

The Arctic regions

The Arctic Legions

By A. de HERRIES SMITH

*Menaced on all sides by the death-dealing
hoofs of migrating caribou, Conroy of the
Mounted and Yeyik, the half-breed
killer, face a struggle for mastery.*

The monotonous clicking of deer hoofs on the rock valleys of the Barren Lands, and the faint fingers of light touching the granite ridges, told Corporal Conroy that another day had come.

The Mounted Policeman's bronzed face wrinkled with pain as he shifted his body into another position and glanced across the upthrust boulder that split the waves of migrating caribou.

Yeyik, the Yellowknife killer, was there, huddled down Indian fashion; he still had Conroy's Colt lying on the flat rock before him. In the half light the Mountie could not determine if the blurred figure opposite were asleep or awake; whether the man had purposely laid the gun there to tantalize him, or whether it was a case of rank carelessness on the Indian's part.

Conroy's eyes became pin points of gray light; the muscles stood out on his neck in little pulsing ridges. With a slow flexing movement the corporal yawned, doubled his arms, threw his shoulders back, and at the same time reached out one long leg toward the revolver.

The Indian made no move.

Another yawn, another stretch, and the Mountie's moccasin was within three inches of the weapon. Conroy blinked his eyes, edged along the rock again, and reached out once more. Still the same space existed between his tensed foot and the gun.

"*Hai, hai, hai!*" Yeyik's shout came all at once, ringing out over the clatter of hoofs and the clicking of horns. "I make the joke, see? *Hai!* I am a hunter—a strong hunter. I do not sleep."

With his leathery face split by a wide grin, the half-breed removed his right knee. Then Conroy saw that the native had a moccasin tie-string attached to the Colt's trigger guard. With the babiche cord passing under his knee, the native had been able to pull the weapon along without detection.

"Huh-huh. You're clever—at children's games," the corporal sneered as Yeyik rocked back and forth in silent laughter. "You're not clever enough to save your own hide, though. A poor hunter. *Tcha!*"

"A strong hunter," the half-breed countered, voice savage all at once as he jerked the gun to him.

"You lie, *sikak!*" Conroy retorted evenly, hard eyes still on the fingers playing with the Colt's trigger. "A strong hunter? You are but a jest for the old squaws squatting in the teepees.

"There are six shells in the little gun, and yet you are afraid to fire one at me!"



"There are six shells in the gun," the Mounted Policeman said, "yet you are afraid to fire one at me!"

The Yellowknife brought the Colt's muzzle up in line with the Mountie's heart; then he dropped it again and recommenced fiddling with the trigger guard.

In time he remembered Conroy's reputation for both speed and cunning.

"I am a wise hunter, and no fool," the half-breed hissed in Cree, eyelids flickering. "Hah, one shot. What then? If I miss you, you are upon me like a wolf, and I go to the Big Stone House from which none return. *Namoya!* I live. If you desire death—behold!"

He waved a tattered arm at the deer surging by under the rock; white-eyed, wide-nostrilled in fear of the man scent, their antlers almost touching the travelers' moccasins.

The corporal shrugged his shoulders and slowly got to his feet, to stand staring into the north. He could see nothing but the hard blue sky and that moving blanket of deer covering the entire face of the Barren Lands. Thousands of caribou pressing forward for the shelter of the Last Woods, there to winter away from the Arctic's gales. The Mountie squatted down on the boulder again, face wrinkled in disgust.

Yeyik was on his feet now, padding up and down like a caged wild animal, the tassels of his gaudily beaded warm *capote* fluttering in the dawn wind. Back and forth the killer paced in soundless moccasins, one eye on the milling deer, the other on the Mountie.

"Hoofs! Hoofs! Hoofs!" the corporal said. "Forty million caribou. They'd trample you to death down there in two minutes."

Yeyik whirled at the corporal's words, thin lips snarling. The Colt was jerked up to his hip.

"Quite correct," Conroy laughed, watching the other man's wind-cracked face. "At least that is the estimate made by the Wild Life Department, and they should know. If we've butted into the main migration, we may be here for three weeks, waiting for them to pass—if we don't go mad in the meantime. Pleasant, eh?"

No reply but a scornful grunt.

"Gets you, doesn't it?" the corporal essayed a moment later. "Nothing but horns, horns, horns, and hoofs, hoofs, hoofs. Reminds me of France, Yeyik. Slogging along in the mud, head down. Feet—feet—feet! Jupiter! I'll never forget that."

"*Namoya!* Stop it," the half-breed shrilled in Cree, flourishing the Colt. The pupils of the man's brown eyes were dilating and contracting, his thin nostrils spread.

"Feet—feet—feet! Yes," Yeyik went on again in his native tongue, unable to ignore the other man's words. "But think of the meat! Nothing to do but kill. *Hai!* I am a strong hunter and I have filled many cooking pots with caribou tongues."

Conroy nodded to himself, watching the native's lips working. Yes, that was Yeyik's reputation, all right. He had been a great hunter of animals before he took to hunting men instead. It had been told how he crouched in a stone shelter on the lip of the Pass and wantonly slaughtered hundreds of deer; then took only the tongues and left the remainder for the white foxes. Yeyik was a killer, right enough—he seemed to have it in his blood.

"Great to stand here and knock 'em over, eh?" the Mountie suggested. "Why, you could get three with each bullet. Dunno that you could, though. Those infernal hoofs would be likely to put you off. God, there's no end to them.

"Hoofs—hoofs—hoofs! You'll go mad before I will, though, Yeyik. Better give me that gun, and I'll get you through somehow.

"Got to take your medicine anyhow, and if I kick out there will be plenty more Mounted Police to take up and follow your trail, so—"

"*Namoya!* Enough!" the half-breed broke in on him, whirling about and jerking up the Colt again. "Listen," he added wildly. "In the mission I learn to count. Twenty, forty, hundred, but now—*sacré!* Did I have but an ax, a little Hudson's Bay camp ax, I could stand and kill—kill—kill. Aha! No more! Back! Back! Back!"

Conroy halted his forward slide and stepped backward in obedience to the gun's threat, until his heels were on the edge of the rock.

"Hell of a hunter you are!" the Mountie taunted, lips scornful. "You have a gun, you have a long knife, and yet you are afraid to kill. When this tale is told about the teepees there will be much laughter."

Yeyik snorted, but apparently had only half heard the words. He turned away again, his gaze on those myriads of legs crisscrossing each other in a maddening jumble.

Silence fell on the two while the forest of antlers surged on down the valley. Sleek brown bodies passed in unending procession, those white forefeet forever flashing under the cold sun's glint.

The whole world seemed to be filled with clashing antlers and the never-ending *click-click-click* of those dainty, death-dealing hoofs.

Watching the tide of animal life flowing past the boulder, it suddenly came to the Mountie that the caribou were even thicker than before and traveling at a greater speed.

Now and then one of the deer would be forced up on its comrade's backs as the pressure became unbearable. The fawns were bleating more, and the sweaty odors of the herds was accompanied by a heat fog that hung in the chilly air over the deer.

"By gosh, Yeyik, the caribou herds are—"

Cr-ack!

Conroy's words were fractured by the Colt's bark.

He whirled about just as the half-breed sent two more bullets thudding into the packed mass of animals underneath.

The stricken deer were instantly engulfed by those pressing on from behind, and in a moment the caribou were moving on as evenly as before.

Cr-ack! Cr-ack!

"All gone but one. But I can count, me," Yeyik shrilled, his voice almost a screech as the Colt's muzzle swung round on the Mounted Policeman. "Hoofs, hoofs, hoofs! I am a great hunter, but you—"

Conroy suddenly doubled down, jerked off his Stetson, and sent the hat skimming through the air. The stiff brim caught the half-breed across the mouth, momentarily jarring him off his balance.

Three things came together with lightning speed; the revolver's crash, Conroy's rush, and Yeyik's plunge. The Mountie's fingers gripped the other man's *capote*, and came away with a handful of fringe as Yeyik leaped out into mid-air.

The jump put the half-breed astride one of the plunging backs below the rock, and Conroy obtained a fleeting glimpse of Yeyik clawing at a terrified caribou's antlers as he struggled to reach the hunting knife sheathed under his waist scarf.

An exultant yell floated up to the man on the boulder.

The corporal kicked the revolver back from the boulder's edge, gathered himself, and ran across the rock. Trail-hardened muscles shot him out into the air, and a split-second later his fingers were again gripping Yeyik's *capote*.

Under this double burden the caribou vented a bleat of terror and collapsed.

The two men rolled off the slippery back and into a mad jumble of stabbing hoofs—a veritable forest of flickering legs.

Still gripping the half-breed, the Mountie came half to his feet, only to be knocked over again by the rush of deer.

White hocks flowed past him in unending procession as he lay for a moment with his head protected by one arm.

"Now! Up!"

Conroy's shout reached Yeyik's ears, although the sound was almost drowned by the clicking hoofs. Some long-forgotten lesson in obedience, learned at the mission school, prompted the killer to respond. Together the men leaped to their feet.

Two wide eyes and a velvety snout suddenly filled the corporal's vision. He crashed his fist into the caribou's nose, and was vaguely conscious of the animal's swerve. In that moment, while the deer threshed away through its comrades, Conroy's eyes caught the opening left by the brute's plunge. He grabbed Yeyik by the collar, half throwing, half carrying him toward the sheltering boulder.

They fell in a panting huddle behind the rock; Yeyik on the gravel, Conroy on top of him; still clutching the other's collar.

Over his shoulder the Mountie saw the white hocks flow on—twin streams, split by the boulder.

The two were still lying there, wordlessly, when five minutes later a furry shape trotted about the rock, propped, and swung about to snarl at the man scent.

It was a gray wolf, evil-eyed, with bloodstained jowls.

"Fine," Conroy said, getting to his feet. "The wolves have come, Yeyik. That means the tail end of the herds, with the packs pulling down the stragglers.

"I told you there was a break, but you wouldn't listen. Had a hunch you'd jump, too, but you did it too soon.

"That impulse to kill is hard to resist, eh? Well, the thing worked out all right, but I lost a damn good hat. Headquarters will likely soak me seven dollars and a half for another one. Hold still! I want that knife. All right, Yeyik, up on the rock."

They climbed the boulder. Conroy picked up his Colt, reloaded it, and then pitched Yeyik's knife away. Once more they squatted down, watching the fleeting gray shapes relentlessly hunting the aged animals and the weaklings, as the last of the herds milled past the rock.

An hour later, but for the two men padding over the hard-packed snow toward the post, the Barren Lands was a soundless, lifeless void.

THE END.