KLONDIKE

Enoch Powell, age 29, was not a happy man.

He lived in Galesburg, Illinois, and worked as a brakeman for the Burlington Railroad. Although he longed to marry and start a family, Enoch's short stature -- at 5'3" -- made the ladies largely ignore him and turn elsewhere. Powell, however, was tough and hard-fisted (he even took boxing lessons for a time), because he had to deal with persistent hobos and vagrants who tried to ride the rails for free. He despised being called "Shorty," but the nickname stuck to him like flypaper his whole adult life, so he finally accepted its reality. Maybe if he somehow got rich, everyone would finally treat him with respect.

The Klondike Gold Rush gave Shorty his longed-for opportunity. Two ships -- the Portland and the Excelsior -- arrived in Seattle on July 17, 1897, bringing ecstatic miners who had unearthed over $1 million in gold nuggets from Bonanza Creek outside of Dawson City in the Canadian Yukon. The news spread quickly -- not just across the country but around the world. Soon, a stampede of hopeful men headed for San Francisco or Seattle to steam north for what they felt was their rightful share of the riches. Many left their jobs and/or their families after just a few day's notice. Virtually none had any experience in either mining or living outdoors in harsh conditions, including Shorty Powell. Many were clerks or farmers or salesmen, or new immigrants from Europe who had moved into American cities. As soon as he settled his meager affairs, Shorty left Galesburg and took a Burlington train (using his employee 'free rail' pass) to Seattle. Powell would later telegraph his boss from there, informing him that he had quit his job as brakeman.

The wharf at Seattle was bedlam when Shorty arrived. Thousands clamored for the mere hundreds of steamer berths. Frantic men pushed, shoved, and bid for tickets, often paying several times their standard price. Shorty was forced to hang around the docks for three days, trying in vain to catch a ship. While he waited, he spent his time purchasing some of the necessary warm clothing, sturdy boots, and digging tools he was told he would need -- the prices of which were steadily increasing by the day. Luckily, he found a man who had seriously taken ill and was willing to sell his berth on the new steamer Vanguard for only twice its original $40 cost. Powell was relieved to be finally sailing north the following day.

Steaming up through the Inside Passage to Alaska was a somewhat frightening revelation for the Illinois flatlander. Gloomy, gray mountains (some with snowy peaks), chilly rain and drizzle, damp forests, fog, and bitter winds assaulted Shorty's senses -- even though this was still the season of summer. He saw scant signs of any human habitation on shore. Orcas, seals, otters, and bald eagles abounded, but lonely silence was the area's chief impression. All of the stampeders on board, however, tried to make light of the eerie experience, with the usual animated male group boasts and brags. The favorite topic at mealtimes was naturally how much gold each expected to find and how they were going to lavishly spend it. And of the 355 passengers on board, Powell noted only three women, and those females were accompanying their husbands. There were also some sled dog teams, and a few large, single dogs.

After stops in Juneau and Skagway, the steamer Vanguard arrived at last in Dyea. This was where Shorty would disembark. His decision was based following a detailed discussion with the ship's crew about which was the best of the two routes to the goldfields: the longer (45 miles) but less steep White Pass route -- which began in Skagway -- or the shorter (33 miles) but more arduous Chilkoot Pass route, which began in Dyea. Both trails ended at Lake Bennett, where a boat would need to be constructed from felled trees to sail down the Yukon River 550 miles to Dawson City and the nearby lucrative diggings.

Dyea was a muddy, ramshackle tent city with a few crude wooden buildings, basically set up to supply the miner's needs, especially for food supplies. The prices were outrageous, but the stampeders had no other recourse. Shorty learned that he had to pack 2000 pounds of food and gear (enough to last a year) to the Canadian border, which began at the crest of the Chilkoot Pass. There, it was strictly checked by the Northwest Mounted Police. This One Ton Rule meant that the average man had to carry fifty pounds on his back at least forty times, making the trip not just 33 miles from Dyea, but rather an exhausting ordeal of backpacking a total of 1350 miles! In addition, no weapons or alcohol was allowed to cross over from the Alaska side. If a newcomer -- called a 'cheechako' (later to be known as a veteran 'sourdough,' after he had spent at least one full year in the Yukon) -- had enough cash, he could hire native Tlingit packers to carry some or all of his required load. But that option was very expensive, and the Indians wisely took advantage of the situation by continuously raising their rates.

Powell loaded up on beans, bacon, oatmeal, coffee, flour, baking powder, lard, sugar, salt, dried fruit, split peas, dried potatoes, butter, and rice. Next, he purchased a 6" buck knife, a small tent, a rubber mat, two thick wool blankets, some cooking equipment and eating utensils, an axe, a saw, a 200' coil of rope, a hammer and crate of nails, a kerosene lantern with extra fuel, two bars of soap, and a simple medicine kit. Shorty then made a wooden frame with shoulder straps for carrying his big canvas supply pack, as he saw others do.

Mentally spent by now, the former railroad brakeman sat down to eat a meal. He was shyly approached by a fellow cheechako wearing grimy, worn clothing who asked if he could join him. The stranger appeared to be in his mid-40's, and was accompanied by a large, seemingly friendly dog.

"Howdy. I'm Ben Naylor, a barber by trade from St. Paul. This here's Samson. He's a beauty, ain't he? He's a Bernese Mountain dog. The breed is originally from Switzerland -- at least that's what the man who sold him to me in Seattle told me. He's bred strong for hard work, yet he's calm and good-natured. Samson's perfect in many ways for the Yukon, but I sadly found out that I'm not. I marched over to the area they call the Scales -- that's where they first check your supply load -- then I climbed the so-called Golden Staircase up to the Chilkoot Pass. The ascent is only 3/4 of a mile, after the 15 mile trek from Dyea, but the 45 degree angle is so steep, and the rock and scree are so sharp and loose, that it just about killed me. And heaven help those who attempt it in slippery ice and snow! I made only one trip up carrying another man's fifty pound load for two dollars as a trial to see if I could do it. Brutal ain't the word, friend! I called it quits right then and there. I ain't cut out for this place. My feet and back are still aching. And they say the winter cold up here is beyond belief, minus 50 or even minus 70 -- even worse than Minnesota. No sir, I'm heading back home. Getting gold this way is plum crazy. I'm glad I checked it all out in person before I purchased my ton of gear and supplies. But somebody robbed my poke while I was sleeping last night in a bunkhouse, so now I'm flat busted. You see, the law is lax here in Dyea, so I'm out of luck with ever getting my money back. Now, I just need enough cash to buy a boat ticket back to Seattle, and then take the train back to St. Paul and my barber shop. Shaving chins and cutting hair suits me way better. Anyway, you seem like kind of a nice fella, Enoch...maybe you would like to buy my Samson? He's all I got that's worth anything. He's only five years old, and I was told his breed can live to ten. He can help you carry some of your gear over the Pass, which is the reason why I bought him along in the first place. So...whatta ya say? Can we make an honest deal right here and now?"

Samson had a long, silky coat of black fur, with a white chest, rust-brown legs, and white paws. His noble head was an attractive mix of black, white, and brown. He was about 28 inches at the shoulders, and weighed about 115 pounds. His dark eyes bespoke both intelligence and loyalty.

Shorty Powell was frankly smitten. He thought long and hard, then made Ben a fair cash offer, which was eagerly accepted with a firm handshake. Naylor took his leave after giving Enoch his heartfelt thanks and his St. Paul address. "Write me if you ever strike it rich, Enoch! I'd like to know at least one person who actually found some nuggets in this God-forsaken wilderness!" Then the Minnesotan lovingly hugged and petted his dog one more time ("You be good to Enoch now, Samson. He's your new master.") before walking away in the drizzling rain toward the big boat dock and its tiny ticket office.

The dog at first looked confused, but then he went to Shorty and licked his hand, and wagged his tail, and got a good petting in return. Powell went with Samson back to the mercantile and bought a full case of tinned corned beef for his new canine companion. He also later fashioned a kind of canvas saddlebag for the back of his dog, which could carry about twenty-five pounds of supplies. Together, they would journey on to the rich Yukon goldfields. The date was August 3, 1897.

It took Shorty and Samson forty-five torturous days -- averaging thirty miles of backpacking a day -- to move their one-ton of supplies first, from Dyea to the Scales, then up and over the Chilkoot Pass to Lake Lindeman, which was connected to Lake Bennett. (There, the White Pass Trail merged, bringing fellow gold stampeders from Skagway.) The ordeal was truly agonizing -- monotonous, initially wooded and muddy, then rocky and often wet and slippery -- all while being plagued by ferocious mosquitoes. The narrow trail was too rough to allow any kind of sledge or wheeled cart. Shorty noticeably lost weight (the waist on his pants was now baggy and loose), but he also gained muscles he never knew existed. Similarly, the blisters on his feet and hands had turned to thick calluses. Samson was still robust, and was allowed to forage and catch any small mammals -- largely gophers, squirrels and mice -- to eat at each day's end to supplement his diet of canned meat. He was probably pleased to see several dozen other dogs, too, here at Lake Bennett. The nights, meanwhile, were getting colder, so man and dog slept together under thick wool blankets in their tent. Powell heard rumors that of the 100,000 souls who tried for the Klondike, only 30,000 made it this far. Now, a boat had to be made somehow and launched before the Yukon River froze up, which typically started in mid-October and went to the end of May. (Shorty had no experience in boat-building; he assumed would carefully watch others, then try to imitate their skill.) But because it was already September 17 -- and the boat building would take at least another month to build and test, and because the river journey from Lake Bennett to Dawson would take another twenty-eight days -- Shorty realized with no small frustration that he was out of luck for this year. He and Samson would have to winter here -- with 30,000 other men -- after building his boat, then wait for the Yukon River ice to thaw so that the estimated 7000 homemade vessels could sail for the Klondike diggings in the spring.

But unexpected things can happen in this life, even in the strangest places, without warning. Shorty had just set up his tent and was preparing a hot meal for himself and his dog when three strangers approached.

"Nice dog! What's his name? You wouldn't want to sell him now, would you, pardner?" asked a tall man by the name of Dick Kincaid. He then introduced his two partners, Bob Thompson and Jim Rogers. All three men were from Denver, and were university students in their early 20's studying mining. Their elderly professors actually insisted that they leave their classes and head north to gain some practical field experience while having a historic, manly adventure."We just finished our boat -- such as it is -- and we aim to shove off for the gold fields tomorrow at first light. Gotta get there before all the rich claims are staked. Sure could use a good strong dog, though."

Shorty simply smiled and said that Samson was not for sale.

"Well, how about selling us some of your foodstuffs instead? Supplies here are even more expensive than in Skagway. We are running kinda low, because we are always hungry and we underestimated our stores," Thompson explained.

"You fellers are welcomed to share some of my bannock if you want," Powell offered. "It's still warm from the fry pan. And I've got some leftover coffee too, but you'll need to go and bring back your own tin cups. But I likewise won't sell any of my food supplies. They have to last me through the coming winter and then into Dawson."

"Fair enough," said Rogers. "We'll be right back." While Shorty waited, he made a mental note that Samson was content and wagging his tail when the three strangers first showed up. Powell noticed over the past weeks that the dog would always growl if he sensed anybody was a bad person, or if he expected any harm to come to his master. This intuition helped Shorty decide that he could indeed trust these college men.

When Kincaid, Thompson, and Rogers returned, the four cheechakos gathered around Enoch's fire for the fresh bannock and coffee. After a sociable half-hour of random conversation, Kincaid spoke up.

"Enoch, my friends and I have been talking. We like you and trust you. How about you throw in with us and sail on our boat to Dawson tomorrow? All we ask is that Samson joins our merry party, and that we can share your foodstuffs on the journey. You help us, we help you. Once we arrive in Dawson, we can split up and go our own ways again. How about it? Is it a deal?"

Shorty Powell was momentarily flummoxed, then jumped up and said, "Sure...you bet! I wasn't very happy at the prospect of staying here alone over the winter anyway. Let's shake on it!" The quartet pumped handshakes all around and grinned. Samson barked along with the excitement too.

Dawn broke the following morning with rare blue skies and sunshine. Naming their boat 'The Denver,' the four men and one dog went to register their craft with the Northwest Mounted Police. This was required by law to keep track of the occupant's names for next-of-kin if the boat and/or crew was lost to the Yukon rapids, or simply sunk due to leaky construction. The Denver was given number 239, which was then painted on its bow by the Mounties.

The boat appeared well-made to Shorty's casual eye, its seams double-caulked with hardened pine resin. It had two side oars, a canvas main sail which could be raised and lowered depending on the winds, and even a steering rudder. It was quite ideal for four men, a large dog, and all of their food and equipment. Their goal was to arrive in Dawson City in twenty-eight days before the river froze solid. They would travel 550 miles of the Yukon's 2000 mile length, intending to average about twenty miles a day before beaching her each night on shore to rest.

The worst dangers they were warned about were three sets of rapids: White Horse Rapids, Miles Canyon, and Five Finger Rapids. No one on The Denver had ever navigated a boat through white water, so the men knew they were taking a gamble and had to count on their own good luck. Still, everyone's spirits were high, and even Samson settled in with his new friends well. In the evenings around the campfire, the four men took turns reading aloud from three books that the college chums had brought with them from Colorado: Charles Dickens' "Great Expectations," Robert Louis Stevenson's "Treasure Island," and Jules Verne's "Journey to the Center of the Earth." Shorty Powell, who was only educated to the sixth grade, was thrilled by the tales from such fine novels, each filled with interesting characters, plot twists, and suspense. Their routine by now was established, and the four men had plenty of food rations too.

The first few days went by -- either cloudy and grey, or rainy, or cold and windy, or a rare one featuring glorious sunny skies. Soon, they saw their first set of churning, roiling rapids -- the dreaded White Horse. It was frankly terrifying! The boat sped up tremendously, bucking up and down like a bronco, the chilled waves soaking them with spray as they dodged huge boulders and sharp stone outcrops. Enoch laid down on his belly in The Denver's bottom for ballast, holding Samson tightly for safety, with Bob and Jim at the oars, and Dick at the rudder. Fortunately, the crew had wisely lashed down all of their equipment with taut ropes, so nothing went lost overboard. Days later, Miles Canyon -- mercifully not as ferocious -- was similarly met and survived.

But at Five Finger Rapids -- on Day 14, about half-way to Dawson -- disaster struck. Four wicked reddish basalt islands in the center of the river divided the waters into five racing channels, like the fingers on a flat inverted hand. Not knowing which channel to run, Dick pulled their boat's rudder and steered to the left instead of the far right, which (they would later learn) was the correct course. They soon rammed into the basalt cliff walls, shattering Jim's oar and catapulting him out of his seat and into the frigid, racing waters. Dick tried to jump overboard in an attempt to rescue his friend, but Enoch leaped up and held him back, shouting, "No! Throw him a rope instead, or we'll lose you too!" But it was already too late. In horror, the three men helplessly watched the fourth man slam into jutting rocks at full force, his body twisting and flipping like a limp manikin. Jim's head finally popped up -- gashed and bleeding, visibly unconscious -- before he went under the unforgiving waves for the last time and disappeared.

The three shocked survivors, soaking wet, beached their craft on the next calm sandbar downriver. The made a quick fire, changed into dry clothing, and dried out their wet outfits. Dick blamed himself for the tragedy, but Bob reassured him that it was an accident and nobody's fault. Kincaid offered to write to Rogers' family, explaining the awful circumstances of their son's death, once they arrived in Dawson. The boat was inspected for damage, and other than the lost oar and its oarlock, and a chunk of wood split off of The Denver's bow, the vessel was intact. They decided to spend the night where they were, and make up the lost hours the following day.

The rest of their time sailing down the Yukon was uneventful, as the gold boomtown at last came into view around a bend on October 16, 1897. Dawson City! The vast shorelines of the mighty river were just starting to ice up as the daily temperatures had continued to drop and the current slowed, so the men had made it just in time. They only wished that Jim Rogers had lived to be there with them now -- hence, their triumph was understandably tinged with much melancholy. The Denver was met by a curious crowd of well-wishers, who were also eager for any news from the outside world. And two Mounties were there too, waiting to register the safe arrival of boat # 239. Kincaid then told the red-uniformed officials about the tragic loss of their companion at Five Fingers. Afterwards, he went to the postal service to pen a heart-breaking report to Jim's parents while Powell and Thompson stayed behind, guarding their boat and its gear.

Next, Enoch, Dick, and Bob divided up their remaining supplies and easily sold their boat to the first bidder, likewise splitting the money. "Well, looks like this is where we say our good-byes," Kincaid announced as they enjoyed a farewell whiskey toast in the first saloon they spied. "As you know, Bob and I have our mining plans already laid out. So we both wish you good luck with your diggings, Enoch. Write us back in Denver if you strike it rich, and we'll send word to Galesburg if we do the same!" Samson barked his adieu as the two college chums walked off with their gear towards Bonanza Creek, which was several miles south of town.

Dawson City lay on the right bank of the Yukon, in a large flat area beneath a high mountain to the north. The town was noisy, smoky, chaotic and crowded with over 8,000 people so far -- and more were arriving every day. The streets were largely seas of mud, but there were some wooden sidewalks on Front Street, the main thoroughfare adjacent to the river. Ramshackle wooden buildings and crammed tents offered meals, lodging, mining supplies, mail service, whiskey, and gambling. There were banks, assay offices, dance halls, a few doctor's offices, and even an opera house -- but no schools or churches yet. Everything was for sale (even imported champagne and caviar), but the prices were heart-stopping. A single egg first cost a dollar, then two, then three. A 20-cent gold pan could be sold for $8. The town's preferred currency was gold dust or nuggets, and every establishment had its own table scales to weigh it. Prostitutes even had their own area called Paradise Alley, its lane of one-room 'cribs' sporting distinctive red doors, and offering all manner of carnal pleasures for a price -- in a place where lonesome, lusty miners outnumbered women by almost a hundred to one.

But newcomers were stunned and dismayed to learn that all the rich claims had already been staked out and dug in the several months immediately following the 1896 Discovery Strike, and that they would either have to look farther away for any gold or simply abandon their quest all together and go back home -- their back-breaking, dangerous, and costly ordeal utterly fruitless. Yes, a few hundred lucky miners had gotten fabulously wealthy, but most of the stampeders would come up empty-handed -- with nothing but a good adventure tale to tell their grandchildren. The people making money in Dawson now were all of those who "mined the miners," that is, shrewd entrepreneurs selling the diggers all the goods, services, and pleasures that they needed and relied on.

Shorty Powell, however, was still stubbornly determined to make his fortune in the Klondike. He would never go back to Illinois in shame and defeat. With his faithful dog by his side, he set out to familiarize himself with his strange, new environment and its wild, assorted inhabitants. That being done, he would then do everything possible to capture his share of the precious, elusive yellow metal in the gold fields.

Seeing as he had not had a hot bath since leaving Seattle, Enoch made that his first priority. While he soaked in comparative luxury in a dented tin tub in a bath tent, he had a boy run his pile of filthy clothes over to a Chinese laundry to be boiled clean. Then Powell headed for a haircut and a beard trim in the barber tent next door, recalling Ben Naylor while he was being attended to by an cheery Italian who spoke little English. Shorty then treated himself to warm indoor lodgings for the night, but Samson still had to sleep outside -- rules of the house.

The next day, Enoch went to retrieve his clean clothes, changed, and left the dirty ones he was wearing to be washed by the Chinamen. He walked around the town with his dog, making casual conversation with fellow gold-seekers while asking questions. Shorty declined persistent offers to sell Samson. He also noticed some of the dog sled teams and their masters anxiously waiting for the first snowfall, which was soon expected. This far north, Shorty noted that the hours of daylight were shrinking fast each day. The sun rose at 8 and set at 6, but in another month it would rise at 10 and set at 4. Time to find and stake a claim and start digging -- before the annual coming darkness covered the land for months.

Powell headed for dinner at Joe Ladue's Saloon, with a perky Samson at his heels. While he waited for an open seat, Enoch saddled up to the long bar with his dog and ordered a beer. That was when a large bully from Texas named Snake-eyes Malone accosted him.

"More over with that mutt of yours, half-man," Snake-eyes growled. "Make some room for a genuine Sourdough." The obnoxious man had already been heavily drinking and smelled it. He was dirty, bearded, and ugly, with tiny, beady eyes -- which gave him his peculiar nickname.

Shorty tilted back his hat, examined Malone for a few seconds (his harasser was well over six feet tall and sixty pounds heavier than him), then shifted over a bit to his left at the bar rail. "How's that? Got enough space now?" he asked plainly, but in a low voice tinged with annoyance.

"Look, you runty cheechako, why don't you just shove off with your smelly cur and give me some real elbow room?" Snake-eyes snarled. Then Malone whapped Powell's hat off his head with a sharp swipe of his fist. Samson sensed the evilness of the other man, and became fully alert, and would attack this enemy if ordered by his master.

The commotion quickly grew a crowd around the two men, already sensing a good, head-busting fight. Shorty knew he couldn't back down from this bully in public, or his newcomer reputation would forever be as nothing but a lowdown coward. He then remembered what his old boxing coach had once told him: When faced with a sure fight with a bigger bully, always get the first blow in, then add as many more punches as you can before your opponent can respond. So Enoch slowly stooped to retrieve his hat, and turned to his dog saying, "It's O.K., Samson," as he patted his furry head. But as he rose, Powell bounded and powerfully rabbit-punched his left fist twice into Malone's nose, followed by a strong sharp right to his opponent's slack jaw. Snake-Eyes was caught unawares, and reflexively took a step back as his nose began to ooze blood. The crowd murmured its approval as still more miners put down their drinks or dinner forks and came to witness the action. Some were even ready to place fast bets on who would win.

"Why you little son-of-a-bitch!" Malone bellowed. "Now you're gonna get it!" Snake-eyes unsheathed his big waist knife, and wielded it with menace.

Shorty went for his buck knife, but a massive hand from behind covered his fist and froze it there. Then he heard a deep voice say, "Hold on there, friend. I'll settle this."

Shorty turned and saw a mountain of a man -- 6'6'', 250 pounds -- a huge, bearded Paul Bunyan-esque character in a brown plaid flannel shirt and a red toque on his head. His name was Big Mike Mercer, and he was a Cajun from the bayous of Louisiana, which accounted for his distinctive Southern accent. He had worked the docks in Shreveport before coming North. He gave Powell a small smile and a quick wink.

"I think y'all should pick on someone your own size, Snake-eyes. You know...someone like me," Big Mike now glared at the bully with intense anger in his cool blue eyes.

Foolishly, Malone licked his lips and made a forward step, and thrust with his knife. But Mercer had already grabbed a chair sideways, then lifted it with both hands and crushed it into the startled face of his opponent. Snake-eyes went down, his blade spinning out of his hand. As the drunk slowly climbed to his feet, Big Mike towered over him, and punished Malone with a brutal right uppercut that reeled the bully backwards and into the dark land of unconsciousness. The fight was over. The inert body of the loser was dragged out the saloon door and dumped into the mud. The crowd loudly cheered the victor with hearty claps and whistles.

"Can I buy you fellows a drink?" asked a genial 21-year old, clean-shaven stranger, approaching the pair. "I'm Jack London, from Oakland, California. I came North for the gold like you, but I'm also a writer. I'd like to get your names and all the details correct when I write up the story of what just happened. And what a magnificent dog! What's his name?" He warmly rubbed Samson's head.

The trio was offered a vacated table, and they talked for two hours and drank while Shorty also enjoyed a delicious -- but pricey -- sirloin steak dinner. (Samson, meanwhile, was given a large cow leg bone to gnaw.) Jack told his new pals about his adventurous life so far: he had been a fish cannery worker, an oyster pirate, a fur seal hunter, and a penniless tramp who had once spent a rough month in jail for vagrancy. London -- who smoked cigarette after cigarette as he animatedly spoke and gestured -- later generously picked up the meal and bar tab, after excusing himself to leave the saloon for another appointment. "Her name is Esmerelda, and she's a real fine gal down in Paradise Alley...sure don't want to keep her waiting!" Jack laughed as they shook hands. "See ya around, boys!"

And that was how the friendship -- and later partnership -- of Enoch Powell and Mike Mercer began. After talking more into the wee hours, Shorty learned that Mike's digging partner had contracted scurvy and had headed home to St. Louis to regain his health. Would Powell like to throw in with Mercer, he asked? Big Mike had a claim he was working off the Klondike River, not far from Bonanza Creek. "No big strike yet, but it yields an average day's wages in gold dust. How about it?" Enoch said he would certainly like to join him, with but one simple caveat: "Just don't ever call me Shorty, alright, Mike?" Mercer agreed, and they shook on it. Soon, Dawson City was used to seeing the oddly-matched mining pair -- one a diminutive 5'3,'' the other a towering 6'6" -- when they came into town for supplies or a drink.

"Did y'all happen to buy a bear whistle yet?" Big Mike asked Enoch one morning when they came in from the bush for supplies.

"No...why?” replied Powell.

"Well, we are in the wilderness, and in bear country too, and when y'all are hiking through the brush, you need to regularly blow a whistle, or clap your hands, or otherwise make a lot of noise so you don't surprise a bear when coming around a blind bend. If you come face-to-face with an unsuspecting male bear, he will charge you and attack. Likewise, if you run into a she-bear, she'll fight to protect her cubs. So let's get you a good bear whistle at the nearest Mercantile. It's also handy if y'all ever get lost or injured. Just keep blowing three blasts until help arrives." Mercer then pulled out his silver whistle on a leather lanyard from under his shirt and demonstrated. "Of course, in the swamps of Louisiana, we Cajuns only need to worry about alligators sneaking up and biting your ass!" he added with a grin. So they bought Powell a metal whistle, and his first pair of snowshoes, and a used Winchester rifle for hunting and protection against claim jumpers.

Over the following three weeks, Powell learned exactly how hard it was to actually dig for gold. You put shovel- after shovel-full of soil and gravel into a wooden cradle, then poured buckets of water over the pile, rocking it back and forth, searching for any glimmering flecks of color. The water was icy cold, and one's fingers grew numb as each tough day progressed. The ground was frozen with permafrost just a few inches under the topsoil, so fires had to be used to melt the ice in the digging trenches. While Enoch was initially thrilled with discovering his first gold flecks, both he and Mike yearned to find a rich 'pay streak' in the rocks that would yield actual nuggets. Meanwhile, the weather was increasingly snowy and getting bitterly colder by the day. Many cheechakos threw in the towel in disgust and defeat at this point and sold their claims at a loss. But they were trapped by now by the solidly frozen Yukon River, and could not leave Dawson until next May when the ice usually broke up. Only then could they sail by boat north and west downriver on the Yukon all the way to St. Michael, a small town on the coast of the Bering Sea, and connect there with steamers going back to Seattle or San Francisco. Living back in Dawson City for the dark winter was also expensive, so most newcomer's money belts were getting thin and light. Patience waned and tempers flared. Veteran Sourdoughs called it 'cabin fever,' and it would get worse in the coming months of forced inactivity. Drinking, fighting, murders, and suicides all increased during the strange, dark wintertime.

One morning in mid-November, coming back from a short hunting trip looking for fresh game, Mike told Enoch that they had some serious trouble to deal with.

"Some nearby diggers confronted me a few hours ago and said that my claim here is invalid, and they threaten to take me to court. They say their boundary extends into my property. I lost my legal title papers in a camp fire accident about six months ago, and never thought I would be challenged and need to prove my rightful ownership of our diggings. I need to go to the official NWMP office at Forty Mile and get a duplicate document of the original that I filed there when I first came North. It's about 55 miles from here one way. I need you and Samson to stay behind and guard our claim and our camp goods until I get back. I'll travel on the frozen river in my snowshoes. It's three days/two nights to Forty Mile, one day rest there, then three days/two nights back. So I'll be gone a full week. I know the way, so I won't get lost," Mercer assured Powell with confidence.

Big Mike packed up his necessary gear and headed out at first light -- which wasn't until 10 a.m. -- the following day. The thermometer in Dawson registered a numbing 15 degrees below zero Fahrenheit.

But Mercer did not come back on schedule a week later. The weather had worsened -- a freezing Arctic blizzard was brewing. Temperatures had fallen now to minus 30, with bitter winds. Powell was worried that something terrible had happened to his partner. He asked a trusted neighboring miner, Amos Baskin, to watch his claim and goods while he was away. "I should only be gone a few days, heading on the river towards Forty Mile." Enoch promised. "I have to find out if Mike ran into any trouble."

It was now that Powell made his worst mistake. Old-timers tried to warn each green cheechako of one hard rule -- never to go out into the bush alone in the winter. But in his haste, Enoch rushed off north with his faithful dog on the frozen Yukon in his snowshoes and backpack. It was hard traveling. Even with his warmest clothes, he was still cold and had to keep moving to generate enough body heat. By just after 4:00 p.m., it was already getting dark, the skies slate gray and blowing both snow and stinging ice pellets. No moon would be visible tonight. Even the moisture in Enoch's eyes was icing up, and he had to repeatedly squint and blink and close his eyelids to thaw them out. He realized that he had to make a shelter fast for himself and Samson, and wait until tomorrow's dim light. He headed towards the forested area above the left side of the snow-covered river bank to make camp.

That was when Powell thought he heard something amidst the howling winds. Faint man-made sounds of some sort. Was it a whistle? He listened carefully, with all of his concentration. Yes! Weak and distant, but clearly -- three blasts. He pulled his own whistle from his pocket and blew as loud as he could. But the simple act of taking his mittens off for a few moments caused his bare fingers to begin freezing up. He left the whistle clamped in his mouth and quickly put his mittens back on. The metal froze fast to his lips. He regularly blew three blasts as he hiked ahead.

Enoch kept going downriver towards the sound. It had to be Mike! It was night now, but Powell was able to light his kerosene lantern after striking several matches, blowing on his mitten-less fingers as they numbed with the cold before replacing them back in their warm coverings. He held the lantern aloft as he snow-shoed forward, and blew his whistle at regular intervals, pausing between reports to listen for any acknowledgement.

Twenty minutes later, Enoch found his friend, aided by Samson's alert barking. Alarmingly, Mercer was barely alive. He had fallen up to his waist through an odd patch of thin ice near the shore, and had somehow dragged himself up out of the water. He had a compound fracture of his right leg, his tibia sticking out at an awkward angle under his solidly frozen pants. Mike was ghostly pale and miserably freezing to death from hypothermia. Powell removed his whistle from his lips so he could talk, but some skin ripped off where it had frozen to the metal, and his lips were suddenly raw and painful.

"Enoch...is that you? Oh thank God! I couldn't make it into the woods and make a fire. I made it O.K. to Forty Mile and got our claim papers. But then this happened. I'm so cold... I just want to go to sleep...but if I do, I don't think I'll ever wake up again...Enoch, y'all got to make a fire quick..." Mercer weakly insisted, his once mighty strength fading fast.

Powell tried to remain calm and keep his mind clear from the shock of their dire situation. He carefully went with his lantern up the river bank and into the forest to get some kindling sticks, but he had to push away the snow from under the trees to find any. After a few minutes, he had a small bundle of wood and placed it on the river bank closest to Big Mike. He would first go and inform his friend of the plan. Enoch would then go back and get the fire going, and drag his partner to its blazing, life-saving warmth.

Horribly, it was too late. Mercer was dead by the time Powell returned. Enoch was all alone now, his own life precarious in a merciless, murderous Yukon snow blizzard.

Another disaster came next, when Powell tripped over a hidden tree root as he climbed back towards his wood pile and fell, shattering his lantern and extinguishing its beam in the process. Plunged into sudden darkness, Enoch then lost both mittens when he frantically removed them to find his matches in his pack to light a fire. The bare flesh of his fingers burned in an instant with rapidly approaching frostbite. He could hardly move them. They were freezing into numb, alien, claw-like appendages. His only hope of staying alive was to light a match and start the kindling on fire. Oh dear God, please don't let me die here like this, he prayed, he pleaded...

He looked into the steady dark eyes of his faithful companion, Samson. Then he had a final, desperate, appalling idea. Bringing his beloved dog close to him in a hug, with his fingers now barely able to hold anything, Enoch pulled his buck knife out from its waist-belt leather sheath. "I'm so sorry, Samson, my old friend..." he, murmured, choked with emotion. The dog gave a sharp whine as his master slit its throat, letting the steaming hot blood soak onto his frozen fingers, giving their blessed circulation back. Then Enoch gently slit the great dead canine's belly open, and placed his hands fully inside the body until they were warm enough to find his life-saving matches and start a fire. The last chance gamble worked, and soon orange flames ignited and spread. More wood was then gathered and added. Shorty sat as close as possible to the fiery warmth.

Two hours later, Powell heard gunshots fired in regular rounds of three, and he saw swinging lanterns in the distance approaching his fire shelter. It was his trusted claim watcher and diggings neighbor, Amos Baskin, along with a seasoned search party of five men from Dawson. "When I realized that you had gone looking for your friend by yourself, Shorty, I knew you might get into serious trouble, especially in this weather. So we came looking for you," Amos explained. The Dawson men soon saw the corpse of Big Mike, his still blue eyes frozen open, as well as the sliced-open body of brave, mighty Samson. "Too bad, Shorty, but you had no alternative. As heart-breaking as it is, always remember that dog saved your life." Enoch Powell said he knew, then broke down and wept uncontrollably for a time, wailing in grief for both Samson and Big Mike. Their remains would be brought back to Dawson for burial once the weather improved.

Enoch recovered from his near-death ordeal in Dawson for the next six months. He was praised for his selfless bravery in trying to save his partner's life. He was also lauded for his survival skills and his smart -- though regrettable -- action involving his dog. But he was also seen as foolish for going out alone in the bush in the winter, a dreadful mistake he admitted with shame, and he told every other cheechako who would listen to heed his hard lesson. Shorty's experience made him an honorary Sourdough in the eyes of the gold rush town.

Powell ran into Jack London twice during his months of recuperation, but he found out that the young writer had unfortunately contracted scurvy. London suffered bleeding gums, the loss of four front teeth, and had terrible muscle pains in his legs and hips. So a Dawson doctor sternly advised him to give up the Yukon and head back to sunny California -- and its healthy citrus fruits -- when the river ice finally broke up on May 29th. Jack reluctantly left Dawson City on June 8, 1898, after saying farewell to Shorty and others.

Five days later, the Yukon Territory was officially established. Civilization had finally claimed the wild boom town. Dawson's population, however, briefly swelled to more than 30,000 by mid-June, as the 7000 homemade boats from Lake Bennett -- that had been waiting for the Yukon River ice to finally melt -- arrived at last. But to the surprise and dismay of the eager newcomers, every gold claim had already been taken. After all of their brutal toil and cost to get here, it was too late.

By now, Enoch had enough of Dawson as well. He wanted to go back home to Illinois, if not to Galesburg, then to somewhere else -- maybe Springfield or Peoria. He sold his mining claim to Amos Baskin after a few final weeks of meager digging, and at last took a passenger boat downriver to St. Michael in mid-September. He had been in the Klondike for a full, amazing year. Other stampeders were leaving too, for the Gold Rush was basically over, with hydraulic mining and corporations now moving in. The adventure and its dreams of wealth were rapidly fading away for the tens of thousands who had come North.

But fate or luck has a funny way of appearing when one least expects it. When Shorty arrived in St. Michael, word came from the city of Nome, 110 miles north up the coast, that three Swedes had found gold at Anvil Creek there. What was different this time was, incredibly, that the gold was lying right on the ground in nuggets in the black sand beaches! So Enoch headed up to Nome on the next boat to see for himself.

Powell found over $58,650 of gold in just two months, and then left Nome just before the usual frantic hordes of new stampeding miners overwhelmed the town and exhausted the Strike. Enoch took a boat back to St. Michael, then a steamer back to Seattle and a train back to Galesburg. He was settled into a fine new house there by New Year's Day, 1899. He then wrote to Dick Kincaid and Bob Thompson in Denver, informing them of his windfall of riches, as earlier promised, and invited them to visit anytime. He also wrote to Ben Naylor in St. Paul. More than anyone, Ben deserved to know the full story of noble Samson, including the great dog's sacrifice which ultimately saved his master's life.

Nobody teased Enoch Powell or ever called him Shorty again. He cleverly decided to invest in several property areas in the busy Illinois real estate market, and soon expanded his fortune considerably. Before long, he met an attractive and sensible young lady, Virginia Longworth, who -- at age 24 and 5'2'' -- was truly honored to accept his proposal of marriage. Over time, their home would resound with the laughter of their four children. Powell was also pleased when he read in the newspapers how his old Dawson pal, Jack London, had become one of the most famous and wealthy writers in the world, getting his start by penning true or fictional stories about his days during the Yukon Gold Rush.

Enoch had come a long, long way in a relatively short time. He had been severely tested -- physically, mentally, and spiritually -- but had come back a wiser and hopefully a better man. His deep Klondike memories lasted him until the end of his days, after a long and happy life...

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

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