

# One Mile of Ice

Survival Story by Hugh Garner

Down here in our part of New Brunswick we have a great respect for winter, but not much liking for it. Snow has its uses: it makes easily traversed winter roads through the woods and covers the earth to keep the frost from penetrating too deep, but, to us, it is not formed of the gossamer flakes that fall upon a poet's window. Sometimes it is blinding and cruel and impenetrable, and its dainty little patterns when multiplied a billion times can kill a person, and often do. And there are those of us who are afraid of the winter as some people are of lightning or fire or high places.

It was about a week before Christmas when, with his brother-in-law Pete, Ralph Marsden set out for town with the mare and sleigh to buy a few things for the children. Gilbert Moncet, who lives back of the settlement, had dropped into his place to thaw out on his way home the evening before and had mentioned that LeFevre, the taxi driver, had crossed the new ice of the river on foot that afternoon.

Ralph was born and raised on the little clearing in the woods seven miles back from the river, and had married an Acadian girl, a Doucette from somewhere down the North Shore. He worked on the drive in the spring and cut pulp on contract most of the winter like everybody else in this part of the world. With the help of his wife, Cecile, he was already the father of eight young Marsdens, although only thirty-one. His brother-in-law Pete, who had been married to Ralph's sister Ella before she died, had come down from Montreal to stay with him for the holidays. He was twenty-five, taller than Ralph, but not as lean and hard. When they stood side by side, Pete wearing Ralph's best mackinaw, they could have been brothers except for the difference in their ways. For our ways aren't the ways of those from the city.

They started out about ten o'clock in the morning. The air was crisp and clear, and before long they buttoned up their collars and pulled the earflaps

down on their caps. The mare needed little urging and she trotted through the soft new snow, the steam rising from her flanks.

Going along the narrow road through the trees they were out of the wind, and they took turns trotting behind the sleigh. The rabbit tracks were everywhere through the woods, marking their winter runs, sometimes following the road for several yards before swinging off into the young fir and spruce.

"It's getting colder," Ralph said once. "It must be forty below."

"The wind has gone down anyway," Pete replied.

"I don't like it," Ralph said, and turned to look up at the narrow ribbon of northwest sky visible through the trees. "The wind dropped too suddenly. I wouldn't be surprised if we had a big blow later in the day."

They made good time through the woods, and a half-hour later came out on the edge of the flats near the sawmill. Madame Cousineau came to the window of her shack and waved at them to stop. Pete drew rein on the mare and waited. Her husband came out and handed them a letter to post in town.

"How's the crossing?" asked Pete.

"I don't know. LeFevre crossed yesterday afternoon, they say. Lots of open water yet. Ice formed too quick this year. Too much air underneath. You figurin' on takin' the sleigh across?"

"We will if it looks good enough."

"Risky so early in the year. Frosty today, eh?"

"It's cold," Pete answered.

"I better go in before I freeze," Cousineau said. "*Bonne chance!*"

Through the open flatlands the snow had drifted across the road, and driving over the soft white hummocks was like riding on a shallow roller-coaster. In the fields the white mantle of snow had been etched into fantastic shapes by the action of the wind, and it was powdered fine in the eddies behind the fence posts and trees.

The cold had rarefied the bitter air so that they gasped sometimes as each in turn ran behind in the runner tracks, holding on to the tailboard of the long portage sleigh.

When they reached the smaller cluster of houses at the summer ferryboat landing, the wind had risen again, and the fine powdered snow stung their faces like a sandblast. The ice near the shore was covered with two or three inches of water pushed up by the action of the tide. Beyond it the ice looked firm enough, although several hundred yards out from the land there were two or three wide pools of clear water, each one topped by a rising film of steam.

"Well, what do you say? Are you game to try it?" Ralph asked.

Pete stared at the wide expanse of white ice, partly obscured now by the driving snow. Across the river the smoke rose from the railroad yards at the edge of town. He thought, I'm not going to be turned back now after driving this far and

with the goal in sight. In another five minutes they would be across, and he would be able to buy the Christmas presents for the kids and have a nice hot dinner at the Chinese restaurant. "Might as well," he answered. "We'll be the first to cross by sleigh this year."

"I've always wanted to be first!" Ralph said, his wide brown face splitting with a grin at the thought.

They drove along the shoreline until they found an easy slope to the surface of the ice. The mare was nervous, tossing her head and balking as her feet came in contact with the tidal slush. Ralph slapped her on the rump with the reins and they slid down the bank and through the shallow water. The mare stretched her neck and set out for the opposite shore.

Except for a few ominous cracks at first, the ice seemed solid enough, and they set a diagonal course from the end of the ferry wharf toward the town, one mile away across the frozen river. The mare was only lightly shod, so Ralph drove her over the snow patches as much as possible.

With the wind at their back, they made good time on the ice. Giving the largest of the water holes a forty-yard berth they turned down-river again in the direction of the town's landing ramp. They crossed a low ice ridge and eased the mare to a walk through the snow of the shoreline, then headed up a lane to the street.

Ralph was smiling. "How did you like it?"

"I'm glad it's over," Pete answered, glowing now that they were sheltered from the wind by the waterside buildings.

"There's nothing to be afraid of. If she'd have broken through, I'd have made sure you got out while I tried to help the mare."

"That's nice to know," Pete said, "but we might both have gone down."

"Not with a long sleigh like this. So long as there are two of you, and you keep your heads, nobody needs to get drowned in an ice-hole."

"My cheeks sting a bit," said Pete. "I don't know whether this is my own nose or not. How does it look?"

"It's not frozen. How's your feet?"

"They're all right as long as I keep them under the buffalo robe."

"Those low shoes and galoshes may be all right for the town, but you should have worn my gum-rubbers or mukluks," said Ralph.



*Village Laurentien* by Clarence Gagnon, before 1928.

They drove into the livery stable yard and unhitched the mare. Pete led her to a stall and removed her bridle. The manager came out of his office. "Good morning," he said. "You fellows come around by Shannonville?"

Ralph said, "No, we crossed the river."

"Eh!" the man exclaimed.

"We came across on the ice," Ralph repeated. "I guess we're the first by sleigh, eh?"

"You're the first any way at all."

"I thought LeFevre the taxi driver from the Point crossed it yesterday on foot?" asked Ralph.

The man shook his head. "He didn't get within five hundred yards of this side. You're not going back that way today, are you?"

"I guess not," answered Ralph, laughing with relief and excitement. "We're the first, and I'm satisfied with that."

They had their lunch and posted Madame Cousineau's letter at the station. Pete bought some magazines for himself, and some toys and Christmas tree decorations for the kids. Ralph suddenly remembered that he wanted to place an order with the mail-order office for some wallboard to finish his kitchen: so he moved on up the street while Pete went back to the combination hotel and livery stable to wait for him.

When Ralph returned, they had supper at the Chinese restaurant. Ralph had been drinking; he was bragging that he and some friends he met had drunk one bottle of brandy, and he had returned to the store and bought another one.

"I don't want to stay here tonight," he said. "What do you say we go home?"

Pete stared at his brother-in-law. When Ralph had a drink, which was seldom, all the loneliness and frustrations of being a pulpcutter were brushed aside, and for the length of time the liquor lasted he became a new Ralph Marsden, cocky, argumentative, and ready to take a chance on anything.

"Don't be a fool, Ralph," Pete said. "Let's go back tomorrow morning in the daylight. Maybe the blizzard will have died down by then."

"I'm going anyway. I don't like leaving Cecile and the kids alone at night this time of the year. If you're scared you can stay here."

Despite all his arguments Pete could not change the other's mind.

The livery stable manger said, "It's none of my business, but I wouldn't take a chance if I were you. Those water holes shift with the tide. She ought to be good crossing by morning, and you'll be able to see your way then. You'll be bucking headwinds too, and don't forget it's over forty below."

As he was harnessing the mare to the sleigh, Ralph turned once more to Pete. "Are you coming or not?"

Pete remembered what Ralph had said earlier in the day about two men being able to help one another out if the sleigh went into a hole. "I'll come, I guess, but I don't like it."

"It'll be a cinch," Ralph said.

Before they reached the edge of the river, the darkness was closing in like a heavy blanket blown across the ice by the moaning wind. After the warmth of the livery stable, the cold snow-laden blasts edged through their clothing and scratched at their skin like small sharp spears.

Ralph halted the sleigh at the shoreline and walked around the mare, checking the harness and reassuring her with his hands along her withers. When he returned to the seat, they tucked the robe around their legs and fastened their collars high over their chins. "Feel like changing your mind?" asked Ralph, turning his face out of the wind to speak.

Pete stared ahead without answering. There was nothing in front but a black void crossed by vapour-like wisps of erratically driven snow. It was awesome and lonely-looking, and he felt a fear creep up his back. It was the fear of darkness and the going forward into the unknown.

"Well, what do you say?" Ralph asked again, as if he too felt the nameless dread of the ice-covered river.

"Sure, let's get going," Pete answered, afraid that in another minute he would change his mind and run back to the lights and warmth.

Ralph clucked to the mare, and she stretched her head toward home, stepping out gingerly on the soft shore slush. When she felt the sleigh settle down on her heels, she tucked her head into her chest and loped into the wind.

The ice was soft and mushy for forty yards out from the shore, where the incoming tide of the afternoon had seeped through. The river crossing was only ten miles in from the open sea.

As they gained the hard surface farther out, Pete felt the uncertainty pressing in on him, and the town was suddenly fifty miles away instead of fifty yards. He felt the sleigh lift over the ice ridge and settle down for the long pull to the opposite side. When the mare faltered in her stride, his fingers gripped the seat through his heavy mitts, and he shoved his body forward as though to help her. The darkness was frightening, and he fought an urge to hide his head under the robe as a child will do. Once or twice he glanced ahead and felt his heart stand still as he saw what at first he took to be open water, but it was only the sheen of windscarred patches of clear ice.

Ralph gave him the lines after a few minutes' driving and turned his head away from the wind, rubbing his face with his hands.

"How much farther is it?" Pete shouted against the wind.

"Three-quarters."

It was impossible to tell whether he meant they still had three-quarters of the way to go, or that they had already traversed that much of the river. Pete was getting too cold to worry about it. He rubbed his nose and cheeks, and wiped the frozen tears from the corners of his eyes. His feet were getting numb, and he banged them frantically against the footboard of the sleigh. Ralph huddled down into the robe, and they let the mare have her head.

Looking behind him Pete saw the lights of the town had been obliterated by the driving snow. By narrowing his eyes and straining into the biting wind he managed to see two or three lights over to their left. Straight ahead was nothing but pitch darkness framed in a maelstrom of driving crystals. He tugged at Ralph's sleeve, and when his brother-in-law bent his head to him he shouted hoarsely, fear gripping his tongue like a vice, "The mare has lost her way. We're heading down the river!"

Ralph straightened up as if suddenly shocked with a bucket of cold water. Pete dragged at the lines and the mare came to a halt.

Now that the sound of hooves and sleigh runners had ceased, they were in the centre of a world turned into a frigid howling cacophony by the elements. The wind screamed in a falsetto from the north before breaking into small gusts, each with a wail of its own, as it plucked at their clothes and shattered itself against the horse and sleigh.

Before they had been motionless a minute, the fine snow began to drift against them, filling the creases of their clothing and cutting across their bare faces like a million tiny whiplashes.

"The mare is lost!" Pete shouted again. "We should have been across long ago!" He suddenly realized that this shout was a cry.

Ralph struggled to his feet, trying to shake the liquor from his head, and stepped from the box of the sleigh. He turned his back to the wind and asked, "Do you know where we are?"

Pete remembered the lights he had seen. With an effort he shouted back, "We're heading down the river. The town is on our right and the Point is over to our left!"

"How far?"

"I saw some lights a few minutes ago . . . a half-mile!"

"Can't be," Ralph said, shaking his head.

He pushed against the wind and drew himself alongside the mare. Pete could see his arms scraping at the frozen crust of snow at her side. When he returned he said, "Got to keeping moving . . . die if we stay here . . . heading to left."

Pete nodded his head as he handed the other the lines. It was fantastic: here they were no more than a half-mile or so from a town of six thousand people who were eating supper, going to the early show at the Capitol, drinking beer

at the Legion Hall, and yet they might have been a thousand miles to the north in the midst of the frozen tundra.

They swung headlong into the storm. The mare stumbled forward, her head almost touching her knees. Pete no longer looked for water holes, but strained his eyes to catch a glimpse of the lights he had seen a short time before. Heedless of the blinding wind he peered into the blackness to their left. Where the lights should have been was now nothing but cold impenetrable darkness.

"No lights!" he screamed at Ralph. "No lights!" He beat at the other's arm with his fist.

Ralph turned his head towards him, and in the slight phosphorescence that surrounded them he noticed that his brother-in-law's face had stiffened into an ugly grimace. "Your face is frozen!" he cried.

Ralph did not understand at first.

"Your face!"

Ralph pulled his hand from his mitt and rubbed it over his cheeks. Then he began punching desperately at his nose and mouth. Pete took the lines once more and tugged at them until the mare stopped. Then he reached over the side of the sleigh, scooped up some snow, and began to rub it over his brother-in-law's cheeks. Ralph sputtered and shook him off. "The brandy!" he shouted.

Pete reached beneath the seat and groped around in the hay until he found the bottle. Keeping it under the robe, he unscrewed the top and poured some through the other's stiffened lips. Ralph choked and fought against him. Taking off one of his mitts, he rubbed his hands against Ralph's cheeks. Ralph slapped his hand away. "Got to get warm," he whispered through chattering lips.

Pete pulled him into the bottom of the sleigh and placed his head between his own knees, covering him completely with the robe. When he tried to recap the brandy bottle, he found that his hands had become too stiff from their slight exposure to the air. The cap rolled away, and he let it go, no longer caring whether the bottle was covered or not. He took a long gulp of liquor before standing the uncapped bottle in a corner and bracing it with some of the parcels which were lying at his feet.

When he gave his attention to the mare he saw that she was crouched almost to her knees, and he whipped at her frenziedly with the lines. She shivered but refused to budge. Crying and cursing with desperation he climbed out of the sleigh and felt his way along her flank, grabbing the bridle. By dint of much tugging, he got her into motion again, and they headed into the wind.

His exertions and the brandy began to warm him and he shouted encouragement to the mare while trying to get his bearings. Glancing back over the sleigh, he picked out a pinpoint of light that flashed momentarily through the darkness.

He knew that if the light was one of those he had glimpsed earlier, they must have swung to the right from their original course, and must now be

facing in the opposite direction. Wherever they were (unless they had travelled three or four miles down the river, which was unthinkable), land could not be more than a half-mile in one of two directions. He tried to reduce everything to its logical perspective. Somewhere in the darkness lay the town they had left behind. It was obvious that the flickering light he could see was not from the town because it would have been accompanied by many more. Therefore, it could only mean they had almost traversed the river in the direction of the north shore before getting turned around and heading out again.

He grasped the mare by the bridle and swung her around. She struggled weakly, but plodded along at his side as they again pressed into the blizzard toward the flickering pinpoint of brightness.

They crept on for what he judged to be thirty or forty yards before he became conscious of a loss of feeling in his feet. He fought against the mounting panic that greeted this realization. Everything now depended on his not losing his head.

His mind worked with the strange clarity that accompanies danger and hardship, and he stamped upon the ice, jumping up and down in a vain attempt to cause a reassuring stab of feeling. Despite all his efforts his feet were like two blocks of wood. He knew then, with the certainty of despair, that his only hope was to reach some haven of warmth.

He was not only cold in a sensory way, his face, legs, and hands, but deep inside him the freezing wind seemed to have penetrated and reduced the temperature of his whole body. He began to fear for his life, no longer philosophical or logical, but aching with an urge to live. His breath came in great searing gasps which chilled and burned his throat and teeth . . .

The mare was enmeshed in a dull lethargy that all his blows and curses could not overcome. No matter how hard he tried, he could not keep the light dead ahead, and sometimes it appeared to be swinging steadily to the left.

He was afraid his face was freezing, and he dragged the horse to a stop and buried his head in the shelter of her neck and rubbed his cheeks against the cold roughness of her hide. When he looked again for his landmark, it had moved several degrees to the left of where it had been a moment before. With a sudden shock he realized that the light was not the fixed one of a window on the north side of the river, but the reflection of the headlight of a train.

It was too much. He turned back to the sleigh sobbing with fear and frustration. He gave up hope there and then of ever making a landfall alive. When he reached for the brandy bottle, he found it had tipped over and was now rattling empty along the floorboards at his feet.

There was nothing else to do but climb under the buffalo-robe alongside the unconscious form of his brother-in-law and let the mare follow her head. He groped around until he found the lines, and slapped them across her haunches. She began moving slowly against the storm.



Later—he did not know how much later it was—he experienced one of those climactic happenings visited on a person once in a lifetime by the devil himself. A gust of wind, stronger than the rest, plucked his cap from his head and flung it over the side of the sleigh. In a temperature of forty degrees below zero, and exposed as he was to the wind, the loss of a head covering meant certain death within minutes. He stood up to try and retrieve it, but stopped as he realized that it was already yards away.

Before he could settle down again into the seat there was a high-pitched almost human scream from the mare. As he stood rooted to the floor in terror, she reared back in the shafts and slipped sideways into a water hole. He grabbed at Ralph's head, shouting something in a crazed scream, and then threw himself over the sideboard, landing on his back upon the ice. As soon as he fell he sprang to his feet, using the last reserves of energy that even an exhausted person can muster against death, and stood there clutching Ralph's cap in his hand.

With a dull splash, the heavy sleigh followed the horse into the water. It floated for a long minute on the surface, and as Pete watched it, horror-stricken, he saw his brother-in-law raise himself on his hands and knees, his bare head shoved out from beneath the robe, his eyes staring at him from his frozen features.

It was impossible to tell whether his expression was one of remorse, hate, or resignation. Pete wanted to blot out the stare of those eyes, and he hoped—yes, and prayed—that the sleigh would quickly sink.

Slowly, Oh God, how slowly! it dipped and twisted before it filled with water and tilted into the cold black depths, bearing away that frozen grinning face.

The water churned and bubbled in the narrow hole, and several objects appeared for a minute on the surface: the buffalo-robe, a parcel or two, and the empty brandy bottle. They swirled in the vortex and were lost again beneath the ice.

He backed away from the hole and ran before the wind in the direction from which they had come. He was no longer aware of distance or purpose in his flight, and his head was light with the fever of approaching death. When he could no longer run, he walked, after pulling Ralph's cap around his ears, looking like a ghostly scarecrow wandering around on the ice. After his legs gave out, he crawled on frozen hands and feet through the drifting snow, falling on his face every few yards, going God knows where . . .

The search party didn't find him until he and Ralph had been gone over three hours and a phone-call to the opposite shore brought back the information they had not arrived over there. He was lying at the edge of the water hole which had swallowed his brother-in-law and the sleigh, and he was screaming in delirium about a stolen cap.

Ralph's body was found the following spring almost twenty miles down the shore. Pete is still alive, but lost both his legs at the knees.

He wanted to stay around the district after he came out of the hospital, and do something for Cecile and the children, but with the first fall of snow he went away. He wrote Gilbert Moncet and told him that on cold winter nights he sometimes saw a vision of a frozen grimacing face, and he wanted to tear away its impenetrable mask . . . He still wonders if Ralph went to his death bearing a hatred for him because he had thought only of himself. It frightens him, so that he is afraid of the winter as some people are of lightning or fire or high places.