The Silent Places

By Stewart Edward White

CHAPTER XIV.—(Continued.)

"Listen, Little Sister," said he. "Now I go on a long journey, perhaps fifteen suns, perhaps one moon. At the end of six suns more Jibibanisi may rise. His leg must be slung, thus. Never must he touch the foot to the ground, even for an instant. You must see to it. I will tell him, also. Each day he must sit in the sun. He must do something. When snow falls we will again take the long trail. Prepare all things for it. Give Eagle-eye materials to work with."

To Dick he spoke with like directness.

"I'm off again, Dick," said he. "There's no help for it; you've got to lay up there for a week yet. Then the girl will show you how to tie your leg out of the way, and you can move on crutches. If you rest any weight on that foot before I get back, you'll be stiff for life. I shouldn't advise you to take any chances. Suit yourself; but I should try to do no more than get out in the sun. You won't be good for much before snow. You can get things organized. She'll bring you the stuff to work on, and will help. So long."

"Good-by," muttered Dick.

He breathed hard, fully occupied with the thought of his helplessness, with blind, unappeasable rage against the chance that had crippled him, with bitter and useless questionings as to why such a moment should have been selected for the one accident of his young life. Outside he could hear the crackle of the little fire, the unusual sound of the Indian's voice as she talked low to the dog, the animal's whine of appreciation and content. Suddenly he felt the need of companionship, the weariness of his own unending, revolving thoughts.

"Hi!" he called aloud.

May-may-gwan almost instantly appeared in the entrance, a scarcely concealed hope shining in her eyes. This was the first time she had been summoned.

"Ninny-moosh—the dog," commanded Dick, coldly.

She turned to whistle the beast. He came at once, already friends with this human being, who understood him.

"Come here, old fellow," coaxed Dick, holding out his hand.

But the half-wild animal was in doubt. He required assurance of this man's intentions. Dick gave himself to the task of supplying it. For the first time in a month his face cleared of its discontent. The old, winning boyishness returned. May-may-gwan, standing forgotten, in the entrance, watched in silence. Dick coaxed knowingly, leading, by the very force of persuasion, until the dog finally permitted a single pat of his sharp nose. The young man smoothly and cautiously persisted, his face alight with interest. Finally he conquered. The animal allowed his ears to be rubbed, his nose to be batted. At length, well content, he lay down by his new master within reach of the hand that rested caressingly on his head. The Indian girl stole softly away. At the fireside she seated herself and gazed in the coals. Presently the marvel of two tears welled in her eyes. She blinked them away and set about supper.

CHAPTER XV.

Whether it was that the prospect of getting about, or the diversion of the dog was responsible for the change, Dick's cheerfulness markedly increased in the next few days. For hours he would fool with the animal, whom he named Billy, after a hunting companion, teaching him to shake hands, to speak, to wrinkle his nose in a doggy grin, to lie down at command, and all the other tricks useful and ornamental that go to make up the fanciest kind of a dog education. The mistakes and successes of his new friend seemed to amuse him hugely. Often from the tent burst the sounds of inextinguishable mirth. May-may-gwan, peeping, saw the young man as she had first seen him, clear-eyed, laughing, the wrinkles of humor deepening about his eyes, his white teeth flashing, his brow untroubled. Three days she hovered thus on the outer edge of the renewed good feeling, then timidly essayed an advance.

Unobstrusive, she slipped inside the teepee's flap. The dog sat on his haunches, his head to one side in expectation.

"The god is a good dog," she said, her breath choking her.

Apparently the young man had not heard.

"It will be well to name the dog that he may answer to his name," she ventured again.

Dick, abruptly gripped by the incomprehensible obsession, uneasy as at something of which he only waited the passing, resentful because of the discomfort this caused him, unable to break through the artificial restraint that enveloped his spirit, lifted his eyes suddenly, dead and lifeless, to hers.

"It is time to lift the net," he said.

"The girl made no more advances. She moved almost automatically about her accustomed tasks, preparing the materials for what remained to be done.

Promptly on the seventh day, with much preparation and precaution, Dick moved. He had now to suffer the girl's assistance. When he first stood upright, he was at once attacked by a severe dizziness, which would have caused a fall had not May-may-gwan steadied him. With difficulty he hobbled to a seat outside. Even his arms seemed to his pithless. He sank to his place hard-breathed, exhausted. It was some minutes before he could look about him calmly.

The first object to catch his eye was the cardinal red of a moose-maple, like a spot of blood on velvet-green. And thus he knew that September, or the Many-caribuo-in-the-woods Moon, was close at hand.

"Hi!" he called.

May-may-gwan came as before, but without the look of expectation in her eyes.

"Bring me wood of mashkigiwateg, wood of tamarack," he commanded; "bring me mokamon, the knife, and tschi-mokamon, the large knife; bring the hide of ah-tek, the caribou."

"These things are ready, at hand," she replied.

With the couteau croche, the crooked knife of the North, Dick labored slowly, fashioning with care the long tamarack strips. He was exceedingly particular as to the selection of the wood, as to the taper of the pieces. At last one was finished to his satisfaction. Slowly then he fashioned it, moulding the green wood, steaming it to make it more plastic, until at last the ends lay side by side, and the loop of wood bowed above in the shape of a snow-shoe raquette. The exact shape Dick still further assured by means of two cross-pieces. These were bound in place by the strips of the caribou-skin rawhide wet in warm water, which was also used to bind together the two ends. The whole was then laid aside to dry.

Thus the next few days Dick fashioned the frame of six snow-shoes. He adhered closely to the Ojibway pattern. In these woods it was not necessary to have recourse to the round, broad shape of the rough bowlder-hills, nor was it possible to use the long, swift shoe of the open plains. After a while he heated the steel end of his rifle cleaning rod and bored holes for the webbing. This also he made of caribou rawhide, for caribou shrinks when wet, thus tightening the lacing where other material would stretch. Above and below the crosspieces he put in a very fine weaving; between them a coarser, that through. Each strand he tested again and again; each knot he made doubly sure.

Nor must it be imagined that he did these things alone. May-may-gwan helped him, not only by fetching for him the tools and materials, of which he stood in need, but also in the bending, binding, and webbing itself. Under the soft light of the trees, bathed in the aroma of fresh shavings and the hundred natural odors of the forest, it was exceedingly pleasant accurately to accomplish the light skilled labor. But between these human beings, alone in a vast wilderness, was no communication outside the necessities of the moment. Thus in a little the three pairs of snow-shoes, complete even to the buckskin foot-loops, hung from the sheltered branch of a spruce.

"Bring now to me," said the young man, "poles of the hickory, logs of gijik, the cedar; bring me wigwass, the birch-bark, and the rawhide of moosewa, the moose."

"These things are at hand," repeated May-may-gwan.

Then ensued days of severe toil. Dick was, of course, unable to handle the axe, so the girl had to do it under his direction. The affair was of wedges with which to split along the grain; of repeated attempts until the resulting strips were true and without warp; of steaming and tying to the proper curve and, finally, of binding together strongly with the tough babiche into the shape of a dog-sledge. This, too, was suspended at last beneath the sheltering spruce.

"Bring me now," said Dick, "rawhide of moosewa, the moose, rawhide of ah-tek, the caribou, watab, the root for sewing."

Seated opposite each other, heads bent over the task, they made the dog-harness, strong, serviceable, not to be worn out, with collar, the broad buckskin strap over the back, the heavy traces. Four of them they made, for Sam would undoubtedly complete the team, and these, too, they hung out of reach in the spruce-tree.

Now Sam returned from his longest trip, empty of information, but light of spirit, for he had succeeded by his simple shrewdness in avoiding all suspicion. He brought with him another "husky" dog, and a strong animal like a Newfoundland; also some tea and tobacco, and an axe-blade. This latter would be especially valuable. In the extreme cold steel becomes like glass. The work done earned his approval, but he paused only a day, and was off again.

From the inside of the teepee hung many skins of the northern hare which May-may-gwan had captured and tanned while Dick was still on his back. The woven blanket was finished. Now she lined the woollen blankets with the hare-skins, over an hundred to each. Nothing warmer could be imagined. Of caribou skin, tanned with the hair on, she and Dick fashioned jackets with peaked hoods, which, when not in use, would hang down behind. The opening about the face was sewn with bushy fox's tails, and a puckering-string threaded through so that the wearer could completely protect his features. Mittens they made from pelts of the muskrat. Moccasins were cut extra large and high, and lined with fur of the hare. Heavy raw-hide dog-whips and buckskin gun-cases completed the simple winter outfit.

But still there remained the question of sustenance. Game would be scarce and uncertain in the cold months.

It was now seven weeks since Dick's accident. Cautiously, with many pauses, he began to rest weight on the injured foot. Thanks to the treatment of massage and manipulation, the joint was but little stiffened. Each day it gained in strength. Shortly Dick was able to hobble some little distance, always with the aid of a staff, always heedfully. As yet he was far from the enjoyment of full freedom of movement, but by expenditure of time and perseverance he was able to hunt in a slow, patient manner. The runways where the caribou came to drink late in the evening, a cautious float down stream as far as the first rapids, or even a plain sitting on a log in the hope that game would chance to feed within range—these methods persisted in day after day brought in a fair quantity of meat.

Of the meat they made some jerky for present consumption by the dogs, and, of course, they ate fresh as much as they needed. But most went into pemmican. The fat was all cut away, the lean sliced thin and dried in the sun. The result they pounded fine, and mixed with melted fat and the marrow, which, in turn, was compressed while warm into air-tight little bags. A quantity of meat went into surprisingly little pemmican. The bags were piled on a long legged scaffolding out of the reach of the dogs and wild animals.

The new husky and Billy had promptly come to teeth, but Billy had held his own, much to Dick Herron's satisfaction. The larger animal was a bitch, so now they all dwelt together in amity. During the still hunt they were kept tied in camp, but the rest of the time they prowled about. Never, however, were they permitted to leave the clearing, for that would frighten the game. At evening they sat in an expectant row, awaiting the orderly distribution of their evening meal. Somehow they added much to the manfeel of the camp. With their coming the atmosphere of men as opposed to the atmosphere of the wilderness had strengthened. On this side was the human habitation, busy at its own affairs, creating about itself a definite something in the forest, unknown before, preparing quietly and efficiently its weapons of offence and defence, all complete in its fires and shelters and industries and domestic animals. On the other, formidable, mysterious, vast, were slowly crystallizing, without disturbance, without display, the mighty opposing forces. In the clarified air of the first autumn frosts this antagonism seemed fairly to saturate the sately moving days. It was as yet only potential, but the potentialities were swelling, ever swelling toward the break of an actual conflict.

CHAPTER XVI.

Now the leaves ripened and fell, and the frost crisped them. Suddenly the forest was still. The great, brooding silence, composed of a thousand lesser woods voices, flowed away like a vapor to be succeeded by a fragile, deathly suspension of sound. Dead leaves depended motionless from the trees. The air hung inert. A soft sunlight lay enervated across the world.

In the silence had been a vast, hely mystery of gerat purpose and life; in the stillness was a menace. It became the instant of poise before the break of something gigantic.

And always across it were rising strange rustlings that might mean great things or little, but whose significance was always in doubt. Suddenly the man watching by the runway would hear a mighty scurrying of dead leaves, a scampering, a tumult of hurrying noises, their abruptness of whose inception tightened his nerves and set galloping his heart. Then, with equal abruptness, they ceased. The delicate and fragile stillness settled down.

In all the forest thus diverse affairs seemed to be carried on—fearfully, in sudden, noisy dashes, as a man under fire would dodge from one cover to another. Every creature advertised in the leaves his presence. Danger lurked to this, its advantage. Even the man, taking his necessary food, was abashed at the disproportionate and unusual effects of his movements. It was as though a retiring nature were to be accompanied at every step through a crowded drawing-room by the jingling of bells. Always the instinct was to pause in order that the row might die away, that the man might shrink to his accustomed unobtrusiveness. And instantaneously, without the grace of even a little transitional echo, the stillness fell, crowding so closely on the heels of the man's presence that almost he could feel the breath of whatever it represented.

Occasionally two red squirrels would descend from the spruce trees to chase each other madly. Then, indeed, did the spirit of autumn seem to be outraged. The racket came to be an insult. Always an ear expected its discontinuance, until finally the persistence ground on the nerves like the barking of a dog at night. At last it was an indecency, an orgy of unholy revel, a profanation, a provocative to anger of the inscrutable woods' god. Then stillness again with the abruptness of a sword-cut.

Always the forest seemed to be the same; and yet somehow in a manner not to be defined a subtle change was taking place in the wilderness. Nothing definite could be instanced. Each morning of that Indian summer the skies were as soft, the sun as grateful, the leaves as gorgeous in their blazonment, yet each morning an infinitesimal something that had been there the day before was lacking, and for it an infinitesimal something had been substituted. The change from hour to hour was not perceptible; from week to week it was. The stillness grew in portent; the forest creatures moved more furtively. Like growth, rather than chemical change, the wilderness was turning to iron. With this hardening it became more formidable and menacing. No longer aloof in nirvanic calm, awakened it drew near its enemies, alert, cunning, circumspect, ready to strike.

Each morning a thin film of ice was to be seen along the edges of the slack water. Heavy, black frosts whitened the shadows and nipped the unaccustomed fingers early in the day. The sun was swinging to the south, lengthening the night hours. Whitefish were running in the river.

These last the man and the girl caught in great numbers, and smoked and piled on long-legged scaffolds. They were intended as winter food for the dogs, and would constitute a great part of what would be taken along when the journey should commence.

Dick began to walk without his crutches, a very little at a time, grimly, all his old objectless anger returned when the extent of his disability was thus brought home to him. But always with persistence came improvement. Each attempt brought its regard in strengthened muscles, freer joints, greater confidence. At last it could be no longer doubted that by the Indian's Whitefish Moon he would be as good as ever. The discovery, by some queer contrariness of the man's disposition, was avoided as long as possible, and finally but grudgingly admitted. Yet when at last Dick confessed to himself that his complete recovery was come, his mood suddenly changed. The old necessity for blind, unreasoning patience seemed at an end. He could perceive light ahead, and so in the absence of any further need for taut spiritual nerves, he relaxed the strain and strode on more easily. He played more with the dogs—of which still his favorite was Billy; occasionally he burst into little snatches of song, and the sound of his whistling was merry in the air. At length he paused abruptly in his work to fix his quizzical, narrow gaze on the Indian girl.

"Come, Little Sister," said he, "let us lift the nets."

She looked up at him, a warm glow leaping to her face. This was the first time he had addressed her by the customary diminutive of friendship since they had both been members of the Indian camp on the Missinaibe.

They lifted the net together, and half filled the canoe with the shining fish. Dick bore himself with the careless good humor of his earlier manner. The greater part of the time he seemed unconscious of his companion's presence, but genuinely unconscious, not with the deliberate affront of a pretended indifference. Under even this negative good treatment the girl expanded with an almost luxuriant gratitude. Her face lost its stoical mask of imperturbability, and much of her former arch beauty returned. The young man was blind to those things, for he was in reality profoundly indifferent to the girl, and his abrupt change of manner could in no way be ascribed to any change in his feeling for her. It was merely the reflex of his inner mood, and that sprang solely from joy over the permission he had given himself again to contemplate taking the Long Trail.

But Sam Bolton, returning that very day from his own long journey, saw at once the alteration in May-may-gwan, and was troubled over it. He came into camp by the river way where the moss and spruce needles silenced his footsteps, so he approached unnoticed. The girl bent over the fire. A strong glow from the flames showed the stronger glow illuminating her face from within. She hummed softly a song of the Ojibway language:

"Mong-a doog-win
Nin dinaindoon——"
"Loon's wing I thought it was
In the distance shining.
But it was my lover's paddle
In the distance shining."

Then she looked up and saw him.

"Little Father!" she cried, pleased.

At the same moment Dick caught sight of the new-comer and hobbled out of the wigwam.

"Hello, you old snoozer!" he shouted. "We began to think you weren't going to show up at all. Look at what we've done. I believe you've been lying out in the woods just to dodge work. Where'd you steal that dog?"

He leaned back against a cedar, half-closing his eyes, but nevertheless keenly alert. The changed atmosphere of the camp disturbed him. Although he had not realized it before, he preferred Dick's old uncompromising sulkiness.

In accordance with the woods custom, little was said until after the meal was finished and the pipes lit. Then Dick inquired:

"Well, where you been this time, and what did you find?"

Sam replied briefly as to his journey, making it clear that he had now covered all the hunting districts of this region with the single exception of one beyond the Kenogami. He had discovered nothing; he was absolutely sure that nothing was to be discovered.

"I didn't go entirely by what the Injuns told me," he said, "but I looked at the signs along the trapping routes and the traping camps to see how many had been at it, and I'm sure the number tallies with the reg'lar Injun hunters. I picked up that dog over to Leftfoot lake. Come here, pup!"

The animal slouched forward, his head hanging, the rims of his eyes blood red as he turned them up to his master. He was a powerful beast, black and tan, with a quaintly wrinkled, anxious countenance and long, pendent ears.

"Shong," commented Dick, "but queer looking. He'll have trouble keeping warm with that short coat."

"He's wintered here already," replied Sam, indifferently. "Go lie down!"

The dog slouched slowly back, his heavy head and ears swinging to each step, to where May-may-gwan was keeping his peace with the other animals.

"Now for that Kenogami country," went on Sam; "it's two weeks from here by dogs, and it's our last chance in this country. I ain't dared ask too many questions, of course, so I don't know anything about the men who're hunting there. There's four families, and one other. He's alone; I got that much out of the last place I stopped. We got to wait here for snow. If we don't raise anything there, we'd better get over toward the Nipissing country."

"All right," said Dick.

The older man began to ask minutely concerning the equipment, provisions, and dog food.

"It's all right as long as we can take it easy and hunt," advised Sam, gradually approaching the subject that was really troubling him, "and it's all right if we can surprise this Jingoss or ambush him when we find him. But suppose he catches wind of us and skips, what then? It'll be a mighty pretty race, my son, and a hard one. We'll have to fly light and hard, and we'll need every pound of grub we can scrape."

The young man's eyes darkened and his nostrils expanded with the excitement of this thought.

"Just let's strike his trail!" he exclaimed.

"That's all right," agreed the woodsman, his eyes narrowing; "but how about the girl, then?"

But Dick exhibited no uneasiness. He merely grinned broadly.

"Well, what about the girl? That's what I've been telling you. Strikes me that's one of your troubles."

Half satisfied, the veteran fell silent. Shortly after he made an opportunity to speak to May-may-gwan.

"All is well, Little Sister?" he inquied.

"All is well," she replied; "we have finished the parkas, the sledges, the snow-shoes, the blankets, and we have made much food."

"And Jibiwanisi?"

"His foot is nearly healed. Yesterday he walked to the Big Pool and back. To-day, even this afternoon, Little Father, the Black Spirit left him so that he has been gay."

Convinced that the restored good feeling was the result rather of Dick's volatile nature than of too good an understanding, the old man left the subject.

"Little Sister," he went on, "soon we are going to take the winter trail. It may be that we will have to travel rapidly. It may be that food will be scarce. I think it best that you do not go with us."

She looked up at him.

"These words I have expected," she replied. "I have heard the speech you have made with the Ojibway men you have met. I have seen the preparations you have made. I am not deceived. You and Jibiwanisi are not looking for winter posts. I do not know what it is you are after, but it is something you wish to conceal. Since you have not told me, I know you wish it not from me. I did not know all this when I left Haukemah and his people. That was a foolish thing. It was done, and I do not know why. But it was done, and it cannot be undone. I could not go back to the people of Haukemah now; they would kill me. Where else can I go? I do not know where the Ojibways, my own people, live."

"What do you expect to do, if you stay with me?" inquired Sam, curiously.

"You come from Conjuror's House. You tell the Indians you come from Winnipeg, but that is not so. When you have finished your affairs, you will return to Conjuror's House. There I can enter the household of some officer."

"But you cannot take the winter trail," objected Sam.

"I am strong; I can take the winter trail."

"And perhaps we may have to journey hard and fast."

"As when one pursues an enemy," said the girl, calmly. "Good. I am fleet. I too can travel. And if it comes to that, I will leave you without complaint when I can no longer tread your trail."

"But the food," objected Sam, still further.

"Consider, Little Father," said May-may-gwan; "of the food I have prepared much; of the work, I have done much. I have tended the traps, raised the nets, fashioned many things, attended Eagle-eye. If I had not been here, then you, Little Father, could not have made your journeys. So you have gained some time."

"That is true," conceded Sam.

"Listen, Little Father, take me with you. I will drive the dogs, make the camp, cook the food. Never will I complain. If the food gets scarce, I will not ask for my share. That I promise."

"Much of what you say is true," assented the woodsman, "but you forget you came to us of your free will and unwelcomed. It would be better that you go to Missinaibe."

"No," replied the girl.

"If you hope to become the squaw of Jibiwanisi," said Sam, bluntly, "you may as well give it up."

The girl said nothing, but compressed her lips to a straight line. After a moment she merely reiterated her original solution:

"At Conjuror's House I know the people."

"I will think of it," then concluded Sam.

Dick, however, could see no good in such an arrangement. He did not care to discuss the matter at length, but preserved rather the attitude of a man who has shaken himself free of all the responsibility of an affair, and is mildly amused at the tribulations of another still involved in it.

"You'll have a lot of trouble dragging a squaw all over the north," he advised Sam, critically. "Of course, we can't turn her adrift here. Wouldn't do that to a dog. But it strikes me it would even pay us to go out of our way to Missinaible to get rid of her. We could do that."

"Well, I don't know—" doubted Sam. "Of course——"

"Oh, bring her along if you want to," laughed Dick, "only it's your funeral. You'll get into trouble, sure. And don't say I didn't tell you."

It might have been imagined by the respective attitudes of the two men that actually Sam had been responsible for the affair from the beginning. Finally, laboriously, he decided that the girl should go. She could be of assistance; there was small likelihood of the necessity for protracted hasty travel.

The weather was getting steadily colder. Greasy-looking clouds drove down from the northwest. Heavy winds swept by. The days turned gray. Under the shelter of trees the ground froze into hummocks, which did not thaw out. The crisp leaves which made the forest so noisy disintegrated into sodden silence. A wildness was in the air, swooping down with the breeze, buffeting in the little whirlwinds and eddies, rocking back and forth in the tops of the storm-beaten trees. Cold little waves lapped against the thin fringe of shore ice that crept day by day from the banks. The water itself turned black. Strange birds swirling down wind like leaves uttered weird notes of migration. The wilderness hardened to steel.

The inmates of the little camp waited. Each morning Dick was early afoot searching the signs of the weather; examining the ice that crept stealthily from shore, waiting to pounce upon and imprison the stream; speculating on the chances of an early season. The frost pinched his bare fingers severely, but he did not mind that. His leg was by now almost as strong as ever, and he was impatient to be away, to leave behind him this rapid that had gained over him even a temporary victory. Always as the time approached, his spirits rose. It would have been difficult to identify this laughing boy with the sullen and terrible man who had sulked through the summer. He had made friends with all the dogs. Even the fierce "huskies" had become tame, and liked to be upset and tousled about and dragged on their backs growling fierce but mock protest. The bitch he had named Claire; the hound with the long ears he had called Mack, because of a fancied and mournful likeness to MacDonald, the chief trader; the other "husky" he had christened Wolf, for obvious reasons; and there remained, of course, the original Billy. Dick took charge of the feeding. At first he needed his short, heavy whip to preserve order, but shortly his really admirable gift with animals gained way, and he had them sitting peacefully in a row awaiting each his turn.

At last the skim ice made it impossible longer to use the canoe in fishing on the river. The craft was therefore, suspended bottom up between two trees. A little snow fell and remained, but was speedily swept into hollows. The temperature lowered. It became necessary to assume thicker garments. Once having bridged the river the ice strengthened rapidly. And then late one afternoon, on the wings of the northwest wind, came the snow. All night it howled past the trembling wigwam. All the long night it swirled and drifted and took the shapes of fantastic monsters leaping in the riot of the storm. Then the stars, cold and brilliant, once more crackled in the heavens. The wilderness in a single twenty-four hours had changed utterly. Winter had come.

CHAPTER XVII.

In the starlit, bitter cold of a north country morning the three packed their sledge and harnessed their dogs. The rawhide was stubborn with the frost, the dogs uneasy. Knots would not tie. Pain nipped the fingers, cruel pain that ate in and in until it had exposed to the shock of little contacts every tightened nerve. Each stiff, clumsy movement was agony. From time to time one of the three thrust hand in mitten to beat the freezing back. Then a new red torture surged to the very finger tips. They bore it in silence, working hastily, showing that every morning of the long, winter trip this fearful hour must come. Thus each day the North would greet them, squeezing their fingers in the cruel hand-clasp of an antagonist testing their strength.

Over the supplies and blankets was drawn the skin envelope laced to the sledge. The last reluctant knot was tied. Billy, the leader of the four dogs, casting an intelligent eye at his masters, knew that all was ready, and so arose from his haunches. Dick untied his feet skilfully from the loops of his snow shoes. Sam, already equipped, seized the heavy dog whip. The girl took charge of the gee-pole with which the sledge would be guided.

"Mush! Mush on!" shouted Sam.

The four dogs leaned into their collars. The sledge creaked free of its frost anchorage and moved.

First it became necessary to drop from the elevation to the river bed. Dick and May-may-gwan clung desperately. Sam exercised his utmost skill and agility to keep the dogs straight. The toboggan hovered an instant over the edge of the bank, then plunged, coasting down. Men hung back, dogs ran to keep ahead. A smother of light snow settled to show, in the dim starlight, a furrow of descent. And on the broad, white surface of the river were eight spots of black which represented the followers of the Long Trail.

Dick shook himself and stepped ahead of the dogs.

"Mush! Mush on!" commanded Sam again.

Dick ran on steadily in the soft snow, swinging his entire weight now on one foot, now on the other, passing the snow shoes with the peculiar stiff swing of the ankle, throwing his heel strongly downward at each step in order to take advantage of the long snow shoe tails' elasticity. At each step he sank deep into the feathery snow. The runner was forced to lift the toe of the shoe sharply, and the snow swirled past his ankles like foam. Behind him, in the trail thus broken and packed for them, trotted the dogs, their noses low, their jaws hanging. Sam drove with two long lashed whips; and May-may-gwan, clinging to the gee-pole, guided the sledge.

In the absolute and dead stillness of a winter morning before the dawn the little train went like ghosts in a mist of starlight. The strange glimmering that seems at such an hour to disengage from the snow itself served merely to establish the separate bulks of that which moved across it. The bending figure of the man breaking trail, his head low, his body moving in its swing with the regularity of a pendulum; the four wolf-like dogs, also bending easily to what was not a great labor; the line of their open jaws and lolling tongues cut out against the snow; another human figure; the low, dark mass of the sledge; and again the bending figure at the rear—all these contrasted in their half-blurred uncertainty of outline and the suggested motion of their attitude with the straight, clear silhouette of the spruce trees against the sky.

Also the sounds of their travelling offered an analogous contrast. The dull crunch, crunch, crunch of the snow shoes, the breathing of the living beings, the glitter and creak of the sledge came to the ear blurred and confused; utterly unlike the cameo stillness of the winter dawn.

Ten minutes of the really violent exertion of breaking trail warmed Dick through. His fingers ceased their protest. Each breath, blowing to steam, turned almost immediately to frost. He threw back the hood of his capote, for he knew that should it become wet from the moisture of his breath, it would freeze his skin, and with his violent exertions exposure to the air was nothing. In a short time his eyebrows and eyelashes became heavy with ice. Then slowly the moisture of his body, working outward through the wool of his clothing, frosted on the surface, so that gradually as time went on he grew to look more and more like a great white-furred animal.

The driving here on the open river was comparatively easy. Except occasionally, the straight line could be adhered to. When it became necessary to avoid an obstruction, Sam gave the command loudly, addressing Billy as the lead dog.

"Hu, Billy!" he would cry.

And promptly Billy would turn to the right. Or:

"Chac, Billy!" he would cry.

And Billy would turn to the left, with always in mind the thought of the long whip to recall his duty to man.

Then the other dogs turned after him. Claire, for her steadiness and sense, had been made sledge dog. Always she watched sagaciously to pull the end of the sledge strongly away should the deviation not prove sufficient. Later, in the woods, when the trail should become difficult, much would depend on Claire's good sense.

Now shortly, far to the south, the sun rose. The gray world at once became brilliant. The low frost haze—invisible until now, to be invisible all the rest of the day—for these few moments of the level beams worked strange necromancies. The prisms of a million ice drops on shrubs and trees took fire. A bewildering flash and gleam of jewels caught the eye in every direction. And, suspended in the air, like the shimmer of a soft and delicate veiling, wavered and floated a mist of vapor, tinted with rose and lilac, with emethyst and saffron.

As always on the Long Trail, our travellers' spirits rose with the sun. Dick lengthened his stride, the dogs leaned to their collars, Sam threw back his shoulders, the girl swung the sledge tail with added vim. Now everything was warm and bright and beautiful. It was yet too early in the day for fatigue and the first discomforts had passed.

But in a few moments Dick stopped. The sledge at once came to a halt. They rested.

At the end of ten minutes Sam stepped to the front, and Dick took the dog whip. The young man's muscles, still weak from their long inaction, ached cruelly. Especially was this true of the ligaments at the groin—used in lifting high the knee—and the long muscles along the front of the shin-bone—by which the toe of the snow shoe was elevated. He found himself very glad to drop behind into the beaten trail.

The sun by now had climbed well above the horizon, but did little to mitigate the cold. As long as the violent movement was maintained a warm and grateful glow followed the circulation, but a pause, even of a few moments, brought the shivers. And always the feathery, clogging snow—offering slight resistance, it is true, but opposing that slight resistance continuously, so that at last it amounted to a great deal. A step taken meant no advance toward easier steps. The treadmill of forest travel, changed only in outward form, again claimed their dogged patience.

At noon they paused in the shelter of the woods. The dogs were anchored by the simple expedient of turning the sledge on its side. A little fire of dried spruce and pine branches speedily boiled tea. Caribou steak, thawed, then cooked over the blaze, completed the meal. As soon as it was swallowed they were off again before the cold could mount them.

The inspiration and uplift of the morning were gone; the sun was sinking to a colder and colder setting. All the vital forces of the world were running down. A lethargy seized our travellers. An effort was required merely to contemplate treading the mill during the three remaining hours of daylight, a greater effort to accomplish the first step of it, and an infinite series of ever-increasing efforts to make the successive steps of that long afternoon. The mind became weary. And now the North increased by ever so little the pressure against them, sharpening the cold by a trifle; adding a few flakes' weight to the snow they must lift on their shoes; throwing into the vista before them a deeper, chillier tone of gray discouragement; intensifying the loneliness; giving to the winds of desolation a voice. Well the great antagonist knew she could not thus stop these men, but so, little by little, she ground them down, wore away the excess of their vitality, reduced them to grim plodding, so that at the moment she would hold them weakened to her purposes. They made no sign, for they were of the great men of the earth, but they bent to the familiar touch of many little fingers pushing them back.

Now the sun did indeed swing to the horizon, so that there remained scant daylight.

"Chac, Billy!" cried Sam, who again wielded the whip.

Slowly, wearily, the little party turned aside. In the grove of spruce the snow clung thick and heavy. A cold blackness enveloped them like a damp blanket. Wind, dying with the sun, shook the snow from the trees and cried mournfully in their tops. Gray settled on the landscape, palpable, real, extinguishing the world. It was the second dreadful hour of the day, the hour when the man, weary, discouraged, the sweat of travel freezing on him, must still address himself to the task of making a home in the wilderness.

Again the sledge was turned on its side. Dick and May-may-gwan removed their snow shoes, and, using them as shovels, began vigorously to scrape and dig away the snow. Sam unstrapped the axe and went for firewood. He cut it with little tentative strokes, for in the intense cold the steel was almost as brittle as glass.

Now a square of ground flanked by high snow walls was laid bare. The two then stripped boughs of balsam with which to carpet all one end of it. They unharnessed the dogs, and laid the sledge across one end of the clear space, covering it with branches in order to keep the dogs from gnawing the moose skin wrapper. It was already quite dark.

But at this point Sam returned with fuel. At once the three set about laying a fire nearly across the end of the cleared space opposite the sledge. In a moment a tiny flame cast the first wavering shadows against the darkness. Silently the inimical forces of the long day withdrew.

(To be continued.)

Mr. Collinson emphasized the necessity of the more careful marking of sheep at a meeting of a new association of Yorkshire wool buyers formed at Bradford and said, "a fortune awaits the person who invents a mark which will stand the climate, and yet be soluble in hot water."

SUTTON'S PEDIGREE SEEDS

Write for Catalogue of 1907 Farm and Garden Seeds to the Agents—

THE BRACKMAN-KER MILLING COMPANY, Limited.

125 Government St., Victoria, B.C.

THE BRITISH LIBRARY
Cms. 1 2 3 4 5
Ins. 1 2