

BLONDIN:

the man who
walked with death

by Bob Considine

Courage and a rope 2 inches wide were all that separated history's greatest tightrope artist from the roaring chasm of Niagara Falls hundreds of feet below.

ON JUNE 30, just a century ago, a slim and bearded Frenchman named Jean Francois Gravelet, who called himself The Great Blondin, ventured upon the giddiest walk of all time. The road he chose was a 2-inch rope stretched 1,000 feet across Niagara Falls from the American to the Canadian side. One misstep meant death.

It was the most spectacular stunt of the era. More than 100,000 gathered, fascinated by the prospect of seeing the daredevil in pink tights fall to a spectacular death. Gamblers worked their way through the mob on both sides, offering a variety of odds on The Great Blondin's survival, how long it would take him to cross, and other wagers. Parasoled women looked about for a bit of turf on which to faint—and thousands did.

One hundred feet along his breath-taking way, Blondin stopped, balancing himself with a long pole, then lay on his back on the rope as if to take a nap. He repeated this contemptuous gesture every 100 feet the rest of the way.

Precisely in the sagging center of the rope (it had rained the night before and the entire rope was treacherously slippery) Blondin let down a string to the steamer Maid of the Mist, far below, and pulled up a bottle of champagne, which he proceeded to drink. Then he balanced the pole on its end, atop his head, and finished the performance by throwing the stick away and proceeding across without it.

For the next year and 10 weeks he performed feats on that rope whose breath-taking nature provoked international attention. He crossed with his hands and feet shackled. He negotiated the terrifying stretch with his feet encased in oaken butter firkins. He escorted Elisa Volta Mantovani, the great Italian acrobat, from the U.S. to Canada by rope. He took a table, chair, and utensils to

mid-rope and cooked himself an omelet. Several times he lunched en route on wine and cakes.

He performed his incredible stunt blindfolded, walked across backwards, in all forms of rough and rainy weather. No one ever calculated how many people saw him perform during his short but historic stay, but all agreed that he was indeed the "World's Outstanding Funambulist."

In the end, he cost too many gamblers too much money, and a covey of them nearly did him in. It happened on Saturday, Sept. 8, 1860, in the presence of the Prince of Wales, later King Edward VII, who had revised all travel plans in this hemisphere to witness Blondin's performance.

On that particular occasion, reporters from all over the country and from Britain and other lands were on hand to cover whatever Blondin chose to do in honor of the Prince. Two of the younger American reporters were William Dean Howells and Mark Twain. The former's story of what transpired was subsequently "spiked" by an editor who didn't believe it was true.

On this memorable occasion Blondin chose to make his way across the sagging rope with his manager, Harry Colcord, riding on a specially built saddle on his shoulders. The betting was lively. Indeed, there had been bets that nobody would volunteer to be Blondin's passenger.

The gamblers "over-laid" the crossing. A group of them, attempting to avoid stiff payoffs, decided to do something about it. They cut the guy ropes which supported the walking rope. The supporting ropes snapped upward from their mooring places like gigantic rubber bands. The tightrope, now treacherously loose, swayed back and forth in the wind. Colcord, who had been giving a carefree imitation of a barber shaving Blondin, let loose a piercing scream and grabbed his client around the neck, with legs entwined around Blondin's hips. He became ill and began to retch.

Blondin faced the breath-taking task of continuing along his desperately swaying 2-inch road. Far below lay the swirling vortex of the Whirlpool. On his neck lay a delirious and sick man. He had long since dispensed with his balancing pole. Niagara Falls roared with deafening defiance.

Blondin crouched under the weight and swaying tension and made his way to safety as a huge crowd cheered—and a few gamblers went broke. A band thumped the French national anthem.

The Frenchman and his ill manager split \$2,500 for the performance, a fraction of the money that was bet on and against him that harrowing day.

If Blondin could be reincarnated, Ed Sullivan would pay him a lot more to do it again tonight. With or (preferably) without Colcord.

