The Lamp in the Valley

BY ARTHUR STRINGER

W. N. U. Service

THE STORY AND AUTHOR

Arthur Stringer is one of America's best known authors. His facile pen has engaged itself in depicting many facets of American life. It was altogether in keeping with his zestful search for new material that he should have gone to Alaska to see at first hand the story of America's latest frontier, the new settlement of the Matanuska Valley. Here was an historical migration of families who had to abandon their impoverished farms in the Middle West to come, at the invitation of the government, to Alaska to begin life anew. What Stringer saw he depicted in the following story of love and adventure. "The Lamp in the Valley" is Matanuska's young school teacher, Carol Coburn. As daughter of a sourdough, she links the old Alaska with the new.

INSTALLMENT 1

CHAPTER I

I opened the cabin window and felt the night air blow in on my face.

There was no mistaking the smell of that air. It carried with it the scent of wide sprucelands and the sparkle of highland ice fields and the razor-edged aroma of valleys where the sun falls thin on balsam and alder and buckcrop. It was the breath of Alaska, calling me back to the home of my youth.

That little ship's cabin became suddenly hateful to me. I was tired of the noise and the accordion music of the drunken groups swarming north to their cannery work. I was tired of tobacco smoke and alcoholic song and crying babies and squawking radios.

So I reached for a wrap and made my way up on deck, where all was quiet and not a ship's lamp showed between the shadowy bow and the equally shadowy bridge.

It was so quiet that I could feel the tremor of the Yukon's screw as she plowed northward through the night. At times it seemed as though we were steaming straight into a mountain side. But the hills, as always, moved apart and let us pass through and as casually came together again in our wake.

And as I sat there, with the night wind fanning my face, I felt that my mission was not a trivial one. I owed something to Alaska. And I had to justify myself through my work there, in what men called the last frontier.

It would be different, of course. That new world would have all the roughness of wilderness life. And, jackaroo that I was, I'd have to begin all over again. I'd be a cheechako once more in the colony of old-timers. But my country was never ashamed of its pioneer women. And there was something moving and mysterious, I felt, in man's eternal quest for new frontiers.

Then the light of mystery faded from the picture. For I woke up to the fact that I was no longer alone on that silent and starlit foredeck.

A man, none too steady on his feet, wavered past me in the darkness.

He laughed as he passed an exploring hand over the softness of my polo coat. Then he sat down on the crate beside me.

I sat silent, without moving, as he turned and tried to throw a bottle overboard.

"Good-by, sweetheart," he said with thick-voiced indifference. He was, I concluded, one of the West Coast wanderers who had been turning the lower decks of the Yukon into a cross between a faro joint and a water-front saloon. But he was sober enough to resent my sustained silence.

"Can't you talk, pretty one?" he asked, with his face insolently close to mine. I wasn't afraid of him. I'd seen camp drunkards enough in my day. So I continued to confront him with the thunders of silence.

He rose unsteadily to his feet and reached into his pocket. From it he took out a flashlight which he even more insolently held up in front of my face.

"Not a bad looker," he had the grace to acknowledge. But it in no way added to my happiness. "Why in hell are you heading for the land of the sourdoughs?"

That question I also declined to answer. I even moved a little to one side, to avoid the wavering flashlight.

"Put out that light," a deep voice commanded from the darkness of the bridge. It was no easy matter, I remembered, to navigate the waters of the Inland Passage.

My tormentor did as he was told. But he took his time about it.

"We like it dark, don't we?" he said as he reached for my hand. The vigor with which I removed it from his clasp caused him to lose his balance for a moment or two.

"What's taking a peach like you to that tin-can territory?" he finally inquired.

"That," I was foolish enough to answer, "is entirely my own affair."

But it was plain that I puzzled him.

"You're a cheechako," he maunderingly proclaimed. "That fact, my pink and white friend, is written all over you."

It didn't seem worth while telling him I was Alaska born.

"And you're still an unpicked peach," he insolently went on, "for no woman who's married is going to be up here stargazing in the dark. But you don't fit in with our fish-pack females. And you're sure not the dance-hall type. On the other hand, you're sure no panhandle chalk-wrangler." He nodded his head in confirmation of his own alcoholic discernment. "No, sir; you're no camptown schoolteacher."

He was held there by the scruff of the neck, writhing and kicking.

"It so happens," I informed him, "that I'm going to teach in the Indian school at Toklutna."

That seemed to hold him for a moment. But his laugh, this time, was more caustic than ever.

"Then your first lesson to those little frostbitten Siwashes ought to be that a bunch of rubber-stamp bureaucrats can't run a country the size of Alaska. Look what they've done with the power rights. Look at their fool laws about salmon fishing. And look how they've let the big interests come in and choke the life out of the territory. No wonder it turns an honest worker into a Red. They've got an idea they can turn us workers into an army of tongue-tied sheep. They think—"

"They don't seem to have left you tongue-tied," I ventured.

"You bet they haven't," he announced. "And that's why I'm known as Eric the Red. I can talk to 'em one at a time or five hundred strong."

But I'd had enough of his soapbox oratory.

"I wish you'd go away," I told him.

His movement, as he leaned closer over me, was an exasperatingly intimate one.

"On a night like this," he murmured, "with the stars up there singing together over the mountain tops? Not on your life, lady!"

I knew my first tingle of fear as I felt his arm creep like a snake's head about the loose folds of my polo coat. The Yukon, at that moment, seemed a terribly empty ship.

"Not on your life," he said for the second time. And he laughed as I tried to writhe free of his encircling arm.

The sound of that carelessly defiant laugh was still in the air when I saw a shadow detach itself from the shadowy iron bulwark toward the bow of the boat.

It was a man, I realized, who'd been leaning against the rail and watching the starlit water. He moved toward me, in the uncertain light, with rather unhurried steps.

"Is this mucker annoying you?" he asked.

"I wanted to be alone here," I found the courage to protest.

But the man on the crate beside me declined to move. It was the tall and shadowy figure above me that came a step or two closer.

"Did you hear what the lady said?" he prompted. But still my tormentor held his ground.

"Who asked you to barge in on this?" he was reckless enough to challenge.

The tall stranger stood silent a moment, in a sort of patiently impatient tolerance.

"Isn't your name Ericson?" he finally demanded.

"You're tootin' right it is," came the prompt reply.

"Well, Ericson, you're not quite sober," said the other. "You haven't been sober a day since we pulled out of Seattle. And at the present moment you're not wanted here."

"Who says I'm not wanted?"

"I do."

"What's that to me?" said the man at my side.

"It's this," was the unexpectedly prompt reply. And before I knew it I was alone on the crate.

But what startled me, after a quick moment of struggle, was that the young man who answered to the name of Eric the Red had not only been lifted bodily from where he sat, but had been shaken as a rag is shaken by a terrier and had been swung out over the ship's rail. He was held there by the scruff of the neck, writhing and kicking. He began, in fact, to emit muffled little rat squeals as he hung over open space, with nothing but the star-riffled, black water under his heels.

"Don't," I gasped.

"A few gallons of sea water," said the untroubled deep voice beside me, "would wash a little of the fireworks out of his system."

"Please don't," I implored, remembering that a moment's unexpected rending of cloth might send the man tumbling down into the channel.

My rescuer turned to me and apparently tried to study my face in that misty midnight duskiness. Then he swung out his second long arm and lifted the still struggling figure back over the rail.

"Now you get down where you belong," said the tall man as he gave his captive a final shake. "And if you talk to this girl again, Ericson, I'll break every bone in your body."

It took time for Ericson to get his breath back.

"You don't own her," he shrilly announced. "And you don't own me. And if you—"

But the other cut him short.

"Are you going?" he demanded.

Ericson fell back a step or two as the other advanced.

"I'll do more than talk before I'm through with her," he proclaimed. It was a final effort, I felt, to save his face. After a silent moment or two that impressed me as heavy with hate, he retreated into the darkness.

The tall man stooped to pick up the fallen flashlight.

"That's the curse," he said, "of our West Coast. It's too full of bums and bindle stiffs. They never stay long enough in one place to take root. And then these soapbox agitators come along and spout communism at them." He looked away, for a moment, and then turned back to me. "But that fire-eater had no right getting rough with a woman. With a woman like you, I mean."

"Why with a woman like me?" I questioned.

"I spotted you the first day out," he said, "as a girl who rather wanted to be let alone."

"I do," I said. But that, I felt, might frighten him away. And I didn't want him to go away. "I mean I did," I amended.

"You naturally don't belong among those roughnecks."

"I'm afraid I do," I told him. "I'm north born."

That seemed to surprise him.

"You've been out for quite a time?" he suggested.

"For seven long years," I told him.

"She's a great country," he said out of the silence. And, being north born, I agreed with him. "But it's no place for a woman," he added.

"Why not?" I demanded. He laughed a little at that quick challenge.

"Because women want anchorage. They're not satisfied with wildness and roughness. And there's been a sort of conspiracy to keep Seward's Icebox uncivilized. It's too proud of its shirt-sleeve past. It's too fond of calling itself the last frontier and doing things on the dime-novel basis. It's banked too long on the bush-rat with a skillet and a slab of sowbelly."

"What's wrong with the bush-rat?" I demanded, remembering that I was the daughter of one.

"Nothing," was the deliberated reply, "except that he's outlived his usefulness. That's what's the matter with your country. It's too full of grubstaked sourdoughs who go out on the creeks with a tomrocker and imagine they're mining. They scratch at the rubble and hill-cracks for a month or two, and wash out a poke of dust and stay drunk for two-thirds of the year. They're hobos at heart. They do nothing for the country. They don't even know the meaning of real mine work."

I had seen those lone-fire wanderers in their lonely valley bottoms, hawking float-gold from the sand of icy creeks, lugging timber down snowy slopes for their cribwork, thawing out the frozen silt of their test pits with hot stones and a hand winch, facing hunger and hardship and pushing deeper and deeper into the unmapped wilderness for their precarious ounce or two of yellow metal.

"To me," I maintained, "they're all terribly brave."

"And terribly inadequate," amended my companion.

"How would you have done it?" I asked. I could hear his quiet chuckle at the challenge in my voice.

"The only way it can be done," he answered. "By big business, by the geologist and the engineer who does more than tickle the surface of things. Then you get something better than claim-jumpers and gun-toters and fly-by-night camps. You get roads and honest workers and towns and settlements and something permanent, while your old sourdough squats beside a saloon drum stove and dreams about the strike he's going to make when he gets back to the hill claim he hasn't even done assessment work on."

"You seem to know all about Alaska," I ventured. But he disregarded the barb in my voice.

"Not as much as I'm going to," he said. "I fell for the North, my first year out of Lehigh. The bug bit me when I prospected the Michikmamau country in Labrador and had to dig in for the winter. Then I went to Flin-Flon for a year. Then I headed for Fairbanks and had a couple of seasons on the gold dredges along the Tanana, where the work's plotted out three and four years in advance. That's what you'd call real mining."

"Where you're really a part of a machine," I amended.

"Sure," he agreed. "But she's a grand old machine. Why, the barge I worked had a million dollars sunk in her before she turned a wheel."

"And you're still on the Tanana?" I questioned, absurdly chilled by the aroma of big business.

"No; the next summer I did field work for a big company along the upper Yukon. Then I swung in with the Trumbull outfit."

"And now?" I prompted.

"Now I'm headed for the valley of the Chakitana, where the Trumbull company is going to consolidate its claims and tackle that territory in earnest. It's got something to work with there."

"The Chakitana," I echoed, ignoring the quiet exultation in his voice. The once-familiar sound of the Chakitana came back to me, across the years, with an oddly disturbing ring.

"Do you know that country well?" I asked.

"Not yet, of course," he said. "But I know something big is going to break before we get through with it. We'll dig a little deeper than the old pan-tilters who've been fussing around the fringes there. And I want to be in on the show when the color comes."

"Where you'll be safe and well fed and getting the news of the world by radio," I said, thinking of the lone-fire old-timers.

"But merely a hired man," my companion added with an unexpected note of regret. Then he laughed, a little defensively, and leaned closer to me in the starlight. "What I'd rather know is more about you. And why you're heading north again. And what you're going to do with yourself up there on the last frontier."

"I promised my father I'd come back and work for Alaska," I told him.

"Dig in and civilize the sourdough?" he said with a flippancy I resented.

I told him that I was going to teach in the Indian school at Toklutna.

"But twenty thousand teachers couldn't tame that country. She was born wild and she seems to want to stay wild."

"I have a promise to keep," I told him. "And I've my father's claim to look into."

"Why'd he ever send you down to the States?"

"He and I were alone, back in the Waceeta hills. And when he struck through to prospect in the Ghost Lake country he felt it wasn't fair to me. He felt I ought to better myself, as he put it. So he sent me out to get civilized."

My companion's laugh was curt but not unkindly.

"It seems to have succeeded," he said. "Where'd you go for your slice of civilization?"

"All the way to Michigan," I told him. "I had an aunt there who was supposed to look after me. But she died the year I entered Ann Arbor."

"Then you had to shift for yourself? Or was your father in Alaska still helping you?"

"He'd promised to come down to the States, but he kept putting it off. I think he was afraid of that outside world. He knew nothing about. Then he went back in the hills, and I had trouble keeping in touch with him. Nearly a year went by, once, before I got a letter."

"That's not so nice," observed my new-found friend. "How did you keep going?"

"By working in a girls' camp for the summer. Then by teaching for a year in a north-side Saginaw school. Then by tutoring a lumberman's feather-headed daughter. And after my final year at Ann Arbor I got a chance to go to England for the summer. I was taken along as a sort of companion for a Detroit automobile maker's daughter. She wasn't very strong. But she got to like me. And when the family went to Amalfi for the winter they kept me on. Then in the spring they went north to Florence, where they leased a villa just above Fiesole."

"I'd call that quite a break," said the man beside me.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

THREE WOMEN loved Sidney Lander, Alaska mining engineer—the daughter of a rich mining operator, the Mantuska schoolteacher, and one of her pupils, a big, outdoors gal.

Start Reading Today

The Lamp in the Valley

By ARTHUR STRINGER

THE PAPERS OF PRIVATE PURKEY

Dear Mom:

I did not write you before because there is more work to be done in an army than I thought, so this is just to say I am well except for a little flu, some trouble with my arches and the fact I can't get used to not being able to say "Okay, later," when I am told to do something.

Training has started and I guess I am being trained to be a letter carrier from all the walking they make me do in all kinds of weather. A modern rifle arrived in camp today and attracted wide attention. We expect to have several in time if there is no strike trouble.

Only the top of my uniform was ready when I got here but the bottom has arrived now. I am well and hope you are the same. Do not worry about me, mom, as I have to go to bed early and am too busy saluting to get into trouble, although if being in the army ain't being in trouble I don't know what is.

Love,
Oscar.

• • •

Dear Mom:

I thought I would drop you a few lines to let you know I have not seen no fighting yet. I heard funny noises last night and was very nervous, but everything was okay this morning so I guess it was all imaginary.

They do not get you up by bugle no more in the army. They use an electric buzzer. I kept getting up and looking for a front door on my tent because I thought it was the milkman or somebody. Where I made my mistake was going back to bed when I found no milkman, and just yelling "nuts" to the buzzer the rest of the morning.

The guardhouse is not a bad place and I will be out in a few days.

Love,
Oscar.

• • •

Dear Mom:

I am out of the guardhouse which I mentioned in my last letter but I still don't like buzzers. If the bugle was good enough for Grant, Lee, Sherman, Teddy Roosevelt, and Pershing, it is good enough for me. I was talking this over with a buddy and he says he thinks the buzzer is being used just to make the army mad. An army is no good unless it is mad, he says. Well the buzzer will do it. A bugle would make me mad at 5 a. m. too, mom, but it is sort of romantic. It kind of stirs you up and makes you feel like you was a fighter. A buzzer just makes you feel like you was a stenographer.

We have a couple of millionaires in my company. One of 'em is a Rockefeller. It is a funny thing how no matter whether you are rich or poor your feet hurt just the same. The photographers are always taking pictures of these rich guys but none of me but you know how I look anyhow so do not worry.

I am well except for that buzzer. I can't help hollering "Come in" whenever I hear it.

Could you send me some warm socks, a homemade cake and some dice?

Love,
Oscar.

• • •

Dear Mom:

Well, just a line to let you know everything is still okay at the arsenal of democracy as it is called in the newspapers. I am getting along well, except the coffee is lousy and the cream is plain sabotage. Another modern rifle arrived today, so I guess things are speeding up in the defense program.

I nearly got in the guardhouse again. I asked the captain for a typewriter so I could write my letters that way and he said why should I think I rated a typewriter, I said, "Well, this is a machine war, ain't it?" He got very sore.

Never mind the dice I asked you to send me. The camp is now full of 'em. Dice are the one thing which ain't behind schedule.

Love,
Oscar.

• • •

THE DIZZY PACE
(From the Conneautville, Pa., Courier)

Gresh's girls have measles.

Mel Davis called on Harley Hills Monday.

Mrs. Ruth Inman is up with an attack of lumbago.

Our roads are so full of awful deep ruts that it is impossible to get by without a team along.

Carl Hills was at the home of his parents, helping with wood.

Fox hunters were out every day last week running foxes.

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HOUSEHOLD QUESTIONS

Boiled frosting will not crack when put on cake if a few drops of vinegar are added to it when putting in flavoring.

• • •

When ironing soft collars start at the center and iron toward the end, beginning at center again to iron the other end. There will then be no creases.

• • •

Kerosene is a good cleansing agent for porcelain.

• • •

Should the lock in your car door freeze, heat the key over a match and insert.

• • •

It is best to whip no more than two cups of cream at a time. Chill bowl and beater. If the cream is beaten in a warm bowl, in a warm place, it is apt to turn to butter.

• • •

Don't cut the lemon in half when you want only a few drops of juice. Instead pierce the lemon with a bone knitting needle and squeeze out the amount required. The hole will seal itself.

• • •

Baked potatoes, if broken as soon as taken from the oven to let out the steam, will not be soggy when served.

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