

Honourable Tenderfoot

By John A. Rickard

I was lost. There was no longer any doubt about it – and within two hours darkness would blot out the mountains.

Blackie, my Akita dog, sat beside me, chewing at a small branch that had broken from a tree during one of the frequent winds that swept through the area.

Stories of the many hikers and climbers who had died of exposure in the freezing mists crept into my mind and for a few seconds panic hovered near, bringing with it a wild impulse to run from the small clearing in the midst of a dense wall of trees and undergrowth.

But it passed and I sat down, leaning against the bole of a small tree. I was not a novice climber and as I sat with back to tree I summoned up memories of many other climbs and treks I'd made – military training on Snowdonia and in the Brecon Hills in Wales; before then as a student taking part in regular vacation climbing expeditions in my native Scotland. But I was younger then.

Somewhere in these wooded hills in northeastern Japan was the village I had left that morning for a day's hiking. And although the hills were not as high and rugged as the Japan Alps, whose snow white mountain tops gleamed distantly in the late afternoon sun, a man could get lost – and stay lost until a search party found his body.

It had happened to other fools, and there was a sick feeling in my stomach as I realised that this time *I* was the fool and it might be happening to me!

That morning, when I left the inn at Murayama, I had met old Miyuchi, the village headman.

After exchanging the usual civilities he had pointed at the lunch box and flask I carried. 'Are you going somewhere for the day?' he asked.

'Yes,' I said, 'I'm planning a tramp through the hills.' I pointed to Blackie. 'The exercise will do us both good.'

Miyuchi shook his head doubtfully. 'You should not go into the hills without a guide. Strangers have frequently lost their way – and it can be dangerous. There are

many hidden gullies in which you may fall and break a leg – and violent storms sweep through the hills without much warning.’

‘Well, thanks for your concern,’ I said. ‘But these hills are not the Japan Alps. And I’ve tramped through much higher hills at home in Scotland and never come to grief.’

Miyuchi still looked worried. ‘I would go with you myself, but I will not be free until this afternoon – why don’t you wait until tomorrow morning when I will be able to accompany you?’

‘No,’ I said, ‘it is such fine weather – and I really do want to get out today. But many thanks for your courtesy.’

Sitting against the tree trunk I cursed myself for rejecting the old man’s offer.

I lighted a cigarette and wondered what to do. I had tramped through the hills, mostly in dense forest, for several hours. For the last three hours I had been searching for the path that led back to the village. To carry on searching seemed futile – I had already walked in a circle twice and could do so again. And if I had to spend the night in the woods I would stand a better chance of survival from exposure and the freezing mists which could blanket the area so quickly if I conserved some of my strength. But I had heard tales of men dying from fear of the utter loneliness of these hills.

Suddenly the forest became darker and it seemed the air was instantly chillier. I *did not* want to spend the night in the hills. I wanted to be back in the inn, with Haruko the maid serving my supper and hot *sake* and chattering gaily, the landlord’s plump children peering shyly round opened doors to catch a glimpse of their father’s unusual guest.

The insects had stopped calling and the silence was broken only by the sound of Blackie chewing on the wood. Somehow I had to find that path.

I stood up – and groaned. My out-of-condition city bred muscles were one solid mass of aching pain from the hours of walking and clambering through steep gullies. I thought longingly of the healing super-heated bath at the inn. ‘I don’t think I’m going to get very far,’ I said out aloud.

Blackie got up and looked at me, his head cocked to one side. Then he ran to the other side of the small clearing and stood waiting for me to follow.

I walked after him slowly, the muscles of my legs protesting, trembling at each step. *Perhaps it was the sitting down that did it*, I thought. *Perhaps if I keep walking for a while the pains will go*. But I knew that the only things that would really do my

muscles any good would be a soak in the steaming hot bath at the inn, a rub down by the fat, blind masseuse with healing fingers of steel, and a good night's rest.

Blackie turned and disappeared into the forest. 'Blackie – come here!' I yelled. An idea had occurred to me – an idea that might me get out of the forest and back to the village.

He ran out of the trees a little to one side of me and sat on his haunches, his tongue hanging out, panting.

'I guess you're hungry,' I said to him. 'Well, you can go back for food.'

Quickly I searched my pockets. There was an old envelope in my wallet and a pencil stub. I wrote a short note to Miyuchi, who could read English very well, telling him of the fix I was in. Fortunately, the clearing had one identifiable landmark – a tree that had been shattered and blasted by lightning. So there was a good chance that some of the woodsmen in the village would know the clearing.

I slipped the envelope under Blackie's collar, and tightened it a little to make sure it would not fall out.

My wife had sent Blackie to a dog school. The teacher, she had assured me, was one of the best in Japan. And Blackie had only just returned home from the school.

'Food time!' I said to him. 'Get food! Get food!'

He stood looking at me, tail wagging, obviously puzzled.

There was a sinking sensation in my stomach. What if he couldn't understand? I hadn't had time to test the value of his training since his return from the dog school. What if he couldn't find his way back to the village?

But it seemed my only hope. It had to be. The air was getting chillier and a mist was beginning to cover the nearest mountains in the distant Alps.

'Go! Go home! Get food!' I shouted. He wagged his tail. I thought he would never leave – then suddenly he turned and ran off into the undergrowth.

After what seemed an eternity I got up and walked back to the spot where Blackie had disappeared. It must have been hour since he had gone.

I called his name several times, but there was no sign of him. I felt a little happier.

I returned to the tree and sat down. *He's no Rin Tin Tin or Lassie*, I thought, *but he's a very intelligent dog. And the teacher trains dogs for the Tokyo police.*

The sun had disappeared and the sky was darkening. Time, which in the city had meant meal times, the start and finish of work, time to go to the cinema or a party,

seemed in the isolation of the wooded hills to have no beginning or end as I sat with my back against the tree. Soon time really would have no meaning if Blackie failed.

After 14 months of high-stress work with an engineering company in Tokyo without a holiday my wife had insisted that I must have a break. What I needed, she said, was exercise and the clean air of the highlands. It was also an opportunity to bond again with Blackie following his three-month absence at the police dog training school. It looked as though my break from routine and the traffic fumes of downtown Tokyo might make my wife a widow. I consoled myself with the thought that at least my last breath would fill my lungs with unpolluted air!

In the gathering darkness the unseen leaves rustled. Were the trees waking, whispering to each other in the showy places. Each tree has a spirit. That's what the Japanese believe. Were the tree spirits aware of me, an invader in the normal solitude of their space? I shivered.

Then above the sounds of the trees I heard a strange noise. Whistling! Yes! It was a human sound – someone whistling and, carrying approaching.

I rose to my feet – and as I did so Miyuch , bearing a flashlight, stepped into the clearing. 'Thank God you got here,' I gasped. As we approached each other he smiled. 'Are you all right?' he asked.

'Yes,' I said, 'I'm just feeling a little tired – but everything's all right now.'

'I thought I'd come out to meet you,' Miyuchi said. 'I've been worried about you all day.'

'I was a fool not to take your advice,' I said. 'I shouldn't have come without you.'

'Oh, you appear to have taken care of yourself,' he said. 'Well, let's get back to the village.'

'Where is Blackie?' I asked.

Miyuchi stopped and turned around. 'I don't understand.'

'But I sent Blackie to get you,' I said. 'There was a note under his collar. You mean you haven't seen him?'

He shook his head. 'No, I haven't seen him since he was with you this morning. He smiled. 'I told you, I decided to come and search likely areas because I was worried. Fortunately I found your tracks.'

'In that case Blackie is probably lost!' I cried.

He made a clicking noise with his tongue. 'Oh, I shouldn't worry, dogs can usually take care of themselves. He'll be all right unless he gets into an argument with a bear.'

We had walked about five hundred yards through the forest when we suddenly came through the trees and on to a wide path – and not a hundred yards down the path were the first houses in the village!

My feeling of happiness, growing relief, as I gazed at the lighted windows was tinged with embarrassment. ‘My God, I’ve been sitting up in that clearing for hours and the village was only a few hundred yards away!’ I cried.

Miyuchi grinned at me. ‘I really should have come with you,’ he murmured.

As we started off down the path there was a loud bark. A few yards away, sitting under a tree on one side of the path, was Blackie.

I ran up to him, but he did not move. Then I saw it. The training had worked – in a fashion! Between his paws were the remains of a rabbit. Blackie had got *his* food – but there was no sign of the note. It was gone! Lost!

Then for the first time it occurred to me – how many commands in English would a dog recognise who had spent weeks in a training school for *Japanese* police dogs?

‘It’s back to school for man and dog,’ I said. ‘A bi-lingual one!’ Miyuchi just smiled. Inscrutable.