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SMOKE BELLEW

By
JACK
LONDON

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Syndicate

SYNOPSIS.

Christopher Bellew, a tenderfoot, starts for the Klondike in a gold rush and plucks by works at the back breaking lot of smoking freight.

He meets a beautiful girl, Joy Gastell, deserters his own party, and he and Shorty, a new acquaintance, hire out to two wealthy prospectors. Joy has nicknamed him "Smoke."

Smoke and Shorty befriended a man named Brock and nearly perish in attempting to cross Lake LeBerge because of the weakness of their employers.

Smoke and Shorty take command by force and get through to Dawson City, where they are discharged. On Brock's tip they stampede for Squaw creek.

They overtake Joy Gastell and her father. To help the Sea Lion crowd Joy treacherously leads them away from Squaw creek.

Smoke saves the girl's feet from freezing. He and Shorty by mistake jump a glacier's claim and lose it. Then Smoke leads Surprise lake, the bottom of which is covered with gold.

Smoke is shot at, witnesses the murder of a miner by the unknown marksmen and is arrested for murder himself.

Smoke goes to Surprise lake. He falls into a crevasse in a glacier, and a miner, Carson, makes heroic efforts to rescue him.

Smoke cuts a rope to save Carson, falls himself and is caught in a pocket below, from which he is rescued by Carson and Joy.

Smoke and Shorty find a tribe of starving Indians, and Smoke goes to Mucius to secure food and help.

Smoke forces Cutlass George, an Indian, to assist by striding him up with a rope. Smoke and Shorty find several dead men in the snow.

They discover Laura Sibley's party dying of scurvy and start heroic nursing measures. One man, Wentworth, is mysteriously free from the trouble.

They discover Wentworth's secret hoard of potatoes and save many lives. Lucille Arral wants Smoke to corner the egg market and discipline her lover, Wild Water.

Wild Water wants eggs for Miss Arral. He agrees to pay \$10 per egg if two dozen sold him win her smile.

By a clever ruse Wild Water unloads bad eggs on Smoke and Shorty and they lose \$17,000. They are captured by Indians.

Smags, a Scotchman, is their chief. No white man is permitted to escape. Labiskwee, daughter of Smags, admires Smoke.

Smoke, Shorty and Dan McCan, another prisoner, plan to escape, and Shorty gets away. Labiskwee loves Smoke and wants to go with him.

McCan joins them and steals food. Labiskwee tries to kill McCan. They are nearly strangled by the white death and are freed upon by pursuing Indians.

McCan dies. Labiskwee starves herself to death to save Smoke, who finally gets back to civilization, appreciating Labiskwee's great sacrifice and more in love with Joy Gastell than ever.

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 his light he saw Labiskwee, her hands at the man'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.

"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.

McCan sat up, whimpering and snarling.

"Where did you get it?" Smoke demanded.

"Feel around his body," Labiskwee said.

CHAPTER XXIV.

Like Weary Ghosts in a Dead World.

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 carbon 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 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 drew at the culprit, only to be caught in Smoke's arms, where she surrendered herself, sobbing with the furthest of her rage.

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

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.

"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."

A quarter of an hour later they paused for breath.

"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.

They saw 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 beyond all counting," McCan cried in fear.

Which was true, for, look where they would, half the circle of the sky was

stled and blazed with new suns forming.

McCan yelled sharply with surprise and pain. "I'm stung!" he cried out then yelled again.

Then Labiskwee cried out, and Smoke felt a pricking stab on his cheek so cold that it burned like acid.

And then a shot rang out, strangely muffled. Down the slope were the young men, standing on their skis, and one after another they 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 on the other side."

"Thank the Lord," Smoke panted to Labiskwee, "all these suns spoil their aim."

"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 don't talk. I know what it is. Cover your mouth with your sleeve, thus, and do not talk."

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 struggled.

"Keep your mouth covered," Smoke commanded. McCan had sunk down, squatting on his skis, his mouth and eyes covered by his arms.

"Come on, make a start," Smoke ordered.

"I can't move," McCan moaned.

"Let him be," Labiskwee muttered harshly.

But Smoke persisted, dragging the man to his feet and facing him down the long slope they must go. Then he started him with a shove, and McCan, bracing 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 sliding 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 slinging 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 skis, 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 mock cry 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 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.

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, oh, 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."

"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 snowbird! 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 had turned back.

There was so little food that they dared not eat a tithe of what they needed, 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 manderings. Labiskwee, too, was light headed most of the time.

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. 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 until at least because they rested. So small was the ration, they permitted that it gave no appearance 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, 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 snowfall came on a great wind that drove the dry and tiny frost particles as sand is driven in a sandstorm. 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 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.

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 snowbird, 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.

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

The days lengthened, and the snow began to sink. Each day the crust thawed, each night it froze again, and they were afire 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 was towed by a thong to his waist. And, starting, in a deeper dream, they struggled on through an awakening land bare of any life save their own.

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.

(Continued next week)

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