

JAMES B. HENDRYX

RAW GOLD



Two generations fight the bitter north for raw gold
"that takes the heart and the guts of a man."

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Raw Gold
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Connie Morgan in the Fur Country
Connie Morgan in the Lumber Camps
Connie Morgan with the Forest Rangers
Connie Morgan with the Mounted
Connie Morgan Hits the Trail

JAMES B. HENDRYX

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CHAPTER I

EIGHTEEN HUNDRED AND FORTY-NINE

MUD, and a gray drizzle. Sodden sand dunes, and bleak hills. Board shanties and tents lining narrow lanes choked with plunging horses and patiently wallowing oxen hitched to huge wagons piled high with merchandise, hub-deep in the mire. Pack mules plodding under towering back loads. Drunken teamsters, mud-caked from boot heels to hats, cursing their animals and one another impartially. Unhoused merchandise, tarpaulin-covered or wholly exposed to the weather, occupying every square foot of space not already tented or shantied. And, dominating all, the electric thrill of gold! San Francisco, in the spring of 1849!

Clutching his green carpetbag, Matthew Blunt drew his companion into one of the narrow footways between the piles of goods, and together the two watched the tense-eyed, rowdy throng crowd pass and lose itself in the misty blur of shanties and tents.

“What’s the use in bein’ first off’n the ship, if we’re goin’ to stand here an’ let all the others pass us?” questioned Jake Valentine, impatiently. “An’ where we goin’ to dig the gold at? By hell, we could of got all the mud we wanted back home in Emmonsville.”

Matthew Blunt grinned as he turned up his coat collar against the chill drizzle. “The talk on the ship was that the gold’s back in the mountains. An’ as for lettin’ the others pass us—they don’t know wher’ they’re goin’ any more’n we do. It pays to look around a little.”

“Look around! What we want’s the tavern where we can get us a dram, an’ a meal of vittles, an’ a bed fer the night.”

“Tavern!” exclaimed Blunt. “We’ll be lucky to get a chance to sleep on a dram-shop floor. The town ain’t big enough for the folks that’s here. Look, there’s a saloon just a little ways down the street. The others all swarmed on past. Maybe we can find out about lodgin’s before they come scatterin’ back. Let’s go.”

Carpetbags in hand, the two made their way over the slippery footboards that paralleled the lane of mud. From the doorway of a shanty a woman in bedraggled finery

called to Valentine who was a few steps in advance, "Hello, dearie! What's your hurry! Come on in for a while."

Valentine stopped stock-still, blocking the narrow way, as he eyed the woman with a friendly smile. "Guess you've made a mistake, ain't you? I never seen you before. We just come in on the ship."

A sharp jab in the ribs from Blunt started him on his way, hot blood flushing his face, as the shrill laughter of the drab rang in his ears.

A sodden banner of canvas, stretched above the sidewalk, bore the single word: SALOON. Beneath it the two entered an open door, stepped to the rough pine bar, and rested their carpetbags on the floor at their feet.

"Two drinks of licker," ordered Jake Valentine, and producing a roll, laid a five-dollar bill on the bar.

Eyeing the roll, the bartender set out bottle and glasses. "Kind of a mean day out," he opined. "But you'll get used to it. Come in on the boat?"

"Yes," answered Blunt. "We're goin' to the mines. Do you know where we can find lodgin's for a few days?"

The man grinned. "There's restaurants to eat in, but a man sleeps where he can. There ain't a bed nor a bunk in town that ain't doin' its double shift at five dollars a throw. I'm sleepin' a few of the boys upstairs on the floor at a dollar a head, fer accommodation. You got blankets?"

"No, but we'll get some. Where's a store?"

"Some acrost the street, an' some on this side. Plenty of stores. Plenty of saloons, too. Too damn many of 'em. Drink up an' have one on the house. Want bitters in it?"

The two drank the whiskey and bitters, and as the bartender served other customers, their eyes took in the details of the saloon. It was different from the quiet taproom of the tavern in the little Ohio town from which they had been lured by the rumors of gold. In the rear of the large room an elegantly dressed and handsomely mustached gentleman lingered near a long table gaudily painted with numerous lines, words, and figures, and containing in its center a revolving disk, or wheel, also numbered. At a round table on the opposite side from the bar, half a dozen men, hatbrims shading their eyes, played poker. Save for an occasional low spoken word and the soft click and rattle of chips, the game proceeded in silence. Mud-spattered men drifted in from the street, drank at the bar, and passed out. A few lingered.

Carrying their luggage, Blunt and Valentine started for the door, to be halted by the bartender. "H'ist yer bags over the bar. I'll look out fer 'em. You can fetch yer blankets here, too."

Gladly the two allowed the heavy carpetbags to be deposited in some recess back of the bar and stepped from the room. Almost in front of the door a heavily loaded wagon was mired to the hubs. The two stopped for a moment to watch the teamster who, driven to fury by his inability to move the load, was screaming an unbroken stream of curses as he belabored the four big horses with a heavy blacksnake whip. The animals, driven to frenzy by the cursing and flailing, plunged and jerked against the collars in frantic and ununified effort to avoid the stinging lash, only to stand quivering with heaving flanks as their teammates plunged.

The sight was too much for Jake Valentine. The mild blue eyes that dominated the good-natured face of the Ohio farm boy hardened, and unmindful of his new cowhide

boots and homespun pants, he stepped from the footboards and, wallowing to the teamster's side, laid a heavy and ungentle hand upon the wrist of the arm that wielded the blacksnake. "You damn fool!" he roared. "That ain't no way to use horse-flesh!"

The bearded teamster, already goaded to insane rage, stared in open-mouthed astonishment for a moment into the blue eyes of this stranger who had presumed to interfere in the matter of his teaming. But only for a moment. With a bellowed curse he lashed out with a fist, and very suddenly Jake Valentine, blood gushing from his nose, landed in the soft mud squarely upon the seat of his homespun pants. For a brief instant he sat there blinking foolishly, while onlookers on the footboards laughed uproariously. Then, blowing the blood from his lips in a red spray, he rose to his feet just as the teamster drew back his arm to finish his work with the blacksnake. The next thing the teamster knew, he was flat on his back, with two hundred pounds of young muscle on top of him, crowding him deeper and deeper into the mud that, gripping him hip and thigh, rendered his frantic struggles futile. But the younger man was not striking blows. A huge hand sticky with blood and mud was laid against the teamster's face, and his head was shoved out of sight in the miry ooze. On the footboards the growing crowd whooped in delight as the face reappeared, drawn from the mud by the whiskers. Again the crowd whooped, as the youth, still spouting a bloody spray, reached for a handful of soft mud and rubbed it well into the black beard and cursing mouth. The cursing thickened and became inarticulate. The frantic struggling ceased.

"You got enough? Hey—you got enough?"

The reply, inaudible to the crowd, was evidently satisfactory, for the younger man removed his knees from the other's midriff, and with difficulty hoisted him by the shoulders from his temporary grave. Then, as the teamster stood clawing the mud from his whiskers and spitting it from his mouth, the stranger favored him with a bloody-lipped grin.

"You wipe them lines off, an' I'll move yer load," he said. And turning his back, he walked to the head of the off wheeler, where, gently rubbing the huge animal's neck and nose, he talked softly into the pricked ears. The off leader came next, then the near leader and wheeler in turn. Crossing back on the doubletree, between horses and wagon, he rejoined the teamster who, staring in wonder, meekly handed over the reins, from which the mud had been carefully wiped. Stooping, he picked up the blacksnake, wiped the mud from the handle, and handed it to the other. Jake Valentine took the whip and with a sweep of his arm hurled it far down the street. Gently he tightened on the four reins.

"Steady now, boys. Steady she goes. Whoa, now. Take it easy. Altogether now, boys—altogether—heave on her—boys—pull her along. Whoa, there—steady." The four big horses leaned easily and steadily against the collars, the mighty muscles ridging along their hips as they strained to move the load. But the wagon remained fixed—gripped fast in the mud. "Whoa, boys—take it easy."

The tugs slackened, and the horses stood quietly, as Jake Valentine studied the load. "You got on too much fer the road you've got," he said, addressing the teamster. "But get a couple of planks to slip under the wheels an' we'll move her."

"Planks! Planks! Sufferin' Mike! What with buildin' goin' on like it is, they'd hang a man fer usin' a lath—let alone a plank. Hold on, I'll give you some footin'!" Clambering onto the load, the man pried the cover from a huge box of merchandise and began throwing out bolts of cloth. "Chuck them under the wheels an' roll her if you kin. There's

too damn much cloth in camp anyhow—they'll never sell the half of it!"

Aghast at the vandalism, Jake rammed the flat slabs of bolt goods under the wheels, and once more he picked up the reins. "Come on, boys." Gently, soothingly his words fell on the ears of the four big horses, as the reins firmly tightened on their bits. "Take her out, boys. All to once, now. Gid-ap, boys. Snatch her along!" Carefully he swung to the left, then to the right as the wheels began slowly to revolve, grinding bolt goods deep into the mire. Feeling the load move, the huge beasts dug in, every strap tight, every muscle bulging to the pull. Gradually, the load gained momentum, the felloes dropping great chunks of mud as they lifted from the mire. On the footwalk the crowd cheered as the heavy load moved forward to the plop and suck of heavy hoofs, and the steady voice of the driver, louder, now, in shouts of encouragement. "Take her along, boys! Walk her out of here!" And the wagon rolled steadily forward until halted on drier ground a hundred yards from the scene of its bogging.

The mud-plastered teamster came up to where Jake Valentine was stroking and talking to the panting horses. He thrust out a grimy hand.

"Put 'er thar, stranger! An' by God! Do you want a job? Stidy work freightin' to Marysville—five dollars a day an' found."

The younger man shook his head. "I'm goin' to the mines," he said. "Me an' my pardner's goin' to dig gold."

"To hell with the gold! Freightin's the game in this country. Hell—they won't one in a hundred git gold. Freightin's sure—they all got to eat, an' they got to have clothes, an' lumber, an' hardware! I got ten outfits on the road now. Tell you what I'll do—ten dollars a day an' found! I'll make you head teamster—wagon boss of the hull works—an' you won't have to lay hand to a harness. By God, you savvy horses! Make all the damn teamsters throw away their whips—er lay 'em on their back an' rub mud in their whiskers!"

Valentine shook his head. "No—I'm goin' to hunt gold."

"All right, have it yer own way. But when you git tired of it, you hunt up Brock Throgmorton, an' I'll give ye a job. Come on in yere now, an' I'll buy ye a new suit of clothes. Them's ruined—an' ye look like a damn emmygrant with 'em on, anyhow."

CHAPTER II

A NIGHT'S SLEEP

FOR the remainder of the day Matthew Blunt and Jake Valentine circulated among the stores and saloons of San Francisco, which many of the inhabitants still called Yerba Buena, listening to the talk of gold. Hangtown—the Yuba, the American, Sutter's Mill, the "Emmygrant" Trail up Bear River, American Hill, Caldwell's store, Gold Run, Johnson's Ranch—each had its quota of adherents and boosters who brazenly bragged up their own choice of location and defamed all others.

"Hell fire! On the North Fork of the Yuba, Major Downey an' the Kanaka is whittlin' three hundred dollars a day in raw gold out of the rock cracks with butcher knives!"

"What's three hundred dollars a day? Look at Cut Eye Foster, an' Bullard's Bar!"

"Hell, that's fine gold—rockers, an' long toms! None of that fer me! I seen chunks that run up to sixteen, seventeen hundred dollars apiece that was prized out of the rocks on a side crick!"

And so went the talk. No sooner had the two partners decided upon a location than a rumor would reach their ears of another strike more fabulous by far, and this in turn would give place to another. They saw raw gold weighed over the bars for drinks, and over store counters in return for goods. They ate at a restaurant that charged outrageous prices for mediocre food, and didn't mind the charge. What were a few dollars when they would soon be prizing gold out of the rocks in chunks?

Now and then a man in a saloon or a store would recognize Jake Valentine as the lad who had put Brock Throgmorton on his back and made him like it, and as a crowning insult, had showed him how to start a load with his own team. By these he was greeted as an equal, especially as his newly purchased clothing disguised the fact that he was of the rawest of the raw "emmygrants." His opinion was asked on the relative merits of the various diggings, and as he spoke oracularly, if casually, of the North Fork of the Yuba or of American Hill, Matthew Blunt repressed a grin.

Late the two lingered in the barroom above which they had paid in advance for floor space for the night. The desultory trade of the daytime became an orgy of spending as the night wore on. Men lined the bar where three bartenders were kept busy. The elegantly dressed and mustached gentleman, aided by three assistants, only slightly his sartorial inferiors, did a rushing business at the long table of the purring wheel—raking in chips, shoving them out, cashing them for gold. Five poker tables were continuously in action with men eager to sit in whenever a seat was vacated.

Matthew Blunt and Jake Valentine drank sparingly at the bar and looked on in bewildered amazement at the reckless play. At midnight they retrieved their blankets from behind the bar and climbed the ladder to the loft, where in the dim light of a low-turned kerosene lantern they picked their way among sleeping forms and sought an unoccupied corner of the bare room.

"My Gawd, Matt, did you ever see the like?" whispered Jake, as, wrapped in their blankets, with their coats for pillows, they lay side by side.

"I never did—but it's the life, ain't it, Jake? I knew it would be like this—I read about it in the *Gazette*. Just think—I've wasted all these years sellin' lime an' coal an' lumber in Pa's little office!"

“Yeah—an’ me on the farm! We won’t never go back, will we, Matt?”

“No—never! Even when we’re rich. I’ll send fer my wife an’ kids.”

“How many you got, Matt?”

“Two boys—one five, an’ one six. I’ll be sendin’ fer ’em next year, maybe.”

“Gawd—they might die crossin’ that there Is’mus. Wasn’t that hell? I never thought it could git so hot! An’ the fever! How many was it died, Matt?”

“Thirty-seven, countin’ them on the boat. We was lucky. . . . This damn floor’s hard.”

“You bet, but it’s better’n the ship. Remember how she rolled; an’ how sick we was? That was the time to die. I wouldn’t of give a damn. What we goin’ to do tomorrow?”

“Get us an outfit an’ hit out fer the mountains an’ begin to dig gold. That’s what we come for.”

“Sure—but wher’ we goin’ to go?”

Matthew Blunt chuckled softly. “You ort to know. I heard you tellin’ which was the best diggin’s.”

“Well, they asked me—an’ everyone else was tellin’ other folks where to go. Where do you think?”

“Yuba River sounds good to me.”

“Yeah—or mebbe somewheres else. We’ll find out tomorrow——”

“Shet yer damn traps!” growled a sleepy voice a few feet distant. “What the hell d’ye think this is—a convention?”

The partners subsided into silence, broken by sounds from below—voices raised in argument, snatches of song and loud laughter.

It was well toward morning when both awoke, sitting bolt upright. Bang! Bang! Bang! A sliver flew up from the floor and fell on Matthew’s blanket, and another dropped from a rafter. A loud-shouted command followed the shots:

“Hey, quit that! Shoot in the floor! There’s men asleep upstairs!”

In the dim light the two saw other men sitting up in their blankets.

“What the hell?” growled someone.

Another shifted his position and lay down: “Aw, jest someone shootin’ off his gun. They don’t mean no harm—let ’em go.”

“But—them bullets come up through the floor here!”

“Well, you don’t expect a inch board to stop a forty-five, do ye?”

“No—an’ by God, I ain’t goin’ to stop one, neither!” The speaker, blanket under his arm, was making for the ladder. Several others followed. Some slept on.

“Lay down,” advised the man who had explained that the shooter meant no harm. “If yer goin’ to git it, you’ll git it—an’ if you ain’t, you won’t. I’m sleepy.”

But despite their late hours, neither Matthew Blunt nor Jake Valentine felt need of further sleep. Very promptly they joined those who sought the ladder. Daylight was just breaking as they stepped onto the barroom floor. The bartender was apologetic: “None of you hit, was you? . . . Well, that’s good.”

“No, we wasn’t hit,” said Jake, “but a couple of them bullets come up through the floor right between where him an’ me was layin’—an’ we wasn’t more’n a foot apart, neither!”

“Well, a foot’s quite a ways when you come to think about it. Anyway, a miss is good as a mile, as the sayin’ is. You can go on back to sleep if you want to. That was only High Flume Johnson—damn good feller, wouldn’t hurt no one. Just a bit drunk, an’ wantin’ to

make a noise. I made him quit shootin' at the ceilin'. That ort to be put a stop to, as long as fellers is sleepin' upstairs. Some of 'em's nervous, like. I'll paint a sign, when I git around to it. Hell—it's jest as much fun shootin' a floor as a ceilin' if they only know'd it. What'll you have? I'll buy a drink to show there's no hard feelin's."

The partners declined the liquor, and caching their blankets behind the bar sought a restaurant. "Gawd, I'm stiff," complained Jake Valentine, stretching himself in his chair. "I'd give a pretty fer one of Ma's shuck ticks."

"You ain't as stiff as you'd be if one of them bullets would of hit the floor a little over from wher' it did," reminded Matthew.

"I'm goin' to hunt another place to sleep. I don't like that place. No more upstairs fer me in Californy!"

"We'll be hittin' fer the mines today. We'll be sleepin' on the ground from now on."

"Suits me. A rock couldn't be no harder'n that floor—an' there can't no bullets come up through one. Gosh, if Ma an' Pa know'd what kind of a place I'd got into they'd make me come back home! Anyhow, this is a lot better'n plowin' an' sloppin' the hogs! This here's livin'!"

"Yeah," grinned Blunt. "An' damn near dyin'."

CHAPTER III

THE GOLD LEDGE MINING CO.

BREAKFAST over, the two drifted back to the saloon where they had passed the night. It was deserted now, save for a few dejected-looking citizens who sourly nursed their hangovers. The bartender engaged them in conversation. A half-hour passed and, one at a time, men began to trickle into the room. Strangers to one another, apparently, they drank alone and loafed about in chairs. The bartender served them perfunctorily and returned to his conversation with the two partners.

Another man entered and, sidling to the bar, ordered liquor. He was a large man, bearded to the eyes, his boots and clothing showing rigorous wear. Downing his liquor, he called for another. The bartender eyed him speculatively.

"Listen, pardner," he said. "Anyone's welcome to a drink. Er, if he tells me he's broke, I'll make it two. But a man can't keep on orderin' drinks without he shows the color of his dust."

The bearded one grinned. "Fair enough, stranger. Well—take a look at that!" Reaching into his pocket, he produced an irregular, flattish lump of gold that covered half the palm of his hand. "An' if that don't hurt yer eyes, you might take a look at this un—an' this—an' this!" One by one he produced other lumps which he placed beside the first on the bar. The bartender's eyes bulged from their sockets. The others swarmed to the bar—the men with the hangovers, and those who had entered later. Matthew Blunt and Jake Valentine had edged close at sight of the first big nugget.

"God A'mighty!" breathed the bartender, staring in fascination at the yellow pile.

"Fill 'em up fer everyone!" roared the newcomer. "The drinks is on me. There's plenty more wher' this come from! I kin shovel her out by the bar'l. Fill 'em up—an' keep on fillin'! I'm in from the mountains—an' I crave action! I'm the grizzly from the high hills! I'm the catamount that yells in the night! Whoopee!"

The men crowded close, tossing off their liquor and plying the man with questions. "Wher'd it come from?" . . . "Wher's yer diggin's, pardner?" . . . "That ain't no river gold!"

The stranger concurred. "Yer right it ain't no river gold! It's rock gold—that is! A whole ledge of it—an' I peck it out with a pick!"

"Wher's the ledge at?"

"Let us in!"

The man laughed loudly. "It's back in the hills—away back! It's up gulches an' acrost ridges. It's wher' no white man's be'n before. Nor there won't none go agin, without I show 'em the way! It's so damn far back a man can't pack the grub that'll git him there. Mules—that's what a man needs—mules an' powder an' grub. I'm thinkin' of formin' a company. Ten thousan' dollars—that'll buy mules an' powder an' grub. Ten men at a thousan' a man! An' I don't put up nothin'—I git in free!"

"You say," asked the bartender, fingering the lumps of gold, "you say that a man can peck this out with a pick?"

"Yes—an' a plenty!"

"An' how big's the ledge?"

"Hell, I don't know. I've prospected a mile of it—an' she's all jest alike."

Swiftly the man reached for his pocket, drew out a wallet, and laid a thick packet of bills on the bar. "Two shares fer me!" he cried, counting out the bills. "Two thousand dollars—two shares!"

"I'll take a share!" cried another.

"And me!"

"And me!"

"I'll take two shares!"

The bartender leaned across the bar and whispered excitedly to Blunt and Valentine, who were staring at the yellow gold. "Git in on this while you can! If I had the dinero I'd take it all. I've seen gold a plenty—but never nothin' like this!"

"I'll take a share!" Matthew Blunt heard himself uttering the words in a voice that sounded high-pitched and dry with excitement.

"Let me in—boys—let me in!" pleaded a smallish man with a blazing red nose. He was dressed in loudly checked trousers, a red plush waistcoat under a long black coat, and a plug hat set at an angle. "I only got five hundred—but I'm a lawyer, an' I'll draw up the papers, an' write out the shares fer the rest of it. Come on—let me in—you got to have papers, or it won't be legal!"

"That's right," agreed the bearded man who had flashed the gold. "We got to have everything legal an' aboveboard er I won't have nothin' to do with it. How many shares is that? Let's see—that makes nine. One more share—who wants it? How about you?" He turned abruptly upon Jake Valentine. "Want the last share, or do we wait fer the next man that comes in to grab it?"

"Sure thing—I'd like to take one," cried Jake, choking with eagerness. "But I ain't got but seven hundred dollars. An' I ain't no lawyer," he added ruefully, eyeing the man in the plug hat with envy.

"Sell him half a share," suggested one.

"No half-shares!" cried the bearded stranger. "Hell—give him a hull share! I'll loan him the three hundred myself. Here, pardner," he cried, with a wave of the hand. "Tell the barkeep to weigh you three hundred out of the pile, an' wrop yer roll around it! Hell fire! You can dig out enough in half a day to pay me back when we git to the diggin's!"

"Here's my money," said the bartender, shoving a sheaf of bills toward the bearded one.

"Hold on," the man objected, returning the bills. "This has all got to be reg'lar an' proper. There ain't no company yet. Keep yer money till the papers is drawn up proper." He turned to the lawyer. "You git busy now an' make up them papers an' write out the shares. There's twelve shares in this here company. You-all pays fer yourn, an' I git my two fer the location. That's fair an' reasonable, ain't it, gents?"

All agreed that it was fair and reasonable, and the lawyer started for the door. The bearded man called after him, "Git them papers out by afternoon. Then we'll call a meetin' an' elect officers. We've got to have a pres'dent, an' secretary, an' treasurer to handle the money. We'll meet at three o'clock. An' jest so they won't everyone know our business, we'll hold the meetin' in my tent which I got her set up out on the edge of town. Everyone be right here at three, an' we go down to the tent. An' in the meantime, let's licker!"

Jake Valentine tendered the man the two nuggets the bartender had weighed out to him. "Here's your three hundred dollars," he said. "You can pay it in for me when we

hold the meetin’.”

The man waved the gold aside: “Keep it on ye, pardner. Shove her right down in yer jeans along with yer bills. If I couldn’t trust a man with a stinkin’ little three hundred, I wouldn’t be lettin’ him in on a deal like this, would I? Not by a damn sight, I wouldn’t! Not Modoc Billings!”

Not caring to join in the drinking bout, Matthew and Jake sauntered from the saloon. They were joined by one of the investors. “Might’s well kind of look the town over whilst that lawyer’s fixin’ up the papers,” he said pleasantly. “I don’t hold fer much drinkin’, neither. Little’s all right, now an’ then. But too much ain’t no good. I tell you, we’re lucky to git in on a strike like that! An’ with old Modoc Billin’s hisself! Yessir—when I first seen him come in the door, I says to myself, I bet that there ain’t no one but Modoc Billin’s—an’ sure enough that’s who he was! He done told us hisself.”

“Who’s Modoc Billin’s?” asked Jake.

“Modoc Billin’s! Hell, man, don’t tell me you ain’t hearn tell of Modoc Billin’s! Everyone knows Modoc. How long you be’n in the country?”

“We come in yesterday on the boat.”

“Oh—that’s different. Well, Modoc Billin’s has made more big strikes than any man in Californy. He makes a strike, an’ then he forms a company an’ gits it goin’ good, an’ then he sells out to his pardners and goes ’way back in the hills an’ makes him another strike. He can’t abide civil-eye-zation—not even minin’-camp civil-eye-zation. So when the camps creeps in on him, he sells out an’ hunts him up another strike. They say he’s got two, three million, already. An’ he’d give a man the shirt off’n his back. Like he give you them nuggets. Let’s have a look at ’em. A man don’t see gold like that every day.”

Down near the docks they paused while Jake unwrapped the bills from about the two irregular lumps of gold while three pairs of eyes feasted gloatingly on their dull yellow richness. One by one they were passed about and hefted by eager hands. “God, it’s heavy! Heavier’n lead. An’ jest think of packin’ it out of the rocks by the bar’l! Boys—we’re rich!” The man’s eyes fairly radiated opulence as he watched Jake wrap the bills about the nuggets and return them to his pocket.

“You bet!” agreed Jake. “Jest think of peckin’ three hundred dollars’ worth of gold out of the rocks in a half a day—that’s what Modoc Billin’s said—a half a day! That’s more’n Pa clears on his farm in a year—some years. Folks is fools that don’t come to Californy. You bet when Matt showed me that piece in the public print about Californy, an’ told me he was goin’ out there, I borried a thousan’ dollars off’n Pa, an’ come along! I’m a-goin’ back to Emmons ville in a year er so, fer a visit—jest to show ’em. I’ll pay Pa back in nuggets like these here—an’ I’ll be dressed up like that feller that runs that gamblin’ wheel, with a big diamon’ ring like his’n—only I’ll have me two big gold watch chains runnin’ acrost the front of my wes’cot. He’s only got one.”

“Sure,” agreed the affable stranger. “That’s Doc Mellie. We’ll make him look like a straggler, the way we’ll be dressin’ around here six months from now.”

“Jest think,” said Matthew as the three turned away from the waterfront, “I’ve be’n wastin’ my life workin’ in my father’s lumber yard fer sixty a month!”

The three sauntered about the town until noon, when the stranger paused before the door of a restaurant. “Let’s eat,” he suggested, addressing Matthew. “Tell you what we’ll do—Jake here ain’t got no more money than what he needs to buy his share, so we’ll let him toss up a dollar, an’ if heads comes up, I’ll buy the dinner for the three of us—tails

you buy.”

Matthew readily agreed, and stepping into the room, the stranger slipped a silver dollar into Jake’s hand. “Toss her up, Jake! Tails you lose, Matt!”

Jake flipped the coin into the air. It rang on the floor, spun for a moment, and settled to rest. “Tails it is!” exclaimed the man, pocketing the coin. “I tell you this is my lucky day! It’s a lucky day for all of us—to get in with Modoc Billin’s. Here’s a table, over here.”

Had Matthew Blunt examined the stranger’s dollar, he would have discovered a surprising fact—both faces of the coin showed tails—its mate, showing heads on both faces, reposed beside it in the stranger’s pocket. But neither he nor Jake had noticed.

The two hours between dinner and three o’clock dragged interminably. At two-thirty they returned to the saloon, where Modoc Billings was still engaged in the pastime of lickin’ up. Both Jake and Matthew commented on the man’s apparent capacity. He was joyously hilarious, but none the worse for his liquor.

“Yeah,” agreed their companion, “Modoc, he don’t hit the camps very often, an’ when he does he likes to celebrate. He kin outdrink any man he ever run up against. He never gets drunk—jest feelin’ good like he is now. An’ he’s religious, too. He kin say the Lord’s Prayer back’ards faster’n any preacher kin say it frontwards. I hearn how he beat a preacher at it fer the drinks fer the house in Marysville last fall. He’ll bet any money he kin do it every time. You kin tell Modoc’s be’n raised right—most folks can’t say it frontwards!”

At a few minutes before three the lawyer appeared, some neatly rolled sheets of foolscap in his hand. Evidently he had consulted John Barleycorn quite as often as he had Blackstone in the drawing up of the document. His face showed owlshly solemn beneath the rim of the plug hat that sat on his head at even a more rakish angle than before, and he made his way to the bar in a series of sedate reverse curves.

Modoc Billings placed a guiding hand under the smaller man’s arm. “Come on along. We’re all here, an’ we’ll go to my tent an’ hold our election.” Followed by the other seven incorporators, he led the way, deftly guiding the solemnly tipsy lawyer over the slippery footboards. Beyond the last board shanty the man raised the flap of a small wall tent. “Go on in,” he invited. “We kin set on the blankets whilst our pardner here reads us what he’s got wrote down.”

When the little assembly was seated, the lawyer unrolled his foolscap, with some difficulty adjusted a pair of spectacles, and proceeded to read with the utmost gravity, swaying slightly as the words rolled pompously, if thickly, from his lips:

“Know all men by zheese preshents zhat the shubscribed gen’lemen have agreed, each and sheveral, to form a company for the mining of gold.

“Whereash, zhish company shall be knows ash the Gold Ledge Mining Company.

“Whereash, there shall be twelve shares of the value of one shousan’ dollers each.

“Whereash, all shaid shares mush be paid up, and the shaid money ushed for the purshase of mulesh and shupplish for ush in transportation and mining.

“Whereash, it shall be the duty of shaid members to elect the following officers, to wit, a preshident, a shecretary, and a treasurer.

“And, whereash, zhish company, to wit, the Gold Ledge Mining Company, ashumes no obligations to anyone, for anything, at any time.

“Shined and shealed before me zhish shirteenth—I mean, shirteenth—— damn it! I’ll make it the twelfth—day of March, eighteen hundred an’ forty-nine.

“Considine Montgomery Potts,

“Attorney at Law.”

Modoc Billings arose and addressed the assembly. "Well, gents, you've heard the paper all draw'd up fair an' reg'lar. If there ain't no objections we'll call it a job, an' go ahead an' elect our officers." He paused abruptly and pointed to the bartender. "What's your name?"

"Sam Sprowl."

"All right, all in favor of Sam Sprowl fer president of this here Gold Ledge Minin' Company, holler 'Aye.'"

The vote was unanimous for Mr. Sprowl, and he took the floor as Modoc Billings sat down. "Thank you, gents. We'll now elect a secretary, which his duty will be to—to—to—well, to kind of carry around that paper our lawyer wrote out, an' answer all letters wrote to the company, or any one of 'em—an' such other matters as comes up. I nominate Mr.—" He paused and glanced toward the lawyer who had slumped down beside Modoc. "What's that long name of yourn, agin?"

"Considine Montgomery Potts—two t's," answered the man, gravely.

"Well, how's Pottsy, fer short? We don't want to have to knock off an hour early any time anyone'd want to holler fer you. Gents, I nominate Pottsy fer secretary. He's educated—an' kin prob'ly read his own writin', to boot. All them in favor, say 'aye.'"

The election of Mr. Potts was likewise unanimous, and the president orated further. "Now, gents, comes the treasurer. We'd ort to have a man fer treasurer which he's honest enough not to skip out with the money, an' likewise which he knows what we need to spend that money fer. I nominate Mr. Modoc Billin's fer treasurer. It was him that found the ledge, an' him that let us in on the proposition, an' it's him that knows jest what's needed to be boughten fer to carry on the business of minin' this here gold. Personal, I'm fer Modoc all the time. How about the rest of you?"

Mr. Billings was unanimously elected, and Mr. Sprowl continued: "All right, gents—the next thing is to pay in our money to the treasurer, an' sign up the paper. I'll lead off, payin' two thousan' dollars fer the two shares I agreed to take." Producing his wallet, the man counted out two thousand dollars in bills, which he handed to the treasurer, who handed him in return two slips of paper upon which had been written by Mr. Potts:

GOLD LEDGE MINING COMPANY
ONE SHARE
PAR VALUE \$1000

The others paid in turn, each receiving a slip representing their holdings in the company, and each in turn affixing his signature to the document drawn up by the lawyer.

Modoc Billings arose, placed the money in his pocket with a flourish, and addressed the assembly. "All set, gents. We'll be pullin' out fer the hills tomorrow er the day after. I'll hit out to a ranch I know, an' buy us up four er five mules fer pack hosses. When I git back in the mornin' we'll buy our stuff an' pack up an' hit the trail. That's all. I guess the meetin's adjourned."

CHAPTER IV

SHANGHAIED

BACK in the saloon the members of the Gold Ledge Mining Company ranged themselves before the bar. "Gen'lemen," said Considine Montgomery Potts, his plug hat rakishly canted, "I move you that a round of drinks be ordered for the shtockholders, and that the treasurer be inshtucted to pay for zhem out of the funds on hand."

"Not by a damn sight!" exclaimed Modoc Billings. "Not a dollar of treasury money goes fer lickier, barrin' a couple of kags we'll take along fer colds an' snakebites, as long as I'm handlin' it. You-all paid in yer money fer to be used fer buyin' transportation an' supplies, neither one of which lickier under a man's belt ain't."

"I beg to differ, gen'lemen," replied Potts, as he drew to his full height and teetered from heels to toes in an endeavor to assume a dignity belied by his rakishly tilted hat. "I beg to differ wish our worthy treasurer."

"Shut up, Potts, I'm buyin' a drink!" Sam Sprowl, the president, tossed a bill upon the bar. "Drink up, gents," he invited, holding his glass aloft. "Here's to the luck of the Gold Ledge Minin' Company! An' that ain't all. Tonight at nine o'clock we'll all go down to my shack, which it's the last one on the shore above the docks, an' have us a big feed fer to celebrate our last night in town fer a many a day. There'll be lickier an' fixin's. The Chinks is to work on it now."

The announcement was greeted with approval by all except Modoc Billings, who regretfully declined. "You-all go down an' have yer fun. But I've got responsibilities onto me—an' I'm leavin' to buy up some mules. Business comes first with Modoc Billings. Have yer frolic, men. I'll be thinkin' about ye whilst I'm foggin' them mules through the night."

"I'll go along an' help with the mules," suggested Jake Valentine eagerly. "I'm a good hand with horses, an' I don't care much fer drinkin' an'—an' I ain't fergot them nuggets you loaned me."

Modoc regarded him benignly. "Yer a good lad, Jake, my boy. An' I'm thankin' ye fer yer offer. Jest you fergit about them nuggets till yer ready to pay me—an' any time ye need more, jest hunt up Modoc Billings! But the trail to the ranch I'm goin' to is so rough that no one that didn't know it could ride it in the dark, no matter how good they was. Go down with the boys tonight an' have you a good time. From tomorrow on it'll be hard work—an' don't you fergit it!"

During the remainder of the afternoon the members of the Gold Ledge Mining Company hung about the saloon. Matthew Blunt, Jake Valentine, Sprowl, and another played old sledge for cigars. Potts devoted himself assiduously to his glass, and the others played poker.

When it was time to depart for the celebration, Matthew and Jake called Sprowl aside. Blunt acted as spokesman. "When the party's over tonight, why not let me an' Jake sleep down to your place? We'd pay you two dollars apiece jest to sleep on the floor. We don't like it upstairs here. We can't get use' to them bullets comin' up through the floor."

"Sure, you kin sleep down there!" agreed the man heartily. "An' now we're what you might say pardners, it won't cost you nothin'. Sorry I ain't got an extry bunk. But there won't be no bullets. Fetch yer blankets right along."

Stepping behind the bar, Sprowl secured the blankets, which he crowded into a grain sack together with several quart bottles of whiskey, and threw it over his shoulder. At a nod the stockholders who had been playing poker cashed in their chips and rose from the table. Indicating Potts with a jerk of the thumb, Sprowl turned to Matthew and Jake. "Fetch him along. He's goin' to need a lot of steerin' to keep from gittin' mired in the mud."

"Why not leave him here?" suggested Blunt. "He's happy."

"Yeah, an' have him makin' speeches about the Gold Ledge Company, an' the gold we got in sight! Hell—we'd have half Californy follerin' us into the hills!"

It was with no little difficulty that Matthew and Jake, one on either side of the drunken lawyer, succeeded in piloting him in the wake of the others over the slippery footboards. After what seemed an interminable stumbling through the darkness, Sprowl pushed open the door of a two-room board shanty built close to the water's edge. "Come right on in, gents, an' make yerselves to home. Them that can't find chairs kin set on the bunk. The Chinks'll have supper ready in a little bit, an' in the meantime, we'll h'ist a few drinks."

Producing a couple of bottles from the sack, he proceeded to the kitchen, whence wafted sounds of cookery and the odor of food.

Water glasses half filled with whiskey were passed around, Sprowl himself handing Matthew and Jake their glasses, which contained a smaller amount than had been apportioned to the others. "I know'd you lads don't go heavy on the lick, an' there's no use wastin' it, nor yet forcin' a man to drink more'n he wants, so I shortened yourn up a little. Not that you ain't welcome to all you can hold. This here's my treat, an' you can drink 'em as big an' as often as you want. Everyone gits in on this first drink, which it's to the good luck of the Gold Ledge Minin' Company, an' it would bring bad luck if any of it was left in the glass or throw'd out. After that you can take 'em as fast or as slow as you want 'em." The man turned to the others. "Come on now, boys—all together. Here's to the best damn proposition in all Californy—the Gold Ledge Minin' Company!" The men drank noisily, and noisily they returned the thick-bottomed glasses to the rude table and rasped the bite of the liquor from their throats.

Seated beside Jake Valentine on the bunk, Matthew Blunt's head began to reel dizzily. The room seemed insufferably hot. He loosened his shirt at the throat. And for what seemed to be a long, long time he fought an overpowering sense of drowsiness. He turned to speak to Jake, but Jake had sunk back on the blankets of the bunk and was breathing heavily and regularly. The conversation of the men was becoming blurred and confused. Sprowl stepped close beside him, and Matthew looked up into the man's face which seemed to be moving grotesquely in a thick fog of tobacco smoke. "I'm—feelin'—sleepy," he muttered thickly. "Didn't—sleep—good—them bullets——"

"Sure, that's all right," answered, Sprowl, stooping low. "Jest you lay back there on the bunk, side of yer pardner, an' we'll wake you fer the big feed."

Ten minutes passed, and, going to the door, Sprowl emitted a peculiar whistle, repeated three times. There was an answering whistle from the darkness, and a few moments later a man stepped into the room. He was a large man, bearded to the eyes. Sprowl grinned. "Well, Modoc, did you fetch them mules?"

The sally was greeted by a burst of guffaws, as the man known as Modoc Billings drew a roll of bills from his pocket. To each of the five conspirators he counted out one hundred dollars, splitting the remaining twelve hundred he had received from Blunt and

Valentine between himself and Sprowl.

“Fork over thet paper with their names signed to it, Pottsy,” he commanded, “an’ you others git them two into the boat. This job fills Cap Bascomb’s crew. The wind’s right, an’ he’ll be wantin’ to sail tonight. An’ you be on hand tomorrow, Pottsy—an’ sober enough to work. I seen Cap Svendrup; he’s got to fill in a crew fer the Sandwich Islands—eight of his Kanakas skipped out fer the mines.”

As the other four carried the two unconscious men from the room, Modoc turned to Sprowl. “You better git back on the job an’ spot some more likely ones. There was plenty come in on that boat. I’ll collect from Bascomb, an’ see you in a little while.”

A moment later Modoc Billings was seated in the stern of a clumsy boat, in the bottom of which lay two unconscious forms, while the four ruffians who had placed them there rowed through the darkness toward a tiny light that showed from the masthead of a sailing ship riding at anchor far out in the bay.

The hail of the deck watch was answered by Modoc, as the dark hulk of the ship towered above him. A line was thrown over the side and the small boat made fast. Other forms appeared at the rail, limned dimly against the sky. Another line was lowered, and one at a time the two unconscious men were hoisted aboard. Modoc followed, scrambling up a rope ladder that had been lowered. He was greeted on deck by a small, sharp-featured man, whose cold, cat-like green eyes stared at him through the lenses of square, steel-rimmed spectacles. “Two?” he snarled, with a glance at the forms on the deck, from one of which a sailor was removing the sling. “Able-bodied?”

“Yes—able-bodied. One of ’em laid Brock Thogmorton on his back, an’ showed him how to drive his own horses. An’ the other’s about as big.”

“Damn horses! I handle ships! Green hands, I s’pose.”

“Yeah—but yer lucky to git any, what with everyone hittin’ fer the mines. Come on—pay off!”

“Got their signatures?”

“Here they be. The two bottom ones.” Modoc handed over the articles of the Gold Ledge Mining Company, which the captain thrust into his pocket. “More bother’n they’re worth—green hands,” he grumbled, as he grudgingly handed over some bills which Modoc meticulously counted, holding them close to his eyes to catch the meager starlight. As he pocketed the money and turned toward the rail, the captain spoke to the mate, a hulking figure that stood scowling down at the two who lay on the deck.

“What with six green hands, you’ll be a busy man, Mr. Swile. Take ’em below an’ we’ll get under way.”

“By God, I’ll make sailors of ’em in a week—or ghosts!” growled the mate as he bellowed an order.

Modoc Billings grinned as he clambered down the rope ladder and took his place in the stern of the small boat. Before the boat beached he looked backward. Far out in the bay a tiny point of light was moving slowly through the blackness toward the Pacific.

CHAPTER V

NORTHWARD HO!

MATTHEW BLUNT awakened and lay for a long time conscious only of a terrible nausea and of the fact that his head ached as though it would split. He had the feeling of being borne up, up, up—and then down, down, down—only to begin the upward motion again. It reminded him of the long swell of the Pacific that had so sickened him on the voyage up from the Isthmus. But there was no clanking of machinery, no steady throbbing of engines. And, anyway, he and Jake had left the ship at San Francisco. He remembered the mushroom city of shanties and tents and mud—of Jake fighting with a teamster—of the saloon, and bullets coming up through the floor, of Modoc Billings, and the Gold Ledge Mining Company, of Sam Sprowl's shack down on the waterfront. They were going to have a supper or something. He remembered taking a drink of liquor—but had he got drunk? And had the men left him there in Sprowl's shack to sleep it off? In vain he cudged his brain to recollect what had taken place. Try as he would, he could remember nothing beyond that one drink. The room had been hot—and he was beginning to get sleepy.

Gradually his brain cleared. But he could not rid himself of the sensation of steadily and persistently rising and falling; nor could he remember a single event of the night beyond that one first drink. His mouth was dry, and he was conscious of a burning thirst. In vain he sought to penetrate the thick blackness. He reached about him. On one side his groping hand encountered a wall—on the other side, nothing. Evidently he was in a bunk of some sort—but where? And where was Jake Valentine? And where were the others? The air he sucked into his lungs was stale and reeked with fetid odors.

He called in a hoarse, croaking voice: "Jake!" And again, "Where are you, Jake?"

Out of the blackness came a hollow groan: "Oh, Gawd, I'm sick! That you, Matt? Who in hell's rockin' this shanty? It's even worse than the boat."

"Yes, it's me—an' I'm sick, too. I've got to have water. What in hell came off last night, or tonight, or whenever it was?"

"I don't know—an' I don't give a damn. I went to sleep. Give me some water, too. I'm burnin' up! An' for Gawd's sake, hold still!"

"I am still. Wait till I find a light." Matthew Blunt fumbled through his pockets. "My God, Jake, I've be'n robbed! Even my watch an' barlow are gone! An' what money I had left, along with 'em!"

After a moment of silence the voice of Jake cut through the darkness: "Me, too! D'you s'pose them Gold Ledgers done it? I'm goin' to git out of here! Where in hell's the door? By Gawd, I believe we're on a ship! Light a locofoco!"

"I can't. I ain't got one. Come on—let's find the door. We'll die in here, it stinks so!"

"Stink can't kill a man—but my head an' guts feels like somethin's goin' to. Where in hell's the door?"

Matthew's feet touched the floor, and as he stood erect he bumped his head sharply. "Ouch," he groaned. "We're in a kind of an alley, an' we can't stand up straight. There's bunks along the side. Come on, Jake. I found a door! An' it ain't locked!"

The door swung inward, and as Matthew pulled it open, dim light percolated the foul-smelling interior. Passing through the door, the two found themselves in a narrow

passageway. There was no doubt in their minds now that they were on board a ship. Daylight filtered down the companionway, and they made their way toward it. A grinning face greeted them from an aperture that gave into the cook's galley.

"For God's sake give us some water!" implored Matthew.

The face disappeared, and a moment later a large tin of water was thrust into his hands. Matthew drained it in great gulps, and again the face disappeared, to thrust a like pannikin into Jake's eager hands.

"What time is it? An' where are we?" asked Matthew.

"Two bells of the forenoon watch——"

"What's that by the clock?" interrupted Jake. "They talked about bells comin' up on the ship from the Is'mus, but I couldn't never figger it out."

"Nine o'clock—but don't worry, cully, you'll know yer bells 'fore you set foot ashore."

"But—we ain't goin' no place! What ship is this? An' why're we on her?"

The grin widened. "Yer goin' places, all right. This ship was the *Sassy Kate* when we cleared port. God knows what she'll be when the new paint dries. An' yer on her, 'cause you was prob'ly crimped."

"What's crimped? We didn't take passage on any ship!"

"You ain't passengers. Yer part of the crew——"

"But—we ain't sailors!"

"You will be, when Mate Swile an' his Sidney Ducks gits through with you." The cook thrust his face closer and lowered his voice. "Git up on deck 'fore the mate comes down an' kicks you up. An' fer God's sake make the best of it. Do as yer told—an' no back talk. Mate Swile's got a reputation—an' it ain't bad enough! He brained a sea lawyer last year with a belayin' pin. An' the captain's worse. Don't tell 'em I told you."

The man turned abruptly and disappeared within his domain, and Matthew led the way toward the companionway.

On deck the two paused and gazed about them in bewilderment. By the sun, the ship, with all sail set, was plowing northward. Far to the eastward a dim coast line showed. A voice bellowed at them from the bridge:

"Woke up, did ye? Well, turn to, an' lend a hand with them paint buckets!"

Matthew turned to look upward into the face of the huge bear of a man who was glowering down at them. "There's some mistake," he explained, raising his voice to carry above the singing of the stiff breeze through the rigging. "We want to see the captain."

"Mistake! Aye, mistakes aplenty!" roared the man, and turning gave an order to the man at the wheel. A moment later he was facing them on the deck. "What's the mistake? Cut it short! An' it's 'Mister' when ye speak to me!"

Matthew met the blaze of the pig-like eyes steadily. "It's a mistake that we're on board this ship, Mister. We want to see the captain."

Evidently, either the prompt use of the word "Mister" or the lack of belligerence in Matthew's eyes somewhat mollified the man. "Ye want to see the cap'n," he repeated with a sneer. "Well—see him ye shall. Foller me, an' ye might tell him to send what's left of ye back on deck."

The man led back down the companionway, and aft to the closed door of a cabin where he rapped sharply. "Couple of gents to see ye, Cap'n," he said, with an evil grin. "Sort of like to pass the time o' day, social."

“Send ’em in,” snapped a squeaky voice, “an’ go back to the bridge.”

The door swung open, and the two entered a tiny cabin to face a small, weasel-faced man whose greenish eyes stared at them through the lenses of his square steel-rimmed spectacles. The man had half turned from a desk littered with papers. “Well, what do you want?”

“There’s be’n some mistake made, sir. We don’t know how we come to be here, nor where we’re supposed to be goin’, nor anything about it.”

“Don’t know how you come to be here! What do you mean? You’re here because you signed on for the voyage!”

“We didn’t sign anything. We ain’t sailors. I worked in a lumber yard, an’ Jake here’s a farmer. We came to California to dig gold.”

“You ain’t sailors!” The voice sounded shrill with anger. “An’ do you mean to tell me you signed on as able seamen, an’ you ain’t sailors! It’s cheatin’! It’s downright skullduggery! I ought to have you clapped in irons. It’s an outrage.”

“But I tell you we didn’t sign on!” insisted Matthew. “Did we, Jake?”

“No, ’course not! How could we be sailors? We never even seen an ocean till we started fer Californy! Ships makes us sick.”

For answer the captain motioned them closer and pointed to a document on the desk before him. “Is that yer handwritin’ er ain’t it?”

Both Matthew and Jake stared aghast as their own signatures appeared before them on the paper. “I—I don’t understand,” stammered Matthew. “I don’t remember of signin’ that paper. We must have be’n awful drunk or somethin’. An’ we only had one drink.”

“That’s what shippin’ articles is fer,” sneered the captain. “To make sailors remember they signed on. An’ drunk er sober, one drink er a thousan’—it don’t make no difference. You didn’t look drunk, er act drunk, er talk drunk when you come up to me an’ Mr. Swile an’ shipped with us—an’ you claimed you was able seamen. An’ there’s yer names, black on white—right wher’ you put ’em.”

“But we got to get back to San Francisco!” exclaimed Jake. “We belong to a minin’ company. We’ve got shares! An’ we’re goin’ to start fer the mountains today er tomorrow!”

The captain laughed mockingly. “Jest speak to Mr. Swile,” he said. “It’s his watch. Mebbe he’ll about-ship an’ take you back to port. He’s an accommodatin’ man, is Mr. Swile.”

Matthew Blunt spoke, and his words came short-clipped and hard: “All right, you’ve got us. I see a lot of things now. We ain’t sailors, but we’ll do the best we can. This voyage can’t last forever. An’ when it’s over there’ll be hell to pay, for some folks.”

Something in the narrowed, steel-gray eyes gave the captain pause as Matthew turned to go. “Come back here!” he piped, in his high squeaky voice. As Matthew again faced him, the captain leaned back against the bulkhead and placed the tips of his fingers together. “Yer smarter’n the common run of sailormen we get—quite a bit smarter.”

“There’s others that’ll find that out, too,” snapped Matthew.

The captain ignored the retort, as an ingratiating note crept into his voice. “Why not let bygones be bygones? You lads say you ain’t sailors, after shippin’ as able seamen. But I’ll fergit that. There’s other work to be done on this ship.” He leaned forward, and one greenish eye winked knowingly behind its square lens. “Work that ain’t hard, but it’s partic’lar—an’ it’ll pay ye better’n any gold-diggin’ you could do in them mountains.”

“What do you mean?” asked Matthew.

“Know anything about gunnery?” countered the captain. “Ever handle a gun?”

“Sure. We’ve shot squirrels. An’ one year I went over to Virginia an’ shot a deer.”

“Rifles is handy fer close work,” admitted the captain. “But I mean big guns—cannon.”

“Cannon!” exclaimed Jake, his eyes bulging. “Hell, I never even seen one! What would a man be shootin’ at with a cannon—whales?”

“Ships!” snapped the captain. “Rooshian fur ships. Ever hear of sea otter an’ seals?”

“I’ve heard of seals,” admitted Matthew. “But what’s that got to do with shootin’ at Rooshian ships with cannons?”

“Like this. Them damn Rooshians owns the country north of here, an’ the Rooshian Fur Company is cleanin’ up millions shippin’ seal an’ sea otter skins to China. Them’s the most valuable skins in the world. They load their holds from the warehouses in Sitka, an’ every cargo’s worth half a million!”

“You mean,” asked Matthew, “that you’re goin’ to capture those ships and steal the fur? Why, it’s like the old pirates!”

Captain Bascomb smiled and shook his head in pious resignation. “No, no, no! Nothin’ like piracy—oh, dear, no! It is merely administering just retribution on the Rooshians for their treatment of the poor Indians. You wouldn’t believe it if I told you that every one of those skins have been stolen from the Indians who catch these animals—but such is the truth. It is criminal, an’ truly deplorable. I have witnessed it myself. I know how the poor savages are robbed. I spent four years in the Rooshian waters as mate of a whaler, an’ I vowed a vow that if ever I commanded a ship of my own, I’d make those Rooshians pay—an’ pay dearly for their infamous exploitation of the poor Indians! ‘An eye for an eye, an’ a tooth for a tooth,’ the Good Book says. An’ I thank the Almighty that He has at last permitted me to become the humble tool to wreak His vengeance.” The captain paused and rolled his green eyes piously. “Remember—‘Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord,’ an’ now that vengeance is about to be visited upon the heads of the wicked. The infamous Rooshians, proud in their iniquity, will sail out of Sitka, with their ships laden with spoils—but we’ll be the ones who will reap the rich harvest. Ours will be the pockets that will ring with Chinese gold!”

“But,” asked Matthew, his brows drawing into a puzzled frown, “how’s that goin’ to help the Indians? Do we carry the gold back an’ give it to ’em?”

“Oh, dear, no! My, my! That would never, never do—even if it were possible. Gold is the curse of the red man. No sooner does he get it than he spends it for strong drink—to the utter damnation of his soul! No, our duty is to place the noble Indian where he was before suffering the exploitation of the Rooshians—a simple, happy savage, content to kill only what he needs for food an’ clothing. The only way to accomplish this is to drive the Rooshian out of business, by rendering that business unprofitable—then he will return to his own country, and the red men will be left as God intended them to be left, simple children of the wilderness.

“The gold that we shall receive in exchange for the fur will be our own—it is God’s way of repaying us for our disinterested carrying out of His will. For this undertaking involves vast expense. I purchased this ship—a good fast ship, she is—one that will show a clean pair of heels to any of the clumsy steam hookers that wallow the seas leaving a long black line of stinkin’ smoke for those who pursue to follow. I also purchased four

East Indiamen guns—excellent pieces that will outshoot anything the Rooshians have aboard. Not only that—but there is the item of ammunition, ship’s stores, and the crew. I have counted not the expense, when once the Lord showed me the way. It is to man one of these guns that I have picked you two. We will select others from the crew to man the other guns.”

“But hell,” cried Jake, “we’re liable to kill someone—shootin’ at ’em with cannons. I don’t want to kill no one—an’ they might shoot back.”

The captain smiled benignly. “No, no! Dear, no! We will give them plenty of warning by shooting across their bows. When they see that our pieces will carry far beyond the range of theirs, they will heave to, and our victory will be bloodless. But should they presume to show fight, it is their own doing; then, my men, we must put away any petty qualms we may have in regard to human life, and battle right valiantly for the Lord. If they fight back,” cried the man, a wicked flash in his green eyes, “we’ll blow every mother’s son of ’em to hell! But shoot high; don’t strike their ship on the water line, and don’t send balls crashing in among those furs. Sweep their decks, cut off their masts an’ funnels, cripple their riggin’—but don’t sink ’em or damage the fur.”

“But we don’t know how to aim a cannon.”

“You’ll know—you’ll know! Mate Swile’s a capital good hand at gunnery. He’ll show ye the tricks. We’ll put into a deep harbor I know, an’ all hands will turn to an’ give the ship a coat of paint. We’ll change even her name. The *Sassy Kate* she is now, but that’s no name for a ship that sails under the banner of the Lord. The *Avenger*, that’s what I’m goin’ to call her. An’ by the time we hit the China ports, she’ll be the *Sassy Kate* again. That’ll put the fear of God in the hearts of them damn Rooshians! A ship with no registry—a ship that never cleared from any port, nor arrived at any—a ship straight from heaven, they’ll think—a mystery ship—that’s what she’ll be.

“*‘God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform.’*”

“Them Rooshians is religious, an’ after they’ve lost a few cargoes they’ll see it ain’t no use to try to fly in the face of the Almighty. We’ll break them guns out of the hold an’ mount ’em, an’ then Mate Swile’ll toll off crews for the other three guns, an’ start you in on yer practice. My information is that they’ll be shippin’ a cargo the first of April, an’ it’s the fourteenth of March today. We don’t want to let ’em slip past us. Go up on deck now, an’ lend a hand with mixin’ the paint. Tell Mr. Swile I want to see him. An’ don’t breathe a word of what I’ve told ye to anyone.”

“All right,” answered Jake.

“Say ‘aye, aye, sir.’ Not ‘all right,’ ” snapped the captain. “Ye might’s well start in right now to learn to do things shipshape. An’ when ye speak to Mate Swile, be sure to call him ‘Mister.’ ”

“Ki yi, sir,” grinned Jake. “Sounds like a dog, don’t it?”

The captain’s eyes seemed about to pop from their sockets; his face purpled with rage as he brought his fist crashing down on his desk. “Aye, aye! Aye, aye! Ye damn lubber! Not ‘ki yi.’ Who the hell d’ye think yer talkin’ to? Git along now, an’ remember to keep a civil tongue in yer head, er, by God, ye’ll wisht ye had!”

In the passageway, with the captain’s door closed behind them, Jake whispered, “Gits mad quick, don’t he? Swears easy, fer a pious man, too. I guess he learnt it off’n the mate. But he means all right. Gosh, he laid out a sight of money to help them pore Injuns.”

“He’s a damned pirate!” snapped Matthew. “I’d like to wring his neck!”

CHAPTER VI

SHIPWRECKED

ON a morning, two weeks later, a smart rakish schooner in dull gray paint sailed out of one of the deep arms of the sea that indent the Alaskan coast behind the Alexanders. She cleared Capes Chacon and Muzon and cruised northward along the island-dotted coast of Prince of Wales Island, headed toward Baranof Island whereon was located Sitka, the gay capital of Russian America and the citadel of the great Russian Fur Company.

Glass in hand, Captain Bascomb paced the bridge while certain men of the crew lolled in the shade of the tarpaulin-covered guns, mounted fore and aft, at the rail.

“When d’you think we’ll sight them Rooshians?” asked Jake Valentine, anxiously. “Gosh, I hope they’ll stop when we shoot in front of ’em. But they might git mad an’ shoot back. Damn if I want to git shot with no cannon ball!”

“An’ I don’t want to go to China, neither,” answered Matthew. “But I guess we’re goin’ to. If they do shoot back we’ll give ’em as good as they send. You be damn spry with the loadin’, Jake, an’ I’ll sight her straight.”

As darkness fell, the vessel hauled seaward, and in the morning stood in toward the island-studded, rocky coast where the tide rips raced and boiled through narrow passes with unbelievable fury.

Continuing her northward course, she ran before a light breeze under shortened sail. Late in the afternoon the voice of Captain Bascomb piped excitedly from the bridge: “Sail on the port quarter! Man the guns, an’ clap on the canvas, Mr. Swile!”

The mate bellowed his orders, sailors sprang to their tasks, and the tarpaulins were jerked from the guns by their crews, while others carried rifles and pistols up from below and placed them at convenient intervals upon the deck.

As the ship gained headway Mate Swile took his position behind Matthew and Jake, who manned the port bow gun. The approaching vessel was a three-masted schooner whose course was laid to pass close to port. When less than a quarter of a mile separated the two ships, the mate growled an order to Matthew: “Fire a shot across her bow a cable’s length in front!”

“Aye, aye, sir,” answered Matthew, and sighted the gun. A moment later the piece spoke with a roar, and a fountain of white spray shot up from the blue just beyond the course of the oncoming ship. Instead of heaving to, the vessel yawed sharply, and the fore part of her deck seemed suddenly to burst into smoke. The next instant hell broke loose on the *Avenger*. She shuddered from stem to stern as a round shot tore through her amidship. The bridge crashed to the deck amid a hail of flying splinters, and Jake Valentine, his eyes bulging from his head, pointed to the captain, who lay in a welter of blood, cursing shrilly, as he tugged with both hands in a vain endeavor to remove a huge sliver that protruded from his chest.

“Their cannons is loaded with lumber! They shot a board clean through him!” he cried. “He’s bleedin’ like a stuck hog, an’ he’ll die!”

“So’ll you,” bellowed Matthew, “if you don’t load that gun! Hurry up! To hell with the captain!”

Their own after port gun roared, but the shot fell short and sent a fountain of spray skyward. Then the after part of the Russian’s deck belched smoke, and again the *Avenger*

shuddered under the impact of solid round shot.

Working feverishly, Jake sprang back from the muzzle of his gun and signaled Matthew to fire. He jerked at his lanyard—but nothing happened. He noted that the Russian was no longer off the port bow. Mate Swile raced up and down the deck bellowing oaths and orders. The ship had come about, and Matthew saw the coast of Prince of Wales Island looming in the distance off the bow. Mate Swile was running away! Astern sounded a loud roar, as the Russian fired another half-broadside, and spurts of white spray shot up from the sea about them.

Men swarmed the rigging under the mate's blasphemous orders to crowd on more sail. The Russian was giving chase! Cursing, Matthew worked at his gun, when Jake stepped close up behind him. "'Tain't no use, Matt. It's my fault. When them damn cannon balls got to whizzin' around me, I got so scairt I put the ball in first, an' rammed the powder down on top of it! There's two dead a'ready, Matt—the captain, an' a sailor that got squashed when the bridge come down. I wisht to hell we was out of here! D'you think they'll ketch us? An' what'll they do to us if they do?"

"Hang us, of course," growled Matthew. "We're pirates, ain't we?"

"By Cripes, they can't hang you an' me! We never shot at 'em. We shot way off ahead of 'em—an' we can show 'em we couldn't of shot 'em with the gun loaded hind side to. Let 'em go ahead an' hang Mate Swile! An' how about us hangin' them fer killin' the captain an' that sailor?"

"Sure," agreed Matthew, sarcastically. "That's a fine idea, Jake. Just line 'em up under their own yardarms an' hang 'em—an' sail off to China with their fur."

As the captain had said, the erstwhile *Sassy Kate* was a fast ship, and under added canvas she was at least holding her own against the pursuing Russian, who sent an occasional shot whistling overhead or crashing into the sea alongside. With a bone in her teeth, she was making for the high coast line that loomed ever nearer in the distance. As darkness approached, however, the Russian seemed to be slowly gaining.

With every stitch of canvas spread, the mate disappeared below, to return a few minutes later cursing like a mad man. "Man the pumps!" he roared. "We're takin' water!"

Matthew and Jake seized a pump handle and worked frantically as the sweat rolled off them in streams. When they dropped out from sheer exhaustion their places were taken by others.

"If we can only get in among them islands," panted Matthew, "we can lose 'em in the dark."

"By Cripes, Matt, we're in a hell of a fix, any way you look at it!" opined Jake, sucking the air into his laboring lungs in great gasps. "If them Rooshians hits us with one of them cannon balls we're goners, an' if they ketch us they'll hang us, an' if we don't kill ourselves at them damn pumps, we'll sink, an' if we hit a rock we'll sink anyhow an' drown, an' if we don't do neither one, the mate'll kill us when he finds out I loaded that damn gun wrong end to. I ain't where I want to be. Things happen too dang fast in Californy! I almost wisht I'd stayed to home!"

"Listen," said Matthew. "You slip one of them pistols in under yer shirt. I got one under mine, an' powder an' ball, too. If the mate tries to kill us, we'll shoot him. It ain't our fault we're here; an' damn if anyone's goin' to kill me! Tonight, if we get away from the Rooshians, we'll prob'ly heave to behind some island, an' then me an' you'll watch our chance an' swim ashore."

“But—wher’n hell would we go to? There ain’t no town. We couldn’t git nothin’ to eat.”

“There’s bound to be varmints. An’ we’ll have the pistols. When it gets a little darker so the mate won’t miss me, I’ll slip down to the fo’c’sle an’ pour some powder in a bottle an’ cork it up so it’ll keep dry. Damn if I’m goin’ to China! There goes the mate now. I’ll slip below.”

Ten minutes later Matthew returned. “I got powder—two pint bottles of it. We’ll watch our chance, an’ over the side we’ll go.”

Land loomed close—high, and black, and forbidding. Astern the Russian showed indistinctly—a ghost ship, her sails limned against the glow in the west. From time to time red flame burst from her bow, and a dull boom roared through the fast-gathering darkness. Bellowing orders to keep the pumps going, the mate took the wheel himself. Closer and closer the black shore seemed towering to the very sky. Veering slightly, the ship headed straight for a narrow gap that showed dimly between two islands. Mate Swile was taking a desperate chance.

Almost at the mouth of the gap the Russian gun spoke again. With a rending crash and the thunder of slitting canvas, the foremast toppled overboard, smashing the rail. The vessel yawed sharply as the mast, held alongside by its tangled rigging, made a drag that rendered the rudder useless. Cries and shrieks rent the air, mingled with curses, as sailors sought vainly to disentangle themselves from the wreckage. From somewhere in the darkness came the bellowing voice of Mate Swile.

Suddenly a new motion was imparted to the ship. She spun and wallowed drunkenly as water rushed and gurgled about her helpless hull. Close at hand the high wooded shore seemed to be rushing astern, as in the grip of the furious tide rip the ship was sucked through the narrow passage.

Grasping Jake by the arm, Matthew made for a loose hatch cover. “Hang holt of this!” he cried, and hardly were the words out of his mouth than there was a mighty crash. The vessel shuddered throughout her length, heeled far over, partially righted herself, swung for a moment as if on a pivot, and slowly heeled to starboard amid a bedlam of shouts and cries. The deck canted crazily. The loose hatch cover to which Matthew and Jake clung with the desperation of utter fright shot down the slanting deck. There was the shock of icy water, endless moments of heaving and bumping amid all manner of floating wreckage, and then silence, save for the sound of rushing water, as the hatch cover with its two clinging forms shot forward through the darkness, born at lightning speed on the surface of a smooth, oily stream.

“Hang on, Jake!” implored Matthew, coughing salt water from his lungs.

“Yeah,” spluttered Jake, from the opposite side of the hatch cover. “We’re goin’ like hell—we’d ort to git somewheres!”

A few moments later the smooth, oily flow of the water was broken in a series of tossing, heaving waves that pitched the hatch cover about like a straw. The swift current seemed dissipated so that there was no consciousness of any forward movement. The tiny bit of flotsam was tossed now this way, now that.

A few stars twinkled overhead, and seemingly close at hand loomed the towering blackness of the shore line. Matthew Blunt was aware that the cold water was beginning to numb his body. “Kick out with yer feet an’ paddle with one arm,” he called to Jake. “There’s the shore. We’ve got to get to it or we’ll freeze.”

“How far is it?”

“I don’t know. Paddle like hell an’ we’ll get there.”

“We can’t build no fire. Our locofocos is all wet.”

“No, they ain’t. I put some in the bottle with the powder.”

“Cripes! You might git blow’d up!”

“Might’s well git blow’d up as drowned. Come on—paddle!”

After what seemed interminable hours of paddling with no consciousness of getting anywhere, their feet touched a gravelly bottom. With their last remaining erg of strength, they drew themselves ashore at the mouth of a small creek that burbled from a cleft in the hills.

“By Gawd, I never want to see another ocean!” chattered Jake, as a half-hour later the two sat close to a crackling fire.

CHAPTER VII

AT FORT STICKINE

DAYLIGHT found the two still sitting close to their fire. They had managed to dry their clothing during the night and were fairly comfortable save for the gnawings of hunger. Neither had tasted food since noon of the preceding day. As the light increased, they surveyed their immediate surroundings. The narrow strip of shingle on which they had landed at the mouth of the creek terminated in a rocky shore line a few hundred feet in either direction. To the eastward, across a narrow strait, loomed the heights of Prince of Wales Island, which the two took to be the mainland. At their backs towered an almost perpendicular wall of rock, cleft by the narrow gorge through which the waters of the creek tumbled noisily to the sea.

“What we goin’ to eat, Matt?” asked Jake, anxiously, as his eye swept the barren shore. “I’m hungry as a hog.”

“Me, too. We’ll find somethin’. We’re lucky to be alive. I bet all the others was drowned. They couldn’t have landed if they’d reached shore agin’ them rocks.”

“I’m sorry about the cook an’ some of the rest,” said Jake. “But not the mate. He was a mean man. Anyhow, he can’t find out I loaded that cannon wrong. But what we goin’ to eat? I don’t believe ther’d be any varmints on top of them rocks, even if we could climb ’em.”

“We’ve got to figure to get acrost to the land some way.”

“Cripes! It’s a mile, er maybe a couple of miles—things looks nearer acrost the water. We can’t make it on that damn lid. We’d be froze before we got there. I see a dead fish!”

Rising, he hurried up the beach toward the spot where the white belly of a fish gleamed at the water line. In a moment he returned. “It stinks,” he announced, in disgust. “We got here too late.”

“There’s plenty of driftwood,” said Matthew. “If we had some way of fastenin’ it together we could build a raft an’ use the hatch cover for a deck. Then, with our shirts for sails, we might make it acrost.”

“Yeah—an’ the wind might change, an’ we’d git blow’d clean to Chiny, er somewheres! Look—there’s a bird. He’s goin’ to light by the dead fish! Gosh, Matt, he’s big as a hen! Git yer pistol.”

Matthew reached for the muzzle-loading revolver he had laid aside, and took careful aim. He pressed the trigger and was rewarded by the sharp snap of the cap. “Powder’s wet,” he said in disgust. “We’ve got to unload ’em an’ dry ’em good, an’ load ’em with dry powder.”

The large white and slaty-blue bird stood beside the dead fish and eyed the intruders with no sign of fear, as they drew the charges of wet powder from the chambers of their pistols and reloaded them.

“Don’t miss, Matt,” implored Jake. “You was pretty good when the mate was makin’ us practise.”

Once again Matthew took careful aim and pressed the trigger. This time the gun functioned, and the gull flopped about crazily upon the sand, to be pounced upon a moment later by Jake, who promptly wrung its neck and brought it in triumph to the fire, where he skinned and cleaned it and divided it into two equal portions. Spitted on sticks,

the two halves were soon broiling over the coals.

“By Gosh, Matt—chicken fer breakfast! Who’d of thought it? An’ us ’way out here to hell an’ gone on a island in the ocean! It’s better’n we ever got on that dang ship. Won’t the folks’ eyes bung out back home when we tell ’em what we done an’ seen!”

“Humph!” grunted Matthew. “They’ll think we’re lyin’.”

“Yeah—that’s ’cause they’re ignorant, an’ ain’t traveled none. I’m glad we come to Californy. Things didn’t look so good fer a while when them damn Rooshians was shootin’ our mast off, an’ the ship was spinnin’ around an’ bustin’ all to hell on them rocks in the dark, an’ tippin’ over an’ sinkin’, an’ us scootin’ down the deck on that lid. But it ain’t so bad now. I’m glad it was us that got to shore instead of someone else, ain’t you, Matt?”

“Why, sure! Anyone would be glad of that.”

“My hen’s done. Here goes. Gosh, I’m that hungry I can’t wait another minute.”

Jake lifted the stick that skewered his portion and inspected the sizzling meat. “I wisht we had some salt. By gosh, the sea’s salty—I got a bellyful when we first hit the water. I’m goin’ to dip mine in the water, an’ that’ll salt it an’ cool it off all to onct.”

Suiting the action to the word, he dabbled the portion in the water, and, removing the stick, seated himself and eyed the morsel gloatingly. Then he bit largely into the breast and began to chew with gusto. Suddenly his jaws ceased to work, an expression of pained surprise overspread his face, and he forcibly ejected the half-masticated mass. Crawling to the brook, he rinsed his mouth with the clear, sweet water.

“What’s the matter?” asked Matthew, in surprise.

“Cripes—it tastes like fish!”

“Well—fish is good.”

“Yeah—but when yer expectin’ a thing to taste like chicken, you don’t want it tastin’ like fish! Anyways, not like rotten fish!”

“You prob’ly dipped it in the ocean too clost to that dead fish,” said Matthew. “Wash it off in the crick, an’ it’ll be all right.”

“I’ll wait till you taste yourn,” said Jake. “I’m kind of sick to my stummick. Anyhow, I ain’t hungry right now.”

Matthew removed his portion from the fire and allowed it to cool slowly while Jake waited expectantly. Finally he bit into it, more gingerly, however, than had Jake. He, too, spat the morsel from his mouth. “Does taste kind of fishy,” he said. “Maybe it’ll be better when it’s cold. I guess them birds must live on dead fish, an’ it tastes in the meat.”

“Hell—hog meat don’t taste like swill!” argued Jake. “It can’t be that.”

Matthew shrugged. “All right—it’s your guess. Anyway, my piece can wait till I’m a damn sight hungrier’n I am now. Look!” he cried suddenly. “There’s a boat!”

Both leaped to their feet and gazed toward a small craft that seemed to be approaching from the opposite shore. Already it was halfway across the narrow strait.

“Maybe it’s some of them Rooshians comin’ to hang us!” exclaimed Jake. “What’ll we do, Matt?”

“Wait an’ see. If they’re Rooshians, we can get behind those rocks at the mouth of the crick an’ stand ’em off. We’ve got our pistols an’ quite a bit of powder an’ ball.”

“Yeah—but how’ll we know if they’re Rooshians? What the hell does a Rooshian look like, Matt?”

“Why—I don’t know. Seems like I remember a picture of the Czar in the geography

book. He had whiskers.”

“Well, we can’t go shootin’ ’em jest because they got whiskers. An’ it might not be the Czar, anyhow. They’s other Rooshians, ain’t there? I’ll tell you—if they talk funny we’ll blast hell out of ’em!”

“Dutchmen an’ Frenchmen talk funny, too. It wouldn’t be right to go shootin’ ’em jest because they was furriners.”

“Well,” said Jake resignedly, “here’s jest one more damn thing goin’ to happen to us! If they hang us, they’re Rooshians—an’ if they don’t, they ain’t.”

The craft was rapidly drawing closer. “It’s a skin boat,” said Matthew, shading his eyes with a hand. “There’s four men paddlin’. They’re Injuns, an’ there’s a white man standin’ up in the bow!”

“He’s got whiskers,” added Jake. “Git yer pistol ready, Matt. It’s prob’ly the Czar!”

“Hel-o-o-o, ashore!” The voice came floating over the wavelets.

“Gosh, he’s a reg’lar American white man! Holler at him, Matt! An’ them must be tame Injuns, too.”

The boat beached a few minutes later, and a tall young man with a rich chestnut beard stepped ashore. He spoke with a strong Scotch burr. “Who are ye?” he asked, his eyes sweeping the beach for some sign of a boat. “An’ how’d ye get here?”

“I’m Matthew Blunt, an’ he’s Jake Valentine. We got shipwrecked an’ floated here on that hatch cover.”

“What ship?”

“She was the *Sassy Kate*, first—but the captain changed the name to the *Avenger*. We put into some bay along the coast an’ repainted her. He figured on stealin’ cargoes of seal an’ sea otter from the Rooshians. But the first Rooshian ship we ran acrost licked us an’ chased us onto the rocks an’ the *Avenger* sunk.”

The man was grinning as he listened to the naïve account. “Ye don’t look much like pirates to me.”

“We ain’t, neither,” explained Matthew. “We came to California to dig gold. A man showed us some nuggets in San Francisco, an’ we bought shares in a company with all the money we had, an’ the night before we was goin’ to start for the mountains, we went down to a shanty to have a supper. We had jest one drink—an’ the next thing we knew it was the next day, an’ we was out in the ocean on the ship. The captain claimed we signed on—but we didn’t.”

“Press gang got ye,” observed the man. “It’s dirty business.”

“Who are you?” asked Matthew.

“I’m Colin McDermott, in charge at Fort Stickine. I was visitin’ some of the Siwash villages on the islands, an’ last evenin’ I heard the sound of heavy gunfire. I thought ’twas strange. The firin’ kept up at intervals till dark. It sounded like one gun. So this mornin’ I come out to investigate.”

“That was them damn Rooshians shootin’ at us!” explained Jake. “They hit us, too. Knocked the bridge all to hell, an’ killed the captain, an’ the last shot knocked down our front mast, an’ we hit a rock an’ sunk.”

“Where’d she sink? Did anyone else get off?”

“I don’t know,” said Matthew. “It can’t be far from here. We floated around awhile an’ came ashore on the hatch cover. I don’t know whether anyone else got off or not.”

“She must have struck in the pass between this island an’ the next. The tide rips

through them passes like a mill race. A ship wouldn't have a chance where there was rocks."

"Will you take us to shore?" asked Matthew. "We ain't got any money—but you can have the pistols. We want to get back to California."

"Aye, I'll tak' ye to the fort. It's a long way to California. Ye'll not be makin' it afoot. Ye can go down to Fort Victoria on the company boat in June, then, mayhap, ye'll find passage from there to San Francisco."

"What kind of a fort is it—an' what company do you mean?" asked Matthew.

"The Hudson's Bay Company. We hold a lease from the Russian Fur Company on the coast from Cape Spencer south. Get in the bidarka an' we'll be goin'. We'll slip around the point of the island to see if any more of the crew got ashore. I'm doubtin' we'll find anyone, with the rocks raisin' straight out of the water like they do. Ye was mighty lucky to find that strip o' gravel."

"Will yer boat hold us all?" asked Jake, eyeing the light craft doubtfully. "She ain't made of nothin' but skins."

"Aye," smiled the man. "Bidarkas are light craft, but they're staunch, an' they'll carry a load. Set on the bottom amidship."

Gingerly the two took their places, McDermott pushed off, and under the short choppy strokes of the paddlers the light craft skirted the shore. Rounding a high, rocky point, another island appeared, separated from the one on which they had been cast by a narrow gut.

"'Twas yonder ye'r ship prob'ly went down," opined the Scot, pointing to the narrow passage. "There's jagged rocks in some of these passes that would rip the bottom out of any ship."

"But the one where we were wrecked had a current running through it—like a river, only stronger."

"'Twas the tide. 'Tis a bad coast fer tides, what wi' the islands an' all. We'll skirt yon shore for a bit to be sure there's na poor devils clingin' amongst the rocks. Then we'll put back."

But beyond a few bits of wreckage bumping the rocky shore, no sign of the ill-fated ship was found. Evidently the two in the bidarka were the sole survivors of the wreck.

"Ye're lucky," repeated McDermott, tersely, and ordered his paddlers to return to the village toward the northern extremity of Prince of Wales Island.

Four days later, after a leisurely journey, during which many Indian villages and encampments were visited, the little party arrived at Fort Stickine to find an emissary of the company, Finlayson by name, who had orders to take over the trading at Fort Stickine. McDermott was ordered to proceed up the Stickine River and establish a new post in the vicinity of the Dease Lake post, founded some ten years before by Robert Campbell, later abandoned, and burned by the Indians. McDermott was authorized to employ such help as he might deem necessary for the exploration of the river and the establishment of the new post. The vessel from Fort Victoria would reach Fort Stickine a month later than usual—in July, instead of in June—so that McDermott should have time to report the success of the upriver venture.

The Scot sought out Matthew and Jake and explained the situation. "Ye canna find passage to Fort Victoria till July, an' 'twill be dull enough an ye bide the time here at Stickine. I can use ye upriver, an' while the pay is not high, 'twill gi' ye work to do an' a

fine chance to see a grand bit o' country."

"I'd like to go," agreed Matthew. "I don't want to lay around doin' nothin'."

"Me, too," seconded Jake. "An' besides, it'll take us back away from this danged ocean. Seems like it's bad luck every time I see one."

And so it came about that the two partners engaged with the great fur company for the exploration of the Stickine.

CHAPTER VIII

ON THEIR OWN

IT was quite a little flotilla that headed upriver a few days later. Five bidarkas, each manned by four Indians, carried supplies for a hundred days, the tools necessary for the building of a trading post, fish nets, and muskets and ammunition for the procuring of meat and repelling attacks of hostile Indians.

In a sixth bidarka, also manned by four Indians, rode the four white men, a carpenter having been included to superintend the erection of the new post. The first bend of the river plunged them into the primeval wilderness—a wilderness of spruce, of craggy mountains, of mighty glaciers, of cascading streamlets, and of deep land-locked lakes whose dark blue waters teemed with fish. Bands of mountain goats, white as the snow fields that splotched the heights, stared at them from beetling cliffs. Peevish grizzlies, disturbed in their fishing, glared at them in surly malevolence. Seals flopped clumsily from rocks and darted like great fish through the pellucid water. Truly this was the land of plenty.

Matthew and Jake took to the life from the first. These two, whose souls had answered the call of the red gods, back in the prosaic Ohio town, found themselves penetrating into the very heart of an unmapped wilderness. Matthew, his imagination fired by speculation of what lay beyond, lived in a sort of ecstasy of anticipation of what the next bend would unfold. The more prosaic Jake enjoyed the bends as they came; gliding smoothly up the deeper stretches, or track-lining past rapids and shallows—it was all the same to Jake. Freed from the bondage of plowing fields and slopping hogs, he was living life in its fullness.

“I wonder where this river leads to,” speculated Matthew, one day as the two stood at the head of a rapid, waiting for the Indians to line the bidarkas through.

“Danged if I know. Guess it don’t make no difference, does it?” answered Jake, his eyes on a huge grizzly that stood motionless on a flat rock close against the opposite bank. “Look at that bear! D’you see that, Matt? He’s big as a steer, an’ quicker’n a cat. He swiped in his paw an’ throw’d a fish clean back in the woods. I got a notion to take a shot at him. We’ll be needin’ meat tonight, an’ I sure like them paws—they’re better’n hog knuckles.”

“Don’t shoot,” advised Matthew. “Remember what McDermott told us about them bears—never shoot unless you’re sure of killin’ em. The Siwashes are right close behind us, an’ if you’d wound him he might come gallopin’ acrost the shallows an’ smash the bidarkas all to hell.”

“That’s right. McDermott claims they git cross if you shoot ’em. Gosh, Matt, ain’t there a sight of varmints in this country? I never see the like. Back home a feller’s got to hunt all day to git him a couple of rabbits. I ain’t never goin’ back.”

“Me neither,” assented Matthew. “That is, not to live there. But we want to get back to California. I want to get some of that gold.”

“Yeah,” agreed Jake, doubtfully. “But this here suits me, too. Plenty to eat by jest shootin’ it, er droppin’ down a net. Back there grub comes high in them restaurants. An’ besides, folks shoots up through floors an’ things like that. An’ there’s so dang many folks there we might not find no good place to dig. An’ then there’s that dang ocean so clost to

there. We might wake up some mornin' on a ship again. You know, Matt, I be'n studyin' about that—an' spite of the captain claimin' he was a religious man, I don't believe we ever signed on. I know I only had one drink that night—an' one drink never made me drunk. An' besides, if we was so drunk we'd want to sign on any ship, we'd be too drunk to write our name. There's somethin' funny about it somewheres—some mistake er somethin'."

Matthew frowned. "Mistake hell! We was drugged an' taken aboard. That whole outfit—Modoc Billin's, an' Sprowl, an' Potts, an' all of 'em was in on it. The Gold Ledge Minin' Company was jest a scheme to get our money, an' when they got it they drugged us an' collected off the damn captain for furnishin' him a crew! McDermott told me how them gangs work it."

"Why—the damn rascals! But what do you want to go back fer? It's better to keep away from them kind of folks. An' here I thought that Modoc was a nice man, what with lendin' me them nuggets an' all. Be you sure, Matt?"

"Yes—I can see it all, now. To hell with 'em! I want to go back to get gold."

"Yeah—but there might some other ones git us. There's lots of folks there, Matt—an' lots of ships. Besides, there might be gold here we could dig. They claimed the gold was in the mountains, an' there's more mountains here than what there is in Californy. Only here the gold ain't be'n found yet, 'cause there ain't no one to find it. If we found it, we could have it all—an' no one shootin' up through floors, an' lyin' to us, an' puttin' us on ships. I don't never want to see another ship nor another ocean. They make you sick to ride on 'em—an' you can't drink the water—an' you can't even eat the birds that flies over 'em! An' if you die out there you don't even git buried."

Matthew grinned. "I wouldn't give a damn if I was dead. How would I know what they done with me?"

"Well, I want to be buried decent—an' not throw'd in no damn ocean, with a cannon ball tied to me—I don't like cannon balls no better'n what I do ships."

"There might be gold in these mountains," speculated Matthew, his eyes on the towering heights.

"Sure there might," agreed Jake eagerly. "An' they find it along the rivers an' cricks. I heard 'em talkin' back there in San Francisco. Let's ask McDermott."

When the little flotilla got under way Matthew turned to the trader: "Ain't there any gold here, like down in the California mountains?" he asked.

The Scot nodded. "Aye, there's gold. I've seen goodly nuggets amongst the Siwashes. An' I've picked up some scatterin' pieces mysel'. I always carry a pan wi' me, an' when chance offers I prospect a bit in the gravel an' on the bars. The company don't favor gold-huntin', no more than they favor farmin'. It brings a rabble of folks into the country, an' it's bad for the fur trade. What animals isn't killed is drove away."

"I'd like to see how you go at it sometime, if you wouldn't mind showin' me."

"Aye, I'll show ye. Tomorrow's the Sabbath, an' we'll be layin' up fer a day of rest. I've got quite a little pouch of gold I've picked up here an' there. I'll show it to ye tomorrow."

The following morning, while the Indians lazed about in the warm sunshine smoking their pipes and gambling at "sticks," McDermott displayed his pouch containing a dozen ounces or so of raw gold. There were a few sizable nuggets, but for the most part it was in very tiny grains and glinting yellow dust.

Proceeding up a small stream to a likely bar, Matthew and Jake watched eagerly as McDermott shoveled gravelly sand into the pan, added water, and began to rotate it with a peculiar motion of his hands, pausing now and again to remove the coarser stones with his fingers. When the operation was completed by flinging the last of the water from the pan, a few yellow particles showed among the grains of sand that remained in the bottom of the pan. These McDermott carefully separated and pouched. The operation was repeated time and again, each pan yielding a few of the precious yellow particles. Not a motion escaped either Jake or Matthew, and after the noonday meal, McDermott showing a preference for a nap, they borrowed the pan and put in the time until darkness in panning various bars and gravel banks of the small stream.

Returning to camp, they proudly displayed the result of their labor to McDermott. "I'd say ye've panned a bit better than a pound," he opined, eyeing the little pile judicially.

"A pound!" cried Jake. "Hell, man—there ain't an ounce!"

The Scot smiled. "A pound sterling, mon—not a pound weight. Ye've less than half an ounce—a pound sterling is about five dollars. An' not bad for haphazard pannin'."

Day after day the outfit pushed on upstream, and in every spare moment Matthew and Jake panned for gold. It took forty days to reach the spot that McDermott selected for the site of the new post. Then for thirty days white men and Indians alike worked in the erection of the building, and there was scant time for prospecting except on Sundays, which McDermott religiously set apart as days of rest.

On one of these Sundays, as they panned a near-by creek, they were interrupted in their work by a band of half a dozen strange Indians who, crowding about, solemnly watched them collect the yellow grains from the bottom of the pan. After watching the process repeated several times, one of the Indians plunged a hand into a mooseskin pouch and withdrew it, his finger and thumb grasping a longish nugget, rough as slag on one side, on the other worn smooth as a mirror. With some unintelligible words he tendered it, at the same time pointing to the knife at Matthew's belt. Matthew took the nugget and turned it over and over in his hand. It was heavy—several ounces in weight. He tendered his knife, which the savage accepted with a grunt of satisfaction, as the white man pocketed the nugget.

Matthew had picked up a smattering of the jargon in his association with the canoemen, and he tried it on the man, who evidently understood no word he uttered. Another, however, acted as spokesman. Matthew gathered that this man had been at Campbell's fort on Dease Lake, but had had no part in its destruction. He was glad the white men were coming again into the country. He liked the things the white men traded for fur.

The Indians were hazy about the source of the large nugget, saying that it came from a river a long way to the northward. They followed the partners to the fort, where McDermott, through the man as interpreter, harangued them on the advantage of a trading post in their country. They departed, after receiving presents of tobacco and tea, promising to return later and bring fur.

The fort was nearly completed, and leaving the carpenter with four Indians to finish the task, McDermott signified his intention of returning to Fort Stickine. He wanted to make sure of returning with his trading stock before the freeze-up.

"Would you mind if we didn't go back?" asked Matthew. "Me an' Jake figure on stayin' here in the mountains an' prospectin'. We'd like to take our pay out in supplies,

an' buy your pan, an' a couple of shovels, an' an ax, an' some cookin' dishes, an' a couple of muskets, an' powder an' lead, an' a fish net."

McDermott looked surprised. "Losh, lads—ye're green i' the brush! Some'at might happen ye."

"We're not as green as we were, an' we're not afraid. There's plenty of varmints an' fish to eat—just think of the moose we've seen!"

"Aye, but i' the winter, wi' the snow lyin' deep, an' the lakes an' the rivers all froze, meat is hard come by. Robert Campbell was a good mon, an' he nearly starved on Dease Lake. Besides, ye'd na make enough prospectin' to pay ye wages."

"We would," answered Matthew, producing the big nugget from his pocket, "if we found a lot of 'em like this."

The Scot took the fragment and examined it with gloating eyes. "Aye, an a mon was to find many like yon, he'd be rich. Where'd ye get it?"

Matthew told of his trade with the Indian. "So," he concluded, "me an' Jake wants to find that river."

McDermott nodded thoughtfully. "I'll not be standin' in ye road. But, I mistrust, ye'll be leavin' yer bones i' the mountains."

"It's better'n havin' 'em dumped in the ocean!" opined Jake, with feeling.

"Aye, that is a cold grave an' a wet one. But I'm minded to die in comfort, in a bed. However, an ye're bent on goin', ye can go. Ye're good lads, an' ye've worked hearty. I'll gi' ye the pan an' the rest o' the gear an' a compass besides. That'll leave yer wages clear fer buyin' food an' clothin'. If ye're so minded, I'll tak' what gold ye have in trade, too—though it's against the policy o' the company to trade for gold. It'll be bad for the trappin' when the natives finds out the worth o' gold."

The partners thanked the kindly Scot, and next morning, with their packs made up, they bade him good-bye. The man took his leave with a few words of advice. "Ye'd best trade fer a light bidarka, or a canoe, an' stick to the rivers. Speak fair to the Siwashes, an' they'll speak ye fair. Prepare well for the winter, for it'll be long an' cold. Remember, the Mackenzie's to the east o' ye, America to the south, the ocean to the west, an' the frozen sea to the north—but there's many a mile betwixt 'em. Ye've room to git lost. 'Tis said Robert Campbell is i' the country north of here wi' orders to build a fort. Mayhap ye'll meet up wi' him."

CHAPTER IX

THE PARTNERS ACQUIRE A FORT

DURING the remainder of the short summer, and all through the fall, the two partners panned the gravel of innumerable creeks and rivers. Somewhere, far to the northward the Indians had said, lay the river of gold. So slowly they worked northward, panning as they went. When winter's warning blasts chilled the air, they holed up in a shelter, half dugout, half poles, that they built on the south slope of a mountain. When the streams froze, they hunted, storing their meat on a platform well out of reach of prowling wolves and carcajous.

When spring came, they moved on. The second summer was a repetition of the first, and that winter was spent in the camp of a band of Indians on the shore of a long, narrow lake.

During all the third summer they moved slowly northward. Their powder and ball had been used up, their net had rotted, and for a long time they had dressed wholly in skins. They still had fish hooks and lines, and had become proficient in the use of the snare and the bow and arrow. Their diet consisted of meat and fish, together with such herbs and berries as the Indians used. One of the shovels had become useless, and they used its blade to patch the gold pan which had worn through in spots. Heating the thin shovel blade to a white heat, they had cut out the patches with the ax and riveted them to the pan with rivets fashioned from nuggets of gold. The remainder of the shovel blade was fashioned into arrowheads and a spearhead.

Slowly the little store of gold in the moosehide sack grew. A few sizable nuggets were mixed with the tiny grains, but for the most part the work was hard and ill-paying. Yet they were contented and happy—always in their minds was the chimera of a river with a bottom cobbled with gold. They were never discouraged. Failure simply never occurred to them. Game and fish were plentiful, they slept in warm robes, and their only thought of the morrow was that it might bring them to the bank of the river of gold.

Late in the fall they crossed a high divide and wintered in a cave in a limestone cliff near the head of a river that flowed to the northward.

When the break-up came, they built a skin canoe and launched forth, pausing to pan every likely-looking bar and shallow. They had long ago lost track of the days. It was 1852, and the month might be April, or May, or June—it made no difference. Summer and winter were all that counted.

Their river flowed into a larger river, and still they floated northward panning the bars.

Toward the close of a day of sunshine and light breeze, they rounded a bend and Jake, who was in the bow, suddenly ceased paddling. "Look, Matt," he cried excitedly, pointing to a spot on the right bank of the river, far in the forefront. "A house! By Gawd, Matt—a house!"

Matthew, too, stopped paddling and the two stared at the building whose square outline showed distinctly at a distance of three or four miles, while the canoe floated lazily, broadside to the current.

"Maybe it's the fort McDermott told us Campbell was going to build up here somewheres?" speculated Matt. "If it is we can get us a new outfit."

"Muskets an' powder an' lead!" cried Jake. "Damn these bows an' arrows!"

“An’ maybe a dram,” suggested Matthew.

“I don’t know about a dram. Remember what happened to us last time we had one.”

“But,” grinned Matthew, “there ain’t any ocean here.”

“They might be one damn clost,” opined Jake. “By Gawd, there’s got to be! You can’t jest keep on a-goin’ without you hit a ocean—and we be’n goin’ a hell of a while. We can git our whiskers cut—an’ our hair. You look like hell, Matt.”

“You ain’t no cromeo, yerself,” grinned Matthew. “But long hair an’ whiskers keep off the damn flies an’ mosquitoes in the summer, an’ they’re warm in winter.”

“Yeah—but it ain’t no fun when yer breath freezes a couple of pounds of ice onto ’em. Look! There goes a canoe!”

“Goin’ like all hell was after ’em,” grinned Matthew. “They’re Siwashes. You can tell by the way they handle their paddles. They’re headin’ fer the fort,” he added, picking up his paddle. “Come on, we might’s well be gettin’ there, too.”

As they approached the low log building they saw that it was situated at the mouth of a large river that flowed in from the eastward. They landed on a stony beach at the foot of a trail that led up the steep bank to the fort, drawing their canoe up between the one that had just landed and a rude flatboat or scow that was partially loaded with bales of fur and supplies.

Ascending the bank, they halted abruptly and stared into the eyes of a man who stood at the door of the fort, a musket leveled at them. The muzzles of half a dozen other muskets protruded from loopholes cut in the log wall.

“Don’t shoot!” cried Jake. “We ain’t Rooshians! We’re white men! Our whiskers grow’d ’cause we didn’t fetch no razor!”

The musket was lowered. “Who are ye? An’ wher’d ye come from?”

“Emmons ville, Ohio,” answered Jake, promptly. “It’s in Scioto County—an’ if they build the new mill, we’ll go ahead of Chillicothe!”

“We’re Americans,” explained Matthew. “Are you Campbell?”

“No. This is Campbell’s fort—Fort Selkirk, he named it. He’s back on the Mackenzie. D’ye know Campbell?”

“No. McDermott told us about him. We came up the Stickine with McDermott three years ago this spring. We’ve be’n prospectin’ in the mountains.”

At mention of Campbell and McDermott the look of suspicion faded from the man’s eyes. He turned and uttered a gruff command. The muzzles disappeared from the loopholes.

“Come on in, an’ welcome,” he invited. “Three year in the bush, eh? Well—ye look it. My name is Pritchard, an’ these two is Elson an’ Bilby,” he added, as two white men and half a dozen Indians joined him in the doorway. “I’m trader fer the company, in charge of the fort, an’ they’re engagés. I’ll have the Siwashes carry yer gear in.”

Matthew smiled. “We ain’t got much gear—some bows an’ arrows an’ a few robes. We figure on gettin’ us an outfit here.”

“Bows an’ arrows!” exclaimed Pritchard. “Ain’t ye got muskets?”

“No, we run out of powder an’ lead an’ give the guns to the Siwashes, near a couple of years ago.”

The two followed the trader into the interior, where everything seemed to be in confusion. “Ye came jest in time,” he explained, “if ye figured on outfittin’ at this post. We’re abandonin’ it tomorrow.”

“Abandonin’ it?” exclaimed Matthew. “What for?”

“There’s two reasons. I ain’t be’n supplied with the trade goods I need, in the first place. The other reason is that it has come to my ears through some friendly Siwashes that there’s a band of Chilkats from over near the coast that’s headed this way for to plunder the fort. They’re a strong party an’ we’re in no shape to stand ’em off, what with only three white men an’ four Siwashes. So I’m loadin’ the fur an’ whatever of supplies she’ll carry into a scow an’ startin’ downriver to Fort Yukon where Chief Trader Murray’s got a good strong fort.”

“There’s five white men now,” suggested Matthew. “If you’ve got plenty of muskets an’ powder an’ lead we’d ort to be able to stand ’em off, no matter how strong they be.”

Pritchard shook his head. He was a man, evidently, with small stomach for combat. “No, likely they’d fire the fort an’ burn us out an’ murder us. Or if they didn’t, an’ we killed some of them, they’d report it to the Rooshians—ye see these Chilkats is Rooshian Siwashes—an’ then the Rooshians would claim the company was murderin’ their Siwashes, an’ there’d be hell to pay all around—an’ I’d be to blame fer it. The best way is to save what I can an’ join up with Murray. I’m a trader, not a soldier. I don’t want to kill no one; an’ more yet, I don’t want to get killed.”

“But,” cried Matthew, “that scow won’t carry much more than jest the fur an’ some supplies. How far is it to Murray’s fort?”

“It’ll be a matter of four or five hundred mile as the river runs, accordin’ to Campbell. I know the scow won’t hold much over the fur an’ supplies. I figure on dumpin’ the goods in the river to keep ’em out of the hands of Chilkats. But ye can help yerselves to what you need, first. It’ll cost ye nothin’. The goods would be’n destroyed, anyway. When the Siwashes I’d set to watch the river brought word of a canoe, I thought ye was the first of the Chilkats. I’d like to get away before they come.”

“I’ll tell you,” suggested Matthew. “We’ll pitch in an’ help you with the loadin’ so you can start this evenin’ instead of tomorrow, if you’ll leave us all the stuff you figured on throwin’ in the river.”

“But what’ll ye do when the Chilkats come? Man, they’ll murder ye an’ take the goods. Ye’d best come on with us to Fort Yukon.”

Matthew smiled grimly. “We don’t want to go to Fort Yukon. We’re goin’ to stay here an’ hunt gold. We need supplies. Jake an’ I’ll stay here an’ stand off the Chilkats. If they run us out, we’ll fix it so they won’t profit none. With those kegs of powder, we could mine the fort, an’ if they chased us out, we could blow ’em to hell.”

“No, ’twould not do at all. This is a company fort, an’ if the Siwashes get blow’d up in it the Rooshians would blame the company.”

“Well, then, we’ll cache the stuff outside where they won’t find it—the muskets an’ powder an’ lead. Then we’ll leave enough other supplies in the fort to satisfy ’em—an’ maybe they won’t burn it. Sometime, maybe the company’ll want to use it again. It might save the fort. But if they don’t get anything for their trouble they’ll be sure to burn it out of revenge.”

“Mebbe ye’re right,” answered Pritchard. “Anyway, I’ll do as ye say. Come on, then, an’ let’s get the scow loaded. The sooner I leave this place the better I’ll like it!”

All hands set to work, and late in the afternoon all the fur, and supplies to last four men for a month, were aboard the scow. Pritchard was taking a company Indian with him, besides the two white men. The other Indians left as soon as the scow was loaded.

Evidently they cared no more than did Pritchard about coming to grips with the Chilkats.

As he was about to push off, the trader turned to the two partners. "If ye'd care to be sendin' word back—letters or anything—I'll wait till ye write 'em. Ye'll find paper an' ink on the desk."

Matthew hesitated a moment and shook his head. "No," he answered. "I wouldn't have nothin' to say."

The man turned to Jake. "How about you?" he asked.

"Cripes, no! I don't want to write no letter! If Pa know'd I was up here, wherever it is, when I claimed I was goin' to Californy, he'd be mad as hell. He give me a lammin' onct fer goin' up to Chillicothe when I claimed I was only goin' to Bearcrick. If you run acrost him don't say nothin' about seein' me—his name's Jake Valentine—same as mine."

"By the way," asked Matthew, "have these rivers got any name?"

"Aye," answered Pritchard. "This is the Lewes—farther down they call it the Yukon. The one that flows into it, there, is the Pelly. Well, if ye've got no word to send, I'll be goin'. Good luck to ye—an' beware the Chilkats."

CHAPTER X

THE FIGHT AT THE FORT

“GAWD, Matt—jest think—we’ve got a whole tradin’ fort gave to us!” said Jake, as the loaded scow disappeared around a bend.

“Yeah—an’ a war along with it. We better be figurin’ out what we’re goin’ to do.”

“We ain’t afraid of no Siwashes. We’ve got a sight of muskets an’ powder an’ lead. An’ there’s three, four bags of bullets already run. An’ besides, we’ll be inside the fort shootin’ out through them holes—an’ the Siwashes ain’t got no fort.”

“There might be a lot of ’em an’ they could rush us. We better fetch some grub an’ some powder an’ ball down here to the canoe, an’ drop down the river a quarter of a mile or so, an’ cache the stuff, canoe an’ all, back in the bush. Then if we have to make a getaway we can hit fer the woods er sneak away in the dark an’ shove the canoe in the water an’ give ’em the slip.”

Darkness was gathering when the task was completed, and inside the fort, with the door barred, the two cooked a sumptuous meal on the stove and ate by the light of candles.

“It’s a hell of a while since we’ve et at a table, ain’t it, Matt?” Jake sat with a slab of salt pork impaled on his fork. “An’ plenty of dishes, too. Next time we’ll try not to lose an’ break so damn much stuff. It’s be’n about a year we’ve got along with a kittle an’ a one-prong fork an’ our belt knives. I hope them dang Chilkats don’t come prowlin’ around tonight. I’d like to see how it feels to sleep in a bunk.”

“They won’t bother us tonight,” opined Matthew. “Remember old Tlagit told us how Siwashes don’t like to git killed in the dark, ’cause they think they’ll always be in the dark in the other world.”

“It’s hell we’ve got to leave all this stuff here. We can’t take only a canoeful.”

“Tomorrow, if the Chilkats don’t show up, we’re goin’ to work like the devil. I’ve be’n studyin’ it out. We’ll dig holes in the ground an’ cache the powder an’ lead an’ all the rest of the stuff we can pack into ’em, then we’ll cover ’em with dirt an’ tromp around on it—or build fires on top so it won’t look like it’s ever be’n dug. Then, if the Siwashes chases us off an’ burn the fort, we can come back an’ git the stuff after they’ve gone. There’s fifteen muskets left. We’ll load ’em all an’ leave ’em beside the loopholes, then when the Chilkats come we can shoot so fast they’ll think there’s a lot of us.”

“Sure,” agreed Jake. “If they come, you go from one hole to the other, shootin’ at ’em, an’ I’ll load muskets as fast as you fire ’em. You can shoot straighter.”

“All right. We’ll load the muskets after supper. An’ be sure you don’t load ’em hind side to, like you done that cannon!”

Jake grinned sheepishly. “We didn’t know nothin’ them days, did we, Matt? Seems like a hell of a while ago. Seems like it was someone else instead of me that use’ to have to plow an’ feed hogs back on the farm. I wouldn’t feed no hogs no more. That’s why I wouldn’t write no letter. Pa might make us come back.”

“He’d have a hell of a time findin’ you,” laughed Matthew.

“That’s so. Seems like you’d ort to wrote back, though, Matt. I ain’t never be’n married, but seems like married folks sort of gits mad if the other one don’t write. Take Ma, now. One time Pa went down to Cincinnati on the steamboat with sixty-nine head of hogs to sell. He didn’t come back on the next steamboat, nor neither he didn’t write no

letter. Even a couple more steamboats come an' he wasn't on 'em. Ma didn't say much, but I seen she was gittin' madder'n madder, an' when Pa did come maybe she didn't give him holy hell! Pa, he didn't have much to say, an' he couldn't of said it if he had—Ma done all the talkin'. So I figure you'd ort to wrote. We be'n gone more'n three year. Yer woman might git mad not gittin' no letter."

Matthew shook his head slowly. "We didn't get on any too good," he said. "She was awful religious; an' I'd ruther hunt Sundays than go to church. An' then, she didn't want me to go to California. Claimed it was a fool's errand an' a wild goose chase an' all that kind of stuff. But when a Blunt makes up his mind there ain't no turnin' him—so I come. I made a deal with Dad. He's makin' money in the lumber an' lime an' coal business, so I told him if he'd give me a half-interest in the business, I'd give him a half-interest in all the gold I got in California. I didn't like the way he ran the business, anyway. He was too damn conservative. I was tired of it. So we got Lawyer Bassett to draw us up the papers. Half the business is mine—an' Pa gits ten percent more'n I do fer runnin' it. He takes sixty percent of the profits, an' pays over forty percent each month to my wife. That's more'n it'll cost her an' the boys to live—so they're all took care of, if I never come back. An' I ain't never goin' back, neither—without a hell of a lot of gold. If I don't make a strike, an' was to go back, she never would get through tellin' me 'I told you so.' We ain't only got about a couple of thousan' dollars' worth of gold in the sack—an' that wouldn't be decent wages. If I'd wrote her how much we had she'd told all over town how she'd be'n right all the time, an' me wrong. I wouldn't lie to her, an' if I didn't say nothin' about gold she'd know'd I didn't have none; so I didn't write at all. If I make a big strike I'll go back, an' we'll move out here somewheres. If I don't make a strike she won't never know I didn't. An' meanwhile she can put in the time guessin'."

"A woman mightn't like it out in this country," said Jake, dubiously. "What with one-prong forks, an' Chilkats prowlin' around, an' no stores an' churches an' things like that."

"She wouldn't need to come, then. It would be a good country for the boys. It would make men of 'em. Let's turn in. I'm sleepy."

For three days the two worked steadily, burying goods from the fort in holes they dug in the edge of the bush. Always they kept an eye out for signs of prowling Indians, but no sign of life appeared on the river or on the hillsides. On the evening of the third day they surveyed their handiwork.

"You couldn't never tell where them holes is," said Jake, eyeing the ground upon which the spruce needles had been carefully scattered. "It looks jest like any other place in the bush."

"Yes," agreed Matthew. "An' we've got supplies enough cached to last for years. Let 'em come. We're ready."

"Maybe there ain't no Chilkats," ventured Jake. "Maybe the trader was easy scairt, or maybe they turned back before they got here. What are we goin' to do if they don't show up?"

"We'll maybe stick around here for awhile, an' then drop on down a ways. We'll keep on goin' till we make a big strike."

"That's right, Matt," seconded Jake. "By Cripes, if we don't never make a strike, we'll be seein' somethin' new all the time; an' that's a damn sight better'n lookin' at the same old barn an' hog pen every day!"

Any doubt that may have arisen as to the existence of the Chilkats was dispersed the

following morning, when six big bidarkas were seen coming down the river. As they approached the landing, Matthew counted forty Indians. He stepped to the door and called to Jake, who was inside: "Here they come, Jake! Get ready to bar the door as soon as I come in!"

Matthew cocked his musket and leveled it at the first Indian who topped the bank. The man stopped, and was immediately joined by a dozen others. "What do you want?" he demanded, in the jargon.

The Indians began talking excitedly among themselves, and Matthew noted that about half of them carried long-barreled flintlock muskets, while the others were armed with hatchets. Presently another Indian appeared, and stepping in front of the others, began a harangue in the jargon. He said that they had come to trade at the fort. They had come far, and were in need of powder and lead and tea and tobacco.

"Wher's your fur?" asked Matthew, noting that they carried nothing beyond the weapons in their hands.

"We have no fur. We will bring the fur later. We have heard that the English give debt."

"Go back where you came from. The English don't want your trade. We give no debt."

"We are many," answered the savage arrogantly. "We have many muskets. You are few; we will take what we need."

"Come on an' get it, you sons of dogs!" cried Matthew, and stepping inside the fort helped Jake bar the door.

With loud cries of rage the Indians fired a ragged volley, and a scattering of musket balls thudded against the logs.

"Give 'em hell, Matt!" cried Jake, as Matthew thrust the muzzle of his musket through a loophole and sighted at an Indian who was about to fire. As the gun roared the Indian dropped his flintlock, leaped into the air, and disappeared over the edge of the bank. The others scattered, some dropping back over the rim while most of them sought refuge in the surrounding timber.

While Jake loaded the musket, Matthew stepped to another loophole and took a shot at a skulking form, but the thick spruce prevented him from seeing the result of the shot. The Indians were popping away from the edge of the woods, their shots striking harmlessly against the log walls.

"Hell, we could stand 'em off fer a year!" cried Jake exultantly. "They can't shoot through these logs."

"They might rush us an' set fire to the buildin'," said Matthew, as he took hasty aim and fired again. The next moment he found himself flat on the floor. Struggling to his feet, he clutched at his shoulder, which felt as though it had been struck by a maul. "They must have got me through the loophole!" he cried.

"No," said Jake. "It was the musket. I forgot to tell you about that one. It was the first one I picked up, an' when I was rammin' down the ball I seen how it wouldn't go down far enough. I pounded it with a chunk of wood but it wouldn't go. Then I happened to think maybe it was loaded already. So I tried some of the others with the ramrod an' found out four or five of 'em was loaded. Them traders had 'em layin' around loaded. So the one you shot had two loads in it, hammered down hard. Maybe you killed two Siwashes!" He applied his eyes to a loophole. "Can't see nothin'," he reported. "If you did, they've drug

'em back.”

“You load them guns right after this!” cried Matthew. “That one kicked like a mule!”

All day the savages skulked in the edge of the bush, shooting at intervals and only rarely showing themselves. When they did, Matthew shot at them. When darkness fell, one dead Indian lay in the open, and it was certain that several more had been wounded.

“They’ve quit fer today,” said Jake, when a half-hour had passed without a shot from the timber.

“They may try to burn us out tonight,” suggested Matthew. “We’ll take turns standin’ watch.”

“Reminds me of that damn ship,” said Jake. “What with gittin’ shot at, an’ all. Only this is better, they can’t sink us, anyhow. An’ there can’t no bullets come up through the floor—like Californy.”

“Let’s eat,” said Matthew, “before it gets plumb dark. We don’t want to light no candles. They might sneak up an’ take a shot at us through a loophole. Where’s that pail of water?”

“I fergot to tell you about that,” answered Jake. “When you hollered at me the Siwashes was comin’ I swung the door bar around an’ knocked it off’n the table.”

“An’ I’m thirstier’n all hell, an’ no water! An’ no water fer tea! You would do somethin’ like that!” Matthew cried impatiently.

“Wait till it gits plumb dark,” said Jake, “an’ I’ll slip down to the river an’ fetch a couple of pails. Listen, what’s that?”

An eerie sound floated from the direction of the forest—the sound of a wailing chant. Through the loopholes the two could see a wavering light playing upon the upper branches of the spruce trees, back from the edge of the clearing. “They’ve got ’em a fire back in there,” said Matthew. “They’re goin’ to camp there tonight, an’ they’re singin’ an’ carryin’ on over that dead Siwash. Remember how they done in the village that winter when Nesheka got tore up by the bear?”

“Now’s my chanct to git the water,” said Jake, reaching for a couple of pails.

Matthew stepped to the door. “Let me go, Jake,” he said. “You might trip over somethin’ an’ make a racket.”

Jake refused to give up the pails. “Not by a damn sight! It was me that spilt the water, an’ it’s me that gits some more. Besides, I ain’t married an’ got no boys. If they git me it won’t make no difference.”

Cautiously they raised the heavy bar, and very cautiously they opened the door. Carrying the pails, Jake stepped out into the darkness while, musket in hand, Matthew stood in the open doorway ready to fire should any skulking form show itself.

Five minutes passed. Ten. Matthew grew nervous. Strain his ears as he would, he could hear no sound save the wailing chant from the forest. Where was Jake? Five minutes at the most should have proved sufficient to go to the river and back. Had some Indian, lying in wait near the water’s edge, knifed him and silently slipped him into the river? . . . Twenty minutes! And still no Jake. Then, suddenly, a dark form showed close beside the waiting man. Instantly the musket leaped to Matthew’s shoulder.

“Don’t shoot—it’s me!” The next moment, both were again in the cabin and Jake deposited two brimming pails of water on the table.

“What took you so long? I thought you was never comin’. Why, Jake! You’re all blood!”

“Yeah. I killed a Siwash. He was layin’ in one of them bidarkas—left there to watch ’em, I guess. Anyways, when I got right beside him he jumped up an’ made like he was goin’ to chop me with his hatchet. I kicked him a good one in the belly, an’ when he doubled up I grabbed his hatchet an’ split his head fer him. He fell right agin’ me. It was worse than stickin’ hogs. Then I took my knife an’ slashed all the bidarkas but one an’ lifted rocks into ’em an’ shoved ’em all out into the river. Them Siwashes is goin’ to be mad as hell in the mornin’.”

“But what did you leave one for?” asked Matthew, puzzled.

“Fer me an’ you. I was thinkin’ while I was workin’ on them bidarkas. What’s the use of us hangin’ around this here fort? They might burn us out, an’ if they don’t, they might pretend to go away an’ take a shot at us when we come out. They’re liable to hang around fer a long while, an’ we’re wastin’ time; even if they should go away we don’t want the damn fort. We got everything cached we want. We can load some things to take along in the bidarka an’ drop down to where our canoe is an’ git that, an’ then paddle acrost the river an’ lay in the bush an’ watch till they go away. Then we can come back an’ get what we need out of the caches.”

“When do you figure on goin’?”

“Right now. While they’re still howlin’ around the fire. If we wait till tomorrow night they might be watchin’ us closer, on account of them bidarkas.”

“But what’ll we do with all these muskets? An’ the powder an’ ball that we’ve got here. We don’t want them to get the guns.”

“We’ll take a couple of muskets apiece an’ the powder an’ ball. The rest of the guns won’t do the Siwashes no good. They’ve got flintlocks, an’ we’ll take all the percussion caps along. They won’t know what the hell to make of them guns.”

Two trips sufficed to carry all the needed gear from the fort, and half an hour later the two stepped into the bidarka and shoved out into the current.

Matthew chuckled as the black bank slipped swiftly past. “Them Siwashes are goin’ to have a long walk back to where they come from,” he said.

CHAPTER XI

THE BIG STRIKE

CARRYING their own canoe to the river, the two towed the lightly loaded bidarka to the left bank, where they landed at a point opposite the abandoned fort, concealed the two craft, and crept inside their robes. At early daybreak they were awakened by the sound of shots. A scattering volley was followed by the intermittent bellowing of flintlocks. Suddenly the firing ceased. Across the clearing that surrounded the fort rushed many figures. Dwarfed by distance, they looked like curious animated dolls. There was a massing before the door, then no figures were in sight as the Indians disappeared into the interior.

Matthew laughed. "They'll find just about enough grub in there for one good feed. I'd like to be where I could watch 'em when they try to work those muskets."

"Look," cried Jake. "They're comin' out agin! Looks like they're carryin' stuff—must be that cloth an' stuff on the shelves. They're takin' it to the river where they left the bidarkas! . . . Look! They've found out they're gone—an' they've found the dead Siwash with his own hatchet stickin' out of his head! They're runnin' around in circles!"

There was more wild running about, then a wisp of blue smoke curled upward. The smoke increased in volume.

"They're burnin' the fort!" cried Jake. "I know'd they'd be mad about them bidarkas an' that Siwash I chopped." The two munched cold bannocks while they watched the destruction of the fort. The logs burned slowly, and it was well toward noon before the last of the walls fell in.

Suddenly from across the river sounded several explosions, like gun shots.

"What in hell are they shootin' at now?" asked Jake, straining his eyes. "Look—they're all runnin' tight as they can leg it!"

It was true. The Indians who had been grouped close about the burning embers were now scattering in every direction. In a moment the clearing was void of human forms. Another explosion sounded, and another. No Indians appeared.

Hour after hour the two partners lay in the edge of the bush watching the opposite bank. Darkness gathered, and still no Indians had appeared.

In the morning the clearing about the burned fort was likewise deserted. The two watched until noon. A smile broadened Matthew's bearded lips. "By golly, I bet I know what happened—why they all run away from there when them shots was fired! They fooled with them muskets till they found out they couldn't use 'em, then they slung 'em in the fire—an' when they begun goin' off, they thought we was shootin' at 'em right out of the fire!"

"Let's paddle acrost an' see if they're gone," suggested Jake. "I bet they're runnin' yet."

The two landed at some distance below the site of the fort, and, muskets ready, worked stealthily up through the bush. A circuit of the clearing told the story. The corpse abandoned in the woods, near the ashes of the ceremonial fire, the wide-spaced tracks and the discarded flintlocks showed that flight had been abrupt and precipitate. The sole thought in the minds of the savages had been to put distance—much distance—between themselves and the *tahmanawus* that shot from the fire. On the river bank the body of the other Indian lay as they had left it. Jake retrieved the hatchet from the man's skull. "No

use wastin' a hatchet," he observed, wiping the blade clean. "It might come in handy."

From the cache the two secured lead, a keg of powder, and such other tools and supplies as they needed, loaded them into the bidarka, and pushed out into the river. Five or six miles below, on the opposite side, they landed and panned some gravel on a bar at the mouth of a small creek. Next day they moved on.

Five days later, after a dozen stops at unproductive bars and creek beds, they camped one evening at the mouth of a broad, shallow river that flowed in from the westward. Jake washed a few pans while Matthew prepared supper.

Suddenly, as he flirited the water from the third pan, he uttered a howl of delight. "By Gawd, Matt! I've got her in chunks!"

Matthew stepped over to see him reach into the bottom of the pan and withdraw a nugget of yellow gold that would weigh three or four ounces. The pan also yielded two smaller nuggets and a scattering of yellow grains.

"I bet it's the river that old Siwash told us about!" cried Matthew. "It's the place we've be'n huntin' fer three years! We're rich, Jake!"

"You bet! An' muskets an' powder an' lead enough to last us from now on! We won't never need to go back!"

Matthew laughed. "What would be the use of diggin' out gold if we didn't go back an' spend it?" he asked. "A man would be jest as well off here with a musket an' powder an' lead without the gold."

"Sure—that's what I claim. So what's the use of goin' back? Besides, gold's heavy, an' it would be a hell of a job gittin' it back. Think of all the hills we've clumb over. We've be'n so tired we couldn't go no further—an' we wasn't luggin' no gold, neither, to speak of."

"When we get enough, we'll build us a flatboat an' float it downriver."

"But the river goes t'other way!"

"It's bound to run into the ocean, some time," reminded Matt.

For several days the two panned with varying success. Abandoning the big river, they pushed on up the tributary which, dividing into innumerable shallow channels, showed a wealth of sandy bars. Slowly they worked upstream, then, a month later, they struck really rich gravel. It was on a broad bend of the river, apparently no different from a hundred bends they had passed. But here the gravel seemed darker and mixed with a sharper sand than the water-worn sand they had been panning. Pan after pan, taken from widely separated points, showed a uniformity of the yellow grains, with now and then a sizable nugget.

The river here ran between high rock walls, at varying distance from its banks. On the bend they were panning, the wall was some five or six hundred feet from the water line.

While Jake was content to pan near the water's edge, Matthew prospected all over the flat, stripping off the topsoil, and digging shallow shafts. Soon he was panning twice as much gold as was Jake at the river bank.

One evening as the two sat at their supper, Matthew spoke. "We ain't goin' no further, Jake. There ain't no use to. This whole flat is full of gold. We'll build us a good cabin an' stay right here."

"Suits me. There's plenty nice straight logs, an' we might's well git at it in the mornin'. We'll build her good an' solid an' put in some loopholes like they had in the fort. There's Siwashes along this river. I seen some tracks."

“They’re prob’ly all right, like the ones we wintered with. But it wouldn’t hurt to have loopholes. I picked out the place for it today. Back a ways from the river, on the edge of the scatterin’ timber, a big spring comes out from under some rocks. We’ll have water right at the door.”

“How big we goin’ to make it?”

“We don’t need a big cabin. We ain’t goin’ to be in it much, an’ a little one is easier het. Eight by ten ort to do, an’ a fireplace in one end.”

“We ain’t got no glass fer a winder,” said Jake.

“We don’t need a winder. The fire’ll give light, an’ there’s plenty of candles back there in the cache—two whole boxes of ’em.”

“There’s a lot more powder an’ lead, too—an’ flour an’ tea, an’ sugar an’ pork. I wisht we had it here.”

“We’ll go an’ get it after we get the cabin built. We must have come seventy or eighty miles up this river, an’ about the same down the big one.”

The cabin took form rapidly. On the third day, as they were laboriously hoisting dirt, bucket by bucket, to cover the roofpoles, a canoe rounded the bend and beached on the gravel. Three Indians stepped out and stood for a long time staring at the apparition that confronted them. Two men with hairy faces, like the men at the fort up the big river, were building a fort here on their own river! That was good. This winter they would not have so far to take their fur. A few words of deep guttural and one of the Indians—a thick, fat-bodied man—walked toward the cabin, closely followed by the other two.

Matthew, who was on the roof, saw them coming. Jumping down, he stood beside Jake to welcome the visitors. The Indians carried no weapons. Evidently they were friendly. “*Klahowya six!*” uttered Matthew, extending his hand.

“*Klahowya,*” answered the fat one, and, remembering that the way of the men with the white skins and the hairy faces was to take one by the hand, he extended his own.

Several moments of awkward silence ensued, during which each took measure of the other. Evidently the survey was satisfactory. The fat one grinned, Matthew and Jake grinned, and the other two grinned. A friendship had been formed. In the jargon Matthew asked where the men had come from—where did they live?

This question seemed beyond the comprehension of the three. “God damn,” replied the fat one pleasantly, proud of his “Boston talk.” “Powda, lead? *Nem Nootlakwat!*”

Matthew grinned, and Jake laughed aloud. “He looks like Ignatz Schwartz that runs the butcher shop in Emmonsville,” he said. “We can’t never learn that name—we’ll call him Ignatz.”

Matthew tried again: “*Nem Matt,*” he said, pointing to himself. Then he pointed to Jake. “*Nem Jake.*”

The Indian nodded in pleased comprehension. “Matt,” he repeated. “Jake.”

“That’s right,” grinned Matthew. Then he pointed at the man himself. “*Mika nem, Ignatz.*”

The Indians seemed amused. They laughed, and the fat one nodded, tapping his chest: “*Nem, Ignazz,*” he repeated. And again he laughed.

Finally, after much repetition, and motioning with arms and fingers, the two managed to understand that the Indian village was only a short distance upriver; that the Indians desired powder and lead; and that they would bring fur to trade.

With less success the two tried to put it across that they desired no fur. That the

building was a house to live in, not a fort for trading purposes. That the fort on the big river had been burned by the Chilkats. That they would trade them some powder and lead, but in return they must have gold and not fur. They showed them the gold they had dug from the sand and gravel and, also, how to pan it. The Indians laughed at the vagary of the hairy ones, and promised to bring gold. Each went away happy, with a small pouch of shot, a pain-killer bottle of powder, and a handful of percussion caps.

The following day the two, towing the bidarka, started for the cache at the site of Fort Selkirk. Thirteen days later they were back, after track-lining the heavily loaded bidarka upstream. Conspicuously placed on the floor of the cabin they found three pain-killer bottles full of yellow gold and three shot pouches similarly filled. The Indians had discharged their debt!

CHAPTER XII

THE SIWASH CHARM

INDUSTRIOUSLY the two panned gold until the river froze and snow covered the ground. Then they built a meat cache and, when the weather got colder, they put in the short days hunting and netting fish through the ice.

From time to time they visited the Indian village, where the band of Ignatz lived in their skin tepees. There were twenty-five or thirty lodges—probably a hundred souls in all. The Indians were friendly and hospitable. The women—“kloochmen” they were called in the jargon—were reserved and overawed by these men with the strange hairy faces, but gradually this reserve was dropped, and at times they even entered into the conversation.

In the spring another trip was made to the fort site for supplies, and the summer passed in panning gold. Powder and lead were traded, bulk for bulk, for gold, to the complete satisfaction of both parties. Before the summer was over, Matthew had evolved a sort of a rude rocker, and from then on the output was increased.

Again winter came, and again the two switched their activities from mining to hunting and fishing and frequent visits to the village of the Indians. Neither ever mentioned leaving the country.

It was during the third winter in the cabin that Matthew discovered the art of winter mining. An unusually successful hunt found them with more moose meat on hand than they could possibly use. They decided to have a big feast and invite all the Indians. “It must be somewheres around Christmas,” said Matthew. “We’ll give ’em a big feed.”

The affair was a great success, and it was at this feast that Matthew and Jake heard for the first time about the charm, or fetish, that belonged to the tribe. Ignatz himself, keeper of the invaluable treasure, had boasted of it under the expanding influence of several tin cups of hot rum and water and sugar. It kept men young. It was of such enormous value that the combined wealth of the tribe would not buy it. All the yellow grains in the cache of the white men would not suffice to buy even the box it was kept in. Would he show it to the white men? No, indeed, he would not! Only he, Nootlakwatl, whom the white men had named Ignatz, had gazed upon it—he and a few of the elder rulers of the tribe. Where had it come from, this vast treasure? No man knew where. Its origin was bathed in mystery. In the dim past there had been a man in a long black robe. He was the Good Spirit, probably the great *Sahalee Tyee* himself—who knows? Anyway, he was a *tah* of great wisdom.

“How, then,” inquired Matthew, “if the fetish keeps men young, are these elder rulers old?”

“That is easy to explain—they were old when the charm came into their possession, and they are old now—but no older.”

“Have not some died since the tribe acquired the charm?”

“Ah, yes, truly some have died; but not from old age. Do not infants die? It is not always the old who die.”

There was a surfeit of meat at the feast which lasted the whole night through. In the morning the Indians returned to their village, and as the last one disappeared, Matthew began to kick snow upon the smoldering embers. The wind was rising, and it was driving the smoke through the loopholes of the cabin. It was slow work, and he got a shovel and

began to scatter the live coals into the snow. As he did so, the shovel scooped up some earth. For several moments he stood looking down at the ash-covered spot where the fire had been. Then he shoveled away the loose dirt that had been thawed by the heat of the fire. The last shovelful contained a little gravel. The fire had thawed down through the topsoil! At least a foot of earth had been thawed—rendered fit for digging! Why not another fire on the same spot? And another, and another? A man could keep on all winter—thawing, digging, panning. His output could be trebled! The winter was twice as long as the summer, and heretofore the winter had been wasted! Matthew entered the cabin. Jake was already snoring in his bunk. Throwing himself onto his own bunk, Matthew drew the robes over him, and he, too, slept.

Toward evening he awoke, and without a word to Jake, who was boiling a pot of tea, stepped outside and kindled a new fire in the hole he had scooped out. There was wood left from the night before, and he heaped it high.

After supper, when the fire had died down, Matthew tossed the coals out of the shallow hole and carefully shoveled the warm gravel into a pile beside the embryo shaft. Then he returned to the cabin. Little did he realize that he had accidentally discovered the method that was to be rediscovered years later on Fortymile, and used on a thousand creeks and feeders to recover millions and millions of dollars' worth of gold from frozen gravel.

CHAPTER XIII

A TRIP TO FORT YUKON

THE following morning more wood was cut and more gravel shoveled from the hole. And so, day in and day out through the long winter, the two continued their mining. Every day they washed a test pan, melting ice in a kettle in the fireplace; and, as Matthew had predicted, the deeper they went the richer the pay streak showed.

Shaft after shaft was burned down to bed rock that winter. It gave them work, wonderfully profitable work, and a welcome break in the monotony of the long dark winter.

Ignatz came down for powder, and Jake brought up the subject of the sacred charm. He finally offered to trade for the fetish. But the Indian would not even consider it. No—they would go back to the bow and arrow—they would starve, before they would part with the thing that keeps men young! So the matter was dropped, and powder was furnished on the promise of Ignatz to pay for it in gold the following summer.

In the spring another trip was made to the fort site, and the last of the powder and lead was brought down.

In the cabin Jake eyed the four kegs of powder speculatively. "Them Siwashes uses a heap of powder," he said. "Ignatz says they use' to have to be careful of it when they had to give good fur for it; but now, when they can git it fer yellow sand, they can afford to shoot at everything that comes along."

Matthew grinned. "Yeah, the last time we was up to the village, they was shootin' at a mark for lynx skins, an' loadin' their muskets with powder that cost 'em five thousan' dollars a pound!"

"Makes it good fer the powder business. But we ain't only got enough, at the rate they're goin', to last fer a year or so. The caps is runnin' low, too. Maybe we better raise the price of them caps. Better cut down on the powder, too. I'd hate like hell to have to go back to them bow an' arrows fer to git meat."

The summer passed, and the winter, and another summer. Many moosehide bags of gold lay on the bed rock in the bottom of the twelve-foot shaft near the spring. Only half a keg of powder, a few pounds of lead, and a box or two of percussion caps remained.

Jake gloomily surveyed the scanty store. "We got to quit sellin' powder an' lead an' caps to them Siwashes," he said. "Cripes, Matt, couple of years from now we'll be back to bow an' arrows ourself."

"There's an awful good profit in it," answered Matt.

"Yeah, but there ain't no profit in dang near freezin' to death tryin' to sneak up on a moose to kill him with an arrow, or either a spear! Remember the time my mittens had froze to the spear handle, an' I jabbed it into that big moose, an' he started through the brush, an' I couldn't leave go? I was in a hell of a fix, Matt! An' on top of that he turned around an' tried to hook me!"

Matthew laughed heartily at the recollection. "I'd almost forgot it," he said. "Gosh, it was funny!"

"Funny! If it had be'n you, you wouldn't of thought it was funny! If that spear handle hadn't of broke, I'd prob'ly be'n goin' yet. Er anyways till it got warm in the spring an' on-froze my mittens!"

"I've be'n thinkin'," said Matthew, "maybe we better get some more powder an' lead to trade. A man can't hardly afford to turn down a profit like that. We used to buy powder for fifty or sixty cents a pound in Emmonsville."

"Yeah," admitted Jake. "But it's a hell of a ways to Emmonsville."

Matthew grinned. "I wasn't thinkin' of Emmonsville," he said. "You remember Pritchard told us that a fellow named Murray had a company post at Fort Yukon? He said it was four or five hundred miles downriver. I figure we could go down there an' get the powder an' lead."

Jake pondered the proposition. "It would be a hell of a chore," he opined. "We'd have to track-line the bidarka all the way back agin' the current. Lots of places the rocks come straight up out of the water. We couldn't make it. An' besides, the freeze-up would ketch us before we'd git back."

"I was figurin' on waitin' till the river froze, an' gettin' some dogs off'n the Siwashes, an' makin' a sled trip. It looks like we ort to make twenty miles a day, an' if it's five hundred miles, that makes a thousan'. That would be fifty days."

"That ain't so bad. I wouldn't mind a little trip. We could find out what year it is, too."

"Who gives a damn?" smiled Matthew.

"Well, it don't make no difference about the day of the week er the month," admitted Jake. "But it looks like a feller ort to know what year it is. Cripes, we don't know how old we be!"

"Who gives a damn?" repeated Matthew.

"We wouldn't have to if we had that thing Ignatz has got," replied Jake. "Say, Matt, there might be somethin' in that—keepin' a man young. Ignatz don't look a day older'n what he did when we first seen him—an' them old men don't, neither."

"Hell," laughed Matthew, "them old men is as old as they can get, anyway. An' Ignatz is so damn fat his hide can't wrinkle. You couldn't tell if he was gettin' old."

The trip to Fort Yukon was made on the new ice. The distance proved to be much nearer four hundred miles than five hundred, and they made nearly forty miles a day, instead of twenty. Good weather prevailed until the last day, and they arrived at the fort in a whirling blizzard that drove the fine-powdered snow into each crack and crevice of their skin clothing. It matted and froze in their long beards and hair, so that when they finally stumbled into the trading room of the fort their faces were enclosed in thick white masks that required many minutes at the roaring stove to thaw off.

Chief Trader Murray greeted them heartily. "So ye're the two that Pritchard was tellin' me about—that stayed on when the Chilkats was comin'. Tell me—what happened?"

"They came, all right," said Matthew. "We managed to cache most of the stuff that Pritchard left, but they burned the fort. We hid in the bush across the river."

"An' ye've be'n up there ever since! Losh—it's five year agone come spring that Pritchard was here!"

"Yes, we built a cabin up a river a little ways below where the fort was. We've be'n prospectin'."

"Did ye find gold?"

"Oh, some," answered Matthew indifferently. "Enough to make a livin'."

"Ye might better be trappin'."

"Maybe, but we don't know anything about trappin'. The prospectin' suits us."

"Ye're wastin' ye'r time. But 'tis ye'r own business. Are ye goin' back?"

“Yes. We want powder an’ lead an’ caps, an’ some more supplies. We’ll pay for it in gold.”

Trader Murray frowned. “W-e-e-l, I’d ruther ye had fur. But, a year or so ago, I got word from the company to report on the gold. ’Tis worth sixteen dollars the ounce, in trade, they said.”

“What year is it?” asked Jake abruptly.

“What year! Why, 1856, o’ course! An’ the day is the twenty-ninth o’ October.”

“An’ I’m twenty-eight years old!” exclaimed Jake. “Who would of thought it?”

“Not me,” grinned the trader. “Ye look fifty!”

“By golly, if there was a barber around here, I’d git me a shave an’ a haircut! That ice freezin’ to my whiskers, the way it done, pretty near pulled the face off’n me!”

“The woman’s handy with the shears,” said Murray. “An’ I’ve got razors.”

“What do you say, Matt?”

Matthew laughed. “Sure, let’s get shaved up once, jest to see what we look like. I believe I’ll buy me a razor, too.”

It took most of the afternoon to accomplish the desired results. When at last the partners faced each other they stared in astonishment. “Well, by gosh, Matt!” cried Jake. “I’d plumb fergot what you use’ to look like.”

“Same to you,” said Matthew. “You sure don’t look fifty now.”

“Whiskers changes a mon,” admitted the trader. “But they’re handy in fly time.”

The following day was spent in buying supplies. “What’s powder worth?” asked Matthew, after the various other purchases had been made.

“Five dollars the pound,” answered Murray. “How much’ll ye be wantin’?”

“Five dollars a pound!” cried Jake, his voice rising in righteous indignation. “Why, you dang robber! We can git it fer forty, fifty cents a pound in Emmons ville!”

“Emmons ville?” said the trader, running thick fingers through his hair. “An’ wheer’s Emmons ville?”

“Gawd, Matt!” cried Jake, aghast at the man’s vast ignorance. “He don’t know where Emmons ville’s at!” He turned to the trader. “Emmons ville’s in Ohio—Scioto County—an’ they’ve prob’ly got the mill in by now. It’s bigger’n Chillicothe.”

“Wheer’s Ohio?” asked the trader. “An’ this Chillicothe—is that a place, too?”

Jake turned away in disgust. “No wonder you charge five dollars a pound fer powder. You don’t know no more about ’rithmetic than you do about geography! But you got to knock off some on that powder. Hell, man, we got to haul it better’n four hundred mile on a dog sled! Anyways, it ort to be cheaper by the keg.”

“Weel, I’ll mak’ it four dollars if you can use a keg; but that’s as low as I’ll go.”

“All right,” grumbled Jake, “but it’s robbery, at that.”

“How much powder have you got?” asked Matthew.

“There’s a matter o’ ten kegs or so,” grinned the man. “I keep it in yon outbuildin’, in case o’ fire.”

“We’ll take ’em,” said Matthew.

“What!” The trader’s eyes were wide. “Ten kegs o’ powder! Mon, are ye crazy?” Then, suddenly, his eyes went bleak and hard. “Ye’re figgerin’ on tradin’ it, eh? Ye’ll buy powder from the company an’ turn around an’ trade it to the Siwashes fer fur! I’ll na let ye have it!”

Matthew laughed. “What would we do with fur? Listen, we trade the powder, all right,

an' lead an' caps—but we trade 'em for gold! There's a bunch of Siwashes livin' near us, an' we've got 'em all pannin' gold in the summer. They did trade with Pritchard, but they haven't had any post near enough to trade at since Campbell's fort was burnt, an' they've got a lot of fur on hand. You sell us the powder an' lead an' caps, an' we'll send them down with their fur to trade with you for the rest of the stuff they need. They wouldn't give you fur for powder anyhow, not when they can buy it for 'yellow iron.' ”

Murray saw the force of the argument. “All right. Ye can have the powder an' lead an' cap business. But, mind ye, no fur! But I'll na sell ye all the powder. The Siwashes around here need some fer the huntin'. I'll let ye have five kegs an' two hundred pound o' lead an' most o' the caps. The lead'll be costin' ye a dollar a pound.”

And so the deal was made, and the two set out on the long back trail.

CHAPTER XIV

TWO TONS AND A POUND OF GOLD

THE winter passed, and the summer. And other winters and summers, and still the partners panned gold and traded powder and lead for more gold.

Four years from the time of their first visit, Jake once more frowned at the single powder keg left in the corner of the cabin. "We've got to make another trip to the fort, Matt," he said. "Seems like we don't do nothin' but run to the store!"

Matthew chuckled. "That's right," he admitted, "we're gettin' plumb shif'less."

"The freeze-up's liable to come any time now. Where's them shears? We'll shave up. The mosquitoes an' flies is all gone, an' damn if I'm goin' to shove no snowdrift along ahead of me with my face agin!"

Ignatz came for more powder before the shaving operations were completed. He seemed vastly interested in the procedure, examining brush, shears, and razors with minute care. "Look better now," he said. "Look like Siwash. Hair on face no good."

Matthew grinned. "You ain't the only one that's got a charm to keep you young. See these things? They keep us young, too. Don't we look a lot younger? How'll you trade charms?" He extended the articles toward the Indian. But the man drew away, refusing to touch them.

"No. Siwash charm for Siwash. W'ite man charm for w'ite mans. Mebbe-so Siwash tak' w'ite man charm, git hair on face lak' dog."

The trip to the fort was made without incident, and four years later another trip was made. On this trip the trader eyed them quizzically. "Ye're Americans, ain't ye?"

"Sure," answered Jake. "What did you think we was—Chinamens?"

"Did ye know theer's a big war goin' on doon in ye'r country?"

"A war!" cried Matthew. "What kind of a war?"

"Weel, fer as I know they ain't only one kind of a war—men shootin' an' killin' one another, an' the half of 'em not knowin' what it's all about."

"But who's fightin' us? An' what for?"

"From what I heer'd it's the north part of the country agin' the south part. Theer fightin' about freein' slaves, er some such matter. One side wants 'em an' one don't. What part do ye come from?"

"Hell," cried Jake. "We're about in the middle!"

"If it's a matter of slavery," said Matthew, "we'd be on the side of the North. Across the river in Kentucky an' all down South they have slaves. We don't have 'em in Ohio."

"It don't stand to reason," argued Jake, "that folks would go to work an' kill one another over a lot of damn niggers! I don't believe it. But if they are fightin', by gosh, they'd better keep away from Emmonsville. We got a lot of dang good shots in town—ain't we, Matt?"

"When folks gets worked up to fightin' sperit," said Murray, sagely, "they'll fight a war about 'most anything. They started in fightin', accordin' to what I heer'd, aboot three, four year agone, an' they ain't quit yet."

"Prob'ly don't amount to nothin'," said Jake, dismissing the matter from his mind. "What's powder worth this year?"

"It's gone up, on account of the war in America," answered Murray. "I'm chargin' six

dollars.”

Jake raged: “It’s jest a dang lie they’ve got up to raise the price of powder! How do you expect us to make a livin’—chargin’ us six dollars a pound? Besides, what with the kind of cannons they’ve got now, an’ guns an’ swords an’ things, a war couldn’t last no three, four years. Everyone would be blow’d to hell in a couple of months at the longest. Me an’ Matt was in a war, once—an’ it didn’t hardly last no time at all! Our ship got sunk out from in under us, an’ we floated ashore on a lid. Come on, now, we’ll pay five a pound for ten kegs.”

“Ten kegs, mon! I’ve only four on hand. It’s almighty hard to get these days. Two kegs is all ye can have, but seein’ ye’r gude customers ye can have it fer five.”

Back in the cabin Matthew thought about the war. Could it be possible that the country had divided, and that the two sections were waging a bloody war one against the other? Hell, no! They were all Americans, weren’t they? They all, North and South, had pitched in and licked the British twice! Why should they be fighting among themselves? And yet

...

How about Emmonsville? As Jake had said, it lay nearly in the middle—right between the two fighting armies. And what of his boys? Let’s see—this is 1864—Good God! When he came away they were just little shavers. Simeon was six, and Gideon was five. Cute little brats—smart, too. But it was in 1849 he had come away. They would be twenty and twenty-one, now. Just the right age for soldiers! Suppose one of ’em had been shot—or both! But no! The regular army could do all the fighting that was necessary. War was a business, nowadays, like lumber, lime, and coal! Well, in a year or so he’d go back. A ton of gold—that was the amount he had fixed as his goal. A ton for himself and a ton for Jake—and they nearly had it! Another year, two at the most, and he’d be going back to Emmonsville—back to pay his dad more than a quarter of a million dollars in gold! A good investment—Dad’s! That would leave a quarter of a million for him and Susie and the boys. Susie couldn’t talk, now, about wild goose chases. He’d show her! Sixteen years—gosh! Dad would be eighty-six! He wondered whether Susie was still religious. He remembered how her chin used to go up when he would start out with his gun on Sunday. Well—she’d had plenty of time to think things over. He would go hunting the first Sunday he was home.

All winter the daily routine went on—chop, burn, dig, crank—chop, burn, dig, crank. The gold was piling up—nearly two tons in the cache.

More and more Matthew thought about the war. He would broach the subject now and then, but Jake wasn’t interested. He didn’t believe there was any war. It was just a scheme to boost the price of powder.

All summer they panned the gravel. Matthew had rigged up a set of balance scales with rocks for weights. He had carefully weighed those little stones on Murray’s scales, and the weight was marked on each. They had weighed all the gold in the cache, and every time it was added to, the weight of the new gold was recorded. They went into the winter lacking one hundred and eighty-seven pounds of having two tons.

All winter Matthew worked steadily. He traded powder and played checkers, as before; but there were long silences—when he sat thinking, wondering, brooding. Jake noticed them and sought to rouse his partner out of the mood, but with small success. Finally he stopped trying.

Then, on a day in the spring, Matthew tossed a mooseskin pouch into the cache,

shoveled three feet of gravel onto it to hide it, and turned to face Jake. "That's the last!" he said, his eyes shining.

"The last!" cried Jake. "What do you mean, the last?"

"I've quit!" announced Matthew, evenly. "At least, until I come back."

"Back from wher'? You don't figger on a trip to the fort, do you?"

"A trip to Emmonsville. There's two ton an' one pound of gold in the cache, Jake. A ton an' a half a pound apiece—more than half a million dollars for each of us. That's a lot of money—a hell of a lot. I'm goin' back an' see my dad an' my boys, an' my wife. I've be'n away a long time. They might get to thinkin' I've forgot 'em. But I haven't. An' then, besides, I want to find out about this war. Come on, Jake, let's go home. We can come back if we don't like it—right back here an' get out more gold!"

Jake was silent for a long time. "Well," he said, "maybe we better be goin' back. We'll stop off in Cincinnati er Chillicothe, an' git us a couple of plug hats an' red plush vests an' big yaller watch chains an' a diamon' ring apiece. But how in hell we goin' to git the gold back? Cripes, two ton is heavy!"

"We'll build us a scow an' float it down to Fort Yukon—then we'll ship it out, like Murray ships out his fur. He'll know how to get it out."

"You know, Matt, I hate to go without that there thing Ignatz has got. I'll bet it's worth almost as much as all our gold. It's a hell of a big diamon' er somethin'. I bet it's bigger'n a hen's aig. Gawd, Matt, if we could only get it, we could saw it in two, an' make us each a ring that would make folks look! I bet old Astor ain't got a ring like that!"

"There's no use tryin' to get it. Ignatz has told us a hundred times he won't trade."

"That's so. But we might steal it. What good does a diamon' all wropped up an' hid away do anyone? It might's well be a rock er a chunk of coal. We could be plumb away before they know'd it was gone."

"Where does he keep it?" asked Matthew, doubtfully. "He'd never tell."

Jake grinned knowingly. "He told me."

"What!"

"Yeah. I give him a lot of rum one night, after you'd went to sleep, an' he got drunk an' told me he kep' it buried in under his robes in his tepee. It's in a little cedar box, all wropped round with moosehide."

"But we couldn't get it. There's always too many Siwashes around."

"We'll throw another big feed an' git 'em all down here. Then we'll give 'em all the rum they can hold, an' while they're havin' the party, I'll slip up an' get the diamon'!"

Finally, after much argument, Matthew gave his half-hearted consent to the plan. Feverishly the two worked until they had completed a scow capable of floating the gold. Then for days they hunted, killing several moose. The Indians were invited to a big feast, with promise of much firewater. They came, young and old, every soul of them.

Watching his chance, Jake whispered to Matthew: "I'm goin' now. Git 'em good an' drunk, an' keep 'em drinkin'. When I git back we'll fill 'em up some more; then when they go back we'll start loadin' up the gold."

The feast was a grand success. Jake's disappearance was not noticed, and he was back before midnight.

"Did you get it?" whispered Matthew excitedly.

"Sure—it's under the robes in my bunk."

Sometime later Matthew entered the cabin and, by the light of the candle, examined

the object. It was, as Jake had said, a small wooden casket or box, some four or five inches deep, the same in width, and eight or ten in length. It was wrapped round and round with strips of moosehide. Hastily Matthew returned the box to its hiding place beneath the robes and stepped outside.

Finally the feast was ended. Indians, in small groups, headed up the creek. Others took to their canoes. But many remained. Some slept on the ground near the fire, and others staggered drunkenly about. Matthew and Jake tried to persuade these to leave—tried to awaken the sleepers. It was no use.

Panic seized the two partners. Here was a pretty kettle of fish! They could not load the gold into the scow that lay ready in the river—not with half the village looking on! Matthew realized this better than did Jake. He had once overheard some of the Indians plotting to steal the gold if they could find the cache, and trade it again for powder. It would be easier than panning it from the ground. And now, emboldened by rum, they might attempt to take it by force.

At his wit's end, Matthew called Jake aside. "You've got us into a hell of a mess now! Go take that damn thing back, before they miss it!"

"How in hell can I? Half of 'em's back at the village!"

Both redoubled their efforts to rid the bend of Indians, but only succeeded in making some of them angry. Then, suddenly, from up the river came loud, excited shoutings. The sleepers awoke at the sound and sprang erect, listening. The drunken ones seemed suddenly sobered. It was a strange, weird cry repeated by many voices—the half-forgotten war cry of the band!

Black looks were darted at the two white men. Suddenly a crowd of yelling savages broke from the timber and rushed toward the cabin. Some were flourishing muskets!

Darting into the cabin Matthew and Jake barred the door. "You shoot, Matt! I'll load!" cried Jake. "We've got four muskets—keep 'em hot, Matt! Them Siwashes is mad as hell!"

Already muskets were roaring and bellowing in the clearing, and bullets were thudding against the walls. Matthew thrust a muzzle through a loophole and fired point-blank at an Indian who was about to shoot. The man dropped kicking into the coarse grass. The shouts redoubled. So did the firing. Matthew shot steadily, aiming low. He was shooting at legs—it seemed a shame to kill these men who were merely seeking to recover a treasure they prized. But some he did kill. Three or four forms lay out there, ominously still.

"They'll run out of powder after a while," panted Jake, as he rammed home a bullet. "They'll quit at dark, anyhow, an' it's damn near noon."

The firing became intermittent. Short of powder, the Indians were saving their fire. Not one was to be seen in the clearing. Through a loophole, Matthew saw the scow float away downriver. The bidarka and the canoe followed. He reported to Jake, who only swore the louder and rammed the faster.

Suddenly the room roared. Acrid powder smoke was in Matthew's nostrils as he whirled. Had the powder exploded? No, there was the keg. But Jake lay face downward on the floor, his legs twitching convulsively, and from the outside a musket barrel was being withdrawn from a loophole.

"Jake!" cried Matthew. "Jake! Get up!" But even as he spoke the words, he knew that Jake would never get up. A bright red ribbon trickled from beneath Jake's face and sank

into the hard-packed dirt. Matthew dashed to the loophole from which the musket had been withdrawn, thrust his own musket through, and fired at a retreating back. The Indian leaped high and toppled sideways into the grass.

Thereafter Matthew shot at no more legs!

Darkness settled. It was a cloudy night and very dark. Outside the cabin the rising wind moaned through the spruce tops. Inside, all was deathly still. Near midnight, Matthew moved. He unbarred the door, opened it, and peered out. For long moments he listened. No sound but the sound of the wind in the trees.

Hot tears dimmed his eyes, and he dashed them away with his hand, then very gently he lifted Jake's body and carried it out. For a moment he paused on the edge of the shaft that was half full of gravel—the gravel that covered more than a million in gold. Then, lowering the body, he dropped it. It made no sound as it settled to rest upon the gravel. Grasping a shovel, Matthew set feverishly to work, filling the hole from the dump of discarded gravel. The task was soon finished, and he slipped silently back into the cabin. Fumbling beneath Jake's bunk, he withdrew a flat stone upon which had been carved the two initials J. V. Jake had spent long hours on that stone. He had made Matthew promise that if he should die he would bury him decently and place that stone above the grave.

Slipping once more from the room, Matthew planted the stone—but instead of planting it upright, in the manner of grave markers, he laid it flat and covered it with gravel.

Back in the cabin, he thought rapidly. The canoe and the bidarka were gone. He could not escape by the river. Tomorrow night might be too late. They might rush him and burn him out before that. Tonight he must go—must leave the gold buried in the gravel, with a dead man guarding it. He must somehow make his way to Fort Yukon. Later he would return for the gold.

To his light pack, consisting of powder and ball and food, he added the little oblong cedar box wrapped round and round with moosehide. Musket in hand, he opened the door and vanished into the thick dark.

Overhead the wind moaned a dirge in the spruce tops.

Book II

CHAPTER I

THE GRANDSONS

IN the little office of Blunt & Blunt, Inc.—dealers in lumber, coal, lime, and cement—Ken Blunt finished checking an invoice, thrust the paper into a pigeonhole of his desk, and half turned in his chair to stare out the window. Rain, in a steady drizzle, had been falling since morning. The minute drops made vertical lines against a mountainous pyramid of coal, beyond which stretched pile after pile of lumber. A team of horses splashed through the mud, pulling an empty wagon. With monotonous rattle and clatter a mechanical contrivance elevated coal from a freight car to the top of the black pyramid. Sliding and rolling, a chunk of coal hurtled down the pile and leaped across the roadway. One of the horses shied violently, and the teamster swore loudly and jerked at his reins. A switch engine, belching black smoke, shunted a car onto the siding and spotted it in front of the lime house.

A drear day, and a drab outlook. Ken drummed on his desk with the tips of his fingers. His brain took no note of what his eyes saw. The pyramid of coal was a snow-covered mountain, its higher reaches gleaming above the dark green spires of a belting of spruce. The hoof-churned road was a river, and lumber piles were other mountains—mountains in endless succession. The clatter of the coal elevator could well be the peck and scrape of a thousand shovels as sweating men tore into the gravel of creeks. Gold! The very word thrilled young Ken Blunt as no other word could thrill him. It was not that he worshiped the value of gold, nor did he particularly admire its beauty. For wrought gold—the bejeweled baubles of women—he cared nothing. The minted gold that occasionally passed through his hands in the course of business was just so much money. But raw gold! Gold that lay hidden deep in the valleys of creeks and seamed in the rocks of mountains—there was gold!

When he was a little boy, Granddad Blunt had showed him pieces of gold—nuggets, Granddad called them—that he himself had dug from the gravel of a river in the far-off northern mountains. Rough and irregular they were, just as they had come from the place where they had lain for thousands and millions of years. That's the gold that excites the imagination. Where had it come from? Why was it there—upon that particular river and not upon other rivers? Was there more gold buried back there in those mountains? Granddad Blunt insisted there was—tons of it—lying there in the gravel. But no one took Granddad seriously. There was the old story—it had been years and years since Ken had heard it—a fantastic story that no one believed, about two tons and a pound of gold that he himself had buried and then had come away. There was a dead man mixed up in it somewhere. Ken grinned. Why should anyone go away and leave two tons and a pound of gold buried in the gravel? But still—Granddad did have some nuggets of raw gold. Of course, half a handful of nuggets was a long way from two tons and a pound. The grin broadened. And why that extra pound? Somehow that extra pound added something to the story—something bizarre—more bizarre even than the part about the dead man. It stirred the imagination—that extra pound of gold. Most men would have said “a couple of tons” and let it go at that. But not Granddad Blunt. Granddad said two tons and a pound; no more, no less.

Granddad had some tall stories, anyhow—about being a pirate and having the ship

shot out from under him, and about his partner's mittens freezing to a spear handle and a moose dragging him through the woods. Granddad was all right! "Old Man Blunt," they called him in Emmons ville. Everyone knew him and humored him—but no one believed his fantastic yarns. It was true that he had been away for a long, long time—went to California in the gold rush of '49 and for eighteen years no one heard a word from him, despite the fact that Great-granddad had advertised in all the California papers. Matthew Blunt had disappeared as completely as though the earth had opened and swallowed him. His father died, and his wife. His two sons, Ken's father, and his uncle Simeon, had inherited the business. Then, suddenly, years and years after he had been given up for dead, Granddad Blunt had appeared. He had stepped off the train one day, shortly after the war, without even a piece of hand baggage; he had walked into the little office and casually inquired how business was going, which was which of his two sons, and why Gideon's empty coat sleeve was pinned to the flap of his pocket. Then, in all seriousness, he had told his fantastic story, and had advised, commanded, and entreated the immediate selling out of the business and the organizing of an expedition to go north and bring back the two tons and a pound of gold.

As Ken had heard it from his father, Gideon, Granddad's expedition was to have been semi-military in character, as there was a band of Indians to be fought—among other incidentals—and, as Gideon had been a captain during the war, he was to be in command, under Granddad Blunt.

But the reconstruction days were on. Business, especially in the building line, was rushing, and Simeon and Gideon were making money hand over fist. The proposition didn't appeal to them, and still less did it appeal to their wives. Eighteen years! No sir-e-e! Not any husband of theirs! Maybe Father Blunt would take a notion to stay away twenty-five years this time. Or fifty! They were both Emmons ville girls and had known "the widow Blunt," who, to the day of her death, was looked upon with a sort of awe by the townspeople because her husband had "disappeared" and left her with two little boys. To be sure, they were always well provided for, but there had always been an aura of mystery about the widow. It wasn't quite the same as though her husband were "dead, an' done for" and decently buried in the village cemetery like other Emmons ville husbands. Matthew Blunt had *disappeared*! Somehow the good folk of Emmons ville always managed to get an awesome sibilance into that word "disappeared." No waggings of the head and widening of the eyes when speaking of *their* husbands, said Mrs. Simeon and Mrs. Gideon—no sir-e-e! And as for fighting Indians! Goodness knows, their husbands had seen fighting enough in the war! It was bad enough fighting white folks—but Indians!

So, after vainly attempting to interest Towler, the village banker, and others in the proposition, Granddad Blunt settled down to live in the same little house on the edge of the village that he had left back in '49. The younger Blunts had built more pretentious houses and had rented the old place from time to time to tenants. Granddad Blunt settled down to "batching it," to taking long walks into the surrounding hills and along the river, and to telling marvelous stories of evenings in the store—yarns that were eagerly listened to by goggle-eyed yokels, to be discussed later with winks and giggles. But it had been many years, now, since Granddad had told his stories. He was a familiar figure—the town character. Everyone liked him, even though everyone admitted that he was "a leetle touched in the head." . . .

Ken Blunt quit drumming with his fingers and brought his fist down on the desk top

with a bang. But—damn it! Granddad had been *somewhere* during those eighteen years! And now the newspapers were carrying stories, with Seattle and Vancouver datings, of a gold strike 'way up north. Alaska, the Klondike, Chilcoot Pass—queer-sounding names, linked with the magic word “gold”! Maybe Granddad *had* been up there, and maybe there were two tons and a pound of gold lying buried in the gravel waiting for someone to reclaim! Two tons and a pound! More than a million dollars! But—damn it! Why that extra pound? Was it a mere quirk of Granddad’s disordered brain? Or did it carry the convincing element of truth? Was Granddad’s brain disordered? Who said it was? Nobody but a lot of small-town wiseacres, who were plumb off the reservation if they took an occasional trip to Cincinnati! Let ’em disappear for eighteen years, as Granddad did—then they could talk!

Mechanically Ken’s hand reached for the copy of the morning paper that lay folded on top of the desk above the pigeonholes, and he reread the story of the docking in Seattle of the steamer *Portland* with sixty miners on board who had wintered on the Yukon River. These men confirmed the statements of those who had landed the day before in San Francisco from the *Excelsior*. To substantiate the story, they had brought down more than eight hundred thousand dollars’ worth of raw gold.

The door opened abruptly, and Bill Blunt entered the little room, stamped the mud from his rubbers on the wooden floor, and hung his dripping umbrella on the end of Ken’s desk. “It’s a hell of a day! Why can’t it rain and be done with it? Here’s the figures on the new bank job. Better check ’em over. There may be some of that stuff we haven’t got on hand. They’re going right ahead with it—some building, when they get it finished. Good thing for the town.” He tossed a packet of papers onto Ken’s desk and, loosening his raincoat, shook a shower of fine drops from its glistening surface. Lighting a cigar, he stood gazing out at the gray drizzle. He turned as Ken absently picked up the packet and thrust it, unopened, into a pigeonhole. “You better take a squint at that stuff, Ken,” he cautioned. “We don’t want to fall down on delivery. I had a hard time putting it over—had to buck Pittsburgh and Cincinnati both on it.”

Two years older than Ken, Bill was larger and huskier. He had gone through college, had been a popular football hero, had captained his team. He had left college—arrogant, avaricious, egotistical—to become secretary to his father, Simeon, who was president and general manager of Blunt & Blunt, Inc.

Ken was yard boss. He had quit college after two years to learn the business. He had piled lumber, shoveled coal, unloaded innumerable carloads of lime and cement. Thus Ken knew a great deal about lumber and coal and lime and cement. Bill knew nothing of the practical end of the business—and cared less. It irked him when the older people of the village told him he looked exactly like his grandfather Blunt had looked at his age.

In the little office Bill Blunt turned from the window and, hooking a chair toward him with his foot, sat down facing his cousin. “Say, Ken,” he began, dropping his voice to a confidential tone, “just between you and me, I wish the old men—our dads—would get out and let us run the business.”

“Get out?” Ken smiled. “Why should they? They took over the business from Granddad’s father. If they get out, what would they do?”

“Hell, they’ve made money enough. They could retire. You and I could make twice as much as they’re making. They’re too damned conservative.”

Ken’s smile widened. “Do you know, Bill, it’s I that am thinking of retiring.”

“You!” the word was an explosion.

“Yeah—me. Read this.” He thrust the newspaper into Bill’s hand and indicated the Seattle story, which was followed by half a column of misinformation about the Far North.

“You mean,” asked Bill, incredulously, after perusing the matter to the last word, “that you’d quit a sure thing here to go up into that damned country to hunt for gold?”

“That’s the thought.”

“You’re crazier than hell! Remember Granddad’s wild-eyed tale of a couple of tons of gold buried somewhere in the gravel! That country gets a man!”

“Two tons and a pound, to be exact. Don’t forget the extra pound, Bill. I believe that’s important.”

“But—you’ve got to mess around in the mud—and dig with a shovel!”

“I’ve shoveled a hell of a lot of coal,” reminded Ken, “and a yard boss gets so he doesn’t mind a little mud.”

Bill flushed slightly, but detected no veiled aspersion in the other’s eyes. He couldn’t, somehow, vision Blunt & Blunt getting along without Ken. “You don’t want to believe everything you see in a newspaper,” he said. “Hell, this is probably all bunk! Some damned reporter trying to earn his wages!”

Ken shook his head. “Nope. I believe it’s straight goods. This isn’t the first item the papers have printed. Did you read yesterday’s news from San Francisco? A steamer docked there with a lot of men on board, and they all had gold! It doesn’t stand to reason that two reporters, one in San Francisco and one in Seattle, would get the same hunch less than twenty-four hours apart. And they both sort of check up with what Granddad has always claimed. There’s gold in the creeks among those northern mountains, as sure as hell! I don’t remember Granddad’s story very well—it’s a long time since I’ve heard it. But Bill, just suppose that Granddad’s right, and we’re the fools! You’ll have to admit the story there checks with his.”

“Maybe it does—in a way—but——”

“But hell!” The younger man rose to his feet and closed his roll-top desk with a bang. “I’m going over to Granddad’s tonight and listen to his story all over again.”

“But nobody believes it.”

“Maybe I will when I come away from there tonight. I’m going to hear it, anyway.”

In his heart Bill Blunt had a vast respect for his younger cousin’s acumen. If Ken really thought there might be something to this newspaper talk . . . Well, there might be, at that! Gold had been found, and hundreds of men had got rich almost overnight. There were California, and Australia, and South Africa. Secretly Bill was jealous of Ken. He knew he was the better man. He would hate like the devil to see Ken get fabulously rich while he himself stayed back here in Emmonsville and sold lumber and coal and lime and cement all his life. It was a good business. But it wasn’t exactly a gold mine.

Ken had his hat on and was drawing on his slicker. Bill buttoned his raincoat and retrieved his umbrella. “By God, Ken,” he said, abruptly, “if you quit, I will! I’ll go with you over to Granddad’s tonight, and if he can convince us that there really is anything to that yarn of his, we’ll both hit north. I guess a man that can plow through a football line as I did can learn to swing a shovel. But, just between you and me, I believe Granddad’s a damned old fraud.”

CHAPTER II

GRANDDAD BLUNT TELLS A STORY

IN the twilight of the long June evening Ken and Bill stepped out of the drizzle onto the little porch of the cottage at the edge of town. The door opened in answer to Ken's knock, and Matthew Blunt greeted his two stalwart grandsons. "Hello, Kenny! Hello, Bill! Come on in."

"Hello, Granddad," said Ken, shaking off his slicker. "Kind of a miserable evening."

"We thought we'd come over and see how you were getting along," added Bill, standing his umbrella in an angle of the wall.

Ken noticed a twinkle in the keen old eyes as he stepped into the parlor. Matthew was speaking: "You come over to see what I know'd about the pieces that's be'n comin' out in the papers the last two days. Gettin' along! How would a man be gettin' along that don't have nothin' to do but draw a pension from the lumber business?"

The two grandsons grinned, a trifle sheepishly. "That's right, Granddad," admitted Ken. "You guessed it the first shot. You've seen the reports about the big gold strike 'way up north?"

"Well, a man that ain't got nothin' else to do but read the papers couldn't help but see it—les 'n he was blind. What's new about that? Hell! I told yer dads an' all the rest of Emmonsville about it thirty year ago, when I first come back in '67. But they wouldn't none of 'em believe it. I showed 'em the nuggets, too, an' still they wouldn't believe it. Gid, he kind of believed it, an' he'd prob'ly have gone back with me; but yer ma wouldn't hear to it. An' Sim, he'd prob'ly went if Gid did; but it was the same thing over to his house. Your ma wouldn't stand fer it, neither, Bill. Trouble is with yer dads—they're woman-rode. Hell, back in '49, when news come through of the California gold strike, I up an' went. Yer gran'ma carried on jest like yer mas done, but I went ahead an' pulled out with her still talkin'. Women's funny that way. They're apt to worry. But—Cripes! There wasn't nothin' to worry about. I come back, didn't I? It's funny to me that a Blunt should be woman-rode!"

Ken chuckled. "You sure did come back, Granddad! But you'll have to admit that you stayed away quite a while. You didn't even write."

"That wasn't my fault. Damn it, if I'd of made my pile the first year I'd of come back then! A man's got to go through with what he sets out to do, or he ain't half a man. An' as for writin', what was the use in it? I only had a chanct to once, that was in '52. I hadn't made my pile yet. An' that wasn't nothin' to be writin' home about, was it? I s'pose I could of wrote three or four times after, from Fort Yukon, but seems like I'd somehow got out of the habit of writin' by then. I know'd it wouldn't only be a few years till I'd be goin' back, anyhow. 'No news is good news,' the sayin' is. Folks ort to use their head."

"Then you believe these newspaper reports?" asked Ken, eagerly.

"Believe 'em! 'Course I believe 'em. I know damn well they're true. Why'n hell wouldn't they be? I know the gold's there; I've know'd it since '52, when me an' Jake Valentine made our first real strike! Only wonder is it ain't be'n found sooner. If yer dads had listened to me an' not to their women, back in '67, we'd all be rich! Hell, I've got two tons an' a pound layin' back there in the gravel right now, unless someone's found it! Yes, sir—two tons an' a pound of raw gold that me an' Jake Valentine cached in the gravel!

More'n a million dollars! An' here you two is pop-eyed over a ship comin' in to Seattle with sixty men that's only got eight hundred thousan' dollars in gold amongst the whole sixty of 'em!"

"Do you suppose somebody has found it?" asked Bill.

"How in hell do I know? It's be'n layin' there long enough for the whole world to find it! There ain't nothin' to prevent it bein' found except six foot of gravel an' Jake Valentine's bones."

"Tell us about it, Granddad," encouraged Ken, his eyes sparkling. "You used to tell me when I was a little shaver, but I don't remember the details."

"Yeah," answered Matthew Blunt wearily. "It's a good while since I've told anyone. They wouldn't believe it when I did tell 'em. Said I was crazy, an' all that. When I seen that I was castin' pearls before swine, as the Book says, I quit."

"But you'll tell us, won't you?" urged Ken.

For several moments Matthew Blunt sat in silence, while his keen gray eyes seemed to bore straight through the younger men. "What for?" he asked, abruptly.

"Why, why, I'll tell you, Granddad," answered Ken, who had always been the old man's favorite. "Bill and I figure that if there really is gold up there we'd like to get in on it. We remembered your story—that is, we remembered vaguely that you used to tell about the two tons and a pound of gold you had buried in the gravel. And we thought that if you'd tell us about it, where it is, and all, we'd like to make a try for it."

Again Matthew Blunt regarded his grandsons with a searching gaze. "You ain't married," he muttered, as if to himself, "an' yer both husky. But—you wouldn't go. Yer mas wouldn't let you."

"We're both of age," reminded Ken. "I'm twenty-five, and Bill's twenty-seven."

The older man looked Bill over appraisingly. "Yer jest my age when I hit fer California," he remarked. "Folks say you look jest like I did then—barrin' the b'iled collar." He paused as his thin lips smiled. "If they're right, I wasn't a bad-lookin' lad. But a man don't get a hell of a ways in that country on his looks! It's guts, not looks, that a man needs. They tell me you was a great hand at playin' football. An' they tell me it's a rough game." Matthew paused to snort contemptuously. "A rough game—that's what they say. Meanin', I guess, that it's plumb boisterous alongside a game of checkers. They say there's rules onto it—you can't bite er claw er hit er kick one another—an' they call it rough! But let me tell you, you don't know what rough is! Wait till that damn North begins to buck you! It won't do nothin' else all the while you're in it! An' there ain't no rules! You'll freeze an' starve an' drown an' get shot at an' get so damn tired you can't lay one foot ahead of the other; but you will lay 'em, an' keep on layin' 'em! Er else——" The old man paused, allowing the two grandsons to put whatever construction upon the "er else" that their imagination dictated.

"But why pick on me, Granddad?" grinned Bill. "I'm bigger than Ken."

"Big don't count," snapped Matthew Blunt. "Size an' looks ain't no assets outside of football commons er dance halls. Guts—that's what a man needs. An' when a man's a young feller, with plenty good-lookin' gals runnin' loose, it takes more guts to pull on a pair of overhauls an' shovel coal in a lumber yard than it does to prance around a common with a football in under yer arm with all the gals in a college lookin' on an' yellin' about it. There ain't no gals lookin' on up there—barrin' a lot of greasy klooches—an' they're cheerin' fer the other side! I ain't worryin' about Ken. I'd say, lookin' you over, that if

you two can get away from yer mas, you might make a go of it. Take Jake Valentine, now. He had all the guts in the world, but he was afraid of his pa an' ma to his dyin' day."

Bill Blunt's face was flushed slightly. "I'm not the rah-rah boy you evidently think me, Granddad. If you can convince us that there's gold up there we'll go and get it!"

"That's the talk," approved Matthew. "I kind of rubbed it in on you, Bill, I'll admit. I wanted to see how you'd take it. You've got the stuff in you somewheres. By God, you're a Blunt! What is it, now, you want to know?"

"We'd like to hear the whole story, right from start to finish," said Ken. "And if we stop you now and then to ask questions, it'll be all right, won't it?"

"Sure. A man can't know too much about that country. Well, here goes. Smoke up, if you like, an' don't mind the floor. I pulled the carpet up 'cause it sweeps easier.

"Me an' Jake Valentine pulled out of here on account of a piece we seen in the paper—same as you boys. Jake's folks lived on a farm three mile out on the Chillicothe Pike. Gid an' Sim tells me that Jake's three brothers all got killed in the war, an' the old folks are both dead. There wasn't no sisters; so all that gold up there is mine—yours, if you're men enough to get it.

"We crossed the Isthmus an' went to San Francisco. Jake had borrowed a thousand dollars from his pa, an' I had seventeen hundred. We didn't have it long after we hit San Francisco. We got roped in on a minin' deal an' shanghai'd onto a ship that was headin' north to pirate sea otter skins from the Rooshians. The first ship we tackled sunk us, an' me an' Jake floated ashore on a hatch cover. We was picked up by a Hudson's Bay Company trader an' went up the Stickine River with him to build a new tradin' fort. We had gold on the brain, an' McDermott, the trader, showed us how to pan gravel. Then one day I traded a knife to a Siwash for a big nugget that he said he got on a river 'way north of where we was. Me an' Jake quit, an' bought an outfit off'n McDermott, an' hit out.

"For three years we never seen a white man. Our ammunition gave out an' we learnt to get our meat with bows an' arrows an' spears. An' we made our clothes out of the hides. Then we hit Fort Selkirk, that Campbell had built where the Pelly runs into the Lewes. The trader was abandonin' the fort because he'd heard from the Siwashes that the Chilkats was comin' inland to plunder it. When he an' his two men pulled out downriver for Fort Yukon, me an' Jake cached all the stuff we could an' waited for the Chilkats. They come an' we killed off a couple er more of 'em an' then slipped away. They burnt the fort, an' me an' Jake moved on downriver.

"We didn't hit nothin' that looked good till we come to a river that runs into the Yukon from the west, about eighty mile below the fort. Jake found some good nuggets on a bar, an' we quit the big river an' went up the smaller one. About seventy or eighty mile up we made our big strike. We built a cabin, an' for fifteen year—winter an' summer—we dug gold."

"How could you dig in the winter?" asked Ken. "Wasn't the ground frozen hard?"

"Froze hard? I'll tell a man it was froze hard—hard as iron! We built fires an' thawed it, then shoveled out the loose gravel onto a dump an' built another fire, an' so on down to bed rock. It's got summer pannin' beat a mile; you can get down to where the rich gravel is. In summer yer shaft fills up with seepage. Then, in the spring, we worked our dump.

"There was a Siwash village a little ways above us, an' we got right friendly with 'em. We traded 'em powder an' lead—bulk fer bulk fer gold. That powder brung us in about five thousan' dollars a pound. We traded 'em all we got at Campbell's fort, an' then made

three trips to Fort Yukon—about four hundred mile downriver—for more.

“On the last trip down—that would be in ’64—the trader told us about the war. I’d set a ton of gold apiece as the amount we was aimin’ at. I’d weighed up some rocks, the first trip I made to the fort, an’ made a balance scale so we could tell how much gold we had.

“Well, I got to thinkin’ about the war, an’ how maybe my boys was in it an’ Emmonsville might be plumb wiped off the map, an’ it made me kind of oneasy in my mind. So when we got back to the cabin, we weighed up everything we had an’ I seen we was a hundred an’ eighty-seven pound short of our two ton. So we went to work agin. A man’s got to do what he sets out to do—war er no war. Come spring, a year from then, we weighed up what we took out of the dump, an’ we was one pound over the two ton. We was through! We put her in the cache, which it was one of the shafts we’d worked out, an’ I covered her over with about three foot of gravel. We could go home now. We’d got what we come for. We figured on buildin’ a scow an’ floatin’ the stuff down to Fort Yukon an’ shippin’ it out from there somehow.”

The old man paused and relighted the cigar Bill had given him. “We’d of done so, too, if it hadn’t be’n fer Jake gettin’ him a big idee. You see, these Siwashes, they had a treasure—a sort of charm or magic, they thought it was—an’ they thought it kep’ folks young; as long as they had it they wouldn’t never grow old. Their chief was a young man about my age. His name was Nootlakwatl. The name bein’ hard to say, before we learnt their lingo we called him Ignatz, an’ we kep’ on callin’ him that. He got rummed up an’ told us about this treasure an’ how it was kep’ in a little wooden box wrapped in strips of moosehide. We figgered it must be awful valuable if they thought so much of it. Hell, they’d trade five thousan’ dollars’ worth of gold for a pound of powder, but they wouldn’t trade their treasure for any amount. We figgered that if it was worth so much more than gold, it couldn’t be nothin’ less than a big diamond.

“Well, this idee Jake got was to steal the treasure jest before we pulled out. I wasn’t so keen about it, but Jake talked me into it. We figgered we could throw a big feast an’ get the Siwashes all rummed up an’ get away with the treasure an’ our gold in the scow before they missed it.

“We built the scow an’ throwed the feast—but we didn’t get away! Leastwise Jake didn’t—an’ the gold didn’t. I was lucky to save my hide. They missed the treasure before we got started, an’ they come down on us. An’ they come a-shootin’—the whole damn tribe of ’em. We got in the cabin an’ fit ’em off. They was short of powder an’ we had plenty, but one ornery cuss snuck up an’ stuck his musket through a loophole—while I was shootin’ out of another one—an’ he shot Jake dead—right through the head, he got him. Well, I pecked at ’em till dark—Siwashes won’t fight in the dark—an’ then I snuck out an’ buried Jake. I didn’t have time to dig no grave, so I throwed him in the shaft—which it was more’n half full, what with the gold an’ the gravel we’d throwed in on it to hide it. Then I filled up the shaft an’ put a stone on top of Jake which he’d cut his initials into. J. V., it says, cut into the side of the flat stone. I didn’t want the Siwashes diggin’ Jake up, so I laid the stone flat an’ covered it with gravel.

“Well, after doin’ that, I snuck away while the sneakin’ was good. I didn’t have no hankerin’ to stick around an’ fight a whole tribe of Siwashes. I figgered on goin’ down to Fort Yukon an’ stayin’ till the Siwashes cooled down, er I could figger a way to sneak back an’ get the gold. It took me a month to get to the fort, an’ when I did get there I found that they was abandonin’ it fer good. You see the United States had bought Alaska,

an' the Hudson's Bay Company, bein' an' English outfit, was movin' out. There wasn't no other place to go. An' I couldn't stay there, maybe for years, layin' for the chance to get the gold. An' if I got it, I couldn't of got it out of the country alone. We'd figgered on shippin' it out from Fort Yukon, the same way they shipped out their fur. But now there wouldn't be no fur goin' out, an' a man can't handle two ton an' a pound of gold alone! No, sir, fer all the good it done me that gold might's well of be'n in Timbuktu—er hell, fer that matter. The only way to do was jest what I done. I come on out with the company men, by way of the Porcupine over onto the Mackenzie, an' so on back here to Emmonsville." Once again the man paused and relighted the dead cigar.

"Oh, I had it all figgered out, I did! I'd get my dad an' my two boys an' enough others to lick them Siwashes if they jumped us, an' we'd come back an' get the gold. I figgered we could make it in a couple of years—an' what's a couple of years, when yer playin' for a million?

"Well, I found out that Dad was dead, an' my wife, too. My boys had be'n through the war an' was runnin' the business. I told 'em about the gold, expectin' they'd come right along without losin' no time. I showed 'em what few nuggets I had left. When I come away I stuck a little poke of gold in my pocket that was layin' in the cabin, left over from our last trip to Fort Yukon; but I didn't have much of it left, time I'd got to Emmonsville. I'd had to get clothes, an' pay my way along. But the boys didn't more'n half believe me, an' anyway their women wouldn't hear to their goin'. I put in a year tryin' to make 'em look at it sensible—tellin' 'em how easy it would be to slip up there an' lick them Siwashes an' come away with the gold. But I might better of saved my breath. The more I talked the sotter the women-folks was agin' it. An' Gid an' Sim, they listened to them, instead of me! That shows what a man comes to when he lets himself git woman-rode!

"After that, I went to Towler, an' some others; but they thought I was lyin'."

The old man tossed the frayed cigar butt to the floor and, stretching his arms above his head, yawned mightily. "Well, boys—gold don't rot. It's layin' there yet in the gravel."

"How would we know the right river if we got to it—the river where you found your gold?" asked Bill.

"Can't miss it. It's the first good-size' river that comes in from the west, below where Fort Selkirk was. There's a couple smaller rivers, but they're closter. The river you want is about eighty mile below Selkirk, an' it's a flat kind of a river, with a lot of channels an' bars."

"But you said this Fort Selkirk had been burned. How will we know when we reach the spot where it stood?"

"Hell—they didn't burn the mouth of the Pelly! Git a map an' find where the Pelly hits the Lewes—below, they call it the Yukon, but it's the same river. Maybe someone else has built a tradin' fort there by this time—it's a good place for a post."

"How will we get there?" asked Ken. "You said it took you and your partner three years to reach there from the Stickine. Could you draw us some kind of a map?"

"Map! Hell, no! That country's jest one damn mountain after another. Use yer head! You'll have to use it to get along in that country, an' you might's well start now. It looks to me like if two steamboats full of folks jest come out of the Yukon country, an' packed dang near a million in gold with 'em, two men ort to be able to foller their back trail, travelin' light."

"What would we need to take along for supplies?" questioned Bill.

“You’ll need a damn sight more’n you can take, so you’ll get along without most of it. Couple of rifles, plenty of ammunition. A compass. Salt comes handy, but it can be got along without. The less a man carries the faster he can travel, an’ the easier.”

“But how about clothing and bedding?”

“Hell, yer clothes an’ beddin’ comes wropped around yer meat! Kill you a couple of moose!”

“How can we find this cache?” asked Ken dubiously. “You said you filled in the shaft and laid the stone flat and covered it with gravel. That was thirty years ago. There might be trees growing over the spot now.”

“There might,” agreed Matthew Blunt. “But that don’t need to bother you. You go up the river seventy, eighty mile, an’ you’ll come to a wide, flat bend. There’s other bends like it, but you’ll know this one, ’cause there’ll either be the remains of our cabin, or the ashes of it if the Siwashes burnt it, which they prob’ly done. The cabin sets a hundred steps back from the river, on the edge of a patch of scraggly spruce timber. The door was on the east side. Ten steps in front of the door was a big spring. Eight steps beyond the spring, keepin’ it lined up with the door, is the shaft. The river runs between high rock walls there. T’other side of the river, the walls is close to the water. But the cabin was on a wide flat. It was jest halfway between the river an’ the wall—a hundred steps to each. Them ashes might be covered with brush er grass, but they’ll be there—old ashes an’ bits of charcoal. You can’t burn a log cabin an’ not leave a trace. You might have to scratch for ’em, but they’ll be there. If the Siwashes didn’t burn the cabin it’ll be tumbled in, prob’ly, an’ rotted down, but easy to find. If they did, you’ll have a harder time—but keep at it. The gold’s there. If you get tired huntin’ it, you can put in the time diggin’ out new gold—the gravel’s full of it—anywheres you dig.”

“There’s one thing you haven’t told us, Granddad,” said Ken. “What became of the treasure that you and Jake Valentine stole from the Siwashes—I suppose that is the name of the tribe of Indians on the river.”

“Hell, no! All Injuns is Siwashes. The treasure, you say? Why, I fetched it back with me, of course!”

Both younger men leaned eagerly forward. “You mean,” asked Bill, “that you’ve still got it? That you haven’t disposed of it—sold it?”

“Yes, I’ve still got it. I ain’t never sold it, ’cause I couldn’t never get my price.”

“What do you hold it at?” asked Ken, his eyes wide with excitement.

“At two ton an’ a pound of gold,” answered Matthew Blunt. “That’s what it cost me an’ Jake Valentine—with Jake’s life throwed in to boot—an’ it’s jest as good as it ever was.”

“But where do you keep it? Have you ever showed it to anyone?”

The oldster jerked a thumb toward his bedroom: “In the low-boy, yonder. Nope, never showed it to no one.”

“Will you show it to us?” asked Ken, breathlessly.

“That depends. Sim an’ Gid tried to get me to show it to ’em thirty year ago—but they ain’t seen it yet. I told ’em jest what I’m tellin’ you boys—I’ll show it to you when you promise to go north an’ hunt fer that gold—an’ not a damn minute sooner. I’ve told you somethin’ about what you’ll be up agin’, but I ain’t told you the half of it. Some new damn thing’ll pop up every day to pester you. It’ll take all you got in you, an’ maybe more. In such case Jake’ll have company. I’d go with you in a minute, but I’ve waited too

long. My heart's gone bad an' I'd be a drag an' a hinderence to you. It ain't a-goin' to be no primrose trail to that there gold, an' if you lay down in a bed of roses you'll jump up on account of the thorns. Promise me you'll go an' get that gold, an' I'll fetch out the box. But remember this—no Blunt ever went back on his word! My dad built up the business on his word. When he said a thing folks knowed he meant it, come what might. An' from what I've seen, yer dads has done likewise. When I left Emmonsville back in '49, I said I wouldn't come back till I'd made my pile. It took me eighteen year to do it, but I done it. What do you say?"

Ken glanced at Bill. Bill had been a good man on the football field, was a good man yet. Bill met the glance. Ken spoke: "Get out the box, Granddad. We'll go. Eh, Bill?"

The old man's tale had been convincing, doubly convincing when considered in connection with the newspaper stories of the past two days. Bill nodded. "I'll go if Ken will," he said.

Without a word Matthew Blunt rose from his chair and stepped into the bedroom. In a few moments he returned, carrying an oblong box—an ancient box, crudely fashioned with primitive tools out of cedar. Amid tense silence Matthew removed the moosehide strips, stiff and dry these many years. Eagerly the two younger men strained forward to catch sight of the treasure as the oldster raised the lid. There, in a nesting of soft bark fiber, lay a small brass crucifix! The two grandsons stared as though stunned at the bauble, worth—intrinsically—perhaps twenty-five cents! Granddad Blunt chuckled dryly.

"Thar she lays, boys! Thar lays the treasure of a whole band of Siwashes. The thing that keeps 'em young. The thing that cost Jake Valentine his life—an' me two ton an' a pound of gold!"

The eyes of the grandsons met. A slow grin twisted Ken's lips. Bill's jaws were clamped hard. "What did I tell you?" he rasped.

"Nothing," answered Ken, "that I remember." He turned to the man whose rheumy old eyes glittered, diamond-bright. "You say, Granddad, that you buried Jake Valentine on top of the gold?"

"That's right. Jake lays about three foot under—an' about three foot under Jake lays the gold—two ton an' a pound of it. An' on top of Jake, jest under the surface, lays the stone—a flattish stone, it is—with J. V. cut on one side. Jake done it hisself of nights, with a busted huntin' knife fer a chisel an' a rock fer a hammer. He set great store by gettin' buried proper, did Jake." Matthew Blunt banged his fist down on the arm of his chair. "*Find that stone!*" he boomed. "It's worth better'n a million! But when you have found it an' fetched back the gold, by God, you'll know you've be'n somewheres! My dad started the business that your dads has made money out of, an' you could of gone ahead an' made money out of it. It's a good business. But—it's a business! An' damn a business!" The old eyes were agleam, and the old voice rang with the iron of youth: "Fightin' the North—that's a man's job! Fightin' the cold an' the long dark an' the bugs an' the hell-roarin' white-water rivers! Washin' raw gold from the gravel! Raw gold—God—the feel of it! Raw gold that's got the heart an' the guts an' the soul of a man right in it! When it's coined—it's money.

"We got the gold—me an' Jake Valentine. She lays thar yet—two ton an' a pound of it—with Jake layin' on top of it—an' all because we done a thing that, maybe, we hadn't ort to done. But them Siwashes—somehow, it didn't seem no harm to plunder 'em. If it was a big diamond they had, what good would it ever do 'em? But it wasn't nothin' but

that thar brass image—an' what good did that do us? Thar's one to chew on! I've be'n chawin' on it till I'm old. A man gets old—an all the images in the world can't stop him! Thar's one thing I want you boys to do: Take them Siwashes back their image. You mightn't never find 'em, but you might. Nootlakwatl, the chief—him that we called Ignatz—he'll be about my age. If he's dead, there'll be old men in the tribe that'll recollect me an' Jake Valentine. An' they'll recollect that thar image, the charm that keeps folks young. It's damn nonsense, an' it don't work. But it's theirs, an' they value it. It might be you could dicker. If you can't locate the cache, it might be you could offer to trade 'em the charm fer them showin' you where our cabin set. But use yer heads. It might be that they'll go to war to get back the charm, like they done on us. When you aimin' to start?"

"The sooner the better," answered Ken. "I suppose it will take a few days to settle our business affairs. We'll talk it over with our fathers tomorrow."

"Talk it over! Hell, tell 'em yer goin'. That's all the 'talkin' over' it takes. An' don't give them women-folks no edge. Tell 'em good-bye, an' that's all there is to it."

A week later Matthew Blunt stood on the platform of the little railway station and waved a wrinkled hand at the two stalwart forms that waved back from the rear platform of a rapidly disappearing train.

When the train was a mere speck in the distance, he turned, and his wistful old eyes swept the little town, pausing to rest on two pretentious houses that faced each other from opposite sides of a shady street—the houses of Simeon and Gideon Blunt.

The wrinkled lips twisted into a grin, and a low chuckle issued from between them. "He, he, he! Thirty year! But them damn women's licked at last!"

CHAPTER III

MOOSEHIDE CHARLIE

IN Seattle, Ken and Bill were fortunate in making the acquaintance of one Moosehide Charlie, a former resident of Fortymile, who had been among the first to stampede upriver the previous autumn and stake on Bonanza, where the squaw man Carmack had made his strike in August. It was a chance meeting, one of those coincidences that are forever throwing people together, for their ultimate good or evil. Having registered at the hotel, the two cousins were plying the clerk with questions as to ways and means for reaching the Yukon country. The clerk answered readily and to the best of his ability, but his information proved meager and vague. Suddenly his glance fixed on a roughly dressed man seated in a big leather chair and apparently absorbed in watching the street traffic through the window. The clerk pointed with his penholder:

“See that man sitting over there? Well, he can tell you everything you want to know. He came down from the Klondike on the *Portland*, and, believe me, he’s got gold! Any amount of it, done up in little buckskin sacks. He’s going on through to Chicago and New York. Just stopped off for a few days to hit the high spots—and they tell me he’s hitting ’em, too. Won twenty thousand the other night on faro, and turned right around and dropped thirty thousand on a wheel without batting an eye.”

“What’s his name?” asked Bill, eyeing the roughly garbed stranger.

“Rathbone,” answered the clerk. “If I were you I’d go over and talk to him.”

The two strolled across the lobby, and Bill accosted the man: “Is this Mr. Rathbone?”

“Who—me?” he countered, eyeing the two well-dressed young men. “Yes, that’s my name. The ‘Mister’ an’ the ‘Rathbone’ part kind of had me stopped fer a minute. Made it kind of sound like some stranger. Where I come from they call me Moosehide Charlie.”

“The clerk told us you came down from the gold country on the *Portland* and that you brought down a lot of gold.”

“That’s right,” answered the man, a twinkle in his gray eyes. “But the fact is, gents, yer jest one day too late.”

“Too late?” asked Ken, smiling. “Too late for what?”

“Why, fer to git in on my pile. I don’t know what yer game is. If it’s a new one, I’m sorry I missed it. I’d figgered on takin’ in Chicago an’ New York. But the gamblers kind of changed my mind fer me. I stopped off fer to give this town a whirl, an’ I’m whirlin’ yet! This here Seattle is plenty giddy fer a man of my attainments. I’m settin’ here now figgerin’ on how to git back to Dawson.”

“Where’s Dawson?” asked Bill, as he and Ken drew up chairs.

“New camp at the mouth of the Klondike. Nearest p’int on the Yukon to the new diggin’s on Bonanza an’ Eldorado an’ Hunker an’ Ophir an’ a lot of other cricks. An’ believe me, she’s goin’ to be a camp! The boys from Fortymile an’ Circle City is already there, an’ from what the newspapers is sayin’ there’s goin’ to be a hell of a stampede up from here.”

“You say Dawson is on the Yukon?”

“Sure—where the Klondike runs in.”

“Do you know whether that is above or below the mouth of the Pelly? There used to be an old trading post there—Fort Selkirk.”

“Dawson’s below there—must be a couple hundred mile downriver. There’s a new store goin’ in at Selkirk. An’ the Mounted Police has got a detachment there.”

“Do you know of a river that runs into the Yukon from the west, about eighty miles below Fort Selkirk?”

“Eighty mile—let’s see—yes, that would be the White. Might a feller ask why you was wantin’ to know?”

“Yes,” answered Bill. “We’re cousins. Our grandfather was up in that country years ago. He came back from there in 1867, and he told us of finding gold on this river. So when the papers began printing stories of gold up there in the North, we decided to go and have a try at it. That’s what we wanted to talk to you about—how to get there and what to take with us. Granddad seemed to think that a couple of rifles and plenty of ammunition and a bag of salt was plenty.”

Moosehide Charlie grinned broadly. “God,” he breathed, “them old timers was tough! But if I was you-all I wouldn’t waste no time on White River. No, sir! I’d hit on down to Dawson. Hell, on some of them cricks up the Klondike they’re shovelin’ it out of the grass roots! I got in on Bonanza, an’ I took seventy-five thousan’ dollars out of one shaft last winter, workin’ alone. But these gamblers is better men than I be. They took it out of me in two weeks!” The man paused, and a slow grin twisted his lips. “I had ’em workin’ in shifts, though.”

“Do you mean,” asked Ken, “that you’re broke?”

“Barrin’ what I got on, an’ a new valise I bought me to keep my other shirt an’ my necktie in, I’m plumb wiped out, as you might say—till I git back to my claim on Bonanza.”

“Well, that’s what I call fortunate,” smiled Ken.

“Yeah?” drawled Moosehide, an answering grin twisting the corners of his own lips. “Well, pardner, it’s plain to see that either you er me has got a word to learn over agin. That is, onless you was lookin’ at it from the standp’int of the gamblers.”

“Fortunate for us, I meant. If you’re broke, and want to go back to the Yukon country, why not throw in with us? It seems to me that we could well afford to pay your expenses in exchange for your experience.” He turned to his cousin. “What do you say, Bill?”

“It looks good to me, if it’s agreeable to our friend here.”

“If you feel that way about it, it sure is a break fer me,” said Moosehide. “Not that I wouldn’t be glad to tell you all I could to help you along, fer nothin’. But I sure do want to git back to a country where a man’s got a run fer his money. If it’s jest the same to you, we’ll call it a loan. When you boys finds out yer wastin’ yer time on the White, you’ll drift on down to a real camp—then you hunt up Moosehide Charlie. There’s a boat pullin’ out day after tomorrow, an’ if we want to be on her we’ve got to shake a leg. They’ll prob’ly tell us they’re full, but you leave it to me. We’ll git the boat part fixed up now, an’ we’ll have all day tomorrow to git the outfit together.”

A half-hour later the three arrived at the edge of the crowd of frantic stampedeers that besieged the steamboat ticket office. The list was closed, and men were bidding two and three times the price for the coveted transportation. A few tickets changed hands, but for the most part the lucky holders refused to sell at any price.

Bill shrugged. “I guess we’ll have to wait for the next boat,” he said.

Moosehide scratched his head thoughtfully. “The next boat an’ the next one an’ all the boats from now on’ll be jest as full as this one. An’ besides, what’s the use of waitin’?”

You give me the reg'lar fare, an' mebbe a little more, an' I'll slip down to the docks an' kind of nose around. You wait up to the *ho*-tel till I git back. I'm sure gittin' homesick fer them mountains."

At midnight Bill Blunt yawned and rose from his chair in the hotel lobby. "Well, I'm going to bed. We're a couple of suckers, Ken. That day clerk and his friend took us, just as that gang in 'Frisco took Granddad and Jake Valentine back in '49. All we need, now, is to be shanghaied by pirates."

Ken grinned. "Give Moosehide a chance. The ship hasn't sailed yet. Somehow, I've got a hunch he'll make good."

Bill snorted. "Oh, he's made good, all right! We'll never see him again! And that damned day clerk will be surprised as hell when we tell him about it. He's playing a safe game. He didn't advise us to give the man any money."

"They didn't nick us very deep," reminded Ken. "If worse comes to worst we can charge it up to experience."

"It isn't the amount," grunted Bill, "not enough to lose any sleep over. Come on—let's turn in. I do hate to be played for a sucker, though."

"Me too!" said a voice behind them. "But they sure played me fer one—to the tune of shev'ny-fi' sousen'."

Both cousins turned to look into the face of Moosehide Charlie. It was a slightly flushed face, and the man's breath was redolent of waterfront whiskey. He weaved slightly upon his feet.

Ken chuckled. "What luck did you have?" he asked.

Moosehide eyed him with drunken solemnity. "Wha' luck? Why—damn bad luck, of coursh! Wha' kin' luck you shposh it ish to loosh shev'ny-fi' sousen—shoushen—*soushen!* Damn it—wha' I tol' you 'shafternoon I loosh! I'm a li'l' bit lickered up." He paused and fished a small roll of bills from his pocket and thrust them toward Bill. "Here'sh yer change."

Bill grinned as he took the money and counted it. "Couldn't make a deal, eh?"

"Wash you mean—deal?"

"Couldn't find any way to get us onto that boat?"

"Hell I couldn't! Wash you shink I shpent zhat money fer?"

"But—you've returned all we gave you except about twenty-five dollars!"

"Sure." The man had thrust his hands in his pockets and was regarding the two cousins owlshly. Out came a hand, and he stared down at some change. This, also, he tendered. "Here'sh shixty shensh more. I don' know where I got it—but ish yoursh—I didn' have none."

"Do you mean," asked Ken, "that we're going to the Yukon on that ship?"

"Hell no! 'Coursh not. Mush be damn' fool to shink you kin pack big boat like zhat over Chilkoot Pash! Boat shtops at Dyea Beach—can't go on lan'. Tomor' night, twelve o'clock, we git on the boat. We ain' on pashener lisht—but b'God, we'll be on the boat! I'm shleepy—goin' to bed. She you'n mornin'—shix o'clock—got to git outfit together."

"Hell, man! You won't be in any shape at six o'clock in the morning!" cried Bill. "Better make it ten. Come on, we'll help you to your room."

"Cripes shakes! I don' need no help! Damn it, if I c'n fin' a *ho*-tel in all zhese shtreets, I c'n fin' one li'l' room, can't I? An' you better be down to breakfash at shix o'clock, too! How long d'you expec' a man to shtay drunk—a year?"

In the morning, when the dining room opened at six o'clock, Moosehide Charlie was waiting for the two cousins. To their surprise he showed no ill effects from his spree of the night before. He ate hugely, and with the stub of a pencil made lists upon the back of the menu card. "We don't want no more than we can pack," he explained. "We ain't reg'lar passengers, an' can't take no baggage. We can git along with what we can git in a back-pack till we hit Bennett."

"How on earth did you work it?" asked Bill, wondering whether the man was not still following a drunken fancy.

"Got the purser drunk an' made him promise to take us," answered Moosehide, with a grin. "It was a tough job—pursers kin drink like hell. Towards the last I didn't know myself whether I was promisin' to take him somewheres, er him us. Next time I'll pick me out a mate er a captain er someone."

"But how do you know he'll keep his promise? He's probably forgotten all about it by this time."

"He'll remember," grinned Moosehide, reaching into his pocket and displaying a thick packet. "I've got his papers!"

It was on Dyea Beach, amid a heaped-up confusion of freight, that Moosehide Charlie once more showed his efficiency. Boxes, barrels, bags, and bales littered the beach where they had been lightered ashore and dumped in what seemed a hopeless confusion. Among and around these swarmed a rabble of men cursing futilely, while as futilely they shifted and tugged at the pieces in frenzied effort to locate their own.

With a grin, Moosehide pointed to the distant pass. "How in hell do they ever expect to git it over the Chilkoot? There ain't one in ten of 'em fetched pack-straps. An' what in hell would they do with the most of it, if they did git it over? They've even got horses an' wagons!"

Reaching down, he swung his pack to his back and helped Bill and Ken adjust their tump straps.

"But we haven't brought any grub," said Bill.

Moosehide pointed up the beach to some low buildings that showed in the distance. "Tradin' store there. We'll git what we need an' hire us a couple of packers an' we'll be over the pass before the damn chechakos finds out what stuff's thein an' what ain't."

Two days later they stood on the summit and looked down on what seemed an endless line of plodding ants. Stiff and sore from the unwonted work of packing, Bill and Ken glanced in admiration upon Moosehide and the two Indians, whose packs were more than double the weight of their own. "I don't see how you do it," said Bill. "I'm bigger than you are, yet another half-pound in this pack would break me in two!"

"Long trips an' long rests," replied Moosehide. "That's the answer. That an' gittin' yer muscles broke in to it. Hell, in a week you'll be puttin' yer straps to a hundred an' fifty pound an' not think nothin' of it." He pointed downward at the long thin line of toiling men. "They'll begin throwin' stuff away when they hit the climb," he said. "A man could get rich on what'll be left at the foot of the hill. An' how'll they git downriver? Build boats out of green lumber that they'll have to whip-saw out of the trees they cut down! There's plenty of 'em'll never see Dawson. There'll be dead men aplenty at the foot of Box Canyon an' the White Horse Rapids. This here's a man's country—an' they won't pan out one good man to the dozen."

"How will we get downriver?" asked Ken.

“Oh, we’ll go down, hell a-kitin’. I cached a good polin’ boat in the brush at the head of Lake Bennett. I’m sure glad we’re on the head end of this here parade, though. There’s about a dozen good boats cached along with mine—an’ the first ones that finds ’em’ll grab ’em. You can’t blame ’em none—some of the folks that owns ’em ain’t comin’ back, nohow.”

Ten days later, at the Selkirk post, Moosehide superintended their purchase of supplies. A canoe was made fast to the poling boat, and a coil of strong, light line was added to the outfit. “You’ll find a canoe a lot handier’n a bigger boat,” explained Moosehide. “An’ when the water gits too swift fer you, it’s easy to track-line her upstream.”

“But,” objected Bill, “a canoe won’t hold all the stuff we’ve got.”

Moosehide grinned. “A cache will. Take what you need the first trip an’ cache the rest. Then, when you git yer camp made, come back an’ git it.”

On the evening of the second day thereafter, they bade Moosehide good-bye at the mouth of the White River. To their profuse thanks, the man turned a deaf ear. “Fergit it! Hell, the accommodation was the other way around. An’ when you git tired of piddlin’ around up here, come on down to Dawson. Everyone knows me down there, an’ maybe I kin steer you onto somethin’ that’ll pay, anyhow, better’n wages. Good luck to you. An’ if you see Old Cush er Black John Smith, tell ’em hello.”

“Who are Black John Smith and Old Cush?” asked Ken.

“Cush, he’s a trader way up somewheres on a crick they call Halfaday. An’ Black John’s an outlaw. Damn good feller. He’s wanted over in Alasky fer holdin’ up a lot of soldiers an’ grabbin’ off the payroll. Him an’ Cush runs the country up around the line. Sort of keeps ’em good, you might say. There’s quite a bunch of outlaws hangs out on Halfaday.”

Bill and Ken exchanged glances. The same thought had leaped into the minds of each—two tons and a pound of gold in Granddad’s cache, and a gang of outlaws for neighbors! Ken managed a grin. “Are they all good fellows—these outlaws?” he asked.

“Well, they’re about like other folks, I guess. Some is, an’ some ain’t. But you don’t need to fear they’ll bother you none. Black John an’ Old Cush don’t stand fer no crime bein’ pulled off in the White River country. They don’t bother no one that don’t bother them. A man’s safer there’n he is ’most anywheres else. An’ say, when you pull out, remember to cache yer stuff back off the main river. Them damn chechakos’ll be swarmin’ down through here after a bit, an’ a chechako’ll steal!”

CHAPTER IV

ON WHITE RIVER

AFTER Moosehide Charlie had departed, Ken and Bill pitched their tent on a sand bar and proceeded to cook a supper of boiled rice, bacon, and tea. They had learned the art of trail camping from Moosehide, the basic principle of which was to “b’ile up enough grub nights when you’ve got time, so you’ll have cold vittles to last till the next night.”

Ken filled his pipe and glanced across the fire at his cousin. “Well, we’re on our own now. Just think, Bill—this may be the very bar where Granddad and Jake Valentine landed when they floated down the Yukon in ’52—the bar where Jake panned the nuggets that took them up this river instead of on down the Yukon.”

“Yeah, and only one of them came back. Maybe only one of us will, too. It might have been better if they’d gone on down the Yukon. I notice that all the talk on the boat was about the Klondike. Moosehide said that was the place to go, too. And he sure knows his stuff. If it hadn’t been for him we’d be back there with the rest of the dubs, trying to build a boat out of green logs.”

Ken grinned. “We would have been back in Seattle! Neither one of us would have thought of the simple expedient of getting the purser drunk and kidnapping his papers. But as for Granddad’s going on downriver, his two tons and a pound of gold is the answer to that. The whole shipload that came out of the Klondike brought less than that.”

“Yeah, but it took Granddad and his partner fifteen years of hard work to collect that gold. And I, for one, don’t intend to put any fifteen years in this damned country!”

“We won’t have to,” answered Ken, “if we locate that cache.”

“Admitting the cache is there, we’ve got a fat chance of getting away with the gold—with the whole river overrun with outlaws.”

“Moosehide said they were good fellows and wouldn’t bother anyone that don’t bother them.”

“An outlaw is an outlaw,” retorted Bill, sourly. “Hell, I’d turn robber myself for a million!”

The next day was spent in caching the surplus supplies on a platform they built high enough to afford protection from prowling animals, and far enough back in the timber to be out of sight of marauding chechakos.

Early the following morning the tent was struck and loaded into the canoe, together with sufficient supplies to last for a month—a “stampedin’ pack,” Moosehide had called it, as he had instructed them in regard to its make-up. The lower reach of the river was divided by bars and sand spits into innumerable shallow channels, the ascent of some of which necessitated stepping into the cold water and pulling the canoe by hand over the shallows. Other channels were so swift that the track-line was resorted to, and still others—for miles at a time—permitted the use of pole and paddle.

The weather remained fine, the air keen and bracing, and, as their muscles hardened to the work, Ken thoroughly enjoyed the experience. Bill merely tolerated it. As they ascended the river the high banks drew nearer together, the channels were reduced in number, until finally the two found themselves in a single channel, split at intervals by islands.

Early one morning, as a light gray fog hung over the water, Ken stepped from the tent

and, rifle in hand, crept to the water's edge to investigate sounds of splashing that seemed to emanate from a slack-water bayou a short distance upstream.

A breath of air fanned his cheek as he reached the bayou, and through the swirling mist he caught sight of a dark form wallowing in the water. Up came a head, and from a distance of some fifty feet Ken found himself staring straight into the face of a huge cow moose, from whose dripping jaws hung festoons of waterplant which she proceeded to chew, as her mule-like ears twitched this way and that, to catch the slightest sound. Behind his sheltering bush Ken froze like a statue, and presently the head and shoulders disappeared beneath the surface. He cocked his rifle and waited for the head to reappear. It seemed to the man who waited with nerves atingle that the head stayed under for minutes. Up it came again, and once more the dripping jaws worked contentedly. It seemed a shame to kill such a superb creature. There were only two of them, it was summer, the meat would not keep, and their limited transportation facilities would permit the saving of only a small portion at best.

Once more the head disappeared. Another splashing, off to one side, attracted Ken's attention, and he made out dimly through the drifting mist another moose—smaller than the big cow—evidently a yearling. The animal drew nearer, working up toward the cow. Suddenly his head, too, disappeared, and to Ken's astonishment the whole body followed. Here was meat without so much waste! Carefully he swung the rifle into line and waited breathlessly for the animal to reappear. The beast broke water close to Ken's hiding place; emerging suddenly, it seemed that half its body shot up from the surface. It looked like some grotesque monster—half mule, half seal! Sighting carefully, Ken pressed the trigger.

The shot and the splashing and crashing of brush brought Bill from his tent in his underclothing, and together the two waded in and drew the dead yearling ashore. But try as they would, they could not get the carcass clear of the mud that edged the bayou, and after several minutes of vain effort they paused, knee deep in mud, and grinned at each other across the kill.

"Guess we'll have to butcher him here," said Ken, as he slit the animal's throat with his hunting knife. "We'll eat breakfast and then get to work."

Breakfast over, they attacked the carcass. Inexperienced as they were in butchering, and handicapped by the oozy mud, they made slow work of it; the forenoon was half spent before the task was finished.

"What do you say we call it a day?" asked Bill, eyeing the younger man who was smeared with mud and blood from heel to crown. "We've both got a job of washing to do, and we can put in the rest of the day boiling up a batch of meat. Moosehide told us it would keep better boiled than raw, in warm weather."

Ken readily agreed and, while Bill attended to the meat-boiling, he got out a shovel and pan and amused himself by washing gravel he scooped from the bank of the river. When Bill called him for supper he spread his handkerchief and proudly exhibited the few yellow grains he had salvaged from the bottom of his pan. "There it is, Bill—gold right out of the gravel!" he exclaimed enthusiastically, moving the particles about with his finger. "Wealth, right where it starts!"

The other eyed the little grains apathetically. "Not a hell of a lot of wealth. It would take about four times that much to make a ten-dollar gold piece. You've put in most of the afternoon for two dollars and a half at a liberal estimate."

"But wait till we come to where the gravel is really rich. I just scooped it up any old

place, and right off the surface. Remember, Granddad said that the deeper you went the richer it got.”

“It better get richer, if you expect me to break my back shoveling it out of the ground and then sloshing it around in the water. Damn the mosquitoes!” he growled, slapping at his neck and forehead. “I’m getting fed up on this country pretty fast. When you aren’t risking your life in some damned rapids, you’re working like hell with a pole or a paddle, or wading in ice-cold water, or standing knee deep in mud with your arms up to the elbows in blood and guts, and either letting the mosquitoes eat you alive or else hugging the fire till the smoke burns your eyes out!”

Ken laughed. “I rather enjoy it. Of course the mosquitoes are a nuisance, and there are some other discomforts. But look at the country we’re seeing! And look how good it makes a man feel—how you can sleep and eat!”

“Yeah,” sneered Bill, “and the more you eat, the more of this damned butchering you’ve got to do to keep going! And as for seeing the country—you can go out to Colorado and sit on a hotel porch and see a damned sight better scenery than this.”

“Yes, but everybody else is looking at the same old views.”

“Suppose they are! It doesn’t hurt a view to look at it, does it?”

“No, not exactly, but this is so different! I’m like Granddad, the sight and feel of new gold—raw gold, he called it—somehow makes my blood tingle. It reeks of adventure!”

“Yeah—and I’ve got a hunch you’re going to get a bellyful of adventure before you get out of here. In the first place, we’ve got only Granddad’s word for it that he ever found any amount of gold; and if he did, we don’t know that we’re on the right river; and if we are, how’n hell will we know when we come to the right bend? And if we do, we’ll probably never locate the cache; but if we do, we’re going to have a hell of a time getting the gold out—with a whole tribe of Indians and a gang of outlaws waiting to kill us if the mosquitoes don’t beat ’em to it!”

Ken grinned broadly. “That’s the spirit that wins, old top! Always look on the bright side of things, and you’ll come through! Take me, now—I know we’re on the right river, and I feel sure that eventually we’ll find the right bend, and when we do it’s a cinch we’ll locate the cache. And as for the Indians and the outlaws—you’ll have to do the worrying about them for both of us. I’m going to roll in. We want to get an early start in the morning.”

CHAPTER V

THE MEADOWS

TOWARD the middle of the afternoon, four days later, the two shoved the canoe in close to the bank as they approached a wide bend of the river, and listened.

“What do you make of it?” asked Ken.

“Sounds like someone driving nails,” answered Bill. “We’ve probably run onto that Siwash village Granddad told us about.”

“I don’t believe so,” answered Ken. “Somehow the driving of nails doesn’t fit in with my ideas of Indians.”

“Probably the outlaws, then,” growled Bill. “If that’s the case, we’re a damned sight worse off than if it was the Siwashes. Let’s take our rifles and slip through the woods and find out.”

Ken shook his head. “No, let’s shove on up the river. Indians or outlaws, I’d rather not be caught sneaking up on their camp with a rifle. They might misconstrue our intentions. We’ll pose as a couple of ordinary prospectors. The Indians are probably used to white men by this time, and we have Moosehide’s word that the outlaws won’t bother us. Come on—let’s go.”

The hammering sounds continued at short intervals, and as the two rounded the bend they came in sight of a ramshackle framework of posts and poles, evidently intended as the skeleton of an enormous building. In fact parts of the side walls, consisting of slabs of bark, bits of canvas, and discarded blankets, were already in place. Off to one side, near where a tiny creek emerged from the rocks, stood a substantial pole cabin. Perched astride a crosspiece of framework, a tall gangling man spiked a rafter in place and reached for a long pole that was handed him by another who stood on the ground.

Although not far away, neither had noticed the canoe which the two voyagers held close against the bank with paddle and pole. The man on the crosspiece presented rather a ludicrous appearance. A head of long gray hair was topped by a flattish black hat of obsolete design, while a beard of stiff gray chin whiskers stood almost straight out from his face. His feet were encased in moccasins, above which a long expanse of sockless shanks reached to the faded blue overalls into which was thrust a nondescript shirt whose tail had worked out and overhung the seat of the overalls. The one on the ground was much younger, and though similarly clad except for the hat, moved about with the lithe suppleness of youth.

“They’re not Siwashes,” said Bill, in an undertone.

Ken grinned. “And they don’t look much like outlaws. Let’s give ’em a hail.” Raising his voice, he called: “Hello!”

Both workers turned at the call and stared for a moment at the two who pushed the canoe to a strip of gravel and stepped out. “How-de-do, strangers—and welcome!” greeted the oldster, tossing his hammer to the ground and hitching himself stiffly along the crosspiece toward a rude ladder. Without a word the younger of the two walked swiftly to the cabin and disappeared through the door.

Reaching the ground, the old man advanced, one hand extended in welcome. “Welcome in the name of the Lord!” he called in a deep, booming voice that sounded strangely startling—issuing, as it did, from between thin lips in a long cadaverous face.

But, more noteworthy, even, than the voice, were the man's eyes. Small, deep-set beneath bushy gray brows, they seemed to glow with a strange inner fire—piercing eyes, so black that pupil and iris seemed merged into one. The deep voice boomed on, without giving the two a chance to speak. "You will camp here for the night, and, I hope, for many nights to come. I will help you with your tent. We will pitch it yonder in the shade. Here is wood and water in abundance—an ideal camping spot—a spot I myself selected as the place above all others for the spreading of God's word in the wilderness."

"You're a missionary, I take it," ventured Bill.

"Yes—a humble servant of the Lord, endeavoring, in my small way, to carry the light of the Blessed Word into the dark lives of the benighted savages."

"What church are you connected with?" asked Ken, by way of conversation.

"I am affiliated with no church. I subscribe to no dogma, nor do I bow down before any authority, save God alone! I preach the simple gospel as it is set down in the Book—the golden streets of heaven for the saved, and a furnace of fire for the damned. There can be no compromise, no equivocation, no tampering with eternity. A man will be saved, or he will be damned—a comforting thought! Truly, a doctrine of love!"

"That's right, I guess," agreed Bill. "That's quite a barn you're putting up."

"Barn! That, young man, is to be the temple of the Lord! It may lack something of the splendor of Solomon's temple, but it is yet incomplete. And who knows? Maybe in time it will outrank in sheer splendor even the temple of Solomon, for its foundations rest upon gold!"

"What!" gasped Ken.

"Yes, the Lord has directed my footsteps toward a spot richly endowed with His treasures. The very ground beneath your feet is impregnated with gold that may be had for the taking. And who knows but that, when these poor savages have embraced the Word, they may not flock here in teeming thousands and dig the gold from the ground and beat it into sheets and overlay my poor tabernacle until it puts to shame even the temple of the great Solomon itself?" The piercing eyes fixed Bill, and the man advanced, pointing a long bony finger almost in his face. "I say—who knows?" he thundered.

Unconsciously the younger man drew back from the burning gaze. "Not I!" he hastened to reply. "I—I think it would be a swell thing to do. It—it would add to its appearance, I think. Don't you?"

"Blessed be the name of the Lord," repeated the man. "And now may I inquire what brings you into this land that floweth with milk and honey?"

"We're prospectors," answered Bill. "You say there's gold here? Right here in this bend?"

"Yes—in this bend and in every bend. This river literally flows through a valley of gold. If it is gold you seek, you need go no farther. Come—I will help you with your tent. For you will tarry here tonight and dine with me. Tomorrow you may dig for gold. But remember the words of the Master: 'Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal.'"

"Many thieves around here?" asked Bill, remembering Moosehide's reference to the outlaws.

"No, not to my knowledge. There is a village of pagans not far from here whose language I am striving to learn so that I may translate the Holy Bible into it, and thus bring them the written Word. Farther up the river, on Halfaday Creek, there is the trading post

of one Cushing; and about his post are gathered a number of men who, like yourselves, are seekers of gold. But they are good men. I have conducted services among them two or three times, and they have listened avidly to the Word and have contributed liberally to the Lord's cause. The leader among them is one John Smith, who because of his black beard is known among them as Black John. He it is who never fails to take up a collection for the furtherance of my cause."

As he talked, the man had shouldered the tent and led the way toward a spot at the edge of the timber, near the little creek, and not a great distance from the cabin. Ken and Bill followed, carrying their bedrolls, and in a surprisingly short time the tent was pitched and all their effects were stowed in it. For, despite his evident fanaticism, the man proved eminently practical in making camp. When the work was finished, even to the carrying of a pail of water from the little spring creek and the drawing up and overturning of the canoe, the man turned to them.

"I will leave you now and clothe myself more fittingly. In a short time I will summon you to supper. We are humble folk and subsist upon humble fare, but such as we have we love to share with the passing stranger."

"Don't bother to dress on our account," said Ken. "And we've got plenty to eat. So if it's any trouble to you——"

"No trouble in the least," interrupted the man. "In fact, we welcome visitors. We have not many here. And such visits serve to break the monotony of our lives."

When the man had disappeared within the cabin Ken grinned at Bill. "What do you make of our friend? Was he kidding us about those outlaws? Black John Smith, you remember, was the man Moosehide mentioned as being at the head of them."

Bill shook his head. "No kidding about that old boy. He's cuckoo. Moosehide might have been kidding us—but not this fellow. If that bunch up on Halfaday are outlaws, they've got the old man fooled. I wonder what the other one's like?"

"Probably some crazy disciple of his," hazarded Ken, his eyes on the skeleton of poles that stood gaunt and bare against the skyline. "You sure put your foot in it when you called his temple a barn," he grinned. "Gosh, if he ever gets that thing finished, it will hold a whole tribe of Indians!"

"It looks to me as though we've hit the best possible spot for our camp. He invited us to stay here, and he seems to be in with both the Siwashes and the outlaws. When they find out we're friends of his they'll probably just take us for granted, and we can carry on our search without exciting too much curiosity in either camp."

"You bet! We'll jolly the old codger along and keep on the good side of him. For my part, I'd even be willing to lend a hand now and then on the construction of the temple."

"You'll be giving him an estimate on flooring and sheeting and roofing," laughed Bill. "And quoting him a price f. o. b. Emmonsville."

"You forget," grinned Ken, "that the specifications call for beaten gold, and we don't carry it in stock."

The deep voice boomed from the doorway of the cabin: "Will you join us at our evening meal?"

It was a strange figure that greeted them at the doorway. The old man had arrayed himself in a long frock coat, faded to a greenish tinge, below which the legs of a pair of black trousers were rolled up to account for the difference between the heeled shoes for which they were originally cut and the moccasins which he was wearing. A celluloid

collar, scrubbed to shininess but with its edges yellowed with age, adorned his neck, and a black string tie dangled limply upon the V of white shirt front that showed between the lapels of the tightly buttoned coat. Ken found himself staring in fascination at the prominent Adam's apple that worked up and down like a piston as the man talked, appearing and disappearing beneath the edge of the celluloid collar.

"It has occurred to me that I completely forgot to introduce myself at the moment of our meeting," he said, in an apologetic tone, as he stepped aside to allow them to enter. "I am Phineas Meadow—and this, gentlemen, is my daughter Lois."

Both Ken and Bill were aware that a girl had stepped from the deep shadow near the stove into the lighter area near the doorway. Sheer surprise forced an awkward silence as the two stared into the soft brown eyes that smiled at them from a face of radiant beauty.

Ken was the first to find his voice, a smile of genuine pleasure curving his lips. "This is indeed a pleasant surprise—to find a charming lady out here in the wilderness. I am Kenneth Blunt; Ken for short. And this is my cousin William Blunt, commonly called Bill."

"On your way to Halfaday?" asked the girl, with a smile that managed to convey that her understanding of the reputation of Halfaday was more sophisticated than that of her father.

"No," Ken answered. "Not on our way to anywhere in particular. Just prospecting. In fact, if it's agreeable, I hope we may be neighbors."

"Oh, that would be fine!" cried the girl. "We don't see many people, except Indians. Do we, Father?"

"No. Far too few. The coming of people of our own race is a welcome incident in our lives. We hope you will remain where you are camped for an indefinite period. There is gold enough for all. It is yours for the taking. We only pan a quantity sufficient for our small needs. But come, let us partake of the food while it is still warm."

The four sat down to a supper which was preceded by an interminably long grace and concluded with a return of thanks, during the course of which the Lord was advised of the day's progress on the tabernacle, nail by nail, chided a bit upon the insufficiency of the timber for the longer pieces, and informed of the arrival of two strangers whose outward appearance doubtless belied sin-blistered souls. A difficulty regarding Indian syntax was also mentioned, and the discourse wound up with the hope that the two strangers would see the light and enter the fold before such time as their riches should prove an insurmountable barrier.

The meal over, the four went out to inspect the tabernacle, and while Phineas discussed certain structural problems with Bill, Ken and the girl strolled to the river bank.

"I don't know when I've enjoyed a meal as I did your supper," said Ken. "Those hot biscuits tasted mighty good after the fare we've had for the past month or so. Neither Bill nor I seem to be much good at cooking, though Moosehide Charlie tried to teach us."

"Where did you meet Moosehide?" asked the girl.

"Do you know him?"

"Yes, indeed. He's a dear—he and Camillo Bill and Old Bettles and Swiftwater Bill. You see, before we came here Father started an independent mission at Fortymile. We were there almost a year before he gave up in disgust because the men wouldn't give up their drinking and card-playing to spend most of their time praying. So he came up here to convert Siwashes where, as he said, 'the seed would fall upon virgin soil.' But he's

finding out that they've got a sort of religion of their own that they're somewhat loath to give up. We've been here two years now. We learned their language, and Father is translating the Bible into it." The girl paused and giggled. "If they can make head or tail out of it when he has finished it will be more than I can do. Really, he's making a terrible mess of it. But he's happy, and I wouldn't discourage him for the world. And then he got the idea of building the tabernacle, so the translation is sidetracked right in the middle of Genesis until the building is completed."

"I should think," grinned Ken, "that a smaller building would have answered the purpose. How many Siwashes are there?"

"Only about thirty or forty, in this band. But the numbers make no difference. The tabernacle, or temple—sometimes he calls it one, and sometimes the other—must conform exactly to the dimensions of Solomon's temple. It had to be so many cubits long, and so many cubits wide, and a certain number of cubits high. You see, his idea is that, when the temple is completed, not only this tribe but all the other tribes in the North will flock to it. I help him all I can with the building. At least, it keeps him out of doors in good weather instead of being humped up over his papers in the cabin."

"Where's your brother?" asked Ken, suddenly remembering that the table had been set for only four.

"Brother! Why did you think I had a brother?"

"Why, the chap who was helping your father as we paddled up. I got hardly more than a glimpse of him as he hurried to the cabin, but he looked a good deal like you. Why wasn't he at supper?"

"He was," laughed the girl. "Did you ever try to build a tabernacle with skirts on?"

Ken joined heartily in the laughter. "That's one thing I've overlooked."

"I hate skirts! I never wear them unless I have to—unless we have company. I wish I were a man!"

"I don't," replied Ken, promptly. "I—I think girls are a lot nicer," he added, hurriedly. "But you don't have to wear skirts on our account. We're not 'company' any more. I think—that is, I hope we're going to be permanent residents."

"I hope so too," added the girl with a naïve frankness that brought a flush to Ken's cheeks. "But you won't. You'll hear of a strike some place else, and you'll stampede. You're not interested in the Siwashes' souls."

Somehow Ken's heart felt strangely light. "Not in the least," he smiled. "And neither are you!"

"I have to be," answered the girl wistfully. "I'm just a woman. But I love to do the things men do—to hunt, and to pan gold, and——"

"So do I!" cried Ken, enthusiastically. "I know we'll be here for a long, long time. I don't care about any new strikes! And I love it all, too—panning gold, and hunting, and all! It'll work out fine! Bill doesn't like to hunt, or pan gold, either. He can help your dad with the tabernacle, and we'll do the other work!"

"That will be fun!" cried the girl. "But—maybe Bill won't like building tabernacles, either."

"Well—gosh—he's got to do something!" said Ken—and both burst out laughing.

"Maybe he won't like it here. He may get tired of it and go back downriver or on up to Halfaday."

"What about this Halfaday?" asked Ken. "Moosehide said something about a bunch of

outlaws up there. But your dad told us they're all good men. Was Moosehide just stringing us?"

The girl smiled. "No, Moosehide wasn't stringing you. Most of 'em are outlaws—but they're just as nice as they can be—most of 'em—and the others don't dare to do anything. They're afraid of Old Cush and Black John Smith. Cush isn't an outlaw. He runs the trading post. But Black John is, and he's a dear. You'll like him—but don't ever let Father know that he's an outlaw. He likes them, and they're all awfully good to him. But he doesn't understand human nature, and if he knew they were outlaws he'd be sure to antagonize them. Black John won't stand for any crime in the White River country. It isn't because of any altruism he may have—it's plain common sense. As long as there are no complaints, the police let them alone. If anything does happen, Black John calls a miners' meetin' and the case is satisfactorily disposed of before the matter gets to the police. Sh-sh-sh, here come the others!"

CHAPTER VI

EACH FOR HIMSELF

FOR two weeks Ken and Bill prospected the bends for half a dozen miles up and down the river. Most of the bends were wide and flat enough to fit Matthew Blunt's description, but they discovered no remains of an ancient cabin, nor could they find any ashes or bits of charcoal that would indicate the spot where such a cabin had been burned. A visit to the Indian village convinced them that, beyond a few "cuss words," the natives neither spoke nor understood English. Inquiry regarding any recollection they may have had of Matthew Blunt and Jake Valentine or the location of their cabin was out of the question.

Long evenings were spent with the Meadows—evenings in which each of the two cousins sought to outmaneuver the other for the girl's favor. The fact that she seemed to prefer Ken roused a spark of jealousy in Bill's heart that grew with the passing of the days into a smoldering volcano of hate. Ken had been the better man in the business back in Emmonsville, he had proven a better man on the rivers, and now he was winning the only girl, Bill admitted to himself, for whom he had ever really cared.

For hours on end he plotted ways and means for discrediting Ken in the girl's eyes and for locating Matthew Blunt's cache. If he could find the cache and secretly remove the gold, Ken could have the girl—an' be damned to him! Back in Ohio a man with a million could pick and choose from many girls!

At other times, when under the spell of the girl's presence, he felt that possession of her was the only thing that counted. At such times he even wished that Ken would locate the cache and clear out with the gold—but these were fleeting moments. For the most part, Bill's mind was on the million that lay buried somewhere in the gravel. Of late he had come to regard it, not as a joint enterprise in which each should share alike, but as a million for himself. To hell with Ken! At times he had even plotted murder. A simple matter—the accidental discharge of his rifle while hunting—a few days of heartbroken regret for the benefit of the Meadows—then both the cache and the girl would be his. Once he even went so far as to draw a bead on Ken's back—but at the moment for pressing the trigger his nerve failed and, white and shaking, he lowered his rifle and passed on.

Day in and day out they searched the bends, even crawling about on hands and knees and digging beneath the spruce needles for traces of ashes or bits of charcoal.

One day, as the two ate their lunch beside the river, Ken ventured a suggestion. "Let's get old Phineas to go up to the village with us and ask the Siwashes if they have any recollection of two white men that lived here a good many years ago. They may be able to show us the cabin site."

Bill shook his head. "There's no use letting Phineas in on the secret. He's hell-bent on keeping on the good side of these Siwashes, and if they told him about the theft of their treasure, he'd side in with 'em, and they might make it too hot for us around here. And we've got to stay till we locate that cache. I'm satisfied that this is the river, and that we're not so far away from the spot where they had their cabin. Granddad's description of the bends and the rock walls and all prove that he's been right around here. I think the best way would be for me to play up to the old codger—help him with his tabernacle and offer to help with the translation. In a week or two I ought to pick up enough of the language to

be able to question the Siwashes myself. You keep right on hunting for the cache, and leave old Phineas to me.”

Ken readily agreed to the plan, and many times that afternoon he wondered at Bill’s marked affability, until he suddenly realized that, with himself relegated to the bush hunting for the cache, Bill would be left with the girl, as well as with Phineas. There was no doubt in Ken’s mind as to which he would play up to. The realization brought a glum hour for Ken, but as he crept disconsolately about among the spruce needles a sudden thought occurred to him, and a slow grin curved his lips. That evening as they made their way to the clearing both were in fine humor, and supper was eaten in a crossfire of good-natured banter.

Bill lost no time in carrying his plan into effect. When Phineas stepped from the cabin after the evening meal, Bill carried him off to the tabernacle, where he bewildered the oldster with a barrage of structural suggestions.

Ken helped Lois with the dishes, and later the two strolled to the bank of the river. “Bill’s got an idea that he wants to learn the Siwash language,” he began, when the two had seated themselves on the verge of a low bluff. “He doesn’t care much for prospecting, anyway, so he’s going to propose that he help your dad with the building in return for lessons in Siwash.”

“Have you two always been good friends?” asked the girl abruptly.

Ken looked up in quick surprise, to note a little puckering frown between the arched brows. “Sure, we have! We’re cousins. Why do you ask that?”

The girl answered, without shifting her gaze from the distant hills: “Oh, I don’t know. I just wondered. It seems to me I’ve noticed little things—a look—a word—I can’t explain it. Maybe it’s all foolishness. But somehow I can’t help but think that Bill hates you.”

Ken laughed aloud. “Sure, it’s all foolishness. Bill’s a good fellow. Why, we grew up together. We’ve been just like brothers. And ever since Bill finished college, we’ve been in business together. Our fathers are partners in a business that was started by our great-grandfather, and some day Bill and I will inherit the business.”

“Didn’t you finish college, too?”

“No, I quit after two years.”

“Why?”

“Well, you see, I figured that one of us should learn the business from the ground up. It’s a coal and lumber and lime and cement business, and there’s a lot of practical things about it that I didn’t believe a man could learn through the office. So I pulled on my overalls and went at it.”

“You mean you piled lumber and shoveled coal and—and things like that?”

“Sure. Hard work never hurt anyone. It’s good for a man.”

“And when Bill finished college—what part of the business did he learn?”

“Oh, he took the office end. Uncle Sim, Bill’s dad, is president of the company—Bill acts as secretary to his dad. He’s learning the financial end.”

“I see,” answered the girl. “And is he running the financial end of your prospecting venture, too? I have noticed that you do most of the work.”

Once more Ken laughed. “No, we’re even Stephen on the prospecting stunt. If I seem to do most of the work it’s because Bill isn’t hardened in to work, as I am. But don’t worry about Bill—he’s all right. Wait till he gets hardened to this sort of life.”

“Why should he want to learn the Siwash language?” persisted the girl. “Does he think that will harden him?”

“Oh, I guess he’s just naturally studious. Anyway, he’ll get exercise enough helping your dad with his tabernacle. And that reminds me—two will be enough to work on the tabernacle. We need some fresh meat—I’m getting tired of fish. Tomorrow, let’s you and I go hunting. We can take a shovel and pan along, and when we get tired of hunting we can pan some gravel.”

“Oh, I’d love it!” cried the girl enthusiastically. “We’ll get an early start and take our lunch. I know an old beaver meadow the moose use this time of year. That will be a lot more fun than poking poles up for Father to nail on his roof!”

“Fine,” said Ken. “Here come the others. That sure was a great idea of Bill’s. I wonder how much Siwash he learned?”

Phineas approached, his deep-set eyes snapping with enthusiasm. “William has offered a suggestion that will reduce the labor of building the tabernacle to a minimum,” he announced proudly.

“He would,” observed Lois, with a dry smile. “What is this wonderful scheme, Father?”

Phineas turned to Bill, who was approaching from the spring, where he had stopped for a drink. “The plan is yours,” he said. “I shall let you announce it.”

“It is really very simple,” announced Bill. “Merely the substitution of intellectual endeavor on the part of the Reverend Doctor Meadow and myself for manual labor. It seems that the all-important task of translating the Holy Scriptures into the Indian tongue has been temporarily laid aside because of the crying necessity for a place of worship. It occurred to me that inasmuch as the tabernacle is being erected solely for the benefit of the Indians, they should be allowed to participate in its construction. They should be given the privilege of contributing the work of their hands and the sweat of their brows toward their own salvation. Thus, when the edifice is completed, they will have developed a real affection for it. It will be theirs—did they not help build it?”

“Amen!” bellowed Phineas fervidly. “Truly this is the voice of a prophet crying in the wilderness!”

“It occurred to me,” continued Bill, rolling his eyes piously, “that, day after tomorrow being the Sabbath, we should proceed to the Indian village and hold divine services. At the conclusion of the meeting, my reverend friend here will issue an impassioned appeal for aid in the construction of the tabernacle. Tomorrow he and I shall labor together—I in drafting the appeal, while he translates it into the Indian language. If we can but succeed in touching the hearts of these untutored savages, so that they will clamor for the chance to assist in the work—all will be well. I myself will supervise the construction, leaving my friend free to further the work of translating the Scriptures. It is an arrangement, I believe, that will work out to the advantage of all.”

“Amen!” seconded Phineas. “Truly a noble concept before the Lord!”

“That’s right,” agreed Ken, repressing a grin. “That ought to work out first rate. Do you think the Siwashes will fall for it?”

“‘Fall for it?’” repeated Phineas, his bushy brows drawing together in a frown. “I do not grasp the allusion of the expression ‘fall for it.’ Why should they not avail themselves of this opportunity to serve their Maker? I think the question is—will they rise to it?”

“Yeah,” agreed Ken, smiling. “Maybe that would be better—‘rise’—like a trout to a

fly.”

Lois swiftly averted her face, and Ken winced from a vicious dig in the ribs from Bill’s elbow. Phineas’s frown deepened, as the deep-set eyes focused on Ken.

“I perceive in you, young man, a deplorable tendency toward flippancy and jest. Take heed lest you dash your foot against a stone,” he said sententiously. “You would do well to emulate your worthy cousin and cast aside your shovel and your pan, which are the tools of mammon, and therefore filthy in the sight of the Lord, and turn your thoughts and the work of your hands to His service, even as William has done.”

“Not me,” smiled Ken good-humoredly. “It strikes me as being mighty presumptuous—this forcing of one’s religion upon people of another race. They seem contented and happy. Why not let ’em alone?”

“But,” cried Phineas, aghast, “don’t you realize that they’re pagans!”

“Sure—what of it?”

“Young man, you are a child of the devil and a disciple of Antichrist!” pronounced Phineas, and turning on his heel strode haughtily toward the cabin.

Later, in their tent, Ken grinned as Bill was undressing. “You’re sure playing up to the old boy, Bill. The first thing you know, you’ll be preaching sermons yourself.”

“Yeah—and for God’s sake don’t go butting in and gumming my game! If we can get the Siwashes to work on his damned shack, that’ll leave him free to teach me the language. I’ll pretend to help him with the translation.”

“I’m going hunting tomorrow,” said Ken. “Don’t you want to go along?”

Bill scowled. “No. I hate hunting! And I’m tired of prodding around these bends and rooting in the dirt like a hog to find the ashes of that old cabin! I hate the mosquitoes and living in a tent and cooking my own meals—and everything else about this damned country! I’m going to find out from the Siwashes just where the cabin stood.”

“Suppose they don’t know, or refuse to tell you if they do? In that case we’ve got to keep on hunting for it. And we’ve got to think about running that other canoe load of supplies up from the cache. And building a cabin for the winter.”

“Winter! Do you suppose I’m going to winter here? Not by a damn sight! If we can’t find where the cabin stood in the summer time, how in the devil are we going to find it with the whole valley full of snow? What in hell would a man do here all winter?”

“Do just what Granddad and Jake Valentine did—dig gold,” answered Ken.

“What—chop wood and thaw out the ground and fill a bucket, and crank a windlass and wallow around belly deep in the snow? Not me. Not for all the gold in a dozen valleys.”

“You mean,” asked Ken, “that you’d quit before you found that gold? That you’d go back and face Granddad who put in sixteen winters here, with the nearest trading post more than four hundred miles away? Tell him you didn’t have guts enough to winter here, with a new post at Fort Selkirk and another at Stewart City and another up on Halfaday! Believe me, the more I see of this country the more I appreciate that Granddad was some man!”

“Yeah,” taunted Bill, stung to cold fury by Ken’s words. “And what did it get him? He was damned fool enough to spend sixteen years in this God-forsaken country—and now he’s living on a pension from his sons!”

Ken’s face went a shade whiter. Suddenly the words of Granddad Blunt flashed into his mind: “It’s guts, not looks, that a man needs! . . . Wait till that damn North begins to

buck you! . . . An' there ain't no rules." And the words of Lois Meadow, uttered only a few minutes ago—words that more than hinted of her distrust of Bill—and—"I have noticed that you do most of the work." With the words ringing in his ears, it suddenly dawned upon Ken that he had done most of the work—always he had done most of the work, while Bill shared equally in the proceeds. And he expected to share equally now! For the first time, it seemed to him, he was seeing Bill in his true colors. Even the shallow hypocrisy that fooled old man Meadow—a pose that only a few minutes before had seemed merely laughable—now appeared underhanded and loathsome. And on top of that, Bill had called Granddad Blunt a damned fool who was living on a pension from his sons!

When he spoke, his words cut cold and hard as chilled steel: "If Granddad was a damned fool, so am I—and I'm proud of it. You can do as you damned please. I'm going to stay here till I locate that cache, if it takes me twice sixteen years to do it."

Bill Blunt stood erect in his underwear and glared down at his cousin, while his brain worked rapidly. Surely he could find out from the Indians where the old cabin had been located, sooner than Ken could find the spot by haphazard exploration. Why not stake all on a break with Ken? Bill had no intention of wintering in the valley, and surely he could locate the cache before winter came. To break definitely with Ken would mean that the entire contents of the cache would go to him who located it! A million instead of half a million! And his own course for finding it was the sound one!

"I suppose," he rasped, "that just because I don't intend to stay here and winter like a savage, if you should find the cache next summer, or the summer after, I could whistle for my share!"

"You sure could," answered Ken, in the same hard tone. "And a hell of a lot of good it would do you to whistle! If I do the work, I get the gold. And if you want to share in it, you can give that brain of yours a rest—and get to work with a shovel. I've done the shoveling for two of us long enough—here and in Emmonsville too! You damned hypocrite!"

Bill's smoldering hate flared into rage. He laughed nastily. "Sure, you have, you poor boob—and what has it got you? I'll tell you—and then try and figure out what your muscles are worth against brains! You'd find it out sooner or later, so you might as well know now—you're nothing but a hired man with Blunt and Blunt! While you were working like a nigger in the yard, I was using my head on the financial end. When the old men kick out, Blunt and Blunt is *me*! I've got the business all sewed up and in my pocket. And from now on it's each one for himself in the hunt for Granddad's cache! One of us gets all, and the other nothing." Bill paused and added with a sneer: "And believe me, you better be the one to find it. You haven't got a damned thing to fall back on if you lose—I've got the business. And just between you and me, it's a hell of a good thing."

Ken's eyes narrowed, as a peculiar smile twisted the corners of his lips. "I suppose I ought to kill you, Bill. But I'm not going to—not now. But if I get back to Emmonsville and find out that what you've told me is true, you'd better travel fast, and travel far. Remember, Jake Valentine had a hell of a good thing, right here in this valley. But he isn't exactly enjoying it. Jake's dead, Bill. He turned crooked."

CHAPTER VII

AT THE SIWASH VILLAGE

NEXT morning the two cousins breakfasted without speaking. The meal over, Bill stalked abruptly away. Ken set the dishpan on the coals and, while the water heated, made up his bed and moved all his belongings to one side of the tent. Then he washed up his own dishes and the teapot, cleaned up the frying pan, and threw out the water, leaving Bill's dishes as they were on the rude table beside the fire. He looked up to see Lois Meadow regarding him gravely. His eyes lighted in swift approval as they took in each detail of the lithe form that stood leaning lightly on a paddle, rifle in one hand. Her overalls were thrust into tightly laced pacs, and from the belt with its row of yellow cartridges depended a light ax and a sheath knife. From the open collar of her flannel shirt the sun-browned throat rose to meet the exquisitely molded chin.

Ken smiled. "If I were only a painter now, I'd make my everlasting fame. 'The Modern Diana,' I'd call the picture, and I'll bet it would sell for a fortune."

The red lips curved. "But you're not a painter. And, anyway, who ever heard of an artist painting a lady in flannel shirt and overalls? It just isn't done, you know." She paused as her glance took in the interior of the tent with one side neatly arranged, and strayed to the set of unwashed dishes on the table beside the fire. "What's happened, Ken?" she asked as her dark eyes looked searchingly into his own.

"Oh, Bill and I've split up. Each going it alone. Bill doesn't want to winter here."

"And—you're going to?"

Ken's heart leaped at the eagerness of the question. "Yes," he answered, "I'm going to. I'm going to stay till I find gold."

"Are you ready?" asked the girl.

"How about a lunch? We won't be back till toward evening, will we?"

The girl smiled. "We have our rifles. And I've got a fish line and salt and matches in my pocket. If we can't manage a lunch, we ought to go hungry." She turned toward the river. "Bring a pole and a paddle," she called over her shoulder, "and a pan and shovel. I've got to begin laying in a little dust to buy winter supplies. Father's too busy with his tabernacle and his translation to bother about gold. He wouldn't do any panning till the last pinch of flour was gone out of the sack."

Under pole and paddle the light canoe moved swiftly upriver, and two hours later they approached the Indian village that marked the limit of Ken's exploration. As they drew opposite the straggling collection of pole shacks and tepees, the girl's brows drew into a puzzled frown. "That's funny," she said, pointing with her paddle toward a group of half a dozen or more Indians who lolled in the shade of a grove of spruce beyond the fish racks. "I never saw them act that way before. Generally, when anyone comes along, they collect on the bank." Two other Indians slipped from a tepee and skulked toward a shack. The girl called one of them by name, but the man paid no attention, and the two disappeared within the shack. "There's something queer, here," she said. "I'm going to land."

Stepping from the canoe, she passed around the drying racks closely followed by Ken. The Indians sprawled in the shade stared at the two stupidly. One nodded indifferently. The girl spoke to him in his own tongue. But the man merely grunted and pulled a battered felt hat over his eyes.

"I don't understand it," muttered the girl, her eyes straying from one to the other of the sodden forms.

Ken grinned. "That's easy," he said. "They're all drunk."

"Drunk!" The dark eyes widened suddenly. "Why, where could they get any liquor?"

"I don't know. But if those Siwashes aren't drunk I'll miss my guess."

"Old Cush has a saloon at his trading post on Halfaday," said the girl. "But neither he nor Black John Smith will allow the Siwashes to have any liquor. And I don't believe anyone could have run any upriver without our knowing it."

Turning abruptly, the girl walked to the shack into which the two men had disappeared, and knocked loudly upon the door. Receiving no reply, she passed on to a tepee in front of which a young woman sat sewing on a garment of red squawcloth. Before the girl could open her mouth the young woman spoke rapidly, without looking up. Lois walked on toward a hovel at the edge of the camp.

"What did she say?" asked Ken.

"She told me to go away. That if she talked her man would beat her. But old Kawashe has no man to beat her. She's the oldest woman in the band. Maybe she'll tell me where they are getting liquor."

They were greeted at the doorway of the hovel by an aged crone with an incredibly wrinkled face from out which a pair of eyes stared beady-black. Ken waited while, in answer to the girl's question, the old woman croaked her deep guttural in evident anger, finally winding up by pointing to the shack where the girl's knock had gone unanswered.

Lois turned to Ken. "She says that a man came downriver three days ago with two kegs of firewater, and that all the men have been drunk ever since. The man gave Nishwa a quart of firewater for the use of his shack. Nishwa's a *kultus* Siwash—and he kicked out his wife and children and let the white man in." She paused and regarded the shack with flashing eyes. "He's not going to keep on trading those men liquor!" she exclaimed. "With two kegs of it, he could keep them drunk all the rest of the summer. The hooch runners dilute the stuff with water and charge outrageous prices for it. He'll have everything these poor people own by the time those kegs are empty! I don't dare to tell Father. He'd be sure to come up here and get into trouble. The man, or even the Siwashes, might kill him. They don't know what they're doing when they're drunk. If I could get word to the police, or to Black John! I wish I knew what to do!"

"I'm not afraid of him," said Ken. "I'll go over and bust in the door of the shack and kick him out, and smash his kegs for him."

"No! No!" cried the girl. "You never could do it! These hooch runners are terribly desperate men. He's armed—you may be sure of that—and he wouldn't hesitate to kill us both."

"You take the canoe and drop on down the river. I'll follow in a little while. There's a foot trail on the other side. Bill and I prospected up to here."

"I won't do it! You wouldn't have a chance. And, somehow, we've got to prevent Father from coming up here tomorrow to hold services. He's going to be furious when he finds those Siwashes drunk. Oh, Ken, don't do anything foolhardy! I—I need you so!" Ken's heart warmed suddenly at the appeal in her voice. "All right," he said. "I'll do as you say. But even if anything did happen to me, there's Bill."

"I hate Bill!" exclaimed the girl with such asperity that he glanced into her face in surprise. "I wouldn't trust him out of my sight! He's a—a miserable hypocrite and a

scoundrel! It's hard to believe that you two are cousins. You're no more alike than black's like white. And he's fool enough to think that I could ever——” The girl broke off abruptly and turned away, her face flaming red.

“Could ever what?” asked Ken, aware that his heart was pounding rapidly.

“I hate him!” reiterated the girl in hurried confusion. “I don't know what I'm saying! These Siwashes have got me all upset!”

“That reminds me,” said Ken. “Would you mind asking the old woman whether she remembers two white men who lived on the river years ago? And if so, does she know just where their cabin stood.”

The girl framed the words slowly in the Indian tongue. The old woman shook her head, and with a skinny arm swept an arc to the southeastward as she jabbered her guttural.

“She says that this tribe has not been here very long. She thinks about six or seven years. They came from the coast country from fear of the Chilkats. She says that they found an old Siwash encampment here but that the people had gone away. She does not know who they were or where they went.” As the girl translated the old woman's words she studied Ken's face, a look of perplexity in her dark eyes. What did Ken know of white men on the river years ago? And why should the information cause his face to assume an expression of extreme gravity, and then suddenly to light with a smile?

As she was wondering, Ken spoke. “Come on,” he said. “Let's go. If we're not going to eject this whiskey peddler and destroy his goods, we can't do any good here. Let's get on with our hunting.”

“Oh, but we've got to go back and tell Father about what's happened to his Siwashes!”

“What for?” smiled Ken. “He's not coming here till tomorrow. He and Bill will be busy all day on their sermon. Tonight we can tell him, and then we'll persuade him that his best bet is to hit out for Fort Selkirk and notify the police.”

“Just the thing!” cried the girl, with an enthusiasm that proclaimed a load lifted from her mind. “And I'll go with him! You see,” she added, with a smile, “people don't always take Father seriously. And the police have just *got* to arrest that man before he debauches the whole tribe!”

“That's right,” agreed Ken, his eyes twinkling. “But what's the matter with Bill going down with him? Bill's convincing—to strangers. And he's appointed himself vicar or curate or acolyte—or whatever they call the flunky to the main squeeze of a tabernacle. Then you and I could go ahead with our hunting and prospecting and——”

“Oh—but we couldn't! It—it wouldn't be right——”

“Rightest thing I know——”

“But—it wouldn't look right! They'd be gone for days and days——”

“The longer the better. They couldn't stay away too long to suit me.”

The girl saw that the man's lips were still smiling, but the mischievous twinkle in the blue eyes blazed suddenly into the fire of a mighty love. Her cheeks tingled with the rush of hot blood, and before her dark eyes the image of the man dimmed. Then he was speaking again. She felt the weight of his hand on her arm, and every fiber of her being seemed to thrill at the touch.

His voice seemed very soft, very gentle, a voice from far away: “Listen, dear, we are going to be together—always—you and I. Why not start now? Your father is a preacher. He can marry us now—tonight, and then——”

“Oh—no—no! I can’t! I——”

The grip on her arm tightened spasmodically. “You do love me—don’t you, Lois? I love you more than you can ever——”

“Oh—I—yes—yes, I do! But——” She paused abruptly, as her wildly roving eyes encountered the stare of the beady-black eyes of the old squaw. Were the withered lips smiling? “Let’s go away from here!” she panted. And turning abruptly, she headed for the canoe, closely followed by Ken, who realized that his heart was pounding like a triphammer.

As they passed the shack to which the old woman had pointed, the door opened a scant foot and a bearded face appeared in the aperture. “Did you git you an earful?” rasped a coarse voice. “If you did, you better go back wher’ you come from. An’ you kin tell that prayer-mumblin’ pap of yourn that if he knows what’s good fer him, he’ll mind his own business. If he shows up around here, he’ll turn up missin’ shore as hell!”

The girl regarded the man with flashing eyes. “We’ll get the police!” she cried. “You have no right to sell liquor to the Siwashes!”

His answer was a derisive laugh. “Shore—go tell the police an’ see what it’ll git you. What with the chechakos pilin’ in on ’em on the Yukon, they ain’t got no time fer the side cricks! By the time they’d git around to yer complaint, I’ll be sold out an’ gone. I wasn’t made in a minute. I picked my time. Call the police—an’ be damned to you!”

Ken sprang at the words. The door slammed shut, quivered from top to bottom under the impact of his shoulder, but held—evidently braced on the inside by the weight of bodies. As his eyes searched the ground for a battering ram, the girl clutched at his sleeve.

“Come!” she cried, pointing to the Indians who were rousing themselves from the shade. “They’re drunk! There’s no telling what they’ll do!”

“Let ’em come! I’ve got my rifle——”

“Oh, but you don’t want to kill them! Come—please! Oh, I—I can’t lose you, now!”

Reluctantly Ken followed the girl to the canoe. It was true; he didn’t want to kill the poor devils, and once a fight started there might be no other way. He took his place in the stern, the girl stepped into the bow and headed the canoe downriver.

“How about our moose?” asked Ken, as the light craft rounded a bend that shut the village from view.

The girl pointed to the sun. “It’s afternoon. We wouldn’t have time to go to the beaver meadows. We’ll drop downriver and catch some fish in that deep hole at the big bend. I’m hungry.”

CHAPTER VIII

BLACK JOHN SMITH

A MILE or so below the village they beached the canoe on a narrow strip of a shingle at the lower end of a steep bank cut by an eddy formed by a sharp bend of the river. Ken collected wood and kindled a fire, and while the girl fished in the pool at the foot of the cut bank he scooped a quantity of blue clay from a deposit at the water's edge. Twenty minutes later, with two sizable fish roasting in their own juices inside their thick clay mantles, he filled his pipe and settled back against the bole of a small spruce, as he watched Lois stretch her fish line between the trunks of two trees.

"Why do you do that?" he asked.

The girl smiled. "Did you ever carry a wet fishline around in your pocket? And besides, if you dry them out they last longer."

"A man can always learn something new about camping," he said, as she seated herself beside him. And then his fingers suddenly imprisoned the two capable brown hands that were clasped about her knees. "Why can't we be married tonight, dearest?" he murmured in a voice that trembled slightly. "I never knew what love was until I knew you. I've never had time to pay much attention to girls. But I love you so—and it would be a shame for you to waste your life just helping your dad convert Siwashes! You do love me, dear. You told me so!"

The clasped brown hands thrilled to the touch of the strong hand that imprisoned them, and the dark eyes met the adoring gaze of the eyes of blue in a look so searching that it seemed to pierce his very soul. The red lips moved, as the dark eyes strayed to the river. "I do love you, Ken," she said, in a low, firm voice. "I know it's love because I'm thinking of you always, and always I want to be near you. But——" She hesitated, and once again the dark eyes sought the eyes of blue. "There's something strange about you, Ken—something mysterious——"

"Mysterious!" cried the man, his eyes widening. "About me?"

"Yes—about you and Bill. I know you're not outlaws—like the men on Halfaday. You are not trappers. And I know you're no prospectors. One day I watched you and Bill from the rimrocks when I was coming back from hunting. You were down on that wide flat a couple of miles below the cabin. You hadn't taken your pans and shovels from the canoe, and you just walked around back and forth from the river, as though you were pacing off some measurement. Then you crawled around clawing among the spruce needles with your hands. I watched you for a long time, and that night you told me you had been prospecting. You've panned a little gold, but not enough to even make wages. And there's better than wages anywhere along the river. Now, for some reason, Bill has stopped even the pretense of prospecting, and pretends to want to help Father with his tabernacle. He's fooled Father, but he can't fool me! I don't know what his game is, but I do know that he's no more interested in the Siwashes than you are—only you're honest enough to say so."

Ken nodded. "I told Bill last night that he was a damned hypocrite."

"That's just what he is!" agreed the girl, heartily. "But you yourself are playing a part! You're pretending to be a prospector, and yet I know that you've got some mysterious motive for being here. All the rest of the chechakos are stampeding to the new diggings

around Dawson. And now the mystery is deeper than ever. Why did you want me to ask that old woman about other white men who lived here years ago? And why do you want to know the location of their cabin? Oh, Ken, don't you see?—I could never marry a man who was keeping something from me—something in his life that was big and important! It would have to be a big and an important thing that would take a man clear from Ohio up onto the White River where nobody lives except Siwashes and outlaws!”

Ken smiled. “You're not a Siwash, or an outlaw——”

“But you didn't know I was here——”

“You bet I didn't, sweetheart, or I'd have been here long ago!”

The girl freed her hands and regarded him with a frown of annoyance “Oh, can't you realize that this is no time for—for joking—or for pretty speeches! It's a crisis in our lives! Can't you see that you must tell me now why you are here—or—or else——”

With a peal of boyish laughter, Ken gathered her into his arms and crushed her against his rapidly pounding heart. “Or else,” he finished, “you'll burst with curiosity! Of course I'll tell you, dearest! I'll tell you all about it. There's really nothing mysterious about it at all—merely that our granddad and his partner came up here in 1852 and panned gold for fifteen years and then left in a hurry, leaving two tons and a pound of gold cached in the gravel. Bill and I are hunting Granddad's cache—that's all.”

“Oh,” cried the girl, her dark eyes shining up into his like twin stars, “tell me all about it!”

Ken smiled. “Sure, I'll tell you all about it. But let's eat first, or our fish will be burned to cinders.”

As they cracked away the baked clay and ate the fish with their fingers, sprinkling it with salt from the little paper that the girl produced from her pocket, Ken told her the whole story from the time of Matthew Blunt's departure from Emmonsville to the arrival of Bill and himself on White River and their fruitless search for the cache. “Then, last night,” he concluded, “Bill and I split up. Granddad distrusted him, but I thought Bill was all right. He was always a great hero in college—played on the football team and all that. But I've found out since that when it comes down to real work, with no one cheering from the bleachers, he's not there. When he told me that he didn't intend to winter here, I accused him of being a quitter and a hypocrite. The only reason he's playing up to your dad is to learn enough of the Siwash language to question them about the location of Granddad's old cabin, and I know, now, that he'd have double-crossed me when he found out. He boasted that, while I was working like a slave back there in Emmonsville, he had manipulated the financial end of the business so that when our dads let go it will all be his.” The young man paused, and his eyes narrowed as the words came in a low, hard voice that carried deadly menace. “If he's done that, it's going to be just too damned bad for him—that's all!”

The girl laid a firm brown hand on his sleeve. “Don't seek revenge, Ken,” she said earnestly. “Let him have the old business. Who wants a business, anyhow? We don't—you and I! We'll stay here and hunt for Matthew Blunt's cache, and we'll dig gold of our own. I'm not afraid to work! I can shovel, and crank a windlass; and I know how to build flumes and sluices and work a rocker and a long tom. The sourdoughs down at Fortymile showed me all about mining gold, and we could be rich—Father and I—if he could forget about converting everybody he sees! You and I will succeed, Ken; we'll find that cache—some time! I just know we will!”

“You bet we will, sweetheart!” cried Ken, tightening his arms about her. “And we’ll have each other, if we never find the cache!” He paused and chuckled. “We’ll let Bill go ahead and learn the Siwash language. It will keep him busy and won’t do him the least bit of good. Meanwhile we’ll keep on searching the bends for the cache.”

Suddenly the girl wriggled free and bent her head in an attitude of listening. “I heard a voice,” she said, “and it sounded like a white man’s.” Instinctively she reached for her rifle. “Maybe that hooch runner decided to go down to give Father a personal warning!”

Ken secured his own rifle, and expectantly the two waited, their eyes on the upriver bend. The sound of voices was distinct now, and presently a scow filled with men rounded into sight. Ken made out the figures of an old Indian and half a dozen white men. At the steering sweep was a huge man, whose heavy black beard covered his face to the eyes.

The girl gave a cry of delight. “Oh, it’s Black John Smith,” she cried, “and the men of Halfaday! Now that terrible hooch runner will wish he’d never sold any liquor to the Siwashes!”

“But—I thought this Black John was an outlaw!”

“He is an outlaw, and so are the others, but you wait and see!” She leaped to her feet and, stepping to the edge of the cut bank, hailed the boat, which was now almost directly beneath them. The men looked up, and Ken saw the bearded lips of the big man part in a smile that exposed flashing white teeth.

“Put brass rings in his ears and what a magnificent pirate he’d make!” he whispered.

“He’s a dear!” answered the girl, as she beckoned for the boat to land.

“Hello, Sis!” boomed the big hearty voice, as with a twist of the sweep the bearded one headed the boat for the shingle beside the canoe. “Be’n fetchin’ the gospel up to the Siwashes?”

As the boat grounded, he leaped lightly ashore, and as he advanced toward them Ken noted that his movements, despite his huge size, were quick and lithe as a panther’s— noted, too, that the keen eyes twinkled with a boyish deviltry that contrasted strangely with the heavy black beard. Instinctively he knew that he liked this big stranger of whom he had heard only that he was an outlaw.

Then Lois was introducing them. “Mr. Smith, I want you to meet Mr. Blunt! Mr. Blunt and his cousin are chechakos who are camped at our place, hunting gold.”

Ken was aware that the eyes of the big man were subjecting him to searching scrutiny, and again the bearded lips parted in a smile. “An’ Mr. Smith is an outlaw,” he said, his eyes flashing mischievously to the girl’s. “You fergot to give out my occupation, er mebbe yer ashamed of the kind of folks yer friends is!”

“You know I’m not ashamed!” laughed the girl. “But some time you’re going to brag about it where Father can hear you. Then you’ll spoil everything! He wouldn’t understand. He thinks you’re just ordinary prospectors.”

“Ornery prospectors is what we be,” chuckled the man. “I s’pose Phineas would shun me ’cause I was lucky enough to h’ist that army payroll!” He turned to Ken. “Four common soldiers an’ a major, an’ I stuck ’em up, single-handed! It was funny as hell to see ’em! Forty thousan’ dollars, it counted up to, an’ mebbe you think I didn’t pick ’em up an’ lay ’em down till I’d got plumb out of Alaska!”

“I wouldn’t go bragging about it,” said Lois seriously. “You know it wasn’t right. It was just plain stealing, and you know it!”

“Now, Sis, how many times have I got to tell you it wasn’t no plain stealin’! It was

doggone fancy stealin', an' this here major had made his brag around Fort Gibbon——”

“That doesn't make the least bit of difference! The money wasn't yours——”

“It's mine now. An' listen here—that robbery didn't hurt no one—an' it done me a heap of good. Figger it out fer yourself. There's better'n a hundred million folks in the U. S. A. to raise that money off'n. Now when you spread a measly forty thousan' dollars amongst all them folks, how much does each one lose? I can tell you—I've figgered it out, more'n onct—each one of them folks loses one twenty-fifth of a penny! Now you ain't picayune enough to blame no one fer stealin' one twenty-fifth of a penny! Ain't that so, Blunt?”

“I guess you're right,” laughed Ken. “By the way, if you're Black John Smith, Moosehide Charlie said to tell you hello.”

“Moosehide, eh? How is old Moosehide? An' where'd you run acrost him?”

“In Seattle. He was broke. Went out with a lot of dust to take in the cities—Seattle, Chicago, New York. But they took him in Seattle for all he had—seventy-five thousand, I think he said. It lasted two weeks, and he canceled his Chicago and New York trip and came on back with us. He went on down to Dawson.”

Black John roared with laughter. “So they took old Moosehide, eh? Well—he's got plenty. It done him good. He'll learn to keep away from them damn crooks an' stay up amongst honest folks! Ain't it so, Sis?”

Lois chuckled. “Sure, where they'll only take one twenty-fifth of a penny away from him! But listen, I've got a job for you.”

“Teachin' Sunday School amongst the little Siwashes?”

“No. Didn't you stop at the Siwash village?”

“Nope, come on past hell a-kitin'. Didn't seem to be no one around, an' we want to make the mouth of the river tomorrow. We'll do it, too, the way the water is. Got a boatload of supplies to be delivered there the fifteenth, an' that's tomorrow.”

“Well, you've got to go back up to the village. There's a hooch runner there, and he's got all the Siwashes drunk, and he's got two kegs of liquor to sell them. He'll have everything they've got before the police can get around to arrest him. They're so busy on the river with the stampeders. The man knows that, and he threatened that if Father came up there he'd turn up missing. Oh, I'm afraid he'll kill Father!”

As the girl spoke, Ken noted that the smile faded from the bearded lips, and the twinkle in the keen eyes crystallized into a steady gleam. “Two kags of licker, eh?” he repeated. “What fer lookin' was he?”

“He was a short man, with a sort of yellowish beard, and he had a nasty, rasping kind of a voice.”

“Clem Biggers—the damn dirty crook! He boughten them two kags off'n Cush three, four days ago, claimin' he was goin' to drop down to the mouth of the river an' peddle it to the chechakos goin' by to Dawson. He's an ornery, low-down, no-count skunk anyhow! I was hopin' he'd git mixed up with the chechakos an' not come back. He kin be got along without on Halfaday. It's suspected he stole a quarter of moose off'n Jabe Cummin's last winter, but we couldn't prove it. You jest rest easy, Sis. Me an' the boys'll kind of mosey back upriver. We'll take the foot trail an' leave the scow here. Tradin' hooch to the Siwashes has got to be put a stop to. Them pore devils needs all they've got. You jest drop on downriver, Sis. We'll prob'ly camp to your place tonight.”

“But how about your supplies at the mouth of the river?”

“Don’t you worry none about them supplies. The party that’s goin’ to deliver ’em’ll be waitin’. He’ll want his pay.”

“But you won’t kill the hooch runner, will you? I—I’d hate to——”

“Now this ain’t no time to be standin’ round askin’ foolish questions. We’ll deal with him accordin’ to custom—call a miners’ meetin’ an’ give him all the breaks he’s got comin’. The boys is fair-minded—’special when it comes to sellin’ hooch to Siwashes. Accordin’ to the doctrine of *pro bono publico*, an’ *quid pro dunk*, as the lawyers says—he’ll git his’n.” Stepping to the scow, Black John spoke hurriedly, and the five white men, each carrying his rifle, stepped onto the gravel, waited in silence till one of their number snubbed a stout line about a near-by tree, and then disappeared into the scrub in the wake of their leader.

The old Indian watched the proceeding with seeming indifference. When the men were gone he lifted a light canoe from the scow, placed a keg of powder and a packsack in the bow, took his place in the stern, and shoved off downstream without a word.

CHAPTER IX

BILL HAS A BAD DAY

BILL BLUNT put in a disquieting night after his open break with Ken. Lying between his blankets in the little tent, listening to the younger man's regular breathing, he realized that he had blundered most seriously in boasting of his business juggling. Well he realized that his carefully built house of cards would go toppling should Ken return to Emmonsville and acquaint the older Blunts with the scheme. The result of more than a year of shrewd planning and secret manipulation had been wiped out in one moment of senseless fury—unless—unless Ken should never return to Emmonsville! Bill's mind flew back to that day when he had paused with his finger on the trigger and the sights of his rifle lined on Ken's back—and cursed himself for not having pressed that trigger. He wished that he had not turned down the younger man's invitation to go hunting. But there would be other times—and next time he would not hesitate. Had not Ken threatened to kill him? What was it he had said? "I suppose I ought to kill you, Bill. But I'm not going to—not now." What was that but a threat of murder? And, if he should kill Ken first, would it not be in self-defense? Sure it would! Well, he'd watch his chance. With Ken out of the way, all the gold in Granddad's cache would be his own. And Lois—no girl would turn down a million! He must find that cache—must learn enough of the Siwash language through old Phineas to question them as to the whereabouts of the cabin. Bill finally fell asleep.

Breakfast was an awkward affair, neither cousin speaking a word. Bill finished and stalked off to the Meadow cabin, leaving the camp work to Ken. Later, his rage flared anew as he saw Lois and Ken shove off in the canoe and head upriver. He pointed through the doorway as the light craft disappeared from view.

"Of course, it may seem to be none of my business," he said, as Phineas looked up from his manuscript, "but I think it is my duty to warn you that Ken is hardly the type of man to be allowed to roam the country alone with a beautiful young girl. You must realize that it pains me deeply to speak thus of my own blood cousin, but I would be remiss in my duty if I failed to tell you that, where women are concerned, his reputation is none too good."

Phineas blinked toward the river as his slow-moving mind detached itself from its work and focused upon Bill's words. "Indeed!" he exclaimed, mildly. "Well, William, I cannot say that I am surprised. He has shown a flippancy toward things sacred that bespeaks a worldly mind. I thank you for mentioning the matter. I shall speak to Lois this evening, and forbid her to again accompany him."

Bill heaved a deep sigh. "Lois is too fine a girl to throw herself away on one of Ken's caliber," he said. "She is one of the finest women I have ever known. In fact, it is my desire to marry her."

"Ah?" Phineas's mind groped at the idea. "But my dear William, she is very young—much too young to think of marriage!"

"She's twenty," answered Bill.

"Twenty? Twenty years old—my little Lois! Is it possible? Have you acquainted her with your desire?"

"No. I thought the honorable thing was to speak to you first."

"Quite true, William. Quite true. A decision that speaks well for your sense of fitness.

You may have her, my lad, but I would suggest that the matter be postponed until late fall. By that time the tabernacle will be completed and we will be well along with our translation. Now as to this appeal to the Siwashes—if you will indite it on paper, I shall translate it.”

Bill was having a disquieting day. He realized that, while he had gained the old man’s consent, Ken was winning the girl. Then, too, Phineas was so absorbed in translating the document Bill had dashed off that he found no time for instruction.

At noon Bill returned to the tent to find all of Ken’s effects neatly arranged on one side, and his own dishes left unwashed on the table. The sight served to aggravate the rage already seething within him so that, volubly and comprehensively, he cursed Granddad Blunt and his gold, the whole North, Ken, the Meadows, and the Siwashes. Having thus relieved himself, he ate his luncheon, washed his dishes, and returned to the cabin to find Phineas still engrossed in his translation.

A slight sound from the outside attracted the attention of the two men, and they looked out to see an old Indian, squat and thick of stature, standing staring in silence at the cabin and the tabernacle. Phineas stepped out and addressed the man in the native tongue, but the Indian continued to stare, paying no heed whatever to the old missionary’s greeting. Stolidly, his gaze roved from the cabin to the tabernacle and back again to the cabin just as Bill stepped through the doorway to join Phineas. At sight of the younger man’s face, the dark eyes of the old Indian widened, and a curious expression overspread the mask-like features. The thick chin sagged gradually to expose a broken row of teeth, yellowed and worn with age. A gnarled hand raised and passed gropingly before the eyes as though to remove some obstruction to clear vision. For a full minute the man stood, his eyes boring into Bill’s. The stare became disconcerting, and as Bill advanced toward him the old Indian turned without a word and, hurrying to his canoe, pushed off and paddled furiously downstream.

“Now what do you make of that?” growled Bill, as the canoe disappeared around the bend. “Sociable old cuss, wasn’t he?”

Phineas continued to stare at the empty bend, a frown of perplexity on his face. “I do not know. He is a man of some other tribe. I have never seen him before. It seemed almost as though the sight of you had implanted an abject fear in his heart.” The old man paused and regarded Bill keenly. “Are you sure you made no enemies coming in? Did you encounter no Indians?”

“None except those we hired for packers on the coast, and a few that were hanging around Fort Selkirk. I don’t think this old specimen was among them—he might have been, though. They all look alike to me. I didn’t pay much attention to them. We couldn’t have made any enemies among them. Moosehide Charlie paid off the packers, and we didn’t have anything to do with the others. The old Siwash has probably got rats in his garret,” concluded Bill.

“Ah,” replied Phineas, his eyes lighting with comprehension. “You mean, you suspect him of being insane?”

“Yeah,” answered Bill dryly. “That’s the thought I was hinting at.”

“There I must disagree with you. I have found very little insanity among the natives, due, I believe, to their simple and natural manner of life——”

“What’s the Siwash for ‘cabin?’” interrupted Bill rudely.

“House,” answered Phineas. “Practically all the natives have adopted the white man’s

word for a dwelling.”

“What’s ‘gold’?”

“*Pil chickamin*. But I must inform you, William, that you are going about the task of acquiring the language in the wrong manner. Simply learning the names of various objects will give you but a superficial knowledge of the language. To obtain a profound insight into the philology of a people, one must master certain basic or underlying principles _____”

“Let’s go and figure on what to put the Siwashes to work at, if they agree to come down and help us with the tabernacle,” interrupted Bill, grinding his teeth in helpless rage.

CHAPTER X

NOOTLAKWATL

LEFT to themselves after Black John's departure, Ken and Lois explored the flat across the river for the site of the old cabin, pausing at frequent intervals to listen for the sound of shots from upriver. But no shots were heard, and late in the afternoon they stepped into the canoe and slipped swiftly downstream.

"I hope they didn't kill that hooch runner, much as he deserves it," said Lois, resting her paddle and watching the banks slip swiftly past. "Maybe they'll just take the liquor away from him and send him back where he came from."

Ken smiled. "I think it's safe to say that whatever disposition is made of him will be conclusive. I rather like your friend Black John."

Phineas and Bill stood near the landing as the two beached the canoe. "You seem to have made quite a day of it," Bill observed, a thinly disguised sneer in his voice. "But I don't see any moose."

Both ignored him, and Phineas regarded them with a frown. "I must command you, Lois, to have nothing further to do with that young man. He is a godless person—a son of Belial. And William intimated that he is no fit companion for any young woman."

The girl laughed lightly. "Oh, he did, did he? Well, Father, you mustn't take William seriously—neither Ken nor I do. He's just something disagreeable that one has to put up with—like a sore thumb."

Bill flushed darkly, but the old man scarcely seemed to hear the remark, his mind, evidently, was upon something else, for his brows drew into a puzzled frown. "Did you, by any chance, come across an old Indian upriver?"

"Why, yes," answered the girl. "He came down in a scow with Black John Smith and some of the men of Halfaday. They went back upriver to the Siwash village, and he loaded his stuff into a canoe and came on down. We didn't pay much attention to him. We had other things to think about. We found nearly all the Siwashes at the village dead drunk."

"Drunk!" cried Phineas. "Are you sure? Who could have done this thing? Where could they have procured liquor?"

"A hooch runner brought it down from Cushing's Fort. I threatened to tell the police, but he told me the police have their hands full with the chechakos along the Yukon and would have no time to investigate until he had sold out and gone. He told me to tell you that if you interfered with him you would turn up missing."

The face of the old man flamed with righteous wrath. "I have no fear of him! I shall go at once and drive him from the village, even as our Lord drove the money changers from the temple!" The old man turned abruptly to Bill. "And you, William, shall accompany me! Together we shall drive him from the country and destroy the vile liquor with which he would debauch the helpless savages."

"I think," said Bill, "that we'd better notify the police."

Looking straight at him, Lois laughed—a silvery laugh of undisguised derision that caused Bill's face to flame red to the ears. Abruptly he turned and strode to the tent.

"You won't either one of you have to exert yourselves," said the girl. "Black John Smith and half a dozen of the men of Halfaday have saved you the trouble."

“The Lord be praised!” cried Phineas. “A good man is Black John—a firm believer in the Lord! I shall pray for his success in the utter confounding of the hooch runner!”

“And it’s a safe bet that there’s one prayer that will be answered,” grinned Ken. “We’ll soon know. Here they come now!” He pointed toward the river, where a scow was rapidly approaching.

The craft was beached, and Black John advanced with a smile. “Hello, Phineas! How’s the tuberkle comin’ along? Hell’s bells! You ain’t even got a roof on her yet!”

“Tabernacle—not tuberkle,” corrected Phineas. “And I must warn you against unseemly ejaculations. Remember, we are told to let our conversation be yea, yea, and nay, nay—for what is more than this cometh of evil.”

“Well,” grinned Black John, “that might be all right fer light conversation, as the feller says, but it wouldn’t git you nowheres in an argument. What I claim—a little cussin’ now an’ then is like pepper an’ salt on yer grub. A man couldn’t git along on cussin’, alone, no more’n what he could on pepper an’ salt; but it sort of makes conversation more tasty like. We’ll be campin’ here an’ git an early start downriver in the mornin’.”

“My daughter informs me that there is a hooch runner in the village of the Siwashes,” said Phineas.

“Yeah,” answered Black John dryly. “There was one.”

“I trust that you properly admonished him and destroyed his stock in trade.”

“Yeah, I guess you could call it that. An’ we fetched his stock in trade along with us. We’re destroyin’ it, as the feller says, by degrees.”

“Are you sure that you made him see the error of his ways?”

“Yeah, he seen it, all right. But he seen it kind of, what you might say, late in life.”

“Amen!” boomed Phineas. “You have this day wrought a good deed before the Lord. Despite certain vagaries of speech, you are a good man, Brother Smith.”

Black John turned toward Lois with a wink. “That’s what I claim,” he said gravely. “You see, Sis, it ain’t everyone that gits commented favorable on by a parson.”

The girl giggled, and when Phineas strolled over to talk with the other men who were making camp beside the river, she regarded Black John seriously. “Tell me what happened back there at the village. We didn’t hear any shooting.”

“No, there wasn’t none. We ketched Clem fillin’ a water bucket at the river, an’ we covered him. Then I called a miners’ meetin’ fer to set on his case. For evidence we found a kag an’ three quarters of licker, an’ some fur in Clem’s possession. Him havin’ two kags of licker an’ no fur an’ no traps a few days before when he left Cush’s—an’ there bein’ numerous an’ sundry drunk an’ partly drunk Siwashes scattered about—we felt safe in assumin’ that he had, then an’ there, traded, purveyed, sold, an’ furnished to them said drunk an’ partly drunk Siwashes, to wit, a certain intoxicatin’ beverage, to the amount of a quarter of a kag, contrary to the laws made an’ pervided fer such cases, an’ agin’ the peace an’ dignity of the Yukon deestrect of Canady, et cetery, an’ so forth. He was thereupon charged with the said offense, an’ was give a chanct to try an’ lie out of it, which he failed to do—successful. He couldn’t even think up no mitigatin’ circumstance, except that his luck was runnin’ pore—which it was plain to all of us that such was the case. That’s about all—except that the verdic’ went agin’ him. We confiscated the remainin’ licker.”

“But what did you do to *him*?” persisted the girl.

“Well, you see, Sis—any crime that might fetch the police into the White River country is frowned on by us better element, as you might say. The bulk of us bein’

outlawed, fer one thing an' another, don't favor the police snoopin' around. It makes it mean, any ways you look at it, an' it interferes with peace an' contentment. Murder, claim-jumpin', cache-robbin', an' sellin' hooch to Siwashes is promptly discouraged. So Clem, bein' found guilty, was give what you might call a kind of a tentative hangin'."

"Oh," exclaimed the girl with evident relief. "You mean you just strung him up and scared him!"

"Yeah—Clem was scairt, all right."

"You don't think he'll get more liquor and repeat the offense?"

"'Tain't likely," answered Black John dryly.

Something in the tone caused the girl to regard the man searchingly. "You didn't kill him, did you?" she asked suddenly.

"Well, we don't know—fer sure. We was in a hurry, an' come away after stringin' him up an' leavin' word with the Siwashes that anyone that cut him down would be treated similar. We'll stop in in a few days, when we go upriver, an' investigate. It wouldn't surprise me none to find that Clem hadn't survived. In the meantime him hangin' there—he'll be a good lesson to them Siwashes. I'll tell you, Sis—there ain't no crime so low-down as tradin' hooch to Siwashes. They need everything they've got to winter through on. It's worse than murder, 'cause it causes more misery than murder does. If he'd be'n let go on with his tradin', there'd be'n plenty of women an' little kids that would be'n half clothed an' half fed this winter—an' some of 'em would of died. So don't you go wastin' no sympathy on Clem—he got what was comin' to him."

"Oh—I suppose so," answered the girl, with a shudder. "But it seems so—so horrible. Wasn't there any other way?"

"Not none that I recall, offhand, that's so convincin' an' permanent."

Phineas sauntered up from the camp by the river. "By the way, Brother Smith," he said. "Who was the old Siwash who came by here this afternoon? My daughter said, I believe, that he had come part way down the river with you."

"Oh, that's old Nootlakwatl. He's——"

"Nootlakwatl!" cried Ken, his eyes wide with excitement.

"Yeah," answered Black John with a smile. "That's jest his name. It ain't nothin' to git excited about. He's chief of a band that lives 'way up near the head of Ladue Crick. He comes acrost to Cush's two, three times a year for a kag of powder. Mostly his band trades down on the Yukon, but he always buys his powder an' caps an' lead from Cush an' pays fer 'em in gold. Some of the band's got breech-loadin' an' repeatin' rifles now, but Nootlakwatl an' some of the old ones still sticks to the muzzle loaders. We was comin' downriver, so Cush loant him a canoe. We was goin' to leave him off at the mouth of Ladue Crick. It's a two-day trail through them mountains from Halfaday, back-packin' his powder an' lead. The canoe'll take a couple of days longer, but it'll be easier work fer the old feller."

"Can he speak English?" asked Ken eagerly.

"A little. That band has got a kind of funny language made up of English an' jargon an' Siwash. Nootlakwatl claims they learnt it off'n a couple of white men that come into the country years back an' traded 'em powder an' lead fer gold. But you can't go on what them Siwashes tells you. Mostly, they're lyin', er all mixed up. I don't believe there was no white men on White River before old Cush come. He's be'n here ten year. Cush claims there was an old fort at Fort Yukon—an' there used to be some ashes where it looked like

one had be'n burnt at Selkirk—claims he dug some old flintlock rifle bar'ls out of the ashes. It was prob'ly there where Nootlakwatl got his powder.”

“Weren't there any ashes on the White, where a cabin could have been burned in the early days?” asked Ken.

“Nope—that is, I never heard of none, an' I sure would of if they'd be'n any.”

“This old man behaved in a most extraordinary manner,” said Phineas. “He landed and stared at the tabernacle for a long time without speaking, although I sought to converse with him. Then William came out of the cabin, and he stared at him for an even longer time, and then hastened away with every evidence of fear.”

“Who's William?” asked Black John.

“He is this man's cousin, and, I may add, a very devout and estimable young man. I am sorry I cannot say the same for Kenneth here.”

Black John, suppressing a grin, turned to Ken. “You should mend yer ways an' jine up with us good ones,” he advised. “So you say, Phineas, that old Nootlakwatl stood an' gawped at the tuberkle, eh? Well, you can't hardly blame him none. It looks like it was built to take in all the Yukon an' part of Alaska. Where in hell do you expect to git enough timber to finish it—let alone put a roof on?”

Phineas frowned disapprovingly at the word “hell,” but proceeded to explain. “The tabernacle conforms exactly in measurements with Solomon's temple.”

“Yeah, I remember of readin' about him in the Book. But you got to remember, Phineas, that he lived where labor was cheap an' lumber was handy, an' besides he had a lot of wives an' prob'ly needed a big place to keep 'em.”

“The temple,” reminded Phineas, “was a place of divine worship, not a dwelling house.”

“Yeah, but he prob'ly made 'em all go to church on Sundays, an' he'd want to have a little room fer other folks.”

“But,” persisted Phineas, “why should the old man have stared at William with every evidence of fear?”

“Mebbe,” grinned Black John, “this here William's so good it scairt him. You can't never tell about a Siwash. Well, I got to go an' throw some grub into me an' roll in. We'll be pullin' out early. See you in two, three days. We're fetchin' up a load of supplies fer Cush.”

A troubled look crept into the deep-set eyes of the missionary. “If I had not been so busy with the tabernacle, I would have had the gold to purchase some necessary supplies. It would have saved me a long trip to the trading post, later.”

“Hell's bells! Don't let that worry you none, parson! Jest you an' Sis pick out what you want when we come by, an' I'll pay Cush fer it, an' you kin pay me back when you feel like it. So long.”

CHAPTER XI

LOIS PROPOSES A PLAN

WHEN Black John had rejoined his crew, Ken took the girl's hand into his own and turned to Phineas. "Mr. Meadow," he said, "Lois and I love each other, and we want you to marry us—now—this evening."

The cavernous eyes beneath the beetling brows glared into the face of the younger man, and the stiff chin whiskers fairly quivered with rage as the man shook a long, bony forefinger. "What!" he boomed, "marry a daughter of mine to you! To a jester at sacred things! To one who would scoff at the spreading of the Word among the heathen!" He turned fiercely upon the girl. "And you! Do you stand there before me and permit this ungodly man to say that you love him, and offer no protest?"

"I do love him!" answered the girl frankly. "And I'm going to marry him. If you refuse to marry us, we'll find someone who will."

The old man seemed fairly astounded at the words. "What!" he cried. "Would you defy me to my face?" Then his rage seemed to cool as suddenly as it had flared. The angry gleam faded from his eyes, and when he spoke again his voice held a note of complacency. "You do not know your own mind, daughter. You are young, and have not the worldly wisdom to perceive the wolf that has approached you in sheep's clothing. You have been carried away by fair words. But I will save you from yourself. Tomorrow I shall marry you to William. Today he expressed his desire to marry you, even as he regretfully hinted that his cousin was no fit companion for a young and beautiful girl. I promised him that in due time he should have you. He is a truly noble character—a godly man—one into whose keeping I shall gladly trust you. Today I saw no reason for haste, but now that this menace has arisen I deem it my duty to see you safely married tomorrow."

The girl's face had flushed to deep scarlet, and her eyes flashed defiance. "It's you who can't see a wolf in sheep's clothing!" she retorted. "I wouldn't marry Bill Blunt if he were the last man on earth! He's a hypocrite and a miserable scoundrel! And a lazy, good-for-nothing schemer! I'd die before I'd marry him. And what right had you to promise him I'd marry him? I'm of age! I've got my own life to live, and it will be with Ken—not Bill!"

"I am your father, and I command you to marry him!"

"And I flatly refuse—so there!"

"Remember, you are breaking the fifth commandment, which says 'honor thy father and thy mother, that thy days may be——' "

"Yes, and I'd break *all* the commandments to keep from marrying that devil!"

Phineas rolled his eyes in holy horror. "Evil companionship has already struck at the very foundation of your religion! But, thank God, the damage is not irreparable. You will see more clearly after a night of meditation and prayer." Abruptly the man turned and strode toward the cabin.

"We'll go downriver with Black John and his men in the morning," said Ken hurriedly, when the old man was out of earshot. "And go on to Dawson and be married."

The girl shook her head. "No—we've got to go to Ladue Creek. That old Siwash was the very man your grandfather told you about!"

“Sure,” smiled Ken, “but we could stop at Ladue Creek coming back. Old Nootlakwatl has lived this long—I guess he’ll hang together a few days longer.”

“Yes!” cried the girl. “And in the meantime Bill might get to him and find out the location of the cache! It isn’t so much the gold, Ken—though of course we want it—but after the way he’s used you, I’d just *die* if he beat you out!”

“But he doesn’t know where Nootlakwatl is. Bill wasn’t here when Black John told us about him.”

“Listen,” said Lois earnestly. “I’ve been doing some thinking since Black John told us about him. I don’t know why he was so much interested in the cabin and the tabernacle, but I do know why he stared at Bill as though he were an apparition. You told me about the charm, and how the Siwashes thought it kept men young, and you told me that everyone who knew your grandfather in his early years says Bill looks just like him. Old Nootlakwatl thought he was looking at your grandfather—just as he was ’way back in 1867! And it wasn’t fear that made him hurry away—it was the determination to get back to the band and let the others know! I know Siwashes. Probably most of those who remember your grandfather are dead. But you may be sure all of them have heard the tradition of the charm. It may take time and much eloquence to rouse them to a fighting pitch. But you may be sure that old Nootlakwatl will never rest till he regains possession of the charm that keeps men young—especially after such convincing evidence of its worth.

“What we’ve got to do is to hurry to their village and arrange to exchange it with them for information as to the location of your grandfather’s cabin.”

“You mean—take the charm with us?”

The girl hesitated for a moment. “No,” she answered, “I don’t think we had better take it. We must arrange to have Nootlakwatl return here for it alone. Then we can see how Bill has played the game in our absence. It was his own proposition that you split up and go each for himself, you know.”

“Oh, that part’s fair enough,” agreed Ken. “But Grandfather gave us both the charm. I know Bill wouldn’t hesitate to use it; still—— Where is this Ladue Creek? How do we get there?”

“It runs into the White from the north, about forty or fifty miles below here. It’s a long creek, and Black John says the Siwashes live ’way up near the head of it. If we get an early start in the morning we can follow Nootlakwatl up to the village and probably reach it soon after he does. At least we can get there before he has time to harangue them up to the point of going to war over the ancestral charm. Two are better than one in a canoe, especially on carries.”

Ken was silent for a moment, his gaze fixed seriously upon the dark eyes that fairly sparkled with excitement. “I’ll go up Ladue Creek,” he said. “You stay here. Those Siwashes might decide that war, like charity, should begin at home, and——”

The girl interrupted him with a laugh. “Don’t be silly, Ken! Remember you’re a chechako, and old Nootlakwatl has a good start. You’d reach the village days behind him. And you couldn’t talk to the Siwashes when you got there. I can talk to them, and I’ll tell them that we have come to arrange the return of the charm to its rightful owners. I’m not afraid of them, but even if they should get nasty, we’ve got our high-power repeating rifles. We could stand off the whole tribe. Think of it, Ken—beating Bill at his own game—and two tons of gold! We’ve got to take a chance! We’ll follow Nootlakwatl to the

village as fast as we can. I want to talk to him before they get all excited. As a matter of fact,” she added, “I can’t imagine their resorting to actual violence. Except for the Chilkats, these northern Siwashes are a peaceful, innocuous lot. It’s hard to believe they’d actually harm anyone.”

“They harmed Jake Valentine,” reminded Ken. “That brass crucifix means more to them than any mere possession. To them it’s a fetish—it’s magic—and you can’t fool with magic.”

“If everything goes right, they’ll soon have their fetish back,” the girl answered. “I’m going to bed now and get a few hours of good sleep instead of the night of meditation and prayer that Father suggested. I’ll take tea and flour and bannocks, and you cache the two rifles and the cartridges and a teapot and frying pan in the canoe tonight, so we can get away just before daylight. We’ll probably be gone several days.”

No hint of dawn yet pinked the east when Black John Smith and his crew shoved off the flatboat and faded into the dark. A few moments later two shadowy forms slipped to the river bank, noiselessly slipped a canoe into the water, and followed in the wake of the flatboat.

CHAPTER XII

THE CHARM THAT KEEPS MEN YOUNG

BILL awoke with a start to hear the voice of Phineas Meadow bellowing through the night. "Lois, come back here! I command you not to go with that man! You are to accompany us to the village!"

There was no reply. Sensing that he was alone in the tent, Bill threw back his blankets and stepped to the doorway to see, in the feeble starlight, the shadowy form of a canoe containing two figures shove off from the landing and shoot rapidly downriver. Halfway between the cabin and the landing Phineas stood with the skirts of a flannel nightgown flapping ludicrously about his thin shanks. Catching sight of Bill, the old man advanced to the tent, picking his way gingerly in his bare feet. "Never before has Lois flouted me to my face," he complained. "Never has she deliberately and brazenly defied me, or disobeyed my commands! That man has gained some evil influence over her and has caused her to turn from the voice of her parent. She told me last evening that she loved him, and they had the effrontery to ask me to marry them—but I told her that today I would marry her to you——"

"You did!" cried Bill. "What did she say?"

The old man hesitated a moment before answering. "She said certain things of a—er—more or less uncomplimentary nature. In fact she flatly refused to marry you. But I pointed out that a night of meditation and prayer would change her viewpoint——"

"And bungled things for fair!" growled Bill angrily. "You should have strung her along and given me time to get rid of Ken——"

"Get rid of him? What do you mean by that?"

"I mean," explained Bill, in confidence, "that Ken was fast becoming tired of this sort of life. He would soon have thrown it up and hit out for Dawson or some place where there are more people—especially more women. That's probably where they're heading for right now, to Dawson to get married!"

"But—who could marry them in Dawson?"

"With the hundreds that are swarming into the country on every boat, there's bound to be preachers among them."

Phineas shook his head. "No, I do not believe they are going to Dawson. Nor do I believe they are going hunting, or they would have gone upriver where moose are plentiful in the beaver meadows. I believe that, somehow, their journey has to do with that old Siwash who visited us yesterday."

"What!" cried Bill. "What do you mean?"

"Well, I noticed that when I asked Black John about him, and he told me his name, both your cousin and Lois seemed greatly excited. They——"

"What is his name?" interrupted Bill.

"It is Nootlakwatl. He——"

"Nootlakwatl!" cried Bill, grasping the old man's arm and shaking it in his excitement. "Where does he live? Where was he going from here?"

"Why, according to Black John, he is the chief of a band whose village is up near the head of Ladue Creek."

"Where's Ladue Creek?" shouted Bill, reaching for the clothing thrown across the foot

of his bed.

“It is a large creek that flows into the White River some forty or fifty miles below here—the only large creek that flows in from the north. But you, too, are showing excitement at mention of his name. I do not understand. Black John mentioned that the old Siwash had spoken of two men who were once on White River, but that was years ago. Yet, William, do you know that when he looked upon you, I could have sworn that he was staring at one that he knew—and feared. I do not understand. Why should he fear you? You told me that, to the best of your knowledge, you had never seen him before.”

As Phineas continued to talk, Bill was frantically drawing on his clothing. Daylight was breaking. Objects were distinguishable now, and utterly ignoring the old man, Bill was muttering to himself: “I know why he stood there glaring at me—he thought he was staring at Granddad. They say I look just like him; and Ken has stolen a march on me——” Suddenly he paused, and then, hurriedly tossing the grub sacks about, began frantically to dig in the earth with his fingers. “By God, if Ken’s stolen that charm, I’ll blow his damned head off!”

“William! William!” exclaimed Phineas, his eyes wide with horror. “Have you taken leave of your senses? What are you saying? You are taking the name of the Lord in vain—and burrowing in the ground like an animal!”

Paying no heed, Bill continued to dig, throwing the dirt back over the blankets. Presently, with a cry of satisfaction, he unearthed a small oblong box, and tearing the moosehide windings from it, removed the cover and seized upon a small brass crucifix. Hastily removing the lace from an extra pack, he passed its end through the small ring on the top of the cross, tied the ends and, passing his head through the loop, slipped the crucifix beneath his shirt.

Phineas stared in utter amazement.

Snatching up his rifle, and throwing some salt pork and a pan of baking-powder bread into his packsack, Bill dashed for the landing, nearly bowling the old man over in his haste. Righting the Meadows’ canoe, which lay overturned on the gravel, he launched it and took his place, paddle in hand.

Phineas approached on the run, his long white shanks working beneath the flapping skirts of his nightgown like pistons. “William! William!” he shouted. “Where are you going? I do not understand! We must be starting soon for the village to appeal to the Siwashes for aid in the completion of the tabernacle!”

“To hell with the Siwashes and your damned old shack! Do you suppose I’m going to let Ken beat me out of a million!”

The canoe shot out into the current and a few moments later disappeared around the bend, leaving Phineas staring after it in dumfounded amazement.

That evening Bill overtook Ken and the girl at the mouth of Ladue Creek. Rounding a wide bend in the early dusk, he caught sight of their campfire, and, swerving to the bank, made a fireless camp in a thicket of spruce.

In the morning he ascended the lesser river in their wake, toiling as he had never toiled before with pole, paddle, and track-line against the swift current of the river. That night, just on the edge of darkness, he again sighted their campfire, and, dropping back around a bend, ventured a small fire of his own.

Another day of hard labor followed, broken at noon by a two-hour rest, while he boiled a quantity of fresh meat he cut from the carcass of a moose, evidently killed by Ken

and the girl, who had taken what they needed and left the remainder lying at the water's edge. Once more he camped in sight of their fire, and that night he considered slipping quietly past them and arriving first at the Indian village. He discarded the idea almost immediately, because of the extreme danger of attempting the ascent of the fast-water river in the darkness and of the realization that he could hold no satisfactory converse with the natives when he did reach them. "Better just to trail along and let them do the preliminary work," he decided. "Lois can talk to them, and Ken will have her arrange to exchange the charm for the information." He smiled grimly to himself. "But when it comes time to do business—I've got the charm! And I'm the one they'll dicker with!"

At noon next day, upon rounding a bend, a sight greeted Bill's eyes that caused him to drop swiftly back around the bend and beach the canoe. He had come suddenly upon the village, a motley collection of huts and tepees that occupied a wide flat. Concealing the canoe and creeping swiftly through the bush, he took his place in the shelter of a scrub spruce upon the very edge of the clearing.

Evidently Lois and Ken had arrived a short time before him, and as evidently, their arrival had created great excitement in the village. The two stood near the landing, in the center of a semicircle of oldsters whose numbers were being rapidly augmented by new arrivals of both sexes and all ages who poured from the huts and the tepees. Bill recognized the squat figure of old Nootlakwatl, who stood flanked by a small group of oldsters directly facing the two visitors.

When all had assembled, the girl began to speak, and as she talked in a jargon unintelligible to Bill, he could see that the dark crowding faces were tense with suppressed excitement. Evidently old Nootlakwatl had had time to acquaint them with the fact of the white man who was still young because of the stolen charm. Bill grinned to himself as his fingers toyed with the little brass crucifix that dangled beneath his shirt front.

The girl ceased speaking, and old Nootlakwatl advanced a step and launched into a harangue that was evidently addressed now to the visitors and now to his own people. He turned this way and that, gesticulated with his hands, pointed to the earth, the sky, and the four points of the compass. When he had finished, the girl spoke again, and again Nootlakwatl replied.

A half-hour of evident bargaining followed, winding up to the apparent satisfaction of all. Fiercely tense faces relaxed into smiles, and Nootlakwatl and the oldsters gravely shook hands with the girl and with Ken, who immediately turned, stepped into their canoe, and shot swiftly from sight downriver.

After the two had gone, the old men of the tribe stood grouped in excited debate, while about them the others clustered in rapt attention. Behind his spruce Bill smiled complacently as he fingered the crucifix. "Now's my chance to gum their game," he muttered. "With all the white men there are in the country, some of the Siwashes must have picked up enough English to understand me. They've probably agreed to send a delegation down after the charm. I'll show 'em the charm and tell 'em they won't have to go after it. They'll see that it's me they've got to deal with, and when I go back downriver I'll have the secret of Granddad's cache!"

Bill Blunt stepped boldly into the clearing and sauntered leisurely toward the massed savages, who, at sight of him, had ceased their palaver and were staring in undisguised surprise. Bill noticed that Nootlakwatl and four or five of the older men were staring wide-eyed, as though they were gazing upon the supernatural, and realizing that they believed

they were gazing upon his grandfather, he approached them, a grin on his face. They bunched closely and shrank back as he advanced within ten feet of them. With his eyes meeting the steady stare of Nootlakwatl, he spoke.

“Hello, Ignatz!” he greeted. “How’s the old boy?”

If any doubt had remained in the minds of the oldsters, the use of the name Ignatz instantly removed it. Never had anyone save this man, and the one who had been dead these many years, ever used that name!

Nootlakwatl advanced a step, sudden fire flashing in the old eyes. His shriveled lips parted to utter the one word, “Matt!”

“That’s right, Ignatz,” grinned Bill. “Your charm has kept me young.”

A moment of silence, and Nootlakwatl launched into an impassioned harangue in the Indian tongue:

“You have heard, O my people, of the days of long ago when we dwelt on the larger river which men now call ‘the White.’ And you have heard of the magic charm that the great *Sahhalee Tyee* himself—the one in the long black robe—had given to our fathers in the days of which no man remembers—the charm that keeps men young! And it has been told to you at the firesides, from the days of your youth—the story of the two white men who came to the river and built a cabin and for many years dug gold and traded powder and lead to us for more gold—a bottle of powder for a bottle of gold—and we traded gladly, for we did not know the worth of gold.

“And you have heard of the trickery by which the two white men made us drunk and stole the charm, and of the great fight we made to reclaim it—of how the white men fired from the holes in the cabin, killing four of us and wounding seven. And of how Mishwapee crept close to the cabin wall and stuck his gun through the hole and shot one of the white men through the head, so that he died. This man was named ‘Jake,’ and the next minute Mishwapee died also, for the other white man, ‘Matt’—the man who stands here before you—shot him!

“And you have heard how the battle continued until night, and of how, in the darkness, Matt carried Jake from the cabin and buried him and placed the stone of the white man’s magic upon him, and covered it with gravel, and then stole away in the darkness, taking the charm for which we had fought away with him. But he took no gold away, for gold is heavy.

“And you have heard of how, in the morning, when we found the cabin empty, we also found the place where Jake was buried, for Matt had thrown fresh gravel over him, and over the stone with the strange markings—the stone of the white man’s magic. And of how we dug Jake up and cut off his head and cleaned his skull and polished it, so that the holes made by Mishwapee’s bullet may be seen to this day. And of how we covered the spot, and leveled the ground, and tore down the cabin, log by log, and carried the logs and threw them in the river, and leveled that spot also, so that no man could tell there had ever been a cabin or a grave.

“And you have heard of how we took the skull and the stone of the strange markings—the stone of the white man’s magic—and came away from that river and made our village here, because that valley had become a valley of death and of ill omen.

“And you know that, since we have learned the worth of gold, we have sought long and diligently for the cache of the two white men; for we know that they had much gold and that the gold still lies where they cached it.

“You know that, for many years, we watched the valley, believing that some day Matt would return for the gold. But the years passed by, and he did not come. Other white men came—and passed on. We who were young when the two white men were upon the river are now old—for the stone of the white man’s magic has no virtue. Despite the strange figures cut upon it, and the fact that it was placed above the body of a dead man, it is only a stone—it could not keep men young!

“Then you all know that two years ago the white man and the young woman who is his daughter came to the valley and built a cabin. You know that they were watched for a whole year, so that their daily acts and their comings and their goings were known to us. For we thought that Matt, fearing to return himself, had sent these two for his gold. But they made no search for the gold. We believed that they did not care for gold, for they dug only enough for their wants. We learned that the man was a *shaman* who sought only to tell the Siwashes who now live upon the river about a strange god, and a devil who would burn men in a great fire. I have warned you to have nothing to do with him, for the white man’s god is no better than the white man’s magic—and his devil burns with fire. So we ceased to watch the white man.

“But in this, my people, we were wrong! Matt had sent these people on before him, and when they sent word to him with the white man’s talking paper that the Siwashes who were upon the river of old were there no more—then came Matt himself and another! And they are building a great devil house. I myself have seen it. And even as I looked, Matt stepped from the cabin! I knew him the moment I laid eyes on him—for he is young—he has not changed by so much as a wrinkle in his skin since the days of long, long ago! But he did not know me—for I am old! The white man’s charm cannot keep one young. But the charm he stole from us has kept him as young as he was upon the day he stole it!”

The old man paused, and, pointing a trembling finger at Matt, fairly shrieked his words: “Look upon him! He is young! And we, who were also young, are now old! The years that have grayed our heads and dimmed our eyes have passed him by! For him the summers will follow the winters and leave no mark upon him until the end of the world! For he has the charm that keeps men young! But—the young may die! The charm belongs to us! He killed to take it from us—shall we not kill to reclaim it? Are we rabbits, that all the people of the earth may have their way with us? Or are we men—to rise up and kill for that which is our own?”

Bill Blunt had stood patiently throughout the discourse, a half-amused smile on his lips. He understood no word save the occasional pronouncement of the names “Matt” and “Jake.” When the old fool got through talking he would show him the crucifix and offer to exchange it for information as to the location of Granddad’s old cabin. With that information in his possession he would watch his chance. With Ken out of the way he would have clear sailing—the gold, the girl, the business! But it must look like an accident. It would be a justifiable killing, of course. Had not Ken threatened to murder him?

The future looked rosy to Bill Blunt. Then—suddenly—he realized that the old man had ceased speaking; realized, too, that hundreds of gleaming eyes were glaring upon him from out the dark faces that gradually hemmed him in. He glanced swiftly toward the clearing across which he had just passed. The way was blocked by the crowding faces, as was the way to the landing. Stark fear gripped his heart. There was murder in those gleaming eyes—the unholy light of a strange fanaticism. Panic seized him. In desperation

he thrust his hand into the bosom of his shirt. His trembling fingers clutched at the crucifix. He must show it to them—must convince them that he had the——

Old Nootlakwatl's arm raised—an ax flashed high. With a shriek of terror, Bill leaped backward, to encounter a solid wall of dark bodies. The ax descended. There was a blinding flash, and Bill Blunt crashed forward upon his face. Eager hands tore the crucifix from stiffening fingers.

With the crucifix held high, that all might gaze upon the magic charm, the old chief again raised his voice in oratory:

“We have not found the white men's gold, my people; but, after many years, we have recovered the charm that keeps men young! It is justice. What is ours has been returned to us by the hand that took it from us! It is enough. We shall seek no more for the white man's gold. Let it lie forever in the place where they cached it! But our work is not yet done. These others must die also—the old white *shaman* and his daughter, and the other who came with her here. They are devil folk! They came to us this day and spoke with forked tongues. They promised that if I and the old men should return in three days to their cabin, they would deliver to me the charm, if only we would point out to them the spot upon which stood the cabin of Matt and Jake. You have all seen that they were lying, for they did not have the charm. Matt had it, so, manifestly, these two could not have returned it.

“But I knew, even without seeing the charm, that they were lying. For had I not seen Matt myself? Matt knew, and these others knew, all about that old cabin. It was a scheme to entice all those of us who are old and wise, who were alive and young at the time they stole the charm, into the devil house upon the pretext of returning us our charm. Then they would have killed us, and their devil would have burned us in a great fire. Then, in all the world, would be no one left who knew of the gold in the cache. And they would take the gold and depart beyond the great water from whence come all white men.

“I tell you, my people, all these others must die, too; for they are part and parcel of a great wrong. We will go down and kill them, and we will tear down their cabin and throw the logs in the river, and we will level off the ground and tear down the devil house—log by log—and throw that also into the river, so that no man may know where it stood.

“We will take the body of Matt and place it in a canoe, together with the skull of Jake and the white man's worthless charm, and set the canoe afloat on White River; so that it shall drift down onto the Yukon that all white men may see and know that their charm is no good. Come! We have much powder and lead! Not one of them must escape! Get your guns! The women shall stay here and prepare a great feast against our return. It shall be the Feast of the Charm, and each year upon this day we shall hold this feast; for has not the great *Sahhalee Tyee* returned to us our charm?”

Wild cries of approval greeted the speech, and a great commotion overspread the village as young men and old, inflamed to murderous fanaticism, gathered their weapons and rushed to the landing.

Old Nootlakwatl stepped from his hut and walked toward his canoe, followed by two young men, one of whom carried a polished skull and the other a heavy, flattish stone, on one side of which appeared the rudely carved initials, J. V.—the stone that had guarded a dead man, the stone of the white man's magic.

Bill Blunt's body was lifted into the canoe, Nootlakwatl took his place in the bow, and with the young men at the paddles his canoe shot out into the current and headed

downstream, followed by a whole flotilla of canoes manned by forty savages who, crazed by the sight of a victim's blood and the knowledge that they had regained the charm of eternal youth, chanted the weird war cry of their ancestors.

CHAPTER XIII

BESIEGED

ON the evening of the third day after their departure from the Siwash village, Ken and Lois beached their canoe at the landing in front of the gaunt framework of the tabernacle.

"The other canoe is gone," said the girl. "Father and Bill must be upriver still trying to persuade the Siwashes to help with the tabernacle. Perhaps, Ken, you'd better get the charm now. We can keep it until you have a chance to talk to Bill."

Stepping from the canoe, Ken started for the tent, to halt a moment later as the voice of Phineas boomed from the door of the cabin. "Come here at once and give an account of yourselves! Where have you been for these past six days?"

Ken turned and followed Lois to the cabin. "We might as well tell him everything," whispered the girl. "There's no use keeping the secret any longer."

"Are you married?" asked Phineas, fixing them with his deep-set eyes as they came to a halt before him.

"No, Father," answered Lois. "We've been to a Siwash village 'way up Ladue Creek. We had to——"

"Heaping sin upon sin! Transgression upon transgression!" boomed the old man. "To the sin of disobedience you have added the more grievous sin of——"

"Father!" interrupted the girl, her cheeks flaming. "You have no right to——"

"No right!" thundered the man. "No right to admonish the evildoer! I, whose mission in life is to save men's souls from everlasting damnation, have no right to upbraid sinners upon the error of their ways! Come with me! We shall proceed at once to the Siwash village, that we may have witnesses. Flouting me to my face, you have chosen this spawn of the devil—and now you shall marry him! Not one more night, nor the part of a night, shall you continue to dwell in your infamy! It is well that we go at this time to the village. For there you may gaze upon an object lesson—the body of a man swinging in the wind! A reminder that the words of the Book are true—the wages of sin is death! A truly inspiring sight to the righteous! Blessed be the name of the Lord!"

"Where's Bill?" asked Ken suddenly, as the old man paused for breath.

The missionary regarded him with a frown. "William has gone—I know not where nor why. There is mystery in this valley that I do not comprehend. It is as though forces are at work of which I know nothing—the dark forces of evil. A moment after you two disregarded my summons to return and disappeared downriver, I looked up to see William standing in the doorway of his tent. I hastened thither and when, during our conversation, I mentioned the name of the old Siwash, he became greatly perturbed and excited, even as you did when Brother Smith mentioned his name. He reached for his clothing and began furiously to dress himself, cursing the while like any pirate, and muttering something about his grandfather and a certain charm.

"I admonished him sternly, but he paid no heed; and suddenly, falling upon his knees, he began to burrow in the earth with his hands. Presently he drew from the ground a small box from which he took a graven image of our Lord upon the cross—a Romish symbol—and he fastened the thing to his neck with a thong. Then he rose to his feet, flung some food into his packsack, grasped his rifle, and hastening to the river, overturned the canoe and departed in your wake. I reminded him that we must start shortly for the Siwash

village, but he cursed me most horribly. I do not understand it. For William is a godly man. It is as though he had suddenly become possessed of a devil—even as the swine in the Bible which plunged violently down a steep place into the sea!”

The girl turned to Ken, a puzzled frown upon her face. “Where could he have gone?” she cried. “Surely we should have met him on Ladue Creek, when we were coming down! He couldn’t have kept up with us in the canoe.”

“He might possibly have kept up, by working longer hours,” said Ken. “But the chances are that he passed the mouth of Ladue Creek and went on down the White. He would have realized his mistake when he hit the Yukon, only a few miles farther down. He’s probably pushing up Ladue Creek right now; and if he is, he’ll meet Nootlakwatl and the old men coming down! And he’s got the charm!” Ken turned and dashed for the canoe, followed closely by the girl, who, disregarding the bewildered bellowing of Phineas, begged to be taken along.

“No,” cried Ken. “You stay here! I may be too late for the meeting—but I’m going to find out the location of that cache or know the reason why! Things will come to a showdown back there—and you had better be out of it!”

“But—oh, Ken—you can’t talk to them! You——”

“I can talk to them as well as Bill can! I’ll be damned if he’s going to beat me!”

“But—he might kill you!”

“I guess there isn’t much danger,” grinned Ken. “Did you ever see Bill shoot?”

“Wait till morning,” persisted the girl. “See—it’s almost dark. You couldn’t get far tonight.”

“I can get five or ten miles before I camp, and that time saved might be just the difference between success and failure. Besides,” he added, a mischievous twinkle in his eye, “your dad will sleep better if he knows we’re far apart. Anyhow, he’s promised to marry us. When I come back, we’ll hold him to that promise.”

The girl’s face flushed, as the red lips curved in a smile. “We won’t need to remind him,” she whispered. “He’ll marry us now—if he has to call in the Mounted Police to help.”

Ken’s lips crushed hers in a long, lingering kiss—and the next moment he was gone.

Just on the edge of daylight the following morning, on a bend some five or six miles downriver from the Meadows’ landing, Ken Blunt awoke, threw off his blanket, and drew on his shirt and trousers. Soap and towel in hand, he stepped to the river and paused to gaze up and down its misty reach. A blur in the light fog caught his attention and, peering downriver, he made out the dim form of a canoe rounding the next bend. Drawing back, he continued to gaze, as little wrinkles creased his forehead in a frown. Was it Bill? Or were the old men from the village coming for their charm? Another canoe rounded the bend, and another and another and yet another! Ken’s frown deepened. “There were only five or six of the old men—surely they would not need all those canoes. And Lois expressly stipulated that only the old men were to come.”

Swiftly Ken stooped and dragged his own canoe out of sight in the bush and, slipping into a place of concealment behind a thick scrub on the edge of a cut bank, peered at the approaching canoes. Ten of them there were, in all, each manned by four Siwashes— young men, for the most part, with tense, evil faces! Ken noted, as he looked down upon the canoes that forged steadily past his place of concealment, that beside each man upon the bottom of the canoe lay a gun!

His brain worked rapidly. Where was Bill? Manifestly the Siwashes had not met him and procured the charm, else why should they be journeying toward the Meadows? And why had they repudiated the terms of the agreement which stipulated that only Nootlakwatl and the old men should come for the charm? What was the meaning of this heavily armed rabble? Had they decided to take by force that which they could have had by merely pointing out the site of an old cabin? Or had the old ones brought the others along to see, from some place of concealment, that the agreement was carried out?

A sudden chill gripped his heart—the charm was gone! Until Bill's return, it could not be produced! What would happen when Lois should face that horde of armed savages and tell them that she could not produce the fetish that was more valuable in their sight than all the gold in the valley? It needed only the passing glance he had just had of the set, tense faces to envision what would happen; and Lois alone at the cabin with Phineas who, under any circumstances, would be more of a hindrance than a help!

There seemed only one course to pursue—to slip his canoe into the water and follow on behind the Siwashes, being careful to keep himself screened from them by the bends. He could beach his canoe a half-mile below the landing and slip through the scrub to the cabin, reaching it before the finish of the conference in which the girl would be forced to admit that she could not deliver the charm as agreed. Then what?

Well Ken knew that those armed young men would not believe the girl's story—would believe that Matthew Blunt himself, whom Nootlakwatl thought he had seen standing in the doorway of the cabin only a few days before, was withholding the charm.

Slipping his canoe into the water, he poled upstream in the wake of the ten canoes. Keeping close to shore to take advantage of the eddies, he made good time, finding it necessary, on one or two of the longer straight stretches, to drop back around the bend to keep from being seen by the tail-enders.

Suddenly, from upriver, the sound of shots reached his ears—one shot, two, then a scattering volley! What did it mean? Surely there had been no time for parley! It was as though the occupants of the leading canoes had opened fire the moment they landed. Beaching the canoe with a thrust of the pole, Ken snatched up his rifle and dashed through the low scrub timber toward the clearing. The sound of shots was continuous now—the vicious crack of high-power rifles and the roar of smooth-bores. Blood pounded Ken's ear drums, and he sucked the air into his heaving lungs in great gasps as he raced through the scrub. Approaching the clearing, he proceeded stealthily but hardly the less swiftly. He could see a group of Siwashes about the canoes at the landing—saw rifles raised and discharged toward the cabin. Gripping his own rifle in readiness, he slanted toward the building, whose outline he could see through the scrub.

He halted abruptly as a movement caught his eye. At the edge of the clearing skulked the form of a Siwash peering toward the cabin. The man dropped to his knee and raised his rifle, aiming at a window. Throwing his own gun to his shoulder, Ken lined the sights against the curved back and pressed the trigger. The Siwash sprawled forward, his fingers clutching convulsively at the spruce needles and dead twigs on the ground.

A glance toward the landing showed the savages still grouped about the canoes. His shot had roused no suspicion among them. If they heard it at all they evidently thought it fired by one of their own number.

Moving swiftly to the twitching form, Ken seized the man's repeating rifle, swung the Siwash's gun upon the group at the landing, and began pumping lead! One fell—two,

three, others staggered and dropped their rifles. Those remaining ceased firing to stare for a moment toward the spot whence was pouring that deadly fire. Screened by a small spruce, Ken continued to shoot until the gun was empty.

Two more Siwashes fell to the ground, and the rest ran for the shelter of the scrub as Ken flung the empty gun from him, picked up his own, and dashed straight across the clearing for the cabin. A ragged volley followed him from the edge of the clearing. His hat went spinning, as though knocked from his head by a club. Diving around a corner of the cabin, he pounded on the door with his fists. "Open the door, Lois! It's me—Ken!"

The door flew open and slammed shut again as bullets thudded against the split logs that were its panels. Inside, Ken helped the girl fit the bar into place. There was a tinkle of glass slivers, and a cloud of steam filled the room, as the bullet that had shattered the window punctured the tea kettle, allowing its contents to spurt over the coals.

"Keep away from the windows!" ordered Ken. "Punch out some chinking and shoot between the logs! Where's your dad?"

"He's in there praying for guidance," answered the girl, indicating the door that led to the two small bedrooms in the rear.

"What started 'em?" asked Ken, punching at the mud chinking with a knife he picked from the table.

"I don't know—I can't imagine! I saw the canoes at the landing and started toward them, when suddenly they began to shoot. They came close, too—look where a bullet clipped through my hair, just above my ear! I turned and ran back and reached the door just as Father was coming out to see what the shooting was. I pushed him back and barred the door. Then I got my rifle and smashed out a window pane and began to shoot back. I hit one, too. I saw him fall, just as he was sneaking into the timber. I kept on shooting every time one showed himself. I didn't dare to shoot through the window that faces the landing, because there was a perfect stream of bullets coming in there—see, every one of the panes is shattered, and almost all the dishes have been shot off the table.

"Then the bullets quit coming through the window, and I slipped over there and looked out to see the Siwashes falling and staggering about, and others running to cover, as a repeater fired steadily from the timber. The next moment I saw you come dashing across the clearing, and I fired at two or three Siwashes that were firing at you. Then I unbarred the door. But—what happened? Why did they start firing as soon as they landed? What in the world has got into them?"

"I can't imagine!" replied Ken. "Here—shove your rifle barrel through this hole! It's close to the corner so they can't reach you with crossfire through the windows."

"But you——"

"I'll dig through in this other corner. That'll give us a line on three sides. They'll hardly show themselves in the clearing. I'll take a squint at that, now and then, from the window."

The girl fired, and pumped in a fresh cartridge. "I hit him!" she cried. "He dropped his rifle and crawled into the bush!"

"Good work!" encouraged Ken. "We'll stand 'em off all right! Hold your fire till you can draw a dead bead. How much ammunition have you got?"

"One whole box and part of another. How about you?"

"I've got a pocketful besides what I've got in my gun. Both rifles are the same caliber. We've got enough to last for a long time if we don't waste it."

“How did you get here so soon?” asked the girl, her eye to the loophole.

“Saw ’em pass my camp just about daylight, and when I saw their numbers, and the rifles, I knew something was wrong; so I followed ’em up, and when I was about half a mile below here I heard them start firing. I landed and ran as fast as I could—shot a Siwash on the edge of the clearing and emptied his gun into the mob at the landing.”

“Do you think they’ve seen Bill?”

Ken shrugged. “I didn’t think so when they passed me on the river. I thought they’d come on up here for the charm. But since they began shooting as soon as they reached here—I’m not so sure.”

“What do you mean?” cried the girl, her eyes wide. “That Bill is in some way connected with the attack on us?”

Once again Ken shrugged. “Figure it out for yourself,” he answered. “Up at the village Nootlakwatl agreed to come down here, bringing only the old men, and show us where Granddad’s cabin stood—in exchange for the charm. Bill takes the charm with him, and hits out to find them and dicker with them on his own terms. It looks mighty ugly to me. Looks as if those terms included wiping me out. Bill would have everything to gain by my death—the cache, the business, everything. And,” Ken added grimly, “he knows good and well he’s got quite a lot to lose if I ever get back to Emmonsville.”

“But,” exclaimed the girl, aghast, “surely he wouldn’t have included Father and me in the plot!”

“No, I don’t believe he did that. Their orders were probably to mop me up without harming you two, but something seems to have gone wrong; that bullet that clipped your hair was fired in deadly earnest.”

The desultory firing from the scrub continued, with Ken and Lois shooting back whenever a mark offered. “They’ve set fire to our tent,” said Ken, with his eye to the loophole. “There’s one old boy dancing around holding up the box that the charm was kept in. I could pick him off easily enough, but he’s an old man, and he’s laid aside his gun. Look sharp, Lois. Don’t let any of them get close enough to set fire to the cabin. We can stand ’em off indefinitely if we don’t waste our cartridges; but if they fire the cabin, it’s good-night!”

A bullet plowed through the chinking, grazing Ken’s shoulder and knocking the clock from its shelf.

The door of the bedroom opened, and old Phineas stood for a moment regarding the two who crouched, sighting along the rifle barrels shoved through the loopholes. His deep-set eyes fixed upon Ken. “How did you come here?” he boomed. “And what is this evil you have brought upon us?”

“Search me!” replied Ken. “I had nothing to do with it. When I got here the Siwasches were firing on the cabin. And you’d better duck back into the other room before you stop a bullet—you’re right in line with that window!”

“The Lord is visiting His wrath upon us because of your sins.” The words rolled above the desultory cracking of rifles. “It is our rebuke for harboring the ungodly.”

A bullet shattered the last remaining pane of glass and thudded into the door jamb scarcely six inches from the old man’s nose, but he paid no heed. “Open the door!” he commanded. “I am a man of peace and not of war. I fear not their bullets. I shall go out and reason with them. Surely the Lord will find some means of punishing you without damaging my property!”

“Get back in there and keep out of the way!” shouted Ken. “Look out, Lois—they’re going to rush us! They’ve got a torch! Here they come! Give it to ’em!”

From the edge of the bush a dozen Siwashes burst into the clearing, yelling and firing as they approached the cabin at a run, one of their number carrying a torch of flaming spruce boughs. Rapidly, steadily, Ken and Lois fired. One after another the advancing Siwashes sprawled in the clearing, while from the scrub poured a steady supporting fire. The torchbearer went down, and as another stooped to recover the torch, he too fell, smothering the flames with his body. The remaining four turned and fled for the bush. Ken was aware that the room had become suddenly lighter. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw Phineas disappear through the open doorway. There was a burst of gunfire from the bush, and the old man crashed heavily forward, riddled by a dozen bullets. Dropping his rifle, Ken sprang to the door and closed it, jamming the bar into place. Dry-eyed, the girl watched; and tight-lipped, she refilled the magazine of her rifle.

Spurred by their success in killing one of the besieged, the Siwashes redoubled their gunfire from the edges of the bush, being extremely careful, however, not to expose themselves to a return fire from the cabin.

“Watch out for another rush,” cautioned Ken. “If we can keep them from firing the cabin we can stand them off indefinitely—at least till Black John and his crew come back upriver.”

“They may be gone for days,” answered the girl. “And our cartridges will never hold out. There’s only part of a box left.”

“We may be able to slip away in the night, as Granddad did——”

The sentence was interrupted by a burst of gunfire from the direction of the scrub on the downriver side of the clearing. Siwashes suddenly appeared, bursting from the bush and rushing toward the landing, flinging away their guns as they ran.

Through their loopholes, the two stared in wide-eyed astonishment—refrained from firing at those who ran. At the landing old Nootlakwatl turned to face the bush just as half a dozen white men dashed into the clearing. Recognizing their leader as one he could trust, he issued a gruff command to those of his followers who were struggling to launch the canoes; and, elevating his arms, he held his hands, palms forward, high above his head.

CHAPTER XIV

TWO TONS AND A POUND OF GOLD!

POLING upriver with their scow load of supplies, Black John Smith and the men from Halfaday camped one evening on the river bank just below the mouth of Ladue Creek. In the morning, as they were breaking camp, a canoe was sighted drifting toward them from upriver. Apparently empty, it floated broadside to the current.

“That’s a Ladue Crick canoe,” said Black John, surveying the craft through eyes shaded by a hand. “Go fetch her in, an’ we’ll tie her up at the mouth of the crick. It belongs to old Nootlakwatl’s outfit.”

As the current carried the canoe close to shore, one of the men retrieved her, and the next moment all stood staring down into the little craft on the bottom of which lay the body of a young white man. The body lay on its back, decently composed, with arms crossed over the breast. On one side of it reposed a grinning, polished skull, while on the opposite side lay a flattish stone, on the face of which the initials J. V. had been rudely carved.

“Well, I’ll be damned!” exclaimed Black John, eyeing the bizarre cargo of the canoe. “This here looks like a case fer the police. It’s a murder, all right, an’ a damn funny one! His head’s be’n stove in with an ax. But what in the devil’s the meanin’ of the skull an’ the rock with them letters cut into it? That’ll give Corporal Downey one to chew on. It’s a Siwash job—but that rock an’ the skull! There’s somethin’ funny here—damn funny! This ain’t no common murder.”

“Who is he?” queried a man, eyeing the dead face with puckered brow. “I never seen him before. An’ I didn’t know any white folks was up on Ladue Crick.”

“There ain’t,” answered Black John. “But it looks like this one come away from there. I never seen him before, neither, but if it was my guess I’d say it’s prob’ly good cousin William that old Phineas was tellin’ me about. He’s cousin to that young feller that was upriver with the gal when she told us about Clem sellin’ hooch to them Siwashes. Accordin’ to Phineas he was plumb sanctimonious. But he sure met up with bad luck. We’ve got to git this evidence to the police. But first we’ll shove on up to Phineas’s place an’ see if they kin identify the corpse. That’ll save time fer the police, an’ keep ’em from prowlin’ all over hell, mebbe. We’ll leave the scow there, an’ a couple of us’ll drop back downriver with the canoe. Leave everything jest as it is without disturbin’ nothin’. Tie her on behind the scow, an’ let’s git agoin’—there ain’t no bad water from here to Phineas’s an’ we kin make good time. I’m bettin’ the drinks this here’s got somethin’ to do with old Nootlakwatl’s eyein’ William—like Phineas was tellin’ me about.”

On the third day thereafter, with the scow in the swamp stretch, the sound of gunfire came floating downriver. “Cripes!” cried Black John. “Listen at that! It sounds like a battle! What the hell! It sounds like it’s comin’ from Phineas’s place!”

“ ’Tain’t likely no one would be botherin’ him,” opined a man.

“Likely hell! It ain’t likely a canoe would be found floatin’ down a river with a dead man layin’ in it between a skull an’ a rock, neither! But we done so! Shootin’ like that means business! Siwash business, I’ll bet! No white man livin’ knows what’s goin’ on inside of a Siwash’s head. That shootin’s got somethin’ to do with that there rock an’ the skull an’ the body—you kin bet yer life on that! An’ somehow old Phineas has got hisself

mixed up in it. Pole like hell, boys, till we git past this swamp! Then we'll land an' hit through the bush!"

Working like demons at the poles, the men shoved the scow up through the swamp stretch and beached it beside Ken's abandoned canoe.

"Things is gettin' more balled up every minute!" cried Black John, pointing to the canoe. "That there's the canoe that young feller an' the gal had upriver! But what in hell's it doin' down here? There was only him in it when he landed here. An' he was in a hell of a hurry! Look at them tracks! Come on—fetch yer rifles an' plenty of shells—listen at that shootin'! By Gawd, I hope we ain't goin' to be too late!"

Dashing through the bush, as Ken had done only a few hours before, the men of Halfaday followed their leader. Approaching the edge of the clearing, they fired a volley at a skulking dark form. Other forms appeared, and another crashing volley followed. Amid cries of terror the forms disappeared, to reappear a moment later racing across the clearing in the direction of the landing, casting away their guns as they ran.

The men charged out into the clearing to see old Nootlakwatl throw up his empty hands in token of surrender.

"Don't shoot!" ordered Black John, as his eyes swept the scene. "There's be'n killin' enough here fer one day."

The door of the cabin flew open, and Ken Blunt, closely followed by Lois—each carrying a rifle—burst from the room. Stooping for a moment over the body of her father, the girl followed Ken to the spot where the men of Halfaday stood, midway between the bush and the landing. "Oh, you've saved our lives!" she cried, tears streaming from her eyes.

"Well, you kin fergit about that part of it," said Black John. "But tell us, Sis—what in thunder come off here? What's the war about? An' why?"

"Oh, I don't know! It's terrible!" she sobbed. "The Siwashes landed early this morning and began shooting, and then Ken came—and we've all been shooting ever since—and they've killed Father! He thought he could reason with them, and he stepped right out into the open when they were shooting from all sides."

"He picked him out a hell of a time to do his reasonin'," opined Black John judicially. "It looks like there's plenty to be found out here—take it first an' last. Old Nootlakwatl, he wouldn't go on the war path fer nothin'. So while the rest of the boys here slips back down an' fetches up the scow and the canoe with the body in it, we'll hold a powwow with the Siwashes."

"Body!" cried the girl. "What body?"

"I don't know fer sure," replied Black John. "But I mistrust it's this here William that Phineas was tellin' me about." He turned to Ken. "You ain't shy a cousin, be you?"

"Yes," answered Ken. "I am."

"He's a total loss," informed the man. "Come on; we'll go over to the Siwashes an' make medicine."

Black John Smith listened attentively to the stories of Ken Blunt and old Nootlakwatl and the girl, and at the end of two hours, when the scow appeared from downriver, he had a fairly accurate conception of the whole situation.

"You can't fool with magic," he pronounced sagely. "I don't care if it's white man's religion er Siwash er niggers er Chinks—when you begin tinkerin' with what they believe in, hell starts poppin'. Take this here case. Old Nootlakwatl believes, right now, that it was

yer Granddad he killed the other day—an' that he'd stayed young because he had that charm. He believes he was right in doin' it, an' I ain't the one to say he wasn't right. 'Course,"—he turned to Lois—"the killin' of yer pa was different. They hadn't ort to done that, but they was excited. Both cases is murder, an' the police can't help but call it such. But it seems kind of too bad to hang the Siwashes, when they thought they was right."

"I think so, too," agreed Lois. "I certainly shall never press any charges. I—I'd rather think of Father's death as accidental."

"Bill's death can be accidental, too—for all of me," added Ken. "I don't believe the poor devils deserve hanging."

Old Nootlakwatl and his men listened owlshly to the opinions—understanding no word. And owlshly they looked on as Ken and Lois gazed down into the canoe which the scowmen had brought up—gazed down upon the body of the man and the grinning skull and the flatfish stone.

Ken pointed to the stone with the rudely carved initials, J. V. "It's Jake Valentine's gravestone, all right—and I suppose that's Jake's skull. There's no chance now of our ever locating Granddad's cache. The Siwashes have the charm—and we have no way of finding the cache. That two tons and a pound of gold will always lie buried in the gravel."

A slow smile curved Black John's lips. "Mebbe—mebbe not. I've got a hunch. The more I think this here thing over, the more it don't look like no case fer the police. It looks like a case fer a miners' meetin'. You see, police an' courts is what you might say hidebound. There ain't no flexibility to what they kin do. They've got to act accordin' to law—an' there's plenty of times when law an' common sense is wide apart.

"Now a miners' meetin' is different. It's got more, what you might say, latitude. It ain't bound by no hard an' fast rules. An' it tries a case accordin' to common sense an' not accordin' to law.

"I hereby call a miners' meetin' to try these here Siwashes fer two murders—to wit, William Blunt an' Phineas Meadow. I declare a quorum present an' app'int myself chairman of same."

Turning to the Siwashes, he repeated the words in the jargon. They had heard of miners' meetings and realized their import. And while all stood in fear of these miners' meetings of the white men, all knew that Black John Smith would give them a square deal.

Black John concluded his oration to the Siwashes by pointing to the stone in the canoe. "An' may God have mercy on your souls if you don't show us where you got that rock! If you do show us, you kin go ahead an' bury yer dead, an' you'll be free to come an' go as you please. We'll bury ourn, an' we won't say nothin' about this here rookus to the police. But if you don't, we'll convict every damn mother's son of you an' hang you higher'n Haman!"

He turned to one of the scowmen, still using the jargon for the benefit of the listening Siwashes. "Fetch that rope, Joe. That there tuberkle will make a dandy gallows—what with them rafters stickin' up like they do, they've got a tree beat all to hell. We'll have to hang 'em one at a time—we ain't got rope enough to do the hull job simultaneous."

When the scowmen had gathered round, Black John called the meeting to order. Nootlakwatl was commanded to stand before him. "Yer charged with the murder of one William Blunt," he roared, pointing at the body in the canoe. "You got anything to say?"

"Nem Matt," said the old Siwash, glancing down at the body.

“All right—Matt, then. An’ yer also charged with the murder of one Phineas Meadow, which he lays over there by the door where you shot him. What you got to say about that?”

“No shoot. Don’t know who shoot.”

“You don’t know, eh? All right. Who’s skull is that in the canoe?”

“Jake.”

“Wher’d you git it?”

“Grave.”

“Wher’d you git that rock?”

“Grave.”

“D’you know wher’ the grave’s at?”

For answer, old Nootlakwatl pointed.

“Kin you set the stone right back wher’ you got it?”

The man nodded.

“Is it far from here?”

“No. Devil house.”

“Devil house!” cried Black John. “You mean the tuberkle? Fetch that rock along an’ put it wher’ you got it!”

Nootlakwatl picked up the stone and, followed by the others, advanced toward the tabernacle. Close beside it he paused and regarded it in evident fear.

“What the hell you gawpin’ at?” cried Black John. “That ain’t nothin’ but a church. It can’t bite!”

“Devil house,” grunted Nootlakwatl.

“Show us wher’ you got that rock er you’ll think it’s a devil house! We’ll hang you to them rafters!”

“Devil house,” reiterated the old man. “No go in.”

“Is the grave in there?”

Nootlakwatl nodded.

Black John took the stone from his hands. “Come on here, where you kin see, an’ tell me wher’ to set it. Remember—yer on trial fer murder, an’ you better tell the truth. If you lie about that grave, yer goin’ to git convicted an’ hung, sure as hell!”

Stepping into the huge partially finished enclosure with the stone in his hands, Black John paused for directions. Nootlakwatl pointed, and Black John set the stone down. The old Siwash shook his head and pointed to another spot near by. This performance was repeated three times before the old man nodded emphatically.

Black John called for shovels. Two were procured and, under his directions, two of the men of Halfaday proceeded to dig at the point indicated, while the others waited breathlessly. Presently, at approximately three feet below the surface, they came upon some bones, and a few minutes later the headless skeleton of Jake Valentine was removed, bone by bone.

Black John turned to the men of Halfaday, who constituted the jury. “You’ve all heard the evidence fer an’ again’ this here prisoner an’ them other *et als*. They’re charged with the murder of one William Blunt an’ one Phineas Meadows. I’ll sum the case up. You heard how the prisoners thinks that this here William Blunt which they murdered is someone named Matt. Bein’ as the killin’ of the aforesaid William Blunt was in the nature of an honest mistake, it should come under the head of a accidental death, or *habeas*

corpus as the lawyers has it.

“In regards to the slayin’ of Phineas Meadow, the prisoner Nootlakwatl claims he don’t know who done it. Bein’ as he’s the chief an’ the smartest one of all the Siwashes, it stands to reason that if he don’t know who done it, there don’t no one know, an’ they can’t therefore be held liable. It looks to me like Phineas was onlucky, an’ jest happened to step outdoors at the wrong time of day. *Tempus fugit* is the legal term for luck like that. Now, therefore, all them in favor of hangin’ these here Siwashes fer murderin’ them two men—which both has be’n conclusively proved to have been took off accidental—signify by holdin’ up yer right er left hand an’ holler ‘Aye.’ An’ anyone so signifyin’ had better be ready to peel off his coat an’ back up his verdict’ with his dukes! I ain’t goin’ to stand fer no coercion er duress, as the lawyers says. Every man’s vote has got to be of his own free will an’ volition. What do you say?”

Silence greeted the words.

“All right. All them in favor of acquittin’ the said prisoners signify in the same manner as aforesaid by h’istin’ hands an’ hollerin’.”

A chorus of “Ayes” rent the air, and, turning to the Siwashes, Black John addressed them in the jargon. “Yer acquitted of murder. Yer free to go anywheres you like an’ keep yer mouths shet. Bury all them dead Siwashes so the police won’t know nothin’ about what come off here. An’ than git to hell out of here an’ leave us bury ourn. You’ve got yer charm back, an’ these folks has got what they was lookin’ fer—so we’re square all around. Now git!”

Under Black John’s orders the two men continued to dig, and presently their shovels tore through rotten moosehide containers into yellow gold! Canvas was spread and the gold shoveled onto it. Two of the men of Halfaday, who were adept at sewing skins, worked in the fashioning of new containers, the others reclaimed the gold from the cache. When the last yellow grain was on the canvas, the bodies of Phineas Meadow and Bill Blunt were carefully deposited in the cavity, and the bones of Jake Valentine were laid beside them with its skull in place.

Lois Meadow said a short prayer over the bodies, as the others stood at respectful attention with uncovered heads. Then the grave was filled and the stone reset above it—upright, this time, as is proper for gravestones.

Jake Valentine had his decent funeral at last.

A half-hour later the men of Halfaday—outlaws all—helped in the resacking of more than a million dollars in gold. Black John Smith appeared worried. “By Gawd, son,” he said to Ken, as Lois disappeared into the cabin. “There ain’t no two ways about it. Us boys has got to turn back an’ see you clean through to Dawson with that there dust. We was in a hurry, but that don’t make no difference. We kin leave our stuff in the cabin here an’ load the gold in the scow. We jest nach’lly dastn’t turn you an’ the gal loose with all that dust. A couple of ton of gold is a hell of a lot of money! An’ with the river full of chechakos, some black-hearted crook might rob you!”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Raw Gold* by James B. Hendryx]