

Requiem for a gambler . . .

The day Morris Butterman cashed in his chips

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by Col. R.T. Lowery

In '97 there were flush times in the Slocan. The overflow of the Rossland boom swished through the silver camps and coated them with gold. The wash struck Sandon the hardest, and for months that town had its Cairo-like street literally paved with dollars and playing cards. Sandon is built in a gulch between high mountains, o'er which the sun occasionally rubbers the burg. In those days it was a hot locality. All night long the pianos shrieked below the 'dead line' while above it the booze factories had no keys. The clinking of glasses kept time to the rattle of chips and cries of 'That's good,' 'I'm fat!' 'Put in with yo', etc. Those were the days when it cost many a plunk to look at your hole card, and chubbers were under the table. Gamblers were thicker than 'coons at a cake wal', and a flash of sunlight made the lower end of the camp look like a switch-yard with all the danger signals on fire. The camp never closed up. It was one long carnival of cards, wine and women. When one shift went flewey another took its place, and Canada's Monte Carlo never blinked an eye.

About this time, Morris Butterman hailed the camp. Morris had no yellow in him, and packed more than 60 years on his broad back. He had been a gambler for nearly half a century. He had faced the tiger in Montana, shot craps in New Orleans, dealt stud on the old Mississippi and peeped from behind fours in many a draw game. So when he hit the camp he was not afraid of anything in sight. He dealt faro in the Bucket of Blood Saloon and kept his shirt bosom ever white. For a long time his meal ticket had figures on it, and then the splits came. The crash in silver, and then the strike, soon made Sandon look like a dirty deuce in a new deck, and the old gambler went up the hill to cook for a while, but he did not suit and wandered back again, broke, but sad, silent and proud.

Several of the boys noticed that he did not eat regularly, and proffered him aid, but he shook his head and stayed put. One day, about five in the afternoon, he passed through the Bucket of Blood to the stairway on the rear to his room. As he mounted the steps he turned and took a long look at the bar and Handsome Jack. Late the next afternoon Jack went upstairs to the old man's room and found him dead. He had put on his best clothes, got under the blankets, took a swallow of poison and cashed in. And thus Morris quit the game - a philosopher. Old, broke, and nothing behind the deal, he preferred to pass up, rather than burden his friends.

With more time, and a pen trained to run romantic, I could have painted a tale from the last deal in this gambler's life that would have touched many a soul, but I throw it in as we go to press, and let it go as it looks. It's real. Just a dash of tragedy in the fever of mining camp life.