

DRIVING A DOG TEAM



An old hand lets you into the secret

How would you like to try your hand at driving a team of sled-dogs—four, six, or eight thick-coated, bushy-tailed Huskies or Malamutes?

I have no doubt you would tackle the job with enthusiasm; and I am able to promise you that you would find it somewhat exciting. Whether you'd care to *have* to do it, hour after hour, and day after day, sometimes in the teeth of bitter, razor-edged winds, or with a snowstorm tumbling down atop of you, is quite another thing.

Handling a team of Huskies is not the simplest of jobs; the driving of them is not entirely a pleasant recreation. For they have their own notions; they're big and strong, weighing up to one hundred pounds; they're full of perversity and cunning as a tree full of monkeys; and they're more willing and ready for a fight than any Irishman. Any time, any place, full or hungry, tired out or fresh, a Husky is never too-anything not to be ready to tumble into a fight at a second's notice.

To begin with, sled dogs aren't driven in the same way as driving a horse. The driver has no reins. All his driving is done with his voice, and a heavy, cutting whip. Reins the

Husky wouldn't understand; he hasn't been used to them. But he does know what a whip is made for. And he's not always afraid of that.

He is harnessed by leather or deer-hide thongs, fastened to a sort of collar and chest harness; and sometimes these thongs are made fast to one long rope made fast to the sled, sometimes to the harness of the dog behind. The rear dog, of course, has his harness fastened to the sled. When he isn't pulling, whenever a brief halt is made for a rest, or to place the capsized sled right way up, or to tie on a load that has worked slack, or while his driver is looking for a lost trail, the sled dog seizes the opportunity to turn about and assault the dog nearest to him. And you can imagine what sort of a muddle he and his mates will make of their harness and fastenings in a very short time. The resulting tangle is rather worse than a fishing-line that has become tangled up.

And perhaps you can imagine—but no, you can't!—just what it means to unravel the tangle when the cold is so great that the mercury in the thermometer has gone down to forty or fifty degrees below zero—seventy or eighty degrees



The driver runs ahead of his team, beating down the soft, loose snow.

below freezing-point—and you have thick, fingerless mitts covering your hands, and if you take the mitts off—and you will have to do that—your bare hands get numb with cold in a very few seconds.

Yes, there are few dull times when driving a sled.

The driver, you know, doesn't always get himself carried along by the dogs; the cold is so great in Alaska and the Canadian North-West, in winter, that such standing still on the sled is anything but a joy. The driver must be moving to keep from being frozen. So most times he is running along behind the sled, or alongside the team, shouting, cheering, encouraging, or reviling the Huskies, and cracking his whip.

That is, when the snow is frozen hard, or the trail lies over smooth, level ice, such as a big lake or river; but when the trail is soft, as it is after a big fall of snow, and the snow hasn't had time to pack or get frozen solid, then driving is no joke. The driver then runs on ahead of his team, beating down the soft, loose snow under his snowshoes, so as to make it hard enough for the team not to sink into it. This is called "breaking trail," and I can assure you it is mighty hard work. It's terrible work when the driver is alone—perhaps the most fatiguing work there is: I know of nothing harder. But it has to be done. With the dogs sinking up to their bellies in the snow, progress would be impossible.

When there are two or more men, one goes ahead to break trail. This he keeps up for a while, then has a rest, dropping behind to ease his aching muscles while another man "breaks trail." So they will take it in turns.

As there are no reins to guide the team, the guiding is done by the voice. When you want a team to go to the right, you bellow "Gee!" When you want the leading Husky to turn to the left, you yell "Haw!" And the dogs understand just as a horse does when you tell him to "Gee up!" But you don't say "Gee up!" to a Husky when you want him

to improve his pace or make a start. You say "Mush!" This is a corruption of the French word "Marche!" meaning "Walk" or "Get on!" The Indians altered it to "Mush," and all white dog drivers have taken to the word.

The average sled dog is a demon to fight; he is not an obedient animal, and there are mighty few that you can make friends with and pet as an English dog; they don't understand and are suspicious. He is cunning as a fox and nearly as intractable as a wolf; but he has his good points—lots of them. And, anyway, in the Frozen North you could not



Frozen fish are warmed and thrown to the dogs—one to each of them.

get on without him. Without him, all transport, all carriage of more goods than a man could pack on his shoulders, would be impossible. Which means that existence would not be possible.

The sled dog has activity, strength, and staying power almost incredible. And the great majority of them are workers. Let them understand it is a real *master* driving them, and they'll go on pulling their courageous hearts out, hour after hour, though they may be wearied to death; though they may have empty stomachs and small prospect of grub—(good dogs will work without a bite to eat for three or four days)—even though the rough,

sharp ice has gashed their feet to such an extent that every step means a blood-stain on the ice.

Yes, they have big hearts; and "Never say die" is their motto.

Again, they're not particular what they eat. Meat they love. Also they like fish—frozen dried salmon or whitefish is their usual winter food; but if they can't get fish they will eat boiled beans and rice or tallow, or bacon, or—just anything. Poor brutes!

Once a day, when on the trail, a team is fed, and that is always at the end of the day, when the journey for the day is ended. If fed at breakfast, the Huskies will not pull at all. So all day they have to work on an empty stomach, thinking of the meal awaiting them.

When camp is made, which is just before night begins to fall—say three o'clock in the afternoon—the first thing is to build a fire. Then the dogs are fed. Their frozen fish are warmed and thrown to them, one fish to each dog. And the quickness with which that fish disappears would do credit to a conjurer. His fish swallowed, the Husky looks about for

something more—the stealing of his meat from another dog who has been a bit slow of swallowing. Then the fight begins, and the fighters have to be banged over the head with a pole to quiet them. When quite certain there's nothing more to be had—and the wise driver hangs up out of reach or hides his stock of grub—the Husky coils down to sleep, his big tail covering him like a garment.

But he won't sleep all night, depend upon that. Sometimes in the night you'll waken to find him prowling about; and often he will waken you with his dismal howling, for he never barks.

And next morning, no matter how long and hard the previous day's work has been, no matter how wakeful the Husky has been overnight, he'll be as full of fight and mischief as ever.

But you'll respect him, all the same, since it may be that your life depends upon his courage, his endurance, and his wonderful intelligence; and you'll forgive him his faults.

Oh, yes, I think you would like trying to drive a dog team.

MORE FAMOUS GREYFRIARS CHARACTERS



Percy Kipps



Bully Bolcover



Cherry Bob Cherry