

ST. VALENTINE COMES TO THE NORTH

BY LORRAINE TAYLOR

Illustration by Howard Edwards

AN acrid smell of paint came over the curtains. Hastings got up and went to the doorway.

"I say, you must like to get up early in the cold to paint. What are you doing now?"

With three pots of paint on the floor, the Italian was painting the green strip on a square board—the white strip and the red were already painted. Tony was being very careful not to put a finger mark on the finished paint.

"It is the flag Italian," he explained to the disgusted Canadian.

"And does that mean I've got to spend the morning doing a Jack to put up with your flag?"

"The ensign Canadian is more one color," Tony made the helpful suggestion in the interests of peace.

"I'd still have the Jack in the corner to do," Hastings strode across the room and began to dump buckets of thawed ice water into the enamelled tub in the tiny wash room.

"What a country! Oh, I say, what a country!" he muttered.

"Have you no flag Canadian?" asked Tony.

"Not one bally flag left—no flag, no country, no—" he spluttered over the word "girl."

"When the post comes, you can requisition one," Tony continued.

When the mail man came! No. It was a country where the mail man never would come. No letters since Christmas. The mail should have come in a week ago. He had thought the letters would have come by the fourteenth of February—by the fourteenth at least. There was nothing in the whole world but Tony who painted Italian flags when there was nothing else to do; an axeman who had to be sworn at; and a cook—well, the cook relieved the situation—he was the bright spot in the combination.

If only the Chief would get back, they could go on with the calculation. But they had waited a week for the Chief. Hang having nothing to do! He would have breakfast. It was the morning of the fourteenth. Surely the mail would come in.

Hastings splashed cold water to the window pane, where it froze instantly.

When he came out into the main room again, he looked at the stove, which was red-hot.

"Is it colder, Tony?"

"Sixty."

"Lord. Yesterday 58 below. Will the spring ever come in this country? Why don't we build a railroad to the Pole?"

He opened the door, humming, "To the Pole, to the Pole."

It was cold. He drew down the flaps of his cap and made a dash for the cook-house.

Instantly, a score of dogs of all sizes jumped around him.

"Down, Beauty, I say."

His favorite turning, snapped at the other dogs. Hastings regarded her disapprovingly. "Bad manners, Beauty, horribly bad manners, you brute."

Beauty crouched against his leg.

At the bluster of his coming and the rush of cold he brought in, the cook turned from his big stove to welcome him.

"Hungry, sir?"

"One pound of bacon, one pound—no less; I tell you, Mason, you've got to eat to live in this country. You wouldn't get away with it, without—or from it."

Silence for some moments until Hastings had got to the maple syrup and the fourth cup of coffee.

"Is the telephone still down, Mr. Hastings?"

"Lord, yes, we're marooned, cut off from the world—nothing to do till the mail comes in—life of luxury, Mason."

The cook grinned.

"Man from Joe's camp at Seven Creek says they'll blow themselves to Hudson Bay if they get much more careless with the dynamite."

"Who's in charge there now?" asked Hastings.

"Joe went out with the Chief, sir. There's no one much in charge."

"There's a foreman," said Hastings, sharply.

"Well—sir—" the cook hesitated.

"Heated with it," said Hastings, "do you mean he's got something to drink?"

"Oh, no, sir, but he's not much with some of the men."

Hastings gave it up.

"I'll go over this morning if I can get through."

He broke out of the cook-house grinning.

"Whiskey," he said, "there's no whiskey in all the blooming land."

He looked about him. The log buildings of the Residency—the office, bunk-house, cookery, and store-house almost buried under the snow, with the deep-dug paths between. Around, the spruce trees stood black against the gray sky. Straight through the dark ranks of trees ran one of the Chief's first trial lines—Hastings looked down the white path to the lake expanse beyond.

"Snow," he said. "It's going to snow. Oh, Lord, what a country, what a country." For seven weeks he had waited for a letter which might not come.

When he entered the Residency, the Italian had put on the Victrola. Vibrating through the rough untrimmed rafters went the rich Italian notes of the aria from I Pagliacci.

"Caruso again," objected Fred.

Tony regarded him darkly.

"He is the finest tenor in the world—that man."

"Yes, so I've heard you say before. 'Annie Laurie' is a better song than that—Oh, Lord man—"

Said Tony, "The opera—you have no regard for it in this country. That is one of the finest songs in the world. Now, 'Annie Laurie,'" he gesticulated, "that is a pretty song, oh, yes, but you say, for no reason apparently, 'I would lay me down and die.'"

"Well, that's all right," insisted Hastings. "In your songs it's the women who die."

"Oh, leesten," implored the Italian.

The magnificent voice sent the last notes over the still cold of the northern land.

"Yes, I know, old man, it gets you. But 'Annie Laurie' is safer."

"Safer?" Tony queried. "What do you mean by safer?"

"I don't know—I'm going up to Joe's. They're fooling around with dynamite up there—ought to let them blow themselves up, eh?"

Tony's dark face wrinkled to a grin.

The Italian had put on the Victrola.

"Caruso again," objected Hastings.

"He's the finest tenor in the world," replied Tony.

Hastings came back with "Yah, Annie Laurie's a better song than that."



"Oh, no."

"We'll keep the fire going. Lord, it's cold."

"That Beauty—she bites at the dogs," said Tony, following him out. "She is not so good a leader as she was."

"I know. I'll fix her." Hastings shook the harness, and his dogs jumped for joy.

Beauty came to lead. Hastings looked at her.

"No, Beauty, you'll go back to-day and learn to behave Buster, here."

Beauty, degraded from the leadership, whimpered at the end of the line.

"Maybe the letters come to-day," remarked Tony.

"Oh," exploded Hastings, "is letters all you've got to think of? Go and play with the Teddy Bear—Mush," he said to his dogs, "mush on."

Dogs and man took the trail to the north-west.

Tony went to see the Teddy Bear.

"He is one fine man, Ted Hastings, but his nerves, to-day they are bad," he confided to the wrinkled nose of the little brown bear. "He does not take a whip for his dogs. He is good. But he does not like my Caruso—not since Christmas does he like my Caruso."

"Safer? 'Annie Laurie' safer?" The man with the sled going to the north-west laughed. Then for the hundredth time the scene on Christmas went across his mind.

They had had a lot of opera—too much!—with Tony playing on his violin, and singing. That had made the atmosphere—had, so to speak, got him going. On Christmas Eve, Rainer, the Chief, had discoursed slightly—and slightly—on girls.

"You say it's a poor job up here. Out at the front they're having the Christmas dances and the office chaps are dancing with the girls you like best. All I can say is, this is a good place to save money in. But you chaps, you want to go down to Quebec and spend all you make—flowers, candy, sleighs, then it's yours for the North and a life of solitude. Oh, I tell you, girls are all right to spend money on."

Fred's resentment at Rainer's sneers had been the last straw. Jean wasn't like that. To be sure, she had said Good-bye apparently unmoved; yet he felt that she cared, knew quite humbly but very surely that she did. He had her last friendly little letter in his pocket and he put his hand on it as Rainer, having finished speaking, puffed again at his pipe.

That, and the opera, and the cold, and the northern stars had written his letter the next day. "Annie Laurie" safer? At least, a chap wouldn't have written the letter he wrote Christmas Day on the strength of "Annie Laurie."

He wished he hadn't written the letter—wished for the fiftieth time he had waited until the spring and gone out to the front to see her. It was asinine to write to a girl he hadn't seen for a year. She would probably think him a fool.

He knew part of that letter by heart. "And if, sweetheart, you send me your picture by St. Valentine's Day, I'll know what it means."

What right had he to ask for that?

And if Tony had let that confounded Italian stuff alone, the letter would never have been written. "Annie Laurie" was such a jolly little song to work on—to go to look after dynamite on—

"Mush, mush on."

The dogs had stopped.

It was a narrow place in the trail and the snow from the cliffs at the side had swept in, completely filling the narrow path. Hastings, getting out, plunged ahead.

It was no use. The trail was blocked. It was a digging job. Whatever happened to the Swedes up at Joe's, dynamite or no dynamite, casualties or no casualties, he had to go back.

Fred turned the team and started back.

It was St. Valentine's Day in the North.

From the sky darkening rapidly, the snow began to fall, gently, steadily. If it began to blow and blew so hard that that fool of a mail man would stop down at Harris's, certainly they would not get the letters that day.

It must be about eleven o'clock. He would get back and Tony would have that music box going all the afternoon. Fred knew one thing, though, surely there would be a cut down on I Pagliacci. They would have "Annie Laurie." No. He would put on Harry Lauder.

Tony would be furious. He hated and despised the Scotch stuff; he would go off in a huff to the cook-house. Hastings rejoicing greatly at the thought, called loudly, gaily, to the dogs,

"Mush, mush on."

The dark trees trunks flashed by. Scurry through the snow, meet the falling flakes, get to camp for dinner.

He drew up with a flourish before the Residency. Whose dogs were those? Two teams.

He rushed in to the office. Rainer was back—

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