

THE YUKON TRAIL

An Alaskan Love Story
By
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HOLT RECOGNIZES ELLIOT, AND THE TWO OVERPOWERING THE KIDNAPERS, RETURN TO KAMATLAH, WHERE ELLIOT LEARNS TRUTH ABOUT COAL LAND DEALS

Synopsis.—As a representative of the government Gordon Elliot is on his way to Alaska to investigate coal claims. On the boat he meets and becomes interested in a fellow passenger whom he learns is Sheba O'Neill, also "going in." Colby Macdonald, active head of the land-grabbing syndicate under investigation, comes aboard. Macdonald is attacked by mine laborers whom he has discharged, and the active intervention of Elliot probably saves his life. Elliot and Macdonald become in a measure friendly, though the latter does not know that Elliot is on a mission which threatens to spoil plans of Macdonald to acquire millions of dollars through the unlawful exploitation of immensely valuable coal fields. Elliot also "gets a line" on the position occupied by Wally Selfridge, Macdonald's right-hand man, who is returning from a visit to "the States," where he had gone in an effort to convince the authorities that there was nothing wrong in Macdonald's methods. Landing at Kusak, Elliot finds that old friends of his, Mr. and Mrs. Paget, are the people whom Sheba has come to visit. Mrs. Paget is Sheba's cousin. At dinner Elliot reveals to Macdonald the object of his coming to Alaska. The two men, naturally antagonistic, now also become rivals for the hand of Sheba. Macdonald, foreseeing failure of his financial plans if Elliot learns the facts, sends Selfridge to Kamatlah to arrange matters so that Elliot will be deceived as to the true situation. Elliot also leaves for Kamatlah and, wandering from the trail, believes that he faces death. Selfridge, on his arrival at Kamatlah, has his agents abduct Gideon Holt, old-time miner, who knows too much about Macdonald's activities.

CHAPTER VIII—Continued.

A man staggered drunkenly into view. He reeled halfway across the mouth of the draw and stopped. His eyes, questing dully, fell upon the camp. He stared, as if doubtful whether they had played him false, then lurched toward the waiting group.

"Lost and all in," Holway said in a whisper to Dud.

The other man nodded. Neither of them made a move toward the stranger, who stopped in front of their camp and looked with glazed eyes from one to another. His face was drawn and haggard and lined. Extreme exhaustion showed in every movement. He babbled incoherently.

"Don't you see he's starving and out of his head?" snapped Holt brusquely. "Get him grub, pronto."

The old man rose and moved toward the suffering man. "Come, pard. That's all right. Sit down right here and go to it, as the old sayin' is." He led the man to a place beside Big Bill and made him sit down. "Better light a fire, boys, and get some coffee on. Don't give him too much solid grub at first."

The famished man ate what was given him and clamored for more. "Coming up soon, pardner," Holt told him soothingly. "Now tell us how come you to get lost."

The man nodded gravely. "Hit that line low, Gord. Hit 'er low. Only three yards to gain."

"Plumb bughouse," commented Dud, chewing tobacco stolidly.

"Out of his head—that's all. He'll be right enough after he's fed up and



A Man Staggered Drunkenly Into View.

had a good sleep. But right now he's sure some Exhibit A. Look at the bones sticking through his cheeks," Big Bill commented.

"Come, Old-Timer. Get down in your collar to it. Once more now. Don't lie down on the job. All together, now." The stranger clucked to an imaginary horse and made a motion of lifting with his hands.

"Looks like his haws is bogged down in Fifty Mile swamp," suggested Holt.

"Looks like," agreed Dud. The old miner said no more. But his eyes narrowed to shining slits. If this man had come through Fifty Mile swamp, he must have started from the river. That probably meant that he had come from Kusak. He was a young man, talking the jargon of a college football player. Without doubt

he was, in the old phrasing of the North, a chechako.

Gideon Holt's sly brain moved keenly to the possibility that he could put a name to this human derelict they had picked up. He began to see it as more than a possibility, as even a probability, at least as a fifty-fifty chance. A sardonic grin hovered about the corners of his grim mouth. It would be a strange freak of irony if Wally Selfridge, to prevent a meeting between him and the government land agent, had sent him a hundred miles into the wilderness to save the life of Gordon Elliot and so had brought about the meeting that otherwise would never have taken place.

CHAPTER IX.

The Rah-Rah Boy Functions. Big Bill grumbled a good deal at the addition to the party. It would be decidedly awkward if this stranger should become rational and understand the status of the camp he had joined. The word of old Holt alone might be negligible, but supported by that of a disinterested party it would be a very different matter. Still, there was no help for it. They would have to take care of the man until he was able to travel. At the worst, Big Bill could give him a letter to Selfridge explaining things and so pass the buck to that gentleman.

Gid Holt had, with the tacit consent of his guards, appointed himself as a sort of nurse to the stranger. Early in the evening the sick man fell into a sound sleep, from which he did not awake until morning. George was away looking after the packhorses, Dud was cooking breakfast, and Big Bill, his rifle close at hand, was chopping young firs fifty feet back of the camp. The cook also had a gun, loaded with buckshot, lying on a box beside him, so that they were taking no chances with their prisoner.

The old miner turned from rearranging the boughs of green fir on the smudge to see that his patient was awake and his mind normal. The quiet, steady eyes resting upon him told him that the delirium had passed. "Pretty nearly all in, wasn't it?" the young man said.

The answer of Gid Holt was an odd one. "Yep. Seven—eleven—fifteen. Take 'er easy, old man," he said in his shrill, high voice as he moved toward the man in the blankets. Then, in a low tone, while he pretended to arrange the bedding over the stranger, he asked a quick question.

"Are you Elliot?"

"Yes."

"Don't fell them. Talk football lingo as if you was still out of your head," Holt turned and called to Dud. "Says he wants some breakfast."

"On the way," the cook answered. Holt seemed to be soothing the delirious man. What he really said was this: "Selfridge has arranged a plant for you at Kamatlah. The camp has been turned inside out to fool you. They've brought me here a prisoner so as to keep me from telling you the truth. Psi! Tune up now."

Big Bill had put down his ax and was approaching. He was not exactly suspicious, but he did not believe in taking unnecessary chances.

"I tell you I'm out of training. Played the last game, haven't we? Come through with a square meal, you four-flusher," demanded Elliot in a querulous voice. He turned to Macy.

"Look here, Cap. Haven't I played the game all fall? Don't I get what I want now we're through?"

The voice of the young man was excited. His eyes had lost their quiet steadiness and roved restlessly to and fro. If Big Bill had held any doubts one glance dissipated them.

"Sure you do. Hustle over and help Dud with the breakfast, Holt. I'll look out for our friend."

Elliot and Holt found no more chance to talk together that morning.

Sometimes the young government official lay staring straight in front of him. Sometimes he appeared to doze. Again he would talk in the disjointed way of one not clear in the head.

An opportunity came in the afternoon for a moment.

"Keep your eyes skinned for a chance to lay out the guard tonight and get his gun," Holt said quickly.

Gordon nodded. "I don't know that I've got to do everything just as you say," he complained aloud for the benefit of George, who was passing on his way to the place where the horses were hobbled.

"Now—now! There ain't nobody trying to boss you," Holt explained in a patient voice.

"They'd better not," snapped the invalid.

"Some scrapper—that kid," said the horse wrangler with a grin.

Macy took the first watch that night. He turned in at two after he had roused Dud to take his place. The cook had been on duty about an hour when Elliot kicked Holt, who was sleeping beside him, to make sure that he was ready. The old man answered the kick with another.

Presently Gordon got up, yawned and strolled toward the edge of the camp.

"Don't go and get lost, young fellow," cautioned Dud.

Gordon, on his way back, passed behind the guard, who was sitting tailor



His Strong Fingers Closed on the Gullet of the Man.

fashion before a smudge with a muley shotgun across his knees.

"This ain't no country for chechakoes to be wandering around without a keeper," the cook continued. "Looks like your folks would have better sense than to let their rah-rah boy—"

He got no farther. Elliot dropped to one knee and his strong fingers closed on the gullet of the man so tightly that not even a groan could escape him. The old miner, waiting with every muscle ready and every nerve under tension, flung aside his blanket and hurled himself at the guard. It took him less time than it takes to tell to wrest the gun from the cook.

He got to his feet just as Big Bill, his eyes and brain still fogged with sleep, sat up and began to take notice of the disturbance.

"Don't move," warned Holt sharply. "Better throw your hands up. No monkey business, do you hear? I'd as lief blow a hole through you as not."

Big Bill turned bitterly to Elliot. "So you were faking all the time, young fellow. We save your life and you round on us. You're a pretty slick proposition as a double-crosser."

"And that ain't all," chirped up Holt blithely. "Let me introduce our friend to you, Mr. Big Bill Macy. This is Gordon Elliot, the land agent appointed to look over the Kamatlah claims. Selfridge gave you lads this penitentiary job so as I wouldn't meet Elliot when he reached the camp. If he hadn't been so darned anxious about it, our young friend would have died here on the divide. But Mr. Selfridge kindly outfitted a party and sent us a hundred miles into the hills to rescue the perishing, as the old sayin' goes. Consequence is, Elliot and me meet up and have that nice confidential talk after all. The ways of Providence is strange, as you might say, Mr. Macy."

"Your trick," conceded Big Bill sullenly. "Now what are you going to do with us?"

"Not a thing—going to leave you right here to prospect Wild Goose creek," answered Holt blandly. "Durden says there's gold up here—heaps of it."

Bill Macy condemned Durden in language profane and energetic. He didn't stop at Durden. Holt came in for a share of it, also Elliot and Selfridge.

"Cut it out, Bill. That line o' talk don't buy you anything," said Holway curtly. "What's the use of beefing?"

"Now you're shouting, my friend," agreed old Gideon. "I guess, Elliot, you can loosen up on the chef's throat awhile. He's had persuading enough don't you reckon? I'll sit here and sorter keep the boys company while you cut the pack-ropes and bring 'em here. But first I'd step in and unload all the hardware they're packing. If you don't one of them is likely to get anxious. I'd hate to see any of them commit suicide with none of their friends here to say, 'Don't he look natural?'"

Elliot brought back the pack-ropes and cut them into suitable lengths. Holt's monologue rambled on. He was garrulous and affable. Not for a long time had he enjoyed himself so much.

Gordon tied the hands of Big Bill behind him, then roped his feet together, after which he did the same for Holway. The old miner superintended the job and was not satisfied till he had added a few extra knots on his own behalf.

"That'll hold them for awhile, I shouldn't wonder. Now if you'll just cover friend chef with this sawed-off gat, Elliot, I'll throw the diamond hitch over what supplies we'll need to get back to Kamatlah. I'll take one bronch and leave the other to the convicts," said Holt cheerfully.

"Forget that convict stuff," growled Macy. "With Macdonald back of us and the Guttenchilts back of him, you'll have a hectic time getting anything on us."

"That might be true if these folks were back of you. But are they? Course I ain't any Sherlock Holmes, but it don't look to me like they'd play any such fool system as this."

After Holt had packed one of the animals he turned to Elliot.

"I reckon we're ready."

Under orders from Elliot Dud fixed up the smudges and arranged the mosquito netting over the bound men so as to give them all the protection possible.

"We're going to take Dud with us for a part of the trip. We'll send him back to you later in the day. You'll have to fast till he gets back, but outside of that you'll do very well if you don't roll around trying to get loose. Do that, and you'll jar loose the mosquito netting. You know what that means," explained Gordon.

"It ain't likely any grizzlies will come pokin' their noses into camp. But you never can tell. Any last words you want sent to relatives?" asked Gideon Holt.

The last words they heard from Big Bill as they moved down the draw were sulphuric.

It was three o'clock in the morning by the watch when they started. About nine they threw off for breakfast. By this time they were, just across the divide and were ready to take the down trail.

"I think we'll let Dud go now," Elliot told his partner in the adventure. "Better hold him till afternoon. Then they can't possibly reach us till we get to Kamatlah."

"What does it matter if they do? We have both rifles and have left them only one revolver. Besides, I don't like to leave two bound men alone in so wild a district for any great time. No, we'll start Dud on the back trail. That grizzly you promised Big Bill might really turn up."

The two men struck the headwaters of Wild Goose creek about noon and followed the stream down. They traveled steadily without haste. So long as they kept a good lookout there was nothing to be feared from the men they had left behind. They had both a long start and the advantage of weapons.

If Elliot had advertised for a year he could not have found a man who knew more of Colby Macdonald's past than Gideon Holt. The old man had worked a claim on Frenchman creek with him and had by sharp practice—so at least he had come to believe—been lawed out of his rights by the shrewd Scotsman. For seventeen years he had nursed a grudge against Macdonald, and he was never tired of talking about him. One story in particular interested Gordon.

"There was Farrell O'Neill. He was a good fellow, Farrell was, but he had just one weakness. There was times when he liked the bottle too well. He'd let it alone for months and then just lap the stuff up. It was the time of the stampede to Bonanza creek. Well, the news of the strike on Bonanza reached Dawson and we all burnt up the trail to get to the new ground first. O'Neill was one of the first. He got in about twenty below Discovery, if I remember. Mac wasn't in Dawson, but he got there next mornin' and heard the news. He lit out for Bonanza pronto."

The old miner stopped, took a chew of tobacco, and looked down into the valley far below where Kamatlah could just be seen, a little huddle of huts.

"Well?" asked Elliot. It was occasionally necessary to prompt Holt when he paused for his dramatic effects.

"Mac drops in and joins O'Neill at night. They knew each other, y' un-

derstand, so o' course it was natural Mac would put up at his camp. O'Neill had a partner and they had located together. Fellow named Strong."

"Not Hanford Strong, a little, heavy-set man somewhere around fifty?"

"You've tagged the right man. Know him?"

"I've met him."

"Well, I never heard anything against Han Strong. Anyway, he was off that night packing grub up while Farrell held down the claim. Mac had a jug of booze with him. He got Farrell tanked up. You know Mac—how he can put it across when he's a mind to. He's a forceful devil, and he can be a mighty likable one. But when he is friendliest you want to watch out he don't slip an uppercut at you that'll put you out of biz. He done that to Farrell—and done it a-plenty."

"How?"

"O'Neill got mellowed up till he thought Mac was his best friend. He was ready to eat out of his hand. So Mac works him up to sign a contract—before witnesses too; trust Mac for that—exchanging his half interest in the claim for five hundred dollars in cash and Mac's no-count lease on Frenchman creek. Inside of a week Mac and Strong struck a big pay streak. They took over two hundred thousand from the spring clean-up."

"It was nothing better than robbery."

"Call it what you want to. Anyhow it stuck. O'Neill kicked, and that's all the good it did him. He consulted lawyers at Dawson. Finally he got so discouraged that he plumb went to pieces—got on a long bat and stayed there till his money ran out. Then one bitter night he starts up to Bonanza to have it out with Mac. The mercury was so low it had run into the ground a foot. Farrell slept in a deserted cabin without a fire and not enough bedding. He caught pneumonia. By the time he reached the claim he was a mighty sick man. Next week he died. That's all Mac done to O'Neill. Not a thing that wasn't legal, either."

Gordon thought of Sheba O'Neill as she sat listening to the tales of Macdonald in Diane's parlor and his gorge rose at the man.

"But Mac had fell on his feet all right," continued Holt. "He got his start off that claim. Now he's a millionaire two or three times over, I reckon."

"They reached the outskirts of Kamatlah about noon of the third day. Gordon left Holt at his cabin after they had eaten and went in alone to look the ground over. He met Selfridge at the post office. That gentleman was effusive in his greeting.

"This is a pleasant surprise, Mr. Elliot. When did you get in? I'm down on business, of course. No need to tell you that—nobody would come to this hole for any other reason. Howland and his wife are the only possible people here. Of course you'll stop with us."

Elliot answered genially. "Pleasant time we had on the river, didn't we? Thanks awfully for your invitation, but I've already made arrangements for putting up."

"Where? There's no decent place in camp except at Howland's."

"I couldn't think of troubling him," countered Gordon.

"No trouble at all. We'll send for your things. Where are they?"

The land agent let him have it between the eyes. "At Gideon Holt's."



"At Gideon Holt's."

"I'm staying with him on his claim."

Wally had struck a match to light a cigarette, but this simple statement petrified him. His jaw dropped and his eyes bulged. Not till the flame burned his fingers did he come to life.

"Did you say you were staying—with Gid Holt?" he floundered.

"Yes. He offered to board me," answered the young man blandly.

"But—I didn't know he was here—"

seems to me I had heard—somewhere—that he was away. Seems to me I heard he went prospecting."

"He did. Up Wild Goose creek, with Big Bill Macy and two other men. But I asked him to come back with me—and he did."

Feebly Wally groped for the clue without finding it. Had Big Bill sold him out? And how had Elliot got into touch with him?

"Just so, Mr. Elliot. But really, you know, Howland can make you a great deal more comfortable than Holt. His wife is a famous cook. I'll have a man go get your traps."

"It's very good of you, but I think I won't move."

"Oh, but you must. Holt's nutty—nobody at home, you know. Everybody knows that."

"Is he? The old man struck me as being remarkably clear-headed. By the way, I want to thank you for sending a relief party out to find me, Mr. Selfridge. Except for your help I would have died in the hills."

This was another facet for Wally. What the devil did the fellow mean? The deuce of it was that he knew all the facts and Wally did not. One thing stood out to Selfridge like a sore thumb. His plans had come tumbling down like a house of cards. Either Big Bill had blundered amazingly, or he had played traitor. In either case Wally could guess pretty shrewdly whose hide Macdonald would tan for the failure. The chief wanted results. He did not ask of his subordinates how they got them. And this was the second time in succession that Selfridge had come to grief.

CHAPTER X.

Gordon Invites Himself to Dinner—and Does Not Enjoy It.

Big Bill and his companions reached Kamatlah early next day. They reported at once to Selfridge. It had been the intention of Wally to vent upon them the bad temper that had been gathering ever since his talk with Elliot. But his first sarcastic question drew such a snarl of anger that he reconsidered. The men were both sullen and furious.

The little man became alarmed. Instead of reproaches he gave them soft words and promises. The company would see them through. It would protect them against criminal procedure. But above all they must stand pat in denial. A conviction would be impossible even if the state's attorney filed an indictment against them. Meanwhile they would remain on the company pay roll.

Gordon Elliot was a trained investigator. Even without Holt at his side he would probably have unearthed the truth about the Kamatlah situation. But with the little miner by his side to tell him the facts, he found his task an easy one.

Selfridge followed orders and let him talk with the men freely. All of them had been drilled till they knew their story like parrots. They were suspicious of the approaches of Elliot, but they had been warned that they must appear to talk candidly. The result was that some talked too much and some not enough. They let slip admissions under skillful examination that could be explained on no other basis than that of company ownership.

Both Selfridge and Howland outdid themselves in efforts to establish close social relations. But Gordon was careful to put himself under no obligations. Within two weeks Elliot had finished his work at Kamatlah.

"Off for Kusak tomorrow," he told Holt that night.

The old miner went with him as a guide to the big bend. Gordon had no desire to attempt again Fifty Mile swamp without the help of someone who knew every foot of the trail. With Holt to show the way the swamp became merely a hard, gruelling mush through boggy lowlands.

Wary with the trail, they reached the river at the end of a long day. An Indian village lay sprawled along the bank, and through this the two men tramped to the roadhouse where they were to put up for the night.

Holt called to the younger man, who was at the time in the lead.

"Wait a minute, Elliot."

Gordon turned. The old Alaskan was offering a quarter to a little half-naked Indian boy. Shyly the four-year-old came forward, a step at a time, his finger in his mouth.

"What's your name, kid?" Holt flashed a look at Elliot that warned him to pay attention.

"Colmac," the boy answered bashfully.

His fist closed on the quarter, he turned, and like a startled caribou he fled to a comely young Indian woman standing near the trail.

With gleaming eyes Holt turned to Elliot. "Take a good look at the squaw," he said in a low voice.

Macdonald and Elliot drop pretense of friendship and start bitter struggle for Sheba's hand. The next installment tells how Macdonald gained the first advantage.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)