

WHEN THE MAIL CAME IN

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WE didn't like Montague Prosser at first—he was too clean. He wore his virtue like a bathrobe, flapping it in our faces. It was Whitewater Kelly who undertook to mitigate him one day, but being as the nuisance stood an even fathom high and had a double-action football motion about him, Whitewater's endeavors kind of broke through the ice and he languished around in his bunk the next week while we sat up nights and changed his bandages.

Yes, Monty was equally active at repaitee or rough-house, and he knocked Whitewater out from under his cap, slick and clean, just the way you map a playing-card out from under a coin, which phenomenon terminated our tendencies to scorp and carp.

Personally, I didn't care. If a man wants to wallow about in a disgusting daily debauch of cleanliness, it is his privilege. If he squanders the fleeting moments brushing teeth, cleaning fingernails, and such technicalities, it stands to reason he won't have much time left to attend to his work and at the same time cultivate the essentials of life like smoking, drinking, and the proper valuation of a three-card draw. But, as I say, it's up to him, and outsiders who don't see merit in such a system shouldn't try to bust up his game unless they've got good foot-work and a knockout punch.

It wasn't so much these physical refinements that riled us as the rarefied atmosphere of his general mental and moral altitudes. To me there's eloquence and sentiment and romance and spiritual uplift in a real, full-grown, black-whiskered cuss-word. It's a great help in a mountainous country. Profanity is like steam in a locomotive—takes more to run you up-hill than on the level, and inasmuch as there's only a few men on the level, a violent vocabulary is a necessity and appeals to me like a certificate of good character and general opability.

There wasn't a thing doing with Prosser in the idiom line, however. His moral make-up was like his body, big and sound and white and manicured, and although his talk, alongside of ours, listened like it was skimmed and seminarian, still when we got to know him we found that his verbal structures had vital organs and hair on their chests just like anybody else's, and at the same time had the advantage of being fit to send through the mails.

He had left a widowed mother and come north on the main chance, like the rest of us, only he originated farther east. What made the particular ten-strike with us was the pride he took in that same mother. He gloried in her and talked about her in that hushed and nervous way a man speaks about a real mother or a regular sweetheart. We men-folks liked him all the better for it. I say we men, for he was a "shine" with the women—all nine of them. The camp was fifteen hundred strong that winter, over and above which was the aforesaid galaxy of nine, stranded on their way up-river to a Dawson dance-hall. The Yukon froze up and they had to winter with us. Of course there were the three married ladies, too, living with their husbands back on the Birch Ridge, but we never saw them, and they didn't count. The others went to work at Eckert's theater.

Monty would have been right popular at Eckert's—he was a handsome lad—but he couldn't see those people with a field-glass. They simply scandalized him to death.

"I love to dance," said he one night, as we looked on, "and the music sends thrills through me, but I won't do it."

"Why not?" I asked. "This is Alaska. Be democratic. You're not so awfully nice that a dance-hall girl will contaminate you."

"It's not democracy that I lack, nor contamination that I'm afraid of," he replied. "It's the principle back of it all. If we encourage these girls in the lives they lead, we're just as bad as they are."

He saw me dancing with them?" "Well, that's a bad line of talk and I couldn't say much."

Of course, when the actresses found out how he felt they came back at him strong, but he wrapped himself up in his dignity and held himself aloof when he came to town, so he didn't seem to mind it.

It was one afternoon in January, cold and sharp, that Ollie Marceau's team went through the ice just below our camp. She was a great dog-puncher and had the best team in camp—seven fine malamoots—which she drove every day. When the animals smelled our place they ran away and dragged her into the open water below the hot springs. She was wet for ten minutes, and by the time she had got out and stumbled to our bunk-house she was all in. Another ten minutes with the "quick" at thirty below would have finished her, but we rushed her in by the fire and made her drink a glass of "hootch." Martin got her parka off somehow while I slipped the strings to her mukluks and had her little feet rubbed red with berries before she'd quit apologizing for the trouble she'd made. A fellow learns to watch toes pretty close in the winter.

"Lord! stop your talk," we said. "This is the first chance we have had to do anything for a lady in two years. It's a downright pleasure for us to take you in this way."

"Indeed!" she chattered. "Well, it isn't mutual—! And we all laughed."

We roused up a good fire and made her take off all the wet clothes she felt she could afford to, then wrung them out and hung them up to dry. We made her gulp down another whisky, too, after which I gave her some footgear and she slipped into one of Martin's Mackinaw shirts. We knew just how faint and shaky she felt, but she was dead game and jolted with us about it.

I never realized what a cute trick she was till I saw her in that great, coarse, blue shirt with her feet in beaded moccasins, her yellow hair tousled, and the sparkle of adventure in her bright eyes. She stood out like a nugget by candle-light, backed, as she was, by the dingy bark walls of our cabin.

I suppose it was a bad instant for Prosser to appear. He certainly cued in wrong and found the sight shocking to his Plymouth Rock propertities.

The raw liquor we had forced on her had gone to her head a bit, as will when you're fresh from the cold and your stomach is empty, so her face was flushed and had a pretty, reckless, daring look to it. She had feet high up on a chair, too—not so very high, either—where they were thawing out under the warmth of the oven, and we were all laughing at her story of the mishap.

Monty stopped on recognizing who she was, while the surprise in his face gave way to disapproval. We could see it as plain as if it were written on his forehead, and that he refused to be a party to anything as devilish as this looked—but it wasn't according to the Alaska code, and it was like a slap in the girl's face.

"Too bad," he said, coldly. "If I can be of any assistance you'll find me down at the shaft-house." And out he walked.

"You know he didn't intend to be inhospitable, that it was just his infernal notions of decency, and that he refused to be a party to anything as devilish as this looked—but it wasn't according to the Alaska code, and it was like a slap in the girl's face."

"Were you ever broke and friendless and hopeless?" "Why, I can't say I ever was."

"And you've never been downright hungry, either, where you didn't know if you'd ever eat again, have you? Then what license have you got to blame people for the condition you find them in? How do you know what brought this girl where she is?"

"Oh, I pity any woman who is adrift on the world, if that's what you mean, but I won't make a pet out of her just because she is friendless. She must expect that when she chooses her life. Her kind are bad—bad all through. They must be."

"Not on your life. Decency runs deeper than the hives."

"Trouble with you," said I, "you've got a juvenile standard—things are all good or all bad in your eyes—and you can't like a person unless the one overbalances the other. When you are older you'll find that people are like gold-mines, with a thin streak of pay on bed-rock and lots of hard digging above."

"I didn't mean to be discourteous," our man continued, "but I'll never change my feelings about such things. Mind you, I'm not preaching, nor asking you to change your habits—all I want is a chance to live my own life clean."

The mail came in during March, five hundred pounds of it, and the camp went farty. Monty had the dogs harnessed ten minutes after we got the news, and we drove the four miles in seventeen minutes. I've known men with sweaters outside, but I never knew one to act gladder than Monty did at the thought of hearing from his mother.

"You must come and see us when you make your pile," he told me, "or—what's better—we'll go East together next spring and surprise her. Won't that be great? We'll walk in on her in the summer twilight while she is working in her flower-garden. Can't you just see the green trees and smell the good odors of home? The carbirds will be calling and the grass will be clean and sweet. Why, I'm so tired of the cold and the snow and the white, white mountains that I can hardly stand it."

He ran on in that vein all the way to town, glad and hopeful and boyish—and I wondered why, with his earnestness and loyalty and broad shoulders, he had never loved any woman but his mother. When I was twenty-three my whole romantic system had been mangled and shredded from heart to gizzard. Still, some men get their age all in a lump; they're boys up till the last minute, then they get the Rip Van Winkle while you wait.

This morning was bitter, but the "sour doughs" were lined up outside the store, waiting their turns like a crowd of Parisian fire-fighters, so we fell in with the rest, whipping our arms and stamping our moccasins till the chill ate into our very bones. It took hours to sort the letters, but not a man whimpered. When you wait for vital news a tension comes that chokes complaint. There was no joking here, nor that elephantine persiflage which marks rough men when they foregather in the wilderness. They were the fellows who biased the trail, bearded, shaggy, and not pretty to look at, for they all knew hardship and went out strong-hearted into this silent land, jostling with danger and singing in the solitude. Here in the presence of the mail they laid aside their cloaks of carelessness and saw one another bared to the quick, timid with hunger for the wives and little ones behind.

There were a few like Prosser, in whom there was still the glamour of the Northland and the mystery of the unknown, but they were scattered, and in their eyes the anxious light was growing also.

Five months is a wearying time, and silent suspense will sap the courage. If only one could banish worry; but the long, unbearable nights when the mind leaps and scurries into the voids of conjecture like sparks from a chimney—well, it's then you roll in your bunk and your sigh ain't from the snow-shoe pain.

A half-frozen man in an ice-clogged dory had brought us, just before the river stopped, and now, after five months, the curtain parted again.

I saw McGill, the lawyer, in the line ahead of me and noted the grayness of his cheeks, the nervous way his lips worked, and the futile, wandering, uselessness of his hands. Then I remembered. When his letter came the fall before it said the wife was very low, that the crisis was near, and that they would write again in a few days. He had lived this endless time with Fear stalking at his shoulder. He had lain down with it nightly and risen with it grinning at him in the slow, cold dawn. The boys had told me how well he fought it back week after week, but now, edging inch by inch toward the door behind which lay his message, it got the best of him.

I wrung his hand and tried to say something. "I want to run away," he quavered. "But I'm afraid to."

When we got in at last we met men coming out, and in some faces we saw the marks of tragedy. Others smiled, and these put hands into us.

Old man Tomlinson had four little girls back in Idaho. He got two letters. One was six-months-old tax receipt; the other a laundry bill. That meant three months more of silence.

When my turn came and I saw the writing of the little woman something gripped me by the throat, while I saw my hands shake as if

Monty had taken his mail and run off like a puppy to feast in quiet, so I went over to Eckert's and had a drink.

"Sam winked at me as I came in. A man was reading from a letter. 'Go on, I'm interested,' said the proprietor."

The fellow was getting full pretty fast and was down to the garrulous stage, but he began again:

"Dear Husband—I am sorry to hear that you have been so unfortunate, but don't get discouraged. I know you will make a good miner if you stick to it long enough. Don't worry about me. I have rented the front room to a very nice man for fifteen dollars a week. The papers here are full of a gold strike in Siberia, just across Bering Sea from where you are. If you don't find something during the next two years, why not try it over there for a couple?"

"That's what I call a persevering woman," said Eckert, solemnly. "She's a business woman, too," said the husband. "All I ever got for that room was seven-fifty a week."

It seems I'd missed Montague at the store, but when the crowd came out Ollie Marceau found him away from the back, having gone there to be alone with his letters. She saw the utter abandon and grief in his pose, and the tears came to her eyes. Impulsively she went up and laid her hand on his bowed head. She had followed the frontier enough to know the signs.

"Oh, Mr. Prosser," she said, "I'm so sorry! Is it the little mother?" "Yes," he answered, without moving.

"Not—not—" she hesitated. "I don't know. The letters are up to the middle of December, and she was very sick."

Then, with the quick sentiment of her kind, the girl spoke to him, forgetting herself, her life, his preju-

dice, everything except the lonely little gray woman out there who had waited and longed just as such another had waited and longed for her, and inasmuch as Ollie had suffered before as this boy suffered now, in her words there was a sweet sympathy and a perfect understanding.

It was very fine, I think, coming so from her, and when the first shock had passed over he felt that here, among all these rugged men, there was no one to give him the comfort he craved except this child of the dance-hall. Compassion and sympathy he could get from any of us, but he was a boy and this was his first grief, so he yearned for something more, something subtler, perhaps the delicate comprehension of a woman. At any rate, he wouldn't let her leave him, and the tender-hearted lass poured out all the best her warm nature afforded.

In a few days he braced up, however, and stood his sorrow like the rest of us. It made him more of a man in many ways. For one thing, he never scoffed now at any of the nine women, which, taken as an indication, was good. In fact, I saw him several times with the Marceau girl, for he found her all ways ready and responsive, and came to confide in her rather than in Martin or me, which was quite natural. Martin spoke about it first.

"I hate to see 'em together so much," said he. "One of 'em is going to fall in love, sure, and it won't be reciprocated none. It would serve him right to get it hard, but if she's hit—it'll be too damn' pitiful. You an' I will have to combine forces and beat him up, I reckon."

The days were growing long and warm, the hills were coming bare on the heights, while the snow packed wet at midday when we went into it. We found everybody else there for the same purpose, so the sap began to run through the camp. We

were loading at the trading-post the next day when I heard the name of Ollie Marceau. It was a big-limbed fellow from Alder Creek talking, and, as he showed no liquor in his face, what he said sounded all the worse. I have heard as bad many a time without offense, for there's no code of loyalty concerning these girls, but Ollie had got my sympathy, somehow, and I resented the remarks, particularly the laughter. So did Prosser, the Puritan. He looked up from his work, white and dangerous.

"Don't talk the way about a girl," said he to the stranger, and it made a sensation among the crowd.

I never knew a man before with courage enough to kick in public on such subjects. As it was, the man said something so much worse that right there the front busted out of the tiger-cage and for a few brief moments we were given over to chaos.

I had seen Whitewater wallowed and I knew how full of parlor tricks the kid was, but this time he went insane. He knocked that man off the counter at the first pass and climbed him with his hobnails as he lay on the floor. A fight is a fight, and a good thing for spectators and participants, for it does more to keep down scum than anything I know of, but the thud of those slick boots into that helpless flosser sickened me, and we rushed Prosser out of there while he struggled like a maniac. I never saw such a complete reversal of form. Somewhere, away back yonder, that boy's forefathers were pirates or cannibals or butchers.

When the fog had cleared out of his brain the reaction was just as powerful. I took him out alone while the others worked over the Alder Creek party, and all at once my man fell apart like wet sawdust.

"What made me do it—what made me do it?" he cried. "I'm crazy. Why, I tried to kill him! And yet what he said is true—that's the worst of it—it's true. Think of it, and I fought for her. What am I coming to?"

After the clean-up we came to camp, waiting for the river to break and the first boat to follow. It was then that the suspense began to tell on our partner. He read and reread his letters, but there was little hope in them, and he grew nervous. Added to everything else, our food ran short, and we lived on scraps of whatever was left over from our winter grub-stake. Just out of cussedness the break-up was ten days late, the ten longest days I ever put in, but eventually it came, and a week later also came the mail. We needed food and clothes, we needed whiskey, we needed news of the great distant world—but all we thought of was our mail.

and you helped me. Only for you I'd have broken down; but I want you to know I've done one good thing at last in my miserable life. I've held in. He never knew—he never knew. O God! what fools men are!"

"Yes," I said, "you did mighty well. He's a sensitive chap, and if you'd broken down he'd have felt awful bad."

"What?" She grasped me by the coat lapels and shook me. Yes! That weak little woman shook me, while her face went perfectly livid.

"He'd have felt badly," eh? Man! Didn't you see? Are you blind? Why, he asked me to go with him. He asked me to marry him. Think of it—that great, wonderful man asked me to be his wife—me—Ollie Marceau, the dancer! Oh, oh! Isn't it funny? Why don't you laugh?"

I didn't laugh. I stood there, picking pieces of fur out of my cap and wondering if ever I should see another woman like this one. She paced about over the skin rugs, tearing at the throat of her dress as if it choked her. There were no tears in her eyes, but her whole frame shook and shuddered as if from great cold, deep set in her bones.

"Why didn't you go?" I asked, stupidly. "You love him, don't you?" "You know why I didn't go," she cried, fiercely. "I couldn't. How could I go back and meet his mother? Some day she'd find me out and it would spoil his life. No! If only she hadn't recovered—No, I don't mean that, either. I'm not his kind, that's all. Ah, God! I let him go—I let him go, and he never knew!"

She was writhing now on her bed in a perfect frenzy, calling to him brokenly, stretching out her arm while great, dry, coughing sobs wracked her.

"Little one," I said, unsteadily, and my throat ached so that I couldn't trust myself to utter a brave-girl, and your's his kind or anybody's kind."

With that the rain came, and so I left her alone with her comforting misery. When I told Kink he sputtered like a pinwheel, and every evening thereafter we two went up to her house and sat with her. We could do this because she'd quit the theater the day the boat took Prosser away, and she wouldn't heed Eckert's offers to go back.

"I'm through with it for good," she told us, "though I don't know what else I'm good for. You see, I don't know anything useful, but I suppose I can learn."

"Not if I wasn't married already," I said. "Humph!" snorted Kink. "I ain't so young as neither one of my partners, miss, but I'm possessed of rare intellectual treasures."

She laughed at both of us, and after that first boat went down with Prosser, we began to look daily for the first up-river steamer, bringing word direct from the outside world. It came one midnight, and as we were getting dressed to go to the landing our tent was torn open and Montague tumbled in upon us.

"What brought you back?" we questioned when we'd finished mauling him.

"The Women Are Worse than the Men," said Monty, "for All the Gamblers Have Lost is Their Honesty!"



Wyckoff

