

In Rampart Grace stood outside the trading post, beneath a sign that read 'Stoves and Tinware'. Through the open door she could see tin goods stacked in pyramids behind the counter, flour on the floor, and woven Indian saddle blankets draped over a keg. Down at the dock the steamer's whistle blew, a low wheezing note, and Raymond appeared around the corner grinning, with muddy boots, and his hat on the back of his head. Grace stood still a moment longer, breathing deeply and looking around her, hoping to remember the rest of her life how exactly she felt at that moment. She stood on the porch of the Yukon store, Raymond holding out his hand to her, and the boat reeled at the river's edge, waiting to pull her away. She closed her eyes and tried to freeze the picture inside her. There was a slapping sound -- a ragged dog trotting down the street. Grace opened her eyes and watched a man in an Eskimo parka toss dishwater out into the wagon ruts. Two roosters crowed. The steamer's insistent call came again and Raymond took her hand and they stepped quickly down the street, past the open clanging heat of a blacksmith's shop.

An old man was boarding the steamer at Rampart, an old character called Captain Mayo, who was the oldest pioneer of Alaska (1873). Years before Grace was born he was a trapper and fur trader up in the wild Yukon territory, subsisting only on wild meat. Before that he was a tumbler in a circus. He was full of fascinating tales. Once he had been piloting a little boat loaded with supplies up the river when he was boarded by a mob of Indians, so great a number that their weight almost sank the vessel. Captain Mayo was tired of them carrying off his supplies and he had been prepared for them; he piled wood on the fire, attached a hose to the steam pipe and turned the hot steam into the pack. The Indians abandoned ship in a hurry.

For the most part, though, Captain Mayo appeared to be on good terms with the Indians. Grace observed that he knew many of them in the settlements they passed. She discovered that his character had been written into a novel by Rex Beach, a local writer who collected Alaskan tales.

They briefly crossed the Arctic Circle and Captain Mayo let Grace look at it through his telescope. At Fort Yukon Raymond and Grace took a walk together while Captain Mayo wandered off in the direction of Halley's Roadhouse. Later he told them that Mrs. Halley, a squaw, had mistaken him for an old friend.

"When she heard Captain Mayo's name she thought she knew him and fell on his neck. He couldn't escape her embrace and was scared half to death for fear someone from the boat would come in and find him. After her husband explained who he really was she renewed her demonstrations with greater zeal and, as the old man said she was strong as a moose he thought he would never be able to escape. When he finally got away one of his friends met him and asked him if he didn't want to go around and meet some more old Indian friends but he refused emphatically and said 'Let's go aboard -- there's a storm ashore'."

Notes G. C.

People were throwing scraps to a mob of wild dogs on the shore as the boat pulled back out into the river. They passed Circle City and Eagle. At Dawson Captain Mayo disembarked to go visit his daughter. Grace and Raymond had to change boats, for this was where the Yukon turned around and headed back up the river. They made reservations on the 'Selkirk', a steamer; a crowded little boat. The river grew narrower and rougher, with rapids and huge boulders to navigate. On board Grace took a mud bath and did some washing on the lower deck. She and Raymond tried making a batch of candy in the galley, but it turned out wrong. They steamed into Lake LaBarge in the evening, and the water was so rough they had to tie up on the marge for the night.

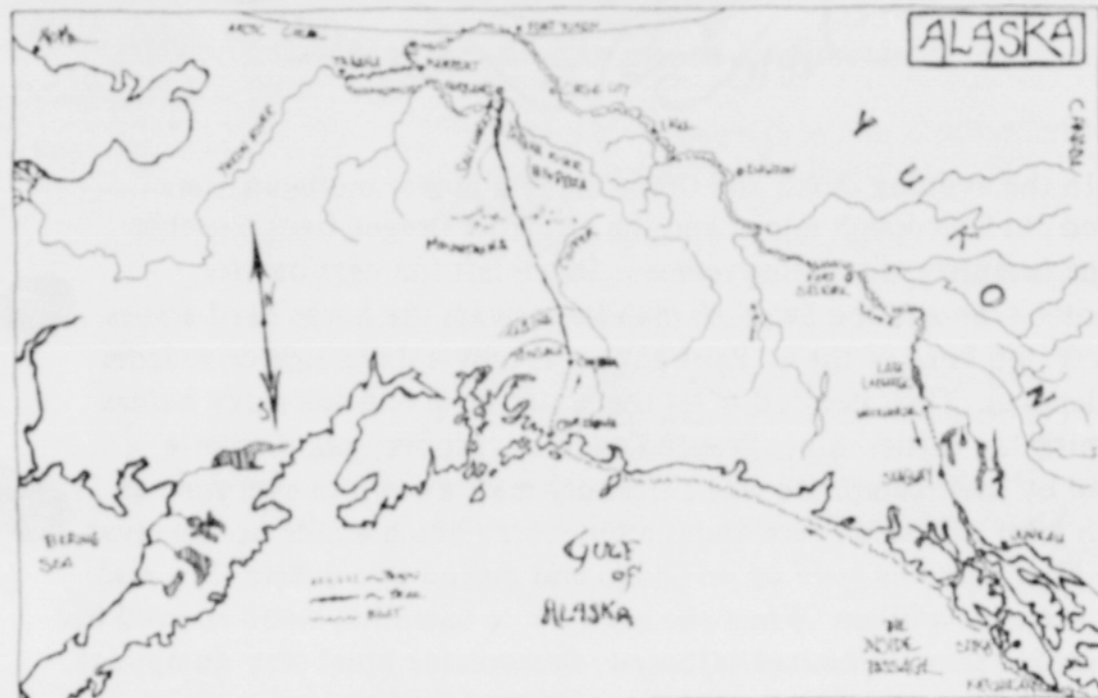
Lake LaBarge led into the Fifty Mile River. They reached Whitehorse that morning and Grace, Raymond, and Bill went on a hike up Miles Canyon to the rapids on the old gold rush trail of '98. The waterfall was magnificent and the canyon treacherous, Bill recounted many tales of the perilous and fatal trips over the trail.

They were three weeks out of Fairbanks and had seen the last of the Yukon River. They took the train on to Skagway. The news came to them that the boat they'd come to Alaska on, the 'Admiral Sampson', had sunk off Port Townsend, rammed by another boat. It had sunk within four minutes, and took two passengers, several of the crew, and the captain down with it.

Skagway was a muddy little place of crooked streets and stumps of trees, saloons and betting parlours. Grace had noticed that up in Alaska about the only jobs for women were teaching school, taking in washing, and telling fortunes. She walked up through the trees to see the grave of "Soapy Smith". Soapy had been notorious in the Old West long before he arrived in Alaska to take over the town of Skagway and swindle unwary gold miners. For a year he held the town under his fearful command -- robbery and murders were a daily occurrence -- until he was finally shot by an irate miner in 1898, and Skagway's rip-roaring days were over.

Grace stood near his grave in the trees and felt that her sojourn in the north was nearing its end. A light rain fell. The sky darkened and lowered over her and the trees moved uneasily. The crisp freshness of the air clung to her clothing and brightened her face. Soon she would be teaching music to her students in a stuffy room in the city, living in the canyon where the trains went by day and night. Raymond would return to La Grande and she would be in Hood River. She wondered if they would ever go to Alaska again. She shivered inside her jacket and pressed her hat to her head. The wind was picking up. She stepped away down through the gloomy trees. Behind her lay a calculating, murdering monster with strange dark eyes who could never leave the cold and desolation of the place. It was growing dark.

Another steamer carried them down into the maze of little islands along the Alaskan coastline. They touched land at Haines, Sitka, Petersburg, Wrangell and Ketchikan. The last afternoon in the Alaskan territory the sky grew clear and the water was smooth as a mirror. Grace and Raymond sat out on deck until very late, enjoying the warmth of the evening, reluctant to take their eyes off the scenery slipping past them in the moonlight. Grace was excited about returning home, but she was also gripped with nostalgia. The boat moved gently under her. Raymond stretched out his legs and sighed, tilting his face up to the sky. Smoke from the steamer's chimneys glinted in the light of the deck lanterns. Grace began to feel sleepy.



"My, but it will seem good to see you all. I have fairly devoured all the letters from home. It has surely been a good trip -- such a variety of new and remarkable things to see."

Letter G. C. to her mother
August 24, 1914

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She cooked all the way through Alaska
Her biscuits went faster and faster.
He ate twenty two
With his Mulligan Stew
And said "To wed me I will ask her."

"My dear Gagic -

I arrived home at 5:35 this morning, and as there was no one at the train I thought I would slip in on the folks at home and surprise them. But just as I stepped up on the porch I heard a blind raise and there stood father in his night shirt with a smile on his face that went across the window. So, that was no surprise.

Then I went in and sat on the edge of the bed and talked business and about the trip as long as I could stand it (which was only a few minutes) then I told them my plans for the future. And they were not surprised. They were very much pleased though, and father said "We will certainly welcome her into our home." And mother, instead of feeling bad about it seemed just as happy and said, "Well, I hate to give you up, but I know it is the best thing for you, and Grace is an awfully nice girl."

Just as soon as I could get away from home I went right up to Jean's and as Ellsworth and Aunt Hattie were in the room while we were talking I didn't mention it to her until we were in the car and headed for the old Curtiss place. Well, she giggled and I giggled and we both acted like a couple of kids. And after killing Old Hank two or three times and finally running out of gasoline, he stopped for good.

But we soon got some more and rushed down to tell George S., as soon as I opened the door he stuck out his hand and said, "Congratulations, old man."

My father had beat me to it. So he wasn't surprised.

Several I have met today thought I was already married, but I assured them I was not married yet. One girl who works at West's store says to me, "What is this I hear everybody talking about? Raymond McKennon is back from Alaska and he is to be married soon."

Back to the Curtiss place, it is a much prettier place than I thought it was, but just looking at it is as far as I have gone. I have been so busy shaking hands and answering questions that I haven't had time for anything else today."

Letter Raymond to Grace
La Grande, Ore
September 9, 1914



JEAN AND GRACE