

THE FREEZE-UP

BY HAMILTON M. LAING



WO days there are in the life of a year in the North, big days, eventful, full of meaning, the birth and death of the kindlier season of summer, the entry and exit of the reign of King Sol. The first is the break-up, that day in April in which the relentless hand of the ice-fanged Boreas relaxes his grip on the land, when the streams run swiftly and chatter as they run, and the marshes gleam blue where the water ripples upon the ice, and the plainland throws off its white shroud. The second is the freeze-up, that day of November in which the land is locked again, when the face of earth and water turns to adamant and the woods settle into their winter silence. And these two times are as different in their significance as life from death or the beginning of things from the end.

What better vantage spot to watch the coming in of the ice king than my elm-clump that looks out across the Manitoba plainland, where the old elm patriarch commands the lake at his feet to westward, the oak and elm and poplar woods along the shore to southward, the winding marsh maze to eastward and off to northward the sandhill country. Each direction, in fact, presents a world in itself; each has to surrender itself to the will of the frost king; each has its own peculiar living things to face the winter problem in their several ways. The separate realms of marsh and wood and lake come together here at the elm-clump and it is a fit place to await the winter and watch the giant of the North working his will upon each of them.

The time of his coming is in the dull days of mid-November. Sometimes he arrives in bluster and sometimes in stealth, but the result is the same. When he rushes down to take the land by storm and assault there is a day of snowing and blowing out of the eastward or northward, the white-flecked world of gray grows whiter, and winter seems to have taken possession of the land.

The lake and the open water of the marshes resist; they struggle and wrestle with the giant hand that has been thrust out of the north to strangle them, and for a time their brown waters eat up the falling hosts. But the white rim grows wider and wider, and white little rafts of snow and ice go drifting across the water to fill the down-wind bays; the end is near. For in the night when the sky has cleared, the wind now weaker but straight from the north and reinforced with a thousand legions of frost-spears, marches stoutly across the land and takes possession. When the tardy sun peeps again over the knoll backing the marsh windings of brown and white, he finds the land and water locked tight. Out in mid-lake the patches of white ice and black ice tell of the struggle there in the night; the black areas denote the last bitter stand of the open water.

But when he comes by stealth there is a hush in the chill dusk; no moaning of bare woods or rattling of naked arms in the elms over my roof, but a cold hand like the hand of death reached out of the realm of Boreas and silently grips and holds tight upon this more southerly land. The chill night is a time of silence; time