

The Free Press Short Story

A PAIR OF SKIS

By R. D. GALT

ASTRID HALVORSON stoked the rose tinged stove, shuddered at the eerie cry of a coyote off on the snow-covered hills and again picked up one of a pair of newly varnished skis that she had been working over. Her slim fingers were stained with gill paint. Her blue apron had splatters of it down the front. She wrinkled her nose at the signs of her amateurishness, then sat down, balanced the slender piece of wood on her updrawn knees and continued her work.

One long, slender piece of polished wood already stood behind the stove. Across the curved point was printed in tiny gilt letters "Comet." Astrid was just applying the final s of "Cometess" on its mate. Wilbur Biddle was coming that evening to go skating over the hard-wind-packed snow. If the sky remained cloudless, it would be a moonlit night.

Skating was the one joy that Astrid got out of winter in the isolated foothills. Her father had taught her the art, which had seemed to come to her naturally. She went everywhere on the two slender pieces of wood, and she never crossed her skis or took tumblers going downhill, as Wilbur sometimes did. She had varnished the skis the night before, painting the names on them had been an afterthought, something to keep her hands busy during the long, winter day. She had been alone since early morning.

Astrid got up when the Cometess was ready and, standing it beside the foothills, behind the ruddy stove, backed away to survey her work. She still held the camel-hair brush pinched between her right thumb and fore-finger. Her cheeks were flushed. A happy sparkle came to her eyes—eyes that were the color of flax blossoms. And her hair, which was like the fibres of flax stalks, hung about her face in unruly wisps; she had been so much interested in her painting that she had shovied it unthinkingly this side and that with the back of her hand until it had escaped the pins. She was aglow with the anticipation of the evening when she should send the glistening skis skimming across the hard snow.

A moment later, hearing booted feet in the shed, she turned to the door. Flinging it open, she stared into the ruddy-checked face of a panting youth. "Wilbur!" she gasped. "I didn't expect you. Come in."

Wilbur Biddle made no move to enter. He was clothed warmly against the crisp December cold; his body was wrapped in a sheep-lined coat with a fur collar, and a wool cap fitted close about his head. He carried a coil of new rope, looped over one arm and he had a rifle tucked beneath the other. Two wide leather straps bit into the thickness of his coat, one round his waist, the other across one shoulder and his chest. Astrid saw a small axe hanging from the waist strap, and when he turned to close the door of the shed she caught a glimpse of steel traps attached to the shoulder strap.

"You're coming in, aren't you?" she asked, holding wide the kitchen door. He shook his head. "Not now. I'll be back later. I'm going down to the river. I thought I'd bring the lariet rope your father ordered. Ed, Spees brought it out from town this morning."

He slipped his arm out of the coiled rope and handed it to her. Astrid took it, but she remained in the doorway. "Father is gone. Jeanie Mack had a bad night. They sent for mother. Father took her over. I've been alone all the morning. Won't you come in and warm your feet?"

Wilbur again shook his head. "I can't," he explained, smiling at the flushed face of the girl. "I'm late now. I've got to take a run over my trap line. And I'm figuring on crossing the river to make some additional sets. The Yellow Rock is frozen now, and I want to pick my sets before Charley Pierre gets ahead of me."

"It's a little early for crossing the river, isn't it?" inquired the girl, and her face suddenly lost its happy flush. "This is the first cold spell, you know."

"I know," he replied quickly, "and I've got to take advantage of it. Charley Pierre got ahead of me last year because I waited. Charley never had any trouble crossing the Yellow Rock in December. I'm just as able as he is."

Astrid was silent; for some vague reason she mistrusted the Yellow Rock. Its muddy swirling water filled her with strange apprehension. It seemed treacherous. On the surface it was much like other rivers, but there were under currents that caught the lazy swirling. She had heard tales too of how deceitful the sluggish appearance of the water was.

"The Yellow Rock—I hate it!" she burst out. "It isn't safe. It's tricky. Wait a day or two. Two nights of freezing weather can make a lot of difference."

the shed door. "If I stay here much longer, you'll be bringing me," she said, laughing. "I'm not afraid. Don't worry about me. I'll get along all right. And it's going to be a great night for shooting down Ski Hill; don't forget that."

He smiled at the seriousness of her face as he pulled open the door. Astrid said nothing more until he had stepped out. Then she rushed to the outside door.

"Thanks for bringing the rope," she called after him. "Father's preparing for spring already; he's making lariats. And be careful!"

Astrid could not help smiling at the carefree chuckle that escaped Wilbur's lips. He was big and strong and above all, fearless. She liked him for that. Nothing seemed to daunt him. He always faced every difficulty with a smile. As she went back into the warm room, admiration and anxiety struggled within her.

She dropped the coil of rope on the kitchen table and put away the gilt and the camel-hair brush. Next she carefully inspected the Comet and the Cometess. Then she tucked the outlaws wisps of flaxen hair into place. But those actions were unimportant; they merely put off the thing she wanted to do. Finally she walked to the curtained window that overlooked the long slope to the river and peered out.

Wilbur was skimming along two hundred yards down the slope. His bulky form stood out distinctly against the dazzling white of the snow. A chill, sun shone on the blanketed hills. The glare was hard on her eyes, but she did not draw back. Her gaze anxiously followed the receding boy. Unnatural lines creased her smooth face. She was worried.

Halfway down the steep slope, a quarter of a mile from the window where Astrid stood watching, the youth paused on the edge of a sharp pitch and looked back. Astrid thought it impossible that he could see her white face framed in the square window, but he lifted his hand and waved nevertheless. She did not try to wave back, for he turned immediately and plunged onward. However, a flood of color swept through her smooth cheeks, driving away the look of anxiety, and for the next few minutes she saw nothing distinctly. Wilbur Biddle had been her only companion during the past two years. The isolated stretch of foothills had been a lonely place until he came. Since then he had been a sort of big brother to her, always looking out for her happiness. He planned unexpected excursions to break the monotony of the foot-hill life, and he always brought a spirit of light-heartedness with him when he came to the Halverson shack. Not once that Astrid could remember had he been disagreeable or unpleasant. He was a good friend; he seemed to understand her, and she him.

That is why his plan to cross the Yellow Rock filled her with growing uneasiness. Her attitude grew tense as she gazed past Wilbur, now a mere moving speck, to the river; there were no trees on the nearer bank; the bluffs ended right at the edge, but on the far side many cottonwoods were growing. The thin sheet of ice that confined the sluggish movement of the water glistened dully in the sunlight. Her eyes refused to leave off studying it. That coating of ice seemed to her merely another evidence of the treachery of the Yellow Rock. The ice appeared firm enough, but she knew that it could not be safe. Something warned her that the river had never been more deceitful than it was on that December afternoon. She wished that she had not let Wilbur go.

Suddenly she turned and snatched a belted coat from a nearby chair. In a second she was buttoning it round her. Again she went back to the window. Wilbur was almost at the bank. She ran for a white tam-o'-shanter that was hanging on a hook in her bedroom. When she came back to the kitchen the tam was topped over one ear, and she was pulling wide-gauntleted white wool gloves over her hands.

A second time she rushed to the curtained window. Only a short hundred yards separated the youth from the Yellow Rock. For an instant she stood watching. What would he think of her if she ran wildly down the slope, shouting his name? He already knew what she thought about his crossing the river. He had laughed at her objections. If she should burst from the shack now crying out like a celebrating cowboy, would he not think her foolish? Would he not think that she was too much interested in his affairs?

Astrid bit her lips. She stayed at the window, but she did not remove her wraps. Her gaze was riveted on the figure of the youth now perched on the very brink of the Yellow Rock. She forgot everything except the expanse of dull ice and the weight of its inert strength. Her gloved hands tightened on the scrim curtains.

Wilbur stepped out upon the ice. He made no attempt to search for the best place to cross, but moved straight ahead for the opposite shore. Astrid's breath grew shorter and shorter as she watched him stride confidently toward midstream. His body seemed bulkier against the dull glitter of the ice; the pack of steel traps looked heavier. Still he went on, moving swiftly, fearlessly, toward the cottonwoods. To her it seemed as if

the width of the Yellow Rock were endless; he was moving swiftly, yet the distance to the opposite shore did not shorten appreciably. Midstream was still before him.

Astrid held her breath as he neared the dangerous area. She seemed to know what was going to happen. She thought of the helplessly bundled body of the heavy coat would not matter so much if both had not been strapped-on with wide, strong straps. It would be next to impossible for him to get rid of either. And thus encumbered, what chance would he have against the deep, icy current?

As she watched the young man drew farther and farther away from the security of the strong ice along the shore. Each step he took the ice grew thinner, more perilous. The next instant, she saw him try to scramble back to safety. Then he sank out of sight.

Astrid turned toward the cozy interior of the kitchen, horrified at what she had seen. Wilbur Biddle, drowning! Clenching her gloved hands, she cast a despairing glance round the room. She spied first the glistening skis propped against the kitchen wall and next the coil of new rope. Her ideas took shape. She tore open the door of a fall cupboard and amid an array of pans and kettles seized an old-fashioned flatiron with a solid handle. To the handle she tied one end of the coiled rope and, slipping her left arm through the break in the determination, she shifted the flatiron to her right hand and, still keeping the coil of rope about her left arm, grasped the flatiron in her left hand. Then gathering the skis under her right arm, she dashed outside.

A hundred feet from the Halverson shack the bluff dropped away sharply. She ran to the spot and threw the skis on the snow. In a flash she had slipped her feet into the straps and was ready to take the stride or two necessary to place her on the brink of the first abrupt pitch. When she had reached the starting point she pointed the skis in parallel courses toward the break in the river ice. Then she shifted the flatiron to her right hand and, still keeping the coil of rope about her left arm, grasped the loose end of the rope in her left. In a second she was skimming over the snow, which hissed under the slender skis.

Astrid had never before tried her skill on the half-mile slope to the river, for there was no stopping place at the bottom. Her face was set and hard. Her eyes, which had been filled with dismay a few seconds before, now shone with determination. She balanced her strong body to the downward sweep of the skis, crouching a trifle with head and shoulders ready for any unexpected dips in the hillsides. Now that she had pointed the skis in the course they were to take she had little control over them; she could only meet the obstacles as they loomed ahead. Fortunately the deep layer of snow covered most of the rocks; she had nothing to fear from them. Moreover, the very speed with which she was now skimming the hillsides helped her to meet the irregularities.

The wind stung her face and whipped aside the corners of her coat. It shot through the baggy part of her tam. The hiss of her skis on the snow grew softer as she gained momentum. At places in her mad flight she seemed to leave the ground.

Astrid was not afraid. The lightning-like motion of the slender skis did not daunt her. She kept her body poised and her feet pointed at the correct distance from each other. She did not worry about getting her skis crossed and taking the terrific fall that would be the result of carelessness. Keeping her eyes intently on the course, she was always ready for the short, abrupt descents. But she had no time to gaze ahead at the object of her downward swoop.

In less than a minute she had swept three quarters of the way down the hillside. The skis were carrying her faster and faster toward the expanse of dull ice. She wondered whether the thin ice at midstream would hold her. As she looked ahead and saw the break where Wilbur was making a last desperate attempt to escape the freezing water she was afraid. Perhaps the weight of her body on the thin ice would be too great. Perhaps she too would crash into the muddy water. She had depended on speed to carry her across the dangerous area. She had reasoned that the momentum gained in shooting down the bluff would carry her over the ice almost without her touching it. Now she thought the skis were holding back, that they were not skimming along as they had skinned an instant before. What was wrong?

She was headed almost directly at the hole in the ice where Wilbur was floundering and each second growing more number from the icy water. If he did not break off more of the fragile layer on the side toward which she was headed, she could edge by. The skis struck the last of the sloping hillside, shot over it and, like a wild duck gliding into water, dropped upon smooth ice. Astrid did not realize until now how fast the skis were rushing her toward her destination. She had scarcely time to glance down at the coil of rope before Comet and Cometess had sent up a fine spray from the water-splashed ice bordering the hole.

"Here!" she cried with all the strength of her voice and as she shot by drew back her hand and tossed the flatiron. Holding fast to the rope, she shot forward. She passed midstream and found herself speeding madly toward a new peril. She had never considered how she should stop; her chief idea had been to reach Wilbur in time. The cottonwoods rose before her. She clung to the rope and waited.

Then the flashing skis left the Yellow Rock and struck. The sound of splintering wood rose on the crisp air, and Astrid, receding from the bole of a cottonwood, lay limp and unconscious.

The snow against her cheek and forehead soon revived her. She sat up dizzily, wondering what was tugging at her arm.

CHURCH SOCIABILITY

This is an age when a great many people are away from home, some seeking pleasure and rest, others attending to business. They stop in our towns and cities, and often drop into the Sunday services. A great many of these are members of the church at home, and others are favorable to the church, and there is scarcely a Sunday when there are not several such persons at public worship. The local church owes these people a duty in making them feel at home by giving them a cordial welcome to the fellowship of the congregation. They are lonesome and long for a word of friendly greeting. Pastor and people should be on the lookout for such persons as that none of this class should get away from God's house under the impression that no one cares for them. Neglect here is not always intentional, but we are all human, and to be quite overlooked is not a pleasant experience. It costs but little effort to be polite and kind, and such courtesies are fruitful of reward. The people who show themselves friendly will always multiply friends, and do them great good spiritually and otherwise.

Some time ago a lady was noticed in a congregation by the pastor, and after the service he hastened to express his gratification at her presence and invited her to return. She cordially responded to the salutation, stated that she had been attending a neighboring church in the city for a year and that during that time no one had spoken to her. She attended this church regularly thereafter, cast in her lot there and became one of its useful members.

The way to be social is simply to be social. Step up to the stranger and say: "I am George Washington Jones, and may I have the pleasure of knowing who you are?" He will take it all right. The ice will be broken and no one will fall in. Make a business of it—everybody keep it up on Sunday and Monday—all days. Everyone you see invite to church service and worship, and when they come, give them a good-house-warming. It won't drive them away. The way to be social is just to be social. All of which is respectfully submitted.—D. R.

IS THERE A BEST HIVE?

In 1855 the Rev. L. L. Langstroth invented the top opening, movable frame hive which, with slight modifications is now in general use the world over. The Langstroth hive of to-day carries eight or more frames, each frame measuring 17 1/2 inches in length and 9 1/2 inches deep and when properly placed in the hive they are spaced 1 1/2 inches from centre to centre of the top bars. The most popular size is one that holds ten such frames. Beekeepers, however, are not agreed as to size, hence we find them using Langstroth hives carrying anywhere from eight to twelve frames while some prefer a hive that carries a deeper frame than the Langstroth hive. The chief point of argument then is size. A beekeeper measures his success by the amount of surplus honey he is able to secure from his bees but this surplus is not governed by the type of hive he uses but by (1) the locality (2) the condition of the colonies (3) by weather conditions and (4) by management. In so far as the hive is concerned, all the bees require is sufficient room and protection for maximum brood rearing and for the storage of all the honey they are capable of gathering. As practically every hive in use can be enlarged by adding additional supers it follows that practically every hive can be made large enough to provide all the space the bees need. A different system of management, however, is necessary with hives of different sizes, but a skillful beekeeper can produce just as much surplus with a small hive as another equally skilled can produce with a large hive or vice versa provided, of course, the factors mentioned above are equal. In a seven year test with hives of different sizes at the Central Experimental Farm, Ottawa, no advantage could be claimed for one hive in so far as production was concerned but any hive smaller than the ten frame Langstroth requires more care for wintering. It has already been said that the ten frame Langstroth hive is the most popular one in use at the present time, because its parts are the most easily obtained and moreover there is a movement on foot to make this size the Standard Hive of Canada.

As a vermifuge an effective preparation is Mother Graves' Worm Expeller, and it can be given to the most delicate child without fear of injury to the constitution.

Her brain cleared quickly. Twisted round her huddled body was her father's new rope. She looked up. Wilbur had already pulled himself from the icy water. Still clutching the rope, he was crawling on hands and knees toward the strip of shore.

Astrid, forgetting the bruise on her forehead, sprang up and ran toward him. She got him to his feet and supported him until they reached the cottonwoods. "We'll get to Monty Mawson's," she said. "Quick. You mustn't stop."

Wilbur stared at her bleeding forehead. "Astrid," he said, smiling weakly, "I saw you coming—and fought! You're—you're an angel!"

Astrid's eyes glowed as she locked her fingers round his arm and started with him upstream toward Monty Mawson's cabin. When Monty's door finally closed on Wilbur she smiled. Her head no longer troubled her. "Because she had known how to use a pair of skis, she had saved a life—the life of Wilbur Biddle, a good friend, a good companion."

THE MEAN THING

The Husband: "If a man steals—no matter what it is—he will live to regret it."

The Wife: "During our courtship you used to steal kisses from me."

Husband: "Well, you heard what I said."

EYESIGHT GONE

"Keep your eye on the Chevrolet," says one ad. "Keep both eyes on the Ford," says another. "Keep your eyes on the Studebaker," says still another. G. W. E. tried to follow this advice, crossing Main Street yesterday and was hit by a Buick, not having any eyes left to keep on it.—Buffalo News.

The Leader for Forty Years "SALADA" TEA "Fresh from the Gardens"

Did You Ever Stop to Think? The way to be social is simply to be social. Edwin S. Rutledge, Editor of the Kenton (Ohio) News-Republican, says: "Mr. Merchant, the newspapers from the larger cities near your community are coming into the homes of your own customers these days with advertising columns bursting with announcements of real values. They are drawing the dollars out of the pockets of the people who should be purchasing from you. "These city merchants know their advertisement in their city newspaper will bring results or they wouldn't be spending good, hard-earned money for that advertising. "Your own values are just as outstanding --- and even more so---than the values being offered your customers by the city merchants. "If you are to get the dollars that are rightfully yours, you will have to inform your customers of this fact in big, bold headlines in your home town newspaper, and then back those headlines up with the price tags on your merchandise. If you will go to your home town newspaper advertising man he will help you with your advertising problems and make your advertising just as appealing to your customers as the 'big city' advertising is. "Local Advertising has the Jump on Advertising that comes in from the Outside, but You, Mr. Merchant, have to keep that Lead by Properly Utilizing the Home Town Newspaper Columns Consistently and with Careful Attention to the Preparing of Copy"