

The Gift of the Storm

By E. C. Cuming

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an allowance, he had sent him to Canada in the hope that the temporary exile would bring him to his senses. But the same spirit which refused to split upon his companions in England asserted itself, and after making his way out of the country, he promptly changed his name and refused to become a remittance man. Thus he found himself after a series of adventures, cut off from his family and friends, except for an occasional newspaper item, entering the greatest adventure that this land has to offer—that of homesteading the great plains of Saskatchewan. Strong and robust of body, with certain mannerisms which belonged to his old life, he had settled down with the determination to show his people his independence and to gain the confidence of his neighbors. Passing through the preliminary stages he had made most of the fool mistakes that the proverbial Englishman commits, so that he had become somewhat of a standing joke with the latter, and to earn the nickname of "The Duke". His splendid spirit and grit, however, had soon won their respect so that he was sought after on this particular holiday by several of the families in the community as a guest at their somewhat primitive celebration. He could tell a good story, sing a fair song and play a hand with most of them, but he consistently refused to give any clue as to his past life. Looking forward with anticipation to the visit to a neighbor some three miles distant from his shack, the change brought about by the storm caused him keen disappointment, which, however, he proceeded to overcome by keeping his own company.

As the day drew on toward evening the storm seemed to increase in its violence so that he decided to tend the few chores that befell to his lot before the sun finally disappeared behind the clouds, and in order to insure his safe return to the house he resorted to a scheme of which he had been told by his friends in the district. He realized that, while under ordinary circumstances he could find his way between the two buildings blindfolded, under the conditions which now prevailed it was possible not only to lose his way but to wander around for hours until compelled to give up with exhaustion. Thus, fastening one end of a line of twine to the outside of the house, he proceeded to unwind until he should reach his destination, which even though he missed, by following the line to its fastened end he could at least land safely at his door. Three times he started out only to lose his directions and failing to locate the elusive building, he made his way almost exhausted to the end of the line and recuperated for the next attempt. Finally, however, the scheme worked and securing the other end of the line to the barn he finished his evening's work. Realising, however, that it might be necessary to look around again during the evening he left the string attached after drawing it as taut as possible, and after fighting with the blinding storm made his way home.

Supper completed and the culinary duties disposed of he decided to spend the evening with his pipe and dreams and settled down before the roaring fire, and for several hours whiled away the time between books and solitaire.

The evening passed more quickly than he had anticipated, and before turning in for the night, he went out to have a look around at conditions. Opening the door he was met by a blinding cloud of snow and sleet which covered him from head to foot with its feathery whiteness, while the wind howled as though it were seeking to revenge itself upon those who had been hardy enough to wrest a home from these great wastes.

"That's a perfect corker of a night to be out in and I pity the poor devil that happens to get lost in such a storm," he said to himself as he secured the door against the onslaught.

With the rising of the storm the temperature had fallen well below zero, finding every crack and cranny in the not too securely built shack, so that the man decided to keep the fire well made and, since it was not yet mid-

night, and it would be necessary to mend it several times during the night, he settled down again for another hour or two of dreaming. He could not have been long thus engaged, when he seemed to hear a call of distress sounding through the lull in the storm. While the wind itself seemed to sound almost human at times, there was something uncanny about the wail that had attracted his attention, but, not being sure, and with the experience of the last opening of the door in his mind, he settled down to wait until he could be more sure of its source.

"Help! Oh, help us, whoever you are," it came again more clearly. "Help! We're lost." It seemed as though it came from the depths of a soul that had indeed lost itself in the great blinding blizzard beyond, and immediately the man within the shack was electrified into action.

Seizing his mackinaw and cap and fastening his ear flaps down as far as possible so as not to avoid his hearing, he lit his lantern and peered into the storm, to find nothing except the engulfing whiteness. Once again the appeal sounded, but fainter than before, and this very failing galvanized the searcher into action.

For several minutes, following his line, Coleman searched the snow, calling at the top of his voice and filling his lungs with the frosty air, when he suddenly realised that somehow, somewhere the line had been broken and that he was simply following a loose end. Making his way back to the shack he fetched a fresh supply and, reaching once more the broken end, he attached a further line on to it and began letting it out until he reached the end of the rope. Groping around he at last stumbled upon an object in the snow which upon rolling over he discovered to be the form of a woman. Evidently she had laid sometime and had in some way broken through the line that he had previously strung that evening connecting his buildings. Her garments were frozen stiff and the man realized that it was imperative that he get her into a place of safety as soon as possible, and that some care would have to be given her to avoid the pain of thawing out the hands and feet that he felt sure were frozen, perhaps stiff. Thus he lifted her into his arms and made his way along the string towards the shack.

But the work of getting to safety was not as simple as it at first seemed. The girl whom he had judged to be of light weight compared with a great many other things he had lifted, seemed momentarily to grow heavier, and as he battled against the wind and storm, he found it necessary again and again to rest. Step after step seemed to be a mile and resting her against the wind he made effort after effort to gain his end. Presently, however, the storm lifted a moment and he saw the most welcome sight he had ever seen in the shape of the light in his own home. With redoubled effort he made his way to the haven of refuge, and, reaching it, thrust the door open with a sigh of relief. Fastening the door behind him against the demon that howled in its fury outside he proceeded to make his uninvited guest as comfortable as possible, and to consider means and ways of bringing her back to consciousness. A cursory investigation showed to him that by some means, he could not fathom, she had been able to keep from freezing so that he was relieved of the process of thawing out. The strong physique of the girl quickly responded to his efforts and opening her eyes to the light, she exclaimed:

"Well, Dad, we did make it after all, didn't we? I surely thought we would never get through."

The mention by the semi-conscious girl of a companion brought to Coleman a sense of impending tragedy, for with the vivid memory of his recent struggle and the realization that it had cost him a great deal of his own strength, he was impressed with the fact that even under promising conditions the second battle might mean death both to the rescuer and the rescued. To leave the girl uncared for meant a further risk and should he fail in his second quest his fight for her life would be futile. It appeared (Contd. on page 12)



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