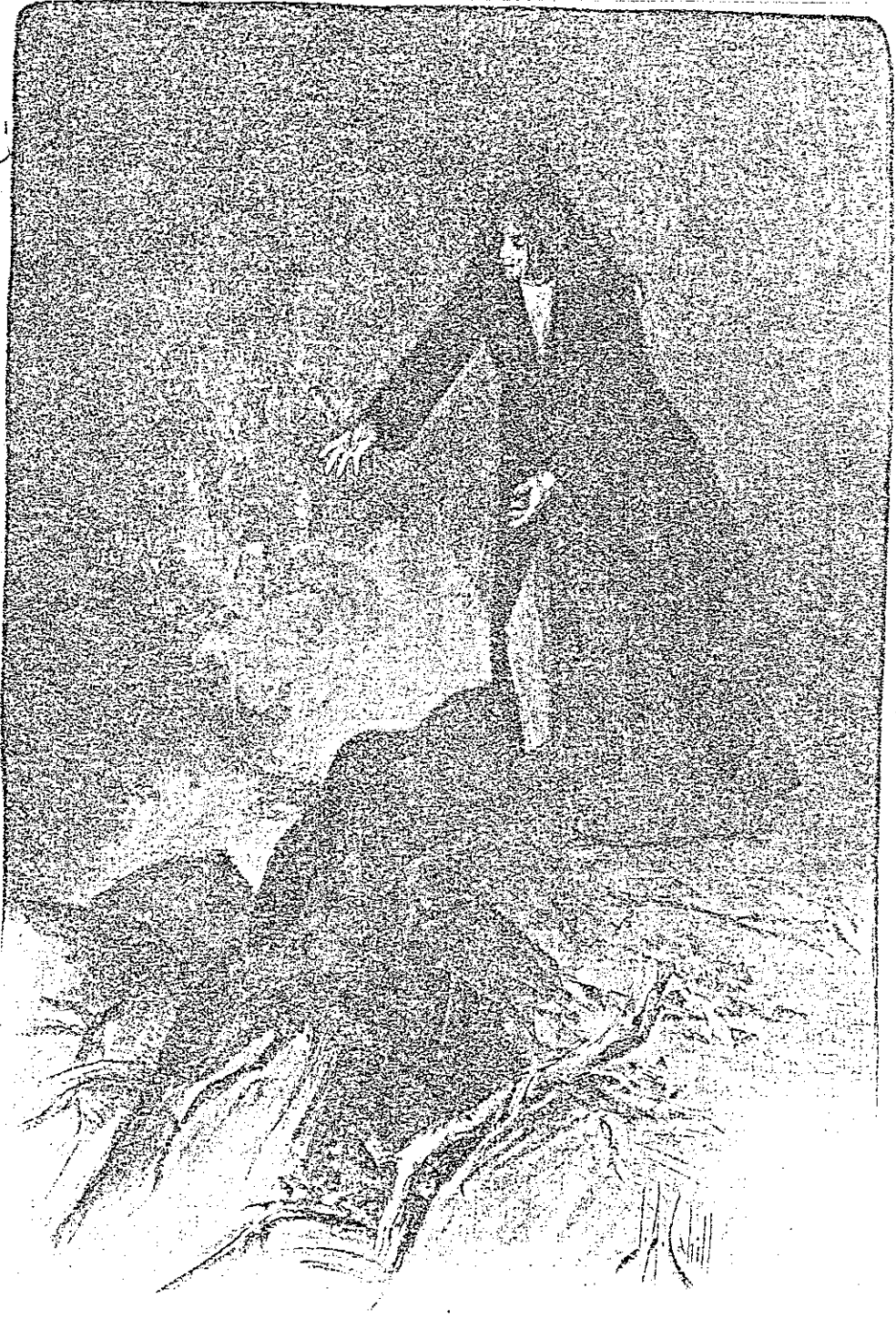


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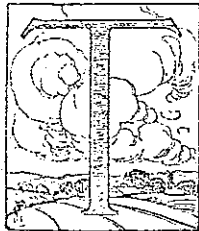
Drawn by J. A. Cahill

"WITH OUTSTRETCHED ARMS SHE STUMBLER TO THE EDGE OF THE BEACH"

The "Bannockburn" Widow

By J. Olivier Curwood

Illustrated by J. A. Cahill



THE little woman with the gold-brown hair and big sleepless eyes slipped into the marine office as the door opened to give exit to a messenger. She had come many times before. There was

pathetic hopelessness in the glance she gave the clerk. The agony of the hours and days that had passed since the Great Storm had stripped her cheeks of color and furrowed them with lines of suffering. She had come so often that now her lips were parted in what might have been the beginning of an apologetic smile had not the misery in her heart destroyed it.

The clerk turned his head. His heart throbbed a little faster, and as the office stenographer lifted to his, eyes that were filled with the intense sympathy of woman for woman, he went back and leaned over a ledger, leaving the little woman standing silently outside the barred window. One of his duties was to give the news of tragedy, to tell of storm and shipwreck, of men lost and vessels saved—to bring happiness and to break hearts; but he could not bring himself to do it now. He heard the stenographer rise from her chair. He knew that she was going to the window, and he listened.

"Have—you heard of the *Bannockburn*?" asked the woman.

Her voice barely rose above a whisper. For an instant there was intense longing in her eyes; then, as the office-girl hesitated, struggling with the truth, hope shot into them with almost the gleam of madness.

"No, dear, we haven't," said the girl softly. "I mean—nothing definite. She was sighted off Grand Island three days ago, and—she hasn't been seen at the Soo."

"Oh, my God!"

The clerk, poring over the ledger, heard the stenographer swish past him into the

and looked at the little woman, who stood with her face bowed in her hands just outside his window. This was not a strange sight, for it had happened many times during the past few days; usually the tragic news had not been received so quietly.

Those were the three days of the Great Storm. The Great Storm comes once each year. It comes in the days of late navigation, November or December, when men and ships of the inland seas face a thousand perils in their mad dashes from port to port through ice and snow. Never has it been known to fail. And the one just past had raged with unprecedented fury for seventy-two hours. It had begun at the uttermost wilderness of Superior, and from end to end of the lakes it had swept until not one of the five escaped the destruction it wrought. Now the stories of the tragedies were coming in over the wires, from port to port, to be disseminated among owners and the friends and relatives of the men whom they hired.

Since early morning the clerk of the marine office had been busy answering questions. There was a lull when the little woman came. But now, as she stood sobbing quietly, an aged man, bent and hobbling, and with snow-white hair touching his shoulders, stumbled up and inquired in a cracked, trembling voice for news of his son's ship. She was safe in port, and he hobbled away, mumbling with hysterical gladness. A young woman, just behind him, with a little boy's hand clasped tightly in her own, whispered for the fiftieth time for word of a wooden ship upon which her husband had sailed. One after another they came, and silently the little woman stood aside from them, unseeing and unhearing, until a woman brushed past her, sobbing aloud.

Instinctively she put out a hand, and the two white, tear-wet faces met. Both were young; sympathy glowed in their eyes. She whose husband had gone with the

"Is it bad, dear?"

"No—no—no——" sobbed the other. "Thank God, they've heard! He's safe—safe! See this."

She held something out for the other to read. It was a telegram. But the little woman's blurred eyes could not see. She reached out and flung her arms blindly around the other's neck, and kissed her. Then she went forth into the storm.

The city was smothered in the damp gray chill of a windy, sleet-filled night, and in the face of it the Bannockburn Widow—for by reason of a custom of the lakes such poor unfortunates are sometimes known by the names of their husbands' ill-fated ships—passed up from the river, and mingled with the hurrying, home-bound throngs that were pouring forth from the shops. She seemed neither to see nor to hear; with blinded eyes turned to the slippery pavement she ran into other pedestrians, until the breath was half jostled out of her; a loiterer, ensconced in the shelter of a doorway, caught the prettiness of her face, and brushed up to her side with a raised umbrella. But he was unnoticed. Without once looking ahead, the woman continued through the sleet. Only the homing instinct in her led her in the right direction, across the car-cluttered square, from under the feet of carelessly driven horses, and up the narrow, alley-like street that passed her home. So far as thoughts for herself were concerned, her mind was a blank. One thing alone seemed to fill it—a vision of a coast of rock, with the sea roaring against it, and a black forest behind, and in the midst of the hissing spume a ship being beaten to pieces. She had seen that coast of rock. Only that summer she had passed it in the vacation trip which her husband had given her. He had pointed out the pictures upon them, which had given them the name of the Pictured Rocks; and she had shuddered when he told her stories of ships that had gone against them.

"Some day I may go up against 'em myself, Nell," he had laughed.

And she had laughed with him. As the memory of it came to her, she moaned aloud.

In front of a little cottage she paused. A small lamp burned dimly in one of the windows, and the Bannockburn Widow strained her eyes to peer through into the room. After a few moments of silent watchfulness she slipped like a shadow up the board walk to the narrow steps, and

tapped gently upon the door. It was cautiously opened, and an elderly woman's face peered out at her. For an instant the eyes of the two met, and the one who had opened the door stood back speechless while the other entered.

"Are they asleep?" whispered the younger.

The elder woman nodded. She tried to speak, but her lips seemed frozen. While the other was taking off her drenched garments she drew a shawl about her head, paused at the door a moment, stammered good night, and hurried to her home.

The sailor's young wife fell upon her knees beside a ragged, upholstered chair, and buried her face in her arms. Her gold-brown hair had become loosened, and fell in a damp, shining mass down her back. For a long time she might have been in a swoon; but the fires of her suffering were burning madly in her brain. All they produced were pictures, pictures, pictures: bursting seas meeting cavernous rocks with the tumult of thunder, a ship battling in a maelstrom of reef and spume, the black forest bending in shrieking blasts—and always somewhere in this terrible scene a human face! And this face became larger and nearer and more real to her, until its lips seemed to move in speech; and out of the ghastly gray mists of her mental phantasm a hand reached and beckoned, beckoned until she flung herself back with a shriek.

A child's half-sleeping cry answered, and the woman sprang to her feet, and stood, almost without breathing, clutching the edge of the chair, and listening. The cry did not come again. On tiptoe the woman went until she could peer into a darkened room, where two little forms lay huddled in the middle of a bed.

As silently she stole back again. A pencil and a tablet lay upon the table. Upon the tablet she wrote:

"Ben is wrecked on the Pictured Rocks. I've gone to help him. Please care for the children until I come back."

Then she put on her water-soaked coat and hat, and went again out into the storm of the night, led on by the pictures in her brain.

They were becoming more and more distinct now. With each passing moment she saw them clearer; and she knew that her duty was defined and indubitable. It seemed a long time afterward that she came down into the crashing tumult of shunting

*Bannockburn
Widow*



"OUT OF THE GHASTLY GRAY MISTS OF HER MENTAL PHANTASY A HAND REACHED AND BECKONED"

engines and the glare of a score of fiery eyes that lit up the sooty drizzle of the station yards. The pictures left her brain for a time as she picked her way among them. The dazzling headlights seemed like oros of fire. Bewildered, she stumbled over tracks and ties, until at last a trainman seized her by an arm and piloted her to safety. Then the pictures came back, and she forgot that she had been lost and in danger. She asked questions, but none of those who answered them saw aught but the misery of some passing misfortune in her face. Strangers looked at her pityingly, the ticket-agent curiously, and when she

passed the gateman her white face was bowed and hidden.

So she went into the train. The yards, with their inferno of blazing eyes and clanging bells, slipped behind unnoticed, the glow of the city melted away, and to the little widow the hours and miles swept past in meaningless procession.

Toward dawn she fell into what might have been sleep had it not been for the pictures. Her head rested upon her arm, and for a long time she lay crumpled up in her seat, starting now and then like one in a nightmare when her mental visions became too exciting. When she straightened her-

The "Bannockburn" Widow

self and looked out into the world again, the sun was shooting fleeting rays through the grimy window. Deep, black forests had taken the place of city and farmland; here and there a woodsman's shanty came into view; and through the open car-door came the redolent perfume of the pine wilderness.

This had been home to her once. It had been life to her, a life which she would not have bartered for the choice of a million others—until came the man who afterward turned sailor. The odor of the pine was an old friend. It reached down into her soul and wrenched her free from the brain-pictures which were maddening her, and she struggled to her feet and went to the car-door, and stood there listening and seeing and smelling, while a flush gathered in her cheeks, and her eyes glowed with the warm beauty that made people love them. Somewhere in this big wilderness she had been a girl; somewhere in it the little farm of the old folks was buried; somewhere—somewhere—in it—she had met the man. The old thoughts returned to her. The pictures came, one, and two, and three, until in their number and hurry they crowded and crushed one another, and drove the Bannockburn Widow back to her seat with a white, drawn face in which were stamped the misery and hopelessness of life.

It was noon when the train ran into the little wilderness station near the white-capped run of Superior. As the woman came out, she saw the black sweep of the lake over the tops of a thousand wind-wrought dunes beyond the shanty that was called a station, and on its uttermost edge, where the gray gloom of the sky seemed to reach down into the somberness of the lake, her eyes caught the faint smoke trail of a south-bound freighter.

The sight of it fascinated her. As she stepped down from the car, she failed to notice the curious glances of men and boys whose daily diversion was meeting the train. In her head the pictures seemed to burst into flame, a heating, maddening fire that filled her with a desire to shriek aloud to the ship which was a thing almost out of her vision. But those who watched her saw nothing of the trouble in her brain. She went slowly down among the dunes, and then to the edge of the lake; and along that she trailed, bent and searching, until the purple shadows of the beach-pines wrapped her from the fol-

she came; none could guess whither she was going. An old lumberman said that she squatter back in the woods was expecting his wife from the south. But few believed that this was the woman. And in the end, the most curious of them all, a small boy dove off into the woods to discover things for himself. It was late when he came back. The lake was shrouded in cold, foggy gloom; the rising night-winds were whistling in the pines; away off in their depths sounded the lone, hungry cry of a wolf; and the woman, the boy said, was miles away—with her face still turned to the peopleless barrans of the Indian cliffs.

Once she had looked back and seen the boy, but she had not thought of calling him. After a time she knew that she stumbled because she could not see, and that an opaque curtain had shut her in until the lake and the forest might have been in another world. But the night held no terrors for her; so she kept on. The lone wolf howled up in the edge of the forest; a flight of belated wild fowl whistled over her head; a quavering, thrilling cry came nearer and nearer from the blackness of the land; the night-wind came colder and stronger; the bursting of the lake among tumbled rocks became more and more tumultuous, but the little Bannockburn Widow was unmindful of them all. The Indian cliffs were ahead. Each step brought her nearer to them, and each moment she could see her husband's ship more distinctly. Now it had ceased its struggles in the seas; its shattered remnants lay among the rocks. Among them she saw human things, some dripping and creeping, some drowned and still; and when she thought that she heard their voices, crying faintly for help, she stopped and listened.

"Ben!" she called. "Ben! Oh, Ben!" She fancied she heard a reply, and called again. The wolf slunk farther behind; two little fiery dots that were leveled at her from the edge of the forest disappeared; the night, too, grew suddenly quiet, and only the noise of the lake drowned the voices of those human things staggering up from the wreck in the woman's brain. It suddenly occurred to her that she must hurry or they would get away from her. So she ran. When she stopped running she fell. For hours after that the pictures were gone, the sound of the night-wind, the howl of the lone

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the lake lashed itself in futile fury against the face of the Pictured Rocks.

When she awoke, the sun was shining upon her. She did not sense the passing of time. The night had gone without reckoning, and she began the search where she had left off, only now there were no human things creeping and dying in her visions. If a hunter had seen her, he would have known that she was weak and footsore. But she was not conscious of hunger or fatigue. Rather than this, a strange content was growing in her; she had reached the Pictured Rocks. The lake was rolling and thundering against them, and she knew that very soon she would find her husband. Hour after hour she went on. She thought that she had traveled far, but the rocks she had left in the morning were in sight at noon. Creatures began peopling her brain again. Now she seemed much nearer to them. She came to a break in the great stone cliffs, and down there in the white sand at their base she thought that she saw men. There was one lying white and naked in the sun, with the water creeping up about him at every roll of the lake. She knew now that her search was at an end.

"Ben! Ben! Ben!——"

She called aloud in her joy as she half crept, half fell, down through the fissure in the cliff. With outstretched arms she stumbled to the edge of the beach. The white thing had been drawn back by a receding wave, and was just out of her reach. It was an oar.

"Ben!" she pleaded. "Ben, my darling!" She waded out to her knees, and met the oar as it came in again. With a scream she snatched it and fell with it upon the sand. After a little she held it out and looked at it, her eyes dazzling in the joy of triumph. Silently she clutched the thing to her breast and slowly made her way up the ragged breach in the rocks. It was a tiresome climb, but she held to her precious burden. When she had reached the summit, she staggered back toward the gloom of the forest, mumbling incoherently. But through it ran one strain,

"Ben—Ben—Ben—Ben——"

She did not look back over the beach trail. If she had, she might have seen human figures an eighth of a mile away. Among them was the small boy who had

scattered into the loneliness of the

"There she is, dad!" he cried, and presently the sailor's wife was in friendly hand.

Late that night the searching party came back with the woman. During the whole of the lonely march she moaned nothing more than the names of her husband and the *Bannockburn*, and even after she fell into a swooning sleep upon the litter they had made for her she hugged the rescued oar to her breast. They took her to McCredon's. There was a light burning in the McCredon window, and Mrs. McCredon, hearing their footsteps, opened the door to admit them. All that night she worked to bring the little woman back into good wholesome life again, but she failed. When morning came the Bannockburn Widow was tossing and moaning in the delirium of fever. For days she lay like that. No word fell from her lips to betray her identity, but it was quickly rumored about the settlement that frequently she spoke the name of a ship, and always coupled with it the name of a man.

At the end of the first week the change came. One evening the woodsman's wife came out of the little woman's room on tip toe, with a finger held warningly upon her lips. McCredon had been reading a paper published three days before in Detroit. He wanted to speak, but his wife interrupted him. "Sh-h-h-h-h-h-h!"

She nodded her head toward the door which she was gently closing behind her. "She's sleeping as soundly as a baby," she whispered. "I think——"

There was something in her husband's face which stopped her. Silently she came up to him and looked over his shoulder at a paragraph which he was marking with a big forefinger. It was at the bottom of the marine column, and bore no head. Manifestly it was of small news importance. It read:

"The crew of the *Bannockburn*, which went down November 25th, off Whitefish Point, have arrived at the Soo. As told a few days ago, the *Bannockburn's* men, after taking to their small boats, made the Michigan shore, where they found shelter in a lumber camp. It develops that only three instead of four men were lost with the ill-fated vessel. They were: Clement Johnston, of Buffalo; Andrew Busch, of Conneaut; and Jack Henderson, of Grindstone City."

The woman took the paper from her husband's hands, and after reading the paragraph a second time, cut it out with a pair of