

We had fair store of brandy; and on Christmas eve those of us who still held some soul for sport essayed to lighten the hour. We brewed a comfortable draught, built the blaze high for the frosts were getting exceeding sharp, gathered as many as could be had of officers and worthy men into our cabin and made brave to sing the songs of France. And now here was a strange thing; that while the hardiest and soundest amongst us had made good show of cheer, had eaten the vile food and tried to speak lightly of our ills, no sooner did we hear our own voices in the songs that carried us back to the pleasantness of our native land than we fell a sobbing and weeping like children; which weakness I attribute to the distemper that was already in our blood.

For the days that followed I have no heart to set down much. We never went without the palisades except well guarded to fetch fire wood. This duty indeed made the burden of every day. A prodigious store of wood was needed for the cold surpassed any thing I had ever known. The snow fell heavily and there were storms when for days the gale drove straight across our bleak plateau. There was no blood in us to withstand the icy blasts. Do what we would the chill of the tomb was in the cabins where the men lay. The wood choppers one day facing such a storm fell in the deep drifts just outside the gate. None durst go out to them. The second day the wolves found them—and we saw it all!

There was not a charge of powder left in the fort. There was not a mouthful of fit food. The biscuits had from the first been full of worms and weevils. The salted meat either from the admixture of sea water through leaky casks or from other cause was rotten beyond the power even of a starving man to hold.

Le Scorbut broke out. I had seen it on shipboard and knew the signs. De Troyes now seldom left his cabin and when in the way of duty I made my devoirs and he asked after the men, I made shift to hide the truth, but it could not be for long.

"My poor fellows," he sighed one day as he turned feebly on his couch of planks. "It must be with all as it is with me—see, look here de Tregay, do you know the sign? and he bared his shrunken arm and side. Indeed I knew the signs—the dry pallid skin with the purple blotches and indurations. He saw I was at a loss for words.

"Sang de Dieu!" he cried, "is this what soldiers of France must come to for the glory of —" He stopped short as if lacking spirit to go on. "Now I bethink me," he added in a melancholy voice, "it is what soldiers must come to." Then after a while he asked, "How many dead today De Tregay?"