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RAY LONG, Editor

The Mouse

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ILLUSTRATED BY NORMAN BORCHARDT

WHY, you onery little cuss," said Falkner, pausing with a forkful of beans half way to his mouth. "Where in God A'mighty's name did you come from?" It was against all of Jim's crude but honest ethics of the big wilderness to take the Lord's name in vain, and the words he uttered were filled more with the softness of a prayer than the harshness of profanity. He was big, and his hands were hard and knotted, and his face was covered with a coarse red scrub of beard. But his hair was blonde, and his eyes were blue, and just now they were filled with unbounded amazement. Slowly the fork loaded with beans descended to his plate, and he said again, barely above a whisper:

"Where in God A'mighty's name did you come from?"

There was nothing human in the one

room of his wilderness cabin to speak to. At the first glance there was nothing alive in the room, with the exception of Jim Falkner himself. There was not even a dog, for Jim had lost his one dog weeks before. And yet he spoke, and his eyes glistened, and for a full minute after that he sat as motionless as a rock. Then something moved—at the farther end of the rough board table. It was a mouse—a soft, brown, bright-eyed little mouse, not as large as his thumb. It was not like the mice Jim had been accustomed to see in the North woods, the larger, sharp-nosed, rat-like creatures which sprung his traps now and then, and he gave a sort of gasp through his beard.

"I'm as crazy as a loon if it isn't a sure-enough down-home mouse, just like we used to catch in the kitchen down in Ohio," he told himself. And for a third time he asked, "Now where in God

A'mighty's name did you come from?" The mouse made no answer. He had humped itself up into a little ball, and was eying Jim with the keenest of suspicion.

"You're a thousand miles from home, old man," Falkner addressed it, still without a movement. "You're a clean thousand miles straight north of the kind o' civilization you was born in, and I want to know how you got here. By George—is it possible—you got mixed up in that box of stuff she sent up? Did you come from her?"

He made a sudden movement, as if he expected an answer, and, in a flash the mouse had scurried off the table and had disappeared under his bunk.

"The little cuss!" said Falkner. "He's sure got his nerve!"

He went on eating his beans, and when he had done he lighted a lamp, for the half Arctic darkness was falling early, and began to clear away the dishes. When he had done he put a scrap of bannock and a few beans on the corner of the table.

"I'll bet he's hungry, the little cuss," he said. "A thousand miles—in that box!"

He sat down close to the sheet-iron box stove, which was glowing red-hot, and filled his pipe. Kerosene was a precious commodity, and he had turned down the lamp wick until he was mostly in gloom. Outside a storm was wailing down across the Barrens from the North. He could hear the swish of the spruce-boughs overhead, and those moaning, half-shrieking sounds that always came with storm from out of the North, and sometimes fooled even him into thinking they were human cries. They had seemed more and more human to him during the past three days, and he was growing afraid. Once or twice strange thoughts had come into his head, and he had tried to fight them down. He had known of men whom loneliness had driven mad—and he was terribly lonely. He shivered as a piercing blast of wind filled with a mourning wail swept over the cabin.

And that day, too, he had been taken with a touch of fever. It burned more hotly in his blood to-night, and he knew that it was the loneliness—the emptiness

of the world about him, the despair and black foreboding that came to him with the first early twilights of the Long Night. For he was in the edge of that Long Night. For weeks he would only now and then catch a glimpse of the sun. He shuddered.

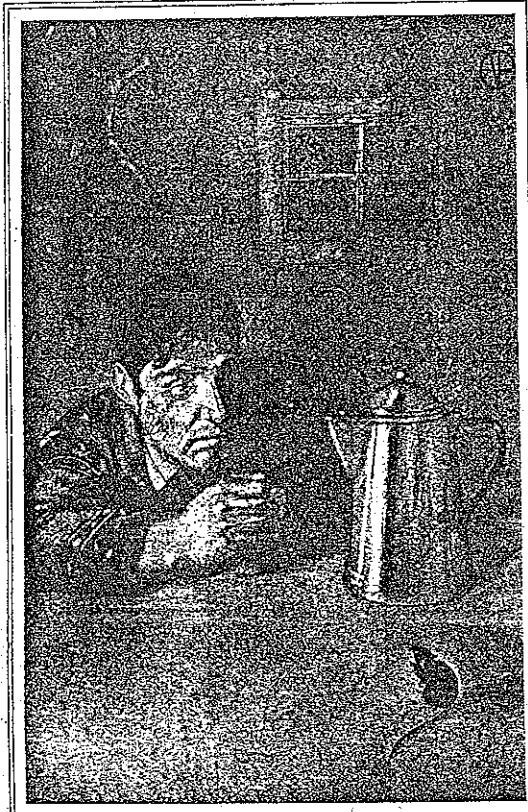
A hundred and fifty miles to the south and east there was a Hudson's Bay Post. Eighty miles south was the nearest trapper's cabin he knew of. Two months before he had gone down to the post, with a thick beard to cover his face, and had brought back supplies—and the box. His wife had sent up the box to him, only it had come to him as "John Blake" instead of Jim Falkner, his right name. There were things in it for him to wear, and pictures of the sweet-faced wife who was still filled with prayer and hope for him, and of the kid, their boy. "He is walking now," she had written to him, "and a dozen times a day he goes to your picture and says, 'Pa-pa—Pa-pa'—and every night we talk about you before we go to bed, and pray God to send you back to us soon."

"God bless 'em!" breathed Jim. He had not lighted his pipe, and there was something in his eyes that shimmered and glistened in the dull light. And then, as he sat silent, his eyes clearing, he saw that the little mouse had climbed back to the edge of the table. It did not eat the food he had placed there for it, but humped itself up in a tiny ball again, and its tiny shining eyes looked in his direction.

"You're not hungry," said Jim, and he spoke aloud. "You're lonely, too—that's it!"

A strange thrill shot through him at the thought, and he wondered again if he was mad at the longing that filled him—the desire to reach out and snuggle the little creature in his hand, and hold it close up to his bearded face, and talk to it! He laughed, and drew his stool a little more into the light. The mouse did not run. He edged nearer and nearer, until his elbows rested on the table, and a curious feeling of pleasure took the place of his loneliness when he saw that the mouse was looking at him, and yet seemed unafraid.

"Don't be scairt," he said softly,



"I killed a man," he repeated, "I killed him, old man, an' you'd have done the same."

speaking directly to it. "I wont hurt you. No sir, I'd—I'd cut off a hand before I'd do that. I aint had any company but you for two months. I aint seen a human face, or heard a human voice—nothing—nothing but them shrieks 'n' wails 'n' baby-cryings out there in the wind. I wont hurt you—"

His voice was almost pleading in its gentleness. And for the tenth time that day he felt, with his fever, a sickening dizziness in his head. For a moment or two his vision was blurred, but he could still see the mouse—farther away, it seemed to him.

"I don't s'pose you've killed anyone—or anything," he said, and his voice seemed thick and distant to him. "Mice don't kill, do they? They live on—cheese. But I have—I've killed. I killed a man. That's why I'm here."

His dizziness almost overcame him, and he leaned heavily against the table. Still the little mouse did not move. Still he could see it through the strange gauzy veil before his eyes.

"I killed—a man," he repeated, and now he was wondering why the mouse did not say something at that remarkable confession. "I killed him, old man, an' you'd have done the same if you'd been in my place. I didn't mean to. I struck too hard. But I found 'im in my cabin, an' she was fighting—fighting him until her face was scratched, an' her clothes torn.—God bless her dear heart!—fighting him to the last breath, an' I come just in time! He didn't think I'd be back for a day—a black-hearted devil we'd fed when he came to our door hungry. I killed him. And they've hunted me ever since. They'll put a rope round my neck, an' choke me to death if they catch me—because I came in time to save her! That's law!"

"But they wont find me. I've been up here a year now, and in the spring I'm going down there—where you come from—back to the Girl and the Kid. The policemen wont be looking for me then. An' we're going to some other part of the world, an' live happy. She's waitin' for me, she an' the kid, an' they know I'm coming in the spring. Yessir, I killed a man. An' they want to kill me for it. That's the law—Canadian law—the law that wants an eye for an eye and a tooth

for a tooth, an' where there aint no ex-tenuatin' circumstance. They call it murder. But it wasn't—was it?"

He waited for an answer. The mouse seemed going farther and farther away from him. He leaned more heavily on the table.

"It wasn't—was it?" he persisted.

His arms reached out; his head dropped forward, and the little mouse scurried to the floor. But Falkner did not know that it had gone.

"I killed him, an' I guess I'd do it again," he said, and his words were only a whisper. "An' to-night they're prayin' for me down there—she 'n' the kid—an' he's sayin', 'Pa-pa—Pa-pa,' an' they sent you up—to keep me comp'ny—"

His head dropped wearily upon his arms. The red stove crackled, and turned slowly black. In the cabin it grew darker, except where the dim light burned on the table. Outside the storm wailed and screeched down across the Barren. And after a time the mouse came back. It looked at Jim Falkner. It came nearer, until it touched the unconscious man's sleeve. More daringly it ran over his arm. It smelled of his fingers. Then it returned to the corner of the table, and began eating of the food that Fordney had placed there for it.

II

The wick in the lamp had burned low when Falkner raised his head. The stove was black and cold. Outside, the storm still raged, and it was the shivering shriek of it over the cabin that Falkner first heard. He felt terribly dizzy, and there was a sharp, knife-like pain just back of his eyes. By the gray light that came through the one window he knew that what was left of Arctic day had come. He rose to his feet, and staggered about like a drunken man as he rebuilt the fire, and he tried to laugh as the truth dawned upon him that he had been sick, and that he had rested for hours with his head on the table. His back seemed broken. His legs were numb, and hurt him when he stepped on them. He swung his arms a little to bring back circulation, and rubbed his hands over the fire that began to crackle in the stove.

It was *the* sickness that had overcome him—he knew that. But the thought of it did not appall him as it had yesterday, and the day before. There seemed to be something in the cabin now that comforted and soothed him, something that took away a part of the loneliness that was driving him mad. Even as he searched about him, peering into the dark corners and at the bare walls, a word formed on his lips, and he half-smiled. It was a woman's name—Hester. And a warmth entered into him. The pain left his head. For the first time in weeks he felt *different*. And slowly he began to realize what had wrought the change. He was not alone. A message had come to him from the one who was waiting for him a thousand miles away: something that lived, and breathed, and was as lonely as himself. It was the little mouse.

He looked about eagerly, his eyes brightening, but the mouse was gone. He could not hear it. There seemed nothing unusual to him in the words he spoke aloud to himself.

"I'm goin' to call it after the Kid," he chuckled. "I'm goin' to call it Little Jim. I wonder if it's a girl mouse—or a boy mouse?"

He placed a pan of snow-water on the stove and began making his simple preparations for breakfast. For the first time in many days he felt actually hungry. And then all at once he stopped, and a low cry that was half joy and half wonder broke from his lips. With tensely gripped hands and eyes that shone with a strange light he stared straight at the blank surface of the log wall—through it—and a thousand miles away. He remembered *that* day—years ago—the scenes of which came to him now as though they had been but yesterday. It was afternoon, in the glorious summer, and he had gone to Hester's home. Only the day before Hester had promised to be his wife, and he remembered how fidgety and uneasy and yet wondrously happy he was as he sat out on the big white veranda, waiting for her to put on her pink muslin dress, which went so well with the gold of her hair and the blue of her eyes. And as he sat there, Hester's marmoset pet came up the steps, bringing

in its jaws a tiny, quivering brown mouse. It was playing with the almost lifeless little creature when Hester came through the door.

He heard again the low cry that came from her lips then. In an instant she had snatched the tiny, limp thing from between the cat's paws, and had faced him. He was laughing at her, but the glow in her blue eyes sobered him. "I didn't think *you* would take pleasure in that, Jim," she said. "It's only a mouse, but it's alive, and I can feel its poor little heart beating!"

They had saved it, and he, a little ashamed at the smallness of the act, had gone with Hester to the barn and made a nest for it in the hay. But the wonderful words that he remembered were these: "Perhaps some day a little mouse will help you, Jim!" Hester had spoken laughingly. And her words had come true!

All the time that Falkner was preparing and eating his breakfast he watched for the mouse, but it did not appear. Then he went to the door. It swung outward, and it took all his weight to force it open. On one side of the cabin the snow was drifted almost to the roof. Ahead of him he could barely make out the dark shadow of the scrub spruce forest beyond the little clearing he had made. He could hear the spruce-tops wailing and twisting in the storm, and the snow and wind stung his face, and half blinded him.

It was dark—dark with that gray and maddening gloom that yesterday would have driven him still nearer to the verge of madness. But this morning he laughed as he listened to the wailings in the air and stared out into the ghostly chaos. It was not the thought of his loneliness that came to him now, but the thought that he was *safe*. The Law could not reach him now, even if it knew where he was. And before it began its hunt for him again in the spring he would be hiking southward, to the Girl and the baby, and it would still be hunting for him when they three would be making a new home for themselves in some other part of the world. For the first time in months he was almost happy. He closed and bolted the door, and began to *whistle*. He was



He stumbled over a stool and fell to the floor. Before he could rise a strange weight was upon him.

amazed at the change in himself, and wonderingly he stared at his reflection in the cracked bit of mirror against the wall. He grinned, and addressed himself aloud.

"You need a shave," he told himself. "You'd scare fits out of anything alive! Now that we've got comp'ny we've got to spruce up, 'n' look civilized."

It took him an hour to get rid of his heavy beard. His face looked almost boyish again. He was inspecting himself in the mirror when he heard a sound that turned him slowly toward the table. The little mouse was nosing about his tin plate. For a few moments Falkner watched it, fearing to move. Then he cautiously began to approach the table.

"Hello there, old chap," he said, trying to make his voice soft and ingratiating. "Pretty late for breakfast, aint you?"

At his approach the mouse humped itself into a motionless ball and watched him. To Falkner's delight it did not run away when he reached the table and sat down. He laughed softly.

"You aint afraid, are you?" he asked. "We're goin' to be chums, aint we? Yes-sir, we're goin' to be chums!"

For a full minute the mouse and the man looked steadily at each other. Then the mouse moved deliberately to a crumb of bannock and began nibbling at its breakfast.

III

For ten days there was only an occasional lull in the storm that came from out of the North. Before those ten days were half over, Jim and the mouse understood each other. The little mouse itself solved the problem of their nearer acquaintance by running up Falkner's leg one morning while he was at breakfast, and coolly investigating him from the strings of his moccasin to the collar of his blue shirt. After that it showed no fear of him, and a few days later would nestle in the hollow of his big hand and nibble fearlessly at the bannock which Falkner would offer it. Then Jim took to carrying it about with him in his coat pocket. That seemed to suit the mouse immensely, and when Jim went to bed

nights, or it grew too warm for him in the cabin, he would hang the coat over his bunk, with the mouse still in it, so that it was not long before the little creature made up its mind to take full possession of the pocket. It intimated as much to Falkner on the tenth and last day of the storm, when it began very business-like operations of building a nest of paper and rabbits' fur in the coat-pocket. Jim's heart gave a big and sudden jump of delight when he saw the work going on.

"Bless my soul, I wonder if it's a girl mouse an' we're goin' to have babies!" he gasped.

After that he did not wear the coat, through fear of disturbing the nest. The two became more and more friendly, until finally the mouse would sit on Jim's shoulder at meal time, and nibble at bannock. What little trouble the mouse caused only added to Falkner's love for it.

"He's a human little cuss," he told himself one day, as he watched the mouse, busy at work caching away scraps of food, which it carried through a crack in the sapling floor. "He's that human I've got to put all my grub in the tin cans or we'll go short before spring!" His chief trouble was to keep his snowshoes out of his tiny companion's reach. The mouse had developed an unholy passion for *babiche*, the caribou skin thongs used in the web of the shoes, and one of the webs was half eaten away before Falkner discovered what was going on. At last he was compelled to suspend the shoes from a nail driven in one of the roof-beams.

In the evening, when the stove glowed hot, and a cotton wick sputtered in a pan of caribou grease on the table, Falkner's chief diversion was to tell the mouse all about his plans, and hopes, and what had happened in the past. He took an almost boyish pleasure in these one-sided entertainments—and yet, after all, they were not entirely one-sided, for the mouse would keep its bright, serious-looking little eyes on Falkner's face; it seemed to understand, if it could not talk.

Falkner loved to tell the little fellow of the wonderful days of four or five years ago away down in the sunny Ohio

valley where he had courted the Girl and where they lived before they moved to the farm in Canada. He tried to impress upon Little Jim's mind what it meant for a great big, unhandsome fellow like himself to be loved by a tender slip of a girl whose hair was like gold and whose eyes were as blue as the wood-violets. One evening he fumbled for a minute under his bunk and came back to the table with a worn and finger-marked manila envelope, from which he drew tenderly and with almost trembling care a long, shining tress of golden hair.

"That's *her's*," he said proudly, placing it on the table close to the mouse. "An' she's got so much of it you can't see her to the hips when she takes it down; an' out in the sun it shines like—like—glory!"

The stove door crashed open, and a number of coals fell out upon the floor. For a few minutes Falkner was busy, and when he returned to the table he gave a gasp of astonishment. The curl and the mouse were gone! Little Jim had almost reached its nest with its lovely burden when Falkner captured it.

"You little cuss!" he breathed reverently. "Now I *know* you come from her! I know it!"

In the weeks that followed the storm Falkner again followed his trap-line, and scattered poison-baits for the white foxes on the Barren. Early in January the second great storm of that year came from out of the North. It gave no warning, and Falkner was caught ten miles from camp. He was making a struggle for life before he reached the shack. He was exhausted, and half blinded. He could hardly stand on his feet when he staggered up against his own door. He could see nothing when he entered. He stumbled over a stool, and fell to the floor. Before he could rise a strange weight was upon him. He made no resistance, for the storm had driven the last ounce of strength from his body.

"It's been a long chase, but I've got you now, Falkner," he heard a triumphant voice say. And then came the dreaded formula, feared to the uttermost limits of the great Northern wilderness: "I warn you! You are my prisoner, in the name of His Majesty, the King!"

Corporal Carr, of the Royal Northwest Mounted, was a man without human sympathies. He was thin faced, with a square, bony jaw, and lips that formed a straight line. His eyes were greenish, like a cat's, and were constantly shifting. He was a beast of prey, as much as the wolf, the lynx, or the fox—and his prey was men. Only such a man as Carr, alone, would have braved the treacherous snows and the intense cold of the Arctic winter to run him down. Falkner knew that, as an hour later he looked over the roaring stove at his captor. About Carr there was something of the unpleasant quickness, the sinuous movement, of the little white ermine—the outlaw of the wilderness. His eyes were as merciless. At times Falkner caught the same red glint in them. And above his despair, the utter hopelessness of his situation, there rose in him an intense hatred and loathing of the man.

Falkner's hands were securely tied behind him.

"I'd put the irons on you," Carr had explained in a hard, emotionless voice, "only I lost them somewhere back there."

Beyond that he had not said a dozen words. He had built up the fire, thawed himself out, and helped himself to food. Now, for the first time, he loosened up a bit.

"I've had a devil of a chase," he said bitterly, a cold glitter in his eyes as he looked at Falkner. "I've been after you three months, and now that I've got you this accursed storm is going to hold us up! And I left my dogs and outfit a mile back in the scrub."

"Better go after 'em," replied Falkner. "If you don't there won't be any dogs an' outfit by morning."

Corporal Carr rose to his feet and went to the window. In a moment he turned.

"I'll do that," he said. "Stretch yourself out on the bunk. I'll have to lace you down pretty tight to keep you from playing a trick on me."

There was something so merciless and brutal in his eyes and voice that Falkner felt like leaping upon him, even with his hands tied behind his back.

He was glad, however, that Carr had decided to go. He was filled with an overwhelming desire to be rid of him, if only for an hour.

He went to the bunk and lay down. Corporal Carr approached, pulling a roll of stout *babiche* cord from his pocket.

"If you don't mind you might tie my hands in front instead of behind," suggested Falkner.

"It's goin' to be mighty unpleasant to have 'em under me, if I've got to lay here for an hour or two."

"Not on your life I wont tie 'em in front!" snapped Carr, his little eyes glittering. And then he gave a cackling laugh, and his eyes were as green as a cat's. "An' it wont be half so unpleasant as having something round your neck!" he joked.

"I wish I was free," breathed Falkner, his chest heaving. "I wish we could fight, man 'n' man. I'd be willing to hang then, just to have the chance to break your neck. You aint a man of the Law. You're a devil."

Carr laughed the sort of laugh that sends a chill up one's back, and drew the caribou-skin cord tight about Falkner's ankles.

"Can't blame me for being a little careful," he said in his revolting way. "By your hanging I become a Sergeant. That's my reward for running you down."

He lighted the lamp and filled the stove before he left the cabin. From the

door he looked back at Falkner, and his face was not like a man's, but like that of some terrible death-spirit, ghostly, and thin, and exultant in the dim glow of the lamp. As he opened the door the roar of the blizzard and a gust of snow filled the cabin. Then it closed, and a groaning curse fell from Falkner's lips. He strained fiercely at the—



From the door he looked back at Falkner, and his face was not like a man's, but like that of some terrible death spirit.

the—things that bound him, but after the first few minutes he lay still, breathing hard, knowing that every effort he made only tightened the caribou-skin cord that bound him.

On his back, he listened to the storm. It was filled with the same strangeries and moaning sound that had almost driven him to madness, and now they sent through him a shivering chill that he had not felt before, even in the darkest and most hopeless hours of his loneliness and despair. A breath that was almost a sob broke from his lips as a vision of the Girl and the Kid came to shut out from his ears the moaning tumult of the wind:

A few hours before he had been filled with hope—almost happiness, and now he was lost. From such a man as Carr there was no hope for mercy, or of escape. Flat on his back, he closed his eyes, and tried to think—to scheme something that might happen in his favor, to foresee an opportunity that might give him one last chance. And then, suddenly, he heard a sound. It traveled over the blanket that

formed a pillow for his head. A cool, soft little nose touched his ear, and then tiny feet ran swiftly over his shoulder, and halted on his breast. He opened his eyes, and stared.

V

"You little cuss!" breathed Falkner. A hundred times he had spoken those words, and each time they were of increasing wonder and adoration. "You little cuss!" he whispered again, and he chuckled aloud.

The mouse was humped on his breast in that curious little ball that it made of itself, and was eying him, Jim thought, in a questioning sort of way. "What's the matter with you?" it seemed to ask. "Where are your hands?"

And Jim answered:

"They've got me, old man. Now what the dickens are we going to do?"

The mouse began investigating. It examined his shoulder, the end of his chin, and ran along his arm as far as it could go.

"Now what do you think of that!" Falkner exclaimed softly. "The little cuss is wondering where my hands are!" Gently he rolled over on his side. "There they are," he said, "hitched tighter'n bark to a tree!"

He wiggled his fingers, and in a moment he felt the mouse. The little creature ran across the opened palm of his hand to his wrist, and then every muscle in Falkner's body grew tense, and one of the strangest cries that ever fell from human lips came from his. The mouse had found once more the dried hide-flesh of which the snowshoe webs were made. It had found *babiche*. And it had begun to gnaw!

In the minutes that followed Falkner scarcely breathed. He could feel the mouse when it worked. Above the stifled beating of his heart he could hear its tiny jaws. In those moments he knew that his last hope of life hung in the balance. Five, ten minutes passed, and not until then did he strain at the thongs that bound his wrists. Was that the breaking of one of the *babiche* cords? He strained harder. The thongs were loosening; his

wrists were freer; with a cry that sent the mouse scurrying to the floor he doubled himself half erect, and fought like a madman. Five minutes later and he was free.

He staggered to his feet, and looked at his wrists. They were torn and bleeding. His second thought was of Corporal Carr—and a weapon. The man hunter had taken the precaution to empty the chambers of Falkner's revolver and rifle and throw his cartridges out in the snow. But his skinning-knife was still in its sheath and belt, and he buckled it about his waist. He had no thought of killing Carr, though he hated the man almost to the point of murder. But his lips set in a grim smile as he thought of what he would do.

He knew that when Carr returned he would not enter at once into the cabin. He was the sort of man who would never take an unnecessary chance. He would go first to the little window—and look in. Falkner turned the lamp-wick lower, and placed the lamp on the table directly between the window and the bunk. Then he rolled his blankets into something like a human form, and went to the window to see the effect. The bunk was in deep shadow. From the window Corporal Carr could not see beyond the lamp. Then Falkner waited, out of range of the window, and close to the door.

It was not long before he heard something above the wailing of the storm. It was the whine of a dog, and he knew that a moment later the Corporal's ghostly face was peering in at the window. Then there came the sudden, swift opening of the door, and Carr sprang in like a cat, his hand on the butt of his revolver, still obeying that first governing law of his merciless life—caution. Falkner was so near that he could reach out and touch Carr, and in an instant he was at his enemy's throat. Not a cry fell from Carr's lips. There was death in the terrible grip of Falkner's hands, and like one whose neck had been broken Carr sank to the floor. Falkner's grip tightened, and he did not loosen it until Carr was black in the face and his jaw fell open. Then Falkner bound him hand and foot with the *babiche* thongs, and dragged him to the bunk.



He examined the pocket carefully. . . .
"I wouldn't want to lose you," he chuckled.

Through the open door one of the sledge-dogs had thrust his head and shoulders. It was a Barracks team, accustomed to wartuth and shelter, and Falkner had no difficulty in getting the leader and his three mates inside. To make friends with them he fed them chunks of raw caribou meat, and when Carr opened his eyes he was busy packing. He laughed joyously when he saw that the man-hunter had regained consciousness, and was staring at him with evident malice.

"Hello, Carr," he greeted affably. "Feeling better? Tables sort of turned, aint they?"

Carr made no answer. His white lips were set like thin bands of steel.

"I'm getting ready to leave you," Falkner explained, as he rolled up a blanket and shoved it into his rubber pack-pouch. "And you're going to stay here—until spring. Do you get onto that? You've got to stay. I'm going to leave you marooned, so to speak. You couldn't travel a hundred yards out there without snowshoes, and I'm goin' to take your snowshoes. And I'm goin' to take your guns, and burn your pack, your coat, mittens, cap an' moccasins. Catch on? I'm not goin' to kill you, and I'm goin' to leave you enough grub to last until spring, but you wout dare risk yourself very far out in the cold and snow. If you do, you'll freeze off your tootsies,

and make your lungs sick. Don't you feel sort of pleasant—you—devil!"

Six hours later Falkner stood outside the cabin. The dogs were in their traces, and the sledge was packed. The storm had blown itself out, and a warmer temperature had followed in the path of the blizzard. He wore his coat now, and gently he felt of the bulging pocket, and laughed joyously as he faced the South.

"It's goin' to be a long hike, you little cuss," he said softly. "It's goin' to be a darned long hike. But we'll make it. Yes-sir, we'll make it. And wout they be s'prised when we fall in on 'em, six months ahead of time?"

He examined the pocket carefully, making sure that he had buttoned down the flap.

"I wouldn't want to lose you," he chuckled. "Next to her, an' the kid, I wouldn't want to lose you!"

Then, slowly, a strange smile passed over his face, and he gazed questioningly for a moment at the pocket which he held in his hand.

"You nervy little cuss!" he grinned. "I wonder if you're a girl mouse, an' if we're goin' to have a fam'ly on the way home! An'—an'—what the dickens do you feed baby mice?"

He lowered the pocket, and with a sharp command to the waiting dogs turned his face into the South.

