



RIVER ROUND-UP

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BEHIND a snow-hung aspen thicket, Poleon Bachee crouched with a ready rifle. On the face of the hard little French-Chippewayan was a look of deadly intensity—such a look as befitted one who tracked for the Mounted Police.

With gloved finger tensed on rifle trigger, Poleon was waiting for "Wolfjaw" Tamson. He knew Wolfjaw would pass here, because ahead and to both sides the outlaw's escape was cut off by Growling Bear River. Many things Wolfjaw Tamson had been called—bush sneak, cache thief, killer of lonely trappers, knifer of his own brother; all these things, and rightly. But one thing he had not been called. That thing was, damn fool.

Wolfjaw would never try to cross the broad river. The Growling Bear at this time of year was a

seething hell of floating ice and white water. No swimmer could survive to cross that spring flood; and the grinding pressure of ice cakes would crunch the staunchest canoe.

As Poleon waited, tense and alert, he chewed with savage gusto on his tobacco. That tobacco was a kind of badge of office. It showed you belonged to the Mounted Police. All the Mounties chewed tobacco, even Sergeant Murphy, especially Sergeant Murphy!

AS the tough little French half-breed pictured his idol, Sergeant Murphy, his face took on a slow glow. Ah, that tall-legged one with the big apple bump in front of his neck which went up and down when he chewed! And red hair on his head, the rich warm red of a

Hudson Bay blanket! Oh, what a man. And a most good friend of Poleon!

Why, was it not the sergeant himself who had said: "That little mutt, Poleon, he is the trail-eatin'est, bush-wisest, nerviest young hellcat in the whole cockeyed Dominion! If Poleon can't find Wolfjaw Tamson's hideout, then no one can."

Yes, of a certainty, the redheaded sergeant had said that. Furthermore, the sergeant had gone to the big boss of the Mounties who stayed all day in a room sitting at a table and moving many papers—he had gone to him and got this trailing job for his so fine friend, Poleon. It was a good job. He did not have to bring in Wolfjaw, just trail him; find out where that evil one stayed when he skulked off into the Northern bush.

Poleon's teeth clenched. His job was only to trail; he did not have to bring in Wolfjaw Tamson. "But a job is what you make it," he had often heard the Sergeant Murphy remark. He was going to make it his job to kill or capture this notorious outlaw! *Waugh!* By the whiskers of ten thousand yellow caribou running backward, but the sergeant would be proud of him when he should swagger in to the post and announce that there was no need for a patrol to go after Wolfjaw Tamson.

Ah, but there was another reason why he undertook this dangerous job. It would impress Marie—Marie, the *adorée*. So much he loved her that sometimes he could not sleep except at night. His jaws slacked now on the chewing tobacco in token of that great love.

For a moment his sunny face grew as long and mournful as a Scotch trader's. Marie had never really returned his love. He had tried hard to make her see his fine qualities. But, as the Sergeant Murphy said: "You can't argue with a woman."

His face brightened. Everything would be all right in the end. Now he was working for the redcoat Mounted. This was his big chance. When he should become known as the man who had captured the outlaw, Wolfjaw Tamson, single-handed and without help, then would Marie save all her smiles for him.

Suddenly he stiffened. From somewhere within the dense underbrush he heard the soft *shuf-shuf* of rapidly approaching snowshoes. The sound came from behind!

He whirled, tightened his grip on the big Winchester and waited. Incredulity overspread his bronzed, good-natured face. How could Wolfjaw

have slipped past him to approach from behind? By the whiskers of many bowlegged caribou, he could not have done so! Furthermore, Wolfjaw would approach more cautiously. This, then, was someone else following up their trail. Who? A friend of Wolfjaw Tamson's, undeniably. Any one roaming this stretch of the Strong Woods forsaken by the kind Providence had to be a friend of Wolfjaw's!

As the snowshoer came into view through the tangled undergrowth, Poleon's dark eyes narrowed and his brows drew together. As that figure came still closer, his grip on the rifle slackened and his jaw sagged so low that the well-chewed rough-cut rolled unnoticed from his mouth.

He shook his head, blinked his eyes shut and opened them again quickly. *Sacré suplice*, this could not be! But yes! This hurrying stranger was a girl!

A young *métisse* girl, shapely even in her loose-fitting, fox-skin parka, and graceful even on those bush webs. Petite—her slight weight left scarce an imprint on the snow. Pretty—the small oval of her face was like a flower peering out from the ermine-trimmed parka hood.

As he looked at her, Poleon felt a great upheaval in his heart, as though a box of dynamite had exploded there. Ah, more lovely than a dream, this girl who came to him from out of the lonely Strong Woods. More lovely than Marie! *Waugh!* To think of Marie now—it was to bring only a *gros* pain to the stomach. Marie had never loved him; nor he Marie. No! It was for this radiant creature that his life had been lived. This was Poleon's woman.

His opened jaws clamped together; he bit his tongue so hard it brought tears starting to his eyes. The saints! By the whiskers of one thousand, ten thousand blue caribou with humps on their backs! Where was his chewing tobacco?

He shrugged his wiry shoulders. *N'import*—no matter—not a thing now but the girl. Beaming with cordiality, he stepped out and confronted her. She gave a frightened little gasp, and her hands tightened instinctively on her rifle.

"*B'jour, m'selle*," he greeted, with a smile that reached all the way around his homely face and back again.

The girl regarded him silently, even hostilely.

He tried again, smiling still.

"Thees ver' nice mornin'."

She did not answer, only stared. In her eyes were icy glints. And those lips, made just for kissing, were pressed together into a firm red line. Poleon hunched his shoulders and snugged his chin more deeply into his mackinaw collar. "I t'ink it meks colder," he said, grinning.

That grin was what did it. Poleon's smile was usually enough, but when he grinned it always got them where they lived. He saw the lips relax, the lines of the face soften.

He pressed his advantage. "My name, Poleon Bachee."

She inclined her head very slightly. It made him think of the way a petite pine siskin will cock its head in looking up at one from its perch on a low tree branch.

"Mine," she said in a soft clear voice that touched off more dynamite in his heart, "ees Elise la Casse. I am een so great hurry, please. You weel let me by."

POLEON thought of Wolfjaw Tamson prowling through the bush in the direction the girl was headed. He envisaged her in the outlaw's brutish grasp. Just to think of it made him shudder.

He spoke earnestly: "You cannot go, m'selle Elise. You mus' wait a leetle w'ile. So sorry." He flung out his arm in a gallant gesture. There was more force than grace in the movement. His hand struck an aspen branch, and snow showered down upon them both.

The girl's eyes flashed. "You weel let me by," she repeated emphatically.

"No!"

"But, yes!" Her voice was almost savage.

Poleon stared. Then it was that the words of the wise Sergeant Murphy came again to him, "Never argue with a woman, Poleon," the sergeant had said. "You gotta appeal to their emotions."

Poleon knew what that emotion business meant. And those red lips of Elise, parted now in anger—he reached out for her suddenly and kissed her.

It was not much of a kiss. Snowshoes on the feet and a rifle in one hand are distinct hindrances in lovemaking. So it was not as technically perfect a kiss as Poleon was capable of. From the standpoint of satisfaction, however, it was grade one, special super-plus-prime. Poleon got a thrill like "nevair" in his life.

He also got slapped down like never in his life.

He felt her small hand strike against his face with surprising force, felt his snowshoes tangling under him as she pushed him backward. The next instant, he was on his back in the snow and she was covering him with her rifle.

Her fingers were trembling so on the trigger, and there was such an angry fire in her eyes that Poleon sent up a quick and silent prayer to *le bon Dieu*. Then he listened to such a tongue-lashing as he had never known a girl could give.

Before she was half-finished, his eyes were wide with admiration and, by the time she ordered him to get along up the trail and never come back, he was grinning once more.

But he did not have to be told twice to leave. That trembling trigger finger spoke loud in all languages.

Poleon did not go far up the trail; just a little way out of sight. Then he turned back silently and started retracing his steps. He had no intention of allowing Wolfjaw Tamson to escape, or of losing track of this girl. But now for the first time black doubts assailed him.

Who was the girl? La Casse, she had said was her name. La Casse—that sounded vaguely familiar. It seemed that Sergeant Murphy had spoken the name in connection with some outlawry of Wolfjaw Tamson's. But there were so many names associated with Wolfjaw's.

WHAT was she doing here? It very evidently wasn't his trail she followed. Then she must be seeking Wolfjaw Tamson! Could it be that she was Wolfjaw's woman? The saints above! By the whiskers of a seven-horned caribou, one horn broken! Wolfjaw's woman!

It must be so. How else account for her presence here in this lonesome Growling Bear country?

The thought struck him forcibly that she had never smiled, not even slightly. Did he imagine it, or had there been something of *tragedie* about her? Yes, he was sure of it now. He had read something in the somberness of those big eyes, eyes made to sparkle, something in the set of the firm little jaw.

Did she fear for someone? Fear for Wolfjaw? Yes, that must be it. And she was hurrying; hurrying to meet Wolfjaw Tamson to warn him of some danger; hurrying to her man. Ah, most sad unhappy day, but this wonderful one deserved a better man. She deserved someone—someone like

himself.

Moving swiftly on his stanch bush webs, Poleon caught sight of the girl again. Suddenly he froze in his tracks. Off to one side through the interlaced aspens, he heard a twig snap. He listened intently. A muffled crackling of underbrush grew fainter and fainter.

Poleon's jaw set grimly. The girl's loud and angry talk had warned Wolfjaw of the ambush! The outlaw was retreating again toward the river. *Eh bien*, if Wolfjaw would not come to him, he would go to Wolfjaw.

Silently, Poleon pressed forward in the direction of the sounds. A little way through the dense thicket he picked up Wolfjaw's fresh snowshoe tracks. Moving warily, he followed those tracks, followed clear to the river. Half-concealed by a blackened willow clump, he stared in fascination at the jostling ice pans slipping by on the spring flood. As his glance swept the broad river up and down, he started violently. Plunging through the willows to the water's edge, and shielding his eyes against the sun glare, he looked downstream at something black stretched out inert on a floating ice cake. From this distance the thing looked like a seal. But it couldn't be a seal in these waters.

The black object moved. Poleon caught the glint of sun against a rifle barrel. There was a dull roar as the rifle spoke. A heavy slug tore through the branches at his side.

Sacré supplice! But that was Wolfjaw Tamson lying out on the floating ice cake! The outlaw was riding the flood downstream. He meant to escape and leave no tracks. Already he was swinging around the first river bend.

Throwing his rifle to shoulder, Poleon had time for just two shots before that ice craft swirled out of sight. A reclining man is a hard target to hit. The bullets, plowing harmlessly into the slab, flashed up tiny brilliants of ice and water.

FOR a split second he hesitated, debating what he should do. Should he risk his life on the river and pursue Wolfjaw on another ice cake? Or should he follow along the shore? The matted willows, the dense growth of birch and aspen, would make slow going by land. Wolfjaw might escape. But the shore way was safe. Which should it be?

Something happened the next instant to decide him. Downstream, near the river's bend, the girl,

Elise, plunged suddenly into view from out of the screening willows. Wriggling out of her webs, she slung the snowshoes deftly over her back. For a moment she crouched on the low rock shelf, scanning the ice which lurched past. Almost before Poleon could grasp her intent, she leaped out onto a fairly large pan. She slipped as the ice cake settled a little under her weight. She threw out her arms wildly, caught her balance; then, steadying herself with her rifle, she braced her feet firmly and stood bravely erect. The next instant she, too, was swept from sight around the curving bank.

Poleon hesitated no longer. Slinging his rifle over his shoulder, he unlimbered his belt-ax, and ran a short distance back from shore into a stand of young birches. With two well-placed blows of the ax, he cut a long stout pole for himself. Crashing back to the river's edge, he pulled out of his snowshoes, slung the racquets on his back, and stood poised while his eyes fastened onto an approaching ice pan. The grip of the current held the pan away from shore as it passed. He vaulted with his birch pole and landed on the ice cake with catlike ease. The ice tilted slightly, but by nimble movement he restored its balance.

Pushing away from the bank with his birch pike-pole, he maneuvered his slippery craft into the very heart of the current. On every side was crunching, sloshing, floating ice. A single slip meant death.

He gripped his pike-pole tightly. *Waugh*, but he had never expected to be glad for those days of hard work at the lumber camps. But his whitewater experience in those log drives was going to do him good now. He who has ridden a log down a swift stream will find himself at home on a floating ice cake—it was such wisdom as the Sergeant Murphy himself might have imparted.

As his ice cake swung around the first bend, he scanned the river before him. Wolfjaw had disappeared beyond another sweeping curve, but the girl was in sight. Just a short distance ahead, firmly braced, defiant, composed, she was riding her slippery craft like a whitewater veteran. Wolfjaw's woman. *Ar-rr-r!*

Poleon jabbed viciously with his birch pole at a point of rock which stuck up above the water. He overshot and came within a wink of pitching head-foremost into the river. That steadied him; he fastened his attention upon his job. With a deft thrust of his long pole, he warded off a mass of

pack that threatened collision. At the same time, he secured impetus for himself.

HIS ice cake was larger and heavier than the girl's. Kept always in the swiftest water by his expert poling, the slick raft bludgeoned along, pushing aside the slob ice as a dory prow through whitecaps. Sometimes he found himself in the dead middle of that slushing ice pack, fifty yards from either shore. Sometimes he was swirling along so close in to the willow-fringed bank that he had to duck to keep from being switched in the face. But at all times he held his ice cake into the current.

His eyes lighted with grim satisfaction as he saw how fast he was gaining. Elise la Casse was going to be crowded to the shore and rescued whether she wished it or not. La Casse? Again he puzzled over that name. He had heard it before. Of that he was certain.

A sudden narrowing of the river, as it swept around a red-granite headland, brought his wandering attention back to his work. The river was rock-walled here. In the constricted channel the water ran faster and the pack jammed more tightly. Sucking over half-submerged rocks, the current in places caused ice cakes to tilt and crash, sending little geyser spumes of water into the air.

Whirled along in the fierce grip of Growling Bear River, splashed with icy spray, Poleon had to be alert every second to push and fend with his makeshift pike-pole. Lurching and tilting, that ice cake was almost continually awash. But even in this kind of going he was indisputably the river's master.

He felt his power and he thrilled to the danger challenge. The splash and grind of the ice cakes, the echoing roar of the rock-girded river formed an elemental symphony which knifed into his very blood.

At, it was *glorieux! Magnifique!*

So sure of himself, he was, that he could venture quick looks to either side where the solid rock rose sheer, and patches of white quartz stringers zigzagged by in the limestone walls. He could even hazard a glance directly above where the sky, sparkling blue in the sunlight, was roofed low over the canyon.

Most of the little French-Chippewayan's glances, however, were directed ahead to that slight figure so bravely riding the tide before him. And

strangely, whenever he looked at her, that danger-thrill seeped out of his blood, and in its place came a great aching.

The little Elise—*adorée*—if she should go down in this icy death! Only to think of it made him feel as weak and limp as a piece of peeled birch bark. *Eh bien*, then he must not think!—only act.

HE was still gaining. That was good. The river was widening out a little now. They would soon be out of the canyon into safer water. By that time he should have worked his way up alongside her. Surely there would be gravel bars beyond this next bend. It would be as nothing for him to force her ice cake ashore with his own. There he would tie her up if necessary, and race on after Wolfjaw. And she did not even know he was here; she had not once looked back.

Poleon was close behind her as they approached a high shoulder at the river's bend. His gaze was riveted ahead to catch a first glimpse of a possible landing place. Around the bend they swung, and there, a hundred yards or so ahead, Poleon glimpsed his gravel bar. More than this he saw.

He saw Wolfjaw Tamson!

Wolfjaw was maneuvering his ice cake into a backwater eddy to land at the gravel strip when he saw his pursuers round the bend.

The first thought to flash in the killer's mind was that he must get off the river and shoot from cover. But no, he could never make it ashore before Poleon's own rifle would speak! Best to go on floating downstream.

He could float as fast as the next one, and shoot straighter! Shoot quicker, too!

Deep in the black stubble of his face, his little eyes glittered coldly as he swung the rifle to his shoulder.

But quick as he was, someone else fired more quickly.

Poleon, poling to get in a shot without endangering the girl, gasped with amazement as he saw Elise jerk up her rifle, level away at Wolfjaw Tamson, and pull trigger.

The girl shooting at Wolfjaw!

Poleon was seized with a fierce elation. *Sacré supplice!* By the whiskers of a black-and-white-spotted caribou with three eyes, one blind! Then the little Elise was not Wolfjaw Tamson's woman! No! She was going to him, yes—but for the

purpose of killing him! *Sacré!*

Poleon noted that Elise's first bullet went wide. That was not surprising. If there was anything worse than shooting from a pitching ice cake, it was to shoot at someone who was standing on another pitching ice cake. Wolfjaw's bullet was wide, too; the heavy slug *whammed* past a dozen feet to the left.

Poleon shouted to the girl to drop on one knee so that he could shoot safely over her head. But she seemed not to hear what he was saying. She flashed him one startled, white-faced glance and kept on firing. Five times more her sharp-cracking Savage spoke, and five times it was answered by the dull boom of Wolfjaw Tamson's Winchester. And all the while Poleon was working frenziedly to pole his ice cake out from behind, where he could get free shooting range and draw Wolfjaw's fire away from the girl and to himself. That last bullet of the outlaw's had been close—too ver' close.

BUT the next was closer! It *snigged* through the end of Poleon's birch pole and drove splinters into his face. Now, however, the little French-Chippewayan was ready to do some shooting on his own account. Dropping the pole across the ice cake, he leveled up his rifle and emptied the clip with cool and assured aim. Some of those bullets came near biting blood, as he could tell by the way Wolfjaw flinched. But so had Wolfjaw's lead been *whanging* close.

Poleon shook his head, worried now. It was beginning to look like a toss-up proposition. They would keep on slinging lead at each other until one scored a lucky shot. With such uncertain targets it would have to be a lucky shot. And there was no luck in the Mounted, he had often heard the Sergeant Murphy say!

He slipped a fresh clip in his rifle as another of the outlaw's bullets *wh-aa-anged* near to him.

Elise's rifle was still cracking. Ah, but this was a woman—Elisa la Casse! For a split-wink he puzzled over that name again. Wait! Had there not been an old man by the name of La Casse who lived in this Growling Bear country? An old man, dead now, murdered? But, yes! And no friend he had been to Wolfjaw! In fact, it was said— Ah, now everything was clear. Elise, the daughter, had waited her time. And now, brave little one, and loyal, she was out to get her father's killer.

Out of the tail of his eye Poleon flashed a glance

at the girl. Suddenly he stiffened, cried out shrilly.

His cry came too late.

Intent upon her shooting, Elise had failed to notice a murderous snag of rock which was thrust up a few inches above water directly in her path. With a sickening crunch her ice cake bore down upon the rock, reared out of the water, and sank back in two pieces.

Poleon stood paralyzed with horror. He caught a flashing picture of the girl pitching forward at the impact of ice against stone. He saw the rifle dropping from her hands, saw her clutch at one of the broken ice pieces and go plunging into the water. He saw the ice cake right itself—slowly, so slowly—lifting her momentarily clear of that lethal flood.

Then, under her weight, the ice settled back until she was clinging to that inadequate float, with her body from the waist down immersed in the blood-chilling water. At any instant she might be ground to death by another ice cake, or, becoming numbed, lose her grip, slip off and sink.

And the maddening thing for Poleon was the knowledge that, so long as Wolfjaw's bullets menaced them, there was nothing he could do to save Elise. Bad targets they were, but even the worst of targets will be hit eventually. If he tried to help Elise, he would but draw the outlaw's fire to her.

FOR one crazed moment Poleon, in an agony of despair, was on the point of leaping into the river to die with the girl. Then he caught her glance.

There was a wild hopelessness in those dear eyes that brought a scalding of tears into his own—hopelessness and something more; a mute appeal. She seemed to be signaling to him to be brave and telling him goodbye! Telling him goodbye! The saints above—and smiling!

A great sob wrenched his body. One of Wolfjaw's bullets tore through his mackinaw and he never knew.

But the next second he was knowing things! An idea, like fire flaming through paper birch, flashed through his mind. Ah, but the Sergeant Murphy was right; when there was nothing else to do, you could think! Sick caribou that he had been to believe that everything was finished. Courage, little Elise, *adorée. Un moment, p'tite.*

More of Wolfjaw Tamson's lead slammed past

his ear, but he did not flinch. With a fierce swipe of his hand, he cleared his tear-blurred eyes, then leveled up his hard-hitting rifle calmly, with grim assurance.

A volley of death poured from that long muzzle, death for Wolfjaw.

Only a hoarse yell wafted back over the river, a yell that was choked off quickly as the icy waters closed over the head of the outlaw. That was all. It left Poleon unmoved. He had known the end would be like this. Since a moment before when he got his idea, he had known.

The rest was easy. He threw down his gun and grabbed up the pike pole. No time passed, not even one little second, it seemed, but in that interval he had rescued Elise from her place of peril, floated her down the river on his ice cake, beached their craft safely, gathered her into his strong arms and carried her ashore, his heart beating wildly against hers. Quickly he had gone about making a fire.

They camped that night on the trail. The light from their glowing bark log put sparkles in Elise's eyes and filtered fire glints through her hair.

"But Poleon, *mon ami*," she said in her bell-clear voice, "you have not tol' me. How is eet that you could shoot so easily that Wolfjaw Tamson,

when before we both miss many shots?"

Poleon grinned.

"Me, I am a man who when I have no other t'ing to do, I t'ink. When I see your ice cake break, I have one beeg idea. I did not shoot Wolfjaw, *p'tite*. I shoot to break up his ice cake which is much more bigger target. *Comprend?*"

"*Merveilleux!* Poleon"—severely—"why is eet that you did not tell me when I first meet weeth you, that you belong to redcoat police?"

"You would not listen."

"Why you did not make me listen?"

Poleon looked indulgent.

"A Sergeant Murphy, ver' wise man of the Mounted Police, and my good friend, has tol' me one t'ing wheech I do not forget: 'Nevaire can you argue weeth de woman.'"

The firelight was doing amazing things to Elise's eyes. She leaned to Poleon.

"But you can kiss a woman, *oui?*"

There were no snowshoes or rifles cluttering up the scenery this time, and her hand which reached up to his face was not slapping him down.

Poleon took a deep breath and kissed her. The Sergeant Murphy himself could not have kissed better.