

Up North They Don't Ask Anything for
Doing Something for a Friend



OLD BLACK MAGIC

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THE biting northeast gale that was disrupting pedestrian traffic at Third and Yesler didn't phase Yukon. It was his first trip outside in more than twenty years. Up there close to the Arctic Circle this would be a nice warm breeze.

Yukon, heavy gunnysack in one hand, was seeing for the first time the sky-soaring white marble facade of Smith Tower. Charlie King had told him about Seattle's first skyscraper that winter when Yukon had dog-sledded to his old tillicum's cabin.

"They just finished the Smith Buildin' the year I come to the Klondike. McGinnis took one whole floor way up in the Tower. 'Square Shooter' McGinnis— Say, Yukon, you'll have the ride of your life, goin' up in that fast elevator when you make your first trip outside."

Yukon carried his heavy gunnysack into the hallway and found the express elevator. He didn't enjoy the ride. He clung to the grillework with one hairy paw and steadied the old gunnysack with the other.

McGinnis was located in the same office Charlie had described. Even from the secretary's office there was a mountaintop view of the war-crowded docks along Elliott Bay and of the smoke-shrouded shipyards at Harbor Island, far across the rough water. And despite the fifty-mile gale there was no creaking of steel or rattling of windows.

Yukon had to sit in the outer office quite a while. The young woman wasn't going to let him in at all when he refused to tell her his business or what was in the sack.

"Looky here, young woman, I dog-sledded

seven hundred miles to see this fellow,” drawled Yukon. “I been four months comin’ out, totin’ this. I aim to see McGinnis.”

She eyed dubiously his battered old hat and tattered mackinaw which was almost as greasy as the gunnysack between his legs. Yukon carried hat and coat in one hand, sack in the other when the girl finally led him to the inner office.

“So you’re ‘Square Shooter’ McGinnis?” said Yukon to the wiry gray-haired little man seated at the big flat desk. I’m Yukon Harris, from Goodnews.”

Astonishment wiped the amused twinkle from McGinnis’ face. He sprang to his feet.

“Yukon! Charlie King’s friend! How is Charlie? I haven’t heard from him for over ten years. One of the best men ever to hit Alaska.”

“Yep, he sure was. Ain’t no more though. A tunnel caved in on him last year.”

YUKON related how Charlie had worked a worthless claim year after year, timbering the tunnel with logs he skidded down in the winter. He barely panned enough dust to live.

“Me—I never took to minin’. I rustle freight, summertime, on the steamboat that runs to Dawson City. Winters, I cut wood around Juneau.”

“Then you weren’t with Charlie when he was killed?”

“Nope. One of the natives come fer me. Charlie had asked me to take care of things, case anything ever happened to him. They told me he seemed to sort of go off his nut long the last few years. But he was always singin’ and whistlin’—like he had a joke on the whole world.”

Yukon was untying the leather thong around the mouth of the gunnysack as he talked.

He let the sack fall to the floor and lifted its contents onto McGinnis’ desk.

It was a hideous squat Indian totem two feet tall, carved evidently from a single block of wood. A huge nose projected from the carved face, overhanging the base.

“One thing Charlie made me swear to,” said Yukon, “was that I’d take this damned thing to you if he died or got killed. Say—watch it now!”

It was monstrosity enough, half human, half animal, squatting there on the mahogany desk, to hold McGinnis’ attention without Yukon’s urging.

“Watch! It’s got the devil beat!” said Yukon.

The thing tilted forward on its base. It set up a

slow rhythmic rocking, farther and farther, until it tipped over, banging its huge nose on the desk.

The crash and McGinnis’ exclamation brought the secretary running. McGinnis reassured her, “It’s all right—this thing tipped over, that’s all.”

Alone, McGinnis asked Yukon, “Its nose is battered as though it had done this trick before, lots of times.”

“Yeah, it has. ‘Old Tamanous,’ Charlie used to call the thing. Then he’d laugh. The natives up there were scared of it. They wouldn’t stay in the house less’n Charlie put Old Tamanous outdoors.”

“Tamanous!” exclaimed McGinnis, his brows knit. “It’s so long since I talked the Chinook jargon. Oh, yes! Tamanous means ‘black magic,’ doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, that’s it,” agreed Yukon, rising. “Well, I’ll be gettin’ on. I did what Charlie asked me to do, I brung the thing to you. I’m headin’ for Todd Shipyards to find work. Got to help out in this war somehow.”

McGinnis rose and came around the desk. “What do you get out of doing this for Charlie? It must have been a tough trip, Yukon.”

Yukon bristled. “Up there we don’t ask what you’re gettin’ fer doin’ somethin’ fer a friend. I found a paper Charlie left though—guess he felt somethin’ might bump him off. He deeded his claim to me. But I don’t want the darn shack, way off there at Goodnews.”

“Have you that paper? Can I see it?” McGinnis was turning the strange totem around and examining it minutely as Yukon dug in his old wallet for the paper.

“Here ‘tis. I’d give it to you, bein’ you’re a friend of Charlie’s—but he begged me to keep it.”

MCGINNIS scanned the paper, laid it aside and renewed his examination of the totem.

Yukon was backing toward the door when McGinnis cried:

“Look, Yukon! This thing that’s supposed be a toe—it unscrews. It’s my guess that there’s something inside this totem—something fine as sand, but heavy. Heavy as gold!”

“Well, it ain’t gold,” grunted Yukon. “They told me Charlie didn’t hardly pan enough to buy grub.”

“There’s some way this thing is fixed inside so that this stuff runs to the top when the figure is flat on its nose. Then it slowly runs into the nose when you set the thing on its base. That’d be Charlie’s

idea of a joke!"

He took the plug out, exclaiming, "damned cunning!" He held the totem upside down, eagerly. A pile of black sand poured out upon the desk before the surprised Yukon.

McGinnis ran some of it through his fingers, Yukon saw his face pale and the pupils of his eyes dilate. McGinnis seemed to struggle to speak calmly.

"Did Charlie tell you I grubstaked him?"

"Sure. Guess he felt sorta bad not bein' able to pay you back nothin' but a wooden totem."

McGinnis ignored this. "Charlie must have had lots of fun figuring this all out. 'Tamanous'! Old Black Magic!" He leaned back, laughing nervously. "Here—set a stack of books under this thing. Let's see how much there is in him, Yukon."

As Yukon complied, McGinnis asked, "You brought this heavy thing clear outside, just because Charlie asked you to! And yet you never got anything out of his mine?"

"You asked me that before. No matter. I got to be moochin' along to Todd's—get a job rivetin' ships."

The pyramid of sand was five inches high. Yukon exclaimed, "Hell, if I'd known I could pour out that sand it wouldn't have been such a job gettin' the damn thing all the way from Goodnews! I must 'a' carted ten pounds of dead weight!"

"Ten pounds. At over a hundred an ounce!

Listen, Yukon. I grubstaked Charlie King for a measly thousand dollars. I'm going to split this with you fifty-fifty." He picked up the paper Yukon had forgotten. "And what this deed of yours is worth, Lord only knows!"

"What in hell you talkin' about? Are you off your nut, too?"

"If you had found this plug and unscrewed it and let this stuff run out, all those years Charlie worked so hard would have been wasted. I see the whole thing now."

Square Shooter McGinnis scooped up a handful of the black crystals and poured them into Yukon's paw.

"We'll have it assayed. It always runs a certain percent iridium. And that's one of the essential materials they need desperately right now, for the war. You get back fast as you can and guard that mine—it'll mean more than if you built a battleship all by yourself. I'll lease us a dredge and ship it up there to do the mining—"

"Minin'?" Yukon's disgust stuck out like the dirt in his wrinkled face.

"Sure . . . mining!" McGinnis grinned. "That stuff on the table, ten pounds of it that Charlie tricked you into lugging out to me, in old Black Magic's belly, that's not sand. If you'd been a mining man, Yukon, you might have guessed Charlie's secret. It's platinum!"