



# Peon of the Snows

by Chart Pitt

**A** THOUSAND jumbled street noises came in through the open window of the Hudson Bay fur-house, where Rod Selkirk was bending over the sorting-table.

It was not the din of a city's traffic that the sorter heard as his fingers lingered upon an unusually fine marten-skin. His heart leaped to the sound of wilderness voices; the low humming of the northern pines, and the silver tinkle of a mountain brook. It was the far challenge of the unmapped lands, that called and called, and refused to be still.

Lovingly he caressed the wonderful skin that had awakened that flood of memories. Then his hand paused in the middle of the stroke.

The unmistakable crackle of paper came to him over the soft whisper of the trembling fur.

Methodically his fingers searched within the marten-skin, and brought out the crumpled page of a magazine. Thoughtfully he placed it upon the table and smoothed out its wrinkled surface.

Then the languid unconcern that was born of a homesick longing was suddenly swept away. White-lipped and trembling he read the written words that glared up at him from the margin of the page.

For God's sake come and save me!

Tom Larkin.

One terrible moment Rod Selkirk held the message in his trembling fingers, fighting off the horror that suddenly had pounced down upon him. For Tom Larkin was *dead!*

Rod Selkirk had ranged the northern wilderness for ten years in company with that matchless old hunter, whose heart was as big and unmapped as the lonely lands that he loved.

At last they had blundered upon an untrapped valley on the far head-waters of the Pelly River, and made a fortune in one winter.

They had agreed never to go back to the old life. Rod had found it a losing battle, fighting against that subtle lure of the north, and had compromised by going to work for the Hudson Bay Fur Company at Seattle, where he might handle the skins that came out of the wilderness which he never could forget.

But Tom Larkin had followed the fur-trails too many years. He sniffed the first autumn wind that blew out of the north—and broke his promise.

With a homesick longing for the lonely lakes and dog-toothed crags of his beloved wilderness, he had hired out to the Hudson Bay people, and turned his face toward the Pelly.

De Friers, at the Pelly River post, sent word down that the old hunter had been caught in a fierce blizzard. An Indian had found him frozen among the drifts.

Yes, Tom Larkin was dead, and the northland had lost something it never could replace. A thousand times the old hero had faced death that weaker men might live. Yet it was the wilderness that had claimed him in the end. He was lost, but never would be forgotten while men followed a dim trail through the blinding smother of the storm. Every wind that blew out of the north seemed to Rod Selkirk to hold something of the old man's presence, as though his soul still wandered upon the hills.

Yet there was the scrap of paper bearing the old man's unmistakable scrawl. Could it be that—somewhere in the trackless north, Tom Larkin lived—and suffered?

However, there was little to point the way. The paper bore neither date nor address. It had every appearance of having been dashed off in haste.

The marten-skin which had served as a hiding-place for the message might have come from any one of a hundred creeks where some independent Indian had a trap-line, and sold his furs through the Pelly River post. Or it might have come direct from the Wolf Canon country, where De Friers was master of the wilderness miles.

But if Tom Larkin still lived, why had De Friers sent out that message about the man who was found dead among the drifts?

It was too detailed a report to have been a case of mistaken identity; and no message had come from Tom since he left tidewater at Skagway.

The thought gave Rod a cold chill, as if some hidden thing menaced him across the miles. But only for a moment did the fur-sorter allow that unspoken fear to stand like a phantom barrier across the northern trail. The conviction grew that Tom Larkin lived, and

waited for his coming.

That was enough. Among the multitude of men who owed a debt of gratitude to the old hunter, none had looked upon his naked soul as had Rod Selkirk; and upon no other did the obligations of brotherhood fall so heavily.

The fur-sorter tucked the paper in his pocket and started for the office. At first he had intended to show the paper to McMasters, who was in charge of the Seattle branch. Upon second thought he decided that it would be foolish to expose his hand now.

He knew he was pitted against some hidden power. It had been no trifling thing that had caused the resourceful old warrior to send out that pitiful appeal for help.

The face of Rod Selkirk had assumed a bored expression when he slipped into the private office of McMasters. He purposely left the door ajar behind him.

"I can't stand it any longer—I got to get back to the wilderness for a while." the fur-sorter complained petulantly.

"This rustle and roar will drive me mad if I stay another day. I'm going to the Barren Grounds or to the tundra-country back of Point Barrow—I got to get a little room to breathe."

"You fellows from the wilds are a queer race of ginks," McMasters smiled. "But we need you in the business. If you ever get tired of wandering, just report to the nearest Hudson Bay post and go to work. There always is room for a man like you with the company."

Rod gripped the extended hand of the manager, and walked out of the room.

"You wasn't thinking of going back to the old stamping-ground, was you Selkirk?"

The voice at his elbow startled the fur-sorter. He turned and looked into the cold, calculating eyes of Louie Raus, the assistant manager.

Raus never had tried to hide his hatred

for Selkirk. He had been at the Pelly River post when the two hunters brought their boat-load of choice marten-skins down from that untrapped valley upon the far head-waters of the stream. Raus had pleaded excitedly, and De Friers had blustered when they saw that cargo of matchless furs slipping through their fingers. But in the end Rod had sold the skins to the Hudson Bay people in Seattle.

That cargo of fur had put Rod and Tom in solid with McMasters and the rest. Yet the hatred only deepened in the gray-green eyes of Raus when he heard of it.

This was the first pleasant word the assistant manager had spoken to the sorter since he came to work for them. So Rod answered him cheerfully:

“I hadn’t thought of it—why?”

“Oh, nothing, only I had some orders going out to De Friers, and thought I might send them along—but no matter—it wasn’t anything important.”

As Rod Selkirk turned away he had the uncomfortable sensation that those gray-green eyes of Raus were looking through him as if he had been made of glass; that even the message from Tom Larkin which he had hidden in his pocket was not safe from the prying assistant manager.

Once more he sensed an intangible danger that hovered over him like a dead man’s curse. He quickened his steps toward his boarding-house in the hope of shaking off the morbid impression. But it followed him through the jostling streets of Seattle, a sinister hate that dogged his footsteps, but refused to come out into the open and fight, as the honor-code of the wilderness demanded.

Yet through the shadow of this nameless danger, which only the soul of the hunter sensed as yet, there was the ringing call of the northland. Now there was a satisfied note in the far voice, like the lazy droning of wind among the spruces. It seemed to him that the wise old wilderness knew that soon it

would once more hear the sound of Rod Selkirk’s feet along the lonely trails.

Then the voice changed, and it seemed to be a greedy gloating that drifted in on the north wind; something that stamped and raged among those homeless solitudes as it waited for the coming of its prey.

## II.

MORE than once Rod Selkirk had made preparations for a thousand-mile journey between the dark and the dawn. So now he gathered up his camp-kit and was aboard a north-bound steamer before most men would have finished reading the time-tables. Less than two hours had elapsed since Rod had heard that call for help, and already he was coming to the relief of his friend as fast as steam could carry him.

There was nothing in the make-up of Rod Selkirk that should have made him a marked man among that crowd of miners and prospectors who were heading back to the wilderness. His garments were of a kind that had won general approval among the hardy souls who people that last frontier up under the flicker of the northern lights. His face bore the indelible traces of arctic winds, and his gait had been schooled to perfection upon hard trails.

Any man of the north would have called him “old timer,” and let it go at that!

But Seattle was still in sight astern when a pious-faced man in black picked Rod out of the crowd to make a confidant of him.

“Brother, tell me of your north. What will I find there?” The stranger laid a hand upon Rod’s shoulder. “You are a wonderful race of men, you fellows who live among the snows. But silent—believe me, brother, you are the first man on the ship who hasn’t backed away from me and whispered ‘sky-pilot’ to his friends.”

“I suppose they don’t want to talk

along your line,” Selkirk ventured, “They don’t keep read up on such things—and are ashamed to show their ignorance.”

“It isn’t that.” The stranger lowered his voice. “I wanted them to tell me about the north—to show me the ways of the land, so I wouldn’t go wrong. I had given up in despair when I happened to see you. I knew at a glance that I had found a man who would show me the ways of the country.”

“You made a mistake that time, parson,” Rod laughed. “You’ll have to wish yourself on one of those miners. They know where they are going, and when they get there they’ll stop. I may keep a going till I hit the pole.”

“A most remarkable man, most remarkable,” the parson flattered. “Just like your wild, free country. To know you is to know the north. It is fortunate that we both have a roving commission, and each has a touch of the wanderlust in his soul. We are going to get on famously together, as soon as we take to the trail.”

“There won’t be any trail where I’m going,” Rod attempted to shake off the unwelcome guest. “I have been down in the States spending my money. I have got enough of civilization to last me a long while. You can bet I won’t let the grass grow under my feet as soon as I get ashore. I wouldn’t dare take you along—you couldn’t keep up with me. I’d have to leave you for the wolves.”

“Don’t be so sure about that!” There was a thrill of pride in the parson’s voice. “I used to be the champion cross-country walker in the Tacoma Y. M. C. A.”

Rod didn’t try to argue it out with the man who wanted to be his trail-mate. He avoided him.

Selkirk was the first passenger ashore at Skagway. Once he caught a glimpse of the parson on the street and dodged around a corner.

Rod hurried aboard the waiting train and began the hard climb to Whitehorse. He had everything in readiness, and as soon as he stepped from the cars he plunged into the wilderness, following an old, abandoned Indian trail that struck across country to the upper Pelly, one hundred and fifty miles as the crow flies. There was a song in the heart of the man who had grown weary of the bustle of the town. The soft wind that fluttered among the tree-tops was like the voice of an old friend speaking to him. As eager as a schoolboy he pressed forward till the gathering darkness shut out the trail and forced him to camp.

He sat beside his leaping fire and listened to the voices of the wilderness night. The spicy perfume of the northern spruces was like wine in Rod Selkirk’s blood. He ate his simple supper with a keener relish than he ever had felt over a feast back there in the town.

The satisfaction of that first camp out there under the fragrant spruces was in a measure broken by the memory of Tom Larkin. There was something missing from the picture. No friendly face smiled at him across the leaping blaze. The big-hearted old hunter who always had shared his camp was caught in the tentacles of some mysterious power that hung like a curse above the northern hills.

Once more Rod seemed to sense the nearness of danger, and his hearing was sharpened for any unusual sound.

For an hour the night deepened about him. The wilderness voices grew more confident and unafraid out in the swamp. Then over the soft sighing of the spruces the man beside the fire heard something that sent the blood leaping in his veins.

It was the measured tread of human feet upon the mossy trail!

Rod moved back into the shadows and waited.

A moment later the hard-walking parson came stamping into the firelight.

"This is worse than anything I ever experienced with the Y. M. C. A.," he wheezed as he threw his pack down beside the fire.

"Forget about that Y. M. C. A. business," Selkirk snapped. "You are trail-wise—and then some. Just how you happened to get tangled up with trouble down there in the States is none of my business. Any man who has known the north as you have known it, and then tries to live on the outside—well, he has my sympathy."

"Sure thing—that parson stunt was for the benefit of the crowd," the stranger laughed. "I didn't expect you to believe it—not after we got out of sight of the rail-head."

"Well, here's luck to you, old timer—but remember I'm traveling alone." Rod handed the parson a cup of steaming coffee from the fire. "Now, don't get it into your head that I've got a rich strike back in the country here because I am so anxious to shake you loose. I have heard enough talk in the past year to last me the rest of my life. I want a chance to stretch out beside the fire and just smoke and think, without having some mouthy guy trying to horn in with a fool argument. It's peace and quiet I want—and I'm willing to fight to get them."

"I'm dog-tired." The stranger deliberately ignored the issue Rod had raised. "I'm going to turn in."

The next morning the parson awkwardly crawled from his sleeping-bag. There was a troubled look in his eyes.

"I was softer than I thought—and tried to do too much yesterday," he admitted woefully. "I'll have to stay in camp to-day."

That suited Rod exactly. He hurriedly ate his breakfast and swung his pack to his shoulders.

"So-long, parson," Selkirk offered his hand.

"So-long, old timer. If we ever meet up there, just forget that you ever saw me

before—will you?"

"Sure thing," Rod agreed as he started down the trail. In his heart he sympathized with the man behind. His own muscles ached, and his joints fairly snapped at every step. As soon as he was out of sight he dropped into an easier gait.

He knew this would be the worst day of the trip. After that he would be able to cover his usual thirty miles.

### III.

THE days that followed were as drab and uneventful as the lonely swamps through which he was journeying. The soft moss underfoot gave no sound as he passed. Like a silent ghost he drifted through the wilderness, where only a narrow speck of sky showed through the swaying branches, and the spruce-gloom hung deep and unbroken over the homeless swamps.

At dawn he was up and away, and when night swooped down upon him he built his camp. There would be an hour of beautiful dreams beside the leaping fire, before the trail-blight drove him to his blankets.

Six days out from Whitehorse the Indian trail joined the well-beaten portage road of Wolf Canon. An hour later the buildings of the Pelly River post showed up through the afternoon haze.

Rod Selkirk hurried up to the post. He intended to pass for a prospector, and had no fear of being recognized. That time when he came down the river with a cargo of marten-skins he had bristled with a six month's growth of hair and beard. Now he was freshly shaved and shorn, and felt that his identity was safely hidden.

As he drew near he noticed that a new building had been added to the settlement, a little block-house perched upon the edge of the river-bank.

When he stepped around the corner of the company store, Selkirk nearly dropped in his tracks.

The parson was seated in front of the building puffing at a fat cigar.

Rod passed him without a word. Not because of his promise, but because of a sudden resentment at the dogged persistency of the man.

He hadn't an idea what kind of game the pious fraud was playing; but the fur-sorter couldn't shake off the feeling that this man who wouldn't take no for an answer would in some way get tangled up in the web of intrigue from which Tom Larkin had found it impossible to escape.

De Friers himself was tending the store. With deliberate care he marked the page and paragraph in the cheap novel he was reading; then he faced his customer across the greasy counter.

"How many prospectors were operating up-stream this summer?" Rod ventured, as he took out his moose-hide wallet.

"About a dozen—but they all went down last week." The man behind the counter loosened the collar about his thick neck. His small eyes gleamed like those of a trapped weasel. Yet there was a trace of a smile beneath his unkempt beard.

"Any of the fellows strike pay dirt?"

"Don't think so." The man who ruled the Wolf Canon country looked his visitor over from top to toe.

"Give me a half-pound of black tea." The pretended prospector walked over to the door and looked anxiously at a bank of soft gray clouds that were beginning to show above the spruce-tops to the northeast.

As soon as the package was on the counter Rod stowed it in his pocket, threw down a half-dollar and walked out of the store.

There was something in the eyes of De Friers that put Selkirk upon his guard. If the

swarthy giant had failed to recognize his new customer, he was trying hard to remember.

The trapper looked about him for a suitable place to camp. He held up a moistened finger to catch the direction of the breeze. It came out of the northeast.

Rod moved up-stream. He didn't want to spend a night down-wind from the Indian village. He knew that the first catch of mink were coming in to the post, and they would be thickly covered with fat. It always fell to the lot of the native women to scrape away this musky grease before drying the skins, and their huts would smell to the high heavens as soon as the wind freshened.

Night swooped down upon the homeless forest, and something in the abysmal loneliness of the surroundings crept into the heart of the trapper as he crouched above his speck of flame.

Caution prompted him to move well back from the fire, and stretch his sleeping-bag in a clump of young spruces. Nothing would be able to prowl among those sharp-spined shrubs without awaking him.

Some time in the night he was roused by the wailing of a gale among the-spruce-tops. Rod sniffed the air in disgust. The fetid odor of mink-grease filled the night. The wind must have changed while he slept.

Then his sharp eyes caught a faint flicker in the dark, where the gale had uncovered an ember among the ashes of his camp-fire. That speck of fire gave him his bearings. Rod Selkirk sat up with a start. The wind had not changed. *The smell of mink-grease was coming down the river!*

The trapper had spent years in the pathless wilderness, and knew that life always hung by a hair. Often the correct reading of a footprint in the snow, or the far call of a bird in the night, had saved him from disaster. It was upon such trifles that he had learned to lean. That one secret had enabled him to fight famine and flood, and yet live.

There was a reason for that mink-odor coming from the direction of the blockhouse instead of the Indian camp. It was a part of Rod Selkirk's creed to know *why*.

He was pitting his wits against the cunning of the wild—against something that crouched in the gloom of the northern spruces, and refused to come out into the open to fight.

Now, if ever, he must rely upon his natural cunning for safety.

#### IV.

LIKE an animal of the wilderness, Rod Selkirk crawled from his lair and followed up-wind through the night.

The soft rustle of spruce-needles against his clothing ceased. He was out into the clearing at last. He could hear the eery calling of the wind as it sucked around the eaves of a building. A moment later the blockhouse rose up before him out of the night-gloom.

The acrid smell of mink-grease hung like a curse about the little structure. In a lull of the gale Rod heard the rattle of a chain from within.

"A fur-house, I guess, and they have got a dog watching it," he grumbled to himself.

The man outside was already turning away when he heard a human voice—a broken, babbling voice as mad as the mirthless laugh of a loon upon some night-bound northern lake.

Cautiously Rod groped his way to the window and peeped through the bars. The stygian blackness within mocked even the sharp eyes of the hunter. He fished a flash-light from his pocket, determined to know the meaning of the strange combination of sounds that came from beyond the guarded window.

Then with a gasp he dropped the electric device back into its hiding-place. The gale had whipped a hole in the heavy clouds,

and the blinding white moonlight flashed across the black forests like the sudden glare of lightning in the night. That ghastly light poured through the little window, and fell in a checkered pattern upon the opposite side of the room.

With horror-stricken eyes Rod Selkirk clung to the bars of that northern prison, and stared at the thing which moved about in the patch of moonlight.

It was the pitiful wreckage of what once had been a mighty hunter—*Tom Larkin, chained like a dog to the wall.*

The fire of madness glared in his sunken eyes, and his wasted face bore the red welts of a dog-whip above his tangled beard.

The clouds scurried over the face of the moon, and once more the northern wilderness was steeped in the murk of the night.

With the lust of battle burning in his heart, Rod Selkirk flung himself against the locked door. It refused to yield an inch. Regardless of consequences he drew his hunting-ax and attacked it savagely.

With the strength of a maniac he tore aside the last splinter that stood between him and his friend, and plunged into the room.

For a moment he fumbled with his flash-light. Then the glare of a suddenly uncovered lantern behind him flooded the interior of the prison with its yellow glow.

Rod Selkirk turned with uplifted ax, determined to fight to the death in defense of the old man whose life had been one endless battle, that weaker men might live.

The fur-sorter was half-blinded by the sudden light in his eyes. Before he could discover anything against which to launch his attack a cudgel came whizzing through the air toward him.

He tried to dodge the treacherous weapon, but he was a fraction of a second too slow, and the heavy club crashed against his head.

He felt the thud as the wood came in contact with his skull, and a multitude of horrible sounds were loosened within his brain.

Then a smothering blackness surged up about him—a blackness that was shot full with a thousand blood-red lights.

When Rod Selkirk recovered his senses the glow of a lantern shone over him. The smell of tobacco smoke had partly deadened the stench of the mink-fat.

“I guess you had reason for wanting to travel alone,” a sarcastic, familiar voice greeted him from across the room.

For a moment Rod blinked at the light, trying to make out the face of the man in the shadows beyond. Then he saw.

“You—you hound of hell,” the trapper choked. Like a panther he sprang at the parson.

His body was in mid air when something tugged at him from behind, and he fell face downward upon the floor. He, too, was chained to the wall. Carefully Rod slipped his hand to his hip. His weapons were gone.

De Friers and the parson moved closer—just beyond the reach of his chain. The new prisoner glared at them in silence.

“When you get ready to tell us where you caught that bunch of marten, I’ll let you and the old man go,” the boss of Wolf Canon gloated.

“I’ll see you dead and rotten first,” Rod defied them. “I wouldn’t tell if you killed me.”

“That’s what Tom said,” the parson sneered. “He was wise to the fact that they couldn’t afford to kill him—a dead man can’t show you the way to a good trapping-ground. But now it is different. We don’t need the old boy since we got you. He’s getting sort of nutty—and makes trouble.”

“How did you come in on this, you cheap skate?” Rod flared at him.

“Same as you did—butted in. If you’d

stayed out of the game I’d be down there in Seattle now, living off the fat of the land. But I’m going back—and I’ll think of you sometimes when the wind is out of the north—and I get a whiff of the mink-grease.”

“We’ll give him a day to think it over,” De Friers suggested as they started to go. “Let him see how he likes the life. We’ll come back to-morrow night and settle things.”

Once more the room was in darkness. Rod lay upon the dirt floor and listened to his jailors as they patched up the broken door and stamped off into the night.

For a while the beaten man huddled against the wall, listening to the eery whining of the wind. A storm was sweeping down from the polar wastes. Soon the wilderness would be covered with a garment of spotless snow. But winter and summer would be the same to the two men who were chained up like dogs in their vile-smelling kennel. There would be no more camps out under the open skies of the northland for them so long as De Friers was master of the wilderness miles.

Rod Selkirk rebelled at the thought. He knew there always was one weak mesh in the web of evil men. He must find that one place where the strands were rotten. Then De Friers must pay for the suffering of Tom Larkin.

Still groping for some means of escape, he fell asleep.

## V.

HE was awakened by the voice of Tom Larkin.

“Don’t you tell them a thing, Rod—promise you won’t tell. They would kill us both as soon as they found out.”

Selkirk shook the sleep from him. It was broad daylight. The old man stared at him from the end of his chain.

The madness had left the old hunter’s eyes. But the daring had also vanished. Tom Larkin’s spirit had broken at last under the



torture of his imprisonment.

“Sure I won’t,” Rod promised. “I’m going to get that bunch yet—see if I don’t?”

“I thought I was going to get them myself when I discovered that they were stealing all the best skins that passed through the post—but they got me instead.”

There was a new sound in the wind. Selkirk looked up. A few flakes of snow were fluttering past the window. Soon everything was hidden in a wall of dancing white.

The sound of footsteps came from outside, and De Friers stumbled in under a heavy load. He threw a few scraps of food to his prisoners, and placed a sack of raw mink-skins in front of each—his allotment for the day.

The old man reached out for his sack of fur, and began work without his breakfast.

The hawk-eyed task-master caught up a dog-whip from the wall and snapped its sharp lash across the head and shoulders of the prisoner who had lost his appetite.

“Come, son, take your bitters. You got to eat or you can’t work,” the fur-man tormented his helpless victim as the lash fell once more.

Tom Larkin squealed pitifully as the stinging rawhide coiled about him. With a feigned eagerness he gulped the scraps of food.

“That’s the way he is going to die tonight if you don’t come across with a map of the hunting-grounds,” De Friers threatened as he walked away.

With a hopeless rebellion flaming in his heart, Rod Selkirk began work upon the filthy skins. The broken blade from a table-knife was the only tool the crafty jailor had allowed him.

Outside the blizzard shrieked and whined. The cold crept in through the log walls, and the two prisoners heaped the furs about their feet to keep them from freezing.

Like an unthinking machine, Tom

Larkin labored over the skins. There was a dumb resignation in his face that told of a broken spirit. But the brain of the younger man was busy, searching for some means of escape.

However, De Friers had left no weak spot in the deadly web he had spun about them.

The heap of scraped skins grew higher and higher as Rod slashed away at the offensive grease, and the bag that held his day’s allotment shrank in size. Then the searching fingers of the new-made peon touched cold iron among the mink-pelts.

A great hope surged up in his heart at the thought of a possible weapon. In fancy the battle already was won, and he was free to wander once more upon his beloved game-trails.

He sank deeper than ever into the hopeless depression of the condemned man when he fished out a wolf-trap that some hunter had forgotten to remove from his bag of furs.

But the old habits were heavy upon the man who had spent his life in the forest. Thoughtfully he toyed with the steel contrivance, setting and resetting it. At last he concealed it under a layer of mink-fat, and fastened the chain to the lower log of the building.

It was slow work, as he had nothing but the heel of his shoe with which to drive the staple into the wood. But it was a welcome change from scraping the skins.

Carefully he shoved the trap and its covering of fat beyond the reach of his hands. Several times he was forced to draw it back by the chain and begin all over. At last it was fixed to his satisfaction. He resumed work upon the skins with a new energy.

In the middle of the day there was the soft thud of feet in the snow outside. A key-chain jingled and the click of the padlock announced a visitor.

The door swung open with a rush of cold air, and a cloud of snow came swirling into the room. Rod glanced up.

Louie Raus stood smiling at him.

“How did you get here?” Selkirk demanded.

“On the same ship with you—kept to my stateroom—and had a man take me out from Whitehorse,” the fur-man chuckled. “You’ve been playing a losing game right from the start.”

“How did you come to know I was heading up this way?” Rod insisted with a shade less resentment in his voice.

Raus showed a mouthful of well-kept teeth. “We knew you would go as soon as you read the note. You passed it up three times, and we kept carrying it back to your table.”

“Then it was a plant—just to get me up here into your bull-pen?”

“No, Tom wrote the note all right—but I happened to find it first—and I let it help me play my game. I just wanted to show you what you are bucking up against. It isn’t the wilderness law—no strong-arm stuff will work here. It’s brains you are up against. As soon as you get that through your skull you’ll be ready to talk business.”

“Sure about that?”

“I got a proposition that don’t need any argument,” Raus indulged in what was intended to be a friendly smile. “You see we intended to split the loot in the middle—but the company detectives got to be such a nuisance that I had to take the parson in to help me with the Seattle end of the business.”

“You got a good mate all right.” Rod sneered.

“Sure I did—I never make any mistakes in my men.” The assistant manager smiled over his own cleverness. “He was taking a watch out of a man’s pocket, and I got the goods on him. After that he was mighty glad to come in and help play the game. That’s another case of brains.”

Rod said nothing to take any luster from the man’s self-asserted prowess.

“Well, when the parson came into the game, that changed things.” Raus went on. “We had to split the loot three ways. That meant we had to drive a harder bargain than ever, to make it worth while for us. Now you do your business with me—on the quiet, you know—and I’ll make it all right with you and the old man.”

“What’s your terms?” Rod sparred to gain time.

“You draw me a map of the secret valley and I’ll turn you loose. De Friers and the parson will think you made your getaway. I’ll send a man to see if you have played fair on the map—and I’ll hold Tom as a hostage.”

Rod knew that the north would be a very unhealthy place for the gang of fur-thieves the minute he regained his liberty. He realized that Raus wasn’t fool enough to give him an even break in the game, now that he had his enemy down. But there was nothing in his voice to indicate that he suspected treachery.

“Give me something to write on—I’m hungry to get out into the woods again.” Rod Selkirk fairly radiated happiness.

He reached a hand for the pencil and paper Raus offered, and carefully began work upon a fake map. When it was finished he hesitated.

“I’m selling out too cheap,” he pondered as he crumpled the sheet of paper in his hand, and gave it a measured toss among the mink-fat.

Raus eyed the discarded map and measured the length of the prisoner’s chain with a careful glance.

Then he made a dive for the piece of paper that lay temptingly exposed in the littered grease.

There was a snap of steel jaws, and a howl of rage from the fur-man who sprawled among the rancid scrapings.

Rod Selkirk reached out a long arm, caught hold of the trap-chain, and began hauling his helpless enemy toward him. Raus was like a baby in the hands of the man who had been educated in the hard school of the wilderness.

For a moment his cries mingled with the shrieking of the gale outside. Then a heavy hand shut off his breath.

Rod Selkirk stepped back panting when the scuffle was over. His shirt had been torn open, but he was free.

Louie Raus was chained to the wall, and his gagged, bound figure had been molded into a position that suggested sleep.

## VI.

As soon as he had unfastened the padlock that held Tom a prisoner, the young man removed the two keys he had used to free them from their chains and hid them in the corner of the room.

The old man reeled as he walked. Rod forced him to pace back and forth across the little room that he might regain the use of his legs.

He now had to contrive some way to relock the door. De Friers would miss his bunch of keys. He must find them still hanging in the door when he came back.

After hard work Selkirk managed to remove the bolt that held the hasp. Then he snapped the padlock into its usual place and left the keys swinging from it. With the help of a string he drew the bolt back through the door and secured it. Then he settled down to wait for the finish of the game.

The night-shadows were beginning to sift through the swirling snowflakes when Rod, watching from the window, saw De Friers hurrying toward the cabin.

He motioned for Tom to go back to his corner. Then he took up his own position close to the door.

He knew it would be no easy job to overpower De Friers. That wiry Frenchman weighed over two hundred pounds, and was as full of fight as a wild-cat.

Rod heard the man stamp up and set his rifle against the wall. He fumbled a moment with the lock, and the door swung open.

The trapper knew the only safe thing was to shoot the slave-master on sight. Rut he always had taken a chance in a fight—and he took one now.

De Friers was well within the room when Rod struck. The blow landed where it was aimed, and the big man settled to his knees.

He staggered to his feet before Selkirk could strike again, and his hand was reaching for a weapon.

Rod pinned the slave-master's arms down in a bearlike hug. Tom Larkin sprang from his corner, as ready as ever to fight for the safety of a friend. His legs collapsed before he reached them. Crawling like a wounded animal, he endeavored to get into the battle. But the straining antagonists were whirling in a giddy death-dance and managed to keep beyond the reach of his grasping arms.

The trapper realized that his only hope lay in keeping his hold about the body of his adversary. De Friers had won his place as master of the Wolf Canon country by the power of his bull-like muscles. Rod never could hope to win in a fair fight. There was one other chance. He might suddenly release his hold upon the slave-driver and draw the pistol which he had taken from Raus, but Rod Selkirk was not prepared for such drastic measures as yet.

As the minutes passed he felt the strength seeping from his body, and knew he could keep his hold upon the enraged Frenchman but for a short time.

At last the moment came when Rod Selkirk must decide whether his own life was worth the price of another man's blood.

But in that instant something beyond his control made that decision unnecessary. The struggling fur-man sent him lurching against the wall, and Rod's weapon thudded to the floor. He was helpless.

With a roar of rage De Friers tore himself from the trembling arms that encircled him and plunged after the exhausted trapper.

For the time the Frenchman had ceased to be a man. He was an animal of the wilderness who fought with tooth and nail, and never thought to draw a weapon.

Warily Rod eluded his flailing blows, and worked his way to where Tom Larkin swayed drunkenly upon his hands and knees. If they came to close quarters the old man might be able to give his young friend some much-needed help.

Then across the massive shoulders of De Friers, Rod Selkirk saw the parson come lunging through the door. With a groan he dodged the blow the Frenchman aimed at him, and scurried along the wall, searching with hands and feet for the lost pistol, determined to sell his life as dearly as possible.

The blows he expected to rain down upon his back did not materialize. Instead, the heavy body of De Friers came swaying through the air, and fell beside him on the dirt floor.

But the fur-man made no effort to regain his feet. Like a lithe-limbed panther the parson stepped toward them and dragged the limp form of his confederate into the middle of the room.

One moment he fumbled over the unconscious man. Then he rose with a slow

smile breaking up the studied solemnity of his face.

There was the stamping of feet, and two constables of the Mounted Police stalked into the room.

"Don't let that fellow get away," Rod pointed an accusing finger at the parson, "He has got more brains than the rest of the bunch put together. If you let him escape the company 'll break you for it!"

"He's valuable all right," agreed one of the policemen. "I reckon he'll be worth a million dollars to the Hudson Bay people yet, if some fur-thief don't get wise to him and stick a knife between his ribs. But that is all in the game—hey, parson?"

"Sure," grinned the officer. "Us fellows take a lot of risks, and play some queer games—but this is the first time I ever smuggled a wolf-trap in to a prisoner so he could catch the jailer. They say 'once a trapper—always a trapper,' and Selkirk hadn't forgot how to make a wolf set."

A volley of half-strangled oaths welled up out of the thick neck of De Friers. He brandished his manacled hands. There was flecks of yellow foam upon his lips.

"Take it easy, old fellow," one of the officers smiled. "If the curses of fur-thieves amounted to anything the parson would have died a hundred times—I guess he has sent about that many of your breed to the pen already."

"A hundred and three, counting this last bag." the pious-faced man nodded solemnly.