



WHEN I STOOD FACE TO FACE WITH DEATH

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THIS article is the first public appearance of these reminiscent thoughts. They earlier found expression in a foreign city under the stimulus and sympathy of a gentle, thoughtful man whose addresses and writings have touched the heart and stirred the emotions of hundreds of thousands of men and women. In itself it would have been one of the most valued memories of my life to recall having been merely the guest of Henry Drummond. But the experience is greatly enhanced by the fact that throughout the night, and until well toward the dawn of morn, we twain gave and took of individual experiences—he of Africa and Glasgow, I of America and the North.

As ever, interested in the eternal problem of eternal existence, and viewing me as one who had stood for months at the threshold of the future life, by query and suggestion he sought to find what of mental attitude or of apprehending knowledge came to me and to my comrades, and what of moral change and mental impress had been wrought in those months of uncertainty and suffering. What was then said under the gray, autumnal sky of Scotland is, as far as the lapse of years permits, here reproduced and somewhat supplemented.

It seems needful, however, to very briefly recount the circumstances that led up to the experiences I am to relate. Under authority of an Act of Congress the United States, acting in unison with eleven other nations, established at Lady Franklin Bay, under my command, one of the international polar stations for simultaneous scientific observations. Two years of highly successful scientific work was supplemented by equally successful geographic expeditions, whereby six thousand square miles of new lands were discovered, and an unparalleled latitude reached, which yet stands as the highest known land.

A FEARFUL VOYAGE OF ELEVEN MILES IN EIGHTEEN DAYS

VISITING ships were promised for 1882 and 1883, but none coming, the expedition, under its original orders, struggled through the ice-filled straits some four hundred miles to the south. After a series of hairbreadth escapes by the moving ice floes, the expedition, on the very point of emerging from Kane Sea into Smith Sound, was frozen in and subjected to the mercy of the floating pack.

For two weeks we awaited the coming of a heavy gale to break up the ice and free our boats. This failing, the steam launch and one boat were abandoned, and by sledge over the heavy ice, and by boat through the open channels an effort was made to reach the land, only eleven miles distant. This may seem to have been an easy task, but we managed only by the most strenuous and exhausting labor to accomplish it, after eighteen days of continuous effort, and under conditions of extreme peril and suffering. We gloried in this success, for in this sea the "Polaris" crew failed, as did elsewhere Rae, the German expedition, and Beaumont. Even Nansen, in summer, was unable to penetrate a shorter distance—ten miles—of shore ice on the coast of East Greenland. But by our strong, energetic men, striving for life and home, the most adverse conditions of ice and water were eventually dominated, and, twenty-five in number, we landed September 19, 1883. In undiminished numbers, with all scientific instruments, complete records; with sledge for land and boat for sea, the future seemed safe.

The land we reached was largely ice-clad, and its few spots of welcome, snow-free earth, though good to the eye, were almost entirely devoid of vegetation, and, consequently, of animal life. It was an uninhabited, barren and desolate coast, without resources or possibilities.

Some food supplies were near Cape Sabine, about thirty miles distant, where a brief record said that everything would be done for our relief. Summoned by this message to a definite abiding-place until the promised relief came, we moved to the most sheltered spot suitable for camp, and there, by the side of a small lake, built new quarters—a stone hut covered and surrounded with snow.

FACE TO FACE WITH DEATH FOR MANY MONTHS

FROM the very first it was evident that we were face to face with death. The factors may be briefly stated: Health, courage, determination, self-helpfulness and hope on one side; on the other, a coast devoid of game; a broad, ice-filled strait opening like a fan to the southward, with current conditions that drove the game to the side opposite us; fuel for warmth lacking, and clothing badly worn. Worst of all we had food for hardly one month. Yet five months must elapse before we could hope for the strait to freeze fast, and over eight months must actually intervene before relief could come.

The winter had set in so sharply that the fur sleeping-bags, freezing inside whenever quitted, were for seven months frozen solidly to the rocky ground on which they rested. It was on October 26, 1883, that the sun went down not to rise again for one hundred and ten days. The temperature at this early date was twenty-eight degrees below freezing, with the certainty that it would approximate one hundred below ere the sun could again shine on us. Our food was divided so as to last until early March. Each man was to have each day as follows: meat, 4.26 ounces; butter, 0.5 ounces; lard, 0.26 ounces; bread, 6 ounces; dog biscuit, 0.8 ounces; condensed milk, 0.2 ounces; canned vegetables, etc., 2.66 ounces, the last actually 2 ounces, owing to short weight. What might we not expect from spring hunting, if we could live on fourteen ounces of mixed food each day, less than one-fourth the usual allowance? If we could live! That was the question in each of our minds. The ounce of seal oil used for reading allowed to the men was already begrudged. We had but a faint ray

of light in our hut even at midday. Each morning as we woke it seemed all a bad dream, only to assert itself each day as a stern reality. The end was always in view. Each day was long in its sufferings and cares, but too short as bringing us one day nearer to the tenth of March, when the last of our rations would be gone.

CHRISTIANITY'S GREAT SOLACE BROUGHT FORTITUDE

DAILY there came into the mind a feeling of rage and defiance at relentless Nature. Impotent we were. Day by day we hunted for game that was not to be found. The vigor of physical manhood filled our veins to bursting. But we could do nothing. The strength of will, the cunning of the mind, and the perception of the spirit were alike of no avail. Plainly we were in a rebellious and stubborn mood, inclined to the thought that of our own powers we could move the world and control the future. How vain it all was! There was more or less wild talk of what would come after all this—in another world. It was significant that those who most proclaimed belief in a future beyond this life were the strongest in will to live out the wretched span that showed its near end to us. If this world is all it would be best to end life rather than pass through the hell on earth that was our certain lot for the next six months—or until death.

Good and bad fortune followed each other. A whale-boat left on the ice was brought by a late gale to the coast where we were, and it served as fuel to cook our tea. The second boat, in good order, was already in use as the roof to our hut. The cold had increased, and the thermometer registered forty degrees below freezing. All the seal holes, where our heroic hunters by a week's exposure had caught one seal, were closed.

The long night without a ray of sun had begun. It would be long! God knows how long it seemed to us! Two thousand six hundred and forty hours without the sun! How would it end? That, we felt, was in the hands of God. But there was no failure of effort on our part. The rule was put into force that each day's duties should engage our full attention. Each man was to work and strive as though our fate rested on him alone.

A HEROIC JOURNEY INTO THE VERY JAWS OF DEATH

A MONTH brought only a tale of pain, failure and almost death. Yet the pluck, the courage, the patience and self-denial in it augured well for the future. The red thread that indicates the cordage of the Queen's Navy found its counterpart in the moral fibre that was interwoven in the character of the men whom I felt it was the highest honor to command. Rising superior to adversity and sufferings, they showed an elevation of the soul that came only from within or from on high. Four volunteers braved death by cold and fatigue in striving to bring to our camp four cases of canned beef from Cape Isabella, where the British expedition cached it. One man froze first his hands and later his feet. The others left the meat to save their comrade, and this latter man, with supreme strength of will, walked for miles on feet frozen solid. Every step was torture, and he fell continually. At last he let his comrades drag him on a sledge until a steep hill stopped them and death awaited all. The others crawled into the buffalo bag beside the frozen man, where they stripped themselves to thaw him out with the heat of their own shivering bodies, while the strongest went on in the deep snow and total darkness to seek help—help which was our camp, and that twenty-five miles distant. Striking terror to my heart this man, with staggering footsteps, fell at midnight against the door of our hut.

Nearly every man volunteered for the awful sledge journey, across a dangerous strait, through utter and almost impenetrable darkness, and in a bitter cold of sixty-six degrees below freezing. But they went, and found the men cemented by frost in the bag, as in a living tomb, which was chopped in pieces with a hatchet.

There are ways and ways of living up to the precepts of Christ. No doubt each nature, in its one-sidedness, stands for that good which seems to itself the highest. We had among us both those who gave up the large things and also those who paid the debt in countless little ways. Our helpless comrade, knowing that his hands and feet must drop off in time, and silent as to the fact that this came through his efforts for the common good, begged me to let him die. It was wrong, he argued, to give his useless mouth a double ration. Piteously he implored us to take his life, that through the food thus saved some one else might live a day or two longer.

THE STARVING AND FREEZING EXPLORERS' CHRISTMAS DINNER

BY THE middle of December we realized that the darkest day had passed, and the sun was returning. An enhanced hopefulness showed the power of mind over matter. How, in that moonless and sunless period of total darkness, the stars were a source of faith and comfort, God only knows. They seemed to us a vision of His glory. Nowhere does the ether so sharply set off the pure color of the stars as in the Arctic heaven.

On Christmas Day we all asked ourselves the same wondering question: Was there ever such another Christmas as ours? It was a feast day for which certain food was set apart, and it was as if we had almost enough to eat. The self-denial of two months now gave us about three ounces each of rice, which was stewed, with about equal amounts of raisins and condensed milk—the only sweet, as our sugar was gone. Then came a cup of chocolate, and in the evening a gill of hot rum, a precious stimulant saved for emergencies. In the health, strength and plenty of the past two years there was always complaining, which was rare in the misery of that period. That Christmas' silent endurance blossomed into speech, and each strove

to outdo in sympathy and affection. The embers of hate, that oft glowed under the breath of circumstance, lost their last spark of malice. Good will and love were the parole and countersign of the day. How can such wealth of things spiritual spring up in the wretched environment of things material, if it be not the expression of immortal souls? Sure it was that our bodies were fast coming to death, as slowly, but inevitably, they were getting out of adjustment with our environment of biting cold and bitter hunger. The soul appears to thrive when the body fails. Fairer were some of these faces to me, since many turned all their manly strength to act and work for others' good. As to our faith and hope, stronger on that Christmas Day than ever, they have been voiced by Cardinal Newman as if for us alone at that time:

"So long Thy power has blest me, sure it still
Will lead me on
O'er moor and fen, o'er crag and torrent, till
The night is gone."

The new year of 1884 was only nineteen days old when death came for the first time. For ninety days we had all lived and kept together. But death was inevitable. Its coming was sure to some, if not to all; our only wonder was it had not come sooner. Only the day before was our comrade at work. We said little. Only one man so far forgot that he was a soldier as to make the faintest sign. But the nearness of the end touched us all. Speech became lower, actions gentler, determined faces grew softer, and conciliation was the spirit of the hour. Who would go next? was the question written on each face. Not a man ventured to say to his fellow, "This is the end." How that eternal question, always so unanswerable, seemed to be even more of a mystery to us!

On March 25 we awoke to find that the sunless night was gone. Our ranks were unbroken save for one. How blessed was that sun on that morning! For the first time in five months a ray of light came into the hut. Ennui and pain, cold and hunger, weakness and anger—as if they were but parts of the darkness—fled away for the moment, giving place to faith, hope and charity. If our misfortunes were overwhelming, each man now rose to the occasion and showed the best of his nature. Sure it was that our common danger had softened the character and called forth virtues that before were latent.

A TINY SONGSTER THE FORERUNNER OF DEATH'S INVASION

ON EASTER Sunday we had a glad surprise. It seemed like the coming of the Lord, when, as a first sign of spring, a tiny snow bunting rested on the ridgepole of our hut and piped a song. All sat silent till the bird passed. How it called up to mind church, home and country, and stirred the hope that we would see them again. Surely we strove to deserve such blessings. How rich had become the every-day gifts of yore through want, pain and sorrow, we had learned. It seemed that we acknowledged God's love under stress of misery.

But our little party could not hold together much longer. All of us felt it. In one hundred and eighty days only one had fallen. The Easter sun had hardly set before the second fell before Death. A day after, and the third succumbed. Then the fourth. One by one they were dropping at our side. The fifth followed quickly to solve the problem of futurity. Then the sixth comrade passed. And now we felt that we were all awaiting the summons, one by one. We scarcely looked at each other. Doubt and wretchedness were allied against us. But the fortunes of war sometimes change at the most critical moment. Strive and do, do and strive until death, were the mottoes of our hunters, and one day nearly five hundred pounds of bear and seal meat came, just as all food had almost failed. Oh! the joy which that meat brought to us. Who can tell but those in that hut! Something to eat—something to keep life! The future seemed assured. Some talked of special providences.

The first day of May came, and the death of our Eskimo cast down our spirits. We all loved this simple son of Nature, who could not be led nor driven to do a mean thing, nor to tell aught but the plain truth. When he could not tell the whole truth he said, "I do not know," or, "I cannot tell." With this noble soul he had a touching faith in fate, and no doubt this explains why he made no effort to save himself, when, paddling for the seal that would have fed all, his kayak was cut by the young, sharp-edged ice. Some mentioned "The Tryst" of Celia Thaxter, that so fascinated us two winters since. The death of all when the ship met the iceberg is not a pleasant story to now recall, nor the startling question:

"What drew the two together o'er the tide,
Fair ship and iceberg pale?"

RESCUED AFTER ALL CHANCE FOR LIFE SEEMED TO HAVE FLED

AMID the gloom and woe of the dark days came the cheery voice of our crippled comrade. In his health and strength somewhat querulous, he lived to exemplify in his misfortune the most beautiful patience and resignation. When fate bore hard and a feeble soul repined, he would say: "If helpless I, without feet and only part of my hands, do not complain; why should you? What would I not endure to work for you as you work for me?" Much of moral courage and mental strength came from this man, who bowed with humility to the inscrutable fate that struck him down when striving for others.

Summer crept slowly on, but food came grudgingly. Each worked to the end, and even on the very morn none ever knew that Death would that day touch him. One after another passed, and when a mighty midsummer gale from the south broke our hitherto uninterrupted scientific observations, there were left seven wan spectres. There was not the physical strength to raise the wind-struck tent, and the end was in sight. Was it to be life or death? It was foolish to hope, for even now did not the midnight sun, that marked midsummer, from that very day (June 21) leave us with coming winter in utter darkness? Had we seven, who were left, gone through all those two hundred and seventy-eight days of suffering amid those icy scenes for naught? But for all that there was a strong faith that this gale must favor the American ships that *must* be working Northward through the ice. And this faith in country turned to reality forty hours later, when our nation's sailors vied in tender offices and sympathy for their comrades of the Army thus saved from death.

Jew and Gentile, savage and civilized, alien and native-born, Catholic and agnostic, good and bad—such were the men whose experiences are herein told. Their courage, charity and faith—associated with direst misery—were practiced throughout a sunless Arctic winter, on the edge of the world, by the barren coast of an icy sea.