

# **ДЖЕК ЛОНДОН**

# **WONDER OF WOMAN**

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“Just the same, I notice you ain’t tumbled over yourself to get married,” Shorty remarked, continuing a conversation that had lapsed some few minutes before.

Smoke, sitting on the edge of the sleeping-robe and examining the feet of a dog he had rolled snarling on its back in the snow, did not answer. And Shorty, turning a steaming moccasin propped on a stick before the fire, studied his partner’s face keenly.

“Cock your eye up at that there aurora borealis,” Shorty went on. “Some frivolous, eh? Just like any shilly-shallyin’, shirt-dancing woman. The best of them is frivolous, when they ain’t foolish. And they’s cats, all of ’em, the littlest an’ the biggest, the nicest and the otherwise. They’re sure devourin’ lions an’ roarin’ hyenas when they get on the trail of a man they’ve cottoned to.”

Again the monologue languished. Smoke cuffed the dog when it attempted to snap his hand, and went on examining its bruised and bleeding pads.

“Huh!” pursued Shorty. “Mebbe I couldn’t ’a’ married if I’d a mind to! An’ mebbe I wouldn’t ’a’ been married without a mind to, if I hadn’t hiked for tall timber. Smoke, d’you want to know what saved me? I’ll tell you. My wind. I just kept a-runnin’. I’d like to see any skirt run me outa breath.”

Smoke released the animal and turned his own steaming, stick-propped moccasins. “We’ve got to rest over to-morrow and make moccasins,” he vouchsafed. “That little crust is playing the devil with their feet.”

“We oughta keep goin’ somehow,” Shorty objected. “We ain’t got grub enough to turn back with, and we gotta strike that run of caribou or them white Indians almighty soon or we’ll be eatin’ the dogs, sore feet an’ all. Now who ever seen them white Indians anyway? Nothin’ but hearsay. An’ how can a Indian be white? A black white man’d be as natural. Smoke, we just oughta travel to-morrow. The country’s plumb dead of game. We ain’t seen even a rabbit-track in a week, you know that. An’ we gotta get out of this dead streak into somewhere that meat’s runnin’.”

“They’ll travel all the better with a day’s rest for their feet and moccasins all around,” Smoke counseled. “If you get a chance at any low divide, take a peep over at the country beyond. We’re likely to strike open rolling country any time now. That’s what La Perle told us to look for.”

“Huh! By his own story, it was ten years ago that La Perle come through this section, an’ he was that loco from hunger he couldn’t know what he did see. Remember what he said of whoppin’ big flags floatin’ from the tops of the mountains? That shows how loco HE was. An’ he said himself he never seen any white Indians—that was Anton’s yarn. An’, besides, Anton kicked the bucket two years before you an’ me come to Alaska. But I’ll take a look to-morrow. An’ mebbe I might pick up a moose. What d’ you say we turn in?”

Smoke spent the morning in camp, sewing dog-moccasins and repairing harnesses. At noon he cooked a meal for two, ate his share, and began to look for Shorty's return. An hour later he strapped on his snow-shoes and went out on his partner's trail. The way led up the bed of the stream, through a narrow gorge that widened suddenly into a moose-pasture. But no moose had been there since the first snow of the preceding fall. The tracks of Shorty's snow-shoes crossed the pasture and went up the easy slope of a low divide. At the crest Smoke halted. The tracks continued down the other slope. The first spruce-trees, in the creek bed, were a mile away, and it was evident that Shorty had passed through them and gone on. Smoke looked at his watch, remembered the oncoming darkness, the dogs, and the camp, and reluctantly decided against going farther. But before he retraced his steps he paused for a long look. All the eastern sky-line was saw-toothed by the snowy backbone of the Rockies. The whole mountain system, range upon range, seemed to trend to the northwest, cutting athwart the course to the open country reported by La Perle. The effect was as if the mountains conspired to thrust back the traveler toward the west and the Yukon. Smoke wondered how many men in the past, approaching as he had approached, had been turned aside by that forbidding aspect. La Perle had not been turned aside, but, then, La Perle had crossed over from the eastern slope of the Rockies.

Until midnight Smoke maintained a huge fire for the guidance of Shorty. And in the morning, waiting with camp broken and dogs harnessed for the first break of light, Smoke took up the pursuit. In the narrow pass of the canyon, his lead-dog pricked up its ears and whined. Then Smoke came upon the Indians, six of them, coming toward him. They were traveling light, without dogs, and on each man's back was the smallest of pack outfits. Surrounding Smoke, they immediately gave him several matters for surprise. That they were looking for him was clear. That they talked no Indian tongue of which he knew a word was also quickly made clear. They were not white Indians, though they were taller and heavier than the Indians of the Yukon basin. Five of them carried the old-fashioned, long-barreled Hudson Bay Company musket, and in the hands of the sixth was a Winchester rifle which Smoke knew to be Shorty's.

Nor did they waste time in making him a prisoner. Unarmed himself, Smoke could only submit. The contents of the sled were distributed among their own packs, and he was given a pack composed of his and Shorty's

sleeping-furs. The dogs were unharnessed, and when Smoke protested, one of the Indians, by signs, indicated a trail too rough for sled-travel. Smoke bowed to the inevitable, cached the sled end-on in the snow on the bank above the stream, and trudged on with his captors. Over the divide to the north they went, down to the spruce-trees which Smoke had glimpsed the preceding afternoon. They followed the stream for a dozen miles, abandoning it when it trended to the west and heading directly eastward up a narrow tributary.

The first night was spent in a camp which had been occupied for several days. Here was cached a quantity of dried salmon and a sort of pemmican, which the Indians added to their packs. From this camp a trail of many snow-shoes led off—Shorty's captors, was Smoke's conclusion; and before darkness fell he succeeded in making out the tracks Shorty's narrower snow-shoes had left. On questioning the Indians by signs, they nodded affirmation and pointed to the north.

Always, in the days that followed, they pointed north; and always the trail, turning and twisting through a jumble of upstanding peaks, trended north. Everywhere, in this bleak snow-solitude, the way seemed barred, yet ever the trail curved and coiled, finding low divides and avoiding the higher and untraversable chains. The snow-fall was deeper than in the lower valleys, and every step of the way was snow-shoe work. Furthermore, Smoke's captors, all young men, traveled light and fast; and he could not forbear the prick of pride in the knowledge that he easily kept up with them. They were travel-hardened and trained to snow-shoes from infancy; yet such was his condition that the traverse bore no more of ordinary hardship to him than to them.

In six days they gained and crossed the central pass, low in comparison with the mountains it threaded, yet formidable in itself and not possible for loaded sleds. Five days more of tortuous winding, from lower altitude to lower altitude, brought them to the open, rolling, and merely hilly country La Perle had found ten years before. Smoke knew it with the first glimpse, on a sharp cold day, the thermometer forty below zero, the atmosphere so clear that he could see a hundred miles. Far as he could see rolled the open country. High in the east the Rockies still thrust their snowy ramparts heavenward. To the south and west extended the broken ranges of the projecting spur-system they had crossed. And in this vast pocket lay the country La Perle had traversed—snow-blanketed, but assuredly fat with

game at some time in the year, and in the summer a smiling, forested, and flowered land.

Before midday, traveling down a broad stream, past snow-buried willows and naked aspens, and across heavily timbered flats of spruce, they came upon the site of a large camp, recently abandoned. Glancing as he went by, Smoke estimated four or five hundred fires, and guessed the population to be in the thousands. So fresh was the trail, and so well packed by the multitude, that Smoke and his captors took off their snow-shoes and in their moccasins struck a swifter pace. Signs of game appeared and grew plentiful—tracks of wolves and lynxes that without meat could not be. Once, one of the Indians cried out with satisfaction and pointed to a large area of open snow, littered with fang-polished skulls of caribou, trampled and disrupted as if an army had fought upon it. And Smoke knew that a big killing had been made by the hunters since the last snow-flurry.

In the long twilight no sign was manifested of making camp. They held steadily on through a deepening gloom that vanished under a sky of light—great, glittering stars half veiled by a greenish vapor of pulsing aurora borealis. His dogs first caught the noises of the camp, pricking their ears and whining in low eagerness. Then it came to the ears of the humans, a murmur, dim with distance, but not invested with the soothing grace that is common to distant murmurs. Instead, it was in a high, wild key, a beat of shrill sound broken by shriller sounds—the long wolf-howling of many wolf-dogs, a screaming of unrest and pain, mournful with hopelessness and rebellion. Smoke swung back the crystal of his watch and by the feel of finger-tips on the naked hands made out eleven o'clock. The men about him quickened. The legs that had lifted through a dozen strenuous hours lifted in a still swifter pace that was half a run and mostly a running jog. Through a dark spruce-flat they burst upon an abrupt glare of light from many fires and upon an abrupt increase of sound. The great camp lay before them.

And as they entered and threaded the irregular runways of the hunting-camp, a vast tumult, as in a wave, rose to meet them and rolled on with them—cries, greetings, questions and answers, jests and jests thrust back again, the snapping snarl of wolf-dogs rushing in furry projectiles of wrath upon Smoke's stranger dogs, the scolding of squaws, laughter, the whimpering of children and wailing of infants, the moans of the sick aroused afresh to pain, all the pandemonium of a camp of nerveless, primitive wilderness folk.

Striking with clubs and the butts of guns, Smoke's party drove back the attacking dogs, while his own dogs, snapping and snarling, awed by so many enemies, shrank in among the legs of their human protectors, and bristled along stiff-legged in menacing prance.

They halted in the trampled snow by an open fire, where Shorty and two young Indians, squatted on their hams, were broiling strips of caribou meat. Three other young Indians, lying in furs on a mat of spruce-boughs, sat up. Shorty looked across the fire at his partner, but with a sternly impassive face, like those of his companions, made no sign and went on broiling the meat.

"What's the matter?" Smoke demanded, half in irritation. "Lost your speech?"

The old familiar grin twisted on Shorty's face. "Nope," he answered. "I'm a Indian. I'm learnin' not to show surprise. When did they catch you?"

"Next day after you left."

"Hum," Shorty said, the light of whimsy dancing in his eyes. "Well, I'm doin' fine, thank you most to death. This is the bachelors' camp." He waved his hand to embrace its magnificence, which consisted of a fire, beds of spruce-boughs laid on top of the snow, flies of caribou skin, and wind-shields of twisted spruce and willow withes. "An' these are the bachelors." This time his hand indicated the young men, and he spat a few spoken gutturals in their own language that brought the white flash of acknowledgment from eyes and teeth. "They're glad to meet you, Smoke. Set down an' dry your moccasins, an' I'll cook up some grub. I'm gettin' the hang of the lingo pretty well, ain't I? You'll have to come to it, for it looks as if we'll be with these folks a long time. They's another white man here. Got caught six years ago. He's a Irishman they picked up over Great Slave Lake way. Danny McCan is what he goes by. He's settled down with a squaw. Got two kids already, but he'll skin out if ever the chance opens up. See that low fire over there to the right? That's his camp."

Apparently this was Smoke's appointed domicile, for his captors left him and his dogs, and went on deeper into the big camp. While he attended to his foot-gear and devoured strips of hot meat, Shorty cooked and talked.

"This is a sure peach of a pickle, Smoke—you listen to me. An' we got to go some to get out. These is the real, blowed-in-the-glass, wild Indians. They ain't white, but their chief is. He talks like a mouthful of hot mush, an' if he ain't full-blood Scotch they ain't no such thing as Scotch in

the world. He's the hi-yu, skookum top-chief of the whole caboodle. What he says goes. You want to get that from the start-off. Danny McCan's been tryin' to get away from him for six years. Danny's all right, but he ain't got go in him. He knows a way out—learned it on huntin' trips—to the west of the way you an' me came. He ain't had the nerve to tackle it by his lonely. But we can pull it off, the three of us. Whiskers is the real goods, but he's mostly loco just the same."

"Who's Whiskers?" Smoke queried, pausing in the wolfing-down of a hot strip of meat.

"Why, he's the top geezer. He's the Scotcher. He's gettin' old, an' he's sure asleep now, but he'll see you to-morrow an' show you clear as print what a measly shrimp you are on his stompin'-grounds. These grounds belong to him. You got to get that into your noodle. They ain't never been explored, nor nothin', an' they're hisn. An' he won't let you forget it. He's got about twenty thousand square miles of huntin' country here all his own. He's the white Indian, him an' the skirt. Huh! Don't look at me that way. Wait till you see her. Some looker, an' all white, like her dad—he's Whiskers. An' say, caribou! I've saw 'em. A hundred thousan' of good running meat in the herd, an' ten thousan' wolves an' cats a-followin' an' livin' off the stragglers an' the leavin's. We leave the leavin's. The herd's movin' to the east, an' we'll be followin' 'em any day now. We eat our dogs, an' what we don't eat we smoke 'n cure for the spring before the salmon-run gets its sting in. Say, what Whiskers don't know about salmon an' caribou nobody knows, take it from me."

“Here comes Whiskers lookin’ like he’s goin’ somewheres,” Shorty whispered, reaching over and wiping greasy hands on the coat of one of the sled-dogs.

It was morning, and the bachelors were squatting over a breakfast of caribou-meat, which they ate as they broiled. Smoke glanced up and saw a small and slender man, skin-clad like any savage, but unmistakably white, striding in advance of a sled team and a following of a dozen Indians. Smoke cracked a hot bone, and while he sucked out the steaming marrow gazed at his approaching host. Bushy whiskers and yellowish gray hair, stained by camp smoke, concealed most of the face, but failed wholly to hide the gaunt, almost cadaverous, cheeks. It was a healthy leanness, Smoke decided, as he noted the wide flare of the nostrils and the breadth and depth of chest that gave spaciousness to the guaranty of oxygen and life.

“How do you do,” the man said, slipping a mitten and holding out his bare hand. “My name is Snass,” he added, as they shook hands.

“Mine’s Bellew,” Smoke returned, feeling peculiarly disconcerted as he gazed into the keen-searching black eyes.

“Getting plenty to eat, I see.”

Smoke nodded and resumed his marrow-bone, the purr of Scottish speech strangely pleasant in his ears.

“Rough rations. But we don’t starve often. And it’s more natural than the hand-reared meat of the cities.”

“I see you don’t like cities,” Smoke laughed, in order to be saying something; and was immediately startled by the transformation Snass underwent.

Quite like a sensitive plant, the man’s entire form seemed to wilt and quiver. Then the recoil, tense and savage, concentrated in the eyes, in which appeared a hatred that screamed of immeasurable pain. He turned abruptly away, and, recollecting himself, remarked casually over his shoulder:

“I’ll see you later, Mr. Bellew. The caribou are moving east, and I’m going ahead to pick out a location. You’ll all come on to-morrow.”

“Some Whiskers, that, eh?” Shorty muttered, as Snass pulled on at the head of his outfit.

Again Shorty wiped his hands on the wolf-dog, which seemed to like it as it licked off the delectable grease.

Later on in the morning Smoke went for a stroll through the camp, busy with its primitive pursuits. A big body of hunters had just returned, and the men were scattering to their various fires. Women and children were departing with dogs harnessed to empty toboggan-sleds, and women and children and dogs were hauling sleds heavy with meat fresh from the killing and already frozen. An early spring cold-snap was on, and the wildness of the scene was painted in a temperature of thirty below zero. Woven cloth was not in evidence. Furs and soft-tanned leather clad all alike. Boys passed with bows in their hands, and quivers of bone-barbed arrows; and many a skinning-knife of bone or stone Smoke saw in belts or neck-hung sheaths. Women toiled over the fires, smoke-curing the meat, on their backs infants that stared round-eyed and sucked at lumps of tallow. Dogs, full-kin to wolves, bristled up to Smoke to endure the menace of the short club he carried and to whiff the odor of this newcomer whom they must accept by virtue of the club.

Segregated in the heart of the camp, Smoke came upon what was evidently Snass's fire. Though temporary in every detail, it was solidly constructed and was on a large scale. A great heap of bales of skins and outfit was piled on a scaffold out of reach of the dogs. A large canvas fly, almost half-tent, sheltered the sleeping- and living-quarters. To one side was a silk tent—the sort favored by explorers and wealthy big-game hunters. Smoke had never seen such a tent, and stepped closer. As he stood looking, the flaps parted and a young woman came out. So quickly did she move, so abruptly did she appear, that the effect on Smoke was as that of an apparition. He seemed to have the same effect on her, and for a long moment they gazed at each other.

She was dressed entirely in skins, but such skins and such magnificently beautiful fur-work Smoke had never dreamed of. Her parka, the hood thrown back, was of some strange fur of palest silver. The mukluks, with walrus-hide soles, were composed of the silver-padded feet of many lynxes. The long-gauntleted mittens, the tassels at the knees, all the varied furs of the costume, were pale silver that shimmered in the frosty light; and out of this shimmering silver, poised on slender, delicate neck, lifted her head, the rosy face blonde as the eyes were blue, the ears like two pink shells, the light chestnut hair touched with frost-dust and coruscating frost-glints.

All this and more, as in a dream, Smoke saw; then, recollecting himself, his hand fumbled for his cap. At the same moment the wonder-stare in the girl's eyes passed into a smile, and, with movements quick and vital, she slipped a mitten and extended her hand.

"How do you do," she murmured gravely, with a queer, delightful accent, her voice, silvery as the furs she wore, coming with a shock to Smoke's ears, attuned as they were to the harsh voices of the camp squaws.

Smoke could only mumble phrases that were awkwardly reminiscent of his best society manner.

"I am glad to see you," she went on slowly and gropingly, her face a ripple of smiles. "My English you will please excuse. It is not good. I am English like you," she gravely assured him. "My father he is Scotch. My mother she is dead. She is French, and English, and a little Indian, too. Her father was a great man in the Hudson Bay Company. Brrr! It is cold." She slipped on her mitten and rubbed her ears, the pink of which had already turned to white. "Let us go to the fire and talk. My name is Labiskwee. What is your name?"

And so Smoke came to know Labiskwee, the daughter of Snass, whom Snass called Margaret.

"Snass is not my father's name," she informed Smoke. "Snass is only an Indian name."

Much Smoke learned that day, and in the days that followed, as the hunting-camp moved on in the trail of the caribou. These were real wild Indians—the ones Anton had encountered and escaped from long years before. This was nearly the western limit of their territory, and in the summer they ranged north to the tundra shores of the Arctic, and eastward as far as the Luskwa. What river the Luskwa was Smoke could not make out, nor could Labiskwee tell him, nor could McCan. On occasion Snass, with parties of strong hunters, pushed east across the Rockies, on past the lakes and the Mackenzie and into the Barrens. It was on the last traverse in that direction that the silk tent occupied by Labiskwee had been found.

"It belonged to the Millicent-Adbury expedition," Snass told Smoke.

"Oh! I remember. They went after musk-oxen. The rescue expedition never found a trace of them."

"I found them," Snass said. "But both were dead."

"The world still doesn't know. The word never got out."

"The word never gets out," Snass assured him pleasantly.

“You mean if they had been alive when you found them—?”

Snass nodded. “They would have lived on with me and my people.”

“Anton got out,” Smoke challenged.

“I do not remember the name. How long ago?”

“Fourteen or fifteen years,” Smoke answered.

“So he pulled through, after all. Do you know, I’ve wondered about him. We called him Long Tooth. He was a strong man, a strong man.”

“La Perle came through here ten years ago.”

Snass shook his head.

“He found traces of your camps. It was summer time.”

“That explains it,” Snass answered. “We are hundreds of miles to the north in the summer.”

But, strive as he would, Smoke could get no clew to Snass’s history in the days before he came to live in the northern wilds. Educated he was, yet in all the intervening years he had read no books, no newspapers. What had happened in the world he knew not, nor did he show desire to know. He had heard of the miners on the Yukon, and of the Klondike strike. Gold-miners had never invaded his territory, for which he was glad. But the outside world to him did not exist. He tolerated no mention of it.

Nor could Labiskwee help Smoke with earlier information. She had been born on the hunting-grounds. Her mother had lived for six years after. Her mother had been very beautiful—the only white woman Labiskwee had ever seen. She said this wistfully, and wistfully, in a thousand ways, she showed that she knew of the great outside world on which her father had closed the door. But this knowledge was secret. She had early learned that mention of it threw her father into a rage.

Anton had told a squaw of her mother, and that her mother had been a daughter of a high official in the Hudson Bay Company. Later, the squaw had told Labiskwee. But her mother’s name she had never learned.

As a source of information, Danny McCan was impossible. He did not like adventure. Wild life was a horror, and he had had nine years of it. Shanghaied in San Francisco, he had deserted the whaleship at Point Barrow with three companions. Two had died, and the third had abandoned him on the terrible traverse south. Two years he had lived with the Eskimos before raising the courage to attempt the south traverse, and then, within several days of a Hudson Bay Company post, he had been gathered in by a party of Snass’s young men. He was a small, stupid man, afflicted with sore

eyes, and all he dreamed or could talk about was getting back to his beloved San Francisco and his blissful trade of bricklaying.

“You’re the first intelligent man we’ve had,” Snass complimented Smoke one night by the fire. “Except old Four Eyes. The Indians named him so. He wore glasses and was short-sighted. He was a professor of zoology.” (Smoke noted the correctness of the pronunciation of the word.) “He died a year ago. My young men picked him up strayed from an expedition on the upper Porcupine. He was intelligent, yes; but he was also a fool. That was his weakness—straying. He knew geology, though, and working in metals. Over on the Luskwa, where there’s coal, we have several creditable hand-forges he made. He repaired our guns and taught the young men how. He died last year, and we really missed him. Strayed—that’s how it happened—froze to death within a mile of camp.”

It was on the same night that Snass said to Smoke:

“You’d better pick out a wife and have a fire of your own. You will be more comfortable than with those young bucks. The maidens’ fires—a sort of feast of the virgins, you know—are not lighted until full summer and the salmon, but I can give orders earlier if you say the word.”

Smoke laughed and shook his head.

“Remember,” Snass concluded quietly, “Anton is the only one that ever got away. He was lucky, unusually lucky.”

Her father had a will of iron, Labiskwee told Smoke.

“Four Eyes used to call him the Frozen Pirate—whatever that means—the Tyrant of the Frost, the Cave Bear, the Beast Primitive, the King of the Caribou, the Bearded Pard, and lots of such things. Four Eyes loved words like these. He taught me most of my English. He was always making fun. You could never tell. He called me his cheetah-chum after times when I was angry. What is cheetah? He always teased me with it.”

She chattered on with all the eager naivete of a child, which Smoke found hard to reconcile with the full womanhood of her form and face.

Yes, her father was very firm. Everybody feared him. He was terrible when angry. There were the Porcupines. It was through them, and through the Luskwas, that Snass traded his skins at the posts and got his supplies of ammunition and tobacco. He was always fair, but the chief of the Porcupines began to cheat. And after Snass had warned him twice, he burned his log village, and over a dozen of the Porcupines were killed in the fight. But there was no more cheating. Once, when she was a little girl, there was one white man killed while trying to escape. No, her father did

not do it, but he gave the order to the young men. No Indian ever disobeyed her father.

And the more Smoke learned from her, the more the mystery of Snass deepened.

“And tell me if it is true,” the girl was saying, “that there was a man and a woman whose names were Paolo and Francesca and who greatly loved each other?”

Smoke nodded.

“Four Eyes told me all about it,” she beamed happily. “And so he did not make it up, after all. You see, I was not sure. I asked father, but, oh, he was angry. The Indians told me he gave poor Four Eyes an awful talking to. Then there were Tristan and Iseult—two Iseults. It was very sad. But I should like to love that way. Do all the young men and women in the world do that? They do not here. They just get married. They do not seem to have time. I am English, and I will never marry an Indian—would you? That is why I have not lighted my maiden’s fire. Some of the young men are bothering father to make me do it. Libash is one of them. He is a great hunter. And Mahkook comes around singing songs. He is funny. To-night, if you come by my tent after dark, you will hear him singing out in the cold. But father says I can do as I please, and so I shall not light my fire. You see, when a girl makes up her mind to get married, that is the way she lets young men know. Four Eyes always said it was a fine custom. But I noticed he never took a wife. Maybe he was too old. He did not have much hair, but I do not think he was really very old. And how do you know when you are in love?—like Paolo and Francesca, I mean.”

Smoke was disconcerted by the clear gaze of her blue eyes. “Why, they say,” he stammered, “those who are in love say it, that love is dearer than life. When one finds out that he or she likes somebody better than everybody else in the world—why, then, they know they are in love. That’s the way it goes, but it’s awfully hard to explain. You just know it, that’s all.”

She looked off across the camp-smoke, sighed, and resumed work on the fur mitten she was sewing. “Well,” she announced with finality, “I shall never get married anyway.”

"Once we hit out we'll sure have some tall runnin'," Shorty said dismally.

"The place is a big trap," Smoke agreed.

From the crest of a bald knob they gazed out over Snass's snowy domain. East, west, and south they were hemmed in by the high peaks and jumbled ranges. Northward, the rolling country seemed interminable; yet they knew, even in that direction, that half a dozen transverse chains blocked the way.

"At this time of the year I could give you three days' start," Snass told Smoke that evening. "You can't hide your trail, you see. Anton got away when the snow was gone. My young men can travel as fast as the best white man; and, besides, you would be breaking trail for them. And when the snow is off the ground, I'll see to it that you don't get the chance Anton had. It's a good life. And soon the world fades. I have never quite got over the surprise of finding how easy it is to get along without the world."

"What's eatin' me is Danny McCan," Shorty confided to Smoke. "He's a weak brother on any trail. But he swears he knows the way out to the westward, an' so we got to put up with him, Smoke, or you sure get yours."

"We're all in the same boat," Smoke answered.

"Not on your life. It's a-comin' to you straight down the pike."

"What is?"

"You ain't heard the news?"

Smoke shook his head.

"The bachelors told me. They just got the word. To-night it comes off, though it's months ahead of the calendar."

Smoke shrugged his shoulders.

"Ain't interested in hearin'?" Shorty teased.

"I'm waiting to hear."

"Well, Danny's wife just told the bachelors," Shorty paused impressively. "An' the bachelors told me, of course, that the maidens' fires is due to be lighted to-night. That's all. Now how do you like it?"

"I don't get your drift, Shorty."

"Don't, eh? Why, it's plain open and shut. They's a skirt after you, an' that skirt is goin' to light a fire, an' that skirt's name is Labiskwee. Oh, I've been watchin' her watch you when you ain't lookin'. She ain't never

lighted her fire. Said she wouldn't marry a Indian. An' now, when she lights her fire, it's a cinch it's my poor old friend Smoke."

"It sounds like a syllogism," Smoke said, with a sinking heart reviewing Labiskwee's actions of the past several days.

"Cinch is shorter to pronounce," Shorty returned. "An' that's always the way—just as we're workin' up our get-away, along comes a skirt to complicate everything. We ain't got no luck. Hey! Listen to that, Smoke!"

Three ancient squaws had halted midway between the bachelors' camp and the camp of McCan, and the oldest was declaiming in shrill falsetto.

Smoke recognized the names, but not all the words, and Shorty translated with melancholy glee.

"Labiskwee, the daughter of Snass, the Rainmaker, the Great Chief, lights her first maiden's fire to-night. Maka, the daughter of Owits, the Wolf-Runner—"

The recital ran through the names of a dozen maidens, and then the three heralds tottered on their way to make announcement at the next fires.

The bachelors, who had sworn youthful oaths to speak to no maidens, were uninterested in the approaching ceremony, and to show their disdain they made preparations for immediate departure on a mission set them by Snass and upon which they had planned to start the following morning. Not satisfied with the old hunters' estimates of the caribou, Snass had decided that the run was split. The task set the bachelors was to scout to the north and west in quest of the second division of the great herd.

Smoke, troubled by Labiskwee's fire-lighting, announced that he would accompany the bachelors. But first he talked with Shorty and with McCan.

"You be there on the third day, Smoke," Shorty said. "We'll have the outfit an' the dogs."

"But remember," Smoke cautioned, "if there is any slip-up in meeting me, you keep on going and get out to the Yukon. That's flat. If you make it, you can come back for me in the summer. If I get the chance, I'll make it, and come back for you."

McCan, standing by his fire, indicated with his eyes a rugged mountain where the high western range out-jutted on the open country.

"That's the one," he said. "A small stream on the south side. We go up it. On the third day you meet us. We'll pass by on the third day."

Anywhere you tap that stream you'll meet us or our trail."

But the chance did not come to Smoke on the third day. The bachelors had changed the direction of their scout, and while Shorty and McCan plodded up the stream with their dogs, Smoke and the bachelors were sixty miles to the northeast picking up the trail of the second caribou herd. Several days later, through a dim twilight of falling snow, they came back to the big camp. A squaw ceased from wailing by a fire and darted up to Smoke. Harsh tongued, with bitter, venomous eyes, she cursed him, waving her arms toward a silent, fur-wrapped form that still lay on the sled which had hauled it in.

What had happened, Smoke could only guess, and as he came to McCan's fire he was prepared for a second cursing. Instead, he saw McCan himself industriously chewing a strip of caribou meat.

"I'm not a fightin' man," he whiningly explained. "But Shorty got away, though they're still after him. He put up a hell of a fight. They'll get him, too. He ain't got a chance. He plugged two bucks that'll get around all right. An' he croaked one square through the chest."

"Yes, I know," Smoke answered. "I just met the widow."

"Old Snass'll be wantin' to see you," McCan added. "Them's his orders. Soon as you come in you was to go to his fire. I ain't squealed. You don't know nothing. Keep that in mind. Shorty went off on his own along with me."

At Snass's fire Smoke found Labiskwee. She met him with eyes that shone with such softness and tenderness as to frighten him.

"I'm glad you did not try to run away," she said. "You see, I—" She hesitated, but her eyes didn't drop. They swam with a light unmistakable. "I lighted my fire, and of course it was for you. It has happened. I like you better than everybody else in the world. Better than my father. Better than a thousand Libashes and Mahkooks. I love. It is very strange. I love as Francesca loved, as Iseult loved. Old Four Eyes spoke true. Indians do not love this way. But my eyes are blue, and I am white. We are white, you and I."

Smoke had never been proposed to in his life, and he was unable to meet the situation. Worse, it was not even a proposal. His acceptance was taken for granted. So thoroughly was it all arranged in Labiskwee's mind, so warm was the light in her eyes, that he was amazed that she did not throw her arms around him and rest her head on his shoulder. Then he realized, despite her candor of love, that she did not know the pretty ways

of love. Among the primitive savages such ways did not obtain. She had had no chance to learn.

She prattled on, chanting the happy burden of her love, while he strove to grip himself in the effort, somehow, to wound her with the truth. This, at the very first, was the golden opportunity.

“But, Labiskwee, listen,” he began. “Are you sure you learned from Four Eyes all the story of the love of Paolo and Francesca?”

She clasped her hands and laughed with an immense certitude of gladness. “Oh! There is more! I knew there must be more and more of love! I have thought much since I lighted my fire. I have—”

And then Snass strode in to the fire through the falling snowflakes, and Smoke’s opportunity was lost.

“Good evening,” Snass burred gruffly. “Your partner has made a mess of it. I am glad you had better sense.”

“You might tell me what’s happened,” Smoke urged.

The flash of white teeth through the stained beard was not pleasant. “Certainly, I’ll tell you. Your partner has killed one of my people. That sniveling shrimp, McCan, deserted at the first shot. He’ll never run away again. But my hunters have got your partner in the mountains, and they’ll get him. He’ll never make the Yukon basin. As for you, from now on you sleep at my fire. And there’ll be no more scouting with the young men. I shall have my eye on you.”

Smoke's new situation at Snass's fire was embarrassing. He saw more of Labiskwee than ever. In its sweetness and innocence, the frankness of her love was terrible. Her glances were love glances; every look was a caress. A score of times he nerved himself to tell her of Joy Gastell, and a score of times he discovered that he was a coward. The damnable part of it was that Labiskwee was so delightful. She was good to look upon. Despite the hurt to his self-esteem of every moment spent with her, he pleased in every such moment. For the first time in his life he was really learning woman, and so clear was Labiskwee's soul, so appalling in its innocence and ignorance, that he could not misread a line of it. All the pristine goodness of her sex was in her, uncultured by the conventionality of knowledge or the deceit of self-protection. In memory he reread his Schopenhauer and knew beyond all cavil that the sad philosopher was wrong. To know woman, as Smoke came to know Labiskwee, was to know that all woman-haters were sick men.

Labiskwee was wonderful, and yet, beside her face in the flesh burned the vision of the face of Joy Gastell. Joy had control, restraint, all the feminine inhibitions of civilization, yet, by the trick of his fancy and the living preachment of the woman before him, Joy Gastell was stripped to a goodness at par with Labiskwee's. The one but appreciated the other, and all women of all the world appreciated by what Smoke saw in the soul of Labiskwee at Snass's fire in the snow-land.

And Smoke learned about himself. He remembered back to all he knew of Joy Gastell, and he knew that he loved her. Yet he delighted in Labiskwee. And what was this feeling of delight but love? He could demean it by no less a name. Love it was. Love it must be. And he was shocked to the roots of his soul by the discovery of this polygamous strain in his nature. He had heard it argued, in the San Francisco studios, that it was possible for a man to love two women, or even three women, at a time. But he had not believed it. How could he believe it when he had not had the experience? Now it was different. He did truly love two women, and though most of the time he was quite convinced that he loved Joy Gastell more, there were other moments when he felt with equal certainty that he loved Labiskwee more.

"There must be many women in the world," she said one day. "And women like men. Many women must have liked you. Tell me."

He did not reply.

“Tell me,” she insisted.

“I have never married,” he evaded.

“And there is no one else? No other Iseult out there beyond the mountains?”

Then it was that Smoke knew himself a coward. He lied. Reluctantly he did it, but he lied. He shook his head with a slow indulgent smile, and in his face was more of fondness than he dreamed as he noted Labiskwee’s swift joy-transfiguration.

He excused himself to himself. His reasoning was jesuitical beyond dispute, and yet he was not Spartan enough to strike this child-woman a quivering heart-stroke.

Snass, too, was a perturbing factor in the problem. Little escaped his black eyes, and he spoke significantly.

“No man cares to see his daughter married,” he said to Smoke. “At least, no man of imagination. It hurts. The thought of it hurts, I tell you. Just the same, in the natural order of life, Margaret must marry some time.”

A pause fell; Smoke caught himself wondering for the thousandth time what Snass’s history must be.

“I am a harsh, cruel man,” Snass went on. “Yet the law is the law, and I am just. Nay, here with this primitive people, I am the law and the justice. Beyond my will no man goes. Also, I am a father, and all my days I have been cursed with imagination.”

Whither his monologue tended, Smoke did not learn, for it was interrupted by a burst of chiding and silvery laughter from Labiskwee’s tent, where she played with a new-caught wolf-cub. A spasm of pain twitched Snass’s face.

“I can stand it,” he muttered grimly. “Margaret must be married, and it is my fortune, and hers, that you are here. I had little hopes of Four Eyes. McCan was so hopeless I turned him over to a squaw who had lighted her fire twenty seasons. If it hadn’t been you, it would have been an Indian. Libash might have become the father of my grandchildren.”

And then Labiskwee came from her tent to the fire, the wolf-cub in her arms, drawn as by a magnet, to gaze upon the man, in her eyes the love that art had never taught to hide.

“Listen to me,” said McCan. “The spring thaw is here, an’ the crust is comin’ on the snow. It’s the time to travel, exceptin’ for the spring blizzards in the mountains. I know them. I would run with no less a man than you.”

“But you can’t run,” Smoke contradicted. “You can keep up with no man. Your backbone is limber as thawed marrow. If I run, I run alone. The world fades, and perhaps I shall never run. Caribou meat is very good, and soon will come summer and the salmon.”

Said Snass: “Your partner is dead. My hunters did not kill him. They found the body, frozen in the first of the spring storms in the mountains. No man can escape. When shall we celebrate your marriage?”

And Labiskwee: “I watch you. There is trouble in your eyes, in your face. Oh, I do know all your face. There is a little scar on your neck, just under the ear. When you are happy, the corners of your mouth turn up. When you think sad thoughts they turn down. When you smile there are three and four wrinkles at the corners of your eyes. When you laugh there are six. Sometimes I have almost counted seven. But I cannot count them now. I have never read books. I do not know how to read. But Four Eyes taught me much. My grammar is good. He taught me. And in his own eyes I have seen the trouble of the hunger for the world. He was often hungry for the world. Yet here was good meat, and fish in plenty, and the berries and the roots, and often flour came back for the furs through the Porcupines and the Luskwas. Yet was he hungry for the world. Is the world so good that you, too, are hungry for it? Four Eyes had nothing. But you have me.” She sighed and shook her head. “Four Eyes died still hungry for the world. And if you lived here always would you, too, die hungry for the world? I am afraid I do not know the world. Do you want to run away to the world?”

Smoke could not speak, but by his mouth-corner lines was she convinced.

Minutes of silence passed, in which she visibly struggled, while Smoke cursed himself for the unguessed weakness that enabled him to speak the truth about his hunger for the world while it kept his lips tight on the truth of the existence of the other woman.

Again Labiskwee sighed.

“Very well. I love you more than I fear my father’s anger, and he is more terrible in anger than a mountain storm. You told me what love is. This is the test of love. I shall help you to run away back to the world.”

Smoke awakened softly and without movement. Warm small fingers touched his cheek and slid gently to a pressure on his lips. Fur, with the chill of frost clinging in it, next tingled his skin, and the one word, "Come," was breathed in his ear. He sat up carefully and listened. The hundreds of wolf-dogs in the camp had lifted their nocturnal song, but under the volume of it, close at hand, he could distinguish the light, regular breathing of Snass.

Labiskwee tugged gently at Smoke's sleeve, and he knew she wished him to follow. He took his moccasins and German socks in his hand and crept out into the snow in his sleeping moccasins. Beyond the glow from the dying embers of the fire, she indicated to him to put on his outer foot-gear, and while he obeyed, she went back under the fly where Snass slept.

Feeling the hands of his watch Smoke found it was one in the morning. Quite warm it was, he decided, not more than ten below zero. Labiskwee rejoined him and led him on through the dark runways of the sleeping camp. Walk lightly as they could, the frost crunched crisply under their moccasins, but the sound was drowned by the clamor of the dogs, too deep in their howling to snarl at the man and woman who passed.

"Now we can talk," she said, when the last fire had been left half a mile behind.

And now, in the starlight, facing him, Smoke noted for the first time that her arms were burdened, and, on feeling, discovered she carried his snowshoes, a rifle, two belts of ammunition, and his sleeping-robos.

"I have everything fixed," she said, with a happy little laugh. "I have been two days making the cache. There is meat, even flour, matches, and skees, which go best on the hard crust and, when they break through, the webs will hold up longer. Oh, I do know snow-travel, and we shall go fast, my lover."

Smoke checked his speech. That she had been arranging his escape was surprise enough, but that she had planned to go with him was more than he was prepared for. Unable to think immediate action, he gently, one by one, took her burdens from her. He put his arm around her and pressed her close, and still he could not think what to do.

"God is good," she whispered. "He sent me a lover."

Yet Smoke was brave enough not to suggest his going alone. And before he spoke again he saw all his memory of the bright world and the sun-lands reel and fade.

“We will go back, Labiskwee,” he said. “You will be my wife, and we shall live always with the Caribou People.”

“No! no!” She shook her head; and her body, in the circle of his arm, resented his proposal. “I know. I have thought much. The hunger for the world would come upon you, and in the long nights it would devour your heart. Four Eyes died of hunger for the world. So would you die. All men from the world hunger for it. And I will not have you die. We will go on across the snow mountains on the south traverse.”

“Dear, listen,” he urged. “We must go back.”

She pressed her mitten against his lips to prevent further speech. “You love me. Say that you love me.”

“I do love you, Labiskwee. You are my wonderful sweetheart.”

Again the mitten was a caressing obstacle to utterance.

“We shall go on to the cache,” she said with decision. “It is three miles from here. Come.”

He held back, and her pull on his arm could not move him. Almost was he tempted to tell her of the other woman beyond the south traverse.

“It would be a great wrong to you to go back,” she said. “I—I am only a wild girl, and I am afraid of the world; but I am more afraid for you. You see, it is as you told me. I love you more than anybody else in the world. I love you more than myself. The Indian language is not a good language. The English language is not a good language. The thoughts in my heart for you, as bright and as many as the stars—there is no language for them. How can I tell you them? They are there—see?”

As she spoke she slipped the mitten from his hand and thrust the hand inside the warmth of her parka until it rested against her heart. Tightly and steadily she pressed his hand in its position. And in the long silence he felt the beat, beat of her heart, and knew that every beat of it was love. And then, slowly, almost imperceptibly, still holding his hand, her body began to incline away from his and toward the direction of the cache. Nor could he resist. It was as if he were drawn by her heart itself that so nearly lay in the hollow of his hand.

So firm was the crust, frozen during the night after the previous day's surface-thaw, that they slid along rapidly on their skees.

"Just here, in the trees, is the cache," Labiskwee told Smoke.

The next moment she caught his arm with a startle of surprise. The flames of a small fire were dancing merrily, and crouched by the fire was McCan. Labiskwee muttered something in Indian, and so lashlike was the sound that Smoke remembered she had been called "cheetah" by Four Eyes.

"I was minded you'd run without me," McCan explained when they came up, his small peering eyes glimmering with cunning. "So I kept an eye on the girl, an' when I seen her caching skees an' grub, I was on. I've brought my own skees an' webs an' grub. The fire? Sure, an' it was no danger. The camp's asleep an' snorin', an' the waitin' was cold. Will we be startin' now?"

Labiskwee looked swift consternation at Smoke, as swiftly achieved a judgement on the matter, and spoke. And in the speaking she showed, child-woman though she was in love, the quick decisiveness of one who in other affairs of life would be no clinging vine.

"McCan, you are a dog," she hissed, and her eyes were savage with anger. "I know it is in your heart to raise the camp if we do not take you. Very well. We must take you. But you know my father. I am like my father. You will do your share of the work. You will obey. And if you play one dirty trick, it would be better for you if you had never run."

McCan looked up at her, his small pig-eyes hating and cringing, while in her eyes, turned to Smoke, the anger melted into luminous softness.

"Is it right, what I have said?" she queried.

Daylight found them in the belt of foothills that lay between the rolling country and the mountains. McCan suggested breakfast, but they held on. Not until the afternoon thaw softened the crust and prevented travel would they eat.

The foothills quickly grew rugged, and the stream, up whose frozen bed they journeyed, began to thread deeper and deeper canyons. The signs of spring were less frequent, though in one canyon they found foaming bits of open water, and twice they came upon clumps of dwarf willow upon which were the first hints of swelling buds.

Labiskwee explained to Smoke her knowledge of the country and the way she planned to baffle pursuit. There were but two ways out, one west,

the other south. Snass would immediately dispatch parties of young men to guard the two trails. But there was another way south. True, it did no more than penetrate half-way into the high mountains, then, twisting to the west and crossing three divides, it joined the regular trail. When the young men found no traces on the regular trail they would turn back in the belief that the escape had been made by the west traverse, never dreaming that the runaways had ventured the harder and longer way around.

Glancing back at McCan, in the rear, Labiskwee spoke in an undertone to Smoke. "He is eating," she said. "It is not good."

Smoke looked. The Irishman was secretly munching caribou suet from the pocketful he carried.

"No eating between meals, McCan," he commanded. "There's no game in the country ahead, and the grub will have to be whacked in equal rations from the start. The only way you can travel with us is by playing fair."

By one o'clock the crust had thawed so that the skees broke through, and before two o'clock the web-shoes were breaking through. Camp was made and the first meal eaten. Smoke took stock of the food. McCan's supply was a disappointment. So many silver fox-skins had he stuffed in the bottom of the meat bag that there was little space left for meat.

"Sure an' I didn't know there was so many," he explained. "I done it in the dark. But they're worth good money. An' with all this ammunition we'll be gettin' game a-plenty."

"The wolves will eat you a-plenty," was Smoke's hopeless comment, while Labiskwee's eyes flashed their anger.

Enough food for a month, with careful husbanding and appetites that never blunted their edge, was Smoke's and Labiskwee's judgment. Smoke apportioned the weight and bulk of the packs, yielding in the end to Labiskwee's insistence that she, too, should carry a pack.

Next day the stream shallowed out in a wide mountain valley, and they were already breaking through the crust on the flats when they gained the harder surface of the slope of the divide.

"Ten minutes later and we wouldn't have got across the flats," Smoke said, when they paused for breath on the bald crest of the summit. "We must be a thousand feet higher here."

But Labiskwee, without speaking, pointed down to an open flat among the trees. In the midst of it, scattered abreast, were five dark specks

that scarcely moved.

"The young men," said Labiskwee.

"They are wallowing to their hips," Smoke said. "They will never gain the hard footing this day. We have hours the start of them. Come on, McCan. Buck up. We don't eat till we can't travel."

McCan groaned, but there was no caribou suet in his pocket, and he doggedly brought up the rear.

In the higher valley in which they now found themselves, the crust did not break till three in the afternoon, at which time they managed to gain the shadow of a mountain where the crust was already freezing again. Once only they paused to get out McCan's confiscated suet, which they ate as they walked. The meat was frozen solid, and could be eaten only after thawing over a fire. But the suet crumbled in their mouths and eased the palpitating faintness in their stomachs.

Black darkness, with an overcast sky, came on after a long twilight at nine o'clock, when they made camp in a clump of dwarf spruce. McCan was whining and helpless. The day's march had been exhausting, but in addition, despite his nine years' experience in the arctic, he had been eating snow and was in agony with his parched and burning mouth. He crouched by the fire and groaned, while they made the camp.

Labiskwee was tireless, and Smoke could not but marvel at the life in her body, at the endurance of mind and muscle. Nor was her cheerfulness forced. She had ever a laugh or a smile for him, and her hand lingered in caress whenever it chanced to touch his. Yet, always, when she looked at McCan, her face went hard and pitiless and her eyes flashed frostily.

In the night came wind and snow, and through a day of blizzard they fought their way blindly, missing the turn of the way that led up a small stream and crossed a divide to the west. For two more days they wandered, crossing other and wrong divides, and in those two days they dropped spring behind and climbed up into the abode of winter.

"The young men have lost our trail, an' what's to stop us restin' a day?" McCan begged.

But no rest was accorded. Smoke and Labiskwee knew their danger. They were lost in the high mountains, and they had seen no game nor signs of game. Day after day they struggled on through an iron configuration of landscape that compelled them to labyrinthine canyons and valleys that led rarely to the west. Once in such a canyon, they could only follow it, no

matter where it led, for the cold peaks and higher ranges on either side were unscalable and unendurable. The terrible toil and the cold ate up energy, yet they cut down the size of the ration they permitted themselves.

One night Smoke was awakened by a sound of struggling. Distinctly he heard a gasping and strangling from where McCan slept. Kicking the fire into flame, by its light he saw Labiskwee, her hands at the Irishman's throat and forcing from his mouth a chunk of partly chewed meat. Even as Smoke saw this, her hand went to her hip and flashed with the sheath-knife in it.

"Labiskwee!" Smoke cried, and his voice was peremptory.

The hand hesitated.

"Don't," he said, coming to her side.

She was shaking with anger, but the hand, after hesitating a moment longer, descended reluctantly to the sheath. As if fearing she could not restrain herself, she crossed to the fire and threw on more wood. McCan sat up, whimpering and snarling, between fright and rage spluttering an inarticulate explanation.

"Where did you get it?" Smoke demanded.

"Feel around his body," Labiskwee said.

It was the first word she had spoken, and her voice quivered with the anger she could not suppress.

McCan strove to struggle, but Smoke gripped him cruelly and searched him, drawing forth from under his armpit, where it had been thawed by the heat of his body, a strip of caribou meat. A quick exclamation from Labiskwee drew Smoke's attention. She had sprung to McCan's pack and was opening it. Instead of meat, out poured moss, spruce-needles, chips—all the light refuse that had taken the place of the meat and given the pack its due proportion minus its weight.

Again Labiskwee's hand went to her hip, and she flew at the culprit only to be caught in Smoke's arms, where she surrendered herself, sobbing with the futility of her rage.

"Oh, lover, it is not the food," she panted. "It is you, your life. The dog! He is eating you, he is eating you!"

"We will yet live," Smoke comforted her. "Hereafter he shall carry the flour. He can't eat that raw, and if he does I'll kill him myself, for he will be eating your life as well as mine." He held her closer. "Sweetheart, killing is men's work. Women do not kill."

“You would not love me if I killed the dog?” she questioned in surprise.

“Not so much,” Smoke temporized.

She sighed with resignation. “Very well,” she said. “I shall not kill him.”

The pursuit by the young men was relentless. By miracles of luck, as well as by deduction from the topography of the way the runaways must take, the young men picked up the blizzard-blinded trail and clung to it. When the snow flew, Smoke and Labiskwee took the most improbable courses, turning east when the better way opened south or west, rejecting a low divide to climb a higher. Being lost, it did not matter. Yet they could not throw the young men off. Sometimes they gained days, but always the young men appeared again. After a storm, when all trace was lost, they would cast out like a pack of hounds, and he who caught the later trace made smoke signals to call his comrades on.

Smoke lost count of time, of days and nights and storms and camps. Through a vast mad phantasmagoria of suffering and toil he and Labiskwee struggled on, with McCan somehow stumbling along in the rear, babbling of San Francisco, his everlasting dream. Great peaks, pitiless and serene in the chill blue, towered about them. They fled down black canyons with walls so precipitous that the rock frowned naked, or wallowed across glacial valleys where frozen lakes lay far beneath their feet. And one night, between two storms, a distant volcano glared the sky. They never saw it again, and wondered whether it had been a dream.

Crusts were covered with yards of new snow, that crusted and were snow-covered again. There were places, in canyon- and pocket-drifts, where they crossed snow hundreds of feet deep, and they crossed tiny glaciers, in drafty rifts, wind-scurried and bare of any snow. They crept like silent wraiths across the faces of impending avalanches, or roused from exhausted sleep to the thunder of them. They made fireless camps above timber-line, thawing their meat-rations with the heat of their bodies ere they could eat. And through it all Labiskwee remained Labiskwee. Her cheer never vanished, save when she looked at McCan, and the greatest stupor of fatigue and cold never stilled the eloquence of her love for Smoke.

Like a cat she watched the apportionment of the meager ration, and Smoke could see that she grudged McCan every munch of his jaws. Once, she distributed the ration. The first Smoke knew was a wild harangue of protest from McCan. Not to him alone, but to herself, had she given a smaller portion than to Smoke. After that, Smoke divided the meat himself. Caught in a small avalanche one morning after a night of snow, and swept a hundred yards down the mountain, they emerged half-stifled and unhurt, but McCan emerged without his pack in which was all the flour. A second and

larger snow-slide buried it beyond hope of recovery. After that, though the disaster had been through no fault of his, Labiskwee never looked at McCan, and Smoke knew it was because she dared not.

It was a morning, stark still, clear blue above, with white sun-dazzle on the snow. The way led up a long, wide slope of crust. They moved like weary ghosts in a dead world. No wind stirred in the stagnant, frigid calm. Far peaks, a hundred miles away, studding the backbone of the Rockies up and down, were as distinct as if no more than five miles away.

“Something is going to happen,” Labiskwee whispered. “Don’t you feel it?—here, there, everywhere? Everything is strange.”

“I feel a chill that is not of cold,” Smoke answered. “Nor is it of hunger.”

“It is in your head, your heart,” she agreed excitedly. “That is the way I feel it.”

“It is not of my senses,” Smoke diagnosed. “I sense something, from without, that is tingling me with ice; it is a chill of my nerves.”

A quarter of an hour later they paused for breath.

“I can no longer see the far peaks,” Smoke said.

“The air is getting thick and heavy,” said Labiskwee. “It is hard to breathe.”

“There be three suns,” McCan muttered hoarsely, reeling as he clung to his staff for support.

There was a mock sun on either side of the real sun.

“There are five,” said Labiskwee; and as they looked, new suns formed and flashed before their eyes.

“By Heaven, the sky is filled with suns beyant all countin’,” McCan cried in fear.

Which was true, for look where they would, half the circle of the sky dazzled and blazed with new suns forming.

McCan yelped sharply with surprise and pain. “I’m stung!” he cried out, then yelped again.

Then Labiskwee cried out, and Smoke felt a prickling stab on his cheek so cold that it burned like acid. It reminded him of swimming in the salt sea and being stung by the poisonous filaments of Portuguese men-of-war. The sensations were so similar that he automatically brushed his cheek to rid it of the stinging substance that was not there.

And then a shot rang out, strangely muffled. Down the slope were the young men, standing on their skees, and one after another opened fire.

“Spread out!” Smoke commanded. “And climb for it! We’re almost to the top. They’re a quarter of a mile below, and that means a couple of

miles the start of them on the down-going of the other side.”

With faces prickling and stinging from invisible atmospheric stabs, the three scattered widely on the snow surface and toiled upward. The muffled reports of the rifles were weird to their ears.

“Thank the Lord,” Smoke panted to Labiskwee, “that four of them are muskets, and only one a Winchester. Besides, all these suns spoil their aim. They are fooled. They haven’t come within a hundred feet of us.”

“It shows my father’s temper,” she said. “They have orders to kill.”

“How strange you talk,” Smoke said. “Your voice sounds far away.”

“Cover your mouth,” Labiskwee cried suddenly. “And do not talk. I know what it is. Cover your mouth with your sleeve, thus, and do not talk.”

McCan fell first, and struggled wearily to his feet. And after that all fell repeatedly ere they reached the summit. Their wills exceeded their muscles, they knew not why, save that their bodies were oppressed by a numbness and heaviness of movement. From the crest, looking back, they saw the young men stumbling and falling on the upward climb.

“They will never get here,” Labiskwee said. “It is the white death. I know it, though I have never seen it. I have heard the old men talk. Soon will come a mist—unlike any mist or fog or frost-smoke you ever saw. Few have seen it and lived.”

McCan gasped and strangled.

“Keep your mouth covered,” Smoke commanded.

A pervasive flashing of light from all about them drew Smoke’s eyes upward to the many suns. They were shimmering and veiling. The air was filled with microscopic fire-glints. The near peaks were being blotted out by the weird mist; the young men, resolutely struggling nearer, were being engulfed in it. McCan had sunk down, squatting, on his skees, his mouth and eyes covered by his arms.

“Come on, make a start,” Smoke ordered.

“I can’t move,” McCan moaned.

His doubled body set up a swaying motion. Smoke went toward him slowly, scarcely able to will movement through the lethargy that weighed his flesh. He noted that his brain was clear. It was only the body that was afflicted.

“Let him be,” Labiskwee muttered harshly.

But Smoke persisted, dragging the Irishman to his feet and facing him down the long slope they must go. Then he started him with a shove,

and McCan, braking and steering with his staff, shot into the sheen of diamond-dust and disappeared.

Smoke looked at Labiskwee, who smiled, though it was all she could do to keep from sinking down. He nodded for her to push off, but she came near to him, and side by side, a dozen feet apart, they flew down through the stinging thickness of cold fire.

Brake as he would, Smoke's heavier body carried him past her, and he dashed on alone, a long way, at tremendous speed that did not slacken till he came out on a level, crusted plateau. Here he braked till Labiskwee overtook him, and they went on, again side by side, with diminishing speed which finally ceased. The lethargy had grown more pronounced. The wildest effort of will could move them no more than at a snail's pace. They passed McCan, again crouched down on his skees, and Smoke roused him with his staff in passing.

"Now we must stop," Labiskwee whispered painfully, "or we will die. We must cover up—so the old men said."

She did not delay to untie knots, but began cutting her pack-lashings. Smoke cut his, and, with a last look at the fiery death-mist and the mockery of suns, they covered themselves over with the sleeping-furs and crouched in each other's arms. They felt a body stumble over them and fall, then heard feeble whimpering and blaspheming drowned in a violent coughing fit, and knew it was McCan who huddled against them as he wrapped his robe about him.

Their own lung-strangling began, and they were racked and torn by a dry cough, spasmodic and uncontrollable. Smoke noted his temperature rising in a fever, and Labiskwee suffered similarly. Hour after hour the coughing spells increased in frequency and violence, and not till late afternoon was the worst reached. After that the mend came slowly, and between spells they dozed in exhaustion.

McCan, however, steadily coughed worse, and from his groans and howls they knew he was in delirium. Once, Smoke made as if to throw the robes back, but Labiskwee clung to him tightly.

"No," she begged. "It is death to uncover now. Bury your face here, against my parka, and breathe gently and do no talking—see, the way I am doing."

They dozed on through the darkness, though the decreasing fits of coughing of one invariably aroused the other. It was after midnight, Smoke

judged, when McCan coughed his last. After that he emitted low and bestial moanings that never ceased.

Smoke awoke with lips touching his lips. He lay partly in Labiskwee's arms, his head pillowed on her breast. Her voice was cheerful and usual. The muffled sound of it had vanished.

"It is day," she said, lifting the edge of the robes a trifle. "See, O my lover. It is day; we have lived through; and we no longer cough. Let us look at the world, though I could stay here thus forever and always. This last hour has been sweet. I have been awake, and I have been loving you."

"I do not hear McCan," Smoke said. "And what has become of the young men that they have not found us?"

He threw back the robes and saw a normal and solitary sun in the sky. A gentle breeze was blowing, crisp with frost and hinting of warmer days to come. All the world was natural again. McCan lay on his back, his unwashed face, swarthy from camp-smoke, frozen hard as marble. The sight did not affect Labiskwee.

"Look!" she cried. "A snow bird! It is a good sign."

There was no evidence of the young men. Either they had died on the other side of the divide or they had turned back.

There was so little food that they dared not eat a tithe of what they needed, nor a hundredth part of what they desired, and in the days that followed, wandering through the lone mountain-land, the sharp sting of life grew blunted and the wandering merged half into a dream. Smoke would become abruptly conscious, to find himself staring at the never-ending hated snow-peaks, his senseless babble still ringing in his ears. And the next he would know, after seeming centuries, was that again he was roused to the sound of his own maunderings. Labiskwee, too, was light-headed most of the time. In the main their efforts were unreasoned, automatic. And ever they worked toward the west, and ever they were baffled and thrust north or south by snow-peaks and impassable ranges.

“There is no way south,” Labiskwee said. “The old men know. West, only west, is the way.”

The young men no longer pursued, but famine crowded on the trail.

Came a day when it turned cold, and a thick snow, that was not snow but frost crystals of the size of grains of sand, began to fall. All day and night it fell, and for three days and nights it continued to fall. It was impossible to travel until it crusted under the spring sun, so they lay in their furs and rested, and ate less because they rested. So small was the ration they permitted that it gave no appeasement to the hunger pang that was much of the stomach, but more of the brain. And Labiskwee, delirious, maddened by the taste of her tiny portion, sobbing and mumbling, yelping sharp little animal cries of joy, fell upon the next day's portion and crammed it into her mouth.

Then it was given to Smoke to see a wonderful thing. The food between her teeth roused her to consciousness. She spat it out, and with a great anger struck herself with her clenched fist on the offending mouth.

It was given to Smoke to see many wonderful things in the days yet to come. After the long snow-fall came on a great wind that drove the dry and tiny frost-particles as sand is driven in a sand-storm. All through the night the sand-frost drove by, and in the full light of a clear and wind-blown day, Smoke looked with swimming eyes and reeling brain upon what he took to be the vision of a dream. All about towered great peaks and small, lone sentinels and groups and councils of mighty Titans. And from the tip of every peak, swaying, undulating, flaring out broadly against the azure sky, streamed gigantic snow-banners, miles in length, milky and nebulous, ever waving lights and shadows and flashing silver from the sun.

“Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord,” Smoke chanted, as he gazed upon these dusts of snow wind-driven into sky-scarves of shimmering silken light.

And still he gazed, and still the bannered peaks did not vanish, and still he considered that he dreamed, until Labiskwee sat up among the furs.

“I dream, Labiskwee,” he said. “Look. Do you, too, dream within my dream?”

“It is no dream,” she replied. “This have the old men told me. And after this will blow the warm winds, and we shall live and win west.”

Smoke shot a snow-bird, and they divided it. Once, in a valley where willows budded standing in the snow, he shot a snowshoe rabbit. Another time he got a lean, white weasel. This much of meat they encountered, and no more, though, once, half-mile high and veering toward the west and the Yukon, they saw a wild-duck wedge drive by.

“It is summer in the lower valleys,” said Labiskwee. “Soon it will be summer here.”

Labiskwee’s face had grown thin, but the bright, large eyes were brighter and larger, and when she looked at him she was transfigured by a wild, unearthly beauty.

The days lengthened, and the snow began to sink. Each day the crust thawed, each night it froze again; and they were afoot early and late, being compelled to camp and rest during the midday hours of thaw when the crust could not bear their weight. When Smoke grew snow-blind, Labiskwee towed him on a thong tied to her waist. And when she was so blinded, she towed behind a thong to his waist. And starving, in a deeper dream, they struggled on through an awakening land bare of any life save their own.

Exhausted as he was, Smoke grew almost to fear sleep, so fearful and bitter were the visions of that mad, twilight land. Always were they of food, and always was the food, at his lips, snatched away by the malign deviser of dreams. He gave dinners to his comrades of the old San Francisco days, himself, with whetting appetite and jealous eye, directing the arrangements, decorating the table with crimson-leafed runners of the autumn grape. The guests were dilatory, and while he greeted them and all sparkled with their latest cleverness, he was frantic with desire for the table. He stole to it, unobserved, and clutched a handful of black ripe olives, and turned to meet still another guest. And others surrounded him, and the laugh and play of wit went on, while all the time, hidden in his closed hand, was this madness of ripe olives.

He gave many such dinners, all with the same empty ending. He attended Gargantuan feasts, where multitudes fed on innumerable bullocks roasted whole, prying them out of smoldering pits and with sharp knives slicing great strips of meat from the steaming carcasses. He stood, with mouth agape, beneath long rows of turkeys which white-aproned shopmen sold. And everybody bought save Smoke, mouth still agape, chained by a leadenness of movement to the pavement. A boy again, he sat with spoon poised high above great bowls of bread and milk. He pursued shy heifers

through upland pastures and centuries of torment in vain effort to steal from them their milk, and in noisome dungeons he fought with rats for scraps and refuse. There was no food that was not a madness to him, and he wandered through vast stables, where fat horses stood in mile-long rows of stalls, and sought but never found the bran-bins from which they fed.

Once, only, he dreamed to advantage. Famishing, shipwrecked or marooned, he fought with the big Pacific surf for rock-clinging mussels, and carried them up the sands to the dry flotsam of the spring tides. Of this he built a fire, and among the coals he laid his precious trove. He watched the steam jet forth and the locked shells pop apart, exposing the salmon-colored meat. Cooked to a turn—he knew it; and this time there was no intruding presence to whisk the meal away. At last—so he dreamed within the dream—the dream would come true. This time he would eat. Yet in his certitude he doubted, and he was steeled for the inevitable shift of vision until the salmon-colored meat, hot and savory, was in his mouth. His teeth closed upon it. He ate! The miracle had happened! The shock aroused him. He awoke in the dark, lying on his back, and heard himself mumbling little piggish squeals and grunts of joy. His jaws were moving, and between his teeth meat was crunching. He did not move, and soon small fingers felt about his lips, and between them was inserted a tiny sliver of meat. And in that he would eat no more, rather than that he was angry, Labiskwee cried and in his arms sobbed herself to sleep. But he lay on awake, marveling at the love and the wonder of woman.

The time came when the last food was gone. The high peaks receded, the divides became lower, and the way opened promisingly to the west. But their reserves of strength were gone, and, without food, the time quickly followed when they lay down at night and in the morning did not arise. Smoke weakly gained his feet, collapsed, and on hands and knees crawled about the building of a fire. But try as she would Labiskwee sank back each time in an extremity of weakness. And Smoke sank down beside her, a wan sneer on his face for the automatism that had made him struggle for an unneeded fire. There was nothing to cook, and the day was warm. A gentle breeze sighed in the spruce-trees, and from everywhere, under the disappearing snow, came the trickling music of unseen streamlets.

Labiskwee lay in a stupor, her breathing so imperceptible that often Smoke thought her dead. In the afternoon the chattering of a squirrel aroused him. Dragging the heavy rifle, he wallowed through the crust that

had become slush. He crept on hands and knees, or stood upright and fell forward in the direction of the squirrel that chattered its wrath and fled slowly and tantalizingly before him. He had not the strength for a quick shot, and the squirrel was never still. At times Smoke sprawled in the wet snow-melt and cried out of weakness. Other times the flame of his life flickered, and blackness smote him. How long he lay in the last faint he did not know, but he came to, shivering in the chill of evening, his wet clothing frozen to the re-forming crust. The squirrel was gone, and after a weary struggle he won back to the side of Labiskwee. So profound was his weakness that he lay like a dead man through the night, nor did dreams disturb him.

The sun was in the sky, the same squirrel chattering through the trees, when Labiskwee's hand on Smoke's cheek awakened him.

"Put your hand on my heart, lover," she said, her voice clear but faint and very far away. "My heart is my love, and you hold it in your hand."

A long time seemed to go by, ere she spoke again.

"Remember always, there is no way south. That is well known to the Caribou People. West—that is the way—and you are almost there—and you will make it."

And Smoke drowsed in the numbness that is near to death, until once more she aroused him.

"Put your lips on mine," she said. "I will die so."

"We will die together, sweetheart," was his answer.

"No." A feeble flutter of her hand checked him, and so thin was her voice that scarcely did he hear it, yet did he hear all of it. Her hand fumbled and groped in the hood of her parka, and she drew forth a pouch that she placed in his hand. "And now your lips, my lover. Your lips on my lips, and your hand on my heart."

And in that long kiss darkness came upon him again, and when again he was conscious he knew that he was alone and he knew that he was to die. He was wearily glad that he was to die.

He found his hand resting on the pouch. With an inward smile at the curiosity that made him pull the draw-string, he opened it. Out poured a tiny flood of food. There was no particle of it that he did not recognize, all stolen by Labiskwee from Labiskwee—bread-fragments saved far back in the days ere McCan lost the flour; strips and strings of caribou-meat, partly gnawed; crumbles of suet; the hind-leg of the snowshoe rabbit, untouched;

the hind-leg and part of the fore-leg of the white weasel; the wing dented still by her reluctant teeth, and the leg of the snow-bird—pitiful remnants, tragic renunciations, crucifixions of life, morsels stolen from her terrible hunger by her incredible love.

With maniacal laughter Smoke flung it all out on the hardening snow-crust and went back into the blackness.

He dreamed. The Yukon ran dry. In its bed, among muddy pools of water and ice-scoured rocks, he wandered, picking up fat nugget-gold. The weight of it grew to be a burden to him, till he discovered that it was good to eat. And greedily he ate. After all, of what worth was gold that men should prize it so, save that it was good to eat?

He awoke to another sun. His brain was strangely clear. No longer did his eyesight blur. The familiar palpitation that had vexed him through all his frame was gone. The juices of his body seemed to sing, as if the spring had entered in. Blessed well-being had come to him. He turned to awaken Labiskwee, and saw, and remembered. He looked for the food flung out on the snow. It was gone. And he knew that in delirium and dream it had been the Yukon nugget-gold. In delirium and dream he had taken heart of life from the life sacrifice of Labiskwee, who had put her heart in his hand and opened his eyes to woman and wonder.

He was surprised at the ease of his movements, astounded that he was able to drag her fur-wrapped body to the exposed thawed gravel-bank, which he undermined with the ax and caved upon her.

Three days, with no further food, he fought west. In the mid third day he fell beneath a lone spruce beside a wide stream that ran open and which he knew must be the Klondike. Ere blackness conquered him, he unlashed his pack, said good-by to the bright world, and rolled himself in the robes.

Chirping, sleepy noises awoke him. The long twilight was on. Above him, among the spruce boughs, were ptarmigan. Hunger bit him into instant action, though the action was infinitely slow. Five minutes passed before he was able to get his rifle to his shoulder, and a second five minutes passed ere he dared, lying on his back and aiming straight upward, to pull the trigger. It was a clean miss. No bird fell, but no bird flew. They ruffled and rustled stupidly and drowsily. His shoulder pained him. A second shot was spoiled by the involuntary wince he made as he pulled trigger. Somewhere,

in the last three days, though he had no recollection how, he must have fallen and injured it.

The ptarmigan had not flown. He doubled and redoubled the robe that had covered him, and humped it in the hollow between his right arm and his side. Resting the butt of the rifle on the fur, he fired again, and a bird fell. He clutched it greedily and found that he had shot most of the meat out of it. The large-caliber bullet had left little else than a mess of mangled feathers. Still the ptarmigan did not fly, and he decided that it was heads or nothing. He fired only at heads. He reloaded and reloaded the magazine. He missed; he hit; and the stupid ptarmigan, that were loath to fly, fell upon him in a rain of food—lives disrupted that his life might feed and live. There had been nine of them, and in the end he clipped the head of the ninth, and lay and laughed and wept he knew not why.

The first he ate raw. Then he rested and slept, while his life assimilated the life of it. In the darkness he awoke, hungry, with strength to build a fire. And until early dawn he cooked and ate, crunching the bones to powder between his long-idle teeth. He slept, awoke in the darkness of another night, and slept again to another sun.

He noted with surprise that the fire crackled with fresh fuel and that a blackened coffee-pot steamed on the edge of the coals. Beside the fire, within arm's length, sat Shorty, smoking a brown-paper cigarette and intently watching him. Smoke's lips moved, but a throat paralysis seemed to come upon him, while his chest was suffused with the menace of tears. He reached out his hand for the cigarette and drew the smoke deep into his lungs again and again.

"I have not smoked for a long time," he said at last, in a low calm voice. "For a very long time."

"Nor eaten, from your looks," Shorty added gruffly.

Smoke nodded and waved his hand at the ptarmigan feathers that lay all about.

"Not until recently," he returned. "Do you know, I'd like a cup of coffee. It will taste strange. Also flapjacks and a strip of bacon."

"And beans?" Shorty tempted.

"They would taste heavenly. I find I am quite hungry again."

While the one cooked and the other ate, they told briefly what had happened to them in the days since their separation.

“The Klondike was breakin’ up,” Shorty concluded his recital, “an’ we just had to wait for open water. Two polin’ boats, six other men—you know ’em all, an’ crackerjacks—an’ all kinds of outfit. An’ we’ve sure been a-comin’—polin’, linin’ up, and portagin’. But the falls’ll stick ’em a solid week. That’s where I left ’em a-cuttin’ a trail over the tops of the bluffs for the boats. I just had a sure natural hunch to keep a-comin’. So I fills a pack with grub an’ starts. I knew I’d find you a-driftin’ an’ all in.”

Smoke nodded, and put forth his hand in a silent grip. “Well, let’s get started,” he said.

“Started hell!” Shorty exploded. “We stay right here an’ rest you up an’ feed you up for a couple of days.”

Smoke shook his head.

“If you could just see yourself,” Shorty protested.

And what he saw was not nice. Smoke’s face, wherever the skin showed, was black and purple and scabbed from repeated frost-bite. The cheeks were fallen in, so that, despite the covering of beard, the upper rows of teeth ridged the shrunken flesh. Across the forehead and about the deep-sunk eyes, the skin was stretched drum-tight, while the scraggly beard, that should have been golden, was singed by fire and filthy with camp-smoke.

“Better pack up,” Smoke said. “I’m going on.”

“But you’re feeble as a kid baby. You can’t hike. What’s the rush?”

“Shorty, I am going after the biggest thing in the Klondike, and I can’t wait. That’s all. Start packing. It’s the biggest thing in the world. It’s bigger than lakes of gold and mountains of gold, bigger than adventure, and meat-eating, and bear-killing.”

Shorty sat with bulging eyes. “In the name of the Lord, what is it?” he queried huskily. “Or are you just simple loco?”

“No, I’m all right. Perhaps a fellow has to stop eating in order to see things. At any rate, I have seen things I never dreamed were in the world. I know what a woman is,—now.”

Shorty’s mouth opened, and about the lips and in the light of the eyes was the whimsical advertisement of the sneer forthcoming.

“Don’t, please,” Smoke said gently. “You don’t know. I do.”

Shorty gulped and changed his thought. “Huh! I don’t need no hunch to guess *her* name. The rest of ’em has gone up to the drainin’ of Surprise Lake, but Joy Gastell allowed she wouldn’t go. She’s stickin’ around Dawson, waitin’ to see if I come back with you. An’ she sure swears, if I

don't, she'll sell her holdin's an' hire a army of gun-fighters, an' go into the Caribou Country an' knock the everlastin' stuffin' outa old Snass an' his whole gang. An' if you'll hold your horses a couple of shakes, I reckon I'll get packed up an' ready to hike along with you."

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