

The old bellman had guessed true. Scarcely had the last stroke of the ninth hour sounded, than a crash louder than the first was heard, and the masses of ice in front of Varennes sank into the water, like a tumbling mountain. A cry of terror flew along the crowd that was gathered on the bank.

"The water rises! The water rises!"

Those who were below rushed up the broad road which leads from the water's edge to the front of the church. Those who were above, being pushed back by the retreating crowds, broke into disorderly groups towards the first houses of the village. All was noise and confusion. But clear above the uproar tolled the bell of the tower.

CHAPTER II.

THE GIRL-PILOT.

As these scenes were enacted in the village of Varennes, where we cannot yet estimate how much mischief is being done, we shall descend the river a few miles, and there detach an incident, which, while it will give us a vivid idea of the dangers attendant on the ice-shove of the St. Lawrence, will likewise supply us with the first event of the series which is to make up the matter of our story.

Four miles below the village of Varennes, but within the parish, on the main road which overlooked the river, stood an isolated farmhouse, distant some twenty arpents from the nearest neighbour. On the night in question, the father and his two eldest sons had hurried up to the village, to see what was going on, and to render whatever help might be needed. They feared nothing for their own home, for it was so high up the bank that the river had never yet reached it, even in its most elevated flood. The mother remained within the house with the younger children, engaged in prayer for the salvation of such as might be in danger on that dreadful night. Their only grown daughter, after looking and listening from the doors and windows for a long time, at length crossed the road and leaned upon the fence which overhang the embankment. She was there when the tocsin sounded, and the mighty tumult on shore and river announced to her that the ice-shove was at its height. Nothing more was needed to inflame her imagination. She stood gazing down into the black abyss before her, lamenting over the fate of those who might be battling for their lives in its dangerous recesses. Fully half an hour had she thus been unconsciously buried in her thoughts, when on a sudden she was aroused by a faint cry far across the river. Was it fancy? Or was it really the shriek of a human being in distress? If it were, she felt—as she grasped tightly the upper rail of the fence—that she had the courage to go to his assistance. She heard the cry again, louder, clearer and more poignant than before. Alas! yes, it was a human cry, and possibly no one but herself could hear it, as it was brought to her by gusts of north wind which came beating on the bank at her feet.

There was a natural stair which led down the hill from the house to the river. She knew every step of its windings, having ascended and descended it from childhood. At the foot of the stair and projecting into the river was a narrow platform such as is used by country housewives on washing days. Fastening her hood and drawing her shawl over her shoulders, the girl rapidly descended the steps and ventured out on the platform. There, unmindful of the rushing water and the floating ice, she bent forward to listen. A third time the scream of agony arose, from the middle of the stream, in a direct line before her. She was electrified. What could she do? Answer the cry? She stood against the wind and her voice would be lost? Rush up the bank for help? Her father and her brothers were gone, and all that part of the parish was deserted. She ran back along the platform, and she struck her foot against some planks that lay across it. She then remembered the boat-house. In those days, there being no ferries or propellers of any kind, nearly every farmer along the river had his boat with which to cross from one bank to the other, and ascend to the "Foot of the Current," when that was required. Often had this girl rowed, single-handed, across the wide St. Lawrence, even in early spring or late in fall. She approached the little shed. The lock was fast, but the sides had been partly torn out by the ice. She stretched her hand to the boat. It was not frozen to the ground, but rocked easily on its blocks. She pulled it to her; it yielded easily. Seeing which, without further reflection, without expressing to herself even in mental words the wild resolution she was forming, she drew the boat from the house, launched it into the water, and leaped into it. She hardly knew what she was doing, yet every motion she made was clearly defined, and her courage was strung to the highest; for while she rapidly performed these evolutions—loud and shrill—louder and shriller—near and nearer—came the cry for help to her ears.

She steered straight in the direction of the voice. One ice-cake after another struck her boat, but as she advanced obliquely, they glanced harmlessly off the sides. The water was very thick and the current rather slacker than she had expected. These circumstances being in her favour, the brave girl plied a vigorous oar. What encouraged her was that the cry became more and more audible, so that when she had rowed about two hundred yards from shore, the voice seemed only a few feet from her. She saw nothing, however, though there was sufficient reflection from the ice to allow any object so large as a human form to be seen. Suddenly, too, the voice ceased its cries. Had the sufferer fallen into the water? Or, being in the water from the first, had he gone down, to rise no more? Was all this peril which she encountered to be ineffectual? For the first time since she had left the platform did the poor girl understand the critical position in which she had placed herself. Having withdrawn her oar from the water,