

## SNOWED OUT!

The howling of the wind outside the door and its endless moaning through the stove pipe had infused Charles' senses, become part of his soul. By January, he ceased to hear it. He had no visitors. But early in the morning of January 17, 1909, Charles awoke, and in one of those somnambulant states of rare clarity, realized the stovepipe was silent.

Fumbling in the dark, Charles found a match, and with fingers stiff with months of cold, lit the candle. The flame sputtered, flared and finally burned with an untroubled and placid glow. Charles knew he had trouble.

For over an hour, he remained in a cocoon of blankets in his bed deep within his sod-roof dugout at the top of the cliffs over the Saskatchewan River. Where was the snow piling up? If it was a southerly wind it would be battering and screaming at the door with the fury of a thousand harpies. But if it was a northerly gale, then the snow would be seeking refuge on the lee side, and drifts would pile up against the door. And if this were so...

He rolled over and left the problem until what he thought might be morning.

His first efforts to escape were the obvious ones. He pushed on the door, but this simply confirmed what he already knew. He put his shoulder to it, strained against its dreadful weight until he was breathless. In the dim light of the struggling candle, he tried rattling the door to provide sufficient space to batter the snowbank into submission. This too was futile. As for the great window from Philadelphia, he'd taken pains to board it up securely in early November. Finally, he drew back as far as he could, and using the kitchen wall as springboard, catapulted all of three strides through the living room, down the hall and hurled himself against the stubborn planks of the door. But he simply crumpled against it, and collapsed in a humiliated heap, literally a victim of his own design.

Should he tunnel his way out, through the ground? Charles laughed bitterly. The night before, he'd left the shovel outside propped up against the doorpost.

For half an hour, he cursed his luck. Then he cursed his gullibility in ever listening to his crotchety old neighbour Belmore as to the design of a door, and then realized it might have been Mr. Slobodnik the ox-cart driver. Surely not. Robin? Yes, it was Robin! Who else but an English Earl-in-Waiting dandy who nibbled on fine biscuits in the comfort of a fine hotel all winter would recommend a door that opened outward with the hinges on the outside?

Then an even graver prospect descended, making Charles chill even in the now frigid atmosphere of his subterranean vault. How would they find him in two or three months? Robin lived all of twelve miles away, and it wasn't in Belmore's nature to pay social visits to neighbours. Charles now regretted his indolence in making acquaintance with his other neighbours. Why had he been such a recluse? Why hadn't he visited the home to his southwest for Sunday dinner, for example?

The only way he would be missed, he realized with horror, was when his letters stopped dribbling in to his mentor Reverend Eaton, and to his fiancé Clara, both in Toronto. Slobodnik came around each Thursday but if Charles weren't there to greet him, he just left the mail at the door. Why had he not written more frequently?

With now numb fingers, he pried his way through his Old Testament to the Book of Job. As if the Book had been a root growing inside his soul all the time, now poking its shoot through the soil of consciousness, Charles knew this was the time to read Job. Mother had always referred to it in times of trouble, when he had skinned his knee or lost at checkers. It was just something that had always been there, like sulphur and molasses and cod-liver-oil.

He flipped through the Bible quickly.

*"There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job; and that man was perfect and upright, and one that feared God..."*

Charles paused for a moment to wonder if he was still perfect and upright but quickly decided he had no time to explore the question. On the practical side, how would he present himself to those who would eventually disentomb him, in May or even in June? He recalled Belmore's account of young Wilkes, who was found frozen solid in the spring, still sitting upright in a chair waiting for his discoverers. Would it be best to be reclined placidly in his bed? Or should he be seated, frozen into a block, with the Bible cradled in his hands? Tears welled in his eyes and ran cold across his cheek.

*"Let the day perish wherein I was born,"* he read, returning to Job, *"And the night..."*

"Goodness," murmured Charles, reading a bit further. Not only had the poor man spent 26 verses condemning his date of birth, he'd even tried to claw back the night he was procreated. Charles tried cursing his birthday but he was less sure about the date of his procreation, and it was too late to make enquiries. He skipped 40 verses ahead, over the admonitions of Job's friends as well as comments from God, all of whom seemed biased.

*"I will not refrain my mouth. I will speak in the anguish of my spirit; I will complain in the bitterness of my soul..."*

"Well then, get on with it, Job," mumbled Charles, flipping through more pages. His breath now exhaled in white clouds in the dim light of the dying candle.

He set down the Book.

"No Job am I!" he cried. And in the darkness, the prisoner groped around the kitchen until he located the carving knife. Choosing his spot blindly and carefully, he cut a square hole in the Assyrian blanket that was the base of the ceiling. He stood back, as an awful shower of

frozen sticks and sod poured down and clattered to the frozen floor. And then he chopped desperately away at it. Snow covered his face, sprinkled its icy fingers around his neck and thrust itself down his shirt. It was a grim race. Would he freeze to death before reaching open air?

Should he leave a note? It would be the considerate thing to do. But how to introduce it? "To whom it may concern?" What did it matter? Slobodnik couldn't read a word of English.

Charles' hands froze in a death grip around the breadknife. He worked feverishly now. He would probably never write or address another letter again, he realized, while the icy sod sprayed into his eyes, his nose, his ears. He tasted blood, but his hands felt nothing. Soon the living room below was half full of snow spattered with blood. There was no retreating.

As he pulled down another heap of frozen sod and crawled back again into the crypt that had been his living room, he wept aloud. What would the newspaper article read, he thought, as his now lifeless hands stabbed desperately at the ceiling? He remembered Belmore's story of poor Wyzynowych, who had gone to pitch hay for his cattle, and on the way back to the house, had lost his way in a sudden blizzard and been found on the following morning leaning against the gate, standing with his hand still on the latch, eyes open and frozen stiff as a stone statue.

It was not even the prospect of death, he moaned, but the spectre of being found in such an undignified position. Clara would think it awfully poor form on his part.

The candle extinguished and the room became completely dark.

Just as he was deciding on the most dignified way to be found, the ceiling of his frozen sepulchre took on a dull blue glow. Charles blinked, and blinked again. What he now grabbed and pulled down was no longer frozen sod but snow. Glorious snow!

Twenty minutes later, Charles tumbled down fifteen feet of snowbank to a ledge somewhere below his home, lodging himself there by grasping snow-swept branches of

buffaloberry. Spreading on the snowy ledge, he lay very still, lest he plunge down the rest of the precipice to the river. For a moment, he watched the frosty ice-dust blowing along the frigid white blanket in the steady wind.

He stared up into the blinding sky. "Oh, joy!" he cried. "Oh, thank you God!" Slowly, he picked his way up the bank above the ledge like a slough hellbender stranded on dry land.

Halfway up, he stopped.

The silhouette at the top of the cliff was wrapped in a shroud. That was all he could make out in the dazzling reflection of sun on snow.

Charles blinked, his lungs still heaving in agonizing gasps. The figure just stood there. When he had nearly reached the top of the incline, he propped himself on his elbows and cleared his throat. He brushed dirt and snow from his hair and face. He cleaned out his eyes with his frozen knuckles and blinked again.

"Ho!" he cried.

The figure seemed to be looking at him and shaking its head.

By the time Charles had scrambled to the crest of the rise, the strange shape had disappeared. He called "Ho!" in several directions, and squinted across the blinding horizon. Belmore? No. The old man would never have bothered to pay a visit. Slobodnik? It was not Thursday. No mortal, in fact, could have dissolved that quickly into such a stark white freezing world.

"Will you have some tea?" he cried. "I'm not always like this!"

