

SHORT STORY AMERICA

BALD-FACE

JACK LONDON

"TALKIN' of bear—"

The Klondike King paused meditatively, and the group on the hotel porch hitched their chairs up closer.

"Talkin' of bear," he went on, "now up in the Northern Country there are various kinds. On the Little Pelly, for instance, they come down that thick in the summer to feed on the salmon that you can't get an Indian or white man to go nigher than a day's journey to the place. And up in the Rampart Mountains there's a curious kind of bear called the 'side-hill grizzly.' That's because he's traveled on the side-hills ever since the Flood, and the two legs on the down-hill side are twice as long as the two on the up-hill. And he can out-run a jack rabbit when he gets steam up.

Dangerous? Catch you? Bless you, no. All a man has to do is to circle down the hill and run the other way. You see, that throws mister bear's long legs up the hill and the short ones down. Yes, he's a mighty peculiar creature, but that wasn't what I started in to tell about.

"They've got another kind of bear up on the Yukon, and his legs are all right, too. He's called the bald-face grizzly, and he's jest as big as he is bad. It's only the fool white men that think of

hunting him. Indiana got too much sense. But there's one thing about the bald-face that a man has to learn: he never gives the trail to mortal creature. If you see him comin', and you value your skin, you get out of his path. If you don't, there's bound to be trouble. If the bald-face met Jehovah Himself ! on the trail, he'd not give him an inch. O, he's a selfish beggar, take my word for it. But I had to learn all this. Didn't know anything about bear when I went into the country, exceptin' when I was a youngster I'd seen a heap of cinnamons and that little black kind. And they was nothin' to be scared at.

"Well, after we'd got settled down on our claim, I went up on the hill lookin' for a likely piece of birch to make an ax-handle out of. But it was pretty hard to find the right kind, and I kept a-goin' and kept a-goin' for nigh on two hours. Wasn't in no hurry to make my choice, you see, for I was headin' down to the Forks, where I was goin' to borrow a log-bit from Old Joe Gee. When I started, I'd put a couple of sour-dough biscuits and some sow-belly in my pocket in case I might get hungry. And I'm tellin' you that lunch came in right handy before I was done with it.

"Bime-by I hit upon the likeliest little birch saplin', right in the middle of a clump of jack pine. Jest as I raised my hand-ax I happened to cast my eyes down the hill. There was a big bear comin' up, swingin' along on all fours, right in my direction. It was a bald-face, but little I knew then about such kind.

"Jest watch me scare him; I says to myself, and I stayed out of sight in the trees.

"Well, I waited till he was about a hundred feet off, then out I runs into the open.

"Oof! oof!" I hollered at him, expectin' to see him turn tail like chain lightning.

"Turn tail? He jest throwed up his head for one good look and came a comin'.

"Oof! oof!" I hollered, louder'n ever. But he jest came a comin'.

"Consarn you!" I says to myself, gettin' mad. 'I'll make you jump the trail.'

"So I grabs my hat, and wavin' and hollerin' starts down the trail to meet him. A big sugar pine had gone down in a windfall and lay about breast high. I stops jest behind it, old bald-face comin' all the time. It was jest then that fear came to me. I yelled like a Comanche Indian as he raised up to come over the log, and fired my hat full in his face. Then I lit out.

"Say! I rounded the end of that log and put down the hill at a two-twenty clip, old bald-face reachin' for me at every jump. At the bottom was a broad, open flat, quarter of a mile to timber and full of nigger-heads. I knew if ever I slipped I was a goner, but I hit only the high places till you couldn't a-seen my trail for smoke. And the old devil snortin' along hot after me. Midway across, he reached for me, jest strikin' the heel of my moccasin with his claw. Tell you I was doin' some tall thinkin' jest then. I knew he had the wind of me and I could never make the brush, so I pulled my little lunch out of my pocket and dropped it on the fly.

"Never looked back till I hit the timber, and then he was mouthing the biscuits in a way which wasn't nice to see, considerin' how close he'd been to me. I never slacked up. No, sir! Jest kept hittin' the trail for all there was in me. But jest as I came around a bend, heelin' it right lively I tell you, what'd I see in middle of the trail before me, and comin' my way, but another bald-face!

"Whoof!" he says when he spotted me, and he came a-runnin.'

"Instanter I was about and hittin' the back trail twice as fast as I'd come. The way this one was puffin' after me, I'd clean forgot all about the other bald-face. First thing I knew I seen him mosying along kind of easy, wonderin' most likely what had become of me, and if I tasted as good as my lunch. Say! when he seen me he looked real pleased. And then he came a-jumpin' for

me.

"Whoof!" he says.

"Whoof!" says the one behind me.

"Bang I goes, slap off the trail sideways, a-plungin' and a-clawin through the brush like a wild man. By this time I was clean crazed; thought the whole country was full of bald-faces. Next thing I knows—whop, I comes up against something in a tangle of wild blackberry bushes. Then that something hits me a slap and closes in on me. Another bald-face! And then and there I knew I was gone for sure. But I made up to die game, and of all the rampin' and roarin' and rippin' and tearin' you ever see, that was the worst.

"My God! O my wife!" it says. And I looked and it was a man I was hammering into kingdom come.

"Thought you was a bear," says I.

"He kind of caught his breath and looked at me. Then he says, 'Same here.'

"Seemed as though he'd been chased by a bald-face, too, and had hid in the blackberries. So that's how we mistook each other.

"But by that time the racket on the trail was something terrible, and we didn't wait to explain matters. That afternoon we got Joe Gee and some rifles and came back loaded for bear. Mebbe you won't believe me, but when we got to the spot, there was the two bald-faces lyin' dead. You see, when I jumped out, they came together, and each refused to give trail to the other. So they fought it out.

"Talkin' of bear. As I was sayin' —

