

TOO MUCH GOLD

This being a story--and a truer one than it may appear--of a mining country, it is quite to be expected that it will be a hard-luck story. But that depends on the point of view. Hard luck is a mild way of terming it so far as Kink Mitchell and Hootchinoo Bill are concerned; and that they have a decided opinion on the subject is a matter of common knowledge in the Yukon country.

It was in the fall of 1896 that the two partners came down to the east bank of the Yukon, and drew a Peterborough canoe from a moss-covered cache. They were not particularly pleasant-looking objects. A summer's prospecting, filled to repletion with hardship and rather empty of grub, had left their clothes in tatters and themselves worn and cadaverous. A nimbus of mosquitoes buzzed about each man's head. Their faces were coated with blue clay. Each carried a lump of this damp clay, and, whenever it dried and fell from their faces, more was daubed on in its place. There was a querulous plaint in their voices, an irritability of movement and gesture, that told of broken sleep and a losing struggle with the little winged pests.

"Them skeeters'll be the death of me yet," Kink Mitchell whimpered, as the canoe felt the current on her nose, and leaped out from the bank.

"Cheer up, cheer up. We're about done," Hootchinoo Bill answered, with

an attempted heartiness in his funereal tones that was ghastly. "We'll be in Forty Mile in forty minutes, and then--cursed little devil!"

One hand left his paddle and landed on the back of his neck with a sharp slap. He put a fresh daub of clay on the injured part, swearing sulphurously the while. Kink Mitchell was not in the least amused. He merely improved the opportunity by putting a thicker coating of clay on his own neck.

They crossed the Yukon to its west bank, shot down-stream with easy stroke, and at the end of forty minutes swung in close to the left around the tail of an island. Forty Mile spread itself suddenly before them. Both men straightened their backs and gazed at the sight. They gazed long and carefully, drifting with the current, in their faces an expression of mingled surprise and consternation slowly gathering. Not a thread of smoke was rising from the hundreds of log-cabins. There was no sound of axes biting sharply into wood, of hammering and sawing. Neither dogs nor men loitered before the big store. No steamboats lay at the bank, no canoes, nor scows, nor poling-boats. The river was as bare of craft as the town was of life.

"Kind of looks like Gabriel's tooted his little horn, and you an' me has turned up missing," remarked Hootchinoo Bill.

His remark was casual, as though there was nothing unusual about the occurrence. Kink Mitchell's reply was just as casual as though he, too,

were unaware of any strange perturbation of spirit.

"Looks as they was all Baptists, then, and took the boats to go by water," was his contribution.

"My ol' dad was a Baptist," Hootchinoo Bill supplemented. "An' he always did hold it was forty thousand miles nearer that way."

This was the end of their levity. They ran the canoe in and climbed the high earth bank. A feeling of awe descended upon them as they walked the deserted streets. The sunlight streamed placidly over the town. A gentle wind tapped the halyards against the flagpole before the closed doors of the Caledonia Dance Hall. Mosquitoes buzzed, robins sang, and moose birds tripped hungrily among the cabins; but there was no human life nor sign of human life.

"I'm just dyin' for a drink," Hootchinoo Bill said and unconsciously his voice sank to a hoarse whisper.

His partner nodded his head, loth to hear his own voice break the stillness. They trudged on in uneasy silence till surprised by an open door. Above this door, and stretching the width of the building, a rude sign announced the same as the "Monte Carlo." But beside the door, hat over eyes, chair tilted back, a man sat sunning himself. He was an old man. Beard and hair were long and white and patriarchal.

"If it ain't ol' Jim Cummings, turned up like us, too late for Resurrection!" said Kink Mitchell.

"Most like he didn't hear Gabriel tootin'," was Hootchينو Bill's suggestion.

"Hello, Jim! Wake up!" he shouted.

The old man unlimbered lamely, blinking his eyes and murmuring automatically: "What'll ye have, gents? What'll ye have?"

They followed him inside and ranged up against the long bar where of yore a half-dozen nimble bar-keepers found little time to loaf. The great room, ordinarily aroar with life, was still and gloomy as a tomb. There was no rattling of chips, no whirring of ivory balls. Roulette and faro tables were like gravestones under their canvas covers. No women's voices drifted merrily from the dance-room behind. Ol' Jim Cummings wiped a glass with palsied hands, and Kink Mitchell scrawled his initials on the dust-covered bar.

"Where's the girls?" Hootchينو Bill shouted, with affected geniality.

"Gone," was the ancient bar-keeper's reply, in a voice thin and aged as himself, and as unsteady as his hand.

"Where's Bidwell and Barlow?"

"Gone."

"And Sweetwater Charley?"

"Gone."

"And his sister?"

"Gone too."

"Your daughter Sally, then, and her little kid?"

"Gone, all gone." The old man shook his head sadly, rummaging in an absent way among the dusty bottles.

"Great Sardanapolis! Where?" Kink Mitchell exploded, unable longer to restrain himself. "You don't say you've had the plague?"

"Why, ain't you heerd?" The old man chuckled quietly. "They-all's gone to Dawson."

"What-like is that?" Bill demanded. "A creek? or a bar? or a place?"

"Ain't never heered of Dawson, eh?" The old man chuckled exasperatingly.

"Why, Dawson's a town, a city, bigger'n Forty Mile. Yes, sir, bigger'n

Forty Mile."

"I've ben in this land seven year," Bill announced emphatically, "an' I make free to say I never heard tell of the burg before. Hold on! Let's have some more of that whisky. Your information's flabbergasted me, that it has. Now just whereabouts is this Dawson-place you was a-mentionin'?"

"On the big flat jest below the mouth of Klondike," ol' Jim answered.

"But where has you-all ben this summer?"

"Never you mind where we-all's ben," was Kink Mitchell's testy reply. "We-all's ben where the skeeters is that thick you've got to throw a stick into the air so as to see the sun and tell the time of day. Ain't I right, Bill?"

"Right you are," said Bill. "But speakin' of this Dawson-place how like did it happen to be, Jim?"

"Ounce to the pan on a creek called Bonanza, an' they ain't got to bedrock yet."

"Who struck it?"

"Carmack."

At mention of the discoverer's name the partners stared at each other

disgustedly. Then they winked with great solemnity.

"Siwash George," sniffed Hootchinoo Bill.

"That squaw-man," sneered Kink Mitchell.

"I wouldn't put on my moccasins to stampede after anything he'd ever find," said Bill.

"Same here," announced his partner. "A cuss that's too plumb lazy to fish his own salmon. That's why he took up with the Indians. S'pose that black brother-in-law of his,--lemme see, Skookum Jim, eh?--s'pose he's in on it?"

The old bar-keeper nodded. "Sure, an' what's more, all Forty Mile, exceptin' me an' a few cripples."

"And drunks," added Kink Mitchell.

"No-sir-ee!" the old man shouted emphatically.

"I bet you the drinks Honkins ain't in on it!" Hootchinoo Bill cried with certitude.

Ol' Jim's face lighted up. "I takes you, Bill, an' you loses."

"However did that ol' soak budge out of Forty Mile?" Mitchell demanded.

"The ties him down an' throws him in the bottom of a polin'-boat," ol' Jim explained. "Come right in here, they did, an' takes him out of that there chair there in the corner, an' three more drunks they finds under the pianny. I tell you--alls the whole camp hits up the Yukon for Dawson jes' like Sam Scratch was after them,--wimmen, children, babes in arms, the whole shebang. Bidwell comes to me an' sez, sez he, 'Jim, I wants you to keep tab on the Monte Carlo. I'm goin'.'

"'Where's Barlow?' sez I. 'Gone,' sez he, 'an' I'm a-followin' with a load of whisky.' An' with that, never waitin' for me to decline, he makes a run for his boat an' away he goes, polin' up river like mad. So here I be, an' these is the first drinks I've passed out in three days."

The partners looked at each other.

"Gosh darn my bottoms!" said Hootchinoo Bill. "Seems likes you and me, Kink, is the kind of folks always caught out with forks when it rains soup."

"Wouldn't it take the saleratus out your dough, now?" said Kink Mitchell.

"A stampede of tin-horns, drunks, an' loafers."

"An' squaw-men," added Bill. "Not a genooine miner in the whole caboodle."

"Genooiner miners like you an' me, Kink," he went on academically, "is all out an' sweatin' hard over Birch Creek way. Not a genooiner miner in this whole crazy Dawson outfit, and I say right here, not a step do I budge for any Carmack strike. I've got to see the colour of the dust first."

"Same here," Mitchell agreed. "Let's have another drink."

Having wet this resolution, they beached the canoe, transferred its contents to their cabin, and cooked dinner. But as the afternoon wore along they grew restive. They were men used to the silence of the great wilderness, but this gravelike silence of a town worried them. They caught themselves listening for familiar sounds--"waitin' for something to make a noise which ain't goin' to make a noise," as Bill put it. They strolled through the deserted streets to the Monte Carlo for more drinks, and wandered along the river bank to the steamer landing, where only water gurgled as the eddy filled and emptied, and an occasional salmon leapt flashing into the sun.

They sat down in the shade in front of the store and talked with the consumptive storekeeper, whose liability to hemorrhage accounted for his presence. Bill and Kink told him how they intended loafing in their cabin and resting up after the hard summer's work. They told him, with a certain insistence, that was half appeal for belief, half challenge for contradiction, how much they were going to enjoy their idleness. But the storekeeper was uninterested. He switched the conversation back to the

strike on Klondike, and they could not keep him away from it. He could think of nothing else, talk of nothing else, till Hootchinoo Bill rose up in anger and disgust.

"Gosh darn Dawson, say I!" he cried.

"Same here," said Kink Mitchell, with a brightening face. "One'd think something was doin' up there, 'stead of bein' a mere stampede of greenhorns an' tinhorns."

But a boat came into view from down-stream. It was long and slim. It hugged the bank closely, and its three occupants, standing upright, propelled it against the stiff current by means of long poles.

"Circle City outfit," said the storekeeper. "I was lookin' for 'em along by afternoon. Forty Mile had the start of them by a hundred and seventy miles. But gee! they ain't losin' any time!"

"We'll just sit here quiet-like and watch 'em string by," Bill said complacently.

As he spoke, another boat appeared in sight, followed after a brief interval by two others. By this time the first boat was abreast of the men on the bank. Its occupants did not cease poling while greetings were exchanged, and, though its progress was slow, a half-hour saw it out of sight up river.

Still they came from below, boat after boat, in endless procession. The uneasiness of Bill and Kink increased. They stole speculative, tentative glances at each other, and when their eyes met looked away in embarrassment. Finally, however, their eyes met and neither looked away.

Kink opened his mouth to speak, but words failed him and his mouth remained open while he continued to gaze at his partner.

"Just what I was thinken', Kink," said Bill.

They grinned sheepishly at each other, and by tacit consent started to walk away. Their pace quickened, and by the time they arrived at their cabin they were on the run.

"Can't lose no time with all that multitude a-rushin' by," Kink spluttered, as he jabbed the sour-dough can into the beanpot with one hand and with the other gathered in the frying-pan and coffee-pot.

"Should say not," gasped Bill, his head and shoulders buried in a clothes-sack wherein were stored winter socks and underwear. "I say, Kink, don't forget the saleratus on the corner shelf back of the stove."

Half-an-hour later they were launching the canoe and loading up, while the storekeeper made jocular remarks about poor, weak mortals and the contagiousness of "stampedin' fever." But when Bill and Kink thrust

their long poles to bottom and started the canoe against the current, he called after them:-

"Well, so-long and good luck! And don't forget to blaze a stake or two for me!"

They nodded their heads vigorously and felt sorry for the poor wretch who remained perforce behind.

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Kink and Bill were sweating hard. According to the revised Northland Scripture, the stampede is to the swift, the blazing of stakes to the strong, and the Crown in royalties, gathers to itself the fulness thereof. Kink and Bill were both swift and strong. They took the soggy trail at a long, swinging gait that broke the hearts of a couple of tender-feet who tried to keep up with them. Behind, strung out between them and Dawson (where the boats were discarded and land travel began), was the vanguard of the Circle City outfit. In the race from Forty Mile the partners had passed every boat, winning from the leading boat by a length in the Dawson eddy, and leaving its occupants sadly behind the moment their feet struck the trail.

"Huh! couldn't see us for smoke," Hootchinoo Bill chuckled, flirting the stinging sweat from his brow and glancing swiftly back along the way they had come.

Three men emerged from where the trail broke through the trees. Two followed close at their heels, and then a man and a woman shot into view.

"Come on, you Kink! Hit her up! Hit her up!"

Bill quickened his pace. Mitchell glanced back in more leisurely fashion.

"I declare if they ain't lopin'!"

"And here's one that's loped himself out," said Bill, pointing to the side of the trail.

A man was lying on his back panting in the culminating stages of violent exhaustion. His face was ghastly, his eyes bloodshot and glazed, for all the world like a dying man.

"Chechaquo!" Kink Mitchell grunted, and it was the grunt of the old "sour dough" for the green-horn, for the man who outfitted with "self-risin'" flour and used baking-powder in his biscuits.

The partners, true to the old-timer custom, had intended to stake downstream from the strike, but when they saw claim 81 BELOW blazed on a tree,--which meant fully eight miles below Discovery,--they changed their minds. The eight miles were covered in less than two hours. It was a

killing pace, over so rough trail, and they passed scores of exhausted men that had fallen by the wayside.

At Discovery little was to be learned of the upper creek. Cormack's Indian brother-in-law, Skookum Jim, had a hazy notion that the creek was staked as high as the 30's; but when Kink and Bill looked at the corner-stakes of 79 ABOVE, they threw their stampeding packs off their backs and sat down to smoke. All their efforts had been vain. Bonanza was staked from mouth to source,--"out of sight and across the next divide." Bill complained that night as they fried their bacon and boiled their coffee over Cormack's fire at Discovery.

"Try that pup," Carmack suggested next morning.

"That pup" was a broad creek that flowed into Bonanza at 7 ABOVE. The partners received his advice with the magnificent contempt of the sour dough for a squaw-man, and, instead, spent the day on Adam's Creek, another and more likely-looking tributary of Bonanza. But it was the old story over again--staked to the sky-line.

For three days Carmack repeated his advice, and for three days they received it contemptuously. But on the fourth day, there being nowhere else to go, they went up "that pup." They knew that it was practically unstaked, but they had no intention of staking. The trip was made more for the purpose of giving vent to their ill-humour than for anything else. They had become quite cynical, sceptical. They jeered and scoffed

at everything, and insulted every chechaquo they met along the way.

At No. 23 the stakes ceased. The remainder of the creek was open for location.

"Moose pasture," sneered Kink Mitchell.

But Bill gravely paced off five hundred feet up the creek and blazed the corner-stakes. He had picked up the bottom of a candle-box, and on the smooth side he wrote the notice for his centre-stake:-

THIS MOOSE PASTURE IS RESERVED FOR THE
SWEDES AND CHECHAQUOS.

--BILL RADER.

Kink read it over with approval, saying:-

"As them's my sentiments, I reckon I might as well subscribe."

So the name of Charles Mitchell was added to the notice; and many an old sour dough's face relaxed that day at sight of the handiwork of a kindred spirit.

"How's the pup?" Carmack inquired when they strolled back into camp.

"To hell with pups!" was Hootchinoo Bill's reply. "Me and Kink's goin' a-

lookin' for Too Much Gold when we get rested up."

Too Much Gold was the fabled creek of which all sour doughs dreamed, whereof it was said the gold was so thick that, in order to wash it, gravel must first be shovelled into the sluice-boxes. But the several days' rest, preliminary to the quest for Too Much Gold, brought a slight change in their plan, inasmuch as it brought one Ans Handerson, a Swede.

Ans Handerson had been working for wages all summer at Miller Creek over on the Sixty Mile, and, the summer done, had strayed up Bonanza like many another waif helplessly adrift on the gold tides that swept willy-nilly across the land. He was tall and lanky. His arms were long, like prehistoric man's, and his hands were like soup-plates, twisted and gnarled, and big-knuckled from toil. He was slow of utterance and movement, and his eyes, pale blue as his hair was pale yellow, seemed filled with an immortal dreaming, the stuff of which no man knew, and himself least of all. Perhaps this appearance of immortal dreaming was due to a supreme and vacuous innocence. At any rate, this was the valuation men of ordinary clay put upon him, and there was nothing extraordinary about the composition of Hootchinoo Bill and Kink Mitchell.

The partners had spent a day of visiting and gossip, and in the evening met in the temporary quarters of the Monte Carlo--a large tent where stampedeers rested their weary bones and bad whisky sold at a dollar a drink. Since the only money in circulation was dust, and since the house took the "down-weight" on the scales, a drink cost something more than a

dollar. Bill and Kink were not drinking, principally for the reason that their one and common sack was not strong enough to stand many excursions to the scales.

"Say, Bill, I've got a chechaquo on the string for a sack of flour," Mitchell announced jubilantly.

Bill looked interested and pleased. Grub as scarce, and they were not over-plentifully supplied for the quest after Too Much Gold.

"Flour's worth a dollar a pound," he answered. "How like do you calculate to get your finger on it?"

"Trade 'm a half-interest in that claim of ourn," Kink answered.

"What claim?" Bill was surprised. Then he remembered the reservation he had staked off for the Swedes, and said, "Oh!"

"I wouldn't be so clost about it, though," he added. "Give 'm the whole thing while you're about it, in a right free-handed way."

Bill shook his head. "If I did, he'd get clean scairt and prance off.

I'm lettin' on as how the ground is believed to be valuable, an' that we're lettin' go half just because we're monstrous short on grub. After the dicker we can make him a present of the whole shebang."

"If somebody ain't disregarded our notice," Bill objected, though he was plainly pleased at the prospect of exchanging the claim for a sack of flour.

"She ain't jumped," Kink assured him. "It's No. 24, and it stands. The chechaquos took it serious, and they begun stakin' where you left off. Staked clean over the divide, too. I was gassin' with one of them which has just got in with cramps in his legs."

It was then, and for the first time, that they heard the slow and groping utterance of Ans Handerson.

"Ay like the looks," he was saying to the bar-keeper. "Ay tank Ay gat a claim."

The partners winked at each other, and a few minutes later a surprised and grateful Swede was drinking bad whisky with two hard-hearted strangers. But he was as hard-headed as they were hard-hearted. The sack made frequent journeys to the scales, followed solicitously each time by Kink Mitchell's eyes, and still Ans Handerson did not loosen up. In his pale blue eyes, as in summer seas, immortal dreams swam up and burned, but the swimming and the burning were due to the tales of gold and prospect pans he heard, rather than to the whisky he slid so easily down his throat.

The partners were in despair, though they appeared boisterous and jovial

of speech and action.

"Don't mind me, my friend," Hootchinoo Bill hiccoughed, his hand upon Ans Handerson's shoulder. "Have another drink. We're just celebratin' Kink's birthday here. This is my pardner, Kink, Kink Mitchell. An' what might your name be?"

This learned, his hand descended resoundingly on Kink's back, and Kink simulated clumsy self-consciousness in that he was for the time being the centre of the rejoicing, while Ans Handerson looked pleased and asked them to have a drink with him. It was the first and last time he treated, until the play changed and his canny soul was roused to unwonted prodigality. But he paid for the liquor from a fairly healthy-looking sack. "Not less 'n eight hundred in it," calculated the lynx-eyed Kink; and on the strength of it he took the first opportunity of a privy conversation with Bidwell, proprietor of the bad whisky and the tent.

"Here's my sack, Bidwell," Kink said, with the intimacy and surety of one old-timer to another. "Just weigh fifty dollars into it for a day or so more or less, and we'll be yours truly, Bill an' me."

Thereafter the journeys of the sack to the scales were more frequent, and the celebration of Kink's natal day waxed hilarious. He even essayed to sing the old-timer's classic, "The Juice of the Forbidden Fruit," but broke down and drowned his embarrassment in another round of drinks. Even Bidwell honoured him with a round or two on the house; and he and Bill

were decently drunk by the time Ans Handerson's eyelids began to droop and his tongue gave promise of loosening.

Bill grew affectionate, then confidential. He told his troubles and hard luck to the bar-keeper and the world in general, and to Ans Handerson in particular. He required no histrionic powers to act the part. The bad whisky attended to that. He worked himself into a great sorrow for himself and Bill, and his tears were sincere when he told how he and his partner were thinking of selling a half-interest in good ground just because they were short of grub. Even Kink listened and believed.

Ans Handerson's eyes were shining unholily as he asked, "How much you tank you take?"

Bill and Kink did not hear him, and he was compelled to repeat his query. They appeared reluctant. He grew keener. And he swayed back and forward, holding on to the bar and listened with all his ears while they conferred together on one side, and wrangled as to whether they should or not, and disagreed in stage whispers over the price they should set.

"Two hundred and--hic!--fifty," Bill finally announced, "but we reckon as we won't sell."

"Which is monstrous wise if I might chip in my little say," seconded Bidwell.

"Yes, indeedy," added Kink. "We ain't in no charity business a-disgorgin' free an' generous to Swedes an' white men."

"Ay tank we haf another drink," hiccoughed Ans Handerson, craftily changing the subject against a more propitious time.

And thereafter, to bring about that propitious time, his own sack began to see-saw between his hip pocket and the scales. Bill and Kink were coy, but they finally yielded to his blandishments. Whereupon he grew shy and drew Bidwell to one side. He staggered exceedingly, and held on to Bidwell for support as he asked--

"They ban all right, them men, you tank so?"

"Sure," Bidwell answered heartily. "Known 'em for years. Old sour doughs. When they sell a claim, they sell a claim. They ain't no air-dealers."

"Ay tank Ay buy," Ans Handerson announced, tottering back to the two men.

But by now he was dreaming deeply, and he proclaimed he would have the whole claim or nothing. This was the cause of great pain to Hootchinoo Bill. He orated grandly against the "hawgishness" of chechaquos and Swedes, albeit he dozed between periods, his voice dying away to a gurgle, and his head sinking forward on his breast. But whenever roused by a nudge from Kink or Bidwell, he never failed to explode another

volley of abuse and insult.

Ans Handerson was calm under it all. Each insult added to the value of the claim. Such unamiable reluctance to sell advertised but one thing to him, and he was aware of a great relief when Hootchinoo Bill sank snoring to the floor, and he was free to turn his attention to his less intractable partner.

Kink Mitchell was persuadable, though a poor mathematician. He wept dolefully, but was willing to sell a half-interest for two hundred and fifty dollars or the whole claim for seven hundred and fifty. Ans Handerson and Bidwell laboured to clear away his erroneous ideas concerning fractions, but their labour was vain. He spilled tears and regrets all over the bar and on their shoulders, which tears, however, did not wash away his opinion, that if one half was worth two hundred and fifty, two halves were worth three times as much.

In the end,--and even Bidwell retained no more than hazy recollections of how the night terminated,--a bill of sale was drawn up, wherein Bill Rader and Charles Mitchell yielded up all right and title to the claim known as 24 ELDORADO, the same being the name the creek had received from some optimistic chechaquo.

When Kink had signed, it took the united efforts of the three to arouse Bill. Pen in hand, he swayed long over the document; and, each time he rocked back and forth, in Ans Handerson's eyes flashed and faded a

wondrous golden vision. When the precious signature was at last appended and the dust paid over, he breathed a great sigh, and sank to sleep under a table, where he dreamed immortally until morning.

But the day was chill and grey. He felt bad. His first act, unconscious and automatic, was to feel for his sack. Its lightness startled him. Then, slowly, memories of the night thronged into his brain. Rough voices disturbed him. He opened his eyes and peered out from under the table. A couple of early risers, or, rather, men who had been out on trail all night, were vociferating their opinions concerning the utter and loathsome worthlessness of Eldorado Creek. He grew frightened, felt in his pocket, and found the deed to 24 ELDORADO.

Ten minutes later Hootchinoo Bill and Kink Mitchell were roused from their blankets by a wild-eyed Swede that strove to force upon them an ink-scrawled and very blotchy piece of paper.

"Ay tank Ay take my money back," he gibbered. "Ay tank Ay take my money back."

Tears were in his eyes and throat. They ran down his cheeks as he knelt before them and pleaded and implored. But Bill and Kink did not laugh. They might have been harder hearted.

"First time I ever hear a man squeal over a minin' deal," Bill said. "An' I make free to say 'tis too onusual for me to savvy."

"Same here," Kink Mitchell remarked. "Minin' deals is like horse-tradin'."

They were honest in their wonderment. They could not conceive of themselves raising a wail over a business transaction, so they could not understand it in another man.

"The poor, ornery chechaquo," murmured Hootchinoo Bill, as they watched the sorrowing Swede disappear up the trail.

"But this ain't Too Much Gold," Kink Mitchell said cheerfully.

And ere the day was out they purchased flour and bacon at exorbitant prices with Ans Handerson's dust and crossed over the divide in the direction of the creeks that lie between Klondike and Indian River.

Three months later they came back over the divide in the midst of a snow-storm and dropped down the trail to 24 ELDORADO. It merely chanced that the trail led them that way. They were not looking for the claim. Nor could they see much through the driving white till they set foot upon the claim itself. And then the air lightened, and they beheld a dump, capped by a windlass that a man was turning. They saw him draw a bucket of gravel from the hole and tilt it on the edge of the dump. Likewise they saw another, man, strangely familiar, filling a pan with the fresh gravel. His hands were large; his hair wets pale yellow. But before

they reached him, he turned with the pan and fled toward a cabin. He wore no hat, and the snow falling down his neck accounted for his haste. Bill and Kink ran after him, and came upon him in the cabin, kneeling by the stove and washing the pan of gravel in a tub of water.

He was too deeply engaged to notice more than that somebody had entered the cabin. They stood at his shoulder and looked on. He imparted to the pan a deft circular motion, pausing once or twice to rake out the larger particles of gravel with his fingers. The water was muddy, and, with the pan buried in it, they could see nothing of its contents. Suddenly he lifted the pan clear and sent the water out of it with a flirt. A mass of yellow, like butter in a churn, showed across the bottom.

Hootchinoo Bill swallowed. Never in his life had he dreamed of so rich a test-pan.

"Kind of thick, my friend," he said huskily. "How much might you reckon that-all to be?"

Ans Handerson did not look up as he replied, "Ay tank fafty ounces."

"You must be scrumptious rich, then, eh?"

Still Ans Handerson kept his head down, absorbed in putting in the fine touches which wash out the last particles of dross, though he answered, "Ay tank Ay ban wort' five hundred t'ousand dollar."

"Gosh!" said Hootchinoo Bill, and he said it reverently.

"Yes, Bill, gosh!" said Kink Mitchell; and they went out softly and closed the door.