

Rex Beach Adventure Stories

Where Northern Lights Come Down o' Nights

By REX BEACH

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THE mission house at Togiak stands forlornly on a wind swept Alaskan spit, while huddled around it a swarm of dirt covered igloo grovel in an ecstasy of abasement.

Many natives crawled out of these and stared across the bay as down a gully came an arctic caravan, men and dogs, black against the deadly whiteness. Ahead swung the guide, straddling awkwardly on his five foot webs, while the straining pack patterned at his heels. Big George, the driver, urged them with strong words, idioms of the northland, and his long whip bit sharply at their legs.

His companion, clanking in the sled, stumbled now and then, while his face, splitting from the snap of the frost, was smothered in a mutter. Sometimes he fell, plunging into the snow, rising painfully and groaning with the misery of "snow blindness."

"Most there now, Cap. Keep up your grit."

"I'm all right," answered the afflicted man wearily. "Don't mind me."

George, too, had suffered from the sheen of the unbroken whiteness, and while his eyes had not wholly closed, he saw but dimly. His cheeks were greasy smeared and blackened with charred wood to break the snow glare, but through his mask showed signs of suffering, while his bloodshot eyes dripped scalding tears and throbbled distressfully. For days he had not dared to lose sight of the guide. Once he had caught him sneaking the dogs away, and he feared he had killed the man for a time. Now Jaska broke trail ahead, his sullen, swollen features baleful in their injury.

Down the steep bank they slid, across the humped up sea ice at the river mouth and into the village.

At the greeting of their guide to his tribesmen George started. Twelve years of coast life had taught him the dialect from Point Barrow south, and he glanced at Captain to find whether he, too, had heard the message. As Jaska handed a talisman to the chief he strode to him and snatched it.

"Oh! It's Father Orloff, is it? D—him!" He gazed at the token, a white spruce chip with strange marks and carvings.

"What does it mean, George?" said the blind man.

"It's a long story, Charlie, and black. You should have known it before we started. I'm a marked man in this coast country. It's Orloff's work, the renegade 'Father', he calls himself—father to those devils he rules and robs for himself in the name of the church. His hate is bitter, and he'd have my life if these watery livered curs didn't dread the sound of my voice. God help him when we meet!"

He shook his hairy claws at the hostile circle, then cried to the chief in the native tongue:

"Oh, Shaman! We come bleeding and hungry. Hunger grips us, and our bones are stiff with frost. The light is gone from my brother's eyes, and we are sick. Open you the door to the mission house that the 'Minoks' may rest and grow strong!"

The Indians clustered before the portal, with its rude cross above, and stared malignantly while the chief spoke. At the name of his enemy the unsightly eyes of George gleamed, and he growled contemptuously, advancing among them. They scattered at the manner of his coming, and he struck the padlocked door till it rattled stiffly. Then, spying the cross overhead, he lifted up and gripped the wood. It came away ripping, and, with walls of rage and horror at the sacrifice, they closed about him.

"Here, Cap! Bust her in quick!" He dragged Captain before the entrance, thrusting the weapon upon him, then ran ferociously among the people. He snatched them to him, cutting like a bear and trampling them into the snow. Those who came into the reach of his knotty arms crumpled up and twisted under his feet. He whirled into the group, roaring hoarsely, his angry, greasy blackened face hideous with rage. The aborigine is not a fighting machine. For him the side step and counter have no being. They melted ahead of his blazing wrath, and he whisked them, feeling, by their garments, so that they felt the stamp of his moccasined heels.

Captain dragged the team within, and George, following, blocked the shattered door.

"We're safe as long as we stay in the church," said he.

"Right of sanctuary, eh? Does it occur to you how we're going to get out?"

"Never mind. We'll get out somehow," said he, and that night as Charlie Captain, late university man and engineer, lay with eyes swathed in steaming cloths the whistler spoke operosely and with the bitterness of great wrong.

"It happened when we rocked the bars of Forty Mile before ever a Chechako had crossed the Chilkoot. I went over to the headwaters of the Tanana. Into the big valley I went and got lost in the flats. 'Tis a wild country, rimmed by high mountains, full of niggerheads and tundra, with the river winding clean back to the source of the Copper. I run out of grub. We always did them days and built a raft to float down to the Yukon. A race with starvation, and a dead heat it near proved, too, though I had a shade the best of it. I drifted out into the main river, raving mad, my 'Mukluks' set off and my moose hide gun cover inside of me.

"A girl spied me from the village, and 'twas her brought me ashore in her birch bark and tended me in her wickup till reason came and the blood ran through me again. "I mind seeing a white man stand around at times and hearing him beg her to leave me to the old squaws. She didn't, though. She gave me bits of moose meat and berries and dried salmon, and when I come to one day I saw she was little and brown and pleading and her clothes all covered



He Whirled Into the Group, Roaring Hoarsely.

with beads. Her eyes was big and sad, Cap, and dimples poked into her cheeks when she laughed. "Twas then that Orloff takes a hand—the white man. A priest he called himself; breed, Russian. Maybe he was, but a blacker hearted thief never wronged a child. He wanted the girl, Metla, and so did I. When I asked her old man for her he said she was promised to the Kussian. I laughed at him, and a chief hates to be mocked. You know what sway the church has over these Indians. Well, Orloff is a strong man. He held 'em like a rock. He worked on 'em till one day the tribesmen came to me in a body and said, 'Go!'"

"Give me the girl and I will," says I.

"Orloff sneered. 'She was mine for a month before ye came,' says he, with the fiend showing back of his eyes. 'Do ye want her now?'"

"For a minute I believed him. I struck once to kill, and he went down. They closed on me as fast as I shook 'em off. 'Twas a beautiful sight for a ruction on the high banks over the river, but I was like water from the sickness. I fought to get at their priest where he lay to stamp out the grinning face before they downed me, but I was beat back to the bluff, and I battled with my heels over the edge. I broke a pole from the fish rack, and a good many went down. Then I heard Metla calling softly from below:

"Jump," she said. "Big one, jump!" She had loosed a canoe at the landing and now held it in the boiling current underneath, paddling desperately.

"As they ran out of the tents with their rifles I leaped.

"A long drop and cold water, but I bit feet first. When I rose the little girl was alongside.

"It's a ticklish thing to crawl over the stern of a canoe in the spatter of slugs, with the roar of muzzle loaders above. It's shaking to the nerves, but the maid never flinched, not even when a bullet split the gunnel. She ripped a piece of her dress and plugged a hole under the water line while I paddled out of range.

"The next winter at Holy Cross she ran to me shaking one day.

"'He is here! He is here! Oh, Big man, I am afraid!'"

"'Who's here?' says I.

"'He is here—Father Orloff.' And her eyes was round and scared so that I took her up and kissed her while she clung to me. She was such a little girl!

"'He spoke to me at the water hole—'I have come for you.' I ran very fast, but he came behind. 'Where is George?' he said.

"'I went out of the cabin down to the mission and into the house of Father Barnum. He was there.

"'Orloff! What do ye want?' says I.

"'Father Barnum speaks up. He's known for a good man the length of the river. 'George,' says he, 'Father Orloff tells me you stole the girl Metla from her tribe. 'Tis a shameful thing for a white to take a red girl for his wife, but it's a crime to live as you do.'

"'What? says I. "We can't sell you provisions nor allow you to stay in the village."

"Orloff grins. 'You must go on,' he says, 'or give her up.'

"'No! I'll do neither.' And I shows the paper from the missionary at Nulato stating that we were married. 'She's my wife,' says I, 'and too good for me. She's left her people and her gods, and I'll care for her.' I saw how it hurt Orloff, and I laid my hand on his shoulder close to the neck. 'I distrust ye, and sure as Fate ye'll die the shocking death if ever harm comes to the little one.'

"That was the winter of the famine, though every winter was the same then, and I went to Anvik for grub, took all the strong men and dogs in the village. I was afraid when I left, too, for 'twas the time I should have been with her, but there was no one else to go.

"'When you come back,' she said, 'there will be another—little boy—and he will grow mighty and strong like his father.' She hung her arms around me, Cap, and I left with her kisses warm on my lips.

"It was a terrible trip—the river wet with overflows and the cutoffs drifted deep, so I drove back into Holy Cross a week late, with bleeding dogs and frozen Indians straining at the sled ropes.

"I heard the wail of the old women before I came to the cabin, and when Metla had sobbed the story out in her weakness I went back into the dark and down to the mission. I remember how the northern lights flared over the hills above and the little spruces on the summit looked to me like headstones, black against the moon, and I laughed when I saw the snow red in the night glare, for it meant blood and death.

"It was as lusty a hale as ever 'crowed, but Orloff had come to the sickbed and sent her squaws away. Baptism and such things he said he'd do. The little fellow died that night.

"They say the mission door was locked and barred, but I pushed through it like paper and came into Father Barnum's house, where they sat. Fifty below is bad for the naked flesh. I broke in, bareheaded, mittless, and I'd froze some on the way down. He saw murder in my eyes and tried to run, but I got him as he went out of the room. He tore his throat loose from my stiffened fingers and went into the church, but I beat down the door with my naked fists, mocking at his prayers inside, and may I never be closer to death than Orloff was that night.

"Then a squaw ruzzed at my parka. "She is dying, Atruk," she said, and I ran back up the hill with the cold biting at my throat.

"There was no death that night in Holy Cross, though God knows one naked soul was due to walk out on to the snow. At daylight, when I came back for him, he had fled down the river with the fastest dogs, and to this day I've never seen his face, though 'tis often I've felt his hate.

"He's grown into the strongest missionary on the coast, and he never lets a chance go by to harry me or the girl.

"D'ye mind the time 'Skagway' Bennett died? We was partners up Norton sound way when he was killed. They thought he suicided, but I know. I found a caribou belt in the brush near camp—the kind they make on the Kuskokwim, Father Orloff's country. His men took the wrong one, that's all.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell ye this, Cap, before we started, for now we're into the south country, where he owns the natives. He knows we've come, as the blood token of the guide showed. He wants my life, and there's great trouble coming up. I'm hoping ye'll soon get your sight, for by now there's a runner twenty miles into the hills with news that we're blind in the church at Togiak. Three days he'll be going, and on the fifth ye'll hear the jangle of Russian dog bells. He'll kill the fastest team in Nushagak in the coming, and God help us if we're here."

George scraped a bit of frost lace from the lone window pane. Dark figures moved over the snow, circling the chapel, and he knew that each was armed. Only their reverence for the church held them from doing the task set by Orloff, and he sighed as he changed the bandages on his suffering mate.

"They awoke the next morning to the moan of wind and the sift of snow clouds past their walls. Staring through his peephole, George distinguished only a swathe of whirling flakes that grayed the view, blotting even the neighboring huts, and when the early evening brought a rising note in the storm the trouble lifted from his face.

"A three day blizzard," he rejoiced, "and the strongest team on the coast can't wallow through it under a week. These on shore gales is beauts."

For three days the wind tore from off the sea into the open bight at whose head lay Togiak, and its violence wrecked the armor of shore ice in the bay till it bent and roared against the spit, a thrashing maelstrom of shattered bergs. The waters piled into the inlet, driven by the lash of the storm, till they overflowed the river ice behind the village, submerging and breaking it into ragged, dangerous confusion.

On the third day, with arctic vagary, the wind gasped reluctantly and scurried over the range. In its wake the surging ocean churned loudly, and the backwater behind the town, held by the dam of freezing slush ice at the river mouth, was skimmed by a thin ice paper, pierced here and there by the up ended piles from beneath. This held the night's snow, so that morning showed the village girl on 'three sides by a stream soft carpeted

and safe to the eye, but falling beneath the feet of a child.

"Your eyes are coming along mighty slow," worried George. "I'm hoping his reverence is up to his gills in drifts back yonder. We must leave him a sled trail for a souvenir."

"How can we with the place guarded?"

"Hitch the dogs and run for it by night. He'll burr us out when he comes. Fine targets we'd make on the snow by the light of a burning shack! If ye can see to shoot we'll go tonight. Hello! What's that?"

Outside came the howl of mauls, mooms and the cry of men. Leaping to the window, George rubbed it free and stared into the sunshine.

"Too late, too late!" he said. "Here he comes! It's time I killed him." He spoke gratingly, with the dull anger of years.

On the bright surface of the opposite hillside a sled bearing a muffled figure appeared silhouetted against the glisten of the crust. Its team, maddened by the village scent, poured down the incline toward the river bank, and the guide swung on to the runners behind, while the voice of the people rose to their priest. In a whirl of soft snow they drove down on to the treachery of the ice. The screams of the natives frenzied the pack, and they rioted out on to the bending sheet, while the long sledge, borne by its momentum, shot forward till the splitting cry of the ice sounded over the lamentations. It slackened, sagged and disappeared in a surge of congealing waters. The wheel dogs were dragged into the opening and their mates ahead jerked backward on to them. In a fighting tangle all settled into the swirl.

Orloff leaped from the stinking sled, but hindered by his fur swaddling, crashed through and lunged heavily in his struggles to mount the edge of

(Continued on page 7, Col. 1.)

Medical.

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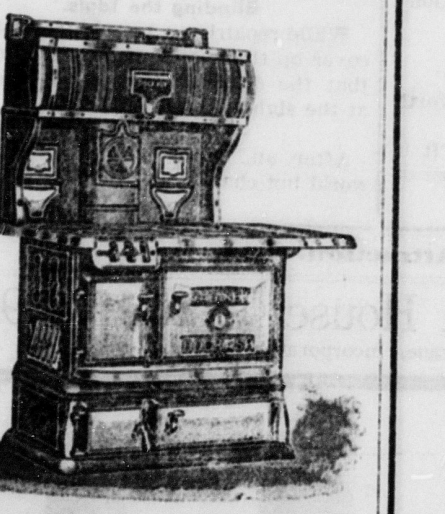
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