

The Yellow Umbrella.

BY JAMES BUCKHAM.



THE story which I am about to tell will not be believed, because, I suppose, nothing like it has ever happened before, not because it is inherently impossible or improbable. You shall hear my story, however, and believe it or not, as you please.

I had been on a sketching tour through some of the most remote regions of the Canadian wilderness; and on the 14th of July, 1881, in company with my French Canadian guide, Prosper Tranquil, I beached my canoe above the famous rapid and falls of Les Grandes Piles, on the St. Maurice River, and prepared to go into camp for the night.

As there still remained an hour or more of daylight, I took my easel to a point some short distance above the camp, and began sketching the beautiful river, with the hills beyond, while my guide built a temporary shelter and kindled our evening fire.

Suddenly I heard a loud hail from the water, and saw a canoeist approaching our camp. From his garb and general appearance I perceived that he was an artist, like myself.

"I am out to see if I can catch a salmon for supper," cried the canoeist, addressing my guide. Perhaps you can tell me where I shall be most likely to get a rise?"

"Better go up stream long ways for fush," shouted Prosper, who was standing, axe in hand, watching the canoeist rather anxiously. "Current strong as bull moose. You git leetle way further down, you go over falls, sure!"

The stranger nodded his thanks, and with several sharp strokes of the paddle turned his rapidly drifting canoe up stream. I watched him from time to time, as he made his way up the river, and finally fell to casting his flies half a mile above me. Then I became so engrossed in my work that I quite forgot the incident

until something drifted across my field of vision as I sketched. It was the man in the canoe. He had hooked a gamy salmon, and was fighting a battle royal with the big fish. So excited and engrossed was he that he never raised his eyes to the shore at all, but kept them fixed steadily on the water, where the taut line cut zigzag through it.

I fixed my attention upon my sketch again, but only for a few moments. A growing sense of uneasiness caused me to look up. The man was still drifting, still fighting his salmon. With his eyes fixed upon the river's surface, the canoe, naturally, seemed to him comparatively stationary. He little realized the speed at which he was being carried down stream.

Alternately watching, and working with nervous uncertainty at my sketch, I saw the fisherman approach the danger line, just below our camp. Finally he reached it, kneeling down in the canoe, with his landing net extended toward the now thoroughly exhausted salmon.

“Look out, there! Better let fush go and 'tend to paddle!”

I saw Prosper come out of the woods and run excitedly down to the rocky shore, yelling, and waving his arms. The stranger looked up in startled surprise, and, seeing where he was, dropped tackle and rod overboard, grabbed up his paddle, and began to fight the current manfully.

An icy shudder ran over me, as I noted the almost imperceptible progress the light canoe was making against the current, and heard the ominous roar of the cataract, less than a quarter of a mile below. For a few moments so sure was I the man would be swept over the falls that I turned away my face. I had not the moral courage to watch his terrible fate. Then I looked again. The stranger, on both knees, was straining mightily against the rushing flood. He was a good paddler, and even then all might have gone well — for he was gaining against the river by inches — had not the madness of terror induced the man to plant the blade of his paddle against a submerged rock, which it grazed in passing, and give a mighty shove. The convulsive movement snapped the paddle in twain! The blade popped to the surface and went whirling down stream, with the canoe alongside it.

For a fatal moment the man in the canoe seemed paralyzed with

horror. Then he sprawled forward and caught up the reserve paddle, without which no experienced canoeist trusts himself upon swift water. But by the time he had straightened up and plunged the fresh paddle into the torrent, it was evident that he had passed the point where human sinews could hold their own against the furious flood. Though he paddled with a perfect frenzy, I could see the canoe yielding, inch by inch, and foot by foot, to the mad pressure of the water. I heard the man scream in his terror, as he fought, bleeding at the mouth, where, in the agony of his fierce effort, he had bit tongue and lips.

Prosper and I involuntarily made a dash for our canoe. Then we stopped, and looked each other in the face. It was all so utterly hopeless and pitiful! The river monster had the man in his jaws, and there was no escape for him. Prosper turned and ran down the rocky bank toward the falls, and I, after hesitating for a few moments in the weakness of dread, followed him.

Until swept within some sixty yards of the fearful brink, the man continued to ply his paddle furiously. Then a sudden calmness of despair seemed to succeed his frenzy. He laid the dripping blade carefully on the bottom of the canoe — as carefully as if he thought he would need it again in the happy hunting ground beyond that roaring gulf — and rising upon his toes as he knelt, whirled in the canoe to face his fate.

For an instant he clung thus, with his hands grasping the sides of the canoe. Then, with wondering astonishment, I saw him reach quickly forward and catch up something that lay in the stern of the canoe. For a moment I could not make out what it was. Then I perceived that it was one of those big, yellow sun-umbrellas that every artist carries to protect himself against the sun while at work in exposed places. The umbrella had evidently been lying in the bottom of the canoe when the artist unpacked his duffle, and had been allowed to remain, as of too slight importance to remove.

Drowning men catch at straws. Men about to be hurled over the brink of a cataract catch at anything that fate vouchsafes them. Evidently, on sight of the yellow umbrella lying at his feet, a desperate scheme had suggested itself to the canoeist.

Quickly — for but an instant of time remained for action — he

flung open the umbrella and rose to his feet. Then, as the canoe quivered and poised upon the rounding edge of the cataract — to which it had seemed to shoot up out of a watery depression — he gathered himself together and made a wild outward and forward leap, holding the strong umbrella spread above him. Aided by the impetus of the canoe, he cleared the great, mist-wreathed wall of water, and fell far beyond it. Even as he leaped, I saw one of his hands go convulsively up to the ribs of the umbrella, as if to grasp them, and so prevent the umbrella from turning inside out in the upward rush of air.

Almost at the same instant that the stranger leaped from the brink of the cataract, Prosper and I reached the edge of the precipice on shore, and gazed down into the awful gulf.

We saw the man going down through the mist like a meteor. Instead of whirling over and over in the air, and dropping like a stone to his certain fate, as would have been the case were he wholly unsustained, the big, strong-ribbed umbrella kept him upright, and, acting as a parachute, visibly lessened the velocity of his descent. We saw him strike the raging, boiling, yeasty water, feet foremost. He went under, of course, like lead; but when the big umbrella touched the surface of the water, it buoyed him up, so that he sank no deeper than the length of its handle.

The yellow umbrella, with its clinging human freight, was carried along at frightful speed for some sixty feet. Then the man, apparently, was dashed against some submerged rock, and the umbrella torn from his hands; for the latter went bobbing away, upside down, in the boiling rapids.

“Come on!” cried Prosper, letting himself down into a cleft in the rocks, through which a difficult path led to the bottom of the cliff. We scrambled down, as fast as we could without danger to our necks, and were soon at the level of the rapids below.

About a hundred rods down stream lay shimmering a narrow strip of sand beach, that marked the terminus of the rapids below the falls. As we neared this beach, in panting haste, we saw some dark object stretched out on the white sand. It was the form of the man in the canoe — the man who had leaped over the falls. As I stumbled to his side, my heart beat as if it would suffocate me. Was he alive? Could it be that he had sur-

vived the strange and terrible experience through which he had passed?

We drew the inert body to a half-submerged log, and rolled it to and fro, till the water ran from the man's lungs. Then, stripping the body to the waist, we used every means of resuscitation known to the woodsman. At length the man's eyelids began to quiver slightly; he gave a gasping breath or two, and commenced to writhe in the physical agony that accompanies restoration to life after the vital spark has almost flickered out. But as, beneath our vigorous chafing, the blood began to circulate freely in its wonted channels again, the man's pain abated, and presently he opened his eyes and attempted to sit up. In less than an hour he was able to talk with us.

Oddly enough, the yellow umbrella was cast ashore only a short distance from where its owner landed, and Prosper found it and brought it to us, as we sat discussing the adventure. The umbrella was pretty badly torn; one or two ribs were hanging loose, and the handle was broken. But it was far from being the total wreck I expected to see. "It's lucky," said the stranger, "that you and your guide were permitted to be eye-witnesses of this strange adventure of mine, for otherwise, although I might show the umbrella as evidence, no one would believe my story." He paused for a moment, looked thoughtfully at the tattered umbrella, and then laughingly asked: "How did I look, anyway, going down over the falls?"

Before I could reply, Prosper broke forth excitedly: "Oh, bah gosh! Ah'll t'ought de moon was break loose an' fall down into a well five t'ousand feet deep. Sacre! Ah'll nev' see anyt'ing lak dat before, me. Ah'll got me dat same kind of sun-umbrel' poot soon rat off, M'sieu! Mebbe dose falls don't scare me some more, hein?"

