

The Free Press Short Story

The Road to Penitence

BY KEITH CLAYTON ALBER

DALE RAWSON laughed victoriously to himself. "They said I was a blind plunger," his cold lips stiffly framed the words. "While they've babbled, I've acted and accomplished. That's the way it has always been. Act first and talk afterwards. It's sure success."

He straightened up from the handlebars of the sled, cracked a long whip over the tandem-hitched string of Malamutes, and the procession jerked forward. He pressed the dogs hard after their short breather until the sled runners fairly whistled over the hard-packed snow. That was Dale Rawson—a driver and a hard one.

Little was to be seen of the man as he well shielded against the white sting of a late Alaskan winter. A wool helmet covered his head, and across his mouth and nostrils was a protecting scarf. The eyes, which were visible, were clear blue and pierced whatever they beheld. Above them arched shaggy blond brows. Below them, hidden in the muffler, wide-set jawbones swept down to a pointed chin. His features were large, regular; he might have appeared a young handsome, but for a premature age set in his face. Even so, he was young—not more than twenty-four years old.

"Gee, you dumb brute!" he shouted as the sled swept down over rolling slopes. He was coming off the mountain range. Behind lay the Tanana country where he had made a mining survey for the Consolidated Ore Company. Ahead, he was going back to the office where jealousy and doubt had gone with his venture. The men down there rankled because he, a youngster only two years out of college, was given an important responsibility where older and tried men were eager to make the trip. Sure, "pull" was needed to get ahead. The men had known that because his father owned a large block of stock in the company.

Dale shrugged his shoulders. Let them think what they wanted. He could not be deviated by them. He saw humans only as automatons who sometimes stand between one and his point of purpose.

In the next hour such thoughts evaporated from his mind like a cloud and Dale became absorbed in the trail. His guide he had left on the other side of the range as he proceeded to the coast alone. He was alone with only the dogs.

Youth and dogs were breaking along over the snow at a fair gait when for no reason apparent the driver called the dogs to a halt. He stood listening. A familiar sound strange in that place came to him. It came now, a high-pitched muted whine. As Dale looked and pondered for direction, a faint female dog came into view around a clump of bushes twenty yards south of him. Hanging from her mouth by the scruff of her neck a limp pup gave a distressed yelp.

As vexation lowered Dale's brows a tug of sympathy for the little fellow exposed to the cruel cold tugged at his heart. Dale called to the mother dog. She walked forward cautiously. As he made no move, she came up to him and dropped the pup on the snow. Immediately she turned, and trotted quickly back from whence she had come.

Dale picked up the pup which nestled down into the two puffs of his hands. He could not be over two weeks old. He was a skinny little fellow. Dale put him on top of his sled and pulled a loose fur robe over him. By that time the mother dog returned with another pup. Dale put him with the first one and followed the mother back to her stump of bushes. There on the other side were two other shivering mites.

Dale wrapped all four of the pups in his robe and with the mother dog running alongside, he struck out again. He pondered at length as to where she had come from.

A little later that wonder changed to brooding anger as he came across the fresh trail of another dog sled. Through his mittened hand he shook some surface snow into the track and estimated it could not be more than a day old. So that was the story behind the mother dog alone in that wilderness with her pups! She had been abandoned by her owner because she was useless to him.

Three months in Alaska, and Dale could hardly be called a cheechako any more. He knew that man with the sled ahead had committed an unpardonable sin. A hot flame of resentment arose in him. Dogs on the trail were man's first care, because that same man's life was dependent on his sled dogs.

Dale stopped over long enough to feed his new charge and dashed on after the dog sled ahead. A day would be a hard and trying margin to narrow down.

That night he pitched his tent on the barren and spent a bad six hours. All that while a howling wind ransacked every nook of the frail shelter and Dale felt its icy fingers through his heavy sleeping bag. At last he crawled out and made a quick start in the dark. It mattered not whether the day was white or black, for the few hours of sun were only a scratch out of the twenty-four.

He did not stop for eight hours after that start, not until he was so weary he felt his very bones would snap off in the cold. An hour later he strove forward with a fresh start. He was thankful that it had not snowed and he could still follow the trail. Half an hour after a blurred sphere came into the heavens where the sun should have been, he came onto high, gritty snows where the winds had swept out all traces. Without that trail he felt lost.

Now he must rely on his own judgment and sense of direction—and hope that he could pick up the trail further on. From then the time dragged and hours seemed to have elapsed before the sun passed its zenith low to the southern horizon.

Dale was still lost from the trail. As he plugged on he became aware that across the lighted snows a black object stuck out of a white mound. Besides himself and his belongings, Dale saw nothing else on the winter waste except that. It struck him peculiarly. It looked like a tall silk hat sticking up from the snow. He knew it could not be that. His curiosity was aroused so he stopped, and leaving the dog team went out of his way to investigate. The mother dog to whom he had attached the name Tam, followed him.

Without warning she bolted ahead across the snow, uttering a low whine. Dale tried to call her back but could not; so he set after her rapidly. Topping the mound, he saw Tam humped over in the snow and sending it flying with her forepaws. He looked about and recognized the black object at this nearness. It was a stove-pipe and the mound he stood upon was a roof. No smoke came from the tin cylinder. Still, down there where Tam was digging a fresh path was dug out to a window of the snowed under cabin. His eyes followed the tracks that came out of the path and onto the snow. They led his vision to the marks left by a dog sled; so, the man he was after—had stopped here—then had gone on.

Dale went down after Tam to get her back to his sled. As he stooped, his eyes came on a level-with-the-window. Inside it was dark and a warm, repelling odor came out of the broken window.

Instinctively he listened. His ears were sensitively keyed to the slightest disturbance. At that, he only imagined for a moment that he heard a sound from within.

Striking a match, he pushed his head and shoulders through the window. The sight which met his eyes caused him to gasp. The match burned his fingers and after it dropped he wriggled inside to roll heavily to the floor. The dog followed to collide with him head on.

Showing her away, Dale arose and struck another match. It showed a table with a burned-out candle, but a fresh one was beside it. He took it and lit it. In the feeble glow of light he rested his eyes on the first object he had seen. A man, from appearance a French-Canadian, lay swathed in covers on the wall bunk.

He linked together the dog, this man, and the trail of the sled outside. Two men had been with that dog team. This one riding and another walking. The one who was walking, evidently left behind. Tam with her pups and then this sick man who was helpless and suffering.

Dale could not be above giving this man a hand. In his short stay above the Fifty-four Forty Line he knew the unwritten laws of the land beneath the northern lights. As he stood watching, though, a frown darkened his face, his jaw became adamant. He did not like to be delayed this way. In accordance with his nervous energy to get on he decided to take the sick man on to the Copper River telegraph station where a village was located and the man could be fully attended.

On his way once more with the additional burden of the man, Dale felt he was doing here all that he could, but he was far from satisfied. In his heart ached revenge against the man who so coldly deserted first the dog and her pups and then this man on the trail. In addition, Dale fretted at the possible delay this added burden might cause him. Another automaton was in his way and he meant to teach him a lasting lesson of what happened to men who got in his way.

He was again following this man's trail, and this time he meant to keep on until he overtook him. If he had

to travel through the night, he must keep on, for he was likely going slower than the other, and his only opportunity was to gain while the other was stopped for rest or food.

Many hours passed after the long night settled over his head. Ahead the vastness of creation was a blank mass except where the snow stretched out and maintained a pale shimmering over its surface. That and the stars overhead which seemed as large as arc lights with their nearness. Another few hours of light were nearing when he came upon the camp of the man ahead.

Dale Rawson halted his own sled a few feet from that of the man, and his pitched tent. He was not expecting the young face that came out of the tent. More readily he would have put in its place that of a hardened old soughdog whose skin was wind-burned and darkened by extreme cold. The young man who stood before him could be no older than himself. He was slightly taller than Dale because of an unusually long pair of legs. He was slender and but for the heavy furs might have appeared spryly; however, all of that was of no consequence now.

"I'm taking your dog team," said Dale.

The tall youth's greeting died on his lips and he stammered, "My dog team—whadda you mean?" "Because you're yellow. You even double-crossed a dog that was better than you. And you've caused me too much bother already." Without waiting for an answer, Dale struck him sharply on the jaw. The blow crashed loudly in the sharp, clear air. The young man was flung back through the tent where he lay still with his feet protruding below the waving flap.

Systematically Dale went about his task of taking the stranger's dogs and hitching them in tandem ahead of his own. He was ready except for Tam. He searched for her, but could not find her until he looked in through the stranger's tent. There she was standing over the youth and licking his face. Dale saw that the dog's first master was struggling to consciousness.

Vainly Dale tried to call the dog away, but she would not come, so he carried her to the sled. Tam growled and snapped at his mittened hands. Greatly angered himself, he cuffed the dog and tied her to a strip of lead rawhide so that she had to trail along behind the sled.

In readiness once more he cracked his whip, his voice commanded the dogs, and he was off. He wanted to get the scurvy-stricken man to the station as quickly as he could make it, for he knew the spark of life was endangered.

On the second day after their timely arrival at the Copper River station, Dale entered the sick man's room for the first time. He felt rested then after eighteen hours of heavy sleep that only a bed could have brought him. The sick man was conscious and feebly regaining strength under a doctor's care.

"Hello," Dale bid the man softly. "Feel better? You've improved in looks since I brought you here."

"I'll be all right, feller, thanks to you." A wan smile crossed the man's lips. "My name's Pierre and if you ever need help, remember to call on Pierre. I've been wanting to see you ever since I came to myself. Where's Stills? That's my partner, Smith. I always called him Stills with those funny long legs."

Dale looked away from Pierre as he spoke harshly. "I guess you don't know what he did." The young mining engineer delineated in full what had happened on the trail since he had first found Tam with her pups. When he again looked into Pierre's face he saw there a haunting look of horror.

"It's all a mistake, feller," Pierre croaked. "You don't know what happened. Stills had to leave the dog and her pups behind. He was trying to get me to the station. He was only thinking of me. The dogs played out; they couldn't pull me any farther. We were low on grub. So he left me at the cabin with what little there was to eat and struck out for the station to get help."

Dale broke the grip on his arm and spoke so hurriedly that he upset the stool upon which he was sitting. He swept a hand over his brow as the revelation brought full stress to his mind. He had been terribly wrong. Without looking back at Pierre he stumbled blindly from the room.

Out there in the howling winter waste, unprotected on the barrens, that poor loyal fellow Pierre had called him Stills was fighting for his life without dog to guide or carry him or food to sustain him. Two days had passed now. Dale felt sick as the truth dawned upon him.

In a rush Dale gathered what he needed and hitched the pick of the two dog teams to his sled. Without saying farewell to anyone or stating where he was going, he struck out toward the barrens.

The farther he progressed the more bewildered he became. He was not a cheechako, but surely he did not know this country well enough to find a lone man out there on the barrens. Hours passed before he finally admitted that he was lost.

As he moved resolutely toward his mind wandered back. Thoughts carried him back to the "outside," down to the Consolidated Ore Company in the United States. Maybe the men had been right back there in the of-

ice, partly right anyway. One old-timer had told him that if he wanted more experienced men than he would, have been needed to accomplish the task. He would have made a bungling mess of the whole thing.

Dale laughed ironically. Mend his ways—yes, if he ever got out of this jam, he would. He must stop to think. He called to his dogs and as the sled came to a standstill he slumped down on it with his face in his hands.

He knew not how long he sat there when a wet tongue licked his hand. He looked up and a dog sprang back away from him. "Tam!" cried Dale, coming down on his knees before the animal. Again Tam sprang away from him. Dale came to his feet and looked blank for only a moment.

"Tam," he repeated. "That dog loves her master. She'll find him if anybody can." Truly enough, Tam led big Dale Rawson to her master. As it turned out, Dale found Stills only a few miles away where he struggled on hands and knees trying to get to the Copper River station. In one mittened hand he clutched a piece of bacon rind he had been chewing on for food.

Dale bent over him and carried him to the sled, to bundle him in with heavy robes thrown over. As he looked down into the other man's face he saw, despite the grim hours, that it was a frank, boyish face.

"I'm just tuckered out," said the young man, smiling feebly up at Dale. "Is Pierre all right? That's swell! That's all I wanted to know." As Dale cried "muah!" to the Malamute he thought of that smile and nothing could have made him feel more penitent.

New Measures To Affect Sale Milk and Cream

In announcing a board order of the Milk Control Board of Ontario, C. M. Meek, chairman, today stated that Ontario housewives will learn that a number of wartime economy measures are to be introduced into the milk industry, effective February 1. This order has received the approval of the Wartime Prices and Trade Board.

The fluid milk industry was advised some months ago by the Wartime Prices and Trade Board that every effort must be made within the milk industry itself to meet its increased costs of wages, supplies, taxes, etc., rather than increase the cost of milk to consumers," Mr. Meek stated.

"The new measures announced today are, accordingly, the first wartime economies affecting the consumers, and will probably be followed by other changes calculated to reduce distribution costs.

"After February 1, there will be not more than two grades of cream available." These are known as "whipping cream" and "cereal treat." Heretofore, in most markets, there have been three or four grades of cream available.

"Under the new order quarter pint containers of cream will be eliminated in all markets, quarts and pints in most markets, leaving the half pint the standard container for cream.

"Another measure of wartime economy effected concerns the number of deliveries of milk to stores. After February 1, there will be only one delivery to stores each day, and stores will no longer have the privilege of returning unsold milk products to the distributors.

"The use of special caps other than the caps used on standard bottles will be discontinued. No new sizes or shapes of containers for milk or cream will be available."

Gun Sprays Paraffin

British engineers have invented a new, more efficient way to wash engineering parts, particularly on the aircraft side. It is a compact and self-contained unit from which oil is sprayed from a pistol-type gun.

Metal parts needing cleaning are usually dipped in tanks of paraffin oil, or some other solvent, a process which dries the paraffin. By the new method, the dirt is separated from the paraffin which is continuously filtered by a centrifugal clarifier.

The metal parts are put on a perforated table and washed with the spray gun. The used paraffin oil drains through the perforations and a strainer to one compartment of a paraffin supply tank, coupled to the centrifugal clarifier. The paraffin is pumped to the clarifier, purified and returned by way of the tank and a paraffin supply tank, coupled to the spray gun.

The feature of this cleaning unit, which can easily be carried from one part of the factory to another, is that the impurities are never allowed to accumulate in the paraffin which can be used over and over again.

Britain's Seed Crop Sets Up Record in 1941

Great Britain's extensive sugar beet war crop has been harvested this year entirely from seed grown at home. Before the war, almost half of the country's sugar beet seed came from abroad; the war has so developed home production that Britain will continue to support herself in sugar beet when peace returns.

This year, with fewer workers and remarkably bad weather, she is producing a larger acreage of all kinds of vegetable seeds than ever before. The demand for them, when every household is "digging," where he can, "for victory," is without precedent.

The most popular seed is onion, with carrot, beet and parsnip following closely. Moreover, the need for shipping—there has caused a great increase in the sale of seeds for animal feeding stuffs like mangolds, turnips, sweeties and kale.

Scientists and Government departments have co-operated with the farmers and distributors in setting up this year's record for British seed production.

Look Out! A Sick Liver is Dangerous

Do you have persistent headaches and backaches? Are you tormented by rheumatic pains in muscles and joints? A faulty liver is clogging your whole system. Serious ill health may result. Your liver is the largest organ in your body and most important to your health. It supplies energy to muscles, tissues and glands. If unhealthy, your body lacks this energy and becomes enfeebled—youthful vim disappears. Again your liver pours out bile to digest food, get rid of waste and allow proper nourishment to reach your blood. When your liver gets out of order proper digestion and nourishment stop—you're poisoned with the waste that decomposes in your intestine. Nervous troubles and rheumatic pains arise from this poison. You become constipated, stomach and kidneys can't work properly. The whole system is affected and you feel "rotten," headache, backache, dizziness, tired out—a ready prey for sickness and disease.



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"I had a bad case of biliousness and constipation. I had no more headache and backache when I became well. I had to go to a hospital. Nothing I tried would help until I started taking Fruit-Lax. In a very short time my troubles disappeared. I have no more headache or backache and can do my housework without feeling like a new person. 25c, 50c. Mrs. E. Hudson, London, Ont.

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