

in ten minutes—very good, good-by."

Then he turned to Alderson. "Are you a mind reader? What's the matter with this engineer of yours? He's coming over."

"Well, you told him that you were afraid the time was too short, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did."

"Well, that's what's the matter with him. He's got his back up—and, gentlemen, one word—Strong won't say much—he never does, so don't expect it. He says the woods make him silent, and there's too much talk, anyway. Now"—turning to the blue print—"here's his starting point, I take it. Good harbour and deep water."

"By the bye," put in Prentice, "where does Strickland stand in this?"

"I was just thinking about that," said Jenkins.

"Saw him two months ago. Said he was taking his family to Europe for six months, and had everything tied up and screwed down. He spoke of the Northwestern, but didn't think anything would turn up just yet. However, he said that, if anything did, we were to do what we thought best, and not bother him, and he would chip in."

"It seems a long time for Angus to drop out," said Prentice thoughtfully. "However, that's all right. I didn't know you had seen him."

They were intent over the map, when the engineer knocked and entered. It may not be amiss to describe something of the man. He stood just under six feet, and was as straight as one of the pine trees that had so often sheltered him. His face was oval and clean-shaven, and his skin tanned to a copper brown that stood out in sharp contrast to his snowy linen. The eyes were grayish-green, deep-set, and far apart, and the mouth, though firm, singularly sweet in expression. His shoulders and chest were of immense width, but so admirably proportioned that it was not at first noticeable; he walked with light, almost catlike tread that spoke of steel sinews and supple muscles, and his voice was quiet and pitched low. There was a pause as the three looked at him with keen interest; then Alderson glanced at Jenkins, and the latter spoke.

"Mr. Strong, the Superior and Northwestern Railway Company, which is controlled by ourselves and one other friend, has a charter to build a line from the Great Lakes to Height of Land—approximately two hundred miles. This charter expires in four months from to-day, unless within that time we file location plans in Ottawa. This is the twenty-second of December, and my friend, Mr. Alderson, has told us that there is one man in Canada, and only one, who can save the situation. That is why we have asked you to come over. Expense is not to be considered. We are in your hands—will you undertake the work?"

John Strong, his quiet eyes on the blue print, did not answer for some time.

The room was very still, and they could hear the dull roar of holiday traffic in the street below. Strong's gaze was traversing the map, resting here and there, and then moving rapidly on, till it reached a broad band of white that marked the course of the Transcontinental. Then he looked up and said:

"I assume you know the government requirements as to grade and curvature?"

Jenkins nodded.

"I assume, also, you can furnish special transportation over the Trans-Pacific, from here to Red Harbour, your starting point?"

Jenkins nodded again.

"Then I want a special on the Trans-Pacific, to leave in five hours, and a box-car attached to to-morrow's express for the West. As to terms, we'll discuss those later. I don't know if I can do what you want. If not, it will be because it's impossible. In an hour I will hand you lists of necessary supplies. These will follow on to-morrow's express. They will be bulky—don't omit anything—send exact quantities, put up as directed. You will have twenty-four hours. Please arrange open credit for me at the Provincial here. I think that is all. I will meet you here on the morning of April twenty-first. Good evening, gentlemen."

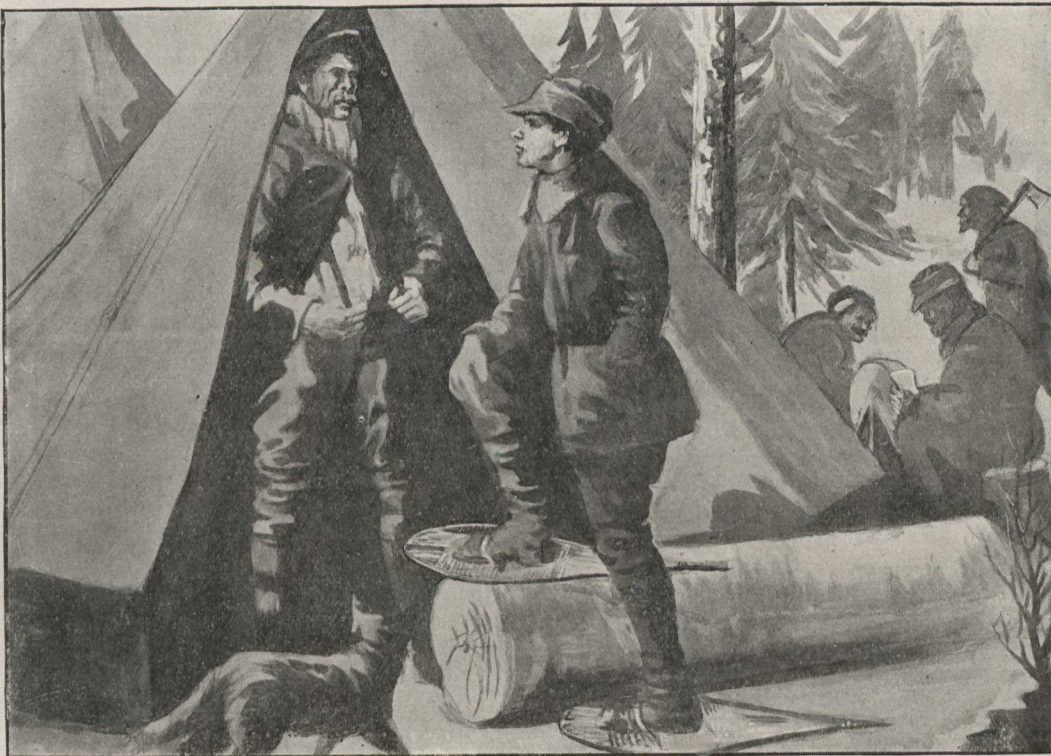
He bowed courteously, and the door closed noise-

lessly after him. So lightly fell his foot that only when the elevator rattled did they know he had gone. They were left looking at each other in quizzical surprise; it was over almost as soon as it began; it was almost uncanny. At last Jenkins looked at Alderson and pulled out a big cigar.

"Well, there's a spirit of the North. Heavens! The man has made me feel a thousand years old. I need a bracer. Boys, I think we're going to get a run for our money."

III.

ON the afternoon of the twenty-second of February, two months after the meeting in the Provincial Bank Building, a solitary figure stood on a ridge in a northern wilderness. As far as the



"How have you made out?" "Pretty well, chief. Eight miles in three days."

Drawn by S. S. Finlay.

eye could see, stretched a waste of snow, rock, and timber.

A hush was in the air. A few flakes of snow, small, fine, and light, trickled down from a gray bank of cloud, beneath which the sun loomed red and sullen as it touched the hilltops into a fleeting gleam of pink and red. In these vast solitudes sound travels fast and far, and from his altitude Strong heard the ring of axes, the call of the chain man, the sharp directions of the transit man, as, beneath him, the survey pushed south toward Lake Superior.

When Strong had watched his special swing round a curve, on her way back to civilization, he had, with a few poignant words, instilled into his men something of his own indomitable spirit. As to their duties and procedure, he had said nothing. He knew that they knew—and in twenty-four hours his axe, chain, and instrument men, his cooks and helpers, his packers and their dogs were facing north. His plan was to explore rapidly to Height of Land, start location there, and work south. He knew that it was not good engineering to locate on descending grade, but he also knew that it might be fatal to finish his work, two hundred miles from a railway, with a stretch of rotten ice between him and his principals.

Now, for two months, all was well. One of them had gone in exploration; in the other, seventy miles of line had been located. So far he was within his estimates, and the weather—well, that had been good, but to-night he was not so sure—it was on the knees of the gods.

He swung down into camp, his snow-shoes rising and falling with the perfect balance of the veteran walker. Long ere he reached it, the pungent incense of the fire came to his nostrils, and, guided by that, in half an hour he pushed into a cluster of spruce trees and was at home. He was glad to be there. For three days he had been ahead of the line, sleeping, when night fell, in a rabbit-skin blanket, carried, during the day, strapped over his shoulders, and living from a small store of provisions, wrapped in the same blanket.

His tent stood a little on one side, floored with aromatic cedar boughs, whose soft green shone in the light of a leaping fire. Around him hummed the life of the camp. The choppers were grinding

their axes to a razor edge for the morrow's work; the chain men were mending snowshoes; the transit and level men were plotting field notes on cross-section paper; the cook and his helpers were hovering like ministering angels over pots and kettles that augured well for supper; and, around them all, shuffled and prowled twelve thick-set Esquimaux dogs, freed from toboggan traces and hungrily awaiting their evening dole of hot corn meal and tallow.

"Ho, Thirsty," called the chief; and a long, lean man of about thirty-five appeared in the door of the tent. "How have you made out?"

"Pretty well, chief. Eight miles in three days, no curve over six degrees, and gradient down to one-half of one per cent."

Strong grunted his appreciation. Packers in yet?"

"Some of them, but there was some mix-up. They only bought corn meal—said the trails were all broken up."

Two little wrinkles appeared on the chief's jaw, the only sign of annoyance he was ever known to give. He was forty miles from his nearest cache of provisions, which had been distributed on the way north to be picked up as needed on the home journey; the packers had failed him, and twenty men looked to him for all things. The situation was serious enough, and looking out he noticed that the small, fine flakes of snow had become larger, and were drifting noiselessly down like crumpled feathers. The cook was summoned, a huge French-Canadian, known from Lake Superior to Hudson Bay as Dominick.

That worthy lifted his hands in despair. "By gar, boss, I can't do noddings. I cook de las' pork to-night. I guess h'everybody play dog an' heat corn meal. By an' by, dose dam' packers come, but dose trails pretty bad by morning."

In the cook camp at supper, Strong surveyed his men with a confidence which was far from what he felt. In summer the thing would have been subject for a jest; but in these ice-bound regions the heat of the body depends upon food, and hunger spelled inability to withstand the seventy-five degrees of frost around them. The country was so deep in snow that no game was moving; for days they had seen but an occasional track, and then only a lynx or weasel, and the cold had been intense. To-night it was not so severe, but ever those big flakes settled quietly down, rounding into blurred outline all things on which they fell. Gradually the sounds of the mimic city died away. The dogs dug their sleeping holes deep in sheltered places, the camp fire subsided into a heap of dull-red coals, a great white owl blinked at the misty moon and sent his defiant cry through the unanswering gloom, and John Strong crawled into his rabbit skin and lay wondering what the day would bring forth.

He got his answer next morning. Silently, ceaselessly, and insistently it had come; it was the beginning of what was known for years, in that country, as the great snowfall. The camp arose as usual by starlight; the dogs were dragged snarling and snapping from the pits which the heat of their bodies had melted beneath them, and the brown-faced men gathered around a board which gave unmistakable evidence of a scanty larder. The purple shade of night was touched with a cold yellow tinge as the last man pushed off into nowhere to the end of last night's line; and the packers began to break and tramp down the trail, which was choked with fine, powdery snow. Strong was apparently everywhere at once. On the line he chatted with the transit man, as he peered through a lane of glistening underbrush and waved his picket man to points of intersection; at the head of it he cheered his choppers, as their axes crashed into ice-bound timber and brought down avalanches from the burdened branches overhead; but ever and ever the snow came down, and the quiet earth beneath seemed to draw up stiff knees, in deeper sleep, beneath her fleecy shroud.

Supper that night would have afforded to a sociologist such an opportunity as those inquiring minds but seldom find. Dominick's efforts had been

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