

Home reading. A Flutter in Eggs by Jack London

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Текст для письменного перевода (15 000 знаков)

It was in the A. C. Company's big store at Dawson, on a morning of crisp frost, that Lucille Arral beckoned Smoke Bellew over to the dry-goods counter. The clerk had gone on an expedition into the storerooms, and, despite the huge, red-hot stoves, Lucille had drawn on her mittens again. Smoke obeyed her call with alacrity. The man did not exist in Dawson who would not have been flattered by the notice of Lucille Arral, the singing soubrette of the tiny stock company that performed nightly at the Palace Opera House.

"Things are dead," she complained, with pretty petulance, as soon as they had shaken hands. "There hasn't been a stampede for a week. That masked ball Skiff Mitchell was going to give us has been postponed. There's no dust in circulation. There's always standing-room now at the Opera House. And there hasn't been a mail from the Outside for two whole weeks. In short, this burg has crawled into its cave and gone to sleep. We've got to do something. It needs livening--and you and I can do it. We can give it excitement if anybody can. I've broken with Wild Water, you know."

Smoke caught two almost simultaneous visions. One was of Joy Gastell; the other was of himself, in the midst of a bleak snow-stretch, under a cold arctic moon, being pot-shotted with accurateness and dispatch by the aforesaid Wild Water. Smoke's reluctance at raising excitement with the aid of Lucille Arral was too patent for her to miss.

"I'm not thinking what you are thinking at all, thank you," she chided, with a laugh and a pout.

"When I throw myself at your head you'll have to have more eyes and better ones than you have now to see me."

"Men have died of heart disease at the sudden announcement of good fortune," he murmured in the unveracious gladness of relief.

"Liar," she retorted graciously. "You were more scared to death than anything else. Now take it from me, Mr. Smoke Bellew, I'm not going to make love to you, and if you dare to make love to me, Wild Water will take care of your case. You know HIM. Besides, I--I haven't really broken with him."

"Go on with your puzzles," he jeered. "Maybe I can start guessing what you're driving at after a while."

"There's no guessing, Smoke. I'll give it to you straight. Wild Water thinks I've broken with him, don't you see."

"Well, have you, or haven't you?"

"I haven't--there! But it's between you and me in confidence. He thinks I have. I made a noise like breaking with him, and he deserved it, too."

"Where do I come in, stalking-horse or fall-guy?"

"Neither. You make a pot of money, we put across the laugh on Wild Water and cheer Dawson up, and, best of all, and the reason for it all, he gets disciplined. He needs it. He's--well, the best way to put it is, he's too turbulent. Just because he's a big husky, because he owns more rich claims than he can keep count of--"

"And because he's engaged to the prettiest little woman in Alaska," Smoke interpolated.

"Yes, and because of that, too, thank you, is no reason for him to get riotous. He broke out last night again. Sowed the floor of the M. & M. with gold-dust. All of a thousand dollars. Just opened his poke and scattered it under the feet of the dancers. You've heard of it, of course."

"Yes; this morning. I'd like to be the sweeper in that establishment. But still I don't get you. Where do I come in?"

"Listen. He was too turbulent. I broke our engagement, and he's going around making a noise like a broken heart. Now we come to it. I like eggs."

"They're off!" Smoke cried in despair. "Which way? Which way?"

"Wait."

"But what have eggs and appetite got to do with it?" he demanded.

"Everything, if you'll only listen."

"Listening, listening," he chanted.

"Then for Heaven's sake listen. I like eggs. There's only a limited supply of eggs in Dawson."

"Sure. I know that, too. Slavovitch's restaurant has most of them. Ham and one egg, three dollars. Ham and two eggs, five dollars. That means two dollars an egg, retail. And only the swells and the Arrals and the Wild Waters can afford them."

"He likes eggs, too," she continued. "But that's not the point. I like them. I have breakfast every morning at eleven o'clock at Slavovitch's. I invariably eat two eggs." She paused impressively.

"Suppose, just suppose, somebody corners eggs."

She waited, and Smoke regarded her with admiring eyes, while in his heart he backed with approval Wild Water's choice of her.

"You're not following," she said.

"Go on," he replied. "I give up. What's the answer?"

"Stupid! You know Wild Water. When he sees I'm languishing for eggs, and I know his mind like a book, and I know how to languish, what will he do?"

"You answer it. Go on."

"Why, he'll just start stampeding for the man that's got the corner in eggs. He'll buy the corner, no matter what it costs. Picture: I come into Slavovitch's at eleven o'clock. Wild Water will be at the next table. He'll make it his business to be there. 'Two eggs, shirred,' I'll say to the waiter. 'Sorry, Miss Arral,' the waiter will say; 'they ain't no more eggs.' Then up speaks Wild Water, in that big bear voice of his, 'Waiter, six eggs, soft boiled.' And the waiter says, 'Yes, sir,' and the eggs are brought. Picture: Wild Water looks sideways at me, and I look like a particularly indignant icicle and summon the waiter. 'Sorry, Miss Arral,' he says, 'but them eggs is Mr. Wild Water's. You see, Miss, he owns 'em.' Picture: Wild Water, triumphant, doing his best to look unconscious while he eats his six eggs.

"Another picture: Slavovitch himself bringing two shirred eggs to me and saying, 'Compliments of Mr. Wild Water, Miss.' What can I do? What can I possibly do but smile at Wild Water, and then we make up, of course, and he'll consider it cheap if he has been compelled to pay ten dollars for each and every egg in the corner."

"Go on, go on," Smoke urged. "At what station do I climb onto the choo-choo cars, or at what water-tank do I get thrown off?"

"Ninny! You don't get thrown off. You ride the egg-train straight into the Union Depot. You make that corner in eggs. You start in immediately, to-day. You can buy every egg in Dawson for three dollars and sell out to Wild Water at almost any advance. And then, afterward, we'll let the inside history come out. The laugh will be on Wild Water. His turbulence will be some subdued. You and I share the glory of it. You make a pile of money. And Dawson wakes up with a grand ha! ha! Of course--if--if you think the speculation too risky, I'll put up the dust for the corner."

This last was too much for Smoke. Being only a mere mortal Western man, with queer obsessions about money and women, he declined with scorn the proffer of her dust.

"Hey! Shorty!" Smoke called across the main street to his partner, who was trudging along in his swift, slack-jointed way, a naked bottle with frozen contents conspicuously tucked under his arm. Smoke crossed over.

"Where have you been all morning? Been looking for you everywhere."

"Up to Doc's," Shorty answered, holding out the bottle. "Something's wrong with Sally. I seen last night, at feedin'-time, the hair on her tail an' flanks was fallin' out. The Doc says--"

"Never mind that," Smoke broke in impatiently. "What I want--"

"What's eatin' you?" Shorty demanded in indignant astonishment. "An' Sally gettin' naked bald in this crimp weather! I tell you that dog's sick. Doc says--"

"Let Sally wait. Listen to me--"

"I tell you she can't wait. It's cruelty to animals. She'll be frost-bit. What are you in such a fever about anyway? Has that Monte Cristo strike proved up?"

"I don't know, Shorty. But I want you to do me a favor."

"Sure," Shorty said gallantly, immediately appeased and acquiescent. "What is it? Let her rip. Me for you."

"I want you to buy eggs for me--"

"Sure, an' Floridy water an' talcum powder, if you say the word. An' poor Sally sheddin' something scand'lous! Look here, Smoke, if you want to go in for high livin' you go an' buy your own eggs. Beans an' bacon's good enough for me."

"I am going to buy, but I want you to help me to buy. Now, shut up, Shorty. I've got the floor. You go right straight to Slavovitch's. Pay as high as three dollars, but buy all he's got."

"Three dollars!" Shorty groaned. "An' I heard tell only yesterday that he's got all of seven hundred in stock! Twenty-one hundred dollars for hen-fruit! Say, Smoke, I tell you what. You run right up and see the Doc. He'll tend to your case. An' he'll only charge you an ounce for the first prescription. So-long, I gotta to be pullin' my freight."

He started off, but Smoke caught his partner by the shoulder, arresting his progress and whirling him around.

"Smoke, I'd sure do anything for you," Shorty protested earnestly. "If you had a cold in the head an' was layin' with both arms broke, I'd set by your bedside, day an' night, an' wipe your nose for you. But I'll be everlastin'ly damned if I'll squander twenty-one hundred good iron dollars on hen-fruit for you or any other two-legged man."

"They're not your dollars, but mine, Shorty. It's a deal I have on. What I'm after is to corner every blessed egg in Dawson, in the Klondike, on the Yukon. You've got to help me out. I haven't the time to tell you of the inwardness of the deal. I will afterward, and let you go half on it if you want to. But the thing right now is to get the eggs. Now you hustle up to Slavovitch's and buy all he's got."

"But what'll I tell 'm? He'll sure know I ain't goin' to eat 'em."

"Tell him nothing. Money talks. He sells them cooked for two dollars. Offer him up to three for them uncooked. If he gets curious, tell him you're starting a chicken ranch. What I want is the eggs. And then keep on; nose out every egg in Dawson and buy it. Understand? Buy it! That little joint across the street from Slavovitch's has a few. Buy them. I'm going over to Klondike City. There's an old man there, with a bad leg, who's broke and who has six dozen. He's held them all winter for the rise, intending to get enough out of them to pay his passage back to Seattle. I'll see he gets his

passage, and I'll get the eggs. Now hustle. And they say that little woman down beyond the sawmill who makes moccasins has a couple of dozen."

"All right, if you say so, Smoke. But Slavovitch seems the main squeeze. I'll just get an iron-bound option, black an' white, an' gather in the scatterin' first."

"All right. Hustle. And I'll tell you the scheme tonight."

But Shorty flourished the bottle. "I'm goin' to doctor up Sally first. The eggs can wait that long. If they ain't all eaten, they won't be eaten while I'm takin' care of a poor sick dog that's saved your life an' mine more 'n once."

Never was a market cornered more quickly. In three days every known egg in Dawson, with the exception of several dozen, was in the hands of Smoke and Shorty. Smoke had been more liberal in purchasing. He unblushingly pleaded guilty to having given the old man in Klondike City five dollars apiece for his seventy-two eggs. Shorty had bought most of the eggs, and he had driven bargains. He had given only two dollars an egg to the woman who made moccasins, and he prided himself that he had come off fairly well with Slavovitch, whose seven hundred and fifteen eggs he had bought at a flat rate of two dollars and a half. On the other hand, he grumbled because the little restaurant across the street had held him up for two dollars and seventy-five cents for a paltry hundred and thirty-four eggs.

The several dozen not yet gathered in were in the hands of two persons. One, with whom Shorty was dealing, was an Indian woman who lived in a cabin on the hill back of the hospital.

"I'll get her to-day," Shorty announced next morning. "You wash the dishes, Smoke. I'll be back in a jiffy, if I don't bust myself a-shovin' dust at her. Gimme a man to deal with every time. These blamed women--it's something sad the way they can hold out on a buyer. The only way to get 'em is sellin'. Why, you'd think them eggs of hern was solid nuggets."

In the afternoon, when Smoke returned to the cabin, he found Shorty squatted on the floor, rubbing ointment into Sally's tail, his countenance so expressionless that it was suspicious.

"What luck?" Shorty asked carelessly, after several minutes had passed.

"Nothing doing," Smoke answered. "How did you get on with the squaw?"

Shorty cocked his head triumphantly toward a tin pail of eggs on the table. "Seven dollars a clatter, though," he confessed, after another minute of silent rubbing.

"I offered ten dollars finally," Smoke said, "and then the fellow told me he'd already sold his eggs. Now that looks bad, Shorty. Somebody else is in the market. Those twenty-eight eggs are liable to cause us trouble. You see, the success of the corner consists in holding every last--"

He broke off to stare at his partner. A pronounced change was coming over Shorty--one of agitation masked by extreme deliberation. He closed the salve-box, wiped his hands slowly and thoroughly

on Sally's furry coat, stood up, went over to the corner and looked at the thermometer, and came back again. He spoke in a low, toneless, and super-polite voice.

"Do you mind kindly just repeating over how many eggs you said the man didn't sell to you?" he asked.

"Twenty-eight."

"Hum," Shorty communed to himself, with a slight duck of the head of careless acknowledgment. Then he glanced with slumbering anger at the stove. "Smoke, we'll have to dig up a new stove. That fire-box is burned plumb into the oven so it blacks the biscuits."

"Let the fire-box alone," Smoke commanded, "and tell me what's the matter."

"Matter? An' you want to know what's the matter? Well, kindly please direct them handsome eyes of yours at that there pail settin' on the table. See it?"

Smoke nodded.

"Well, I want to tell you one thing, just one thing. They's just exactly, preecisely, nor nothin' more or anythin' less'n twenty-eight eggs in the pail, an' they cost, every danged last one of 'em, just exactly seven great big round iron dollars a throw. If you stand in cryin' need of any further items of information, I'm willin' and free to impart."

"Go on," Smoke requested.

"Well, that geezer you was dickerin' with is a big buck Indian. Am I right?"

Smoke nodded, and continued to nod to each question.

"He's got one cheek half gone where a bald-face grizzly swatted him. Am I right? He's a dog-trader--right, eh? His name is Scar-Face Jim. That's so, ain't it? D'ye get my drift?"

"You mean we've been bidding--?"

"Against each other. Sure thing. That squaw's his wife, an' they keep house on the hill back of the hospital. I could 'a' got them eggs for two a throw if you hadn't butted in."

"And so could I," Smoke laughed, "if you'd kept out, blame you! But it doesn't amount to anything. We know that we've got the corner. That's the big thing."

Shorty spent the next hour wrestling with a stub of a pencil on the margin of a three-year-old newspaper, and the more interminable and hieroglyphic grew his figures the more cheerful he became.

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"There she stands," he said at last. "Pretty? I guess yes. Lemme give you the totals. You an' me has right now in our possession exactly nine hundred an' seventy-three eggs. They cost us exactly two thousand, seven hundred an' sixty dollars, reckonin' dust at sixteen an ounce an' not countin' time. An' now listen to me. If we stick up Wild Water for ten dollars a egg we stand to win, clean net an' all to the good, just exactly six thousand nine hundred and seventy dollars. Now that's a book-makin' what is, if anybody should ride up on a dog-sled an' ask you. An' I'm in half on it! Put her there, Smoke. I'm that thankful I'm sure droolin' gratitude. Book-makin'! Say, I'd sooner run with the chicks than the ponies any day."

At eleven that night Smoke was routed from sound sleep by Shorty, whose fur parka exhaled an atmosphere of keen frost and whose hand was extremely cold in its contact with Smoke's cheek.

"What is it now?" Smoke grumbled. "Rest of Sally's hair fallen out?"

"Nope. But I just had to tell you the good news. I seen Slavovitch. Or Slavovitch seen me, I guess, because he started the seance. He says to me: 'Shorty, I want to speak to you about them eggs. I've kept it quiet. Nobody knows I sold 'em to you. But if you're speculatin', I can put you wise to a good thing.' An' he did, too, Smoke. Now what'd you guess that good thing is?"

"Go on. Name it."

"Well, maybe it sounds incredible, but that good thing was Wild Water Charley. He's lookin' to buy eggs. He goes around to Slavovitch an' offers him five dollars an egg, an' before he quits he's offerin' eight. An' Slavovitch ain't got no eggs. Last thing Wild Water says to Slavovitch is that he'll beat the head offen him if he ever finds out Slavovitch has eggs cached away somewheres. Slavovitch had to tell 'm he'd sold the eggs, but that the buyer was secret.

"Slavovitch says to let him say the word to Wild Water who's got the eggs. 'Shorty,' he says to me, 'Wild Water'll come a-runnin'. You can hold him up for eight dollars.' 'Eight dollars, your grandmother,' I says. 'He'll fall for ten before I'm done with him.' Anyway, I told Slavovitch I'd think it over and let him know in the mornin'. Of course we'll let 'm pass the word on to Wild Water. Am I right?"

"You certainly are, Shorty. First thing in the morning tip off Slavovitch. Have him tell Wild Water that you and I are partners in the deal."

Five minutes later Smoke was again aroused by Shorty.

"Say! Smoke! Oh, Smoke!"

"Yes?"

"Not a cent less than ten a throw. Do you get that?"

"Sure thing--all right," Smoke returned sleepily.

In the morning Smoke chanced upon Lucille Arral again at the dry-goods counter of the A. C. Store.

"It's working," he jubilated. "It's working. Wild Water's been around to Slavovitch, trying to buy or bully eggs out of him. And by this time Slavovitch has told him that Shorty and I own the corner."

Lucille Arral's eyes sparkled with delight. "I'm going to breakfast right now," she cried. "And I'll ask the waiter for eggs, and be so plaintive when there aren't any as to melt a heart of stone. And you know Wild Water's been around to Slavovitch, trying to buy the corner if it costs him one of his mines. I know him. And hold out for a stiff figure. Nothing less than ten dollars will satisfy me, and if you sell for anything less, Smoke, I'll never forgive you."

That noon, up in their cabin, Shorty placed on the table a pot of beans, a pot of coffee, a pan of sourdough biscuits, a tin of butter and a tin of condensed cream, a smoking platter of moose-meat and bacon, a plate of stewed dried peaches, and called: "Grub's ready. Take a slant at Sally first."

Smoke put aside the harness on which he was sewing, opened the door, and saw Sally and Bright spiritedly driving away a bunch of foraging sled-dogs that belonged to the next cabin. Also he saw something else that made him close the door hurriedly and dash to the stove. The frying-pan, still hot from the moose-meat and bacon, he put back on the front lid. Into the frying-pan he put a generous dab of butter, then reached for an egg, which he broke and dropped spluttering into the pan. As he reached for a second egg, Shorty gained his side and clutched his arm in an excited grip.

"Hey! What you doin'?" he demanded.

"Frying eggs," Smoke informed him, breaking the second one and throwing off Shorty's detaining hand. "What's the matter with your eyesight? Did you think I was combing my hair?"

"Don't you feel well?" Shorty queried anxiously, as Smoke broke a third egg and dexterously thrust him back with a stiff-arm jolt on the breast. "Or are you just plain loco? That's thirty dollars' worth of eggs already."

"And I'm going to make it sixty dollars' worth," was the answer, as Smoke broke the fourth. "Get out of the way, Shorty. Wild Water's coming up the hill, and he'll be here in five minutes."

Shorty sighed vastly with commingled comprehension and relief, and sat down at the table. By the time the expected knock came at the door, Smoke was facing him across the table, and, before each, was a plate containing three hot, fried eggs.

"Come in!" Smoke called.

Wild Water Charley, a strapping young giant just a fraction of an inch under six feet in height and carrying a clean weight of one hundred and ninety pounds, entered and shook hands.

"Set down an' have a bite, Wild Water," Shorty invited. "Smoke, fry him some eggs. I'll bet he ain't scoffed an egg in a coon's age."

Smoke broke three more eggs into the hot pan, and in several minutes placed them before his guest, who looked at them with so strange and strained an expression that Shorty confessed afterward his fear that Wild Water would slip them into his pocket and carry them away.

"Say, them swells down in the States ain't got nothin' over us in the matter of eats," Shorty gloated. "Here's you an' me an' Smoke gettin' outside ninety dollars' worth of eggs an' not battin' an eye."

Wild Water stared at the rapidly disappearing eggs and seemed petrified.

"Pitch in an' eat," Smoke encouraged.

"They--they ain't worth no ten dollars," Wild Water said slowly.

Shorty accepted the challenge. "A thing's worth what you can get for it, ain't it?" he demanded.

"Yes, but--"

"But nothin'. I'm tellin' you what we can get for 'em. Ten a throw, just like that. We're the egg trust, Smoke an' me, an' don't you forget it. When we say ten a throw, ten a throw goes." He mopped his plate with a biscuit. "I could almost eat a couple more," he sighed, then helped himself to the beans.

"You can't eat eggs like that," Wild Water objected. "It--it ain't right."

"We just dote on eggs, Smoke an' me," was Shorty's excuse.

Wild Water finished his own plate in a half-hearted way and gazed dubiously at the two comrades.

"Say, you fellows can do me a great favor," he began tentatively. "Sell me, or lend me, or give me, about a dozen of them eggs."

"Sure," Smoke answered. "I know what a yearning for eggs is myself. But we're not so poor that we have to sell our hospitality. They'll cost you nothing--" Here a sharp kick under the table admonished him that Shorty was getting nervous. "A dozen, did you say, Wild Water?"

Wild Water nodded.

"Go ahead, Shorty," Smoke went on. "Cook them up for him. I can sympathize. I've seen the time myself when I could eat a dozen, straight off the bat."

But Wild Water laid a restraining hand on the eager Shorty as he explained. "I don't mean cooked. I want them with the shells on."

"So that you can carry 'em away?"

"That's the idea."

"But that ain't hospitality," Shorty objected. "It's--it's tradin'."

Smoke nodded concurrence. "That's different, Wild Water. I thought you just wanted to eat them. You see, we went into this for a speculation."

The dangerous blue of Wild Water's eyes began to grow more dangerous. "I'll pay you for them," he said sharply. "How much?"

"Oh, not a dozen," Smoke replied. "We couldn't sell a dozen. We're not retailers; we're speculators. We can't break our own market. We've got a hard and fast corner, and when we sell out it's the whole corner or nothing."

"How many have you got, and how much do you want for them?"

"How many have we, Shorty?" Smoke inquired.

Shorty cleared his throat and performed mental arithmetic aloud. "Lemme see. Nine hundred an' seventy-three minus nine, that leaves nine hundred an' sixty-two. An' the whole shootin'-match, at ten a throw, will tote up just about nine thousand six hundred an' twenty iron dollars. Of course, Wild Water, we're playin' fair, an' it's money back for bad ones, though they ain't none. That's one thing I never seen in the Klondike--a bad egg. No man's fool enough to bring in a bad egg."

"That's fair," Smoke added. "Money back for the bad ones, Wild Water. And there's our proposition--nine thousand six hundred and twenty dollars for every egg in the Klondike."

"You might play them up to twenty a throw an' double your money," Shorty suggested.

Wild Water shook his head sadly and helped himself to the beans. "That would be too expensive, Shorty. I only want a few. I'll give you ten dollars for a couple of dozen. I'll give you twenty--but I can't buy 'em all."

"All or none," was Smoke's ultimatum.

"Look here, you two," Wild Water said in a burst of confidence. "I'll be perfectly honest with you, an' don't let it go any further. You know Miss Arral an' I was engaged. Well, she's broken everything off. You know it. Everybody knows it. It's for her I want them eggs."

"Huh!" Shorty jeered. "It's clear an' plain why you want 'em with the shells on. But I never thought it of you."

"Thought what?"

"It's low-down mean, that's what it is," Shorty rushed on, virtuously indignant. "I wouldn't wonder somebody filled you full of lead for it, an' you'd deserve it, too."

Wild Water began to flame toward the verge of one of his notorious Berserker rages. His hands clenched until the cheap fork in one of them began to bend, while his blue eyes flashed warning sparks. "Now look here, Shorty, just what do you mean? If you think anything underhanded--"

"I mean what I mean," Shorty retorted doggedly, "an' you bet your sweet life I don't mean anything underhanded. Overhand's the only way to do it. You can't throw 'em any other way."

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