



## To the Man on Trail

“G O AHEAD AND PUT IT ALL IN.”

“But I say, Kid, won’t that make the drink too strong? That is a lot of liquor!”

“Put it in. Who is making this drink?” And Malemute Kid smiled kindly through the clouds of steam. “When you have been in the country as long as I have, you will learn that the holidays come only once a year. And without some strong drinks they are like digging for gold and hitting rock.”

“And that is the truth,” approved Big Jim Belden, who had traveled from his mining camp to observe the holidays in Malemute Kid’s cabin. “Have you forgotten the stuff we gave the Tananas to drink?”

“I guess I did,” replied Malemute Kid. “Boys, that was something

to see. The whole tribe was ready to fight because of the drinks we gave them.”

“That was before your time,” Malemute Kid continued, as he turned toward Stanley Prince, a young mining engineer who had been in the country two years. “There were no white women in the country then and Mason wanted to get married. Ruth’s father was chief of the Tananas and he objected. The rest of the tribe did, too. But we gave them some really strong drinks! And you should have seen them try to catch us when we ran away with Ruth.”

“What happened to the girl?” asked Louis Savoy, the tall French Canadian, becoming interested.

Malemute Kid, who was a good storyteller, proceeded with the rest of the tale. “We reached the Yukon at the right moment. The tribe was only a quarter of an hour behind us. But that saved us. When they arrived, the ice on the river had started to break up and move and they could not cross. When they finally got into the town, everyone was ready for them. Ask Father Roubeau here. He married the couple.”

The missionary took the pipe he was smoking from his lips and smiled to see that the whole company approved the story.

Then, as the first cups of the drink were passed around, Bettles leaped to his feet and began to sing a well-known song.

Malemute Kid’s drink did its work; the men of the camps and trails felt its warmth. Soon jokes and songs and tales of past adventure were told around the table. They were strangers from a dozen lands, but they drank to the good health and fortune of each and all.

Then Malemute Kid arose, cup in hand, and glanced at the window where the frost stood three inches thick. “A health to the man on trail this night; may his food be enough; may his dogs keep their legs; may his matches never miss fire.”

Suddenly they heard the familiar music of the dog whip and the sound of a sled as it stopped in front of the cabin. Conversation ceased while they waited to see what would happen next.

“It is someone who knows life on the trail. Hear how he cares for his dogs first and then himself,” whispered Malemute Kid to Prince.

They listened to the harks of pain which told their practiced ears that the stranger was beating back their dogs while he fed his own.

Then came the expected knock, sharp and confident. The stranger entered. Blinded for a moment by the light, he hesitated at the door. He made a handsome picture in his warm clothing of wool and fur. He stood six feet two or three inches tall; his face was pink from the cold, and his hair was frosted with ice. On a belt outside his jacket he wore two guns and a hunting knife. In addition, he carried a dog whip and another gun. As he came forward into the room, they could see that he was very tired.

There was a moment when no one spoke. Then his greeting, "What cheer, my lads?", put them at ease. In the next instant, Malemute Kid and he had grasped hands. Although the two men had never met, each had heard of the other and recognized the other at once. The stranger was introduced all around and a cup of liquor was forced upon him before he could explain his presence.

"How long since that sled with three men and eight dogs passed?" he asked.

"About two days ahead. Are you trying to catch them?"

"Yes. They have my team. They stole them from under my nose. But I have gained two days already. I will find them soon."

"Do you think they will give you a fight?" asked Belden, to keep the conversation going. Malemute Kid already had the coffee pot on the stove and was busy cooking some meat.

Answering the question, the stranger pointed to his guns.

"When did you leave Dawson?"

"Twelve o'clock."

"Last night?" Belden asked.

"Today."

A murmur of surprise spread around the circle. And it was with good reason. It was then exactly midnight, and traveling over 75 miles of rough river trail was an unusual accomplishment in 12 hours.

But soon they began talking of other things. And the young stranger sat down to eat. As he did so, Malemute Kid studied his face. He

was not long in deciding that it was a fair and honest face and that he liked it. It was still young, but the lines on it had been firmly traced by much work. His blue eyes were calm when resting, but they gave the promise of a hard steel-like shine when called into action. The lower part of his face had a firmness that showed an unyielding character. The qualities of the lion could be seen there. But there was no lack of a kind of softness which indicated that emotions were part of his nature.

“So that is how my wife and I got married,” said Belden, concluding the exciting tale of his wedding.

“Are there any children waiting for you at home?” asked the stranger, joining the talk again.

“No. My wife died before any came. That is why I am here.” Belden tried to light his pipe, not noticing that he had already done so. He was thinking of the past. Then he turned to the stranger and his face brightened somewhat as he said, “How about you? Are you a married man?”

As a reply, the stranger opened his **watch** and handed it to Belden. He examined the inside of the watch case carefully and admired its contents quietly. Then he handed it to Louis Savoy. Exclaiming softly, he showed it to Prince, too. As he did so, they noticed that his hands trembled and his eyes took on a strange softness. And so it went from hand to hand—the picture of a woman with a baby at the breast. Those who had not yet seen the watch case were most curious. Those who had seen it became silent and thoughtful. They could face famine or quick death. But the picture of a woman and child made women and children of them all.

“I have never seen the child. He is a boy and two years old,” said the stranger as his treasure was returned to him. For a moment he gazed upon it. Then he closed the case and turned away, but not quickly enough to hide the tears.

Malemute Kid led him to a bed and told him to get some sleep.

“Call me at four o’clock in the morning. Don’t fail me,” were his last words. A moment later he was breathing heavily in sleep.

“My God! He is a brave one,” Prince remarked. “Three hours of sleep after 75 miles with the dogs. And then he plans to return to the

trail again. Who is he, Kid?"

"Jack Westondale. He has been here almost three years, with nothing to reward him except being known as a good worker. He has had much bad luck, too. I never knew him, but Sitka Charley told me about him."

"It seems unfair that a man with a sweet young wife like his should be wasting his years in this wild place."

"His problem is that he won't accept defeat. He has had a grub-stake twice, but lost it both times."

Here the talk was interrupted by Bettles. The effect of the stranger had begun to wear away and soon the merriment had started again. Malemute Kid alone seemed unable to forget the stranger and cast many an anxious look at his watch. Once he put on his mittens and cap and, leaving the cabin, went out to his cache.

Nor could he wait until the hour that had been set by the stranger. He was a quarter of an hour early in waking his guest. The young fellow had become quite stiff because of his long hours on the trail, and it was necessary to rub his body and his legs to bring him to his feet. He walked painfully out of the cabin to find his dogs already harnessed and everything ready for the start. The company wished him good luck and a short hunt for his enemies, while Father Roubeau hurriedly blessed him. Then everyone ran quickly to the cabin, because it is not good to face such cold with naked ears and hands. They became frozen within moments!

Malemute Kid went with him to the main trail, and there, grasping his hand firmly, gave him advice.

"You will find 100 pounds of fish eggs on the sled," he said. "The dogs will go as far on that as with 150 pounds of fish. You can't get dog food at Pelly, as you probably expected." The stranger looked surprised, but he did not interrupt. "You can't get any food for dog or man until you come to the town of Five Fingers, and that is 200 miles away. Be careful to avoid open water on the Thirty Mile River."

"How did you know the truth about me? Surely the news can't have traveled ahead of me already?"

"I don't know it. And what is more, I don't want to know it. But you never owned that team you are following. Sitka Charley sold it to those people last spring. But he told me you were a good man once, and I believe him. I have seen your face; I like it. And I have seen— Oh, hell! Start moving, for the sake of that wife of yours, will you?" Here the Kid took off his mittens and pulled out his money.

"No. I don't need it," and the tears began to freeze on his face as he grasped Malemute Kid's hand.

"Then don't spare the dogs. Cut them out of the harnesses as fast as they drop. Buy dogs, and think they are cheap at ten dollars a pound. You can get them at Five Fingers, Little Salmon, and Hootalinqua. And don't get wet feet," was his parting advice. "Keep traveling until it gets too cold. Then build a fire and change your socks."

No more than a quarter of an hour had passed when the sound of sled bells announced new arrivals. The door opened and a policeman of the Northwest Territory entered. He was followed by two dog drivers. Like Westondale, they carried many guns and were very tired. The drivers had been born to the trail and endured it easily; but the young policeman could go no farther.

"When did Westondale leave?" he asked. "Did he stop here?" The question was unnecessary, because the tracks in the snow told their own tale too well.

Malemute Kid had given Belden a knowing look. Belden began to realize what the true situation was and answered accordingly. "Oh, he left a long time ago."

"Come, my man. Tell me," the policeman ordered.

"You seem to want him very badly. Did he have some trouble down in Dawson?"

"He stole 40 thousand dollars from Harry McFarland's **gambling** house. Who is to stop him from leaving the country if we don't catch him? When did he leave?"

Every eye hid its excitement, because Malemute Kid had shown them how to act. The young officer met with unknowing faces on every side.

Walking toward Prince, he asked him the same question. Prince gave him an indefinite reply concerning the condition of the trail.

Then the policeman saw Father Roubeau, who could not lie. "A quarter of an hour ago," the missionary answered. "But he had four hours of rest for himself and his dogs."

"A quarter of an hour! And he is fresh! My God!" The unhappy fellow sat down, half-fainting because of his own tired state. He murmured that he had come from Dawson in ten hours and the dogs could travel no farther.

Malemute Kid forced him to drink a cup of the liquor. Then the policeman turned toward the door, ordering the dog drivers to follow. But the drivers did not want to leave the warmth and the promise of rest. They objected strongly. The Kid could understand the strange language they spoke and followed their words anxiously.

They insisted that the dogs were too tired and that it would be necessary to shoot two of them before the first mile had been traveled. They said it would be better for everyone to rest.

"Would you lend me five dogs?" the policeman asked, speaking to Malemute Kid.

But the Kid shook his head, meaning "no."

"I will sign a note of payment for you in the name of the chief of police. I have the authority to do so."

Again the Kid refused silently.

"Then I must take your dogs in the name of the law."

Smiling, the Kid glanced at his stock of guns. The policeman, realizing his lack of power, turned toward the door. The dog drivers still objected and he spoke to them fiercely, calling them women and dogs. The older driver rose to his feet. With a curse, he promised that he would travel fast. He would travel so fast, he added, that the policeman's legs would break. Then he threatened that he would happily plant him in the snow.

The young policeman walked steadily to the door, displaying a freshness that he did not possess. But they all knew and admired his proud effort. Covered with frost, the dogs were sleeping in the snow. It

was almost impossible to force them to stand. The tired animals cried as they were whipped, because the dog drivers were angry and cruel. Not until Babette, the leader dog, was cut from the harnesses could they load the sled and start traveling.

“He lied!” “Worse than an Indian!” “He is no good!”

It was easy to see that the men were angry. First, because they had been fooled by Westondale. And, second, they knew the principles by which men lived in the Northland; and honesty was the chief of these.

“And to think that we helped him, after knowing what he had done.” All eyes turned toward Malemute Kid, who rose from the corner where he had been comforting Babette. He silently emptied the bowl for a final drink.

“It is a cold night, boys—a very cold night,” was what he said as he began to defend himself. “You have all traveled the trail and know how difficult it is. Don’t judge a man without knowing his whole story. You have only heard one side. A better man than Jack Westondale never ate from the same pot with you and me. Last year he gave his whole earnings, 40 thousand dollars, to Joe Castrell to buy a share in a mining company for him. Today he would be a rich man. But while he stayed behind at Circle City to help his sick companion, what did Castrell do? He went into McFarland’s and lost all the money by gambling. They found him dead in the snow the next day. And Jack had made his plans to leave this winter to join his wife and the boy he had never seen. You will notice that he took exactly what Castrell lost—40 thousand dollars. He will be out of the country soon. And what are you going to do about it?”

The Kid glanced around the circle of his judges. He noted the softening of their faces, then raised his cup high. “So a health to the man on trail this night; may his food be enough; may his dogs keep their legs; may his matches never miss fire. God help him; good fortune go with him; and—”

“Bad luck follow the Northwest Police!” cried Bettles, to the crash of the empty cups.