

THE BOY WHO SAVED THE SCHOOL.

Two thousand miles from the mouth of the Mississippi, where it flows into the Gulf of Mexico, is a remarkable enlargement of the river known as "Lake Pepin." It is, in fact, a lake, for it is a body of water without any perceptible current, thirty miles long and four miles wide, through which the great river flows in some mysterious way.

This lake lies between Wisconsin and Minnesota, and is bounded alternately by high rocky bluffs four hundred feet high on one side, and prairies, from one to three miles wide, on the opposite shore.

On these prairies are many pretty villages and homesteads; and during the summer months it is a lovely place and one which the Indians of the North West loved and clung to until driven away by civilization.

Although it is so far from the sea, it is large and deep enough to float all the navies of the world.

The water is so clear that a silver dime can be seen lying on the sandy bottom where the water is ten feet deep.

There is no current on the surface of the lake, and a raft or log, if left floating, may drift about for weeks just as the winds may blow it. The old river-men say there is an under-current by which the waters of the Mississippi escape; and this seems probable, as the surface water being warmer in summer would naturally be on top, while the colder water of the river would run below.

At any rate, there is a tremendous current at the outlet of the lake where the river escapes from its long imprisonment of thirty miles. The water fairly boils and whirls in eddies as it rushes on, and the great steamers coming up the river put on extra steam at this point to overcome the strong current, and reach the quiet waters of the lake.

Early in the winter the still waters of the lake freeze over long before the ice forms on the river, and during the long, cold winter the ice becomes very thick, often four feet in depth; and when covered with snow it becomes a general highway for travelling with sleighs.

At the foot of the lake where the river escapes, the current is so strong that it has never been known to freeze over, even during the coldest weather, and often in midwinter clouds of steam or vapor hang over it, and travellers give it a wide berth, crossing the lake a mile or more above it.

When the wind blows from the south in the winter, the air is driven under the ice at the lower end, and finding no escape, it is forced along under the ice for miles, causing the sounds which are associated with an earthquake; there are terrible mutterings and rumblings, which the Indians believed were caused by evil spirits.

These sounds are like subdued or distant thunder, and roll miles up the lake, and often the solid ice is cracked from the water to the surface to permit the confined air to escape.

We know of no human being who ever escaped alive who was so unfortunate as to be caught in the grasp of this mighty current.

There is an old Indian tradition relating to a party of young braves who had chased a large deer on the ice above this outlet.

One of the party who had been paying his addresses to a young Indian beauty, had been rejected by the girl because he had never distinguished himself by any act of daring that would entitle him to be called a Brave. Stung to desperation by her taunts, he determined that no opportunity should pass without his proving his right to be known by that title.

One day he and his party were hunting deer. A deer found himself closely pursued by the hunters and ran for the open water, followed by the Indians; but when the hunters saw the deep, black water they all stopped except the rejected lover, who rushed eagerly on after the panting creature.

The deer paused a moment on the brink of the ice, but its pursuer was close at hand, and it plunged into the river. As it rose to the surface the young Indian gave a loud whoop and sprang upon it. Both sank struggling in the dark water; then for a minute they floated on the surface. The deer might have swum to land, but the Indian clung to it, and soon they both disappeared, to be seen no more.

A few years before the war I had charge of the "Hesperian Institute," located in one of the villages on the shore of the lake.

Among the students attending the school was a boy fifteen years old, named Joseph Willis.

He was a commonplace boy who attracted no attention, and gained no especial reputation at school either by good or bad conduct. He was well-meaning, but a dull student. As a pupil he was noticed by me only for his simple obedience to the rules of the school, his hard efforts, and his prompt attendance.

He had three miles to come to school, and often against storms and through snow-drifts waist-high, yet he never missed a day and never failed to respond to the morning roll-call.

His father was a poor man who lived in a cabin near the outlet of the lake, and made a living by cutting wood and selling it to the steamboats in summer, and by trapping animals for furs in winter. Joe was a sturdy boy for his age, and could swing an axe nearly as well as his father, and was superior to him in trapping; for while he attended school he followed also a woods-life. He learned from old hunters the manners and haunts of the wild animals. He knew the names and uses of the trees and plants of the forests, and from the Indians he had learned many secrets of woodcraft; so that in the forests he could tell the points of the compass by noticing the bark of the trees, and other signs which the Indians had taught him.

He was often employed by strangers as a guide through the immense pineries of the Northwest, and was entirely at home in the heart of these wild forests, although he had never been there before. He was a close observer of nature. In fact, nature was his teacher; and he learned her beautiful lessons as he saw and heard them in the songs of the wild birds and the rushing of the river, and in the never-ending changes and beauties of the seasons, which a boy with eye and ear open will always find in a country life.

Joe would have made an awkward appearance in the streets of one of our great cities; but the simple lessons of his life he had learned so well that he was prepared to perform a noble deed when the hour of trial came.

To nearly every one there comes an hour of special trial, which is usually the turning-point in his career; and happy is he whose experiences and daily habits have been preparing him for this great test. Unconsciously this unknown boy had been training for this supreme effort of his life; guided only by the grand principle of closely observing the common events of his daily life, and now when the voice of duty called on him he was found as ready to act as Napoleon at Lodi, Nelson at Trafalgar, or Perry on Lake Erie.

It was a custom in our academy occasionally for the whole school to make a visit to some neighboring school. On such occasions some of the patrons of the school would come with their large sleighs to take the younger pupils, while the older pupils went in single sleighs. These visits had always been pleasant occasions, and were gladly welcomed by the pupils.

One bright day in January we started at noon to visit a school across the lake, in Minnesota. The young men had six single sleighs, and each of them took a young lady; while the rest of the school went in two large sleighs. One of these had four horses attached to it, and was well furnished with straw, buffalo robes and blankets; it carried thirty pupils. The driver was a brave and skillful man who had two children in the sleigh. Another sleigh drawn by two horses and carrying fifteen pupils, followed the large sleigh.

The day was bright and sunny, the sleighing across the lake was fine, and the destination was soon reached.

We received a hearty welcome, and the two schools passed a delightful afternoon in singing, speaking and general exercises.

At three o'clock our driver came in to tell us there were signs of a storm, and we must start for home at once. So hasty good-byes were exchanged, and we were soon away. The sky had become overcast, the sun had disappeared, and snow in large flakes was slowly drifting through the air.

The young men in the single sleighs were eager for a race, and they were all soon out of sight; but our large sleighs drove rapidly homeward, the scholars singing as they went.

By the time we reached the lake it was quite dark, and the storm had grown into a

howling tempest of wind and snow, beating down from the northwest, and increasing in fury every moment as we advanced out on the open ice. The twilight was gone, and night came on at once.

The wind had been sharp on the land, but was doubly so on the lake, and soon the songs were all hushed, and the singers sheltered themselves under the buffalo robes which were spread over them.

Our driver, muffled up to his eyes, directed all his energies to keeping the horses straight in the track, all signs of which were rapidly disappearing beneath the drifting snow. For a while we heard the bells of the single sleighs ahead of us, but they, in the racing, soon passed beyond hearing, and then there was no sound but of the roaring tempest and the tramping of our horses' feet in the snow.

The other sleigh was close behind us, following in our track. A dark, sullen sky hung over us, the snow now fell, not in flakes but in drifts, and there was not a star or light, true or bluff, to guide us. Still we had little fear of any danger, but trusting to the experience and skill of our driver, we drew the buffalo robes between us and the storm, thinking we should soon be at home.

Nearly an hour passed in this way, when suddenly the horses stopped at the command of the driver. He called me up and told me in a low, anxious voice that he was lost! He found that we had just recrossed our own track, over which he had driven a short time before. The horses were running in a circle to keep from facing the storm, and he could no longer trust to their instincts to guide them. His great fear was that we were approaching the outlet of the lake, and he dared not go further until he knew where we were and in what direction we were going.

I got out of the sleigh and looked and listened; there were no sights or sounds but of the shrieking tempest and falling snow. We were alone and surrounded by danger, for it was impossible to remain where we were, and at the rate we had been going we might at any moment plunge into the open water.

A brief consultation with the two drivers brought no relief. In times of doubt, when they had been lost before, they usually depended upon the instinct of their horses to guide them; but now the poor animals were bewildered and frightened, and could not be trusted.

I made a hasty circuit around the sleighs, going as far away as I dared, but saw nothing to give us hope or warning. Returning to the sleighs I found Joe had joined the drivers in their consultation, and on my approach he said he "could get out of this scrape."

I thought of the dark river and the merciless storm, and heard the pupils murmuring at the delay, and then looked at this commonplace boy. Could he help us when these experienced men were powerless? Should I put these fifty lives into his hands? While these thoughts were rapidly passing through my mind, Joe had gone off, and was lost to sight in the storm. He soon came back, and confidently said he could find the way home if I would give him permission. There was nothing else to do, and I told him to make the effort.

He did not attempt to move the sleighs, but calling together six of the larger boys, he briefly told them our situation, and that he wanted them to do exactly what he told them. A sense of our danger and their own weakness made them entirely willing to obey him.

After carefully noting which way the wind was blowing and the direction of the horses' heads, he started straight off to the right with his little company. Walking away into the storm until they were nearly out of sight, he halted his little command and left one of the boys, with instructions not to move from his post, but to be ready to answer any signal or call made to him. Then going on until the first was nearly lost to sight, he posted a second, with the same instructions, and so proceeded until the six boys were all stretched out in a line, each one barely able to distinguish his nearest neighbor.

All this was done in a few minutes, but it seemed a long time to us, for the storm was increasing in fury every moment, and the horses were becoming unmanageable, and some of the younger pupils were crying from the increasing cold.

Presently Joe appeared alone, and asked me to go with him. We passed quickly along the line of his "telegraph," as he called

it, and not far from the last boy in the line we halted, where a sight presented itself which nearly paralyzed me with terror.

An immense black field lay before us, which I soon saw was a terrible outlet of the lake.

The mighty current of the Mississippi, released from its long imprisonment, was rushing and roaring like a mountain torrent, nearly a mile wide and one hundred feet deep. The water was of inky blackness compared with the surrounding snow, only where it boiled up and burst into the fitful gleams of whirling billows.

Had our sights continued in their course a few minutes longer, we should all have been plunged into the river, and not one of us could have escaped destruction.

After looking at the water a moment, Joe said,—

"I know where we are now, and can soon get all safe home again."

We retraced our way back to the sleighs, taking up our "telegraph" of boys as we went. When we got back to the sleighs, Joe carefully made a circuit around them and noticed the direction in which the storm was coming; then selecting four more boys, making ten in all, he started out as before, but in nearly an opposite direction. When the boys were all stretched out in a line, reaching away into the unknown darkness, the sleighs started along the line. It required all the efforts of the drivers to make the poor horses face the storm, which was beating fiercely in their faces.

As we passed each sentinel, or telegraph boy, he ran along the line to the last one, where he found Joe, who then stretched them all out ahead again, always taking the lead himself.

This was repeated three times, when word came back to us from the head of the line that a gun had been heard. We now drove rapidly along the line taking up the telegraph boys as we went, and soon came to Joe, standing alone and listening intently.

We all stopped, and presently heard the dull boom of a gun, and then three others in quick succession. We knew this was a signal for us, and hope cheered every heart.

Taking Joe into the sleigh, our driver urged horses to the direction of the guns, which we now heard every minute; but the darkness was so intense we could see nothing.

But presently, when one of the guns was fired we saw a flash, and then another! Then came a rolling volley and a long hurrah of men's voices! We replied as well as we could, but the howling wind was against us, and they could not hear us. The sound of the guns now came to us more distinctly, and the horses seemed to know their way home, for without urging from the driver, they sprang boldly forward, facing the storm.

Soon we came in sight of a row of lanterns, then a huge bonfire on shore burst into flames, and a moment later the lights in the windows were plainly seen and we were all safe.

Tears of joy were shed and prayers of thanksgiving went up in that village that night, when the story of our loss and rescue was told.

Joe had gone to his humble home, unconscious that he had done anything unusual; but his noble deed was in every one's mind, and all were resolved that he should not be forgotten.

One of the wealthiest men in the village, whose daughter was one of those saved by Joe's skill and courage, resolved to make him a present of a fine gold watch and chain.

But the pupils demanded the privilege of sharing in the gift; so the poorest child in the school was allowed to contribute toward the purchase of the watch. It was all arranged before we slept that night, and our jeweller—with a willing heart, for he too had a child who had been saved—sat up a late hour engraving a suitable inscription on the watch-case.

In the morning there were many mysterious gatherings and whispered consultations by the pupils, in which I was not allowed to participate; but it was evident that some unusual event was to occur, for at the ringing of the bell every one was in his seat, and the spare seats were all filled by their parents and friends.

For the first time Joe was late; he had been purposely detained by some of the men in the village, who were in the secret, and

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