

THE OUTCASTS OF POKER FLAT

By Bret Haite

THE PINES ROCKED, THE STORM WHIRLED ABOVE AND ABOUT THE MISERABLE GROUP DRIFT ON DRIFT OF SNOW PILED HIGH-- A HOPELESS, TRACKLESS, UNCHARTED SEA OF WHITE LYING BELOW THE ROCKY SHORES TO WHICH THE CAST- AWAYS STILL CLUNG. WHO WERE THESE FORLORN TRAVELERS?

LET US GO BACK SEVERAL DAYS...



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AS JOHN OAKHURST, GAMBLER, LEFT HIS HOTEL, HE WAS CONSCIOUS OF A CHANGE IN POKER FLAT'S MORAL ATTITUDE SINCE THE PRECEDING NIGHT.

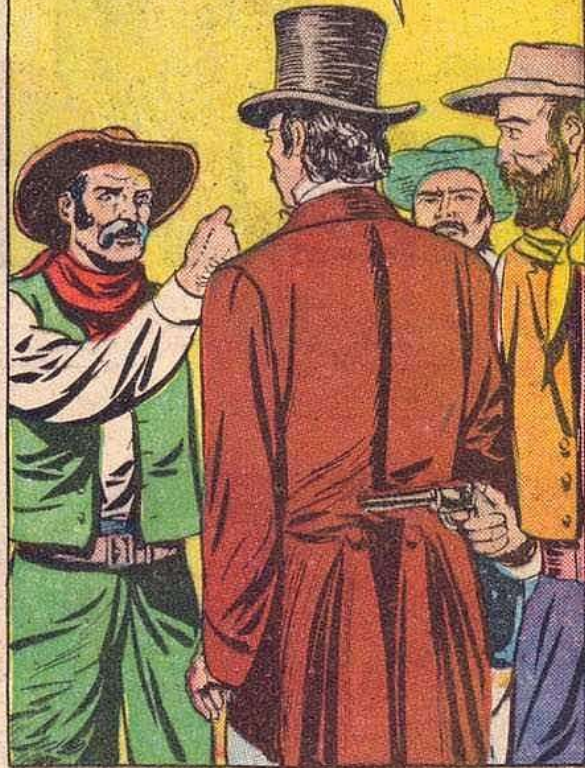
I RECKON THEY'RE AFTER ME.



WE DON'T WANT NO GAMBLERS IN POKER FLAT.

YOU'RE LUCKY WE DON'T LIFT YOU OUT AT THE END OF A ROPE!

YOU WON'T BE LONESOME! THERE'S COMPANY WAITIN' FOR YOU!

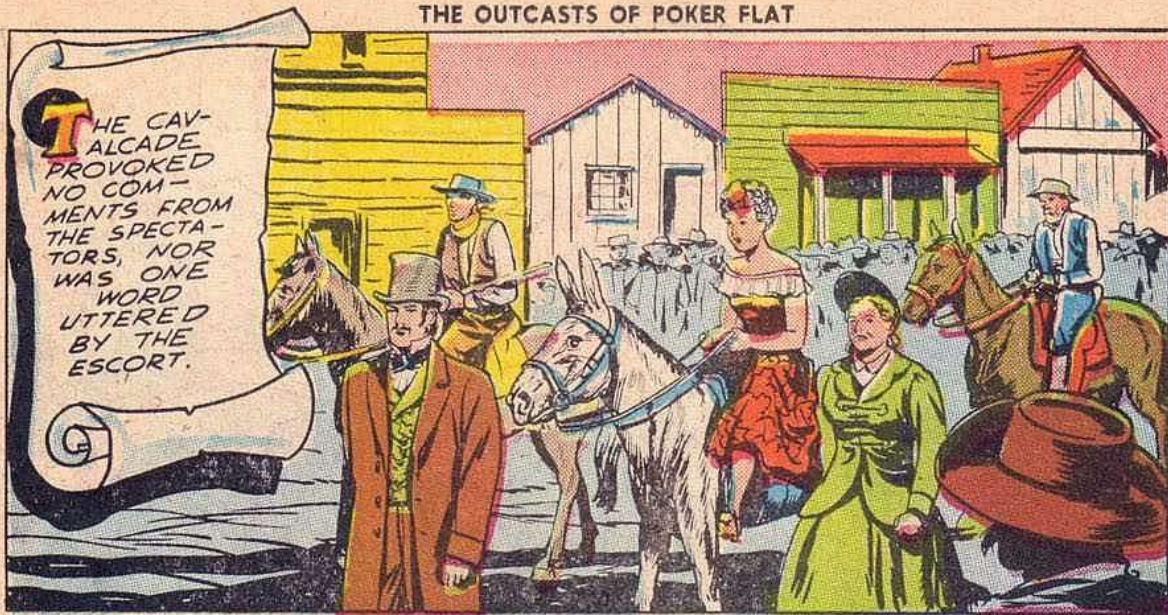


BESIDES OAKHURST, THE OUTCASTS OF POKER FLAT INCLUDED "THE DUCHESS," ANOTHER WHO HAD WON THE TITLE "MOTHER SHIPTON," AND "UNCLE BILLY," A SUSPECTED ROBBER AND CONFIRMED DRUNKARD.

LET'S GET GOING! AND REMEMBER, NONE OF YOU ARE COMING BACK!



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AT THE GULCH WHICH MARKED THE
UTTERMOST LIMIT OF POKER FLAT,
THE LEADER SPOKE BRIEFLY AND
TO THE POINT...



AS THE POSSE DISAPPEARED,
THE OUTCASTS GAVE VENT
TO THEIR FEELINGS. OAK-
HURST ALONE REMAINED SILENT.



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WHERE IS THE NEAREST TOWN?

SANDY BAR, I'D SAY.

WE'VE GOT TO GO OVER SOME STEEP MOUNTAIN RANGE TO REACH IT.



THE PARTY BEGAN THEIR MARCH AND SOON PASSED OUT OF THE MOIST, TEMPERATE REGIONS OF THE FOOT-HILLS INTO THE DRY, BRACING AIR OF THE SIERRA MOUNTAINS.

THE PARTY WEARILY PUSHED ITS WAY UPWARD. UNCLE BILLY AND OAKHURST KNEW HOW IMPORTANT IT WAS THAT THEY CLEAR THE MOUNTAIN TOP BEFORE THE BLIZZARDS CAME.

THIS TRAIL IS GETTING NARROW.

WE'LL SOON HAVE TO REST. I CAN'T GO MUCH FARTHER.



WE'VE GOT TO HURRY!

THEN YOU MUST GO ON WITHOUT ME. I HAVE TO REST.



THE PARTY HALTED WHEN "THE DUCHESS" ROLLED OUT OF HER SADDLE UPON THE GROUND.

I WON'T GO ANY FARTHER! I WON'T!



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THE THOUGHT OF DESERTING HIS WEAKER COMPANIONS NEVER OCCURRED TO OAKHURST. AS HE WASHED HIS HANDS AND FACE IN A NEARBY STREAM, HE HEARD A HORSE APPROACHING...



AS THE HORSE DREW NEAR, ITS RIDER SHOUTED A GREETING...



AKHURST WAS GLAD TO SEE TOM SIMSON, OTHERWISE KNOWN AS "THE INNOCENT" OF SANDY BAR. HE HAD MET HIM SOME MONTHS BEFORE OVER A "LITTLE GAME" AND THEY'D BECOME FAST FRIENDS.



WHERE ARE YOU HEADED?

POKER FLAT.



ALONE?

NOT EXACTLY ALONE I'VE RUN AWAY WITH PINEY WOODS DO YOU REMEMBER HER, MR. OAKHURST?



WAS SHE THE LITTLE GIRL USED TO WAIT ON TABLE AT THE TEMPERANCE HOUSE IN SANDY BAR?

THE SAME. WE'VE BEEN ENGAGED A LONG TIME, BUT HER FATHER OBJECTED AND WE HAD TO RUN AWAY.



YOU FIGURE ON BEING MARRIED IN POKER FLAT?

THAT'S WHAT WE FIGURE, BUT WE'RE LUCKY TO FIND A PLACE TO CAMP AND COMPANY.



WHERE IS THE BRIDE-TO-BE?

HIDING. SHE'S KIND OF BASHFUL. ANYWAY, WE THOUGHT IT BEST FOR HER TO HIDE UNTIL I COULD SEE WHO YOU WERE.

THE OUTCASTS OF POKER FLAT



OAKHURST ENCOURAGED THE RUN-AWAYS TO CONTINUE THEIR JOURNEY TO POKER FLAT BUT "THE INNOCENT" AND PINEY THOUGHT IT BETTER TO CAMP.

BUT WE HAVE NO PROVISIONS, NOR ANY MEANS OF MAKING A CAMP.

WE HAVE PROVISIONS... AND THERE'S A LOG HOUSE BACK ON THE TRAIL!



"THE INNOCENT" THOUGHT "THE DUCHESS" WAS MRS. OAKHURST. NO ONE BOTHERED TO DISILLUSION HIM.

PINEY CAN STAY WITH MRS. OAKHURST, AND I CAN SHIFT FOR MYSELF.

YOU'D BE BETTER OFF TO CONTINUE ON TO POKER FLAT, BEFORE THE SNOW TRAPS YOU.



NOTHING COULD DISSUADE THE NEWCOMERS FROM STAYING, AND ALL WERE SOON AT THE CABIN...

I'M NOT IN FAVOR OF THIS PICNIC. WE BETTER GET ON WITH OURSELVES!



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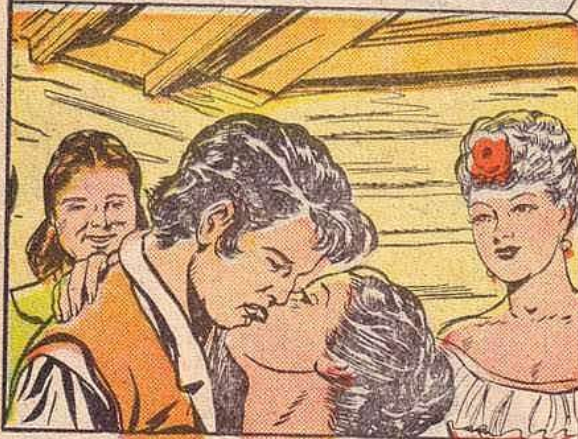
S CORN FILLED
UNCLE BILLY
AS HE WATCHED
HIS COMPANIONS
ACTUALLY RELAXING
INTO AMIABILITY
WITH THE
NEWCOMERS

YOU'D THINK WE
WERE ALL UP
HERE ON A
PICNIC!



THE RUINED CABIN, PATCHED AND
COVERED WITH PINE BOUGHS, WAS
SET APART FOR THE LADIES. THE LOVERS
EXCHANGED A GOODNIGHT KISS SO
HONEST AND SINCERE IT MIGHT HAVE
BEEN HEARD ABOVE THE SWAYING PINES.

S UDDENLY, AN IDEA MINGLED WITH
THE ALCOHOLIC FUMES THAT DIS-
TURBED UNCLE BILLY'S BRAIN.



THE FIRE WAS
REPLENISHED,
THE MEN LAY
DOWN BEFORE
THE DOOR, AND
IN A FEW MIN-
UTES, OAKHURST
AND
"THE INNOCENT"
WERE ASLEEP--
BUT NOT
UNCLE BILLY!



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OAKHURST WAS A LIGHT SLEEPER AND AWOKE TOWARDS MORNING TO FIND SNOW WHIRLING ABOUT. HE LOOKED ABOUT AT HIS COMPANIONS AND WAS STARTLED TO SEE THAT UNCLE BILLY WAS GONE FROM HIS PLACE. A SUSPICION LEAPED TO HIS BRAIN AND HE RAN TO WHERE THE ANIMALS HAD BEEN TIED. ALL THAT GREETED HIM WAS EMPTINESS.



UNCLE BILLY'S TRACKS HAD DISAPPEARED IN THE SNOW. THERE WAS NO POSSIBLE CHANCE OF TRACKING HIM DOWN. OAKHURST RETURNED TO THE CABIN WITH HIS USUAL CALM.



WHEN THE OTHERS AWOKE, OAKHURST TOLD THE TRUTH TO MOTHER SHIPTON AND THE 'DUCHESS'. THEY AGREED TO KEEP THE FACTS FROM 'THE INNOCENT' AND HIS BRIDE-TO-BE.



UNCLE BILLY PROBABLY STAMPEDED THE ANIMALS AND WENT OFF LOOKING FOR THEM.



THE SUPPLIES HERE WILL LAST TEN DAYS.

IT'S A GOOD THING THEY WERE INSIDE THE CABIN WHERE THAT THIEF COULDN'T GET HIS HANDS ON THEM!



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I FIGURE, WITH CARE, THE PROVISIONS MIGHT LAST TEN DAYS-- BUT THEY'RE YOUR PROVISIONS, AND YOU'D BE BOARDING US.

WE'LL HAVE A GOOD CAMP TOGETHER AND THEN THE SNOW'LL MELT, AND WE'LL ALL GO BACK TO POKER FLAT TOGETHER.

"THE INNOCENT" AND OAKHURST, WITH THE AID OF PINE BOUGHS, COMPOSED A THATCH FOR THE ROOFLESS CABIN.



"THE DUCHESS" DIRECTED PINEY IN THE REARRANGEMENT OF THE INTERIOR AND HER RED CHEEKS REDDENED THROUGH THEIR PROFESSIONAL TINT AT PINEY'S PRAISE.

I RECKON, NOW, YOU'RE USED TO FINE THINGS AT POKER FLAT.



RETURNING FROM A WEARY SEARCH FOR THE TRAIL, OAKHURST HEARD THE SOUND OF HAPPY LAUGHTER ECHOING FROM THE CABIN. HIS FIRST THOUGHT WAS THAT MOTHER SHIPTON AND "THE DUCHESS" HAD FOUND THE WHISKEY HE HAD HIDDEN.

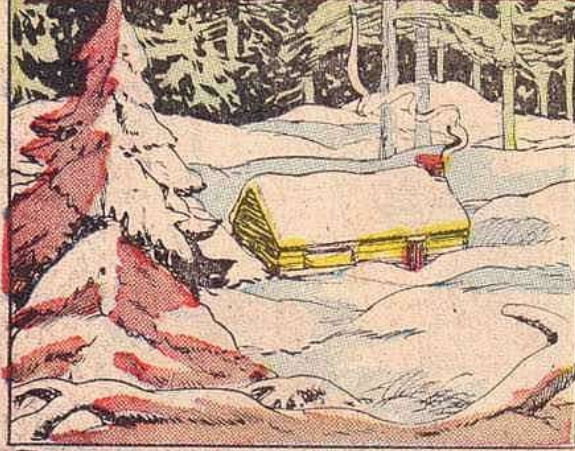
AND YET, IT DON'T SOMEHOW SOUND LIKE WHISKEY!



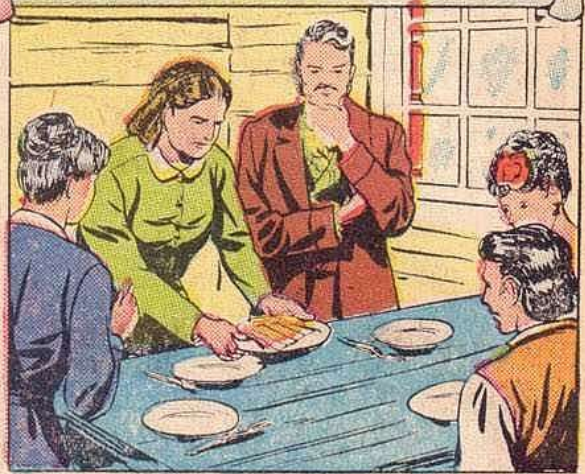
THE OUTCASTS OF POKER FLAT



DRIFT ON DRIFT OF SNOW PILED HIGH AROUND THE HUT-- A HOPELESS, UNCHARTED, TRACKLESS SEA OF WHITE LYING BELOW THE ROCKY SHORES TO WHICH THE CASTAWAYS STILL CLUNG



THE THIRD DAY CAME, AND THE SUN, LOOKING THROUGH THE WHITE-CURTAINED VALLEY, SAW THE OUTCASTS DIVIDE THEIR SLOWLY DECREASING PROVISIONS FOR THE MORNING MEAL.



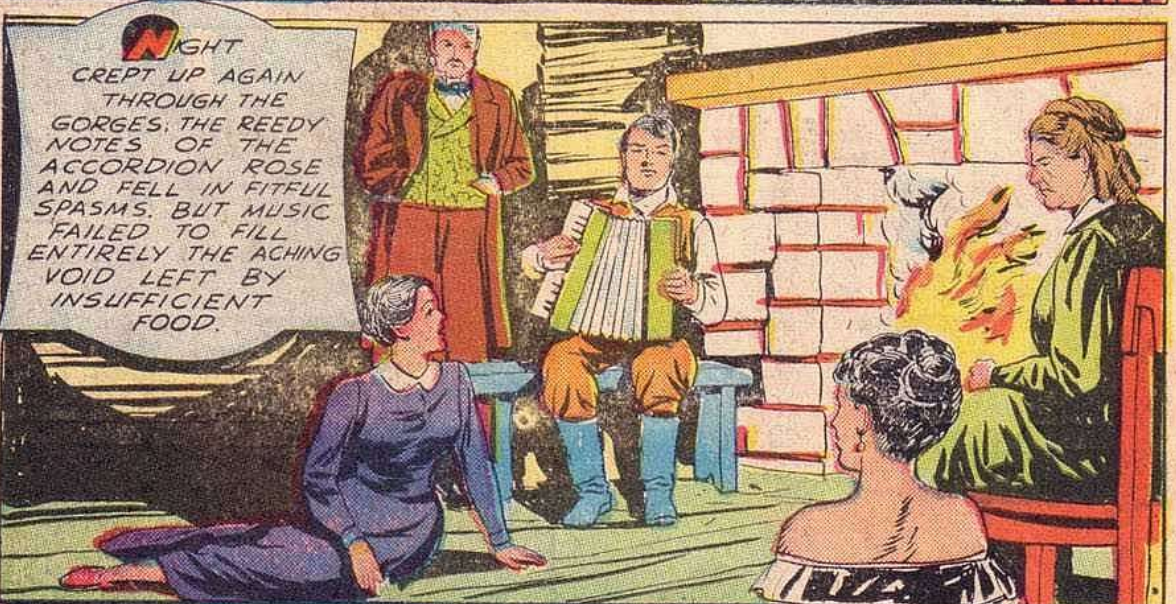
THROUGH THE MARVELLOUSLY CLEAR AIR, THE SMOKE OF POKER FLAT ROSE MILES AWAY.



LOOK, I CAN SEE THE SMOKE OF POKER FLAT!

THAT'S WHERE WE SHOULD BE INSTEAD OF UP HERE.

NIGHT CREEPT UP AGAIN THROUGH THE GORGES, THE REEDY NOTES OF THE ACCORDION ROSE AND FELL IN FITFUL SPASMS. BUT MUSIC FAILED TO FILL ENTIRELY THE ACHING VOID LEFT BY INSUFFICIENT FOOD.



THE OUTCASTS OF POKER FLAT

SO, WITH LITTLE FOOD AND MUCH OF THE ACCORDION, A WEEK PASSED.



THE SUN FORSOOK THEM, AND AGAIN SNOWFLAKES SIFTED OVER THE LAND.



DAY BY DAY, CLOSER AROUND THEM DREW THE SNOWY CIRCLE UNTIL, AT LAST, THEY LOOKED FROM THEIR PRISON OVER DRIFTED WALLS OF DAZZLING WHITE THAT TOWERED TWENTY FEET ABOVE THEIR HEADS.

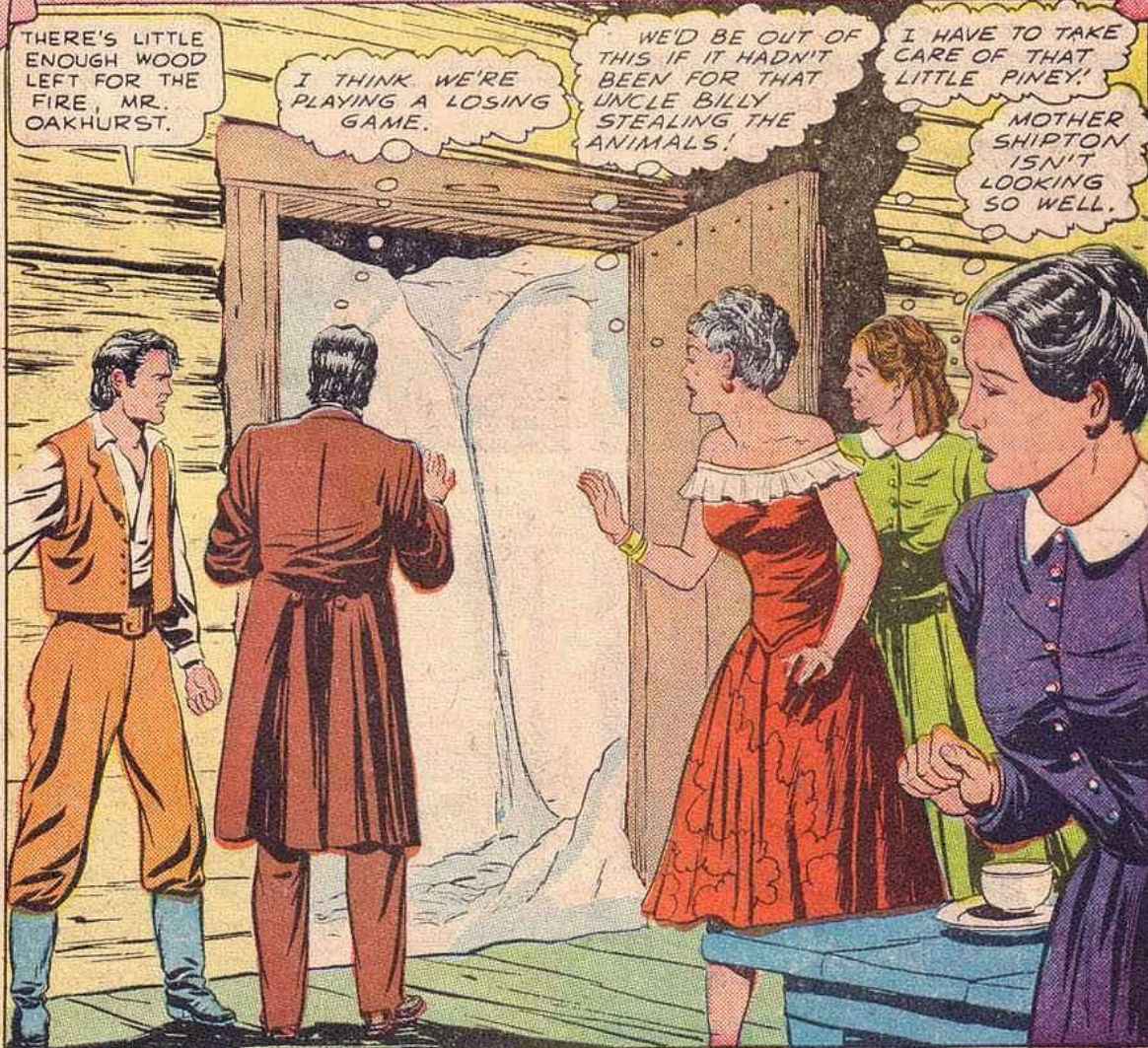
THERE'S LITTLE ENOUGH WOOD LEFT FOR THE FIRE, MR. OAKHURST.

I THINK WE'RE PLAYING A LOSING GAME.

WE'D BE OUT OF THIS IF IT HADN'T BEEN FOR THAT UNCLE BILLY STEALING THE ANIMALS!

I HAVE TO TAKE CARE OF THAT LITTLE PINEY!

MOTHER SHIPTON ISN'T LOOKING SO WELL.



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IT BECAME MORE AND MORE DIFFICULT TO REPLENISH THEIR FIRES, EVEN FROM THE FALLEN TREES NOW HALF-HIDDEN IN THE DRIFTS.



NO ONE COMPLAINED. THE LOVERS LOOKED INTO EACH OTHER'S EYES AND WERE HAPPY. OAKHURST SETTLED CALMLY TO THE LOSING GAME BEFORE HIM. THE 'DUCHESS' ASSUMED THE CARE OF PINEY. ONLY MOTHER SHIPTON SEEMED TO SICKEN AND FADE.



AT MIDNIGHT OF THE TENTH DAY, WHILE THE OTHERS SLEPT, MOTHER SHIPTON CALLED OAKHURST TO HER SIDE.



I'M GOING BUT DON'T SAY ANYTHING ABOUT IT. DON'T WAKEN THE KIDS. TAKE THE BUNDLE FROM UNDER MY HEAD AND OPEN IT.

THE BUNDLE CONTAINED MOTHER SHIPTON'S RATIONS FOR THE WEEK WHICH HAD PASSED.



YOU'VE STARVED YOURSELF!

THAT'S WHAT THEY CALL IT. GIVE 'EM TO THE CHILD.

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AKHURST HAD FASHIONED A PAIR OF SNOW-SHOES FROM THE OLD PACK-SADDLE. AFTER THE BURIAL OF MOTHER SHIPTON, HE DISCUSSED HIS PLAN WITH "THE INNOCENT."

THERE'S ONE CHANCE IN A HUNDRED TO SAVE PINEY. IF YOU CAN REACH POKER FLAT IN TWO DAYS, SHE'S SAFE.

I'LL TRY.



YOU ARE NOT GOING, TOO?

ONLY AS FAR AS THE CANYON.



AKHURST TURNED SUDDENLY AND KISSED "THE DUCHESS."



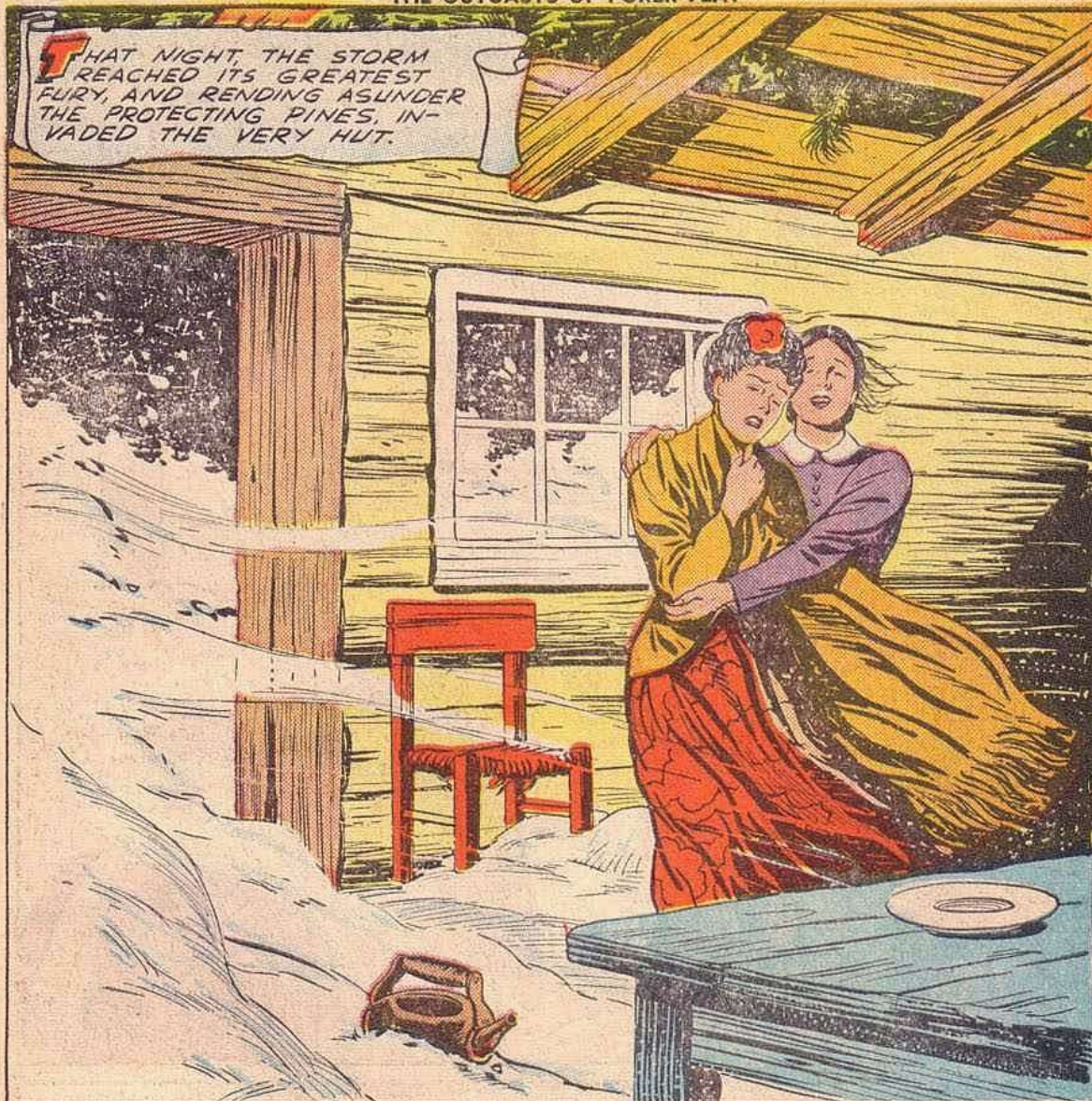
"THE DUCHESS" FELT HER PALLID FACE AFLAME. HER LIPS WERE RIGID WITH AMAZE-
MENT.



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TOWARDS MORNING, THEY FOUND THEMSELVES UNABLE TO FEED THE FIRE WHICH GRADUALLY DIED AWAY. AS THE EMBERS SLOWLY BLACKENED, "THE DUCHESS" CREEPT CLOSER TO PINEY.



THUS, PINEY AND "THE DUCHESS" SOON FELL ASLEEP. THE WIND LULLED AS IF AFRAID TO WAKEN THEM. FEATHERY DRIFTS OF SNOW, SHAKEN FROM THE LONG PINE BOUGHS, FLEW LIKE WHITE-WINGED BIRDS, AND SETTLED ABOUT THEM AS THEY SLEPT.



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