

## A HERO OF METIS

“I tell it as it was told to me”

The great River St Lawrence has been called by some writer, the noblest, the purest, the most interesting river on God’s earth, and perhaps without exaggeration; yet it is doubtful if any other coast of corresponding length with that of the St Lawrence from Quebec to Anticosti, has caused so many shipwrecks and has been the source of so much human suffering. Among the many curious features this coast is an occasional mass of gray rock rising abruptly on the vision of the tourist from out a stretch of level country, to the height in many instances of several hundred feet.

The presence, near the coast, of one of those marvellous rock elevations, is an almost sure indication that danger to the mariner lurks in the vicinity; its base, visible or invisible, in almost every instance, reaching out, like a monster spur, far into the water. About two hundred miles below Quebec on the south shore, rises one such gigantic pile, called by the inhabitants “Mount Misery”. A vast ledge extends from the base of the rock mountain far into the river and, after a course of a mile or so parallel with the coast, ends in a most dangerous point.

Previous to the time when the Canadian government began to erect lighthouses numerous were the vessels that went to pieces on this submerged and pitiless point from which fact “Mount Misery” received its gruesome appellation. At the time of which I am writing, the locality is known as Little Metis, had not attained to the distinction which it now enjoys of being a popular resort for tourists, pleasure seekers, and health seekers for three or four months in the year; yet the place was not one of solitude even then. From the earliest times it had held out its share of inducements to the hunter and the fisherman. Coming first to hunt and fish, men began to make homes on the land bordering on Metis Bay – a sheltered cove a mile below Mount Misery – where, almost opposite the dreaded “point,” vessels of small tonnage [*could*] anchor in safety.

At quite an early period in the history of the locality, a company of thrifty Scotch immigrants arrived at Metis and soon gave a tone and vigour to the settlement which it has retained to this day. Work became [...] systematized. Fisheries were constructed, and the fishing industry carried on vigorously in their season. Farms began to stretch, not only along the coast, but far inland the forests gave place to cultivated fields and rolling pasture-lands.

Several farms bordered on the bay and from the elevated sites upon which the buildings were erected, could - and can – be obtained a grand view of the mighty ocean-like river which at this point is thirty miles wide. Besides the habitations above mentioned the fishermen’s huts had given place to more substantial structures for the occupation of traffickers and men of miscellaneous callings. One of these buildings stood on a rocky eminence and overlooked a wide extent of sea from above the line of white surf which mark the course of the dangerous ledge to a distance of several miles below.

This magnificent view was best obtained from the door and window opening from the apartment occupied as a general store kept to supply the neighbourhood with groceries and the hunters and fishermen with such materials and implements as their different calling required. It was here too that people came for their mail and here that men congregated of an evening and discuss politics and related and listened to marvelous tales of the sea. Captain Mack, the proprietor of the little store, could boast a most eventful history. There was hardly a Saint Lawrence pilot or a Canadian sailor who did not know him, at least by reputation, or a parish along the whole coast from Gaspé to Quebec where wonderful tales [have] not been related of his daring in fearless enterprises at sea.

Those among whom he had, comparatively, but lately taken up his abode, from being familiar only with his unassuming everyday life, were somewhat skeptical in regard to the truth of some floating stories of his intrepidity and courage; but the time has come when the most marvellous tales of his achievements were no longer doubted. The month was October, the day was the tenth and the year was one in the early seventies, before the lighthouse was erected which now throws its wondrous rays far out across the mariner's perilous course, that the storm, still remembered as "the great storm," raged in the gulf and the lower St Lawrence.

The ninth had been one of the "perfect" days and the men in the parish of Metis deplored the necessity which compelled them to improve the favourable weather in securing their late crops when they longed to be on the water but no boat had gone beyond the bay that day.

The usual number had congregated in the store that evening and when, at a somewhat late hour, they took their departure, Captain Mack accompanied them to the door. He stood on the broad step as he had been accustomed to stand on the deck of his ship just before "turning in," and swiftly swept the waters with his powerful glass.

"What do you make out, captain," said one. "Not a craft in sight, but there will be a storm before morning," and he turned and went in.

There was a black line at the northeast low down on the horizon but nothing else to indicate a storm; yet not long after midnight his prediction was verified. The wind blew a gale, the rain fell in torrents, the waves ran mountain high. People in the neighborhood of the bay were early astir and at half past six were horrified at the tidings that a craft of some sort had been sighted a short distance below the "point". Ten or a dozen men were soon collected on the shore at the nearest approach possible to the dangerous reef. The rain has ceased but not the wind, and in the uncertain light of the gray and grim morning with a dense leaden-hued clouds almost enveloping them, in the waves rolling and breaking, the position of the vessel could hardly at first be made out.

The light gradually strengthened and the sight that met the strained gaze of those on shore was a fearful one - a schooner making directly towards the rocks.

How terrific sounded the roar of the water! How terrible appeared the peril of the dismantled vessel - at one moment borne up to where cloud and bellows met, the next plunged into an abyss that threaten to engulf; and all the time making for that pitiless point of rocks. Onward it rushed with ever accelerating speed it seemed by the anxious spectators "To the right!" "To the

left,"! were the contradictory commands shouted from the shore in both French and English though no human voice could be heard to that distance amid the rush and the roar of the waves. Moment by moment the light strengthened and with custom to the smell and sweep of the ocean those unsure could know with painful distinctions the craft is it laboured and plunged helplessly to its sure it was a schooner of the smaller size and of course carried but for few hands but not less anxious on that moment were those who were watching and shouting and gesticulating from the shore. The number of men had gradually augmented as the tidings spread to more than were running here there and said [they we]re anxious to do something and other[s were] powerless to do anything.

Suddenly the anticipated crash came! A great sheet of foaming water enveloped the unfortunate vessel and a sheet and shriek sounded above the turmoil of the elements. Soon it was discovered that the vessel was fast on the rocks and that four human beings were standing at the bow drenched to their skins.

The raging waves were breaking high over the wreck and in their mad haste to reach the shore, the poor wretches on board appeared about to cast [...] themselves into the sea and swim for it. When their mad intention became realized by those on shore, with wild gesticulations and shouts they begged them to desist. The motions were understood if the words were not, for when the next wave subsided the four were still clinging to the wreck.

The situation was the most pitiable one and two or three eager men began to shout for a boat, but no owner of one cared to risk either himself or it in an undertaking so hopeless, and no boat was forthcoming. The waves beat on the long line of ledge with terrible force, throwing the spray high into the air, and every now and again one more terrific than the last would roll over the disabled schooner.

A tremendous sea rolled in. Not one of the anxious spectators expected to ever again behold a sign of the devoted vessel or its unhappy crew. It rolled away, and a dismayed shout went up. Only one figure was to be seen! "Yes, there two - a woman and a little child!" Another took up the cry. "And the woman is frantically waving something white as a signal of distress."

"A [wo]man and a little child!" What magic was in the sentence! There were almost tears in the eyes of the hitherto hard-featured men like themselves were in peril, they could hesitate to risk life and property in a hopeless cause, but not now when a woman and a little child appealed to their manhood and sympathies.

With sudden eagerness men began to bestir themselves – several immediately rushing for a boat. Just as they reappeared bearing a staunch little craft - one of the best the bay could boast - tall erect and vigorous old man with snow white hair and piercing on eyes came rapidly but not excitedly towards them. It was Captain Mack. He had a heavy coil of rope on each arm and the moment the boat was lowered to the ground he proceeded to attach one end of one then to the stern and pass the other end to several men who stood ready to obey any command of his. One end of the rope was in like manner attached to the bow and the coil placed carefully in the bottom of the boat. The men near him noticed that the portion of the coil which lay uppermost, consisted of a mere cord no larger than an ordinary clothes line and that to the end of it a leaden ball was attached and they were quick to understand his purpose. The captain, while he

worked, called for an extra pair of oars and after placing them securely in the bottom he stepped in and ordered the boat pushed off.

As the brave old man struck into the raging deep, there were tears in many eyes and a prayer on every lip, and here and there a sign of the cross was made.

Every moment the anxious spectators expected to see the little craft and its daring commander engulfed as wave succeeded wave in shutting them from their view, but to their infinite relief and amazement when they were about to give him up for lost they would catch sight of the captain's white head, and then the little boat as it mounted another wave beyond the intervening one. The interest of those on shore was now divided between the wreck and the brave man who was risking his life to save those on board.

Though not more than twenty minutes had elapsed from the time the woman and child had first been discovered till Captain Mack was on his way to their deliverance, they had disappeared and only one man was seen clinging to the railing.

It was but a short pull in calm weather, not more than forty or fifty rods from shore to the point on which the schooner was fast, but what a terrible distance it seemed now with so many lives in deadly peril. The schooner might go to pieces at any moment and little boat might be lost in spite of the efforts of the strong men who were carefully paying out the rope as required. Whenever the little craft rose on the crest of a wave it would hang there for a moment as though dreading the inevitable plunge. When near enough to the wreck for his purpose, the captain took advantage of such a position and with shouts and gestures to warn the men who clung to the railing of his intention, he was dexterously sent the ball which was attached to the line spinning towards him.

It was a successful throw and when the great wave which then broke over them had spent its force and rolled away, two men had come to the assistance of the master of the schooner and the three were swiftly hauling in the rope, Captain Mack made them understand that the woman and child were to be ready immediately and that the rope was not to be allowed to slacken.

What a moment of suspense was that to those on shore from the time the wave began to recede which would drop the little boat to a level with the wreck, to the quick transfer of the woman and child ; then began the perilous return trip.

Careful and strong hands at the ropes alternately paying out and hauling in and the vigorous strokes of the Captain's oars to prevent upsetting, soon brought the little craft safely to shore.

By this time there were women added to the anxious crowd and great was the rejoicing over the rescued ones, but the work had only begun. As but one could be brought off at a time, there were three more trips to be made, and no time was to be lost for the storm was increasing rather than abating in its fury any moment might be the last for the doomed vessel and its despairing crew.

Barely waiting for his passengers to be drawn to land by swift and willing hands Captain Mack and his sturdy little boat were again breasting the billows on their way back to the wreck. The

next two trips were accomplished in safety, much as the first had been, and now, only one remained on board, a German sailor who, from his superior strength was best able to manage the rope alone.

Two hours of arduous toil in terrible exposure had begun to tell on the brave Captain and an added fear took possession of the spectator, a fear that his strength might fail and that he would yet perish before their eyes. One and another volunteered to take his place but his quiet yet decisive manner made it clear that he must have his own way, and with a set and determined visage he struck out once more.

Those on shore watched with increasing eagerness the boat as it obeyed the swell and depression of the mighty waves – saw it as formerly, drop to a level with the schooner, saw the sailor make the hawser fast to the railing and lower himself into the little ark of promised safety. They watched with bated breath, a tremendous sea roil towards them - saw the Captain cut loose from the wreck. Just at that moment the wave broke and as the shower of spray and boiling waves hid the vessels from view, a mighty crash was heard above the roar of the storm.

The wave rolled on, only white breakers marked the spot where the wreck had been and the little boat was not to be seen. The men did not relax their efforts at the rope but dismay was stamped on every countenance. Presently the little craft appeared, tossing about like an egg shell, the sport of the angry waves. Once more it was lost sight of and when it reappeared it was evident that both men were fast losing their power to control it. In an instant the coast was the scene of the wildest excitement. The destruction of the boat seemed inevitable. Women wrung their hands in despair, men groaned in agony. They realized that the boat was wholly at the mercy of the waves, that the hauling of the rope only increased the danger by causing her to dip and take in water. But a few rods intervened between safety and two brave men about to perish miserably. It was true the boat was coming in, but there was not one chance in a thousand that they would ever reach land with her precious freight. Inaction could be no longer endured, so with long ropes attached to themselves, several men braved the dangers of the in-rolling breakers rushed into the seething bellows and by plunging and swimming reached the boat and dragged it with its nearly exhausted occupants to shore amid the united shouts of more than a score of threats.

A great fire had been kindled in the ample fireplace of a long deserted and almost roofless house in their gratitude for their preservation and for the ministrations of the rejoicing men and women around them, the poor castaways almost forgot the warfare of the elements outside. For three days the storm raged. The coast below strewn with wrecks - not less than four ocean steamers having gone to pieces in the fatal shores of Anticosti.

To this day harrowing narratives incident upon the “great storm,” are related, but among the many brave and daring deeds recounted as having been performed, none evince a courage and endurance surpassing those displayed by Captain Mack of Metis.

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