

West to Siberia



IVAN KOROFF



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A Complete No-Shirt McGee Novelet

I

ALL THIS happened before folks started callin' me No-Shirt McGee. In them days I was young and full of vinegar and my eyesight was so good I could spot a squaw in a blueberry patch three miles away. I'd come over the Chilkoot Pass with the rest of the boys and floated down the Yukon to Dawson. But there must've been a musty Eskimo curse on me because I couldn't seem to hit pay-dirt. All I ever staked was hungry ground.

Bein' a gent who follows the line of least resistance, it was easier for me to drift down the Yukon to the Berin'

Sea, than to buck the stream. At the Scales, which was a place where packers kinda got organized before packin' outfits over the pass, I meets a rooster that looked as if life had yanked out most of his tail feathers.

He was a deceivin'-lookin' cuss. He stood about six feet and had long legs and a short back and he'd have made a good packer, I was thinkin', if he'd had a little more meat on his bones. He couldn't've weighed more'n a hundred and thutty pounds. He had a cough and his face was white and his hands soft from office work of some kind, and believed in calculation instead of luck.

In them days, as now, nicknames was sometimes downright insultin' and sometimes cruel. I got mine because I liked to work without a shirt. An educated Yukon Indian takes a look at this rooster and wants to know if he's one of the palefaces he'd read about



in stories of the Indian Wars on the plains.

Everybody started callin' him Pale-Face and I don't suppose one stamper in a hundred knowed his rear name was Steve Mulcahy. Yeah, you're right, he was Irish. He had black hair and blue eyes and the combination made his face look paler than it really was. Locked up in his sickly body was iron courage, and he had more claws than a wildcat.

Me and him decided to go pardners as far as Dawson, and I learned he was nearly thutty years old, done office work, and was in love. That's quite a handicap for a man to pack on a stampede. But this weren't no puppy love. It'd been goin' on ten years. The girl's name was Elsie Lane, and she was two years younger'n him.

He had a sickly ma and pa to support, along with

a lot of younger brothers and sisters. It seemed like the old folks kept right along bein' blessed with kids even if they was sickly. May be that's what made 'em sick. I know another mouth to feed every year or so would get me down if I was sickly. Pale-Face was the only support. And just to show you how fate works, he had to fall in love with Elsie who was lookin' after her mother and seven kids. Her mother was a widder woman and had asthma. It was all she could do to drag one foot after the other.

When Elsie come home nights from the factory where she worked she had to roll up her sleeves and pitch into mendin' and housework. I'm tellin' you all this so you'll know why Pale-Face and Elsie couldn't get married. They'd

"Jes' plain prospectin's tough enough," proclaims the mighty No-Shirt, "'thout havin' Roossian gun-boats saltin' yore mine o' misfortunes."

laid up a nest egg again' the happy day, but it didn't look as if they'd ever have a chance

to use it. Then Carmack strikes gold on the Klondike and the rush is on. The two of 'em talked it over. She figgered she could keep both pots boilin' if he pulled his freight for the diggin's and he said, even if he didn't know nothin' about frontier life he'd get through some way. So he takes the nest egg and heads for Seattle.

It takes a set-up like that to put a burr under a man and make him keep goin' when Fate has stacked the cards again' him and his fellow man ain't doin' anything to help him along.

As the days passed and me and Pale-Face drifts down the Yukon you could see him pick up color and weight. For awhile I done most of the work, but little by little he took over his share. Fresh air, work and moose steaks worked miracles in the cuss.

WHEN we found the Klondike couldn't do us no good we went on down the river. There was talk about gold in the Nome country. It seems some professor shark took a look at the rollin' tundra and figgered there had been several beach lines as the ground slowly lifted durin' the ages. He predicted gold would be found on each. Nobody paid him any attention. What'd a prof know about gold minin' anyway? Then some cuss hits her, provin' the prof knowed his onions as the feller says.

Me and Pale-Face hits the Nome country too late. There's a fleet of ships off the shore, and there's miles of freight that'd been lightered through the surf to the beach, but there ain't no worthwhile ground for Pale-Face Mulcahy and No-Shirt McGee.

While we're talkin' things over Pale-Face gets letters from home. There's one from Elsie sayin' everything at home is hunky-dory, and another from

a close friend who says the girl is workin' herself to skin and bones and unless he finds gold in a hurry Elsie's friends will be takin' up collections for funeral flowers.

I hear him say, "Poor little kid," and there's a mist in his eyes, then they suddenly harden and he looks across the Berin' Sea in the general direction of Siberia. "Listen, McGee," he says, "we've got to beat this game. I can't let that girl down."

"If I had any money," I answers, "you could have it."

"I know it," he says, "and I thank you. Now get this. The professor who said they'd find gold on the Nome beach lines, also said the same thing was true along the Siberian Coast. To me it means finding gold is calculation, not luck. What does that mean to you?"

"Not a thing," I answers, "I know a cuss that went over there prospectin' and all he found was great gobs of grief. Them Russians don't like Americans takin' their gold."

"Then why don't they pan it themselves?" he argues.

"I don't know anything about that," I answers, "you'll have to ask the Russians. It's a wild country over there. Even the Eskimos are different. Ask any of our Eskimos, and they'll tell you they're bad. The Russians have a gunboat or two, hangin' 'round. What chance have you got again' a gunboat?"

"Knowing what Elsie is up against," he answers, "I'll take my chances on a gunboat." He pats his thirty-thirty rifle. "If I could meet 'em ashore, I ain't sure but what I could whip a gunboat's crew single handed. Sailors are lousy shots. Just the same, McGee, I'm going to take a chance."

I could see he was wantin' me to

throw in with him so I says. "When do we start?"

We inquires around and learns there weren't no great obstacles to overcome. There's a Russian consul in camp and he gives us a permit to trap and prospect. When we told the boys what a cinch it was to get a permit they warned us there was a catch. "They let you find the gold," one of them says, "and then they confiscate it. If you start hollerin' they charge you with violatin' some law and from then on you get a bellyful of minin'—in the Siberian salt mines."

A couple of days before we was set to start, I et somethin' out of a can that laid me low. I didn't care whether I lived or died. The doctor helped a lot, too. He stepped outside of our tent and says to Pale-Face, "You'd better go. If you miss your schooner, you'll miss a season. There won't be another trading boat leaving for the Siberian Coast this season. We will see that McGee's relatives are notified and that he is given a decent funeral."

Then Pale-Face comes into the tent and he is wearin' a poker face. "S'long, old son," he says brightly, "I can't take a chance of missing the schooner because of Elsie, the folks and all of the kids down in the States. You're looking fine. Doc tells me you'll be on your feet in three or four days."

I'm wonderin' if they plan to bury me standin' up. That's the only way I can figger to be on my feet. "Now, old man," he says with more affection than I'd ever seen him show, "don't let this floor you. And say, if you have any extra money send it to Elsie. I'll double anything you send when I come back from Siberia."

"All right," I says between gasps of pain, "but if you try payin' me any interest I'll shoot you."

II

I **CROSSED** the doctor up by gettin' well three weeks later. But I was kinda weak, so I got a job in a hash-house with room-and-board throwed in. Every time a steamer left for Outside I'd send money to Elsie, tellin' her I was doin' it for Pale-Face. If I hadn't done that, it'd have gone for hellin' around anyway.

The summer passes, but there's no word of Pale-Face Mulcahy until early fall. Just before the ice comes down from the Arctic there's the devil to pay in camp. Doc comes runnin' to me. "Pale-Face is back," he says, "and he's crazier'n a loon. They're tryin' to catch him now."

I ran out of the hash-house and saw a mob chasin' a scarecrow of a man who was high-tailin' it over the tundra. I figgered he'd circle and cut across country with the idear of headin' him off. It was Pale-Face, but you couldn't see much face. It was covered with a spade beard, which same was plenty dirty, and what face there was showin' wasn't pale.

"Steve!" I yells. "Steve!"

He looks at me with kinda glazed eyes and don't answer. "I'll beat 'em yet," he yelps at the mob. "Those Russians can't have my gold. I'll beat 'em." I figgers the Russians must've run him ragged. He's faster and tougher than any miler you ever saw at a track meet. He's more like a quarter-miler who can do a mile at quarter-mile speed.

He swings away from me and starts crossin' a creek. Somebody's dropped a plank over the narrowest and deepest part and when Pale-Face is halfway across, the plank busts in two. Down he goes and when the foam drifts away I can see him standin' on the bottom with his head four feet below the sur-

face. He's threshin' about with his arms, but he ain't comin' up.

I grabs a rope with my left hand, jumps in and wraps my right arm about him. The boys haul away and we come to the surface. I tries to pack him as soon as my feet hit bottom, but man alive, the cuss is heavy. And yet he's mostly skin, bones and muscle. It don't make sense.

A man gets hold of his shoulders, I pack his feet and we stagger ashore. The water's about two degrees above freezin' and the air's colder. But we don't think about that. We're thinkin' about Pale-Face's weight. "He must be loaded with gold," the other cuss gasps. "Nothin' else weighs that much."

We go to the nearest cabin, where there's a red-hot Yukon stove, and strip. The Doc has got there and is emptyin' the water from Pale-Face. I picks up his parka, and gets muscle cramp from the weight. It's the kind of a parka the Eskimos and some whites wear, with the fur turned in, and the outside covered with denim. Only he's been wearin' it with the denim side in.

I investigates and what do I find? It's loaded with little pockets and each is filled with fine gold. It's the same way with his pants. There's fifty pounds of it, if there's a ounce.

"Good gosh!" Doc exclaims, "no wonder he sank."

He's kinda out of his head the next forty-eight hours, but when he comes to I'm settin' beside his bunk. It takes him some time to figger things out. "Hello, McGee," he says, and his voice is kinda relieved. "I've been through hell. Had to sail from Siberia alone. Got caught in the ice. I've been missin' meals, too. Lived on seal oil. Ever taste seal oil?"

"Nope," I answers.

"Taste it. After that you can taste *anything* without gagging," he answers. "You got the gold. It was sewed up in my parka and pants."

"Yeah, I got it," I answers, "and shipped it out on the senator to the assay office in Seattle. She may be the last ship out this Winter. I wrote to assay office to send the money to Elsie. I told her to doll up next spring and meet you here, if you didn't come out over the winter trail."

"McGee," he says, "you're a mind-reader. Listen, old son, I struck it. Those Russians are fur trappers and traders. It seems like they don't take naturally to mining. But they try to take the clean-up from American miners after they strike it. I prospected on what must've been the third beach-line over there. The gold had gathered in a low place. Had to thaw, but there was plenty of driftwood."

"Yeah, I know, it comes down on the big rivers emptyin' into the Arctic," I says.

"I didn't like the look of things," he continues. "Too much snoopin' around. Sometimes it was Eskimos, sometimes Russian trappers. They knew I was taking out money, but they didn't know how much."

"How much?" I asks.

"Six thousand ounces in two months," he answers. "Besides what I sewed up in my parka. I knew they were just waiting until I started out, then they intended swooping down. I fooled 'em and buried it. We're going back after it next summer."

"Did they try to take it?"

"Sure! A trader wanted to buy everything I took out, and I showed 'em a hundred ounces," Pale-Face explains. "What I saw in their eyes was the tip-off. They bought it, and when

I headed for Nome in an *umiak*, a trader with an official aboard overhauled me. He was all set to confiscate everything I'd taken, claiming I owed the government a tax. Also I'd disobeyed the law covering tax evasion. What saved me, was I didn't have any. They arrested me anyway, but fixed it so I would escape."

"I see," I says, "they figgers you'd go to your cache, pick it up, then head for the American Coast."

"But I didn't do that," he explains. "I made 'em think I done it, reasoning if I got away, they'd think I had the gold with me, and would forget all about it and it would be easier for me to take it out next Summer. If they caught me, well, I didn't have the goods, so they might think there wasn't any cache after all. The devils ran me ragged and I was crazy when I saw Nome comin' over the horizon."

"You sure was," I agrees. "Let's see, six thousand ounces, makin' allowance for impurities, black sand and such should figure around fifteen dollars an ounce. That's ninety thousand dollars."

"Just about," he says, "and it's worth risking a life term in the salt mines to bring out." I could see he was thinkin' what he could do for his folks, Elsie's folks and the kids.

"It means," he says, breakin' a long silence, "the whole works can get out of the slums, into the country where there's fresh air. They can take care of themselves and give Elsie and me a chance to grab a little happiness on our own account. Do you know, McGee, in the ten years we've been engaged, I haven't heard her complain once of the load she was carrying."

"And that isn't all, Steve," I answers, "I never heard you kick. And that's the reason why I'll help you get that gold out if you want me to."

"I was hoping you'd say that," he says. "But I think you should know this. Those Russians are no fools. They are liable to be waiting for me next Summer."

And that's just the way it turned out. A slim Russian who could speak English showed up durin' the winter and he learned two things. First, I'd shipped out fifty pounds of gold and I was Pale-Face Mulcahy's pardner. Next, he found out we was livin' on the fat of the land. And it cost plenty to live on the fat of the land at Nome in them days.

He didn't come near us and after awhile he disappeared. His name was Ivan Koroff and while he was there he made a hit with the dance-hall girls by bowin' from the waist and clickin' his heels together when he saluted. That salute was a tip-off. It was the Russian-navy salute.

"We'd better do a lot of plannin'," Pale-Face says, "and get well organized. Part of the organizin' will be plenty of ammunition, some binoculars and two good thirty-thirty rifles. Oh, don't get alarmed, I'm not going to declare war—merely defend ourselves."

WHEN the icè went out the next summer the both of us was in good shape. We'd put in a lot of time eatin' and mushin' dogs. They was just gettin' the Nome dog-races started and everybody was excited. It struck me Pale-Face was gettin' our legs in shape for some tall runnin'.

The tradin' schooner, *Polar Sea*, was goin' across to East Cape to do a little tradin' with the Russians and natives and we got passage. With the days twenty-four hours long we couldn't hope to pull off anything under cover of darkness. There weren't any darkness.

The schooner skipper wasn't any too pleased with his passengers, either. "If a Russian gunboat orders us to heave to," he warns, "I'll heave to. I can't get away from 'em, and I don't propose to ruin' my good standin' with Russian officials in this region. My business depends on it."

"Cross their palms with gold," Pale-Face suggests, "and I'll stand the cost." He figgers they might be *had*, but he didn't want to risk it himself.

I was below asleep when we drops anchor at East Cape. It ain't much of a place. There's a treeless mountain that rises up out of icy water, and a sand spit. The ice had just gone out and the natives had killed a lot of walrus and drug 'em ashore. They had the walrus heads up on racks, dryin' and some of 'em were puttin' meat into the cache. We could see the doin's through binoculars. There was some stirrin' round on the beach and pretty soon a *umiak*, or skin-boat comes out. Natives were paddlin' it and there was a Russian officer settin' amidships smokin' a cigarette.

"This is where I go below," Pale-Face whispers to me. "If that isn't Ivan Koroff it's his twin brother." He snuck below and hid himself in the cargo.

I went for'd and took the line the *umiak* sent aboard and fussed around like I was one of the crew. It was Koroff, sure enough. He had some white-fox pelts he wanted to trade and a few Russian sable. It looked like a stall to me to give him a chance to see who was aboard. The skipper got out tobacco and a few things and I asked permission to go ashore and look around while they was dickerin'. I figgered two could play at that game.

It was all right with the skipper and Koroff nods his head and says some-

thin' in dialect to the crew in the *umiak*. I goes down the ladder and sets on a thwart. It's coated with seal-oil and smells of it.

The native in the stern handles a steerin' oar and he's somethin' to write home about. He's got bangs almost to his eyes, which makes his head look round. The high cheekbones show he's got plenty of Mongol in his veins. He's got a football mustache—eleven hairs on a side, and some chin whiskers. There ain't more than fifteen or twenty hairs on his chin, but they're stiff as bristles. One of the crew has been slashed across the eye with a knife. The eyeball wasn't cut, but the scarred skin gives him a perpetual leer.

I'd never seen a tougher bunch. They heads for the beach a mile away and about a hundred natives line up in rows. The beach is steep, so each row can look over the heads of the row in front.

They're wearin' denim parkas, it bein' warm, and most of the wimmin' have a baby in their parka hood. Fierce-lookin' dogs sniff around or howl dismally and there's a moanin' breeze blowin' across the sand spit where the settlement is built.

WHAT the settlement ground needed was a good goin'-over with a rake, then a bonfire. It's littered with bones, pieces of fish the dogs haven't chawed up, and the lord only knows what else. It would have shocked a health inspector. As I jumped ashore a native with most of his teeth gone leaps at me and says, "Hello."

I says hello and shakes his hand, then comes a painful silence. He's exhausted all his English in that one blast, but he motions me to follow him, so I trails along. He's proud as the

dickens to have grabbed hisself a stranger. Maybe it gives him social standin'. If so, it's the first time any of my bunch of the McGees boosted somebody up the social ladder.

He takes me to his igloo. It's made of sod and driftwood and the top's covered with walrus hides held in place with sealskin lines. Heavy stones attached to the ends keep the lines in place. He's got a copper-colored squaw inside. She's slim, with black hair, fine teeth and there's somethin' wild and primitive about her that makes a man think of the dark ages.

She was wearin' somethin' a white woman would've buttoned up in front, but she seemed unconscious of the neck line. I never saw anything lower even at the swell dances. The Eskimo smiles and waves his hand around the igloo. I didn't catch on at first, then I figgers he's offerin' me the hospitality of his home. And that includes everything that's his. I'd read about Eskimo hospitality in books, and here I was up to my ears in it.

I waves my hands, explainin' I wasn't stayin' long enough to really be called a house guest. I guess you might say I was window shoppin'. I tried to talk English, but he shook his head, then suddenly got an idear. He takes my arm and I smiles at the squaw. My mother had learned me never to be rude to a host, and I'd been told when in Rome do as the Romans do, but . . .

He takes me to another igloo and there's the oldest Eskimo I ever saw. He limps up and looks close into my eyes. "You from San Francisco?" he asks.

You could've knocked me over with a feather. "Sure," I says, figgerin' he didn't know his geography.

"I been San Francisco," he says.

"Market Street, ferry buildin'. Barbary Coast. Dance like this." He grabs a simperin' young squaw and starts two-steppin' round the igloo. "You got cigar?"

"Sure," I answers. I fished one out of my pocket, stuck it into his mouth and held a match. He puffs awhile, gets the end glowin' nicely, then inspects the end like you see men do in swell clubs. No foolin' that cuss had been places.

"Father on whaler," he says. "Me, I go San Francisco on whaler."

"How about a little snort?" I says.

He gets that, so I fishes out a flask of whisky. He pulls the cork, measures the bottle with his fingers and says, "Here's lookin' at yuh."

"Down the hatch," I answers. And he takes three fingers as neat as you ever saw.

"Ah," he says, comin' up for air. "Elegant stuff." Yes sir, he'd sure been places.

I can see he's a quarter-breed, so I figgers it's his grandfather who was on a whaler. He says somethin' in dialect and the others, includin' the man who'd brought me there, clears out.

"You come for gold?" he asks. "You with feller who come last year?"

I don't know whether I smells a rat or not. Then I figgers this cuss is prouder of his English blood than he is of his native, and I remember what somebody said about blood bein' thicker'n water. "I thought I might prospect a little," I says.

"Watch out," he says, "gunboat catch you sure as catfish. Everybody plenty mad. Feller get away in *umiak* last year. Russian think maybe he come back for more. Or maybe he didn't take all."

"Thanks for the tip," I says. "And have another snort?"

"Don't care if I do," he answers. "Here's to Madame Marie on the Barbary Coast, the whaler's friend." No doubt of it, he'd been places and I took the hint. I went back aboard the schooner, got me a couple of quarts we'd been savin' against bad colds, or rattlesnake bite. Hold on, don't interrupt, I know there ain't no snakes in Alaska and the Arctic. As I was sayin' I gave the old boy the two quarts and my blessin'.

The schooner traded about a week, with Pale-Face keepin' below decks, then we sails for points to the north-west. Pale-Face paced the deck and prayed for a fog, but the weather stayed bright and clear. Finally he says, "Drop us, Captain!"

THE skipper puts our *umiak* over the side and we lowers our outfit into it, then drops in ourselves. The skipper mops his brow and wishes us luck. He acts like we had smallpox. "I've been afraid a gunboat would show up, find you aboard, Mulcahy, and confiscate my schooner. Don't ever ask passage of me again. You won't get it." And he mops his brow once more.

We steps a small mast, raises a sail and goes skimmin' over the water. Fifteen hours later Pale-Face puts into a small bay and lands the outfit, then we sails down the coast three miles and heads up a small creek. It takes us two hours to cache the *umiak* and cover it with tundra. We wades downstream so as to not leave tracks, but it ain't so bad, as we're wearin' *mukluks* with waterproof seams.

"Where's this gold?" I asks Pale-Face when we gets back to the outfit.

"Let's build a fire," he answers.

There's a pile of driftwood above highwater mark and some blackened

stones, but he don't build the fire there. He builds it on the edge of the tundra, throws on a lot of damp wood and up goes a cloud of smoke and steam that just about blots out the sun. Then he starts diggin' amongst them blackened stones. Two feet below the surface he uncovers the gold cache. "It's here!" he exclaims, in a relieved voice. "I was afraid they might've found it. Let's get it covered up before the smoke dies down. No tellin', they might have spotters on the ridge."

"Don't you think we'd better get the *umiak*, load this aboard and get out?" I suggests.

"The breed in the village warned you, didn't he?" he answers. "He said the gunboat would catch us? Well, now isn't the time to move. I'd sooner the gunboat commander tipped his hand first."

He led the way to a little creek a half mile away, and the first thing I spots is a pile of tailin's, a rocker and a pond of water. He'd diverted the creek, cleaned out the pocket, and the water had seeped in formin' the pond.

We put in a couple of weeks drainin' the pond and prospectin'. From time to time Pale-Face takes a run up to the ridge, swings back and forth, lookin' for tracks possible spotters might've left. He don't find a thing.

"I'm beginning to think," he says, "the Russians don't know that we landed from the schooner. But I'm not going to lean on that theory just yet, old son."

We takes out a little money in the weeks that follow, but not enough to start a stampede. The sun plays along the horizon twenty-four hours a day for awhile, then it begins to dip. Each day the dip below the horizon is lower and we know summer's drawin' to a close.

We're gettin' a little darkness for a change and it's somethin' we can use. The two of us dig up the gold cache and pack it to the *umiak*. We don't put it aboard, but cache it in a small pool and let the sand cover it up. He ain't takin' no chance on somebody findin' the *umiak* and sailin' away with six thousand ounces of gold.

"Why not make a run for it tomorrow night?" I suggests.

"No," he answers, "the time ain't right."

"Before we know it," I argues, "the pack ice will be comin' down again." Calculatin' is all right for him, but I still believe in luck.

"That's just what I'm waitin' for," he answers.

A week later we're back at camp and I'm workin' the rocker when a cloud of smoke comes over the horizon. "The Russian gunboat," he yells. "I've had a hunch it's been hangin' round here all the time. I've had a feelin' in my bones, too, that we've been watched even if I couldn't find tracks on the ridge."

"Listen," I says, "you hightail it out of here. They haven't got a thing on me. I'm an American citizen, with the proper permit, doin' a little prospectin' on Russian soil. May be they'll check me over and clear out. That's the worst they can do. With them gone, we can head for Nome."

SUDDENLY I sees his game. He's waitin' for the threat of the pack ice to chase the gunboat south. I say as much and he only grins. "That's just part of it," he admits, finally, "and the smallest part." Then he picks up his rifle and a pack of grub. "You're right, McGee, they've nothing on you, while I may be wanted. I'll clear out while you find out their game."

"All right," I agrees, "you'd better

take more grub than that, just in case. Also, two sleepin' bags in camp will look queer. Take yours along, you might need it."

Our *mukluks* are the same size and pattern, so there's no way of tellin' whether one man or two made the tracks around camp. Twilight comes, then darkness. I can hear the trickle of water against the gunboat's bows, and the shout of the man in the chains who is takin' soundin's. After awhile the anchor goes down.

In the mornin' a boat's crew lands and who steps ashore but Ivan Koroff. He's wearin' a big coat with gold buttons, a clankin' sword, a revolver and is backed up by a squad of sailors. "Where is Mr. Mulcahy?" he asks politely.

"I'm prospectin' alone," I answers. And that was the truth. Pale-Face had told me any gold I took out was mine, as a reward for helpin' him out. I had a couple of thousand dollars worth in a moose-hide poke.

"I am no fool," he snaps in his precise English. "You were his partner in Nome."

"We aren't pardners any more," I answers. "You know how it is!"

"Exactly," he says, then he snaps out somethin' in Russian and a couple of the sailors nudge me with the muzzles of their rifles.

"What's the play?" I asks. "I am an American citizen. I'm here on Russian soil under a permit." I flashes my permit on him and he glances at it and sticks it in his pocket.

"And now you haven't any permit," he says. "You are under arrest." The men dump my outfit into the boat and push me into it, and me kickin' like a bay steer and tellin' 'em they can't do that to me. And all the while they're doin' it.

The skipper can't speak English, so Koroff does all the translatin' with me bowin' my neck and gettin' madder every minute. "Have you ever thought of mining for salt?" Koroff asks finally. He speaks with soft confidence that left no doubt in my mind.

"I can't say that I have," I answers.

"Only the very strong survive," he says, "and you don't look . . . shall we say, robust?"

I looks around the gunboat, and my gaze lingers on the Russian flag and the guns. Golly Moses, the United States seemed a long ways away, but just the same I get good and mad. They ain't got no business cuttin' in on Pale-Face's gold any way, and I'm blamed if I'm goin' to show the white feather, Siberian salt mines or not.

"I might last a year in your cursed salt mines," I suggests, "but that'd hardly be worth the trouble of shippin' me there. There's no percentage in handlin' weaklings like me who'll peter out on you."

"Enough of this sparring!" he snaps. "You know where Mulcahy is. You know he has a gold cache."

"Do you know it?" I asks.

"We do!" he snaps.

"Then what's the use of askin' me questions?" I yells. "And what's more you can't do this to an American citizen."

He turns his back on me, talks to the skipper and that big bruiser barks orders in Russian and pretty soon a landin' party goes over the side.

It sounds kinda funny, a Navy vessel landin' armed sailors to flush out one lone American, but it's logical, as the feller says. The Navy's the only law up there. There's a Cossack at East Cape but he ain't got a horse, and he couldn't swim them icy streams if he did have.

THEY swing along the beach. spread out and commence to go through the tundra. I've got my binoculars, so I watch the show and I get kinda tense when they draw near to the spot where I figger Pale-Face is hidin'.

All at once I catches a puff of smoke and a sailor a quarter mile off jumps two feet off'n the ground, then goes down in a heap. He ain't hurt. You can tell that by the way he wiggles to cover. It's plain Pale-Face Mulcahy figgers the nonsense has gone far enough. He knows if they find his food cache and sleepin' bag all they've got to do is to take 'em. He'll either have to show up at East Cape or starve to death. It comes to me, too late, we should've left plenty of grub near the cached *umiak* along with the gold.

Koroff's sword flashes, the landin' party flattens out and opens fire. I can see them clippin' tundra all around where Mulcahy is hidin' and he just let's 'em clip awhile, then all at once he goes into action. The Russians stand it as long as they can, then fall back. Just as he said, sailors are bum shots.

The gunboat hoists a string of signal flags and the landin' party, fallin' back in good order to the beach, piles into the boat and returns.

I tries to wipe the grin off'n my face. "Mulcahy is a very poor shot," Koroff says.

"That makes it unanimous," I says. "Listen, you boys were playin' for keeps, but Mulcahy wasn't tryin'. He could've murdered you if he'd wanted to. I've seen him knock over too many caribou on the dead run not to know what he can do with a thirty-thirty. I wouldn't crowd him if I was you."

Koroff salutes the skipper, says a few words and the old man brushes his spade beard and rubs a pair of eve-

brows with hair enough on 'em to make a pillow. Then he bellows his orders. A gun crew pulls the canvas coverin' off a for'd gun, and ammunition comes up from below.

They blaze away and kick up the dirt above Mulcahy's hideout. The next shot falls a little short. They're gettin' the range now and I holds my breath while the sight-setter is turnin' a couple of gadgets. My common sense tells me Mulcahy is a fool to try and lick a warship. But I feel sorry for the cuss just the same. His own early struggles, and a lot of sickly brothers and sisters has done things to him. His fear of poverty, sickness and early death is greater than his fear of guns. He's goin' down with flyin' colors, or he's goin' to win out.

They throw another load into the breech and the plug goes home with a smash. I'm lookin' at the gun crew, when I look up again, Mulcahy is high-tailin' it across country, with his outfit on his back. The trainer shifts the gun slightly, then she roars.

Muck and tundra fly into the air a hundred feet behind Mulcahy and he goes down. There's a cheer from the Russians, and I don't do myself any good by jeerin' 'em. Before the cheers end, Mulcahy is up and runnin' again. "Good old Pale-Face," I yells.

Well, they've got him into the open, so over the side goes the landin' party again. In the midst of all this, the tradin' schooner that's been far up the Siberian Coast, shows up. That old American flag flappin' in the breeze sure looks good to me, and I'm wonderin' what it must look like to Pale-Face Mulcahy when the landin' party hits the beach.

The for'd gun roars and chases Mulcahy up the hill, then drops a shell in behind him to run him down again.

The strategy is clear—keep him in the open until the sailors can pick him off with their rifles.

The tradin' schooner comes in close and speaks the Russian. The skipper can talk the lingo. When he's through jabberin' with the commander he spots me. "Are you a prisoner?" he asks.

"They can't do this to me," I yells back. Just about then I remembers Elsie must be at Nome. "Never mind me," I says, "just tell the marshal at Nome about it. Now listen, don't say anything about this battle. There's a girl who's been waitin' ten years to marry Pale-Face. She's come all the way to Nome to get married. If she hears about this battle, she'll worry."

"Worry?" the skipper roars. "Worry! You poor fool, you don't think Pale-Face will ever get out of this jam do you?"

"Danged if I know," I answers, "but I ain't givin' up hope. He's sure playin' his cards smooth, and they's no sense in a nice girl believin' her sweetheart's dead until he is."

"They've got him right where they want him," the skipper yells back. "If he don't surrender he'll be dead in five minutes."

III

IT SURE looked bad. There was Pale-Face crouchin' in a low spot and the men movin' toward it. The low spot was about halfway up the side of the ridge, and kinda protected by shoulders of dirt. One good shell planted in one of them shoulders would fill the low spot.

The first shell went high but Mulcahy figgered they'd call the turn on the next. While the landin' party was rushin' up the slope, he suddenly breaks in the clear, runs a hundred yards and dives behind a heap of stones before

any of 'em can get into action. They're watchin' the shellin' and he catches 'em completely by surprise.

At the same time he goes into action. Luck was with him on his first shot. He shoots the sword out of Koroff's hand. And I know even he ain't that good. His next shot glances off a rock, but bits of rock pepper a sailor's face and he drops down.

The others are shootin' from all angles and I take a look at the gun crew. It's standin' by waitin' for orders. Even I can see if one of their shots falls short it'll like as not kill some of their own men.

Every now and again Pale-Face pops up and eases a shot at a sailor. They begin to give ground. The bullets are comin' too close for comfort and their own fire ain't nothin' to brag about. You can't do your best when you're expectin' the other feller will get you any minute.

Suddenly up goes a flag above my head and a bugler on the beach blares. The landin' party falls back with plenty of caution and comes aboard. "How much ammunition do you suppose he has?" Koroff asks me.

I figger Mulcahy's ammunition must be getting low, but I answers, lightly, "Oh, about five hundred rounds. But you boys needn't worry, he won't hurt you unless you crowd him too much. Then he'll get down to business. If he kills one, then he'll go all the way and make a good job of it. Because, you see, he knows you can't shoot or hang him more'n once."

I think Koroff realizes Pale-Face has been just scarin' his men, and that he could have killed 'em all if he'd wanted to.

"You see," I explains, "he don't want a killin' charge again' him. But he'll go all the way, if you crowd him."

The commander and Koroff go below for a powwow, and the next thing I know the sailors are gettin' up the anchor. "Hey," I yells, "why can't I be put aboard that schooner? I ain't done nothin' again' the Czar."

"We need men like you," Koroff says, "in the salt mines."

The saddest thing I ever saw was that schooner sailin' toward Nome with the stars and stripes flutterin' the breeze. I felt funny in the stomach, but I was glad in a way. The Russians were quittin' because they couldn't bag Mulcahy with a cannon, nor get their men close enough to bring him down with a rifle.

Somebody hands me a snort of vodka and when that took a hold I figgered why Russians have beards—I could feel tufts of hair begin to sprout on my ears. Things commence to blur, then the deck flew up and hit me.

I'm in a hammock when I try to wake up, and I've got a head as big as a squaw's chest. Blinkin' my eyes and peerin' through a porthole I spots something that looks like a blur of East Cape in the distance. When I wakes up the second time, we're anchored and Koroff's gone ashore.

The gunboat's got a brig, or jail, but nobody throws me into it. Like as not they figger I won't blow up the ship, and they know I wouldn't last five minutes in the icy water. I wanders about deck and nobody pays me the slightest attention.

THREE or four hours later an *umiak* comes from the village and ties up at the gangway. A half dozen Eskimos come on deck and start tradin' carved ivory to the sailors. Among 'em is my old San Francisco friend. He don't recognize me, and I don't let on

I've ever seen him before. After awhile he shows me a cribbage board made of a walrus tusk.

"Don't try to get away," he whispers, "they're lookin' for an excuse to kill you."

"Is that why I ain't locked up?" I asks.

He nods and I see the play—if I'm shot tryin' to escape Uncle Sam can't make an incident out of it. They'll say I should've worked through the American consul, and Uncle would've agreed.

"They'll leave a small boat astern," he whispers again, "but don't take it." He grinned. "You give me fine whisky. I come out to tell you."

Sometimes I think there are moments when a snort, or a bottle of whisky are the soundest investment a man can make, if he's lookin' for quick dividends.

"Listen," I whispers, "have they quit tryin' to catch the other fellow, Mulcahy?"

"Pretty soon," he answers, "you see smoke on mountain. Smoke means Mulcahy tryin' to sail to Nome. Then they catch him."

"Thanks," I answers, "if I get out of this mess alive and ever have the chance, I'll buy you a case of whisky." I gives him my five-dollar watch for the cribbage board to make it look like there was a business deal on, and then does some tall thinkin'. It's plain Pale-Face is goin' to be caught and there ain't nothin' I can do to help him, unless I can get away, sail up the coast and warn him.

That night, all is peaceful aboard, and the first thing I see as twilight begins, is a small boat with a sail bobbin' up and down astern. It'd be a cinch to slide down the rope, cast off and make a run for it. And I'd've done it,

too, but for that breed Eskimo's warnin'. At that I'm tempted until that old hymn comes into my mind. It goes, "Yield not to temptation, for yieldin' is sin."

When I turns in that night, I can see Koroff's disappointed. He ain't gettin' to first base with his plans. Several days pass, the pack ice is gettin' closer and the natives are beginnin' to get ready for a walrus hunt, but the gunboat stays at anchor.

Suddenly I catches a column of smoke on the mountain top. It's just daybreak, but it's plain enough. Koroff trains a telescope on it, nods his head and sends word to the skipper. Ten minutes later the're gettin' up the anchor.

That skipper's no fool. He knows all about the wind and currents and what time an *umiak* will make under sail with a desperate American at the steerin' oar. He lays out a course that'll put Pale-Face Mulcahy under his guns inside of twenty-four hours.

Shortly before darkness sets in that night the gunboat slows down. They take soundin's, then drop anchor. The skipper ain't takin' chances of pilin' into an ice floe in the dark. They turn off all lights above decks and hang canvas over the portholes where they had to use lights below decks.

That gives me an idear. When nobody's lookin' I fix canvas on portholes on the port and starboard side so a crack of light will show. I figger if Mulcahy spots it, he'll know it's the Russian and he will give her a good wide berth.

Everybody turns in, except the officer of the deck, and the usual deck watch. It's a dirty night and the officer of the deck hunts a warm spot. As soon as he's out of sight, the men ease themselves into sheltered places.

THERE'S no small boat driftin' astern this night, but just the same I sneaks up on deck when the coast is clear. There's a long chance Pale-Face will mistake the crack of light for a tradin' schooner, and I want to be around to warn him off.

About two in the mornin' I hears a faint rattle, then a squeak, like a steerin' oar shiftn' in it's lock. Then comes the trickle of water again' an *umiak's* bow. It's blacker'n hell, but I spots Mulcahy's *umiak* movin' slowly along under shortened sail. It's all I can do to keep from yellin' with joy. There ain't much wind blowin', but with luck he should be out of sight before daylight.

He waves his hand, and I figgers he's spotted me again' the starlight. I waves back again, and thinks, well, there he goes to his Elsie. And I'm glad. Their faith, patience and courage rates them the best there is in happiness. While I'm standin' there, thinkin' and makin' sure nobody's spotted him, he comes back again. He lowers the sail and lets the *umiak* drift under the stern.

There's a coil of rope on deck and I takes a quick turn around a cleat, drops the end over the stern and slides down. "You crazy fool," I hisses, "to come back for me."

He pushes a paddle into my hand and, dippin' silently, we backs away. A quarter mile from the gunboat he hoists sail. "You shouldn't've done it," I says.

"What'd you hang 'round on deck for?" he asks.

"To warn you in case you blundered into us," I explains. "They'd covered up all lights, hopin' you'd do just that. I fixed it so a couple would show."

"I saw one," he answers, "and that's why I came up with shortened sail—so I could size things up. If it was a trader, my troubles were over. Then I

saw it was the gunboat and I figgered you were aboard. Naturally I wasn't going to leave you."

"If I'd've figgered you'd do that," I snaps, "I'd've left the gunboat in darkness. You should think of Elsie."

"I was," he answers. "When we marry and settle down to real happiness, I don't want any regrets hauntin' me. And if I'd have passed you up, old son, I never would have felt right."

The wind petered out a half hour later, and we grabs the paddles. Day was just breakin' when we spots a floe ahead. It's seven miles long, as a guess, and a half mile wide—the advance guard of the pack ice headin' south into the Berin' Sea.

Mulcahy heads for it and lets out a squawk. "You fool, do you want to get us caught in the ice? An Eskimo can live all winter on seal and walrus meat, but I can't."

"Listen, old son," he answers good-naturedly enough, "I figgered out every move long ago. And this is one of 'em."

The bow comes up against the ice and I jumps onto the floe. In a few minutes we've unloaded everything onto the ice. The two of us haul the *umiak* out, put it on a small sled and haul it across the floe and launch it in a lead on the other side. We're just reloadin' the gold when the gunboat shows up. She's a long ways off but somebody in the crow's nest spots us, and a minute later smoke's pourin' from her stack.

We get under sail, but there ain't wind enough to flutter a flag. That Russian gunboat gets larger and larger and pretty soon there's a golden flash and the air's full of ice as the shell hits the floe. I wonder if he's calculated what a shell could do to a *umiak*?

"They can't reach us," Pale-Face yells, answerin' my thoughts.

IV

I DON'T say nothin'! I'm tryin' to make my paddle move the *umiak* sixty miles an hour, but we're crawlin' along about four. A half hour later a shell kicks up a column of water a half mile astern.

The firin' dies down and the next sixty minutes are the kind of suspense that takes the heart out of a man. "They must be almost up against the floe by now," Mulcahy says.

A column of water a hundred yards astern is the answer. They've got as close as they can get, and have settled down to business. The next shell screams over head and strikes a hundred yard ahead. "They've got the range, blast 'em!" I yells.

"So it would seem," he answers.

He changes the course slightly and I have the doubtful satisfaction of seein' the next shell hit where we'd been. Two more came, then things quieted down.

"They'll have to go around the ice," Mulcahy says. "We'll have four or five hours of peace and quiet. You'd better get some rest."

"Rest?" I croaks. "With that gunboat after us? Not me! Don't you realize we're trapped? All they'll have to do is to keep ahead of the pack ice and we'll be forced into their arms."

"Then," he answers, ignorin' my argument, "I'll get some sleep." And by golly he flops down and sleeps like a baby. I don't wake him up until the gunboat is ten miles astern. It's gone around the ice now.

There's quite a breeze and I'm wonderin' whether we'd better not take in some sail. "Let 'er blow," Pale-Face orders, "and shift the ballast."

It's a race, then, with the *umiak* skimmin' along. They're light and ride high. Two strong men could lift ours,

and yet it'd hold nearly two tons. Once in' awhile the water would splash over the bow, it was that rough. But it wasn't rough enough to stop the gunboat from shootin' at us.

The shells hit the water and bounce two or three times, sending geysers into the air behind us. But gradually they get closer.

Pale-Face wakes up after awhile and I points ahead. "Ain't that smoke?"

"It should be," he answers. I'm too busy steerin' to handle a pair of binoculars, so he stands up, braces hisself and takes a long look. "A United States revenue-cutter," he says.

I busts out singin' *Three Cheers for the Red, White and Blue* and looks over my shoulder. That Russian gunboat can see the revenue cutter. Its bridge is much higher than our *umiak*, so they know it's there, but it don't stop 'em. It keeps right along easin' shells at us. Pale-Face Mulcahy takes over the steerin' and suggests I'd better get some sleep before my nerves go to pieces. "Tryin' to be funny?" I sneers.

He changes the course so we're in line with the revenue cutter and a half hour later the Russians have to quit shootin'. They're afraid one of them bouncin' shells will hit the cutter. It's changed its course and is headin' for us. The rail is black with men, mostly young cusses who've let their beards grow. But you can't make a Russian out of an American no matter how much whiskers he can grow. And them kids looked as good as the flag flutterin' at the masthead.

Pale-Face puts the *umiak* alongside and down comes a gangway. "We're Americans in distress," he says. "My name is Mulcahy and this cuss's name is McGee."

"And mine is Finnegan," says the man on the bridge. He's a four-striper

and that means he's the skipper. "And so it's in distress you are?"

"Something like that," Mulcahy admits. "I—"

"Mulcahy fought 'em off single-handed to save his gold," I says. "And he didn't quit even when they unlimbered their for'd deck gun. Not only that, he snuk up in the dark and took me off the gunboat—"

"Heck," says Finnegan, "you men can take care of yourselves. You don't need a revenue cutter." But just the same he passes the word, a boom comes down and lifts our *umiak* aboard. By that time the Russian has broke out a bunch of signal flags which mean they want to talk it over.

THE gunboat heaves to, drops a boat, and pretty soon Koroff comes over the side. He's wearin' a cocked hat and is greeted by side boys and a bos'n's mate blows on his pipe. There's salutes and then Koroff goes below.

I can hear loud words, and finally Finnegan says, "We admit he resisted you. We admit everything, but it goes back to some of your civilian officials. They wanted Mulcahy's gold, which he took legally, and tried to frame him. Well, they aren't going to get away with it. You will note he was careful not to kill or even wound any of your men. And he could have murdered the entire landing party. The two gentlemen are American citizens in distress and it is the duty of the revenue-cutter service to aid them."

There was a long silence and after awhile Koroff comes out. He looks a hole through me and Pale-Face, returns all salutes, and goes back to his ship.

"Now, McGee," Mulcahy says, "maybe you'd like a little sleep."

When I woke up, the revenue cutter

was wallowin' in a storm off'n Nome. It was two days before she could land us through the surf. And when we did go ashore, it was in the *umiak*. Folk on the beach saw us comin' and when we hit the sand, dozens of hands grabbed the skin boat and carried us high and dry.

There was a girl standin' apart from the crowd—a pretty girl, with her soul in her eyes and her lips parted in a welcomin' smile. I knowed it was Elsie. It couldn't've been anyone else. Mulcahy doesn't say a word, but I can see he keeps swallowin' suthin' in his throat. He opens his arms, and closes them again and he looks down and kisses her, then looks across the tundra and I know he's seein' farther than Anvil Rock, farther even than Alaska or the whole American continent. He's lookin' ten years back and countin' the cost. And bein' what he is, he's findin' it worth it.

After awhile he says, "We can be married today, and leave on tomorrow's boat." She smiles and nods and then he comes over and says, "Elsie, this is McGee. You'll be hearin' about him the rest of your life."

"Why scare the girl out of a weddin'?" I asks. "Listen, Elsie, you're marryin' a gent who has not only brains, but plenty of luck. If he fell into a swamp, he'd prob'ly come up with a poke of gold in his hand. Just when he needed a revenue cutter worst, one comes over the horizon. And if that ain't luck, I don't know what is."

"McGee," he says, "it wasn't luck at all. It was methodical calculation. My bookkeeping training coming to the surface. I knew the revenue cutter would come out ahead of the ice, and that's why I didn't start until the ice moved south."



Paul held up his hand but the 'hogs went on yelling



Sandhog

By BORDEN CHASE

UNDER the river, down in the muck, with the threat of death hanging continuously over their heads, ready to spring at the next thrust of the shovel, always waiting . . . to crush, to maim, to kill. . . . So work the sandhogs, a tough breed of men, fierce and proud.

Such a one was Bert Saxon, risen from the ranks of the mucker to tunnel-superintendent for that graceless dilettante among engineers, Paul Touchet, who preferred a Mozart sonata to any reality of life or work that you could name.

Kay McLane was of the sandhog clan, too—but she'd broken away, sickened with the misery and tragedy of the sandhogs' women's lives. That is, she thought she had, until she re-met Bert Saxon, and their boy-and-girl-sweetheart love sprang up again between them. She'd met Paul Touchet, too—and the two men symbolized the clash of her desires. Bert, the life she'd left but which fascinated her still with its strength, its constant threat of peril. Paul, the life she was trying to grow into, cultured, urbane, charmingly superficial.

Paul plans to submit bids for the new East-River tunnel, but because his financial

circumstances are in one of their chronically difficult periods, he is forced to take into partnership one Gus Blaucher—a crude, wily, unscrupulous grafter and climber. Bert Saxon refuses to have anything to do with any job that Gus Blaucher has any part of.

BERT'S opinion of Gus Blaucher and of the conditions under which Blaucher's men work is borne out when there is a slide on Blaucher's Fulton-Street excavation job.

It is Blaucher's practice to employ strictly union labor—but for the delicate subterranean operations, he is quite as apt to use unskilled above-ground hands. It is one of these hands, unused to sandhogging, who has, by his inexperience and carelessness, precipitated the Fulton-Street cave-in.

And only Bert Saxon's yeoman rescue-work gets three of the four entombed men out alive. Kay McLane, who has impulsively accompanied him, watches, fascinated, feeling again the old thrill, the old despair, of the sandhog's woman.

Later she and Bert walk through Brooklyn's late-night streets. Bert, half jokingly, proposes to her. Kay is confused. She does not know how to answer.

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