

North-West ROMANCES

STORIES 20c
OF THE
WILDERNESS FRONTIER

SPOILERS OF PARADISE VALLEY

A STEAM-MADE TROPICAL
OASIS HIDDEN IN THE
ICE-BOUND WILDERNESS
—A SAVAGE LOST RACE
AND A WHITE-SKINNED,
GOLDEN-HAIRED GIRL.

by
ROGER DANIELS

TUNDRA GOLD

by
FRED NEBEL

HOBNAIL JUSTICE

by
CHAS. NELSON

SAUNDERS
FICTION HOUSE
MAGAZINES

NO LAW BELOW ZERO

DEATH WAS MARKED FOR
THE RED-COAT WHO TREKKED
THE BLOOD-SPECKED MURDER
TRAIL—BUT CORPORAL M'CREE
WAS HARD TO KILL.

A COMPLETE NORTHLAND
NOVELET BY

A. de HERRIES
SMITH



North-West ROMANCES



T. T. SCOTT, *President and General Manager*
MALCOLM REISS, *Editor*

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A Complete Novel of the Yukon

- TUNDRA GOLD** Fred L. Nebel 3
"Gold stamped!" The whisper raced on blizzard wings. Cameo Dowd, five-ace king, Burke, the Chechako, and the Girl from Outside follow it to feud's end where the Grim Reaper waited for pay-off.

Three Thrilling Snowland Novelets

- NO LAW BELOW ZERO** A. deHerries Smith 42
Corporal McCree mushed along a blood-specked murder trail—lured deeper and deeper into the frozen Bering by the rumor of a beautiful ice-girl and the ghostly crew of a long-lost mystery ship.
- BUCCANEER OF THE BARRENS** Sewell P. Wright 76
Eau Blanc was forbidden territory, a Barrenland fur-pirate's guarded wilderness. But the grinning young trapper raised his war-flag there, daring Desjoie's Cree killers to come and blast him out.
- SPOILERS OF PARADISE VALLEY** Roger Daniels 106
Through the blizzard's endless wrath stumbled grim-jawed Peters of the Mounted, seeking a green Eden amid that white wilderness, where a Golden Goddess ruled a lost race of savage blue-eyed warriors.

Four Fast Northwest Short Stories

- BLOOD BROTHER OF THE SNOW-GODS** Sgt. Dan O'Rourke 33
To the Klingat huts of far-off Hoonyah, Cramer sailed to claim his torture-stake bride.
- OUTLAW OF THE SNOWS** H. S. M. Kemp 64
Ahead lay freedom. Yet law-tagged Billy Nelson turned back to side a Redcoat foe.
- HOBNAIL JUSTICE** Charles Nelson 72
Giant-powder booms—and a timber-topper gambles his life on a swaying death-spar.
- FLAMING RIVER** Edwin M. Sampson 96
Fugitives both! One from the leaping tongues of death—the other from Mounty law.



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A Complete Novel of Alaska

Tundra Gold

By FREDERICK L. NEBEL

Gold stampede! The whisper came on blizzard wings—a challenge to stake life against yellow treasure. Cameo Dowd, card king, and Burke, the chechako, followed it to feud's end on a death-strewn trail.

THE Tivoli, in Dyea, was in full blast. The last boat of the season, from Seattle, had docked that afternoon, and from it had disembarked hundreds of men with tons of luggage. The beach was strewn with tents and campfires and packs,

and the lanes of the overnight metropolis were choked with milling men in mackinaws and muclucs. The honkatonks bleated and blared; and men drank and talked of the promised land in maudlin frenzy.

On the morrow they would be off. Chil-

koot had to be scaled, the chain of lakes to Laberge traversed before the freeze-up, else King Winter would hold them ice-bound till the spring. Many there were who sat and drank serene in the knowledge that they had plenty of money and had already hired packers to freight their luggage six hundred miles to Dawson. Many others—and these constituted the majority—had come to Dyea on a shoestring. Brave souls, brave spirits. But it takes more than a soul and a spirit to drive through a wilderness of snow and ice and low temperatures; and there were officials seeing to it that no man crossed the boundary unless he was equipped with sufficient grub and other equipage to last him through the winter.

Perhaps the most hopeless of the lot was Burke, the chechako. He stood with his hands thrust into the pockets of his mackinaw, one of a knot of men who looked on while others bet and won or lost at the whirring roulette wheel in the Tivoli. He was a burly young giant, gray-eyed, square-jawed, silent. In his jeans was the pitifully small capital of fifty dollars. Nothing else had Burke—neither dunnage nor friend.

HE watched a man win three times in a row on number twenty-two. When the man shifted to another number, Burke edged in and placed ten dollars on twenty-two. The wheel spun, and he lost. No change of expression crossed his face. He played twenty-two again and again lost. He paused, setting his lips a little tighter, his fingers toying with his remaining thirty dollars.

Then he took a long chance and placed ten dollars on twenty-two. In less time than it takes to tell it he found the keeper paying him three hundred and fifty dollars. That almost took his breath away, but he didn't show it. He lost three bets on twenty-two and then shifted to thirty-three. His first try here brought him three hundred and fifty dollars. His gray eyes steadied and he continued betting, but the wheel turned from him and after losing six times in a row, he stepped back.

Yet in place of his original fifty dollars he now had five hundred. A hunch told him to quit when he did. Five hundred dollars felt good in a man's pocket. It

would not by any means get him to Dawson, but it would serve as a starter. Later he would come back and try his luck again.

Big, towering above many of the men, he elbowed his way through the crowd. A girl linked her arm in his and whispered of a drink and a dance, but Burke shook his head, disengaged her arm, and received a number of uncomplimentary remarks that rolled off him like water off a duck.

Out in the moonlit cold, out of the din and clamor and the smells of rank tobacco and rot-gut rum and steaming moosehide, he paused in a lee corner to light his pipe. Then he thrust his hands back into his pockets and strolled down the street. The night air was clear and cold and crisp, and mixed with his pipe-smoke, exhilarating. Out of the polar north the Aurora was shooting streamers of weird radiance that spun sibilantly among the stars.

Burke was a man addicted to solitary strolls. He liked to walk on and on, drinking in great draughts of the chill, clean air. He was born on the bleak shores of Lake Michigan, and having spent much of his time as a Great Lakes sailorman, was consequently used to the rigors of winter.

Presently he was by himself, tramping leisurely along in the pale gloom, his breath and pipe-smoke trailing behind him, the one hard to distinguish from the other. The path was beaten, but he saw no signs of life. Beyond a rise on his left he could see the glow of many campfires, but the sounds were muffled by distance.

Braced by the walk, he finally stopped, turned around and headed back. In the back of his head was the idea that he ought to return and try his luck again at the wheel. A wave of confidence was coursing through him, and he lengthened his strides.

He did not see a shadow detach itself from the deeper shadow of a clump of trees, as he swung by. The shadow sprang to life. A club traveled wickedly, landed on Burke's head with a dull thud. He slumped to his knees and then fell forward on his face, unconscious. Quick fingers rifled his pockets. Then the shadow straightened and sped off, and Burke lay as one dead.

TEN minutes later Stump McGonigle, slushing along from the direction of the town, came upon him. Stump had been

whistling a singsong chantey, but at sight of the lump on the trail he cut it short and bent over.

"Hey, you!" he called, prodding with his mittened hand. "Hey, you, what the devil now?—Um," he muttered, and dropped to one knee. "Guess he ain't drunk, either."

Stump saw the knitted toque lying in the snow, picked it up and tried to shove it back on the tousled head. In so doing he felt a large lump just above Burke's left ear.

"Um," he nodded. "This chum's been bushwhacked." He shook the unconscious man. "Hey, are you knocked out?" Receiving no reply, he said, "Well, I guess you are."

He stood up, a short, broad figure of a man, with a bushy beard touched up with snow crystals. He scratched his nose, looking around in the ghostly murk. Then he shrugged, bent down and heaved at the dead-weight figure.

"Gosh," he groaned. "Why in Helen Highwater do they make 'em so heavy?"

He tugged and heaved. Though short, he seemed possessed of an ox-like strength. He managed to wedge his shoulder in under his half-raised charge and stagger off with him. He continued along the dim path, then presently cut into one that diverged at right angles. A few minutes later he stopped before a tent surrounded by mounds of luggage. Dogs stirred and stretched in the gloom. Inside the tent there was a light, and a faint red glow rose from a tin chimney projecting from one side of the roof. He dropped the unconscious man and let out a vast breath.

"Is that you, Stump?" floated out a woman's voice.

"Yes, Miss Morgan. It's me—me and a poor critter I picked up down the trail a piece. Seems he was clouted on the knob."

There was a stir within, and then the flap parted and a girl was outlined in the lantern light, her head wreathed in a halo of golden hair.

"Oh, bring him in, Stump," she cried. "We must see what we can do."

"Y' bet," nodded Stump, and lugged Burke into the tent.

Thus they worked over him. The girl bathed his face and head with water, Stump

uncorked a flask of brandy and pressed it to the man's lips.

Burke felt life returning. Lights whirled before his eyes, dazzling, and his ears pounded. Then the lights whirled slower, slower, and he saw that he was looking at a lantern. In the radius of the glow he saw a broad, bearded face, with a nose like a gnarled pine knot and wide, serious eyes.

He licked his lips and turned his head a trifle. Another face. Hair like spun-gold, cheeks touched to a rosy hue by fresh air, eyes round and violet-blue and wondering.

"WHAT happened?" he asked. "I was—"

"Bushwhacked," put in Stump. "Did you have any mazuma?"

"I—" Burke stopped short, felt through his pockets, then relaxed. "I had five hundred. It's been taken. I played the roulette wheel for a flurry. Had fifty and hit such a sudden streak of luck I had to go out and cool off." His lips set, and he looked toward the flap. "If I find the man who waylaid me—"

"No use worryin'," said Stump, "if you got no idea who did it. What you get for strollin' in the moonlight."

"I've got no idea," replied Burke. "Saw no one following me. Saw nothing. But I'd just like three minutes with the rat who did it." Lights rose in his gray eyes, scintillating. Then he shrugged. "Well, no matter. Thanks for taking care of me. I'm back where I started from. I'll get along." He buttoned his mackinaw.

"What do you mean—back where you started from?" asked the girl.

"Broke," he chuckled, bitterly then, "Well, it's all in the game. I'll walk back and—Well, thanks again for—"

"Wait," interrupted the girl. "Are you bound north?"

He looked at her, and the ghost of a grin came to his face. "I'm bound for nowhere just now," he replied. "I'm stagnant. But I have hopes of getting north—like a couple of thousand others now in Dyea."

The girl looked at Stump, who blinked and then looked innocently up at the canvas ceiling. Then she turned back to Burke.

"Are you willing to work?" she asked.

"I'll have to," he said.

"Well, I am leaving for Nugget City, on

the Stewart, tomorrow. I'm a chechako, like yourself. Stump—Mr. McGonigle—was here to meet me with the team. He is a sourdough. He needs a man to help with the freight. He's been looking for one."

"I'd jump at the chance," Burke assured her.

Stump said, "You look husky enough, m' friend. D' you know cold weather?"

"Plenty," nodded Burke. "And snow and dogs and snowshoes and river boats. I'm a Great Lakes man. Day I was born it was thirty below."

"Um," mused Stump. "Well, then you're on. Seventy-five dollars for the trip and found. Bring your things here, if you got any."

"I've just got a blanket and a few clothes and my old Winchester down at the saloon. I'll get them." He paused on the way out. "Oh, my name's Burke—Cliff Burke."

"Your boss is Miss Morgan," said Stump. "And just a minute. Crossin' the boundary, you got to say how you expect to live. We ain't gold-rushers. You got to say if you expect a job where you're goin', and show proof." He looked at the girl. "What'd you say, Miss Morgan?" he asked.

She leaned back, and then lantern glow shimmered on her sea of golden hair.

"Oh," she said, "we'll say that Mr. Burke is to be bartender in my Nugget City Palace."

Tramping back to town, Burke was mystified—and a little awed. She was the last person in the world he would have placed as a saloon owner.

II

"YOU leavin'?" asked the bartender as he handed over Burke's rifle and small bundle of clothes.

"Yes. I'm taking a job as a freighter. Going in with the Morgan outfit."

A man leaning against the bar nearby stopped a drink half-way to his mouth and flung Burke a sidelong look. This man ran to height and beef—big and heavy and rock-like in build. He wore a bearskin cap, the ear-flaps turned up and tied, and a red-blocked mackinaw. His eyes were greenish, his stubble a muddy brown.

Burke had seen the man's sudden show of interest in the mirror back of the bar.

He turned to face him, saying nothing, a lifted eyebrow indicated his question—"Well?"

The stranger turned back to his drink with a frown, gulped it down straight, then pushed his hands into his pockets and wandered off into the gambling room.

"Do you know him?" Burke asked the bartender.

"No. He came out of the north a week ago."

"I was robbed tonight," said Burke. "About two hours ago."

"He's been here all evenin'," observed the bartender.

Burke left, wondering why the green-eyed stranger had shown such sudden interest in him. He strode past the Tivoli as a man was being propelled into the street by the able foot of a bouncer who had learned his profession on the old Barbary Coast. Burke had seen a lot of this since his arrival, and did not stop to join the booing crowd that gathered. Men struck suddenly and for no great reason, in that country. Brawls became so common that they drew little attention. Hard, the country and its men—hard and ruthless.

Burke reached the camp and found Stump making a fire at one side of the tent.

"I always sleep out," he said. "You'll have to do the same. Tent's for Miss Morgan. You got a six-gun?"

"Only a rifle," said Burke, raising it.

"There's a extry belt and six-gun in that b x there. You best use it when we're on the prod—buckled outside your parka."

Burke was a little puzzled. That sounded as if something ill were in the wind. He said nothing, however, on that score. But, after stowing away his small lump of clothes and rifle, he remembered the saloon incident, and said:

"By the way, commander—"

"Stump will do," mumbled the sourdough through his chew.

"—Stump, then. Look here. When I got my things at that little saloon below the Tivoli, the barkeep asked me if I were leaving, and I said, yes—with the Morgan outfit."

Stump turned on him. "Why 'd you have to go do that? I should ha' told you, the less said the better."

Mystery here—mystery. It was only then that Burke wondered why the camp

was situated so far from the town. But he went on: "And when I said this, a man at the bar jerked his head toward me, as if interested—"

"What 'd he look like?" chopped off Stump, one fist doubling.

"Big, broad, heavy-set—brown beard. I thought his eyes looked green—"

"Cripes!" Stump punctuated this by cracking fist into palm. He pivoted swiftly, for all his hammered-down bulk, and stared into the gloom out of which Burke had come. Without moving, he asked, "Did he foller you?"

"Didn't see him."

Stump was breathing heavily, his breath swirling around his shaggy head in silver clouds. Then he swung about, strode to the tent.

"Miss Morgan, can I come in?" he asked. He went in.

BURKE stood alone, his feet spread wide, hands in pockets, head lowered, eyes peering through the scrub timber. He had blundered, talked too much. Yet how could he have known? He told himself, if he had been less dumb he might have known.

Faintly he heard the voices of Stump and the girl—low, hurried, the words indistinguishable. Stump was talking most. His tone indicated he might be trying to drive home a point. Minutes dragged by. A wind blew in intermittent puffs, rattling the scrub timber. Powdery snow fell from the branches. The dogs stirred; one stretched and yawned, its tendons crackling like twigs underfoot. The Aurora flared, faded, flared again.

Stump came out. Beside him was the girl, buttoning a muskrat coat. Stump looked purposeful.

He said, "Come on, Cliff. We're mushin'."

"Tonight?"

Stump eyed him fixedly. "T'night."

Then he pointed to the big twelve-foot sledge, and directed Burke how to load, himself joining in. He went a little later to empty out the collapsible sheet-iron stove in the tent. He folded it and stowed it away on the sledge. Then Burke joined him to knock down the tent. They worked swiftly, with an economy of words, and toward the end both were perspiring freely.

The girl stood at one side, her face showing like a white cameo against the blur of fur hat and coat. Eight malemutes Stump routed out from holes they had burrowed in the snow. Quickly, deftly, he strung them out. One line ran directly from the sledge to the lead dog. Between the leader and the sledge the others were hitched to traces attached at intervals to the main line.

Burke was naturally curious because of this sudden departure under cover of darkness. No inkling of the reason was given him, and he did not ask.

Stump held out the belt and six-gun. "Better start wearin' these now, Cliff," he recommended.

Burke took the belt, strapped it outside his mackinaw, slid the gun in the holster, clipped down the flap.

"All ready," said Stump, and handed Burke the whip. "You take the gee-pole. I'll mush ahead. Don't use the whip on the leader. He knows his business and don't like to be told with a whip." He turned to the girl. "Ready, Miss Morgan?"

"Yes, Stump."

Stump took a fresh chew of tobacco, then slushed up along the team, shouting "Mush, m' huskies—mush, m' beauties!"

The team lined out. Burke steadied the sledge with his hand on the gee-pole that stuck out from the side. The girl was directly opposite, one the other side. The outfit moved off through the gloom, crunching through low, blanched brush, the runners scraping over dead twigs.

Thus Burke was off for the gold country, the country that made many men and broke the hearts and souls of more. Men came, hundreds, thousands, from the far reaches of two hemispheres. Men are like that. Send out the world that gold lies at the very pole, that it rims the ramparts of hell, that the way to it is beset by madness, disease and death. Do all this, and your man will leave home and fireside and chase the elusive rainbow.

Burke was like that. But a few hours back he had been almost broke. Then a whim of the wheel had dealt him five hundred dollars. Then a whim of the devil had dealt him a crack on the head and empty pockets again. Burke still ached to meet the man. Yet he realized it would have been futile to seek him in crowded, hectic Dyea. Forget it. And anyhow, if

it hadn't been for that crack on the head he would not be heading north now. Out of evil had come some good.

Stump, fast for a man of his squat bulk, led the way out of the scrub timber and on to a beaten trail. Behind, Dyea was marked by a faint glow in the darkness. Ahead, white hills and beyond them fantastic peaks of ice looking like a mirage under the fountains of weird light that sprayed up from the polar north. A wind was singing down from those far peaks which it would take days of travel to reach and pass. Cold the wind was; it stabbed at a man's face, billowed into his lungs, made his eye-balls ache.

Burke looked across to where the girl was plodding beside the sledge. He could see only the white tip of her nose and a bit of her cheek. She was pretty, he remembered. Now on the trail, her stride was resolute. She was not short, far from weak. She was all that was intrinsically feminine, and there was something capable about her, too. He mused it would take a lot to make her faint. He somehow did not like women who fainted at sight of a mouse.

AN hour passed. The way was deserted except for occasional camps stuck away in the lee of drifts or cut-banks. The outfit wound a serpentine way, snaking between snow-hills, skirting the rim of a field of boggy slush-ice.

Burke looked back once—caught a fleeting glimpse of a dark blur against the moonlit pallor of a snow ridge. Then it disappeared. Burke said nothing. Might be just a man on a legitimate mission of his own. But Burke kept looking back oftener. And, ten minutes later, he saw the blur again, nearer, following.

"Oh, Stump!" he called out.

Stump looked over his shoulder as he trudged, and Burke stopped. Then Stump turned and stood motionless, and the girl stopped, too. Burke slushed up to the old sourdough.

"I think someone's trailing us," he said. "Twice I've seen a man behind us. Last time he was nearer." He waved toward the country behind.

Stump's hand was resting on the flap of his holster. His eyes were narrowed.

"Prob'ly wait till we make camp," he

said. A pause. Then, "Well, we'll keep mushin'." He unfastened the flap of his holster.

Burke did likewise. Then Stump spat tobacco juice and tramped up to the head of the team, starting it with a word to the leader. Burke trudged at the gee-pole, his eyes swinging intently from left to right and then back over his shoulder. They struck a narrow, winding trail where on their right rose a sheer bank of snow a dozen feet high, while on their left sprawled slush ice and black water.

A FEW minutes later the cold solitude was shattered by the bang of a rifle. The lead-dog screamed and twisted clear of the snow. Followed another bang, from a clump of trees on the top of the bank. The wheel-dog jerked to one side, bared its fangs and sent a wild cry into the night.

Burke whipped out his revolver and put a shot screaming toward the last gun-flash on the hill. But Stump yelled, "The team! The team!"

Panic took hold of the team. The lead-dog, hard hit, was tearing at the snow, leaping and lunging, yelping frantically. The wheeler tugged and heaved, and the other dogs, frightened by the actions of the mainstays, yowled and tugged at the traces. "Hold 'em!" yelled Stump.

Burke gripped the sledge. So did the girl. Stump tried to get at the leader but the grizzled old veteran of trail and trace was crazed with pain and was running amuck. The whole team was afflicted with panic. Neither whip nor command stayed them. It was difficult for two men to handle eight panic-stricken malemutes.

The leader snapped at Stump, ripped the sleeve of his mackinaw. The wheeler yanked at the sledge violently. The leader leaped, spiraled in mid-air, and shot down toward the slush-ice. The others followed. Burke was a powerful man, yet eight dogs were far more powerful. The leader plunged into the slush, drawing the other dogs with him. The sledge skittered over the crust, heading for the black waters.

Burke saw the futility of trying to hold them. His brain flashed. He tugged at his knife, drew it, intending to slash away the traces and free the sledge so that it would not drag down the whole team. But he was a second too late. The sledge shot off with

the dogs, and Burke went with it, plunged down into the cold, slush-covered water.

His breath seemed wrenched from his body at contact with the water. The sledge plummeted beneath him. He struck out, his arms groping through the slush. It was like trying to swim through mud. He heard, vaguely, the girl's cry. His head came up, dripping, the water already turning to ice. He saw Stump's extended arm, reached for it, gripped the hand. His other hand was gripped by the girl. Together they hauled him out.

"The dogs!" he gulped.

"No use," chopped off Stump. "It must be deep. They ain't come up yet. Sled held 'em down. Run up and down, Cliff. Keep runnin' or you'll freeze to death."

Burke was a figure wrought in ice. He swung his arms as he ran up and down, and the ice that sheeted him crackled. Stump and the girl were frantically gathering sticks to make a fire.

"Keep runnin'!" warned Stump. "If you stop, you'll be dead in no time!"

Burke kept running. His backbone seemed frozen stiff. He could feel icicles hanging from his ears, his eyebrows, his chin, his nose. They clicked about his legs, clinging to the woolen trousers. Up and down he ran, up and down, his breath pumping from his chilled lungs. To stop would mean to die.

A fire was started. When it blazed up Burke wanted to hug it, to take it in his arms. Stump brought him into the warmth by degrees.

"Arms and legs first!" he said, and sent the girl away out of sight.

Off came Burke's moccasins and socks and frieze trousers, all caked with ice. Stump spread them close to the fire. He worked quickly, rubbing Burke's arms and legs. He took off his own mackinaw and wrapped it around Burke. He piled on fresh wood. The fire blazed and roared, and little by little Burke was moved nearer. His clothing steamed, dried rapidly, almost scorching.

An hour later he was dressed again, but still hugging the fire. That awful plunge had chilled him to the marrow. Stump called out to the girl, and she came out of the gloom, swinging her arms, grave and pale.

"How—how are you?" she asked Burke.

"Better," he said, and grinned; then frowned, looking at the black, slush-choked waters that had entombed the eight dogs. "Your whole outfit," he muttered.

Stump nodded. "Which means we don't get to the inside till the spring break-up."

"But we—*must*—this winter!" breathed the girl.

SHE squatted down between the men. Stump was chewing dismally. Burke had tied his pipe and pouch to the end of a stick and was holding them over the fire, to dry.

"Miss Morgan," ventured Stump. "Here we are, the three of us, stranded without an outfit. I vote we tell Cliff certain things. One for all, and all for one kinda, what I mean."

The girl looked at Burke, measured him with frank eyes, then nodded.

Stump went on, "Cliff, Miss Morgan is the daughter of the late Jim Morgan, a pioneer in the Yukon. He made a lot in the diggin's on Moosehide Creek. In his spare time, he was a gambler—not a professional, but he was a clever man at cards. A year ago he got into a game with Billy O'Hara, owner of the Nugget City Palace, and the game lasted fifty-two hours. It wound up by Jim winnin' the Nugget City Palace. He moved in, kicked out the tin-horns, and ran the squarest saloon in the country. Then he backed a mining syndicate that went on the rocks, and lost everything but the saloon. Three months ago he died with pneumonia, and left all he owned to his daughter Kate, who sits right here. I was his pardner when he hunted for gold. Miss Morgan is goin' north now to settle up—sell the saloon, if she can, and then go out.

"There's one other saloon in Nugget City owned by a gent named 'Cameo' Dowd. As far back as I can remember Dowd's tried to buy out Miss Morgan's dad. But they were enemies. It started when Jim was gold-huntin' and Dowd tried to frame him on the ownership of a claim. In his last will Jim writ the saloon could be sold to anybody but Cameo Dowd.

"That made Dowd sore. At Jim's death the saloon was closed down, but it's still stocked and worth, as it stands, a hundred thousand dollars. The green-eyed gent you saw is a critter called 'Butch' Dike, a

friend o' Dowd's. It's my bet that Dowd's aimin' to keep the Nugget City Palace closed as long as he can. It's my bet he sent Dike south to see Miss Morgan didn't get in. And it's my bet Dike fired them shots that wounded our two dogs, stampeded the others and sent our outfit down and out. That covers most all, Cliff," he concluded.

"Then," replied Burke, "since we're one for all and all for one, we've got to get north and turn the tables on this Cameo Dowd. You took me in when I was stranded. I'd like to lend a hand."

"We sure could use that hand," agreed Stump.

"Then let's all shake on it," smiled the girl. "One for all and all for one. From now on it's to be a three-cornered partnership. I'm Kate. You're Stump. You're Cliff."

She held out her hands. Stump took one. Burke took the other.

"There's a camp up ahead where we can buy outfits, but no dogs," said Stump. "It'll be hard goin'. On the way down I stopped at Lake Bennett and told a carpenter there to have a boat ready by the time I came back. If we travel fast, maybe we can beat the freeze-up to Nugget City. The critter that fired that shot used his head. He figured we couldn't fight back with the dogs stampedin'. He made a clean get-away."

"Maybe we'll meet him again," said Burke.

"I'd sure like to," replied Stump, "over a gun-sight."

III

AT Sheep Camp they bought out a disheartened chechako for a song. Stump had sufficient dust with him to make the deal. They resold parts of it, at a profit, retaining four hundred pounds in grub, blankets, sleeping bags and cooking utensils—enough to last them two months on the trail. Since they were not going in as gold rushers, the law required no more. It was technically Kate Morgan's outfit. She was en route to take possession of a saloon left her by the late Jim Morgan. Stump was her guide, Burke his assistant; thus it was on the books.

The freight was carried forward in re-

lays, a mile at a time. The girl worked too, slinging as much as fifty pounds on her back. It was slow, tedious, back-breaking toil. Yet they passed one man who was relaying an outfit of two thousand pounds in lots of eighty pounds each!

"You'll never get in this year, m' friend," said Stump.

"I know. But I'll get this stuff to Bennett in a month or two. Then I'll build a boat during the winter and go down north in the spring."

Burke marveled at the spirit of the man. Their own lot was an easy one compared with that man's. But not too easy. Day after day they toiled northward. They clawed their way over Chilkoot in the grip of a thirty below cold. Below and for miles beyond they saw glacial peaks, blue-white, forbidding.

Finally, Lake Bennett. There they found hundreds of men and camps, and the men were working furiously at the building of frail boats to float their dunnage down north. Everyone was in haste. Word had come in from the farther north that the freeze-up would come earlier than usual. A craft caught in the first ice would be doomed to remain there till the spring thaw. Brawls sprang up quickly on the busy shore. Men almost killed each other over possession of an oar or a boat-hook. It seemed the hundreds there were keyed up to the danger point, because all wanted to get to Dawson City before the big freeze, yet all knew that many would not succeed, and one envied the other.

"I'll find me that carpenter," said Stump, "and our boat. I paid him a hundred dollars deposit. The job costs five hundred."

"For a boat with oars!" echoed Burke, frowning.

"Yep. A thirty-foot boat," nodded Stump.

"I'll wait here," said Kate, sitting down on a mound of luggage. She was dead-tired, and circles were under her eyes.

As the two men strode off, Stump said, "Great gal, Cliff!"

"She certainly is," nodded Burke. "She's stood the gaff better than many a man. And she's less complaining than a good deal of men. She's—priceless!"

"We'll see no tin-horn fimflams her, Cliff."

"Tell the world!" Burke assured him. "I'm all for her."

"One for all," said Stump, "and all for one."

"You bet!"

They tramped up along the shore. Axes were ringing; saws were droning. Men were hard at work. They worked all day, and most of the night with the aid of a lantern. Stump cut in to a shack near which stood a couple of boats in the making. A man met him in the doorway.

"Where's that feller Anderson?" asked Stump.

The man took his pipe from his mouth. "Oh, you mean Sammy Anderson? Sammy went north two weeks ago."

"What!" exploded Stump.

"Yeah," nodded the man. "I bought him out. He met an old sourdough friend of his that got the gold-bug in Sammy's head so bad that Sammy took a boat he'd just finished and lit out."

Stump's face puffed up and reddened, and his big hands knotted. "The dirty little pup!" he snorted.

"'S matter?" asked the stranger.

Stump turned fiercely on him. "What's the matter! Why, dang me blue in the face, I contracted for a boat on the way to Dyea. I was goin' to carry my dogs and dunnage down the lakes to save time and if the freeze-up caught me, I was goin' to go on over the ice with the dogs. Now I lost my dogs and—Ding-bust that pie-faced pup's soul!"

"Ah, I remember," said the man. "Sammy told me about you. He left your hundred dollars with me. Just a minute." He went back into the cabin and came out with a small pouch, handed it to Stump. "I'd like to help you out with a boat, but I'm six behind already and—"

"Go build them!" snapped Stump, and strode off, boiling.

BURKE joined him. "Looks like we're stuck for good now, Stump, old timer."

"I dunno what to do," bit off Stump. "My brain's all fagged out of ideas. I was figgerin', I was *countin'*, on this boat. It was a long chance, but I figgered we might get way back country before the freeze-up. Yeah, we're stumped, Cliff. We ain't even got the dogs now. We could ha' gone in

over the ice with them. It's pure hell!"

Kate received the news stoically. Only a faint tightening of the lips showed how the shock struck her. Stump was in pure agony.

"Don't take it so hard, Stump," she smiled bravely. "It wasn't your fault. We'll have to build our own boat and wait for the spring."

"And sit here while Cameo Dowd rakes in a fortune over the winter!" fumed Stump.

Kate shrugged. "I know, it's hard. I wanted awfully to get to Nugget City, and then return south in the spring. But we must take the worst with the best, Stump."

"We been gettin' mostly the worst," said Stump.

"Ever since I joined you," put in Burke. "I've been your hard luck card. I've been a hard luck number as far back as I can remember."

"Shucks, it ain't your fault, Cliff," came back Stump.

"Bah! I know it is!"

"Oh, Cliff, don't be like that," urged Kate, leaning forward. "They would have crossed us soon or later, anyhow."

Burke shrugged and turned away to gather wood for the evening fire. He felt pretty much sunk. Inwardly, he placed the guilt on himself. The casual remark of his to the bartender in the saloon in Dyea had sharpened the interest of the green-eyed man. He drew into himself, and he found a grudge growing within him—a grudge against the green-eyed man and all who were connected with him. They were plotting against Kate. In his quiet way he liked the girl. He liked to sit back beyond the rim of the firelight and watch her, watch the light flickering through her spungold hair, sparkling in her luminous eyes when she laughed.

AFTER supper, when she was mending a moccasin and Stump was repairing a snowshoe, he got up, buttoned his mackinaw, and with a brief word, went off on one of his solitary strolls. He wandered down among the beach-fires, saw men still at work with axe and saw. He paused before a tent where a game of faro was going on. He did not enter, merely looked in at the door.

He saw the green-eyed man in profile.

His hands knotted in his pocket. He stepped back, looked around, then walked over and took up a position beneath a stunted tree. He was, among other things, a patient man. Leaning there, he smoked his pipe, his hand cupped over the bowl to keep out the wind.

At the end of an hour he saw the green-eyed man—Butch Dike—come out of the tent. With him was another, smaller man. They pulled up the collars of their mack-inaws and tramped off up the shore. Burke followed at an inconspicuous distance. They turned inland five minutes later and strode past a street of tents.

Burke trailed them to a low hill, waiting until they had topped it and disappeared. Then he hurried up, peered over the top and saw a campfire below and, dimly, a tent. He saw them stop by the tent, where another man rose to join them. After a moment the three entered the tent.

Burke cut off to the left and made for the camp by circuitous route, taking advantage of the bushes. He came up from the rear, and paused, lying still. He saw a sledge and dogs half-covered with snow.

He drew his revolver and edged his way closer. Ten feet from the entrance of the tent he stood up. His hand tightened over the butt of his gun. He bunched his muscles and leaped in long strides. He ripped aside the tent flap and thrust in.

The three men jerked back, and Dike clutched for his gun.

"No, you don't!" clipped Burke, quietly. "You, Dike, unbuckle that belt. Quick! And you two!" he flung at the others.

Motionless, he blocked the entrance, his gray eyes steady, watching every move.

"You don't know what you're doin'," argued Dike, sullenly.

"Never mind! Off with the belt!"

The three men gave up their weapons, and Burke threw belts and guns outside. He looked at the sheet-iron stove, glowing red, with a stack of wood alongside.

"Now," he said, "all of you take off your moccasins and socks."

"What the—" began Dike, his mouth falling open.

"You heard me! Take 'em off! I'm in a hurry. Snap to it! I'll blow apart the first rat moves out of turn!"

Dazed, bewildered, the men jerked at their moccasins, drew them off.

"Now your socks!" prompted Burke.

"But—but we'll freeze!" croaked one.

"Not if you stay in here," said Burke.

"If you try to go out, yes. Exactly. Off with them!"

Dike grumbled with baffled rage. But his socks came off. Likewise, the other men's. Burke gathered them up, looked around to make sure there was no other footgear. There wasn't.

He addressed Dike simply. "The joke's on you. Nice trick you played when you shot our dogs. Well, I'm taking yours. I'll dump your dunnage at the other side of the hill. Maybe somebody'll come to help you in the morning. Poke out your head while I'm lining up the dogs and I'll knock it off."

"By cripes, guy!" snarled Dike. "I'll get you yet. And when I do—"

"Look me up in Nugget City. Good night."

Burke backed out, pulled shut the flap. He picked up their weapons, threw them along with their footgear on the sledge. Then he routed out the dogs, drove them into the traces, and started off.

"Damn your soul!" yelled Dike. "I—I'll kill you!"

"Whistle it!" sang back Burke, and drove the dogs over the hill.

AT the other side he dumped off the dunnage, the guns and the footgear. Then he cracked the whip and boomed down back off the shore camps, lashed the dogs on through the night and came tearing into camp as Stump was gloomily pitching sticks into the fire.

"Why—!" exclaimed Kate, eyes wide.

Stump squared around, his eyes narrowed. "Now what the—?"

Burke hauled the dogs to a standstill and dived for the dunnage. "Come on," he said. "Let's mush." He offered no further explanation.

"Say, look here," broke in Stump. "You gone dippy? Where'd you steal that team?"

"Didn't steal it. Took it from Dike and his two playmates."

"But they'll come after us!" cried Kate.

"Not in bare feet," chuckled Burke. "Took their socks. Come on, Stump! Fast, old timer! We'll travel all night!"

"Jumpin' jackrabbits!" exploded Stump. "You—you—"

"That grub-box, Stump!" cut in Burke. "Pile it here!"

Stump cut loose with a booming laugh, then leaped to load the sledge, chuckling in his beard.

Twenty minutes later the outfit pounded off into the night. Kate half-ran, half-rode on the rear of the runners, gripping the horizontal handle-bar and at the same time steering the sledge. Stump and Burke trotted on either side, the snow dust flying beneath their feet.

"Cliff," yelled Stump, "Dike'll try to kill you, sure as you're born!"

"Dike said the same thing," threw back Burke; and added, with a chuckle, "I'm worried stiff!"

"If not him, then Cameo Dowd—when Dowd gets wind of it."

"I'm worried stiffer!" laughed Burke, softly.

The camps of Bennett dropped behind. Ahead sprawled the long, lean reaches of the wilderness, ghostly under the frigid radiance of the Northern Lights. Beyond—days and weeks beyond—lay Nugget City and the notorious Cameo Dowd.

IV

THINGS were tame in the Royal Flush Saloon and Dancehall in Nugget City. It was getting on toward eleven of a chill, drab morning, with the tardy sun still down behind the southern bulge of the earth. Most of last night's revelers were evidently still abed. Only one girl was afield in the wide, barn-like structure. She sat at a table tweaking the ear of a huge Swede who looked as if he'd just come in from the trail.

One old sourdough was placidly playing solitaire. No one was at the roulette wheel, but the keeper was idly and dreamily spinning the wheel and yawning between spins. A mulatto was learning the bars of a new-song at the piano, plunking listlessly, one eye squinted against the rising smoke from a rag of a cigarette. Two men were standing at the bar fighting a hang-over with whisky straight, the argument being that the only way to kill the devil was with the devil.

At a table by a front window, alone, silent, erect in his chair, sat Cameo Dowd, having his first eye-opener and his first

cigar of the day. Lean and tall was Dowd, olive-skinned, jet-eyed, smooth-shaven. An old scar high on his left cheek had, in healing, drawn up the eyebrow, slanting the eye, and leaving a vaguely satanic expression on his immobile face. He wore a light gray suit, a pearl-gray Stetson and a wing-collar. To all the women he had loved in his forty years he had presented rare cameos.

He looked out through the window, across the street at the Nugget City Palace, windows boarded, doors padlocked. For four months he had held full sway in Nugget City, supplying all its amusement and liquor, reaping a fortune. The freeze-up had not come too early, and the chechakos had poured in day after day. Things looked rosy for Cameo Dowd.

HE was smiling to himself confidently when a dog team trotted into his vision. His eyes squinted, then tightened. A black lead-dog, with streaks of white along his flank. He knew that team! Through the slightly misted window he saw three figures.

"Dike," he murmured, "and Kline and Cokely."

He stood up, tall and straight and wiry in his leanness. He strode for the door, pulled it open and put one foot out, smiling thinly.

And then his teeth snapped on his cigar, and his crooked left eye twitched. Three figures—but not the three he had thought. He buttoned his coat and stalked across the street. One of the figures turned, and he saw a girl—a beautiful, radiant girl with wisps of golden hair blowing from the hood of her parka. He slowed down, his shoulders squaring.

"Oh, hello there, Cameo," greeted Stump, shifting his chew. Dowd stopped, his lean cheeks drawn in, his mouth a hard slash.

"Where did you get that team?" he demanded curtly.

"Oh, we picked it up kind of," replied Stump innocently.

Behind Stump stood Burke, big and burly, his face wreathed in a young beard, his gray eyes regarding Dowd levelly, serenely.

"Where did you get *my* team?" snapped Dowd.

Burke said, "I helped myself to it down at Bennett."

Dowd shifted his rapier black look. "Who are you?"

"Burke."

"Oh, you did, did you?"

"Yep."

Dowd tilted his chin. "Stole it, eh?"

"Have it your way."

"Dump off your junk," went on Dowd. "I'll take my dogs."

"I didn't take 'em from you," said Burke. "Took 'em from a bird named Dike and two others."

"You turn them over." Dowd bit his lip in quick thought. "They were stolen from me a couple of months ago. They're prize dogs, and I want 'em."

"Prize dogs all right," agreed Burke, "but you're not going to get 'em."

Dowd's eyes glittered. He took three quick steps toward the sledge and kicked off a grub-box. Burke stepped over leisurely, grabbed his shoulder and spun him backward.

"Keep your hands off, mister," he said simply.

Dowd stood with shoulders thrown back, chin in the air, eyes narrowed murderously, his whole body tense.

"You give me those dogs!" he rasped. "They were stolen. If you bought or took them from the man who stole them, you're out of luck. They're still mine."

"Run along," recommended Burke quietly. "They're mine. Dike'll drift in here some day. Said he would. Said he would come on after me and do a little killing."

Dowd's crooked eye twitched faster, and his thin lips flattened back against his teeth. His right hand was playing with a button on his coat. Presently the top of his coat opened.

Stump was watching him. The old-timer had raised the flap on his holster and his fingers folded around the butt of his six-gun.

"I wouldn't go pullin' that derringer, Cameo," he drawled.

DOWD jerked his gaze to face Stump. He saw the short man's gun partly drawn.

"I ain't awful fast in the draw," went on Stump, "but I ain't awful slow, either."

Dowd lowered his hand, the fingers writhing. "I see," he snarled.

"Good you do," grinned Stump. "You'll be seein' a lot of us, too."

Dowd, always a good actor, relaxed, arched his eyebrows and chuckled liquidly in what seemed like high amusement. Then he put his cigar carefully, firmly, between his teeth, swiveled slowly and sauntered across the street. Pausing in the doorway of the Royal Flush, he half-turned, and again his head tilted back in a mocking chuckle. Then he entered, closing the door quietly.

"When Cameo's mildest," observed Stump, "he's worst."

Kate said, "Oh, Cliff, why did you get into an argument with him? Why didn't you give him the dogs if they're his?"

"I don't know," admitted Burke slowly.

"I guess I didn't like the way he went about it."

Stump nodded vigorous agreement. "Y'bet. Cameo's trying to hand out the idea his team was stolen. Stolen my aunt's eyebrow! Butch Dike was always his right-hand man. My dogs wasn't so good, but they was dogs and they got me where I wanted to go. I sure hand it to Cliff for replacin' them dogs with Cameo's. This here team right now is worth five thousand dollars!"

"But you've caused hard feeling," said Kate.

"Shucks! Hard feelin's would ha' come anyhow." Stump turned, put hands on hips and looked at the Nugget City Palace. "There, Kate, m' gal, is your property. Billy O'Hara built it on a grand scale. Billy's over on the Yukon now. Owns another there. He was a great critter, and one o' your dad's best friends. A mighty good loser was Billy O'Hara." He looked down the street. "We can get the key from Ken Emmonds, who is a lawyer when he ain't off after gold. Come on."

They moved on, and Ken Emmonds, a large man with iron-gray hair, flannel-shirted, high-booted, greeted them expansively. Stump got the introductions over quickly, and Emmonds brought a bunch of keys from his safe.

"Here you are, Miss Morgan," he said. "They're yours. And there are some papers here you'd better sign. Stump and Cliff Burke can act as witnesses."

While the papers were signed, Emmonds went on: "Several offers have been made, Miss Morgan. Of course, Mr. Dowd up the street has been persistent, but—ahem—it seems your father and Mr. Dowd were not exactly friendly—and your father has stipulated that the saloon must not be sold to Mr. Dowd. But there are others. A Mr. Floyd, from Cassiar Bar, but he will go no higher than eighty-five thousand. A couple of partners from Dawson, too. Then, last week, old Billy O'Hara, the original owner, stopped here on his way down the Stewart. He'd like to buy it back again. He'll be here again shortly. And by the way, Miss Morgan, while you're here, we have a spare room at our house and I'm sure Mrs. Emmonds would be glad to have you."

Kate accepted graciously, and then lowered her voice. "But first, I'd like to visit—my father's—grave."

"Yes," nodded Emmonds gravely. "The cemetery is under two feet of snow, however, and the grave could not be located."

"But I'll just go there," Kate said.

Emmonds put on his mackinaw, and giving the keys to Stump, went off with Kate. Burke and Stump drove the team back of the saloon and put the dogs in the kennel-yard. Then they entered the building by a rear door, and toured the place from top to bottom. Dusty glasses still stood on the bar, and a couple of half-empty bottles. Stacks of chips were on the gambling tables. The store-room was crammed with all kinds of liqueurs and whiskies.

"We'll take possession of a room here, Cliff," said Stump, "till the place is sold. And meantime I got a claim down-river we ought to work a bit."

"I've got no right to work your claim, Stump," replied Burke.

"Who says you ain't?" demanded Stump. "We're pardners, and when you find a good claim you let me in on it, too." He added, as an after-thought, "Where'd I be—where'd Kate be—if you didn't help yourself to that team? It's your team, by rights, and it's worth five thousand. I'll buy it for five thousand in dust."

"No," said Burke. "It's our team. You know, one for all and all for one."

"There you are!" beamed Stump. "Like I said about my claim."

Burke grinned, laid his hand on the old-

timer's shoulder. "I'm mighty glad I met you, Stump. It's a go."

NEXT day they loaded their sledge and went booming down the Stewart for Stump's claim. There was nothing sensational about Stump's claim. By the wood-burning method they managed to average fifty dollars a day. The snow was thawed with fires, and then striking bare earth, they thawed it with another fire, dug down till the earth became too hard and then built another fire—and so on, foot by foot, fire after fire, they bored into the earth.

A month later they plugged back into Nugget City with fifteen hundred dollars in dust. All the outsiders of the season were in, and the stragglers had finished dragging their outfits the last hundred miles over the ice. Hundreds of others had been caught in the freeze-up on the chain of lakes from Laberge to Linderman.

Kate met her two "pardners" with sparkling eyes and warm handshakes. She told of having received many offers for the saloon, but Emmonds had advised her to take not a cent less than a hundred thousand.

"He's suggested I wait until Billy O'Hara comes back from his mysterious trip down the Stewart," she told the two partners. "Mr. Dowd has paid me several visits and the last time he offered a hundred and ten thousand. But you know my father's will."

"I'll bet," said Stump, "Billy O'Hara will pay your price. I wonder what the devil he's doin' down the Stewart all this time?"

"I'll have to sell soon," Kate observed. "Most of my money is exhausted, and I've been Mrs. Emmond's guest just about long enough—longer than is polite in fact."

Burke and Stump left after a while to feed their dogs in the kennel back of the Nugget City Palace. Then Stump suggested a drink, and they crossed to Dowd's Royal Flush. It was three in the afternoon, and dusk was settling rapidly. The place was fairly crowded, and a couple of stud games were under way.

As they stepped up to the bar, a short, spare man was talking rapidly with Cameo Dowd, in a jocular vein. His toque was resting on one ear, and a cigar was bobbing up and down as he spoke. Dowd seemed

a bit annoyed, and as he espied the two partners, he tightened his jaw and narrowed his eyes. Stump edged over and hit the spare man a thundering crack on the back.

"Ugh!" he choked, almost losing his cigar; and then, "Well, Stump McGonigle, you old son of a Siwash!"

"Billy O'Hara, you old trail hound!" roared Stump, and introduced Burke.

"Say, Billy," said Stump, "I hear you're interested in the Nugget City Palace."

"I sure am, Stump. I'm going to buy it. I hear Jim Morgan's daughter's in town."

"Yep. Let me introduce you, Billy."

"Time enough, Stump—time enough. Wait till tomorrow. I've been living on beans and bacon for almost two months, and this is my night to get pie-eyed drunk. I was telling Cameo he's going to have me for a neighbor. Yes, sirree! Eh, Cameo?"

Dowd shrugged. "Looks that way, Billy," he said, and strolled off.

O'Hara prodded Stump in the ribs. "Listen, Stump. I want to have a little talk with you and"—he nodded toward Burke—"your young pardner. Come on."

HE turned, looked around and then led the way upstairs to a booth on the balcony overlooking the dancehall. Burke and Stump sat down and O'Hara drew shut all the curtains. He passed around cigars as he sat down and took off his toque. His merry blue eyes twinkled as he leaned forward.

"I've spent two months down the Stewart," he said, "and I'm going to let you boys in on something. I don't forget the time you tipped me off over on Tanana, Stump. One good turn deserves another. I'm rotten rich already, but gold always tugs at me, and I'm going to stock up enough so I won't go broke again. I've got a weakness for backing wildcat schemes, and you know I've made and lost three fortunes in my day.

"Well, as I said, I've been snooping around down the Stewart. I always had a hunch there was something doing on Crooked Knee Creek, and I aimed to start a rush, stake me a claim and then buy the Nugget City Palace. Business, see?" He drew a pouch from his pocket and poured out a handful of nuggets. "There's my sample."

Stump craned his neck. "You got them on Crooked Knee, Billy?"

"Yes, sirree! I've staked but I haven't filed yet. I'm letting half-a-dozen of my old friends in on it. Nils Jansen, Frank Tate, Herman Shultz, Ike Cosgrove, and you. I won't file till first thing tomorrow morning. I'm telling you like the rest. Rest up tonight, and sneak off at two in the morning. My claim's a mile up the creek. Two dead spruces, interlocked, mark it. It's going to be the biggest stampede of the year!"

"Billy," said Stump, "you're aces up!"

"Forget it, Stump. One good turn deserves another. Keep it under your hat. The news will spread when I file, but you'll have a six-hour start. Good luck, both o' you boys!"

O'Hara shook with them, slammed his toque on one ear and bobbed out in his jaunty, happy-go-lucky manner. Burke looked down from the balcony a few minutes later and saw the pioneer saloonman and all-around good-fellow laughing and joking while he placed bets at the roulette wheel.

"Wonder where Dike could ha' got stuck?" ventured Stump as they descended to the bar.

"I was looking forward to meeting him," chuckled Burke.

"If I know Dike, he ain't the critter'll come out in the open to meet you. But get him off your mind, Cliff. Somethin' tells me we're primed to make a fortune. Well, we ought to, if Bill's tip pans out."

"And if my hard-luck streak doesn't pop up."

Stump snorted. "Still harpin' on that? Shucks! Let's go over to our room and get a stampede outfit together."

They went out, crossed the street, unlocked the front door and entered. They climbed up to their room and Stump lit a lamp on the table. Burke closed the door.

"I'll start a fire," said Stump. "Little wood here, but we'll need more. We'll wolf some grub, take a nap and be fit to travel twelve hours."

"I'll get some more wood," replied Burke, and went downstairs.

Out in the yard he gathered an armful of kindling, re-entered the back door, bolted it, and felt his way through the gloom toward the stairs. He was half-way up

when a terrific explosion rocked the building and hurled him back down to the bottom, the wood clattering about him.

V

HE landed on his head, and the abrupt stop snapped his teeth together. He rolled over, stunned, millions of light-needles flashing and spinning before his eyes. Trip-hammers seemed to be pounding in his brain, and the shocks traveled the length of his spine.

Vaguely he remembered that something terrific, something like an earthquake, a volcanic upheaval, had occurred. He groped with his hands. He gripped something. It was the bottom of the balustrade. He dragged himself closer, wrapped his arms around the wooden post. Why was he so weak? Why did his muscles tighten and relax, quivering, beyond his control?

"Stump!" he choked. "Stump!"

He rocked, hugging the post. He tried to haul himself erect, toiled to his knees, as if a couple hundred pounds were on his back, holding him down. Sweat streamed down his face from the tremendous exertion, though deep within him he felt chilled.

"What?" clicked through his numbed brain. "What had happened?"

The sharp corners of the post dug into his arms. He heaved again, and the whole length of the balustrade creaked and swayed. Inch by inch he dragged his body up the post, and then stood on wobbling legs.

Smoke! Was that smoke in his nostrils? "Stump!"

He reeled away from the post, brought up against the wall. He shook his head from side to side, ran a hand over his face. Damn those spinning, whirling lights before his eyes! His feet stumbled against the base of the stairs, and he fell forward. He clawed at the stairs. Step by step he toiled upward, his lungs pumping hard.

He reached the top and heaved up to his feet. He was steadier, the needle-pointed lights were vanishing. He swayed into billowing clouds of smoke. He saw tongues of flame licking the gloom ahead, heard a furious crackling sound.

Fire!

The smoke blinded him, gagged him. It

was like a solid wall that held him back. He coughed and choked, crooked an arm across his face and lunged desperately through the suffocating clouds. A tongue of flame scorched his mackinaw; the heat of it hurled him backward against the wall.

"God . . . Stump!" he groaned.

His teeth set, his neck cords bulged. He bunched his muscles and with sudden abandon hurtled through the sheets of flame. The heat stabbed through him, made him grind his teeth. He struck a chair and tumbled over it.

The room was an inferno. The flames were shooting through the ceiling. Burke flung about furiously, hurled aside the table, came upon Stump huddled beneath the window. He fell upon the old-timer, wrapped his arms about him to shield him from the awful heat. Stump's beard was scorched to cinders; there was blood on his face. He was a limp, dead weight.

Burke wrenched a blanket from his pack in the corner. He wrapped it around his partner, stood up, with the old-timer draped across his shoulder. He squinted at the twisting flames, lowered his head and crashed out through the door. He slammed into the wall in the hall, turned and staggered for the stairway, flames licking at his heels.

He half-ran, half-stumbled down the staircase. His knees almost buckled as he reached the bottom. He plunged through the gloom of the bar, reached the front door, groped for the bolt, shot it back, yanked open the door and plunged out into the street and the cold and the milling crowd.

Billy O'Hara was the first to meet him.

"My God, Burke! What happened?"

"I don't just know," panted Burke. "Poor Stump! He's half-dead!"

Through the crowd came Kate and Ken Emmonds. The girl was wide-eyed, white-faced.

"Cliff!" she called.

"Kate!" he called back. "Stump—"

"My house!" broke in Emmonds. "Come on, Cliff!" He turned and flung up his hands. "Out of the way!" he yelled, boring into the throng. "Clear out!"

Burke lunged after him, with Kate at his side. They surged into Emmonds' cabin and his wife gasped. Burke laid his partner down gently on a couch.

"Where can I get a doctor?" he asked. "Stump needs a doctor."

"I'll get one," flung back Emmonds and dived out through the door.

But the doctor was already on the way, having picked up the news from the crowd of an injured man. Emmonds half-dragged him into the house. Burke stood aside, his face smeared with soot and grime, his eyes red-rimmed, his big chest heaving up and down, patches of the stubble on his face singed.

He looked at Kate, and he saw tears in her eyes. Her upper lip was quivering and she drew it under her teeth. She turned away, went over beside the doctor. Burke moved around, filling the room with his burliness, wanting to help Stump, yet knowing he could not. He felt miserable, the soul of him shocked and numbed to the core.

"Doc," he ventured clumsily, "what—what—?"

"He's badly stunned. See—his hair has been singed off! His face is gashed—his neck and chest and shoulders. Bits of metal in the wounds. A bad case. All of you clear out but— Will you help me, Ken?"

"Let me," urged Burke.

"No," said the doctor. "You look all in, Ken?"

"Sure thing, Doc. You'll have to clear out, you folks!"

Burke and Kate went out into the street.

NUGGET CITY was bathed in a red glow that pulsed in the Arctic sky. The Palace was a huge inferno. The black skeleton of it stood stark against the writhing sheets of flame. It roared and crackled mightily, and hundreds of men milled through the street, their faces limned in red.

Fortunately, the Palace stood alone, and a windless night saved nearby houses that otherwise would have gone up in flames. There was no saving it. In the mad hunt for gold, men did not stop to bother about forming fire brigades against such disasters. But a gang of men were on the roof of the Royal Flush, pouring buckets of water down its front to save it from the terrific heat.

"I'm sorry," said Burke to Kate, watching one side of the Palace crash in, while

a tountain of sparks and cinders billowed into the sky.

"It—it's not your fault," she said. "Think of poor Stump."

"I am," he said, "I am. Of Stump and you. You're practically stranded, Kate."

"I know—I know," she nodded.

"You'll"—he drew a breath—"you'll need us. One for all—"

"Oh, Cliff, what are we going to do?" she cried; then she put up her chin. "I'll work. I'll do something. I'll have to."

"But there's nothing here for a woman, Kate—nothing but the dancehall."

She stiffened. "Not that—no—no—not that!"

"No," agreed Burke, bitterly; then, "Kate, this is sudden, but I've just realized—I love you. I mean it." He was clumsy but determined. "Crises make a man open his eyes. Kate, I want to marry you. I want to protect you. I'd give my life, such as it is, to have that right."

She turned her head away. He did not see how her lips compressed. "No—no!" she cried. "I can fight alone! I won't be a burden—to you!" She swung on him suddenly, her voice throbbing. "I don't mean to be harsh, Cliff. I know your love would be a great and steadfast one. But—but—"

"Kate," he said, softly, "do you love me?"

She looked at him with wide, moist eyes, her lips moving. Then she spun away, ran from him. Burke started after her, but dragged to a stop, hung his head. Running feet slowed down near him, and Billy O'Hara puffed to a stop.

"Cripes, Burke, I thought I could save something, but no chance," he said. "The place is double-distilled hell. *Look!*"

BURKE turned in time to see the roof cave in. Sparks sprayed upward, timbers crashed into the inferno with a rippling, thundering roar, and the crowd pressed backward. Walls followed roof, booming downward. Burning splinters spattered and hissed on the snow.

"I feel it, too," grated Billy O'Hara, "even though I don't own it. Jim Morgan—the squarest man I ever knew—won it from me in the biggest card game north of Chilkoote. But I built it, Burke. I saw it go up, bit by bit. Ain't it queer? I'm here

to see it go up in smoke." He shook his head wearily. Then, suddenly, "How's Stump?"

"Don't know. Doctor's with him. Maybe we can see now."

They moved over to the door, looked in. They went into the living-room, quietly. They saw the doctor bandaging the old-timer's head. His hands were already swathed in white. They were motioned away, and went out again. Billy O'Hara said he'd be back later, and strode off down the street.

Burke paced up and down in front of the cabin, impatient, anxious for his partner. Kate came back from her solitary walk, and stood beside him, watching the fire dwindle, a heap of smoldering embers where once had stood the Nugget City Palace. Burke turned and looked down at the grave white face. He took hold of her hand, pressed it.

"Kate . . ."

"Don't, Cliff—please, don't . . .!"

She withdrew, trembling.

The door opened and Emmonds said, "Stump wants to see you, Cliff."

Burke went in slowly, his face drawn. He saw the old-timer lying on the couch, all of his face but eyes and mouth in bandages. One of the bandaged hands beckoned weakly. Burke went over, dropped to his knees.

"Stump, old-timer . . ."

"Cliff, young-timer . . ." The cracked lips essayed a brave smile.

"What happened, Stump?"

"It was so sudden, Cliff. I was startin' a fire in the stove when—*bang!* Lucky I was over in the corner gettin' a chaw from my pack when it happened. The stove—it blew up!"

Burke's eyes widened. "Blew . . . up!"

Stump nodded. He saw Burke's jaw harden, the hint of cold steel that grew in the gray eyes that he had never seen otherwise than calm and gentle.

"Someone," breathed Burke huskily, "must have sneaked in while we were away and planted something in the stove!"

The steel grew in his eyes.

"Cliff," whispered Stump. "Don't forget Crooked Knee Creek. I'm sorry I can't go, young-timer. Think, Cliff. Don't lose your head. Think of Kate. She'll need you—now I'm out for a while."

"Cameo . . . Dowd!" muttered Burke.

"Cliff!" urged Stump. "Think! Kate! One for all, like Kate says, and all for one. Dowd can wait. But beat it for Crooked Knee at two. You can stake for me, too. Cliff . . ." His eyes closed and he relaxed, unable to even whisper.

THE doctor came over and gently but firmly moved Burke away. Kate had never seen the big man as he looked now. The color had fled from his face. It was cold with anger, the eyes were narrowed and flinty, the mouth set in a hard, tight line.

"Cliff, what on earth's the matter?" she asked.

He did not see her for a moment. Then he blinked, and some of the hardness vanished. "Oh, Kate," he mumbled, as if he were just aware of her presence. "I—I'll be back soon. Take care of yourself. Take care of Stump, little pardner."

"Where are you going?" she asked.

But he was already heading through the door, and did not stop. Outside he ran into Billy O'Hara.

"Here's your team and sledge, Burke," said Billy. "Nils Jansen got them out o' the kennel. How's Stump?"

"Pretty bad. Guess you can go in, though."

O'Hara entered and Burke drove the dogs around to the rear of the cabin and tied the leader to a tree. He struck a match and looked at his watch. It was almost eleven.

Grim—grimmer than he had ever been in his life—he rolled down the street and saw the last glowing coals of the razed Palace. Most of the crowd had dispersed, but a few groups still lingered, wagging their heads dolefully.

Burke turned to look at the Royal Flush, and his lips moved in a silent oath. His hands clenched in his pockets. As far back as he could remember nothing had stirred his blood as turbulently as what had happened during the past hours. He had never been a brawler. He was ordinarily a quiet, silent man.

But he wanted to have a talk with Cameo Dowd. There was no concrete proof that Dowd had had anything to do with the tragedy. Yet he had schemed and tried his hardest to prevent the re-opening of

the Palace. Burke believed him guilty. He wanted to walk in and break the saloon-man with his hands. He was all primed, his blood was pitched high.

He set his jaw and strode toward the entrance. But he dragged to a stop. Stump had warned him to—think. Too much was at stake to run amuck. Kate was at stake. Stump was at stake. They had to live; there was no room in the country for empty pockets—not with eggs at twenty-five dollars a dozen and flour at three dollars a pound.

It took a tremendous effort of will to suppress his natural desire for a show-down. Personally, he would rather a show-down with Cameo Dowd just then than the richest claim in the hills. But there was Stump, laid up for God knew how long—and Kate, almost penniless as a result of the razed Palace and its stock of supplies. They had taken him in when he was broke. He must not fail them now. A thousand or two was only a drop in the bucket.

"I'll go in," he mused, "and kill some time, that's all."

But first he needed a stampede equipage. He strode down the street to the little trading store, and the manager expressed sympathy.

"Lucky they wa'n't much wind," he said.

Burke bought beans and flour and tea and a side of bacon, letting loose the hint that since he'd lost his room in the old Palace he'd have to camp out. He carried these down the street and loaded them on the sledge. Then he took his ax and crossed a snow dune to the timber, where he cut stakes for the claims he hoped to stake on Crooked Knee. These he packed on his sledge.

By this time it was midnight. Burke looked up at the bright stars; low, they were, and clear-cut in the polar cold. Still windless, too. A perfect night for fast travel down the Stewart. This—perhaps this was the eve of the greatest stampede in the country.

He strode out past the cabin. All was dark within. Poor old Stump! Kate—the priceless, brave girl, unwilling to make a burden of herself. Burke sighed. Leaving the cabin, he did not see a figure come slinking out of the timber where he had cut the stakes.

TWO hours to kill. . . .

Burke entered the Royal Flush thoroughly determined to mind his own business and ignore Cameo Dowd. Later—after the rush was over, after he had staked—he would attend to Dowd. But this was no time to let himself go when Stump's and—he believed—Kate's destiny rested in the hollow of his hand.

A couple of dozen men lined the bar, most of them pretty far under the weather. A group surrounded the faro table. Another group circled the roulette wheel. Dancing had stopped, and most of the tables were occupied by chechakos and sourdoughs and the spangled women.

Burke leaned against the bar and ordered a drink. A raw-boned, blue-eyed giant edged up beside him.

"Billy giff you dem huskies all right, Burke?" asked the man.

"Yes," nodded Burke. "Oh, you're Nils Jansen?"

"Yah. Ay had wan hal hof a time with dem huskies." He looked at his watch. "Say, you play poker, Burke? Ay bane t'ank ve haff time for little game." He winked.

"All right," agreed Burke. "Just a quiet little game. Sure."

They left the bar and found an empty table, sat down and broke open a fresh deck of cards. Two men came up and asked if they might join in. Both Burke and Jansen nodded, and the men took seats, introducing themselves. One was called Hinkle, the other Starr. They drew for the deal, and Hinkle, drawing high card, picked up the deck and shuffled deftly.

Cameo Dowd was standing at one end of the bar drinking with Tess Brennan, a tall, auburn-haired woman of uncommon poise. He jerked his head toward Burke and said, in a low voice, "There's one bird I'd like to break, Tess."

"Well"—she tapped the ash of her cigarette—"why don't you?"

Dowd looked her square in the eye, then smiled crookedly. She smiled back, lifting a knowing eyebrow.

Burke played amiably, but with no great interest. His mind was too much concerned with the coming stampede. However, after six fast hands, three of which

he won, he became aware of the fact that luck was with him, and his interest sharpened.

His deal came along, and he dealt swiftly. He picked up his hand, found two kings, two queens, and an ace. He discarded the queens and held the ace for a kicker. On the draw he pulled a king and an ace, which filled his hand to a full house.

Jansen, on his left, passed, laying down his cards. Starr, who had opened for five dollars, bet five and Hinkle paced him. Burke bumped it for five more, and Hinkle bumped it for another five. Burke jumped it for ten, Starr came along and Hinkle raised it for another ten. There was no stalling. It ended when Starr and Burke called and Hinkle laid down a quartette of deuces.

He grinned as he hauled in the pot. "Cards are big tonight, gents. I vote we call the ceiling the limit."

"The roof," said Starr.

"Hal," grinned Jansen. "Take off de roof."

Burke looked at the clock over the bar. Twelve-thirty. Jansen dealt. The hand passed swiftly. Starr won a small pot on two kings. Hinkle dealt, and Burke found himself with a handful of picture cards. He threw away the king, jack and ace and held on to a pair of queens. On the draw he got a two-spot and a pair of queens.

He sat pretty with four of a kind Jansen, who had opened, bet fifty dollars. Hinkle bet seventy-five. Starr covered that bet and Burke bet a hundred.

"Yumpin' yimminy!" laughed Jansen, and threw in a hundred and fifty dollars' worth of chips.

Hinkle grinned and pushed in two hundred. By this time the original half-dozen onlookers had grown to a couple of dozen, and among them was Cameo Dowd. The fast betting wound up when Jansen called, followed by Hinkle and Starr. Burke laid down his four queens, and raked in twelve hundred dollars.

"Funny," chuckled Starr, "how these small games wind up in big ones."

CAMEO DOWD pressed closer. "Understand the sky's the limit?" he droned.

"High and wide," nodded Hinkle.

"Mind if I join?"

The players looked at one another, and shrugged. Dowd took a seat facing Burke. Burke fixed him with his frank gray eyes. Dowd smirked unconcernedly, shuffled the cards with the lightning swiftness of a veteran.

Burke's blood was beginning to stir up again. He repressed himself with an effort. He wanted to curse Dowd, to have it out with him right then and there. But his head said no. Stump was depending on him to be the first, or one of the first, to stake on Crooked Knee. He must not fail his partner, who had never failed him.

He forced himself to keep his eyes off Dowd. He looked at no one. He leaned on elbows, his head bent forward. He dealt with his eyes on the stacks of chips that marked each player's seat. Since Cameo Dowd had joined more onlookers had gathered, for it was said that any time Dowd played poker big things happened.

Burke's luck stayed with him. In two stiff hands he beat Dowd and the two pots totaled eighteen hundred dollars. He was now thirty-five hundred to the good, but it was a quarter past one, and no matter how high his luck ran he knew he had to leave at two. He played a shrewd, canny game. He was not reckless. Bluffing was not one of his tactics, for he was not a hardened gambler.

At half-past one Jansen dropped out, and nobody took his place. Ten minutes later Starr and Hinkle, having had poor hands for the past hour, gave up and left.

Dowd looked at Burke. "You still staying?"

"For a while," replied Burke, staring at the table.

"All right, then. I vote that every pot must be opened by the dealer, no matter his hand. After that he can pass. One hundred iron men the ante."

"Suits me."

Dowd dealt and opened. Burke got a pair of jacks, discarded the others and drew mixed numbers. Both passed and the ante remained in the pot. It grew in size with the minutes. Then Burke got three of a kind—three jacks. On the draw he got another.

Dowd bet two hundred. Burke, for a teaser, raised it only twenty-five. Dowd bumped it for another hundred and then Burke came back to raise it two hundred.

They bet and raised rapidly, and at fifteen hundred Burke called.

Dowd laid down four queens and took the pot. When, two hands later, Burke had three kings and was prepared for some lively betting, Dowd passed promptly after the second bet. Burke continued to draw good hands, but in most cases Dowd paid to see after the first or second hand and laid down low cards, giving Burke the small pots. When the betting ran high, with Dowd evidently holding good cards, the saloonman eventually won.

Burke became uneasy. His money disappeared rapidly, until finally he was down to a thousand dollars. Once he glanced up at the clock. It was a quarter to two. In ten minutes he would have to leave. He had no complaint with the cards. He drew more good hands than Dowd, but he lost nevertheless, because Dowd only bet high when his hand was worth it.

AT ten to two Burke pulled three kings and got another on the draw. Dowd began betting fast, and in short time eight hundred dollars was in the pot and Dowd showed no signs of calling. Burke was becoming restless. Only a few minutes to go. He was on the point of throwing in two hundred dollars when—

"Just a minute," broke in Billy O'Hara.

The crowd looked up. Burke looked up. Dowd kept looking fixedly at his cards.

"I might be drunk," went on O'Hara, "but I ain't so drunk I can't see this man Burke is being done wrong. Don't nobody move! *You neither, Tess!*" he ripped out.

Tess Brennan had tried to melt back into the crowd.

Dowd's crooked left eye twitched under the shadow of his Stetson. He stood up, lean, wiry, dignified. He turned on O'Hara.

"You're drunk—and crazy," he said calmly.

"Drunk," agreed O'Hara, "but not crazy." He raise his hand. "I just saw the trick pulled on this last hand. Tess was standing behind Burke. She was playing with a cameo. On the back of that cameo is a mirror. She held it in the hollow of her hand so's it would be visible only to Cameo Dowd. He could see what cards Burke held."

An ominous grumble rose from the crowd. Dowd remained unperturbed.

"You were seeing things, Billy," he said nonchalantly. "Tess isn't wearing a cameo."

Everybody looked. She was not wearing a cameo. O'Hara blinked his blue eyes, and his jaw clamped.

"She ain't now, but she was! I saw it!"

"Nonsense, Billy!" chuckled Tess.

"Not nonsense, either!" shot back O'Hara. "You must have dropped it down your waist!"

Dowd darkened. "You're just drunk, Billy. Go sober up." He swung his eye about the crowd. "This is a frame-up, gentlemen. And if any man doubts my word, dares shove his hand in Miss Brennan's waist, he'll cross me."

Burke stood up, a dangerous pallor on his face. "Dowd," he said, "I don't believe Billy is crazy. I'll not rough-house the lady, but I believe Billy's right. I can tell better than anyone else by the way you bet. You bet as though you were sure when you had good cards. You dropped out when it seemed you were sure you didn't. You're a double-crossing skunk!"

Dowd smiled thinly, stepped back. "That remark calls for a fight, Burke. I'm going to beat you to a frazzle, with my hands. Five years ago I was Kid Dowd, the crackajack heavyweight of the Pacific Coast. Take off your coat."

Burke's heart leaped. His hands knotted. He wanted nothing more than to meet Dowd with bare hands and pound him to a pulp. He started to take off his coat. But his eyes swept up to the clock.

Five to two!

He saw Nils Jansen making quietly for the door.

A lump rose in his throat. His lips pursed. Stump! He couldn't forget Stump! And Kate! He needed money, lots of it—to take care of them. She would have to let him take care of her. He believed she loved him. Money—food—lodging throughout the winter—and more to take them out in the spring!

He turned away, hunching his shoulders. With eyes almost closed, with the blood pounding at his temples, with the derisive shouts of the mob ringing in his ears, he ran for the door, pulled it open and lunged out.

Down the street he ran—down to the cabin. Stumbling, half-blind with chagrin

and humiliation, he raced around to the rear. He brought up short, with a stifled cry.

The team and sledge were gone!

VII

SWAYING, he stood there, alternate waves of heat and cold pumping through his body. Then he whirled, a groan in his throat, and broke into a trot. Without food, without dogs, with nothing but the gun at his hip, he raced out of town.

Dimly, on the trail ahead, which was lit by the writhing banners of the Northern lights, he saw three men running. Beyond them was a fourth. Passing the fourth, and driving a team, was the fifth.

Burke stretched his legs. His moccasins crunched on the packed snow. His exhaled breath flew behind him. He gained on the straggler, Herman Shultz, and swung by. "Himmel!" yelled Shultz. "I thought you vass pass mitt der dogs!"

"Someone stole them!" shouted Burke. "Mein Gott! Und I yelt, 'Hurrah for der Crooked Knee!'"

Burke made no reply. He left Shultz behind, musing bitterly that Shultz had unwittingly let loose the secret. Down the frozen river he plugged, sweeping past Ike Cosgrove, Frank Tate and Nils Jansen. No words passed between the men. All energy must be conserved for the long run. It was every man for himself. All but Burke carried light stampede packs, strapped to which were the stakes they hoped to use.

Ahead was the speeding team, the man riding on the runners, grinding over the harsh crust, wheeling beneath the wide array of stars. Burke tore after him, but did not gain. At intervals the team disappeared behind curves in the shoreline, for the man was driving close to the shore.

The cold air poured into Burke's lungs like liquid ice. It made his nose ache, up between the eyebrows. It stung his throat, seemed to cut its way down into his lungs. Yet he began to perspire, beneath his heavy clothing. Little patches of ice, like thin isinglass, sheeted his face and crackled when he worked his jaws.

Faintly he could hear the pounding feet of the men he had left behind. Sometimes,

clear on the motionless air, he heard the crack of the dog whip far ahead. The wall of the mottled forest along which he ran stood silent and without motion. Not a grain of snow fell from the branches, not a tree-top swayed. The night yawned vastly in a vacuum of silence, frozen-hearted, breathless. Once the river ice, beneath its two-foot crown of snow, snapped with a muffled, reverberating boom.

A man could not run all the time. Sometimes he had to walk. Dogs were used to trotting mile after mile—but not men. Hence the team and its driver disappeared in the night silence beyond, while Burke walked, then trotted, then walked again, with Nils Jansen a quarter of a mile behind and the rest pounding resolutely along in his wake.

Night swung by, the cold darkness fled slowly before the tardy streaks of a chill gray dawn. Somewhere down beyond the southern bulge of the earth was the sun, but not one solitary ray of her touched the leaden pall that was the Arctic sky. No clouds, no mists, no haze; only the twilight half-gloom of a twilight country.

At noon Burke dragged to a stop, stumbled to the shore, gathered twigs and made a fire. Only then did the sun show, a rayless disk revealed on the shaggy horizon for a few moments; then it descended again, and by half-past twelve the entire sky was once more a dome of dull lead, passionless as the dead earth that sprawled lean miles beneath it.

Nothing to eat had Burke, so he smoked his pipe by way of nourishment for nerves, if not stomach. When the fire was blazing, he took off his sweat-soaked duffel-socks and moccasins and held them on sticks over the fire to dry. Wet footgear is one of the most dangerous enemies of mankind in the high North. He emptied his last grains of gold-dust from a moosehide pouch and deposited them in a pocket. Then he stuffed snow into the pouch and held it over the fire to thaw. When it had turned to water he quenched his thirst.

When he took up the hard trail again, he looked back to see Nils Jansen again under way, no more than five hundred yards behind. Nils waved, half-challenge, half-cheer. Burke waved back and went trotting down the wilderness river, confidence coming with his second wind.

THE day dragged by, and darkness came between three and four, and the cold stars blinked in the frigid gloom. Burke did not stop. He had vowed to himself not to stop until the others did. He followed the river doggedly, and as he was trotting along the wooded shore he saw dimly a snowshoe rabbit flash into view. His gun came out and he fired. The rabbit died in mid-career, and Burke snatched it up and continued on his way.

At midnight he looked back to see a fire growing on the shore. That was probably Nils making a camp. Burke kept on for another mile, then stopped too and built a fire. He roasted the rabbit on a spit and ate sparingly. What remained he rolled up in a bandana, then spread a bed of boughs before the fire and drowsed.

Two hours later the fire dying, the increasing cold wakened him. He put on more wood, sat for half an hour smoking his pipe, then stamped out the red coals and proceeded on the river at a fast walk. Later he broke into an easy, swinging trot. Just before another dawn snow began falling, backed up by a sharp east wind that whimpered in the strong woods and sighed across the surface of the frozen river. The snow was harsh, each individual flake like a large grain of sand that rebounded when it struck.

It blurred the vision. It frosted on Burke's stubble, and the bitter cold of it darkened his lips and cheeks. Later, during a breathing spell, he cut off a lump of the frozen rabbit meat and stuffed it in against the warmth of his body. Then he plugged onward, and near noon, stopped but made no fire. His body warmth thawed the meat sufficiently to chew and digest.

During the afternoon the going was harder. He had no webs, and the fallen snow was slushing up around his legs. His muscles were aching, the tendons in thigh and calf were taut and seemed ready to snap. He felt it in his loins, too, and there were little nervous twitchings in his stomach muscles.

In his mind were Billy O'Hara's directions: the mouth of the creek, the site of Billy's claim marked by two dead spruces interlocked, a mile up the creek. Thoughts, too, of poor old Stump, swathed in bandages, depending on him to make good; and of Kate, smiling bravely through tear-

dimmed eyes, refusing his aid because she was brave, yet needing it more than she realized. Or maybe she did realize it but the spirit of her rebelled.

These thoughts—these and the streak of the die-hard underlying his quiet exterior, drove Burke onward through the black night through which whined and whistled the wind-driven snow. Speed was out of the question now. He had to plow through snow almost knee-deep, and the vast exertion of it, hour after hour, mile after mile, yanked at his muscles, almost pulled the heart out of him. Yet he kept on, stopping neither for fire nor food. No need to stop for the latter, since he had no more.

It must have been midnight when he turned and trudged into the mouth of Crooked Knee Creek. He was coated from head to foot with snow and ice, and his clothing was stiff as a board. His face was a frozen mask, and his head swam, pounded dully, and his lungs pumped laboriously. His feet seemed booted with lead. Each step meant double effort; the effort of pulling up each foot perpendicularly and then swinging it forward, to sink knee deep in the snow and be hauled up again for another step.

The creek was narrow and crooked, walled on either side by twisted willows and stunted spruce and stretches of muskeg. His eyes peered keenly through frost-rimmed lids, searching for the two dead interlocked spruces. On he toiled, yard by yard, his feet dragging, his big frame heaving and rolling slowly, tiredly.

Out of the gloom rose a huge, broad figure, square in his path. Burke almost walked into it. He felt a prod in his stomach, and knew it was the muzzle of a revolver.

"Now, Burke, damn your soul, where do I stake?"

The voice was vaguely familiar. The wind flapped the man's parka hood. Dimly he saw the broad face, the bushy beard, the faint gleam of bared teeth, the clouds of steaming, exhaled breath smoking between them.

"So you came, Dike," he said simply.

THE wind whisked streamers of stringing snow about their heads.

"I said I would," rumbled Dike. "And if you don't lead me to it, I'll spill your

rotten blood all over the snow. A fine stunt you pulled at Bennett, eh? I'll stunt you, pup! I'll load your belly with lead, that's what!"

Burke licked his ice-caked lips. "My, but you're tough, Dike."

"I'm tough as they come, Burke."

"When you're holding a gun."

"Cut out the gas, guy! Where do I stake?"

"There are four men somewhere behind me. They know. Try asking them when they come."

Dike crouched, a snarl on his lips. "Don't be funny! So help me, Burke, I'll kill you if you don't speak and speak fast!" He reached out a hand and took Burke's revolver.

Burke swayed with anger, his eyes glittered in the murk.

"Now move," commanded Dike. "Lead me to it. My dogs are in the bush and I'll get the stakes."

Burke drew in a deep breath and started off. He bent his head and slushed forward. Hidden in the thickets were the team and sledge. Dike picked up the stakes, prodded Burke in the back with his gun and urged him forward.

Burke went, winding slowly through the willows, tramping across a field of choppy muskeg. Dimly he saw the two interlocked spruces.

"They mark Billy O'Hara's claim," he said.

"We gotta find his center stake," rumbled Dike. "See you move like I tell you. Here, carry these stakes."

Burke took the stakes, and they slushed up past the two spruces. Almost hidden by snow they found Billy O'Hara's center stake. Dike measured off from that and then stopped. He flung Burke an ax.

"Drive my center stake," he ordered.

Burke hefted the ax, a curl on his lip. But he nevertheless hammered down the center stake.

"Now the corner ones," added Dike. "And don't stall."

"There are two men in this country," said Burke, "that I'm going to kill or lay up for the rest of the year. You're one of them."

"Wind, guy, hot air! On your way! You're going to stake my claim and then I'm going to give you a half-hour head-

start away from Nugget City or pot you in the back."

They trudged up along the stream, and Burke drove a corner stake. With Dike's gun at his back he went on to drive the others.

"Nice to have a guy working for me," Dike cackled.

Burke was driving the last stake on sharp, slippery incline. Dike was behind him, gloating.

"I'm going to take the team and sail back to Nugget City and be the first to file. When you get tired of wandering around the country you can just curl up and croak. See if I care. And if I see you once on the way back I'll kill you on sight. You pulled a fast one at Bennett, you young pup, but I'm laughing last."

With a final smash Burke drove the stake in. Then his foot slipped, it seemed almost on purpose. His body shot down the incline and took Dike with it. Together, clawing at each other, they crashed into blanched willows.

DIKE was already cursing a sizzling blue streak of baffled rage. Even as they crashed, even as their bodies were still in motion, Burke lashed out and drove a terrific blow flush into the bushy beard. Dike yelled and Burke hit him again, caught his gun arm and with no waste motion yanked it behind his back as he was rolling. The fingers spread, and the gun fell away.

Burke scooped it from the snow as it was sliding and rapped the barrel against Dike's head. The man groaned and covered his face, and then Burke was straddling him, with the muzzle jammed into Dike's throat.

"Not a move!" he warned, and took the gun which a short time back Dike had taken from his holster.

Then he stood up, shrugging off the snow.

"Up, Dike! Get up and from now on close your dirty jaw!"

Dike staggered to his feet, wiping blood from his face.

"You—you pup!" he snarled between breaths.

"Shut up, I said. Get moving. Head back for the team. I've staked my claim and now I'm going to stake for Stump. Move!"

The tables thus turned, he made Dike drive the other stakes. Up the stream they ran into Nils Jansen.

"Say, what's dis?" boomed Jansen.

"Dike," said Burke. "Bird tried to use my stakes and do a little claim jumping."

"Val," said Jansen. "Lat us hang de skunk. Vhen de odder boys stake ve'll hold us a meeting and find us a tree. Ay bane not hang a skunk in long time, by yimminy!"

"No," objected Burke. "I'm taking him back to Nugget City."

"Hal, Burke, vhy vaste time on a skunk?"

"No matter, Jansen. I've got reasons of my own for taking him back. See you later."

He prodded Dike and they slushed ahead. When they brought up by the team, Burke took a ten-foot length of babiche, looped it and swung the loop around Dike's neck. The other end he tied to the handle-bar of the sledge.

"Now we're going to Nugget City," he said. "We're going to travel fast and you're going to run with me. If you hang back, the noose is liable to tighten and give you throat trouble."

"What are you taking me to Nugget City for?" rumbled Dike.

"You're dumb, Dike, but don't act dumber than you are. On your toes. I'll use the snowshoes."

He took the whip, cracked it sharply and drove the team out of the thickets. Steadily they plowed down the creek and drove out on to the broad surface of the Stewart.

VIII

THE big stampede, the real stampede, the mad, frenzied rush of a thousand-odd men had started.

Burke, returning to file his claim, driving the team steadily, forcing Dike to pace him, passed the long line of men on the waterway. The men saw Dike staggering along at the end of the babiche line, but they did not stop to ask questions. It was no time for asking questions, scarcely time at all to even stop and eat.

Downriver they swept, an endless string of trotting, walking, stumbling men under light stampede packs. The less sportsman-like of the horde cursed when a faster man

gained and passed. Burke saw two men suddenly stop, square off and pump lead into each other's body. Both went down, both dead, while the horde swept on, turning only to look at the toll of greed, one old-timer pausing long enough to make sure the men were dead.

There was one who, with a fierce oath of chagrin, stuck out a foot to trip another who was laboring by. The latter fell headlong, sat up and deliberately drew his gun. Another coming up from behind kicked the gun away and shouted, "Don't kill him, pard. 'Tain't worth it. Here, I'll help you up." With which he heaved up the fallen man, and both took up the trail.

Others there were, the weak, the aged, the men who had crawled from sickbeds at the cry of gold. These tottered and swayed, faces twisted in pain, lungs straining, muscles quaking. Some fell, crawled along on hands and knees, clawed at the crust with numbed fingers, watched with anguished eyes the legs of stronger men swing by, looked up to see their bobbing packs, yet rarely saw a back-turned face or felt a helping hand. Some cursed the cruelty of the stronger men. Others, the hardened old sourdoughs, merely rested and took it all with philosophic resignation, knowing that the strong belong the spoils.

Thus the hard law of that hard country.

But none would turn back. Of such titanic magnetism is the lure of raw gold. Several times Burke offered to pile a winded man on his sledge and take him to Nugget City. But the reply was either a friendly negative or a blasphemous refusal.

So Burke gave it up and continued on his way, already having covered half the distance to Nugget City. The storm had stopped during the night. The temperature had dropped to forty below, and it was barbed with a lacerating wind out of the northwest. During a brief breathing spell Dike whined. He was not so blustering as when he had been top-dog, yet he had intermittent moments of vile abuse.

"Listen, Burke," he cried. "Let me go. I want to go back and stake. Maybe I'll have luck. I'll let you keep that claim."

"Oh," said Burke, mildly, "you'll let me. Thanks."

"I mean, Burke, I want to have another chance. I—"

"Put on the brakes, Dike. And don't whine.

You're going to Nugget City with me."

"Cripes, Burke, listen to reason. I don't want to go back. Lookit all them fellers going to stake. I still gotta chance to stake me a claim. I'm almost broke, Burke."

"What's the matter?" asked Burke. "Did Cameo Dowd strike you off his payroll?"

Dike's eyes widened. He turned away, looking at the stampede as they trudged by. Gold! There might still be time to stake another claim, a legitimate claim. Gold! The greed and lust of the yellow dirt burned in his piggish eyes, and his teeth bit into his lip.

"Listen, Burke!" he panted. "Let me go! I ain't really the man you want. Dowd's the man. I'll tell you everything, Burke, only let me go and stake a claim. I'll tell everything, Burke. Dowd gave me the gate. I don't care about him. He—"

"Wait a minute," interrupted Burke. "You're not going to buy your freedom by squealing on Dowd. Just now I don't know which of you birds I want most. I'll see, though, when we get to Nugget City. Now shut up. I don't want to hear a thing. When we get to Nugget City you'll talk—and you'll talk in Dowd's presence!"

"I won't go!" roared Dike.

"Mush, huskies!" Burke yelled to the dogs.

The team lunged into action and Dike was almost yanked from his feet. He screamed hoarsely. "I'll kill you! I'll cut your lousy heart out! I'll—"

"Mush, mush!" boomed Burke, and cracked the whip in the air.

"Ugh!" choked Dike, reeling and plunging behind, his face red, his eyes popping from their sockets, his lips spitting abuse.

SO for hour after hour the outfit swept up the ice-locked waterway. A camp was made late at night, and Dike was securely bound. Before daybreak they were off again, Dike raging and ranting now that Nugget City was drawing nearer. To prevent him from unloosing the noose about his neck, Burke had tied his hands. He was thoroughly determined to make this a showdown, and since he had set his mind on it, he was going to make sure that nothing, nobody would change his purpose. It had taken him a long while to get really and wholeheartedly mad. And after the

manner of quiet men once aroused, it would take a lot to even the score.

Presently he saw Nugget City from afar, a blot of civilization on the lee shore of the great wilderness river. He trotted his team leisurely into town. It was like a land forsaken. Almost every man in town had gone off on the stampede. A couple of women were afield, and a few old men shambling along with the aid of sticks.

Burke stopped at Ken Emmond's cabin. He grabbed Dike by the back of the neck and marched up to the door. He knocked and Mrs. Emmonds opened it.

"Well, Mr. Burke!" she exclaimed.

"How do you do, Mrs. Emmonds. May I come in?"

He stepped back and shoved Dike in before him.

Stump was lying on the cot, smoking his pipe, his face still in bandages.

"Cliff, young timer!"

"Hello, Stump! Wait till I tie this two-legged skunk to a chair."

He slammed Dike down not too gently and lashed him to the chair. Then he threw open his mackinaw, crossed the room, and knelt down.

"How are you, Stump, old timer?"

"Mad as a hornet, Cliff! I can't get up, Doc says. What happened?"

"Well, I staked," said Burke, and went on to tell about the stolen team and the fight with Dike.

Stump looked across the room. "Ah-r-r, you're a fine bum, Butch!" Then he turned back to his partner. "They been tellin' me, Cliff, you crawled out of a fight with Cameo Dowd. I didn't believe it."

"Yes, I crawled out," nodded Burke, "for a reason. But I'm going to drop in on him soon and take up the argument where we left off. Now I'll run down and file. Where's Kate?"

The door opened at that moment and Kate came in. Burke stood up.

"Cliff, you're back!" she cried.

"Back again," smiled Burke. "Congratulate me. I've staked for Stump and myself. Now I have a little business to attend to. When it's all over you and I are going to have a serious little talk, little pardner."

She lowered her eyes and looked away. Then she saw Dike, red-faced and scowling.

"Who is this man, Cliff?" she asked.

"Oh, that man," replied Burke. "That's the man who shot up Stump's team outside of Dyea. He just can't wait until he meets Cameo Dowd."

Dike muttered sullenly in his beard. Mrs. Emmonds asked Burke if he had seen her husband, who had gone off on the stampepe also, but Burke hadn't.

"I'll be back shortly," he said. "Kate you just sit here and watch that Mr. Dike doesn't go out for a walk."

"Cliff," she smiled. "I've never seen you so facetious. What amuses you?"

"The forthcoming meeting," he replied, "between Mr. Dike and Mr. Cameo Dowd."

WITH that he went out and strode down the street to file his claim. Then he crossed to the Royal Flush and entered. The place was almost deserted. The two bartenders were drowsing behind the bar. Half a dozen girls were sitting at a table, lonesome and disconsolate. Burke leaned against the bar.

"Where's the crowd?" he asked.

One of the bartenders looked up. "Gold-huntin', if you must know. Oh-ho, you're the guy tried to get wise with Cameo!"

"Yes," nodded Burke. "I'm the guy crawled. Where's Cameo?"

"Off with his team to stake. Catch Cameo sittin' tight through a stampepe. My advice to you, big boy, is move outta Nugget City before Cameo comes back. He might pick on you."

"Oh, he might," said Burke. "You couldn't say for sure, eh?"

"Cameo's got to be pretty mad to go botherin' about a tin-horn chechako. You want to buy a drink? If you don't, I don't feel like just gabbin' with your kind. Buy or go get out o' my sight."

Burke grinned. "I aim to make Cameo good and mad. And look here, you flat-faced squirt!"

With a sudden movement he reached over the bar, caught the bartender by the throat and hauled him clear over. Then picking up a soggy bar-rag he washed the man's face, turned him around and planted a foot firmly and forcefully against the seat of his pants. The man skidded over the floor and stopped head-on against a cuspidor. Burke brushed his hands together and looked at the other man.

"You want the same? No? Suits me. But listen, the two of you. I came north as peaceful a man as you'd want to find. But ever since I left Dyea I've been rubbed the wrong way. I'm getting sore. I never looked for trouble in my life, but I am now."

He walked behind the bar, picked up a piece of soap, wet it and stood before the long mirror. On this he scrawled:

AN OPEN LETTER TO CAMEO DOWD:

I herewith repeat my words of the other night, to wit: You are a damned double-crossing skunk. When you have rested thoroughly from your trek, let me know and I'll come in here to repeat the above a third time.

Affectionately yours,
CLIFF BURKE.

Finished, he threw away the soap, went out in front of the bar and stood looking at his message with keen eyes. The girls had strolled over.

It was Tess Brennan who said, "You must be looking for trouble, kiddo."

"I certainly am, sister," he replied, and turning on his heel, strode out.

Back in Emmonds' cabin, he said, "Well, Dowd's out on the stampepe, too."

Mrs. Emmonds and Kate were in the kitchen preparing supper. Stump was propped against a couple of pillows, with his gun in hand watching Butch Dike.

"What you figger on doin', Cliff?"

"Introducing one skunk to another. I don't want word to get out that I have Dike. Somebody's got to pay for the burning of the Palace. Somebody's got to pay. I'm mad, Stump. I never thought anybody could work me up this way!"

"Go easy, Cliff, pardner," warned Stump.

"Watch me!" clipped Burke, grimly.

IX

NEXT day, about noon, the first of the stampedes came pounding in to file their claims. Those with dogteams came first. Among them was Cameo Dowd. Straight, stiff, sure of himself, he filed his claim while his Indian driver took care of the dogs.

Then Dowd stalked down the street and banged into his saloon. Nils Jansen and Ike Cosgrove were drinking at the bar.

"Letter for you, Cameo," grinned Cosgrove.

"Eh?" Cameo drew off his mittens.

Cosgrove waved a hand toward the mir-

ror. Cameo came closer, read the fighting words, and sucked in a thin breath. His hands clenched. His crooked left eye twitched.

"So!" he snarled. "The puppy's growling again. All right," he nodded, and spoke to the bartenders. "Leave that there, boys! I'll sleep until five. Then I'll come down and finish this wiseacre's goose."

During the afternoon more stampereders flooded in, and as they lined up at the bar and read the message on the glass, they poked one another in the ribs and licked their lips in anticipation of a lively evening. By four o'clock three hundred men crowded the big saloon.

No one cared about playing cards or trying the roulette wheel. No one cared about dancing. On everyone's lips were conjecturings relative to the impending crisis. Every table was taken, every chair. The bar was lined with men shoulder to shoulder. Many stood around the walls, waiting, and the word having traveled, many others drifted in until space was at a premium and the newcomers were forced to take to the balcony, where they leaned on the rail, smoking.

At five Cameo Dowd strolled from his room, looked over the assembled crowd with keen, appraising eyes and smiled to himself. He proceeded to the center of the barroom and climbed upon a table.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "you've all read the words written on the mirror. I've read 'em too. I'm here, this evening, to call the writer's bluff. I'll write an invitation to this Cliff Burke to come in and join us."

He stepped down, went to the bar, wrote out a brief note and gave it to one of his boys to deliver. A few minutes later the man returned.

"Burke says he'll be right over," was the reply. "He hopes he hasn't kept you waiting."

Dowd nodded and drew complacently on his cigar. He stood and drank and chatted idly with Tess Brennan. All eyes were riveted on the door.

Five minutes later it opened and Burke strolled in. He was smoking a pipe, and nodded genially to everyone. He spotted Dowd and saluted.

"Got your invitation, Dowd," he said. "How do you like the writing on the glass?"

Dowd tapped off the ash of his cigar, took another lazy puff, and dropped it carefully into a cuspidor.

"I'd like to hear you repeat it," he said, "a third time."

Burke said it as he strolled through the crowd. "You're a damned double-crossing skunk."

Dowd took off his hat and handed it to Tess Brennan. To the crowd he said, "Will you kindly step back? I'll need a little room." He sighed and removed his coat, folded it with meticulous care and laid it over Tess Brennan's extended arm. He unhooked his gold cuff links and rolled up his sleeves. His arms were corded and tough-looking.

"Ay take your coat, Burke," offered Nils Jansen.

Burke shrugged out of his mackinaw and Jansen caught it on the fly. He knocked out his pipe and thrust it into the Swede's hand. He looked around critically, addressed the crowd, "Move back a little more, folks. When I hit Cameo he's going to sail a bit."

Part of the crowd roared derisively. "It's all right, folks," grinned Burke. "I'm glad to see Cameo's got a lot of friends. He'll need 'em." He swiveled, his eyes narrowing. "All right, Dowd."

DOWD shot out from the bar, fast and agile. Two lefts sank into Burke's middle, a right sizzled up and glanced wickedly off his jaw. Burke took it and snorted away the sting. He ripped in a short right that got tangled up in Cameo's guard. Dowd rapped him again, high on the cheek, and left a red welt. He was no taller than Burke, but his reach seemed longer, and he could stab accurately.

For three lively minutes Burke took a whale of a lot of punishment in the ribs and on the face. But months on the trail had hardened his body and padded it with good muscle, and he took the punishment without a whimper.

His first real blow was a short, trip-hammer right that banged its way into Dowd's chin and almost took his head off his shoulders.

"Yumpin' yimminy!" roared Jansen. "Dad was dynamite—hal, yes!"

Dowd reeled away to recover. Burke went after him, hooking in right and left

and rocking Dowd's head from left to right. But Dowd was a boxer, and he hung on, tying up Burke while his reeling senses slowed down to normalcy.

"Leggo there, you bum!" someone yelled crazily.

"Close your yap!" cracked another voice.

Another brawl was on the verge of starting when a bottle broke over somebody's head.

Dowd was out of his trouble. He leaped back, took a blow on the jaw, but traveled with it and killed its sting. Then he stopped, danced, sparred, feinted and came in with a dream of an uppercut that caught Burke square and sent him skidding backwards.

"Knock him out, Cameo!"

Dowd sailed in, smashing rights and lefts into Burke's face, aiming each blow, making each blow felt. Burke covered up, hunched, stood his ground and then muscled Dowd backward. He opened up suddenly, buried a short jolt in Dowd's middle, took two rights on the jaw, shook them off, and hooked a left to Dowd's chin. Dowd felt this, and snorted. He sidestepped and speared Burke on the ear and followed with a blow on the back of Burke's neck. Burke lunged forward, groping, stopped against the bar and turned.

Dowd boomed in and with a long right to the jaw bent Burke backward over the edge of the bar. Four times he repeated the blow, until Burke, in a bad way, hurled away from the bar and carried Dowd with him. They broke in the center of the floor, and both missed rights to the head.

Burke uncorked a stiff left that Dowd tried to catch with his hand and ward off. But he missed and the fist banged terrifically between his eyes. It shocked his brain and he clinched, but Burke tore away and hit him while backing up, and Dowd spat out a tooth. His crooked left eye was twitching rapidly. This Burke was a hard nut to crack, he must have mused.

But he came in warily, deftly, and speared Burke with a long left to the cheek. Burke bobbed with the blow, wheeled his torso and came up under Dowd's guard, ripping a short jolt up to Dowd's chin. Dowd tried to dance away; he liked long-range work, but it appeared that Burke preferred infighting and short, chopping blows. He kept at Dowd, forcing the fight furiously,

and blood flew from punch and counter-punch.

Both men were badly cut up, and until that moment the fight looked even. But Burke was fighting faster, and the yells of the crowd were rising. Men were stamping and clapping, and the whole building shook with the tumult.

Dowd tried every trick he knew to break the infighting. He clinched time and time again, but every time he broke away Burke was after him, close, chopping with both fists, pressing the fight faster and faster. He rattled Dowd's ribs with terrific body punches, he snapped his head back with blows so fast and short that few saw them.

Dowd's cheeks were puffing in and out, his teeth were clenched hard. But Burke gave no quarter. He bored in, he drove Dowd around in a circle, he hammered him tirelessly. With another of his short, bone-crushing blows that nobody saw because of its speed, he sent Dowd crashing to the floor.

Dowd swayed back and forth where he lay. Then he toiled up, crouched and sprang. Burke met him with a thundering right that hit Dowd's jaw in mid-career. Dowd pitched to the floor, clawed at the boards. He struggled up, got to his knees, sagged and then crumpled again, rolled over on his back.

TESS BRENNAN detached herself from the crowd and bent over him with a handkerchief. No one saw him reach into a pocket in her dress and take out a small derringer. Only Tess saw. She clutched at him, shaking her head. He flung her off with one arm. With the other he raised the derringer.

Nils Jansen's foot lashed out as the derringer spat. The bullet sang past Burke's head and buried itself in the ceiling. Immediately the crowd turned on Dowd. He lay back, bloody and beaten, cackling hysterically.

"Damn . . . all of . . . you!" he screeched insanely.

"Wait!" roared Burke, raising a scarred, bleeding hand, looking through bruised, discolored eye-lids.

He strode to the door, pulled it open and stepped back. In walked Butch Dike, his hands bound. Behind him came Kate

Morgan and Billy O'Hara and Ken Emmonds, the lawyer.

A murmur of consternation rose from the crowd. Burke hauled Dowd to his feet and rushed him across to a chair at a nearby table. Opposite Dowd he placed Butch Dike. The crowd circled, craning necks, elbowing one another.

Burke looked at Dowd. "Dike," he said through puffed lips, "says you set fire to the Palace."

The accusation was well-timed, the crowd gasped.

Dowd bared his teeth at Dike. "You lousy bum! I did it, eh? Why, damn your soul, it was your dumb head did it! Why should I set fire to it, when it was so near my own place it might have burnt me out. It was you! You hated Burke as bad as I do. You wanted to kill him. I hid you in town—"

"And said if I'd kill him you'd give me five thousand to clear out o' the country," snarled Dike.

"But did I tell you to plant a home-made bomb in the stove where their room was? What a blockhead you are! You near burnt down my place too."

"Ay bane got some rope," broke in Nils Jansen. "Who bane got a tree?"

"Use a rafter," suggested a sourdough. "It was Dike blew the Palace up!" shouted Dowd.

Dike writhed in his chair. "You wanted Burke killed! You was going to see the gal got hers too! You hired me to go south and see she didn't get in to Nugget City! And when I got stranded at Bennett them pups Cokely and Kline got yellin and breezed. What about your crooked gambling? What about that lookin'-glass you get women to handle for you?"

"You dirty, rotten son-of-a-pup!" screamed Dowd, rising and clenching his fists.

Burke slammed him back into his chair. The crowd yelled for rope and a tree or a convenient rafter.

"No!" shouted Burke. "You've all heard. These two birds were cheek and jowl. Dike burned down the Palace, but he was Dowd's man. He was indirectly the cause of Miss Morgan losing a hundred thousand dollars. I say this. Dowd signs over the Royal Flush as it is to Miss Morgan. He takes what else he has and

gets out of the country. That," he swung on Dowd, pointing toward the ceiling, "or a necktie party."

Dowd licked his lips, red murder in his eyes, his fingers twitching.

"There's a lawyer here," added Burke. "with power of notary."

Dowd stood up, tightened his lips, drew in a slow breath. "All right. Get the papers."

"I have them," said Ken Emmonds.

When the papers were signed, Billy O'Hara stepped forward. "I aim," he said, "to buy the place from Miss Morgan."

"I'm Miss Morgan's agent," put in Emmonds. "Sold!"

An hour later Butch Dike crept out of town and struck for the western hills, under cover of darkness.

Next morning, before dawn, a sledge and a six-dog team trotted southward on the wilderness river. On the sledge rode Tess Brennan. At the gee-bar ran Cameo Dowd, the exile.

A COUPLE of days later Burke and Kate stood on a hill overlooking Nugget City. Far and wide about them stretched the wilderness. In the distance rose ice-fanged peaks, coldly blue in the frosty air of morning. The frozen waterway wound its lean miles bravely into the heart of the country beyond, and the keen wind clicked and murmured in the strong woods.

Burke put his arm around Kate's waist and drew her gently to his side. With his other arm he pointed down river.

"It won't be so awfully long, Kate darling. You won't miss me."

"Oh, yes, I will!"

"That's why I said that," he grinned.

She snuggled closer and pressed the hand that held her waist.

"Billy's showed me some more nuggets," he went on. "We'll go out in the spring, little pardner. I'll have lots of gold."

"Oh, forget about the gold, Cliff."

"Can't, Kate. Man should never marry a girl wealthier than himself.

"But where would I be if you hadn't forced that issue—if you hadn't fought Dowd and revealed his complicity? I owe everything to you."

"Now, now, pardner. Where'd I be if you hadn't hired me in Dyea?"

She slapped his hand. "Don't be like that."

He laughed softly and caught hold of the hand, turned to face her. "Well, anyhow, I'll be back when the missionary gets here from Dawson, darling. And by that time good old Stump will be able to hit the trail with me again, bless his hard-bitten hide. You know, I asked Stump if he'd stand up for me, but he said, though he wanted to, how could he when the doctor

said he must lie down, the old humorist."

"Stump is priceless, and he must go out with us in the spring."

Burke nodded. "You bet. And then, later on, when we're all sitting before the grate in our house, I can point at Stump and tell our kids that once on a time. . . ."

"Don't you think it's a little early to be thinking of kids?" Kate asked him.

"A little," Burke admitted. They both laughed.
