

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Thanksgiving on Slav Creek

JACK LONDON

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In contrast to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s “How We Kept Thanksgiving at Oldtown,” the “prosperity” in this tale exists mainly as a hope—in keeping with the root meaning of the word, (Latin: pro + spes, hope) “according to hope”—as the main characters hopefully prospect (“look forward”: pro + specere) for gold. Like them, Jack London (1876–1916) participated in the Yukon Gold Rush of 1897. But the only gold he brought back was an experience that he would mine for gems of literature for much of his writing life, as evidenced in his well-known novels like Call of the Wild (1903) and White Fang (1906), as well as in his stories like “To Build a Fire” (1908) and “Thanksgiving on Slav Creek” (1900), all of which draw on the places he saw and the people he met during those simultaneously hope-filled and brutal times in the Northwestern Yukon territory.

In this story, Nella and George Tichborne have left their home “down in the States” and come to the Yukon territory in search of gold. Accompanied by Ikeesh, an Indian woman, they brave the darkness and the freezing cold to beat out “the stampede” of fortune hunters rushing to stake a prospecting claim on Slav Creek, rumored to be a place where anyone might strike it rich. Can you imagine what the experience must have been like for these three? What enabled them to bear the brutal conditions? For what purpose do they want to find gold? What would be their ultimate “prosperity”? What is the significance of the uninvited guest who suddenly appears at the end? What makes this story a tale of “true Thanksgiving”?

She woke up with a start. Her husband was speaking in a low voice, insistently.

“Come,” he added. “Get up. Get up Nella. Quick. Get up.”

“But I don’t want to get up,” she objected, striving vainly to lapse back into the comfortable drowse.

“But I say you must. And don’t make any noise, but come along. Hurry! Oh, do hurry. Our fortune’s made if you will only hurry!”

Nella Tichborne was now wide awake, what with the suppressed excitement in his whispers, and she thrust her feet out with a shiver upon the cold cabin floor.

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“What is it?” she asked, petulantly. “What is it?”

“Ssh!” he sibilated. “Don’t make a noise. Mum’s the worse. Dress at once.”

“But what is it?”

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“Be quiet, if you love me, and dress.”

“Now, George, I won’t move an inch until you tell me.” She capped the ultimatum by sitting back on the edge of the bunk.

The man groaned. “Oh, the time, the precious time, you’re losing! Didn’t I tell you our fortune was made? Do hurry! It’s a tip. Nobody knows. A secret. There’s a stampede on. Ssh! Put on warm clothes. It’s the coldest yet. The frost is sixty-five below. I’m going to call Ikeesh. She would like to be in on it, I know. And oh, Nella—”

“Yes?”

“Do be quick.”

He stepped across to the other end of the cabin where a blanket partitioned the room into two, and called Ikeesh. The Indian woman was already awake. Her husband was up on his Bonanza claim, though this was her cabin, in which she was entertaining George Tichborne and Nella.

“What um matter, Tichborne?” she asked. “Um Nella sick?”

“No, no. Stampede. Rich creek. Plenty gold. Hurry up and dress.”

“What um time?”

“Twelve o’clock. Midnight. Don’t make any noise.”

Five minutes later the cabin door opened and they passed out.

“Ssh!” he cautioned.

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“Oh, George! Have you got the frying-pan?”

“Yes.”

“And the gold-pan? And the axe?”

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“Yes, yes, Nella. And did you remember the baking-powder?”

They crunched rapidly through the snow, down the hill into sleeping Dawson. Light stampeding packs were on their backs, containing a fur robe each, and the barest necessities for a camp in the polar frost. But Dawson was not sleeping, after all. Cabin windows were flashing into light, and ever and anon the mumble of voices drifted to them through the darkness. The dogs were beginning to howl and the doors to slam. By the time they reached the Barracks the whole town was aroar behind them. Here the trail dropped abruptly over the bank and crossed the packed ice of the Yukon to the farther shore.

George Tichborne swore softly and to himself; but aloud: “It’s leaked out somehow, and everybody’s in it. Sure to be a big stampede now. But hurry up; they’re all behind us, and we’ll make it yet!”

“George!” A frightened wail punctured the still air and died away as Nella slipped on the icy footing and shot down the twenty-foot embankment into the pit of darkness beneath.

“Nella! Nella! Where are you?” He was falling over the great ice-blocks and groping his way to her as best he could. “Are you hurt? Where are you?”

“All right! Coming!” she answered, cheerily. “Only the snow’s all down my back and melting. Brrr!”

Hardly were the trio reunited when two black forms plumped into their midst from above. These were followed by others, some arriving decorously, but the majority scorning the conventional locomotion and peregrinating along on every other portion of their anatomies but their feet. They also had stampeding packs on their backs and a great haste in their hearts.

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“Where’s the trail?” the cry went up. And thereat all fell to seeking for the path across the river.

At last, George Tichborne found it, and, with Nella and Ikeesh, led the way. But in the darkness they lost it repeatedly, slipping, stumbling, and falling over the wildly piled ice. Finally, in desperation, he lighted a candle, and as there was not a breath of wind, the way was easier. Nella looked back at the fifty stampedeers behind and laughed half-hysterically. Her husband gritted his teeth and plunged savagely on.

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“At least we’re at the head of the bunch, the very first,” he whispered to her, as they swung south on the smoother trailer which ran along under the shadow of the bluffs.

But just then a flaming ribbon rose athwart the sky, spilling pulsating fire over the face of the night. The trail ahead lighted up, and as far as they could see it was cumbered with shadowy forms, all toiling in one direction. And now those behind began to pass them, one by one, straining mightily with the endeavor.

“Oh, Nella! Hurry!” He seized her hand and strove to drag her along. “It’s the one chance we’ve been waiting for so long. Think of it if we fail!”

“Oh! Oh!” She gasped and tottered. “We will never make it! No, never!”

There was a sharp pain in her side, and she was dizzy with the unwonted speed. Ikeesh grunted encouragement and took her other hand. But none the less the vague forms from the rear continued to steadily overtake and pass them.

Hours which were as centuries passed. The night seemed without end to Nella. Gradually her consciousness seemed to leave her, her whole soul narrowing down to the one mechanical function of walking. Ever lifting, ever falling, and ever lifting anon, her limbs seemed to have become great pendulums of time. And before and behind glimmered two eternities, and between the two eternities, ever lifting, ever falling, she pulsed in vast rhythmical movement. She was no longer Nella Tichborne, a woman, but a rhythm—that was all, a rhythm. Sometimes the voices of Ikeesh and her husband came to her faintly; but in her semi-conscious condition she really did not hear. To-morrow there would be no record of the sounds; for a rhythm is not receptive to sound. The stars paled and dimmed, but she did not heed; the aurora-borealis shrouded its fires, and the darkness which is of the dawn fell upon the earth, but she did not know.

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But ere the darkness fell, Ikeesh drew up to Tichborne and pointed to the loom of the mountains above the west shore of the river.

“Um Swede Creek?” she asked, laconically, pointing whither the trail led.

“No,” he replied. “Slav Creek.”

“Um no Slav Creek. Slav Creek—” She turned and pointed into the darkness five degrees to the south. “Um Slav Creek.”

He came suddenly to a stop. Nella persisted in walking on, heedless of his outcries, till he ran after her and forced her to stop. She was obedient, but as a rhythm she no longer existed. The two eternities, which it was her task to hold apart, had rushed together, and she was not. So she wandered off to the old home down in the States, and sat under the great trees, and joyed in the warm sunshine—the old home, the old mortgaged home, which had driven them poleward after the yellow gold! The old home which it was their one aim to redeem! But she forgot all this, and laughed, and babbled, and poured the sunshine back and forth from hand to hand. How warm it was! Was there ever the like?

Tichborne conferred with Ikeesh. She so stolidly reiterated that Slav Creek lay farther to the south that he believed.

“Somebody went astray in the dark,” he exulted, “and the rest followed his trail like sheep. Come on! Come on! We’ll be in at the finish yet, and ahead of no end of those that passed us!”

He cut across a five-mile flat into the south-west, and two hours later, with gray dawn creeping over the landscape, entered the wood-hidden mouth of Slav Creek. The fresh signs of the stampede were so many and so various that he knew Ikeesh had spoken true, though he feared that the mistake had occurred too late in the night to have led enough on the wild-goose chase up Swede Creek.

“Oh, Nella,” he called to his wife, stumbling blindly at his heels, “it’s all right. We are sure to get a claim. Day has come. Look about you. This is Slav Creek, and behold the day is Thanksgiving day!”

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She turned a blank face upon him. “Yes, the mortgage shall be lifted, principal and interest, I promise you—George and I both promise you. Even now, to-morrow, do we go north to lift the mortgage.”

Tichborne glanced helplessly at Ikeesh.

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“Um much tired,” she commented, dryly. “But um be all right bime-by. Bime-by make camp, um be all right.”

They hastened on for five miles more, when they came to the first white-blazed trees and fresh-planted stakes of the newly located claims. Hour after hour, they traveled up the frozen bed of the creek, and still, stake to stake, the claims stretched in an unbroken line. Even the man and the Indian women grew weary and panted. Ikeesh kept a jealous eye on Nella’s face, and now and again, when it turned white, rubbed with snow the tip of the nose and the stretched skin of the cheek-bones. They passed many men—the successful ones—rolled in their furs by the side of the trail, or cooking and warming themselves over crackling fires of dry spruce. At eleven o’clock the sun rose in the south-east; but though there was no warmth in its rays, it gave a cheerier aspect to things.

“How much farther do the stakes run?” Tichborne asked of a man limping down the trail.

“I staked 179,” the man answered, stopping to pound the aching muscles of his legs. “But there were about ten more behind me: so I guess they’ve run it up to 189.”

“And this is 107,” Tichborne calculated aloud. “Five-hundred-foot claims—ten to the mile—about eight miles yet, eh?”

“Reckon you’ve ’bout hit it on the head,” the other assured him. “But you’d better hurry. Half the stampede went wrong up Swede Creek—that’s the next one to this—but they’re onto themselves now, and crossing the divide and tapping Slav Creek in the hundred-and-eighties.

“But they’re having a terrible time” he shouted back as he went on his way. “I met the first one that succeeded in crossing over. He said the trail was lined with people tee-totally played out, and that he knew himself five frozen to death on the divide.”

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Frozen to death! The phrase served to rouse Nella from her maze of memory visions. Her glimmering senses came back to her, and she opened her eyes with a start. The interminable night was gone—spent where or how she could not say—and day broke upon her with a blinding flash. She looked about. Everything was strange and unreal. Both her companions were limping pitifully, and she was aware of a great full pain in her own limbs. Her husband turned his head, and she saw his face and beard a mass of bristling ice. Ikeesh's mouth was likewise matted with frost, and her brows and lashes long and white. And Nella felt the weight on her own lashes, and the difficulty of drawing them apart from each other whenever she closed her eyes. The double excessive demand of the toil and the frost had burned up all the fuel of her body, and she felt cold and faint with hunger. This latter she found worse than the agony of the overused muscles; for a quivering nausea came upon her, and her knees trembled and knocked together with weakness.

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Occasionally Tichborne made excursions to one side or the other in search of the claim-stakes, which were not always posted in the creek-bed. At such times Nella dropped down to rest, but Ikeesh dragged her afoot again, and shook her, and struck her harsh blows upon her body. For Ikeesh knew the way of the cold, and that a five-minute rest without fire meant death. So Nella has lapses and cruel awakenings till the whole thing seemed a hideous nightmare. Sometimes, the trees became glibbering shades, and Slav Creek turned to an Inferno, with her husband as Virgil, and leading her from circle to circle of the damned. But at other times, when she was dimly conscious, the memory of the old home was strong upon her, and the mortgage nerved her on.

A long, long time afterward—ages afterward, it seemed—she heard George cry aloud joyfully, and looking at him as though from a great distance, she saw him slashing the bark from a standing tree, and writing on the white surface with a lead-pencil. *At last!* She sank down into the snow, but Ikeesh struck her a stinging blow across the mouth. Nella came back angrily to her feet, but Ikeesh pushed her away and set her to work gathering dry wood.

Again came a long lapse, during which she toiled mechanically and unknowing; and when she next found herself she was in the furs by a big fire, and Ikeesh was stirring a batter of flour and water and boiling coffee. To her surprise, Nella felt much better after her rest, and was able to look about her. George ran up with a gold-pan of gravel which he had got from the creek bottom through an air-hole, and warmed his hands by the fire. When he had panned it out he brought the prospect over to her. The streak of black sand

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on the bottom was specked with yellow grains of glistening gold, and there were several small nuggets besides. He leaped up and down and about like a boy, for all his weary body.

“We’ve struck it at last, Nella!” he cried. “The home is safe! If that is a surface indication, what must it be on bed-rock?”

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“Tell you what—”

They turned their heads, startled. A man had crawled up to the fire unobserved in their excitement.

“Tell you what,” he glowed, “it’s the richest creek in Alaska and the Northwest. Sure!” He sat down uninvited, and tried to unfasten his ice-bound moccasins. “Say, I broke through the ice up here a piece and wet my feet. I kind of think they’re freezing.”

Ikeesh stopped from her cooking, and Tichborne lending a hand, they cut off the new-comer’s moccasins and socks and rubbed his white feet till the glow of life returned.

“Tell you what,” the sufferer went on, unconcernedly, while they worked over him, “judging from indications, you people are located on the richest run of the creek. Sure! But I got in on it; you betcher life I did! Got lost on Swede Creek, too, and hit across the divide. Say! No end of frozen men on that trail. But I got in on it, tell you what!”

“A true Thanksgiving, Nella.”

George Tichborne passed her a tin plate of flapjacks swimming in bacon grease and a great mug of piping black coffee. She seized his hand impulsively and pressed it, and her eyes grew luminously soft

“Tell you what—” she heard the new-comer begin; but a vision of the old home, warm in the sunshine, came into her eyes, and she dropped off to sleep without hearing “what.”