

“Even Unto Death” by Jack London

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It might have been due to mere coincidence, it might have been because there are undreamed of bonds between the quick and the dead, and it might have been that Bat Morganston felt a blind consciousness of the future when he turned suddenly to Frona Payne and asked, “Even unto death?”

Frona Payne was startled for the moment. Her shallow nature would not permit her to understand the strength of a strong man's love; such things had no place in her fickle standard. Yet she knew men well enough to repress her inclination to smile; so she looked up to him with her serious child's eyes, placing a hand on each brawny shoulder, and answered, “Even unto death, Bat, dear.”

And as he crushed her to him, half-doubting, he passionately cried, “If it should happen so, even in death I shall claim you, and no mortal man shall come between!”

“How absurd,” she thought as she freed herself and watched him untangling his dogs. And a handsome fellow he was, as he waded among the fierce brutes, pulling here and shoving there, cuffing right and left and dragging them over and under the frozen traces till the team stood clear. Nipped by the intense cold to a tender pink, his smooth-shaven face told a plain tale of strength and indomitability. His hair, falling about his shoulders in thick masses of silky brown, was probably more responsible for winning the woman's fleeting affections than all the rest of him put together. Yet when men ran their eyes up and down his six feet two of brawn, they declared him a man, from his beaded moccasins to the crown of his wolf-skin cap. But then, they were men.

She kissed him once, twice, and yet a third time, in her shy trusting way; then he broke out the sled with the gee-pole,¹ “mushed-up” the dogs² as only a dog-driver can, and swung down the hill to the main river trail. The meridian sun, shouldering over the snowy summits to the south, turned the tiny frost particles to scintillating gems, and through this dazzling gossamer Bat Morganston disappeared on his journey down the Yukon to Forty Mile. Down there he was accounted a king, in virtue of the rich dirt which was his after the dreary years he had spent in the darkness of the Arctic Circle.

Dawson had no claims upon him. He did not own a foot of gravel in the district, nor was he smitten with its inhabitants — the che-cha-quas³ that had rushed in like jackals and spoiled the good old times when men were men and every man a brother. In fact, the only reason for his presence, and a most unstable one at that, was Frona. He had harnessed his dogs and run up on the ice to renew the pledges of the previous summer, and to plead for an early date. Well, they were to be married in June, and he was re turning to the management of his mines with a light heart. June! — the clean-up promised to be rich; he would sell out; and then, the States, Paris, the world! Of course he doubted — most men do when they leave a pretty woman behind — ; but ere he had reached Forty Mile he no longer mistrusted, and by the time he froze his lungs on a moose-hunt and died a month later, he had attained a state of blissful optimism.

Frona waved him good-bye, and also with a light heart turned back to her father's cabin; but then, she had no doubts at all. They were to be married in June. That was all settled. And it was no unpleasant prospect. To tell the truth, she thought she would rather like it. Men thought a great deal of him, and it was a match not to be ashamed of. Besides, he was rich. People who should know said he could at any time clean up half a million, and if his American Creek interests turned out anywhere near as reported, he would be a second MacDonal. Now this meant a great deal, for MacDonal was the richest miner in the North, and the most conservative guessers varied by several millions in the appraisal of his wealth.

Now be it known that the sin Frona Payne committed was a sin of deed, not fact. There were no mail-teams between Forty Mile and Dawson and as Bat Morganston's mines were still a hundred miles into the frozen wilderness from Forty Mile, no news of his death came up the river. And since he had agreed to write only on the

¹ A gee-pole is a pole tied to the side of a dogsled (usually on the right, hence the name) which can be used by a musher to help move the sled around tight turns. See [The Antarctic Dictionary](#).

² To get the dogs ready and set them to pulling the sled.

³ A derogatory term for a non-Native Alaskan, particularly one with little knowledge of the northern wilderness.

highly improbable contingency of a stray traveler passing his diggings, she thought nothing of his silence. To all intents, so far as she was concerned, he was alive. So the sin she committed was of a verity a sin of deed.

By no method may a woman's soul be analyzed, by no scales may a woman's motive be weighed; so no reason can be given for Frana Payne giving her heart and hand to Jack Crelin within three months of her farewell to Bat Morganston. True, Jack Crelin was a Circle City king, possessed of some of the choicest Birch Creek claims; but the men who had made the country did not rate him highly, and his only admirers were to be found among the sycophantic tenderfeet who generously helped him scatter his yellow dust. Perhaps it was the way he had about him, and perhaps it was the impulsive affinity of two shallow souls; but be it what it may, they agreed to marry each other in June, and to journey on down to Circle City and set up housekeeping after the primitive manner of the Northland.

The Yukon broke early, and soon after that important event the river steamer *Cassiar*, captained by her brother, was scheduled to sail. The *Cassiar* had the mingled honor and misfortune to be both the treasure ship and the hospital ship of the year. In her strong boxes she carried five millions of gold, in her staterooms ten score⁴ of crippled and diseased. And there were also Lower Country traders and kings, returning from their winter labors or pleasures at Dawson. Among these – a little anticipation of the event – were listed Mr. and Mrs. Jack Crelin. But when the sick and heart-weary lifted their voices to heaven at the cruel delay, and the gold-shippers waxed clamorous, the *Cassiar* was forced to sail before her time, and Mr. and Mrs. Jack Crelin were yet man and maid.

“Never mind, Frana,” her brother said; “come aboard and I'll take charge of you. Father Mahan takes passage at Forty Mile, and you'll be snugly one before we say good-bye at Circle City.”

Plimsol marks,⁵ boiler inspectors, and protesting boards of underwriters, not yet having penetrated the dismal dominions of the North, the *Cassiar* cast off her lines, with passengers, freight and chattels⁶ packed like badly assorted sardines. Wolf-dogs, whose work began and ceased with the snow, and who grew high-stomached⁷ with summer idleness, rioted over the steamer from stem to stern or killed each other on the slightest provocation. Stalwart Stick Indians of the Upper River regions lightened their heavy money pouches in brave endeavors to best the white man at his games of chance, or outraged their vitals with the whisky he sold at thirty dollars the bottle. There were squat Mongolian featured Malemute and Innuite wanderers from the Great Dalta [*sid*] two thousand miles away; not among the whites was the jangle of nationalities less pronounced. The nations of the world had sent their sons to the North, and the tongues they spoke were many. In short, the brother of Frana Payne commanded a floating Babel, commanded and guided it unerringly through an uncharted wilderness upon the breast of a howling flood — for the mighty Yukon had raised its sullen voice and roared its anger from mountain rim to mountain rim. Nine months of snow was passing between its banks in as many days, and the journey to the sea was long.

At Forty Mile more passengers and freight were crowded aboard. Among the pilgrims was Father Mahan, and in the baggage was an unpainted pine box, corresponding in size to the conventional last tenement of man.⁸ The rush of life has little heed for death, so this box was piled precariously upon a pyramid of freight on the *Cassiar's* deck. But Bat Morganston, having lain till the moment of shipment in a comfortable ice-cave, did not care. Nobody cared. There were no mourners, save a huge wolf-dog, to whom the taste of his master's lash was still sweet. He crept aboard unnoticed, and ere the lines were cast off had taken up his accustomed vigil on the heap of freight by his master's side. He was such a vicious brute, and had such a fearful way of baring his fangs, that the other canine passengers gave him a wide berth, choosing to leave him alone with his dead.

The cabins were crowded with the sick, so the marriage began on the stifling deck. It was near midnight, but the sun, red-disked and somber, slanted its oblique rays from just above the northern sky line. Frana Payne and Jack Crelin stood side by side. Father Mahan began the service. From aft came the sound of scuffling among half a dozen drunken gamblers; but in the main the human cargo had crowded about the center of interest. And also the dogs.

Still, all would have been well had not a Labrador dog sought a coign of vantage⁹ among the freight. He had traveled countless journeys, was a veteran of a dozen famines and a thousand fights, and knew not fear. The

⁴ Ten score: 200

⁵ A plimsol (or plimsoll) mark is the line painted on the side of a ship to mark the maximum safe waterline when the ship is fully loaded. In this sentence London is pointing out that at the time of this story, there were no regulations concerning how heavily, or carelessly, a ship could be loaded with freight; the “underwriters” would be inspectors hired by insurance companies to ensure that safe freight-loading regulations were followed.

⁶ Chattel: goods or property.

⁷ High-stomached: “Of high courage or spirit; high-spirited, haughty” (OED).

⁸ That is, a coffin.

⁹ “coigne of vantage”: “a position (properly a projecting corner) affording facility for observation or action” (OED). A coign is a projecting corner in a masonry wall. This phrase apparently was – pardon the pun – first coined by William Shakespeare.

truculent front of the dog which guarded the pine box interested him. He drew in, his naked fangs shining like jeweled ivory. They closed with snap and snarl, the carelessly piled freight tottering beneath them.

At this moment Father Mahan blessed the two which were now one, and Jack Crelin solemnly added, "Even unto death."

"Even unto death," Frona Payne repeated, and her mind leaped back to the other man who had spoken those words. For the instant she felt genuine sorrow and remorse for what she had done. And at that instant the two dogs shut their jaws in the death-grip, and the long pine box poised on the edge of its pyramid. Her husband jerked her from beneath as it fell, end on. There was a crash and splintering; the cover fell away, and Bat Morganston, on his feet, erect, just as in life, with the sun glinting on his silky brown locks, swept forward.

It happened very quickly. Some say that his lips parted in a fearful smile, that he hung his arms about Frona Payne and held her till they fell together to the deck. This would seem impossible, seeing that the man was dead; but there are those who swear that these things were done. However, Frona Payn shrieked terribly as they drew her from beneath the body of her jilted lover, nor did her shrieking cease till land was made at Circle City.

And Bat Morganston's words were true, for to-day, if one should care to journey over to the hills which lie beyond Circle City, he will see, side by side, a cabin and a grave. In the one dwells Frona Payne; in the other Bat Morganston. They are waiting for each other till their fetters shall fall away and the Trump of Doom breaks the silence of the North.

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