

Rex Beach Adventure Stories

The Test

By REX BEACH

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PIERRE "FEROCE" showed disapproval in his every attitude as plainly as disgust peered from the seams in his dark face.

They were skirting the coast, keeping to the glare ice, wind swept and clean, that lay outside the jumbled shore pack.

This route is dangerous, of course, from hidden cracks in the floes, and most travelers hug the bluffs, but he who rides with Pierre "Feroce" takes chances.

The power that pulsed within him gleamed from his eyes, rag in his song, showed in the aggressive thrust of his sensual face.

This particular morning, however, Pierre's distemper had crystallized into a great contempt for his companion.

Though modest in the extent of his learning, Pierre glared in a freedom of speech the which no man dared deny him.

"Bah! I think you dam poor feller!" he said finally. "Ow you going stan' these trip, eh? She's need beeg mans, loo leetle runt like you."

Amusement at this frankness glimmered in Willard's eyes. "You're like all ignorant people. You think in order to stand hardship a man should be able to toss a sack of flour in his teeth or juggle a cask of salt horse."

"Sure t'ing," grinned Pierre. "That's right. Look at me. Mebbe you hear 'bout Pierre 'Feroce' some time, eh?" "Oh, yes; everybody knows you, knows you're a big bully. I've seen you drink a quart of this wood alcohol they call whisky up here and then jump the bar from a stand, but you're all animal—you haven't refinement and the culture that makes real strength. It's the mind that makes us stand punishment."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the Canadian. "W'at a founy talk! She'll take the headcate man for stan' the col', eh? Mon Dieu!" He roared again till the sled dogs turned fearful glances backward and bushy tails drooped under the weight of their fright.

"Yes; you haven't the mentality. Some time you'll use up your physical resources and go to pieces like a burned wick."

Pierre was greatly amused. His yellow teeth shone, and he gave vent to violent mirth as, following the thought, he pictured a naked mind wandering over the hills with the quicksilver at 60 degrees.

"Did you ever see a six day race? Of course not. You barbarians haven't sunk to the level of our dissolute east, where we joy in Roman spectacles. But if you had you'd see it's will that wins; it's the man that eats his soul by inches. The educated soldier stands the campaign best. You run too much to muscle. You're not balanced."

"I think mebbe you'll ave chance for show 'im, thees stout will of yours. She's going to long 'mush' troo the mountains, plentees snow, plentees cold." Although Pierre's ridicule was galling, Willard felt the charm of the morning too strongly to admit of anger or to argue his pet theory.

The sun, brilliant and cold, lent a paradoxical cheerfulness to the desolation, and, though never a sign of life broke the stillness around them, the beauty of the scintillant, gleaming mountains, distinct as cameos, that guarded the bay, appealed to him with the strange attraction of the arctic—that attraction that calls and calls insistently till men forsake God's country for its mystery.

He breathed the biting air cleaned by leagues of lifeless barrens and voids of crackling frost till he ached with the exhilaration of a perfect morning on the tundra.

Also before him undulated the grandest string of dunes the coast had known. Seven there were tall and gray, with tails like plumes, which none but

Pierre could lay hand upon, fierce and fearless as their master. He drove with the killing cruelty of a stamper, and they loved him.

"You say you have grub cached at the old Indian hut on the Good Hope?" questioned Willard.

"Sure! Fire poun' bacon, leetle flour and rice, I cache one gum boot, too, ha! Good thing for make fire queeck, eh?"

"You bet! An old rubber boot comes handy when it's too cold to make shavings."

Leaving the coast, they ascended a deep and tortuous river where the snow lay thick and soft. One man on snowshoes broke trail for the dogs till they reached the foothills. It was hard work, but infinitely preferable to that which followed, for now they came into a dangerous stretch of overflows.

The stream, frozen to its bed, clogged the passage of the spring water beneath, forcing it up through cracks till it spread over the solid ice, forming pools and sheets covered with treacherous ice skins. Wet feet are fatal to man and beast, and they made laborious detours, wallowing trails through tangled willows waist deep in the snow smother or clinging precariously to the overhanging bluffs.

As they reached the river's source the sky blackened suddenly and great clouds of snow rushed over the bleak hills, boiling down into the valley with a furious draft. They flung up their flimsy tent only to have it flattened by the force of the gale, that cut like well honed steel. Frozen spots leaped out white on their faces, while their hands stiffened ere they could fasten the guy strings.

Finally, having lashed the tent bottom to the protruding willow tops, by grace of heavy lifting they strained their flapping shelter up sufficiently to crawl within.

"By gar! She's blow hup ver' queeck!" yelled Pierre as he set the ten pound sheet iron stove, its pipe swaying drunkenly with the heaving tent.

"Good t'ing she hit us in the brush," he spoke as calmly as though danger was distant, and a moment later the little box was roaring with its oil soaked kindlings.

"Will this stove burn green willow tops?" cried Willard.

"Sure! She's good stove. She'll burn hicleses eef you get 'im start one time. See 'im get red?"

They rubbed the stiff spots from their cheeks; then, seizing the ax, Willard crawled forth into the storm and dug at the base of the gnarled bushes. Occasionally a shrub assumed the proportions of a man's wrist, but rarely, gathering an armful, he bore them inside, and, twisting the tips into withes, he fed the fire. The frozen twigs stizzled and snapped, threatening to fall utterly, but with much blowing he sustained a blaze sufficient to melt a pot of snow. Boiling was out of the question, but the tea leaves became soaked and the bacon cauterized.

Pierre freed and fed the dogs. Each gulped its dried salmon and, curling in the lee of the tent, was quickly drifted over. Next he cut blocks from the solid bottom snow and built a barricade to windward. Then he accumulated a mow of willow tops without the tent fly. All the time the wind blew down the valley like the breath of a giant bellows.

"Supper!" shouted Willard, and as Pierre crawled into the candlelight he found him squatted, fur bundled, over the stove, which settled steadily into the snow, melting its way downward toward a firmer foundation. The heat was insufficient to thaw the frozen sweat in his clothes; his eyes were bleary and wet from smoke, and his nose needed continuous blowing, but he spoke pleasantly, a fact which Pierre noted with approval.

"We'll need a habees corpus for this stove if you don't get something to hold her up, and I might state, if it's worthy of mention, that your nose is frozen again."

Pierre brought an armful of stones from the creek edge, distributing them beneath the stove on a bed of twisted willows; then, swallowing their scanty, half cooked food, they crawled, shivering, into the deerskin sleeping bags that animal heat might dry their clammy garments.

Four days the wind roared and the ice filings poured over their shelter

while they huddled beneath. When one travels on rations delay is dangerous. Each morning, dragging themselves out into the maelstrom, they took sticks and poked into the drifts for dogs. Each animal as found was exhumed, given a dish and became straightway reburied in the whirling white that seethed down from the mountains.

On the fifth, without warning, the storm died and the air stilled to a perfect silence. "These dog bad froze," said Pierre, swearing earnestly as he harnessed. "I don't like eet much. They going play hout, I'm 'fraid." He knelt and chewed from between their toes the ice pellets that had accumulated. A malamoot is hard pressed to let his feet mass, and this added to the men's uneasiness.

As they mounted the great divide mountains rolled away on every hand, barren, desolate, marble white, always the whiteness, always the listening silence that oppressed like a weight. Myriads of creek valleys radiated below in a bewildering maze of twisting seams.

"Those are the Ass' Ears, I suppose," said Willard, gazing at two great fangs that bit deep into the sky line. "Is it true that no man has ever reached them?"

"Yes; the Hinjun say that's w'ere half the storm come from, because, w'on the win' blow troo the ass' ear, look out! Somebody going ketch 'em." Dogs' feet wear quickly after freezing, for crusted snow cuts like a knife. Spots of blood showed in their tracks, growing more plentiful till every print was a crimson stain. They limped pitifully on their raw pads, and occasionally one whined. At every stop they sank in track, licking their lacerated paws, rising only at the cost of much whipping.

On the second night, faint and starved, they reached the hut. Digging away the drifts, they crawled inside to find it half full of snow—snow which had sifted through the cracks. Pierre groped among the shadows and swore excitedly.

"What's up?" said Willard. Vocal effort of the simplest is exhausting when spent with hunger, and these were the first words he had spoken for hours. "By gar, she's gone! Somebody stole my grub!" Willard felt a terrible sinking, and his stomach cried for food. "How far is it to the Crooked River Roadhouse?"

"One long day drive—forty mile."

"We must make it tomorrow or go hungry, eh? Well, this isn't the first dogfish I ever ate." Both men gnawed a moldy dried salmon from their precious store.

As Willard removed his footgear he groaned.

"What's the maitaire?" "I froze my foot two days ago—snowshoe strap too tight." He exhibited a heel, from which, in removing his inner sock, the flesh and skin had come away.

"That's all right," grinned Pierre. "You got the beeg will lef' yet. It tak the heduate man for stan' the col', you know."

Willard gritted his teeth. They awoke to the whine of a gray windstorm that swept the cutting snow in swirling clouds and made travel a madness. The next day was worse.

Two days of hunger weigh heavy when the cold weakens, and they grew gaunt and fell away in their features.

"I'm glad we've got another feed for the dogs," remarked Willard. "We can't let them run hungry, even if we do."

"I think she's be half right tomor," ventured Pierre. "Thees ain't snow-jus' win'; bimeby all blow hout. Sacrel! I'll can eat 'nuff fore 'ole harny."

For days both men had been cold, and the sensation of complete warmth had come to seem strange and unreal, while their faces cracked where the spots had been.

Willard felt himself on the verge of collapse. He recalled his words about strong men, gazing the while at Pierre. The Canadian evinced suffering only in the haggard droop of eye and mouth; otherwise he looked strong and dogged.

Willard felt his own features had shrunk to a mask of loose jawed suffering, and he set his mental sinews, muttering to himself.

He was dizzy and faint as he stretched himself in the still morning air upon waking and bobbed painfully, but as his companion emerged from the darkened shelter into the crystalline brightness he forgot his own misery at sight of him. The big man reeled as though struck when the dazzle from the hills reached him, and he moaned, shielding his sight. Snow blindness had found him in a night.

Slowly they plodded out of the valley, for hunger gnawed acutely, and they left a trail of blood tracks from the dogs. It took the combined efforts of both men to lash them to foot after each pause. Thus progress was slow and fraught with agony.

As they rose near the pass miles of arctic wastes bared themselves. All about towered bald domes, while everywhere stretched the monotonous white, the endless snow unbroken by tree or shrub, pallid and menacing, maddening to the eye.

"Thank God, the worst's over!" sighed Willard, flinging himself on to the sled. "We'll make it to the summit next time; then she's downhill all the way to the roadhouse."

Pierre said nothing. Away to the northward glimmered the Ass' Ears, and as the speaker eyed them carelessly he noted gauzy clouds and streamers veiling their tops. The phenomena interested him, for he knew that here must be wind-wind, the terror of the bleak tundra, the hopeless, merciless master of the barrens; However, the distant range

beneath the twin peaks showed clear cut and distinct against the sky, and he did not mention the occurrence to the guide, although he recalled the words of the Indians, "Beware of the wind through the Ass' Ears."

Again they labored up the steep slope, wallowing in the sliding snow, straining silently at the load; again they threw themselves exhausted upon it. Now, as he eyed the panorama below, it seemed to have suffered a subtle change, indefinable and odd. Although but a few minutes had elapsed, the coast mountains no longer loomed clear against the horizon, and his visual range appeared foreshortened, as though the utter distances had lengthened, bringing closer the edge of things. The twin peaks seemed endlessly distant and hazy, while the air had thickened as though congested with possibilities lending a remoteness to the landscape.

"If it blows up on us here, we're gone," he thought, "for it's miles to shelter, and we're right in the saddle of the hills."

Pierre, half blinded as he was, arose uneasily and cast the air like a wild beast, his great head thrown back, his nostrils quivering.

"I smell the win'," he cried. "Mon Dieu! She's goin' blow!"

A volatile pennant floated out from a nearby peak, hanging about its crest like faint smoke. Then along the brow of the pass writhed a wisp of drifting, twisting flakelets, idling hither and yon, ecstatic and aimless, settling in a hollow. They sensed a thrill and rustle to the air, though never a breath had touched them; then, as they mounted higher, a draft fanned them, icy as interstellar space. The view from the summit was grotesquely distorted, and, glancing upward, they found the guardian peaks had gone a-smoke with clouds of snow that whirled confusedly, while an increasing breath sucked over the summit.

(Continued on page 7, Col. 1.)



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