

The One who Survived: Ada Blackjack – summary

In the days when large parts of the earth had not been explored, and sea faring was very fraught, four men and a woman set out on a voyage. The three men Frederick Maurer (28), E Lone Knight (28), Allan R Crawford (20), set out under the leadership of Stefansson to discover new lands and conquer them. The spirit of adventure and the lure of virgin islands drove them, whereas the fourth member, a woman named Ada Blackjack (23) undertook the perilous journey to resuscitate her ailing son battling T.B. What unfolded during the voyage is both saddening and heartening.

Ada was born in the year 1898. Curiously, she avoided going out to play with other children preferring to stay indoors to do household chores to help her grandma. The exuberance of a youngster was missing in her.

By 1921, Ada had married, and become a mother, but sadly had lost two of her babies. The five-year-old Bennett lay in bed, afflicted by TB. Woefully short of money, Ada could ill-afford good medical care for her sick son. She could do nothing but bemoan her fate.

At this point of time, entered Stefansson, the leader of the expedition. He made a proposal to Ada. Stefansson needed a help who would accompany the four young sailors aboard their ship. She had to do cooking, mending clothes and other such sundry work. Could she accompany the expedition, asked Stefansson. But, Ada had her leg tied to Bennett's sick bed. She could never leave him to die. She was lost in thoughts.

Stefansson made an enticing offer. He would make arrangements for Bennett's comprehensive medical care to turn him around till Ada returned.

Ada weighed the offer, and concluded that the medical care was vital for her sick son. She could bear the separation from her son for some time if it could ensure his recovery from TB. She would also get her remuneration. With mind engulfed in torment, she agreed to Stefansson's offer to work as a cook and a seamstress for the Arctic expedition. Stefansson was delighted.

On 21st September, the group set out for Wrangel Island. Initially, the other members of the group felt Ada was too frail to stand the cold hazardous journey, but Ada showed remarkable determination and resilience. They agreed.

Stefansson saw off the group assuring that the place they were heading to was awash with wild life. The young men could hunt them for the meat. Stefansson had six months ration loaded on the ship. Additionally, he assured that he would send another supply ship after six months to replenish the stock.

Their ship Silverwave left the port. Soon, on board the ship, Bennett's memory began to haunt Ada. She consoled herself thinking that it was more important for Bennett to stay alive than her remaining close to him.

The expedition landed in the island. Unlike their earlier assumption, the island turned out to be a vast swathe of land, not a tiny patch. Ada made up her mind to stick to

her assigned work – sewing and cooking. The young men decided to begin hunting from the next day.

It was 1922. Spring arrived. Life was rather easy for the members of the expedition. There were games aplenty for hunting. Seals, polar bears, ducks and geese provided plentiful of the much-needed meat for consumption in that desolate cold land. The crew decided to build a snow-house for shelter to keep warm.

Things started to take a turn for the worse. Lone Knight returned to the camp after swimming across the Skeleton River. The cold water and the exhaustion took their toll. Lone felt uneasy. Soon he was taken ill. No amount of care and nourishing could revive him. His condition went from bad to worse.

The members of the crew began to worry stock of essential items like sugar, coffee, bean and flour reached critically low levels. Lone showed no sign of recovery. His moral was low, as he felt he couldn't pull it through. Ada was there with her words of comfort, but Lone had slipped past the threshold. Doom and despondency was in the air.

One of the crew members suggested that they could cross the icy Chukki Sea to reach the land where they could seek help for themselves and the beleaguered comrades left behind. In other words they mulled over the idea of expedient escape from the camp.

Lone's condition deteriorated fast. Leaving him to the care of Ada, the three other crew members left the camp for their onward journey. The demure Ada could neither demur, nor vent her anxiety.

It was January 1923. Crawford, Malle and Gaurer headed for Siberia crossing the Chukki Sea. Ada did her best to instill some confidence in the ailing Lone, but his condition was too grim for her kind words to have any salutary effect. There was no food to eat. It was a desperate situation. Starvation loomed over the duo – one critically ill, the other, a frail woman with little skill to gather food in those hostile cold surroundings.

Ada pulled herself up and decided to go hunting. Lone protested, but Ada said she would do it – anyhow. She managed to kill a few animals, and could fend off starvation. Tragedy befell again. Lone passed away, leaving Ada heart-broken, and alone. There was no trace of the three men. The ghoulish wilderness gnawed her relentlessly. But, she refused to capitulate. She thought of Bennett, and drew comfort from the fact that he must be recovering fast. She had a reason to stay alive. She kept the fire burning in her tent. Inside her, the fire of hope and energy remained aglow. Despair and despondency began to recede. She clung to her life and spirit. On August 23, 1923, a merchant ship named Donaldson laid anchor in the shore. The sailors took good care of Ada, by then half-starved and battered by the cold. Her ordeal was finally over.

When she reached home, she was treated like a hero. She became the darling of the media who gave her front-page coverage. She was invited to gatherings to recount her struggle with the adversity and the elements. Felicitations flowed from all quarters.

Ada narrated her learning experience – how she studied maps, and how she hunted foxes with the help of traps. Her story became an inspiring saga of struggle and survival.

With her accumulated salary, she took her fit and fine son to Seattle to start life anew. She declared that the spirit of adventure was still alight in her.

The indomitable Ada finally went to Arctic and made it her home.

Questions

1. Why did Ada agree to join the expedition?
2. Why did Lorne knight not traverse the icy sea with other explorers?
3. Write down the character sketch of “Ada Blackjack”.
4. What happened to son of Ada Blackjack?
5. How was Ada Blackjack rescued in the end from the isolated island?

1. Why did Ada agree to join the expedition?

Ada decided to join the expedition as an assistant because she needed money for the treatment of her only son. Ada’s son, Bennett, was very ill and needed constant attention and care. She lived with her grandmother; they were very poor and there was very little food left in the house. Ada had lost her husband and there was no one to earn money in their household. It was during such a time that Ada decided to join the expedition.

2. How useful was Ada’s skills as a cook and a seamstress in her career and life?

Ada’s skills as a cook and a seamstress helped her become the assistant of a team of four men who were going to explore the Arctic. When the four men first met Ada, they thought Ada was a frail woman who would find it difficult to survive the harsh conditions on Wrangel Island. However, it was only Ada who survived the expedition. She took care of all the men, cooked and sewed clothes for them. At a certain point she had to take care of one of the men who fell ill, with almost no resources at her disposal. She learned to hunt and it was because of these skills that she finally discovered that she was a good explorer too.

3. Why did Lorne Knight not transverse the icy sea with Maurer, Crawford and Galle?

Lorne Knight did not traverse the icy sea with Maurer, Crawford and Galle because he had fallen severely ill. He was too frail to even sit up properly.

4. Maurer, Crawford and Galle were never seen after that. What do you happened to them?

The three other men who went out to traverse the icy sea and look for help did not return. They perhaps perished in the cold and of hunger