

**ДЖЕК
ЛОНДОН**

SMOKE
BELLEW

Джек Лондон

Smoke Bellew

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Jack London

Smoke Bellew

I. THE TASTE OF THE MEAT

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 tricks.” 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 you do, 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 criticisms. 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 expounded 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 afterward 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. 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 tom foolery 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 box last?”

“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 prison 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 Coluso. 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. If 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-round 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."

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 Chilkoot. 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 tenderfeet 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-five 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.

"Chechako," 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 over the lapse of a thousand years.

"Did you see that man with the girl?" Kit's neighbor 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 'chechako' 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?"

“Tenderfoot.”

On his way back to the beach, Kit turned the phrase over and over. It rankled to be called tenderfoot 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 it, reached down, and strove to get it on his shoulder. His first conclusion was that one hundred pounds were 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.”

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 tenderfeet 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 eardrums 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 Chilkoot," others told him as they rested and talked, "where you climb with hands and feet."

"They ain't going to be no Chilkoot," 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 meant it.

"They drown three or four a day there," the man assured him. "I helped fish a German out of 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 were 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 Kit up.

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

"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 even this was 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 of 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 Chilkoot, and it nearly broke him. As it was, some four hundred pounds of clothes-bags and camp outfit were 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.

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 Chilkoot, 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, but, 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 Chilkoot 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 backbone 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 flapjacks and crawled into the folds of the partly unrolled tent. As he dozed off he had time for only 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 Chilcoat. 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 a tenderfoot 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 chechako,” 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 old 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 heaped and shifted 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.

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 Chilkoot 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.

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 hundred-weight 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 hundred-weight 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 Chilkoot Trail. And if they don’t cry – I repeat, if they don’t cry, I’ll lambaste the stuffing out of them.”

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 it was 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! He’s a gentleman’s man! 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 the devil. 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.”

II. THE MEAT

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 Chilkoot. 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 carry 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 them grown men. What d'ye know about boatin' on the water? I'm a cowman and a prospector, but I'm sure tenderfooted 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 been doin’ nothing,” Shorty said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “We ain’t been 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 morning now.”

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 gusts 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 metaphor.

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 Bennett 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 unavoidable 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 Chechako.”

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 chechako 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.”

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 center 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 goldrushers.

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 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 with me only my nephew, 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 what 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 help keep her straight. Once we’re started, you won’t be able to hear me, so just keep on keeping her 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 scarest 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.”

After running the stranger’s 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 up-flung into 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 third 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 was 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 of 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-gear, 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. If 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, the boat 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 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."

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 hurrying 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 doubled 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 Labarge. 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 northwest shore 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 into 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 northwest shore loomed nearer and nearer. The gale blew ever 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 labored, and a second.

“If you fellows’d 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 enclosure 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 Labarge 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 the sleep of exhaustion.

“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 your outfit to Dawson,” Shorty caught him up. “Well, we’re takin’ it, 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 harbor, 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 as 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.

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, at the lower end of the bend, they caught the current 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 center of a cake seventy-five feet in diameter. Sometimes they floated sideways, 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.”

For three days Kit and Shorty labored, 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. Savvy? 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.”

III. THE STAMPEDE TO SQUAW CREEK

Two months after Smoke Bellew and Shorty went after moose for a grub-stake, 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 who 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 an' 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 they 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 remitted his naked hand hastily as if the frost had burned 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 of 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.”

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 barkeeper.”

“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 neighborhood. 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? An’ 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 a whole string 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 stampederers.

“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 stampederers 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 stampederers 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 chechako jumps my claim.”

The average pace of the stampede 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 been figgerin’. Creek claims is five hundred feet. Call ‘em ten to the mile. They’s a thousand stampede 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’d 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 stampede 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 layin’ 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 been 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 again. Seven were frozen to death, while scores of amputations of toes, feet, and fingers were performed in the Dawson hospitals on the survivors. For the stampede 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 hand, 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 nothin' 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 chechakos. 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 her.

"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 chechakos 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 chechakos. 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 Koyukuk 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 'em 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 Koyukuk."

"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 been there for another half hour to the least, accordin' to my reckonin'. I must 'a' been 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 solicitously.

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 chechakos 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 to the fresh trail 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 make 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 wallop in', if women folk 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 stampedeers 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 been 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 pasear 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 Koyukuk 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, so 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 their pace on account of her evident weariness, insisted on taking her turn in 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 stampede.

"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 cease at the lowest temperatures. The water flows out from the banks and lies in pools which are 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 center-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 stampedeers 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 center-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 thousand feet,” he proclaimed. “Number twenty-seven an’ 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 center-stakes of two full an’ honest five-hundred-foot creek 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’.”

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 of their blankets lay six inches of frost crystals.

“Good morning! how are 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 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 center-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 the rest and all of this woman of his kind. 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 center-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.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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