Smoke Bellew

Jack London

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THE TASTE OF THE MEAT.

I.

In the beginning he was Christopher Bellew. By the time he was at college he had become Chris Bellew. Later, in the Bohemian crowd of San Francisco, he was called Kit Bellew. And in the end he was known by no other name than Smoke Bellew. And this history of the evolution of his name is the history of his evolution. Nor would it have happened had he not had a fond mother and an iron uncle, and had he not received a letter from Gillet Bellamy.

"I have just seen a copy of the Billow," Gillet wrote from Paris. "Of course O'Hara will succeed with it. But he's missing some plays." (Here followed details in the improvement of the budding society weekly.) "Go down and see him. Let him think they're your own suggestions. Don't let him know they're from me. If he does, he'll make me Paris correspondent, which I can't afford, because I'm getting real money for my stuff from the big magazines. Above all, don't forget to make him fire that dub who's doing the musical and art criticism. Another thing, San Francisco has always had a literature of her own. But she hasn't any now. Tell him to kick around and get some gink to turn out a live serial, and to put into it the real romance and glamour and colour of San Francisco."

And down to the office of the Billow went Kit Bellew faithfully to instruct. O'Hara listened. O'Hara debated. O'Hara agreed. O'Hara fired the dub who wrote criticism. Further, O'Hara had a way with him−−the very way that was feared by Gillet in distant Paris. When O'Hara wanted anything, no friend could deny him. He was sweetly and compellingly irresistible. Before Kit Bellew could escape from the office he had become an associate editor, had agreed to write weekly columns of criticism till some decent pen was found, and had pledged himself to write a weekly instalment of ten thousand words on the San Francisco serial−−and all this without pay. The Billow wasn't paying yet, O'Hara explained; and just as convincingly had he exposited that there was only one man in San Francisco capable of writing the serial, and that man Kit Bellew.

"Oh, Lord, I'm the gink!" Kit had groaned to himself afterwards on the narrow stairway.

And thereat had begun his servitude to O'Hara and the insatiable columns of the Billow. Week after week he held down an office chair, stood off creditors, wrangled with printers, and turned out twenty−five thousand words of all sorts weekly. Nor did his labours lighten. The Billow was ambitious. It went in for illustration. The processes were expensive. It never had any money to pay Kit Bellew, and by the same token it was unable to pay for any additions to the office staff.

"This is what comes of being a good fellow," Kit grumbled one day.

"Thank God for good fellows then," O'Hara cried, with tears in his eyes as he gripped Kit's hand. "You're all that's saved me, Kit. But for you I'd have gone bust. Just a little longer, old man, and things will be easier."

"Never," was Kit's plaint. "I see my fate clearly. I shall be here always."

A little later he thought he saw his way out. Watching his chance, in O'Hara's presence, he fell over a chair. A few minutes afterwards he bumped into the corner of the desk, and, with fumbling fingers, capsized a paste pot.

"Out late?" O'Hara queried.

Kit brushed his eyes with his hands and peered about him anxiously before replying.

"No, it's not that. It's my eyes. They seem to be going back on me, that's all."

For several days he continued to fall over and bump into the office furniture. But O'Hara's heart was not softened.

"I tell you what, Kit," he said one day, "you've got to see an oculist. There's Doctor Hassdapple. He's a crackerjack. And it won't cost you anything. We can get it for advertizing. I'll see him myself."

And, true to his word, he dispatched Kit to the oculist.

"There's nothing the matter with your eyes," was the doctor's verdict, after a lengthy examination. "In fact, your eyes are magnificent−−a pair in a million."

"Don't tell O'Hara," Kit pleaded. "And give me a pair of black glasses."

The result of this was that O'Hara sympathized and talked glowingly of the time when the Billow would be on

its feet.

Luckily for Kit Bellew, he had his own income. Small it was, compared with some, yet it was large enough to enable him to belong to several clubs and maintain a studio in the Latin Quarter. In point of fact, since his associate editorship, his expenses had decreased prodigiously. He had no time to spend money. He never saw the studio any more, nor entertained the local Bohemians with his famous chafing−dish suppers. Yet he was always broke, for the Billow, in perennial distress, absorbed his cash as well as his brains. There were the illustrators who periodically refused to illustrate, the printers who periodically refused to print, and the office boy who frequently refused to officiate. At such times O'Hara looked at Kit, and Kit did the rest.

When the steamship Excelsior arrived from Alaska, bringing the news of the Klondike strike that set the country mad, Kit made a purely frivolous proposition.

"Look here, O'Hara," he said. "This gold rush is going to be big−− the days of '49 over again. Suppose I cover it for the Billow? I'll pay my own expenses."

O'Hara shook his head.

"Can't spare you from the office, Kit. Then there's that serial. Besides, I saw Jackson not an hour ago. He's starting for the Klondike to−morrow, and he's agreed to send a weekly letter and photos. I wouldn't let him get away till he promised. And the beauty of it is, that it doesn't cost us anything."

The next Kit heard of the Klondike was when he dropped into the club that afternoon, and, in an alcove off the library, encountered his uncle.

"Hello, avuncular relative," Kit greeted, sliding into a leather chair and spreading out his legs. "Won't you join me?"

He ordered a cocktail, but the uncle contented himself with the thin native claret he invariably drank. He glanced with irritated disapproval at the cocktail, and on to his nephew's face. Kit saw a lecture gathering.

"I've only a minute," he announced hastily. "I've got to run and take in that Keith exhibition at Ellery's and do half a column on it."

"What's the matter with you?" the other demanded. "You're pale. You're a wreck."

Kit's only answer was a groan.

"I'll have the pleasure of burying you, I can see that."

Kit shook his head sadly.

"No destroying worm, thank you. Cremation for mine."

John Bellew came of the old hard and hardy stock that had crossed the plains by ox−team in the fifties, and in him was this same hardness and the hardness of a childhood spent in the conquering of a new land.

"You're not living right, Christopher. I'm ashamed of you."

"Primrose path, eh?" Kit chuckled.

The older man shrugged his shoulders.

"Shake not your gory locks at me, avuncular. I wish it were the primrose path. But that's all cut out. I have no time."

"Then what in−?"

"Overwork."

John Bellew laughed harshly and incredulously.

"Honest?"

Again came the laughter.

"Men are the products of their environment," Kit proclaimed, pointing at the other's glass. "Your mirth is thin and bitter as your drink."

"Overwork!" was the sneer. "You never earned a cent in your life."

"You bet I have−−only I never got it. I'm earning five hundred a week right now, and doing four men's work."

"Pictures that won't sell? Or−−er−−fancy work of some sort? Can you swim?"

"I used to."

"Sit a horse?"

"I have essayed that adventure."

John Bellew snorted his disgust.

"I'm glad your father didn't live to see you in all the glory of your gracelessness," he said. "Your father was a

man, every inch of him. Do you get it? A Man. I think he'd have whaled all this musical and artistic tomfoolery out of you."

"Alas! these degenerate days," Kit sighed.

"I could understand it, and tolerate it," the other went on savagely, "if you succeeded at it. You've never earned a cent in your life, nor done a tap of man's work."

"Etchings, and pictures, and fans," Kit contributed unsoothingly.

"You're a dabbler and a failure. What pictures have you painted? Dinky water−colours and nightmare posters. You've never had one exhibited, even here in San Francisco−"

"Ah, you forget. There is one in the jinks room of this very club."

"A gross cartoon. Music? Your dear fool of a mother spent hundreds on lessons. You've dabbled and failed. You've never even earned a five−dollar piece by accompanying some one at a concert. Your songs?−−rag−time rot that's never printed and that's sung only by a pack of fake Bohemians."

"I had a book published once−−those sonnets, you remember," Kit interposed meekly.

"What did it cost you?"

"Only a couple of hundred."

"Any other achievements?"

"I had a forest play acted at the summer jinks."

"What did you get for it?"

"Glory."

"And you used to swim, and you have essayed to sit a horse!" John Bellew set his glass down with unnecessary violence. "What earthly good are you anyway? You were well put up, yet even at university you didn't play football. You didn't row. You didn't−"

"I boxed and fenced−−some."

"When did you last box?"

"Not since; but I was considered an excellent judge of time and distance, only I was−−er−"

"Go on."

"Considered desultory."

"Lazy, you mean."

"I always imagined it was an euphemism."

"My father, sir, your grandfather, old Isaac Bellew, killed a man with a blow of his fist when he was sixty−nine years old."

"The man?"

"No, your−−you graceless scamp! But you'll never kill a mosquito at sixty−nine."

"The times have changed, oh, my avuncular. They send men to state prisons for homicide now."

"Your father rode one hundred and eighty−five miles, without sleeping, and killed three horses."

"Had he lived to−day, he'd have snored over the course in a Pullman."

The older man was on the verge of choking with wrath, but swallowed it down and managed to articulate:

"How old are you?"

"I have reason to believe−"

"I know. Twenty−seven. You finished college at twenty−two. You've dabbled and played and frilled for five years. Before God and man, of what use are you? When I was your age I had one suit of underclothes. I was riding with the cattle in Colusa. I was hard as rocks, and I could sleep on a rock. I lived on jerked beef and bear−meat. I am a better man physically right now than you are. You weigh about one hundred and sixty−five. I can throw you right now, or thrash you with my fists."

"It doesn't take a physical prodigy to mop up cocktails or pink tea," Kit murmured deprecatingly. "Don't you see, my avuncular, the times have changed. Besides, I wasn't brought up right. My dear fool of a mother−"

John Bellew started angrily.

"−As you described her, was too good to me; kept me in cotton wool and all the rest. Now, if when I was a youngster I had taken some of those intensely masculine vacations you go in for−−I wonder why you didn't invite me sometimes? You took Hal and Robbie all over the Sierras and on that Mexico trip."

"I guess you were too Lord Fauntleroyish."

"Your fault, avuncular, and my dear−−er−−mother's. How was I to know the hard? I was only a chee−ild. What was there left but etchings and pictures and fans? Was it my fault that I never had to sweat?"

The older man looked at his nephew with unconcealed disgust. He had no patience with levity from the lips of softness.

"Well, I'm going to take another one of those what−you−call masculine vacations. Suppose I asked you to come along?"

"Rather belated, I must say. Where is it?"

"Hal and Robert are going in to Klondike, and I'm going to see them across the Pass and down to the Lakes, then return−"

He got no further, for the young man had sprung forward and gripped his hand.

"My preserver!"

John Bellew was immediately suspicious. He had not dreamed the invitation would be accepted.

"You don't mean it," he said.

"When do we start?"

"It will be a hard trip. You'll be in the way."

"No, I won't. I'll work. I've learned to work since I went on the Billow."

"Each man has to take a year's supplies in with him. There'll be such a jam the Indian packers won't be able to handle it. Hal and Robert will have to pack their outfits across themselves. That's what I'm going along for−−to help them pack. It you come you'll have to do the same."

"Watch me."

"You can't pack," was the objection.

"When do we start?"

"To−morrow."

"You needn't take it to yourself that your lecture on the hard has done it," Kit said, at parting. "I just had to get away, somewhere, anywhere, from O'Hara."

"Who is O'Hara? A Jap?"

"No; he's an Irishman, and a slave−driver, and my best friend. He's the editor and proprietor and all−around big squeeze of the Billow. What he says goes. He can make ghosts walk."

That night Kit Bellew wrote a note to O'Hara.

"It's only a several weeks' vacation," he explained. "You'll have to get some gink to dope out instalments for that serial. Sorry, old man, but my health demands it. I'll kick in twice as hard when I get back."

II.

Kit Bellew landed through the madness of the Dyea beach, congested with thousand−pound outfits of thousands of men. This immense mass of luggage and food, flung ashore in mountains by the steamers, was beginning slowly to dribble up the Dyea valley and across Chilcoot. It was a portage of twenty−eight miles, and could be accomplished only on the backs of men. Despite the fact that the Indian packers had jumped the freight from eight cents a pound to forty, they were swamped with the work, and it was plain that winter would catch the major portion of the outfits on the wrong side of the divide.

Tenderest of the tender−feet was Kit. Like many hundreds of others he carried a big revolver swung on a cartridge−belt. Of this, his uncle, filled with memories of old lawless days, was likewise guilty. But Kit Bellew was romantic. He was fascinated by the froth and sparkle of the gold rush, and viewed its life and movement with an artist's eye. He did not take it seriously. As he said on the steamer, it was not his funeral. He was merely on a vacation, and intended to peep over the top of the pass for a 'look see' and then to return.

Leaving his party on the sand to wait for the putting ashore of the freight, he strolled up the beach toward the old trading post. He did not swagger, though he noticed that many of the be−revolvered individuals did. A strapping, six−foot Indian passed him, carrying an unusually large pack. Kit swung in behind, admiring the splendid calves of the man, and the grace and ease with which he moved along under his burden. The Indian dropped his pack on the scales in front of the post, and Kit joined the group of admiring gold−rushers who surrounded him. The pack weighed one hundred and twenty pounds, which fact was uttered back and forth in tones of awe. It was going some, Kit decided, and he wondered if he could lift such a weight, much less walk off

with it.

"Going to Lake Linderman with it, old man?" he asked.

The Indian, swelling with pride, grunted an affirmative.

"How much you make that one pack?"

"Fifty dollar."

Here Kit slid out of the conversation. A young woman, standing in the doorway, had caught his eye. Unlike other women landing from the steamers, she was neither short−skirted nor bloomer−clad. She was dressed as any woman travelling anywhere would be dressed. What struck him was the justness of her being there, a feeling that somehow she belonged. Moreover, she was young and pretty. The bright beauty and colour of her oval face held him, and he looked over−long−−looked till she resented, and her own eyes, long−lashed and dark, met his in cool survey.

From his face they travelled in evident amusement down to the big revolver at his thigh. Then her eyes came back to his, and in them was amused contempt. It struck him like a blow. She turned to the man beside her and indicated Kit. The man glanced him over with the same amused contempt.

"Chechaquo," the girl said.

The man, who looked like a tramp in his cheap overalls and dilapidated woollen jacket, grinned dryly, and Kit felt withered though he knew not why. But anyway she was an unusually pretty girl, he decided, as the two moved off. He noted the way of her walk, and recorded the judgment that he would recognize it after the lapse of a thousand years.

"Did you see that man with the girl?" Kit's neighbour asked him excitedly. "Know who he is?"

Kit shook his head.

"Cariboo Charley. He was just pointed out to me. He struck it big on Klondike. Old timer. Been on the Yukon a dozen years. He's just come out."

"What's chechaquo mean?" Kit asked.

"You're one; I'm one," was the answer.

"Maybe I am, but you've got to search me. What does it mean?"

"Tender−foot."

On his way back to the beach Kit turned the phrase over and over. It rankled to be called tender−foot by a slender chit of a woman.

Going into a corner among the heaps of freight, his mind still filled with the vision of the Indian with the redoubtable pack, Kit essayed to learn his own strength. He picked out a sack of flour which he knew weighed an even hundred pounds. He stepped astride of it, reached down, and strove to get it on his shoulder. His first conclusion was that one hundred pounds was the real heavy. His next was that his back was weak. His third was an oath, and it occurred at the end of five futile minutes, when he collapsed on top of the burden with which he was wrestling. He mopped his forehead, and across a heap of grub−sacks saw John Bellew gazing at him, wintry amusement in his eyes.

"God!" proclaimed that apostle of the hard. "Out of our loins has come a race of weaklings. When I was sixteen I toyed with things like that."

"You forget, avuncular," Kit retorted, "that I wasn't raised on bear−meat."

"And I'll toy with it when I'm sixty."

"You've got to show me."

John Bellew did. He was forty−eight, but he bent over the sack, applied a tentative, shifting grip that balanced it, and, with a quick heave, stood erect, the somersaulted sack of flour on his shoulder.

"Knack, my boy, knack−−and a spine."

Kit took off his hat reverently.

"You're a wonder, avuncular, a shining wonder. D'ye think I can learn the knack?"

John Bellew shrugged his shoulders.

"You'll be hitting the back trail before we get started."

"Never you fear," Kit groaned. "There's O'Hara, the roaring lion, down there. I'm not going back till I have to."

III.

Kit's first pack was a success. Up to Finnegan's Crossing they had managed to get Indians to carry the twenty−five hundred−pound outfit. From that point their own backs must do the work. They planned to move forward at the rate of a mile a day. It looked easy−−on paper. Since John Bellew was to stay in camp and do the cooking, he would be unable to make more than an occasional pack; so, to each of the three young men fell the task of carrying eight hundred pounds one mile each day. If they made fifty−pound packs, it meant a daily walk of sixteen miles loaded and of fifteen miles light−−"Because we don't back−trip the last time," Kit explained the pleasant discovery; eighty−pound packs meant nineteen miles travel each day; and hundred−pound packs meant only fifteen miles.

"I don't like walking," said Kit. "Therefore I shall carry one hundred pounds." He caught the grin of incredulity on his uncle's face, and added hastily: "Of course I shall work up to it. A fellow's got to learn the ropes and tricks. I'll start with fifty."

He did, and ambled gaily along the trail. He dropped the sack at the next camp−site and ambled back. It was easier than he had thought. But two miles had rubbed off the velvet of his strength and exposed the underlying softness. His second pack was sixty−five pounds. It was more difficult, and he no longer ambled. Several times, following the custom of all packers, he sat down on the ground, resting the pack behind him on a rock or stump. With the third pack he became bold. He fastened the straps to a ninety−five− pound sack of beans and started. At the end of a hundred yards he felt that he must collapse. He sat down and mopped his face.

"Short hauls and short rests," he muttered. "That's the trick."

Sometimes he did not make a hundred yards, and each time he struggled to his feet for another short haul the pack became undeniably heavier. He panted for breath, and the sweat streamed from him. Before he had covered a quarter of a mile he stripped off his woollen shirt and hung it on a tree. A little later he discarded his hat. At the end of half a mile he decided he was finished. He had never exerted himself so in his life, and he knew that he was finished. As he sat and panted, his gaze fell upon the big revolver and the heavy cartridge−belt.

"Ten pounds of junk," he sneered, as he unbuckled it.

He did not bother to hang it on a tree, but flung it into the underbush. And as the steady tide of packers flowed by him, up trail and down, he noted that the other tender−feet were beginning to shed their shooting irons.

His short hauls decreased. At times a hundred feet was all he could stagger, and then the ominous pounding of his heart against his ear− drums and the sickening totteriness of his knees compelled him to rest. And his rests grew longer. But his mind was busy. It was a twenty−eight mile portage, which represented as many days, and this, by all accounts, was the easiest part of it. "Wait till you get to Chilcoot," others told him as they rested and talked, "where you climb with hands and feet."

"They ain't going to be no Chilcoot," was his answer. "Not for me. Long before that I'll be at peace in my little couch beneath the moss."

A slip, and a violent wrenching effort at recovery, frightened him. He felt that everything inside him had been torn asunder.

"If ever I fall down with this on my back I'm a goner," he told another packer.

"That's nothing," came the answer. "Wait till you hit the Canyon. You'll have to cross a raging torrent on a sixty−foot pine tree. No guide ropes, nothing, and the water boiling at the sag of the log to your knees. If you fall with a pack on your back, there's no getting out of the straps. You just stay there and drown."

"Sounds good to me," he retorted; and out of the depths of his exhaustion he almost half meant it.

"They drown three or four a day there," the man assured him. "I helped fish a German out there. He had four thousand in greenbacks on him."

"Cheerful, I must say," said Kit, battling his way to his feet and tottering on.

He and the sack of beans became a perambulating tragedy. It reminded him of the old man of the sea who sat on Sinbad's neck. And this was one of those intensely masculine vacations, he meditated. Compared with it, the servitude to O'Hara was sweet. Again and again he was nearly seduced by the thought of abandoning the sack of beans in the brush and of sneaking around the camp to the beach and catching a steamer for civilization.

But he didn't. Somewhere in him was the strain of the hard, and he repeated over and over to himself that what other men could do, he could. It became a nightmare chant, and he gibbered it to those that passed him on the trail. At other times, resting, he watched and envied the stolid, mule−footed Indians that plodded by under heavier

packs. They never seemed to rest, but went on and on with a steadiness and certitude that was to him appalling.

He sat and cursed−−he had no breath for it when under way−−and fought the temptation to sneak back to San Francisco. Before the mile pack was ended he ceased cursing and took to crying. The tears were tears of exhaustion and of disgust with self. If ever a man was a wreck, he was. As the end of the pack came in sight, he strained himself in desperation, gained the camp−site, and pitched forward on his face, the beans on his back. It did not kill him, but he lay for fifteen minutes before he could summon sufficient shreds of strength to release himself from the straps. Then he became deathly sick, and was so found by Robbie, who had similar troubles of his own. It was this sickness of Robbie that braced him up.

"What other men can do, we can do," Kit told him, though down in his heart he wondered whether or not he was bluffing.

IV.

"And I am twenty−seven years old and a man," he privately assured himself many times in the days that followed. There was need for it. At the end of a week, though he had succeeded in moving his eight hundred pounds forward a mile a day, he had lost fifteen pounds of his own weight. His face was lean and haggard. All resilience had gone out of his body and mind. He no longer walked, but plodded. And on the back−trips, travelling light, his feet dragged almost as much as when he was loaded.

He had become a work animal. He fell asleep over his food, and his sleep was heavy and beastly, save when he was aroused, screaming with agony, by the cramps in his legs. Every part of him ached. He tramped on raw blisters, yet this was even easier than the fearful bruising his feet received on the water−rounded rocks of the Dyea Flats, across which the trail led for two miles. These two miles represented thirty−eight miles of travelling. He washed his face once a day. His nails, torn and broken and afflicted with hangnails, were never cleaned. His shoulders and chest, galled by the pack−straps, made him think, and for the first time with understanding, of the horses he had seen on city streets.

One ordeal that nearly destroyed him at first had been the food. The extraordinary amount of work demanded extraordinary stoking, and his stomach was unaccustomed to great quantities of bacon and of the coarse, highly poisonous brown beans. As a result, his stomach went back on him, and for several days the pain and irritation of it and of starvation nearly broke him down. And then came the day of joy when he could eat like a ravenous animal, and, wolf−eyed, ask for more.

When they had moved the outfit across the foot−logs at the mouth of the Canyon, they made a change in their plans. Word had come across the Pass that at Lake Linderman the last available trees for building boats were being cut. The two cousins, with tools, whipsaw, blankets, and grub on their backs, went on, leaving Kit and his uncle to hustle along the outfit. John Bellew now shared the cooking with Kit, and both packed shoulder to shoulder. Time was flying, and on the peaks the first snow was falling. To be caught on the wrong side of the Pass meant a delay of nearly a year. The older man put his iron back under a hundred pounds. Kit was shocked, but he gritted his teeth and fastened his own straps to a hundred pounds. It hurt, but he had learned the knack, and his body, purged of all softness and fat, was beginning to harden up with lean and bitter muscle. Also, he observed and devised. He took note of the head−straps worn by the Indians, and manufactured one for himself, which he used in addition to the shoulder−straps. It made things easier, so that he began the practice of piling any light, cumbersome piece of luggage on top. Thus, he was soon able to bend along with a hundred pounds in the straps, fifteen or twenty more lying loosely on top the pack and against his neck, an axe or a pair of oars in one hand, and in the other the nested cooking−pails of the camp.

But work as they would, the toil increased. The trail grew more rugged; their packs grew heavier; and each day saw the snow−line dropping down the mountains, while freight jumped to sixty cents. No word came from the cousins beyond, so they knew they must be at work chopping down the standing trees, and whipsawing them into boat−planks. John Bellew grew anxious. Capturing a bunch of Indians back−tripping from Lake Linderman, he persuaded them to put their straps on the outfit. They charged thirty cents a pound to carry it to the summit of Chilcoot, and it nearly broke him. As it was, some four hundred pounds of clothes−bags and camp outfit was not handled. He remained behind to move it along, dispatching Kit with the Indians. At the summit Kit was to remain, slowly moving his ton until overtaken by the four hundred pounds with which his uncle guaranteed to catch him.

V.

Kit plodded along the trail with his Indian packers. In recognition of the fact that it was to be a long pack, straight to the top of Chilcoot, his own load was only eighty pounds. The Indians plodded under their loads, but it was a quicker gait than he had practised. Yet he felt no apprehension, and by now had come to deem himself almost the equal of an Indian.

At the end of a quarter of a mile he desired to rest. But the Indians kept on. He stayed with them, and kept his place in the line. At the half mile he was convinced that he was incapable of another step, yet he gritted his teeth, kept his place, and at the end of the mile was amazed that he was still alive. Then, in some strange way, came the thing called second wind, and the next mile was almost easier than the first. The third mile nearly killed him, and, though half delirious with pain and fatigue, he never whimpered. And then, when he felt he must surely faint, came the rest. Instead of sitting in the straps, as was the custom of the white packers, the Indians slipped out of the shoulder− and head− straps and lay at ease, talking and smoking. A full half hour passed before they made another start. To Kit's surprise he found himself a fresh man, and 'long hauls and long rests' became his newest motto.

The pitch of Chilcoot was all he had heard of it, and many were the occasions when he climbed with hands as well as feet. But when he reached the crest of the divide in the thick of a driving snow− squall, it was in the company of his Indians, and his secret pride was that he had come through with them and never squealed and never lagged. To be almost as good as an Indian was a new ambition to cherish.

When he had paid off the Indians and seen them depart, a stormy darkness was falling, and he was left alone, a thousand feet above timber line, on the back−bone of a mountain. Wet to the waist, famished and exhausted, he would have given a year's income for a fire and a cup of coffee. Instead, he ate half a dozen cold flap− jacks and crawled into the folds of the partly unrolled tent. As he dozed off he had time only for one fleeting thought, and he grinned with vicious pleasure at the picture of John Bellew in the days to follow, masculinely back−tripping his four hundred pounds up Chilcoot. As for himself, even though burdened with two thousand pounds, he was bound down the hill.

In the morning, stiff from his labours and numb with the frost, he rolled out of the canvas, ate a couple of pounds of uncooked bacon, buckled the straps on a hundred pounds, and went down the rocky way. Several hundred yards beneath, the trail led across a small glacier and down to Crater Lake. Other men packed across the glacier. All that day he dropped his packs at the glacier's upper edge, and, by virtue of the shortness of the pack, he put his straps on one hundred and fifty pounds each load. His astonishment at being able to do it never abated. For two dollars he bought from an Indian three leathery sea−biscuits, and out of these, and a huge quantity of raw bacon, made several meals. Unwashed, unwarmed, his clothing wet with sweat, he slept another night in the canvas.

In the early morning he spread a tarpaulin on the ice, loaded it with three−quarters of a ton, and started to pull. Where the pitch of the glacier accelerated, his load likewise accelerated, overran him, scooped him in on top, and ran away with him.

A hundred packers, bending under their loads, stopped to watch him. He yelled frantic warnings, and those in his path stumbled and staggered clear. Below, on the lower edge of the glacier, was pitched a small tent, which seemed leaping toward him, so rapidly did it grow larger. He left the beaten track where the packers' trail swerved to the left, and struck a patch of fresh snow. This arose about him in frosty smoke, while it reduced his speed. He saw the tent the instant he struck it, carrying away the corner guys, bursting in the front flaps, and fetching up inside, still on top of the tarpaulin and in the midst of his grub−sacks. The tent rocked drunkenly, and in the frosty vapour he found himself face to face with a startled young woman who was sitting up in her blankets−−the very one who had called him chechaquo at Dyea.

"Did you see my smoke?" he queried cheerfully.

She regarded him with disapproval.

"Talk about your magic carpets!" he went on.

"Do you mind removing that sack from my foot?" she said coldly.

He looked, and lifted his weight quickly.

"It wasn't a sack. It was my elbow. Pardon me."

The information did not perturb her, and her coolness was a challenge.

"It was a mercy you did not overturn the stove," she said.

He followed her glance and saw a sheet−iron stove and a coffee−pot, attended by a young squaw. He sniffed the coffee and looked back to the girl.

"I'm a chechaquo," he said.

Her bored expression told him that he was stating the obvious. But he was unabashed.

"I've shed my shooting−irons," he added.

Then she recognized him, and her eyes lighted.

"I never thought you'd get this far," she informed him.

Again, and greedily, he sniffed the air.

"As I live, coffee!" He turned and directly addressed her. "I'll give you my little finger−−cut it right off now; I'll do anything; I'll be your slave for a year and a day or any other odd time, if you'll give me a cup out of that pot."

And over the coffee he gave his name and learned hers−−Joy Gastell. Also, he learned that she was an old−timer in the country. She had been born in a trading post on the Great Slave, and as a child had crossed the Rockies with her father and come down to the Yukon. She was going in, she said, with her father, who had been delayed by business in Seattle, and who had then been wrecked on the ill−fated Chanter and carried back to Puget Sound by the rescuing steamer.

In view of the fact that she was still in her blankets, he did not make it a long conversation, and, heroically declining a second cup of coffee, he removed himself and his quarter of a ton of baggage from her tent. Further, he took several conclusions away with him: she had a fetching name and fetching eyes; could not be more than twenty, or twenty−one or −two; her father must be French; she had a will of her own and temperament to burn; and she had been educated elsewhere than on the frontier.

VI.

Over the ice−scoured rocks, and above the timber−line, the trail ran around Crater Lake and gained the rocky defile that led toward Happy Camp and the first scrub pines. To pack his heavy outfit around would take days of heart−breaking toil. On the lake was a canvas boat employed in freighting. Two trips with it, in two hours, would see him and his ton across. But he was broke, and the ferryman charged forty dollars a ton.

"You've got a gold−mine, my friend, in that dinky boat," Kit said to the ferryman. "Do you want another gold−mine?"

"Show me," was the answer.

"I'll sell it to you for the price of ferrying my outfit. It's an idea, not patented, and you can jump the deal as soon as I tell you it. Are you game?"

The ferryman said he was, and Kit liked his looks.

"Very well. You see that glacier. Take a pick−axe and wade into it. In a day you can have a decent groove from top to bottom. See the point? The Chilcoot and Crater Lake Consolidated Chute Corporation, Limited. You can charge fifty cents a hundred, get a hundred tons a day, and have no work to do but collect the coin."

Two hours later, Kit's ton was across the lake, and he had gained three days on himself. And when John Bellew overtook him, he was well along toward Deep Lake, another volcanic pit filled with glacial water.

VII.

The last pack, from Long Lake to Linderman, was three miles, and the trail, if trail it could be called, rose up over a thousand−foot hogback, dropped down a scramble of slippery rocks, and crossed a wide stretch of swamp. John Bellew remonstrated when he saw Kit arise with a hundred pounds in the straps and pick up a fifty−pound sack of flour and place it on top of the pack against the back of his neck.

"Come on, you chunk of the hard," Kit retorted. "Kick in on your bear−meat fodder and your one suit of underclothes."

But John Bellew shook his head.

"I'm afraid I'm getting old, Christopher."

"You're only forty−eight. Do you realize that my grandfather, sir, your father, old Isaac Bellew, killed a man with his fist when he was sixty−nine years old?"

John Bellew grinned and swallowed his medicine.

"Avuncular, I want to tell you something important. I was raised a Lord Fauntleroy, but I can outpack you, outwalk you, put you on your back, or lick you with my fists right now."

John Bellew thrust out his hand and spoke solemnly.

"Christopher, my boy, I believe you can do it. I believe you can do it with that pack on your back at the same time. You've made good, boy, though it's too unthinkable to believe."

Kit made the round trip of the last pack four times a day, which is to say that he daily covered twenty−four miles of mountain climbing, twelve miles of it under one hundred and fifty pounds. He was proud, hard, and tired, but in splendid physical condition. He ate and slept as he had never eaten and slept in his life, and as the end of the work came in sight, he was almost half sorry.

One problem bothered him. He had learned that he could fall with a hundredweight on his back and survive; but he was confident, if he fell with that additional fifty pounds across the back of his neck, that it would break it clean. Each trail through the swamp was quickly churned bottomless by the thousands of packers, who were compelled continually to make new trails. It was while pioneering such a new trail, that he solved the problem of the extra fifty.

The soft, lush surface gave way under him; he floundered, and pitched forward on his face. The fifty pounds crushed his face in the mud and went clear without snapping his neck. With the remaining hundred pounds on his back, he arose on hands and knees. But he got no farther. One arm sank to the shoulder, pillowing his cheek in the slush. As he drew this arm clear, the other sank to the shoulder. In this position it was impossible to slip the straps, and the hundredweight on his back would not let him rise. On hands and knees, sinking first one arm and then the other, he made an effort to crawl to where the small sack of flour had fallen. But he exhausted himself without advancing, and so churned and broke the grass surface, that a tiny pool of water began to form in perilous proximity to his mouth and nose.

He tried to throw himself on his back with the pack underneath, but this resulted in sinking both arms to the shoulders and gave him a foretaste of drowning. With exquisite patience, he slowly withdrew one sucking arm and then the other and rested them flat on the surface for the support of his chin. Then he began to call for help. After a time he heard the sound of feet sucking through the mud as some one advanced from behind.

"Lend a hand, friend," he said. "Throw out a life−line or something."

It was a woman's voice that answered, and he recognized it.

"If you'll unbuckle the straps I can get up."

The hundred pounds rolled into the mud with a soggy noise, and he slowly gained his feet.

"A pretty predicament," Miss Gastell laughed, at sight of his mud− covered face.

"Not at all," he replied airily. "My favourite physical exercise stunt. Try it some time. It's great for the pectoral muscles and the spine."

He wiped his face, flinging the slush from his hand with a snappy jerk.

"Oh!" she cried in recognition. "It's Mr−−ah−−Mr Smoke Bellew."

"I thank you gravely for your timely rescue and for that name," he answered. "I have been doubly baptized. Henceforth I shall insist always on being called Smoke Bellew. It is a strong name, and not without significance."

He paused, and then voice and expression became suddenly fierce.

"Do you know what I'm going to do?" he demanded. "I'm going back to the States. I am going to get married. I am going to raise a large family of children. And then, as the evening shadows fall, I shall gather those children about me and relate the sufferings and hardships I endured on the Chilcoot Trail. And if they don't cry−−I repeat, if they don't cry, I'll lambaste the stuffing out of them."

VIII.

The arctic winter came down apace. Snow that had come to stay lay six inches on the ground, and the ice was forming in quiet ponds, despite the fierce gales that blew. It was in the late afternoon, during a lull in such a gale, that Kit and John Bellew helped the cousins load the boat and watched it disappear down the lake in a snow−squall.

"And now a night's sleep and an early start in the morning," said John Bellew. "If we aren't storm−bound at the summit we'll make Dyea to−morrow night, and if we have luck in catching a steamer we'll be in San Francisco

in a week."

"Enjoyed your vacation?" Kit asked absently.

Their camp for that last night at Linderman was a melancholy remnant. Everything of use, including the tent, had been taken by the cousins. A tattered tarpaulin, stretched as a wind−break, partially sheltered them from the driving snow. Supper they cooked on an open fire in a couple of battered and discarded camp utensils. All that was left them were their blankets, and food for several meals.

From the moment of the departure of the boat, Kit had become absent and restless. His uncle noticed his condition, and attributed it to the fact that the end of the hard toil had come. Only once during supper did Kit speak.

"Avuncular," he said, relevant of nothing, "after this, I wish you'd call me Smoke. I've made some smoke on this trail, haven't I?"

A few minutes later he wandered away in the direction of the village of tents that sheltered the gold−rushers who were still packing or building their boats. He was gone several hours, and when he returned and slipped into his blankets John Bellew was asleep.

In the darkness of a gale−driven morning, Kit crawled out, built a fire in his stocking feet, by which he thawed out his frozen shoes, then boiled coffee and fried bacon. It was a chilly, miserable meal. As soon as finished, they strapped their blankets. As John Bellew turned to lead the way toward the Chilcoot Trail, Kit held out his hand.

"Good−bye, avuncular," he said.

John Bellew looked at him and swore in his surprise.

"Don't forget my name's Smoke," Kit chided.

"But what are you going to do?"

Kit waved his hand in a general direction northward over the storm− lashed lake.

"What's the good of turning back after getting this far?" he asked. "Besides, I've got my taste of meat, and I like it. I'm going on."

"You're broke," protested John Bellew. "You have no outfit."

"I've got a job. Behold your nephew, Christopher Smoke Bellew! He's got a job at a hundred and fifty per month and grub. He's going down to Dawson with a couple of dudes and another gentleman's man−−camp−cook, boatman, and general all−around hustler. And O'Hara and the Billow can go to hell. Good−bye."

But John Bellew was dazed, and could only mutter:

"I don't understand."

"They say the baldface grizzlies are thick in the Yukon Basin," Kit explained. "Well, I've got only one suit of underclothes, and I'm going after the bear−meat, that's all."

THE MEAT.

I.

Half the time the wind blew a gale, and Smoke Bellew staggered against it along the beach. In the gray of dawn a dozen boats were being loaded with the precious outfits packed across Chilcoot. They were clumsy, home−made boats, put together by men who were not boat− builders, out of planks they had sawed by hand from green spruce trees. One boat, already loaded, was just starting, and Kit paused to watch.

The wind, which was fair down the lake, here blew in squarely on the beach, kicking up a nasty sea in the shallows. The men of the departing boat waded in high rubber boots as they shoved it out toward deeper water. Twice they did this. Clambering aboard and failing to row clear, the boat was swept back and grounded. Kit noticed that the spray on the sides of the boat quickly turned to ice. The third attempt was a partial success. The last two men to climb in were wet to their waists, but the boat was afloat. They struggled awkwardly at the heavy oars, and slowly worked off shore. Then they hoisted a sail made of blankets, had it carried away in a gust, and were swept a third time back on the freezing beach.

Kit grinned to himself and went on. This was what he must expect to encounter, for he, too, in his new role of gentleman's man, was to start from the beach in a similar boat that very day.

Everywhere men were at work, and at work desperately, for the closing down of winter was so imminent that it was a gamble whether or not they would get across the great chain of lakes before the freeze−up. Yet, when Kit arrived at the tent of Messrs Sprague and Stine, he did not find them stirring.

By a fire, under the shelter of a tarpaulin, squatted a short, thick man smoking a brown−paper cigarette.

"Hello," he said. "Are you Mister Sprague's new man?"

As Kit nodded, he thought he had noted a shade of emphasis on the mister and the man, and he was sure of a hint of a twinkle in the corner of the eye.

"Well, I'm Doc Stine's man," the other went on. "I'm five feet two inches long, and my name's Shorty, Jack Short for short, and sometimes known as Johnny−on−the−Spot."

Kit put out his hand and shook.

"Were you raised on bear−meat?" he queried.

"Sure," was the answer; "though my first feedin' was buffalo−milk as near as I can remember. Sit down an' have some grub. The bosses ain't turned out yet."

And despite the one breakfast, Kit sat down under the tarpaulin and ate a second breakfast thrice as hearty. The heavy, purging toil of weeks had given him the stomach and appetite of a wolf. He could eat anything, in any quantity, and be unaware that he possessed a digestion. Shorty he found voluble and pessimistic, and from him he received surprising tips concerning their bosses, and ominous forecasts of the expedition. Thomas Stanley Sprague was a budding mining engineer and the son of a millionaire. Doctor Adolph Stine was also the son of a wealthy father. And, through their fathers, both had been backed by an investing syndicate in the Klondike adventure.

"Oh, they're sure made of money," Shorty expounded. "When they hit the beach at Dyea, freight was seventy cents, but no Indians. There was a party from Eastern Oregon, real miners, that'd managed to get a team of Indians together at seventy cents. Indians had the straps on the outfit, three thousand pounds of it, when along comes Sprague and Stine. They offered eighty cents and ninety, and at a dollar a pound the Indians jumped the contract and took off their straps. Sprague and Stine came through, though it cost them three thousand, and the Oregon bunch is still on the beach. They won't get through till next year.

"Oh, they are real hummers, your boss and mine, when it comes to sheddin' the mazuma an' never mindin' other folks' feelin's. What did they do when they hit Linderman? The carpenters was just putting in the last licks on a boat they'd contracted to a 'Frisco bunch for six hundred. Sprague and Stine slipped 'em an even thousand, and they jumped their contract. It's a good−lookin' boat, but it's jiggered the other bunch. They've got their outfit right here, but no boat. And they're stuck for next year.

"Have another cup of coffee, and take it from me that I wouldn't travel with no such outfit if I didn't want to

get to Klondike so blamed bad. They ain't hearted right. They'd take the crape off the door of a house in mourning if they needed it in their business. Did you sign a contract?"

Kit shook his head.

"Then I'm sorry for you, pardner. They ain't no grub in the country, and they'll drop you cold as soon as they hit Dawson. Men are going to starve there this winter."

"They agreed−−" Kit began.

"Verbal," Shorty snapped him short. "It's your say so against theirs, that's all. Well, anyway−−what's your name, pardner?"

"Call me Smoke," said Kit.

"Well, Smoke, you'll have a run for your verbal contract just the same. This is a plain sample of what to expect. They can sure shed mazuma, but they can't work, or turn out of bed in the morning. We should have been loaded and started an hour ago. It's you an' me for the big work. Pretty soon you'll hear 'em shoutin' for their coffee−−in bed, mind you, and they grown men. What d'ye know about boatin' on the water? I'm a cowman and a prospector, but I'm sure tender−footed on water, an' they don't know punkins. What d'ye know?"

"Search me," Kit answered, snuggling in closer under the tarpaulin as the snow whirled before a fiercer gust. "I haven't been on a small boat since a boy. But I guess we can learn."

A corner of the tarpaulin tore loose, and Shorty received a jet of driven snow down the back of his neck.

"Oh, we can learn all right," he muttered wrathfully. "Sure we can. A child can learn. But it's dollars to doughnuts we don't even get started to−day."

It was eight o'clock when the call for coffee came from the tent, and nearly nine before the two employers emerged.

"Hello," said Sprague, a rosy−cheeked, well−fed young man of twenty− five. "Time we made a start, Shorty. You and−−" Here he glanced interrogatively at Kit. "I didn't quite catch your name last evening."

"Smoke."

"Well, Shorty, you and Mr Smoke had better begin loading the boat."

"Plain Smoke−−cut out the Mister," Kit suggested.

Sprague nodded curtly and strolled away among the tents, to be followed by Doctor Stine, a slender, pallid young man.

Shorty looked significantly at his companion.

"Over a ton and a half of outfit, and they won't lend a hand. You'll see."

"I guess it's because we're paid to do the work," Kit answered cheerfully, "and we might as well buck in."

To move three thousand pounds on the shoulders a hundred yards was no slight task, and to do it in half a gale, slushing through the snow in heavy rubber boots, was exhausting. In addition, there was the taking down of the tent and the packing of small camp equipage. Then came the loading. As the boat settled, it had to be shoved farther and farther out, increasing the distance they had to wade. By two o'clock it had all been accomplished, and Kit, despite his two breakfasts, was weak with the faintness of hunger. His knees were shaking under him. Shorty, in similar predicament, foraged through the pots and pans, and drew forth a big pot of cold boiled beans in which were imbedded large chunks of bacon. There was only one spoon, a long−handled one, and they dipped, turn and turn about, into the pot. Kit was filled with an immense certitude that in all his life he had never tasted anything so good.

"Lord, man," he mumbled between chews, "I never knew what appetite was till I hit the trail."

Sprague and Stine arrived in the midst of this pleasant occupation.

"What's the delay?" Sprague complained. "Aren't we ever going to get started?"

Shorty dipped in turn, and passed the spoon to Kit. Nor did either speak till the pot was empty and the bottom scraped.

"Of course we ain't ben doin' nothing," Shorty said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "We ain't ben doin' nothing at all. And of course you ain't had nothing to eat. It was sure careless of me."

"Yes, yes," Stine said quickly. "We ate at one of the tents−− friends of ours."

"Thought so," Shorty grunted.

"But now that you're finished, let us get started," Sprague urged.

"There's the boat," said Shorty. "She's sure loaded. Now, just how might you be goin' about to get started?"

"By climbing aboard and shoving off. Come on."

They waded out, and the employers got on board, while Kit and Shorty shoved clear. When the waves lapped the tops of their boots they clambered in. The other two men were not prepared with the oars, and the boat swept back and grounded. Half a dozen times, with a great expenditure of energy, this was repeated.

Shorty sat down disconsolately on the gunwale, took a chew of tobacco, and questioned the universe, while Kit baled the boat and the other two exchanged unkind remarks.

"If you'll take my orders, I'll get her off," Sprague finally said.

The attempt was well intended, but before he could clamber on board he was wet to the waist.

"We've got to camp and build a fire," he said, as the boat grounded again. "I'm freezing."

"Don't be afraid of a wetting," Stine sneered. "Other men have gone off to−day wetter than you. Now I'm going to take her out."

This time it was he who got the wetting, and who announced with chattering teeth the need of a fire.

"A little splash like that," Sprague chattered spitefully. "We'll go on."

"Shorty, dig out my clothes−bag and make a fire," the other commanded.

"You'll do nothing of the sort," Sprague cried.

Shorty looked from one to the other, expectorated, but did not move.

"He's working for me, and I guess he obeys my orders," Stine retorted. "Shorty, take that bag ashore."

Shorty obeyed, and Sprague shivered in the boat. Kit, having received no orders, remained inactive, glad of the rest.

"A boat divided against itself won't float," he soliloquized.

"What's that?" Sprague snarled at him.

"Talking to myself−−habit of mine," he answered.

His employer favoured him with a hard look, and sulked several minutes longer. Then he surrendered.

"Get out my bag, Smoke," he ordered, "and lend a hand with that fire. We won't get off till the morning now."

II.

Next day the gale still blew. Lake Linderman was no more than a narrow mountain gorge filled with water. Sweeping down from the mountains through this funnel, the wind was irregular, blowing great guns at times and at other times dwindling to a strong breeze.

"If you give me a shot at it, I think I can get her off," Kit said, when all was ready for the start.

"What do you know about it?" Stine snapped at him.

"Search me," Kit answered, and subsided.

It was the first time he had worked for wages in his life, but he was learning the discipline of it fast. Obediently and cheerfully he joined in various vain efforts to get clear of the beach.

"How would you go about it?" Sprague finally half−panted, half− whined at him.

"Sit down and get a good rest till a lull comes in the wind, and then buck in for all we're worth."

Simple as the idea was, he had been the first to evolve it; the first time it was applied it worked, and they hoisted a blanket to the mast and sped down the lake. Stine and Sprague immediately became cheerful. Shorty, despite his chronic pessimism, was always cheerful, and Kit was too interested to be otherwise. Sprague struggled with the steering sweep for a quarter of an hour, and then looked appealingly at Kit, who relieved him.

"My arms are fairly broken with the strain of it," Sprague muttered apologetically.

"You never ate bear−meat, did you?" Kit asked sympathetically.

"What the devil do you mean?"

"Oh, nothing; I was just wondering."

But behind his employer's back Kit caught the approving grin of Shorty, who had already caught the whim of his simile.

Kit steered the length of Linderman, displaying an aptitude that caused both young men of money and disinclination for work to name him boat−steerer. Shorty was no less pleased, and volunteered to continue cooking and leave the boat work to the other.

Between Linderman and Lake Bennet was a portage. The boat, lightly loaded, was lined down the small but violent connecting stream, and here Kit learned a vast deal more about boats and water. But when it came to

packing the outfit, Stine and Sprague disappeared, and their men spent two days of back−breaking toil in getting the outfit across. And this was the history of many miserable days of the trip−−Kit and Shorty working to exhaustion, while their masters toiled not and demanded to be waited upon.

But the iron−bound arctic winter continued to close down, and they were held back by numerous and avoidable delays. At Windy Arm, Stine arbitrarily dispossessed Kit of the steering−sweep and within the hour wrecked the boat on a wave−beaten lee shore. Two days were lost here in making repairs, and the morning of the fresh start, as they came down to embark, on stern and bow, in large letters, was charcoaled 'The Chechaquo.'

Kit grinned at the appropriateness of the invidious word.

"Huh!" said Shorty, when accused by Stine. "I can sure read and spell, an' I know that Chechaquo means tenderfoot, but my education never went high enough to learn me to spell a jaw−breaker like that."

Both employers looked daggers at Kit, for the insult rankled; nor did he mention that the night before, Shorty had besought him for the spelling of that particular word.

"That's 'most as bad as your bear−meat slam at 'em," Shorty confided later.

Kit chuckled. Along with the continuous discovery of his own powers had come an ever−increasing disapproval of the two masters. It was not so much irritation, which was always present, as disgust. He had got his taste of the meat, and liked it; but they were teaching him how not to eat it. Privily, he thanked God that he was not made as they. He came to dislike them to a degree that bordered on hatred. Their malingering bothered him less than their helpless inefficiency. Somewhere in him, old Isaac Bellew and all the rest of the hardy Bellews were making good.

"Shorty," he said one day, in the usual delay of getting started, "I could almost fetch them a rap over the head with an oar and bury them in the river."

"Same here," Shorty agreed. "They're not meat−eaters. They're fish−eaters, and they sure stink."

III.

They came to the rapids, first, the Box Canyon, and, several miles below, the White Horse. The Box Canyon was adequately named. It was a box, a trap. Once in it, the only way out was through. On either side arose perpendicular walls of rock. The river narrowed to a fraction of its width, and roared through this gloomy passage in a madness of motion that heaped the water in the centre into a ridge fully eight feet higher than at the rocky sides. This ridge, in turn, was crested with stiff, upstanding waves that curled over, yet remained each in its unvarying place. The Canyon was well feared, for it had collected its toll of dead from the passing gold− rushers.

Tying to the bank above, where lay a score of other anxious boats, Kit and his companions went ahead on foot to investigate. They crept to the brink and gazed down at the swirl of water. Sprague drew back shuddering.

"My God!" he exclaimed. "A swimmer hasn't a chance in that."

Shorty touched Kit significantly with his elbow and said in an undertone:

"Cold feet. Dollars to doughnuts they don't go through."

Kit scarcely heard. From the beginning of the boat trip he had been learning the stubbornness and inconceivable viciousness of the elements, and this glimpse of what was below him acted as a challenge.

"We've got to ride that ridge," he said. "If we get off of it we'll hit the walls−−"

"And never know what hit us," was Shorty's verdict. "Can you swim, Smoke?"

"I'd wish I couldn't if anything went wrong in there."

"That's what I say," a stranger, standing alongside and peering down into the Canyon, said mournfully. "And I wish I were through it."

"I wouldn't sell my chance to go through," Kit answered.

He spoke honestly, but it was with the idea of heartening the man. He turned to go back to the boat.

"Are you going to tackle it?" the man asked.

Kit nodded.

"I wish I could get the courage to," the other confessed. "I've been here for hours. The longer I look, the more afraid I am. I am not a boatman, and I have only my nephew with me, who is a young boy, and my wife. If you get through safely, will you run my boat through?"

Kit looked at Shorty, who delayed to answer.

"He's got his wife with him," Kit suggested. Nor had he mistaken his man.

"Sure," Shorty affirmed. "It was just that I was stopping to think about. I knew there was some reason I ought to do it."

Again they turned to go, but Sprague and Stine made no movement.

"Good luck, Smoke," Sprague called to him. "I'll−−er−−" He hesitated. "I'll just stay here and watch you."

"We need three men in the boat, two at the oars and one at the steering sweep," Kit said quietly.

Sprague looked at Stine.

"I'm damned if I do," said that gentleman. "If you're not afraid to stand here and look on, I'm not."

"Who's afraid?" Sprague demanded hotly.

Stine retorted in kind, and their two men left them in the thick of a squabble.

"We can do without them," Kit said to Shorty. "You take the bow with a paddle, and I'll handle the steering sweep. All you'll have to do is just to keep her straight. Once we're started, you won't be able to hear me, so just keep on keeping straight."

They cast off the boat and worked out to middle in the quickening current. From the Canyon came an ever−growing roar. The river sucked in to the entrance with the smoothness of molten glass, and here, as the darkening walls received them, Shorty took a chew of tobacco, and dipped his paddle. The boat leaped on the first crests of the ridge, and they were deafened by the uproar of wild water that reverberated from the narrow walls and multiplied itself. They were half−smothered with flying spray. At times Kit could not see his comrade at the bow. It was only a matter of two minutes, in which time they rode the ridge three−quarters of a mile, and emerged in safety and tied to the bank in the eddy below.

Shorty emptied his mouth of tobacco juice−−he had forgotten to spit− −and spoke.

"That was bear−meat," he exulted, "the real bear−meat. Say, we want a few, didn't we, Smoke, I don't mind tellin' you in confidence that before we started I was the gosh−dangdest scaredest man this side of the Rocky−Mountains. Now I'm a bear−eater. Come on an' we'll run that other boat through."

Midway back, on foot, they encountered their employers, who had watched the passage from above.

"There comes the fish−eaters," said Shorty. "Keep to win'ward."

IV.

After running the strangers' boat through, whose name proved to be Breck, Kit and Shorty met his wife, a slender, girlish woman whose blue eyes were moist with gratitude. Breck himself tried to hand Kit fifty dollars, and then attempted it on Shorty.

"Stranger," was the latter's rejection, "I come into this country to make money outa the ground an' not outa my fellow critters."

Breck rummaged in his boat and produced a demijohn of whiskey. Shorty's hand half went out to it and stopped abruptly. He shook his head.

"There's that blamed White Horse right below, an' they say it's worse than the Box. I reckon I don't dast tackle any lightning."

Several miles below they ran in to the bank, and all four walked down to look at the bad water. The river, which was a succession of rapids, was here deflected toward the right bank by a rocky reef. The whole body of water, rushing crookedly into the narrow passage, accelerated its speed frightfully, and was upflung unto huge waves, white and wrathful. This was the dread Mane of the White Horse, and here an even heavier toll of dead had been exacted. On one side of the Mane was a corkscrew curl−over and suck−under, and on the opposite side was the big whirlpool. To go through, the Mane itself must be ridden.

"This plum rips the strings outa the Box," Shorty concluded.

As they watched, a boat took the head of the rapids above. It was a large boat, fully thirty feet long, laden with several tons of outfit and handled by six men. Before it reached the Mane it was plunging and leaping, at times almost hidden by the foam and spray.

Shorty shot a slow, sidelong glance at Kit, and said:

"She's fair smoking, and she hasn't hit the worst. They've hauled the oars in. There she takes it now. God! She's gone! No; there she is!"

Big as the boat was, it had been buried from sight in the flying smother between crests. The next moment, in the thick of the Mane, the boat leaped up a crest and into view. To Kit's amazement he saw the whole long bottom

clearly outlined. The boat, for the fraction of an instant, was in the air, the men sitting idly in their places, all save one in the stern who stood at the steering sweep. Then came the downward plunge into the trough and a second disappearance. Three times the boat leaped and buried itself, then those on the bank saw its nose take the whirlpool as it slipped off the Mane. The steersman, vainly opposing with his full weight on the steering− gear, surrendered to the whirlpool and helped the boat to take the circle.

Three times it went around, each time so close to the rocks on which Kit and Shorty stood, that either could have leaped on board. The steersman, a man with a reddish beard of recent growth, waved his hand to them. The only way out of the whirlpool was by the Mane, and on the round the boat entered the Mane obliquely at its upper end. Possibly out of fear of the draw of the whirlpool, the steersman did not attempt to straighten out quickly enough. When he did, it was too late. Alternately in the air and buried, the boat angled the Mane and sucked into and down through the stiff wall of the corkscrew on the opposite side of the river. A hundred feet below, boxes and bales began to float up. Then appeared the bottom of the boat and the scattered heads of six men. Two managed to make the bank in the eddy below. The others were drawn under, and the general flotsam was lost to view, borne on by the swift current around the bend.

There was a long minute of silence. Shorty was the first to speak.

"Come on," he said. "We might as well tackle it. My feet'll get cold if I stay here any longer."

"We'll smoke some," Kit grinned at him.

"And you'll sure earn your name," was the rejoinder. Shorty turned to their employers. "Comin'?" he queried.

Perhaps the roar of the water prevented them from hearing the invitation.

Shorty and Kit tramped back through a foot of snow to the head of the rapids and cast off the boat. Kit was divided between two impressions: one, of the caliber of his comrade, which served as a spur to him; the other, likewise a spur, was the knowledge that old Isaac Bellew, and all the other Bellews, had done things like this in their westward march of empire. What they had done, he could do. It was the meat, the strong meat, and he knew, as never before, that it required strong men to eat such meat.

"You've sure got to keep the top of the ridge," Shorty shouted at him, the plug tobacco lifting to his mouth, as the boat quickened in the quickening current and took the head of the rapids.

Kit nodded, swayed his strength and weight tentatively on the steering oar, and headed the boat for the plunge.

Several minutes later, half−swamped and lying against the bank in the eddy below the White Horse, Shorty spat out a mouthful of tobacco juice and shook Kit's hand.

"Meat! Meat!" Shorty chanted. "We eat it raw! We eat it alive!"

At the top of the bank they met Breck. His wife stood at a little distance. Kit shook his hand.

"I'm afraid your boat can't make it," he said. "It is smaller than ours and a bit cranky."

The man pulled out a row of bills.

"I'll give you each a hundred if you run it through."

Kit looked out and up the tossing Mane of the White Horse. A long, gray twilight was falling, it was turning colder, and the landscape seemed taking on a savage bleakness.

"It ain't that," Shorty was saying. "We don't want your money. Wouldn't touch it nohow. But my pardner is the real meat with boats, and when he says yourn ain't safe I reckon he knows what he's talkin' about."

Kit nodded affirmation, and chanced to glance at Mrs Breck. Her eyes were fixed upon him, and he knew that if ever he had seen prayer in a woman's eyes he was seeing it then. Shorty followed his gaze and saw what he saw. They looked at each other in confusion and did not speak. Moved by the common impulse, they nodded to each other and turned to the trail that led to the head of the rapids. They had not gone a hundred yards when they met Stine and Sprague coming down.

"Where are you going?" the latter demanded.

"To fetch that other boat through," Shorty answered.

"No you're not. It's getting dark. You two are going to pitch camp."

So huge was Kit's disgust that he forebore to speak.

"He's got his wife with him," Shorty said.

"That's his lookout," Stine contributed.

"And Smoke's and mine," was Shorty's retort.

"I forbid you," Sprague said harshly. "Smoke, if you go another step I'll discharge you."

"And you, too, Shorty," Stine added.

"And a hell of a pickle you'll be in with us fired," Shorty replied. "How'll you get your blamed boat to Dawson? Who'll serve you coffee in your blankets and manicure your finger−nails? Come on, Smoke. They don't dast fire us. Besides, we've got agreements. It they fire us they've got to divvy up grub to last us through the winter."

Barely had they shoved Breck's boat out from the bank and caught the first rough water, when the waves began to lap aboard. They were small waves, but it was an earnest of what was to come. Shorty cast back a quizzical glance as he gnawed at his inevitable plug, and Kit felt a strange rush of warmth at his heart for this man who couldn't swim and who couldn't back out.

The rapids grew stiffer, and the spray began to fly. In the gathering darkness, Kit glimpsed the Mane and the crooked fling of the current into it. He worked into this crooked current, and felt a glow of satisfaction as the boat hit the head of the Mane squarely in the middle. After that, in the smother, leaping and burying and swamping, he had no clear impression of anything save that he swung his weight on the steering oar and wished his uncle were there to see. They emerged, breathless, wet through, and filled with water almost to the gunwale. Lighter pieces of baggage and outfit were floating inside the boat. A few careful strokes on Shorty's part worked the boat into the draw of the eddy, and the eddy did the rest till the boat softly touched against the bank. Looking down from above was Mrs Breck. Her prayer had been answered, and the tears were streaming down her cheeks.

"You boys have simply got to take the money," Breck called down to them.

Shorty stood up, slipped, and sat down in the water, while the boat dipped one gunwale under and righted again.

"Damn the money," said Shorty. "Fetch out that whiskey. Now that it's over I'm getting cold feet, an' I'm sure likely to have a chill."

V.

In the morning, as usual, they were among the last of the boats to start. Breck, despite his boating inefficiency, and with only his wife and nephew for crew, had broken camp, loaded his boat, and pulled out at the first streak of day. But there was no hurry in Stine and Sprague, who seemed incapable of realizing that the freeze−up might come at any time. They malingered, got in the way, delayed, and doubted the work of Kit and Shorty.

"I'm sure losing my respect for God, seein' as he must a−made them two mistakes in human form," was the latter's blasphemous way of expressing his disgust.

"Well, you're the real goods at any rate," Kit grinned back at him. "It makes me respect God the more just to look at you."

"He was sure goin' some, eh?" was Shorty's fashion of overcoming the embarrassment of the compliment.

The trail by water crossed Lake Le Barge. Here was no fast current, but a tideless stretch of forty miles which must be rowed unless a fair wind blew. But the time for fair wind was past, and an icy gale blew in their teeth out of the north. This made a rough sea, against which it was almost impossible to pull the boat. Added to their troubles was driving snow; also, the freezing of the water on their oar−blades kept one man occupied in chopping it off with a hatchet. Compelled to take their turn at the oars, Sprague and Stine patently loafed. Kit had learned how to throw his weight on an oar, but he noted that his employers made a seeming of throwing their weights and that they dipped their oars at a cheating angle.

At the end of three hours, Sprague pulled his oar in and said they would run back into the mouth of the river for shelter. Stine seconded him, and the several hard−won miles were lost. A second day, and a third, the same fruitless attempt was made. In the river mouth, the continually arriving boats from White Horse made a flotilla of over two hundred. Each day forty or fifty arrived, and only two or three won to the north−west short of the lake and did not come back. Ice was now forming in the eddies, and connecting from eddy to eddy in thin lines around the points. The freeze−up was very imminent.

"We could make it if they had the souls of clams," Kit told Shorty, as they dried their moccasins by the fire on the evening of the third day. "We could have made it to−day if they hadn't turned back. Another hour's work would have fetched that west shore. They're−−they're babes in the woods."

"Sure," Shorty agreed. He turned his moccasin to the flame and debated a moment. "Look here, Smoke. It's hundreds of miles to Dawson. If we don't want to freeze in here, we've got to do something. What d'ye say?"

Kit looked at him, and waited.

"We've got the immortal cinch on them two babes," Shorty expounded. "They can give orders an' shed mazuma, but, as you say, they're plum babes. If we're goin' to Dawson, we got to take charge of this here outfit."

They looked at each other.

"It's a go," said Kit, as his hand went out in ratification.

In the morning, long before daylight, Shorty issued his call.

"Come on!" he roared. "Tumble out, you sleepers! Here's your coffee! Kick in to it! We're goin' to make a start!"

Grumbling and complaining, Stine and Sprague were forced to get under way two hours earlier than ever before. If anything, the gale was stiffer, and in a short time every man's face was iced up, while the oars were heavy with ice. Three hours they struggled, and four, one man steering, one chopping ice, two toiling at the oars, and each taking his various turns. The north−west shore loomed nearer and nearer. The gale blew even harder, and at last Sprague pulled in his oar in token of surrender. Shorty sprang to it, though his relief had only begun.

"Chop ice," he said, handing Sprague the hatchet.

"But what's the use?" the other whined. "We can't make it. We're going to turn back."

"We're going on," said Shorty. "Chop ice. An' when you feel better you can spell me."

It was heart−breaking toil, but they gained the shore, only to find it composed of surge−beaten rocks and cliffs, with no place to land.

"I told you so," Sprague whimpered.

"You never peeped," Shorty answered.

"We're going back."

Nobody spoke, and Kit held the boat into the seas as they skirted the forbidding shore. Sometimes they gained no more than a foot to the stroke, and there were times when two or three strokes no more than enabled them to hold their own. He did his best to hearten the two weaklings. He pointed out that the boats which had won to this shore had never come back. Perforce, he argued, they had found a shelter somewhere ahead. Another hour they laboured, and a second.

"If you fellows put into your oars some of that coffee you swig in your blankets, we'd make it," was Shorty's encouragement. "You're just goin' through the motions an' not pullin' a pound."

A few minutes later Sprague drew in his oar.

"I'm finished," he said, and there were tears in his voice.

"So are the rest of us," Kit answered, himself ready to cry or to commit murder, so great was his exhaustion. "But we're going on just the same."

"We're going back. Turn the boat around."

"Shorty, if he won't pull, take that oar yourself," Kit commanded.

"Sure," was the answer. "He can chop ice."

But Sprague refused to give over the oar; Stine had ceased rowing, and the boat was drifting backward.

"Turn around, Smoke," Sprague ordered.

And Kit, who never in his life had cursed any man, astonished himself.

"I'll see you in hell, first," he replied. "Take hold of that oar and pull."

It is in moments of exhaustion that men lose all their reserves of civilization, and such a moment had come. Each man had reached the breaking−point. Sprague jerked off a mitten, drew his revolver, and turned it on his steersman. This was a new experience to Kit. He had never had a gun presented at him in his life. And now, to his surprise, it seemed to mean nothing at all. It was the most natural thing in the world.

"If you don't put that gun up," he said, "I'll take it away and rap you over the knuckles with it."

"If you don't turn the boat around I'll shoot you," Sprague threatened.

Then Shorty took a hand. He ceased chopping ice and stood up behind Sprague.

"Go on an' shoot," said Shorty, wiggling the hatchet. "I'm just aching for a chance to brain you. Go on an' start the festivities."

"This is mutiny," Stine broke in. "You were engaged to obey orders."

Shorty turned on him.

"Oh, you'll get yours as soon as I finish with your pardner, you little hog−wallopin' snooper, you."

"Sprague," Kit said, "I'll give you just thirty seconds to put away that gun and get that oar out."

Sprague hesitated, gave a short hysterical laugh, put the revolver away and bent his back to the work.

For two hours more, inch by inch, they fought their way along the edge of the foaming rocks, until Kit feared he had made a mistake. And then, when on the verge of himself turning back, they came abreast of a narrow opening, not twenty feet wide, which led into a land−locked inclosure where the fiercest gusts scarcely flawed the surface. It was the haven gained by the boats of previous days. They landed on a shelving beach, and the two employers lay in collapse in the boat, while Kit and Shorty pitched the tent, built a fire, and started the cooking.

"What's a hog−walloping snooper, Shorty?" Kit asked.

"Blamed if I know," was the answer; "but he's one just the same."

The gale, which had been dying quickly, ceased at nightfall, and it came on clear and cold. A cup of coffee, set aside to cool and forgotten, a few minutes later was found coated with half an inch of ice. At eight o'clock, when Sprague and Stine, already rolled in their blankets, were sleeping the sleep of exhaustion, Kit came back from a look at the boat.

"It's the freeze−up, Shorty," he announced. "There's a skin of ice over the whole pond already."

"What are you going to do?"

"There's only one thing. The lake of course freezes first. The rapid current of the river may keep it open for days. This time to− morrow any boat caught in Lake Le Barge remains there until next year."

"You mean we got to get out to−night? Now?"

Kit nodded.

"Tumble out, you sleepers!" was Shorty's answer, couched in a roar, as he began casting off the guy−ropes of the tent.

The other two awoke, groaning with the pain of stiffened muscles and the pain of rousing from exhausted sleep.

"What time is it?" Stine asked.

"Half−past eight."

"It's dark yet," was the objection.

Shorty jerked out a couple of guy−ropes, and the tent began to sag.

"It's not morning," he said. "It's evening. Come on. The lake's freezin'. We got to get acrost."

Stine sat up, his face bitter and wrathful.

"Let it freeze. We're not going to stir."

"All right," said Shorty. "We're goin' on with the boat."

"You were engaged−−"

"To take you to Dawson," Shorty caught him up. "Well, we're takin' you, ain't we?"

He punctuated his query by bringing half the tent down on top of them.

They broke their way through the thin ice in the little harbour, and came out on the lake, where the water, heavy and glassy, froze on their oars with every stroke. The water soon became like mush, clogging the stroke of the oars and freezing in the air even as it dripped. Later the surface began to form a skin, and the boat proceeded slower and slower.

Often, afterwards, when Kit tried to remember that night and failed to bring up aught but nightmare recollections, he wondered what must have been the sufferings of Stine and Sprague. His one impression of himself was that he struggled through biting frost and intolerable exertion for a thousand years more or less.

Morning found them stationary. Stine complained of frosted fingers, and Sprague of his nose, while the pain in Kit's cheeks and nose told him that he, too, had been touched. With each accretion of daylight they could see farther, and far as they could see was icy surface. The water of the lake was gone. A hundred yards away was the shore of the north end. Shorty insisted that it was the opening of the river and that he could see water. He and Kit alone were able to work, and with their oars they broke the ice and forced the boat along. And at the last gasp of their strength they made the suck of the rapid river. One look back showed them several boats which had fought through the night and were hopelessly frozen in; then they whirled around a bend in a current running six miles an hour.

VI.

Day by day they floated down the swift river, and day by day the shore−ice extended farther out. When they made camp at nightfall, they chopped a space in the ice in which to lay the boat, and carried the camp outfit hundreds of feet to shore. In the morning, they chopped the boat out through the new ice and caught the current. Shorty set up the sheet−iron stove in the boat, and over this Stine and Sprague hung through the long, drifting hours. They had surrendered, no longer gave orders, and their one desire was to gain Dawson. Shorty, pessimistic, indefatigable, and joyous, at frequent intervals roared out the three lines of the first four−line stanza of a song he had forgotten. The colder it got the oftener he sang:

"Like Argus of the ancient times, We leave this Modern Greece; Tum−tum, tum−tum; tum−tum, tum−tum, To shear the Golden Fleece."

As they passed the mouths of the Hootalinqua and the Big and Little Salmon, they found these streams throwing mush−ice into the main Yukon. This gathered about the boat and attached itself, and at night they found themselves compelled to chop the boat out of the current. In the morning they chopped the boat back into the current.

The last night ashore was spent between the mouths of the White River and the Stewart. At daylight they found the Yukon, half a mile wide, running white from ice−rimmed bank to ice−rimmed bank. Shorty cursed the universe with less geniality than usual, and looked at Kit.

"We'll be the last boat this year to make Dawson," Kit said.

"But they ain't no water, Smoke."

"Then we'll ride the ice down. Come on."

Futilely protesting, Sprague and Stine were bundled on board. For half an hour, with axes, Kit and Shorty struggled to cut a way into the swift but solid stream. When they did succeed in clearing the shore−ice, the floating ice forced the boat along the edge for a hundred yards, tearing away half of one gunwale and making a partial wreck of it. Then they caught the current at the lower end of the bend that flung off−shore. They proceeded to work farther toward the middle. The stream was no longer composed of mush−ice but of hard cakes. In between the cakes only was mush−ice, that froze solidly as they looked at it. Shoving with the oars against the cakes, sometimes climbing out on the cakes in order to force the boat along, after an hour they gained the middle. Five minutes after they ceased their exertions, the boat was frozen in. The whole river was coagulating as it ran. Cake froze to cake, until at last the boat was the centre of a cake seventy−five feet in diameter. Sometimes they floated sidewise, sometimes stern−first, while gravity tore asunder the forming fetters in the moving mass, only to be manacled by faster−forming ones. While the hours passed, Shorty stoked the stove, cooked meals, and chanted his war song.

Night came, and after many efforts, they gave up the attempt to force the boat to shore, and through the darkness they swept helplessly onward.

"What if we pass Dawson?" Shorty queried.

"We'll walk back," Kit answered, "if we're not crushed in a jam."

The sky was clear, and in the light of the cold leaping stars they caught occasional glimpses of the loom of mountains on either hand. At eleven o'clock, from below, came a dull, grinding roar. Their speed began to diminish, and cakes of ice to up−end and crash and smash about them. The river was jamming. One cake, forced upward, slid across their cake and carried one side of the boat away. It did not sink, for its own cake still upbore it, but in a whirl they saw dark water show for an instant within a foot of them. Then all movement ceased. At the end of half an hour the whole river picked itself up and began to move. This continued for an hour, when again it was brought to rest by a jam. Once again it started, running swiftly and savagely, with a great grinding. Then they saw lights ashore, and, when abreast, gravity and the Yukon surrendered, and the river ceased for six months.

On the shore at Dawson, curious ones gathered to watch the river freeze, heard from out of the darkness the war−song of Shorty:

"Like Argus of the ancient times, We leave this Modern Greece; Tum−tum, tum−tum; tum−tum, tum−tum, To shear the Golden Fleece."

VII.

For three days Kit and Shorty laboured, carrying the ton and a half of outfit from the middle of the river to the log−cabin Stine and Sprague had bought on the hill overlooking Dawson. This work finished, in the warm cabin,

as twilight was falling, Sprague motioned Kit to him. Outside the thermometer registered sixty−five below zero.

"Your full month isn't up, Smoke," Sprague said. "But here it is in full. I wish you luck."

"How about the agreement?" Kit asked. "You know there's a famine here. A man can't get work in the mines even, unless he has his own grub. You agreed−−"

"I know of no agreement," Sprague interrupted. "Do you, Stine? We engaged you by the month. There's your pay. Will you sign the receipt?"

Kit's hands clenched, and for the moment he saw red. Both men shrank away from him. He had never struck a man in anger in his life, and he felt so certain of his ability to thrash Sprague that he could not bring himself to do it.

Shorty saw his trouble and interposed.

"Look here, Smoke, I ain't travelin' no more with a ornery outfit like this. Right here's where I sure jump it. You an' me stick together. Savve? Now, you take your blankets an' hike down to the Elkhorn. Wait for me. I'll settle up, collect what's comin', an' give them what's comin'. I ain't no good on the water, but my feet's on terry−fermy now an' I'm sure goin' to make smoke."

. . . . .

Half an hour afterwards Shorty appeared at the Elkhorn. From his bleeding knuckles and the skin off one cheek, it was evident that he had given Stine and Sprague what was coming.

"You ought to see that cabin," he chuckled, as they stood at the bar. "Rough−house ain't no name for it. Dollars to doughnuts nary one of 'em shows up on the street for a week. An' now it's all figgered out for you an' me. Grub's a dollar an' a half a pound. They ain't no work for wages without you have your own grub. Moose−meat's sellin' for two dollars a pound an' they ain't none. We got enough money for a month's grub an' ammunition, an' we hike up the Klondike to the back country. If they ain't no moose, we go an' live with the Indians. But if we ain't got five thousand pounds of meat six weeks from now, I'll−−I'll sure go back an' apologize to our bosses. Is it a go?"

Kit's hand went out and they shook. Then he faltered.

"I don't know anything about hunting," he said.

Shorty lifted his glass.

"But you're a sure meat−eater, an' I'll learn you."

THE STAMPEDE TO SQUAW CREEK.

I.

Two months after Smoke Bellew and Shorty went after moose for a grubstake, they were back in the Elkhorn saloon at Dawson. The hunting was done, the meat hauled in and sold for two dollars and a half a pound, and between them they possessed three thousand dollars in gold dust and a good team of dogs. They had played in luck. Despite the fact that the gold rush had driven the game a hundred miles or more into the mountains, they had, within half that distance, bagged four moose in a narrow canyon.

The mystery of the strayed animals was no greater than the luck of their killers, for within the day four famished Indian families reporting no game in three days' journey back, camped beside them. Meat was traded for starving dogs, and after a week of feeding, Smoke and Shorty harnessed the animals and began freighting the meat to the eager Dawson market.

The problem of the two men now, was to turn their gold−dust into food. The current price for flour and beans was a dollar and a half a pound, but the difficulty was to find a seller. Dawson was in the throes of famine. Hundreds of men, with money but no food, had been compelled to leave the country. Many had gone down the river on the last water, and many more with barely enough food to last, had walked the six hundred miles over the ice to Dyea.

Smoke met Shorty in the warm saloon, and found the latter jubilant.

"Life ain't no punkins without whiskey an' sweetenin'," was Shorty's greeting, as he pulled lumps of ice from his thawing moustache and flung them rattling on the floor. "An' I sure just got eighteen pounds of that same sweetenin'. The geezer only charged three dollars a pound for it. What luck did you have?"

"I, too, have not been idle," Smoke answered with pride. "I bought fifty pounds of flour. And there's a man up on Adam Creek says he'll let me have fifty pounds more to−morrow."

"Great! We'll sure live till the river opens. Say, Smoke, them dogs of ourn is the goods. A dog−buyer offered me two hundred apiece for the five of them. I told him nothin' doin'. They sure took on class when they got meat to get outside of; but it goes against the grain feedin' dog−critters on grub that's worth two and a half a pound. Come on an' have a drink. I just got to celebrate them eighteen pounds of sweetenin'."

Several minutes later, as he weighed in on the gold−scales for the drinks, he gave a start of recollection.

"I plum forgot that man I was to meet in the Tivoli. He's got some spoiled bacon he'll sell for a dollar an' a half a pound. We can feed it to the dogs an' save a dollar a day on each's board bill. So long."

"So long," said Smoke. "I'm goin' to the cabin an' turn in."

Hardly had Shorty left the place, when a fur−clad man entered through the double storm−doors. His face lighted at sight of Smoke, who recognized him as Breck, the man whose boat he had run through the Box Canyon and White Horse rapids.

"I heard you were in town," Breck said hurriedly, as they shook hands. "Been looking for you for half an hour. Come outside, I want to talk with you."

Smoke looked regretfully at the roaring, red−hot stove.

"Won't this do?"

"No; it's important. Come outside."

As they emerged, Smoke drew off one mitten, lighted a match, and glanced at the thermometer that hung beside the door. He re− mittened his naked hand hastily as if the frost had burnt him. Overhead arched the flaming aurora borealis, while from all Dawson arose the mournful howling of thousands of wolf−dogs.

"What did it say?" Breck asked.

"Sixty below." Kit spat experimentally, and the spittle crackled in the air. "And the thermometer is certainly working. It's falling all the time. An hour ago it was only fifty−two. Don't tell me it's a stampede."

"It is," Breck whispered back cautiously, casting anxious eyes about in fear of some other listener. "You know Squaw Creek?−−empties in on the other side the Yukon thirty miles up?"

"Nothing doing there," was Smoke's judgment. "It was prospected years ago."

"So were all the other rich creeks. Listen! It's big. Only eight to twenty feet to bedrock. There won't be a claim that don't run to half a million. It's a dead secret. Two or three of my close friends let me in on it. I told my wife right away that I was going to find you before I started. Now, so long. My pack's hidden down the bank. In fact, when they told me, they made me promise not to pull out until Dawson was asleep. You know what it means if you're seen with a stampeding outfit. Get your partner and follow. You ought to stake fourth or fifth claim from Discovery. Don't forget−− Squaw Creek. It's the third after you pass Swede Creek."

II.

When Smoke entered the little cabin on the hillside back of Dawson, he heard a heavy familiar breathing.

"Aw, go to bed," Shorty mumbled, as Smoke shook his shoulder. "I'm not on the night shift," was his next remark, as the rousing hand became more vigorous. "Tell your troubles to the bar−keeper."

"Kick into your clothes," Smoke said. "We've got to stake a couple of claims."

Shorty sat up and started to explode, but Smoke's hand covered his mouth.

"Ssh!" Smoke warned. "It's a big strike. Don't wake the neighbourhood. Dawson's asleep."

"Huh! You got to show me. Nobody tells anybody about a strike, of course not. But ain't it plum amazin' the way everybody hits the trail just the same?"

"Squaw Creek," Smoke whispered. "It's right. Breck gave me the tip. Shallow bedrock. Gold from the grass−roots down. Come on. We'll sling a couple of light packs together and pull out."

Shorty's eyes closed as he lapsed back into sleep. The next moment his blankets were swept off him.

"If you don't want them, I do," Smoke explained.

Shorty followed the blankets and began to dress.

"Goin' to take the dogs?" he asked.

"No. The trail up the creek is sure to be unbroken, and we can make better time without them."

"Then I'll throw 'em a meal, which'll have to last 'em till we get back. Be sure you take some birch−bark and a candle."

Shorty opened the door, felt the bite of the cold, and shrank back to pull down his ear−flaps and mitten his hands.

Five minutes later he returned, sharply rubbing his nose.

"Smoke, I'm sure opposed to makin' this stampede. It's colder than the hinges of hell a thousand years before the first fire was lighted. Besides, it's Friday the thirteenth, an' we're goin' to trouble as the sparks fly upward."

With small stampeding packs on their backs, they closed the door behind them and started down the hill. The display of the aurora borealis had ceased, and only the stars leaped in the great cold, and by their uncertain light made traps for the feet. Shorty floundered off a turn of the trail into deep snow, and raised his voice in blessing of the date of the week and month and year.

"Can't you keep still?" Smoke chided. "Leave the almanac alone. You'll have all Dawson awake and after us."

"Huh! See the light in that cabin? And in that one over there? An' hear that door slam? Oh, sure Dawson's asleep. Them lights? Just buryin' their dead. They ain't stampedin', betcher life they ain't."

By the time they reached the foot of the hill and were fairly in Dawson, lights were springing up in the cabins, doors were slamming, and from behind came the sound of many moccasins on the hard−packed snow. Again Shorty delivered himself.

"But it beats hell the amount of mourners there is."

They passed a man who stood by the path and was calling anxiously in a low voice: "Oh, Charley; get a move on."

"See that pack on his back, Smoke? The graveyard's sure a long ways off when the mourners got to pack their blankets."

By the time they reached the main street a hundred men were in line behind them, and while they sought in the deceptive starlight for the trail that dipped down the bank to the river, more men could be heard arriving. Shorty slipped and shot down the thirty−foot chute into the soft snow. Smoke followed, knocking him over as he was rising to his feet.

"I found it first," he gurgled, taking off his mittens to shake the snow out of the gauntlets.

The next moment they were scrambling wildly out of the way of the hurtling bodies of those that followed. At

the time of the freeze− up, a jam had occurred at this point, and cakes of ice were up−ended in snow−covered confusion. After several hard falls, Smoke drew out his candle and lighted it. Those in the rear hailed it with acclaim. In the windless air it burned easily, and he led the way more quickly.

"It's a sure stampede," Shorty decided. "Or might all them be sleep−walkers?"

"We're at the head of the procession at any rate," was Smoke's answer.

"Oh, I don't know. Mebbe that's a firefly ahead there. Mebbe they're all fireflies−−that one, an' that one. Look at 'em. Believe me, they is whole strings of processions ahead."

It was a mile across the jams to the west bank of the Yukon, and candles flickered the full length of the twisting trail. Behind them, clear to the top of the bank they had descended, were more candles.

"Say, Smoke, this ain't no stampede. It's a exode−us. They must be a thousand men ahead of us an' ten thousand behind. Now, you listen to your uncle. My medicine's good. When I get a hunch it's sure right. An' we're in wrong on this stampede. Let's turn back an' hit the sleep."

"You'd better save your breath if you intend to keep up," Smoke retorted gruffly.

"Huh! My legs is short, but I slog along slack at the knees an' don't worry my muscles none, an' I can sure walk every piker here off the ice."

And Smoke knew he was right, for he had long since learned his comrade's phenomenal walking powers.

"I've been holding back to give you a chance," Smoke jeered.

"An' I'm plum troddin' on your heels. If you can't do better, let me go ahead and set pace."

Smoke quickened, and was soon at the rear of the nearest bunch of stampeders.

"Hike along, you, Smoke," the other urged. "Walk over them unburied dead. This ain't no funeral. Hit the frost like you was goin' somewheres."

Smoke counted eight men and two women in this party, and before the way across the jam−ice was won, he and Shorty had passed another party twenty strong. Within a few feet of the west bank, the trail swerved to the south, emerging from the jam upon smooth ice. The ice, however, was buried under several feet of fine snow. Through this the sled−trail ran, a narrow ribbon of packed footing barely two feet in width. On either side one sank to his knees and deeper in the snow. The stampeders they overtook were reluctant to give way, and often Smoke and Shorty had to plunge into the deep snow, and by supreme efforts flounder past.

Shorty was irrepressible and pessimistic. When the stampeders resented being passed, he retorted in kind.

"What's your hurry?" one of them asked.

"What's yours?" he answered. "A stampede come down from Indian River yesterday afternoon an' beat you to it. They ain't no claims left."

"That being so, I repeat, what's your hurry?"

"WHO? Me? I ain't no stampeder. I'm workin' for the government. I'm on official business. I'm just traipsin' along to take the census of Squaw Creek."

To another, who hailed him with: "Where away, little one? Do you really expect to stake a claim?" Shorty answered:

"Me? I'm the discoverer of Squaw Creek. I'm just comin' back from recordin' so as to see no blamed chechaquo jumps my claim."

The average pace of the stampeders on the smooth going was three miles and a half an hour. Smoke and Shorty were doing four and a half, though sometimes they broke into short runs and went faster.

"I'm going to travel your feet clean off, Shorty," Smoke challenged.

"Huh! I can hike along on the stumps an' wear the heels off your moccasins. Though it ain't no use. I've ben figgerin'. Creek claims is five hundred feet. Call 'em ten to the mile. They's a thousand stampeders ahead of us, an' that creek ain't no hundred miles long. Somebody's goin' to get left, an' it makes a noise like you an' me."

Before replying, Smoke let out an unexpected link that threw Shorty half a dozen feet in the rear.

"If you saved your breath and kept up, we'd cut down a few of that thousand," he chided.

"Who? Me? If you's get outa the way I'd show you a pace what is."

Smoke laughed, and let out another link. The whole aspect of the adventure had changed. Through his brain was running a phrase of the mad philosopher−−"the transvaluation of values." In truth, he was less interested in staking a fortune than in beating Shorty. After all, he concluded, it wasn't the reward of the game but the playing of it that counted. Mind, and muscle, and stamina, and soul, were challenged in a contest with this Shorty, a man

who had never opened the books, and who did not know grand opera from rag− time, nor an epic from a chilblain.

"Shorty, I've got you skinned to death. I've reconstructed every cell in my body since I hit the beach at Dyea. My flesh is as stringy as whipcords, and as bitter and mean as the bite of a rattlesnake. A few months ago I'd have patted myself on the back to write such words, but I couldn't have written them. I had to live them first, and now that I'm living them there's no need to write them. I'm the real, bitter, stinging goods, and no scrub of a mountaineer can put anything over on me without getting it back compound. Now, you go ahead and set pace for half an hour. Do your worst, and when you're all in I'll go ahead and give you half an hour of the real worst."

"Huh!" Shorty sneered genially. "An' him not dry behind the ears yet. Get outa the way an' let your father show you some goin'."

Half−hour by half−hour they alternated in setting pace. Nor did they talk much. Their exertions kept them warm, though their breath froze on their faces from lips to chin. So intense was the cold that they almost continually rubbed their noses and cheeks with their mittens. A few minutes cessation from this allowed the flesh to grow numb, and then most vigorous rubbing was required to produce the burning prickle of returning circulation.

Often they thought they had reached the lead, but always they overtook more stampeders who had started before them. Occasionally, groups of men attempted to swing in behind to their pace, but invariably they were discouraged after a mile or two, and disappeared in the darkness to the rear.

"We've been out on trail all winter," was Shorty's comment. "An' them geezers, soft from laying around their cabins, has the nerve to think they can keep our stride. Now, if they was real sour−doughs it'd be different. If there's one thing a sour−dough can do it's sure walk."

Once, Smoke lighted a match and glanced at his watch. He never repeated it, for so quick was the bite of the frost on his bared hands, that half an hour passed before they were again comfortable.

"Four o'clock," he said, as he pulled on his mittens, "and we've already passed three hundred."

"Three hundred and thirty−eight," Shorty corrected. "I ben keepin' count. Get outa the way, stranger. Let somebody stampede that knows how to stampede."

The latter was addressed to a man, evidently exhausted, who could no more than stumble along, and who blocked the trail. This, and one other, were the only played−out men they encountered, for they were very near to the head of the stampede. Nor did they learn till afterwards the horrors of that night. Exhausted men sat down to rest by the way, and failed to get up. Seven were frozen to death, while scores of amputations of toes, feet, and fingers were performed in the Dawson hospitals on the survivors. For of all nights for a stampede, the one to Squaw Creek occurred on the coldest night of the year. Before morning, the spirit thermometers at Dawson registered seventy degrees below zero. The men composing the stampede, with few exceptions, were new−comers in the country who did not know the way of the cold.

The other played−out man they found a few minutes later, revealed by a streamer of aurora borealis that shot like a searchlight from horizon to zenith. He was sitting on a piece of ice beside the trail.

"Hop along, sister Mary," Shorty gaily greeted him. "Keep movin'. If you sit there you'll freeze stiff."

The man made no response, and they stopped to investigate.

"Stiff as a poker," was Shorty's verdict. "If you tumbled him over he'd break."

"See if he's breathing," Smoke said, as, with bared hands, he sought through furs and woollens for the man's heart.

Shorty lifted one ear−flap and bent to the iced lips.

"Nary breathe," he reported.

"Nor heart−beat," said Smoke.

He mittened his hand and beat it violently for a minute before exposing it to the frost to strike a match. It was an old man, incontestably dead. In the moment of illumination, they saw a long grey beard, massed with ice to the nose, cheeks that were white with frost, and closed eyes with frost−rimmed lashes frozen together. Then the match went out.

"Come on," Shorty said, rubbing his ear. "We can't do nothing for the old geezer. An' I've sure frosted my ear. Now all the blamed skin'll peel off and it'll be sore for a week."

A few minutes later, when a flaming ribbon spilled pulsating fire over the heavens, they saw on the ice a quarter of a mile ahead two forms. Beyond, for a mile, nothing moved.

"They're leading the procession," Smoke said, as darkness fell again. "Come on, let's get them."

At the end of half an hour, not yet having overtaken the two in front, Shorty broke into a run.

"If we catch 'em we'll never pass 'em," he panted. "Lord, what a pace they're hittin'. Dollars to doughnuts they're no chechaquos. They're the real sour−dough variety, you can stack on that."

Smoke was leading when they finally caught up, and he was glad to ease to a walk at their heels. Almost immediately he got the impression that the one nearer him was a woman. How this impression came, he could not tell. Hooded and furred, the dark form was as any form; yet there was a haunting sense of familiarity about it. He waited for the next flame of the aurora, and by its light saw the smallness of the moccasined feet. But he saw more−−the walk; and knew it for the unmistakable walk he had once resolved never to forget.

"She's a sure goer," Shorty confided hoarsely. "I'll bet it's an Indian."

"How do you do, Miss Gastell," Smoke addressed.

"How do you do," she answered, with a turn of the head and a quick glance. "It's too dark to see. Who are you?"

"Smoke,"

She laughed in the frost, and he was certain it was the prettiest laughter he had ever heard.

"And have you married and raised all those children you were telling me about?" Before he could retort, she went on. "How many chechaquos are there behind?"

"Several thousand, I imagine. We passed over three hundred. And they weren't wasting any time."

"It's the old story," she said bitterly. "The new−comers get in on the rich creeks, and the old−timers who dared and suffered and made this country, get nothing. Old−timers made this discovery on Squaw Creek−−how it leaked out is the mystery−−and they sent word up to all the old−timers on Sea Lion. But it's ten miles farther than Dawson, and when they arrive they'll find the creek staked to the skyline by the Dawson chechaquos. It isn't right, it isn't fair, such perversity of luck."

"It is too bad," Smoke sympathized. "But I'm hanged if I know what you're going to do about it. First come, first served, you know."

"I wish I could do something," she flashed back at him. "I'd like to see them all freeze on the trail, or have everything terrible happen to them, so long as the Sea Lion stampede arrived first."

"You've certainly got it in for us, hard," he laughed.

"It isn't that," she said quickly. "Man by man, I know the crowd from Sea Lion, and they are men. They starved in this country in the old days, and they worked like giants to develop it. I went through the hard times on the Koyokuk with them when I was a little girl. And I was with them in the Birch Creek famine, and in the Forty Mile famine. They are heroes, and they deserve some reward, and yet here are thousands of green softlings who haven't earned the right to stake anything, miles and miles ahead of them. And now, if you'll forgive my tirade, I'll save my breath, for I don't know when you and all the rest may try to pass dad and me."

No further talk passed between Joy and Smoke for an hour or so, though he noticed that for a time she and her father talked in low tones.

"I know'm now," Shorty told Smoke. "He's old Louis Gastell, an' the real goods. That must be his kid. He come into this country so long ago they ain't nobody can recollect, an' he brought the girl with him, she only a baby. Him an' Beetles was tradin' partners an' they ran the first dinkey little steamboat up the Koyokuk."

"I don't think we'll try to pass them," Smoke said. "We're at the head of the stampede, and there are only four of us."

Shorty agreed, and another hour of silence followed, during which they swung steadily along. At seven o'clock, the blackness was broken by a last display of the aurora borealis, which showed to the west a broad opening between snow−clad mountains.

"Squaw Creek!" Joy exclaimed.

"Goin' some," Shorty exulted. "We oughtn't to ben there for another half hour to the least, accordin' to my reckonin'. I must a' ben spreadin' my legs."

It was at this point that the Dyea trail, baffled by ice−jams, swerved abruptly across the Yukon to the east bank. And here they must leave the hard−packed, main−travelled trail, mount the jams, and follow a dim trail, but slightly packed, that hovered the west bank.

Louis Gastell, leading, slipped in the darkness on the rough ice, and sat up, holding his ankle in both his

hands. He struggled to his feet and went on, but at a slower pace and with a perceptible limp. After a few minutes he abruptly halted.

"It's no use," he said to his daughter. "I've sprained a tendon. You go ahead and stake for me as well as yourself."

"Can't we do something?" Smoke asked.

Louis Gastell shook his head.

"She can stake two claims as well as one. I'll crawl over to the bank, start a fire, and bandage my ankle. I'll be all right. Go on, Joy. Stake ours above the Discovery claim; it's richer higher up."

"Here's some birch bark," Smoke said, dividing his supply equally. "We'll take care of your daughter."

Louis Gastell laughed harshly.

"Thank you just the same," he said. "But she can take care of herself. Follow her and watch her."

"Do you mind if I lead?" she asked Smoke, as she headed on. "I know this country better than you."

"Lead on," Smoke answered gallantly, "though I agree with you it's a darned shame all us chechaquos are going to beat that Sea Lion bunch to it. Isn't there some way to shake them?"

She shook her head.

"We can't hide our trail, and they'll follow it like sheep."

After a quarter of a mile, she turned sharply to the west. Smoke noticed that they were going through unpacked snow, but neither he nor Shorty observed that the dim trail they had been on still led south. Had they witnessed the subsequent procedure of Louis Gastell, the history of the Klondike would have been written differently; for they would have seen that old−timer, no longer limping, running with his nose to the trail like a hound, following them. Also, they would have seen him trample and widen the turn they had made to the west. And, finally, they would have seen him keep on the old dim trail that still led south.

A trail did run up the creek, but so slight was it that they continually lost it in the darkness. After a quarter of an hour, Joy Gastell was willing to drop into the rear and let the two men take turns in breaking a way through the snow. This slowness of the leaders enabled the whole stampede to catch up, and when daylight came, at nine o'clock, as far back as they could see was an unbroken line of men. Joy's dark eyes sparkled at the sight.

"How long since we started up the creek?" she asked.

"Fully two hours," Smoke answered.

"And two hours back makes four," she laughed. "The stampede from Sea Lion is saved."

A faint suspicion crossed Smoke's mind, and he stopped and confronted her.

"I don't understand," he said.

"You don't. Then I'll tell you. This is Norway Creek. Squaw Creek is the next to the south."

Smoke was for the moment, speechless.

"You did it on purpose?" Shorty demanded.

"I did it to give the old−timers a chance."

She laughed mockingly. The men grinned at each other and finally joined her.

"I'd lay you across my knee an' give you a wallopin', if womenfolk wasn't so scarce in this country," Shorty assured her.

"Your father didn't sprain a tendon, but waited till we were out of sight and then went on?" Smoke asked.

She nodded.

"And you were the decoy."

Again she nodded, and this time Smoke's laughter rang out clear and true. It was the spontaneous laughter of a frankly beaten man.

"Why don't you get angry with me?" she queried ruefully. "Or−−or wallop me?"

"Well, we might as well be starting back," Shorty urged. "My feet's gettin' cold standin' here."

Smoke shook his head.

"That would mean four hours lost. We must be eight miles up this Creek now, and from the look ahead Norway is making a long swing south. We'll follow it, then cross over the divide somehow, and tap Squaw Creek somewhere above Discovery." He looked at Joy. "Won't you come along with us? I told your father we'd look after you."

"I−−" She hesitated. "I think I shall, if you don't mind." She was looking straight at him, and her face was no

longer defiant and mocking. "Really, Mr Smoke, you make me almost sorry for what I have done. But somebody had to save the old−timers."

"It strikes me that stampeding is at best a sporting proposition."

"And it strikes me you two are very game about it," she went on, then added with the shadow of a sigh: "What a pity you are not old− timers."

For two hours more they kept to the frozen creek−bed of Norway, then turned into a narrow and rugged tributary that flowed from the south. At midday they began the ascent of the divide itself. Behind them, looking down and back, they could see the long line of stampeders breaking up. Here and there, in scores of places, thin smoke−columns advertised the making of camps.

As for themselves, the going was hard. They wallowed through snow to their waists, and were compelled to stop every few yards to breathe. Shorty was the first to call a halt.

"We ben hittin' the trail for over twelve hours," he said. "Smoke, I'm plum willin' to say I'm good an' tired. An' so are you. An' I'm free to shout that I can sure hang on to this here pascar like a starvin' Indian to a hunk of bear−meat. But this poor girl here can't keep her legs no time if she don't get something in her stomach. Here's where we build a fire. What d'ye say?"

So quickly, so deftly and methodically, did they go about making a temporary camp, that Joy, watching with jealous eyes, admitted to herself that the old−timers could not do it better. Spruce boughs, with a spread blanket on top, gave a foundation for rest and cooking operations. But they kept away from the heat of the fire until noses and cheeks had been rubbed cruelly.

Smoke spat in the air, and the resultant crackle was so immediate and loud that he shook his head.

"I give it up," he said. "I've never seen cold like this."

"One winter on the Koyokuk it went to eighty−six below," Joy answered. "It's at least seventy or seventy−five right now, and I know I've frosted my cheeks. They're burning like fire."

On the steep slope of the divide there was no ice, while snow, as fine and hard and crystalline as granulated sugar, was poured into the gold−pan by the bushel until enough water was melted for the coffee. Smoke fried bacon and thawed biscuits. Shorty kept the fuel supplied and tended the fire, and Joy set the simple table composed of two plates, two cups, two spoons, a tin of mixed salt and pepper, and a tin of sugar. When it came to eating, she and Smoke shared one set between them. They ate out of the same plate and drank from the same cup.

It was nearly two in the afternoon when they cleared the crest of the divide and began dropping down a feeder of Squaw Creek. Earlier in the winter some moose−hunter had made a trail up the canyon−−that is, in going up and down he had stepped always in his previous tracks. As a result, in the midst of soft snow, and veiled under later snow falls, was a line of irregular hummocks. If one's foot missed a hummock, he plunged down through unpacked snow and usually to a fall. Also, the moose−hunter had been an exceptionally long− legged individual. Joy, who was eager now that the two men should stake, and fearing that they were slackening pace on account of her evident weariness, insisted on taking the lead. The speed and manner in which she negotiated the precarious footing, called out Shorty's unqualified approval.

"Look at her!" he cried. "She's the real goods an' the red meat. Look at them moccasins swing along. No high−heels there. She uses the legs God gave her. She's the right squaw for any bear−hunter."

She flashed back a smile of acknowledgment that included Smoke. He caught a feeling of chumminess, though at the same time he was bitingly aware that it was very much of a woman who embraced him in that comradely smile.

Looking back, as they came to the bank of Squaw Creek, they could see the stampede, strung out irregularly, struggling along the descent of the divide.

They slipped down the bank to the creek bed. The stream, frozen solidly to bottom, was from twenty to thirty feet wide and ran between six− and eight−foot earth banks of alluvial wash. No recent feet had disturbed the snow that lay upon its ice, and they knew they were above the Discovery claim and the last stakes of the Sea Lion stampeders.

"Look out for springs," Joy warned, as Smoke led the way down the creek. "At seventy below you'll lose your feet if you break through."

These springs, common to most Klondike streams, never ceased at the lowest temperatures. The water flowed out from the banks and lay in pools which were cuddled from the cold by later surface−freezings and snow falls.

Thus, a man, stepping on dry snow, might break through half an inch of ice−skin and find himself up to the knees in water. In five minutes, unless able to remove the wet gear, the loss of one's foot was the penalty.

Though only three in the afternoon, the long grey twilight of the Arctic had settled down. They watched for a blazed tree on either bank, which would show the centre−stake of the last claim located. Joy, impulsively eager, was the first to find it. She darted ahead of Smoke, crying: "Somebody's been here! See the snow! Look for the blaze! There it is! See that spruce!"

She sank suddenly to her waist in the snow.

"Now I've done it," she said woefully. Then she cried: "Don't come near me! I'll wade out."

Step by step, each time breaking through the thin skin of ice concealed under the dry snow, she forced her way to solid footing. Smoke did not wait, but sprang to the bank, where dry and seasoned twigs and sticks, lodged amongst the brush by spring freshets, waited the match. By the time she reached his side, the first flames and flickers of an assured fire were rising.

"Sit down!" he commanded.

She obediently sat down in the snow. He slipped his pack from his back, and spread a blanket for her feet.

From above came the voices of the stampeders who followed them.

"Let Shorty stake," she urged

"Go on, Shorty," Smoke said, as he attacked her moccasins, already stiff with ice. "Pace off a thousand feet and place the two centre− stakes. We can fix the corner−stakes afterwards."

With his knife Smoke cut away the lacings and leather of the moccasins. So stiff were they with ice that they snapped and crackled under the hacking and sawing. The Siwash socks and heavy woollen stockings were sheaths of ice. It was as if her feet and calves were encased in corrugated iron.

"How are your feet?" he asked, as he worked.

"Pretty numb. I can't move nor feel my toes. But it will be all right. The fire is burning beautifully. Watch out you don't freeze your own hands. They must be numb now from the way you're fumbling."

He slipped his mittens on, and for nearly a minute smashed the open hands savagely against his sides. When he felt the blood−prickles, he pulled off the mittens and ripped and tore and sawed and hacked at the frozen garments. The white skin of one foot appeared, then that of the other, to be exposed to the bite of seventy below zero, which is the equivalent of one hundred and two below freezing.

Then came the rubbing with snow, carried on with an intensity of cruel fierceness, till she squirmed and shrank and moved her toes, and joyously complained of the hurt.

He half−dragged her, and she half−lifted herself, nearer to the fire. He placed her feet on the blanket close to the flesh−saving flames.

"You'll have to take care of them for a while," he said.

She could now safely remove her mittens and manipulate her own feet, with the wisdom of the initiated, being watchful that the heat of the fire was absorbed slowly. While she did this, he attacked his hands. The snow did not melt nor moisten. Its light crystals were like so much sand. Slowly the stings and pangs of circulation came back into the chilled flesh. Then he tended the fire, unstrapped the light pack from her back, and got out a complete change of foot− gear.

Shorty returned along the creek−bed and climbed the bank to them.

"I sure staked a full thousan' feet," he proclaimed. "Number twenty−seven and number twenty−eight, though I'd only got the upper stake of twenty−seven, when I met the first geezer of the bunch behind. He just straight declared I wasn't goin' to stake twenty− eight. An' I told him . . . ."

"Yes, yes," Joy cried. "What did you tell him?"

"Well, I told him straight that if he didn't back up plum five hundred feet I'd sure punch his frozen nose into ice−cream an' chocolate eclaires. He backed up, an' I've got in the centre−stakes of two full an' honest five−hundred−foot claims. He staked next, and I guess by now the bunch has Squaw Creek located to head−waters an' down the other side. Ourn is safe. It's too dark to see now, but we can put out the corner−stakes in the mornin'."

III.

When they awoke, they found a change had taken place during the night. So warm was it, that Shorty and

Smoke, still in their mutual blankets, estimated the temperature at no more than twenty below. The cold snap had broken. On top their blankets lay six inches of frost crystals.

"Good morning! how's your feet?" was Smoke's greeting across the ashes of the fire to where Joy Gastell, carefully shaking aside the snow, was sitting up in her sleeping furs.

Shorty built the fire and quarried ice from the creek, while Smoke cooked breakfast. Daylight came on as they finished the meal.

"You go an' fix them corner−stakes, Smoke," Shorty said. "There's a gravel under where I chopped ice for the coffee, an' I'm goin' to melt water and wash a pan of that same gravel for luck."

Smoke departed, axe in hand, to blaze the stakes. Starting from the down−stream centre−stake of 'twenty−seven,' he headed at right angles across the narrow valley towards its rim. He proceeded methodically, almost automatically, for his mind was alive with recollections of the night before. He felt, somehow, that he had won to empery over the delicate lines and firm muscles of those feet and ankles he had rubbed with snow, and this empery seemed to extend to all women. In dim and fiery ways a feeling of possession mastered him. It seemed that all that was necessary was for him to walk up to this Joy Gastell, take her hand in his, and say "Come."

It was in this mood that he discovered something that made him forget empery over the white feet of woman. At the valley rim he blazed no corner−stake. He did not reach the valley rim, but, instead, he found himself confronted by another stream. He lined up with his eye a blasted willow tree and a big and recognizable spruce. He returned to the stream where were the centre stakes. He followed the bed of the creek around a wide horseshoe bend through the flat, and found that the two creeks were the same creek. Next, he floundered twice through the snow from valley rim to valley rim, running the first line from the lower stake of 'twenty−seven,' the second from the upper stake of 'twenty−eight,' and he found that THE UPPER STAKE OF THE LATTER WAS LOWER THAN THE LOWER STAKE OF THE FORMER. In the gray twilight and half−darkness Shorty had located their two claims on the horseshoe.

Smoke plodded back to the little camp. Shorty, at the end of washing a pan of gravel, exploded at sight of him.

"We got it!" Shorty cried, holding out the pan. "Look at it! A nasty mess of gold. Two hundred right there if it's a cent. She runs rich from the top of the wash−gravel. I've churned around placers some, but I never got butter like what's in this pan."

Smoke cast an incurious glance at the coarse gold, poured himself a cup of coffee at the fire, and sat down. Joy sensed something wrong and looked at him with eagerly solicitous eyes. Shorty, however, was disgruntled by his partner's lack of delight in the discovery.

"Why don't you kick in an' get excited?" he demanded. "We got our pile right here, unless you're stickin' up your nose at two−hundred− dollar pans."

Smoke took a swallow of coffee before replying.

"Shorty, why are our two claims here like the Panama Canal?"

"What's the answer?"

"Well, the eastern entrance of the Panama Canal is west of the western entrance, that's all."

"Go on," Shorty said. "I ain't seen the joke yet."

"In short, Shorty, you staked our two claims on a big horseshoe bend."

Shorty set the gold pan down in the snow and stood up.

"Go on," he repeated.

"The upper stake of twenty−eight is ten feet below the lower stake of twenty−seven."

"You mean we ain't got nothin', Smoke?"

"Worse than that; we've got ten feet less than nothing."

Shorty departed down the bank on the run. Five minutes later he returned. In response to Joy's look, he nodded. Without speech, he went over to a log and sat down to gaze steadily at the snow in front of his moccasins.

"We might as well break camp and start back for Dawson," Smoke said, beginning to fold the blankets.

"I am sorry, Smoke," Joy said. "It's all my fault."

"It's all right," he answered. "All in the day's work, you know."

"But it's my fault, wholly mine," she persisted. "Dad's staked for me down near Discovery, I know. I'll give you my claim."

He shook his head.

"Shorty," she pleaded.

Shorty shook his head and began to laugh. It was a colossal laugh. Chuckles and muffled explosions yielded to hearty roars.

"It ain't hysterics," he explained, "I sure get powerful amused at times, an' this is one of them."

His gaze chanced to fall on the gold pan. He walked over and gravely kicked it, scattering the gold over the landscape.

"It ain't ourn," he said. "It belongs to the geezer I backed up five hundred feet last night. An' what gets me is four hundred an' ninety of them feet was to the good . . . his good. Come on, Smoke. Let's start the hike to Dawson. Though if you're hankerin' to kill me I won't lift a finger to prevent."

SHORTY DREAMS.

I.

"Funny you don't gamble none," Shorty said to Smoke one night in the Elkhorn. "Ain't it in your blood?"

"It is," Smoke answered. "But the statistics are in my head. I like an even break for my money."

All about them, in the huge bar−room, arose the click and rattle and rumble of a dozen games, at which fur−clad, moccasined men tried their luck. Smoke waved his hand to include them all.

"Look at them," he said. "It's cold mathematics that they will lose more than they win to−night, that the big proportion is losing right now."

"You're sure strong on figgers," Shorty murmured admiringly. "An' in the main you're right. But they's such a thing as facts. An' one fact is streaks of luck. They's times when every geezer playin' wins, as I know, for I've sat in in such games an' saw more'n one bank busted. The only way to win at gamblin' is wait for a hunch that you've got a lucky streak comin' and then to play it to the roof."

"It sounds simple," Smoke criticized. "So simple I can't see how men can lose."

"The trouble is," Shorty admitted, "that most men gets fooled on their hunches. On occasion I sure get fooled on mine. The thing is to try, an' find out."

Smoke shook his head.

"That's a statistic, too, Shorty. Most men prove wrong on their hunches."

"But don't you ever get one of them streaky feelin's that all you got to do is put your money down an' pick a winner?"

Smoke laughed.

"I'm too scared of the percentage against me. But I'll tell you what, Shorty. I'll throw a dollar on the 'high card' right now and see if it will buy us a drink."

Smoke was edging his way in to the faro table, when Shorty caught his arm.

"Hold on. I'm gettin' one of them hunches now. You put that dollar on roulette."

They went over to a roulette table near the bar.

"Wait till I give the word," Shorty counselled.

"What number?" Smoke asked.

"Pick it yourself. But wait till I say let her go."

"You don't mean to say I've got an even chance on that table?" Smoke argued.

"As good as the next geezers."

"But not as good as the bank's."

"Wait and see," Shorty urged. "Now! Let her go!"

The game−keeper had just sent the little ivory ball whirling around the smooth rim above the revolving, many−slotted wheel. Smoke, at the lower end of the table, reached over a player, and blindly tossed the dollar. It slid along the smooth, green cloth and stopped fairly in the centre of '34.'

The ball came to rest, and the game−keeper announced, "Thirty−four wins!" He swept the table, and alongside of Smoke's dollar, stacked thirty−five dollars. Smoke drew the money in, and Shorty slapped him on the shoulder.

"Now, that was the real goods of a hunch, Smoke! How'd I know it? There's no tellin'. I just knew you'd win. Why, if that dollar of yourn'd fell on any other number it'd won just the same. When the hunch is right, you just can't help winnin'."

"Suppose it had come 'double nought'?" Smoke queried, as they made their way to the bar.

"Then your dollar'd ben on 'double nought,'" was Shorty's answer. "They's no gettin' away from it. A hunch is a hunch. Here's how. Come on back to the table. I got a hunch, after pickin' you for a winner, that I can pick some few numbers myself."

"Are you playing a system?" Smoke asked, at the end of ten minutes, when his partner had dropped a hundred dollars.

Shorty shook his head indignantly, as he spread his chips out in the vicinities of '3,' '11,' and '17,' and tossed a

spare chip on the 'green.'

"Hell is sure cluttered with geezers that played systems," he exposited, as the keeper raked the table.

From idly watching, Smoke became fascinated, following closely every detail of the game from the whirling of the ball to the making and the paying of the bets. He made no plays, however, merely contenting himself with looking on. Yet so interested was he, that Shorty, announcing that he had had enough, with difficulty drew Smoke away from the table. The game−keeper returned Shorty the gold sack he had deposited as a credential for playing, and with it went a slip of paper on which was scribbled, "Out . . . 350 dollars." Shorty carried the sack and the paper across the room and handed them to the weigher, who sat behind a large pair of gold−scales. Out of Shorty's sack he weighed 350 dollars, which he poured into the coffer of the house.

"That hunch of yours was another one of those statistics," Smoke jeered.

"I had to play it, didn't I, in order to find out?" Shorty retorted. "I reckon I was crowdin' some just on account of tryin' to convince you they's such a thing as hunches."

"Never mind, Shorty," Smoke laughed. "I've got a hunch right now−−"

Shorty's eyes sparkled as he cried eagerly: "What is it? Kick in an' play it pronto."

"It's not that kind, Shorty. Now, what I've got is a hunch that some day I'll work out a system that will beat the spots off that table."

"System!" Shorty groaned, then surveyed his partner with a vast pity. "Smoke, listen to your side−kicker an' leave system alone. Systems is sure losers. They ain't no hunches in systems."

"That's why I like them," Smoke answered. "A system is statistical. When you get the right system you can't lose, and that's the difference between it and a hunch. You never know when the right hunch is going wrong."

"But I know a lot of systems that went wrong, an' I never seen a system win." Shorty paused and sighed. "Look here, Smoke, if you're gettin' cracked on systems this ain't no place for you, an' it's about time we hit the trail again."

II.

During the several following weeks, the two partners played at cross purposes. Smoke was bent on spending his time watching the roulette game in the Elkhorn, while Shorty was equally bent on travelling trail. At last Smoke put his foot down when a stampede was proposed for two hundred miles down the Yukon.

"Look here, Shorty," he said, "I'm not going. That trip will take ten days, and before that time I hope to have my system in proper working order. I could almost win with it now. What are you dragging me around the country this way for anyway?"

"Smoke, I got to take care of you," was Shorty's reply. "You're getting nutty. I'd drag you stampedin' to Jericho or the North Pole if I could keep you away from that table."

"It's all right, Shorty. But just remember I've reached full man− grown, meat−eating size. The only dragging you'll do, will be dragging home the dust I'm going to win with that system of mine, and you'll most likely have to do it with a dog−team."

Shorty's response was a groan.

"And I don't want you to be bucking any games on your own," Smoke went on. "We're going to divide the winnings, and I'll need all our money to get started. That system's young yet, and it's liable to trip me for a few falls before I get it lined up."

III.

At last, after long hours and days spent at watching the table, the night came when Smoke proclaimed he was ready, and Shorty, glum and pessimistic, with all the seeming of one attending a funeral, accompanied his partner to the Elkhorn. Smoke bought a stack of chips and stationed himself at the game−keeper's end of the table. Again and again the ball was whirled and the other players won or lost, but Smoke did not venture a chip. Shorty waxed impatient.

"Buck in, buck in," he urged. "Let's get this funeral over. What's the matter? Got cold feet?"

Smoke shook his head and waited. A dozen plays went by, and then, suddenly, he placed ten one−dollar chips on '26.' The number won, and the keeper paid Smoke three hundred and fifty dollars. A dozen plays went by, twenty plays, and thirty, when Smoke placed ten dollars on '32.' Again he received three hundred and fifty dollars.

"It's a hunch." Shorty whispered vociferously in his ear. "Ride it! Ride it!"

Half an hour went by, during which Smoke was inactive, then he placed ten dollars on '34' and won.

"A hunch!" Shorty whispered.

"Nothing of the sort," Smoke whispered back. "It's the system. Isn't she a dandy?"

"You can't tell me," Shorty contended. "Hunches comes in mighty funny ways. You might think it's a system, but it ain't. Systems is impossible. They can't happen. It's a sure hunch you're playin'."

Smoke now altered his play. He bet more frequently, with single chips, scattered here and there, and he lost more often than he won.

"Quit it," Shorty advised. "Cash in. You've rung the bull's eye three times, an' you're ahead a thousand. You can't keep it up."

At this moment the ball started whirling, and Smoke dropped ten chips on '26.' The ball fell into the slot of '26,' and the keeper again paid him three hundred and fifty dollars. "If you're plum crazy an' got the immortal cinch, bet'm the limit," Shorty said. "Put down twenty−five next time."

A quarter of an hour passed, during which Smoke won and lost on small scattering bets. Then, with the abruptness that characterized his big betting, he placed twenty−five dollars on the 'double nought,' and the keeper paid him eight hundred and seventy−five dollars.

"Wake me up, Smoke, I'm dreamin'," Shorty moaned.

Smoke smiled, consulted his note−book, and became absorbed in calculation. He continually drew the note−book from his pocket, and from time to time jotted down figures.

A crowd had packed densely around the table, while the players themselves were attempting to cover the same numbers he covered. It was then that a change came over his play. Ten times in succession he placed ten dollars on '18' and lost. At this stage he was deserted by the hardiest. He changed his number and won another three hundred and fifty dollars. Immediately the players were back with him, deserting again after a series of losing bets.

"Quit it, Smoke, quit it," Shorty advised. "The longest string of hunches is only so long, an' your string's finished. No more bull's−eyes for you."

"I'm going to ring her once again before I cash in," Smoke answered.

For a few minutes, with varying luck, he played scattering chips over the table, and then dropped twenty−five dollars on the 'double nought.'

"I'll take my slip now," he said to the dealer, as he won.

"Oh, you don't need to show it to me," Shorty said, as they walked to the weigher. "I ben keepin' track. You're something like thirty−six hundred to the good. How near am I?"

"Thirty−six−thirty," Smoke replied. "And now you've got to pack the dust home. That was the agreement."

IV.

"Don't crowd your luck," Shorty pleaded with Smoke, the next night, in the cabin, as he evidenced preparations to return to the Elkhorn. "You played a mighty long string of hunches, but you played it out. If you go back you'll sure drop all your winnings."

"But I tell you it isn't hunches, Shorty. It's statistics. It's a system. It can't lose."

"System be damned. They ain't no such a thing as system. I made seventeen straight passes at a crap table once. Was it system? Nope. It was fool luck, only I had cold feet an' didn't dast let it ride. It it'd rid, instead of me drawin' down after the third pass, I'd a won over thirty thousan' on the original two−bit piece."

"Just the same, Shorty, this is a real system."

"Huh! You got to show me."

"I did show you. Come on with me now and I'll show you again."

When they entered the Elkhorn, all eyes centred on Smoke, and those about the table made way for him as he took up his old place at the keeper's end. His play was quite unlike that of the previous night. In the course of an hour and a half he made only four bets, but each bet was for twenty−five dollars, and each bet won. He cashed in thirty−five hundred dollars, and Shorty carried the dust home to the cabin.

"Now's the time to jump the game," Shorty advised, as he sat on the edge of his bunk and took off his moccasins. "You're seven thousan' ahead. A man's a fool that'd crowd his luck harder."

"Shorty, a man would be a blithering lunatic if he didn't keep on backing a winning system like mine."

"Smoke, you're a sure bright boy. You're college−learnt. You know more'n a minute than I could know in forty thousan' years. But just the same you're dead wrong when you call your luck a system. I've ben around some, an' seen a few, an' I tell you straight an' confidential an' all−assurin', a system to beat a bankin' game ain't possible."

"But I'm showing you this one. It's a pipe."

"No, you're not, Smoke. It's a pipe−dream. I'm asleep. Bime by I'll wake up, an' build the fire, an' start breakfast."

"Well, my unbelieving friend, there's the dust. Heft it."

So saying, Smoke tossed the bulging gold−sack upon his partner's knees. It weighed thirty−five pounds, and Shorty was fully aware of the crush of its impact on his flesh.

"It's real," Smoke hammered his point home.

"Huh! I've saw some mighty real dreams in my time. In a dream all things is possible. In real life a system ain't possible. Now, I ain't never ben to college, but I'm plum justified in sizin' up this gamblin' orgy of ourn as a sure enough dream."

"Hamilton's 'Law of Parsimony,'" Smoke laughed.

"I ain't never heard of the geezer, but his dope's sure right. I'm dreamin', Smoke, an' you're just snoopin' around in my dream an' tormentin' me with system. If you love me, if you sure do love me, you'll just yell, 'Shorty! Wake up!' An' I'll wake up an' start breakfast."

V.

The third night of play, as Smoke laid his first bet, the game− keeper shoved fifteen dollars back to him.

"Ten's all you can play," he said. "The limit's come down."

"Gettin' picayune," Shorty sneered.

"No one has to play at this table that don't want to," the keeper retorted. "And I'm willing to say straight out in meeting that we'd sooner your pardner didn't play at our table."

"Scared of his system, eh?" Shorty challenged, as the keeper paid over three hundred and fifty dollars.

"I ain't saying I believe in system, because I don't. There never was a system that'd beat roulette or any percentage game. But just the same I've seen some queer strings of luck, and I ain't going to let this bank go bust if I can help it."

"Cold feet."

"Gambling is just as much business, my friend, as any other business. We ain't philanthropists."

Night by night, Smoke continued to win. His method of play varied. Expert after expert, in the jam about the table, scribbled down his bets and numbers in vain attempts to work out his system. They complained of their inability to get a clew to start with, and swore that it was pure luck, though the most colossal streak of it they had ever seen.

It was Smoke's varied play that obfuscated them. Sometimes, consulting his note−book or engaging in long calculations, an hour elapsed without his staking a chip. At other times he would win three limit−bets and clean up a thousand dollars and odd in five or ten minutes. At still other times, his tactics would be to scatter single chips prodigally and amazingly over the table. This would continue for from ten to thirty minutes of play, when, abruptly, as the ball whirled through the last few of its circles, he would play the limit on column, colour, and number, and win all three. Once, to complete confusion in the minds of those that strove to divine his secret, he lost forty straight bets, each at the limit. But each night, play no matter how diversely, Shorty carried home thirty−five hundred dollars for him.

"It ain't no system," Shorty expounded at one of their bed−going discussions. "I follow you, an' follow you, but they ain't no figgerin' it out. You never play twice the same. All you do is pick winners when you want to, an' when you don't want to, you just on purpose don't."

"Maybe you're nearer right than you think, Shorty. I've just got to pick losers sometimes. It's part of the system."

"System−−hell! I've talked with every gambler in town, an' the last one is agreed they ain't no such thing as system."

"Yet I'm showing them one all the time."

"Look here, Smoke." Shorty paused over the candle, in the act of blowing it out. "I'm real irritated. Maybe you think this is a candle. It ain't. An' this ain't me neither. I'm out on trail somewheres, in my blankets, lyin' on my back with my mouth open, an' dreamin' all this. That ain't you talkin', any more than this candle is a candle."

"It's funny, how I happen to be dreaming along with you then," Smoke persisted.

"No, it ain't. You're part of my dream, that's all. I've hearn many a man talk in my dreams. I want to tell you one thing, Smoke. I'm gettin' mangy an' mad. If this here dream keeps up much more I'm goin' to bite my veins an' howl."

VI.

On the sixth night of play at the Elkhorn, the limit was reduced to five dollars.

"It's all right," Smoke assured the game−keeper. "I want thirty− five hundred to−night, as usual, and you only compel me to play longer. I've got to pick twice as many winners, that's all."

"Why don't you buck somebody else's table?" the keeper demanded wrathfully.

"Because I like this one." Smoke glanced over to the roaring stove only a few feet away. "Besides, there are no draughts here, and it is warm and comfortable."

On the ninth night, when Shorty had carried the dust home, he had a fit.

"I quit, Smoke, I quit," he began. "I know when I got enough. I ain't dreamin'. I'm wide awake. A system can't be, but you got one just the same. There's nothin' in the rule o' three. The almanac's clean out. The world's gone smash. There's nothin' regular an' uniform no more. The multiplication table's gone loco. Two is eight, nine is eleven, and two−times−six is eight hundred an' forty− six−−an'−−an' a half. Anything is everything, an' nothing's all, an' twice all is cold cream, milk−shakes, an' calico horses. You've got a system. Figgers beat the figgerin'. What ain't is, an' what isn't has to be. The sun rises in the west, the moon's a paystreak, the stars is canned corn−beef, scurvy's the blessin' of God, him that dies kicks again, rocks floats, water's gas, I ain't me, you're somebody else, an' mebbe we're twins if we ain't hashed−brown potatoes fried in verdigris. Wake me up! Somebody! Oh! Wake me up!"

VII.

The next morning a visitor came to the cabin. Smoke knew him, Harvey Moran, the owner of all the games in the Tivoli. There was a note of appeal in his deep gruff voice as he plunged into his business.

"It's like this, Smoke," he began. "You've got us all guessing. I'm representing nine other game−owners and myself from all the saloons in town. We don't understand. We know that no system ever worked against roulette. All the mathematic sharps in the colleges have told us gamblers the same thing. They say that roulette itself is the system, the one and only system, and, therefore, that no system can beat it, for that would mean arithmetic has gone bug− house."

Shorty nodded his head violently.

"If a system can beat a system, then there's no such thing as system," the gambler went on. "In such a case anything could be possible−−a thing could be in two different places at once, or two things could be in the same place that's only large enough for one at the same time."

"Well, you've seen me play," Smoke answered defiantly; "and if you think it's only a string of luck on my part, why worry?"

"That's the trouble. We can't help worrying. It's a system you've got, and all the time we know it can't be. I've watched you five nights now, and all I can make out is that you favour certain numbers and keep on winning. Now the ten of us game−owners have got together, and we want to make a friendly proposition. We'll put a roulette table in a back room of the Elkhorn, pool the bank against you, and have you buck us. It will be all quiet and private. Just you and Shorty and us. What do you say?"

"I think it's the other way around," Smoke answered. "It's up to you to come and see me. I'll be playing in the bar−room of the Elkhorn to−night. You can watch me there just as well."

VIII.

That night, when Smoke took up his customary place at the table, the keeper shut down the game.

"The game's closed," he said. "Boss's orders."

But the assembled game−owners were not to be balked. In a few minutes they arranged a pool, each putting in a thousand, and took over the table.

"Come on and buck us," Harvey Moran challenged, as the keeper sent the ball on its first whirl around.

"Give me the twenty−five limit," Smoke suggested.

"Sure; go to it."

Smoke immediately placed twenty−five chips on the 'double nought,' and won.

Moran wiped the sweat from his forehead.

"Go on," he said. "We got ten thousand in this bank."

At the end of an hour and a half, the ten thousand was Smoke's.

"The bank's bust," the keeper announced.

"Got enough?" Smoke asked.

The game−owners looked at one another. They were awed. They, the fatted proteges of the laws of chance, were undone. They were up against one who had more intimate access to those laws, or who had invoked higher and undreamed laws.

"We quit," Moran said. "Ain't that right, Burke?"

Big Burke, who owned the games in the M. and G. Saloon, nodded.

"The impossible has happened," he said. "This Smoke here has got a system all right. If we let him go on we'll all bust. All I can see, if we're goin' to keep our tables running, is to cut down the limit to a dollar, or to ten cents, or a cent. He won't win much in a night with such stakes."

All looked at Smoke. He shrugged his shoulders.

"In that case, gentlemen, I'll have to hire a gang of men to play at all your tables. I can pay them ten dollars for a four−hour shift and make money."

"Then we'll shut down our tables," Big Burke replied. "Unless−−" He hesitated and ran his eye over his fellows to see that they were with him. "Unless you're willing to talk business. What will you sell the system for?"

"Thirty thousand dollars," Smoke answered. "That's a tax of three thousand apiece."

They debated and nodded.

"And you'll tell us your system?"

"Surely."

"And you'll promise not to play roulette in Dawson ever again?"

"No, sir," Smoke said positively. "I'll promise not to play this system again."

"My God!" Moran exploded. "You haven't got other systems, have you?"

"Hold on!" Shorty cried. "I want to talk to my pardner. Come over here, Smoke, on the side."

Smoke followed into a quiet corner of the room, while hundreds of curious eyes centred on him and Shorty.

"Look here, Smoke," Shorty whispered hoarsely. "Mebbe it ain't a dream. In which case you're sellin' out almighty cheap. You've sure got the world by the slack of its pants. They's millions in it. Shake it! Shake it hard!"

"But if it's a dream?" Smoke queried softly.

"Then, for the sake of the dream an' the love of Mike, stick them gamblers up good and plenty. What's the good of dreamin' if you can't dream to the real right, dead sure, eternal finish?"

"Fortunately, this isn't a dream, Shorty."

"Then if you sell out for thirty thousan', I'll never forgive you."

"When I sell out for thirty thousand, you'll fall on my neck an' wake up to find out that you haven't been dreaming at all. This is no dream, Shorty. In about two minutes you'll see you have been wide awake all the time. Let me tell you that when I sell out it's because I've got to sell out."

Back at the table, Smoke informed the game−owners that his offer still held. They proffered him their paper to the extent of three thousand each.

"Hold out for the dust," Shorty cautioned.

"I was about to intimate that I'd take the money weighed out," Smoke said.

The owner of the Elkhorn cashed their paper, and Shorty took possession of the gold−dust.

"Now, I don't want to wake up," he chortled, as he hefted the various sacks. "Toted up, it's a seventy thousan' dream. It's be too blamed expensive to open my eyes, roll out of the blankets, an' start breakfast."

"What's your system?" Big Burke demanded. "We've paid for it, and we want it."

Smoke led the way to the table.

"Now, gentlemen, bear with me a moment. This isn't an ordinary system. It can scarcely be called legitimate, but its one great virtue is that it works. I've got my suspicious, but I'm not saying anything. You watch. Mr Keeper, be ready with the ball. Wait, I am going to pick '26.' Consider I've bet on it. Be ready, Mr Keeper−−Now!"

The ball whirled around.

"You observe," Smoke went on, "that '9' was directly opposite."

The ball finished in '26.'

Big Burke swore deep in his chest, and all waited.

"For 'double nought' to win, '11' must be opposite. Try it yourself and see."

"But the system?" Moran demanded impatiently. "We know you can pick winning numbers, and we know what those numbers are; but how do you do it?"

"By observed sequences. By accident I chanced twice to notice the ball whirled when '9' was opposite. Both times '26' won. After that I saw it happen again. Then I looked for other sequences, and found them. 'Double nought' opposite fetches '32,' and '11' fetches 'double nought.' It doesn't always happen, but it USUALLY happens. You notice, I say 'usually.' As I said before, I have my suspicions, but I'm not saying anything."

Big Burke, with a sudden dawn of comprehension reached over, stopped the wheel, and examined it carefully. The heads of the nine other game−owners bent over and joined in the examination. Big Burke straightened up and cast a glance at the near−by stove.

"Hell," he said. "It wasn't any system at all. The table stood close to the fire, and the blamed wheel's warped. And we've been worked to a frazzle. No wonder he liked this table. He couldn't have bucked for sour apples at any other table."

Harvey Moran gave a great sigh of relief and wiped his forehead.

"Well, anyway," he said, "it's cheap at the price just to find out that it wasn't a system." His face began to work, and then he broke into laughter and slapped Smoke on the shoulder. "Smoke, you had us going for a while, and we patting ourselves on the back because you were letting our tables alone! Say, I've got some real fizz I'll open if all you'll come over to the Tivoli with me."

Later, back in the cabin, Shorty silently overhauled and hefted the various bulging gold−sacks. He finally piled them on the table, sat down on the edge of his bunk, and began taking off his moccasins.

"Seventy thousan'," he calculated. "It weighs three hundred and fifty pounds. And all out of a warped wheel an' a quick eye. Smoke, you eat'm raw, you eat'm alive, you work under water, you've given me the jim−jams; but just the same I know it's a dream. It's only in dreams that the good things comes true. I'm almighty unanxious to wake up. I hope I never wake up."

"Cheer up," Smoke answered. "You won't. There are a lot of philosophy sharps that think men are sleep−walkers. You're in good company."

Shorty got up, went to the table, selected the heaviest sack, and cuddled it in his arms as if it were a baby.

"I may be sleep−walkin'," he said, "but as you say, I'm sure in mighty good company."

THE MAN ON THE OTHER BANK.

I.

It was before Smoke Bellew staked the farcical town−site of Tra−Lee, made the historic corner of eggs that nearly broke Swiftwater Bill's bank account, or won the dog−team race down the Yukon for an even million dollars, that he and Shorty parted company on the Upper Klondike. Shorty's task was to return down the Klondike to Dawson to record some claims they had staked.

Smoke, with the dog−team, turned south. His quest was Surprise Lake and the mythical Two Cabins. His traverse was to cut the headwaters of the Indian River and cross the unknown region over the mountains to the Stewart River. Here, somewhere, rumour persisted, was Surprise Lake, surrounded by jagged mountains and glaciers, its bottom paved with raw gold. Old−timers, it was said, whose very names were forgotten in the forests of earlier years, had dived in the ice−waters of Surprise Lake and fetched lump−gold to the surface in both hands. At different times, parties of old−timers had penetrated the forbidding fastness and sampled the lake's golden bottom. But the water was too cold. Some died in the water, being pulled up dead. Others died of consumption. And one who had gone down never did come up. All survivors had planned to return and drain the lake, yet none had ever gone back. Disaster always happened. One man fell into an air−hole below Forty Mile; another was killed and eaten by his dogs; a third was crushed by a falling tree. And so the tale ran. Surprise Lake was a hoodoo; its location was unremembered; and the gold still paved its undrained bottom.

Two Cabins, no less mythical, was more definitely located. 'Five sleeps,' up the McQuestion River from the Stewart, stood two ancient cabins. So ancient were they that they must have been built before ever the first known gold−hunter had entered the Yukon Basin. Wandering moose−hunters, whom even Smoke had met and talked with, claimed to have found the two cabins in the old days, but to have sought vainly for the mine which those early adventurers must have worked.

"I wish you was goin' with me," Shorty said wistfully, at parting. "Just because you got the Indian bug ain't no reason for to go pokin' into trouble. They's no gettin' away from it, that's loco country you're bound for. The hoodoo's sure on it, from the first flip to the last call, judgin' from all you an' me has hearn tell about it."

"It's all right, Shorty. I'll make the round trip and be back in Dawson in six weeks. The Yukon trail is packed, and the first hundred miles or so of the Stewart ought to be packed. Old−timers from Henderson have told me a number of outfits went up last fall after the freeze−up. When I strike their trail I ought to hit her up forty or fifty miles a day. I'm likely to be back inside a month, once I get across."

"Yes, once you get acrost. But it's the gettin' acrost that worries me. Well, so long, Smoke. Keep your eyes open for that hoodoo, that's all. An' don't be ashamed to turn back if you don't kill any meat."

II.

A week later, Smoke found himself among the jumbled ranges south of Indian River. On the divide from the Klondike he had abandoned the sled and packed his wolf−dogs. The six big huskies each carried fifty pounds, and on his own back was an equal burden. Through the soft snow he led the way, packing it down under his snow−shoes, and behind, in single file, toiled the dogs.

He loved the life, the deep arctic winter, the silent wilderness, the unending snow−surface unpressed by the foot of any man. About him towered icy peaks unnamed and uncharted. No hunter's camp− smoke, rising in the still air of the valleys, ever caught his eye. He, alone, moved through the brooding quiet of the untravelled wastes; nor was he oppressed by the solitude. He loved it all, the day's toil, the bickering wolf−dogs, the making of the camp in the long twilight, the leaping stars overhead and the flaming pageant of the aurora borealis.

Especially he loved his camp at the end of the day, and in it he saw a picture which he ever yearned to paint and which he knew he would never forget−−a beaten place in the snow, where burned his fire; his bed, a couple of rabbit−skin robes spread on fresh−chopped spruce− boughs; his shelter, a stretched strip of canvas that caught and threw back the heat of the fire; the blackened coffee−pot and pail resting on a length of log, the moccasins propped on sticks to dry, the snow−shoes up−ended in the snow; and across the fire the wolf− dogs snuggling to it

for the warmth, wistful and eager, furry and frost−rimed, with bushy tails curled protectingly over their feet; and all about, pressed backward but a space, the wall of encircling darkness.

At such times San Francisco, The Billow, and O'Hara seemed very far away, lost in a remote past, shadows of dreams that had never happened. He found it hard to believe that he had known any other life than this of the wild, and harder still was it for him to reconcile himself to the fact that he had once dabbled and dawdled in the Bohemian drift of city life. Alone, with no one to talk to, he thought much, and deeply, and simply. He was appalled by the wastage of his city years, by the cheapness, now, of the philosophies of the schools and books, of the clever cynicism of the studio and editorial room, of the cant of the business men in their clubs. They knew neither food nor sleep, nor health; nor could they ever possibly know the sting of real appetite, the goodly ache of fatigue, nor the rush of mad strong blood that bit like wine through all one's body as work was done.

And all the time this fine, wise, Spartan North Land had been here, and he had never known. What puzzled him was, that, with such intrinsic fitness, he had never heard the slightest calling whisper, had not himself gone forth to seek. But this, too, he solved in time.

"Look here, Yellow−face, I've got it clear!"

The dog addressed lifted first one fore−foot and then the other with quick, appeasing movements, curled his bush of a tail about them again, and laughed across the fire.

"Herbert Spencer was nearly forty before he caught the vision of his greatest efficiency and desire. I'm none so slow. I didn't have to wait till I was thirty to catch mine. Right here is my efficiency and desire. Almost, Yellow Face, do I wish I had been born a wolf− boy and been brother all my days to you and yours."

For days he wandered through a chaos of canyons and divides which did not yield themselves to any rational topographical plan. It was as if they had been flung there by some cosmic joker. In vain he sought for a creek or feeder that flowed truly south toward the McQuestion and the Stewart. Then came a mountain storm that blew a blizzard across the riff−raff of high and shallow divides. Above timber−line, fireless, for two days, he struggled blindly to find lower levels. On the second day he came out upon the rim of an enormous palisade. So thickly drove the snow that he could not see the base of the wall, nor dared he attempt the descent. He rolled himself in his robes and huddled the dogs about him in the depths of a snow−drift, but did not permit himself to sleep.

In the morning, the storm spent, he crawled out to investigate. A quarter of a mile beneath him, beyond all mistake, lay a frozen, snow−covered lake. About it, on every side, rose jagged peaks. It answered the description. Blindly, he had found Surprise Lake.

"Well−named," he muttered, an hour later, as he came out upon its margin. A clump of aged spruce was the only woods. On his way to it, he stumbled upon three graves, snow−buried, but marked by hand− hewn head−posts and undecipherable writing. On the edge of the woods was a small ramshackle cabin. He pulled the latch and entered. In a corner, on what had once been a bed of spruce−boughs, still wrapped in mangy furs, that had rotted to fragments, lay a skeleton. The last visitor to Surprise Lake, was Smoke's conclusion, as he picked up a lump of gold as large as his doubled fist. Beside the lump was a pepper−can filled with nuggets of the size of walnuts, rough−surfaced, showing no signs of wash.

So true had the tale run, that Smoke accepted without question that the source of the gold was the lake's bottom. Under many feet of ice and inaccessible, there was nothing to be done, and at mid−day, from the rim of the palisade, he took a farewell look back and down at his find.

"It's all right, Mr Lake," he said. "You just keep right on staying there. I'm coming back to drain you−−if that hoodoo doesn't catch me. I don't know how I got here, but I'll know by the way I go out."

III.

In a little valley, beside a frozen stream and under beneficent spruce trees, he built a fire four days later. Somewhere in that white anarchy he left behind him, was Surprise Lake−−somewhere, he knew not where; for a hundred hours of driftage and struggle through blinding driving snow, had concealed his course from him, and he knew not in what direction lay BEHIND. It was as if he had just emerged from a nightmare. He was not sure that four days or a week had passed. He had slept with the dogs, fought across a forgotten number of shallow divides, followed the windings of weird canyons that ended in pockets, and twice had managed to make a fire and thaw out frozen moose−meat. And here he was, well−fed and well−camped. The storm had passed, and it had turned clear and cold. The lay of the land had again become rational. The creek he was on was natural in appearance, and

trended as it should toward the southwest. But Surprise Lake was as lost to him as it had been to all its seekers in the past.

Half a day's journey down the creek brought him to the valley of a larger stream which he decided was the McQuestion. Here he shot a moose, and once again each wolf−dog carried a full fifty−pound pack of meat. As he turned down the McQuestion, he came upon a sled− trail. The late snows had drifted over, but underneath, it was well−packed by travel. His conclusion was that two camps had been established on the McQuestion, and that this was the connecting trail. Evidently, Two Cabins had been found and it was the lower camp, so he headed down the stream.

It was forty below zero when he camped that night, and he fell asleep wondering who were the men who had rediscovered the Two Cabins, and if he would fetch it next day. At the first hint of dawn he was under way, easily following the half−obliterated trail and packing the recent snow with his webbed shoes so that the dogs should not wallow.

And then it came, the unexpected, leaping out upon him on a bend of the river. It seemed to him that he heard and felt simultaneously. The crack of the rifle came from the right, and the bullet, tearing through and across the shoulders of his drill parka and woollen coat, pivoted him half around with the shock of its impact. He staggered on his twisted snow−shoes to recover balance, and heard a second crack of the rifle. This time it was a clean miss. He did not wait for more, but plunged across the snow for the sheltering trees of the bank a hundred feet away. Again and again the rifle cracked, and he was unpleasantly aware of a trickle of warm moisture down his back.

He climbed the bank, the dogs floundering behind, and dodged in among the trees and brush. Slipping out of his snow−shoes, he wallowed forward at full length and peered cautiously out. Nothing was to be seen. Whoever had shot at him was lying quiet among the trees of the opposite bank.

"If something doesn't happen pretty soon," he muttered at the end of half an hour, "I'll have to sneak away and build a fire or freeze my feet. Yellow Face, what'd you do, lying in the frost with circulation getting slack and a man trying to plug you?"

He crawled back a few yards, packed down the snow, danced a jig that sent the blood back into his feet, and managed to endure another half hour. Then, from down the river, he heard the unmistakable jingle of dog−bells. Peering out, he saw a sled round the bend. Only one man was with it, straining at the gee−pole and urging the dogs along. The effect on Smoke was one of shock, for it was the first human he had seen since he parted from Shorty three weeks before. His next thought was of the potential murderer concealed on the opposite bank.

Without exposing himself, Smoke whistled warningly. The man did not hear, and came on rapidly. Again, and more sharply, Smoke whistled. The man whoa'd his dogs, stopped, and had turned and faced Smoke when the rifle cracked. The instant afterwards, Smoke fired into the wood in the direction of the sound. The man on the river had been struck by the first shot. The shock of the high velocity bullet staggered him. He stumbled awkwardly to the sled, half− falling, and pulled a rifle out from under the lashings. As he strove to raise it to his shoulder, he crumpled at the waist and sank down slowly to a sitting posture on the sled. Then, abruptly, as the gun went off aimlessly, he pitched backward and across a corner of the sled−load, so that Smoke could see only his legs and stomach.

From below came more jingling bells. The man did not move. Around the bend swung three sleds, accompanied by half a dozen men. Smoke cried warningly, but they had seen the condition of the first sled, and they dashed on to it. No shots came from the other bank, and Smoke, calling his dogs to follow, emerged into the open. There were exclamations from the men, and two of them, flinging off the mittens of their right hands, levelled their rifles at him.

"Come on, you red−handed murderer, you," one of them, a black− bearded man, commanded, "an' jest pitch that gun of yourn in the snow."

Smoke hesitated, then dropped his rifle and came up to them.

"Go through him, Louis, an' take his weapons," the black−bearded man ordered.

Louis, a French−Canadian voyageur, Smoke decided, as were four of the others, obeyed. His search revealed only Smoke's hunting knife, which was appropriated.

"Now, what have you got to say for yourself, Stranger, before I shoot you dead?" the black−bearded man demanded.

"That you're making a mistake if you think I killed that man," Smoke answered.

A cry came from one of the voyageurs. He had quested along the trail and found Smoke's tracks where he had left it to take refuge on the bank. The man explained the nature of his find.

"What'd you kill Joe Kinade for?" he of the black beard asked.

"I tell you I didn't−−" Smoke began.

"Aw, what's the good of talkin'. We got you red−handed. Right up there's where you left the trail when you heard him comin'. You laid among the trees an' bushwhacked him. A short shot. You couldn't a−missed. Pierre, go an' get that gun he dropped."

"You might let me tell what happened," Smoke objected.

"You shut up," the man snarled at him. "I reckon your gun'll tell the story."

All the men examined Smoke's rifle, ejecting and counting the cartridges, and examining the barrel at muzzle and breech.

"One shot," Blackbeard concluded.

Pierre, with nostrils that quivered and distended like a deer's, sniffed at the breech.

"Him one fresh shot," he said.

"The bullet entered his back," Smoke said. "He was facing me when he was shot. You see, it came from the other bank."

Blackbeard considered this proposition for a scant second, and shook his head.

"Nope. It won't do. Turn him around to face the other bank−−that's how you whopped him in the back. Some of you boys run up an' down the trail and see if you can see any tracks making for the other bank."

Their report was, that on that side the snow was unbroken. Not even a snow−shoe rabbit had crossed it. Blackbeard, bending over the dead man, straightened up, with a woolly, furry wad in his hand. Shredding this, he found imbedded in the centre the bullet which had perforated the body. Its nose was spread to the size of a half−dollar, its butt−end, steel−jacketed, was undamaged. He compared it with a cartridge from Smoke's belt.

"That's plain enough evidence, Stranger, to satisfy a blind man. It's soft−nosed an' steel−jacketed; yourn is soft−nosed and steel− jacketed. It's thirty−thirty; yourn is thirty−thirty. It's manufactured by the J. and T. Arms Company; yourn is manufactured by the J. and T. Arms Company. Now you come along an' we'll go over to the bank an' see jest how you done it."

"I was bushwhacked myself," Smoke said. "Look at the hole in my parka."

While Blackbeard examined it, one of the voyageurs threw open the breech of the dead man's gun. It was patent to all that it had been fired once. The empty cartridge was still in the chamber.

"A damn shame poor Joe didn't get you," Blackbeard said bitterly. "But he did pretty well with a hole like that in him. Come on, you."

"Search the other bank first," Smoke urged.

"You shut up an' come on, an' let the facts do the talkin'."

They left the trail at the same spot he had, and followed it on up the bank and in among the trees.

"Him dance that place keep him feet warm," Louis pointed out. "That place him crawl on belly. That place him put one elbow w'en him shoot−−"

"And by God there's the empty cartridge he had done it with!" was Blackbeard's discovery. "Boys, there's only one thing to do−−"

"You might ask me how I came to fire that shot," Smoke interrupted.

"An' I might knock your teeth into your gullet if you butt in again. You can answer them questions later on. Now, boys, we're decent an' law−abidin', an' we got to handle this right an' regular. How far do you reckon we've come, Pierre?"

"Twenty mile I t'ink for sure."

"All right. We'll cache the outfit an' run him an' poor Joe back to Two Cabins. I reckon we've seen an' can testify to what'll stretch his neck."

IV.

It was three hours after dark when the dead man, Smoke, and his captors arrived at Two Cabins. By the starlight, Smoke could make out a dozen or more recently built cabins snuggling about a larger and older cabin on a flat by the river bank. Thrust inside this older cabin, he found it tenanted by a young giant of a man, his wife,

and an old blind man. The woman, whom her husband called 'Lucy,' was herself a strapping creature of the frontier type. The old man, as Smoke learned afterwards, had been a trapper on the Stewart for years, and had gone finally blind the winter before. The camp of Two Cabins, he was also to learn, had been made the previous fall by a dozen men who arrived in half as many poling− boats loaded with provisions. Here they had found the blind trapper, on the site of Two Cabins, and about his cabin they had built their own. Later arrivals, mushing up the ice with dog−teams, had tripled the population. There was plenty of meat in camp, and good low−pay dirt had been discovered and was being worked.

In five minutes, all the men of Two cabins were jammed into the room. Smoke, shoved off into a corner, ignored and scowled at, his hands and feet tied with thongs of moosehide, looked on. Thirty− eight men he counted, a wild and husky crew, all frontiersmen of the States or voyageurs from Upper Canada. His captors told the tale over and over, each the centre of an excited and wrathful group. There were mutterings of "Lynch him now−−why wait?" And, once, a big Irishman was restrained only by force from rushing upon the helpless prisoner and giving him a beating.

It was while counting the men that Smoke caught sight of a familiar face. It was Breck, the man whose boat Smoke had run through the rapids. He wondered why the other did not come and speak to him, but himself gave no sign of recognition. Later, when with shielded face Breck passed him a significant wink, Smoke understood.

Blackbeard, whom Smoke heard called Eli Harding, ended the discussion as to whether or not the prisoner should be immediately lynched.

"Hold on," Harding roared. "Keep your shirts on. That man belongs to me. I caught him an' I brought him here. D'ye think I brought him all the way here to be lynched? Not on your life. I could a− done that myself when I found him. I brought him here for a fair an' impartial trial, an' by God, a fair an' impartial trial he's goin' to get. He's tied up safe an' sound. Chuck him in a bunk till morning, an' we'll hold the trial right here."

V.

Smoke woke up. A draught, that possessed all the rigidity of an icicle, was boring into the front of his shoulder as he lay on his side facing the wall. When he had been tied into the bunk there had been no such draught, and now the outside air, driving into the heated atmosphere of the cabin with the pressure of fifty below zero, was sufficient advertizement that some one from without had pulled away the moss−chinking between the logs. He squirmed as far as his bonds would permit, then craned his neck forward until his lips just managed to reach the crack.

"Who is it?" he whispered.

"Breck," came the answer. "Be careful you don't make a noise. I'm going to pass a knife in to you."

"No good," Smoke said. "I couldn't use it. My hands are tied behind me and made fast to the leg of the bunk. Besides, you couldn't get a knife through that crack. But something must be done. Those fellows are of a temper to hang me, and, of course, you know I didn't kill that man."

"It wasn't necessary to mention it, Smoke. And if you did you had your reasons. Which isn't the point at all. I want to get you out of this. It's a tough bunch of men here. You've seen them. They're shut off from the world, and they make and enforce their own law−−by miner's meeting, you know. They handled two men already−− both grub−thieves. One they hiked from camp without an ounce of grub and no matches. He made about forty miles and lasted a couple of days before he froze stiff. Two weeks ago they hiked the second man. They gave him his choice: no grub, or ten lashes for each day's ration. He stood for forty lashes before he fainted. And now they've got you, and every last one is convinced you killed Kinade."

"The man who killed Kinade, shot at me, too. His bullet broke the skin on my shoulder. Get them to delay the trial till some one goes up and searches the bank where the murderer hid."

"No use. They take the evidence of Harding and the five Frenchmen with him. Besides, they haven't had a hanging yet, and they're keen for it. You see, things have been pretty monotonous. They haven't located anything big, and they got tired of hunting for Surprise Lake. They did some stampeding the first part of the winter, but they've got over that now. Scurvy is beginning to show up amongst them, too, and they're just ripe for excitement."

"And it looks like I'll furnish it," was Smoke's comment. "Say, Breck, how did you ever fall in with such a God−forsaken bunch?"

"After I got the claims at Squaw Creek opened up and some men to working, I came up here by way of the Stewart, hunting for Two Cabins. They'd beaten me to it, so I've been higher up the Stewart. Just got back yesterday out of grub."

"Find anything?"

"Nothing much. But I think I've got a hydraulic proposition that'll work big when the country's opened up. It's that, or a gold− dredger."

"Hold on," Smoke interrupted. "Wait a minute. Let me think."

He was very much aware of the snores of the sleepers as he pursued the idea that had flashed into his mind.

"Say, Breck, have they opened up the meat−packs my dogs carried?"

"A couple. I was watching. They put them in Harding's cache."

"Did they find anything?"

"Meat."

"Good. You've got to get into the brown canvas pack that's patched with moosehide. You'll find a few pounds of lumpy gold. You've never seen gold like it in the country, nor has anybody else. Here's what you've got to do. Listen."

A quarter of an hour later, fully instructed and complaining that his toes were freezing, Breck went away. Smoke, his own nose and one cheek frosted by proximity to the chink, rubbed them against the blankets for half an hour before the blaze and bite of the returning blood assured him of the safety of his flesh.

VI.

"My mind's made up right now. There ain't no doubt but what he killed Kinade. We heard the whole thing last night. What's the good of goin' over it again? I vote guilty."

In such fashion, Smoke's trial began. The speaker, a loose−jointed, hard−rock man from Colorado, manifested irritation and disgust when Harding set his suggestion aside, demanded the proceedings should be regular, and nominated one, Shunk Wilson, for judge and chairman of the meeting. The population of Two Cabins constituted the jury, though, after some discussion, the woman, Lucy, was denied the right to vote on Smoke's guilt or innocence.

While this was going on, Smoke, jammed into a corner on a bunk, overheard a whispered conversation between Breck and a miner.

"You haven't fifty pounds of flour you'll sell?" Breck queried.

"You ain't got the dust to pay the price I'm askin'," was the reply.

"I'll give you two hundred."

The man shook his head.

"Three hundred. Three−fifty."

At four hundred, the man nodded, and said: "Come on over to my cabin an' weigh out the dust."

The two squeezed their way to the door, and slipped out. After a few minutes Breck returned alone.

Harding was testifying, when Smoke saw the door shoved open slightly, and in the crack appear the face of the man who had sold the flour. He was grimacing and beckoning emphatically to one inside, who arose from near the stove and started to work toward the door.

"Where are you goin', Sam?" Shunk Wilson demanded.

"I'll be back in a jiffy," Sam explained. "I jes' got to go."

Smoke was permitted to question the witnesses, and he was in the middle of the cross−examination of Harding, when from without came the whining of dogs in harness, and the grind and churn of sled− runners. Somebody near the door peeped out.

"It's Sam an' his pardner an' a dog−team hell−bent down the trail for Stewart River," the man reported.

Nobody spoke for a long half−minute, but men glanced significantly at one another, and a general restlessness pervaded the packed room. Out of the corner of his eye, Smoke caught a glimpse of Breck, Lucy, and her husband whispering together.

"Come on, you," Shunk Wilson said gruffly to Smoke. "Cut this questionin' short. We know what you're tryin' to prove−−that the other bank wasn't searched. The witness admits it. We admit it. It wasn't necessary. No tracks led to that bank. The snow wasn't broke."

"There was a man on the other bank just the same," Smoke insisted.

"That's too thin for skatin', young man. There ain't many of us on the McQuestion, an' we got every man accounted for."

"Who was the man you hiked out of camp two weeks ago?" Smoke asked.

"Alonzo Miramar. He was a Mexican. What's that grub−thief got to do with it?"

"Nothing, except that you haven't accounted for HIM, Mr Judge."

"He went down the river, not up."

"How do you know where he went?"

"Saw him start."

"And that's all you know of what became of him?"

"No, it ain't, young man. I know, we all know, he had four day's grub an' no gun to shoot meat with. If he didn't make the settlement on the Yukon he'd croaked long before this."

"I suppose you've got all the guns in this part of the country accounted for, too," Smoke observed pointedly.

Shunk Wilson was angry.

"You'd think I was the prisoner the way you slam questions into me. Come on with the next witness. Where's French Louis?"

While French Louis was shoving forward, Lucy opened the door.

"Where you goin'?" Shunk Wilson shouted.

"I reckon I don't have to stay," she answered defiantly. "I ain't got no vote, an' besides my cabin's so jammed up I can't breathe."

In a few minutes her husband followed. The closing of the door was the first warning the judge received of it.

"Who was that?" he interrupted Pierre's narrative to ask.

"Bill Peabody," somebody spoke up. "Said he wanted to ask his wife something and was coming right back."

Instead of Bill, it was Lucy who re−entered, took off her furs, and resumed her place by the stove.

"I reckon we don't need to hear the rest of the witnesses," was Shunk Wilson's decision, when Pierre had finished. "We know they only can testify to the same facts we've already heard. Say, Sorensen, you go an' bring Bill Peabody back. We'll be votin' a verdict pretty short. Now, Stranger, you can get up an' say your say concernin' what happened. In the meantime we'll just be savin' delay by passin' around the two rifles, the ammunition, an' the bullets that done the killin'."

Midway in his story of how he had arrived in that part of the country, and at the point in his narrative where he described his own ambush and how he had fled to the bank, Smoke was interrupted by the indignant Shunk Wilson.

"Young man, what sense is there in you testifyin' that way? You're just takin' up valuable time. Of course you got the right to lie to save your neck, but we ain't goin' to stand for such foolishness. The rifle, the ammunition, the bullet that killed Joe Kinade is against you−−What's that? Open the door, somebody!"

The frost rushed in, taking form and substance in the heat of the room, while through the open door came the whining of dogs that decreased rapidly with distance.

"It's Sorensen an' Peabody," some one cried, "a−throwin' the whip into the dawgs an' headin' down river!"

"Now, what the hell−−!" Shunk Wilson paused, with dropped jaw, and glared at Lucy. "I reckon you can explain, Mrs Peabody."

She tossed her head and compressed her lips, and Shunk Wilson's wrathful and suspicious gaze passed on and rested on Breck.

"An' I reckon that new−comer you've ben chinning with could explain if HE had a mind to."

Breck, now very uncomfortable, found all eyes centred on him.

"Sam was chewing the rag with him, too, before he hit out," some one said.

"Look here, Mr Breck," Shunk Wilson continued. "You've ben interruptin' proceedings, and you got to explain the meanin' of it. What was you chinnin' about?"

Breck cleared his throat timidly and replied. "I was just trying to buy some grub."

"What with?"

"Dust, of course."

"Where'd you get it?"

Breck did not answer.

"He's ben snoopin' around up the Stewart," a man volunteered. "I run across his camp a week ago when I was huntin'. An' I want to tell you he was almighty secretious about it."

"The dust didn't come from there," Breck said. "That's only a low− grade hydraulic proposition."

"Bring your poke here an' let's see your dust," Wilson commanded.

"I tell you it didn't come from there."

"Let's see it just the same."

Breck made as if to refuse, but all about him were menacing faces. Reluctantly, he fumbled in his coat pocket. In the act of drawing forth a pepper can, it rattled against what was evidently a hard object.

"Fetch it all out!" Shunk Wilson thundered.

And out came the big nugget, first−size, yellow as no gold any onlooker had ever seen. Shunk Wilson gasped. Half a dozen, catching one glimpse, made a break for the door. They reached it at the same moment, and, with cursing and scuffling, jammed and pivoted through. The judge emptied the contents of the pepper can on the table, and the sight of the rough lump−gold sent half a dozen more toward the door.

"Where are you goin'?" Eli Harding asked, as Shunk started to follow.

"For my dogs, of course."

"Ain't you goin' to hang him?"

"It'd take too much time right now. He'll keep till we get back, so I reckon this court is adjourned. This ain't no place for lingerin'."

Harding hesitated. He glanced savagely at Smoke, saw Pierre beckoning to Louis from the doorway, took one last look at the lump− gold on the table, and decided.

"No use you tryin' to get away," he flung back over his shoulder. "Besides, I'm goin' to borrow your dogs."

"What is it−−another one of them blamed stampedes?" the old blind trapper asked in a queer and petulant falsetto, as the cries of men and dogs and the grind of the sleds swept the silence of the room.

"It sure is," Lucy answered. "An' I never seen gold like it. Feel that, old man."

She put the big nugget in his hand. He was but slightly interested.

"It was a good fur−country," he complained, "before them danged miners come in an' scared back the game."

The door opened, and Breck entered.

"Well," he said, "we four are all that are left in camp. It's forty miles to the Stewart by the cut−off I broke, and the fastest of them can't make the round trip in less than five or six days. But it's time you pulled out, Smoke, just the same."

Breck drew his hunting knife across the other's bonds, and glanced at the woman.

"I hope you don't object?" he said, with significant politeness.

"If there's goin' to be any shootin'," the blind man broke out, "I wish somebody'd take me to another cabin first."

"Go on, an' don't mind me," Lucy answered. "If I ain't good enough to hang a man, I ain't good enough to hold him."

Smoke stood up, rubbing his wrists where the thongs had impeded the circulation.

"I've got a pack all ready for you," Breck said. "Ten days' grub, blankets, matches, tobacco, an axe, and a rifle."

"Go to it," Lucy encouraged. "Hit the high places, Stranger. Beat it as fast as God'll let you."

"I'm going to have a square meal before I start," Smoke said. "And when I start it will be up the McQuestion, not down. I want you to go along with me, Breck. We're going to search that other bank for the man that really did the killing."

"If you'll listen to me, you'll head down for the Stewart and the Yukon," Breck objected. "When this gang gets back from my low−grade hydraulic proposition, it will be seeing red."

Smoke laughed and shook his head.

"I can't jump this country, Breck. I've got interests here. I've got to stay and make good. I don't care whether you believe me or not, but I've found Surprise Lake. That's where that gold came from. Besides, they took my dogs, and I've got to wait to get them back. Also, I know what I'm about. There was a man hidden on that bank. He came pretty close to emptying his magazine at me."

Half an hour afterward, with a big plate of moose−steak before him and a big mug of coffee at his lips, Smoke half−started up from his seat. He had heard the sounds first. Lucy threw open the door.

"Hello, Spike; hello, Methody," she greeted the two frost−rimed men who were bending over the burden on their sled.

"We just come down from Upper Camp," one said, as the pair staggered into the room with a fur−wrapped object which they handled with exceeding gentleness. "An' this is what we found by the way. He's all in, I guess."

"Put him in the near bunk there," Lucy said. She bent over and pulled back the furs, disclosing a face composed principally of large, staring, black eyes, and of skin, dark and scabbed by repeated frost−bite, tightly stretched across the bones.

"If it ain't Alonzo!" she cried. "You pore, starved devil!"

"That's the man on the other bank," Smoke said in an undertone to Breck.

"We found it raidin' a cache that Harding must a−made," one of the men was explaining. "He was eatin' raw flour an' frozen bacon, an' when we got 'm he was cryin' an' squealin' like a hawk. Look at him! He's all starved, an' most of him frozen. He'll kick at any moment."

. . . . .

Half an hour later, when the furs had been drawn over the face of the still form in the bunk, Smoke turned to Lucy.

"If you don't mind, Mrs Peabody, I'll have another whack at that steak. Make it thick and not so well done."

THE RACE FOR NUMBER ONE.

I.

"Huh! Get on to the glad rags!"

Shorty surveyed his partner with simulated disapproval, and Smoke, vainly attempting to rub the wrinkles out of the pair of trousers he had just put on, was irritated.

"They sure fit you close for a second−hand buy," Shorty went on. "What was the tax?"

"One hundred and fifty for the suit," Smoke answered. "The man was nearly my own size. I thought it was remarkable reasonable. What are you kicking about?"

"Who? Me? Oh, nothin'. I was just thinkin' it was goin' some for a meat−eater that hit Dawson in an ice−jam, with no grub, one suit of underclothes, a pair of mangy moccasins, an' overalls that looked like they'd ben through the wreck of the Hesperus. Pretty gay front, pardner. Pretty gay front. Say−−?"

"What do you want now?" Smoke demanded testily.

"What's her name?"

"There isn't any her, my friend. I'm to have dinner at Colonel Bowie's, if you want to know. The trouble with you, Shorty, is you're envious because I'm going into high society and you're not invited."

"Ain't you some late?" Shorty queried with concern.

"What do you mean?"

"For dinner. They'll be eatin' supper when you get there."

Smoke was about to explain with elaborate sarcasm when he caught the twinkle in the others' eyes. He went on dressing, with fingers that had lost their deftness, tying a Windsor tie in a bow−knot at the throat of the soft cotton shirt.

"Wish I hadn't sent all my starched shirts to the laundry," Shorty murmured sympathetically. "I might a−fitted you out."

By this time Smoke was straining at a pair of shoes. The thick woollen socks were too thick to go into them. He looked appealingly at Shorty, who shook his head.

"Nope. If I had thin ones I wouldn't lend 'em to you. Back to the moccasins, pardner. You'd sure freeze your toes in skimpy−fangled gear like that."

"I paid fifteen dollars for them, second−hand," Smoke lamented.

"I reckon they won't be a man not in moccasins."

"But there are to be women, Shorty. I'm going to sit down and eat with real live women−−Mrs Bowie, and several others, so the Colonel told me."

"Well, moccasins won't spoil their appetite none," was Shorty's comment. "Wonder what the Colonel wants with you?"

"I don't know, unless he's heard about my finding Surprise Lake. It will take a fortune to drain it, and the Guggenheims are out for investment."

"Reckon that's it. That's right, stick to the moccasins. Gee! That coat is sure wrinkled, an' it fits you a mite too swift. Just peck around at your vittles. If you eat hearty you'll bust through. And if them women−folks gets to droppin' handkerchiefs, just let 'em lay. Don't do any pickin' up. Whatever you do, don't."

II.

As became a high−salaried expert and the representative of the great house of Guggenheim, Colonel Bowie lived in one of the most magnificent cabins in Dawson. Of squared logs, hand−hewn, it was two stories high, and of such extravagant proportions that it boasted a big living room that was used for a living room and for nothing else.

Here were big bear−skins on the rough board floor, and on the walls horns of moose and caribou. Here roared an open fireplace and a big wood−burning stove. And here Smoke met the social elect of Dawson−− not the mere pick−handle millionaires, but the ultra−cream of a mining city whose population had been recruited from all the

world−− men like Warburton Jones, the explorer and writer, Captain Consadine of the Mounted Police, Haskell, Gold Commissioner of the North−West Territory, and Baron Von Schroeder, an emperor's favourite with an international duelling reputation.

And here, dazzling in evening gown, he met Joy Gastell, whom hitherto he had encountered only on trail, befurred and moccasined. At dinner he found himself beside her.

"I feel like a fish out of water," he confessed. "All you folks are so real grand you know. Besides I never dreamed such oriental luxury existed in the Klondike. Look at Von Schroeder there. He's actually got a dinner jacket, and Consadine's got a starched shirt. I noticed he wore moccasins just the same. How do you like MY outfit?"

He moved his shoulders about as if preening himself for Joy's approval.

"It looks as if you'd grown stout since you came over the Pass," she laughed.

"Wrong. Guess again."

"It's somebody else's."

"You win. I bought it for a price from one of the clerks at the A. C. Company."

"It's a shame clerks are so narrow−shouldered," she sympathized. "And you haven't told me what you think of MY outfit."

"I can't," he said. "I'm out of breath. I've been living on trail too long. This sort of thing comes to me with a shock, you know. I'd quite forgotten that women have arms and shoulders. To−morrow morning, like my friend Shorty, I'll wake up and know it's all a dream. Now, the last time I saw you on Squaw Creek−−"

"I was just a squaw," she broke in.

"I hadn't intended to say that. I was remembering that it was on Squaw Creek that I discovered you had feet."

"And I can never forget that you saved them for me," she said. "I've been wanting to see you ever since to thank you−−" (He shrugged his shoulders deprecatingly). "And that's why you are here to−night−−"

"You asked the Colonel to invite me?"

"No! Mrs Bowie. And I asked her to let me have you at table. And here's my chance. Everybody's talking. Listen, and don't interrupt. You know Mono Creek?"

"Yes."

"It has turned out rich−−dreadfully rich. They estimate the claims as worth a million and more apiece. It was only located the other day."

"I remember the stampede."

"Well, the whole creek was staked to the sky−line, and all the feeders, too. And yet, right now, on the main creek, Number Three below Discovery is unrecorded. The creek was so far away from Dawson that the Commissioner allowed sixty days for recording after location. Every claim was recorded except Number Three Below. It was staked by Cyrus Johnson. And that was all. Cyrus Johnson has disappeared. Whether he died, whether he went down river or up, nobody knows. Anyway, in six days, the time for recording will be up. Then the man who stakes it, and reaches Dawson first and records it, gets it."

"A million dollars," Smoke murmured.

"Gilchrist, who has the next claim below, has got six hundred dollars in a single pan off bedrock. He's burned one hole down. And the claim on the other side is even richer. I know."

"But why doesn't everybody know?" Smoke queried skeptically.

"They're beginning to know. They kept it secret for a long time, and it is only now that it's coming out. Good dog−teams will be at a premium in another twenty−four hours. Now, you've got to get away as decently as you can as soon as dinner is over. I've arranged it. An Indian will come with a message for you. You read it, let on that you're very much put out, make your excuses, and get away."

"I−−er−−I fail to follow."

"Ninny!" she exclaimed in a half−whisper. "What you must do is to get out to−night and hustle dog−teams. I know of two. There's Hanson's team, seven big Hudson Bay dogs−−he's holding them at four hundred each. That's top price to−night, but it won't be to−morrow. And Sitka Charley has eight Malemutes he's asking thirty−five hundred for. To−morrow he'll laugh at an offer of five thousand. Then you've got your own team of dogs. And you'll have to buy several more teams. That's your work to−night. Get the best. It's dogs as well as men that will win this race. It's a hundred and ten miles, and you'll have to relay as frequently as you can."

"Oh, I see, you want me to go in for it," Smoke drawled.

"If you haven't the money for the dogs, I'll−−"

She faltered, but before she could continue, Smoke was speaking.

"I can buy the dogs. But−−er−−aren't you afraid this is gambling?"

"After your exploits at roulette in the Elkhorn," she retorted, "I'm not afraid that you're afraid. It's a sporting proposition, if that's what you mean. A race for a million, and with some of the stiffest dog−mushers and travellers in the country entered against you. They haven't entered yet, but by this time to−morrow they will, and dogs will be worth what the richest man can afford to pay. Big Olaf is in town. He came up from Circle City last month. He is one of the most terrible dog−mushers in the country, and if he enters he will be your most dangerous man. Arizona Bill is another. He's been a professional freighter and mail−carrier for years. It he goes in, interest will be centred on him and Big Olaf."

"And you intend me to come along as a sort of dark horse."

"Exactly. And it will have its advantages. You will not be supposed to stand a show. After all, you know, you are still classed as a chechaquo. You haven't seen the four seasons go around. Nobody will take notice of you until you come into the home stretch in the lead."

"It's on the home stretch the dark horse is to show up its classy form, eh?"

She nodded, and continued earnestly. "Remember, I shall never forgive myself for the trick I played on the Squaw Creek Stampede until you win this Mono claim. And if any man can win this race against the old−timers, it's you."

It was the way she said it. He felt warm all over, and in his heart and head. He gave her a quick, searching look, involuntary and serious, and for the moment that her eyes met his steadily, ere they fell, it seemed to him that he read something of vaster import than the claim Cyrus Johnson had failed to record.

"I'll do it," he said. "I'll win it."

The glad light in her eyes seemed to promise a greater need than all the gold in the Mono claim. He was aware of a movement of her hand in her lap next to his. Under the screen of the tablecloth he thrust his own hand across and met a firm grip of woman's fingers that sent another wave of warmth through him.

"What will Shorty say?" was the thought that flashed whimsically through his mind as he withdrew his hand. He glanced almost jealously at the faces of Von Schroeder and Jones, and wondered if they had not divined the remarkableness and deliciousness of this woman who sat beside him.

He was aroused by her voice, and realized that she had been speaking some moments.

"So you see, Arizona Bill is a white Indian," she was saying. "And Big Olaf is−−a bear wrestler, a king of the snows, a mighty savage. He can out−travel and out−endure an Indian, and he's never known any other life but that of the wild and the frost."

"Who's that?" Captain Consadine broke in from across the table.

"Big Olaf," she answered. "I was just telling Mr Bellew what a traveller he is."

"You're right," the Captain's voice boomed. "Big Olaf is the greatest traveller in the Yukon. I'd back him against Old Nick himself for snow−bucking and ice−travel. He brought in the government dispatches in 1895, and he did it after two couriers were frozen on Chilcoot and the third drowned in the open water of Thirty Mile."

III.

Smoke had travelled in a leisurely fashion up to Mono Creek, fearing to tire his dogs before the big race. Also, he had familiarized himself with every mile of the trail and located his relay camps. So many men had entered the race, that the hundred and ten miles of its course was almost a continuous village. Relay camps were everywhere along the trail. Von Schroeder, who had gone in purely for the sport, had no less than eleven dog teams−−a fresh one for every ten miles. Arizona Bill had been forced to content himself with eight teams. Big Olaf had seven, which was the complement of Smoke. In addition, over two−score of other men were in the running. Not every day, even in the golden north, was a million dollars the prize for a dog race. The country had been swept of dogs. No animal of speed and endurance escaped the fine−tooth comb that had raked the creeks and camps, and the prices of dogs had doubled and quadrupled in the course of the frantic speculation.

Number Three Below Discovery was ten miles up Mono Creek from its mouth. The remaining hundred miles was to be run on the frozen breast of the Yukon. On Number Three itself were fifty tents and over three hundred

dogs. The old stakes, blazed and scrawled sixty days before by Cyrus Johnson, still stood, and every man had gone over the boundaries of the claim again and again, for the race with dogs was to be preceded by a foot and obstacle race. Each man had to re−locate the claim for himself, and this meant that he must place two centre−stakes and four corner−stakes and cross the creek twice, before he could start for Dawson with his dogs.

Furthermore, there were to be no 'sooners.' Not until the stroke of midnight of Friday night was the claim open for re−location, and not until the stroke of midnight could a man plant a stake. This was the ruling of the Gold Commissioner at Dawson, and Captain Consadine had sent up a squad of mounted police to enforce it. Discussion had arisen about the difference between sun−time and police−time, but Consadine had sent forth his fiat that police time went, and, further, that it was the watch of Lieutenant Pollock that went.

The Mono trail ran along the level creek−bed, and, less than two feet in width, was like a groove, walled on either side by the snow− fall of months. The problem of how forty−odd sleds and three hundred dogs were to start in so narrow a course was in everybody's mind.

"Huh!" said Shorty. "It's goin' to be the gosh−dangdest mix−up that ever was. I can't see no way out, Smoke, except main strength an' sweat an' to plow through. If the whole creek was glare−ice they ain't room for a dozen teams abreast. I got a hunch right now they's goin' to be a heap of scrappin' before they get strung out. An' if any of it comes our way you got to let me do the punchin'."

Smoke squared his shoulders and laughed non−committally.

"No you don't!" his partner cried in alarm. "No matter what happens, you don't dast hit. You can't handle dogs a hundred miles with a busted knuckle, an' that's what'll happen if you land on somebody's jaw."

Smoke nodded his head.

"You're right, Shorty. I couldn't risk the chance."

"An' just remember," Shorty went on, "that I got to do all the shovin' for them first ten miles an' you got to take it easy as you can. I'll sure jerk you through to the Yukon. After that it's up to you an' the dogs. Say−−what d'ye think Schroeder's scheme is? He's got his first team a quarter of a mile down the creek an' he'll know it by a green lantern. But we got him skinned. Me for the red flare every time."

IV.

The day had been clear and cold, but a blanket of cloud formed across the face of the sky and the night came on warm and dark, with the hint of snow impending. The thermometer registered fifteen below zero, and in the Klondike−winter fifteen below is esteemed very warm.

At a few minutes before midnight, leaving Shorty with the dogs five hundred yards down the creek, Smoke joined the racers on Number Three. There were forty−five of them waiting the start for the thousand−thousand dollars Cyrus Johnson had left lying in the frozen gravel. Each man carried six stakes and a heavy wooden mallet, and was clad in a smock−like parka of heavy cotton drill.

Lieutenant Pollock, in a big bearskin coat, looked at his watch by the light of a fire. It lacked a minute of midnight.

"Make ready," he said, as he raised a revolver in his right hand and watched the second hand tick around.

Forty−five hoods were thrown back from the parkas. Forty−five pairs of hands unmittened, and forty−five pairs of moccasins pressed tensely into the packed snow. Also, forty−five stakes were thrust into the snow, and the same number of mallets lifted in the air.

The shots rang out, and the mallets fell. Cyrus Johnson's right to the million had expired. To prevent confusion, Lieutenant Pollock had insisted that the lower centre−stake be driven first, next the south−eastern; and so on around the four sides, including the upper centre−stake on the way.

Smoke drove in his stake and was away with the leading dozen. Fires had been lighted at the corners, and by each fire stood a policeman, list in hand, checking off the names of the runners. A man was supposed to call out his name and show his face. There was to be no staking by proxy while the real racer was off and away down the creek.

At the first corner, beside Smoke's stake, Von Schroeder placed his. The mallets struck at the same instant. As they hammered, more arrived from behind and with such impetuosity as to get in one another's way and cause jostling and shoving. Squirming through the press and calling his name to the policeman, Smoke saw the Baron, struck in collision by one of the rushers, hurled clean off his feet into the snow. But Smoke did not wait. Others

were still ahead of him. By the light of the vanishing fire he was certain that he saw the back, hugely looming, of Big Olaf, and at the south−western corner Big Olaf and he drove their stakes side by side.

It was no light work, this preliminary obstacle race. The boundaries of the claim totalled nearly a mile, and most of it was over the uneven surface of a snow−covered, niggerhead flat. All about Smoke men tripped and fell, and several times he pitched forward himself, jarringly, on hands and knees. Once, Big Olaf fell so immediately in front of him as to bring him down on top.

The upper centre−stake was driven by the edge of the bank, and down the bank the racers plunged, across the frozen creek−bed, and up the other side. Here, as Smoke clambered, a hand gripped his ankle and jerked him back. In the flickering light of a distant fire, it was impossible to see who had played the trick. But Arizona Bill, who had been treated similarly, rose to his feet and drove his fist with a crunch into the offender's face. Smoke saw and heard as he was scrambling to his feet, but before he could make another lunge for the bank a fist dropped him half−stunned into the snow. He staggered up, located the man, half−swung a hook for his jaw, then remembered Shorty's warning and refrained. The next moment, struck below the knees by a hurtling body, he went down again.

It was a foretaste of what would happen when the men reached their sleds. Men were pouring over the other bank and piling into the jam. They swarmed up the bank in bunches, and in bunches were dragged back by their impatient fellows. More blows were struck, curses rose from the panting chests of those who still had wind to spare, and Smoke, curiously visioning the face of Joy Gastell, hoped that the mallets would not be brought into play. Overthrown, trod upon, groping in the snow for his lost stakes, he at last crawled out of the crush and attacked the bank farther along. Others were doing this, and it was his luck to have many men in advance of him in the race for the northwestern corner.

Down to the fourth corner, he tripped midway and in the long sprawling fall lost his remaining stake. For five minutes he groped in the darkness before he found it, and all the time the panting runners were passing him. From the last corner to the creek he began overtaking men for whom the mile−run had been too much. In the creek itself Bedlam had broken loose. A dozen sleds were piled up and overturned, and nearly a hundred dogs were locked in combat. Among them men struggled, tearing the tangled animals apart, or beating them apart with clubs. In the fleeting glimpse he caught of it, Smoke wondered if he had ever seen a Dore grotesquery to compare.

Leaping down the bank beyond the glutted passage, he gained the hard−footing of the sled−trail and made better time. Here, in packed harbours beside the narrow trail, sleds and men waited for runners that were still behind. From the rear came the whine and rush of dogs, and Smoke had barely time to leap aside into the deep snow. A sled tore past, and he made out the man, kneeling and shouting madly. Scarcely was it by when it stopped with a crash of battle. The excited dogs of a harboured sled, resenting the passing animals, had got out of hand and sprung upon them.

Smoke plunged around and by. He could see the green lantern of Von Schroeder, and, just below it, the red flare that marked his own team. Two men were guarding Schroeder's dogs, with short clubs interposed between them and the trail.

"Come on, you Smoke! Come on, you Smoke!" he could hear Shorty calling anxiously.

"Coming!" he gasped.

By the red flare he could see the snow torn up and trampled, and from the way his partner breathed he knew a battle had been fought. He staggered to the sled, and, in a moment he was falling on it, Shorty's whip snapped as he yelled: "Mush! you devils! Mush!"

The dogs sprang into the breast−bands, and the sled jerked abruptly ahead. They were big animals−−Hanson's prize team of Hudson Bays−− and Smoke had selected them for the first stage, which included the ten miles of Mono, the heavy−going of the cut−off across the flat at the mouth, and the first ten miles of the Yukon stretch.

"How many are ahead?" he asked.

"You shut up an' save your wind," Shorty answered. "Hi! you brutes! Hit her up! Hit her up!"

He was running behind the sled, towing on a short rope. Smoke could not see him; nor could he see the sled on which he lay at full length. The fires had been left in the rear, and they were tearing through a wall of blackness as fast as the dogs could spring into it. This blackness was almost sticky, so nearly did it take on the seeming of substance.

Smoke felt the sled heel up on one runner as it rounded an invisible curve, and from ahead came the snarls of

beasts and the oaths of men. This was known afterward as the Barnes−Slocum Jam. It was the teams of these two men which first collided, and into it, at full career, piled Smoke's seven big fighters. Scarcely more than semi−domesticated wolves, the excitement of that night on Mono Creek had sent every dog fighting−mad. The Klondike dogs, driven without reins, cannot be stopped except by voice, so that there was no stopping this glut of struggle that heaped itself between the narrow rims of the creek. From behind, sled after sled hurled into the turmoil. Men who had their teams nearly extricated were overwhelmed by fresh avalanches of dogs−−each animal well−fed, well−rested, and ripe for battle.

"It's knock down an' drag out an' plow through!" Shorty yelled in his partner's ear. "An' watch out for your knuckles! You drag out an' let me do the punchin'!"

What happened in the next half hour Smoke never distinctly remembered. At the end he emerged exhausted, sobbing for breath, his jaw sore from a first−blow, his shoulder aching from the bruise of a club, the blood running warmly down one leg from the rip of a dog's fangs, and both sleeves of his parka torn to shreds. As in a dream, while the battle still raged behind, he helped Shorty reharness the dogs. One, dying, they cut from the traces, and in the darkness they felt their way to the repair of the disrupted harnesses.

"Now you lie down an' get your wind back," Shorty commanded.

And through the darkness the dogs sped, with unabated strength, down Mono Creek, across the long cut−off, and to the Yukon. Here, at the junction with the main river−trail, somebody had lighted a fire, and here Shorty said good bye. By the light of the fire, as the sled leaped behind the flying dogs, Smoke caught another of the unforgettable pictures of the North Land. It was of Shorty, swaying and sinking down limply in the snow, yelling his parting encouragement, one eye blackened and closed, knuckles bruised and broken, and one arm, ripped and fang−torn, gushing forth a steady stream of blood.

V.

"How many ahead?" Smoke asked, as he dropped his tired Hudson Bays and sprang on the waiting sled at the first relay station.

"I counted eleven," the man called after him, for he was already away behind the leaping dogs.

Fifteen miles they were to carry him on the next stage, which would fetch him to the mouth of White River. There were nine of them, but they composed his weakest team. The twenty−five miles between White River and Sixty Mile he had broken into two stages because of ice− jams, and here two of his heaviest, toughest teams were stationed.

He lay on the sled at full length, face−down, holding on with both hands. Whenever the dogs slacked from topmost speed he rose to his knees, and, yelling and urging, clinging precariously with one hand, threw his whip into them. Poor team that it was, he passed two sleds before White River was reached. Here, at the freeze−up, a jam had piled a barrier allowing the open water, that formed for half a mile below, to freeze smoothly. This smooth stretch enabled the racers to make flying exchanges of sleds, and down all the course they had placed their relays below the jams.

Over the jam and out on to the smooth, Smoke tore along, calling loudly, "Billy! Billy!"

Billy heard and answered, and by the light of the many fires on the ice, Smoke saw a sled swing in from the side and come abreast. Its dogs were fresh and overhauled his. As the sleds swerved toward each other he leaped across and Billy promptly rolled off.

"Where's Big Olaf?" Smoke cried.

"Leading!" Billy's voice answered; and the fires were left behind and Smoke was again flying through the wall of blackness.

In the jams of that relay, where the way led across a chaos of up− ended ice−cakes, and where Smoke slipped off the forward end of the sled and with a haul−rope toiled behind the wheel−dog, he passed three sleds. Accidents had happened, and he could hear the men cutting out dogs and mending harnesses.

Among the jams of the next short relay into Sixty Mile, he passed two more teams. And that he might know adequately what had happened to them, one of his own dogs wrenched a shoulder, was unable to keep up, and was dragged in the harness. Its team−mates, angered, fell upon it with their fangs, and Smoke was forced to club them off with the heavy butt of his whip. As he cut the injured animal out, he heard the whining cries of dogs behind him and the voice of a man that was familiar. It was Von Schroeder. Smoke called a warning to prevent a

rear−end collision, and the Baron, hawing his animals and swinging on the gee−pole, went by a dozen feet to the side. Yet so impenetrable was the blackness that Smoke heard him pass but never saw him.

On the smooth stretch of ice beside the trading post at Sixty Mile, Smoke overtook two more sleds. All had just changed teams, and for five minutes they ran abreast, each man on his knees and pouring whip and voice into the maddened dogs. But Smoke had studied out that portion of the trail, and now marked the tall pine on the bank that showed faintly in the light of the many fires. Below that pine was not merely darkness, but an abrupt cessation of the smooth stretch. There the trail, he knew, narrowed to a single sled−width. Leaning out ahead, he caught the haul−rope and drew his leaping sled up to the wheel−dog. He caught the animal by the hind−legs and threw it. With a snarl of rage it tried to slash him with its fangs, but was dragged on by the rest of the team. Its body proved an efficient brake, and the two other teams, still abreast, dashed ahead into the darkness for the narrow way.

Smoke heard the crash and uproar of their collision, released his wheeler, sprang to the gee−pole, and urged his team to the right into the soft snow where the straining animals wallowed to their necks. It was exhausting work, but he won by the tangled teams and gained the hard−packed trail beyond.

VI.

On the relay out of Sixty Mile, Smoke had next to his poorest team, and though the going was good, he had set it a short fifteen miles. Two more teams would bring him in to Dawson and to the Gold− Recorder's office, and Smoke had selected his best animals for the last two stretches. Sitka Charley himself waited with the eight Malemutes that would jerk Smoke along for twenty miles, and for the finish, with a fifteen−mile run, was his own team−−the team he had had all winter and which had been with him in the search for Surprise Lake.

The two men he had left entangled at Sixty Mile failed to overtake him, and, on the other hand, his team failed to overtake any of the three that still led. His animals were willing, though they lacked stamina and speed, and little urging was needed to keep them jumping into it at their best. There was nothing for Smoke to do but to lie face−downward and hold on. Now and again he would plunge out of the darkness into the circle of light about a blazing fire, catch a glimpse of furred men standing by harnessed and waiting dogs, and plunge into the darkness again. Mile after mile, with only the grind and jar of the runners in his ears, he sped on. Almost automatically he kept his place as the sled bumped ahead or half− lifted and heeled on the swings and swerves of the bends. First one, and then another, without apparent rhyme or reason, three faces limned themselves on his consciousness: Joy Gastell's, laughing and audacious; Shorty's, battered and exhausted by the struggle down Mono Creek; and John Bellew's, seamed and rigid, as if cast in iron, so unrelenting was its severity. And sometimes Smoke wanted to shout aloud, to chant a paean of savage exultation, as he remembered the office of the Billow and the serial story of San Francisco which he had left unfinished, along with the other fripperies of those empty days.

The grey twilight of morning was breaking as he exchanged his weary dogs for the eight fresh Malemutes. Lighter animals than Hudson Bays, they were capable of greater speed, and they ran with the supple tirelessness of true wolves. Sitka Charley called out the order of the teams ahead. Big Olaf led, Arizona Bill was second, and Von Schroeder third. These were the three best men in the country. In fact, ere Smoke had left Dawson, the popular betting had placed them in that order. While they were racing for a million, at least half a million had been staked by others on the outcome of the race. No one had bet on Smoke, who, despite his several known exploits, was still accounted a chechaquo with much to learn.

As daylight strengthened, Smoke caught sight of a sled ahead, and, in half an hour, his own lead−dog was leaping at its tail. Not until the man turned his head to exchange greetings, did Smoke recognize him as Arizona Bill. Von Schroeder had evidently passed him. The trail, hard−packed, ran too narrowly through the soft snow, and for another half−hour Smoke was forced to stay in the rear. Then they topped an ice−jam and struck a smooth stretch below, where were a number of relay camps and where the snow was packed widely. On his knees, swinging his whip and yelling, Smoke drew abreast. He noted that Arizona Bill's right arm hung dead at his side, and that he was compelled to pour leather with his left hand. Awkward as it was, he had no hand left with which to hold on, and frequently he had to cease from the whip and clutch to save himself from falling off. Smoke remembered the scrimmage in the creek bed at Three Below Discovery, and understood. Shorty's advice had been sound.

"What's happened?" Smoke asked, as he began to pull ahead.

"I don't know," Arizona Bill answered. "I think I threw my shoulder out in the scrapping."

He dropped behind very slowly, though when the last relay station was in sight he was fully half a mile in the rear. Ahead, bunched together, Smoke could see Big Olaf and Von Schroeder. Again Smoke arose to his knees, and he lifted his jaded dogs into a burst of speed such as a man only can who has the proper instinct for dog−driving. He drew up close to the tail of Von Schroeder's sled, and in this order the three sleds dashed out on the smooth going, below a jam, where many men and many dogs waited. Dawson was fifteen miles away.

Von Schroeder, with his ten−mile relays, had changed five miles back, and would change five miles ahead. So he held on, keeping his dogs at full leap. Big Olaf and Smoke made flying changes, and their fresh teams immediately regained what had been lost to the Baron. Big Olaf led past, and Smoke followed into the narrow trail beyond.

"Still good, but not so good," Smoke paraphrased Spencer to himself.

Of Von Schroeder, now behind, he had no fear; but ahead was the greatest dog−driver in the country. To pass him seemed impossible. Again and again, many times, Smoke forced his leader to the other's sled−trail, and each time Big Olaf let out another link and drew away. Smoke contented himself with taking the pace, and hung on grimly. The race was not lost until one or the other won, and in fifteen miles many things could happen.

Three miles from Dawson something did happen. To Smoke's surprise, Big Olaf rose up and with oaths and leather proceeded to fetch out the last ounce of effort in his animals. It was a spurt that should have been reserved for the last hundred yards instead of being begun three miles from the finish. Sheer dog−killing that it was, Smoke followed. His own team was superb. No dogs on the Yukon had had harder work or were in better condition. Besides, Smoke had toiled with them, and eaten and bedded with them, and he knew each dog as an individual, and how best to win in to the animal's intelligence and extract its last least shred of willingness.

They topped a small jam and struck the smooth−going below. Big Olaf was barely fifty feet ahead. A sled shot out from the side and drew in toward him, and Smoke understood Big Olaf's terrific spurt. He had tried to gain a lead for the change. This fresh team that waited to jerk him down the home stretch had been a private surprise of his. Even the men who had backed him to win had had no knowledge of it.

Smoke strove desperately to pass during the exchange of sleds. Lifting his dogs to the effort, he ate up the intervening fifty feet. With urging and pouring of leather, he went to the side and on until his lead−dog was jumping abreast of Big Olaf's wheeler. On the other side, abreast, was the relay sled. At the speed they were going, Big Olaf did not dare the flying leap. If he missed and fell off, Smoke would be in the lead and the race would be lost.

Big Olaf tried to spurt ahead, and he lifted his dogs magnificently, but Smoke's leader still continued to jump beside Big Olaf's wheeler. For half a mile the three sleds tore and bounced along side by side. The smooth stretch was nearing its end when Big Olaf took the chance. As the flying sleds swerved toward each other, he leaped, and the instant he struck he was on his knees, with whip and voice spurting the fresh team. The smooth pinched out into the narrow trail, and he jumped his dogs ahead and into it with a lead of barely a yard.

A man was not beaten until he was beaten, was Smoke's conclusion, and drive no matter how, Big Olaf failed to shake him off. No team Smoke had driven that night could have stood such a killing pace and kept up with fresh dogs−−no team save this one. Nevertheless, the pace WAS killing it, and as they began to round the bluff at Klondike City, he could feel the pitch of strength going out of his animals. Almost imperceptibly they lagged, and foot by foot Big Olaf drew away until he led by a score of yards.

A great cheer went up from the population of Klondike City assembled on the ice. Here the Klondike entered the Yukon, and half a mile away, across the Klondike, on the north bank, stood Dawson. An outburst of madder cheering arose, and Smoke caught a glimpse of a sled shooting out to him. He recognized the splendid animals that drew it. They were Joy Gastell's. And Joy Gastell drove them. The hood of her squirrel−skin parka was tossed back, revealing the cameo−like oval of her face outlined against her heavily−massed hair. Mittens had been discarded, and with bare hands she clung to whip and sled.

"Jump!" she cried, as her leader snarled at Smoke's.

Smoke struck the sled behind her. It rocked violently from the impact of his body, but she was full up on her knees and swinging the whip.

"Hi! You! Mush on! Chook! Chook!" she was crying, and the dogs whined and yelped in eagerness of desire and effort to overtake Big Olaf.

And then, as the lead−dog caught the tail of Big Olaf's sled, and yard by yard drew up abreast, the great crowd on the Dawson bank went mad. It WAS a great crowd, for the men had dropped their tools on all the creeks and come down to see the outcome of the race, and a dead heat at the end of a hundred and ten miles justified any madness.

"When you're in the lead I'm going to drop off!" Joy cried out over her shoulder.

Smoke tried to protest.

"And watch out for the dip curve half way up the bank," she warned.

Dog by dog, separated by half a dozen feet, the two teams were running abreast. Big Olaf, with whip and voice, held his own for a minute. Then, slowly, an inch at a time, Joy's leader began to forge past.

"Get ready!" she cried to Smoke. "I'm going to leave you in a minute. Get the whip."

And as he shifted his hand to clutch the whip, they heard Big Olaf roar a warning, but too late. His lead−dog, incensed at being passed, swerved in to the attack. His fangs struck Joy's leader on the flank. The rival teams flew at one another's throats. The sleds overran the fighting brutes and capsized. Smoke struggled to his feet and tried to lift Joy up. But she thrust him from her, crying: "Go!"

On foot, already fifty feet in advance, was Big Olaf, still intent on finishing the race. Smoke obeyed, and when the two men reached the foot of the Dawson bank, he was at the others heels. But up the bank Big Olaf lifted his body hugely, regaining a dozen feet.

Five blocks down the main street was the Gold Recorder's office. The street was packed as for the witnessing of a parade. Not so easily this time did Smoke gain to his giant rival, and when he did he was unable to pass. Side by side they ran along the narrow aisle between the solid walls of fur−clad, cheering men. Now one, now the other, with great convulsive jerks, gained an inch or so only to lose it immediately after.

If the pace had been a killing one for their dogs, the one they now set themselves was no less so. But they were racing for a million dollars and great honour in Yukon Country. The only outside impression that came to Smoke on that last mad stretch was one of astonishment that there should be so many people in the Klondike. He had never seen them all at once before.

He felt himself involuntarily lag, and Big Olaf sprang a full stride in the lead. To Smoke it seemed that his heart would burst, while he had lost all consciousness of his legs. He knew they were flying under him, but he did not know how he continued to make them fly, nor how he put even greater pressure of will upon them and compelled them again to carry him to his giant competitor's side.

The open door of the Recorder's office appeared ahead of them. Both men made a final, futile spurt. Neither could draw away from the other, and side by side they hit the doorway, collided violently, and fell headlong on the office floor.

They sat up, but were too exhausted to rise. Big Olaf, the sweat pouring from him, breathing with tremendous, painful gasps, pawed the air and vainly tried to speak. Then he reached out his hand with unmistakable meaning; Smoke extended his, and they shook.

"It's a dead heat," Smoke could hear the Recorder saying, but it was as if in a dream, and the voice was very thin and very far away. "And all I can say is that you both win. You'll have to divide the claim between you. You're partners."

Their two arms pumped up and down as they ratified the decision. Big Olaf nodded his head with great emphasis, and spluttered. At last he got it out.

"You damn chechaquo," was what he said, but in the saying of it was admiration. "I don't know how you done it, but you did."

Outside the great crowd was noisily massed, while the office was packing and jamming. Smoke and Big Olaf essayed to rise, and each helped the other to his feet. Smoke found his legs weak under him, and staggered drunkenly. Big Olaf tottered toward him.

"I'm sorry my dogs jumped yours."

"It couldn't be helped," Smoke panted back. "I heard you yell."

"Say," Big Olaf went on with shining eyes. "That girl−−one damn fine girl, eh?"

"One damn fine girl," Smoke agreed.