

THE MARCH OF THE WHITE GUARD.

find it necessary to speak. His comrade had answered for him. Late Carscadden held it inquisitively for a moment, and then his jaws opened and shut as if he were about to speak. But before he did so the Sub-Factor said: "It is a long journey and a hard one. Those who go may never come back. But this man was working for his country, and he has got a wife—a good wife."

The four rose, and Cloud-in-the-Sky nodded approvingly many times. The Sub-Factor held out his hand. Each man shook it. Jeff Hyde first; and he said: "Close up ranks for the H. B. C." (H. B. C. meaning, of course, Hudson Bay Company.)

With a good man to lead them they would have stormed, alone, the Heights of Balaklava.

Once more Jaspur Hume spoke: "Go to Gasse and get your outfits at 9 tomorrow morning. Cloud-in-the-Sky, have your sleds at the store at 8 o'clock, to be loaded. Then all meet me at 10:15 at the office of the Chief Factor. Good night."

As they passed out into the semi-Arctic night, Late Carscadden, with an unreal obstinacy, said: "Slow march to the Barren Grounds—but who leads?"

Left alone, the Sub-Factor sat down to the pine table at one end of the room and, after a short hesitation, began to write. For hours he sat there, rising only to put wood on the fire. The result was three letters: the largest addressed to a famous society in London, one to a solicitor in Montreal, and one to Mr. Field, the Chief Factor. They were all sealed carefully. Then Jaspur Hume rose, took out his knife and went over to the box, as if to break the red seal. He paused, however, sighed, and put the knife back again. As he did so he felt something touch his leg. It was the dog. Jaspur Hume drew in a sharp breath and said, "It was all ready, Jacques; and in another three months I should have been in London with it. But it will go whether I go or not—whether I go or not, Jacques." The dog sprang up and put his head against his master's breast.

"Good dog! good dog! it's all right, Jacques; however it goes, it's all right!" Then the dog lay down and watched the man until he drew the blankets to his chin and sleep drew oblivion over a fighting but masterly soul.

CHAPTER II.

The March.

AT 10 o'clock next morning Jaspur Hume presented himself at the Chief Factor's office. He bore with him the letters he had written the night before.

The Factor said, "Well, Hume, I am glad to see you. That woman's letter was on my mind all night. Have you anything to propose? I suppose not," he added, despairingly, as he looked closely into the face of the other.

"Yes, Mr. Field, I propose this: That the expedition shall start at noon to-day."

"Shall—start—at noon—to-day?"

"In two hours."

"But, who are the party?"

"Jeff Hyde, Gaspé Toujours, Late Carscadden and Cloud-in-the-Sky."

"And who leads them, Hume? Who leads?"

"With your permission, sir, I do."

"You, Hume! You! But, man, consider the danger! And then there is—there is, your invention!"

"I have considered all. Here are three letters. If we do not come back in three months, you will please send this one, with the box in my room, to the address on the envelope; this is for a solicitor in Montreal, which you will also forward as soon as possible; this last one is for yourself; but you will not open it until the three months have passed. Have I your permission to lead these men? They would not go without me."

"I know that, I know that, Hume. I hate to have you go, but I can't say no. Go, and good luck go with you."

Here the manly old Factor turned away his head. He knew that Jaspur Hume had done right. He knew the possible sacrifice this man was making of all his hopes, of his very life; and his sound Scotch heart appreciated the act to the full. But he did not know all. He did not know that Jaspur Hume was starting to look for the man who had robbed him of youth and hope and genius and home.

"Here is a letter that the wife has written to her husband in the hope that he is alive. You will take it with you, Hume. And the other she wrote to me, shall I keep it?" He held out his hand.

"No, sir, I will keep it, if you will allow me. It is my commission, you know." And the shadow of a smile hovered about Jaspur Hume's lips.

The Factor smiled kindly as he replied, "Ah, yes, your commission—Capt. Jaspur Hume—of what, Hume?"

Just then the door opened and there entered the four men whom we saw around the Sub-Factor's fire the night before. They were dressed in white blanket costumes from head to foot, white woollen capotes covering the gray fur caps they wore. Jaspur Hume ran his eye over them and then answered the Factor's question: "Of the White Guard, sir."

"Good," was the reply. "Men, you are going on a relief expedition—one in which there is danger. You need a good leader. You have one in Capt. Jaspur Hume."

Jeff Hyde shook his head at the others with a pleased I-told-you-so expression; Cloud-in-the-Sky granted his deep approval; and Late Carscadden smacked his lips in a satisfied manner and rubbed his leg with a school-boy sense of enjoyment. The Factor continued: "In the name of the Hudson Bay Company I will say that if you come back, having done your duty faithfully, you shall be well rewarded. And I believe you will come back, if it is in human power to do so."

Here Jeff Hyde said: "It isn't for reward we're doin' it, Mr. Field, but because Capt. Hume wished it, because we believed he'd lead us; and for the lost fellow's wife. We wouldn't have said we'd do it, if it wasn't for him that's called us the White Guard."

Under the bronze of the Sub-Factor's face there spread a glow more red than brown, and he said simply: "Thank you, men"—for they had all nodded assent to Jeff Hyde's words—"Come with me to the store. We will start at noon."

And at noon the White Guard stood in front of the store on which the British flag was hoisted with another beneath it bearing the magic letters, H. B. C.; magic, because they have opened to the world regions that seemed destined never to know the touch of civilization. The few inhabitants of the Fort had gathered; the dogs and loaded sleds were at the door. The White Guard were there, too—all but their leader. It wanted but two minutes to 12 when Jaspur Hume came from his house, dressed also in the white blanket costume, and followed by his dog, Jacques. In a moment more he had placed Jacques at the head of the first team of dogs. They were to have their leader, too; and they testified to the fact by a bark of approval. Punctually at noon, Jaspur Hume shook hands with the Factor, said a quick good-bye to the rest, called out a friendly "How!" to the Indians standing near, and to the sound of a hearty cheer, heard perhaps because none had a confident hope that the five would come back, the March of the White Guard began.

It is eighteen days after. In the shadow of a little island of pines, that lies in a shivering waste of ice and snow, the White Guard camp. They are able to do this night what they have not done for days—dig a great grave of snow, and building a fire of pine wood at each end of this strange house, get protection and something like comfort. They sit close to the fires. Jaspur Hume is writing with numbed fingers. The extract that follows is taken from his diary. It tells that day's life, and so gives an idea of harder, sterner days that they have spent and will spend, on this weary journey.

"Dec. 25.—This is Christmas day and Camp Twenty-seven. We have marched only five miles to-day. We are eighty miles from Great Fish River, and the worst yet to do. We have discovered no signs. Jeff Hyde has had a bad two days with his frozen foot. Gaspé Toujours helps him nobly. One of the dogs died this morning. Jacques is a great leader. This night's shelter is a godsend. Cloud-in-the-Sky has a plan whereby some of us will sleep well. We are in latitude 63° 47' and longitude 112° 32' 14". Have worked out lunar observations. Have marked a tree JH-27, and raised cairn No. 3. We are able to celebrate Christmas Day with a good basin of tea and our standby of beans cooked in fat. I was right about them; they have great sustaining power. To-morrow we will start at 10 o'clock."

The writing done, Jaspur Hume puts his book away and turns toward the rest. Cloud-in-the-Sky and Late Carscadden are smoking. Little can be seen of their faces; they are muffled to the eyes. Gaspé Toujours is drinking a basin of tea, and Jeff Hyde is fitfully dozing by the fire. The dogs are above in the

tent, all but Jacques, who to-night is permitted to be near his master. The Sub-Factor rises, takes from a knapsack a small tin pail, and puts it near the fire. This operation is watched by the others. Then he takes five little cups that fit snugly into each other, separates them and puts them also near the fire. None of the party speaks. A change seems to pass over the faces of all except Cloud-in-the-Sky. He smokes on unmoved. At length the Sub-Factor speaks cheerily: "Now, men, before we turn in we'll do something in honor of the day. Liquor we none of us have touched since we started; but back there in the fort, and maybe in other places, too, they will be thinking of us; so we'll drink a health to them though it's but a spoonful, and to the day when we see them again."

The cups were passed round. The Sub-Factor measured out a very small portion to each. They were not men of uncommon sentiment; their lives were rigid and isolated and severe. Fireside comforts under fortunate conditions they saw but seldom, and they were not given to expressing their feelings demonstratively. But each man then, save Cloud-in-the-Sky, had some memory worth a resurrection, and hearts are heard, even under all unceremoniousness. Jaspur Hume raised his cup; the rest followed his example. "To absent friends and the day when we see them again!" he said; and they all drank.

And sitting here in the winter desolation Jaspur Hume holds scenes of twenty years before and follows himself, a poor dispensing clerk in a doctor's office, working for that dream of achievement in which his mother believed; for which she hoped. And following further the boy that was himself, he saw a friendless first-year man at college, soon, however, to make a friend of Varre Lepage, and to see always the best of that friend, being himself so true. And the day came when they both graduated together in science, a bright and happy day, succeeded by one still brighter, when they both entered a great firm as junior partners. Then came the meeting with Rose Varcoe; and he thought of how he praised his friend Varre Lepage to her, and brought that friend to be introduced to her. He recalled all those visions that came to him when, his professional triumphs achieved, he should have a happy home, and a happy face, and faces, by his fireside. And the face was to be that of Rose Varcoe, and the other faces of those who should be like her and like himself. He saw, or rather felt, that face clouded and anxious when he went away ill and blind for health's sake. He did not write. The doctors forbade him that. He did not ask her to write, for his was so strong and steadfast a nature that he did not need letters to keep him true; and he thought if she cared for him she must be the same. He did not understand a woman's heart, how it needs remembrances, and needs to give remembrances.

Looking at Jaspur Hume's face in the light of this fire it seems calm and cold, yet behind it is an agony of memory, the memory of the day when he discovered that Varre Lepage was married to Rose Varcoe, and that the trusted friend had grown famous and well-to-do on the offspring of his brain. His first thought had been one of fierce anger and determination to expose this man who had falsified all trust. But then came the thought of the girl, and, most of all, there came the words of his dying mother: "Be good, my boy, and God will make you great," and for his mother's sake he had compassion on the girl, and sought no revenge upon her husband. Rare type of man, in a so-called, unchristian world! And now, ten years later, he did not regret that he had stayed his hand. The world had ceased to call Varre Lepage a genius. He had not fulfilled the hope that was held of him. This Jaspur Hume knew from occasional references in scientific journals.

And he was making this journey to save, if he could, Varre Lepage's life. And he has no regret. Though just on the verge of a new era in his career, to give to the world the fruit of ten years' thought and labor, he had set all behind him that he might be true to the friendship of his youth, that he might be loyal to his manhood, that he might be clear of the strokes of conscience to the last hour of his life.

Looking round him now, the debating look comes again into his eyes. Jaspur Hume places his hand in his breast, and lets it rest there for a moment. The look becomes certain and steady. The hand is drawn out, and in it is a Book of Common Prayer. Upon the fly-leaf is written: "Jane Hume, to her dear son Jaspur, on his twelfth birthday."

These men of the White Guard are not used to religious practices, whatever their past has been in that regard, and at any other time they might have been surprised at this action of Jaspur Hume. Under some circumstances it might have lessened their opinion of him, but his influence over them now was complete. They knew they were getting nearer to him than they had ever done; even Cloud-in-the-Sky appreciated that. He spoke no word to them, but looked at them and stood up. They all did the same, Jeff Hyde leaning on the shoulders of Gaspé Toujours. He read first, four verses of the Thirty-first Psalm, then followed the Almighty to mercifully look upon the infirmities of men, and to stretch forth His hand to keep and defend them in all dangers and necessities. Late Carscadden, after a long pause, said "Amen," and Jeff Hyde said in a whisper to Jaspur Hume, "That's to the point. Infirmities and dangers and necessities is what troubles us."

Immediately after, at a sign from the Sub-Factor, Cloud-in-the-Sky began to transfer the burning wood from one fire to the other, until only hot ashes were left where a great blaze had been. Over these ashes pine twigs and branches were spread, and over them again blankets. The word was then given to turn in, and Jeff Hyde, Gaspé Toujours and Late Carscadden lay down in this comfortable bed. Each wished to give way to their captain, but he would not consent, and he and their heads completely, and under the Arctic sky they slept alone in an austere and tenantless world. They never know how loftily sardonic Nature can be who have not seen that land where the mercury freezes in the tubes and there is light but no warmth in the smile of the sun. Not Sturt, in the heart of Australia, with the mercury bursting the fevered tubes, with the finger-nails breaking like brittle glass, with the ink drying instantly on the pen, with the hair falling off and fading, would, if he could, have exchanged his lot for that of the White Guard. They are in a frozen endlessness that stretches away to a world where never voice of man or clip of wing or tread of animal is heard. It is the threshold to the undiscovered country, to that untouched north whose fields of white are only furrowed by the giant forces of the elements; on whose frigid hearthstone no fire is ever lit; a place where the electric phantoms of a nightless land pass and repass, and are never still; where the magic needle points not toward the north, but darkly downward, downward!—where the sun never stretches warm hands to him who dares confront the terrors of eternal snow.

The White Guard sleeps!

CHAPTER III.

Face to Face with Death.

"NO, Captain; leave me here and push on to the Manitou Mountain. You ought to make it in two days. I'm just as sure here as on the sleds and less trouble; a blind man's no good. I'll have a good rest while you're gone, and then perhaps my eyes will come out right. My foot is nearly well now."

Yes, Jeff Hyde was snow-blind. This, the giant of the party, had suffered most.

But Jaspur Hume said, "I won't leave you alone, my man. The dogs can carry you, as they've done for the last ten days."

But Jeff replied, "I'm as safe here as marching, and safer. When the dogs are not carrying me, nor any one leading me, you can get on faster; and that means everything to us; now don't it?"

Jaspur Hume met the eyes of Gaspé Toujours. He read them. Then he said to Jeff Hyde, "It shall be as you wish. Late Carscadden, Cloud-in-the-Sky and myself will push on to Manitou Mountain. You and Gaspé Toujours will remain here."

Jeff Hyde's blind eyes turned toward Gaspé Toujours, and Gaspé Toujours said, "Yes. We have plenty of tabac."

A tent was set up, provisions were put in it, a spirit-lamp and matches were added, and the simple menage was complete. Not quite. Jaspur Hume looked round. There was not a tree in sight. He stooped and cut away a pole that was used for strengthening the runners of the sleds; fastened it firmly in the ground, and tied to it a red woollen scarf which he had used for tightening his white blankets round him. Then he said: "Be sure and keep that flying, men."

Jeff Hyde's face was turned toward the north. The blind man's instinct was coming to him. Far off white eddying drifts were rising over long hillocks of snow. When Jeff turned round again his face was slightly troubled. It grew more troubled, then it brightened up again, and he said to Jaspur Hume, "Captain, would you leave that book with me till you come back—that about affirmities, dangers and necessities? I know a river-boat who used to carry an old spelling-book round with him for luck. It had belonged to a school-