

CHAPTER XIII.

Incidents — Fall of Table Rock — Remarkable phenomenon in the river — Driving and lumbering on the Rapids — Points of the compass at the Falls — A first view of the Falls commonly disappointing — Lunar bow — Golden spray — Gull Island and the gulls — The highest water ever known at the Falls — The Hermit of the Falls.

OF incidents, curious, comic, and tragic, connected with the locality the catalogue is long, but we must make our recital of them brief.

We have before referred to Professor Kalm's notice of the fall of a portion of Table Rock previous to 1750. Authentic accounts of like events are the following: In 1818 a mass one hundred and sixty feet long by thirty wide; in 1828 and '29 two smaller masses; also in 1828 there went down in the center of the Horseshoe a huge mass, of which the top area was estimated at half an acre. If this estimate was correct, it would show an abrasion equivalent to nearly one foot from the whole surface of the Canadian Fall. In April, 1843, a mass of rock and earth about thirty-five feet long and six feet wide fell from the middle of Goat Island. In 1847, just north of the Biddle Stairs, there was a slide of bowlders, earth, and gravel, with a small portion of the bed-rock, the whole mass being about forty feet long and ten feet wide. About



Opposite page 109. Fall of Table Rock.

every third return of spring has increased the abrasion at these two points. At the first-named point more than twenty feet in width has disappeared, with the whole of the road crossing the island. From the latter point, near the Biddle Stairs, which was a favorite one for viewing the Horseshoe Fall, the seats provided for visitors and the trees which shaded them have fallen.

On the 25th of June, 1850, occurred the great downfall which reduced Table Rock to a narrow bench along the bank. The portion which fell was one immense solid rock two hundred feet long, sixty feet wide, and one hundred feet deep where it separated from the bank. The noise of the crash was heard like muffled thunder for miles around. Fortunately it fell at noonday, when but few people were out, and no lives were lost. The driver of an omnibus, who had taken off his horses for their midday feed, and was washing his vehicle, felt the preliminary cracking and escaped, the vehicle itself being plunged into the gulf below.

In 1850, a canal-boat that became detached from a raft, went down the Canadian Rapids, turned broadside across the river before reaching the Falls, struck amidships against a rock projecting up from the bottom and lodged. It remained there more than a year, and when it went down took with it a piece of the rock apparently about ten feet wide and forty feet long. At the foot of Goat Island some smaller masses have fallen, and three extensive earth-slides have occurred.

In the spring of 1852 a triangular mass, the vertex of which was just beyond or south of the Terrapin Tower,

while its altitude of more than forty feet lay along the shore of the south corner of Goat Island, fell in the night with the usual grinding crash. And with it fell some isolated rocks which lay on the brink of the precipice in front of the tower, and from which the tower derived its name. Before the tower was built, some person looking at the rocks from the shore suggested that they looked like huge terrapins sunning themselves on the edge of the Fall. A few days after the fall of the triangular mass, a huge column of rock a hundred feet high, about fourteen feet by twelve, and flat on the top, became separated from the bank and settled down perpendicularly until its top was about ten feet below the surface rock. It stood thus about four years, when it began gradually to settle, as the shale and stone were disintegrated beneath it, and finally it tumbled over upon the rocks below, furnishing an illustration of the manner in which we suppose the rocks which once accumulated below the Whirlpool must have been broken down. In the spring of 1871 a portion of the west side of the sharp angle of the Horseshoe, apparently about ten by thirty feet, went down, producing a decided change in the curve.

On the 7th day of February, 1877, about eleven o'clock of a cold, cloudy day, there occurred the most extensive abrasion of the Horseshoe Fall ever noted. It extended from near the water's edge at Table Rock, more than half the distance round the curve, some fifteen hundred feet, and at the most salient angle the mass that fell was from fifty to one hundred feet wide. By this downfall the contour of the Horseshoe was

decidedly changed, the reëntering angle being made acute and very ragged. Less than three months afterward the abrasion was continued some two hundred feet toward Goat Island.

The trembling earth and muffled thunder gave evidence of the immensity of the mass of fallen rock, but no one saw it go down. For several months after the fall, until the mass of rock got thoroughly settled in the bed of the Falls, the exhibition of water-rockets, sent up a hundred feet above the top of the precipice, was unique and beautiful. The greatest angle of retrocession, which had previously been wearing toward Goat Island, is again turning toward the center of the stream.

On the 29th of March, 1848, the river presented a remarkable phenomenon. There is no record of a similar one, nor has it been observed since. The winter had been intensely cold, and the ice formed on Lake Erie was very thick. This was loosened around the shores by the warm days of the early spring. During the day, a stiff easterly wind moved the whole field up the lake. About sundown, the wind chopped suddenly round and blew a gale from the west. This brought the vast tract of ice down again with such tremendous force that it filled in the neck of the lake and the outlet, so that the outflow of the water was very greatly impeded. Of course, it only needed a short space of time for the Falls to drain off the water below Black Rock.

The consequence was that, when we arose in the morning at Niagara, we found our river was nearly half

gone. The American channel had dwindled to a respectable creek. The British channel looked as though it had been smitten with a quick consumption, and was fast passing away. Far up from the head of Goat Island and out into the Canadian rapids the water was gone, as it was also from the lower end of Goat Island, out beyond the tower. The rocks were bare, black, and forbidding. The roar of Niagara had subsided almost to a moan. The scene was desolate, and but for its novelty and the certainty that it would change before many hours, would have been gloomy and saddening. Every person who has visited Niagara will remember a beautiful jet of water which shoots up into the air about forty rods south of the outer Sister in the great rapids, called, with a singular contradiction of terms, the "Leaping Rock." The writer drove a horse and buggy from near the head of Goat Island out to a point above and near to that jet. With a log-cart and four horses, he drew from the outside of the outer island a stick of pine timber hewed twelve inches square and forty feet long. From the top of the middle island was drawn a still larger stick, hewed on one side and sixty feet long.

There are few places on the globe where a person would be less likely to go lumbering than in the rapids of Niagara, just above the brink of the Horseshoe Fall. All the people of the neighborhood were abroad, exploring recesses and cavities that had never before been exposed to mortal eyes. The writer went some distance up the shore of the river. Large fields of the muddy bottom were laid bare. The shell-fish, the uni-valves,

and the bi-valves were in despair. Their housekeeping and domestic arrangements were most unceremoniously exposed. The clams, with their backs up and their open mouths down in the mud, were making their sinuous courses toward the shrunken stream. The small-fry of fishes were wriggling in wonder to find themselves impounded in small pools.

This singular syncope of the waters lasted all the day, and night closed over the strange scene. But in the morning our river was restored in all its strength and beauty and majesty, and we were glad to welcome its swelling tide once more.

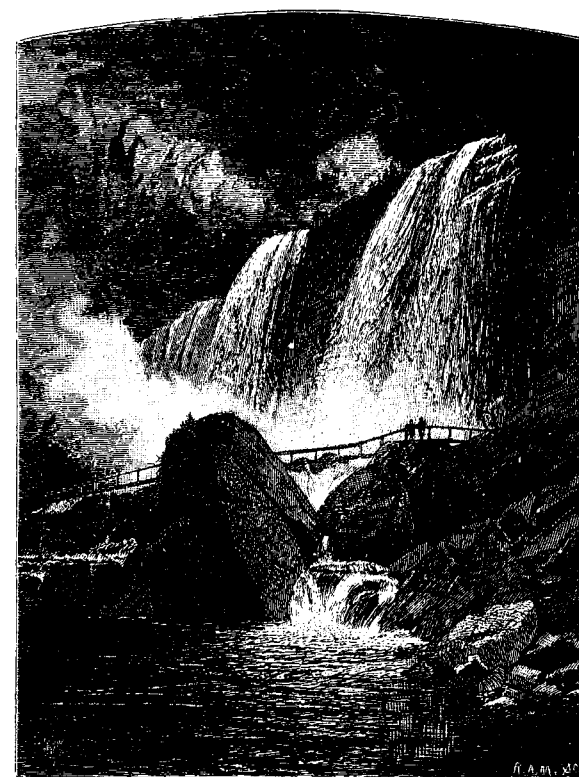
It is a curious fact that nine out of every ten persons who visit the Falls for the first time, are on their arrival completely bewildered as to the points of the compass; and this without reference to the direction from which they may approach them. All understand the general geographical fact that Canada lies north of the United States. Hence they naturally suppose, when they arrive at the frontier, that they must see Canada to the north of them. But when they reach Niagara Falls they look across the river into Canada, in one direction directly south, and in another directly west. Only a reference to the map will rectify the erroneous impression. It is corrected at once by remembering that the Niagara River empties into the south side of Lake Ontario.

One other fact may be regarded as well-established, namely, that most visitors are disappointed when they first look upon the Falls. They are not immediately and forcibly impressed by the scene, as they had expected to

be. The reasons for this are easily explained. The chief one is that the visitor first sees the Falls from a point above them. Before seeing them, he reads of their great height; he expects to look up at them and behold the great mass of water falling, as it were, from the sky. He reads of the trembling earth; of the cloud of spray, that may be seen a hundred miles away; of the thunder of the torrent, and of the rainbows. He does not consider that these are occasional facts. He may not know he is near the Falls until he gets just over them. At certain times he feels no trembling of the earth; he hears no stunning roar; he may see the spray scattered in all directions by the wind, and of course he will see no bow. Naturally, he is disappointed. But it is not long before the grand reality begins to break upon him, and every succeeding day and hour of observation impresses him more and more deeply with the vastness, the power, the sublimity of the scene, and the wonderful and varied beauty of its surroundings. Those who spend one or more seasons at Niagara know how very little can be seen or comprehended by those who "stop over one train."

They are fortunate who can see the Falls first from the ferry-boat on the river below, and about one-third of the way across from the American shore. The writer has frequently tried the experiment with friends who were willing to trust themselves, with closed eyes, to his guidance, and wait until he had given them the signal to look upward.

Those who may be at Niagara a few nights before and



Rock of Ages and Whirlwind Bridge.

Opposite page 114.

after a full moon should not fail to go to Goat Island to see the lunar bow. It is the most unreal of all real things—a thing of weird and shadowy beauty.

Another striking scene peculiar to the locality is witnessed in the autumn, when the sun in making its annual southing reaches a point which, at the sunset hour, is directly west from the Falls. Then those who are east of them see the spray illuminated by the slant rays of the sinking sun. In the calm of the hour and the peculiar atmosphere of the season, the majestic cloud looks like the spray of molten gold.

In 1840 there was a small patch of stones, gravel, sand, and earth, called Gull Island, lying near the center of the Canadian rapid and about one hundred rods above the Horseshoe Fall. It was apparently twenty rods long by two rods wide, and was covered with a growth of willow bushes. It was so named because it was a favorite resort of that singular combination of the most delicate bones and lightest feathers called a gull.

The birds seem large and awkward on the wing, but as they sit upon the water nothing can appear more graceful. They are far-sighted and keen-scented. Their eyes are marvels of beauty. They are eccentric in their habits, the very Arabs of their race—here to-day and gone to-morrow. They are gregarious and often assemble in large numbers. At times in a series of wild, rapid, devious gyrations, and uttering a low, mournful murmur, they seem to be engaged, as it were, in some solemn festival commemorative of their departed kindred. One moment the air will be filled with them and their sad

refrain; the next moment the cry will have ceased and not a gull will be seen. They come as they go, summer and winter alike. In thirty years the writer has never been able to discover when nor whence they came. In winter they generally appear in the milder days, and their disappearance is followed by cooler weather.

In the spring of 1847 a long and fierce gale from the west, which drove the water down Lake Erie, caused the highest rise ever known in the river. It rose six feet on the rapids, and for the first time reached the floor-planking of the old bridge. The greater part of Gull Island was washed down in this flood, and ten years later it had wholly disappeared.

The vague tradition—the origin of which cannot be traced—that there is a flux and reflux of the waters in the Great Lakes, which embraces a period of about seven years, is not confirmed by our observation, if it be intended to affirm that the ebb and flow are both completed in seven years. Our observation shows that there is a flow of about seven years, and a reflux, which is accomplished in the same period. The water in the Niagara was very low in 1843-4, again in 1857-8, and again in 1871-2. This last is the lowest long continued shrinkage ever known. It is, however, altogether probable that the general level of the lakes will fall hereafter, owing to the destruction of the forests and the cultivation of the land along their shores. In this case the waters of the Niagara and Detroit rivers may, in the far future, meet in the bed of Lake Erie, and their margins be covered with orchards and vineyards more extensive and productive than those along the Rhine.

The Hermit of the Falls, so called, Mr. Francis Abbott, came to the village in June, 1829. He was a rather good-looking, respectable young man, of moderate attainments, who was subject, apparently, to a mild form of intermittent derangement. Though his manner was eccentric, his conduct was harmless, and it is probable that his parents, who, it was afterward ascertained, were respectable members of the Society of Friends in England, encouraged his desire to travel, and furnished him the means to do so. He seems to have had some taste for music, and to have been a tolerable performer on the flute. He wandered much about the island, both night and day, and often bathed below the little fall on the south side of Goat Island, near its head. He lived alone in an unoccupied log-hut, directly across the island from this fall, until about the first of April, 1831, when he removed to a little cabin of his own building, on Point View. In June of that year, just two years after his arrival, he was drowned while bathing below the ferry. Ten days after, his body was found at Fort Niagara, brought back, and buried in the God's-acre at the Falls.