

OVER THE LINE.

By Lilian C. Paschal, in Pearson's Magazine.



Annie's Brave Klondiker Lover Had Passed Over the Great Divide into God's Country.

"It's no use, fellows, I can't hold out till we reach Lake Lindeman — you go on and leave me." The eyes of the sick man looked longingly at the distant peaks of the Chilkoot away to the southwest.

"Nonsense! Cheer up, old man. You'll live to see God's country yet — and that little sweetheart of yours, too, down in the States." Frank Hirsh smiled around cheerfully over the rope traces at the thin face looking out of the rough sleeping-bag on the sledge behind him.

But his heart sank, and with a low word to Gilmore plodding ahead, he quickened his weary feet along the trail over the frozen surface of Lake Bennett. They rounded a jutting ice-crug, and stopped for a moment's rest in its shelter from the biting wind.

"Wish we had Luluk and Argo and the rest of the dogs back again. This is slow work." And Jack Gilmore rubbed his galled shoulder, where the heavy rope-harness had worn its way.

"Well, we haven't," rejoined his comrade, "nor the dough to buy 'em back again, so we might as well shut up wishing. But I'm afraid we'll never get him over the divide," he added in a low voice, with a backward glance at the wasted form on the sledge. "Though why the mischief he's so dead set on getting over the line, I don't understand," he broke off, and in one long stride reached the side of the sufferer.

"What is it, Martin, old boy? Let me help you." There was a rough tenderness in his tone, and a horror in his face as he lifted the convulsed and writhing shoulders of the sick man up to his own broad chest. His big fingers, calloused from the pick-handle, stroked with trembling gentleness the damp white brow, while Gilmore knelt and chafed the stiffening fingers of their ailing comrade.

"Boys—it's all up. Get me—over the line—tonight. I'll never see—another sunrise. It's for Annie—the policy—she has no one but me—the policy—" He panted and gasped, but soon seemed a little easier. Gently they laid him down and wiped the blood from his lips. He was speechless after the attack, but his eyes followed them in imploring protest as they decided, after a hasty conference, to camp here for the night.

"We'd better get him alongside a fire," said Hirsh, lighting some sticks of kindling. "We can't humor his sick fancy to die over in Uncle Sam's country, I'm afraid. We're both dead beat out now."

The bronzed, bearded faces were grimly solemn in the lurid glow of the camp-fire after they had eaten their coarse fare.

The white snow-silence of the Klondike seemed to press down upon them

like a ghastly pall; the northern lights shot up and paled again beyond the great summits toward the pole, flashing across the sky like some gigantic searchlight turned by invisible hands upon earth from the distant watch-towers of heaven.

"It's the devil's own country anyway," Gilmore's voice was savage with feeling. The labored breathing of the dying boy on the other side of the fire, combined with their uncanny surroundings to stir the depths of his great, honest heart. He swore softly as he thought of Martin's little Annie who would watch in vain for his coming with a fortune that was to make their marriage possible.

Gilmore got up and stamped his feet on the icy ground to keep them warm and relieve his feelings.

"It's an infernal shame!" he broke out. "Such as he ought to stay at home out of this howling wilderness. It's bad enough for big, strong chaps like you and me, Frank, and him just a kid with eyes and hands like a girl."

Even profanity has its limits of expressiveness, so he kicked a pine knot farther into the snapping fire and stood silently gazing into the flames. What they both saw in the burning embers, those picture-books of memory, only a heartsick, home-hungry Klondiker knows.

The long howl of a wolf-echoed down the stillness. Hirsh shivered and stood up.

"I can't stand this any longer," he said. "I'm going to find out, if I can, why he's so anxious to get over the line. Doesn't it strike you, if I wanted to tell us something — something about a policy?"

The other nodded and together they bent over the sledge, rousing Martin from his stupor.

"What is it you want, old man? Can we help you?" Only an anguished look in the speaking, brown eyes.

"Why were you so set on getting over the line? Annie?" A light came into the eyes.

"Letters?" A scarcely perceptible falling of the lids and a downward glance was the only answer.

"George Martin, our young townsman in the Yukon gold-fields," a lock of glinting hair, which they touched reverently and laid aside, and last a diary containing accounts of wanderings and privations—almost starvation—in the gold diggings, stopping suddenly with the final entry:

"February 6.—Nearly to the end of my string when I fell in with two brother Masons today at the lower end of Lake Bennett. Said they'd give me a lift over the line into the N. W. Ter., though they have no huskies.

"February 8.—Know I'm going to die. I'll never see home again. The pain in my chest is worse—had another hemorrhage this morning. Annie, dear, you used to say we had to be good to each other, for we were the 'Two Orphans'—there'll be only one pretty soon—and for your sake I've got to get over the line. The policy—"

Here the weak fingers had failed in their last record. Gilmore, swearing under his breath, rose hurriedly and went over to the sledge again. After a moment he came back carrying a long, soiled white envelope.

"Just as I thought," he remarked huskily, scanning its contents by the flickering flame-light. "It's a life insurance policy for \$5,000, made out to Miss Annie Rickards — and it's good only in the United States! If he dies over in British Columbia, it's null and void. Whew!" He whistled his dismay, he even forgot to swear.

"By Jove! Jack, we've got to get him over to Chilkoot Pass tonight," exclaimed his companion. "It's five miles across to the police post, then up Three-Quarter Mile, and four miles across the lower end of Lake Lindeman, and seven more to the Pass. Can we do it?"

"We've got to," was the terse reply. "Get the things onto the sleds again. It's on account of that policy he wants to die in United States territory. Hurry!"

Hastily they made preparations for a start. The wind was rising and the snow began to fall. It made the trail on the ice treacherous, but one look at the sledge was enough for the prospectors.

They harnessed themselves up again tandem-fashion, and stepped out in the teeth of the biting wind. For four hard miles they raced steadily over the ragged, slippery trail, once through an overflow, where the water oozed up from a deep crack in the ice, soaking and freezing their buckskin moccasins; still onward with the wind cutting their icicle-hung faces, and the snow swishing about their feet. Then as they rounded a point and the lights of the police post twinkled into view, they gave a winded shout and broke into a sledge's dog-trot.

Suddenly Gilmore, who was in the lead, stopped with an exclamation of dismay.

"What's up?" panted Hirsh alongside, while a low moan came from the sledge.

"The water's up — that's what," answered Gilmore with a curse that was half a groan.

"It's only another overflow, isn't it?" queried his companion, with eyes straining shoreward. But even as he asked the question, the lipping of water was at their very feet.

It was as they feared, the ice had been thawed loose from the shore by the Chinook of the day before, and over a hundred yards of bitter cold water intervened between them and their first destination.

"What in thunder'll we do now?" Frank's brave voice faltered, his teeth chattering from the cold. They both shouted for help, but the wind carried the tones back into their throats. They hallooed themselves hoarse, and stamped their frosted feet, but no help came.

"I'm going to do the Leander act!" finally said Gilmore, throwing off his fur outer garments. "Guess his girl wasn't any more to him than Annie is to Martin. Anyway, here goes for the Hellespont."

And before Hirsh could recover his breath, his comrade had plunged into the icy waters of Lake Bennett.

"God! I hope he'll get through. They say a man's body never even comes up if he's drowned in these cursed lakes." And Frank waited in an agony of suspense.

He paced anxiously back and forth, too excited, weary as he was, to remember bodily fatigue. The sick man's eyes gleamed in the dark with a fierce light of determination. He was fighting off the grim foe by sheer force of will. His fevered brain was possessed by the one idea, that he must not die till he was over the line.

The storm beat upon them as they waited, like a pack of hungry wolves. The gorgeous canvas of the polar sky resting on its easel of mountain peaks, and painted by the fiery fingers of the aurora borealis, had long been hidden from sight by the gray drapery of swirling snow-cloud, drawn across its face by the unseen hands of the wind.

At last a faint halloo came down the steep of the storm, and Hirsh answered hoarsely. Then came the push of oars, and a boat shot into view and grated upon the edge of the ice.

"How is he—still alive?" asked an eager voice, and Gilmore in dry clothes and with help at hand clambered out. How he had fought his way through that stretch of frigid water, dodging the floating ice-cakes and lived, through it he never knew.

but he did it, and there are those at the post who still tell of it.

"Thank God you've come, Jack!" "Well, now let's get 'em in here, and you fellows row like the devil! We've got to get in sight of Old Glory on Chilkoot Pass before sunrise. All ready! Heave ho!" And sledge and its burden were lifted quickly on board, and they pushed out. Restoratives were administered to the sick man, while a stiff pull of brandy and dry footgear were passed over to the shivering Hirsh. "Sorry we've no dogs to help you on. Why don't you fellows stop at the post tonight and go on in the morning?" asked one of the patrol in the rescue party.

"Because the powers that be are fighting over a few miles of boundary territory, that's why. We've got to shake hands with Uncle Sam tomorrow—that is, if St. Peter doesn't get a chance at one of us first." Gilmore glanced at the ashen face of the poor boy who had been the cause of all this terrible journey, and set his teeth.

"Here, let me row. We're just crawling." He braced his broad shoulders, and the boat leaped forward. "Lord, it brings old Harvard days back again. Guess this is the greatest regatta we've ever been mixed up in—eh, Frank? But we'll beat the Angel Boatman by a length or two, or my name's Mud." With which irreverent remark he relapsed into panting silence.

When they touched land they tenderly carried the half-dead Martin ashore, hastily donned the harness gear, and thanked the boatmen, who stood staring at the prospectors strode out of sight dragging the sled. Gilmore waved a farewell. "Will see you later and tell you all about it!"

On again through the now abating storm, down the trail, along the small river that connects the two lakes, they raced with death, out into the open where Lake Lindeman's white-plain of frozen waters showed faintly in the pale glimmer of the moon.

Here they struck boldly out across the lake toward Chilkoot, yet many miles away. Hitting the forest trail on the farther shore, they plunged into the drifts neck-deep, floundered out, and struggled on under giant pines cracking with their weight of sleet and snow, on and ever on, once losing the trail and hacking their way back again with hatchet and knife through the snow-choked

underbrush and overhanging boughs, starting a herd of caribou from their covert, their small boots padding sharply over the rocky ice-way amid the crash of splintering icicles, once at the head of a small cañon they sighted the great antlers of a bull-moose, who whistled and stared stupidly, then trotted off into the forest.

Pausing for breath, they heard the stifled respiration of Martin, and then it ceased suddenly as they bent anxiously over him.

"He's just fainted, his heart's still beating," said Hirsh, with a hand under the flap of the sleeping-bag. "Come on, we've got to get that five thousand provided for Annie. He'll turn in his grave if we don't."

A gentle sprinkle of snow on the face and some brandy revived the fainting man, and they raced on.

The first streaks of the belated northern dawn were lighting the sky as they emerged, ragged, exhausted, and half-frozen in front of a lumber camp at the foot of Chilkoot. They staggered like drunken men as they walked, there was blood on their faces where the striking fir-boughs had lashed them, and each had frost-bitten fingers, but they reaped their reward for their terrible night.

For, as the lumbermen collected around the group, the dying man opened his eyes, and saw, against the heavenly blue of the sky, the Stars and Stripes flung to the morning breeze on the summit of Chilkoot Pass. He raised his wasted form, and on his boyish face shone a light not born of the dawning sun.

"Thank God!" he gasped. "I'm over—the line—at last. Tell Annie—"

He fell back, and the strained eyes took on a look of great peace.

Annie's brave Klondiker lover had passed over the Great Divide into God's country.

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