

CHAPTER XI.

Joel R. Robinson, the first and last navigator of the Rapids — Rescue of Chapin — Rescue of Allen — He takes the *Maid of the Mist* through the Whirlpool — His companions — Effect upon Robinson — Biographical notice — His grave unmarked.

THE history of the navigation of the Rapids of Niagara may be appropriately concluded in this chapter, which is devoted to a notice of the remarkable man who began it, who had no rival and has left no successor in it — Joel R. Robinson.

In the summer of 1838, while some extensive repairs were being made on the main bridge to Goat Island, a mechanic named Chapin fell from the lower side of it into the rapids, about ten rods from the Bath Island shore. The swift current bore him toward the first small island lying below the bridge. Knowing how to swim, he made a desperate and successful effort to reach it. It is hardly more than thirty feet square, and is covered with cedars and hemlocks. Saved from drowning, he seemed likely to fall a victim to starvation. All thoughts were then turned to Robinson, and not in vain. He launched his light red skiff from the foot of Bath Island, picked his way cautiously and skillfully through the rapids to the little island, took Chapin in and brought him safely to

the shore, much to the relief of the spectators, who gave expression to their appreciation of Robinson's service by a moderate contribution.

In the summer of 1841, a Mr. Allen started for Chipewewa in a boat just before sunset. Being anxious to get across before dark, he plied his oars with such vigor that one of them broke when he was about opposite the middle Sister. With the remaining oar he tried to make the head of Goat Island. The current, however, set too strongly toward the great Canadian Rapids, and his only hope was to reach the outer Sister. Nearing this, and not being able to run his boat upon it, he sprang out, and, being a good swimmer, by a vigorous effort succeeded in getting ashore. Certain of having a lonely if not an unpleasant night, and being the fortunate possessor of two stray matches, he lighted a fire and solaced himself with his thoughts and his pipe. Next morning, taking off his red flannel shirt, he raised a signal of distress. Toward noon the unusual smoke and the red flag attracted attention. The situation was soon ascertained, and Robinson informed of it. Not long after noon, the little red skiff was carried across Goat Island and launched in the channel just below the Moss Islands. Robinson then pulled himself across to the foot of the middle Sister, and tried in vain to find a point where he could cross to the outer one. Approaching darkness compelled him to suspend operations. He rowed back to Goat Island, got some refreshments, returned to the middle Sister, threw the food across to Allen, and then left him to his second night of solitude. The next day



Opposite page 86. Joel R. Robinson.

Robinson took with him two long, light, strong cords, with a properly shaped piece of lead weighing about a pound. Tying the lead to one of the cords he threw it across to Allen. Robinson fastened the other end of Allen's cord to the bow of the skiff; then attaching his own cord to the skiff also, he shoved it off. Allen drew it to himself, got into it, pushed off, and Robinson drew him to where he stood on the middle island. Then scattering Allen in the stern of the skiff he returned across the rapids to Goat Island, where both were assisted up the bank by the spectators, and the little craft, too, which seemed to be almost as much an object of curiosity with the crowd as Robinson himself.

This was the second person rescued by Robinson from islands which had been considered wholly inaccessible. It is no exaggeration to say that there was not another man in the country who could have saved Chapin and Allen as he did.

In the summer of 1855 a canal-boat, with two men and a dog in it, was discovered in the strong current near Grass Island. The men, finding they could not save the large boat, took to their small one and got ashore, leaving the dog to his fate. The abandoned craft floated down and lodged on the rocks on the south side of Goat Island, and about twenty rods above the ledge over which the rapids make the first perpendicular break. There were left in the boat a watch, a gun, and some articles of clothing. The owner offered Robinson a liberal salvage if he would recover the property. Taking one of his sons with him, he started the little red skiff from the

head of the hydraulic canal, half a mile above the island, shot across the American channel, and ran directly to the boat. Holding the skiff to it himself, the young man got on board and secured the valuables. The dog had escaped during the night. Leaving the canal-boat, Robinson ran down the ledge between the second and third Moss Islands, and thence to Goat Island. On going over the ledge he had occasion to exercise that quickness of apprehension and presence of mind for which he was so noted. The water was rather lower than he had calculated, and on reaching the top of the ledge the bottom of the skiff near the bow struck the rock. Instantly he sprang to the stern, freed the skiff, and made the descent safely. If the stern had swung athwart the current, the skiff would certainly have been wrecked.

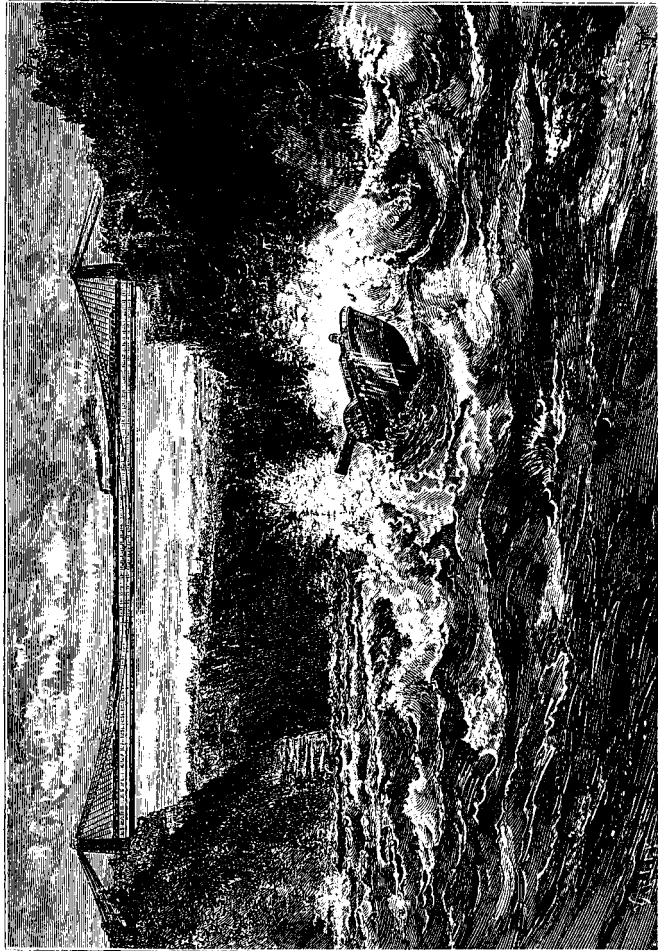
In the year 1846, a small steamer was built in the eddy just above the Railway Suspension Bridge, to run up to the Falls. She was very appropriately named *The Maid of the Mist*. Her engine was rather weak, but she safely accomplished the trip. As, however, she took passengers aboard only from the Canadian side, she could pay little more than expenses. In 1854 a larger, better boat, with a more powerful engine, the new *Maid of the Mist*, was put on the route, and as she took passengers from both sides of the river, many thousands of persons made the exciting and impressive voyage up to the Falls. The admiration which the visitor felt as he passed quietly along near the American Fall was changed into awe when he began to feel the mighty pulse of the great deep just below the tower, then swung round into the

white foam directly in front of the Horseshoe, and saw the sky of waters falling toward him. And he seemed to be lifted on wings as he sailed swiftly down on the rushing stream through a baptism of spray. To many persons there was a fascination about it that induced them to make the trip every time they had an opportunity to do so. Owing to some change in her appointments, which confined her to the Canadian shore for the reception of passengers, she became unprofitable. Her owner, having decided to leave the neighborhood, wished to sell her as she lay at her dock. This he could not do, but he received an offer of something more than half of her cost, if he would deliver her at Niagara, opposite the fort. This he decided to do, after consultation with Robinson, who had acted as her captain and pilot on her trips below the Falls. The boat required for her navigation an engineer, who also acted as fireman, and a pilot.

Mr. Robinson agreed to act as pilot for the fearful voyage, and the engineer, Mr. Jones, consented to go with him. A courageous machinist, Mr. McIntyre, volunteered to share the risk with them. They put her in complete trim, removing from deck and hold all superfluous articles. Notice was given of the time for starting, and a large number of people assembled to see the fearful plunge, no one expecting to see the crew again alive after they should leave the dock. This dock, as has been before stated, was just above the Railway Suspension Bridge, at the place where she was built, and where she was laid up in the winter—that,

too, being the only place where she could lie without danger of being crushed by the ice. Twenty rods below this eddy the water plunges sharply down into the head of the crooked, tumultuous rapid which we have before noticed as reaching from the bridge to the Whirlpool. At the Whirlpool, the danger of being drawn under was most to be apprehended; in the rapids, of being turned over or knocked to pieces. From the Whirlpool to Lewiston is one wild, turbulent rush and whirl of water, without a square foot of smooth surface in the whole distance.

About three o'clock in the afternoon of June 15, 1861, the engineer took his place in the hold, and, knowing that their flitting would be short at the best, and might be only the preface to swift destruction, set his steam-valve at the proper gauge, and awaited—not without anxiety—the tinkling signal that should start them on their flying voyage. McIntyre joined Robinson at the wheel on the upper deck. Self-possessed, and with the calmness which results from undoubting courage and confidence, yet with the humility which recognizes all possibilities, with downcast eyes and firm hands, Robinson took his place at the wheel and pulled the starting bell. With a shriek from her whistle and a white puff from her escape-pipe, to take leave, as it were, of the multitude gathered on the shores and on the bridge, the boat ran up the eddy a short distance, then swung round to the right, cleared the smooth water, and shot like an arrow into the rapid under the bridge. Robinson intended to take the inside curve of the rapid, but a



The "Maid of the Mist" in the Whirlpool.

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fierce cross-current carried him to the outer curve, and when a third of the way down it a jet of water struck against her rudder, a column dashed up under her starboard side, heeled her over, carried away her smoke-stack, started her overhang on that side, threw Robinson flat on his back, and thrust McIntyre against her starboard wheel-house with such force as to break it through. Every eye was fixed, every tongue was silent, and every looker-on breathed freer as she emerged from the fearful baptism, shook her wounded sides, slid into the Whirlpool, and for a moment rode again on an even keel. Robinson rose at once, seized the helm, set her to the right of the large pot in the pool, then turned her directly through the neck of it. Thence, after receiving another drenching from its combing waves, she dashed on without further accident to the quiet bosom of the river below Lewiston.

Thus was accomplished one of the most remarkable and perilous voyages ever made by men. The boat was seventy-two feet long, with seventeen feet breadth of beam and eight feet depth of hold, and carried an engine of one hundred horse-power. In conversation with Robinson after the voyage, he stated that the greater part of it was like what he had always imagined must be the swift sailing of a large bird in a downward flight; that when the accident occurred the boat seemed to be struck from all directions at once; that she trembled like a fiddle-string, and felt as if she would crumble away and drop into atoms; that both he and McIntyre were holding to the wheel with all their strength, but produced no more effect than they would if they had been two flies;

that he had no fear of striking the rocks, for he knew that the strongest suction must be in the deepest channel, and that the boat must remain in that. Finding that McIntyre was somewhat bewildered by excitement or by his fall, as he rolled up by his side but did not rise, he quietly put his foot on his breast, to keep him from rolling around the deck, and thus finished the voyage.

Poor Jones, imprisoned beneath the hatches before the glowing furnace, went down on his knees, as he related afterward, and although a more earnest prayer was never uttered and few that were shorter, still it seemed to him prodigiously long. To that prayer he thought they owed their salvation.

The effect of this trip upon Robinson was decidedly marked. As he lived only a few years afterward, his death was commonly attributed to it. But this was incorrect, since the disease which terminated his life was contracted at New Orleans at a later day. "He was," said Mrs. Robinson to the writer, "twenty years older when he came home that day than when he went out." He sank into his chair like a person overcome with weariness. He decided to abandon the water, and advised his sons to venture no more about the rapids. Both his manner and appearance were changed. Calm and deliberate before, he became thoughtful and serious afterward. He had been borne, as it were, in the arms of a power so mighty that its impress was stamped on his features and on his mind. Through a slightly opened door he had seen a vision which awed and subdued him. He became reverent in a moment. He grew venerable in an hour.

Yet he had a strange, almost irrepressible, desire to make this voyage immediately after the steamer was put on below the Falls. The wish was only increased when the first *Maid of the Mist* was superseded by the new and stancher one. He insisted that the voyage could be made with safety, and that it might be made a good pecuniary speculation.

He was a character—an original. Born on the banks of the Connecticut, in the town of Springfield, Massachusetts, it was in the beautiful reach of water which skirts that city that he acquired his love of aquatic sports and exercises and his skill in them. He was nearly six feet in stature, with light chesnut hair, blue eyes, and fair complexion. He was a kind-hearted man, of equable temper, few words, cool, deliberate, decided; lithe as a Gaul and gentle as a girl. It goes without saying that he was a man of "undaunted courage." He had that calm, serene, supreme equanimity of temperament which fear could not reach nor disturb. He might have been, under right conditions, a quiet, willing martyr, and at last he bore patiently the wearying hours of slow decay which ended his life. His love of nature and adventure was paramount to his love of money, and although he was never pinched with poverty, he never had abundance.

He loved the water, and was at home in it or on it, as he was a capital swimmer and a skillful oarsman. Especially he delighted in the rapids of the Niagara. Kind and compassionate as he was by nature, he was almost glad when he heard that a fellow-creature was, in some way, entangled in the rapids, since it would give him an ex-

cuse, an opportunity, to work in them and to help him. As he was not a boaster, he made no superfluous exhibitions of his skill or courage, albeit he might occasionally indulge—and be indulged—in some mirthful manifestation of his good-nature; as when, on reaching Chapin's refuge for his rescue, he waved from one of its tallest cedars a green branch to the anxious spectators, as if to assure and encourage them; and when he returned with his skiff half filled with cedar-sprigs, which he distributed to the multitude, they raised his pet craft to their shoulders, with both Chapin and himself in it, and bore them in triumph through the village, while money tokens were thrown into the boat to replace the green ones.

He never foolishly challenged the admiration of his fellow-men. But when the emergency arose for the proper exercise of his powers, when news came that some one was in trouble in the river, then he went to work with a calm and cheerful will which gave assurance of the best results. Beneath his quiet deliberation of manner there was concealed a wonderful vigor both of resolution and nerve, as was amply shown by the dangers which he faced, and by the bend in his withy oar as he forced it through the water, and the feathery spray which flashed from its blade when he lifted it to the surface.

In all fishing and sailing parties his presence was indispensable for those who knew him. The most timid child or woman no longer hesitated if Robinson was to go with the party. His quick eye saw everything, and his willing hand did all that it was necessary to do, to secure the comfort and safety of the company.

It is doubtful whether more than a very few of his neighbors know where he lies, in an unmarked grave in Oakwood Cemetery, near the rapids. Robinson went forth on a turbulent, unreturning flood, where the slightest hesitancy in thought or act would have proved instantly fatal. Benevolent associations in different cities and countries bestow honor and rewards on those who, by unselfish effort and a noble courage, save the life of a fellow-being. This Robinson did repeatedly, yet no monument commemorates his worthy deeds.