



THE SIN THAT WAS HIS

FRANK L. PACKARD

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CHAPTER I—THREE-ACE ARTIE

OF Arthur Leroy, commonly known throughout the Yukon as Three-Ace Artie, Ton-Nugget Camp knew a good deal—and equally knew very little. He had drifted in casually one day, and, evidently finding the environment remuneratively to his liking, had stayed. He was a bird of passage—tarrying perhaps for the spring clean-up.

He was not exactly elegant in his apparel, for the conditions of an out-post mining camp did not lend themselves to elegance; but he was immeasurably the best dressed and most scrupulously groomed man that side of Dawson. His hands, for instance, were very soft and white; but then, he did no work—that is, of a nature to impair their nicety.

His name was somewhat confusing. It might be either French or English, according to the twist that was given to its pronunciation—and Three-Ace Artie could give it either twist with equal facility. He confessed to being a Canadian—which was the only confession of any nature whatsoever that Three-Ace Artie had ever been known to make. He spoke English in a manner that left no doubt in the world but that it was his native language—except in the mind of Canuck John, the only French Canadian in the camp, who was equally positive that in the person of Three-Ace Artie he had unquestionably found a compatriot born to the French tongue.

A few old-timers around Dawson might have remembered, if it had not been so commonplace an occurrence when it happened, that Leroy, as a very young man, had toiled in over the White Pass; though that being only a matter of some four years ago at this time, Leroy was still a very young man, even if somewhat of a change had taken place in his appearance—due possibly, or possibly not, to the

rigours of the climate. Three-Ace Artie since then had grown a full beard. But Leroy's arrival, being but one of so many, the old-timers had found in it nothing to remember. Other and more definite particulars concerning Three-Ace Artie, however, were in the possession of Ton-Nugget Camp. Three-Ace Artie had no temperance proclivities—but he never drank during business hours. No one had ever seen a glass at his elbow when there was a pack of cards on the table! Frankly a professional gambler, he was admitted to be a good one—and square. He was polished, but not too suave; he was unquestionably possessed of far more than an ordinary education, but he never permitted his erudition to become objectionable; and he had a reputation for coolness and nerve that Ton-Nugget Camp had seen enhanced on several occasions and belied on none. He was of medium height, broad shouldered, and muscular; he had black hair and black eyes; under the beard the jaw was square; unruffled, he was genial; ruffled, he was known to be dangerous; and, still too young to show the markings of an ungracious life, his forehead was unwrinkled, and his skin clear and fresh.

Also, during his three months' sojourn in Ton-Nugget Camp, he was credited, not without reason, in having won considerably more than he had lost. Upon these details rested whatever claim to an intimate acquaintanceship with Three-Ace Artie the camp could boast; for the rest, Ton-Nugget Camp, in common with the Yukon in general, was quite privileged to hazard as many guesses as it pleased! In a word, such was Three-Ace Artie's status in Ton-Nugget Camp when there arrived one afternoon a young man, little more than a boy, patently fresh from the East. And here, though Ton-Nugget Camp was quick to take the newcomer's measure, and, ignoring the other's claim to the self-conferred title of Gerald Rogers, promptly dubbed him the Kid, it permitted, through lack of observation, a slight detail to escape its notice that might otherwise perhaps

have suggested a new and promising field for its guesses concerning Three-Ace Artie.

Though at no more distant a date than a few days previous to his arrival, the Kid had probably never seen a "poke" in his life before, much less one filled with currency in the shape of gold dust, he had, in the first flush of his entry to MacDonald's, and with the life-long air of one accustomed to doing nothing else, flung a very new and pleasantly-filled poke in the general direction of the scales at the end of the bar, and, leaning back against the counter, supporting himself on his elbows, proceeded to "set them up" for all concerned. MacDonald's, collectively and individually, which is to say no small portion of the camp, for MacDonald's was at once hotel, store, bar and general hang-out, obeyed the invitation without undue delay, and was in the act of enjoying the newcomer's hospitality when Three-Ace Artie strolled in.

Some one nearest the bar reached out a glass to the gambler over the intervening heads, the cluster of men broke away that the ceremony of introduction with the stranger might be duly performed—and Ton-Nugget Camp, failing to note the sudden tightening of the gambler's fingers around his glass, the startled flash in the dark eyes that was instantly veiled by half dropped, sleepy lids, heard only Three-Ace Artie's, "Glad to know you, Mr. Rogers," in the gambler's usual and quietly modulated voice.

Following that, however, not being entirely unsophisticated, Ton-Nugget Camp stuck its tongue in its cheek and awaited developments—meanwhile making the most of its own opportunities, for the Kid, boisterous, loose with his money, was obviously too shining a mark for even amateurs to overlook. Ton-Nugget Camp, therefore, was, while expectant, quite content that Three-Ace Artie should, through motives which it attributed to professional delicacy, avoid rather than make any hurried advances toward intimacy with the newcomer; since, not feeling the

restraint of any professional ethics itself, Ton-Nugget Camp was enabled to take up a few little collections on its own account via the stud poker route at the expense of the Kid. Two days passed, during which Three-Ace Artie, besides being little in evidence, refrained entirely from pressing his attentions upon the stranger; but despite this, thanks to the adroitness of certain members of the community and his own all too frequent attendance upon the bar, matters were not flourishing with the Kid. The Kid drank far more than was good for him, played far more than was good for him, and, flushed and fuddled with liquor, played none too well. True, there were those in the camp who offered earnest, genuine and well-meant advice, amongst them a grim old Presbyterian by the name of Murdock Shaw, who was credited with being the head of an incipient, and therefore harmless, reform movement—but this advice the Kid, quite as warmly as it was offered, consigned to other climes in conjunction with its progenitors; and, as a result, all that was left of his original poke at the expiration of those two days was an empty chamois bag from which, possibly by way of compensation, the offensive newness had been considerably worn off.

"If he's got any more," said the amateurs, licking their lips, "here's hopin' that Three-Ace Artie 'll keep on overlookin' the bet!"

And then, the next afternoon, the Kid flashed another poke, quite as new and quite as pleasantly-nurtured as its predecessor—and Three-Ace Artie seemed to awake suddenly to the knock of opportunity at his door.

With just what finesse and aplomb the gambler inveigled the Kid into the game no one was prepared to say—it was a detail of no moment, except to Three-Ace Artie, who could be confidently trusted to take care of such matters, when moved to do so, with the courtly and genial graciousness of one conferring a favour on the other! But, be that as it may, the first intimation the few loungers who were in

MacDonald's at the time had that anything was in the wind was the sight of MacDonald, behind the bar, obligingly exchanging the pokes of both men For poker chips. The loungers present thereupon immediately expressed their interest by congregating around the table as Three-Ace Artie and the Kid sat down.

"Stud?" suggested Three-Ace Artie, with an engaging smile. The Kid, already none too sober, nodded his head.

"And table stakes!" he supplemented, with a somewhat lordly flourish of the replenished glass that he had carried with him from the bar.

"Of course!" murmured the gambler.

It was still early afternoon, but an afternoon of the long-night of the northern winter, sunless, with only a subdued twilight without, and the big metal lamps, hanging from the ceiling, were lighted. In the centre of the room a box-stove alternately crackled and purred, its sheet-iron sides glowing dull red. The bare, rough-boarded room, save for the little group, was empty. Behind the bar, with a sort of curious, cynical smile that supplied no additional beauty to his shrewd, hard-lined visage, MacDonald himself propped his bullet-head in his hands, elbows on the counter, to watch the proceedings.

Three-Ace Artie and the Kid began to play. Occasionally the door opened, admitting a miner who took a brisk, fore-intentioned step or two toward the bar—and catching sight of the game in progress, as though magnet-drawn, immediately changed his direction and joined those already around the table. But neither Three-Ace Artie nor the Kid appeared to pay any attention to the constantly augmenting number of spectators. The game see-sawed, fortune smiling with apparently unbiased fickleness first on one, then on the other. The Kid grew a little more noisy, a little more intoxicated—as MacDonald, from a mere spectator, became an attendant at the Kid's frequent beck and call. Three-Ace Artie was entirely professional—there was no glass at

Three-Ace Artie's elbow, when he lost he smiled good-humouredly, when he won he smoothed over the other's discomfiture with self-deprecatory tact; he was unperturbed and cordial, he bet sparingly and in moderation—to enjoy the game, as it were, for the game's own sake, the stakes being, as it were again, simply to supply a little additional zest and tang, and for no other reason whatever!

And, then, little by little, the Kid began to force the game; and, as the stakes grew higher, began to lose steadily, with the result that an hour of play saw most of the chips, instead of a glass, flanking Three-Ace Artie's elbow—and saw a large proportion of Ton-Nugget Camp, to whom the word in some mysterious manner had gone forth, flanking the table five and six deep.

The more the Kid lost, the more he drank. Whatever ease of manner, whatever composure he had originally possessed was gone now. His hair straggled unkemptly over his forehead, his cheeks were flushed, his lips worked constantly on the butt of an unlighted cigarette.

The crowd pressed a little closer, leaned a little further over the table. There was something almost fascinating in the deftness with which the soft, white hands of Three-Ace Artie caressed the cards, there was something almost fascinating, too, in the cool impassiveness of the gambler's poise, and in the sort of languid selfpossession that lighted the dark eyes; but Ton-Nugget Camp had lived too long in familiarity with Three-Ace Artie to be interested in the gambler's personality at that moment—its interest was centred in the game. The play now had all the earmarks of a grand finale. There were big stakes on the table—and the last of the Kid's chips. The crowd raised itself on tiptoes. Both men turned their "hole" cards. Three-Ace Artie reached out calmly, drew the chips toward him, smiled almost apologetically, and, picking up the deck, riffled the cards tentatively—the opposite side of the table was bare of

stakes.

For a moment the Kid circled his lips with the tip of his tongue, and flirited his hair back from his forehead with an uncertain, jerky motion of his hand; then he snatched up his glass, spilled a portion of its contents, gulped down the remainder, and began to fumble under his vest, finally wrenching out a money-belt.

"Go on—what do you think!" he said thickly. "I ain't done yet! I'll get mine back, an' yours, too! Table stakes—eh? I'll get you this time—b'God! Table stakes—eh—again? What do you say?"

"Of course!" murmured Three-Ace Artie politely.

And then the crowd shuffled its feet uneasily. Murdock Shaw, who had edged his way close to the table, leaned over and touched the Kid's shoulder.

"I'd cut it out, if I was you, son," he advised bluntly. "You're drunk—and a mark!"

A sort of quick, sibilant intake of breath came from the circle around the table. Like a flash, one of Three-Ace Artie's hands, from the deck of cards, vanished under the table; and the dark eyes, the slumber gone from their depths, narrowed dangerously on Murdock Shaw. Then Three-Ace Artie smiled—unpleasantly.

"It isn't as though you were *new* in the Yukon, Murdock"—there was a deadliness in the quiet, level tones. "What's the idea?"

Like magic, to right and left, on each side of the table, the crowd cleared a line behind the two men—then silence.

The gambler's hand remained beneath the table; his eyes cold, alert, never wavering for the fraction of a second from the miner's face.

Perhaps a minute passed. The miner did not speak or move, save that his lips tightened and the tan of his face took on a deeper hue.

Then Three-Ace Artie spoke again:

"Are you *calling*, Murdock?" he inquired softly.

The miner hesitated an instant, then turned abruptly on his heel.

"When I call you," he said evenly, over his shoulder, "it will break you for keeps—and you won't have long to wait, either!"

The Kid, who had been alternating a maudlin gaze from the face of one man to the other, stood up now, and, hanging to the back of his chair, watched the miner's retreat in a fuddled way.

"Say, go chase yourself!" he called out, in sudden inspiration—and, glancing around for approval, laughed boisterously at his own drunken humour.

The door closed on Murdock Shaw. The Kid slipped down into his chair, dumped a handful of American double-eagles out of the money-belt—and, reaching again for his glass, banged it on the table.

"Gimme another!" he shouted in the direction of the bar.

"Hey—Mac—d'ye hear! Gimme another drink!"

Three-Ace Artie's hands were above the table again—the slim, delicate, tapering fingers shuffling, riffling, and reshuffling the cards.

MacDonald approached the table, and picked up the empty glass.

"Wait!" commanded the Kid ponderously, and scowled suddenly in the throes of another inspiration. He pointed a finger at Three-Ace Artie. "Say—give him one, too!" He wagged his head sapiently. "If he wants any more chance at my money, he's got to have one, too! That's what! Old guy's right about that! I'm the only one that's drunk—you've got to drink, too! What'll you have—eh?"

The group had closed in around the table again, and now all eyes were riveted, curiously, expectantly, upon Three-Ace Artie. If the gambler had one fixed principle from which, as Ton-Nugget Camp had excellent reasons for knowing, neither argument nor cajolery had ever moved him, it was that of refusing to drink while he played—but

now, while all eyes were on Three-Ace Artie, Three-Ace Artie's eyes were on the pile of American gold that the Kid had displayed. There was a quick little curve to the gambler's lips, that became a slightly tolerant, slightly good-natured smile—and then the crowd nodded significantly to itself.

"Why, certainly!" said Three-Ace Artie pleasantly. "Give me the same, Mac."

"That's the talk!" applauded the Kid.

Three-Ace Artie pushed the cards across the table.

"This is a new game!" announced the Kid. "Cut for deal. Table stakes!"

They cut. Three-Ace Artie won, riffled the cards several times, passed them over to be cut again, and dealt the first card apiece face down.

The Kid examined his card in approved fashion by pulling it slightly over the edge of the table and secretively turning up one corner; then, still face down, he pushed it back, and, MacDonald, returning with the glasses from the bar at that moment, reached greedily for his own and tossed it off. He nodded with heavy satisfaction as Three-Ace Artie drained the other glass. Again he examined his card as before.

"That's a pretty good card!" he stated with owlish gravity.

"Worth pretty good bet!" He laid a stack of his gold eagles upon the card.

Three-Ace Artie placed an equivalent number of chips upon his own card, and dealt another apiece—face up now on the table. An eight-spot of spades fell to the Kid; a ten-spot of diamonds to Three-Ace Artie.

"Worth jus' much as before!" declared the Kid—and laid another stack of eagles upon the card.

"Mine's worth a little more this time," smiled Three-Ace Artie—and doubled the bet.

"Sure!" mumbled the Kid. "Sure thing!"

Again Three-Ace Artie dealt—a king of hearts to the Kid; a deuce of hearts to himself.

The Kid's hand seemed to tremble eagerly, as he fumbled with his gold eagles. He glanced furtively at the gambler—and then, as though trying to read in Three-Ace Artie's face how far he might safely egg the other on, he began to drop coin after coin upon his cards.

The crowd stirred a little uncomfortably. The Kid had undoubtedly the better hand so far, but he had made a fool play—a blind man could have read through the back of the card that was so carefully guarded face down on the table. The Kid had a pair of kings against a possible pair of tens or deuces on the gambler's side.

Three-Ace Artie imperturbably "saw" the bet—and coolly dealt the fourth card. Another king fell to the Kid; another deuce to himself.

The Kid's eyes were burning feverishly now. He bet again, laughing, chuckling drunkenly as he swept forward a generous share of his remaining gold—and with a quiet, unostentatiously appraising glance at what was left of the pile of eagles, Three-Ace Artie raised heavily.

Then, for the first time, the Kid hesitated, and a momentary frightened look flashed across his face. He lifted the corner of his "hole" card again and again nervously, as though to assure himself that he had made no mistake—and finally laughed with raucous confidence again, and, pushing the hair out of his eyes, demanded another drink, and returned the raise.

The onlookers sucked in their breath—but this time approved the Kid's play. The cards showed a pair of deuces and a ten-spot spread out before Three-Ace Artie, a pair of kings and an eight-spot in front of the Kid. But the Kid had already given his hand away, and with a king in the "hole," making three kings, Three-Ace Artie could not possibly win unless his "hole" card was a deuce or a ten, and on top of that that his next and final card should be a deuce or ten as well. It looked all the Kid's way.

Three-Ace Artie again "saw" the other's raise—and dealt

the last card.

There was a sudden shuffling of feet, as the crowd leaned tensely forward. A jack fell face up before the Kid—a ten-spot fell before the gambler. Three-Ace Artie showed two pairs—it all depended now on what he held as his "hole" card.

But the Kid, either because he was too fuddled to take the possibilities into account, or because he was drunkenly obsessed with the invincibility of his own three kings, laughed hilariously.

"I got you!" he cried—and bet half of his remaining gold. Three-Ace Artie's smile was cordial.

"Might as well go all the way then," he suggested—and raised to the limit of the Kid's last gold eagle.

The Kid laughed again. He had played cunningly—quite cunningly. The gambler had fallen into the trap. All his hand showed was two kings.

"I'll see you! I'll see you!"—he was lurching excitedly in his chair, as he pushed the rest of his money forward. "This is the time little old two pairs are no good!" He turned his "hole" card triumphantly. "Three kings" he gurgled—and reached for the stakes.

"Just a minute," objected Three-Ace Artie blandly.

He faced his other card. "I've got another ten here. Full house—three tens and a pair of deuces."

A dead silence fell upon the room. The Kid, lurching in his chair, stared in a dazed, stunned way at the other's cards—and then his face went a deathly white. One hand crept aimlessly to his forehead and brushed across his eyes; and after a moment, leaning heavily upon the table, he stood up, still swaying. But he was not swaying from drunkenness now. The shock seemed to have sobered him, bringing a haggard misery into his eyes. The crowd watched, making no comment. Three-Ace Artie, without lifting his eyes, was calmly engaged in stacking the gold eagles into little piles in front of him. The Kid moistened his lips with his tongue,

attempted to speak—and succeeded only in * swallowing hard once or twice. Then, with a pitiful effort to pull himself together, he forced a smile.

"I—I can't play any more," he said. "I'm cleaned out"—and turned away from the table.

The crowd made way for him, following him with its eyes as he crossed the room and disappeared through a back door at the side of the bar, making evidently for his "hotel" room upstairs. Three-Ace Artie said nothing—he was imperturbably pocketing the gold eagles now. The crowd drifted away from the table, dispersed around the room, and some went out. Three-Ace Artie rose from the table and carried the chips back to the bar.

"Guess I'll cash in, Mac," he drawled.

The proprietor pushed the two pokes across the bar.

"Step up, gentlemen!" invited the gambler amiably, wheeling with his back against the bar to face the room.

An air of uneasiness, an awkward tension had settled upon the place. Some few more went out; but the others, as though glad of the relief afforded the situation by Three-Ace Artie's invitation, stepped promptly forward.

Three-Ace Artie's hand encircled a stiff four-fingers of raw spirit.

"Here's how!" he said—and drained his glass.

Somebody "set them up" again; Three-Ace Artie repeated the performance—and MacDonald's resumed its normal poise.

For perhaps half an hour Three-Ace Artie leaned against the bar, joining in a dice game that some one had inaugurated; and then, interest in this lagging, with a yawn and a casual remark about going up to his shack for a snooze, he put on his overcoat, pulled his fur cap well down over his ears, sauntered to the door—and, with a cheery wave of his hand, went out.

But once outside the door, Three-Ace Artie's nonchalance dropped from him, and he stood motionless in the dull light

of the winter afternoon peering sharply up and down the camp's single shack-lined street. There was no one in sight. He turned quickly then, and, treading noiselessly in the snow, stole along beside the building to a door at the further end. He opened this cautiously, stepped inside, and, in semidarkness here, halted again to listen. The sounds from the adjoining barroom reached him plainly, but that was all. Satisfied that he was unobserved, he moved swiftly forward to where, at the end of the sort of passageway which he had entered, a steep, ladder-like stairway led upward. He mounted this stealthily, gained the landing above, and, groping his way now along a narrow hallway, suddenly flung open a door.

"Who's there!" came a quick, startled cry from within.

"Don't talk so loud—damn it!" growled Three-Ace Artie, in a hoarse whisper. "You can hear yourself think through these partitions!" He struck a match, and lighted a candle which he found on the combination table and washing-stand near the bed.

The Kid's face, drawn and colourless, loomed up in the yellow light from the edge of the bed, as he bent forward, blinking in a kind of miserable wonder at Three-Ace Artie.

"You!" he gasped.

Three-Ace Artie closed the door softly.

"Some high-roller, you are, aren't you!" he observed caustically.

The Kid did not answer.

For a full minute Three-Ace Artie eyed the other in silence—then he laughed shortly.

"I don't know which of us is the bigger damn fool—you trying to buy a through ticket to hell; or yours truly for what I'm going to do now! Maybe you have learned your lesson, maybe you haven't; but anyway I am going to take the chance. I'm not here to preach, but I'll push a little personal advice out of long experience your way. The booze and the pasteboards won't get you anywhere—except into

the kind of mess you are up against now. If you are hankering for more of it, go to it—that's all. It's your hunt!" He flung the Kid's poke suddenly upon the table, and piled the gold eagles beside it.

A flush crept into the Kid's cheeks. He leaned further forward, staring helplessly, now at Three-Ace Artie, now at the money on the table.

"W-what do you mean?" he stammered.

"It isn't very hard to guess, is it?" said Three-Ace Artie quietly. "Here's your money—but there's just one little condition tied to it. I can't afford to let the impression get around that I'm establishing any precedents—see? And if the boys heard of this they'd think I was suffering from softening of the brain! You get away from here without saying anything to anybody—and stay away. Bixley, one of the boys, is going over to the next camp this afternoon—and you go with him."

"You—you're giving me back the money?" faltered the Kid.

"Well, it sort of looks that way," smiled Three-Ace Artie.

A certain dignity came to the Kid—and he held out his hand.

"You're a white man," he said huskily. "But I can't accept it. I took it pretty hard down there perhaps, it seemed to get me all of a sudden when the booze went out; but I'm not all yellow. You won it—I can't take it back. It's yours."

"No; it's not mine"—Three-Ace Artie was still smiling.

"That's the way to talk, Kid. I like that. But you're wrong—it's yours by rights."

"By rights?" The Kid hesitated, studying Three-Ace Artie's face. "You mean," he ventured slowly, "that the game wasn't on the level—that you stacked the cards?"

Three-Ace Artie shook his head.

"I never stacked a card on a man in my life."

"Then I don't understand what you mean," said the Kid.

"How can it be mine by rights?"

"It's simple enough," replied Three-Ace Artie. "I'm paying

back a little debt I owe, that's all. I figured the boys had pecked around about deep enough on the outskirts of your pile, and that it was about time for me to sit in and save the rest. I cleaned you out a little faster than I expected, a little faster perhaps than the next man will if you try it again—but not any the less thoroughly. It's the 'next man' I'm trying to steer you away from, Kid."

"Yes, I know"—the Kid spoke almost mechanically. "But a debt?"—his eyes were searching the gambler's face perplexedly now. Then suddenly: "Who are you?" he demanded. "There's something familiar about you. I thought there was the first time I saw you the other afternoon. And yet I can't place you."

"Don't try," said Three-Ace Artie softly. He reached out and laid his hand on the other's shoulder. "It wouldn't do you or me any good. There are some things best forgotten. I'm telling you the truth, that's all you need to know. You're entitled to the money—and another chance. Let it go at that. You agree to the bargain, don't you? You leave here with Bixley this afternoon—and this is between you and me, Kid, and no one else on earth."

For a moment the Kid's gaze held steadily on Three-Ace Artie; then his eyes filled.

"Yes; I'll go," he said in a low voice. "I guess I'm not going to forget this—or you. I don't know what I would have done, and I want to tell you——"

"Never mind that!" interrupted Three-Ace Artie with sudden gruffness. "It's what you do from now on that counts. You've got to hurry now. Any of the boys will show you Bixley's shack, if you don't know where it is. Just tell Bixley what you want, and he'll take you along. He'll be glad of company on the trail. Shake!" He caught the other's hand, wrung it in a hard grip—and turned to the door.

"Good luck to you, Kid!" he said—and closed the door behind him.

As cautiously as he had entered, Three-Ace Artie made his

way downstairs again; and, once outside, started briskly in the direction of his shack, that he had acquired, bag and baggage, shortly after his arrival in the camp, from a miner who was pulling out. It was some three or four hundred yards from MacDonald's, and as he went along, feet crunching in the snow from his swinging stride, he began quite abruptly to whistle a cheery air. It was too bitterly cold, however, to whistle, so instead he resorted to humming pleasantly to himself.

He stamped the snow from his feet as he reached the shack, opened the door, and went in. A few embers still glowed in the box-stove, and he threw on a stick of wood and opened the damper. He lighted a lamp, and stood for a moment looking around him. There was a bunk at one side of the shack, the table, the stove, a single chair, a few books on a rude shelf, a kit bag in one corner, a skin of some sort on the floor, and a small cupboard containing supplies and cooking utensils. Three-Ace Artie, however, did not appear to be obsessed with the inventory of his surroundings. There was a whimsical smile on his lips, as he pulled off his fur cap and tossed it on the bunk.

"I guess," said Three-Ace Artie, "it will give the Recording Angel quite a shock to chalk one up on the other side of the page for me!"

CHAPTER II—THE TOAST

THREE-ACE ARTIE, sprawled comfortably cally at the book he held in his hand, a copy of Hugo's *Claude Gueux* in French, tossed it to the foot of the bunk, and sat up, dangling his legs over the edge.

A mood that had long been a stranger to him, a mellow mood, as he had defined it to himself, had kept him away from MacDonald's that night. It was the glow of self-benediction, as it were, ever since he had left the boy's room that afternoon, though it had puzzled him to some extent to explain its effect upon himself—that, for instance, the corollary should take the form of a quiet evening, a pipe, and Hugo.

He shrugged his shoulders. It had been so nevertheless. His shoulders lifted again—it was decidedly an incongruous proceeding for one known as Three-Ace Artie!

His thoughts reverted to the Kid. No one had come to the shack since he had returned from the hotel, but he knew the Kid had left the camp, for he had watched from the shack window as Bixley and the boy had passed down the street together. The Kid would not play the fool again for a while, that was certain—whatever he did eventually.

Three-Ace Artie stared introspectively at the lamp, out at full length upon his bunk, yawned, and looked at his watch. It was already after midnight. He glanced a little quizzically.

Kid, of course! He had been conscious of an inward flame for a moment—then for the third time shrugged his shoulders.

"I guess I'll turn in," he muttered.

He bent down to untie a shoe lace—and straightened up quickly again. A footstep sounded from without, there was a knock upon the door, the door opened—and with the

inrush of air the lamp flared up. Three-Ace Artie reached out swiftly to the top of the chimney, protecting the flame with the flat of his hand, and, as the door closed again, stared with cool surprise at his visitor. The last time he had seen Sergeant Marden, of the Royal North-West Mounted Police, had been the year before at Two-Strike-Mountain, where each had followed a gold rush—for quite different reasons!

"Hello, sergeant!" he drawled. "I didn't know you were in camp."

"Just got in around supper-time," replied the other. "I've been up on the Creek for the last few weeks."

Three-Ace Artie smiled facetiously.

"Any luck?" he inquired.

"I got my man," said the sergeant quietly.

"Of course!" murmured Three-Ace Artie softly. "You've got a reputation for doing that, sergeant." He laughed pleasantly.

"But you haven't dropped in on *me* officially, have you?"

Sergeant Marden, big, thick-set, with a strong, kindly face, with gray eyes that lighted now in a gravely humorous way shook his head.

"No," he answered. "I'm playing the 'old friend' rôle to-night."

"Good!" exclaimed Three-Ace Artie heartily. "Peel off your duds then, and—will you have the bunk, or the chair? Take your choice—only make yourself at home." He stepped over to the cupboard, and, while the sergeant pulled off his cap and mitts, and unbuttoned and threw back his overcoat, Three-Ace Artie procured a bottle of whisky and two glasses, which he set upon the table. "Help yourself, sergeant," he invited cordially.

The sergeant shook his head again, as he drew the chair toward him and sat down.

"I don't think I'll take anything to-night," he said.

"No?"—Three-Ace Artie's voice expressed the polite regret of a perfect host. "Well, fill your pipe then," he suggested

hospitably, as he seated himself on the edge of the bunk. He began to fill his own pipe deliberately, apparently wholly preoccupied for the moment with that homely operation—but his mind was leaping in lightning flashes back over the range of the four years that he had spent in the Yukon. What *exactly* did Sergeant Marden of the Royal North-West Mounted want with him to-night? He had known the other for a good while, it was true—but not in a fashion to warrant the sergeant in making a haphazard social call at midnight after what must have been a long, hard day on the trail.

A match, drawn with a long sweep under the table, crackled; Sergeant Marden lighted his pipe, and flipped the match-stub stovewards.

"It looks as though Canuck John wouldn't pull through the night," he said gravely.

"Canuck John!" Three-Ace Artie sat up with a jerk, and glanced sharply at the other. "What's that you say?" Sergeant Marden removed his pipe slowly from his lips.

"Why, you know, don't you?" he asked in surprise.

"No, I don't know!" returned Three-Ace Artie quickly. "I haven't been out of this shack since late this afternoon; but I saw him this morning, and he was all right then. What's happened?"

"He shot himself just after supper—accident, of course—old story, cleaning a gun," said the sergeant tersely.

"Good God!" cried Three-Ace Artie, in a low, shocked way—and then he was on his feet, and reaching for his cap and coat. "I'll go up there and see him. You don't mind, sergeant, if I leave you here? I guess I knew Canuck John better than any one else in camp did, and—" His coat half on, he paused suddenly, his brows gathering in a frown.

"After supper, you said!" he muttered slowly. "Why, that's hours ago!" Then, his voice rasping: "It's damned queer no one came to tell me about this! There's something wrong here!" He struggled into his coat.

"He's been unconscious ever since they found him," said Sergeant Marden, his eyes fixed on the bowl of his pipe as he prodded the dottle down with his forefinger. "The doctor's just come. You couldn't do any good by going up there, and"—his eyes lifted and met Three-Ace Artie's meaningly—"take it all around, I guess it would be just as well if you didn't go. Murdock Shaw and some of the boys are there, and—well, they seem to feel they don't want you."

For a moment Three-Ace Artie stood motionless, regarding the other in a half angry, half puzzled way; then, his weight on both hands, he leaned forward over the table toward Sergeant Marden.

"In plain English, and in as few words as you can put it, what in hell do you mean by that?" he demanded levelly.

"All right, if you want it that way, I'll tell you," said Sergeant Marden quietly. "I guess perhaps the short cut's best. They've given you until to-morrow morning to get out of Ton-Nugget Camp."

"I beg your pardon?" inquired Three-Ace Artie with ominous politeness.

Sergeant Marden produced a poke partially filled with gold dust and laid it on the table.

"What's that?"—Three-Ace Artie's eyes were hard.

"It's the price you paid Sam MacBride for this shack and contents when he went away. The boys say they want to play fair."

And then Three-Ace Artie laughed—not pleasantly.

Methodically he removed his overcoat, hung it on its peg, and sat down again on the edge of the bunk.

"Let's see the rest of your hand, sergeant"—his voice was deadly quiet. "I don't quite get the idea."

"I wasn't here myself this afternoon," said Sergeant Marden; "but they seem to feel that the sort of thing that happened kind of gives the community a bad name, and that separating a youngster, when he's drunk, from his last

dollar is a bit too raw even for Ton-Nugget Camp. That's about the size of the way it was put up to me."

It seemed to Three-Act Artie that in some way he had not quite heard aright; or that, if he had, he was being made the object of some, unknown to its authors, stupendously ironical joke—and then, as he glanced at the officer's grim, though not altogether unfriendly countenance, and from Sergeant Marden to the bag of gold upon the table, a bitter, furious anger surged upon him. His clenched fist reached out and fell smashing upon the table.

"So that's it, is it!" he said between his teeth. "This is some of Murdock Shaw's work—the snivelling, psalm-singing hypocrite! Well, he can't get away with it! I've a few friends in camp myself."

"Fairweather friends, I should say," qualified the sergeant, busy again with his pipe bowl. "You said yourself that no one had been near the shack here. The camp appears to be pretty well of one mind on the subject."

"Including the half dozen or more who started after the Kid to begin with!"—Three-Ace Artie's laugh was savage, full of menace. "Are they helping to run me out of camp, too!"

"You seem to have got a little of *everybody's* money," suggested Sergeant Marden pointedly. "Anyway, I haven't seen any sign of them putting up a fight for you."

"Quite so!" There was a sudden cold self-possession in Three-Ace Artie's tones. "Well, I can put up quite a fight for myself, thank you. I'm not going! It's too bad Shaw didn't have the nerve to come here and tell me this. I——"

"I wouldn't let him," interposed the sergeant, with a curious smile. "That's why I came myself."

Three-Ace Artie studied the other's face for an instant.

"Well, go on!" he jerked out. "What's the answer to that?"

"That I am going on to Dawson in the morning, and that I thought perhaps you might be willing to come along."

Three-Ace Artie's under jaw crept out the fraction of an inch, and his eyes narrowed.

"I thought you said you weren't here officially!"

"I'm not—at least, not yet."

"Well, it sounds mighty like an arrest to me!" snarled Three-Ace Artie. He stood up abruptly, and once more leaned over the table. His dark eyes flashed. "But that doesn't go either—not in the Yukon! You can't hold me for anything I've done, and you ought to know better than to think you can do any bluffing with me and get away with it! Murdock Shaw is, evidently running this little game. I gave him a chance to call my hand this afternoon—and he lay down like a whipped pup! That chance is still open to him—but he can't do it by proxy! That's exactly where you and I stand, Marden—don't try the arrest game!"

"I'm not going to—at least, not yet," said the sergeant again. "It's not a question of law. The day may come when the lid goes on out here, but so far the local millennium hasn't dawned. There's no dispute there. I told you I came in here on the 'old friend' basis, and I meant it. I've known you off and on a bit for quite a while; and I always liked you for the reputation you had of playing square. There's no talk of crookedness now, though I must confess you've pulled something a little thinner than I thought it was in you to do. However, let that go. I don't want to butt in on this unless I have to—and that's why I'm trying to get you to come away with me in the morning. If you don't, there'll be trouble, and then I'll have to take a hand whether I want to or not."

"By God!"—the oath came fiercely, involuntarily from Three-Ace Artie's lips. The irony of it all was upon him again. The injustice of it galled and maddened him. And yet—tell them the truth of the matter? He would have seen every last one of them consigned to the bottomless pit first! The turbulent soul of the man was aflame. "Run out of camp, eh!"—it was a devil's laugh that echoed around the shack. "That means being run out of the Yukon! I'd have to get out, wouldn't I—out of the Yukon—ha, ha!—my name

would smell everywhere to high heaven!"

"I'm not sure but that's exactly what I would do if I were you," said Sergeant Marden simply. "The fact you've got to face is that you're black-balled—and the easiest way to swallow a nasty dose is to swallow it in a gulp, isn't it?" He got up from his chair and laid his hand on Three-Ace Artie's shoulder. "Look here, Leroy," he said earnestly, "you've got a cool enough head on you not to play the fool, and you're a big enough sport to stand for the cards whatever way they turn. I want you to say that you'll come along with me in the morning—I'll get out of here early before any one is about, or I'll go now if you like, if that will help any. It's the sensible thing to do. Well?"

"I don't know, Marden—I don't know!" Three-Ace Artie flung out shortly.

"Yes, you do," insisted the sergeant quietly. "You know a fight wouldn't get you anywhere—if you got one or two of them, Murdock Shaw for instance, you'd simply be hung for your pains. They mean business, and I don't want any trouble—why make any for me when it can't do you any good? I'm putting it to you in a friendly way; and, besides that, it's common sense, isn't it?" His grip tightened in a kindly pressure on Three-Ace Artie's shoulder. "I'm right, ain't I? What do you say?"

"Oh, you're right enough!"—a hard smile twisted Three-Ace Artie's lips. "There's no argument about that. I'd have to go anyway, I know that—but I'm not keen on going without giving them a run for their money that they'd remember for the rest of their lives!"

"And at the same time put a crimp into your own," said Sergeant Marden soberly. He held out his hand. "You'll come, won't you?"

Twice Three-Ace Artie paced the length of the shack. Logically, as he had admitted, Marden was right; but battling against logic was a sullen fury that prompted him to throw consequences to the winds, and, with his back to

the wall, invite Ton-Nugget Camp to a showdown. And then, abruptly, the gambler's instinct to throw down a beaten hand, when bluff would be of no avail and holding it would only increase his loss, turned the scales, and he halted before Sergeant Marden.

"I'll go," he said tersely.

There was genuine relief in the officer's face.

"And I'll stick to my end of the bargain!" the sergeant exclaimed heartily. "When do you want to start?"

"It makes damned little odds to me!" Three-Ace Artie answered gruffly. "Suit yourself."

"All right," said the sergeant. "In that case I'll put in a few hours' sleep, and we'll get away before the camp is stirring." He buttoned up his overcoat, put on his cap, and moved toward the door. "I've got a team of huskies, and there's room on the sled for anything you want to bring along. You can get it ready, and I'll call for you here."

Three-Ace Artie nodded curtly.

Sergeant Marden reached out to open the door, and, with his hand on the latch, hesitated.

"Don't go up there, Leroy," he said earnestly, jerking his head in the direction of the upper end of the camp.

"Canuck John is unconscious, as I told you—there's nothing you could do."

But Three-Ace Artie had turned his back. To Canuck John and Sergeant Marden he was equally oblivious for the moment. He heard the door close, heard the sergeant's footsteps outside recede and die away. He was staring now at the bag of gold upon the table. It seemed to mock and jeer at him, and suddenly his hands at his sides curled into clenched and knotted fists—and after a moment he spoke aloud in French.

"It was the first decent thing I ever did in my life"—he was smiling in a sort of horrible mirth. "Do you appreciate that, my very dear friend Raymond? It is exquisite! *Sacré nom de Dieu*, it is magnificent! It was the first decent thing you

ever did in your life—think of that, *mon brave!* And see how well you are paid for it! They are running you out of camp!" He turned and flung himself down on the bunk, his hands still fiercely clenched. Black-balled, Sergeant Marden had called it! Well, it was not the first time he had been black-balled! Here, in the Yukon, the name of Three-Ace Artie was to be a stench to the nostrils; elsewhere, in the city of his birth, he, last of his race, had already dragged an honoured and patrician name in the mire.

A red flame of anger swept his cheeks. What devil's juggling with the cards had brought that young fool across his path, and brought the memories of the days gone by, and brought him an indulgence in weak, mawkish sentimentality! A debt, he had told the boy!

The red flamed into his face again—and yet again. Curse the memories! Once aroused they would not down. Even the old schooldays crowded themselves upon him—and at that he jeered out at himself in bitter raillery. Brilliant, clever in those days, outstripping many beyond his years, as glib with his Latin as with his own French tongue, his father had designed him for the Roman Catholic priesthood, and he, Raymond Chapelle, the son of the rich seigneur, of one of the oldest families in French Canada, instead of becoming a priest of God had become—Three-Ace Artie, the pariah of Ton-Nugget Camp!

Would it not make all hell scream with glee! It brought unholy humour to himself. He—a priest of God! But he had not journeyed very far along that road—even before he had finished school he had had a fling or two! It had been easy enough. There was no mother, and he did not know his father very well. There had been great style and ceremony in that huge, old, lumbering, gray-stone mansion in Montreal—but never a home! His father had seemed concerned about him in one respect only—a sort of austere pride in his accomplishments at school. Produce proof of that, and money was unstinted. It had come very easily,

that money—and gone riotously even as a boy. Then he had entered college, and half way through his course his father had died. He had travelled fast after that—so fast that only a blur of wreckage loomed up out of those few years. A passion for gambling, excess without restraint, a *roué* life—and his patrimony, large as it was, was gone. Family after family turned their backs upon him, and his clubs shut their doors in his face! And then the Yukon—another identity—and as much excitement as he could snatch out of his new life!

There was a snarl now on his lips. It had been a furious pace back there in Montreal, but whose business was it save his own! He was not whimpering about it. He could swallow his own medicine without asking anybody else to make a wry face over it for him! Regrets? What should he regret—save that he had lost the money that would enable him to maintain the old pace! Regrets! He would not even be thinking of it now if that young fool had not crossed his path, and he, the bigger fool of the two, had not tried to play the game of the blind leading the blind!

Repay a debt! Fie had not even displayed originality—only a sort of absurd mimicry of the boy's father! He was taunting himself now, mocking at himself mercilessly. What good had it done! How much different would it be with young Rogers than it had been with himself when Rogers' father, an old and intimate friend of his own father's, had taken him home one night just before the final crash, and had talked till dawn in kindly earnestness, pleading with him to change his ways before it was too late! True, it had had its effect. The effect had lasted two days! But somehow, for all that, he had never been able to forget the old gentleman's face, and the gray hairs, and the soft, gentle voice, and the dull glow of the fire in the grate that constantly found a reflection in the moist eyes fixed so anxiously upon him.

What imp of perversity had inspired him to consider that a