

Close and Critical Reading

Excerpt from *Jason's Gold* – Chapter 11

At first light Jason was moving again, anxious to catch a glimpse of the infamous Chilkoot Pass. By mid-morning he'd reached another tent and hut metropolis, Sheep Camp, at the end of the wagon road. Here the thick coastal forest gave way to knee-high spruces, tundra, and rock. Here the endless line of Klondikers and hired packers ascended the steep push up Long Hill – four miles long – that would lead them to the bottom of the Chilkoot and the final climb.

Up, up, Jason climbed in pursuit of the snow line. Klondikers stepping out of the trail to rest spared the breath to admire King. “Now, that’s a dog.” “How much is he carrying?” “Is your husky for sale?”

The last question was the most frequent. “Nope,” Jason would say, “he’s my partner.”

At last Jason crowned the top of Long Hill. Here was yet another tent city in a bowl at the foot of the encircling peaks. Directly across the bowl was the sight of a lifetime – a stream of stampedeers marching straight up for the sky, through rockslides and snowfields, at an angle that seemed impossible. The procession was aimed for a towering notch between two peaks, so high about that it seemed he'd fall backward looking at it. “The Golden Stairs,” he heard someone say, “The stairs to the gold.”

“Chilkoot Pass,” Jason said under his breath. It was worse than he had pictured.

This last encampment before the summit, all congested with stampedeers and mounded outfits, was called the Scales. Here the packers weighted everything and raised their rates for the foot traffic cover the pass. The packhorses, mules, and burros were turned around. From this point on, everyone walked.

Jason found a spot to unpack the husky and himself, then lay back in the wildflowers and the sunshine for a few minutes. He drank from the creek, ate some jerky and dried apples. His shoulders felt like pincushions.

“Ready, King? This is it.”

At the foot of the slope Jason joined the human lockstep up the Chilkoot – Klondikers lined up heel-to-toe. Within a minute his lungs were burning and he was gasping for air. He was afraid for the man in front of him, bent double under the weight of a gargantuan load that was heavy enough without the seven-foot sled that was lashed to the outside. The man’s every breath sounded like a death wheeze.

Before long the trail left the rocks and started up the arrow-straight gully through the dirty snow remaining from the previous winter. The August day was hot despite the snow underfoot.

With so many coming behind, no one dared to stop moving. The lockstep proceeded at a snail’s pace up, up, up. And up. To Jason’s right, stampedeers returning from the pass for another load were sledding down vertical chutes on their rumps.

Finally, a place to step out of line, breathe all the air he wanted, slow his heart, admire the view of the Scales far below and the peaks all around. King’s tongue was lolling, but his eyes were burning bright.

Back in line. “We’re halfway up,” he encouraged the husky while he still had the breath. “Halfway up the Golden Stairs.”

With every staggering step he took, his brothers came more clearly into focus. It had been over eleven months now since he’d seen them.

How much farther can the top possible be?

Took off with my \$500, did you? Nice boat you’ve fashioned here. Oh, I forgive you. Let’s go find that gold in the creekbeds, thick as cheese in a sandwich.

And here, finally, was the summit! ENTERING CANADA, a small sign proclaimed.