

Le Noir—Sneak-Cat!

By the author of "The Madness of Billy," etc.



NOT a single trapper along the whole river or up the Bay liked him, and when it leaked out at the Post that he could see a dollar a mile away and would walk backward and tumble over everything to reach it, the men frowned. He was a surly little black-whiskered man, and lived in a lonely shack far up the French River—this Le Noir.

When Angus Fletcher found the door of his shed broken open one morning not long before Christmas, and some brand new otter-traps, a good "peevy," a new axe, and a quantity of ammunition missing, he straightway lost his temper and wasted the best part of a day following a difficult trail through the tamarack swamp. It only led to Le Noir's shack, and he might have known that the woods contained but one two-legged "sneak-cat." There are generally reasons for things, and in this particular instance there was one big reason which Angus Fletcher and his brother Don knew about.

The ice had been so smooth and wind-swept all winter that most of the trappers had skated down to the fur-trading stations along the Georgian Bay, dragging their pelts on pack-sleds over the ice. When the Fletcher boys built the ice-boat, however, and beat the time-record down to half, the men became interested in the offer of carrying their skins for a small fee. The journeys to the Post were long, toilsome even for the best skaters, and often fraught with danger, so that after Jake Hawkins took the lead and allowed the Fletchers to carry his pelts, it was not long before the young men had worked up quite a custom. The season was therefore proving of high profit.

Le Noir never had many skins of his own, and as his sled was large, there was generally room for several extra packs, but since the ice-boat monopolized patrons, his long trips to the Bay now brought but small returns.

The day before Christmas the Fletchers found it necessary to make an extra trip to the Post for provisions and other articles of which they stood immediately in want. On the advice of Jake Hawkins, they had decided to keep the theft quiet and await developments. The offence was of the "high sass" order and indignation would run riot for miles around if the men heard of it; Le Noir would not be safe.

Hawkins was smoking some new steel traps over a fire of hemlock and spruce when he heard a shrill whistle and saw the ice-boat bearing up the inlet to where his shanty stood.

"Hullo! boys," he called out. "Reckon ye'll not be scuttin' along much this mornin' with seel a wind."

"Tis rather slow, agreed Angus," but it's on the increase."

Hawkins sniffed the air. "I low it's comin' on to snow fore night an' it'll be colder'n Biter by mornin'—reg'lar bliz."

"So much the better; we'll come home full tilt," cried Angus. "Pretty cold last night and there's a few cracks in the ice. Over on the Big Pond there's one with about a dozen feet split."

"Yes, an' what d' you think, Jake," Don interposed, "the mury was wonderin' if the Sprite could jump it."

"So she could in a stiff wind," retorted Angus while the trapper laughed a big silent laugh.

"Seed any bob-cats lately?" he asked.

"Nary a one."

"I heard 'm screechin' last couple nights over'n the swamp, an' say, boys, the wolves is gittin' mighty oneasy in this here cold snap; reckon ye better be a kinder keeful. Chris Dawson sayed as he seed seven tracks t'other day all 'n a heap."

"Bah!" Angus laughed aloud. "Why there ain't a wolf in the timber could keep the Sprite in sight for a mile!" he scoffed.

yet?" Don shook his head and Angus' face darkened. "Don't ye go worryin' over that measly sneak—he ain't worth it. He's a thorough-bred skunk."

This last was shouted out, for the Sprite was gathering headway, and an echo flung the word "skunk" through the trees.

About three o'clock in the afternoon, the Fletcher's reached the mouth of the river and were coasting among the islands along the bay shore when Don caught sight of a man with an empty pack-sled just rounding an islet opposite the river. He was too far away to be definitely recognized, but the figure was that of Le Noir.

By the time the Fletcher's had unloaded the ice-boat, which was designed for carrying a limited cargo, and had re-packed her with provisions, night was closing in. It got dark very quickly and no practised eye was needed to note the signs of an approaching storm. The trappers and settlers from along the bay who had come to the Post, one and all decided to remain over night, and when it became known that the young men were bent on setting out for home, there was a murmur of dissent.

"I reckon ye better not try fer it," Chris Dawson whispered after calling Angus aside. "There's snow in that there sky an'—"

"Tah! man, we'll be home before the storm breaks; the wind couldn't be better."

"Ye'll smash to smithereens in the dark an' there's wolves about fer I seen 'em."

But Angus shrugged a shoulder and proceeded to overhaul the sail-ropes. Twenty minutes later the Post buildings were rapidly fading out in the gloom as the ice-boat sped away into the night.

The wind moaned through the forest and swept along the river with increasing force. At the end of two hours it was blowing half a gale and the Sprite was obliged to hug the lee of the river and the islands. It was too dark to discern objects at any great distance and there was the constant danger of running into a snag, but away out in the centre of the river the mad rush of the wind was even more to be feared. It was bitterly cold and the young men smuggled down amongst the furs beside the tiller and drew their heavy caps close over their ears. They were travelling at a great rate with the white rime streaming away from the iron heels of the runners which gave out a low singing hum.

All was going well and the miles were slipping to the rear in rapid succession, when suddenly Don uttered a cry and sprang back as a low black object whizzed by on the ice, scarcely a foot away. Angus glanced quickly

out into the full blast of the gale. The Sprite was sailing close to the wind and she careened and shivered and fairly flew. Don glanced in alarm at his brother, whose face was white and his teeth set with a grim determination.

"What's—?"

"Shut up!"

All at once the low cloud swerved sharply to the left and an involuntary cry broke from Angus' lips.

"We've got to save him, Don!" he shouted above the whistling of the wind in the ropes, and threw the helm over a point to the right. Their speed was something terrific.

"The crack! The crack!" screamed Don, seizing the other by the shoulder.

But Angus deliberately shifted their course another point so that they would meet the ten-foot crack head on. They were flying at an appalling rate, and there was now no time to avoid the crevice. If they would save Le Noir their only chance lay in crossing it and reaching him in advance of the howling pack.

Madly they swept on in the grasp of the wind.

"Hang on!"

There was a wild leap into space and the whole fabric trembled with the shock as the ice-boat struck the opposite side of the crevice. The steering-runner ripped the edge, then the boat pitched forward with a thud onto the level surface beyond. There was the sound of breaking wood, and the white faces of the two boys grew whiter still, as for an instant they thought a runner was gone. Like some startled wild thing the Sprite shuddered in the wind, gave a sudden lurch, and then scooted rapidly away.

The wolves were coming swiftly back into the course, but the ice-boat was ahead of them now. Don seized his Martini repeater and scattered several shots amongst the animals, bringing down the big shaggy leader. As the ravenous pack fought savagely over the victim the ice-boat bore rapidly up to the figure a head.

At sound of the rattle, Le Noir had turned and his failing hopes revived. Down swept the Sprite and Angus shouted to him as he hummed past. Intuitively the Frenchman skated around an islet just as the ice-boat luffed sharply into the wind.

"Quick man!" cried Angus.

The sail threatened to be torn to ribbons, but before the boat's headway was altogether checked, Le Noir had skated alongside and dropped upon the boards in an exhausted collapse.

There was not a moment to lose, for the wolves were again in headlong pursuit. With a quick movement the helm was

Angus laughed harshly as they headed for home.

Through the whole night the storm raged and swept across the country. Christmas morning broke clear and

cold upon a world of snow that lay in great drifts of diamond-sparkles beneath the sun.

Jake Hawkins was slowly breaking a path across a small bay opposite the Fletcher's place. The thongs that bound his snowshoes to his moccasins squeaked at every stride, and he was whistling for very joy of being alive. He stopped short.

It was the end of an old toboggan sticking up out of a drift. Hawkins took off one of his racquettes and scraped away the snow, slowly at first, but soon he was digging with all his might. It was only a battered toboggan on which were lashed some traps, a peevy, an axe, and a package of ammunition.

But near by lay a man frozen in the snow, and a smile was on the upturned face.

Hopkins' Monks

Unanointed Altars.

It was not for the sake of the things we sought,

Nor the foolish crowns we cried for,
Nor yet for the sake of those ancient gods
Our fathers fought and died for.

It was not for the bronze and gold we gave,
Nor the loins nor the land that bore him,
O never for these did he battle so long
With the world that lay before him.

"Let it be that the hounds of the Earth
shall win
Let it come that I bow to the curs,
And stand a fool in the eyes of the world
— But O never a fool in Her's."

So the years of his barren youth went by,
With the one word left unspoken;
And the blood in his weary heart ran dry
And his godly strength was broken:

But to those who haggled and fought and fell,
For the fame he met with laughter,
She came full off and we kissed the face



THE SHEPHERDESS

over his shoulder just in time to recognize it

before it faded away

"If we'd hit that log—" Don gasped.

"That was no log," cried his brother excitedly. "Don, something's happened to Le Noir."

"Le Noir!"

"That was his sled!"

"Why, what—?"

But Angus was listening intently to a faint noise far ahead, scarcely to be distinguished above the roaring draught of the wind and the drone of the runners. Soon it grew louder and the young men looked quickly at each other.

"It's wolves!" cried Don.

Angus nodded as the ice-boat sped around a turn in the river. They were just entering the Big Pond where the stream widened out into an elongated lake.

With a sudden ejaculation, Angus peered into the gloom ahead. He could make out a low black cloud skimming along over the ice with the speed of the wind. Far in advance a lone figure was dashing wildly on and the frantic ring of skates upon the ice sounded clear above all.

Angus had been keeping the ice-boat in shore, but now he shifted the helm and they shot

thrown hard over and the Sprite fell off on another tack—faster and faster until she was simply spinning. Several shots took effect, but held the pack in check for a moment only. They had suddenly grown mad with the taste of blood, but no wolf could keep pace with the iceboat in that wind, and once she had gathered headway the danger was over. The howls dropped farther and farther to the rear as the miles slipped by, and soon all sound of the animal was lost in the distance.

Le Noir lay like a log where he had first thrown himself, until they were running up an inlet near his shack.

"We'll drop you off at the Point," said Angus.

But Le Noir gave no sign that he heard. When the ice-boat came to a stand-still in the lee of the Point, he roused himself as from a dream, got to his feet and without a word skated away, fading into the night like a shadow.

"Well, of all the things you ever heard tell!" cried Don in amazement. "Not even a 'thank you'!"

Of the Thing he hung gered after.

And he stood, at the end, in our wondering eyes, (For all that he held us curs.)

Far more of a god than a fool, indeed, — But ever a fool in Her's!

Arthur Hanger

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