S. O. S.

by Algernon Blackwood

It is a question how many witnesses shall be required to establish the veracity of an occurrence so singular, especially when one of such witnesses is a dog.

Three of us, two men and a girl, had skimmed the snow-covered Jura slopes on our skees since noon, arriving toward four o'clock at the deserted chalet where the fourth was to meet us. Upon the arrival of that fourth hung all the future happiness of the girl, and he was to come from a village far away on the other side. The Christmas rendezvous had been carefully arranged.

We had brought provisions for making a hot supper in the empty building, a lonely farm-house used only in summer, and our plan was to skee back all together by moonlight.

"Put on your extra sweaters before you begin to cool," said the older man, coming round the corner with an armful of logs from the frozen woodpile. "I'll get the fire going. Here, Dot,"—turning to his niece,—"stack your skees, and get the food out. He'll be hungry as a bear."

The three of us bustled about over the crisp snow, and the older man had a wood fire blazing upon the great open hearth in less than ten minutes. The interior of the big room lit up, shadows flew over-head among the rafters, and shafts of cheery yellow light flashed even into the recesses of the vaulted barn that opened out into the cow-sheds in the rear. Outside, the dusk visibly deepened from one minute to the next.

The cold was bitter; but our heated bodies fairly steamed. The big St. Bernard ran, sniffing and prancing, after each of us in turn, and from time to time flew up the mounds of snow outside, where he stood, with head flung back and muzzle up, staring against the sunset. He knew perfectly well that some one else was expected and the direction from which he would come. The effect of the firelight streaming through door and cracks of muffled window into the last hour of day-light was peculiar; night and day met together on the threshold of the chalet, under the shadows of that enormous snow-laden roof. For the sun was now below the rim of the Suchet ridges, flaming with a wonderful sheet of red and yellow light over the huge white plateau, and the isolated trees threw vague shadows that easily ran into a length of half a kilometer. Rapidly they spread, assuming monstrous shapes, half animal, half human; then, deceiving the sight, merged into the strange uniform glow that lies upon a snow-field in the twilight. The forest turned purple; the crests of the pines cut into the sky like things of steel and silver. Everything shone, crackled, sparkled; the cold increased.

"Dorothy, where are you going?" sounded the older man's voice from the door, for the girl was out on her skees again. Her slim young figure, topped by the pointed, white snow-cap, was sprite-like.

"Just a little way over the slopes—to meet him," came her reply. She seemed to float above the snow, not on it.

With decision he called her in, and it was the warning in his tone that perhaps made her obey.

"Better rest," he said briefly; "we've got a long run home in the moonlight." On her skees she came "sishing" back down the gleaming slope to his side, neat and graceful, her shadow shooting ahead like black lightning, enormously elongated. "The Creux du Van precipices, besides, lie over that way," he continued. "They begin without warning—a sheer drop, and nothing to show the edge."

"I know them," she said, pouting a little.

"He knows them, too," her uncle answered, putting a hand on her shoulder. "He'll take the higher slopes. He'll get around all right." He had noticed the look in her soft, brown eyes that betrayed—it was the merest passing lash—an eagerness lying too close upon the verge of anxiety. "Harry knows these ridges even better than I do."

He helped her stack the skees, then turned to whistle in the dog, which had stayed behind on the summit of the slope she had just left, and it was at this instant, I think, that I first suddenly became aware of an unusual significance lying behind the little scene. Such moments are beyond explanation or analysis; one can only report them. They pertain, some hold, to a kind of vision. I can

merely affirm that the flash came to me in this wise: I saw the big dog, his outline sharply silhouetted against the skyline and his head turned westward, refusing for the first time that day to obey instantly a whistle that for him was a summons always to be obeyed. His master, noticing nothing, had already gone inside; but the girl saw what I saw, caught a flash similar to my own, and recognized in the animal's insignificant disobedience a corroboration of something in herself that touched uneasiness. I cannot prove it,—she has never spoken of it,—only, as she stood there a moment, with the sunset in her face and her tumbled hair half over her eyes, I intercepted the swift glance that ran upward to the St. Bernard, traveled beyond him to the huge, distant snow-slopes, and then fell upon me. It was love, perhaps, that carried and interpreted thus the instantaneous wireless message—the love that lay undelivered in my heart, as in her own, and, since she was foresworn already, lay unrecognized. In view of what followed, I cannot wholly say. My sight held clearer and steadier than her own, and it came to me that my strange perception, sharpened to bitter sweetness as if by sacrifice, approached possibly to some kind of inferior divination of the wounded soul. The next minute the great dog came bounding down, and we entered the chalet together, busying ourselves with fire, benches, table, and supper. The portable little kettle of aluminum already steamed upon the hearth.

With us—with myself, at any rate—came into the cozy fire-lit interior a sensation that was new. I felt the terror and desolation of these vast, snow-covered mountains, immense, trackless, silent, lying away from the world of men below the coming stars. Winter, like a winter of the polar regions, held them fast. In the brilliant sunshine of the day they had been friendly, enticing, sympathetic. Now, with the icy dusk creeping over their bare, white faces, the freezing wind sifting with long sighs through the forests below, and the silent Terror of the Frost stalking from cliff to ridge with his head among the stars, they turned terrible. With the coming of the night they awoke to their true power. They showed their teeth. Our own insignificance became curiously emphasized. I thought of the Creux du Van precipices, sweeping crater-like with their semicircle of dark grandeur, a gulf of snow-drifts about their dreadful lips, six hundred feet of shadows yawning within, and shuddered.

"You're cold," said Dot, softly, pulling me to the fire, where she warmed her steaming boots. "I'm cold, too." We piled the wood on; the flames leaped and crackled; shadows flew among the rafters.

"Harry's due any minute," said her uncle. "We'll drop the eggs in as soon as we hear his whistle." He stooped down to pat the St. Bernard, which lay with head stretched on his fore paws before the fire, staring, listening. "You'll hear him first," he laughed cheerily, giving the beast a resounding pat. "Long before we do."

The dog growled low, making no other response to a caress that usually brought him leaping to his master's breast. We heard the wind keening round the wooden walls, rushing with a long faint whistle over the roof, and we drew closer to the fire. For a long time no one spoke. The minutes passed and passed.

It was then, quite suddenly, that we heard a step in the snow; but not before the dog had heard it first and bounded to his feet with a growl that was more like a human roar than any animal sound I have ever heard. He fairly leaped toward the door, and the same second Dot and I were also upon our feet.

"What's the matter?" exclaimed her uncle, startled and surprised. "That's only wind, or snow falling from the roof."

Behind us the wooden walls gave out sharp, cracking reports as the heated air made them expand; but in my heart something turned into ice with a cold that lay beyond all cold of winter. The terror I at first experienced, however, was not for myself, but for this soft, brown-eyed little maid who shot so swiftly by me and opened the heavy door. I was ready there to catch her, ready to protect and shield, yet knowing by some strange authority within me that she stood already safe, held by a power that lay beyond all little efforts of my own.

For into that great, fire-lit interior stepped at once the figure of a peasant, large, uncouth, lumbering, his face curiously concealed either by the play of the shadows or by the fall of his hair and beard,—to this day I know not which,—filling the

threshold with his bulk, the freezing wind rushing in past his great, sheathed legs, and an eddy of dry snow veiling him like a flying cloak beyond. He stood there a second with an atmosphere of power about him that seemed to dwarf everything, and of such commanding stature that into my mind, bewildered and confused a little with the sudden entrance, ran the thought of a bleak and towering peak of mountain. It came to me that the chalet must crumble, the huge beams split, and fall upon our heads. There was a rush of freezing wind, a touch of ice, and at the same time I was aware of some strange, intolerable beauty, as of wild nature, that made me hide my eves. It was only long afterward that I remembered there was no snow upon his feet, that his eyes remained hidden, and also that he spoke not a word.

"The door's blown open!" cried the uncle. "For God's sake—"

All this, moreover, in the tenth of the first second, for immediately I saw that the St. Bernard was bounding round the figure with an unfeigned delight that knew no fear; and next, that he had stretched his arms out toward the girl with a gesture of tenderness and invitation possible only in this whole world to the arms of woman. Terrible, yet inconceivably winning, was that gesture, as of a child. And the same moment, to my amazement, she had leaped forward and was gone. With her, barking and leaping, went the St. Bernard dog.

"Dot, you silly child, where in the world are you going? Do shut the door! It's not Harry yet. It was a false alarm." It was the matter-of-fact tone of her uncle's voice that let me into the secret—that only she, I, and the dog had witnessed anything at all.

"I'll go with her and see her safe," I shouted back, and it was only then, as I turned toward the door again after saying it, that I understood there was no one standing there, and that her leap had been really a springing run toward the corner where her skees lay. Already, I saw, they were on her feet. She was away. I saw the dog bounding over the frozen slope beside her. He was a little in front. He held her skirt in his teeth, guidingly. In that pale wintry light of the rising moon I saw their two outlines against the snow. They were alone.

"Bring brandy and a blanket!" I had the sense to call back into the room, and was after her in my turn. But the frozen fastenings of my skees had never seemed so obstinate. It was a whole minute before I was whizzing down the mile-long slope. The speed was tremendous, and the skees skidded on the crust. She left only faint indications of her trail. It was the barking of the dog that guided me best, and far away below me in the yellow moonlight the little speeding spot of black that showed me where she flew, heading straight for the Creux du Van.

At any other time such a descent as we two then made would have been sheer lunacy, even in daylight. The tearing speed, the angle of the huge slope, the iciness of that gleaming crust, all were invitations to disaster; and with the gaping chasm of the Creux du Van lying waiting at the bottom, it was simply a splendid race into suicide. The water poured from my eyes, the frozen mounds whipped by like giant white waves, and no sooner was the black line of some isolated pine-tree sighted than it was past, like the telegraph-poles to an express-train. Only the yellow face of the big rising moon held steady.

She had soon outstripped the dog, and as I shot past him, wildly cantering, with his tongue out and steaming, open jaws, he caught vainly at my puttees. The next moment he was a hundred yards behind me.

But Dot, guided by some power that the mountains put into her little feet, knew her direction well, and went as straight as a die to the edge of the awful gulf; then stopped dead, buried to her neck in a drift that climbed wave-like upon the very lips of the chasm. It stopped her, as ten minutes before it had also stopped another, coming down from the slopes that lay to the westward. I saw the hole of the valley gaping at our very feet as a successful "telemark" flung me backward beside her just in the nick of time.

"Quick!" I heard her cry. "He's still sliding!" It was then that I realized that the third body, lying there unconscious where the drift had likewise stopped it, was slowly moving with the weight of snow toward the edge. One skee already projected horribly over the actual brink. I heard a mass of snow detach itself and drop even as she said it.

It took less than a second to detach my belt and fasten it to his leg; but even then I firmly believe the strain of our slow pulling must have landed us

all three into the gulf below had not the arrival of the St. Bernard put a different complexion upon the scene. It was the grandest thing I have ever witnessed. A second he stood there, the supreme instinct of his noble race judging the problem. He knew the softness of the drift that must engulf him if he advanced; he also saw it sliding. Very slowly, like a courageous human being, on all fours, calculating distance, angle, and tensions, as it were, by his superb animal divination, he crawled round to another side. He crept gingerly along the very edge. His teeth fastened upon the boot and skee-straps. We pulled together. God! I cannot understand to this day how it was that the four of us were not gone! He knew, that splendid dumb creature. We merely followed his his magnificent lead.

A moment later we were safe on hard, solid snow. As we lay back exhausted, the snow immediately at our feet slid with a hiss, and disappeared into the valley hundreds of feet below. But the St. Bernard, still pulling carefully and gently by himself, was next busily licking the boy's white face and breathing his heat upon him, when help arrived with the brandy and the blankets. I believe it was the tireless and incessant attentions of that great dog that really saved the life, for he lay upon the form with his whole body, keeping him warm, and letting go only when he understood that the blankets and our arms, carrying him to the chalet, might replace own self-sacrificing love.

"I heard a voice crying outside the door in the wind," she told me afterward. "It was his voice, you see, and it called me by name. I don't know what guided me to the place, for I think I shut my eyes the whole way till I fell at his side."

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