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Twain Walther von der Vogelweide Fouqué Friedrich II. von Preußen
Weber Freiligrath Frey
Fechner Fichte Weiße Rose von Fallersleben Kant Ernst Richthofen Frommel
Engels Fielding Hölderlin Eichendorff Tacitus Dumas
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Feuerbach Maximilian I. von Habsburg Fock Ewald Vergil
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Bismarck Vigny Gengenbach Barlach Heine Grillparzer Georgy
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Chamberlain Tersteegen Gilm Grillparzer Georgy
Brentano Claudius Schiller Lafontaine Kralik Iffland Sokrates
Strachwitz Bellamy Schilling Raabe Gibbon Tschchow
Katharina II. von Rußland Gerstäcker Raabe Gibbon Tschchow
Löns Hesse Hoffmann Gogol Wilde Gleim Vulpius
Luther Heym Hofmannsthal Klee Hölty Morgenstern Goedicke
Roth Heyse Klopstock Puschkin Homer Kleist
Luxemburg La Roche Horaz Mörike Musil
Machiavelli Kierkegaard Kraft Kraus
Navarra Aurel Musset Lamprecht Kind Kirchhoff Hugo Moltke
Nestroy Marie de France Laotse Ipsen Liebknecht
Nietzsche Nansen Lassalle Gorki Klett Leibniz Ringelntz
Marx vom Stein Lawrence Irving
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Smoke Bellew

Jack London

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Contents

THE TASTE OF THE MEAT

THE MEAT

THE STAMPEDE TO SQUAW CREEK

SHORTY DREAMS

THE MAN ON THE OTHER BANK

THE RACE FOR NUMBER ONE

THE TASTE OF THE MEAT.

I.

In the beginning he was Christopher Bellew. By the time he was at college he had become Chris Bellew. Later, in the Bohemian crowd of San Francisco, he was called Kit Bellew. And in the end he was known by no other name than Smoke Bellew. And this history of the evolution of his name is the history of his evolution. Nor would it have happened had he not had a fond mother and an iron uncle, and had he not received a letter from Gillet Bellamy.

"I have just seen a copy of the Billow," Gillet wrote from Paris. "Of course O'Hara will succeed with it. But he's missing some plays." (Here followed details in the improvement of the budding society weekly.) "Go down and see him. Let him think they're your own suggestions. Don't let him know they're from me. If he does, he'll make me Paris correspondent, which I can't afford, because I'm getting real money for my stuff from the big magazines. Above all, don't forget to make him fire that dub who's doing the musical and art criticism. Another thing, San Francisco has always had a literature of her own. But she hasn't any now. Tell him to kick around and get some gink to turn out a live serial, and to put into it the real romance and glamour and colour of San Francisco."

And down to the office of the Billow went Kit Bellew faithfully to instruct. O'Hara listened. O'Hara debated. O'Hara agreed. O'Hara fired the dub who wrote criticism. Further, O'Hara had a way with him—the very way that was feared by Gillet in distant Paris. When O'Hara wanted anything, no friend could deny him. He was sweetly and compellingly irresistible. Before Kit Bellew could escape from the office he had become an associate editor, had agreed to write weekly columns of criticism till some decent pen was found, and

had pledged himself to write a weekly instalment of ten thousand words on the San Francisco serial—and all this without pay. The Billow wasn't paying yet, O'Hara explained; and just as convincingly had he exposted that there was only one man in San Francisco capable of writing the serial, and that man Kit Bellew.

"Oh, Lord, I'm the gink!" Kit had groaned to himself afterwards on the narrow stairway.

And thereat had begun his servitude to O'Hara and the insatiable columns of the Billow. Week after week he held down an office chair, stood off creditors, wrangled with printers, and turned out twenty-five thousand words of all sorts weekly. Nor did his labours lighten. The Billow was ambitious. It went in for illustration. The processes were expensive. It never had any money to pay Kit Bellew, and by the same token it was unable to pay for any additions to the office staff.

"This is what comes of being a good fellow," Kit grumbled one day.

"Thank God for good fellows then," O'Hara cried, with tears in his eyes as he gripped Kit's hand. "You're all that's saved me, Kit. But for you I'd have gone bust. Just a little longer, old man, and things will be easier."

"Never," was Kit's plaint. "I see my fate clearly. I shall be here always."

A little later he thought he saw his way out. Watching his chance, in O'Hara's presence, he fell over a chair. A few minutes afterwards he bumped into the corner of the desk, and, with fumbling fingers, capsized a paste pot.

"Out late?" O'Hara queried.

Kit brushed his eyes with his hands and peered about him anxiously before replying.

"No, it's not that. It's my eyes. They seem to be going back on me, that's all."

For several days he continued to fall over and bump into the office furniture. But O'Hara's heart was not softened.

"I tell you what, Kit," he said one day, "you've got to see an oculist. There's Doctor Hassdapple. He's a crackerjack. And it won't cost you anything. We can get it for advertizing. I'll see him myself."

And, true to his word, he dispatched Kit to the oculist.

"There's nothing the matter with your eyes," was the doctor's verdict, after a lengthy examination. "In fact, your eyes are magnificent—a pair in a million."

"Don't tell O'Hara," Kit pleaded. "And give me a pair of black glasses."

The result of this was that O'Hara sympathized and talked glowingly of the time when the Billow would be on its feet.

Luckily for Kit Bellew, he had his own income. Small it was, compared with some, yet it was large enough to enable him to belong to several clubs and maintain a studio in the Latin Quarter. In point of fact, since his associate editorship, his expenses had decreased prodigiously. He had no time to spend money. He never saw the studio any more, nor entertained the local Bohemians with his famous chafing-dish suppers. Yet he was always broke, for the Billow, in perennial distress, absorbed his cash as well as his brains. There were the illustrators who periodically refused to illustrate, the printers who periodically refused to print, and the office boy who frequently refused to officiate. At such times O'Hara looked at Kit, and Kit did the rest.

When the steamship Excelsior arrived from Alaska, bringing the news of the Klondike strike that set the country mad, Kit made a purely frivolous proposition.

"Look here, O'Hara," he said. "This gold rush is going to be big—the days of '49 over again. Suppose I cover it for the Billow? I'll pay my own expenses."

O'Hara shook his head.

"Can't spare you from the office, Kit. Then there's that serial. Besides, I saw Jackson not an hour ago. He's starting for the Klondike to-morrow, and he's agreed to send a weekly letter and photos. I wouldn't let him get away till he promised. And the beauty of it is, that it doesn't cost us anything."

The next Kit heard of the Klondike was when he dropped into the club that afternoon, and, in an alcove off the library, encountered his uncle.

"Hello, avuncular relative," Kit greeted, sliding into a leather chair and spreading out his legs. "Won't you join me?"

He ordered a cocktail, but the uncle contented himself with the thin native claret he invariably drank. He glanced with irritated disapproval at the cocktail, and on to his nephew's face. Kit saw a lecture gathering.

"I've only a minute," he announced hastily. "I've got to run and take in that Keith exhibition at Ellery's and do half a column on it."

"What's the matter with you?" the other demanded. "You're pale. You're a wreck."

Kit's only answer was a groan.

"I'll have the pleasure of burying you, I can see that."

Kit shook his head sadly.

"No destroying worm, thank you. Cremation for mine."

John Bellew came of the old hard and hardy stock that had crossed the plains by ox-team in the fifties, and in him was this same hardness and the hardness of a childhood spent in the conquering of a new land.

"You're not living right, Christopher. I'm ashamed of you."

"Primrose path, eh?" Kit chuckled.

The older man shrugged his shoulders.

"Shake not your gory locks at me, avuncular. I wish it were the primrose path. But that's all cut out. I have no time."

"Then what in-?"

"Overwork."

John Bellew laughed harshly and incredulously.

"Honest?"

Again came the laughter.

"Men are the products of their environment," Kit proclaimed, pointing at the other's glass. "Your mirth is thin and bitter as your drink."

"Overwork!" was the sneer. "You never earned a cent in your life."

"You bet I have—only I never got it. I'm earning five hundred a week right now, and doing four men's work."

"Pictures that won't sell? Or—er—fancy work of some sort? Can you swim?"

"I used to."

"Sit a horse?"

"I have essayed that adventure."

John Bellew snorted his disgust.

"I'm glad your father didn't live to see you in all the glory of your gracelessness," he said. "Your father was a man, every inch of him. Do you get it? A Man. I think he'd have whaled all this musical and artistic tomfoolery out of you."

"Alas! these degenerate days," Kit sighed.

"I could understand it, and tolerate it," the other went on savagely, "if you succeeded at it. You've never earned a cent in your life, nor done a tap of man's work."

"Etchings, and pictures, and fans," Kit contributed unsoothingly.

"You're a dabbler and a failure. What pictures have you painted? Dinky water-colours and nightmare posters. You've never had one exhibited, even here in San Francisco—"

"Ah, you forget. There is one in the jinks room of this very club."

"A gross cartoon. Music? Your dear fool of a mother spent hundreds on lessons. You've dabbled and failed. You've never even earned a five-dollar piece by accompanying some one at a concert. Your songs?—rag-time rot that's never printed and that's sung only by a pack of fake Bohemians."

"I had a book published once – those sonnets, you remember," Kit interposed meekly.

"What did it cost you?"

"Only a couple of hundred."

"Any other achievements?"

"I had a forest play acted at the summer jinks."

"What did you get for it?"

"Glory."

"And you used to swim, and you have essayed to sit a horse!" John Bellew set his glass down with unnecessary violence. "What earthly good are you anyway? You were well put up, yet even at university you didn't play football. You didn't row. You didn't—"

"I boxed and fenced – some."

"When did you last box?"

"Not since; but I was considered an excellent judge of time and distance, only I was – er—"

"Go on."

"Considered desultory."

"Lazy, you mean."

"I always imagined it was an euphemism."

"My father, sir, your grandfather, old Isaac Bellew, killed a man with a blow of his fist when he was sixty-nine years old."

"The man?"

"No, your – you graceless scamp! But you'll never kill a mosquito at sixty-nine."

"The times have changed, oh, my avuncular. They send men to state prisons for homicide now."

"Your father rode one hundred and eighty-five miles, without sleeping, and killed three horses."

"Had he lived to-day, he'd have snored over the course in a Pullman."

The older man was on the verge of choking with wrath, but swallowed it down and managed to articulate:

"How old are you?"

"I have reason to believe—"

"I know. Twenty-seven. You finished college at twenty-two. You've dabbled and played and frilled for five years. Before God and man, of what use are you? When I was your age I had one suit of underclothes. I was riding with the cattle in Colusa. I was hard as rocks, and I could sleep on a rock. I lived on jerked beef and bear-meat. I am a better man physically right now than you are. You weigh about one hundred and sixty-five. I can throw you right now, or thrash you with my fists."

"It doesn't take a physical prodigy to mop up cocktails or pink tea," Kit murmured deprecatingly. "Don't you see, my avuncular, the times have changed. Besides, I wasn't brought up right. My dear fool of a mother—"

John Bellew started angrily.

"—As you described her, was too good to me; kept me in cotton wool and all the rest. Now, if when I was a youngster I had taken some of those intensely masculine vacations you go in for—I wonder why you didn't invite me sometimes? You took Hal and Robbie all over the Sierras and on that Mexico trip."

"I guess you were too Lord Fauntleroyish."

"Your fault, avuncular, and my dear—er—mother's. How was I to know the hard? I was only a chee-ild. What was there left but etchings and pictures and fans? Was it my fault that I never had to sweat?"

The older man looked at his nephew with unconcealed disgust. He had no patience with levity from the lips of softness.

"Well, I'm going to take another one of those what-you-call masculine vacations. Suppose I asked you to come along?"

"Rather belated, I must say. Where is it?"

"Hal and Robert are going in to Klondike, and I'm going to see them across the Pass and down to the Lakes, then return-"

He got no further, for the young man had sprung forward and gripped his hand.

"My preserver!"

John Bellew was immediately suspicious. He had not dreamed the invitation would be accepted.

"You don't mean it," he said.

"When do we start?"

"It will be a hard trip. You'll be in the way."

"No, I won't. I'll work. I've learned to work since I went on the Billow."

"Each man has to take a year's supplies in with him. There'll be such a jam the Indian packers won't be able to handle it. Hal and Robert will have to pack their outfits across themselves. That's what I'm going along for—to help them pack. If you come you'll have to do the same."

"Watch me."

"You can't pack," was the objection.

"When do we start?"

"To-morrow."

"You needn't take it to yourself that your lecture on the hard has done it," Kit said, at parting. "I just had to get away, somewhere, anywhere, from O'Hara."

"Who is O'Hara? A Jap?"

"No; he's an Irishman, and a slave-driver, and my best friend. He's the editor and proprietor and all-around big squeeze of the Billow. What he says goes. He can make ghosts walk."

That night Kit Bellew wrote a note to O'Hara.

"It's only a several weeks' vacation," he explained. "You'll have to get some gink to dope out instalments for that serial. Sorry, old man, but my health demands it. I'll kick in twice as hard when I get back."

II.

Kit Bellew landed through the madness of the Dyea beach, congested with thousand-pound outfits of thousands of men. This immense mass of luggage and food, flung ashore in mountains by the steamers, was beginning slowly to dribble up the Dyea valley and across Chilcoot. It was a portage of twenty-eight miles, and could be accomplished only on the backs of men. Despite the fact that the Indian packers had jumped the freight from eight cents a pound to forty, they were swamped with the work, and it was plain that winter would catch the major portion of the outfits on the wrong side of the divide.

Tenderest of the tender-feet was Kit. Like many hundreds of others he carried a big revolver swung on a cartridge-belt. Of this, his uncle, filled with memories of old lawless days, was likewise guilty. But Kit Bellew was romantic. He was fascinated by the froth and sparkle of the gold rush, and viewed its life and movement with an artist's eye. He did not take it seriously. As he said on the steamer, it was not his funeral. He was merely on a vacation, and intended to peep over the top of the pass for a 'look see' and then to return.

Leaving his party on the sand to wait for the putting ashore of the freight, he strolled up the beach toward the old trading post. He did not swagger, though he noticed that many of the be-revolvered individuals did. A strapping, six-foot Indian passed him, carrying an unusually large pack. Kit swung in behind, admiring the splendid calves of the man, and the grace and ease with which he moved along under his burden. The Indian dropped his pack on the scales in front of the post, and Kit joined the group of admiring gold-rushers who surrounded him. The pack weighed one hundred and twenty pounds, which fact was uttered back and forth in tones of

awe. It was going some, Kit decided, and he wondered if he could lift such a weight, much less walk off with it.

"Going to Lake Linderman with it, old man?" he asked.

The Indian, swelling with pride, grunted an affirmative.

"How much you make that one pack?"

"Fifty dollar."

Here Kit slid out of the conversation. A young woman, standing in the doorway, had caught his eye. Unlike other women landing from the steamers, she was neither short-skirted nor bloomer-clad. She was dressed as any woman travelling anywhere would be dressed. What struck him was the justness of her being there, a feeling that somehow she belonged. Moreover, she was young and pretty. The bright beauty and colour of her oval face held him, and he looked over-long—looked till she resented, and her own eyes, long-lashed and dark, met his in cool survey.

From his face they travelled in evident amusement down to the big revolver at his thigh. Then her eyes came back to his, and in them was amused contempt. It struck him like a blow. She turned to the man beside her and indicated Kit. The man glanced him over with the same amused contempt.

"Chechaquo," the girl said.

The man, who looked like a tramp in his cheap overalls and dilapidated woollen jacket, grinned dryly, and Kit felt withered though he knew not why. But anyway she was an unusually pretty girl, he decided, as the two moved off. He noted the way of her walk, and recorded the judgment that he would recognize it after the lapse of a thousand years.

"Did you see that man with the girl?" Kit's neighbour asked him excitedly. "Know who he is?"

Kit shook his head.

"Cariboo Charley. He was just pointed out to me. He struck it big on Klondike. Old timer. Been on the Yukon a dozen years. He's just come out."

"What's chechaquo mean?" Kit asked.

"You're one; I'm one," was the answer.

"Maybe I am, but you've got to search me. What does it mean?"

"Tender-foot."

On his way back to the beach Kit turned the phrase over and over. It rankled to be called tender-foot by a slender chit of a woman.

Going into a corner among the heaps of freight, his mind still filled with the vision of the Indian with the redoubtable pack, Kit essayed to learn his own strength. He picked out a sack of flour which he knew weighed an even hundred pounds. He stepped astride of it, reached down, and strove to get it on his shoulder. His first conclusion was that one hundred pounds was the real heavy. His next was that his back was weak. His third was an oath, and it occurred at the end of five futile minutes, when he collapsed on top of the burden with which he was wrestling. He mopped his forehead, and across a heap of grub-sacks saw John Bellew gazing at him, wintry amusement in his eyes.

"God!" proclaimed that apostle of the hard. "Out of our loins has come a race of weaklings. When I was sixteen I toyed with things like that."

"You forget, avuncular," Kit retorted, "that I wasn't raised on bear-meat."

"And I'll toy with it when I'm sixty."

"You've got to show me."

John Bellew did. He was forty-eight, but he bent over the sack, applied a tentative, shifting grip that balanced it, and, with a quick heave, stood erect, the somersaulted sack of flour on his shoulder.

"Knack, my boy, knack—and a spine."

Kit took off his hat reverently.

"You're a wonder, avuncular, a shining wonder. D'ye think I can learn the knack?"

John Bellew shrugged his shoulders.

"You'll be hitting the back trail before we get started."

"Never you fear," Kit groaned. "There's O'Hara, the roaring lion, down there. I'm not going back till I have to."

III.

Kit's first pack was a success. Up to Finnegan's Crossing they had managed to get Indians to carry the twenty-five hundred-pound outfit. From that point their own backs must do the work. They planned to move forward at the rate of a mile a day. It looked easy—on paper. Since John Bellew was to stay in camp and do the cooking, he would be unable to make more than an occasional pack; so, to each of the three young men fell the task of carrying eight hundred pounds one mile each day. If they made fifty-pound packs, it meant a daily walk of sixteen miles loaded and of fifteen miles light—"Because we don't back-trip the last time," Kit explained the pleasant discovery; eighty-pound packs meant nineteen miles travel each day; and hundred-pound packs meant only fifteen miles.

"I don't like walking," said Kit. "Therefore I shall carry one hundred pounds." He caught the grin of incredulity on his uncle's face, and added hastily: "Of course I shall work up to it. A fellow's got to learn the ropes and tricks. I'll start with fifty."

He did, and ambled gaily along the trail. He dropped the sack at the next camp-site and ambled back. It was easier than he had thought. But two miles had rubbed off the velvet of his strength and exposed the underlying softness. His second pack was sixty-five pounds. It was more difficult, and he no longer ambled. Several times, following the custom of all packers, he sat down on the ground, resting the pack behind him on a rock or stump. With the third pack he became bold. He fastened the straps to a ninety-five-pound sack of beans and started. At the end of a hundred yards he felt that he must collapse. He sat down and mopped his face.

"Short hauls and short rests," he muttered. "That's the trick."

Sometimes he did not make a hundred yards, and each time he struggled to his feet for another short haul the pack became undeniably heavier. He panted for breath, and the sweat streamed from

him. Before he had covered a quarter of a mile he stripped off his woollen shirt and hung it on a tree. A little later he discarded his hat. At the end of half a mile he decided he was finished. He had never exerted himself so in his life, and he knew that he was finished. As he sat and panted, his gaze fell upon the big revolver and the heavy cartridge-belt.

"Ten pounds of junk," he sneered, as he unbuckled it.

He did not bother to hang it on a tree, but flung it into the underbush. And as the steady tide of packers flowed by him, up trail and down, he noted that the other tender-feet were beginning to shed their shooting irons.

His short hauls decreased. At times a hundred feet was all he could stagger, and then the ominous pounding of his heart against his ear-drums and the sickening totteriness of his knees compelled him to rest. And his rests grew longer. But his mind was busy. It was a twenty-eight mile portage, which represented as many days, and this, by all accounts, was the easiest part of it. "Wait till you get to Chilcoot," others told him as they rested and talked, "where you climb with hands and feet."

"They ain't going to be no Chilcoot," was his answer. "Not for me. Long before that I'll be at peace in my little couch beneath the moss."

A slip, and a violent wrenching effort at recovery, frightened him. He felt that everything inside him had been torn asunder.

"If ever I fall down with this on my back I'm a goner," he told another packer.

"That's nothing," came the answer. "Wait till you hit the Canyon. You'll have to cross a raging torrent on a sixty-foot pine tree. No guide ropes, nothing, and the water boiling at the sag of the log to your knees. If you fall with a pack on your back, there's no getting out of the straps. You just stay there and drown."

"Sounds good to me," he retorted; and out of the depths of his exhaustion he almost half meant it.

"They drown three or four a day there," the man assured him. "I helped fish a German out there. He had four thousand in greenbacks on him."

"Cheerful, I must say," said Kit, battling his way to his feet and tottering on.

He and the sack of beans became a perambulating tragedy. It reminded him of the old man of the sea who sat on Sinbad's neck. And this was one of those intensely masculine vacations, he meditated. Compared with it, the servitude to O'Hara was sweet. Again and again he was nearly seduced by the thought of abandoning the sack of beans in the brush and of sneaking around the camp to the beach and catching a steamer for civilization.

But he didn't. Somewhere in him was the strain of the hard, and he repeated over and over to himself that what other men could do, he could. It became a nightmare chant, and he gibbered it to those that passed him on the trail. At other times, resting, he watched and envied the stolid, mule-footed Indians that plodded by under heavier packs. They never seemed to rest, but went on and on with a steadiness and certitude that was to him appalling.

He sat and cursed—he had no breath for it when under way—and fought the temptation to sneak back to San Francisco. Before the mile pack was ended he ceased cursing and took to crying. The tears were tears of exhaustion and of disgust with self. If ever a man was a wreck, he was. As the end of the pack came in sight, he strained himself in desperation, gained the camp-site, and pitched forward on his face, the beans on his back. It did not kill him, but he lay for fifteen minutes before he could summon sufficient shreds of strength to release himself from the straps. Then he became deathly sick, and was so found by Robbie, who had similar troubles of his own. It was this sickness of Robbie that braced him up.

"What other men can do, we can do," Kit told him, though down in his heart he wondered whether or not he was bluffing.