

The Covenant of Salt and Bread

AT times in the outland, charity, honour, and brotherhood die sudden, deplorable deaths. On occasions the ten commandments are shattered and the fragments ground to dust. Yet though the decalogue does not always hold for those of the high north, there exists one covenant infallible. It is the covenant of salt and bread.

Who eats salt and breaks bread with a man shall not harm that man!

From St. Michaels to the Ramparts of the Porcupine, from Lake Liard to Dyea Beach, men of the northland know that law. He who transgresses it takes the consequences. Sometimes the consequences arrive in the form of a rifle bullet fired in mad pursuit, sometimes in the shape of a noosed rope over the branch of a handy spruce, sometimes in other ways. But invariably they are sure and sufficient.

All other laws Gene Tagus had broken with impunity—also with immunity. Honourable men of the trail, men who swore by the code of things, wondered at his seemingly perfect immunity. In the sink-hole of Skagway, with its mired streets, sordid waterfront, riotous saloons, and flambuoyant dance halls, whence frantic gold seekers departed over the White and Chilcoot Passes for the glamorous hinterland, Gene Tagus lived his eventful days, unjailed. United States marshals had not as yet cleaned out the Alaskan coast camps, and Mounted Police were scarce in the Yukon. Soapy Smith's gang reigned at the zenith of its power, and Soapy's right-hand man was the redoubtable Gene Tagus. There arose no need for such men to hit the Dawson Trail. Their golden harvest was gathered there in Skagway. They lay in wait for the lucky ones from the Inside who returned over the Passes with fat pokes. Dance hall or saloon, gaming table or sand bag, it was all the same. All formed part of the Soapy Smith combine. The stakes of the Eldorado and Bonanza kings passed over to the treasury of this strange under-world trust, and along with Soapy and the other evil magnates Gene Tagus divided the spoils.

But one night there occurred an error in division, Gene's arithmetic being as bad as his morals when it came to dividends, and in the morning Soapy immediately rectified it.

"You're done here," he declared. One hand flourished wrathfully in Gene's face, the other shifted back under his own coat near his hip pocket. "There's honour among thieves. But you ain't got it. Not a red cent do you draw this month. And you hike on the minute. Wade into the sea, or climb the Passes. I don't care so long as you leave this coast."

Now, the month was December, and the gale-driven winter waves were icing all the iron shore. Gene Tagus did not fancy wading into the sea. The Passes seemed the lesser evil. Given somewhat to not altogether unsuccessful argument with his fellow men, he knew better than argue with Smith. He saw where Soapy had his gun hand and remembered well that his former partner was seconds quicker on the draw.

Though generally taken to be a quiet and harmless man, Soapy had a mighty reputation as a killer. Moreover, he never broke his word. Not a cent of that month's spoils did Tagus get when he departed. Most of the income of other months he had already squandered like a true gambler. Barely enough was left to buy dogs and outfit for the trail he was forced to take.

THE White Pass route held forth no sweet inducements. It was too long, he thought, and his feet were none too hard. A couple of years of easy Skagway living had well-nigh unfitted him for any privation whatever. The Chilcoot Pass suited better. It was steeper, but the miles from Dyea Beach to Lake Linderman he reckoned only twenty-eight. It was far too precipitous for dogs, yet he could buy them on the other side. Assuredly if he had to go to Dawson, his way lay over Chilcoot Mountain. So for the consideration of a dollar a mile he took passage in a rowboat with a longshoreman rowing to Dyea, six miles across the corner of Taiya Inlet. There he landed at the beginning of the trail. At the end, six hundred miles away, was Dawson City, where only he might ply his trade. Cursing Soapy Smith for his banishment and enforced march, Tagus took up the journey through the snow-smothered, boulder-cobbled Dyea Flats.

Hordes of men before him in that year had strained to the north, hopeful, eager, frenzied for

This story is one of the best ever turned out by the man who wrote "Empery." It's a tale of the far north; gold, avarice, hospitality, honour and knavery jostling together. The two characters are bold, realistic types. The story is full of strong sentiment, without gush.

By SAMUEL ALEXANDER WHITE

Author of "Empery," "The Wildcatter," etc.

Drawing by Arthur Heming

this selfsame trail. Thousands had turned their backs on all they loved in the sunland and on mortgaged homes in order to set triumphant feet upon it. An army of Argonauts they had poured inland, drawn by the magic yellow lure.

But not so Gene Tagus! Without ambition, without fascination, without glamour, without feeling of any kind except sullen resentment, he shuffled forward on his snowshoes, his bullet head down, his packsack and blanket roll strapped to his huge, slouching shoulders. The trail ran like a trench between twin ramparts of snow across the two miles of Dyea Flats and wound upward through Canyon City and Sheep Camp to the steepest pitch of Chilcoot called the Scales. All the way along it, camped here, in motion there, delayed at various points, the rear of the great autumn stampede trickled in to the magnetic Yukon. Like sand bags on the snow entrenchments provision caches walled the path, and piles of hand sledges, discarded where the incline grew too sharp for dragging, stood up like strong redoubts. Sheep Camp had become a shelter for the cripples and the beaten, Canyon City a baggage depot and a sorting place of men. On the Scales, too, were huge freight deposits thrown down while the owners back-tripped for more. Hundreds toiled there like galley slaves, and Tagus marvelled at their frenzy and their desperate haste. Would he work like that for gold? Not for all the gold in all the gold countries from Nome to Cape Town! He was lightly laden, and although he clawed his way as well as climbed up the cliff-like walls of Chilcoot's crest, he came safely over the pass and down the divide to Crater Lake. Here was a larger and more congested camp, where trafficking and outfitting went on night and day. Sleds were coming into use again on this side of the pass, and great loads were being freighted across Crater Lake, Mountain Lake, and Canyon Lake to Lake Linderman, the end of the twenty-eight mile traverse. At Linderman Gene Tagus bought a dog team and sledge from the famous old musher, Silas Manning. Also he purchased additional provisions for himself and dried salmon for the dogs. The packsack and blankets came off his shoulders. The whole outfit was securely lashed to the sledge, and more cheerful than at any time since leaving Skagway, Tagus mushed out on the trail up the frozen lakes.

Linderman was like a floor, and Bennett, too. He made as much as forty miles that day and camped far up Bennett, near West Arm. In the morning it was thirty below, but clear weather, and the trail held good, as it did for many days. In the taintless, bracing cold, Tagus left Bennett behind and forged on, making night camps where he found the shelter and the timber good. He went up Tagish Lake, past Windy Arm and Taku Arm to Tagish Post, on through Lake Marsh to the mouth of the McClintock, where the Lewes River trail began. Still more cheerful Tagus was. Everything broke right for him. He had a packed trail, splendid camps, sound sledge, and lusty dogs. The dangerous river stretch to the Whitehorse camp brought no accident, nor even the treacherous Thirty Mile. He crossed Lake LaBarge, a widening of the Lewes River, and mushed past the Hootalinqua towards the Big Salmon. No man had ever had a better journey so far. Tagus chuckled at his luck. Or was it luck? Maybe the perils and the herculean endeavours of the trail, of which he had heard so much, were only myths and lies. Here he was of a late afternoon at Cassier Bar, and there on the right lay the Semenof Hills, down past which the Big Salmon flowed. He swung carelessly along, not bothering to steer at the gee pole of the sledge, and idly figured on a

camping place somewhere below. He did not notice the loping huskies raise their heads, sniff hungrily at the air, and swerve from the middle river ice at the confluence of the streams. He was not alert till an ominous crash jerked him up short in his stride.

AND what happened occurred so quickly that he had neither time to raise a hand nor take a step to prevent. The river ice, apparently a yard thick, collapsed under the feet of the two foremost dogs. They dropped through like stones, dragging the other three and the sledge into the hole they had broken. The current of the Big Salmon combined at that point with the current of the Lewes, and the force of the double flow swept the dogs under the ice. The seven-foot sledge jammed a moment, shaken furiously by the huskies' struggles, and Gene Tagus sprang for it. With an oath he threw himself face down on the rim of the hole. He grabbed the gee pole and felt for the sheath knife at his belt to cut the traces and save his outfit. But wolf dogs' drowning paroxysms are powerful, and even as Gene laid hold on his knife, the sledge sank through under a tremendous jerk, and he was plunged in icy water to his neck. The words of fire and brimstone died on his lips as he seized on the strong ice at the edge of the hole and clambered out. Cold fear struck him like a knife in the heart when he stood up and felt his garments instantly stiffen like mail in the sixty-some degrees of frost. There was a confused shouting in his ears which he took to be water sounds as he stumbled dazedly about. He shook his head to stop it, and the shouting came clear—a human voice.

"Run," it shouted. "Run like blazes!"

And almost as swift as the voice its owner appeared before him, speeding from the east bank, a parka-clad, shoe-packed, bare-headed man.

He seized Tagus by the arm. "I got a cabin up the bank. Come on."

Slowly at first and then with ever-increasing rapidity he shoved and pulled Tagus along. Running wild, they hit the cabin door together and fell in the middle of the floor. Gene's limbs were numb. He could do little with his frozen garments, but his rescuer stripped them off and rolled him up beside the red hot stove.

"Rub," he commanded. "Chase the numbness. That's all it is. You ain't bitten at all. I'll rustle some dry clothes."

Gene rubbed stubbornly, though the heat of the fire was like acid in his cold flesh, rubbed till the clothes came.

Here, proffered the man, dumping down a bundle consisting of thick Arctic underwear, flannel shirt, woollen vest, parka, trousers, socks, German socks, and shoe-packs. "It's my spare outfit. They'll fit all right. You're about my build. Where you heading, stranger, when you soused?"

"Dawson City. My name's Tagus."

"Mine's Camrose. It's too bad. Whole outfit and dogs! It's too derved bad."

"It's hell," exploded Tagus, his usual brutish anger at misfortune reviving with his vital forces. "What's wrong with that ice? A spring?"

CAMROSE'S face became apologetic, almost guilty. "My water-hole," he enlightened. "She's froze a skin since noon, I guess."

"Water-hole! Great Scott, man, how big's your pail?"

"It ain't that," Camrose hastened to explain. "I happened to cut right on an eddy, where the Big Salmon strikes the Lewes. The swirl had a hollow underneath where it never froze."

"What'd you cut it away out there for?"

From anger Tagus was going on to accusation.

"Had to," returned Camrose, with some warmth. "She's froze to gravel next the shore. Why in thunder didn't you keep the middle trail?"

Tagus averted his eyes. Dogs, I guess. Must have smelled your cabin. Maybe I was careless. Got any whiskey, Camrose?"

"No. I dassen't fool with it. That's why I'm wintering here. Dawson City gets me. I can't last on any creek there. Got to keep outside. Sorry about the whiskey, Tagus. But hot coffee's just as good. The pot's on. It's eating-time, anyway, ain't it?"

"Feels like it." Tagus rubbed a hand around his stomach. He was warm. All he wanted now was food and money. Presently Camrose would give him food. He wondered if the man had any money. Continually he wondered that, watching Camrose