



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

A Klondike Christmas

Jack London

Mouth of the Stuart River,
North West Territory,
December 25, 1897.



My dearest Mother:-

Here we are, all safe and sound, and snugly settled down in winter quarters.

Have received no letters yet, so you can imagine how we long to hear from home. We are in the shortest days of the year, and the sun no longer rises, even at twelve o'clock.

Uncle Hiram and Mr. Carter have gone to Dawson to record some placer claims and to get the mail, if there is any. They took the dogs and sled with them, as they had to travel on the ice. We did expect them home for Christmas dinner, but I guess George and I will have to eat alone.

I am to be cook, so you can be sure that we'll have a jolly dinner. We will begin with the staples first. There will be fried bacon, baked beans, bread raised from sour-dough, and—

He seemed perplexed, and after dubiously scratching his head a couple of times, laid down the pen. Once or twice, he tried to go on, but eventually gave it up, his

face assuming a very disgusted expression. He was a robust young fellow of eighteen or nineteen, and the merry twinkle which lurked in his eyes gave the lie to his counterfeited displeasure.

It was a snug little cabin in which he sat. Built of unbarked logs, measuring not more than ten by twelve feet on the inside, and heated by a roaring Yukon-stove, it seemed more homelike to him than any house he had ever lived in, except—of course, always the one, real home.

Two bunks, table and stove, occupied two-thirds of the room, but every inch of space was utilized. Revolvers, rifles, hunting-knives, belts and clothes, hung from three of the walls in picturesque confusion; the remaining one being hidden by a set of shelves, which held all their cooking utensils. Though already eleven o'clock in the morning, a sort of twilight prevailed outside, while it would have been quite dark within, if it had not been for the slush-lamp. This was merely a shallow, tin cup, filled with bacon grease. A piece of cotton caulking served for a wick; the heat of the flame melting the grease as fast as required.

He leaned his elbows on the table and became absorbed in a deep scrutiny of the lamp. He was really not interested in it, and did not even know he was looking at it, so intent was he in trying to discover what else there could possibly be for dinner.

The door was thrown open at this moment, and a stalwart young fellow entered with a rush of cold air, kicking off his snow shoes at the threshold.

"'Bout time for dinner, isn't it?" he asked gruffly, as he took off his mittens. But his brother Clarence had just discovered that "bacon," "beans" and "bread" all began with "b," and did not reply. George's face was covered with ice, so he contented himself with holding it over the stove to thaw. The rattle of the icy chunks on the sheet-iron was getting monotonous, when Clarence deigned to reply by asking a question.

"What's 'b' stand for?"

"Bad, of course," was the prompt answer.

"Just what I thought," and he sighed with great solemnity.

"But how about the dinner? You're cook. It's time to begin. What have you been doing? Oh! Writing! Let's see."

His jaw fell when he got to "bacon, beans and bread," and he said; "It won't do to write home that that's all we've got for Christmas dinner. It would make them worry, you know. Say, haven't we some dried apples?"

"Half a cup. Not enough for a pie."

"They'll swell, you ninny. Sit down and add apple pie to that list of yours. And say dumplings, too, while you're at it. We can make a stagger at them—put two pieces of apple in two lumps of dough and boil them. Never say die. We'll make them think we're living like princes when they read that."

Clarence did as directed, and then sat with such a look of query on his face as to make George nervous and doubtful.

"Pretty slim after all," he mused. "Let's see if we can't find something else—bread, flapjacks and—and—why flour-gravy, of course."

"We can bake, and boil, and fry the beans," Clarence suggested; "but what's to be done with the bacon except to fry it, I can't see."

"Why parboil it; that makes another course, nine altogether. How much more do you want, anyway?" And then to change the subject, "How cold do you think it is?"

Clarence critically studied the ice which had crept far up the cracks in the door, and then gave his judgment; "Past fifty."

"The spirit thermometer gives sixty-five, and it's still falling." George could not prevent an exultant ring in his voice, though if he had been asked why, he would not have known.

"And water freezes at thirty-two degrees above zero," Clarence began to calculate. "That makes ninety-seven degrees of frost. Phew! Wouldn't that open the eyes of the folks at home!"

So, like the two boys that they were, they temporarily forgot their monotonous fare in an exciting discussion of the whys and wherefores of cold. But when one is afflicted with a healthy appetite he can not escape from it very long at a time, and at twelve o'clock they set about cooking their slender meal.

George went into the cache for bacon, and begun to rummage about in odd places to see what he could find. Now the cache, or place where their food was

stored to keep it away from the perpetually-hungry native dogs, was built onto the back of the cabin. Clarence heard the racket he was making, and when he began to cheer and cry out "Eureka! Eureka!" he ran out to see what had happened.

"Manna! brother mine! Manna! dropped from the clouds for the starving children of Israel!" he cried, waving a large can above his head. "Mock-turtle soup. Found it in the tool box," he went on, as they carried it into the cabin.

True enough; it was a quart-can of specially prepared and very rich mock-turtle soup. They sang and danced and were as jubilant as though they had found a gold mine. Clarence added the item to the bill of fare in his letter, while George strove to divide it up into two items, or even more. He showed a special aptitude for this kind of work; but how many tempting dishes he would have finally succeeded in evolving out of it, shall never be known, for at that moment they heard a dog team pull up the river bank before the cabin.

The next instant the door opened, and two strangers came in. They were grotesque sights. Their heads were huge balls of ice, with little holes where their mouths should have been, through which they breathed. Unable to open their mouths or speak, they shook hands with the boys and headed for the stove. Clarence and George exchanged glances and watched their strange visitors curiously.

"Wal, it's jes' this way," one of them began, as he shook the remaining chunks of ice from his whiskers; "me an' my pard ha' ben nigh on two months, now, over on the Mazy May, with nothin' to eat but straight meat. Nary flour, nary beans, nary bacon. So me an' him sorto' talked it over, an' figgered it out. At last I sez, 'Wot yeh say, Jim? Let's cross the divide an' strike some camp on the Yukon, an' git some civilized grub again? Git a reg'lar Christmas dinner? An' he sez 'I'll go yeh, by gum.' An' here we be. How air yeh off fer meat? Got a hundred pound or so, on the sled outside."

Just as Clarence and George were assuring him that he was heartily welcome, the other man tore away the last hindrance to his speech, and broke in; "Say, lads; yeh haint got a leetle bit o' bread yeh might spare. I'm thet hungry fer jes' a leetle bit—"

"Yeh jes' shet up, Jim!" cried his partner indignantly. "Ye'd make these kids think yeh might be starvin'. Haint yeh had all yeh wanted to eat?"

"Yes," was the gloomy reply; "but nothin' but straight meat."

However, Clarence put an end to the discussion by setting the table with sour-dough bread and cold bacon, having first made them promise not to spoil their appetites for the dinner. The poor fellows handled the heavy bread reverently, and went into ecstasies of delight over it. Then they went out, unharnessed the dogs, and brought some magnificent pieces of moose meat in with them. The boys' mouths watered at the sight, for they were longing for it just as much as the others longed for the bread.

"Porterhouse moose-steak," whispered George; "tenderloin, sirloin and round; liver and bacon; rib-roast of moose, moose stew and fried sweet breads. Hurry, Clarence, and add them to the bill of fare."

"Now don't bother me. I'm cook, and I'm going to boss this dinner, so you obey orders. Take a piece of that meat and go down to the cabin on the next island. They'd give most anything for it, so see that you make a good trade."

The hungry strangers sat on the bunk and watched proceedings with satisfied countenances, while Clarence mixed and kneaded the dough for a baking of bread. In a short time George returned, with one cup of dried apples and five prunes. Yet they were all disappointed at his failure to get sugar. But the dinner already promised to be such a grand affair that they could readily forego such trifling matter as sweets.

Just as Clarence was shortening the pie-dough with bacon grease, a second sled pulled up at the door, and another stranger entered. A vivid picture he made, as he stood for an instant in the doorway. Though his eyebrows and lashes were matted with ice, his face was clean-shaven, and hence, free from it. From his beaded moccasins to his great gauntleted mittens and wolf-skin cap from Siberia, every article of wearing apparel proclaimed him to be one of the "Eldorado Kings," or millionaire mine-owners of Dawson.

He was a pleasant man to look at, though his heavy jaw and steel-blue eyes gave notice of a firm, indomitable will. About his waist was clasped a leather belt, in which reposed two large Colt's revolvers and a hunting-knife, while in his hand, besides the usual dog whip, he carried a smokeless rifle of the largest bore and latest pattern. They wondered at this, for men in the Klondike rarely go armed, and then because of necessity.

His story was soon told. His own team of seven dogs, the finest in the country and for which he had recently refused five thousand dollars, had been stolen five days before. He had found the clue, and discovered that the thieves had started out of the country on the ice. He had borrowed a team of dogs from a friend and

taken their trail.

They marvelled at his speed, for he had left Dawson at midnight, having traveled the seventy-five miles in twelve hours. He wished to rest the animals and take a few hours sleep, before going on with the chase. He was sure of overtaking them, he said, for they had foolishly started with an eighteen-inch sled, while the regular, trail Yukon-sleds were only sixteen inches wide. Thus, they had to break trail constantly for one of the runners, while his was already broken.

They recognized the party he was after, and assured him that he was certain to catch them in another twelve hours' run. Then he was made welcome and invited to dinner. To their surprise, when he returned from unhitching and feeding his dogs he brought several pounds of sugar and two cans of condensed milk.

"Thought you fellows, up river here, would be out of luxuries," he said, as he threw them upon the table; "and as I wanted to travel light, I brought them along, intending to trade for beans and flour whenever I got a chance. No, never mind thanks. I'm going to eat dinner with you. Call me when it's ready." And he climbed into one of the bunks, falling asleep a moment later.

"I say, Jim. Thet's travelin', aint it?" said the Man from Mazy May, with as much pride as though he had done it himself. "Seventy-five mile in twelve hours, an' thet cold he wa'nt able to ride more'n half the time. Bet ye'd be petered clean out if yeh done the like o' thet."

"Maybe yeh think I can't travel," his partner replied. But before he could tell what a wonderful traveler he was, their dogs and the dogs of the new arrival started a fight, and had to be separated.

At last the dinner was ready, and just as they were calling the "Eldorado King," Uncle Hiram and Mr. Carter arrived.

"Not an ounce of sugar or can of milk to be bought in Dawson," he said. But his jaw dropped as he caught sight of the sugar and milk on the table, and he sheepishly held up a quart-can of strained honey as his contribution.

This addition necessitated a change in the bill of fare; so when they finally sat down, the first course of mock-turtle soup was followed by hot cakes and honey. While one after another the delicacies of "civilized grub," as they called it, appeared, the eyes of the Men from Mazy May opened wider and wider, and speech seemed to fail them.

But one more surprise was in store for them. They heard a jingle of bells, and another ice-covered traveler entered and claimed their hospitality. The new-comer was an Associated Press reporter, on his way to Dawson from the United States. His first question was concerning the where-abouts of a Mr. Hiram Donaldson, "said to be camped on the Yukon near the mouth of the Stuart River." On Uncle Hiram being pointed out to him, the reporter handed him a letter of introduction from the Mining Syndicate which he, Mr. Donaldson, was representing. Nor was this all. A fat package of letters was also passed over—the longed-for letters from home.

"By gum! This do beat all," said the Man from Mazy May, after a place had been made for the last arrival. But his partner had his mouth so full of apple dumpling that he could only roll his eyes in approval.

"I know what 'b' stands for." whispered George across the table to Clarence.

"So do I. It stands for 'Bully' with a big 'B'."

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