

# Under Frozen Stars

by GEORGE MARSH

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## FROM THE BEGINNING

At his fur post, Sunset House, in the Canadian north, Jim Stuart, trader in charge, with his h-adman, Omar, rescues Aurore LeBlond, daughter of Stuart's rival in the fur business, from an overturned canoe in the lake. In a spirit of fun, she and Jim arrange to exchange notes on a certain island. LeBlond, with Paradis, his half-breed lieutenant, arrives in search of the missing girl. Paradis displays enmity toward Jim. Going to the island to see if Aurore has left the promised note, Jim is ambushed by Paradis and forced to travel toward the LeBlond post. On the way he overturns the boat, leaving his enemy on the beach. Jim's superior, Andrew Christie, displeased at Stuart's trade showing, allows him, at his request, one year to "make good." Paradis bribes an Indian to ambush Jim and Omar. The attempt fails, and Jim takes the Indian to LeBlond. After hearing the story, LeBlond discharges Paradis. Jim and Aurore acknowledge their mutual love, though Aurore is returning to Winnipeg, and Jim has planned a canoe trip to make a personal appeal to the Indians, who have persistently refused to trade their furs with him. He finds that Paradis has enlisted their superstition to discourage them from trading with Stuart.

## CHAPTER V—Continued

"They'll take her away from Jim, down there in the city, Smoke. They won't let him have her, but Smoke'll always love old Jim, won't he?"

So the man and the great dog he had once carried inside his fur parka as a puppy, sat side by side, in perfect understanding, while the flush of the sky slowly faded through the long northern twilight in the mirror of the lake. Then, as Jim held a lighted match to his pipe, in the indigo gloom of the spruce of the mainland across the straight, there was the flash and roar of a rifle, followed swiftly by another.

A bullet wrenched the shattered pipe from Stuart's teeth. Then he dove headlong for the bushes, as Omar and Esau took cover on the opposite side of the dead fire.

"You heet?" called Omar.  
"No," growled Jim, hunching toward his gun which stood propped against a bush. "If they want war—give it to 'em!"

Again the twilight silence was split by the guns on the mainland, and bullets splattered around the camp, while the excited Smoke yelped as he raced back and forth, still untouched.

"They'll ruin the canoe if we don't stop 'em!" stormed the maddened fur trader, as he drew himself within reach of his gun. "Here, Smoke, they'll get you! Here! Down!"

Then the rifles of Omar and Esau opened on the ambush and two hundred yards across the strait. Shortly the repeating guns of the three men, firing at the flashes, made the opposite shore too hot for the single shot rifles in the ambush. The shooting stopped.

"Well, the war on the Pipestone is on, Omar!" called Jim. "I think they're making their getaway—afraid we'll cross in the canoe in the dusk and hunt 'em."

Knowing that rifle sights were now invisible in the murk of the opposite shore, Jim stood up, to find Omar calmly examining the canoe.

"Now who do you suppose pulled that trick, Esau?"  
"Dose young men follow us from de camp."

"I suppose they're some of Paradis' people—only they don't know that they'll never see him again."

Omar approached Jim and thrust a face into his, the fierceness of which even the gathering dusk did not soften. "Dey follow us and shoot to keel. Do I use dees now, w'en I feel de neck of dat Paradees?" The half-breed pointed to the long skinning knife slung from the sash at his waist.

"Yes, I guess you're justified in using anything, now. They're after us and they'll get us too, in this country, if we're not careful. Came pretty close with that first shot. Got my pipe right under my hand. I didn't know an Indian could shoot so straight."

"Dese peopl' goin' follow us," said Esau. "W'en de moon go down, we drop down de riviere an' wait for dem een de mornin'."

"Ah-hah!" agreed Omar. "We mak a leetle ambush for dem."

As the night thickened before the moon died at midnight, the peterboro from Sunset House silently left the island, and dropped down through the shadows to the outlet and into the river. A few miles downstream they turned in and made camp.

Jim wrapped himself in his blanket with Smoke beside him, to wrestle with a difficult problem. Clearly the Indians who had followed them down the lake would stop at nothing to drive them out of the country. With these paid henchmen of Paradis on his heels, he could not go on. But to allow Omar and Esau to shoot them out of their canoe in the morning, much as they deserved it, would be bad generalship. They had kinsmen among the Pipestone Ojibwas who would take up the feud, thus started, and Jim's mission was one of conciliation. Yet he had to defend himself, and Omar and Esau would be hard to handle.

The sun was high in the sky on the following morning before the three who waited in the river willows saw a canoe turn the bend above them. Clearly the two paddlers were confident that the peterboro was somewhere far ahead of them downstream, for the men in the willows plainly heard their voices.

There was the muffled click of steel on steel as three rifles were cocked. Then the willows were silent. Presently, as the birch bark canoe drifted abreast of the ambush, there was a roar, as the guns spat from the shore. The paddle of the bowman fell, splintered from his hands. With a cry of terror the sternman swung the nose of the craft toward the opposite bank, as the rifles again exploded.

In his fear the Indian in the bow of the canoe plunged headlong into the river and made for the shore, while his mate flattened on the floor of the canoe. Then from the willows,



"They'll Take Her Away From Jim Down There in the City, Smoke."

two men paddled rapidly across the stream to the drifting canoe, while the third covered the craft with his rifle. Running the peterboro alongside, Omar stepped into the birch bark and, lifting the gray-faced young Ojibwa in his great arms, with a curse threw him into the water.

"We not shoot Jijag, de skunk, an' we not shoot at you, dis tam!" roared the infuriated half-breed, deprived of his vengeance by the commands of Stuart. "But de next tam, I weel split your t'roat lak' I stab de caribou."

As the frightened Ojibwa swam for the shore, Omar returned to the peterboro and finished the work of the rifle shots in destroying the canoe, by opening great seams with his knife. Then he tossed overboard the bag of provisions, with the rifles of the Indians, and abandoned the water-logged craft.

"Now travel home in your moccasins," called the half-breed in Ojibwa to the Indian as he reached the shore, "and tell them how we gave you a swim and let you go!"

Wondering what further evidence of Jimgwak's hostility awaited them, but forced by the necessity of breaking the conjurer's influence in the Pipestone country if Sunset House were to survive, Jim continued down the river.

## CHAPTER VI

Through the Pipestone chain of lakes traveled the canoe from the south, visiting the fishing camps, and denouncing Jimgwak as a false shaman, an imposter, the paid agent of Paradis and LeBlond. Often the appeals of Jim and Omar were met with sneers and shouts of dissent. More than once, superstitious Indians refused to talk to them, and frightened women herded their offspring into the tips at the coming of the white trader with the Evil Eye, but to Jim's satisfac-

tion, most of the older Indians listened, while many were friendly. And notwithstanding sullen and black faces among the younger men, the progress of the peterboro through the Pipestone country had not been again molested. But one night an old Ojibwa came to their camp on the Lake of the Great Stones, which emptied into the Sturgeon.

"You are going down into the Sturgeon river country?" he asked, accepting the tobacco and dish of tea Jim offered him.

"Yes," replied Jim in Ojibwa, "this false shaman, Jimgwak, has turned the hunters against us for the pay of Paradis. We are going to find him and make him eat his lies."

For a long interval the old man smoked, his slit-like eyes on the fire. Then he said: "Do not go. He is waiting for you."

Jim glanced at the interested faces of Omar and Esau. Was this man friendly or a spy? he wondered. "I am glad," he said. "I feared he would run away."

The old Indian lifted questioning eyes to the bronzed face of the white man. For a space he seemed to measure the metal of the speaker whose cold gaze met his scrutiny. Then he quietly said, as he again looked into the fire: "You will never come back."

Jim studied the wrinkled mask of the old Ojibwa, framed in its long grizzled locks. Had he come to warn them as a friend, or was he seeking to learn their plans, only to send the information ahead of them?

"You have lived through many snows," he said. "Wisdom has come to you through the years. You know that Jimgwak is a liar or you would not sit here and look me in the eye. This Paradis has filled his tipi with flour and tea and tobacco. Why? Because Jimgwak keeps the hunters from trading with the old company. But this is finished. LeBlond has sent Paradis far south to the Nipigon."

The old Indian looked up with puzzled eyes. "You say Paradis has gone south?"

"Yes,"  
The seamed visage of the Indian stiffened in thought as his narrowed eyes sought his moccasin. Then he said: "He has put a spell upon the young men on the Sturgeon river—this Jimgwak. If you go there—they will kill you."

At the words, Omar Boisvert rose to his feet, shaking with rage. Thrusting his clenched fists at the Ojibwa, he opened and closed his fingers. "With these hands," he stormed, "I will choke the breath from the lying throat of this wabeno. Go back and send your young men to tell him we are coming. Tell him that Omar Boisvert who broke the neck of Big Pierre, at Fort Severn, with his fist, is coming to drive him out of the Sturgeon river country. Tell him if he stays, Omar Boisvert, who sets bear-traps with his hands, will tear his tongue from his throat."

Inflamed with passion, Omar stood over the squatting figure of the old Indian, who gazed up at him with a look of mingled surprise and regret.

"You think me the friend of Jimgwak and this Paradis," he said calmly. "You are wrong. I come here because I am their enemy. Jimgwak took my daughter from me."

In silence the Indian rose, shook hands, and went to his birchbark. As he pushed out from the shore, he said to Jim, who followed him with the customary, "bo'jo's," "Your canoe will never pass this way again."

"Well, what d'you make of him?" asked Jim of the silent figures of his friends. "Was he nosing around trying to find out something, or was he bringing a friendly warning?"

"He is fren' of Jimgwak," said Esau, "and Jimgwak is scare'."

"Ah-hah!" agreed Omar. "He ees scare'. He got no Paradees to help heem now."

But in spite of the confidence of his men, Jim was troubled. What he desired was to bring about the downfall of the sorcerer by peaceable means—to gain the friendship of the hunters, but it looked as if he would fail. If the old Indian was to be trusted, they would be lucky to get out of the Sturgeon with whole skins. How far the adherents of Jimgwak were prepared to go he already knew. In the end it meant bloodshed, and that meant defeat—the enmity of many of the hunters whose trade he sought. And defeat meant good-by to Sunset House—and Aurore LeBlond. For he would have not even a future in the company's service to offer her. As he brooded with his thoughts, the day on

the island with the daughter of the man whose wiles were fast drawing the net of defeat about the little fur post seemed more like something he had read—more the fancy of a dream than reality. Those brief hours of unalloyed delight had been given him to torment his memory in the years to come. She would never return to the Lake of the Sand Beaches.

The following morning, Esau left them. Traveling in a small birchbark canoe he had got by trade from an Ojibwa, the old man started ahead of them down the Sturgeon on his lone search for Jimgwak. Time and again Jim had endeavored to learn how he hoped to circumvent the medicine man who had such a hold on the hunters of the Sturgeon, but Esau had kept his own counsel. With a smile, the wily old Indian had replied: "Eet may be Esau ees too old. Hees back no longer carry de beeg load for de companee. His leg are stiff for de winter trail. But he has seen manee t'ing and hees memory ees long. Eef he nevalre come back, eet mean hees head, also, ees no good."

More he refused to say, and Omar, when questioned by the curious Jim, had shaken his head doubtfully as he explained Esau's reticence. The old man's plan was so wild in its details and depended for its success so largely on luck that Esau dared not divulge it to his chief.

So Stuart parted with his friend with misgiving in his heart. The loyal old Indian was going down the Sturgeon into the enemies' country, alone, to fight for Sunset House. What could he do to Jimgwak there, in his stronghold, one against many?

He gripped the old Ojibwa's hand in parting. "I don't like to have you go alone, Esau," Jim said. "We ought to fight this out together."

"You an' your fader was de good fren' of me," rallied Esau, his eyes bright with feeling. "I am ole man. Soon I go talk to your fader. W'en I meet heem, he sk, 'Esau, how you leev de boy?' I wan' to tell heem de boy ees ver' fine and de beeg trade at de House of de Setting Sun." The old man's fingers gripped hard on Jim's. "Dat ees w'y I go to fin' Jimgwak."

Turning, Esau shoved off the canoe and was soon out of sight behind a timbered point. In the gray eyes of Jim Stuart, as he watched the dip and swing of Esau's paddle until the bent back of the old man disappeared, there was the mist of memory and the emotion of a full heart.

The father he had buried on the shore of far Goc's lake—what would he not give today for his companionship and his counsel?

It was September, the moon of the mating of the caribou; September, when through the wild valleys, the lifting sun rolled back curtains of mist, veiling ridges touched here and there with yellow and gold by the magic wand of the frost; September, when the muskys were blue with ripened berries and the loons, restless with the urge of far journeying, called at sunset across nameless lakes. North, on the vast marshes of the great bay, the legions of the geese were assembling for their autumn rendezvous—later to ride the first stinging winds south over the green seas of the spruce and the flaming islands of the hardwood ridges.

Passing over the spawning beds of the sturgeon, at the outlet of the Lake of the Great Stones, where, for a mile, on the sandy bottom, the dark shapes of the huge fish were visible beneath the peterboro, Jim and Omar entered the river from which the old Ojibwa had warned them; they would never return. Two days' journey downstream, where the river widened to form a large lake, Jim hoped to find the man they sought. How, when he found him, he was to break the power of the sorcerer, he did not know. But the future of Sunset House depended on it, and in his desperation, Jim was prepared to go far—how far, the man who realized that failure in the trade would mean in the end the loss of Aurore LeBlond, did not dare admit to himself.

All the morning the peterboro rode the swift current of the Sturgeon. Toward noon the drum-beat of rapids which the old Ojibwa had warned them they could not run, sounded in their ears. Then, as they dropped alongside, with their poles toward the first broken water, they saw the portage trail leading from the river shore back into the timber.

They landed, at 1 Omar, first swinging to his back on a trap-line a haunch of the yearlingoose they had shot at daylight, baled the heavy, water-soaked peterboro on its center thwart across his thick shoulders and walked briskly off up the trail. To Omar Boisvert, the man who had packed five bags of company flour a half-mile without resting, this back load, while awkward to balance in the thick brush, was a toy.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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