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The Hunger Test

By THEODORE ROBERTS

When cold and hunger have possession of both sides of the door; when one's toil brings no return save weariness; when the shadow wolf haunts the hearth, long-jawed and hollow-flanked—then is the test of a man's courage. The horror of these conditions came, one winter, to Nick Cormey, of Squid Cove on the Labrador—and he failed in the test. His failure was not due to a lack of natural courage, but to the activity of his imagination. The eyes and fangs of the wolf were as real to his anxious vision as flesh and bone that can be touched with the fingers. The shore ice lay firm along the ach-ing coast, a full two miles in width; so there was no help to be looked for from the sea.

"Maybe some deer be winterin' back in the woods," said Nick. He stowed on the kammutik his sleeping bag, his gun, and a little food for himself and the three dogs, kissed the woman and the child, and started inland; but he felt no hope of success, even at the commencement of his journey. It was out of all reason to expect to find any caribou in the nearer woods; for, in winter, the herds of that country move westward, beyond the distant hills, in search of food and shelter. And Nick Cormey knew that there was not food enough, either for himself or for the two at home, to bridge the time re-quired for the longer journey.

Nick Cormey followed the hopeless quest for two days; and despair was always at his elbow, running on the snow like a shadow. He saw no sign of game. The dogs, maddened by hunger, were either sulking or fighting continually. On the morning of the third day, while he was eating his scrap of breakfast, and wondering bitterly if he should push farther inland or return to Squid Cove empty handed, he heard the sound of voices. Then two men, walking on rackets, and a loaded sledge drawn by six dogs came into sight around a spur of woods.

The men with the six dog sledge proved to be a stranger named Dr. Scovill and a half-breed Micmac from Wellington Harbor. The doctor told Cormey that he had come to Labrador as an officer of the British Northern Mission Society, to bring help to the fishermen of that coast, and that his newly established headquarters were at Wellington Harbor. He was now on his way to Wreck Islands, with provisions and medicines for the people there; but he assured Cormey that his assistant, Dr. Scott, who had remained in Wellington Harbor, would look after his case. He gave Cormey a note for the other doctor, authorizing him to treat the fisherman from Squid Cove with liberality.

Even as Nick Cormey turned his dogs back toward the coast, a twinge of his old enemy, rheumatism, gnawed in his loins. Within an hour from that first warning, the pains were so severe that he was forced to remove his rackets from his feet and lie on the sledge. In his crippled condition he had not full command over the dogs; but after three days and two nights of agony, he crawled from the sledge and beat on the door of the cabin with his mitted hands. The woman helped him in, very tenderly, without a second glance at the empty sledge.

"What be the trouble with Davy?" he asked, looking toward the bed in the corner.

"He be taken bad," whispered the woman, brokenly—and then she hid her face in her hands.

"An' look 'e here!" cried the man, with a sob in his voice.

He gave her the piece of paper that, but for his helplessness, would bring them food and healing. Then he cried out against the blindness and bitterness of life, and cursed his pain-racked limbs for their uselessness.

The sight of her husband's despair lifted the woman's spirit above its own grief. She comforted him with tenderness of hand and voice; and at last he was calm enough to explain to her the meaning of the written message. When

she understood it, she cried out her gratitude to God and called upon the saints to reward the goodness of the unknown doctor. Nick looked at her with wonder, and with a light of reviving hope in his eyes.

"I be goin' to Wellington Harbor first thing in the mornin'," she said. "'Tis a fair path, an' only sixteen mile. That good doctor will give me medicine for ye an' Davy, an' bread an' molasses an' tea. May the saints crown him!"

"But the dogs, Kate!" replied Nick, stilling a groan for the agony in his legs. "They be worse nor I ever seen them, girl! Them two huskies be like devils. Sure, 'twere all I could do to master 'em, Cap'n be the only best I 'd the team ye can trust."

"I'll go out now, an' feed 'em a full half-o' the caplin that be left—an' 't'other half afore we start in the mornin'," replied the woman fearlessly.

Nick could not sleep, so torn was he with pain and black fear; and little Davy, who was suffering from general weakness brought on by cold and lack of nourishment, whimpered thru half the night. So the woman took no rest, but tended and comforted them until dawn. Then she carried in a great store of fire wood, and cooked a mess of the last scraps of fish and hard bread in the cabin.

She fed the last of the frozen caplin to the three dogs. Nick tried to crawl from the cabin, to harness the team for her; but he got no farther than the threshold, and was then near to fainting with the pain.

"Nay, boy, ye must not fret," said the woman. "I'll tend to the dogs, never fear!"

"But for that fool Peter Sprowl a livin' on us all last summer, sure ye'd never have to make the trip at all," he cried. "We give him the good medicine for his chest, an' he et a full quintal o' fish!"

By this time Kate was ready to harness the dogs and set out on the journey. She wore Nick's coat and cap and mittens, and held her rackets in one hand and the great dog whip in the other.

"'Twould not be Christian to grudge what we give to that poor unfortun-ate," she replied. "Keep yer heart up, Nick, dear, an' tend well to Davy. I'll master them huskies, never fear; an' even if they do get bad, sure I'll be back afore midday tomorrow. I'll be to Wellington Harbor long afore sun-down, an' the dogs'll get a good feed there."

"If ye'd lay me on the sledge, may-be I'd get to the harbor," said Cormey.

"'Twould be yer death, boy," said the woman.

She harnessed the three dogs at last, but was forced to lash the two huskies severely before she could win control over them.

II

Nick crouched beside the bed where little Davy lay in troubled slumber. His spirit raged stupidly within him, like a caged animal. He tried to quiet himself to sleep. He closed his eyes, but no rest came to either mind or body. What were the dogs doing now? Were they running quietly, or threatening Kate with rebellion?

Why had God struck his great muscles useless in the hour of bitterest need? Why was Peter Sprowl, who had neither wife nor child, spared to go light foot over the snow at every whim of his foolish wits? He forgot how Peter had once been a mail-carrier—and at times believed himself still to be one—and had lost his sanity during a great storm of wind and snow, in which he had wandered, alone and without food, for days, finally bringing in his mail-bags safely. No, he could think of Peter only as the worthless idiot who had eaten the food that should have fed Kate and the child.

For a few miles the dogs traveled steadily. The sledge ran light over the wind-packed snow, and the sky was clear. Captain, who was in the lead,

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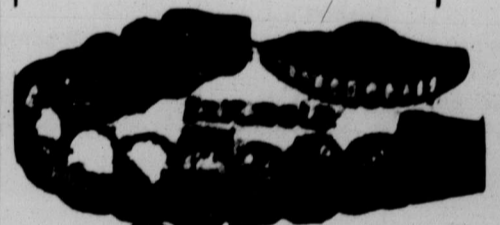
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