



# FROZEN WINGS

by FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

*“Hawk” Breed was out to beat him; but “Rusty” Wade made a dare-devil’s landing and pledged himself to play a desperate game!*

**R**USTY” WADE’S PLANE, the *Air Musher*, was doing a hundred and twenty-five miles an hour as the little mining camp, Umiak, came over the rim of a cold world. Rusty was in a hurry for the days were all too brief and the nights too long. As it was lie was doomed to make a night landing at Gold Poke, farther south.

“I’d like to see anything stop me today,” he growled. “I’d—hello! There’s Umiak and—what in the deuce is that?” He slowed down, circled and dropped lower.

Five dots on the snow appeared to he moving slowly toward the largest building in camp. The five dots were dragging out something. Rusty suddenly grinned.

“Five kids dragging a Christmas tree to the

schoolhouse. Holy smoke! Is Christmas that near? Hmmmm!” Rusty grew thoughtful.

Each year he promised himself a real, old-fashioned Christmas, and each year Fate decreed that he be riding high in the air, eating cold sandwiches instead of thrusting his long legs under a table groaning with turkey and the other good things that went with a Christmas dinner.

“My idea,” he mused, “would be to get up in the morning and open up some presents. I wouldn’t want much—just a package or two to open up. Then I’d like to tune in on a radio and listen to some Christmas songs coming in from the South.

“Some time during the day I’d like to sit down opposite a pretty girl and eat dinner. Hmmmm! It’d be something like this—soup to sorta get the old appetite in good shape, then— No, danged if I’d want anything

else. The best way would be to start right in on the turkey, then you could eat more of it. Now and again a fellow could grab off a mouthful of celery, cranberries and so forth—but the main idea would be to work on the turkey.

“I’d have to make room, some way, for a lot of sweet spuds, well buttered and then covered with turkey gravy. Later on, I’d tamp the whole feed into place with a piece of mince pie and maybe a slab of pumpkin pie, too. After that I’d like to laze back in an easy-chair, smoke a good cigar and look at the girl. Just sort of dream for a few hours.

“About eight o’clock in the evening I’d start working on the turkey again—just cutting off large, thin slices of cold turkey. About nine o’clock I’d take the girl to the usual dance and we’d dance all night. I love flying better than anything in the world, but I’ve got a Christmas coming to me and—”

He grew suddenly determined. “I’m going to set aside this coming Christmas for myself. And no amount of money is going to induce me to fly that day. I’ve got it coming to me. I’m going to collect. I’ll go on to Gold Poke and come back to-morrow and make a date with Mary Heath—the prettiest teacher in the whole Yukon country.” He reconsidered this last statement. “That is I’ll make a date if somebody hasn’t beaten me to it,” he added thoughtfully.

In the Umiak district there were nearly two hundred men who liked to dance. There were exactly twenty girls. Thus it was that competition was keen. Every girl would receive at least ten invitations to attend the Christmas dance in the log schoolhouse. While Mary Heath was sure to receive nearly two hundred invitations.

Once at the dance it was an inspiring sight to see the male wall flowers grouped about the room. Tag dances and circle two-steps were frequent so that some time during the evening every man got at least one dance.

Rusty was about to leave Umiak behind when he noticed a plane being pushed into a hangar. One look was sufficient for Rusty.

“Hawk’ Breed’s come North again. And Hawk is sweet on Mary Heath!”

The *Air Musher* changed its course with startling abruptness. The last time Rusty had seen Hawk Breed was when he had flown his enemy south to a hospital. And now he was North again, or at least some one who flew Breed’s kind of plane had just arrived.

Rusty looked down and caught sight of a hurrying figure.

“Yep, that’s Breed. I recognize his parka. And he’s heading for the school-house. The cuss has recognized me, too.”

WITHOUT a moment’s hesitation Rusty cut his switches and skimmed the treetops. There was just room enough to land—providing he had plenty of luck. But he could never take off from the spot. However, he knew if he landed at the regular field he never could beat Hawk Breed to the school-house.

The *Air Musher*’s skis broke a trail through the snow. Snow filled the air until it seemed as if the plane must be smothered, then it lurched to a stop. Rusty legged it across country at top speed, leaped a fence, and beat Breed into the schoolhouse by a scant fifty feet.

Mary Heath, who was nobody’s fool, looked up from her work. She had seen the desperate landing and the race. So had the pupils. They were grinning. Mary Heath was flushing.

“Rusty Wade!” she cried, “are you trying to kill yourself?”

“No, Mary, I’m not. Will you have Christmas dinner with me? And may I take you to the dance afterward?” Rusty blurted the whole message out in a single breath.

“Why—Rusty—let me think,” she began.

“Don’t think,” he interrupted, “or you’ll say no. Particularly don’t think about last year when I was called away the last minute and you were left in the lurch.” He smiled into her eyes and the girl was decidedly fussed now. Few, indeed, could resist Rusty Wade’s smile.

“Why, of course I’ll go with you, Rusty,” she answered. “You are entitled to a day of rest at least once a year. You may have all my time Christmas day and evening if you want it.”

“Gee, Mary, you’re a peach,” he cried. “You don’t know what a real Christmas will mean to me. I’ve got to go on to Gold Poke, but I’ll be back some time to-morrow. I want to be here in plenty of time so that nothing can stop me the last minute. I’ll never forget this, Mary.”

Then he was gone, a dashing knight of the air, dressed not in armor, but in the flying togs of the North—caribou-skin parka, with hood faced with wolverine fur which does not gather the moisture from the breath and freeze it to the face; dressed, also, in mukluks which keep out the cold, yet are excellent footwear in case a pilot is forced down and must walk back.

AS HE passed through the door Hawk Breed entered. The two men nodded briefly. The girl smiled at Breed. The man could be mighty pleasant to the fair sex when occasion demanded. He was good looking in a hawkish sort of way and few, indeed, aside from Rusty and his close friends, knew of Breed's devilry. Few, indeed, knew that each man felt they would some day meet and settle their difficulties in a finish fight high in the air.

"Hello, Mary!" Hawk smiled carelessly. "May I have the honor of your company on Christmas day—dinner, dance and whatever other form of entertainment the camp puts on?"

"I'm sorry," she answered, "but Rusty Wade has already asked me. I'll save you a dance though—if you want one."

"If I want one?" His voice was low and tense with feeling. "In all the world there is no girl I'd rather dance with. I know I may seem selfish, but I'd like every dance. That, Mary, is what you mean to me." And Hawk made the statement in a way he knew from experience would please any girl. "Suppose Rusty doesn't show up on Christmas? Flying conditions often spoil the plans of the best pilots. Suppose—well, Mary, in that event may I have the honor of your company?"

"If Rusty doesn't show up on Christmas day, Mr. Breed," the girl answered, "then you may take his place."

With difficulty Hawk concealed the satisfaction he felt. Only another flyer would appreciate what a real Christmas would mean to one who had spent so many hours alone, winging his way, day after day, over a frozen land. In denying Rusty his day of pleasure, Hawk knew he would square up for a number of defeats he had suffered at the hands of the lanky, rusty-headed pilot.

He bowed his way from the room and hurried over to the road house which served as a hotel to those who passed through Umiak. Alone, in silence, he studied the situation. A mind trained in cooking up tricks and evil designs rejected plan after plan.

"Might have a friend fix his motor and keep him at Gold Poke!" Then he shook his head. "Too crude. That won't do. No, it's got to be something unusual. Something whereby I can take advantage of his overdeveloped sense of duty. He's got the idea he owes a certain duty to these miners, trappers and traders because he's taught them to depend on him. Yes, that's the way to hook that baby. If I could only send him off on a wild-goose chase and lose him I'd be sitting

pretty. Hmmm! It's queer, but a man's mind won't spark when he tries to force it. I'm going down and join the gang hanging around the stove—maybe they'll give me an idea."

WHEN winter's grip tightens on the North and mining ceases, men gather around the stove and spin yarns. Some of the stories have been told so many times the sour dough relating the yarn actually believes the experience happened to Him. First conceived to counteract some experience related by an accomplished liar, the story grows with the telling and retelling and takes on the garb of truth. In the end a man will swear to it.

Under the spell of tobacco smoke and the warmth of a stove built from an oil drum, romance thrives. Hawk Breed seated himself on the outskirts of the group and listened. They came in rapid succession—stories of bear hunting; of Indian potlatches; fights with men; fights with animals and then: "Me and Joe had a bad case of cabin fever that winter and—" began a sour dough.

"What's cabin fever?" Hawk Breed demanded.

"I guess you're a *chechahko*—a tenderfoot—or you wouldn't ask that question," the miner replied. "It come from two or more men bein' cooped up together month after month. You get on each other's nerves and pretty soon you're hatin' each other. You fight to a finish and sometimes you kill. It's pretty hard to believe just how much you can hate at such times. And those you think the most of you hate the most. That, young feller, is cabin fever."

The others nodded and the story went on—the story of the white silence of winter; of nerves that were raw, of men who fought each other and wrecked their cabin and its contents; of men who set forth for the nearest community in the dead of winter, who worked together on the trail to survive yet never spoke. Of men who renewed their friendship with a silent handclasp after a few days' contact with others.

When the story was ended, Hawk Breed left the group. He had heard enough. He walked over to the owner of the road house—a sour dough named Dud Perkins.

"Whatever became of that schooner that was frozen in last winter, Mr. Perkins," he asked. "Did she get out?"

"No!"

"Why didn't the crew abandon her this summer?"

"She's too good a ship, that's why. Besides she's got two hundred thousand dollars' worth of fur aboard,

and most of the crew has a share in it. Fur ain't getting any cheaper, either. They'll make twenty per cent while they're waiting to get out."

Dud Perkins regarded Hawk Breed with interest. He was a keen student of human nature. He rather had an idea Breed was the sort of a man who had a purpose behind his every act. "Why, Mr. Breed?"

"Just curious is all." Breed pretended to be careless. "I was wondering if men on an ice-bound ship ever had cabin fever."

"Sure!"

"It must be a madhouse!"

"It is," Perkins answered.

Hawk Breed hesitated at the next question, then slowly said: "Isn't the skipper of that schooner a friend of Rusty Wade's?"

"Yes, Mr. Breed, he is," Perkins said with some feeling. "And to satisfy your curiosity I'll just add that the skipper's name is Dan Dutton and the schooner's name is *Ellen Dow!*"

Hawk Breed flushed slightly. "Thanks," he said as he walked away. Then to himself he added, "I had a hunch I shouldn't have asked that question. Oh, well, he can't put two and two together. Just the same some of these birds aren't so dumb as they look."

BREED headed for the Signal Corps office next. The United States Army maintains a telegraph line in various parts of Alaska and the operators know pretty much of what is going on all over the Territory. Hawk Breed got to the point at once.

"How long since word has been received from the schooner *Ellen Dow?*" he asked.

"A good many weeks," the operator replied. "She used to send out weekly reports, but I guess her radio has gone dead. None of the boys has picked up any word lately. It's pretty tough when their set is out of commission—can't send word out. Maybe they can't even receive. A good radio has saved many an outfit from cabin fever."

"No doubt," Breed agreed. He was in a high state of satisfaction as he hurried over to his plane. From a locked compartment he took a number of maps and charts. These he studied. Then he ordered the bus serviced and, a half hour later, flew into the night. Two hours later he dropped on a snow-covered plateau and was greeted by his brother, "Kid" Breed.

A cave had been fitted up and was stocked with oil, gasoline, radio equipment, several machine guns and considerable ammunition and food. If ever Hawk

Breed slipped and the authorities were too close behind him he could hide out at this point for months with comparative safety.

"What's the excitement?" Kid Breed demanded.

"Plenty! We've got a chance to get in a good dig at Rusty Wade and if we're lucky we can get rid of him for good. A man might beat Wade to a pulp and it wouldn't hurt him much, but he's got a sentimental streak, and if we can knock him out of spending Christmas at Umiak—something he's looked forward to for years—that'll hurt. Also, when the story comes out, he'll be laughed at all over Alaska. Help me get that short-wave-length transmitter into the bus. We've got to hurry. Briefly this is the plan—Rusty Wade's going to receive a distress call from an old friend, Captain Dan Dutton of the schooner *Ellen Dow.*"

"Yeah?" Kid Breed grinned evilly. "Yeah, and we've got to drop this transmitter down on a direct line between the schooner and Umiak. No, we can't operate it from here—some radio shark might be fussing around with a direction finder and wonder how a schooner frozen in in the arctic could be sending from a point southeast of Umiak and miles inland."

"Hawk," exclaimed the Kid with admiration, "you're a wonder. You never overlook nothing."

True, the Hawk might be a wonder, but he had never yet outguessed Rusty Wade. For a moment Hawk Breed looked serious, then he smiled. It was a cold, crafty smile. His eyes narrowed as he pictured himself dancing with Mary Heath while Rusty Wade roared through the white silence of the arctic.

RUSTY WADE was walking home from school with Mary Heath when the signal corps operator hailed him.

"Just looking for you, Rusty," he said, "come over here and listen. This message has come through twice now. It may come again. If it don't, then I'll tell you what was said."

Rusty looked at Mary and Mary looked at Rusty. Somehow each sensed that their Christmas plans were to be upset. Neither spoke, but Mary smiled softly.

A crash of static filled the station room, then a voice, clear and distinct though weak.

"All stations in Alaska stand by! Captain Dan Dutton of the *Ellen Dow* speaking. Radio receiving set out of commission. Transmitter likely to go at any time. The ship is a madhouse. All hands suffering from cabin fever and fighting is a daily occurrence. The cook went insane and committed suicide, and the approach

of Christmas is increasing the danger because this is the second Christmas the men have been locked in the ice. Tell Rusty Wade the schooner needs—” The voice trailed away into silence.

“That’s what happens every time,” the operator explained. “He gets about that far along, then something in his transmitter quits. It’s almost as if a battery had gone dead or something got too hot and burned out. Stick around and maybe we can get him again.”

Rusty and Mary waited in silence. The pilot was thinking and thinking hard. He had been iced in one winter on a trading schooner. He had known the strain. It was particularly difficult at Christmas time. For generations men had instinctively turned homeward, when possible, Christmas time. Then home ties were strongest. And such ties spanned the thousands of miles of land and ice, found each heart and pulled to the breaking point.

Yes, Rusty had seen men go mad and then they broke. At midnight he quit. Mary Heath had brought in a hot meal for Rusty and the operator, then she had waited with them.

“Think hard,” Rusty said in leaving the station, “did he say anything other than what I heard?”

“No, except he said something about cabin fever several times. That’s all.”

Rusty turned to the girl. “Come on, Mary, I’ll walk home with you.”

Slowly they made their way to the girl’s cabin. “There’s only one thing for me to do, Mary, and that’s light out for the *Ellen Dow*. I think I know what they need. I think I know what’s happening there right now—men at each other’s throats and all that. It’s a madhouse, that schooner. The silence alone is enough to drive a man crazy. I think, Mary, I can get back in time for Christmas.”

“You are going before Christmas?” she asked.

He nodded, and though his face was almost concealed in the parka hood she caught a wistful expression around his strong mouth. “After Christmas might be too late,” he explained.

He made no mention of the hundreds of miles he must fly into the arctic night; guided by instinct, an occasional peak and the stars. Then he must leave the land behind and fly over the ice and pick out a speck of a schooner, probably drifted over with snow. After that he must land.

It took a real man and a real motor to do that and the odds were all against both. And yet he talked of

getting back in time to keep an engagement. Instead of a flight of more than two thousand miles he might be talking of stepping across the street.

“I think I can make it, but I may be a little late,” he said again. “You won’t mind?”

“Of course not, Rusty. And don’t worry if you are real late. I’ll take care of the Christmas dinner and have everything ready when you arrive—no matter how late it is.”

“I sure appreciate it, Mary. Of course I might put it off until—” He choked back the thought and shook himself almost furiously. “I’m a darned weakling,” he snarled, “trying to sell myself on putting it off when I know after Christmas will be too late. Well, good night. I’ve got some running around to do. There’s certain stuff I need that’ll help cure cabin fever and I must get it.”

“Medicine?” she inquired.

“Sort of,” he answered.

NO ONE saw Rusty Wade take off except his mechanic. For nearly two hundred yards the plane lumbered down the landing field before it lifted even slightly. Then it settled back. With throttle wide open Rusty left the field and roared over the snow-covered tundra. Just when he felt defeat was certain the plane lifted and began its sluggish attempt to climb.

“Just about as big a load as the old *Air Masher* ever lifted,” he growled, “but we’re in the air.”

He looked down and saw the faint outlines of the schoolhouse where he had landed just a few days before and won an engagement with Mary Heath. He smiled grimly. It had taken all the dog teams in Umiak and several strong men to drag the *Air Masher* up to the landing field for its take-off to Gold Poke. The smile faded. There would be no more smiles for many long and weary hours to come.

He climbed steadily, for he must lift the load over a mighty range of mountains before he reached the Arctic Ocean. As a result he failed to notice a trapper’s cabin with gleaming lights and Hawk Breed’s plane near by. But Hawk saw Rusty. He let out a yell that could have been heard a mile.

“I knew it! I knew he’d bite. That poor sap is off, and I don’t care if he never comes back. There’s no limit to that bird’s conceit—thinking he can find an ice-bound schooner in the arctic on a moonless winter night.” Hawk listened a moment. The steady drone of the *Air Masher*’s motor grew faint, lingered musically on the frosty air, then died.

“And so died Rusty Wade,” said Hawk, grinning. “And now for little Mary Heath.”

“Yeah,” Kid Breed observed, “but if Rusty should happen to find the schooner I’d give ten years of my life to see the look on his face when he learns he’s been tricked into flying away from a Christmas dinner. And what a laugh the North will give him. Ridicule kills a man quicker than a bullet—and it’s more painful. It looks to me, Hawk, as if we’d have this neck of the woods pretty much to ourselves from now on.”

And while Hawk Breed and his brother enjoyed themselves Rusty Wade flew steadily northward. Twelve thousand feet was his ceiling with that load. There were mountains that towered fifteen thousand feet in that cold range that stood a barrier to all men afoot and most men in the air.

Rusty made out various peaks and formations along the course that had served as landmarks on other flights. One and all were snow-capped, but this was an aid in this instance as they stood boldly out in the darkness. And when at last the peaks loomed so high that his skis barely cleared them the lone pilot swung along until he recognized a snow-swept pass. Then twisting and turning between the peaks that often missed his wing tips by two or three hundred feet he broke through the barrier and the arctic lay far ahead.

Frequently he switched on a small light and checked over his instrument board or plotted his next course, but mostly he rode in the darkness, flying by instinct and the aid of the cold arctic stars.

HOURS later the land lay behind him; the arctic beneath. He followed the longer course and swung along the coast, checking on headlands as he flew. The point of land he sought was long in coming, but in time it loomed out of the night—sheer, unfriendly, cold, silent. On a previously plotted course he flew at slow speed, losing altitude, watching the gloomly area below him. How warm and snug his plane felt just then; how he gloried in the motor on which life itself depended.

“Too far,” he presently muttered. “The *Ellen* lays sixty miles northeast of that headland! Nothing to do but go back and try again.”

Three times he returned to the headland only to overshoot his mark on each attempt. His eyes were tired from the constant straining. His fingers on the controls were numb.

“If they only knew I was coming and would burn a

flare,” he growled, “if they would only hear my motor. But they’re probably inside where it’s warm. And if they did happen to come outside their ears would be covered with the parka hood.”

The fourth time luck was with him. But it was luck and nothing else. Just a flash of yellow light as some one stepped from a lighted room into the night. He fairly tore towards the spot. It was repeated as the man reentered the vessel.

Rusty had the compass bearing now. He never lost it. He dropped low, and the masts of a schooner flashed past. Snow had drifted high on one side. But the visible portion was a craft of ice—spars, shrouds and masts were ice-coated. Yes, and something else—the ice-coated figure of a man swinging from a boom.

“They’ve hanged somebody,” Rusty cried. “Poor devils! The *Ellen’s* a madhouse, and no fooling.”

Back he swung, picking out a landing field as best he could. Then, with nerves tense, he dropped to the ice. His skis screamed over the snow. The plane creaked and groaned, almost turned on her nose then lurched to a stop.

Rusty threw open the door and looked out. The silence was maddening. For once the ice was not moving and the hand of death seemed on the place.

“White silence,” Rusty whispered. “It hasn’t changed since I was frozen in. Listen! What’s that?”

It was the scream of a man in agony or was it madness? Rusty ran from the plane to the schooner and scraped the frost from one of the port holes. A strange scene greeted his eyes. The cabin was unusually large, built so that men might gather about and enjoy themselves in happier days.

Now half of the bearded, fur-clad figures were against the wall. Terror filled their eyes. A giant of a man had torn his parka from his body and stood, naked to the waist as he defied them.

“I’m sick of you all,” he snarled. “Sick of your accursed faces. Come on! I want to feel the impact of my hard fists against your soft bodies. I want to beat you down and watch you die. Who’ll be first? Come on!” His roar changed from a deep bellow to a high-pitched scream.

Then a gaunt man stepped before him—Dan Dutton, the schooner’s master, whom tradition and the laws of the sea had given even the power of life and death. Men gone mad often felt the force of the captain’s word. It was not the man before them who spoke, but the authority of the combined nations of the world. And men obeyed.

And now Dan Dutton, sick, but game, faced the giant.

"Jake! Go to your bunk. You're tired. Rest up! Tomorrow's Christmas and—"

The ship's bell broke in. *Ding-ding! Ding-ding! Ding-ding! Ding-ding!* Eight bells, twelve o'clock. It was Christmas.

"Merry Christmas!" Dutton cried.

A mad laugh came from the giant's throat. He threw his head back and his teeth gleamed white in the light. He waved his hand and the smoke from many pipes eddied and grew still.

"Chnsimas! Christmas!" Then a string of terrible oaths fell from his lips.

Rusty Wade hesitated, then stepped to the door and entered. a

"Merry Christmas," he cried.

"We're all mad!" a sailor screamed. "We're all mad! This ghost comes from the night—and no human being within hundreds of miles."

FROST gleamed from every hair in Rusty's parka. There was almost a halo of frost around his face. He threw back the hood of his parka and disclosed his freshly shaved face. Dan Dutton threw his hand up before his eyes.

"Am I dreaming?" he muttered. "Am I mad? Or—"

"It's me, Dan. It's Rusty. I flew up. I figured you needed me!"

Dan's big hand flew out and gripped Rusty's. Then he dragged Rusty into the small compartment that was his private quarters. For a moment he looked into the younger man's face. Then sobs shook his wasted frame. And he, whose iron nerve had held a crew in check for months, broke down and cried. "I'm a woman, Rusty, but I can't help it. I've got to cry."

"You're one of the gamest men I've known or ever expect to know," Rusty answered.

"Scurvy got me, Rusty," the skipper explained.

"I've wanted to break, but I couldn't. It's been a madhouse the last three months. Our radio went out of commission and we couldn't get news from the outside, nor could we send anything out. If we could have I'd have offered you any price to come to our aid. I knew you'd get here if anybody could. But—Rusty. How did you know we needed you? Rusty! God sent you!"

"Yes, Dan, I guess He did," Rusty said. "Now let's go out there and straighten up this mess."

"What had we better do? It's got beyond me now.

Ordinary rules don't work. The thing you think will straighten them out touches them off. I've got two men with knife wounds for'd. Two others have tried to escape over the ice. One was lost, but they don't know it. They think I hung him to the boom for mutiny. But I only strung up a dummy. For a while they feared me. It kept them down, but the white silence, the close contact, the same faces day after day grew stronger than my will. And to-night—the night before Christmas—Jake went crazy!"

"I'll tell you what to do," Rusty answered. "I've been through this myself and I know the medicine that will cure. Chase 'em forward and let me have the cabin to myself. Will you do that?"

"I'll give it a try, Rusty!" With an effort Dan Dutton regained his composure. Then he stepped into the room.

"You men get forward and stay there for a half hour. Out with you." The old ring of authority was there. "Come on, I'm going, too." He led the way; the others followed, but the giant Jake muttered to himself.

RUSTY WADE worked desperately.

He made repeated trips from the *Air Musher* to the schooner and the ice about the plane was littered with material the aircraft had yielded. The half hour became forty minutes, then he called them.

As one man they moved aft, scowling, sullen, cursing each other for trivial things and receiving snarling retorts in return.

Rusty opened the door and they entered. A green Christmas tree stood in one corner. It was lighted with candles and trimmed with tinsel—a tree cut more than a thousand miles away less than twenty-four hours before.

"It's green!" A sailor cried hoarsely as he ran forward. "Look, boys, a green tree. The first we've seen in nearly two years. Green! Living green. Boys, there is a world beyond the ice."

But another caught up a potato. He ate it as one might eat an apple.

"Look! Spuds!" For months his system had cried out for fresh vegetables. And now he held a raw potato in his hand.

Their eyes roved the room. The table was piled high with fresh vegetables and there was turkey enough for two meals with all the trimmings. A box of cigars stood open, but all hands ignored it. They were eating the fresh vegetables.

And while they wolfed down their food Rusty

overhauled the radio sending and receiving set and installed new parts. The trouble was not serious, mostly burned-out tubes and an amplifier that needed adjusting. Presently he spoke into the transmitter.

“Hello! Umiak! Hello! Yes, I can heat you. It’s Rusty Wade. Reception is perfect. Put Mary Heath on the air. Hello, Mary. Yes, I’m all right. Made it in good shape. Got here just in time, too. Listen, Mary, sing a Christmas carol. It’s just what we need to—to”—he lowered his voice, but she heard—“to break ’em down,” he added.

There was a brief delay, then from the loud speaker came the golden notes of the girl’s voice.

*“Silent night. Holy night.  
All is calm! All is bright!”*

A peace seemed to come into the room; a presence, felt, yet invisible, moved among them. Tenseness dropped away and for the first time in months men relaxed.

“A woman’s voice,” whispered a sailor. “Not a phonograph with a scratchy needle, but a woman’s voice. She might have been my mother. Sweet!” He spoke the words softly and tears slipped down his cheeks. Awkwardly he reached across the table.

“Sorry, Swede, for some of the things I’ve done to you. You understand, Swede.”

“It bane my fault,” the Swede answered. “Aye go off half cocked aye tell you.”

But the giant Jake only muttered. And yet Rusty thought he saw a change. As the girl finished speaking their shouts spanned the cold miles and reached her ears. She could not see them, but something they put into their approval helped her to picture the scene—men penned in by the walls of a ship and the white silence. Her eyes filled with tears and she sang the song over again. And to her ears came only silence. Even static appeared to have been stilled.

“Look,” Rusty whispered. “Look at Jake!”

Into Jake’s eyes came the light of reason. It came slowly, timidly, as the song searched amid the madness of his brain and found reason. A sigh came from his depths.

“Oh, God!” he whispered. “Where have I been?” He pressed his big fingers against his eyes, and when he again looked about he was the Jake they had known—the Jake who did his own work like a man and helped the others out.

And this time Mary Heath heard no applause. The spell of peace was upon them; the horror of the past

was behind. No man would break the spell, and the girl so far away understood.

And presently Dan Dutton started as though awakening from a dream. “Where’s Rusty?”

He dashed outside. Rusty was pouring gasoline into his tanks and making ready for the return trip.

“Hey, you big stiff,” Dutton shouted, “aren’t you going to stay for Christmas dinner?”

“Nope, got a date,” Rusty answered.

“Listen, Rusty,” Dutton pleaded, “you had a lot of luck getting here, but it may not last on the return trip. Why not make sure of a Christmas dinner by sticking around with us?”

“My luck’s got to hold out,” Rusty insisted, “you see I promised myself to spend this Christmas with a certain young lady. There’ll be about fourteen hours of Christmas left when I take off and it’s going to take at least ten of ’em for me to fly back. And—the lady’s waiting. No gentleman will ever keep a lady waiting.”

They stood about and watched him service his plane and later, when his motor was warmed up and he was ready to take off, they helped him break the skis loose from the ice. Considerably lighter, the *Air Musher* lifted after a short run and vanished in the gray black of the southern sky.

Dan Dutton and his men returned to their schooner. A voice was muttering in the loud speaker. “This is the operator at Umiak. Tell Rusty Wade to delay starting at least twelve hours—a blizzard is raging two hundred miles north of Umiak. Why don’t you answer?”

Dan Dutton stepped to the transmitter.

“Too late, Umiak,” he said, “Wade has just left.”

A groan came over the air.

MARY HEATH looked into the night. A flurry of snow eddied in front of her window. The storm had reached Umiak. She looked at the dock. It was eight o’clock—four hours of Christmas remained.

“If we could only have reached Rusty before he started back,” she cried, “but—still—I doubt if that would have stopped him. He was so determined to spend this Christmas as he wanted to and now the day is almost gone.”

She glanced at the Christmas dinner. The table had been set for hours. The turkey was ready to go into the oven. She shuddered and could not enjoy the warmth of the room with Rusty tossing about in that blizzard, flying blind, groping his way through mountain ranges, searching for the dot on the map that was Umiak.



Some one knocked sharply on the door.

"Come in!" she called.

Hawk Breed entered. His parka was covered with snow. He threw the hood back, then smiled.

"Well, Mary, it's about time to start for the dance."

"I'm waiting for Rusty," she answered.

"Then you'll miss the dance," he informed her. "No man can fly to Umiak on such a night. He can't even find it. Rusty's down somewhere waiting for the storm to blow over."

"Rusty isn't down," she insisted.

"Besides," he suggested, "the others expect you at the dance." There was something in that argument when girls were so scarce.

"Rusty has until twelve o'clock," she said slowly, "after twelve o'clock it will no longer be Christmas. I'll run over to the dance then. But Rusty has all of my Christmas time."

Hawk Breed wandered over to the dance. His brother, Kid Breed, had been drinking moonshine. He was somewhat the worse for wear and he was talking too much. "Hawk put one over on Wade," he was saying. "Sent in a fake call from the *Ellen Dow* and Rusty's there now."

Kid Breed's companions laughed loudly. The word spread about. It was a good joke on Rusty every one thought. It was not that they wanted Rusty to come to any harm, but because he had been two jumps ahead of Hawk so long. Now Hawk had slipped one over and swiped a pretty girl from under Rusty's eyes.

The signal corps operator wandered into the dance, looked about, then disappeared. As he passed Hawk Breed he laughed.

"What's the joke, brother?" Hawk demanded.

"He who laughs last—" drawled the operator. "So have your laugh now, Breed."

IT WAS eleven o'clock when Hawk returned to Mary Heath's cabin. The odor of roasting turkey filled the air.

"Decided to cook your Christmas dinner at the eleventh hour, eh?" Breed observed.

"Eleventh hour is right," the girl replied with a glance at the clock.

Hawk looked puzzled. A half hour passed. Hawk suddenly straightened up. Was that the roar of a motor above the howling of the storm? He listened, then relaxed. The girl had taken the turkey from the oven and put it on a platter. Now she began to mobilize the side dishes.

"There!" she exclaimed, surveying the table with pardonable pride. "A wonderful dinner."

"And only you to eat it," Hawk observed.

Before she could answer some one knocked. "Come in!" she called.

The door opened and Rusty Wade filled the doorway. He was a man of snow from head to foot. The heat of the room began to melt it slowly.

"Hello, Mary!" he said. His face was gray with exhaustion and strain. "I'm right on time. Hello, Breed!"

Breed nodded. "Thanks, Breed!" Rusty said as he pulled off his parka.

"What for?" Breed blurted.

"Many things! First because of your fake message from the *Ellen Dow*. It was the first I had heard that messages had quit coming from her, or I would have gone to her before. That set me to thinking. With the aid of the operator we checked up with radio stations about Alaska and got a compass bearing from where you were sending. I saw through your little game. Mary and I talked it over. I had a hunch of what might be going on at the schooner and we decided I should go. It was a good thing I did. Coming back was tough. I stopped at three stations and sent word to Mary I was on my way. You see she didn't know just when to put the turkey into the oven and no gentleman would keep a lady's dinner waiting. But you helped me on that, too. By triangulation the boys doped out the exact location of your trick station. I stopped there and sent word to the Umiak operator. He came over and told Mary to put the turkey into the oven. The rest was easy. I located Granite Peak, then dropped through the storm onto the river. And I taxied down the river to Umiak—there are more ways than one of finding a camp in a blizzard. Thanks, Breed, and—good night!"

Hawk Breed slowly left the room. Of a sudden he realized that the local operator had been talking. He appreciated now that when people laughed over the trick he had played on Rusty Wade they were laughing at him—not with him. His head was lowered in shame as he walked out into the snow.

In the snug cabin Rusty Wade smiled across the table at Mary Heath, then slowly he carved off a large, thin slice of golden-brown turkey. From the arctic to the southern boundary of Alaska the storm raged—but Rusty Wade didn't mind. This was one Christmas dinner he would not eat on frozen wings.