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THE MATCH

BY JAMES OLIVER CURWOOD.

PART III.

"Thoreau lives on this creek," Brokaw said. "How much farther is it?" "Fifteen or sixteen miles," replied Billy. "You'll last just about five, Brokaw. I won't last that long unless you take these things off and give me the use of my arms."

"To knock out my brains when I ain't looking," growled Brokaw. "I guess—before long—you'll be willing to tell where the Indian's shack is."

He kicked his way through a drift of snow to the smoother surface of the stream. There was a breath of wind in their faces, and Billy bowed his head to it. In the hours of his greatest loneliness and despair Billy had kept up his fighting spirit by thinking of pleasant things, and now, as he followed in Brokaw's trail, he began to think of home. It was not hard for him to bring up visions of the girl wife who would probably never know how he had died. He forgot Brokaw. He followed in the train mechanically, failing to notice that his captor's pace was growing steadily slower, and that his own feet were dragging more and more like leaden weights. He was back among the old hills again, and the sun was shining, and he heard laughter and song. He saw Jeanne standing at the gate in front of the little white cottage, smiling at him, and waving Baby Jeanne's tiny hand at him as he looked back over his shoulder from the dusty road. His mind did not often travel as far as the mining camp, and he had completely forgotten it now. He no longer felt the sting and pain of the intense

cold. It was Brokaw who brought him back into the reality of things. The sergeant stumbled and fell in a drift and Billy fell over him.

For a moment the two men sat half buried in the snow looking at each other without speaking. Brokaw moved first. He rose to his feet with an effort. Billy made an effort to follow him. After three efforts he gave it up, and blinked up into Brokaw's face with a queer laugh. The laugh was almost soundless. There had come a change in Brokaw's face. Its determination and confidence were gone. At last the iron mask of the law was broken, and there shone through it something of the emotions and the brotherhood of man. He was fumbling in one of his pockets, and drew out the key to the handcuffs. It was a small key, and he held it between stiffened fingers with difficulty. He knelt down beside Billy. The keyhole was filled with snow. It took a long time—ten minutes—before the key fitted in and the lock clicked. He helped to tear off the cuffs. Billy felt no sensation as the bits of skin and flesh came with them. Brokaw gave him a hand, and assisted him to rise. For the first time he spoke.

"Guess you've got me beat, Billy," he said. "Where's the Indian's?"

He drew his automatic Savage from its holster and tossed it in the snow-drift. The shadow of a smile passed grimly over his face. Billy looked about him. They had stopped where the frozen path of a smaller stream joined the creek. He raised one of his stiffening arms and pointed to it.

"Follow the creek—four miles—and you'll come to Indian Joe's shack," he said.

"And a mile is just about our limit." "Just about—yours," replied Billy. "I can't make another half. If we had a fire—"

"If—" wheezed Brokaw. "If we had a fire," continued Billy, "we could warm ourselves, an' make the Indian's shack easy, couldn't we?"

Brokaw did not answer. He had turned toward the creek when one of Billy's pulseless hands fell heavily on his arm.

"Look here, Brokaw." Brokaw turned. They looked into each other's eyes.

"I guess mebbe you're a man, Brokaw," said Billy quietly. "You've done what you thought was your duty. You have kept your word to th' law, an' I believe you'll keep your word with me. If I say the word that'll save us now will you go back to headquarters an' report me dead?"

For a full half minute their eyes did not waver.

Then Brokaw said: "No."

Billy dropped his hand. It was Brokaw's hand that fell on his arm now.

"I can't do that," he said. "In ten years I ain't run out the white flag once. It's something that ain't known in the service. There ain't a coward in it, or a man who's afraid to die. But I'll play you square. I'll wait until we're both on our feet again and then I'll give you twenty-four hours the start of me."

Billy was smiling now. His hand reached out. Brokaw's met it, and the two joined in a grip that their numb fingers scarcely felt.

"Do you know," said Billy softly, "there's been somethin' runnin' in my head ever since we left the burning cabin. It's something my mother taught me: 'Do unto others as you'd have others do unto you.' I'm a d—fool, ain't I? But I'm goin' to try the experiment, Brokaw, an' see what comes of it. I could drop in a snow-drift an' let you go on—to die. Then I could save myself. But I'm going to take your word—an' do the other thing. I've got a match."

"A match!"

"Just one. I remember dropping it in my pants pocket yesterday when I was out on the trail. It's in this pocket. Your hand is in better shape than mine. Get it."

Life had leaped into Brokaw's face. He thrust his hand into Billy's pocket, staring at him as he fumbled, as if fearing that he had lied. When he drew his hand out the match was between his fingers.

"Ah!" he whispered excitedly.

"Don't get nervous," warned Billy. "It's the only one."

Brokaw's eyes were searching the low timber along the shore.

"There's a birch tree," he cried. "Hold it—while I gather a pile of bark!"

He gave the match to Billy, and staggered through the snow to the bank. Strip after strip of the loose bark he tore from the tree. Then he gathered it in a heap in the shelter of a long-hanging spruce, and added dry sticks, and still more bark, to it. When it was ready he stood with his hands in his pockets, and looked at Billy.

"If we had a stone, an' a piece of paper—" he began.

Billy thrust a hand that felt like lifeless lead inside his shirt and fumbled in a pocket he had made there. Brokaw watched him with red, eager eyes. The hand reappeared and in it was the buckskin wrapped photograph he had seen the night before. Billy took off the buckskin. About the picture there was a bit of tissue paper. He gave this and the match to Brokaw.

"There's a little gun-file in the pocket the match came from," he said. "I had it mending a trap-chain. You can scratch the match on that."

He turned so that Brokaw could reach into the pocket, and the man hunter thrust in his hand. When he brought it forth he held the file. There was a smile on Billy's frostbitten face as he held the picture for a moment under Brokaw's eyes. Billy's own hands had ruffled up the girl's shining curls an instant before the picture was taken, and she was laughing at him when the camera clicked.

"It's all up to her, Brokaw," Billy said gently. "I told you that last night. It was she who woke me up before the fire got us. If you ever prayed—pray a little now. For she's going to strike that match!"

He still looked at the picture as Brokaw knelt beside the pile he had made. He heard the scratch of the match on the file, but his eyes did not turn. The living, breathing face of the most beautiful thing in the world was speaking to him from out of that picture. His mind was dazed. He swayed a little. He heard a voice, low and sweet, and so distant that it came to him like the faintest whisper. "I am coming—I am coming, Billy—coming—coming—coming—" A joyous cry surged up from his soul, but it died on his lips in a strange gasp. A louder cry brought him to himself

for a moment. It was from Brokaw. The sergeant's face was terrible to behold. He rose to his feet, swaying his hands clutched at his breast.

"The match—went—out—"

He staggered up to Billy, his eyes like a madman's. Billy swayed dizzily. He laughed, even as he crumpled down in the snow. As if in a dream he saw Brokaw stagger off on the frozen trail. He saw him disappear into hopeless effort to reach the Indian's shack. And then a strange darkness closed him in, and in that darkness he heard still the sweet voice of his wife. It spoke his name again and again, and it urged him to wake up—wake up—wake up! It seemed a long time before he could respond to it. But at last he opened his eyes. He dragged himself to his knees, and looked first to find Brokaw. But the man hunter had gone—forever. The picture was still in his hand. Less distinctly than before he saw the girl smiling at him. And then—at his back—he heard a strange and new sound. With an effort he turned to discover what it was.

The match had hidden an unseen spark from Brokaw's eyes. From out of the pile of fuel was rising a pillar of smoke and flame.

(The End.)

Knew His Business.

The elevator boy was green at the job. Two passengers, a man and a woman, got on at the street floor. "Ninth," said the later once they were fairly started. "Sixth," said the man. The car sped by the sixth floor and stopped at the ninth. On the way back the man said: "Why in thunder didn't you stop at the sixth floor? The sixth is lower than the ninth." "I know that," said the elevator boy, "but the lady said 'Ninth' first."

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