

Buffalo Express
June 4, 1899

From Dawson to the Sea

It was well into June when we cast off the boat's painter, and, with the last goodbyes ringing in our ears, began the 2,000-mile journey down the Yukon to St. Michael. As the six-mile current took us briskly in tow, we turned about for a final glimpse of Dawson – dreary, desolate Dawson, built in a swamp, flooded to the second story, populated by dogs, mosquitoes and gold-seekers. Our friends attempted a half-hearted cheer, and filled the air with messages for those at home.

Our boat was home-made, week-kneed and leaky, but in thorough harmony with the wilderness we were traversing. A smooth and polished creation of the boat-builder's art might have been more beautiful, but we were quite agreed that it would have been less comfortable and a positive discord to our rough-hewn environment. In the bow was the wood shed, while amidships, built of pine boughs and blankets, was the bed chamber. Then came the rower's bench, and jammed between this and the steersman was our snug little kitchen. It was a veritable home, and we had little need of going ashore, save out of curiosity or to lay in a fresh supply of firewood.

The three of us had sworn to make of this a pleasure trip, in which all labor was to be performed by gravitation, and all profit reaped by ourselves. And what a profit it was to us who had been accustomed to pack great loads on our backs or drag all day at the sleds for a paltry 25 or 30 miles. We now hunted, played cards, smoked, ate and slept, sure of our six miles an hour, of our 144 a day.

Scarcely pausing at the deserted mining camp of Forty-Mile or at Fort Cudahy, we arrived at Eagle City, the first town on the American side of the boundary. What with the strange actions and heavy exactions of the Northwest Territorial officials, we gave vent to a most excessive enthusiasm on once more treading the soil of Uncle Sam. The 50 inhabitants, while waiting for some steamer to bring them food, were engaged in bucking a faro layout. But they were boomers, halting the game in a vain attempt to sell us corner lots.

Three hundred miles below Dawson we encountered Circle City, the largest camp on the Yukon previous to the Klondike discoveries, and so named because of its proximity to the Arctic Circle. It lay on the edge of the great Yukon Flats, a dismal domain, about which little is known. The "Flats" are a vast area of low country, extending for hundreds of miles in every direction, into which the Yukon plunges and is practically lost. The river, hitherto flowing between mountains, rugged and sternly outlined, with few islands on its breast, now begins its heart-breaking dividing and subdividing. One finds himself in a gigantic puzzle, consisting of thousands of miles of territory, and cut up into countless myriads of islands and channels. Men have been known to lose their way and wander for weeks in this perplexing maze. Great "blind" sloughs, on every hand, lie in wait for the unwary. And most exasperating it is to labor several score of miles into one of these, to find it is "blind" (has no outlet) and that you must retrace

your steps. The islands are well wooded, but, having also been well flooded, are miserable to land upon. The region is one of the greatest nesting grounds in the world, abounding with all kinds of ducks, brant, geese and swans. The adventurer who faces this soggy wilderness of water, mud, dank vegetation and mosquitoes, does not care to linger by the way, but, with an intense longing and exceeding haste, keeps to the largest channels and swiftest currents.

Eighty-five miles within the Flats, where the Yukon crosses the Arctic Circle and makes its magnificent bend to the west and south, and the Porcupine threads the lacustrine wilderness and enters from the east, we landed at the old Hudson Bay Company post of Fort Yukon. The North American Trading and Transportation and the Alaska Commercial companies' caches are located here, also an Indian village. During the winter, while Dawson was on the ragged edge of famine, these caches were stocked to overflowing; yet it was impossible to sled the provisions such a distance up the river, while the steamers had found it equally impossible to get up before navigation closed.

The steamer *Bella*, a year late, was industriously loading up. It was a peculiar scene of animation and excitement. Four o'clock in the morning, under the Arctic Circle, yet the sun was high in the heavens and it was already uncomfortably warm. It seemed more like some festival day at 3 o'clock in the afternoon. All was gaiety, noise and laughter. The bucks were skylarking or flirting with the maidens; the older squaws were gossiping in bunches, while the younger ones shrank and giggled in the corners. The children played or squabbled, and the babies rolled in the muck with the tawny wolf-dogs. Fantastic forms, dimly outlined, flitted to and fro, surged together, eddied, parted, in the smoke laden atmosphere. Only by nosing and poking about could one see anything; for the reeking smoke rose from untold smudges, bringing grief to the mosquito, tears to the soft eyes of the white men and giving to the whole affair a mysterious air of unreality.

Through all this portion of the trip it was hard to realize our far-northerly latitude. It was more like an enchanted land, teeming with paradoxes. For instance, gasping for breath in the noonday heat and sweltering in a tropic temperature under Arctic skies or panting on top of the blankets at midnight, the red-disked sun poised like a ball of blood above the northern horizon. And the strange beauty and charm of the noonday nights – drifting, always drifting with the stream. Now slipping down a narrow channel where the wooded shores seem to meet overhead; now flashing into the open, where a thousand streams converge and form a mighty river; and again the diverging courses, the tiny channel, the overhanging forest, the smell of the land and the damp warmth of the vegetation. And above all, the hum of life, bursting into sudden gushes of song, slowly swelling to a great, dull roar of satisfaction or dying away into sweetly cadenced silence. Not a sound as we round the tail of a bar, disturbing a solitary crane from his ghostly reveries. A partridge drums in the forest, a moose lunges noisily as it takes to the water, and again silence. Then an owl hoots from some gloomy recess or a raven croaks gutturally overhead. Suddenly, the wild cry of a loon sweeps across a grassy stretch of river, awakening myriad answers. The robins open their full, rich throats, and the woods burst into music. The tree squirrels play half a dozen instruments at once, while the blackbirds sing shrill choruses to the sharp-marked time of the wood-pecker. The pure treble of the songbirds is accompanied by the steady boom boom of the partridge, till all is lost in the general pandemonium. Then the wild fowl of the swamp join the quick crescendo, and the finale, swelled to bursting, slowly dies away. A kildee calls timidly to its mate, and silence falls.

After 300 miles of the Flats, we made Minook, the principle mining camp on the Lower River. It has since received the less euphemistic name of Rampart City. While the news of

Dawson was by no means fresh, the men of the Lower River had had none all winter; so we landed amid a bombardment of queries. They were mostly perturbed over the war, the Thanksgiving football game and the execution of Durant. True to Northland tradition, we expanded items into chapters, yet failed utterly in satisfying their unholy lust for news.

Running the rapids below Minook, where the Yukon at some period cut its way through the Rampart Mountains, we made Tanana station. Here also was the Indian town of Nuklukyeto, while several miles below stood the old mission of St. James. Great was the merrymaking as we arrived in the wee, small hours. The spring run of salmon was expected at any moment, and the mission, Tanana and Tozikakats were all assembled, to say nothing of the general sprinkling contributed by the several hundred miles of Yukon on either side of the station. We landed our heavy craft amid the litter of flimsy bark canoes which lined the bank, and found ourselves in the great fishing camp. Picking our steps among the tents and wading through the sprawling babies and fighting dogs, we made our way to a large log structure where a dance was in progress. After much pushing and shoving, we forced an entrance through the swarming children. The long, low room was literally packed with dancers. There was no light, no ventilation, save through the crowded doorway, and, in the semi-darkness, strapping bucks and wild-eyed squaws sweated, howled and reveled in a dance which defies description. With the peculiar elation of the travelers who scales the virgin peak, we prepared to enjoy the novelty of the situation; but, imagine our disappointment on discovering that even here, 1,000 miles beyond the uttermost bounds of civilization, the adventurous white man already had penetrated. In the crowded room, dizzy with heat and the smell of bodies, we at last discerned the fair bronzed skin, the blue eyes, the blonde mustache of the ubiquitous Anglo-Saxon. A glance demonstrated how thoroughly at home he was.

One hundred miles below Nuklukyeto, our midnight watch was beguiled by a wild chant, which rose and fell uncannily as it floated across the water. An hour later we rounded a bend and landing at a fishing village, so engrossed in its religious rites that our arrival was unnoted. Climbing the bank, we came full upon the weird scene. It brought us back to the orgies of the cavemen and more closely in touch with our common ancestor, probably arboreal, which Mr. Darwin has so fittingly described. Several score of bucks were giving tongue to unwritten music, evidently born when the world was very young, and still apulse with the spirit of primeval man. Urged on by the chief medicine man, the women had abandoned themselves to the religious ecstasy, their raven hair unbound and falling to their hips, while their bodies were swaying and undulating to the swing of the song.

Nor was the ubiquitous Anglo-Saxon absent; for there, between the flaps of a tent, with a nursing child at the breast, we found him staring at us through the eyes of a half-caste woman. Slender formed, with her Caucasian features and delicate oval face, she seemed as a pearl caste among swine. Lafcadio Hearn had dwelt with great pathos upon the Japanese half-caste; but how much harder the lot of the Yukon Indian half-breed. It is a life of severest toil, coupled with extreme privation and misery. What white woman would care or dare to strap her suckling babe to her back, and, with the temperature ranging from 50 to 70 degrees below zero, travel 40 miles a day with the dogs? Such is but an instance of their continual life, whether at the hunting or the fishing, or when famine pinches or sickness is in the camps. Yet their lot is a common one, from the Coast Indians of the Panhandle to the Esquimaux of the Arctic Ocean, from the Rocky Mountains to the most westerly Aleutian isle.

In the course of trading with the natives, one soon learns much of the sickness and misery with which their lives are girt. From one end of the land to the other, the piteous cry for medicine

goes up. In the most cursory intercourse, one stumbles upon pathetic little keynotes that serve as inklings to the solemn chords of heartache with which their lives vibrate. At the mouth of the Koyokuk, I wandered into a summer camp in the hope of picking up some specimens of beadwork. At one of the neatest tents of the encampment, I opened negotiations with a young half-breed woman for some exceptionally fine work, and, when I went away, I was filled with wonder at the bargain she had got. Nor was I at loss, for, before me, on a bearskin mat, had played a most beautiful child – flaxen-haired, blue-eyed and rosy-complexioned, a typical Saxon lass. As often as I stiffened the lines of the barter in accordance with Indian trading, I softened as I rescued my sheathknife or tobacco pouch from the baby fingers, or gazed into the blue eyes of the white father. And, when I hardened my heart for the articles of the final agreement, the mother said, “O you big white man, why so hard? I do much work, Oh, so much work. I get fish and moose and flour for two, and no man to help me.”

I pointed to the child with a glance of interrogation, and she answered, “He go way – one – two – three years now.”

And the bargain she made caused great envy among her dark sisters huddled in the doorway.

All through the interior, save in the sheltered nooks and on the northern slopes of the loftier peaks, the snow had quite disappeared by the middle of June. But from Tozikakat it began to grow more plentiful, till at Koyokuk, even the southern exposure was no longer bare – a sign that we were approaching the coast, or rather, the coast climate, for we were still 700 miles above the mouth of the river. It is naturally thus with a marine climate, where, because of the great body of water, the heat is neither absorbed or radiated as rapidly as in the interior. Hence, the winters are much colder and the summers equally warmer at Dawson than at St. Michael. Along the shores of Bering Sea, even a month after the sun has passed its northern solstice, great bodies of snow are to be found lying at the water's edge.

At Nulato, 650 miles above the mouth, we found two small steamers fitting out and extensive preparations being made for the exploration of the Koyokuk, which is looked upon as the coming Alaskan Klondike. We were just in time for service at the Roman Catholic mission, and, strange it was, gazing upon the finely chiseled features of the bemoccasined, black-stoled priest, and listening to the strange unison of the shrill voices of the Indian women and the deep basses of the fathers. Father Monroe, a cultured, and as rumor puts it, a very wealthy Frenchman, has devoted his life to the cause of the missions, and for five long years has labored zealously at Nulato. The Indians are always more energetic, thrifty, and of better appearance at the missions than elsewhere, though Christianity seems never to get a really deep hold on them. Several of my souvenirs will testify to the readiness with which they will trade a crucifix for an old pack of cards.

It has been a very early spring, and the breaking of the Yukon was accompanied by the greatest high-water known for years. From Dawson to Kutlik, every station and long-established village had been severely flooded, many being washed away. If signs are to be trusted, the ice-run for the last 500 miles of river must have been terrific. Many portions of the mainland and whole islands had been swept clear of the timber which always clusters thickly in the bottoms. The large trees are uprooted or literally gnawed in two by the grinding ice, while the smaller ones bend before it and are rubbed clean of bark, reminding one of well-picked bones on some endless battlefield.

Game and fish were quite abundant the whole length of the river, and every camp had a fresh bearskin or so stretched on the drying frames. While we did much of our own hunting, we

did not waste time in gathering eggs or fishing, preferring to trade for such staples. However, we were usually disappointed in the eggs, not relishing the embryonic diet of ducks and geese which the natives so delight in. But the fish were excellent, especially the salmon. Oh, you, who pay big for the silver salmon of the fish market and then say it is good, come north and buy a great king salmon, weighing from 40 to 50 pounds of clean meat, for a tin cup or so of flour. They are to be found in the pink of condition in the icy waters of the Yukon, cold, firm-fleshed and, above all, delicious. But it takes one quite a time to learn to trade with the Indians. He must have the foresight of Joseph and the patience of Job, else will he be mulcted as the Gentile should be. The practiced hand endeavors to exhibit a well-disguised desire for the article he does not wish, and but ordinary interest in that which he is after. The native will then elevate the price of the former and correspondingly depress that of the latter. When he has thus brought the thing you wish absurdly low, snap it quick and pay on the spot. He will be chagrined, but a bargain's a bargain.

The hunting we could not forego, though the shotgun was old and decrepit, and one trigger persisted in discharging both barrels. Very pleasant it was during midnight lookouts, listening to the comrades snoring beneath the mosquito tent, drifting along the low-flooded banks, watching the sun above the northern horizon and dropping the startled fowl as they rose from the river.

By the time we arrived at Anvik, 600 miles from the mouth, we began to realize the mighty river we were voyaging on. At Fort Yukon, 1,300 miles from the mouth, it is 8 miles wide; at the Koyokuk it narrows to 2 or 3 miles; and from Koserefski it maintains a width of from 8 to 10 miles, till it is lost in the Great Delta, where its southern and northern mouths are over 80 miles apart. But at Anvik it is 40 miles wide, with a spring rise of from 30 to 40 feet. This great width is due to a division which makes possible one of the largest inland islands of the world – and island that is not even named.

A totally different native population is encountered from Anvik to the sea. The clean-limbed stalwart Indians disappear, being replaced by the Malemutes, who are a sort of mongrel cross of Thlinket and Esquimau. Poverty-stricken, with little energy and no ambition, they have not furnished much inducement to the white traders; hence, they continue to exist on a straight fish and meat diet, washed down with incalculable quantities of vile-smelling seal oil. Their houses are merely holes in the ground, shored with driftwood timbers. In the center of this they build an open fire, the smoke of which escapes through a venthole in the roof. In the winter time, the men, women and children crowd into these burrows like sardines. The sanitary, social and moral conditions may be conjectured.

They have quite a reverence for their dead, however; their burial places being neat, clean and pleasing to the eye. Rough palings surround the graves, which are usually covered with a rain shed. Fantastic designs are often painted upon them by the means of soot and seal oil. Occasionally, a curiously carved totem pole is raised; but, by the crosses the great majority rest in the consecrated ground of the Catholic Church. It is hard to say what becomes of the Protestant converts, but the more impressive ritual of the Catholic service, opposed to the bare, Puritanical mode of Protestant worship, and so pregnant with mysticism to the barbaric mind, may perhaps explain it.

From the Mission of the Holy Cross to the Russian Mission of Icogmtute, we found the mountains dwindling sadly, and at Andrefsky we bade farewell to the last barren hills and plunged into the dismal solitude of the Great Delta, of the Yukon. It was a repetition of the Flats, but fraught with more serious consequences. A mistake in this uncharted wilderness and one would blunder into the Southern Channel, wandering no man knows whether, till he emerged,

without guide or landmark, on the bleak coast of Bering Sea. Disdaining Malemute guides, we were two days in traveling these 120 miles. We gave vent to much foolish enthusiasm when we felt the first pulse of the tide; and when in Kutlik we slept in sight of open sea, deemed ourselves to be nearly home.

The 80-mile run up the coast was full of excitement. As we skirted dangerous Point Romanoff, we picked up a Jesuit priest who was having a hard time in the surf. And for all the cloth he was a jolly fellow, pulling an oar, smoking a pipe or telling a tale with the next one. He was an illustration of the many strange types to be found in the Northland. An Italian by blood, a Frenchman by birth, a Spaniard by education and an American by residence, he was a marvelous scholar and his whole life was one continuous romance; but sworn to the oaths of his order, he had sacrificed twelve prime years of his life in bleak Alaska, and in all things, even to reducing the Innuite language to a grammar, was happy.

Our last taste of Bering Sea was a fitting close to the trip. Midnight found us wallowing in the sea, a rocky coast to leeward and a dirty sky to windward, with splutters of rain and wind squalls which soon developed into a gale. Removing the sprit and bagging the after-leech, we shortened to storm canvas and ran before it, reaching the harbor of St. Michael just 21 days from the time we cast off the lines at Dawson.