

JOHN STRONG, CIVIL ENGINEER

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indeed studied; but the glaring facts were there, and assailed both eye and nostril. The cook's attitude was one of mingled apology and defiance, and he it understood that, under canvas, the cook is the autocrat of his own table. Strong glanced about with a look of quiet amusement, which did much to maintain the security of the unfortunate Dominick; and, when he passed his platter for a second portion of the unsavory mess, a titter went around the circle. It is the unexpected which drags to light our inmost characteristics, and so it was that the men's attitudes varied. George Girard, a chain man from the Saguenay, crouched on his knees and barked like a dog; Tom McPherson, an axeman from Glengary, mumbled, "She's no that bad; gie us a bittock mair," while the Indian packers regarded the occasion with almost contemptuous indifference.

Again the gray dawn broke, pitiless and relentless. When the chief awoke, the sagging roof of his tent told the story, and when he threw open its flap, the whole heaven seemed to have dissolved itself in snow. It lay light as air, and almost as impalpable, but a foot deeper than the night before; sixty inches on the level, and no break in the lowering sky. By what subtle means he marshaled his men, this quiet leader could not, himself, have told you; but once more the trailing procession dragged its weary way out of camp and into the solitude, and again the Superior and Northwestern pushed its indomitable course to the south. Hunger had now reached that stage where it assaulted the judgment of the best of them; and yet, such was the men's confidence in the dominant self-reliance of their chief, that, as their bodies failed, they leaned more completely on him. Of insurrection, of complaint, not a word—did he not eat out of their own dish? And ever as the grip of circumstance tightened upon them, did it breed in John Strong those very qualities by which he laughed in its face.

One mile and one quarter was recorded that day, and every foot a victory. Did snowfall and severe cold go together, the tally would have been less; for the fuel was lacking, and the fire of energy was burning low.

The camp held for them no word of Tom Moore, and as before Dominick's efforts were conscientious, rather than edible. He had decked the table with every dish his outfit boasted, and down the middle of it smoked platters of a dirty yellow, sodden mess. The men strove valiantly, but failed utterly.

There is a certain fine, eloquent silence, pertaining to the companionship bred beneath the cedar and the pine, that puts to shame the meaningless chatter of that intercourse which we characterize as social. These men understood each other, and their chief understood them all; and their quiet, uncomplaining, unquestioning acceptance of the pangs of hunger did not strike them as being anything out of the ordinary. For, by this time, hunger had reached the point of pain. It was not that maddening frenzy which comes of thirst, but it was a ceaseless gnawing of the stomach, as if the very vitals of the body, lacking their natural substance, had turned upon each other to destroy.

Their mental attitude was one of impatience—vexation at a prolonged delay. They were, almost without exception, good woodsmen, and Tom Moore's probable actions and procedure were subjected to a microscopic analysis in which no possibility was left unconsidered. However soon or late he came, he would have to stand up to their fire of cross-questioning.

That night the snow ceased, and over the stark land came a tremor, as the air in little puffs and gusts began to stir. Northwest, clear under a waxing moon, small, gray handfolds of cloud pushed up over the skyline, creeping ever faster and faster into the zenith. The tops of the spruce and pine moved slightly to and fro, divesting themselves gently and daintily of that white fleece which had for

days enshrouded them. Slowly and intermittently a faint whine came from the shifting branches, and out on the spotless, manacled lakes, rounded plumes of dusty silver danced uncertainly into the southeast. Then, with ever-increasing pressure, came the winter gale, heavier and stronger, till the sky was blotted out by level lines of streaming snow, and the desolate North vented its wrath on all that lay before it. So, in suffering, came and passed the third day in Starvation Camp.

Far across the sky next night flared a great Aurora that hung, in the scintillating heavens, like some ethereal drapery palpitating with color. From one end of it sprang vibrating folds which traversed its length, wave after wave in quick procession, and flung an unearthly radiance over the silent, frost-bound land. The glassy surfaces of the wind-swept lakes flashed it back to the winking stars, and its cold, unearthly tints penetrated through tangled brush and all the stark and silent woods. It awoke John Strong, as he tossed restlessly under his rabbit skin, revealing all the crude simplicity of his tent; and he turned on his back, looking up at the ridgepole, waiting and listening—he scarce knew why.

The gale of the previous day had swept the ice quite bare of snow, and now it lay clean and naked to the intense cold. He could hear it crackling and expanding, and the sound of it was like distant cannonading, as the split edges of it shouldered up above the surface. In between these sounds was a vast silence, a deadly stillness, which seemed almost to have weight and measurement and form; and it was in one of these pauses that he heard a wolf bark across the lake. He listened indifferently, for wolves were many in that land; and then it came faintly to his ear again.

At once the man's frame stiffened; he raised himself on his elbow and became part of the very silence itself. Again the sound—very distant, very thin, but very perfect—was it a wolf? Once more—a little clearer, a little nearer—and his body relaxed in a sigh of huge relief. "Good old Tom," he said, and got up, pulled on his moccasins, and very, very quietly went over to the cook camp.

The provident Dominick was buried in a mountain of blankets, but had left a hole to breathe through; the mouth of it was encircled by a ring of ice, and from this at regular intervals rose a puff of mist, as his cavernous lungs emptied and filled. It was like a geyser giving vaporous evidence of the forces that slept below.

Smiling to himself, Strong put a foot on his shoulder and gently rolled him over; the mass of blankets heaved and twisted, some of them were flung back, and Dominick's eyes blinked up into his chief's.

"Reveillez, mon vieux, Tom est presque arrive. Je l'ai entendu; mais pas de bruit."

The cook was on his feet in a second—it was marvellous that such a man could move so quickly. He stood motionless till he heard that sound, now evidently nearer than before; then put out a hairy paw and stood his sleeping chore boy up vertically, where he slept. "Wood, wood, toute suite, wood!" he hissed, and soon the sheet steel stove was red with anticipating flames.

By this time Tom's voice was heard "Mush, mush," to his dogs; then the toboggans, sliding and slewing over the ice as they came on at top speed; then the crunch of the snowshoes as they bit into the crust at the edge of the lake, until, finally, steaming and panting, the dogs pulled up—in camp at last—and sat down, biting at the ice balls between their toes.

It was a barbaric scene, though to Strong it was natural enough. The huge breed, standing six feet four, towered in the midst, clad in caribou-skin leggings and tunic, a red scarf about his waist, and his short, stiff beard frozen solid—behind him the

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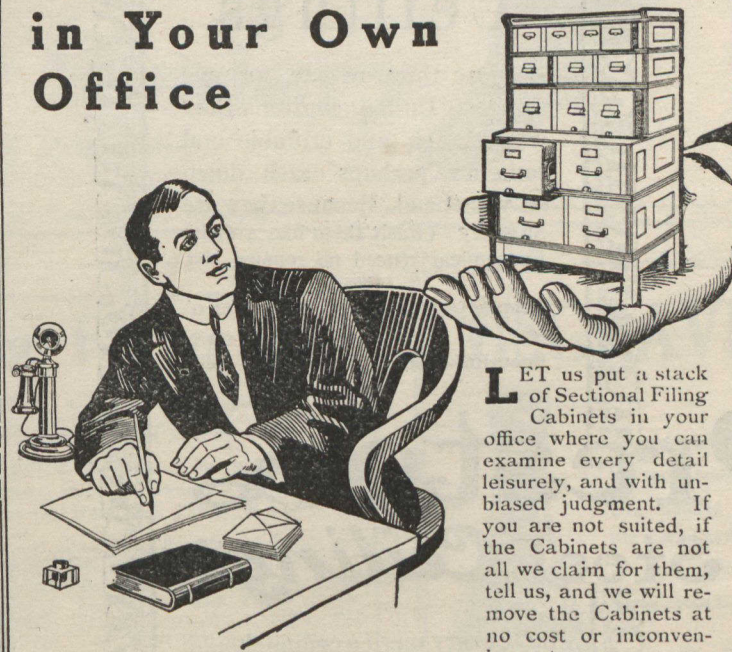
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