

Cranstoun's manner," eagerly asked the aid-de-camp, his curiosity excited by the general titter that followed the remark.

"Shall I tell him, Cranstoun?" asked Villiers, in the same bantering tone.

"Don't bother me," petulantly returned the other, as, thrusting his long legs under the table and turning his back upon the questioner, he joined, or affected to join, in a conversation that was passing, in a low tone, at his end of the room.

"I must premise," began Villiers, addressing himself to the attentively listening De Courcy, "that such is the mania for dancing in this country, scarcely any obstacle is sufficient to deter a Canadian lady, particularly a French Canadian, from indulging in her favorite amusement. It is, therefore, by no means unusual to see women drawn in sleighs over drifting masses of ice, with chasms occasionally occurring of from fifteen to twenty feet—and that at a moment when, driven by wind and current, the huge fragments are impelled over each other with a roar that can only be likened to continuous thunder, forming, in various directions, hillocks from which the sun's rays are reflected in a thousand fantastic shades and shapes. On these occasions the sleighs, or carioles, are drawn, not as otherwise customary, by the fast-trotting little horses of the country, but by expert natives whose mode of transportation is as follows: A strong rope is fastened to the extremity of the shafts, and into this the French Canadian, buried to the chin in his blanket coat, and provided with a long pole terminating in an iron hook, harnesses himself, by first drawing the loop of the cord over the back of his neck, and then passing it under his arms. In this manner does he traverse the floating ice, stepping from mass to mass with a rapidity that affords no time for the detached fragment to sink under the weight with which it is temporarily laden. As the iron-shod runners obey the slightest impulsion, the draught is light; and the only fatigue encountered is in the act of bringing the detached bodies together. Wherever an opening intervenes, the Canadian throws forward his pole, and, securing the pointed hook in some projection of the floating ice, drags it towards that on the extreme verge of which he stands. In like manner he passes on to the next, when the same operation remains to be performed, until the passage is fully effected. Sometimes it happens that a chasm of more than ordinary extent occurs, in which case the pole is unavailable, and then his only alternative is to wait patiently until some distant mass, moving in a direction to fill up the interstice, arrives within his reach. In the meanwhile the ice on which he stands sinks slowly and gradually, until sometimes it quite disappears beneath the surface of the water."

"And the women, all this time?" demanded De Courcy, with something of the nervousness which might be attributed to such a situation.

"Sit as quietly and as unconcernedly, wrapped in their furs, as if they were merely taking their customary drive on terra firma," continued Villiers; "nay, I am persuaded that if they ever entertain an anxiety on those occasions, it is either lest the absence of one of these formidable masses should compel them to abandon an enterprise, the bare idea of entering upon which would give an European woman an attack of nerves, or that the delayed aid should be a means of depriving them of one half minute of their anticipated pleasure."

"Why," interrupted Middlemore, despite of a dozen ohs and ahs—"why, I say, is Villiers like a man of domestic habits? Do you give it up? Because he is fond of dwelling on his own premises."

"Middlemore, when will you renounce that vile habit of punning?" said De Courcy, with an earnestness of adjuration that excited a general laugh at his end of the table. "Come, Villiers, never mind his nonsense, for your premises, although a little long, are not without deep interest—but what has all this to do with our good friend above?"

"You shall hear. After a succession of balls last winter, to which the ladies on either shore were invariably invited, the concluding one was given by the officers in garrison at Detroit. This was at the very close of the