

CALL COURAGEOUS



by **SAMUEL TAYLOR**

There was a debt he owed his uncle, and he faced death for weeks in order to pay it

THERE'S no accounting for tastes; and psychology isn't an exact science purely because human reactions vary with a given stimulus—pull a knife on one man and he'll run, another, and he'll fight. But still it was disconcerting, to say the least, the way tough old Mel Martin took up with Lawton. The sourdoughs claimed Martin would use only one hand to lick his weight in wildcats, and further said if anybody went a-gunning for him to use steel-jacketed bullets, because lead would just splatter on his thick hide. Of course the old-timers might have

exaggerated, but—well, Lawton . . .

He came into the Upper Koyukuk country in a blizzard, alone, and on the run. When he staggered into Footstool Bill's trading post he was anything but attractive. Lawton was on the plump order, not fat, but soft. His putty-like face, with the loose lips and pug nose, looked like some caricature of a crying child. Saliva had rolled down and frozen in his chin whiskers. Two things will cause that, intoxication or abject fear. And Lawton wasn't drunk.

"They're after me!" he panted hoarsely.

“They’re coming for me—goin’ to kill me! Men, do something! For God’s sake, help me!”

There were a half-dozen sourdoughs in Footstool Bill’s post. They surveyed Lawton shrewdly, but, not knowing the play, they did nothing.

“How much do you want?” the plump one cried desperately. “I’ll give all I’ve got for some help!”

“Who’s after you?” asked Footstool Bill.

“Beet Nisonger and his gang! . . . Look, here! Here’s the money!” Lawton blubbered, dragging a poke from under his parka. “Here! There’s better than thirty ounces in it! It’s yourn. I’ll give it to anybody who takes me away from here! Lost my outfit back about fifteen mile through a soft spot in the river ice and I’ve got to get away!”

Not a face in the trading post changed so much as a flicker. Beet Nisonger is a name to conjure with, up beyond the Arctic Circle. Nisonger is not outlawed only because he is too clever. But everybody knows what he is. Merciless, brutal, he knows no code but that of his own making. Three times the law went after him, and three times a U.S. Marshal, sent to bring him in, just simply never returned. No evidence against Nisonger; no bodies were ever found. When at last he was apprehended and brought to trial on the original charge, two witnesses disappeared—and the others promptly “forgot” what they knew. Not a man to trifle with, Beet Nisonger . . . Lawton’s thirty-odd ounces of gold dust wasn’t enough to raise a finger among the sourdoughs.

The whine of dogs sounded from outside, and then mukluks creaked on the frozen surface. Lawton screamed in terror, and made a scrambling rush behind the counter as the door opened. But it was not Beet Nisonger who came in; no, the fog of the cold air rushing into the room swirled around the big figure of Mel Martin. As was his habit he glanced around at the faces to see if there was a stranger there—somebody he hadn’t licked. But just seeing old acquaintances, he sighed and said:

“Boys, I brought some magazines along to trade with anybody for somethin’ I ain’t read more’n twice.”

At the voice, Lawton’s plump face peered around the edge of the counter and then the fellow scrambled for Martin, clasping his knees and blubbering out a plea in a manner that was embarrassing.

Sitka Red clucked sympathetically. It was just

like somebody sticking a pin in a mule’s hind leg, the way Lawton lathered around Martin, for the big man was hard and so entirely without fear you’d think he wouldn’t know what the emotion was. Then Martin grabbed Lawton’s shoulder by one big hand and heaved him upright, shaking him until his teeth rattled. Some of the boys looked away.

BUT you could always count on Martin to do the unexpected. Instead of smashing a fist to that blubbering mouth, the northerner said: “All right, now tell me without bawlin’.” And his voice was gentle, as if he were speaking to a child. He listened gravely, and then said: “Sure, I’ll help you. But keep your poke. I don’t want your money.”

Footstool Bill whistled in amazement, then grunted to Sitka Red: “I bet even money he’s got a trick up his sleeve!”

“Even money hell! How much odds will you give?”

Martin and Lawton went out the door, then dodged back in. Up the trail from the frozen river was coming a ten-dog team and a sledge outfit, with a man running ahead and four following. The plump man was actually whining like a dog with fear.

“Shut that up!” snapped Martin, and his fist came with the words. Lawton slumped to the floor.

“You’re just helpin’ him, huh?” Footstool Bill called. The sourdoughs laughed.

“Shut up, you wolves!” Martin roared. “Didn’t want him screamin’ when Nisonger comes in!” As he spoke he dragged Lawton through the door behind the counter.

“I know why,” whispered Footstool Bill. “Martin’s just spoilin’ for a fight. That’s why he’s doin’ this.”

Sitka Red shook his head. “Dunno.”

WHEN Beet Nisonger and his crew swaggered through the doorway, the sourdoughs inside had with extreme nonchalance sauntered to the edges of the room. This looked like plenty of trouble, and nobody wanted to be in on it—except Martin, who thrived on trouble. Martin casually was leaning against the end of the counter, shutting off access to that backroom door.

“I’m lookin’ for a fat guy named Lawton,” announced Beet Nisonger. “He’s wanted by the law, and wanted bad.”

“Since when was you the law?” asked Martin

quietly.

"I'll be the law if the law can't take care of things! And I asked a question, Mel Martin!"

"Why are you so all-fired anxious to uphold the law?"

"Because I don't want no murder charge again' me!" the big man spat. "There's them which says it was me who shot that deputy marshal in Fairbanks. I didn't do it, and I know Lawton did. If I could catch the yellow-gut I'd make him talk and talk plenty. I'm a honest man and I don't want no suspicions—"

"Since when was you so all-fired particular about your reputation?"

Nisonger squinted, then said in a low voice: "Mel, you wouldn't want to be the man to shield the killer of deputy marshal Ken Cowley."

"Ken Cowley!" Martin had gone on a couple of manhunts with Cowley. More, he had had a couple of grand fistfights with the deputy marshal, which made them friends. Martin glanced at the rear door, then he said: "Never you mind about Lawton. I'll see that he talks!"

"By Joe! Then he's here!" roared the big man, interpreting that glance.

"But I'm dealin' with him," growled Martin, shoulders hunching like a bear. "You'll talk with Lawton—if you git by me."

Nisonger made a lunge, and Martin caught him just right—a fist cracked against the jaw and then as Nisonger's head snapped back from the blow he rammed into a wooden peg on the log wall, a hard peg which caught him just behind the right ear. Nisonger went down with his eyes crossing.

"Too bad," murmured Martin. "Figured on maybe a fight."

But the northerner didn't have to mourn long. The other four of the gang jumped him. You'd go a long ways to find as fine a bunch for scaring children as the associates of Beet Nisonger. One was a Bokharan Uzbek with typical Mongoloid features; another a Mackenzie River Eskimo outlawed by his tribe; while a third, darkly handsome except for a missing eye, had started life in the Tongan Islands. The fourth was a shriveled little Cockney with buck teeth. These four jumped Martin when their leader went down. The one-eyed Tongan rushed in brashly and Martin sent him sprawling with a single blow. The Cockney dived at the legs, while the Eskimo circled for the back. The crafty Uzbek waited an opening, then dived

with the quickness of a python's strike. Martin went down.

"Four to one," rumbled Sitka Red, advancing to the tangle of flying arms and legs.

"Me, I wouldn't be helpin' a escaped murderer," said Footstool Bill. "Especially if he killed a deputy marshal—and if it meant mixin' with the Nisonger gang."

"You're right." Sitka retreated again out of the circle. If Martin was crazy, then let him drink the dose he had mixed up. After all, he had invited the fight.

But Martin was getting along; he was holding his own. With a kick he sent the Cockney howling against the counter, and then a big fist rammed into the Eskimo's belly, wilting the starch in the native's backbone. But the Uzbek was like an oiled phantom. He slipped around on Martin's back and clamped on a full-Nelson, rubbery arms reaching under the northerner's armpits and back behind the head, fingers locked, cinching Martin's head forward, ramming chin against the chest. To a man with a strong neck, the full-Nelson is not dangerous. But it's mighty hard to break, and it interferes with a man's movements plenty. The Tongan was getting up, and he roared in with his one eye gleaming hate, white teeth flashing. Neck kinked with that full-Nelson, Martin couldn't dodge, and he caught a half-dozen fists full in the face while his own arm movements were hampered by the Uzbek's hold. The Eskimo recovered and came in, clawing with open hands, native fashion, seizing the hair and trying to get a thumb in the eye. Martin made a lunge, carrying the man on his back with him, and each big hand slapped at a head, knocking them together with a thud. Then he went down as the Cockney dived into his legs from behind. The other two piled on the heap. It looked plenty bad for Martin.

But the northerner was only down—not out. He couldn't do much with his arms tangled up, so he used his legs. Rolling over on his back, atop the Mongol, he rammed those mukluks like a pair of mule's hoofs. Two kicks put the Cockney and the Eskimo out of the way, then another sailed the Tongan atop the counter. Martin climbed to his feet, and the three roared in again. The Mongol still had that full-Nelson, and now had circled legs around Martin's torso and was squeezing the sap out of him—then abruptly the hold changed, and the Uzbek had an elbow around Martin's neck,

squeezing a choke hold. It looked bad for Martin. But while the choke hold was more vicious, it was less hampering than the full-Nelson. With arms free, Martin caught up the little Cockney and swung him overhead, flinging him through the double-glass of the window. The rush of the other pair took him down again, but Martin's fist caught a jaw as he went over, and the Eskimo was finally out for good. Then on the floor Martin rolled with the one-eyed Tongan. The native, quick as a panther, squirmed around and clamped a toehold on Martin's mukluk-clad foot, bearing down with all his strength.

And there he was, the mighty one helpless, the Tongan with his leg bent up, straining with that toehold, the Uzbek cinching the torso and shutting off the supply of wind. The sourdoughs watched gravely. It looked like the great Martin was licked.

BUT the northerner was moving, digging fingers between the cracks of the plank flooring, inching himself along, pulling the other two. Nobody divined his purpose until—*crack!*—like the backlash of a snapping cable that twisted leg straightened out. The Tongan let loose too late. His head rapped against the wall and he relaxed. But still the Uzbek kept that life-blasting cinch on the windpipe and that strength-sapping squeeze on the torso. Martin tried to pull the arm from his neck, then he tried to loosen the legs at his middle. The northerner's face was purple, and his eyes bulged out until they seemed ready to pop from the sockets. His frame shook like a wild mustang trying to dislodge a saddle. Then, very slowly, he slumped face downward.

"Well, boys, there's something which you ain't never seen before," croaked the wizened trading post keeper. "Martin's gone down an' stayed down in a fair fight."

"Fair—hell! Four again' one, and—"

But Martin was moving! He was getting up. As if drugged, or possessed with a supernatural strength, or as if this were the last pulse of life before the spirit left the body, he was moving. Slowly, mechanically, bulging eyes staring sightlessly from the blood-blackened face, he got one foot on the floor, then the other; then there was an agonizing struggle while the trembling legs fought to straighten. And then, swaying drunkenly, he was up. The Uzbek clung to his double hold like a leech.

A sourdough rasped an awed oath. Footstool Bill pulled a big six-gun from under the counter and, clasping the barrel, came up behind to lay the butt against the Uzbek's ear. Sitka Red spoke softly: "Martin ain't never asked for help."

There was some obscure purpose in the northerner's blind staggering. Reeling drunkenly he plodded across the room, and then came to rest—with his back to the red-hot belly of the big stove in the corner. But Martin's back did not touch that stove. The Uzbek was there.

A scream came from the Mongol's lips, and then the Asiatic had released his hold and was writhing on the floor. Martin gasped in air with the sound of a gale whistling through a spruce grove.

Lawton came from the rear room. He had been watching through a crack in the door. Even Lawton could see, now, that he was not fit to walk along the same trail as a man like Martin. His tone came with tremendous awe:

"Thanks a lot, mister. I'll be goin' on, now, before they wake up. I know—you wouldn't want to—but if I could buy your dogs—"

"Let's go, Lawton," croaked Martin. "Let's hit the trail."

And when they went out together Footstool Bill uncorked a brilliant string of cusswords.

When the dogs were racing smoothly along the snow-cruled ice of the river, Martin asked: "Now, I want the straight about the killin' of Ken Cowley."

The wind was driving a flood of dry snow into their faces, but the white mask could not conceal the terror that made Lawton's buttery countenance sag. "I can't tell you about that! It'd mean my life!"

Martin rammed the iron brake-claw into the snow and stopped the dogs.

"Lawton, the reason I come along with you wasn't pity, and you know it ain't from wantin' your gold—and I can fight Beet Nisonger's bunch regular without you bein' mixed up in it. I'm bringin' you out on the trail because of a debt I owe my old Uncle Jake Stillson."

"You—what?"

"Never mind why. You wouldn't understand now, and it don't matter. But you just call yourself lucky that what is, is. Now, Lawton, I'll hear your story, and I'll take your word again' that of Beet Nisonger, 'cause I know a little about him. But speak fast and straight."

"I can't!" came the husky croak. "I can't tell

you that!”

Martin shrugged. “Then Nisonger was right. We’ll go back and talk with him.” He called to the dogs and they began swinging around.

Lawton snatched a six-gun from under his parka and batted the big man on the head. Martin went down like an ox under the hammer.

When the northerner came to, Lawton was out of sight, and the whining wind had obliterated all tracks. Martin got up, rubbing his skull beneath the parka hood. “Well, that’s gratitude,” he observed aloud, “and it begins to look like Uncle Jake Stillson might have to wait.”

He headed north through the blizzard, cutting to the left at Bear Creek and following it about four miles to the cabin shared by himself and his two partners. As he approached, whines came from the kennels behind the cabin. He went around to investigate.

The dogs were there! His own dogs were put in the kennels, and his sledge was upended neatly against the rear wall of the dwelling. Very carefully, Martin went around the cabin to the window, made of double panes, half-inch apart and puttied airtight. Such glass withstands the terrific cold of the Arctic—if it isn’t rapped very hard—and it doesn’t frost readily. Through the glass could be seen Lawton blissfully stowing away food at the same table with O’Toole and the enormously lank Slim Smith.

WHEN the door opened to admit Martin, Lawton’s jaw dropped, a mouthful of chewed food drooling out over his chin and onto the table. O’Toole and Slim greeted Martin casually. With a cry of pure terror Lawton realized that he had inadvertently stopped at the cabin of the man whose outfit he had stolen. He plunged backwards over his chair, clawing under his parka for his revolver. Martin dived across the table, and a sharp blow anaesthetized the plump man. Martin secured the weapon.

“A fine way to treat my biscuits,” observed Slim, eyeing the food which Martin had scattered in that leap. “But say, Mel, what the devil was the guy doin’ with your outfit? We just invited him in and waited until you showed up.”

Martin did not answer. Young O’Toole cocked a shrewd eye and said to Slim: “All right, you sweep the floor every day next week. I win the bet. I knew Mel couldn’t go down to the trading post to

borrow a magazine without getting a black eye. It’s a pip, Mel! But is it private? I’d like a good ring-tailed scrap to keep my hand in. What was the trouble about?”

Martin went outside and returned with a double handful of snow. “That’s what I’m trying to find out, what it’s about.” He began chafing Lawton’s plump face with the snow. The man came to sputtering, then as his eyes focused he croaked. “I—I didn’t mean to hit you—but I had to get away—I couldn’t go back. That’s why I hit you!”

“I guess so,” admitted Martin. “They say a rat will turn, and you don’t look much different from a cornered rat right now. But down there on the river I asked you a question, and now I want an answer. What about the killing of deputy marshal Ken Cowley? He was my friend.”

“All right, I’ll tell! But promise you’ll never repeat a word I say!”

“Talk! I’ll promise nothing!”

Lawton babbled it out in jerky sentences: Ken Cowley had been in the back room of a Fairbanks saloon when Beet Nisonger’s gang, who had been having trouble with the marshal, came in the rear door and filled him full of lead. Lawton and a friend, Ed Allen, were at the time cutting back-lots on their way home, and they saw the whole thing through the open door—Ken Cowley cringing under the murderous barrage, the gang rushing out with smoking revolvers. Nisonger’s crew opened up on the witnesses, mowing Ed Allen down, but Lawton scampered around the corner of the building and got away unharmed.

“Why didn’t you tell what you knowed to the police?” Slim inquired.

“What was my word again’ the five of ‘em?” the plump man asked desperately. “Ken Cowley and Ed Allen was rushed to the operatin’ table unconscious. Me, I hit out—an’ they trailed me clean up here—‘cause I seen them do the shootin’. They know they’re not safe if I talk. I’ve left word behind as I run—left word that I wouldn’t squeal. But Nisonger’s afraid I might. One man’s testimony couldn’t convict him. There might be other evidence—I never waited to find out.”

“And you’re too yellow to tell your story straight to the law,” finished Slim scornfully. He and O’Toole exchanged disgusted glances. But Martin’s face held no expression at all. Slim said, “Mel, I don’t see why you had to go get mixed up in this—or why you have to keep on bein’ mixed

up in it.”

Lawton began to plead again, but Martin’s voice cut through: “It’s on account of my Uncle Jake Stillson. I owe him something and I’m paying it back now.”

The two partners gawped, looking from Martin to Lawton and back again. “You—which? Is this bozo your cousin? Or—?”

“Nope. And he don’t even look like Uncle Jake. But I promised him I’d pay back the debt, and this is the first chance I’ve had of doin’ it. Anyhow, I’d do it without having any debt, so far as that goes. . . Come on, Lawton, we’ve got to push trail under us.”

Fifteen minutes later Martin and Lawton hit north through the hills into the teeth of the blizzard. The pelting snow soon swallowed them from view.

“I’ll flip a coin,” offered Slim. “Heads, he’s crazy; tails, it’s a joke.”

The younger man shook his head. “Wish it was as simple as that. What does he mean about that debt to Uncle Jake Stillson?”

For answer Slim followed the example Footstool Bill had set earlier in the evening—he cussed. But Slim put Jake in the shade. When Slim started in calling names, you had to open the door to air out the cabin.

THE blizzard was strong, driving the fine snow with an insistent pressure which nothing could resist. Martin went ahead of the team to lead the courageous huskies. The sand-like snow rasped on sledge runners like so much powdered glass. For about three hours they traveled, and then camped at the forks of a stream. By morning the storm had died. Martin was up at daybreak, and went up on a little hill to survey the country, then came back to the tent and woke Lawton up. “Come on, we’re travelin’. Here, gnaw some pemmican, we won’t cook breakfast.”

Lawton kept looking around curiously as they packed up and harnessed the dogs. Finally he cried: “Martin! This—damn you! This is the forks of the Koyukuk and Bear Creek! We’re *south* of your cabin! We circled in the night!”

“Might be right. Purty bad wind last night.”

“If you’re takin’ me back down to Nisonger—” Lawton went for his revolver. Martin batted the hand down, then with a slap of the open hand sent Lawton staggering.

“I’ll fight when there’s more time. Right now

we’ve got to hurry and leave. From the hill I seen Nisonger’s crew mushin’ up the river!”

“*Whick!*” Like a whip-crack came the report of a rifle, sharp and clean in the subzero air. A half-mile south was a black dot atop a snow-covered hill. Two more shots rang out. “Nisonger!” bleated the fat Lawton. His knees lost starch through pure terror and he had to grab for the sledge handles to keep from falling. Martin went about harnessing the dog team. He seemed in no hurry.

Martin kept his half-mile lead. At every place where the river was straight so the pursuit could see the men ahead, Nisonger’s crew opened up. “They’re fools,” rumbled Martin calmly, “wastin’ ammunition.” But Lawton was blathering with fear.

All day long the race kept up, and then there was a night when the strong cold settled down over the Arctic and congealed everything. Temperature dropped down and down. At about fifty below the men’s breath began crackling with the sound of snapping twigs as it instantly froze on issuing from their mouths. In the strong cold, wise old-timers stay inside, and keep off the trails. But there was no stopping for Martin and Lawton. Hoar frost rimmed their parka hoods an inch thick. Martin kept feeling at the flanks of the dogs to see if they were freezing. Each deep breath brought the risk of frostbitten lungs. But Nisonger put on the pressure, and they had to keep ahead. All the long night the chase continued, with Nisonger intent to run the fugitive pair into the ground. All day the strong cold continued, and the two parties kept on without rest. Dogs were giving out. With fatigue came added hazard from the cold as bodily resistance lowered.

As twilight came again, the plump Lawton was reeling like a drunk man from fatigue. “We’ll ambush ‘em!” he croaked desperately.

“Good idea,” Martin agreed. “Only five against two, and with surprise we might come out atop.”

So they stopped over the rim of the next hill, crawled back on their bellies to the crest, and lay there in the snow waiting, rifles cocked. When Nisonger and his crew were within two hundred yards, Lawton drew a bead and squeezed the trigger. Merely the click of the falling hammer. He jerked the lever and again there was no report. Eyes white-rimmed, he seized Martin’s rifle. It, too, was unloaded.

“Funny,” mused Martin. “I’d swore that there was bullets in them guns. Always have ‘em loaded.

Can't figure it out. We could use revolvers—" But he spoke to the empty air. Lawton was racing away towards the sledge, shouting at the exhausted dogs.

Along about dusk the weather broke suddenly as clouds settled over the sky. A breeze came up, easing the thermometer, and by midnight it was snowing hard. There was no trailing in such weather. Martin camped in a little hollow for much-needed rest. Next morning it still was snowing. Martin went out and surveyed things, reported no sight of the pursuit, and then cooked a hot breakfast on the Primus stove. After breakfast Lawton went outside to begin striking camp, and immediately dashed back.

"Mel! The dogs—they're gone!"

Martin shrugged. "Sure. I noticed it, but didn't want to spoil your breakfast."

Lawton cried. He actually slumped down on his face like a woman and bawled. Martin, face red with embarrassment, went out muttering something about looking around. Snow was coming down thickly.

NISONGER and his crew packed up everything but the stove and coffee pot, and sat around cursing the storm which blotted out trails. "What I can't figure is why Martin camped right there at the forks in plain sight the other night," the big man rumbled. "He's not a fool. But he should have known we'd come right up the river as soon as that blizzard stopped. Looks like he was just playin' with us!"

The slant-eyed Uzbek felt the long blister along his spine where he had contacted that red-hot stove. "Me, I play wi' heem! Yess!"

The coffee sizzled over. The Tongan tossed in a handful of snow to settle it, then lifted the container and began pouring into the tin cup Nisonger held.

A revolver shot blasted. As one the bunch yelled, from surprise—and pain. The bullet struck the lower edge of the coffee pot, mushroomed its way through, ripping the bottom half off and throwing scalding coffee in the faces around the circle. Even as they roared, the crew grabbed for rifles and scrambled for shelter behind the sledge and outcropping rocks.

A taunting laugh came from a hill fifty yards away. "Martin!" bawled Nisonger. He shot at a black object, then cursed as the bullet knocked a mitten off the end of a stick. "Take it easy, he's a dead shot!" the leader growled.

They made their way cautiously around the hill from both sides—to see Martin waving from the top of another rise a quarter of a mile away. Three men ran back for the outfit. Nisonger and the Cockney kept on Martin's trail, floundering through the snow. "Blimey! Hit looks loik you was right, Skipper! The blinkin' awss ain't tryin' to get away, I'd sye! Makin' a gyme of it, he is!"

"Sure, let him have his fun. If he just wants to be chased, we'll oblige him!" Nisonger patted the stock of his rifle. "And I got a hunch they've only got six-guns. If they had rifles, they'd used 'em before now. We'll keep just out of six-gun range, and mow 'em down."

Martin came clomping into camp on snowshoes. "They're on our heels! Make a pack and—wait!"

But there was no talking with Lawton. The plump one hopped off the sledge and began floundering madly away. Martin overtook him on the snowshoes, whirled him around and smashed him in the jaw. The blow steadied Lawton, and he came back. But his hands shook so that he was useless. Working swiftly, Martin threw two packs together, then they struck out on the trail as, with a shot and a shout, Nisonger and his men topped a hill to the rear.

THE chase kept on the next day and the next. Martin and Lawton stayed ahead, but not very far. Weather was uncertain. Martin picked trail. He managed to elude the pursuit by seeming miracles. Then another day came and went, and another. Finally a week of this racking hare-and-hound game had gone by. Always Martin and Lawton kept just one jump ahead. Almost miraculously they escaped tight corners time and time again as Nisonger tried to outflank them.

Then, incredibly, the chase stretched for another week of snatched moments of rest, of constant peril. The food on those backpacks ran out, and for a day and a half Martin and Lawton went on empty bellies. But they kept ahead.

But Nisonger was beside himself with rage. "They're just dodging around! Ain't went outside a fifty-mile circle in all this time! It's Martin doin' this! If he wanted to go anyplace he could've done it long ago. What's he tryin' to do, just see how long he kin keep from gettin' killed? By Joe, I'll show him that!"

"Supply on backpack gone," spoke up the Eskimo. "We git 'em."

“Better idea,” said the Tongan in a liquid voice. “Bear Creek rapids ahead. Man cannot cross.”

Nisonger’s battered face formed a grim smile. “There’s a idea!”

The two weeks had done little to Martin, but the constant strain had etched lines in Lawton’s face. Fear, never-ending fear, eternal peril, had left him red-eyed and haggard. They had eaten on the run, snatching sleep an hour or so at a time, always on watch. They could not even turn and fight, because their revolvers would be of little use against the pursuit’s rifles. And now the second day without food was drawing to a close.

“Mel, I can’t—”

Two shots came. The Tongan and the little Cockney were four hundred yards behind and to the left. Lawton broke to the right but Martin stopped him, “Straight ahead! I’ve seen the Eskimo and the Mongol over that way.”

“What they tryin’ to do?”

“Squeeze us over the gorge ahead. I didn’t figure they knowed the country well enough to see that possibility. But maybe they’ve forgotten that ravine cuttin’ crossways through the gorge. Come on! It’s a run for it!”

And they would have made it except that Beet Nisonger, a quarter of a mile behind, took a long shot from a prone rest, and the bullet brought Lawton down. The slug just barely grazed Lawton’s skull and whined away, but the plump man was out cold. Martin scooped him over his shoulder and plunged onwards, while with victorious shouts the gang roared in pursuit.

Martin’s snowshoes sank into the powdery snow with each step as the double burden bore down. “Tough medicine, Uncle Jake Stillson!” he mumbled aloud. “If I get through this we’ll call that debt square for sure!”

He skidded down a slope and began running along the curving ravine which was the only path to safety. But two of the pursuit came in view ahead and opened up with their rifles. Martin turned straight up the hillside, and then along its level surface. A couple of hundred yards along the barren plateau went Martin, and then dropped behind an upthrust of rock. He was trapped.

Behind him was a steep walled-gorge, and on three sides were the men with rifles. The chasm was maybe a hundred feet deep and, at the bottom, about thirty feet across. Bear Creek ripped through this narrows with the speed of a mill-race, deep,

turbulent from the uneven bottom, a mass of foaming rapids which never froze. Clinging to the rocky walls was shelf ice from the spray. But those shelves lacked eighteen feet of touching together in the middle of the gorge, even if a man scaled down to them.

LAWTON came to consciousness and sized the situation up at a glance. “They got us,” he croaked. “We’re out of grub. If we try to rush back through ‘em, we got a couple hundred yards of bare surface to go while they pot us.”

Martin said nothing. The fat man seized his six-gun and began shooting from behind the rock. Nisonger and his bunch impudently exposed themselves, knowing the range was too far for any kind of accurate revolver shooting. Lawton emptied the six-gun and then flung the weapon in a childish gesture.

“Now you’ve had your fun, just sit down and keep cool,” Martin advised. “I still got one six-gun with five slugs in it. They’ll keep their distance as long as I’ve got that.”

“Are you goin’ to sit here and starve?”

“What would you suggest?”

But starvation was not their problem. With inaction, the cold crept through their clothing and numbed feet and hands. The others could walk around out of sight below the edge of the hill, but the two behind the rock had no room to move. With night the cold increased as if the very stars emanated a white chill. Lawton tried to sleep. Martin slapped his face until the plump man was furious with rage. “Leave me alone! I don’t give a damn if I do freeze! I ain’t had sleep for a long time and I’m goin’ to sleep now, whether I wake up or not!”

For some reason, Martin’s thin lips were smiling grimly. “Are you game to make a break?”

“Through ‘em?”

“No—back over the gorge and around the shelf ice. The river spreads out and is capped with ice, there a spell down where the ravine intersects. Then there’s rapids again further down. But if we could reach that wide spot an’ cross on the ice, we’d give ‘em the slip. . . . Are you willin’ to risk it? That gorge wall is plenty slippery and so’s the ice ledge.”

“Risk it? Would anything be worse than the fix we’re in?” rasped Lawton.

So, very cautiously, wriggling along on their

bellies, they began worming away from the sheltering rock towards the lip of the chasm.

The Cockney, on watch, caught sight of the pair and hissed a warning. The big Beet Nisonger signaled with palms horizontal: "Keep down!" The five men waited until Martin and Lawton had disappeared over the edge, then Nisonger stood up on the level and signaled again. When his men were in a bunch, the tall man said: "Look at your guns and be sure they're ready. Take it easy and aim careful. By Joe, we've got 'em at last!"

Martin and Lawton scaled down the rock wall and reached the slippery ice ledge above the foaming rapids. Then Lawton's bloodshot eyes caught a motion above. "Mel! They—!"

Martin acted. Even as he glanced up and saw the five men in a row, guns bearing down—he jumped. He gave a mighty leap—a jump out over the edge of the ice ledge into the foaming rapids. And as he went he pulled the howling Lawton with him.

The men above did not shoot. They just stared. The water struck the two men like the jet of a fire hose, tumbling them over and over as they rushed downward. A few degrees below freezing, the water seemed warm in comparison to the bitter air. Like a pair of chips the rapids tossed the men, over and around like bubbles. But through the narrow gorge the water luckily was deep, and there were no rocks to smash them. Martin kept one big fist in the hood of Lawton's parka, and he didn't let go. The current swirled them under the ice ledge on the far side. Martin tried to grip something, but the rock surface was glazed. He kicked back into the center of the rushing stream. The light from the stars was becoming but a narrow strip with blackness on either side. The stream was widening at the intersecting ravine, and ice ledges reached farther and farther over the surface as the water quieted.

Martin flung up a big arm and gripped the edge of the ice. The surface was rounded and slippery. His other hand held onto Lawton's parka, and the plump man was dragging against the grip. The mitten slipped off.

Then abruptly everything was plunged in darkness as the two men were swirled under the ice cap.

"Well, men, whatever game it was Martin was playin' with us, he lost," observed Nisonger. "And with him goes the last witness of the pluggin' of

deputy marshal Ken Cowley. But, by Joe!" the big man exploded. "I'd sure admire knowin' why he took up with Lawton, an' what game he's been playin' in this chase!"

THE swift stream plunged the two men into a torture chamber as they went under the cap of ice. Because of differences of pressure from the water, the underside of the ice was uneven—cupped out, ridged, thick and thin. The men bumped along it, whirling, rolling, with the ice smashing them blows with every inch they traveled. Martin somehow kept that fist in the plump man's parka. A minute stretched into another, and then more seconds ticked by, and the men kept rolling and bumping in the blackness, carried along under the ice cap by the torrent. Long ago had the last whiff of air been rammed out of the northerner's chest. But Martin did not betray nature by yielding to the racking desire to suck in something, anything at all, into the starving lungs.

Then once again there was a thin strip of light as the stream entered the rapids beyond the intersecting ravine which cut through the gorge. Martin gasped in life-giving air. The slice of starlight widened as the ice ledges retreated, and again the pair were being swept between high walls. But below this second gorge, Bear Creek widened out as it went into the valley, and the capping ice was permanent. Just one chance to survive—keep from being swept under the ice.

The gorge was flattening out . . . light above wedging shut as the ledges reached closer and closer together. . . . Martin flung up a mittened hand, clawed vainly at the smooth edges. The current swung him around, under the ice ledge. Still desperately clutching Lawton's parka, Martin lashed legs out blindly in the darkness and kicked himself into the center of the stream where yet was a narrow opening between the ice shelves. He flung up an arm again just before reaching the spot where the entire stream was covered with thick ice.

The shock seemed almost to tear his arm out of the socket as the ice cap stopped the forward motion. Martin hung there, his big arm lapped up over the slick rim. Lawton was dragging against his other arm, under the ice. Might be dead. . . . Never get atop the ice while hanging onto him. . . . But Martin kept his fist in that parka. Struggling, he inched one leg up over the rim of the ice. The force of the stream dragging that weight kept pulling him

down, then he would hitch up a new grip on the slick surface like a dog snapping a new hold on a bone.

Then Martin staked everything on one desperate move. With feet forked on that ice rim, one below and one above, he released his arm and made a snatch under his parka. His leg slipped down off the ice—but the arm came back up and rammed his gleaming snow knife into the ice. After that it was only a matter of minutes—agonizing minutes of desperate struggle—before in little hitches, with many a slip back, he kept ramming the point of the snow knife into the ice, straining upwards a bit, and then taking another hitch with the knife.

Then when he was out, that one arm still was hanging under the ice rim, Lawton's body dragging against it. More minutes of struggle as Martin fought to drag the fat man against the current, then pull him up on the slick surface. When they both were atop, Martin's breath was coming like the panting of a locomotive up a grade. But there was no time to rest. Lawton had been submerged somewhere around eight minutes, and he was limp as a bag of fresh blubber.

Turning the figure face downward on the ice, Martin kneeled over Lawton, ramming hands against the ribs with slow rhythm. There could be no hurry, no haste, in urging life back into the body. Yet in the bitter air the wet clothing turned to ice, and every second of inaction brought the threat of the long sleep—death by freezing—closer. It looked as if Lawton were done for. To stay and work over him was only to invite the long sleep. Yet, "Pull out of it, pardner," Martin growled at the prone figure through stiffening lips. "We're goin' on, pard. We're keepin' on for Uncle Jake Stillson."

He kept pressing against the back of the ribs with regular rhythm. And finally Lawton strangled a bit and then began breathing of himself. Martin's frostbitten face formed a smile. He helped the plump one breathe awhile, then pulled him to his feet. "Come on, fellow. We've got to Siwash it, or we're done for."

They began walking, their frozen clothing crackling with each movement. Soon they increased the pace to a blood-warming trot. Hands were pulled up inside the loose parka sleeves and clasped under warm armpits. Shooting pulses of pain signaled the return of circulation to the feet. An hour they ran along in the bitter cold.

"We're finished," gasped Lawton. "We can't keep this run up forever, and we'll freeze if we don't. Without grub—"

"What the hell? You've got to die sometime, anyhow."

"Sure, but I hate to kick in while that damned Nisonger crew goes Scot-free."

The growth of whiskers on Martin's lean face cracked the film of ice as he grinned. Lawton continued, his voice rising to a shout: "Mel! We've got a chance! We've got a bare chance! There's food, dry clothing, fire—at Nisonger's camp!"

Martin shoved an arm out through a frozen parka sleeve and extended a broad palm. "Shake on it, pardner! I knowed if I worked it right you'd come around!"

Lawton whirled, stopping dead in his tracks. "What was that, Mel Martin? What did you say?"

"Come on! Do you want to stand there and freeze to death?"

"Not so fast, you black-bearded walrus! What I want to know is whether you've been playin' some sort of left-handed game with me. It's damned funny how Nisonger's crew always kept findin' us after we'd give them the slip. Now—"

"Nisonger's camp will be back this way. We ain't got time to stop and gossip."

LAWTON jerked Martin around. "I'm havin' a showdown, Mel! There's a lot of things need explaining now I think of 'em. How about them dogs runnin' away? How did they get loose of their chains? And how about there bein' no bullets in those rifles? An old-timer like you wouldn't let things happen—"

"All right, listen quick," Martin growled. "You was such a yellow-gutted baby that I had to do it. I had to put you through hell. I kept your life in danger for days on end with your nerves tight as fiddle strings. I had to make you look Death in the face until you didn't give a hoot in hell whether you lived or not! That's what it takes for guts, Lawton. A man ain't born with courage. Some get it easier than others—but it comes through danger. Show me a man who'll walk into anything and I'll show you one who's already been *through* everything. So I took you out—"

"You hammer-headed coyote!" snarled Lawton, shoving that buttery face forward. "You'll take me in hand and make a man out of me, will you? You'll risk my neck an' get me shot at—you'll

keep me goin' night and day afoot after you let them dogs loose—you'll shove me into them rapids— Damn you for an old nursemaid! I'll take you down to man-size with my bare hands!"

"Sure," grinned Martin, "—after we pay a visit to Nisonger."

Nisonger and his men were finishing supper when, as the wind shifted, the dogs began whining and jumping at their chains. The Cockney stuck a face out of the tent flap to see what was the matter, then slumped as Martin's revolver barrel slapped against his head. Martin shoved the gun through the flap, with his head behind it. Nisonger ripped out an oath, but up went his hands. Foolishly, he and his men had left weapons in the sledge pack. Lawton followed Martin inside. Nisonger's long arm reached up beside the gasoline lantern. Without betraying the motion with as much as the flicker of an eyelid, the man's hand closed around the handle.

"Now, boys—" began Martin, but the speech was blotted out with a shot as the Eskimo lunged for the gun arm. Martin's tightening fist sent the shot through the tent walls. As the Eskimo leaped, the Uzbek made a lunge and the Tongan followed suit. Then the tent was in blackness as Nisonger flung the lantern through the small opening out into the snow.

Martin jerked away from the Eskimo's grasp and had the gun free, but in the dark there was no way of seeing what target to shoot at, and Lawton was mixed up there in the fighting mass. Martin shoved the gun under his belt and whaled away with fists.

Six fighting men in a tent—a tent with canvas bottom like a sack. The four bamboo corner-poles snapped like toothpicks and the tent was a limp sack of canvas, double thickness—a cage full of fighting hell. The snarling ball rolled over, spilling the unconscious Cockney out the flap.

Came Martin's voice above the heavy breathing and the thud of fist on flesh: "How's the crybaby?"

"Tryin' to find your jaw with my fist!" roared Lawton in the darkness.

Nothing to go by, no sense of direction, no knowledge of vulnerable spots. Just flesh; flesh in the dark. Motion. Bodies. Blows. Martin rammed out his massive fists blindly. An arm caught him across the face and he lashed back, ramming at flesh. Then he was snowed under with kicking weight as the sack-like tent rolled over. In turn he

came atop the heap and was tromping on whatever was beneath him, flailing at anything within reach in that black net. Outside, the dogs were making a terrible fuss.

The Cockney, who had been spilled outside, regained consciousness and went into action with admirable grasp of the situation. Never one to take chances, the little man played safe. He got a rifle from the sledge and then ran to the rolling tent. As a knob shoved the canvas out from inside, the Cockney rapped said knob—not too hard, because he didn't know whom he was hitting—but with nicely calculated force he kept slapping with that rifle barrel.

Gradually the rumpus inside the tent subsided under the influence of the Cockney's persuasive wand. Then everything was quiet. A wiggle; a rap with the rifle. Quiet. The Cockney began dragging the unconscious men out of the tent flap.

WHEN Martin opened his eyes the big Nisonger was awake, but everybody else except the Cockney was out cold. Nisonger was gripping Martin's .45 Colt, and the hammer was cocked.

"The only reason I let you wake up was to listen to what you've got to say," the big man explained. "It won't make a speck o' difference about me shovin' a lead biscuit into your belly, but will you please tell me why the hell you kept runnin' around just ahead of us, doublin' back and forth, not headin' nowhere, and then why you hunted us up when we thought you was dead?"

"I might tell you, but you wouldn't understand. There was a couple of reasons. One was that deputy Ken Cowley was my friend, and I wanted to toughen up Lawton so that he would testify again' the men who shot him."

"Oh, so you're a character builder!" sneered Nisonger. He bellowed a derisive laugh. "You're a Boy Scout out doin' a good turn, huh? And I reckon the reason you done it was on account of you was like that yourself once, huh?" Nisonger guffawed; the Cockney was cackling.

Mel Martin nodded soberly. "That's right. I was sheltered from everything until I was full grown. An' I guess I was plenty yellow. My Uncle Jake Stillson took me out in an Arctic whaler and put the screws on me. I wanted to kill him, then I wanted to kill myself. But finally I toughened up, and I ain't never had a chance to pay old Uncle Jake,

so—”

“Blimey!” the Cockney squealed. “E might be tellin’ the Gospel, at that!” The little man rolled in the snow with laughter. Beet Nisonger was gasping, but he finally managed to mutter:

“We’ll find out what kind of a job you done, anyhow, Mel Martin. You go over an’ rub Lawton’s face with snow. Wake the other boys up the same way, so they won’t miss the fun. Me, I never went in fer character buildin’, an’ I’m real curious.”

When everybody was conscious, Nisonger said to Lawton: “Fat boy, what you know would stretch my neck. You seen us shoot down marshal Ken Cowley and then plug your pal. An’ because you could do us so much dirt, an’ ‘cause you caused us such a long chase, I’m going to kill you slow-like. First of all I’ll put a bullet through your belly. A man never can get well in this country with a slug through the guts. But you’ll last two, three days—just lyin’ helpless. And while you’re like that, I’ll come up and plug you through the legs an’ arms once in awhile, bein’ careful not to let out too much blood, so you’ll last quite a while. What do you think of that?”

But Lawton had been staring Death in the eye for too long for his gaze to quaver under the stare of a bully such as Beet Nisonger. It wasn’t heroics, it wasn’t courage—it was just devil-may-care boredom with and contempt for danger, and for life itself. Martin’s lips tightened with grim pride as Lawton growled:

“Are you makin’ a stump speech, Nisonger?”

“Is them your last words?” the big man growled. Obviously Nisonger couldn’t believe the amazing change which had come over the plump fellow.

Maybe Lawton wouldn’t stay that way to such a degree. It is entirely possible that the freshness of danger and the long strain had numbed his sensibilities. His clothing now was a sheet of ice, eyes were red from lack of sleep, limbs ached with fatigue and his head throbbed from the blow from Cockney’s rifle. The physical misery likely had a lot to do with it—Lawton was so far gone that nothing could scare him. But right now he *was* that way. He was your man of courage, because he purely and simply had undergone so much that there was nothing in life—nor in death—which held any terror for him.

“Yeah, that’s all I got to say,” he rasped “But, Nisonger, before you go ahead and pull that trigger,

let me first of all take this caribou-face ape which stuck hisself up as my nursemaid, and let me push a few fists into his mug. After that, then go ahead and shoot!”

“I’m dog-gonned if you ain’t done it, Martin!” said Nisonger in bleak amazement.

“I’m square with Uncle Jake Stillson,” said Martin.

Nisonger was grinning again. “But, sure, I reckon we always like to see a good fight. Go ahead, boys—a fight to the end. The loser sweats in hell, and”—he gestured with the revolver—“I give the winner a lead ticket to heaven!”

MARTIN sprang to his feet, and Lawton roared *Min. Pow!* Martin sent the fat one back on his heels. “Gratitude!” he snarled.

“Nursemaid!” bellowed Lawton, leaping back into the fray. Nisonger and his crew made a good audience, cheering blows regardless of who delivered them. Nisonger kept the .45 cocked and ready. Whatever Lawton had been, he now was making a good account of himself. Of course, both men were too far gone to use any wasted motions. They just rammed out fists at one another. It was a hopeless sort of fight, for death awaited the winner. But they seemingly forgot that in the swirl of action. Martin was your born fighting man, and Lawton—well, he was making up for a lot of lost time. Down they went, rolling over and over, snarling like wolves. Then they got to their feet and leaped—but not at each other.

“Blimey!” screamed the Cockney, throwing up the rifle barrel. Lawton’s two hundred-odd pounds bore him to the ground. Martin floundered into Beet Nisonger, taking a point-blank shot from the revolver but driving into the big man nevertheless, seizing the weapon and grimly hanging onto it despite the numbing effects of the .45 slug. Lawton swept the other members of the gang with the rifle he had wrested from the Cockney.

“All right! Stand over there! You too, Nisonger! We’ll tie you up and then—aw, hell,” he sighed. “Why did you have to go git hurt, Mel Martin? Now we’ve got to wait to finish that fight, and—stop!” he cried. Three newcomers were there—Martin’s two partners, Slim and O’Toole, together with deputy U.S. marshal Terry Johns. “Throw up your hands an’ drop your weapons! I’ve gone through too much to be took in by the law now!”

The three new arrivals were standing waist-deep

in a gully which they had crawled along. Slim and O'Toole looked questioningly at the deputy. Lawton hissed hurriedly to Martin: "I can't prove I didn't kill deputy Ken Cowley. It's still just my word again' Nisonger's whole gang."

Martin got to his feet. The bullet had gone through the upper part of his left arm. In his right hand was the .45 Colt he had wrested from Nisonger. "I'm with you," he whispered to Lawton, then raised his voice and called to his two partners: "Boys, put your guns down, an' persuade that deputy t' do likewise, 'fore there's bloodshed."

"You're just in time, marshal," boomed Nisonger. "We been attacked!"

Then spoke up deputy marshal Terry Johns: "Lawton, point that gun at Nisonger's bunch, not at us. You too, Martin. Deputy Ken Cowley didn't die. When he came to, he told who shot him up, and I've been on the trail since. Slim and O'Toole figured you ought to be close, when the dog team

returned to the cabin with a note on the leader's harness saying not to worry."

Lawton was too relieved to do more than shoot Martin a hard glance.

Slim said, grinning: "It was a lovely fight. Too bad you got a wounded arm an' can't keep on, Mel."

Martin glanced contemptuously at his wounded member. "I never did need more than one hand to take Lawton down to size!"

Lawton laughed, proving he was confident, and not touchy. Then he said good-naturedly, but in earnest: "That arm won't be lame forever, Martin. You've paid back a debt. Sure. And I'm goin' to pay one back also when you get well. I owe you a big debt—a debt of fists. I'll pay with interest."

Martin sighed sadly. "There you go! I make him. By hand I make out of him a he-man. And now I've got to go ahead an' give him the licking of his life to put the fear of the devil back in him!"