

Deaths Door



Erroll Collins

February 1939

Deaths Door

--with the drifting floes of the lake
rasping against its base. Death's Door!
With Leroux waiting like a wolf on the
otherside.

Deaths Door

"I tell you, John Warner, I will have zose pelts. You vill deliver zem here, to ze Rocking Moon Fur Trading Station, by midnight. And, *sapristi*, if you fail~ – fail by one minute – I vill sell ze shack over your head!"

Although Jacques Leroux's voice was coming over the swaying wire across the vast, snow-bound wastes of the North, its sharp timbre vibrated harshly around the gale – lashed log cabin set in the pine-forest clearing on the frozen shores of Caribou Lake.

The grey-haired man in the bunk stirred restlessly beneath his coverlet of hide. His gaunt frame was racked by a painful fit of coughing. It cost him a real effort to lift the telephone to the level of his aching head.

"But listen, Leroux," he persisted. "I'm not askin' you to let me off anything. I've got enough pelts to settle my debt at your stores. You shall have them, as promised. But I'm sick; I can't stir out o' my hut.

Besides, Death's Door is likely to come crashing down on the lake at any minute. Even the Injuns won't set foot on it. So if you can wait, say, another three days –"

The line seemed to crackle with concentrated fury as the Rocking Moon trader blared into the 'phone.

"Not anoizzer day, not anoizzer minute!" he raved. "*Mon dieu*, what d'you take me for? Because I am a half-breed, you t'ink I am a fool. But I trust no one. I trust not you. I care nozzing for a rotten ice bridge. I do not believe you when you say you are sick. I want zose pelts; you will deliver zem to-night. An', *sapristi*, if you one minute late, I – I break you!"

Choking with fury, he slammed down the receiver. The vicious click echoed through the cabin as the door swung open and a young fur-clad figure, snow on his coat and his face whipped to crimson by the wind, strode briskly into the hut.

"Morning, Dad. More chips for the fire," he said cheerily. "Hallo, what's up?"

He looked up sharply, in the act of poking the logs into the stove, as the trapper turned on him a haggard face. "It's no good, Keith," he said wearily. "I've been talking to Leroux and he won't budge. The pelts must be in by midnight or--"

The wood clattered to the floor as young Keith Warner sprang to his feet.

"I know, he'll take the roof from over our heads," he burst out. "Dad, that fellow makes my blood boil. For weeks Mother's been slaving her fingers to the bone and you've not been able to afford a proper doctor, and all because that rich half-breed wants his pound of flesh. It's a pity Steve Blair, the real Rocking Moon boss, is away in Alaska. He'd have a few kind words to say to that manager of his."

The sick man's careworn face, seamed with the black scars of frostbite, lit up with a faint smile.

“Still, Keith, we can’t go owin’ folks money. Arter all, the debt’s a just one,” he pointed out. The boy laughed bitterly.

“Did we ever deny it?” he retorted. “Sorry, Dad, but that beggar knows you’re as straight as a string. He’s simply got his knife into you, because you stuck up for those Indian trappers he tried to cheat. Why, when we offered him the pelts last week, he wouldn’t take them. Pitched us some yarn about not having any storage room. Well,” drawing on his gloves with a resolute air, “I’m going to mush into Rocking Moon and deliver those bales to him to-night. And a big chunk of my mind to go with them!”

The sick man sprang up in his bunk.

“Son,” he jerked out, “you’re not to go! I won’t have you do it. That bridge of ice is a death-trap – the most dangerous spot in the North. The next blow will bring it smashing down, and –”

But Keith was not to be moved. His mind was made up and for once John Warner was too weak to argue. His long illness had sapped his strength severely. And the boy gave him no chance to make any more protests as he loaded the heavy bales of fur – the fruits of a season’s hard trapping – on to the sled.

Halfway

“I’ve got to make it. It’ll break Dad’s heart if he has to leave the North,” muttered Keith, as he buckled the fighting, snarling huskies into their harness. And, as to his “Mush!” the team streaked forward, the boy’s lips set in a hard, grim line. It was not for himself that he cared. Hang it! Sixteen years in the North had taught him how to rough it. It was his parents who would suffer. For if Keith failed Jacques Leroux would jump at the chance of carrying out his threat. He was like that bitter, hard, vindictive! Even the thrifty French Canadians had dubbed him the most grasping man north of the Circle. And his grudge against John Warner was a very real one.

The mere thought of the gloating half – caste spurred Keith on. The crack of his whip rang sharply across the lonely crystalline wastes. An icy wind sweeping straight down from the Arctic slashed his face, setting every drop of blood in his veins a tingle. Although early in the afternoon, the stars were already prinking the sky with silver. Yet on he bored, into the heart of the blackish-green twilight, the eerie half-light of the North. He caught the sheen of ice through clouds of powdery snow flung up by team and sled. Great cliffs and bergs loomed up before him like dismal phantoms. Pine forests flashed by like the sticks of a fan, as glimpsed against the ghostly, yellow fires of the aurora, which capered across the heavens in a freakish dance.

The huskies seemed tireless. They were setting a grand pace. The sled runners, well caked with mud and ice for the purpose, skimmed the ground like magic. But time and again Keith glanced anxiously at the flickering heavens. Snow – the sky was full of it. Suppose a blizzard, that shrieking, gusty fury of the North, should come sweeping down, to blot

Deaths Door

everything out? But the thought only made the boy set his jaw more grimly. Time enough to worry about blizzards when he reached Death's Door.

For Keith knew all about that wonderful bow of crystal ice that, from time immemorial, had spanned the treacherous, shifting waters of Rocking Moon Lake. How many trappers, traders, and Indians had sheared across it with their sledges into the outpost of Rocking Moon he had no means of knowing. Enough that for years the bridge had resisted every gale, gust, and blizzard, until the saying "When Death's Door falls" had become a proverb in the North. Well, Death's Door was falling at last. Perhaps, and Keith thrilled oddly at the thought, he would be the last man to cross it. Why, he was halfway there already! For here he was mushing into the mining town of Peacepipe. And now for some steaming hot beans and coffee, the one break Keith would permit himself in his wild dash North; for, although he had made good time, he knew that the most hazardous part of the journey was yet to come. And he and his team would be all the better for a meal and a rest before they hit the trail again.

But as he skimmed the firm, blue ice of Peacepipe Lake something arrested his attention. There, poised on her skis, stood a big tri-motor Fokker 'plane, with three oil-stoves, their glare reflected weirdly in the ice, burning under her engines, to stop the fuel in each from freezing into a solid lump.

Keith recognised that ship. He also knew the burly figure in shaggy furs and a cap with ear-flaps, who came plunging forward to meet him, his paw outstretched in hearty greeting.

But although Keith and Joe Peters, the brawny Arctic pilot, were good friends, the boy did not slow up. "Sorry, old man," he shouted, as he flashed by. "Can't stop for a chat. I'm on my way to Rocking Moon!"

At the words Joe gave a bellow.

"Rockin' Moon? Not if I know it. Here, you young chipmunk, come back!" he yelled. There was something so imperative in the tone that Keith brought his team to a standstill.

"And so, you young idjut, you're aimin' to make Rockin' Moon," accused Joe, as he strode forward.

"Well, let me tell you you won't even be able to pass Tomahawk Gulch. It's all choked up with last week's drift. You'll need a snow-plough to get through. And don't you know that Death's Door ain't safe? Why, a party of Eskimos from Candlefish Bay tried to cross it this morning and had to turn back afore they'd gone fifty yards."

Keith was silent. This, indeed, was the worst of all news; but: "Thanks, Joe, but I've got to keep going," he said.

"Then, darn it, what's the *Snowbird* done?" roared Joe, gesticulating towards his ship. "Hop aboard and I'll whizz you across the Circle in a jiffy. What are they, pelts? Good, I want some ballast. Now, you go and get yourself some grub while I stow 'em aboard my crate."

A glow of relief and pleasure flooded the boy's cheeks. "Thanks, J'oe; it's jolly good of you," he cried impulsively. "I'm in the very dickens of a hurry"

"Aw, cut it out," was the pilot's reply. "You ain't the only one I'm taking. There's another passenger."

And when Keith, rested and with a hot meal inside him, clambered into the cabin of the waiting 'plane, that passenger had already taken a seat. He proved to be a stubby, fur-clad youth with a pleasant, freckled face.

"I'm Sandy MacLean. Have a shortcake!" was his greeting. "Thanks," grinned Keith, fumbling in the proffered packet. "This your first flight?" he added, as, with a shattering roar, the motors burst into life and the ship greased forward upon her skis.

The red-haired boy nodded. "Yes, I'm dashing North to meet the Dad. He's been in Alaska. I haven't seen him for nearly three years," he explained. just then the snarl of *Snowbird's* engines, as she took the air in a steep upward climb, washed out further conversation.

The Great Blow

Jove, how quiet it was all of a sudden! Keith glanced at his companion, to see if he had noticed the hush, but Sandy was peering out of the window, on a world of desolate, snow-clad peaks. He looked towards Joe Peters, who, a frown on his weather beaten face, sat huddled over his instruments, one fur-mitted hand on the control wheel.

Twice Keith saw him glance outwards, heard him mutter to himself. Once the ship lurched ominously, but there was no wind.

Then down from the Pole it swooped, in a blinding whirl of white. The last and worst blizzard of the season. The Great Blow of '39!

Without warning, it broke loose in all its fury. The wind seemed to blow from all points of the compass at once. It swirled and howled fiercely around the 'plane. *Snowbird* whirled on ahead like a leaf in the gale, despite her pilot's dogged efforts to keep her on an even keel.

Vicious, biting blasts whipped in under the door. And they brought with them, not snow, but a stinging, icy grit, which razed the skin from one's face, leaving it sore and smarting. Upflung currents of chill air changed freakishly to whistling down—draughts. Once the air-speed needle flickered perilously near stalling point. Only by a supreme effort did Joe save his craft from crashing out of control.

And yet somehow he kept her on her course, boring her way into the heart of the blizzard. Sandy glanced at Keith and smiled gamely. Keith grinned back. Got to keep one's nerve; but, gosh I it was dreadful to feel the ship caught and tossed like a shuttlecock over ridges and crags, to hear her creaking and drumming as the wind whined through flying wires and struts. If only he could do something to help. Joe, however, was putting up a grand

fight. Silent, grim-lipped, the grizzled old veteran crouched over his controls, fighting his way over the route, as he had fought it so many times before.

But something was wrong. The Fokker was not answering to Joe's touch. She seemed unable to climb above the wind. And Keith, with sick horror, realised the truth.

Ice – that terrible foe of airmen.

It was piling up on *Snowbird's* wings at an incredible rate. Joe, of course, had set the flaps in motion on the wings' leading edges, but even they could not cope with the rapid crystal growth. Worse still, it was forming on the airscrews, making the motors vibrate hollowly. A real peril this; a chip of ice flung into the control-room by the whirling blades can stun, or even kill the pilot.

And such an accident must have happened!

Keith heard the glass crash in, saw Joe clap his hand to his head. Then, with a cry, he slumped across the wheel. And, as the two boys, horrified, sprang up to make at least some effort to save the machine, there was a rending, splintering crash.

A great fountain of white soared into the air. When it cleared, Keith found himself lying face downwards on a bank of soft snow. The impact, evidently, had hurled him right clear of the cabin. There was frozen blood on his brow. His limbs felt numb. As he stumbled to his feet, a hot, jarring pain stabbed his side, making it agony for him to walk.

But Keith cared nothing for his hurts as he staggered towards the wrecked Fokker. Joe Peters, half buried in the drift, lay sagged across the wheel, his features rugged even in death. But another figure was sprawled half in half out of the cabin, a figure with a deathly white face, who lay still and motionless, with one leg twisted under it.

"Sandy!" cried Keith. No answer. Feverishly he slipped his hand beneath the unconscious boy's jacket. Yes, Sandy MacLean was alive, but his heart-beat was so feeble that Keith could hardly feel it. He was hurt – how badly Keith couldn't tell. Perhaps he was dying! He must rush him to the nearest outpost at once.

Yes, but where was the nearest outpost? He was lost, bewildered in this blinding white world. Then suddenly the aurora blazed out in vivid splendour, lighting up the scene with a blood-red glare. And a cry of heartfelt relief burst from Keith's lips. He was standing on the heights around Rocking Moon Lake. Looking down, he could see the green, grinding ice on its surface. On the opposite shore twinkled the lights of the trading post; and, bridging the gap between, stretched that shimmering arch of ice – Death's Door!

The Nightmare Journey

Desperately Keith unearthed an axe from the wreck. Swiftly he hacked away at *Snowbird's* top plane, to make a sled for the injured boy. For he must haul Sandy into Rocking Moon across Death's Door. It was the only way to the post, that rickety ice bridge which, even as he worked, he could hear quivering and creaking menacingly as each gust of wind struck it.

Deaths Door

Death's Door, with the drifting floes of the lake rasping against its base! Death's Door, with Leroux waiting like a wolf on the other side!

And suddenly a ghastly thought struck Keith, bringing him out in a sweat. The pelts! Great heavens! The pelts – they were still in the cabin, undamaged by the crash. They must be in Leroux's hands by midnight – in less than an hour !

If he failed his father would be ruined. Leroux would see to that. Could he take both the bales and Sandy on the sled? Impossible; the load would be too great. The ice would shiver to splinters the moment he set foot on it. And he couldn't make the journey twice. Even if the bridge held, there would not be time.

Either the pelts must be left behind, or –

Keith was not conscious of the bitter glance he cast at the senseless boy. He could have groaned aloud. If he failed his father, how could he go back and break the news – news that might kill him? How explain that he had betrayed his own people to save a stranger? What – oh! What would John Warner say ?

And Keith Warner rose resolutely to his feet.

"Yes, Dad," he whispered ; " I know what you would say,"

Quickly he raised Sandy in arms that were growing numb and laid him on the sled. It was swift work to bind him on safely, with lashings cut from rudder and aileron wires. Throwing a pelt over him – the one skin Keith would allow himself to take – Warner drew the two hauling wires over his shoulders and plunged into the wind's teeth, dragging his burden behind him.

And now the nightmare journey across Death's Door began. The dizzy bridge jarred violently beneath his tread the moment he set foot on it. Gaping blue cracks opened like hungry mouths, threatening to trip him. Fissures, thin as threads, ran shudderingly across his path. Sharp reports and crackles, loud as pistol shots, rang out as chunks of ice snapped loose and plunged, with a hissing roar, into the lake, starring the surface as they fell.

Still, Arctic ice, be it wafer thin, can bear surprising weights. But one must keep going, keep going all the time. Head down, Keith ploughed through the biting wind. The storm's first fury had abated, but snow whipped viciously in his face like grains of sand. Before he had gained the centre, his skin was raw. The hot, throbbing agony in his side made his breath come in great, sobbing gasps. His arms seemed lifeless; had he run a pin into them he would not have felt the pain. His legs, too, were growing dead; they felt as if they were made of wadding.

The sled was a leaden weight. More than once Keith thanked his stars that Sandy was still unconscious . Had he come round and struggled to sit up, the sudden jolting motion would have sent the arch smashing down, hurling both boys to destruction.

Deaths Door

For Death's Door was not only quivering and groaning in the breath of the moaning gale, it was being eaten away from below. Keith felt every bump as the drifting ice floes on the lake scraped and ground against its foundations.

Nearly over now! If he could stick it another five minutes. Then out flamed the spectral Northern Lights, and Keith saw on the shore a party of fur clad men. They were signalling to him wildly, shouting to encourage him. No, they were shouting to warn him. Without slackening his pace, he peered down into the lake... just in time to see a great, jagged ice-floe – a miniature berg. It was plunging across the lake, dashing the smaller ice to fragments, and heading straight for the bridge's base.

And Keith, still dragging the sled, ran with all his speed across the slippery bridge. At the end, he stumbled and fell headlong; but it was only to tumble fainting into the arms of the men, who, rushing up, hauled him and Sandy to safety.

Then cr aaa-ck! A terrific splintering crash; a sound like shattering glass as tons upon tons - of brittle ice collapsed upon the lake. Keith had cheated death by a second. Death's Door had fallen at last!

The Trade Name

"So, *chine*, you recover. It ees quite time, too! You rascal, you *vaurien*! Where are my pelts?"

A harsh voice raised in anger jarred Keith Warner back to consciousness. Slowly he opened his eyes. His head was throbbing like a drum; he had but the haziest memory of his pain when being "thawed out". He only knew that he was lying in bed in a strange shack, and that a swarthy, unshaven man in a loud check shirt was bending over him, his tobacco-stained teeth bared in a malicious grin.

"So you fail, *hein*?" raged the half-breed, whom the boy now recognised as Jacques Leroux. "You break your promise? Do you know what ze time is? It ees an hour after midnight, and ze skins are not here. You could have brought zem, you stupid fool. But instead, what do you do? You drag here a young brat who is too lazy to walk, and leave my precious pelts behind."

Keith could bear no more. He struggled up.

"Look here, you rotter – –" he blazed, when the door swung open, admitting an icy current of air, and a big shaggy-capped man stalked into the room. "What's that measly ferret bin saying to you?" he demanded, advancing towards the bed. But under his bristly brows his eyes held a kindly twinkle.

The half-breed sprang forward, apprehension in his little blood-shot eyes. "But, Mister Blair, you do not understand," he cried, his bullying voice dropping to a whine. "Zat young scoundrel zere – he owe me money an' refuse to pay."

Brushing Leroux aside with one sweep of his mighty paw, Steve Blair, the Rocking Moon boss, caught Keith's hand in a hearty grip.

Deaths Door

"Shake, youngster," he said huskily. "I'm proud to meet you. Everybody's talkin' about the chap who risked his life on Death's Door, lugging a young feller to safety, and that young feller my son—" Keith stared at the words.

"Sandy your son!" he gasped. "But his name's MacLean."

"So's mine, laddie—Steve Blair MacLean. Blair's my trade name. And as for you, you half-baked Shylock," whirling in fury upon the now quaking Leroux, "I heard your remark about 'young brat'.

You'd ha' left my boy out in the snow to die ; but he ain't going to die. He's going to recover an' give you a licking. And so, you walrus, take all the pelts you like out o' my stock an' clear out! Clear out and don't show your ugly face this side o' Rocking Moon again. This store's going to have a new manager."

With a yell, Leroux dodged; but not quickly enough to escape the kick from Steve Blair's heavy boot, which catapulted him for ever out of Rocking Moon.

To-day the company has a new manager. His name is John Warner. Under his rule, Steve Blair's stores are more flourishing than ever. Trappers, white and native flock to him from all over the Arctic. They know "Dad" Warner always treats them fairly.

Keith, too, hits the trail for the firm. But it is the air trail. His ship, the *Thunderbird*, lives up to her name, for in all weathers she roars over the most perilous country in the North with her cargoes of pelts and ores. Sandy is Keith's co-pilot and friend. But whenever they cross Rocking Moon Lake, they always remember that perilous night when the real Death's Door swung open and then slammed mercifully shut in their faces.

Deaths Door

Published in "Boys Own" February 1939

Although arguably still under copyright the descendants of Ellen Redknap have undertaken to digitise all of her available work to preserve it for their children and for others to enjoy. They very much hope that any publishers who might have an interest in this will not see this as commercial piracy or an attack, but as a labour of love, that they hope will bring back a few happy childhood memories from the post war years in Great Britain.

Other writing by Erroll Collins (the pen name for Ellen Edith Hannah Redknap) is available from <http://www.wkins.co.uk/books/>

This eBook is for the use of anyone anywhere at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it, all we ask is that you mention Ellen Redknap or Erroll Collins when you do so.

The story and images were scanned from an original copy of the Boys Own Paper using an Epsom flatbed scanner and Photoshop CS2, the resulting images were converted to text using FreeOCR (<http://www.paperfile.net>), edited in Microsoft's Word (Office 2010) and converted to epub and txt formats with the help of Calibre (www.calibre-ebook.com).

Chris Hawkins
chris@wkins.co.uk
November 2011