

CHAPTER I.

THE ICE-SHOVE.

THERE is nothing lost in this world. In the moral as well as in the material universe, there is a recuperative force, a vitality that not only shrinks from annihilation, but ultimately triumphs over it. There was a germ of profound truth in the Pythagorean theory of Metempsychosis. A perfect transfusion and transformation of elements is going on around us, operating new effects and producing unlooked-for results. Not a tear is shed, not a sigh is heard, not a pang is endured in this passionate world of ours, that does not, sooner or later, far or near, secretly or publicly, work out its influences.

The traveller, descending the St. Lawrence from Montreal to Quebec, is struck with the picturesque site of the village of Varennes, perched on a high bank, within easy view of the Royal Mountain. It is one of the most ancient settlements of Lower Canada, bears the name of an honoured French house, and is mostly peopled by the descendants of those who, with the Bouchervilles, the Longueuils and the Contrecoeurs, figured in the wild, ungracious warfare which enlivened the early annals of New France. Varennes wears the quiet look of all Canadian villages, where nothing hardly ever occurs to disturb the routine and uniformity of a simple virtuous life which has few wants beyond the boundaries of the household. If now and then something unusual ruffles the serenity of its atmosphere, gossip runs high for a while—for this people are very talkative—then suddenly subsides with the even current of nursery tales. April 5th, 1837, was one of these remarkable days in the memory of the inhabitants of Varennes. The winter had been unusually severe, and the ice of the St. Lawrence held out longer than it had done, for several previous years. The ice-shove or *débauche* is always an event—sometimes a critical one—in Lower Canada, and this year, it was looked forward to with unusual foreboding. Rumours had come from Montreal that the current was rapidly swelling, and that ice-banks were forming on the eastern end of St. Helen's island. Ominous rumblings were heard opposite Longueuil and in the vicinity of Boucherville islands. If, as some hoped, the ice sank enough at those points to make the tide rush over it, all would be well, and an easy rupture would take place in the Varennes channel. But the older inhabitants, who had studied the freaks of the great river, feared that the ice would resist all the more, for the partial openings above, and massing in cliffs along the Varennes highlands, would present there a tremendous breakwater. In that case, the northern bank of the river would surely be flooded, and the ice might create havoc even on the more elevated southern side.

April 5th was a day of portents. The sun rose bright and shone resplendent for two or three hours, then gradually receded behind a curtain of vapour. All that remained was a dull purplish ball, which

It is a starting point, but that is because it is the era of our Union. Outside of this fact, I can trace no direct influence it has had on the Canadian people. The rebellion was crushed before it became a revolution, and it is only revolutions, you know, that can materially alter a national character, one way or the other. Hence the Canadian people, barring always their steady advance with the wave of universal progress, have remained since the rebellion pretty much what they were before it. Still, there are numerous episodes connected with that event—scraps of the legendary and ballad literature of our village firesides, most of them still unwritten—which, while they give us a deeper insight into the details of the rebellion, testify to some of the personal virtues and vices of the French Canadian people in a period of unusual anxiety and danger. Many of these I am acquainted with—having heard them related by the old folks in my boyhood. One especially I have written out in full, because the personages included in it belonged to my own family. If you desire it, I shall take pleasure in handing you the manuscript."

"At once, if it is convenient," exclaimed the American, with the eagerness of the student who finds himself suddenly on the threshold of a new field of information.

The Canadian looked at his watch.

"Very well. It is now seven o'clock. We have had our supper. The whole evening is before us. So we shall light a cigar and proceed directly to my residence. Are you equal to a walk up to St. Catherine street?"

"That north wind!" replied the American, shaking his head dubiously. "I think we had better take a cutter."

"Sleigh, sir? Sleigh, sir?" was the hoarse cry that greeted the two companions as they stepped out of the *Cosmopolitan*. The Canadian carter is a peculiar but very uniform type. His winter aspect is an awkwardly muffled figure, with worn beaver cap drawn down over the eyes, red sash at the waist, thick moccasins, whip stiffly adjusted in the curvature of the thumb and forefinger, red nose, cheeks tanned by all weathers, sleety beard and lashes, and voice harshly resonant with the inspiration of a thousand snow-storms. The two gentlemen soon made a choice, for they threw themselves into the nearest sleigh, and rolling under the robes, away they flew over the icy streets. In five minutes they had reached their destination.

The Canadian introduced his friend into a cosy cabinet, showed him to an easy chair, and taking out of the library a roll of manuscript, laid it on the table beside him.

"Read," said he, "what a Canadian girl can do."

Accordingly, while he pored over *Les Anciens Canadiens* de De Gaspé, the American read what follows.