

'Naw, yuh couldn't. I ain't got no shelter for Taylor's sheep. You can turn 'em loose in the field and let 'em take chances, seein' they're here, an' you're welcome t' stay here with a good supper an' a good bed; I ain't got any quarrel with you.'

Dot had poured a cup of coffee, trickled a thin stream of canned cream into it, and added sugar.

'Here, Joe, you drink this anyway; it'll warm you up. You better stay. A man's worth more than a bunch of sheep.'

Joe took off a mitten and emptied the cup in two great gulps.

'That's sure all right, Miss Hawkins, thanks. I'd like to stay all right. I ain't stuck on blizzards, but I can't leave them poor animals t' face it alone.'

He pulled the door open and listened, then closed it, and set his broad back against it. The dogs were holding the sheep; he could tell by the sound. He could afford to steal another minute of light and warmth and of being in Dot's presence.

'Oh, here's that song yuh wanted, Miss Hawkins,' he said, fumbling inside his overcoat. 'I copied it off last night. I hope yuh can make it out. It's all there, I guess.'

Dot took the paper, written closely with lead pencil, and slipped it into her pocket. Then she held out a paper bag, warm and moist from the hot biscuits and bacon t' held.

'Take this along, Joe; it'll come handy maybe. Oh, it's just to pay for the song, so don't say anything. I'm awfully obliged.'

Joe looked wistfully around the shabby little room and at the face of the girl.

'Well, I must get in motion. Good-bye.'

'Good-bye,' repeated Dot, her eyes misty. 'Good luck.'

The door slammed, shutting out the wind and the snow and the cold; shutting out the tall form of the sheep-herder as well. Mike lifted the lid of the stove and laid in a lump of coal, dragged his chair across the floor to the table, and took up knife and fork.

'What d' you want t' give him all the biscuits fur?' he growled. 'A fool like that ought t' go hungry—and freeze, too.'

'I didn't,' retorted his sister calmly. 'There's plenty left. He ain't a fool either; he's what I call a brave man.'

'He's what I call a darned fool,' reiterated Mike sullenly.

Dot crumpled the paper in her pocket and listened shuddering to the wind.

Out in the field, where the world seemed but a dizzying dance of frozen white meal, Joe plodded steadily against the wind, guided by the staccato of his dogs. The sheep huddled together, their weakened, reproachful little faces turned from the cruel beat of the blizzard.

Joe took his station behind, and once his face was sheltered set his teeth greedily into the crusty warmth of a biscuit. He had eaten breakfast before day, had munched a chunk of sour dough bread with a cold slice of bacon at noon, and had drunk from a brackish stream. Then the blizzard swept down upon him before he could reach shelter and the sheep refused to face it home, and he had walked and shouted and raved against the shivering, drifting block of gray. So they had wandered blindly until now.

Joe thrust his bare fingers into the bag and counted the biscuits. Two—three—four—there had been five—light, fluffy things, such as only a woman can make. He carressed them each in turn. The warmth of them—and the smell—and the crisp, sweet bacon between!

Only a healthy man who has walked long hours in the cold may know the keen agony of hunger or the ecstasy of yearning at the whiff of fresh fried bacon. The fingers closed around a biscuit.

'Oh-h, Bonnie!'

A dog voice—a tired, patient voice—answered away to the right. He could hear her scurry toward him, and he knew the trustful shine in her eyes even though he could not see.

The little creature bounded against his legs and whimpered pitifully. Joe stooped in the snow and patted her eager little head.

'It's ladies first, ain't it, Bonnie, old girl? Here! What d'yuh think of this now? Smell it once! Ain't that the stuff? Yuh wasn't looking for no such hand-out as that out here in this frozen hell, where the freeze is ground up into flour and thrown into your face, hey? Naw, it's a cinch yuh wasn't. That went down easy, didn't it? Here's another, old lady; put it away where it'll do the most good. They're out uh sight, them biscuits are, Bonnie, 'cause—Dottie made 'em!'

It seemed that even the dog read the wistfulness of the last whispered words, for she raised her cold muzzle

against the man's chilled brown cheek and whined. Joe pushed her gently from him and stood up.

'That's all, Bonnie. Lad's got t' work, too, this night, and he's going t' have a taste. There now—go on—way round 'em!'

The dog gave a short, shrill yelp which held more of courage and not so much of weariness and bounded away into the blur.

Joe listened until he heard her driving in the stragglers on the far side of the band. Then he sang out cheerfully:

'Hi, Laddy!'

From the left came a glad yelp, and another dog wallowed up to the master and crouched, fawning, at his feet. As before, Joe stooped and greeted him like a comrade.

'Good boy. You're sure the proper stuff, Lad. And what d'yuh think, say? Here's your supper, all hot from the stove. Ain't that the clear article? Say, Lad, how's your appetite for warm biscuits, hey? Set your teeth into that once and tell us what yuh think. Ain't it a peach? Say! You're sure the lad that can appreciate good grub an a cold stunt like this, you bet. If you'd a-seen her, Lad, with the lamp a-shining on 'er hair and in 'er eyes when she handed these out t' me you'd love her, Lad, you sure would. No, there ain't any more; I took one myself (it was an odd one, yuh see). I just had to, it smelled so good—and she made it. Well, lick my fingers, then. I wish I hadn't eat that other one, Lad, on my soul I do. I was a big chump, that's what. There; go back and keep 'em close; go on.'

The dog ran back to his post and the man sighed, folded the paper bag as best he could, and put it tenderly away inside his coat before he followed after his sheep.

Tramping blindly with the wind at his back he pictured the little room he had left behind. He smelt the coffee boiling and heard the rattle of the dishes while they ate. He felt the warmth even while he thrashed his body with his arms to fight off the creeping numbness in his hands. He called cheering words to his dogs and tried to forget the gnawing hunger while he hummed the song he had pencilled so painstakingly the night before in the little cabin where he lived alone with his friends—the dogs:

'There's a sob on every breeze'—

'There sure is, all right, on this one. What's the matter, Bonnie? Oh-h, Bonnie! Why, hang it! It's the river—and no fence!'

He set off at a run toward Bonnie, raging at 'er charges and trying all she could to turn them. Stumbling, breathless, slipping on the wiry sand grass which bordered the river, Joe reached her and heard the rush of water close below—too close.

He whistled imperiously to Lad, who, all unconscious, was pressing the band nearer to the death that waited a scant two rods away. Lad came with a rush, and together they charged the bunch desperately. It was hard work in the face of that gale, and by the time they were safe away from that treacherous overhanging bank Joe felt almost warm.

Then the dreary march began again. Mike Hawkins' south fence held them for a few minutes, but it had only three wires, and they were not of the tightest, and the sheep crawled under, leaving whole handfuls of wool to gather snow and swing on the barbs. Beyond there was no river, but there were dangerous washouts, where the surrounding country drained into the coulees.

Into one of these the sheep drifted, and followed its windings like gray, troubled waters to its outlet in the coulee. Then, worn with travel and pinched with cold, they halted at last under a high rocky bank and crowded close for warmth, while the wind passed harmlessly over their heads to the hillside beyond, and only the snow sifted silently down upon their cowering backs.

The dogs lay down on the outer edge and licked their chilled feet while they rested, while their master tramped up and down beside them, beating his hands to keep the blood moving, and thinking of many things.

He wondered how a man felt who could refuse shelter to suffering brutes on such a night because of a prejudice against their owner and calmly allow a comrade to face that wilderness of cold also because of that prejudice.

He wondered if Dot read the song he had given her, and if she noticed the smudges where he erased words not spelled at first to his liking.

He wondered if the coffee pot still stood on the stove, with the coffee hot and strong and fragrant.

What a bitter thing is a blizzard—a blizzard at night! How the cold eats up a man's courage and grips at his blood, chilling it even as it bubbles fresh from his heart. Why hadn't he left the sheep? What was it Dot had said? 'A man is worth more than a bunch of sheep.' Well, yes. But is a man worth more than his honor?

What if he had left them? No one could blame him, surely—no one, that is, except himself—and—yes, Dot,