

# **The Last Patrol**

Alan Sullivan

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# The Last Patrol

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From Bermondsey and Brighton,  
From Auckland and the Forth,  
From all the seas are gathered in  
The wardens of the North;  
Whose empty spaces bind them  
That the return no more,  
To all they left behind them  
And all they lived before.

And some would fain remember,  
And some would fain forget,  
That down the hollow Kentish lanes  
The wild rose lingers yet;  
That 'cross the moor and through the glen  
The infant rivers run;  
The days were long in Scotland then,  
But here the midnight sun;

And here the great auroras swing  
Like curtains in the sky,  
The wild swan lifts his trumpeting,  
The grey goose hurtles by;  
For half the year the naked land  
It sheathed in rigid mail;  
Brothers! God wot, ye understand  
Who tramp the Dawson trail.

FITZGERALD'S patrol was due in Dawson on February the 1st. After three weeks of storm and cold, the Indian Esau arrived, saying that he had left Fitzgerald on January the 1st, at Mountain Creek, twenty days' easy travelling from Dawson.

Thereupon Synder, commanding B division on the Yukon, thought hard, and telegraphed to Perry, Commissioner at Regina, via Eagle, Valdez, and wireless.

Perry's answer halted, for the wires went down under the weight of winter winds. But, when it did arrive, Dempster's patrol pulled out for Fort McPherson on the very same day. With him were Constable Fyfe, ex-Constable Turner, Indian Charles Stewart, and three teams of five dogs each.

Three weeks later, Dempster, having tramped four hundred and fifty miles, was swinging down the Peel River. His eyes, roving restlessly, picked up an old snowshoe trail. Turning sharply, he followed it up the steep bank and pushed his way into a clump of ground willows. There he stopped, stared hard and long, and stooped over something that broke the smooth curves of drifting snow.

From Fort McPherson south-west to Dawson as the crow flies is three hundred and fifty miles. As man walks it is five hundred. As water runs it is a good deal more. Inspector Fitzgerald told Corporal Somers that it was just

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about thirty–five days, and, as you will see, Somers had reason to remember that just three months later.

Fitzgerald's orders were very brief. He was to patrol to Dawson in the winter of 1910–11. Thus wrote the Commissioner in Regina to the Comptroller in Ottawa, the summer before. There was nothing unusual about it. The Mounted Police were threading the wilderness everywhere.

So Fitzgerald gathered in Constables Kinney and Taylor, and Special Constable Carter, who had made the trip once, from the other end, four years before. Also he requisitioned, to be exact, twelve hundred and fifty–six pounds of supplies. These included nine hundred pounds of fish for the fifteen train–dogs. In other words, he allowed two and one–quarter pounds of food per man per day, which is less than the subarctic standard ration. It was to be a record patrol. Every pound of weight was a handicap.

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Now, the recognized route is up the Peel a hundred miles, across the big bend eighty more, hit the Peel again, then turn up through the Big Wind into the Little Wind River, till you strike Forrest Creek. This takes you by way of Mountain Creek to the gaunt backbone of the big divide. Here the waters on your left hand flow into Bering Sea and on your right into the Arctic. Once over the big divide you strike Wolf Creek, then down hill, across the glaciers, the Little Hart River and Christmas Creek and the Blackstone. These are Yukon waters. All of this sounds geographic. In winter–time, in the North, it is something more, for here geography is vital and insistent.

On December the 21st, which was a Wednesday, a pygmy caravan swung out on the broad expanse of the Peel. Three men, three dog teams, one man — that was the order of going. The wind was strong and the cold was bitter. Fifty–one below on the tenth day — you have the figures in Fitzgerald's diary for it. Half–way over the eighty–mile portage is Caribou Born Mountain. Eighteen hundred feet above the stark wilderness it shoulders, mantled with great drifts, plastered with ice, searched and harried by every wind that lifts across these speechless wastes. The trail clings to its bleak flanks; and over the trail toiled Fitzgerald's patrol.

What shall be said of the trail to you who know it not? The air is tense and sharp, it almost rings. The nights are luminous with ghostly fires that palpitate through the sparkling zenith. The days are full of aching, destroying, indomitable effort, when the body summons all its powers to live under the weight of arctic frosts. And through the body run the pain and torture of burning sinews and scorched sight, till the innermost essence of courage and fortitude and contempt of death rise up to laugh out in these silences. Here the soul of a man shouts aloud for life is terrible and fierce.

On January the 8th, on Little Wind River, it was sixty–four below, with a strong head wind. A day or two before the temperature was the same, and Fitzgerald records some slight frostbites. What eloquence of brevity!

Then began the search for Forrest Creek, that led to the big divide. It will be remembered that Carter had come from Dawson once, but he had come north. There was a vast difference. In between times he had been roaming the subarctics, and, with the exception of a few gaunt landmarks, the great ridges and plains of the Yukon district are like brothers all. There was also the map that Darrel drew the summer before. But Darrel was on his way in a canoe from La Pierre House, near the, Alaskan frontier, to the Red River, south of Winnipeg. This was a matter of some three thousand miles. So he was in a hurry and not spend much time when he stopped at Fort, and Fitzgerald was not there to see him draw it and ask questions.

A few days later the inspector pulled up. The Dawson trail was lost. The tributaries of the Little Wind River, among which somewhere lay Forrest Creek, had yielded no clue. Precious days were spent in which dauntless humanity had braved the double rigour of cold and a gradually increasing hunger. In these latitudes the body cries out for food. Its demand is primordial and relentless, and what the body receives it almost instantly transmutes into strength and bodily warmth, into an inward glow to fortify it against the death that otherwise is sure. In the north, to be hungry is to be cold, and to be cold is to invite the end.

All of this Fitzgerald knew, and yet, when his lean brigade faced backward on the trail, there was left of the provisions only ten pounds of bacon, eight pounds of flour, and some dried fish, the latter for the dogs. The delay

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was the price of his contempt for hardship and danger. But you must know that hunger and cold were no strangers to the police. They met and grappled yearly, with no quarter asked. On the seventeenth of January began the retreat of beaten men. Who shall say what thoughts animated them, moving like specks, infinitesimally small, over a blank and measureless expanse? With nightfall came the first tragedy. The first—train dog was killed.

Now the dog of the North is cousin to the wolf and kindred to the fox. He is very wise and his teeth are very sharp. But here, more than in all the world, he is the friend and servant of man. By the trail you will know him, when his shoulders jam tight into the collar and his tawny sides break into ripples with the play of tireless muscles underneath. Man may at times kill man, but not, save in the last extremity, may man kill dog.

Fitzgerald's axe fell. There was a quick twitching of sinews and a snarling from the fourteen comrades of the trace. Then something older than man himself rose in them and they drew back from the gory fragments of their brother. Their bellies were empty, their eyes glanced shiftily and winking at their masters. Insensate hunger was assailing their entrails, but dog would not eat dog.

Thus continued the agonizing march. Their bodies, lacking natural food, began slowly to capitulate their outposts to the frost. Grey patches appeared on faces and arms and there was no rush of warm blood to repel the invader. Day by day with dwindling strength these indomitable souls fought on, giving of themselves to the fight, but day by day having less to give. That is the great drama of the North. It demands, it seizes, it usurps; but, for itself, it does nothing but wait. It closes in little by little, by day and night, always waiting and always taking, till, after a little moment of its eternal silence, it has taken everything.

By February the 5th many things had happened. The dauntless four had travelled about two hundred miles on dog—meat. The river ice was weighted down with its burden of snow, and both Carter and Taylor had plunged through into numbing waters while the temperature was fifty—six below. The human organism shrank from its savage portion of canine flesh. The skin began to split and peel and blacken. The tissues of their bodies shrank and contracted closer and closer round hearts that still beat defiantly. Feet and hands began to freeze, and ominous grey patches mottled their high cheek—bones that stood out sharply from hollow faces.

When and where Taylor and Kinney dropped behind is the secret of the North. But soon after the fifth a morning came when they did not break camp with the others, and the fort was only thirty—five miles away. The parting must have been brief. Then, in the grey of the arctic morning, Fitzgerald and Carter summoned their last reserves of failing strength and staggered on for help.

The day waxed and waned in the little camp and all around closed in the stark and stinging wilderness. Food there was none. By now the organs of the body, lacking sustenance, had turned upon each other to destroy. Hunger had changed from a dull pain to a fierce gnawing and snatching at the vitals. With cracked fingers they chopped at a moose hide and boiled the fragments. But their stomachs, which receded to the backbone, refused to harbour it. So beneath the Alaska robes they lay and waited.

Taylor spoke. There came no answer. He looked into Kinney's face. It stared up blankly and the hardening body did not yield to his touch. The comrade of the trail had changed places with Death — with a new bedfellow from whose chill embraces he struggled weakly to escape.

Strange visions came into his mind: thoughts of running water and warm weather and bronzed men sitting round big camp—fires telling stories of patrols. And the most interesting of all was about the Dawson patrol that broke the record from Fort McPherson under Fitzgerald. Just as he was getting a light from the next man, his elbow touched something, and, turning, he saw a corpse that looked like Kinney. He thrust out a hand and it — encountered something cold. So his eyes travelled slowly till they saw Kinney's face, and it was grey with frost. The fire went out. The men stopped talking. All at once he heard, something coming through the underbrush. It was strangely difficult to move, for he was still very sleepy, but he did manage to get hold of his carbine. Then something lurched toward him, lumbering and dreadful, and he pointed the carbine straight at its crimson, dripping mouth, and crooked his finger.

A shot rang out, sudden and sharp. It rolled from the little camp, through the scant timber fringing the river—bank, up into the motionless atmosphere and toward the diamond—pointed stars. There was no one left to bear it. But Christ is wise and merciful, and He understood how it was that Taylor lay with the top of his head blown off beside his comrade of the trail.

The price was not yet paid; the North demanded full tribute. Ten miles nearer home, twenty—five miles from the cheer and warmth of Fort McPherson, it was paid in full. Ex—Constable Carter lay on his back, with folded

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hands and a handkerchief over his face. Beside him crouched Fitzgerald, battling for life. His stiffening fingers wrote laboriously with a charred stick on a scrap of paper. His stricken eyes moved from it to the still figure, then back to his writing. "All money in despatch—bag and bank, clothes, etc., I leave to my beloved mother." It was all very clear and plain. Then, as the ultimate distress seized him, he added, "God bless all."

He was now conscious that it was left for him to balance the account. The physical struggle was ended. There remained only the mental anguish. So Fitzgerald must have summoned to his aid all the heroic traditions, all the magnificent discipline of the service. He faced the end like a soldier and an officer, without rancour, fear, or complaint. He gave himself, all of himself, to that baptism of mortality with which the vast spaces of this silent country are being redeemed.

Winds blew. Snow fell. The hollow caverns of the North emptied themselves of storm and blizzard. And after weeks of silence came Dempster.

He had searched Forrest Creek, but found no sign. Little Wind River did not speak of the vanished brigade. The Big Wind had no word of them save deserted camps and the black hearts of dead fires. Caribou Born Mountain held its peace, for they were not there, but the sign came when the Peel began to broaden to the Arctic.

First, a despatch—bag in Old Colin's lonely cabin; then a tent and a stove; then dog—harness from which had been cut all hair and hide that might retain anything of nourishment. Thus grew the tokens that tightened the cords round Dempster's breast and chilled the hot blood pumping through his heart.

And, at the end of it all, two rigid forms beneath their sleeping—bags. The face of one blue and blotched, painted with all the fearful colouring of frozen death. The other no longer the face of a man.

A few miles further on, their brothers of the trail, the hands of one crossed, his eyes decently closed and covered. Beside him the lost leader, the last to die.

Race now with Dempster to Fort McPherson, only twenty—five miles away. Call Corporal Somers and make with him the last short journey that brought Fitzgerald's patrol back home again. Stand and watch the three Indians dig a great grave in the iron earth. Listen to Whittaker, English Church missionary, speaking trembling words over the four rough coffins. Guard your ears while the red flames leap and the echoes crash from the rifles of the firing party. And, when you have done all this, do one thing more: Remember that while the wilderness endures there will also endure those to whom its terrors are but an invitation; those who will meet its last demands with the calm cognizance that mocks at danger.

Brothers of the pack—strap and the saddle — well—tried comrades of the trail — sojourners in silent places — honour to the Service and to you all!