

REX BEACH ADVENTURE STORIES

North of Fifty-three

By REX BEACH

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BIG GEORGE was drinking and the activities of the little arctic mining camp were paralyzed. Events invariably ceased their progress and marked time when George became excessive, and now nothing of public consequence stirred except the quicksilver, which was retiring fearfully into its bulb at the song of the wind which came racing over the lonesome, bitter, northward waste of tundra.

He held the center of the floor at the Northern club and proclaimed his modest virtues in a voice as pleasant as the cough of a bull wairus.

"Yes, me—little George! I did it. I've licked 'em all from Herschel Island to Dutch Harbor, big uns and little uns. When they didn't suit I made 'em over. I'm the boss carpenter of the arctic, and I own this camp; don't I, Slim? Hey? Answer me!" he roared at the emaciated bear of the title, whose attention seemed wandering from the inventory of George's startling traits toward a card game.

"Sure ye do," nervously smiled Slim, frightened out of a heart solo as he returned to his surroundings.

"Well, then, listen to what I'm saying. I'm the big chief of the village, and when I'm stimulated and happy them fellows I don't like hides out and lets me and nature operate things Ain't that right?" He gazed inquiringly at his friends.

Red, the proprietor, explained over the bar in a whisper to Captain, the new man from Dawson: "That's Big George, the whaler. He's a squaw man an' sort of a bully—see? When he's sober he's on the level strictly, an' we all like him fine, but when he gets to fighting the pain killer he ain't altogether a gentleman. Will he fight—oh, will he fight? Say, he's there with chimes, he is! Why, Doc Miller's made a grub stake rebuilding fella's that had a lingering doubt caked away about that, an' now when he gets the booze up his nose then patched up guys oases away an' hiber nates till the gas dies out in him. Afterward he's sore on himself an' apologies to everybody. Don't get into no trouble with him, 'cause he's two checks past the limit. They don't make 'em as bad as him any more. He busted the mold."

George turned and, spying the newcomer, approached, aying him with equal disfavor.

"Captain saw a bearlike figure, clad cap-a-pie in native fashion. Reindeer pants, with the hair inside, clothed legs like rock pillars, while out of the loose squirrel parka a corded neck rose, brown and strong, above which darkly gleamed a rugged face seamed and scarred by the hate of arctic winters. He had kicked off his deer skin socks and stood barefooted on the cold and drafty floor, while the poison he had imbibed showed only in his heated face. Silently he extended a cracked and hardened hand, which closed like the armored claw of a crustacean and tightened on the crunching fingers of the other. Captain's expression remained unchanged, and, gradually slackening his grip, the sailor roughly inquired:

"Where'd you come from?"

"Just got in from Dawson yester day," politely responded the stranger.

"Well, what're you going to do now you're here?" he demanded.

"Stake some claims and go to prospecting, I guess. You see, I wanted to get in early before the rush next spring."

"Oh, I s'pose you're going to jump some of our ground, hey? Well, you ain't! We don't want no claim jumpers here," disagreeably continued the seaman. "We won't stand for it. This is my camp—see? I own it, and these is my little children." Then, as the other refused to debate with him, he resumed, groping for a new ground of attack.

"Say! I'll bet you're one of them addicted dudes, too, ain't you? You talk like a feller that had been to college," and, as the other assented, he scornfully called to his friends, saying: "Look here, fellers! Pipe the jellyfish! I never see one of these here animals that was worth a cuss. They plays football and smokes cigarets at school; then when they're wanted they come off up here and jump our claims 'cause we can't write a location notice proper. They ain't no good, I guess I'll stop it."

Captain moved toward the door, but the whaler threw his bulky frame against it and scowlingly blocked the way.

"No, you don't. You ain't going to run away till I've had the next dance, Miss Education! Hump! I ain't here to tell you yet what a useless little turnpike you are."

Had interfered, saying: "Look 'em, George, this guy ain't no playmate of none. We'll all have a jolt of this substance promoter and call it off."

Then, as the others approached, he walked at Captain and jerked his head slightly toward the door.

The latter, heeding the signal, started out, but George leaped after him and, seizing an arm, whirled him back, roaring:

"Well, of all the cussed impudence I ever see. You're too high toned to drink with us, are you? You don't get out of here now till you take a licking like a man!"

He reached over his head and, grasping the hood of his fur shirt, with one movement he stripped it from him, exposing a massive naked body whose muscles swelled and knotted beneath a skin as clear as a maiden's, while a map of angry scars strayed across the heavy chest.

As the shirt sailed through the air Red lightly vaulted to the bar and, diving at George's naked middle, tackled beautifully, crying to Captain: "Get out quick! We'll hold him!"

Others rushed forward and grasped the bulky sailor, but Captain's voice replied: "I sort of like this piece, and I guess I'll stay awhile. Turn him loose."

"Why, man, he'll kill ye," excitedly cried Slim. "Get out!"

The captive hurled his peace-makers from him and, shaking off the clinging arms, drove, furiously at the insolent stranger.

In the cramped limits of the corner where he stood Captain was unable to avoid the big man, who swept him with a crash against the plank door at his back, grasping hungrily at his throat. As his shoulders struck, however, he dropped to his knees, and before the raging George could seize him he avoided a blow which would have strained the rivets of a strength tester and ducked under the other's arms, leaping to the cleared center of the floor.

Seldom had the big man's rush been avoided, and, whirling, he swung a boomlike arm at the agile stranger. Before it landed Captain stepped in to meet his adversary and, with the weight of his body behind the blow, drove a clinched and bony fist crashing into the other's face. The big head with its blazing shock of hair snapped backward, and the whaler dropped to his knees at the other's feet.

The drunken flush of victory swept over Captain as he stood above the swaying figure, then suddenly he felt the great bare arms close about his waist with a painful grip. He struck at the bleeding face below him and wrenched at the circling bands which wheezed the breath from his lungs, but the whaler squeezed him writhing to his breast and, rising unsteadily, wheeled across the floor and in a shiver of broken glass fell crashing against the bar and to the floor.

As the struggling men writhed upon the planks the door opened at the hurried entrance of an excited group, which paused at the sight of the ruin; then, rushing forward, tore the men apart.

The panting Berserker strained at the arms about his glistening body, while Captain, with sobbing sobs, relieved his aching lungs and watched his enemy, who frothed at the interference.

"It was George's fault," explained Slim to the questions of the arrivals. "This feller tried to make a getaway, but George had to have his amusement."

A newcomer addressed the squaw man in a voice as cold as the wind. "Cut this out, George! This is a friend

"They was crossing the bay and got carried out by the offshore gale," explained Jones. "Windy was following 'em when the ice ahead parted and began moving out. He tried to yell to 'em, but they was too far away to hear in the storm. He managed to get back to the land and followed the shore ice around. He's over at Hunter's cabin now, most dead, face and hands froze pretty bad."

A torrent of questions followed and many suggestions as to the fate of the men.

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"The ice pack'll break up in this wind," added another, "and if they don't drown they'll freeze before the floe comes in close enough for them to land."

From the first announcement of his friends' peril Captain had been thinking rapidly. His body, sore from his long trip and aching from the huz of his recent encounter, cried wofully for rest, but his voice rose calm and clear. "We've got to get them off," he said. "Who will go with me? Three is enough."

The clamoring voices ceased, and the men wheeled at the sound, gazing incredulously at the speaker. "What! In this storm? You're crazy!" many voices said.

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Captain strode to him with outstretched hand. "You're a man," he said. "You've got the nerve, George, and you'll go with me, won't you?"

"What! Me?" questioned the sailor vaguely. His wondering glance left Captain and drifted round the circle of shamed and silent faces. Then he straightened stiffly and cried: "Will I go with you? Certainly! I'll go to— with you."

Ready hands harnessed the dogs, dragged from protected nooks where they sought cover from the storm which moaned and whistled round the low houses. Endless ragged folds of sleet whirled out of the north, then writhed and twisted past, vanishing into the gray veil which shrouded the landscape in a twilight gloom.

The fierce wind sank the cold into the aching flesh like a knife and stiffened the face to a whitening mask, while a fusillade of frozen ice particles beat against the eyeballs with blind fury.

As Captain emerged from his cabin, furred and hooded, he found a long train of crouching, whining animals harnessed and waiting, while muffled figures stocked the sled with robes and food and stimulants.

Big George approached through the whirling white, a great, squat figure, with fluttering squirrel tails blowing from his parka, and at his heels trailed a figure skin clad and dainty.

"It's my wife," he explained briefly to Captain. "She won't let me go alone."

They gravely bade farewell to all, and the little crowd cheered lustily against the whine of the blizzard as, with cracking whip and hoarse shouts, they were wrapped in the cloudy winding sheet of snow.

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The little party toiled through the smother till they reached the igloos under the breast of the tall coast bluffs where coughing Eskimos drilled patiently at ivory tusks and gambled the furs from their backs at stud horse poker.

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"Two trips, eh?" answered the other. "We'll be doing well if we last through one, I'm thinking."

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The wind hurried them out from land, while it drove the sea water to freezing spray over their backs and changed their fur garments into scaly armor as they worked through the ice cakes, peering with strained eyes for a sign of their friends.

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At last, beaten and tossed, they rested, disheartened and hopeless. Then, as they drifted, a sound struggled to them against the wind—a faint cry, illusive and fleeting as a dream voice—and, still doubting, they heard it again.

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Barton and Sullivan had fought the cold and wind stoutly hour after hour till they found their great foe was breaking up in the heaving waters.

Then the horror of it had struck the Kid till he raved and cursed up and down their little island as it dwindled gradually to a small arc.

He had finally yielded to the weight of the cold, which crushed resistance out of him, and settled, despairing and listless, upon the ice. Barton dragged him to his feet and forced him round their rocking prison, begging him to brace up, to fight it out like a man, till the other insisted on resting and dropped to his seat again.

The older man struck deliberately at the whitening face of his freezing companion, who recognized the well meant insult and refused to be roused into activity. Then to their ears had come the faint cries of George, and in answer to their screams through the gloom they beheld a long covered skin canoe and the anxious faces of their friends.

Captain rose from his cramped seat, and, ripping his crackling garments from the boat where they had frozen, he wriggled out of the hole in the deck and grasped the weeping Barton.

"Come, come, old boy! It's all right now," he said.

"Oh, Charlie, Charlie!" cried the other. "I might have known you'd try to save us. You're just in time, though, for the Kid's about all in."

Sullivan apathetically nodded and sat down again.

"Hurry up there. This ain't no G. A. R. encampment, and you ain't got no time to spare," said George, who had dragged the canoe out and with a paddle broke the sheets of ice which covered it. "It'll be too dark to see anything in half an hour."

The night, hastened by the storm, was closing rapidly, and they realized another need of haste, for even as they spoke a crack had crawled through the ice floe where they stood and, widening as it went, left but a heaving cake supporting them.

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"Never mind me," roughly interrupted George. "It's too late to get back here. When you get ashore it'll be dark. Besides, Sullivan's freezing, and you'll have to rush him through quick. I'll stay here."

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A torrent of questions followed and many suggestions as to the fate of the men.

"They'll freeze before they can get ashore," said one.

"The ice pack'll break up in this wind," added another, "and if they don't drown they'll freeze before the floe comes in close enough for them to land."

From the first announcement of his friends' peril Captain had been thinking rapidly. His body, sore from his long trip and aching from the huz of his recent encounter, cried wofully for rest, but his voice rose calm and clear. "We've got to get them off," he said. "Who will go with me? Three is enough."

The clamoring voices ceased, and the men wheeled at the sound, gazing incredulously at the speaker. "What! In this storm? You're crazy!" many voices said.

He gazed appealingly at the faces before him. Brave and adventurous men he knew them to be, jesting with death and tempered to perils in this land where hardship rises with the dawn, but they shook their ragged heads hopelessly.

"We must save them!" resumed Captain hotly. "Barton and I played as children together, and if there's not a man among you who's got the nerve to follow me I'll go alone, by heavens!"

In the silence of the room he pulled the cap about his ears and, tying it snugly under his chin, drew on his huge fur mittens. Then, with a scornful laugh, he turned toward the door.

He paused as his eye caught the swollen face of Big George. Blood had stiffened in the heavy creases of his face like rusted stringers in a ledge, while his mashed and discolored lips protruded thickly. His hair gleamed red, and the sweat had dried upon his naked shoulders, streaked with dirt and flecked with spots of blood, yet the battered features shone with the unconquered, fearless light of a rough, strong man.

Captain strode to him with outstretched hand. "You're a man," he said. "You've got the nerve, George, and you'll go with me, won't you?"

"What! Me?" questioned the sailor vaguely. His wondering glance left Captain and drifted round the circle of shamed and silent faces. Then he straightened stiffly and cried: "Will I go with you? Certainly! I'll go to— with you."

Ready hands harnessed the dogs, dragged from protected nooks where they sought cover from the storm which moaned and whistled round the low houses. Endless ragged folds of sleet whirled out of the north, then writhed and twisted past, vanishing into the gray veil which shrouded the landscape in a twilight gloom.

The fierce wind sank the cold into the aching flesh like a knife and stiffened the face to a whitening mask, while a fusillade of frozen ice particles beat against the eyeballs with blind fury.

As Captain emerged from his cabin, furred and hooded, he found a long train of crouching, whining animals harnessed and waiting, while muffled figures stocked the sled with robes and food and stimulants.

Big George approached through the whirling white, a great, squat figure, with fluttering squirrel tails blowing from his parka, and at his heels trailed a figure skin clad and dainty.

"It's my wife," he explained briefly to Captain. "She won't let me go alone."

They gravely bade farewell to all, and the little crowd cheered lustily against the whine of the blizzard as, with cracking whip and hoarse shouts, they were wrapped in the cloudy winding sheet of snow.

Arctic storms have an even sameness—the intense cold, the heartless wind, which augments tenfold the chill of the temperature; the air thick and dark, with stinging flakes rushing by in an endless cloud, a drifting, freezing, shifting eternity of snow, driven by a ravening gale, which sweeps the desolate, bald wastes of the northland.

The little party toiled through the smother till they reached the igloos under the breast of the tall coast bluffs where coughing Eskimos drilled patiently at ivory tusks and gambled the furs from their backs at stud horse poker.

To George's inquiries they answered that their largest canoe was the three holed bidarka on the cache outside. Owing to the small circular openings in its deck, this was capable of holding but three passengers, and Captain said, "We'll have to make two trips, George."

"Two trips, eh?" answered the other. "We'll be doing well if we last through one, I'm thinking."

Lashing the unwieldy burden upon the sled, they fought their way along the coast again till George declared they were opposite the point where their friends went adrift. They slid their light craft through the ragged wall of ice hummocks guarding the shore pack and dimly saw in the gray beyond them a stretch of angry waters mottled by drifting cakes and floes.

George spoke earnestly to his wife, instructing her to keep the team in constant motion up and down the coast a rifle shot in either direction and to listen for a signal of the return. Then he picked her up as he would a babe, and she kissed his storm beaten face. "She's been a good squaw to me,"

he said as they pushed their dancing craft out into the breath of the gale. "And I've always done the square thing by her. I s'pose she'll go back to her people now, though."

The wind hurried them out from land, while it drove the sea water to freezing spray over their backs and changed their fur garments into scaly armor as they worked through the ice cakes, peering with strained eyes for a sign of their friends.

The sailor with deft strokes steered them between the grinding bergs, raising his voice in long signals like the weird cry of a siren.

Twisting back and forth through the floes they held to their quest, now floating with the wind, now paddling desperately in a race with some drifting mass which dimly towered above them and splintered hungrily against its neighbor close in their wake.

Captain emptied his six shooter till his numbed fingers grew rigid as the trigger, and always at his back swelled the deep shouts of the sailor, who with practiced eye and mighty strokes forced their way through the closing lanes between the jaws of the ice pack.

At last, beaten and tossed, they rested, disheartened and hopeless. Then, as they drifted, a sound struggled to them against the wind—a faint cry, illusive and fleeting as a dream voice—and, still doubting, they heard it again.

"Thank God. We'll save 'em yet!" cried Captain, and they drove the canoe bolting toward the sound.

Barton and Sullivan had fought the cold and wind stoutly hour after hour till they found their great foe was breaking up in the heaving waters.

Then the horror of it had struck the Kid till he raved and cursed up and down their little island as it dwindled gradually to a small arc.

He had finally yielded to the weight of the cold, which crushed resistance out of him, and settled, despairing and listless, upon the ice. Barton dragged him to his feet and forced him round their rocking prison, begging him to brace up, to fight it out like a man, till the other insisted on resting and dropped to his seat again.

The older man struck deliberately at the whitening face of his freezing companion, who recognized the well meant insult and refused to be roused into activity. Then to their ears had come the faint cries of George, and in answer to their screams through the gloom they beheld a long covered skin canoe and the anxious faces of their friends.

Captain rose from his cramped seat, and, ripping his crackling garments from the boat where they had frozen, he wriggled out of the hole in the deck and grasped the weeping Barton.

"Come, come, old boy! It's all right now," he said.

"Oh, Charlie, Charlie!" cried the other. "I might have known you'd try to save us. You're just in time, though, for the Kid's about all in."

Sullivan apathetically nodded and sat down again.

"Hurry up there. This ain't no G. A. R. encampment, and you ain't got no time to spare," said George, who had dragged the canoe out and with a paddle broke the sheets of ice which covered it. "It'll be too dark to see anything in half an hour."

The night, hastened by the storm, was closing rapidly, and they realized another need of haste, for even as they spoke a crack had crawled through the ice floe where they stood and, widening as it went, left but a heaving cake supporting them.

George spoke quietly to Captain, while Barton strove to animate the Kid. "You and Barton must take him ashore and hurry him down to the village. He's most gone now."

"But you?" questioned the other. "We'll have to come back for you as soon as we put him ashore."

"Never mind me," roughly interrupted George. "It's too late to get back here. When you get ashore it'll be dark. Besides, Sullivan's freezing, and you'll have to rush him through quick. I'll stay here."

"No, no, George," cried the other as the meaning of it bore in upon him. "I got you into this thing, and it's my place to stay here. You must go!"

But the big man had hurried to Sullivan and forced him to a seat in the middle opening of the canoe.

"Come, come," he cried to the others; "you can't spend all night here! If you want to save the Kid you've got to hurry. You take the front seat there, Barton," and as he did so George turned to the protesting Captain. "Shut up, curse you, and get in!"

"I won't do it," rebelled the other. "I can't let you lay down your life in this way when I made you come."

George thrust a cold face within an inch of the other's and grimly said: "If they hadn't stopped me I'd beat you into dog meat this morning, and if you don't quit this sniveling I'll do it yet. Now, get in there and paddle to beat h—I or you'll never make it back quick!"

"I'll come back for you then, George. If I live to the shore," Captain cried, while the other slid the burdened canoe into the icy waters.

As they drove the boat into the storm Captain realized the difficulty of working their way against the gale. On him fell the added burden of holding their course into the wind and avoiding the churning ice cakes. The spray whipped into his face like shot and froze as it clung to his features. He strained at his paddle till the sweat soaked out of him and the cold air filled his aching lungs.

Unceasingly the merciless frost cut his face like a keen blade till he felt the numb paralysis which told him his features were hardening under the touch of the cold.

An arm's length ahead the shoulders of the Kid protruded from the deck

hole where he had sunk again into the death sleep, while Barton, in the forward seat, leaned wearily on his ice clogged paddle, moaning as he strove to shelter his face from the sting of the blizzard.

An endless time they battled with the storm, slowly gaining, foot by foot, till in the darkness ahead they saw the wall of shore ice and swung into its partial shelter.

Dragging the now unconscious Sullivan from the boat, Captain rolled and thrashed him, while Barton, too weak and exhausted to assist, feebly strove to warm his stiffened limbs.

In answer to their signals the team appeared maddened by the lash of the squaw. Then they wrapped Sullivan in warm robes and forced scorching brandy down his throat till he coughed weakly and begged them to let him rest.

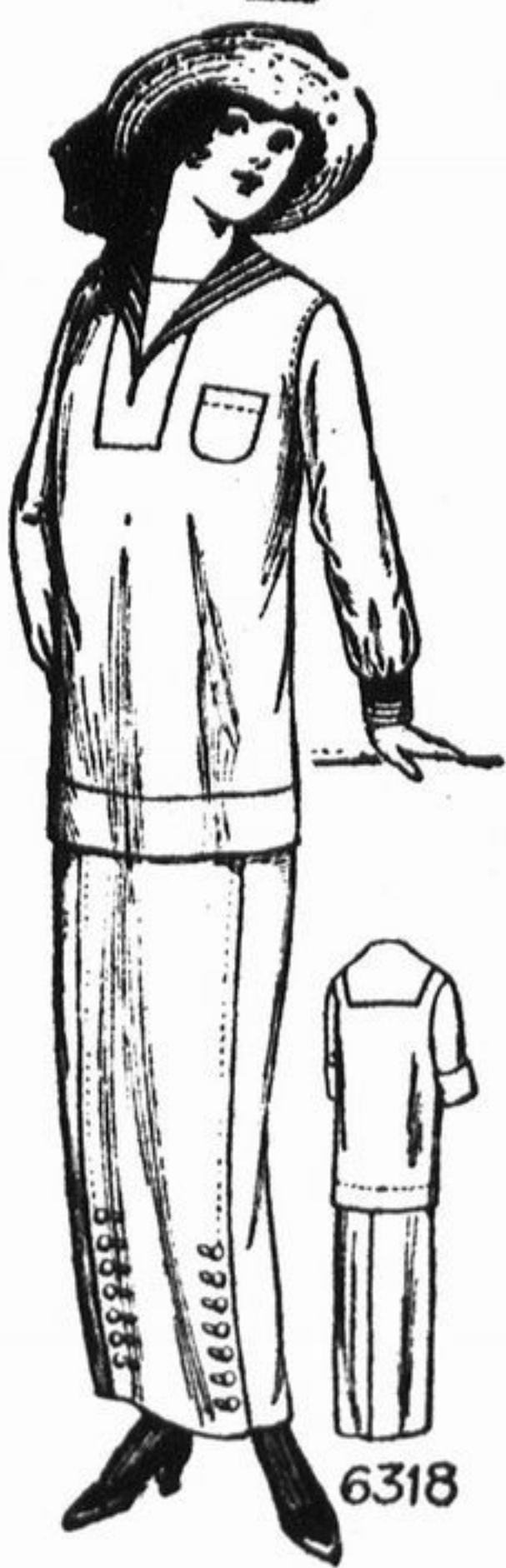
"You must hurry him to the Indian village," directed Captain. "He'll only lose some fingers and toes now, maybe, but you've got to hurry!"

"Aren't you coming, too?" queried Barton. "We'll hire some Eskimos to go after George. I'll pay 'em any thing!"

"No; I'm going back to him now. He'd freeze before we could send help

Practical Fashions

MISSER'S MIDDY DRESS.



The midly suit is strictly up to date, being cut on scant lines, with inset sleeve and without any opening other than the neck. The three gore skirt has a panel front. Linen, duck, serge, flannel and the like are used for these dresses, with trimmings of satin or other contrasting material.

The dress pattern (6318) is cut in sizes 14, 16 and 18 years. Medium size requires 5 1/2 yards of 36 inch material, with 3/4 yard of 27 inch contrasting goods.

To procure this pattern send 10 cents to "Pattern Department," of this paper. Write name and address plainly, and be sure to give size and number of pattern.