

# THE SKIN GAME



By FREDERICK L. NEBEL

*It was dead man's choice for Dike. Behind, the furious demons of the icy wind howled for their meat—ahead, the tundra tamer placed his deadfall cunningly.*

**A** GAUNT-FACED Cree with a bullet in his lung brought the news to Lac la Marthe. He came staggering across the blizzard-swept lake, mumbling to himself, breathing in choked gasps. Twice he fell and the dark stain of blood marked the places. A six-dog team, dragging an empty sledge, snarled and watched and followed behind.

Ed Dike saw the Cree as he fell the second time. Ed barged out the door of the lonely post. Once of the Old Company, once of Revillons on the Bay, he was now the best known free-trader north of Great Slave Lake. He carried the young buck into the trade store and laid him down on a pile of skins.

"My best runner," he said thickly, and then swore under his breath.

Two trappers rubbed life into the wounded man's hands and feet while Dike gave him a shot of brandy and went about

cleaning the wound.

He was saying:

"Take your time, Billy, m' lad, but tell me why you're in such a mess. I see your sled's empty. It looks like dirty work, I'm thinking."

The Indian, half-frozen, more than half-dead, was struggling for words. "I mak camp Grandin Lake. Shot get me lung. Men come from timber. Hit me on head. I dead long tarn. I wak, furs gone. ..."

He lapsed into unconsciousness.

"So that was it!" exclaimed Dike, rising. "It gets me, it does, the scum that's in the country nowadays. Billy, as good an Injun as ever a white man had working for him, shot and banged over the head and robbed. I not only lose a slice of money on them furs, but I lose Billy. Damn bums!"

He turned to one of the Indians.

“Joe, Billy’s in bad shape. Maybe the mission doctor at Fort Rae can help him. Take your dogs and use my cariole—not your toboggan.”

The Indian shuffled out and rounded up his dogs. Bundling up the wounded Billy thoroughly, they carried him out and placed him in the cariole. Not half an hour elapsed since Billy’s arrival and the mission of mercy upon which Joe started, bound east for Fort Rae and medical aid for his brother.

Directly after he departed, Dike went for his own dogs—nine big Mackenzie hounds that held several records for speed and endurance. Meanwhile Ajeri, his assistant at the post, was loading a six-foot toboggan with provisions and robes, aided by a number of breed trappers who had just driven in their pelts from the Land of the Great Bear, from Lac Ste. Croix and points between and beyond.

In the trade-room, Dike was struggling into a caribou-skin capote, muttering dire threats against a certain “damn darn cutthroat.” Taking a thirty-foot whip from the counter, he slipped on gloves and mittens and strode out, his broad jaw set hard, a cool, hard glint in his eyes.

He said to Ajeri:

“I may be gone two or three days. Take good care of things. And, remember, go the limit on blackies, but no more.”

The whip snaked out, ending in a sharp report. With a snarl King-O, the whale of a leader, leaped forward and broke his mates into a fast trot. Dike, running beside the sled, kept snapping the whip and urging them on. Once upon the frozen surface of the lake they had good going, and Dike laid a westerly course.

IT was an hour past noon, and the sun, a bruised red globe, was riding low over the southeastern bulge of the earth. At three the lake began to broaden out, and a little later

Dike swung northward. As he traveled the shores converged until at last he passed through a narrow passage that merged into a sheltered bay. Speeding across this, he struck a waterway, followed it due north and came out upon Grandin Lake when night was full upon him. Here he halted for a hasty meal of tea and cold bannocks.

He traveled by the moon and the ghostly flare of the Northern Lights, which played weirdly down upon the broad surface of the lake. The temperature plummeted. A stiff wind was working out of the northeast, blowing full in Dike’s face. His breath, spuming out, fell back against his beard and froze.

His face was beginning to freeze. But frost-bite was an everyday occurrence in Dike’s life. He often made the remark that he was born in a blizzard, and he’d been frozen more times than he could remember. Big, sturdy and rounding forty years, he had a name among men who admired him for his honesty and his cool courage.

At midnight he made the northern rim of Grandin Lake and camped for the night. The first touches of dawn found him on the trail, toiling with his dogs through a rugged country. He gave a grunt of satisfaction when he left the timber behind and found good going on Lac Tache. Two hours later he veered toward the eastern shore and led his team up to a clearing in front of a wide, high cabin. He went to the door, pushed it open and stepped in.

The room was almost empty. A French-looking breed lounged against a trade-counter. A heavy-set man, built low and wide, with a nose that sprawled all over his bearded face, sat in a split-log chair with his feet perched on the edge of the stove. His small, close-set eyes darkened beneath bushy brows when he beheld Dike. He removed one foot from the stove.

“Howdy, Dike,” he said.

“Howdy, Pogue.”

Dike kicked a stool up beside the stove and sat down, stuffing his pipe. “Hear you’ve got a new batch of prime blackies?”

Pogue frowned. “What about it?”

“Who brought ’em in?”

Pogue took his other foot down from the stove and leaned forward, shoving out his heavy jaw.

“What’s that to you?” Pogue asked.

“Billy, my Injun boy, was shot over on Grandin the other night and robbed of a sled-load of pelts.”

Pogue spat out of the side of his mouth.

“You mean to say I took ’em!” he jerked out. “You can’t prove it!”

“I didn’t say you took ’em,” Dike came back coolly, his eyes narrowing. “Thought maybe you’d know who did. You haven’t got a good name north of Athabasca Landing, Pogue, so don’t look so damned outraged. The Company kicked you out for shady deals, you know.”

“Now cut that talk out, Dike,” Pogue lashed out. “You’re as much as accusing me.”

“I never said anything to accuse you. You accused yourself, almost.”

Pogue had drawn his gun.

“I don’t like the way you talk, anyway, chum. Just about turn and slide out. You ain’t got nothing on me.”

“If you’re not guilty, Pogue, you’re sure getting in a heat over nothing.”

“Get out!” Pogue was boiling.

Dike calmly knocked the ashes from his pipe, drew his capote closer about him and without another word walked out. Outside, he turned his team about and swung down toward the lake. Looking back, he saw two evil faces pressed against the window; Pogue’s and that of the French-breed who had been leaning against the counter.

BACK in his own post on the following night,

Dike and one of his runners, a Dog-Rib named Toochoo, were convened in the little living-room behind the trade-store. Toochoo had been extending credit to the trappers in the country between Lac la Marthe and the Yellow-Knife, and Dike considered him a valuable man.

Dike was saying:

“I’m not forcing this run on you, Toochoo, you understand. But I need a good man for the country between here and McVicar Bay. I’m sure Billy got shot by accident. They want the pelts, that’s all. If you take that run you’ll know there’s dirty work afoot and you can keep a look-out. If they threaten to shoot you, let ’em take the pelts. For my scheme, I want ’em to take the pelts. Now it’s up to you. You can take that run or leave it.”

“Take,” nodded Toochoo.

“Good man. Now here’s the scheme.” Briefly speaking in whispers, Dike outlined his plan.

Toochoo, his dark eyes impassive, listened. When Dike had finished, he rose. He was a stalwart fellow, of noble stature.

“For the honor of the trade,” he said solemnly.

“For the honor of the trade,” repeated Dike, and they shook hands.

Next morning, when it was still dark, Dike walked with Toochoo and his dog-team down to the lake, giving him last-minute instructions. With a farewell shake, Toochoo cracked his whip and swung off behind his dogs.

“Good man,” muttered Dike.

Several days later a trapper who ran his fur paths in the Lac Tache country stopped in on his way toward the Mackenzie. He told Dike just what he thought about that neck of the woods, and swore he’d never go within a thousand miles of it again.

Someone had been raiding his traps for the past month, he explained with much

blasphemy, and he'd be damned if he'd squat in a country where a man's traps weren't safe. Dike sympathized with him, sheltered him for the night, and saw him off next morning without airing his own suspicions.

On the tenth day after Toochoo's departure, he climbed to the look-out tower which he had built a-top his station and swept the lake with his glasses. Three times during the day he made the search, and on the third time, in early afternoon, he spotted far off to the west a dog-team and a man riding on the sled. He left the look-out and went down to the lake.

Toochoo, with a bloody bandage showing beneath his plaid toque, drew up and leaped from the sled. Except for his trail equipage, the sled was empty. No furs!

"What now, Toochoo?" asked Dike.

"Made camp south shore of Lac Ste. Therese. Fell asleep. Banged on head. Furs gone. Big snow. No trail." He was concise if anything.

"So they got you before you reached Lac Tache, eh?" Dike clamped his jaw grimly. Then: "You did as I told you?"

Toochoo nodded.

"All right. Now I'm ripe for anything short of murder. Come, Toochoo."

Dike was grim as he stamped into his trade-room. He told Ajeri to load the toboggan and get out his dogs. He kicked off his slippers and put on several pairs of socks, duffels and moose-hide moccasins. He buckled his gun-belt outside his caribou-skin capote, practiced sliding the gun out of its holster, and finally was satisfied that it was in the right position.

Toochoo came in from the other room, pulling his toque over a fresh bandage.

"Feel all right?" asked Dike concernedly.

"Good," Toochoo shot over his shoulder as he passed out.

When Dike went out a moment later

Toochoo had his snowshoes on and was standing up by the lead dog. Stepping upon his own rackets, Dike gave a few instructions to Ajeri; then snapped his whip.

DUSK was falling even as they started. Before they were an hour on the trail a flurry of snow smote them, and then a strong wind blew across the lake and the snow whirled in great clouds. But the outfit did not falter. Toochoo, his elbows pressed close to his sides, trotted briskly in the lead, his head bent into the teeth of the storm.

King-O, mighty leader, the harshest taskmaster a string of dogs ever followed, tagged close behind the Indian. Dike, already covered with snow, ran tirelessly beside the toboggan, shouting encouragement to his dogs, cracking his whip over their heads.

The storm grew in fury, howling across the lake in reckless abandon. The outfit swung in and hugged the shore line, but it never wavered. They made a camp in the middle of the night on a wooded island in Grandin Lake. Next day they fought in the chaos of the blizzard, made bleak Lac Tache and halted in the afternoon to make final plans.

"I'll go into the cabin alone," explained Dike. "You watch by the window. Most likely he'll have his gang in on a day like this. If I think I need you I'll take off my hat and scratch my head."

Toochoo nodded agreement.

They went on. At a point on the shore a little below Pogue's cabin they left the dogs. Then they crept up to the cabin, Toochoo sidling over to the window which, though pretty well frosted, offered him a fair view of the interior. Dike pushed open the door and stepped in.

Pipe smoke hung thick under the rafters. Six men lounged about; tough-looking fellows. Pogue was again ensconced in his chair, his feet planted against the stove. He

lifted drowsy eyes when the door opened, then sat erect and glared at the man who was wiping the salt-rheum from his eyes.

"Evening, boys," called Dike, coming forward.

Grunts greeted him.

"I see you're back again," drawled Pogue harshly.

"So I am."

Their eyes met: Dike's cool, level ones, and Pogue's querulous ones. Pogue rose, his big hand sliding to his right hip.

"Well?" he blurted.

"As man to man, I'd like to look over your pelts, Pogue," said Dike simply.

Pogue's lips writhed in a sneer. "The hell you say!"

"Just so. Another of my boys was robbed. I want to make sure you haven't got 'em."

POGUE was on the verge of drawing his gun. Then, crossing his arms, he threw back his head and laughed, turning to the others.

"Ha, boys! Dike thinks we've got his pelts. He's as much as accused me of stealing 'em! Let's show him some rough stuff."

He whirled on Dike with a roar.

But the trader from Lac la Marthe jumped back and swung out his revolver. He said—"Not a move out of any of you!"

Glowing, his huge face contorted with rage, Pogue stopped in mid-career. His followers, muttering, riveted their burning eyes on the man with the gun. Hands strained at knife-hilts and revolver butts.

"Raise 'em high," went on Dike. "I want to look over your pelts, Pogue."

He raised his hat and touched his head. The door opened. Silently, his rifle leveled, Toochoo slid in and over beside Dike.

"Into the store-room, Toochoo, and get those pelts."

"Wait," snarled Pogue. "How do I know he won't fake it? How does he know

which is which?"

"He knows," said Dike.

Toochoo had passed behind the counter and into the store-room. The trade-room was deathly silent. The men, tense as drumheads, watched wolfishly for a chance to outwit Dike. The minutes passed. Finally Toochoo, frowning a little, came out. He shook his head.

"No find," he said.

Dike seemed perplexed. In the momentary movement of his eyes to Toochoo, a breed swept his hand toward his knife. Toochoo's gun cracked. The breed slumped. That broke the tension. Another breed snatched at his revolver and Dike, shooting low, smashed his hand. Pogue, bellowing, had his gun trained on Dike when Toochoo, hiding behind the counter, blazed and sent it spinning from his hand. Knives came into play.

A greasy Indian made a panther-like leap for Dike, who ducked under, spun around and shot another breed in the act of drawing a bead on Toochoo. He emptied his gun and picked up a stool as he saw Pogue hurtling toward him with drawn knife. He missed Pogue and caught another fellow flush in the face. That put the third man out of commission. The other three were concentrating their efforts on Toochoo, who was hidden somewhere among the stores behind the counter.

Dike met Pogue and missed the wielded knife by a fraction of an inch. He hurled Pogue away and dove for another stool. Raising it, he crouched, while Pogue circled around him with drawn knife. A gun spat from behind the counter and an Indian hit the boards. The two others fired. Pogue, unable to hold back, leered bestially and hurtled for Dike.

The stool grazed Pogue's head, ripped open his left ear and thudded against his shoulder. He groaned, but he was a hard-case brawler, and he forced Dike to the floor, his

one arm helpless, but his knife-arm still in fighting form. Madly he jabbed it down, blind with rage. The blade grazed Dike's bearded face and sank three inches in the hard pine floor.

DIKE caught Pogue's thick throat and struggled to force him up, but Pogue had worked his knee in his stomach and was pressing down with all his strength, while his one good hand was working feverishly for the brutal nose-grip. The cabin was foul with oaths and powder smoke. The two remaining breeds were creeping toward the counter, emboldened by no recent challenge from Toochoo. Dike and Pogue were fighting to the death, locked in each other's grips, streaming blood.

Pogue had Dike's nose between his fingers and Dike had Pogue by the throat in an unbreakable vise. Finally, with a mighty effort, Dike managed to throw Pogue on his side and thus broke the terrible knee-to-stomach grip. He worked him to his back, still with the throat grip, and then lifted one hand long enough to smash him between the eyes.

Grudgingly, Pogue's nose grip relaxed and Dike, grimacing with pain, tore his hand away altogether and again smashed him between the eyes.

Pogue flopped spasmodically—lay still.

Dripping blood, his nose already swelling monstrously, Dike lunged after the two who were stalking Toochoo. He leaped on the one fellow's back and cracked him on the ear with a short, chopping jab, tearing his gun from senseless hands. The other fellow lurched back and swung his rifle, butt to hip. A shot boomed from the other side of the room. The rifleman dropped in his tracks. Toochoo mysteriously appeared from nowhere.

"He'da got me that time," muttered Dike, wavering. "Where'd you come from?"

Thought you were back here."

He pointed to the counter.

Toochoo actually grinned.

"Got pelts," he said in Dike's ear. "Come."

Bewildered, Dike followed Toochoo behind the counter, then into the room where pelts were stored. The Indian scrambled up a rope that dangled from a rafter, looked down to see if Dike were still watching, and reached up into the shadows under the roof. He tugged at something which finally gave way and came tumbling down. Toochoo worked his way toward the front of the cabin on the rafters, then dropped down near the door, thus showing Dike how he had fooled the two Indians.

Dike, opening the moose-hide bundle, found almost half a hundred pelts; silvers, crosses, one black-fox, marten, otter, and a few fisher-cats. Turning one of them over, he saw on the rawhide the outline of a little circle, apparently imprinted with a heated instrument.

Toochoo, pulling his revolver from his belt, fitted the muzzle on the little circle.

"You sure branded 'em," Dike smiled, thinking of Toochoo's cunning. He looked about the post. The struggle of the fight had all but wrecked it. Pogue was shaking his head, and face on the back of his hand. Some of his henchmen lay motionless. Others were groaning, sickly fighting their way back to consciousness.

Dike threw his batch of pelts over his shoulder, and moved toward the door. Pogue surveyed him with one good eye. He blinked stupidly. "You've got your pelts, Dike. Now go to hell."

"Thanks, Pogue," Dike called as he stood on the threshold, "but if you don't hustle out of this country, you'll be waiting for me down there on the Devil's reception committee."

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