

Frozen Hell

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THE panting dogs slid to an abrupt halt before the door of the Real Home, hotel and boarding house, in the little camp of Kellar.

Enveloped in a cloud of steam and upcast snow, they squatted on their haunches, with tongues lolling from their open mouths, long white fangs agleam, their eyes snapping with curiosity, and watched their huge, fur-clad master stamp through the snow to the door of the Real Home and knock thereon with the butt of his dog-whip.

“Do you work here?” the driver demanded abruptly of the nondescript, slouching man who opened the door to him.

“Yes,” the man muttered in a surprised tone.

“Then you must need money pretty bad,” the driver concluded. “Me? I got more money than ambition, so tend to my dogs and I’ll owe yuh more than yuh make here in a whole day’s work. Git!”

He pulled the employee of the hostelry out through the door, sent him spinning with a good-natured push, entered the hotel, and slammed the door.

The Real Home hotel boasted an office, and, tiny though the office was, it in

turn boasted a desk, and from behind this desk came a woman—a middle-aged, striking-looking woman, with intent to confront and squelch the insolent stranger who had manhandled her man-of-all-work. The effect of her appearance on the stranger was even more potent than she had hoped for. He gasped and stepped backward.

“Are you Blanche Murdock?” he inquired huskily.

It was the woman’s turn to start. The color went from her face, and a look of haunting fear came into her eyes.

“Well, I’ll be damned!” the man chanted solemnly, and with a sweep of his arm wiped the fur-rimmed parka-hood back from his head, exposing a brick-red, square-jawed face, set with two tiny, wide-apart eyes, of the most brilliant, scintillant blue imaginable.

Recognition banished the fear from the woman’s eyes, and called a flush of pleasure to color her cheeks as she joyfully welcomed him.

“Oh, Bill Heenan, I’m so glad to see you! Bill Heenan? It’s you, isn’t it? I can’t believe it. It’s nineteen years, isn’t it. Bill?”

Heenan nodded.

“Easy that. Yuh look mighty fine,

Blanche. Where's Ed?"

The woman shook her head.

"He died, Bill, within a year after we were married. I've been living in Oregon and Washington ever since. I heard of this strike and had an opportunity to come up, so I came and started this hotel here. I haven't met any of the real old-timers, Bill."

"They do thin out," Heenan said regretfully. "They do thin out"

Remembrance led a vision to his eyes, and he looked back through the years at himself, standing in the front of a rude dance-hall with a smoking gun in each hand, holding back an angry, snarling mob of gamblers and dance-hall hangers-on. He saw himself standing thus, holding the evil throng at bay, while he listened to the gradually lessening sounds of the flight of his friend, Ed Carmack, with the youngest and prettiest of all the girls of the dance-hall, Blanche Murdock.

In a flash, time shut the past from his view again, and revealed the present in the person of the capable-looking woman who stood before him—Blanche Murdock of the dance hall, remolded by nineteen years of life. Heenan felt a glow of satisfaction as his eyes told him the molding had been good.

"I never seen yuh after that night, Blanche," he said with a chuckle. "Yuh got away all right, didn't yuh?"

The woman nodded and patted Heenan's arm.

"Thanks to you, Bill," she said softly. "We were married in Victoria. We were mighty happy, Bill."

"Thought yuh would be," Heenan muttered, embarrassed by sentiment. "You and Ed sure set a lot o' store by each other. Yuh sure did."

He laughed suddenly and his eyes glittered wickedly.

"I had some time holdin' that outfit back, Blanche. I held 'em under my guns in the hall for a solid two hours, and then made a

shootin' get-away. I hiked up the trail a couple o' hundred yards, and laid there after I got out o' the hall. Soon as ever they got started after you and Ed, I cut loose at 'em again. They kind o' lost interest in followin' yuh up after that. They sure was keen on holdin' yuh there."

The woman shrugged.

"Why not?" she asked bitterly. "There wasn't a girl in the place who could make a man spend as much as I could, Bill. No wonder they didn't want to lose me. I was a valuable asset. Ah! Bill, I'm mighty glad to see you, but you do make some old memories, that I'd like to blot out of my mind, mighty vivid. I was pretty, wasn't I, Bill?"

"The queen o' the lot," Heenan said enthusiastically. "Believe me, Blanche, there never was one like you in them days, and there never will be—"

He broke off suddenly in his sentence and stared past the woman with startled eyes. Following the direction of his gaze, she turned and saw her daughter, Elsa, standing in the doorway.

"Elsa, child, come meet an old and dear friend of mine, and a great friend of your father's, deary. You know how often you have heard me speak of Bill Heenan. Well, Elsa, here he is. My daughter, Bill. Don't you think she has Ed's eyes?"

Heenan took the fair-haired young girl's slim hand in both his huge, paw-like ones, and enveloped her in an intent gaze.

"Yuh done made a liar out o' me," he informed the girl. "I was just tellin' your mother that there never was a girl like she was at eighteen. I stand by that remark; then I go farther and tell her that there never will be another one, and you step into the room and prove me a liar. Ed's eyes? Why, Blanche, I bet she hasn't got so much as an eyelash that ain't the dead spit o' what you was at her age. She just naturally don't look like nobody but you."

A shadow crossed the woman's face, and her lips thinned with disapproval.

"Run tell John to fix a place for Mr. Heenan, Elsa," she instructed her daughter briefly, and when the girl had left the room:

"She does look like me, doesn't she? I don't really think that she has eyes like Ed's. I only wish it. I know that she's the perfect image of what I was at her age. I wish she wasn't. You know why, Bill."

"I reckon yuh needn't fret. You was a dance-hall girl, but there ain't a one of us old-timers that knew you in them days but what 'll swear you was as straight as any woman that ever lived. I reckon a woman who could work the dance-halls and go straight in them days—"

A sudden rush of tears crowded the woman's troubled, blue-gray eyes.

"I'm glad you said that Bill," she said brokenly. "You know it's true. But others—a woman who's worked in a dance-hall—you know that any one who found it out wouldn't believe."

"I reckon. Does she—your girl—know anything about—er—things, before you and Ed—"

"No. She knows nothing about that, Bill. I've kept that from her. There are few left who knew me in those days, and the risk of discovery is not great. But the fear of it, Bill! I think it would kill me if she ever found out. And I shudder to think of what it would mean to her. Bill, I owe it to Ed's memory to keep that from her, and I live constantly under the fear that some time—some one—"

"Any time you get worried for fear somebody's goin' to—let me know," Heenan advised.

"Thank you, Bill," the woman said gratefully. "Come on now and I'll stare at you while you eat and try to realize that I'm really looking at Big Bill Heenan; the Big Bill that gave me my husband and my hope in life; the Big Bill that I haven't seen for nineteen years.

Come on, you big, overgrown boy, you."

Heenan's goal was the camp of a trapper friend, one hundred and fifty miles northwest of Kellar; the camp of a man whom he had grubstaked and in whose take of furs for the winter, therefore, he had a half-interest. His stop in Kellar was incidental, but he prolonged it for a week, renewing his friendship with the woman who had been Blanche Murdock, the widow of his old friend, Ed Carmack, and becoming acquainted with her daughter.

Elsa was a source of constant delight to Bill. She was such a slender, delicate, beautiful tiling, all the more fragile in contrast with Heenan's great bulk.

Bill played with the girl, much as a lumbering, tame bear might scuffle and box with a small dog. He would toss her about, tweak her cheeks, ruffle her hair with his enormous fingers, and rock with gusty gales of mirth at her verbal sallies and futile physical attempts to retaliate for his rough play. Heenan's enjoyment of the girl was more than equaled by her delight in Heenan. He was so big and genuine, eager and childish, and he had known her father.

Ere the week was up, the two were firm friends. The night before Heenan was to resume his journey the girl timidly broached a subject that lay close to her heart. They were sitting alone together in the office of the hotel, on a great brown-bear rug, before the open fire of birch logs. After a long silence the girl impulsively placed her hand on one of Heenan's.

"Bill, you knew daddy, didn't you?" she said tremulously.

Heenan nodded soberly.

"Sure did, little girl. Me and your dad was right good friends one time."

"I never knew him," the girl said wistfully. "I wish I had, Bill."

"He was worth knowin'," Heenan assured her.

"I think he was," the girl said tenderly. "You won't laugh at me if I tell you something, will you, Bill?"

Bill regarded her with amused eyes.

"I'll try to keep a straight face," he promised.

"Well, you know, you knew mama when she was a girl, and you knew daddy. You introduced them to each other," the girl stammered. "I never knew daddy, you know, and somehow, since you've been here, I have felt just like—just like as though—you were my dad. Now? don't you laugh."

The amusement flicked out of Heenan's eyes, banished by the yearning expression of an old hunger that filled them. His lips moved, but no sound came, and he wet them carefully with his tongue. Then:

"God, no," he said huskily, and again: "My God, no."

"That's just the way I feel," the girl went on, only vaguely conscious of the emotions her statement had aroused in the big, wild wanderer with the lonely child's eyes.

"I always wanted my dad so much, you know; I've always felt so badly because I didn't know him, and when you first came I just played to myself that you were him, and then it got to seem real. You don't mind, do you?"

Heenan shook his head slowly.

"No," he said dully. "No. That's all right. I don't mind."

They sat late into the night in the flickering glow of the firelight. When the girl rose to go to her room, Heenan stopped her.

"Speakin' about playin' I was your dad," he said haltingly, "would yuh mind kissin' me good night like as if I was?"

"Of course I will," she said.

She put her two hands on his shoulders, lifted her small face to his, and kissed him softly.

"Good night, my daddy," she said with a smile, and ran out of the room.

A minute later Heenan, still standing statue-like, as she had left him, became conscious of an irritation in the palm of his clenched right hand. He opened the fingers to see his pipe crushed to fragments by the force of his grip. He dusted the broken litter off into the fireplace absently, and shook himself.

"They're nice to have," he muttered. "Ones like her. Real nice."

A mighty, irresistible surge of loneliness swept through him, and, like a heart-broken child, he threw himself face downward on the bear rug with his face pillowed in the crook of his outflung arm, and, like a heart-broken child, he permitted himself one short sob of heart-hunger agony. Just one. A moment later he rose with a shamed, sheepish grin, and dug at his eyes with the knuckle, of a big forefinger.

"Hell!" he muttered contemptuously, as he strode away to his room. "Aw, hell!"

Shortly after Heenan's departure Walter Gilbert arrived at the Real Home hotel. Gilbert was young and too good-looking. His black hair was faintly wavy and so black it seemed like plush. His every feature was so perfect that the ensemble was weak. He had no rugged imperfection to give him the true appearance of manly strength.

But he was young and pleasant in his manner, and Elsa liked him. Gilbert's courtship of her was ardent, and within a month of his arrival they became engaged. He represented himself as a mining engineer, and seemed to have plenty of money. He told in detail of his family in Philadelphia, and planned to take Elsa there with him after their marriage, which was to take place in the spring.

It was nearing time for the spring break-up when Heenan returned to Kellar. The land still lay locked in the frigid grip of the frost king, and yet there was a sense—an indefinable feeling—of new life in the air. The

ice-locked arctic was pregnant with the marvel of a new spring, and everywhere vague stirrings presaged the approach of its birth-hour.

Heenan sensed it as he drove toward Kellar. The big man was delicately attuned to the silent harmony of the rugged land he dwelt in and loved, and he was keenly susceptible to its seasonal transitions.

He drove toward Kellar over the low, snow-covered hills, bawling tuneless songs of joy and showering his dogs with affectionate curses. The surging tides of renewed life—the wonder of returning spring—flowed in him. Bubbling over with an exuberance of animal spirits, he reached Kellar and halted his dogs before the Real Home hotel.

Elsa came running out to meet him, and at sight of her Heenan's elation vanished. And yet he had never seen her looking better. She was glorified in appearance. Her cheeks were delicately aflame with the soft blush of happiness and health. Her eyes were shining wonder-pools of deep joy.

"The greatest news," she apprised him breathlessly. "Oh, Heenan! I'm—I'm engaged. Aren't you surprised?"

An ache that was like unto a gradually tightening cord encircled Heenan's heart—why, he knew not—and he felt suddenly weary and dull.

"I should say I am," he admitted mechanically. "Engaged, eh? Well, that's fine, now ain't it? I'm right glad to hear it."

"I'm so happy, Bill," Elsa said shyly. "So unbelievably happy."

In a lesser degree the mother exhibited the happiness that fairly glowed in the girl.

"It's fine, isn't it, Bill?" she said to Heenan when they were alone. "The boy is a splendid fellow, and they're so madly in love. Their courtship was very sudden. I'm so glad for her."

Heenan nodded and gulped.

"It's fine," he reiterated. "Just fine."

"I know you'll like Walter, Bill," the woman ran on. "I'm so happy about it all. You know I've always had a lurking fear that somehow—some way—well—you know what I mean, Bill. But it's all right now."

"Sure," Heenan agreed with a forced enthusiasm. "I'd like to meet with the young fellow."

"Here he is," the woman cried. "Come here, Walter. I want you to meet Mr. Heenan."

Heenan extended his hand to the dark, handsome young fellow who entered the room. Something in the touch of the young fellow's fingers sent a shudder through him. It was as though he had accidentally touched a deadly reptile. Heenan hated him on the instant, and sensed that he was hated in return. Gilbert muttered a commonplace in answer to Heenan's "howdy," excused himself rather shortly, and disappeared.

"Isn't he a splendid fellow?" Blanche asked proudly.

Heenan darted a quick glance at her and suddenly sensed to the full the meaning to her of her daughter's engagement; sensed the woman's life of sacrifice subsequent to her marriage and her husband's death; the years of lonely nights and work-filled days through which she had lived, pursued always and forever by the specter of her past.

He sensed the fear under which she had lived, and understood something of what her daughter's happy marriage would mean to her. He realized this, and shook with a sudden rage to think that the happiness of the brave mother and the beautiful girl should be lodged in the hands of the too-handsome shell of a man he had just met.

Leaving the hotel, Heenan encountered Gilbert just outside the door. He clutched him by one shoulder, and the boy muttered with pain and fear as the big man's fingers sank into his flesh. Heenan's face was terrible to behold, pale and contorted as it was with a mighty fury.

Gilbert glanced up, dropped his eyes, and shook with fear of the thing he saw in the big man's face. Heenan's voice came from his throat, low and husky:

"You're pretty good at kidding women, you good-looking — you. Don't ever think that you'll get by me. I know you, you scurvy-souled, curly-headed doll off the devil's Christmas tree, you! You got them women kidded, and now you see to it that you keep 'em kidded. Understand me? They think you're the finest thing that ever went two-legged. I know damn well you ain't.

"I know what you are. If you ever let them find out, if you ever give them cause to think that you're anything but what they think you are now, I'll feed you a death that you'll be able to taste for a long, long time. Do yuh understand me, you blinking little marble-eyed lap-dog, you?"

"What—what's the matter with you?" Gilbert gasped.

Heenan shook him once. He did it with a short movement of the arm below the elbow only, but the movement jarred Gilbert nigh unto unconsciousness.

"Don't talk back to me," Heenan advised him sulkily. "Don't do it. You'll aggravate me in a minute, an' I'll just naturally pick you to pieces an' scatter yuh around. I never saw yuh before; never heard o' yuh. Don't know nothin' yuh ever done, but I know what pups like you always do. Whatever you've done is done, an' I can't help it, but I'm goin' to have some say about what you're goin' to do.

"I'm due out at Mackenzie's place on the Little Loup to-night, but I'll be back here day after to-morrow, an' then me an' you's goin' to have a little settlement. I'm goin' to know some things about you that these women most like ain't found out yet, an' when I know 'em they're goin' to find 'em out sudden, yuh take that from me. Now this little talk is between you an me, damn yuh! See that it

don't go no' further."

That afternoon Heenan left for Mackenzie's road-house on the Little Loup, and that night Jennie Clare arrived at the Real Home hotel. She staggered into the office, a disheveled, wild-looking creature, and called shrilly for Walter Gilbert.

"Come out an' show yourself," she yelled. "I'll tear down the dump looking for you if you don't. This is me—Jennie Clare. You know mighty well who it is.

Come on out here and show yourself, I say."

Elsa and her mother reached the office in time to see Gilbert attempt to grasp her. The girl picked up a chair and brandished it before her. Gilbert ducked and backed away.

"What do you want?" Mrs. Murdock asked.

"My husband, damn him," the woman screamed. "Him that married me in Denver six years ago. Pretty soft for him, but he can't put it over any longer. He's tryin' to get by without slippin' me anything. He doped me last night when I made a play for a piece of change from him, and I just came to. Think I'm goin' to keep still forever for nothin' while he marries another dame and goes South with the bank-roll?"

"Your—husband?" Elsa gasped.

"Sure he is!" the red-eyed dance-hall woman said with a leer. "You the doll he's been double-crossin'? Goin' to marry you, wasn't he? Sure. He marries 'em all. They'll get him for bigamy one o' these days, but he's sure got by a long time without gettin' tripped. I'll bet he's married a dozen—that guy.

"He's gettin' stingy. Say—he owes me somethin', he does. I was a decent girl when I married him in all good faith, and I never turned wrong till I found out about him. What was the use then? But I was willing to play fair.

"When I blew in here and found out he

was going to marry again, I was willing to behave. I told him I'd keep still if he'd come across with a little piece o' change for me to get out o' the country on. My lungs are going wrong up here, and I've got to get out. But no. He thought he'd get by without slipping me anything but some salve.

"Yuh know he's got a nice line o' talk; but sweet words don't pay none o' my bills nor buy me a ticket to some place where I can breathe without burnin' my lungs up. I bawled him out yesterday afternoon, and you know what he done? He slipped a shot o' dope into my drink.

I just woke up. Been dead to the world ever since. Say, you listen to me: he ain't goin' to get by this time."

"Don't pay any attention to her," Gilbert said furiously. "Don't mind what she says, Elsa. She's drunk. She—"

"She tells the truth," Elsa said brokenly. "I can see it in her face—and in yours. No. Don't touch me. Just go."

"Well, you needn't get so up in the air about it," Gilbert sneered. "You think you're pretty high and fine, don't you? But I know a thing or two you don't. Huh! My father was a faro-dealer in this land in the early days. Blanche Murdock may think she's some lady these days, but my father knew her when—"

"Stop!" Mrs. Murdock commanded. "Don't say another word."

"That hurts, does it?" Gilbert laughed. "Well, if you don't want Elsa to know more of what I've got to tell if I want to—"

"That's enough," Mrs. Murdock interrupted. "I was in this country in the early days, and I've a friend left to me from those times that I'll call on if you say one more word. I mean Bill Heenan. One more word, and I'll turn him loose on you."

"I'll be ready for him," Gilbert said with an attempt at bravado, but his face was white and he was shaking. "I seem to be one too many around here—so good night."

He stepped to the door, bowed mockingly, and went out. The dance-hall woman swayed and slumped to her knees.

"I'm about done," she muttered. "Lungs are bad. I thought maybe he'd—he'd help me out o' the country at least."

She sighed and slipped forward on her face to the floor. Elsa knelt by her side.

"Call John, and well get her to bed, mother," she said quietly.

"Elsa," Mrs. Murdock said tremulously—"Elsa, child, you mustn't think—what that man said—oh, Elsa! Don't hate your mother, will you?"

"Never, mother," she replied. "I don't know what he meant, but I do know that my mother is a good woman, and always was."

"Your father never had reason to be ashamed of me after I met him," Mrs. Murdock said brokenly. "I've much to tell you, Elsa, that I hoped you might never hear."

Jennie Clare died the night Heenan returned from the Little Loup. Heenan was by her bedside when she passed out. To the last she raved of the man she had married in good faith, calling upon him in the terms of her courtship.

Heenan watched Elsa fearfully. He was afraid of the results that might accrue from her wrecked love affair, and though he found her quiet, he saw in her eyes the reflection of an awful sorrow.

"Mama told me all about her early life up here, Bill," Elsa told him.

"How do you feel about it?" he asked her clumsily.

"I feel that I can never love her enough," she answered gently.

"You're right," Heenan said chokily. "I knew her in them days, Elsa, as I knew your father, and whatever folks may think, I'm here to tell you that you've no cause to ever be ashamed of your mother."

"Thank you, Bill," the girl said quietly. "I'd rather hear you say that than any one

else.”

Heenan left her and passed into the room where the dead girl lay. He stood long, arms folded, looking down at the poor, wasted form. Then he slipped quietly from the house, and made inquiries about Walter Gilbert.

He was very quiet about it all.

Within an hour he drove out of camp, speeding beside his dog-team very silently, running with a crouching, catlike, swinging stride that strongly suggested the soft, hurried tread of a tiger with the tang of prey in its nostrils. He spoke to his dogs in low tones, and wasted no words as he sped south to kill.

As Heenan sped south on the trail of Walter Gilbert, he became possessed of a feeling of impotence that outweighed even his anger and, sorrow. He took no joy in the thought of Gilbert’s flesh in his angry hands.

He could kill him. Yes. He could, and meant to, but he sensed the futility of it. He felt keenly his inability to mete a punishment fitting Gilbert’s crime.

He took no pleasure in signs of a camp-fire and trail which told him that he was rapidly overtaking the man he sought, for the thought of Gilbert’s death at his hands was weak and tasteless to him, and he was vaguely troubled.

On the afternoon of the third day, Heenan, from a hillside, sighted his quarry about three miles ahead, following the course of the frozen river. It was still cold, varying from thirty to forty-five below; clear and still, and the traveling was fine.

Heenan managed a cut-off through the hills that brought him to the river beyond the big bend ahead of Gilbert. He concealed himself in a thick copse of willows on top of a steep bank overlooking the bed of the river on which Gilbert was traveling. Heenan inspected his gun, settled himself comfortably in the snow, and waited.

The feeling of utter impotence which had grown with the days vexed and saddened

him. He felt vaguely that killing Gilbert was a peevish, futile punishment for the horror the man had wrought. He felt, somehow, ashamed of the thing he meant to do.

Gilbert came into sight around the bend, mushing stolidly behind his dog-team, and Heenan felt no elation at sight of him. He was impotent, weak, powerless to punish with even a partial measure of justice. All he could do was kill, and he sighed, threw his rifle wearily to his shoulder, and waited.

Gilbert’s course led him within ten feet of the bank where Heenan knelt, and when he arrived directly opposite Heenan’s hiding-place, the big man rose, his rifle trained on the unsuspecting man, and called sharply:

“Hands up!”

Gilbert jumped with fright, faced about, and, at sight of Heenan and the menacing gun on his shoulder, moaned and swayed weakly.

“Put ’em up!” Heenan barked. “Hands up!”

Slowly Gilbert raised his fur-mittened hands above his head, his breath coming and going with little audible gasps of fear. His dogs yapped and fled suddenly, but so intent was Gilbert on his fear of Heenan that he took no notice.

Heenan, on his part, was oblivious for the moment of everything but the face that he scowled down at along the barrel of his gun; that hated face, and his own impotence, his utter, pitiful impotence to wreak just punishment.

Suddenly Gilbert jumped, half lowered his hands, and looked down.

“Stand still!” Heenan ordered savagely. “You bat an eye again, and I’ll shoot. Hands up there!”

Gilbert raised his hands and stood quiet again, his lips writhing with an effort for speech. And then Heenan saw why the dogs had fled. Saw why Gilbert had jumped so sharply.

Filming the glazed surface of the river to a depth of perhaps three inches, spreading noiselessly, swiftly, there crept the supreme dread of the Arctic traveler on river courses—the overflow.

From a break in the ice on the river above it gushed forth, flowed down over the glazed surface, becoming slush one instant and solid ice the next. Woe be to him whose feet are wetted from this sudden overflow at a time when he cannot camp at once and dry them!

Heenan beheld this overflow, saw it spread around Gilbert's moccasin-shod feet to a depth of about three inches, turn to slush as it spread, and a shock of satisfaction thrilled through him like a charge of electricity.

"Don't move, damn you!" he bawled at Gilbert. "If you move but one little finger, I'll shoot. Steady, damn you! Don't you move. Don't you dare move. Ah!"

The last was a long-drawn exhalation of savage satisfaction. Heenan dropped his rifle at his side and drew a deep breath.

"Let—let me come ashore," Gilbert begged tremulously. "The overflow, Bill. Let me come ashore."

"Come right ahead, my lady-killing friend," Heenan invited him, grinning. "Don't let me stop you."

Gilbert dropped his hands and made to take a step. Surprised, he stared down at his feet.

As high as the ankle-bones, they were encased in solid ice, as firmly loomed to the frozen bosom of the river as though fluid steel had been poured about them and let cool!

He looked up with a cry, read Heenan's purpose in his face, and, stretching forth his hands, shrieked for mercy, and shrieked again and again, until the low-lying river hills flung back the echo of his shrill, reiterated pleadings in discordant racket of sound, and the malemutes, squatted along the bank, their deep-furred bellies to the ground

and bushy tails thrust between their legs, whined in sympathy with the fear in the human voice that made the darkening valley hideous.

On the bank at the river's edge Heenan built a camp of fire. The fire was not ten feet from the shrieking wretch who stood upright, unable to do otherwise, with his feet cemented into the icy surface of the river.

And squatting on his heels near the camp-fire, staring into its twisting flames and meditatively consuming thin, handmade cigarettes, Heenan told Walter Gilbert the story of the dance-hall girl who was Blanche Murdock; of the wife and mother who was Mrs. Carmack; of the widow who worked and hoped and guarded her daughter so carefully; of the Jennie Clare who had loved unwisely and died.

He told Walter Gilbert all this, very slowly and in detail. At times he drank deep from large tins full of hot coffee, and all the while, the man, who was the end of the story Heenan told, shrieked pleas for mercy. And as he shrieked, Heenan's sense of impotence left him, and he harkened to the hoarse pleadings with an ear of satisfaction.

Darkness came. Heenan's story was told. The shrieking still continued from the lips of the man wedded to the ruling element of the Arctic with the bonds of death.

Heenan squatted by his fire and smoked endless hand-made cigarettes. The malemutes skulked near by, whining and howling in sympathy with the fear in the human voice that grew fainter as the minutes passed. It sank to a husky, wheezy whisper. It ceased. Heenan rolled cigarettes and smoked them.

An hour after the last faint sound had issued from the lips of Walter Gilbert, Heenan turned his head and looked at the dark figure upright on the river bosom. He rose and approached it.

He tapped the cheeks with an

inquisitive forefinger. They were as marble. He pinched the arms, the torso. They were the same. Deliberately, he struck a match and, holding the tiny flame close to the frozen face, scrutinized the fear-strained features. The match sputtered and went out. Heenan turned away with a deep-drawn breath of satisfaction.

He harnessed his dogs and started away down the valley. As he mushed away, the full moon peeked up over the rim of the river hills and flooded the valley with a clear radiance.

A quarter of a mile away, Heenan stopped and looked back on the course of the river. His camp-fire was nearly out. Ten feet from it he could descry what seemed like an old snag projecting through the ice. He laughed, yelled to his dogs, and turned his face from it forever.

And as he traveled through the moonlit, frosty night, he bawled tuneless songs to himself and cursed his dogs affectionately, for he was filled with a feeling of power and the sense of a task well done.