

STORIETTES

Connors, McFee, and "Cook."

I.

FROM the East came Connors, burly, bellicose, and blunt; from the South, McFee, slender, sensitive, and silent. They met at Chilkoot's great gray wall; formed a friendship at Dawson City; staked out adjoining claims on Bonanza Creek, that marvelous treasure-field, concealed by capricious fortune from a dozen skilled prospectors to be revealed to a Chilkat buck whose savage name is already forgotten.

There, with thousands of others, Connors and McFee built fires upon the icy earth; shoveled and washed the few inches of thawed soil; kindled more fires in the slowly deepening excavations; shoveled and washed again, anxiously, fruitlessly, while their joint stock of costly provisions steadily decreased.

Then, on the same short arctic day, the precious metal glistened in each pan, and each tired toiler saw amid the golden grains the vision of a woman far away. To Connors came the memory of a mazy dance; music and moonlight, and low-whispered words. McFee was once more on a white-winged yacht, sighing sweet nothings into a not unwilling ear. Then both turned fiercely to the task at hand.

Henceforth there was little time for sleeping, less for eating, less still for cooking, and when, one morning, a starving, pain-racked wanderer appeared, offering to cook for his "grub," the bargain was quickly closed. Neither Connors nor McFee asked the newcomer's name or history; time was too precious to waste in profitless inquiries. They dubbed him "Cook," and placed him in charge of the hoarded provisions, pleased that his help would enable them to return to Paradise a few days sooner. Neither confided to the other his hope and ambition—there are some thoughts too sweet, too sacred, too near the heart, to be laid bare.

Three days after Cook came Connors cursed him vehemently, furiously. Cook only stared at him with sunken, tired, pathetic eyes. After dinner, in the pit, McFee remonstrated with his partner.

"He warned us, you know, that he'd never cooked," he said mildly. "I shouldn't be surprised if he'd leave."

"I wish he would leave, if he can't do better than that! We've got no food to burn. Grub's grub up here," Connors retorted, viciously jabbing his shovel into the earth.

Cook didn't leave, and one evening McFee, lingering at work after supper-call, heard an oath and a blow. Looking up, he saw Cook slowly rising from the hard earth, while Connors, still cursing, removed a smoking kettle from the fire. After the dismal supper, while Cook with bruised and bleeding face was busy with pots and pans, McFee called his partner aside.

"Now, look here, Connors," he said insistently, "this won't do, you know. The man's ill, and you're almost twice his size. I didn't think it of you, Connors, and, if I must say it, it's—it's cowardly!"

Connors glared down at him pugnaciously.

"Cowardly, eh? Say, if you wasn't such a runt——"

McFee put up a hand in protest.

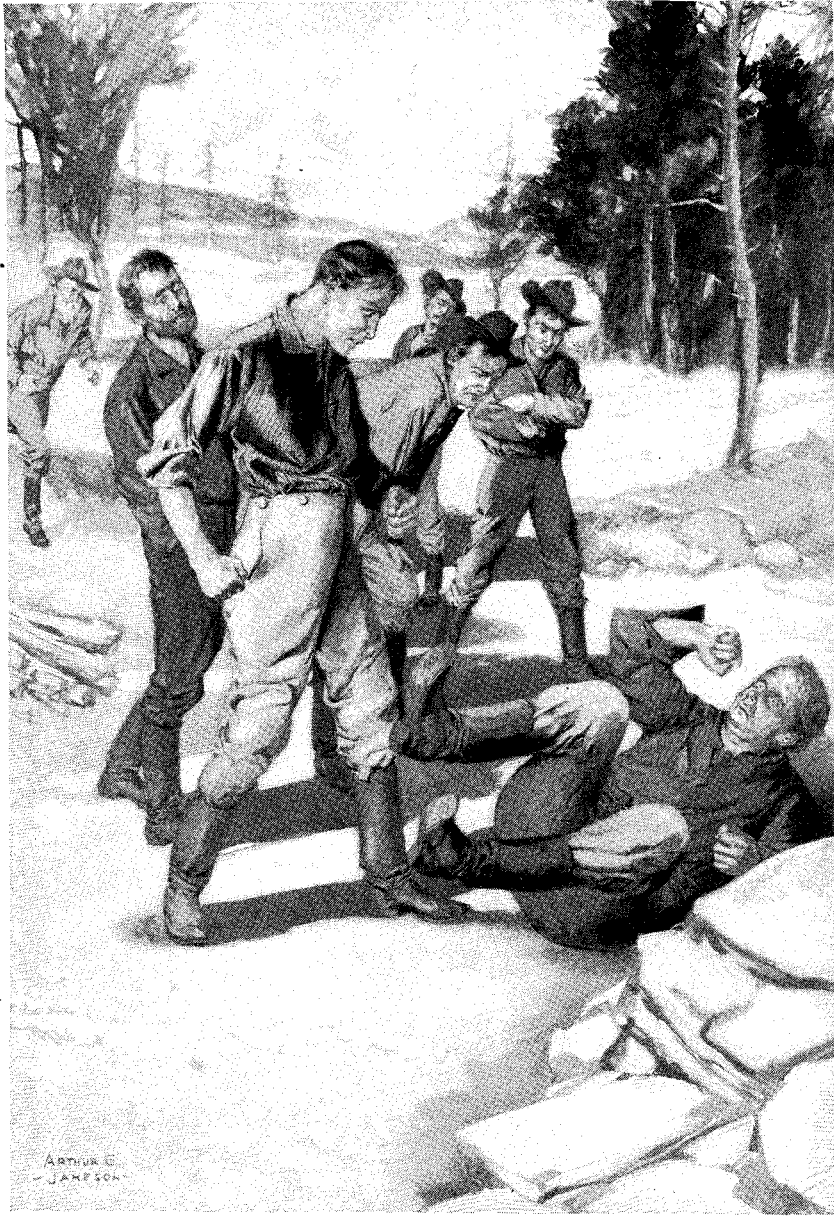
"There, there, let's not quarrel, Connors. We've pulled together nicely so far. Just try to curb your temper, that's all. Cursing him is bad enough, but please don't strike him again. I can't——"

"All right; I'll not strike him again," Connors interrupted; and when McFee smiled gratefully he continued: "I'll kick him next time; that's what I'll do—just kick him off the diggings," and he strode down to the pit, growling to himself.

McFee returned to where Cook sat gazing thoughtfully into the fire, passing his left hand slowly up and down his right arm.

"I'm awfully sorry about this, Cook," he said softly, "but I can't help it, really. Maybe you'd better leave. It's likely to get worse, you know."

Cook looked up and grinned hideously. Not that he wasn't a handsome fellow, normally, but his swollen and discolored face made his attempt to look pleasant a ghastly failure.



"MOST FELLERS WOULD BE KICKIN' CONNORS' HEAD OFF, 'STEAD OF WAITIN' FER HIM TO GIT UP."

"It's all right," he said slowly. "I'm taking on flesh and getting stronger fast. Maybe in another month I'll be ready to—leave."

That was all McFee could get out of him. Cook was a man of few words.

Four weeks passed without an outbreak. Perhaps the rapidly increasing

richness of the claims kept Connors in comparatively good humor; perhaps it was because Cook was more careful. He had rounded out wonderfully, had a bright eye and a good color, and moved about alertly. Then, one day, just before noon, Connors suddenly straightened up, dropped his pick, and scrambled

out of the pit like a wild man, with McFee clinging to him. The odor of scorching soup again permeated the frosty air.

"He's got a kicking coming this time," Connors roared, trying to shake McFee off.

"Now, wait a minute, Connors," panted McFee. "Let me reason with him. Cook, I really think the soup is burning, you know, and——"

"Does smell like it, doesn't it?" remarked the offender complacently, folding his arms and sniffing vigorously.

"Curse you, I believe you meant to do it!" howled Connors, breaking McFee's grip.

Cook gave a quick, sweeping glance at the ground behind him, and unfolded his arms.

"Well," he said in a tone that made McFee gasp, "if anybody asks you—I did!"

Connors hurled himself forward—upon Cook's fist. The big miner staggered and sank to one knee, while Cook waited, laughing. He arose unsteadily and advanced resolutely, but cautiously; his reputation was at stake, and men were running up from the surrounding claims.

Sparring and feinting clumsily, he saw what he thought was an opening. He rushed in, and swung his right with a mighty sweep. Cook's head ducked under the catapult at the same instant that his left hand shot out; then he stepped back while Connors again struggled to arise.

"Fair little game-cock, ain't he?" remarked one of the grinning circle of miners to McFee. "Most fellers would be kickin' Connors' head off, 'stead of waitin' fer him to git up."

McFee nodded. Amazement had tied his tongue.

Connors regained his feet, swayed for a moment, and then, red with rage, his huge arms guarding his reeling head, crept step by step, half crouching, warily, watchfully, toward his antagonist. Let him but once get his foe within those ponderous arms, and all the fight, perhaps the life, would be out of him in a moment.

Cook, circling about, stepping nimbly in and out, stumbled, apparently, and in an instant his adversary was over him with eager, outstretched hand. No two agreed, afterward, just how Cook did it. Some of them contended that he was actually within the encircling arms when Connors went up in the air; but the opinion was unanimous that it was as

neat an upper-cut as was ever landed on the point of a chin.

While some of the spectators labored with the unconscious man, Cook held out his hand to McFee.

"Good-by," he said. "You know now why I stayed. After he cursed me that first time you couldn't have driven me away."

He walked jauntily through the crowd that parted respectfully before him, and disappeared in the direction of Dawson City.

II.

SOME months later, Connors and McFee, with the independent air of men who had conquered fortune, followed the same course. Turning from the receiving teller's window in a Seattle bank, the big fellow took his companion's hand.

"Well, partner," he said, "I guess it's good-by at last. I'm off for Los Angeles."

"That's odd," said McFee joyously.

"There's where I'm going."

"Good!" exclaimed Connors. "Acquainted there?"

"Only slightly. Passed my vacation there last summer. Good place to rest. And you?"

"Have an uncle there. Visited him last year. Thought I'd stop off again, and—rest up."

Stepping from the train at Los Angeles, McFee called out:

"Butler, Jack Butler! Don't you know me? What's the latest? How are——"

Connors was shaking his shoulder and pointing to a scurrying automobile.

"Cook!" cried McFee.

"Cook?" said Butler. "I guess nit. That's Lamb, Sammy Lamb, the luckiest dog on the coast. First he wins the light-weight championship in the inter-collegiate boxing contest—what are you laughing at, Mac?"

"Nothing!" roared McFee, beating Connors on the back. "Go on! What next?"

"Well, then he quarrels with his millionaire father over his allowance, disappears for almost a year, and when the old man is almost crazy, Sammy turns up, brown and hearty, from the Klondike. The pater promptly kills the fattened calf, or rather the golden calf, and hands it over to Sammy, who promptly marries the prettiest girl on the coast. You know her, Mac—Rose Alton. Say, what

is the matter with you fellows, anyhow?"

"I—I'm not quite well—change of climate, you know," McFee stammered, staring hard at Connors. "See you later, Jack."

He pulled Connors around the corner, stopped, and stared again into his ghastly face.

"You—you, too?" he asked.

Connors nodded and pulled out his watch.

"In three minutes a train goes east," he murmured wearily. "I think I'll go with it. Good-by, McFee."

Frank N. Stratton.

The Mantel from the Red Room.

I.

It was the night before he had to leave the party and return to his consulate that Fulton Blender told Mollie Putnam about the mantel in the red room at home. Why the day's ride through the treeless yellows and ochers of the desert, hemmed in by violet peaks, should have made him think of an old-fashioned house on Twenty-First Street, New York, was something which he could not at first determine. Later, when the purple night had fallen, and the large, kind stars lit the heavens, he knew that it was because he was in love with Mollie Putnam, and wanted to lead her into every tender recollection of his life.

"It is one of those foolish mantels," he rambled on, while in the distance Mollie's Aunt Lucia complained that the girls should sit out so late when the sleeping tent was already pitched for them. "Marble, you know, with convoluted edges and bunches of grapes and a cherub scorching above the fire. And the walls are hideous—red, in stripes, with little gilt leaves and things up and down every other stripe. You know. And my mother's things—middle Victorian, black walnut, much carved—oh, hopeless, according to the new school! I loved it. I used to hang my stockings up there every Christmas Eve. But I must be boring you stiff."

"No," said Mollie softly.

"Really? You're good to let me talk. I'm homesick. Out here ten years now, and—of course I have seen other Americans, but—they haven't made me feel like this! You've made me want to go back home, Miss Putnam! I was only fifteen when she died—my mother, you know. She was always there, in the red

room, when I came tumbling in from school. I went there to her with everything—torn jackets and cut fingers, lessons, rows, prizes. It was an ugly old house. I suppose Twenty-First Street has changed? It was a quiet, homely old block then."

"Shops and business buildings are creeping in," admitted Mollie.

"I sometimes wonder how she happened to marry into our family," he went on. "We're such quarrelsome, pig-headed brutes, we Blenders; and she was all gentleness and sympathy and lovely mirthfulness. I wish that you could have known her."

"I wish I might have," said Mollie.

She slid a kind hand out to him in the darkness and he thanked it with a pressure. Then he put brakes upon his crowding impulses. He, outcast from his father's house, professionless, dawdler for so many years in the far East—what had he to say to Mollie Putnam? He sought safety in the red room again.

"It was there," he said, "that—You knew that my father and I had quarreled?"

"I have heard it," said Mollie, loyally suppressing the additional information that Aunt Lucia was a compendium of New York gossip, and that all her sympathies in the mysterious Blender affair were frequently proclaimed to be with Adam Blender and not with his amazing son.

"Yes," Fulton went on. "It was in that room—in her room—that he chose to announce to me his intention to marry again."

Mollie was silent for a minute. Her tender sympathies were with the exile, who had so loved his mother; but Mollie had a sense of justice.

"He was of age, you know," she suggested mildly.

"Oh, yes!" Blender wearily acquiesced. "He was quite within his legal rights, no doubt. But—well, I dare say that we both said things that had been better left unsaid. He made quite an impossible condition for our future intercourse—something about my attitude toward the lady who is now my stepmother. She was, as perhaps you know, from the stage."

"I may have heard," answered Mollie. "But I had forgotten everything except that Aunt Lucia says that she is very much liked and that she is devoted to your father."

Blender grunted. And then Aunt