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LOST ON THE GREAT BELT

by Sterry Egerton

A fearful experience among the ice cakes of the Danish Sea—Perils attending a novel means of transport when boats were turned into sledges.

THAT thrilling night adventure on the frozen waters of the Danish Sea has left memories that time can never dull, and more than one experience of that sort a man doesn't care to pass through in a lifetime.

It was Fred Mayne who first suggested that wandering tour in Denmark as a happy change from the well beaten Continental paths, and Fred it was, too, who got us into the scrape, though through no fault of his own, poor fellow.

He had slipped off a mountain ledge away up in Jutland, and before his broken leg had knit, the autumn had passed into winter.

We made all haste to reach Copenhagen, but a sudden cold snap swooped down upon us, and when we arrived at Nyburg, early in December, the Great Belt was a sea of ice.

Only once or twice in ten years, perhaps, does this happen, for the current is fierce and strong; but when one of these severe winters does come and the Great Belt freezes over, a novel device is used to carry the mails and the passengers from island to island. The Ice Boat Transport they call it, and it consists of large boats capable of holding ten persons, and yet light enough to be easily dragged over the ice by four men.

Open spaces are often reached, and the ice, by reason of the strong current, is liable to break up very suddenly, so that sledges cannot safely be used.

Three days we waited, together with a constantly increasing number of passengers and a large amount of back mail; for the ice gave promise of breaking up and allowing the steamers to cross. On the fourth day, however, it grew colder, and the next morning it was decided to start.

It was a strange and novel sight to see the procession winding across the frozen sea, for all the world like a caravan on a desert of ice. There were in all some twenty boats, each drawn by the sturdy transport men, who were strong, hardy fellows, while the passengers, who were of various nationalities, walked alongside or lent their assistance to the boatmen. Among them were several ladies, who were not compelled to walk but sat snugly among the mail pouches.

Our boat was the first to start, and Captain Fane, who was one of the most skilled pilots of the Great Belt, walked ahead, sounding the ice constantly with a huge staff, while his four assistants came close behind, dragging the boat with comparative ease by means of oars lashed across the bow and stern. Fred and I walked alongside, wrapped up warmly in great Danish coats that we had purchased at Nyburg.

The dull leaden sky hung close over us, and a hazy mist in the atmosphere soon hid the shore in our rear, while the Zealand coast in front of us was completely invisible. It was a great desert of ice, and strangely enough, when we had tramped over the monotonous surface for several hours, we seemed to be floating in space, for on all sides the line of the horizon was lost, completely merged in the dusky sky.

Several times Captain Fane halted to snuff the air, and looked uneasily about him; and presently it grew strangely white in the distance and a fierce snow storm came beating down on us from the north.

"Keep close to the boat," directed the captain. "Don't lose sight of it." And as the flakes fell in a blinding cloud, we stumbled on, tripping constantly over blocks of ice, but never for an instant taking our gaze from the dark outlines of the boat and the stout form of the captain ahead of it.

Soon we became separated from the rest and saw dark forms moving vaguely on our right and left, while some of the boats turned back and we heard faint shouts from time to time as they receded in the distance.

But Captain Fane went steadily on, and we followed him blindly through the storm. Once through the driving snow something dark loomed up and we heard the dashing of waves.

It was a break in the ice, and without hesitation the boat was shoved into the water and we hastily took our seats, while four stout pair of oars carried us across this unknown expanse of sea.

The captain looked grave, for the wind and current were terribly strong, and in spite of all efforts we were losing ground. Presently the storm lifted just long enough for us to make a difficult landing on the ice again, and then it gathered round us with redoubled fury.

We moved forward very slowly and cautiously, never taking our hands from the side of the boat, and once I thought we were lost, for the captain examined a small compass with an air of uneasiness; but presently, loud above the whistling of the wind, came a dull booming sound.

"Faster now," said the captain, cheerily, "that is the signal gun at Korsor."

Korsor was the transport station on the opposite side of the Belt, where supplies and extra boats are kept. The little signal gun kept booming loudly at intervals, a welcome sound no doubt to all the scattered boats.

We hurried on unceasingly until the gun already had a plainer sound, and then a catastrophe occurred with startling suddenness. A terrific blast of wind, filled with hail and snow, blew over us like a hurricane, and as we crouched and bent before its stinging force, a report like a cannon shot rang in our ears and went echoing past in the distance, while we felt the ice part beneath us and the black waters surged madly up, boiling and hissing about our feet. The sea was throwing off its icy fetters.

I made a frantic leap into the boat, dragging after me Mayne, who had sunk to his waist. Then to our horror we saw Captain Fane struggling amid the broken ice.

Holding on to his staff, which rested on two cakes, he was making desperate efforts to raise his body from the water, while the great blocks that surged around him threatened every instant to crush him in their icy embrace. I gave a cry of horror as he missed an oar that was extended to him.

Then the boat lunged forward, one of the men leaned out and caught the

captain's staff, and in a minute he was dragged unhurt on board.

Shaking off the water, he looked around him and began to count eagerly.

"One, two, three, four, five, six—where is Hamar?" he cried, and then I saw that one man was missing. On all sides we searched, but, no trace of him was seen. He must have been instantly forced under water.

A tear trickled down the captain's furrowed cheek, and he repeated incessantly, "Poor Hamar! Poor Hamar! How can I tell his wife," while the brave sailors seemed stupefied by their comrade's death.

There was no time for mourning, however, for the situation was perilous in the extreme, and we felt there was little chance of ever seeing home again. The storm was now at its height, and mingled with the wind and the patter of sleet and hail, we heard the sickening crush of great blocks of ice grinding against one another, and the angry moaning of the sea, while the boat plunged dizzily up and down, creaking in every timber as some huge cake rushed into violent collision with it.

With their oars the sailors attempted to ward off the dangerous blows, and finally succeeded in heading the boat with the current. With the gale in our teeth we floated to the north, while Fred and I, seated on the mail bags, watched with mute despair the hurrying sea of ice around us.

Faster and faster came the snow, and at times it nearly blinded us, hiding everything from view; then at intervals the wind would fall and we could see for a long distance the broken field of ice, motionless, it seemed to us, for the boat was gliding along with equal speed.

Captain Fane stood with arms folded, looking straight before him, and the boatmen in dull resignation, whispered among themselves, while all the time we were drifting rapidly toward the open waters of the Cattegat, where chance of rescue would be small indeed.

The booming of the signal gun became fainter and fainter, and then ceased entirely. It grew bitterly cold, and to keep from freezing we were obliged to stamp up and down the boat. Once, when the storm had lifted, we caught sight of a dark object some distance away, and when we all shouted, a faint cry came back in return. It was one of the other boats drifting nearly parallel with us, but it was evidently heavily freighted, for it lay low in the water, and the ice as it rose and fell seemed to hide it from view.

We seemed for a little while to be drawing nearer, and the shouts came to our ears more distinctly; but suddenly another flurry of snow came on, dense and blinding, and the wind blew with such awful force that the boat threatened to go over, and the ice thundered against it on all sides.

In terror we clung to the bottom boards, expecting each moment to be our last, while the boatmen stood bravely to their posts and kept the boat balanced on its keel.

The severity of the storm blew over after a while, and the whirling snow cloud lifted again. We looked anxiously for the other boat; but though we could see half a mile around, not a thing was in sight, only the ice and the dark, gloomy sky.

"Has the boat gone down?" cried Fred, and the captain nodded his head in silent assent.

Hours passed by—hours of long and wretched misery—while the snow fell steadily. The wind had died away, and the still cold numbed our limbs and made us drowsy. We would have gone calmly to sleep on the mail bags never to awaken

again; but the boatmen, more inured to the rugged climate, dragged us roughly to our feet and rubbed snow on our faces, and made us take the poles and ward off the threatening cakes of ice.

At last, as night approached, the sky grew darker and dimmer, and the snow seemed whiter in contrast. As darkness came on the snow ceased falling entirety, and after a while we saw stars peeping out from the broken clouds.

We drifted on and on in the gloom, each moment that passed making the situation more hopeless and despairing. We refused to abandon hope entirely, though for all we knew we were even now far out on the Cattegat. It was calm and still, no sounds to be heard but the low, harsh grinding of the ice.

Suddenly a great bar of yellow light shone out in the darkness, dazzling our eyes with its brightness and shedding a golden pathway across the drifting ice.

"The island of Sprogo!" cried the captain, and the boatmen all shouted for joy.

Then, in an instant, I knew where we were.

The island and lighthouse of Sprogo stand at the northern entrance to the Great Belt, midway in the channel. Beyond it lies the Cattegat.

In an instant the men had seized the oars, and with all their power tried to force the boat sideways against the ice. It was folly to attempt it. The oars were broken and split at once, and the boat swung back into the current with a jerk that nearly upset it.

Then all shouted, for the island was only a few yards away, and in the gloom we saw figures moving to and fro at the foot of the lighthouse, and heard distinctly their answering hails.

A fire was started, and as the flames danced among the rocks, we could almost count the moving blocks of ice that lay between us and the shore.

Suddenly Captain Fane stood up in the end of the boat and addressed the men in a loud voice, waving his hands and pointing to the land. What he was saying Fred and I could not understand, for he spoke in the Danish tongue, but the men only hung their heads and made no reply.

The captain hesitated a brief second, then, with a scornful gesture and without another word, he hastily snatched up a coil of rope from an open locker and attached one end firmly to a great iron ring in the bow of the boat. He next coiled the rope up on the seat, and taking the other end firmly in his hand stepped over the side on a great cake of ice that was floating past and started to make his way toward shore. No one raised a hand to stop him, and in horror we looked on while those on the beach gave one cheer and then watched him, too, in breathless silence.

The fire crackled and roared merrily, and by its flickering light the brave captain stepped from cake to cake and coil after coil of the rope ran out.

Once he slipped and tossed up his arms, but the block he was on bore him well, and he leaped in safety to the next one. Another and another was safely passed over, and now the shore seemed very near, and the eager watchers were close to the verge, ready to clutch the rope on which our very lives depended. But the treacherous current had swept us farther away, and even as he prepared for one final leap the last coil ran out, the rope tightened, and as the jerk came Captain Fane tossed up his arms and shot down among the ice blocks.

I saw the water spurt up in the

firelight; I remember the cry of horror and despair that rose from those on shore and the lost ones in the boat, and then I knew no more.

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When consciousness came back to me, it was dark. The stars were hid, and the snow was falling again, while far in the distance a pale, faint gleam marked the sight of Sprogo Lighthouse. Fred was rubbing my face with snow, and the crew were sitting hopelessly on the mail bags.

We were now far out on the Cattegat, for the ice had nearly vanished, only stray cakes floating along here and there, while in its place were the black crested waves.

I shuddered as I thought of the fate of Captain Fane, for I did not think it possible he could have been saved. It was the hunger and cold, together with the excitement, that had caused my fainting spell, and now, Fred, too, became weak, for it was early morning since either of us had tasted food.

The horrors of that night are not to be described. It grew colder and colder, the wind blew, and the snow came down again in blinding squalls, while all the time we were moving farther and farther from all hope of rescue. The boatmen sat in a kind of stupor, talking among themselves in a strange tongue.

At last we gave up. All hope was gone, and we must starve or freeze to death, unless, indeed, the boat would upset and make a speedy end of our sufferings.

It was long after midnight, and already half stupefied we lay huddled up among the mail bags, when Fred raised his head and hoarsely whispered, “Hark!”

The boatmen, too, were roused, and listened eagerly, and above the wind I heard faintly a curious puffing sound. What it meant never flashed across me. It seemed to come nearer, and as we all rose to our feet a light flashed through the mist of snow—a faint, dusky gleam.

We shouted with all our might, and, as if in answer to our cries, the great black hull of a steamboat loomed up out of the darkness, and her paddles churned the water into billows that tossed us to and fro.

Again and again we shrieked imploringly, but the black monster shot past, leaving us plunging about in its wake. Then the paddles ceased to revolve, and the vessel lay motionless on the sea, while dark forms appeared on deck, and we heard voices calling loudly. The men sprang to the two remaining pairs of oars and bent to them with all their might.

Slowly we drew near, voices called to us encouragingly, and then, as ropes were slung over the steamer’s side, we clambered up on deck.

It was a government steamer, hunting up the scattered transport boats.

By morning the ice was all out of the Great Belt, and we steamed slowly into the channel, stopping on the way at Sprogo Light to pick up a number of rescued transport passengers, and to our great surprise Captain Fane himself, who had made a miraculous escape.

The same afternoon we landed at Korsor in safety. Two of the boats were never heard of again, but all the rest succeeded in reaching places of safety.