

SHORT STORY AMERICA

THE MEAT

JACK LONDON

Chapter I

Half the time the wind blew a gale, and Smoke Bellew staggered against it along the beach. In the gray of dawn a dozen boats were being loaded with the precious outfits packed across Chilcoot. They were clumsy, home-made boats, put together by men who were not boat-builders, out of planks they had sawed by hand from green spruce trees. One boat, already loaded, was just starting, and Kit paused to watch.

The wind, which was fair down the lake, here blew in squarely on the beach, kicking up a nasty sea in the shallows. The men of the departing boat waded in high rubber boots as they shoved it out toward deeper water. Twice they did this. Clambering aboard and failing to row clear, the boat was swept back and grounded. Kit noticed that the spray on the sides of the boat quickly turned to ice. The third attempt was a partial success. The last two men to climb in were wet to their waists, but the boat was afloat. They struggled awkwardly at the heavy oars,

and slowly worked off shore. Then they hoisted a sail made of blankets, had it carried away in a gust, and were swept a third time back on the freezing beach.

Kit grinned to himself and went on. This was what he must expect to encounter, for he, too, in his new role of gentleman's man, was to start from the beach in a similar boat that very day.

Everywhere men were at work, and at work desperately, for the closing down of winter was so imminent that it was a gamble whether or not they would get across the great chain of lakes before the freeze-up. Yet, when Kit arrived at the tent of Messrs Sprague and Stine, he did not find them stirring.

By a fire, under the shelter of a tarpaulin, squatted a short, thick man smoking a brown-paper cigarette.

"Hello," he said. "Are you Mister Sprague's new man?"

As Kit nodded, he thought he had noted a shade of emphasis on the mister and the man, and he was sure of a hint of a twinkle in the corner of the eye.

"Well, I'm Doc Stine's man," the other went on. "I'm five feet two inches long, and my name's Shorty, Jack Short for short, and sometimes known as Johnny-on-the-Spot."

Kit put out his hand and shook.

"Were you raised on bear-meat?" he queried.

"Sure," was the answer; "though my first feedin' was buffalo-milk as near as I can

remember. Sit down an' have some grub. The bosses ain't turned out yet."

And despite the one breakfast, Kit sat down under the tarpaulin and ate a second breakfast thrice as hearty. The heavy, purging toil of weeks had given him the stomach and appetite of a wolf. He could eat anything, in any quantity, and be unaware that he possessed a digestion. Shorty he found voluble and pessimistic, and from him he received surprising tips concerning their bosses, and ominous forecasts of the expedition. Thomas Stanley Sprague was a budding mining engineer and the son of a millionaire. Doctor Adolph Stine was also the son of a wealthy father. And, through their fathers, both had been backed by an investing syndicate in the Klondike adventure.

"Oh, they're sure made of money," Shorty expounded. "When they hit the beach at Dyea, freight was seventy cents, but no Indians. There was a party from Eastern Oregon, real miners, that'd managed to get a team of Indians together at seventy cents. Indians had the straps on the outfit, three thousand pounds of it, when along comes Sprague and Stine. They offered eighty cents and ninety, and at a dollar a pound the Indians jumped the contract and took off their straps. Sprague and Stine came through, though it cost them three thousand, and the Oregon bunch is still on the beach. They won't get through till next year.

"Oh, they are real hummers, your boss and mine, when it comes to sheddin' the mazuma an' never mindin' other folks' feelin's. What did they do when they hit Linderman? The carpenters was just putting in the last licks on a boat they'd contracted to a 'Frisco bunch for six hundred. Sprague and Stine slipped 'em an even thousand, and they jumped their contract. It's a good-lookin' boat, but it's jiggered the other bunch. They've got their outfit right here, but no boat. And

they're stuck for next year.

"Have another cup of coffee, and take it from me that I wouldn't travel with no such outfit if I didn't want to get to Klondike so blamed bad. They ain't hearted right. They'd take the crape off the door of a house in mourning if they needed it in their business. Did you sign a contract?"

Kit shook his head.

"Then I'm sorry for you, pardner. They ain't no grub in the country, and they'll drop you cold as soon as they hit Dawson. Men are going to starve there this winter."

"They agreed--" Kit began.

"Verbal," Shorty snapped him short. "It's your say so against theirs, that's all. Well, anyway--what's your name, pardner?"

"Call me Smoke," said Kit.

"Well, Smoke, you'll have a run for your verbal contract just the same. This is a plain sample of what to expect. They can sure shed mazuma, but they can't work, or turn out of bed in the morning. We should have been loaded and started an hour ago. It's you an' me for the big work. Pretty soon you'll hear 'em shoutin' for their coffee--in bed, mind you, and they grown men. What d'ye know about boatin' on the water? I'm a cowman and a prospector, but I'm sure tender-footed on water, an' they don't know punkins. What d'ye know?"

"Search me," Kit answered, snuggling in closer under the tarpaulin as the snow

whirled before a fiercer gust. "I haven't been on a small boat since a boy. But I guess we can learn."

A corner of the tarpaulin tore loose, and Shorty received a jet of driven snow down the back of his neck.

"Oh, we can learn all right," he muttered wrathfully. "Sure we can. A child can learn. But it's dollars to doughnuts we don't even get started to-day."

It was eight o'clock when the call for coffee came from the tent, and nearly nine before the two employers emerged.

"Hello," said Sprague, a rosy-cheeked, well-fed young man of twenty-five. "Time we made a start, Shorty. You and--" Here he glanced interrogatively at Kit. "I didn't quite catch your name last evening."

"Smoke."

"Well, Shorty, you and Mr Smoke had better begin loading the boat."

"Plain Smoke--cut out the Mister," Kit suggested.

Sprague nodded curtly and strolled away among the tents, to be followed by Doctor Stine, a slender, pallid young man.

Shorty looked significantly at his companion.

"Over a ton and a half of outfit, and they won't lend a hand. You'll see."

"I guess it's because we're paid to do the work," Kit answered cheerfully, "and we

might as well buck in."

To move three thousand pounds on the shoulders a hundred yards was no slight task, and to do it in half a gale, slushing through the snow in heavy rubber boots, was exhausting. In addition, there was the taking down of the tent and the packing of small camp equipage. Then came the loading. As the boat settled, it had to be shoved farther and farther out, increasing the distance they had to wade. By two o'clock it had all been accomplished, and Kit, despite his two breakfasts, was weak with the faintness of hunger. His knees were shaking under him. Shorty, in similar predicament, foraged through the pots and pans, and drew forth a big pot of cold boiled beans in which were imbedded large chunks of bacon. There was only one spoon, a long-handled one, and they dipped, turn and turn about, into the pot. Kit was filled with an immense certitude that in all his life he had never tasted anything so good.

"Lord, man," he mumbled between chews, "I never knew what appetite was till I hit the trail."

Sprague and Stine arrived in the midst of this pleasant occupation.

"What's the delay?" Sprague complained. "Aren't we ever going to get started?"

Shorty dipped in turn, and passed the spoon to Kit. Nor did either speak till the pot was empty and the bottom scraped.

"Of course we ain't ben doin' nothing," Shorty said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "We ain't ben doin' nothing at all. And of course you ain't had nothing to eat. It was sure careless of me."

"Yes, yes," Stine said quickly. "We ate at one of the tents--friends of ours."

"Thought so," Shorty grunted.

"But now that you're finished, let us get started," Sprague urged.

"There's the boat," said Shorty. "She's sure loaded. Now, just how might you be goin' about to get started?"

"By climbing aboard and shoving off. Come on."

They waded out, and the employers got on board, while Kit and Shorty shoved clear. When the waves lapped the tops of their boots they clambered in. The other two men were not prepared with the oars, and the boat swept back and grounded. Half a dozen times, with a great expenditure of energy, this was repeated.

Shorty sat down disconsolately on the gunwale, took a chew of tobacco, and questioned the universe, while Kit baled the boat and the other two exchanged unkind remarks.

"If you'll take my orders, I'll get her off," Sprague finally said.

The attempt was well intended, but before he could clamber on board he was wet to the waist.

"We've got to camp and build a fire," he said, as the boat grounded again. "I'm freezing."

"Don't be afraid of a wetting," Stine sneered. "Other men have gone off to-day

wetter than you. Now I'm going to take her out."

This time it was he who got the wetting, and who announced with chattering teeth the need of a fire.

"A little splash like that," Sprague chattered spitefully. "We'll go on."

"Shorty, dig out my clothes-bag and make a fire," the other commanded.

"You'll do nothing of the sort," Sprague cried.

Shorty looked from one to the other, expectorated, but did not move.

"He's working for me, and I guess he obeys my orders," Stine retorted. "Shorty, take that bag ashore."

Shorty obeyed, and Sprague shivered in the boat. Kit, having received no orders, remained inactive, glad of the rest.

"A boat divided against itself won't float," he soliloquized.

"What's that?" Sprague snarled at him.

"Talking to myself--habit of mine," he answered.

His employer favoured him with a hard look, and sulked several minutes longer. Then he surrendered.

"Get out my bag, Smoke," he ordered, "and lend a hand with that fire. We won't get off till the morning now."