## WHEN THE MAIL CAME IN

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By REX BEACH World Famed Author of Successful Fiction

TE 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 day, but, being as the nuisance stood an even fathom high and had a double-action football motion about him, Whitewater's endeavors team went through the ice just bekind of broke through the ice and

nights and changed his bandages. knocked Whitewater out from unfrom under a coin, which phenomenon terminated our tendencies to scoff and carp.

ness, it is his privilege. If he squanders the fleeting moments A fellow learns to watch toes pretty brushing teeth, cleaning finger- close in the winter. nails, and such technicalities. stands to reason he won't have and at the same time cultivate the ure for us to take you in this way." essentials of life like smoking. drinking, and the proper valuation of a three-card draw. But, as I say, shouldn't try to bust up his game unless they've got good foot-work and a knockout punch.

rarefled atmosphere of his general mental and moral altitudes. To me about it. there's eloquence and sentiment and romance and spiritual uplift in a she was till I saw her in that great, cuss-word. It's a great help in a mountainous country. Profanity is ture in her bright eyes. She stood like steam in a locomotive-takes out like a nugget by candle-light, more to run you up-hill than on the backed, as she was, by the dingy level, and inasmuch as there's only a few men on the level, a violent vocabulary is a necessity and ap- cued in wrong and found the sight peals to me like a certificate of good shocking to his Plymouth Rock character and general capability.

There wasn't a thing doing with | The raw liquor we had forced on Prosser in the idiom line, however. her had gone to her head a bit, as it will when you're fresh from the His moral make-up was like his cold and your stomach is empty, manicured, and although his talk, pretty, reckless, daring look to it alongside of ours, listened like it was skimmed and seminaried, still they were thawing out under the when we got to know him we found warmth of the oven, and we were that his verbal structures had vital all laughing at her story of the organs and hair on their chests just like anybody else's, and at the same time had the advantage of being fit his face gave way to disapproval. 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 eyes were fastened on the bottle on pride he took in that same mother. the table, and I saw also that he He gloried in her and talked about knew what caused the fever in her her in that hushed and nervous way a man speaks about a real mother or a regular sweetheart. We menfolks liked him all the better for it. I say we men, for he was a "shine" I knew he didn't intend to be inwith the women-all nine of them. fernal notions of decency, and that which was the aforesaid galaxy of nine, stranded on their way upriver to a Dawson dance-hall. The Yukon froze up and they had to be going now." winter with us. Of course there were the three married ladies, too, living with their husbands back on in a mile!" And we made her listen the Birch Ridge, but we never saw to us. them, and they didn't count. The others went to work at Eckert's theater.

popular at Eckert's-he was a handsome lad-but he couldn't see those people with a field-glass. They finally sent the young woman off simply scandalized him to death.

"I love to dance," said he one night, as we looked on, "and the

"Why not?" I asked. "This is telligent dam' fool as you are." 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

"Look here, son, when I quit salt the old man. "And what's the matnor that elephantine persifiage so flercely that when the light came ways ready and responsive, and where her little nest was perched. and the medicine-kit. We'll overwater I left all that garbage and ter with that kind of people? You which marks rough men when they into my face he snatched the letter came to confide in her rather than Every one spoke and smiled to her take you." are too short, the nights are too cold, and grub is too dear for me to sweat instead of perspiring you hardship and went out strong- the time she'd make it. Why, I much," said he. "One of 'em is go- her pace quickened, however, and I And so she went up the river trail

"No, sir: I won't associate with gamblers and crooks, so why should They're worse than the men, for all it?" the gamblers have lost is their honesty. Every time I see these girls I think of the little mother man?" back home. It's awful. Suppose "No."

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

Of course, when the actresses found out how he felt they came back at him strong, but he wrapped so he didn't seem to mind it.

It was one afternoon in January.

low our camp. She was a great he languished around in his bunk dog-puncher and had the best team the next week while we sat up which she drove every day. When the animals smelled our place they Yes, Monty was equally active at ran away and dragged her into the repartee or rough-house, and he open water below the hot springs. She was wet for ten minutes, and by the time she had got out and der his cap, slick and clean, just the stumbled to our bunk-house she way you snap a playing-card out | 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." Mar-Personally, I didn't care. If a tin got her parka off somehow while man wants to wallow about in a I slashed the strings to her mukluks and had her little feet rubbed red as berries before she'd quit apologizing for the trouble sho'd made.

"Lord! stop your talk," we said "This is the first chance we have live my own life clean." had to do anything for a lady in much time left to attend to his work two years. It's a downright pleas-"Indeed!" she chattered. "Well, it isn't mutual-" And we all laughed.

it's up to him, and outsiders who made her take off all the wet clothes sweethearts outside, but I never into us, don't see merit in such a system she felt she could afford to, then knew one to act gladder than Monty wrung them out and hung them up did at the thought of hearing from little girls back in Idaho. He got "Yes," he answered, without movanother whisky, too, after which I gave her some footgear and she you make your pile," he told me, bill. That meant three months more It wasn't so much these physical slipped into one of Martin's Mack- "or-what's better-we'll go East of silence. refinements that riled us as the inaw shirts. We knew just how together next spring and surprise When my turn came and I saw was very sick." faint and shaky she felt, but she her. Won't that be great? We'll the writing of the little woman Then, with the quick sentiment of

I never realized what a cute trick real, full-grown, black-whiskered coarse, blue shirt with her feet in beaded moccasins, her yellow hair tousled, and the sparkle of advenbark walls of our cabin.

I suppose it was a bad instant for Prosser to appear. He certainly proprieties.

body, big and sound and white and so her face was flushed and had a She had feet high up on a chair, too -not so very high, either-where mishap.

Monty stopped on recognizing who she was, while the surprise in We could see it as plain as if it was blazoned there in printer's ink, and it sobered us. The girl removed her feet and stood up.

"Miss Marceau has just had an accident," I began, but I saw his cheeks.

"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.

The camp was fifteen hundred he refused to be a party to anystrong that winter, over and above thing 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. "I am quite dry," she said. "I'll

"You will not. You'll stay to supper and drive home by moonlight," says we. "Why, you'd freeze

During the meal Prosser never opened his mouth except to put something into it, but his manner was as full of language as an ora-Monty would have been right tion. He didn't thaw out the way a man should when he sees strangers wading into the grub he's paid

Martin turned on him. eyes were black - "I've rattled music sends thrills through me, but many a good and many a bad man, around for thirty years and seen but I never before seen such an in-"What do you mean?" said the

> "You've broke about the only law the store, waiting their turns like a when he did he shuddered. that this here country boasts of- crowd of Parsifal first-nighters, so the law of hospitality.

spoke up. "Did you, Monty?"

water East, all pink and perfumed were the fellows who blazed the and-beans country where people pretty to look at, for they all knew couldn't fool me. No, sir. I felt all "I hate to see 'em together so As we came near to the end and you pretty badly." find. What do you know about peo- solitudes. Here in the presence of

"Of course not," said Prosser, who bared to the quick, timid with kept his temper. "Did you ever want to drink

you ever want to kill

"Were you ever broke and friendless and hopeless?"

"Why, I can't say I ever was." tion you find them in? How do you bunk and your sigh ain't from the know what brought this girl where snow-shoe pain.

cold and sharp, that Ollie Marceau's in camp—seven fine malamoots— out of her just because she is after five months, the curtain parted friendless. She must expect that again. when she chooses her life. Her kind I saw McGill, the lawyer, in the must be."

> deeper than the hives." lots of hard digging above."

The mail came in during March, something. five hundred pounds of it, and the camp went daffy.

Monty had the dogs harnessed ten We roused up a good fire and teen minutes. Ive known men with Others smiled, and these put heart enough to know the signs.

Five months is a wearying time, "And you've never been downright worry; but the long, unbearable had a drink. hungry, either, where you didn't nights when the mind leaps and know if you'd ever eat again, have scurries out into the voids of conwho undertook to mitigate him one himself up in his dignity and held you? Then what license have you jecture like sparks from a chimney himself aloof when he came to town, got to blame people for the condi- -well, it's then you roll in your

> A half-frozen man in an ice-"Oh, I pity any woman who is clogged dory had brought us our adrift on the world, if that's what last news, one October day, just you mean, but I won't make a pet before the river stopped, and now,

are bad-bad all through. They line ahead of me and noted the grayness of his cheeks, the nervous "Not on your life. Decency runs way his lips worked, and the futile, wandering, uselessness of his hands. "Trouble with you," said I, "you've Then I remembered. When his got a juvenile standard-things are letter came the fall before it said all good or all bad in your eyes- the wife was very low, that the and you can't like a person unless crisis was near, and that they would the one overbalances the other. write again in a few days. He had not try it over there for a couple?" When you are older you'll find that lived this endless time with Fear people are like gold-mines, with a stalking at his shoulder. He had thin streak of pay on bed-rock and lain down with it nightly and risen with it grinning at him in the slow, "I didn't mean to be discourteous," cold dawn. The boys had told me our man continued, "but I'll never how well he fought it back week for that room was seven-fifty a the counter at the first pass and as if it choked her. There were no things. Mind you, I'm not preach- inch toward the door behind which It seems I'd missed Montague at lay on the floor. A fight is a fight, frame shook and shuddered as if

I wrung his hand and tried to say

ered. "But I'm afraid to."

two letters. One was a six-months- ing. "You must come and see us when old tax receipt, the other a laundry

and stient suspense will sap the run off like a puppy to feast in the next day when I heard the I'd have broken down; but I want courage. If only one could banish quiet, so I went over to Eckert's and name of Ollie Marceau. It was a you to know I've done one good

> proprietor. The fellow was getting full pretty there is no code of loyalty concern- well. He's a sensitive chap, and if 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 crowd. 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 during the next two years, why

woman," said Eckert, solemnly. "She's a business woman, too,"

ing, nor asking you to change your lay his message, it got the best of the store, but when the crowd came and a good thing for spectators and from great cold, deep set in her out Ollie Marceau found him away participants, for it does more to bones. in at the back, having gone there keep down scurvy than anything I to be alone with his letters. She know of, but the thud of those stupidly. "You love him, don't you?" "I want to run away," he quay- saw the utter abandon and grief in heavy boots into that helpless flesh his pose, and the tears came to her sickened me, and we rushed Prosser When we got in at last we met eyes. Impulsively she went up and out of there while he struggled like could I go back and meet his minutes after we got the news, and men coming out, and in some faces laid her hand on his bowed head. a maniac. I never saw such a com- mother? Some day she'd find me

Old man Tomlinson had four so sorry! Is it the little mother?" butchers.

"Not-not-" she hesitated.

was dead game and joked with us walk in on her in the summer something gripped me by the throat, her kind, the girl spoke to him, for- me do it?" he cried. "I'm crazy.

A man was reading from a letter. "Go on. I'm interested," said the the worse. I have heard as bad men are!" many a time without offense, for

> my sympathy, somehow, and I re- awful bad." sented the remarks, particularly the laughter. So did Prosser,"the Puritan. He looked up from his work, white and dangerous.

"Don't talk that way about a face went perfectly livid. girl," said he to the stranger, and

the tiger-cage and for a few brief you laugh?" "That's what I call a persevering I had seen Whitewater walloped and wondering if ever I should see said the husband. "All I ever got insane. He knocked that man off tearing at the throat of her dress

his brain the reaction was just as never knew!" powerful. I took him out alone "I don't know. The letters are up while the others worked over the in a perfect frenzy, calling to him

"What made me do it-what made wrenched her. twilight while she is working in her while I saw my hands shake as if getting berself, her life, his preju- Why, I tried to kill him! And yet and my throat ached so that I and I fought for her. What am I anybody's kind."

coming to ?" Added to everything else, our food Eckert's offers to go back. days late, the ten longest days I suppose I can learn." ever put in, but eventually it came, "Now, if I wasn't married aland a week later also came the mail, ready-" I said, We needed food and clothes, we the great, distant world-but all we ners, miss, but I'm possessed of rare

thought of was our mail. The boy had decided to go home. She laughed at both of us. We were sorry to see him leave, too, When a week had passed after the for he had the makings of a real first boat went down with Prosser, we man in him even if he shaved three began to look daily for the first uptimes a week, but no sooner was the river steamer, bringing word direct steamer tied than he came plunging from the outside world. It came into my tent like a moose, laughing one midnight, and as we were get-

The mother was well again. Later I went aboard to give him | tumbled in upon us. the last lonesome good wishes of the "What brought you back?" we fellow who stays behind and fights questioned when we'd finished maulalong for another year. The big ing him. freighter, with her neat staterooms It was June, and the nights were and long, glass-burdened tables, as light as day in this latitude, so awoke a perfect panic in me to be we could see his face plainly. going with him, to shake this cruel country and drift back to the home instant, then threw back his head, mother made.

the Marceau girl, who was saying back to marry Olive Marceau," said good-by to him. There was a look he. "I came to take her back home about her I had never seen before, to the little mother." and all at once the understanding He stared out wistfully at the disand the bitter irony of it struck me. tant southern mountains, effulgent This poor waif hadn't had enough and glorified by the midnight sun to stand, so Love had come to her, which lay so close behind their just as Kink had predicted-a hope- crests, and I winked at Martin. less love which she would have to the green trees and smell the good news was good, though, and I read little gray woman off there who had fight the way she fought the whole world. It made me bitter and will be calling and the grass will be at last when I looked up I found other had waited and longer for her, cynical, but I admired her nerve— pose you can see her until tomorshe was dressed for the sacrifice, row." trim and well-curried as a thousand-dollar pony. Back of her smile, though, I saw the waiting "when you quit her like a dog I

cider-press.

"God bless you, lad! You must ! come back to us," I said, but he stant's hesitation, the last he ever shook his head, and I heard the had, and then I said; girl's breath catch. I continued: "You walk up the river trail for a "Come on, Ollie; I'll help you quarter of a mile and wait. If I can shore."

rether and watched the last of him. tall and clear-cut against the white you left." of the wheel-house, and it seemed . "I wouldn't gamble none on her to me when he had gone that some- meetin' you," Martin said, discourthing bright and vital and young agingly, and combed out his new-In a few days he braced up, how- had passed out of me, leaving in mown beard with ostentation. Then, recognizing me, he thrust ever, and stood his sorrow like the its stead discouragement and dark-

"That kind of people," yelled plaint. There was no joking here. But she had, and he watched me Marceau girl, for he found her alsaloops, till we came to the hill "You run along while I fetch Kink in Martin or me, which was quite and she answered in the same way. "Ah-h! Give it to me! Give it natural. Martin spoke about it though I knew she was on parade

Monty had taken his mail and were loading at the trading-post and you helped me. Only for you big-limbed fellow from Alder Creek thing at last in my miserable life. Sam winked at me as I came in. talking, and, as he showed no liquor I've held in. He never knew-he in his face, what he said sounded all never knew. O God! what fools

fast and was down to the garrulous ing these girls, but Ollie had got you'd broken down he'd have felt "What!"

She grasped me by the coat lapels and shook me. Yes! That weak little woman shook me, while her

"'He'd have felt badly,' eh? Man! it made a sensation among the Man! Didn't you see! Are you blind? Why, he asked me to go I never knew a man before with with him. He asked me to marry courage enough to kick in public on him. Think of it-that great, wonsuch subjects. As it was, the man derful man asked me to be his wife said something so much worse that |-me-Olive Marceau, the dancer! are. If you don't find something right there the front busted out of Oh, oh! Isn't it funny? Why don't

moments we were given over to I didn't laugh. I stood there, and I knew how full of parlor tricks another woman like this one. She the kid was, but this time he went paced about over the skin rugs, climbed him with his hobnails as he tears in her eyes, but her whole

"You know why I didn't go," she we drove the four miles in seven- we saw the marks of tragedy. She had followed the frontier plete reversal of form, Somewfiere, out and it would spoil his life. No. away back yonder, that boy's fore- no! If only she hadn't recovered-"Oh, Mr. Prosser," she said, "I'm fathers were pirates or cannibals or No, I don't mean that, either. I'm not his kind, that's all. Ah, God! When the fog had cleared out of I let him go-I let him go, and he

> to the middle of December, and she Alder Creek party, and all at once brokenly, stretching out her arms my man fell apart like wet sawdust, while great, dry, coughing sobs

what he said is true-that's the couldn't trust myself. "you're a worst of it-it's true. Think of it, brave-girl, and you're his kind or

With that the rain came, and so After the clean-up we came to I left her alone with her comforting camp, waiting for the river to break misery. When I told Kink he sputand the first boat to follow. It was tered like a pinwheel, and every then that the suspense began to evening thereafter we two went up tell on our partner. He read and to her house and sat with her. We reread his letters, but there was could do this because she'd quit the little hope in them, and now, with theater the day the boat took Prosno work to do, he grew nervous. ser away, and she wouldn't heed

ran short, and we lived on scraps "I'm through with it for good," of whatever was left over from our she told us, "though I don't know winter grub-stake. Just out of what else I'm good for. You see, I cussedness the break-up was ten don't know anything useful, but I

"Humph!" snorted Kink. "I ain't needed whisky, we needed news of so young as neither one of my pard-

intellectual treasures."

and dancing in his first gladness. ting dressed to go to the landing our tent was torn open and Montague

"Why-er-" - He hesitated for an

and the wife and the pies like squared his great young shoulders, and looked us in the eyes, while all I found him on the top deck with his embarrassment fied. "I came

"She's left-"

"What!" He whirled quickly. Disappointment darkened his face. "Besides," Kink added, gloomily,

tears, and my heart bled. Spring is slicked myself up some, and I ain't a flerce time for romance, anyhow, anyways sure she'll care to see you There wasn't time to say much, now-only jest as a friend of mine. so I squeezed Monty's hand like a Notice I've cut my whiskers, don't you?" We made Monty pay for that in-

persuade her to come out at this We stood on the bank there to- hour I'll send her to you. No, you couldn't find her. She's moved since

She was up the moment

"Is it anything serious?"

"Yes, it's apt to be unless you

of long, bright days that had no



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 we fell in with the rest, whipping "He didn't mean it that way," I our arms and stamping our moc- the missive into my hand. casins till the chill ate into our very

anxious light was growing also.

flower-garden. Can't you just see they belong to somebody else. My dice, everything except the lonely old smells of home? The catbirds it slowly-some parts twice-then waited and longed just as such anclean and sweet. Why, I'm so tired McGill near me. Unconsciously we and, inasmuch as Ollie had suffered of the cold and the snow and the had both sought a quiet corner, but before as this boy suffered now, in white, white mountains that I can be had sunk on to a box. Now, as her words there was a sweet sym-I glanced at him I saw what made pathy and a perfect understanding.

He ran on in that vein all the way me shiver. The Fear was there It was very fine, I think, coming to town, glad and hopeful and boy- again-naked and ugly-for he held so from her, and when the first ish-and I wondered why, with his one lonesome letter, and its inscrip- shock had passed over he felt that earnestness and loyalty and broad tion was in no woman's hand. He here, among all these rugged men, shoulders, he had never loved any had crouched there by my side all there was no one to give him the woman but his mother. When I this time, staring staring comfort he craved except this child was twenty-three my whole ro- at it, afraid to read-afraid to open of the dance-halls. Compassion and "Young feller," said he-and his mantic system had been mangled it. Some men smile in their agony, sympathy he could get from any of and shredded from heart to gizzard. shifting their pitiful masks to the us, but he was a boy and this was last, others curse, and no two will his first grief, so he yearned for take their blows alike.

McGill was plucking feebly at the perhaps the delicate comprehension end of his envelope, tearing off tiny of a woman. At any rate, he bits, dropping the fragments at his wouldn't let her leave him, and the "sour doughs" were lined up outside feet. Now and then he stopped, and tender-hearted lass poured out all "Buck up, old pal," I said.

up, and when you get into a bacon- trail, bearded, shaggy, and not to me! I knew it! I told you they first,

"What's the date?" I inquired. just as they come—and I'd advise ple, anyhow? Did you ever want to the mail they laid aside their cloaks Then, as he realized how old it was, of carelessness and saw one another he began to worry again.

hunger for the wives and little ones They must know I'll eat my heart

something more, something subtler, the best her warm nature afforded.

rest of us. It made him more of ness and age. "Certainly not. I'd help anybody bones. It took hours to sort the quick. I can't— No, no—wait! Not thing, he never scoffed now at any me up to my cabin?" Ollie asked, mur sympathetically as she dressed. out of trouble—man or woman—but letters, but not a man whimpered. yet. Don't tell me, I'll know from of the nine women, which, taken as "Of course not," I said, and we When we came to our tent I stopped girls in the lives they lead, we're I refuse to mix with that kind of When you wait for vital news a your face. They said she couldn't an indication, was good. In fact, I went down the long street, past the her.

ing to full in love, sure, and it won't guessed the panic that was on her to where he was waiting, her way be reciprocated none. It would to be alone where she could drop golden with the beams of the sun "September thirtieth," he said serve him right to get it hard, but her mask and become a woman-a whose rim peeped at her over the f she's hit—ft'll be too dam' pitiful. poor, weak, grief-stricken woman. far-off hills. And there, in the free, You an' I will have to combine But when we were inside at last still air, among the virgin spruce. "Why didn't they write later? forces and beat him up. I reckon." her manner astounded me. She with the clean, sweet moss beneath hobnob with these women? whisky so bad you couldn't stand There were a few like Prosser, in That's it. They wrote too soon, and the heights, while the snow packed but turned on me with burning the grim Yukon harried past, The days were growing long and didn't throw herself on her couch their feet, they met. The good sun warm, the hills were coming bare on nor go to pieces, as I had dreaded, smiled broadly at them now, and wet at midday when we went into eyes and her hands tight clenched, chuckling under its banks and of the Northland and the mystery got worse-died-months ago, and town to sled out grub for the clean- while her voice was throaty and swiggering among the roots, while up. We found everybody else there hoarse. The words came tumbling the song it sang was of spring and scattered, and in their eyes the "Stop it," I said, and reasoned for the same purpose, so the sap be- out in confusion.

gan to run through the camp. We! "T've let him go," she said. "Yes. night.