

The Man from Alaska.

BY LOUIS WESLYN JONES.



OOD little Monsieur François! He leaned against the short counter in the front part of his little restaurant and allowed his tearful gaze to wander out into the street over the boiled crabs, juicy beefsteak, and wine bottles which adorned his show window. One thing was certain, he thought to himself — that, if he would continue as proprietor of the "Louis d'Or French Eating House," assuredly something must be done immediately towards improving business. But what could he do without capital with which to back his operations? Mechanically he opened the cash drawer and peeped in. What he saw couldn't have offered much encouragement, for he closed it quickly, and, with a deep sigh, once more gazed out into the street. After all, he thought, what was the use of longer continuing the everlasting struggle for success? Here he was, with the same little restaurant, in the same little side street, offering to the public the same excellent cooking as when he first started in business fifteen years before — and yet how different was everything now! Many other restaurants had sprung up in the neighborhood, and, alas! there wasn't enough trade to go round.

"*Sapristi!* San Francisco is filled with eating houses," groaned the little Frenchman, "and so many poor, cheap affairs, too! My old customers have deserted me. What care Americans for good cooking? The American atmosphere affects even my own countrymen, who also pass me by. Bah! they think me old-fashioned; they believe me not *fin de siècle*. Had I but a thousand dollars what couldn't I do? I would make the "Louis d'Or" so attractive that none could resist it. But alas! I've nothing — nothing. Unless trade improves I must surely close up in another week. I fear that I must ask Pierre and Jean to wait a few more

days for their wages — poor, honest fellows, they are the only ones that have stuck by me." And mine host had hard work to keep back those glistening, rebellious tears.

Just then a cab was driven up alongside the curbstone directly in front of the restaurant.

"Surely it won't stop here," thought François.

But it did stop there; and a big giant of a fellow clambered out of it with a great deal of unnecessary noise, and, handing the driver a five-dollar gold piece, dismissed him and his vehicle. Then the big man, who was dressed in a rough but well-fitting suit of brown Scotch cloth, opened the door of the "Louis d'Or" and stepped inside. He drew a large gold watch from his pocket and noted the time as he inquired in a stentorian voice that admirably suited the rest of his general make-up, "Five o'clock — am I too early for *dinner à la carte*?"

François answered no — that, although Monsieur was the first guest of the evening, his dinner should certainly not be delayed, nor in any way inferior, on that account.

"Good!" shouted the big man, seating himself at the large table in the middle of the room. "If you're ready, why then, by George! I am, too. Bring on your menu."

Pierre at once appeared with the bill of fare. Faithful Pierre! — he was the only waiter left now. But then, as François had argued, such a modest little restaurant with such a very slender patronage didn't require more than one waiter.

The big stranger's large blue eyes swept the cardboard at a glance. Then he stroked his luxurious brown beard and bellowed enthusiastically: "Who says there's another such place in all 'Frisco as the 'Louis d'Or'? Damn your bespangled and be-mirrored cafés, say I! Give me good eating in a tiny shop like this, where you pay your honest money for honest cooking and honest wines, and not for a lot of devilish clap-trap rubbish!"

François's face showed uncertainty. Was this big chap drunk, or fooling, or really sincere? The guest seemed to read his host's thoughts, for he added immediately: —

"Oh, I mean just what I say! I'm not one of your confounded joshers, and I'm not under the influence, either. To tell the plain, unvarnished truth, I've had nothing to eat and nothing

to drink for twenty-six hours. Oh, I've been preparing for this feast, I can tell you!"

François's face showed worriment. Could the big chap pay for his dinner? Had he any money, that he had starved so long? Again were his thoughts apparently read by the first guest of the evening, who went on to say: "Don't you be afraid for an instant that I'm unable to settle my bill. Why, dang it all, man! I'll not only pay, but I'll pay better than you were ever paid in your life before!" And he whacked a bulging leather wallet down on the table with such force that the water-bottle was almost upset. "And now, waiter," he continued, "bring on the soup."

"What kind of soup, sir?" asked the interested Pierre.

"All kinds," replied the big man.

"Very well, sir"; and Pierre went about his duty with a puzzled expression on his brow, while Monsieur François pinched his leg under the counter to make sure of his wakefulness.

While Pierre was gone, the stranger improved the time by carefully studying the bill of fare, and marking with a blue pencil the dishes that especially appealed to him. When the waiter returned he brought with him an immense tray containing six dishes of soup of various kinds, which he proceeded to arrange in a semicircle on the table before the big man.

"Ah!" exclaimed the latter gentleman, "this is what I call bully!" And he sampled each soup in turn, beginning at the right-hand side and taking them in rotation. "Now, when they are ready, bring on the fish."

"What kind of fish, sir?"

"All kinds."

Pierre's eyes sought his master's, but he could gain no additional intelligence from the stupid look on François's countenance.

"Very well, sir," mechanically said Pierre, and started off.

"And the wine, too," called the guest.

"What kind, sir?" Pierre stopped to inquire from the doorway.

"All kinds," was the hearty reply; and Pierre disappeared with a reverential bow.

The stout gentleman appeared to be delighted with the soups, and was not at all backward in expressing his satisfaction.

"This *consommé* is grand!" he declared, nodding approvingly at François, "and so are these other three, but when it comes to downright epicurean excellence, I'm thinking, by George! that it's a stand-off between the tomato-bisque and the mock-turtle."

And he fell to with renewed vigor, and did justice to each one of the six.

Then Pierre reappeared with his immense tray, loaded down with boiled salmon, fried flounder, broiled boned smelts, and other palate ticklers from the sea, which soon were being devoured by the hungry guest with many manifestations of pleasure.

"Don't forget the wines," he managed to say between mouthfuls, as the waiter vanished with the empty soup dishes.

The wines were soon at hand — pint bottles of fine old claret, Burgundy and Riesling, and the big man finished them all, together with most of the fish, while François and Pierre looked on with growing interest and wonder.

"And now," cried the banqueter, with undaunted enthusiasm, "let's have everything that I've marked with the blue pencil," and he tossed the cardboard to the waiter. "And, by the way, have you any extra dry champagne? Well, bring me a half-dozen bottles — the finest you have."

There's no use going further into details regarding that dinner. Let it be sufficient to say that no one human being, before or since, ever consumed a greater amount of food and drink at one sitting than did that lone guest at the "Louis d'Or." To remark that François and Pierre were amazed is to say too little — they were appalled, paralyzed, for in all their experience they had seen nothing like it. François made up his mind that, at all events, the big chap must and should be humored; Pierre couldn't even make up his mind — it was beyond him.

While the stranger was finishing his dessert, a few old customers dropped into the restaurant for their usual evening meal, and the waiter was compelled to divide his attention and services between them and the stout gentleman. When the newcomers observed the numerous empty dishes and wine bottles on the table in front of the lone banqueter, they all stopped to gaze in astonishment at such an unusual spectacle. Oblivious of all the excitement he was causing, that gentleman finished his black coffee and cognac

with a flourish, and then, rising noisily to his feet, announced in a loud voice that he was through.

"All except," he added with emphasis, "the toast. My friends, pardon me for interrupting you at the very beginning of your dinner, but I have three bottles of champagne left—the best, by the way, that ever warmed the heart—and I want you all to join me in drinking—the toast."

The newcomers all signified their willingness to partake of the wine at the expense of the liberal gentleman, and Pierre was ordered to fill all glasses.

"Yours also, mine host," called out the banqueter, with a low bow to François. "And yours, too, waiter."

And so both proprietor and servant joined the party with well-filled bumpers, in spite of François's protest that it was a very unusual proceeding.

"By George!" suddenly shouted the stout man, "I nearly forgot the cook. Oh, say, let's have the cook by all means."

And the wondering Jean was brought forth into the world from the mysteries of his kitchen amid general applause, and was given a large goblet of sparkling champagne.

"And now, my friends," continued the big man, his good-natured face all aglow, "allow me to explain the origin of the toast which we are about to drink. Just a year ago this month a poor, proud devil, who had failed in business, came here to 'Frisco without a penny in his pocket. For three long, dreary days he walked the streets of this town, seeking employment, without a bite of food to eat. On the evening of the third day he found a ten-cent piece in a gutter. He was so devilish hungry that he must have been a little out of his head, for, strange as it seems, he felt that nothing on earth would satisfy his outraged appetite but raw oysters. Oh, I know it sounds funny, but just wait till you are dying of that terrible sickness, starvation, and then see how it affects you—no two men alike, I swear. Well, gentlemen, this unhappy chap went from restaurant to restaurant in a dazed sort of way, trying to get ten cents' worth of oysters with salt and pepper, and lemon on 'em, but in every place he was laughed at, and sneered at, and was turned away, until he happened into a tiny French cook-shop in a little side street, where

they served him the few oysters as if he were buying a dozen, — with salt, and pepper, and lemon, too, by George! And in one of those oyster shells that starving man found a large pearl. He didn't realize what it was at first, and when a jeweler in Montgomery Street gave him three hundred dollars for it, the shock nearly killed him. The forlorn stranger's good luck dated from his visit to that little French eating-house. He met an old acquaintance that very night, who was bound for the Alaska gold fields, and the two of them made the trip together — and struck it rich! I was that starving man, gentlemen, and this was the restaurant where I got my oysters. And, gentlemen, since I arrived in San Francisco twenty-six hours ago, I've touched neither food nor drink, in order that I might banquet here this evening in a manner befitting the occasion. And I might add that even ordinarily I have the appetite of an ox. I've just finished the grandest feast ever set before man, gentlemen, and I've made out my own bill, which amounts to exactly two thousand and sixty dollars, with a hundred dollars each to waiter and cook as tips — and there's the cash!"

With this the big man laid a great roll of crisp bank bills on the table.

"Don't interrupt," he cried, as François tried hard to speak. "Every dollar of it is due you. And now, gentlemen, up with your glasses!" Every glass was held on high.

"Here's to the 'Louis d'Or' and its proprietor!" roared the big fellow. "May their success increase with each new day."

And every glass was drained.

"Ah, there's my cab now!" the banqueter exclaimed, and before any one could collect his scattered wits, the man from Alaska was out of the door, which, however, was opened immediately while the big, brown head was thrust inside.

"Oh, I say, gentlemen," called out the departing guest, "there are some of my cards," and he tossed a bunch of business pasteboards into the room. "I'm to be married at the Occidental Hotel next Wednesday morning, and I want all of you to come. If you don't," and he winked threateningly at François, "why, damn it all, I'll come back and eat you out of house and home!"