

Feb 13 1912
Red Book

The Blind God

BY JAMES OLIVER CURWOOD

author of "Steels of The Royal Mounted," etc

CORPORAL SYLVESTER DUCK, of the Royal Northwest Mounted Police, drew one hand across his face, looked again at the thermometer between his fingers, and swore softly to himself in the tone of one to whom had come a mystery beyond his understanding. After a moment his eyes met Jossman's. Jossman was old at the game of man-hunting. Eleven years he had been in the service; twelve times he had broken new trails by snow-shoe and dog-sledge to the Arctic. He did not know fear. He had run down many men. A score of times he had faced death. But in his face there had never been the look that the other saw there now. It was not fright. It was more than that—the look of a man who for the first time beholds an abyss too deep for the earth, a mountain too tall for the heavens. His face was the face of a man rendered stunned and expressionless by a thing which it was impossible to comprehend, almost madness to contemplate.

"What does it say, Sylver?" he asked.

"A degree and a half above zero," replied Corporal Duck.

"And this morning—seven hours ago—it was *sixty below!* Sylver, they'll never believe this at headquarters when we report it. They'll call us mad, and furlough us for our health. But you'd better make a memo. of it. We're just about on the sixty-seventh degree, two hundred miles from the Arctic coast, a thousand due north of the northernmost civilization. Tab it, Sylver, for God's sake, tab it—even if they do call us mad. I half believe we are!"

Corporal Duck sat down on the edge of the dog-sledge, close to the fire which they had built in front of their tent. From his pocket he drew the worn re-

port-book in which, each night, he laboriously and painstakingly wrote down the important events of the day. From another pocket he produced the stub of a pencil.

Jossman went back among the dogs and fed the famished huskies a dozen frozen fish. Then he cleaned up the supper things. By the time he was done, Corporal Duck had finished his writing.

"This beats the frozen whaler we found three years ago," he said, as he gave Jossman the report-book. "They couldn't believe it when we told them of finding the captain sitting at his table, frozen stiff as iron, and with a pen in his hand. What'll the Inspector and the Big Mogul down at Regina say to *this?*"

Jossman read slowly, and aloud:

December 13, 1910. Several times to-day Jossman and I have asked ourselves if we can be in our right minds. Since morning we have entered into an experience and passed through a change which are unlike anything that have ever been reported in the far North. We rose this morning at dawn (seven o'clock). At that time, thirty-five miles south of this spot, our thermometer registered sixty-two and a quarter degrees below zero. Toward noon we began to feel a curious quality in the air. It was warmth. At first we thought our thermometer had gone wrong, and that the sensation of warmth was in reality caused by the intense cold numbing our bodies. So we built fires at frequent intervals. But the thermometer continued to rise thirty degrees in the first five hours. By the end of the sixth hour we were compelled to throw off our heavy coats. The dogs began to pant as they dragged the sledge, and the snow grew soft under our feet. An hour ago (three o'clock P.M.) we discarded our snowshoes. Occasionally we felt warm currents of air in our faces, blowing directly from the

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North. Jossman says that he has detected the odors of vegetation and flowers in the air. This must be his imagination. Within the last ten miles the trees have doubled in size, vegetation is as dense as five hundred miles south, and in places we have found the ground bare of snow. The thermometer now stands at a degree and a half above zero, a rise in the temperature of sixty-three and three-quarters degrees in seven hours, and to-night we have a temperature fifty-two degrees warmer than any previous record in this latitude at this season of the year. Warm air is blowing from the North, and within the space of half an hour our thermometer varies from three to seven degrees. The dogs are nervous, and are constantly sniffing toward the North. During the day we have struck balsam and poplar, whose northernmost limits are supposed to be three or four hundred miles south. I beg to report that we must now be at about the sixty-seventh degree, in the heart of the big unexplored country north of the Great Bear, and between the Mackenzie and the McFarlane.

When he had finished reading, Jossman slowly filled and lighted his pipe.

"You know the stories of the Indians," he said. "I remember an old fellow who came into Fort Good Hope seven or eight years ago, just after we discovered the frozen mastodon on Hare Indian River. We were feeding the meat to the dogs. We laughed at him when he said there was a hot country far to the north where those animals still lived, and that he had seen their tracks. He stayed one night—and was gone. We never saw him again."

"Rot?" said Corporal Duck.

"You don't believe it?"

"I believe your story—but not the mastodon business. They've been dead for ten thousand years."

"But you ate mastodon meat down at Fort Wrigley."

"Yes—taken out of a ten thousand year old ice-box. That's what this country is, Jossy—an ice-box, when you get four feet below the surface. When we die and are buried up here our friends can dig us up a thousand years later and we'll look natural. That's the one and only advantage of living north of sixty-six."

Jossman had risen to his feet.

"Did you catch that, Sylver?"

"The warmth? Yes. It's queer—damned queer."

Both men looked off into the night.

"I wish there had been an hour more of daylight," said Jossman. "I don't feel like—going to bed. In an hour more—"

"We'd have been smearing our boots in strawberries," interrupted Corporal Duck, trying to laugh. "I'm going to bed."

His companion placed a detaining hand on his arm.

"Do you hear anything, Sylver?"

"No."

"Smell anything?"

"No."

"Look—" He pointed one long arm to the North, where the pale, steely flashes of the aurora borealis were beginning to lighten up the sky. "Did you ever see the lights look like that, Sylver—as though there were some sort of a gauzy curtain between us and them? Looks like a mist—"

"I'm going to bed," reiterated Corporal Duck. "Better turn in, Jossy. We'll find out what it means to-morrow."

He turned and disappeared into their little service tent. But Jossman remained where he was.

II

For many minutes after Corporal Duck left him Jossman stood without moving, gazing off to the North. After a time he quietly got his blanket, wrapped it about him, and sat down near the fire. Jossman had run up against enough of the mysteries of life to be a little superstitious. He was thirty-two, and it was his fault that he had not a corporalship or a sergeancy, a choice rather than a fault. He had declined both when they had been offered him because he knew that they would bar him, to a large extent, from that wilder and more adventurous service which he loved—the actual service of man-hunting. He had no taste for office work. He had joined the Service because of his passion for a wild and adventurous life.

and he had no desire to give up that life for a stripe or two on his sleeve. But different thoughts had been running through his head for several days. Now, for the first time in his life he was homesick; so homesick that his heart ached, and he was filled with a deep longing to turn back. At Fort Good Hope he had received a letter. It was two months old when it reached him, and had come from the girl, whom, long ago, he had believed that he would marry. It was curious, he had often thought, that a girl should love a man as this girl loved him. In that letter she had talked to him in the same old way. He could read her heart, still true and loyal in its waiting, in the words she wrote. Often he had cursed himself for not caring a great deal. But at last the truth had come home to him, and with the truth both pain and joy. He had written to her before starting on this expedition, and a dozen times since then when Corporal Duck was not looking he had re-read her letter. To-night, as he gazed into the fire, he saw once more the old farm among the hills, and the little white cottage in the valley, fifteen hundred miles away. He saw the girl again, as he had seen her on that last day three years ago, when the big orchard was in bloom, and the larks were singing their mating-song about them in the meadows. He saw her blue eyes shining at him from out a wreath of apple blossoms; he saw her brown hair disheveled and flying in the sunlight as they ran a race for home; and he saw, then, those blue eyes, sad and fighting back the tears, when the hour of parting came.

Corporal Duck was asleep when finally Jossman raised his head and looked out beyond the fire. He had heard no sound, and yet something had come up close to him from out of the stillness of the night. A white and terrified face met his eyes. It was a woman's face. He sprang up, stifling a cry of astonishment on his lips. For a moment the woman did not move, but stared at him with panting bosom and parted lips through which her breath came in gasps. She

had been running. He knew that in an instant. Her long black hair had fallen loose about her. Her black eyes were shining wildly, and her hands were clutched at her breast, as though she were striving to fight back her exhaustion so that she could speak. She was a white woman. Jossman stood like one paralyzed. At first he thought that what he saw must be a vision born of the pictures he had seen in the fire. He drew back half a step, and then she spoke.

"Thank God," he heard her cry, softly. "I thought you were—Indians. I saw your fire—"

She saw his astonishment, and thrust back her hair so he could see her face.

"I know—I startle you," she said, gaining her breath. "We live back there—three miles—my husband and I, and the baby. She is sick—my little Jeanne. I am afraid she is dying. I saw your fire, and ran all the way. We must have medicine—quick! You have medicines—something for the fever—"

She was gripping him by the arms now, her face tense with agony as she waited for him to answer.

"Yes, we have medicines," he said almost mechanically. "But who—"

"Please, please don't question me now," she interrupted, reading what was in his face. "I will tell you everything—answer all your questions—as we go. Please get the medicines, and hurry!"

"She is very ill?" he persisted.

"Yes—yes—I am afraid she is dying. It is some kind of a fever."

"And it is only three miles?"

"Yes—we can make it in half an hour. My God, wont you hurry?"

In an instant Jossman had made up his mind. He turned quickly and entered the tent. Corporal Duck was still asleep. Careful not to disturb him, he secured their rubber medicine bag. In another moment he was again at the woman's side.

"We can harness the dogs," he suggested.

"In another mile there will be no snow," she replied quickly. "We must walk—and run."

"No snow," he repeated, as she led him swiftly away. "What do you mean?"

"The springs," she said, "hot springs. You must know. There are thousands of them, for twenty miles to the north and west. We never have snow. It is always warm. The streams run with warm water; some of them are hot. Our name is Norton, and we came here three years ago. We are the only ones. No one else lives here."

She spoke in short, quick breaths. Suddenly she added, "We call it our Blind Eden."

"Why 'blind?'" he asked.

"Because—" He caught the throb in her voice. "Because *he* is blind—my husband. He was blind when we came here. He has never seen it."

"Good Heaven!" he gasped.

He did not question her further, but his mind was working in a whirlwind of thought. The mystery that had puzzled him had resolved itself down to a matter of ordinary fact, replaced now by this other mystery—the mystery of the man and woman. Who were they? What curious swing of fate had brought them alone to this place, a thousand miles from civilization? He knew that his companion was not even a half-breed. Her voice, a little tremulous with excitement and fear, was exquisitely perfect. The quick working of his mind impelled him to conceal his own identity, and Corporal Duck's, when she suddenly asked:

"And who—who are you? What brings *you* here?"

He detected a strange note in her voice as she asked the question, and her face was turned to him, white and tense.

"Prospectors," he said. "Fool prospectors."

She almost ran now. The air was growing warmer with a swiftness that would have amazed him if he had not understood the cause. In places the snow was soft and slushy. He drew off his coat, and carried it. His head began to sweat under his heavy cap. Twice he saw misty vapors rising out of the earth, a little to one side, where the springs

were pouring forth their subterraneously heated waters. The woman seemed tireless, and yet he could hear her panting. Her long hair almost concealed her face when she stopped at last on the summit of a ridge, and pointed down.

"Our home is there," she said, "in the valley. See—the light—"

He caught the glimmer of a light far down, and followed her swift lead along a winding path. Fifteen minutes later they stood in an open meadow. The ground was bare of snow. The air was of the softness of spring, but damp.

"We have found a cold spring here," she said. "So this is our home."

A hundred paces more and they came to the cabin. The door was open and the girl ran in, followed by Jossman. As they entered, a man rose from beside a low cot to greet them. He reached out his arms toward the girl, and Jossman saw that he was blind. He was a tall, powerful man, with a great blond head, and a face that even now lighted up with a smile of happiness.

"Sh-h-h-h!" he warned softly. "She is better, my darling. Thank God, she is sleeping!"

The young mother turned to Jossman, scarce restraining the cry of joy and thankfulness that rose to her lips. Then for a moment she stood transfixed, while a wild horror filled her eyes.

Jossman was staring at the man. His lips were parted; one hand had fallen to the butt of his automatic revolver; there was the sudden glare of the awakened man-hunter in his eyes. In that one instant Jossman had solved the mystery. And the woman knew that he had solved it. She swayed a little. Her face turned as white as chalk. And Jossman still stared into the smiling and unseeing countenance of the man—the countenance of Richard Colton, the murderer, who had escaped from his own detachment four years before.

The fatal words of accusation on his lips, he turned. His eyes met those of the woman. Mutely she pointed to the cot where the sick child lay, and in her big, dark eyes he saw the plea which

she dared not utter in words. He nodded, and the chilly glitter in his own eyes gave place to a smile.

She went to her husband and placed her hands upon his broad shoulders.

"I found them, dear," she said gently. "They were white men, and I've brought one of them back—with medicines."

The man held out his hand, and as Jossman took it, a shudder ran through him. Colton had killed two men. His escape had saved him from hanging. He spoke a few words, in a low voice, but Jossman was not listening. The woman held him—the terror in her eyes, the straight, fierce line of her bloodless lips, the clenching of her hands at her breast. She did not for an instant let her gaze fall from his face, and Jossman wondered, as he turned his back, if she would shoot. He bent over the child. She was sleeping. The fever flush was still in her cheeks, and her golden curls shone in the lamplight. He was sufficiently acquainted with fever to know that the crisis had passed for the child while the mother was away. He listened—touched her face; then he felt the quivering presence of the woman near him.

"She is better?" she whispered.

"Yes, you will have no need of the medicine," he replied. "The crisis has passed, and she is sleeping—well."

He lifted his glance slowly. The woman's face was so close that he could feel her breath. Back of them, in the center of the room, stood the man, waiting.

"I am sorry," he whispered so that only she could hear, "but I must take him back. He is Richard Colton. We have wanted him a long time—for murder."

There was no change in the woman's face, but he saw that she was struggling to remain calm, as she whispered:

"Not now—not now. Give us a few hours longer—only a few hours—until morning—You—will—do—that. My God, you can't take him now—with little Jeanne—sick!"

"I will wait," he said.

The man was advancing, a questioning look in his sightless face.

"Bernice!" he said.

She ran to him and threw her arms about his neck, and laid her sobbing head upon his breast. Tenderly Colton stroked her shining hair.

"She is better?" he asked, speaking to Jossman.

"The danger is past."

"Thank God!"

He pressed his face close down against the woman's and when again he raised it, Jossman saw the dampness of tears on his cheeks.

"Sit down," he said. "Sit down—and talk to us. We haven't heard a white man's voice in—a long time."

Jossman seated himself and the woman brought another chair for her husband. Then she sat down on a stool at his feet, and the blind man's hand rested on her head. For a long time they talked in low voices, he asking questions chiefly, and Jossman answering them, while the woman sat white-faced and silent, her eyes burning straight into Jossman's soul. A hundred times he told himself that she would not give up. At the very last there would be the fight—with the woman.

Suddenly Colton leaned forward; his cheeks were flushed.

"Do you know," he said, "years ago I could never have believed that a blind man could be happy. But I—am. I am happier now than I ever was in the days when I could see—and shoot, and watch the world around me. You don't know—until you are blind—how deeply the old pictures are burned in your brain. They are all masterpieces. I remember the first time I saw Bernice—my wife—and the picture grows more perfect each day. It was in an orchard, and the apple trees were in bloom, just as—"

"Just as I saw a girl once," Jossman interrupted, scarcely hearing his own speech. "In an orchard, with her brown hair flying—"

"Yes, yes, with her hair loose and flying about her," almost laughed the blind man. "I will always know her as

I saw her then, even when she is old and gray. That is the glory of being blind. I will always see her beautiful golden hair, her laughing blue eyes—"

"Golden hair—blue eyes—" gasped Jossman.

Into the woman's face had shot a look of death. Her hair was black, her eyes deep, jet dark pools of agony. He caught his words, and in that moment she gave him a sign which he obeyed, but could not understand.

"Yes, her golden hair and blue eyes," repeated the blind man. He lifted a handful of his wife's heavy hair and let it slip between his fingers fondly. "I can see it now—even more clearly than you. I can see it in the sunlight and in the shadow. To me she will never change, because I am blind—"

An hour later, out in the darkness of the night, the woman stood close to Jossman's side.

"You shall not take us back—alive," she said. "Listen, and I will tell you why. He is mine. I worship him. And he is happy with me—you have seen that. He thinks that my eyes are blue, and that my hair is gold! My God, I must tell you—tell you—and then—perhaps you will have mercy. I loved him down there—years ago—and he loved the other. She was Bernice. It was she who had the golden hair and the blue eyes. And then he fought that day, and killed two men. It was not he who was in the wrong—but he killed, as you might have killed, and you have hunted him. An explosion—in a mine—and he was blinded. I went to him then, and when I dropped down at his bedside and began to sob, he put his poor hand out and stroked my hair, and then he started up, and said, 'Bernice—Bernice—is it you?'"

"You—you understand—I loved him so! I have been Bernice ever since. I took him away when he was well, and we were married, where no one knew us. After that we came far north, and the

police ran him down. You know—how he escaped. I got the Indians to help, and we came north—north—north—until we reached this place. It was I who came to him when he was man-hunted; it was I who went to him when he was blind—only a week after Bernice had married a man who could see. He is mine. I robbed no one of him. My love is so great that I have done all this for him, and now—now do you think I will let you take him back?"

Jossman was breathing hard. Behind him there was a low, hissing monotone in the sky—the crackling music of the aurora, and he turned his face slowly toward it, and gazed at the pale radiance of the mystery lights above the Pole. What he saw was like a faded, age-old painting, and suddenly, as he looked, a low cry fell from him. For to his eyes the dimly colored sky resolved itself into a vast orchard that shaded the top of the earth, and out of that orchard there grew a single tree, over-topping all the rest, as he remembered a certain tree at home, under whose radiant blossoms he and a brown haired girl had smiled into each other's eyes many, many springs ago.

When at last he spoke, it was with a low huskiness in his throat.

"No, I don't think that you will let me take him back," he said softly and evenly. "You love him too much. You would fight. You would kill. And there is something else—" He turned upon her and caught her face between his two hands, staring down into her eyes. "There is a girl—down there—who loves *me*—as you love *him*. I am going back to her. And I am going to leave you—you and him and yours—here. Listen—"

He raised his head, still holding the woman's face between his hands. From far away there came a voice—Corporal Duck's voice.

"Good-by," he whispered.

Then he walked swiftly away through the gloom.