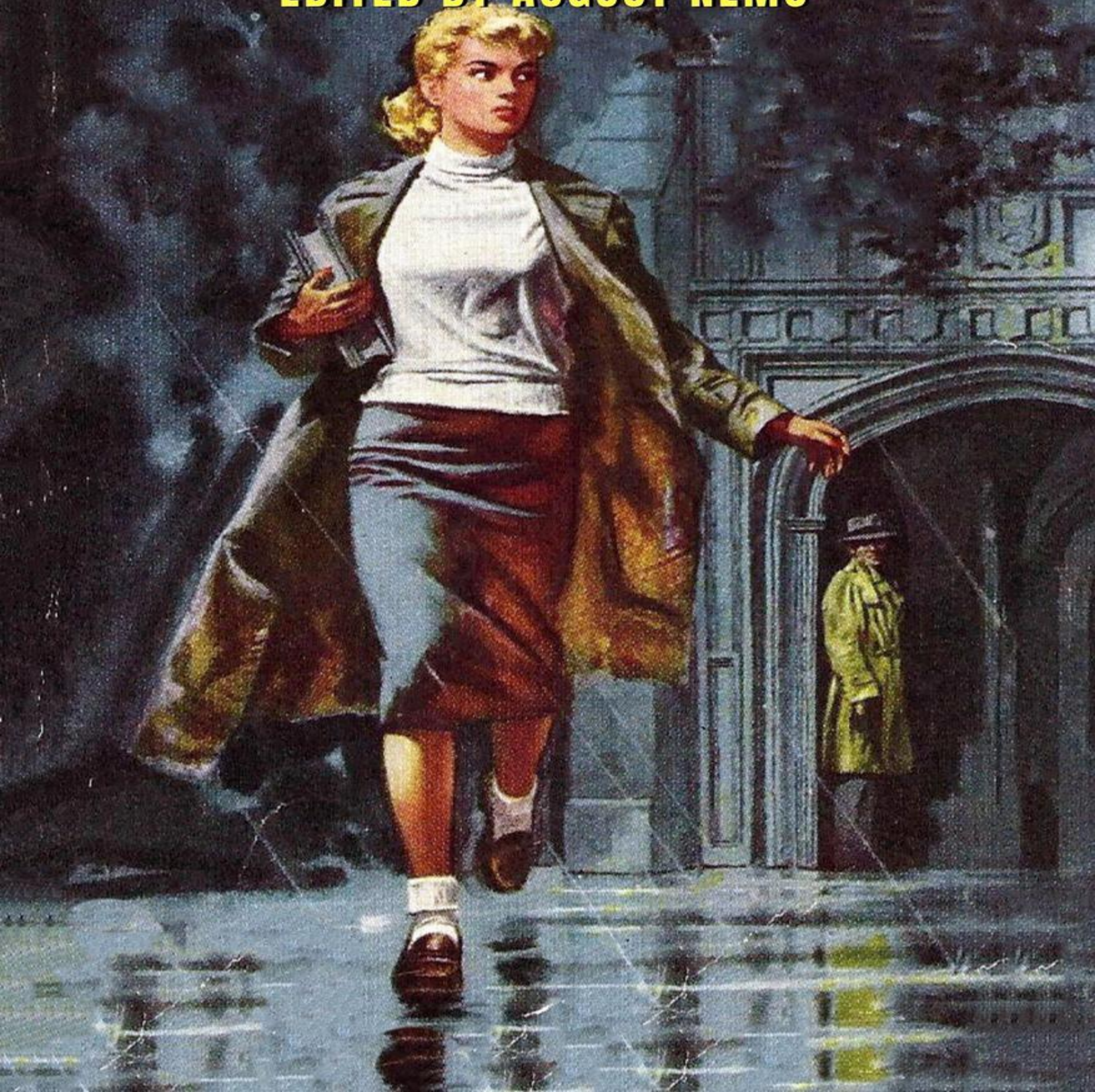


7 BEST SHORT STORIES BY **Frank L. Packard**

EDITED BY AUGUST NEMO



TACET BOOKS

7 BEST SHORT STORIES

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Packard

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Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[The Author](#)

[Corporal Bob](#)

[The Guardian of the Devil's Slide](#)

["Where's Haggerty?"](#)

[McQueen's Hobby](#)

[Munford](#)

["If a Man Die"](#)

[The Blood of Kings.](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

The Author

Frank L. Packard was born in Montreal, Quebec and educated at McGill University and the University of Liege. As a young man he worked as a civil engineer for the Canadian Pacific Railway. His experiences working on the railroad led to his writing many railroad stories, then to a series of mystery novels, the most famous of which featured a character called Jimmie Dale. Several of his novels were made into films.

Frank Packard died in 1942 in Lachine, Quebec and was buried in the Mount Royal Cemetery in Montreal.

Corporal Bob

Corporal Bob Marston, Northwest Mounted Police, shuffled the greasy cards wearily, and laid them perfunctorily in little piles on the table before him. Then he swept them petulantly into a confused heap. He had played solitaire for two weeks, and the diversion had lost its attraction. The strain of the situation was getting on his nerves.

He pushed back his chair and walked to the single window that the hut boasted. From the lean-to behind the little shanty came the mournful whine of the sledge dogs. He gazed drearily out on the endless plain of white. As far as his eye could reach there was nothing 'to vary the monotonous miles of snow, save here and there a cluster of gaunt, naked trees.

"Bob!"

Marston turned from the window to the corner where Jack Evans lay tossing restlessly on his bunk. He raised the sufferer's head awkwardly, and poured a few drops between the parched lips.

"Well, old chap?" he asked.

Evans' eyes opened to rest curiously for a moment on Bob's face, then he whispered feebly:

"Been pretty bad, ain't I?"

Bob nodded.

"Yep," he said tersely. "Better now, though."

Evans closed his eyes an instant; the light hurt them.

"How's the grub?" he asked suddenly.

"Grub? Grub's all right—lots of it," replied Bob shortly, turning his back to Evans under pretense of lighting his pipe. Conscious that the sick man's eyes were on him, Bob crossed the room and began to poke the pitifully inadequate fire into a cheerier blaze.

"That," said Evans, slowly and deliberately, "is a darned lie!"

The stick in Bob's hand dropped with a crash to the floor.

"It ain't no use," continued Evans, "tryin' ter bluff me. Ye're a good feller, Bob, an' white clean through; but I ain't been so sick but what I know it's two week er more I been on this here bunk, an' the day afore I was taken down we was plannin' ter strike fer the fort. 'Cause why? 'Cause thar warn't only a week's grub left. Thet's why!"

Corporal Marston squinted at him a minute through the immense puffs of smoke he was emitting.

"You know too blamed much for your own good, you do," he growled.

"Thet ain't all neither," resumed the sick man, nervously plucking the fluffs of the coarse blanket. "The heavy storms air a-comin' on, wuss'n the one thet ketched us. 'Twouldn't hev been no easy job ter make the fort a week ago. Every day makes it wuss, dogs gettin' weaker an' weaker, an'——"

"Shut up!" snarled Bob. Every nerve in his body seemed to jangle discordantly. He passed his hands over his eyes in an effort to still the violent throbbing in his head. Desperately he pulled himself together, knocked the ashes from his pipe, placed it carefully in his pocket, and marched over to the bed. "You shut up!" he repeated peremptorily, his hands stuck deep in his trousers pockets. "I'm in command of this expedition. All you've got to do is obey orders."

A little red flush of resentment tingled the pale, drawn features.

"I'm no chicken at this business," said Evans querulously. "Ten years I've been on duty in this God-forsaken country. Yer talk's jest baby talk, so it is. Don't ye think I know," he cried, his voice rising stronger in emotion, "thet it's sure death ter stay anuther day? I can't go, so I got ter cash in; but yer stayin' don't help none. You hike out fer the fort while you got the strength left. What's the use uv yer goin' down an' out jest 'cause / hev ter?"

Bob's lips twitched nervously.

"I ought to feel like smashing you for that," he said with painful slowness, "only you're sick—and—somehow, I guess I'm kind of out of sorts."

Neither of the men spoke for a time that seemed ages to them both. Finally, Evans raised himself painfully on his elbow.

"I'm in dead earnest, Bob, an' I'm goin' ter hev my say. I seen you kiss thet photergraph last night when you thought I was asleep. I ain't got a soul in all the world what cares a cuss about me. I ain't sayin' but it's my own fault; thet's neither 'ere ner thar. 'Tain't fittin' fer you ter stay. It's murder, thet's what it is—jest murder! An' I ain't a-goin' ter hev it on my conscience. An', so help me God," he finished solemnly, "ye're a-goin' ter make tracks!"

Bob moistened his lips with his tongue as he leaned over the bunk.

"There'll be a search party after us in a day or so," he said thickly.

"Search party nothin'——"

But Bob's hand closed over the other's mouth. He turned Evans over with his face to the wall, and drew the coverings up around him.

"Go to sleep," he commanded sharply. "Maybe I'll go out by and by and try for a shot."

He took his gun from the corner, drew the chair up to the table, and began to polish an already spotless barrel. After a time his exertions relaxed, and the gun was allowed to slip gradually to the ground. He leaned forward with his elbows on his knees, his chin resting in his hands, his eyes staring hard before him.

Once or twice he moved, shifting his position restlessly. He groaned aloud in anguish, then started with a guilty glance toward the corner. The figure on the bed was motionless.

Bob hitched his chair around until he faced the door with his back to the bunk. His hand stole into his pocket. He took out a photograph and laid it reverently on his knee. The eyes that looked into his seemed pleading with him to come back. He shook his head sadly as he lifted the picture to his lips.

"Oh, Mary!" The words welled up from the heart of the man with its immensity of yearning; the lips that scarcely moved to form them trembled piteously. His head sank down again between bowed shoulders. "My Mary!"

Suddenly he straightened up, his hands clenched tight in fierce resentment. What was this sick thing on the bed that it should stand between them? What claim had it to interpose? What jibing mockery was this that held him back from the craving that racked his very soul? Duty! The thought loomed up unbidden. What was duty to him? A morbid sentiment—and how chimerical! Everything was chimerical!

He drew his hand peevishly over his face; the photograph fell unheeded to the floor. His bloodshot eyes fastened themselves on the fur mat that hung before the little doorway leading to the dogs' quarters. Slowly he rose to his feet, and on tiptoe began to cross the room toward it, his hands stretched out before him like one groping in the dark. His face, sullenly averted from the sick man's corner, was drawn and haggard, ashy white with the workings of his reeling brain. Trembling as with the ague, he pushed aside the mat and let it fall behind him; then he paused to wipe the great beads of sweat from his forehead.

"What's wrong with me?" he muttered plaintively. "It's a square deal. The fool suggested it himself; I'd never have thought of it if he hadn't. Lie down, confound you!" he snarled, with a vicious kick at the dogs that whined around him.

They huddled back into the corner, crouching in fear before this new master whom they did not know. Bob stooped and hauled the sled into the middle of the shed. He began to fumble with the gear.

"There's more harness than I want," he babbled, with a curious chuckle. "Didn't bring any spare ones either; there must be more dogs somewhere." He commenced to count them. "One—two—three—four; where's the others? Dead. Of course they're dead! Knew it before, only I must have forgotten."

He sat down on the sled and began to tell off the details on his fingers.

"Four dogs—two hundred miles—no rations—Mary? "

There was a note of interrogation in the last word. Who was Mary? Yes, he remembered now—there had been a picture, hadn't there? He felt in his pockets. Well, it didn't matter, he

must have lost it. Nothing mattered! He was going away from this hell of torment, away from——

He bounded to his feet, shivering in every limb. What was that? Stealthily he edged toward the doorway, and cautiously lifted a corner of the rug to peer through into the room beyond. His eyes mechanically followed Evans' movements, as from the floor, where he had fallen in an effort to leave his bunk, the sick man slowly and painfully pulled himself to his knees, swaying to and fro as he clutched desperately for support.

There was a moment's quiet as Evans steadied himself; then Bob started nervously. The slow, faltering words seemed to reach him from some great distance.

"I ain't never prayed afore, God," was the piteous confession, "an' I ain't no kind uv right ter now; but seems's if I'd orter. You know how 'tis, God, an' how on account uv me Bob's figurin' ter stick it out. 'Taint't fit ner proper fer me what has nary chick ner child ter stand atween him an' her. Oh, God! I don't know how ter pray, but thar ain't no call fer Bob ter die!"

Evans' voice broke with a half sob as he fumbled for his words. Bob stirred uneasily. A faint glimmer of reason had come to him, and he understood that Evans was praying—praying that he, Bob, shouldn't die. Well, he wasn't going to die. He was going away. He'd almost forgotten that. He was going away.

Evans' voice was firmer as he continued:

"An' so, God, thar ain't no other thing fer me ter do." His hand groped beneath the blanket. "Jest make me man enough ter ——"

Like a flash Bob's awakening came in all its bitterness. With a cry he dashed across the room and knocked up Evans' hand. The bullet buried itself harmlessly in the rafters above their heads.

Evans staggered slowly to his feet. Between them, on the floor, lay the still smoking revolver. The sick man's glance, half defiant, half wistful, rested for an instant on Bob's face; then he pitched forward in a deathlike swoon.

Bob caught him as he fell, and lifted him tenderly back into the bunk. The room seemed stifling hot. He staggered blindly to the door, wrenched it open, and sank bareheaded upon his knees in the snow.

For a moment he stayed there motionless; then, sobbing like a little child, he poured forth the bitter weight of shame that bowed him down. And as he prayed, in the distance, faintly borne to him by the wind, came the yelping of a pack of dogs—the crack of whips—the sound of a human voice.

The Guardian of the Devil's Slide

There is one bad piece of track on the Hill Division, particularly bad, which is the same as saying that it is the worst piece of track, bar none, on the American Continent. Not that the engineers were to blame—they weren't. It was Dame Nature in the shape of the Rockies—Dame Nature and the directors.

Sir Ivers Clayborn, gray-haired and grizzled, a man schooled in the practical school of many lands and many years, who was chief consulting engineer when the road was building, advised a double-looped tunnel that, according to his sketch, looked something like the figure 8 canted over sideways. The directors poised their glasses and examined the sketch with interest until they caught sight of the penciled estimate in the corner. That settled it. They did not even take the trouble to vote. They asked for an alternative—and they got it. They got the Devil's Slide.

First and last, it has euchred more money out of the treasury of the Transcontinental than it would have taken to build things Sir Ivers' way to begin with; and it has taken some years, a good many of them, for the directors to learn their lesson. The old board never did, for that matter; but, thanks perhaps to younger blood, they've begun now to build as they should have built in the first place. It isn't finished yet, that double-looped tunnel, it won't be for years, but, no matter, it's begun, and some day a good many more than a few men will sleep the easier because of it.

From Carleton, the super, to the last section hand and track-walker, the Devil's Slide was a nightmare. The dispatchers, under their green-shaded lamps, cursed it in the gray hours