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YUKON'S MARTHA BLACK

Enid Mallory





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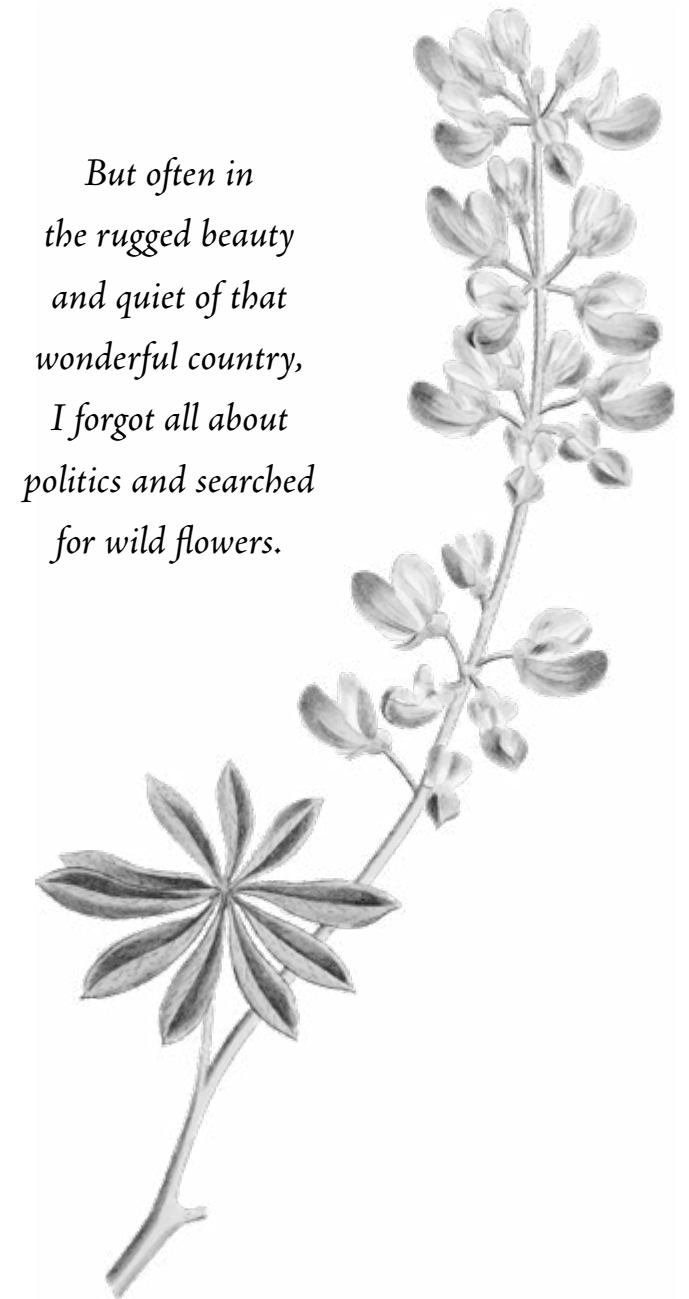
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*But often in
the rugged beauty
and quiet of that
wonderful country,
I forgot all about
politics and searched
for wild flowers.*

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PACKERS ASCENDING SUMMIT OF CHILROO PASS 1917
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1898-1903

Over the Chilkoot

AN ICONIC GOLD rush photo taken in 1898 shows a black line of men crawling up the white Chilkoot mountain. Among them is a petite woman with bright blue eyes and a saucy set to her jaw, wearing a heavy brown corduroy velvet skirt of “shockingly immodest” length (to keep it out of slush and snow). It is five yards around the bottom, edged with braid. Between the silk lining and the corduroy, it has a layer of buckram. Above that, she wears a Norfolk sealskin jacket and a blouse with a stiff collar, and beneath the skirt, a pair of voluminous silk bloomers that reaches below her knees. On her feet she has high Russian leather boots.

Her party left Dyea at noon the day before to climb the 35 miles over the Chilkoot Pass to Lake Bennett. At first, they followed an easy wagon road; then they were crossing mountain streams on precarious stones or working their way around huge boulders. Nine miles along, they reached Canyon City, a conglomeration of shacks and tents

PREVIOUS PAGE: *This photo by E.A. Hegg captures both the forbidding face of the Chilkoot Mountain and the tenacity of those who were after gold. The few women among them included Martha Munger Purdy, Dawson City Museum, 2005.442.14*

trees and catalpas and flowers in bloom. That year, Martha helped her parents plan a giant 25th anniversary party for 40 house guests and 200 guests coming to dinner.

Will worked for his father's Chicago Rock Island and Pacific Railway as assistant paymaster. Financially, their marriage was off to a good start. Ten years later, they had two children, Warren and Donald. Martha had a nanny, which gave her time and energy for work outside her home.

While the rest of their country was falling into an economic depression, Chicago was thriving as thousands of men labored to build the Columbian Exposition, or World's Fair. Martha, too, was caught up in the excitement of the beautiful "White City," with its palaces and domes and enormous wheel invented by a man named Ferris and capable of whirling through the air 2000 people at a time. Her aunt Martha Morse was a friend of Bertha Palmer, president of the Board of Lady Managers. Martha became her errand girl and was included in many of the ceremonies. She was invited into the elegance of the Palmer mansion for social gatherings. She watched Mrs. Palmer drive the golden nail with a silver hammer to open the Women's Building on Dedication Day. She also watched her navigate the inevitable clashes of personality as the fair took shape, learning from her tact and grace.

Her position at the fair let Martha watch landscape architect Frederick Olmstead at work. What he was creating was not conventional flower beds but expanses of wild nature, with lagoons and streams and trees, vines and shrubs set against the blue backdrop of Lake Michigan. His vision made a lasting impression on Martha.

Martha was at the fair on closing day, when Chicago's favourite mayor, Carter Harrison, was shot by a disappointed and delusional supporter. Harrison had been a close friend of Will's father, Warren Purdy. That event canceled the closing ceremonies for the Exposition

and was an exclamation mark to the end of the good times the fair had created.

The Exposition had glorified industry and invention and convinced a generation that anything was possible, only to see the city plunged into a pit of economic despair when it ended. Bankers and businessmen shot themselves, factories closed, fathers without work became alcoholics. As winter added to the misery of unemployment and poverty, mothers could not feed their children or afford coal to warm them. Martha volunteered at Hull House, established by the social worker Jane Addams. Jane's settlement house provided impoverished families with food, clothing, education, even nursery schools.

There was trouble for Father Purdy when 2000 Pullman workers went on strike. There was shooting, burning of railway equipment, riots and an explosion on Michigan Avenue. In the empty White City, arsonists burned seven of the palatial buildings. Federal troops arrived in Chicago to establish order.

Despite the unrest, the 1890s were gay years for Martha and Will and the favoured life they lived. There were dinner parties, soirees, plays and musicals, and they loved to ride with a bicycle club on their tandem bicycle.

By the end of the '90s, Martha and George were both restless. In spite of her love for her two little boys, Martha was finding life monotonous, and Will, away from home ten days each month, was probably seeking excitement elsewhere. Martha wrote about the work and care and restrictions of motherhood, and about husbands who might feel neglected. "If they are good-looking as my husband was, they may wander away to more interesting pursuits."³

All over America, news of gold in the Yukon was reaching people whose lives had been ruined by the depression, who were jobless, hopeless, sometimes starving. They suddenly had hope. They could go

north, find gold, and reclaim their lives. Martha and Will had come through the depression financially unscathed, but they did need some excitement in their lives.

Will's best friend was Eli Gage, whose father, Lyman J. Gage, was vice-president of the First National Bank. For a time, Lyman Gage had also served as president of the Chicago World's Fair, but he resigned as, across America, banks began to fail. His first imperative was to keep his First National Bank afloat. Eli had married Sophy Weare, whose brother, Will Weare, was director of the North American Trading and Transportation Company, operating on the lower Yukon River.

Steamboats on the lower Yukon would play an important part in the gold rush. Before there was a rail link to Whitehorse and boats on the upper Yukon, they plied the 1700 miles from St. Michael's, Alaska, to supply the settlement at Forty Mile and the new tent city rising at Dawson.

Portus B. Weare had been a fur trader who dealt with John Healey at his trading post at Fort Benton, Montana. As the fur trade waned, Weare moved to Chicago and became wealthy trading in grain. One day in the early '90s, John Healey came into his office and plunked a bag of gold dust on his desk. Healey, who now had a fur post at Dyea, Alaska, said the gold came from Forty Mile on the Yukon River. What he wanted from his old fur-trading friend was money to start a riverboat company to serve the stampede of miners he expected would be coming to the Yukon Valley. Together, they formed the North American Transportation and Trading Company, to compete with the longer established Alaska Commercial Company on the Yukon River.

When a Tagish man known as Skookum Jim and George Carmack in 1896 discovered nuggets of gold on Rabbit Creek, which flowed into the Klondike River, prospectors already on the Yukon River made

haste to the Klondike's Rabbit Creek (now called Bonanza). They soon found more gold on two other tributaries of the Klondike, Eldorado and Hunker creeks. Healey and Weare, who had seen this coming, were ready to transport the gold out and a stampede of gold-seekers into the region.

Chicago had a circle of wealthy, influential men well-positioned to get involved in a gold rush. Portus B. Weare was one of them. So was Will's father, Warren G. Purdy, as president of the Rock Island Railroad. So was Eli's father, Lyman J. Gage. Appointed Secretary of the Treasury in 1897 by President William McKinley, he was instrumental in securing the Gold Standard Act, meant to keep American money backed by gold. Gold was scarce in the 1890s; a gold rush was exactly what was needed.

As rumours of gold reached Chicago in the mid-'90s, Eli, who had been working on the railway with Will, quit his job and went north. He spent the winter in a crude cabin at Circle City on the Lower Yukon. In the spring of 1897, he was working with the North American Trading and Transportation Company for Sophy's brother Will when the *Portus B. Weare* carried her cargo of gold down the Yukon to the sea. Sophy had left her new baby behind to go north with Eli and probably spent the winter at St. Michael's. When the gold was loaded on the S.S. *Portland* bound for Seattle, Sophy was aboard, along with her brother, Will Weare, and 68 grimy, grizzled prospectors, all of them "filthily rich." Among them strode Sophy, dressed in finery and having the time of her life. Interviewed when she landed, she was later quoted in a guide book for fortune seekers, minimizing the hardship and dangers of the Yukon and extolling the ease of getting rich. Back in Chicago, she passed on her enthusiasm to Will and Martha first-hand.

Chicago businessmen considered news from the N.A.T.T. more reliable than secondhand newspaper reports. What they were hearing

led to investment and speculation and government lobbying. There was even a scheme to lobby Washington to carve a Yukon River section out of Alaska as a separate territory. With Eli Gage already on the river and his father being Secretary of the Treasury, Eli's name came up as a possible governor of the proposed territory. Nothing came of this scheme.

Will quit his paymaster job. Backed by both fathers, he and Eli formed the Purdy-Gage Company and bought a steamboat, two sailboats and two ocean-going tugs. Ships of all sorts and in every condition were being rushed to the west coast to transport gold-rush stampedeers north. Will was making plans to go north with Eli in the spring. Martha watched their great adventure taking shape and begged to go. "I was consumed with the urge to have my part in it."⁴ Sophy helped Martha petition their fathers-in-law, who began to think that having their wives along might keep their sons out of trouble.

The matter had not been decided when a man named Lambert came to Father Purdy with a story that his uncle had died in the Klondike and willed his mine plus a million dollars in gold dust to the family. He showed Father Purdy the will, which appeared legitimate, with proper witnesses. If Purdy's son was going to the gold fields, could he act as agent for the family and claim the fortune? Instead, Father Purdy chose Martha for this task. He negotiated with Lambert that her reward should be 50 percent of the gold dust. Martha was delighted with this proposition. She would see the Yukon and she would claim a fortune for her family.

There were serious discussions in the Munger family. George and Susan read the newspapers and the guide books and listened to the talk in Chicago drawing rooms. They knew about the dangers of the Chilkoot Pass, especially after newspapers carried reports of the tragic avalanche in April. Martha and Will would be leaving two small sons

behind. But gold fever had infected Martha's parents, too, especially George. He admired Martha's spirit and could not say no to her. He and Susan would care for Warren, aged nine, and Donald, aged three, at Catalpa Knob.

Excitement mounted as brother George and cousin Harry Peachy decided to join Will and Martha. George was six years younger than Martha and had been working in his father's laundry business.

There followed weeks of planning, of gathering more information about the Yukon and how to get there and what equipment was needed and where to find it, now that stampedeers were emptying shelves across the country to outfit themselves.

From Catalpa Knob ranch, where Martha said a tearful goodbye to two little boys, she and George and Harry headed to Denver to meet Will and Eli and Sophy Gage. In Denver, they bought clothing for the trip. They were a merry group as they headed to Seattle, where they met the rest of the party: Captain Spencer, business agent for the Purdy-Gage Company, his son Ed, and Captain Treat. The party would split up now, with Eli and Sophy heading south to San Francisco to take a steamboat to St. Michael's, Alaska, then travel the 1700 miles up the Yukon River on one of the Weare boats. The other six would take a ship from Seattle, climb the Chilkoot Pass and find water transportation down the Yukon to Dawson City, where they would all meet.

Martha's euphoria in Seattle was short-lived. Will had a telegram from Eli in San Francisco and had to hurry there on business. Then came a letter that he was delayed there, then another letter, and Martha's world crashed around her.

Will had decided not to go the Klondike. This was the grand adventure that had put new joy into their marriage, that they had planned together all winter. Now he wanted to abort it; he had heard

of good opportunities in the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii), and he wanted to go there.

Will argued that she was being unreasonable. He had found a better adventure where they would not freeze to death. He had heard enough about the Chilkoot Pass that he no longer wanted to climb it. Why would she?

Martha asked herself what her mother would do and immediately knew the answer. But Martha was not her mother. There was a family story that makes this clear. Susan Munger was still a teenager when she gave birth to twin girls. George Munger came into the room, looked at the babies and said, "Susan, I'm disappointed. I expected a boy."

The young, exhausted mother said, "Yes, I know. I am so sorry."

Martha later said to her mother, "If my husband had said that to me, I would have thrown those two babies at him."

Her mother's reply was, "Not a man like your dear father."⁵

One of those babies was herself. The other twin did not survive. Martha would always feel the absence of that sister who had shared the womb with her. Perhaps she would need to live larger than life, for the two of them.

Now, Will was suggesting that if she would not come with him, she should go home to her family until he decided what he wanted to do. In her autobiography she writes, "Go to the Sandwich Islands? With my Klondike ticket bought, my passage booked, my vision of a million dollars in gold dust? Even after ten years of married life how little Will Purdy knew me!"⁶

That sentence sums up a marriage that had become shaky. Martha describes this pivotal moment as "the crisis which parted two high-spirited and determined young people."⁷ She could not go to the Sandwich Islands with Will. Her path lay north. She had a mission, a fortune to claim for their two boys, and a gold rush to experience. She



The City of Seattle carrying the gold rush north. Steamboats, scows, cattle boats, anything that would float, were filled with men, horses, donkeys, goats, sheep, all headed to Skagway or Dyea where trails led over the mountains to the headwaters of the Yukon River. Yukon Archives, H.C. Barley Fonds, 82/298 5138.

would not turn back, with or without her husband. She wrote Will that she was going north as planned; that he was undependable and she never wanted to see him again.

She never would.

Her next problem was with her brother George, who was refusing to take her without her husband. He came close to sending for Father to come and take her home. Martha pleaded, cried and threatened to go north by herself. She finally convinced George to take her and not