

Treasure Trail

By Frederick Niven

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(Continued from last issue)

As in hand, clipping footholds, now and then hitting the frozen snow with the back of his ax and listening to the sound of his blows lest there was but a crust over a cavity, he went far to the angle of the slope. Then he came back to say:

"We'd better get down into the edge of the woods to camp. We'll make it in the morning. It gets cold up here when the sun is going."

"You bet," said Piccolo. "It is just my ears that get it. Funny! It's like summer, as you say, down in Kokanee and up here—it's my ears get it; and at night I have enough blankets for anyone except the small-of-my-back."

"Quits so," said Angus MacPherson. So down they went into the shelter of the timber, filled their cans with water at a creek brawling out from under a complete arch of snow and ice. Early in the morning they were up, saddled and packed the horse and had the beast carry their load to the glacier's beginning.

"If only he was winged like the horse called Pegasus, Piccolo, we would find him still useful. As it is he may now as well go home. We'll cache part of our supply here and see about packing round as much as we can and getting over ourselves."

So the horse was unladen for the last time, then led back to the beginning of the timber, headed downhill. Both of them went down with it. It was chill at that early hour. For one to wait by the cache would have been a cold employ, and there was that in the vastness of these upper regions of the world (to Piccolo at any rate an unexpected and appalling vastness) that made human companionship good. He wondered how prospectors could go alone for months, among such scenes. He looked at his grim partner and understood better that air he had of patience, restraint.

Angus took the bridle off the horse. The lines and it he tied securely to the pack-saddle; then he gave the horse a clap on the haunch. It looked round at them with its big understanding eyes, and went away stepping daintily, head lowered, down the declivity through the woods.

Angus turned from watching it go and noted the expression on Piccolo's face.

"What are ye thinking?" he asked. Piccolo sighed.

"Oh, just that we are all alone now—just us two with these awful up-ended rocks," he replied.

"Ay. It was a kind of symbolical picture, yon horse-giving us that look and then—gone away through the woods. There! I heard his hoof click on a stone! You are accustomed to the society of horses, Pic. Ay, horses and dogs are fine company. I wish Darkie was with us; but he's company for Mauggie—Margaret, you know, Miggles. Yes, all alone now."

As he spoke a sound like a wind passing rose above them. It changed into a noise like a steam exhaust; it increased in volume; it was suggestive of a thousand giants putting up a thousand parcels in tissue paper. It rushed towards them, and was followed by a rumbling that finished in a series of stony reports. It was an avalanche on the slopes somewhere, ending in a rock slide. But they did not see it, only saw a sift of snow rise and fall beyond a protruding rib of rock, like flour in air when a flour bag is carelessly emptied.

The last of it came to their ears—the rending of wood, trees being broken by the roll of the rocks below timber-line. Then silence for a moment, and then a great chirping of squirrels in the forest, perturbed clucking of grouse down there in agitation.

They returned to their cache and making up as heavy loads as they could conveniently carry, with these well-packed, and their rifles, proceeded across the frozen snow where Angus had cut the way.

"And now," said Angus, "there's where we've got to go. You wouldn't ask even a mountain goat to do that—only a mountain goat or me!"

Piccolo frowned.

"All right," he said thinly but with vigour.

"You are just like a cornice of ice hanging over us," Angus remarked, and he pointed. "But we are early enough in the day; there is no great chance of it falling—like a broken cornice. We're really a good month too early attempting this. That Kokanee policeman, with the dark eyes and the fat like a ham, knew what he was talking about. But I think we will make it. I come from Aberdeen!"

So saying he strutted off, planting his feet with vigour, ax in hand. They headed south, across the lower snows, cutting steps for themselves wherever there was a possibility of glistening down. They crossed intervening rock slides cannily, not to start the boulders going; and then suddenly round the knife-edge of the crest they saw the woods below to south, and had a glimpse of the West Arm nine thousand feet beneath them, peaceful, awesome, quiet.

A flight of Clark's crows rose from some trees and drifted like notes in a sun ray. Piccolo's heart was thumping vehemently, but he said not a word about that, considering that where Angus went without a rest he could go. They rounded the hill's edge; and there below them was a field of ice. The lower edge they could not see over. It might go on in easy grades, or it might drop hundreds of feet.

"Up or down?" asked Angus of the vastness.

He dropped his pack and carefully scrambled along on the near solid rib of rock. Piccolo saw him lying down and looking over. He came back very serious of face.

"It's a sheer drop of a thousand feet," he said. "The bits of ice falling off at the edge go plunk down on what looks like the peat of Auld Scotland, a black-looking earth; and the lumps of ice when they fall off are white, but lying down there on that black soil they look like amethyst brooches for to clasp a highland plaid. There's no way for it, Pic, but to go up and cut steps along under yon big cave of snow."

Piccolo actually stammered: "But if it falls?"

"The edge will hardly fall till the afternoon warmth. Any slide from above will shoot over us," Angus assured him. "That's why I suggest doing it right under the cornice. It's the only way. Halfway down, if there came a slide of snow, it would shove us off the slope the way you brush the crumbs off your knees after a meal. Ay, right at the top, if there is a slide, it will shoot over us—like the way the water shoots over folks going under the falls of Niagara."

Piccolo drew a long breath.

"If you can do it I can," said he. "You'll have to lead, Mr. MacPherson—I mean Scotty."

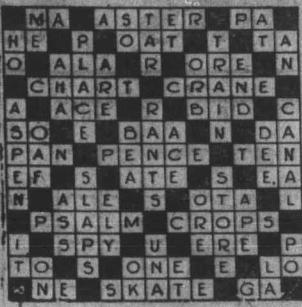
"Call me Angus," said MacPherson. "I admit we're up against a wee bit of danger here together; but we are not going back."

They climbed on, as high as they could among the rocks, and then set out across the hard ice-crusted snow, straight under the eaves of snow, where the falling of them, ever and again, had left a hump like a new bastion, or breast-work, on the lower side. But that bastion was about a foot away from the cliff front.

Piccolo heaved a sigh of relief when he saw this wonderful natural path and, above all, that ice balustrade. Its firm presence there made a vast difference, steadied the nerves. Without it, he felt, he would have been too dizzy to move on. With it there, even though never once did he actually step against it and require it to prevent a headlong slide, he went easily.

Angus too shared that feeling. He looked up at the curve of cliff and snow eaves over him, but that edge to the lower side gave him confidence. It was solid. He knew that if they slipped against it, it was amply strong enough to support them.

Suddenly the full day was shut out for them—a rushing sound was in their ears, a queer white shadow engulfed them and passed. It was as though it would be in such a contingency in the event of a snowslide higher up



Answer to Last Week's Puzzle

The little avalanche had shot clear over them. They looked down on the last of it rushing on its way.

"It's begun early," said Angus, over his shoulder. "But there will be no big one till the sun gets warmer, however." They went on quickly, to get their passage over. They reached the further end of that high cliff, and to their delight saw that the base of the next stretch was not simply a drop—space. Along the butt-end were trees, the edge of the timber, low, steep-eaved spires of hardy firs.

"If we slide, we slide; but we're round the bend," said Angus as if thinking aloud rather than addressing Piccolo.

He bent down and, thus humped, moved on, cutting steps all the way. Moving like crabs, atilt to the slope, their feet planted solidly in the steps, steps with a good inward dip to them, they ventured onward. But the day was wearing on. Above them suddenly came that sighing sound they knew. And they were on a long polished incline.

"Pray! We must pray!" cried out Piccolo.

Angus glanced round at him. "We must keep moving," he shouted. "We can render up thanks afterwards. Come on."

He gave but one look upwards and then flung his pack sidewise from his shoulder he shot forward with it, as if it were a toboggan. Piccolo, with a gasp, understood his design and followed. Behind them rushed the snow while they, sliding and kicking out, tobogganed at a tangent on their packs across the last of that slope. They came, blown and staring, to rest against the roots of the hardy little pinnacle-like firs below.

Angus sat still upon his pack. Then very sincerely he looked up at the awesome white stretches, and— "Thank God!" said he. "Thank God!"

He mopped his forehead. "Man, it's astonishing how hot a body can be in a seemingly cold situation like this!" he remarked. They sat there to breathe some time, very hot; but then the cold chilled them.

"Pic, my lad," said Angus, "would ye step back and bring the rest of our grub from the cache where we left it? You are younger than me. We needn't both go."

Piccolo's jaw dropped; he stared. He thought to say: "It is late in the day, and would it not be better to go early tomorrow?" Angus's eyes were keenly gazing upon him from under the grey tufts of brows.

"All right," said Piccolo, and rose; and taking up his ax made the first clip for a foothold in the front of the frozen snow.

"Fine, man! Fine, man!" said Angus. "Come back. I have not entire patience with Lord Tennyson's words about: 'Their not to reason why, Their but to do or die...'"

The day is coming, though 't's a long way off, I fear, when we will all reason why. But of course we must have our leaders to hold us together. It seems to me that you have elected me leader; and if I wanted that grub, and thought it worth the risk, I'd go for it myself.

BABY'S OWN SOAP

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That's the kind of leader to have! I wouldn't do it myself, and so I'll not ask you. I was joking; but it was maybe over Scots for you to catch. Come back, Piccolo. Man, ye are certainly a fine little twig of a body," and his eyes were so full of friendliness that Piccolo, for some reason—he was perhaps a trifle unstrung by their experience—filled a moment with tears.

To be continued.

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