



# Dad Simms Strikes Pay

By Frank Richardson Pierce

*Author of "The Come-back Race," etc.*



HE tables had been cleared from the dining room of the New Deal Café at Cold Deck, the chairs had been placed close to the walls. In one corner three men were playing a lively tune of another day. One played a fiddle, keeping time while he banged his heels against the floor, the second did wonderful things with a banjo, while the third played an accordion. The room was filled with dancers.

"Grand right and left!" shouted the fiddler. As one, the dancers executed the movement. Seconds passed, then, "Swing your pardner!"

"Flapjack" Meehan, his moccasined feet lightly touching the floor, swung his partner off her feet. "Lady on the left!" yelled the perspiring fiddler. Flapjack gave a young squaw a dizzy swing then returned to his place.

It was a typical sourdough dance and there was more enthusiasm than one could possibly find Outside. When a man wanted to yell from sheer joy, he yelled. There wasn't a drop of hooch in the place and only one man's breath carried the suggestion of white mule. Of course there were not enough women and girls to go around, even including the young squaws drafted for the occasion. Here and there men danced together.

The music stopped at last and the dancers

dropped weakly into the nearest chair, saying something about not being so young as they used to be. "Tubby" Willows jerked a thumb toward the door leading to their private office; Flapjack entered the room and Tubby followed.

"Flapjack, have you noticed 'Dad' Simms lately? He's going down fast. He's lost interest in life. Tonight is the first time he's ever failed to notice the girls. Dad always said he liked 'em pretty, with lots of pretty clothes of different colors; said it was sort of restful to the eyes to see 'em dancing about forgetting the troubles this old world has. Tonight he just sat close to the stove and dreamed," said Tubby.

"I noticed it, also," Flapjack admitted; "and after that I didn't enjoy my dance. I hate to see the old boy go down the grade. He has always been generous with his dust and that's why he's broke today. It was only a year or so ago that he made a little strike. He spent every darned ounce of it helping out old friends who were down and out. He should have saved five hundred or a thousand dollars' worth of his dust for a trip Outside. You'll recall two years ago he went Outside. He didn't stay long, but the trip pepped him up a lot."

"We might give him the money," Tubby suggested.

"No, he won't take it. He says it's all right to

take food and shelter as a gift, but not a good time—at least not on other people's money. He's kinda proud that way."

"What are we going to do about it?"

"I don't know, but we should do something."

They looked out. Dad had not moved from his position near the stove. When people spoke to him he glanced up and smiled the kindly smile of an old man whom age has not embittered; then his eyes closed again.

Flapjack walked over to him. The tall sourdough's hand fell heavily on the elder man's shoulder. "Cheer up, old-timer, the worst is yet to come!"

"Heh! Heh!" Dad chuckled for the first time in days. "I know the worst is yet to come. They're going to serve a swell lunch in a little while and I can't eat rich foods no more without it raising thunder with my digestion." Almost instantly his face became serious again.

"What's wrong, Dad?"

"Nothing's wrong with me. I'm thinking. I've been thinking a lot lately."

"About what?"

"That!"

Dad jerked his thumb over his shoulder to a poster someone had pinned on the wall just over the cigar counter. It read:

REWARD.

\$5,000.

Five thousand dollars will be paid for the recovery, if dead, and the rescue, if alive, of John Hunt Reagan, who started for Cold Deck alone from the Baxter Mining Claim, and has not since been heard of. The reward is held by the National City Bank at Seattle, and will be paid through the Cold Deck Bank or on order.

KATE REAGAN.

Flapjack was familiar with all details. When young Reagan had failed to show up after a reasonable period Flapjack had organized a searching party. Then there was no reward in sight, but the search had been thorough. There simply was no trace of Reagan. He had in some way become lost and vanished in a territory several thousand square miles in area. The reward was posted after the searching party had reported no trace.

That it had been service to an unfortunate fellow and not reward that prompted the search was

proved by the fact that no one resumed the search after the reward was posted. It was generally agreed that young Reagan was now dead.

"That's tough, Dad, but don't let it worry you," Flapjack admitted.

"I'm not worrying. I'm thinking. I knew old Reagan. We fought on the plains several times over different things. When he was old enough to know better he married a young woman. In eighteen ninety-five she stuck up her nose at me. I never forgot it. The Reagans have got more money than's good for themselves and I was thinking how much fun I could have on that five thousand dollars. I could go Outside and sort of look around. It'd do me good and add a year or two to my life. I sure have been down in the dumps a lot lately."

"Now, Dad, Tubby and I—"

"Yes, I know Tubby and you will give me the money, but I couldn't enjoy it. It ain't right that a man waste charity money in fast living. There's too many needing it for bread and butter. Oh, well—" Again he stopped.

"Well, what?" asked Flapjack.

"I've been thinking a lot and I've got a hunch I can find John Reagan's body, or maybe find him alive. I think I'll go!"

Flapjack was dumbfounded. Dad was too old for that sort of thing. And yet Flapjack knew that objection on the grounds that he was too old was useless. Flapjack had observed Dad too many years not to know him. "All right, Dad, let's hear your hunch!"

"Young Reagan was raised on Puget Sound, wasn't he?"

"I believe he was!"

"And he spent quite a lot of time in the woods hunting and fishing. He didn't have to work like most kids!"

"Yes, from what I hear he spent considerable time in the open. That is why his disappearance is a mystery."

"I'm going to play my hunch, Flapjack. Will you lend me a couple of dependable dogs, some grub, and a sleeping bag? No, I don't want a sled—couldn't use it!"

"Sure I'll get you ready for the trail. When do you want to start?"

"The sooner I earn that five thousand and start Outside for a bust, the better. I'll hit the trail in the morning. Guess I'll go to bed now and get some sleep."

Briefly Flapjack outlined the situation to Tubby Willows. His partner was supposed to do the thinking for the pair. The short, genial sourdough pondered a moment.

"I guess we'd better let him go. He's got a hunch, and when these old birds get a hunch you've got to let 'em play it. Dad can take care of himself. We'll give him a couple of days' start and follow. It may do him a world of good. Anything to get him away from the stove."

A week later Dad Simms found himself following a small stream. It was the only stream between Cold Deck and the Baxter Mining Claim. The stream was off the usual trail and ran away from Cold Deck and the river. This was due to the peculiar formation of the land. Each night Dad made camp and each morning his stiff muscles protested as he crawled from the sleeping bag.

"Kate Reagan once turned up her nose at me," he muttered, "and it's going to hurt her to have to pay me five thousand dollars. I'm going to earn it. I've got to earn it."

Then he would set his lips, curse deep in his throat and force his unwilling muscles to do his bidding. It was sometime later that doubt as to the value of the hunch assailed him. He searched carefully for signs and failed to find them. Twice he thought of quitting.

"No, I won't quit. If I do, that's a sure sign I'm old. If I ever admit I'm too old to finish what I start, then I'll pine away and die. I've got to go on. So here goes—nothing."

Dad Simms knew the stream, for he had shot the rapids twice in his life. Now he prepared for the third attempt. With his ax he cut down several trees into sections of the proper length and floated them to a shallow spot. Here he constructed a raft. The following day he loaded the dogs and himself aboard and shoved into the stream. As Dad expected, things happened from the start.

White water broke all around them and frequently over the raft. They missed spray-drenched boulders by a narrow margin and scraped along the mossy walls of a gorge. Three hours after the start Dad sent the raft ashore.

"Saved a week's hard going even if I did nearly drown myself a couple of times. Dang it! I didn't think I was as young as I used to be, but I guess I am—younger, in fact."

He searched surrounding bars for signs of a

body or smashed raft. There were none. "It begins to look as if my hunch was wrong," he muttered. "Still, I'm not licked. We rest here tonight, and tomorrow we strike downstream, boys."

The following day Dad's keen eye noticed something dark on a flat, white rock, the lower end of which was awash in the stream. He examined it closely. "Ah!" he exclaimed, "that's a crimson stain as sure as I'm a foot high. I'm right! My hunch was right!"

But right then Dad did not think of his trip Outside. Instead, he hurried along the bank, watchful and alert. He found other red stains here and there. In one place matted grass indicated that someone had camped for the night. There were several bits of charred wood scattered about. Shortly before dark a flock of ravens flew from a nearby clump. Dad prepared himself for a shock and investigated. He sighed with relief several minutes later when the body of a moose appeared. The animal had been killed by a blow from an ax not two days previous. A portion of the meat had been taken. The remainder was being eaten by prowling animals and birds.

Dad forced his pace until darkness and was on the trail again at the peep of day. Toward noon he looked down and saw a strange figure moving along the river bank. Dad fired his old .44 to attract attention. The figure stopped; then as Dad ran toward it, the figure broke into a run. Dad shook his head. "It's the Reagan kid all right," he said aloud, "and the poor cuss has broken down—mighty near crazy from fright. This is going to be hard for an old man like me to handle!"

He knew that a show of force would not do; he doubted his ability to approach the other despite his weakened condition. "I'm glad he's alive," he muttered; "alive, just as I figured he was. I couldn't have a good time on a reward paid for finding a dead boy." Dad tugged at his chin and considered. Presently he spliced his pack ropes together and made a lariat. Then he worked his way along the bank, circled the spot where he had last seen the almost wild creature, and waited.

Dad heard the padding of feet and the crash of brush; there was a sudden rush, and young Reagan was in the open. His clothing was torn, his face scratched and bruised. His only weapon was a hand ax. On his back he carried a small pack of fresh meat. On his feet were moccasins roughly fashioned from freshly stripped moose hide. Dad

caught the fear light in the youth's eyes, hesitated, then tossed his lariat. It sent the boy to the ground, and with a few deft movements Dad had secured him.

"Now, now," Dad whispered, "it's going to come out all right, sonny. I'm going to fix you up fine."

Dad realized the youth did not understand his words, that he was, in a sense, unconscious, his nerves far beyond the breaking point. First the old sourdough built a fire, then he brought his outfit down. Lastly he cut a pile of brush and made a shelter. "If I could just give him a hot bath and tuck him in bed," Dad mused, "he'd come out of it. I've got to do something or he'll die."

Dad had forgotten this youth's mother had once turned up her nose at him and that his father had fought him again and again. He was too sorry for the lad to let such thoughts creep in. Nearby he located a natural basin in the river. It was a pothole formed by boulders being whirled about by the current. It was four feet across and three feet deep, full of water. Dad cut a huge pile of dry wood and then built a fire near the pool. It was a roaring old fire, and he heaped log after log upon the blazing pile. To this he added a number of rocks; then he waited.

When the rocks were red-hot Dad took a long pole and rolled them into the pool. As they cooled off he removed them and added other hot stones. When the temperature was more than he could stand, he stopped. The red-hot coals warmed the immediate vicinity; the pool itself was steaming. Without ceremony Dad thrust the delirious youth into the pool, clothing and all. For nearly a minute the youth struggled; then he relaxed, except for a nervous twitching.

"I seen a bunch of miners quiet an insane man like that once," Dad commented to himself, "and it's working here."

To Dad it was a beautiful sight to see terror vanish and something akin to confidence come to the face. There was no waking the youth. Instead, it required all of Dad's strength to keep him from slipping too deeply into the pool.

Later Dad dragged him out, removed his clothing, dried him and thrust him into his sleeping bag. This done, Dad dried out the youth's clothing, fed himself and the dogs, then went to sleep. He slept brokenly, however, rising frequently to observe his patient.

Several times Reagan cried out, and always Dad's old hand patted him, as a mother would soothe a dreaming child. Once Dad heard him whisper, "Mother!" It was spoken so softly the old man's ears barely caught the word. Dad smiled there in the night. It was snowing now, and the going would be difficult when they started back, a week or a month hence.

John Reagan had slipped into unconsciousness, pursued by a brown bear. He recalled days of terror when he realized he was lost. Hunger drove him to kill a moose with an ax, and the kill had attracted the bear. When the youth returned later for more meat, the bear had charged him. That's all he remembered. He awakened to find himself warm and rested with a hunger that knew no bounds. A kindly old man was sitting on a log smoking, a rude hut of brush and sod sheltered him. He rubbed his hand across his eyes. "What happened?" he muttered.

Dad smiled. "Hello, son. I've been expecting a question like that. You've slept around the clock all right. You take some broth I've stewed up here and rest some more. Then we'll talk."

"How'd you happen along?"

"I didn't happen along. I came to find you."

"How'd you know where I was?"

"Hunch, my boy; a strong hunch! You used to live on Puget Sound, didn't you? Well, so did I. When a Puget Sounder gets lost, or anybody on the west coast for that matter, he goes until he strikes a stream, then he sticks to the stream. Sooner or later it will cross a railroad or a wagon road, or empty into the Sound or ocean. You got lost and did the only thing you knew how. In this country it don't always work out that way. You were headed for the Arctic Ocean, if you followed streams long enough. Now take this broth and sleep some more."

While the youth slept Dad Simms planned his vacation South. "I'll take about a thousand dollars and keep it for old-timers who are up against it. Then I'll go down to Hollywood and see the picture people. After that I'll see what this here Palm Beach the rich people go to looks like; then I'll go to New York. I'm going to get a tailor-made suit. Yes, by heck, two of 'em. I'll get me one of those swallowtail coats with the tails cut off like the waiters wear, too. I'm going to stop at the best hotel, then I'm coming back to Alaska and live another ten years."

As he dreamed he was abruptly aroused by his dogs breaking away and vanishing. He called sharply, then he swore at them. Neither obeyed. "Never thought they'd quit me," he muttered. "Now that does mess up things. Huh! how am I going to get this kid out? What a blamed fool I was!"

"Yes, what a blamed fool you are!" answered a voice, and Flapjack Meehan emerged from the swirling snow. "Great guns, Dad, we didn't intend you to get away from us on this fool trip of yours. We figured a little trip would do you good and pep you up. Say, what possessed you to shoot those long rapids?"

"Pure laziness, Flapjack. To go the land route meant three days of hard work. I'd always shot those rapids before."

"You might have been drowned!"

"Yes, and I might have slipped on a glacier and broken my neck if I'd gone the land route. Where's Tubby?"

"Coming with a dog team. We didn't know where you were until the dogs I lent you came bounding into our camp. Of course, Dad, you didn't find any trace of Reagan."

"I found traces, Flapjack!" Dad looked Flapjack in the eye as he made the statement. "Would you like to see 'em? Well, John Reagan's in that brush shack making up for lost time."

"You found him alive!" Flapjack was dumbfounded.

"Yep."

Dad explained and Flapjack listened. It was incredible! To his affection for the old-timer was added genuine admiration.

"I'm beginning to think, Dad, when you sit by the stove you are not dreaming at all, but resting up for another start," said Flapjack.

"I'm beginning to think so myself. You've brought a sled along to haul me out, I suppose?" Dad's gaze was accusing.

"Er—well—" began Flapjack.

"Don't try to lie," Dad said; "you never were any good at it. It's a good thing you brought the sled, because we can haul the kid out. Let's see, with good boat connections, I ought to be on Second Avenue, Seattle, Washington, United States of America, three weeks from tonight. And five thousand dollars in the poke. Flapjack, I'm going to enjoy collecting this money, not because I nearly killed myself to earn it, but because Kate Reagan

once stuck up her nose at me. She's proud and rich, and it's going to hurt her to pay it to me."

Flapjack nodded. "I know the kind: rich, stuck-up and selfish. You may have some trouble collecting."

"Then there'll be some excitement." Dad peered into the brush shack. The son of his enemy was still sleeping off his utter exhaustion.

"Tomorrow," Flapjack announced, "we'll load him onto the sled and start. He can rest there as well as anywhere."

No one at Cold Deck had the heart to tell Mrs. Reagan the truth when she arrived. "Is there some hope that he'll be found?" she asked again and again.

Always they hesitated and returned the same answer. "There's one party still out—Flapjack Meehan, Tubby Willows and Dad Simms. Simms had a hunch of some kind the rest of us didn't have."

For several days the woman waited, sitting in the lobby of Cold Deck's best hotel and watching the camp life go by. Here was a squaw, there a dog, hurrying through the storm. A miner in moccasins passed, his parka flapping in the breeze; then came a dog team. It was the last that excited the woman. Each time a dog team came into camp, she hoped.

Then toward evening she heard a voice shout: "Here's Meehan!"

Flapjack was running lightly behind the sled which his great team of malemutes drew without effort. Kate Reagan looked for the familiar figure of her son. She saw Tubby Willows, then Dad Simms, but no others. There was a bulky object on the sled, and she suddenly grew cold. A slight gasp escaped her.

"So they're bringing him back," she whispered; "my boy!"

The team stopped and the robes were hurled back. A gasp came from those in the vicinity. The youth grinned, then sobered as he caught sight of his mother.

"I'm all right, mother," he cried; "Dad Simms figured I'd follow a watercourse, like I did at home when I got lost. I was headed for the arctic several thousand miles from here, the way the river meanders."

Mrs. Reagan said nothing; she couldn't. All she could do was to hold him close for a long time and cry a little. Then she turned.

"Mr. Simms," she managed to say, "God bless you!"

Dad gulped. This woman had once paid no attention to him. She was different now. Time had worked its changes. The haughty attitude she had once shown was now gone. It was apparent she did not recall the incident of years ago. Dad had no desire to remind her of it. She opened her hand bag and brought forth a certified check. "I am sorry it is only five thousand, Mr. Simms. To me it was worth a hundred million, yes, more than that. It can't be measured in terms of money, your service."

Dad noticed the worn purse and the calloused fingers holding the check. They were the fingers of a woman who worked with her hands. It was then that Dad sensed she had given her all to post this reward. There was something about the love of a mother for a child that always got under Dad's skin. He'd seen so many examples of it. It was always the same; they'd give their all. He noticed Kate Reagan's hair was gray and her shoulders

slightly bent. So he walked over and patted her on the shoulder as he took the check. He understood now that John Reagan had been prospecting and not taking a vacation in the Baxter district.

"You're right, Mrs. Reagan, sometimes it is hard to figure the value of some things. It might be worth a lot—more than he could pay—for an old man to know that he could rough it as he used to. It might be worth more to him than an artificial thing like a vacation. On a vacation he might discover he was old. Tonight, Mrs. Reagan, I'm quite a wealthy man. I've struck it rich."

Dad Simms slipped the check into Mrs. Reagan's well-worn bag and closed the bag. He stepped lightly as he walked across the street to the New Deal Café for a meal that he had in mind. A young man who has struck pay can eat big meals, composed of rich foods and dance afterward. Dad intended to dance tonight with some of the girls, maybe a young squaw or two and Mrs. Reagan.

