

THE MANIAC SKATER.

On one of the Canadian rivers—a branch stream that empties itself into the Ottawa, many miles above the modern Canadian capital—stands the town, or village, of P—. It is a pretty place picturesquely situated on the river's bank, and backed by hills of bold outline, upon whose sides the maple sheds its broad, bright leaf, while their crests are covered by forests of the evergreen hemlock and spruce.

Romantic in appearance, the little town is also of romantic interest in its history: having been in the earlier days of Canadian colonization a noted rendezvous of fur traders, trappers, and *voyageurs*—the boatmen made immortal by Moore in his celebrated song.

That was in times past. The fur-bearing animals are still found near it, but not in such numbers as of yore, and the trade has sought other centres of activity, and other depots, further off in the great north-western wilderness of Prince Rupert's Land. Still, the town of P— has not been deserted. A considerable population yet remains in it, chiefly descendants of the ancient trappers, *voyageurs*, and *coureurs du bois*; while the axe of the colonist, echoing in woods, where once was heard only the crack of the rifle, has brought a new era of prosperity to the place. Above and below it, on the river's bank, large clearings have been made, and handsome houses are seen, reflecting their images in the water.

A mile below the town, and just before the stream mingles its waters with those of the Ottawa, it makes a leap over a bar of rock that runs transversely to its course—forming a beautiful waterfall of forty or fifty feet in height. Although the stream itself is of inconsiderable size—that is, for Canada—the rocky ridge, thus damming it up, gives it a breadth of two or three hundred yards, which is continued up to the town, and for some distance beyond. This also imparts tranquility to the current, leaving the river surface smooth as a sleeping lake; so that during the long Canadian winter the ice formed upon it is of the very best quality for skating.

As a large proportion of the inhabitants of P— are of French origin—*habitants*, in short,—it need not be told that they are fond of cheerful amusements, and take full advantage of the pastime thus afforded them. On the bright, crisp evenings, almost peculiar to the Canadian winter, men, women, and children may be seen in scores, costumed in garments tastefully trimmed with furs, standing in groups upon the smooth, shining ice, or shooting and circling about in every direction; while the air resounds with their merry laughter, and the metallic ringing of their skates.

Contests are often carried on between them, as to who can perform the most difficult feats, and cut the most complicated figures; and excellence in this pastime—in Canada truly national—is held in high estimation.

About Christmas time these contests are especially common, and full of exciting interest; for in Canada, as in all Christian lands, this is the season of most merriment. Fortunate it is for the villagers of P— when the ice during the last day of December is in good condition; that is, free from snow. If not however, they will not be balked of their sport. A band of volunteer sweepers, armed with birchen brooms, will soon clear space sufficient for this, and if the white mantle be too deep and heavy for brooms, horses and the snow-plough will be employed in its removal.

On a Christmas eve some few years ago the villagers of P— were out in force upon the ice. This was in perfect condition—clear as plate glass. Not a smirch of snow could be seen on the long reach of the river extending below the town; although a white mantle covered the earth on either bank, and even the dark leaves of the hemlocks, and the spreading fronds of the spruce trees were loaded with snow-flake.

On this Christmas eve King Winter seemed to have taken especial delight in spreading a table, so attractive as to draw from out their houses nearly the whole population of P—. Men, women, and children had assembled on the river ice to participate in the delightful sport of skating, or to watch the evolutions of the skaters.

It was, in truth, a grand sight to observe hundreds of both sexes dressed in various costumes, and gliding rapidly over the smooth, translucent surface; while shouts and peals of laughter rang mellow and merry on the still evening air. The low winter sun had already sunk behind the hemlock-hills, and a bonfire, kindled on the ice, sent up its flames, and cast their red glare far along the river. From the quiet village nestled near its bank the light glistened away to the frosted forest on the opposite side—rendering the scene so wild and fanciful, that the skaters as they swept to and fro might easily have been taken for the ghostly inhabitants of some supernatural world.

"What splendid skaters!" was the exclamation passing through the crowd, as a young gentleman and lady made their appearance upon the ice, coming up the river from below. They were skating hand in hand, now backward, now forward, now performing some difficult feat, or whirling around in wide sweeping circles.

"Who are they?" was the question asked by many among the spectators.

"Kate Mackenzie and Frank Scott," was the reply, pointing them out as belonging to the two most prominent families in the neighborhood, whose splendid mansions stood near the river's bank a little further down.

The two skaters, who had thus unexpectedly made their appearance, at once became the object of universal attention, and an admiring crowd soon collected around them.

Observing this, and not appearing to like such a public exhibition, the young lady whispered some words in the ear of her companion; who suddenly wheeling, so as to face down the river, and carrying her round along with him, by a few forcible strokes shot clear of the crowd, and skated rapidly away from it.

A murmur of disappointment followed their departure; while glances of something like disapproval were cast after them, as they glided off under the gleaming firelight. The villagers appeared to think they had been unfairly dealt with, to be thus cheated of a spectacle.

"They are vexed at our leaving them," remarked the young gentleman, as he swept along by the side of his beautiful companion, her hand held in his.

"For what reason?" she innocently asked.

"They don't often see such an accomplished skater as you, Kate."

"As yourself, you mean, Frank. It was your performance they so much admired; and, now I think of it, it wasn't very graceful in me to have been the cause of disappointing them. Suppose you go back, and show them a little more of your skill. Do, Frank! I can stay here till your return."

"Anything to please you, my dear Kate."

And so saying, the young man released the tiny-gloved hand of his charming partner; and, after a few long shots, was once more in the midst of the villagers, gratifying them with the display so desired.

More than five minutes were thus spent, during which time the accomplished skater was repeatedly cheered, and greeted with complimentary speeches. Then, bethinking himself of the fair creature he had left waiting alone and in the cold, he was about to break off, when the pleased spectators entreated him to remain a moment longer, and once more show them a figure that had especially elicited their applause.

He consented; repeated the figure called for; and then, resisting all further appeals, with one grand stroke he glided out from among the people, and off towards the spot where he had left the young lady on the ice.

On nearing the place, he saw that she was not there, or anywhere in sight!

Where could she have gone?

It occurred to him, that, while he was entertaining the villagers, she might also have rejoined them, and become one of the spectators.

With all speed he skated back again, and quartered the crowd—in every direction scanning the faces and figures by the red firelight.

But among them he saw neither features nor form bearing the slightest resemblance to those of the beautiful Kate Mackenzie.

"So," soliloquized he, "she's playing a little trick, to surprise me. She has slipped in under the river-bank; and while I am rushing to and fro in search of her, she is no doubt standing in the shadow of a hemlock, and quietly laughing at me."

Yielding to this conjecture, he once more plied his skates, and shot rapidly down the river—keeping close alongside the bank, and scanning every spot overshadowed by the dark fronds of the hemlocks.

But he saw no one there, either in the moonlight or shadow; nor was there any mark made by skates upon the inshore ice.

It now occurred to him, that he might discover where she had gone by getting upon the track of her skates and following it up. With this intent he hastened back to the spot where he had left her.

On reaching it a cold thrill shot through his frame, as if the blood had suddenly become frozen in his veins. In addition to two sets of skate tracks made by himself and the young lady in their passage up and down, he now saw a third, whose deep scores upon the ice showed them to have been made by a man! There were confused curves around the spot and zigzaggings, as if there had been a struggle, or some slight difficulty in starting; but beyond that point were two sets of straight continuous furrows, running parallel, and side by side, as if the skaters had gone away at a rapid rate, and with joined hands.

The direction was down the river—towards the home of Miss Mackenzie.

At a glance the young man recognized the thin tiny mark left by the slender steel blades on the feet of his late partner. But the man who had taken her off, skating so close by her side—who was he? This was the question put by Frank Scott to himself.

A painful suspicion shot through his brain. He remembered that, shortly after leaving the house, they had passed a man upon the ice, who was also on skates. They had brushed so near this man as to see who he was; and in the moonlight had beheld a countenance bearing a most sinister cast. It was the face of Charles St. Clair, a French Canadian; whom Frank knew to be a rival—like himself a suitor for the hand of Miss Mackenzie.

This man had made his appearance in the neighborhood, some three months before; coming no one knew whence. In fact, there was nothing known of him except his name; and this might have been an assumed one. He put up at the principal hotel of the village; appeared to have money, and to be a person of good education. Was it he who had joined Miss Mackenzie upon the ice, and carried her away with him? It could be no other; for Scott now remembered having heard the ring of skates behind, as they were coming up the river from the place where St. Clair had been seen, and where shortly after they had passed him.

The first thought of the lover was one of a most painful nature. It was, in fact, the bitterest pang of jealousy. The whole thing had been pre-arranged, and she had willingly gone away with St. Clair, who, though a stranger to others, might be better known to her. The French Canadian, if not what might be called a very handsome man, was, nevertheless, good-looking enough to give cause for jealousy.

It was a fearful reflection for Frank Scott, who was exasperated beyond bounds at being, as he fancied, both duped and slighted. It passed like a spasm; another nearly as painful taking its place. He recalled a rumour, that had been for some days current in the neighborhood—of a strangeness observed in the behaviour of St. Clair, that had caused doubts of his sanity. And more forcibly came back to Frank Scott's mind, what he had heard that very morning; how the Frenchman had presented himself at the house of Miss Mackenzie's father; proposed marriage to her; and, when refused, had acted in such a strange manner—uttering wild speeches and threats against the life of the young lady—that it had been necessary to use force in removing him from the premises.

Could this be the explanation of her disappearance? Was the man in reality a maniac? Was he now in the act of carrying out the threat he had