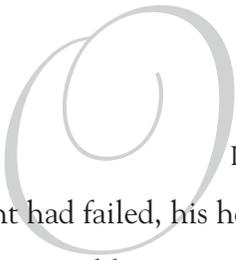




## The Law of Life



LD KOSKOOSH LISTENED GREEDILY. Although his sight had failed, his hearing remained good. The slightest sound was recognized by a mind yet active behind the aged forehead. Ah! That was Sit-cum-ha shouting curses at the dogs as she beat them into the harnesses. Sit-cum-ha was his daughter's daughter, but she was too busy to waste a thought upon her old grandfather, sitting alone there in the snow. Camp must be broken. The long trail waited while the short day refused to delay. Life called her, and the duties of life, not death. And he was very close to death now.

The thought frightened the old man for the moment. He stretched forth a shaking hand which wandered over the small pile of dry wood beside him. Reassured that it was indeed there, his hand returned to the shelter of his old, worn furs. He again began to listen. He heard

the noise of half-frozen animal skins being moved. He knew that even then the chief's moose-skin tent was being packed. The chief was his son, leader of the tribesmen, and a mighty hunter. As the women worked, his voice rose, exclaiming at their slowness. Old Koskoosh strained his ears. It was the last time he would hear that voice. There went Geehow's tent! And Tusken's! Seven, eight, nine; only the medicine man's could yet be standing. There! They were at work upon it now. He could hear the medicine man struggling loudly as he piled it on the sled. A child cried and a woman calmed it with gentle singing. Little Koo-tee, the old man thought. That child was always weeping, and it was sickly. It would die soon, perhaps, and they would burn a hole through the frozen ground and pile rocks above to keep the wolves away. And what difference would it make? A few years at best, and as many an empty stomach as a full one. And in the end, death waited, ever-hungry and hungriest of them all.

What was that? Oh, the men binding the sleds together and drawing tight the ropes. He listened, he who would listen no more. The whips whistled among the dogs. Hear them **howl!** How they hated the work and the trail through the snow! They had started! Sled after sled moved slowly away into the silent forest. They were gone. They had passed out of his life, and he faced the last bitter hour alone. No. The step of a moccasin broke the snow's surface. A man stood beside him; upon his head a hand rested gently. His son was good to do this thing. He remembered other old men whose sons had not waited after the tribe had gone. But his son had. The old man's thoughts wandered away into the past, until the young man's voice returned him to the present.

"It is well with you?" he asked.

And the old man answered, "It is well."

"There is wood beside you," the younger man continued, "and the fire burns bright. The morning is gray, and the cold has lessened. It will snow presently. Even now it is snowing."

"Yes, even now is it snowing."

"The tribesmen hurry. Their loads are heavy and their stomachs empty with lack of feasting. The trail ahead is long and they travel fast.

I go now. It is well?"

"It is well. I am as a last year's leaf, hanging lightly on a branch. When the first wind blows, I fall. My voice has become like an old woman's. My eyes no longer show me the way of my feet, and my feet are heavy, and I am tired. It is well."

He bowed his head in contentment until the last noise of the moccasin on the snow died away. He knew his son was beyond recall. Then his hand moved out from the furs to touch the wood. It alone stood between him and what lay beyond the death that opened before him. Now the measure of his life was a handful of sticks. One by one they would go to feed the fire, and just so, step by step, death would come closer to him. When the last stick had given all of its heat, the frost would begin to gather strength. First his feet would yield, then his hands; and the lack of feeling would travel, slowly, to his body. His head would fall forward upon his knees, and he would rest. It was easy. All men must die.

He did not murmur. It was the law of life, and it was just. He had been born close to the earth and close to the earth had he lived. Its law was not new to him. It was the law of all flesh. Nature was not kindly to the flesh. She had no concern for that single thing called the individual. Her interest lay in the race of man as a whole. This was the deepest thought that old Koskoosh's uneducated mind could master. But he grasped this idea firmly. He saw its truth displayed everywhere. The awakening of life in a tree, the bursting greenness of its branches, the fall of the yellow leaf—in this alone was told the whole history. But one task nature did give the individual. Did he not perform it, he died. Did he perform it, it was all the same—he died. Nature did not care; there were plenty who would obey. It was only the need that this duty be obeyed, not the man who obeyed it, which lived and lived always. The tribe of Koskoosh was very old. The old men he had known when he was a boy had known old men before them. Therefore, it was true that the tribe lived, that it represented the obeying of all its members, whose final resting places were unremembered. They were not important; they were chapters in life's story. They had passed away like

clouds from a summer sky. He also would pass away. Nature did not care. To life she gave one task and one law. To continue the race was the task of life; its law was death. A young girl was a good creature to look upon, full-breasted and strong, with a lightness to her step and a shine in her eyes. But her task was yet before her. The light in her eyes brightened and her step quickened. She laughed with the young men, then she turned away. She passed on to them her own unrest. And she grew fairer and yet fairer to look upon. Finally, some hunter took her to his tent to cook and work for him and to become the mother of his children. And with the coming of her children her beauty left her. She dragged her legs and arms when she walked. Her eyes lost their brightness. Then only the little ones found joy in the old, lined face. Her task was done. In a little while, in the first famine or in the first long trail, she would be left, as he had been left, in the snow, with a little pile of wood. Such was the law.

He placed a stick carefully upon the fire and returned to his thoughts. It was the same everywhere, with all things. The insects disappeared with the first frost. When age settled upon the rabbit it became slow and heavy and could no longer run faster than its enemies. Even the big bear grew old and blind, to be dragged down at last by a small group of barking sled dogs. He remembered how he had left his own father along the Klondike River one winter. It was the winter before the missionary came with his books and his box of medicines. Many times Koskoosh had recalled with pleasure the taste of those medicines. The one called "painkiller" was especially good. But now his mouth refused to moisten. He remembered that the missionary had become a worry to them. He brought no meat into the camp, and he ate much. The hunters did not like this. Then when they were near the Mayo, he became ill. And afterward, the dogs pushed the stones away and fought for his bones.

Koskoosh placed another stick on the fire and let his thoughts travel deeper into the past. There was the time of the great famine. He had lost his mother in that famine. In the summer the usual plentiful catch of fish had failed, and the tribe looked forward to the winter and

the coming of the **caribou**. Then the winter came, but with it there were no caribou. Never had the like been known, not even in the lives of the old men. The rabbits had not produced any young and the dogs were skin and bone. And through the long darkness the children wept and died. So did the women and the old men. Not one in ten lived to meet the sun when it returned in the spring. That was a famine!

But he had seen times of plenty, too, when the meat spoiled before it could be eaten. Even the dogs grew fat and were worth nothing from eating too much. In these times they let the animals and birds go unkilled and the tents were filled with newly born children. Then it was that the men remembered old quarrels and crossed to the south and to the west to kill ancient enemies. He remembered, when a boy, during a time of plenty, when he saw a moose pulled down by the wolves. Zing-ha lay with him in the snow and watched. Zing-ha was his friend who later became the best of hunters. One day he fell through an air hole on the frozen Yukon River. They found him a month later, frozen to the ice where he had attempted to climb out.

Zing-ha and he had gone out that day to play at hunting, in the manner of their fathers. Near a creek they discovered the fresh track of a moose and with it the tracks of many wolves. "An old one," Zing-ha said. "It is an old one who cannot travel as fast as the others. The wolves have separated him from his brothers, and they will never leave him." And it was so. It was their way. By day and by night, never resting, biting at his heels, they would stay with him to the end. How Zing-ha and he had felt the desire to see blood! The finish would be a sight to remember!

Eagerly, they started up the trail. Even he, Koskoosh, who was not a good tracker, could have followed it blind, it was so wide. They were not far behind the hunt, reading its awful story at every step. Now they saw where the moose had stopped to face his attackers. On every side the snow had been stamped heavily. In the middle were the deep footprints of the moose. All about, everywhere, were the lighter footmarks of the wolves. Some had moved to one side and rested while their brothers tried to seize the moose. The full-stretched impressions

of their bodies in the snow were as perfect as though they had been made the moment before. One wolf had been caught in a wild dash at the moose and had died under its heavy stamping. A few bones remained as witness.

The two boys stopped again at a second stand. Here the great animal had fought with despair. As the snow indicated, he had been dragged down twice. And twice he shook off his enemies and gained his footing once more. He had finished his task long before, but nevertheless, life was dear to him. Zing-ha said it was a strange thing for a moose once down to struggle free again. But this one certainly had done so. The medicine man would see signs and wonders in this when they told him.

Then they came to the place where the moose had tried to climb the riverbank and go into the woods. But his enemies had attacked from behind, until he leaped high and then fell back upon them, crushing two deep into the snow. It was clear that the kill was near, because the two dead wolves had been left untouched by their brothers. The trail was red with blood now, and the distance between tracks of the great beast had become shorter and shorter. Then they heard the first sounds of the battle—the quick bark of the wolves which spoke of teeth tearing flesh. On hands and knees Zing-ha and Koskoosh made their way through the snow. Together they pushed aside the low branches of a young pine tree and looked forth. It was the end that they saw.

The picture, like all of youth's memories, was still strong with him. His eyes now watched the end acted again as clearly as in that earlier time. Koskoosh was surprised at this, because in the days which followed, he had done many great deeds. He had been a leader of men and his name had become a curse in the mouths of his enemies.

For a long time he recalled the days of his youth, until the fire grew cold and the frost bit deeper. He placed two sticks in the fire this time. Then he figured how much life was left by the amount of wood that remained in the pile. If Sit-cum-ha had remembered her grandfather, and gathered a larger armful, his hours would have been longer. It would have been easy. But she was always a selfish child. She had

not honored her ancestors from the time the Beaver, son of the son of Zing-ha, first looked at her. Well, what did it matter? Had he not done the same in his own quick youth? For a while he listened to the silent forest. Perhaps the heart of his son might soften. Then he would return with the dogs to take his old father with the tribe to where the caribou ran thick and the fat hung heavy upon them.

He strained his ears. There was not a sound to be heard. Nothing. He alone took breath in the middle of the great stillness. It was very lonely. Wait! What was that? His body suddenly felt cold. A familiar cry broke the silent air, and it was close to him. Then his darkened eyes again saw the old moose—the bloody sides, the torn legs, the great branching horns, fighting to the last. He saw the flashing forms of gray, the bright eyes, the dripping tongues and the sharp teeth. And he saw the circle move closer until it became a dark point in the middle of the stamped snow.

A cold nose pushed against his face and at its touch his soul leaped back to the present. His hand shot into the fire and dragged out a burning stick. Overcome for the moment by his fear of man, the beast drew back, raising a call to his brothers. Greedily they answered, until a ring of gray was stretched around him. The old man listened to the steady breathing of this circle. He waved his flaming stick wildly, but the beasts refused to scatter. Now one moved slowly forward, dragging his legs behind. Now a second, now a third. But now, not one moved back from his flaming stick. Why should he so desire life? He asked, and dropped the burning stick into the snow. It made a slight noise and then there was no more fire. The circle murmured uncertainly but held its place. Again he saw the last stand of the old moose, and Koskoosh dropped his head hopelessly on his knees. What did it matter? Was it not the law of life?