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# ROSALBA; OR, FAITHFUL TO TWO LOVES.

An Episode of the Rebellion of 1837-38.

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(Written for the Canadian Illustrated News.)

## 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 overhangs the embankment. She was there when the tides 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 funny? 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 slack, 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, while looking around her for the object of her search, her boat began to shift with the current, and thus exposing its broad side to the action of the floating ice, was rocking very rapidly. A moment later, and some sudden shock would have capsized it. But at that supreme moment, her keen eye descried a dark object a few feet on her left, and she fancied she heard a subdued moan. Grasping her oar with both hands, she dashed it into the water with a nervous stroke and, turning the front of the boat, shot right up the object. It was the form of a man doubled up on a cake of ice, about two feet square. The hands and feet were nearly fastened together, the head was down, so that the forehead touched the ice. A low groan escaped from the struggling chest. The brave girl understood the situation at one glance. The poor exhausted victim was falling asleep upon the ice. It was the prelude of his death. There was no time to be lost. He must be awakened. But how? She might strike him with her oar, and thus arouse him, but the shock would so startle him as to make him lose his already unsteady balance. She might draw up her boat beside him, but besides that she had not the strength to lift such a dead weight; the very effort to do so would certainly overturn her little craft. Alas! what was to be done? Some ten rods below, she thought she noticed that there was a large and solid bank of ice which was probably held by a series of frozen grapnels to the thicker shore ice. If she could reach that and propel the prostrate figure with her, she would there find a fulcrum where-with to raise it into her boat. With the heroism of despair, she tried the manoeuvre and succeeded. Placing the fragile lump of ice to the barboard, she drifted rapidly to the temporary haven of safety. Then only did she venture to arouse the sufferer. He started up as if stung by a galvanic shock. He stood on his feet and his eyes glared wildly around him. Where was he? What was he doing? He heard a sweet, silvery voice saying: "Courage! Step out on the ice-bank and you are saved." Saved! That word was like a draught of cordial, streaming to his heart. Summoning all his strength, he made a bound upon the bank. The slender cake that had supported him sank into the water like a stone, brushed under the bottom of the boat, then spun out into the middle of the river. The man was wild with excitement; he threw his arms aloft; and turned in narrow circuits, stamping his feet. He seemed not to see his deliverer, as she stood up in the prow of her boat. His on-delirious sensation was to have a firm support under him. The girl spoke again: "The ice will soon break. Get into my boat and let us make for the shore."

The man trembled and murmured a few unintelligible words. His overwrought energies suddenly collapsed, as was to be expected, and making a few mechanical strides forward, he fell full on his face in the bottom of the boat. It was a syncope. The girl turned her prow and started rapidly for shore. The return voyage was far more dangerous, for she had to drift with the current, and might be jammed in by blocks of floating ice. But Providence that had enabled her to save the life of a fellow creature, was not to abandon her in the most perilous part of her adventure. As she looked to the shore, in order to shape her course, she saw the light of many torches on the water's edge and heard the echo of many voices.

"It is my father and my brothers!" thought she. And she was right. The father and his sons had returned to their home from the village of Varennes with the good news that less damage than was feared had been done by the ice and overflow. But the pleasure of their return was soon marred by the young girl's absence. Where was she? She was gone from the fence. They tracked her footsteps to the brink of the embankment. Could she have ventured down these steps? They descended. They ran out on the platform. Thence back to the boat-house. The boat was gone! In a few minutes the whole neighbourhood was aroused, and soon the bank was bright with torches. The excitement was at its highest when the thud of a boat was heard, and, full in the circle of light, stood the upright figure of the girl pilot. It was Dante's Beatrice ferrying her burden on the waters of Lethe! A moment more, and the prow grated on the bank. The delighted father snatched up his daughter in his arms.

"My dear, my dear, what does this mean?"

She smiled for all answer.

"Are you not frozen? Are you not exhausted?"

But the poor delicate child had already fainted on his breast.

Meantime, four men had picked up the prone figure in the boat, and the procession ascended the hill to the farm-house.

The reader may be anxious to know the heroine's name.

She was called Rosalba Varny.

## CHAPTER III.

### THE BUREAUCRAT.

THE Varnys were among the most ancient of Canadian families. They ranked with the first settlers of Varennes. Their genealogy need not be traced to France, for it was essentially plebeian, and whatever prestige the name may have possessed was derived exclusively from virtues practised in the new world. It is one of the amiable delusions of French Canadian families to claim aristocratic origins, which the student of history laughs at, because he knows that only one or two really noble families settled in Canada. This people would be wiser to take pride in the sterling democracy which is the best feature of their country.

Samuel Varny, the head of the house, had, unlike the majority of his fellow-pioneers, acquired considerable wealth in real estate. His residence, though built after the uniform pattern of all Canadian farm-houses, betokened more ease and comfort than the generality of them. It was a large stone structure with a verandah all around it, and extensive gardens fencing it from the outlying fields. The family retained the old Canadian simplicity of manners, and though affable for all their neighbours, preferred the seclusion and freedom of their own domestic circle.

The Canadian mothers are proverbially prolific, and Madame Varny was no exception. She had given birth to seventeen children, seven of whom still survived. The favourite among them, the pearl of the family, was Rosalba, the subject of our sketch.

Rosalba Varny was by no means a faultless beauty, but she had many of the charming traits of the unalloyed Canadian type. None of your thin diaphanous creatures whose life is a perpetual jerk and struggle after effect, but broad-shouldered, full-chested, and with just that amplitude of flesh which betokens vital development and gives fair play to the lines and curves of beauty, without dwindling into the grossly sensuous or grotesque. Her hair was a light brown and there was plenty of it—one of the cheriest signs of female health and spirit. Her eyes were deep blue, large and sparkling with expression. She was full of activity, but her deportment was always graceful, free at once from the gawkishness of the country girl, and the prim affectation of the urban damsel. That she was a brave girl we have already seen. Indeed, in presence of that feat, we might have dispensed with any detailed description of her person, for a heroine is always lovable, even independently of her charms.

We have said that though the Varnys led rather a solitary life, they stood well with their neighbours. This had been the case in the past, but it was not strictly true at the present stage of our narrative. During the winter that had just elapsed, political excitement had been great throughout the province. The elements were stirring which were soon to break out in open insurrection. Not only the large centres, such as Montreal, Quebec, and Three Rivers were agitated with the shock of contending opinions, but even the quiet country places were successively catching up the rumour of discontent, and busying themselves therewith. Of course, Varennes, from its proximity to Montreal, was among the first to take part in the movement. The vast majority of its inhabitants sided with the popular cause, and the few who either held back or pronounced against them, were already the objects of a hidden, but not less decisive hostility. It was only natural that those who had a stake in the land, who had a reputation of peaceful and loyal citizenship to maintain, or who had aspirations towards rising with the legitimate futures of the country, should think long and anxiously before compromising themselves by participation in a movement whose results were always, but especially in its initiatory steps, extremely problematical. Such men were, of course, objects of suspicion. It has been said that patriotism is the virtue of the common people, not of the higher or wealthy classes. On the other hand, prudence is distinctive of the latter, and is never found among the former. But patriotism without prudence is nothing worth. This, in the opinion of many then and since, was the mistake with the rebellion of 1837. Waiving the question of its justifiability, many believed that it was unwisely planned, and foolishly conducted.

Long before the insurrection broke out, *bureaucrat* was an odious term in the eyes of the patriots. Whoever received that designation was effectually tabooed in his parish. This partially happened to the father of Rosalba. Samuel Varny was suspected of being a bureaucrat. For months the suspicion had been spread, but it acquired some colour of consistency after the following little incident. Two farmers living in the neighbourhood had been discussing the political situa-

tion on their return from the Saturday village market. The bad rum which they had guzzled at the different taverns on the way had rather obscured their ideas, but it excited their passions.

"And Samuel? Do you believe it?" said one.

"Believe what?" asked the other.

"That he is a bureaucrat?"

"Samuel is my friend and a man of sense. I don't believe it."

"But Lorient the inn-keeper has assured me of it."

"Lorient has a spite against Varny because he always puts up at Alexis."

"I shouldn't wonder, however."

"How so?"

"Varny is rich and is apt to put on airs. Then there is his daughter, whom he has educated at a convent. She is no *habitant's* daughter, but a city lady, and they tell me he intends to send her up to Montreal to bargain for a marriage with some officer."

"An officer!" exclaimed the other, with an oath. "See here, this is too bad. It must be inquired into. We are going to pass before Varny's door. We shall stop and speak to him. What do you say?"

The first speaker hesitated a little, for, belonging to the class of small farmers, he felt somewhat awed at the idea of entering the mansion of the Varnys with an accusation on his lips, he who had rarely entered it, and then only with a full sense of his inferiority. Curiosity, however, and perhaps the ignoble desire of being able to inculpate Varny among his fellow-farmers, if the odious charge were not denied, prevailed upon him, and he assented.

A few moments later, the two knocked unceremoniously at the back door of the Varny house, and, after the fashion of farmers, entered without waiting for an answer. They found Samuel Varny in his large kitchen, smoking his pipe after the evening meal. Each taking a seat, the more friendly of the two, bluntly, and without any oratorical precaution whatsoever, asked their host what he thought of the political state of things. Varny flared up at once and said:

"Did you come in here expressly to ask that question? Have you no other business?"

The small farmer twisted his cap sheepishly, but the other in this questioner's look without quailing. He had evidently got the better of his liquor.

"Samuel," said he in a more subdued and calm voice, "we are old friends, you know, and if I have addressed you that question, it is because I have friendly reasons for it. You see, I have brought Bayard with me. He is to be my witness."

Varny drew his pipe from his lips and reflected a moment, then looking earnestly at his interlocutor, said:

"Well, let me first hear your reasons. I have no doubt they are friendly, as far as you are concerned, but they may not be such after all, as to justify me in answering you."

"Varny, you are aware that this is an anxious time," said the visitor.

"I know it is."

"Spirits are very much excited."

"So I perceive," smiling maliciously.

"And it is every man's interest to let people know unequivocally how he stands."

"That depends."

"How?"

"On what people you mean."

"Why, in the first place, your enemies."

"I care nothing about them."

"But what if they should care about you?"

"Let them. I shall thank them for their politeness."

"But don't you mind their rumours?"

"Not a particle."

"And what about your friends?"

"That is another matter."

"Some of them may believe those ugly rumours."

"Then they are not my friends."

"Former friends become the worst of enemies."

"Alas! that is too true."

"Some of these have already threatened you."

"I despise their threats."

"Two or three are very violent."

"I dare them."

As he said this, Varny rose from his seat, looking very stern. A great passion was rising within him, but he contained himself so far as not to betray it too openly to his visitors. During the foregoing dialogue, his eye had frequently rested on Bayard, and there was something in the fellow's manner which displeased him. It was upon him that he discharged the first volley of his ill-humour.

"Bayard, you have not yet opened your lips," said he sharply.

The small farmer bounded on his seat, looking puzzled and embarrassed. The man who is a bully behind your back is a sneak before your face. In both cases he is a coward.

"Mr. Sinard brought me in here as his witness," he at length replied with hesitation. "I have nothing to say."

"Witness of what?" rejoined Varny sharply.

Bayard looked at his companion, who, finding that the situation was getting awkward, took upon himself to explain:

"To come to the point at once, my friend,