



# A Matter of Temperature

A Short Story of the Yukon

OUTSIDE Alec Stewart's saloon at Cudahy there was dead silence, the stillness of frozen desolation such as the Yukon district presents when the temperature is floating between thirty and forty below zero, not freezing-point; but within the long, solidly-built timber shack there was neither silence, cold, nor freshness of atmosphere. Good luck exhilarates, but the worst of bad luck cannot keep under for long the average miner's exuberance of spirits, and he loves to hear the sound of his own voice. Two almost red-hot stoves made the saloon so hot that more than one man had shed his outer garments, while it was with difficulty one could distinguish those sitting or standing at the far end of the room, so thick was the atmosphere with the fumes of "myrtle plug" or strong "twist."

Supplies of grub might be short, the cold so intense that for the time being all panning was held up; but the owners of the claims on Forty Mile, Coal Creek, Clinton, and Sourdough flatly refused to be depressed.

With one exception. Tom Parsons, a short, broad-built man, with a pug nose and a cast in his left eye, had little or nothing to say. Spoken to by the other miners or jollied by the saloon keeper, he answered only in monosyllables. Leaning heavily against the bar, he stared moodily at nothing, sucking at an empty pipe. By no means a bad-tempered or taciturn fellow as a rule, his obvious depression of spirits seemed unaccountable. He had two claims, one at Clinton and a second at Glacier; and as no miner's luck was ever a secret from his fellow gold seekers, every one in the room was aware that, until

the cold had stopped operations, Parsons had been getting first-rate returns from his daily washings.

"What in thunder's wrong with ye, old son?" a miner named Evarts at length inquired of the lugubrious Parsons. "Look about as happy an' comfortable as a man in bed with a skunk."

Parsons stirred himself.

"Gotter go out," he replied heavily.

"Why?"

"Grub!" answered Parsons tersely.

"Waal, yer ain't no worse off 'n the rest of th' boys," another man said consolingly. "We're all short."

"Mebbe; but I ain't takin' no risks. I means goin' out," Parsons declared doggedly. "Sell off my truck an' quit!" he added.

Stewart, busy behind the bar, turned quickly.

"What d'ye say, man Parsons? Quittin'?"

"That's me. Had one winter starvin' in this blamed country, and I don't mean standin' for another. Ain't got much ter get rid of, an' when it's gone I'm quittin'."

Stewart leaned across the bar and whispered in the ear of the dejected miner two words.

"Candles—ile?"

His Scots blood was guarantee enough that the saloon keeper was a keen hand at a bargain; and in Parsons' decision to get away from the mining camp, Stewart saw the opportunity of a possible and profitable speculation. With only three or four hours out of the twenty-four being daylight, means of illumination are at a high premium. Moreover,

Stewart was well aware that there was a serious shortage of both coal, oil, and candles at Fort Cudahy and the adjacent Forty Mile. In a few weeks' time both these necessary commodities were going to jump in price. Here was a chance of a profitable deal.

"He—none; candles—jest a few," replied Parsons in a low, uninterested voice.

An hour later he shambled from the saloon, to pick his way across the slippery, uneven ground to the shack perched twenty feet above the smooth white ribbon of ice that was Clinton Creek.

The following forenoon, as he was preparing breakfast by the light of a tall, guttering candle stuck in the mouth of an empty whisky bottle, the door of the shack was shoved open, and in came Alec Stewart.

"About those candles, Parsons," began the saloon keeper without any preliminary. "What about a trade now, if ye're not takin' them all along with ye. I'm no that well fixed up as I'd like to be, an' since ye're goin' out ye'll not be wantin' to drag along more'n ye can help. I'll take them candles, and it's a bigger price I'll be givin' than any of th' other fellers will."

Parsons, who looked even more depressed and miserable than the evening before, muttered something to the effect that Stewart might as well have the candles as any other son-of-a-gun.

"Sure. How many ye got?"

"Jest a few, I told you."

"Let's have a squint at 'em, man."

"Candles are worth money—

going to be worth a whole lot more," observed Parsons. "Grub?" He looked up, long knife in one hand, a slab of fat bacon in the other.

"I've had breakfast."

"I ain't. Mind, I ain't jest givin' them candles away."

"I ain't said that ye're a fool, man Parsons," Stewart remarked pleasantly. "Where are they?"

Parsons, bending over the frypan, jerked a stubby thumb to the far end of the sixteen-foot shack, where a partly open candle box occupied a corner in company with half a dozen empty condensed milk tins, odd boots, a Winchester, a collection of odorous rags, a half-emptied sack of flour, and a few other odds and ends.

Stewart stepped briskly across, dug out a candle and looked at it, not forgetting to make certain that it was supplied with a wick; he made a rough mental calculation of the number left in the box.

"Like this one burnin' here?" he inquired, indicating the cabin's source of illumination.

Parsons, his mouth full, made a noise that the saloon keeper correctly translated as "Jes' like 'em."

"What's yer figger, man?" he demanded crisply.

Parsons left off eating, to sit for some seconds in deep thought.

"Candles 's sca'ce," he observed slowly. "They'll be sca'cer later on. Reckon, Alec, them candles. 'll cost ye half a dollar apiece."

"Half a dollar!" shouted Stewart excitedly,



"I ain't said that ye're a fool, man Parsons," Stewart remarked pleasantly. "Where are them candles?"





"To thunder with yer profit!" shouted an impatient miner. "How much?" "A dollar a candle, boys!" said Stewart promptly.

his face going a rich red. "Man, ye're joking."

"I'm not," answered Parsons, truthfully, if his face were an index of his feelings. "Half a dollar," he repeated. "Reckon they're cheap, too."

"It's an outrage!" asserted the scandalised saloon owner.

"Take 'em or leave 'em," rejoined Parsons indifferently. "I ain't havin' t' haul away such a lot o' truck that a few candles, more or less, 'll make sech a difference."

Stewart thought for half a minute.

"Come man, be reasonable," he advised.

"Twenty-five cents."

"Half dollar," the miner said stolidly.

"Then you'll be makin' a handsome profit."

Stewart knew that. If his calculations were correct, the available stock would be used up before the new year was many weeks forward, and, the only man with candles to sell, it would be a cold day if he weren't able to get a clear dollar apiece for every one he had to dispose of. But he made one more effort.

"Forty cents, man Parsons," he said.

"And I'll take all ye have, throwin' in th' risk of any bein' broken."

Parsons shook his head.

"Half dollar," he said again, depressed but stubborn.

"Ye'd break up yer mither's coffin t' sell for kindlin', Tom Parsons, an' that ye would," Stewart cried bitterly. "Ye're a hard man. But I'll pay ye th' half dollar. Is this all ye got?"

"There's mebbe a few more somewhere," replied the miner carelessly.

He got up and rummaged here and there, bringing five full boxes to light, each containing ten pounds of candles at eight to the pound.

He lent a hand at carrying the boxes to the saloon, where they were stored away in a cupboard of divers contents and composite perfumes; and the next day he loaded up a sled and took leave of Cudahy and its denizens. Stewart wished him a pleasant journey.

The long-headed Scot proved correct in his surmise. Less than a month after Parsons' departure, Cudahy began to consider very seriously the shortage in illuminating power. Confined to their shacks by the bitter cold, the miners could not pass the whole twenty-four hours in sleeping, and sitting around in the darkness of the Arctic winter was still more undesirable. Those lucky enough to possess kerosene or candles beyond their own needs rose grandly to the occasion, and extorted unheard of sums from less fortunate comrades. Presently the rumour got about

that Alec Stewart had a store of candles laid by, and a noisy deputation came to interview him. He grudgingly admitted that he might have rather more than he could use.

"Hand 'em out, then. What's th' figger for them?" demanded the spokesman of the deputation.

"A dollar a candle, boys," Stewart said promptly.

"Fetch 'em out."

"That's for now—th' first box. I'm no sayin' that when th' second box is opened two dollars won't be——"

"Where—are—them—candles?"

Without haste Stewart turned to the store and threw open the door, letting out a wave of blended odours of a sickly potency that attracted the attention of the by no means delicate olfactory organs of his impatient customers. On the table he laid a greasy, sticky, smelly candle box.

"No, no, boys; it's a dollar a time, remember," he cried, fending off a hasty grab at the box. "Beauties, too, an' well worth it."

He ripped off the lid, and a score of eager eyes were turned on the contents of the box. Thence they were lifted to the blank face of the dumb saloon-keeper.

Save for a number of wicks, some thick stains, and a few spoonfuls of a semi-white, sticky, Swiss-milk like compound, the box was empty.

For a half minute there was dead silence. Then came an abrupt and deafening clamour of laughter, hoots, and

yells, followed by a howl of dismay and anger from Stewart that might have been heard at Dawson. The floor of the saloon rocked under the stamping feet of the bellowing, choking, side-splitting miners.

"Suferin' Caesar, Alec!" spluttered Pat James, when he could find the breath. "Them ca-ca—ha, ha, ha!—candles! Where'd ye buy 'em. Tell us for th' love of Mike!"

"Tom Parsons. Before he went out," stammered Stewart.

"Gone out! Tom Parsons! But he ain't gone out!" shouted Joe Collins. "Why, I saw Tom not four days back, workin' up at his claim at Glacier. He was pannin' out twenty-five a day."

"Boys," Stewart's sad voice matched his face, though he was trying hard to smile. "Th' joke's on me."

It was. There was no need to look inside the other boxes. Like the first, they had been filled by the ingenious Mr. Parsons with a mixture of condensed milk, flour, and water, which, with the aid of candle moulds and wicks, had been converted into so near a resemblance to candles that while they remained frozen the deception of the saloon keeper was easily to be understood.

"It's sure no wonder Tom was that down in th' mouth before he 'went out,'" declared Joe Collins. "He was considerin', Alec, th' disappointment that was comin' to ye." Stewart grinned.

"It's a bonnie actor is Tom Parsons; but maybe if we have another deal together it'll be me that has the laugh."

THE END



Save for a number of wicks, some thick stains, and a few spoonfuls of Swiss milk, the box was empty. "Boys," said Stewart. "The joke's on me!"