

# THE GOLDEN BOOK MAGAZINE\*

for January, 1931

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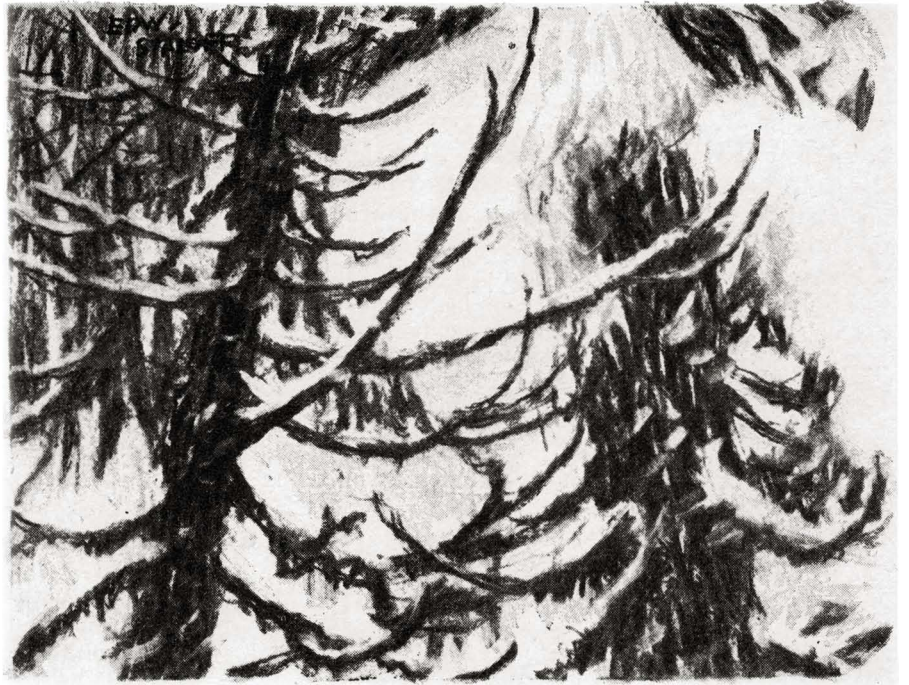
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THE GOLDEN BOOK is indexed for ready reference in the Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature.

Surprisingly enough, the author of this intensely dramatic "man's story" of the Northwoods is a woman, Susan Carleton Jones, a Nova Scotian (1869-1926), and wife of a Director-General of the Canadian Medical Service.



# The Corduroy Road

By S. CARLETON

*He started due east again. He must fetch Megodik and the mine by midnight.*

**I**N THE LAST LIGHT of the gray December day Trench stopped and looked about him.

It was forty miles from Caraquet to the Megodik mine if in his rage and humiliation he had not begun by leaving the trail and taking a fool's short cut. He considered the starless sky, the thickening dusk, the unfamiliar vagueness of the high barrens, and grunted. The best way he could make was to stay where he was.

It was not a remarkably attractive place to make camp. There was a grim coldness about the prospect, which consisted largely of boulders and low scrub, and a small, discomforting wind crept through the withered leaves of the huckleberry bushes with a rustling that was not cheerful. Trench lay down under the lee of a boulder, with some hardly got spruce boughs for a bed. It was not cold; the thing that kept him awake was that incessant dry rustling all around him: it had a nasty, threatening sound, as though it were unsettling the weather. He had reason to prefer the weather steady.

He fell asleep at last, and when he awoke he had forgotten why he was sleeping out, and felt warm and in no hurry. Besides, it was early; the night had cleared, and there was moonlight on his face. The thought sent his foolish content flying. He jumped from his bed and stood staring at the sky as though he saw a miracle. The waning moon was straight before him, when it ought to have been at his back. He faced about in the bland light and saw the east, and day. As he looked the horizon began to glow in dull red, the moonlight to go from honey color to wan. That the sight was exquisite was not what occurred to

him. His short cut of yesterday had turned him round as if he had been raw to the woods.

He was a profane man: he did justice to himself and his waste of time in exactly half a minute. Then he ate, without making a fire, and started due east again. The glow there had faded, and the sky turned white over his head. It was all of a piece with last night's wind, and it did not appeal to him. He calculated hastily that the trail lay to the south, and made a long angle for it. He might fetch Megodik and the mine by midnight if it did not snow; then heaven alone knew how long it would take. And as he thought it, the first fine flake touched his cheek.

"Snow, now!" said Trench angrily. He went on with his angle on the double.

It was just before dark that he came out of heavy spruce woods and saw an unbroken thread of snow stretching off through the bush to his right. He plumped down on his hands and knees and felt through it with his bare hand, to make sure it was the path he sought. The snow had fallen and swirled and grown thicker all day till there had been minutes when he had had to swear to himself that he was going right. But he rose from his knees satisfied. He struck out along the path, hope rising in him with the plain way till he was sure of Megodik at midnight. And through the optimistic conclusion he heard something whining.

"Trapped fox," he said. He stood and tried to peer into the falling snow. He was a hard man to men, never to animals, and in a country of trapping had no opinion of traps. In the snow and the growing dark



Drawings by Edward Staloff

he had an objection to leaving the track, but the thing he could not see kept on whining. Trench swore, marked the sound, and swore again patiently. He left the path and plunged through the light snow, fingering his axe. If the beast were caught by the leg the trap could go. It would serve some Indian right. He moved deviously among snow-covered rocks till he saw his fox, and even in the instant of seeing it jerked up standing. The thing was a dog. There was no mistaking it, even in the failing light.

"Hullo!" he said softly, and it shrieked with rapture, whereby it was no Indian dog; men mean sticks to Indian dogs. This one feebly wagged its tail. It was all it could do, for it was fast in something. Trench stooped over it, looking for the trap, which was not there.

"Heaven knows who you belong to," he ejaculated, "but you've been digging for porcupines, and there's a slump in your stock!" He lifted a good-sized stone, and the dog screamed and rolled backwards. Both its forepaws were smashed, and while it moaned and licked them Trench regarded it with disfavor. It could not walk, and he must still be every bit of ten miles from Megodik.

"If I'd any sense I'd kill the thing," he growled: he took a softly murderous hold of it, and the dog looked at him. The pitiful eyes, the wincing bones, went to something he did not call his heart. There is no drawing-room word for his speech as he slung his axe behind him and very carefully picked up the dog.

It was half perished, and he warmed it inside his coat. He explained to himself that it was the easiest way to carry a small dog. Then he set forth into the white muddle of swirling dusk, and was suddenly aware that his track from his path was already covered, and that he could not hit the trail again in the dark. He was as lost as a fool. He put his burden down grimly, and began to cut spruce for a camp. He was sick with the thought that here was another night

wasted. The dog whined anxiously as it watched him. The axe rang dully in the heavy air, and Trench was angry because he was shivering. He chopped with his might to warm himself, and get a lean-to built: there was no sense in being smothered alive. The dog's sharp bark startled him. He stopped chopping, listened, and went wearily on again. He had not known he was so tired. His hope that the dog belonged to some man trapping near by was faint: he had lost a good dog once, because it would range on its own hook. But the shivering thing kept on barking in a screaming note of uneasiness. Trench wheeled, and saw nothing. Then he spoke angrily, but the dog took no notice.

"Some blasted wild-cat!" he muttered. He was choking with rage at the delay, and the knowledge that he had neither food nor whisky left. He turned to his axe again, and was conscious of a light, a crashing, and a torrent of profanity equal to his own. As the three approached they resolved themselves into a lantern, a man, and a furious insinuation as to Trench's particular business with that particular dog. Even while he threatened, the stranger was down on his knees by it, and Trench stared stupidly. If he had been about to avenge a stolen dog he would not have gone on his knees to do it.

"Did you smash his paws?" asked the owner. The excitement was gone from his voice. He slipped one hand into his pocket, and the lantern swung behind him.

"I'm not an Indian!" snapped Trench. "If you want to know, I heard him crying. He'd been hunting something and had his paws caught where a rock caved on them. I took him out. If he's yours you're not fit to have a dog. Why on earth don't you take care of him?"

He was not a funny sight, standing tall in the snow with his axe in his hand, but the man on his knees laughed.

"Surely," he said; his accent was oddly gentle. "I couldn't tell you were that sort. I'm obliged to you. Were you," there was curiosity or anxiety in his voice, "were you going to make camp with him?"

"I guessed I had to," shortly. "I couldn't get on in the dark. I'm off the track somehow."

"Track where to?"

"Megodik."

"What were you going to do with the dog in the morning?" The man was on his feet now; his hand had come out of his pocket, and he took the dog on one arm, the lantern on the other.

"Oh, I supposed he'd go to Megodik, too!" lightly, because he was ashamed.

"Where are the rest of you?" the lantern slipped upward on the shifted arm, and happened to cast all its light on Trench's face.

Trench shrugged his shoulders. "I'm alone."

"Oh," said the dog owner slowly. "Well, I don't think you'll need that camp you were making! I'll put you on your road in the morning. You'll be your own time making Megodik from here: you're on the"—he turned his shoulder to Trench, sharply, instead of looking at him—"you're on a back track. Come on!" Trench was smarting under his own inferiority already: his only return speech was a grunt. He followed on in silence, and that his legs seemed suddenly to weigh a ton did not help him to speech. He was stupidly and unaccountably annoyed when his guide spoke over his shoulder.

"I'm taking you in for the dog's sake; I'm grateful to you. I live alone except for him, and I don't want men coming out to my ground: there's little enough on it now. I suppose you can hold your tongue about me?"

"If I don't you'll never know it," said Trench: and at the sound in his voice the man turned.

"You'll do," he nodded coolly; "I'll not be troubled from your speaking. Bend your head, and keep close."

IT WAS ALMOST DOUBLE that Trench followed him, and it struck him as rank carelessness that the lantern flickered out, leaving him to blunder in pitchy darkness, just when he must be under very thick trees—for there was certainly no snow falling on him. Then he felt it in his face again, and the blur of it in his eyes against the dazzle of a thrown-open door and a lighted room.

"Walk in," said the man; his intonation was not that of a person accustomed to visitors. He laid down his dog and shut his door before he looked at his guest.

Trench was thankful, because he was staggered.

The place was a mere shack, the fireplace the chief thing in it. It did not take a practiced eye to see it was fire-proof clay, nor that it had a draught like a blast furnace. The wood in it was a solid glowing mass which tore into flame as the man threw a log on it. Trench could have sworn there was an inlet pipe somewhere, and that as he stooped over the log his host turned off the draught, for the fire was ordinary at once.

The man lit a candle.

"I don't always use one," he observed simply, "it's hard to get them out here. But you're not used to the

firelight. I've arranged it so that I can nearly always read by it."

The easy words made Trench feel a fool for the sudden suspicion that had thrilled him. He sat down and took off his boots, wishing he had dry socks. His host was fumbling at the other end of the room; he came back slowly, and threw some clothes down by the fire.

"They're clean," he submitted, with hesitating gravity; "I daresay you can see by the house. I knit the socks. I've plenty of time out here."

Trench picked up the clothes, and was dumb-founded. Their owner could be no sort of trapper, and he wished he had no sick suspicion as to what he was: it brought back Megodik, and the mine, and the unbearable trouble he was in. To get rid of it he stared uneasily round the room. There was a table, some humble crockery, a built-in bunk and a home-made chair: only one. It struck him dully that it was a lonely life that needed only one chair. His gaze traveled past the rifle and shotgun on the wall to an open book on the bunk, an old novel pitifully thumbed and worn; above it, on a shelf, were some rags of old newspapers. The owner of these luxuries was handling his dog, and the dexterity of the pointed fingers startled Trench afresh. He had seen just such hands before, used to scales that weighed infinitesimal gradations, to—if what he were thinking were true he did not want to swallow food here, badly as he needed it.

"What do you do out here?" he demanded roughly.

"Oh," the man looked up coolly, "I live! My name's Gabriel. I shoot enough meat to keep me, and I like the woods."

"Then you're not a trapper?"

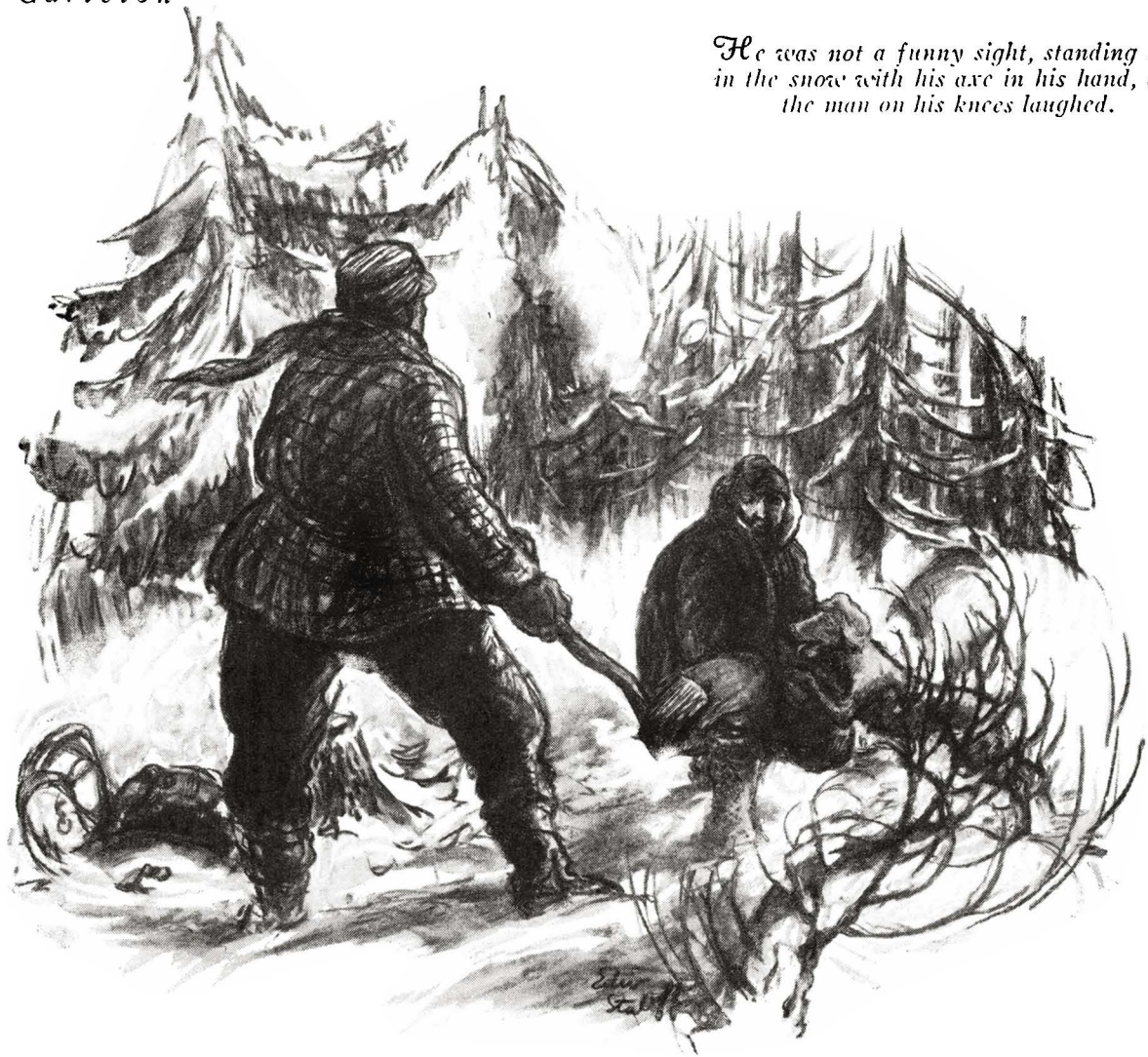
The snarl of the answer astounded him. "I don't snare. It's not a pretty death, hanging."

Trench agreed with him, eagerly and profanely; he had an inborn aversion to traps. In an amity he had not dreamed he could feel to a man who was clearly a mystery—and just now he had a grudge against the least thing mysterious—he drew up his chair to the table. The host produced a box as a seat for himself, and fed his dog before he ate. He had perhaps seen trouble, for he was acutely conscious that the lines on his guest's face came neither from fatigue nor from a day's hunger. Trench was twenty-four, and tough as a lucivee, therefore the drawn look should have gone from his face when he was done eating. But it was no concern of Gabriel's. When the brief understanding over the trapping had died out they sat in silence. Gabriel patted his dog, and saw what he was used to seeing in the fire, but before Trench there rose up blackly the trouble in the mine and the look on its owner's face when he left him at Caraqueet. Every long minute filled him with foreboding. Even now the manager at Megodik—Trench was assistant—might be putting together things which would ruin him, because he was absent. He heaved himself to his feet and looked at Gabriel.

"Whereabouts am I?" he asked harshly. "Could I get to Megodik by daylight if I started now?"

Gabriel shook his head. "You couldn't start. Look!" He opened the door, and Trench was aware that the quiet snowfall was changed to a blizzard.

*He was not a funny sight, standing tall in the snow with his axe in his hand, but the man on his knees laughed.*



The icy force of it swayed past the door, but the sound of it was unmistakable. His unworthy thought when he saw the furnace of a fireplace cut into his mind again. For all he knew, any one in the countryside might be the devil who was ruining him. Even this outlier—but he could not be sure! His eyes searched the shack fiercely.

"Haven't you any other room?" he said.

Gabriel shrugged his shoulders. It seemed to Trench that they were more eloquent than his tongue.

"My life doesn't need two rooms. If you're thinking of the furnace," quietly, "I made it to be warm, and not waste candle-light. I saw you noticed it."

"I'm a miner," said Trench sharply, and in the second of speaking it came over him that he might be one no longer.

Gabriel nodded. If a change came over his face he hid it with that quick averting of his shoulder.

"For God's sake," Trench broke out, "how far is this place from Megodik? I have to get there in the morning!"

"It depends on how you go," unsatisfactorily; he had considering eyes on Trench's mouth, "I don't go there. That wasn't the Megodik trail you'd just left when I came on you; it was only mine to my hard wood patch. It will take you all tomorrow," there was something in his eyes behind their

vagueness, "to get back to the Megodik trail. You can't strike it till you work back nearly to Caraquet."

For the first time in his life his hearer's profanity failed him.

"Then I'm gone," Trench said it to himself, quite unconscious that he spoke at all. "Conroy won't give me any chances if—"

"Conroy?" the quiet mouth bit out the words from the context as if it had turned to a beast's. "Is Conroy at your mine?"

"Manager." Trench had no eyes for the excitement in the other man's.

"What Conroy?" it was as if he had put an iron hand on himself, but again Trench did not notice.

"Sebastian. It's a fine name for a Conroy. Used to be in these parts before." The effort at lightness was a failure. "Why? Do you—did you ever know him?" It was not likely that an outlying remnant like this should know Conroy.

"I don't—think—I did." There was consideration in each word.

"He's a good enough sort," commented Trench dully; for, after all, it was not Conroy who was to blame for his trouble, but his own blank ignorance that he could ever be suspected of what had happened at Megodik. A hundred small things rose before him and showed him he had no chance there at all if his

absence were taken as it must be taken. He looked with hatred at his safe housing, since in it his trouble seemed to have come home to him for the first time. To put it out of his head he went over to the bunk for the shabby novel that lay there, and he stumbled blindly as he walked.

Gabriel's eyes fastened on his back with avid curiosity, and a detached and flaming hatred. Out of them he spoke very softly.

"Better go to bed. You're too tired to read."

Trench did not turn, because he could not speak.

"Better go to bed," repeated the soft voice behind him, "I'll do very well as I am. You take the bunk."

The flame in the speaker's eyes had smoldered down to a steady purpose. Perhaps if he had been the strong man, and Trench the weak, he might have sprung on him from behind and forced all his thoughts out of him. As it was, he sat very still. He was sitting still when Trench lay in the bunk staring at the dying fire and the bright point of flame from the candle—very, very tranquilly still. Trench turned on his side and dreamed of that point of candle flame all night, and of something that seemed to float by his face like spider's webs, and that he could not lift his hand to brush away. Then he had the nightmare, and was sure he was talking in his sleep before an outcast who had a clay furnace and might be a link in his ruin. He heard himself mumbling out the whole story of his trouble at the Megodik mine—and then his voice began to come out loud and distinct and he could not stop it.

"The difficulty was to identify the gold. I had known we were losing gold. When the plates were robbed I went to Conroy, and Conroy said he knew. He said he was sorry. So was I sorry. There was nothing to make Conroy look so queer. If I could have got back from Caraquet before anyone knew I was coming I might have found out something. It's too late now. Old Johnson would help me, perhaps. But anyway, it's too late now!"

Then a far away voice began to tell him something, and he knew he was silent because he must listen very, very carefully. And after that he slept like the dead.

When he woke, Gabriel was at the fire cooking, and there was a feeling in the shack that told him it was morning. Trench got up and began to put on his own

clothes without speaking. He knew exactly what Gabriel would say to him; he waited for it patiently as the man looked up.

"You needn't worry about the trail. I can take you into Megodik by an old corduroy road."

The words seemed to break Trench's apathy. He was conscious that he heaved at his mind as a man heaves at a rock, to get at something in the back of it that he should have remembered. Then he was comfortably sure that it did not matter, as Gabriel went on speaking.

"It is a very easy road. You will have good walking all the way."

And Trench, perfectly aware of the deep and drifted snow outside, was convinced that he would have no heavy walking. He did not seem to be able to break silence unless he were asked to, but he went over to the dog where it basked by the fire and made much of it; he was very glad he had found that dog. Then he followed Gabriel out of the shack, and was dully amazed that the entrance did not lie under trees, but through over-hanging rocks like a tunnel; once out of it, the shack was invisible. When daylight came there was no sun, but Trench was not concerned because he was not finding the way. He had not thought of his trouble since he woke; instead he was full of a senseless gratitude to Gabriel, that stammered out of him when after mid-day they came out on a blueberry barren and the man stopped. Gabriel did not answer the gratitude. He was stooping, scraping in the snow.

"This is the corduroy road," he said; "see?"

Trench saw the old rotten logs as he bared a couple from the snow. "Now, you can go on by yourself! You can't get lost; you can see the road all the way between the bushes. And you know what to do when you get to Megodik."

Trench, with nothing at all in his head, answered that he knew. He held out his hand to Gabriel, but the other turned his shoulder and was gone, muttering something about getting back to his dog. Trench would have run after him, but he had a devouring desire to set out on that corduroy road, where it would be easy walking. Sometimes he stumbled over a log that must have been bigger than the rest, and always he sank deep in snow, but it was light snow, light as

air; he felt no fatigue nor heaviness. And just after dark the logs ended under his feet, and he looked in front of him. He stood in a pasture; a familiar pasture he passed every day of his life.

"Megodik," he said aloud, and without surprise. He was there; just behind the blacksmith's shop, where you turn off from the post road. It occurred to him that the thing to do was to see Johnson, that he and Johnson had business. And he sought Johnson's house circuitously, keeping off the road. The cobwebs on his face worried him, and he kept brushing them away. He forgot them when he opened the door on Johnson and saw him spring clumsily to his feet.

"Mr. Trench," he stammered. "Mr. Trench! My God, sir, do you know what they're saying? They—" he let out the truth helplessly—"There's been no gold stolen since you went away, and they've got Mayne, the detective, here. Whatever kept you away?"

"Finding out who robbed the plates!" said Trench; he was much pleased with the sound of the words. "Conroy says it was I—you know that! But I didn't know it till I guessed it at Caraquet. Come over to the blacksmith's."

"He'll be in bed by now. What do you want of him?" Johnson looked at Trench's face anxiously, and Trench laughed very loud.

"Business," he said. He took the miner by the arm and dragged him out toward the smithy across the corner of the pasture, and was angry when he complained of the heavy walking and wished to go by the road. He stopped and adjured him without swearing, which made Johnson more anxious than ever.

"I know who robbed the plates, and you can obey my orders. If you don't want to help me, say so."

Johnson stopped in a snowdrift and gulped. "I was nigh mad yesterday when I heard it. You'd had time to get back and you didn't come. And—there's not a man who didn't believe Conroy, except me!"

"Then you play up," said Trench cavalierly.

**T**HE SMITHY was dark, for the smith was an early man and lived alone. Trench went to the back door and scratched on it like a dog, and Johnson wiped the sweat from his puzzled face. Scratch-scratching would never wake a tired man.

But the back door opened into darkness. A voice inquired, "All right?"—and Trench whispered: "Yes." The next instant he had the smith by the throat and was inside the smithy, and Johnson, who did not fight well in the dark, lost touch of them. But his blood was crawling in him till he found a candle end. Trench had the smith down as a child holds a kitten, and he was the lighter man.

"Shut the door; tie him," he ordered Johnson. And, being used to obey, the miner did it.

Trench took a hammer and smashed open a second door. There was light enough in the room inside, for it had no window to betray it, and Johnson saw. The smith on the floor had all the appliances for smelting, amalgamating and retorting on the premises—and something more. Conroy himself sat in the windowless room like a rat in a trap; Conroy, who

had accused Trench of robbing the Megodik mine!

It was Johnson who locked the door and fled for Mayne, and when the detective came the bluster was out of Conroy. The smith was not a stout-hearted ally, with a rope cutting into his neck.

He had been in the business for years, off and on, for Mr. Conroy. Oh, yes, he sold the gold after he assayed it; Conroy paid him well. But he wasn't going to jail for it; there wasn't any law that could convict him; he didn't know where the gold came from. Conroy brought it to him—just as he did ten years ago at the Cap d'Or mine, when they ran young Gabriel in for plate robbing. That was Conroy; Gabriel never saw the gold. The third man in the thing was the Frenchwoman's son: he had thought it was he when Trench scratched at the door. But there was no law to convict anyone but Conroy.

And Conroy only sat and stared.

Trench staggered home with Johnson and slept like a stone till morning. Then he began to talk as if he had just learned how, and the miner stood over him with a queer face and no questions till he was done. Then he nodded, as a man nods who knows more than he is told.

"Gabriel," he commented slowly, "I thought he was dead! Oh, yes, I knew him; so did the smith—you heard what he said last night! It's clear enough now, but we all believed in Conroy then. He ruined Gabriel as he'd have ruined you, and for like reason—both of you went to him and made a fuss about missing gold. And you say Gabriel's out there?" he motioned behind him vaguely, toward the wilderness, "Well, he was always one of the queer kind that liked the woods! And he told you about Conroy? Now, I—wonder—how he knew!"

"He didn't tell me." Once more Trench felt himself heaving at his memory and not stirring it, "I—I think I just seemed to know when I saw the smithy. Gabriel never said anything. I named Conroy—that was all."

"He put the truth into your head all right, just the same," grimly. "He had a queer trick that way; I've seen him work it on men. He would have done it to you. He was the sort to snatch at his chance to get at Conroy."

"He never said a word," Trench swore angrily. "He only showed me a short cut over here. I came straight across country by the old corduroy road that comes out into the smithy pasture."

"Where?" Johnson was a Megodik man.

"The pasture. Funny we never noticed it."

"Corduoy road!" shouted the miner. "My God, Mr. Trench—get on your boots and come with me!"

He hurried like a frightened ox through the pasture, and Trench went after him, obstinately secure that it could only be a matter of minutes to come on his track of yesterday. And it was.

He had come over everything—rocks, bushes, and barrens. There was no road, nor a sign of one.

That night it snowed. It is a year now since Trench finally gave up trying to find his way back to Gabriel's house to thank him.