

Gold

Bits of sunlight glittered through the scraggly pine trees on the horizon. Only a few birch trees ventured this far north. Most of the ground was covered with dark, spindly pine, interspersed with “meadows” of muskeg or lichen covered rock. Mike Sullivan pushed his canoe still further north. The sun had already dipped below the tree line, but this time of year the twilight would last a long time. He would have plenty of time to set up camp before it got dark. With luck, he could make it to his claim first. He was pretty sure it was near here, but it had been a long time since he last saw it.

His smooth, purposeful strokes were the result long experience with canoes, but the aching in his back and shoulders reminded him it had been a long time since he had paddled one. Certainly it had been a long time since he had spent five days journeying up an unnamed tributary of the Chena River. Not that he'd been idle. The Army had seen to that. Ten years of hard labor. Didn't use the same muscles that paddling did, though.

Mike scowled as he thought about what a waste the Army had been. He'd come in from his claim to winter over in Fairbanks, and folks were all a-buzz with the news that the US had declared war on Germany. Some archduke had shot somebody or other, and a German U-Boat sank a British ship, and some fool sent a telegram to Mexico. Didn't make sense to Mike. He didn't see where it was any concern of Uncle Sam's, and it certainly wasn't any concern of his. He just wanted to buy some flour, shoot a moose, and spend the winter minding his own business. Turned out there was a law called Conscription that was bent on making it his concern. He didn't believe it when the Marshall told him he'd been conscripted into the Army. The Marshall said if he didn't go he could spend 20 years in prison. Mike argued, but he didn't want to make an enemy of the Marshall for fear he'd start looking into Mike's past so he finally relented and reported to the training camp. That's where he ran into the damn sergeant. The sergeant screamed insults at him, using words he wouldn't take from any man. Mike whopped him in a fair fight, but the Army didn't see it that way. That was just the beginning of his troubles with the Army. The worst of it was he'd been drafted for the duration of the war, but when the war ended they wouldn't let him out. They kept him until he finished his sentence.

Mike eyed the shoreline intently, looking for some sign of his claim. He knew the clearing he'd made for his tent would be overgrown by now, but the rocks he'd used as a canoe landing should still be there. He needed to find it soon, as it was far too late in the year to get caught this far north. There had already been a couple of snowstorms that hadn't stuck, and every morning there was a thin crust of ice on standing water. The wind was out of the north now, and that didn't bode well. Mike wouldn't be up here this late except he needed enough gold dust to see him through the winter. Not enough to arouse suspicion. Just enough to get by. Originally his plan had been to come up in the spring, spend the entire summer on his claim so folks would know he'd had enough time to make a good strike, and then go back to Fairbanks with his fortune. But, the Army had jinxed that plan. They grabbed him before he could make that spring trip, and they didn't let him go until a couple of months ago. It had taken him two months just to make his way back to Fairbanks.

The sun had set now, and the twilight shadows made it hard to distinguish features. Mike was about to give up for the day, but somehow the bend ahead looked familiar. He couldn't say what made it look different from every other bend in this convoluted river, but it did. He paddled a little faster. As he rounded the bend he saw a familiar pile of rocks on the eastern shore. It was his claim.

He pulled the canoe up on the shore and carried a rope toward a tree to tie it up. A large rock unexpectedly rolled out from under his foot and sent him sprawling to the ground, cursing. He brushed the dirt off his battered knee with a hand that was still stinging from the impact. As he did so he noticed the rock wasn't a rock after all. It was a skull.

"Must be Bill's" he thought to himself. He knew he should have buried Bill's body deeper, but the permafrost discouraged him from digging too deep. "Probably dug up by wolves," he thought, "although a bear will do that too." He examined the teeth marks on the skull. It was wolves, all right. He suddenly worried about what else the wolves might have dug up. He pushed inland, picking his way through the dead branches and small scrub brush that lay underneath the trees. He searched for the small hill with the granite outcropping, cursing the Army all the while. It wasn't supposed to take him ten years to come back here. What if his memory was playing tricks on him? What if he couldn't find it?

Finally he found it. It was further north than he'd remembered, and closer to the river, but there was no mistaking that outcropping. He snapped a small limb off a fallen pine tree and began scraping away the dirt underneath the outcropping. When he saw a scrap of moosehide, he dropped to his knees and carefully cleared away the dirt with his fingers. The string that held the moosehide bags shut crumbled when he tried to untie it, but it had done its job. One bag was still half-full of gold flakes, and the other contained a large nugget of solid gold. It was the nugget that had caused Bill's demise.

It's funny how you can live with a man for three years and not really know him. Mike and Bill had been partners for three years. Every spring they packed a canoe and headed up river, searching for terrain and rock formations that might indicate the presence of gold. They'd do some exploratory panning, and if the results were favorable they'd set up camp and start panning in earnest. If not, they'd journey further and try again. In the fall they'd head back to Fairbanks, cash in whatever gold they'd found, and hole up for the winter in a one room, waterless cabin. They made enough to get by, but were in no danger of becoming rich. They got along pretty well, too. Oh sure they fought now and then. You can't coop two men up in a cabin for a winter without having a few fights. But they realized early on that somebody was going to get hurt if they used fists and chairs, so mostly they just wrestled until one of them pinned the other. Then they'd forget about it and go back to whatever they were doing before the fight broke out.

All that changed the third summer. That summer they explored a new branch in the spiderweb of creeks and rivers that feeds the Chena and struck it rich. Almost every pan they dipped produced a small treasure of dust and flakes. By the end of the summer they had

enough gold so they could both live out the rest of their days in ease and comfort. They continued to pan as far into the fall as they dared, but finally they both agreed it was time to strike camp and head to Fairbanks. The next morning they packed their canoe and enjoyed one last breakfast on their claim before pushing off. They split the gold dust between them, so if the canoe flipped and plunged them into the river they could each decide for themselves if they could make it to shore with the gold or if they had to ditch it to keep from drowning. They trusted each other with most things, but neither man wanted to be left empty handed because the other panicked and let go of the gold. Then Mike rinsed the dishes in the river while Bill packed the last of their grub into the canoe. That's when Mike caught a glimpse of something shiny buried under the rocks that lined the riverbed. He pawed through the rocks with his hands and pulled out the largest gold nugget he'd ever seen. By itself, it weighed more than all the rest of the gold they'd found that summer. That's when Mike discovered he didn't really know Bill. On that day Bill proved he wasn't very bright.

Bill had always seemed smart enough before. He was a good storyteller, a tolerable cook, and he had a good understanding of the geology that brought gold to the surface. Mike had always respected Bill's mining skills, but Bill didn't seem to realize that the nugget changed everything. To begin with, Bill just assumed the nugget was part of the poke they were going to split 50/50. That was how they handled the gold they'd panned, but Mike had never agreed to share any gold he found on his own. Bill insisted the nugget was half his. He wanted to cut it in half right then and there. He said if Mike didn't want to dull his knife on it, to hand it over and Bill would do it. Mike told Bill to go to hell, and the conversation went downhill from there.

Suddenly Bill hunched down into a crouching position. "Then we'll fight for it" he said, and he lunged at Mike. He knocked Mike over backward and would have been in a good position to pin him if Mike hadn't shoved his hunting knife up under Bill's ribs. Bill clasped his hands over the wound, stared at the blood in disbelief, then looked up at Mike in bewilderment. Without uttering a word he slowly collapsed and lay still.

Ten years later Mike still couldn't believe Bill had been so stupid. "Did he really think I was going to wrangle him for a fortune in gold?" Mike wondered. Wrestling was for minor disputes, like whether or not the cook who burned the dinner had to clean the frying pan. Nobody in their right mind would trust a fortune to the outcome of a wrestling match. No, Bill had attacked him and he'd defended himself. It was a fair fight. The trouble was, there were no witnesses. If Mike went back to Fairbanks with a fortune in gold and no partner, there were bound to be questions. Chances are some lawyer would claim that half the gold belonged to Bill's relatives, or worse yet he'd have Mike thrown in jail. That's when Mike decided to hide the gold and come back for it the following year.

"It's been a lot more than a year" Mike thought as he ran a finger through the gold dust. Things had certainly calmed down in the intervening years. He doubted that anyone in Fairbanks even remembered Bill any more. He tried to pick up the bag but the moosehide was rotten and it began to tear. He gingerly set it back down and headed back to the canoe to get another bag. It was getting pretty dark now but he could still pick his way back to the river. He

found the landing – but there was no canoe! He could dimly see it about a quarter-mile downstream, drifting away from him. He plunged into the river and swam after it. He was a strong swimmer, but between the current and the north wind the canoe was faster. Exhausted, Mike finally had to give up the chase and crawl onto the riverbank. All his supplies were in that canoe. His tent was in the canoe. And his dry clothes. And his bedroll. And his rifle. And his matches. He was cold and wet and hungry, with no means to remedy his situation. Tomorrow he might be able to find the canoe, if it got hung up along the river bank, and if he survived the night. But that was by no means certain. It seemed like the cold north wind was picking up.

Mike cursed Bill soundly. This was all Bill's fault. If that old fool hadn't gotten greedy and tried to steal half of Mike's nugget this never would have happened. And it was Bill's skull that tripped him and made him forget about tying up the canoe. "He's probably laughing about this now" Mike thought bitterly. "Damn that stupid old fool!"

Somewhere in the distance a wolf howled. It wasn't distant enough to suit Mike.