Putnam Syndicate
2 West 45th Street
New York City

Feature article.
5000 words.

# HOW I PICK MY MEN

by

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Not so many years ago, twenty-five men lay huddled in a rude rock shelter far beyond the arctic circle, dying of starvation. Suddenly one of the party sat up. Above the ghastly whisper of the incessant wind was audible a scratching sound.

"A bear!" murmured someone.

Hope flickered up. A bear would mean meat. Meat meant a chance to survive.

The man who had first sat up drew on his overshirt of fur, bending double as he did so because the roof over him, composed of two whaleboats laid crosswise on four rock walls, was very low. He looked at his rifle's magazine before he left. Eyes of the dying followed him with pitiful eagerness and envy as he shuffled out through the canvas curtain that did for an inner door leading to a snow passage beyond.

Outside was night; it had been night for three months and would still be night for another month. A million stars glistened overhead. In the north a bright aurora slowly unfurled its iridescent banners. A sharp wind cut down from the looming cliffs nearby. The temperature was 51° degrees below zero.

The man outside did not know that another man had followed him to the door of the hut but did not come out; instead, crouched watching the one outside. "Going to see if he'll get the bear," an invisible onlooker would have said about the second man.

Wrong. Something far more vital was in the wind. For the man outside, after prowling about for a few minutes headed back toward the hut. Stepping carefully he stopped just outside and listened. There was no sound. The man inside the entrance passage held his breath.

Now a strange and terrible thing happened. The man without leaned over a snow-covered wooden case. Carefully he raised the lid, withdrew a small package and placed it under his shirt.

He was stealing food from the small precious store of provisions that stood between twenty-five American explorers and death, as they were suffering at Cape Sabine, Ellsemere Land.

The man inside the passage quickly slipped back into the squalid hut and reported the matter to Lieutenant Greely. A few days later the strongest survivors shot their companion whose physique was admirable but whose moral character could not stand the strain of hunger and of cold.

Private Henry, U.S.A., was the unfortunate man.

Thirty years later five Englishmen found themselves in much the same situation as the twenty-five Americans of the ill-fated Greely expedition which I have just described. The Englishmen were encamped on the great ice-capped antarctic plateau; they were bound home; and they were making a desperate fight to keep going as distinct from the forlorn entrenchment of the Greely party. Yet like the latter they were victims of cold and hunger, and knew

the cards were stacked against them.

Again, as was the case with the Americans, above the ghastly whisper of the incessant wind was audible a scratching sound. At least so it seemed to one of the party.

"I am just going outside," this man said quietly.

He drew on his overshirt, bending double because the roof over him was low thin fabric white with hoarfrost that fell in showers on his wretched companions when he touched it. Eyes of four dying men followed him with pitiful concern as he shuffled out of the curtain that did for a door.

"I may be some time," he added just before he disappeared.

Outside a smother of snow struck the man's face which was striped with frost sores. A sharp wind cut down from the ice-caps' higher level behind him. The temperature was 43° below zero.

The man outside had been weakening daily on the terrible march of cruel miles. His feet were frozen, one so badly that he was sure to lose it. The chances were fair that he might die even if he reached the base camp. He reasoned that the food he would eat on the way might save the lives of his four friends if it could be apportioned between them.

Next morning the leader of the party wrote in his diary, later recovered with the bodies of all four, "He went into the blizzard and we have not seen him since.....the act of a brave man and an English gentleman."

The man was Captain Titus Oates of the British South Polar party of 1912, whose heroism was superb but whose physical equipment could not stand the strain of hunger and of cold.

Between Henry and Oates lies a vast spread of human possibili-

ties in the way of character, temperament, courage, will-power, imagination, physique and self control.

The two cases are as extreme as the bitter events leading up to each tragedy. But they serve to show to what heights or depths a man's normal self may be forced under the pressure of weakness, suffering and protracted isolation.

How is it possible to tell what a man will be like in emergency? What traits should be looked for to mark the brave man? How old should he be? How big? How strong? How energetic? How phlegmatic?

What racial characteristics fit him best for meeting danger? What education and training lay the surest foundation against nervous collapse under strain? What prior habits are dangerous and what are helpful? And how does one locate them?

What are the rules of physical examination in choosing men for hazardous field work? How does one pass upon thousands of applicants when there is scarce time to pass properly upon a hundred? Where is one to draw the line between physical and mental qualifications for scientific work?

What about the married man? The smoker? The brilliant bookworm gifted also with good muscles? The star athlete? How far does family history count? And how do you get at it?

These are but a few of the questions the leader of any sort of expedition would like answered, whether he be bound across an ocean by air, to one of the poles or across the frontiers of an unexplored wilderness.

Every man familiar with the archives of exploration knows dozens of cases in which a fine man at home became a menace in the field. Some of the most notorious types of such cases are:

The man who, despite previous physical examination, turns up with a weak heart, digestion or lungs. The man who "goes native", wants to eat and live and dress with native negligence. The man who becomes hysterical in a tight place and wants to fight. The man who is a secret drinker. The man who blows up when his tobacco is gone. The victim of nostalgia, with wife or sweetheart at home. The man who has a vulnerable spot: old wound, football knee, shoulder or ankle, infected tooth, or asthma, etc. The man who, when he's tired, can't stand the other fellow's banjo. The man who becomes misanthropic under pressure. The mild pervert who finds an outlet in some annoying neurosis. And so on.

It is all very well to say that a good physical examination ought to suffice for discovering such defects. But this is not the case. Few of us who have not the germs of some weakness or other. And if we could only be punished to the breaking point we should soon enough find out what our weaknesses are.

What the leader is after is the man whose potential defects are well buried in the first place, and who is strong enough physically and nervously almost to remove the likelihood of these defects ever coming into view.

I think that when I consider a man for danger or hardship I put the facing of danger first.

When I speak of danger I don't mean the sudden emotional situation men faced who went over the top in France. There the individual was sustained by a combination of mass emotion and excitement. What I have in mind is protracted peril, in which there is no stimulant of rapid and vital events.

In our transatlantic flight last summer my ~~men~~ crew had to give highly concentrated attention to important duties during twenty-~~two~~ four

hours in which we saw neither land nor sea. All knew well that trouble with our engines or with our instrument board might plunge us to death in thirty seconds. Yet all worked accurately and without cessation throughout the flight. A peculiar indifference to continued danger made such efficiency possible.

The health of a man has much to do with the degree of this indifference. The same man may cease to be sanguine after a bad attack of grippe, indigestion or other illness.

Fliers inaccurately say "so-and-so lost his nerve after the crash." I remember in my training days seeing a plane plunge into the sea with two men aboard. Both lived to tell the tale. One was hurt; the other wasn't. The hurt man was said to have "lost his nerve." Literally this was not true. It was only a case of nature subconsciously asserting her rights by urging the man to protect himself while he was not up to his usual form.

When mild ill-health becomes chronic there is a strain of this same apprehension or pessimism running just beneath the surface. It may not show and be of utterly no consequence in the protective confines of civilization. But let this man have to face danger and his apprehension comes out full force in the shape of a timidity that damages his judgment. The man is not at all a coward, but merely the victim of mild ill-health.

Temperament and danger are a far more complex combination. Lord Byron flung himself into a war for Greece with gorgeous disregard of personal safety. All his poetical genius flamed up in a grand defiance of consequences.

Savonarola threatened with burning at the stake succumbed to a temperament equally high-strung, but with opposite results.