

The coon was heading for the river. I could tell my dogs were crowding him, and wondered if he'd make it to the water. I was hoping he wouldn't, for I didn't want to wade the cold water unless I had to do it.

I figured the smart old coon had a reason for turning and coming back to the river and wondered what trick he had in mind. I remembered something my grandfather had told me. He said, "Never underestimate the cunning of an old river coon. When the nights are dark and the ground is frozen and slick, they can pull some mean tricks on a hound. Sometimes the tricks can be fatal."

I was halfway through the fog-covered bottoms when the voices of my dogs stopped. I stood still, waited, and listened. A cold silence settled over the bottoms. I could hear the snap and crack of sap-frozen limbs. From far back in the flinty hills, the long, lonesome howl of a timber wolf floated down in the silent night. Across the river I heard a cow moo. I knew the sound was coming from the Lowery place.

Not being able to hear the voices of my dogs gave me an uncomfortable feeling. I whooped and waited for one of them to bawl. As I stood waiting I realized something was different in the bottoms. Something was missing.

I wasn't worried about my dogs. I figured that the coon had pulled some trick and sooner or later they would unravel the trail. But the feeling that something was just not right had me worried.

I whooped several times but still could get no answer. Stumbling, slipping, and sliding, I started on. Reaching the river, I saw it was frozen over. I realized what my strange uneasy feeling was. I had not been able to hear the sound of the water.

As I stood listening I heard a gurgling out in the middle of the stream. The river wasn't frozen all the way across. The still eddy waters next to the banks had frozen, but out in the middle, where the current was swift, the water was running, leaving a trough in the ice pack. The gurgling sound I had heard was the swift current as it sucked its way through the channel.

The last time I had heard my dogs they were downstream from me. I walked on, listening.

I hadn't gone far when I heard Old Dan. What I heard froze the blood in my veins. He wasn't bawling on a trail or giving the tree bark. It was one, long, continuous cry. In his deep voice there seemed to be a pleading cry for help. Scared, worried, and with my heart beating like a churn dasher, I started toward the sound.

I almost passed him but with another cry he let me know where he was. He was out on the ice pack. I couldn't see him for the fog.

I called to him and he answered with a low whine. Again I called his name. This time he came to me.

He wasn't the same dog. His tail was between his legs and his head was bowed down. He stopped about seven feet from me. Sitting down on the ice, he raised his head and howled the most mournful cry I had ever heard. Turning around, he trotted back out on the ice and disappeared in the fog.

I knew something had happened to Little Ann. I called her name. She answered with a pleading cry. Although I couldn't see her, I guessed what had happened. The coon had led them to the river. Running out on the ice, he had leaped across the trough. My dogs, hot on the trail, had followed. Old Dan, a more powerful dog than Little Ann, had made his leap. Little Ann had not made it. Her small feet had probably slipped on the slick ice and she had fallen into the icy waters. Old Dan, seeing the fate of his little friend, had quit the chase and come back to help her. The smart old coon had pulled his trick, and a deadly one it was.

I had to do something. She would never be able to get out by herself. It was only a matter of time until her body would be paralyzed by the freezing water.

Laying my ax down, I held my lantern out in front of me and stepped out on the ice. It started cracking and popping. I jumped back to the bank. Although it was thick enough to hold the light weight of my dogs, it would never hold me.

Little Ann started whining and begging for help. I went all to pieces and started crying. Something had to be done and done quickly or my little dog was lost. I thought of running home for a rope or for my father, but I knew she couldn't last until I got back. I was desperate. It was impossible for me to swim in the freezing water. I wouldn't last for a minute. She cried again, begging for the one thing I couldn't give her, help.

I thought, "If only I could see her maybe I could figure out some way I could help."

Looking at my lantern gave me an idea. I ran up the bank about thirty feet, turned, and looked back. I could see the light, not well, but enough for what I had in mind. I grabbed my lantern and ax and ran for the bottoms.

I was looking for a stand of wild cane. After what seemed like ages, I found it. With the longest one I could find, I hurried back. After it was trimmed and the limber end cut off, I hung the lantern by the handle on the end of it and started easing it out on the ice.

I saw Old Dan first. He was sitting close to the edge of the trough, looking down. Then I saw her. I groaned at her plight. All I could see was her head and her small front paws. Her claws were spread out and digging into the ice. She knew if she ever lost that hold she was gone.

Old Dan raised his head and howled. Hound though he was, he knew it was the end of the trail for his little pal.

I wanted to get my light as close to Little Ann as I could, but my pole was a good eight feet short. Setting the lantern down, I eased the pole from under the handle, I thought, "I'm no better off than I was before. In fact I'm worse off. Now I can see when the end comes."

Little Ann cried again. I saw her claws slip on the ice. Her body settled lower in the water. Old Dan howled and started fidgeting. He knew the end was close.

I didn't exactly know when I started out toward my dog. I had taken only two steps when the ice broke. I twisted my body and fell toward the bank.

Just as my hand closed on a root I thought my feet touched bottom, but I wasn't sure. As I pulled myself out I felt the numbing cold creep over my legs.

It looked so hopeless. There didn't seem to be any way I could save her.

At the edge of the water stood a large sycamore. I got behind it, anything to blot out that heartbreaking scene. Little Ann, thinking I had deserted her, started crying. I couldn't stand it.

I opened my mouth to call Old Dan. I wanted to tell him to come on and we'd go home as there was nothing we could do. The words just wouldn't come out. I couldn't utter a sound. I lay my face against the icy cold bark of the sycamore. I thought of the prayer I had said when I had asked God to help me get two hound pups. I knelt down and sobbed out a prayer. I asked for a miracle which would save the life of my little dog. I promised all the things that a young boy could if only He would help me.

Still saying my prayer and making promises, I heard a sharp metallic sound. I jumped up and stepped away from the tree. I was sure the noise I heard was made by a rattling chain on the front end of a boat.

I shouted as loud as I could. "Over here. I need help. My dog is drowning."

I waited for an answer. All I could hear were the cries of Little Ann.

Again I hollered. "Over here. Over on the bank. Can you see my light? I need help. Please hurry."

I held my breath waiting for an answering shout. I shivered from the freezing cold of my wet shoes and overalls. A straining silence settled over the river. A feathery rustle swished by in the blackness. A flock of low-flying ducks had been disturbed by my loud shouts. I strained my ears for some sound. Now and then I could hear the lapping slap of the ice-cold water as it swirled its way through the trough.

I glanced to Little Ann. She was still holding on but I saw her paws were almost at the edge. I knew her time was short.

I couldn't figure out what I had heard. The sound was made by metal striking metal, but what was it? What could have caused it?

I looked at my ax. It couldn't have made the sound as it was too close to me. The noise had come from out in the river.

When I looked at my lantern I knew that it had made the strange sound. I had left the handle standing straight up when I had taken the pole away. Now it was down. For some unknown reason the stiff wire handle had twisted in the sockets and dropped. As it had fallen it had struck the metal frame, making the sharp metallic sound I had heard.

As I stared at the yellow glow of my light, the last bit of hope faded away. I closed my eyes, intending to pray again for the help

I so desperately needed. Then like a blinding red flash the message of the lantern bored its way into my brain. There was my miracle. There was the way to save my little dog. In the metallic sound I had heard were my instructions. They were so plain I couldn't help but understand them. The bright yellow flame started flickering and dancing. It seemed to be saying, "Hurry. You know what to do."

Faster than I had ever moved in my life I went to work. With a stick I measured the water in the hole where my feet had broken through the ice. I was right. My foot had touched bottom. Eighteen inches down I felt the soft mud.

With my pole I fished the lantern back to the bank. I took the handle off, straightened it out, and bent a hook in one end. With one of my shoelaces I tied the wire to the end of the cane pole. I left the hook sticking out about six inches beyond the end of it.

I started shouting encouragement to Little Ann. I told her to hang on and not to give up for I was going to save her. She answered with a low cry.

With the hook stuck in one of the ventilating holes in the top of my light, I lifted it back out on the ice and set it down. After a little wiggling and pushing, I worked the hook loose and laid the pole down.

I took off my clothes, picked up my ax, and stepped down into the hole in the icy water. It came to my knees. Step by step, breaking the ice with my ax, I waded out.

The water came up to my hips, and then to my waist. The cold bite of it took my breath away. I felt my body grow numb. I couldn't feel my feet at all but I knew they were moving. When the water reached my armpits I stopped and worked my pole toward Little Ann. Stretching my arms as far out as I could, I saw I was still a foot short. Closing my eyes and gritting my teeth, I moved on.

The water reached my chin.

I was close enough. I started hooking at the collar of Little Ann. Time after time I felt the hook almost catch. I saw I was fishing on a wrong angle. She had settled so low in the water I couldn't reach her collar. Raising my arms above my head so the pole would be on a slant I kept hooking and praying. The seconds ticked by. I strained for one more inch. The muscles in my arms grew numb from the weight of the pole.

Little Ann's claws slipped again. I thought she was gone. At the very edge of the ice, she caught again. All I could see now were her small red paws and her nose and eyes.

By Old Dan's actions I could tell he understood and wanted to help. He ran over close to my pole and started digging at the ice. I whopped him with the cane. That was the only time in my life I ever hit my dog. I had to get him out of the way so I could see what I was doing.

Just when I thought my task was impossible, I felt the hook slide under the tough leather. It was none too soon.

As gently as I could I dragged her over the rim of the ice. At first I thought she was dead. She didn't move. Old Dan started whining and licking her face and ears. She moved her head. I started talking to her. She made an effort to stand but couldn't. Her muscles were paralyzed and the blood had long since ceased to flow.

At the movement of Little Ann, Old Dan threw a fit. He started barking and jumping. His long red tail fanned the air.

Still holding onto my pole, I tried to take a step backward. My feet wouldn't move. A cold gripping fear came over me. I thought my legs were frozen. I made another effort to lift my leg. It moved. I realized that my feet were stuck in the soft muddy bottom.

I started backing out, dragging the body of my little dog. I couldn't feel the pole in my hands. When my feet touched the icy bank, I couldn't feel that either. All the feeling in my body was gone.

I wrapped Little Ann in my coat and hurried into my clothes. With the pole I fished my light back.

Close by was a large drift. I climbed up on top of it and dug a hole down through the ice and snow until I reached the dry limbs. I poured half of the oil in my lantern down into the hole and dropped in a match. In no time I had a roaring fire.

I laid Little Ann close to the warm heat and went to work. Old Dan washed her head with his warm red tongue while I massaged and rubbed her body.

I could tell by her cries when the blood started circulating. Little by little her strength came back. I stood her on her feet and started walking her. She was weak and wobbly but I knew she would live. I felt much better and breathed a sigh of relief.