GOD'S COUNTRY--- AND THE WOMAN

The Mystery Romance of a Man and a Maid in the Frozen North

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SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS.

Philip Wyman, returning toward Fond-du-Lac after a four-year sojourn in the Arctic regions, meets Josephine Adare, a gloriously beautiful daughter of the northern wilderness. Her sable furs lie to assume the name of "Darkwater" and to call her his husband. She will give no reason for this odd request. Yet he consents, for he has fallen in love with her. They are accompanied on their journey to her father's forest home by Jean Croisset, a half-breed Indian, who is devoted to Josephine's interests. Arriving at Adare House, Philip is warmly welcomed by Josephine's father and by Marian Adare, her young mother around whom a mystery seems to cling. Philip, that night, is fired on. He dashes out of the house in pursuit of his unseen assailant.

CHAPTER VII.

(Continued.)

He was not afraid of a second shot. Even caution was lost in his mad desire to catch Jean red-handed and choke a confession of several things from his lips. If Jean had suddenly risen out of the snow he would not have used his pistol unless forced to do so. He wanted to be hand to hand with the treacherous halfbreed, and his breath came in panting eagerness as he ran.

Suddenly he stopped short. He had struck the trail. Here Croisset had stood, fifty yards from his window, when he fired. The snow was beaten down, and from the spot his retreating footsteps led toward the forest. Like a dog Philip followed the trail. The first timber was thinned by the axe, and the moon lighted up the white spaces ahead of him. He was half across the darker wall of the spruce when his heart gave a sudden jump. He had heard the snarl of a dog, the lash of a whip, a man's low voice cursing the beast he was striking.

The sounds came from the dense cover of the spruce, and told him that Jean was not looking for immediate pursuit. He slipped in among the shadows quietly, and a few steps brought him to a smaller open space where a few trees had been cut. In this little clearing a slim dark figure of a man was straightening out the tangled traces of a sledge team.

Philip could not see his face, but he knew that it was Jean. It was Jean's figure, Jean's movement, his low, sharp voice as he spoke to the dogs. Man and huskies were not twenty steps from him. With a tense breath Philip replaced his pistol in its holster. He did not want to kill, and he possessed a proper respect for the hair trigger mechanism of his automatic. In the fight he anticipated with Jean the weapon would be safer in its holster than in his hand. Jean was at present unarmed, except for his hunting knife. His rifle leaned against a tree, and in another moment Philip was between the gun and the half-breed.

One of the sledge dogs betrayed him. At its low and snarling warning the half-breed whirled about with the alertness of a lynx, and he was half ready when Philip launched himself at his throat. They went down free of the dogs, the forest man under. One of Philip's hands had reached his enemy's throat, but with a swift movement of his arm the half-breed wrenched it off and slipped out from under his assailant with the agility of an eel. Both were on their feet in an instant, facing each other in the tiny moonlit arena a dozen feet from the silent and watchful dogs.

Even now Philip could not see the half-breed's features because of a hood drawn closely about his face. The "breed" had made no effort to draw a weapon, and Philip flung himself upon him again. Thus in open battle his greater physical strength and advantage of fifty pounds in weight would have won for Philip. But the forest man's fighting is filled with the elusive ermine's trickery and the lithe quickness of the big, fur-padded cat of the trap-lines.

The half-breed made no effort to evade Philip's assault. He met the shock of attack fairly, and went down with him. But this time his back was to the watchful semicircle of dogs, and with a sharp, piercing command he pitched back among them, dragging Philip with him. Too late Philip realized what the cry meant. He tried to fling himself out of reach of the threatening fangs, and freed one hand to reach for his pistol.

This saved him from the dogs, but gave the half-breed his opportunity. Again he was on his feet, the butt of his dog-whip in his hand. As the moonlight glinted on the barrel of the automatic, he brought the whip down with a crash on Philip's head—and then again and again, and Philip pitched backward into the snow.

He was not wholly unconscious. He knew that as soon as he had fallen the half-breed had turned again to the dogs. He could hear him as he straightened out the traces. In a subconscious sort of way, Philip wondered why he did not take advantage of his opportunity and finish what he had failed to do with the bullet through the window. Philip heard him run back for his gun, and tried to struggle to his knees.

Instead of the shot he half expected there came the low "Hoosh—hoosh—marche!" of the forest man's voice. Dogs and sledge moved. He fought himself up and swayed on his knees, staring after the retreating shadows. He saw his automatic in the snow and crawled to it. It was another minute before he could stand on his feet, and then he was dizzy. He staggered to a tree and for a space leaned against it.

It was some minutes before he was steady enough to walk, and by that time he knew that it would be futile to pursue the half-breed and his swift-footed dogs, weakened and half dressed as he was. Slowly he returned to Adare House, cursing himself for not having used his pistol to compel Jean's surrender. He acknowledged that he had been a fool and that he had deserved what he got. The hall was still empty when he re-entered it. His adventure had roused no one, and with a feeling of relief he went to his room.

If the walls had fallen about his ears he could not have received a greater shock than when he entered through the door.

Seated in a chair close to the table, looking at him calmly as he entered, was Jean Jacques Croisset!

CHAPTER VIII.

Unable to believe that what he saw was not an illusion, Philip stood and stared at the halfbreed. No word fell from his lips. He did not move. And Jean met his eyes calmly, without betraying a tremor of excitement or of fear. In another moment Philip's hand went to his pistol. As he half drew it his confused brain saw other things which made him gasp with new wonder.

Croisset showed no signs of the fight in the forest which had occurred not more than ten minutes before. He was wearing a pair of laced Hudson's Bay boots. In the struggle in the snow Philip's hand had once gripped his enemy's foot, and he knew that he had worn moccasins. And Jean was not winded. He was breathing easily. And now Philip saw that behind the calmness in his eyes there was a tense and anxious inquiry. Slowly the truth broke upon him. It could not have been Jean with whom he had fought in the edge of the forest! He advanced a step or two toward the halfbreed, his hand still resting uncertainly on his pistol. Not until then did Jean speak, and there was no pretense in his voice:

"The Virgin be praised, you are not badly hurt, M'sieur?" he exclaimed, rising. "There is a little blood on your face. Did the glass cut you?"

"No," said Philip. "I overtook him in the edge of the forest."

Not for an instant had his eyes left Croisset. Now he saw him start. His dark face took on a strange pallor. He leaned forward and his breath came in a quick gasp.

"The result?" he demanded. "Did you kill him?"

"He escaped."

The tense lines on Croisset's face relaxed. Philip turned and bolted the door.

"You are glad that the man who tried to kill me escaped?" he asked.

The promptness and quiet decisiveness of Jean's answer amazed him.

"Yes, M'sieur, I am. But the shot was not for you. It was intended for the master of Adare House. When I heard the shot to-night I did not know what it meant. A little later I came to your room and found the broken window and the bullet mark in the wall. This is M'sieur Adare's old room, and the bullet was intended for him. And now, M'sieur Philip, why do you say that I am responsible for the attempt to kill you, or the master?"

"You have convicted yourself," declared Philip, his eyes ablaze. "A moment ago you said you were glad the assassin escaped!"

"I am M'sieur," replied Jean in the same quiet voice. "Why I am glad I will leave to your imagination. Unless I still had faith in you and was sure of your great love for our Josephine, I would have lied to you. You were told that you would meet with strange things at Adare House. You gave your oath that you would make no effort to discover the secret which is guarded here. And this early, the first night, you threaten me at the end of a pistol."

Like fire Jean's eyes were burning now. He gripped the edges of the table with his thin fingers and his voice came with a hissing fury.

"By the great God in Heaven, M'sieur, are you accusing me of turning traitor to the Master and to her, to our Josephine, whom I have watched and guarded and prayed for since the day she first opened her eyes to the world? Do you accuse me of that—I, Jean Jacques Croisset, who would die a thousand deaths by torture that she might be freed from her own suffering?"

He leaned over the table as if about to spring. And then, slowly, his fingers relaxed, the fire died out of his eyes; and he sank back in his chair. In the face of the half-breed's outburst Philip had remained speechless. Now he spoke:

"Call it threatening, if you like. I do not intend to break my word given to Josephine. I demand no answer to questions which may concern her, for that is my promise. But between you and me there are certain things which must be explained. I concede that I was mistaken in believing that it was you with whom I fought in the forest. But it was you who looked through my window earlier in the night, with a pistol in your hand. You would have killed me if I had not turned."

Genuine surprise shot into Jean's face.

"I have not been near your window, M'sieur. Until I returned with M'sieur Adare I was waiting up the river several miles from here. Since then I have not left the house. Josephine and her father can tell you this if you need proof."

"Your words are impossible!" exclaimed Philip. "I could not have been mistaken. It was you."

"Will you believe Josephine, M'sieur? She will tell you that I could not have been at the window."

"If it was not you—who was it?"

"It must have been the man who shot at you," replied Jean.

"And you know who that man is, and yet refuse to tell me in order that he may have another opportunity of finishing what he failed to do to-night. The most I can do is to inform John Adare."

"You will not do that," said Jean confidently. Again he showed excitement. "Do you know what it would mean?" he demanded.

"Trouble for you," volunteered Philip.

"And ruin for Josephine and every soul in the House of Adare!" added Croisset swiftly. "As soon as Adare could lace his moccasins he would take up that trail out there. He would come to the end of it, and then—mon Dieu!—in that hour the world would smash about his ears!"

"Either you are mad or I am," gasped Philip, staring into the half-breed's tense face. "I don't think you are lying, Jean. But you must be mad. And I am mad for listening to you. You insist on giving this murderer another chance. You as much as say that by giving him a second opportunity to kill John Adare you are proving your loyalty to Josephine and her father. Can that be anything but madness?"

An almost gentle smile flickered over Jean's lips. He looked at Philip as if marvelling that the other could not understand.

"Within an hour it will be Jean Jacques Croisset who will take up the trail," he replied softly, and without boastfulness. "It is I, and not the master of Adare House, who will come to the end of that trail. And there will be no other shot after that, and no one will ever know—but you and me."

"You mean that you will follow and kill him—and that John Adare must never know that an attempt has been made on his life?"

"He must never know, M'sieur. And what happens in the forest at the end of the trail the trees will never tell."

"And the reason for this secrecy you will not confide in me?"

"I dare not, M'sieur."

Philip leaned across the table.

"Perhaps you will, Jean, when you know there is no longer anything between Josephine and me," he said. "To-night she told me everything. I have seen the baby. Her secret she has given to me freely—and it has made no difference. I love her. To-morrow I shall ask her to end all this make-believe, and my heart tells me that she will. We can be married secretly. No one will ever know."

His face was filled with the flush of hope. One of his hands caught Jean's in the old grip of friendship—of confidence. Jean did not reply. But his face betrayed what he did not speak. Once or twice before Philip had seen the same look of anguish in his eyes, the tightening of the lines around the corners of his mouth. Slowly the half-breed rose from the table and turned a little from Philip. In a moment Philip was at his side.

"Jean!" he cried softly, "you love Josephine!"

No sign of passion was in Jean's face as he met the other's eyes.

"How do you mean, M'sieur?" he asked quietly. "As a father and a brother, or as a man?"

"A man," said Philip.

Jean smiled. It was a smile of deep understanding, as if suddenly there had burst upon him a light which he had not seen before.

"I love her as the flowers love the sunshine, as the wood violets love the rains," he said, touching Philip's arm. "And that, M'sieur, is not what you understand as the love of a man. There is one other whom I love in another way, whose voice is the sweetest music in the world, whose heart beats with mine, whose soul leads me day and night through the forests, and who whispers to me of our sweet love in my dreams—Iowaka, my wife! Come, M'sieur; I will take you to her."

"It is late—too late," voiced Philip wonderingly.

But as he spoke he followed Jean. The half-breed seemed to have risen out of his world now. Out into the night Philip followed him, bareheaded, with the moonlight streaming down from above; and he stopped only when Jean stopped, close to a little plot where a dozen wooden crosses rose above a dozen snow-covered mounds.

Jean stopped, and his hand fell on Philip's arm.

"These are Josephine's," he said softly, with a sweep of his other hand. "She calls it her Garden of Little Flowers. They are children, M'sieur. Some are babies. When a little one dies—if it is not too far away—she brings it to Le Jardin—her garden, so that it may not sleep alone under the lonely spruce, with the wolves howling over it on winter nights. They must be lonely in the woody graves, she says. I have known her to bring an Indian baby a hundred miles, and some of these I have seen die in her arms, while she crooned to them a song of Heaven. And five times as many little ones she has saved, M'sieur. That is why even the winds in the treetops whisper her name, L'Ange! Does it not seem to you that even the moon shines brighter here upon these little mounds and the crosses?"

"Yes," breathed Philip reverently.

Jean pointed to a larger mound, the one guardian mound of them all, rising a little above the others, its cross lifted watchfully above the other crosses; and he said, as if the spirits themselves were listening to him:

"M'sieur, there is my wife, my Iowaka. She died three years ago, but she is with me always, and even now her beloved voice is singing in my heart, telling me that it is not black and cold where she and the little ones are waiting, but that all is light and beautiful. M'sieur"—his voice dropped to a whisper—"could I sell my hereafter with her for the price of another woman's love on earth?"

Philip tried to speak; and strangely after a moment he succeeded in saying:

"Jean, an hour ago I thought I was a man. I see how far short of that I have fallen. Forgive me, and let me be your brother. Such a love as yours is my love for Josephine. And to-morrow"——

"Despair will open up and swallow you to the depths of your soul," interrupted Jean gently. "Return to your room, M'sieur. Sleep. Fight for the love that will be yours in heaven, as I live for my Iowaka's. For that love will be yours, up there. Josephine has loved but one man, and that is you. I have watched and I have seen. But in this world she can never be more to you than she is now, for what she told you to-night is the least of the terrible thing that is eating away her soul on earth. Good night, M'sieur."

Straight out into the moonlight Jean walked, head erect, in the face of the forest. And Philip stood looking after him over the little garden of crosses until he had disappeared.

CHAPTER IX.

John Adare did not fail in his promise to rouse Philip early in the day. When Philip jumped out of bed in response to Adare's heavy knock at the door, he judged that it was not later than 7 o'clock and the room was still dark.

As he and Adare sat smoking after breakfast, the talk turned to winter sports. Adare spoke up grimly:

"Winter brings close to our doors the one unpleasant feature of this country," he said, turning to light a second cigar. "Thirty-five miles to the north and west of us there is what the Indians call 'Muchemunito Nek'—the Devil's Nest. It's a Free Trader's house. A man down in Montreal by the name of Lang owns a string of them, and big agent over at the Devil's Nest is a scoundrel of the first water. His name is Thoreau. There are a score of half-breeds and whites in his crowd, and not one of them with an honest hair in his head. It's the one criminal rendezvous I know of in all this North country.

"Bad Indians who have lost credit at the Hudson's Bay Company's posts go to Thoreau's. Whites and half-breeds who have broken the laws are harbored there. A dozen trappers are murdered each winter for their furs, and the assassins are among Thoreau's men. One of these days there is going to be a big clean-up. Meanwhile, they are unpleasant company. There is a deep swamp between our house and Thoreau's, so that during the open water seasons it means we are a hundred miles away from them by canoe. When winter comes we are only thirty-five miles, as the sledge-dogs run. I don't like it. You can snow-shoe the distance in a few hours."

"I know of such a place far to the west," replied Philip. "Both the Hudson's Bay Company and Revillon Freres have threatened to put it out of business, but it still remains. Perhaps that is owned by Lang, too."

He had joined Adare at the window. The next moment both men were staring at the same object in a mutual surprise. Into the white snow space betwen the house and the forest there had walked swiftly the slim, red-clad figure of Josephine, her face turned to the forest, her hair falling in a long braid down her back.

The master of Adare chuckled exultantly.

"There goes our little Red Riding Hood!" he rumbled. "She beat us after all, Philip. She is going after the dogs!"

Philip's heart was beating wildly. A better opportunity for seeing Josephine alone could not have come to him. He feared that his voice might betray him as he laid a hand on Adare's arm.

"If you will excuse me I will join her," he said. "I know it doesn't seem just right to tear off in this way, but—you see" ——

Adare interrupted him with one of his booming laughs.

"Go, my lad. I understand. If it was Miriam instead of Mignonne running away like that, John Adare wouldn't be waiting this long."

Philip turned and left the room, every pulse in his body throbbing with an excitement roused by the knowledge that the hour had come when Josephine would give herself to him forever, or doom him to that hopelessness for which Jean Croisset had told him to prepare himself.

CHAPTER X.

Three or four hundred yards in the forest Philip overtook Josephine.

He had come up silently in the soft snow, and she turned, a little startled, when he called her name.

"You, Philip!" she exclaimed, the color deepening quickly in her cheeks. "I thought you were with father in the big room."

She had never looked lovelier to him. From the top of her hooded head to the hem of her short skirt she was dressed in a soft and richly glowing red. Her eyes shone gloriously this morning, and about her mouth there was a tenderness and a sweetness which had not been there the night before. The lines that told of her strain and grief were gone. She seemed like a different Josephine now, confessing in this first thrilling moment of their meeting that she too had been living in the memory of what had passed between them a few hours before. And yet in the gentle welcome of her smile there was a mingling of sadness and of pathos that tempered Philip's joy as he came to her and took her hands.

"My Josephine!" he cried softly.

She did not move as he bent down. Again he felt the warm, sweet thrill of her lips. He would have kissed her again, have clasped her close in his arms, but she drew away from him gently.

"I am glad you saw me—and followed, Philip," she said, her clear, beautiful eyes meeting his. "It is a wonderful thing that has happened to us. And we must talk about it. We must understand. I was on my way to the pack. Will you come?"

They had gone but a few steps when Josephine paused close to the fallen trunk of a huge cedar. With her mittened hands she brushed off the snow, seated herself, and motioned Philip to sit beside her.

"Let us talk here," she said. And then she asked a little anxiously: "You left my father believing in you—in us?"

"Fully," replied Philip. He took her face between his two hands and turned it up to his. Her fingers clasped his arms. But they made no effort to pull down the hands that held her eyes looking straight into his own.

"He believes in us," he repeated. "And you, Josephine, you love me?"

He saw the tremulous forming of a word on her lips, but she did not speak. A deeper glow came into her eyes. Gently her fingers crept to his wrists, and she took down his hands from her face and drew him to the seat at her side.

"Yes, Philip," she said then, in a voice so low and calm that it roused a new sense of fear in him. "There can be no sin in telling you that—after last night. For we understand each other now. It has filled me with a strange happiness. Do you remember what you said to me in the canoe? It was this: 'In spite of all that may happen, I will receive more than all else in the world could give me. For I will have known you, and you will be my salvation.' Those words have been ringing in my heart night and day. They are there now. And I understand them; I understand you. Hasn't some one said that it is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all? Yes, it is a thousand times better. The love that is lost is often the love that is sweetest and purest, and leads you nearest Heaven. Such is Jean's love for his lost wife. Such must be your love for me. And when you are gone my life will still be filled with the happiness which no grief can destroy. I did not know these things—until last night. I did not know what it meant to love as Jean must love. I do now. And it will be my salvation up in these big forests, just as you have said that it will be yours down in that other world to which you will go."

He had listened to her like one stricken by a sudden grief. He understood her, even before she had finished, and his voice came in a sudden broken cry of protest and of pain.

"Then you mean—that after this—you will still send me away? After last night? It is impossible! You have told me, and it makes no difference, except to make me love you more. Become my wife. We can be married secretly and no one will ever know. My God, you cannot drive me away now, Josephine! It is not justice. If you love me—it is a crime!"

In the fierceness of his appeal he did not notice how his words were driving the color from her face. Still she answered him calmly, in her voice a strange tenderness. Strong in her faith in him she put her hands to his shoulders and looked into his eyes.

"Have you forgotten?" she asked gently. "Have you forgotten all that you promised and all that I told you? There has been no change since then—no chance that frees me. There can be no change. I love you, Philip. Is that not more than you expected? If one can give one's soul away I give mine to you. It is yours for all eternity. Is it not enough? Will you throw that away—because—my body—is not free?"

Her voice broke in a dry sob; but she still looked into his eyes, waiting for him to answer—for the soul of him to ring true. And he knew what must be. His hands lay clenched between them. Jean seemed to rise up before him again at the grave sides and from his lips he forced the words:

"Then there is something more—than the baby?"

"Yes," she replied, and dropped her hands from his shoulders. "There is that of which I warned you—something which you could not know if you lived a thousand years."

He caught her to him now, so close that his breath swept her face.

"Josephine, if it was the baby alone you would give yourself to me? You would be my wife?"

"Yes."

"Then you have not killed my hope!" he cried.

His enthusiasm, the strength and sureness of him as he stood before her, sent the flush back into her own face. She rose and reached to one of his outstretched hands with her own.

"You must hope for nothing more than I have given you," she said. "A month from to-day you will leave Adare House and will never return."

"A month!" He breathed the words as if in a dream.

"Yes, a month from to-day. You will go off on a snowshoe journey. You will never return, and they will think that you have died in the deep snows. You have promised me this. And you will not fail me?"

"What I have promised I will do," he replied, and his voice was now as calm as her own. "And for this one month—you are mine!"

"To love as I have given you love, yes."

For a moment he folded her in his arms; and then he drew back her hood so that he might lay a hand on her shining hair, and his eyes were filled with a wonderful illumination as he looked into her upturned face.

"A month is a long time, my Josephine," he whispered. "And after that month there are other months—years and years of them, and through years, if it must be, my hope will live. You cannot destroy it, and some day, somewhere, you will send word to me. Will you promise to do that?"

"If such a thing becomes possible, yes."

"Then I am satisfied," he said. "I am going to fight for you, Josephine. No man ever fought for a woman as I am going to fight for you. I don't know what this strange thing is that separates us. But I can think of nothing terrible enough to frighten me. I am going to fight, mentally and physically, day and night—until you are my own. I cannot lose you now. That will be what God never meant to be. I shall keep all my promises to you. You have given me a month, and much can happen in that time. If at the end of the month I have failed—I will go. But you will not send me away. For I shall win!"

So sure was he, so filled with the conviction of his final triumph, so like a god to her in this moment of his greatest strength, that Josephine drew slowly away from him, her breath coming quickly, her eyes filled with the starlike pride and glory of the Woman who has found a Master.

For a moment they stood facing each other in the white stillness of the forest, and in that moment there came to them the low and mourning wail of a dog beyond. And then the full voice of the pack burst through the wilderness, a music that was wild and savage, and yet through which there ran a strange and plaintive note for Josephine.

"They have caught us in the wind," she said, holding out her hand to him. "Come, Philip. I want you to love my Beasts."

CHAPTER XI.

After a little the trail through the thick spruce grew narrow and dark, and Josephine went ahead of Philip.

The voice of the pack came to them stronger each moment, yet for a space it was unheard by him. His mind—all the senses he possessed—travelled no further than the Rhiseome red and gold figure ahead of him. The thick strands of her braid had become partly undone, covering her waist and hips in a shimmering veil of gold. He wanted to touch that rare treasure with his hands. He was filled with the desire to stop her and hold her close in his arms. And yet he knew that this was a thing which he must not do. For him she had risen above a thing merely physical. The touching of her hair, her lips, her face, were no longer the first passions of love with him. And because Josephine knew these things rose the joyous flush in her face and the wonder-light in her eyes.

Suddenly she ran a little ahead of him and then stopped. A moment later he stood at her side. They were peering into what looked like a great, dimly lighted and carpeted hall. For the space of a hundred feet in diameter the spruce had been thinned out.

The place was filled with moving shapes and with gleaming eyes that were half fire in the gloom. Here were leashed the forty fierce and wolfish beasts of the pack. The dogs had ceased their loud clamor, and at sight of Josephine and sound of her voice, as she cried out greeting to them, there ran through the whole space a whining and a clinking of chains, and with that a snapping of jaws that sent a momentary shiver up Philip's back.

Josephine took him by the hand now. With him she ran in among them, calling out their names, laughing with them, caressing the shaggy heads that were thrust against her—until it seemed to Philip that every beast in the pit was straining at the end of his chain to get at them and rend them into pieces. And yet, above this thought, the nervousness that he could not fight out of himself, rose the wonder of it all.

Philip had seen a husky snap off a man's hand at a single lunge; he knew it was a creature of the whip and the club, with the hatred of men inborn in it from the wolf. What he looked on now filled him with a sort of awe—and a fear for Josephine. He gave a warning cry and half drew his pistol when she dropped on her knees and flung her arms about the shaggy head of a huge beast that could have torn the life from her in an instant. She looked up at him, laughing, the inch-long fangs of Captain, the lead dog, gleaming in brute happiness close to her soft, flushed face.

"Don't be afraid, Philip!" she cried. "They are my pets—all of them. This is Captain, who leads my sledge team. Isn't he magnificent?"

"Good God!" breathed Philip, looking about him. "I know something of sledge dogs, Josephine. These are not from mongrel breeds. There are no hounds, no malemutes, none of the soft-footed breeds here. They are wolf!"

She rose and stood beside him, panting, triumphant, glorious.

"Yes—they've all got the strain of wolf," she said. "That is why I love them, Philip. They are of the forests. And I have made them love me!"

A yellow beast, with small, dangerous eyes, was leaping fiercely at the end of his chain close to them. Philip pointed to him.

"And you would trust yourself there?" he exclaimed, catching her by the arm.

"That is Hero," she said. "Once his name was Soldier. Three years ago a man from Thoreau's Place offered me an insult in the woods, and Soldier almost killed him. He would have killed him if I had not dragged him off. From that day I called him Hero. He is a quarter-strain wolf."

She went to the husky, and the yellow giant leaped up against her, so that her arms were about him, with his wolfish muzzle reaching her face. Under the cedars Philip's face was as white as the snow out in the open. Josephine saw this, and came and put her arm through his fondly.

"You are afraid for me, Philip?" she asked, with a little laugh of pleasure at his anxiety. "You mustn't be, for you must love them—for my sake. I have brought them all up from puppyhood. And they would fight for me—just as you would fight for me, Philip. Once I was lost in a storm. Father turned the dogs loose. And they found me—miles and miles away. When you hear the wonderful stories I have to tell about them you will love them. They will not harm you. They will harm nothing that I have touched. I have taught them that. I am going to unleash them now. Metoosin is coming along the trail with their frozen fish."

Before she had moved, Philip went straight up to the yellow creature that she had told him was a quarter wolf.

"Hero," he spoke softly. "Hero"——

He held out his hands. The giant husky's eyes burned a deeper glow; for an instant his upper lip drew back, baring his stiletto-like fangs, and the hair along his neck and back stood up like a brush. Then, inch by inch, his muzzle drew nearer to Philip's steady hands, and a low whine rose in his throat. His crest drooped, his ears shot forward a little, and Philip's hand rested on the wolfish head.

"That is proof," he laughed, turning to Josephine. "If he had snapped off my hand I would say that you were wrong."

She passed quickly from one dog to another now, with Philip close at her side, and from the collar of each dog she snapped the chain. After she had freed a dozen, Philip began to help her. A few of the huskies snarled at him. Yet in their eyes he saw the smouldering menace, the fire that wanted only a word from her to turn them into a horde of tearing demons.

Just then Josephine came and stood at Philip's side, and put her hands to his shoulders.

"They have all seen me with you now," she cried after that. "They have seen me touch you. Not one of them will snap at you after this."

The dogs swapt on ahead of them in a great wave as they left the spruce shelter. Out in the clear light Philip drew a deep breath. He had never seen anything like this pack. They crowded shoulder to shoulder, body to body, in the open trail. Most of them were the tawny dun and gray and yellow of the wolf. There were a few blacks, and a few pure whites, but none that wore the mongrel spots of the soft-footed and softer-throated dogs from the south.

(To Be Continued.)

Can You Beat It?

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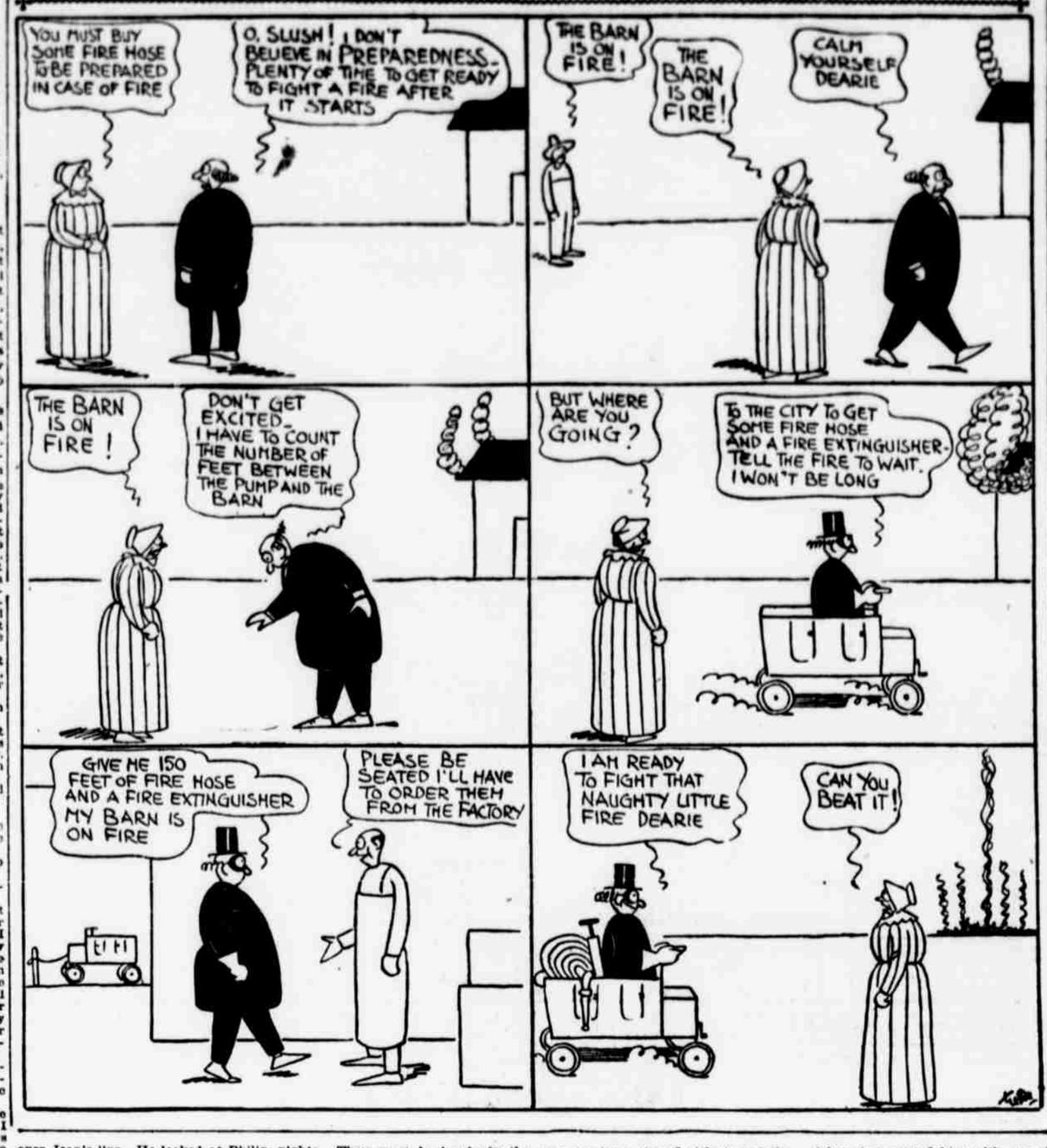
By Maurice Ketten



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