

Blizzard-Bound Crypt

By Edward A. Herron

In the lawman's weakening fingers lay the key that would open up the road to freedom—or seal him in a blood-chilled tomb.



DEPUTY Marshal Royal kept his prisoner well up in front, breaking trail down the Innoko River for the six dogs who came panting along the crusted snow. Each night, moving warily, he hobbled Louer and let him eat by the fire. Afterwards he slipped handcuffs on him, stuffed him into a sleeping robe, and fastened it tightly about his neck.

“Not taking any chances, are you?” Louer asked as they completed the nightly ritual. Out in the cold darkness one of the dogs moved uneasily, and the six furred heads lifted.

Royal shrugged his shoulders. “It’s a job. Might as well do it the right way as the wrong—and have you slitting my throat.”

Louer’s lips parted beneath his black mustache. “Interest you in a thousand dollars? Forty-eight hours would see me into the delta of the Kuskokwim. Nobody’d ever find me in there.”

“Forget it.”

“The hero type.”

“What do you mean, hero? I’m not the guy that caught you. All I’m doing is taking you down to be hanged.”

Louer was silent, and between the two men hunched in their robes the fire dropped lower. Royal looked up at the stars and the flat disc of the moon. One of the stars wavered and fell in a tremendous zig-zag. He blinked, and his mind crawled

into action. Across from him, Louer spoke in the darkness.

“Saw it too, eh? Remember what they used to say in school—about shooting stars meaning death?”

“Save your stories for the hangman, Louer. I’m tired. Good night.”

The fire gutted and became red eyes winking. There was a movement outside the dull glow of the embers and one of the dogs came padding through the clearing, sniffing cautiously at Louer’s robe, then went back to its bed of spruce boughs. Royal pulled his head deeper within the robe as the temperature started to sag. At the edge of the clearing a spruce suddenly cracked with a startling pop.

Royal raised himself on one elbow, straining toward Louer, but the prisoner was silent. The deputy marshal rubbed the back of his head against the soft fur of the robe. He closed his ears to the small sounds of the night, and sleep came over him like an extra blanket.

He woke from sleep screaming, fighting the entangling folds of the robe, threshing about, rolling over and over until his cheek touched a hot ember of the fire, and he snapped into wakefulness. Louer was cursing at him, calling his name.

“Royal! Royal! Blast you, wake up! If you’re going to kill yourself open these handcuffs first! You hear me? Royal!”

The deputy marshal sat upright, shaking his head, rubbing his cheek where an ember had burned it. He grinned sheepishly in the darkness.

“Okay, Louer,” he called, “I’m sorry. Got to dreaming about how you did in that guy up on the Dishna River. Gave me the horrors.”

“Yeah,” Louer snarled, “but I killed him quick. Did you ever think what’d happen to me if you got yourself killed off while I was still trussed up like a rotten pig? Did you know I’d die out here by bits, with maybe the dogs eating me before I was dead? How’d you like to be trussed up here with a fool deputy heaving himself around like a mad man, throwing himself in the fire? Why’n’t you give me a fighting chance?”

“Go to sleep,” Royal called wearily, but as he adjusted himself in the robe the thought preyed on him. What would Louer do? Would he go mad before the cold or the dogs got him? Or starve while he was cased like a mummy? All night Royal was wakeful, worrying.

On the move next day with Louer running ahead, breaking trail, Royal was nagged by the thought.

THAT night after they had eaten he snapped the cuffs on the prisoner, placing the murderer’s hands behind his back. Louer protested.

“Let me have my hands in front of me. Then if anything happened to you, I still could get out of the robe somehow and have a chance against the dogs.”

“Yeah,” Royal agreed, “and the same way you might find a chance to splatter my head with a rock while I was sleeping. No, thanks. You’re the guy that got yourself in this mess.” He took the axe and walked over to a clump of spruce to cut boughs on which to spread their robes.

He was nervous, swinging the axe in short, choppy strokes, wincing when the steel bit into a knot and sent an angry shake along the axe handle to tug at his wrists. He was conscious of Louer’s eyes

upon him—too conscious.

“Look out there!” Louer yelled.

Royal half-turned his head, and the axe glanced against the hard trunk and shot downward to his instep. He shuddered with the quick stab of pain and stepped back, watching the blood spurt upward.

“The axe,” he said uncertainly, “I’ve cut myself.”

He stumbled to the fire, kneeling, his fingers moving about the gash in his mukluk. Louer bent over, fascinated, staring down at the thick red flow bubbling like a miniature artesian well and tumbling off the mukluk. Royal shifted his foot, leaving a cherry-red stain on the snow. He started to speak, but the words became entangled in his tongue and only a low sound of disbelief came out.

“You’ll bleed to death,” Louer whispered hoarsely, straining his arms against the handcuffs. “You gotta stop that bleeding.” He lifted his dark lean face anxiously. “Do something! Quick!”

Royal pressed his fingers about the wound, and the blood came faster. He could feel the strength drain from him with the angry flood. Once he’d heard that a man who lost half his blood was doomed. The way the blood was coming, he’d lose all he had. He took his handkerchief and sopped at the stream, fighting the panic that mounted within him.

“Press on your groin, man!” Louer yelled at him. “Quick! That’s it! Now hard! Hard!”

The angry spurt slowed to a sluggish stream. Royal lifted his head, looking to the dogs, to the sled, and to Louer, who leaned forward, panting with excitement.

“Tourniquet’s next,” Louer snapped.

Royal looked about the fire for a stick, and fumbled with one hand to pull the belt from his trousers. His fingers lifted from his groin, and immediately the blood came to life again. He was like a man transfixed,

with death threatening at every move.

“Unlock these cuffs!” Louer pleaded. “Let me out of here, Royal! For God’s sake, man, let me out of these the cuffs!”

Royal snapped his head back, his fingers pressing even harder against the artery. He leaned heavily against a spruce, fighting the impulse to slump to the ground. How much blood had he lost? With an effort he limped over to Louer and fumbled with the key until the cuffs unlocked.

HE TURNED away, almost liking the lethargy that came over him. Slowly he fastened the belt about his thigh, wadding a handkerchief and placing it over the artery while he began languidly to twist the spruce stick in the belt. Behind him he could hear Louer fighting the knots in the cord that bound his ankles, but he didn’t bother to turn his head.

He felt a heavy, rough hand upon his shoulder, and knew that the same hand was diving within his parka, fumbling for the gun in his shoulder holster. Next, he thought, would come the crushing blow on

the head. He twisted on the tourniquet, then he slid off into darkness. . . .

When he fought his way upward through the gray clouds of unconsciousness, the doctor at the mission hospital was putting the final knot on a pure white bandage encasing his foot. The doctor nodded to him.

“Glad to see you coming around, Royal. Keep this foot quiet.”

Royal could see the white coat floating toward the door, then the voice came again. “That fellow who brought you in asked me to give you this message when you came around. ‘Forty-eight hours.’ That’s all. ‘Forty-eight hours.’ Quite a character. Want to send a telegraph message to the marshal downriver?”

Royal’s fingers gripped the sheet beneath him. He tried to struggle upward. “Yes. Yes. Tell him—” He bit down on his tongue. “How long’ve I been here?”

“Since yesterday morning.”

The deputy dropped his head back on the pillow. How long was forty-eight hours? “Tomorrow,” he murmured, “tomorrow I’ll give you a message for the marshal.” Then he pretended to sleep.