

A Man's Woman

By

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Chapter I.

At four o'clock in the morning everybody in the tent was still asleep, exhausted by the terrible march of the previous day. The hummocky ice and pressure-ridges that Bennett had foreseen had at last been met with, and, though camp had been broken at six o'clock and though men and dogs had hauled and tugged and wrestled with the heavy sledges until five o'clock in the afternoon, only a mile and a half had been covered. But though the progress was slow, it was yet progress. It was not the harrowing, heart-breaking immobility of those long months aboard the Freja. Every yard to the southward, though won at the expense of a battle with the ice, brought them nearer to Wrangel Island and ultimate safety.

Then, too, at supper-time the unexpected had happened. Bennett, moved no doubt by their weakened condition, had dealt out extra rations to each man: one and two-thirds ounces of butter and six and two-thirds ounces of aleuronate bread—a veritable luxury after the unvarying diet of pemmican, lime juice, and dried potatoes of the past fortnight. The men had got into their sleeping-bags early, and until four o'clock in the morning had slept profoundly, inert, stupefied, almost without movement. But a few minutes after four o'clock Bennett awoke. He was usually up about half an hour before the others. On the day before he had been able to get a meridian altitude of the sun, and was anxious to complete his calculations as to the expedition's position on the chart that he had begun in the evening.

He pushed back the flap of the sleeping-bag and rose to his full height, passing his hands over his face, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. He was an enormous man, standing six feet two inches in his reindeer footnips and having the look more of a prize-fighter than of a scientist. Even making allowances for its coating of dirt and its harsh, black stubble of half a week's growth, the face was not pleasant. Bennett was an ugly man. His lower jaw was huge almost to deformity, like that of the bulldog, the chin salient, the mouth close-gripped, with great lips, indomitable, brutal. The forehead was contracted and small, the forehead of men of single ideas, and the eyes, too, were small and twinkling, one of them marred by a sharply defined cast.

But as Bennett was fumbling in the tin box that was lashed upon the number four sledge, looking for his notebook wherein he had begun his calculations for latitude, he was surprised to find a copy of the record he had left in the instrument box under the cairn at Cape Kammeni at the beginning of this southerly march. He had supposed that this copy had been mislaid, and was not a little relieved to come across it now. He read it through hastily, his mind reviewing again the incidents of the last few months. Certain extracts of this record ran as follows:

Arctic steamer Freja, on ice off Cape Kammeni, New Siberian Islands, 76 deg. 10 min. north latitude, 150 deg. 40 min. east longitude, July 12, 1891.... We accordingly froze the ship in on the last day of September, 1890, and during the following winter drifted with the pack in a northwesterly direction.... On Friday, July 10, 1891, being in latitude 76 deg. 10 min. north; longitude 150 deg. 10 min. east, the Freja was caught in a severe nip between two floes and was crushed, sinking in about two hours. We abandoned her, saving 200 days' provisions and all necessary clothing, instruments, etc....

I shall now attempt a southerly march over the ice to Kolyuchin Bay by way of Wrangel Island, where provisions have been cached, hoping to fall in with the relief ships or steam whalers on the way. Our party consists of the following twelve persons: ... All well with the exception of Mr. Ferriss, the chief engineer, whose left hand has been badly frostbitten. No scurvy in the party as yet. We have eighteen Ostiak dogs with us in prime condition, and expect to drag our ship's boat upon sledges.

WARD BENNETT, Commanding Freja Arctic Exploring Expedition.

Bennett returned this copy of the record to its place in the box, and stood for a moment in the centre of the tent, his head bent to avoid the ridge-pole, looking thoughtfully upon the ground.

Well, so far all had gone right—no scurvy, provisions in plenty. The dogs were in good condition, his men cheerful, trusting in him as in a god, and surely no leader could wish for a better lieutenant and comrade than Richard Ferriss—but this hummocky ice—these pressure-ridges which the expedition had met the day before. Instead of turning at once to his ciphering Bennett drew the hood of the wolfskin coat over his head, buttoned a red flannel mask across his face, and, raising the flap of the tent, stepped outside.

Under the lee of the tent the dogs were sleeping, moveless bundles of fur, black and white, perceptibly steaming. The three great McClintock sledges, weighted down with the Freja's boats and with the expedition's impedimenta, lay where they had been halted the evening before.

In the sky directly in front of Bennett as he issued from the tent three moons, hooped in a vast circle of nebulous light, shone roseate through a fine mist, while in the western heavens streamers of green, orange, and vermilion light, immeasurably vast, were shooting noiselessly from horizon to zenith.

But Bennett had more on his mind that morning than mock-moons and auroras. To the south and east, about a quarter of a mile from the tent, the pressure of the floes had thrown up an enormous ridge of shattered ice-cakes, a mound, a long hill of blue-green slabs and blocks huddling together at every conceivable angle. It was nearly twenty feet in height, quite the highest point that Bennett could

discover. Scrambling and climbing over countless other ridges that intervened, he made his way to it, ascended it almost on hands and knees, and, standing upon its highest point, looked long and carefully to the southward.

A wilderness beyond all thought, words, or imagination desolate stretched out before him there forever and forever—ice, ice, ice, fields and floes of ice, laying themselves out under that gloomy sky, league after league, endless, sombre, infinitely vast, infinitely formidable. But now it was no longer the smooth ice over which the expedition had for so long been travelling. In every direction, intersecting one another at ten thousand points, crossing and recrossing, weaving a gigantic, bewildering network of gashed, jagged, splintered ice-blocks, ran the pressure-ridges and hummocks. In places a score or more of these ridges had been wedged together to form one huge field of broken slabs of ice miles in width, miles in length. From horizon to horizon there was no level place, no open water, no pathway. The view to the southward resembled a tempest-tossed ocean suddenly frozen.

One of these ridges Bennett had just climbed, and upon it he now stood. Even for him, unencumbered, carrying no weight, the climb had been difficult; more than once he had slipped and fallen. At times he had been obliged to go forward almost on his hands and knees. And yet it was across that jungle of ice, that unspeakable tangle of blue-green slabs and cakes and blocks, that the expedition must now advance, dragging its boats, its sledges, its provisions, instruments, and baggage.

Bennett stood looking. Before him lay his task. There under his eyes was the Enemy. Face to face with him was the titanic primal strength of a chaotic world, the stupendous still force of a merciless nature, waiting calmly, waiting silently to close upon and crush him. For a long time he stood watching. Then the great brutal jaw grew more salient than ever, the teeth set and clenched behind the close-gripped lips, the cast in the small twinkling eyes grew suddenly more pronounced. One huge fist raised, and the arm slowly extended forward like the resistless moving of a piston. Then when his arm was at its full reach Bennett spoke as though in answer to the voiceless, terrible challenge of the Ice. Through his clenched teeth his words came slow and measured.

"But I'll break you, by God! believe me, I will."

After a while he returned to the tent, awoke the cook, and while breakfast was being prepared completed his calculations for latitude, wrote up his ice-journal, and noted down the temperature and the direction and velocity of the wind. As he was finishing, Richard Ferriss, who was the chief engineer and second in command, awoke and immediately asked the latitude.

"Seventy-four-fifteen," answered Bennett without looking up.

"Seventy-four-fifteen," repeated Ferriss, nodding his head; "we didn't make much distance yesterday."

"I hope we can make as much to-day," returned Bennett grimly as he put away his observation-journal and note-books.

"How's the ice to the south'ard?"

"Bad; wake the men."

After breakfast and while the McClintocks were being loaded Bennett sent Ferriss on ahead to choose a road through and over the ridges. It was dreadful work. For two hours Ferriss wandered about amid the broken ice all but hopelessly bewildered. But at length, to his great satisfaction, he beheld a fairly open stretch about a quarter of a mile in length lying out to the southwest and not too far out of the expedition's line of march. Some dozen ridges would have to be crossed before this level was reached; but there was no help for it, so Ferriss planted his flags where the heaps of ice-blocks seemed least impracticable and returned toward the camp. It had already been broken, and on his way he met the entire expedition involved in the intricacies of the first rough ice.

All of the eighteen dogs had been harnessed to the number two sledge, that carried the whaleboat and the major part of the provisions, and every man of the party, Bennett included, was straining at the haul-ropes with the dogs. Foot by foot the sledge came over the ridge, grinding and lurching among the ice-blocks;

then, partly by guiding, partly by lifting, it was piloted down the slope, only in the end to escape from all control and come crashing downward among the dogs, jolting one of the medicine chests from its lashings and butting its nose heavily against the foot of the next hummock immediately beyond. But the men scrambled to their places again, the medicine chest was replaced, and Muck Tu, the Esquimau dog-master, whipped forward his dogs. Ferriss, too, laid hold. The next hummock was surmounted, the dogs panting, and the men, even in that icy air, reeking with perspiration. Then suddenly and without the least warning Bennett and McPherson, who were in the lead, broke through some young ice into water up to their breasts, Muck Tu and one of the dogs breaking through immediately afterward. The men were pulled out, or, of their own efforts, climbed upon the ice again. But in an instant their clothes were frozen to rattling armor.

"Bear off to the east'ard, here!" commanded Bennett, shaking the icy, stinging water from his sleeves. "Everybody on the ropes now!"

Another pressure-ridge was surmounted, then a third, and by an hour after the start they had arrived at the first one of Ferriss's flags. Here the number two sledge was left, and the entire expedition, dogs and men, returned to camp to bring up the number one McClintock loaded with the Freja's cutter and with the sleeping-bags, instruments, and tent. This sledge was successfully dragged over the first two hummocks, but as it was being hauled up the third its left-hand runner suddenly buckled and turned under it with a loud snap. There was nothing for it now but to remove the entire load and to set Hawes, the carpenter, to work upon its repair.

"Up your other sledge!" ordered Bennett.

Once more the expedition returned to the morning's camping-place, and, harnessing itself to the third McClintock, struggled forward with it for an hour and a half until it was up with the first sledge and Ferriss's flag. Fortunately the two dog-sleds, four and five, were light, and Bennett, dividing his forces, brought them up in a single haul. But Hawes called out that the broken sledge was now repaired. The men turned to at once, reloaded it, and hauled it onward, so that by noon every sledge had been moved forward quite a quarter of a mile.

But now, for the moment, the men, after going over the same ground seven times, were used up, and Muck Tu could no longer whip the dogs to their work. Bennett called a halt. Hot tea was made, and pemmican and hardtack served out.

"We'll have easier hauling this afternoon, men," said Bennett; "this next ridge is the worst of the lot; beyond that Mr. Ferriss says we've got nearly a quarter of a mile of level floes."

On again at one o'clock; but the hummock of which Bennett had spoken proved absolutely impassable for the loaded sledges. It was all one that the men lay to the ropes like draught-horses, and that Muck Tu flogged the dogs till the goad broke in his hands. The men lost their footing upon the slippery ice and fell to their knees; the dogs laid down in the traces groaning and whining. The sledge would not move.

"Unload!" commanded Bennett.

The lashings were taken off, and the loads, including the great, cumbersome whaleboat itself, carried over the hummock by hand. Then the sledge itself was hauled over and reloaded upon the other side. Thus the whole five sledges.

The work was bitter hard; the knots of the lashings were frozen tight and coated with ice; the cases of provisions, the medicine chests, the canvas bundle of sails, boat-covers, and tents unwieldy and of enormous weight; the footing on the slippery, uneven ice precarious, and more than once a man, staggering under his load, broke through the crust into water so cold that the sensation was like that of burning.

But at last everything was over, the sledges reloaded, and the forward movement resumed. Only one low hummock now intervened between them and the longed-for level floe.

However, as they were about to start forward again a lamentable gigantic sound began vibrating in their ears, a rumbling, groaning note rising by quick degrees to a strident shriek. Other sounds, hollow and shrill—treble mingling with diapason—joined in the first. The noise came from just beyond the pressure-mound at the foot of which the party had halted.

"Forward!" shouted Bennett; "hurry there, men!"

Desperately eager, the men bent panting to their work. The sledge bearing the whaleboat topped the hummock.

"Now, then, over with her!" cried Ferriss.

But it was too late. As they stood looking down upon it for an instant, the level floe, their one sustaining hope during all the day, suddenly cracked from side to side with the noise of ordnance. Then the groaning and shrieking recommenced. The crack immediately closed up, the pressure on the sides of the floe began again, and on the smooth surface of the ice, domes and mounds abruptly reared themselves. As the pressure increased these domes and mounds cracked and burst into countless blocks and slabs. Ridge after ridge was formed in the twinkling of an eye. Thundering like a cannonade of siege guns, the whole floe burst up, jagged, splintered, hummocky. In less than three minutes, and while the Freja's men stood watching, the level stretch toward which since morning they had struggled with incalculable toil was ground up into a vast mass of confused and pathless rubble.

"Oh, this will never do," muttered Ferriss, disheartened.

"Come on, men!" exclaimed Bennett. "Mr. Ferriss, go forward, and choose a road for us."

The labour of the morning was recommenced. With infinite patience, infinite hardship, the sledges one by one were advanced. So heavy were the three larger McClintocks that only one could be handled at a time, and that one taxed the combined efforts of men and dogs to the uttermost. The same ground had to be covered seven times. For every yard gained seven had to be travelled. It was not a march, it was a battle; a battle without rest and without end and without mercy; a battle with an Enemy whose power was beyond all estimate and whose movements were not reducible to any known law. A certain course would be mapped, certain plans formed, a certain objective determined, and before the course could be finished, the plans executed, or the objective point attained the perverse, inexplicable movement of the ice baffled their determination and set at naught their best ingenuity.

At four o'clock it began to snow. Since the middle of the forenoon the horizon had been obscured by clouds and mist so that no observation for position could be taken. Steadily the clouds had advanced, and by four o'clock the expedition found itself enveloped by wind and driving snow. The flags could no longer be distinguished; thin and treacherous ice was concealed under drifts; the dogs floundered helplessly; the men could scarcely open their eyes against the wind and fine, powder-like snow, and at times when they came to drag forward the last

sledge they found it so nearly buried in the snow that it must be dug out before it could be moved.

Toward half past five the odometer on one of the dog-sleds registered a distance of three-quarters of a mile made since morning. Bennett called a halt, and camp was pitched in the lee of one of the larger hummocks. The alcohol cooker was set going, and supper was had under the tent, the men eating as they lay in their sleeping-bags. But even while eating they fell asleep, drooping lower and lower, finally collapsing upon the canvas floor of the tent, the food still in their mouths.

Yet, for all that, the night was miserable. Even after that day of superhuman struggle they were not to be allowed a few hours of unbroken rest. By midnight the wind had veered to the east and was blowing a gale. An hour later the tent came down. Exhausted as they were, they must turn out and wrestle with that slatting, ice-sheathed canvas, and it was not until half an hour later that everything was fast again.

Once more they crawled into the sleeping-bags, but soon the heat from their bodies melted the ice upon their clothes, and pools of water formed under each man, wetting him to the skin. Sleep was impossible. It grew colder and colder as the night advanced, and the gale increased. At three o'clock in the morning the centigrade thermometer was at eighteen degrees below. The cooker was lighted again, and until six o'clock the party huddled wretchedly about it, dozing and waking, shivering continually.

Breakfast at half past six o'clock; under way again an hour later. There was no change in the nature of the ice. Ridge succeeded ridge, hummock followed upon hummock. The wind was going down, but the snow still fell as fine and bewildering as ever. The cold was intense. Dennison, the doctor and naturalist of the expedition, having slipped his mitten, had his hand frostbitten before he could recover it. Two of the dogs, Big Joe and Stryelka, were noticeably giving out.

But Bennett, his huge jaws clenched, his small, distorted eyes twinkling viciously through the apertures of the wind-mask, his harsh, black eyebrows lowering under the narrow, contracted forehead, drove the expedition to its work relentlessly. Not Muck Tu, the dog-master, had his Ostiaks more completely under his control than he his men. He himself did the work of three. On that vast frame of bone and muscle, fatigue seemed to leave no trace. Upon that inexorable bestial determination difficulties beyond belief left no mark. Not one of the twelve men under his command fighting the stubborn ice with tooth and nail who was not galvanised with his tremendous energy. It was as though a spur was in their flanks, a lash upon their backs. Their minds, their wills, their efforts, their physical strength to the last ounce and pennyweight belonged indissolubly to him. For the time being they were his slaves, his serfs, his beasts of burden, his draught animals, no better than the dogs straining in the traces beside them.

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