

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 headman, 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, 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. Esau, half-breed partisan of Stuart, leaves on a mysterious journey which they hope will result in the overthrow of Jingwak.

CHAPTER VI—Continued

With his tump-line Jim lashed the two guns to a provision bag, swung it to his back, adjusted the head-strap over his forehead, and piled on the rest of their outfit, while Smoke thrashed off through the "bush" after snow-shoe rabbits. For a half mile the trail held to the high land back from the river, then turned toward the water. Bent under his heavy load, Jim followed the moving legs of Omar under the peterboro. From the slowly increasing clamor of the rapids, Jim judged that they were nearing the end of the carry and approaching the river, but his sweat-blinded eyes did not lift from the moccasins of the man in front.

Suddenly, the legs of Omar came to a halt. Curious, Jim raised his head banded by the tump-line, but the canoe on Omar's broad back, blocking the trail, alone met his blurred eyes. Then, to his startled ears came Omar's hoarse whisper: "De gun! Quick!"

"What is it? Game ahead?" Jim wondered, as he slipped off the head-strap.

As his load slid to the ground he wiped the sweat from his eyes and scowled past Omar toward the river. With a bound his heart started drumming against his ribs. There, twenty yards up the trail, leaning at the waiting Omar, stiff as a spruce under the canoe, stood Paul Paradis.

"Trapped!" muttered Jim, working desperately to free the rifles from the knotted tump-line which bound them to the pack.

Again came Omar's whispered warning: "De gun! Tak' to de bush! Queek!" followed by the jeer of Paradis: "So you have come to viset me?"

With his gun almost free, Jim heard a movement in the bush, and looked up to see two Indians hurl themselves at the man waiting, legs braced, under the canoe.

As they came headlong on, with a lunge of his great shoulders Omar pivoted and swung the heavy peterboro crashing into their heads, at the same time slipping his tump-line and avoiding the falling boat. Then with a roar the enraged half-breed met the rush of a third man and, lifting him above his head in his vise-like grip, flung the writhing body to the trail. Leaping over the stunned Indian, he made for the surprised Paradis.

Dodging into the brush to escape the charging Omar, Paradis shouted: "No knives!" as two Ojibwas catapulted into the half-breed from the rear, bringing him to his knees.

But they were fighting to take alive a man whose strength was a byword from God's lake to the Barren Grounds, and, as he tripped and fell with two clawing Indians on his back, legs twined around his, Omar snarled: "I tak' you, too, Parades!"

When Omar clubbed his first assailants with his swinging canoe, Jim, with his hands on his lashed gun, was hurled to his face by the impact of two heavy bodies. As he felt the realization that all he had worked for—all he loved—hung on the next few seconds, flashed through his consciousness.

They had not knifed him! Thought they could take him and Omar with their bare hands, did they?

The old fury he had known in many a trench fight overseas returned as Jim fought the men on his back who sought to pin him to the ground. A desperate heave and he twisted and thrashed in their clinging arms until he reached his knees. A wrench, and he had a hand free, as they fell to the trail—a heap of straining, panting men. Chin clamped on chest to cheat their clawing fingers seeking his throat, again and again Jim hunched his fist over the shoulder into the jaw of the man who faced him, then by sheer strength bent back the head, until, with a groan, he fainted.

Desperate with the knowledge of the white man's superior strength, the remaining Ojibwa clung like a cat, with arms and legs, to Stuart's back, but wrenching himself from his grip, Jim beat him to the ground. On his knees, the hands of the dazed Indian fumbled with something on the trail, as Jim rose panting to his feet. Then, with a blind lunge he lurched forward with Stuart's recovered knife, to meet the crash of a swinging fist which crumpled him in a heap.

Omar!

Picking up the knife, Jim hurried ahead to aid his friend. As he approached, from the limp bodies of two men rose a pair of massive bleeding shoulders, from which a shirt hung in tatters. His heart checked as the sun flashed from a knife blade and a crouching figure left the brush to run at the square bulk of Omar's back.

"Behind you, Omar!" warned the running Stuart.

At the words, Omar leaped far to the side and turned to face the danger. But the courage of Paul Paradis

was not equal to meeting the black fury of the unarmed half-breed, and he was dashed into the spruce and disappeared toward the river.

"We get de gun!" panted Omar, "dere are more of dem!"

Tearing their rifles from their lashings, Jim and Omar followed Paradis. As they ran, from the direction of the stream sounded the yelp of Smoke.

"He's struck 'em! Hurry up or they'll get him!" cried Jim, increasing his speed.

Again above the distant drum-beat of the rapids lifted the angry yelp of Smoke. Then two rifle shots drove Jim headlong, his heart cold with fear for his dog. At last the panting runners reached the river. But neither dog nor the canoe of Paradis was in sight.

"Smoke!" Jim called. "Here Smoke!" There was no answering yelp. Omar, closer to the water, suddenly dropped to a knee and fired down river. Joining him, Jim looked to see, far below, a canoe paddled by two crouching men. Again and again the two took careful aim and fired at the distant craft, but the range was great, and the riflemen panting from exertion. At last the canoe turned a bend.

Back and forth through the thick bush near the landing Jim searched, calling the dog he loved—hoping, if he were alive, that the hurt animal would answer with a whine. But Smoke did not answer. The two friends widened their hunt, thinking the wounded husky might have crawled off somewhere to die. Finally Jim was forced to the conclusion that the dog had been shot in the water and carried down stream.

Poor Smoke! Sick at heart, Stuart bathed his grimy face and arms at the shore as his thoughts went back three years to the puppyhood of the friend he had lost. From the time when, a fluffy ball of fur, Jim had brought him south from the bay to God's lake, man and dog had known no separation; together they had faced the drive of the blizzards and the slant of the spring rains; shared the hardships of the white trails of the long snows and the summer white-waters. Two great tears ran down the bronzed face of the man who knelt by the river, for the slant eyes of his dog would never again shine with idolatry as his deep throat rumbled at Jim's caress; his plume of a tail beat frantically to Jim's call as he yelped in answer.

"Good-by, Smoke!" sobbed the man, turning his face twisted with grief from the sober eyes of his friend. "I loved every black hair on you. Jim will never forget! Good-by, Smoke!"

"Well you wanted to meet him again and you had your wish," said Jim, as they filled the magazines of their rifles and started back for the canoe. "Now did LeBlond lie to us and send him here to hide, or is Paradis disobeying orders? I wish I knew."

The muscles ridged on Omar's clamped jaws as he scowled his disappointment. "Eef he onlee jump me wid dose oders," he sighed. Then his hand slid back to the empty sheath on his sash. "Dey get my knife w'en dey hit me from behind. Dey get your knife, too? You have moch trouble wid dem?"

"They got mine, too, but I picked it up." Jim smiled at Omar's matter of fact reference to his struggle to free himself of the two Ojibwas. "We must wash these scratches, Omar," he went on, examining the bulging shoulders protruding through the ripped shirt of his friend. "They clawed you like a lynx."

Omar's marked face wrinkled in perplexity. "W'y you t'ink dat Paradeses try to tak' us wid hees hand? Ver' strange t'ing!"

"I don't know. Maybe he wanted to keep us in a cage to show us to the Indians up here," laughed Jim. "One thing's certain; if he caught us we'd have never seen home again. But that was a clever trick of yours—clubbing them with the boat, you old wolverine. These young bucks of Paradis won't forget the trimming you gave them. There were three or four decorating the trail when I got loose and started to help you. How they'd laugh at

God's lake at these people trying to take Omar Boisvert with their hands!"

Omar's mouth widened across his square face. "Dese young feller on de Sturgeon keep dere hand off Omar Boisvert, ah-hah," laughed the swart son of Anak. "Dey got sore neck all right."

"D'you suppose they've come to, and are waiting for us with guns to come back for the boat?"

Omar shook his head. "We go an' see. I t'ink dey got dere fill for to-day. Paradis run; dey run. He keep dere gun een hees canoe. He want tak' us alive, he not dare geeve dem de gun."

"You didn't kill any of 'em—break any necks—with those bear traps of hands?"

Omar thoughtfully scratched his head. "Wan, mebbe. I twist hees neck ver' hard." Then the narrow



Again and Again the Two Took Careful Aim and Fired at the Distant Craft.

eyes of the half-breed suddenly clouded. "Esau!" he gasped. "Dey know we come; by gar, dey get Esau!"

The canoe of the old Indian, a day ahead of them on the river, must have run into the party of Paradis.

"He told me he would travel only at night."

The deep chest of the half-breed lifted in a heavy sigh. "Widout Esau we are no good," he said, as they started back to the canoe.

"He may have missed them. There's nothing to do but keep on."

Cautiously, deep in the bush on either side of the portage trail, the two men approached their canoe. As Omar had said, it was unlikely that Paradis had allowed his men to carry rifles to the ambush, for in their excitement the Indians would have used them, and for some subtle reason he wanted to take Omar and Jim unhurt. Nevertheless, the two men stalked their canoe as if sure that trouble would come from their rough handling. Disappeared, leaving the canoe outfit, with Omar's knife, lying on the trail, untouched.

"Dey were scare' we come back wid our gun and dey make for dere canoe." "Yes, they must have had another boat downstream."

As the peterboro was brought to the river, and slid into the water, Jim pointed at a patch of mud. "Look! There they are—Smoke's tracks!"

The two men bent over the deep impressions of a dog's feet in the mud of the shore.

"He jumped from here—there's where he landed. See that moccasin print? He was right after them as they put in the canoe! They couldn't miss him—shot him dead!"

Foot by foot Jim and Omar searched the mud of the shore, but found no further traces of the vanished dog.

"Smokey—poor old Smokey!" mourned Jim. "You died like a soldier, facing 'em! And Jim can't give you a decent grave."

Stuart straightened, and gazing downstream where the stiffened body of his dog rode the swift current on its way to the sea, brought his hand to his forehead in salute.

The friends dropped a mile down river, and, cutting back into the timber, made a small fire and ate. To avoid a possible ambush, they waited for the moon, then, hugging the shadows of the shore, traveled, until stopped by the churn of broken water ahead.

At dawn they carried around the white-water, which seemed impassable, and all day lay hidden in the brush below, watching the river and wondering what chance two voyageurs who had beaten their young men would have with the wild Ojibwas of Sturgeon lake. Since the meeting with Paradis and his men, the mission to Sturgeon lake in search of Jingwak seemed but a forlorn hope to Jim Stuart. The presence in the country of LeBlond's man had put a new face on things. At the best, the Indians would refuse to listen to them once they had heard of the fight on the portage. At the worst, it looked as if the prediction of the old Ojibwa at the Lake of the Great Stones would be fulfilled. The peterboro would never return up the Sturgeon.

Of course, Jim knew that he and Omar could not disappear off the face of the earth without a search by company men and the Provincial police. The first sledding snow would bring dog-teams from the south into the Sturgeon valley—clean-faced trackers who would follow Indian or white man, wanted for murder, into the uttermost north—clear to the frozen sea, and beyond. There would be trouble in the Pipestone and Sturgeon river country if the factor of Sunset House and his head man did not come back. But unless Paradis was betrayed, how were these grim man-hunters from the south to prove that the missing men had been shot out of their canoe from ambush or stabbed as they slept? Whom could they accuse? Unless, by some miracle, Esau returned to Sunset House, all that men would ever know would be that three voyageurs and a dog had, like thousands before them, faded into the north, leaving no trace.

Yes, the two friends agreed, having shown his hand, there was no doubt that Paradis, for his own personal safety, would hunt them down when he found they had continued north to Sturgeon lake. In keeping on and attempting to find Jingwak, supported by LeBlond's man, they were paddling into certain disaster, for after the lesson on the portage, Paradis would never again try to take them with bare hands. And yet, as they planned while they waited for darkness, and the deep set gray eyes of the factor of Sunset House met the knotted squint of Omar's swart face, no suggestion of turning back was voiced by either. Ahead of them, they hoped against hope, a dauntless old man still traveled on his lonely mission to Sturgeon lake—a mission which would mean, if he were met and recognized by Paradis, the swift disappearance of Esau Othig. They had let him go alone, on this mad search for the sorcerer. They would follow and find him, if alive, and make their fight together. Jim would have as soon deserted the old Ojibwa in his present need as he would have left a wounded man between the lines in Flanders.

As the moon rose and they pushed off into the shadows of the river shore, the words of Aurore LeBlond, "You'd die for love, so you say, but your duty—" haunted Jim's thoughts. Had he played fair with this girl who had so frankly shown him her heart? He had allowed a sense of duty—of loyalty to the company—to cheat them of priceless hours together before she went south. And now this loyalty was to rob them of their birthright. For even the masterful Omar admitted that Jingwak and Paradis would never allow the peterboro to return to Sunset House. And now that he felt in his heart that he had said good-by forever, Jim lived again and again each treasured moment he had spent with her. Once more, as the boat slid past the shadow-packed river shore, he felt the warm caress of her lips, heard her low whisper, gazed into the dark depths of her eyes and crushed her lithe body to his heart.

"Good-by, Aurore!" he murmured, and above the fret of the river on the near shore, he again heard her, "Good-by, magician, don't forget me!"

But he had forgotten her, the brooding bowman, told himself, when he left her and come north to his defeat. To him in his loneliness had come this miracle of the love of Aurore LeBlond and he had turned from it, put it aside as if a thing of little worth—this miracle of her love.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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