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Story of the day:

A Dog and a Glacier

“Come on, boy, come on, Stickeen!” cried the man. The wind was blowing hard and it was starting to snow. It had rained most of the day, and now it was a dark twilight, and the man was soaked all through. That didn’t bother him so much, because he was used to it. He had lived his whole life outdoors, in all kinds of weather, exploring deserts and climbing mountains and tracking rivers to their source. He was standing on a flat stretch of a glacier in Alaska, on the Wrangel icefield.

Stickeen was a little black dog that had followed him that day.

Between him and Stickeen was a crevasse, a crack in the glacier.

It was not a few feet wide. Stickeen was a plucky fellow who seemed to have springs in his stubby legs. He would leap over those cracks as if they were nothing. It was fifty feet wide. And the walls of the glacier went straight down, smooth sheer walls of ice, a thousand feet, two thousand feet. If you dropped a stone, you would not see it hit the ground. You would not hear it. It would just seem to vanish.

The man hadn’t jumped over the gap. Nobody could do that. There was a way across.

You have to imagine a slender “bridge” of ice, slung out from one wall of the glacier to the other, like a strand, a thread. If you’ve ever seen a bridge shaped like an arch, it would be like this one, except that this *was upside down*, like a U, and it didn’t begin until ten feet down the wall, and when

you got to the other side you had same to climb up. The bridge went on a slant, seventy feet long.

The man had crossed it. He had to cut notches in the ice with his ax, just to get a foothold, and slowly, very slowly, taking a good hour, he had climbed down to the bridge, pressing his knees tight against the ice, and holding on with his free hand. He was afraid – who wouldn’t be? But he also said that he thought that to die “on a mountain, in a grand canyon, or in the heart of a crystal glacier would be blessed as compared with death from disease, a



mean accident in a street, or from a sniff of sewer-gas.” But what about the poor dog?

Stickeen would swim through icy waters to jump onto the man’s canoe. He would go hunting in the woods alone all day and come back to camp only at night. He had no opinion of bears or wild cats or wolves. But now he was on the other side, crying.

When he was getting ready to try the bridge, the man talked to the dog as you would talk to a boy. Or as you would talk to a boy, if when you were a

boy you had gotten by heart three quarters of the Old Testament and all of the New Testament.

“Hush your fears, my boy,” said the man. “We will get across safe, though it is not going to be easy. No right way is easy in this rough world. We must risk our lives to save them. At the worst we can only slip; and then how grand a grave we shall have!”

Grand indeed. That day he had seen a sight that showed the might of nature, and its beauty. Can you imagine a waterfall, frozen, and taking months to travel the hundred yards that a river falling over a brink would travel in a few seconds? Can you imagine it carrying away a forest that had stood for hundreds of years, and grinding two-foot thick trunks to sticks and chips? That was what the man saw. But now he could think only of the loyal ball of dog-muscle and dog-courage, Stickeen.

The dog lay down on the other side and put his muzzle between his paws and cried. Stickeen never cried about anything. “But in this gulf,” the man said, “a huge, yawning sepulcher big enough to hold everybody in the territory – lay the shadow of death, and his heartrending cries might well have called Heaven to his help.”

The man meant every word of that. “Perhaps they did,” he said. You see, the dog eventually gave in, and, flattening himself to the ice, he picked his slow way down the notches in the wall that the man had cut. The dog was almost standing on his head as he did so. He made it to the slippery bridge. Then he moved, one paw at a time, till finally he

was at the other side. But the wall stood in front of him. What to do? The man would have lassoed him and pulled him up if he had had a rope, but while he was thinking, Stickeen scrambled up the notches on the wall and whizzed right past the man’s head!

He was safe, he was alive, he was free, and all he could do for a while was race here and there and back and forth, tumbling head first, rolling over and over, in the heights of doggy joy.

From that time on Stickeen would follow the man everywhere, and lay his head upon the man’s knee at the campfire. “And

often,” the man wrote, “as he caught my eye, he seemed to be trying to say, ‘Wasn’t that an awful time we had together on the glacier?’”

Who was the man with the big heart for nature and the glory of God who made it? His name was John Muir, and

if you have ever been to a national park in the United States, you should say a word of thanks on his behalf, because it was Muir more than any other man who explored those wild places and who persuaded the government to set them aside for future generations.

And what about Stickeen? Muir never knew what became of him at last. He wrote many years later that if Stickeen was still alive, he would be very old. “Most likely he has left this world – crossed the last crevasse – and gone to another. But he will not be forgotten. Come what may, to me Stickeen is immortal.”



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