

# THE GARDEN OF THE GULF

*A Tale of Close Quarters with a Polar Bear.*



I AM a detective — or more truthfully, I *was* a detective, but at the offset I wish to enforce the idea upon the reader that emphasis must be placed strongly on the word 'was.' Those days, and nights, of shadowing, trailing, deceiving and hoodwinking my fellow men and women are a thing of the past. And this is not a detective story even. I simply had to bring in the fact of my being a detective to account for the experience that I am about to relate.

It started on the little schooner *Mary Jane*. Never mind what country's flag she flew—Canada, or the United States. To the uninitiated she was a simple little fishing boat that paid very frequent visits to the Prince Edward Island shores, remained a few days, then scurried rapidly southward, from whence she was sure to return before many tides.

To the confidential men of at least one government she was more than an innocent fishing smack. However, I believe I said this was no detective story. I have friends in both countries and have solved many a tangled riddle for both governments, and plainly speaking it was no person's business what I was doing on the *Mary Jane* one early spring day in 19—. I am not going to tell my reason for being on this mysterious little craft. My space will be amply filled with what happened when I was off her—and an ignominious getting off it was to a sleuth who prided himself on his ability to keep out of trouble.

We were heading for Prince Edward Island—the Garden of the Gulf they call it, although in the early spring before the leaves begin to open it is a barren, bleak-looking garden to be sure. The *Mary Jane* was far from roomy at best, and in my cramped position, hidden behind a few barrels of salt pork, the lack of space was painfully apparent. I had already been cramped up for twenty-four hours without a wink of sleep, and now in the midnight watch when not a soul could be seen on the after deck, I felt it was time to ease my aching limbs. arose and gave one delicious stretch. Then in a flash dark shapes appeared from nowhere and engulfed me.

It was all over quickly. The *Mary Jane*, innocent fishing boat though she was, had no room for spies. Securely wrapped in a heavy piece of sailcloth with a lump of lead from the ballast for a companion, I was carried to the side.

I remember the hum of gruff seamen's voices as I lay balanced on the rail, and the command to heave me over. Not a moment even was given to make my peace with my Maker. I felt myself tearing through space, down, down, hundreds of feet it seemed, although I knew full well that the *Mary Jane's* deck was a bare ten feet from the water line. I drew my knees to my chest as I fell, feeling already the ice-cold water of the Atlantic as it soaked through the canvas and choked the life out of me. My knife was in my belt and I decided to at least make an attempt to live; who knew but that the shore of at least a floating ice-field was not near?

Thud! I struck; not water, but something solid, the impact with which caused stars, crescents and forks of gilt-edged lightning to dance before my eyes. At the same moment I heard a crash as the *Mary Jane* ran full tilt into the ice field upon which I had fallen.

Gruff voices, cursing, ordering and expostulating came to my ears. But I had no time to listen. My knife had already cut a slit in the canvas and I was in the open in a minute. I was surprised to find myself fully a dozen feet from the edge of the field. No doubt when I struck I had involuntarily rolled over and over to a place of safety. But I could not reason the matter then. With head bent low I raced across the ice—my destination anywhere in an opposite direction to the *Mary Jane*. I was careful, however, to keep an eye open so that I did not strike the water on the other side.

When a good eighth of a mile lay between myself and the edge of the schooner I squatted on a piled-up hillock of snow-covered ice and watched the lights from my late home twinkle in the darkness. After a while they began to move, and gradually became dimmer and dimmer. Backing away, I figured it, and while the receding lights

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filled me with feelings of lonesomeness, I was thankful that they were receding. I did not wish a game of hare and hounds on the ice field in which I played the part of the hare.

When the lights had practically disappeared toward the northwest, I picked my way carefully back to my late shroud. It was still there, and gratefully I dragged it away from the edge. In spite of my adventure I was inexpressibly sleepy. The shroud, as I called it, was waterproof and would make a good mattress as well as covering. The night was warm and my overcoat was fur-lined and heavy. Still, to make doubly sure of not being awakened by the chill blast of a northwester before my sleep was over, I crawled through the slit in the canvas.

"Funny old place for a siesta," I murmured drowsily to myself just before I sank into a delightful slumber. And I learned later that it was far more funny than I imagined.

I have always dreaded the next part of my story. Incredulous smiles, open derision, and sneers of disbelief have been my lot when telling it. However, I always had satisfaction in the end. I was willing to wager good money that I could prove my statements and invariably won. The harbour-master at Pictou, the captain of the revenue cutter—but wait, I have promised the Government to be sparing of names.

I awoke; there was nothing startling about that. In fact, it was to be expected sooner or later. There was a delicious feeling of warmth at my back although the tip of my nose assured me that the weather had changed and it was anything but warm. I yawned drowsily, trying to imagine a reason that would account for such a difference in temperature between the back and front portions of my body.

Was I frozen? Alarmed, I kicked my foot backwards to see if I had full power over my muscles.

The answer was entirely different from what I had expected. I heard a grunt as some unwieldy body slid away from behind me, followed by the hasty patter of feet. Immediately the temperature of my back dropped at least forty degrees. I could feel the cold shivers run up and down my spine, and my hair I am sure stood on end.

Grasping my knife, I stuck my head through the slit in the canvas. Standing not thirty feet away, his small, bright eyes looking at me inquisitively and his huge, shaggy head moving from one side to another stood my bed-mate—a polar bear of the first water, the pure, unadulterated stuff, all wool, or fur rather, and a yard wide.

I don't know which was the most alarmed. With a bravado I was far from feeling I shouted at him and waved my hands furiously. He gave an affrighted woof and scuttled across the ice. I followed joyously. Here was where I would show the superiority of the human over the brute. But my calculations were wrong. Suddenly Bruin reached the open water. Apparently he was loath to take a bath so soon after rising. Or perhaps he wished his breakfast first. At any rate he turned, stood on his hind legs, opened his ponderous jaws and snarled—yes, actually snarled at his bed-fellow.

And then I ran, and did not stop until I had reached my canvas upon which I dropped and watched him, ruminating in my mind as to the probable outcome of this adventure.

Bruin gazed at me for a while, then turned his attention to the water. Soon he captured a fish of goodly dimensions and began to regale himself.

That reminded me that I, too, was hungry, but as I was not gifted with natural fishing tackle like my northern friend, I was forced to content myself with munching one of my last hard-tack sea biscuits and draining the last drops from my tea-can, which luckily I had brought with me when I boarded the *Mary Jane*. This done, I cast my eyes around my floating home.

Strange as it may appear, it was the first time that I had attempted to size up my chances of escape. Fatigue had claimed me the night before and when I awoke there had been enough excitement in the air to keep my mind on matters other than the chances of getting to land. The chances of being eaten were what worried me, for I fully believed that polar bears were particularly fond of castaways, and that I had been foreordained to keep this handsome specimen from dwindling to a shadow with starvation. It was a great relief to learn that I was to have a little time to myself at

least before Bruin would have finished his fish and be ready for his meat course.

And then the thought struck me that it was Friday. I fairly danced with delight. Surely no well-brought-up bear would molest me on a Friday. My chances of escape appeared brighter by far, now that this thought gave me relief.

However, I was anxious to get to shore. Friday or no Friday I was not going to tempt Providence, and the ice-field, no matter how large, was far too small for myself and yonder fish-eating quadruped.

Far off in the distance I could see the Prince Edward shore. Between me and land, however, was at least three miles of open water. Still a fresh northeaster was blowing and it would not take long to drive the ice in-shore. The field itself was perhaps half a mile in length and an eighth of a mile wide, but the wind had caused a fairly heavy sea to come up and an occasional crack showed me that pieces from the edge were breaking off and rapidly decreasing the area. Even now I could see several cakes of goodly size drifting in the wake of the mother field, and the problem came up in my mind just how much would be left of the original field when it had drifted to shore, which it undoubtedly would do with the present wind. I sincerely hoped that I would be fortunate enough to stick to the large part and not be carried away on the flotsam.

With this end in view I took up my stand as near the centre as I could, and the bear, evidently guided by instinct as acute as my reasoning powers, deemed it advisable to squat far too near my location for my complete satisfaction.

Not fifty yards from one another we sat and viewed the distant shore, my furry companion shaking his wise old head knowingly from side to side and giving an occasional grunt of alarm when a larger piece of ice than usual would break away from its parent with a resounding crash.

The wind had been increasing steadily, and naturally the ice had yielded to the force of the rising waves and was becoming more and more rapidly a jumbled mass of smaller cakes.

The stern truth was not brought home to me with full force until a louder report than usual sounded at my very feet. I sprang back just in time to escape slipping into the widening gap beneath my eyes. The other cake, on which Bruin squatted, was gradually drifting away and I realised that the field had broken squarely in two. The bear's portion yielded to the force of a mighty wave and rose high in the air, the pure green ice showing for an instant until with a mighty splash of spray it sank into the ocean. The spray fell to the very feet of my former companion. He sniffed it disdainfully, then trotted to the edge of the water between us. I had congratulated myself that I was well rid of him. Whether it was that he appreciated my company or whether my cake appeared larger and safer to him I cannot tell, but after taking the temperature of the water with a hairy paw, he gave a whimper and plunged into the waves.

I could see his glistening nose ploughing toward me, and a splash of salt spray as his big, heavy paw occasionally missed connection with the water and showed clear and white above the crest of a wave.

I met him at the edge, determined that the field, or what remained of it, should not be burdened with double weight. As his snorting nose drew near I sat down with my hands braced behind me, and when his foremost paw fell on the ice I brought my heavy nailed boot down on it. With a whimper of pain he sank back and swam toward the left.

I shoved myself across the ice after him. Here, near the edge, it was almost impossible to stand upright and I was in momentary terror lest I should either slip off or that portion on which I sat should become dissected from the rest.

Bruin made better speed as a swimmer than I did as an ice-boat and he was half up on the field when with a frantic kick I attempted to push him back. The slope of the ice aided me for he slipped into the water with a growl of rage. A floating block struck him a sounding whack and with a sniff he sank out of sight.

"Drowned," I muttered as I hastened toward the centre, but five minutes later when I looked over my shoulder and saw him sitting on his haunches calmly licking his wounded paw, and glaring wrathfully at me, I formed another opinion. I verified my suspicions later in a large encyclopedia where I learned

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