

A MIDNIGHT ACQUAINTANCE

'I guess I'll go home by way of Blackcap, uncle,' said Peter Aldrich to the little group that was assembled in the broad doorway of the Emmons farmhouse.

'It means quite a climb,' replied Mr. Emmons. He looked up at the dark dome of the mountain that rose high above the farm.

'But a mighty short trip once you're on the way down,' said his nephew.

A chorus of feminine objections arose:

'It's dreadfully steep!' 'There's the river, father!' 'Do you think it's safe?'

'Oh, Peter's done it before,' said Mr. Emmons, easily. It's bright starlight, and the turn at the bottom's wide and plain.'

With a cheery good-night, Peter picked up the cord of his sled and started off through the snow. The road up the mountain showed its pale, curving length among the stripped trees. Mr. Emmons lived about half a mile from the summit of Blackcap, and nearly three miles from the little town in the valley, where Peter Aldrich lived with his family. The boy frequently came out to visit his cousins; once or twice in winter he had returned from the farm, not by the usual road, but by one that he had himself discovered; that is, he had climbed with his sled from the Emmons farm to the summit of Blackcap, and from there had coasted down a clear slope that brought him near the village. That was what he proposed to do now.

The road to the summit was steep: but Peter, dragging his sled, went along briskly, and soon gained the top of the mountain. The wind had swept the summit bare: Peter turned to the right, and followed the line where the snow met the foot of the granite cliffs. The axe had been ruthlessly put to the land, and the slope ran down, white and unbroken, to the valley and the river that fed the two mills of the little village.

The keen air, the mystery that even the most familiar things assume in starlight, the silence, the long, steep fall of the mountain side, with its suggestion of swift movement filled Peter with excitement. He pointed his sled towards the distant town, and stood for a moment enjoying the thrills of anticipation.

Then he threw himself flat upon the sled.

The steel-shod runners crunched crisply on the snow as the sled started. It glided forward smoothly, rocked a little as it gathered speed, and then leaped forward and sped down the slope: the air burned Peter's face and beat back his hair. The speed of his descent really frightened him for a moment.

When his eyes grew able to endure the pressure of the air without blinking, he had another shock. On two former occasions he had coasted down the mountain at this very point, but that was in the daytime: he now realised that the starlight, bright as it seemed, was not strong enough to enable him to pick out any landmark while he was going at such speed. The stumps left by the woodcutters were not visible at all; the few patches of scrub were flying shadows.

'I must be sure to turn when I get to the logging road,' he thought. 'That's just below the last big stretch of scrub. It's so flat there I can't miss it, and the turn is easy—there's plenty of room.'

But here the starlight tricked him again. There seemed to be no break in the level of the bluish-white slope that fell away before him; and the stretch of scrub had vanished. He could not judge the speed of the sled very accurately. He was almost sure that he was near the road, which lay on a broad shelf near the base of the mountain. If he was, his speed must be less than it appeared to be: yet when he lowered one foot, it struck the snow with a violence that shook him.

Peter had overlooked the fact that the drop in the temperature, following the long thaw, had made a crust on the snow. Towards the bottom particularly, the slope was like glass, and when Peter put out his foot the sled leaped and slewed like a shying horse. It took him a few moments to control the sled and prevent a 'spill,' and in those moments he must have passed the road.

At any rate, pass it he did. He felt the sled pitch suddenly, as it took the slope beyond. Yet nothing more dangerous than the river lay ahead, and he was sure that its frozen surface would support him. Suddenly the snow dropped from under him, like the brittle crust of a monstrous pie, and he tumbled pell-mell into the bowels of a great hole filled with the most pungent odor he had ever smelled.

He knew at once that he was not alone in the hole. The odor was unmistakably that of a wild beast, and, moreover, he felt a warmth that could come only from a living body. He did not try to see what was close to him; he was frankly afraid to look at it. Bent only on escaping from the rank pit, he fought his way up its crumbling side until he reached the firm crust.

On the very edge of the pit was his sled, with the forward part of its runners thrust deep into the snow. He seized it and tugged at it with awkward violence, while something black and large and silent heaved itself slowly up the side of the pit. Before Peter got his sled free, the big, uncouth shape labored out on the crust.

Peter had heard that the bears round Blackcap were seldom dangerous, but he had never met one face to face before. The size of the great brute, the fact that it was night and that they were alone together, frightened Peter. He yanked his sled into position, and threw himself upon it with a violent forward thrust.

In normal circumstances the bear would probably have been anxious to avoid an encounter, but in the long thaw it had come out of its winter's nap, lean, hungry, and irritable, and the rude shattering of its house had let the cold in upon its now sensitive body. Its irritation centred itself instantly upon the cause of its unpleasant situation. It leaped forward to overtake the moving sled, and swung its big forepaw out in a sweeping blow. Below the shelf where the bear had made its winter quarters, the pitch of the ledgy bank was almost perpendicular. During the thaw the drippings from above had run down this slope; then freezing weather had made a sheet of glaze ice, so hard that neither the sled runners nor the bear's claws could make any impression upon it. Bear and sled shot down the polished incline together, and spun out upon the frozen surface of the river, which, with a volley of sharp sounds, splintered beneath them.

Peter rose to the surface of the cold, black pool; and pawed frantically at the tinkling fragments of ice. His sled was gone, carried away by the current; but the bear was there, a burly, snorting figure, swimming round the pool in a search for some avenue of escape. Hardly knowing which to fear the more, the river or the brute, Peter began to swim round, too; when the bear paused and stretched its forepaws out upon the ice in an effort to get out of the water, Peter did the same on the opposite side of the pool.

The bear strained and puffed; Peter strained and shivered, chilled to the marrow of his bones. Once and again he got his breast on the ice, and once and again the ice snapped under him. Peter was a good swimmer, but the intense cold of the water was clutching his muscles, and he knew that unless he got out very soon he could never get out at all.

The bear had been trying the ice opposite the nearer bank. Now it turned and floundered across the pool and attacked the point that Peter had hurriedly vacated at its approach. On this side the bank was almost a hundred feet away: perhaps the animal realised the fact, for it soon became discouraged, and turned back to the other side of the pool. Back went Peter to his former position, full of bitter despair. As he grasped the ice again, he felt that his strength was going fast. He raised his voice again and again in cries for help.

Suddenly another sound rolled between the walls of the river: the grunting of the bear. The animal seemed stirred into a frenzy at hearing the human voice. It no longer tried to crawl out on the ice, but struck at it repeatedly, as if trying to break its way through to the shore. The swash it raised in the little pool was considerable, and with the steady pull of the current, tore Peter's numbed fingers from the ice. He

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