PART ONE:
THE WILD

CHAPTER 1
The Trail of the Meat

Dark spruce forest frowned on either side of the frozen waterway. The trees seemed to lean toward each other, black and ominous in the fading light. A vast silence reigned over the desolate, lifeless land. The land was so lone and cold that its spirit was not even that of sadness, but one which held a hint of laughter as cold as the frost. It was the all-powerful wisdom of eternity laughing at the futility of life. It was the Wild—the savage, frozen-hearted Northland Wild.

But there was life, abroad in the land and defiant. Down the frozen waterway toiled a string of wolfish dogs, their bristly fur coated with frost. Their breath froze as it left their mouths. Leather harnesses were on the dogs, and leather traces attached them to a birch-bark sled which dragged along behind. The sled was without runners. On the sled, securely lashed,

was a long and narrow oblong box. There were other things on the sled—blankets, an axe, and a coffeepot and frying pan; but prominent, occupying most of the space, was the long and narrow oblong box.

Ahead of the dogs, on wide snowshoes, toiled a man. Behind the sled toiled a second man. On the sled, in the box, lay a third man whose toil was over—a man whom the Wild had conquered and beaten down, never to move or struggle again. Life offends the Wild—for life is movement. The Wild aims always to destroy all movement. It freezes the water to prevent it from running to the sea, it drives the sap out of the trees till they are frozen to their mighty hearts, and most ferociously and terribly of all, it crushes man into submission.

But at the front and the rear, the two men toiled on, unawed and indomitable. Their bodies were covered with fur and soft-tanned leather. Eyelashes and cheeks and lips were so coated with the crystals from their frozen breath that their faces were obscured. This gave them a masked look, like undertakers at a ghostly funeral. But under it all they were men, penetrating the desolation and silence, puny adventurers bent on colossal adventure, pitting themselves against the might of a

remote, alien world.

They traveled on without speech, saving their breath for the work of their bodies. On every side was the silence, pressing in on their minds as deep water does to a diver's body, until they felt finite and small and naïve amidst the interplay of the great elements.

An hour went by, and then another. The pale light of the short sunless day was fading when a faint, far cry arose on the still air. It soared upward with a swift rush, peaked, then slowly died away. It might have been a lost soul wailing, had it not been invested with a certain sad fierceness and hungry eagerness. The front man turned to meet the eyes of the man behind. Across the oblong box, each nodded to the other.

A second cry arose, piercing the silence like a needle. Both men located the sound. It was to the rear, somewhere in the snowy expanse they had just crossed. A third and answering cry arose, also behind and to the left of the second cry.

"They're after us, Bill," said the man at the front, his voice labored and hoarse.

"Meat is scarce," answered his comrade. "I ain't seen sign of a rabbit for days."

They spoke no more, but listened keenly for the hunting-cries that continued to rise

behind them.

At the fall of darkness, they swung the dogs into a cluster of spruce trees on the edge of the waterway and made a camp. The coffin served as seat and table. The wolfish sled-dogs, clustered on the far side of the fire, snarled and bickered among themselves, but showed no inclination to stray off into the darkness.

"Seems to me, Henry, they're stayin' remarkable close to camp," Bill commented.

Henry, squatting over the fire and settling the pot of coffee with a piece of ice, nodded. He kept silent until he was seated on the coffin, eating.

"They know where their hides is safe," he said. "They'd sooner eat grub than be grub. They're pretty wise, them dogs."

Bill shook his head. "Oh, I don't know."

His comrade looked at him curiously. "First time I ever heard you say anything about their not bein' wise."

"Henry," said the other, munching his beans with deliberation, "did you happen to notice the way them dogs kicked up when I was a-feedin' 'em?"

"They did cut up more'n usual," Henry acknowledged.

"How many dogs've we got, Henry?"

"Six."

"Well, Henry . . . " Bill stopped a moment for emphasis. "As I was sayin', Henry, we've got six dogs. I took six fish out of the bag. I gave one fish to each dog, an', Henry, I was one fish short."

"You counted wrong."

"We've got six dogs," the other repeated dispassionately. "I took out six fish. One Ear didn't get no fish. I came back to the bag afterward an' got 'm his fish."

"We've only got six dogs," Henry said.

"Henry," Bill went on. "I won't say they was all dogs, but there was seven of 'm that got fish."

Henry stopped eating to glance across the fire and count the dogs. "There's only six now," he said.

"I saw the other one run off across the snow," Bill announced positively. "I saw seven."

Henry looked at him in sympathy, and said, "I'll be almighty glad when this trip's over."

"What d'ye mean by that?" Bill demanded.

"I mean that this load of ours is getting' on your nerves, an' that you're beginnin' to see things."

"I thought of that," Bill answered gravely.

"An' so, when I saw it run off across the snow, I looked in the snow an' saw its tracks. Then I counted the dogs an' there was still six of 'em. The tracks is there in the snow now. D'ye want to look at 'em? I'll show 'em to you."

Henry finished eating in silence, topping the meal with a final cup of coffee. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and finally replied: "Then you're thinkin' as it was—"

A long, fiercely sad wail interrupted him from somewhere in the darkness. He stopped to listen to it; then he finished his sentence with a wave of his hand toward the sound of the cry—". . . one of them?"

Bill nodded. "I'd sooner think that than anything else. You yourself noticed the row the dogs made."

Cry after cry, and answering cries were turning the silence into bedlam. The cries arose from every side. The dogs huddled together in fear, so close to the fire that the heat scorched their hair. Bill threw on more wood before lighting his pipe.

"I'm thinking you're down in the mouth some," Henry said.

"Henry . . . " He sucked meditatively at his pipe for some time before he went on. "Henry, I was a-thinkin' what a blame sight luckier he is than you an' me'll ever be." He

pointed to the coffin on which they sat. "You an' me, Henry, when we die, we'll be lucky if we get enough stones over our carcasses to keep the dogs off of us."

"But we ain't got people an' money an' all the rest, like him," Henry rejoined. "Long-distance funerals is somethin' you an' me can't exactly afford."

"What gets me, Henry, is what a chap like this, that's a lord or something in his own country, and that's never had to bother about grub nor blankets, why he comes a-buttin' round the Godforsaken ends of the earth."

"He might have lived to a ripe old age if he'd stayed at home," Henry agreed.

Bill opened his mouth to speak, but changed his mind. Instead, he pointed toward the wall of darkness that pressed about them from every side. There was no suggestion of form in the utter blackness. All that could be seen was a pair of eyes gleaming like live coals in the darkness. Henry indicated with his head a second pair, and a third. A circle of the gleaming eyes had drawn about their camp. Now and again a pair of eyes moved, or disappeared and then reappeared a moment later.

The dogs' unrest had been increasing. They stampeded in a surge of sudden fear to

the near side of the fire, cringing and crawling about the legs of the men. In the scramble one of the dogs was overturned on the edge of the fire. It yelped with pain and fright as the smell of its singed coat possessed the air. The commotion caused the circle of eyes to shift restlessly for a moment and even to withdraw a bit, but it settled down again as the dogs became quiet.

"Henry, it's a blame misfortune to be out of ammunition."

Bill had finished his pipe and was helping his companion to spread the bed of fur and blanket upon the spruce boughs which he had laid over the snow before supper. Henry grunted and began unlacing his moccasins.

"How many cartridges did you say you had left?" he asked.

"Three," came the answer. "An' I wisht 'twas three hundred. Then I'd show 'em what for, damn 'em!" He shook his fist angrily at the gleaming eyes and began to prop his moccasins before the fire.

"An' I wisht this cold snap'd break," he went on. "It's been fifty below for two weeks now. An' I wisht I'd never started on this trip, Henry. I don't like the looks of it. I don't feel right, somehow. An' while I'm wishin', I wisht the trip was over an' done with, an' you

an' me a-sittin' by the fire in Fort McGurry just about now an' playing cribbage."

Henry grunted and crawled into bed. As he dozed off, he was reawakened by his comrade's voice.

"Say, Henry, that other one that come in an' got a fish—why didn't the dogs pitch into it? That's what's botherin' me."

"You're botherin' too much, Bill," came the sleepy response. "You was never like this before. You jes' shut up now, an' go to sleep, an' you'll be all hunkydory in the mornin'. Your stomach's sour, that's what's botherin' you."

The men slept, breathing heavily, side by side under the one covering. The fire died down, and the gleaming eyes tightened the circle they had flung about the camp. The dogs clustered together in fear, now and again snarling menacingly as a pair of eyes drew close. Once their uproar became so loud that Bill woke up. He got out of bed carefully, so as not to disturb the sleep of his comrade, and threw more wood on the fire. As it began to flame up, the circle of eyes drew farther back. He glanced casually at the huddling dogs, then rubbed his eyes and looked at them more sharply. Then he crawled back into the blankets.

"Henry," he said. "Oh, Henry."

Henry groaned as he passed from sleep to waking and demanded, "What's wrong now?"

"Nothin'," came the answer. "Only there's seven of 'em again. I just counted."

Henry acknowledged receipt of the information with a grunt that slid into a snore as he drifted back into sleep.

In the morning it was Henry who awoke first and got his companion out of bed. Daylight was yet three hours away, though it was already six o'clock. Henry went about preparing breakfast in the dark, while Bill rolled the blankets and made the sled ready for lashing.

"Say, Henry," he asked suddenly, "how many dogs did you say we had?"

"Six."

"Wrong," Bill proclaimed triumphantly.

"Seven again?" Henry queried.

"No, five; one's gone."

"The hell!" Henry cried in wrath, leaving the cooking to come and count the dogs.

"You're right, Bill," he concluded. "Fatty's gone."

"An' he went like greased lightnin' once he got started. Couldn't 've seen 'em for smoke."

"No chance at all," Henry concluded. "They jes' swallowed 'm alive. I bet he was

yelpin' as he went down their throats, damn 'em!"

"He always was a fool dog," said Bill.

"But no fool dog ought to be fool enough to go off an' commit suicide that way." He looked over the team with a speculative eye that instantly summed up the key traits of each animal. "I bet none of the others would do it."

"Couldn't drive 'em away from the fire with a club," Bill agreed. "I always did think there was somethin' wrong with Fatty, anyway."

And this was the epitaph of many a dead dog on the Northland trail, and of many a man.