

The Men of Forty Mile

Malemute Kid Leaves the Main Question Unanswered

By JACK LONDON

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WHEN Big Jim Belden ventured the apparently innocuous proposition that much ice was "rather peccoliar" he little dreamed of what it would lead to. Neither did Lon McFane when he affirmed that anchor ice was even more so, nor did Bettles as he instantly disagreed, declaring the very existence of such a form to be a bugaboo.

"An' ye'd be tellin' me this," cried Lon, "after the years ye've spent in the land! An' we eatin' out the same pot this many's the day!"

"But the thing's agin reason," insisted Bettles. "Look you, water's warmer than ice."

"An' little the difference once ye break through."

"Still it's warmer, because it ain't froze. An' you say it freezes on the bottom?"

"Only the anchor ice, David; only the anchor ice. An' have ye niver drifted along, the water clear as glass, whin suddin, belike a cloud over the sun, the mushy ice comes bubblin' up an' an' up till from bank to bank an' blind to bind it's drapin' the river like a first snowfall?"

"Unh huh, more'n once when I took a doze at the steerin' oar. But it allus come out the nearest side channel an' not bubblin' up an' up."

"But with niver a wink at the helm?"

"No, nor you. It's agin reason. I'll leave it to any man!"

Bettles appealed to the circle about the stove, but the fight was on between himself and Lon McFane.

"Reason or no reason, it's the truth I'm tellin' ye. Last fall a year gone 'twas Sitka Charley an' meself saw the sight, droppin' down the raffle ye'll remember below Fort Reliance. An' regular fall weather it was—the glint of the sun on the golden larch an' the quakin' aspens, an' the glister of light on ivery ripple, an' beyond the winter an' the blue haze of the north comin' down hand in hand. It's well ye know the same, with a fringe to the river an' the ice formin' thick in the eddies, an' a snap an' sparkle to the air, an' ye a-feelin' it through all yer blood, a-takin' new lease of life with ivery suck of it. 'Tis then, me boy, the world grows small an' the wandther-just lays ye by the heels."

"But it's meself as wandthers. As I was sayin', we a-paddlin', with niver a sign of ice, barrin' that by the eddies, when the Injin lifts his paddle an' sings out: 'Lon McFane, look ye below! So have I heard, but niver thought to see!' As ye know, Sitka Charley, like meself, niver drew first breath in the land. So the sight was new. Then we drifted, with a head over ayther side, peerin' down through the sparkly water, for the world like the days I split with the pearlers, watchin' the coral banks a-growin' the

same as so many gardens under the sea. There it was, the anchor ice, clingin' an' clusterin' to ivery rock, after the manner of the white coral.

"But the best of the sight was to come. Just after clearin' the tail of the raffle the water turns quick the color of milk, an' the top of it in wee circles, as when the graylin' rise in the spring or there's a splatter of wet from the sky. 'Twas the anchor ice comin' up. To the right, to the left, as far as iver a man cud see, the water was covered with the same. An' like so much porridge it was, slickin' along the bark of the canoe, stickin' like glue to the paddles. It's many's the time I shot the selfsame raffle before, an' it's many's the time after, but niver a wink of the same have I seen."

"'Twas the sight of a lifetime."

"Do tell!" dryly commented Bettles. "D'ye think I'd b'lieve such a yarn? I'd ruther see the glister of light'd gone to your eyes an' the snap of the air to your tongue."

"'Twas me own eyes that beheld it, an' if Sitka Charley was here he'd be the lad to back me."

"But facts is facts, an' they ain't no gittin' round 'em. It ain't in the nature of things for the water furthestest away from the air to freeze freez."

"But me own eyes—"

"Don't git het up over it," admonished Bettles as the quick Celtic anger began to mount.

"Then yer not after belavin' me?"

"Sence you're so blamed forehanded about it, no. I'd b'lieve nature first an' facts."

"Is it the lie ye'd be givin' me?" threatened Lon. "Ye'd better be askin' that Sitka Charley of yours. I'll have it to her, for the truth I spake."

Bettles flared up in sudden wrath. The Irishman had unwittingly wounded him, for his wife was the half breed daughter of a Russian fur trader, married to him in the Greek mission of Nulato, a thousand miles or so down the Yukon, thus being of much higher caste than the common Sitka, or native, wife. It was a mere northern nuance, which none but the north-land adventurer may understand.

"I reckon you kin take it that way," was his deliberate affirmation.

The next instant Lon McFane had stretched him on the floor, the circle was broken up, and half a dozen men had stepped between.

Bettles came to his feet, wiping the blood from his mouth. "It hain't new, this takin' an' payin' of blows, an' don't you never think that this will be squared."

"An' niver in me life did I take the lie from mortal man," was the retort courteous. "An' it's an avil day I'll not be to hand waitin' an' willin' to help ye lift yer debts, barrin' no manner of way."

"Still got that 38-55?"

Lon nodded.

"But you'd better git a more likely father. Mine'll rip holes through you the size of walnuts."

"Niver fear. It's me own slugs smell their way with soft noses, an' they'll spread like flapjacks against the comin' out beyond. An' when'll I have the pleasure of waitin' on ye? The water hole's a strikin' locality."

"Tain't bad. Jest be there in an hour, an' you won't set long on my comin'."

Both men mittened and left the post, their ears closed to the remonstrances of their comrades. It was such a little thing, yet with such men little things, nourished by quick tempers and stubborn natures, soon blossomed into big things. Besides, the art of burning to bedrock still lay in the womb of the future, and the men of Forty Mile, shut in by the long arctic winter, grew high stomached with overeating and enforced idleness and became as irritable as do the bees in the fall of the year when the hives are overstocked with honey.

There was no law in the land. The mounted police was also a thing of the future. Each man measured an offense and meted out the punishment, inasmuch as it affected himself. Rarely had combined action been necessary, and never in all the dreary history of the camp had the eighth article of the Decalogue been violated.

Big Jim Belden called an impromptu meeting. Scruff Mackenzie was placed as temporary chairman and a messenger dispatched to solicit Father Roubeau's good offices. Their position was paradoxical, and they knew it. By the right of might could they interfere to prevent the duel, yet such action, while in direct line with their wishes, went counter to their opinions. While their rough hewn, obsolete ethics recognized the individual prerogative of wiping out blow with blow, they could not bear to think of two good comrades such as Bettles and McFane meeting in deadly battle. Deeming the man who would not fight on provocation a dastard, when brought to the test it seemed wrong that he should fight.

But a scurry of moccasins and loud cries, rounded off with a pistol shot, interrupted the discussion. Then the storm doors opened and Malemute Kid entered, a smoking Colt's in his hand and a merry light in his eye.

"I got him." He replaced the empty shell and added, "Your dog, Scruff."

"Yellow Fang?" Mackenzie asked.

"No; the lop eared one."

"The devil! Nothing the matter with him."

"Come out and take a look."

"That's all right, after all. Guess he's got 'em too. Yellow Fang came back this morning and took a chunk out of him and came near to making a widower of me. Made a rush for Zarinska, but she whisked her skirts in his face and escaped with the loss of the same and a good roll in the snow. Then he took to the woods again. Hope he don't come back. Lost any yourself?"

"One, the best one of the pack—Shookum. Started amuck this morning, but didn't get very far. Ran foul of Sitka Charley's team, and they scattered him all over the street. And now two of them are loose and ragin' mad. So you see he got his work in. The dog census will be small in the spring if we don't do something."

"And the man census too."

"How's that? Whose in trouble now?"

"Oh, Bettles and Lon McFane had an argument, and they'll be down by the water hole in a few minutes to settle it."

The incident was repeated for his benefit, and Malemute Kid, accustomed to an obedience which his fellow men never failed to render, took charge of the affair. His quickly formulated plan was explained, and they promised to follow his lead implicitly.

"So you see," he concluded, "we do not actually take away their privilege of fighting. And yet I don't believe they'll fight when they see the beauty of the scheme. Life's a game and men the gamblers. They'll stake their whole pile on the one chance in a thousand. Take away that one chance and they won't play."

He turned to the man in charge of the post. "Storekeeper, weigh out three fathoms of your best half inch manila."

"We'll establish a precedent which will last the men of Forty Mile to the end of time," he prophesied. Then he coiled the rope about his arm and led his followers out of doors, just in time to meet the principals.

"What danged right'd he to fetch my wife in?" thundered Bettles to the soothing overtures of a friend. "Twa'n't called for," he concluded decisively. "Twa'n't called for," he reiterated again and again, pacing up and down and waiting for Lon McFane.

And Lon McFane—his face was hot and tongue rapid as he faunted insurrection in the face of the church. "Then, father," he cried, "it's with an atsy heart I'll roll in me flamy blankets, the broad of me back on a bed of coals. Niver shall it be said Lon McFane took a lie 'twixt the teeth without iver liftin' a hand! An' I'll not ask a blessin'. The years have been wild, but it's the heart was in the right place."

"But it's not the heart, Lon," interposed Father Roubeau; "it's pride that bids you forth to slay your fellow man."

"Yer Frinch," Lon replied, and then, turning to leave him, "An' will ye say a mass if the luck is against me?"

But the priest smiled, thrust his moccasined feet to the fore and went out upon the white breast of the silent river. A packed trail the width of a sixteen inch sled led out to the water hole. On either side lay the deep, soft snow. The men trod in single file without conversation, and the black

stated priest in their midst gave to the function the solemn aspect of a funeral. It was a warm winter's day for Forty Mile—a day in which the sky, filled with heaviness, drew closer to the earth, and the mercury sought the unwanted level of 20 below. But there was no cheer in the warmth. There was little air in the upper strata, and the clouds hung motionless, giving sullen promise of an early snowfall. And the earth, unresponsive, made no preparation, content in its hibernation.

When the water hole was reached Bettles, having evidently reviewed the quarrel during the silent walk, burst out in a final "Twa'n't called for," while Lon McFane kept grim silence. Indignation so choked him that he could not speak.

Yet deep down, whenever their own wrongs were not uppermost, both men wondered at their comrades. They had expected opposition, and this tacit acquiescence hurt them. It seemed more was due them from the men they had been so close with, and they felt a vague sense of wrong, rebelling at the thought of so many of their brothers coming out, as on a gala occasion, without one word of protest, to see them shoot each other down. It appeared their worth had diminished in the eyes of the community. The proceedings puzzled them.

"Back to back, David. An' will it be fifty paces to the man or double the quantity?"

"Fifty," was the sanguinary reply, grunted out, yet sharply cut.

But the new manila, not prominently displayed, but casually coiled about Malemute Kid's arm, caught the quick eye of the Irishman and thrilled him with a suspicious fear.

"An' what are ye doin' with the rope?"

"Hurry up!" Malemute Kid glanced at his watch. "I've a batch of bread in the cabin, and I don't want it to fall. Besides, my feet are getting cold."

The rest of the men manifested their impatience in various suggestive ways. "But the rope, Kid? It's bran' new, an' sure yer bread's not that heavy it needs raisin' with the like of that?"

Bettles by this time had faced around. Father Roubeau, the humor of the situation just dawning on him, hid a smile behind his mittened hand.

"No, Lon; this rope was made for a man." Malemute Kid could be very impressive on occasion.

"What man?" Bettles was becoming aware of a personal interest.

"The other man."

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Took a Flying Shot at Yellow Fang.

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The Next Instant Lon McFane Stretched Him on the Floor.

TELLS OF THE CATASTROPHE

Reformed Druggist Explains How Customer's Head Was Blown Off When Gun Cotton Exploded.

The Reformed Druggist was talking to the Man With the Cracked Lip. "Now, collodion," he said, relates a writer, "collodion is just the thing to put on that lip of yours. It is a great thing to promote the growth of new skin. Just brush that lip with collodion, and it will be well in no time. But," he continued warningly, "you want to be very careful. One of the worst accidents I ever saw was the direct result of collodion."

The Man With the Cracked Lip shivered apprehensively. "How was that?" he asked.

The Reformed Druggist lighted a fresh cigar and stuck his feet upon the radiator. "Yes," he continued, reflectively, "that was a bad accident, and the worst of the whole thing was that I was responsible for it in a way."

"But what was it?" insisted the Man With the Cracked Lip.

"It was just like this: One day before I reformed and while I was keeping a drug store, a man came into the store with the worst pair of lips I ever saw. Why, that fissure in that lip of yours wasn't a mark to the gully that was in his lower lip. I saw in a minute that he must be suffering a good deal. He was a great, big man, and his teeth were rather protuberant. I asked him if he wanted something for those lips, and he told me that I had guessed right. Then I told him just what I have been telling you. I explained to him the action of collodion, and he told me to put some on his lips. I got the bottle and picked out a can-

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