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The End of the Trail.

Written for The Western Home Monthly, by H. Mortimer Batten

TO the trapper, bad luck generally comes in "spells," and this had been an altogether unsuccessful season for Ginger Bill. Shortly after the freeze-up blizzard after blizzard had swept the country, with the result that he was late in reaching his hunting ground, where he found the conditions altogether unfavorable. Since then he had scarcely collected enough fur to pay the season's expenses, and on the return journey to civilization the crowning misfortune had befallen him. While yet among the head-waters the ice of the rapidly-running creek he was travelling had given way under his sled, and before his very eyes dogs, furs—the complete sum of his worldly possessions—had vanished beneath a huge smother of foam.

Was Ginger Bill discouraged? No! He was one of the few who regard misfortune as part of the routine of life, and do not waste time bewailing it. Behold him, then, this bright and frosty morning, whistling a jaunty air as he trudged doggedly through the winter solitude.

All things considered, Ginger Bill had not very much to whistle over; his rifle, three cartridges, and about a pound and a half of pemmican were all he had secured from the disaster. He had yet two hundred miles to go, and there was no particular reason why he should expect to make it, for he was suffering from that nauseous ailment which only regular doses of spruce tea can keep in check.

But Ginger Bill had not wasted time thinking over the future. The only thing to be done was to plug doggedly ahead. He knew that, if the worst were in store, the end of the trail would not be hard to gain. He would merely fall in his tracks and sleep would come to him—a sleep as sweet and peaceful as the sleep of childhood.

"She won't turn against me now," thought Ginger Bill, as he looked round at the great silent wilderness he had loved so long. "I'm one of her old chums, and she don't turn against her old chums. When their turn comes she just whispers to them to fall asleep; then she sprinkles their eyes with silver frost, and whispers to them not to waken. No, she don't turn against her old chums."

There is no discouraging the heart of the poet, yet Ginger Bill was poignantly aware of the fact that he was up against it. His ailment was calling out for spruce tea, but he had no culinary equipment in which to prepare the beverage, and it was hourly taking a firmer hold of him.

Then all at once he ceased whistling and stopped dead. At his feet were the marks of snowshoes—of a white man's snowshoes. He stared at the tracks incredulously—saw that the man who made them had zig-zagged from left to right as though drunken.

Someone else was up against it. Someone else with no dogs, no cash, and just about all in. The little man started off at a feeble run, and half a mile further on he distinguished a dark shape lying in the centre of the waterway. He had no fear of death, yet the sight of that stiff, motionless object filled him with a vague apprehension. He stole forward slowly, and peered down into a white face—white as marble. Then he took the motionless figure in his arms, and listened for the pulsing of the heart.

"Wake up, sonny!" he cried jubilantly. "You ain't dead yet."

It was a middle-aged man, with a black-pointed beard, and wearing the usual winter furs of the bush. The poor fellow was almost frozen through, and it was only after an hour's strenuous work that Bill was able to assist nature in restoring the life which had so nearly ebbed away.

The stranger opened one eye, and looked at him almost comically. "Let's all go down the Strand!" he muttered thickly.

Ginger Bill glanced round with a whimsical little grin. "Wish to goodness we could," he mused. "It would be

quick march to the nearest coffee stall. Right wheel; present arms; fire! And if we didn't make the steam fly off that coffee—pints and pints of it, blinking well boiling hot. Say, where's your billy can?"

The stranger hadn't one. He had nothing but the clothes in which he lay, and a huge wad of ten-dollar bills which, under the conditions, were not much good. By night, however, he was sufficiently recovered to explain what had befallen him. "Wolves got my Indian guide, got my dogs, near got me," was his brief but adequate story.

Ginger Bill was in a dilemma. "It comes to this," he muttered pensively—"My partner here weighs anything between sixteen stone and two tons. He ain't no fairy anyway. He can't walk an inch, and I got to get him home—got to get him home!"

The unexpected turn of events had opened up a new line of thought in the little man's mind. He had not dreaded the fate which a short time ago had seemed so certain in store. From boyhood he had known that sooner or later the woods would claim him and, in fact, had not troubled him much of recent years, for he had neither friends nor relatives. But the stranger—

"Well," mused Ginger Bill, "perhaps he's got a wife and kiddies, sitting over the stove and thinking of him right now. That's why I got to get him home."

Then he stooped over the bed of spruce branches, and looked down into the stranger's face. "Partner," he said, "who are you? Where you been? What you doing in this all-fired country?"

"Been to look at some claims on Auro Lake," the man answered. "Ran out of cartridges. Game scarce. Wolves devilish hungry. Name Macdolan. And yours?"

Ginger Bill drew back in surprise. "Macdolan!" he repeated incredulously. Then he laughed softly, all his suspicion gone. "I knew a man of that name long ago," he went on. "He was my partner—a skunk! I'd have trusted him with my life, and he knew it. I trusted him too far. He robbed me. It was that season we got four black fox skins. They meant a fortune to us. We sat up all one night talking how we should invest the money, and when I got up next morning he was gone—and the skins were gone with him." Ginger Bill sighed. "It near broke my poor mother's heart," he went on. "She was old, and it meant a whole heap to her. Besides, she'd liked the boy."

Ginger Bill did not notice the painful flush that had crept over his companion's face. "As for Macdolan," he proceeded, "he evidently invested the money well, for he became a millionaire. But he was a different fellow from you—slight, dark hair. If I thought you was him I fancy I shouldn't have wakened you."

It was characteristic of Ginger Bill that he should make no allowance for time. He thought of Macdolan only as the bright-eyed boy he had last seen—the companion of his youth, whom he had refused to betray to the police. It never occurred to him that fifteen years of money-making—fifteen years of heavy toiling up the mountain of "success" might have tinged that boy's hair with grey, and added a line or two to his handsome countenance. He dismissed the horrible suspicion from his mind, and next morning he fashioned a toboggan of cedar branches, and laid his partner upon it. It was hard work drawing the toboggan, and the rope cut cruelly into his hands, but he stuck to it till the distant snow climbed to its zenith, and sheer exhaustion forced him to "take a spell." Then he drew out the can of pemmican, and looked pathetically at his partner.

"There ain't enough for both of us," he told himself, and tightened his belt another notch. "Maybe he's got a wife and kiddies, and I've no one."

So he fed his partner, and closed the tin with a sigh.

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