



The Wit of Porportuk

EL-SOO HAD BEEN A MISSION GIRL. Her mother died when she was very small and one of the **Sisters**, Sister Alberta, had taken her to live with them at Holy Cross Mission. El-Soo's Indian blood was not mixed with any other race. Never had the Sisters found a girl so easy to teach and at the same time so full of life.

El-Soo was quick to learn what the Sisters taught her. She had a good mind. But it was her character which was so unusual; she was like fire, a living flame of life. Her personality combined will, sweetness, and daring. Her father was a chief, and his blood was in her. The act of obeying others, in the mind of El-Soo, was a weighing of what was just or unjust. She had a passion for justice in her actions toward others. Perhaps for this reason she did very well in her study of numbers.

But she was excellent in other studies, too. She learned to read and write English as no girl in the mission had ever learned to do. She led the girls in singing and she was a fine artist. Had she been born into more favorable circumstances, she would have found her life's work in literature or music.

Instead, she was El-Soo, daughter of Klakee-Nah, a chief. And she lived in the Holy Cross Mission where there were no artists, but only Sisters who were interested in the life of the soul and the heaven that lay beyond the skies.

The years passed. She was eight years old when she entered the mission. When she was 16, and the Sisters were planning to send her to the United States to complete her education, a man of her own tribe arrived at Holy Cross and talked with her. El-Soo found it difficult to like him. He was dirty. He was rough in his manners and his hair had never been combed. He looked at her unfavorably and refused to sit down.

"Your brother is dead," he said.

El-Soo was not particularly shocked. She remembered little of her brother. "Your father is an old man, and alone," the messenger continued. "His house is large and empty. He would like to hear your voice and to look at you."

She remembered her father Klakee-Nah. He was the chief of the village, the friend of the missionaries and the traders, a large man like a giant, with kindly eyes and a masterful manner.

"Tell him that I will come," El-Soo answered.

Although the Sisters were saddened, El-Soo made plans to return. All talking with her was without effect. There was much arguing and weeping. Sister Alberta even revealed to her the plan to send her to the United States. El-Soo understood the promise of such a plan but she shook her head. She was thinking of other things. In her mind she saw the curve of the Yukon River at Tanana Station, with the St. George Mission on one side and the store on the other. Between them was the Indian village and a large log house where lived an old man cared for by slaves.

All who lived on the Yukon banks for two thousand miles knew the large log house, the old man, and the slaves. The Sisters also knew about the house with its unending feasting and its fun. So there was weeping at Holy Cross when El-Soo departed.

There was a great cleaning of the large house when El-Soo arrived. Klakee-Nah objected to the changes made by his young daughter. But finally, he **borrowed** a thousand dollars from old Porportuk, the richest Indian on the Yukon. El-Soo re-created the large house. She gave it a new magnificence, while Klakee-Nah continued to welcome his guests with much feasting and merrymaking.

All of this was unusual for a Yukon Indian, but Klakee-Nah was an unusual Indian. Because he was a chief and had a lot of money, he was able to do all this. In the early days, he had held a power over his people and he had profitable business with the white trading companies. Later, with Porportuk, he had found gold on the Koyukuk River. Klakee-Nah was by training and nature a chief. Porportuk was a business man, and Porportuk bought the chief's share of the gold mine. Porportuk was content to work and increase his wealth. Klakee-Nah returned to his large house and proceeded to spend. Porportuk was known as the richest Indian in Alaska. Klakee-Nah was known as the one most like the white man. Porportuk was a moneylender. Klakee-Nah was a fighter and a feaster, happy with wine and song.

El-Soo learned about the large house and its manner of life as easily as she had learned about Holy Cross Mission and its manner of life. She did not try to change her father and lead him toward God. It is true, she tried to prevent him from drinking too much liquor, but that was to guard his health.

The door of the large house was always open in welcome. People came and went. The house was never quiet. The great main room was always ringing with song. At tables sat men from around the world and chiefs from distant tribes. There were Englishmen, traders, officers of the great companies, sailing men from the sea, and hunters and miners from many nations.

El-Soo enjoyed this varied companionship. She could speak

English as well as she could her native language, and she sang English songs. She knew the Indian customs as well. She knew how to wear the customary Indian dress of the daughter of a chief for special occasions. But usually, she dressed as white women dress. She had learned to sew at the mission and combined this skill with her own art. She wore her clothes like a white woman and she made clothes that could be thus worn.

In her manner, she was as unusual as her father, and the rank she occupied was as special as his. She was the one Indian woman who was socially equal with the several white women at Tanana Station. She was the one Indian woman white men asked to marry.

El-Soo was beautiful, not as white women are beautiful, and not as Indian women are beautiful. It was the flame of her, that did not depend upon the features of her face, that was her beauty. In figure and feature, she was an Indian type. She had black hair and golden brown skin; her eyes were black and bright. The bones of her face were high, but not too broad; her lips were thin. But over all and through all poured the flame of her. There was something that was fire and that was the soul of her. It lay warm in her eyes; it colored her cheeks; it curled in her lips.

And El-Soo had wit. She never used it to hurt others, yet it was quick to search out forgivable weakness. The joy in her mind played like a flame over all near her, and from all near her arose answering joy. Yet she was never the center of attention. This she would not permit. The large house was her father's; and through it, to the end, moved his figure. He was the master of the feast and the giver of the law. It is true, as strength left him, that she accepted his responsibilities. But in appearance he still ruled.

And always through the large house moved the worried figure of Porportuk who was paying for it all. It was not that he really paid. He figured how much was due him and year by year he took control of the properties of Klakee-Nah. Porportuk once decided to speak to El-Soo of the wasteful way of life in the large house. It was after he had taken the last of Klakee-Nah's wealth. But he never spoke of it again. El-Soo,

like her father, was proud and was not concerned with money.

Porportuk continued to lend them money and they continued to spend it. El-Soo had decided upon one thing: her father should die as he had lived. For him there should be no passing from high to low, no lessening of the feast. When there was famine in the old times, the Indians came in hunger to the large house and went away content. When there was famine and no money, money was borrowed from Porportuk and the Indians again went away content. During this time, old Porportuk watched and waited. With every loan of money, he looked at El-Soo as if he were possessing her. He felt old desires arising again within him.

But El-Soo was not interested in old Porportuk. Nor was she interested in the white men who wanted to marry her. Because at Tanana Station was a young man, Akoon, of her own blood and tribe and village. He was strong and handsome to her eyes, and a great hunter. Because he had wandered far and much, he was also very poor. He had been to all the unknown places. He had journeyed to the United States; he had crossed the land to Hudson Bay and returned; and as a seal hunter he had sailed on a ship to Siberia.

When he returned from seeking gold in Klondike, he came to the large house to report to old Klakee-Nah on all of the world that he had seen. There he first saw El-Soo, who had returned three years before from the mission. After that, Akoon wandered no more. He refused wages of 20 dollars a day on the big steamboats. He hunted some and fished some, but never far from Tanana Station. He was at the large house often and for long times. And El-Soo measured him against many men and found him good. He sang songs to her and was full of joy. Soon all Tanana Station knew he loved her. And Porportuk just smiled and arranged loans of more money to continue the manner of life at the large house.

Then came the death table of Klakee-Nah. He sat at a feast with death in his throat that could not be washed away with wine. And there was laughing and joking and singing. There were no tears or sighs at that table. It was proper that Klakee-Nah should die as he had lived and

none knew this better than El-Soo. The old crowd was there. As in the old days three sailing men were there, recently returned from a long journey in the Arctic. At Klakee-Nah's back were four old men, all that remained of the slaves of his youth. With tear-filled eyes they attended to his needs. With shaking hands they filled his glass or struck him on the back when he coughed.

It was a wild night. As the hours passed and the fun laughed and roared louder, death moved more strongly in Klakee-Nah's throat.

Then it was that he sent for Porportuk. And Porportuk came in from the frost outside to look unfavorably upon the meat and wine on the table for which he had paid. But as he looked down the length of faces to the far end and saw the face of El-Soo, a light could be seen glowing in his eyes.

Place was made for him at Klakee-Nah's side, and a glass was put before him. Klakee-Nah, with his own hands, filled the glass.

"Drink!" he cried. "It is not good?"

And Porportuk's eyes watered as he nodded his head and enjoyed his drink.

"When, in your own house, have you had such drink?" Klakee-Nah demanded.

"I will not deny that the drink is good to this old throat of mine," Porportuk answered. Then he hesitated to find the words to complete the thought.

"But it costs too much!" Klakee-Nah roared, completing it for him.

Porportuk was angered by the laughing voices around the table. His eyes assumed an evil look. "We were boys together, of the same age," he said. "In your throat is death. I am still alive and strong."

A threatening murmur arose from the company. Klakee-Nah coughed and the old slaves hit him between the shoulders. He struggled for breath and waved his hand to quiet the threatening murmur.

"You have hated even the fire in your house because the wood cost too much!" he cried. "You have hated life. To live cost too much, and you have refused to pay the price. Your life has been like a cabin where the fire is dead and there are no blankets on the floor." He sig-

naled a slave to fill his glass, which he held high. "But I have lived. And I have been warm with life as you have never been warm. It is true, you shall live long. But the longest nights are the cold nights when a man trembles and lies without sleep. My nights have been short, but I have slept warm."

He emptied the glass. The shaking hand of a slave failed to catch it as it fell to the floor. Klakee-Nah sank back, watching the upturned glasses at the lips of the drinkers. His own lips were smiling slightly as the company expressed its pleasure at his words. At a sign, two slaves attempted to help him sit straight again. But they were weak, and the four old men shook as they helped him to move forward in his chair.

"But manner of life is not important tonight," he continued. "We have other business, Porportuk, you and I. I owe you money. How much is it?"

Porportuk searched in his pocket and brought forth a note. He drank from his glass and began. "There is a note of August 1889 for 300 dollars. The note of the next year is for 500 dollars. This note was included in the note of two months later for a thousand dollars. Then there is the note—"

"Don't speak of the many notes!" Klakee-Nah cried. "They make my head turn around. The whole thing! How much is it?"

Porportuk glanced at his papers. "15,967 dollars and 75 cents," he read carefully.

"Make it 16,000 dollars. Make it 16,000 dollars," Klakee-Nah said grandly. "Odd numbers were always a worry. And now—and it is for this that I have sent for you—write a new note for 16,000, which I shall sign. I have not thought about your price for lending me the money. Make it as large as you wish, and make it payable in the next world, when I shall meet you by the fire of the Great Father of all Indians. Then the note will be paid. This I promise you. It is the word of Klakee-Nah."

Porportuk looked puzzled. Loud laughing began and continued until it shook the room. Klakee-Nah raised his hands. "No," he cried. "It is not a joke. I speak honestly. It was for this purpose that I sent for you, Porportuk. Write the note."

"I have no business with the next world," Porportuk answered slowly.

"Do you not plan to meet me before the Great Father?" Klakee-Nah demanded. Then he added, "I shall surely be there."

"I have no business with the next world," Porportuk repeated.

The man who was near death looked at him with surprise.

"I know nothing of the next world," Porportuk explained. "I do business in this world."

Klakee-Nah understood immediately. "This is a result of sleeping in the cold at night," he laughed. He thought for a moment. Then he said, "It is in this world that you must be paid. There remains to me this house. Take it and the debt will be settled."

"It is an old house and not worth the money you owe me," Porportuk answered.

"There are my gold mines."

"They have never paid well," was the reply.

"There is my share in the steamboat *Koyukuk*. I own half of it."

"She is at the bottom of the Yukon River."

Klakee-Nah seemed surprised. "Oh, that is true. I forgot. It happened last spring when the ice melted." He thought for a while. The glasses went untasted, and all the company waited for his next words.

"Then it would seem I owe you a sum of money which I cannot pay...in this world?" Porportuk nodded and glanced toward the end of the table.

"Then it would seem that you, Porportuk, are not a good business man," Klakee-Nah said cleverly.

Porportuk answered in a firm voice. "No. There is something yet unmentioned."

"What!" cried Klakee-Nah. "Do I still have property? Name it, and it is yours, and the debt is no more."

"There it is." Porportuk pointed at El-Soo.

Klakee-Nah could not understand. He looked down the length of the table and wiped his eyes. Then he looked again.

"Your daughter, El-Soo. Her will I take and the debt is no more.

I will burn the note there in the fire.”

Klakee-Nah began to shake from laughing. “Ho! Ho! Ho! That is really a joke! And with your cold bed and daughters old enough to be the mother of El-Soo. Ho! Ho!” He began to cough and the old slaves struck him on the back. “Ho! Ho!” he began again, and started coughing.

Porportuk waited patiently, drinking from his glass and studying the double row of faces along the table. “It is no joke,” he said finally. “My speech is well meant.”

Klakee-Nah became quiet and looked at him. Then he reached for his glass, but could not touch it. A slave passed it to him. He threw the glass and the liquor into the face of Porportuk.

“Put him outside!” Klakee-Nah shouted to the waiting guests at the table who were straining like dogs in harness. “And roll him in the snow!”

The crowd rushed past him out the doors. He signaled to the slaves, and the four old men supported him on his feet as he met the returning company and greeted them for the last time with raised glass.

It did not take long to settle the affairs of Klakee-Nah. Tommy, the little Englishman who worked at the store, was asked by El-Soo to help. Nothing remained but debts. All the notes were held by Porportuk. All the properties had been given to Porportuk in return for borrowed money.

The winter passed. The debt owed to Porportuk remained unpaid. He saw El-Soo often and explained to her, as he had explained to her father, the manner in which the debt could be settled. Also, he brought with him old men of the tribe who told her that her father would not rest if the debt were not paid. One day, after such a discussion, El-Soo made a final announcement to Porportuk.

“I shall tell you two things,” she said. “First, I shall not be your wife. Will you remember that? Second, you shall be paid the last cent of the 16,000 dollars.”

“15,967 dollars and 75 cents,” Porportuk corrected.

“My father said 16,000 dollars,” was her reply. “You shall be paid.”

“How?”

“I know not how, but I shall discover how to do it. Now go, and trouble me no more. If you do,” she hesitated to find a proper threat. “If you do, I shall have you rolled in the snow again as soon as the first snow falls.”

This was still early in April. And a little later El-Soo announced a plan that surprised the country. News of the plan traveled up and down the Yukon and was carried from camp to camp. It was said that in June, when the fish began to swim up the river, El-Soo, daughter of Klakee-Nah, would sell herself to pay the debt owed to Porportuk. The attempts made to stop her were without success. The missionaries at St. George Mission argued with her, but she replied:

“Only the debts to God are settled in the next world. The debts of men are of this world, and in this world are they settled.”

Akoon talked with her, but she replied: “I do love you, Akoon. But honor is greater than love.”

Sister Alberta journeyed the many miles from Holy Cross Mission, on the first steamboat to sail after the ice had gone, but she had no better luck in changing El-Soo’s mind.

“My father wanders after death,” said El-Soo. “And he will continue to wander, with no peace, until the debt is paid. Then, and not until then, may he go to the house of the Great Father.”

“Do you believe this?” Sister Alberta asked.

“I do not know,” El-Soo answered. “It was my father’s belief.”

Sister Alberta shook her head in despair.

“Who knows if the things we believe are true?” El-Soo continued. “Why not? The next world to you may be heaven because you have believed in heaven. To my father the next world may be a large house where he will sit always at tables feasting with God.”

“And you?” Sister Alberta asked. “What is your next world?”

El-Soo hesitated for a moment. “I should like a little of both,” she said. “I should like to seek your face as well as the face of my father.”

The day of the sale arrived. Tanana Station was crowded with people. As was their custom, the tribes had gathered to await the com-

ing of the fish. During the time they were waiting, they danced and traded and talked. Then there was the ordinary gathering of white adventurers, traders and miners. In addition, a large number of white men had come because they were curious, or interested in the affair.

The fish were late coming up the river that year. This delay increased the interest. Then, on the day of the sale, the situation was made worse by Akoon. He made a public announcement that the man who bought El-Soo would immediately die. He held a gun in his hand to indicate the manner of death. El-Soo was angered by his action, but he refused to speak with her.

The first fish was caught at ten o'clock in the evening, and at midnight the sale began. It occurred on the top of the high bank beside the Yukon. A great crowd gathered around the table and the two chairs that stood near the edge of the bank. At the front of the crowd were many white men and several chiefs. There, too, stood Akoon. Tommy, at El-Soo's request, managed the sale, but she made the opening speech and described what was to be sold. She was wearing her native dress, the dress of a chief's daughter. She stood on a chair so that she might be seen by everyone.

"Who will buy a wife?" she asked. "Look at me. I am twenty years old and a maid. I will be a good wife to the man who buys me. If he is a white man, I shall dress in the fashion of white women. If he is an Indian, I shall dress as an Indian. I can make my own clothes, and sew, and wash. I was taught for eight years to do these things at Holy Cross Mission. I can read and write English, and I know music. I shall be sold to the one who offers the most money, and for him I will prepare a paper saying that he has bought me. I forgot to say that I can sing very well, and that I have never been sick in my life. I weigh 132 pounds. My father is dead and I have no other family. Who wants me?"

She looked over the crowd and stepped down. At Tommy's request she stood upon the chair again, while he mounted the second chair and started the bidding.

Surrounding El-Soo stood the four old slaves of her father. In the front of the crowd were several Indian kings from the upper Yukon.

Beside them, sick and weak, were two old miners. Beyond, a half-dozen French-Canadian travelers stood in a group. An Indian from the lands near the coast stood alone. From afar came the cries of the wild birds on their nesting grounds. Other small birds flew overhead singing.

The bidding began slowly. A stranger from Sitka, who had arrived only half an hour before, offered one hundred dollars in a confident voice. He looked surprised when Akoon turned threateningly toward him with the gun. The bidding was slow. An Indian bid 150 dollars, and after some time a gambler raised the bid to 200. El-Soo was saddened; her pride was hurt.

There was a murmur from the crowd as Porportuk forced his way to the front. "Five hundred dollars!" he bid in a loud voice, then looked about him proudly to see the effect.

He hoped to use his great wealth to stop all bidding. But one of the travelers, looking at El-Soo with shining eyes, raised the bid a hundred.

"700!" Porportuk replied immediately.

And equally fast came the reply of "800" from the traveler.

Porportuk tried again. "1,200!" he shouted.

With a look of sadness, the traveler said no more. There was no further bidding. Tommy tried to excite the crowd, but could not raise the bid.

El-Soo spoke to Porportuk. "It would be wise, Porportuk, for you to consider your bid. Have you forgotten what I told you: that I would never marry you!"

"It is a public sale," he answered. "I shall buy you and have a paper to show that you belong to me. I have offered 1,200 dollars. Your price is cheap."

"Too cheap!" Tommy cried. "Even if I am managing the sale that does not prevent me from bidding. I will pay 1,300 dollars."

"1,400," was Porportuk's reply.

"I will buy you to be my—my cousin," Tommy whispered to El-Soo. Then he called aloud, "1,500!"

At 2,000 one of the Indian kings started bidding and Tommy stopped.

For the third time Porportuk tried to win by using his wealth. He raised the price by 500 dollars. But the Indian king's pride was affected. And he answered with a raise of another 500 dollars.

The price for El-Soo was now three thousand dollars. Porportuk made it 3,500 and was surprised when the Indian king raised it a thousand dollars. Porportuk again raised it five hundred and again showed surprise when the king raised the price a thousand more.

Porportuk was angered. His pride was hurt. His strength had been questioned, because to him, strength was wealth. He could not appear to be weak before the eyes of the crowd. El-Soo was not important to him now. The savings gained from the cold nights of all his years were ready to be spent, if necessary. El-Soo's price was now six thousand. He made it seven thousand. And then, in thousand-dollar bids, as fast as they could be uttered, her price increased. At 14,000 dollars the two men stopped to breathe.

Then the unexpected happened. In the brief pause that followed, the **gambler**, who had added his money to that of several of his friends, bid 16,000 dollars.

"17,000 dollars," Porportuk said weakly.

"18,000," said the king.

Porportuk gathered his strength. "20,000."

The gambler stopped bidding. The Indian king raised the price a thousand, and Porportuk answered with another raise. As they bid, Akoon turned from one to the other, half threateningly, half curiously. He seemed to be wondering what manner of man it was that it would be necessary to kill. When the king prepared to make his next bid, Akoon moved closer toward him. The king first took his gun in his hand, then said:

"23,000 dollars."

"24,000," said Porportuk. He smiled proudly, for he was certain that he had finally defeated the king. The latter moved close to El-Soo. He studied her carefully for a long time.

"And five hundred," he said.

"25,000," came Porportuk's raise.

The king looked once more and shook his head. He looked again and then said, "And five hundred."

"26,000," Porportuk shouted.

The king shook his head and refused to look at Tommy who was urging him to bid more. At the same time Akoon had moved close to Porportuk. El-Soo's quick eye noted this. While Tommy begged the Indian king for another bid, she bent and spoke in a low voice in the ear of a slave. The slave went to Akoon and spoke in a low voice in his ear. Akoon made no sign that he had heard, although El-Soo looked at him anxiously.

"Sold!" Tommy's voice could be heard saying. "To Porportuk, for 26,000 dollars."

Porportuk glanced nervously at Akoon. All eyes were upon Akoon, but he did nothing.

"Let the scales be brought," said El-Soo.

"I shall make payment at my house," said Porportuk.

"Let the scales be brought," El-Soo repeated. "Payment shall be made here where all can see."

So the gold scales were brought, while Porportuk went away. He returned with a man at his heels, on whose shoulders was a weight of gold dust in moose-skin bags. Also, at Porportuk's back walked another man with a gun, who looked only at Akoon.

"Here are the notes for the debt of 15,967 dollars and 75 cents," said Porportuk.

El-Soo received the notes in her hands and said to Tommy, "Let the debt be figured as 16,000 dollars."

"There remains 10,000 dollars to be paid in gold," Tommy said.

Porportuk nodded and opened the mouths of the bags. El-Soo, standing on the bank of the river, threw the pieces of paper into the Yukon. The weighing began, but then stopped.

"The scales must be set at 17 dollars an ounce," Porportuk had said to Tommy.

"At 16 dollars," El-Soo said quickly.

"It is the custom to figure gold at 17 dollars for each ounce,"

Porportuk replied. "And this is a business affair."

El-Soo laughed. "That is a new custom," she said. "It began in April. Last year, and the years before, it was 16 dollars an ounce. When my father's debt was made it was 16 dollars for each ounce of gold. Therefore, you shall pay for me at 16 and not at 17." Porportuk agreed and allowed the weighing to proceed.

"Weigh it in three piles, Tommy" she said. "A thousand dollars here, three thousand here, and here six thousand."

It was slow work and while the weighing proceeded, everyone wondered what Akoon would do.

"He is waiting until the money is paid," one said. And this opinion was repeated and was accepted. They waited for what Akoon would do when the money was paid. And Porportuk's man with the gun waited and looked at Akoon.

The weighing was finished, and the gold dust lay on the table in three dark yellow piles. "There is a debt of my father to the company for three thousand dollars," said El-Soo. "Take it, Tommy, for the company. And here are four old men, Tommy. You know them. And here is one thousand dollars. Take it, and see that the old men are never hungry and never without tobacco."

Tommy put the gold into separate bags. Six thousand dollars remained on the table. El-Soo pushed her hand into the pile. With a sudden turn, she threw the dust into the Yukon in a golden shower. Porportuk's seized her hand as she reached a second time into the pile.

"It is mine," she said calmly. Porportuk let her go, but he bit his lip in anger as she continued to throw the gold into the river until none remained.

The crowd looked only at Akoon. The gun held by Porportuk's man pointed directly at him. But Akoon did nothing.

"Prepare a paper for the sale," Porportuk demanded.

And Tommy wrote a paper saying that the woman El-Soo belonged to the man Porportuk. El-Soo signed the paper, and Porportuk folded it and put it in his pocket. Suddenly his eyes flamed and in sudden speech he said to El-Soo.

“But it was not your father’s debt,” he said. “What I paid was the price for you. Your sale is business of today and not of last year and the years before. The ounces I paid for you will buy flour worth 17 dollars today, and not 16. I have lost a dollar on each ounce. I have lost 625 dollars.”

El-Soo thought for a moment, and saw the error she had made. She smiled, and then she laughed.

“You are right,” she laughed. “I made a mistake. But it is too late. You have paid, and the gold is gone. You did not think quickly. It is your loss. Your wit is slow these days, Porportuk. You are getting old.”

He did not answer. He glanced anxiously at Akoon and was reassured. His lips tightened and his face had a cruel look. “Come,” he said, “we will go to my house.”

“Do you remember the two things I told you before?” El-Soo asked, making no movement to accompany him.

“My head would be full of the things women say, if I remember them,” he answered.

“I told you that you would be paid,” El-Soo said carefully. “And I told you that I would never be your wife.”

“But that was before the paper was written.” Porportuk fingered the paper inside his pocket. “I have bought you before all the world. You belong to me. You will not deny that you belong to me.”

“I belong to you,” El-Soo said steadily.

“I own you.”

“You own me.”

Porportuk’s voice rose slightly. “As a dog, I own you.”

“As a dog, you own me,” El-Soo continued calmly. “But, Porportuk, you forget the thing I told you. Had any other man bought me, I should have been a good wife to that man. Such was my will. But my will with you was that I should never be your wife. Therefore, I am your dog.”

Porportuk knew that he must be careful and he decided to act in a firm manner. “Then I speak to you not as El-Soo but as a dog,” he said, “and I tell you to come with me.” He reached for her arm, but she held him away from her.

“Not so fast, Porportuk. You buy a dog. The dog runs away. It is your loss. I am your dog. What if I run away?”

“As the owner of the dog, I shall beat you—”

“When you catch me?”

“When I catch you.”

“Then catch me.”

Quickly he reached for her, but she ran from him. She laughed as she circled around the table. “Catch her!” Porportuk commanded the Indian with the gun, who stood near her. But as the Indian stretched forth his arm to her the king struck him under the ear. The gun fell to the ground. Then was Akoon’s opportunity. His eyes shone, but he did nothing.

Porportuk was an old man, but his cold nights had kept him in possession of his activity. He did not circle the table. He leaped across suddenly, over the top of the table. El-Soo was surprised. She jumped back with a cry of alarm. Porportuk would have caught her had it not been for Tommy. Tommy’s leg went out. Porportuk fell forward on the ground. El-Soo got her start.

“Then catch me,” she laughed over her shoulder as she ran away.

She ran lightly and easily, but Porportuk ran like a wild man. He ran faster than she did. In his youth he had been the quickest of all the young men. But El-Soo ran from side to side to escape his grasp.

With noise and laughing the great crowd scattered to see the hunt. It led through the Indian camp. Always circling, El-Soo and Porportuk appeared and disappeared among the tents. El-Soo seemed to balance herself against the air with her arms, now on one side, now on the other. And Porportuk, always a leap behind, or a leap to this side or to that, struggled after her.

They crossed the open ground beyond the camp and disappeared in the forest. Tanana Station waited for their reappearance. Long and without success they waited.

During this time Akoon ate and slept. He waited much of the time where the steamboat landed, not hearing the words which were said about him because he did nothing. A day later Porportuk returned. He

was tired and bad-tempered. He spoke to no one but Akoon, and tried to quarrel with him. But Akoon walked away. Porportuk did not waste time. He hired a half a dozen young men and went into the forest with them.

The next day the steamboat *Seattle* stopped at the shore. When she departed again Akoon was employed on the boat. Not many hours afterward, when it was his duty to guide the steamboat, he saw a small boat coming from the shore. There was only one person in it. He studied it carefully and slowed the big boat's speed.

The captain came in.

"What is the trouble?" he demanded. "The water is good here."

Akoon made no answer. He saw a larger boat leaving the bank and in it were several persons. He turned the wheel of the steamboat toward the smaller boat.

The captain was angered. "It is only a woman," he protested.

Akoon did not reply. He looked only at the woman and the boat following her.

"You will drive the steamboat on the shore," the captain protested, seizing the wheel.

But Akoon applied his strength to the wheel and looked directly into the captain's eyes. The captain slowly released the wheel.

Akoon held the *Seattle* steady until he saw the woman's fingers grasp the forward rail. Then he signaled for full speed ahead. The large boat was very near, but the space between it and the steamboat was widening.

The woman laughed and leaned over the rail. "Then catch me, Porportuk!" she cried.

Akoon left the steamboat at Fort Yukon. He purchased a small boat and went up the Porcupine River. And with him went El-Soo. It was a difficult journey, but Akoon had traveled it before. When they came to the head waters of the Porcupine they left the boat and went on foot across the Rocky Mountains.

Akoon greatly liked to walk behind El-Soo and watch her movement. There was a music in it that he loved. And especially he loved

the well-rounded legs and the small moccasined feet that never tired.

"You are light as air," he said, looking up at her. "It is no labor for you to walk. You almost float, so lightly do your feet rise and fall."

And El-Soo bent and kissed Akoon.

"When we reach the Mackenzie River we will not delay," Akoon said later. "We will go south before the winter catches us. We will go to the sun lands where there is no snow. But we will return. I have seen much of the world, and there is no land like Alaska. There is no sun like our sun, and the snow is good after the long summer."

"And you will learn to read," said El-Soo.

And Akoon said, "I will surely learn to read."

But there was a delay when they reached the Mackenzie. They joined a group of Mackenzie Indians. When they were hunting, there was an accident in which Akoon was shot. His right arm was broken and his shoulder was hurt. Akoon knew something about medicine, as did El-Soo. Akoon lay by the fire to rest so the bones would become strong again.

It was then that Porportuk, with his six young men, arrived. Akoon was still weak and he appealed to the Mackenzies. But Porportuk made his demands and the Mackenzies did not know how to settle the problem.

Porportuk wanted to seize El-Soo, but this they would not permit. Judgment must be given. Because it was an affair of man and woman, the council of the old men was gathered. They had been selected so that judgment might not be given by the young men, who were warm of heart.

The old men sat in a circle about the fire. Their faces were lean and old and they breathed heavily. The smoke was not good for them. Occasionally they struck at the insects that flew into the warmth of the fire. After such effort they coughed painfully. Some of them coughed blood. One of them sat a little apart, with head bent forward, and blood flowed slowly from his mouth. They were like dead men; their time was short. It was a judgment of the dead.

"And I paid for her a heavy price," Porportuk concluded. "Such

a price you have never seen. Sell all that is yours. Sell your spears and guns, sell your furs, sell your tents and boats and dogs, sell everything, and you will not have a thousand dollars. Yet I gave for the woman, El-Soo, 26 times the price of all your spears and guns, your furs and your tents and boats and dogs. It was a heavy price.”

The old men nodded, although they wondered that any woman should be worth such a price.

The one from whose mouth blood flowed wiped his lips. “Is it true?” he asked each of Porportuk’s six young men. And each answered that it was true.

“Is it true?” he asked El-Soo, and she answered, “It is true.”

“But Porportuk has not told that he is an old man,” Akoon said, “and that he has daughters older than El-Soo.”

“It is true, Porportuk is an old man,” said El-Soo.

“It is for Porportuk to measure the strength of his age,” said he on whose mouth were drops of blood. “We are old men. Behold! Age is never so old as youth would measure it.”

And the circle of old men nodded their agreement, and coughed.

“I told him that I would never be his wife,” said El-Soo.

“Yet you took from him 26 times the value of all that we possess?” asked a one-eyed old man.

El-Soo was silent.

“Is it true?” His one eye stared at her.

“It is true,” she said.

“But I will run away again,” she cried a moment later. “Always will I run away.”

“That is for Porportuk to consider,” said another of the old men. “It is for us to consider the judgment.”

“What price did you pay for her?” was demanded of Akoon.

“No price did I pay for her,” he answered. “She was above price. I did not measure her in gold dust, nor in dogs, and tents and furs.”

The old men talked together. “These old men are like ice,” Akoon said in English. “I will not listen to their judgment, Porportuk. If you take El-Soo, I will surely kill you.”

The old men stopped talking and looked at him uneasily. "We do not know the language you speak," one said.

"He said that he would kill me," Porportuk told them. "So it would be well to take his gun from him, and to have some of your young men sit by him, so he may not harm me. He is a young man, and what are broken bones to youth!"

Akoon, lying helpless, had gun and knife taken from him and beside each of his shoulders sat young men of the Mackenzies. The one-eyed old man stood up. "We are surprised at the price paid for one mere woman," he began, "but the price is no concern of ours. We are here to give judgment and judgment we give. We have no doubt. It is known to all that Porportuk paid a heavy price for the woman El-Soo. Therefore does the woman El-Soo belong to Porportuk and none other." He sat down heavily and coughed. The old men nodded and coughed.

"I will kill you," Akoon cried in English.

Porportuk smiled and stood up. "You have given true judgment," he said to the council, "and my young men will give you much tobacco. Now let the woman be brought to me."

Akoon bit his lip. The young men took El-Soo by the arms. She did not struggle and was led to Porportuk.

"Sit there at my feet until I have spoken," he commanded. He paused a moment. "It is true," he said, "I am an old man. Yet can I understand the ways of youth. The fire has not all gone out of me. Yet I am no longer young, nor am I about to run on these old legs of mine through all the years that remain to me. El-Soo can run fast and well. This I know, for I have seen and run after her. It is not good that a wife should run so fast. I paid for her a heavy price, yet she runs away from me. Akoon paid no price at all, yet she runs to him.

"When I came among you people of the Mackenzie, I was of one opinion. As I listened in the council and thought of the speed of the legs of El-Soo, I had many different opinions. Now I am of one opinion again, but it is a different one from the one I brought to the council. Let me tell you my opinion. When a dog runs away once from a master, it will run away again. It does not matter how many times it is

brought home, each time it will run away again. When we have such dogs we sell them. El-Soo is like a dog that runs away. I will sell her. Is there any man of the council that will buy?"

The old men coughed and remained silent.

"Akoon would buy," Porportuk continued, "but he has no money. So I give El-Soo to him, as he said, without price. Even now will I give her to him."

Reaching down, he took El-Soo by the hand and led her across the space to where Akoon lay on his back.

"She has a bad habit, Akoon," he said, seating her at Akoon's feet. "As she has run away from me in the past, in the days to come she may run away from you. But there is no need to fear that she will ever run away, Akoon. I shall see to that. Never will she run away from you. You have the promise of Porportuk. She has great wit. I know, for often I have felt its bite. Yet I will show my wit for once. And by my wit I will secure her to you, Akoon."

Bending over, Porportuk crossed El-Soo's feet. Then, before his purpose could be guessed, he raised his gun and shot her through both feet. As Akoon struggled to rise against the weight of the young men, there was heard the sound of his broken bone, rebroken.

"It is just," said the old men, one to another.

El-Soo made no sound. She sat and looked at her destroyed feet, on which she would never walk again.

"My legs are strong, El-Soo," Akoon said. "But never will they carry me away from you."

El-Soo looked at him, and for the first time in all the time he had known her, Akoon saw tears in her eyes.

"Is it just?" Porportuk asked and stood laughing as he prepared to depart.

"It is just," the old men said. And they continued sitting silently.