

The Dogs of Purgatory

BY HUGH PENDEXTER



DIX stared gloomily across the flat, monotonous country and its illimitable expanse of swamp and dreary areas of moss-bearded evergreens. The gray autumnal sky minimized the charm of the riotous coloring of the hard growth on the low hills behind him and prevented his appreciating the beauty of the frost-burned ferns and grasses in the lowlands ahead. He was not circumstanced to enjoy the dying glory of Indian Summer and moodily likened the painted landscape to a gaily bedecked wanton bedraggled by the storm. In fact, it was a most inhospitable country, and he cursed the chance which had led him there. It had seemed a simple matter to make the camp on Caribou Lake, but what with the loss of his compass and the clouds masking the heavens he had gone hopelessly astray three days back. For twelve hours he had been without food.

He recalled odds and ends of campfire gossip about the dismal Purgatory country and fished out his woods map. Sure enough; there were the two lakes, Big and Little Purgatory, connected by a sluggish, winding stream. He had wandered some

fifty miles from the Caribou Lake trail.

The discovery was startling. Once the clouds let loose the "line" storm this whole region would be inundated. To retrace his way before securing food was impossible. To advance was a waste of his remaining energy. A drop of rain splashed ominously on the map.

He must build a lean-to to shut out the storm. First, he would light a fire before the rain soaked the dead wood; and he searched his pockets for matches. Ordinarily, for the sake of a climax, one match is found and a tragedy lived while it is being nursed into feeble flame. Dix was denied this conventional thrill. He had no matches.

The thatch of spruce boughs remained to be constructed, and unslinging his small axe he assailed a clump of evergreens and labored fiercely for several minutes. Then the absurdity of it all struck him and he threw down the axe. If a man must die of starvation what odds whether he die wet or merely moist? Without fire or food, with his strength lessening, he had been dreading the rain as a major evil. It suggested a drowning man's fears

lest he wet his feet.

As he crouched on a blanket of moss and stared helplessly on the flat waste his range of vision gradually shortened, for lowering clouds and gathering dusk shut down about him like a collapsing canopy. Queer stories of the Purgatory country drifted through his mind and as they were accentuated by despair he found it easy to imagine strange shapes in the swamp growth. The funereal cedars in the foreground became filled with supernormalities.

“Rot!” he angrily exclaimed, shaking his head to dislodge the unwholesome fancies. “When a chap gets to seeing things—” He chopped the sentence abruptly and leaned forward with mouth agape. His ears had joined in the conspiracy of nerves against reason; he had caught the deep baying of a dog.

Now the Purgatory region was an abomination and no man lived there, consequently there could be no dogs. Thus spoke Reason, and again the long, deep-mouthed cry sounded, this time more distinct and much nearer. He frowned and remembered his guide’s garrulous recital of a spookish experience in this same region.

The guide had sworn by all the woods gods that he had wandered to the edge of the swamp country and at twilight had glimpsed the gorgon shapes of fearful creatures, which moved with the lithe stealth of tigers and cried out like dogs after game. However, there could be no dogs in this deserted place, Reason persisted. Nor could they be wolves, for wolves do not bark. His ears had picked up some woods sound and had distorted it into an illusion.

EVEN as he clung to this explanation the hoarse clamor of the canine voices swept nearer and nearer, dinning on his ears like the climax of a nightmare. He was halfway down the side of a low ridge and from this coign of vantage he now saw them just below him, and counted them, seven huge, tawny forms. They were running one behind another and not in a pack, as the wolf runs. Dix rubbed his eyes but the spectacle would not vanish. Next he discovered he was alive with fear and yet had no impulse to fly. Once he thought he heard an alien sound behind him, but the sinister figures circling up the slope held his gaze. The leader spied him; instantly the chorus was changed to a sharp, triumphant key, and they were streaking up the

ridge in a long, undulating line which vaguely reminded him of sea serpents.

There were trees nearby and yet he remained motionless, the thought of avoiding their onrush never finding room in his dazed mind. Then the leader was upon him, snarling and mouthing horribly, nuzzling at his throat. There was no hallucinations in the fierce impact of the heavy body, nor in the hurt of the pounding attack of the others. He struck and kicked and cried out wildly. Above the clamor he finally caught a shrill voice and heard the swishing blows of a whip. The brutes minded this none. A man’s voice, shouting commands accompanied by resounding whacks of a club, by degrees quieted the confusion until the furious animals were beaten off and Dix to his surprise found himself alive and suffering only from bruises and scratches.

“If they hadn’t had their muzzles on!” panted the shrill voice.

“They’d have killed him in no time,” proudly completed the man.

Pulling himself to a sitting posture Dix stared in amazement at the couple. The man was almost a dwarf in stature, with a broad face that was nearly covered by a beard. He was eyeing Dix with open disfavor as he waved his stout cudgel to keep the dogs at a distance. The woman—Dix gaped incredulously—was exquisitely out of place in the rough scene. He noted the texture of her brown skin, the sheen of her hair, the noble poise of her small figure and her dainty grace as she kneeled beside him. But as he met her anxious gaze he read sadness and trouble in the small, oval face, a sadness which was deep seated and in nowise hinging on the danger just averted.

“The dogs?” he managed to exclaim as he rubbed his aching chest.

“Keep them back, Cumber,” she cried. “Beat them back. On your life don’t slip their muzzles!”

The last struck him as being rather a ridiculous speech, for who but a murderer would think of freeing those slaving jaws? The man grunted something unintelligible and astounded Dix by displaying a surly unwillingness in herding the brutes before him down the slope.

“Lock them in the hovel till I get to the house,” she called after him. Grumbling and mumbling the man drove the dogs into the underbrush, but it was not till he had vanished that the girl turned to Dix.

“Are you badly hurt?”

“Only bruised and shaken—thanks to the muzzles. But my mind riots most confoundedly. They’re real, eh?”

“Fearfully so,” she shuddered. “They’re a cross between the giant Danes and the bloodhound—ferocious as tigers.”

“But why are they? And why do you have them?” he puzzled.

The transient horror of her gaze was succeeded by somber earnestness as she ignored his query and said, “Turn back to the hills from where you came. Once you’ve covered a few miles you’ll be safe, as the dogs never wander far from the swamps.”

“Turn back?” he blankly repeated. “But I’m famished. I’m all in. I was prepared to meet Death when you came.”

“You were never nearer to it,” she muttered, staring intently at the swamp cedars. “When unmuzzled, one of the dogs would be more than a match for any three men. Of course if you’re unable to travel—”

“I’m not,” he abruptly cut in. “Who owns the dogs? Why are the devils allowed to run loose?”

“They belong to old Cumber, my uncle’s servant,” she explained. “You’ve never heard of them?”

“Only in ghost stories. My name is Bruce Dix. I was camping with friends on Caribou Lake. Tried to cruise back alone from Clear River a few days ago. Lost my compass, lost my way. I’ve not eaten for hours. Began seeing things. Thought the dogs were imagination till they leaped on me.”

She listened gravely and in turn informed, “I’m Florence Dessel. Andrew Dessel, my uncle, has a cabin on the lake. We came here for his health. He has grown worse and will never return home alive.”

“I’m mighty sorry to hear it,” consoled Dix. “Of course, you can’t take in wanderers. I’ll turn back and make it somehow.”

“You mustn’t attempt it till we’ve outfitted you with supplies and a compass. You must stay with us tonight and start back tomorrow.”

He staggered to his feet, found strength in her level gaze, and asked, “Can’t your uncle be moved to some settlement? I will return with my friends and get him.”

“That’s good of you, but he would never stand the trip out,” she sighed.

“But should he die—what about you?” he demanded.

SHE shook her head despondently. “I don’t know. I should be alone then except for old Cumber—and the dogs. He is deranged, I fear. He’s been in uncle’s service for years and always faithful. He’s changed sadly the last few months, but I suppose I could depend on him to take me to the settlement.”

“Good heavens, Miss Dessel! There must be no guesswork,” he cried. “Don’t you realize winter will soon be here? I shall come back with my friends and guides and make a camp till you can return with us.”

“The snow will be terrible,” she admitted. “But I’ve been so worried about uncle I haven’t had time to think of myself. Of course, Cumber would take me out safely. He’s a good woodsman.”

“If he’s deranged you can’t tell what he’ll do,” he objected. “What makes you think he’s unbalanced?”

“The dogs.” She shivered in saying it. “We had been here some two months when suddenly he disappeared. We took it for granted he had deserted us; then, after an absence of five or six weeks, he returned with them. He imagines we’re in danger from the outside world. He lets the brutes run the woods unmuzzled at night to guard us from the supposed danger. Which reminds me, we must be going.”

“The dogs loose at night reminds you?” he inquired.

“It’s unsafe for anyone but him to be abroad after dark,” she simply explained. “No time for talk now. We’ll finish our plans tonight.”

“Our plans for getting you back to civilization,” he grimly appended.

“It seems cruel to anticipate my uncle’s death while making arrangements for my comfort.”

“It would be hideously wrong to leave your safety to chance,” he warmly insisted. Before he could say more she suddenly clutched his wrist and urged him after her down the slope, her eyes wide with fear as she cried:

“Hurry, hurry. I fear Cumber has loosed the dogs!”

“Knowing you’re out?” he exclaimed.

“He’s forgotten. Remember he is weak-witted. Hark!”

A deep-throated baying sounded through the thickening gloom, the chorus entering its full swing with a tempo that could emanate only from wildlife suddenly set free and rejoicing. “He started to take

them to the hovel," she called over her shoulder as she took the lead in a narrow, winding path. "But he forgot. He's obeying his one obsession, his nightly habit. They're running unmuzzled."

"They're between us and the house," he protested, slackening his pace.

"We've time if we hurry. Don't talk," she sharply commanded.

He doubted it, for they were heading straight for the bellowing clamor. But pride kept him close to her heels. "Unless the house is very near—" he began.

"I'm making for a boat," she informed, now running swiftly and lightly.

A gray blur of water opened to their view even as she spoke. On their right and drawing nearer with unnerving rapidity rose the hunting cry of the dogs. But already the girl was splashing through the mud and reeds and was pushing off a crudely constructed flat-bottomed boat. "Jump in!" was her staccato command.

He gently lifted her aboard and with a push of the paddle sent the frail craft gliding from the shore. As he dropped in the stern and began sculling, the dogs burst into view, jaws free and exulting. On discovering their quarry had escaped they made fierce whining noises and ran up and down the shore. The leader even jumped into the water and swam a short distance after the boat.

"The cabin is on the knoll to the right," informed the girl. "The dogs will try to head us off, but we'll have time enough, as they'll make a wide detour to pass round a morass."

"He unmuzzled them knowing it might mean death for us," raged Dix.

"He's not responsible," she reminded, picking up the second paddle. "We'll soon be indoors and the dogs will lose interest in us. Then to plan your escape back to civilization."

"Escape?" he muttered. "To be sure. I had forgotten I must use finesse in quitting here."

"Faster! The dogs are swinging in," she warned.

DIX made sure the heavy door of the long, low structure was fast behind him before searching the shadows of the room. Then a seed of light budded and blossomed and he beheld her standing by a lamp, her profile that of a child if not for the heavy shadow sorrow had laid upon it.

Outside the dogs were making the night hideous, while the harsh voice of old Cumber

occasionally roared some order. As Dix leaned against the door, striving to coordinate his thoughts, the girl threw some pine-knots on the hearth of the huge fireplace and set them to blazing. Warmth and light filled the place, and if not for the dogs and the girl's melancholy mien Dix would have pronounced the retreat most comfortable. For the cold rain was now beating steadily on the roof and the coziness of the open fire suggested confidences.

"Please step in here to see uncle while I get you something to eat," she listlessly invited.

He furtively studied her small face as he advanced. It was her slight stature that had induced him to think of her as a mere child.

A glimpse of the misery in her wide eyes bespoke the woman who had suffered not a little.

"Who is it, Florence?" called a weak voice from an adjoining room.

She lighted a candle and passed into the room, announcing, "Mr. Bruce Dix, of the city, lost his way and here for the night, Uncle."

Dix gazed in pity at the sunken face of the sick man. In the prime he must have presented a fine figure of a man, but now he was woefully emaciated. Only his eyes seemed alive and in the feeble light of the candle they glowed like coals.

The man nodded to Dix and motioned him to approach closer. At the same time the girl glided to the door, saying, "He'll talk with you while I'm preparing your supper, Uncle."

She had barely crossed the threshold before the sick man had seized Dix's hand, scanned him with burning gaze, and then whispered, "You look clean and honest. Thank God for that! Hush! Did Cumber come in?"

"He's outside," soothed Dix. "Your servant—"

"Servant!" bitterly interrupted Dessel, his wasted features grimacing. "Master is the better word. The girl and I are his prisoners. It doesn't matter about me as my time is short. But it's eating my soul out to think of her being left."

"Prisoners?" gasped Dix.

"Softly. She doesn't know the worst. She doesn't know he believes he must keep us here. He believes evil awaits us if we return to civilization. That's why he got the dogs, to keep us here—to keep others out."

"It's damnable!" gritted Dix.

"He mustn't find you talking with me," hurriedly whispered Dessel, half rising. "I didn't

suspect the truth till too late. You must take my niece out to the nearest settlement.”

“She worries about you more than about herself,” said Dix.

“She doesn’t realize the danger,” muttered Dessel. “Cumber will not go out for provisions. Once the snow comes and buries this part of the world—it means starvation!”

“I leave tomorrow to bring help,”

“No, no,” huskily protested Dessel. “I shall not last till you return. Once I’m gone no knowing what insane freak old Cumber will take. You must stay till the end and somehow manage to take her with you. Promise me as you’re a man you’ll stand by her.”

“By all that’s good in the world I promise,” solemnly assured Dix.

“You’ve made it easier for me,” sighed Dessel, closing his eyes. “You must get a good start with the boat while Cumber sleeps. Pass through Little Purgatory. This rain will flood all the swamps south of it. You can go for miles and miles in the boat. It’ll be a hard rub, a good seventy-five miles if you go south. If you strike west to hit the traveled trail between Caribou Lake and Clear River, it means fifty miles and you can’t use the boats except in crossing the lake. I fear Cumber would follow you with the dogs if you took that course.”

“She shall get through safely. If you could hold out for a while—”

“Sh-h-h!” cautioned Dessel, his eyes flying open. “Leave me. Quick!”

Dix glided back to the living-room and had scarcely seated himself before the blaze than the door opened and Cumber entered. He slowly advanced to the fire, his frowning gaze never leaving the newcomer’s pale face. “What do you want here?” was his abrupt query.

“Food, rest. I lost my way,” replied Dix, fearful lest the madman spring upon him.

THE deep set eyes leered at him mockingly. “You were pretty near this place before losing your way. You were aiming in this direction.”

Dix patiently explained his experience in wandering from the Caribou trail, but even as he spoke he knew old Cumber’s thoughts were not following the recital. He was wandering among suspicions, dallying with half-formed plans, cunningly arranging plots, all of which were hostile and deadly to the stranger. As Dix concluded,

Cumber wheeled and glared at the candle in the sick room. “Who took that in there?” he demanded.

“The young lady.”

He snarled in his thick beard, sprang into the room and blew out the candle. On returning to the living-room he all but closed Dessel’s door. Then his mood lighted up with some fierce joviality which caused him to rub his hairy hands and chuckle deep in his throat. Dix decided it was the baying of the dogs, for their master was cocking his head as though weighing the individual notes and appraising the total effect.

“Brave, brave voices,” he gleefully cried. “And they are hungry.”

“Why do you have them here?” boldly asked Dix.

Cumber stealthily gave him the tail of his eye and readily explained, “To haul the sled in winter. They’ll make a brave team.”

“Great scheme,” endorsed Dix. “And you made the sled?”

To his surprise Cumber motioned him to follow and led the way through the kitchen, where the girl was busy with coffee making. Opening a door to a shed Cumber proudly pointed. Sure enough he had a sled, a long, narrow affair, homemade yet serviceable and built along the lines of the travois sled of the woodsmen. Only unlike the travois, it was boxed in like a sleigh, the back being unusually high.

“One could ride very comfortably in that,” approved Dix, noting how the runners had been shod with iron.

“Aye. And ride far,” muttered Cumber, turning away.

“There is room for but one,” added Dix.

“Only one,” agreed Cumber, snapping his finger joints excitedly. “It will travel smoothly. Nothing at all for my pets to haul. I used the hoops of the kerosene barrel on the runners.”

“You may have your supper now, Mr. Dix,” the girl called out with a touch of nervousness in her voice. “Cumber, your supper is by the stove.”

As Dix entered the kitchen she passed into the living-room with a tray of food and a pot of coffee. He admired her courage in holding the old man to his plane of servant and wondered if she sensed his status, that of master. Cumber bestowed a flaming look upon them, hesitated for a moment, then rushed to the small table and fell to eating like some ferocious, half-starved animal.

Dix, faint for need of food, lost no time in assailing the tray. From his place by the fireplace he could observe Cumber snapping and bolting his meat and bread. And as he watched him he likened him to one of the howling brutes outside. The girl passed to her uncle's room, carrying some steaming drink.

When she returned Dix asked, "Do you never eat?"

"Not now," she murmured. "By and by, perhaps. He is worse tonight."

"Miss Dessel, you must be brave. He is a very sick man. He is living on borrowed time. Even were he in town no physician could help him."

Tears welled to her eyes and her chin quivered although she fought bravely to control her emotion. To divert her thoughts Dix asked, "What is the meaning of the sled?"

"One of his fancies. When in his black moods he rambles much about going far away to a strange country."

"Apparently he plans to go alone."

"Possibly. Yet he has skates ready to use besides the sled. He was sharpening them only a few days ago. One could ride in the sled, one could skate—" She paused with a glimmer of horror in her eyes, and whispered, "Why, he must be planning to take *me!*"

"Good heavens, child," he whispered. "Haven't you given any thought to the future?"

"I suppose so. But not much," was the spiritless reply. "It has worried uncle, though. He just told me to talk with you. You start back tomorrow?"

"I remain here," he firmly replied. "It would be a crime to desert you. It is your uncle's wish that I stay."

There was no doubting the relief and sense of security his words had given her; her face mirrored it and her eyes thanked him warmly. "Now I shall feel safe," she murmured.

Both were silent till he had finished his meal, when he said, "Listen to the rain."

The wind was driving it in sheets against the small window. The dogs had fled to the refuge of the hovel. "If this keeps up the whole country will be flooded." He added, "So much the better for us."

She knew he was planning to use the boat. It seemed wrong to concert their own safety while no early aid could benefit her uncle; yet reason and common sense assured her it was right. She rose and passed to the window and blinked into the

blackness. Her little startled exclamation brought him to her side to peer over her shoulder. A light was mistily bobbing along the shore.

"What is he doing?" she puzzled, as, in a lull of the storm, they heard the sound of blows and the breaking of timbers.

He stepped to the door and opened it a trifle. When he returned to her his face was pinched and haggard. "He's destroyed the boat," he informed.

She heard him in stony silence, the hand clutching the simple window curtain straining till the muslin parted in shreds. "We must know the worst," he hoarsely continued. "Unless we can escape to high ground this flood will maroon us."

"We're surrounded by the swamp," she dully discouraged. "By morning this knoll will be an island. We three in here; Cumber and the dogs outside."

FOR three days the torrential downpour continued till the pools and the lakes of the Purgatory country were merged in one far stretching sheet of black water. Then overnight the skies cleared, the frost swept down from the north and the people on the knoll awoke in a new world.

It was on the morning of the fourth day of the cold wave that Mr. Dessel dropped into his last sleep.

Once old Cumber understood his master had gone he withdrew with his dogs to the farther side of the knoll and remained until nightfall. This left Dix alone to fashion a coffin and dig a shallow grave in the frozen ground. Dry-eyed and silent the girl watched him line the grave with spruce boughs and heard him repeat the service for the dead. After doing his duty by the deceased he led her through the edge of night to the cabin and sought to comfort her, promising that once back in civilization he would send men to remove the remains. On entering the living-room she seated herself by the fire and for a long time remained silent.

"It's bitter cold out," he said, standing by her side and gently patting her shoulder. "And you have been very brave."

"The ice thickens fast in the lake," she murmured. Suddenly lifting her head and meeting his pitying gaze she whispered, "Don't think I fail in appreciation. You have been good to me. What could I have done without you, what—" Unable to continue she wept for the first time since her uncle's death.

He was wise enough not to interrupt this display of emotion and simply stood by her side, patting her shoulder. Gradually her sobs ceased and she said, "I won't be weak again."

"Don't try to suppress anything, little woman," he gently soothed.

She clasped his hand, then clutched it fiercely as a sharp report echoed through the darkness outside, smiting their ears through the frosty air like the crack of a whip.

"What was that?" cried Dix, releasing his hand and darting to the window.

"Cumber shooting small game for the dogs," she explained. "It made my nerves jump."

"Then he has a weapon?" whispered Dix.

At first the full significance of his tone and query did not register. She stared at him questioningly for a moment; then her face flushed and she lamented, "I should have told you. Yes; he has a rifle. I know what you fear and it was criminal in me not to think to tell you."

"We'll fear nothing," he mumbled, yet gnawing his lips. "If I had known—"

"Forgive me," she pleaded. "If heedless for myself I should have remembered your danger. Now with uncle gone and him armed—"

"It matters none his having the gun," he deprecated. "I'll make a try for it tonight—"

When old Cumber finished feeding his pets and entered the house he was unarmed. Nor could Dix locate the weapon although he searched the shed and peeped into Cumber's room. The fact that the man was cunning enough to keep the rifle concealed bespoke a sinister purpose. Dix did not dare to wander from the immediate vicinity of the house, for once he strayed aside he knew the dogs would hunt him as fair game. Undoubtedly the rifle was in the hovel, but to search there with the brutes unmuzzled meant a horrible death.

When he returned to the living-room, his ears tingling with the cold, he found old Cumber crouched on the floor and brooding before the leaping flames.

"It's zero or lower," Dix announced to the girl who had withdrawn to the shadows in one corner.

Cumber jerked up his head and staring at the two remarked, "The master is gone to a fair country far to the North. The ice holds and tomorrow I must be off to find him."

The light from the fireplace flared in Dix's eyes and the glance he exchanged with the girl contained

a message. She caught his inspiration and her own gaze warmed and she slowly nodded her head in acquiescence. Bowing over her he whispered, "We will start early and get ahead of him."

"The dogs will stay in the hovel because of the cold," she murmured. "I will be ready."

"Pack up food, matches and a compass. Make a bundle of blankets and put on your warmest clothes. Where are the skates?"

"Hanging in the shed behind the door. I'll secure the provisions now."

THE glowing coals in the fireplace vaguely illuminated the room as Dix tiptoed to the door and opened it a crack. The sharp air whipped the blood to his face and filled him with a strange exultation. The half-lights in the east were announcing the morning. The dogs were quiet, doubtlessly crowded together in the hovel for warmth. Old Cumber was in his room, asleep, Dix hoped.

He tapped softly on the girl's door and immediately she appeared, a mackinaw swathing her small figure. She carried a roll of blankets and a bag of provisions. "We must bring the sled through the house," he whispered.

Moving as softly as possible they gained the shed and picked up the sled. It was necessary to pass old Cumber's door, but this, fortunately, was closed. The skates had been already secured. Dix was now in something of a quandary. He did not believe he could drag the sled to the lake without arousing both Cumber and the dogs. The girl guessed the dilemma and insisted she be allowed to help. He was loath to consent. His indecision was interrupted by the sound of a shuffling step in the kitchen. Dropping the provisions and blankets into the sled Dix pushed it through the door, whispering:

"Drag it to the ice. It's a case of must."

"And you?" she shivered.

"I'll be along directly. Go."

He closed the door on her and turned just as Cumber stole into the room. For a moment his heart jumped and he fancied he was facing a new and grotesque evil—a beast that walked erect like a man. A second glance revealed the cause for such grim imagining. Cumber had pulled a heavy fur cap down to his ears and what with his beard and deep-set eyes he resembled anything savage except a man. He took in the situation at a glance and with a

growling cry turned to retreat. With a spring Dix was upon him and had him by his broad shoulders. Outside came the rasping shriek of the iron-shod runners as they grated over the frozen ground, to be quickly answered by the fierce *qui vive* of the dogs.

"You are a devil!" screamed the madman, twisting and seizing Dix around the waist and with terrible strength hurling him across the room.

Again Dix overtook him before he could make the kitchen, and this time managed to avoid the crushing embrace. The sled complained shrilly and the dogs increased their protest. The two men fought blindly, Cumber striving to break clear and release the dogs, Dix grimly determined to stop him. In one of their gyrations they crashed against the table and as Dix fell across it his outstretched hand brushed across the skates. With a mighty effort he drew clear of the groping fingers and struck at random. Cumber fell with a crash. Still grasping the skates Dix sprinted down the slope and arrived just as the girl drew the sled onto the ice.

"Jump in and roll up in the blankets," he barked, as he rapidly adjusted the skates.

"Cumber?" she choked.

"He won't bother us," he panted. "But the dogs may break loose any minute . . ."

"They're shut in or they would have been here before now," she shuddered, staring horrified at the dark bulk of the cabin.

A high-pitched, ululating cry ascended from the top of the knoll in a hideous spiral of warning and a door slammed violently.

"By heavens! He's able to do mischief," groaned Dix, fumbling at the last clamp.

"He's gone to the hovel," moaned the girl.

"Sit tight!" commanded Dix. The next moment the sled was gliding over the ice, the clear musical clang of the skates cutting the crisp air like knives. He took a course paralleling the shore and as he found his stride the uproar on the knoll changed into a purposeful chant, the deep, swinging chorus of the dog-pack hot on the trail, pricked through with the sharp strident cries of the madman.

"They're coming!" gasped the girl, peering back.

Dix swung farther from the shore and cast a glance behind. Dark shapes were darting along the edge of the ice. Suddenly a spurt of flame punctured the gloom and something whined viciously overhead.

"He's using the rifle," muttered the girl.

Dix mended his stride, spurred on by the singing lead. He was now at the tip of a cedar-draped point and as he rounded this and left Cumber's range of vision he breathed in deep relief. But his meandering course had cost them distance as was emphasized by a crashing in the undergrowth on his left and just ahead. Without pausing to reason he swerved at right angles from the shoreline and darted toward the middle of the lake. As he gave his heel to the ice in making the turn, a sprawling, snarling shape struck the ice by his side and slid along helplessly beside him, the hot glow of the cruel eyes causing the girl to mask her face with the blanket. This loathsome companionship endured only for a moment, however, as with another backward thrust Dix headed the sled down the lake. The rest of the pack were now on the ice, running rapidly.

SKATING easily and hugging the shore now he knew all the dogs were behind him, Dix allowed the animals to draw within some fifty feet of him, when he turned sharply. The maddened brutes essayed in vain to change their courses as they slid helplessly along. Enraged by their failure and pricked on by the fearful cries of their master, somewhere behind the point, they frantically regained their feet and streaked once more after the fugitives. Dix held straight ahead until they were dangerously near, then repeated his maneuver and sped for the outlet. But now he was within the zone of the rifle as Cumber had gained the point. Several times the bullets clipped the ice on either side of the sled.

Either the instinct of the chase or the commands of their master now worked a change in the brutes' tactics, for immediately following their last grotesque failure they scrambled ashore and disappeared in the spruce. The girl cried out in relief, but Dix gritted his teeth and put every ounce of energy into his feet. Ahead was the outlet of the lake, and the winding stream connecting it with Little Purgatory seemed very narrow in the gray dawn. He knew the dogs would attempt to head him off once he quit the open expanse of the lake. Already they were racing in a straight line while he was held to the curving course of the river. A wild impulse to trust to luck and enter the overflowed areas was entertained for a moment, but he feared the shadows and the logs and reeds, and held to the

stream.

"We've left them behind," rejoiced the girl.

"Sit tight," he panted. "They may try to head us off."

The stream curved and twisted and in places doubled back on itself. Between strokes Dix listened for the menace he knew was threading the covert ahead. At last he located the danger, a low rasping growling. His aching back straightened, his sagging arms grew rigid, and before the girl detected the danger he had picked up speed to the sprinting point, and he thanked God he had learned to skate as a youth.

"Open water!" she shrilly warned, pointing to a black streak in the middle of the channel. Too late to swing to the right, he skirted it on the left, plunging into the face of the crouching danger.

Then it was upon him, and with an inarticulate cry in which was blended the shrill scream of the girl, he lunged ahead just as the mass of infuriated beasts leaped out to pull them down. Like a meteor the sled shot ahead. Something grabbed at his steel-shod heel and relinquished it with a howl of pain. And he was clear of them and they were sliding into the black water.

"That'll hold them for a bit," he choked, bending low over the back of the sled.

"I'm proud of you," she cried.

"Nonsense. I was scared blue," he panted. "Plenty of room ahead. No more ambushes."

He took it leisurely and over his shoulder watched the dogs struggling to crawl back to the ice. The plunge evidently had lessened their lust, for they whined and shivered as old Cumber trotted up and dragged them from their bath. Dix was halfway across Little Purgatory before the last brute was rescued. Cumber frantically discharged his rifle and raged at his pets. But their ardor was dampened and they would not resume the pursuit. Strangely indifferent to the occasional bullets Dix watched the scene with grim satisfaction. The dogs refused to advance and Cumber's wild rage had spoiled his marksmanship.

A slow smile of triumph was overspreading Dix's haggard face when there came a wrench at his right foot and he would have fallen if not for his grasp on the back of the sled. As it was he sagged to his knees. As the girl felt herself whirled about she cried out, "Are you hurt?" And there was a world of agony in her voice.

"Clamp given out," he explained. "Give me a piece of cord—anything."

"Better than cord. Here's a strap," she rejoiced by replying.

AS he knelt to repair the damage he noted with alarm that Cumber had detected his predicament and with renewed zeal was urging the dogs forward. But the brutes were mutinous and moved uneasily in a circle about their master,

Infuriated to see his victims within reach and about to escape, the crazed man began belaboring the dogs with the butt of his rifle. They fell back from him, snapping and snarling as the blows fell. With a wild cry Cumber swung his rifle at the leader, holding it by the muzzle. The blow fell heavily, the dog reared with rage and grabbed it between his powerful teeth, there was an explosion and the man went down in a heap.

"He's shooting at us," mumbled the girl.

"He'll not harm us," comforted Dix, rising to his feet once more and resuming his flight.

"We shall soon be there," he encouraged, pointing to the smoke of the settlement.

"You've been good to me," she said.

"Who wouldn't be?" he murmured. "Sometime I shall have something to say to you, sometime when I have the right."

"The right? You have that now," she impulsively cried.

"No; not till you're back home among your kin and friends," he awkwardly corrected.

Then she understood and a crimson wave swept up from beneath the mackinaw collar and made her eyes appear very moist and tender. "I shall always be glad to see you," she shyly whispered.