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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 crag. They moved like weary ghosts in a dead world. "Something is going to happen," Labaskwee 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 gasped excitedly. "That is the way I feel it."

A quarter of an hour later they paused for breath. "The air is getting thick and heavy," said Labaskwee. "It is hard to breathe." "There are three suns," McCan muttered hoarsely, reeling as he clung to his staff for support. "They saw a mock sun on either side of the real sun."

"There are five," said Labaskwee, and as they looked new suns formed and flashed before their eyes. "By heaven, the sky is filled with suns beyond all counting," 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 Labaskwee cried out, and Smoke felt a prickling stab on his cheek so cold that it burned like acid."

lapsed and on hands and knees crawled about the building of a fire. But, try as she would, Labaskwee 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.

CHAPTER XXV. Wonder of Women.

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 walloped 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.

So profound was his weakness that he lay like dead through the night, nor did dreams disturb him. The sun was in the sky, the same squirrel chattering through the trees, when Labaskwee'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."

"I 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 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



Three Days, With No Further Food, He Fought West.

curiosity that made him pull the drawing 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 Labaskwee from Labaskwee—bread fragments saved far back, strips and strings of caribou meat, partly gnawed; crumbies of suet; a hind leg of the snowshoe rabbit, untouched; a hind leg and part of a fore leg of the white weasel; a wing, dented still by her reluctant teeth, and a leg of the snowbird—pitiful remnants, tragic recollections, 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 man should prize it so, save that it was good to eat?

He was awoke to another sun. His brain was stung 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 it. Blessed well being had come to him. He turned to awaken Labaskwee and saw and remembered. He looked for the food hung 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 Labaskwee, 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 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 that he knew must be the Klondike. Ere blackness conquered him he unlashed his pack, said goodby 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 bows 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 ached. A second shot was spoiled by the involuntary wince he made as he pulled trigger.

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 chuckled it greedily and found that he had shot most of the meat from 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—flesh disrupted that his life might feed and live.

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, awake 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 coffeepot 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; also flapjacks and a strip of bacon." 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, "and 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're sure here a-comin'-polin' land up, an' 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 know I'd find you a-driffin' an' all in."

Smoke nodded. "Well, let's get started," he said. "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 simply 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 whitest 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 bunch 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 steekin' 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' go into the caribou country an' knock the over-lashtin' stuffs 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."

THE EXP. SYNOPSIS. Christopher Bellew, a tenderfoot, starts for the Klondike in a gold rush and pluckily works at the back breaking toil of packing freight. He meets a beautiful girl, Joy Gastell, descends his own party, and he and Shorty, a new acquaintance, hire out to two wealthy prospectors. Joy has nicknamed him "Smoke." Smoke and Shorty befriend a man named Breck and nearly perish in attempting to cross Lake LeBarge because of the untrustworthiness of their employers. Smoke and Shorty take command by force and get through to Dawson City, where they are discharged. On Breck's tip they stampede for Squaw creek.

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