

## THE GREAT LAD by Joyce Stranger

It had been a wicked day. Snow lay deep in crack and crevice.

The dog had been uneasy all day. Restless, as they dug out the sheep and tried to guide them back to the farm through the deep snow.

The dog could not tell his master his fears. Twice he crouched and whined, refusing to move on, and the man shouted at him.

The man used his crook to test the depth of a drift that covered a deep gully. He started to wade across the gully but before he could get to the other side the hill seemed to shudder and a weight of snow rock and earth came tumbling from the heights faster and faster straight for the man.

The dog barked and ran. The man followed, clumsy in his thick clothing. A rock struck his shoulder, and another pinned his arm as he fell. He couldn't move. He lay helpless as an insect pinned on a collector's board.

He whistled the dog and Moss came.

"Home lad" the shepherd said. The dog was puzzled. "Home" was a command for unruly pups, not for a grown dog out with his master on the hill. He crept forward whining.

Now Wyn Jones cursed the gruelling training he had given the dog. Training that ensured the dog would always rely on his master's brains and never on his own.

"Home dog" he yelled. But Moss could still not believe his ears. There was work to be done, and his master had no right to lie in the snow. He tried to dig at the rock that held him prisoner. Jones sighed. The poor beast was doing his best but help must come from men.

"No" he said sharply, and the dog backed away, head on one side, ears half cocked, puzzled.

"HOME!" the shepherd roared.

This time the dog started, but kept looking back, eyes anxious, as if hoping to see his master stand and follow him. Soon persuaded that this was not going to happen, he gave his whole mind to following the trail back to the farm.

He knew the way by scent and sight, but scent was masked and landmarks had vanished. Unbroken snow lay all around him. Once he fell into a small drift and struggled out panting. Once he dropped to the ground to rest, but the command given him was too powerful. His duty was to obey, and he had to go home.

The shepherd, lying where he had fallen, wiped tears of cold away from his eyes and looked at the sheep. One of them came and stood beside him. The other sheep followed, not realising that their coming offered the shepherd the chance of warmth and life. The shepherd pushed his hands into the rank smelling wool of the nearest ewe and dozed, dreaming uneasily of hot coffee and steak and kidney pudding.

Meanwhile the dog was almost home but suddenly, without warning a blizzard struck. Blindness came on the dog as the great flakes of snow swirled on the wind and fell on

his eyes and muzzle. He shook himself repeatedly and then sat in the clammy snow using first one paw and then the other to try and clear away the clinging clammy stuff that prevented sight and movement.

It was useless to go on. He crouched where he lay, listening to the close and familiar sounds from the farm somewhere down below. The clank of a bucket, the yelp of a dog.

That gave him his clue. He barked sharp and loud, calling to the dog below and Rex heard his companion and answered.

When Rex stopped for breath Moss barked again.

“Dammit, that’s Moss out there” the farmer said to his wife, as he stood in the doorway, staring at the swirling flakes. “What’s happened to Wyn then?”

His wife stared at him, white faced. The dog had never come home alone before.

The farmer stood in the doorway and called “Moss, here Moss. Come then, good dog.”

The dog barked, and given the guidance of the voice crawled over the ridge, slipped and fell headlong into a ditch, hidden and deep. He tried to claw his way out, but the soft snow was loose and fell away, leaving him beyond the wall and whimpering.

The farmer brought his big torch and walked cautiously towards the sound, his voice reassuring. He leaned over the wall, and saw the dog. He leaned down, gripped the loose scruff and heaved. Moss, wild with pleasure at being once more with men, wagged his tail and licked the man’s hand in an ecstasy of welcome.

The farmer brought the dog into the warmth of the kitchen and put food before it. Moss stared at the food but refused to eat.

Out in the farmyard one of the ponies yickered a complaint, afraid of the weather as snowflakes drifted in through his half open stable door.

The farmer went out to shut it, sliding and cursing. He turned in time to see the dog, half a leg of lamb in its mouth, streak out into the night.

“Damned little thief” he said in fury “Wouldn’t touch his own food. Had to take our supper instead.”

“Are you going out on the hill?” his wife asked him.

“No, be two of us lost out there” he said at last “At first light, I’ll get up there and take Williams with me.”

The dog was trying to retrace his path, back to the hill and the man that meant more to him than food and warmth. The meat held in his jaws made his mouth slaver, but he did not take a single bite.

A faint trace of scent lay on the ground and he tracked back. The snow stopped. The moon broke through a layer of cloud. Moss went on. In places he struggled, neck deep, dragging each leg from the snow, getting more and more weary.

At last he came to the patch where the shepherd lay, and stopped and looked in surprise at the unbroken snow. Carefully he put the meat down, sniffed around and then began to dig.

He found sheep and man in a hollow made by their breath, but the man felt overwhelming disappointment when he saw the dog.

“Moss, Moss. You dammed old fool. We’ll both die out here now.” The dog wagged a forlorn tail, unable to understand why he was not greeted with fervour.

He went back for the meat.

The shepherd watched him with dull eyes, saw the half leg of lamb, and stared at it unbelieving.

“You durned old fool. You been back? I hope they saw you.” He reached out a hand to pat the wet coat. The dog dropped beside him and licked his face.

The shepherd took the meat. It was slimed and snowy but it was life sustaining. He dragged at it with his teeth and spat the outer parts to the dog, who took his reward greedily.

A few hours later the farmer managed to track the dog through the snow, with the men from the neighbouring farm. They found dog and shepherd asleep, a ewe under the shepherd’s head acting as a pillow

The farmer stared at them and at the bone that lay, gnawed clean beside them.

“Moss brought me some dinner” the shepherd said, his eyes proud on the dog, as they dug the rock and snow away from his arm. They rolled him in blankets and put him on a stretcher. Hot coffee laced with rum quickly restored the shepherd and the damage to his arm, apart from bruising was not bad.

That night bedded on the settee of the warm farmhouse Wyn watched his dog eat a meal fit for a king.

“Eh Moss, you’re a great lad” he said and the dog turned and looked at him, and his tail beat a steady thunder on the hard floor before he returned to the dish Mair had given him as his right.