

# Rex Beach



*North of Fifty-Three*

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Published by Good Press, 2022

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EAN 4066338067210

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Big George was drinking, and the activities of the little Arctic mining camp were paralysed. Events invariably ceased their progress and marked time when George became excessive, and now nothing of public consequence stirred except the quicksilver, which was retiring fearfully into its bulb at the song of the wind which came racing over the lonesome, bitter, northward waste of tundra.

He held the centre of the floor at the Northern Club, and proclaimed his modest virtues in a voice as pleasant as the cough of a bull-walrus.

"Yes, me! Little Georgie! I did it. I've licked 'em all from Herschel Island to Dutch Harbour, big uns and little uns. When they didn't suit I made 'em over. I'm the boss carpenter of the Arctic and I own this camp; don't I, Slim? Hey? Answer me!" he roared at the emaciated bearer of the title, whose attention seemed wandering from the inventory of George's startling traits toward a card game.

"Sure ye do," nervously smiled Slim, frightened out of a heart-solo as he returned to his surroundings.

"Well, then, listen to what I'm saying. I'm the big chief of the village, and when I'm stimulated and happy them fellers I don't like hides out and lets me and Nature operate things. Ain't that right?" He glared inquiringly at his friends.

Red, the proprietor, explained over the bar in a whisper to Captain, the new man from Dawson: "That's Big George, the whaler. He's a squaw-man and sort of a bully—see? When he's sober he's on the level strickly, an' we all likes him fine, but when he gets to fightin' the pain-killer, he ain't altogether a gentleman. Will he fight? Oh! Will he fight? Say! he's there with chimes, he is! Why, Doc Miller's made a



grub-stake rebuildin' fellers that's had a lingerin' doubt cached away about that, an' now when he gets the booze up his nose them patched-up guys oozes away an' hibernates till the gas dies out in him. Afterwards he's sore on himself an' apologizes to everybody. Don't get into no trouble with him, cause he's two checks past the limit. They don't make 'em as bad as him any more. He busted the mould."

George turned, and spying the new-comer, approached, eyeing him with critical disfavour.

Captain saw a bear-like figure, clad cap-a-pie in native fashion. Reindeer pants, with the hair inside, clothed legs like rock pillars, while out of the loose squirrel parka a corded neck rose, brown and strong, above which darkly gleamed a rugged face seamed and scarred by the hate of Arctic winters. He had kicked off his deer-skin socks, and stood bare-footed on the cold and draughty floor, while the poison he had imbibed showed only in his heated face. Silently he extended a cracked and hardened hand, which closed like the armoured claw of a crustacean and tightened on the crunching fingers of the other. Captain's expression remained unchanged and, gradually slackening his grip, the sailor roughly inquired:

"Where'd you come from?"

"Just got in from Dawson yesterday," politely responded the stranger.

"Well! what're you goin' to do now you're here?" he demanded.

"Stake some claims and go to prospecting, I guess. You see, I wanted to get in early before the rush next spring."

“Oh! I ’spose you’re going to jump some of our ground, hey? Well, you ain’t! We don’t want no claim jumpers here,” disagreeably continued the seaman; “we won’t stand for it. This is my camp—see? I own it, and these is my little children.” Then, as the other refused to debate with him, he resumed, groping for a new ground of attack.

“Say! I’ll bet you’re one of them eddicated dudes, too, ain’t you? You talk like a feller that had been to college,” and, as the other assented, he scornfully called to his friends, saying “Look here, fellers! Pipe the jellyfish! I never see one of these here animals that was worth a cuss; they plays football an’ smokes cigareets at school; then when they’re weaned they come off up here an’ jump our claims ’cause we can’t write a location notice proper. They ain’t no good. I guess I’ll stop it.”

Captain moved toward the door, but the whaler threw his bulky frame against it and scowlingly blocked the way.

“No, you don’t. You ain’t goin’ to run away till I’ve had the next dance, Mister Eddication! Humph! I ain’t begun to tell ye yet what a useless little barnacle you are.”

Red interfered, saying: “Look ’ere, George, this guy ain’t no playmate of yourn. We’ll all have a jolt of this disturbance promoter, an’ call it off.” Then, as the others approached he winked at Captain, and jerked his head slightly toward the door.

The latter, heeding the signal, started out, but George leaped after him and, seizing an arm, whirled him back, roaring:

“Well, of all the cussed impidence I ever see! You’re too high-toned to drink with us, are you? You don’t get out of

here now till you take a lickin' like a man."

He reached over his head and, grasping the hood of his fur shirt, with one movement he stripped it from him, exposing a massive naked body, whose muscles swelled and knotted beneath a skin as clear as a maiden's, while a map of angry scars strayed across the heavy chest.

As the shirt sailed through the air. Red lightly vaulted to the bar and, diving at George's naked middle, tackled beautifully, crying to Captain: "Get out quick; we'll hold him."

Others rushed forward and grasped the bulky sailor, but Captain's voice replied: "I sort of like this place, and I guess I'll stay a while. Turn him loose."

"Why, man, he'll kill ye," excitedly cried Slim. "Get out!"

The captive hurled his peacemakers from him and, shaking off the clinging arms, drove furiously at the insolent stranger.

In the cramped limits of the corner where he stood. Captain was unable to avoid the big man, who swept him with a crash against the plank door at his back, grasping hungrily at his throat. As his shoulders struck, however, he dropped to his knees and, before the raging George could seize him, he avoided a blow which would have strained the rivets of a strength-tester and ducked under the other's arms, leaping to the cleared centre of the floor.

Seldom had the big man's rush been avoided and, whirling, he swung a boom-like arm at the agile stranger. Before it landed, Captain stepped in to meet his adversary and, with the weight of his body behind the blow, drove a clenched and bony fist crashing into the other's face. The

big head with its blazing shock of hair snapped backward and the whaler drooped to his knees at the other's feet.

The drunken flush of victory swept over Captain as he stood above the swaying figure; then, suddenly, he felt the great bare arms close about his waist with a painful grip. He struck at the bleeding face below him and wrenched at the circling bands which wheezed the breath from his lungs, but the whaler squeezed him writhing to his breast, and, rising, unsteadily wheeled across the floor and in a shiver of broken glass fell crashing against the bar and to the floor.

As the struggling men writhed upon the planks the door opened at the hurried entrance of an excited group, which paused at the sight of the ruin, then, rushing forward, tore the men apart.

The panting Berserker strained at the arms about his glistening body, while Captain, with sobbing sighs, relieved his aching lungs and watched his enemy, who frothed at the interference.

"It was George's fault," explained Slim to the questions of the arrivals. "This feller tried to make a get-away, but George had to have his amusement."

A new-comer addressed the squaw-man in a voice as cold as the wind. "Cut this out, George! This is a friend of mine. You're making this camp a regular hell for strangers, and now I'm goin' to tap your little snap. Cool off—see?"

Jones's reputation as a bad gun-man went hand in hand with his name as a good gambler, and his scanty remarks invariably evoked attentive answers, so George explained: "I don't like him Jones, and I was jus' makin' him over to



look like a man. I'll do it yet, too," he flashed wrathfully at his quiet antagonist.

" 'Pears to me like he's took a hand in the remodelling himself," replied the gambler, "but if you're lookin' for something to do, here's your chance. Windy Jim just drove in and says Barton and Kid Sullivan are adrift on the ice."

"What's that?" questioned eager voices, and, forgetting the recent trouble at the news, the crowd pressed forward anxiously.

"They was crossing the bay and got carried out by the off-shore gale," explained Jones. "Windy was follerin' 'em when the ice ahead parted and begun movin' out. He tried to yell to 'em, but they was too far away to hear in the storm. He managed to get back to the land and follered the shore ice around. He's over at Hunter's cabin now, most dead, face and hands froze pretty bad."

A torrent of questions followed and many suggestions as to the fate of the men.

"They'll freeze before they can get ashore," said one.

"The ice-pack'll break up in this wind," added another, "and if they don't drown, they'll freeze before the floe comes in close enough for them to land."

From the first announcement of his friends' peril, Captain had been thinking rapidly. His body, sore from his long trip and aching from the hug of his recent encounter, cried woefully for rest, but his voice rose calm and clear:

"We've got to get them off," he said. "Who will go with me? Three is enough."

The clamouring voices ceased, and the men wheeled at the sound, gazing incredulously at the speaker. "What!"—"In

this storm?"—"You're crazy," many voices said.

He gazed appealingly at the faces before him. Brave and adventurous men he knew them to be, jesting with death, and tempered to perils in this land where hardship rises with the dawn, but they shook their ragged heads hopelessly.

"We *must* save them!" resumed Captain hotly. "Barton and I played as children together, and if there's not a man among you who's got the nerve to follow me—I'll go alone by Heavens!"

In the silence of the room, he pulled the cap about his ears and, tying it snugly under his chin, drew on his huge fur mittens; then with a scornful laugh he turned toward the door.

He paused as his eye caught the swollen face of Big George. Blood had stiffened in the heavy creases of his face like rusted stringers in a ledge, while his mashed and discoloured lips protruded thickly. His hair gleamed red, and the sweat had dried upon his naked shoulders, streaked with dirt and flecked with spots of blood, yet the battered features shone with the unconquered, fearless light of a rough, strong man.

Captain strode to him with outstretched hand. "You're a man," he said. "You've got the nerve, George, and you'll go with me, won't you?"

"What! Me?" questioned the sailor vaguely. His wondering glance left Captain, and drifted round the circle of shamed and silent faces—then he straightened stiffly and cried: "Will I go with you? Certainly! I'll go to — with you."

Ready hands harnessed the dogs, dragged from protected nooks where they sought cover from the storm

which moaned and whistled round the low houses. Endless ragged folds of sleet whirled out of the north, then writhed and twisted past, vanishing into the grey veil which shrouded the landscape in a twilight gloom.

The fierce wind sank the cold into the aching flesh like a knife and stiffened the face to a whitening mask, while a fusillade of frozen ice-particles beat against the eyeballs with blinding fury.

As Captain emerged from his cabin, furred and hooded, he found a long train of crouching, whining animals harnessed and waiting, while muffled figures stocked the sled with robes and food and stimulants.

Big George approached through the whirling white, a great squat figure with fluttering squirrel tails blowing from his parka, and at his heels there trailed a figure, skin-clad and dainty.

"It's my wife," he explained briefly to Captain. "She won't let me go alone."

They gravely bade farewell to all, and the little crowd cheered lustily against the whine of the blizzard as, with cracking whip and hoarse shouts, they were wrapped in the cloudy winding sheet of snow.

Arctic storms have an even sameness; the intense cold, the heartless wind which augments tenfold the chill of the temperature, the air thick and dark with stinging flakes rushing by in an endless cloud. A drifting, freezing, shifting eternity of snow, driven by a ravaging gale which sweeps the desolate, bald wastes of the Northland.

The little party toiled through the smother till they reached the "egloos" under the breast of the tall, coast