



Fuel

by

George L. Catton

OLD PETE SAUNDERS ran a drift into the side of the hill and took out four thousand dollars. He thawed out the frozen rocks and earth and swung his pick and went back fifty feet. Then, when he had cleaned out the pocket, he climbed up over the top of the hill and sat down on the other side. Down in the valley below him was the big lode, the "Farthest North." Kenneth Cary's mine.

Now the big lode really belonged to Old Pete. Old Pete had staked it. But Kenneth Cary was as crooked as a corkscrew, and far faster on his feet than the old man, so it was Kenneth Cary who registered it. Old Pete wasn't a mile from his claim notices before Gary had them replaced by his own; and by the time the old man had reached the registry office to learn that his claim was already registered ahead of him by Cary, Cary was figuring on the cost of stamp-mill and amalgamation. And Old Pete could do nothing.

Then, while the old man was finding and cleaning out the pocket on the other side of the big hill, Cary was bringing in and installing his machinery. The Farthest North had nearly two hundred men on the job when Old Pete sat down on the side of the hill and

looked down on it.

Old Pete was worn and frayed, and the hardships of the prospector's trail were too much for him. Or, as he put it himself:

"You're gettin' kind of frazzled, Pete. 'Bout another year of hard work an' your slavin' days is done. You've got to take it easy pretty soon, ole horse, or you'll beat the ole woman to the cemetery."

He ran his hand beneath his vest to feel the broad belt around his waist.

"But four thousand!" he snorted sarcastically. Then his wrinkled old face softened a little.

"Four thousand dollars would buy a home for me an' the ole woman. But that's all. There wouldn't be a nickel left for the kids. Let's see, now." He pointed the first finger of his right hand at the five fingers of his left—a habit he indulged in when his thoughts were busy on addition.

"Four thousand would buy the old Kennedy place for me an' the ole woman. Three thousand more would finish payin' for Ted's farm. Another two thousand to Bert would pay for a workin' model and the patent on his new disk-harrow. That's nine thousand dollars. Then there's Sarah. Dr. Baume

says he'll guarantee to straighten Sarah's feet for one thousand. That's that's ten thousand dollars. An'—an' I got four," he finished ruefully.

Down in the valley a hoarse yell of "Down!" floated up, followed by the crash of a falling tree: and Old Pete's eye swept across the hundreds of stumps on the hillside below.

"There's work down there," he grinned. "By the looks of all them stumps they're usin' a powerful lot of wood, an' I guess I can swing an ax yet. Might get in a winter's work? Lets see now, this is July. From July to next spring is—" he counted again—"say ten months. Ten months' wages at maybe a hundred a month and board would be shucks! One thousand, puh!"

Down in the valley a little, squat man stepped out of a building and crossed over to another. Old Pete recognized him.

"Cary!" he rasped. "The dirty little sneak! The—the—" He stopped, at a loss for words that would fit his opinion of Cary.

Then he got up on his feet and started down the hill.

"I'm going down to talk to him," he grinned. "I ain't never yet had any words with him, an' maybe he'll give me a little better job than cuttin' wood. An', anyway, even if he don't, might as well be swingin' an ax as sittin' idle all winter. I'll get my board, an' I won't have to touch the four thousand."

But Cary was as dirty as he was crooked. Ole Pete met him outside one of the buildings and drew him aside.

"I ain't sayin' much, Cary," he growled shortly. "Just askin' you if you ain't got a pretty fair job for me after—"

Cary cut him off.

"Job nothing!" Cary snapped. "If

you're looking for work go see the manager! I've got nothing to do with hiring the hands!" And he turned his back and hurried away.

Old Pete's eyes blazed. But he said nothing. He was past the fighting age, and he knew it. He hunted up the manager.

The manager, Phil Horne, was, the old man found, one of those garrulous, know-it-all men who go into uncalled-for and unnecessary detail in their answers to every trifling question. He answered Old Pete characteristically.

"Use a powerful lot of fuel?" he quoted the old man. "That's the surest thing you know, old timer. Why, come in here." He led the way into the first drift into the hillside. "See that?" he pointed to the white frost on the earth and rocks. "That's ice. Ice! And the farther in we go the harder it gets. Been frozen solid since the year one, and won't ever thaw out. Eight or ten feet from the surface we hit the frost and we got to start thawing. Takes a hundred pounds of steam to keep the pipes hot. A powerful lot of fuel? Why, say, we've got a half a hundred men doing nothing but cut wood, and they can't hardly get a stick ahead!"

Old Pete nodded his head.

"Too had now," he grinned, "that there ain't no coal in this district."

"There is," Horne growled. "There's all kinds of coal on Coal Creek, two hundred miles south of here. But that's not here. Can't get transportation for grub half the time: never mind coal!"

Old Pete walked out of the drift into the warm sunshine. Horne's chatter irritated him.

"What are you payin' your axmen?" he asked.

"Seventy-five a month and

board,” Home rasped. “And that’s too much. Wouldn’t pay more than fifty or sixty if it wasn’t that we got to git our winter’s fuel cut before the river stops running. Transportation stops dead when the river freezes, and we’ve got to fire the bush gangs. Can’t feed them. There’s a month or six weeks’ work yet, though. May be more. All depends on the game around here. If we can pull down enough meat to feed the gangs we’ll keep them as long as it lasts. Seventy-five’s the wages. Want a job?”

“No.” Old Pete shook his head slowly and turned away, he wasn’t going to work for seventy-five a month for only a month or two. And especially for Cary. Damn Cary! His faded blue eyes blazed again.

Then half-way back up the hill Old Pete turned around and shook his fist at the cluster of buildings that housed Cary. For the first time since Cary jumped his claim the old man was harboring thoughts of vengeance. The winter was coming on and in the ten months of it the land would be ice-closed to prospecting, work would be non-existent, and his food alone would eat far into that four thousand dollars in his belt. And that—that hurt!

“I’ll get back at you, Cary!” he blazed wrath fully.

But how? It would have to be done legally and aboveboard. There wasn’t more than a handful of hair left on the old man’s head; but every hair of it was straight.

How? Old Pete was nearly to the top of the hill before he got an answer to that question. Then he turned around and climbed down again.

But he didn’t go near Cary.

Old Pete paddled up to Circle City and bought four big padlocks and

four big hinges. He had a notice—“Trespassers on this claim, and any one tampering with this door, will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law”—printed in big, black letters. Then he paddled back to his claim.

Old Pete built a squared-log door and swung it across the mouth of his drift in the hillside. He locked it with the four big padlocks and nailed his notice on it. And he laughed.

“That will start Cary guessing.”

Then he sat down and filled his pipe. He wasn’t going to work for Cary; but if his plans went according to their frame-up he was going to get out of Cary that seven or eight thousand dollars that he needed to make up the ten thousand that he still needed.

And in the mean time he was going to be a sport. He was going to get Siwash Joe, the old Indian up the river, to help him play five hundred and go hunting and fishing, and have a whale of a time.

Old Pete was banking on the fact that, if Cary’s woodcutters “can’t hardly get a stick ahead” as Horne had said, they would never get enough ahead in a month or six weeks to last all winter.

It was a good bank.

It was the 10th of July when Old Pete hung that notice on the door to the drift on his claim. It was the 15th of August when the first frost came.

Kenneth Cary called his manager aside on the morning of the 15th of August and whispered in his ear:

“What was Old Pete Saunders talking to you about that morning he was down here?”

Horne scratched his head.

“Fuel,” he grinned. “Wouldn’t take a job cutting it, but he seemed interested in the amount we was using.

Said something about it was too bad there wasn't any coal around here."

"H-m!" Cary frowned. "He's got a big, locked door swung across the mouth of his drift so no one can get in, and a trespasser's notice on it, and he ain't done an hour's work since he was down here. Wish you'd kind of look into the matter, will you? Try and get a look on the other side of that door. I'm going out to-night, and I won't get back till spring; so you've got all winter."

"And supposing he's found coal?" Horne ventured.

"No chance! Not this far north!"

"But just suppose he has? You won't be here and—"

"Buy if he'll sell. If it's coal, or lignite—fuel that we can use at all—offer him about half what it's worth. He'll be just fool enough to accept what you offer."

And the very next day down came Old Pete.

For a month Old Pete and Siwash Joe had been having a "whale of a time." While Cary and his manager worried and cursed about the slow and very unsatisfactory growth of their winter's fuel supply for the mine, Old Pete wandered at will through the valleys and over the hills, banging away at the game; or paddled his old canoe on the river with a fish-pole hanging over the side. Nobody ever caught him working.

Then when the first frost came, and Old Pete found his tent a cold place to sleep in, he wandered down the hill and interviewed Phil Horne.

"How's the fuel coming, Mr. Horne?" he queried.

Horne snorted in disgust.

"Not worth a damn! Couldn't get men enough, and we've been using it about as fast as it was cut. We'll have to

shut down in another month unless"—he paused to peer into the old man's face—"unless somebody finds coal or something like that round here close. We've got to fire the bush gangs first of the week, can't feed them, and we'll last a couple of weeks after that. Can't keep up steam without fuel. And you haven't helped any, old man. You've been banging away with that old gun of yours and scared all the running meat clean out of the district."

"So," Old Pete nodded. Then he pulled one eye down in a wink.

"Suppose," he drawled slowly, "suppose now I had a kind of solution to that there trouble of yours, do you think it would be worth a little walk over to my place for a look-see?"

Horne looked at him a moment. Then he pulled his cap down and led the way up the hill.

Old Pete unlocked the four big padlocks on his drift door and swung the door wide. He gathered up a handful of dry spruce-bark and twisted it into a torch. He led the way in.

Horne buttoned up his coat around his throat. Like in the drifts in the Farthest North mine, the rocks ten or twelve feet from the door in the old man's drift were coated with frost, and the still air was arctic. Then, twenty-five or thirty feet back into the hill Horne came to a sudden stop.

"Hell!" he ejaculated. He had been sure that Old Pete had found coal, or lignite. Finally a broad smile spread across his face.

"Yep," he nodded his head; "that will settle the trouble. What's your price?"

Old Pete turned and led the way out. He closed and locked the door. He grinned.

“It’s this way, Mr. Horne. I’d like to get out this fall. I’d like to catch the last boat, and I can if I hurry. If it wasn’t for that I’d ask more for it than I’m going to. How would eight thousand dollars listen to you?”

“For the whole works?” Home demanded.

“Yes.”

Horne studied a moment. His boss, Cary, had said to offer about half, and—well, eight thousand was about half what the stuff was worth.

“Come on,” he said.

Twenty minutes later Horne, with Old Pete grinning behind him, strode into the office of the Farthest North and barked at the time clerk.

“Don’t fire the bush gangs! Don’t fire anybody! We’ll work everybody all winter!”

Then he turned on the cashier.

“Make out a check,” he ordered, “Make it out for eight thousand dollars; payable to Peter Saunders on demand.”

The cashier reached for his check-book. Then he looked up. He was a very careful and methodical man.

“Eight thousand dollars to Peter Saunders, you said, Mr. Horne? And to what will I credit it against on the books?”

Horne glared at him a moment. Then he laughed.

“Fuel,” he chuckled. “Don’t know the weights yet, but there’ll be all of eight or ten tons of it.”

“But the kind of fuel, Mr. Horne? Mr. Cary is very particular, you know, and we’ve got to itemize everything.”

“Stomach fuel,” Home snapped. “Stomach fuel for the woodcutters. Cold-storage moose, caribou, and bear-meat.”