

slightly in the nebulous atmosphere, like one of those semaphores set upon rocky ledges in the sea, or at the head of mountain viaducts to signal danger or distress. Old farmers pointed with trembling finger to that sign. Clouds upon clouds of mist arose from the direction of the city, like the smoke of battle or of a great conflagration, shooting up rapidly in straight lines, or slowly in languid spirals, till reaching a higher stratus of air, they banked in compact terraces over the broad surface of the river. The horizon was hazy and indistinct, now streaked with bars of pearly whiteness, then dimmed with masses of floating shadow. At times, the sounds of bells, the cries of men and animals could be heard from one bank to the other; then, as some sudden atmospheric change took place, all sounds were deadened, and the silence was painful. Evidently, there was the shock of currents and counter-currents on the face of the river, and the mysterious gyrations of some cosmic force down in its hidden depths. All physical science is merely empiric. We note signs, but we cannot investigate causes, and it is as well that it should be so, for if the elements were unveiled to us, even in a glimpse, we should be appalled from all further research.

The forenoon passed thus. The farmers said that if no change took place at meridian, the day would go on darkening, and there would be a crisis of some kind before nightfall. There was no change at noon. The sun flashed a little, once or twice, then disappeared completely. The wind rose gradually, first brushing the light snow from the surface of the ice, then reaching to the upper layers of vapour, tore them in shreds and drove them helter-skelter along the sky. Fool-hardy pedestrians crossing from one bank to the other, looked like muffled giants stalking on the edges of the horizon. Such apparitions—due to refraction—are frequent in boreal climates and give rise to many superstitions. The travellers themselves were as frightened as those on shore, for the ice crackled everywhere under their feet, undulated at times like a molten mass, and the water, gurgling under the numerous air-holes, seemed ever about to burst through and overflow.

Evening came at last, and with it a sudden lull in the storm. The Angelus bells from the turret of Varennes church answered, across the ice, the silver peal of the Pointe-aux-Trembles chimes. This was the signal for the crowd that lined the highlands during the day, to return to their homes. Some hoped that the weather would moderate, but the more knowing shook their heads and predicted that the present calm was the forerunner of a more furious storm. For that reason, many prepared to continue their look-out, rather than go in to supper.

An hour later, while the inhabitants of Varennes were quietly seated around their tables or near their firesides—many of them, perhaps, quite forgetful of the portents of the day—they were suddenly startled by a terrible sound that seemed to rock the foundations of their

houses. It was not like the dull roar of thunder, nor like the sonorous explosion of cannon, but rather a sharp, harsh clash, as if a Plutonian rock were hurled on some great metallic shield. Men and women started to their feet, children awoke in their cradles. "*La débacle!*" was the universal cry.

In a moment, the hill-side and the edge of the bank below were crowded with people. And what a spectacle met their eyes! The night, which was pitchy dark before, was illuminated by crepuscular gleams. It was the ghastly irradiation of the ice, piled up now in all kinds of fantastic ledges and blocks, here in the shape of a pyramid, there in the form of a Gothic castle or Cathedral, and yonder in an incongruous heap of phosphorescent fragments, suggestive of an earthquake or a wreck. The water roared and hissed as it struck against a solid barrier or struggled through a narrow aperture. Now it boomed like a cataract, as it toppled over some gigantic crag, then murmured like a brook, when it crept over the open spaces. The wind blew a hurricane. It seemed as if an array of blasts and currents, ice-bound during the winter, had been let loose with the opening of the river, and were now careering wildly in the cruel exultations of recovered freedom. Who knows whether the old fancy of the Æolian cave have not some scientific reality?

It was an hour of agony and suspense. The frightened inhabitants stood there waiting for the worst. As yet, they could do nothing. Behind them were their homes which the ice might tear away, or the water submerge. Before them, some unfortunate victims might be struggling for their lives, having been caught up in the bursting of the waters. There was one chance. If a second shove, equal in force to the first, came on soon, all danger would be past, because the shock would be sure to clear the stream. If, on the contrary, a sufficient interval elapsed to allow the ice to re-form a little, the consequences would be most disastrous when the final collapse came. Unfortunately, this very thing happened.

Ten minutes elapsed—twenty, thirty, forty minutes—an hour passed by, and no change took place. The ice stood firm, though the waters thundered and the winds roared as in mid-sea.

There was an old man who watched the catastrophe in all its phases, with more calm than the rest, and, perhaps, with more intelligence. It was the bellman of the church. He had foretold from the beginning of the evening how events would turn out, and at this stage declared to those around him that the crisis would come on at nine o'clock.

"Be on the alert," said he. "I am going to the tower, to sound the tocsin at that moment. We must arouse the people of the neighbouring ranges, in case their help is needed. That is, if they can hear the bell, which I doubt. Then, if any should be on the ice at that dreadful hour, the sound of the bell may indicate to them where to direct their cries. God help us and them! It is a fearful *débacle!*"

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