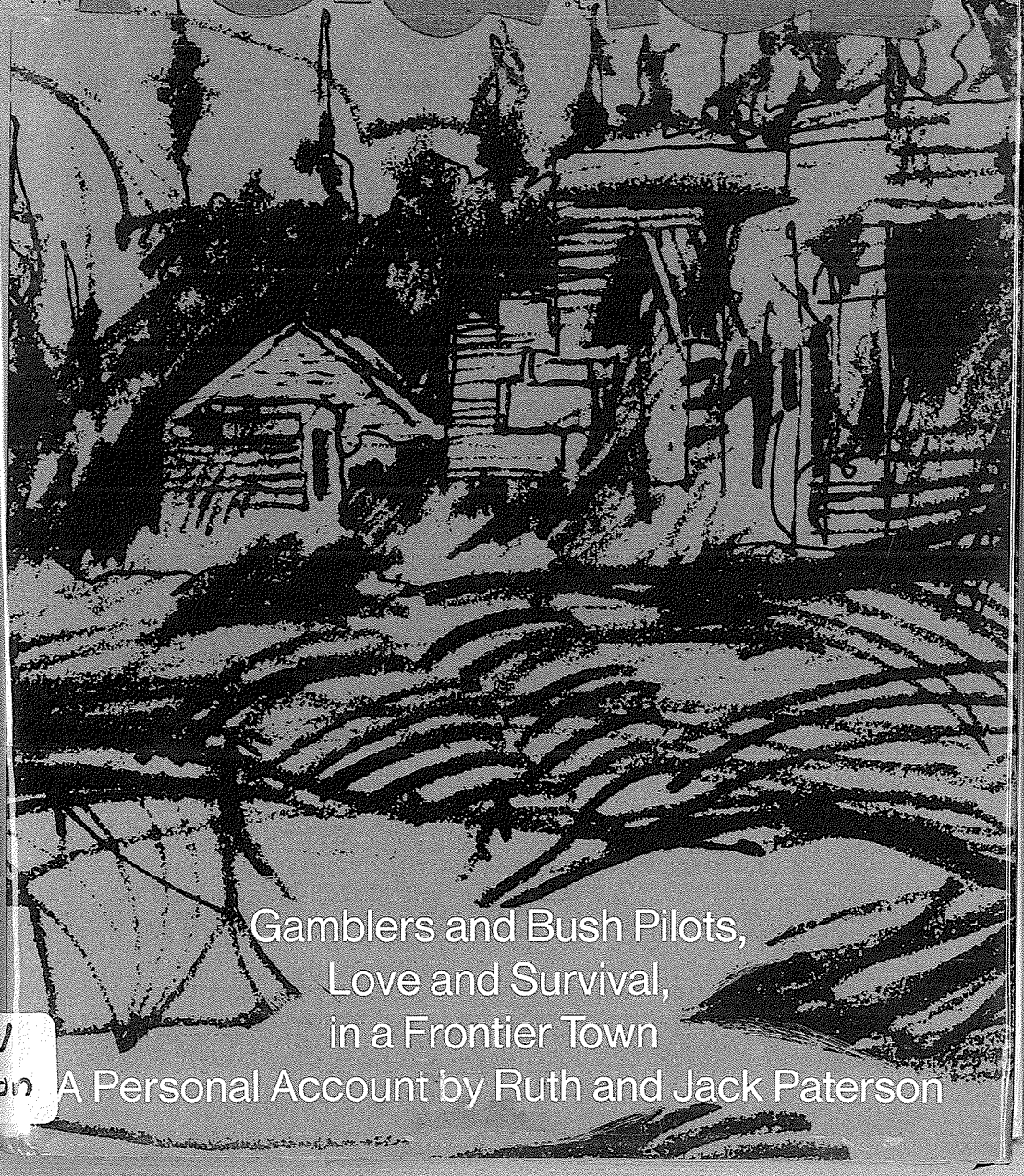
GAMBERY PORTAGE



Gamblers and Bush Pilots,
Love and Survival,
in a Frontier Town

A Personal Account by Ruth and Jack Paterson

5.95
Cranberry Portage
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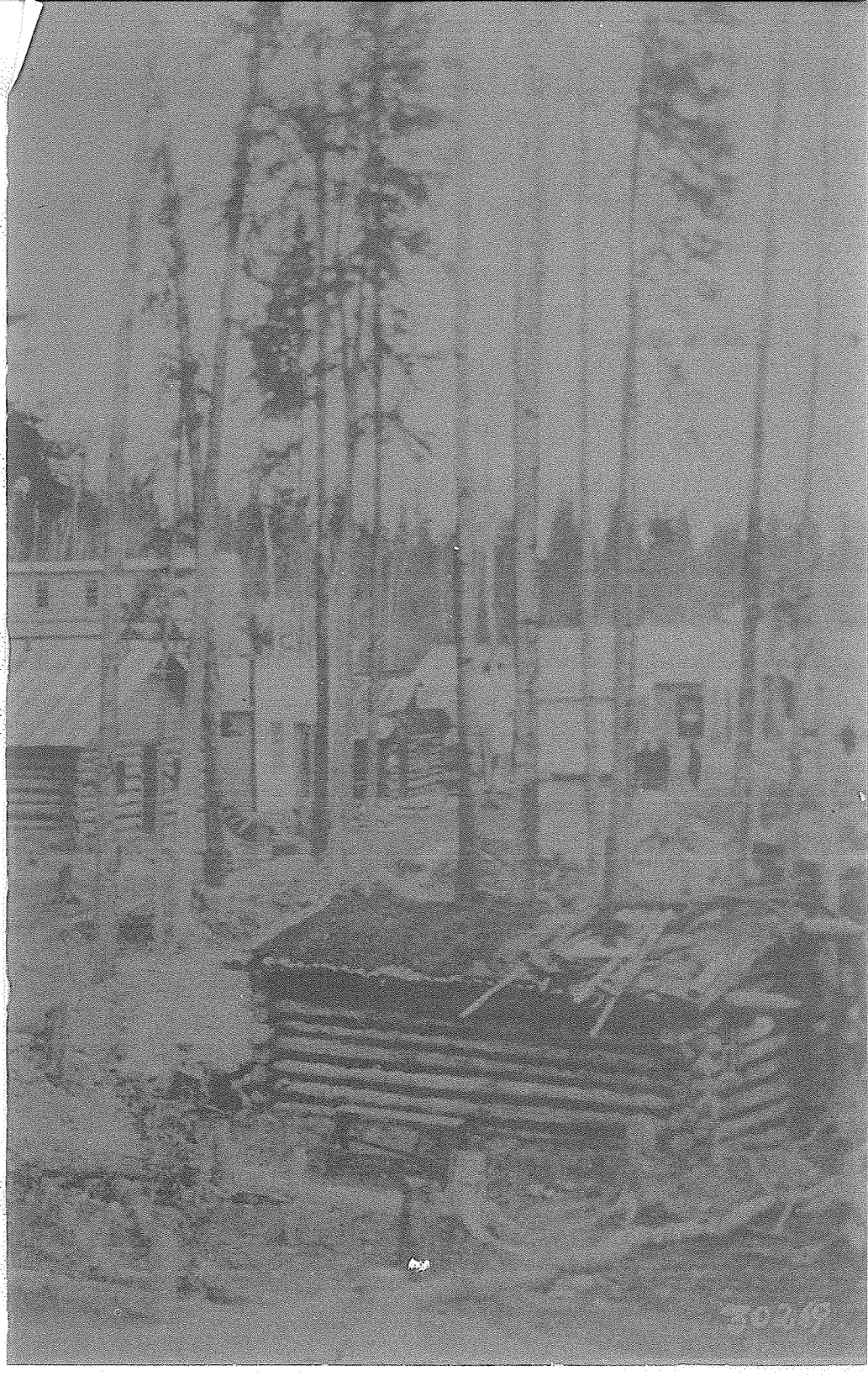
CRANBERRY PORTAGE

Ruth and Jack Paterson

A pretty blonde wife, a four-year-old daughter, dubious health, and a determination to earn his own living as a writer – these were Jack Paterson's main assets (and liabilities) when he and his family arrived in the wild frontier town of Cranberry Portage in the summer of 1928. He had just been released from a T.B. sanatorium, and he and his wife, Ruth, had decided that a career as a writer was just what the doctor would order for a man who had to watch his health. And what better locale for an aspiring writer than the raw and booming North, where history, and fortunes, were in the making every day of the week? In Cranberry Portage, the Patersons had certainly picked the right place for action. Its one ragged street boasted twenty gambling and bootlegging joints. Lake traffic and construction trains poured new supplies and new citizens daily into the town, from which the new railroad was being extended to Flin Flon – itself no more than a scattering of tents and log cabins. Among their fellow settlers were traders and rail-construction men, gamblers and bootleggers, bush pilots and gold-mad prospectors.

Here is the extraordinary story of a young couple determined to build a new life for themselves in a huge, implacable land where miracles and mayhem, tragedy, humour, and plain old-fashioned courage were an everyday commonplace.



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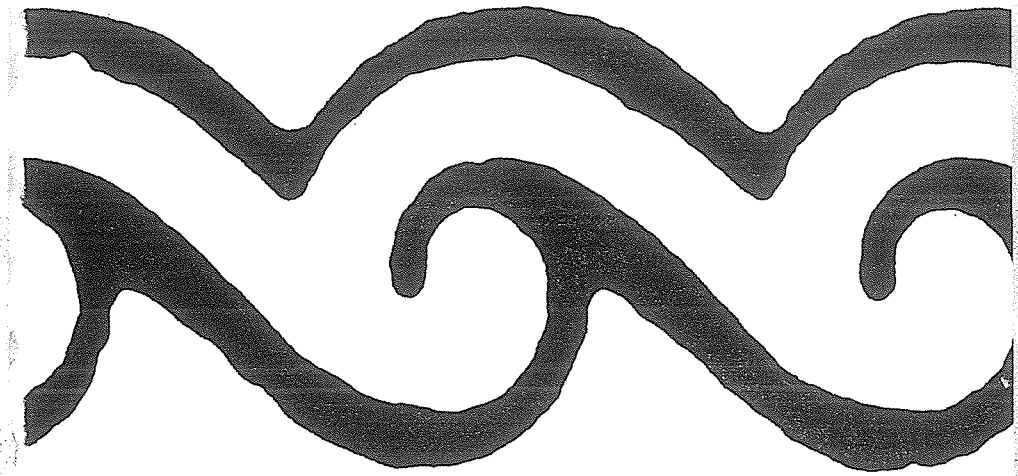

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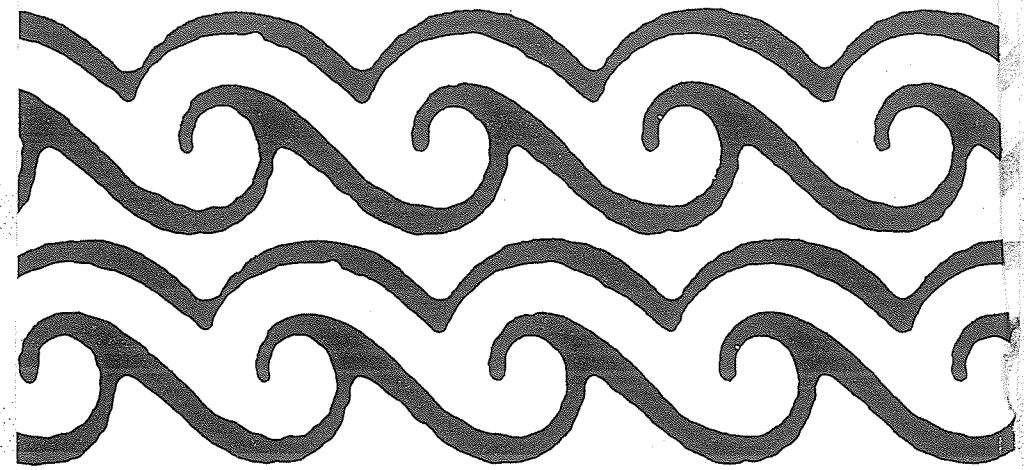

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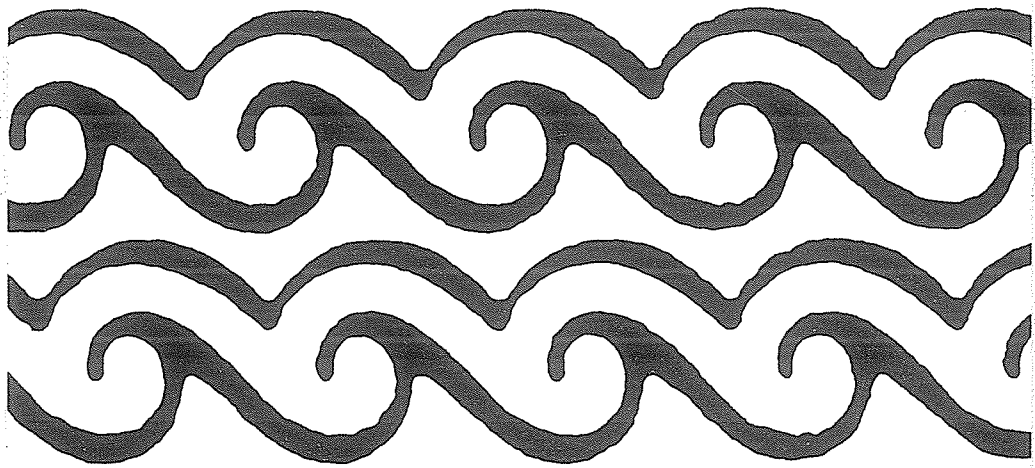

Ruth and Jack Paterson

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To all woodsmoke-and-bacon people

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Prologue

The first night we spent in our gleaming tents on the edge of boom town Cranberry Portage, in Canada's raw North, we had late visitors, well-looped on bootleg alky. To them, a young, blonde, beautiful female locating in that womanless area meant only one thing. Their spokesman was an itinerant Toronto mining engineer, in sober daylight possibly not a bad sort.

It's also possible that my handling of the situation was overbold for an ex-T.B. patient, only one week free of a sanatorium where, almost three years earlier, doctors had given me only six months to live. But the rough bush clothes I wore, and my height, five-eleven, bolstered the bluff. The three men apologized and left.

The second time it happened it was broad northern daylight. I was gone only minutes, putting mail on a bush-plane headed for The Pas, a frontier town on the Saskatchewan River, fifty-five miles to the south. Rounding a clump of birch by our tents, I found a rifle jabbed at my heart. It was Ruth–doing a grim, steady job of it.

She dropped the rifle and started sobbing in my arms. "You! Oh, I thought he was coming back!"

A caller had refused to believe that she was only *living* in a tent, not making a living in one. Leering, confident, he had gone on arguing until Ruth grabbed the loaded repeater from inside the sleeping-tent and convinced him she would use it. When she calmed, I picked up the rifle. She *had* meant it; the safety catch was off.

That was in the rousing, roistering summer of 1928, when men of a hundred nationalities were pitchforked into Canada's sub-Arctic to build eighty-seven miles of railroad to a wilderness tent camp, today the modern mining and tourist city of Flin Flon.

In 'twenty-eight, by risky choice, Ruth and I had become part of that northern madness. Now, forty crowded years later, we were back.

Together under summer stars, where once our pioneer tents had

stood, on ground which had recently been dedicated as a government park, we sorted out memories.

Well up from the lakeshore a diesel train rattled through and whooped a greeting: the labouring engines we had known were gone, and their descendants now moved in sweeping curves about the daily business of serving Flin Flon, a city still hundreds of miles removed from cities like Winnipeg, "Outside."

No white tent camps of sub-contractors lined the railroad now; no night crews battled muskeg sink-holes through the long northern twilight. Wallowing barges and bridge-timber rafts were missing from the lakefront. There were no people there either; the crowds of men–and a few women–who had toiled and suffered in the first stages of the massive northern mineral development–all were gone.

The present town was well up a sandy slope from Lake Athapapuskow. For centuries a link in fur-trade routes, modern Cranberry Portage knew a different breed of traveller. Rail-lines branched out to serve mines and settlements. A highway, leading hundreds of miles north from the U.S. border to Flin Flon, crossed between the two lakes at Cranberry.

Cranberry's posh lodges and camps for sports fishermen were known throughout America; lakesides were crowded with rows of mobile homes with licence-tags from points as distant as Florida, Texas, and California. Trailers arrived before spring ice left Athapapuskow, or First, Second, and Third Cranberry lakes, and stayed till autumn's first quick freeze sealed over the sport-fishing waters. These eager visitors knew: a sixty-three-pound trout, what was then a world-record fish, had been taken from Lake Athapapuskow –and by a woman, at that.

To us, a formal government park, located in what we remembered as a crude stumpland, seemed incredible. Well back from the site where our raw settlement had once suffered its growing pains were family trailers, truck-campers and tents, utility buildings, a beach playground, a baseball field, acres of parking space for northern sports days–and a drive-in food bar.

The lake itself no one had managed, or mismanaged, to change. There was still the clop, clop of waves on a sandy beach, and, farther along, on a wooded rocky shore. Only small trees remained where great spruce trees once had towered. The same old moon of our campfire and banjo days shone across upholstered islands floating in the bay. The same old loon was out there, still laughing at the foolish ways of all humans.

"No howling dogs," Ruth said.

"No clanging steel or thumping timbers," I added. "No snarling outboard motors, or buildings packed tight with about twenty bootleg joints on one ragged street."

Ghosts. For us, there in the misty moonlight, the deserted lakeshore swarmed with them. Ghost people, ghost buildings, ghost activities, lawful and otherwise. Only in phantom form could we find *our* Cranberry Portage–centre of trading, prospecting, railroad-building, gambling, bootlegging, and quiet, almost respectable, whoring. An early outpost for what would become Canada's great bush-flying industry. From the quiet bay below us, exploring parties had laboured off in clattery one-engine flying crates, to probe the then unknown Barren Lands far into the Arctic. A crossroads where eastern money and brains teamed up with northern knowledge and daring. An unhealed scar in a birch-filled parkland. An ice-box in winter, a searing hell of flame and smoke in summer.

Like many others, we had originally come North to gamble on a new way of life. We had welcomed the frenzied activity, the chance to study this wild collection of cursing, sweating men, many of them New Canadians, droves of what, in those rude and thoughtless days, we called "hunkies." As new and green as the settlement itself when we arrived at the developing railroad's halfway point, we had groped toward a future based only on our own uncertain hopes and a mad dream.

Cranberry Portage had remade our lives, rebuilt those hopes, nurtured that dream. We had had to struggle in that town; now, looking back over the years from the safety and contentment of the jet age, we knew that we owed it much.

There, in the moonlight, on the shore of Lake Athapapuskow, Ruth found my hand. I knew what she was thinking, what she was seeing. She was thinking of a young husband, wary and uncertain after three years in bed, and of the numbing problems of keeping him alive until he could master a strange new way of making a living. She was seeing a flanged-wheel rail truck piled with men, packsacks, mailbags–and us. She was seeing the two of us, with a trusting, four-year-old daughter at heel, picking our way past Indian tents, log shacks, fresh-cut tree stumps, and staring men and dogs, heading toward a great box of raw boards with its homemade cotton banner: "Lakeview Hotel."

Chapter 1

Before we reached the Lakeview Hotel that heat-crackling June day in 1928, we met a huge old man who had come with us on the rail trolley from The Pas. He had been talking earnestly with a young missionary, wearing a full-speed-astern white collar under an outing shirt. Now, free of his companion, the old man stood gazing about him at the shambles of the settlement. A black felt hat was tipped over his eyes; chewing-tobacco stains spread from a grizzly moustache down his neck and under his blue shirt collar.

"Time God's church begun paying decent wages," he grumped, recognizing us. "I got a stoppinghouse here. Was bringing that preacher feller home with me like any good Christian would, when of a sudden I remember my rooms is all full up." It was apparent that only in the last few minutes had he learned that young missionaries depended mostly on the Lord to provide. He checked over his shoulder to make sure God's messenger had gone, and gave his neck muscles a jerk. "Anyhow he's here to save Company souls; they damn-well ought to feed'm. I'll see Harry McLean."

"He the construction boss?" I asked.

Realizing I was a newcomer, the old man filled me in. Harry McLean, he explained, *was* the Company, a physical and mental giant, with big jobs going in New York, Mexico, and Hawaii.

"I'm eighty-one year old," he went on. "Been on plenty jobs with horse-teams for hauling. This tops 'em all."

Looking around the town, we could see what he meant. Everywhere, men were working at full speed. Buildings were going up, made of logs, lumber, or stout canvas. Construction company bunkhouses, a cookhouse, office shacks, and docks, were crammed together along the shoreline. Some traders had shacks, some tents. Every second one was tagged EATS or HOME MEALS; many, we would learn later, were mere fronts for alky peddlers.

Tobacco Jowls' eyes swung back to me. His neck gave another

inquisitive twitch. "What's your business?" he asked.

Here it came, the question I'd been dreading. I stalled.

"My husband's a writer," Ruth said.

Tobacco Jowls harrumphed. "Company men claim us squatters –us businessmen–has no need here, that we're crowding Company holdings into the lake. We ain't; the bootleggers are. A writing feller could let city people Outside know the truth of it before trouble starts."

There were two reasons, he went on to explain, why people were jamming so close to the lakeshore. One was to grab the business provided by the growing hordes of trappers, freighters, fishermen, prospectors, and, in the near future, the pilots of pontoon planes. The other reason was the danger of fire farther back in the woods, where building logs had been cut, and their branches left to dry. "Cranberry settlement'll burn some day," he told us ominously. His neck muscles did tricks again. "You folks got somewheres to stay? Might get you in at my place." Remembering the young parson, he covered up. "I been three days in The Pas on business. Someone coulda' pulled out."

I thanked him. "We'll try the hotel. Our tents and outfit should be here tomorrow."

He didn't push it. Instead he waved a great arm toward endless piles of construction timber and rail steel. "Main supply base here. Stuff goes north by water. New railroad edges Athapapuskow and Schist lakes clear to Flin Flon camp. Mobs of men. Payroll money. Cranberry's the goingest town in Canada. I'm eighty-five year old, and ain't seen the like nowhere."

"How old?" I asked. (Minutes before he had been eighty-one!)

He blinked–neck muscles jerked. "Pretty damn old," he compromised.

We leaped for the safety of the Lakeview Hotel steps, as a pair of plunging horses snaked a load of building logs past us at a half-run, convoyed by a flotilla of plume-tailed dogs. The driver, a galloping scarecrow, halted the menagerie. His lean frame flapped within tattered overalls. He had a long solemn face with a tangle of brown beard, a hooked nose, and a pair of blue eyes as gentle as a baby's.

He addressed the closest chestnut in a soft brogue: 'Ye ignerant article, Shorty, scarin' people. Bow yer knee to the fine lady. Do as I say, now!" Shorty dipped one knee, tossed his head and snorted.

"Fine team," I said, returning the compliment.

He jerked his head. "Figger to live in yon weasel-run of a hotel? A fearsome dump. The big baboon that runs it knows nothin' of hotels. A logger, he was. Followin' that, a rassler. He's my first cousin."

Blue eyes regarded Ruth, then turned on me. "This human scummery's no place for a lady," he reproved. "But if ye've haulin' to do, just ask for Paddy."

Daughter Bud's own blue eyes had been wide. She spoke up: "How many dogs have you?"

He looked about him. "There's only eleven today. The other nineteen was invited on a picnic with the Indian dogs across the portage, where Willie Longclaws shot a moose. You've a dog?"

"Not yet," Bud made apology. "We just got here."

"On the Portage they come mostly in dozens," Paddy warned. With a quick snorting and creaking of harness the convoy moved off.

The proprietor of the Lakeview Hotel was a surprising figure, 300 pounds of shaggy man in a rough shirt and a logger's chopped-off pants. He shot a grim look at Ruth and Bud, then squeezed in behind a shaky board counter.

"The bridal suite's loaded. One room left in the bull-pen." He jabbed a thumb upward, gazing out the bare window and rooting with a pine sliver at his strong white teeth.

I'd been in bull-pens. They were tough, and Ruth was young and attractive. Among the droves of workers, gamblers, and bootleggers in a new settlement, there were bound to be bad actors. A man must enforce respect for his mate. Well, I might *look* man-size but I was barely able to hoist my own packsack. And already the groups of men around the lobby were eyeing us–eyeing Ruth.

I hesitated, my belly doing a slow turn. I was remembering that day I found out I had tuberculosis–a load of it, both lungs. Result of the war, the doctors told me. That figured. I'd gone to war at age sixteen, seeking adventure. Three years later, after a run-in with poison gas, I'd been invalided out of the army.

With only one year of high school, and a great yen for remaining free, I tried outside work at first. A series of jobs, which all proved too tough for my uncertain health, dwindled to selling shoes, part-time, in a Prairie city. Then, one Saturday, a blonde college kid got her first real fit in a pair of shoes. From that day onward, shoe-selling, and life, blossomed. Five years later we were living on Vancouver Island, with our own shoestore, a car, golf member-

ships, and a baby daughter. That was when the boom fell, and tuberculosis took over.

Once we'd heard the news, Ruth and I crawled back to Manitoba, where we hoped the dry air would help. Doing everything the doctors told me I should do, I fought for life. And had won–so far. Now, here we were in remote Cranberry Portage, the blonde college kid and I, facing this great moose of a hotel-keeper, and trying to make the first big decision in our new life.

Already our madness in coming here was plain. We had shipped our tents and camp oufit north from Winnipeg, to be trans-shipped from The Pas by construction railway. They might not arrive for days. Meanwhile we had to dig in somewhere.

Towhead Bud clutched Ruth's outing breeks with one hand and fought off mosquitoes with the other. She was so tired she could hardly stand. Up at four that morning, we had left The Pas at six. Looking down at Bud, Ruth made the decision for both of us.

"This waif should be in bed. The bull-pen it is."

I signed the school-scribbler register. The proprietor's finger jabbed. "Occupation," he said curtly.

Again I stalled. The old man we'd been talking to a few minutes back hadn't balked when Ruth told him I was a writer. Putting it on paper was different; the claim was mostly a bluff. But in a hamlet like Cranberry Portage, packed with every human type–some legitimate, some on the run, some just plain bums–your declared occupation could be important.

Now I stood, staring down at the register, reminding myself that I had two good reasons for my present choice of profession. The first–plain necessity. The second–the death of an old army friend.

It had been in the sanatorium. An ex-soldier was admitted one morning and died the same night. "He was only a bum, anyway," the bed-patient next to me said. Casually, he mentioned the dead man's name, and I froze. We'd fought together in France. During front-line raids and scouting forays he had been a sure and fearless leader.

Later that night, lying on the screened-in balcony, trying to sleep, my anger grew as I thought about public ignorance regarding those war vets who, like myself, had a hidden disability. I found myself out of bed, scribbling down his story in a sanatorium bathroom.

It took two more after-midnight sessions to finish it. Then Ruth pecked it out on a borrowed typewriter, it went to *Maclean's*, and we got our first rejection slip. I threw the manuscript in a drawer,

intending to forget it. But Ruth wouldn't let me. She kept nagging me to send it out again. Finally, a veteran's magazine, *The Legionary*, bought the story and sent a cheque for fifteen dollars.

From that point on, we were hooked. Flat on my back in the sanatorium, I studied writing. Ruth bought a machine and learned to type. Writers were people who could stop and rest whenever they needed to, weren't they? So we'd be writers. Then we heard about a wilderness railroad, being built to crack open Manitoba's North. In new country like that, with much going on, we might learn to be writers, we told ourselves–and the open-air life would be a healthy one. The moment I was allowed back into the world again we bought camp equipment, plus a banjo for moonlight nights, and headed north.

Before we left, I tried to build up a reliable source of income. A visit to the Winnipeg *Tribune*, offering ourselves as live reporters to cover the new boom, somehow went wrong. However, we did talk to their Church and Country editor. He was a scholarly soul, swamped with vital statistics from a hundred rural correspondents. He was something less than excited at adding yet another name to his list, but he did it.

"Put down occupation," the proprietor said impatiently, jarring me back to the present. I looked at Cranberry's largest citizen and then at Ruth. She smiled. Straddling my legs and bracing myself, I wrote the hopeful word beside my name: "Writer."

Our host led us outside, to where a set of steps, spiked to the wall of the building, creaked under his hulk as he preceded us to the top floor, which lay directly under the flat roof.

On the stair landing we encountered a young half-breed, wearing moccasins and trailing a packsack and rifle. He did not look pleased to see us.

"Your bill's eight bucks, Hiawatha." Our host had no difficulty in blocking the stairway. "Same for your mate, hiding in back of the spruce stump." Head lowered, the culprit paid up and hurried past us.

"Them fisheaters think 'cause I'm big, I'm simple," the landlord grunted. He turned his red face, flanked with curly brown hair, full upon us, like a great glowing moon. "Well, I ain't." (We found out later his nickname actually was Moon Glow.) Now he showed us into our tiny room and told me, "You got booze, ditch it. Not allowed on construction. Women neither. Never been a hoor in my place. I'll warn the boys there's a lady here."

We lasted in that room for ten stifling minutes. Then the northern sun, cooking the rubberized roofing, which lay only a few feet above our heads, drove us from our boxstall quarters and down to the lakeshore.

Our first glimpse of Lake Athapapuskow that day had been from the rail trolley. After eight hours of jungle-thick spruce, steaming muskeg, and hard-biting mosquitoes and blackflies, we had swung upward into a cool, moss-carpeted cathedral of towering spruce and birch, with blue waters flashing beyond. Close up, it looked a bit different. Already the immediate shore had become a squalid shambles, with a conspicuous sanitary problem. But in spite of the slummy atmosphere, the stench, and the surrounding clamour–we were happy. Here was the North–our chance for a new life–our chance for real freedom.

But there was still one big problem bothering both of us–and it was a problem we weren't allowed to forget for a moment. Men. As we picked our way through the great piles of materiél along the spur line we were the centre of attention. Or, I should say, *Ruth* was the centre of attention. Every man in the strings of workers unloading rail-cars or loading barges stopped to stare at her.

Certainly, her 112 pounds, tailored breeks and a bright sweater, with her long hair, bright and smooth as the sunshine, rated a look in any language. And she *did* look very young to be married, or to have a child.

"In this country, a real blonde with a turned-up snoot like yours can't miss," I kidded. "That peavy juggler almost asked, 'You come Sveden?' "

"Yes." Ruth stopped. "Listen, Jack, there's something we have to decide. Right now. You aren't going to like it."

We sat on a stack of bridge timbers where the lake breeze moving in from the green islands was cool. Bud was off watching a Cree urchin playing in the water with two white husky pups.

"It's about all these men, isn't it?" I said. "And me being an invisible cripple. I know what you're going to say. No matter what happens, I'm to dodge trouble."

"You're right. You *look* as fit as any man. That's the danger. For three years you obeyed the doctors, and you got well. Most of the boys didn't. One slip now could ruin everything. You know what a lung hemorrhage would mean–there's not even a doctor here."

"So I'm to stand back like a . . . a cripple and take what anyone wants to hand me–or hand you!"

Tears showed. "Please. Promise me. We've come through too much to throw it away." She nodded along the shore. "Don't forget poor old Bud. For three years now she hasn't had a dad."

"I know. I know." I felt sick.

A locomotive came crawling along the rough spur track. The fireman leaned far out, shaded his eyes with an exaggerated hand flick, and ogled Ruth. We both laughed and saluted.

"If they're all like that bird it'll be easy," I said. "But of course they won't be. Just the same you're right. I promise. Whatever jam we get into, I swear to keep my hands open and my mouth closed. Dammit!"

Chapter 2

Cranberry Portage had had two startling arrivals that day. Both had been mentioned to us earlier by Tobacco Jowls. The first, a red cow great with calf, had been wrestled in over a hundred miles of lake, river, and portage by hoof and freighter canoe; the second was a gold and blue cabin airplane.

The red cow, no doubt resting after her trip, we never did see. But at a new dock we found a crowd of solemn men and head-tilted dogs gazing in silence at a business-like Fokker. Sent north from Winnipeg to open a new base for Western Canada Airways, the aircraft was accompanied by a crew of three–a chunky blond pilot named Roy Brown, a Cockney air-engineer, and a belligerent Irish base agent.

Crowd faces were grim, and we knew why. Flying, new to the North, had already made news in recent months, mostly bad. The sister of this machine had crashed in The Pas, killing its pilot. Then a popular trapper-prospector, Carl Sherritt, who had hit the big money through sale of a copper discovery (later to become the Sherritt-Gordon Mine), got his pilot's licence in Florida, purchased his own light machine, and flew it to The Pas. Townspeople were out *en masse* to cheer the daring prospector-pilot as he took off with a local lad as passenger. Somehow, Sherritt lost control and was thrown from the ship. Hundreds of northerners saw his body strike the ground, then watched the tiny plane, flying on its back, crash with its second victim a quarter of a mile away.

Many of that crowd on the dock at Cranberry had seen one or the other of the two crashes, and their feelings about flying showed. "Sure they'll save you time," one old boy told his partner. "With tree roots growin' in your whiskers."

Ruth had been looking over the Fokker. She turned. "I've never been up–till now. Come on!"

"Aren't you afraid?" I asked. I wasn't too sold on water-flying.

She nodded and swallowed. "Sure. Only it'll be something to write about. Can't you see it? 'First flight at new base'." This time I was the one to swallow.

Bud was the only one we didn't need to worry about. She was already on her way into the plane.

"Dollar a minute," the agent said. I gave him fifteen bucks.

The gold and blue ship nosed its silver floats into the lake swell, rolling like a big canoe. Across the bay, a red sun sagged behind a ridge toothed with jack-pine. The engine started to roar. The dock, with its collection of men, dogs, boxes, bales, and gas drums, began to slowly recede. The pilot dropped a trap door, connecting the cabin with his open cockpit, and grinned down at us.

"All set? Here we go!" He gunned the motor into the breeze and started pumping the control stick, nosing her onto the float step. We moved faster, the pumping ceased, and soon we were skimming the tops of the waves.

Lake waters fell away, waves flattening, receding. We banked toward shore. The dock crowd stood with shaded eyes, faces turning with us as we passed overhead. Ruth clutched my arm and tried to smile; Bud's blue eyes were wide.

Out over the bay, islands floated beneath us, green-upholstered rock heaps, miniature waves lapping at their edges. We looked back. A pencil line of grey curved up from the south–the railroad we had travelled. Matchbox cars moved along it, a cocky little locomotive puffing at their head. On the lakeshore to the north, spasmodic rock cuts and fills outlined the course of the future railroad. Then the ship levelled off, as did our stomachs, and Ruth relaxed with a sigh.

The dock was crowded when we landed. There were many head-shakes, but some of the men edged up to ask about flying sensations, then checked with the agent on rates. Safe on shore, Bud announced, "And we didn't get squoozed." The mystery of this statement was solved days later, when she pointed out the size of a plane in the sky compared with its size at moorage. Once she had been convinced that aircraft did not shrink to insect size when aloft, her one fear of flying was gone.

We ate with the three-man crew at a café run by Wing Wong, described by Moon Glow as "the best damn Chink north of the border." Wing was slim, quiet, and wore glasses; his restaurant was the busiest in town, filled with oil-cloth-covered tables, set with new and shiny cutlery.

Starting on moose steak listed as veal, our pilot, Roy Brown, said,

"You were in the war. So were all of us. Mick with the Irish, Lou with the Limeys; I did a bit of flying. What's your line now?"

I swallowed a hunk of moosemeat whole. "Writer."

"Huh? Who you write for?"

I had him there. "So far, about the same people you fly for. Ourselves. We're new at it. Damn new."

He dusted mosquitoes from his blond head and grinned. "Literary man myself. Peddled books on a bicycle before I got back into flying a month ago. You think you're new? How about us? Trying to get those holdouts on the dock tonight to trust us won't be easy." He turned to Ruth. "A girl taking that flip just now helped. Hope we can square it later."

We returned with them to the lake. A fresh breeze, free of the stench of cooking, garbage, and worse, was blowing in from the water. Cockney Lou went to work checking the Fokker.

"Mick and I have to make out reports for Winnipeg on all today's flying jobs," Brownie told us, and laughed. "See you in ten minutes."

Ruth spread a folded blanket on the dock. Awake since four A.M., Bud was asleep in seconds, overalls and jacket tied with string at ankles and wrists as a defence against swarms of mosquitoes.

Presently, she squirmed, and muttered in her sleep. "Dreaming about those bears," Ruth said, soothing her.

The bears had provided an unexpected bit of excitement during our railway journey. Passing a lone camp beside the rail right-of-way, we had seen a terrified cook standing by while a she-bear and her two cubs wrecked his tent cookery. The truck trolley rattled to a halt. Passengers piled off, grabbed stones from the grade and loosed a bombardment that brought squeals from the cubs. Hurriedly, their old lady shooed them back into the bush. Bud had been indignant. "Men shouldn't throw stones at baby bears!" she told Ruth.

When the Airways boys had finished their paperwork they came and sat with us. Brownie enlarged on their future plans. He explained that mineral wealth in the North had not even been scratched. And in one day an aircraft could explore territory which would take prospectors a full season to cover. Flying was going to save time, grief, and money–especially time. "In ten years, even the Arctic will be served by air," Brownie ended. "And that sunset glow across the bay hasn't affected my head either."

"Fly plenty," I said. "Give us something to write about."

"Anything big you'll get first crack at," he promised. "I'm glad

you're here. My wife and baby daughter are coming from Winnipeg. Di's English. London. We'll all have fun in this country once we get going."

The stocky Irish agent nodded, fogging his pipe into clouds of mosquitoes. "We'll have five craft working out of here by fall, or I'm a pin-toed bog-trotter!"

Brownie's boast would come true; so would Mick's; and bush-flying would give us plenty to write about. But there was little sign of it that night. The lone Fokker squatted in the fading light, dipping with the rhythm of the waves, and all of us sat there staring at it, waiting for the morning and what it might bring.

For Brownie and the Fokker, it brought action. At three o'clock we were wakened by the roar of the plane's engine. There were shouts, the sound of shots, and by breakfast-time the news was all round the settlement: a bootlegger's wife, caught with another man, had needed a quick route of escape. The safety (and rapidity) of air travel had received a prompt endorsement at Cranberry Portage!

The other arrival of the day before, the red cow that had captured Tobacco Jowls' fancy, fared less well. The owner of the cow learned that, if she was to prove a paying proposition in an area where feed cost $100 a ton, she would have to produce fifty gallons of milk daily! But some good came of it: Wing Wong's café established a record by serving 300 pounds of choicest sirloin steak from only one animal, and we had our first item for the Church and Country editor back in Winnipeg.

We were paid only a few cents for the small article–but that didn't matter. It appeared in print, and our reason for being here was established for both the settlement people and ourselves. Especially ourselves.

Chapter 3

On his return flight from The Pas that day, Pilot Brownie brought with him a new citizen who later was to give me a unique and startling experience. He was the talkative half of a honeymoon couple. The bride, young and comely, formerly of The Pas, owned a rough-lumber hotel in Cranberry Portage. The groom's background was hazy. Swarthy, cigar-puffing, he had a Southern drawl that earned him the tag of "Dixie." But more about Dixie later.

The following week, our camp outfit, including lumber for tent frames and floors, arrived by construction freight. When the tents were half up, I began to wonder if we were wise to locate so far back in the woods. It was a tough choice. The town was shoving and spreading itself everywhere. Everyone was jockeying for a lakeshore spot to corral lake business. The whole area was unorganized territory; no one could buy or lay legal claim to any piece of ground. A home-owner might waken from a binge to find his front door blocked by the blank wall of another building. His only redress was tongue, fists, or, in rare cases, firearms.

Day and night, hammers rattled on raw lumber. Everywhere underfoot were dogs, freed of sled work for the summer, haunting cafés and canoe docks, interbreeding, doing vigorous battle. And always the droves of construction workers came and went, loading and unloading with the thumping of timber and the clang of railroad steel.

It was plain that locating too near the lake would mean living in bedlam. On the other hand, situating ourselves too far back in the woods, as Tobacco Jowls had warned, meant added fire hazard. Now, looking around our "property" I decided, in spite of the fire risk, that I was glad we had chosen the peace and quiet. It was a beautiful spot, well up a moss-floored slope in a stand of white birches. We had chosen it carefully, wanting somewhere suitable as a cabin site, if we decided to build later on.

The sleeping-tent had spring cots and Hudson's Bay blankets under mosquito bars; the cook-tent was equipped with a small-ovened tin campstove with two speeds–redhot and out. We had dry wood, water from the lake, flour, sides of bacon, and cases of canned grub. We were settled.

The bearded Paddy built frames and screen doors for our two tents while answering Bud's flow of questions. Shorty and Spike and all the dogs, he informed her, were in the tender care of his partner, Society Red, "an ignerant article, but kind to animals." He muttered a curse when told of Ruth's having to use the rifle to discourage a visitor. I suggested that we might move closer to the lake.

"I'd not do it," Paddy said. "Ye've a beauty spot away from the scummery. What's needed is a sign. I'll see to it." He spat and flapped off down the path.

"My guess is 'Smallpox'," I told Ruth.

"How about 'Undertaker'? That always scares people."

"Not any more," I said. We both laughed; the name of the undertakers next to the sanatorium I had been in was "Box Brothers."

The next afternoon we went to the plane dock to meet Brownie's English wife and infant daughter. Di Brown was slender, with a proud carriage and flashing eyes. On first acquaintance, people might call her "snooty English," and some of them did, but she was to become a close friend. We arrived back to find a misspelled sign nailed to a tree before our tents.

NORTHERN TEMPRANCE SOCIETY. DONATIONS NEEDED

Paddy knew his roustabouts! We had only one further visitor, a young missionary bearing an invitation to attend Cranberry's first church service. His face lit up when he saw the sign. Ruth found an excuse and escaped. While I tried to think of something to head off the misplaced praise I saw rising within him, Bud fixed everything.

"Drunk men kept coming to see Mum and making Dad swear," she announced. "So Paddy put up a sign."

By Sunday, the young parson had canvassed the settlement, inviting all creeds. Cranberry's first divine service was held at the second lumber pile beside the spur track near the telephone caboose. Sunday, of course, was just another work-day, and the street was busy as usual with silent prospectors, construction men off-shift, and natives from Cree town.

Nevertheless, as the congregation gathered, our "church" began to take shape. Settlement women, white and dark, sat in rows along

improvised plank benches. Brownie was flying, but Brownie's wife Di, daughter Nola, Airways Agent Mick, Ruth, Bud, and I were seated together. There was a scattering of men, with or without their women.

Also present, perched on a plank which sagged between two stumps, were the members of Cranberry's only established family, hatted and groomed, white gloves resting peacefully on prayer books. Isolated from squatter town by acres of virgin lakeshore timber and an aura of dignified mystery, they were now honouring the new settlement with their first formal appearance. For years, the Thompsons had lived in their sprawling log home. Mr. Thompson–"The Chief"–as his sons and daughters dared to call him–was an elderly land surveyor. Hoping for lasting peace in the wilderness, he had now had a railroad and a squabbling boom town plunked on his doorstep. His family's presence amongst us now was an unexpected gesture of goodwill, even though he was not with them.

Something, that summer Sabbath morning, caused a strange hush. Beyond the immediate congregation, men were standing on the road or sitting on tree stumps, allowing the embers in their pipes to die out. Even the Cranberry dogs sensed a change; the mildest howl brought quick curses and hurled sticks.

The young parson, wearing a cassock that looked suspiciously new, chose the lumber pile as a pulpit. This placed the rail spur, and the wagon road that ran parallel to it, between the minister and his congregation, but it helped the cleric's voice to carry, and allowed him to be seen by those clusters of men along the street whose position made it uncertain whether or not they were in attendance. Certainly, as he hit his oratorical stride, the minister's presence on the lumber pile was commanding. However, he failed to consider the routine ways of three prominent Cranberry residents. During a lengthy prayer, the throaty chuckle of wagon wheels abruptly brought the parson's uplifted eyes back to an earthly focus–and an unexpected sight greeted him. Unmindful of anything but his teamster's routine, Society Red was guiding Shorty, Spike, and their canine convoy directly between the pulpit and the front pews.

Spotting the unusual formation of onlookers, Red stopped the team and took a curved-stem pipe from his mouth. In his heartiest voice he inquired of a worshipping acquaintance, "Good'ay, Rat-Face! What the hell's goin' on here?"

In the hushed moment that followed, the figure on the lumber pile might have made a name for himself; a touch of wit was needed.

Instead, seeing the shocked faces of the ladies, he became upset, sputtered, and bogged down. The laughter that broke out was not with him but at him. In its first bout with Cranberry, the church was thrown for a sad loss. Society Red, who later was inclined to be a bit sullen about it, was put straight by Paddy: "Remember, Red, ye ignerant article, always to tip yer hat when drivin' through a church."

That same Sunday, in the drugstore tent, we met Cranberry's lone policeman, traditionally blue-eyed and square-jawed, an Arctic veteran of the R.C.M.P. He was in Cranberry representing the Manitoba Provincials, and already was called by his first name, George.

He had an unusual surname that aroused my curiosity. As a kid I had once moved with my family into a new prairie town. Every day after school I had been goaded into fighting with a boy who had that name. Our battles had gone on for a whole week. (His belligerence arose mostly from resentment at being called "Puddin'.") I now found myself wondering if the constable could be one of Puddin's several brothers. So I invited him to dinner at Wing Wong's café.

I mentioned the town, and he grinned with recognition. "I knew your brother," I told him. "The one we called Puddin'."

His blue eyes went dark and his chair shot back from under him. "By God," he snarled, "don't ever call me that!"

Ruth jumped a foot; Bud's eyes popped–from then on I called him George.

Since George's wife would not arrive until the following week, we helped to provide company. Following a trout dinner, my boyhood sparring partner took us on a cruise among lake islands in the police canoe. His eyes were busy as we prowled the shorelines, but I thought nothing of it.

It was Paddy who informed me, a couple of days later, that our friendship with George was harming my growing local status. Flatteringly referred to by Tobacco Jowls as "that noospaper feller," and with my reputation further boosted by the news item appearing in the *Tribune*, I had been squeezing by. I could move everywhere freely, and had been welcomed in gambling and bootleg cabins. Now Paddy made a special trip to our tents to bring us the bad tidings.

"I found ye square," he said. "It's right ye should know what them articles is sayin' about ye." He spat a stream of snoose, eyed the ground, and looked up. "Ye've been in their dives, see? Now they say yer helpin' the new bull to scout the islands for booze-caches."

I was jolted–a reputation as a stool-pigeon was not a great advertisement for a journalist. I thanked Paddy, and assured him I discussed neither booze-caches nor booze-joints with Constable George. "Tell them I resent their suspicion of a profession that has done more than any other to keep bootleggers in business," I suggested.

When he was gone, I got fired up about it, and anger was something the doctors had warned me to avoid. "I'm not taking sides!" I told Ruth. "If I tell the jointmen to go to hell, I'm a policeman. If I steer clear of the police–no stories!"

She put her arms around me, laughing. "Hey, forget it. Remember? No fights, no fuss! Something will happen to straighten it out."

Something did. The lady moose came to town.

In our prospector-trapper area of year-round hunting, a new police order had decreed closed game seasons for Cranberry Portage and vicinity. The order had stunned the oldtimers who, except for flour, tea, and tobacco, lived off the country. Unaware of civilization's invasion, the lady moose one evening started swimming the bay toward a settlement that, apparently, had been suppressing a violent craving for moosemeat.

Ruth and I were at the Airways dock with Di and Nola, watching for Brownie's return from a freight trip to Cold Lake. His landing caused the swimming moose to show a burst of blind aquatic speed that landed her smack in one of Cranberry's newest suburbs. Startled at the change there, she charged for the fringe of the woods, but too late. Sharp old eyes had watched her progress: a half-dozen prospector rifles cracked in unison.

When the sound of shots reached him, Constable George was up on the wooded ridge at the police cabin superintending erection of a new jail lean-to. Minutes later, he hit the scene, to find hunks of moose disappearing in every direction. Questioning disclosed nothing. No one had fired the shots. No one knew anything. It was hot weather; meat would not keep. George decided to dole it out legally, so that Indian town got most of it. The lady moose's hide went to a Cree matron, who had many papooses in need of moccasins.

I attempted a light bit for the Winnipeg *Tribune*. Its punch line was the statement that, following investigation, the police had pronounced the lady moose's demise a clear case of suicide. I showed the story to George, who grinned and okayed it.

It turned out to be our first piece to escape the scholarly clutches

of the Church and Country editor. It made the *Tribune's* front page–and it brought some remarkable results. At Cranberry, the jointmen regarded it as a dig at the law. They were happy, and my popularity began to rise again. At the *Tribune*, the ice had been broken, and more of our frontier bits began to get onto the front page. A further long-term result was that it was seen by Bob Davis, the famous U.S. editor. He suggested to an equally well-known New York writer who was headed north that he should call on whoever had written it–which he eventually did.

So the moose story did everyone good. With the exception of Constable George. For him, it backfired completely.

When George had been on remote Arctic outposts, he had grown used to making his own decisions. But the Manitoba Provincial Police favoured more formality than had been demanded by the R.C.M.P. They saw my story, and they wrote George a letter. Correct procedure, it informed him, would have been to give the meat to the nearest hospital. (In this case, fifty-five hot, impossible miles away, at The Pas.) He should also have made a full report on all those persons present at the scene or in the vicinity of the crime. The letter went on for two closely-typed pages. In short, Cranberry's Constable George got hell.

He brought the letter to show to me, and his jaw was set firmly. He had also re-read the press story and had this time decided that I regarded out-of-season hunting as a big joke. "Why don't you try it sometime?" George suggested. "Just once."

I regretted the backfire, and said so. I added that we weren't planning any illegal hunting. But if we ever did, I said, we wouldn't expect any favours. After which the subject was dropped–although for days George remained grim.

We had no idea, then, that one frosty morning Constable George would get his longed-for chance to square accounts.

Chapter 4

The first lodger in Constable George's new, square-timbered jail was a drunk. A very drunk. But to us he brought luck. Through him we found a staunch new female friend, and we also got the lead which was to give us our first sale of a magazine article.

George's lodger was a big, yellow-headed Swede. He was not violent when apprehended–only independent. But George called upon three fellow-citizens for assistance, and in due course the law and its allies won. Hours later, George and Mrs. George were finally able to go to Wing Wong's for a midnight dinner, leaving the Swede peacefully asleep behind bars. They were past the lake trout and blueberry pie, and were relaxing over coffee, when George suddenly noticed a familiar face busily stuffing itself with great cuts of beef-steak. It was his prisoner, who greeted him with respect.

"Don't vorry, Mister," the Swede said. "I got pie to eat, den I go back and straighten up de yail."

The jail needed straightening up. The cell bars, which reached from floor to ceiling, were twisted like spaghetti, and the lock and hinges had been ripped off the outer door. The prisoner was contrite. "I vas veak from hunger," he pleaded.

The law's judgement was in this case leavened by George's sense of humour. He kept the culprit in jail until the damage had been repaired and a stack of winter wood cut. Then he released him to a friend who guaranteed his sober return to laying railroad steel. The friend turned out to be a big Finnish woman with a generous smile and cheerful eyes, her gingham house dress well-filled from top to bottom. Her dealings with the law were so assured and business-like that I felt I would like to get to know her better.

I went to visit her. She was the owner of the Cranberry Steam Bath, which was housed in a building well around the bay. I was baffled by the word "sauna" which appeared beneath the sign. All it meant, the lady explained, was "steam bath" in Finnish. She told

me that she further supplemented her income by doing laundry, and patching and mending clothes.

But the steam baths were her main source of both money and entertainment. They were open all the time, but if I was interested in seeing real action she suggested I come on a Saturday night.

"My boys will be in. I got a hundred regulars out along the line." A quick laugh shook her. "They're howlers when they hit the booze joints."

"All Finns?"

"Ho! Finns are the tame ones. Danes, Norways, Swedes–they'll all be here. They work hard, play hard, fight hard. They want me and Billie to open a café. She's fifteen, my Billie, a good kid. The boys treat her like they should." She sat on a box behind the packing case that was her office desk and waved me to a seat.

"What do your boys do out on the line?" I asked.

"Clearing right-of-way, or rock work. All on contract. They're tough workers. Like Pete Rod and his bunch of young Danes."

She then went on to cheerfully describe the ordeal this group had recently undergone. They had arrived at The Pas from the old country in February of the preceding winter, and had immediately taken a clearing contract. To get to the job they had to walk. The "walk" consisted of a long haul up the Saskatchewan River to Cumberland House, another sixteen land miles to Lake Athapapuskow, then twenty miles across the open lake stretch to Cranberry. And this in sixty-below-zero weather. The temperature wasn't their only problem. Grub for their trip had been bought at a café in The Pas, but the wrong boxes were loaded out. All that those half-frozen and homesick Danish boys had had to eat during their four days on the trail were three big boxes of frozen raisin pies.

Mrs. Sauna rocked with hearty laughter. "That's one kinda pie I never give that Dane bunch! They was three days rinsing cold raisins outa their pipes with old Fred's homebrew!"

I stared. Last winter the railroad job had only begun. "Were there bootleggers here *before* the railroad?" I demanded.

"Old Fred's been here years. Gover'ment land grant around the bay–that's what he has. Little store with canned stuff and salt pork. Winters he uses his horse-team lake-freighting, summers he hauls canoes across the portage to First Cranberry Lake. Sells homebrew the year round. Ten dollars a bottle, four dollars to fill a beer bottle." Mrs. Sauna sighed. "But these slick new booze and card dealers is ruining Fred. All they need is a shack and a can of alky, and they're

in business. They buy the stuff at The Pas liquor store for twenty-six dollars a gallon, cut it with lake water and sugar, and sell it here for a clear profit of three hundred dollars. Goes like hot cakes. I tell my boys not to be crazy–but they just laugh. Money? Get rid of it; that's all they want to do."

I had another question. "How does the booze get here?"

"By rail in packsacks. In boxes of drygoods, bags of flour. Plenty comes by water. Airplanes land it on an island with its owner; canoes pick it up at night. The Company yells that alky slows their railroad building. The police scramble, some of them not too hard, maybe. Cranberry always has booze."

Her reference to the police made me dig deeper. "You think some fixing might go on?"

Mrs. Sauna smiled. "Where there's wholesale booze there's fixing. Winnipeg, The Pas, here–who knows where it ends? I know I been offered a hundred a month, just to let 'em store extra booze in this bathhouse. Guaranteed no search. I can use the money. Take a lotta laundry to make that up. But my nose is clean–and'll stay clean."

The following Saturday night I went to watch the construction workers at play. Mrs. Sauna was on the job and waved me in to have a look at the steamroom. There was an airtight bathroom surrounded by tiers of wide shelves. In the corner was a fireplace that produced the steam when cold water was thrown on the white hot stones above it. A thick grey fog, thicker and hotter toward the roof, enfolded the few men who were already stretched out when I arrived; occasionally a tormented body would stir to life, and move up or down a tier.

Afterwards, buckets of cold water were dashed over par-boiled pelts, and bundles of switches were handed round. Some men did their own switching; others, weakened from the steam, let a "swamper," as the attendant was called, paddle them to a glow. In a cooling-off room they adjusted to normal air, dressed, then paid Mrs. Sauna. As cashier, she sat enthroned in her new office, her smile topped by a bright gingham dust cap. Any clothes left with her by her customers would be washed, ironed, and patched within the week.

"Don't go yet," Mrs. Sauna told me. "The rowdies'll be here any time."

They started coming in a few minutes later, fresh from the alky joints, rough, hard-handed, stepping high or staggering, eager for a contest. Grinning, each tossed five dollars to the swamper as a winner-take-all stake on who could stand the steamroom longest.

One of them was not grinning. I saw a big Finn, very drunk, eyeing me. He pointed at me and muttered something.

Mrs. Sauna saw trouble coming and tried to head it off. "Only twelve men, Nick."

The Finn threw down an extra bill for my entry in the contest. "T'irteen men." Again he pointed at me. He was a black Finn. His eyes were mean, his nose flat and off-centre. My belly tightened.

I was back in a corner, perched on an upturned bucket. "No thanks," I told him.

"T'irteen," he repeated, leering. "One more. Him. In a bat'house, every man gotta take a bat'."

A steam bath was not for me and my patched-up lungs. Breathing any sort of vapour brought near-suffocation. The other men were filing in. "Next time," I said.

He stood, head pushed forward, mean eyes squinted. I knew the signs. *Hands open and mouth closed,* I told myself. I'd been wrong, promising Ruth that. As a healthy-looking cripple, what did I do now?

"T'irteen." He came toward me. It had taken only seconds. I was on my own. The others were gone.

Except for one. I was half up, reaching for a grip on the bucket, my promise and my instincts fighting their own battle, when a sharp voice said, "Nick! You'll miss your place! You can fight after!"

The big Finn stopped abruptly. His head lifted and a huge hand waved. "Ve fight after," he said, staggering inside.

I was still in a spot. It would be foolish to hang around and wait for trouble, but I couldn't leave without some explanation to Mrs. Sauna. I decided on the truth. "I'd better go. I've been crocked up in a hospital. Chest. Three years in bed. I couldn't risk the steam or a fight. You got me out of a bad corner."

Her smile faded. "The war?" When I nodded, she said, "You stay. I'll handle Nick."

It was a wild affair. Dense steam was loosed, and the battle was on. For a beginner five minutes was plenty. For these tough contestants, fifteen, twenty-five, even thirty minutes in that sweating hell-box was possible. The pressure was kept high. One by one they gave up.

The winner was Nick. Wobbly, too weak to stand alone, he was helped from his bench and propped against the wet wall. The dousing began. Some went outside in the half-dark and plunged into the

lake, hurrying back for the free-for-all that the switching had become. The swishing of cedar and spruce boughs, the roars of the victims and the laughter of the lambasters, could be heard all across the Portage.

After it was over, Mrs. Sauna introduced me to Nick. He was sober and docile. Clutching his winnings, he managed a grin. Mrs. Sauna laughed. "The steam's always a cure for you, eh, Nick? There's fried chicken at the tent. Billie's there."

They were a fine-looking gang. Norwegians, Danes, Swedes, and Finns, now sober, clean, and refreshed. Nick told me, "Have a bat', cure a cold, fix a hango'er. It vorks all d'same, and a man ain't clean wit'out it."

"They're good boys," Mrs. Sauna said as I left. "Anything Cranberry Portage needs, they'll be in on it. I may open that eats place. Billie's as much help as any grown-up, only she oughta be in school." Her chin firmed. She looked me straight in the eyes. "You know what? It's time some of us that ain't bootleggers got together. Let's start a little civilization going around here."

I agreed, not realizing what agreeing with the vigorous Mrs. Sauna might lead to. Meeting her had been a pleasure, and the experience provided us with a saleable story. Titled "Sauna," it was written in longhand, typed by Ruth, and brought a cheque from the Toronto *Star Weekly* for six dollars.

The size of the cheque didn't discourage us. We felt full of optimism and increasing self-confidence. Not only was our stuff selling, but now an eastern editor wanted to hear more of our adopted settlement. We were on our way!

Chapter 5

Monday morning, dust cap over one ear, Mrs. Sauna came puffing up the path through the birches to our tents. She gave Ruth a warm greeting and presented Bud with a tiny pair of beaded moccasin slippers.

"They're having a celebration July First," she announced. "The booze peddlers is behind it, but they're smart. They've kidded us businessmen into handling it. Half the North'll be there; Cranberry's first sports day; and that's where you and me come in. I mean the school."

I tried not to look blank. "What do you think we should do?"

She had it all pegged. "Somebody's gonna have to run dances here in Cranberry. We can't let some crook get 'em started. We gotta head 'em off. July First, we'll run the dance to raise money for the school."

I began to protest that I'd never run any dances, but Mrs. Sauna swept my objections aside. *She* had run plenty. "And don't worry about music," she said. "There's always Breeds, or somebody, can fiddle."

I got out hand-lettered bills headed "Cranberry's First Dance." Mrs. Sauna's Billie, blonde and as vigorous as her mother, plastered them all over town, and then talked the affair up in cafés, trading stores, Company offices, hotels, and bunkhouses.

The news of our dance signs soon brought me another visitor. He was bald as a dinner plate, harassed, and wearing a dirty white apron.

"I'm havin' a free dance tonight," he said. "To open my café. But people sees your bills an' thinks I'm chargin' a dollar. Christ! I've got the orchestra hired and ever'thin'!"

I reassured him. I wrote a rider to be attached to our posters, and Billie re-ran her earlier route. Baldy was relieved. He had been a cook on a steel gang, and had sunk his life-savings into this

venture. It meant everything to him. He had planned it all down to the last detail, and that had included sizing up the other local eating places.

"Watcha get at these cafés?" he demanded, and then proceeded to answer himself before we could say a word. "Bacon, eggs, whitefish, lake trout–all of 'em throwed at you. Now people like you and your missis likes dainty meals–and that's what I'm going to give you. I'm opening the biggest and best place in town. Come to the dance tonight–you'll see what I mean."

We left Bud with Tobacco Jowls' wife, a kindly, hard-working little woman. Baldy's was packed by the time we arrived. And it was something! Where other cafés were fifty feet long, Baldy's was a hundred. Instead of an ordinary stove, Baldy had steam tables. As a special drawing card, he had two plump, uniformed waitresses, fresh from Winnipeg. Wearing a clean apron, Baldy beamed about, dropping hints regarding the gastronomic triumphs that would be his as of the following day.

The orchestra for the dance consisted of two white musicians, a fiddler, and a banjo player. Oldtime dances were ripped off in dizzy succession, hobnails clattering in time with silent moccasined feet. The frame supporting the canvas walls creaked and lurched as flying bodies whirled against it. Ruth and the fiddler's wife were the only white women guests, the balance being Cree maidens from nine to ninety, so men tied bright bandannas about their arms and took the place of ladies.

"Boy, is this a wallflower's heaven!" Ruth laughed. "No sit-outs here. Why don't you get your banjo?"

Banjo playing was a doubtful talent I had acquired in the sanatorium, and I was reluctant to experiment before such a crowd. But dancing was too strenuous for me, so when Baldy's banjoist, the visiting son of a prominent Cranberry gambler, yelled for help, I took over. I'd just do it for the evening, I explained. But I was out of luck. Pete Rod, a slim young Dane, in from up the line to pick up mail, promptly informed Mrs. Sauna of my talent, thus permanently settling the question of music for school dances. Overnight, I became leader of a one-fiddle, one-banjo band that later would grow in size, volume, and northern fame to become the "Cranberry Husky Howlers."

Lunchtime that night was Baldy's triumph. Three-decker sandwiches, snagged with toothpicks, were passed in a wash-boiler; each of the toothpicks blunted with a green olive. (A swank touch that

caused frontier jaws to sag.) Coffee was served by the new waitresses, causing shaggy heads to come together and tongues to wag as the girls made the rounds. Here was life! Here would be the place to eat.

It was, for two days. The first day the flies were bad. The second day they were a moving cloud that followed every dish from, and to, the kitchen. Hot summer sun blazed down on the canvas building sixteen hours a day. Butter was like soup, currant-studded. Each forkful of food had to be swept clear of flies. Loyally we gave Baldy a share of our business, but the brief picture of his kitchen, glimpsed through swinging doors, each day became less assuring.

Besides, the waitresses were short on loyalty. Any remark regarding the heat was sufficient to start the flow of whispered treason. "Yeah, and the flies! Look–don't say I told you, but there's a new de-luxe café opening. Better class. And no flies."

Baldy lasted a week. His five years' savings were gone. Right next door, his help hung out a new sign, traded white aprons for blue, and waded in on their own, taking over with Baldy's customers and Baldy's flies.

But the new "de-luxe café," along with the rival eating places, the hotels, trading-stores, and bootleggers, was now ready for the really big event of the season–Canada's Dominion Day–July First.

It would be the first breather the busy, booming North had taken since the break-up of the spring ice. No one had had time for a holiday. During the past months, increasing droves of construction men, office staff, prospectors, and eastern mining men with lumps of promotion money, had been rolling in by canoe, train, and plane. Night and day, along the main-line grade that now reached beyond Cranberry, came the shriek of gravel trains. Bunk-cars lined the sidings. Barges waddled north from the bay, piled high with construction materials and supplies for the mining camp at Flin Flon. Men had worked hard without a murmur–double shift, sixteen hours a day, co-operating with the Company's drive to complete a bonus two-year railroad job in one year. At last, out of the mad jumble of activity, a pattern could be seen evolving. But everyone needed a break, and a hell-raising bender was clearly in order.

We heard the early morning rattle of kicker canoes, as trail people arrived for the celebration. Even Brownie was getting flying customers. Constable George had police extras brought from The Pas. Every tent and cabin had visitors; our guests were a young engineer and his wife from the new mine camp at Flin Flon, in by

canoe for the fun. Scores of dirty tents popped up. Canoes piled high with camping equipment, squaws, kids, dogs, and wriggling puppies, trebled Indian Town's population overnight. It was a sports-day first in the area, and was greeted as such. There were stump-dodging track events, for Crees, for whites, and mixed.

We cheered and whooped with other Cranberry squatters when young Art Moen, a resident fire-ranger, cleaned up in the kicker-canoe events open to all the North. During the final, exciting heat, an old Cree and his squaw paddled their canoe through the screaming confusion to the sandy bay end. They hauled out, shrugged into the blanket-roll and grub-box straps, hoisted the craft, and, paddles trailing, headed across the Portage for First Cranberry Lake. Seeing old Fred, Cranberry's early white settler, the Cree ancient grunted what would become a local byword: "Cranberry Portage, he boom."

It was a roaring day, afloat and ashore. Drinks, bets, money, and fists flew. Men shouted and argued while Constable George and his imports stood by, just in case real trouble developed.

During the course of the day Mrs. Sauna and I were kept busy making last-minute preparations for our big dance, which was to take place that night. I dug around the crowd, looking for musicians. It paid off. Our orchestra grew to include two banjos, two fiddles, a sax and an Eskimo tom-tom.

Next came the question of locale. It was a frontier custom to commandeer as dance hall whatever new building had reached the stage of having both floors and walls. In this case, the building was owned by two Jewish boys from Winnipeg. As part of a committee of two for fronting our mythical school I went with Mrs. Sauna to see them. I let her do the talking.

We met with a blanket refusal. The owners pointed out that although the structure of their store-to-be was well underway, they were new at carpentry. The walls of their building were less rigid than they had hoped, and the floor tended to sag. Admittedly, there was visible proof that this was so, but we attacked from a new angle. They remained adamant. They were sorry. No dance.

Mrs. Sauna was undaunted. "Don't you boys believe in advertising?" she demanded. They admitted that they did. "And you'll agree that other traders who got here first has the edge on you right now?" They nodded their heads. "Well then," Mrs. Sauna concluded triumphantly, "our school committee's giving you a chance to short-cut the bunch of them–and we never hand out second chances. Hold the dance here, and everyone in town will know you're a

couple of right guys. Remember, all the North loves a good sport—but not a bad one." The two brothers conferred privately. Finally, still sad, they agreed. Mrs. Sauna turned as we were leaving. "You can take my order for ten cases of laundry soap," she said. They brightened considerably.

The dance started at 10:00 P.M. and was a roaring, seething success. Bud was again farmed out with Mrs. Jowls, which was just as well. It was not until 5:30 the next morning that the music stopped, and the 6:00 A.M. day shift went directly from riot to railroading, sleep forgotten. There had been fun, fights, and one near tragedy, handled by Ruth. We had noticed that local custom tagged old prospectors to tend the Indian babies while their mothers danced. One papoose, in the care of Cyclone Ned, came close to finding its first settlement dance its last. All day Cyclone had been celebrating. Now he was content to stay, jammed by the milling mob, on a bench in a corner, foot pounding in time with the music. Perched upon his bouncing knee, the six-month-old babe was having a merry ride. But somehow its padded silk bonnet, once white, was jarred from its head, kicked half-way around the shaky dance floor, and, by some miracle, returned to Ned, who undertook to replace it.

A few minutes later I saw Ruth, who was dancing with the district fire-ranger, break from her big partner and dive for the corner where Cyclone was sitting. There were excited cries from other women, frantic calls for a doctor (with none closer than The Pas). We stopped the music. The crowd was beaten back, to allow Ruth to get outside with her grimy bundle.

Afraid one of them might get trampled, she had been keeping an eye on all the infants. Of all the oldtimers, Cyclone Ned had seemed the most attentive, his charge the most content. Until she suddenly realized that where a stolid papoose face had been framed in a bonnet opening, there now appeared only a mat of oily black hair. Cyclone had somehow managed to put the bonnet on backwards. Dirty ribbons were tied across the nape of the tyke's neck, and its nose and mouth were blocked by the bonnet's heavy padding.

At last the smoky, smothered little face squeaked signs of life. Its mother was found, and Cyclone was banished with appropriate jeers from other prospector baby-tenders. The dance roared on. (As a sequel, next day among Ruth's golden tresses we found a new tribe of active Northerners.)

When the dance finally ended, the takings were packaged, sealed, and placed in Moon Glow's hotel safe, until such time as a promised

bank-in-a-tent would open for business. Moon Glow snorted when we told him what the money was for. "School! For what? Bootleggers or café cooks? Who'll support a school?"

Mrs. Sauna laughed. "You been too long a bachelor. If this world's bachelors started schooling even their own kids, it could take a load off us taxpayers."

There had been one other sobering moment during the dance. It was getting toward daylight when the music was again stopped–this time for an announcement about a lost prospector. Andy Taylor, formerly of South Porcupine, Ontario, was missing in the Burntwood River country north of us. Search parties were being organized. The Manitoba Forestry Service was supplying a plane. Indians, prospectors, and canoe freighters were asked to volunteer for the hunt.

Men who knew the Burntwood country shook their heads. Taylor, his partners had reported, was without food, rifle, or fire. Any chance of a man staying long alive in that barren land of torturing flies was a slim one. I wrote a short news item and left it at the Company telephone hut, to be phoned through by construction line to The Pas. From there, it would go by Canadian National Telegraph to the Winnipeg *Tribune*.

Finally, Ruth and I, weary and happy, plodded through trees tipped with early sunshine up the hill to our tents. To us, Andy Taylor was just a name. We didn't know it was a name that, weeks later, would bring us our first big journalistic break. Till then, we would go on living comfortable, normal lives. But he, poor devil, was destined to wander through another forty days and nights of solitary hell.

Chapter 6

However, before the Andy Taylor story broke, another big scoop was to come our way, although we missed the excitement leading up to it because we were away from Cranberry on a trip. We had been invited by the young mining engineer and his wife, whom we had met on Dominion Day, to visit the new mine camp at Flin Flon.

The journey to the camp was an all-day haul by freight-barge and motorboat-tug across big stretches of lake, past high rock faces, and along peaceful, connecting creeks, ending with a four-mile tramp through rock hills, Bud riding the shoulders of a tall Indian. We hadn't been told that a long hike was part of the deal, and Ruth was worried in case it was too much for me, but I made it.

Flin Flon, when we finally reached it, turned out to be a handful of log shacks, a scattering of tents, and a test mill, all held together by yet another frontier dream. Northerners had waited years for a railroad that would allow the Whitney interests of New York to start spilling thirty million dollars into the rugged landscape. The citizens of Flin Flon assured us that the blueprint for the future was clear. A world-renowned mine would be created on this rocky terrain, and a planned, modern city would grow up around it.

We were impressed by both the vigour of the tiny settlement and the hospitality with which we were greeted. But when our empty barge nudged the Cranberry dock at dusk a couple of days later, we found we were glad to be back. Any plans and hopes Cranberry might have for the future were much more vague and chaotic than those of Flin Flon. But there was something about the crazy jumble of our town, with all its familiar sounds–the howl of chained dogs, the clatter of hammers, the clang of railway steel, the shriek and fuss of busy locomotives–that made us feel at home. Including the all-too-familiar smells which were now an accepted part of the atmosphere.

"We must be squatters at heart," Ruth said. It was true. We

looked forward to being back in our two small tents with their camp cots and bright Hudson's Bay blankets. Instead of Flin Flon's rock, a thousand years of spruce and pine needles were soft under our feet. Lake waters patted gently against yellow pilings at the dock where Brownie's Fokker rested beside moored, lurching canoes.

It was a well-earned rest, as we were soon to learn. In our absence the Fokker and Brownie had shared a dramatic experience. We were barely back at our tents when Brownie arrived.

"Where the wrinkled hell you been?" he demanded. "I'm sitting on the mining story of the year!"

He and I flopped under the mosquito bars that covered the cots, while Ruth rustled up some food on the tin stove, and got a very sleepy Bud into her bunk. A full moon, rolling up over the trees, lit the tents with a soft glow. And Brownie, lying on his back, feet crossed, hands behind his blond head, told us the story that was to make early bush-flying history.

Three brothers named Hall, one of them a member of the Saskatchewan Legislature, had made Lac La Ronge, 220 miles north and west of Cranberry Portage, their prospecting base. Some Indians came to them with a story of seeing, far north, a "big red mound–it glow in sun." Though usually sceptical of such native yarns, the brothers decided it was worth investigating, and two of them hired an Indian to guide them to the spot. The canoe trip took many days of hard travelling through a baffling country of lakes, streams, and sudden storms. There were clouds of black-flies, endless portages to chop clear, great areas of muskeg, and rough rock.

Finally they reached the "big red mound" and discovered that the story had not just been cooked up by Indians looking for a well-paid trail journey. The small hill really did "glow," and in the bright sun it appeared to be made of solid copper! The brothers were excited, but being experienced prospectors they decided to get assay returns before going to the expense of locating and recording a group of claims. They felt there was little danger of others finding the red mound; its location was far from any of the more travelled wilderness routes. Rock samples from the find were sent Outside from Lac La Ronge, and a few weeks later came the expected good news of sensational values in copper!

But bad news trailed close behind. Following the annual treaty payoff of so many government dollars per adult head, some of the Indians had gone on a drunk, and had babbled about the shining

red mound. A group of parasite bootleggers, abandoning their liquor-selling in the wake of the treaty party, were headed for the hill of copper, with mining-company scouts hard on their heels. Equipped with the best available canoe outfits and Indian guides, these expert prospectors were already four days on their way.

The Hall brothers were stunned by the news. After years of study, search, and trail-slogging in the North, a fortune was being yanked from under them. They *had* staked one claim each, but so small a holding would count for little in any sale to a big company. And to overcome a four-day lead by canoe would be impossible.

"Then came the miracle," Brownie related. "Me. With my overworked airplane. I was headed home light, from a Hudson's Bay post charter trip. The sun was down; it was too late to make it here to Cranberry, so I landed at Lac La Ronge to stay the night."

The Halls fell on his neck. Anything they owned was his–anything, now, always, if he would fly them to the red mound.

"Hell of a spot to be in," Brownie told me. "Asked to gamble a $40,000 aircraft on a shaky deal like that!"

He thought it over. The copper find was in unmapped country, far from the usual plane or canoe routes. Western Canada Airways were talking about two-way radio sets for their planes in the future, but none had yet been installed. Brownie had no way of advising his base where to start a search, if he were forced down by engine failure, and there were no gas caches in that remote land. With his base in Cranberry and his wife expecting him home next morning, a missing aircraft would mean air search parties, taking planes away from such urgent work as the Andy Taylor hunt. Plowing around in unfamiliar, unmapped country could mean disaster for a search pilot as well as for Brownie.

"All the odds were against it," Brownie said. "But it was a chance to prove something, to sell flying, which is what we were sent here to do. So–I told Halls I'd go. There was no shut-eye for me that night."

At daylight, the Fokker's cabin stacked with extra fuel in cans, Brownie and the Halls hoisted clear. In two hours, labouring all out at eighty-five M.P.H., they reached the point where the Halls and their Indian guide had cut northward from the Churchill River. To the brothers, everything looked different from the air, though Brownie flew dangerously low to help them spot landmarks. In a repetitious panorama of rock, lake, river, and creek, they had no luck. They landed on an unknown lake, refuelled from their cargo

of four-gallon cans, and took off. Hours passed–locating, losing, cross-flying, back-tracking. Still the Halls were unable to spot the main trail.

Late in the evening, almost out of gas, and feeling completely beaten, they landed back at Lac La Ronge. "Things looked grim," Brownie said. "I'd been missing from base a full day–and it had been a wasted effort. That canoe bunch would have all the portages the Halls had cut to guide them. They were certain to reach the hill the next day–and we were nowhere."

But they tried again. At daybreak the Fokker was in the air. They flew two hours, picked up where they had left off and resumed shuttling forward and back, staring down at the same confusing jig-saw of rock, stunted trees, and water. As they flew, they sketched maps of larger lakes, rivers, rock bluffs–anything that would help them find their way back out.

In late afternoon, Dick Hall gave a sudden, wild yell. He had recognized a waterfall with a fresh portage cut around it. The rest was simple. An hour later they clattered low over a lake where the reddish mound glowed in the late sun. "Close call," Brownie said. "On the last portage, two miles from the mound, those other birds were scrambling into their last lap, slapping their canoes onto the water!"

Brownie and the Halls landed, snubbed the Fokker to a tree, and grabbed axes to blaze lines and cut stakes. By the time the canoe party arrived, more claims had been outlined, and a camp established on the ground. (Later, the Hall brothers were to sell their claims for a reputed $150,000.)

There, in our sleeping tent, still steamed up about it, Brownie bounced to his feet. "We made it! By God, brother, bush-flying's here to stay!"

At Cranberry Portage, during that long wait, it had been a different story. With Brownie and the Fokker missing, silent men haunted the Airways dock, watching the sky. Settlement women turned up at the cabin to help Brownie's wife, Di, and the baby. We, of course, were still away on our trip to Flin Flon, so we had missed this first anxious experience of awaiting an overdue flyer. There would be other, longer waits.

For Brownie and Western Canada Airways, that Lac La Ronge exploration trip triggered big flying business. Eastern interests got busy on the copper find. Men, tons of camp supplies, and a dismantled diamond drill outfit were among the endless loads that

Airways planes hoisted on contract that summer and fall from the end of steel at Cranberry to the new mineral find at Rottenstone Lake. In the mining-mad East, our story got full magazine treatment –with illustrations. The Airways boys were pleased; Ruth and I were thrilled.

The magazine cheque bought us cases of groceries, but the story provided more than that. One sunny day there was a flying trip that interested me. Airways' Winnipeg chief, portly, vigorous, and hurried, was on an inspection trip to Cranberry base. It was our first meeting, but I mustered courage to ask him for a free flight. He was tough. "Who are you? Why should we be carrying you around?" When I mentioned publicity, he snapped, "What publicity have you ever given us?"

We were in Airways lakeshore office. I might have given up, except for a tip I'd had from Brownie. I picked up an illustrated publicity pamphlet lying on the desk. "Who wrote this?"

"It happens I did!"

I kept plugging. "Where'd you get the stuff on this page?"

He peered at it. "If it's any of your damn business, my secretary dug it up. Why?"

"I wrote it." When he stared, I added, "Ask Roy Brown."

He called Brownie up from the dock, spoke to him, and came back grinning. "Touché," he said. "The trip's yours. You'll have to sign a waiver form, releasing the Company of all responsibility. Odd times, when the boys are flying light, you can go along." We shook hands. "Good luck," he added.

I hurried, cloud-hopping, to our camp for a jacket, and told Ruth. She whooped. "Hurray! We're honest-to-God writers! But hold on– maybe you shouldn't go. Mrs. Sauna was just here, and before that Moon Glow. You have to be at a meeting tonight. Cranberry's hatching a Board of Trade, maybe a school. The Company's out to buck it."

"I'm not mixing in that mess."

"No?" She laughed. "Ask Mrs. Sauna. She figures everybody with kids has to boost the school, and we've got Bud. Moon Glow's the opposition. *He* says Cranberry's only a boom town, and there's no damned Board of Trade needed. *Or* a school."

Since our first meeting, we'd got to know the Lakeview's big owner. He was a shrewd gent, and a puzzle. It seemed unlikely he was in Cranberry just to rent a few rooms, yet he didn't bootleg or harbour loose women. We were interested in the stand he was taking. We also respected Mrs. Sauna's ideas.

"Mrs. Sauna said to see her before the meeting," Ruth added. "Moon Glow said to see him." It looked as though I was bloody well cornered.

"Hell." I shrugged. "Maybe Brownie'll be forced down."

I kissed her goodbye–as a precaution against T.B., it was always behind the ear–and got my jacket. Parting, we both grinned. "Publicity man," Ruth said. "Big stuff, huh?"

I sat beside Brownie in the double cockpit forward, as we flew far north to pick up a mining engineer on the Churchill River. It was an open cockpit; we both wore leather helmets, mine a borrowed one. At 2,000 feet, routine for bush-flying, Brownie levelled off, turned his face to the sky, and gave a wild "Yah-hoooo!" He waved at the country below, turned to me, and shouted above the engine roar, "By God, I get *paid* for this!"

I knew how he felt. Flying this North had the very smell of freedom. Brownie kept his chin jutted; his nose that, like my own, was no nub, pointed into the slipstream, as though not wanting to miss one sniff of the life he was living, and loving.

That flight gave me a chance, at last, to sort out Brownie's background. He yelled replies to my questions, grinning at memories of his rough earlier years, at times wing-waggling or tilting the empty Fokker in a series of left and right banks, just for the hell of it.

Farm-born, once western Canada's long-haul bike-racing champ, Brownie had the sturdy bowed legs to prove it. At the end of the war, Captain Brown, combat pilot, had accepted, of all things, a position in a London bank. Seven years of the tea-and-toast set had driven him back to Canada, where his London bride tried bravely to adjust.

The only job he could find was selling books for a high-pressure American firm. The job required a car, which he told them he had, but hadn't. His route was rural, rough, and long, his only conveyance a leg-powered racing bike. For weeks he pushed hard, matching the salesmen with cars in miles covered and calls made–till the office learned of his unorthodox vehicle. Company prestige entered the picture, and Roy Brown left it.

He was desperate until he heard of a pilot's job. His war record got him the interview, his personality a check-out on floats. Now here he was, on basic pay plus mileage, crowding the Fokker hard from dawn to dusk.

Bee-lining north for the Churchill River, we detoured over the Burntwood country, where Andy Taylor still was lost. *En route* we examined every creek and lake shoreline. Brownie veered off and

shook his helmeted head. "Gone goose," he shouted. "He'll never turn up!"

It was a holiday afternoon for me. We weren't forced down. I was back in time for the meeting held in the Lakeview Hotel lobby, but with no time to confer with Mrs. Sauna or Moon Glow. They were both there, in a room packed with café owners, merchants, traders, bakers, barbers, the new tent banker, prospectors, bunk-housemen, Airways crew members, and white and Cree fishermen.

Tobacco Jowls, astute operator, was there. So was Dixie, the gambler, swarthy and glum, chewing on a big cigar. He was at the meeting, he told me later, to stall any resolution that might cramp his own illegal gambling activity. Paddy and Society Red were there, only because they lived at the Lakeview, and were damned if they'd be driven from home by, as Paddy put it, "a lot of bloated fish floppin' about in a small puddle." Mrs. Sauna sat near the door. She caught my eye and shook here head sadly.

I soon learned why she looked unhappy. In the prospectus the Cranberry merchants had cooked up with the aid of a real-estate man, the school, which was Mrs. Sauna's main objective, had become a minor item. The chairman of the meeting, a paunchy merchant, rose. List in hand, he ballyhooed the settlement's great future. There would be a town-site survey and a lot sale. A branch railroad from Cranberry Portage to Sherritt-Gordon Mine would tap the area to the north and to the east. A local gold prospect could become a producing mine. The Portage would be a main base for flying operations far into the Arctic. Cranberry would have a post office, bank, hospital, school, newspaper, theatres, and a great fishing industry, commercial and tourist. The list went on and on.

Much aimless talk was tossed about. At last, a lean, sun-browned Company superintendent stood up and had his blunt say: "Cranberry Portage is a rail construction boom town. When the railroad's built, this settlement will die. Loose expansion talk causes real harm. City people, prairie people, eastern people, sell out where they are, and come here with high hopes. When the bottom drops out, they'll be stranded."

The stout chairman stood up, sputtering, waving his list. Tobacco Jowls grunted his backing of the chairman, looked for somewhere to spit and hit only his chin. The Company man ignored them.

"We carry passengers, mail, and urgent express on that one small motor truck on rails," he told the crowded room. "All of this interferes with our own emergency supplies. You so-called traders double-cross us, bringing in illegal booze. We're trying to build a

railroad." He turned to the chairman. "People get mail at your store. Good business for you. Who brings it from The Pas–bags of it? We do, every damn' day. And free! But enough's enough! Stop urging more people to come here. We're swamped! Even now sanitary conditions are terrible. There'll be sickness. Fire danger alone should keep them away. You talk like a bunch of opium dreamers!" The Company man stalked out, his heavy boots gritting on the hollow, sand-strewn floor.

As events were to prove, it was a meeting that none of us would forget. Every item on the chairman's list, some of them ridiculous dreams that made Moon Glow and the Company man snort, would come true. So would the disasters the Company man predicted. Meanwhile, when the Company man had gone, the chairman took over. Flushed with anger, he announced, "That being the Company's attitude on mail, I move that a post office be made our first concern."

It was. The stout merchant himself agreed to act as postmaster. An urgent telegram was drafted for Ottawa. Chairs and benches scraped. The crowd thumped down the Lakeview's outside steps and dispersed. "A fine bunch," Mrs. Sauna told me. "No school talk. See you tomorrow."

That same week, on his way to country far back from the settlement to cut building logs, Paddy dropped by our tents. "News," he confided. "The Great Cranberry Trade Board's scared the livin' gizzard out of Ottawa. Only ten telegrams they'd sent when there come a reply. Cranberry Portage'll have a post office, in the corner of what's the hardware store, poolroom, and barber shop– startin' tomorrow. But all them big-bugs is madder'n a duck with chickens."

"Mad? What at?"

Paddy chuckled in his beard. "Because their mail will be stacked up in The Pas. They've limed their own nest with all their fancy telegrams and importance. The Company's been given a reg'lar gover'ment mail contract to carry a limit of 200 pounds. But instead of comin' every day, mail's to come but once a week."

"Once a week!"

"It's what me and Red figgered would happen." He strode off, still chuckling.

Once a week it was, to the disgust of Cranberry squatters including us. The Company official must have grinned at the irony of further urgent telegrams being dispatched by worried committee members over his Company wires.

"Tit-squeaks," Moon Glow commented when I saw him.

Chapter 7

It was at the town meeting that we talked to the new banker and, as a result, took our first fling at wild gold. The banker was from the city, and while officially he might not approve of wildcat mining schemes, privately he was eager to take a flyer for himself and some friends.

He hadn't been too much impressed by Cranberry's brain trust that night, but one unlikely character had managed to intrigue him. This was the cigar-puffing gambler, Dixie, a recent arrival locally.

Before their marriage, Dixie's comely young bride had done well with her own hotel at Cranberry. Since Dixie had moved in, the place had become the centre of local night-life. He was what other gamblers called a "mechanic," an expert manipulator of playing cards. A big poker game ran around the clock in the honeymoon hotel, but no liquor was sold there, as the police kept proving by their frequent, and futile, searches during the summer. (They should have looked in the false-bottomed woodbox.) Dixie himself had remained a bit of an enigma, although he claimed to be the son of a wealthy hotel-owner in California. He also modestly confessed that he was the top horse wrangler and the best hombre with a rifle in all of Canada. (The rifle business we were to learn more about later.)

The young banker came to me to discuss the proposition Dixie had made to him. He was young, dark, round-faced, well-spoken and, in this case, surprisingly frank. The story was that to square a gambling debt with Dixie, a sucker bargeman had spilled an important secret. He had had a prospector friend, now dead, who once spent his summers on a little lake north of Flin Flon. Each autumn he returned with $5,000 in gold. The bargeman knew the lake. After checking with others, the banker was convinced that the old prospector's annual trek and the free gold were no myth. In a country of a thousand lakes, no one had managed to locate the spot. Now Dixie knew it, and he was going there.

It was Mrs. Sauna who suggested to the banker that I go along. Mine was a simple role as, on a prospecting trip, it would need to be. The banker and Dixie would split fifty-fifty on grub and outfit, including two trail men, and the banker was to own half the claims staked. It seemed to be a fair deal, but the banker didn't trust Dixie. By talking up the advantage of publicity in case they struck something good, he sold Dixie on my going along. I was to watch Dixie, see that the banker got a fair break on the gold claims, and–ostensibly for publicity–photograph the claim posts.

I would travel as what the Crees called a "Hudson's Bay man, one-who-does-no-work-on-the-trail," with a private tent and no packing to do on portages. I could stake two gold claims, one each for Ruth and myself. For me there would be no expense, nothing to lose. I'd see the country, maybe hit it rich. Why not? Men were turning up fortunes all over the North.

I said nothing about the trip till all was arranged. When I told Ruth, she looked at me a long moment and shook her head. "You'd be crazy to go. Think what could happen! You might have to swim ashore. Or paddle. Or sleep out in the rain. Everything we've gained in three years could be gone in three minutes. Don't go."

I remained calm and tried to explain. There was a freight canoe big enough to ride out any storm, with the best kicker engine gambling money could buy, tents and grub, two experienced guides to pack and cook. It was, I insisted, a Sunday-school picnic.

Ruth looked at me. We were alone, standing by the tents. Bud was having her afternoon rest. Ruth sat down slowly on a stump. "When would you rest? You don't even rest now. I hate to mention it, but . . . how much weight have you lost since we came here?"

She had me. Doctors' orders had made it clear that at first sign of weight loss, I was to spend half-days in bed. Ruth got up and came close to me. "I know how it's been. So much to see, so much to write about, you've made yourself keep going."

My health was something we tried to avoid discussing. Always active, back now as a man among active men, being reminded of my shaky physical condition filled me with a quick resentment. For Ruth, torn between dread of the bitterness such discussions might stir up, and fear of the consequences if I were not kept aware of my condition, it must have been hell. Now, her mention of work gave me an out.

"Write! That's just the problem. I could write day and night at the rates we get, and still not be able to pay our grub bill. I've got to

do better stuff, or more of it." I paused. "And there's another gamble we've got to face soon."

"The cabin?" Her eyes were worried. If we put what money we had into building and furnishing a cabin, we were stuck here, writers who couldn't make enough at their writing, and couldn't do much else.

I purposely piled it on. "We could leave. I could get a city job."

A silence. Then Ruth said what I hoped she would say. "We're not the only ones gambling on a shaky future."

That was something we *had* discussed–the courage of many of our fellow-settlers. Men were pulling up roots and coming here with their wives and families, in most cases to tackle some completely new line of business. One of the local merchants had been thirty years with a city fire department. A notary, ex-civil servant, now glowed with the joy of living. City men were prospecting, as were ex-preachers, teachers, insurance men, scores of office people. The payroll of Dominion Construction Company, the railroad's contractors, showed men of all callings, some famous in earlier professions.

Ruth and I had gained confidence from knowing this. Many, freed from the war, at last were living a life of self-determination. Those who had been most prominent in their former activities were happiest in their new ones. They worked harder than they had ever worked, but, like ourselves, they welcomed a chance to get clear of a rat-race, where the price of security was the monotony of regimentation.

Some of them had war disabilities; one had lost an arm, another a foot. Here, war was seldom mentioned. The North breathed a peace which lulled all ugly memories. Struggle or not, I decided, it was too fine a thing to give up. Bud was still sleeping. "It's too hot to think," I said. "Let's get out of here."

We started off in silence to walk through the woods. I had cleared that path myself, a little at a time, as strength permitted. Slender birches gleamed white against evergreens. As we moved through the trees it already felt cooler. At the wood's fringe, we stopped to let a lake breeze fan us. Below, along the water's edge men moved about. The steady bur-r-r of a kicker was cut off, and a canoe with a laughing husky dog in its bow slid silently toward shore. An idling engine swept close over our heads; Brownie's plane dipped, levelled off, skittered onto the bay. Beyond, the islands lay floating in a blue afternoon haze.

"Nice, huh?"

Ruth turned. "We can't go back. Let's be like the others. Build the cabin. Let's gamble and live!"

"Yes." I waited a moment. "Gamble on bigger stories, more money. This gold trip could be the answer to both."

She was still a long time. When I touched her hand it was cold. "I don't like that man," she said at last. "His eyes. His mouth. Don't let's get mixed up with him."

"Who, Dixie?" I took both her cold hands. "He's harmless. Anyway, I'm not dealing with him."

"He's the only man in town Bud's afraid of. She says none of Paddy's dogs will go near him."

"Dogs?" I laughed. "The kid's getting as Irish as Paddy. What harm can Dixie do me?"

"I don't want you to go." The set of her lips showed she meant it. "Perhaps we never should've come north. The risks you take frighten me." She should have stopped there. Instead she went on: "Remember the boy at sanatorium? Got out after three years, went duck hunting, landed back in bed, and died the same week. Remember what a damned fool we all said he was?"

I was cornered. On any other subject I might have admitted being wrong. But something made me shout, "Christ! There's such a thing as common sense! He *was* a damn fool. Used a shotgun till his shoulder was black and blue. I'm not nuts; only half nuts from wondering if I'm fit for this, or fit to do that. I want to find out how much of a cripple I really am. What if it is a gamble? Everything in this goddam world is a gamble! I'm going on the trip!"

An hour later, as the big freighter canoe pulled away from Cranberry dock, I was still trying to forget that look on Ruth's face. I felt like hell.

The others didn't. They felt good and smelled of alky. With Dixie, myself, and two guides, there was a surprise packet, trim in breeks, high-laced boots, and leather jacket, excited at going along–Dixie's bride, Sugar.

Dixie was wearing a straw sombrero, his teeth clamped on a cigar. He handled the outboard engine, and we swashed uplake. I was in the bow, free from exhaust fumes, a choice place to ride. The canoe prow knifed through clear green water, the sun was warm, the breeze pleasant–what was there in this for Ruth or me to get upset about?

Part of the route we followed was the one that we had taken on

our barge trip to Flin Flon, among islands, over broad stretches of open water, through narrow passages shadowed by high rock cliffs, along winding creeks.

Dixie struck the first sour note when we reached a grassy creek and came suddenly upon a family of young ducks. Grabbing one of our two rifles he blasted into the close-packed bunch. Those he killed were too small to be eaten. Along with the two guides, I could only stare at this senseless display.

After that, I began to size him up more critically. When he talked with his bride, as he did much of the time, Dixie's manner was bright and attentive, his drawled remarks sly and humorous. It was plain that Sugar adored him. But when he was silent and relaxed, he let down badly. As good humour faded from his eyes, they went cold; without a smile or a cigar, his mouth was slack and cruel.

And Paddy's dogs don't like him, I reminded myself with an inward grin.

However, he was co-operative enough on the journey. Even though he was used to the lazy life of a gambler, now he didn't dodge work. On portages, he out-slugged the guides, old Dad and Shorty, kidding them when they cursed the weight of the jumbo-size freighter canoe. "Heavy? Hell, I could pack that thing all by my ownse'f!" In spite of my doubts about him, his positive attitude cheered me. This was going to be a good trip, with every camp comfort, great weather, and a pot of gold at trail's end.

Unfortunately, it didn't turn out that way. Making camp the very first night, it began to rain. Hard. We scrambled to get under cover and found that one tent had been left behind, the one that had been promised to me. By trail law, the packers were entitled to the overturned canoe. Dixie and his bride had a chummy little pup tent, four feet by seven. I had only an eiderdown bedroll, borrowed from Airways.

I spread it under a big tree where the ground was still dry; in an hour it was wet. The wind grew to a gale that spilled water from spruce boughs and deluged me. I thought of my tent cot at Cranberry with warm, dry blankets, and was glad that neither Ruth, nor the doctors who had given me so many warnings, could see me.

I had almost decided it would be safer to put on my rain slicker and walk around in the fury of the storm, when I felt a firm footnudge on my rump. It was Dixie's Sugar, wrapped in her own slicker.

"Hey," she shouted above the shriek of the wind, "you can't stay out in this! We'll squeeze up. Come on."

To hell with embarrassment; I joined them. Three people plus supplies in the pup tent was a real squeeze, but it was an arrangement that held on all future bad nights. Dixie wasn't overjoyed about it.

The next day we were storm-bound, and the next. The gale hurled itself down the cliff-edged lake, piling white-caps ashore, bowing trees halfway to the ground. I was fortunate in having no apparent ill-effects from my dousing that first night. We loafed, ate, slept. Dixie was never without his hat, or cigar. His endless talk continued to be full of humour, much bravado, and tenderness toward his bride. He talked of the gold we would find, of a luxurious life in California that winter, the movie stars his Sugar would meet, the clothes she would wear. "You got the frame for it Sugar Bowl." Sugar listened, awed, with deep trust in her hazel eyes.

The second day something happened that seemed normal enough at the time, but later was to look strange. The rain had stopped, but the gale was still screaming when Dixie suggested to Sugar that they climb the high rock bluff back of the camp for a look at the country. Being their bedfellow, I could understand them wanting to be alone, but I saw Shorty's head jerk up as they left. Small, wiry, dark by birth, and from the smoke of many campfires, he was not a man to waste words. "Damn fool!" he snapped. "Dangerous climbin' them wet cliffs in that wind!"

Shorty was right. Soon they were back, Dixie with a wrenched ankle from slipping on the rocks. He lay in the tent, cursing, while Sugar stripped off his knee-high boot, bathed his ankle, strapped it up, and was thrilled by the chance to fuss over him.

A mile from shore next morning, the kicker broke a cylinder. We conferred. We could turn back, abandoning the gold search, or paddle on. It wasn't my picnic; I said little. It was decided to cache the engine, and go ahead to find the treasure as planned. Sugar was first to grab a paddle, straining to move the heavy freighter canoe. When I had discussed the trip with the banker at Cranberry, it seemed natural that I should get a free ride. Circumstances had changed that. I couldn't see myself perched there in the canoe's bow, idle, while a girl paddled. Nor could I hear myself explaining diseases of the chest to a pair of sweating, arm-aching guides. I brushed aside sane judgement and took my turn.

That was a long day. After hours of paddling, packing the canoe and outfit across a mile-long portage seemed like a rest. But following two loaded trips back and forth over rocky hills or through soft muskeg, I was relieved to be again in the canoe, paddle and all. At least I was sitting down. And our secret map still showed a dozen more lakes and portage trails to traverse.

Then again something happened that Shorty afterward referred to as "funny business." It was late afternoon, and all of us were weary. In the canoe's stern, Dixie suddenly snatched up a rifle and fired a shot that missed Sugar by inches as she rose to change paddling position. He was at once beside her, pointing to where, a quarter mile ahead, a startled eagle had just left a lone tree. He had been trying to get that eagle for his Sugar, he explained. A hand held to her deafened ear, Sugar was in his arms, with Dixie full of apologies for having startled her. "Somebody's gonna get hurt on this goddam trip," I heard Shorty mutter as he spat snoose overside.

But none of us had time to worry about Dixie's careless habits. We had too many problems to face. The following day, exhausted from a long portage, I dropped a fifteen-dozen case of eggs down a rocky slope, and scored almost 100 percent–only three eggs were left intact. That same evening, a case of canned meats went to a deep lake bottom when Dixie's lame foot slipped. Besides, Dixie's habit of taking random rifle shots to relieve his boredom lessened our hope of seeing game. We kept heading northward. Paddling and packing that monster canoe ate up the days as, with Sugar doing the cooking, we ate up the groceries. "We ain't got time to waste fishin'," Dixie said. For some reason he had brought no tackle. Inevitably–we began to run short of grub.

Then Dixie became vague about map directions, suggesting a route that would take us too far north. "You must have the damn map upside down," I told him. He wasn't pleased, but Sugar soothed him, gently persuading him that I was right. After only a brief argument, he suddenly gave in with a grin. His change of pace was baffling. I couldn't figure him out. Always he made a great show of respecting Sugar's every whim. He was full of consideration and honeyed talk. But there were still these flashes of bad humour. No wonder the banker figured he was worth watching.

Then came the final rifle episode. Making camp one weary night at dusk, a shot blasted from directly below where I was erecting the tent. A frightened yell came from Sugar, who was getting water at the lake edge. Again a bullet had just missed her. Again Dixie was

contrite. He had been shooting at a muskrat swimming in the shadow. "Goddammit, honey, we gotta have grub ain't we? I never knowed you was there." He was patting, caressing her.

This time, backed by an approving glance from Shorty, I took over. I told Dixie he was too nervous, or too careless, with a rifle to suit me, and suggested a change in routine. He started to argue, then, as before, suddenly gave in with an easy grin. For the balance of the trip, in or out of the canoe, on or off the trail, I kept both rifles.

At last we reached a lake, said to be within a mile of the free gold. That day we found values, but no rich pocket. Our grub was just about gone. We decided to stake enough claims between two small lakes to blanket the old prospector's diggings. I staked Ruth's claim and mine, saw that the banker got a fair break, and photographed the claim posts. No further trouble arose with Dixie.

Then Sugar made an exciting discovery. In a tangled thicket on the lake edge she found a crude gold-washing cradle, fashioned from sticks and flattened tin cans. Again we searched for the lode. Earlier paths and trails were overgrown, and there was much rock where a trail would not show. With no luck in our search, and grub low, we hurried back to blaze and cut boundary lines.

I was still trying not to overdo it. The hang of my clothes told me I had lost weight, but I kidded myself that I felt as fit as any of the others looked. Every chance I had, I lay down to rest. If the grub held out, I felt I could make it. I slept like the dead and ate as much as Shorty, which was plenty.

Dixie made a big show of staking "Sugar's very own little ol' claim." He decided to project or "throw" half the claim out over the lake to blanket any mineral body lying under water. To do this, the post, set in a pile of rocks, was located on the edge of a high bare cliff. It also allowed for less line cutting. It was a common procedure in staking claims, but for one thing. It struck me that Dixie was locating the claim stake and its supporting mound unnecessarily close to the edge. The operation required much small talk by Dixie. Sugar would mark the claim post "all by her ownse'f." Sugar was thrilled.

Returning from showing Shorty and Dad where to cut and blaze the line down below, I looked for an easier way up the rock hump around through the woods. The detour brought me to the summit, immediately behind Dixie and Sugar. They stood at the edge of the sheer two-hundred-foot drop, Sugar printing information on the

claim post as Dixie instructed. With moss under my feet, neither of them had heard me.

"Hey!" I yelled. "Where's the next line-cutting job?" As Dixie swung around, I brandished my axe.

His face went as black as a squall cloud. I began to apologize for startling him, as he looked ready to do murder. A week's growth of beard added to the sudden viciousness of his mouth and eyes.

The impression lasted only a moment. Almost immediately he was laughing and talking in his casual way as Sugar finished marking her claim post and leaned back to survey it.

It was the last claim. In the clumsy great canoe, weary, hungry, we headed for home. Sugar, who did much of the cooking besides a man's work on the trail, announced that our only remaining rations were two cans of beans and three raw onions. With five of us, returning over tough portages the way we had come, we'd never make it. Knowing that there was canoe freighting between Cranberry Portage and the settlement of Cold Lake, we decided to swing eastward toward that main route, hoping to meet someone with grub, perhaps catch a tow with a kicker canoe. Still packing both rifles, I went ahead on portages and picked off partridge that showed on the trail. The coveys were young, small, and quick to hide, but I managed to provide something for each meal. We saw no moose or caribou.

Then we struck a wasteland, an area that had been burned over—no more birds. Charred trees, flattened by a gale, lay tangled across the portage trails. Some of these, the big canoe had to be lifted over, others it had to be hauled and tussled under. Hundreds we had to chop clear. Being tired and hungry was bad enough, but now we were blackened from battling charred trees, and breathing charcoal dust from the burned moss. For me, that was really dangerous. Dixie ran out of both laughter and patter. He and Shorty never stopped cursing the freight canoe's dead weight. I packed my share on portages, chopped and paddled my weary share, but I refused to strain on the outsize canoe. Sugar was a marvel; she did a man's work without a murmur.

Completely out of grub, we hoped to hit the north-south canoe route next day. That night we reached the ruins of a cabin. Shorty, years in the North, recognized it. He had known its occupant. For the first time on the trip he became talkative. Crouched on moccasined heels before the fire, he told of how this trapper, crazed with

raw alky and loneliness, had taken his own life by leaping against the cabin walls and ripping his throat on great spikes driven into the logs.

Shorty spared no gory detail. Sugar snuggled, wide-eyed, in the crook of Dixie's arm, shuddering at the thought of sleeping near a place that had seen such violence. Dixie was silent. His face, lit, then shadowed by the fire, showed many changes as he sat, busy with his own thoughts. Recalling that campfire picture later, I realized how interesting some of those thoughts of Dixie's might have been.

On the Pine Root River the next night, hollow but thankful, we finally connected with an Indian canoe party going out light for freight. We had a good meal of bannock and moose meat, and after midnight were towed alongside the canoe dock at Cranberry. Ruth and Bud were bunking with Constable George's wife while George was on a trip. We were five days overdue, and Ruth was so relieved to see me that she made no comment on my grim physical state.

The gold claims still had to be recorded in The Pas. Dixie and I were to fly there the next morning, at his and the banker's expense. Again Dixie did a strange thing. With the plane due to leave, Sugar came to the dock. Dixie, it seemed, couldn't leave because he had a ripe sucker in a poker game. And, Sugar added, the power-of-attorney papers still had to be fixed up with the banker. Dixie wanted me to go ahead, and he would meet me in The Pas next morning.

I didn't get it. The papers, I knew, *had* been fixed up. But what the hell? If something had gone wrong, it was their headache, not mine. I flew with Brownie to The Pas.

Dixie didn't call me at the hotel next morning; I had to hunt the town for him. When I at last located him he was dressed in a business suit, puffing an expensive cigar, and was most genial. "Just goin' lookin' for you. Them papers'll be in from Cranberry this evenin'. We'll record in the mornin'."

We didn't. In the morning, Dixie was missing: he had taken the train for Outside the night before. Alone.

Back home, I got Sugar and the banker together and told them. Sugar's eyes, for a moment, were startled. Then she nodded. "Sure. He had to go on business. He'll be back Monday." I knew she was lying–to us and to herself.

"H'm," was all the banker said.

Dixie didn't ever come back. The banker's claim-recording fund went with him, but that was incidental, compared with Sugar's loss.

Not only was her adored husband gone. With him, went the bank balance she had made over to him on their wedding day–some thousands of dollars.

Sugar was heartbroken. At first she insisted that there must be a mistake, Dixie would be back. It was weeks before her faith finally died, and she asked the police to investigate.

Late in the summer we heard that, in the United States, a man matching Dixie's description was wanted for questioning regarding the accidental death or disappearance of three former wives. One, an oil-wealthy Cherokee maiden, had drowned under strange circumstances while on a canoe trip. A second had fallen from a high cliff. The third was killed in a hunting accident. Each had died as a bride of only a few months–and all had had money.

At about the same time the gamblers' grapevine reported that the wanted man was hung in Wyoming. Whether or not it was Dixie was never publicly disclosed by the police in The Pas, but not long after the rumour circulated, Sugar married again.

I began to eye Paddy's dogs with more respect.

Our gold claims were never recorded. The banker went cold on gold, and we hadn't the cash to gamble on the required assessment work. But someone else had, and a few years later there was a gold mine on that little lake.

Among many other things, that trip taught me much about my health. After a week in bed I felt restored. "No sign of hemorrhage," I assured Ruth, to ease her worry. She was attentive and considerate, but quiet. Too quiet. For her sake–and my own–I vowed that in the future I would not take so heavy a gamble on my physical condition. Many of those tough, wilderness miles I had tramped with my fingers crossed.

As a journalistic venture, the prospecting jaunt had turned out a flop. But there was no time to fret about that. Too many big things were waiting close ahead.

Chapter 8

There was danger ahead at Cranberry. Everyone was scrambling to make a business killing, and the settlement was running wild. With the hot weather and overcrowding, sanitary conditions grew steadily worse.

Stores, cafés, open garbage heaps, smelly outhouses, and private dwellings sprawled indiscriminately in each other's laps. Flies swarmed over everything, polluting food, water, confections. There was talk of typhoid, of dysentery.

The protests of Moon Glow, Tobacco Jowls, Mrs. Sauna, and others who knew, did no good. People were too busy making money, or expanding their squatter holdings, to heed warnings.

"Men the world over is just plain damn fools!" Jowls told me, waving a great fist at filthy backdoor garbage heaps. "Somebody'll need to near die. Won't be none of them tough-gutted slop-wallopers. Never is. Could be me, could be you."

It was neither of us. The victim was Ruth.

Cranberry Portage had no resident doctor, and no nurse. The medical contract for the swarms of workers on the Flin Flon rail job, and on the 510 miles of Hudson Bay Railway battling across the Barrens to Churchill, was handled by one clinic in The Pas. Its doctors were desperately busy, and even getting to them was a problem.

The day Ruth took sick there had been a startling new development in the search for Andy Taylor, the prospector now lost many weeks in the Burntwood River area. A message, scratched by Taylor on a piece of bark, and judged to be three days old, was found on a lakeshore rock. Search aircraft were again called out. As a result, neither at Cranberry, nor at Airways base in The Pas, was there a plane to take Ruth to hospital.

It was evening, raining and drear, when we moved her by stretcher from our tent camp to the warmth of Constable George's

cabin. Whatever the illness, her agony was hellish. Every minor jolt, as we carried her down the path through the birches, made her eyes start and her lips tighten. We knew she could never stand the rough rail-trip to The Pas. Gravel trains, working day and night to spill ballast along the single rail-line, had clear right of way. To by-pass them would require endless hours of waiting on sidings.

Bud, meanwhile, was at the Browns' cabin. I did what I could to help Mrs. George minister to Ruth, and haunted the Company telephone caboose. At last there was a reply to my repeated message. A doctor was just in from the Bay line; he was utterly fagged, but he would come. I chartered a special rail trolley for him, and, at nine o'clock that morning, word came that the doctor was leaving The Pas.

Rain poured down, with a west wind that increased to a gale lashing the woods into wild and startling explosions. Close outside the cabin there was a ripping sound, a warning whoosh!–and the thud of a crashing tree. High lake-rollers pummelled the shore. We had done all we could for Ruth; much of the time she was delirious. Mrs. George sat by the bed, a city girl, wide-eyed at the fury of a northern night. The hours dragged by, dominated by Ruth's high fever, her continuing pain, and the unbearable waiting. On toward daylight, there was a tap at the cabin door, and Mrs. Sauna looked in. Her dust cap was soggy, her face dripping with rain. She had come to ask if she or Billie could help.

Dr. Shanks arrived at four o'clock the next morning. I guided him through the storm to Constable George's cabin. White-haired, more than seventy years old, he had already been fifty hours without sleep. Ten miles from The Pas, the special rail truck had met a wreck on the line. Since there had been no hope of getting past it, the doctor had abandoned the trolley, walked miles in the rain, finally caught a gravel train at the end of its run, then had carried on again by handcar and locomotive. Blackened, dishevelled, and rain-soaked, he apologized for his tardiness.

Hypodermics finally blunted Ruth's pain, and brought her much needed sleep. Mrs. George had food ready for the doctor, and afterwards I took him to our camp. I returned from the second tent with extra bedding to find him already asleep. He didn't even move while I stripped off his wet clothing, and rolled him in heavy wool blankets.

He had told us that hospitalization for Ruth was urgent, and had given me an emergency flight order. But the earliest flight that Agent

Mick could arrange was hours away. One pilot, Hollick-Kenyon, was on a trip to Cold Lake, but would be available on his return. He had gone at 5:00 A.M., was due back at seven. We waited. Eight o'clock came; nine o'clock, and still no plane. The doctor had gone out on the line farther north, to cope with another emergency. Ruth's condition was growing steadily worse.

There was still a stiff breeze, but the sunshine was warm. To save time, we got Ruth onto a stretcher and brought her down to the Airways dock. Word got about. Tobacco Jowls strolled by, checking a pile of boxes one of his teamsters had delivered for re-shipment by plane. He eyed Ruth a moment, blew his nose, grunted, "Sick girl," and went on. He managed a curt nod for Paddy, a competitor in the hauling end of his business, who was coming on foot along the dock. Passing where Ruth lay, Paddy touched his hat and handed me a note. It was from Moon Glow. "Don't go short," was all it said, and all it needed to say.

Settlement work lagged, while everyone watched for the incoming plane. Dixie's Sugar came. There was nothing she could do, but stare with shaded eyes over the tree tops and swear like a man.

Kenyon came at eleven o'clock. Mick, as Airways agent, raised a special brand of hell on the dock. Kenyon was noncommittal regarding the delay. Later we learned that a second garbled Andy Taylor message had been found. It was certain the wandering prospector could not last more than a few hours. At Cold Lake settlement, trailsmen who had searched for weeks by canoe or on foot were now in a frenzy to get back there. Kenyon had taken time to drop another search party north in the Burntwood area.

Our trip to The Pas was rough. Ruth was only half-conscious. At times, as the ship met one hard jolt after another in the storm-stirred air, she passed out completely. She felt that she might be dying, and each time she went limp in my arms I had the same dread feeling.

The Pas appeared below us, curved along a sweep of the wide Saskatchewan River. A railroad, coming up from the south, angled through the town and continued north across a toy bridge. We banked, cut downward and slid low over the muddy current. I tried to tell Ruth the glad news that we were arriving, but she didn't hear it.

Kenyon ignored the flying dock up-river. Instead, he slipped to an inshore landing, close to the hospital, steadying the machine in the heavy current with engine and controls. Men in bathing suits battled out and took the stretcher on their shoulders. Forty minutes

after leaving Cranberry, Ruth was safe in a hospital bed, with a group of nuns fluttering over her.

For the first two days Ruth was in hospital she was desperately ill. Then she took a gradual turn for the better. I was living at a hotel, and had brought our small portable typewriter. When not at the hospital, I tried to work.

As soon as I knew Ruth was going to get well, my relief was so great that other problems seemed of small importance. But there was one thing about which I had to make a decision. A week or so earlier, we had given Paddy a contract to build us a log cabin. The logs were already there. It was to rise in our birch grove, and all of us, including Paddy, could hardly wait to see it built. But now we were faced with hospital and doctors' bills, the cost of the hotel, of air and rail transportation, as well as Bud's keep in Cranberry. With all these extra expenses, would we be able to afford the cabin? Should I tell Paddy to wait? I couldn't discuss it with Ruth, she was still much too ill, so the decision had to be mine.

I tried to size up all the advantages and disadvantages, but still could not make up my mind. Then, just days after Ruth and I had arrived at The Pas, Bud came south by trolley, to join me at the Opasquai Hotel. She had lots of news. The Browns had a curly pup, flown in from Lac La Ronge as a present from the Hall brothers. Billie Sauna had taken all the laundry and bedding from our tents, so it would be clean and nice when Mum got home, and Society Red and Paddy were building themselves a cabin right next to the Lakeview. This last item made me wonder. Was Paddy playing safe, and using "our" logs to build his own place? No–not Paddy. But the thought of him building his own cabin suddenly made me see things more clearly regarding our own life-plan. I remembered Ruth's earlier decision about it–"Let's gamble and live." I decided to let Paddy go ahead.

Meanwhile, tension was building on the Andy Taylor situation. A great oval table, at the hotel where we had our meals, was reserved for male guests, although Bud was allowed to sit there with me. At the moment, quite a number of the hotel's occupants were reporters from Outside, who had been sent north by their newspapers to cover the expected rescue. There had already been wide coverage of the search. Canadian and American papers, East and West, had been following it with their own correspondents, or through the press services. Then, as weeks went by, and there was still no trace of the lost man, public interest faded. The occasional

brief item described him as "certainly dead." No man had ever been able to survive under similar circumstances for even half as long.

Then searchers found the message scratched on bark. Taylor was alive, and again his story became hot news. His message had given the direction he planned to take in a final attempt to find food or help. It seemed certain now that, dead or alive, he would be found, and top newsmen from both the United States and Canada were in The Pas to get the story.

The day after Bud arrived the news broke. Andy Taylor, found by a canoe party, had been brought south that day by plane. He was in The Pas hospital. The reporters around the big table at the hotel were raging because they couldn't get to him. Orders from Fred Coleman, a prospecting partner, were that no one could see Taylor. Some said that Taylor had made a hot gold strike, others that Coleman was after big money for the story. All reporters were barred from the hospital. Two of them had beaten the barricade, but they got nowhere–Taylor refused to talk. Meanwhile–ranting editors Outside were demanding the story.

As Bud and I were on our way to the hospital to visit Ruth, I wondered about my own chances on the Taylor story. If I could get in to see him, he still might refuse to talk, but I had nothing to lose by trying. No editor was hounding me for the story. I hadn't any editor. The items Ruth and I sent to the Winnipeg *Tribune* either appeared or didn't appear, and each month we got some sort of cheque.

I had seen Coleman around the hotel. Now he was standing at the hospital's main door, refusing entrance to three indignant reporters. Tall, lounging, well-dressed, he had more the appearance of a successful businessman than a prospector, and was best known as a gambler. A meandering Bud in tow, both of us in scuffed outing togs, I excused our way past the group and entered.

Ruth smiled wanly, as always, when we arrived. She was still in considerable pain and, at times, semi-groggy. But she had been alert enough to keep track of what went on around her. She knew the lost prospector was in the hospital, and she knew his room number. It was on that same floor.

I watched till the Sister in charge was well along the corridor and the others busy. I reached his door, tapped, and entered.

Andy Taylor's appearance was startling. Only a shaggy head showed from under the bed coverings. Fevered eyes gleamed from a mat of yellow beard and long hair.

"My wife is ill two rooms along," I said. "Kenyon flew her in from Cranberry a few days before he brought you. Thought I'd drop in and offer congratulations."

He eyed me a long moment. The skin stretched over the points of his face was blistered red with the sun, raw with fly bites. He drew one hand slowly forth and extended it. It was the hand of a living skeleton. I took it.

"Thanks," he said. His voice was low-pitched and quavering. "Figgered first you was a newspaperman."

"Why?" I asked. "Reporters been bothering you?"

He nodded. "They were here. Never thought about offering congratulations though. Didn't give a damn about me. All they wanted was the story. Walked in and demanded it."

"I'm not tied to any paper," I said, "but I write some. It's your story to use as you please; but if you should decide to talk about your experience, I'd be glad to know."

Again he eyed me. "You talk like a man, not like a machine," was all he said.

We chatted. I told him of happenings in the rest of the world during the weeks he was lost, described how his story had been in every newspaper, and on every tongue. The room door pushed open. A Sister rustled in, stopped, and stiffened.

I tried to make my nod casual, but my hope of landing the story all but died. I felt frozen with disappointment. Now that I had met this man I knew his story could be big. Really big.

There was what seemed to be a very long silence. The Sister eyed me, waiting.

Then Taylor gestured. "Friend of mine. It's all right." She smiled, nodded politely to me, and left.

We chatted on. I didn't press. When I rose to go, he waved me down.

"I've been thinking," he said. "I don't figger Fred'll mind if I give you something. If people's been following my case, pulling for me like you say, it's maybe the least I can do to thank them through the papers."

He talked an hour, with one interruption for a light feeding. He had lost eighty-five pounds during his ordeal. I asked if he minded if I took notes, and he shook his head.

His story was one of desperate hardship, told without frills. It had begun when he had left camp to get a pail of water after dark. It was raining, and the wind was high. Somehow he got turned

about, and couldn't find his way back. With him he had a pail, three matches, an axe, and a miniature penknife, worn as a watch charm. The last match failed as he tried to light a beacon fire in the rain. He lost the axe the next day when he shied it at a sitting partridge, and watched his only weapon slither down a rock-face into deep water.

For days he wandered through the rock and lake wilderness, at times swimming rivers with his clothing kept dry on tiny pole-rafts he contrived, climbing every promontory for a lookout, seeing always the same fire-killed bleakness on every side.

"Were you ever real hungry?" he asked me, eyes wide, with the look of starvation still in them. "Maybe you think you'd not eat bugs, or dead fish washed ashore, or the salty grubs you find under rocks. You would. Raw frogs was better, but they're slippery devils to catch."

He had been wearing knee-length leather boots, that soon wore out on the rough, burnt-over ground. He cut off the bottoms, and fashioned the tops into moccasins with the aid of tough roots and the toy knife. For days he would stay near some lake edge; then, knowing his strength was failing, and always with the hope of finding aid on the next lake, he would struggle on. His clothes were in tatters, his body torn with the rough going. Flies and insects chewed his face and neck raw. At night, he curled up in some clump of bushes to fight mosquitoes and, later, the cold, till the dawn of another cheerless day. As he went, he left notes, rock mounds, or broken tree branches, as clues for possible searchers.

After weeks of wandering, starved, nearly naked, he found his sanity going. For days it rained, the cold rain of the wilds. The winds that came with it, and after it, were biting.

"I tried to think of how to weather one awful night," he said. "I tried the water in the lake. I slid into that black water and found it warmer, at first. Then I began to get cold. My teeth were chattering. I was worse off than ever.

"I dragged myself from the water to a grove of spruce. Some of the dirt close to the tree trunks was dry. With my bare hands I dug a hole between the roots, long enough to lie in and more than a foot deep. It looked like a grave, and I knew it might turn out to be one. It took a long time to gather dry dirt from close around the trunks of other trees, and pile it by the hole. The moss was wet, but I collected a big pile and some spruce boughs. I took off my clothes, wrung them out standing there in the cold, and put them back on.

When I had everything ready, I laid down in the hole and packed the dirt around me, then the moss and boughs.

"Before long, body-feeling began to come back. In a few hours, I was warmer. By morning, my clothes was nearly dry. That idea saved my life that night, and lots of others."

As he talked, Andy Taylor was miles away, re-living those forty-six days of hell, while staring at the white hospital ceiling. When he came to the point where he had, finally, given up hope and decided it was all over, his story slowed.

"I gave up then," he admitted. "I was nearly dead from hunger, drenched by a whole day of rain. I couldn't make fifty feet at a time. I was on a stretch of barren rock, with no shelter. Twice I was knocked out by falls on the rocks.

"I don't know how long I laid there that last time. Then I gave up. I crawled to the edge of a big rock and fumbled in the rags I wore till I found the little knife. I set my arm against the rock and cut my wrist."

He was silent a while. "Three places I cut it, but I was too weak, or the knife blade was too little. I couldn't hit the artery. I crawled higher and hung my arm down over the rock to help the bleeding." He sighed, and went on: "People that's not been through it might say I was yellow. I figger I wasn't sane then. I couldn't seem to help it.

"But the bleeding must've cleared my head. I got thinking. I got thinking of my wife and kids back home. I got thinking of the boys I knew would be looking for me. It didn't seem square to them, somehow.

"So I laid there and fought it out. I pulled myself together, tied up my cut wrist, and started moving again. Nine days after leaving a lake I found myself back there. It was soon after that they came. I don't know how long." He fell silent.

I rose to go. He was moved by his own story, his eyes moist. I also was moved, and I wanted to be fair. "Anything you don't want mentioned won't be," I told him.

The shaggy head nodded slowly. "Thanks. I didn't figger to tell nobody about . . . my wrist," he admitted. "Just leave that out."

Chapter 9

Back at the hotel, with Bud tucked in bed, I stared at the wall wondering how to handle the story. Every paper and news service was somehow represented in the area. The Winnipeg *Tribune*, the only newspaper ever to hear of us, already had a man in The Pas. I was overawed by these big-name news-hawks. While frustrated editors Outside cursed, and burned up telegraph wires, I sat in a room at the Opasquai Hotel, wondering what to do with my batch of scribbled notes.

I knew where I could get help with the story. Any one of ten experienced men, chain-smoking cigarettes in the lobby below, would have been glad to help. Well–I was green, but not that green!

My casual wire to the Winnipeg *Tribune* terminated forever our association with the Church and Country editor.

Can you use first person story Andy Taylor lost prospector?

Could they! A flash came instructing me to send every detail, to inform the *Tribune* man in The Pas that I would handle the story.

Rush story. Rush pictures. Rush everything.

Typewriter clatter in the hotel that night would have been dynamite. I wrote. The dishevelled, lone night-operator at the telegraph office groaned when he saw my lengthy dispatch, in long hand.

I planned to see the *Tribune* man next morning, but listening to the madhouse at breakfast changed my mind. Cigarettes were lit, jabbed out, followed at once by others. Reporters were already receiving hot telegrams from their papers. They read them aloud to each other, compared notes, cursed. They had been "scooped"–whatever a scoop was. What annoyed them most was that no one would admit to having copped the story. I sat tight, more than ever awe-struck at everything and everyone in this new, big-time field I had crashed.

A day later, great bundles of Winnipeg *Tribunes* arrived by train from Outside. Grim reporters snatched copies and scanned them.

The front-page story, blown up from my notes, carried a banner headline. A real reporter would have raised hell at finding no by-line, but I was vastly relieved.

That day, I filed more copy on Andy Taylor. Wires began arriving from eastern editors, wanting me to represent them in the North. I was mystified. With no by-line on the story, how did these eastern people know who had landed it? I simply blundered on. With Bud dawdling beside me I continued to visit Ruth at the hospital–and Andy Taylor.

The first day Taylor was out of bed I got pictures. Still bearded, draped in a long hospital gown, he hobbled out to the upper balcony. Being a family man, he insisted that Bud join him. Even with his wild hair and beard trimmed, he looked so fearsome that Bud was openly unenthusiastic about the idea of being used as a decoy. But she finally complied. I got the film away with the Pullman porter on that night's Winnipeg train, and wired the *Tribune* to meet him.

The editors must have liked the human-interest touch. Instead of trimming Bud from the cut, as I had expected, they let it run. In the next few days, exclusive photos of bearded Andy Taylor, appearing throughout the continent, showed our four-year-old towhead, unsung, scowling beside him.

Locally, I knew Bud with her boy's haircut would be instantly recognized. I turned up at the next hotel meal with a fluttering where my appetite belonged. But my stomach was wrong; the reception I got was cordial. Reporters asked about my affiliations, offered congratulations, and let me buy them drinks. By now I could afford to.

The single hold-out was a pudgy, red-faced man. While others chatted amiably, he told me, "The real story hasn't been cracked. They don't want it cracked. They're taking Taylor to Winnipeg for an operation. Do you know what kind?"

"Hernia," I found myself lying like a veteran, I hoped. "Old trouble come back."

He grinned wisely. "Yeah? Thought maybe it was flat feet from wearing those homemade moccasins. Anyhow, I've got a date with the Doc to find out. Sorry boys. Exclusive."

We soon found out what he was up to.

Rumours of Taylor's attempted suicide had leaked. Cords in one wrist were severed. With facilities lacking in The Pas, doctors had been in touch with Winnipeg. By playing up the suicide issue, a

reporter could get square with Taylor and Coleman for holding out on the story.

I got to Taylor and we talked about it. Without mention of the hardship preceding it, the suicide attempt would be damaging to Taylor. I wrote the story, from his standpoint, and wired it to several editors. It was another scoop, and the damaging effort never saw print.

The cheques and bonuses for the Andy Taylor story paid all the hospital, medical, hotel, and transportation costs incurred by Ruth's illness. Aside from that, we had made many contacts in the newspaper field and, in a short period of time, had learned much about writing.

One item in the original story boomeranged, however, arriving back within inches of my innocent jaw. The *Tribune* re-write man had credited Taylor's partner, Fred Coleman, with pressing on when others had given up. Actually, Coleman had spent most of his time organizing the search. He had been out over the area by plane, but had done little or no ground trailing.

Weeks later, after Taylor had returned to South Porcupine, Coleman stepped from a plane in his home settlement of Cold Lake. Grim-faced men were waiting. They displayed the *Tribune* dispatch and suggested, with blue frills, that he get back in the plane and land elsewhere.

Coleman did. With a companion he landed at Cranberry, looking for me. He found me. I was leaving Syd's Bakeshop, after talking prairie days with a mild old Granny, who lived in back with Syd and his wife, Miranda. My mind was at peace, my only weapon a loaf of hot bread.

Coleman was six-foot-two. His openly pushy friend was just as big, and just as drunk. Shouting threats, Coleman denied giving such an interview, or making such a claim. His pal backed him up with equal belligerence.

I remembered my fists-open-mouth-closed promise to Ruth, wondering how effective a loaf of bread might prove as a cushion between my jaw and the bony fist Coleman was waving. My free fist I kept open, but it was no time to stay silent. I admitted the hero bit had been overdone, but reminded him that he had raised no objection at the time. It was the wrong thing to say; Coleman stepped closer. I added quickly that in a re-write job on a hot story, with the presses waiting, such things could happen.

That comment brought unexpected help. "Hold 'er, Fred!" His boozy mate came close to me, peering from eyes that told of many bad nights. "Zat true? Re-write man work that story Outside?" I assured him that was what had happened, and he stepped back. "Ten years in the game," he told me. "Saskatoon." He jerked his head in Coleman's direction. "Lemme handle this."

Somehow he did. Coleman at last stopped sizzling, opened his fists, and grunted. A visit to Mac's Place concluded things. The pair had a long start on me, and I was able to survive the bout.

Chapter 10

While still in The Pas, as I recalled the help given us at Cranberry, I felt even warmer toward the place and its people. That Ruth might feel differently, didn't occur to me. I had sent Paddy windows, roof and floor lumber, and rubberized roofing for the new cabin. Furnishings could be ordered from Outside later; meanwhile, we could manage indoors with our original camping outfit. Ruth knew nothing about the cabin being underway. It was to be a surprise for our arrival home.

Then, with her recovery almost complete, something came up to change things. Pain showed in her eyes at any mention of our return to Cranberry. I thought the rough trolley trip could be the reason, and made arrangements to fly. I, myself, was anxious to get back. Reports had Cranberry Portage booming. I wanted to catch up on spot news and article material.

But the problem wasn't transportation, as I found out one day while we sat in the sun on the hospital balcony. I was talking of how work was progressing on the Flin Flon job, of a branch rail-line planned for Sherritt-Gordon Mine, north and east of Cranberry. This would mean new mobs of men, and a winter of mad activity. For a writer who was right on the spot, I told her, things looked bright.

Ruth looked up. "I'm afraid of that place. Don't let's go back."

All I could do was stare.

"I've thought about it a lot," she went on. "It isn't worth the gamble. What I went through was bad enough, but what about you? You know the risks you've been taking on your health. What chance do you have? Or Bud? I can't bear to think of taking Bud back there."

I tried to reassure her. Many of our hopes had come true, and Cranberry had done it. How could we leave it all now? "It isn't as you remember it," I told her. "It's better. The hot weather is about over. They must have cleaned up the settlement–there haven't been any more desperate cases like yours."

Ruth was silent. She had said what there was to say. I felt helpless. Her expression was the one she had had when the gold-search trip had come up, the look she tried to hide when I worked too long and hard, or when I weighed myself on the freight scales at the Airways dock, and fell far short.

It was only fair, now, to give her the whole picture. "It's going to be a lot different," I said. "With a good stove, we could eat all our meals at home, and avoid all the risks of café meals. For a while, we might even get Billie Sauna to cook for us at our cabin."

"*Cabin*?"

I nodded, full of sudden hope. "It's almost finished. Living room with a bedroom partitioned off, and a lean-to kitchen. Everything fresh and clean. It was to be a surprise. I can see now it was stupid not to tell you."

Her eyes were moist, only partly with tears. Interest was there as well, and excitement coloured her cheeks.

"There's talk of a permanent doctor and nurse at Cranberry, too," I told her. "I won't try to persuade you, but it *will* be different. Anyway, we can always sell the cabin."

"Not till I see it. What about furnishings?"

"If you like the cabin, and want to stay, we'll order them."

She sat silent a moment, then reached for the buzzer. A Sister came swishing out to the balcony. "Could you, do you think," Ruth asked, "find me an Eaton's mail-order book?"

Back in Cranberry Portage, we spent our first night at the Browns' cabin. It was small, with a crowded main room, and two cubicle bedrooms. Helping to fill the main room was a big cabinet Victrola Brownie had flown in, plus stacks of recordings, mostly from musical shows. The machine was kept busy entertaining Airways staff and flying customers. Canadian ways were new to Di (who was called, in fun, *Lady* Di), but she caught on fast. Extra bedrolls were tossed on the floor for unexpected guests, and she didn't turn a hair.

We hadn't been able to move into our cabin for one peculiar reason–wood shavings. Leaving Ruth at the Browns', I had hurried with Paddy up the wooded path to find the exact picture I had imagined–a small structure of peeled spruce logs set in a sloping grove of birches. I knew Ruth would be thrilled. To speed things up, Paddy had entrusted the fitting of doors and windows to a squat, swarthy citizen known as the Chirper. We looked in at a long window beneath the low eave to find the Chirper very busy. Whistling with great cheer, he was edge-planing a board. Ribbons of white wood streamed from between his hands and boiled into the room.

Paddy's blue eyes were hard. He motioned me to remain outside, spat out his tobacco, cleaned his beard with the back of his hand, and entered.

"Have ye no saw?" he asked, indicating the shavings tangle. "Two days ye've been at them trim boards that needs only ten minutes."

The Chirper lit his pipe, taking his time. "Longer 'e stays away, longer the job lasts. No need to tell 'im nothing. That's wot's wrong with this world–workers like us don't 'old together."

Paddy flung the board from the stands. "What's wrong with this world is there's too many rat-brained articles like yerself in it! Ye've been here nine days! I'm payin' ye for six; that's givin' ye plenty graft. Here, take yer money, or I'll black yer name with every white man in the town. Now git!"

The Chirper got. When he was gone the back way, Paddy came out. The fire died from his eyes. "To think," he observed, "our Lord was once a carpenter."

As we cleared up the cabin together, he related settlement news. "I'm glad yer back," he said. "We're to have a school. The settlement supplies log walls and volunteer labour, the government the roof, floor, windows, doors, and what-all. They're buyin' logs that's already set up. Them of Droopy Gibson's with the bark still on, next the Swede's."

I jerked up. "That's crazy! It isn't half big enough for a school! Droopy built it for a bachelor cabin. Besides, it's in the most crowded part of town! That's no place for kids!"

"Ye're wrong." Paddy stayed calm. "It's the best set of logs for the school. Old Droopy, ye see, owes money to two of them big shots. They buy Droopy's logs, they git paid. There's a meetin' tonight for it."

We hadn't planned to get involved in settlement politics, but something was cockeyed here. What was needed was a building big enough to hold dances in, because that would help to pay school costs. A wall structure of Paddy's, the logs already peeled, was favoured by Mrs. Sauna, and others. It would provide a finished building, twice the size of Droopy's, and, situated halfway between the Lakeview and our own cabin, was well clear of what Paddy called "the scummery." I decided to attend the meeting.

My first clue to the under-the-table dealing was that the meeting was being held in Tobacco Jowls' stoppinghouse. A merchant was chairman, but Jowls was having difficulty controlling the twitching of his neck muscles–a sure sign of scheming afoot. As I found a seat

on a bench, Mrs. Sauna caught my eye and winked.

The eager merchant told the crowd that Droopy Gibson's set of logs could be bought for only $110. Furthermore, Mr. Gibson would donate ten dollars of that amount to the school fund. He moved that the deal be closed.

I mentioned the need of a larger place, and that Paddy's site and structure had been considered by many a good bet. This brought from the chair the surprising information that Paddy would not sell.

I found myself forced to wonder aloud if Paddy mightn't be persuaded to change his mind. Others agreed, among them Mrs. Sauna. When a motion was passed that two delegates from the meeting be sent to interview Paddy, the merchant and Jowls promptly volunteered. Mrs. Sauna just as promptly overruled them.

The appointed delegates, a commercial fisherman, and Bakeshop Syd, both with kids, returned with Paddy's price: $150, and a $20 donation for the school fund. A vote okayed it, only Tobacco Jowls and the merchant dissenting. The latter protested that it was a damnable thing to bleed the Provincial Government for the additional roof lumber and flooring that the larger premises would require. This claim nearly brought the house down with laughter.

Leaving, Mrs. Sauna sidled up to me. "I couldn't get hold of you. Who told you?"

"Paddy."

Her eyes laughed. "The booggers," she said.

The school was built entirely by volunteers. Constructionmen, fishermen, prospectors, traders, trainmen, and transients piled in, with the experienced Jowls in charge. I dodged heavier work, but did my share. Wing Wong amazed all by winning the roof-shingling competition. Mrs. Sauna's committee collected cash donations for school furniture, and promises of future donations to pay a teacher's salary.

For the grand opening, a concert, box-social, and dance, the place was packed at a dollar a head. Speeches extolled Cranberry's future. With Tobacco Jowls as auctioneer, there was reckless bidding on ornate lunch boxes, supplied by the ladies. Money for the school rolled in. A hitch developed when a prospector, fresh from a trail-diet of bacon and bannock, paid twenty dollars for a be-ribboned parcel claimed by Jowls to hold only sweets and goodies. Packed by a Cree matron, the box contained bacon and bannock. Disgusted, the prospector hurled it back. In spite of his eighty-whatever years, Jowls dodged the fancy missile and, later, sold the wreckage to a soused late-comer for an additional three dollars.

Opening the dance, the new school treasurer's say was short and peppery: "We don't want this floor ruined. Ever'body with hobnails in their boots is to stay outside." Jowls, standing nearby on the platform, nodded grim assent, but there was a startled hush. Railroaders, prospectors, and roustabouts almost all wore hobnails. They had donated both money and work to the school, and were here to enjoy the completed job.

I waited for the open protest. It came–from right beside me. Recovered from her illness, Ruth was present for the big show. "You can't let him get away with that!" she whispered. "Get up!"

"I crimped them on the log deal," I said. "They'll think I'm always horning in. Somebody'll get up."

Nobody did–and suddenly I knew why. Nobody needed to protest now. But pretty soon donations would be required for the teacher's salary–and that's when the hobnail set would get even with us! Meanwhile, Ruth still prodded and from a far corner, Mrs. Sauna, resplendent in a dress of bright green satin, signalled frantically.

I got up. With the kind of respect befitting his new position, I reminded the chairman of the percentage of those present who wore hobnails. I noted that, although not family men, they had worked and donated cash cheerfully. I suggested that the dance be thrown open to all who had paid entrance, and Mrs. Sauna led the applause.

The chairman sprang to the platform edge. As secretary-treasurer of the school, he stated, he forbade hobnails. He shook with importance and sat down.

"Vell, Holy Yeezus!" came from the back.

Again I was prodded to my feet. As a shortcut, I called for a crowd guarantee that if the floor met ruin from hobnailed boots, the owners of the boots would provide lumber and lay another. When the cheering died, I made it a motion. Tobacco Jowls, his neck muscles working with vigour, as he saw how things were bound to go, doublecrossed his dumbfounded committee member with the greatest of ease, and became my seconder.

The dance was a wild soirée. Music was gratis, the musicians taking turns at dancing and playing instruments on the raised platform. I was free of the banjo, standing with Ruth, when four city-dressed men crossed to where we were. One, in tweeds, bowed and said, "I have some friends who wish to meet you and your wife."

Two were slight, thin-faced men, one dark, the other tall and prematurely white. The third man was a portly old gentleman, bald and jovial.

Tweeds did the honours. "Er–Mr. Smith, Mr. Brown, and Mr.

Jones, meet Mr. and Mrs.–ah–?"

I laughed. "Green?" I suggested.

Their spokesman reddened. The others laughed with me. "Fair enough," the white-haired one agreed, and asked Ruth to dance.

The crowd was hilarious, as alky joints along the street did a roaring business. Musicians banged banjos and walloped drums. It being his eighteenth birthday, Freddie, the drummer, had been allowed a gulp from the band's private bottle. He had made it a good gulp. Reaching one finishing flurry of exceptional brilliance, he veered from his Eskimo tom-tom, bonged his heavy homemade sticks along five graduated fry-pans, and clonked a cigar box. Finding himself with one beat left over, he landed his stick blithely upon a shiny bald head passing close before him.

The owner of the irresistible target sank without trace in a sea of jostling bodies. A trip to Mac's place cured his ailment; and when the martyr to rhythm returned in an hour, alky had lulled both his pain and his pride.

The real names of our city friends were still unknown to us. Noting the migrations of the crowd, and their boisterous entries from the street, they asked to see the inside of a joint. Having received the assurances necessary for the protection of the jointmen, I took them to Mac's place. It was only three cabins along, and Mac was the most disreputable bootlegger in town.

Two light taps, and a scraping of feet on a small platform, were enough to get us inside. A dozen men were lounging there. I vouched for my friends to Mac himself, whose facial eczema looked worse than usual. Scratching with yellowed nails on the back of each hand in turn, he peered from beneath a smoke cloud banked against the low ceiling, and, in his hard voice, asked the usual: "Hat-scatch er alky?"

Our genial fat man perched on a bench end. He waved a hand. "Nothing for us, but set 'em up," he ordered.

Mac did. Mostly the call was for alky. It was the jointman's special, which cost $26 a bulk gallon, but brought in $300 a gallon when sold by the drink. Bottles of genuine whiskey at $25 were too awkward to hide and handle, and were not popular with Mac.

Soon the alky was disappearing at a great rate. Someone must have spread the word that free booze was available and more and more men came crowding into the small room. Mac was all smiles. He scurried round, slopping out ever-smaller drinks, and using the excuse of haste when checked. There was interesting talk, but no indication of why the four city men were in Cranberry. The portly

one paid Mac with a large bill–and a chuckle.

When the dance ended, we invited the mystery four, along with some others, to our cabin for food. (Constable George was on a trip, Mrs. George was staying with us.) Our mail-order furnishings had arrived from Outside, including cots and chairs, offering something better than the usual wood blocks as seats. The white-haired man, in an apron, helped Ruth juggle pans of bacon and eggs in our lean-to kitchen, while the stout man chatted with Mrs. George about her husband's police activities. I was beside the quiet, dark man, who looked very tired.

"I want you to know why we were anxious to meet you," he said. I waited. It was evident they were important people in some line. Could they be editors? He went on: "We were out for a bedtime stroll, and looked in at the log school. We were on the porch when the hobnail question came up. Jimmie"–he gestured toward the white-haired man–"was deploring the lack of a hobnail champion, and then you took over. Afterward he said he wanted to meet you, and had the doctor arrange it." The dark man smiled. "The doctor's a good fellow, but he's worried about me. I've been ill. He didn't approve of so much activity."

"Do you mind telling me who you are?" I asked.

"Not at all. My name is Bell. I'm with the railway department in Ottawa."

I must have stared. "Major Graham Bell, Deputy Minister of Railways?"

He nodded. "Our stout friend is Benny Butler, President of Canada Car and Foundry; the doctor is my personal physician this trip."

There was a shout from the kitchen: "Come and get it!"

Graham Bell smiled. "Honourable James Malcolm, Minister of Trade and Commerce; at present he's Acting Minister of Transport."

They were making their visit to determine whether a railway line for the Sherritt-Gordon Mine would be built from Flin Flon, or from Cranberry. The decision meant much to Cranberry. The local board of trade had campaigned for it, and owners of mineral claims *en route* had great hopes of the road passing through their properties.

Ruth and I were to hear the Ottawa men's decision the night they invited us to a dinner party aboard a private rail-car, on the lakeshore siding. They had done a survey of both routes by plane, and had finally voted in favour of the Cranberry cutoff. However, before

the announcement was made, as a courtesy to guests who lived in the area, our opinion was asked.

Ruth, unaware that the matter had already been settled, argued strongly in favour of Cranberry, and outlined her reasons. Her argument was so persuasive that further discussion was ruled out, and a lake was named in her honour, "in recognition of the great service she has rendered the country."

Our host that night was Harry F. McLean, extolled by Tobacco Jowls during our first day in Cranberry. This millionaire contractor was to be widely publicized in later years as Canada's money-throwing Mr. X. From his rail, bridge, and tunnelling jobs in Canada, the U.S. and Mexico, Harry McLean had summoned top experts for the Flin Flon rail contract. He originally had worked his way up from waterboy, knew the construction game backward, and was openly proud of all his men.

At the dinner party, everyone was called on to entertain. Ruth and I had cooked up a bit of doggerel:

> The Contractor Man with his cohorts and chieves,
> His graduates, 'nebriates, thugs, mugs, and thieves,
> Odd ones of 'em crooked, but most of 'em square,
> Drawn from the ends of the earth to be there.
> Men of great loyalty, muscle, or plan–
> "They'll build any road!" cries the Contractor Man!

The Contractor Man liked it. As settlement squatters, we had never received more than curt nods from Company officials. But that night Harry McLean issued an order allowing us travel privileges over all the Flin Flon rail job, and the officials' attitudes became most friendly. In addition, we had picked up Ottawa contacts, and all this was the result of taking the hobnail side of a discussion in a little log schoolhouse!

Now that the school was a point of focus, Cranberry citizens were better organized, and local problems were being solved. Except for sanitation. With warnings being ignored, a hard-hatted Department of Health official was sent from Winnipeg, to hold meetings and threaten legal consequences for offenders.

The most vital problem was the not-too-delicate one of outhouses, and their proximity to neighbouring front doors. At a meeting in the school, the unsmiling envoy offered suggestions, illustrated by grotesque architectural drawings on the blackboard. Finally a uniform type of structure to accommodate from four to six families was

agreed on. A scale of scavenging rates for cafés, hotels, laundries, and private homes was also drawn up. Only one item remained on the agenda.

There was cold silence when the position of scavenger was opened for takers. To avoid the embarrassment of refusal, Paddy hovered just outside the doorway. Tobacco Jowls, also the owner of horse outfits and keen for business, made no comment. Moon Glow didn't go for what he called "all this moose feathers"; satisfied with the facilities which were at the disposal of his hotel guests, he scowled his disapproval of it all.

Actually, Lakeview Hotel's sanitary arrangements had become well known since an event which had occurred a month earlier. One evening, Moon Glow had directed a city salesman to the Lakeview comfort station, a log shack, with a single pole transversing a deep excavation, one half of the pole peeled, the other end with the bark still on. He ignored the traveller's remarks on the structure's crudity, but he kept an eye out to where a sagging door allowed a glimpse of the "bark" end of the outhouse's interior. After several grim glances over his shoulder, Moon Glow exploded from his chair, strode to the door, and yanked it wide. "Here you!" he shouted wrathfully. "Don't none of you ignerant city animals know nothing? Get offa there! That peeled end's the ladies' end!"

Now, with Moon Glow picking away at his strong teeth with a wood sliver, and the meeting at a standstill for scavenger offers, bearded Paddy spoke from the doorway. "I don't want the job, meself, but if ye pay money enough ye'll get action on anythin'."

The suggested wage was doubled to a figure that would make the appointee independent of other work. Within minutes, so many were after the job that the decision was reserved till a later meeting.

Caribou Pete, a gaunt white man with a comfortable-looking Cree wife and a cabin filled with prattling papooses, topped the poll. To Caribou, it was like winning a sweepstake. Being a civic servant gave him prestige, and his appointment required only ownership of horses and a tank wagon, both of which he had.

We were also pleased to find that he took his duties very seriously. A week after assuming his position, a movie was showing in a lakeshore fish warehouse. Bang on ten o'clock, as called for in his contract, Caribou Pete rose from a front bench beside wife and young'uns, and left to begin his rounds. The audience applauded lustily.

It had been quite a week! In seven days we had acquired a school, a scavenger, and a cinema. Big stuff! Culture had come to Cranberry, and more was in the offing.

Chapter 11

That thirty-million-dollar flood that all the North had been waiting for was now pouring into the Flin Flon area from the Whitney mining people. Suddenly a lot of other New Yorkers became interested. Magazine editors wanted stories on Canada's frontier boom, and their top writers began to invade the wilderness. Which is how our miracle came about.

Like most miracles, it was wholly unexpected. At the cabin in the birches our day was progressing as usual, except for the extra chores of washday. When I wasn't bringing water from the new well, which was Paddy's latest contribution to any who cared about pure water, I was at my typewriter, trying to write fiction. Ruth had a heavy load of wash to struggle through, and my story refused to be born. In addition, it was Indian summer, a throw-back to July heat, and much too fine a day to be either washing or working. Nobody was feeling too happy, and domestic relations were inclined to be strained.

Suddenly I was surprised by a knock on the front door, an entrance that was seldom used. I was greeted there by a tall, gaunt man and a blonde, attractive young woman. For a moment I could only stare at their get-up–they were dressed for the dead of winter in heavy rainbow blanket-cloth shirts, wooly mackinaw breeks and jackets, thick socks, high shoepack footgear, and knitted wool caps.

Then came my second shock.

"I'm Courtney Ryley Cooper." The man uncovered a bald head and introduced his wife.

I couldn't believe it. Courtney Ryley Cooper was a writer for the *Saturday Evening Post*, world-famous for his stories and books on circus life. For me to meet so big a writing name in the flesh was like a parish priest blundering into a chance encounter with the Pope.

Bug-eyed, all but speechless, I managed to invite them to come in

and sit down. Then I excused myself, and went through to the steamy lean-to kitchen where Ruth was bent over a washboard.

"You know Courtney Ryley Cooper? Writes for *Saturday Post*?"

Ruth looked up, her face glowing with exertion. She shoved back her damp hair, and sighed. "I'm reading an elephant yarn of his right now. Or will be if I ever get this damned beautiful white wash hung out."

"Chance to have it autographed," I told her. "He's in the other room."

"You're never funny on washday." She went back to her scrubbing. "Who is in there?"

I assured her that I was not being funny, that Courtney Ryley Cooper and his wife were in the next room.

"And don't start asking them if they're planning a trip to the North Pole," I warned. "Their outfits are a month ahead of the weather. Come and meet them."

Ruth's reaction was typically feminine. "Good gosh! Look at me! How can I meet anybody?"

She needn't have worried. The Coopers were equally startled to meet someone like Ruth in so rough a town, and even more surprised when Bud showed up. They agreed to stay for lunch, but insisted it must be camp style, without frills.

By now I had successfully come through the first shock of seeing Courtney Ryley Cooper in the flesh. But I found myself wondering, "God, why have they come to us? What have *we* got to offer?" They soon explained. Our lady-moose story in the Winnipeg *Tribune*, the one that had got Constable George into so much trouble, was paying a further unexpected dividend. A clipping of the story had been seen by the famous U.S. editor, Bob Davis, while visiting Winnipeg. He had showed it to Ryley Cooper, and when the Coopers planned a two-week trip to the end of steel on the Hudson Bay Line, they had included a special side-trip to Cranberry to look us up.

We spent the rest of the day talking about the North country, and the Flin Flon program. Having had the run of the rail construction job, there was a lot I could tell them. They found it hard to believe that bottomless muskeg pits, or sinkholes, could take a *trainload* of gravel to fill each *foot* in length of roadbed–that a pit 250 feet across might engorge even more than 250 trainloads. I told them about the great rock blast-and-fill contracts, edging Schist Lake, where built-up pressure on the slope rock formations which lay underneath might whisk everything, including the grade, passing

trains and crews, into lake waters. I described how subcontracts were completed by hundreds of rugged men facing every kind of operational and weather hazard. I told them of accidents, deaths, failures–and magnificent successes.

Meanwhile Ryley Cooper told us something of his own plans. He had come North to get material for a series of *Saturday Evening Post* articles, and a fiction serial for *Country Gentleman.* We were stunned at the thought of anyone being able to gather that much story material in a short two weeks, and I learned all I could about his methods. He was most patient, asked to see our published work, and offered tips on style, and on different methods of approaching a story. Ruth and I soaked up every word.

Ryley was leaving on the Hudson Bay Line from The Pas the next day by what was called the Muskeg Special. His wife, Gen, had intended to wait for him in The Pas, but Ruth persuaded her to stay with us instead. We found her a fascinating companion who knew most of the big-name magazine writers, editors, and agents in New York and elsewhere. Fortunately, she and Ruth were much the same size, so she was soon relieved of her heavy mackinaw ensemble. Overnight, Mrs. Courtney Ryley Cooper had become a colourful part of our family, and of our mad squatter settlement.

We introduced her to all the local sights, and smells.

We took her over the portage to what was called locally "the canoe rack," two sets of posts with cross-bars, beside a sandy trail at the top of the slope. Hoisting a heavy canoe from the ground was an irksome chore of portaging. Laden packers went between the posts, set their canoe's bow and stern on the shoulder-high rack, and stepped from under it to rest. She was astonished that records showed white men crossing the Portage in 1763.

With Bud, Mrs. Cooper viewed the kennels, which were within easy howling distance of our cabin, where Earl Brydges bred and summered his hound huskies, and trained them for the winter dog derbies. Each racing dog was chained to a separate tree. Judging by their howls and explosive, lunging snarls, any one of them would be capable of swift murder. But their hostility was partly Bud's fault. Although we still did not own a dog, Bud had succeeded in attracting half the settlement's canine crowd. Wherever she went, she was surrounded by a forest of curled, or waving, tail plumes. And the sight of other dogs running free was pure torture to any dog on the end of a chain.

Then came the weekly school pie social and dance, and Gen Cooper from dignified Park Avenue was treated to a live northern fracas. The innocent cause of the trouble was the new teacher, only lately arrived from Winnipeg. (The question of what sex our schoolteacher should be had been decisively ruled upon by the hobnail set.)

Now the tall dark girl was being literally kept on the whirl. Since she knew that her salary depended upon regular male attendance at the dances, she was doing her best to be a super-diplomat. Somehow her dances, booked hours ahead, got crossed up. The result was our social season's best head-on collision, between two well-lit steel-gang heart-throbs, a fight that ended in Constable George's bridge-timber jail.

Our Husky Howlers band played gratis, except for a bottled bribe, which was unofficially deducted each week by Mrs. Sauna from the door take. Gen Cooper, having witnessed the fight, and having watched Ruth survive a wild polka with one of Mrs. Sauna's flying Swedes, decided only to watch. However, she was not neglected. At lunchtime, eating one of Bakeshop Syd's apple pies while a crowd of men milled about her, she was handed a tobacco-stained hunting knife, hilt first, by the ever-helpful Cyclone Ned.

When Ryley returned from the North, the Coopers insisted we be their guests for three days in The Pas, so we went there by passenger coach tagged to a freight. Compared with Cranberry, The Pas was a modern metropolis. The new Cambrian Hotel actually boasted suites, complete with baths for people, not laundry. Ruth and Bud pronounced it Heaven. Meanwhile, in the beer parlours, Ryley drew talk from frontier characters, which gave me a further opportunity to study his methods.

Then we were invited along with the Coopers to a big dance in town, the Freeze-Up Frolic. Because Ryley already was hard at work on a *Post* article, they declined the invitation, but Gen insisted we go. There followed a mysterious conference between the girls—and when Ruth reappeared I saw why. We had brought town clothes from our big wardrobe trunk in the cabin where they had hung since coming North, ignored. Ruth's were still being ignored. With the courtesy of borrowed clothing reversed, squatter-town Ruth was a knockout in the latest from New York, including a fur coat that was to remain high on her list of unfulfilled dreams. "You'll be shopping in New York someday," Gen told her that night.

There was scant sign of it, but if any such possibility existed, it was certainly helped by their visit. In The Pas we had long chats with Ryley about magazine writing and U.S. markets. Later, we received patient, helpful letters from him. No established writer was ever freer with advice and assistance to a pair of groping beginners.

As a starter, we had hit a hot story during Gen's stay with us at Cranberry. While searching lakeshore, dollar-a-night bunkhouses for someone to rechink our cabin for the winter, I came across Eskimo Charlie, a squat, swarthy Serbian with eyes puffy from earlier snow-blindness. During years spent in futile search of free Arctic gold, he had lived one long adventure. Now, like many other drifters, he had landed in Cranberry Portage–broke.

We did all we could to help him, including finding him other work when our cabin was finished. In return, during a series of long coffee sessions, he talked. His life had been one continuous saga of danger and hardship; he had witnessed murder, famine, and cannibalism during long Arctic nights. At one time, five Eskimo wives had fought each other for the favours of the one they called "Kablu-na-htahak" –White Master of the Barrens. The stories he told brought us our biggest cheques yet, but, being green, I managed to muff the deal. Ryley Cooper, when he read the published material, wrote from New York: "Great first-person stuff. Should have been a book."

Inspired by the Cooper's visit, I was determined to conquer problems of fiction writing. Days were becoming shorter, and the long dark evenings were for work. Paddy had built us an additional room, to be our office.

In preparation for the winter, we had stacked a wood pile that was warming just to look at. We needed it, since we had the kitchen range and our large living-room heater to keep filled, as well as the stove in our new office annex. We had gasoline lamps, cases of grub, earth and moss banked well up the outer walls. Our outhouse was the required thirty feet from the back door, its detachable seat kept warm behind the kitchen stove. We were ready for winter.

And just in time. Around us were all the ominous signs: bare birches, bleak and penetrating winds, moss crisp underfoot, snow flurries, grey lake waters. On everyone's tongue, as they scrambled to provide tight cover, was the dire word: freeze-up.

Chapter 12

Freeze-up was a mad enough period without having a plane go missing. Throughout the North, icing over meant that all water transport must end. Aircraft, switched from summer floats to winter skis, would be idle several weeks until the new ice could bear their weight. Prospector canoe outfits caught in the wilds could camp until ice travel was safe, or use both canoe and sled to haul the canoe on ice, and ship the sled and dogs over open water stretches.

Freeze-up at Cranberry Portage was a time of special urgency and importance, because Cranberry was the end of steel. The Company was now rushing stacks of rail construction material farther north by cheap water transport. Flin Flon Mine was doing the same. Smaller mines and fur-traders, outfitting their camps and fur-posts, now used Cranberry Portage as a base.

Airways dock was stacked high with freight. As daylight flying hours shortened, more planes and pilots were rushed in. The aircraft of mining companies, like N.A.M.E. and Dominion Explorers, were leaving the Arctic and heading for eastern bases, and all of them made Cranberry a stopover. Air Force fire patrol flying-boats from Cormorant Lake on the Hudson Bay Railway regularly waggled in and hoisted out. With not enough dock space, rows of planes were moored to offshore buoys. Every day, we saw aircraft with new markings and met new pilots. Mick and Brownie were so busy we scarcely saw them.

All during daylight hours planes loaded at the dock and nosed into lake waters that were sullen and dark under heavy skies and icy winds. The smaller lakes were already frozen over. Caught short, canoe-freighting traders begged Airways to fly their goods. Extra ground crews worked day and night on aircraft and engines to keep up the pace.

Then everything came to a full stop. Brownie was missing.

His freight trip was west and north in Saskatchewan. After the

usual wait of twenty-four hours, a search by plane was started. Every hour counted. If freeze-up came, it would mean no further air or ground search for weeks. Other things worried us. The search area had several emergency gas caches, so Brownie's being short of fuel was unlikely. The ugly word "crash" was in everyone's mind.

The next day was colder. A biting wind drove sleet flurries across black waters. Some settlement people, using moss, were chinking cracks in log walls, others were adding to their fuel supply. As they worked, stopping often to search the sky, they talked of the Portage tradition.

"Ye've lost a good pal," Paddy told me as we added to our own woodpile. "He'll not be back. We was due for the third one."

The tradition of people dying in threes was only part of it. Cranberry Portage had its own tradition. In the history of the portage, no one had died a natural death there. Old-time northerners, and new arrivals like ourselves, had the details.

An ancient log hut, first building on the portage, jostled now by raw new buildings like a tired old man in a crowd of milling youths, had known a double murder and three suicides. Two men, greedy for gold, had fought and killed each other there. At intervals since, three others, perhaps moved to morbidness at the thought of the murders, or because of their own lost hopes, had taken the short way out.

Recent rail-construction accidents had helped boost the toll. Then came the two recent deaths among the squatters, the ones Paddy was referring to.

The first was that of a young prospector, son of the red cow's butcher, who had been shot while hunting.

The second victim was the young son of a prominent prospector, Billy Baker, whose wife was a native Cree. While splitting wood, a sharp flying splinter pierced the boy's brain. Mourners gathered in the new school. The small homemade coffin, covered in black cloth held in place by rows of brass nails, rested on the platform while Indian women stood about, weeping silently. A short service was read by a new young missionary, Moosehide Jake. The coffin was placed in a wagon drawn across the portage by Shorty and Spike, with a bearded Paddy, still in tattered overalls, his hat pulled low to hide moist eyes, striding alongside.

Now Paddy, like many others, looked for a third death, and Portage tradition demanded that it be a violent one. Brownie was missing at the worst possible time of year. Grimly, everyone waited.

At the Brown's log cabin, Ruth and I tried to be casual, to act as always. Airways crew and passengers came and went as usual, showing no sign of anything being wrong. Talk flew, but now it concerned any topic but flying, weather, or freeze-up. After spending one winter in Canada, Lady Di was well aware of the added dangers freeze-up involved, but she was braving it well.

The waning day became bleaker and colder. Agent Mick came in for fur gauntlets he had left there, and stopped to play a moment with the baby. She was named Nola, after Brownie's favourite piano number. Someone who was unaware of the name's meaning put the recording on the big Victrola in the corner. Ruth casually turned it off. Even baby Nola sensed a falseness in the general atmosphere. She would not be amused, she refused to eat, and then couldn't sleep for hunger.

"Brat." Agent Mick forced a grin and left.

The hours crawled by. Food was prepared, left mostly uneaten, at last cleared away. Bud came in from play, proud of her new winter parka, its hood trimmed with wolverine fur that wouldn't frost. "No planes," she announced, hauling the parka over her head like someone whose day's work was done.

Talk lagged. Dusk crept out from the bordering evergreens and moved through the settlement. The flicker of flames from the roaring stove became brighter while I delayed pumping and lighting the gasoline lamp suspended from its ceiling hook: the coming of darkness meant the end of hope for another dreary day.

Sprawled upon the floor, Bud jerked up and cocked her sharp ears. "Plane coming."

A plane! The tension broke. Lady Di moved to open the door. The clattery whine of an aircraft engine came from beyond the tree fringe. She drew one deep breath and turned.

"Whose?"

There was no use lying to her. Brownie's ship was a Fokker Universal; the search plane flown by Major Tommy Thompson, was a Fokker Super, larger, and with a heavier engine.

"It's the Super," I admitted to Di. "I'll go down."

"I'm going too." Ruth helped her into a coat. The look Ruth gave me showed the faint hope we all felt.

We hurried in silence through the settlement, past buildings glowing with soft light from within, along narrow lanes, over the spur track, and on down toward the Airways dock. The plane had landed; the throaty roar of an engine pushing floats through bay

waters came to us as an echo among the buildings. That engine was bringing the story. The Super being back meant either that Brownie was with it, or. . . .

We reached the dock. The silent crowd there, both human and canine, recognized Lady Di in the half darkness and cleared a way for her. She stood upon the last inch of dock planking above the dark water, tense, forgetting for seconds to breathe. She seemed about to step from the dock-end as the ship laboured closer. I took her arm. She was shaking, as though chilled through her heavy clothing.

The ship swung about. Its cabin windows were aligned for an instant against the light of the sky, and I saw movement inside.

"Steady, Di," I said. "There's someone in the cabin."

She took a deep calming breath. As the ship veered about for the dock, its cabin door was pushed open against the force of the slip-stream, and a figure emerged onto a wallowing float. Then there was the exaggerated bending of bowed legs and a casual hand flick, a combined gesture that was Brownie's habitual salute.

They slid past us along the dock to where the Airways mechanics and freight-handlers waited. Brownie vaulted up. "Blew a cylinder," he told the head air-engineer. He yanked the helmet from his blond head and kidded his way through the crowd to where Di stood. "Just a little later than usual, Sweet," he apologized, smiling. "Hope you didn't mind awfully."

She clung to him, silent, shaking her head.

We had a party that night. Among the many toasts was a derisive one: "To the Portage tradition!" Brownie clamped down on it, fast. "My grandmother was Irish. Don't twist the devil's tail!"

The Portage tradition had last word. Paddy, his brown beard grown to winter length, was at our door next morning. "The Bull wants ye for jury dooty, along with the Big Boy, meself, and others," he announced. "Jacob Cook is dead." There was satisfaction in his tone. "Shot. The third he was."

Reported missing by his Cree wife, elderly trapper-prospector Jacob Cook had been found, still in a crouched position where a slip on the first glassy ice of freeze-up had discharged his rifle. It would take days to thaw the contorted, frozen body and prepare it for burial. Snow mice had nibbled along the eyebrows. "It's where a man'll sweat. It's the salt of it they're after," Paddy explained to the jury foreman.

The thawing of Jacob Cook nearly brought about two further

fatalities: the bustling merchant, postmaster, school-secretary and Board of Trade head, now by self-appointment the undertaker, and Bornite Joe, who doubled as barber and pool-shark in the same store-post office.

Big Frank Doran, a jobber meat saleman, was in The Pas to meet his wife, coming north from Winnipeg to share a new cabin at Cranberry. Tall and amiable, Bornite Joe had agreed to keep fires going in the empty cabin till the meat-man's return in a week. It happened to be the week Jacob Cook needed thawing. The cabin's owner, keen to introduce his wife to her trim and spotless home, arrived back two days early. With an expectant gleam in his eye, he threw open the door.

Big Frank told me later, told the world: "Christ!–this corpse is tied in a granny knot on my eating table! Not even a newspaper under it or over it!" By the time he had helped his wife recover from her hysteria, the merchant-turned-mortician and his assistant had received warning. "I don't know where they've got to," Big Frank bellowed, searching the town, "but they better be bloody long gone!"

Chapter 13

Each day the fringe of ice grew. A glassy surface extended from the bay shoreline and circled each island, gradually encroaching on the area of black open water farther out. Then came a clear, cold night. All Airways ships were hauled ashore. In the morning, the bay, far along to crowded islands, was completely frozen over.

Everyone took a holiday. After weeks of high-pressure work, freeze-up came as a welcome break for crews–flying, construction, lake boat, and barge. By noon the bay was dotted with skaters. Ruth ran wild on her long racing tubes, paced by Brownie, also on racers, a souvenir of speed-skating victories Outside.

Lady Di, late from England, couldn't ice skate, and I didn't dare; from the warmth of the Airways office, we watched people starting a new winter routine. Swooping skaters and slow-moving pedestrians were like actors on a great glass stage. Already fishermen were cutting ice holes and setting their nets; Paddy was chopping a water-hole for Shorty and Spike. Yelling kids, white and Cree, were out with sleds, skates, and hockey sticks, our Bud bouncing on and off her first bob-skates and her well-padded little rump.

But something familiar was missing from the wide-screen picture of the bay. Suddenly I knew what it was. "Hey!" I shouted, "no dogs!"

Cranberry's canine population knew what it was doing. To casual strays and to dogs with owners, freeze-up came as a jail sentence. Summer meant loafing, luxury; winter meant dog-teams. Sleds were being overhauled, harnesses mended. Even family dogs with young masters deserted them, and took to the woods.

During the freeze-up lay-over, many new travellers had jammed into our squatter-town. After a few days of holiday, men were ready for the trail again, and, after a few days hunger in the woods, so were their dogs. Some of them had good masters, some were not so lucky; others were shanghaied, regardless of former ownership, and disappeared.

Freeze-up at last gave us a chance to sort out Bud's favourite settlement friends. One of those to be shanghaied was old Grampa. Grampa's white-spotted black hide hung from the skeleton of a once-rugged frame. Old age, or a too-steady diet of frozen fish, had cost him every tooth in his huge, bleary-eyed, old head. Without home or friends, Grampa had joined Bud's following. Later we introduced him to the back door of Wing Wong's cafe, where no polite-mannered dog was ever refused a meal.

Grampa began to pick up. Meat scraps that he could down in one gulp found their way to the flat rock that was his private dining table. By freeze-up he was fat and sleek, new light in his eye and a curl to his tail. But that new life was his undoing. One morning he was gone; a Cree kid reported seeing him in harness with other dogs. Willing to work, but toothless and unable to gnaw the frozen fish tossed to him once a day, he didn't make it. A prospector reported seeing Grampa's black-and-white body abandoned on a small lake farther north.

Another of Bud's friends was Constable George's Maggie, like himself ex-R.C.M.P. For five winters in the Arctic she had led a Mounted Police team, while during the summers she had mothered official pups. With a grey muzzle and ears that sagged, Maggie looked with disdain on members of local small-time dog-teams. "The old lady's police record of 25,000 miles and 98 husky pups has gone to her head," George admitted.

Spaniel Peggy, famous among lakeshore flophouse dwellers, was the North's most intelligent dog, or so it was claimed by her owner, a pal of Society Red. One late fall evening, according to her master, Peggy had jumped into Goose Lake, south of Cranberry, to retrieve a duck. After an hour of searching she came ashore for further instruction.

"Git into that lake," the prospector told the little black spaniel. "Don't come back without that duck. You know I never miss!"

The trail partners ate a camp supper and bedded down. Far on into the early, shivery hours of morning, a scrambling and tussling in the nearby bush roused the sleepers. They stirred up the fire and waited. Soon, Peggy backed in from the shadows, wet, and mud-bedraggled, tugging an enormous jackfish.

"Holy doodle!" the partner howled. "Couldn't find the duck so she brung a fish instead!"

Her owner grunted, "That's better, girl." He took his knife, opened the great fish from gills to tail, removed the duck that was in the fish's belly, and returned to his blankets.

Cranberry's best-known dog was Paddy's Silver. Even the gruff Moon Glow recognized his existence, mainly because Silver was always flopped on Paddy's bunk when Moon Glow wanted to sit there.

Silver's parents had been a grey barrenlands wolf and a venturesome husky, yet Silver had no viciousness in him. From when he was a furry ball, till the time he had grown into a huge dog with a beautiful silver-grey coat, he was the town clown. Following a summer of kicks and cuffs because he always chose to sleep on the main drag, Silver blundered across Paddy's trail, and promptly adopted a life partner.

Together with Shorty and Spike, he shared Paddy's deepest affections. Mealtimes, he sat at Paddy's elbow, towering above the table; in cold weather he slept by Paddy's bunk, on guard. Not guarding Paddy. Under that bunk was kept Silver's dessert, a flat, crunchy beaver tail, supplied on order by an Indian trapper. A nibble a night was his ration.

Silver had an interesting record as a fighter, too. Even as an oversized pup he had always been peace-loving. When other dogs fought, it distressed him. Then a wolf hound, owned by Tobacco Jowls, decided that a grown dog loafing about with tail down lacked spunk. The subsequent scrap, which was Silver's first, set his many human friends chuckling. For a month afterwards, the belligerent hound nursed a limp foreleg, and always when he trotted down the street, Silver wore a carefree expression, and carried his plumed tail high over his back in a tight curl.

Silver once proved himself capable of straining even the close friendship between Bud and Paddy. His rough treatment of the newest addition to our family aroused her indignation, and she refused to be convinced by Paddy's long explanation that the dog's behaviour must be excused on the grounds of heredity. Bud proved her point. To our own and Paddy's amazement she succeeded in teaching half-wolf Silver, during his daily visits, to play peaceably with Willie The Cat.

Silver's special pal, who usually accompanied him on visits to our cabin, was Cranberry's dog policeman, Ted. Ted was a huge Collie-St. Bernard, like Silver peace-loving, but a fury if forced into battle. Every cabin in town welcomed him, and every man who ever met Ted, including myself, wanted to own him. As a sleigh dog, he was the best. Anyone could hitch him. Settlement kids, Cree or white, made free use of the knowledge and Ted enjoyed it with them.

He was a natural vocalist–and Bud never tired of hearing him. When he called with Silver at our cabin, she would greet him with the simple request, "Sing, Ted." While Silver sat stupidly eyeing him, Ted would throw up his head and begin with a faint "Oooooo-ing" that increased in volume as his mouth opened, gradually descending the scale to end in a deep bass organ note. However, he would never sing more than once. When he had obliged, he would turn and stalk away, with Silver swinging proudly along behind him.

Big Ted loathed fighting and rowdyism. A snapping, snarling group would dissolve into a bunch of docile dogs when his big frame crashed among them. Any dog foolish enough to disregard his policing methods received a lesson in swift and silent warfare.

Ted was not in town for freeze-up. His master and a partner were caught far from the settlement with a heavy canoe. A pole sled was lashed together, and the partner purchased an Indian dog to help haul. At first Ted was friendly with the big white dog, but after an hour on the trail his attitude changed. Several times he turned to growl, and his master saw why. The Indian dog was a loafer. Barely keeping his own rope tugs taut, he was letting Ted do all the work. The men tried to keep the slacker up in his place, but without luck. From the very first day Ted ignored him, doing the work of several dogs, lugging the clumsy outfit over lake and portage trail. Five days later, gaunt and weary, and glad to be home, he dragged the canoe and sled off Lake Athapapuskow to the partners' Cranberry Portage cabin.

The men freed the team, and noted with surprise a new friendliness between Ted and the white dog. Together the two trotted off, but when Ted returned the Indian dog was not with him.

An explanation came the next day, when the other dog was found. Thoroughly disgusted, and fiercely determined that Cranberry's dogland should not be polluted by such scum, policeman Ted had taken the white quitter into the nearby woods and there had quietly strangled him.

Many northerners spent their winters fur-trapping. Ted's master and others who were strictly prospectors had made it back to town just in time. The inevitable siege of snow that would hide rock, and with it mineral hopes, was overdue. Dug in at Cranberry, some still in tents, many men faced a long dull waiting period till spring break-up again freed the land.

For us, the winter months promised to bring a revival of rail construction work, and additional aircraft, operating on skis. There

would also be settlement lake-fishing and winter-trail activites to cover. But we reminded ourselves that we must use caution. Sharp weather, with extreme changes of temperature, could bring new health hazards and we could not afford to take many risks.

Chapter 14

Lengthening winter nights, brief hours of daylight, and swirling snow storms cut actual flying in half. A great deal of time was spent warming aircraft engines with roaring fire-pots inside the canvas nose-hangers. Brownie and the Airways crew now had long evenings free, but for us winter was a time of work.

Our true-life Northern stories were selling, but the cheques were small–and there were too few of them. I was still only able to work for short periods, with rest periods in between. Even in good months, our income barely covered out needs.

Our new office, which Ruth had dubbed "the sweatshop," did help to keep us organized. A single cot in there allowed me to flatten out whenever I became tired. Paddy was adding finishing touches. While nailing protecting tin along the log wall by the room's small heater, he lifted the lid, spat into the flame, and observed:

"The wood ye need for the heater is birch. There's plenty of it right handy. Let me know when ye want it cut."

"If there's one tree I don't want cut it's a birch," I said quickly. "It's the most beautiful tree there is." I pointed from the window to one of the finest groves of birch in the Northland. "And it's too delicate-looking to spend its winters in this country."

He gave me an odd look, his bearded lips pouted. "Ye don't want 'em cut?"

"Not a one."

"Whatever ye say," he grunted. "But if it's beauty ye want, they make a beautiful heat."

Next day I dead-headed with Brownie on a freight trip that almost was my last trip anywhere. Ruth and Bud were to spend the afternoon with Lady Di and Nola. The main purpose of our flight was to pick up a passenger at Cold Lake, but *en route* we were landing a load of explosives at a mine camp on Sourdough Bay.

Brownie's Fokker, now on skis, still had the open forward cock-

pit with centre stick control, and an extra jump seat beside the pilot. Bundled in woolens under heavy breeks and socks, and moccasins, leather jacket, and borrowed helmet, I perched beside him on the jump seat.

The day was dull, with light snow in the air and a blustery north wind. The world below us was like a drawing, white background with dark trees and jutting rocks etched in. Horse and dog-team trails, wandering over the snowy lake surface, were like finger-smudges on a sheet of clean paper. A wide swath cut across the portage was the Company's new winter trail for tractor-trains, hauling thousands of tons of material to build the rail branch to Cold Lake and Sherritt-Gordon Mine. Cranberry settlement squatted beneath a shifting smoke blanket, upheld by grey-blue columns spinning upwards from a hundred galvanized roof jacks.

Our engine roared over the silent rock and snowscape. Engine heat, and the oil-spattered windscreen, kept our noses and cheeks from freezing in the buffeting slipstream. Nearing Sourdough Bay, the weather roughened. The loaded plane was jerking and pitching as we circled over a cluster of mine-camp buildings, and coasted toward a landing in the small bay.

The bay's tree-lined border was only a hundred feet below us when it happened. We hit one of those air currents that lurk where trees meet open lake, and the Fokker dropped like a stone. Brownie came up hard against his safety-belt, battling for control. With no safety-belt, I kept going.

My lightning flash-picture was of pilot, cockpit, and engine falling from under me. Across the bay, I caught a bird's-eye glimpse of ragged shoreline; below me, waiting, an expanse of smooth snow. I had no time to grab the windscreen in passing. My moccasined feet lashed out for a hold beneath the instrument panel–and missed.

I was clear of the plane, without a chance, when a steel trap closed on my left ankle. It was one quick grab, like the bite of a dog, but enough. I hooked the toes of my other foot under a piece of brace tubing, jack-knifed to gain a hand grip, and was back in the cockpit.

The ground was only feet below, the Fokker half out of control. Brownie pulled a desperate manoeuvre, landed on one ski, swooped, rocked, righted, and plowed to a stop in a blanket of flying snow. At that moment, even if our cargo of explosives had let go as we hit the ice–I don't think we would have heard it.

I can't remember what was said, if anything. We just stared at

one another. There was a strange look on Brownie's face–which was probably reflected on my own. It startled us to realize that the fingers of Brownie's *left* hand had gripped my ankle in that moment when the loaded plane was plummeting downward.

For Brownie to handle a ship that was out of control, only feet from crashing, while using one hand to rescue me, was incredibly fast thinking. It was nothing short of miraculous–an action dictated by pure instinct, rather than thought. There hadn't been time to *think.*

Except for warning other pilots of the shoreline bump, the incident was not discussed. Close squeaks in the flying game, no matter how expertly handled, were poor publicity. Western Canada Airways was nearing a record of a million miles flown without the loss of a pound of freight or a passenger. I was thankful that Brownie's presence of mind had prevented my ruining Airways' chance of attaining so worthy an objective.

Comic relief was near that blustery day. Two big pieces of rich raisin pie and three mugs of coffee still hadn't killed my hollow feeling, when we took off again for Cold Lake. Turbulence had increased, and my choice of lunch proved to be poor ballast for a gale-buffeted groundlubber.

My discovery of the problem resulting was too sudden to allow escape to the cabin. I had watched cursing mechanics swab out decorated cockpits, and decided to do a clean job of it. Signalling Brownie to grip my coat tail, I stood, faced the ship's tail, and heaved ho.

The laws of gravity, aeronautics, and fair play combined in a startling double-cross. The load neared the tail, reversed, and arrived back with all the precision of a slapstick comedy missile. I groped for my seat, grotesque and bewildered. My only compensation for Brownie's howls of glee was the fact that I was wearing his spare helmet.

At Pine Root Stan's Cold Lake trading post, we got our passenger, Weekend Annie, a frizz-haired madam headed for The Pas on a recruiting trip, and made it back home just at dark.

Coming up through the woods along the snowy path, my first glimpse of our cabin was comforting. The glow of gaslight from the low windows under dark trees, and the lazy funnel of smoke rising in the frosty air, promised warmth, food, and relaxation. It was good to be home.

But on Ruth's face was a look that all married men at some time

or other must have known. I was puzzled. I wasn't late for dinner; nor was I bringing unannounced dinner guests. I had the calm feeling of one who is about to be accused, who is innocent and can prove it.

"Did you see the trees?–the birches?" Ruth asked. I admitted that I hadn't noticed them. "His name is the same as ours," she hurried on. "He stays at Droopy's flophouse. Even if he is old, go down and knock . . . knock *hell* out of him!" The tears began to flow.

I couldn't imagine what she was talking about until she led me to the front door and yanked it open. "Look!" She swept the beam of her flashlight over the clearing. In that one glimpse I saw a dozen of our finest birches, mutilated, lying in the snow.

"Twenty-seven of them close around the cabin," she sobbed. "He did it while we were away–chopped down fifty-two birch trees looking for the proper grain to make snowshoes. Paddy told me."

What had been a beauty-spot had now become a shambles. Trees lay everywhere. There was nothing we could do about it; the ground was not ours. Like everyone, we were squatters. In legal terms, the place where our cabin stood would still be defined as wilderness. I knew the culprit. He was a mild old prospector who took pride in his snowshoe-making. Always he had taken what he needed from the wilds. To him, trees were for firewood, or for making sleds, canoes, or snowshoes. I had Paddy come the next day to saw up the slaughtered birches for wood. As he had promised, they did make a beautiful heat. We decorated pieces of birch bark to send Outside as Christmas cards.

Worse was to come. Somehow the old prospector must have learned of our feelings, for a week later he made amends in a way that again, to him, was natural, but that threatened us with even greater disaster. At daylight one morning I heard our back door open. There was a heavy thump on the kitchen table, someone shouted, and the door closed. It was forty below zero outside. Our double bed with its eiderdown was cozy. I didn't move.

Then there was the pounce of exploring feet, as Willie The Cat landed on the table, and I had a quick suspicion. Without disturbing Ruth, I slid from bed, pulled on socks and dressing gown, and went through the front cabin to the kitchen lean-to. From an unfrosted spot on the window I caught a glimpse of the old prospector, on his way back along the woods path. And on our kitchen table was a great hind-quarter of frozen moosemeat.

Moose season was past. The local police, now increased to three

members, to more effectively combat bootlegging, had made it plain that anyone found with contraband game would get soaked. I might be doubly soaked; there was, following the lady-moose suicide story that summer, Constable George's promised revenge. The penalty for having contraband meat was a $200 fine.

Even more griping was the fact that we didn't *want* any moose-meat! For weeks, during the season, we had lived on game. We were fed to the teeth with venison, moose, and caribou. But that would be no defence. Possession meant conviction. The old boy, I realized, must have come directly along the ridge above Constable George's cabin, and George didn't miss much.

I was in two tight spots. Following three days in bed, with what I hoped was no worse than 'flu, I lacked the strength to shoulder the huge hind-quarter and dump it back in the woods. It was too awkwardly big for any cupboard space we had. Still in my dressing gown, I lit the fire laid ready in the kitchen stove, got the hand-saw, and began to whack the frozen haunch in half, while Willie The Cat watched with interest. I was no more than halfway through the chore when a sharp rap came at the kitchen door. I knew at once who would be there–so opened it only a crack. Sure enough, it was Constable George.

"Just a minute George," I said. "I'm taking a bath. I'll get a gown."

I opened the kitchen cupboard. The shank refused to go in. I glanced at the big woodbox. For once it was full. Seconds were precious–and it was a helluva situation. Almost our last penny had gone in to the building and furnishing of the cabin. With our present state of finances, two hundred dollars meant two months' living. Two hundred dollars wasted on a hunk of old, tough bull moosemeat we didn't even want! And George–God, would he gloat!

Desperately, I looked for a safe hiding place, and then suddenly thought of one. I took my frosty burden through the front cabin into the bedroom and yanked back the covers. "Measemoot . . . moot-mease," I whispered, and tossed it into bed with an amazed and sleepily protesting Ruth.

Bulky in fur police jacket and cap, Constable George came through the kitchen into the chill of the front cabin. His eyes jerked about. He had been our guest often, knew the cabin's every corner. Whatever happened, there could be no hard feelings. It was a game.

But George, too, was in rather a spot. So early a visit called for some excuse. I saw him glance toward the curtained doorway in the

pole partition as he said casually, "The wife wondered if she could borrow your Eaton's catalogue." At break of day!

It struck me that in our little game he might consider the curtained-off bedroom an unfair advantage. I could afford to be fair. I pulled back the curtain. "Here's George," I announced to Ruth and Bud, and ushered him in.

Ruth stretched and grinned sleepily. "Hello, George." From her bunk in the corner Bud parroted, "Hello, George. Has Maggie got her pups yet?"

Maggie hadn't. George sat on a low trunk where he could see under both beds. He took a hard look at our main trunk, an upright wardrobe model of massive size, where our city-type clothing was stored. "The catalogue's in the sweatshop," I said. "Come on out."

There was scant space to hide anything in the tiny office annex. George took a look around, I got the catalogue and, chatting casually, showed him out the way he had come. George looked grim.

I was feeling pretty good. Then, as he went through the outer door, George looked back. A flicker of humour showed in his steely eyes.

Puzzled, I closed the door behind him and turned. Pride met its fall. Stretched in plain sight against the woodbox was Willie The Cat, busily licking moosemeat hash from the teeth of the forgotten saw.

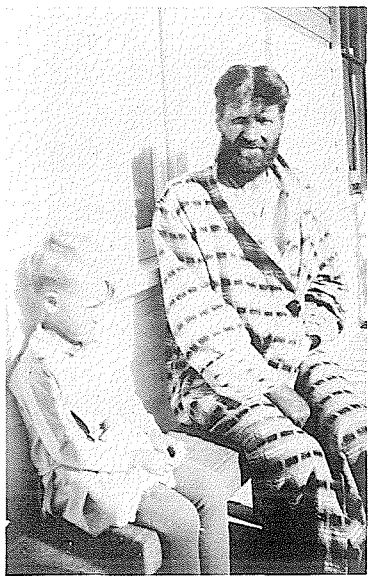
Effects being retrieved from the dry well after Cranberry Portage forest fire. (Photo by Neighbour Pete).


CAFE

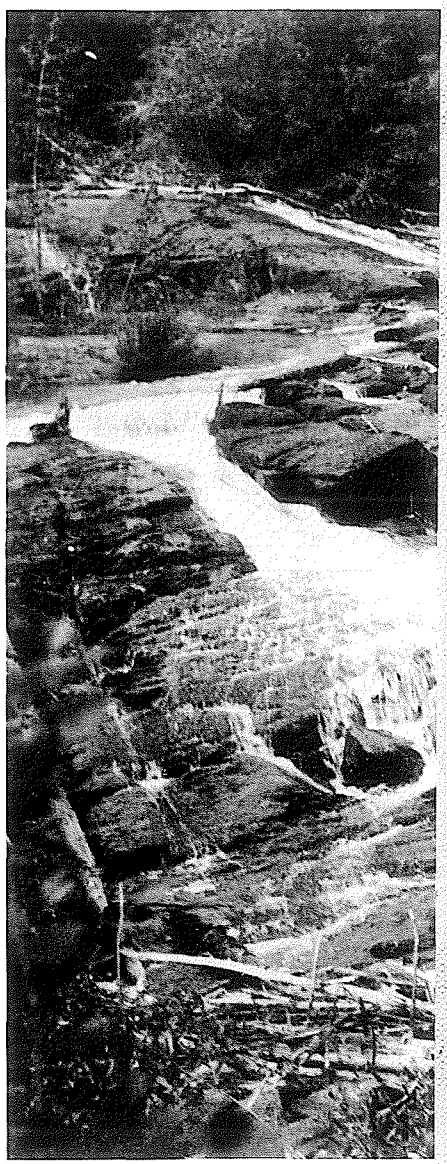
Early builders on shore of Lake Athapapuskow used logs, lumber, or stout canvas for walls. Beds fifty cents. (Canadian National Railways)

Daughter Bud and the settlement clown, half-wolf Silver. (Paterson)

Tobacco Jowls in his authentic 90's, with 300-pound Concrete Mac of egg-nog fame.



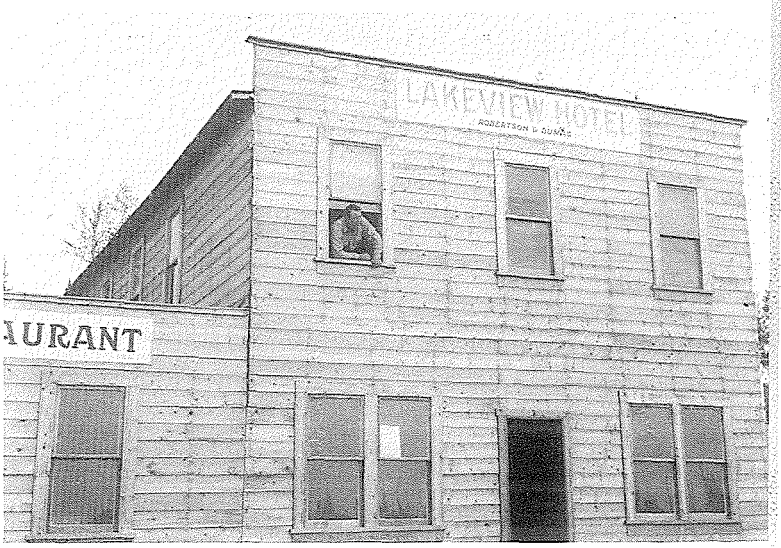
Used as a decoy, Daughter Bud poses reluctantly with Andy Taylor, the prospector lost for forty-six days. Taylor keeps left wrist concealed. (Paterson)



Sugar and her gambler husband making a portage on the Pine Root River during an ill-fated search for gold. (Paterson)

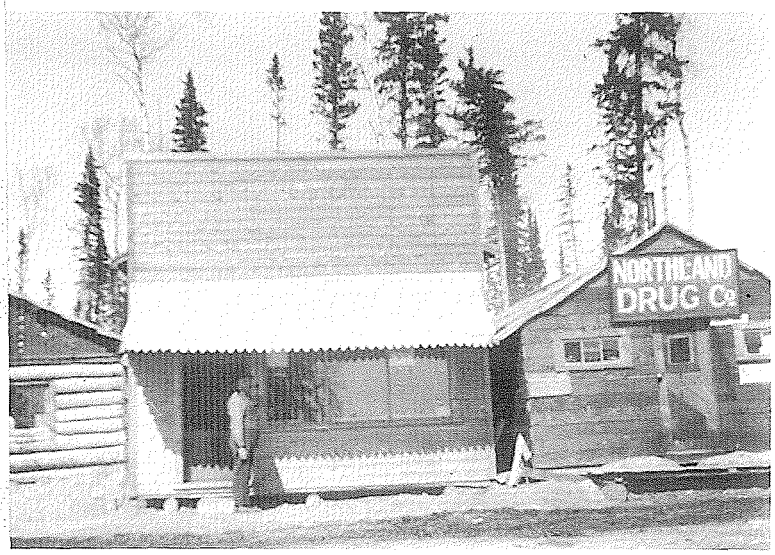

COMPANY

Effects being dumped near lakeshore during forest fire. At left:



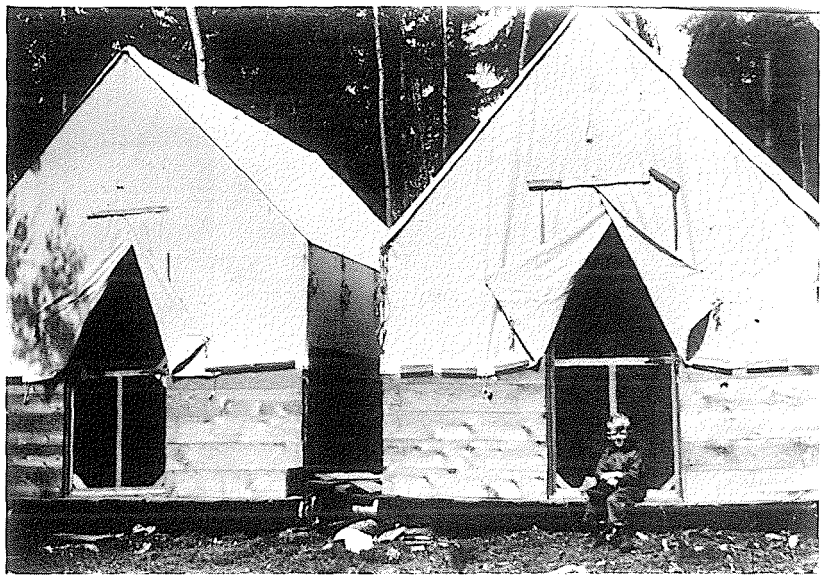
Massive Moon Glow, hotel proprietor, announces with pride: "Got all my upstairs work done!" (Paterson)

Paddy with horses, Shorty and Spike. (Williams photo)

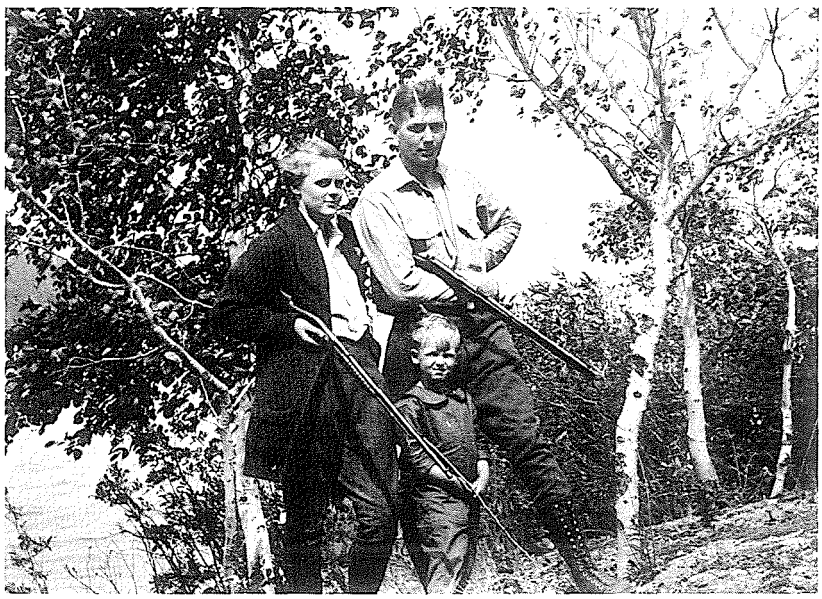


operty squeeze. Tobacco Jowls with one of his many lakeshore
siness establishments. (Paterson)

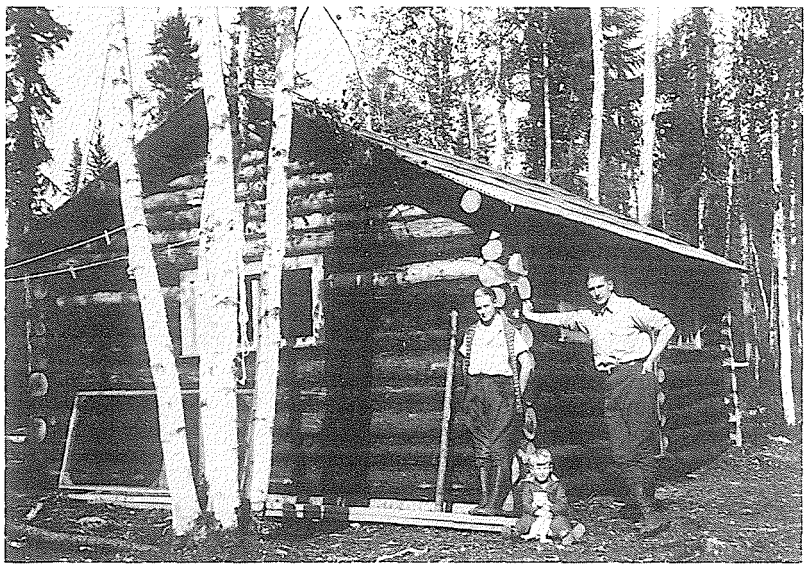
Inspection tour, Cranberry Portage. Left to right: Leigh Brintnell, Gen. Mgr. Western Canada Airways; Hon. John Bracken, Premier of Manitoba; Major Tommy Thompson; Roy Brown. (Paterson)



Newly-erected sleeping and cooking tents, floored and screened against northern mosquitoes. (Paterson)

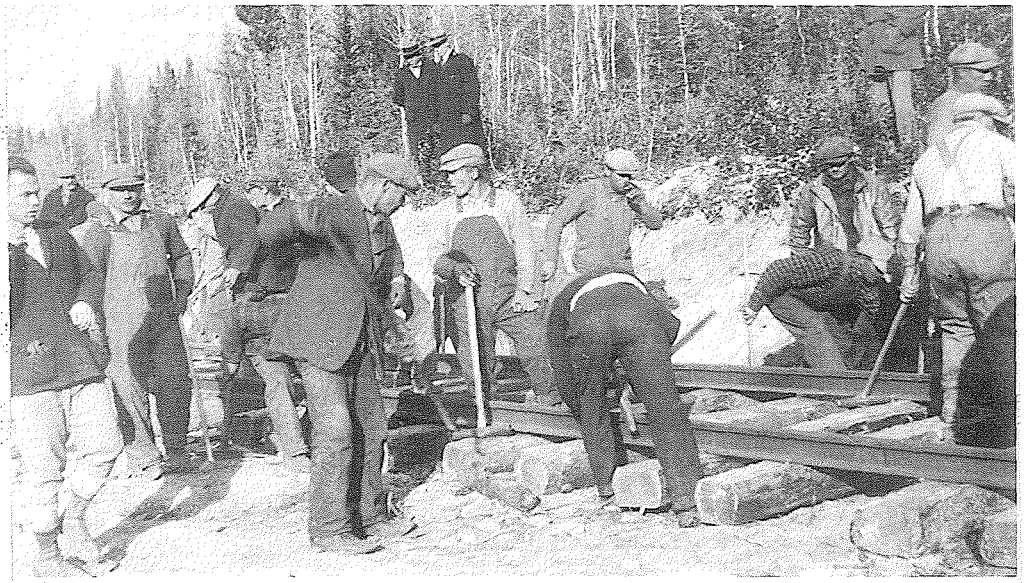


Ruth, Jack and Bud on a hunting hike at First Cranberry Lake. (Moosehide Jake)



Completed cabin, except for "sweatshop" annex to be added. Bud holds half-grown Willie The Cat. (Moosehide Jake)

Defying all laws of instinct, Bud teaches half-wolf Silver to play peaceably with Willie The Cat. (Paterson)



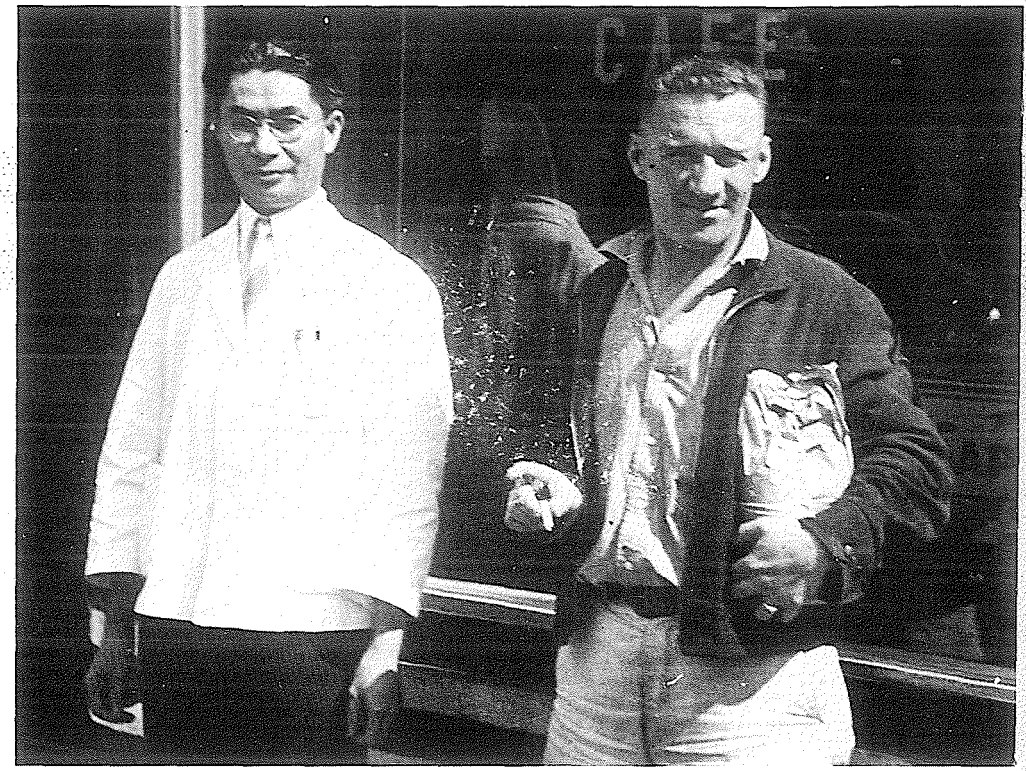
New Canadians of many tongues laying steel, watched from above by John Bracken, Manitoba's Premier. (Paterson)

Neighbour Pete and his man help recover weighty wardrobe trunk from well following settlement fire. (Ruth Paterson)

Women and children, during the fire, being taken out to refugee barge. (Williams photo)

Billie, Tressa and Mrs. Sauna, following loss of their cafe in the Cranberry fire. (Paterson)

Along both sides of the railroad, fire swept south upon Cranberry Portage. (Williams photo)



After Cranberry days: Flin Flon Rotarian Wing Wong, and Roy Brown M.L.A.

Chapter 15

The North's two most cheery seasons were, for us, embarrassing ones: Christmas and the great annual Dog Derby Carnival at The Pas.

Everyone blew their cash roll for Christmas. Our friends drew good salaries, from the Company, from Airways, or from other sources; some officials drew lavish ones. Businessmen, contractors, even day-workers, had assured incomes, with extra for the big celebration. Groping through periods of feast and famine, we had no comparable money to spend. Merry old Christmas caught us cold broke.

One drawback was that we didn't show it. We had been provident. Our furnished cabin was perhaps the best in town; we had our winter's wood supply, and we hadn't skimped on cold-weather clothing for Bud, Ruth, and myself. We were proud of being ready, but our former bank balance was gone. Adrift on a comfortable raft, warmly clothed, we were still dependent on the fish we caught. We had a monthly grocery bill at Wing Wong's, but were confident that, with growing magazine contacts, we could write our way past that. Our magazine cheques were anticipated rather than actual; so except for swapping family gifts, we thought of Christmas as a season that could take pot luck along with us.

At least–that's what we thought until the celebration began. There was never a Christmas like it, with our cabin as base for the week-long festival. We had Bud–and Bud had a Christmas tree. Strangers from out on the line, with kids of their own in some distant town, or country, arrived with a doll, a sled, beaded mocassins. One visitor brought a wooly brown husky pup. By Christmas Eve, Bud had eleven new dolls. Their donors were invited in, and we were glad to have them. Drinks were no problem, since visitors brought their own, but there had to be food as well, and anytime was meal-time during the holiday. For a week, day and night, the sizzle of cooking

scarcely died in our kitchen. We had to hire an Indian girl to wash dishes and help. We tried to get Billie Sauna, but Mrs. Sauna's new café was as jammed as our small cabin.

Bud slept out in the sweatshop. No one else got any sleep. Half my time was spent, by now muttering to myself, on the well-worn path between our kitchen and Wing Wong's grocery shelves. Wing had those carbon counter slips that automatically added new purchases to the grand total. I became afraid to look–and afraid not to look. I didn't mention the bills to Ruth; she would know soon enough. I managed to pay cash for the half-ton of bread I relayed home from Syd's Bakeshop, so large an amount that even old Granny noticed it. "You eat a lot of bread," she told me.

Christmas day, many old friends called. Paddy and a laughing Silver came. Paddy, in beaver cap and a greasy parka, apologized for his lack of dress-up clothing: "Never bought none since the war." Moon Glow, seldom out of the Lakeview, had his first look at the cabin and shook his head. Tobacco Jowls was more outspoken. He handed Bud a doll, declined our invitation to stay, and waved a great hand at the woods surrounding us. "Burn some day. Always some damn fool'll set it off." He eyed yet another group coming up the path, then left.

Most of our male visitors were from the camps or the bullpens around town, knowing that at Christmas, in a private home, they would find good cheer, good food, and good songs. My Husky Howlers turned up on several occasions with their instruments, and the snowy woods rang. At night, the settlement echoed with lusty carol singing in mixed tongues. Men of each nation claimed familiar tunes for their homeland, ready to back up their theories with stout voices or hard fists. Early Christmas Eve we had a special champagne and turkey dinner with the Browns and the Airways gang at Wing Wong's. Midway through the meal, an Irishman and an American, both fresh from Alky Ike's, argued as to whether Santa Claus had been born in the States or the Emerald Isle. With ladies present, the two adjourned to the street to settle the question like gentlemen. Minutes later they returned, considerably battered, uttering mutual condolences. Someone ventured to ask where Santa was born. The Irishman pointed to a swelling left eye. "Them bunch of Scandihoovians outside had the proof," he admitted. "T'was Norway."

Guests continued to turn up at our birch grove. Ruth was the recipient of a number of gifts, and even I received some boxes of

cigars. Occasionally someone offered to help cook–but cook what? The uncomfortable truth was that we were now eating our way through a store of grub that was supposed to last us until spring break-up.

The Airways gang were the first to spot our fix. Two mechanics came one night, very merry, with a case of canned grapefruit and a side of bacon. A Canadian National Railways engineering crew carolled in with a case of canned milk, three sides of bacon, a box of butter, and an invitation from their chef for Ruth, Bud, and me to have New Year's dinner at their camp.

Four more boxes, brought as extra seats, contained canned tomatoes, two others pails of jam. We found a thirty-dozen case of eggs in the kitchen. So many sides of bacon were stacked in our cellar floorhole under the kitchen that we lost count of them. Every raided commissary along the line must have been represented there.

New Year's Eve was another Christmas. One boisterous group retrimmed the tree, which was still standing in its corner. Bud, allowed out of bed for the midnight madness, called my attention to it. The tree surely was trimmed! Tied to branch ends were bills–tens, fives, twos, ones–while the culprits stood about commenting solemnly on the currency's singular beauty.

When I insisted that there was no way we would accept such unorthodox "decorations," they laughed and retrieved the bills. But I noticed certain sly glances pass among them. Later, dismantling the tree, we found out why. Inside the Star of Bethlehem ornament adorning its tip was a rolled-up $50 bill.

We were dismayed. There was no way now of tracing the donor, or donors. "Bank it," Ruth said at last. "Extra groceries for next Christmas."

I was debating the idea when a shock of red hair above a blue parka hood passed the window. Moosehide Jake, the young missionary, was seeking donations to help build himself a cabin. I knew through Mrs. Sauna that he also had his eye on a dog-team. For once I was in a position to oblige, and sent Moosehide on his way with two sides of choice Canadian National Railways bacon, a pail of Dominion Construction Company marmalade, and a box of reasonably good cigars.

Ruth was horrified that I should pass out items we had accepted as gifts. I wasn't and I went all the way. "Bud's a lucky kid," I said. "Most kids are full-grown before they help their old folks out of financial jams. Here she is, only four years old, paying fifty bucks

on our grocery bill. How much bacon and other loot is there? Keep enough for a month and, after dark, Wing Wong gets the rest as payment toward our grub bill." Then I added, "But for God's sake don't ask Wing, or me, how much the grub bill is."

Wing came to the cabin to take inventory. He was more pleased to get the bacon than the $50 bill. "The balance may take a while, Wing," I told him. "We had too big a Christmas."

Wing tossed his head back and laughed. "That be secret. Three month all right. Four, five month. Everybody have fine Christmas your cabin. I make bill wholesale: fifteen percent off. Merry Christmas, okay?"

That four, five month offer of Wing's was the finest Christmas present we received.

At the end of the week, we finally discarded our roles as host and hostess to attend the Canadian National boys' New Year's dinner. It was a banquet. The cook for the engineering crowd was an old Frenchman, once head chef at a big eastern hotel. The decorations, the food, the wine–all were perfection. Ruth and Bud were the only ladies there, but everyone had dressed in city clothes for the occasion.

During dinner we got information on two important–and very hush-hush–topics. The first of these concerned The Pas' great 200-mile, non-stop Dog Derby, which was to be held soon. The second had to do with Cranberry's future and our own.

For some time there had been a rumour that the Ottawa government wanted the eastern foreshore of Lake Athapapuskow as a location for a future national park. As Ottawa's representatives on the job, the engineering boys had received certain instructions regarding all lakeshore squatters. If Ottawa made the present order stick, everyone now living below the track would have to move above it. A new townsite had already been chosen.

The full force of how such a decision might effect our lives did not immediately strike us. Warmed by wine, and in convivial company, we were more interested in hearing about the coming Derby, and the secret dog-team entry the engineering crews had in training.

Hundreds of miles north, on the Bay line, engineering crews were working with dogs–tough, barrenland huskies that really knew what work and endurance meant. A team had been chosen, and was being trained at Cranberry by an expert musher, who was working the dogs day and night. They weren't as fast as Emil St. Goddard's famous racing hounds, or Earl Brydges' hound-huskies, but their

backers were gambling on the weather. If it happened to be rough and stormy for the race, the railroad dogs could easily romp home the winners. Bucking strong winds and drifting snow would be their dish.

Hence the secrecy. The engineers were not interested in the thousand-dollar winner's purse, but in the betting odds that could be demanded by backers of a relatively unknown team, turning up as a last-minute entry. Their scheme was complete. All they needed was bad weather.

After dinner we inspected the "dark horses." From thirty chained dogs, seven had been chosen. They looked wildly fit, with patent-leather snoots, bright eyes, lolling red tongues, and shiny coats. "Say nothing," the boys cautioned. "If the weather's bad, it's in the bag. We'll post you on what odds to demand."

Plodding homeward, Ruth asked: "Are we going to the Dog Derby? Everyone else is."

"On what?" I asked. "We couldn't pay cash fare past Mile Forty-Nine."

"It's the event of the year. Writers come hundreds of miles for it. It's only fifty-five miles."

"As well be fifty-five hundred. Train fare, a week's hotel, meals, entertainment. Hell, let's forget it."

"If a cheque came you could go," Ruth said. "People there from all over the North! Fiction material!"

"Look," I told her, "we're hardly over Christmas. Now there's a new worry. You heard what the boys said about the settlement moving to the surveyed townsite? That means us."

She stopped in the snowy woods path. "Us ?Are they crazy?"

"We were, building that damn cabin. If everyone below the track has to move above it–we'll have to go with them. First we'll have to buy a lot. Three hundred dollars. Then, to move a cabin you have to mark the logs, take them down, and later reassemble them. Another three hundred."

"What . . . what are we going to *do*? Sell the cabin?"

"Who'd buy it? They'd only have to move it. They could build a new one cheaper."

Ruth turned, her mittened fists clenched. "We damn-well won't move! It's our cabin! It's paid for! Who can make us?"

"The Ottawa government. Remember–those people the local Board of Trade egged on? Remember what Paddy said about the post office? Same thing, a hundred times over."

"But . . . but the birches? Everything!"

"They have birches on the new townsite," I reminded her.

They had. On the wooded crown of the portage ridge, above the railroad, was a square mile of them. It was a fine setting for a town, clean and healthy. Spruce, pine, and birches grew from sandy soil. Light underbrush, with moss that was thickly sprinkled in season with the plants and red berries that gave Cranberry Portage its name, made it a pleasant parkland. There would be no squalor, no bickering over land or buildings, no sanitary problem–only peace and permanency. But, like other squatter-town shoe-stringers, how would we get there?

Hearing earlier rumours, Tobacco Jowls had bought up or grabbed any lake frontage available, bellowing that he would not budge for Ottawa. Moon Glow had hooted, insisting it wouldn't happen. Others weren't so sure. With steel laid over the frozen ground to Flin Flon, thousands of tons of construction materials were being rushed north. The new rail line transported men in droves. Some lakeshore café owners and bootleggers had moved up the hill to catch the increased rail-passenger traffic, and the business of the many tractor crews now freighting north over the new Sherritt-Gordon lake-and-portage winter route. Mrs. Sauna had opened a café by the track, but below, not above it.

Mellowed by Ottawa wine and fancy grub, bearing Bud pick-a-back through the star-lit January cold toward the warmth of home, I told Ruth, "There's going to be screaming hell to pay here, come spring. Let's grab what comfort we can from the cabin."

She mumbled something into the fur of her parka, and I asked for a repeat. "Nothing I can say out loud," she said. I had a sudden hollow feeling as she changed her mind and added, "I wish we were a thousand miles from this place."

Chapter 16

Dog Derby week in The Pas that year was a must for everyone capable of making town. Jobs like rail construction, freighting, fishing, trapping, railroading, or flying became incidental. Everyone was about to concentrate on outdoor and indoor sports: hockey, dog-racing, public dances, and private parties.

Among the people we talked to, no one was planning, for that week, to either work or go to bed–not for the purpose of sleeping, anyway! It was the Northland's most extravagant playtime, climaxed by the "Great International Non-Stop Dog Derby," which would cover 200 miles of wilderness lake and portage trail. Droves of men rolling into the new areas were familiar with The Pas, which called itself "Gateway To The North." The coming Derby Week should roar to a new high in lusty merry-making.

Broke or no, Ruth and I found ourselves involved in the queen contest through Mrs. Sauna. Ballots for the selection of a queen were sold for a dollar a piece, and sales had to cover a long prize list, including $1,000 for the Derby winner, as well as "The Queen's" gowns, jewellry, and furs, and her week in the "Royal Suite" at the Cambrian Hotel. With an eye on heavy payroll money, available for the first time from farther north, The Pas committee had invited outlying settlements to enter their own queen candidates. Additional ticket sales would swell the Derby cash pot, with no danger of any outside entry winning.

Mrs. Sauna spiked that sly scheme. Flin Flon had a candidate, an attractive office secretary, the only unmarried girl in the mine camp. When Cranberry was invited to choose its queen, Mrs. Sauna abandoned her bath-house, laundry, school, and cooking chores, and came up to our cabin on the run.

"Those people in The Pas are playing us for a bunch of lake trout," she announced. "The boys want Billie to run for queen. I say no. They'd blow their money on tickets for nothing. To beat that Pas bunch we gotta gang up."

"How?" It was our first inkling that Derby Week could be a serious matter.

"I can't swing it, but you and me together can. We'll hook up with Flin Flon."

That was a surprising thought. Cranberry Portage and Flin Flon were opposites. We were a settlement of squatters, rough and ready. Flin Flon camp was Company-organized, and with a planned future. Its leaders were mining engineers and their families, much more conservative than our own. Flin Flon marched steadily toward becoming a city; Cranberry jostled and elbowed, mob-style, toward a very uncertain future. Many settlement people resented Flin Flon's superior attitude.

"How are the boys on that?" I asked.

"Cold as a church mouse," Mrs. Sauna admitted. "We gotta sell 'em on Flin Flon's queen. Get her down here and put it across. You and me can do it. We'll have a special dance. Get Cold Lake in with us too."

I said I'd think it over. Mrs. Sauna laughed. "No need. You folks've always been on the right side of everything that's gone on here. You won't let Cranberry down now. This time we're sticking our nose in a tough league but we'll win." She waived her hand gaily and was gone.

I sighed, and asked Ruth, "What can we do now? We can't even get to their damned Derby. But we can't let Mrs. Sauna down."

"Go as far as we can, then drop out," Ruth said. "It should be fun."

It was. Flin Flon's candidate, Babs McCormick, and her white-haired chaperone, "Maw" Bell, known throughout the North, were overnight guests at our cabin and attended the Grand Masquerade organized by Mrs. Sauna. Entries included the Flying Swedes as cannibals, in long black-dyed underwear, and Cyclone Ned as a Red Cross nurse, complete with can, collecting alky money.

Miss Flin Flon was dressed as an Oriental maiden in a gold-and-black patterned kimono with wide sash and flowing sleeves, and had a flowery hair-do. She needed little verbal support, but I was called on to explain things. It was no time for frills.

"The Pas has invited outside competition," I told the eager crowd. "Let's surprise 'em. Show them the centre of action has left their town and is moving north. Tomorrow Miss Flin Flon goes to Cold Lake and Sherritt-Gordon. They've agreed to support her. If we do the same, we'll elect an outside queen and make the Derby Committee in The Pas like it. How about it?"

For three weeks there was a wild chase. Every trainman, tractorman, miner, trapper, trader, and flyer was a salesman. Queen tickets were pushed in fish camps, bootleg joints, poker games, at church service, and from a special stall set up by Wing Wong in his café. Pete Rod and his Danes peddled tickets at contract camps up the line. Girls supporting candidates from The Pas invaded outside settlements for ticket sales. While in Cranberry one such group made our cabin their home base. Rivalry was keen, but mostly friendly. When the result was announced, there were broad grins in Cranberry. This year The Pas must pay homage to, and lavish its costly gifts upon a Flin Flon queen.

Ruth and I failed to see why anyone should mind; much of the Derby revenue came from our queen's election. But the gleeful Mrs. Sauna seemed, as always, to know. "At the crowning every year, the Mayor of The Pas has first dance with the queen," she said. "This year I'll bet he won't. He'll be scared of a razzing from the out-of-town crowd. Wait and see."

I still shied from telling Mrs. Sauna we wouldn't be there. Everyone talked Derby; everyone was going; no one thought to ask. We knew we'd be missing something; our last stay in The Pas had hatched the Andy Taylor story. Cold broke, there was nothing we could do.

Then we got a magazine cheque. It was small, but large enough to re-open the question. "You go," Ruth said. "Double up with someone in a room corner–some man. You'll have cash for meals. If the weather's bad and the odds are good, stop eating and bet on the Railway dogs. Gosh, you might come home with a roll!"

"If one goes, all go," I said.

"So it's no Derby?"

"No Derby."

I went for the mail. There was a note from a Mrs. Sinclair in The Pas, whose daughter had stayed at our cabin while selling tickets for a rival candidate for queen. The mother thanked us for our hospitality, and wondered if we would spend Derby Week at their home, instead of at a hotel. She hoped we would. We were surprised, and pleased. Things looked brighter, but there was still the rail-fare problem. It was Brownie who settled that. During Derby week, all Airways ships would work out of The Pas. "Deadheading the crew to the Pooch Stampede Tuesday morning," he announced. "Got room for you three."

So it came about that we *were* at the coronation in The Pas when Mrs. Sauna's prophecy about the Mayor came true. The decorated

ballroom was crowded to the doors, the music modern and smart. At the official start of the dance, with our Flin Flon queen in all her finery on show before the assembly, the Mayor was missing. Whether his absence was deliberate or not made no difference; to the young lady from farther North, expecting this usual courtesy, it brought sharp embarrassment. Chaperone Maw Bell was furious. Someone had to make a move. I stepped from the crowd, led the queen from her throne, and we danced.

High in the balcony at the back of the hall there was sudden whacking applause from a score of work-calloused hands. A figure in bright green satin, stretched to dangerous tautness rose, an arm waving. "Three cheers for Cranberry!" shrilled Mrs. Sauna, jubilant, unabashed, while the music was lost in a roar from her rollicking boys.

The incident was not typical. The queen's attendants, formerly candidates, were good sports. The royal party performed ceremonies, attended dinners and dances, caressed dogs, kissed babies, travelled by limousine, dog-team, and airplane. Any town matrons who were cool toward the queen were neatly handled by Maw Bell, who had lived in The Pas and knew them all. The dark-eyed girl from Flin Flon, modest and charming, soon had the northern kingdom at her feet.

Starting time for the great 200-mile, "Non-Stop Derby" was Thursday morning at ten o'clock. New spectators, and speculators, crowded the town. Every hotel, bunkhouse, boarding house, and private home was filled; poolrooms, pubs, cafés, and joints swarmed with men. The Muskeg Special from the North brought railroaders and trappers; trains from the South brought tourists, news-hawks, gamblers, and casual females. All were out that morning for the Derby start.

Cranberry Portage had two teams in the big race. Formerly of The Pas, Earl Brydges of Cranberry was rated the favourite; and, before post time, entry of the Canadian National Railways team was announced.

Emil St. Goddard of The Pas, French-Canadian favourite, had faith in speedy hounds; Brydges, a boyhood friend of Emil, had hound-huskies. The Railway dogs were barrenland huskies. Shorty Russick of Cold Lake, holder of the all-time record of twenty-three hours and a few minutes for the 200-mile route, had a team of untried hound pups. Flin Flon's entry, driven by Flin Flon-born Hec Campbell, was husky. The usual Cree entry was a team of seven

white, fish-fed huskies that in former years had always lagged far back.

At the house where we were staying, as in most homes that week, everybody came and went independently, day or night, as suited their various activities. Ruth had her friends, Bud her play pals, and I my cronies in bunkhouses and hotels, where dog derbies, past, present, and future, were being run and rerun. Thursday morning, however, the family was reunited. Everyone was out of bed, fed, and bundled in parkas or bright outing togs. Then, in a group, we were off to see the start of the big race.

Teams, and a noisy crowd laying bets, filled the wide white expanse of the Saskatchewan River with colour and movement. Racing dogs, and a hundred others, yelped in wild excitement. The sleds were the high Alaska type, with flat runner ends projecting, so that drivers could stand on them while gripping the plow-handle guide bars. A brake pedal was rigged to press steel teeth into snow or ice. Hitched in pairs, each dog was snapped separately to a central drag line, so that a played-out dog could be removed in seconds. Any number of dogs could be used, but all must be brought across the finish line, under their own steam, or riding the sled.

We remembered being briefed by the engineering boys on how decisive a factor the weather could be in the betting. On a packed trail, light hounds had winning speed. In heavy snow, the rugged huskies did better. Crossbred hound-huskies had less speed than the hounds, more than the huskies. For a year, breeding, training, feeding, and care had all been studied and debated by hundreds of heavy backers. At last, here was the test.

It looked as though our engineer friends had got the break they wanted. The weather was really bad. Eye-stinging snow whirled down the river from the northwest, blotting out a sundog–a recognized sign of a continuing storm. The crowd milled about the starting line while helpers struggled to prevent squirming, inter-team entanglements. Hound dogs shivered in short-haired misery. The Railways dogs waited, unmoved by the rough weather, eyes screwed up against driving snow, casually sniffing the gale.

The Cranberry boys were dodging around, laying last-minute bets and gloating over the odds received. Dogs here were like horses elsewhere: backers knew their age, their breeding, their strange quirks. But no one knew our favourites.

"Dese Railroad dogs," a St. Goddard backer announced, "dey are nobody. Dey come from nowhere. One t'ing only you can say–

dey are dogs." The Railway boys got to him. Bills were waved and wagered at ten-to-one, the best odds yet.

Ruth's fur-hooded face was sad. In spite of favourable conditions, we had decided not to bet. "Ten dollars would make a hundred," Ruth shouted now.

We'd been over it all before, but now above the noise I yelled "We've got twenty-one bucks. Twenty gets us two hundred. Last damn time. Let's toss. No hedging. No regrets!" She nodded. We cleared snow from a patch of ice and I tossed. Tails. No bet. We both groaned.

It was starting time. Drivers in light parkas controlled the dogs by whip and command, eyes on the point far across the river ice, where a trail angled up the steep bank. There was more than just this race at stake; the winner would travel east by special express car to enter big-time races in Quebec and New Hampshire. The starter waited, gun raised.

Crack!

Sleds leaped in the air as the teams streaked away from the cheering crowd. The lead dogs scurried over the windswept ice, plunging through soft drifts and dragging teammates with them in their excitement.

The crowd cheered madly as the teams began to form into line. The first reached the far side, raced up the steep river bank, and was gone. The next. Teams charged in turn over the snowy hump that allowed the yelling crowds their last sight of the race until, after twenty, thirty, or even forty hours of battling the blizzard, some team of weary dogs would weave and stagger back over that same hill to victory and fame.

Betting would continue throughout the race, and speculation was running high. The first ninety miles through heavy snow favoured the huskies. Along Schist Lake, ten miles in and ten miles out of Flin Flon, was a packed and storm-sheltered freighting route which would create the kind of fast-trail conditions that the hounds needed. Teams usually stopped at Flin Flon to feed before starting back; the first brief progress report would come from there. This year, loose snow balling between the dogs' toes and pads might necessitate frequent stops.

Betting continued to rage–on the dogs–and on the weather. Late that night, a single terse construction-line telephone bulletin flashed through town: the first team was at Flin Flon.

From Cranberry next morning came word that the Railways team

had passed through the settlement. In The Pas there was new excitement. Going out, all teams must follow the lake and portage trail, miles west of the railroad. Coming south from Flin Flon, they were allowed a choice of route. There were rumours of section-crews shovelling snow on to bare patches between the rails south of Cranberry. With only fifty odd-miles of hard-packed railway grade to cover, while other teams plowed through snowdrifts on the lake route, the Railways dogs looked like winners. A mild old man recalled that they hadn't been mentioned in reports from Flin Flon, but he was hooted into silence. The engineering boys invaded poolrooms, hotels, gambling and bootleg joints, to lay further bets.

The blizzard still raged. I met Ruth, dressed for a tea in honour of the Derby queen. She didn't like teas, and she had heard the news. "Two hundred dollars," she moaned. "Thrown away like *that*!"

"Hey!" I said. "Are you swearing?"

"No," she said. "Hardly any."

In late afternoon, a plane took off and bucked the gale northward. People nodded; there went the big gamblers, the wise-money boys. With exclusive information on how the teams were lined along the trail, they would be in a position to sure-bet. At dark the plane returned. Somehow the news leaked: after thirty hours of hard going, Earl Brydges was reported in the lead, his pace laboured, but all of his dogs in harness. Well back, handicapped by the heavy snow, Emil St. Goddard's slim hounds were playing out. One dog was out of the team. Now the others had to lug his extra weight, lashed to the sled.

Then came the bombshell. On the railroad grade between Cranberry Portage and The Pas, there was no team. What had happened to the Railways entry? Wires were busy; at Cranberry someone was sent scouting, and the real story came through. The Railways team hadn't even reached Flin Flon. For them, from the start, the professional pace was a killer. Fagged after only eighty miles of the northward course, the barrenlands team and their driver holed up for the night and jogged home the next day. They were housed in Cranberry kennels, while their backers waited for them at the finish line.

"Remember us?" I kidded Ruth. "We're the people who still have twenty bucks."

With word of Emil St. Goddard's plight, men hurried to French Town to cash in on Earl Brydges' sure win. Young Emil's sup-

porters, by no means all of them French-Canadian, dipped into socks and mattresses to cover every bet. In spite of the heavy going, and the dog on the sled, they stuck.

At ten that night people thronged through the howling blizzard to Derby Week's great wind-up dance. Always a Derby winner had been present for the affair; this year he was still somewhere out on the screaming night trail, his identity to be known only when dogs appeared over the river bank and jogged toward a small, waiting crowd. That might be an hour, or three hours. Already the mushers had trailed thirty-six hours, a record for hard going.

The dance roared on, merry-makers keeping one eye on the committee members. Just before midnight, the music stopped with a crash; a spokesman sprang to the platform. Backstage there was talk and excitement. Dancers crushed forward till an official held up a hand. Silence fell.

"Presenting the winner of the toughest dog race in our history!"

From backstage he brought a moccasined, youthful figure, short and round-faced, with a modest smile showing a set of fine white teeth.

"Emil St. Goddard!"

There wasn't a throat that didn't scream or shout acclaim. Men who had backed other teams with thousands of dollars roared their appreciation of the winner. When, minutes later, slim Earl Brydges appeared, he was given just as great a reception. Anyone trailing 200 non-stop miles under such conditions, win or lose, rated the admiration of every northerner. The finish had been the closest ever, ten seconds between the two teams.

Later that night Ruth and I were at a reception in a private home for Emil St. Goddard. He arrived wearing dress clothes, looking remarkably fit. The wild welcome went on and on, with young Emil slammed and whacked, prodded and kissed, by family, friends, and strangers alike.

He had promised me a few minutes, and we escaped to the only room in the house where admiring females would not follow. He was modest about himself, but eager to talk of his dogs. While champagne corks popped and music pounded downstairs, he went back over the long grind in detail.

During a one-hour stop at Flin Flon, he fed his hounds a mixture of ground steak and raw egg. Going out, the mushers had taken turns breaking trail to save the dogs; coming back, it was everyone for himself.

He grinned when I asked about the fagged dog on the sled, spotted from the plane. Raised and schooled in The Pas, his speech still had a nice tinge of French accent. "That was my strongest dog. He was still fresh. He felt disgraced when I tied him on the sled." Emil laughed. "I carried him forty miles. Ten miles out, with Earl ahead, I hitch him. Boy! you should see him go! The others can't help themselves; he drags them with him!"

Seeing him, immaculate, only a pair of tired eyes showing the real fatigue he must feel, it was hard to believe that this youth could be capable of so great a physical effort. Extension runners allowed a musher to step on and ride. I asked him how long, during thirty-seven hours and 200 miles of howling wind and blizzard, he had ridden.

Going to rejoin the crowd, Emil hesitated. "It was heavy on the dogs this year. I didn't ride much." He did some figuring and turned at the foot of the stairs. "About twenty minutes," he said, and bounded off to claim his dance with the queen.

At that glowing moment I knew that our trip to The Pas had been worthwhile. I had an idea for a fiction story that itched to be written. In one week, Ruth and I had met people from every outlying area. Stories in the North were without limit. We could record them for people Outside, and still live among our friendly birches at Cranberry.

Chapter 17

We deadheaded home from The Pas, after signing the customary waiver that would absolve Airways of all responsibility in case of a crack-up. Landing at Cranberry that bright Sunday afternoon, we thought for a moment that our waiver would be needed.

The three-day blizzard of Derby Week had smothered all the North in new white. At The Pas we plowed through clouds of loose snow before labouring off. The bay at Cranberry was without mark or track, making landing judgement difficult. Under the level spread of snow were hidden piles of chopped ice shovelled from waterholes. Experienced Cranberry pilots had these clearly etched on their private memory charts– but our present pilot was new on the base.

"He's too close inshore," I warned Ruth as we slanted toward a landing. "The Anderson waterhole is just ahead." We were perched on crates of vegetables. I grabbed Bud and wedged her against the wall.

Our pilot made a nice landing. The bounding skis spurted soft snow in feathery plumes past the cabin windows, and I had started to release Bud from her wedged position when–*wham*!–we struck.

It was the Anderson waterhole ice pile all right. We were lucky. Our ground speed was such that skis glanced off the pile with a high bounce and carried on. We all hit the roof with a force that rattled our teeth. Hammered by assorted grocery cartons, we were slammed back to the floor, too surprised to be scared.

The cabin was filled with flying dust. Bud crawled from under a loose bedroll, laughing. We laughed with her, but Ruth's laugh was uncertain, and she held her side where it had struck a box edge. "Welcome home," she panted. As I helped her up, she added, "Home? This town's a hoodoo for me!"

The bruise was painful, but liniment and a week's complete rest fixed it. Her big worry was that she might miss out on the great celebration that had been announced for Flin Flon.

Derby Week had mellowed northerners in many ways. Flin Flon-

ners who enjoyed themselves at The Pas wanted to show people what they had to offer in their new town. Rail trains were dumping great piles of construction material there. Tractor-trains clattered farther north over frozen lakes and portages, trailing loads to the mine's new power site at Island Falls. Flin Flon was growing; many mine officials and hardrock men had brought their wives and families. During Derby Week the Flin Flon management had invited all the North to join in the opening of a large new community hall as a sample of great things to come.

The new railroad ran a Sunday special, because that was the day most people would be free. A hockey game, Flin Flon versus The Pas, was arranged for the afternoon. The grand community hall opening and the dance would take place that night. To the Cranberry Husky Howlers fell the honour of supplying dance music.

From our humble beginnings of fiddle, banjo, and Eskimo tom-tom, we had grown into a renowned little band. The drummer had the latest in drums and traps, and we had saxophones, banjos, violins, vocalists–even rehearsals. When the ten-car special train arrived at Cranberry on Sunday, in mid-morning, and the local contingent swarmed aboard, our drummer, swinging all out, led the way.

Anything less than a drum wouldn't have been heard. In coaches packed to the doors, the celebration was already well launched. Men and women jostled from car to car, wearing fine fur coats, shirt sleeves, mackinaws, fringed buckskin jackets, and parkas. People of every social level joined in the hilarious fray. In addition to a special baggage-coach bar up ahead, private bottles were being brandished, or passed from hand to hand over the heads of the crowd.

The Husky Howlers unlimbered their instruments to lead a community sing that must have startled wilderness denizens for miles around as the new railroad's first all-passenger train whistled its way along lake edges and through rough rock cuts. We had left daughter Bud in Cranberry, with an old lady who had a kind face, a comfortable cabin, and cats. We were glad now we had done so; the outing promised to be–literally–a staggering success.

There was a wild welcome at Flin Flon's new freight sheds. Friend met friend, gang met gang. Grub-baskets, bottles, coats, kids, hockey sticks, skates, club-bags, orchestra instruments–and an early casualty or two–were hauled from the train. The new community hall, planned by Flin Flonners to serve for years to come, was already too small, as hundreds jammed their way inside to eat–or drink–lunch.

Committee members found a safe place for us to store our orchestra instruments. I had just rejoined Ruth on the edge of the crowd when we heard a muffled call. Maw Bell, wearing a white blanket coat, her hat knocked over one eye, struggled through the crush toward us.

"Where *have* you been?" She clutched me for support, all puffed out. "I missed you at the train. Did you ever see such a bedlam! Come this way; I have dinner ready. Just a few friends. Whew!"

We escaped the mob. Going down a packed trail to her log cabin on the lakeshore, she was stopped a hundred times. "Hello, Maw!" a burly giant called as he swung the little old lady in the air, gave her a smacker of a kiss, and set her down. "Looked for you at The Pas when I got in from Churchill. Gone bushed on us now, huh?"

"Why not?" She waved a hand. "Everything's moving farther north. I'm not going to miss the fun. Come to my cabin later, Henry. Don't forget."

Men of every age and type stopped to shake her hand. Maw Bell's eyes shone. "In The Pas my place was home for all these boys, along with my own sons," she explained. "Some lived with me, others just dropped in. They're scattered over the North, railroading, mining, trapping, running cats. They've all done well; I'm proud of my boys!" She looked around. "Say–where's Bud?" We told her. "Glad to see somebody with sense," she said. "This'll be no ring-a-round-a-rosie affair."

Maw Bell's cozy cabin was filled with invited guests. The walls were lined with heavy, green-tinted building-paper, the floors colourful with gay hooked rugs, the couches covered with bright blankets. A special table, loaded with food, ran the length of the room.

A plane landed on the lake in front of the cabin and Constable and Mrs. George from Cranberry came to the door. Maw Bell's white head appeared around the kitchen partition. "Come in, come in!" she called. "Not guilty. First offence." Two more places were set, and the law joined the gaiety.

"Wrong uniform for tonight, George," someone shouted, and got a laugh. Flin Flon was policed by Manitoba, but the new hall was just over the Saskatchewan border.

"We can still give orders this side of the line." George grinned. "Pass the pickles."

After lunch Maw Bell shoved everyone out. "Go on to the hockey game. All of you. I'll be along later." She winked at Ruth to stay. "I like a little company," she confided.

It was an open-air rink surrounded by a four-foot board wall. The crowd was six deep, squirming and pushing to get a better view of the hockey battle underway. Betting was wild and open. Men left the game to visit the walled tents that were temporary housing for mine workers, and returned to the battle with renewed exuberance.

Nearing the end of the third period, with the score deadlocked and excitement high, a greater wave of cheering swept the crowd. Following the Derby, Emil St. Goddard and Earl Brydges had shipped their dogs east. News was just in: competing with professional mushers from all America, including Alaska, Emil St. Goddard had won the big Quebec race.

I was wedged against the rink fence beside a little Frenchman wearing a fur cap. He had been helping the general hilarity of the hockey game with his chatter and the instructions he kept shouting at the unhearing players. When the dog-race news came, I found myself next to a human explosion. He turned with a yell.

"Allow me! Allow me! Where is it? The telegram!"

Shouting, arms flailing, he struggled through the mob. The added commotion caught the attention of those farther along. "Fight!" someone shouted. Scores deserted their places and rushed to see the fun. All along the side of the rink people leaned over the boards, straining for a view.

It was too much. Cracking like great whips, the frost-filled supporting posts gave way. Forty feet of rink-side collapsed. A hundred spectators sprawled out on the ice among the speeding players.

Everything came to a stop. Everything, that is, but the little Frenchman. He clawed his way from under a pile of bodies, gained the clear and, now bareheaded, rushed away, still waving his arms and shouting. People were up, laughing, whacking caked snow from themselves and their neighbours.

"Who is he?" I asked a roaring monster who had rescued the little man's cap.

He stuck the bit of fur on his own great head and laughed. "He's happiest man in the Nort'! Emil St. Goddard's papa." At last I knew how young Emil came by his amazing store of energy.

The hockey ended in a Flin Flon win. The game finished late, and the dance started early. At Cranberry we knew about capacity crowds, but the droves of dancers cramming the Flin Flon community hall that Sunday night created a new problem. The music couldn't be heard.

For the first time our Husky Howlers had the help of a piano. It was the only one in the area, owned by a young preacher and his bride. Their broadmindedness in allowing its use for Sunday dancing gained them respect among heathen and adherents alike, since there was a fair chance that they wouldn't get it back in one piece. Our hurriedly recruited pianist was a railway coach cleaner from The Pas, and a top performer. Like the rest of us, jammed as we were in a corner of the hall, he tried gamely to make his instrument heard above the noise; but it was no use. Shouts, laughter, and the grinding of rock grit on the hollow board floor, killed all other sound. Until, pushing the preacher's piano before us, the Husky Howlers moved in a body to the centre of the floor and let the dancers mill in a slow, inching procession around the music.

It was a cold night. Those inside the hall found it impossible to get outside for drinks; those outside battled at the doorway and at last entered by the windows. Window sills became impromptu bars as friends outside served those within. Mine officials frowned at such open flaunting of the liquor laws, but they were helpless. Constable George, with other police, stayed well in the background, ready to move only in case of riot or rough stuff.

There was no need. Inter-town friendships, begun with Derby Week, were growing. People could see the signs of change, the coming of a new North. Many visitors, during the course of that day, were looking the town over, considering sites, sizing up business possibilities. We had been surprised to see Moon Glow there. He stood on a smooth, sloping rock-face, gazing about him. At first we didn't recognize him, dressed as he was in a sober, dark suit, a black felt hat perched high on his shaggy head. "I wonder?" I said to Ruth, and we looked at one another. Finding him in these strange surroundings, looking so different from his usual self, somehow suggested impending loss or change.

Change there would certainly be. A year ago Flin Flon had been only a wilderness camp. In another six months, a rapidily-growing modern city would take the place of this frontier town. The old North was having its last fling.

And a wild fling it was. At four o'clock the next morning, when the special train stopped at Cranberry, new bottles were still being broached. After many noisy and maudlin farewells, the denizens of Cranberry disembarked and the train, crowded with singing passengers, continued on south.

It had snowed again in our absence. Ruth and I plodded through

feathery trees to the cabin. After the glitter and blare of the mine camp, with its background of stark, blasted rock-work, machines, and the calculating schemes of men, the quiet of our slumbering lake setting was a welcome relief. We stood, breathing it in. Here was the true North, ageless, calm, and deep. Here was home.

Home was also a welcome sight for Bud, who usually liked to visit. She was very quiet the next day as I paid the old lady and we started for home. I carried the basket that had held food supplies for Bud, with extras for the old lady.

Coming along the snowy woods path Bud kept eyeing the empty basket, and at last said, "Next time you go, could I go too?"

"That depends on where we go," I said. "Why?" Again she was silent, still eyeing the basket. "Didn't you like staying with that nice old lady?" I asked.

She shook her head.

"Gosh kid, you're getting fussy," I teased. "She's good to you. She's got cats, and a warm cabin. I thought you liked visiting people. What was the matter?"

She looked up, her lip quivering. "I didn't like the grub."

The way she came out with it made me laugh. Then I stopped. I had watched Ruth pack the basket. Included were Bud's favourite foods, enough to last a week in case we were delayed. "Hey," I said, "what did you have to eat?"

"Porridge."

"Sure, for breakfast. But for supper last night, and dinner yesterday noon?"

"Porridge last night."

"And yesterday noon?"

"Porridge."

"Ye gods," I yelled, "didn't she give you anything else?"

She shook her head. "Just porridge."

I left it for a moment, trying to think of a safe explanation. "I'm afraid her memory must be slipping," I said at last, and added a word meant only for me.

Bud looked up eagerly. "*Is* she a witch?"

"Not quite," I said. "But we'd better find ourselves a new old lady."

At home Bud looked around and told Ruth, "This is the cabin I like. It's ours."

"Yes," Ruth said, "it's ours." She looked at me, and I knew her thought matched my own disturbing one: But for how long?

Chapter 18

The Flin Flon soirée resulted in a showdown between work and health. Our recent trips had been strenuous, and my work had been piling up. Now, when I was all set to tear into it, Ruth felt she had to remind me that it was a bad time of year for me to tear into anything. March was approaching and always, no matter how careful I was, I ran into hemorrhage trouble at this time. Whether it was caused by my resistance being lowered after the long winter, or for some other reason, I did not know. But it was certainly no myth–three successive Marches had proved that.

"All that work you're planning to do frightens me," Ruth said. "Can't we coast till spring, just to get you past your hoodoo season?"

"I'm not having one this year," I told her. "I'm stronger, and I'm a human barometer. If I'm overdoing it, I can tell. I won't overdo it."

I worked hard, but tried to rest. For weeks, slugging on articles and fiction, I stuck in the sweatshop. Our only visitors were close friends like the Browns. My weight was down, I knew. So did Ruth. Cheques trickled in, enough to clean up Wing Wong's bill and pay our way. And I was hoping that the stuff I was turning out now would give us a backlog.

I was happy about it; I wasn't so sure about Ruth. While I worked she tried to keep busy, but I would find her with a good book tossed aside, or staring soberly from a window–at a wall of snowy trees. She kept her concern mostly to herself; perhaps she had grown tired of protesting.

But she did protest when the Cold Lake trip came up. To me, it looked harmless. I had hoped all winter to go, and now seemed the time. Lake-freighting by tractor-train had increased as the Company slammed steel and supplies through to strategic points ready for spring construction of the new rail-line. Over the lake and portage trail, chopped ,snowplowed, and iced for easier hauling, tractor, snowmobile, and dog outfits travelled. Then a tractorman got an idea. He shipped a big sedan by rail from The Pas to Cranberry and

started a taxi service across the fifty miles of winter wilderness. It caught on fast; other cars appeared. A grim, slow trip to Cold Lake became a swift one, in almost luxurious conditions.

There were trail dangers, of course. Thick lake ice heaving, bursting, booming like thunder, left water channels that, frozen lightly over and dusted with snow, would trap the first outfit to happen along. Where rivers entered lakes there was treacherously thin ice. Winter blizzards, rising in quick fury, could fill in a plowed road in minutes, marooning a car and its occupants in forty- or fifty-below zero weather, miles from the shelter of even a wooded shoreline.

There were other dangers. Traffic pounded in three shifts, both in daylight and through the long northern winter nights. Tough men and great Lynn tractors, with sled runners up front and caterpillar treads, rolled from the supply yards at Cranberry Portage, grinding northward with their creaking sled-trains of rail construction tonnage. The snowplowed trail was narrow, slippery, and treacherous. Accidents and frostbite were common.

Our outward trip was routine. Returning from Cold Lake late at night by sedan, we hit trouble. The driver had a call to make at a fish camp off the main plowed road. The side trip took half an hour; that was all the time it took for the rutted trail to drift in. Our driver knew his business. He hit some drifts hard, rode over, or plowed through others. But a hundred yards short of the main road we bogged down. Passengers had to work fast. All passengers–including me. Drifting snow could pile around a stalled car in minutes.

I tried not to get overheated, but there was no way to avoid it. Some of us were shovelling, others pushing. Finally, we got through. But then, during the long ride home, I became more and more chilled.

The night journey seemed unending. There were what the boys called "meets" that caused lay-overs and delays. Spinning and skidding over lake ice and wooded portages, we met tractor-trains, their blinding headlights reflected from eight-foot snowbanks.

Monsters loomed in the darkness like rail locomotives, with muffled men perched high in their closed cabs. As they clanked and clattered past us on steel caterpillar tracks their loads would follow, weaving lines of frost-crunching, wide-bunked sleighs. Dogteams whisked by in the darkness, and horse-drawn sleighs pulled over to let faster mechanical outfits thunder past. It was a strange *mélange* of old and new northern methods, a weird, unreal movie, screened on a windshield.

At last we left the main trail, and bumped down over the railway.

Shivering, bone-chilled, I again compared the out-country bleakness with home. Cranberry, sheltered peacefully beneath its snowy evergreens, offered every comfort. Already, as we drove among the buildings, it seemed warmer. And, God, how I needed warmth!

I was in bed a month, all of March, on a single cot in the sweatshop. Thanks to earlier efforts, our income was adequate; it even stacked up a few dollars. But during that month, and the month's convalescence which followed, the office desk held only extra blankets and dry bed-wear.

Realizing that my health setback could develop into a major affair, I returned to the routine that had freed me from a sanatorium bed. That meant lying for hours without moving a limb, a finger or a toe. It had taken my first six months in bed to learn it. Since then, I used the system during each afternoon rest. Flat on my back, with body and mind relaxed, one seemed to leave the other. My mind might be active in many spheres, not all of them useful, but my body lay inert as a corpse. I knew vaguely what went on about me, but gave it no thought. I concentrated on the necessary self-healing.

Lying there in the sweatshop, long miles from a doctor or a hospital, I knew this was the only thing I could do. Of course, the tough end of it fell on Ruth and Bud. Bud was allowed no closer than the door. Visitors were discouraged. Ruth had spent a good deal of time at the Browns' cabin, but now Lady Di and Nola were in England. The few times Ruth went out, she tended to hurry home early, fearing trouble, The monotony of the confined life preyed on her nerves. It might have been best if she had blasted me for getting myself, and her, into such a spot. But she didn't. By the time I was up, she had begun to look as though *she* should be spending a few weeks in bed.

Getting out in the sunshine saved us, lightening an increasing grimness indoors. By the time I was up and around again, it was spring break-up. Unlike freeze-up, it was a slow process. The sun steamed and cleared cabin roofs; bare ground appeared along the main street; freight trails turned to mud; the lake ice softened along the shoreline, and became honeycombed, far out, with the pleasant hissing sound of evaporating water.

But the coming of spring was mainly messy. Heaps of winter refuse, exposed by the thaw, lay black and ugly on the bay surface. A pile of empty tin cans settled into the ice; a dead dog appeared near a community waterhole.

On the new townsite above the railroad, big things were happening, but I was too shaky to venture up there to see. Ruth and I sat for hours on the sun-warmed planking of the Airways dock, sheltered from the wind by heaps of last-minute freight. Each day, as the end of winter flying came closer, the boys scrambled harder to clear freight piles, and to be ready for their three-week break-up holiday Outside.

Word came that some rivers were clear. Small lakes everywhere, and large ones to the south, where spring came earlier, were breaking up. At Cranberry, the last of the snow went; the fringe of open water along the lakeshore widened; planes made their take-offs and landings on a waterlogged island of ice out in the bay. All flights were in the early morning, when the surface was stiffened by frost. Any other traffic across the lake ice, whether motor, horse, or dog-team, was no longer possible.

One afternoon, as we loafed at the flying dock, Ruth said, "I wish you could go to Winnipeg for a check-up. If you don't, when you do go back to work you'll wonder how much you can do, or how little." She looked away, adding, "So will I."

I knew she was right. If I could get Outside for a real going-over by chest experts, and if the X-rays told a good story, it would save both of us worry. "How much dough have we?" I asked. Travel would be the heavy item.

"Enough for you. Even the change would help you."

I watched as she stared out over the water to the great ice island, where Airways boys were switching a plane from skis to wheels. Her eyes were dull with worry; she had lost weight and her natural good colour was gone. "You need a change more than I do," I told her. "Can't we both go? We could stay at Jean's." (I had a sister in Winnipeg.)

She shook her head. "You go. Get a good report. That's all we need." She stood up. "The sun's cooling off. I'll find Bud."

Then magic happened, again through Brownie, our worker of miracles. Ruth came flying home next morning with the mail. The outer door slammed as she ran through the cabin to the sweatshop. "The boys are flying to the 'Peg! Leaving now. Five of them–and us, if we can make it. There's room for one small bag. Hurry!"

"Money! The bank!"

"I've got it. Bud's with Mrs. Roberts. Lucky us!" Mrs. Roberts's new, log dining-room lounge above the railway had stuffed furniture, floor rugs, a fireplace, and a piano; this time, Bud would be in good hands.

We hugged her goodbye at the dock and piled into a canoe. The water was choppy from a strong breeze. Agent Mick and an Indian paddled hard, while I signed the required waivers. When we reached the ice island, the others were already in the wheel-rigged plane. Brownie grinned down at us from the cockpit. "Whatcha know? We'll land in Winnipeg on an airdrome. Just like regular airplane pilots!"

That we would fly with one engine over 400 miles of wild country, which offered no landing spot, was nothing to them, or to us. Rivers and lakes to the south were open, but the strip of shore water at Cranberry was not long enough to allow a take-off with floats. To avoid riding a train for thirty-six hours in order to get Outside on their break-up holiday, the boys had decided upon this experiment on wheels.

Up front with Brownie was another pilot, George McKee, lean, dark, and full of hellery. With pilots Con Farrell, Paul Calder, and air-engineer Don Goodwin, Ruth and I sprawled on top of the luggage in the crowded cabin. The engine roared, tires rolled and swished over honeycombed ice, spun faster. The speed we gained on clear ice was lost as the wheels showered the aircraft with water which lay in shallow pools. We zigged and zagged at sharp speed, as Brownie turned and twisted in search of a clear runway. Then there was a brisk leap forward, as he found a strip of clear ice. The machine bounced once, and we were in the air.

"Keep here there, brother," Paul Calder grinned, as he expressed all our hopes. Brownie finished his climb, and we arranged ourselves about the cabin on luggage and boxes. An Airways operator would inform Winnipeg when we passed over The Pas. After that, we were on our own. A rollicking tail-wind offered us a chance to break the air-time record from Cranberry Portage to Winnipeg.

At The Pas, the Saskatchewan River was a wild flood of moving ice chunks. We went east and south over Lake Winnipegosis and Lake Manitoba, with bleak danger below. The dark waters were grey-patched with floating ice islands. The few fishing hamlets we saw in wooded bays had no landing areas for skis, floats, or wheels. The tail-wind whooped us along, the ship pitching wildly over land, steadying over water, the engine song changing to a hollow rumble when ice fields were below.

Heavy storm clouds reared ahead. We belly-dragged to dodge them, reached the lake end, flew over farms laid out in tartan patterns, and landed in bright sunshine on a dry Winnipeg air field. We had bettered the former flight time by one hour.

With no time to warn my sister and her husband, we went to a hotel. Still in bush clothes, still unbelieving, we stood staring at shiny bath fixtures. Ruth turned on the hot. "Me first; I'm dirtiest! Thick towels!–and I don't have to wash 'em!"

"Call me in an hour," I told her. "I'm dead."

For the remainder of the week, we stayed with the Youngs in St. James. The eldest of their three, a chunky eleven-year old, was a kid who spent every spare minute on outdoor rinks, earflaps flying, or around Winnipeg baseball and football parks in season. He was nephew Scott Young, who later would use his sports knowledge as a base for launching an extensive writing career.

To our great relief, the report on my chest showed improvement over the past year. It might have showed even more, if it hadn't been for the Cold Lake episode, but we felt good about it. I also visited the *Tribune* office to meet with Allen Bill, who had been the re-write editor on our Andy Taylor story. "We hear there's a weekly newspaper starting in Cranberry Portage," he said. "Yours?"

"No!" I laughed. "What'll it live on?–Dog Eat Dog?" Like the *Tribune* people, I wondered who the owner could be.

"Tomorrow's train day," I told Ruth that night; we had played safe and bought our tickets earlier. "Break-up, North. A barrel of work and fun waiting. What say?"

She didn't say much. In my own eagerness, I disregarded what for me should have been a sharp warning. "We have to go back. Bud's there," was all she said.

Winnipeg's Canadian National depot looked like war days as we caught our train for The Pas. Hobnailed men with packsacks clattered over the tiled floor, trailed by relatives offering last-minute gifts and advice. City mining men gave quiet instructions to their field crews. University students, freed for the summer, crackling in new bush togs, shouldered heavy packs and followed survey-party bosses. A bunch of northerners, topping off a city bender, shouted orders at amused redcaps, who were bearing their scruffy gear.

Break-up of 1929 promised the biggest boom year in Canada's mining history, opportunities for youth, riches to be nabbed by cracking a chip of rusty rock. But the stagey enthusiasm of these fortune hunters, their boasting, their swaggering sureness, seemed amateurish to us.

I realized why, and told Ruth as the train began to roll: "We're just snooty. We're oldtimers." (We had been North a year.)

Inwardly I cussed the long train trip. With a clearance on health, my one urge now was to get back.

Chapter 19

Our Winnipeg-Cranberry Portage rail-trip proved to be a panorama of the changes that were overtaking the North. Only a year earlier The Pas had been a frontier town. Now it had the feel of a young, modern city, with suit-dressed merchants, crowded streets, and even a daily paper, the *Northern Mail.* Trading stores were modern shops; river, rail and air transport converged there. The "Gateway To The North" bore itself with metropolitan dignity.

A year back, we had wobbled into Cranberry on the trolley, over naked ties and rails. Now we rode a passenger coach, packed with government survey crews, mining engineers, underground workers, prospectors, Cree families, and eager commercial men. *En route,* one of these demonstrated a new idea, a granulated soap called Oxydol. Another, during the journey, sold several made-to-fit "city suits." Civilization, as Paddy had predicted, was "creepin' in."

But there were major signs of the old North left. Before we reached Cranberry, Constable George and a police partner came through from the baggage car. George spoke to a man, indicated a brown canvas packsack, and searched it. No luck. Deadpan, he balanced on a wooden seat arm, reached into the two ventilator crannies near the roof, and took from each a shiny gallon tin of alcohol. "Yours?" he asked the man.

"Yours, it looks like, Constable," the man replied. George carried his booty through the car past wide grins.

At Cranberry, Ruth hurried to the new townsite above the track to get Bud. A well-tailored young bootlegger, whom I knew only as "Irish," and who had been on the train, joined me and asked, "Get the play on Curly?"

"Was it really his alky?" I asked.

"Sure. Except Curly rides the train just to play decoy. His boys are hauling a big load by sleigh and canoe across the ice island in the main lake. Since break-up no one else has been trailing."

"How about you?" I dug a bit. "Travelling light today?"

"No percentage in that." His eye had a glint. "My partner and I have new set-up. Like a look?"

I had wondered about Irish, how he operated, why he never got pinched. His new cabin was above the track, and on our way there I saw some of the many changes that had taken place in the town. It was odd, our journeying a thousand miles in order to become aware of what had been happening only a quarter-mile from the lakeshore. Climbing the sandy slope, Irish jerked his head back toward the railroad's new station. "Pick my stuff up later. Bohunk basket. Sure camouflage."

"Bohunk basket" was what people called the wicker trunks that all the Europeans arrived with. They were lightweight, strong, and now available in quantity. "The basket's the first thing they ditch," Irish explained. "There's a second-hand joint in The Pas that has hundreds. A big one holds three dozen forties. Pack the jugs in blankets, ship to some -owski name–the cops never check bohunk baskets. Then we just burn 'em."

Irish's new cabin had corner bunks, a round poker table, and a sink with a drain. "No alky. All Scotch." He set a white serving pitcher by the sink. "Dumps fast if there's a surprise caller. No gurgle like with a bottle." He opened a wall cupboard, removed the dishes it held, and pointed to a wide upright board that had a row of spaced nail heads. "Fake nails. Cut off behind." He gave a sharp push, and the board, the crack between it and another one hidden by a shelf, snapped back over a stiff spring. "Holds a dozen bottles. There's another cache over here," he said, slapping the plank door frame that was set into the solid log kitchen wall. "Try and find it."

I searched. Great spikes were driven through the frame to keep the log ends in line, with nowhere to hide anything. Irish drew out a top spike with his fingers, and the heavy jamb pivoted on the only real spike, exposing log ends that were dried and cracked by heat. With a knife blade he lifted out a circle of wood, and left me staring at a whisky bottle lying on its side.

"Three logs; dozen jugs each. We hook 'em out with a long wire and a loop. Hollowed the logs with an auger and redhot irons. Helluva chore."

The Scotch was a top brand. From the window, I saw Ruth coming with Bud, and asked, "No alky?–coloured, flavoured, and tagged with phony whisky and rum labels like some of the boys have?"

Irish closed the cache and grinned. "Little better class of people around here," he admitted with commendable modesty as I went on outside.

Bud came running. She had had a happy time, but was excited at having us back. As we went toward the lake she hurried along beside Ruth, eyeing the bag I carried, no doubt imagining the loot it might contain. We crossed the track by Mrs. Sauna's café and already could see our cabin. The clearing in the birches was lighter, less secluded. Then, as the lake waters still patched with floating ice appeared ahead, we stopped amazed.

Earlier, we hadn't been allowed more than a glimpse of the lake from our cabin; now we could see the whole bay. The main street, from lake to railway, was not just one line of new buildings, but two lines. Trees that once had blocked our view, had become building logs. Everywhere the ground was littered or piled deep with tree tops and slashings. Denuded of its timber backdrop, the street was almost in our yard. And if the street was not, something else was: thirty feet from our front door, set among birches in what we called our front yard, was a new log cabin.

"A man made it," Bud said, as she puffed up the woods path beside us. She added, indignantly, "And Paddy helped, too!"

The new building explosion had been sparked by a false rumour that the townsite survey would include a limited section below the track. Between us and the lake was a three-family fisherman's lodge, a new café, a photographer's tent, and a laundry run by a Cockney woman. Also new, were a poolroom, a newspaper and print shop, a private hospital, a flop-house, and a Negro bootleg joint. Some were only half-completed.

Above the track, on the proposed townsite, were a general store, a café, a hotel larger than Moon Glow's Lakeview, a confectionary, a movie theatre, and various private dwellings, scattered through the woods. There was also a new Syd's Bakeshop. With the townsite situation vague, people had built on lots they could only hope to buy from the government later.

I went to see Paddy. In the cabin next to the Lakeview, he gave the news and his views. "Here on the lakeshore, them traders had boomin' business seven days a week, Sundays besides. No rent. Not a tax." He spat in disgust. "So them brainy articles belly-bitch for a post office, a school, for buildin' lots, and for the divil himself couldn't mark down what! Now the bulls has told them to close up Sundays, and that everybody's to move to the townsite. Herded like squealin' pigs into a pen."

"Are you going to move?" I asked.

He glanced from the door and turned. "It's a secret, but me and the Big Boy's for Flin Flon."

"What about the hotel?"

"He'll unload it."

"This cabin?"

"Walk away from it."

I thought of our own cabin and felt sick. We hadn't money to move, or to buy a lot and build. What *were* we going to do? I got off the numbing subject by asking about our new neighbour.

"I scared some hunks off there that figgered to build, and laid a round of logs to hold it. When he come along, I let it go. Gamblin', but no booze in the place. Quiet. He's a gentleman and a woodsman. Burnt his slashin's up clean and safe. Not many does. I don't."

Then Paddy made a prophecy. "Hell will be loosed when things dries out here. Nobody's fire insured, nor won't be with rates at a hundred dollars a thousand." The thought of losing our cabin, and everything in it, made me feel even sicker.

A 300-pound, shaggy-headed hulk filled the doorway. "Heard you was here," Moon Glow said. He hoisted the slumbering Silver from Paddy's bunk and sagged onto it. "You been Outside. Learn anything there about this noospaper tit-squeak that's taking over the town?" I told him what I'd heard in Winnipeg. "He's crazy, or a crook," Moon Glow said. "Got these local birds fooled. Nicked 'em nice."

"On what?"

"Big ideas. Talked a raft of 'em into donating cash to get his paper going. Claims he'll make this a town." He swung about. "Anybody knows that in six months there'll not be fifty people left here. Only place is end of steel. Flin Flon or Cold Lake. If these local loons don't get took for a ride, then I'm simple as I look." He picked Silver up by the tail and scruff, tossed him back on the bunk, and stalked out.

"Should've been a politician," Paddy said, nodding after him. "Knows more and does less than anybody. Since spottin' it, I just trail along where he goes. Ain't been broke, nor drunk, nor in jail since."

It was a week before we saw our new neighbour. A stocky workman, cutting wood, had been the only sign of life around the cabin, and the back door facing our front one was never opened. Then one evening on our path I met a stranger, a man of fifty, tall, in well-

tailored breeks and high boots. From his speech, I guessed his nationality as American.

"My name's Pete. Sorry I couldn't see you before I built." He was quiet-mannered. "I run a little game every night. You won't be disturbed. My man's digging a well; I'd be glad if you'd use it." He grinned. "Call it ground rental." He was from Minnesota, an ex-baseball catcher with the gnarled little fingers to prove it. I had played ball in the same general area, and we shot the breeze for a while. Leaving, he said, "No drinks in the game, but I keep a case of fizz in the floor hole. Drop in anytime."

"I like poker, but not its hours," I told him.

"Drop in anyhow," he said. "Lunch every night, one o'clock."

We had our chats, always late in the day, since Pete slept till noon. Then one night, I remembered his invitation. We had as visitors four college girls from Des Moines, Iowa, craving northern adventure. Together with Airways, we had arranged for them to accompany Pine Root Stan and his trail boys on a canoe-freighting trip to Cold Lake. As our overnight guests, the girls were excited to learn of the gambling lay-out. I left them chattering and went to Pete's cabin. Pete came to the door.

"We have some American gals looking for northern colour," I told him. "Could I bring them over? Maybe cook up some fun?"

We schemed a moment. Pete chuckled. "Give me an hour. I'll wise the boys."

At one-thirty I guided our visitors through the birches to Pete's back door. A special tap brought the doorman, then Pete himself. His raised finger warned the girls to be silent. Hardly breathing, they slid into the darkened room.

Pete and the boys had done a good job of stage-setting. In a far corner of the cabin men were slouched around a canvas-topped table. Some I knew. There was a clutter of money, bottles, and glasses. Bets were made in silence; the atmosphere was tense.

Beside me our visitors waited as heavy betting narrowed to two men, grim-faced, staring at a heap of tens and twenties. One called; the other spread his cards. "Four of the biggest." He waited, hand poised, ready to rake in the pot.

The other man stiffened. "There's four aces in the deck. I already got two of 'em." His chair screeched back. "You rat!" His hand came up with a gun. Men shouted, tried to grab him.

"Beat it," Pete snarled at our visitors, and opened the door. "No noise!"

Ruth had been cued in, and she had the gas lantern in the window of our cabin, to light the way. There was a wild scramble through the birches, and we felt lucky not to have a case of hysterics on our hands. But Pete fixed that, too. Minutes afterwards, his man was at the door with two quarts of iced Mumm's. "For the American ladies. Boss's compliments." Grinning, he hustled back to work.

Even earlier that night, the Iowa girls hadn't lacked for Cranberry colour. We had taken them to a meeting at the schoolhouse, which proved to be the season's most uproarious. There was a typhoid scare, and the stern-faced, hard-hatted Winnipeg health officer had returned to the town to issue warnings, offer further architectural suggestions regarding sanitation, and to insist on water chlorination.

It was our introduction to the local newspaperman and his wife. Like Moon Glow and Mrs. Sauna, we were astonished at how Mister Moses, as Paddy called him, had taken the town over in so short a time. "We started the school. Let 'em run it if they want," was Mrs. Sauna's comment. "I'm too busy, so busy I'm getting another girl. Business is jumping."

The editor's wife was dark, open-faced, and well-preserved, with a way of turning her head and hoisting an unbelieving eyebrow when someone neglected to listen to her husband's every word of wisdom. If a question was of too little importance to engage his attention, she handled it; so it was that she tangled with the man who had put the trim boards on the cabin, our voluble maker of shavings, the Chirper.

With Cockney vigour, the Chirper demanded a lower scavenging fee for householders. Cafés, hotels, and laundries, he said, should be charged more. Mrs. Moses listened, conferred with her husband, then rose with dignity enough to dominate a discussion of any subject, including the trying one at hand.

"During our settlement canvass on school matters, we have learned many things." she said. "And among them is perhaps the reason why our friend objects to paying a scavenger fee. He has a family of six. With your permission, Mr. Chairman, I would like to ask a direct question." She favoured the Chirper with a stern eye. "*Have you,*" she enquired, "an outhouse at *your* place?"

The Chirper exploded from his chair. "Mind your own bloody business!" he shouted. "Who are you to ask questions? I'll ask you one! Are you really married to that long-geared, slick-tongued. . . ."

From behind, Moon Glow's great hand closed his mouth and seated him in a single motion. Mrs. Moses remained serene, a

curve of satisfaction at the corners of her mouth. "I think Mr. Chairman, that this man's position has been made clear. You are looking for possible sources of contamination. I am content to leave the matter in your hands."

Our Americans, jammed in the standing crowd near the door, were pop-eyed. They would hear more on the subject of sanitation, but first came a discussion of impending fire danger that ended when Tobacco Jowls and I agreed to act as a committee to organize a settlement fire-hazard clean-up day. The meeting was already adjourned when there was a commotion in the doorway, and gaunt-framed Caribou Pete, official scavenger, found a wide path cleared for him.

He hesitated, cap in hand, his scrawny neck muscles tight. Caribou was peeved. "It's them goddam bohunks," he said, addressing the health officer, who blinked at him in amazement. "Either I get public support, or I quit." There was sudden silence. The Winnipeg man looked about him for local guidance as Caribou continued: "They ain't fit to be on no scavenging list. They don't go by no rules. I've went after the settlement committee. They won't do nothing. I want action! Call yourself an expert? Come with me on my rounds tonight–and you'll learn about sanitation!"

Caribou's face was white with anger. The livelihood of his large family was at stake, but that was beside the point. Job or no job, he intended to force a showdown. "I've had four years experience in this game," he shouted from the doorway, "and I puked *three times* the other night!"

So vivid an appeal could not be ignored. The local committee promised fast and fearful action. Caribou departed, chin jutting. The American girls watched eagerly, but the Winnipeg health man did not go with him.

Cranberry's sanitation program obviously was in capable hands. An equally urgent and serious problem still remained. The fire hazard.

Chapter 20

No one we knew in the settlement carried fire insurance. As Paddy had said, the local rate was an impossible ten percent. In the scramble to cut building logs and stove wood on the settlement edge, few had even piled their slashings. Tree-tops and branches lay in windrows, or scattered, already crackling with dryness in the hot May sun. A spark would set off the whole shebang; there was no time to lose. Tobacco Jowls and I got busy organizing–which meant brow-beating, threatening, pleading, and bulldozing–our settlement fire clean-up day.

Jowls was a good canvasser. He wore a black vest that failed to button across his rounded paunch, and the usual black felt hat tipped over his eyes. Even in the early morning, the spitting side of his grey beard stubble was already stained brown. Any building owners along the lakeshore who were at cross-purposes with the old boy, I tackled alone, asking co-operation.

Our first snag was a pair of newly-arrived "hunkie" merchants who, when we mentioned nonpaying work, became unable to savvy English. Jowls had the answer. He strolled about, sizing up their building like someone ready to buy.

"We're making this a white man's town. Ever'body's gotta move next month. Us two has a big say on the committee and at Ottawa as to who's allowed in the new gover'ment town." He looked around for a polite place to spit as he allowed his words to sink in. "We're making up our townsite list from them that helps pile and burn. It's up to you fellers." He stamped out. I followed, feeling like Silver tagging after Ted when Ted had finished singing.

Our many calls brought promises of help, and also gave me a chance to size up the new business places. In a year, many of the lakeshore squatters had graduated from log shacks to frame building with full shelves and show windows. Always grimly opposed to the new townsite idea, Jowls now preached it.

I soon learned his reason. When traders moved up toward the railroad to become orthodox merchants, Jowls was quick to grab vacated buildings. Some he paid a few dollars for, those which had been deserted, he commandeered. He had a row of places near the water, some rented out, others used for hotel overflow or freight storage. I found my canvassing partner was using our official status to push his personal schemes.

Droopy Gibson, when we called at the flop-house he ran, was too drunk to care about the new townsite. He admitted to Jowls and myself that his own little racket supplied him with booze and grub. Could any good citizen want more?

We knew what his racket was. Each day, lean, stooped, with watery eye and glib tongue, Droopy met the northbound train. He would ask a group of men if they wanted work, secret prospecting work–at double wages. "Boss is in The Pas; back tomorrow. If you want, you can bunk up with me till then."

After three days, Droopy would fake deep sorrow. "Looks like it's no use, boys. He's fell off the wagon. Drunk as a he-goat likely. If I was you I wouldn't wait." He would shake his head and sigh. The disgruntled men would pay their bunkhouse bill and leave; but for Droopy there were other trains and other hopeful men looking for work at double wage.

"I ought to have that man closed up," Jowls said as we left. "Bad for the town."

"That place of his would make a good fish warehouse for next winter," I agreed.

"Eh?" He gave me a sharp look, then dropped it. "Let's try here."

It was the new laundry, small and steamy, run by a little Cockney woman built like a plum pudding, and all out for business. We waited while a dark-skinned man got his washing, Jowls twitching with impatience. The customer was a young half-breed who had lost his Company job through drinking and was recently the alleged issuer of bad cheques.

The woman plopped his laundry bundle on the counter. "Yer washing, mister, all nice an' clean." She kept her hand on it while squinting suspiciously. "Dollar eighty-five it is, but remember this: I don't want none of yer bloody 'omemade cheques."

We escaped that near one-man riot. At Mrs. Sauna's new café beside the railroad, we encountered what sounded like another.

From inside came Mrs. Sauna's voice, shrill but calm: "Yes, I put your drunk of a friend out. He got fresh with Billie. You're just as drunk. Now get, or I'll show you who runs this place."

There was a rumbling reply and a scuffle. The wide screen door ripped with a screech across the top, and down the sides, as a man exploded backward through it. Mrs. Sauna followed him out through the hole, dust cap over one ear, and swung a hefty kick to his stern as he scrambled up. The man kept going. Mrs. Sauna turned and saw us.

"Good morning." She laughed. "You've caught me house-cleaning. Come in. What you two collecting for now? The Anderson baby or the Cranberry smelter?"

The Anderson baby everyone knew about, a lusty boy born to the wife of Cap Anderson, a lake-boater and commercial fisherman. Cranberry's first white baby had set off a roaring celebration along Joint Row. But I knew nothing about a smelter.

We reminded Mrs. Sauna of the fire-hazard clean-up. "Oh, sure. Some of the boys'll be there," she promised. That was enough.

While Jowls went to the new rail-station nearby, to check on some freight bills, Mrs. Sauna took me through the café with its long counter and tables to show me their quarters at the back. They were well-furnished, with the feel of permanency. At mention of a smelter I had seen Jowls stiffen. Now I had a chance to ask about it. Mrs. Sauna laughed and jerked a thumb. "He'll tell you. Mister Editor's schemes are too wild for me to savvy."

Billie came from the bedroom, brushing her fair hair. She was an attractive kid, now sixteen, but she acted older, being wise to the schemes of men. "How do you like the dump?" She waved the brush. "Perfect, huh?"

I agreed. Mrs. Sauna shooed her into the front part and drew the door curtain. "I'm doing great," she confided. "This place is paid for; all my store and café stock's paid for. Besides–look!"

She unlocked a sewing-machine drawer, took out an envelope packed with bills, and whispered, "Five hundred dollars, and more to come. For Billie's city schooling next winter. I keep it hid. She won't know till the time comes."

"A lot safer in the bank," I told her.

"She'd get wise then. That kid knows everything. This is once I'm going to surprise her."

When I complimented Mrs. Sauna, she beamed. "I've got another

good girl now. Prairie. Knows how to work. Tressa's a peach. I ain't been away since I came to Cranberry, but I'm taking a day off soon to size up Flin Flon. Tressa and Billie'll manage."

I rejoined Tobacco Jowls; we crossed the track and started along the street cleared through a fine stand of trees on the surveyed townsite. Entering Syd's Bakeshop, a frame building with big front windows, gave me special pleasure. No one had worked harder for what they had than Syd and Miranda. Beaten by crop disasters on the Prairies, they had come North to start over. Miranda was tall and spare; she was not too strong, but she had spent long hours in their former log place by the lakeshore, a purgatory of stove-heat and steam.

It had been hardest for little wizened Granny to fit in. Helping when she could, she mostly stayed in a corner, in her padded chair, drawing comfort from her Bible. Exposed to throngs of people, but separated from her many prairie grandchildren, each time we visited her she would tell Ruth and me: "Oh, but it is lonely here." Things were better now for Granny; in the new bakeshop was a brighter corner, free from excessive heat and draughts.

Syd beckoned me back in when Jowls went outside, and said with pride. "She's all paid for–building, equipment, grocery stock; close to ten thousand." Then he asked: "Whatcha think about this noospaper idea?" When I hesitated, he sighed. "Good thing, mebbe. I hope so. I give him some cash. Like he says, a noospaper could boost the town."

I thought of the suave Mister Moses, and of Syd and Miranda slaving for those dollars! It was, perhaps, not my affair, but there were too many sly schemes hatching locally.

These were in addition to legitimate efforts. The wild dreams outlined at that first Board of Trade meeting in Moon Glow's hotel were coming true. Cranberry Portage was a main flying base in the North. There were wholesale fish houses, a post office, a school, a theatre–and now a weekly paper. The Cold Lake railway branched from a junction one mile north; the townsite was occupied; there was a private hospital run by a graduate nurse, and a rail hospital car with a young Company doctor. New dwellings brightened the woods; businesses were expanding. Now there was this talk of a smelter.

When I asked Tobacco Jowls about it, he was, as always, cagey. "That noospaper feller not been to see you?" He nodded down street to a small log place with a big sign: *Northland Printery*. The news-

paper "feller" hadn't been; when we met he eyed me, spoke, and passed on. He hadn't skimped on good equipment. His first issue of the *Northland Echo* was a tidy eight pages, well-printed on slick paper, and with good photos. It boosted Cranberry to the blue northern skies. "Smart feller," Jowls commented, tearing off a chew with a yank that told of something big coming. "He's gonna put this town on the map."

"He seems sold on Cranberry", I said. "What all's he going to do?"

"Well . . . lottsa things. He's bringing in a smelter."

"That's interesting," I said, remembering how the Winnipeg editor and I had speculated on a newspaper's surviving in Cranberry.

"Smelter's a sure bet," Tobacco Jowls went on. "Flin Flon and Sherritt-Gordon'll mine the ore, we'll smelt it here. Railroad from their doors to Cranberry smelter. This'll be the main centre. Year from now, we'll have a city here." He spat emphatically, but with only fair success.

"Flin Flon's building a smelter on their own property," I reminded him.

"Not now, they won't." He was blunt, and sure. "Can't afford to. Not when they hear this proposition of his. He's going to Flin Flon tomorrow to let 'em in on it."

I stayed deadpan, I hoped. "How about financing? A smelter will cost . . . what? Millions?"

"Nope." He squared his old shoulders with assurance. "That's the nub of it. New invention from Germany. One tenth the cost. Since the war, Germany ain't been allowed by the League of Nations to sell new inventions in other countries. He's having it brought out through Sweden on the quiet, straight into Hudson Bay and down across the barrens by railroad. That means ther'll be no duty to pay like in the East."

Jowls paused for breath. I felt almost as breathless. He looked around, and continued: "That's why he's keeping it so quiet. He don't bother with no small potatoes. Nothing less'n thousand-dollar blocks. I can get you in," he offered.

"Quite a project." I dug deeper. "Think Cranberry can swing it?"

Jowls flared. "Hell, we gotta swing it! It's already swung!" From an inside pocket of his black vest he drew out a folded paper, hesitated, then replaced it. He eyed me sternly. "You wanta see this country go ahead don't you?" Without waiting for a reply he added, "I'll keep you posted on it."

At home I told Ruth the smelter news. "And Mister Moses hasn't come near us. I feel slighted," I added.

She nodded. "Maybe, among other things, he's checked on everybody's bank balance."

"Ouch." Mention of money made me wince. "Were you at the bank today?"

"I was. Our balance is one dollar and twenty-two cents–and all we've got to eat is bacon and beans. But–remember us? We're writers."

"I'll get back to being a writer after tomorrow. I picked up article material today, but it will have to wait. Jowls and I have two hundred volunteers for the fire clean-up. I've got to be on the job."

"Please be careful," she begged. "Try to remember you're not built like Moon Glow."

There weren't 200 men out next morning. There weren't two dozen. Even the two local fire-rangers were absent, no one knew where. In spite of our organizing, clean-up day looked like a dead flop. And to pile and burn dry slashings when we were twenty shorthanded would be dangerous. Again we made the rounds. Residents were warned that the burning could get out of hand, and become a catastrophe.

There was some response, and a start was made. Isolated brush heaps were fired. Men dragged loads of branches to the flames, clearing ground as they went. But at the end of an hour, not even a scar was burned across the danger area. Tobacco Jowls, whose team and waterwagon stood by in case of any fire getting out of control, ordered his teamster back to the stables.

"To hell with these greenhorns," he bellowed, waving a great arm. "Let 'em learn their own lesson. Nigh on ninety years I've seen it! Men the world over is just plain damn fools!"

Right then we got a break. From a fired brush-pile came a loud *pop*! Another!

"Hooch!" someone shouted. A man with a long-handled fork, braving heat and whirling smoke, emerged juggling a forty-ounce bottle of Johnnie Walker's best, intact. Before he could return to the cache, there were other explosions, and the balance of the hidden bootleg stock had perished.

On our rounds the day before, we had ignored the men who ran the bootleg joints. "Waste of time," Jowls had said. "Wouldn't be interested. Never are interested in anything that looks like work."

Now they would have been most interested. With the rescued

bottle sitting on a stump to cool, like an inspirational beacon, a vigorous search began. The next find was a gallon of alky, then more Scotch. The clean-up work began to roll.

Word of the booze bonanza hit the main settlement. All business was dropped in favour of brush-burning. Men came on the run. Transients who had never seen the town before, and might never see it again, took a sudden interest in Cranberry's civic affairs, and joined the exuberant throng working for its future safety. Our sudden success was the result of a happy coincidence. The bootleggers had been warned of an impending large-scale police raid and had hidden booze stocks well away from their premises.

Now, as new caches continued to pop, clean-up day threatened to pass beyond control. Great fires flared back through the woods; at times there would sound a mighty *whoosh*! as flames swept up a dry jackpine and licked it clean.

Jowl's teamster returned, dancing a jig aboard the flat water tank. With real fire danger in sight, everybody, drunk or sober, piled in to help. Only our small army of men on the job saved the day. At one stage, I rallied a crew to rescue our private backhouse, as the slashings piles flanking it were touched off. By dusk, every brush heap within a quarter mile of town had been first scrutinized, and then burned. Great quantities of liquor were consumed, a small percentage by flame. Men weaved homeward, smoke-blackened and hilarious.

To the sad-faced local bootleggers went credit for a roaringly successful clean-up campaign. Imbibing citizens had no qualms; the alcoholic windfall was declared an earned dividend on earlier investments.

I overtook Tobacco Jowls strolling lakeward. He turned to look back over the ground cleaned up and made fire-safe. "People needs organizing, that's all," he said. As I grinned agreement, he jerked his head toward the tangle of buildings closest to the lakeshore, including many of his own. "Could be all right now." With another jerk he indicated those up toward the railroad and beyond. "Them fellers?–ain't got a chance."

Chapter 21

It was a desperately dry summer. Fire danger lurked throughout the North and could be smelled in the still air. People stopped work to look up at a yellowing sky.

Our clean-up day smoke columns had brought prompt official investigation. The brush heaps were hardly ablaze when an Air Force patrol plane, the type our own Airways boys called a flying hayrack, circled the scene, side-slipped low over the trees, and flopped onto the bay.

In Canada's northwest areas, peacetime R.C.A.F. pilots and aircraft did fire-patrol work, and aerial mapping, through a financial arrangement with the provinces. It offered pilot-training, and provided a valuable service in the North. Planes carrying homing pigeons cruised the wilderness to report fires, some of which were caused by lightning. However, it was no secret that many fires were deliberately set by wildcat prospectors, who saved themselves time, and cost the country millions of dollars in timber, by burning off the overburden to see what mineral hopes lay in the rock beneath.

Scout-plane reports brought flying-boats with pumps, fire hose, and trained fire-fighters. These men recruited and directed local gangs, and their orders were law. This produced friction, when the local workers knew more about the area than those in charge. It was the same with some Air Force flyers. A top pilot, with high rank, might still lack northern savvy.

In the following weeks, many fire-patrol planes refuelled at the Cranberry dock. On the rail right-of-ways, along both the Flin Flon and Cold Lake lines, fires broke out. Camps burned, long stretches of muskeg cross-logging were lost, telephone dispatching lines suffered. Rail construction was slowed when men were taken off their regular work, and rushed from point to point with pumps and lengths of hose.

Smoke haze, often accompanied by glassy water that always made

landing tricky, was bad for flying, but air activity grew. Incoming trains spilled Canadian and U.S. mining engineers, interested investors, government officials. Hotels and log annexes were filled, and there were guests staying in private cabins, including our own. The days were hot, and packed with work for us. I wrote one prophetic piece on the fire danger at Cranberry.

June came in as a scorcher. Since the spring break-up, we had seen no rain. The sun rolled above the pines at 4 A.M., and got in sixteen hours of vicious work daily, before a long-suffering Mother Earth could heave up a protecting shoulder. Each breeze became a withering blast that dragged moisture from the very tree roots. The forest quiet was punctuated with a million faint cracklings. Undergrowth wilted and browned; leaves hung motionless. Spruce and pine slashings along many miles of right-of-way waited for just one spark to transform them into screaming explosions of flame.

Farther north, fires were already being fought, cornered, beaten, only to break out anew. Additional fire-fighting equipment was rushed from Outside. Planes landed near the outbreaks, left pumping engines and men, and roared away on new fire errands. Airways planes, busy with their own freighting, were pressed into service. The smoke haze rolling in from a wilderness aflame curbed the sun's heat, but it covered lake and land with a weird yellow haze that caused throats to parch, and ringed sleepless eyes with red.

The Company was speeding up work on both railroads, and men not fighting fires worked long overtime hours, taking advantage of the drought to conquer difficult stretches of sinkhole and muskeg. At the Cranberry supply yards, noisy trains from the South dumped their loads. The piles of bridge timbers, ties, steel, and explosives continued to multiply because of the frenzied dumping from the south, and the limited outlet north.

In the "V" formed by the Cold Lake rail junction, a mile north of Cranberry settlement, 200 men were fighting a fire that had crawled from farther up the line. With both wide, cleared right-of-ways at their backs, they seemed to have it licked. Then a strong wind grew, and changed direction. A fierce gust lifted the fire over the tracks both ways. It caught, flared, and escaped southward toward the settlement, sweeping through thick woods on both sides of the railroad.

It was mid-morning. Ruth and I were in the sweatshop getting out mail when Bud came running in from play. "There's a big bonfire in the woods," she announced. "Come and hear it."

We rushed out. Bud was right. From the north came a steady roar, with added explosions. Through the woods we saw a spot of red. Gone. Another, this time a steady glow, followed by a sudden flare and distant crackling.

"Warn everyone!" I told Ruth. "I'll waken Pete."

Gambler Pete, who slept till noon, took one grim look from his back door. "That's it," he said. "This town's a goner!"

Beside his door was a half-dug well, down fifteen feet in yellow sand, but not yet to water. "Grab what stuff you can and we'll bury it," he advised. "Get the wife and kid to the lake."

Ruth arrived back with Bud, whose eyes were popping. "They know," Ruth called. "It's a madhouse down there. They say nothing can stop it."

We tossed clothing, silverware, office files, and typewriter into two trunks, dragged them through the birches, and dropped them down the well. The wardrobe trunk, huge and heavy, we almost abandoned in mid-yard. But it held clothes we would need if the cabin burned, and we stuck with it. Grub, kettles, pans, all the blankets, anything needed for camp life, followed. Pete's stuff went in on top, labelled luggage that had travelled the world, looking out-of-place here. The fire was close now, screaming through the tree tops, roaring like a thousand locomotives in the sky.

By the time we had shovelled in five feet of protecting sand, flaming twigs were burning our backs. Carrying a rifle and axe, arms loaded with grub, Ruth was chased to the lakeshore. Bud had packed a toy hat bag with her own treasures. Under one arm she clutched Willie The Cat who was struggling and yowling for freedom and a change of scenery. He eventually gained both–for keeps. Exit Willie The Cat.

The heat drove us lakeward. Pete and I stopped for a last look at the cabins, the beautifully treed setting, birches with leaves already shrivelling in the furnace blast. Suddenly I remembered the gasoline lamps and a four-gallon can of gas. We raced back to the cabin, grabbed them, and tossed them into the eight-foot sump-hole that was part of our private sanitation system. The trees around us sizzled and moaned. Those already on fire shrieked in their agony. A gusty treetop explosion rained fire on us. Heat fanned my cheek like a blow-torch, and I felt my eyebrows frizzle. We ran.

People on the new townsite, further up the hill, had got an earlier warning. As we raced down toward the main street, they were already running for the lakeshore. The main street itself was jammed

with hurrying people. Women struggled under loads of bedding, clutching tots by their hand, losing half their load and, when they bent to recover it, losing the other half. Dogs ran whining among heaps of household goods. Teams, hitched to wagons loaded with belongings from the upper townsite, careened at full gallop through the mob. Heavy motors roared as Airways planes were taxied to safe moorings, far out in the bay.

Now a real panic threatened, because nobody knew what had happened to the kids who had been in school when the fire reached us. Women were everywhere, fighting their way through the crowds, calling their children by name, beseeching help.

Then Tobacco Jowls appeared, in shirt-sleeves, his white head bare. He waved a great arm and bellowed:

"The kids are safe! They were took from school, and put on a gravel train. They're gone to Mile Thirty-seven. Look out for yourselves! The kids are safe!"

Women now gathered in groups, where some of them nearly collapsed with relief at the news.

Tobacco Jowls waved me over. "Where's the fire-rangers?" he demanded. "Godammit, they're needed here to handle things! Some of the townsite people could be trapped."

"We'll get up there," I yelled. "Nobody's seen the bloody fire-rangers." On our way toward the railway we encountered another frantic mother. To this Polish woman, wearing only a scanty housedress, the news of the children's rescue had brought no relief. Her two kids were not of school age. She had left them at home, and gone to the drugstore. Now her log shack was in flames. She fought men who were holding her, screaming, "I go there me! *Son of a beeches*! Not stop! I go!"

"The train! They're with the others," I shouted at her. She was past hearing. We saw the walls of the shack move then it folded to the ground in a tangle of blazing sticks. The woman fainted. (Later that day she reached the refugee train at Mile Thirty-seven. She was exhausted and desperate. Telegraph and telephone wires were down, and she had run fourteen miles over rough gravel and ties to find her own. They were there among the others, wide-eyed and wondering.)

As Tobacco Jowls and I moved through the billowing smoke, we met Syd's Miranda. Tall, white, and calm, she walked as though in a dream. Behind her came little Granny, one veined hand clutching her Book, the other tight on the arm of her chair, carried between

two men. A weird jangling in the smoke materialized into the slight figure of Freddie, the Husky Howler's drummer, blinded by smoke, staggering under a load of pans, bells, nickel fittings, and big bass drum.

Men were returning through the murk. "All clear above the track, except for the Finns at the hotel. Can't get to 'em. They're surrounded."

As they spoke, the main wall of fire left the half-burned buildings on one side of the street, and pounced across the gap to the other side. The buildings there, already smoking from the heat, were ready at the slightest touch of flame to hell-flare skyward. Following a sudden lift in the smoke, I saw the train dispatcher's office collapse; the engineering buildings beside it were a framework of fiery skeleton uprights. The front windows of Mrs. Sauna's place exploded with a sighing scream, and seconds later the walls went down.

"Mrs. Sauna? Anyone seen her?" I shouted. No one had. I felt hollow. The name was passed through the straggling, retreating crowd.

"Here's Billie!"

Wearing shirt and overalls like a boy, blackened, blonde hair rumpled, Billie dived through the crowd. She was flushed with excitement, missing nothing of what went on. I grabbed her.

"Where's your mother?"

"Away. She went to Flin Flon for the day. Boy! Is *she* missing a swell fire!" She started to run; I nailed her again.

"Listen, Punkin! Did you save anything? The sewing machine?"

"Sewing machine! Holy Dinah! I was lucky to get out of there with a seat in my pants. Tressa's wearing a barrel!" She laughed and was gone. I thought of that brown envelope, of all those baths and meals; the long hours of work and heat: five hundred sweat-earned dollars!

"Everybody get clear! Back! *Back*!"

A man with a rifle knelt and took aim at a steel gas drum lying against the front of a building that housed winter snowmobiles. Fire was close around the drum. Better to clear it now.

Crack! Poom!

Everything loose on earth seemed to lift and settle back. A dark pillar towered two hundred feet in the air, like an oil well blowing. It hung there, blossomed into a burst of creamy smoke that spread, curled downward, and took the form of a giant mushroom in vivid

black and white. For seconds it held, symmetrical, perfect; then swirling smoke blotted it out.

With the first gale-like sweep of the fire past, men got organized to fight the long line of red that was creeping crab-like toward the remaining part of the settlement on the lakeshore. Checked by a breeze from the water, the main fire had veered left and followed the ridge. Already, lower down, pumps were rattling. Axemen, shovelmen, and beaters with wet sacks, advanced in line–stolid hunkies, nervous jointmen gripping shovel hilts, prospectors, panting merchants.

I was wondering about Ruth, worried that she might have returned to the cabin for something–there was a chance it was still standing. As fire drove us lakeward, I looked everywhere for her.

In such a scramble, it was hopeless looking for anyone. Work engines were on the lakeshore siding, clearing boxcars, bunk trains, strings of gravel cars–panting, groaning, wheels spinning to start an overload. Gritty faces poked from their cab windows. All Company man-power was now concentrated on a mile-long firefront, attempting to save millions of dollars in rail-construction equipment and supplies.

The lake waters were at their summer low, too shallow for big planes to reach the shore docks. Instead, Airways used great loading barges moored well out in the bay. In addition to freight, these barges were now crowded with women and younger children. Loaded canoes lined a beach piled with household furniture, bedding, and boxes of canned goods from trading stores. The postmaster was on his roof with wet blankets to combat flying fire brands, while a gangly Bornite Joe handed up additional hardware-stock pails of water. As I passed on the run, searching for an empty canoe, Dixie's Sugar appeared with an axe at an upstairs window of her hotel. There was the crash of glass as panes and frames went out, to allow mattresses and heaps of bedding to hurtle in great lumps to the ground. I found a red canoe, and hauled it by hand, swashing back along shore through shallow water.

Paddy, stripped to his undershirt, arrived with Shorty and Spike snorting and blowing, lathered with white foam and sweat. A man and a woman heaved stuff from his wagon to the damp ground at the water's edge, as he held the terrified horses.

"Fine bit of a war we're havin'!" Paddy spat. "The Big Boy sold his hotel just in time. Cash. He's at Flin Flon today."

It all had happened in short minutes. With the local fire-rangers

missing, no one was in charge, officially, but already a plan of fire-fighting was shaping up. I helped place old Granny, moaning gently, in the red canoe, manned now by its grizzled prospector owner. I saw Pete coming. "If the women are all clear, let's take a whack at saving the cabins," Pete said. "They're still standing."

The women were all offshore but for Dixie's Sugar and one other. Mine. I turned to see Ruth struggling with a determined stranger.

"I'm not going to the barge!" She twisted free of him, and rolled a case of oranges into his canoe. "Wait. I'll get some more." She was already on her way back toward Wing Wong's, when I stopped her with my shout. "You stay here," I told her. "I'm coming with you," she argued. "Bud's safe on the barge with seventeen young pups she collected."

"Right here by the lake," I repeated. "I'll know where you are."

"Sure. But how will I know where *you* are? What you're doing–or overdoing?"

"I'll look after myself." I grabbed a shovel and wet sacks and ran with Pete up the hill. The cabin roofs, both smoldering with spot fires, came first. We scrambled up, beat out the fire patches with wet sacks, then found time to look around.

Our two cabins were in a spearhead salient, with fire crawling well down the hill on both sides. A clearing behind our place, including a spot blackened by the clean-up fire that had almost cost us our outhouse, was responsible for the miracle. Backing into a lake breeze, the flames were now travelling in short leaps to close in behind us. Along the edges of the fire, groups of hard-working men weaved and floated in billows of shifting smoke. We joined them.

The heat was hellish. When one flare-up was killed, others came alive on each side. There was no spelling off as the odds got tougher. Pete and I stuck together in case either should falter and go down. We were completely fagged, eyes smarting from thick smoke, noses and throats burning.

Pete grabbed my arm. "Bad for you! Get back to the air!"

"Bad for everyone," I choked out. "I'll make it."

I began to wonder if I would–if I could. I was desperately short of breath. Were others having these damnable chest pains? I flailed on. My legs started to fold: I knew I couldn't hold on another second. My head was wonky, my vision blurred. I tried to tell Pete, but couldn't. Instead I wavered, pawing for air.

A sudden rush of it hit me as a muffled plop and an exultant

whoop sounded close to me. I got a gulp of new life, staggered back, and stood staring.

Ruth was there, hauling globes filled with purple liquid from a sack. She heaved one where the fire was thickest, and, as it shattered, there appeared a large blackened patch. "Airways," she panted. "Fire bombs! They've been itching to test 'em. Here, take one! Take two! Are you all right?"

I nodded, took a fire bomb, and kneeled for thankful seconds, gaining the strength to toss it. Then we made good use of those purple globes. "Anything you want from the cabin, get it," I told Ruth as my breath returned. "If the wind veers we're sunk."

"Paddy's coming. I'll get the junk out." She dived inside, then reappeared. "Ginger ale! In the cellar."

I wouldn't have thought of it. Harry McLean had sent us a case of fifty paper-jacketed bottles of Canada Dry from his private car. We lugged the case into the yard, cold from our earthen hole under the kitchen. The relief it gave us from the heat and sweat and grime and weariness was a reviving godsend.

Ruth opened one for Pete, then stacked an armful of bottles and went through the smoke to where other men were working. The covers, strewn in the yard, looked like beer jackets. A Negro bootlegger running along the line to join a work gang spotted them. "Yee-ow!" he yelled to his mates. "Suds! Ah'm workin' right heah!"

So he did, and so did others who might have gone by. It wasn't beer, but it hit the spot. Airways' fire bombs, and that case of ginger ale both remembered by Ruth, saved the two cabins.

Late that afternoon a trainload of reinforcements reached the settlement, and the first wave of fire-fighters dragged wearily to the lakeshore for a gulp of breeze. Those with families shouted across the water to the barges, where women prepared food, or sat, heartsick, just watching.

Ruth was at the lakeshore, checking blankets, a tired-eyed Billie Sauna helping her. In the early hours of fire-fighting, Billie had found something exciting to do. She had carried boxes of explosives and detonator caps from a Company warehouse to be dumped in the lake for safety. Now she looked disinterested, as well as weary. "Billie's lost her favourite man," Ruth explained. "She's blue."

Billie's latest was a handsome lad, "a swell dancer," recently arrived in town as the manager of a business. I asked what the trouble was.

"He's gone!" Billie was scornful, folding a blanket, then punching it hard. "He went with the women and kids. Him and some other sissy. The only two men on the whole damn train! Yellow rats!"

I knew them. I also knew that men could act strangely under stress. Today's coward could be tomorrow's hero. The war had shown that. I tried to explain it to Billie.

"Bunk!" she said. "I know men! They always alibi each other. I'm off him like a dirty shirt." And she was.

I suddenly realized that I was hungry, and mentioned food. The girls had eaten. Billie patted her boyish tum. "T-bone steak, spuds, salad, celery, whole pie, drinks, fifty smokes." Then she added, "Good old Wing Wong. Everything's free."

"Free?"

"Sure. By the plate or by the case. We've sent enough grub out to the barges to feed a steel gang. If the wind swings, everything goes up in smoke anyhow. You can't spend a dime in this town."

She was right. Most of the cafés were gone, including Mrs. Sauna's, but Wing Wong was still in business. Fire-fighters and citizens alike were being fed. There were no meal checks, no cashier. Boxes of cigars, tobacco, cigarettes, oranges, sat open on the counters. With added staff from the Chinese laundry, Wing was hustling out meals.

"Everybody fight fire; we help this way," he told me. "Please tell all peoples you see." For two days and two nights, Wing worked without rest, feeding fire victims. Some paid him, some didn't, some thanked him, some forgot. It was all the same to Wing.

During the day, planes taxied in through the smoke with reporters and photographers. They got their fire stories and hopped for the nearest wire, now at The Pas. I scribbled a brief dispatch to send out with Brownie. "It's short," I told him. "This is our busy day."

He grinned. "Bit of a literary man myself. I'll add a few stanzas on the way out."

Later I told Ruth, "I'll never make a newspaperman."

"Damn the newspapers," she agreed. "*They* won't be cold or hungry tonight. We've got more important things to do."

I was glad she felt as I did about it. People needed looking after It was hoped that the evening dampness would bring a lull in the fire-fighting, but that night there was no dampness, no lull. Forestry and Company pumps rattled through the night. The women came ashore at dark, and billets were arranged for the homeless. The

gravel train was returned to the settlement when mothers refused to bed down without seeing their young unharmed.

Tents were pitched along the shore, bedding and blankets brought from trading stores and surviving homes. The encampment looked like a great gypsy gathering, except for the lack of camp fires. People had seen enough fire: a bloody glow against the night sky, the rattle of pumps, and the flare-up of an occasional dry treetop, were dismal reminders of our common enemy.

Old Granny, badly shaken by it all, had been found a bed. Ruth and I searched out Syd and Miranda. They stood together, silent, gazing over dusky waters. Syd's hands and hairy forearms, that had always looked so out of place in a bakeshop, were singed and reddened by flame, his mouth so dry that when he tried to speak no words came.

There could have been other reasons why he found speech so difficult. Only that morning, he and Miranda had owned their own store, their home, assets worth thousands of dollars, earned by hard work. Tonight, they stood on an open lakeshore, facing an empty future.

It was the patient Miranda who brought an ache to my own throat. She took her man's reddened hand in hers and pressed it to comfort him. "I was just telling Syd," she said with a strange wistfulness, "this is the first holiday I've had since we came to Cranberry Portage."

For Granny it was the end. Soon afterward, too tired to start over like the others, she died in her sleep. She was buried on the open shore of First Cranberry, and wind in the trees seemed to echo that quiet, kindly voice: "*Oh, but it is lonely here. . . .*"

At last the Portage tradition regarding violent death had been beaten. Or had it?

Chapter 22

The two fire-rangers, young Art Moen and his partner, remained missing for days. Their absence brought upon them angry local criticism, even though it had not been their fault. In spite of the recognized fire-danger around Cranberry, a patrol officer had arbitrarily carried them off to fight a remote fire, some distance from the Cold Lake railway. Isolated with their crew from all communication, the rangers finally managed to contain the wilderness threat. They returned to Cranberry, after five days of battling fire, to find their home base almost completely destroyed by fire, and all their own possessions lost.

"Here's where them fellers oughta been," Tobacco Jowls told the first official to land in after the Cranberry disaster. "Not took away out to some goddam moose pasture!"

Wiry Pete Rod, one of the raisin-pie Danes, was another man made indignant by the stubbornness of officialdom. He had been working all out as a volunteer, when his group got on order to clear a width of fire guard in the woods. "How vide?" Pete yelled.

"Twelve feet."

"*Tvelve feet?* Hell, dat fire could hop a *hoonred* feet!"

"Twelve feet!" came the repeat order.

Pete shouldered his grub hoe. "I don't vaste no more my time vit greenhorns. I go fight fire vere it do some good."

"If you leave this work you'll be under arrest," the official decreed.

"Vell, holy yeezus!" Pete stayed. When the fire arrived it proved Pete right. It swept over the twelve-foot gap without a downward glance. Minutes later, the same surge of fire burned Pete's home shack and everything he owned.

Something we were all grateful for, was that no lives had been lost at Cranberry Portage, not even the two Finnish hotel owners whom we had given up as lost. They turned out to be the luckiest

lads of the day. Trapped, with fire on both sides of them, they counter-attacked to split an approaching wall of flame. Each grabbed a bottle of whisky, gulped half, and took the rest along. Husky contract workers, they grubbed two lines in a V, and back-fired along both sides of the spearhead, controlling the backfire with wet sacks and water. The work done by those two men would have inspired a bulldozer.

They were found where they had won their battle, blissfully blotto, the empty bottles beside them. Their last-ditch effort had saved not only the Great Northern hotel, but also two flanking buildings, one of which was Mrs. Roberts' dining-room lounge, complete with piano. This oasis, a scant acre, remained the only green spot in a square mile surrounding the once-beautiful town-site. Elsewhere, sixty-five homes, business places, and storage buildings had been swept away in minutes.

What sleep Ruth and I had the first night of the fire was on the floor of Roy Brown's cabin. Lady Di and Nola were still in England. Our own cabin, in danger for two more days, was at the extreme tip of the unfired salient. Pete's, below us, also was standing. The odds on their survival changed almost hourly. Men fought, ate, drank, fought some more.

Then a change of wind brought rain.

It was a deluge. The bay was lashed with whitecaps. Along the shore, great piles of construction supplies, still intact, hissed under the downpour; steam filtered upward from burning moss to show against the naked black corpses of trees. Hundreds of fire-marked men dropped their axes and shovels. Those who had lost homes or businesses crawled in somewhere to sleep a few hours, then reached wearily for hammers and saws. Already people had begun to rebuild.

As a direct result of our fire clean-up day, the original settlement by the lakeshore had been saved. Higher up, on both sides of the track, everything was gone. The hospital car, set on a private rail spur, was a heap of tangled rods and wreckage, its patients saved by the heroic action of the doctor and his helpers. The railway engineering buildings were burned, along with files, maps, and records, which had cost a year of field and office work.

As soon as live coals underfoot were killed by the downpour, Mrs. Sauna had a tent up and was serving meals. Next to her, men were building a new dispatcher's office, while the dispatcher on shift-duty worked beside the open track in cold, teeming rain. Within

hours, trains were running, and construction work was moving again.

A fund was started for fire victims. Many who formerly were well-off now had nothing. Men who had been prosperous citizens accepted tobacco or a few dollars from friends. Women, formerly well-dressed, were thankful for an old sweater.

Clothing, food, money, were shared. We dug our stuff from the well, using a rope hoist to retrieve the heavy wardrobe trunk. We had considerable bedding. We kept one covering each, and distributed the rest. These wool blankets, sheared, spun, designed, and woven by our great grandames, had been handed down through generations as wedding blessings. Now they sprawled in the grime of tents, appreciated by new owners, not for their family background but for their warmth.

All along the blackened street, people poked about in charred log ruins to recover any item of value: an iron pot, the belly of a stove that could be rigged to work again, a long-handled spoon, cutlery, a stack of tin plates, an axe-head. Silver dishes, watches, precious objects, now were useless blobs. Mrs. Sauna's kitchen range, tilted, with its length of attached pipe aimed slantwise at the sky, resembled a wrecked howitzer, an appropriate addition to the desolation of this new No Man's Land.

Engaged like many others in the settlement's post mortem, Ruth and I stopped to help Mrs. Sauna, Billie, and Tressa search their ruin. They had saved some clothes. Mrs. Sauna, home from Flin Flon, was back in a work dress. Near a twisted bed frame we uncovered the waffle-like treadle of a sewing machine. Mrs. Sauna stared at it briefly; then, with the flip of a grimey shoe she dismissed it and went on. When the others were busy talking, I asked, "Does Billie know about the money?"

She shook her dustcap. "I'll tell her–but not till she's safe Outside at school. She'll be going. We'll all just have to work harder." She brightened, and pointed. "One building's left–the backhouse. None of them burned."

It was true. Later people were to laugh about this bizarre fact, which would surely have interested chemical or sanitary engineers. While rows of log or frame buildings were destroyed by the sweep of flame, the outdoor toilets belonging to them were not. Directly in the fire's path, they remained now in a row, all of them the required thirty feet from back doors, a monument to a hard-hatted outhouse designer, and to Cranberry's sternest perennial problem.

Farther along, Ruth and I encountered Tobacco Jowls, hat shading his eyes, hands shoved into the top of his pants. The town's business was again centred on the lakeshore, where, through northern savvy and experience, he now owned or controlled the bulk of the buildings. He had called it from our first day in Cranberry:

"This place'll burn," he said. "They all do." Now, the fire had wrecked the official plans; the new townsite was blackened and dead, and Jowls was sitting pretty.

In a way so were we. The truth hit me, and I told Ruth, "One of our own problems is solved. At least no one's going to make us move out of the cabin."

I thought it would cheer her, but it didn't. "Why would we stay here now?" she asked.

Strolling like a wealthy planter among his grubbing people, Tobacco Jowls' eye had that scheming glitter. I stopped to speak to him, while Ruth went on for mail.

"Bad mess." I said, nodding at trees that now were tombstones.

He flexed his neck muscles and squared heavy shoulders. "Folks'll pick back up. Next time they'll mebbe listen to them that knows. Trees don't matter. Be killed by fumes anyhow."

"Fumes?"

"Smelter. Kill everything in miles. Can't be helped."

"What's new on the smelter?" The promotion scheme was still being kept dark.

"Ante's going up. In a week blocks'll cost five thousand. Soon's the survey's done."

"Survey?"

Jowls nodded. "He's staked a claim a mile north. At the rail junction. They're surveying the smelter site. On the quiet. He don't want the big fellers hopping in here from Outside and down East. For once local folks is to have a chance. You better get in on it."

"You figure he'll sell any stock?"

Jowls' hand was fiddling inside his vest, and I remembered the paper he had once almost showed me. He snorted. "Thousands sold right now, with it not even open for sale. Friends of his on the Prairies. Ground floor.–Lookit."

He took from his pocket a document, signed and witnessed. It was a contract to cut a highway through the woods from Cranberry settlement to the smelter site, and to clear the site. "If it gets out, there'll be a stampede here." Jowls pocketed the proof. "He's a smart feller." That, I was ready to concede.

I met Ruth returning with the mail. She sighed, shook her head, and handed me a letter. It was from Canadian National Railways Publicity in Toronto, introducing Earl P. Hanson of the Explorers Club, New York.

Hanson, a close friend of Vihjalmur Stefansson, was a civil engineer, a renowned globe-trotter, and an author. New York magazines had asked him for stories on Canada's new seaport at Churchill on Hudson Bay. In addition, Hanson, after making exploratory trips to Iceland and Greenland, was hot on the feasibility of a northern airmail route from America to Europe. He was travelling by Muskeg Special as far north as it went, then crossing the Barrens to Churchill. Our northern writings had interested Hanson, and the Canadian National people thought I might be of help. Transportation would be provided if I cared to go along.

Ruth was silent till we reached the cabin; then she said, "You won't be foolish enough to go. There's no railroad the last fifty miles. You'd have to sleep in the open, eat cold food. Don't let's get upset by discussing it."

But it had to be discussed. I soft-peddled the hazards, and stressed the advantages. I assured her that I felt fit in spite of the ordeal of the fire. This was our chance to crack bigger writing markets; it could change our whole life. Think of what I could learn from Hanson! How could I–we–pass it up?

Ruth stood, silent, looking from the window at the part of our yard that was still green. She didn't have to speak; I knew her thoughts.

"If it's too tough, I'll stop at Mile 445," I promised. I remembered the stuff Ryley Cooper had got from there. "Even if I get only that far–think of the stories I'll get!"

She spoke without moving. "Will you promise to go no farther than the train goes?"

It was my turn to be silent. No writers had been allowed into Churchill–Hanson and I would be the first. Deep-sea ships were bringing dredges and crews to begin construction of huge elevators at Western Canada's new grain-shipping port, right on the edge of Eskimo country. Stories? I might never get another such chance!

"I have to go," I told Ruth. "I swear not to gamble on my health if the odds are too tough. That's the best I can do."

When I left to join Earl Hanson in The Pas, no mention was made of where I was going, or for how long. Talk, we both knew, could only stir up trouble. Once I was gone, Ruth would relax, I thought;

letters and wires sent from along the line would help. But I felt miserable.

Plodding alone with borrowed bedroll and packsack through the burned woods to the freight yards didn't help. Everything around me was depressing. Waiting to board a construction caboose, I was to witness a tragic after-effect of the fire.

A line of bunk and cook cars stood on a siding. From one of them stepped a man I knew–a middle-aged cook. Instead of his usual kitchen clothing, he wore a trunk-wrinkled dark grey suit, grey felt hat, brown shoes, white collar, and a bright tie. The story told later was that following the fire he had been acting strangely. A foreman had persuaded him to take a week off.

As our train with its line of flats and boxcars pulled past us, the cook shook hands with an assistant. "Good luck," he said. He moved toward the approaching caboose as though to board it. Instead, he suddenly sprawled under it, placing his neck on the rail, a foot from a moving wheel. His body flattened, fingers convulsed. The severed end of his bright tie went round and round, clinging to the wheel. The brown shoes twitched once in the gravel and were still.

"Jesus Mary!" A little Frenchman crossed himself, took three great gulps from a bottle and passed it along. No one refused it. The train was held until the police arrived. While we waited, one trainman told another of the Portage tradition.

It was three weeks before I was back. Mile 445 was as far as transients were allowed, but we had made it through to Mile 510, at Churchill, on a small gas mail-car. Laid from 445 north over frozen tundra for winter hauling, the railroad was only a fifty-mile ladder of bare ties and rails, floating across muskeg barrenland sloughs, or deep, swift-flowing rivers. Hanson and I knew that in a country where it couldn't be spent, money would be worthless as a bribe for the mail carriers; so, in the best northern tradition, we had taken whisky.

In every way, the venture was a success. Earl Hanson was a congenial companion, especially pleased with a break I managed to arrange for him at Churchill. A wireless operator at the powerful government station there, earlier had been a partner of Pine Root Stan, our trader friend at Cold Lake. Stan had asked me to look him up. By coincidence, Earl Hanson's brother, Parker Hanson, was a radio operator with the Byrd Antarctic expedition. With one of them at the top, and the other at the bottom of the world, the

Hanson boys held a wireless reunion. It would have been a hot story, in New York, but because such private traffic was against government regulations, it couldn't be used.

I piled off the Muskeg Special in The Pas feeling fit and flush. In three days, returning on the train, I had made my trip expenses playing poker. I called Airways to find that Brownie was in town, and leaving at once. An hour after detraining in The Pas, I was at home in Cranberry.

What a home! Even with Brownie's warning I wasn't prepared for the new disaster that had struck our cabin setting. The starkness of blackened trees and ashes had been made worse by the havoc of wind. Birches lay in heaps and tangles, some chopped clear of the cabin. Two had crashed on the roof. Everywhere was ruin and ugliness. Being away, and returning, would increase the shock of it, I told myself. To anyone staying here, it couldn't seem as bad.

Ruth's first words as she flew into my arms destroyed the illusion. "I'm sick, sick, sick of it all!" she sobbed. "Every gust of wind is a moan. Even the birds are gone! Don't let's wait till it sinks you too. Let's pack and go!"

Chapter 23

Earl Hanson was headed for the Turner Valley oil fields, and later the Peace River country in northern Alberta. Returning from Churchill, he suggested that Ruth and I join him on the trip. When I told him we weren't that stakey, he said, "Canadian railroads want publicity. They know your stuff. Hit 'em for transportation. Tell 'em your wife's going along. You're too damned modest about your work!"

Our dead home in Cranberry, and Ruth's greeting, decided me. I wrote the railroad, this time the C.P.R. A prompt reply requested our full itinerary, and Ruth's eyes widened with happiness when she saw it.

We needed money, but I hoped it would come. While waiting for our rail passes, I had stacks of work to do. Acting on one of Hanson's many tips I had approached some New York editors with ideas for articles. Now, three of them had given me the nod. I was hardly started on the Churchill stories when big Harry McLean, Company head, hit our cabin. Dark, handsome, and determined, he stamped through to our tiny sweatshop and towered above my desk.

"I'm fed up with his goddam personal publicity in eastern papers," he announced. "I didn't build this railroad. The boys did. You live here; you know what they've done, how they've done it. Let the public know. Newspaper, magazine–I don't care, so long as it's their story. The Canadian National takes over in August. Have it out by then."

"I can't," I told him. "I'm swamped with Churchill stuff. And we have a trip West arranged."

"To hell with Churchill! Let 'em wait! Go out over the line and get what you need. I've told the boys. They'll look after you. Here's expense money." He tossed a roll of bills on my desk, ducked through the low door, and strode out.

Ruth came in and I pointed. "Expense money. H.F. wants a story."

She counted it and her eyes grew. "Five hundred dollars! But that means we can't get away. All the other articles, now this!"

"I'll do them all," I said. "I can make it."

She dropped the money. "You can't! Writing's so hard on you. You've had two setbacks this year. Your health won't stand it. You'll have to leave one or the other."

"The hell I will. This is the chance we've been hoping for, yelling for! H.F. has been good to us. He means what he says about the boys. He's always talking about the Sons of Martha. The story's a natural! It might even make *Maclean's*. I've got to do it!"

"Then cancel some of the others."

"Cancel nothing. It's our harvest. I'm going to do every damn one of them."

"You can't. You haven't the energy. Besides. . . ." She stopped.

"Besides what?"

She let go then. "We'll be stuck in this damned, desolate, ghastly hole of a place! You'll be out on the line, busy. You don't know what it means! You haven't been left here alone for weeks, but I have. You didn't lie here in bed with trees crashing all around, but I did! I can't stand it any longer. I can't!"

Finally, we both calmed down. Sitting together on the camp cot, inspiration came. "You can be busy," I told her. "Take a notebook. Check on people and things here. It will be a wonderful help. Do that, would you?"

She dried her tears and nodded. "I'll try."

For days I travelled by locomotive, trolley, speeder, anything moving my way. I arranged to be home every night but was often late. Ruth was keeping herself busy, and reported many changes. Buildings were occupied one day, empty the next, owners gone to Flin Flon or Cold Lake. Only a few diehards, still sold on Cranberry's future, had rebuilt. With rail-construction almost complete, there was little lake freighting. The cafés at the track served trainloads of men shuttling between The Pas and the two mine towns. Mrs. Sauna's new place, with the blessing of the railroad, had a ramp running directly from the station platform to her door. There was a new policeman in town; Constable George was gone.

I arrived home late one night, mind and leg weary, smudged with grease from a locie ride. Bud was long in bed, still grieving for Willie The Cat. Ruth had kept my meal hot for hours. I had eaten at a camp, but didn't like to tell her. As I tried to eat again, she was very quiet, her face wan, eyes without life or interest.

"When did *you* eat?" I suddenly asked.

"I don't know. Who cares?" As though to avoid that subject, she made an effort and said, "Moon Glow was here. He leaves in the morning. Flin Flon. Paddy too." The coldness left her, and tears came.

I knew now how she felt. I had a strange sinking of heart. Busy with work, something I had been dodging for days hit me hard: everything around us at Cranberry was crumbling. Daily, there were new gaps among our friends; tomorrow Paddy and Moon Glow, to us a basic part of the town, were leaving. The Company offices were gone. With Cranberry Portage no longer the end of steel, local planes and pilots were moving to other boom areas. The bootleg and poker joints were at Mile Eighty-three, or Cold Lake; some jointmen had gone to far-off Peace River, where there was railroad construction.

"I know how you feel," I told Ruth. "Trapped."

"Worse. Worse. Trapped, with all those others going free. The black deadness here smothers me. No matter what I do, how I try." She brought her notebook, blank except for a few sad lines, and threw it down. "Take notes. About what? People? There are none. They're gone!"

I took the notebook and closed it. My bright idea had backfired. Instead of taking Ruth's mind off things, it had emphasized for her the melancholy of departing friends, of those who hadn't even been friends.

"We'll go," I said. "The day our rail passes come, we'll go." As she stared, I promised. "Finished or not."

I held her until she had calmed. Suddenly her face brightened. "Con Farrell wants to bring his wife up here till freeze-up. He'll rent the cabin."

"Good," I said, "great." It would be tough just to abandon it.

I went to see Moon Glow. A different moon glow was abroad that night; it shone, as serenely as ever, from a clear sky, lighting the stark silhouettes of trees, charred logs, and sordid wreckage that once had been so green a picture. In the moon's bloated face I saw the reflection of a callous sun, a sun that had dried and bleached and cooked this place till fire had destroyed it. "Smirk and bedamned!" I told it. No one heard me. The world was empty.

Moon Glow sat alone in the Lakeview lobby. The one-storey, adjoining building was in darkness, empty. Next to it was Mac's place, empty, as were a dozen others beyond. Moon Glow dropped his newspaper and the inevitable wood sliver, and motioned me to a chair.

"Leaving?" I asked.

He nodded. "New people take over in the morning. Greenhorns." He jerked his head toward the quiet settlement. "Told 'em a year back. Just another boom town." He turned quickly. "You ain't staying here?" I outlined our plans, and he nodded. "Flin Flon wouldn't suit. Smelter fumes'd get you."

I laughed. "Smelter fumes could get me here."

He jerked up. "Hey! Slippery Tits ain't got into you on that smelter?"

"He hasn't even approached me."

"Me neither." Moon Glow scowled. "The once he came in here, the look I give him was enough. Lard-heads! Fifty of 'em went for his smelter talk, all on the quiet. When old Lakeshore Napoleon begun clearing a road to the junction, they fell over theirselves getting out bankrolls."

He got up and paced, making the floor boards crunch and creak, still in the same chopped-off loggers' pants he always wore. "Nicks 'em first to start his noospaper. I was told in The Pas he don't even own the equipment, after them chumps donating to pay for it. Twice a month he takes a trip Outside. Smelter business he tells 'em! Sure! Peddling shares to them prairie gophers that know nothing of mining. Now he heads the Cranberry Fire Relief Fund. There's money rolling in from all over the West and the States. Who's to check it?"

I asked Moon Glow about his Flin Flon plans, and Paddy. He came back and sat. "You'll think this is funny, but it ain't. I built a hotel at Flin Flon. I'm getting a beer licence."

"*You*?"

He nodded. "Things get around. When I went to see the mine people, they put it up to me. With 1,500 men on the payroll, there'll be beer. In a Company town, they don't want no joints. Enough of them at Eighty-three."

Covering the rail-line north, I'd heard much about Mile Eighty-three, that new haven for jointmen, jointwomen, and taximen. Police raids hadn't slowed it, and new dives grew overnight, as the lawless learned that Mile Eighty-three, on the front porch of a growing mine city, was a most desirable location for the iniquitous.

His chair tilted back against the wall, Moon Glow went on. "My hotel's already built. Somehow the mine people learnt I'd always run a clean place." For once he almost grinned. "I'd been sitting here a year hoping they would. I peddled no booze, and there's never been a hoor in this hotel."

Suddenly his chair hit the floor. "Hey! That little redhead! Seen her on the street talking to. . . ." He grabbed the school-scribbler register, and ran a great finger down scrawled names. "Huh! I'll just check on that!"

"I have to catch the phone shack before it closes," I said. "May see you at Flin Flon." We shook hands, but Moon Glow's mind was not on farewells. As I left, I heard him pounding up the stairs.

The phone shack was closed. Headed home past the Lakeview I heard an uproar, protesting voices muffled by half-sleep, slamming doors, the thump of moved furniture, and the proprietor's wrathful voice as he searched the upstairs. "Shut up! I can smell a woman somewheres in here, and by God I'll find her!"

For once Moon Glow was wrong. The woman was not in there. She was standing, a nude statue bathed in moonlight, on the flat roof next door, having escaped through an upstairs window.

Whatever she was, had been, or would be, she was, at that moment, virginally lovely. Her long coppery hair fell past her shoulders and breasts toward shapely thighs and legs as she stood close to the wall, arms folded to ward off chill night air.

I knew that the voice of so perfect a creature must be soft and musical, her laugh a melody. Then a voice, whisky-hoarse and flint-hard, murdered the silence! "For the lova God, brother, find me a ladder!" Luckily I was spared a decision when Moon Glow shoved a tousled head from an upstairs window and discovered her.

Next morning my Nymph of the Night appeared before Airways Agent Mick, in his new capacity of District Magistrate. His blue eyes chill, Mick was at first caustic in his address to the erring. Then his manner softened. "I'll give you another chance. Be clear of this settlement within an hour." Ten minutes later, he sold her a plane passage to Mile Eighty-three.

Our day of departure was drawing nearer, and I was keeping up with my schedule of work. Then requests arrived for articles on Cold Lake and Flin Flon. The same day, a wire came from Earl Hanson in New York; he was joining a South American expedition headed up the Amazon, and the Peace River jaunt was out. "We'll go anyway," I told Ruth. "Bud can stay in Winnipeg. Our transportation's due any day."

But each day she felt deeper gloom. "Let's get the passes in Winnipeg," she urged. "We could. The world here is dying. Let's not wait. Let's just–go!"

"A few days here to clean up," I pleaded. "I've got to finish this piece before the Canadian National takes over. I promised Harry

McLean. Then Cold Lake and Flin Flon. We can all go there." She walked away, silent.

One morning, slaving at my desk, I heard trunks in the bedroom being moved, the big wardrobe scraping the floor. Drawers were being opened and closed; there followed more scuffling with one trunk. "Sorting stuff to pack," I thought vaguely, and shut out the disturbing sounds from a work-fogged mind. The big trunk had always stood open in the bedroom, all its drawers shared between us, except for the small, top one that was Ruth's. This was secured by a tiny, gold heart-shaped padlock I had given her. I had no idea what treasures she kept there.

Later came the sound of the big trunk being closed. The fact that Ruth said nothing about it should have warned me.

Looking back on it, the emotional flare-up that swept our lives was much like what had happened to the settlement itself. Danger was there, building quietly, deep down. Faint cracklings. Increasing heat. Tensions mounting. Pressures growing. And like the settlement, I had been too intent on my own schemes to face grave and pressing facts. Until the confined accumulation grew, flared, and burst through our weakened control.

The lid blew off one August morning. Ruth and I were ragged from long hours of work, and little sleep. She stood by my desk with tightened fists. Her blunt accusation that I was killing myself through stubbornness stung, perhaps because I realized it was true. "Is it possible for you to think of anyone else?" she asked.

I was juggling a head full of facts, fighting them onto paper. "For God's sake get out!" I yelled. "Let me finish!"

She stopped in the doorway. "I will get out. All the way."

I sat up. "What are you talking about?"

She was calm. Too calm: her gaze steady. "If the passes don't come today, I'm going anyway."

"You know what that means?"

"I do." She closed the door. I heard her say to Bud, "Come with me." I glanced from the window, saw them going down the path, and lost myself again in work.

At some time during the day I heard men in the cabin. I was only vaguely aware of their grunts and curses, and I didn't allow their presence to interrupt me.

An hour later, I finished my writing chore, "Steel's March To Flin Flon," and dragged myself out of the sweatshop. The bedroom appeared strangely empty. The big trunk was gone. So was Ruth's hand-luggage.

My strongest feeling was of unbelief. I was here–my work was finished now. All we had to do was pack, sell some furnishings, and lock the rest in the cabin. Two days at Cold Lake, the same at Flin Flon, then pick up mail, rail passes, and bank account, and leave Cranberry Portage behind. Everything had worked out. Except that now–Ruth and Bud were not here.

A little panicky, I found myself staring from a window, as I had seen Ruth do so many times. But rather than gloom, what I saw brought a lift of relief. Clonking and jouncing over roots and downed trees, a horse outfit was approaching. On the wagon was our familiar unwieldy, family trunk.

I went out to help the driver unload, but neighbour Pete was already there. "Don't touch that monster," he ordered me. "It's a good half-ton." They got it down, and I had them leave it just inside the door, ready for its next trip. That would be soon, I thought. Ruth had obviously changed her mind. She would be getting grub and mail, or having coffee with Mrs. Roberts and her daughter, where Bud had stayed.

I started on some other work. By evening, when Ruth had not come home, I left to find her. She was not with Mrs. Roberts. Nor with Mrs. Sauna and Billie. Going toward the lakeshore, wondering now, a little hollow, I met an Airways freight handler. He stopped and looked embarrassed. "Sorry about that trunk. Just wouldn't go in the aircraft no bloody how. Goddam charter trip at that!"

I assured him it didn't matter. Legs drained of strength, I got to the Airways office. The fifty-five-mile charter to The Pas was seventy-five dollars. "Your wife paid it in cash," Mick said, when I offered him a cheque. He was curt about it, and I wondered how much he had guessed.

It was after tent-banking hours, but I found the banker, and my sickness grew. Ruth had taken exactly half the account, and it never had been big. She had paid the plane charter, and she wouldn't stop in The Pas. That meant she must pay fare, Pullman, and meals to Winnipeg. She, or Bud, had no clothes–they were all jammed in the big wardrobe. I knew Ruth was too proud to ask help of friends. What would she live on?

There was no chance of catching her by plane or message; the overnight train out of The Pas was gone. It was morning before I thought about the mail, with sudden hope. But there was nothing from Ruth–only a friendly letter from the Canadian Pacific Press Bureau, with our passes.

Chapter 24

It was then that I found out what it meant to be alone in such desolation–and, for me, there was no looking forward to someone's return. I took one look around the cabin, and packed the other trunk. Paddy was gone, so I had Tobacco Jowls' teamster clear the cabin stuff to the main street, and announced an auction; by evening, our belongings had a score of new owners. With some cash payments, and the auctioneer's list of collections that never would be made, I flew with Con Farrell to Cold Lake, where I had a story on Sherritt-Gordon to do. Con and his wife, Clare, had agreed to rent the cabin until freeze-up. After that, Mrs. Sauna was to sell it on a fifty-fifty arrangement. Months later, she sent a bill of sale and a statement: sale price, $50; school tax, $10. She enclosed my half –$20. (A fisherman had bought it.)

From Pine Root Stan, at Cold Lake, I got a rundown on the new boom town, its joints, and its promising copper mine. Early Sunday, returning light after another freight trip, Con Farrell delivered me at Mile Eighty-three, by slide-slipping into the narrow neck of Schist Lake, closest big-plane water-landing spot to Flin Flon.

Sunday was a bad morning at Mile Eighty-three, and I had no time to waste. The taximen who could be pommeled awake refused to drive. Doors were open everywhere. Celebrants were sprawled asleep, on floors, chairs, and under tables. A frowzy madam cursed at my shouting, then let her head flop back down. At last I found a lank, pimply youth asleep at the wheel of a car parked between two buildings.

"Christ–not me," he pleaded. "Twenty trips last night, ten bucks each way. What a night!"

"Get over. I'll drive." I hadn't driven a car in four years, and the changes since then included four-wheel brakes. The stupified driver crawled into the back seat among empty bottles, and flopped around like a corpse as I jerked and spurted and sharp-braked over the rocky, twisting four-mile route.

A wrecked sedan was wheels-up in a rock heap. Forgetting the four-wheel brakes, I stopped the taxi almost on its nose, and took a quick look around. No bodies.

Flin Flon had changed from a log-cabin camp to a skeleton city. Huge areas were covered by concrete forms and steel framework that later would become office buildings, company houses, bunkhouses, and stores. Streets followed natural corridors that wound among rock hills.

At Moon Glow's hotel, the beer tavern was mobbed. The miners were working in three shifts, and the cafés and pubs were never closed. Paddy was on a hauling contract with Shorty, Spike, and Silver. "Say hello to the missis and kid," Moon Glow said.

"Sure," I said. I left without telling him the truth.

Moon Glow, I was told, would clear $10,000 a month at Flin Flon. At last I knew what his thoughts had been when he stared from the Lakeview window, digging his teeth with that pine sliver.

With my hurried Flin Flon notes, I saved hours by travelling back to Cranberry as a stowaway on a special train from Saskatchewan that carried the province's Premier, Members of Legislature, Boards of Trade, and big businessmen. There was an hour stopover at Cranberry for speech-making, and a local sports day. When the train was gone, I wandered down the almost deserted, fire-blackened street. A brave attempt to hide an ugly scene that had once been so alive with Nature's beauty made it more desolate, more pathetic. Hundreds of cut evergreens brought by wagonloads from across the portage, were lined in stiff rows along the street, each nailed rigidly to a charred stump.

I bunked that last night at Sugar's hotel. Sugar was gone. I ate dinner with the Airways crew at Wing Wong's, but Wing, too, was gone. The crew's talk was of the important Prairie Airmail contract Airways had landed. Pilots were in Winnipeg, taking night-flight training; gas beacons, set at ten-mile intervals across the prairies, would guide them. Roy Brown was going on the new job.

The boys were happy, looking ahead to regular hours, soft beds, baths, and bright lights. Their cheery banter helped hide my own heavy dullness–maybe that was its purpose. No mention was made of Bud or Ruth. All I wanted was to get away from Cranberry–somewhere, anywhere.

Neighbour Pete beckoned me to the café doorway. He edged up close beside me at the front counter and spoke in an undertone, watching from the window. "Quick. Take this. Cop on my tail."

"Right." I grabbed the paper bag and slipped it under my jacket.

Bottles! Big bottles.

Pete was grinning. "Couple of fizz for your farewell dinner. You're leaving tomorrow?" I nodded. "Flying?" he asked.

"No, I've got the trunks."

He hesitated. Soberly, he said, "Know where you're . . . headed?"

"No," I said. "But I'll find her."

Pete's face lit up. His hand gripped mine. "Kid," he said, "to me that's good news."

I saw Tobacco Jowls next morning. He twitched. "Bought a mirror for my missis at your sale," he grumped, and handed me ten dollars. Good-byes made me uncomfortable, and I said as few as possible. Mrs. Sauna and Billie I left until last. For once Billie was silent. "Come back when you can," Mrs. Sauna said. "All of you," she added. I handed her the cabin key.

The southbound passenger coaches were packed. Now that they were through with rail-construction work, Company men were moving Outside in droves. My story on them, those Sons of Martha, was finished and gone. The construction dead-heading days were past; a stout Canadian National Railways conductor, with gold braid and buttons, was taking tickets. Now this was a real railroad.

In a seat next to the window, I thought of the crowded rail-trolley that first had brought us here. Since then, men had battled, slaved, suffered maiming and death, to bring about this change. Unwittingly, they had brought about another. In little more than a year, a beautiful spot in the wilderness, centuries old, had got one sharp blast of civilization, and had met ruin.

The train began to move. I half-closed my eyes to soften a fire-blackened picture. Instead, I tried to recapture the one that Ruth, Bud, and I had first seen here. I pictured great spruce, and clean white birch, gazing out over Athapapuskow's sparkling waters; blue shadows and wooded islands; ankle-deep moss underfoot. In my forced dream, I smelled again the clean, soft lake air.

That had been long, long ago, in the days of sub-contractors, clanging steel, cursing men, skeleton track–days of the lurching, gravel-grinding trolley that had carried us here. Now, leaving, the train wheels rolled on a smooth roadbed, clucked rhythmically over flush rail-joints, gained speed.

It was strange to be saying good-byes, to be leaving it all. I thought of soft summer nights, a yellow moon rising from the pines, the moaning howl of dogs; heard again the sleepy laugh of a loon, the gentle clop, clop, of waves on a rocky shore.

Together with our "struggle town" we had groped and grown.

Like it, we had gained much. Suddenly, like it, we had lost everything.

For neither of us, I knew, could that first bright picture ever fade. Given a chance, Nature would some day restore this place. Now I must find a way to restore my own loss.

"And someday," I told the mournful, dejected trees, "together we're coming back."

The director of the C.P.R. Press Bureau in Winnipeg was Hugh Campbell, big physically, and in his dealings with people. Earl Hanson had not exaggerated when he said Canada's two big railroads accorded writers royal service.

Our rail passes had been made to include Banff. In Hugh Campbell's office, after meeting his staff, I learned why. "The Highland Games are a big tourist draw with us," he explained. "As an ex-Cameron Highlander, you're a natural for this. A week at Banff for you and your wife would make a bang-up magazine story. If you can make it there. It's in three days. Is your wife here?"

I was cornered. During my one day in Winnipeg I had not found Ruth and Bud. Friends I telephoned had been polite and formal. Those who didn't ask for Ruth, I was sure must know, but I had no desire to discuss so private a matter with friends or relatives. I had tried to use the radio to locate her, but stations would not handle that type of message.

The Banff turn of events made finding her even more urgent. We had worked hard and as partners toward such a break; whatever our private relationship, I didn't want Ruth to miss that trip.

I told Hugh Campbell the truth. Relaxed in his office chair he listened, nodded, and seemed little concerned, until I added: "Unless I find her, I can't go to Banff."

He sat up then. As Bureau head, he knew all press and radio people, and my carefully worded plea was broadcast. Ruth telephoned. I had left a letter with the Youngs in case she came there. When we met, and before we talked, I gave her the letter to read.

On a working basis only, she agreed to make the trip. But on the Banff train, crowded with Scottish folk, we found an awkward cross-up in berth reservations. Those involved with us were elderly, and very upset, so Ruth and I accepted the only available space–a single upper. There, surrounded by endless chatter and subdued confusion, very close to each other, whether we had planned to be or not, we talked things out. "My health weathered it, but I've learned," I admitted at last. "It won't happen again."

"If it should, I'll understand better. A lot of things are going to be

different," Ruth said. She laughed softly. "Banff Springs Hotel certainly will be."

"Then Turner Valley Oil, Calgary, Edmonton, Peace River country. Remember us? We're writers." I added, "In this league, we'd damn-well better be."

"I hope Bud won't be too lonesome."

"Not Bud. She'll catch up with us when we light somewhere for the winter. Edmonton, maybe." Bud was with my sister in St. James: an excited Bud, the world at her slippered feet, out of mosquito pants, into frilly dresses. She was too young for school, but not for Saturday wild-West movies, ice cream, pop, and other city miracles, all bought with her own weekly allowance. She would have indoor plumbing, and three cousins to play with or hero-worship.

"Hey," I said, suddenly remembering, "know what's on this train? Our baggageman's nightmare: the wardrobe trunk. Everything in it from Bud's wolverine parka, and your grandmother's heirloom spoons, to my gold-claim samples. Log cabin to Scottish castle in one nimble bound! Let's get the hotel maid to unpack it, and watch her face–if we can find the key."

Ruth sighed. "I kept the keys–hoping. Especially the little gold one. To me–it was the most important one of all."

"A lot of precious things in that top drawer?" It was something I hadn't ever asked her.

She thought about it. "Yes. Your letters. And when I needed them most, I didn't have them." Her admission brought a surge of happiness.

"There'll be many others," I promised.

We talked, whispered, in the creaking, swaying night-car. For the moment we forgot the past, concerning ourselves only with the future and its hopes. Until at last, drowsy and relaxed, Ruth said, "When I left there I was afraid to even look back. If I'd known we would be like this again, I could have."

I recalled then my pledge to the blackened trees. "Someday it will all be green again," I told her. "Grown from a new start–like us now. Someday we'll go back."

Epilogue

Busy years flipped by, became decades, and it was the jet age. We were flying the Arctic Route from Vancouver, Canada, via Amsterdam to London. We planned to spend a year poking into the quainter corners of the British Isles and Europe, by car. Over the Canadian Rockies, a dark and trim senior stewardess presented herself at our seat.

"I'm Lois Dickinson. Red carpet treatment for you," she announced. "Bud's orders."

We all laughed. Since her first fifteen-minute flight at Cranberry Portage in 1928, Bud's great love had been for flying. As a Canadian Pacific Air Lines private secretary, she had made it her career, and we had been staying with her in Vancouver.

Later, crossing the Canadian North, there was little to see but bright March sunshine. Our send-off party had been strenuous; I was roused from a doze by the same stewardess. "The Captain would like to see you in his office."

"Is he lost already?" I kidded.

"He wants to see if you are."

Captain Fred Meliecke shook hands. He was enjoying a good cigar. Standing beside him, I had a wide view of the sub-Arctic country. "Recognize anything?" he asked.

At 30,000 feet, what a question! Then I raised my sights and saw it: a white plume rising in the still air. "Not Flin Flon?" He grinned, then tilted his head to look overside. I did the same, and saw it right under our ship's nose. "Good Lord! Cranberry Portage!"

Far below us, at the end of an expanse of frozen lake, was a cluster of pin-point buildings. Then it was gone. He resumed the business of intercontinental flying. "Slight deviation from course. Traffic Boss Con Farrell thought you might like a look."

Pleasantly shocked by the abrupt colliding of present and past, at 600 miles an hour, I returned to my seat. Ruth had also been

found a spot where she could get a quick view. Drinks were brought, so we could toast what had just passed below, and I said to Ruth, "I wonder what Cranberry's like on the ground?"

It took us a while to find out. When, after an absence of forty years, we did get back to Cranberry Portage, we were greeted by the same old moon and the same lap-lapping waters, bridging the gap of time.

Many things had happened to us during four decades. As the Ryley Coopers predicted, through our "output of used paper" we had progressed from those original two tents beside this northern lake to the bright canyons of New York. Our travels had taken us from the Arctic Circle to Key West. We had known cities East, West, and in the deep South; prairie-lands, mountains, foothills, and cow-country; oil-fields, logging woods, air-lanes, and the sea. We had survived times of feast–and also times of famine, when health problems slowed our pace.

Top magazines, once as remote as the sun, had eventually published our work. An early break-through sale to *Maclean's* magazine had come in late 1929. It had been the Sons of Martha article, suggested by Harry McLean, with the final title, "Steel's March to Flin Flon." (I was to spend four editorial years with *Maclean's*, terminated by ill-health in 1943.)

Now, we had returned, hauling a compact sleeping-trailer. Our first visit was not to Cranberry, but to Flin Flon, where we had promised to arrive for a pre-arranged dinner. Without stopping, and with only a quick glance at lake waters flashing beyond streets with stores, houses, service stations, and a sign that read "Cranberry Portage" we continued on north. Ruth and Bud and I had once been an advance party of three. We must have done a good selling job. Living at Flin Flon now, were twenty-three members of our family connection, boosted to twenty-seven with the arrival of ourselves, and the writing Youngs, Astrid and Scott, from Toronto.

While still sorting out tribe members, we had a phone call: "This Wing Wong here. Your sister say you coming. Bring everybody dinner my place. All my guest."

I managed to talk Wing out of his generous offer. Instead, I met him later in the big café that was being run, that night-shift, by Wing's only son. "Harold got boy, 'leven year. Good at school," grandfather Wing told me. Tall, with spectacles, his straight-combed hair now white, he added, "My daughter, big family. Six she got." He tossed his head back with the familiar gesture, and laughed. "All

make plenty noise–but healthy kids, though."

In a back booth, while Wing kept an eye out for any operational problems in the café, we covered the years. "Paddy die. T.B. Big Boy, Paddy cousin, sell hotel, go way. He make lotsa money Flin Flon."

"You've done all right yourself," I prodded.

Wing laughed with modesty, and waved at the packed booths about him. "Café business better than stake claim for me." At Cranberry Portage, and since, Wing had backed many prospectors. Some had proved obvious deadbeats. "People say 'Sucker Wong'," he went on. "No sucker. I grubstake prospector, he find mine, that good for North, good for Canada. Not Sucker Wong."

"Did you ever hit it big, Wing?"

He shrugged. "One time we got deal. Hundred thousand. Deal fall through."

He had photos to show me–one of his daughter, enthroned with her princesses, as queen of a big Flin Flon carnival. "When we pushed tickets for a Flin Flon queen at Cranberry, you didn't think you'd have a daughter in that honoured spot some day, did you?" I asked.

Wing smiled. "I don't know I have daughter. Bachelor then. I don't know then. Maybe never marry. Maybe always be bachelor."

We had missed seeing Mrs. Sauna; she had died only recently. Married to a mine official, with a fine home and every comfort–including that of grandchildren, by courtesy of Billie–her later life was spent like her Cranberry one, amiably and vigorously backing any good community cause; active in politics and church work. Her dustcap, we heard, was long gone. In Flin Flon circles, our Mrs. Sauna had been noted for her formal Queen Mary hats.

Tobacco Jowls had lived out his days at Flin Flon, still scheming; a man among men. Once, playing poker in a poolroom fronting on Flin Flon's main street, when he was well into his authentic nineties, he spotted skulduggery. His great right arm let go at half-cock to send the culprit, still riding his chair, spilling from the doorway onto a crowded sidewalk.

The next day, I was pacing a Flin Flon hotel's modern lobby, waiting for a mysterious lunch-date appointment. (My sister, Jean Young, a reporter for a local paper had set it up, telling me only that it would be a surprise.) Suddenly, an erect man, wiry, with greying hair, and a big envelope under his arm, strode over. "Greetings from Cranberry. Thought I'd run up for lunch. I'm Pete Rod."

I reared back, hardly believing him; then, with wide grins, we stood looking each other over. "Frozen raisin pie for dessert," I reminded.

"I meant to be here first," Pete explained, "but I had to call in at the airport."

Ruth and I had seen the airport, halfway between Cranberry and Flin Flon, a modern layout, handling airliners and the private planes of hunters, fishermen, and regular tourists. Near it, small lakes, and the lake arms of Athapapuskow, were lined with the summer homes of Flin Flonners. A winding stretch of paved highway followed the Pine Root River, that same river that Dixie, Sugar, Old Dad, Shorty, and I had reached, long years ago, trail-blackened, weary, and with empty bellies.

During lunch, Pete Rod sketched his own and Cranberry's modern history. He was married, had children. His sons had done well, and his one daughter had been a model, then a T.C.A. stewardess. She was now married, living in San Francisco. Following the Cranberry fire, a small gold mine, a few miles from the settlement, had started production, and Pete had worked as shift boss. "When that pinched out," he said, "I raised chickens to supply Flin Flon. The whole carboogle burned; that made it twice for me at Cranberry."

As a commercial fisherman, with his own mink ranch to use up the fish scraps, he got rolling. But so did sports-fishing and tourist-camp businesses, once the Americans, in force, had discovered northern lakes. The government had closed the area for commercial fishing. It was still closed. From mink, Pete went to setting up roadside parks for the Highways Department. "In a few years they changed to a new system that didn't work out for me." He shrugged.

"What's your line now, Pete?" I asked.

He smiled. "I'm superintendent of maintenance for Frontier College, at Cranberry. That's janitor."

The job was more than that. The school was a big modern layout, built originally for a radar base, with 150 military personnel and their familes. The link-in with the costly secondary DEW LINE across Canada's North had given Cranberry's economy a fillip. Its discontinuance had come as a stunning wallop.

Now the base had become a residential school, with twenty-six teachers on staff. Four hundred students, white, Indian, and Métis, were brought by the Manitoba government from outlying northern points to receive free high school educations, complete with room and board. Locally, it was big business. Since the early fur trade

days, Cranberry Portage had been a focal point for travel; now as the home of "Frontier College," our former settlement had achieved a place on the North's map which was both important and permanent.

From his envelope, Pete Rod drew a tattered copy of the *Northland Echo*, circa 1929. In it, Mrs. Sauna's bath-house offered a Wednesday afternoon ladies' special. A full-page mine promotion stated: "Geological conditions are similar to those found in the Flin Flon properties." Beside it was a pencilled note from an official Flin Flon report of 1963: "Gross value of metal sales to date has exceeded the One Billion Dollar mark." The New York Whitneys' original thirty million, dumped down a hole in the Canadian wilderness, had paid off nicely.

"Hey!" Pete sat back. "There's another Cranberry old-timer!" He waved across the crowded dining room to a chunky outdoorsman who looked to be in his thirties. A very young old-timer, I thought. "Cap Anderson," Pete said. "Remember his celebration? First white baby born on the Portage. Cap still lives there. Moved one mile, over to First Cranberry. Runs a swank tourist lodge–smorgasbord on weekends, dance orchestra from The Pas. There's a highway across the portage. No more canoe rack or foot-trail."

"Quite a change from before the railroad, when old Fred with his horses and homebrew was the only one there," I told him. "Is he still around?"

Pete sobered. "After all the years, he lost his property. Somehow. Old Fred hung himself." I was startled, recalling Cranberry's original citizen, and the old Portage tradition of violent death.

Days later Pete drove us around Cranberry town, through the woods on both sides of the bay, past permanent and summer homes, with sloping lawns and white birches. Thompson Lodge alone retained its original setting and seclusion, except that now there was a motor driveway through tall trees. "The Thompson family made a pile from mineral claims," Pete said. "South for the winters, Cadillacs, and a big Flin Flon home–but this is still their favourite spot."

We saw the tourist lodges that are modern Cranberry's best-known industry. One was still owned by Fred and Evelyn Constable, on the same lake bay where, in squatter-town days, Earl Brydges' racing dogs had been their only guests. Another original, the postmaster-hardwareman, had pursued into his eighties a long-ago vision that had finally become reality. The business, fronting on Cranberry's paved main street, was being carried on by his son.

From the same block, a mukluk factory shipped fancy, and expensive, designs throughout Canada. To tie in with campus capers, there was now a pool hall. Well-dressed kids brightened the streets, transistor music blaring. Where, in the old days, mineralization had killed all radio reception, Cranberry now had both radio and TV.

The rally held at Pete and Vi Rod's, where we were trailer guests, roared into the night. Pete's wife was dark, with a quiet sense of humour. Ruth asked Pete where he had met her. Both Vi and Pete laughed. "I was batching," Pete said. "Vi came to cook for Mrs. Roberts in the old log dining room that was saved from the fire. It still stands. I tasted that first meal, and after that I camped right there till she married me."

We knew most of the originals; the cross-fire of remember-whens was beyond recording. When we mentioned Moon Glow, there were headshakes. "He hit it big at Flin Flon and went to the Coast," someone said. "Figured to make a million in real estate, but he lost the works. Came here, once after, still wearing those short, cut-off pants."

Tollef Wikjord, who years ago we had known as a rugged construction-worker, now domesticated, with a neat home and garden, recalled a memorable night at Mile Sixty. A muskeg sinkhole had stalled the work crews–to conquer its 250-foot length was to eventually take 330 trainloads of gravel. At night, the fill would be up to track level, but morning showed only an empty maw, with a ladder of suspended ties and rails. At intervals, far below, there would be a disturbance, as thousands of dollars in fill-material and labour would be lazily absorbed, and the displacement, a matching amount of black muskeg material, would rise far out on either side of the right-of-way.

To beat the jinx, floodlights were rigged for round-the-clock work. Standing one night in their glare, gazing across the morass, a man shouted, pointing. Sixty feet from the track, being forced up by tons of muck, the shape of a boat showed. Men watched in silence as it emerged to lie on top of the quivering slime. Years ago, this had been birch-canoe country, but what they saw was a dugout, hewn from the trunk of a great tree, perhaps centuries earlier. It lay in plain sight, a primitive axe blade embedded in its prow. Ancient tribes? Wandering Vikings? No one would ever know.

Aware of its historic value, workmen tried to reach it across the squirming, treacherous mass, but failed. Ten minutes it stayed, a link with the past; then the great pit leisurely re-devoured its prey.

To a group in the kitchen, Pete was describing a famous alky bout at Louie Nelson's camp: "Like always, Louie's contract records were behind. After Concrete Mac had a go at them, they were worse. The Cranberry timekeeper phoned that he was coming up. 'Good,' Concrete told him. 'We're dry here. Bring two forties of alky.'

"After a few drinks, Louie and Concrete decide on an eggnog. They dump two-dozen storage eggs, months old, in a galvanized bucket with a forty of alky. By the time Concrete gets the canned milk stabbed open, the alky's got the eggs half-cooked. When they mix in the milk, everything curdles. It's a dog's breakfast, but it don't stop 'em. They keep going till they hit the bottom of that bucket."

When we mentioned Tobacco Jowls and the smelter, everyone laughed. "All he wanted was a clearing contract for his men and teams." Mister Moses had stayed a while after the fire. "Remember the sports day, with the special train? He raffled a boat and motor, and won it himself. He made a speech: 'I find this very embarrassing,' but he kept the loot." More laughs. No one knew where he had gone. Pete told us later that off and on for years, prairie farmers arrived asking to see the Cranberry smelter.

The party at Pete's and Vi's broke up; summer was a busy time. Cranberry people once had been judged by whether they paddled a canoe or could afford a kicker engine; that night everyone drove home in late-model cars: three top-line Fords, a Chevy wagon, three Buicks, and a Chrysler New Yorker. When I mentioned this, Pete nodded wisely. "Cranberry's doing okay."

Now, our last night north, the trailer was parked where our cabin had stood. All was quiet, campers a-bed, many of them geared up for dawn fishing trips on Athapapuskow. Under a sailing moon we sat alone, mostly silent, seeing ghost buildings, and ghost people, on the lakeshore below.

"The last I saw was the Airways dock," Ruth said. "Everything Bud and I owned was in the wardrobe trunk. But it wouldn't go in the plane."

"It took too much space in their shed so Airways sent it back to the cabin," I told her. "I was glad to see it."

"Then Winnipeg, with no clothes, no money to buy any. Thank God I heard your radio message. I was scared."

"So was I. Something about, 'Have passes. Leaving for Banff and Peace River. Care to come along?' "

" 'Better come along'," Ruth corrected. "Almost an order. I didn't mind."

"We learned from that business." A change in the light made me turn. "Over your shoulder," I told her. "Look." To the east, northern lights flickered high, their long banners waving to us. "There's a special welcome home," I said. "In living colour." We watched the display a moment. "Remember them on winter nights, with snowy trees, smoke climbing a mile straight up, the deep path through the woods to the lighted cabin?"

Ruth was silent.

"Or summer; that first one. Great spruce, towering over white birches, moss carpet, cool shade. Lines of men unloading rail cars. Barges, boats, Indians, canoes, dogs. Planes at the big dock; Airways boys slinging freight like mad." I hesitated, the picture incomplete, then added: "Brownie horsing around between trips."

Ruth's voice was small. "If only they could be here." Over the years, we had managed visits with Lady Di and Roy, had seen their daughters, Nola and Georgia, grow up, and have families. His Cranberry start had launched Roy Brown on a remarkable career. A key pilot on the MacAlpine search in 1929, he had been stranded for thirteen days on Arctic ice, had pioneered western airmail night-flying, become president of a large air operation, Wings Limited. As factory test pilot in War II, he had lifted more than 2,000 military aircraft off the ground on their first flight. A booster for northern people, he had become their representative in Manitoba's Legislature.

Having him for a friend had been invaluable to us as writers. When pencil and notebook had parlayed us from tents beside a northern lake to the roar of New York City, Roy Brown was the subject of our first sale to the *Saturday Evening Post*.

Over the years, in hotels, at their home, at ours, if we had one, we had spent comfortable, lazy intervals together, stolen from busy schedules.

We had often talked of all of us returning to Cranberry someday. Now Ruth and I were here–but Roy and Di would never be again.

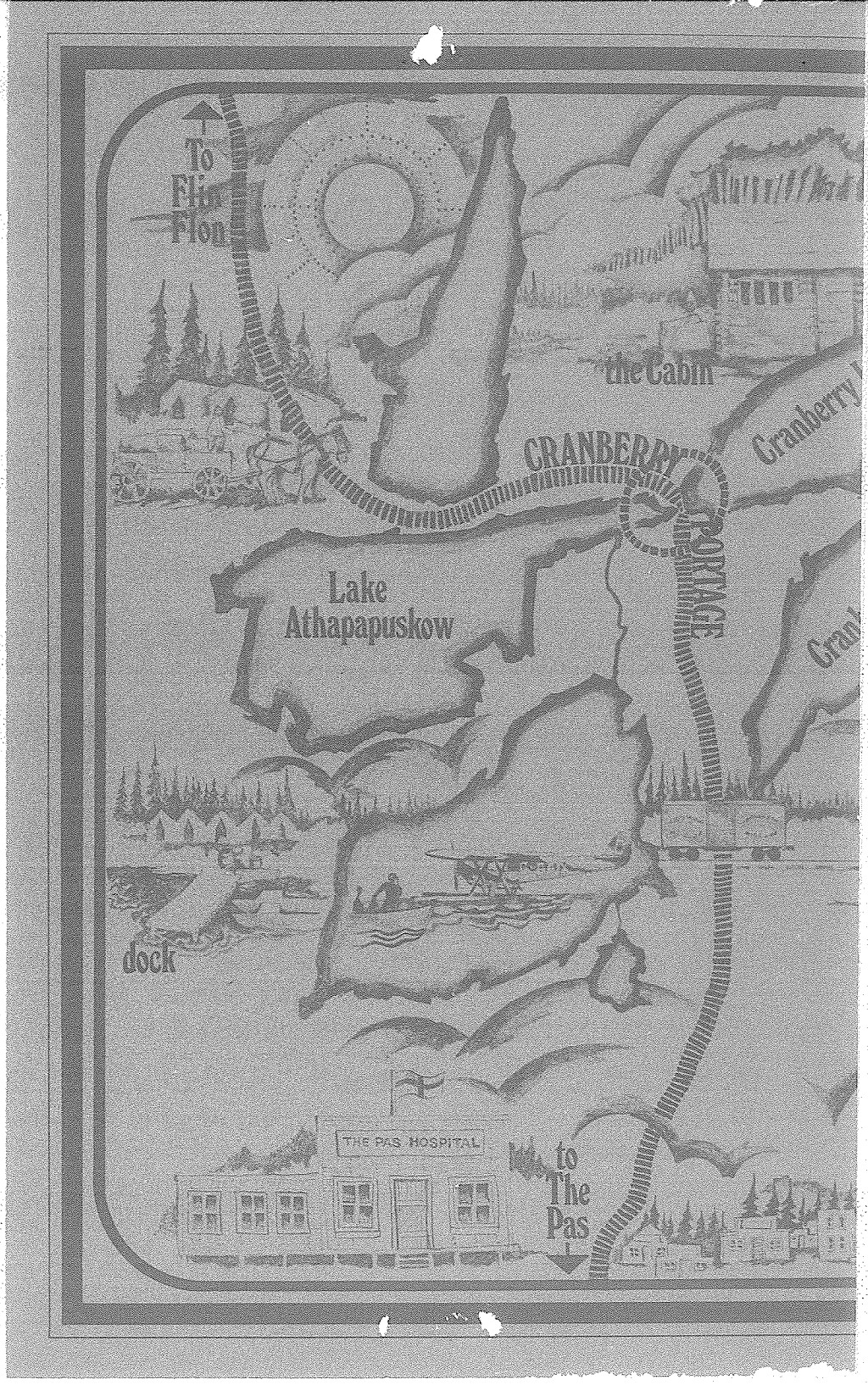
I tried to cover our sadness by recalling aloud the cabin in the birches, the chuckle of Paddy's wagon wheels, the smell of fresh-cut spruce, of wood smoke, sizzling bacon; all the warming memories of this place that had given us a fresh start in life. "You're standing in the doorway and I'm coming home," I said. "I'm probably late."

It came then. Ruth turned. In the half-light I saw her mouth quiver. *"Oh, why does everything have to change!"*

I left it a moment, and then told her: "Not everything. The moon hasn't. Our old friend the loon hasn't.–I know something else that hasn't." I found her lips.

The moon, drifting high, smiled down its yellow path across the water. Far out in the bay, the old loon laughed. Like passing clouds, the years were gone. Time took a beating.

Nothing had really changed. . . .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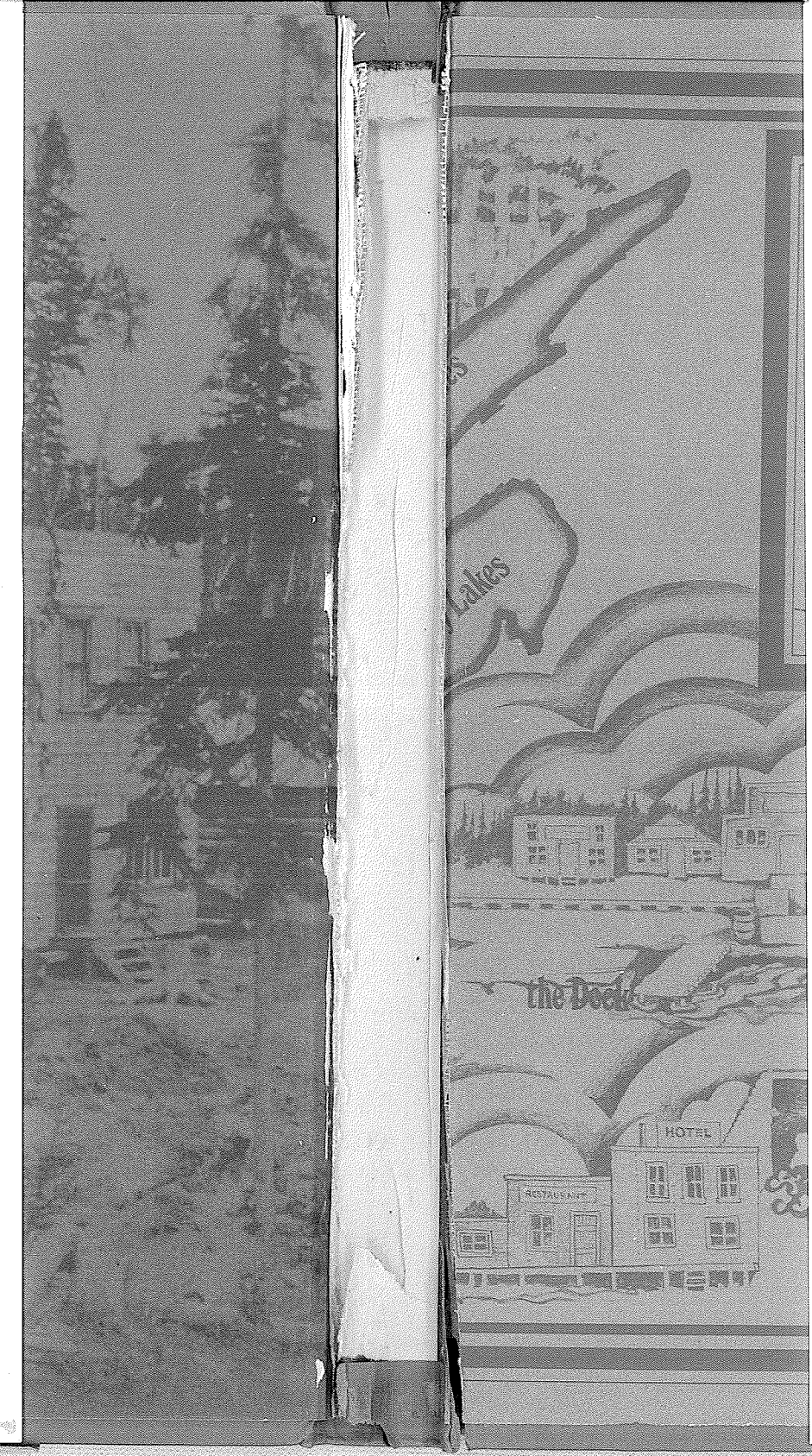

Ruth and Jack Paterson

Ruth and Jack Paterson have been free-lance writers, off and on, for forty years. Articles and stories (by one Paterson or the other) have appeared in such periodicals as the *Star Weekly, Maclean's* (where Jack was at one time fiction editor), *Chatelaine, New York Herald Tribune Magazine, This Week, Magazine Digest, Argosy, True* (in one issue, Jack had three stories published under three different names!), *Saturday Evening Post, Liberty, Outdoor Life, Holland's, The Furrow, 'Teen Magazine, Weekend,* and "others we can't recall."

Jack Paterson has recently sold a short story to the B.B.C., for their World Broadcast. He has also kept close ties with the development of both Canada's railways and her flying industry (the northern activities of both form an important part of this book), and for fourteen years worked with the Investor's Syndicate of Canada – ten of those years were spent in Kenora, Ontario.

Before her marriage, Ruth Paterson, Jack's wife and collaborator, taught school briefly. Following their business retirement in 1960, both Patersons returned to writing. They are now living in Courtenay, B.C., and are engaged in completing a sequel to *Cranberry Portage,* which describes their progress from embryo writers in northern tents to full-fledged journalists in roaring Manhattan!

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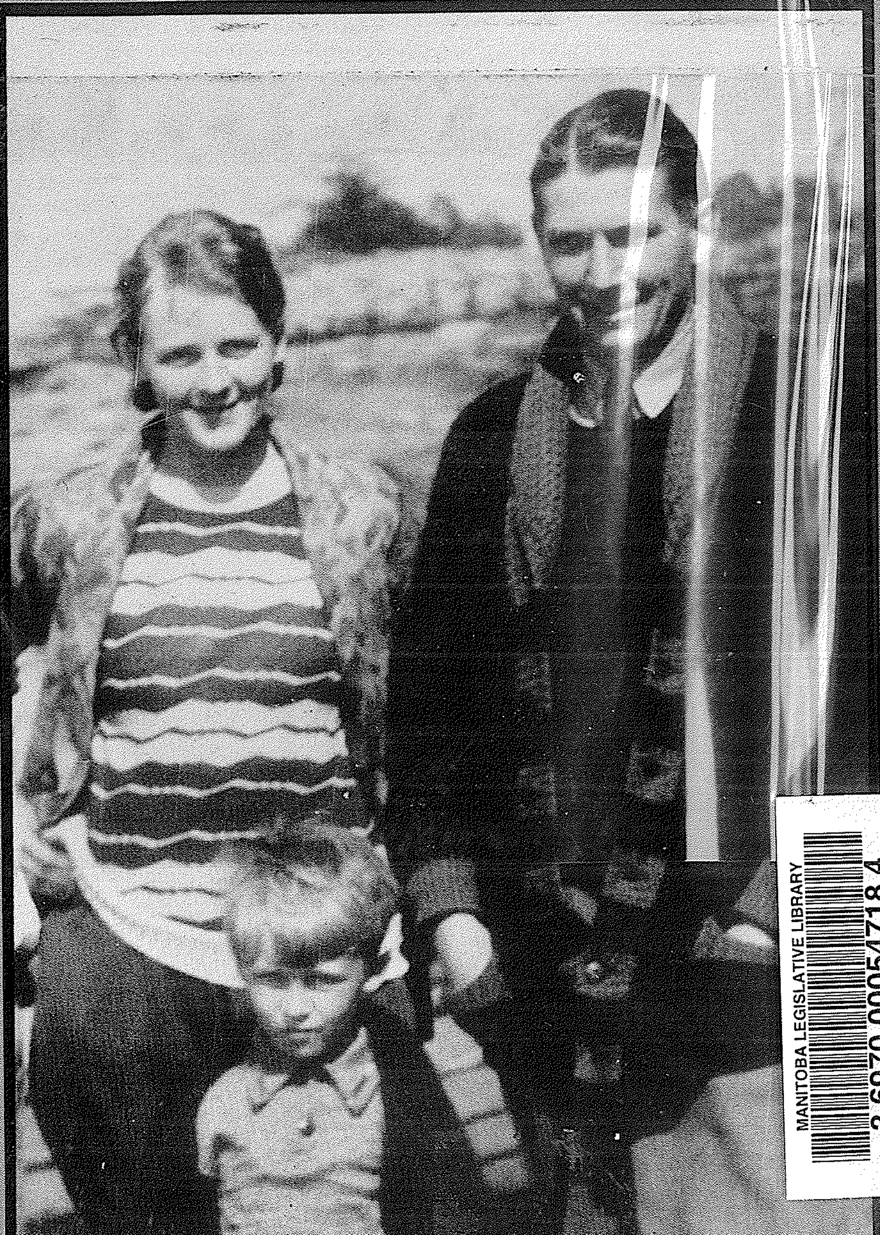

Paterson

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