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S.S.S.



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STARVING ON DAKOTA PLAINS

Written for The Western Home Monthly by "Kootenai" Brown

"We broke trail all that day, and night caught us still several miles from Mouse River."

I REMEMBER almost perishing on Dakota plains in the winter of 1869 and 1870. The weather was very cold and heavily crusted snow covered the plains of Northern Dakota to a depth of from eighteen inches to two feet. It was good going for dogs and snow-shoes.

I was in the service of the United States Government as scout and despatch rider, and at the time of this experience I was going from headquarters at Fort Stevenson to Mouse River, about a four-day trip there and back. We used dogs—huskies from the north—some of which would weigh one hundred pounds. These dogs were so savage they would snap the finger off a person if he were not careful.

It was in the month of February, and with me was a Frenchman named Baptiste Guardepuy, and a little white boy, Bobbie Mulligan, born at Fort Garry, and afterwards frozen to death in the vicinity of Edmonton. The three of us were detailed with three teams of four dogs each, and heavy mail for Mouse River, about half-way to Fort Totten, but not in a straight course nor along a regular wagon road. In the winter we used ice roads wherever possible and travelled in the shelter of scrub brush or timber if there was any on the way.

The government had men at all stations, and in winter mail was relayed. That is, our route was about sixty miles from Fort Stevenson to Mouse River and return. Another party with dogs would meet us at Mouse River and we would take the mail for Fort Stevenson, and give them our mail for Fort Totten. There was a large store of provisions at these stations, and we carried only enough with us to last from one station to another.

This trip it stormed something fierce. All of the first day we fought cold and blinding snow, and late at night got to a point half-way to Mouse River called "The Dog's Den." The Sioux word was "Skunk-a-teepee," meaning dog's lodge. There was a cabin here for shelter, but no provisions, and no one in charge. Next morning we were off early for we knew it would take us all day to get to Mouse River if it were still storming. And it was. The second day was as bad or worse than the first. There was not a living soul for two hundred miles all around us, except at the military posts and stations, save the wandering bands of Sioux making depredations wherever possible. There was no trail or road of any description, nothing but bald windswept prairie with little islands of small trees dotted here and there. There was some timber at the "Dog's Den," enough to ensure good shelter. We had great difficulty keeping our direction. The Mulligan boy was only sixteen years old and hadn't the experience of Guardepuy and myself, so it fell to us to break trail for the dogs.

We broke trail all that day, and night caught us still several miles from Mouse River. We didn't carry watches in those days, but we knew we were about six or seven hours late in our time schedule. We finally got down to the ice on Mouse River, and we thought ourselves out of danger, for we could not then get lost. Guardepuy knew when we should have been in sight of the station of Mouse River where Louie Bellgarde was keeper, and he called out to me: "Must be something wrong. Don't see any sparks coming out of the chimney. And how is it that little Louie's dogs do not run out and bark? I'm sure there is something wrong."

There was no sign of life about the station; and what was particularly significant to Guardepuy and myself: there were no dogs around. We might not expect to find them in the daytime, but at night it was impossible to get to any such station without a half a dozen savage brutes rushing out to devour you. So we took our dog trains ashore and

tied them up. We did not tie them in reality. We took one fore paw of each of the three lead dogs and put it through the collar. He can't get it out and will not try to go very far on three legs. Then we stole quietly up to the house, carrying our guns in our hands at full cock. When we got to the cabin we found the door ajar and Guardepuy whispered: "What will we do?" We were rather puzzled as to the next move. Finally I whispered to Guardepuy: "I'm going in there anyhow." He whispered back: "Don't do such a foolish thing. Maybe the keeper is killed and the cabin full of Indians. If it is, you'll be shot as soon as you pop your head in."

"Well," I answered him, "sooner be shot than frozen to death. I'm tired standing here like a poor relation."

The Keeper Murdered

So I walked in and started poking around with the muzzle of my gun. It was pitch dark and it wasn't just a pleasant feeling to think that at any moment the muzzle of a gun might be stuck into your face by a hostile Indian, or perhaps a knife stuck into your back. When I was reasonably sure that there were no Indians in the place I lit a match. There lying on the floor was poor Bellgarde dead as a door nail and frozen stiff. He was shot and stabbed, and his throat cut. The ghastly deed had apparently been committed three or four days before.

There were no lamps in those days, and we could find no candles, but we located a bowl of grease with a rag in the centre, and with the light this gave we could see clearly that it was the work of Indians. The station was entirely looted; blankets, food, dogs, everything gone. As we hadn't eaten anything since noon we searched eagerly for food, but there was nothing to eat, not a thing. We had a little left from noon, enough for ourselves, but none for the dogs, and twelve dogs needed a lot of feed.

Finally we lay down on the beds with the body of Bellegrade laid out on the floor. We couldn't move a leg or an arm; it would have broken off for he was as stiff as a poker, cramped up in a corner. We couldn't put him outside because the dogs would eat him. So we just left him in the corner and went to sleep.

We were up early in the morning, made a good fire and had a look around. As soon as it was light enough to see outside we discovered that the party from Fort Totten had got to Mouse River ahead of us, left the mail, which was looted and strewn around the station, and had probably been murdered and carried off. Sitting Bull and his Sioux were blamed for it, and were afterwards proven guilty.

We then had a conference to consider what it was best to do. I was for hiking right through to Fort Totten. I said: "We can kill a dog and have a good feed here and then start out."

Guardepuy said: "No, don't think that a good plan. Enemy are not far away and maybe laying for us on the way to Fort Totten. When our mail does not get in day after to-morrow, soldiers at Fort Stevenson will know something has happened and will send relief. We have lots of dogs we can spare to eat, and surely we can get some game, antelope or something." To this I found it hard to consent, so we asked the boy Mulligan what he thought. He replied that he was only a kid and would not advise one way or the other.

Finally as Guardepuy was much older than I, I gave in to him, and we decided to stay. It was storming again just as bad as the first two days, but we all took guns and went out to see what game we could get. We came back in the evening without having seen a thing. We were all as hungry as bears. We had

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