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Illustration by R. E. Johnston.

The LUCK of LAST CHANCE CREEK

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How Hard-Luck Loudon Captured the Outlaw Malemute "Devil-Eye"

HARD-LUCK LOUDON painted the Klondike snows a lurid purple with emphatic language which has license only in the outland. The sight of his Yukon sledge, laden with his grub and outfit, being whisked down Chicken Creek by a bolting husky was not one to call forth soft words. In an unavailing attempt to halt the fleeing brute Loudon interspersed his trenchant expressions with the Indian command to stop. Insistently he repeated it, running in the trail which he unguided, lurching sledge had left, but the wild-blooded dog Devil-Eye was a half-mile down Chicken before his master had covered a hundred yards. Farther pursuit at that moment when the husky was possessed of such incarnate speed was ludicrous. Loudon ceased the long, loping stride in his snowshoes and stood still. Far down Chicken Creek a shaggy back streaked round a bend. A wabbling gee pole rocked after it and disappeared. Devil-Eye was a husky at large.

Often had the lead-dog tried for freedom during the bitter mush out of the Tanana country, when famine pressed and three of the four behind him were cut out of the harness to fill his own and the wheel-dog's stomachs, but he had never gained it till now. Loudon's whip had always been too ready and Loudon's feet too free. Also, the malemute wheel-dog was a traitor who would not help him, but sided with his master. Yet at the last Devil-Eye had caught both the master and Trailer, the wheel-dog, off their guard, and with a tremendous leap had broken away.

Here was more of the thing that had given Loudon his nickname. It didn't seem to be enough that the spirit of the gold-lands had put him down and out a hundred times with a hundred knock-out disappointments. That spirit was inimical still. It had bruised him, starved him, frozen him, and now it swallowed the last dollar he had. His face pinched in lines of suffering beneath his parka's hood, Loudon swung back sharply up Chicken Creek. He wondered why Trailer had not assisted him as usual. Trailer was a beautiful malemute, the gentlest malemute Loudon had ever known, the only northern dog he had ever seen that could be ruled by kindness. Loudon had so ruled him and won his heart. And Trailer had won the heart of his master. So Loudon noted with alarm that Trailer was lying motionless where Devil-Eye had made his break and jerked the breast-band over the wheel-dog's head. Loudon ran to him and, laying hands upon him, felt the head roll limply. Twisted in the harness as Devil-Eye bolted, the heavy sledge, over-riding Trailer, had broken his neck.

LOUNDON cursed softly. Only one other devotion in his life equalled his love for the faithful wheel-dog, which had journeyed with him through fire and frost, through famine, pestilence, and death. His face was wild with anger when he arose, and he shook a vengeful fist after the invisible Devil-Eye.

"I'll get you!" he vowed. "Run as far as you like, but I'll get you for this, you cursed savage!"

It was hard luck and more of it. He grimly reached for his pipe as solace, and while the match flickered over the bowl, he pondered on why the cur should have bolted at the precise moment it did. He pondered, and before the match was out came an answer to his pondering—the cry of a wolf-pack shrilling over the Divide to the west. It was the second time the sound had echoed through the Chicken Creek valley. The first time, his ears muffled by the parka's hood, Loudon had not distinguished the howl, but now he understood that Devil-Eye had heard the call.

"By thunder!" he exclaimed, speaking aloud after the manner of men who spend much time

alone in the silent places. "I always thought he was half wolf. Now he's gone wild again. But wild or not wild doesn't make any difference to me. I'll get him!"

The concentration of his mind on this purpose made him draw wickedly at his pipe as he turned and headed on up Chicken Creek towards Last Chance. Chicken Creek was a branch of the Forty-Mile River and Last Chance Creek a branch of Chicken. Snipers were thick on the main river, and many men had pushed their work on up the side stream as far as Last Chance. For this section of the Forty-Mile was famous as a bar-digging ground. Prospectors, dead broke and disgusted, came and camped on the river and thawed the bar gravels to renew their grubstakes. If the gravel ran rich, they rocked it at once, using ice-water melted on the Yukon tent stoves. If it did not prove so rich, they heaped high dumps on the bank, sluiced them in the spring, and rushed away for the latest stampede.

In a country so huge and so difficult to prospect as the Forty-Mile the river bars were to many miners the seats of salvation. He who never knew the grubstake ground had to be blessed with a syndicate purse. Loudon himself had come to it and gone from it a score of times. This time, at evening, he lurched into the camps at Last Chance Creek without dogs, minus a sledge, and guiltless of an outfit.

"Here's Hard-luck back!" announced Tim Healey, crawling into Hootch Harrison's snow-banked tent, the place of largest roof-area in the camp where miners congregated to smoke and swap experiences.

Healey's intimation was given as some common incident. It was received with a total lack of interest.

"Yes, I seen him," yawned Taku Torrence. "Pretty bad this trip! Ain't got a dast thing but his dog-whip and his pipe."

Loudon crept in a little after Healey.

"Tell us about it, pal," they sympathized.

SO Hard-luck told them of the Tanana failure of his starvation back-trip, of the defection of Devil-Eye, and of the death of his faithful malemute wheel-dog.

"But I'll get that brute yet!" he burst out, in conclusion. "I'll get him and bury Trailer on top of him."

"He deserves it," muttered Healey.

"Sartin he does," agreed Taku Torrence. "What if all our own dogs takes that as a press-e-dent?" Taku's was a mind of quaint philosophy.

"Wot?" spluttered Lombard, an English remittance man who was daring the rigours of the Klondike in hopes of a lucky cheechako's strike. "Wot? D'ye think they'll know? Bah Jove, that's a rippin' funny thot, ye know!"

"Course they'll know," Taku growled. "Every bloody yap on the creek'll understand. If one makes a break, what's the matter with them all makin' a break? That's the way they'll figger it, if ye ast me. For the good of our teams I say Devil-Eye has to come back."

"Don't worry, boys," advised Loudon, grimly. "He'll come back alright—on a sledge. Yours, Taku, if you'll lend me it in the morning. I'll need your rifle, too. Mine's lashed to my outfit."

"They're yer own?" nodded Torrence.

"But bah Jove, ye know," Lombard cut in, "that's a bloomin' funny idea—followin' a dog out of superstition."

"The devil!" scoffed Loudon. "I'm not superstitious. It's revenge I want. Revenge and my outfit. I haven't a cursed cent but that outfit. It'll pay my passage Outside."

"Going out?" they all chorused.

"Yes," replied Hard-luck, bitterly. "I'll never

wash another grubstake."

His gloomy eyes swept the group around the sheet-iron stove. They were derelicts like himself, but they were not suffering in the same way, and he recognized the futility of trying to reveal the canker in his heart without betraying himself. He bent low over the heater and spoke no more. He did not hear the gossip of the creeks and the tales of big strikes that went around. He was lost in painful retrospection of his home life in the southland and the ties that still held him to it, ties which had been the primary cause of his exodus to the golden North. As thrice bitter gall had been his disappointments everywhere he set foot, and the rending part of it all was that some one else must suffer through his failure.

His thoughts were not pleasant ones to take to bed, but before the last pipes of the others had been smoked out, he shuffled into borrowed blankets beside the stove. One by one those who had camps of their own went off to them. Presently Harrison, Healey, Torrence, Lombard, and a few more rolled up by the heater. When he thought they were asleep, Loudon drew from a pocket inside his parka a moose-skin wallet. Gently setting the stove door ajar so as to obtain a streamer of light, he opened the wallet. Its very leanness seemed to mock him as he took out a small photo, and his face, bathed in the stove's red glow, was a monochrome of suffering as he gazed on the face of the southland girl for whom he had moiled and striven.

"So that's the hard part of it," muttered some one on the other side of the fire.

Staring swiftly across the heater, Loudon saw Taku Torrence lying on his side, his eyes wide open. "God, Taku!" he exclaimed. "That's the hard part."

He laid the pasteboard on the coals and watched it shrivel as his golden dreams had shrivelled.

AND while Loudon tossed in troubled sleep, Devil-Eye was speeding on his way to rejoin his wolfish brothers. He crossed the Divide from Chicken Creek, found another stream, and followed it up into the desolate reaches of the western valleys. His environment grew more unfamiliar with every mile. He crossed snows that husky's pads had never trodden before. His ambitious heart carried him on in a peculiar feverish unrest induced by the distant wolf-cry that had come out of nowhere to set him free.

Along the wooded edge of a far bench ground Devil-Eye dragged the sledge foul of a small spruce, cunningly circled the trunk again, and snapped the traces by hard tugging. Bounding away with renewed speed, he rejoiced in his freedom from this encumbrance. He was aware that he had taken another step towards complete liberty. Still, his ambition was not yet fully realized. He found himself unable to get rid of the harness. The breast-band fitted snugly. He could not get room to slip his forefeet underneath and work the leather over his head. Neither could he turn the trick of hooking the galling thing on a snag to tear it off. Rolling amongst the shale ice failed to disembarass him of the harness, and ripping through the niggerhead swamps accomplished nothing, so he was forced to run still in the hateful contrivance. The weight of it worried him not at all. He knew it was a human trademark. That was his unsurmountable handicap.

In the heart of a frozen muskeg Devil-Eye at last sighted the pack. Silhouetted against the weird aurora, they were squatting on the crust, suspiciously watching his yelping advance. Of a single husky they were not afraid. Over a returned brother, even if his blood was tainted with a civilized strain, they would have waxed joyous. But this fawning cur bore the bond of a tamed