

**Alan Sullivan**



*Under the Northern Lights*

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Published by Good Press, 2022

[goodpress@okpublishing.info](mailto:goodpress@okpublishing.info)

EAN 4064066353544

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# **UNDER THE NORTHERN LIGHTS**

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# TRADE

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Ajidamo, the Squirrel, pushed his way through the undergrowth. He had been walking thus, silently and observantly, for hours, while he made the round of his traps. Like a brown ghost he came, guided by a broken twig here, an overturned leaf there, and other signs so faint as to be imperceptible save to the eye of an aborigine. It was mid-afternoon when he reached a ridge where most of the rock was bare, and the forest pushed up close on either side. Close to the ridge, in a clump of ground hemlock, was a stream on whose banks the snow still lay a few inches deep. Beside the stream glinted a small steel trap. In the trap was a mink with russet-brown fur.

Ajidamo grunted complacently, opened the spring, dropped his quarry into a sack, where it nestled softly against an otter and a stone marten, then took his way silently along the ridge. He did not hurry. The day was fine, and he was at home wherever sunset might overtake him.

Three hundred yards farther on lay a young Norway pine overthrown by winter winds. Its black roots lifted grotesquely into the air and carried patches of earth and moss. In one of these tangles Ajidamo noticed a piece of rock different from any he had ever seen. It was strongly gripped, as though in a man's hand, and the level rays of the sun seemed to pass through it. He looked at it curiously. To the ordinary observer it would have resembled a bit of semi-transparent alabaster enclosing a twist of gilded lace. To a mining man it would have been a sample of high-grade,

free-milling gold ore. But to Ajidamo it was only something different. And just for that reason he knocked it free, examined it closely with unwinking, black eyes, and dropped it in beside the stone marten.

He tramped on, slept that night five miles away, continued his silent pilgrimage another twenty miles, and reached his winter camp at sundown. Here he thawed out his take, pulled the precious skins inside out over the slim, red bodies, threw the bodies into the pot, and stretched the fur over thin, wedge-shaped pieces of wood. He thought nothing more about the piece of rock, till presently the oldest grandchild, rummaging in the sack with reddened fingers, pulled the thing out. Ajidamo took it, held it questioningly toward his daughter, and, when she shook her head, tossed the fragment carelessly back.

Storms raged and ceased, snow fell and melted, the sun grew stronger, water began to run over the rocks, the wilderness seemed to yawn luxuriously in the growing warmth after months of rigid slumber, and presently spring came to the Northern wilderness. There was a slackening of the bones of earth, the whiteness of rabbit fur became patched with dirty brown, from the skies drifted the calling of geese and swans on the long trek to the Arctic, while a thousand streams burst their manacles and went singing through the woods. It was at this time that Ajidamo gathered together his winter's catch. Then he lifted his canoe from the place where it had lain covered with spruce boughs since last November, sewed up its gaping seams with fine strips of tamarac root, sealed them with cloth dipped in hot resin, and went off to the nearest Hudson Bay

post, which was a hundred miles away, as quietly as a dry leaf moves in front of a puff of wind.

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The Hudson Bay factor is a taciturn man, clothed generally in nondescript garments and always with a great authority. His word goes forth as the law of the Northern wilderness, because it has never been broken. To Ojibway and Iroquois, to Yellowknife and Cree, to Piegan and Blackfoot, that word is the same. When it comes to a matter of trade, the bargain is hard and the terms are stiff, but the faith is absolute. So it happens that in a season of the year the hunters turn from the smoke of a thousand camp fires and push their canoes over leagues of water, black and brown, by lake and rapid and cataract, to do business as their fathers did it, and with the offspring of those who traded with their fathers.

Thus came Ajidamo to the post on Crooked Lake. He came at his own pace, a leisurely twenty miles a day, his eyes active on the journey, for when one lives by eye and ear and the strength of one's sinews, there is much to be learned be one ever so old, and Ajidamo was only seventy. He caught a few fish, mostly in the rapids, where pickerel were to be had for the taking, snared a few rabbits, drank a good deal of tea and smoked incessantly. In the bottom of the canoe, tied neatly in the sack, were mink, otter, marten, a few fisher skins and one cross fox. He hoped for a good deal from the latter.

Nearing the post, he fell in with others on the same errand. Some he knew personally, such as Wa-wa, the Wild Goose, and Ah-tick, the Caribou, but they did not talk much,

making camp the last night a little way apart on the river's bank, so that their fires blinked like a succession of the red eyes of animals that came down in the dark to drink when drinking could be done safely. Nor was there any hustling for bargains when the post was reached, it being common knowledge that prices did not vary. Each of them came up in turn, emptied his catch on the rough-hewn counter, and waited voicelessly till the factor had checked the number of skins and formed his own opinion of their condition and value. And while he waited, there was a swift, narrow-eyed scrutiny of the loaded shelves, bulging with all that the heart of man, woman or child could desire. Not the least thing to the credit of Ajidamo and his friends was the fact that no Hudson Bay post reported losses by theft.

When it came to Ajidamo's turn, he up-ended his sack, and with the fur there tumbled out that forgotten fragment of rock. It fell to the floor, lying unnoticed till the bargaining was done. Ajidamo owed fifty dollars from last year, and when this had been liquidated he still found himself able to get most of the things he wanted—cloth, a red shawl for his daughter, powder for recharging Winchester cartridges, lead, three new traps, a four-pound axe head, a net with four-inch mesh for whitefish, a slab of salt pork, tea, sugar, baking-powder. These he collected, making a neat pile that rose beside him. The factor put in a pound of tobacco as a present, then leaned forward.

“What's yon bit of rock?”

Ajidamo gave it to him and shook his head. “I don't know. Maybe no good.”

The factor twisted it between his hard fingers. “Where did it come from?”

Ajidamo made a gesture that took in the entire country lying north of Crooked Lake. “Up there. Long way. Me find him two months gone—I guess no good.”

Followed a little silence. There were rumours of gold in the district, talks of gold around a good many camp fires, and a trickle of prospectors from the area farther south. The factor had a month-old paper that came in by dog team the week before, and there was an article in that. He didn’t take it very seriously. This was a good fur country, and that ought to be enough for him, and he didn’t know anything about minerals. But one could never tell. He turned the thing round so that the light fell into it, and thought it very pretty.

“Want it?” he asked Ajidamo.

The old hunter shook his head. “Me think no good,” he said, and gathered up his purchases.

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Kelly was plainly out of luck. He lay on his back in his tent, slapped at mosquitoes and cursed creation in general. For a year now he had been scratching rock to no purpose. Other men had made good strikes, cleaned up a pile, and had either got out of the country or else done the same thing over again. But on the Abitibi River the Irish seemed to have lost their luck.

Added to this was the sobering fact that he was nearly broke. The small sum of forty dollars separated him from that bankruptcy which meant that he would have to work for someone else, a fate that all real prospectors dread. To get up in the morning and feel that you couldn’t go where you

wanted to go was something worse than death. It stared Kelly in the face now. If one adds to this the further truth that he was nearly out of grub, the venom of his language will be the more understandable.

He lighted a pitch-pine knot, took a torn map from his packsack and studied it intently. It was thumbed and mutilated beyond repair, but still decipherable. In the flicker, and between slaps at the mosquitoes, which were now worse than before, he saw that the post of Crooked Lake lay about two days' journey off. H B P, the map said, from which Kelly knew that there was to be obtained there all that made life feasible in the wilderness. He reckoned that the district was no good, never had been and never would be any good, but, because he was in the middle of it, decided to give it just one more chance. So at daybreak he started off, making a bee-line for Crooked Lake, and wondering what the Scotchman, who was bound to be in charge, would have the nerve to ask for a fifty-pound sack of self-rising flour. He arrived on the eve of the second day in a worse temper than ever. Mackintosh looked in his angry eye and waited placidly. He was a man of experience.

“ 'Twill be ten cents a pound, cash,” he said easily.

Kelly gulped. “It's a hold-up—three cents a pound in Toronto.”

“Ye're no forced to buy it if ye dinna want it,” said Mackintosh.

“You know I've got to buy it, but it's a hell of a price.”

“Maybe. I'm not disputin' that, but it didn't exactly fly here, ye ken.”

“Can I have twenty dollars credit?”

Mackintosh shook his head. "If ye were an Indian; but I'll no trust a white man in this country." He paused a moment. "Happen ye're not a squaw man? That might help."

This left Kelly breathless, and he rocked with anger. "Think I'd marry an Indian?" he hissed.

"Ye might do a sight waur," said Mackintosh calmly. "I've married ane mysel'. D'ye want that flour?"

Kelly swallowed his wrath and bought. With the flour were other things, and while the factor sorted them out, his visitor's eye fell on a fragment of rock that glinted whitely on a corner shelf.

"What's that?" he said, pointing.

"Naethin' but a bit that ane of ma customers left here last winter. D'ye ken what it is?"

Kelly fingered the thing, and his pulse began to pound. Never in his dreams had he seen a specimen like this. A thousand dollars to the ton if it was worth a cent.

"Careful," he whispered to himself, "careful now!" and laid it casually back on the counter.

"It might be worth following up. Where does the Indian live? I'll drop in if I'm in that direction."

"I'm no sure where he is the noo, but he wintered on Loon Lake. That's a hundred mile from here."

"What's he call himself?" Kelly's voice creaked a little.

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Ajidamo sat in the sun, making a new cedar paddle which would be as light as a feather. One end of it was against his stomach, and he drew the knife toward him with long, smooth strokes, while the shavings fell away in neat, regular

curls. Presently he saw a distant flicker on the glassy water. There was a white man coming.

Kelly floated up half an hour later, laid his own paddle across the thwarts, leaned forward and lit his pipe.

*"Boozhoo,"* he said.

*"Boozhoo,"* replied Ajidamo. *"Meno keejegud."*

Kelly admitted that it was a fine day, took another look at the camp, and came ashore. He had given a good deal of thought to this interview. When one dealt with an Indian, the thing was not to be too earnest or impetuous. It made the other fellow suspicious. One led up to what one wanted, then touched on it casually in passing. So he, too, lay in the sun and talked generalities of the wilderness, while the paddle took shape under Ajidamo's firm, brown fingers. It was not till evening that he got round to the subject.

"Much rock about here?"

The old man waved a hand at the purple horizon. "Plenty rock—some places." He knew what Kelly sought before the canoe touched shore, and Kelly knew that he knew. But that didn't alter anything.

"Much fur last winter?"

"Some," said Ajidamo, and put a kettle on the fire.

"Smoke?" Kelly tossed over a plug of tobacco.

The ancient aristocrat nodded, filled his pipe, and relapsed into silence. He wasn't interested, or even amused. He ripped up the belly of a five-pound pickerel, carved out its backbone with two swift strokes, and laid it in the pan. Kelly contributed a lump of salt pork. The meal was shared without speech. Kelly glanced at the grave, aquiline face and felt like choking, but it was no use trying to hustle a

man for whom time and space and riches and the world in general did not exist. Still, there remained the outrageous fact that this relic of a vanishing race possessed knowledge that was worth a barrel of money. He decided to wait a little longer.

An hour before sunset he unrolled his blankets, and there fell out a piece of white quartz. He pitched it across to Ajidamo.

“Ever see any rock like that?”

Ajidamo fingered it, and knew at once all about it—the upturned Norway pine, earth and moss in its roots, and this glistening in the sun. So that was what had brought the stranger. He rather liked Kelly, because the latter hadn’t jumped down his throat, bombarding him with questions. There was a way of doing everything—even talking about rocks.

“Over there,” he said, pointing west. “Me see him last spring.”

“Far?”

“Two days.”

Kelly laid a hot coal in the bowl of his pipe just to make sure of his nerves. They were quite steady.

“How much—go there?”

Ajidamo considered this patiently. He usually asked two dollars and a half a day for what little work he had ever done, and he never got anything for the return trip, because one place was the same as another as far as he was concerned. But this time, and since something assured him that Kelly was very much in earnest, he decided to take a chance and double the charge.

“Ten dollars,” he said.

Kelly shook his head. “Too much. Give you five.”

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Paterson had a combined office and residence, a wooden structure twelve by twenty-four, on the outskirts of the town of Porcupine. Over the door was a large sign: “Mines and Mining Shares Bought and Sold.” He lived in the other end—twelve by twelve. In the office were shelves carrying samples of ore from various properties. The sight of them was apt to impress a client, and helped to keep up his enthusiasm, for he had never bought a share or sold a mine. His capital was five thousand dollars.

He was lounging about in front when Kelly came up the road, staggering under a packsack, which, though it was only half filled, seemed extremely heavy. He dropped it opposite the office for a rest, and Paterson caught the grinding creak of broken rock. He strolled over and offered the stranger a cigarette.

“Got anything?”

Kelly glanced at the broad, red, good-natured face and rather liked it.

“I’ve got the original horned mint,” he said. “What have you got?”

“A bottle and a few thousand dollars. What’s your hurry?”

Kelly brightened, then hesitated. “What do you call a few?”

“Enough to buy the real thing when I see it. And the other stuff isn’t wood alcohol.”

Kelly went in. Paterson was right about the bottle, and it was some time before they got round to the packsack.

Neither wanted to seem in a hurry, and Paterson played the same rôle as Kelly when the latter did diplomatic work in the camp of Ajidamo. The scale of intelligence ascended.

The up-ended packsack disgorged its burden. Gold, and lots of it—gold in little filaments and plates and grains, frozen, seemingly, in the milky quartz. Paterson had seen nothing like this before.

“Not so bad,” he said evenly. “Where is it?”

Kelly laughed at him. The latter had had a good many drinks, but his mind was fairly clear.

“Nothing doing, pilgrim. I’m no free information bureau.”

Paterson passed on undisturbed. He didn’t expect to be told yet, but it was worth trying.

“Much of it?”

That was horse sense, and Kelly loosened up.

“She’s about eight hundred feet long and seven wide. I stripped her in seven places—all about the same. Some of it’s richer than this, and some not so good. Can you beat it?”

Paterson had a lump in his throat. “Far from the water?”

“About a quarter-mile.”

“Hard to get at?”

“Easy as drink.”

“There’s another bottle,” said Paterson.

He went into the back room and prised up a plank in the floor. Precious stuff, this, saved over for just such an occasion. His heart was jumping about, so he poured himself a drink very slowly to try his nerve. Nothing spilled. He returned, comforted and resolute, and put the bottle on the table.

“Cut loose, stranger. What’s your name and your price?”

Kelly leaned back luxuriously. He had been thinking about the price ever since Ajidamo led him up to the overturned Norway pine, and he actually saw the thing he had dreamed of for years. The figure had varied a good deal on the way out, but never got any smaller. In the glow of the present moment he decided to take a chance and double it.

“I want ten thousand down, twenty in three months, and another twenty in six.”

“Give you half that, and it’s a deal,” said Paterson.

James Randolph, of New York, sat at a corner table in the dining-room of the Porcupine Hotel. He was a quiet man, very silent, and had a keen grey eye. There was nothing conspicuous about Randolph, nothing to betray the fact that he was a noted geologist; nothing to suggest that he represented enough money to buy the entire township and all in it twice over. He ate slowly and without interest, glancing occasionally at the very mixed assemblage. It was nothing unusual to him.

Two strangers came in and annexed the adjoining table, one large, red-faced, and of the type recognisable as “mining broker,” the other evidently just out of the woods. They were not drunk, but very cheerful, and Randolph wondered where they got it. One ate peas with his knife, very neatly and without spilling any, while the other, apparently not hungry, ranged a row of quartz specimens in front of his plate. Randolph noted these, and forgot about their owner. Ten minutes later he strolled out, took a chair on the verandah near the dining-room door, and began to smoke thoughtfully.

“Eight hundred long, seven wide, and pans heavy all the way. She’s the original nickel-plated mint, pilgrim, and you ought to be tickled down the back.” The words came quite clearly.

Presently the large man appeared and struck off down the road. Randolph pitched away his cigarette and paced slowly in that direction.

At two o’clock Paterson had the thing pretty well thought out. He proposed to make his pile out of this one deal, as it was not likely anything of the same sort would come his way again. He had to find another twenty thousand in six months, so a fair price would be a hundred thousand in five. He was gloating over the samples when a stranger chanced in and asked the way to the Lockmaster Mine.

The latter got the information and was about to walk on, when he glanced casually at the specimens on Paterson’s table.

“That looks to be pretty good stuff.”

Paterson surmised that it was, the best stuff that ever came out of the darned district, and, what’s more, he owned it.

“Whereabouts?” asked the stranger.

Paterson grinned. “That exact information comes after a deal and not before it.”

“Far from here?”

“No—easy as drink. Have one?”

“Guaranteed?”

“Have it, and see for yourself. You in the mining business?”

“In a sort of way. Friends of mine might put some money in. But I’m told there’s been a lot lost up here.”

Paterson chuckled. “ ’Tain’t lost if you know where it is.”

Randolph didn’t answer. He was wondering how much the other man knew about mines and mining.

“Is this much of a vein you’ve got?”

The figures came out, and he looked up rather wistfully.

“It’s this way with me. I’m free to buy something for my friends to develop. That stuff seems to have gold in it, and in a general way I’m ready for a gamble. What’s your price?”

Paterson told him, but he shook his head.

“Figure’s too big for me. Doesn’t matter. I’m going on to the silver country to-morrow, and just came over here for a look. I’ve real money to spend, but not as much as that. Must keep something for development.” He got up, smiling. “Thanks for a real drink.”

Paterson reflected. He’d rather like to say he’d bought a lode and sold it in four hours. And perhaps the late vendor was a bit of a liar. “Suppose you made an offer?”

“My limit is just half your price, and you’d have to show me the lode before you got the cheque.”

“Just as the other fellow has to show me before he gets his, eh?”

“Exactly.”

“Shake on it,” said Paterson.

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Ajidamo had heard it all afternoon, a low, constant rumble that sounded like distant thunder, but was always in the same place. It grew louder as he paddled, till, rounding