



Linore Rose Burkard



Inspirational Romance  
to Warm the Soul

# Extraordinary Escape of An American Traveller

From Rudolph Ackermann's *Repository of Arts, Literature, Commerce, Manufactures, Fashions and Politics*, August, 1819

(For easier reading, I've transcribed the account straight from Ackermann's, beginning at right):



On the 22<sup>nd</sup> day of April, our party set sail in a large schooner from Fort George, or Niagara-Town, and in two days crossed Lake Ontario to Kingston at the head of the river St. Lawrence, distant from Niagara about 200 miles. Here we hired an American barge (a large flat-bottomed boat), to carry us to Montreal, a further distance of 200 miles; then set out from Kingston on the 28<sup>th</sup> of April, and arrived the same evening at Ogdensburgh, a distance of 75 miles.

The following evening we arrived at Cornwall, and the succeeding night at Pointe du Lac, on Lake St. Francis. Here the bargemen obtained our permission to return up the river, and we embarked in another barge, deeply laden with potashes, passengers, and luggage. Above Montreal, for nearly 100 miles, the river St. Lawrence is interrupted in its course by rapids, which are occasioned by the river being confined in comparatively narrow, shall-

## EXTRAORDINARY ESCAPE OF AN AMERICAN TRAVELLER.

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river being confined in comparatively narrow, shallow rocky channels; through these it rushes with great force and noise, and is agitated like the ocean in a storm. Many people prefer these rapids, for grandeur of appearance, to the falls of Niagara. They are from half a mile to nine miles long each, and require regular pilots.

On the 30<sup>th</sup> of April, we arrived at the village of Cedars, immediately below which are three sets of very dangerous rapids (the Cedars, the Split-rock, and the Cascades), distant from each other about one mile. On the morning of the 1<sup>st</sup> of May, we set out from the Cedars, the barge very deep and very leaky. The captain, a daring rash man, refused to take a pilot.

After we passed the Cedars rapid, not without danger, the captain called for some rum, swearing at the same time, that God Almighty could not steer the barge better than he did! Soon after this, we entered the Split-rock rapids by a wrong channel, and found ourselves advancing rapidly towards a dreadful watery precipice, down which we went.

The barge slightly grazed her bottom against the rock, and the fall was so great as to nearly take away the breath. We here took in a great deal of water, which was mostly baled out again before we hurried on to what the Canadians call the *Grand Bouillon*, or great boiling.

In approaching this place, the captain let go the helm, saying, "By God, here we fill!"

The barge was almost immediately overwhelmed in the midst of immense, foaming breakers, which rushed over the

bows, carrying away planks, oars, &c. About half a minute elapsed between the filling and going down of the barge during which I had sufficient presence of mind to strip off my three coats, and was loosening my suspenders when the barge sunk, and I found myself floating in the midst of people, baggage &c.

Each man caught hold of something; one of the crew caught hold of me, and kept me down under water, but, contrary to my expectation, he let me go again. On rising to the surface, I got hold of a trunk, on which two other men were then holding. Just at this spot, where the Split-rock rapids terminate, the bank of the river is well inhabited; and we could see the women on the shore, running about much agitated.



A canoe put off and picked up three of our number, who had gathered at the bottom of the barge, which had upset and got rid of its cargo; these they landed on an island. The canoe put off again, and was approaching near to where I was holding on the trunk, when, terrified with the vicinity of the cascades, to which we were approaching, it put back, notwithstanding exhortations in French and English, to induce the two men on board to advance.

The bad hold which one man had of the trunk to which we were adhering, subjected him to constant immersion, and in order to escape his seizing hold of me, I let go the trunk, and, in conjunction with another man got hold of the boom, (which, with the gaff, sails, &c. had been detached from the mast to make room for the cargo), and floated off. I had just time to grasp this boom when we were hurried into the Cascades; in these was instantly buried and near suffocated.

On rising to the surface, I found one of my hands still on the boom, and my companion still adhering to the gaff. Shortly after descending the Cascades, I perceived the barge, bottom upwards, floating near me. I succeeded in getting to it, and held by a crack in one end of it: The violence of the water and the falling out of the casks of ashes, had quite wrecked it. For a long time, I contented myself with this hold, not daring to endeavour to get upon the bottom, which I at length effected; and from this my new situation, I called out to my companion, who still preserved his hold of the gaff.



He shook his head, and when the waves suffered me to look up again, he was gone.

He made no attempt to come near me, being unable or unwilling to let go his hold and

trust himself to the waves, which were then rolling over his head. The Cascades are a kind of fall, or rapid descent, in the river, over a rocky channel below: going down is called by the French *sauter*, to leap or shove the Cascades.

For two miles below, the channel continues in uproar, just like a storm at sea, and I was frequently nearly washed off the barge by the waves which rolled over. I now entertained no hope whatever of escaping; and although I continued to exert myself to hold on, such was the state to which I was reduced by cold, that I wished only for speedy death, and frequently thought of giving up the contest as useless.

I felt as if compressed into the size of a monkey; my hands appeared diminished in size one half, and I certainly should (after I became very cold and much exhausted) have fallen asleep, but for the waves which were passing over me, and obliged me to attend to my situation.

I had never descended the St. Lawrence before, but I knew there were more rapids ahead, perhaps another setoff the Cascades; but at all events the La Chine rapids, whose situation I did not exactly know, I was in hourly expectation of these putting an end to me, and often fancied some points of ice extending from the shore to be the head off foaming rapids.

At one of the moments in which the succession of waves permitted me to look up, I saw at a distance a canoe with four men, coming towards me, and waited in confidence to hear the sound of their paddles: but in this I was disappointed. The

men, as I afterwards learned, were Indians (genuine descendants of the Tartars), who, happening to fall in with one of the passenger's trunks, picked it up, and returned to shore, for the purpose of pillaging it, leaving, as they since acknowledged, the man on the boat to his fate.

Indeed, I am certain I should have had more to fear from their avarice, than to hope from their humanity; and it is more than probable, that my life would have been taken, to secure them in the possession of my watch and several half-eagles which I had about me.

The accident happened at eight o'clock in the morning; in the course of some hours, as the day advanced, the sun grew warmer, the wind blew from the south, and the water became calmer. I got upon my knees, and found myself in the small Lake St. Louis, about three to five miles wide. With some difficulty I got upon my feet, but was soon convinced, by cramps and spasms in all my sinews, that I was quite incapable of swimming any distance, and I was then two miles from shore.

I was now going, with wind and current, to destruction; and cold, hungry, and fatigued, was obliged again to sit down in the water to rest, when an extraordinary circumstance greatly relieved me.

On examining the wreck, to see if it was possible to detach any part of it to steer by, I perceived something loose, entangled in a fork of the wreck, and so carried along. This I found to be a small trunk, bottom upwards, which, with some difficulty, I dragged up upon the barge. After nearly an hour's work, in which I broke my penknife trying to cut

out the lock, I made a hole in the top, and to my great satisfaction, drew out a bottle of rum, a cold tongue, some cheese, and a bag full of bread, cakes, &c. all wet.

Of these I made a seasonable though very moderate use, and the trunk answered the purpose of a chair to sit upon, elevated above the surface of the water.

After in vain endeavouring to steer the wreck or direct its course to the shore, and having made every signal (with my waistcoat, &c.) in my power, to the several headlands which I had passed, I fancied I was driving into a bay, which, however, soon proved to be the termination of the lake, and the opening of the river, the current of which was carrying me rapidly along.



I passed several small uninhabited islands; but the banks of the river appearing to be covered with houses, I again renewed my signals with my waistcoat and a shirt which I took out of the trunk, hoping, as the river narrowed, they might be perceived: the distance was too great.

The velocity with which I was going, convinced me of my near approach to the dreadful rapids of La Chine. Night was drawing on, my destruction appeared certain, but did not disturb me very much: the idea of death had lost its novelty, and become quite familiar.

Finding signals in vain, I now set up a cry or howl, such as I thought best calculated to carry to a distance, and being favoured with the wind, it did, although at above a mile distance, reach the ears of some people on shore. At last I perceived a boat rowing towards me, which being very small and white-bottomed, I had for some time taken for a fowl with a white breast; and I was taken off the barge by Captain Johnstone, after being ten hours on the water.

I found myself at the village of La Chine, 21 miles below where the accident happened, and having been driven by the winding of the current a much greater distance. I received no other injury than bruised knees and breast, with a slight cold: the accident took some hold of my imagination, and for seven or eight succeeding nights, in my dreams I was engaged in the dangers of the Cascades, and surrounded by drowning men.

My escape was owing to a concurrence of fortunate circumstances, which appear almost providential. I happened to catch hold of various articles of support, and to exchange each article for another, just at the right time. Nothing but the boom could have carried me down the Cascades without injury, and nothing but the barge could have saved me below them.

I was also fortunate in having the whole day; had the accident happened one hour later, I should have arrived opposite the village of La Chine after dark, and of course should have been destroyed in the rapids below, to which I was swiftly advancing.

The trunk which furnished me with provisions and a resting-place above the

water, I have every reason to think was necessary to save my life; without it I must have passed the whole time in the water, and been exhausted with cold and hunger.

When the people on shore saw our boat take the wrong channel, they predicted our destruction: the floating baggage, by supporting us for a time, enabled them to make an exertion to save us; but as it was not supposed possible to survive the passage of the Cascades, no further exertions were thought of, nor indeed could they well have been made.

It was at this very place that General Ambert's brigade of 300 men, coming to attack Canada, were lost; the French at Montreal received the first intelligence of the invasion by the dead bodies floating past the town. The pilot who conducted their first bateau, committing the same error as we did, ran for the wrong channel, and the other bateaux following close, all were involved in the same destruction.

The whole party with which I was, escaped: four left the barge at the Cedars village, above the rapids, and went to Montreal by land; two more were saved by the canoe. The barge's crew, all accustomed to labour, were lost: of the eight men who passed down the Cascades, none but myself escaped, or were seen again; nor indeed was it possible for any one, without my extraordinary luck, and the aid of the barge, to which they must have been very close, to have escaped: the other men must have been drowned immediately on entering the Cascades.

The trunks, &c. to which they adhered, and the heavy great-coats which they had on, very

probably helped to overwhelm them: but they must have gone at all events; swimming in such a current of broken stormy waves was impossible. Still, I think my knowing how to swim kept me more collected, and rendered me more willing to part with one article of support to gain a better: those who could not swim, naturally clung to whatever hold they first got, and of course many had very bad ones.

The captain passed me above the Cascades, on a sack of woolen clothes, which were doubtless soon saturated and sunk.

The trunk which I picked up belonged to a young man from Upper Canada, who was one of those drowned; it contained clothes, and 70*l.* in gold, which were restored to his friends. My own trunk contained, besides clothes, about 200*l.* in gold and bank-notes.

On my arrival at La Chine, I offered a reward of 100 dollars, which induced a Canadian to go in search of it. He found it some days after, on the shore of an island on which it had been driven, and brought it to La Chine, where I happened to be at the time. I paid him his reward, and understood that above one-third of it was to be immediately applied to the purchase of a certain number of masses, which he had vowed in the event of success, previous to his setting out on the search.

*I hope you've enjoyed this account, which was published in 1819 and read by many a regency man or woman. For more downloadable resources, visit my website! Linore*



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