

Story #21. Northern Fantasy  
 (Adapted from novel "Iron" on Feb. 4-5, 1937)

Sent to:	When:	Returned:
Scribner's Mag.	Feb. 6, 1937.	Feb. 23, 1937. <i>man.</i>
Midwest (Letter)	Feb. 24, 1937.	Mar. 22, '37. Letter
Hinterland	Mar. 23, 1937.	Apr. 27, 1937. <i>Letter.</i>
Fantasy	Apr. 10, 1937.	<i>Novel, 1937. Letter</i>
Talent 68. 46th Ave	Oct 9, 1937	Oct. 12, 1937
Woodman	Oct. 22, 1937.	Oct. 30, '37. Letter.
The Catamount	NOV. 22, 1937.	Dec. 13, 1937. Letter.
Story	Mar. 16, 1938.	Apr. 2, '36. NOTE.
Catamount	June 27, 1938.	Aug. 22 "re-folded"
Haverick 13 Shawmut St. Boston.	Aug. 22, '38.	Sept. 6 - Note.
2 Hinterland	Jan. 26, 1939.	Mar. 17, 1939
Esquire	Sept. 23, 1939.	Sept. 30
<del>Hinterland</del> Transition.	April 1, 1940.	May 11.
Southern Review	May 20, '40.	

Written by:  
John Voelker  
Ishpeming, Michigan

NORTHERN FANTASY

by  
Robert Traver

FORM

The praying maples and thin birches, silent and frozen in the deepness of midwinter, reached beseeching naked arms up the wailing wall of the tall hill, fringing out to the width of the ski slide, and sober small boys and some drunken men clung to the limbs of the trees -- bear-hugging alcoholic wag shouting 'so only God can make a tree, hey!' -- perhaps the better to watch the ski jump, though they could not see so well.

Urgently lining each side of the ski slide were the crowds of spectators, their dragon breaths upon the frosty February air, and down below across the wideness of the valley were the autos and the trucks, and silent horses quietly stomping and steaming under their blankets. And over all it was cold and clear, and the sun was high, its frost-thin glitter feeble upon the deep snow.

Far up the hill, rising above its steep and snowy crest, fluttered the flag from the ski tower, the scaffold, from which the clustered, waiting skiers looked like little men, like childhood gnomes from out a Christmas book, standing so far up there against the cold blue Northern sky, quietly waiting for the signal to fling themselves on down along the steep and narrow way.

Standing far up on the starting tower the bugler raised his bugle to his lips -- "Marble Eye" Couch, a little Cornish miner who had lost an eye in the War and had never done anything about it -- and when this bugler raised his bugle he pouted and then he blew, and the last notes still raced and rang and echoed across the valley, even after he had taken his bugle down and replaced it with a bottle, grinning, gurgling: 'Hi can pl'y 'pon any hinstrument which 'asn't a bloody reed!'

Jooseppi raised his hand that he was ready, and far below, by the great jump, another more sober, far-seeing, and less colorful bugler answered, blurted, "Ready!" and Jooseppi shuffled forward and dipped off and down, hurtling, rushing down, crouching low, cupping his ears from the tremendous and freezing speed, here now at once incredibly at and past the jump-off, seeming to straighten and to spring far out, leaning forward, looking lying on his skis as he soared into the air, far out into the air, at last a man stole freedom from the earth, arms waving and circling like children's playful angels in the snow, still soaring out into the air, the skis now gradually, quickly won back to earth, now landing with clear and wooden slap far down the hill, into the bleating of the crowd, one foot forward, crouching low again and racing, crunch-whistling, far down and out across the valley, finally swirling to a circling, skirling stop before the practical, solemn small boys who liked to see their heroes near, closeup.

In the dense crowd Julie Boniface turned to her husband, her dark eyes deeply glowing. "Oh, I am so glad we came. It is so incredibly beautiful and graceful. It is poetry soaring before our eyes."

Dr. Boniface laughed, a brief, high, nasal laugh. "Yes, he is a good-looking fellow....I want a drink, it's cold."

In the wintertime the mining town of Iron Cliffs became one of the coldest, stormiest areas in the entire country. Wild, demented, snarling blizzards would suddenly leap out of the northwest and swoop down the wide valleys, lashing the obedient earth for days on end. During these blizzards, with their silent, numbing blasts of cold, trains would be hours and sometimes days late; and despite the courageous bucking, the staccato barking and

charging of the huge tractor-plows, auto traffic would be virtually at a standstill.

One night during the third day of a terrific blizzard Jooseppi was skiing to work from the farm for the night shift at the mine, bending low into the biting, blinding wind and snow, the crunch and squeal of his skis lost in the shrieking storm. As he approached the turn-off into Vanhalla's farm, one of his skis struck something, an object nearly buried in the snow. Jooseppi knelt beside the reclining form of a man and, despite the wind, he could hear him muttering "Julie, Julie, Julie...."

Jooseppi raced the quarter mile into Vanhalla's farm. Soon he and Vanhalla, seated in a low, two-runner sledge, lantern guttering, were plunging out to the road, Vanhalla, with guttural Finnish oaths, profanely whacking and pounding his hay-bloated, dung-coated mare on the rump with one of Jooseppi's ski poles.

Dr. David Boniface lay on a worn sheepskin blanket on the floor of Vanhalla's kitchen, quietly blowing bubbles. His frozen swollen lips were beefy and nearly bursting, like a lynched negro's. Jooseppi and Vanhalla were rapidly applying snow packs to his face and ears to draw out the frost. The good Vanhalla moonshine which Jooseppi forced down the doctor's throat, crackled along his gullet like water on a frozen window.

An old Finnish woman was silently shuffling in and out of the next room, carrying pans of water from the stove. Jooseppi finally became aware of the lusty squalling of a baby and a sound of subdued moaning. He looked inquiringly at Vanhalla. Vanhalla jerked his thumb at the room. "Ol' woman just go and give 'nudder baby. The doc he is too late, yes. Looks like he got stuck in

the snow, already, I guess so." He laughed boisterously, overcome by the splendid logic of his induction.

David Boniface opened his eyes and lay there, watchfully, silently listening to the sounds from the next room. Then, wetly mouthing and mumbling with his frozen lips, in a grotesque parody of human speech, he managed to say, "Sor' ol' man....Too damn mus snow....tried hard get here....How they -- -- how they doin'?"

Vanhalla slowly grinned and winked at Jooseppi. "Oh, ol' woman she being fine, already. Dat baby fine baby, too. 'Nudder son for Vanhalla, ya....You's the bucko what's not being so good, Doc. You's to freezing you self pretty bad, already."

Dr. Boniface gulped and looked at Jooseppi. "Interne! Give the patient 'nother shot of that canned heat, Sir." As Jooseppi bent down with the drink he went on. "An' thanks awfully, tall boy....Saved my life....Loss would've paralyzed medical worl'....Bulletin: Boniface rallies to bull-chat at bedside of new mother." He closed his eyes, and then opened one eye, staring at Jooseppi like a stricken pirate. "Damned if it isn't the handsome ski jumper....Julie mus' meet you....see you later." He again closed his eyes and resumed his peaceful blowing of bubbles. Outside the blizzard howled and strained at the farmhouse, the stout logs creaking and sighing under the insane searching and prying, the obscene curiosity, of the wind.

Jooseppi quietly gathered up his skis and poles and knapsack and went out into the storm. Dr. Boniface spent the night on the floor of Vanhalla's kitchen. During the night the storm had gradually subsided. The next morning Dr. Boniface insisted on examining and treating Vanhalla's wife, leaning heavily on the proud and grinning Vanhalla. Then Vanhalla drove him, swathed and bundled, and both of them gently drunk, into the Iron Cliffs Hospital on a dung-sleigh.

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The smoky, eerie shafts of the Northern Lights wavered and raced, shifting and melting across the brilliant sky in great dripping organ pipes of silent melody, dancing and leaping far and away and beyond the cold gleaming loneliness of the hills behind the farm.

Jooseppi sat hunched over the little radio, abstractedly listening to the lament of a broken-hearted cowboy in a distant city, yearning and moaning for his boots and saddle. The creaking of the boots and saddle drowned out the sound of sleigh bells as a steaming horse drew up in front of the farmhouse, and a man and a woman got out of the cutter and walked up to the house.

Jooseppi wheeled around and stood up as the door flew open and in walked a shouting David Boniface, followed by his wife, the woman Julie.

"This, my little dove, is the handsome ski jumper who saved my life. Julie, this is Jooseppi!"

The summer night was warm and languorous. Jooseppi and his mother sat in the little farmhouse, his mother reading her bible and Jooseppi reading a Finnish newspaper, waiting for the sauna to heat up for his Saturday night bath.

Jooseppi put down his paper and quietly walked out of the front door and sat on the steps of the tiny porch. The moonlight seeped through the tall pines in front of the house, and the needles of the trees were silver. The odors of the fields and from the farm hung very still in the moonlight, and Jooseppi got up and lay on the warm, needle-covered ground, stretching and writing his long body, sighing like an animal. Then he lay still. Faint

snatches of accordion music drifted from Vanhalla's farm. From time to time, from far away, sifted through the sounds of night, he half heard the rush of an automobile as it hurtled along the state highway and on and along through the night.

As he lay there with his head cupped in his hands, Jooseppi idly observed the headlights of an automobile threading through the stunted jack pines bordering the road into the farm. As the lights passed the turn-off into Vanhalla's farm, pursued by the hollow yapping of Vanhalla's dog, Jooseppi got up and slowly walked down the moon-drenched roadway. As the auto neared Jooseppi it stopped and a woman got out and came down the road to meet Jooseppi. It was Julie Boniface.

Jooseppi took her hand. "Julie!" he said.

They walked down the road to the farmhouse. Julie spoke quickly in her low voice. "Jooseppi, I have come to say good-bye. We are leaving Iron Cliffs tomorrow. In fact David has left already....he is in a sanitarium down in Minneapolis."

"Sanitarium, Julie!"

"It is his drinking....He had been missing for nearly a week -- we could not find him -- all his birth cases were neglected. It was awful....I thought of asking you to help me -- but I did not want to drag you into it. Then the other day a drunken Finnish farmer from the Dead River district came staggering into the hospital and begged them to come and take 'dat 'razy doctor' away....They found David sitting at a parlor organ in this farmer's house -- sitting there in his underwear, singing and shouting and terribly drunk....And so, Jooseppi, I have packed our things and I am leaving tomorrow. But I could not go without seeing you -- without saying good-bye."

\* \* \*

Jooseppi and Julie walked across the farm commons through the moonlight and slowly down the slope to the lake and up the wooden steps of the sauna to the door of the log bathhouse. Jooseppi unlatched the door and stood aside as Julie went in. Jooseppi entered and latched the door and fumbled in the darkness for the kerosene lamp, which finally glowed feebly through the steam and intense heat of the room.

In its foggy twilight Julie looked about the square, windowless, log-walled room. Against one of the walls arose a series of wooden benches in three tiers. Near the opposite wall was a railed-off wooden crib filled with large field stones, resting on an iron plate, and through which ran the chimney from the crackling fire underneath the building. Next to this stood a pump and two barrels of cold and hot water. On the wall hung dippers and pans and coarse brushes, and bunches of broom-shaped birch switches.

Jooseppi handed Julie a man's bathing suit. "Here, put this on. I'll go out and change and stoke the fire. You might take a chill."

Jooseppi returned, and the two of them sat in the blinding heat, silent as their bodies began to perspire. They sat there, lost in the steam. For a long time they sat there.

Jooseppi said: "Julie, you are going away. I cannot say good-bye to you -- -- in words I cannot talk to you." He took her two hands and led her to the door of the hot room. He threw open the door, and they stood there in the moonlight looking at the lake and at the night.

The warm moonlit Northern night was wide and still. The high moon, passionately naked in its endless quest for a mate,



bathed the lonely earth in its soft light, transforming by its sensuous female glow the drear and prose of earth-bound things into pulsing, living poetry.

Jooseppi and the woman Julie lay on the wooden pier, the man upon his belly, in brooding contemplation of the vast, mobile stream of moonglow flowing across the lake. Around them the night-sounds, the noises and small tickings of the little objects of the earth; the soaring sung of the night birds; the hot click of grasshoppers; the shrill, timeless rivalry of frogs and crickets; the gulping snore of the bullfrog -- and over all a whispering stillness, the murmuring echo, of a million nights in time.

A long while they lay there listening to the music not yet written, and then the woman Julie tried to speak and her voice came as a low sound in her throat as she reached for Jooseppi. And this Jooseppi stepped off the pier and swam quietly into the path of the moon and the woman followed him, and then they disappeared into the deep shadows of the small, pine-clad island; and it grew still; nothing, then, but the yellow, baleful light of the moon -- that ancient procuress -- jealously dancing on the disturbed waters of the lake -- dancing amid the gleeful small shouts and night-noises of a throbbing and victorious earth.

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