

North to Adventure

**by
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Prologue

It was five minutes to ten; I rubbed my eyes and looked at my watch again to make sure I hadn't misread it. I took the wriststrap off and shook the watch, and I was surprised that I could not keep my hand steady as I did it. My fingers fumbled. The watch hands remained at the same places, five minutes to ten. I figured it must be day, for there was some faint illumination across the overhung northern sky.

Then I heard someone give a sort of whimper. I turned my head and looked, but there seemed to be no one near me. I shuddered. It must be I, Sydney Robert Mantague, from whom those sounds came - puling little sounds. Yes, it must be I, the young man who stood five feet nine in height and turned the scale at one hundred and seventy-five pounds. The young man who was a fair-haired and blue-eyed member of Canada's crack civilian corps of insurance against crime, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, and yet somewhat different from the majority of the members of the Force, for this young man was a volunteer on northeaster Arctic service.

I wiped drops of moisture from my hairy face with sleeve of my summer keeool-ee-tuk, and I wondered if these could be tears of a grown man. I hadn't wept in years.

I'd always wished and hoped and agonized during boyhood days that I'd get "north to adventure." The years never went fast enough, so I could grow old enough, quickly enough, to grasp that excitement I craved. Here I was, though, and it seemed I'd got my wish, for I was in the midst of all the adventure any lad or mand could ever want. So I thought then, and I was right, nor could I guess there was a lot more to come.

I thought I was about to die; I was to think that, too, half a dozen times more in the next thirty-six months. I wondered whether a fellow knew when he was dead; maybe I was dead already.

Hunger, that was it. Have you ever been really hungry: Have you ever been in a place where there was no food? Nothing, not even the garbage cans of

civilization where a dry crust might be found to stay those prowling, twisting, grinding pains that start in the upper middle of the belly and crawl slowly, like uncoiling snakes, along the deepest innards, the slash viciously through to the small of the back; they quiet a second only to start up again and grow in intensity.

I wasn't dead - I was hungry; more than that I was starving. So this was starvation, and I knew it.

The pains were gone, and so were the procession of luscious foods which are hallucinations that pass through the imagination, so that you believe you can taste and smell the viands.

My head was light and my limbs were heavy as lead. The blood circulation was slowing up. No food and no fuel means that the engine revolutions of the body get slower and slower, halt, begin again, then slow-and slow-and slow, and stop.

The early nausea of hunger had stopped. There was no more retching. That gets you. It's spasmodic, racking and tearing, and when a spell is over you lie back panting. It got worse when I lapped fresh water that trickled from a fissure in the rock and lodged in a hollow within my arm's reach. I learned to sip the drops and let them linger on my tongue before swallowing.

I shook my watch again, but it was no good, the hands did not move, and the stem would wind no more. The wrist watch seemed to be my last link with civilization. Five minutes to ten, and I...hell, I hated to die. I was young, strong, the virile blood had coursed through my veins; that's why adventure called and sang and beckoned to me, that's why I was a Royal Canadian Mounted Policeman away up beyond the Arctic Circle.

"Damn you...Damn you, damn you!" I shouted, and threw the watch away; but it seemed that my shoulder wouldn't function, and the watch just dropped to the rock by my side.

"Ha...ha...ha!" There was someone laughing. I looked around, and there was no one near.

"Who's that laughing?" I asked, and when I heard no answer, I knew I was going mad - and I mustn't go mad. No: I was a white man, a Mounted Policeman; I had to pull myself together.

I sat up; I tried to stretch soggy muscles and I looked around me. I could see only rocks, hard, jagged, merciless black rocks; there was a shale beneath my feet,

and my seat was a flat rock, with another one for a back rest. Someone must have propped me up. I did not remember finding this resting place, but I began to recall what had happened. I could hear the roar of the sea, that endless, monotonous roar of the northern ocean. I knew the waves were pounding on the headland that lay to my right, further down the shore line.

I began to remember clearly. I was shipwrecked, and I was alone in all this desolation. It seemed to me I was alone, for the five Eskimos, natives of the Baffin Land coast, were the same as nothing and nobody. I could not speak their language; we could communicate in a sort of way by signs.

There was a lot for me to learn. These five, squat little men with their strangely Mongolian type of features, here on the northeastern seaboard of the Atlantic Ocean, - they alone stood between me and death. The science of the white man; the inventiveness of the trained campaigner - and I was that although I was young; my high school education and my two years of studying engineering technique; even my experience in the police service along the Mackenzie River section of northwestern Canada - these were useless things and so much waste of time so far as they meant safety for this moment.

I was up against it as never before. The time I'd been frozen stiff as a board astride my horse on the Saskatchewan prairie as a blizzard overtook me on routine patrol, was nothing to the facing of starvation on a rockbound coast of Baffin Land. That time I'd only had to rely on the sense of my horse that brought me to the door of the Police Pose, and there were comrades there to care for me.

Food! God - I could hear myself whimper again, and I had to stop that. Hush, there's a voice speaking aloud in English: "Our Father, give us our daily bread..." It was my own voice.

And then I roused. There came a shout, and when I looked in the direction whence it came I could see the Eskimos gesticulating and capering on the smoother stretch of rough sand below the small hillock on which I rested. I must have been unconscious for an interval or else I had dozed. I shouted too, and the men looked toward me. Lukas, chief in his own right and head of our sealing expedition, came to me and clutched my sleeve as he pulled at me to rise. I got to my feet, and then I followed him down to the shore. It was Lukas whom I had persuaded to take me on this very trip which had precluded the shipwreck and the tight corner in which we now found ourselves. The chief pointed downward where wetted sand lay between gobs of out-jutting rock.

I saw the footprint, an enormous footmark, - was it made by a devil or a human being? Was it a mark of the land beast or of some giant amphibian of the northern waters that teem with such strange life?

I looked from man to man of the natives, and each one was smiling as he rubbed his stomach, round and round. This footprint meant food, and food should mean safety. I even chuckled to myself a little, for never before had I realized the significance of the "full dinner pail", let alone that of the full belly. Now I knew.

The natives became very active in their slow way. We got some fresh water from a crevice in the rocks, and drinking slowly, I regained my strength. The men shouted again.

At the edge of the water, some considerable distance away, there cavorted a rolling white monster. Sometimes it was swimming, sometimes gallumphing in a series of leaps, its small head ceaselessly swinging from side to side at the end of its huge, ungainly body.

It was a great yellow-white polar bear. It was food on four legs.

I had no rifle....

Well, as the disturbers of a motion-picture audience say: "This is where we came in, isn't it; do you want to stay and see the picture from the start?"