

Luck

Marjorie Pickthall

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THERE were four bunks in the shanty, and three of them were filled.

Ohlsen lay in one, a great bulk under the Hudson Bay Company blankets, breathing like a bull; in the next was Forbes, with eyes as quick as a mink's, and now red rimmed from snow blindness, twinkling from time to time over his yellowish furs. Nearest the door was Lajeune, singing in his sleep. In one corner an old Indian cowered, as little regarded as the rags and skins in which he was hidden; and Desmond sat by the stove, drinking to his luck, fingering it and folding it.

It was all there in a bag – raw gold, pure gold, the food of joy. At the weight of it in his rough palm, Desmond chattered and chuckled with delight. He had sat there talking and laughing for hours, while the glow of the stove grew darker and the cold crept in. Little blots of snow from the snow-shoes, first melting, had turned again to dark ice on the floor; the red light clung to them until each little circle seemed to be one of blood. Outside the world trembled under the shafts of the bitter stars; but Desmond, with the very fuel of life in his hand, was warm.

Dreams ran in his brain like a tide and dripped off his tongue in words. They were strangely innocent dreams of innocent things; sunlight on an old wall, honey, a girl with sandy eyebrows, and yellow ducklings.

“And maybe there'll be a garden, with fruit you pick off the bushes. 'Twas under a thorn-bush she used to stand, with the wind snapping her print gown. Or maybe I'll see more of the world first in an easy fashion, never a drink scarce, and no man my better at it. I know how a gentleman should behave. Are you hearing me, boys?”

Ohlsen breathed as slowly and deeply as a bull, Forbes blinked a moment over the greasy furs and said, “I'm hearing you.” Lajeune gave a sudden little call in his sleep, like a bird.

“They're all asleep, like so many hogs,” said Desmond, with a maudlin wonder; “they don't care. Two years we've struggled and starved together in this here freezing hell, and now my luck's come, and they don't care. Well, well.”

He stared resentfully at the bunks. He could see nothing of Ohlsen but blanket, yet Ohlsen helped him to a new outfit when he lost everything in a snow-slide. Forbes was only an unheeding head of grimy fur, yet once he had pulled Desmond out of a log-jam. And Lajeune had nursed him laughingly when he hurt his foot with a pick. Yet now Lajeune cared nothing; he was asleep, his head flung back, showing his smooth, lean throat and a scar that ran across it, white on brown. Desmond felt hurt. He took another drink, strode over to the bunk, and shook him petulantly.

“Don't ye hear when a friends talks t'ye?”

Lajeune did not move, yet he was instantly awake. His eyes, so black that they showed no pupil, stared suddenly into Desmond's muddled blue ones. His right hand gripped and grew rigid.

Desmond, leaning over him, was sobered by something in the breathless strain of that stare. He laughed uneasily.

“It's only me, Jooney. Was you asleep? I'm sorry.”

He backed off bewildered, but young Lajeune smiled and yawned, showing his red tongue curled like a wolf's.

“Still the gold, my friend?” he asked, drowsily.

“I—I can't seem to get used to it, like,” explained Desmond; “I have to talk of it. I know I'm a fool, but a man's luck takes him all ways. You go to sleep, young Jooney. I won't talk to you no more.”

“Nor before your old savage in the corner, *hein?*”

Desmond glanced at the heap of rags in the corner.

“Him? What's the matter? Think he'll steal it? Why, there's four of us, and even an Injun can have a corner of my shack for an hour or two to-night. I reckon,” finished Desmond, with a kind of gravity, “as my luck is making me soft. It takes a man all ways.”

Lajeune yawned, grinned, flung up his left arm, and was instantly asleep again. He looked so young in his sleep that Desmond was suddenly moved to draw the blanket over him. In the dim light he saw Forbes worn and grizzled, the wariness gone out of him, a defeated old man with horrible eyes. Ohlsen's hand lay over the edge of the bunk, his huge fingers curved helplessly, like a child's. Desmond felt inarticulately tender to the three who had toiled by his side and missed their luck. He piled wood on the stove, saying, “I must do something for the boys.

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They're good boys."

At the freshened roar of the stove the old Indian in the corner stirred and lifted his head, groping like an old turtle in the sunlight. He had a curious effect of meaningless blurs and shadows. Eye and memory could hold nothing of his insignificance. Only under smoked and puckered lids the flickering glitter of his eyes pricked in a meaning unreadable. Desmond looked at him with the wide good nature born of his luck.

"I ain't going to turn you out, Old Bones," he said.

The eyes steadied on him an instant, and the old shadow spoke fair English in the ghost of a voice.

"Thanks. You give grub. I eat, I warm, I rest. Now I go."

"Jest as you like. But have a drink first." He pushed over the dregs of the whiskey bottle.

The old man seized it; seemed to hold it to his heart. While he could drink whiskey he might drink and forget; when he could get no more, he must remember and die. He drank, Lethe and Paradise in one, and handed back the bottle.

"How," he said. "You good man. Once I had things to give, now nothing. Nothing but dreams."

"Dreams, is it, Old Bones?"

The eyes were like cunning sparks.

"Dreams, yes," he said, with a stealthy indrawing of breath. "You good man. I give you three dreams. See."

With a movement so swift the eye could hardly follow it, he caught three hot wood-coals from the ash under the stove and flung them on the floor at Desmond's feet. He bent forward, and under his breath they woke to a moment's flame. The strangeness of his movements held Desmond, and he also bent forward, watching. He had an instant's impression that the coals were burning him fiercely somewhere between the eyes, that the bars of personality were breaking, that he was falling into some darkness that was the darkness of death. Before his ignorance could find words for his fear, the old Indian leaned back, the fire fled, and the spent coals were no more than rounds of empty ash, which the old man took in his hands.

"Dreams," he said, with something that might have been a laugh. He blew the ash like little grey feathers toward the men in the bunks. His eyes were alive, fixed on Desmond with a meaning unreadable. He thrust his face close. "You good man. You give me whiskey. I give you three dreams, little dreams—for luck."

Desmond was staring at the little floating feathers of wood ash. As they slowly sank and settled, he heard the door close and felt a sharp stab of cold. The old Indian had gone; Desmond could hear his footsteps dragging over the frozen crust of the snow for a little while. He got up and shook himself. The drink had died out of him; he felt himself suddenly and greatly weary of body and mind. The fire would last till morning. "Dreams—dreams, for luck!" he muttered, as he rolled into the fourth bunk. He was ready for sleep. And as he lay down and yielded to the oncoming of sleep, as a weed yields to the tide, he knew of a swift, clear certainty that he would dream.

HE opened his eyes to the pale flood of day; Lajeune was cooking pork and making coffee; Ohlsen was making snow shoes; Forbes bent over his bunk, black against the blind square of the frozen window, feeling blindly with his hands, and snuffling a little as he spoke:

“We'd ha' let you sleep on, but we wanted to know what you'd be doing. Will ye stay here with me and the rest—I'm all but blind the day—or will ye go into Fort Recompense with Jooney here and the dogs, and put the dust in safety? Or will ye try to short cut across the pass with Ohlsen?”

Desmond stretched, grunted, and hesitated. He felt curiously unwilling to decide. But Forbes was waiting, his yellow fingers twitching on the end of the bunk.

“Oh, I dunno,” he said. “What's the hurry? Well—I guess I'll try the pass with Ohlsen.”

“Right.” Ohlsen nodded his heavy head, for he seldom spoke. He had the physique men always associate with a kind and stupid fidelity. Desmond said of him, “Them that talks most ain't the best at heart.” Desmond said it to himself as he rolled out of the bunk for breakfast.

Forbes stayed in his bunk, and made little moaning animal noises while he fed. Lajeune bubbled over with quick laughter. Desmond beamed on everyone and talked of his luck. Ohlsen sat immovable, working his jaws like an ox, watching Desmond with his small, pale eyes.

He did not speak as they drew on their furs and packed the gold; nor as they turned out of the shack, shutting the door swiftly behind them, and faced the stinging splendour of the windy winter day. The cold had lessened with the sunrise, but what cold there was the wind took and drove to the bone. The air was filled with a glittering mist of blown snow, and all the lower slopes of the hills and the climbing spruce forests were hidden. Above the *poudre* the mountains lifted like iron in the unpitying day, and every snowfield and glacier was crowned with a streaming feather of white against a hard turquoise sky.

“You think we'll get through?” asked Desmond, doubtfully.

“Ay t'ank so.” Ohlsen was striding heavily, tirelessly, just behind his shoulder. His grey eyes, still fixed on Desmond, were like little bits of glacier ice inset above his high cheek bones.

“We may.”

“We may. It ain't far.” Desmond was talkative. “This gold weighs heavy. I like the colour o' gold. Ohlsen, you got any children?”

“Ay, got two kids.”

“Wisht I had. Maybe I will, though—little boy 'n' gal, with kind o' gold hair. See here, you ever had a garden?”

“No.”

“I've me a garden on me back here, hey? With them blue things that smell, and hens. You come and see me, Ohlsen, and you'll have the best there is.”

“T'anks. I like fresh eggs.”

“So do I. And apples. Say, Ohlsen, I'm sorry this luck ain't for you.”

Ohlsen did not answer or slacken his heavy, stooping stride against the wind. The curved hills opened slowly, swung aside. The spruce stood up, came nearer, and closed in around them like the outposts of a waiting army. The wind roared through the trees like a flood of which the surf was snow.

“Do you think we'll do it?” shouted Desmond again and Ohlsen answered:

“Ay t'ank so.”

In a little while the trees were a dark mass beneath them, and they were out on the bare heights, fighting with the wind for every foothold. Desmond staggered under it, but Ohlsen seemed untiring, climbing very close at his shoulder. The glare of the sun seared their eyes, but they had no heat of it. In all the vast upheaval of the hills, in all the stark space of the sky, there was no warmth, no life.

Something took Desmond by the throat.

“We'll not do it,” he cried, to Ohlsen. “Let's turn back.”

For answer Ohlsen unstrapped the heavy pack of gold, fastened it on his shoulders, and went on. This time he

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was ahead, and his huge body sheltered Desmond from the wind.

“I been drinking too much,” thought Desmond, “and here's Ohlsen having to do my work for me. It ain't right.”

They were on a high ridge, and the wind was at its worst. On the left lay a precipice, and the dark masses of the spruce. On the right the depths were veiled with glittering silver, now and then shot through with the blue-green gleam of a glacier. It was fair going for a steady head, but the wind was dangerous. It took Desmond, as with hands, and thrust him to his knees at the narrowing of the ledge. He slipped a little. The dark grey ice, white veined, gave him no hold. He lost his head, slipped a little farther, and the white driven foam of snow and cloud above the glacier was suddenly visible. He called to Ohlsen.

Ohlsen could not have heard, yet he turned and came slowly back. Desmond could have raged at him for his slowness if his lips had not been so stiff and dry. Inside his fur mitts his hands were suddenly wet. Gently he slid a little farther, and the wind-driven white below was plainer, cut through with turquoise as with a sword. He shut his eyes. And when he opened them Ohlsen had stopped and was standing quietly watching him.

Desmond shrieked hoarsely, for he understood. Between the two drove the torrent of the wind, shutting slayer and all but slain into a separate prison of silence. But even the wind did not stir Ohlsen; he stood like a grey rock, watching Desmond. Presently he leaned forward, hands on knees, his back humped grotesquely under the pack, as the cruel or the curious might watch the struggles of a drowning kitten. Desmond was shaken to his fingers by the terrible thudding of his heart. He could not make a sound. Earth and sky flashed away. There remained only the grey inhuman shape beyond the barrier of the wind.

Presently that also flashed away. Yet, as Desmond fell, he was aware of light, a great swift relief, for he knew that he dreamed.

Then came darkness.



IT was a darkness glittering with stars. Such stars as the men of the South, the men of the cities, never see. Each was a blazing world hung in nothingness, rayed with sapphire and rose. Now and then the white ice-blink ran over and died beyond them in the spaces where even stars were not. Desmond was lying on his back, staring at them through a cranny in his sleeping-bag. He knew where he was, yet in his brain was a sort of cold confusion. He seemed to hear Forbes speaking.

“Will ye stay here with me and rest—I'm all but blind the day—or will ye go into Fort Recompense with Jooney here and the dogs, and put the dust in safety? Or will ye try the short cut across the pass with Ohlsen?”

“And here I am, half-way to the fort, and sleeping out with Jooney and the dogs,” Desmond muttered, “but I can't remember coming.”

Yet, as he turned in his sleeping bag, his knowledge of his whereabouts was exact. He was in a stony little gully beyond Fchette, where high banks cut off the wind and ground willows gave firing. The huskies were asleep and warm in deep drift under the bank, after a full meal of dried salmon.

“I'll say this for young Jooney,” said Desmond, drowsily, “he's got some sense with dogs.”

Lajeune was beside him, asleep in another bag. Between them was the pack of gold and the sledge harness. And the great plain, he knew, ran north and south of the very lip of the gully, silver under the stars, ridged and rippled by the wind, like white sand of the sea. The wind was now still. The earth was again a star, bright, silent, and alone, akin to her sisters of the infinite heavens.

“There ain't so much gold in a place like this here,” Desmond whispered, resentfully, to the night, “but jest you wait till I get south-east again.” He was filled with blind longing for red brick, asphalt, and crowded streets; even the hens and ducklings were not enough. He hungered in this splendour of desolation for the little tumults of mankind. It seemed as if the stars laughed.

“There ain't nothing my gold won't get me,” said Desmond more loudly. His breath hung in little icicles on the edges of his spy-hole. It was cruelly cold. He drew his hood closer round his head, and thrust it out of the bag.

Lajeune was gone.

He did not feel afraid; only deadly cold and sick as he struggled to his feet. Under their shelter of canvas and snow he was alone; everything else was gone. He fell on his hands and knees, digging furiously in the trodden snow, like a dog.

The gold was gone also.

“My luck,” whispered Desmond, stupidly. “My luck.”

He was still on his knees, shaping a little rounded column of snow; suppose it might be Lajeune's throat, and he with his hands on each side of it—so. Lajeune's dark face seemed to lie beneath him, but it was not touched with fear, but with laughter. He was laughing, as the stars had laughed, at Desmond and his luck. Desmond dashed the snow away with a cry.

He scrambled out of the gully. The dog-trail was easy to read, running straight across the silvery plain. He began to run along it.

As he ran he admired Lajeune very much. With what deadly quietness and precision he must have worked! The gully and the deserted camp were a gray streak behind him, were gone. He was running in Lajeune's very footprints, and he was sure he ran at an immense speed. The glittering levels reeled away behind him. A star flared and fell, staining the world with gold. Desmond had forgotten his gold. He had forgotten food and shelter, life and death. He could think of nothing but Lajeune's brown throat with the scar across it. That throat, his own hands on each side of it, and an end for ever to the singing and the laughter.

He thought Lajeune was near at hand, laughing at him. He felt the trail, and searched. The dark face was everywhere, and the quick laughter; but silence was waiting.

Again he knelt and groped in the snow; but he could feel nothing firm and living. He tore off his mitts, and groped again, but there was only the snow, drifting in his fingers like dust. Lajeune was near at hand, yet he could not find him. He got up and began to run in circles. His feet and hands were heavy and as cold as ice, and his breath hurt; but Lajeune was alive and warm and lucky and laughing.

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He fell, got up, and fell again. The third time he did not get up, for he had caught young Lajeune at last. The brown throat was under his hands, and the stricken face. He, Desmond, was doing all the laughing, for Lajeune was dead.

“My luck, Jooney, my luck,” chuckled Desmond.

His head fell forward, and the dry snow was like dust in his mouth. Darkness covered the stars.

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IN the darkness and the shadow something moved. Desmond was in his own bunk at the shack. There seemed to be an echo of words in the air, yet he knew that he had slept for some time. He was not asleep now, yet sleep lay on him like a weight, and he could not move.

Forbes was silent, too. He was quite clear that he was alone with Forbes, and that the other two had gone prospecting beyond Fchette. Forbes had asked him, "Will ye stay here with me and rest,— I'm all but blind the day,—or will ye go into Fort Recompense with Jooney here and the dogs, and put the dust in safety? Or will ye try the short cut across the pass with Ohlsen?" And he knew he had chosen to stay in the shack with Forbes.

It was night. The shack was dark, save for the red glow of the stove, and something moved very softly in the dusk and the shadow.

Desmond, weighted with sleep, could not move; but he listened. Someone was shuffling very softly and slowly round the wall of the shack pausing at the bunks. It was Forbes. He was snuffling to himself, as some little soft-nosed animal might snuffle, and feeling in his blind way with one yellowed hand.

Desmond was amused. "If I was to yell out, old Scotty'd have a fit," he thought. He decided to wait until Forbes was quite near, and then yell, and hear the old man curse. Old Forbes' cursing was the admiration of the camps. Desmond lay very still and listened.

Forbes was coming nearer, feeling his way as if over unseen ground, and whimpering to himself very softly. Desmond could hear the scratch, scratch of his long-clawed fingers as he slipped his hand over the empty bunk near the door. He was silent and still for a minute, then the shuffling came again.

"I'll wait till he's at the foot o' my bunk," thought Desmond, grinning foolishly, "and then I'll bark like a dog. Used to do it in school when I was a kid and scare the teacher. Lord! how a bit of luck does raise a man's spirits!" He lay very quiet, grinning to himself in the dark.

Forbes' blind, bent head showed, swaying slightly, against the dull, red glow of the farther wall. A tremulous touch, as light as a falling leaf, fell on Desmond's foot, and suddenly he was stricken with the black, dumb terror of dreams; for he knew there was death in the touch of that hand.

The walls reeled about him, shot with streaks of red. He could feel the hand hovering lightly at his knee. The blind man's soft, whimpering breathing sounded close above him. But he could not move. His whole life was centered in the quivering nerves which recorded the touch of the blind man's hand.

It travelled very slowly and lightly up his body, and lingered above his heart. His life gathered there also like a cold flame. And he could not move.

Visions rose before him. The gold was under his head and he heard again the sound of wind in a garden among tall flowers, and thud of ripe apples falling, soft croons, and cluckings of hens, a whirring of the wings of doves. He saw a straight girl in a stiff print dress, with very blue eyes under brows and lashes the colour of sea sand. He saw two children with hair the colour of gold.

The blind man moaned and bent waveringly near, his right hand gathered to his breast.

The flowers of the hollyhocks were gold, and the little ducks were gold, and gold sunlight lay on the gold hair of the children. "Gold," said Desmond, faintly—"gold; my luck." The blind hand crept upward. Like a blown flame, the golden visions flickered and went out.

Desmond awoke, fighting upward out of darkness and the dreams of the night. He felt reality coming back to him as a tide comes back to a beach, and opened his eyes on a glad world. His terrors fell away from him. He came near to thanking God. Dark words he had dreamed, dark deeds, but they were not true. Thank God! They were only dreams. He stirred in the bunk, sat up, and brushed a white feather of wood ash from his sleeve. Only dreams!

Lajeune was cooking pork and making coffee; Ohlsen was mending snow shoes; Forbes bent over his bunk, black against the frozen window, feeling blindly with his hands and snuffling a little as he spoke, "We'd ha' let you sleep on, but we wanted to know what you'd be doing. Will ye stay with me and rest—I'm all but blind the day—or will ye go into Fort Recompense with Jooney here and the dogs, and put the dust in safety? Or will ye try the short cut across the pass with Ohlsen?"

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He stopped suddenly. Desmond shrank back slowly against the wall of the bunk, his eyes staring on them as a man stares on death, a fleck of froth on his lips. There was no sound in the shack but the quick breathing of four men.