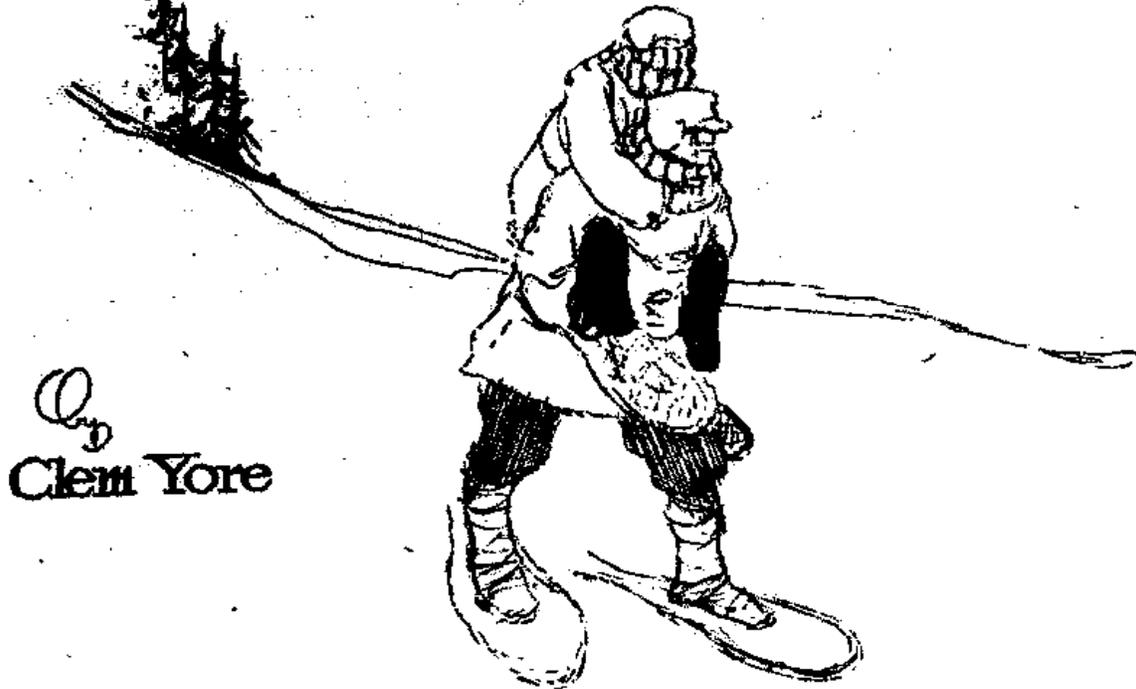


# Through *the* Storm



*Clem*  
Clem Yore

**A** TREMENDOUSLY dramatic story of a mountain adventure and of a real and vital love-affair.

**E**VERY Saturday the mail came over the range, for the widely scattered inhabitants of the Cache le Poudre and the Grand River valleys. It was brought by carrier through the defile known as Squaw Pass, and every Friday left "Four Mile," the stage-town on the eastern side of the mountains, thirty-six miles away as the magpie flies.

On one of his February trips the mail-carrier had straggled all night through the drifts, carrying forty pounds of mail. His "webs" were ice-enameled; his heavy socks and moccasins were stiff, and they were spangled with a sparkling beadwork of frost. The morning sky was ash-colored, somber and ominous.

At seven o'clock, as he swung down the north fork of the Grand River, tediously toiling through the snow, his tired eyes caught a thin

spiral of smoke spinning from a cabin chimney and losing itself in a background that stretched for more than one hundred miles in a solid, pitiless white.

He knew that the smoke meant conversation with a human being, rest, breakfast and warmth; so he quickened his pace until a scant fifty yards lay between him and the cabin.

"Hello, Buck!" he shouted.

A man opened the cabin door, filling the frame with his form. He called to the carrier as he waved a hand of welcome.

"Hello, Jim. Fling your feet. The pancakes are waiting."

When the carrier had removed his snowshoes and pack and had placed them behind the kitchen stove, he took off his mackinaw, tossed his cap into a corner and began to talk. All men

crave speech who travel trails alone.

“Some mush down the Michigan!” he began. “Snow—why, man, it was like traveling through smoke and as fine as flour, but it sure stung when it had the wind behind it. It took me four hours to do that three-mile stretch between the Blasted Pine and the While Owls. I moled my way into a drift, and I let her howl. If the postmaster general knew this, he’d laugh hisself silly. Say, you ought to see Chapin and Cachita. If the gable end of hell blew out and it rained fire and brimstone for forty days and forty nights, it wouldn’t melt enough snow on them hills to wet a pair of socks.”

FROM the north room of the cabin came a woman, slender, willowy and strangely incongruous to the surroundings. There was a gentleness and sureness about her that added to the charm of her face and form. Her hair was heavy and coiled in braids. It was creamy gold and shadowy. The color in her eyes was like a patch of cloudless mountain ssky on a May morning. Without knowledge, one would have estimated her as belonging exclusively to the hills.

“Hello, Bubbles!” greeted the carrier. “What you doin’ here?”

“Sick,” the girl replied. “I petered out last week when Big Sam, Snaky and I were coming over to the ski-tournament at Steamboat. Buck’s been nursing me. I sure was weak when we came down the Poudre, wasn’t I, Buck? I thought I never was going to hit this cabin.”

“You certainly were,” replied Buck. “Any mail, Jim?”

The carrier took the pack and held the fastenings to the stove, thawing them. He brought forth a package and gave it to Buck. There were magazines and newspapers and a letter. The man tore the letter open and read it. The contents numbed him; and as Bubbles and Jim watched him, they saw the corners of his

mouth tighten and grow into hard, pale lines. He reread the letter:

Buck:

It is one great thing to have lived a dream, and another to have dreamed a life. I have learned that Bubbles is wintering with you. Circumstances demand this letter, but they do not occasion a reply. There is such a thing among men and women as being too deeply, too cruelly hurt to forget. I fancied you *real*, and find you *rowdy*. My appreciation of you was, after all, only complimenting you, for appreciating unworthiness is of men an unworthiness.

VIRGINIA.

Outaide, the wind blew little swirls of snow along the cabin roof and around the window of the kitchen. Inside the room, the silence was broken by a crackling, snappy discord from the dry pitch in the stove.

Buck laid the letter on a shelf beside the clock and walked past Bubbles into her room.

“Now aint that hell!” whispered Jim. “He’s read his dishonorable discharge.”

“What’s the matter?” asked Bubbles.

“The story’s all over Four Mile that Snaky and Big Sam was paid a hundred by Buck to bring you over Squaw Pass to winter here. They told it themselves.”

Bubbles laughed—but there seemed a far-away hollowness in the sound.

She was at that moment a woman of her kind, the kind that make up the feminine part of the dance-hall as it exists in the mining-camps. She was twenty and wise. She could deal faro and stud better than any man in the State. Her mother had been Cincinnati Sadie, also of the dance hall, a renowned beauty. She had married Dutch Dave, a notorious gambler, who had been shot by Texas Charlie at Hot Sulphur Springs for sleeving cards.

The uncomfortable atmosphere that

filled the room was broken by Jim.

“How about pancakes, Bubbles? I’m some wild for food.”

WITHOUT answer the girl fried bacon and pancakes and placed them before the carrier, who ate them as fast as they came from the stove.

After breakfast, he slung his pack as his back, took his snowshoes outside and tied the thongs in place about his feet.

“Eh, Buck!” he shouted through the open door of the kitchen. “I’m goin’ to beat it down to Grand Lake. *Adios!*”

In answer to Jim’s call, Buck came out of the room, from the window of which he had been gazing at the storm that was gathering its forces on top of the Divide.

“What do you think she’s going to do up there?” He indicated the range.

“There’ll be merry hell inside of three hours. Why?” replied Jim.

“I’m thinking some of going over Flat Top to Four Mile,” said Buck. “I’m in a hurry.” “Flat Top!” cried Jim. “Flat Top! Why, man, you couldn’t get over Flat Top. Look at ‘er up there. That breeze is dancing sixty miles right now, and she’ll be kickin’ eighty by early afternoon; and if you’re caught up there—good night! Why don’t you go over Squaw Pass?”

“It’s time I’m after. I’m going over Flat Top.”

“Fare-thee-well, old porcupine! The best you’ll get is the worst of it, but I aint aimin’ none to tell you nothin’ about these hills.”

Jim hurried off down the creek, leaving a dainty imprint from his shoes in the soft drifts. Buck looked after him until he disappeared in a thicket of quaking aspen, and then turned and caught Bubbles observing him abstractedly.

“Buck,” she said, “come inside. I want to talk to you.”

He closed the door and walked to the wood-box, above which hung his snowshoes.

He took these down and from the floor picked up a bottle of linseed oil and rubbed the rawhide lacings of the shoes with it. The girl followed the movement of his hands for some seconds.

“Surely you’re not going over Flat Top to-day,” she said.

“Yes,” he replied, looking coldly, candidly into her eyes.

She noted that his face was ashen, the lips cruelty tight and white-spotted, and in his half-closed eyes an expression of tenacious resolution was bitterly forming.

“Why?” she whispered weakly, seating herself beside him.

“Read that,” he answered, pointing with the bottle of oil to the letter on the shelf. Bubbles read the letter, replaced it, and without speaking or looking at him, walked into her room.

After oiling his shoes, he filled the pack light. In it he put half a loaf of bread, a piece of bacon, some sweet chocolate, a flask of whisky, some small, heavy pieces of solid pitch for starting fires, a can of coffee extract; on top of these he rolled his rubber poncho.

When the pack was filled, he said through the door:

“Stay in there a moment; I want to change my clothes.”

BUBBLES and Buck had been living for more than a week in the small cabin, she using his bed and he a shakedown on the kitchen floor. Quickly he made the change to the heavier garments of the trail. When dressed, he called to the girl.

“I’d like a word with you before I hit the trail.”

She opened the door, and he saw that she was attired in the heavy clothes in which she had come to the cabin.

“I’m going with you,” she said simply. “Get my webs, please.”

“You can’t go with me; you’re too

weak.”

“Weak? I’m not weak. I *was*, but I’m not now.”

“What do you mean?” he asked; for somehow the emphasis rather than the words conveyed to him a double meaning.

She spoke quickly in reply, and from her eyes there flashed truth. Conviction bore in upon Buck’s mind.

“I got a hundred to frame up on you. Big Sam and Snaky told me that if they could prove that we had been living together, they could contest your last filing on your prospect. I was to pretend illness so that you would have to take care of me all winter. They were coming over later with an agent of the land office and find me here with you. After your arrest and the claim relocated, I was to get a third interest in it. But that wasn’t all I came over for.”

“Who paid you that hundred?” demanded Buck.

“Big Sam,” she admitted.

“But a hundred is nothing to you, Bubbles.”

“Maybe I didn’t do it for the hundred; maybe I didn’t intend to let them get away with it; maybe you don’t know any more why I did it than I do. Get my webs ready. I’m going with you.”

“Why do you want to do this?” questioned Buck.

A new light was beginning to dawn upon him. He saw a strange expression in the girl’s eyes as she looked at him.

“They made a monkey out of me. That letter shows they were after Virginia, but you don’t think I’d frame on a woman, do you? I’ve bluffed a lot of men, but I never hurt a woman in my life.”

“This is square of you. and it would be the *real* answer, if you could go with me,” said Buck.

“Go!” shouted Bubbles. “I’m going. Get my webs, please.”

“You’re great,” Buck smiled, extending his hand to her. The girl grasped it, and the man’s emotion almost crushed the fingers of the little woman. The pain was a relief to the heart of her.

THEY stood there typifying the country in which they lived. Buck was a lithe giant. Trained as he had been in the old college days back East, his ten years of hill life had made of him an Apollo of tan. His broad shoulders, narrow hips and straight legs manifested an incomprehensible extent of strength, agility and endurance. Incased in heavy winter clothes, he contrasted strangely with the little figure beside him in woolen cap and high-collared sweater-jacket and deerskin pants.

After Bubbles’ shoes had been treated to the oil, the pack was thrown across the man’s shoulders, a belt and six-shooter buckled about him and a heavy cup tied to the belt with a bunch of extra thongs. Tucking a woolen scarf into the front of his mackinaw, Buck closed the cabin, examining the thermometer beside the door.

“Five below,” read Bubbles. “I’ll bet there’s no bottom to it, on top.”

It was past nine o’clock as they set out up the little branch that is the north fork of the Grand River of the Colorado. The man “mushed” ahead, breaking trail through the willows.

The sun tried to break through the heavy banklike clouds that were being forced downward on the tree-tops by their swirling brothers above, but it succeeded only in making itself a wallow of yellow in a setting of drab.

A great storm-center of the North American continent, where blizzards are born and sent hurtling across the withered breasts of the great plains, is that wonderfully rugged range lying slightly below the Wyoming line in Colorado. These mountains rear their heads almost three miles into the air from the level of

the sea. They catch the west and east winds and trap them into great vacuums, which, when released, spell wintry blasts for all the Mississippi River valley. Here the west wind blows furiously and steadily from September until May—and to cross the range over Flat Top trail any time between these months is a man's work. During a February storm it is considered impossible.

ON the other side of the Continental Divide and almost opposite to Buck's cabin lay the little mining-town of Four Mile. Sheltered as it was by the backbone of the continent, and scattered under the steep sides of Prospect Mountain, it was snug from the great winds of winter save only when the east wind drove storms from the plains. Here dwelt a most peculiar people, some of them rough, but all of them man and women, gauged by the sterling standard of the hills. This standard was never talked of; it was achieved; and the greatest feat a man could do, in order to receive the plaudits of the village, was to be able, ever able, to cross the divide over Flat Top in the dead of winter when the west wind blew a gale.

On the western slope of the range there grows a might forest of giant Engelmann spruce, a virgin forest, for the fire-monster has never entered it. Some of these trees are one thousand years old, and they rear their heads more than one hundred and fifty feet into the air. The hardest winds cannot penetrate far into the forest, but the snow finds its silent way everywhere, settling amid the trees, sometimes to a depth of thirty feet.

Out of the willows and quaking-aspen thickets of the bottom, the man and the girl wound upward into the silence and comfort of the forest. The snow was better here, without a crust, so that shortly before noon they came to a prospector's deserted cabin and rested for the midday meal. They talked but little. Bubbles had the fear of the trail always before her,

companied with a constant questioning whether she would fail; but most of her time was spent in covertly glancing at Buck, estimating him.

"Dear God," she mused, "if he were only mine!"

After lunch they took the trail refreshed. The snow lay higher than the blaze of the ax on the trees, which is here placed at seven feet, but Buck knew that forest and all of its short-cuts, so the hidden trail did not make them lose time. At two o'clock they felt the wind whipping around their legs. They had passed the big trees and were now in open sight of the trail that led for more than a mile along a narrow, barren shelf, reaching upward to the top of the range.

At timber-line they rested and tightened the thongs of their snowshoes. From above them they heard the crash, collision and kick of the wind; and nowhere else on earth is the littleness of man so emphasized as at timber-line when he stands alone and looks upon a battle between the forces of the air and the earth. The two stood looking up at the awesome conflict that raged amid the ledges, towers, pillars, highland flats, inclines, stupendous domes and soil-less reaches. The air in motion was using its entire tribe of destruction.

Wind, wind, nothing but wind, in blast, gust, tempest, whirlwinds, torando, little capfuls, that scurried here and there sucking the snow from sheltered places and hurling the clouds up; while over all hung a murderous, fear-breeding sky. There was no terror of its punishment in the heart of the girl, only a sense of regret that she could not make it, and thereby would be unable to help the man—to what?

IN the mind of Buck there arose a bitterness as he saw the region through which he must drag Bubbles. Turning to her, he asked:

"Don't you want to back-trail to the cabin?"

"Will you go?"

"No! But I had no idea it was as nasty as that!" -indicating the path over which they must travel.

"I'll go where you go," she said.

"I don't feel right about it, Bubbles; you don't know what it means; it is gilt-edged, smothering hell; that's what it is. You don't know what it means."

"Oh, yes, I do, but I'm willing to gamble."

"It might mean that I couldn't get you down—fast enough."

"Then I'd die farther from hell than I've ever lived," she answered, a tone of finality in her voice.

"All right," he said. "Come on, and keep your webs so that the wind can't get under them."

As they broke into the open, the cold became intense. They labored amid the drifts of the timber-line willow-beds and crossed them. Then upward they began the mile zigzag that would reward them only with the sheer shock and strain of the wind's fury. Now the clouds were piling about them, carrying a deadly burden of snow and ice that stung into their faces like iron-filings.

After a while the trail led them to the exposed face of a giant pinnacle known as the Big Chimney. To pass this they had to walk along a narrow path or trough that had, through some freak of the ages of wind and erosion, been cut into its sheer side. Above the trough the Chimney arose more than two hundred feet, and below it a chasm yawned wide and cloud-filled to a tremendous depth. The path was cleanly swept of snow, so that the jagged rock-corners and ice-ridges made a menace to the rawhide bottoms of the shoes. If these were severed, both were truly at the mercy of the storm, for without snowshoes, they could not plow through the great drifts of the forest below in the event that they were compelled to return to the cabin. The wind and the cold forbade the

removal of the "webs," and the thongs were stiffly frozen, making this almost an impossibility.

Along the path their steps were now shortened to about ten inches; hand to hand, leg interlocking leg, they moiled along the ledge. Here the wind drove with three forces—downward from the Chimney, up from the gorge, and against them. The gale came in gusts, some of these of unbelievable intensity.

WHEN they were slightly more than halfway across the Chimney's shelf, Bubbles was struck in the face by a terrific gust as she bent her body to take a forward step; and before Buck realized what had occurred, she was slammed directly between his legs, her snowshoes blown at right angles to the trail. The air was dense, with a fine swirl of ice and snow, so that he could but dimly discern her form below him. A cloud-bank whirled about them, and he clutched her hand more tightly, slipping his glove along her wrist and taking a firm grip upon her forearm, she grasping his in like fashion.

Whether she was blown or attempted to arise, he did not know, but with a fresher and stronger wind-effort, he felt her slipping from him and away from the trough. Involuntarily his arm went above his head to the wall for a handhold, and he caught a sharp-edged jutting cleft and clung to it. As he did so, the girl was swung clear of the path and blown in a semicircle behind him. His grip upon her compelled the driving force of the wind to swing her back to the path, after having tossed her over the abyss. She weighed slightly over a hundred pounds, but Buck's shoulder-blades were ground together by the wide circle she had followed. He felt he could hold the position no longer; his muscles were jumping, and a band of pain shot across his abdomen.

"Grab my belt and pull yourself up!" he shouted.

Bubbles released his hand, grasped the

belt above her, arose and forced her body against the wall beside that of the man. Still holding to the wall, Buck looked at her and saw that she was deadly pale and horrified as she glanced over the ledge into the foggy clouds below. The fury of the wind abated, and grasping hands once more, they hastened across the remainder of the trough, coming out upon the long, smooth incline that reaches away to the real summit of Flat Top. Here in desperation they threw themselves flat to rest, side by side, head to head.

His eyes were so close to the girl's face that he noted for the first time, that the journey across the Chimney had frozen two patches on her cheeks. Fumbling beneath his mackinaw, he brought out the scarf and with difficulty tied it about her head until all her face was hidden except the eyes. From these there shone a light of thanks.

"Let's go at it again," she said after the rest had rallied her.

"That's the girl," encouraged Buck as they arose and began to cross the incline.

To do this they were compelled to select an oblique course in order to save two miles across the mountain's top, for Flat Top is, on its summit, a table-land twelve miles square, and their course would bring them out upon the down-trail of the eastern slope. The wind blowing as it was, and they traveling aslant it, made the journey one of great trial and necessitated the expenditure of as much effort to hold what they gained as to proceed on their way.

Buck now began to feel Bubbles stumble and weaken, so that he slackened the pace as much as he could. From time to time he stole side-glances at her and saw that her eyes were drawn tight as though in suppressed agony. At last the incline ceased, and before them the great boulder-field of the summit stretched—gray, echoing and desolate.

BUCK pulled the girl around a large boulder and let her slip to rest out of the wind. Time and again they resumed their monotonous journey, dropping behind boulders to gain relief from the killing gusts. Now the daylight faded, and their troubles increased because of their inability to see. The girl was becoming weaker, so that the rests were longer and more frequent. Buck tried to limit her to a minute of repose, for he was fearful that her muscles would stiffen with the inactivity and cold and that she would be unable to move. Many times he rubbed her arms and legs and struck her between the shoulders to maintain circulation. The exhaustion and drowsiness that had own an agony of apprehension to him now began to assail the girl. In the darkness they had strayed out of their course, and the thin snow over which they had been traveling of a sudden became deep, so that Buck "mushing" ahead, felt his webs settle into it eight or nine inches.

Instantly there came into this mind the thought of the snow-cornice that hung over the gorge between Flat Top and Notch Top mountains. They had lost more than a mile. Their added weight to the cornice might make the overhanging monster give way and carry them with it into the gulch below. Abruptly he turned about, dragging the stupefied and half-dead girl with him, not ceasing the scrambling pace until he felt the solid earth beneath the thin snow. Then he stopped with his back to the wind. Bubbles leaned her head against his arm and clutched his body with her hand. If the danger had been close, it had also been valuable, for Buck now found his bearings; he knew intimately the locality of that snow-ledge. Pulling the girl along, he hastened toward the down-trail of the summit, resting on the way in the refuge of boulders.

At each rest the girl talked less, though she did try to reassure him that she could go on; and she did go on, many times after he thought it was the last effort. At length, as he attempted

to rouse her after a rest which had been purposely made longer than was his wont, she made no response to his urging.

THE night had now settled about them and he could not see her face. He dropped to his knees and felt for her head. It had fallen to one side, and she had thrown an arm over it. In the shelter of the boulder he struck a wind-match and I saw that her eyes were wide open, a small bead of frozen tears holding them so that they could not drop down. The ball had rolled backward, exposing the white. The sight was ghastly. He chafed her hands and limbs, but she gave no evidence of reviving.

“Great God!” he cried aloud. “And the timber is four miles away!”

All man though he was, the hammering of the trail was now beginning to get him. He knew that his cheeks were freezing. The pangs of hunger and thirst were shooting and racking him with a gnawing torment, sapping his vitality and staying powers. Without hesitation he unslung the pack from his shoulders and took out the poncho. He then stowed the bacon, whisky, coffee and chocolate into his mackinaw pockets, together with a few pieces of the pitch. With some of the extra thongs he bound the hands of the girl together and then lifted her so that they dropped over his head. He arose, and she hung from him a dead, swinging weight. He swung her about until she hung behind him. Then he passed the poncho beneath her and made a sling of it, so that with a hand grasping either leg, she hung without swaying.

He stumbled on blindly through the storm.

Bubbles’ snowshoes, still upon her feet, ever and anon caught in the wind and twisted him about. On he staggered, gaining headway at the price of excruciating agony, the girl’s head bobbing about his shoulder. Every time he raised a foot, a great shiver ran along his leg. His head burned and throbbed, and he bit into

his frozen lips. When he wanted rest, he backed into a boulder, taking the weight of the girl from his body. He was mortally afraid of stopping: yet he knew that the sudden renewal of his strength which he now felt was unreal, uncanny; and he recalled that it comes always to the one who is about to collapse. He recognized it as an approaching disaster and took advantage of it to hasten his pace. .... At last he could discern the tops of willows as he plowed through them and felt them stinging his legs.

“Timber-line—timber-line—timber-line! The big trees are just below me. I’ll make it—damn you, I’ll make it!” he yelled into the night air.

The girl stirred on his back in a writhing convulsion. The feel of her involuntary action nauseated him. Now the wind was beginning to whimper overhead.

“I’m under it!” he thought.

He *was* under it.

No longer was there sensation in his face, and when he opened his mouth, he could not feel the contact of his lips as he closed them. Behind a clump of boulders, willow-bound, he laid Bubbles against the rocks and released his hands from her legs, striking them together. They responded. They were not frozen. Feeling ran up his arm.

Now the storm could no longer be heard; it was only a mutter above his head. The silence drove in upon him.

“I’ve got you, I’ve beaten you, and I’ve dragged her with me!” he shouted into the scurrilous sky.

The voice of the girl sounded at his ear. “I must get over.”

He felt that he was raving, that his own mind was now wandering. He was not certain that he heard aright, and so he asked.

“What is it, Bubbles?”

“Dear God, if he were only mine!” the girl muttered, and then she shrieked into the stillness of the night: “I’m clean. I’ll swear I’m

clean.”

Realizing that she was delirious and that it might not be too late to revive her, Buck jerked her from the boulder and broke again into his stride. Stumbling, swaying, zigzagging down the trail, he went toward the timber, the ghoulis voice gibbering on his shoulder, making each step hideous. At last he was amid the big trees, and there was a tremendous quietude about him and a high happiness as he placed Bubbles in a snow-bed, wrapped in the poncho, and stood off looking into the gleeful flames of a roaring fire.

AT midnight the storm blew itself out and the moon cast fascinating purple shadows into the forest and long, slender blue streaks of light across the snow that lighted the dark recesses of the thicket. An owl, lured by the fire, awakened the night with its mournful voice. Coyotes yapped in the distance; a mountain lion cried afar off. A snowshoe rabbit skipped into the edge of the fire’s glow and scampered frightened into the brush of a ravine. The heat of the fire had revived the exhausted girl, and Buck had succeeded in getting her to drink some hot whisky, after which she had eaten some chocolate and bacon and drunk a large cup of coffee. He felt an overpowering craving for rest, and the soft, white, warm snow called to him to burrow into it and sleep—sleep. He knew that one moment’s forgetfulness would mean that the wolverines and coyotes would be scattering their bones along the ridge. Every few moments he stirred the girl to keep her from too deep a repose. The very minutes dragged themselves by his brain to the rhythmic beat of his thoughts.

At last the night wore itself into a mistiness of gray; the moon sank to rest behind the range. Gradually from the east through a rift in the trees below him he saw streaks of pale amber shooting up from the horizon. The sight gladdened him. and he turned to call the

sleeping girl. She had arisen on one elbow; she was weeping.

“That’s better, Bubbles.” he said joyously. “I love to see you cry.”

“Oh, Buck!” she sobbed. “If I could make you understand, if I only could!”

“Make me understand what?” he queried.

“About the frame-up,” she replied “I never intended to let them get away with it.”

“That’s all right, Bubbles,” he said coaxingly. “You and I have passed through the storm to understanding. We’ve been to hell and back, and nothing counts now.”

The girl looked at him through her tears.

“Nothing counts now,” she thought. “I’ve got to tell him.”

THE fire was dying. Buck left the girl and went to gather the dead, low-hanging dry branches from the trees. He came back with both arms full and tossed the load on the fire. The flames sprang upward and illumined the forest about them—the snow hanging on the pine needles, sparkling like some gigantic page from a fairy book, sifted with diamond-dust.

“I want to tell you something, Buck,” the girl pleaded. “I may never get another chance.”

“All right, girlie—go ahead!”

“Do you remember when my mother brought me over from Hot Sulphur, after Dad was killed?”

“Yes,” he answered.

“I was just sixteen then. I was full of the hatred my mother had put into me for men. Dad’s death added only to Mother’s frenzy, to teach me to despise everything that was not a woman. I played with dolls in a dance-hall, and knew faro when I was seven years old. At sixteen I was as wise as a woman of thirty. Every man I had ever known had the same look in his eye. When we came to Four Mile, I met you, and you didn’t even look at me. During that fall I dealt you many a game, and I tried to

make you notice me. But you wouldn't. There was something about you that I couldn't get through. You were different. It doesn't matter now—but since that winter—I have loved you.”

She turned her face away from the fire. Buck watched her.

“Everything I've done since then I've thought of you—whether you would like it or not. I have saved myself for you.”

She looked at him. The condition of her face, frozen as it was, and torn by her weeping, touched his heart.

“You know how they maul a girl around Big Sam's?” she continued. “Well—I wasn't any different than the rest—except that I was clean. Do you know what I mean?”

“Yes,” Buck said faintly.

“But do you believe what I saw?” she pleaded. “Do you believe what I say?”

“Yes, I do believe you, Bubbles; I know what you mean.”

“Well, when Virginia came to town last year and I saw how hard she had hit you, I lived a perfect hell. I never saw you after that at the Silver Dollar. I did everything I knew to throw myself in your way. Once when you were going home I went up the trail ahead of you, thinking I could meet you, make you see me, but you went up Black Canon, and I failed.”

“You poor little kid!” His voice was full of comfort, without the humiliating quality of pity.

“Another time, when they were giving a dance at the schoolhouse, I tried to go, but they wouldn't let me—they just wouldn't, and I stayed outside and watched until the dance broke up.”

Buck listened, wholly stunned, struck so much by the agony in the girl's voice as by the revelation of her words.

“Last winter when Mother died, I wanted to come to you and tell you of my grief. You were the only person alive that I looked up to as I had looked up to Mother. I believed in

her. I don't care what they say about her; I knew her; I lived with her. She was clean at heart. Love did it—whatever went wrong in her life, it was love for my dad that did it.”

SHADOWS, gray and slanting, were creeping over the snow. The streaks in the east were changing from amber to lilac, and great shafts of color were shooting pearl tones to the sky. Buck felt a smothering sense of comparison. Virginia and Bubbles flashed into his mental vision, one with a cloak of his own making about her, the other naked—with a woman's soul baring itself for his scrutiny. One was there in the warmth and contentment of respectability, framed in a setting of his own desire; the other half frozen, black of face, features distorted and drawn, numb beside him in a bed of snow—a piece of human driftwood whose name was known wherever ribaldry held sway. One had condemned him without a trial; the other had believed in him and gone clean—a diamond thrown into the pigsty of destiny.

Again the voice at his elbow:

“Every morning I would write you a letter. They are under my bed in the trunk. I told you of my love for you, that I was staying just the way I thought you'd want me to stay. I answered all manner of questions as though you had asked them. When Sam and Snaky came to me to get you and your claim, as I thought, there was something inside of me that cried out: 'Here's your chance; let him see that you are clean. So I agreed. It was because I loved you!'” she sobbed on her arm in a wild agony.

She wept long, then turned her face to Buck, smiles trying to play over it and making it only the more hideous.

Swift, sure, satisfying comprehension came to Buck, just as the sun rose over the distant flatness of the prairies far below them. It burst through the trees and tipped the mountains with a pale gold. Birds twittered, and a camp-robber flew across a limb above them.

"I'm all right now," she said. "Let me see if I can walk. Oh, what a wonderful sunrise!"

"It's the dawn, Bubbles," he said, "—a new day for us. Do you understand? A new day!"

"I hope it is," she said simply, and then: "I feel that I can go on now."

She was too weak to stand; so they had to rig the sling and travel as they had from the top of the range—only that Bubbles' webs were now tied on her back, and she was able to clasp her arms about his neck. The feel of him to her breast thrilled her with a deep peace.

IT was noon as they entered the street of the village. A strange sight they made as the man staggered down the snow, legs widely separated, his body bent slightly forward, his hands beneath the legs of the girl. Bubbles' head lying against his cheek, her eyes closed and her face drawn in pain. As they passed the "General Store," both of them saw Big Sam leaving the door. He saw them, but he gave no sign of recognition; he walked ahead of them to the end of the village, where the school-children were strolling homeward at the side of Virginia, their teacher. Buck went on until he came to the platform that was built up from the ground in front of the dance-hall owned by Big Sam. Out of the door of the dive came men and women. Buck sidled up to the platform that reached waist-high and set Bubbles upon it. The denizens of the Silver Dollar watched him remove the poncho that held her to him and untie the webs from her back. Then he turned to the crowd and said:

"Some of you women take care of her."

Down the street he looked, his eyes seeking the form of Big Sam. When he saw him coming back up the street with Virginia, he advanced to meet him.

Bubbles divined his intent.

"Don't let him go," she cried. "He's

exhausted—don't let him go. Wont somebody stop him?"

She tried to rise, to go to him, but she fell back in weakness. Some of the women from the Silver Dollar attempted to assist her.

"Let me alone," she screamed. "I want to go to him."

Buck stood in the middle of the street, untying the thongs of his shoes, glancing now and then at the couple approaching him. When Virginia and Sam had come abreast of him, Virginia paled as she recognized the blackened face and bent figure before her. Buck flung the shoes from his feet and smiled.

"Stay here a minute," he said to her, "I'm going to answer that letter." And then catching Big Sam eyeing him, he continued:

"I've just crossed Flat Top and packed Bubbles from the top down here."

A murmur of astonishment ran through the crowd and along the platform where Bubbles sat stupefied, mouth open, filled with a silencing terror.

"I'm dog-tired and sleepy, but that makes the odds just even for you. Peel that coat and jump into me; I'm going to give you the beating of your life."

Big Sam was well named. He stood eye to eye with Buck, an even six foot two, especially made for manhandling. His huge box chest stood out from his body amazingly. His neck was thick and set close to his shoulders, which sloped downward like those of an ape; and he had immense arms and oversized hands that hung even with his knees. His massive muscles evidenced themselves beneath his clothes; and his eyes, steely gray, shone wickedly from brows that were patches of bristles. His jaw was very long; and his chin, seamed from the nostrils to his jawbone by two scarlike snarling depressions, indicated a violence of temper and obstinacy like that of a bulldog. He was known as a man who had never been beaten in a rough and tumble fight, and he

was just as good with a gun or a knife as he was with his bare hands.

“Somebody take this crazy man away from me or I’ll kill him,” he said in answer to Buck’s challenge.

“Toss that coat and gun to her!”—indicating Virginia. “I’m going to clean you.”

Both men removed their coats, caps and guns. In taking off his gloves, Buck tested his hands, opening and closing them, and gloried in the fact that they were “working.”

Bubbles watched the men approach each other.

“Wont somebody stop them?” she cried.

“Let them go,” said Snaky. “He’s got it comin’ to him.”

THE men came together, sparring lightly in a circle for an opening. Buck was the first to land. The blow was a light counter to the forehead. It reddened Sam’s scalp where it glanced. Sam then placed a right uppercut to the chin of Buck, who laughed in his face as he threw back his head, weakening the force of the punch, and danced away. In breaking from this blow he slipped, and before he could recover, Sam shot forward and completed the fall by tripping him, first with one foot and then the other. But he did not succeed in taking advantage of the effort, for when Buck had fallen to the ground, he side-rolled; and Sam, attempting to fall upon him, found that he had jumped to his feet and stood smiling.

“Everything goes now,” said Buck as Sam arose. “I’m glad you pulled that foot thing. I’ll teach you something about feet.”

Gray fire flashed from the eyes of Big Sam, and his chest worked like a bellows. He rushed Buck, flailing his arms in great circles, head down and legs wide apart, to withstand the uppercut he felt must come, but willing to take it if he might get his arms around the man in front of him. Buck neatly sidestepped, and as Sam passed him, he sprang in close and swung a

terrific right-hand punch into the body just over the kidney. The big hulk staggered a few feet, the knees sagging with the last step, then dropped prone to the ground, with hands extended and face in the snow.

Buck seemed as though new strength had come to him; a freshness that was truly wonderful to behold seized him. Leaping forward, he grasped the right toe of the fallen man and with it bore the leg backward until the abdomen was lifted from snow; then he reached downward, knkeeling upon the back, and with the other hand raised the chin, pressing the body down with his knee, drawing the toe and the head together. The first position of the hold sent a pain through Sam, and he tried furiously to break the grip. But the application of that punishing grip, the toe-hold, sickened Sam, and his struggles were futile. The foot was laid almost flat upon the lower portion of the back. Buck watched the progress of the grip and its effect upon his antagonist. At last, under the constant pressure of his fingers, the foot came exactly where he wanted it. He then let go the head, and seizing the toe with both hands, he raised his body a trifle for better purchase, then suddenly shot the foot down to the back. For an instant it resisted him; then it went crashing into the soft mass and turned flat.

An exclamation of wonder and horror went up from the onlookers. A wild shriek of pain, as though emanating from an inhuman throat, broke into the chill air. Buck took his hands from the foot and stood up. Sam had fainted; his leg had been broken.

“That’s my answer,” Buck said to Virginia. “Appreciating unworthiness is a unworthiness.”

He put on his cap and coat and snapped his gun in place. Turning to the crowd, he said coldly:

“If there’s anyone else who believes the lies this skunk has spread about Bubbles and me, now’s his chance; for when I hit the hay I

won't be receiving caters for a week."

Not a voice was heard.

Bubbles saw Virginia move as though to speak to Buck. The little frozen girl was amazed a moment later as Buck staggered toward her, smiling. He picked her up in his arms and walked around the corner of the dance-hall to her cabin.

"There goes a he-man," said old Black Jack Ike. "They sure busted the mold after they made him.

BUCK laid Bubbles on the bed and built a fire.

He stood looking into it a moment and then sat down on the bed beside her, looking at the two black spots in her cheeks where the frost had laid its finger. Her hair was a mat of gold about her face. She smiled at him.

"When we've caught up on our sleep and you're able to travel," he said, "we're going back home, Bubbles, over Squaw Pass-double."

She closed her eyes and felt for his hand which she laid upon her throat.

"Dear God!" she murmured. "To give me such a man!"