

SHORT STORY AMERICA

THE END OF THE STORY

JACK LONDON

The table was of hand-hewn spruce boards, and the men who played whist had frequent difficulties in drawing home their tricks across the uneven surface. Though they sat in their undershirts, the sweat noduled and oozed on their faces; yet their feet, heavily moccasined and woollen-socked, tingled with the bite of the frost. Such was the difference of temperature in the small cabin between the floor level and a yard or more above it. The sheet-iron Yukon Stove roared red-hot, yet, eight feet away, on the meat-shelf, placed low and beside the door, lay chunks of solidly frozen moose and bacon. The door, a third of the way up from the bottom, was a thick rime. In the chinking between the logs at the back of the bunks the frost showed white and glistening. A window of oiled paper furnished light. The lower portion of the paper, on the inside, was coated an inch deep with the frozen moisture of the men's breath.

They played a momentous rubber of whist, for the pair that lost was to dig a fishing hole through the seven feet of ice and snow that covered the Yukon.

"It's mighty unusual, a cold snap like this in March," remarked the man who shuffled.

"What would you call it, Bob?"

"Oh, fifty-five or sixty below—all of that. What do you make it, Doc?"

Doc turned his head and glanced at the lower part of the door with a measuring eye.

"Not a bit worse than fifty. If anything, slightly under—say forty-nine. See the ice on the door. It's just about the fifty mark, but you'll notice the upper edge is ragged. The time she went seventy the ice climbed a full four inches higher." He picked up his hand, and without ceasing from sorting called "Come in," to a knock on the door.

The man who entered was a big, broad-shouldered Swede, though his nationality was not discernible until he had removed his ear-flapped cap and thawed away the ice which had formed on beard and moustache and which served to mask his face. While engaged in this, the men at the table played out the hand.

"I hear one doctor faller stop this camp," the Swede said inquiringly, looking anxiously from face to face, his own face haggard and drawn from severe and long endured pain.

"I come long way. North fork of the Whyo."

"I'm the doctor. What's the matter?"

In response, the man held up his left hand, the second finger of which was monstrously swollen. At the same time he began a rambling, disjointed history of the coming and growth of his affliction.

"Let me look at it," the doctor broke in impatiently. "Lay it on the table. There, like that."

Tenderly, as if it were a great boil, the man obeyed.

"Humph," the doctor grumbled. "A weeping sinew. And travelled a hundred miles to have it fixed. I'll fix it in a jiffy. You watch me, and next time you can do it yourself."

Without warning, squarely and at right angles, and savagely, the doctor brought the edge of his hand down on the swollen crooked finger. The man yelled with consternation and agony. It was more like the cry of a wild beast, and his face was a wild beast's as he was about to spring on the man who had perpetrated the joke.

"That's all right," the doctor placated sharply and authoritatively. "How do you feel? Better, eh? Of course. Next time you can do it yourself—Go on and deal, Strothers. I think we've got you."

Slow and ox-like, on the face of the Swede dawned relief and comprehension. The pang over, the finger felt better. The pain was gone. He examined the finger curiously, with wondering eyes, slowly crooking it back and forth. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a gold-sack.

"How much?"

The doctor shook his head impatiently. "Nothing. I'm not practising—Your play, Bob."

The Swede moved heavily on his feet, re-examined the finger, then turned an admiring gaze on the doctor.

"You are good man. What your name?"

"Linday, Doctor Linday," Strothers answered, as if solicitous to save his opponent from

further irritation.

"The day's half done," Linday said to the Swede, at the end of the hand, while he shuffled. "Better rest over to-night. It's too cold for travelling. There's a spare bunk."

He was a slender brunette of a man, lean-cheeked, thin-lipped, and strong. The smooth-shaven face was a healthy sallow. All his movements were quick and precise. He did not fumble his cards. The eyes were black, direct, and piercing, with the trick of seeming to look beneath the surfaces of things. His hands, slender, fine and nervous, appeared made for delicate work, and to the most casual eye they conveyed an impression of strength.

"Our game," he announced, drawing in the last trick. "Now for the rub and who digs the fishing hole."

A knock at the door brought a quick exclamation from him.

"Seems we just can't finish this rubber," he complained, as the door opened. "What's the matter with *you*?"—this last to the stranger who entered.

The newcomer vainly strove to move his icebound jaws and jowls. That he had been on trail for long hours and days was patent. The skin across the cheekbones was black with repeated frost-bite. From nose to chin was a mass of solid ice perforated by the hole through which he breathed. Through this he had also spat tobacco juice, which had frozen, as it trickled, into an amber-coloured icicle, pointed like a Van Dyke beard.

He shook his head dumbly, grinned with his eyes, and drew near to the stove to thaw his mouth to speech. He assisted the process with his fingers, clawing off fragments of melting ice which rattled and sizzled on the stove.

"Nothing the matter with me," he finally announced. "But if they's a doctor in the outfit he's sure needed. They's a man up the Little Peco that's had a ruction with a panther, an' the way he's clawed is something scand'lous."

"How far up?" Doctor Linday demanded.

"A matter of a hundred miles."

"How long since?"

"I've ben three days comin' down."

"Bad?"

"Shoulder dislocated. Some ribs broke for sure. Right arm broke. An' clawed clean to the bone most all over but the face. We sewed up two or three bad places temporary, and tied arteries with twine."

"That settles it," Linday sneered. "Where were they?"

"Stomach."

"He's a sight by now."

"Not on your life. Washed clean with bug-killin' dope before we stitched. Only temporary anyway. Had nothin' but linen thread, but washed that, too."

"He's as good as dead," was Linday's judgment, as he angrily fingered the cards.

"Nope. That man ain't goin' to die. He knows I've come for a doctor, an' he'll make out to live until you get there. He won't let himself die. I know him."

"Christian Science and gangrene, eh?" came the sneer. "Well, I'm not practising. Nor can I see myself travelling a hundred miles at fifty below for a dead man."

"I can see you, an' for a man a long ways from dead."

Linday shook his head. "Sorry you had your trip for nothing. Better stop over for the night."

"Nope. We'll be pullin' out in ten minutes."

"What makes you so cocksure?" Linday demanded testily.

Then it was that Tom Daw made the speech of his life.

"Because he's just goin' on livin' till you get there, if it takes you a week to make up your mind. Besides, his wife's with him, not sheddin' a tear, or nothin', an' she's helpin' him live till you come. They think a almighty heap of each other, an' she's got a will like hisn. If he weakened, she'd just put her immortal soul into hisn an' make him live. Though he ain't weakenin' none, you can stack on that. I'll stack on it. I'll lay you three to one, in ounces, he's alive when you get there. I got a team of dawgs down the bank. You ought to allow to start in ten minutes, an' we ought to make it back in less'n three days because the trail's broke. I'm goin' down to the dawgs now, an' I'll look for you in ten minutes."

Tom Daw pulled down his earflaps, drew on his mittens, and passed out.

"Damn him!" Linday cried, glaring vindictively at the closed door.