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CHAPTER XVIII. "Five Hundred Dollars a Potato."

PERSUADING, bullying, and, at times, by main strength, men were dragged from their bunks and forced to dress. Smoke selected the mildest cases for the burial squad. Another squad was told off to supply the wood by which the graves were burned down into the frozen muck and gravel. Still another squad had to chop firewood and partially supply every cabin. Those who were too weak for outdoor work were put to cleaning and scrubbing the cabins and washing clothes. One squad brought in many loads of spruce boughs and every stove was used for the brewing of spruce tea.

But, no matter what face Smoke and Shorty put on it, the situation was grim and serious. At least thirty fearful and impossible cases could not be taken from the beds, as the two men, with nausea and horror, learned, while one, a woman, died in Laura Sibley's cabin. Yet strong measures were necessary.

When the working gangs came in at noon they found decently cooked dinners awaiting them, prepared by the weaker members of their cabins under the tutelage and drive of Smoke and Shorty.

"That'll do," Smoke said at 3 in the afternoon. "Knock off. Go to your bunks. You may be feeling rotten now, but you'll be the better for it tomorrow. Of course it burrs to get well, but I'm going to get you well." "Too late," Amos Wentworth sneered pallidly at Smoke's efforts. "They ought to have started in that way last fall."

"Come along with me," Smoke answered. "Pick up those two pairs. You're not alling."

From cabin to cabin the three men went, dosing every man and woman with a full pint of spruce tea. Nor was it easy.

"You might as well learn at the start that we mean business," Smoke stated to the first obstinate, who lay on his back growling through set teeth. "Stand by, Shorty," Smoke caught the patient by the nose and tapped the solar plexus section so as to make the mouth gape open. "Now, Shorty! Down she goes!"

And down she went, accompanied with unavoidable splutterings and stranglings.

"We're covering this spruce tea route four times a day, and there are eighty of you to be dosed each time," Smoke informed Laura Sibley. "So we've no time to loaf. Will you take it, or must I hold your nose?" His thumb and forefinger hovered eloquently above her. "It's vegetable, so you needn't have any qualms."

"I'll take it," she quavered. "Hurry up!"

That night, exhausted as by no hard day of trail, Smoke and Shorty crawled into their blankets.

"I'm fairly sick with it," Smoke confessed. "The way they suffer is awful. But exercise is the only remedy I can think of, and it must be given a thorough trial. I wish we had a sack of raw potatoes."

"Spartans, he can't wash no more dishes," Shorty said. "It hurts him so he sweats his pain. I seen him sweat it. I had to put him back in the bunk he was that helpless."

"It only we had raw potatoes," Smoke went on. "The vital, essential something is missing from that prepared stuff. The life has been evaporated out of it."

"An' if that young fellow Jones in the Brown cabin don't croak before mornin' I miss my guess."

"For heaven's sake be cheerful," Smoke chided.

I'd get this scurvy. I only sold it so as to be able to buy a passage out of the country when the river opens." Despite the cessation of potato juice, the two treated cases continued to improve through the third day. The untreated cases went from bad to worse. On the fourth morning three corpses were buried.

Then Smoke and Shorty together invaded Wentworth's cabin, throwing him out in the snow, while they turned the interior upside down. Laura Sibley hobbled in and frantically joined them in the search.

Though the very floor was dug up, they discovered nothing.

Another day passed, during which they kept a steady watch on Went-



"I'll give you \$500 a potato up to \$50,000 worth."

worth's movements. Several times when he started out, water bucket in hand, for the creek they casually approached the cabin, and each time he hurried back without the water.

"They're cached right here in his cabin," Shorty said. "But where? We sure overhauled it plenty." He stood up and pulled on his mittens. "I'm goin' to find 'em if I have to pull the blame sack down a log at a time."

He glanced at Smoke, who, with an intent, absent face, had not heard him. "What's eatin' you?" Shorty demanded wrathfully.

"Just trying to remember something, Shorty."

"What's the game?" "Watch me, that's all," Smoke baffled. "I always told you, Shorty, that a deficient acquaintance with literature was a handicap, even in the Klondike. Now, what're we going to do come out of a book. I read it when I was a kid, and it will work. Come on!"

Several minutes later, under a pale gleaming, greenish aurora borealis, the two men crept up to Amos Wentworth's cabin. Carefully and noiselessly they poured kerosene over the logs, extra drenching the door frame and window sash. Then the match was applied, and they watched the flaming oil gather headway. They drew back beyond the growing light and waited.

They saw Wentworth rush out, stare wildly at the conflagration and plunge back into the cabin. Scarcely a minute elapsed when he emerged, this time slowly, half doubled over, his shoulders burdened by a sack, heavy and unmistakable.

Smoke and Shorty sprang at him like a pair of famished wolves. They hit him right and left at the same instant. He crumpled down under the weight of the sack, which Smoke pressed over with his hands to make sure. Then he felt his knees clasped by Wentworth's arms as the man turned a glastly face upward.

"Give me a dozen, only a dozen—half a dozen—and you can have the rest," he squalled. "Just half a dozen," he wailed. "Just half a dozen. I was going to turn them over to you—tomorrow. Yes, tomorrow. That was my idea. They're life! They're life! Just half a dozen!"

"Where's the other sack?" Smoke bluffed. "I ate it up," was the reply, unimpeachably honest. "That sack's all that's left. Give me a few. You can have the rest."

"Ate 'em up?" Shorty screamed. "A whole sack? An' them peezers dyin' for want of 'em! This for you! An' this! An' this! An' this! You swine! You hog!"

There was no sleep in camp that night. Hour after hour Smoke and Shorty went the rounds, doling the life-renewing potato juice, a quarter of a spoonful at a dose, into the poor ruined mouths of the population. And through the following day while one slept the other kept up the work.

There were no more deaths. The most awful cases began to mend with an immediacy that was startling.

"Nary a potato," Shorty told the whining, begging Wentworth. "You ain't even touched with scurvy. You got outside a whole sack, an' you're loaded against scurvy for twenty years. Knowin' you, I've come to understand God. I always wondered why he let Satan live. Now I know. He let him live just as I let you live. But it's a cryin' shame, just the same."

well fast. Shorty and I are leaving in a week, and there will be nobody to protect you when these men go after you. There's the trail, Dawson's eighteen days' travel."

"Gentlemen, I beg of you, listen to me," Wentworth whined. "I'm a stranger in this country. I don't know the trail. Let me travel with you. I'll give you \$1,000 if you'll let me travel with you."

"Sure," Smoke grinned maliciously, "if Shorty agrees."

"Who? Me?" Shorty stiffened for a supreme effort. "I ain't nobody. Wood ticks ain't got nothin' on me when it comes to humility. I'm a worm, a maggot, brother to the pollywog, a child of the blowfly. I ain't afraid or ashamed of nothin' that creeps or crawls. But travel with that mistake of creation—go 'way, man! I ain't proud, but you turn my stomach."

And Amos Wentworth went away, alone, dragging a sled loaded with provisions sufficient to last him to Dawson. A mile down the trail Shorty overhauled him.

"Come here to me," was Shorty's greeting. "Come across. Fork over Cough up."

"I don't understand," Wentworth quavered, shivering from recollection of the two beatings, hand and foot, he had already received from Shorty.

"That thousand dollars, dy'e understand that? That thousand dollars-gold Smoke bought that measly potato with. Come through."

And Amos Wentworth passed the gold sack over.

"Hope a skunk bites you an' you get bowlin' hydrophoby," were the terms of Shorty's farewell.

CHAPTER XIX. A Flutter in Eggs.

It was in the A. C. company's big store at Dawson that Lucille Arral beckoned Smoke Bellew over to the dry goods counter.

Smoke obeyed her call with alacrity. The man did not exist in Dawson who would not have been flattered by the notice of Lucille Arral, the singing soubrette of the tiny stock company that performed nightly at the Palace Opera House.

"Things are dead," she complained, with pretty petulance. "There hasn't been a standee for weeks. There's no dust in circulation. There's always standing room now at the opera house. And there hasn't been a mail from the outside for two whole weeks. In short, this burg has crawled into its cave and gone to sleep. We've got to do something. It needs livin', and you and I can do it. I've broken with Wild Water, you know."

Smoke caught two almost simultaneous visions. One was of Joy Gaslett, the other was of himself, in the midst of a "kiss snow" under a cold, arctic moon, being pot-shotted with accurateness and dispatch by the afforsaid Wild Water. Smoke's reluctance at raising excitement with the aid of Lucille Arral was too patent for her to miss.

"I'm not thinking what you are thinking at all, thank you," she chided, with a laugh and a pout. "Take it from me, Mr. Smoke Bellew, I'm not going to make love to you, and if you dare to make love to me Wild Water will take care of your case. You know him. Besides, I-I haven't really broken with him. Wild Water thinks I've broken with him, don't you see?"

"Well, have you, or haven't you?" "I haven't—there! But it's between you and me in confidence."

"Where do I come in, stalking horse or fall guy?" "Neither. You make a pot of money, we put across the laugh on Wild Water and cheer Dawson up, and best of all and the reason for it all, he gets disciplined. He needs it. He's—well, the best way to put it is he's too turbulent. He broke out last night again. Sowed the floor of the M. & M. with gold dust—all of a thousand dollars. You've heard of it, of course."

"Yes, this morning. But still I don't get you."

"Listen. He was too turbulent. I broke our engagement, and he's going around making a noise like a broken heart. Now we come to it. I like eggs."

"But what have eggs and appetite got to do with it?" Smoke demanded. "Everything, I like eggs. There's only a limited supply of eggs in Dawson."

"Sure. Slavovitch's restaurant has most of them. Ham and one egg, \$2. Ham and two eggs, \$5. That means \$3 an egg, retail."

"He likes eggs too," she continued. "But that's not the point. I like them. I have breakfast every morning at 11 o'clock at Slavovitch's. I invariably eat two eggs." She paused impressively. "Suppose, just suppose, somebody corners eggs."

She waited, and Smoke regarded her with admiring eyes, while in his heart he backed with approval Wild Water's choice of her.

Wild Water, you see, miss, he owns 'em. Pictures: Wild Water, triumphant, doing his best to look unconcerned while he eats his six eggs.

"Another picture: Slavovitch himself bringing two shirred eggs to me and saying: 'Compliments of Mr. Wild Water, miss. What can I do? What can I possibly do but smile at Wild Water? And then we make up, of course, and he'll consider it cheap if he has been compelled to pay \$10 for each and every egg in the corner."

"Go on, go on!" Smoke urged. "At what station do I climb on to the choo-choo cars or at what water tank do I get thrown off?"

"Ninny! You make that corner in eggs. You start in immediately, to-day. You can buy every egg in Dawson for \$3 and sell out to Wild Water at almost any advance. And then, afterward, we'll let the inside history come out. The laugh will be on Wild Water. His turbulence will be some subdued. You and I share the glory of it. You make a pile of money, and Dawson wakes up with a grand haul."

"Hey, Shorty!" Smoke called across the main street to his partner and crossed over. "I want you to do me a favor."

"Sure," Shorty said gallantly. "What is it? Let her rip."

"I want you to buy eggs for me—"

"Sure, an' floridly water an' talcum powder, if you say the word. Look here, Smoke, if you want to go in for high livin' you go an' buy your own eggs."

"I am going to buy, but I want you to help me to buy. You go right straight to Slavovitch's. Pay as high as \$3, but buy all he's got."

"Three dollars!" Shorty groaned. "An' I heard tell only yesterday that he's got all of 700 in stock! Twenty one hundred dollars for ten fruit. Say Smoke, I'd sure do anything for you if you had a cold in the head an' was layin' with both arms broke I'd set by your bedside day-an' night an' wipe your nose for you, but I'll be everlastin' in'y d-d if I'll squander twenty-one hundred good iron dollars on ten fruit for you or any other two-legged man!"

"They're not your dollars, but mine, Shorty. It's a deal I have on. What I'm after is to corner every blessed egg in Dawson, in the Klondike, or the Yukon. You've got to help me out. I haven't the time to tell you of the in-wardness of the deal. I will after ward and let you go half on it if you want to. But the thing right now is to get the eggs. Now, you hustle up to Slavovitch's and buy all he's got. And then keep on. Nose out every egg in Dawson and buy it. Understand? Day it!"

Never was a market cornered more quickly. In three days every known egg in Dawson with the exception of several dozen was in the hands of Smoke and Shorty.

The several dozen not yet gathered in were in the hands of two persons. One, with whom Shorty was dealing, was an Indian woman who lived in a cabin on the hill back of the hospital.

"I'll get her today," Shorty announced next morning. "I'll be back in a jiffy, if I don't bust myself a-shovin' dust at her."

In the afternoon when Smoke returned to the cabin he found Shorty.

"What luck?" Shorty asked carelessly after several minutes had passed.

"Nothing doing," Smoke answered. "How did you get on with the squaw?" Shorty cocked his head triumphantly toward a tin pall of eggs on the table. "Seven dollars a clatter, though," he confessed.

"I offered \$10 finally," Smoke said, "and then the fellow told me he'd already sold his eggs. Now that looks bad, Shorty. Somebody else is in the market. Those twenty-eight eggs are liable to cause us trouble. You see, the success of the corner consists in holding every last—"

He broke off to stare at his partner. A pronounced change was coming over Shorty—one of agitation masked by extreme deliberation. "Do you mind kindly just repeatin' over how many eggs you said the man didn't sell to you?" he asked.

"Twenty-eight."

"Hum!" Shorty commuted to himself. "They's just exactly, precisely nor nothin' more or anything less'n twenty-eight eggs in that there pall settin' on the table, an' they cost, every dinged last one of 'em, just exactly seven great big round iron dollars a throw. If you stand in cryin' need of any further items of information I'm willin' and free to impart."

"Go on," Smoke requested.

"Well, that geezer you was dickerin' with is a big buck Indian. Am I right?"

Smoke nodded and continued to nod to each question.

"I just seen Slavovitch. He says to me: 'Shorty, I want to speak to you about them eggs. I've kept it quiet. Nobody knows I sold 'em to you. But if you're speculatin' I can put you wise to a good thing.' An' he did, too, Smoke."

"Well, maybe it sounds incredible, but that good thing was Wild Water, Charley. He's lookin' to buy eggs. He goes around to Slavovitch an' offers him \$5 an egg, an' before he quits he's offerin' \$8. An' Slavovitch ain't got no eggs. Last thing Wild Water says to Slavovitch is that he'll beat the head off him if he ever finds out Slavovitch has eggs cached away some-where. Slavovitch had to tell me he'd sold the eggs, but that the buyer was secret."

"Slavovitch says to let him say the word to Wild Water, who's got the eggs. 'Shorty,' he says to me, 'Wild Water'll come a-runnin'. You can hold him up for \$8. Eight dollars your grandmother, I says. He'll fall for \$10 before I'm done with him.' Anyway, I told Slavovitch I'd think it over and let him know in the mornin'. Of course we'll let 'em pass the word to Wild Water. Am I right?"

"You certainly are, Shorty. First thing in the mornin' tip off Slavovitch. Have him tell Wild Water that you and I are partners in the deal."

In the morning Smoke chanced upon Lucille Arral again at the dry goods counter of the A. C. store.

"It's working!" she jubilated. "It's working! Wild Water's been around to Slavovitch, trying to buy or bully eggs out of him. And by this time Slavovitch has told him that Shorty and I own the corner."

Lucille Arral's eyes sparkled with delight. "I'm going to breakfast right now," she cried. "And I'll ask the waiter for eggs and he so painterly when there aren't any as to melt a heart of stone. And you know Wild Water's heart is anything but stone. He'll buy the corner if it costs him one of his mines. Hold out for a stiff figure. Nothing less'n \$10 will satisfy me, and if you sell for anything less, Smoke, I'll never forgive you."

That noon, up in their cabin, Shorty placed on the table a pot of beans, a pot of coffee, a smoking platter of moose meat and bacon, a plate of stewed dried peaches and called. "Grab 'em ready!"

Smoke opened the door for a breath of frosty air and saw something that made him close the door hurriedly and dash to the stove. The frying pan, still hot from the moose meat and bacon, he put back on the front lid. Under the frying pan he put a generous dab of butter, then reached for an egg, which he broke and dropped spluttering into the pan. As he reached for a second egg Shorty gained his side and clutched his arm in an excited grip.

"Hey, what you doin'?" he demanded. "Frying eggs?" Smoke informed him, breaking the second one and throwing off Shorty's detaining hand. "Get out 'Grub's ready!"

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"I should say Miss Arral's worth the price of the eggs," Smoke put in quietly.

"Worth it?" Wild Water stood up in the heat of his eloquence. "She's worth a million dollars. She's worth all the dust in Klondike. But that ain't no call for me to gamble \$10,000 on a breakfast for her. Now, I've got a proposition. Lend me a couple of dozen of them eggs. I'll turn 'em over to Slavovitch. He'll lend 'em to her with my compliments. She ain't smiled to me for a hundred eggs. If there eggs get a smile for me I'll take the whole boiling off your hands."

"Will you sign a contract to that effect?" Smoke asked quickly, for he knew that Lucille Arral had agreed to smile.

Wild Water gasped. "You're almighty swift with business up here on the hill," he said, with a hint of a snarl.

"We're only acceptin' your own proposition," Smoke answered.

"All right, bring on the paper; make it out hard and fast. Wild Water cried in the anger of surrender.

(To Be Continued.)

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"Yes, but—you can't eat eggs like that," Wild Water objected. "It's ain't right."

"We just date on eggs, Smoke an' me," was Shorty's excuse.

Wild Water finished his own plate in a half hearted way. "Say, you fellows can do me a great favor," he began tentatively. "Sell me, or lend me, or give me, about a dozen of them eggs."

"Sure," Smoke answered. "I know what a yearning for eggs is myself. But we're not so poor that we have to sell our hospitality. They'll cost you nothing. Go ahead, Shorty. Cook them up for him."

But Wild Water laid a restraining hand on the eager Shorty as he explained. "I don't mean cooked. I want them with the shells on."

"So that you can carry 'em away?" "That's the idea."

"But that ain't hospitality," Shorty objected. "It's—It's tradin'."

Smoke nodded concurrence. "That's different, Wild Water. I thought you just wanted to eat them. You see, we went into this for a speculation."

The dangerous blue of Wild Water's eyes began to grow more dangerous. "I'll pay you for them," he said sharply. "How much?"

"Oh, not a dozen," Smoke replied. "We couldn't sell a dozen. We're not retailers; we're speculators. We can't break our own market. We've got a hard and fast corner, and when we sell out it's the whole corner or nothing."

"How many have you got and how many do you want for them?"

"How many have we, Shorty?" Smoke inquired.

Shorty cleared his throat and performed mental arithmetic aloud. "Lemme see. Nine hundred an' seventy-three minus nine, that leaves nine hundred an' sixty-two. An' the whole shootin' match at \$10 a throw will tote up just about nine thousand six hundred an' twenty iron dollars. Of course, Wild Water, we're playin' fair, an' it's money back for that, guess, though they ain't none. That's one thing I never seen in the Klondike—a bad egg."

Wild Water shook his head sadly and helped himself to the beans. "That would be too expensive, Shorty. I only want a few. I'll give you \$10 for a couple of dozen. I'll give you \$20, but I can't buy 'em all."

"All or none," was Smoke's ultimatum.

"Look here, you two," Wild Water said in a burst of confidence. "I'll be perfectly honest with you, an' don't let it go any further. You know Miss Arral an' I was engaged. Well, she's broken everything off. It's for her I want them eggs. I want to give them to her on a platter shirred. That's the way she likes 'em."

"Do you want 'em ninety-six hundred an' twenty dollars' worth?" Shorty queried.

"Aw, listen to reason," Wild Water pleaded. "I only want a couple of dozen. I'll give you \$20 apiece for 'em. What do I want with all the rest of them eggs?"

"I should say Miss Arral's worth the price of the eggs," Smoke put in quietly.

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