THE GREAT LAD

By Joyce Stranger

IT had been a wicked day. Snow lay deep in crack and crevice and gully, drifted against the drystone walls, and hid the shape of the land beneath it. A wind whipped across the steeps, whining as it came, and the trees were heavy and doom laden, branches cracking under the sullen weight.

The dog had been uneasy all day. Restless as they quartered the ground, digging out the ewes, and trying to guide them back to the farm through snow that came tail high, so that the beasts plunged miserably, each step a struggle.

He could not tell his master his fears. The snowfilled sky lay dark and leaden, sulphur yellow on the far horizon, eerie with light that made the dog shiver. The hill grumbled to itself, too softly for the shepherd to hear, but loud enough to panic the sheep and make the dog unbiddable.

Twice he crouched and whined, refusing to move on, and the man shouted at him, hating the weather and annoyed that his dog should choose such a day to play him up. He wanted to get back to the farmhouse, to scalding tea and a blazing fire. He cursed the sheep.

Once he used his crook to drag a beast down from a rocky plateau where it stood stupefied, never having seen such weather before in its short life. Once he had to use it to help the dog out of a drift that covered a deep gully, and into which the animal plunged with a yelp of terror.

A moment later, the dog was clear. The man used his crook to judge the depth of the snow, and found a way to the other side, but before he reached it the hill shuddered, and a weight of snow and rock and earth came tumbling from the heights, gathering momentum in a tide that came faster and faster, straight for the man.

The dog barked and ran. The man followed, clumsy in his thick clothing. He missed the main tide, but a rock struck his shoulder, and another, hurling itself downwards, pinned his arm as he fell. Try as he would, he could not move, but lay helpless as an insect pinned on a collector's board.

He whistled the dog and Moss came doubtfully, tail moving slowly, not in greeting, but in bewilderment. He was too young to have seen snow before, and he was well drilled. He knew he must never move without his master's command.

Now Wyn Jones cursed the gruelling training he had given the dog. Training that ensured that if told to sit he would sit for two days if not given a counter order, training that ensured he would watch other dogs herd sheep, and never interfere. Training that ensured he would rely on his master's brains and never on his own.

"Home, lad," the shepherd said.

He could think of no other command. If the dog came alone they would come out and look for him. If it did not snow they might be able to follow his tracks. If it did snow…Wyn Jones closed his eyes and prayed to his Maker, sweat darkening his skin in spite of the cold that seeped through his clothes and the damp that soaked him.

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.

"Home, you fool."

The voice was testy, but not yet a shout. The dog looked at the sheep, grey against the dazzling white, huddled in misery, woolly fleeces close packed, as they waited patiently for someone to herd them.

Wyn Jones cursed to himself, for one of the ewes was due to lamb and any lamb born in the snow and the cold was doomed unless he could get them to safety.

"Home, dog," he yelled, with all the strength he could muster, and watched anxiously as Moss's tail went between his legs, and crouching, hangdog, punished unknowingly, he turned away.

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 ran back and tried to dig at the rock that held him prisoner. Jones sighed. The poor beast was trying his best, but help must come from men.

"No," he said sharply, and the dog backed away, head on one side, ears halfcocked, 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, and by the feel of the ground, but scent was masked, landmarks had vanished, and the unbroken hummocked snow lay all around him. He plunged and floundered, afraid of the quietness, of the absence of birds, and the dimming light, and the sultry glow in the sky.

Much was hidden because he was small. Each crest was a mountain, to be traversed with difficulty. Once he fell into a small drift and struggled out again, 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 with gloved fingers, and looked at the sheep. They stood listlessly, heads hanging, tails into the wind. When he moved one of them turned towards him, and perhaps seeking shelter under the lee of the snow that partly covered him, came and stood beside him.

The other sheep followed, breaking the wind, unknowing that their coming offered the shepherd a longer grip on life. He pulled at the nearest fleece, and the ewe lay in the snow against him, the presence of the familiar man giving her comfort. He pushed his hands into the rank smelling wool, and dozed, dreaming uneasily of hot coffee and steak and kidney pudding, rich with warm gravy, and the warmth and comfort of the farmyard. Each waking was a small agony.

The sheepdog was half way home. The wind caused his eyes to water, stung his eyeballs, and froze his muzzle so that there was ice clinging to the fur around his jaws.

He hungered more for men than for food. Men who encouraged him and brought him comfort and gave him warmth. He could not bear the dismal landscape where nothing moved, and he was too low on the ground to see the far away plume of welcoming smoke from the farmhouse chimneys. He struck the track, worn by the passing of sheep and men, and ran more jauntily, the freer movement bringing warmth.

When he paused, weary, his breath plumed on the air and he shook his head, not liking this sudden surprising manifestation of something he could not understand.

The track ended, as the men had turned away to a farm lower down the valley. His own, the sheep still on the hill, caught by the sudden early unseasonable November snowfall, lay trapped and white, the only path cleared round the yard so that the cows could be brought for milking and pigs and chickens fed.

The dog was almost home when the blizzard struck, coming without, for him, any warning. One moment he was plunging, able to see, through hard-packed snow in which were the tracks of fox and stoat and weasel, and of foraging birds. The next, blindness came on him as the great flakes swirled on the wind and fell on eyes and muzzle, on shoulder and back, and on his head and neck, so that he shook himself repeatedly and then sat in the clammy snow using first one paw and then another to try and clear away the clinging uncanny stuff that prevented sight and movement.

It was useless to go on. He crouched where he lay, listening to the wind keening from the North and the now close and familiar sounds from below. The clank of a bucket, oddly muffled, the low of a cow as she was led to shelter, 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, a welcome barking that went on even after the farmer had shouted at him.

When Rex stopped for breath Moss barked again.

"Dammit, that's Moss out there," the farmer called to his wife, and he stood in the doorway, staring at the swirling fakes. "What's happened to Wyn, then?"

Mair Thomas could only stare at him, white-faced. The dog had never come home alone before, not since he was a pup. Wyn had trained him too well to have sent him off in punishment for disobedience. Nor would he send the animal home alone on a night like this.

"What can you do?" she asked Dai, almost whispering, fear taking away her voice.

The farmer was already huddled into his coat, dialling at the telephone that was the only link with neighbours too far to see or call on casually.

"Damme, the line's dead," he said, after futile jerkings at the receiver rest.

"You can't go out in this." Mair pushed her dark hair back with her hands, a gesture of extreme worry that Dai recognised. He halted at the door, and called.

" Moss, here Moss. Come then, good dog."

The dog barked, and, given the guidance of a voice, crawled over the ridge, slipping on ice that had formed on top of a trickle of water coming out of the spring.

"That's Moss," Dai said.

He stared out into the night. Gathering darkness had hidden the world. A tree, normally stark, was a blurred outline, soft with snow, fairylike by day, but now inimical, a symbol of the weather that paralysed all movement on the hill.

The dog barked again. It was dark, and he was too low to see the farmhouse lights, which, for him, were hidden behind the low wall that lay, humped and unrecognisable, blocking his view.

"Moss. Good lad, here then."

The voice was welcome, a warmth in the night. He plunged towards it and came to grief, with a yelp of fright, in the 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, whimpering.

Dai Thomas brought the big torch that he used in the byre at calving time. It threw a feeble circle of light on the packed snow, beaten by the hooves of the cows into a flat and sodden mush that had thawed and frozen again until now it was glacierlike, threatening a man with sudden disaster if he failed to watch his step.

The dog whined again and Dai walked cautiously towards the sound, his voice reassuring.

He leaned over the wall, feeling it hard beneath the snow that gave beneath his weight, and saw the dog, a dark patch against the glitter. He moved, leaned down, gripped the loose scruff and heaved, and Moss, wild with pleasure at being once more with men, whined and wagged his tail and licked the man's hand in an ecstasy of welcome.

"Don't usually do that," Dai said, as he brought the dog into the warmth. He set food before it. Moss stared at him, whimpered and refused to eat.

"Well then, you'd best be eating. We can't find shepherd now," the man said, looking out into the darkness where the flakes swirled, feather light, drifting and clinging to byre and barn and stable. Beyond the patch of light one of the ponies yickered a

complaint, afraid of the weather as snowflakes drifted in through his half open stable door.

Dai 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 mine."

"Are you going out on the hill?" Mair asked, busy at the sink.

Dai moved restlessly, looking out into the night. The snow came thickly, swirling towards him, eddying upwards as the wind blew, and he listened unhappily to the scream of the gale and the bluster in the chimney.

"Be two of us lost out there," he said at last, unwilling to face the truth, yet aware of his responsibility to his wife and the three lads safely asleep upstairs.

"First light," he said. "I'll get help from the Williams. Can't even track the dog in the snow. All tracks will be covered."

He was too restless for sleep. The thought of the shepherd irked him. Perhaps the man was dead, but more likely, buried in some drift, or fallen on the ice, to die by little inches in the wicked cold.

Long after his wife had gone upstairs he sat by the fire, watching the kittens play with a straw brought in from the yard on somebody's shoe, thinking of the wildness beyond the windows, and wishing that he had a warm job in town, not tied to the cattle and the bitter bleak hills, working for a pittance grubbed from the ground while other men fattened on the food he grew and played with their money, earned much more easily than his.

He forgot about Moss, and the stolen meat.

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. He picked his way carefully out of the farmyard, and back onto the hill.

The wind was behind him and in spite of the snow, the going was easier. A faint trace of scent lay on the ground, and he tracked back, with difficulty because the smell of mutton was strong in his nose, but it did not mask his own familiar trail, nor the rankness of the fox that caught a whiff of dog and meat and came running, only to find

disaster as it met a drift that covered it completely and left it hungry and tantalised, buried until the thaw that found it thinner and wiser, not to be caught that way a second time.

The snow stopped. The moon broke through a layer of cloud, and shone on whiteness that covered all tracks, that hid the shepherd and the sheep that sheltered him, and hid the path.

Moss went on. In places he struggled, neck deep, dragging each leg from the snow, jumping and bounding on, more and more weary. Once he rested by a humped tree, and the meat tempted him badly, but he left it alone. It made his jaws ache, but he went on gamely.

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, and the man, glad of fresh air, felt overwhelming disappointment when he saw the dog.

" Moss, Moss. You damned old fool. We'll both die out here now," he said, and the dog wagged a forlorn tail, unable to understand why he was not greeted with fervour.

He went back for the meat.

This time, he approached more cautiously, afraid of a cuff for his trouble. The shepherd, watching him with dull eyes, saw the half leg of lamb and stared at it, unbelieving.

"You darned old fool. You been back? I hope they saw you," he said, and reached out a hand to pat the wet coat.

The dog dropped beside him, and licked his face. The sheep, too exhausted by snow and cold, were too apathetic to move. They watched Moss, eyes wary, but did not move. The lambing ewe struggled to bring her lamb to birth.

The shepherd took the meat. It was slimed and snowy, but he dragged at it with his teeth and spat the outer parts to the dog, who took his reward greedily, while the man gnawed at the bone, too hungry to care what he ate.

The farmer, tracking the dog through the snow two hours later, with the men from the farm in the hollow, found the pair of them asleep, the lamb cuddled between them,

the ewe under the shepherd's head, acting as a pillow, her own head stretched to lick her son.

Dai Thomas stared at them, at the dog, which came to greet 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 and helped him to stand, rolling him in blankets to go on the stretcher that the second farmer had provided. Hot coffee laced with rum quickly restored him, and the damage to his arm, apart from bruising, was not bad.

That night, bedded in the warm farmhouse on Mair Thomas's settee, which she thought a better bed than his own above the cow byre until he was well and rested, 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 that Mair had given him as his right.