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Shorty sat down at the table. By the time the expected knock came at the door Smoke was facing him across the table, and before each was a plate containing three hot fried eggs.

Wild Water Charley, a strapping young giant, entered and abook hands. "Set down an' have a bite, Wild Water," Shorty invited.

CHAPTER XX. Four Years Old.

SMOKE wrote the document, wherein Wild Water agreed to take every egg delivered to him at \$10 per egg.

Wild Water paused with uplifted pen as he was about to sign. "Hold on," he said.

Smoke inserted the word "good" in the contract, and Wild Water suddenly signed, received the trial two dozen in a tin pulled on his mittens and opened the door.

"You're lucky at finding eggs than me," Wild Water admitted. "Now, how many eggs have you got now—say how much did I tote up the bill?"

"Forty thousand dollars!" Wild Water bellowed. "You said there was only something like 900 eggs. It's a stick-up, I won't stand for it!"

"In the safe, all but that six I have all thawed and ready for you any time you sing out."

"I don't want 'em for myself," Wild Water breathed in a still lower voice. "Shir' 'em up and present 'em to Miss Arral there."

"I'll attend to it personally myself," Slavovitch assured him.

"An' don't forget—compliments of me," Wild Water concluded, relaxing his detaining clutch on the proprietor's shoulder.

Pretty Lucille Arral was gazing forlornly at the strip of breakfast bacon and the flamed mashed potatoes on her plate when Slavovitch placed before her two shirred eggs.

"Compliments of Mr. Wild Water," they at the next table behind him say.

"Do you want 'em ninety-six hundred an' twenty dollars' worth?" Shorty queried.

And with sidelong glances they saw Lucille Arral hesitate, almost push the dish from her, then surrender to its lure.

"I'll take them eggs," Wild Water said to Smoke. "The contract holds. Did you see her? Did you see her? She almost smiled. I know her. It's all fired. Two more eggs tomorrow an' she'll forgive an' make up. If she wasn't here I'd shake hands, Smoke, I'm that grateful. You ain't a robber; you're a philanthropist."

"Smells all right," he said. "But it looks all wrong," Wild Water contended. "An' how can it smell when the smell's frozen along with the rest of it? Wait a minute."

He put the two halves into a frying pan and placed the letter on the front lid of the hot stove. Then the three men, with distended, quivering nostrils, waited in silence. Slowly an unmistakable odor began to drift through the room.

"Throw it out!" Smoke cried, gasping. "What's the good?" asked Wild Water. "We've got to sample the rest."

"Not in this cabin," Smoke coughed and conquered a quain. "Chop them open, and we can test by looking at them. Throw it out, Shorty! Throw it out! And leave the door open!"

Box after box was opened: egg after egg, choson at random, was chopped in two, and every egg carried the same message of hopeless, irremediable decay.

"I won't ask you to eat 'em, Shorty," Wild Water jeered. "An', if you don't mind, I can't get outa here too quick. My contract called for good eggs. If you'll loan me a sled an' team I'll haul them good ones away before they get contaminated."

Smoke helped in loading the sled. "Say, how long you been holdin' that corner?" was Wild Water's parting gibe.

Smoke made no reply, and, with one glance at his partner, proceeded to fling the soap boxes out into the snow.

"Say, Shorty, how much did you say you paid for that three thousand?" Smoke queried gently.

"Eight dollars. Don't talk to me. I can offer as well as you. We lose seventeen thousand on the flatter, if anybody should ride up on a dog sled waitin' for the first egg to smell."

Smoke pondered a few minutes, then again broke silence. "Say, Shorty, \$40,000 gold weighs 200 pounds. Wild Water borrowed our sled and team to haul away his eggs. He came up the hill without a sled. Those two sacks of dust in his coat pockets weighed about twenty pounds each. The understanding was cash on delivery. He brought enough dust to pay for the good eggs. He never expected to pay for those three thousand. He knew they were bad. Now, how did he know they were bad? What do you make of it anyway?"

"Huh! That ain't nothin'." A child could answer it. We lose seventeen thousand, Wild Water was seventeen thousand. Then eggs of Gante-reux's was Wild Water's all the time. Anything else you're curious to know?"

"Yes. Why in the name of common sense didn't you find out whether those eggs were good before you paid for them?"

"Just as easy as the first question. Wild Water swung the bunko game timed to seconds. I hadn't no time to examine them eggs. I had to hustle to get 'em here for delivery. An' now, Smoke, lemme ask you one civil question. What did you say was the party's name that put this egg corner idea into your head?"

Smoke was casting about to begin the preparation for supper when Colonel Rowie knocked at the door, handed Smoke a letter and went on to his own cabin.

"Did you see his face?" Shorty raved. "He was almost bustin' to keep it straight. It's the big ha-ha for you an' me, Smoke. We won't never dast show our faces again in Dawson."

The letter was from Wild Water, and Smoke read it aloud: "Dear Smoke and Shorty—I write to ask, with compliments of the season, your presence at a supper tonight at Slavovitch's joint. Miss Arral will be there, and so will Gautereux. Him and me was partners down at Circle five years ago. He is all right and is going to be beat man. About them eggs. They come into the country four years back. They was all bad when they come in. They was bad when they left California. They always was bad. They stopped at Carliou on winter, and one winter at Nutlik, and last winter at Forty Mile, where they were sold for storage. And this winter I guess they stop at Dawson. Don't keep them in a hot room, Lucille says to say you and her and me has sure made some excitement in Dawson. And I say the drinks is on you, and that goes."

"Respectfully your friend, W. W."

CHAPTER XXI. Captured by Indians.

SMOKE, sitting on the edge of a sleeping robe, examined the feet of a dog he had rolled, snarling, on its back in the snow.

"We've got to rest over tomorrow 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, sure feet an' all. Now, how even seen them white Indians anyway? Nothin' but hearsay. An' how can an Indian be white? Smoke, we just gotta travel tomorrow."

"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 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. An' he said himself he never seen any white Indians. That was Anton's yarn. An' Anton kicked the bucket two years before you an' me come to Alaska. But I'll take a look tomorrow. An' maybe I might pick up a moose."

Smoke spent the morning in camp sewing dog moccasins. At noon he cooked a meal for two and began to look for Shorty's return. An hour later he was strapped on his snowshoes 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 snowshoes 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.

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 his 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 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 the snow on the bank above the stream and trudged on with his captors.

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 pemican, which the Indians added to their packs. From this camp a trail of many snowshoes led off—Shorty's captors, was Smoke's conclusion—and before darkness fell he succeeded in making out the tracks Shorty's narrower snowshoes had left.

Always in the days that followed they pointed north, and always the trail, turning and twisting through a jumble of upstanding peaks, trended north.

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. 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 flat 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, they came upon the site of a large camp, recently abandoned. Glancing as he went by it, Smoke estimated 400 or 500 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 snowshoes and in their moccasins struck a swifter pace.

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-green 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.

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, jokes and jokes thrust back again, the snapping snarl of wolf dogs, the scolding of snags, laughter, the whimpering of children and wailing of infants, all the pandemonium of a camp of nervous, primitive wilderness folk.

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. "None," he answered. "I'm a Indian. I'm learnin' not to show surprise. When did they catch you?"

"Next day after you left." "Huh! Well, I'm doin' fine, thank you most to death. This is the bachelor's camp. An' these are the bachelors. They're glad to meet you, Smoke. Set down an' dry your moccasins, an' I'll cook up some grub. You'll have to come to it, for looks as if we'll be with these folks a long time. They's another white man here. Got caught six years ago. 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."

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 devoured strips of hot meat Shorty talked.

"This is a sure peach of a pickle, Smoke. 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 blooded 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 no 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 lonesome. 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. "Why, he's the top gezer. He's the Scotcher. He's gettin' old, an' he's sure asleep now, but he'll see you tomorrow an' show you clear as print what a meanly shrimp you are on his stompin' grounds. These grounds be long to him. You got to get that into your noodle. They ain't never been explored nor nothin', an' they're bish, an' he won't let you forget it. He's got about 20,000 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! A hundred thousand of good runnin' meat in the herd an' ten thousand wolves an' cats a-followin' an' livin' off the stragglers an' the leavin's. The herd's movin' to the east, an' we'll be followin' 'em any day now."

"Here comes Whiskers, lookin' like he's goin' somewhere," Shorty whispered. It was morning, and the bachelors were squawking over a breakfast of caribou meat. 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. Bushy whiskers, yellowish gray and stained by camp smoke, concealed most of the face, but failed wholly to conceal the gaunt, almost cadaverous, cheeks.

"How do you do?" the man said, slipping a mitten and holding out his bare hand. "My name is Snass."

"Mine's Bellew," Smoke returned, feeling peculiarly disconcerted as he gazed into the keen, searching black eyes.

"Getting plenty to eat, I see. 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 the 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 writ 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 then, recollecting himself, remarked casually over his shoulder:

"I'll see you later, Mr. Bellew. The caribou are movin' east, and I'm going ahead to pick out a location. You'll all come on tomorrow."

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. 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 banging sagittas.

Segregated in the heart of the camp, Smoke came upon what was evidently Snass' 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 torn, 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



And for a long moment they gazed at each other.

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 a slender, delicate neck, lifted her head, the rose face blond 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 she slipped a mitten and extended her hand.

"How do you do?" she murmured gravely, with a queer, delightful accent, her voice as silvery as the furs she wore.

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 was French and English and a little Indian too. Her father was a great man in the Hudson Bay company. B-r-r-r! It is cold. 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. These were real wild Indians, the ones Anton had encountered and escaped from long years before. But strive as he would Smoke could get no clew to Snass' history in the days before he came to live in the northern wilds. Educated he was, yet in all the intervening years what had happened in the world he knew not. Nor did he show desire to know.

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.

CHAPTER XXII. The Love of Labiskwee.

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. 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 Luskuw, 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:

(Continued next Saturday.) The household helps your wife needs can be found quickly through the Journal Want Ads.