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THRILLING TRAPPING ROMANCE,

The Night-Blindnese of Pierre Fontaine—

By George Harlow Clark.

When Pierre Fontaine and Camille Chaquette built their cabin on the bank of the Beaver River, a tributary of the Upper George, in Northern Labrador, they looked forward confidently to a profitable winter. Both had resigned only recently from the Hudson Bay Company's corps of voyaguers, and this was to be their first season as independent trappers. Except for a few roving Montagnais Indians, the district was quite uninhabited, but inured to solitude, the hardy young hunters were not men to lament the dearth of neighbors.

Their store of pelts accumulated steadily. Early in the winter Pierre brought in a silver fox skin, and later Camille secured a black one. But skins of the marten predominated.

It was, in fact, what trappers term a marten year. Like the migratory caribou and their faithful followers, the wolf packs, these highly prized little animals occasionally forsake their regular habitat. Years, during which few or none are to be found, may elapse before they reappear in numbers.

"'Tis a rare run of luck, Pierre," said Camille, one evening in January. "If it holds, we shall have a fine freight for Fort Chimo when the ice goes out of the river."

In April a serious mishap befell. For some time game had been growing scarce. Day after day the young men returned empty-handed to the cabin. The furs already procured surpassed in value their expectations, but their supply of provisions was nearly exhausted, and they were dependent in large measure for food upon the result of their hunting. Except grouse and ptarmigan, bird and beast alike had apparently fled from that vicinity. Camille set out one forenoon to make the rounds of their longest line of traps, which extended northwest in the same direction as the river. He expected to be gone two days. The route which it was Pierre's turn to follow, and which lay in the opposite direction, was ordinarily covered in half that time.

Snow was falling when Pierre arrived at the end of his line. Perceiving that a severe storm was at hand, he hurried homeward at his best pace. Presently a blizzard was roaring through the woods, and the driving snow-spray soon obscured the trail, compelling the trapper to seek shelter in a rocky den amid thick clumps of spruce. There he remained a prisoner for forty-eight hours, suffering intensely with hunger, thirst and cold, before an intermission in the gale permitted him to proceed to the cabin. Camille was not there!

Filled with anxiety, Pierre was preparing to search for his comrade, when he was again stormbound.

It was not until five days had elapsed since Camille's departure that Pierre was enabled to start on his erraud of relief. But his quest proved futile. No trace of his missing partner could he find.

Stormy weather prevailed almost continually throughout April, keeping Pierre indoors much of the time. Never before in his twenty-four years had inactivity proved so hard to bear. The sorting and packing of furs furnished some occupation, but this done, the hours dragged heavily. But except for an occasional pain in his forehead, no premonitory symptoms heralded the singular affliction that impended.

One evening, shortly before the ice in the river broke up, Pierre was cutting spruce for fuel near the door of his cabin. The sun had just dropped behind the bald hills to southwestward, when, as he stood with ax uplifted, something seemed to pass swiftly before his eyes, blotting out the waning daylight.

Bewildered, he let his ax fall, and drew his hand across his face, then blinked and peered about. Darkness encompassed him. He was blind, utterly blind.

In fear and trembling, Pierre groped his way into the cabin and threw himself despairingly upon the bales of furs piled beside his bunk.

Then, gradually taking heart, he tried to comfort himself with the hope that his mistortune would prove to be only temporary.

"It is the night-blindness!" he cried. "It will pass away with the dawn."

He recalled cases, one of which he had himself witnessed, where others had been afflicted with that peculiar loss of sight which the voyageurs of the north term "night blindness."

By day, the vision of those who suffer with the malady is seemingly unimpaired, but when deprived of sunlight they immediately become absolutely powerless to see. Some maintain that the same conditions which produce that dread scourge of high latitudes, scurvy, are also responsible for this curious visual trouble; but whether it is scorbutic or not, its origin has yet to be satisfactorily explained.

To poor Pierre, awaiting in the deepest anxiety the dawn which was to reveal whether or not his sight was permanently lost, that night seemed infinitely long. Supperless, he crept into his bunk, where he tossed hour after hour, starting up nervously at every sound.

Once he fancied he heard Camille's voice, but when he strained his ears to listen, there was only the whisper of the wind.

A pair of smoke-colored Labrador jays, chattering hungrily as they fluttered about the cabin, roused him. Opening his eyes, he sprang from his bunk with a loud cry of joy. His sight was restored!

It was broad day. The frost-jeweled trees and the icicles pendent from the eaves and logs of the cabin sparkled in the bright sunshine. As Pierre observed the tiny clouds of powdered snow falling from the spruce boughs, where a flock of crossbills were twittering over their breakfast, he was almost persuaded that the experience of the preceding night had existed only in nightmare. But at sunset that evening blindness again assailed him.

A week later the ice on the river broke up, and the strong current soon carried it away. Waiting only until the high water had partly subsided, Pierre launched his canoe, freighted with its precious cargo of skins, and began his voyage downstream to the trading post.

When he pitched camp for the night, which he took care to do a full hour before sunset, he was but a couple of miles above the point where a small river enters the Beaver. A winter encampment of a small band of Montagnais Indians was situated on the bank of this tributary, near its mouth. Pierre planned to pass it early on the following morning, hoping thus to avoid discovery by the natives.

With Camille, who was well and favorably known throughout the tribe, at his side, he would have encountered them willingly; but now, alone and practically helpless at night, he considered it politic to give them a wide berth His furs had been collected in Montagnais hunting-grounds, and the tribesmen might declare him a trespasser and confiscate his booty.

Rising with the sun, he resumed his voyage. Paddling stealthily in the shadow of the opposite shore, he scanned the woods at the mouth of the stream. A thin smoke-wreath above the treetops indicated the position of the Indians, but except that, he saw no sign of them.

Toward evening he descended the rapids above Stone Beaver Falls. These derive their title from a huge mass of dark-colored rock, which at low water resembles the colossal effigy of a couchant beaver, upreared in mid stream on the brink of the plunging flood which it divides. But now only the upper part of the spray-drenched, glistening back was visible.

Otherwise unobstructed, the river drops in twin sheets sheer eighty feet, with an incessant crash audible for a great distance.

A short reach of comparatively calm water intervenes between the foot of the rapids and the falls. To the expert voyageur, shooting the rapids was not difficult, but the current below, where the waters gathered for their mighty leap, proved stronger than he had anticipated.

However, thanks to his skill, he gained the landing-place in safety. Then, disembarking, he emptied the canoe and drew it up on shore, preparatory to portaging round the falls.

The portage trail was at least a half mile long. Several trips would be necessary in order to transport canoe and cargo to the point of relaunching below, and as it was then well on toward sunset, Pierre concluded to await the morning before beginning his task.

Accordingly, carrying the canoe a few paces back from the water, he overturned it, and propping it up on edge, bestowed the bales of fur under it, thus providing comfortable sleeping quarters for the night.

Having finished his frugal supper, he had stepped to the edge of the river to draw a cup of water when, as he stooped to dip it up, darkness overtook him. In turning to grope his way back to the canoe, he slipped and fell. The next instant he was in the river, and the cold flood closed above him!

Although dazed by the shock of his sudden immersion, he rose to the surface, and taking his bearings from the course of the current, he struck out manfully for shore

He was a strong swimmer, but the current was his master, and bore him rapidly toward the falls, his frantic struggles serving only to keep his head above water.

He had given up hope when, on a sudden, his outstretched hand touched a rock, the top of which rose a few inches above water. As he was swept against it he instinctively flung out his arms and clutched it, at the same time gripping with his knees the submerged end.

There he clung in momentary dread lest the swirling flood should wrench him from his hold and hurl him over the seething precipice close below. Then, with anxious care, he dragged himself out upon the topmost part of the rock.

The voyaguer knew that it must be the great stone beaver on which he had found refuge. The banks at that point were vertical walls of rock, with no protruding spurs or boulders.

The din of the falls was terrifying, and the huge rock seemed to tremble with their thunder.

Presently, gathering courage, he ventured to wring some of the water from his dripping garments.

(Continued on page 6.)



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