

KLONDIKE

Screen story by John Collee

1. The ship of Millionaires

Seattle, 1896. A ship comes into harbour. The passengers who disembark are a motley collection of ragged and bearded men - dragging old gunny sacks and carpet-bags, held together with string.

One of the men stumbles. His sack breaks open and a fortune in gold nuggets spills out on the dockside. And suddenly the word is out. Huge riches have been found in the Klondike. Wealth beyond the ordinary man's wildest imaginings are said to be there for the picking.

2. Jake Hears the News

The news spreads like wildfire. It reaches a young medical student called Jake - early twenties, handsome, impetuous.

He skips class, runs home through the town and informs his parents he's leaving medical school to find gold in the Yukon. There's gold up there for the picking. The first ones in will be millionaires. Those who hesitate will get nothing.

His parents tell him its madness and order him to stay at his studies. His father refuses to lend Jake a cent to go north.

3. Nathan's Offer

Jake goes to his sister's husband - an older guy who is manager in a big department store. Jake never really understood what his sister saw in this boring guy but he's not above trying to wangle some money out of him for the boat fare up North.

Nathan says no. He figures Jake would die up there then Jake's father will blame Nathan forever for the inevitable tragedy. Afterwards, Nathan's wife Charlotte - Jake's sister - says Jake will probably go anyway, so Nathan finally makes an extraordinary suggestion: He'll fund the trip, but he's going too.

Charlotte doesn't believe he'll do it, but there are some things she doesn't know about her boring, dependable god-fearing husband

4. The Voyage North

This isn't really what Jake wanted. His idea was to travel light and fast. Now he's lumbered with the stolid, stubborn Nathan with his armloads of blankets and his crates of food.

This unlikely couple board the ship to Skagway, which is already double booked and overloaded beyond the bounds of safety.

5. Horseflesh

Somehow they limp into the muddy makeshift port of Skagway. Jake finds out there are pack horses for sale and tries to badger Nathan into buying a couple of them.

Nathan says horses will be useless in the high passes - they should drag their luggage over the mountains on sledges.

Jake is sure now that Nathan knows nothing of Arctic travel - he's a phoney and a miser. While Nathan sleeps, Jake steals fifty dollars from him and goes out to buy the horses anyway.

Later, drinking in a tavern, he meets Braesmith, a fellow traveller who claims to be an English Lord, who fled Britain wrongly accused of a servants murder. Together they chat to an old prospector, just back from the Klondike missing one arm and all his toes. The prospector tells them: don't go there, you'll find nothing. It's hell on earth.

Next morning Nathan wakes and realises some of his money is missing. Learning about the purchase of horses, Nathan draws his pistol, goes out in the street and shoots the animals dead.

'You're crazy ' Jake tells him, 'we could at least have sold them.'

'Cut em up for horse meat,' Nathan replies, 'and add it to our supplies

6. Crossing The Chilikoot Pass.

They set off, up and over the Chilikoot pass, into the heart of Alaska, as winter descends like a steel door.

If they don't get through in the next few weeks the Klondilke will be frozen in, closed to them for the next six months, by which time all the worthwhile claims will have been staked.

Their progress is painfully slow, manhandling their gear by stages up the mountain on a wooden sledge. One partner guards the pile while the other goes back and gets the next load. So they continue.

At first the men with horses have an obvious edge and Jake watches them bitterly as they romp past. But as they move higher and the slopes become more treacherous, Nathan's advice proves prophetic. The pass becomes a horrific graveyard for the horses who collapse from exhaustion, to die, wild eyed with terror in the drifts that flank the trail.

The weather gets worse and worse still. As things deteriorate men start dying as well as the horses. Desperate travellers come to Nathan and Jake begging for clothing and food. Nathan turns them all down.

Something extraordinary is happening to Nathan. The man Jake knew as a rather fussy shop manager is transformed into something else: A seasoned veteran of war. a tough, heartless man, impressive, scary and capable

7. The Last Raft

They make it through to the headwaters of the Klondike river. It's downstream from here to Dawson city, but you have to build a boat first. The river is freezing as its banks narrow, the slow moving channel will become a raging torrent full of ice and boulders.

Racing against the encroaching ice. Nathan cuts down trees and teaches Jake to build a raft. They lash their goods on board, cover it with a tarpaulin and set off down-river.

Its a nightmare voyage. Soaked and frozen, almost capsized, they are soon locked into the rapids, moving faster and faster downstream as their steering poles and then the raft itself splinters beneath them. On the banks they see wrecked boats and drowned , frozen men. .

They keep going. faster and faster. The raft is sinking. there's no way to get off. Then the river freezes solid beneath them. They've made it through.

8. Too Late

They walk the next six miles to Dawson, dragging their supplies over the treacherous ice, catching up with Braesmith who made it also

At Dawson they collapse into a makeshift saloon to be told the gold-bearing valleys are all staked out already, there are no sites left worth claiming.

ACT 2

8. Winter In Dawson

The winter sets in - five long months of twilight and darkness. All along the sides of Bonanza and Eldorado creek, men who have stakes their claims have started digging down to the gold seam that lies below.

At night the frozen stream beds in the hills above Dawson twinkle with prospectors fires. Miners are thawing the ground so they can dig it, hauling up bucketloads of earth and gravel out of which they plan to wash the gold when the spring thaw comes.

Dawson itself is a strange town of millionaires dressed in rags living in mean wooden cabins. The currency is gold dust in cartridge cases. Food is scarce and getting scarcer. A hens egg worth two cents in Seattle sells for a quarter of an ounce of gold up here. Nuggets the size of your thumb are wagered in gambling games.

You see gold glinting in the sewer that runs down main-street. Dust worth a couple of hundred dollars is swept every night off the shack that serves as a bar.

Braesmith decides there is more money to be made off the goldfields than on them. He starts up a makeshift casino where Nathan wins enough playing poker to keep himself and Jake in food.

9. Nathan's Secret Past

One long winter night Nathan tells Jake about his years before his marriage to Jake's sister. The brutal times he spent on the sealing ships and on the fur trail.

Jake never knew any of this. Now he begins to see his brother-in-law in a different light - a man who consciously tamed the wild pioneering spirit in himself, who grew up poor, saw the very depths to which humanity could sink; then fell in love and, for his wife's sake, chose the middle-class life, which requires a different sort of courage, a different sort of endurance.

However, the journey has had an unexpected effect on Nathan himself, awakening the old demons - the restless streak which for the sake of his marriage he has fought to suppress. Having got here he wants the gold more than Jake does.

Whatever it takes, he's not going to leave here empty-handed

10. The Laundry Girl and the Surveyor

In the Streets of Dawson Jake meets Elise, a slip of a girl forever clad in furs and blankets, who left her job in a Chicago laundry and now runs a miners canteen.

Jake donates her a couple of pots from their supplies and in return she tells Jake and Nathan of the government surveyor who just arrived in town, before the big freeze and who is now resurveying the various claims.

Some of these claims are bigger than they should be and when the surveyor readjusts the boundaries, the valuable plots will go to the first man to register the claim.

11. The Gamble

As Elise predicted , a boundary is found to be wrong and a valuable new plot is identified between two existing claims. This plot of land - three hundred yards of steep, snow-covered gully called “Three below on bonanza” is right on the gold seam. Its estimated to be worth a million dollars. And its going free

According to law the plot has to be staked on the stroke of midnight, then registered in the surveyors office, four hours away by dog-sleigh

Jake and Nathan decides to stake everything on this prize. Nathan spends all the money they possess on dogs, plus sled and harness. They need a bit more money so Elsie puts in all her savings in return for a share of the claim.

Braesmith who runs the casino buys two dog teams and hires tough experienced mushers to drive them

12. The Fight for Three below

An hour before midnight on the agreed date a crowd of fur-clad man gather at three below. At least a dozen other syndicates of miners are here to contest the claim. What follows is a twelve-sided fight between desperate men with a fortune to play for and nothing to lose.

Jake and the other runners wait, with armloads of stakes and mallets. The gun fires the signal and they're off.

Its bedlam, struggling across down the frozen gully by torchlight, crossing and recrossing the stream to stake every corner of the claim. then fighting out of the gully in a mad flailing punching crowd of men.

Off they go down the track where the dog teams are lined up. Nathan with his torch yelling in the darkness to Jake “over here over here!”

Half a dozen sleds set off together and immediately get snarled up. Dogs are fighting, men are slugging it out. Nathan, the former store manager stands like a wild man in the middle of the melee clubbing back the rest of the mob as Jake fights to extricate his team.

13. The Race to Dawson

Somehow he gets free and they're off, plunging down the frozen track in darkness at breakneck speed. Sleds crash into trees or go tumbling into ravines. Men drive shoulder to shoulder trying desperately to overtake then crowding together in the narrow chicanes where the dogs bite at each other and the men lash across with their whips.

Jake is forced off the track. He cuts an injured dog free of its harness, then manhandles the sled back on the track. Another sled is coming up fast behind threatening to ram into the back of him but he's mushing the dogs and he's off again, tearing through the frozen wasteland onward onwards as dawn begins to break.

There are four men ahead of him, but Jake is lighter and fitter. One by one he gains on them and overtakes them. As Dawson comes into view Jake is neck and neck with the last of his rivals – Braesmith's man.

Now they're racing for the last narrow section. Neither is going to let up. The sleds collide and both are wrecked. The men drag themselves free and start running on foot, uphill through thick snow over the last desperate mile to Dawson.

It's a gruelling battle, Running falling, barging the other guy down then getting up and running again. Ahead, the icy streets of Dawson are crowded with onlookers. The sight of Elise spurs Jake on and he pulls ahead.

He runs down the street, twenty yards ahead of the other guy, then takes a wrong turning and misses the surveyors office. The Indian gets there first and registers the claim with a strangled gasp. Jake falls through the door on top of him, ten seconds to late. He's lost. Braesmith has won and is suddenly a wealthy man.

14. Dr Jake

It's a tragedy for Jake and Nathan but the story of the race is instantly a legend. Everyone wants to buy Jake a drink.

It comes out that Jake was at medical school and people start asking him if he can treat their sick partner. Jake's eyes are opened to the real extent of suffering in this town. While men fight over gold people are dying of scurvy, frostbite gangrene and malnutrition. Stuff he can treat

Jake sets up a clinic, next to Elsie's soup kitchen.

Nathan isn't interested. Losing the race has awakened his darker self. He wants gold. He's seen it, he's been almost in reach of it. He dreams of it. He's obsessed by it.

15. Nathan Heads for the Hills

Deprived of a stake on the wealthy gold-bearing creeks, Nathan gets it into his head that there's gold on the slopes above the creeks.

The experienced prospectors say this is entirely wrong - the gold is always washed downwards, it's always in the creek beds. Nathan ignores this and stakes his claim higher up.

16. Lovers

All Spring. Nathan digs obsessively in his lonely camp above the creek Jake is run off his feet in the clinic - trying to get hold of medicines or to learn of possible remedies from the local Indians. In trying to make a living he's discovered something more precious than gold - his talent as a doctor.

Jake and Elise become lovers.

17. No Place for Young Men

Nathan finds nothing. Stubbornly he stakes a different claim on the slopes, sinks his second shaft.

Summer turns to Autumn. Jake's clinic prospers, but as he treats more and more people he's aware of his own limitations. He needs to go home and complete his medical studies.

Then Elise announces she is pregnant.

Dawson is no place for a baby. Jake tell Elsie they'll go to Seattle , get married and set up home there. Elsie accepts. Jake goes to tell Nathan of his decision.

Winter is coming. Nathan wont leave. He makes Jake sign a disclaimer, renouncing his share of any gold Nathan may find.

And he warns, in parting, that Jakes parents wont accept Elsie

19. Return of the Prodigal

He's right. Back in Seattle Jakes parents are appalled by the idea of marriage. Elise is a laundry girl for Gods sake, what was he thinking?!

Worse Jake's sister is furious to learn that Jake left her husband in the Klondike. Nathan went up there to protect Jake ...and Jake abandoned him.

This isn't true of course but its clear to Jake what he has to do: Before he can start his own life he has to fight his way back up to the frozen hell that is Dawson, find Nathan and bring him back.

Elise thinks it a ruse. She thinks Jake's parents have convinced him she's not good enough for him and he's using Nathan as an excuse to leave her. Jake says that's not true. he loves her and he'll be back to set up home with her, before the baby's born.

Feeling alienated from everyone who once loved him, Jake assembles his kit and goes North again

20. The Second Wave

He joins the second wave of goldrushers – crazy men and women trying to bring in bicycles, crates of eggs, ballgowns, chandeliers and electric generators.

Jake is only a year older than he was on the last trip but he's a changed person. He passes through Skagway with a kind of bemused fascination with the folly of humankind. He makes it over the Chilikoot pass again, helping out where he can, and helps pilot a flimsy overloaded sled down the still-frozen river.

He can see beyond the gold fever now and he moves among the others, who are scrabbling to get ahead, quite separate from their struggle, giving help where he can. You can see that if he survives he is going to be a great man, a great humanitarian, a great doctor.

...If he survives

21. The King of Dawson

In the course of a few months, Dawson has become Sodom and Gomorrah. A muddy boomtown of whores and gunslingers, with two storey hotels, pianos and dancing girls. Braesmith "Smithy" is a wealthy man, obviously the local crime boss now, extracting a percentage from any new find, which he says is for the city coffers but is actually protection money

22. The Jam Jar Millionaire

In the hills above the town Jake finds Nathan still labouring away in the muddy mine shaft in the centre of his claim. His clothes are matted with mud and he lives in a mean, rough hewn shack, the walls of it which are lined with coffee tins and jam jars

Something glints dully in these jars
Each of them is full of gold nuggets.

There is gold in the hills above the creek. The reclusive Nathan is now one of the richest men in Dawson and no-one knows a thing about it.

23. The Fight with Nathan

Two years of hard labour, poor food and lack of light have taken a terrible toll on Nathan. The damage is mental and spiritual as well. He's an angry drunk reclusive and paranoid, convinced that Jake just came back to claim a half share of his riches.

Jake says he has no interest in the gold. he came to fulfil a promise to take Nathan home. Nathan won't go. he says there's more gold in the ground. He hasn't got enough yet.

Jake finally yells at him. 'Well what's enough for you? you want to be richer than my father, even though it means killing yourself, have your wife die in penury. There's enough here to do great things with. To buy your own department store, set up your own trading company, or just do nothing and live all your life in comfort. Money isn't the problem. the problem is deciding what kind of life you should live. Now you can choose any kind of life. So choose it, just for gods sake get out of this pit you've dug for yourself.

Nathan wont agree and wont let Jake leave for fear he'll reveal Nathan's secret. It comes to a vicious fight in which Nathan drunkenly attempts to shoot Jake and Jake knocks him out cold. Then hogties him and takes a tin of gold..

ACT 3

24. The Secret Purchase

The fastest way out of Dawson is to carry on downriver to the sea.

In a shack by the river-bank Jake finds a guy who will sell him one of the few watertight vessels not controlled by Braesmith.

He buys it and goes back to Nathan who is now just about sober
Jake , tells him he's bought a boat. They're leaving.

Nathan asks How did you buy it?

With Gold.

Then we're dead men

Braesmith won't let them go without extracting his tithe and Nathan isn't inclined to pay him.

25. Escape from Dawson

They fill sacks with the gold and lug it down the hill under cover of dark.
As they're loading up, Braesmiths men arrive demanding to speak to them.
Nathan tells them to go fuck themselves

Under gunfire Jake and Nathan get in the boat and push off into the current
Braesmiths men pile aboard another boat and give chase

26. The Fight on the River

It's the spring thaw. The river is in full flood.

Great slabs of ice, logs and uprooted trees are borne along on the muddy rushing waters.

The two boats pole and paddle downriver. First Jake and Nathan have a good lead, then the distance closes, then the boats pull apart again.

It seems like they might get away. Then a rifle shot tears into Jake and knocks him overboard

27. The Longest Minute

Jake is in the river, weighed down by his clothes, unable to swim with his wounded arm. The sacks of gold are in the bottom of the boat.

There's no way Nathan can save him without abandoning the boat and the fortune.

For what seems like a lifetime he just stands there as they drift apart.

Their enemies draw closer.

Nathan watches Jake from him recede – floundering and drowning in the river.

Then at the last minute Nathan comes to his senses, tears of his coat, dives in and saves Jake.

28. Justice

The boat, caught in the current carries on down into rapids.

The bad guys follow it.

The abandoned boat and its pursuers hit rocks at the same time.

Villains and treasure are lost in the raging torrent.

Meanwhile Nathan hauls Jake to the banks by an Indian trapper's camp.

All he has left of his fortune are the few gold nuggets. He saved Jake and lost everything

– well not quite everything. When he takes off his clothes to get dry there's still a nugget the size of a hen's egg in one of his trouser pockets.

29. The Homecoming

They return to Seattle. Nathan goes back to his family. Jake goes to the boarding house where he left Elsie to find she is not there.

The baby is due any minute. He races through town looking for her and finally tracks her down, to a girlfriend's house.

He grabs a local priest and marries her while she's in labour. "Oh Suffering Christ I do!" she gasps between contractions. The child is born. They decide to name him Dawson.

30. Post Script

Nathan sold his abandoned claim for 50,000 dollars and went on to become a wealthy and influential congressman in Seattle.

Jake had three sons and became one of Chicago's most distinguished doctors.

As for the others in this story: of the ten thousand stampedeers who set off for the Klondike, five thousand actually got there, less than two thousand dug for gold, a couple of hundred got rich and no more than a handful became wealthy. But none came home unchanged by the experience.

The End

