
Gratitude
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www.saptarshee.in

First published in 1920 ebook by www.saptarshee.in India in 20.4.2024

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Typeset/Printed by Krutika Printers, mangalwedha

I've heard of hearts unkind, kind deeds
With coldness still returning;
Alas! The gratitude of men
Hath oftener left me mourning.

Shakespeare George, lover of poetry, found the quotation in an old magazine, and carefully framed and tacked it above his bunk, where, in somber moods, he might refer to it. And the rest of us, partners in that isolated heart of Alaska, smiled, being well aware that cynicism had no place in his character. Sometimes, when tales of ingratitude came to his ears, he attempted to quote it; usually after this fashion:

"I've hearn of hearts unkind, them deeds
With coolness still a-turning;
But, Lord! The gratitude of folks
Has most always left me busted."

He sometimes stated that there were cases where even the poetry was inadequate, and in particular mentioned this fact in connection with Laughing Jim.

Jim was bad, through and through, with a thoroughness that left no cause for mistake, and he was rendered worse by such a charm of recklessness, bravery, and laughter, that half his misdeeds were overlooked. He laid no claim to honesty, and with amazing, disarming truthfulness, admitted his own shortcomings. He was a delightful story-teller, who could amuse and interest his auditors with recountals of his varied experiences in many jails. He was above the average in height, and as if to give the lie to his life, had fearless, candid, laughing eyes. Perhaps it was his sense of humor that made one doubt whether he was consciously bad, or merely lacking in moral sense. Anyway, he laughed at everything, himself included.

No one quite remembers when he arrived in Marook, or, at least, none ever mentioned it. Probably he came with that inrush in the late fall of '97, when the newly discovered Klondike sent its refugees hurrying down the river to camps where they might be sure of supplies through the long winter season, and he laughed his way into a job as bartender, for want of something else to do, and then, in time, graduated to the post of running the roulette wheel at the Hang-out. He was distinguished in dress by having the only toothpick shoes in camp, which he always wore, and for the excellent care he bestowed on his hands. He was popular with those who went to the Hang-out to lose their hard-won gold dust, and set a new pace in crying his wares.

"Come, gather round me, merry gentlemen!" he would shout, when business languished. "Why play the bank when you can lose your money here so much faster? Your money extracted without pain. Try the wheel! No man ever quit me winner!"

And then he would throw back his handsome young head, and that free, reckless laugh of his would roar out over the rumble of conversation, the clink of bottle on glass, the persistent clacking of chips and markers at the bank, and the clattering of dice where chuck-a-luck held forth. My partners, known to the camp as "the

Competents" Westerners all, and all of the sober, taciturn type, were too wise in the ways of gamedom to patronize either his or any of the other games in the Hang-out; but when spending nights in camp they frequently went there in lieu of other places to go, and for Shakespeare George this strange, unmoral, laughing man formed a liking. That George did not dislike him stood him in good stead on that night when Phil Mahoney ran amuck.

Phil had sold a claim for two thousand dollars, and Phil, ordinarily taciturn, developed into a roaring carouser of high rank. Moreover, a sporting tendency led him to accept Laughing Jim's challenge and attempt to worst that proficient at his own game. We were loitering there when Phil, leering, trudged away from the bar to the wheel and bought chips.

"One more man's money in the till!" shouted Jim. "Fair warning is fair warning. Play with me long enough and I take your wad!"

"If I plays long enough," growled Phil, seating himself and shoving a stack of chips on the fifteen spot and sparing a few for the single and double O.

Still voicing that deep-throated laugh, Jim raked them in, and again asserted that all men who came to his wheel lost; but Phil, angry, doubled his stakes, and assumed a grin. Five times in succession he lost, and then bought more chips, and now the grin had given place to a sullen frown.

"There'll be trouble with that fool yet," said George to me, "and it'll be his own bloomin' fault, because he's been warned often enough by Jim."

We drew closer to the table, as did several others, seeing that Mahoney's bets were increasing; but his exclamations of disappointment were drowned in the babel of sound that weltered throughout the Hang-out. Jim had begun by taunting him; but now, discovering his ill temper, as merely the cool "wheelman," twirling the little white ball, and raking in the losses, or paying out the winnings. Once he objected to something Phil said.

"What makes you play when luck's all against you?" he demanded. "It's not my fault if you lose all the time, is it?"

But Phil, by this time heavily short in purse, played on with a certain unmistakable desperation, and lost with a persistence that rapidly depleted his bag of gold dust. Now and then he won for a few turns of the illusive wheel, but the certain percentage of the game against him again told, and finally he was down to his last money. He staked everything recklessly on the old "star combination," and Jim waited patiently for him to place his bet, and, it seemed to me, with a faint hope that it might be withdrawn.

"All bets down?" he demanded at last.

"Ain't blind, are you?" was Phil's surly response, and Jim, with a slight shrug, twirled the ball. It hovered aimlessly for two or three turns as the wheel slowed down, and once it threatened to fall into a winning pocket; then, with the perversity of fortune, it slipped quietly into a partition and lay there. For a full quarter of a minute

Jim did not touch it, nor the stakes that Phil had lost, and then he slowly reached over and swept the table clean, and, as he did so, again vented that slow laugh of his.

"Told you I'd get you," he said; but in the friendliest and most careless of tones.

Phil, who had risen to his feet as the wheel spun, stood as if transfixed by adversity when Jim swept the last of the money into the drawer; but his lips were drawn back into a stiff, snarling grin, and his eyes were wild with disappointment and anger. At the sound of Jim's laugh he suddenly broke loose into a storm of oaths, and, almost before any one could realize his intent, so swift was his action, he whipped a gun from his belt and "threw it down" on the wheelman.

The quickness of Shakespeare George was, and still is, proverbial among those who knew him up and down the long Northwestern coast. Undoubtedly, on that evening, it was the means of saving the life of Laughing Jim; for even as George leaped forward from the side and caught Phil's arm, the pistol exploded. But so sure and deft had been George's attack, the heavy bullet merely buried itself in one of the poles of the cabin roof, and the pistol hand, clutched by the harsh, sinewy fingers of the miner, waved aloft helplessly as the two men struggled backward and forward. The roulette wheel with its table was overturned, and for a minute the room was filled with excited men who broke forward to witness or participate in any trouble. Quite steadily George forced Phil back against the wall, still clutching the upraised hand, and held him there.

"Phil! Phil!" George expostulated. "What's the matter with you—you fool! Cut it out, I tell you!"

Other voices joined the protest, and another of the competents, Bill Davis, reached up and twisted the gun from Phil's hand. George released his hold, and for a minute they stood there, angry, excited, and gathered as if for further combat; then, slowly, Phil relaxed.

"You got a square deal, pardner, all right," insisted Shakespeare George with his slow drawl. "I ain't got no use at all for gamblers or them that plays; but we stood behind you when you commenced, and Jim told you he'd get your money. Then he tried to get you to stop when he saw luck was against you, and that you was gettin' sore, and that didn't do no good. I ain't right sure that, if you'd 'a' killed him, I wouldn't have helped hang you. Now will you be good?"

With an impatient curse Phil shoved men out of his path and tramped through the doorway and into the night. Some one laughed with a clear, cool laugh, and it was Jim, the wheelman, righting his table and wheel. Another man laughed, some one said, "The cussed fool!" There was a return movement toward the other gambling tables, and the Hang-out had resumed its normal atmosphere of rumbling, subdued noise, stale smells of sweaty furs, dead smoke, and poisonous liquors.

Laughing Jim dropped the wheel back to its pivot, gave it a spin, and looked across at Shakespeare George. His face was, for an instant, grave and earnest.

"Close call—that!" he said quietly. "And I reckon, Mister Shakespeare George, that I owe you one. Thanks!"

He looked down and began to adjust his chips as if words were awkward for him under such circumstances, and then, as if to further conceal embarrassment, or through sheer, careless hardness, he again lifted his head and laughed, and his clear voice went out: “Everything all right again! Still doing business at the same old stand. Come up and try your luck, boys! Come try your luck!”

I was not certain whether mine was a sense of surprise at this callous outburst, or one of intense disgust for the whole sordid and near-tragic drama, as we followed the broken man out into the cold, still, starlit night. And, so slight is our gift of prescience, I did not in the least anticipate that this was but the opening scene for others in which Shakespeare George, clean, homely, and capable, and Laughing Jim, bad, attractive, and reckless, were to play parts.

The second scene was two months in coming. It was toward the very close of the long winter season that shut us in, and infolded us, like prisoners in a gloom of frost and ice, in the cold, yet attractive, center of a frozen world.

We, the Competents and I, had been working with persistent industry for weeks, and hungered for a touch of the camp and its vicissitudes; so, one night, when the restless craving for recreation was strong upon us, we went, slipping swiftly over the frozen trails in our moccasins, panting up steeps, and racing down short hills between bare trees as the dim path opened and beckoned us on.

The trail leading into the camp debouched into a cluster of cabins owned by miners who had claims on the gulches, and these were spread, regardless of streets, on the flat facing the river—frozen now into a broad ribbon of ice, snow-covered, and resting like a sinuous white blanket between the bordering hills. We passed through this clump of black squares, snow-capped, and out to the ribbon’s edge. Bill Davis, in the lead, stopped us with a gesture and an exclamation.

“Listen!” he said.

We did. In the profound stillness we heard voices—angry voices—as of turbulent men. They came from down the straggling business street, lasted for a moment, and then were again shut off, even as the shutter of a camera, timed, permits light and then stops it.

“Must have been down at the post,” Bill said. “We heard it while the door was open. Something doing. Let’s lope along and see.”

He set the pace, and in a few minutes we opened the door of the trading post to find it filled with muttering men, and it was plain to us that a miner’s meeting, irregular and hurried, perhaps, but nevertheless a miner’s meeting, was in session. Men in mackinaws, furs, and parkas were crowded into the place, and the dim lamps, with their tin reflectors, betrayed angry faces. Phil Mahoney was standing on the rough counter haranguing the men, and his face was black with excitement and temper.

“And look what he did to me!” he shouted, just as we entered. “Skinned me out of all I had, then laughed in my face. And it only took him ten or fifteen minutes to do it. They ain’t no square game could do it. He’s a crook! That’s what this Jim is! Why, he

says so himself, and laughs about it. This camp's had too much of him. He's busted too many men. I move we go down and get him and start him over the ice, to-night! Now!"

Despite the small esteem in which I held Laughing Jim, a shudder rippled up my spine at the thought of such an execution; for it meant nothing less. To "start a man over the ice," meant that he would be sent without blankets, or food, and that, with a full eighty miles to Taninaw, the nearest point of succor, meant nothing save condemnation to slow death by cold or exhaustion.

"Hold on! Hold on, a minute, before that's put to a vote," I heard Shakespeare George demand.

Men turned and craned their necks to look at him as he crowded toward the counter and into the little, open space reserved beneath it for courtesy.

"Me and my pardners just got here," said George, "and we'd like to know what Jim's done this time."

"Done?" shouted Phil, rendered more angry by interference. "He's skinned Missouri Jones out of all he had, and then won his pay dump from him. Ain't that enough?"

George eyed Phil steadily, and took his time to answer.

"Why did Missouri go against him?" he demanded. "Ain't he old enough, and wise enough, to know that he can't beat a wheel?"

"But the wheel's crooked!" declared Phil, his very beard bristling with excitement.

"Humph! You don't know that, and I don't," retorted George. "Until it's proved that it is, I'll not vote to kill a man. That's what it amounts to. You all know it."

There was an instant's silence that gave way to murmurs of approval, angry protests, and argument, above which rose Phil's voice, high and shrill, demanding the question. George fought for more time, and begged men to consider carefully before voting; but the clamor drowned him at last, and the chairman put the motion to a vote by counting hands. There was a sudden silence, portentous, as it took place, and I looked around me at the hard or cruel faces of men whose hands were uplifted in the death sign, and heard the steady, solemn voice of the chairman counting: "One—two—three—" and so on, up to "twenty-seven."

When the call for those opposed came, my hand, with those of the Competents, was held high, and with restrained breath we again listened to the tally. Slowly and more slow, it approached the end, and stopped at identically the same number. Three or four men, loudest of whom was Phil Mahoney, began shouting arguments; but were silenced by the chairman, who calmly stated that for purposes of certainty he would ask for another vote. Again trying moments passed and the result was the same. Quite deliberately the chairman got to his feet on the counter, and held up his hand.

"It rests with me to cast the deciding vote," he said, and we all leaned forward in suspense and stared at him. His face was firm, and his voice without a tremor as he

spoke. He was a brave man, was that chairman, standing there, dominant, before more than half a hundred earnest men!

"Shakespeare George," he said, "has convinced me that we are in possible danger of condemning a man who, though his business is questionable, and his character confessedly loose, may be innocent of crookedness in the cases before this meeting. I therefore cast the deciding vote against sending him out over the ice, and declare the meeting open for any further business, or a motion to adjourn."

Instantly the room was in a tumult that the chairman could not quell. Above the clamor, I heard Phil Mahoney shouting; "To thunder with such a vote! Come on, boys! Meeting or no meeting, we'll get that thief! All that's with me, come on!"

I felt a sudden jerk at my arm that almost overthrew me, and saw that it was George's hand that had seized me.

"Quick! Outside!" he shouted in my ear, and plunged toward the door.

As a flying wedge the Competents, accustomed for many years to fighting together, quick, sinewy, big, and powerful men all, charged to the door, jerked it open, and drew themselves together in front of it, a grim little line of determination. The moon had risen to cast shadows at the foot of the trees on the white, still snow, and shadows at the feet of our pitifully thin line; but we were tensed and waiting for the rush. As the foremost men belched from the door they halted in surprise, for directly before them stood Shakespeare George with a heavy, menacing gun, held at the hip, and pointed toward them.

"Stop!" he ordered, and there was something so chill and commanding in his voice that men paused irresolutely; then, sensing the deadliness of the situation, obeyed.

"The meeting in there fairly voted down any action against Laughing Jim," George said quietly. "My pardners and I stand for law and order. The majority is still the law in this camp, and if it comes to a show-down, we, my pardners and I, will furnish the order! There'll be no rush on Laughing Jim so long as any of us can handle his gun. If you think you can put it over, men, try it on!"

His grim conclusion was not to go unchallenged; for when he ceased, Phil Mahoney leaped to the front, waving his arms and shouting an appeal to his followers to pay no heed. Before he had uttered a dozen words George leaped. The long barrel of his pistol flew into the air, and came crashing sidewise against Phil's head, and the disturber fell to the snow, stricken as is an animal beneath the blow of a pole-ax.

Even as he fell, George's voice, cold and drawling, steady and distinct, queried: "Who's next?"

There was no "next." I found myself the only unarmed one from our camp, leaning forward on tiptoes, with fists clenched, and the expectant lust of battle ripping through my veins as I saw them waver, saw other men line themselves back of us ready for combat, and witnessed, as the long seconds flew, the dissolution of Phil Mahoney's forces. At the time it seemed that hours were passing; but that entire change of sentiment could not have required more than five minutes, and then there arose the

murmur: “George is right, boys! The meeting decided it! That settles it!” and all was over.

The strange character of Shakespeare George was never better exemplified than in his following action, and thinking of the events of that far-fled night, I sometimes smile at his conception of “law and order”; for when it was certain that the mob spirit was quelled and dissipated, he slipped the gun back into its worn holster and whispered to us, his partners: “Come on, boys! I’ve got something else we ought to do,” and trudged away. The door of the trading post slammed as old Mayo swore at the loiterers and asserted that he had no contract to warm all outdoors. Black-moving spots were here and there on the white-covered earth as groups turned toward their cabins, moving quickly to escape the nipping teeth of the air.

Wondering what George could have in mind, we followed him, for with us it was custom to cling together, come what might. Straight he led us to the Hang-out, and in through the door. Already Laughing Jim was the center of a garrulous group, and his face for once was grave. As we entered he broke away from those who retailed to him the narrowness of his escape, and came toward George, admiring, reluctant, yet evidently anxious to voice his gratitude. But George’s brows drew themselves into a scowl, and his gray-blue eyes were cold and sharp as he looked at the man whose life he had most certainly saved for a second time.

“Put on your coat,” he said, “and come outside for a minute. We want to talk to you, Jim.”

Again we followed him out as we saw that Jim, his young face depicting curiosity, was turning over his cash drawer to the bartender, and looking for his mackinaw. We had but a minute to wait before he emerged, and no time at all to speculate over George’s intentions.

“I’ve saved you to-night, for the second time,” was our partner’s terse statement.

Jim started to thank him, but George threw up his hand, demanding attention.

“So you owe me something, and you’ll pay! Jim, your game’s done as far as this camp’s concerned.”

Again the wheelman opened his lips as if to speak, and again was abruptly silenced.

“We’ll have no powwow,” declared George, scowling at him, as he stood there in the moonlight. “But you’ll do this! You’ll walk back into the Hang-out and announce that never again in this camp will you roll a wheel or turn a card; that you’re through; that you’ve finished! Then you’ll wait for the first chance to go down, or up, the river when spring comes, and—Jim—you’ll go!”

“But—” objected Jim.

“I said you’d go!” was the quick assertion. “There are a bunch of us here, pardners all, who say that you’ll go as I say, quit to-night, and go as soon as you can. And it’s up to you where you go. Up the river to Dawson, down to St. Michaels, or—”

Significantly the thumb of his mitten turned toward the earth, and Jim understood. The shadows on the snow, sharp and defined, nodded their heads in assent, and the

gambler looked from man to man, reading in those dim faces a sentence. It was characteristic of him that after this quick appraisement he drew a deep breath, looked out across the broad expanse of snow-clad river, up at the flaming skies, and then laughed, deeply, recklessly, and shrugged his shoulders. Also it was characteristic that he turned toward the door, and said: "Good! Come ahead and see if I can't play any game!"

Once inside he walked unhesitatingly to the rough bar, seized a cigar cutter that rested thereon, and banged it loudly on the pine boards. Every one in the room paused and turned toward him, men's faces, dim through the smoke, expressing open-mouthed curiosity.

"Men," said Jim, when he had their full attention, "I've been accused of turning a crooked game. It isn't so. I've played it fair, but had rare good luck. I owe Shakespeare George a debt. I'm paying it, full and square. And to pay it, and be quits with a clean slate, he demands that I play no more—any game—in Marook. It costs me a lot, for you're a bunch of easy marks—suckers—with gold dust! But I pay! From this minute, now, I play nothing, gamble nothing in this camp, and am done!"

The surprised silence following this strange assertion was broken by his big, hearty laugh, and the banging of his emphatic fist on the bar. Quite mockingly he backed away from George, doffed his hat, brought his heels together, and bowed deeply.

"I've made good," he said. "Othello's occupation's gone! But God speed the spring so that he may find other fields to conquer!"

And he backed away, down the open space in front of the bar, and out of the door, while George's face lighted with sudden interest at the sound of the double quotation.

"That's from the third act and the third scene," said George delightedly, as if he had made a great discovery. And then: "It means that he's lost his job! That's the place where Othello talks about the dread clamorous counterfeiters. That Jim's a scholar! That's what he is—a scholar."

It was not the fear of enmities that kept us away from the camp on the banks of the Yukon in the weeks that followed that night, but the demands of work. Slowly the disappointment had come to us that our claims were not of the best, and that only by continuous effort could we hope to make them pay scant profit. Save on occasions when some of them passed on the trail we saw nothing of the men of Marook or Laughing Jim. Once we heard that the latter had complained that George had kept him from reaping the profits of the camp, and again that, loafing on the outer edge of his gambling world, he had angrily sworn that if he had been left undisturbed he would have made his fortune. I suppose there was some truth in his statement. Yet he held to his word, this unmoral, reckless vagabond who laughed. They said that he was still there, wearing, despite derision, his pointed-toed shoes, and manicuring his nails; but gambling not at all.

And so, at last, the sun found us, and burst glaring upon our activities, and thawed the huge black dumps, and melted the snow, devoting all his energy of the high

latitudes throughout the long days. Water streamed from the hillsides. Every brook was a torrent, every snow bank the repository for the continuous, melodious chorus of tinkling water drops as they dripped and dripped, and sang their little good-by songs. The dams were built, the gates swung up and down, the shovels tore into the pay dumps, and the sluice boxes roared as we men of Little Marook strove, and cleaned up our winter's profit, be it large or small. Gone was the whine of the windlass in the frosty air, gone the sound of belabored arms beating heavy chests in the struggle to keep warm. Gone was the ring of the ax, the clatter of buckets emptying their contents on the apex of pyramids. The air was redolent with the call of wild fowl come to the breeding ground, the chirping of migratory birds, and the noiseless hum of insects.

"Boys," said Bill Davis on the night we cleaned up the last of our pay dirt, "I figure that she runs about fifteen thousand dollars, at eighteen an ounce. Not much, but a mighty sight better than nothing."

As he talked, he poured the dust into one of our half-filled buckskin sacks, and dropped it into our safe deposit—an empty oil can. Then, heaving a tired sigh, he slid the can under the bunk. On the morrow we would pick up the last scant remnants, pull the sluices, and divide this mass of gold into packs for the next day's journey to the post trader at the camp. Our season's work was done. As claims went in that country, and in proportion to the cost of living, we had not prospered; but we had more than paid our way and were glad; for, long before, we had decided to sell the claim and go "outside"—to the real United States—for the summer season. We went to sleep with the cabin door open, now that spring had come, and I remember that the last feature I observed was the lengthening of the daylight.

Full of the desire of youth for rest, I awoke only when Tim shouted his call for breakfast, and tumbled sleepily to my clothing, to the washbasin outside the door, and my seat at the table. Then, a gallant company, we sallied down for our last day's work on the claim. And we made merry over it, this last day, and played pranks, and loitered, and threw the last shovelfuls with something of regret, for we were leaving the ground that had promised much, paid something, and was to be bartered. It was like bidding good-by to a friend, when we took the last pan of dust we would ever "clean up" from it, and filed toward the homely cabin on the mountainside. George put the pan on top of the stove to dry, for we used no amalgam; and Tim, whose week it was to cook, put the supper before us. We ate with something of melancholy, some queer mingling of good-by regret and satisfaction that at least we had worked as men. Tim got up at last and caught the pan in his hands with a strip of cloth, and reached under the bunk for the can. We heard an exclamation, first of surprise, and then alarm, as he pulled it out from beneath the bunk, clattering hollowly.

"Robbed! By heavens! Some one's looted us!"

His voice arose in a queer crescendo of astonishment and indignation. Stools were thrust back and our feet trampled heavily over the floor as we bent above him and stared down at the empty can, disbelieving him and our senses. It was true. The can

was empty, and the profits of our year's toil had vanished as if by malignant magic. We started toward the door foolishly intent on plunging out into the night, but Bill Davis, veteran of the trails, leaped in front of us and threw up a restraining hand.

"Easy, boys! Easy does it," he said quietly, and we paused, looking at him expectantly, and wondering what he had in mind.

"Our only chance," he said, "of learning how, or by whom it was taken, is the sign out here in the mud. Whoever got it left a track. If we run over it in the night, it will be wiped out. If we wait until morning the sign will be there, some place; unless the man that robbed us had wings."

"Right for you!" was a chorus, growled in unison.

And so we all remained in the cabin, and sat and talked, and waited for daybreak, and indulged in idle speculation, but there was no lamentation.

It was George's wholesome, kindly hand that crept over on mine, as we sat there in the gloom, and it was his kindly voice that said: "Don't worry, boy! It hits you harder than us, because we've money outside. Alaska to us was an adventure. To you it was the first step on the big stairs of life, for you are young, but we'll get him yet. It's part of the game that we should."

And I was comforted thereby, and asleep when some one aroused us in the morning. I tumbled from my bunk, astonished by the sudden knowledge that I had slept in all my clothing, and that I had not suffered a wickedly troublesome dream. Tim was up and pouring coffee, hot and steaming, into the tin cups, and the day was breaking over the eastern hills in the early hour of the morning, so swift is the sun's reappearance in that high clime. We ate and drank sparsely, quietly, each intent on what the signs might show, and deliberately, nay, almost leisurely, tightened our belts and went out of the door, George in the lead, Tim, short and stocky, bending behind him like an unleashed hound, and Bill, huge and grim, following.

It was a foregone conclusion that the robber had done one of two things—approached from behind the cabin in the daylight, while we were working, or crept stealthily in at night while we were asleep. In the latter case he had doubtless fled down the trail. In the former he would have retreated by the rear of the cabin, and out into the screen of the forest on the mountainside above. So, first, we inspected the trail. Veterans in reading signs were these men who had permitted me to share their lot, and they walked forward with keen eyes sweeping this way and that—eyes which nothing could escape. A broken twig, a patch of crushed, indented moss, anything unusual, would be observed and noted. They bade me walk behind, and scanned the ground for a hundred yards before one of them uttered a sound. Then George straightened up, and I saw the hurt look on his face give way to an angry scowl, and saw him swing one ponderous fist into a palm.

"Come here," he said, with strange repression, and we joined him.

There, plainly imprinted in the mud, where some one had entered the trail from a moss-carpeted side, were tracks, and they were those of one who wore shoes—shoes

of civilization, such as but few men wore in our outskirt of a rough world, and the shoes were pointed, delicately, foppishly, almost daintily.

We lifted our heads and stared at one another, with the same unvoiced comment leaping from our eyes. We looked again at the telltale tracks in the mud, clearly leading down the hillside to the gulch below, and thus off toward the camp. We lifted our heads once more and George spoke.

"Laughing Jim!" he said.

"No other man in all the country wore such shoes!" Tim added.

"And no one but an expert crook would have taken a chance in coming into our cabin night before last," suggested Bill.

"That's when the trick was turned," declared George. "And he has paid me—gratitude!"

We passed, peering, down the trail and out into the gulch. Straight down it we went, finding here and there, in the slow miles, that unusual mark, the mark of a toothpick shoe in a country where all men wore rubber boots or mukluks in the wet and soggy spring. There could have been but one destination for those feet, so, at last, we wasted no more time on signs, but strode hurriedly and angrily away toward Marook. We gained the top of the hill in the pass above the town and looked down. Where last we had seen the ribbon of white, was now open water. The river had broken and cleared itself of ice while we toiled over our dumps. It ran below us, a turgid flood. Down in front of the A. C. Trading Post men were assembled, and they fired guns and shouted, while dogs ran hither and yon, howling a chorus of excitement and salute for the first steamboat of the year. It was coming slowly toward the bank, a tiny, rough affair that had wintered in a slough up the river. We hurried onward toward the water front, and had small need to ask questions, inasmuch as the first one was answered.

"Has any one seen Laughing Jim lately?" demanded George of the group in front of the Hang-out.

"If you're looking for him, you're a trifle late," jocularly asserted the nearest man. "He pulled out yesterday mornin' in a boat, goin' down the river. And he seemed in a hurry; but he stopped to laugh and twiddle his thumb at his nose to the boys who saw him go, and said he was right sorry he hadn't had a chance to skin the whole blamed camp before he set sail. Ha! Ha! Ha!"

He laughed boisterously at his own joke, a laugh in which we did not join, for now we knew, indubitably, that Jim had sufficient reason for haste. It was Bill, slow and cautious, who asked another question, pertinent to our quest.

"Any one else gone from the camp?" he asked.

"Nope! No one else had any reason to be in a rush," was the response.

"What makes you think Jim was in a hurry?" asked George, frowning at the man.

"Because he just dumped himself, and some blankets, and grub into a canoe that belonged to an Injun, and paddled away as if he was out to break records," asserted our informant. "Somebody asked him what was his rush, and he said he had a new job

that he must move fast to grab. Cute of him, wasn't it? He was a smart son of a gun, all right, and would have his little joke, right up to the last."

Again the man laughed, and then, as the steamboat was about to land, hurriedly left us and started toward the river bank.

Bill beckoned us to one side.

"Boys," he said, "we've got just one chance, and that is to get to St. Michaels as soon as he does. Unimak Pass probably isn't clear of ice yet, and he will have to lay there until the steamer can get in from outside to take him away. We've got to try to catch him between here and there, and we've got several hundred miles to do it in. Two of us better rustle a boat. The others arrange for some one to keep an eye on our cabin up in the gulch, and buy grub for a cruise. Then it's a case of work at the oars and make time. Let's get a move on ourselves."

We did, most effectually, and in just two hours' time were shoving a crude, whipsawed skiff out into the river, and feeling the current catch us and sweep us toward the Ramparts below. We had begun the grim chase to overtake the one man who had paid his toll of gratitude by robbing the man who had twice saved his life, and it was certain that, did we overtake him, this time there would be no escape; for we would bring him back for trial.

The current helped us, and, to our satisfaction, we discovered that the apparently clumsy skiff handled excellently and responded bravely to our steady oars. We tore through the Ramparts where the waters lashed the rocks, and out into the breadths below, and then set ourselves to our task, as we traveled through that great uninhabited country. Save for the flying fowl, and a bear that lazily paused from drinking on a distant shore, we saw no living thing, and we did not pause for luncheon, but took turns with the oars. Accustomed as we were to the heaviest work, and in the perfect physical condition that comes from healthful food and clean lives, we did not suffer from the prolonged exertion. Indeed, had our mission been less melancholy and desperate, I, for one, would have enjoyed that steady, rhythmic motion, the gurgling of the water under our bow, the ever-changing scenery at our sides, and the beauties of a perfect day. We did not talk much, but once or twice Shakespeare George, brooding, quoted as if to himself, in a bitter tone, his own version of Wordsworth's "Gratitude."

What would have been evening in a more southerly latitude came on, and found us still rowing with that same measured stroke, save that we took shorter turns at the oars, and found the resting spells more grateful. The current carried us closer toward a shore, around a point that seemed blanketed with the evening's purple haze, and we stopped rowing abruptly at the sound of a rifle shot. Nestled at the foot of a bluff was a squalid little Indian village, and the natives were running excitedly up and down the water's edge and waving to us. It was evident that the shot had been fired to attract our attention. We headed the boat toward them, and they caught our prow and pulled us up on the shingle before we could protest.

"Come! Quick come!" urged a withered, kindly faced old native, presumably the tyune of this little domain. "White man 'most *peluck*! Him soon die. Quick come!"

We hastened after him to the big Kazima, a sort of clubhouse which each village of any size possesses, crawled in after him, and when our eyes grew accustomed to the dull, smoke-blackened, raftered interior, lighted only by a huge hole in the upper center over the fire pit through which the soft daylight streamed, we stood above the cause of his solicitude. Our chase was ended; for on the skins, at our feet, lay Laughing Jim.

George knelt beside him, and ran his hand inside the blue shirt that was torn open across the chest, and then looked up at us.

"Somethin's happened to him," he said, "feels to me as if he was all shot to pieces."

At the sound of his voice Laughing Jim opened his eyes a little wildly, then smiled as recognition crept into their clear, but pain-drawn, depths.

"I'm going," he croaked, with a queer, gasping effort. "You got here just in time. I—I— Drink!"

Bill Davis pulled our little emergency flask from his pocket, George lifted the wounded man up, and gave him a strong sup of the brandy, and it momentarily strengthened him. All our animosity was forgotten now, as we stood there rubbing shoulders with death, such is the queer awe and pity that assails us at sight of the mortally stricken regardless of their merits.

"Who did it, Jim?" asked George, still supporting the dying man's shoulders and head.

"Mahoney. But I got him! He's over there!"

He rolled his eyes toward the dark corner of the Kazima, and with exclamations of surprise all of us, save George, hurried to the corner, struck matches, and looked. There lay Phil Mahoney, beyond all aid, dead. I threw my handkerchief over his face before we went back to George and Jim, on tiptoe, as if the sound of our footsteps on that beaten earth would ever matter to him. We gave Jim another draft of the brandy, and he feebly waved for silence.

"Let me talk," he said. "Not much time left. Been going out all day. I've never been any good. Gambler's habit of sleeping days, awake nights. Took walk yesterday morning. Wanted to get close to birds and hear 'em sing. Mile above camp. Saw Phil Mahoney toting something toward boat. Acted queer. Didn't see me. Got in boat and shoved off. Skirted opposite shore as if afraid being seen. 'Funny,' says I. 'Wonder what that big, ugly devil's up to?' Forgot all about it and went back to my cabin, to clean up. Couldn't find best shoes. Cussed some, and wondered what Siwash could have swiped them. Then, all of sudden, remembered Mahoney walked queer. So I—"

He stopped and his lithe, wounded body was twisted with a harsh cough that threatened to undo him, and again we gave him brandy. After a time, but in a weaker and more broken voice, he went on: "So I went back. Never trusted him, anyhow. Sure enough there were tracks in the mud. He had 'em on. I back-tracked him. Found

thicket of pussy willows, and inside of it empty gold sacks. Special buck. You fellows' names on 'em in indelible pencil. Got wild! Ran back farther along tracks and saw he must have come from gulch trail—your direction. Saw it all in a minute. Saw you fellows wouldn't believe me, because you know I've been a bad one—sometimes—not always. Maybe not so bad as some. Only thing I could do to show you I wasn't a dog, and appreciated what you all had done for me, was to catch thief. Grabbed canoe and chased him. Caught him here, where he'd stopped to make tea, above village. Saw smoke. Found boat—nothing in it. Crept up on him. He had gold dust with him. Tried to get drop on him, but he was too quick. Whirled and shot."

He rested silently for a moment as if to gather strength, and there was a little, exultant gleam in his eyes as he continued:

"I was down. Played fox. 'That's all right!' says he, as he came up and stood over me, 'but I'd rather you'd been hanged by them Competents.' Then he laughed and turned back. I got to my elbow and shot. He went down. Then we shot from the ground, and luck was against me. Could feel every one of his hit. Didn't know any more till Indians came running and picked me up. Phil was dead. Made natives bring me here with your dust. Told 'em better bring Phil, too, so if I went out, and you came, you'd understand."

He coughed again, more violently, and the brandy seemed to have lost its effect. He motioned with his dying fingers toward his side, and we had to bend over to catch his whispered words:

"It's there—by me—all of it—and—and—George, you're white and—I'm not so bad—after all—am I? Wanted you boys to know that—"

As if the severing of soul and body had given him an instant's strength, he half stiffened, struggled, and then tried to laugh, a ghastly semblance of that reckless, full-throated laugh that had given him his sobriquet, twitched, gasped, seemed to abruptly relax, and rested very still.

"Right? You're right as rain! You are! God knows you are!"

George shouted the words to him as if speeding them out to overtake his parting soul, and I like to remember that Laughing Jim's eyes seemed to twitch and that he went out with a smile on his face.

Side by side we buried them there, close to where the babble of the Yukon might croon to them in the long summers, or display to the cold skies its beaten winter trails, Phil Mahoney, the thief, in his stolen shoes, and Laughing Jim, the strange admixture of evil and nobility. And over each, with equal forgiveness, we put a rude wooden cross, while curious, stolid natives stood quietly by. The sole distinction we made was that the cross above Jim was carefully hewn. But George lingered behind as we made our preparations to camp in the village for the night, and the next morning, still filled with the tragedy, I slipped back up the hillside for a last look at the graves. On that of Laughing Jim, who would laugh no more, lay a handful of dying wild flowers, and I saw scrawled on the cross, in the handwriting of Shakespeare George, these words:

Under here is Laughing Jim. Paid a little favor with his life,
And died with a laugh on his lips! Bad as he was, better'n
Most of us, and provin' that sometimes even poets is wrong, and
That men don't forget. Lord help us all to do as well.

And so we left him, and my eyes were fixed, as we rowed back up the river, and the village with its natives was lost to view, on the rough-hewn cross that seemed to blaze with a peculiar glory all its own, a shining standard for one honorably dead on the field of gratitude.