

## Reader's Theatre—*Jason's Gold*—Chapter 19

Charlie: Who are you?

Jason: Jason Hawthorn

Charlie: Where are they? I'll never catch up.

Narrator: He doesn't remember about his leg.

Jason: They're long gone, you weren't well enough to travel.

Narrator: The boy's eyes went around the room, from the opposite bunk and the shelf of magazines above it, to the wash on the clothesline strung across the room, to the window made of bottles.

Charlie: Who else lives here?

Jason: Just me. I'm holding up here for the winter, on the way to finding my brothers in Dawson City.

Charlie: Is that... a wolf?

Jason: It's a dog. A husky. His name's King.

Charlie: It's warm in here.

Jason: That's right. Nice and warm. Try to rest.

Narrator: Shortly after he awoke the next time, the boy looked startled. His head snapped back with a sudden realization as if he'd taken a punch. Very slowly, he lifted the blanket, and he gasped. Then he stared at the floor and saw the enormous bloodstain there. Jason had tried without success to wash it away. The boy's face went as pale as a corpse and his lips began to tremble.

Jason: (trying to take Charlie's mind off of his leg) Where were they going, Charlie?

Charlie: Who?

Jason: Your uncle, and the others. Where were they going?

Charlie: Skagway

Jason: Where did you start out from?

Charlie: Chicago

Narrator: With that, the dark-haired boy groaned and looked away, buried his face in the blanket, and sobbed himself to sleep. Jason went outside to split wood and to think. If only he knew what to do, how to help this boy cope with the calamity that had some crashing down on him. Make some kind of crutches? If the boy was going to be able to get around at all, he'd need them. Fashioning crutches would give Jason something to do. And it would keep his mind off of his biggest worry, whether he had enough food to take the two of them through the winter.

**Appendix #15a1**

Charlie: I have to outside.

Jason: You lose enough blood for two people. Don't try getting up just yet.

Charlie: (said fiercely) Just help me up, will you? Don't tell me not to try.

Jason: Does it hurt bad?

Charlie: Hurts worse when I stand up.

Narrator: It was late afternoon already, time to think about supper. He took the ladder from behind the cabin and climbed up to the cache. He threw the makings for mulligan stew in a bag – some bacon, dried onions, dried potatoes, and other dried soup vegetables. In the cabin, Charlie was awake, lying on the bunk with his hands behind his head, staring at the log rafters.

Jason: (speaking of supper) This will need to soak and simmer for a while. I'll fry up the bacon a little later.

Charlie: Can I stay here?

Jason: I could use the company.

Charlie: (whispered) Good. How long were they here?

Jason: Your uncle and the rest? Not long. They thought you were a goner.

Charlie: When they get back home to Chicago, that's what they'll tell my mother. They'll tell her I'm dead.

Jason: Well then, you'll just have to surprise her.

Charlie: She'd like that, all right.

Jason: Tell me again, Charlie, where your uncle and the others going, and where you started from.

Charlie: We were trying to get to Skagway. We started in Dawson City.

Jason: You've been to Dawson? How long were you there?

Charlie: Ten days or so. We got there the twenty-fifth of September.

Jason: You might have seen my brothers. Their names are Abe and Ethan. They're twenty-three and twenty-one. Abraham's taller, with a mustache; Ethan's powerful like a lumber jack and has a beard.

Charlie: I don't remember those names. So many people there. Everyone has a mustache or a beard.

Jason: I suppose they were already at the creeks, staking a claim. Did you?

Appendix #15a2

Charlie: Stake a claim? No, we didn't. People were saying that the new discovers don't amount to much. It looks like you had to be there earlier, maybe a lot earlier.

Jason: But you did get there early, and so did my brothers. The Klondike is the richest goldfield in the world!

Charlie: I suppose so, but how big? Oh, lots of people still think there will be new strikes anytime now – maybe they're right. I'm sorry. I just said what I heard.

Jason: There'll be new strikes. There have to be.

Charlie: Gold wasn't even what everyone was talking about. Famine, that's what everyone was talking about. There's hardly any food there.

Jason: My brothers traded away some of their grub.

Charlie: We never had much, and that's why we had to turn around. We had money, because of the investors at the bank where my uncle's a clerk. All the way from Chicago, my uncle kept saying, "We can buy grub in Dawson. The most important thing is to go fast and get there first." When we got to customs, the Mounties weren't enforcing the weight limit for food yet-

Jason: They are now? How many people are there in Dawson City?

Charlie: They say three or four thousand have been there almost since the beginning – August a year ago. When we got there, everybody was waiting for five steamboats that were supposed to be bringing supplies upriver all the way from the ocean. Two different companies in Dawson have food warehouses – both guarded by men with rifles – but there's hardly any food to buy. A couple pounds of beans or flour was all they'd sell you.

Jason: Did you see any gold?

Charlie: I sure did. A man buys a shovel; he puts down dust or nuggets. People had gold, all right. Everybody was saying that the grub was going to sell out fast, though, once the steamboats arrived, so we stayed close. Everyone was listening for a while and keeping one eye on the river. But only two steamboats ever got through, and by the time they did, the ice was thirty feet out from the shore.

Jason: Did you by food then?

Charlie: No. They hardly had any once they got to Dawson. Way downriver the boats got stuck on sandbars, because of the low water. They had to unload half their cargo to get unstuck; then the other half got robbed at some Alaska mining camp. About all they had left when they got to Dawson was hardware.

Jason: Good Lord!

Appendix # 15a3

Charlie: You should've seen the panic. The inspector in charge of the Mounties posted a notice on Front Street, right by the river. It said something like, "For those who have not laid in a winter's supply, to remain longer in Dawson City is to court death by starvation, or at least the certainty of sickness from scurvy and other troubles. Starvation now stares everyone in the face who is hoping and waiting for outside relief..."

Jason: My brothers...

Charlie: It was bedlam. An official from one of the trading companies went running up and down Front Street yelling, "Go! Go! Flee for your lives! There is no time to lose! There are some supplies down at Fort Yukon. Whichever way you go, up the river or down, it's hazardous – but you must make the try!"

Jason: What did people do? Did many leave?

Charlie: At least fifty small boats took off within an hour, to be the first ones to Fort Yukon, which is more than three hundred miles downstream. At the same time, there was an official from another trading company who was calling the other fellow a frightened little cheechako. He said there wouldn't be enough food down at Fort Yukon to feed everybody who was evacuating Dawson City. "Stay put in Dawson," he said, "There will be no starvation. If there is starvation, it won't be until spring."

Jason: (laughing) That must have sounded reassuring.

Charlie: Everyone was crazy trying to make up their minds. The two steamboats were leaving within hours to try to beat the ice down to Fort Yukon. Some people were saying it was too late; the ice was going to catch them and wreck the boats, and they'd be stranded. Still, the decks of those two boats were full to bursting, and we kept wondering down to the last minute if we we should get on board."

Jason: Why didn't you go?

Charlie: My uncle George had been running around like a chicken with its head cut off. He'd found a decrepit little steamboat called the Kieukik, and he'd got it in his mind that the only safe thing to do was to backtrack the way we'd come, and hike back over the Chilkoot Pass. So that's what we did – started back upriver – but the machinery on the boat kept breaking down. A week later we'd gone about thirty-five miles.

Jason: Battling the ice, I bet.

Charlie: You're right; there was ice on all sides. Finally we ripped a gash in the hull and set out in Indian canoes. We thought we'd be able to buy some more food at the mouth of the Stewart River – we knew that some Klondikers had built winter cabins on the islands in the Yukon there. But they weren't willing to sell more than a few pounds from their outfits – they were worried about famine too. By this time the river froze up, and we had to abandon the canoes and go on foot. A week or so later – I don't remember exactly; it was all a nightmare – my leg went right through the ice and my boot filled with water. I was walking at the end of the line. I didn't tell anybody it happened, because my uncle – everybody, really – was crazy to keep going. My uncle was always yelling at me to keep up, like it was my fault. I was in a daze and just kept walking. In camp I was so exhausted; I didn't even pull my book off to dry it out. We built two big bonfires and slept real close to the fire, as usual. I felt no pain. Sometime during the night, in my sleep I must have shifted positions and my foot ended up nowhere close to the fire. My sock and my boot were still wet, and my foot froze. That's how it happened.

Appendix #15a4

Narrator: Jason started frying the bacon for the stew. Then he reached over and handed the boy a piece of yeast cake.

Jason: Here. You can chew on this until the stew's ready.

Charlie: Thanks – I'm starving. How long can I stay here?

Jason: Until we float out together in the spring, unless you feel like hiking over the Chilkoot this winter. Don't think I'd like to join you...

Charlie: What about grub? Do we have enough?

Narrator: Instantly, Jason knew he had to steer a path around the truth. This boy wasn't strong enough to hear it, at least not anytime soon.

Jason: We're okay if we pace ourselves. Otherwise, I wouldn't have told time to leave you here with me.

Appendix #15a5