

An Ark Of Safety.

THE BELL OF ST. JOHN'S: A STORY OF THE FLOODS.

(New York 'Observer'.)

For many days the rain had fallen in ceaseless, heavy torrents, and from every direction came now the brooks and streams rushing with unwonted swiftness, and sending up a deep, hoarse murmur, which was but as a musical echo to the voice of the mighty, swollen rivers.

In the little town of Chesterbrook there was every cause for the anxiety and alarm increasing hourly; already was the giant Mississippi, near which the village lay, at its greatest height known at that point, and stealthily encroaching nearer and nearer upon the main street, while the inhabitants dwelling farther back were thankful for the natural rise in the land placing them in a safer position.

'Is not the river very, very high, grandfather?' asked Ruth Boynton, a timid accent faltering in her tone.

She was a young girl of fifteen years, busied at the time with preparations for the evening meal, but pausing now as she spoke to look toward her grandfather as he sat beside the window in his large chair, looking anxiously without.

Ruth came nearer to him, laying her hand on his shoulder.

'Does it not look very, very high?' she repeated, 'and there seem to be so many timbers floating on the waves.'

'It is, indeed, higher than I have ever seen it in my eighty years, Ruth,' answered the old man in the voice grown feeble with age.

'Do you think the town is in danger, grandfather?' asked the young girl, a slight pallor creeping over her face as she spoke.

'Not to-night, child, not to-night,' he answered, 'and to-morrow may bring brighter skies; ay, to-morrow, who knows,' he murmured softly to himself, as Ruth turned away to her work again, and the old man folded his hands and closed his eyes in silent prayer to the God who rules the storm and clouds.

Midnight had already passed in the thick darkness enshrouding the silent town, and even the most watchful and anxious were at last sleeping heavily, when suddenly—with a confused thunder of sound rising in crashing din above the voice of storm or river, and seeming to rend heaven and earth asunder, the village nestling so peacefully under the shadow of the hills was roused to death and destruction.

Restrained no longer by any former bounds, the relentless stream had broken every barrier, and now amid the despairing cries of fated human beings was wildly sweeping away every tenement or building in its widening pathway.

With the first wild alarm, Ruth Boynton had started terrified and bewildered from her bed, and rushed into the adjoining room to find her grandfather also up, groping with the nervous tremor of age, blindly for a light. In that moment it seemed as though the old man, who had been strong for his eighty years, was transformed into a weak and timid child.

'What is it, Ruthie?' he cried, with an imploring, piteous glance at the girl entering with a candle in her hand. 'What can it be, and what, O what shall we do!'

'It is the river, grandfather,' she answered, hurrying to the door; 'the town is flooded, and everything is being swept away!'

'My God, my God!' cried the old man, trembling in every limb, 'who will save us, and what can I do!'

Whether it was the sense of appalling danger at their very door, or tender pity even in this terrible moment for her helpless companion, the young girl seemed suddenly imbued with a new heroic strength, tingling in every nerve; and with a voice almost steady, she said calmly:

'God is still with us, grandfather, and will surely make some way of escape; try to be strong and trust to his help.'

But even as she spoke another fearful crash, accompanied by piteous shrieks, told of a nearer catastrophe, and Ruth impulsively laid a trembling hand on the old man's arm.

'Come, grandfather,' said she, 'let us hasten to the nearest house; they may be there making some plan of safety and will help us;' and waiting only to exchange the flickering candle for a lantern, the two helpless ones hurried out into the darkness of the night.

But little were they prepared for the scene of desolation around them; only in the distance glimmered moving lights, and with the slow progress alone possible in the feeble condition of her companion, Ruth felt that they could never reach the far-off help. Only a small strip of land seemed left to them, the river behind and to the right of them, while on the left rose the high steep bank, up which her active feet might have climbed, but never the old man by her side; and not once did the thought of escape apart from him enter the brave girl's mind.

With a heart beating wildly with fear, Ruth raised her eyes to the cloud-covered sky, half breathing a prayer for aid, while the trembling one beside her uttered a helpless groan. Suddenly a ray of hope quickened her senses. A little higher up on the left, somewhat elevated above the path before them, stood the old church—untouched as yet by the water, looking in silent pity upon the scene of destruction surrounding it. It was possible that safety might be found there; even though the waves should reach it, might not the strong foundation on which it had stood so long prove invincible.

'The church, grandfather! the church!' cried Ruth, in tones of hope and encouragement. 'Surely we will be safe there;' and the next moment they were hurrying over the short space intervening, and finding but a feeble resistance in the old lock, they soon stood within the silent church.

Was it that the soothing spirit of prayer still hovered like incense about the place, or was it the thought of the ever-abiding presence of God in this his house, that seemed to impart a sudden calm to the weary old man? Silently he sank within one of the old-fashioned pews; and here, ah, yes, here, he could die peacefully if such were God's will.

The lantern gave but a feeble light in the great room; but thankful for even this mitigation of the darkness, Ruth placed it near, and with loving, tender care knelt beside her grandfather, still bent in cheering and encouraging him.

'I think we are surely safe here, grandpapa,' she said, nestling close to him in her old childlike way, feeling now, having done all that she could, a sudden longing for comfort and support.

'I trust so, my child,' answered the old man, in a tone so strong and calm that it surprised as much as it comforted the young girl. 'God has surely guided and sustained you in this hour of danger, and we are now in his hands; he will save or take us to himself as he sees best.'

A deep silence fell upon them then, a trembling, prayerful silence on Ruth's part, for nearer and nearer came the sound of the rushing water, while a great sense of desolation crept over her.

Suddenly a cold dampness seemed to pervade the room, and the next moment a perceptible tremor passed over the building, causing the young girl to spring to her feet and clasp her arms about her grandfather, trembling violently.

Quickly and firmly he drew her closer to him, pressing her tenderly to his breast.

'Be brave, my child,' he said in a voice subdued, but calm; 'the hour of danger has come, but God is with us still.'

Again and again came that quiver through the old building, while around it could be distinctly heard the splash of waves; then came one convulsive throes, that seemed vio-

lently wrenching timber from timber, and with a rocking, reeling motion the old church, with its living inmates, was washed from its foundations, and floated down away on the bosom of the angry stream.

Almost unconscious from fright, Ruth lay on her grandfather's breast; but as the movement became more regular and steady, she raised her pale face and whispered:

'Grandpapa, are we really floating?'

'Yes, my child, like the ark of old,' answered her grandfather. 'We are adrift, and God only knows how long we may float, or what the end will be. Let us not murmur at his will; we will perhaps find many friends who have gone to-night into the other world.'

The girl hid her face again for a moment, but suddenly a faint, as it were, far-off sound broke the stillness—the sound of a bell, feebly, slowly tolling.

Ruth started up. 'Oh, listen, grandfather!' she cried, 'it is the bell, the church-bell, tolling with the motion of the waves!'

The old man started listening intently also, and a tear moistened his eye, trickling slowly down his furrowed cheek. 'Aye, child, it is the old bell of St. John's, that has rung out many a chime. It is tolling now its long last message—tolling its own knell, and the knell of the many that to-night have passed away.'

But to Ruth the familiar sound, solemn and sad as it was, seemed to bear a message of life and hope; and, with her young face all aglow, she started once again to her feet, exclaiming:

'Grandfather, I know what I will do! I will climb the belfry stair, and hang the lantern from its high window, and I will send out such a peal from the good old bell that help, I am sure, must come.'

Timid for her safety, where he was brave for his own, the old man anxiously tried to dissuade her from an effort so perilous at this hour of darkness; but, scarce waiting for permission, Ruth had already darted away with the lantern, leaving her grandfather in the solemn darkness, where he could only wait and pray, while she was cautiously but swiftly climbing the belfry stair.

On through the gloom and silence the old church floated, when suddenly through the darkness a bright light sparkled like a beacon star from a light-house tower, and, above the din of the rushing waters, a ringing peal came forth, awakening the startled echoes slumbering on the river bank.

'Clang! Clang! Clang!' The sound seemed almost to dance along the waves, while the brave girl aloft clung to her frail support, and the old man prayed below.

The river had now found a deeper, narrower channel, with high dry cliffs once more on either side, and as that strange sound rang out amid the storm and gloom, a group of men with skiffs moored high peered up the rushing stream with wondering, awe-struck faces.

'Egad!' cried one, 'it sounds like the old bell of St. John's! Can it be the timbers of little Chesterbrook that have been floating by to-night? On came the pealing sound and now the starlike light shone out upon them. 'As I live!' cried the same speaker, 'it is the old church afloat, and that bell could never ring like that from the motion of the waves; there are living souls within calling for help! To the rescue, men; out with the ropes and skiffs!'

Five minutes more, and strong, brave hands were out in the stream, all unknown to the two anxious ones within; heavy ropes were being securely fastened to the old building, and, with the bell still tolling, the old church was rapidly towed toward a haven-like break in the cliffs. And suddenly, with a startling shock, it stood still; and with a frightened, beating heart, Ruth gazed anxiously from the little window. Could it be possible! Was that really the bank on which they were safely moored? And the lights and moving figures—had God really sent help so soon?

Hastily, swiftly, she descended the rickety stairs, crying joyfully, 'We are saved, grandfather! thank God we are saved!'

A sudden light in the doorway, and the next moment kindly voices were breaking the silence. Lanterns held high soon revealed the two lonely figures, and guided by kindly, helpful hands, Ruth and the old man soon found themselves by the hospitable firesides of a little hamlet a short distance back from the dangerous river. And here they made new friends and a new home, as did also more than one of the few who were picked up and rescued from the ruins of Chesterbrook.