

ONE ALASKA NIGHT

by
BARRETT WILLOUGHBY

*The light fell on the thing which lay half-concealed
under the moonlit leaves. It was a fleshless, skeleton hand,
cut off at the wrist.*

A root tripped me and threw me flat in the trail that led through the blueberry thicket. For a moment I was too tired to stir. I lay there, face on my arms, feeling that I'd been foolhardy to start out alone on a ten-mile hike across an unfamiliar peninsula. Yet I comforted myself with the thought that it could not be much farther to the coast fox-ranch which was my destination. There Lonnie, a schoolmate of mine, was spending the summer with her father, who owned the place.

Suddenly, nose to the ground, I became aware of a rank, musky odor that brought my head up with a jerk. Something queerly crawling touched my cheek. I slapped my hand over it and, with a chill of premonition, looked at what I'd caught—a long tuft of coarse

brown hair dangling from a twig above.

One startled glance told me it had been raked from the side of an Alaskan brown bear—the largest carnivorous animal that walks the world today. With the tuft of hair clutched in my hand and sudden alarm sharpening my senses, I looked closely at the path leading forward under the leafy tunnel in which I lay.

All along it, evenly spaced in the damp, brown mold, were deep depressions, round and large as dinner plates.

The truth came with a shock—I had been following a bear trail! It was already getting dark, and I was unarmed.

I'm not a hunter. I'm not even a brave woman. And I'd never before been

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alone in a bear-infested forest with night coming on. I recalled that bears do most of their traveling after dark — and I was lying flat in the middle of one of their thoroughfares.

I leaped to my feet, turned off the trail, and began plowing through the brush, intent only on putting all possible distance between me and that place before dark.

Almost at once the bushes thinned out, and I was able to make good time through stretches of short ferns; but the light was fading fast. Oddly, it was only now, when I was safely away from the bear trail, that it dawned on me that I had no idea which way to go.

I was lost.

In that instant of realization all my strength seemed to ooze out of me. Then panic came upon me. I had a senseless, almost uncontrollable impulse to dash madly through the trees, regardless of direction, bears, or anything else. But I got hold of myself, decided on a course, and with forced calmness went forward, watching tensely for that breaking away of the timber which foretells an approach to the sea.

Every step took me deeper into the darkening wilderness. There was no wind. Not a thing moved except myself — not a leaf, not a twig.

The very silence began to frighten me. I found myself stepping furtively, trying not to make any noise, and

straining to hear the slightest sound. I kept glancing back over my shoulder. Every few feet I'd stop suddenly, holding my breath while I studied a moss-grown log or the long arm of a thorny shrub which I was sure had stirred a second before.

I was groping with my feet, my gaze fixed ahead, when out of the tail of my eye I saw a blurred stirring in the shadows under the hemlocks. I jerked my head around to look.

Nothing moved.

I wondered if the "woods-madness" that seizes lost persons was coming upon me so soon.

And then I paused to stare at a murky clump which I hoped was only bushes. The clump, big as a truck horse, started toward me. It kept coming, slowly, heavily, swinging a great, low head. Brush rattled under its shambling tread. I smelled the rank, musky odor of bear.

The next instant I had turned from the monster and was running madly through the semidarkness of the forest.

I was nearly exhausted when I burst through the timber and saw the log cabin. I was running toward this refuge with all the speed left in me when something in the look of the place caused me to slow up. I came to a stop and peered fearfully through the dusk.

There was something distinctly sinister in the very quality of the silence

that hung over the cabin—a feeling as if death brooded there. The boarded windows on each side of the closed door stared back at me like eye sockets in a brown and weathered skull.

My recoil from the place was so strong that I turned to go back, but after one glance back into the black forest, I changed my mind. I slipped my belt ax from its sheath, grasped it firmly, and moved forward.

At the edge of the dooryard I came upon a stump and again hesitated. My fingers, absently exploring the stump's broad top, felt a crosshatch of ax marks. A block for chopping firewood, I thought, glancing at the nearby stack of dead hemlock boughs.

For some reason, this evidence of human workaday activity heartened me. I moved on and paused before the closed door. It was a homemade door of heavy, rough planks, silvered by the beating of many storms. In place of a knob, it had a rawhide latch thong hanging outside. The thong had curled up into a hard, dry knot.

Obviously, no one had drawn this latchstring for many months. Yet when I gave it a pull, I leaped back, expecting—I don't know what.

The creaking door swung in of its own weight, revealing an interior so dark I could make out no details. I listened. All was silent. I sniffed. The place gave off the faint rancid odor that clings to a

cabin in which raw furs have been dried.

Suddenly impatient at my senseless hesitancy, I plunged inside and bumped against a crude table in the middle of the floor. My outflung hand touched a bottle with dribbles of wax on the side. I struck a match, lighted the candle stub, and turned to inspect my shelter. Clearly, this was the very ordinary dwelling of some trapper who had abandoned it for other fields. There was nothing here to alarm even the most fearful woman, yet I continued to feel uneasy.

The sensible thing to do now was build a fire and then eat a sandwich. Luckily I had a couple remaining from lunch. I would go on to the fox ranch in the morning. A trail must lead out from here; and I knew I could find it when the sun came up. As I raked the ashes from the stove, I began searching my memory for all I had heard of this region.

The first thing that popped into my mind was the story of five prospectors who, a few years before, had vanished on this peninsula without leaving a trace. Rumor had it that they had met foul play at the hands of a crazy trapper—"Cub Bear" Butler. I didn't even know whether the mystery had ever been solved. But—a crazy trapper . . . I glanced back over my shoulder, wishing I hadn't thought about that.

A moment later, ax in hand, I reluctantly went out-of-doors to the

chopping block to cut some wood for the stove. In nervous haste I chopped an armload of wood, then began piling the sticks on my arm. As I was reaching for the last stick which had fallen in the bear weed, my groping fingers touched something which made me recoil so violently that all my wood fell to the ground. Hurriedly I struck a match and, leaning forward, lowered it until the tiny light fell on the thing which lay half-concealed under the moonlit leaves.

It was a fleshless, skeleton hand, cut off at the wrist.

The match burned my fingers. I dropped it. I was backing away when my eyes, now adjusted to the darkness, fell on another set of bony fingers thrust out from under a round leaf of bear weed. Then, just beyond that, a third skeleton hand took shape in the gloom.

My brain went into a sickening tallsipin. I tried to scream, but could make no sound. I tried to run, but my legs seemed turned to water. Then the hope that my eyes had tricked me in the dim light brought back a measure of calmness. I struck another match and, sweeping aside the weeds with my foot, bent to look.

They were there—all three of them. I don't know how I nerved myself to make a thorough search of the ground around that ax-marked stump, but I did. And in the dense bear weed I saw twelve skeleton hands, all cut off at the wrist.

There wasn't a skull or bone of any other kind.

Somehow I got back inside the candlelit cabin with an armload of wood, and, shoving the door shut, latched it. The fastening was an unusually sturdy bar of wood. The only way to lift and lower the bar from the outside was by means of the latch thong. I pulled this through its small hole, grateful that the door was strong and that no one could enter unless I lifted the bar.

But I was hollow with dread. My mind kept swirling about Cub Bear Butler, the crazy trapper, and the five prospectors who had vanished. The men were last seen on this peninsula when Butler was living in the vicinity running his trap lines. Was it possible that I had stumbled on to Cub Bear's cabin? Could those skeleton hands belong to —

"But there were only five prospectors." I was startled to find I had spoken aloud. There were six pairs of fleshless hands out there. To whom did the sixth pair belong?

I was so unstrung by these thoughts that even after the fire was going I couldn't eat a sandwich. Instead, after making sure that the door was still barred, I snuffed the candle, knowing it would soon burn out anyway. With my wadded jacket for a pillow, I lay down in the bare bunk, my little ax handy by my side.

I didn't intend to go to sleep, but

gradually fatigue began to triumph over nerves.

I don't know what awakened me; but suddenly I found myself sitting bolt upright, heart pounding, ears straining. In the sooty darkness I could see nothing except a streak of moonlight lancing in through a knothole in one of the slats over the window. The stillness was intense. Yet, I knew that some sound had penetrated my sleep.

I was about to get up to light the candle when it came again: *Thump!* . . . *Thump-thump-thump!* Someone was knocking to get in!

I chilled to the pit of my stomach, for the summons was curiously muffled as if the visitor were rapping not with firm knuckles, but with—I shoved the horrible thought from me.

"Who—who's there?" I called unsteadily.

Silence.

Ax in hand, I eased out of the bunk, lighted the candle, and turned to inspect the door. It was barred. Everything in the dim room was just as it had been when I fell asleep.

"Who is it?" I demanded in a firmer voice.

I knew that anyone knocking at this hour of the night would identify himself—unless he were a—

Again I put from me the thought of a dead man with no hands. I do not believe in ghosts.

I was trying to convince myself that the knocking had been born of my overwrought nerves when—*Thump!* . . . *Thump-thump-thump!* *Thump!* . . . *Thump-thump-thump!* It was like the fleshy stub of an arm hammering on wood.

Leaden with fright, I managed to reach the door and press my ear against it. "Who—what do you want? Answer me!"

I heard a faint rustling, as of a loose garment brushing against the rough log wall outside. After a dozen seconds, I had a sudden, desperate impulse to end the suspense. I lifted the bar, flung open the door, and looked out.

Nothing.

The high moon lighted the clearing with a brilliance almost like that of day, but there was neither movement nor sound in the breathless northern night.

Puzzled as well as frightened, I went back inside.

No sooner had I dropped the bar in place than it came again—*Thump!* . . . *Thump-thump-thump!* Instantly I jerked open the door.

No one was there. But the slithering sound, plainer than before, seemed to come from the corner to the right, as if someone had knocked and then run, to play a joke on me.

A flash of anger banished my fear. I darted out and ran all the way around the cabin.

There was no one.

The nearest cover—a tall hemlock—was fully fifty feet away. Nothing human, no matter how fleet, could possibly have covered that distance in the second between the last knock and my abrupt opening of the door. No creature larger than a rabbit could have concealed itself in the meadow surrounding the cabin.

Then gooseflesh broke out all over me. With a rush of terror came the thought that I was gazing on no ordinary wild meadow. Under the bear weed were skeleton hands—so many of them that this was literally a meadow of the dead.

I was trembling, and though it was not from cold, I wanted the comfort of a fire—a great, flaming fire. I dragged the pile of dead limbs over to the hut and kindled a roaring blaze just outside the door. The crackling and the warmth of it put new courage into me. I sat in the doorway and watched the clearing.

Nothing further disturbed me. After a while I began to nod.

I woke with a start, thinking I heard laughter and someone calling my name. Late morning sun flooded the clearing. Then I saw a slim, blonde young woman in breeches and a windbreaker, running across the meadow toward me. Lonnie, my friend of the fox ranch! Behind her strode her father, a lean, sourdough Alaskan who had, as I well knew, no very high opinion of a woman's ability to take care of herself in the woods.

I was so overjoyed to see them that I

could have rushed upon them and fallen to embrace their knees. But pride kept me from betraying myself to the quizzical eyes of Lonnie's father, whom I always called "Dad." I assumed a nonchalant manner and strolled out to greet them.

"There, Dad!" said Lonnie, laughing. "I told you she'd be cool as a cucumber!" She gave me a hug. "I knew you'd be all right, but Dad had a fit when you failed to show up last night."

"A woman," declared Dad, "should never go into the woods alone. Women are always getting lost." He readjusted the heavy holster on his hip. "I was afraid you'd run into a bear—there are a lot of brownies around this summer. You can thank your lucky star you stumbled onto Butler's cabin."

Butler's cabin! But even as a shivering thrill ran through me, Dad's I-told-you-so manner nettled me.

"It's not only women who get lost," I retorted. "How about those five prospectors who disappeared in these woods a few years ago?"

"Oh, those chaps! It's likely they were drowned in the tiderips off the Cape."

"No, they weren't, Dad," I said quietly. "They were killed—murdered—right here at Butler's cabin."

He and Lonnie stared at me as if they thought I had gone insane. Then Dad began to laugh. "Now, Sis, don't try

to put over any of your writer's imaginings on an old fellow like me."

"It's not imagination. Come. I'll show you."

I led the way to the chopping block, and, brushing aside the bear weed with my foot, one by one revealed the skeleton hands, stark white in the sunlight.

Dad looked grave. "By George," he muttered. "This looks bad. I remember there was some talk about Cub Bear Butler, but——" He stooped and picked up one of the bony things.

After a moment's inspection he tossed it back into the weeds, and brushed his hands together. "Just like a woman!" he drawled, grinning at me. "Those are not human hands, Sister. They're the skeleton paws of cub bears."

I must have looked uncommonly foolish for he patted my shoulder consolingly. "Nine men out of ten would have made the same mistake. You see, the skeleton of a bear's paw, particularly a cub's, is almost identical with that of the human hand."

"But—why are there no other bones here?"

"Cub Bear Butler, like all other trappers, skinned his catch at the traps in the woods—all except the feet, which need a good deal of care. He brought the pelts back here to his cabin to skin the paws. He trapped only cubs,

yearlings. That's how he got his nickname."

Feeling very much deflated, I followed him into the cabin.

"Poor old Cub Bear," he said. "They finally got him."

"Who got him?" I asked, remembering that Butler had been called "the crazy trapper."

"Bears. Some Indians round here swear it was the Great She-Bear, the Spirit Bear, who took revenge on him for killing so many cubs. At any rate he was found crumpled down right there"—Dad pointed to a spot just outside the door—"killed as a bear kills a man. He'd been dead only a couple of days and the tracks of a big brownie were still visible in the dooryard."

"But why didn't he shoot the beast if it jumped him in his own yard?"

"Couldn't reach his gun. When they found him, his rifle, his ax, and a fresh cub pelt were all here in the cabin, and the door was barred and the latch thong broken off."

"What a strange thing!"

"Nothing strange about it. What happened was plain enough. Cub Bear must have come in from his trap line with the pelt. He dropped it when he put his rifle on the table, and then went out—for water, likely—shutting the door behind him. Possibly the mother of the cub he'd just killed did follow him home, and—well, an angry she-brownie is just about

the most terrifying creature a man can run up against. When she went for him, he ran for his cabin to get his rifle. In his haste, he jerked the latch thong so hard he broke it off. Then he couldn't open the door. And it is so heavy he couldn't break it in. So—the beast got him."

"How terrible—and ironic!" I shuddered as I pictured what had happened.

"Tough luck, all right. Bert Slocum, one of my ranch hands now, spent a couple of months here afterward, trapping mink. He came out with a fine, large tale about Cub Bear's ghost hanging around here, and——"

"Ghost," I started, and turned to stare at the spot where Butler must have stood frantically beating on the heavy plank door trying to get in.

"Yes, so Bert claims." Dad chuckled. "But Bert's the biggest liar in Alaska. The way he tells it, Cub Bear——"

Thump! . . . Thump-thump-thump!
With the door wide open it came, and before I knew it I had leaped to my feet.

"What in heck's the matter with you, Sis?" inquired Dad.

I looked from the empty door to the faces of my companions. "Didn't you hear it?" I demanded.

"Hear what?"

"That knocking."

"Oh, those pesky flying squirrels," drawled Dad. "The country's getting overrun with 'em. On a moonlight night a

man can't get a wink of sleep, the way they play humpty-dumpty on the roof. They——"

"Flying squirrels," I interrupted, doubtfully. "I'd like to see one—playing."

"No trouble. Just stand there inside the door, sort of hidden, and keep your eye on that lone hemlock out in front."

I took up the position he indicated.

After a moment, sure enough, a small, furry form soared out from the top of the tree and, with little legs outspread, came gliding down to land with that soft, solid *thump!* on the roof. Then, quickly, *thump-thump-thump!* it bounded down to the eaves, and off, racing back toward the tree.

"What a cunning little creature," I observed, turning around with what must have been a sickly smile.

As I did so, my attention was caught by the door, swung in so that the outside of it was very close to me. Years of Alaska weather—beating rain and wind and snow, alternating with hot summer sun—had worked the rough grain of the unfinished planks into a coarse, light gray nap. Visible now on the sunstruck surface, and about even with the top of my head were curious marks—depressions in the weathermap of the wood, such as might have been made by the edge of heavily pounding fists.

"What are you staring at now, Sis?" Dad broke in on my thoughts.

"Those marks on the door."

He laughed. "You must have been pretty excited when you got here last night—knocking that hard. But that's just like a woman—never able to tell whether a cabin's deserted or not." He picked up my jacket from the bunk and held it for me. "Come, now. Slip into this. It's time we were moving. I'm hungry enough to eat boiled owl, and it's eight miles to the ranch."

A few minutes later, as we were walking away across the sunny clearing, I fell a step behind the other two and turned to look back at the cabin in which I had spent the most terrifying night of my life.

I was remembering that two days ago there had been a heavy southeast

gale which must have beat directly on that closed door. Yesterday's sun drying out the planks would have raised the wood-*nap*, obliterating any depressions that might have been there before I reached the cabin. Yet marks were there, as if two fists had pounded on the door. Dad thought I had made them.

I looked down at my hands, and though I don't believe in ghosts, I had a queer feeling in the pit of my stomach. The marks were there, plainly visible when the sun struck the door just right. But I knew that my two small fists had never made them.

For I had never knocked, or even thought of knocking, on the door of that grim, deserted cabin in the clearing.

Comment

1.
 - a. Where is the narrator at the beginning of the selection?
 - b. What facts make her realize that she has been following a bear trail?
 - c. How does she happen to find the deserted cabin?
2. There are three things that terrify the narrator:
 - (1) the skeleton hands
 - (2) the knocking noises
 - (3) the depressions in the wood of the door
 - a. Why is she frightened about each of these things?
 - b. What explanation does Dad give for each one?