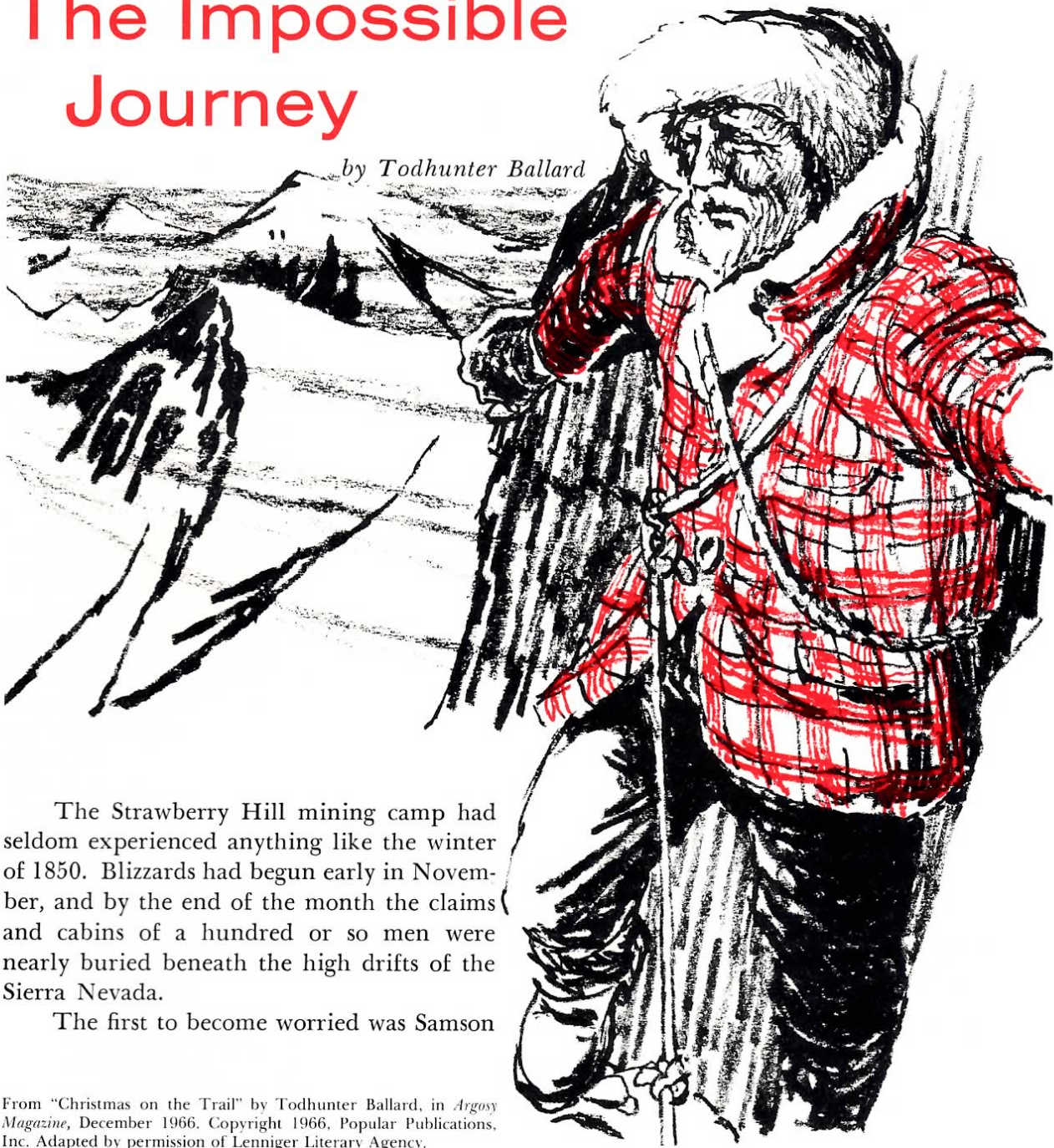


The Impossible Journey

by Todhunter Ballard



The Strawberry Hill mining camp had seldom experienced anything like the winter of 1850. Blizzards had begun early in November, and by the end of the month the claims and cabins of a hundred or so men were nearly buried beneath the high drifts of the Sierra Nevada.

The first to become worried was Samson

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Dohne, but nobody heeded his warnings, for seldom did anyone take Samson seriously. The big man from the Kentucky hills was, in fact, the butt of most of the camp jokes. They kidded him about his size—he was a head taller than the rest of them—and about his way of always expecting the worst. Although occasionally the kidding rankled, Samson usually took it good-naturedly.

As the weeks went by and the packtrain that usually brought supplies failed to appear, however, the other miners began to echo Samson's concern. Their food was almost exhausted, and even the game that usually roamed the hills had been driven away by the deepening snow.

Then influenza struck, leaving half the miners helpless in their bunks and plunging the camp into really deep trouble.

"Somebody's got to go down to Sonora to get food," said Samson in his slow way.

The others looked at him as if he were crazy. Nobody could get down the narrow canyon trail in a blinding blizzard, much less climb it again, they protested.

Samson didn't argue, but simply put on some snowshoes and started out into the howling storm.

He had thirty-five miles to go, over a trail that was difficult in the best of weather, so narrow in places that two burro trains couldn't pass. Samson had to feel his way along the snow-filled ledge, inching as close to the canyon wall as possible, lest a misstep send him plunging toward the Stanislaus River a thousand feet below.

The wind beat at him and the driving snow blinded him, but he kept moving stead-

ily, and by midafternoon he had reached the canyon bottom. From there on the going was easier, for the snow and wind had died down, and around midnight the following day he reached Sonora.

He knocked on the door of the first cabin he came to, and a sleepy-eyed man named Hank Powers let him in.

"Good Lord!" Powers exclaimed after hearing the story of Samson's descent of the cliff. "It's a miracle you didn't go over the edge. Here, get out of those wet clothes." He tossed a blanket around Samson's big shoulders, poured coffee, and dipped a plate of beans from a pot on the stove.

Samson asked the single question on his mind—was there enough food in town? On hearing that a big shipment had come in the day before, he sighed in relief, for he had feared that Sonora, too, might be short of food.

By morning it was snowing again—so hard that Powers warned Samson not to go back. But his plea fell on deaf ears, and Samson set out to retrace his trail, this time on horseback and followed by two burros and three horses loaded with supplies.

As he struggled through an afternoon of decreasing visibility and increasing wind, Samson's body became numb and his brain dulled. And then, around nightfall, he came upon other tracks.

Looking at them stupidly, he wondered who else could possibly be riding in the blizzard. He had followed the tracks for a thousand feet before he stopped abruptly, realizing his ghastly mistake. These were his own tracks, and he had been going in circles for

—who knew how long? He had no sense of direction, no idea where the trail was, no notion of where he was headed. Overcome by sheer weariness, he sat down in the snow and wept.

Finally he collected himself and made a rough camp, waiting for daylight or a break in the storm—a chance to get his bearings.

At dawn he rose from a restless sleep and again strung out his small caravan. At last, as the sky turned lighter, he saw ahead a familiar break in the canyon rim and took the trail downward toward the river. Then, as the rugged path rose again, he paused, looking up the frightening slope and its seven miles of buried trail.

The horses resisted the climb, hanging back nervously and grudging every step. Then, only a hundred yards from the top, disaster struck. The lead rope jerked tight in his hand. He turned, thinking that the lead horse was balking again, but instead, to his horror, he saw that the rear burro had slipped over the edge and that momentarily the other would be pulled over by the weight on the line. As the back horse struggled to

hold its footing, he fumbled for his knife and managed, barely in time, to slash the rope on which the burros dangled. The horse staggered to its feet, and Samson grabbed its halter and patted its neck until it quieted. Then he edged forward again and worked the three animals up the remaining ledge.

Looking out the window of his cabin, one of the miners at Strawberry Hill squinted at the snow-covered slope, only half believing that something was actually moving there. Finally he made out a mounted man leading two packhorses. His shouts brought the miners out of their cabins to throng about Samson and unload the supplies from the weary animals.

That night the camp celebrated with a glorious full-course dinner. But Samson missed it and the entertainment that followed, for he was sound asleep. He continued to sleep for twenty-four hours, and oddly enough, no one made a single joke about it. In fact, when he awoke he found that his fellow miners had formed a council to meet future emergencies, and had elected him head of it.

CHECK YOUR READING

1. No supplies had been brought up to the camp at Strawberry Hill because the
 - A weather was too bad
 - B men were too sick
 - C canyon was too steep
2. Samson Dohne volunteered to get supplies probably because he was
 - A stupid
 - B ambitious
 - C concerned
3. The other miners thought the trip was
 - A unnecessary
 - B impossible
 - C Both A and B
4. The trail from the camp led down a
 - A riverbed
 - B canyon wall
 - C Neither A nor B
5. When Samson reached the canyon bottom, he found the going more
 - A difficult
 - B rapid
 - C confusing
6. Hank Powers' reaction to Samson's story of his trip was one of
 - A astonishment
 - B enjoyment
 - C annoyance
7. Hank Powers urged Samson not to
 - A start back to the camp
 - B try to use horses
 - C use up Sonora's food
8. The tracks Samson came across on his return trip had been made
 - A on his trip to Sonora
 - B by another wanderer
 - C Neither A nor B
9. Samson saved the horses by
 - A cutting the burros loose
 - B wrapping the rope round his wrist
 - C grabbing their halters
10. The miners showed Samson their appreciation by
 - A giving him a dinner
 - B electing him a leader
 - C presenting him with a gift