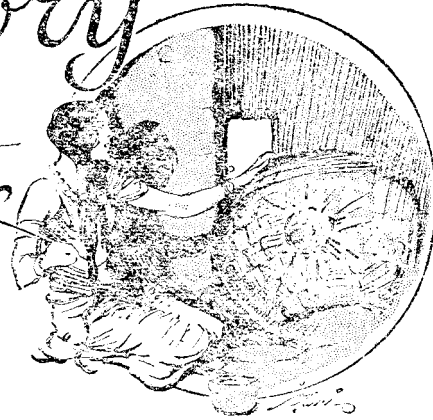


The Story Basket

by Herman
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TO-LO TALAPUS, "the wolf that kills," had had a way of ridding himself of enemies, and treacherous, seeming friends, that had earned for him, at his death, ten yellow stripes, painted across the blade of the war-canoe paddle thrust into the earth at the head of his grave.

Malah, his daughter, inherited, apparently, none of the old brave's bloodthirsty traits.

On the contrary, she was so thrifty and gentle, and withal so pleasing to the eye, that Lars Arend, Finnish sailor, within a few hours of the time that he had deserted ship at Victoria and landed on Cypress Island of far lower Puget Sound, on the American side, hunted up To-lo Talapus, and paid over, as earnest of honorable matrimonial intention, one California gold slug. Then Lars built his cabin; the witch doctor hung about the sailor's neck and about the neck of Malah each a deerskin sack of strong medicine, and they were wed.

In time was born Klikwillie, from whose eyes, black and hard as shoe-buttons, shone the implacable, reincarnated spirit of To-lo Talapus, the wolf that kills.

Lars, entertaining still some old country notions, attempted to tame little Klikwillie,

wearing out in the futile effort many a bundle of slender, stinging willow-withes. Never under castigation, which decidedly was none of the gentlest, did the girl ever shed a tear except upon one occasion. The girl, then five or six years old, had been beating her dog with a stick. Lars began beating Klikwillie with a switch when the dog fastened its teeth in the calf of the sailor's leg. At once, Klikwillie, who had shed never a tear, flung her arms about the dog's neck in a paroxysm of weeping.

Never again did Lars lay a hand upon the girl who rapidly grew from childhood into young womanhood, sullen, vicious, unconquered.

When Klikwillie had been about fourteen years of age, Lars had died. Shortly thereafter had come to the island the mining man, whom the Indians called "Tukomonuk," "the one who talks big," and his daughter, called for convenience, "Little Tuk." Tuk and Klikwillie became playmates, loved each other dearly for five years, when— But that's the story.

Treading stealthily, parting the branches before her cautiously, Klikwillie made her way to the edge of the clearing where stood the cabin of Little Tuk. Glad voices sounded

from within—Tuk's, and the voice of the newcomer, the young white man, Ross Hardy. The half-breed's brown fingers, where they rested upon a madrona branch, tensed as if clutching themselves about a knife-haft.

The man's voice grew louder as his hand rattled at the latch, swung open the door. Tuk and Hardy were standing upon the porch, the man prattling away nonsensically as he glanced down at the girl. He had never talked that way, looked that way at Klikwillie.

Hardy picked up an immense basket, loaded into it a pair of garden trowels, then he and the girl made off into the wood by a trail that opened from the cabin clearing.

Boldly now Klikwillie advanced from hiding, sent a malevolent look after the couple, stood scowling at the cabin where, more than once, she had played the drudge for Lady Tuk. But no more; now she was as good as Little Tuk; better, if one took for a standard the white man's gage of wealth. Old Tukomonuk, the man who talked big, was dead, leaving his daughter worse than penniless.

Sheer above the cabin, at a height of nearly a thousand feet, showed in the side of the mountain, the round hole of the mine-tunnel from which old Tuk had surely expected to extract a fortune, and where, firing a faulty fuse, his mortal body had been annihilated, wafted into nothingness by a shot of dynamite. Soleks, an Indian who had helped in the mine work, thinking to save Little Tuk from any untimely visits of her father's ghost, had boarded up the tunnel with heavy stringers and planks, and had tumbled from place the long, fir-tree ladders by which the shaft had been reached.

The tunnel, which pierced the mountain-top, opened on the side opposite to the cabin. This opening, Soleks had left open, reasoning sagaciously that if the spirit of the miner took to wandering and chanced to

emerge by the far hold, it would never, never find its way around into the cañon where the cabin nestled.

Immediately after the death of her father, Little Tuk had dispensed with the services of Malah and Klikwillie, who had been hired, if not always paid, by old Tuk to do the housework. Really mistress of the miner's house for more than five years, it had transpired naturally enough that Malah had trained together her own girl and Little Tuk in the arts of housewifery. Together the girls had learned to prepare seaweed, dig and hoard the edible fern roots, and side by side upon a little bench they had learned the art of basket-making.

The Indian girl of the San Juan Islands, after she had served proper apprenticeship, and when approaching marriageable age, is required to make what is known as the *ekhanum opekwan*, or story-basket. The story-basket design is literally the girl's history and depicts, to him who knows the Indian sign language, notable events in her own career, the very longings and ambitions of her heart. The story-basket completed, is laid away, to become, at the girl's marriage, the principal culinary implement in the household of the new establishment.

Little Tuk, under Malah's instruction, had become a famous weaver of baskets, and, following her father's death, she had taken seriously to making them in order to pay off her father's debts, the greater majority of which she had discharged when, one day, a camp outfit had been dumped upon the shore, and a young man had come knocking at the cabin door.

The attractive young man had asked for her father. Eloquently she had pointed to the boarded mine-shaft, when, stammering and ill at ease, the young man had started to back away. Little Tuk insisted upon knowing what business had brought the man in search of her father.

He was Ross Hardy. Years before, his

father, Dr. Hardy, had grubstaked old Tuk. Under the terms of the agreement Dr. Hardy was to have an undivided half-interest in any mining or other property acquired as a result of the expenditure of the Hardy money. Dr. Hardy had died. Young Ross Hardy's sole heritage, as he had discovered, was the ancient grub-stake agreement, and he had come on to the San Juan Islands to claim his own. which, strictly under the law, would have been a half-interest in one cedar shake cabin, an abandoned mine tunnel in Cypress Mountain, and about a hundred and twenty acres of rocky hillside and cañon where grew cedar-trees, madronas, and the delicate, beautiful sword-fern.

After Little Tuk had called him back, demanded and received the explanation, young Ross Hardy had laughingly declared that he was going to claim his partnership rights. He would pitch his tent somewhere on the beach. Was there any fishing, any hunting? Then, when he learned that Little Tuk was making baskets, filling them with sword-ferns, selling them to vacationists all over the islands, he had declared himself in on the basket business.

Many times young Hardy had encountered Klikwillie as she suddenly emerged into the trail, or confronted him in the depths of the glen. The half-breed, interested, yet repelled him. The girl's eyes were so black, intense, tragic. Several times Klikwillie invited him to come to her cabin. Laughingly he had accepted, but had never gone, and the proud, revengeful heart of the granddaughter of To-lo Talapus began to fester and ooze poison like a snake-bitten heel.

Klikwillie stared down the trail in the direction whence Little Tuk and Ross had disappeared. He had never come to see her—never. He wanted a white girl. Tuk was white; she was a half-breed. Little Tuk had claimed that any one by earnest, persistent effort could make of himself what he chose.

Fool! Liar! She, Klikwillie, might study, toil until the protesting soul of her flew from her body to the skies, and still she would be a half-breed, granddaughter of the wolf that kills.

Ah, yes. Fate had made of her a half-breed. Well enough. Let then this same fate guard preserve those who mocked, despised, flaunted the granddaughter of To-lo Talapus.

Still, Klikwillie wanted to be very, very sure. She and Little Tuk, in girlish confidence, had talked often of love and marriage, and Little Tuk had advanced the astounding rule that no nice girl should ever, ever betray her liking for any certain man. Perhaps Little Tuk was dissembling with Ross Hardy. How Klikwillie prayed to her savage gods that this might be so. But presently she would know Tuk's secret. For this very opportunity the half-breed had waited, watched for more than a week.

The glad voices of Tuk and Ross were still audible down the trail when Klikwillie opened the door, crossed the kitchen floor. Behind the stove was a cupboard. The half-breed opened this door, drew up a wooden-bottomed chair, mounted it. From the topmost shelf Klikwillie drew forth Little Tuk's unfinished story-basket.

The story-basket was of pliable, tough, yellow cedar-roots, with the designs worked in with other cedar-roots stained a deep scarlet in the sap of the blood-bush. Near the bottom of the basket showed a rhododendron-leaf, the Indian hope sign. Next came a design showing half the disk of the sun showing above the horizon. This was the Indian "klipsun," or sunset, the death sign, and commemorated the death of Tuk's father.

Lastly—Klikwillie's face, as a look of hatred swept over it was something appalling—lastly, was the figure of the *chee kalakala*, the fabled, whisper bird of the Siwashes which, said the old wives' tales, came at dusk, breathed the word into a

maiden's ear when love drew near.

Klikwillie's hands clenched into the delicate fabric of the basket, she made as if to tear it, but threw it disdainfully back onto the shelf, closed the door. She stood glaring about the room like some wild thing at bay. Voices sounded, and she sped from the cabin and into the brush.

Plan after plan for revenge with the mentor, caution always at her elbow, Klikwillie meditated as she went sullenly about the tasks imposed by the thrifty Malah. Whenever she could shirk or evade a duty. Klikwillie haunted the vicinity of Little Tuk's cabin, shadowed the lovers through the wood, stalking them as it is said the forest cougar will—days, weeks even—before the kill.

Still Klikwillie waited. For one thing, her wish fashioning the thought, she was not absolutely certain that Little Tuk was not coquetting with the white man. For another, she hoped against hope that something might arise to estrange the white folks, break up forever the growing intimacy of the partnership which had grown from jest to dangerous earnestness. Then, one afternoon, Klikwillie, hidden in a covert, saw Ross fling down his trowel and gather Little Tuk into his arms.

By an obscure trail Klikwillie slunk to her miserable cabin.

For several days Little Tuk had not seen Klikwillie, so, perhaps a week later, it was with genuine pleasure that the white girl welcomed her old playmate and invited her to enter.

Abruptly, Klikwillie began. "Soleks ever tell you he find anything strange in tunnel time Papa Tukomonuk die?"

Little Tuk's eyes started, her lips opened apprehensively. "Anything strange? No. What? Tell me, Klikwillie."

The half-breed shook her head. "I don't know. Something, I think, not right. But I don't know."

"But you suspect something, Klikwillie. It isn't kind not to tell me."

"I know nothing," protested Klikwillie "Just one time I hear Soleks say it that it is strange. Besides, you remember how Soleks board up the tunnel quick, throw down the ladders?"

Little Tuk stood studying the half-breed's immobile, dark face. Soleks, the white girl reflected, had been in a great hurry to board up the tunnel, but this she had always attributed to the Indian's superstitious fears. "If you know nothing, Klikwillie, why did you mention this at this time? You must have some reason."

Klikwillie shook her head, "No. I just think all time what Soleks say, and I wonder. I know nothing."

The white girl glanced from the window to where the landing steps, dug out of the cliff side for the ladders, still showed. "If the ladders were in place," said Little Tuk, "I'd have a look."

There was just a trace of eagerness in the gesture as Klikwillie touched the white girl's arm. "On other side," offered the half-breed, "tunnel is not boarded up. Easy to go in with a rope."

Some subtle warning of treachery flashed to Tuk's consciousness, but vanished before Klikwillie's unwavering regard.

"With a rope, two folks go in easy, then they find out. Soleks say it. I don't know."

As if dismissing the subject. Klikwillie pointed suddenly to the cupboard behind the stove. "You finish story-basket yet?" she asked.

Little Tuk's cheek flushed. "Not yet—quite," she answered. "Have you completed yours?"

The half-breed shook her head. "No. No picture to finish with—yet."

Abruptly, as is the Indian fashion, Klikwillie started for the door. "Klakowa," she said, and disappeared down the trail.

Half a dozen wild conjectures entered

Tuk's mind. Perhaps the blast that had destroyed her father had opened up the long sought, priceless vein of chrome iron. Her father had related many such fateful instances. Or, perhaps her father had hidden in the tunnel treasure, something. Highly improbable. But she could never rest until she knew for certain. Klikwillie had said that two folks could go into the tunnel easily with a rope. Two folks. That had meant herself and Ross. But Tuk felt a delicacy about broaching the subject to Ross. The long, dark tunnel through the mountain was but a mine-shaft; still, it was the grave of the dreamer father whom she loved. If two people could enter the tunnel with a rope, one could. She'd try it alone. Later, perhaps, she'd tell Ross about it.

Klikwillie, with an impressive show of hurry, plunged noisily down the trail, came to pause when well out of sight of Tuk's cabin, stealthily retraced her steps, hid herself in the shrubbery. Presently, the young white man appeared, coming from his tent on the beach. Little Tuk met him at the door, thrust at him a bit of paper.

"You'll have to go to the store, Ross. Be sure about the coffee and don't let them give you the wrong kind; the last bacon was too fat."

Laughingly, Ross bantered her about having so serious a face over a tin of coffee, started for the trail, playfully pretending that he proposed to take one of Little Tuk's hands along with him.

As Ross passed her hiding-place, Klikwillie's savage, muttered exclamation almost betrayed her. Her plan had gone agley. She had never dreamed but that Tuk would take the white man into her confidence.

Then, a moment later, when Little Tuk appeared upon the step, a coil of stout rope in her hand, Klikwillie's evil heart gave an exultant bound. Fate, this was fate, the hand of the *Saghalie Tyee* directing that Little Tuk

alone should pay.

For nearly a mile the trail led down the cañon to where a second trail joined winding by a circuitous route to the top and opposite side of the mountain where opened the tunnel. As swiftly as the white girl traversed the path, never once did the softly footing half-breed lose sight of her.

Where the trail emerged upon the bald, rocky top of the mountain, the side dropped away, leaving an immense mushroom stone, which actually shelved above the waters of the shallow bay far beneath. The bay side of the island was entirely uninhabited, and as it afforded no fishing was visited but rarely.

As Tuk came to a pause on the crest of the mushroom rock, Klikwillie dropped from sight behind a boulder. Half a dozen scraggly cedars found precarious rooting in the cracks of the rocks. Selecting the tree nearest the edge of the rock, Tuk made fast one end of the rope, then began tying knots in the free portion. Then she tested the rope with her weight, and, clutching it firmly, walked cautiously to the brim. Slowly she leaned, until she gazed down into the depths below. An involuntary shudder passed over her, and she drew back. A moment she stood staring at the frail bit of cord to which she must trust her life, dropped to her knees, backed to the edge of the stone, slipped over, disappeared from sight.

Swiftly, Klikwillie ran to the edge of the precipice, and with never a tremor of fear, leaned over the abyss and looked below. Little Tuk had gained the tunnel mouth, ten feet below, no great feat for an island girl with muscles steeled by tugging at a dory's heavy oars, and was drawing the length of rope in after her. Klikwillie stretched forth her hands. The instant that Tuk laid down the rope-coil, the half-breed would seize it, yank it from the tunnel-mouth, loose it from the tree, fling it into the bay beneath.

Reaching forward and downward, Klikwillie laid hold of the rope and gave a

sudden yank. One piercing scream the half-breed uttered, clutching madly at the rock as she fell, and managed to gain a hold upon the line, to come to a stop opposite the tunnel-mouth with a sudden violence that almost dislocated her arms.

She had seized the rope too soon. Little Tuk had not yet laid it coiled upon the tunnel-floor. Thinking that the wind was whipping it about, the white girl, at the instant the half-breed had seized the line, had given it a twitch, which had caused Klikwillie to lose her balance.

But the half-breed had nerves of iron. As Little Tuk uttered a terrified scream, Klikwillie uttered a cold laugh, jerked her body, placed one foot upon the edge of the tunnel-entrance and scrambled in.

As she stood calmly coiling the rope in her hand, Klikwillie stared insolently into the horror-stricken countenance of the white girl. "You wish I was in bay below," said the half-breed. "Don't lie. I know you do."

Her lips snarled away from the strong, white teeth, as she coiled the rope tighter and tighter.

At the murderous look upon the breed's dark face, Little Tuk backed away. "You 'fraid to die, Little Tuk? My plan go wrong. It's no matter. I got nothing to live for; you have everything. We see who cry out first."

She drew back her arm, and as Tuk, divining her purpose, sprang toward her, gave the rope-coil a heave and a twist which landed it upon the rock above, a single, depending coil hanging over the brim, but far beyond arm's reach.

Tuk was running back and forth in the tunnel, crying, moaning, clasping and unclasping her hands. Had Klikwillie gone mad! "Klikwillie, why did you? We'll die! We'll die, starve, miserably alone in this tunnel! Why, why did you, Klikwillie?"

The half-breed, her countenance as hard, as impassive as the rock against which she had imperturbably seated herself, began to

grin horribly. "We just alike now, Tuk, you and me; white girl going to die no better than half-breed going to die. Just alike now, you and me. He—"

"He!" repeated Little Tuk. "He! Now I understand. You would have left me here purposely to die. Murderer! Oh! Oh! Ross! Ross!"

Again and again she screamed his name, the frantic call echoing faintly over the deserted bay.

"No good to call. Nobody hear. You 'fraid to die?"

By an effort the white girl regained control of herself. Walking back into the tunnel to where a sharp curve cut off the light from the narrow entrance, she felt her way to the boarded entrance above her cabin. Soleks had done his work well. Scarcely a ray of light found its way past the snugly fitted double planking.

Back she crept through the tunnel. Klikwillie sat near the entrance staring out at the circle of blue sky. A panic of fear seized upon the white girl as she contemplated the tall, muscular form of the half-breed. What if Klikwillie, in a sudden access of savage rage, should seize her and fling her from the rock. Back into the tunnel Little Tuk retreated a distance, to sink weakly upon the floor.

The morning passed, midday, afternoon. Away in the distance sounded faintly the whistle of the packet boat landing on Cottonwood Island. Five o'clock.

About midway in the tunnel Tuk had felt the drip of cold water seeping through a crack in the rock. Hither she crept, held open her parched lips and drank.

Again the white girl returned, took her seat a distance from the half-breed, who still sat staring into space. Settling her back against the wall of the tunnel, Little Tuk made herself as comfortable as possible. Desperately she searched her mind for some way of escape. Her hand, feeling idly about

on the rock beside her, encountered a bit of shale which had been chipped from the wall. Instantly a plan occurred to her. If only Klikwillie would fall asleep.

Klikwillie, listening with ears as sharp as those of a wild thing, was thinking, if only Tuk would fall asleep. She, too, had a plan, if only Tuk would fall asleep. She'd wear the white girl down. She could wait. She was an Indian. She was the granddaughter of To-lo Talapus, the wolf that kills.

Morning came, and again Little Tuk sought the dripping rock and drank. Klikwillie, as insensible to physical want apparently as the rock at her back, had scarcely moved.

Noon came, afternoon, then night. Little Tuk's head sagged upon her bosom, but she awoke with a scream. Klikwillie uttered a sharp reprimand, laughed harshly, asked the white girl sneeringly if she were afraid to die.

Again morning. Little Tuk had scarcely the strength to drag herself to the dripping rock. Even while she held her open lips up for the blessed drops, Klikwillie came, thrust her aside, drank and returned to the tunnel-mouth.

The brain of the white girl was reeling madly. Sleep! She must sleep! What if the half-breed did creep upon her, fling her from the rock. Sleep! Better death than this. Sleep!

She bowed her head upon her breast, slept.

A wailing cry, a cry of mortal fear, sounded through the tunnel, electrifying Little Tuk's palsied limbs into action. To the tunnel-mouth she went lurching.

Morning was just breaking over the bay. Hanging by the rope, staring down into the void below, was the half-breed.

She had worked her plan. While Little Tuk had slept, the half-breed had raveled threads from her dress, twisted them into a string, attached a bit of stone, had tossed it and hauled in the coil of rope. Bereft of

strength by hours, days of fasting, Klikwillie had not the strength to gain the top, or even to scramble in at the tunnel-entrance.

Though her brain reeled, the white girl clutched her dead fingers into a depression in the tunnel side, reached, drew Klikwillie to safety. The half-breed sank into a helpless heap.

Finally she lifted her head. A seizure of rage distorted her face into an expression truly fiendish. "Why not let me die then? It's no business of yours. Fool!"

Klikwillie clasped her hands to her face; her shoulders began to shake.

Little Tuk was by her side. "I couldn't, Klikwillie, let you die. Never! Never! I don't hate you, Klikwillie, even—"

Little Tuk threw her arms about her old playmate, drew the black head onto her bosom. "Listen, Klikwillie. I think, I am sure, I can make it up the rope. I have slept. I am stronger."

"And leave me here? It is right. Go!"

"Leave you? Never! I'd bring help. Leave you? I understand, Klikwillie, but I've forgiven you."

"Forgive me!"

"Yes."

The half-breed's arms tensed about the white girl as she moaned: "She forgives me! Oh, God! she forgives me!"

Little Tuk laid her hands to the rope, swung out over space. But for the half-breed she would have fallen. The white girl was too weak, too spent to make the ascent. Too long they had waited.

Morning passed, noon and again it was night. Side by side, hands clasped, the girls waited, waited for the bitter end. They slept the deep, merciful sleep of utter exhaustion.

Little Tuk thought she must be dreaming. From afar off, somewhere in the darkness, from another world it seemed, some one called her name.

Stupidly she smiled at the pleasing fantasy. But no.

“Tuk! Little Tuk! Oohoo! Tuk!”

“Ross! Ross! Here in the mine-tunnel! Here, Ross!”

The light of a lantern shot over the black abyss. “Here, Ross!”

Then they called back and forth to each other. “Don’t try to climb,” he admonished her. “Just make the rope fast about your waist. Careful! Are you ready?”

No answer. Tuk had made the line fast about her waist, then had fainted dead away.

Carefully the young man, suspecting what had happened, tensed the rope, made certain that she was securely fastened, drew her up.

She awakened in her own clean, little bed. Beside her stood the white doctor, Ross, and good, old Malah. In her own little bed. “How long had she been there? Why, two weeks.”

Two weeks. Ah, it was good to feel the cool, soft sheets, to turn her head in the

hollow of the big, soft pillow. Just two weeks.

Suddenly she reared her body erect, fell back, crying, “Klikwillie! Klikwillie! Where’s Klikwillie!”

Malah placed her hard, brown hand upon the girl’s forehead.

“Klikwillie’s gone,” said Ross softly. “You raved of her in your delirium, so I went back, entered the tunnel. She was gone. We dragged the bay. There had been a long run out of tide.”

“Gone!”

Little Tuk’s lips moved, and Malah bent her head. “I’m so glad,” whispered Tuk, “that I forgave her. So glad. Poor Klikwillie.”

“*Malah tikegh tenas Tuk.* For that, Malah loves Little Tuk,” whispered the Indian woman in reply, a tear shining upon her cheek. “*Malah tikegh tenas Tuk.*”