

The newcomer ignored him and addressed the master of ceremonies. "I bid one hundred and twenty-five," he said.

Cook's eye brightened.

"Who goes higher?"

"One hundred and thirty-five!" snorted Saw-Ridge.

The bidding went on by fives and tens until at length in sheer desperation Saw-Ridge called out one hundred and eighty and with a cordial oath sank down upon a pickle-keg.

"Two hundred," said the bronzed stranger, firmly.

"Go higher?" asked Cook, turning an avaricious eye upon the surly sourdough.

"No, curse you, I've bid my last. Take the dog, tenderfoot, and be d—d!"

Saw-Ridge turned and made his way out of the shack the crowd falling back respectfully on either side, for as he strode he flourished the villainous whip and his eyes gleamed wrathfully upon all.

"Buy a dog-collar?" asked Cook, rubbing his fat hands together and turning to the dog's new owner, to receive his money.

"No thanks," replied the latter, "I'm stony broke."

And with a gesture of careless indifference he handed over the bills and then turned the lining of his pockets out, for the benefit of all.

A laugh of derision went up among some of the crowd.

"You blamed fool!" ejaculated old Dave Bellamy, in whose eyes money was radium, just now.

"Say, stranger," said Dick Delaney, "what did you blow into Dead-End for?"

The newcomer had a pair of frank boyish eyes. There was a twinkle in them now.

"Why, gold, of course," he answered.

"You figger on strikin' gold here?"

Bellamy's tones quavered. The child-like credulity of the tenderfoot was almost pitiful.

"I do."

"Then lemme tell you lad, there ain't so much as a grain of it around the diggin's. The camp's been swept from Watch-tower up to the head of the river. We're all goin' back to Dawson when the snow melts."

The newcomer looked a bit thoughtful. He stood patting his new canine friend on the head and did not reply. Gradually we all trooped out into the road, and back to the restaurant where Saw-Ridge now stood before the rude counter, drinking hard cider. His dog-team was before the door, ready, the sleigh filled with supplies, for the long mush upstream. We noticed as we passed, that the four dogs lay stretched out in their harness snatching a much needed rest. The leaders whined and moaned.

"Poor beasts!" said Dick Delaney, with an oath of pity. The tenderfoot was just behind us. He halted and then stepped up to the prone huskies.

A low exclamation escaped from him. We turned around. Great welts and the blood frozen along deep cuts on their bodies told a story of the poor beasts' late treatment at the hands of their owner, that was all too well known in camp. It was new however to the tenderfoot. The angry blood surged to his face.

"Who has done this?" he demanded, turning to us.

"I reckon 'twas Saw-Ridge," drawled Dick, with a grim smile.

"Who?"

"The chap inside, standin' at the bar." "Stay, youngster!" here interposed another, "where you goin'?" Don't go for to talk big to Saw-Ridge!

But the "youngster" had dashed into the North Star eating house. We followed. The prospect of a little real excitement was sweet—these being the days before the moving picture shows had penetrated as far north as the Yukon.

The tenderfoot approached the redoubtable sourdough who stood draining a glass of hard cider, and spoke very quietly. But there was a pant—the pant of an aroused lion—behind the words.

"I am going to give you the best thrashing you ever got in your life," he said, "going to draw as much blood out of your ruffianly carcass, as you've drawn to-day from those huskies."

Saw-Ridge stared, glass in hand—stared, speechless at the stranger's colossal nerve. The rest of us stood with bated breath. We figuratively saw the lad—he was little more—lying unconscious under

the tables and chairs. Not one of us had courage enough to offer any assistance.

Saw-Ridge whipped out his ever-ready revolver and fired three shots in rapid succession into the pine rafters above. "There's three more fer you, kid!" he said, smiling until his thick lips parted showing his crooked yellow teeth. "Come on!"

"Fists! Fists!" we pellowed, "a fair fight Saw-Ridge!" And we hooted so long and so loudly that at last he threw down the pistol. At the same instant Dick Delaney sneaking forward drew the sourdough's long knife out of his bootleg. The latter finished his drink unconcernedly.

The next instant the cider-glass crashed over the pine counter and shattered into atoms among the array of bottles. The tenderfoot had sent a lightning blow out and Saw-Ridge staggered up against a pile of biscuit boxes. But he retaliated with a bull-like rush. The tenderfoot skipped aside and avoided the impact. Then came a clinch. The tenderfoot knew a bit of jiu-jitsu for he managed to keep his feet nine times out of ten while Saw-Ridge wiped the floor every second round. All the camp had now gathered in the cafe, at the door and out in the road, and cheers filled the air from fifty throats.

Bleeding profusely, torn and dishevelled, Saw-Ridge at last growled out that he had had enough. The tenderfoot wasn't so sure. He knelt on the sourdough's chest, pale, panting, but little hurt—the victor. Yet the lust of battle still burned in his eye. There was scarcely a square inch on his adversary that did not contain a bruise, and he was unable to mush homeward for two days afterward.

The tenderfoot rose reluctantly. How we cheered! The sound echoed far away down into the canyon.

Saw-Ridge gained his feet, and vowing vengeance and the law, limped away. Those who habitually defy the law are ever the first to clamor for it when worsted.

"If ever you ill-treat a dumb creature again," said the stranger slowly, as the other slunk off, "I hope to heaven I'm around. But—I think you won't!"

From that hour Jack Wynne—that was the tenderfoot's name—was one of us. He shared the poor luck of Dead-End, ate with us, starved with us, and the weeks slipped away till the middle of May had arrived. We had learned in this period that Jack's mother was an invalid down east and that he had come north to look for gold so that he might be able to pay for an expensive operation for her. In addition there was a family of small brothers and sisters who looked to Jack for support, the father being dead. Jack never doubted but that he would strike gold and we who knew better—or thought we did—hated to discourage him. By half-dozens and dozens the camp drifted away until only a round dozen of us remained. As for Saw-Ridge he came and went as before but we all knew—all but Jack, that is—that he would wreak vengeance at some time or another. Hate and malice smouldered in him and the glance of his eye was ugly when it fell on the young easterner.

Friend of all dumb beasts was Jack, not a dog or horse but knew his caressing hand. A young fellow from the lower gold camp rode into Devil Valley one day on a cayuse that had been urged to its topmost speed up the trail. A heavy pack-saddle and the leather straps over its shoulders rubbed on raw flesh, and the animal was lamed as well.

"I say, Stranger," said Jack Wynne when the fellow had dismounted, "this poor animal is in actual distress. Look! See here—and here—and here. How far have you ridden him?"

"Fifty-five miles," returned the other, surlily.

"To-day?"

"Of course! Think I'm on a pleasure trip? An' what's more, I gotta get back to-night."

He added with an oath that it was nobody's business but his own. For answer Jack tossed the pack off into the mud, then unbuckled the other harness and seized the halter.

"Talk of nerve!" ejaculated the stranger, a slim chap, who, unlike the sourdough, was no match for Jack.

"I'll take care of the cayuse," answered Jack, coolly, "and you can either wait till he is fixed up and ready for travel—or you can hire another to ride back on."

Al Gringley, the owner, stood surrounded by his pack-saddle and harness, swearing roundly while Jack led the cayuse away. Dick Delaney came up to him just then and advised him to make no trouble.

"That's the guy what laid Saw-Ridge out," he remarked in his slow drawl. "You heard about it?"

Gringley had. The whole Yukon knew that tale. So, finding discretion the better part of valor, he hired a fresh horse, made his purchases and rode away.

The trail to Dawson ran beside Watch-tower Rock, hugging the cliff for some hundred yards, with the river upon the other side foaming and dashing along in its turbulent course, to the Pacific. At this season it was swollen and very rapid and at one point where the trail wound about the base of the hill there was but a narrow margin of a few feet between the roadway and an instant and horrible death.

Jack Wynne and I had been prospecting far south one day and were returning to camp on horseback tired, dispirited and as hungry as only healthy youth can be after a long day's arduous toil. Our packs were guiltless of nuggets. We had panned some rather indifferent quartz but gold had eluded us.

Jack's mare walked lame. "She's picked up a stone," observed Jack, as the animal raised a hind foot uneasily.

So he dismounted and busied himself in extracting the pebble. I reined in also. Before us, its crest bathed in the golden light of the western sun, frowned Watch-tower. We had now entered upon that hundred-yard shelf-like portion of trail between the Rock and the river.

Jack's foot had just touched his stirrup and I had gathered up my reins again, when a short sharp report, too heavy for a gun shot, and seeming to come from the clouds, startled us. We looked up. There was a puff of dark smoke, a shower of dirt and stones and then we beheld, rolling down hill, a huge boulder. Along the jagged fissure of a glacier track it bounded, coursing in a southwesterly direction, then with a sound like a mighty clap of thunder it hit the trail not twelve feet ahead of us and leaped into the water below, sending a shower of spray fifty feet into the air. We were covered with the flying dust and sprinkled with the water.

But we had been delivered miraculously from death. A long moment we were silent—wordless from sheer astonishment. We gazed upward again. The giant-head top of the Watch-tower was gone!

Then it was that Jack seized my arm. "Draw in close to the hillside," he said, "then wait and keep an eye south. That was a pretty close shave all right!" We reined in until a clump of birch entirely screened us. A quarter of an hour passed, while we sat in our saddles, eyes bent down the trail towards a point where a bridge-track leading out from the mountains behind, crossed the main roadway. "There he is," said Jack, quietly, at length.

Riding south on his piebald cayuse we beheld Saw-Ridge. "I'm going to climb Watch-tower, to have a look at his fuse—if any is left—and to see if he has any more traps laid for the unwary," said Jack.

It was useless to attempt to deter him. He had dismounted and bounded part of the way up the slope before he had finished speaking. The departure of the knob had lowered the height of Watch-tower by ten feet. I watched him climb until he disappeared around a bend in the Rock.

Presently a wild halloo clove the air and looking up I saw him standing bare-headed and waving his hat frantically. I could only conclude that the fine air of that altitude had gotten to his head.

He came down at length, heralding his approach by a rain of pebbles.

"What's the matter?" I demanded.

"Hustle up and let's beat it back to camp," was all the reply I got, and not another word could I get from him, till we had reached Dead-End.

"Come along, boys! Into your saddles!" shouted Jack as he reined in his mare.

"What for?" asked Olsen, rising from a seat in front of the eating house. The Swede had not yet acted upon his intention of returning to Dawson.

"Never mind what for! I'll tell you about our narrow squeak as we ride along. Quick! Delaney, Cook, Bellamy—the whole lot of you! I've got something to show you."

The men were ready for anything, for life had been a rather monotonous affair these past weeks. We caught fire from Jack's mood, almost forgetting that we were rotten-luck prospectors and that we must inevitably pull stakes and move—move on eternally, the will-o'-the-wisp of gold ever before us, advancing, receding, tantalizing us, but always evading our eager grasp.

"How many are good for a climb?" demanded Jack, when he had told of our escape.

Half a dozen of us acknowledged the soft impeachment. The others remained below, when we had reached the Rock. We climbed slowly, picking our way, groping, staggering over boulders, bruising our shins, tearing our hands, cursing good-humoredly but impelled onward and upward.

"Thet Saw-Ridge ought to be reported," vowed Bellamy, as he puffed and panted up the incline.

"I reckon we'll never see him again," prophesied Dick. "He's a coward. He thinks he's done for Jack, so he's shown a clean pair o' heels."

"Here we are!" announced our van-guard.

"Well boys, how do you like the view?" he asked.

"View!" snorted Dick. "Say,—is that all you brought us up here for? I thought you were goin' to enact some sort o' gun-play for us."

"Tell us just how it happened—" began Cook.

But a shriek interrupted him. We turned. There was old Bellamy, the hoariest campaigner of the lot down upon his knees clawing at the earth.

"The pay-streak! The pay-streak!" he yelled in a high treble.

Where the giant-head crest had rested there now shone a myriad veins of a dull yellow color, intermingled with dirt and rock. It was the color our eyes had long sought in vain, and it spread upon all sides and ran down for yards into the canyon. We fell upon our knees also, (all but Jack who stood grinning at the joy his little surprise had called forth) and began crawling, clutching, scraping and shouting like a lot of men gone suddenly mad. Bellamy, poor old fellow wept like a child, and then cackled, and pawed at the earth like a puppy.

"There's oodles of it—oodles of it!" he raved.

The find was a rich one—rich beyond our wildest imaginings.

"Hooray for Dead-End Camp!" chortled Cook, "watch her spring to life once more!"

"Hooray for Jack! He diskivered it!" cried another. Bellamy still crawled about on hands and knees, mumbling like a maniac. The old fever had hit him hard. "This news'll travel faster'n greased lightning, so come on lads, an' stake yer claims!" said Cook.

"Hold!" interposed Dick. "These diggin's, whole and entire belong to Jack Wynne. It's the law o' the Yukon, lads."

There was a silence. Jack Wynne now drew a sheet of paper from some place about him and folded it several times. We watched him, fascinated, and still in silence. Then he produced a stub of pencil. Next he tore the paper into twelve bits and made markings on each piece.

"Pass them round," he said, handing the lot to Jakey Olson. The Swede gave us each a slip, and kept one himself. There were a few left over, to be given to the others who had not come.

"One-twelfth share, Giant-Head Claim," we read.

After the cheering had subsided and when we had lifted Jack shoulder high to bear him down hill, we turned for another look across the territory that spread away upon all sides into dim distances from the eminence upon which we stood. The evening was clear as crystal and the few smoke wreaths ascended like gray plumes into the blue translucent air.

"Look lads," said Dick, "look away yonder between the Piapot range and the sea."

We gazed long and finally discerned a tiny dark speck many miles distant on the dun plain, to the south. The speck moved. We judged that it had just set out on the second lap of its journey, and that it was travelling at a fair rate of speed. No need to ask what it was. Truly has it been said—"the wicked flee when no man pursues."