

Caught in a Blizzard

The bleak Iowa prairie was covered with a two-foot blanket of snow. Cold weather had come early in the fall of 1872, beginning in November with unusual severity and tightening its grip on the grim pioneers, who struggled for existence as the winter months closed in upon them. Finally January arrived, and the mercury fell as low as thirty degrees below zero.

On Thursday, January 2, 1873, a heavy snow began to fall and continued steadily, with scarcely an interruption, for three long days. By Saturday the supply seemed to have been exhausted and the prairie came slowly to life. Farmers ventured out, well-bundled, to break new roads over the forbidding expanse of white prairie, which was broken only at rare intervals by lines of fence. Hunters plodded heavily across the fields, sometimes floundering through great drifts into the frozen woods, and occasionally pausing to pound their arms against their heavily wrapped bodies. But as the days passed, the temperature rose and the sun shone a little more cheerfully.

Among other new settlers in northeastern Iowa were the country minister, his wife, and their six

children. They had traded their Wisconsin farm for a half section of the flowery unbroken prairie land of Howard County about seven miles northwest of Cresco. Ministers were sorely needed and on Sundays, Reverend John J. Evans held meetings among the Welsh pioneers. During the week, he labored on his new farm.

It had been necessary to build the barn first, and the family used the central portion of it as a temporary abode. In this way both family and stock could be sheltered. The house had progressed more slowly than they had wished, and January found them still quartered in the barn.

Tuesday, January 7th, dawned very pleasantly. Reverend Evans felt the call of the bright weather, and as he stamped his snowy feet on the floor, he called to his wife, "Eleanor, I believe I'll drive over to Owen Thomas's this afternoon. It's moderated quite a bit — must be about eight below. You'd better bundle up Elizabeth and the baby and ride along. We won't be gone long and can be back by the time the children get home from school."

Reverend Evans was a tall man with a large, aquiline nose. Contrary to the custom of the time, he was clean-shaven except for a short white mustache. The hair that was not hidden under his fur cap was thick and prematurely gray. The

eyes that he turned toward his wife were deep set and of a penetrating dark blue color.

In the center of the room was a heavy, wooden table. Eleanor had her sewing spread upon it and was busily cutting out what appeared to be a woman's coat. She worked deftly, pinning and cutting and matching carefully. At her husband's words she looked up from her sewing. She stroked up the brown scolding locks that curled softly at the back of her neck.

"Elizabeth, shall we go with father?" she questioned. From the corner of the room a little girl about four years of age scrambled to her feet and ran toward her father. He sat down and drew her gently between his knees, putting one arm about her. She said not a word but her brown eyes sparkled with lively expectation.

"I wish I had Mrs. Thomas's coat done so I could take it to her." Eleanor held up a part of the front with a caressing glance. "It's the new 'Ladies Cloth' that Owen bought her at the store. I'm afraid it will outshine even my new homespun." Before her marriage, Eleanor had been a tailoress in Milwaukee and she still spent her spare time sewing.

The sun shone in through one small window that had been put in only temporarily. As soon as the family moved into the new house the window

would be used there and a door fitted into its place in the barn. The floor was rough and uneven. Although the room was only a temporary dwelling, it had an atmosphere of coziness.

The low wail of a baby interrupted the conversation. Eleanor laid down her scissors.

"Baby wants to go too, I guess," she said as she went to push back the curtains which partitioned off one corner of the room. Behind them was a cord bed covered with a light-gray blanket of wool. She picked up the child and carried it in one arm as she replenished the fire with wood. "The first thing we must have after we get into the house is a new box-stove," she remarked. "We'll use my sewing money for that."

She passed from the stove to the bench which held a pail of water, and back to the stove again as she put the water on to heat. Then she went to the cupboard and took out a large pan. Evidently the baby was going to have a bath.

Beyond the cupboard, the wall was lined with a row of nails from which hung all of the family wardrobe except that which was kept in an oak chest at the foot of the bed. Eleanor worked busily, humming a low tune as she moved about. She dressed the baby and Elizabeth and then put on a dress of brown homespun just the color of her soft hair.

A half hour later found them packed in a clumsy old cutter, creaking slowly over the snow. The minister's friendly eyes shone under his black fur cap as he urged the horses into a trot. Eleanor's lips parted to show teeth which were strong and white, as she spoke a few words to the squirming bundle of brown shawl on her lap. Only Elizabeth's bright eyes were visible. Even the tip of her tiny nose was securely buried in a heavy knitted scarf, which was tied in a huge knot at the back of her head.

"The Thomases are good neighbors," Eleanor said as they drove up to the house. "We are fortunate to have them less than a mile from us."

As they stopped, Owen threw open the door and greeted them with a cordial, "Hello, neighbor!" and then called back to his wife, "It's the preacher and his woman." Mrs. Thomas ushered them cheerily in and bustled about unwrapping Elizabeth and exclaiming over the baby.

"Here, we'll put the baby right here in the old black rocker," Mrs. Thomas planned, as she fluffed up a pillow and laid the baby on it. "Eleanor, you take this chair by the fire. Did you get very cold?"

"No, only my feet," replied Eleanor as she took the chair. "I suppose your feet never get cold any more. John told me you had some new shoes to

wear over your leather ones." She rubbed Elizabeth's hands which were red with cold.

"Oh yes!" Mrs. Thomas disappeared for a moment, returning with a pair of sturdy one-buckled overshoes. "Arctics, they call them," she explained. "They keep a person's shoes dry and clean and are real warm, too." She stirred up the fire and settled down for a good visit. Owen and the preacher were putting up the horses. As they came toward the house, Owen led his visitor into a little side woodshed.

"Look here what I bagged this morning," he said, holding up four plump quail. They sat down on the wood while Owen picked his game and the preacher whittled and talked.

When they entered the house some time later, they found Eleanor busily knitting red mittens and Mrs. Thomas carding wool. She cordially set out chairs for the men.

"Hope Owen didn't freeze you to death out there with his quail. I'll get them right on and we'll have an early supper."

Near her mother's chair, Elizabeth was happily stringing buttons of all sizes and colors on a black cord. Sometimes she became so deeply engrossed in her play that she whispered snatches of conversation to herself.

Her supper started, Mrs. Thomas resumed her

carding. "Last week's cold spell made me get at my quilts again," she explained. "I'll be having a 'Bee' next week and I want you to come."

At about four o'clock, dark clouds began to overcast the sky and the wind started to blow. Eleanor glanced anxiously out of the window. "We must be getting home, John. The fires will be low and the boys will wonder what has become of us," she said.

"Yes, it looks as if we might get a storm before long," said Mrs. Thomas after surveying the leaden skies from the window. "But you must have a bite to eat before your cold ride. I'll steep a little tea and we'll have some bread and butter." She had a lunch set for them very soon. They ate rather hurriedly. The men had ceased to joke and Eleanor kept glancing out at the dark sky.

When they had finished, Mrs. Thomas warmed Elizabeth's small coat and little red mittens, Eleanor wrapped the baby warmly and as Owen tucked them all snugly into the cutter, he remarked, "Guess we're in for another spell of weather. It's a good thing you don't have far to go." The air had become filled with fine whirling snow that cut into their faces.

Unwillingly the horses turned into the wind. A gust of it made the air dense with snow. They started off. After a moment Eleanor glanced back

to wave a last good-bye, but to her surprise the house was almost indiscernible through the snow. John urged the horses to a trot. They increased their speed grudgingly and covered the first quarter mile at a slow trot. Snow was fast wiping out all signs of the road. The wind was piling up drifts. John urged the horses on again. They lowered their heads and trotted uncertainly for a few yards and then were forced to a walk. At times they lurched and floundered through great banks of snow. Snow began to cling to the long winter hair on their legs and bellies. Their cheeks were crusted with snow and frost, their nostrils were dilated and their sides heaved from the great exertion. The cold was becoming more intense, accentuated by the terrific gale they faced. John reached down and packed the robes more tightly around their feet, and pounded first one mittened hand and then the other. Eleanor tried to shelter her face near his shoulder. She felt of the baby's little hands. They were cold! She pressed the child closer to her and drew the covers up higher.

"It's bitter cold, John. I wish that I had not brought the children out."

After a moment's pause John replied, "If we had known it was going to get as bad as this we would have stayed at Owen's till morning. We're half way home now. There is nothing to do but go

on." Little Elizabeth began to cry softly. The tears froze instantly on her white cheeks. Her father lowered his face to hers, holding up his great mittened hand to shield her from the beating snow. A flash of pain stabbed his deep blue eyes.

"Eleanor, the child's face is freezing!" he gasped. "Here, little one, put your face in my lap and we'll soon be safe home with the boys." The child stiffly lowered her head and her body shook with sobs.

The horses were reluctant to face the wind. Twice they came to a complete stop and the minister could scarcely get them to move again.

"We ought to be to the willow trees." Eleanor's voice came despairingly. "Are you sure, John, that you know where we are?"

The minister's voice came back through the darkness and tearing wind. "We can't be far from the house now. I am going to get out and see what the horses have come up against."

They were half-buried in the seething snow, motionless except for the heaving of their sides. He disappeared from sight and Eleanor screamed, "John, where are you?"

His voice came muffled, "Here. Keep talking to me. I think I see trees a little ways on."

She kept calling to him. Sometimes the demon wind brought back a faint reply, at other times no

sound came but the roar and the rush of the storm. Eleanor tried to shield both children from it. After endless minutes John reappeared suddenly, floundering through the snow about him.

"We are near the house. I think I can make it on foot. I'll unhitch the horses and then take Elizabeth first. Here, child", he said after a moment. She had ceased to cry. Her face had a deathly pallor and her eyes were dull. One word escaped the man's lips. "God", he implored. Eleanor sat as if stunned, clasping the snow-covered, motionless, brown-shawled bundle to her cold breast.

John disappeared in the storm. His burden was dead weight. At times progress seemed impossible, but he floundered on. Then he stumbled and his shoulder struck something that was not snow. The tree by the house! Again the prayer escaped his lips, "Oh, God!" He stumbled to the door and struck it with a numb foot.

Two frightened boys ran toward him. "Take care of Elizabeth," he ordered as he laid the child on the bed. "She's badly frozen. Your mother and the baby are out there freezing. I am going back after them."

Back into the storm he went. The wind whipped and cut and lashed. Slowly he fought back to the sleigh. "Are you all right, Eleanor?" he

called. She did not move, but as he lifted the baby from her breast he felt the gentle movement of her breathing.

"Oh, God, give me strength," he sobbed. The wind tore the covers from him as he tried to tuck them more firmly about his wife. She moved and murmured his name. "I'll be back soon, Eleanor", he gasped and again was lost in the darkness and snow and wind. His feet were leaden. He could not feel the weight in his arms. The snow seemed to grasp him from all sides. The wind beat him back. The tree — oh, where was it? Slowly he sank down. He made a futile effort to move. He would rest just a moment. . . .

The next day the storm abated somewhat. The oldest son set out early for Thomas's thinking his parents had returned there. Then began the search. The horses were found seeking shelter near a clump of bushes and farther on, the cutter, half-drifted over with snow. On the floor of the sleigh, where she had slipped to her knees, was the mother's frozen body.

A day later the minister was found but a short distance from his house. He still held the child fast in his arms.

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