BLOOD LAIRS

By LARS HANSEN

The following short story is an excellent example of modern Norwegian literature. It has the flavor of that wild harshness of nature and climate against which the Norwegians must battle all their lives, more so than most other Europeans.

The author, Lars Hansen, was originally a skipper of the Arctic waters, dealing in furs and fish which he picked up in Spitsbergen, Greenland, Iceland, and the settlements of northern Norway. About 1925 it occurred to him to put down some of his experiences in writing, and he was so successful that he became a professional writer. He has published many stories and several books whose plots are laid in the icy wastes of the Far North.

This story was translated from the Norwegian by Cris Norlund, the author of "Europe's North" (October 1942).—K.M.

ONE morning Anton Jakobsen went out to examine the fox traps and the spring guns which had been put up for bears. Traps and spring guns were placed on capes and headlands below the steep fjeld and in conspicuous places scattered all over the miles of desolation which characterize the west coast of Spitsbergen. They had put up so many traps and spring guns that a man had to be swift-footed if he wanted to examine all of them in one day, and then only when the ground was perfect for skiing.

Anton had covered about half his round when he came upon a spring gun. In some inexplicable way the gun went off when Anton was about to change the old bait for a new one—the gun went off, and the Remington bullet went through his thigh.

It was about six hours' march at top speed as the crow flies to reach the house.

When the gun went off Anton did not fall; but he knew what had happened. It was cold, and he knew that when it is very cold a wound will not bleed as much as in hot weather. He had a bit of rope and, being an old-time sailor, he laid a lashing around the wound. The bullet had passed through the limb about eight inches above the knee. The bone had not been hit; but, judging from the path of the bullet, he realized that it had gone through the muscle. When he put on the lashing he used his ski stick in the same way as a sailor uses a spike to tighten a rope's end. After that, when he saw that the blood no longer ran as freely as before, he set out on his way back.

The first hour passed, the second too. At short intervals he threw a glance across his shoulder at his ski trails. Alongside these lay a thin dotted streak of red blood which stood out against the glaring white snow. How often he had followed a similar track—a trail of blood from a bear which had also had a bullet through its body! He could not forget the one a week ago which had had a bullet through its belly into the lung and out again on the other side. He had tracked it for nine hours. He had seen its prints in the snow where it had lain, and there had been a big clump of frozen blood. Then it had risen: he recalled how the bear had staggered and swayed before it could break into a regular jog trot.

Now he felt that he himself had to rest. But then he remembered the bear

again—how he himself had thought that, when it was so bad that the bear must lie down, he knew very well that it did not have much time left, that a rest for the bear meant a loss of its strength, so—

The sweat streamed down his face; he clenched his teeth; he swayed and fell prostrate in the snow. He lay there thinking of the bear: it had not fallen, it had lain down. Strange—when he lay like this he felt nothing, only a violent throbbing in his thigh; it throbbed as if somebody stood beside him beating a hammer against the bandage. He moved his arms, he stretched. Then it flashed through his mind that he had calculated how many times the bear would have to lie down before he could reach it, dead or alive. And now—now this was his first "blood lair." This is what they called the places of rest of a bear which had been hit by a spring gun. Many of the bears which had got a bullet through their body had never got any further than their first blood lair, but a few of them had trotted on, and one had even had twenty-six blood lairs before Anton had found it, and still it had been so much alive that he had had to beat the life out of it with his ski stick.

Anton got to his feet again and said aloud: "If that bear could manage twenty-six blood lairs, I should be able to manage ten, and then I'll be home."

And then he walked—but he had to strain his will to the utmost not to fall. He gained ground step by step. He had to. After half an hour he threw aside his rifle, it had grown too heavy. In throwing it aside he fell in the snow with a shriek. He screamed, but in his scream were words, for he shrieked: "Blood lair number two already—it mustn't happen."

And by dint of his staff and his arms he got up. Disgraceful—it seemed to him as if the other foot were bad too, but it could only be his imagination, because, after all, it had not been damaged. Strange—in spite of all his efforts he could not help looking back. That cursed red blood line kept following him. But there was no blood lair this time, only prints appeared where his two hands had gone through the snow as well as a print of the ski stick which had dropped out of his hand. There was also a clear print of the rifle running across the print of the stick.

With a grin he drove his rifle butt-end down into the snow. In the barrel he placed the cleaner and pulled one of his extra woollen mittens down over it so that Oskar could find the rifle when he came this way. Now he had to go on, dragging his legs through the snow.

The pain was so frightful that his face was completely distorted. He assumed that his leg was beginning to freeze hard. He had often noticed, when he had found bears which were not yet dead, that one of their paws—the one nearest the bullet hole—was sometimes frozen as hard as a piece of wood. No doubt the same thing had happened to his own leg now; but as long as he succeeded in dragging it along, it would remain where it was. And if he could not stand it any longer he would take his long knife and cut off his leg at the knee. For he knew that, when he had cut off a bear's stiffly frozen paw, no blood would run unless he chopped it off too high.

He walked on. He knew the way, he knew precisely how far he still had to go; and while walking he tried to calculate whether he could get home without any further blood lairs.

He wondered whether the bad foot and the good foot left similar prints in the snow, ski trails of the same depth. He looked back, but forgot to look at that which he had turned his head to see. For what he saw, or rather what he did not see, led his thoughts in another direction. There was no longer any blood in the tracks. How could this have happened? It could only be that everything was frozen. He tore off his mitten and squeezed the wound. Out of the wound, or rather from between the tatters where the bullet had left the flesh and where the hole was large, came a thick reddish fluid. He saw it was

frozen blood, and when he took a lump between his fingers it melted into blood —red and fresh. The pain had now spread to his whole body except the damaged thigh and leg.

He pressed on, walking for dear life. The air was motionless. There was a full moon, and the scene was as bright as at noon, so that he could follow a direct course toward the house. He wondered if he could manage to climb the small hill which he had to cross to get home.

He could, of course, walk through the cleft to avoid the hill; but, in the first place, that route would be longer, and secondly there had been snow slides in two places which would probably cause him difficulties, because he would have to count on using only one foot. So he headed for the hill. The house stood not far off on the other side, a few hundred meters off on the headland, and he hoped that, if he managed to reach the top of the hill, Oskar would see him and come to his rescue.

He staggered on. He could feel his wounded leg now and then. That is to say, when he had to put his weight on it and it then slipped into a wrong position, he would scream with pain. Once he shrieked so loudly that he frightened himself. It was as if he were torn out of his half-consciousness by the noise in the midst of the stillness. He reeled. The ski on his foot would not steer any more. It was only his eyes which told him, because his nerves felt nothing. He was only certain that he was walking—walking bent nearly double.

He reached the hill and tried to climb it by placing his skis athwart with his good foot first. He lifted it a step, but his frozen leg would not follow. He bent down and with one hand grasped his leg below the knee and lifted it. Leaning on the ski stick, he placed his damaged leg with the ski right beside the good one. In this way he managed to get halfway up before he toppled over. He was turning giddy, everything went black before him, but in spite of this he flung himself in such a direction that he lay with his head above his body and legs. He was given just seconds to think clearly, and during these few fragments of time he managed to fall the right way. Had he fallen head downwards he would never have been able to get up again.

This, then, was to be blood lair number three.

He lay there, groaning. He was in a rage, he cursed, pronouncing his horrible maledictions on life in general and the winters of Spitsbergen in particular. Without standing up, he began to move uphill by means of his hands, his stick, and his good leg, inch by inch, foot by foot. In this way he reached the top. A sickly smile passed across his face. He saw the house. He dared not rest, because now he was perspiring, and to rest now meant death. If he surrendered now, he would never wake up again, he knew that. He recalled how he had found Ole Andersdal three years ago. Ole had been sitting there fast asleep in the snow, but when he stepped up to him he had found he was merely a frozen block of ice. Remembering this, he got up and set off, leaning on his stick. In another five minutes he was far across the plain and quite near the house.

He shouted—but nobody answered. He walked up till he was standing outside the door. He shouted again, but nobody came out. So Oskar had not yet returned.

WHEN Oskar came home a few hours later, Anton was in bed. The stove was lit, the coffee had been made. Oskar stepped up to him, but Anton had fainted in bed. Oskar realized at once that there must have been an accident, for Anton himself had cut open his clothes and bared his thigh and leg. From the water on the floor Oskar concluded that Anton had tried to thaw up the frozen muscle. So well are these people acquainted with arctic conditions that Oskar, when he saw how things were with his friend, ran outdoors with a bucket in his hand. Returning with it full of snow and ice,

he took a bag and emptied the contents of the bucket into it, using it as a dressing for the naked bleeding thigh.

A few moments later Anton woke up. "Was it a spring gun which went off, Anton?" asked Oskar.

"Yes, is the thigh very much torn up?" Anton answered.

"I don't know, your leg is still frozen, and we must let the ice melt first before we can tell anything. In fifteen minutes or half an hour we shall see. Well, Anton—here is some hot coffee. How you ever managed to heat up the stove—I must say, Anton, you're a lion—it's not everyone who could have done that."

He went out once more and came back with a bottle of 96-per-cent brandy, the last of six bottles. Anton lay quiet, looking up at the ceiling; his eyes were big, blue, and shining. Oskar said :

"When you feel the pain coming on in your leg, let me know, though I guess I don't have to ask you to, because you'll probably roar like a wounded tiger. You bet it's bad, but then I'll give you a fine treat of 96. I suppose you haven't been really tight since we went to Tromsö, but now you are going to be—you can be sure of that!"

He talked and talked, and while he did so, squeals and weak screams came from Anton, who tried to swallow the contents of a big iron mug, strong black coffee in which there was a full tumbler of 96-per-cent brandy.

The next day came. Anton was in bed, and he was still there after two months. During this period Oskar Haugan had attended to all the fox traps and spring guns. On the wall were twenty-eight blue foxes and thirty-nine white foxes, stretched and dried; in addition there were twenty-three bears lying in brine. Anton looked bad. He did not seem the old Anton—he himself said that he did not feel well.

Oskar always left his Remington rifle by the kitchen range. One day as he was skinning a fox out in the corridor, he thought he heard something moving about in the next room. He opened the door and saw to his surprise that Anton had crawled out of bed and was standing with the rifle in his hand. He rushed in, tore the rifle out of his friend's grasp, and said :

"So that's the way things are with you? Poor Anton—no, no—don't cry, everything may still be all right."

Anton was unable to get back to bed and Oskar had to help him. Then Anton said: "Oskar, take a look at this leg of mine: it is black, and you know it got gangrenous long ago. It's putrefying—I can't stand the stench—and now that you have prevented me from putting an end to it, what are you going to do?"

Oskar looked him straight in the eyes: "Anton, we have no right to take our own lives. There are two things we might try: one is to cut off your leg—I can do that, and then carve out all the putrid flesh—but then you'll die, I'm afraid. Or I can try to go to Bellsund. There is a doctor there. But that is a trip that might cost me my life. That, however, is of minor importance, but who is to take care of you while I'm away? The trip can't be done both ways, even with a fine skiing ground, in less than four days, and you—you will be dead by the time I get back with the doctor."

A little farther south in the same district was a hut in which one of our best-known wintering men lived all by himself. His name was Petter Trondsen. Oskar told Anton that he would go to Petter and ask him if he would go for the doctor or if he would stay with Anton and look after him while he went himself. Anton had no objection to that.

Oskar removed the rifle which he did not take along with him, placed food and drink on the table, moved the latter up to the bed in order that Anton might reach the food, and left.

The trip took him over steep fjelds, and at intervals he had to make detours across the pack ice of the bays. He reached Petter's house in ten hours.

Petter was in and, after he had heard Oskar's explanation of what had happened, he said: "I'll go for the doctor, and if I don't come back, then look me up when spring comes around and bury me—what's left of me. I'll go up through the valley here and follow the fjeld eastward until I have crossed the Sörfjord at Bellsund."

Petter Trondsen trudged off between snow heaps. On his back he carried a bag of food, and over his shoulder hung his rifle.

IT caused a unique sensation in Bellsund when a strange, frost-covered, bearded skiier entered the settlement asking for the doctor. The latter was told the whole story. At first he refused to go back with Petter, because nothing could be done about a man who had been in bed for two and a half months with a battered thigh affected with gangrene, and that to such a degree that it stank of putrefaction. However, he was a medical man and keen on his job. He finally agreed to come along.

After a good meal, the doctor and Petter put on their skis and, in spite of the fact that Petter had had a march of thirty-six hours, the doctor could hardly keep up with him.

On his back Petter carried the doctor's instrument case containing instruments and bandages, as well as his own rifle and the food bag which had been filled in Bellsund with provisions for Anton. All these things together made up quite a heavy load.

The doctor, who was not exactly a brilliant skiier but, on the other hand, a young, vigorous, and brave fellow, tried to follow Petter. But this proved to be impossible, for coming down hills and knolls the doctor invariably tried to slow down. Either he sat on his skis and steered with his feet or he used his two sticks as brakes so that veritable snow clouds whirled about him and a deep furrow was to be seen where he had dashed downhill. Then Petter Trondsen took hold of him and explained to him that, if they were to reach their goal in time, he must not be afraid: "Come on, man, don't ever hesitate to follow my track, and remember that if you drop behind too far and happen to meet a bear you have no rifle."

From that moment on the journey went splendidly; and by the time they got through to the house where Anton and Oskar were waiting for them, the doctor was quite a good skiier.

When the doctor got a look at the leg he said: "Well, things are none too good here," and Petter said: "Phew! It's rotten — completely rotten!"

The doctor started his work of amputating the leg with the assistance of Petter Trondsen and Oskar, and after four hours the chopped-off leg was carried out into the corridor by Oskar, who covered it carefully with snow and ice for preservation until summer. When spring came around again and Anton and Oskar were called for, Anton had taken to a wooden leg with which he tottered down to the boat that took him on board the waiting ship.

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The following summer I went for a trip to the Flöifjeld which is situated above Tromsö about 2,000 feet above sea level. The young people of Tromsö go up there on Saturday evenings when the weather is fine and the midnight sun illuminates the fair Nordic summer nights. A crowd of lads and lassies wound their way up the fjeld path singing and laughing.

When they reached the summit I saw Anton Jakobsen and Oskar Haugan among them—Anton on two legs. Good gracious! He walked up to me, greeted me, and said :

"Do you think that there has been anybody up here before with a wooden leg? This leg of mine, which cost me 2,000 kroner, why, it's the best leg I've ever had, far better than the one I lost, because it won't ever be affected with gangrene and it can easily stand a Remington bullet."

And with a beaming face both he and Oskar told me that now they were going to spend another winter in Spitsbergen, and this time they were to be given their equipment by the fur dealer Claus Andersen. It was a well-known fact that people traveling for Andersen were equipped in such a way that, even if the trip should last two years, there was nothing to be feared.

THE THREE SAPPERS

A TRUE STORY

By KARL SPRINGENSCHMID

The second of the two short stories published in this double issue has just reached us from Germany. Although it has the German-Soviet front for its background, it is not a war story in the ordinary sense of the word. An example of the broad humor of the front, it shows one of the other sides of war.

As regards the author, we know nothing about him except that, like the three sappers he describes, he is one among millions of German men fighting on the Eastern Front.—K. M.

THOSE had been hard days in the forests around Lake Ilmen. For three weeks the regiment had been in battle. But now another division was at the front, and the regiment was going to the rear for a spell of rest.

The clouds hung low over the forests. Rain was pouring down. After the long, tedious march, the men were dead tired. Sapper Hotter, "Mine" Hotter, slept as he stood leaning against a tree, while the other two men were putting up the tent. Hotter could sleep in peace, for there were no more mines around here. In his company it was said that he could "smell" the mines. His nose was long enough, all right. But where nobody else saw or even suspected anything, he would suddenly pull back the others, creep forward, and dig out the nicest mines, as if he had buried them there himself. It was not only his nose, it was also his fingers. He had fingers, they said, as sensitive and skillful as those of a midwife. No one would have credited that coarse lumberman with such a fine touch; what he needed for the mines he had probably learned at home with the girls.

Lance Corporal Knapp was more for rough things. Blasting was what he liked. It wasn't a real war for him unless there was something he could blow up: bridges, pillboxes, houses, trees, barbed-wire entanglements, fish out of the water, stones out of the ground. "Blow it up!" was his slogan. At the moment, however, he was kneeling on the floor of the forest like any ordinary soldier and was pulling his end of the canvas so tight that the third man, Federspiel, was almost dragged over the tent post.

"What's the hurry?" yelled stout little Federspiel, trying hard to keep his balance and stretch the canvas on his own side. In contrast to the other two, Federspiel was an all-round sapper, always there, always useful. He liked a well-built tent. So he finished up by digging a small