

set tin plates and mugs and heap the table with food. "You been up the Big Salmon all summer?" he asked, as his host pulled the coffee pot and fried moose meat off the stove and motioned him to sit in.

"Yes," was the answer, vouchsafed between bites. "Found some pretty fair bars. Washed out not a half-bad stake."

Gene's eyes flashed at the information, but he discretely lowered his head over his plate.

"Going back in the spring?" he asked, casually.

Camrose nodded while he helped them both to beans. "Care to try it?" he inquired. "There's gravel enough for two."

"Afraid I can't. Haven't any grub-stake, thanks to that bloody hole of yours."

"That's all right," declared Camrose, the generosity of the true old-timer springing forth. "Don't you worry about that. I got grub-stake enough for us both. The bars were pretty fair. Pretty fair, you know, Tagus—"

HE paused impressively, and looked significant things across the table.

Tagus stopped the great slab of pilot bread on the way to his mouth. "You don't mean—that is, you ain't struck a big thing?"

Camrose chuckled knowingly and cocked a triumphant eye. "I got some poke," he admitted.

"You don't say? And on the bars!" Gene pondered heavily, silent except for the sound of his munching. The meal was good, the best he had since quitting Skagway. Camrose had little luxuries to help him through the lonely winter—sugar, salt, pepper, pickles, condensed milk, stewed prunes, and suchlike. He had spread everything available for the visitor, whose coming, though accidental, was a boon to his isolated soul and a break in the wintry monotony to be keenly relished.

Tagus had never spent a winter alone under the north's long night. He could not understand Camrose's attitude, his beaming delight in this hour of companionship, his expansiveness of manner, his generosity, his careless trust in mentioning riches guarded only by cabin walls. He could not understand, because he was not such a man as Camrose. Camrose belonged to the outland breed, open-hearted, open-handed, fearless, fine, true as the North star to any worthy man, bitter as Arctic frost toward the pilager and crook. And Camrose was far from supposing that at his table, eating salt and breaking bread with him, sat a man who was a ruthless pilager, a confirmed crook, a dangerous thug, and a vile conglomeration of various darker evils. Camrose had given him of his services. He had given him of his food. He was ready to give him of his money.

Supper over, they smoked and gossiped of the camps and trails, and Camrose again urged Tagus to try the river bars in spring.

But Gene demurred. "I ain't got no grub-stake," he objected, craftily "And I ain't sure it'd be worth my while."

"Worth your while!" echoed Camrose, with a whistle of surprise. "Wait a minute!" He jumped upon his chair, groped on a four-foot shelf up near the ceiling, and threw on the table a long poke like an over-grown sausage.

The poke thumped heavily. Gene's eyes glittered brighter than they had done at supper, and a scarlet stain flushed his cheeks. It was the biggest poke he had ever seen, probably because they were always more or less depleted when they came his way before in those Skagway days. He hefted the poke, staring at it between his hands in a sort of speechless fascination.

"What'll she weigh?" asked Camrose, speculatively.

"Maybe ten pounds!" blurted Gene.

"Mighty near it," corroborated Camrose. He smiled benignantly through the haze of tobacco smoke that filled the cabin. "Three thousand dollars there if there's a cent. Washed her all in three months. Thousand a month. Think it's worth while?"

Tagus suddenly shoved the poke away, as if he

dared not trust himself in contact with it. "My Lord, it certainly is. No mistake about that. I got to go to Dawson, though."

"It's coarse gold," Camrose observed, untying the poke strings and letting some of the dust sift through his fingers. "Coarse and flat. That kind assays high. There's no chance of you changing your mind?"

An unholy light flamed in Gene's face at sight of the yellow grains. Camrose was sifting away and did not see. Only he heard a powerful set of teeth click sharply. He looked up, but Gene's expression had changed into a mask of stolid indifference.

"No chance of your changing your mind, eh?"

"No chance. I got to make Dawson."

"Ain't you lost everything?"



"In the centre of the glow crouched Tagus with the poke of gold in his hand."

Tagus nodded, sullenly.

"Well, here!" Some ounces of dust poured out on the table.

Gene grabbed Camrose's arm.

"Hold on," he commanded, some spark of his long-dead better nature flaming into life. "I—I can't take that."

"Leggo," laughed Camrose, pulling his arm away. "I'm doing this. Take me for a miser?"

He heaped a little golden pyramid on the table corner, retied the strings of the poke, and threw it up on the shelf.

"Take that," he ordered, kindly. "Take it or I'll sweep it off onto the floor."

Camrose's palm threatened imminently, so Tagus sullenly took the dust. He offered no word of thanks. An awkward restraint had settled on him, a selfish bitterness, and his tongue was tied.

CAMROSE, whistling cheerfully, crammed the stove full of big knots which would last till after midnight, and moved Gene's steaming clothes a fraction closer.

"They'll be dry by morning," he announced. "But that ain't saying you got to hit the trail that soon."

"I got to," Tagus declared, arranging a bed on the floor with some of Camrose's extra blankets. "Got to make Dawson City."

"Just as you say," assented Camrose.

They pulled off their shoe-packs, which was all the undressing any one did on trail or in cabin with the mercury thirty below. Camrose blew out the tallow light and felt for the bunk on the wall of which Tagus had refused to deprive him. A seasoned north-man, he was asleep in five minutes. As for Tagus, he never closed a lash. Before his eyes flashed the sheen of sifting yellow gold and in his veins burned the lust of a lifetime of pillaging.

On toward midnight Gene sat up. He drew on his shoe-packs carefully, noiselessly laced them, and as noiselessly crept to the chair beneath the shelf. He stood upon it as Camrose had done, groped for the poke, and seized it with quivering fingers. So far he had not made a sound, but as he turned to step off the chair, his shoe-pack, greasy with its oil-tan finish, slipped on the edge of the seat and threw him off his balance. His palm, shoved suddenly out against the wall, righted him even while in mid-air, and he avoided a fall, but the thud of his weight as he landed on his soft foot-gear shook the slab floor. He heard Camrose turn in the bunk.

"Who's that?" his host demanded, sharply. "Oh, it's you, Tagus! Forgot I had a partner. Stoking up?"

Tagus caught desperately at the chance, and kicked his feet noisily in the corner. "Yes," he answered, making a great effort to steady his voice, "but where in thunder is this wood?"

"Over in that other corner." Camrose slipped off the edge of his bunk. "Wait a jiffy, and you can see."

There was a swift clang of metal as Camrose swung open the stove door for his guest to see. The red glow lit up the square of the opposite wall like a limelight view. In the centre of the glow crouched Tagus with the poke of gold in his hand.

Camrose stared a second and jumped for him. Tagus swung up the ten-pound poke like the sand-bag he could use so cunningly and landed squarely on Camrose's head. Camrose fell stunned, and as if his inert self still made struggle to prevent the thug's escape, his senseless body rolled between Gene's legs and almost tripped him as he dashed out the door.

GENE'S snowshoes were stuck in a bank outside. He inserted his toes in the harness, twisted the heel loops in place, and was off, running with a long, lurching stride upon the river trail.

What matter if Camrose had saved his life there by the water-hole? What matter if he had taken Camrose's shelter, sat by his fire, eaten his food, smoked his tobacco, bedded in his blankets? He had the gold. That answered all. Here in his breast was the yellow stuff, and yonder at the end of the trail was Dawson. But he had to hurry. Camrose would have his senses before morning and maybe strength enough to follow. Let him follow then! Tagus felt for him a great contempt. He had the start, and he would see to it that he was never caught up with. And once at Dawson, he was safe. Into that great maelstrom of converging stampedes with its forty thousand men he could plunge and Camrose or any one else be none the wiser. There was an under-world there, deeper than that of Skagway, where he might dwell secure.

Tagus rushed on. It was necessary to travel all night. He must make the Little Salmon, thirty miles away, by morning. A trader had a post there, and he could buy the food he lacked. It was dangerous travelling thus after dark. There were rapids, air-holes, and the Yukon springs that never freeze. Yet he had no choice. He had to take his chance. If he went through, he could stop and build a fire, but he would not halt until compelled.

The air was very cold, much colder than at evening. Tagus reckoned it forty below. That was hard on the lungs, but he couldn't help it. He drew the hood of the parka tight and covered his mouth. As he ran on with increased speed, only his hard glittering eyes showed under the fur fringe. The night was like some gigantic vault with the chill of death in it. It pierced his marrow in spite of his exertion. His body steamed and yet was cold, and the vapour from his skin froze in hoar frost form outside the many ply of garments. About him as he ran, the ice boomed and cracked with thunderous sounds under the intense frost. A dancing gleam shot here and there over the congealed river surface. It had the suggestion of flashes of lightning following the thundering, but it was really the billions of snow particles on the Lewes' banks giving back the light of the diamond stars. There

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