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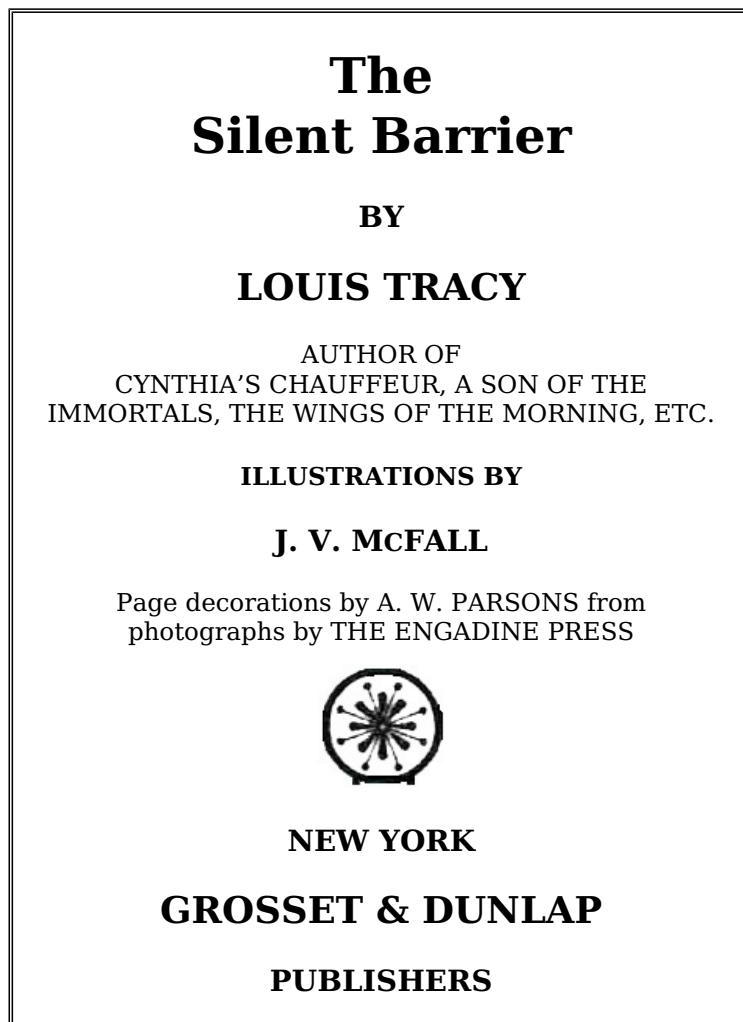
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE SILENT BARRIER ***



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Entered at Stationers' Hall



**"Spare me one moment, Miss Wynton,"
he said.**

Frontispiece

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Ich muss—Das ist die Schrank, in welcher mich die Welt
Von einer, die Natur von anderer Seite hält.

FR. RÜCKERT: *Die Weisheit des Brahmenen.*

[I must—That is the Barrier within which I am pent by the
World on the one hand and Nature on the other.]



THE SILENT BARRIER

CHAPTER I

THE WISH

“Mail in?”

“Yes, sir; just arrived. What name?”

“Charles K. Spencer.”

The letter clerk seized a batch of correspondence and sorted it with nimble fingers. The form of the question told him that Spencer was interested in letters stamped for the greater part with bland presentments of bygone Presidents of the United States. In any event, he would have known, by long experience of the type, that the well dressed, straight limbed, strong faced young man on the other side of the counter was an American. He withdrew four missives from the bundle. His quick eyes saw that three bore the Denver postmark, and the fourth hailed from Leadville.

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“That is all at present, sir,” he said. “Would you like your mail sent to your room in future, or shall I keep it here?”

“Right here, please, in No. 20 slot. I could receive a reply by cable while I was going and coming along my corridor.”

The clerk smiled deferentially. He appreciated not only the length of the corridor, but the price paid by the tenant of a second floor suite overlooking the river.

“Very well, sir,” he said, glancing again at Spencer, “I will attend to it;” and he took a mental portrait of the man who could afford to hire apartments that ranked among the most expensive in the hotel. Obviously, the American was a recent arrival. His suite had been vacated by a Frankfort banker only three days earlier, and this was the first time he had asked for letters. Even the disillusioned official was amused by the difference between the two latest occupants of No. 20,—Herr Bamberger, a tub of a man, bald headed and bespectacled, and this alert, sinewy youngster, with the cleancut features of a Greek statue, and the brilliant, deep set, earnest eyes of one to whom thought and action were alike familiar.

Spencer, fully aware that he was posing for a necessary picture, examined the dates on his letters, nipped the end off a green cigar, helped himself to a match from a box tendered by a watchful boy, crossed the entrance hall, and descended a few steps leading to the inner foyer and restaurant. At the foot of the stairs he looked about for a quiet corner. The luncheon hour was almost ended. Groups of smokers and coffee drinkers were scattered throughout the larger room, which widened out below a second short flight of carpeted steps. The smaller anteroom in which he stood was empty, save for a few people passing that way from the restaurant, and he decided that a nook near a palm shaded balcony offered the retreat he sought.

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He little dreamed that he was choosing the starting point of the most thrilling adventure in a life already adventurous; that the soft carpet of the Embankment Hotel might waft him to scenes not within the common scope. That is ever the way of true romance. Your knight errant may wander in the forest for a day or a year,—he never knows the moment when the enchanted glade shall open before his eyes; nay, he scarce has seen the weeping maiden bound to a tree ere he is called in to couch his lance and ride a-tilt at the fire breathing dragon. It was so when men and maids dwelt in a young world; it is so now; and it will be so till the crack of doom. Manners may change, and costume; but hearts filled with the wine of life are not to be altered. They are fashioned that way, and the world does not vary, else Eve might regain Paradise, and all the fret and fume have an end.

Charles K. Spencer, then, would certainly have been the most astonished, though perhaps the most self possessed, man in London had some guardian sprite whispered low in his ear what strange hazard lay in his choice of a chair. If such whisper were vouchsafed to him he paid no

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heed. Perhaps his occupancy of that particular corner was preordained. It was inviting, secluded, an upholstered backwash in the stream of fashion; so he sat there, nearly stunned a waiter by asking for a glass of water, and composed himself to read his letters.

The waiter hesitated. He was a Frenchman, and feared he had not heard aright.

"What sort of water, sir," he asked,— "Vichy, St. Galmier, Apollinaris?"

Spencer looked up. He thought the man had gone. "No, none of those," he said. "Just plain, unemotional water,—*eau naturelle*,—straight from the pipe,—the microbe laden fluid that runs off London tiles most days. I haven't been outside the hotel during the last hour; but if you happen to pass the door I guess you'll see the kind of essence I mean dripping off umbrellas. If you don't keep it in the house, try to borrow a policeman's cape and shoot a quart into a decanter."

The quelled waiter hurried away and brought a carafe. Spencer professed to be so pleased with his rare intelligence that he gave him a shilling. Then he opened the envelop with the Leadville postmark. It contained a draft for 205 pounds, 15 shillings, 11 pence, and the accompanying letter from a firm of solicitors showed that the remittance of a thousand dollars was the moiety of the proceeds of a clean-up on certain tailings taken over by the purchasers of the Battle Mountain tunnel. The sum was not a large one; but it seemed to give its recipient such satisfaction that the movement of chairs on the floor of the big room just beneath failed to draw his attention from the lawyer's statement.

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A woman's languid, well bred voice broke in on this apparently pleasant reverie.

"Shall we sit here, Helen?"

"Anywhere you like, dear. It is all the same to me. Thanks to you, I am passing an afternoon in wonderland. I find my surroundings so novel and entertaining that I should still be excited if you were to put me in the refrigerator."

The eager vivacity of the second speaker—the note of undiluted and almost childlike glee with which she acknowledged that a visit to a luxurious hotel was a red letter day in her life—caused the man to glance at the two young women who had unconsciously disturbed him. Evidently, they had just risen from luncheon in the restaurant, and meant to dispose themselves for a chat. It was equally clear that each word they uttered in an ordinary conversational tone must be audible to him. They were appropriating chairs which would place the plumes of their hats within a few inches of his feet. When seated, their faces would be hidden from him, save for a possible glimpse of a profile as one or other turned toward her companion. But for a few seconds he had a good view of both, and he was young enough to find the scrutiny to his liking.

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At the first glance, the girl who was acting as hostess might be deemed the more attractive of the pair. She was tall, slender, charmingly dressed, and carried herself with an assured elegance that hinted of the stage. Spencer caught a glint of corn flower blue eyes beneath long lashes, and a woman would have deduced from their color the correct explanation of a blue sunshade, a blue straw hat, and a light cape of Myosotis blue silk that fell from shapely shoulders over a white lace gown.

The other girl,—she who answered to the name of Helen,—though nearly as tall and quite as graceful, was robed so simply in muslin that she might have provided an intentional contrast. In the man's esteem she lost nothing thereby. He appraised her by the fine contour of her oval face, the wealth of glossy brown hair that clustered under her hat, and the gleam of white teeth between lips of healthy redness. Again, had he looked through a woman's eyes, he would have seen how the difference between Bond-st. and Kilburn as shopping centers might be sharply accentuated. But that distinction did not trouble him. Beneath a cold exterior he had an artist's soul, and "Helen" met an ideal.

"Pretty as a peach!" he said to himself, and he continued to gaze at her. Indeed, for an instant he forgot himself, and it was not until she spoke again that he realized how utterly oblivious were both girls of his nearness.

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"I suppose everybody who comes here is very rich," was her rather awe-stricken comment.

Her companion laughed. "How nice of you to put it that way! It makes me feel quite important. I lunch or dine or sup here often, and the direct inference is that I am rolling in wealth."

"Well, dear, you earn a great deal of money——"

"I get twenty pounds a week, and this frock I am wearing cost twenty-five. Really, Helen, you are the sweetest little goose I ever met. You live in London, but are not of it. You haven't grasped the first principle of social existence. If I dressed within my means, and never spent a sovereign until it was in my purse, I should not even earn the sovereign. I simply must mix with this crowd whether I can afford it or not."

"But surely you are paid for your art, not as a mannikin. You are almost in the front rank of musical comedy. I have seen you occasionally at the theater, and I thought you were the best dancer in the company."

"What about my singing?"

"You have a very agreeable and well trained voice."

"I'm afraid you are incorrigible. You ought to have said that I sang better than I danced, and the fib would have pleased me immensely; we women like to hear ourselves praised for accomplishments we don't possess. No, my dear, rule art out of the cast and substitute advertisement. Did you notice a dowdy creature who was lurching with two men on your right? She wore a brown Tussock silk and a turban—well, she writes the 'Pars About People' in 'The Daily Journal.' I'll bet you a pair of gloves that you will see something like this in to-morrow's paper: 'Lord Archie Beaumanoir entertained a party of friends at the Embankment Hotel yesterday. At the next table Miss Millicent Jaques, of the Wellington Theater, was lurching with a pretty girl whom I did not know. Miss Jaques wore an exquisite,' etc., etc. Fill in full details of my personal appearance, and you have the complete paragraph. The public, the stupid, addle-headed public, fatten on that sort of thing, and it keeps me going far more effectively than my feeble attempts to warble a couple of songs which you could sing far better if only you made up your mind to come on the stage. But there! After such unwonted candor I must have a smoke. You won't try a cigarette? Well, don't look so shocked. This isn't a church, you know."

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Spencer, who had listened with interest to Miss Jaques's outspoken views, suddenly awoke to the fact that he was playing the part of an eavesdropper. He had all an American's chivalrous instincts where women were concerned, and his first impulse was to betake himself and his letters to his own room. Yet, when all was said and done, he was in a hotel; the girls were strangers, and likely to remain so; and it was their own affair if they chose to indulge in unguarded confidences. So he compromised with his scruples by pouring out a glass of water, replacing the decanter on its tray with some degree of noise. Then he struck an unnecessary match and applied it to his cigar before opening the first of the Denver letters.

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As his glance was momentarily diverted, he did not grasp the essential fact that neither of the pair was disturbed by his well meant efforts. Millicent Jaques was lighting a cigarette, and this, to a woman, is an all absorbing achievement, while her friend was so new to her palatial surroundings that she had not the least notion of the existence of another open floor just above the level of her eyes.

"I don't know how in the world you manage to exist," went on the actress, tilting herself back in her chair to watch the smoke curling lazily upward. "What was it you said the other day when we met? You are some sort of secretary and amanuensis to a scientist? Does that mean typewriting? And what is the science?"

"Professor von Eulenberg is a well known man," was the quiet reply. "I type his essays and reports, it is true; but I also assist in his classification work, and it is very interesting."

"What does he classify?"

"Mostly beetles."

"Oh, how horrid! Do you ever see any?"

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"Thousands."

"I should find one enough. If it is a fair question, what does your professor pay you?"

"Thirty shillings a week. In his own way he is as poor as I am."

"And do you mean to tell me that you can live in those nice rooms you took me to, and dress decently on that sum?"

"I do, as a matter of fact; but I have a small pension, and I earn a little by writing titbits of scientific gossip for 'The Firefly.' Herr von Eulenberg helps. He translates interesting paragraphs from the foreign technical papers, and I jot them down, and by that means I pick up sufficient to buy an extra hat or wrap, and go to a theater or a concert. But I have to be careful, as my employer is absent each summer for two months. He goes abroad to hunt new specimens, and of course I am not paid then."

"Is he away now?"

"Yes."

"And how do you pass your time?"

"I write a good deal. Some day I hope to get a story accepted by one of the magazines; but it is so hard for a beginner to find an opening."

"Yet when I offered to give you a start in the chorus of the best theater in London,—a thing, mind you, that thousands of girls are aching for,—you refused."

"I'm sorry, Millie dear; but I am not cut out for the stage. It does not appeal to me."

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"Heigho! Tastes differ. Stick to your beetles, then, and marry your professor."

Helen laughed, with a fresh joyousness that was good to hear. "Herr von Eulenberg is blessed with an exceedingly stout wife and five very healthy children already," she cried.

"Then that settles it. You're mad, quite mad! Let us talk of something else. Do you ever have a holiday? Where are you going this year? I'm off to Champèry when the theater closes."

"Champèry,—in Switzerland, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Ah, that is the dream of my life,—to see the everlasting snows; to climb those grand, solemn mountains; to cross the great passes that one reads of in the travel books. Now at last you have made me envious. Are you going alone? But of course that is a foolish question. You intend to join others from the theater, no doubt?"

"Well—er—something of the sort. I fear my enthusiasm will not carry me far on the lines that would appeal to you. I suppose you consider a short skirt, strong boots, a Tyrolese hat, and an alpenstock to be a sufficient rig-out, whereas my mountaineering costumes will fill five large trunks and three hat boxes. I'm afraid, Helen, we don't run on the same rails, as our American cousins say."

There was a little pause. Millicent's words, apparently tossed lightly into the air after a smoke spiral, had in them a touch of bitterness, it might be of self analysis. Her guest seemed to take thought before she answered:

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"Perhaps the divergence is mainly in environment. And I have always inclined to the more serious side of life. Even when we were together in Brussels——"

"You? Serious? At Madam Bérard's? I like that. Who was it that kicked the plaster off the dormitory wall higher than her head? Who put pepper in Signor Antonio's snuff box?"

Spencer saw the outer waves of a flush on Helen's cheeks. "This is exceedingly interesting," he thought; "but I cannot even persuade myself that I ought to listen any longer. Yet, if I rise now and walk away they will know I heard every word."

Nevertheless, he meant to go, at the risk of their embarrassment; but he waited for Helen's reply. She laughed, and the ripple of her mirth was as musical as her voice, whereas many women dowered with pleasantly modulated notes for ordinary conversation should be careful never to indulge in laughter, which is less controllable and therefore natural.

"That is the worst of having a past," she said. "Let me put it, then, that entomology as a pursuit sternly represses frivolousness."

"Does entomology mean beetles?"

"My dear, if you asked Herr von Eulenberg that question he would sate your curiosity with page extracts from one of his books. He has written a whole volume to prove that the only true entoma, or insects, are Condylapoda and Hexapoda, which means——"

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"Cockroaches! Good gracious! To think of Helen Wynton, who once hit a Belgian boy very hard on the nose for being rude, wasting her life on such rubbish! And you actually seem to thrive on it. I do believe you are far happier than I."

"At present I am envying you that trip to Champèry. Why cannot some fairy godmother call in at No. 5, Warburton Gardens, to-night and wave over my awed head a wand that shall scatter sleeping car tickets and banknotes galore, or at any rate sufficient thereof to take me to the Engadine and back?"

"Ah, the Engadine. I am not going there this year, I think."

"Haven't you planned your tour yet?"

"No—that is, not exactly."

"Do you know, that is one of my greatest pleasures. With a last year's Continental Bradshaw and a few tattered Baedekers I journey far afield. I know the times, the fares, and the stopping places of all the main routes from Calais and Boulogne. I could pass a creditable examination in most of the boat and train services by way of Ostend, Flushing, and the Hook of Holland. I assure you, Millie, when my ship does come home, or the glittering lady whom I have invoked deigns to visit my lodgings, I shall call a cab for Charing Cross or Victoria with the assurance of a seasoned traveler."

For some reason, Miss Jaques refused to share her friend's enthusiasm. "You are easily pleased," she said listlessly. "For my part, after one shuddering glance at the Channel, I try to deaden all sensation till I find myself dressing for dinner at the Ritz. I positively refuse to go beyond Paris the first day. Ah, bother! Here comes a man whom I wish to avoid. Let us be on the move before he sees us, which he cannot fail to do. Don't forget that I have a rehearsal at three. I haven't, really; but we must escape somehow."

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Spencer, who had salved his conscience by endeavoring to read a technical letter on mining affairs, would be less than human if he did not lift his eyes then. It is odd how the sense of hearing, when left to its unfettered play by the absence of the disturbing influence of facial expression, can discriminate in its analysis of the subtler emotions. He was quite sure that Miss Jaques was startled, even annoyed, by the appearance of some person whom she did not expect to meet, and he surveyed the new arrival critically, perhaps with latent hostility.

He saw a corpulent, well dressed man standing at the foot of the stairs and looking around the spacious room. Obviously, he had not come from the restaurant. He carried his hat, gloves, and stick in his left hand. With his right hand he caressed his chin, and his glance wandered slowly over the little knots of people in the foyer. Beyond the fact that a large diamond sparkled on one

of his plump fingers, and that his olive tinted face was curiously opposed to the whiteness of the uplifted hand, he differed in no essential from the hundreds of spick and span idlers who might be encountered at that hour in the west end of London. He had the physique and bearing of a man athletic in his youth but now over-indulgent. An astute tailor had managed to conceal the too rounded curves of the fourth decade by fashioning his garments skillfully. His coat fitted like a skin across his shoulders but hung loosely in front. The braid of a colored waistcoat was a marvel of suggestion in indicating a waist, and the same adept craftsmanship carried the eye in faultless lines to his verni boots. Judged by his profile, he was not ill looking. His features were regular, the mouth and chin strong, the forehead slightly rounded, and the nose gave the merest hint of Semitic origin. Taken altogether, he had the style of a polished man of the world, and Spencer smiled at the sudden fancy that seized him.

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"I am attending the first act of a little play," he thought. "Helen and Millicent rise and move to center of stage; enter the conventional villain."

Miss Jaques was not mistaken when she said that her acquaintance would surely see her. She and Helen Wynton had not advanced a yard from their corner before the newcomer discovered them. He hastened to meet them, with the aspect of one equally surprised and delighted. His manners were courtly, and displayed great friendliness; but Spencer was quick to notice the air of interest with which his gaze rested on Helen. It was possible to see now that Millicent's unexpected friend had large, prominent dark eyes which lent animation and vivacity to a face otherwise heavy and coarse. It was impossible to hear all that was said, as the trio stood in the middle of the room and a couple of men passing up the stairs at the moment were talking loudly. But Spencer gathered that Millicent was explaining volubly how she and Miss Wynton had "dropped in here for luncheon by the merest chance," and was equally emphatic in the declaration that she was already overdue at the theater.

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The man said something, and glanced again at Helen. Evidently, he asked for an introduction, which Miss Jaques gave with an affability that was eloquent of her powers as an actress. The unwished for cavalier was not to be shaken off. He walked with them up the stairs and crossed the entrance hall. Spencer, stuffing his letters into a pocket, strolled that way too, and saw this pirate in a morning coat bear off both girls in a capacious motor car.

Not to be balked of the dénouement of the little comedy in real life for which he had provided the audience, the American grabbed the hall porter.

"Say," he said, "do you know that gentleman?"

"Yes, sir. That is Mr. Mark Bower."

Spencer beamed on the man as though he had just discovered that Mr. Mark Bower was his dearest friend.

"Well, now, if that isn't the queerest thing!" he said. "Is that Mark? He's just gone round to the Wellington Theater, I guess. How far is it from here?"

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"Not a hundred yards, sir."

Off went Spencer, without his hat. He had intended to follow in a cab, but a sprint would be more effective over such a short distance. He crossed the Strand without heed to the traffic, turned to the right, and, to use his own phrase, "budded into a policeman" at the first corner.

"I'm on the hunt for the Wellington Theater," he explained.

"You needn't hunt much farther," said the constable good humoredly. "There it is, a little way up on the left."

At that instant Spencer saw Bower raise his hat to the two women. They hurried inside the theater, and their escort turned to reënter his motor. The American had learned what he wanted to know. Miss Jaques had shaken off her presumed admirer, and Miss Wynton had aided and abetted her in the deed.

"You don't say!" he exclaimed, gazing at the building admiringly. "It looks new. In fact the whole street has a kind of San Francisco-after-the-fire appearance."

"That's right, sir. It's not so long since some of the worst slums in London were pulled down to make way for it."

"It's fine; but I'm rather stuck on antiquities. I've seen plenty of last year's palaces on the other side. Have a drink, will you, when time's up?"

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The policeman glanced surreptitiously at the half-crown which Spencer insinuated into his palm, and looked after the donor as he went back to the hotel.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" he said to himself. "I've often heard tell of the way some Americans see London; but I never came across a chap who rushed up in his bare head and took a squint at any place in that fashion. He seemed to have his wits about him too; but there must be a screw loose somewhere."

And indeed Charles K. Spencer, had he paused to take stock of his behavior, must have admitted that it was, to say the least, erratic. But his imagination was fired; his sympathies were all a-quiver with the thought that it lay within his power to share with a kin soul some small part of the

good fortune that had fallen to his lot of late.

"Wants a fairy godmother, does she?" he asked himself, and the quiet humor that gleamed in his face caused more than one passerby to turn and watch him as he strode along the pavement. "Well, I guess I'll play a character not hitherto heard of in the legitimate drama. What price the fairy godfather? I've a picture of myself in that rôle. Oh, my! See me twirl that wand! Helen, you shall climb those rocks. But I don't like your friend. I sha'n't send you to Champéry. No—Champéry's off the map for you."



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CHAPTER II

THE FULFILLMENT OF THE WISH

Explanations of motive are apt to become tedious. They are generally inaccurate too; for who can reduce a fantasy to a formula? Nor should they ever be allowed to clip the wings of romance. But the painter who bade his subject sit under a sodium light would justly be deemed a lunatic, and any analysis of Spencer's character drawn from his latest prank would be faulty in the extreme.

In all London at that moment there was not a more level headed man of his years. He was twenty-eight, an expert mining engineer, and the successful pioneer of a new method of hauling ore. Even in Western America, "God's own country," as it is held to be by those who live there, few men "arrive" so early in life. Some, it is true, amass wealth by lucky speculation before they are fitted by experience to earn the price of a suit of clothes. But they are of the freak order. They are not to be classed with one who by hard work wrests a fortune out of the grim Colorado granite. Spencer had been called on to endure long years of rebuff and scorn. Though scoffed at by many who thought he was wrong, he persisted because he knew he was right.

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Ofttimes Fate will test such a man almost to breaking point. Then she yields, and, being feminine, her obduracy is the measure of her favors, for she will bestow on her dogged suitor all, and more than all, that he desired.

The draft from Leadville, crammed so carelessly into a pocket when he followed the three to the door, was a fair instance of this trick of hers. A tunnel, projected and constructed in the teeth of ridicule and financial opposition, had linked up the underground workings of several mines, and proved conclusively that it was far cheaper to bring minerals to the rail in that manner than to sink expensive shafts, raise the ore to the top of a mountain, and cart it to its old level in the valley.

Once the thing was indisputable, the young engineer found himself rich and famous. To increase the feeders of the main bore, he drove another short gallery through a mining claim acquired for a few dollars,—a claim deemed worthless owing to a geological fault that traversed its whole length. That was Fate's opportunity. Doubtless she smiled mischievously when she gave him a vein of rich quartz through which to quarry his way. The mere delving of the rock had produced two thousand dollars' worth of ore, of which sum he took a moiety by agreement with the company that purchased his rights.

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People in Leadville soon discovered that Spencer was a bright man,—“yes, sir, a citizen of whom the chief mining city of the Rocky Mountains has every reason to be proud,”—and the railway magnate who had nearly ruined him by years of hostility buried the past grandiloquently with a *mot*.

“Charles K. Spencer can't be sidetracked,” he said. “That K isn't in his name by accident. Look at it,—a regular buffer of a letter! Tell you what, you may monkey with Charles; but when you hit the K look out for trouble.”

Whereupon the miners laughed, and said that the president was a mighty smart man too, and Spencer, who knew he was a thief, but was unwilling to quarrel with him for the sake of the company, thought that a six months' vacation in Europe would make for peace and general

content.

He had no plans. He was free to wander whithersoever chance led him. Arriving in London from Plymouth late on a Thursday evening, he took a bus-driver's holiday on Friday. Finding a tunnel under the Thames in full progress near the hotel, he sought the resident engineer, spoke to him in the lingua franca of the craft, and spent several dangerous and enjoyable hours in crawling through all manner of uncomfortable passages bored by human worms beneath the bed of the river.

And this was Saturday, and here he was, at three o'clock in the afternoon, turning over in his mind the best way of sending on an expensive trip abroad a girl who had not the remotest notion of his existence. It was a whim, and a harmless one, and he excused it to his practical mind by the reflection that he was entitled to one day of extravagance after seven years of hard labor. For his own part, he was weary of mountains. He had wrought against one, frowning and stubborn as any Alp, and had not desisted until he reached its very heart with a four thousand foot lance. Switzerland was the last place in Europe he would visit. He wanted to see old cities and dim cathedrals, to lounge in pleasant lands where rivers murmured past lush meadows. Though an American born and bred, there was a tradition in his home that the Spencers were once people of note on the border. When tired of London, he meant to go north, and ramble through Liddesdale in search of family records. But the business presently on hand was to arrange that Swiss excursion for "Helen," and he set about it with characteristic energy.

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In the first instance, he noted her name and address on the back of the Leadville envelop. Then he sought the manager.

"I guess you know Switzerland pretty well," he said, when a polite man was produced by a boy.

The assumption was well founded. In fact, the first really important looking object the manager remembered seeing in this world was the giant Matterhorn, because his mother told him that if he was a bad boy he would be carried off by the demons that dwelt on its summit.

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"What sort of places are Evian-les-Bains and Champèry?" went on Spencer.

"Evian is a fashionable lakeside town. Champèry is in the hills behind it. When Evian becomes too hot in August, one goes to Champèry to cool down."

"Are they anywhere near the Engadine?"

"Good gracious, no! They are as different as chalk and cheese."

"Is the Engadine the cheese? Does it take the biscuit?"

The manager laughed. Like all Londoners, he regarded every American as a humorist. "It all depends," he said. "For my part, I think the Upper Engadine is far and away the most charming section of Switzerland; but there are ladies of my acquaintance who would unhesitatingly vote for Evian, and for a score of other places where there are promenades and casinos. Are you thinking of making a tour there?"

"There's no telling where I may bring up when I cross the Channel," said Spencer. "I have heard some talk of the two districts, and it occurred to me that you were just the man to give me a few useful pointers."

"Well, the average tourist rushes from one valley to another, tramps over a pass each morning, and spends the afternoon in a train or on board a lake steamer. But if I wanted a real rest, and wished at the same time to be in a center from which pleasant walks, or stiff climbs for that matter, could be obtained, I should go by the Engadine Express to St. Moritz, and drive from there to the Maloja-Kulm, where there is an excellent hotel and usually a number of nice people."

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"English?"

"Yes, English and Americans. They select the best as a rule, you know."

"It sounds attractive," said Spencer.

"And it is, believe me. Don't forget the name, Maloja-Kulm. It is twelve miles from everywhere, and practically consists of the one big hotel."

Spencer procured his hat, gloves, and stick, and called a cab. "Take me to 'The Firefly' office," he said.

"Beg pawdon, sir, but where's that?" asked the driver.

"It's up to you to find out."

"Then w'at is it, guv'nor? I've heerd of the 'Orse an' 'Ound, the Chicken's Friend, the Cat, an' the Bee; but the Firefly leaves me thinkin'. Is it a noospaper?"

"Something of the sort."

"All right, sir. Jump in. We'll soon be on its track."

The hansom scampered off to Fleet-st. As the result of inquiries Spencer was deposited at the entrance to a dingy court, the depths of which, he was assured, were illumined by "The Firefly."

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There is nothing that so mystifies the citizen of the New World as the hole-and-corner aspect of some of the business establishments of London. He soon learns, however, to differentiate between the spidery dens where money is amassed and the soot laden tenements in which the struggle for existence is keen. A comprehensive glance at the exterior of the premises occupied by "The Firefly" at once explained to Spencer why the cabman did not know its whereabouts. Three small rooms sufficed for its literary and commercial staff, and "To let" notices stared from several windows in the same building.

"Appearances are deceptive ever," murmured he, as he scanned the legends on three doors in a narrow lobby; "but I think I'm beginning to catch on to the limited extent of Miss Helen's earnings from her scientific paragraphs."

He knocked at each door; but received no answer. Then, having sharp ears, he tried the handle of one marked "Private." It yielded, and he entered, to be accosted angrily by a pallid, elderly, bewhiskered man, standing in front of a much littered table.

"Confound it, sir!" came the growl, "don't you know it is Saturday afternoon? And what do you mean by coming in unannounced?"

"Guess you're the editor?" said Spencer.

"What if I am?"

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"I've just happened along to have a few quiet words with you. If there's no callers Saturdays, why, that's exactly what I want, and I came right in because you didn't answer my knock."

"I tell you I'm not supposed to be here."

"Then you shouldn't draw corks while anybody is damaging the paint outside."

Spencer smiled so agreeably that the editor of "The Firefly" softened. At first, he had taken his visitor for an unpaid contributor; but the American accent banished this phantom of the imagination. He continued to pour into a tumbler the contents of a bottle of beer.

"Well," he said, "now that you are here, what can I do for you, Mr.—"

"Spencer—Charles K. Spencer."

Instantly it struck the younger man that little more than an hour had elapsed since he gave his name to the letter clerk in the hotel. The singularity of his proceedings during that hour was thereby brought home to him. He knew nothing of newspapers, daily or weekly; but commonsense suggested that "The Firefly's" radiance was not over-powering. His native shrewdness advised caution, though he felt sure that he could, in homely phrase, twist this faded journalist round his little finger.

"Before I open the ball," he said, "may I see a copy of your magazine?"

Meanwhile the other was trying to sum him up. He came to the conclusion that his visitor meant to introduce some new advertising scheme, and, as "The Firefly" was sorely in need of advertisements, he decided to listen.

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"Here is last week's issue," he said, handing to Spencer a small sixteen-page publication. The American glanced through it rapidly, while the editor sampled the beer.

"I see," said Spencer, after he had found a column signed "H. W.," which consisted of paragraphs translated from a German article on airships,— "I see that 'The Firefly' scintillates around the Tree of Knowledge."

The editor relaxed sufficiently to smile. "That is a good description of its weekly flights," he said.

"You don't use many cuts?"

"N-no. They are expensive and hard to obtain for such subjects as we favor."

"Don't you think it would be a good notion to brighten it up a bit—put in something lively, and more in keeping with the name?"

"I have no opening for new matter, if that is what you mean," and the editor stiffened again.

"But you have the say-so as to the contents, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes. The selection rests with me."

"Good. I'm sort of interested in a young lady, Miss Helen Wynton by name. She lives in Warburton Gardens, and does work for you occasionally. Now, I propose to send her on a month's trip to Switzerland, where she will represent 'The Firefly.' You must get her to turn out a couple of pages of readable stuff each week, which you will have illustrated by a smart artist at a cost of say, twenty pounds an article for drawings and blocks. I pay all expenses, she gets the trip, and you secure some good copy for nothing. Is it a deal?"

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The editor sat down suddenly and combed his whiskers with nervous fingers. He was a weak man, and a too liberal beer diet was not good for him.

"Are you in earnest, Mr. Spencer?" he queried in a bewildered way.

"Dead in earnest. You write the necessary letter to Miss Wynton while I am here, and I hand you the first twenty in notes. You are to tell her to call Monday noon at any bank you may select, and she will be given her tickets and a hundred pounds. When I am certain that she has started I undertake to pay you a further sum of sixty pounds. I make only two conditions. You must guarantee to star her work, as it should help her some, and my identity must not be disclosed to her under any circumstances. In a word, she must regard herself as the accredited correspondent of 'The Firefly.' If she appears to be a trifle rattled by your generosity in the matter of terms, you must try and look as if you did that sort of thing occasionally and would like to do it often."

The editor pushed his chair away from the table. He seemed to require more air. "Again I must ask you if you actually mean what you say?" he gasped. [Pg 29]

Spencer opened a pocketbook and counted four five-pound notes out of a goodly bundle. "It is all here in neat copperplate," he said, placing the notes on the table. "Maybe you haven't caught on to the root idea of the proposition," he continued, seeing that the other man was staring at him blankly. "I want Miss Wynton to have a real good time. I also want to lift her up a few rungs of the journalistic ladder. But she is sensitive, and would resent patronage; so I must not figure in the affair at all. I have no other motive at the back of my head. I'm putting up two hundred pounds out of sheer philanthropy. Will you help?"

"There are points about this amazing proposal that require elucidation," said the editor slowly. "Travel articles might possibly come within the scope of 'The Firefly'; but I am aware that Miss Wynton is what might be termed an exceedingly attractive young lady. For instance, you wouldn't be philanthropic on my account."

"You never can tell. It all depends how your case appealed to me. But if you are hinting that I intend to use my scheme for the purpose of winning Miss Wynton's favorable regard, I must say that she strikes me as the kind of girl who would think she had been swindled if she learned the truth. In any event, I may never see her again, and it is certainly not my design to follow her to Switzerland. I don't kick at your questions. You're old enough to be her father, and mine, for that matter. Go ahead. This is Saturday afternoon, you know, and there's no business stirring." [Pg 30]

Spencer had to cover the ground a second time before everything was made clear. At last the fateful letter was written. He promised to call on Monday and learn how the project fared. Then he relieved the cabman's anxiety, as the alley possessed a second exit, and was driven to the Wellington Theater, where he secured a stall for that night's performance of the Chinese musical comedy in which Miss Millicent Jaques played the part of a British Admiral's daughter.

While Spencer was watching Helen's hostess cutting capers in a Mandarin's palace, Helen herself was reading, over and over again, a most wonderful letter that had fallen from her sky. It had all the appearance of any ordinary missive. The King's face on a penny stamp, or so much of it as was left uninjured by a postal smudge, looked familiar enough, and both envelop and paper resembled those which had brought her other communications from "The Firefly." But the text was magic, rank necromancy. No wizard who ever dealt in black letter treatises could have devised a more convincing proof of his occult powers than this straightforward offer made by the editor of "The Firefly." Four articles of five thousand words each,—tickets and 100 pounds awaiting her at a bank,—go to the Maloja-Kulm Hotel; leave London at the earliest possible date; please send photographs and suggestions for black-and-white illustrations of mountaineering and society! What could it possibly mean? [Pg 31]

At the third reading Helen began to convince herself that this rare stroke of luck was really hers. The concluding paragraph shed light on "The Firefly's" extraordinary outburst.

"As this commission heralds a new departure for the paper, I have to ask you to be good enough not to make known the object of your journey. In fact, it will be as well if you do not state your whereabouts to any persons other than your near relatives. Of course, all need for secrecy ceases with the appearance of your first article; but by that time you will practically be on your way home again. I am anxious to impress on you the importance of this instruction."

Helen found herein the germ of understanding. "The Firefly" meant to boom itself on its Swiss correspondence; but even that darksome piece of journalistic enterprise did not explain the princely munificence of the hundred pounds. At last, when she calmed down sufficiently to be capable of connected thought, she saw that "mountaineering" implied the hire of guides, and that "society" meant frocks. Of course it was intended that she should spend the whole of the money, and thus give "The Firefly" a fair return for its outlay. And a rapid calculation revealed the dazzling fact that after setting aside the fabulous sum of two pounds a day for expenses she still had forty pounds left wherewith to replenish her scanty stock of dresses. [Pg 32]

Believing that at any instant the letter might dissolve into a curt request to keep her scientific jottings strictly within the limits of a column, Helen sat with it lying open on her lap, and searched the pages of a tattered guidebook for particulars of the Upper Engadine. She had read every line before; but the words now seemed to live. St. Moritz, Pontresina, Sils-Maria, Silvaplana,—they ceased to be mere names,—they became actualities. The Julier Pass, the Septimer, the Forno Glacier, the Diavolezza Route, and the rest of the stately panorama of snow capped peaks, blue lakes, and narrow valleys,—valleys which began with picturesque chalets, dun colored cattle, and herb laden pastures, and ended in the yawning mouths of ice rivers whence issued the milky white streams that dashed through the lower gorges,—they passed before her eyes as she read till she was dazzled by their glories.

What a day dream to one who dwelt in smoky London year in and year out! What an experience to look forward to! What memories to treasure! Nor was she blind to the effect of the undertaking on her future. Though "The Firefly" was not an important paper, though its editor was of a half-forgotten day and generation, she would now have good work to show when asked what she had done. She was not enamored of beetles. Even the classifying of them was monotonous, and she had striven bravely to push her way through the throng of would-be writers that besieged the doors of every popular periodical in London. It was a heartbreaking struggle. The same post that gave her this epoch marking letter had brought back two stories with the stereotyped expression of editorial regret.

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"Now," thought Helen, when her glance fell on the bulky envelopes, "my name will at least become known. And editors very much resemble the public they cater for. If a writer achieves success, they all want him. I have often marveled how any author got his first chance. Now I know. It comes this way, like a flash of lightning from a summer sky."

It was only fit and proper that she should magnify her first real commission. No veteran soldier ever donned a field marshal's uniform with the same zest that he displayed when his subaltern's outfit came from the tailor. So Helen glowed with that serious enthusiasm which is the soul of genius, for without it life becomes flat and gray, and she passed many anxious, half-doubting hours until a courteous bank official handed her a packet at the appointed time on Monday, and gave her a receipt to sign, and asked her how she would take her hundred pounds—did she want it all in notes or some in gold?

She was so unnerved by this sudden confirmation of her good fortune that she stammered confusedly, "I—really—don't know."

"Well, it would be rather heavy in gold," came the smiling comment. "This money, I understand, is paid to you for some journalistic enterprise that will take you abroad. May I suggest that you should carry, say, thirty pounds in notes and ten in gold, and allow me to give you the balance in the form of circular notes, which are payable only under your signature?"

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"Yes," said Helen, rosy red at her own awkwardness, "that will be very nice."

The official pushed across the counter some banknotes and sovereigns, and summoned a commissionaire to usher her into the waiting room till he had prepared the circular notes. The respite was a blessing. It gave Helen time to recover her self possession. She opened the packet and found therein coupons for the journey to and from St. Moritz, together with a letter from the sleeping car company, from which she gathered that a berth on the Engadine Express was provisionally reserved in her name for the following Thursday, but any change to a later date must be made forthwith, as the holiday pressure was beginning. It was advisable too, she was reminded, that she should secure her return berth before leaving London.

Each moment the reality of the tour became more patent. She might feel herself bewitched; but pounds sterling and railway tickets were tangible things, and not to be explained away by any fantasy. By the time her additional wealth was ready she was better fitted to guard it. She hurried away quite unconscious of the admiring eyes that were raised from docketts and ledgers behind the grille. She made for the court in which "The Firefly" had its abode. The squalor of the passage, the poverty stricken aspect of the stairs,—items which had prepared her on other occasions for the starvation rate of pay offered for her work,—now passed unheeded. This affectation of scanty means was humorous. Obviously, some millionaire had secured what the newspapers called "a controlling interest" in "The Firefly."

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She sought Mackenzie, the editor, and he received her with a manifest reluctance to waste his precious time over details that was almost as convincing as the money and vouchers she carried.

"Yes, Thursday will suit admirably," he said in reply to her breathless questions. "You will reach Maloja on Friday evening, and if you post the first article that day week it will arrive in good time for the next number. As for the style and tone, I leave those considerations entirely to you. So long as the matter is bright and readable, that is all I want. I put my requirements clearly in my letter. Follow that, and you cannot make any mistake."

Helen little realized how precise were the instructions given two hours earlier to the editor, the bank clerk, and the sleeping car company. Mackenzie's curt acceptance of her mission brought a wondering cry to her lips.

"I am naturally overjoyed at my selection for this work," she said. "May I ask how you came to think of me?"

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"Oh, it is hard to say how these things are determined," he answered. "We liked your crisp way of putting dull facts, I suppose, and thought that a young lady's impressions of life in an Anglo-Swiss summer community would be fresher and more attractive than a man's. That is all. I hope you will enjoy your experiences."

"But, please, I want to thank you——"

"Not a word! Business is business, you know. If a thing is worth doing, it must be done well. Good-by!"

He flattered himself that he could spend another man's money with as lordly an air as the youngest journalist on Fleet-st. The difficulty was to find the man with the money, and Mackenzie

had given much thought during the Sabbath to the potentialities that lay behind Spencer's whim. He was sure the incident would not close with the publication of Miss Wynton's articles. Judiciously handled, her unknown benefactor might prove equally beneficial to "The Firefly."

So Helen tripped out into Fleet-st., and turned her pretty face westward, and looked so eager and happy that it is not surprising if many a man eyed her as she passed, and many a woman sighed to think that another woman could find life in this dreary city such a joyous thing.

A sharp walk through the Strand and across Trafalgar Square did a good deal toward restoring the poise of her wits. For safety, she had pinned the envelop containing her paper money and tickets inside her blouse. The mere presence of the solid little parcel reminded her at every movement that she was truly bound for the wonderful Engadine, and, now that the notion was becoming familiar, she was the more astonished that the choice of "The Firefly" had fallen on her. It was all very well for Mr. Mackenzie to say that the paper would be brightened by a woman's views on life in the high Alps. The poor worn man looked as if such a holiday would have done him a world of good. But the certain fact remained that there was no room for error. It was she, Helen Wynton, and none other, for whom the gods had contrived this miracle. If it had been possible, she would have crossed busy Cockspur-st. with a hop, skip, and a jump in order to gain the sleeping car company's premises.

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She knew the place well. Many a time had she looked at the attractive posters in the windows,—those gorgeous fly sheets that told of winter in summer among the mountains of Switzerland and the Tyrol, and of summer in winter along the sunlit shores of the Côte d'Azur. She almost laughed aloud at the thought that possessed her as she waited for a moment on the curb to allow a press of traffic to pass.

"If my luck holds till Christmas, I may be sent to Monte Carlo," she said to herself. "And why not? It's the first step that counts, and 'The Firefly,' once fairly embarked on a career of wild extravagance, may keep it up."

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Under the pressure of that further inspiration she refused to wait any longer, but dodged an omnibus, a motor car, and some hansoms, and pushed open the swing doors of the Bureau de la Campagnie des Wagons-Lits. She did not notice that the automobile stopped very quickly a few yards higher up the street. The occupant, Mark Bower, alighted, looked at her through the window to make sure he was not mistaken, and followed her into the building. He addressed some question to an attendant, and heard Helen say:

"Yes, please. Thursday will suit admirably. I am going straight through to St. Moritz. I shall call on Wednesday and let you know what day I wish to return."

If Bower had intended to speak to her, he seemed to change his mind rather promptly. Helen's back was turned. She was watching a clerk writing out a voucher for her berth in the sleeping car, and the office was full of other prospective travelers discussing times and routes with the officials. Bower thanked his informant for information which he could have supplied in ampler detail himself. Then he went out, and looked again at Helen from the doorway; but she was wholly unaware of his presence.

Thus it came about, quite simply and naturally, that Mark Bower met Miss Helen Wynton on the platform of Victoria Station on Thursday morning, and learned that, like himself, she was a passenger by the Engadine Express. He took her presence as a matter of course, hoped she would allow him to secure her a comfortable chair on the steamer, told her that the weather report was excellent, and remarked that they might expect a pleasant crossing in the new turbine steamer.

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"I am going through to St. Moritz."

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Then, having ascertained that she had a corner seat, and that her luggage was registered through to St. Moritz (Helen having arrived at the station a good hour before the train was due to start), he bowed himself away, being far too skilled a stalker of such shy game to thrust his company on her at that stage.

His attitude was very polite and friendly, and Helen was almost grateful to the chance which had brought him there. She was feeling just a trifle lonely in the midst of the gay and chattering throng that crowded the station. The presence of one who was not wholly a stranger, of a friend's friend, of a man whose name was familiar, made the journey look less dreamlike. She was glad he had not sought to travel in her carriage. That was tactful, and indeed his courtesy and pleasant words during her first brief meeting with him in the Embankment Hotel had conveyed the same favorable impression.

So when the hour hand of the big clock overhanging the center of the platform pointed to eleven, the long train glided quietly away with its load of pleasure-seekers, and neither Helen nor her new acquaintance could possibly know that their meeting had been witnessed, with a blank amazement that was rapidly transmuted into sheer annoyance, by a young American engineer named Charles K. Spencer.

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CHAPTER III

WHEREIN TWO PEOPLE BECOME BETTER ACQUAINTED

Mackenzie, of course, was aware that Miss Wynton would leave London by the eleven o'clock train on Thursday, and Spencer saw no harm in witnessing her departure. He found a good

deal of quiet fun in noting her animated expression and businesslike air. Her whole-souled enjoyment of novel surroundings was an asset for the outlay of his two hundred pounds, and he had fully and finally excused that piece of extravagance until he caught sight of Bower strolling along the platform with the easy confidence of one who knew exactly whom he would meet and how he would account for his unbidden presence.

Spencer at once suspected the man's motives, not without fair cause. They were, he thought, as plain to him as they were hidden from the girl. Bower counterfeited the genuine surprise on Helen's face with admirable skill; but, to the startled onlooker, peering beneath the actor's mask, his stagy artifice was laid bare.

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And Spencer was quite helpless, a condition that irritated him almost beyond control. He had absolutely no grounds for interference. He could only glower angrily and in silence at a meeting he could not prevent. Conjecture might run riot as to the causes which had given this sinister bend to an idyl, but perforce he must remain dumb.

From one point of view, it was lucky that Helen's self appointed "godfather" was in a position not to misjudge her; from another, it would have been better for Spencer's peace of mind were he left in ignorance of the trap that was apparently being laid for her. Perhaps Fate had planned this thing—having lately smiled on the American, she may have determined to plague him somewhat. At any rate, in that instant the whole trend of his purpose took a new turn. From a general belief that he would never again set eyes on one in whose fortunes he felt a transient interest, his intent swerved to a fixed resolve to protect her from Bower. It would have puzzled him to assign a motive for his dislike of the man. But the feeling was there, strong and active. It even gave him a certain satisfaction to remember that he was hostile to Bower before he had seen him.

Indeed, he nearly yielded to the momentary impulse that bade him hasten to the booking office and secure a ticket for St. Moritz forthwith. He dismissed the notion as quixotic and unnecessary. Bower's attitude in not pressing his company on Miss Wynton at this initial stage of the journey revealed a subtlety that demanded equal restraint on Spencer's part. Helen herself was so far from suspecting the truth that Bower would be compelled to keep up the pretense of a casual rencontre. Nevertheless, Spencer's chivalric nature was stirred to the depths. The conversation overheard in the Embankment Hotel had given him a knowledge of the characteristics of two women that would have amazed both of them were they told of it. He was able to measure too the exact extent of Bower's acquaintance with Helen, while he was confident that the relationship between Bower and Millicent Jaques had gone a great deal further than might be inferred from the actress's curt statement that he was one whom she "wished to avoid." These two extremes could be reconciled only by a most unfavorable estimate of Bower, and that the American conceded without argument.

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Of course, there remained the possibility that Bower was really a traveler that day by idle chance; but Spencer blew aside this alternative with the first whiff of smoke from the cigar he lit mechanically as soon as the train left the station.

"No," he said, in grim self communing, "the skunk found out somehow that she was going abroad, and planned to accompany her. I could see it in the smirk on his face as soon as he discovered her whereabouts on the platform. If he means to summer at Maloja, I guess my thousand dollars was expended to no good purpose, and the quicker I put up another thousand to pull things straight the happier I shall be. And let me tell you, mother, that if I get Helen through this business well and happy, I shall quit fooling round as godfather, or stage uncle, or any other sort of soft-hearted idiot. Meanwhile, Bower has jumped my claim."

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His glance happened to fall on an official with the legend "Ticket Inspector" on the collar of his coat. He remembered that this man, or some other closely resembling him, had visited the carriage in which Bower traveled.

"Say," he cried, hailing him on the spur of the moment, "when does the next train leave for St. Moritz?"

"At two-twenty from Charing Cross, sir. But the Engadine Express is the best one. Did you miss it?"

"No. I just blew in here to see a friend off, and the trip kind of appealed to me. Did you notice a reserved compartment for a Mr. Mark Bower?"

"I know Mr. Bower very well, sir. He goes to Paris or Vienna twenty times a year."

"To-day he is going to Switzerland."

"So he is, to Zurich, I think. First single he had. But he's sure to bring up in Vienna or Frankfort. I wish I knew half what he knows about foreign money business. I shouldn't be punching tickets here very long. Thank you, sir. Charing Cross at two-twenty; but you may have difficulty about booking a berth in the sleeper. Just now everybody is crossing the Channel."

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"It looks like that," said Spencer, who had obtained the information he wanted. Taking a cab, he drove to the sleeping car company's office, where he asked for a map of the Swiss railways. Zurich, as Bower's destination, puzzled him; but he did not falter in his purpose.

"The man is a rogue," he thought, "or I have never seen one. Anyhow, a night in the train doesn't cut any ice, and Switzerland can fill the bill for a week as well as London or Scotland."

He was fortunate in the fact that some person wished to postpone a journey that day, and the accident assured him of comfortable quarters from Calais onward. Then he drove to a bank, and to "The Firefly" office. Mackenzie had just opened his second bottle of beer. By this time he regarded Spencer as an amiable lunatic. He greeted him now with as much glee as his dreary nature was capable of.

"Hello!" he said. "Been to see the last of the lady?"

"Not quite. I want to take back what I said about not going to Switzerland. I'm following this afternoon."

"Great Scott! You're sudden."

"I'm built that way," said Spencer dryly. "Here are the sixty pounds I promised you. Now I want you to do me a favor. Send a messenger to the Wellington Theater with a note for Miss Millicent Jaques, and ask her if she can oblige you with the present address of Miss Helen Wynton. Make a pretext of work. No matter if she writes to her friend and the inquiry leads to talk. You can put up a suitable fairy tale, I have no doubt."

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"Better still, let my assistant write. Then if necessary I can curse him for not minding his own business. But what's in the wind?"

"I wish to find out whether or not Miss Jaques knows of this Swiss journey; that is all. If the reply reaches you by one o'clock send it to the Embankment Hotel. Otherwise, post it to me at the Kursaal, Maloja-Kulm; but not in an office envelop."

"You'll come back, Mr. Spencer?" said the editor plaintively, for he had visions of persuading the eccentric American to start a magazine of his own.

"Oh, yes. You'll probably see me again within six days. I'll look in and report progress. Good by."

A messenger caught him as he was leaving the hotel. Mackenzie had not lost any time, and Miss Jaques happened to be at the theater.

"Sorry," she wrote, in the artistic script that looks so well in face cream and soap advertisements, "I can't for the life of me remember the number; but Miss Wynton lives somewhere in Warburton Gardens." The signature, "Millicent Jaques," was an elegant thing in itself, carefully thought out and never hurried in execution, no matter how pressed she might be for time. Spencer was on the point of scattering the note in little pieces along the Strand; but he checked himself.

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"Guess I'll keep this as a souvenir," he said, and it found a place in his pocketbook.

Helen Wynton, having crossed the Channel many times during her childhood, was no novice amid the bustle and crush on the narrow pier at Dover. She had dispensed with all accessories for the journey, except the few articles that could be crammed into a handbag. Thus, being independent of porters, she was one of the first to reach the steamer's gangway. As usual, all the most sheltered nooks on board were occupied. There seems to be a mysterious type of traveler who inhabits the cross-Channel vessels permanently. No matter how speedy may be the movements of a passenger by the boat-train, either at Dover or Calais, the best seats on the upper deck invariably reveal the presence of earlier arrivals by deposits of wraps and packages. This phenomenon was not strange to Helen. A more baffling circumstance was the altered shape of the ship. The familiar lines of the paddle steamer were gone, and Helen was wondering where she might best bestow herself and her tiny valise, when she heard Bower's voice.

"I took the precaution to telegraph from London to one of the ship's officers," he said, and nodded toward a couple of waterproof rugs which guarded a recess behind the Captain's cabin. "That is our corner, I expect. My friend will be here in a moment."

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Sure enough, a man in uniform approached and lifted his gold laced cap. "We have a rather crowded ship, Mr. Bower," he said; "but you will be quite comfortable there. I suppose you deemed the weather too fine to need your usual cabin?"

"Yes. I have a companion to-day, you see."

Helen was a little bewildered by this; but it was very pleasant to claim undisputed possession of a quiet retreat from which to watch others trying to find chairs. And, although Bower had a place reserved by her side, he did not sit down. He chatted for a few minutes on such eminently safe topics as the smooth sea, the superiority of turbine engines in the matter of steadiness, the advisability of lunching in the train after leaving Calais, rather than on board the ship, and soon betook himself aft, there to smoke and chat with some acquaintances whom he fell in with. Dover Castle was becoming a gray blur on the horizon when he spoke to Helen again.

"You look quite comfortable," he said pleasantly, "and it is wise not to risk walking about if you are afraid of being ill."

"I used to cross in bad weather without consequences," she answered; "but I am older now, and am doubtful of experiments."

"You were educated abroad, then?"

"Yes. I was three years in Brussels—three happy years."

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"Ah! Why qualify them? All your years are happy, I should imagine, if I may judge by appearances."

"Well, if happiness can be defined as contentment, you are right; but I have had my sad periods too, Mr. Bower. I lost my mother when I was eighteen, and that was a blow under which I have never ceased to wince. Fortunately, I had to seek consolation in work. Added to good health, it makes for content."

"You are quite a philosopher. Will you pardon my curiosity? I too lead the strenuous life. Now, I should like to have your definition of work. I am not questioning your capacity. My wonder is that you should mention it at all."

"But why? Any man who knows what toil is should not regard women as dolls."

"I prefer to look on them as goddesses."

Helen smiled. "I fear, then, you will deem my pedestal a sorry one," she said. "Perhaps you think, because you met me once in Miss Jaques's company, and again here, traveling *de luxe*, that I am in her set. I am not. By courtesy I am called a 'secretary'; but the title might be shortened into 'typist.' I help Professor von Eulenberg with his—scientific researches."

Though it was on the tip of her tongue to say "beetles," she substituted the more dignified phrase. Bower was very nice and kind; but she felt that "beetles" might sound somewhat flippant and lend a too familiar tone to their conversation.

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"Von Eulenberg? I have heard of him. Quite a distinguished man in his own line; an authority on—moths, is it?"

"Insects generally."

She blushed and laughed outright, not only at the boomerang effect of her grandiloquent description of the professor's industry, but at the absurdity of her position. Above all else, Helen was candid, and there was no reason why she should not enlighten a comparative stranger who seemed to take a friendly interest in her.

"I ought to explain," she went on, "that I am going to the Engadine as a journalist. I have had the good fortune to be chosen for a very pleasant task. Hence this present grandeur, which, I assure you, is not a usual condition of entomological secretaries."

Bower pretended to ward off some unexpected attack. "I have done nothing to deserve a hard word like that, Miss Wynton," he cried. "I shall not recover till we reach Calais. May I sit beside you while you tell me what it means?"

She made room for him. "Strictly speaking, it is nonsense," she said.

"Excellent. That is the better line for women who are young and pretty. We jaded men of the world hate to be serious when we leave business behind. Now, you would scarce credit what a lively youngster I am when I come abroad for a holiday. I always kiss my fingers to France at the first sight of her fair face. She bubbles like her own champagne, whereas London invariably reminds me of beer."

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"Do I take it that you prefer gas to froth?"

"You offer me difficult alternatives, yet I accept them. Though gas is as dreadful a description of champagne as entomological is of a certain type of secretary, I would venture to point out that it expands, effervesces, soars ever to greater heights; but beer, froth and all, tends to become flat, stale, and unprofitable."

"I assure you my knowledge of both is limited. I had never even tasted champagne until the other day."

"When you lunched with Millicent at the Embankment Hotel?"

"Well—yes. She was at school with me, and we met last week by accident. She is making quite a success at the Wellington Theater, is she not?"

"So I hear. I am a director of that concern; but I seldom go there."

"How odd that sounds to one who saves up her pennies to attend a favorite play!"

"Then you must have my address, and when I am in town you need never want a stall at any theater in London. Now, that is no idle promise. I mean it. Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to think you were enjoying something through my instrumentality."

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"How exceedingly kind of you! I shall take you at your word. What girl wouldn't?"

"I know quite a number who regard me as an ogre. I am not a lady's man in the general sense of the term, Miss Wynton. I might tell you more about myself if it were not for signs that the next five minutes will bring us to Calais. You are far too independent, I suppose, that I should offer to carry your bag; but will you allow me to reserve a joint table for *déjeuner*? There will be a rush for the first service, which is the best, as a rule, and I have friends at court on this line. Please don't say you are not hungry."

"That would be impolite, and horribly untrue," laughed Helen.

He took the implied permission, and hurried away. They did not meet again until he came to her carriage in the train.

"Is this where you are?" he cried, looking up at her through the open window. "I am in the next block, as they say in America. When you are ready I shall take you to the dining car. Come out on the platform. The corridors are simply impassable. And here are baskets of peaches, and ripe pears, and all manner of pleasant fruits. Yes, try the corridor to the right, and charge resolutely. If you inflict the maximum injury on others, you seldom damage yourself."

In a word, Mark Bower spoke as lightheartedly as he professed to feel, and Helen had no cause whatever to be other than thankful for the chance that brought him to Switzerland on the same day and in the same train as herself. His delicate consideration for her well being was manifested in many ways. That such a man, whom she knew to be a figure of importance in the financial world, should take an interest in the simple chronicles of her past life was a flattering thing in itself. He listened sympathetically to the story of her struggles since the death of her mother. The consequent stoppage of the annuity paid to the widow of an Indian civilian rendered it necessary that Helen should supplement by her own efforts the fifty pounds a year allotted to her "until death or marriage."

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"There are plenty of country districts where I could exist quite easily on such a sum," she said; "but I declined to be buried alive in that fashion, and I made up my mind to earn my own living. Somehow, London appeals to young people situated as I was. It is there that the great prizes are to be gained; so I came to London."

"From—" broke in Bower, who was peeling one of the peaches bought at Calais.

"From a village near Sheringham, in Norfolk."

He nodded with smiling comprehension when she detailed her struggles with editors who could detect no originality in her literary work.

"But that phase has passed now," he said encouragingly.

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"Well, it looks like it. I hope so; for I am tired of classifying beetles."

There—the word was out at last. Perhaps Bower wondered why she laughed and blushed at the recollection of her earlier determination to suppress von Eulenberg's "specimens" as a topic of conversation. Already the stiffness of their talk on board the steamship seemed to have vanished completely. It was really a pleasant way of passing the time to sit and chat in this glass palace while the train skimmed over a dull land of marshes and poplars.

"Beetles, though apt to be flighty, are otherwise dull creatures," he said. "May I ask what paper you are representing on your present tour?"

It was an obvious and harmless question; but Helen was loyal to her bond. "It sounds absurd to have to say it, but I am pledged to secrecy," she answered.

"Good gracious! Don't tell me you intend to interview anarchists, or runaway queens, or the other disgruntled people who live in Switzerland. Moreover, they usually find quarters in Geneva, while you presumably are bound for the Engadine."

"Oh, no. My work lies in less excitable circles. 'Life in a Swiss hotel' would be nearer the mark."

"Apart from the unusual surroundings, you will find it suspiciously like life in a quiet Norfolk village, Miss Wynton," said Bower. He paused, tasted the peach, and made a grimace. "Sour!" he protested. "Really, when all is said and done, the only place in which one can buy a decent peach is London."

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"Ah, a distinct score for Britain!"

"And a fair hit to your credit. Let me urge in self defense that if life in France bubbles, it occasionally leaves a bitter taste in the mouth. Now you shall go and read, and sleep a little perhaps, if that is not a heretical thing to suggest. We have the same table for afternoon tea and dinner."

Helen had never met such a versatile man. He talked of most things with knowledge and restraint and some humor. She could not help admitting that the journey would have been exceedingly dull without his companionship, and he had the tact to make her feel that he was equally indebted to her for passing the long hours. At dinner she noticed that they were served with dishes not supplied to others in the dining car.

"I hope you have not been ordering a dreadfully expensive meal," she ventured to say. "I must pay my share, you know, and I am quite an economical person."

"There!" he vowed. "That is the first unkind word you have uttered. Surely you will not refuse to be my guest? Indeed, I was hoping that to-day marked the beginning of a new era, wherein we might meet at times and criticize humanity to our hearts' content."

"I should feel unhappy if I did not pay," she insisted.

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"Well, then, I shall charge you table d'hôte prices. Will that content you?"

So, when the attendant came to the other tables, Helen produced her purse, and Bower solemnly accepted her few francs; but no bill was presented to him.

"You see," he said, smiling at her through a glass of golden wine, "you have missed a great opportunity. Not one woman in a million can say that she has dined at the railway company's expense in France."

She was puzzled. His manner had become slightly more confidential during the meal. It needed no feminine intuition to realize that he admired her. Excitement, the sea air, the heated atmosphere, and unceasing onrush of the train, had flushed her cheeks and lent a deeper shade to her brown eyes. She knew that Bower's was not the only glance that dwelt on her with a curious and somewhat unnerving appraisal. Other men, and not a few women, stared at her. The mirror in her dressing room had told her that she was looking her best, and her heart fluttered a little at the thought that she had succeeded, without effort, in winning the appreciation of a man highly placed in the world of fashion and finance. The conceit induced an odd feeling of embarrassment. To dispel it she took up his words in a vein of playful sarcasm.

"If you assure me that for some unexplained reason the railway authorities are giving us this excellent dinner for nothing, please return my money," she said. [Pg 57]

"The gifts of the gods, and eke of railway companies, must be taken without question," he answered. "No, I shall keep your pieces of silver. I mean to invest them. It will amuse me to learn how much I can make on an initial capital of twelve francs, fifty centimes. Will you allow that? I shall be scrupulously accurate, and submit an audited account at Christmas. Even my worst enemies have never alleged dishonesty against me. Is it a bargain?"

"Y-yes," she stammered confusedly, hardly knowing what he meant. He was leaning over the small table and looking steadfastly at her. She noticed that the wine and food had made his skin greasy. It suddenly occurred to her that Mark Bower resembled certain exotic plants which must be viewed from a distance if they would gratify the critical senses. The gloss of a careful toilet was gone. He was altogether cruder, coarser, more animal, since he had eaten, though his consumption of wine was quite moderate. His big, rather fierce eyes were more than prominent now; they bulged. Certain Jewish characteristics in his face had become accentuated. She remembered the ancient habit of anointing with oil, and laughed at the thought, for that was a little trick of hers to conceal nervousness.

"You doubt me, then?" he half whispered. "Or do you deem it beyond the power of finance to convert so small a sum into hundreds—it may be thousands—of pounds in six months?" [Pg 58]

"Indeed I should credit you with ability to do that and more, Mr. Bower," she said; "but I was wondering why you made such an offer to a mere acquaintance,—one whom it is more than likely you will never meet again."

The phrase had a harsh and awkward sound in her ears. Bower, to her relief, seemed to ignore it.

"It is permissible to gratify an impulse once in awhile," he countered. "And not to mention the audited accounts, there was a matter of theater tickets that should serve to bring us together again. Won't you give me your address, in London if not in Switzerland? Here is mine."

He produced a pocketbook, and picked out a card. It bore his name and his club. He added, in pencil, "50 Hamilton Place."

"Letters sent to my house reach me, no matter where I may happen to be," he said.

The incident brought fresh tremors to Helen. Indeed, the penciled address came as an unpleasant shock; for Millicent Jaques, on the day they met in Piccadilly, having gone home with Helen to tea, excused an early departure on the ground that she was due to dinner at that very house.

But she took the card, and strove desperately to appear at ease, for she had no cause to quarrel with one whose manners were so courteous. [Pg 59]

"Thank you very much," she said. "If you care to see my articles in the—in the paper, I shall send you copies. Now I must say good by. I am rather tired. Before I go let me say how deeply indebted I feel for your kindness to-day."

She rose. Bower stood up too, and bowed with smiling deference. "Good night," he said. "You will not be disturbed by the customs people at the frontier. I have arranged all that."

Helen made the best of her way along the swaying corridors till she reached her section of the sleeping car; but Bower resumed his seat at the table. He ordered a glass of fine champagne and held it up to the light. There was a decided frown on his strong face, and the attendant who served him imagined that there was something wrong with the liqueur.

"*N'est-ce pas bon, m'sieur?*" he began.

"Will you go to the devil?" said Bower, speaking very slowly without looking at him.

"*Oui, m'sieur, Je vous assure,*" and the man disappeared.

It was not the wine, but the woman, that was perplexing him. Not often had the lure of gold failed so signally. And why was she so manifestly startled at the last moment? Had he gone too far? Was he mistaken in the assumption that Millicent Jaques had said little or nothing concerning him to

her friend? And this commission too,—there were inexplicable features about it. He knew a great deal of the ways of newspapers, daily and weekly, and it was not the journalistic habit to send inexperienced young women on costly journeys to write up Swiss summer resorts.

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He frowned still more deeply as he thought of the Maloja-Kulm Hotel, for Helen had innocently affixed a label bearing her address on her handbag. He peopled it with dozens of smart young men and not a few older beaux of his own type. His features relaxed somewhat when he remembered the women. Helen was alone, and far too good-looking to command sympathy. There should be the elements of trouble in that quarter. If he played his cards well, and he had no reason to doubt his skill, Helen should greet him as her best friend when he surprised her by appearing unexpectedly at the Maloja-Kulm.

Then he waxed critical. She was young, and lively, and unquestionably pretty; but was she worth all this planning and contriving? She was by way of being a prude too, and held serious notions of women's place in the scheme of things. At any rate, the day's hunting had not brought him far out of his path, Frankfort being his real objective, and he would make up his mind later. Perhaps she would remove all obstacles by writing to him on her return to London; but the recollection of her frank, clear gaze, of lips that were molded for strength as well as sweetness, of the dignity and grace with which the well shaped head was poised on a white firm neck, warned him that such a woman might surrender to love, but never to greed.

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Then he laughed, and ordered another liqueur, and drank a toast to to-morrow, when all things come to pass for the man who knows how to contrive to-day.

In the early morning, at Basle, he awoke, and was somewhat angry with himself when he found that his thoughts still dwelt on Helen Wynton. In the cold gray glimmer of dawn, and after the unpleasant shaking his pampered body had received all night, some of the romance of this latest quest had evaporated. He was stiff and weary, and he regretted the whim that had led him a good twelve hours astray. But he roused himself and dressed with care. Some twenty minutes short of Zurich he sent an attendant to Miss Wynton's berth to inquire if she would join him for early coffee at that station, there being a wait of a quarter of an hour before the train went on to Coire.

Helen, who was up and dressed, said she would be delighted. She too had been thinking, and, being a healthy-minded and kind-hearted girl, had come to the conclusion that her abrupt departure the previous night was wholly uncalled for and ungracious.

So it was with a smiling face that she awaited Bower on the steps of her carriage. She shook hands with him cordially, did not object in the least degree when he seized her arm to pilot her through a noisy crowd of foreigners, and laughed with utmost cheerfulness when they both failed to drink some extraordinarily hot coffee served in glasses that seemed to be hotter still.

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Helen had the rare distinction of being quite as bright and pleasing to the eye in the searching light of the sun's first rays as at any other hour. Bower, though spruce and dandified, looked rather worn.

"I did not sleep well," he explained. "And the rails to the frontier on this line are the worst laid in Europe."

"It is early yet," she said. "Why not turn in again when you reach your hotel?"

"Perish the thought!" he cried. "I shall wander disconsolate by the side of the lake. Please say you will miss me at breakfast. And, by the way, you will find a table specially set apart for you. I suppose you change at Coire?"

"How kind and thoughtful you are. Yes, I am going to the Engadine, you know."

"Well, give my greetings to the high Alps. I have climbed most of them in my time. More improbable things have happened than that I may renew the acquaintance with some of my old friends this year. What fun if you and I met on the Matterhorn or Jungfrau! But they are far away from the valley of the inn, and perhaps you do not climb."

"I have never had the opportunity; but I mean to try. Moreover, it is part of my undertaking."

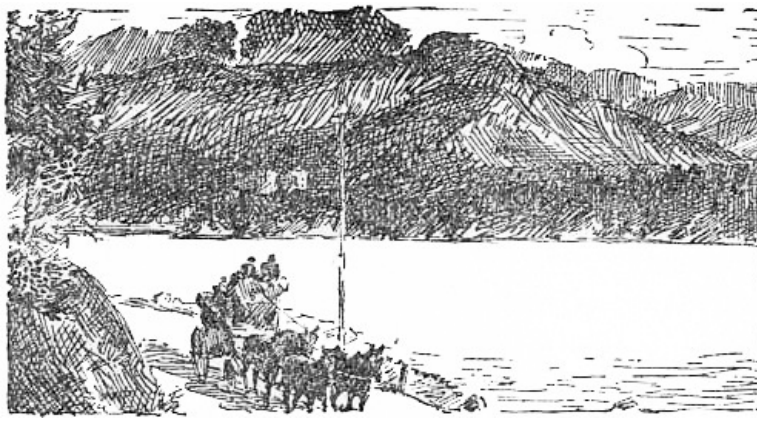
"Then may we soon be tied to the same rope!"

Thus they parted, with cheery words, and, on Helen's side, a genuine wish that they might renew a pleasant acquaintance. Bower waited on the platform to see the last of her as the train steamed away.

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"Yes, it is worth while," he muttered, when the white feathers on her hat were no longer visible. He did not go to the lake, but to the telegraph office, and there he wrote two long messages, which he revised carefully, and copied. Yet he frowned again, even while he was paying for their transmission. Never before had he taken such pains to win any woman's regard. And the knowledge vexed him, for the taking of pains was not his way with women.

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CHAPTER IV

HOW HELEN CAME TO MALOJA

At Coire, or Chur, as the three-tongued Swiss often term it—German being the language most in vogue in Switzerland—Helen found a cheerful looking mountain train awaiting the coming of its heavy brother from far off Calais. It was soon packed to the doors, for those Alpine valleys hum with life and movement during the closing days of July. Even in the first class carriages nearly every seat was filled in a few minutes, while pandemonium reigned in the cheaper sections.

Helen, having no cumbersome baggage to impede her movements, was swept in on the crest of the earliest wave, and obtained a corner near the corridor. She meant to leave her handbag there, stroll up and down the station for a few minutes, mainly to look at the cosmopolitan crowd, and perhaps buy some fruit; but the babel of English, German, French, and Italian, mixed with scraps of Russian and Czech, that raged round a distracted conductor warned her that the wiser policy was to sit still. [Pg 65]

An Englishwoman, red faced, elderly, and important, was offered a center seat, facing the engine, in Helen's compartment. She refused it. Her indignation was magnificent. To face the engine, she declared, meant instant illness.

"I never return to this wretched country that I do not regret it!" she shrilled. "Have you no telegraphs? Cannot your officials ascertain from Zurich how many English passengers may be expected, and make suitable provision for them?"

As this tirade was thrown away on the conductor, she proceeded to translate it into fairly accurate French; but the man was at his wits' end to accommodate the throng, and said so, with the breathless politeness that such a *grande dame* seemed to merit.

"Then you should set apart a special train for passengers from England!" she declared vehemently. "I shall never come here again—never! The place is overrun with cheap tourists. Moreover, I shall tell all my friends to avoid Switzerland. Perhaps, when British patronage is withdrawn from your railways and hotels, you will begin to consider our requirements."

Helen felt that her irate fellow countrywoman was metaphorically hurling large volumes of the peerage, baronetage, and landed gentry at the unhappy conductor's head. Again he pointed out that there was a seat at madam's service. When the train started he would do his best to secure another in the desired position. [Pg 66]

As the woman, whose proportions were generous, was blocking the gangway, she received a forcible reminder from the end of a heavy portmanteau that she must clear out of the way. Breathing dire reprisals on the Swiss federal railway system, she entered unwillingly.

"Disgraceful!" she snorted. "A nation of boors! In another second I should have been thrown down and trampled on."

A stolid German and his wife occupied opposite corners, and the man probably wondered why the *Englischer frau* glared at him so fiercely. But he did not move.

Helen, thinking to throw oil on the troubled waters, said pleasantly, "Won't you change seats with me? I don't mind whether I face the engine or not. In any case, I intend to stand in the corridor most of the time."

The stout woman, hearing herself addressed in English, lifted her mounted eyeglasses and stared at Helen. In one sweeping glance she took in details. As it happened, the girl had expended fifteen of her forty pounds on a neat tailor made costume, a smart hat, well fitting gloves, and the best pair of walking boots she could buy; for, having pretty feet, it was a pardonable vanity that she should wish them well shod. Apparently, the other was satisfied that there would be no loss of caste in accepting the proffered civility. [Pg 67]

"Thank you. I am very much obliged," she said. "It is awfully sweet of you to incommode yourself for my sake."

It was difficult to believe that the woman who had just stormed at the conductor, who had the effrontery to subject Helen to that stony scrutiny before she answered, could adopt such dulcet tones so suddenly. Helen, frank and generous-minded to a degree, would have preferred a gradual subsidence of wrath to this remarkable *volte-face*. But she reiterated that she regarded her place in a carriage as of slight consequence, and the change was effected.

The other adjusted her eyeglasses again, and passed in review the remaining occupants of the compartment. They were "foreigners," whose existence might be ignored.

"This line grows worse each year," she remarked, by way of a conversational opening. "It is horrid traveling alone. Unfortunately, I missed my son at Lucerne. Are your people on the train?"

"No. I too am alone."

"Ah! Going to St. Moritz?"

"Yes; but I take the diligence there for Maloja."

"The diligence! Who in the world advised that? Nobody ever travels that way."

By "nobody," she clearly conveyed the idea that she mixed in the sacred circle of "somebodies," carriage folk to the soles of their boots, because Helen's guidebook showed that a diligence ran twice daily through the Upper Engadine, and the Swiss authorities would not provide those capacious four-horsed vehicles unless there were passengers to fill them.

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"Oh!" cried Helen. "Should I have ordered a carriage beforehand?"

"Most decidedly. But your friends will send one. They know you are coming by this train?"

Helen smiled. She anticipated a certain amount of cross examination at the hands of residents in the hotel; but she saw no reason why the ordeal should begin so soon.

"I must take my luck then," she said. "There ought to be plenty of carriages at St. Moritz."

Without being positively rude, her new acquaintance could not repeat the question thus shirked. But she had other shafts in her quiver.

"You will stay at the Kursaal, of course?" she said.

"Yes."

"A passing visit, or for a period? I ask because I am going there myself."

"Oh, how nice! I am glad I have met you. I mean to remain at Maloja until the end of August."

"Quite the right time. The rest of Switzerland is unbearable in August. You will find the hotel rather full. The Burnham-Joneses are there,—the tennis players, you know,—and General and Mrs. Wragg and their family, and the de la Veres, nominally husband and wife,—a most charming couple individually. Have you met the de la Veres? No? Well, don't be unhappy on Edith's account if Reginald flirts with you. She likes it."

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"But perhaps I might not like it," laughed Helen.

"Ah, Reginald has such fascinating manners!" A sigh seemed to deplore the days of long ago, when Reginald's fascination might have displayed itself on her account.

Again there was a break in the flow of talk, and Helen began to take an interest in the scenery. Not to be balked, her inquisitor searched in a *portmonnaie* attached to her left wrist with a strap, and produced a card.

"We may as well know each other's names," she cooed affably. "Here is my card."

Helen read, "Mrs. H. de Courcy Vavasour, Villa Menini, Nice."

"I am sorry," she said, with a friendly smile that might have disarmed prejudice, "but in the hurry of my departure from London I packed my cards in my registered baggage. My name is Helen Wynton."

The eyeglasses went up once more.

"Do you spell it with an I? Are you one of the Gloucestershire Wintons?"

"No. I live in town; but my home is in Norfolk."

"And whose party will you join at the Maloja?"

Helen colored a little under this rigorous heckling. "As I have already told you, Mrs. Vavasour, I am alone," she said. "Indeed, I have come here to—to do some literary work."

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"For a newspaper?"

"Yes."

Mrs. Vavasour received this statement guardedly. If Helen was on the staff of an important journal there was something to be gained by being cited in her articles as one of the important persons "sojourning" in the Engadine.

"It is really wonderful," she admitted, "how enterprising the great daily papers are nowadays."

Helen, very new to a world of de Courcy Vavasours, and Wraggs, and Burnham-Joneses, forgave this hawklike pertinacity for sake of the apparent sympathy of her catechist. And she was painfully candid.

"The weekly paper I represent is not at all well known," she explained; "but here I am, and I mean to enjoy my visit hugely. It is the chance of a lifetime to be sent abroad on such a mission. I little dreamed a week since that I should be able to visit this beautiful country under the best conditions without giving a thought to the cost."

Poor Helen! Had she delved in many volumes to obtain material that would condemn her in the eyes of the tuft hunter she was addressing, she could not have shocked so many conventions in so few words. She was poor, unknown, unfriended! Worse than these negative defects, she was positively attractive! Mrs. Vavasour almost shuddered as she thought of the son "missed" at Lucerne, the son who would arrive at Maloja on the morrow, in the company of someone whom he preferred to his mother as a fellow traveler. What a pitfall she had escaped! She might have made a friend of this impossible person! Nevertheless, rendered wary by many social skirmishes, she did not declare war at once. The girl was too outspoken to be an adventuress. She must wait, and watch, and furbish her weapons.

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Helen, whose brain was nimble enough to take in some of Mrs. Vavasour's limitations, hoped that the preliminary inquiry into her caste was ended. She went into the corridor. A man made room for her with an alacrity that threatened an attempt to draw her into conversation, so she moved somewhat farther away, and gave herself to thought. If this prying woman was a fair sample of the people in the hotel, it was obvious that the human element in the high Alps held a suspicious resemblance to society in Bayswater, where each street is a faction and the clique in the "Terrace" is not on speaking terms with the clique in the "Gardens." Thus far, she owned to a feeling of disillusionment in many respects.

Two years earlier, a naturalist in the Highlands had engaged von Eulenberg to classify his collection, and Helen had gone to Inverness with the professor's family. She saw something then of the glories of Scotland, and her memories of the purple hills, the silvery lakes, the joyous burns tumbling headlong through woodland and pasture, were not dimmed by the dusty garishness of the Swiss scenery. True, Baedeker said that these pent valleys were suffocating in midsummer. She could only await in diminished confidence her first glimpse of the eternal snows.

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And again, the holiday makers were not the blithesome creatures of her imagination. Some were reading, many sleeping, and the rest, for the most part, talking in strange tongues of anything but the beauties of the landscape. The Britons among them seemed to be brooding on glaciers. A party of lively Americans were playing bridge, and a scrap of gossip in English from a neighboring compartment revealed that some woman who went to a dance at Montreux, "wore a cheap voile, my dear, a last year's bargain, all crumpled and dirty. You never saw such a fright!"

These things were trivial and commonplace; a wide gap opened between them and Helen's day dreams of Alpine travel. By natural sequence of ideas she began to contrast her present loneliness with yesterday's pleasant journey, and the outcome was eminently favorable to Mark Bower. She missed him. She was quite sure, had he accompanied her from Zurich, that he would have charmed away the dull hours with amusing anecdotes. Instead of feeling rather tired and sleepy, she would now be listening to his apt expositions of the habits and customs of the places and people seen from the carriage windows. For fully five minutes her expressive mouth betrayed a little moue of disappointment.

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And then the train climbed a long spiral which gave a series of delightful views of a picturesque Swiss village,—exactly such a cluster of low roofed houses as she had admired many a time in photographs of Alpine scenery. An exclamation from a little boy who clapped his hands in ecstasy caused her to look through a cleft in the nearer hills. With a thrill of wonder she discovered there, remote and solitary, all garbed in shining white, a majestic snow capped mountain. Ah! this was the real Switzerland! Her heart throbbed, and her breath came in fluttering gasps of excitement. How mean and trivial were class distinctions in sight of nature's nobility! She was uplifted, inspirited, filled with a sedate happiness. She wanted to voice her gladness as the child had done. A high pitched female voice said:

"Of course I had to call, because Jack meets her husband in the city; but it is an awful bore knowing such people."

Then the train plunged into a noisome tunnel, and turned a complete circle in the heart of the rock, and when it panted into daylight again the tall square tower of the village church had sunk more deeply into the valley. Far beneath, two bright steel ribbons—swallowed by a cavernous mouth that belched clouds of dense smoke—showed the strangeness of the route that led to the silent peaks. At times the rails crossed or ran by the side of a white, tree lined track that mounted ever upward. Though she could not recall the name of the pass, Helen was aware that this was one of the fine mountain roads for which Switzerland is famous. Pedestrians, singly or in small parties, were trudging along sturdily. They seemed to be mostly German tourists, jolly, well fed folk, nearly as many women as men, each one carrying a rucksack and alpenstock, and evidently determined to cover a set number of kilometers before night.

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"That is the way in which I should like to see the Alps," thought Helen. "I am sure they sing as they walk, and they miss nothing of the grandeur and exquisite coloring of the hills. A train is

very comfortable; but it certainly brings to these quiet valleys a great many people who would otherwise never come near them."

The force of this trite reflection was borne in on her by a loud wrangle between the bridge players. A woman had revoked, and was quite wroth with the man who detected her mistake.

At the next stopping place Helen bought some chocolates, and made a friend of the boy, a tiny Parisian. The two found amusement in searching for patches of snow on the northerly sides of the nearest hills. Once they caught a glimpse of a whole snowy range, and they shrieked so enthusiastically that the woman whose husband was also in the city glanced at them with disapproval, as they interrupted a full and particular if not true account of the quarrel between the Firs and the Limes.

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At last the panting engine gathered speed and rushed along a wide valley into Samaden, Celerina, and St. Moritz. Mrs. Vavasour seemed to be absorbed in a Tauchnitz novel till the last moment, and the next sight of her vouchsafed to Helen was her departure from the terminus in solitary state in a pair-horse victoria. It savored somewhat of unkindness that she had not offered to share the roomy vehicle with one who had befriended her.

"Perhaps she was afraid I might not pay my share of the hire," said Helen to herself rather indignantly. But a civil hotel porter helped her to clear the customs shed rapidly, secured a comfortable carriage, advised her confidentially as to the amount that should be paid, and promised to telephone to the hotel for a suitable room. She was surprised to find how many of her fellow passengers were bound for Maloja. Some she had encountered at various stages of the journey all the way from London, while many, like Mrs. Vavasour, had joined the train in Switzerland. She remembered too, with a quiet humor that had in it a spice of sarcasm, that her elderly acquaintance had not come from England, and had no more right to demand special accommodation at Coire than the dozens of other travelers who put in an appearance at each station after Basle.

She noticed that as soon as the luggage was handed to the driver to be strapped behind each vehicle, the newcomers nearly all went to a neighboring hotel for luncheon. Being a healthy young person, and endowed with a sound digestion, Helen deemed this example too good not to be followed. Then she began a two hours' drive through a valley that almost shook her allegiance to Scotland. The driver, a fine looking old man, with massive features and curling gray hair that reminded her of Michelangelo's head of Moses, knowing the nationality of his fare, resolutely refused to speak any other language than English. He would jerk round, flourish his whip, and cry:

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"Dissa pless St. Moritz Bad; datta pless St. Moritz Dorp."

Soon he announced the "Engelish kirch," thereby meaning the round arched English church overlooking the lake; or it might be, with a loftier sweep of the whip, "Piz Julier montin, mit lek Silvaplanaer See."

All this Helen could have told him with equal accuracy and even greater detail. Had she not almost learned by heart each line of Baedeker on the Upper Engadine? Could she not have reproduced from memory a fairly complete map of the valley, with its villages, mountains, and lakes clearly marked? But she would not on any account repress the man's enthusiasm, and her eager acceptance of his quaint information induced fresh efforts, with more whip waving.

"Piz Corvatsch! Him ver' big fellow. Twelf t'ousen foots. W'en me guide him bruk ze leg."

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She had seen that he was very lame as he hobbled about the carriage tying up her boxes. So here was a real guide. That explained his romantic aspect, his love of the high places. And he had been maimed for life by that magnificent mountain whose scarred slopes were now vividly before her eyes. The bright sunshine lit lakes and hills with its glory. A marvelous atmosphere made all things visible with microscopic fidelity. From Campfer to Silvaplana looked to be a ten minutes' drive, and from Silvaplana to Sils-Maria another quarter of an hour. Helen had to consult her watch and force herself to admit that the horses were trotting fully seven miles an hour before she realized that distances could be so deceptive. The summit of the lordly Corvatsch seemed to be absurdly near. She judged it within the scope of an easy walk between breakfast and afternoon tea from the hotel on a tree covered peninsula that stretched far out into Lake Sils-Maria, and she wondered why anyone should fall and break his leg during such a simple climb. Just to make sure, she glanced at the guidebook, and it gave her a shock when she saw the words, "Guides necessary,"—"Descent to Sils practicable only for experts,"—"Spend night at Roseg Inn,"—the route followed being that from Pontresina.

Then she recollected that the lovely valley she was traversing from beginning to end was itself six thousand feet above sea level,—that the observatory on rugged old Ben Nevis, which she had visited when in Scotland, was, metaphorically speaking, two thousand feet beneath the smooth road along which she was being driven, and that the highest peak on Corvatsch was still six thousand feet above her head. All at once, Helen felt subdued. The fancy seized her that the carriage was rumbling over the roof of the world. In a word, she was yielding to the exhilaration of high altitudes, and her brain was ready to spin wild fantasies.

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At Sils-Maria she was brought suddenly to earth again. It must not be forgotten that her driver was a St. Moritz man, and therefore at constant feud with the men from the Kursaal, who brought empty carriages to St. Moritz, and went back laden with the spoil that would otherwise

have fallen to the share of the local livery stables. Hence, he made it a point of honor to pass every Maloja owned vehicle on the road. Six times he succeeded, but, on the seventh, reversing the moral of Bruce's spider, he smashed the near hind wheel by attempting to slip between a landau and a stone post. Helen was almost thrown into the lake, and, for the life of her, she could not repress a scream. But the danger passed as rapidly as it had risen, and all that happened was that the carriage settled down lamely by the side of the road, with its weight resting on one of her boxes.

The driver spoke no more English. He bewailed his misfortune in free and fluent Italian of the Romansch order. [Pg 79]

But he understood German, and when Helen demanded imperatively that he should unharness the horses, and help to prop the carriage off a crumpled tin trunk that contained her best dresses, he recovered his senses, worked willingly, and announced with a weary grin that if the *gnädiche fräulein* would wait a little half-hour he would obtain another wheel from a neighboring forge.

Having recovered from her fright she was so touched by the poor fellow's distress that she promised readily to stand by him until repairs were effected. It was a longer job than either of them anticipated. The axle was slightly bent, and a blacksmith had to bring clamps and a jackscrew before the new wheel could be adjusted. Even then it had an air of uncertainty that rendered speed impossible. The concluding five miles of the journey were taken at a snail's pace, and Helen reflected ruefully that it was possible to "bruk ze leg" on the level high road as well as on the rocks of Corvatsch.

Of course, she received offers of assistance in plenty. Every carriage that passed while the blacksmith was at work pulled up and placed a seat therein at her command. But she refused them all. It was not that she feared to desert her baggage, for Switzerland is proverbially honest. The unlucky driver had tried to be friendly; his fault was due to an excess of zeal; and each time she declined the proffered help his furrowed face brightened. If she did not reach the hotel until midnight she was determined to go there in that vehicle, and in none other. [Pg 80]

The accident threw her late, but only by some two hours. Instead of arriving at Maloja in brilliant sunshine, it was damp and chilly when she entered the hotel. A bank of mist had been carried over the summit of the pass by a southwesterly wind. Long before the carriage crawled round the last great bend in the road the glorious panorama of lake and mountains was blotted out of sight. The horses seemed to be jogging on through a luminous cloud, so dense that naught was visible save a few yards of roadway and the boundary wall or stone posts on the left side, where lay the lake. The brightness soon passed, as the hurrying fog wraiths closed in on each other. It became bitterly cold too, and it was with intense gladness that Helen finally stepped from the outer gloom into a glass haven of warmth and light that formed a species of covered-in veranda in front of the hotel.

She was about to pay the driver, having added to the agreed sum half the cost of the broken wheel by way of a solatium, when another carriage drove up from the direction of St. Moritz.

She fancied that the occupant, a young man whom she had never seen before, glanced at her as though he knew her. She looked again to make sure; but by that time his eyes were turned away, so he had evidently discovered his mistake. Still, he seemed to take considerable interest in her carriage, and Helen, ever ready to concede the most generous interpretation of doubtful acts, assumed that he had heard of the accident by some means, and was on the lookout for her. [Pg 81]

It would indeed have been a fortunate thing for Helen had some Swiss fairy whispered the news of her mishap in Spencer's ears during the long drive up the mist laden valley. Then, at least, he might have spoken to her, and used the informal introduction to make her further acquaintance on the morrow. But the knowledge was withheld from him. No hint of it was even flashed through space by that wireless telegraphy which has existed between kin souls ever since men and women contrived to raise human affinities to a plane not far removed from the divine.

He had small store of German, but he knew enough to be perplexed by the way in which Helen's driver expressed "beautiful thanks" for her gift. The man seemed to be at once grateful and downhearted. Of course, the impression was of the slightest, but Spencer had been trained in reaching vital conclusions on meager evidence. He could not wait to listen to Helen's words, so he passed into the hotel, having the American habit of leaving the care of his baggage to the hall porter. He wondered why Helen was so late in arriving that he had caught her up on the very threshold of the Kursaal, so to speak. He would not forget the driver's face, and if he met the man again, it might be possible to find out the cause of the delay. He himself was before time. The federal railway authorities at Coire, awaking to the fact that the holiday rush was beginning, had actually dispatched a relief train to St. Moritz when the second important train of the day turned up as full as its predecessor. [Pg 82]

At dinner Helen and he sat at little tables in the same section of the huge dining hall. The hotel was nearly full, and it was noticeable that they were the only persons who dined alone. Indeed, the head waiter asked Spencer if he cared to join a party of men who sat together; but he declined. There was no such general gathering of women; so Helen was given no alternative, and she ate the meal in silence.

She saw Mrs. Vavasour in a remote part of the salon. With her was a vacuous looking young man who seldom spoke to her but was continually addressing remarks to a woman at another table.

"That is the son lost at Lucerne," she decided, finding in his face some of the physical traits but none of the calculating shrewdness of his mother.

After a repast of many courses Helen wandered into the great hall, found an empty chair, and longed for someone to speak to. At the first glance, everybody seemed to know everybody else. That was not really the case, of course. There were others present as neglected and solitary as Helen; but the noise and merriment of the greater number dominated the place. It resembled a social club rather than a hotel.

Her chair was placed in an alley along which people had to pass who wished to reach the glass covered veranda. She amused herself by trying to pick out the Wraggs, the Burnham-Joneses, and the de la Veres. Suddenly she was aware that Mrs. Vavasour and her son were coming that way; the son unwillingly, the mother with an air of determination. Perhaps the Lucerne episode was about to be explained.

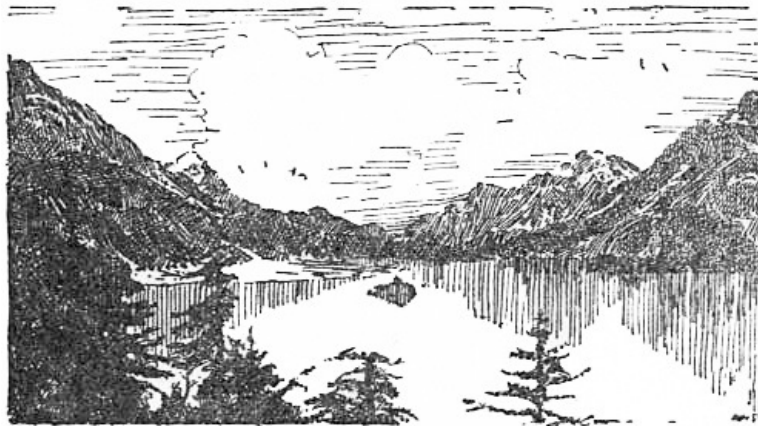
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When young Vavasour's eyes fell on Helen, the boredom vanished from his face. It was quite obvious that he called his mother's attention to her and asked who she was. Helen felt that an introduction was imminent. She was glad of it. At that moment she would have chatted gayly with even a greater ninny than George de Courcy Vavasour.

But she had not yet grasped the peculiar idiosyncrasies of a woman who was famous for snubbing those whom she considered to be "undesirables." Helen looked up with a shy smile, expecting that the older woman would stop and speak; but Mrs. Vavasour gazed at her blankly—looked at the back of her chair through her body—and walked on.

"I don't know, George," Helen heard her say. "There are a lot of new arrivals. Some person of no importance, rather déclassée, I should imagine by appearances. As I was telling you, the General has arranged——"

Taken altogether, Helen had crowded into portions of two days many new and some very unpleasant experiences.



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CHAPTER V

AN INTERLUDE

Helen rose betimes next morning; but she found that the sun had kept an earlier tryst. Not a cloud marred a sky of dazzling blue. The phantom mist had gone with the shadows. From her bed room window she could see the whole length of the Ober-Engadin, till the view was abruptly shut off by the giant shoulders of Lagrev and Rosatch. The brilliance of the coloring was the landscape's most astounding feature. The lakes were planes of polished turquoise, the rocks pure grays and browns and reds, the meadows emerald green, while the shining white patches of snow on the highest mountain slopes helped to blacken by contrast the somber clumps of pines that gathered thick wherever man had not disputed with the trees the tenancy of each foot of meager loam.

This morning glory of nature gladdened the girl's heart and drove from it the overnight vapors. She dressed hurriedly, made a light breakfast, and went out.

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There was no need to ask the way. In front of the hotel the narrow Silser See filled the valley. Close behind lay the crest of the pass. A picturesque château was perched on a sheer rock overhanging the Vale of Bregaglia and commanding a far flung prospect almost to the brink of Como. On both sides rose the mountain barriers; but toward the east there was an inviting gorge, beyond which the lofty Cima di Rosso flung its eternal snows heavenward.

A footpath led in that direction. Helen, who prided herself on her sense of locality, decided that it would bring her to the valley in which were situated, as she learned by the map, a small lake and a glacier.

"That will be a fine walk before lunch," she said, "and it is quite impossible to lose the way."

So she set off, crossing the hotel golf course, and making for a typical Swiss church that crowned the nearest of the foothills. Passing the church, she found the double doors in the porch open, and peeped in. It was a cozy little place, cleaner and less garish than such edifices are usually on the Continent. The lamp burning before the sanctuary showed that it was devoted to Roman Catholic worship. The red gleam of the tiny sentinel conveyed a curiously vivid impression of faith and spirituality. Though Helen was a Protestant, she was conscious of a benign emotion arising from the presence of this simple token of belief.

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"I must ascertain the hours of service," she thought. "It will be delightful to join the Swiss peasants in prayer. One might come near the Creator in this rustic tabernacle."

She did not cross the threshold of the inner door. At present her mind was fixed on brisk movement in the marvelous air. She wanted to absorb the sunshine, to dispel once and for all the unpleasing picture of life in the high Alps presented by the stupid crowd she had met in the hotel overnight. Of course, she was somewhat unjust there; but women are predisposed to trust first impressions, and Helen was no exception to her sex.

Beyond the church the path was not so definite. Oddly enough, it seemed to go along the flat top of a low wall down to a tiny mountain stream. Steps were cut in the opposite hillside, but they were little used, and higher up, among some dwarf pines and azaleas, a broader way wound back toward the few scattered chalets that nestled under the château.

As the guidebook spoke of a carriage road to Lake Cavloccio, and a bridle path thence to within a mile of the Forno glacier, she came to the conclusion that she was taking a short cut. At any rate, on the summit of the next little hill she would be able to see her way quite distinctly, so she jumped across the brook and climbed through the undergrowth. Before she had gone twenty yards she stopped. She was almost certain that someone was sobbing bitterly up there among the trees. It had an uncanny sound, this plaint of grief in such a quiet, sunlit spot. Still, sorrow was not an affrighting thing to Helen. It might stir her sympathies, but it assuredly could not drive her away in panic.

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She went on, not noiselessly, as she did not wish to intrude on some stranger's misery. Soon she came to a low wall, and, before she quite realized her surroundings, she was looking into a grass grown cemetery. It was a surprise, this ambush of the silent company among the trees. Hidden away from the outer world, and so secluded that its whereabouts remain unknown to thousands of people who visit the Maloja each summer, there was an aspect of stealth in its sudden discovery that was almost menacing. But Helen was not a nervous subject. The sobbing had ceased, and when the momentary effect of such a depressing environment had been resolutely driven off, she saw that a rusty iron gate was open. The place was very small. There were a few monuments, so choked with weeds and dank grass that their inscriptions were illegible. She had never seen a more desolate graveyard. Despite the vivid light and the joyous breeze rustling the pine branches, its air of abandonment was depressing. She fought against the sensation as unworthy of her intelligence; but she had some reason for it in the fact that there was no visible explanation of the mourning she had undoubtedly heard.

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Then she uttered an involuntary cry, for a man's head and shoulders rose from behind a leafy shrub. Instantly she was ashamed of her fear. It was the old guide who acted as coachman the previous evening, and he had been lying face downward on the grass in that part of the cemetery given over to the unnamed dead.

He recognized her at once. Struggling awkwardly to his feet, he said in broken and halting German, "I pray your forgiveness, *fräulein*. I fear I have alarmed you."

"It is I who should ask forgiveness," she said. "I came here by accident. I thought I could go to Cavloccio by this path."

She could have hit on no other words so well calculated to bring him back to every day life. To direct the steps of wanderers in his beloved Engadine was a real pleasure to him. For an instant he forgot that they had both spoken German.

"No, no!" he cried animatedly. "For lek him go by village. Bad road dissa way. No cross ze field. *Verboten!*"

Then Helen remembered that trespassers are sternly warned off the low lying lands in the mountains. Grass is scarce and valuable. Until the highest pastures yield to the arid rock, pedestrians must keep to the beaten track.

"I was quite mistaken," she said. "I see now that the path I was trying to reach leads here only. And I am very, very sorry I disturbed you."

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"I fear I have alarmed you, *fräulein*."

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He hobbled nearer, the ruin of a fine man, with a nobly proportioned head and shoulders, but sadly maimed by the accident which, to all appearances, made him useless as a guide.

"Pardon an old man's folly, *fräulein*," he said humbly. "I thought none could hear, and I felt the loss of my little girl more than ever to-day."

"Your daughter? Is she buried here?"

"Yes. Many a year has passed; but I miss her now more than ever. She was all I had in the world, *fräulein*. I am alone now, and that is a hard thing when the back is bent with age."

Helen's eyes grew moist; but she tried bravely to control her voice. "Was she young?" she asked softly.

"Only twenty, *fräulein*, only twenty, and as tall and fair as yourself. They carried her here sixteen years ago this very day. I did not even see her. On the previous night I fell on Corvatsch."

"Oh, how sad! But why did she die at that age? And in this splendid climate? Was her death unexpected?"

"Unexpected!" He turned and looked at the huge mountain of which the cemetery hill formed one of the lowermost buttresses. "If the Piz della Margna were to topple over and crush me where I stand, it would be less unforeseen than was my sweet Etta's fate. But I frighten you, lady,—a poor return for your kindness. That is your way,—through the village, and by the postroad till you reach a notice board telling you where to take the path."

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There was a crude gentility in his manner that added to the pathos of his words. Helen was sure that he wished to be left alone with his memories. Yet she lingered.

"Please tell me your name," she said. "I may visit St. Moritz while I remain here, and I shall try to find you."

"Christian Stampa," he said. He seemed to be on the point of adding something, but checked himself. "Christian Stampa," he repeated, after a pause. "Everybody knows old Stampa the guide. If I am not there, and you go to Zermatt some day—well, just ask for Stampa. They will tell you what has become of me."

She found it hard to reconcile this broken, careworn old man with her cheery companion of the previous afternoon. What did he mean? She understood his queer jargon of Italianized German quite clearly; but there was a sinister ring in his words that blanched her face. She could not leave him in his present mood. She was more alarmed now than when she saw him rising ghostlike from behind the screen of grass and weeds.

"Please walk with me to the village," she said. "All this beautiful land is strange to me. It will divert your thoughts from a mournful topic if you tell me something of its wonders."

He looked at her for an instant. Then his eyes fell on the church in the neighboring hollow, and he crossed himself, murmuring a few words in Italian. She guessed their meaning. He was

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thanking the Virgin for having sent to his rescue a girl who reminded him of his lost Etta.

"Yes," he said, "I will come. If I were remaining in the Maloja, *fräulein*, I would beg you to let me take you to the Forno, and perhaps to one of the peaks beyond. Old as I am, and lame, you would be safe with me."

Helen breathed freely again. She felt that she had been within measurable distance of a tragedy. Nor was there any call on her wits to devise fresh means of drawing his mind away from the madness that possessed him a few minutes earlier. As he limped unevenly by her side, his talk was of the mountains. Did she intend to climb? Well, slow and sure was the golden rule. Do little or nothing during four or five days, until she had grown accustomed to the thin and keen Alpine air. Then go to Lake Lunghino,—that would suffice for the first real excursion. Next day, she ought to start early, and climb the mountain overlooking that same lake,—up there, on the other side of the hotel,—all rock and not difficult. If the weather was clear, she would have a grand view of the Bernina range. Next she might try the Forno glacier. It was a simple thing. She could go to and from the *cabane* in ten hours. Afterward, the Cima di Rosso offered an easy climb; but that meant sleeping at the hut. All of which was excellent advice, though the reflection came that Stampa's "slow and sure" methods were not strongly in evidence some sixteen hours earlier.

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Now, the Cima di Rosso was in full view at that instant. Helen stopped.

"Do you really mean to tell me that if I wish to reach the top of that mountain, I must devote two days to it?" she cried.

Stampa, though bothered with troubles beyond her ken, forgot them sufficiently to laugh grimly. "It is farther away than you seem to think, *fräulein*; but the real difficulty is the ice. Unless you cross some of the crevasses in the early morning, before the sun has had time to undo the work accomplished by the night's frost, you run a great risk. And that is why you must be ready to start from the *cabane* at dawn. Moreover, at this time of year, you get the finest view about six o'clock."

The mention of crevasses was somewhat awesome. "Is it necessary to be roped when one tries that climb?" she asked.

"If any guide ever tells you that you need not be roped while crossing ice or climbing rock, turn back at once, *fräulein*. Wait for another day, and go with a man who knows his business. That is how the Alps get a bad name for accidents. Look at me! I have climbed the Matterhorn forty times, and the Jungfrau times out of count, and never did I or anyone in my care come to grief. 'Use the rope properly,' is my motto, and it has never failed me, not even when two out of five of us were struck senseless by falling stones on the south side of Monte Rosa."

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Helen experienced another thrill. "I very much object to falling stones," she said.

Stampa threw out his hands in emphatic gesture. "What can one do?" he cried. "They are always a danger, like the snow cornice and the *névé*. There is a chimney on the Jungfrau through which stones are constantly shooting from a height of two thousand feet. You cannot see them,—they travel too fast for the eye. You hear something sing past your ears, that is all. Occasionally there is a report like a gunshot, and then you observe a little cloud of dust rising from a new scar on a rock. If you are hit—well, there is no dust, because the stone goes right through. Of course one does not loiter there."

Then, seeing the scared look on her face, he went on. "Ladies should not go to such places. It is not fit. But for men, yes. There is the joy of battle. Do not err, *fräulein*,—the mountains are alive. And they fight to the death. They can be beaten; but there must be no mistakes. They are like strong men, the hills. When you strive against them, strain them to your breast and never relax your grip. Then they yield slowly, with many a trick and false move that a man must learn if he would look down over them all and say, 'I am lord here.' Ah me! Shall I ever again cross the Col du Lion or climb the Great Tower? But there! I am old, and thrown aside. Boys whom I engaged as porters would refuse me now as their porter. Better to have died like my friend, Michel Croz, than live to be a goatherd."

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He seemed to pull himself up with an effort. "That way—to your left—you cannot miss the path. *Addio, signorina*," and he lifted his hat with the inborn grace of the peasantry of Southern Europe.

Helen was hoping that he might elect to accompany her to Cavloccio. She would willingly have paid him for loss of time. Her ear was becoming better tuned each moment to his strange patois. Though he often gave a soft Italian inflection to the harsh German syllables, she grasped his meaning quite literally. She had read so much about Switzerland that she knew how Michel Croz was killed while descending the Matterhorn after having made the first ascent. That historic accident happened long before she was born. To hear a man speak of Croz as a friend sounded almost unbelievable, though a moment's thought told her that Whympfer, who led the attack on the hitherto impregnable Cervin on that July day in 1865, was still living, a keen Alpinist.

She could not refrain from asking Stampa one question, though she imagined that he was now in a hurry to take the damaged carriage back to St. Moritz. "Michel Croz was a brave man," she said. "Did you know him well?"

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"I worshiped him, *fräulein*," was the reverent answer. "May I receive pardon in my last hour, but I took him for an evil spirit on the day of his death! I was with Jean Antoine Carrel in Signor

Giordano's party. We started from Breuil, Croz and his voyageurs from Zermatt. We failed; he succeeded. When we saw him and his Englishmen on the summit, we believed they were devils, because they yelled in triumph, and started an avalanche of stones to announce their victory. Three days later, Carrel and I, with two men from Breuil, tried again. We gained the top that time, and passed the place where Croz was knocked over by the English milord and the others who fell with him. I saw three bodies on the glacier four thousand feet below,—a fine burial-ground, better than that up there."

He looked back at the pines which now hid the cemetery wall from sight. Then, with another courteous sweep of his hat, he walked away, covering the ground rapidly despite his twisted leg.

If Helen had been better trained as a woman journalist, she would have regarded this meeting with Stampa as an incident of much value. Long experience of the lights and shades of life might have rendered her less sensitive. As it was, the man's personality appealed to her. She had been vouchsafed a glimpse into an abyss profound as that into which Stampa himself peered on the day he discovered three of the four who fell from the Matterhorn still roped together in death. The old man's simple references to the terrors lurking in those radiant mountains had also shaken her somewhat. The snow capped Cima di Rosso no longer looked so attractive. The Orlegna Gorge had lost some of its beauty. Though the sun was pouring into its wooded depths, it had grown gloomy and somber in her eyes. Yielding to impulse, she loitered in the village, took the carriage road to the château, and sat there, with her back to the inner heights and her gaze fixed on the smiling valley that opened toward Italy out of the Septimer Pass.

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Meanwhile, Stampa hurried past the stables, where his horses were munching the remains of the little oaten loaves which form the staple food of hard worked animals in the Alps. He entered the hotel by the main entrance, and was on his way to the manager's bureau, when Spencer, smoking on the veranda, caught sight of him.

Instantly the American started in pursuit. By this time he had heard of Helen's accident from one of yesterday's passers by. It accounted for the delay; but he was anxious to learn exactly what had happened.

Stampa reached the office first. He was speaking to the manager, when Spencer came in and said in his downright way:

"This is the man who drove Miss Wynton from St. Moritz last night. I don't suppose I shall be able to understand what he says. Will you kindly ask him what caused the trouble?"

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"It is quite an easy matter," was the smiling response. "Poor Stampa is not only too eager to pass every other vehicle on the road, but he is inclined to watch the mountains rather than his horses' ears. He was a famous guide once; but he met with misfortune, and took to carriage work as a means of livelihood. He has damaged his turnout twice this year; so this morning he was dismissed by telephone, and another driver is coming from St. Moritz to take his place."

Spencer looked at Stampa. He liked the strong, worn face, with its half wistful, half resigned expression. An uneasy feeling gripped him that the whim of a moment in the Embankment Hotel might exert its crazy influence in quarters far removed from the track that seemed then to be so direct and pleasure-giving.

"Why did he want to butt in between the other fellow and the landscape? What was the hurry, anyhow?" he asked.

Stampa smiled genially when the questions were translated to him. "I was talking to the *signorina*," he explained, using his native tongue, for he was born on the Italian side of the Bernina.

"That counts, but it gives no good reason why he should risk her life," objected Spencer.

Stampa's weather furrowed cheeks reddened. "There was no danger," he muttered wrathfully. "Madonna! I would lose the use of another limb rather than hurt a hair of her head. Is she not my good angel? Has she not drawn me back from the gate of hell? Risk her life! Are people saying that because a worm-eaten wheel went to pieces against a stone?"

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"What on earth is he talking about?" demanded Spencer. "Has he been pestering Miss Wynton this morning with some story of his present difficulties?"

The manager knew Stampa's character. He put the words in kindlier phrase. "Does the *signorina* know that you have lost your situation?" he said.

Even in that mild form, the suggestion annoyed the old man. He flung it aside with scornful gesture, and turned to leave the office. "Tell the gentleman to go to Zermatt and ask in the street if Christian Stampa the guide would throw himself on a woman's charity," he growled.

Spencer did not wait for any interpretation. "Hold on," he said quietly. "What is he going to do now? Work, for a man of his years, doesn't grow on gooseberry bushes, I suppose."

"Christian, Christian! You are hot-headed as a boy," cried the manager. "The fact is," he went on, "he came to me to offer his services. But I have already engaged more drivers than I need, and I am dismissing some stable men. Perhaps he can find a job in St. Moritz."

"Are his days as guide ended?"

"Unfortunately, yes. I believe he is as active as ever; but people won't credit it. And you cannot blame them. When one's safety depends on a man who may have to cling to an ice covered rock like a fly to a window-pane, one is apt to distrust a crooked leg."

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"Did he have an accident?"

The manager hesitated. "It is part of his sad history," he said. "He fell, and nearly killed himself; but he was hurrying to see the last of a daughter to whom he was devoted."

"Is he a local man, then?"

"No. Oh, no! The girl happened to be here when the end came."

"Well, I guess he will suit my limited requirements in the fly and window-pane business while I remain in Maloja," said Spencer. "Tell him I am willing to put up ten francs a day and extras for his exclusive services as guide during my stay."

Poor Stampa was nearly overwhelmed by this unexpected good fortune. In his agitation he blurted out, "Ah, then, the good God did really send an angel to my help this morning!"

Spencer, however, reviewing his own benevolence over a pipe outside the hotel, expressed the cynical opinion that the hot sun was affecting his brain. "I'm on a loose end," he communed. "Next time I waft myself to Europe on a steamer I'll bring my mother. It would be a bully fine notion to cable for her right away. I want someone to take care of me. It looks as if I had a cinch on running this hotel gratis. What in thunder will happen next?"

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He could surely have answered that query if he had the least inkling of the circumstances governing Helen's prior meeting with Stampa. As it was, the development of events followed the natural course. While Spencer strolled off by the side of the lake, the old guide lumbered into the village street, and waited there, knowing that he would waylay the *bella Inglesa* on her return. Though she came from the château and not from Cavloccio, he did not fail to see her.

At first she was at a loss to fathom the cause of Stampa's delight, and still less to understand why he should want to thank her with such exuberance. She imagined he was overjoyed at having gone back to his beloved profession, and it was only by dint of questioning that she discovered the truth. Then it dawned on her that the man had been goaded to desperation by the curt message from St. Moritz,—that he was sorely tempted to abandon the struggle, and follow into the darkness the daughter taken from him so many years ago,—and the remembrance of her suspicion when they were about to part at the cemetery gate lent a serious note to her words of congratulation.

"You see, Stampa," she said, "you were very wrong to lose faith this morning. At the very moment of your deepest despair Heaven was providing a good friend for you."

"Yes, indeed, *fräulein*. That is why I waited here. I felt that I must thank you. It was all through you. The good God sent you——"

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"I think you are far more beholden to the gentleman who employed you than to me," she broke in.

"Yes, he is splendid, the young *voyageur*; but it was wholly on your account, lady. He was angry with me at first, because he thought I placed you in peril in the matter of the wheel."

Helen was amazed. "He spoke of me?" she cried.

"Ah, yes. He did not say much, but his eyes looked through me. He has the eyes of a true man, that young American."

She was more bewildered than ever. "What is his name?" she asked.

"Here it is. The director wrote it for me, so that I may learn how to pronounce it."

Stampa produced a scrap of paper, and Helen read, "Mr. Charles K. Spencer."

"Are you quite certain he mentioned me?" she repeated.

"Can I be mistaken, *fräulein*. I know, because I studied the labels on your boxes. Mees Hélène Weenton—so? And did he not rate me about the accident?"

"Well, wonders will never cease," she vowed; and indeed they were only just beginning in her life, which shows how blind to excellent material wonders can be.

At luncheon she summoned the head waiter. "Is there a Mr. Charles K. Spencer staying in the hotel?" she asked.

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"Yes, madam."

"Will you please tell me if he is in the room?"

The head waiter turned. Spencer was studying the menu. "Yes, madam. There he is, sitting alone, at the second table from the window."

It was quite to be expected that the subject of their joint gaze should look at them instantly. There is a magnetism in the human eye that is unailing in that respect, and its power is

increased a hundredfold when a charming young woman tries it on a young man who happens to be thinking of her at the moment.

Then Spencer realized that Stampa had told Helen what had taken place in the hotel bureau, and he wanted to kick himself for having forgotten to make secrecy a part of the bargain.

Helen, knowing that he knew, blushed furiously. She tried to hide her confusion by murmuring something to the head waiter. But in her heart she was saying, "Who in the world is he? I have never seen him before last night. And why am I such an idiot as to tremble all over just because he happened to catch me looking at him?"



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CHAPTER VI

THE BATTLEFIELD

Both man and woman were far too well bred to indulge in an *œillade*. The knowledge that each was thinking of the other led rather to an ostentatious avoidance of anything that could be construed into any such flirtatious overture.

Though Stampa's curious statement had puzzled Helen, she soon hit on the theory that the American must have heard of the accident to her carriage. Yes, that supplied a ready explanation. No doubt he kept a sharp lookout for her on the road. He arrived at the hotel almost simultaneously with herself, and she had not forgotten his somewhat inquiring glance as they stood together on the steps. With the chivalry of his race in all things concerning womankind, he was eager to render assistance, and under the circumstances he probably wondered what sort of damsel in distress it was that needed help. It was natural enough too that in engaging Stampa he should refer to the carelessness that brought about the collapse of the wheel. Really, when one came to analyze an incident seemingly inexplicable, it resolved itself into quite commonplace constituents.

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She found it awkward that he should be sitting between her and a window commanding the best view of the lake. If Spencer had been at any other table, she could have feasted her eyes on the whole expanse of the Ober-Engadin Valley. Therefore she had every excuse for looking that way, whereas he had none for gazing at her. Spencer appeared to be aware of this disability. For lack of better occupation he scrutinized the writing on the menu with a prolonged intentness worthy of a gourmand or an expert graphologist.

Helen rose first, and that gave him an opportunity to note her graceful carriage. Though born in the States, he was of British stock, and he did not share the professed opinion of the American humorist that the typical Englishwoman is angular, has large feet, and does not know how to walk. Helen, at any rate, betrayed none of these elements of caricature. Though there were several so-called "smart" women in the hotel,—women who clung desperately to the fringe of Society on both sides of the Atlantic,—his protégée was easily first among the few who had any claim to good looks.

Helen was not only tall and lithe, but her movements were marked by a quiet elegance. It was her custom, in nearly all weathers, to walk from Bayswater to Professor von Eulenberg's study, which, needless to say, was situated near the British Museum. She usually returned by a longer route, unless pelting rain or the misery of London snow made the streets intolerable. Thus there was hardly a day that she did not cover eight miles at a rapid pace, a method of training that eclipsed all the artifices of beauty doctors and schools of deportment. Her sweetly pretty face, her abundance of shining brown hair, her slim, well proportioned figure, and the almost athletic swing of her well arched shoulders, would entitle her to notice in a gathering of beauties far more noted than those who graced Maloja with their presence that year. In addition to these physical attractions she carried with her the rarer and indefinable aura of the born aristocrat. As it happened, she merited that description both by birth and breeding; but there is a vast company entitled to consideration on that score to whom nature has cruelly denied the necessary hallmarks—otherwise the pages of Burke would surely be embellished with portraits.

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Indeed, so far as appearance went, it was rather ludicrous to regard Helen as the social inferior of any person then resident in the Kursaal, and it is probable that a glimmering knowledge of this fact inflamed Mrs. de Courcy Vavasour's wrath to boiling point, when a few minutes later, she saw her son coolly walk up to the "undesirable" and enter into conversation with her.

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Helen was seated in a shady corner. A flood of sunlight filled the glass covered veranda with a grateful warmth. She had picked up an astonishingly well written and scholarly guide book issued by the proprietors of the hotel, and was deep in its opening treatise on the history and racial characteristics of the Engadiners, when she was surprised at hearing herself addressed by name.

"Er—Miss—er—Wynton, I believe?" said a drawling voice.

Looking up, she found George de Courcy Vavasour bending over her in an attitude that betokened the utmost admiration for both parties to the tête-à-tête. Under ordinary conditions,—that is to say, if Vavasour's existence depended on his own exertions,—Helen's eyes would have dwelt on a gawky youth endowed with a certain pertness that might in time have brought him from behind the counter of a drapery store to the wider arena of the floor. As it was, a reasonably large income gave him unbounded assurance, and his credit with a good tailor was unquestionable. He represented a British product that flourishes best in alien soil. There exists a foreign legion of George de Courcy Vavasours, flaccid heroes of fashion plates, whose parade grounds change with the seasons from Paris to the Riviera, and from the Riviera to some nook in the Alps. Providence and a grandfather have conspired in their behalf to make work unnecessary; but Providence, more far-seeing than grandfathers, has decreed that they shall be effete and light brained, so the type does not endure.

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Helen, out of the corner of her eye, became aware that Mrs. de Courcy Vavasour was advancing with all the plumes of the British matron ruffled for battle. It was not in human nature that the girl should not recall the slight offered her the previous evening. With the thought came the temptation to repay it now with interest; but she thrust it aside.

"Yes, that is my name," she said, smiling pleasantly.

"Well—er—the General has asked me to—er—invite you take part in some of our tournaments. We have tennis, you know, an' golf, an' croquet, an' that sort of thing. Of course, you play tennis, an' I rather fancy you're a golfer as well. You look that kind of girl—Eh, what?"

He caressed a small mustache as he spoke, using the finger and thumb of each hand alternately, and Helen noticed that his hands were surprisingly large when compared with his otherwise fragile frame.

"Who is the General?" she inquired.

"Oh, Wragg, you know. He looks after everything in the amusement line, an' I help. Do let me put you down for the singles an' mixed doubles. None of the women here can play for nuts, an' I haven't got a partner yet for the doubles. I've been waitin' for someone like you to turn up."

"You have not remained long in suspense," she could not help saying. "You are Mr. Vavasour, are you not?"

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"Yes, better known as Georgie."

"And you arrived in Maloja last evening, I think. Well, I do play tennis, or rather, I used to play fairly well some years ago——"

"By gad! just what I thought. Go slow in your practice games, Miss Wynton, an' you'll have a rippin' handicap."

"Would that be quite honest?" said Helen, lifting her steadfast brown eyes to meet his somewhat too free scrutiny.

"Honest? Rather! You wait till you see the old guard pullin' out a bit when they settle down to real business. But the General is up to their little dodges. He knows their form like a book, an' he gets every one of 'em shaken out by the first round—Eh, what?"

"The arrangement seems to be ideal if one is friendly with the General," said Helen.

Vavasour drew up a chair. He also drew up the ends of his trousers, thus revealing that the Pomeranian brown and myrtle green stripes in his necktie were faithfully reproduced in his socks, while these master tints were thoughtfully developed in the subdominant hues of his clothes and boots.

"By Jove! what a stroke of luck I should have got hold of you first!" he chuckled. "I'm pretty good at the net, Miss Wynton. If we manage things properly, we ought to have the mixed doubles a gift with plus half forty, an' in the ladies' singles you'll be a Queen's Club champion at six-stone nine—Eh, what?"

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Though Vavasour represented a species of inane young man whom Helen detested, she bore with him because she hungered for the sound of an English voice in friendly converse this bright morning. At times her life was lonely enough in London; but she had never felt her isolation there. The great city appealed to her in all its moods. Her cheerful yet sensitive nature did not shrink from contact with its hurrying crowds. The mere sense of aloofness among so many

millions of people brought with it the knowledge that she was one of them, a human atom plunged into a heedless vortex the moment she passed from her house into the street.

Here in Maloja things were different. While her own identity was laid bare, while men and women canvassed her name, her appearance, her occupation, she was cut off from them by a social wall of their own contriving. The attitude of the younger women told her that trespassers were forbidden within that sacred fold. She knew now that she had done a daring thing—outraged one of the cheap conventions—in coming alone to this clique-ridden Swiss valley. Better a thousand times have sought lodgings in some small village inn, and mixed with the homely folk who journeyed thither on the diligence or tramped joyously afoot, than strive to win the sympathy of any of these shallow nonentities of the smart set.

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Even while listening to "Georgie's" efforts to win her smiles with slangy confidences, she saw that Mrs. Vavasour had halted in mid career, and joined a group of women, evidently a mother and two daughters, and that she herself was the subject of their talk. She wondered why. She was somewhat perplexed when the conclave broke up suddenly, the girls going to the door, Mrs. Vavasour retreating majestically to the far end of the veranda, and the other elderly woman drawing a short, fat, red faced man away from a discussion with another man.

"Jolly place, this," Vavasour was saying. "There's dancin' most nights. The dowager brigade want the band to play classical music, an' that sort of rot, you know; but Mrs. de la Vere and the Wragg girls like a hop, an' we generally arrange things our own way. We'll have a dance to-night if you wish it; but you must promise to——"

"Georgie," cried the pompous little man, "I want you a minute!"

Vavasour swung round. Evidently he regarded the interruption as "a beastly bore." "All right, General," he said airily. "I'll be there soon. No hurry, is there?"

"Yes, I want you now!" The order was emphatic. The General's only military asset was a martinet voice, and he made the most of it.

"Rather rotten, isn't it, interferin' with a fellow in this way?" muttered Vavasour. "Will you excuse me? I must see what the old boy is worryin' about. I shall come back soon—Eh, what?"

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"I am going out," said Helen; "but we shall meet again. I remain here a month."

"You'll enter for the tournament?" he asked over his shoulder.

"I—think so. It will be something to do."

"Thanks awfully. And don't forget to-night."

Helen laughed. She could not help it. The younger members of the Wragg family were eying her sourly through the glass partition. They seemed to be nice girls too, and she made up her mind to disillusion them speedily if they thought that she harbored designs on the callow youth whom they probably regarded as their own special cavalier.

When she passed through the inner doorway to go to her room she noticed that the General was giving Georgie some instructions which were listened to in sulky silence. Indeed, that remarkable ex-warrior was laying down the law of the British parish with a clearness that was admirable. He had been young himself once,—dammit!—and had as keen an eye for a pretty face as any other fellow; but no gentleman could strike up an acquaintance with an unattached female under the very nose of his mother, not to mention the noses of other ladies who were his friends. Georgie broke out in protest.

"Oh, but I say, General, she is a lady, an' you yourself said——"

"I know I did. I was wrong. Even a wary old bird like me can make a mistake. Mrs. Vavasour has just warned my wife about her. It's no good arguing, Georgie, my boy. Nowadays you can't draw the line too rigidly. Things permissible in Paris or Nice won't pass muster here. I'm sorry, Georgie. She's a high stepper and devilish taking, I admit. Writes for some ha'penny rag—er—for some cheap society paper, I hear. Why, dash it all, she will be lampooning us in it before we know where we are. Just you go and tell your mother you'll behave better in future. Excellent woman, Mrs. Vavasour. She never makes a mistake. Gad! don't you remember how she spotted that waiter from the Ritz who gulled the lot of us at the Jetée last winter? Took him for the French marquis he said he was, every one of us, women and all, till Mrs. V. fixed her eye on him and said, 'Gustave!' Damme! how he curled up!"

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George was still obdurate. A masquerading waiter differed from Helen in many essentials. "He was a Frenchman, an' they're mostly rotters. This girl is English, General, an' I shall look a proper sort of an ass if I freeze up suddenly after what I've said to her."

"Not for the first time, my boy, and mebbe not for the last." Then, in view of the younger man's obvious defiance, the General's white mustache bristled. "Of course, you can please yourself," he growled: "but neither Mrs. Wragg nor my daughters will tolerate your acquaintance with that person!"

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"Oh, all right, General," came the irritated answer. "Between you an' the mater I've got to come to heel; but it's a beastly shame, I say, an' you're all makin' a jolly big mistake."

Georgie's intelligence might be superficial; but he knew a lady when he met one, and Helen had

attracted him powerfully. He was thanking his stars for the good fortune that numbered him among the earliest of her acquaintances in the hotel, and it was too bad that the barring edict should have been issued against her so unexpectedly. But he was not of a fighting breed, and he quailed before the threat of Mrs. Wragg's displeasure.

Helen, after a delightful ramble past the château and along the picturesque turns and twists of the Colline des Artistes, returned in time for tea, which was served on the veranda, the common rendezvous of the hotel during daylight. No one spoke to her. She went out again, and walked by the lake till the shadows fell and the mountains glittered in purple and gold. She dressed herself in a simple white evening frock, dined in solitary state, and ventured into the ball room after dinner.

Georgie was dancing with Mrs. de la Vere, a languid looking woman who seemed to be pining for admiration. At the conclusion of the waltz that was going on when Helen entered, Vavasour brought his partner a whisky and soda and a cigarette. He passed Helen twice, but ignored her, and whirled one of the Wragg girls off into a polka. Again he failed to see her when parties were being formed for a quadrille. Even to herself she did not attempt to deny a feeling of annoyance, though she extracted a bitter amusement from the knowledge that she had been slighted by such a vapid creature.

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She was under no misconception as to what had happened. The women were making a dead set against her. If she had been plain or dowdy, they might have been friendly enough. It was an unpardonable offense that she should be good looking, unchaperoned, and not one of the queerly assorted mixture they deemed their *monde*. For a few minutes she was really angry. She realized that her only crime was poverty. Given a little share of the wealth held by many of these *passée* matrons and bold-eyed girls, she would be a reigning star among them, and could act and talk as she liked. Yet her shyness and reserve would have been her best credentials to any society that was constituted on a sounder basis than a gathering of snobs. Among really well-born people she would certainly have been received on an equal footing until some valid reason for ostracism was forthcoming. The imported limpets on this Swiss rock of gentility were not sure of their own grip. Hence, they strenuously refused to make room for a newcomer until they were shoved aside.

Poor, disillusioned Helen! When she went to church she prayed to the good Lord to deliver her and everybody else from envy, hatred, and malice, and all uncharitableness. She felt now that there might well be added to the Litany a fresh petition which should include British communities on the Continent in the list of avoidable evils.

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At that instant the piquant face and figure of Millicent Jaques rose before her mind's eye. She pictured to herself the cool effrontery with which the actress would crush these waspish women by creating a court of every eligible man in the place. It was not a healthy thought, but it was the offspring of sheer vexation, and Helen experienced her second temptation that day when de la Vere, the irresistible "Reginald" of Mrs. Vavasour's sketchy reminiscences, came and asked her to dance.

She recognized him at once. He sat with Mrs. de la Vere at table, and never spoke to her unless it was strictly necessary. He had distinguished manners, a pleasant voice, and a charming smile, and he seemed to be the devoted slave of every pretty woman in the hotel except his wife.

"Please pardon the informality," he said, with an affability that cloaked the impertinence. "We are quite a family party at Maloja. I hear you are staying here some weeks, and we are bound to get to know each other sooner or later."

Helen could dance well. She was so mortified by the injustice meted out to her that she almost accepted de la Vere's partnership on the spur of the moment. But her soul rebelled against the man's covert insolence, and she said quietly:

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"No, thank you. I do not care to dance."

"May I sit here and talk?" he persisted.

"I am just going," she said, "and I think Mrs. de la Vere is looking for you."

By happy chance the woman in question was standing alone in the center of the ball room, obviously in quest of some man who would take her to the foyer for a cigarette. Helen retreated with the honors of war; but the irresistible one only laughed.

"That idiot Georgie told the truth, then," he admitted. "And she knows what the other women are saying. What cats these dear creatures can be, to be sure!"

Spencer happened to be an interested onlooker. Indeed, he was trying to arrive at the best means of obtaining an introduction to Helen when he saw de la Vere stroll leisurely up to her with the assured air of one sated by conquest. The girl brushed close to him as he stood in the passage. She held her head high and her eyes were sparkling. He had not heard what was said; but de la Vere's discomfiture was so patent that even his wife smiled as she sailed out on the arm of a youthful purveyor of cigarettes.

Spencer longed for an opportunity to kick de la Vere; yet, in some sense, he shared that redoubtable lady-killer's rebuff. He too was wondering if the social life of a Swiss hotel would permit him to seek a dance with Helen. Under existing conditions, it would provide quite a humorous episode, he told himself, to strike up a friendship with her. He could not imagine why

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she had adopted such an aloof attitude toward all and sundry; but it was quite evident that she declined anything in the guise of promiscuous acquaintance. And he, like her, felt lonely. There were several Americans in the hotel, and he would probably meet some of the men in the bar or smoking room after the dance was ended. But he would have preferred a pleasant chat with Helen that evening, and now she had gone to her room in a huff.

Then an inspiration came to him. "Guess I'll stir up Mackenzie to send along an introduction," he said. "A telegram will fix things."

It was not quite so easy to explain matters in the curt language of the wire, he found, and it savored of absurdity to amaze the beer-drinking Scot with a long message. So he compromised between desire and expediency by a letter.

"DEAR MR. MACKENZIE," he wrote, "life is not rapid at this terminus. It might take on some new features if I had the privilege of saying 'How de do' to Miss Wynton. Will you oblige me by telling her that one of your best and newest friends happens to be in the same hotel as her charming self, and that if she gets him to sparkle, he (which is I) will help considerable with copy for 'The Firefly.' Advise me by same post, and the rest of the situation is up to yours faithfully,

"C. K. S."

The letter was posted, and Spencer waited five tiresome days. He saw little or nothing of Helen save at meals. Once he met her on a footpath that runs through a wood by the side of the lake to the little hamlet of Isola, and he was minded to raise his hat, as he would have done to any other woman in the hotel whom he encountered under similar circumstances; but she deliberately looked away, and his intended courtesy must have passed unheeded.

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As he sedulously avoided any semblance of dogging her footsteps, he could not know how she was being persecuted by de la Vere, Vavasour, and one or two other men of like habit. That knowledge was yet to come. Consequently he deemed her altogether too prudish, and was so out of patience with her that he and Stampa went off for a two days' climb by way of the Muretto Pass to Chiareggio and back to Sils-Maria over the Fex glacier.

Footsore and tired, but thoroughly converted to the marvels of the high Alps, he reached the Kursaal side by side with the postman who brought the chief English mail about six o'clock each evening.

He waited with an eager crowd of residents while the hall porter sorted the letters. There were some for him from America, and one from London in a handwriting that was strange to him. But he had quick eyes, and he saw that a letter addressed to Miss Helen Wynton, in the flamboyant envelope of "The Firefly," bore the same script.

Mackenzie had risen to the occasion. He even indulged in a classical joke. "There is something in the name of Helen that attracts," he said. "Were it not for the lady whose face drew a thousand ships to Ilium, we should never have heard of Paris, or Troy, or the heel of Achilles, and all these would be greatly missed."

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"And I should never have heard of Mackenzie or Maloja," thought Spencer, sinking into a chair and looking about to learn whether or not the girl would find her letter before he went to dress for dinner. He was sure she knew his name. Perhaps when she read the editor's note, she too would search the spacious lounge with those fine eyes of hers for the man described therein. If that were so, he meant to go to her instantly, discuss the strangeness of the coincidence that led to two of Mackenzie's friends being at the hotel at the same time, and suggest that they should dine together.

The project seemed feasible, and it was decidedly pleasant in perspective. He longed to compare notes with her,—to tell her the quaint stories of the hills related to him by Stampa in a medley of English, French, Italian, and German; perhaps to plan delightful trips to the fairyland in company.

People began to clear away from the hall porter's table; yet Helen remained invisible. He could hardly have missed her; but to make certain he rose and glanced at the few remaining letters. Yes, "The Firefly's" gaudy imprint still gleamed at him. He turned way, disappointed. After his long tramp and a night in a weird Italian inn, a bath was imperative, and the boom of the dressing gong was imminent.

He was crossing the hall toward the elevator when he heard her voice.

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"I am so glad you are keen on an early climb," she was saying, with a new note of confidence that stirred him strangely. "I have been longing to leave the sign boards and footpaths far behind, but I felt rather afraid of going to the Forno for the first time with a guide. You see, I know nothing about mountaineering, and you can put me up to all the dodges beforehand."

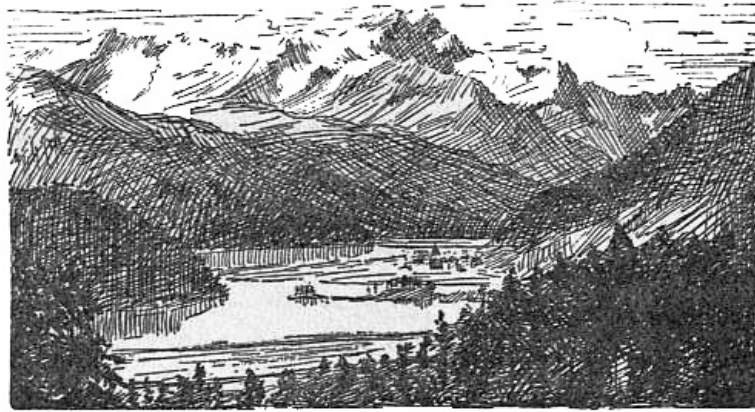
"Show you the ropes, in fact," agreed the man with her, Mark Bower.

Spencer was so completely taken by surprise that he could only stare at the two as though they were ghosts. They had entered the hotel together, and had apparently been out for a walk. Helen picked up her letter and held it carelessly in her hand while she continued to talk with Bower. Her pleasurable excitement was undeniable. She regarded her companion as a friend, and was

evidently overjoyed at his presence. Spencer banged into the elevator, astonished the attendant and two other occupants by the savagery of his command, "Au deuxième, vite!" and paced through a long corridor with noisy clatter of hob-nailed boots.

He was in a rare fret and fume when he sat down to dinner alone. Bower was at Helen's table. It was brightened by rare flowers not often seen in sterile Maloja. A bottle of champagne rested in an ice bucket by his side. He had brought with him the atmosphere of London, of the pleasant life that London offers to those who can buy her favors. Truly this Helen, all unconsciously, had not only found the heel of a modern Achilles, but was wounding him sorely. For now Spencer knew that he wanted to see her frank eyes smiling into his as they were smiling into Bower's, and, no matter what turn events took, a sinister element had been thrust into a harmless idyl by this man's arrival.

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CHAPTER VII

SOME SKIRMISHING

Later, the American saw the two sitting in the hall. They were chatting with the freedom of old friends. Helen's animated face showed that the subject of their talk was deeply interesting. She was telling Bower of the slights inflicted on her by the other women; but Spencer interpreted her intent manner as supplying sufficient proof of a stronger emotion than mere friendliness. He was beginning to detest Bower.

It was his habit to decide quickly when two ways opened before him. He soon settled his course now. To remain in the hotel under present conditions involved a loss of self respect, he thought. He went to the bureau, asked for his account, and ordered a carriage to St. Moritz for the morrow's fast train to England.

The manager was politely regretful. "You are leaving us at the wrong time, sir," he said. "Within the next few days we ought to have a midsummer storm, when even the lower hills will be covered with snow. Then, we usually enjoy a long spell of magnificent weather."

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"Sorry," said Spencer. "I like the scramble up there," and he nodded in the direction of the Bernina range, "and old Stampa is a gem of a guide; but I can hardly put off any longer some business that needs attention in England. Anyway, I shall come back, perhaps next month. Stampa says it is all right here in September."

"Our best month, I assure you, and the ideal time to drop down into Italy when you are tired of the mountains."

"I must let it go at that. I intend to fix Stampa so that he can remain here till the end of the season. So you see I mean to return."

"He was very fortunate in meeting you, Mr. Spencer," said the manager warmly.

"Well, it is time he had a slice of luck. I've taken a fancy to the old fellow. One night, in the Forno hut, he told me something of his story. I guess it will please him to stop at the Maloja for awhile."

"He told you about his daughter?" came the tentative question.

"Not all. I am afraid there was no difficulty in filling in the blanks. I heard enough to make me respect him and sympathize with his troubles."

The manager shook his head, with the air of one who recalls that which he would willingly have forgotten. "Such incidents are rare in Switzerland," he said. "I well remember the sensation her death created. She was such a pretty girl. The young men at Pontresina called her 'The Edelweiss' because she was so inaccessible. In fact, poor Stampa had educated her beyond her station, and that is not always good for a woman, especially in these quiet valleys, where knowledge of cattle and garden produce is a better asset than speaking French and playing the piano."

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Spencer agreed. He could name other districts where the same rule held good. He stood for a moment in the spacious hall to light a cigar. Involuntarily he glanced at Helen. She met his gaze, and said something to Bower that caused the latter also to turn and look.

"She has read Mackenzie's letter," thought Spencer, taking refuge behind a cloud of smoke. "It will be bad behavior on my part to leave the hotel without making my bow. Shall I go to her now, or wait till morning?"

He reflected that Helen might be out early next day. If he presented his introduction at once, she would probably ask him to sit with her a little while, and then he must become acquainted with Bower. He disliked the notion; but he saw no way out of it, unless indeed Helen treated him with the chilling abruptness she meted out to other men in the hotel who tried to become friendly with her. He was weighing the pros and cons dispassionately, when the English chaplain approached. [Pg 125]

"Do you play bridge, Mr. Spencer?" he asked.

"I know the leads, and call 'without' on the least provocation," was the reply.

"You are the very man I am searching for, and I have the authority of the First Book of Samuel in my quest."

"Well, now, that is the last place in which I should expect to find my bridge portrait."

"Don't you remember how Saul's servants asked his permission to 'seek out a man who is a cunning player'? That is exactly what I am doing. Come to the smoking room. There are two other men there, and one is a fellow countryman of yours."

The Rev. Mr. Hare was a genial soul, a Somersetshire vicar who took his annual holiday by accepting a temporary position in some Alpine village where there was an English church. He did not dream that he was acting the part of Hermes, messenger of the gods, at that moment, for indeed his appearance on the scene just then changed the whole trend of Spencer's actions.

"What a delightful place this is!" he went on as they walked together through a long corridor. "But what is the matter with the people? They don't mix. I would not have believed that there were so many prigs in the British Isles."

Some such candid opinion had occurred to Spencer; but, being an American, he thought that perhaps he might be mistaken. "The English character is somewhat adaptable to environment, I have heard. That is why you send out such excellent colonists," he said. [Pg 126]

"Doesn't that go rather to prove that everybody here should be hail fellow well met?"

"Not at all. They take their pose from the Alps,—snow, glaciers, hard rock, you know,—that is the subtlety of it."

The vicar laughed. "You have given me a new point of view," he said. "Some of them are slippery customers too. Yes, one might carry the parallel a long way. But here we are. Now, mind you cut me as a partner. I have tried the others, and found them severely critical—as bridge players. You look a stoic."

The vicar had his wish. Spencer and he opposed a man from Pittsburg, named Holt, and Dunston, an Englishman.

While the latter was shuffling the cards for Hare's deal he said something that took one, at least, of his hearers by surprise. "Bower has turned up, I see. What has brought him to the Engadine at this time of year I can't guess, unless perhaps he is interested in a pretty face."

"At this time of the year," repeated Spencer. "Isn't this the season?"

"Not for him. He used to be a famous climber; but he has given it up since he waxed fat and prosperous. I have met him once or twice at St. Moritz in the winter. Otherwise, he usually shows up in the fashionable resorts in August,—Ostend, or Trouville, or, if he is livery, Vichy or Aix-les-Bains,—anywhere but this quiet spot. Bower likes excitement too. He often opens a thousand pound bank at baccarat, whereas people are shocked in Maloja at seeing Hare play bridge at tenpence a hundred." [Pg 127]

"I leave it, partner," broke in the vicar, to whom the game was the thing.

"No trumps," said Spencer, without giving the least heed to his cards. It was true his eyes were resting on the ace, king, and queen of spades; but his mind was tortured by the belief that by his fantastic conceit in sending Helen to this Alpine fastness he had delivered her bound to the vultures.

"Double no trumps," said Dunston, gloating over the possession of a long suit of hearts and three aces. Hare looked anxious, and Spencer suddenly awoke to the situation.

"Satisfied," he said.

Holt led the three of hearts, and Spencer spread his cards on the table with the gravity of a Sioux chief. In addition to the three high spades he held six others.

"Really!" gasped the parson, "a most remarkable declaration!"

Yet there was an agitated triumph in his voice that was not pleasant hearing for Dunston, who took the trick with the ace of hearts and led the lowest of a sequence to the queen.

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"Got him!" panted Hare, producing the king.

The rest was easy. The vicar played a small spade and scored ninety-six points without any further risk.

"It is magnificent; but it is not bridge," said the man from Pittsburg. Dunston simply glowered.

"Partner," demanded Hare timidly, "may I ask why you called 'no trumps' on a hand like that?"

"Thought I would give you a chance of distinguishing yourself," replied Spencer. "Besides, that sort of thing rattles your opponents at the beginning of a game. Keep your nerve now, *padre*, and you have 'em in a cleft stick."

As it happened, Holt made a "no trump" declaration on a very strong hand; but Spencer held seven clubs headed by the ace and king.

He doubled. Holt redoubled. Spencer doubled again.

Hare flushed somewhat. "Allow me to say that I am very fond of bridge; but I cannot take part in a game that savors of gambling, even for low stakes," he broke in.

"Shall we let her go at forty-eight points a trick?" Spencer asked.

"Yep!" snapped Holt. "Got all the clubs?"

"Not all—sufficient, perhaps."

He played the ace. Dunston laid the queen and knave on the table. Spencer scored the winning trick before his adversary obtained an opening.

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"You have a backbone of cast steel," commented Dunston, who was an iron-master. "Do you play baccarat?" he went on, with curious eagerness.

"I regret to state that my education was completed in a Western mining camp."

"Will you excuse the liberty, and perhaps Mr. Hare won't listen for a moment?—but I will finance you in three banks of a thousand each, either banking or punting, if you promise to take on Bower. I can arrange it easily. I say this because you personally may not care to play for high sums."

The suggestion was astounding, coming as it did from a stranger; but Spencer merely said:

"You don't like Bower, then?"

"That is so. I have business relations with him occasionally, and there he is all that could be wished. But I have seen him clean out more than one youngster ruthlessly,—force the play to too high stakes, I mean. I think you could take his measure. Anyhow, I am prepared to back you."

"I'm leaving here to-morrow."

"Ah, well, we may have another opportunity. If so, my offer holds."

"Guess you haven't heard that Spencer is the man who bored a tunnel through the Rocky Mountains?" said Holt.

"No. You must tell me about it. Sorry, Mr. Hare, I am stopping the game."

Spencer continued to have amazing good fortune, and he played with skill, but without any more fireworks. At the close of the sitting the vicar said cheerfully:

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"You are not a ladies' man, Mr. Spencer. You know the old proverb,—lucky at cards, unlucky in love? But let me hope that it does not apply in your case."

"Talking about a ladies' man, who is the girl your friend Bower dined with?" asked Holt. "She has been in the hotel several days; but she didn't seem to be acquainted with anybody in particular until he blew in this afternoon."

"She is a Miss Helen Wynton," said the vicar. "I like her very much from what little I have seen of her. She attended both services on Sunday, and I happen to be aware of the fact that she was at mass in the Roman church earlier. I wanted her to play the harmonium next Sunday; but she declined, and gave me her reasons too."

"May I ask what they were?" inquired Spencer.

"Well, speaking in confidence, they were grievously true. Some miserable pandering to Mrs. Grundy has set the other women against her; so she declined to thrust herself into prominence. I tried to talk her out of it, but failed."

"Who is Mrs. Grundy, anyhow?" growled Holt.

The others laughed.

"She is the Medusa of modern life," explained the vicar. "She turns to stone those who gaze on

her. Most certainly she petrifies all good feeling and Christian tolerance. Why, I actually heard a woman whose conduct is not usually governed by what I hold to be good taste sneer at Miss Wynton this evening. 'The murder is out now,' she said. 'Bower's presence explains everything.' Yet I am able to state that Miss Wynton was quite unprepared for his arrival. By chance I was standing on the steps when he drove up to the hotel, and it was perfectly clear from the words they used that neither was aware that the other was in Maloja."

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Spencer leaned over toward the iron-master. "Tell you what," he said; "I've changed my mind about the trip to England to-morrow. Get up that game with Bower. I'll stand the racket myself unless you want to go half shares."

"Done! I should like to have an interest in it. Not that I am pining for Bower's money, and it may be that he will win ours; but I am keen on giving him a sharp run. At Nice last January not a soul in the Casino would go Banco when he opened a big bank. They were afraid of him."

While he was speaking, Dunston's shrewd eyes dwelt on the younger man's unmoved face. He wondered what had caused this sudden veering of purpose. It was certainly not the allurements of heavy gambling, for Spencer had declined the proposal as coolly as he now accepted it. Being a man of the world, he thought he could peer beneath the mask. To satisfy himself, he harked back to the personal topic.

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"By the way, does anyone know who Miss Wynton is?" he said. "That inveterate gossip, Mrs. Vavasour, who can vouch for every name in the Red Book, says she is a lady journalist."

"That, at any rate, is correct," said the vicar. "In fact, Miss Wynton herself told me so."

"Jolly fine girl, whatever she is. To give Bower his due, he has always been a person of taste."

"I have reason to believe," said Spencer, "that Miss Wynton's acquaintance with Mr. Bower is of the slightest."

His words were slow and clear. Dunston, sure now that his guess was fairly accurate, hastened to efface an unpleasant impression.

"Of course, I only meant that if Bower is seen talking to any woman, it may be taken for granted that she is a pretty one," he explained. "But who's for a drink? Perhaps we shall meet our expected opponent in the bar, Mr. Spencer."

"I have some letters to write. Fix that game for to-morrow or next day, and I'll be on hand."

Dunston and Holt paid the few shillings they owed, and went out.

Hare did not move. He looked anxious, almost annoyed. "It is exceedingly ridiculous how circumstances pass beyond a man's control occasionally," he protested. "Am I right in assuming that until this evening neither Bower nor Dunston was known to you, Mr. Spencer?"

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"Absolutely correct, vicar. I have never yet spoken to Bower, and you heard all that passed between Dunston and myself."

"Then my harmless invitation to you to join in a game at cards has led directly to an arrangement for play at absurdly high figures?"

"It seems to me, Mr. Hare, that Bower's tracks and mine are destined to cross in more ways than one in the near future," said Spencer coolly.

But the vicar was not to be switched away from the new thought that was troubling him. "I will not ask what you mean," he said, gazing steadfastly at the American. "My chief concern is the outcome of my share in this evening's pleasant amusement. I cannot shut my ears to the fact that you have planned the loss or gain of some thousands of pounds on the turn of a card at baccarat."

"If it is disagreeable to you——"

"How can it be otherwise? I am a broad-minded man, and I see no harm whatever in playing bridge for pennies; but I am more pained than I care to confess at the prospect of such a sequel to our friendly meeting to-night. If this thing happens,—if a small fortune is won or lost merely to gratify Dunston's whim,—I assure you that I shall never touch a card again as long as I live."

Then Spencer laughed. "That would be too bad, Mr. Hare," he cried. "Make your mind easy. The game is off. Count on me for the tenpence a hundred limit after dinner to-morrow."

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"Now, that is quite good and kind of you. Dunston made me very miserable by his mad proposition. Of course, both he and Bower are rich men, men to whom a few thousand pounds are of little importance; or, to be accurate, they profess not to care whether they win or lose, though their wealth is not squandered so heedlessly when it is wanted for some really deserving object. But perhaps that is uncharitable. My only wish is to thank you from the bottom of my heart for your generous promise."

"Is Bower so very rich then? Have you met him before?"

"He is a reputed millionaire. I read of him in the newspapers at times. In my small country parish such financial luminaries twinkle from a far sky. It is true he is a recent light. He made a great deal of money in copper, I believe."

“What kind of character do you give him,—good, bad, or indifferent?”

Hare’s benevolent features showed the astonishment that thrilled him at this blunt question. “I hardly know what to say——” he stammered.

Spencer liked this cheery vicar and resolved to trust him. “Let me explain,” he said. “You and I agree in thinking that Miss Wynton is an uncommonly nice girl. I am not on her visiting list at present, so my judgment is altruistic. Suppose she was your daughter or niece, would you care to see her left to that man’s mercies?”

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The clergyman fidgeted a little before he answered. Spencer was a stranger to him, yet he felt drawn toward him. The strong, clear cut face won confidence. “If it was the will of Heaven, I would sooner see her in the grave,” he said, with solemn candor.

Spencer rose. He held out his hand. “I guess it’s growing late,” he cried, “and our talk has swung round to a serious point. Sleep well, Mr. Hare. That game is dead off.”

As he passed the bar he heard Bower’s smooth, well rounded accents through the half-open door. “Nothing I should like better,” he was saying. “Are you tired? If not, bring your friend to my rooms now. Although I have been in the train all night, I am fit as a fiddle.”

“Let me see. I left him in the smoking room with our *padre*——”

It was Dunston who spoke; but Bower broke in:

“Oh, keep the clergy out of it! They make such a song about these things if they hear of them.”

“I was going to say that if he is not there he will be in his room. He is two doors from me, No. 61, I think. Shall I fetch him?”

“Do, by all means. By Jove! I didn’t expect to get any decent play here!”

Spencer slipped into a small vestibule where he had left a hat and overcoat. He remained there till Dunston crossed the hall and entered the elevator. Then he went out, meaning to stroll and smoke in the moonlight for an hour. It would be easier to back out of the promised game in the morning than at that moment. Moreover, in the clear, still air he could plan a course of action, the need of which was becoming insistent.

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He was blessed, or cursed, with a stubborn will, and he knew it. Hitherto, it had been exercised on a theory wrapped in hard granite, and the granite had yielded, justifying the theory. Now he was brought face to face with a woman’s temperament, and his experience of that elusive and complex mixture of attributes was of the slightest. Attractive young women in Colorado are plentiful as cranberries; but never one of them had withdrawn his mind’s eye from his work. Why, then, was he so ready now to devote his energies to the safeguarding of Helen Wynton? It was absurd to pretend that he was responsible for her future well-being because of the whim that sent her on a holiday. She was well able to take care of herself. She had earned her own living before he met her; she had risen imperiously above the petty malice displayed by some of the residents in the hotel; there was a reasonable probability that she might become the wife of a man highly placed and wealthy. Every consideration told in favor of a policy of non-interference. The smoking of an inch of good cigar placed the matter in such a convincing light that Spencer was half resolved to abide by his earlier decision and leave Maloja next morning.

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But the other half, made up of inclination, pleaded against all the urging of expediency. He deemed the vicar an honest man, and that stout-hearted phrase of his stuck. Yet, whether he went or stayed, the ultimate solution of the problem lay with Helen herself. Once on speaking terms with her, he could form a more decided view. It was wonderful how one’s estimate of a man or woman could be modified in the course of a few minutes’ conversation. Well, he would settle things that way, and meanwhile enjoy the beauty of a wondrous night.

A full moon was flooding the landscape with a brilliance not surpassed in the crystal atmosphere of Denver. The snow capped summit of the Cima di Rosso was fit to be a peak in Olympus, a silver throned height where the gods sat in council. The brooding pines perched on the hillside beyond the Orlegna looked like a company of gigantic birds with folded wings. From the road leading to the village he could hear the torrent itself singing its mad song of freedom after escaping from the icy caverns of the Forno glacier. Quite near, on the right, the tiny cascade that marks the first seaward flight of the Inn mingled its sweet melody with the orchestral thunder of the more distant cataracts plunging down the precipices toward Italy. It was a night when one might listen to the music of the spheres, and Spencer was suddenly jarred into unpleasant consciousness of his surroundings by the raucous voices of some peasants bawling a Romansch ballad in a wayside wine house.

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Turning sharply on his heel, he took the road by the lake. There at least he would find peace from the strenuous amours of Margharita as trolled by the revelers. He had not gone three hundred yards before he saw a woman standing near the low wall that guarded the embanked highway from the water. She was looking at the dark mirror of the lake, and seemed to be identifying the stars reflected in it. Three or four times, as he approached, she tilted her head back and gazed at the sky. The skirt of a white dress was visible below a heavy ulster; a knitted shawl was wrapped loosely over her hair and neck, and the ends were draped deftly across her shoulders; but before she turned to see who was coming along the road Spencer had recognized her. Thus, in a sense, he was a trifle the more prepared of the two for this unforeseen meeting, and he hailed it as

supplying the answer to his doubts.

"Now," said he to himself, "I shall know in ten seconds whether or not I travel west by north to-morrow."

Helen did not avert her glance instantly. Nor did she at once resume a stroll evidently interrupted to take in deep breaths of the beauty of the scene. That was encouraging to the American,—she expected him to speak to her.

He halted in the middle of the road. If he was mistaken, he did not wish to alarm her. "If you will pardon the somewhat unorthodox time and place, I should like to make myself known to you, Miss Wynton," he said, lifting his cap. [Pg 139]

"You are Mr. Spencer?" she answered, with a frank smile.

"Yes, I have a letter of introduction from Mr. Mackenzie."

"So have I. What do we do next? Exchange letters? Mine is in the hotel."

"Suppose we just shake?"

"Well, that is certainly the most direct way."

Their hands met. They were both aware of a whiff of nervousness. For some reason, the commonplace greetings of politeness fell awkwardly from their lips. In such a predicament a woman may always be trusted to find the way out.

"It is rather absurd that we should be saying how pleased we are that Mr. Mackenzie thought of writing those letters, while in reality I am horribly conscious that I ought not to be here at all, and you are probably thinking that I am quite an amazing person," and Helen laughed light heartedly.

"That is part of my thought," said Spencer.

"Won't you tell me the remainder?"

"May I?"

"Please do. I am in chastened mood."

"I wish I was skilled in the trick of words, then I might say something real cute. As it is, I can only supply a sort of condensed statement,—something about a nymph, a moonlit lake, the spirit of the glen,—nice catchy phrases every one,—with a line thrown in from Shelley about an 'orbéd maiden with white fire laden.' Let me go back a hundred yards, Miss Wynton, and I shall return with the whole thing in order." [Pg 140]

"With such material I believe you would bring me a sonnet."

"No. I hail from the wild and woolly West, where life itself is a poem; so I stick to prose. There is a queer sort of kink in human nature to account for that."

"On the principle that a Londoner never hears the roar of London, I suppose?"

"Exactly. An old lady I know once came across a remarkable instance of it. She watched a shipwreck, the real article, with all the scenic accessories, and when a half drowned sailor was dragged ashore she asked him how he felt at that awful moment. And what do you think he said?"

"Very wet," laughed Helen.

"No, that is the other story. This man said he was very dry."

"Ah, the one step from the sublime to the ridiculous, which reminds me that if I remain here much longer talking nonsense I shall lose the good opinion I am sure you have formed of me from Mr. Mackenzie's letter. Why, it must be after eleven o'clock! Are you going any farther, or will you walk with me to the hotel?" [Pg 141]

"If you will allow me——"

"Indeed, I shall be very glad of your company. I came out to escape my own thoughts. Did you ever meet such an unsociable lot of people as our fellow boarders, Mr. Spencer? If it was not for my work, and the fact that I have taken my room for a month, I should hie me forthwith to the beaten track of the vulgar but good natured tourist."

"Why not go? Let me help you to-morrow to map out a tour. Then I shall know precisely where to waylay you, for I feel the chill here too."

"I wish I could fall in with the first part of your proposal, though the second rather suggests that you regard Mr. Mackenzie's letter of introduction as a letter of marque."

"At any rate, I am an avowed pirate," he could not help retorting. "But to keep strictly to business, why not quit if you feel like wandering?"

"Because I was sent here, on a journalistic mission which I understand less now than when I received it in London. Of course, I am delighted with the place. It is the people I—kick at? Is that a quite proper Americanism?"

"It seems to fit the present case like a glove, or may I say, like a shoe?"

"Now you are laughing at me, inwardly of course, and I agree with you. Ladies should not use slang, nor should they promenade alone in Swiss valleys by moonlight. My excuse is that I did not feel sleepy, and the moon tempted me. Good night." [Pg 142]

They were yet some little distance from the hotel, and Spencer was at a loss to account for this sudden dismissal. She saw the look of bewilderment in his face.

"I have found a back stairs door," she explained, with a smile. "I really don't think I should have dared to come out at half-past ten if I had to pass the Gorgons in the foyer."

She flitted away by a side path, leaving Spencer more convinced than ever that he had blundered egregiously in dragging this sedate and charming girl from the quiet round of existence in London to the artificial life of the Kursaal. Some feeling of unrest had driven her forth to commune with the stars. Was she asking herself why she was denied the luxuries showered on the doll-like creatures whose malicious tongues were busy the instant Bower set foot in the hotel? It would be an ill outcome of his innocent subterfuge if she returned to England discontented and rebellious. She was in "chastened mood," she had said. He wondered why? Had Bower been too confident,—too sure of his prey to guard his tongue? Of all the unlooked for developments that could possibly be bound up with the harmless piece of midsummer madness that sent Helen Wynton to Switzerland, surely this roué's presence was the most irritating and perplexing.

Then from the road came another stanza from the wine bibbers, now homeward bound. They were still howling about Margarita in long sustained cadences. And Spencer knew his Faust. It was to the moon that the lovesick maiden confided her dreams, and Mephisto was at hand to jog the elbow of his bewitched philosopher at exactly the right moment. [Pg 143]

Spencer threw his cigar into the gurgling rivulet of the Inn. He condemned Switzerland, and the Upper Engadine, and the very great majority of the guests in the Kursaal, in one emphatic malediction, and went to his room, hoping to sleep, but actually to lie awake for hours and puzzle his brains in vain effort to evolve a satisfying sequel to the queer combination of events he had set in motion when he ran bare headed into the Strand after Bower's motor car.



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CHAPTER VIII

SHADOWS

"It is a glorious morning. If the weather holds, your first visit to the real Alps should be memorable," said Bower.

Helen had just descended the long flight of steps in front of the hotel. A tender purple light filled the valley. The nearer hills were silhouetted boldly against a sky of primrose and pink; but the misty depths where the lake lurked beneath the pines had not yet yielded wholly to the triumph of the new day. The air had a cold life in it that invigorated while it chilled. It resembled some *viz* *frappé* of rare vintage. Its fragrant vivacity was ready to burst forth at the first encouraging hint of a kindlier temperature.

"Why that dubious clause as to the weather?" asked Helen, looking at the golden shafts of sunlight on the topmost crags of Corvatsch and the Piz della Margna. Those far off summits were so startlingly vivid in outline that they seemed to be more accessible than the mist shrouded ravines cleaving their dun sides. It needed an effort of the imagination to correct the erring testimony of the eye. [Pg 145]

"The moods of the hills are variable, my lady,—femininely fickle, in fact. There is a proverb that contrasts the wind with woman's mind; but the disillusioned male who framed it evidently possessed little knowledge of weather changes in the high Alps, or else he—"

"Did you beguile me out of my cozy room at six o'clock on a frosty morning to regale me with stale jibes at my sex?"

"Perish the thought, Miss Wynton! My only intent was to explain that the ancient proverb maker, meaning to be rude, might have found a better simile."

"Meanwhile, I am so cold that the only mood left in my composition is one of impatience to be moving."

"Well, I am ready."

"But where is our guide?"

"He has gone on in front with the porter."

"Porter! What is the man carrying?"

"The wherewithal to refresh ourselves when we reach the hut."

"Oh," said Helen, "I had no idea that mountaineering was such a business. I thought the essentials were a packet of sandwiches and a flask."

"You will please not be flippant. Climbing is serious work. And you must moderate your pace. If you walk at that rate from here to Forno, you will be very, very ill before you reach the hut." [Pg 146]

"Ill! How absurd!"

"Not only absurd but disagreeable,—far worse than crossing the Channel. Even old hands like me are not free from mountain sickness, though it seizes us at higher altitudes than we shall reach to-day. In the case of a novice, anything in the nature of hurrying during the outward journey is an unfailing factor."

They were crossing the golf links, and the smooth path was tempting to a good walker. Helen smiled as she accommodated herself to Bower's slower stride. Though the man might possess experience, the woman had the advantage of youth, the unattainable, and this wonderful hour after dawn was stirring its ichor in her veins.

"I suppose that is what Stampa meant when he took 'Slow and Sure' for his motto," she said.

"Stampa! Who is Stampa?"

There was a sudden rasp of iron in his voice. As a rule Bower spoke with a cultivated languor that almost veiled the staccato accents of the man of affairs. Helen was so surprised by this unwarranted clang of anger that she looked at him with wide open eyes.

"He is the driver I told you of, the man who took the wheel off my carriage during the journey from St. Moritz," she explained. [Pg 147]

"Oh, of course. How stupid of me to forget! But, by the way, did you mention his name?"

"No, I think not. Someone interrupted me. Mr. Dunston came and spoke to you——"

He laughed gayly and drew in deep breaths of the keen air. He was carrying his ice ax over his left shoulder. With his right hand he brushed away a disturbing thought. "By Jove! yes! Dunston dragged me off to open a bank at baccarat, and you will be glad to hear that I won five hundred pounds."

"I am glad you won; but who lost so much money?"

"Dunston dropped the greater part of it. Your American friend, Mr. Spencer, was rather inclined to brag of his prowess in that direction, it appears. He even went so far as to announce his willingness to play for four figures; but he backed out of it."

"Do you mean that Mr. Spencer wanted to stake a thousand pounds on a single game at cards?"

"Evidently he did not want to do it, but he talked about it."

"Yet he impressed me as being a very clear-headed and sensible young man," said Helen decisively.

"Here, young lady, I must call you to account! In what category do you place me, then?"

"Oh, you are different. I disapprove of anyone playing for such high stakes; but I suppose you are used to it and can afford it, whereas a man who has his way to make in the world would be exceedingly foolish to do such a thing." [Pg 148]

"Pray, how did you come to measure the extent of Spencer's finances?"

"Dear me! Did I say that?"

"I am sorry. Of course, I had no wish to speak offensively. What I mean is that he may be quite as well able to run a big bank at baccarat as I am."

"He was telling me yesterday of his early struggles to gain a footing in some mining community in Colorado, and the impression his words left on me was that he is still far from wealthy; that is, as one understands the term. Here we are at the footpath. Shall we follow it and scramble up out of the ravine, or do you prefer the carriage road?"

"The footpath, please. But before we drop the subject of cards, which is unquestionably out of

place on a morning like this, let me say that perhaps I have done the American an injustice. Dunston is given to exaggeration. He has so little control over his face that it is rank robbery to bet with him. Such a man is apt to run to extremes. It may be that Spencer was only talking through his hat, as they say in New York."

Helen had the best of reasons for rejecting this version of the story. Her perceptive faculties, always well developed, were strung to high tension in Maloja. The social pinpricks inflicted there had rendered her more alert, more cautious, than was her wont. She was quite sure, for instance, judging from a number of slight indications, that Spencer was deliberately avoiding any opportunity of making Bower's acquaintance. More than once, when an introduction seemed to be imminent, the American effaced himself. Other men in the hotel were not like that—they rather sought the great man's company. She wondered if Bower had noticed it. Despite his candid, almost generous, disclaimer of motive, there was an undercurrent of hostility in his words that suggested a feeling of pique. She climbed the rocky path in silence until Bower spoke again.

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"How do the boots go?" he asked.

"Splendidly, thanks. It was exceedingly kind of you to take such trouble about them. I had no idea one had to wear such heavy nails, and that tip of yours about the extra stockings is excellent."

"You will acknowledge the benefit most during the descent. I have known people become absolutely lame on the home journey through wearing boots only just large enough for ordinary walking. As for the clamping of the nails over the edges of the soles, the sharp stones render that imperative. When you have crossed a moraine or two, and a peculiarly nasty *geröll* that exists beyond the hut, if we have time to make an easy ascent, you will understand the need of extra strong footwear."

Helen favored him with a shy smile. "Long hours of reading have revealed the nature of a moraine," she said; "but, please, what is a *geröll*?"

"A slope of loose stones. Let me see, what do they call it in Scotland and Cumberland? Ah, yes, a scree. On the French side of the Alps the same thing is known as a *casse*."

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"How well you know this country and its ways! Have you climbed many of the well known peaks?"

"Some years ago I scored my century beyond twelve thousand feet. That is pretty fair for an amateur."

"Have you done the Matterhorn?"

"Yes, four times. Once I followed Tyndall's example, and converted the summit into a pass between Switzerland and Italy."

"How delightful! I suppose you have met many of the famous guides?"

He laughed pleasantly. "One does not attempt the Cervin or the Jungfrau without the best men, and in my time there were not twenty, all told. I had a long talk with our present guide last night, and found I had used many a track he had only seen from the valley."

"Then——"

A loud toot on a cowhorn close at hand interrupted her. The artist was a small boy. He appeared to be waiting expectantly on a hillock for someone who came not.

"Is that a signal?" she asked.

"Yes. He is a *gaumer*, or cowherd,—another word for your Alpine vocabulary,—the burgher whose cattle he will drive to the pasture has probably arranged to meet him here."

Bower was always an interesting and well informed companion. Launched now into a congenial topic, he gave Helen a thoroughly entertaining lecture on the customs of a Swiss commune. He pointed out the successive tiers of pastures, told her their names and seasons of use, and even hummed some verses of the cow songs, or *Kuh-reihen*, which the men sing to the cattle, addressing each animal by name.

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An hour passed pleasantly in this manner. Their guide, a man named Josef Barth, and the porter, who answered to "Karl," awaited them at the milk chalet by the side of Lake Cavloccio. Bower, evidently accustomed to the leadership of expeditions of this sort, tested their ice axes and examined the ropes slung to Barth's rucksack.

"The Forno is a glacier *de luxe*," he explained to Helen; "but it is always advisable to make sure that your appliances are in good order. That *pickel* you are carrying was made by the best blacksmith in Grindelwald, and you can depend on its soundness; but these men are so familiar with their surroundings that they often provide themselves with frayed ropes and damaged axes."

"In addition to my boots, therefore, I am indebted to you for a special brand of ice ax," she cried.

"Your gratitude now is as nothing to the ecstasy you will display when Karl unpacks his load," he answered lightly. "Now, Miss Wynton, *en route*! You know the path to the glacier already, don't you?"

"I have been to its foot twice."

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"Then you go in front. There is no room to walk two abreast. Before we tackle the ice we will call a halt for refreshments."

From that point till the glacier was reached the climb was laboriously simple. There was no difficulty and not the slightest risk, even for a child; but the heavy gradient and the rarefied air made it almost impossible to sustain a conversation unless the speakers dawdled. Helen often found herself many yards in advance of the others. She simply could not help breasting the steeper portions of the track. She was drawn forward by an intense eagerness to begin the real business of the day. Bower did not seek to restrain her. He thought her high spirits admirable, and his gaze dwelt appreciatively on her graceful poise as she stopped on the crest of some small ravine and looked back at the plodders beneath. Attractive at all times, she was bewitching that morning to a man who prided himself on his athletic tastes. She wore a white knitted jersey and a short skirt, a costume seemingly devised to reveal the lines of a slender waist and supple limbs. A white Tam o' Shanter was tied firmly over her glossy brown hair with a silk motor veil, and the stout boots which she had surveyed so ruefully when Bower brought them to her on the previous evening after interviewing the village shoemaker, were by no means so cumbrous in use as her unaccustomed eyes had deemed them. Even the phlegmatic guide was stirred to gruff appreciation when he saw her vault on to a large flat boulder in order to examine an iron cross that surmounted it.

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"*Ach, Gott!*" he grunted, "that Englishwoman is as surefooted as a chamois."

But Helen had found a name and a date on a triangular strip of metal attached to the cross. "Why has this memorial been placed here?" she asked. Bower appealed to Barth; but he shook his head. Karl gave details.

"A man fell on the Cima del Largo. They carried him here, and he died on that rock."

"Poor fellow!" Some of the joyous light left Helen's face. She had passed the cross before, and had regarded it as one of the votive offerings so common by the wayside in Catholic countries, knowing that in this part of Switzerland the Italian element predominated among the peasants.

"We get a fine view of the Cima del Largo from the *cabane*," said Bower unconcernedly.

Helen picked a little blue flower that nestled at the base of the rock. She pinned it to her jersey without comment. Sometimes the callousness of a man was helpful, and the shadow of a bygone tragedy was out of keeping with the glow of this delightful valley.

The curving mass of the glacier was now clearly visible. It looked like some marble staircase meant to be trodden only by immortals. Ever broadening and ascending until it filled the whole width of the rift between the hills, it seemed to mount upward to infinity. The sidelong rays of the sun, peeping over the shoulders of Forno and Roseg, tinted the great ice river with a sapphire blue, while its higher reaches glistened as though studded with gigantic diamonds. Near at hand, where the Orlegna rushed noisily from thralldom, the broken surface was somber and repellent. In color a dull gray, owing to the accumulation of winter débris and summer dust, it had the aspect of decay and death; it was jagged and gaunt and haggard; the far flung piles of the white moraine imposed a stony barrier against its farther progress. But that unpleasing glimpse of disruption was quickly dispelled by the magnificent volume and virgin purity of the glacier as a whole. Helen tried to imagine herself two miles distant, a tiny speck on the great floor of the pass. That was the only way to grasp its stupendous size, though she knew that it mounted through five miles of rock strewn ravine before it touched the precipitous saddle along which runs the border line between Italy and Switzerland.

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Karl's sigh of relief as he deposited his heavy load on a tablelike boulder brought Helen back from the land of dreams. To this sturdy peasant the wondrous Forno merely represented a day's hard work, at an agreed sum of ten francs for carrying nearly half a hundredweight, and a liberal *pour-boire* if the voyageurs were satisfied.

Sandwiches and a glass of wine, diluted with water brought by the guide from a neighboring rill, —glacier water being used only as a last resource,—were delectable after a steady two hours' walk. The early morning meal of coffee and a roll had lost some of its flavor when consumed apparently in the middle of the night, and Helen was ready now for her breakfast. While they were eating, Bower and Josef Barth cast glances at some wisps of cloud drifting slowly over the crests of the southern hills. Nothing was said. The guide read his patron's wishes correctly. Unless some cause far more imperative than a slight mist intervened, the day's programme must not be abandoned. So there was no loitering. The sun was almost in the valley, and the glacier must be crossed before the work of the night's frost was undone.

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When they stepped from the moraine on to the ice Barth led, Helen followed, Bower came next, with Karl in the rear.

If it had not been for the crisp crunching sound of the hobnails amid the loose fragments on the surface, and the ring of the *pickel's* steel-shod butt on the solid mass beneath, Helen might have fancied that she was walking up an easy rock-covered slope. Any delusion on that point, however, was promptly dispelled by a glimpse of a narrow crevasse that split the foot of the glacier lengthwise.

She peered into its sea-green depths awesomely. It resembled a toothless mouth gaping slowly open, ready enough to swallow her, but too inert to put forth the necessary effort. And the

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thought reminded her of something. She halted and turned to Bower.

"Ought we not to be roped?" she asked.

He laughed, with the quiet confidence of the expert mountaineer. "Why?" he cried. "The way is clear. One does not walk into a crevasse with one's eyes open."

"But Stampa told me that I should refuse to advance a yard on ice or difficult rock without being roped."

"Stampa, your cab driver?"

There was no reason that she could fathom why her elderly friend's name should be repeated with such scornful emphasis.

"Ah, yes. He is that because he is lame," she protested. "But he was one of the most famous guides in Zermatt years ago."

She swung round and appealed to Barth, who was wondering why his employers were stopping before they had climbed twenty feet. "Are you from Zermatt?" she demanded.

"No, *fräulein*—from Pontresina. Zermatt is a long way from here."

"But you know some of the Zermatt men, I suppose? Have you ever heard of Christian Stampa?"

"Most certainly, *fräulein*. My father helped him to build the first hut on the Hörnli Ridge."

"Old Stampa!" chimed in Karl from beneath. "It will be long ere he is forgotten. I was one of four who carried him down from Corvatsch to Sils-Maria the day after he fell. He was making the descent by night,—a mad thing to do,—and there was murder in his heart, they said. But I never believed it. We shared a bottle of Monte Pulciano only yesterday, just for the sake of old times, and he was as merry as Hans von Rippach himself." [Pg 157]

Bower was stooping, so Helen could not see his face. He seemed to be fumbling with a boot lace.

"You hear, Mr. Bower?" she cried. "I am quoting no mean authority."

He did not answer. He had untied the lace and was readjusting it. The girl realized that to a man of his portly build his present attitude was not conducive to speech. It had an additional effect which did not suggest itself to her. The effort thus demanded from heart and lungs might bring back the blood to a face blanched by a deadly fear.

Karl was stocked with reminiscences of Stampa. "I remember the time when people said Christian was the best man in the Bernina," he said. "He would never go back to the Valais after his daughter died. It was a strange thing that he should come to grief on a cowherd's track like that over Corvatsch. But Etta's affair—"

"*Schweige!*" snarled Bower, straightening himself suddenly. His dark eyes shot such a gleam of lambent fury at the porter that the man's jaw fell. The words were frozen on his lips. He could not have been stricken dumb more effectually had he come face to face with one of the horrific sprites described in the folklore of the hills. [Pg 158]

Helen was surprised. What had poor Karl done that he should be bidden so fiercely to hold his tongue? Then she thought that Bower must have recalled Stampa's history, and feared that perhaps the outspoken peasant might enter into a piquant account of some village scandal. A chambermaid in the hotel, questioned about Stampa, had told her that the daughter he loved so greatly had committed suicide. Really, she ought to be grateful to her companion for saving her from a passing embarrassment. But she had the tact not to drop the subject too quickly.

"If Barth and you agree that roping is unnecessary, of course I haven't a word to say in the matter," she volunteered. "It was rather absurd of me to mention it in the first instance."

"No, you were right. I have never seen Stampa; but his name is familiar. It occurs in most Alpine records. Barth, fix the rope before we go farther. The *fräulein* wishes it."

The rush of color induced by physical effort—effort of a tensity that Helen was wholly unaware of—was ebbing now before a numbing terror that had come to stay. His face was drawn and livid. His voice had the metallic ring in it that the girl had detected once already that day. Again she experienced a sense of bewilderment that he should regard a trivial thing so seriously. She was not a child. The world of to-day pulsated with far too many stories of tragic passion that she should be shielded so determinedly from any hint of an episode that doubtless wrung the heart's core of this quiet valley one day in August sixteen years ago. In some slight degree Bower's paroxysm of anger was a reflection on her own good taste, for she had unwittingly given rise to it. [Pg 159]

Nevertheless, she felt indebted to him. To extricate both Bower and herself from an awkward situation she took a keen interest in Barth's method of adjusting the rope. The man did not show any amazement at Bower's order. He was there to earn his fee. Had these mad English told him to cut steps up the gentle slope in front he would have obeyed without protest, though it was more than strange that this much traveled *voyageur* should adopt such a needless precaution.

As a matter of fact, under Barth's guidance, a blind cripple could have surmounted the first kilometer of the Forno glacier. The track lay close to the left bank of the moraine. It curved

slightly to the right and soon the exquisite panorama of Monte Roseg, the Cima di Rosso, Monte Sissone, Piz Torrone, and the Castello group opened up before the climbers. Helen was enchanted. Twice she half turned to address some question to Bower; but on each occasion she happened to catch him in the act of swallowing some brandy from a flask. Governed by an unaccountable timidity, she pretended not to notice his actions, and diverted her words to Barth, who told her the names of the peaks and pointed to the junctions of minor ice fields with the main artery of the Forno.

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Bower did not utter a syllable until they struck out toward the center of the glacier. A crevasse some ten feet in width and seemingly hundreds of feet deep, barred the way; but a bridge of ice, covered with snow, offered safe transit. The snow carpet showed that a number of climbers had passed quite recently in both directions. Even Helen, somewhat awed by the dimensions of the rift, understood that the existence of this natural arch was as well recognized by Alpinists as Waterloo Bridge is known to dwellers on the south side of the Thames.

"Now, Miss Wynton, you should experience your first real thrill," said Bower. "This bridge forms here every year at this season, and an army might cross in safety. It is the genuine article, the first and strongest of a series. Yet here you cross the Rubicon. A mixture of metaphors is allowable in high altitudes, you know."

Helen, almost startled at first by the unaffected naturalness of his words, was unfeignedly relieved at finding him restored to the normal. Usually his supply of light-hearted badinage was unceasing. He knew exactly when and how to season it with more serious statements. It is this rare quality that makes tolerable a long day's solitude *à deux*.



She flourished her ice axe bravely.

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"I am not Cæsar's wife," she replied; "but for the credit of womankind in general I shall act as though I was above suspicion—of nervousness."

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She did not look round. Barth was moving quickly, and she had no desire to burden him with a drag on the rope. When she was in the center of the narrow causeway, a snow cornice in the lip of the crevasse detached itself under the growing heat of the sun and shivered down into the green darkness. The incident brought her heart into her mouth. It served as a reminder that this solid ice river was really in a state of constant change and movement.

Bower laughed, with all his customary gayety of manner. "That came at a dramatic moment," he said. "Too bad it could not let you pass without giving you a quake!"

"I am not a bit afraid."

"Ah, but I can read your thoughts. There is a bond of sympathy between us."

"Hemp is a non-conductor."

"You are willfully misunderstanding me," he retorted.

"No. I honestly believed you felt the rope quiver a little."

"Alas! it is the atmosphere. My compliments fall on idle ears."

Barth interrupted this play of harmless chaff by jerking some remark over his shoulder. "Looks like a *guxe*," he said gruffly.

"Nonsense!" said Bower,— "a bank of mist. The sun will soon melt it."

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"It's a *guxe*, right enough," chimed in Karl, who had recovered his power of speech. "That is why the boy was blowing his horn—to show he was bringing the cattle home."

"Well, then, push on. The sooner we are in the hut the better."

"Please, what is a *guxe*?" asked Helen, when the men had nothing more to say.

"A word I would have wished to add later to your Alpine phrase book. It means a storm, a blizzard."

"Should we not return at once in that event?"

"What? Who said just now she was not afraid?"

"But a storm in such a place!"

"These fellows smell a *tourmente* in every little cloud from the southwest. We may have some wind and a light snowfall, and that will be an experience for you. Surely you can trust me not to run any real risk?"

"Oh, yes. I do, indeed. But I have read of people being caught in these storms and suffering terribly."

"Not on the Forno, I assure you. I don't wish to minimize the perils of your first ascent; but it is only fair to say that this is an exhibition glacier. If it was nearer town you would find an orchestra in each amphitheater up there, with sideshows in every couloir. Jestings apart, you are absolutely safe with Barth and me, not to mention the irrepressible gentleman who carries our provisions."

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Helen was fully alive to the fact that a woman who joins a mountaineering party should not impose her personal doubts on men who are willing to go on. She flourished her ice ax bravely, and cried, "Excelsior!"

In the next instant she regretted her choice of expression. The moral of Longfellow's poem might be admirable, but the fate of its hero was unpleasantly topical. Again Bower laughed.

"Ah!" he said. "Will you deny now that I am a first rate receiver of wireless messages?"

She had no breath left for a quip. Barth was hurrying, and the thin air was beginning to have its effect. When an unusually smooth stretch of ice permitted her to take her eyes from the track for a moment she looked back to learn the cause of such haste. To her complete astonishment, the Maloja Pass and the hills beyond it were dissolved in a thick mist. A monstrous cloud was sweeping up the Orlegna Valley. As yet, it was making for the Muretto Pass rather than the actual ravine of the Forno; but a few wraiths of vapor were sailing high overhead, and it needed no weatherwise native to predict that ere long the glacier itself would be covered by that white pall. She glanced at Bower.

He smiled cheerfully. "It is nothing," he murmured.

"I really don't care," she said. "One does not shirk an adventure merely because it is disagreeable. The pity is that all this lovely sunshine must vanish."

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"It will reappear. You will be charmed with the novelty in an hour or less."

"Is it far to the hut?"

"Hardly twenty minutes at our present pace."

A growl from Barth stopped their brief talk. Another huge crevasse yawned in front. There was an ice bridge, with snow, like others they had crossed; but this was a slender structure, and the leader stabbed it viciously with the butt of his ax before he ventured on it. The others kept the rope taut, and he crossed safely. They followed. As Helen gained the further side she heard Bower's chuckle:

"Another thrill!"

"I am growing quite used to them," she said.

"Well, it may help somewhat if I tell you that the temporary departure of the sun will cause this particular bridge to be ten times as strong when we return."

"Attention!" cried Barth, taking a sharp turn to the left. The meaning of his warning was soon apparent. They had to descend a few feet of rough ice, and Helen found, to her great relief it must be confessed, that they were approaching the lateral moraine. Already the sky was overcast. The glacier had taken to itself a cold grayness that was disconcerting. The heavy mist fell on them with inconceivable rapidity. Shining peaks and towering precipices of naked rock were swept out of sight each instant. The weather had changed with a magical speed. The mist advanced with the rush of an express train, and a strong wind sprang up as though it had burst

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through a restraining wall and was bent on overwhelming the daring mortals who were penetrating its chosen territory.

Somehow—anyhow—Helen scrambled on. She was obliged to keep eyes and mind intent on each step. Her chief object was to imitate Barth, to poise, and jump, and clamber with feet and hands exactly as he did. At this stage the rope was obviously a hindrance; but none of the men suggested its removal, and Helen had enough to occupy her wits without troubling them by a question. Even in the stress of her own breathless exertions she had room in her mind for a wondering pity for the heavily laden Karl. She marveled that anyone, be he strong as Samson, could carry such a load and not fall under it. Yet he was lumbering along behind Bower with a clumsy agility that was almost supernatural to her thinking. She was still unconscious of the fact that most of her own struggles were due more to the rarefied air than to the real difficulties of the route.

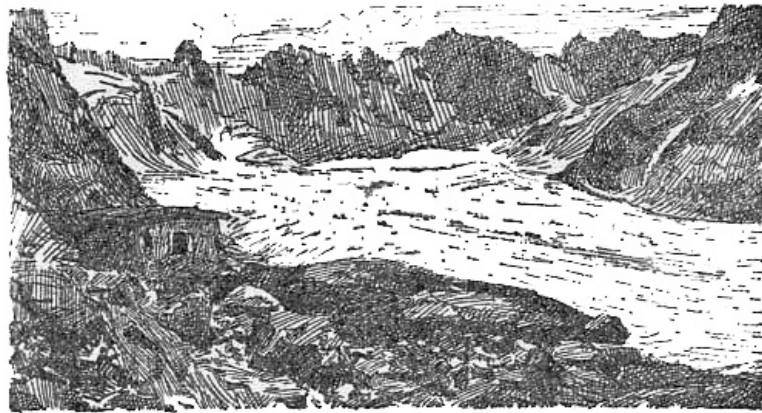
At last, when she really thought she must cry out for a rest, when a steeper climb than any hitherto encountered had bereft her almost of the power to take another upward spring to the ledge of some enormous boulder, when her knees and ankles were sore and bruised, and the skin of her fingers was beginning to fray under her stout gloves, she found herself standing on a comparatively level space formed of broken stones. A rough wall, surmounted by a flat pitched roof, stared at her out of the mist. In the center of the wall a small, square, shuttered window suggested a habitation. Her head swam, and her eyes ached dreadfully; but she knew that this was the hut, and strove desperately to appear self possessed.

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“Accept my congratulations, Miss Wynton,” said a low voice at her ear. “Not one woman in a thousand would have gone through that last half-hour without a murmur. You are no longer a novice. Allow me to present you with the freedom of the Alps. This is one of the many châteaux at your disposal.”

A wild swirl of sleet lashed them venomously. This first whip of the gale seemed to have the spitefulness of disappointed rage.

Helen felt her arm grasped. Bower led her to a doorway cunningly disposed out of the path of the dreaded southwest wind. At that instant all the woman in her recognized that the man was big, and strong, and self reliant, and that it was good to have him near, shouting reassuring words that were whirled across the rock-crowned glacier by the violence of the tempest.



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CHAPTER IX

“ETTA’S FATHER”

Though the hut was a crude thing, a triumph of essentials over luxuries, Helen had never before hailed four walls and a roof with such heartfelt, if silent, thanksgiving. She sank exhausted on a rough bench, and watched the matter-of-fact Engadiners unpacking the stores and firewood carried in their rucksacks. Their businesslike air supplied the tonic she needed. Though the howling storm seemed to threaten the tiny refuge with destruction, these two men set to work, coolly and methodically, to prepare a meal. Barth arranged the contents of Karl’s bulky package on a small table, and the porter busied himself with lighting a fire in a Swiss stove that stood in the center of the outer room. An inner apartment loomed black and uninviting through an open doorway. Helen discovered later that some scanty accommodation was provided there for those who meant to sleep in the hut in readiness for an early ascent, while it supplied a separate room in the event of women taking part in an expedition.

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Bower offered her a quantity of brandy and water. She declined it, declaring that she needed only time to regain her breath. He was a man who might be trusted not to pester anyone with well meant but useless attentions. He went to the door, lit a cigarette, and seemed to be keenly interested in the sleet as it pelted the moraine or gathered in drifts in the minor fissures of the glacier.

Within a remarkably short space of time, Karl had concocted two cups of steaming coffee. Helen was then all aglow. Her strength was restored. The boisterous wind had crimsoned her cheeks beneath the tan. She had never looked such a picture of radiant womanhood as after this tussle with the storm. Luckily her clothing was not wet, since the travelers reached the *cabane* at the very instant the elements became really aggressive. It was a quite composed and reinvigorated Helen who summoned Bower from his contemplation of the weather portents.

"We may be besieged," she cried; "but at any rate we are not on famine rations. What a spread! You could hardly have brought more food if you fancied we might be kept here a week."

The sustained physical effort called for during the last part of the climb seemed to have dispelled his fit of abstraction. Being an eminently adaptable man, he responded to her mood. "Ah, that sounds more like the enthusiast who set forth so gayly from the Kursaal this morning," he answered, pulling the door ajar before he took a seat by her side on the bench. "A few minutes ago you were ready to condemn me as several kinds of idiot for going on in the teeth of our Switzers' warnings. Now, confess!"

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"I don't think I could have climbed another ten yards," she admitted.

"Our haste was due to Barth's anxiety. He wanted to save you from a drenching. It was a near thing, and with the thermometer falling a degree a minute soaked garments might have brought very unpleasant consequences. But that was our only risk. Old mountaineer as I am, I hardly expected such a blizzard in August, after such short notice too. Otherwise, now that we are safely housed, you are fortunate in securing a memorable experience. The storm will soon blow over; but it promises to be lively while it lasts."

Helen was sipping her coffee. Perhaps her eyes conveyed the question her tongue hesitated to utter. Bower smiled pleasantly, and gesticulated with hands and shoulders in a way that was foreign to his studiously cultivated English habit of repose. Indeed, with his climber's garb he seemed to have acquired a new manner. There was a perplexing change in him since the morning.

"Yes," he said. "I understand perfectly. You and I might sing *lieder ohne worte*, Miss Wynton. I have known these summer gales to last four days; but pray do not be alarmed," for Helen nearly dropped her cup in quick dismay; "my own opinion is that we shall have a delightful afternoon. Of course, I am a discredited prophet. Ask Barth."

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The guide, hearing his name mentioned, glanced at them, though he was engaged at the moment in taking the wrappings off a quantity of bread, cold chicken, and slices of ham and beef. He agreed with Bower. The barometer stood high when they left the hotel. He thought, as all men think who live in the open, that "the sharper the blast the sooner it's past."

"Moreover," broke in Karl, who refused to be left out of the conversation, "Johann Klucker's cat was sitting with its back to the stove last evening."

This bit of homely philosophy brought a ripple of laughter from Helen, whereupon Karl explained.

"Cats are very wise, *fräulein*. Johann Klucker's cat is old. Therefore she is skilled in reading the tokens of the weather. A cat hates wind and rain, and makes her arrangements accordingly. If she washes herself smoothly, the next twelve hours will be fine. If she licks against the grain, it will be wet. When she lies with her back to the fire, there will surely be a squall. When her tail is up and her coat rises, look out for wind."

"Johann Klucker's cat has settled the dispute," said Bower gravely in English. "A squall it is,—a most suitable prediction for a cat,—and I am once more rehabilitated in your esteem, I hope?"

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A cold iridescence suddenly illumined the gloomy interior of the hut. It gave individuality to each particle of sleet whirling past the door. Helen thought that the sun had broken through the storm clouds for an instant; but Bower said quietly:

"Are you afraid of lightning?"

"Not very. I don't like it."

"Some people collapse altogether when they see it. Perhaps when forewarned you are forearmed."

A low rumble boomed up the valley, and the mountain echoes muttered in solemn chorus.

"We are to be spared none of the scenic accessories, then?" said Helen.

"None. In fact, you will soon see and hear a thunder storm that would have delighted Gustave Doré. Please remember that it cannot last long, and that this hut has been built twenty years to my knowledge."

Helen sipped her coffee, but pushed away a plate set before her by Barth. "If you don't mind, I should like the door wide open," she said.

"You prefer to lunch later?"

"Yes."

"And you wish to face the music—is that it?"

"I think so."

"Let me remind you that Jove's thunderbolts are really forged on the hilltops."

"I am here; so I must make the best of it. I shall not scream, or faint, if that is what you dread." [Pg 172]

"I dread nothing but your anger for not having turned back when a retreat was possible. I hate turning back, Miss Wynton. I have never yet withdrawn from any enterprise seriously undertaken, and I was determined to share your first ramble among my beloved hills."

Another gleam of light, bluer and more penetrating than its forerunner, lit the brown rafters of the *cabane*. It was succeeded by a crash like the roar of massed artillery. The walls trembled. Some particles of mortar rattled noisily to the floor. A strange sound of rending, followed by a heavy thud, suggested something more tangible than thunderbolts. Bower kicked the door and it swung inward.

"An avalanche," he said. "Probably a rockfall too. Of course, the hut stands clear of the track of unpleasant visitors of that description."

Helen had not expected this courageous bearing in a man of Bower's physical characteristics. Hitherto she had regarded him as somewhat self-indulgent, a Sybarite, the product of modernity in its London aspects. His demeanor in the train, in the hotel, bespoke one accustomed to gratify the flesh, who found all the world ready to pander to his desires. Again she was conscious of that instinctive trustfulness a woman freely reposes in a dominant man. Oddly enough, she thought of Spencer in the same breath. An hour earlier, had she been asked which of these two would command her confidence during a storm, her unhesitating choice would have favored the American. Now, she was at least sure that Bower's coolness was not assumed. His attitude inspired emulation. She rose and went to the door. [Pg 173]

"I want to see an avalanche," she cried. "Where did that one fall?"

Bower followed her. He spoke over her shoulder. "On Monte Roseg, I expect. The weather seems to be clearing slightly. This tearing wind will soon roll up the mist, and the thunder will certainly start another big rock or a snowslide. If you are lucky, you may witness something really fine."

A dazzling flash leaped over the glacier. Although the surrounding peaks were as yet invisible through the haze of sleet and vapor, objects near at hand were revealed with uncanny distinctness. Each frozen wave on the surface of the ice was etched in sharp lines. A cluster of séracs on a neighboring icefall showed all their mad chaos. The blue green chasm of a huge crevasse was illuminated to a depth far below any point to which the rays of the sun penetrated. On the neighboring slope of Monte Roseg the crimson and green and yellow mosses were given sudden life against the black background of rock. Every boulder here wore a somber robe. They were stark and grim. The eye instantly caught the contrast to their gray-white fellows piled on the lower moraine or in the bed of the Orlegna.

Helen was quick to note the new tone of black amid the vividly white patches of snow. She waited until the deafening thunder peal was dying away in eerie cadences. "Why are the rocks black here and almost white in the valley?" she asked. [Pg 174]

"Because they are young, as rocks go," was the smiling answer. "They have yet to pass through the mill. They will be battered and bruised and polished before they emerge from the glacier several years hence and a few miles nearer peace. In that they resemble men. 'Pon my word, Miss Wynton, you have caused me to evolve a rather poetic explanation of certain gray hairs I have noticed of late among my own raven locks."

"You appear to know and love these hills so well that I wonder—if you will excuse a personal remark—I wonder you ever were able to tear yourself away from them."

"I have missed too much of real enjoyment in the effort to amass riches," he said slowly. "Believe me, that thought has held me since—since you and I set foot on the Forno together."

"But you knew? You were no stranger to the Alps? I am beginning to understand that one cannot claim kinship with the high places until they stir the heart more in storm than in sunshine. When I saw all these giants glittering in the sun like knights in silver armor, I described them to myself as gloriously beautiful. Now I feel that they are more than that,—they are awful, pitiless in their indifference to frail mortals; they carry me into a dim region where life and death are terms without meaning." [Pg 175]

"Yes, that is the true spirit of the mountains. I too used to look on them with affectionate reverence, and you recall the old days. Perhaps, if I am deemed worthy, you will teach me the cult once more."

He bent closer. Helen became conscious that in her enthusiasm she had spoken unguardedly. She moved away, slightly but unmistakably, a step or two out into the open, for the hut on that side was not exposed to the bitter violence of the wind.

"It is absurd to imagine us in a change of rôle," she cried. "I should play the poorest travesty of Mentor to your Telemachus. Oh! What is that?"

While she was speaking, another blinding flare of lightning flooded moraine and glacier and pierced the veil of sleet. Her voice rose almost to a shriek. Bower sprang forward. His left hand

rested reassuringly across her shoulders.

"Better come inside the hut," he began.

"But I saw someone—a white face—staring at me down there!"

"It is possible. There is no cause for fear. A party may have crossed from Italy. There would be none from the Maloja at this hour."

Helen was actually trembling. Bower drew her a little nearer. He himself was unnerved, a prey to wilder emotions than she could guess till later days brought a fuller understanding. It was a mad trick of fate that threw the girl into his embrace just then, for another far-flung sheet of fire revealed to her terrified vision the figures of Spencer and Stampa on the rocks beneath. With brutal candor, the same flash showed her nestling close to Bower. For some reason, she shuddered. Though the merciful gloom of the next few seconds restored her faculties, her face and neck were aflame. She almost felt that she had been detected in some fault. Her confusion was not lessened by hearing a muttered curse from her companion. Careless of the stinging sleet, she leaped down to a broad tier of rock below the plateau of the hut and cried shrilly:

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"Is that really you, Mr. Spencer?"

A more tremendous burst of thunder than any yet experienced dwarfed all other sounds for an appreciable time. The American scrambled up, almost at her feet, and stood beside her. Stampa came quick on his heels, moving with a lightness and accuracy of foothold amazing in one so lame.

"Just me, Miss Wynton. Sorry if I have frightened you, but our old friend here was insistent that we should hurry. I have been tracking you since nine o'clock."

Spencer's words were nonchalantly polite. He even raised his cap, though the fury of the ice laden blast might well have excused this formal act of courtesy. Helen was still blushing so painfully that she became angry with herself, and her voice was hardly under control. Nevertheless, she managed to say:

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"How kind and thoughtful of you! I am all right, as you see. Mr. Bower and the guide were able to bring me here before the storm broke. We happened to be standing near the door, watching the lightning. When I caught a glimpse of you I was so stupidly startled that I screamed and almost fell into Mr. Bower's arms."

Put in that way, it did not sound so distressing. And Spencer had no desire to add further difficulties to a situation already awkward.

"Guess you scared me too," he said. "I suppose, now we are at the hut, Stampa will not object to my waiting five minutes or so before we start for home."

"Surely you will lunch with us. Everything is set out on the table, and we have food enough for a regiment."

"You would need it if you remained here another couple of hours, Miss Wynton. Stampa tells me that a first rate *guxe*, which is Swiss for a blizzard, I believe, is blowing up. This thunder storm is the preliminary to a heavy downfall of snow. That is why I came. If we are not off the glacier before two o'clock, it will become impassable till a lot of the snow melts."

"What is that you are saying?" demanded Bower brusquely. Helen and the two men had reached the level of the *cabane*; but Stampa, thinking they would all enter, kept in the rear, "If that fairy tale accounts for your errand, you are on a wild goose chase, Mr. Spencer."

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He had not heard the American's words clearly; but he gathered sufficient to account for the younger man's motive in following them, and was furiously annoyed by this unlooked for interruption. He had no syllable of thanks for a friendly action. Though no small risk attended the crossing of the Forno during a gale, it was evident he strongly resented the presence of both Spencer and the guide.

Helen, after her first eager outburst, was tongue tied. She saw that her would-be rescuers were dripping wet, and was amazed that Bower should greet them so curtly, though, to be sure, she believed implicitly that the storm would soon pass. Stampa was already inside the hut. He was haranguing Barth and the porter vehemently, and they were listening with a curious submissiveness.

Spencer was the most collected person present. He brushed aside Bower's acrimony as lightly as he had accepted Helen's embarrassed explanation. "This is not my hustle at all," he said. "Stampa heard that his adored *sigñorina*—"

"Stampa! Is that Stampa?"

Bower's strident voice was hushed to a hoarse murmur. It reminded one of his hearers of a growling dog suddenly cowed by fear. Helen's ears were tuned to this perplexing note; but Spencer interpreted it according to his dislike of the man.

"Stampa heard," he went on, with cold-drawn precision, "that Miss Wynton had gone to the Forno. He is by far the most experienced guide to be found on this side of the Alps, and he believes that anyone remaining up here to-day will surely be imprisoned in the hut a week or

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more by bad weather. In fact, even now an hour may make all the difference between danger and safety. Perhaps you can convince him he is wrong. I know nothing about it, beyond the evidence of my senses, backed up by some acquaintance with blizzards. Anyhow, I am inclined to think that Miss Wynton will be wise if she listens to the points of the argument in the hotel."

"Perhaps it would be better to return at once," said Helen timidly. Her sensitive nature warned her that these two men were ready to quarrel, and that she herself, in some nebulous way, was the cause of their mutual enmity.

Beyond this her intuition could not travel. It was impossible that she should realize how sorely her wish to placate Bower disquieted Spencer. He had seen the two under conditions that might, indeed, be explicable by Helen's fright; but he would extend no such charitable consideration to Bower, whose conduct, no matter how it was viewed, made him a rival. Yes, it had come to that. Spencer had hardly spoken a word to Stampa during the toilsome journey from Maloja. He had looked facts stubbornly in the face, and the looking served to clear certain doubts from his heart and brain. He wanted to woo and win Helen for his wife. He was enmeshed in a net of his own contriving, and its strands were too strong to be broken. If Helen was reft from him now, he would gaze on a darkened world for many a day.

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But he was endowed with a splendid self control. That element of cast steel in his composition, discovered by Dunston after five minutes' acquaintance, kept him rigid under the strain.

"Sorry I should figure as spoiling your excursion, Miss Wynton," he was able to say calmly; "but, when all is said and done, the weather is bad, and you will have plenty of fine days later."

Bower crept nearer. His action suggested stealth. Although the wind was howling under the deep eaves of the hut, he almost whispered. "Yes, you are right—quite right. Let us go now—at once. With you and me, Mr. Spencer, Miss Wynton will be safe—safer than with the guides. They can follow with the stores. Come! There is no time to be lost!"

The others were so taken aback by his astounding change of front that they were silent for an instant. It was Helen who protested, firmly enough.

"The lightning seems to have given us an attack of nerves," she said. "It would be ridiculous to rush off in that manner—"

"But there is peril—real peril—in delay. I admit it. I was wrong."

Bower's anxiety was only too evident. Spencer, regarding him from a single viewpoint, deemed him a coward, and his gorge rose at the thought.

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"Oh, nonsense!" he cried contemptuously. "We shall be two hours on the glacier, so five more minutes won't cut any ice. If you have food and drink in there, Stampa certainly wants both. We all need them. We have to meet that gale all the way. The two hours may become three before we reach the path."

Helen guessed the reason of his disdain. It was unjust; but the moment did not permit of a hint that he was mistaken. To save Bower from further commitment—which, she was convinced, was due entirely to regard for her own safety—she went into the hut.

"Stampa," she said, "I am very much obliged to you for taking so much trouble. I suppose we may eat something before we start?"

"Assuredly, *fräulein*," he cried. "Am I not here? Were it to begin to snow at once, I could still bring you unharmed to the chalets."

Josef Barth had borne Stampa's reproaches with surly deference; but he refused to be degraded in this fashion—before Karl, too, whose tongue wagged so loosely.

"That is the talk of a foolish boy, not of a man," he cried wrathfully. "Am I not fitted, then, to take mademoiselle home after bringing her here?"

"Truly, on a fine day, Josef," was the smiling answer.

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"I told monsieur that a *guxe* was blowing up from the south; so did Karl; but he would not hearken. *Ma foi!* I am not to blame." Barth, on his dignity, introduced a few words of French picked up from the Chamounix men. He fancied they would awe Stampa, and prove incidentally how wide was his own experience.

The old guide only laughed. "A nice pair, you and Karl," he shouted. "Are the voyageurs in your care or not? You told monsieur, indeed! You ought to have refused to take mademoiselle. That would have settled the affair, I fancy."

"But this monsieur knows as much about the mountains as any of us. He might surprise even you, Stampa. He has climbed the Matterhorn from Zermatt and Breuil. He has come down the rock wall on the Col des Nantillons. How is one to argue with such a *voyageur* on this child's glacier?"

Stampa whistled. "Oh—knows the Matterhorn, does he? What is his name?"

"Bower," said Helen,— "Mr. Mark Bower."

"What! Say that again, *fräulein!* Mark Bower? Is that your English way of putting it?"

Helen attributed Stampa's low hiss to a tardy recognition of Bower's fame as a mountaineer. Though the hour was noon, the light was feeble. Veritable thunder clouds had gathered above the mist, and the expression of Stampa's face was almost hidden in the obscurity of the hut.

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"That is his name," she repeated. "You must have heard of him. He was well known on the high Alps—years ago." She paused before she added those concluding words. She was about to say "in your time," but the substituted phrase was less personal, since the circumstances under which Stampa ceased to be a notability in "the street" at Zermatt were in her mind.

"God in heaven!" muttered the old man, passing a hand over his face as though waking from a dream,— "God in heaven! can it be that my prayer is answered at last?" He shambled out.

Spencer had waited to watch the almost continuous blaze of lightning playing on the glacier. Distant summits were now looming through the diminishing downpour of sleet. He was wondering if by any chance Stampa might be mistaken. Bower stood somewhat apart, seemingly engaged in the same engrossing task. The wind was not quite so fierce as during its first onset. It blew in gusts. No longer screaming in a shrill and sustained note, it wailed fitfully.

Stampa lurched unevenly close to Bower. He was about to touch him on the shoulder; but he appeared to recollect himself in time.

"Marcus Bauer," he said in a voice that was terrible by reason of its restraint.

Bower wheeled suddenly. He did not flinch. His manner suggested a certain preparedness. Thus might a strong man face a wild beast when hope lay only in the matching of sinew against sinew. "That is not my name," he snarled viciously.

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"Marcus Bauer," repeated Stampa in the same repressed monotone, "I am Etta's father."

"Why do you address me in that fashion? I have never before seen you."

"No. You took care of that. You feared Etta's father, though you cared little for Christian Stampa, the guide. But I have seen you, Marcus Bauer. You were slim then—an elegant, is it not?—and many a time have I hobbled into the Hotel Mont Cervin to look at your portrait in a group lest I should forget your face. Yet I passed you just now! Great God! I passed you."

A ferocity glared from Bower's eyes that might well have daunted Stampa. For an instant he glanced toward Spencer, whose clear cut profile was silhouetted against a background of white-blue ice now gleaming in a constant flutter of lightning. Stampa was not yet aware of the true cause of Bower's frenzy. He thought that terror was spurring him to self defense. An insane impulse to kill, to fight with the nails and teeth, almost mastered him; but that must not be yet.

"It is useless, Marcus Bauer," he said, with a calmness so horribly unreal that its deadly intent was all the more manifest. "I am the avenger, not you. I can tear you to pieces with my hands when I will. It would be here and now, were it not for the presence of the English *signorina* who saved me from death. It is not meet that she should witness your expiation. That is to be settled between you and me alone."

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Bower made one last effort to assert himself. "You are talking in riddles, man," he said. "If you believe you have some long forgotten grievance against one of my name, come and see me to-morrow at the hotel. Perhaps—"

"Yes, I shall see you to-morrow. Do not dream that you can escape me. Now that I know you live, I would search the wide world for you. Blessed Mother! How you must have feared me all these years!"

Stampa was using the Romansch dialect of the Italian Alps. Bower spoke in German. Spencer heard them indistinctly. He marveled that they should discuss, as he imagined, the state of the weather with such subdued passion.

"Hello, Christian," he cried, "the clouds are lifting somewhat. Where is your promised snow?"

Stampa peered up into Bower's face; for his twisted leg had reduced his own unusual height by many inches. "To-morrow!" he whispered. "At ten o'clock—outside the hotel. Then we have a settlement. Is it so?"

There was no answer. Bower was wrestling with a mad desire to grapple with him and fling him down among the black rocks. Stampa crept nearer. A ghastly smile lit his rugged features, and his *pickel* clattered to the broken shingle at his feet.

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"I offer you to-morrow," he said. "I am in no hurry. Have I not waited sixteen years? But it may be that you are tortured by a devil, Marcus Bauer. Shall it be now?"

The clean-souled peasant believed that the millionaire had a conscience. Not yet did he understand that balked desire is stronger than any conscience. It really seemed that nothing could withhold these two from mortal struggle then and there. Spencer was regarding them curiously; but they paid no heed to him. Bower's tongue was darting in and out between his teeth. The red blood surged to his temples. Stampa was still smiling. His lips moved in the strangest prayer that ever came from a man's heart. He was actually thanking the Madonna—mother of the great peacemaker—for having brought his enemy within reach!

"Mr. Bower!" came Helen's voice from the door of the *cabane*. "Why don't you join us? And you,

Mr. Spencer? Stampa, come here and eat at once."

"To-morrow, at ten? Or now?" the old man whispered again.

"To-morrow—curse you!"

Stampa twisted himself round. "I am not hungry, *fräulein*," he cried. "I ate chocolate all the way up the glacier. But do you be speedy. We have lost too much time already."

Bower brushed past, and the guide stooped to recover his ice ax. Spencer, though troubled sufficiently by his own disturbing fantasies, did not fail to notice their peculiar behavior. But he answered Helen with a pleasant disclaimer. [Pg 187]

"Christian kept his hoard a secret, Miss Wynton. I too have lost my appetite," said he.

"Once we start we shall hardly be able to unpack the hamper again," said Helen.

The American was trying her temper. She suspected that he carried his hostility to the absurd pitch of refusing to partake of any food provided by Bower. It was a queer coincidence that Spencer harbored the same notion with regard to Stampa, and wondered at it.

"I shall starve willingly," he said. "It will be a just punishment for declining the good things that did not tempt me when they were available."

Bower poured out a quantity of wine and drank it at a gulp. He refilled the glass and nearly emptied it a second time. But he touched not a morsel of meat or bread. Helen, fortunately, attributed the conduct of the men to spleen. She ate a sandwich, and found that she was far more ready for a meal than she had imagined.

Stampa's broad frame darkened the doorway. He told Karl not to burden himself with anything save the cutlery. Now that he was the skilled guide again, the leader in whom they trusted, his worn face was animated and his voice eager.

Helen heard Spencer's exclamation without.

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"By Jove, Stampa! you are right! Here comes the snow."

"Quick, quick!" cried Stampa. "*Vorwärtz*, Barth. You lead. Stop at my call. Karl next—then the *fräulein* and my monsieur. Yours follows, and I come last."

"No, no!" burst out Bower, lowering a third glass of wine from his lips.

"*Che diavolo!* It shall be as I have said!" shouted Stampa, with an imperious gesture. Helen remarked it; but things were being done and said that were inexplicable. Even Bower was silenced.

"Are we to be roped, then?" growled Barth.

"Have you never crossed ice during a snow storm?" asked Stampa.

In a few minutes they were ready. The lightning flashes were less frequent, and the thunder was muttering far away amid the secret places of the Bernina. The wind was rising again. Instead of sleet it carried snowflakes, and these did not sting the face nor patter on the ice. But they clung everywhere, and the sable rocks were taking unto themselves a new garment.

"*Vorwärtz!*" rang out Stampa's trumpet like call, and Barth leaped down into the moraine.



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CHAPTER X

ON THE GLACIER

Barth, a good man on ice and rock, was not a genius among guides. Faced by an apparently unscalable rock wall, or lost in a wilderness of séracs, he would never guess the one way that

led to success. But he was skilled in the technic of his profession, and did not make the mistake now of subjecting Helen or Spencer to the risk of an ugly fall. The air temperature had dropped from eighty degrees Fahrenheit to below freezing point. Rocks that gave safe foothold an hour earlier were now glazed with an amalgam of sleet and snow. If, in his dull mind, he wondered why Spencer came next to Helen, rather than Bower or Stampa,—either of whom would know exactly when to give that timely aid with the rope that imparts such confidence to the novice,—he said nothing. Stampa's eye was on him. His pride was up in arms. It behooved him to press on at just the right pace, and commit no blunder.

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Helen, who had been glad to get back to the moraine during the ascent, was ready to breathe a sigh of relief when she felt her feet on the ice again. Those treacherous rocks were affrighting. They bereft her of trust in her own limbs. She seemed to slip here and there without power to check herself. She expected at any moment to stumble helplessly on some cruelly sharp angle of a granite boulder, and find that she was maimed so badly as to render another step impossible. More than once she was sensible that the restraining pull on the rope alone held her from disaster. Her distress did not hinder the growth of a certain surprise that the American should be so sure footed, so quick to judge her needs. When by his help a headlong downward plunge was converted into a harmless slide over the sloping face of a rock, she half turned.

"I must thank you for that afterward," she said, with a fine effort at a smile.

"Eyes front, please," was the quiet answer.

Under less strenuous conditions it might have sounded curt; but the look that met hers robbed the words of their tenseness, and sent the hot blood tingling in her veins. Bower had never looked at her like that. Just as some unusually vivid flash of lightning revealed the hidden depths of a crevasse, bringing plainly before the eye chinks and crannies not discernible in the strongest sunlight, so did the glimpse of Spencer's soul illumine her understanding. He was not only safeguarding her, but thinking of her, and the stolen knowledge set up a bewildering tumult in her heart.

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"Attention!" shouted Barth, halting and making a drive at something with his ax.

The line stopped. Stampa's ringing voice came over Helen's head:

"What is that ahead there?"

"A new fall, I think. We ought to leave the moraine a little lower down; but this was not here when we ascended."

How either man, Stampa especially, could see anything at all, was beyond the girl's comprehension. The snow was absolutely blinding. The wind was full in their faces, and it carried the huge flakes upward. They seemed to spring from beneath rather than drop from the clouds. Ever and anon a weirdly blue gleam of lightning would give a demoniac touch to a scene worthy of the Inferno.

"Make for the ice—quick!" cried Stampa, and Barth turned sharply to the left. Falling stones were now their chief danger, and both men were anxious to avoid it.

After a brief scramble they mounted the curving glacier. A fiercer gust shrieked at them and swept some small space clear of snow. Helen had a dim vision of lightning playing above the crest of a great mound on the edge of the ice field,—a mound that she did not remember seeing before. Then the gale sank back to its sustained howling, the snow swirled in denser volume, and the specter vanished.

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Ere they had gone another hundred yards, Barth's hoarse warning checked them again. "The bridge has fallen!" was his cry. "There has been an ice movement."

There was a question in the man's words. Here was a nice point submitted to his judgment,—whether to follow the line of the recently formed schrund yawning at his feet, or endeavor to cross it, or go back to the scene of the landslip? That was where Barth was lacking. In that instant he resigned his pride of place without further effort to retain it. He was in the van, but did not lead. Thenceforth Stampa was master.

"What is the width—ten meters?" demanded the old guide cheerfully.

"About that."

"All the better. It is not deep here. The shock of that avalanche opened it up. You will find a way down. Cut the steps close together. You know how to polish them, Karl?"

"Yes, I can do that," said the porter.

"And watch the *sigñorina's* feet."

"Yes, I'll take care."

Barth was peering fixedly into the chasm. To Helen's fancy it was bottomless, though in reality it was not more than forty feet deep, and the two walls fell away from each other at a practicable angle. In normal summer weather, a small crevasse always formed there owing to the glacier flowing over a transverse ridge of rock beneath. To-day the impact of many thousands of tons of débris had disrupted the ice to an unusual extent. Having decided on the best line, the leading

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guide stepped over into space. Helen heard his ax ringing as he fashioned secure foothold down the steep ledge he had selected. He was quite trustworthy in such work.

Stampa, who had a thought for none save Helen, gave her a reassuring word. "Barth will find a way, *fräulein*," he said. "And Herr Spencer knows how you should cross your feet and carry your ax, while Karl will see to your foothold. Remember too that you will be at the bottom before I begin the descent, so no harm can come to you. Try and stand straight. Don't lean against the slope. Lean away from it. Don't be afraid. Don't trust to the rope or the grip of the ax. Rely on your own stand."

It was no time to pick and choose phrases, yet Helen realized the oddity of the absence of any reference to Bower. One other in the party had a thought somewhat akin to hers; but he slurred it over in his mind, and seized the opportunity to help her by a casual remark.

"Guess you hardly expected genuine ice work in to-day's trip?" he said. "Stampa and I had a lot of it last week. It's as easy as walking down stairs when you know how."

"I don't think I am afraid," she answered; "but I should have preferred to walk up stairs first. This is rather reversing the natural order of things, isn't it?"

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"Nature loves irregularities. That is why the prize girl in every novel has irregular features. A heroine with a Greek face would kill a whole library."

"*Vorwärtz—es geht!*"

Barth's gruff voice sounded hollow from the depths. Karl, in his turn, went over the lip of the crevasse. Helen, conscious of an exaltation that lifted her out of the region of ignoble fear, looked down. She could see now what was being done. Barth was swinging his ax and smiting the ice with the adz. His head was just below the level of her feet, though he was distant the full length of two sections of the rope. He had cut broad black steps. They did not seem to present any great difficulty. Helen found herself speculating on the remarkable light effects that made these notches black in a gray-green wall.

"Right foot first," said Spencer quietly. "When that is firmly fixed, throw all your weight on it, and bring the left down. Then the right again. Hold the pick breast high."

"So!" cried Karl appreciatively, watching her first successful effort.

As Spencer was lowering himself into the crevasse, he heard something that set his nimble wits agog. Stampa, the valiant and light hearted Stampa, the genial companion who had laughed and jested even when they were crossing an ice slope on the giant Monte della Disgrazia,—a traverse of precarious clinging, where a slip meant death a thousand feet below,—was muttering strangely at Bower.

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"*Schwein-hund!*" he was saying, "if any evil befalls the *fräulein*, I shall drive my ax between your shoulder blades."

There was no reply. Spencer was sure he was not mistaken. Though the guide spoke German, he knew enough of that language to understand this comparatively simple sentence. Quite as amazing as Stampa's threat was Bower's silent acceptance of it. He began to piece together some fleeting impressions of the curious wrangle between the two outside the hut. He recalled Bower's extraordinary change of tone when told that a man named Christian Stampa had followed him from Maloja.

Helen was just taking another confident step forward and down, balancing herself with graceful assurance. Spencer had a few seconds in which to steal a backward glance, and a flash of lightning happened to glimmer on Bower's features. The American was not given to fanciful imaginings; but during many a wild hour in the Far West he had seen the baleful frown of murder on a man's face too often not to recognize it now in this snow scourged cleft of a mighty Alpine glacier. Yet he was helpless. He could neither speak nor act on a mere opinion. He could only watch, and be on his guard. From that moment he tried to observe every movement not only of Helen but of Bower.

The members of the party were roped at intervals of twenty feet. Allowing for the depth of the crevasse, the amount of rope taken up in their hands ready to be served out as occasion required, and the inclination of Barth's line of descent, the latter ought to be notching the opposing wall before Stampa quitted the surface of the glacier. Though Spencer could not see Stampa now, he knew that the rear guide was bracing himself strongly against any tell-tale jerk, with the additional security of an anchor obtained by driving the pick of his ax deeply into the surface ice. It was Bower's business to keep the rope quite taut both above and below; but the American was sure that he was gathering the slack behind him with his right hand while he carried the ax in his left, and did not use it to steady himself.

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Spencer assumed, from various comments by Helen and others, that Bower was an adept climber. Therefore, the passage of a schrund, or large, shallow crevasse was child's play to him. This departure from all the canons of the craft as imparted by Stampa during their first week on the hills together, struck Spencer as exceedingly dangerous. He reflected that were it not for the words he had overheard, he would never have known of this curious proceeding. Indeed, but for those words, with their sinister significance augmented by Bower's devilish expression, had he even looked back by chance, the maneuver might not have attracted his attention. What, then,

did it imply? Why should a skilled mountaineer break an imperative rule that permits of no exceptions? He continued to watch Bower even more closely. He devoted to the task every instant that consideration for Helen's safety and his own would allow.

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There was not much light in the crevasse. Heavy clouds and the smothering snow wraiths hid the travelers under a dense pall that suggested the approach of night, although the actual time was about half past one o'clock in the afternoon. The wind seemed to delight in torturing them with minute particles of ice that stung with a peculiar sensation of burning. These were bad enough. To add to their miseries, fine, powdery snowflakes settled on eyes and eyelids with blinding effect.

During a particularly baffling gust Helen uttered a slight exclamation. Instantly Spencer stiffened himself, and Barth and Karl halted.

"It is nothing," she cried. "For a second I could not see."

Barth's ax rang out again. The vibrations of each lusty blow could be felt distinctly along the solid ice wall. After a last downward step he would begin to notch his way up the other side, where the angle was much more favorable to rapid progress. Spencer stole another glance over his shoulder. Bower had fully ten feet of the rearmost section of rope in hand. His head was thrown well back. Standing with his face to the ice, he was striving to look over the lip of the schrund. Stampa, feeling a steady tension, must be expecting the announcement momentarily that Barth was crossing the narrow crevice at the bottom. Helen and Karl, intent on the operations of the leader, paid heed to nothing else; but Spencer was fascinated by Bower's peculiar actions.

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At last, Barth's deep bass reverberated triumphantly upward. "*Vorwärtz!*"

"*Vorwärtz, Stampa!*" repeated Bower, suddenly changing the ice ax to his right hand and stretching the left as far along the rope and as high up as possible. Simultaneously he raised the ax. Then, and not till then, did Spencer understand. Stampa must be on the point of relaxing his grip and preparing to descend. If Bower cut the rope with a single stroke of the adz, a violent tug at the sundered end would precipitate Stampa headlong into the crevasse, while there would be ample evidence to show that he had himself severed the rope by a miscalculated blow. The fall would surely kill him. When his corpse was recovered, it would be found that the cut had been made much closer to his own body than to that of his nearest neighbor.

"Stop!" roared Spencer, all a-quiver with wrath at his discovery.

Obedience to the climbers' law held the others rigid. That command implied danger. It called for an instant tightening of every muscle to withstand the strain of a slip. Even Bower, a man on the very brink of committing a fiendish crime, yielded to a subconscious acceptance of the law, and kept himself braced in his steps.

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The American was well fitted to handle a crisis of that nature. "Hold fast, Stampa!" he shouted.

"What is wrong?" came the ready cry, for the rear guide had already driven the pick of his ax into the ice again after having withdrawn it.

Then Spencer spoke English. "I happen to be watching you," he said slowly, never relaxing a steel-cold scrutiny of Bower's livid face. "You seem to forget what you are doing. Follow me until you have taken up the slack of the rope. Do you understand?"

Bower continued to gaze at him with lack-luster eyes. All he realized was that his murderous design was frustrated; but how or why he neither knew nor cared.

"Do you hear me?" demanded Spencer even more sternly. "Come along, or I shall explain myself more fully!"

Without answering, the other made shift to move. Spencer, however, meant to save the unwitting guide from further hazard.

"Don't stir, Stampa, till I give the order!" he sang out.

"All right, monsieur, but we are losing time. What is Barth doing there? *Saperlotte!* If I were in front—"

Bower, who owned certain strong qualities, swallowed something, took three strides downward, and said calmly: "I was waiting to give Stampa a hand. He is lame, you know."

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Helen, of course, heard all that passed. She had long since abandoned the effort to disentangle the skein of that day's events. Everybody was talking and acting unnaturally. Perhaps the ravel of things would clear itself when they regained the commonplace world of the hotel. In any case, she wished the men would hurry, for it was unutterably cold in the crevasse.

At last, then, there was a movement ahead.

Barth began to mount. Muttering an instruction to Karl that he was to give the girl a friendly pull, he cut smaller steps more widely apart and at a steeper gradient. Soon they were on the floor of the ice and hurrying to the next bridge. Not a word was spoken by anyone. The fury of the gale and the ever gathering snow made it imperative that not a moment should be wasted. The lightning was decreasing perceptibly, while the occasional peals of thunder were scarcely audible above the souging of the wind. A tremendous crash on the right announced the fall of another

avalanche; but it did not affect the next broad crevasse. The bridge they had used a few hours earlier stood firm. Indeed, it was new welded by regelation since the sun's rays had disappeared.

The leader kept a perfect line, never deviating from the right track. Helen, who had completely lost her bearings, thought they had a long way farther to go, when she saw Barth stop and begin to unfasten the rope. Then a thrust with the butt of her *pickel* told her that she was standing on rock. When she cleared her eyes of the flying snow, she saw a well defined curving ribbon amid the white chaos. It was the path, covered six inches deep. The violent exertions of nearly three hours since she left the hut had induced a pleasant sense of languor. Did she dare to suggest it, she would have liked to sit down and rest for awhile.

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Bower, who had substituted reasoned thought for his madness, addressed Spencer with easy complacency while Barth was unroping them. "Why did you believe that I was doing a risky thing in stopping to assist Stampa?" he asked.

"I guess you know best," was the uncompromising answer.

"Yes, I think I do. Of course, I could not argue the matter then, but I fancy my climbing experience is far greater than yours, Mr. Spencer."

His sheer impudence was admirable. He even smiled in the superior way of an expert lecturing a novice. But Spencer did not smile.

"Do you really want to hear my views on your conduct?" he said.

"No, thanks. The discussion might prove interesting, but we can adjourn it to the coffee and cigar period after dinner."

His eyes fell under Spencer's contemptuous glance. Yet he carried himself bravely. Though the man he meant to kill, and another man who had read his inmost thought in time to prevent a tragedy, were looking at him fixedly, he turned away with a laugh on his lips.

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"I am afraid, Miss Wynton, you will regard me in future as a broken reed where Alpine excursions are concerned," he said.

"You were mistaken—that is obvious," said Helen frankly. "But so was Barth. He agreed that the storm would be only a passing affair. Don't you think we are very deeply indebted to Mr. Spencer and Stampa for coming to our assistance?"

"I do, indeed. Stampa, one can reward in kind. This sort of thing used to be his business, I hear. As for Mr. Spencer, a smile from you will repay him tenfold."

"Herr Spencer," broke in Stampa, "you go on with the *signorina* and see that she does not slip. She is tired. Marcus Bauer and I have matters to discuss."

The old man's unwonted harshness appealed to the girl as did the host of other queer happenings on that memorable day. Bower moved uneasily. A vindictive gleam shot from his eyes. Helen missed none of this. But she was fatigued, and her feet were cold and wet, while the sleet encountered on the upper glacier had almost soaked her to the skin. Nevertheless, she strove bravely to lighten the cloud that seemed to have settled on the men.

"That means a wordy warfare," she said gayly. "I pity you, Mr. Bower. You cannot wriggle out of your difficulty. The snow will soon be a foot deep in the valley. Goodness only knows what would have become of us up there in the hut!"

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He bowed gracefully, with a hint of the foreign air she had noted once before. "I would have brought you safely out of greater perils," he said; "but every dog has his day, and this is Stampa's."

"*En route!*" cried the guide impatiently. He loathed the sight of Bower standing there, smiling and courteous, in the presence of one whom he regarded as a Heaven-sent friend and protectress. Spencer attributed his surliness to its true cause. It supplied another bit of the mosaic he was slowly piecing together. Greatly as he preferred Helen's company, he was willing to sacrifice at least ten minutes of it, could he but listen to the "discussion" between Stampa and Bower.

Therein he would have erred greatly. Helen was tired, and she admitted it. She did not decline his aid when the path was steep and slippery. In delightful snatches of talk they managed to say a good deal to each other, and Helen did not fail to make plain the exact circumstances under which she first caught sight of Spencer outside the hut. When they arrived at the carriage road, which begins at Lake Cavloccio, they could walk side by side and chat freely. Here, in the valley, matters were normal. The snow did not place such a veil on all things. The windings of the road often brought them abreast of the four men in the rear. Bower was trudging along alone, holding his head down, and seemingly lost in thought.

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Close behind him came Stampa and the Engadiners. Karl, of course, was talking—the others might or might not be lending their ears to his interminable gossip.

"We are outstripping our companions. Don't you think we ought to wait for them?" said Helen once, when Bower chanced to look her way.

"No," said Spencer.

"You are exceedingly positive."

"I tried to be exceedingly negative."

"But why?"

"I rather fancy that they would jar on us."

"But Stampa's promised lecture appears to have ended?"

"I think it never began. It is a safe bet that Mr. Bower and he have not exchanged a word since our last halt."

Helen laughed. "A genuine case of Greek meeting Greek," she said. "Stampa is an excellent guide, I am sure; but Mr. Bower does really know these mountains. I suppose anyone is liable to err in forecasting Alpine weather."

"That is nothing. If it were you or I, Stampa would dismiss the point with a grin. You heard how he chaffed Barth, yet trusted him with the lead? No. These two have an old feud to settle. You will hear more of it."

"A feud! Mr. Bower declared to me that Stampa was absolutely unknown to him."

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"It isn't necessary to know a man before you hate him. I can give you a heap of historic examples. For instance, who has a good word to say for Ananias?"

The girl understood that he meant to parry her question with a quip. The cross purposes so much in evidence all day were baffling and mysterious to its close.

"My own opinion is that both you and Stampa have taken an unreasonable dislike to Mr. Bower," she said determinedly. The words were out before she quite realized their import. She flushed a little.

Spencer was gazing down into the gorge of the Orlegna. The brawling torrent chimed with his own mood; but his set face gave no token of the storm within. He only said quietly, "How good it must be to have you as a friend!"

"I have no reason to feel other than friendly to Mr. Bower," she protested hotly. "It was the rarest good fortune for me that he came to Maloja. I met him once in London, and a second time, by accident, during my journey to Switzerland. Yet, widely known as he is in society, he was sufficiently large minded to disregard the sneers and innuendoes of some of those horrid women in the hotel. He has gone out of his way to show me every kindness. Why should I not repay it by speaking well of him?"

"I shall lay my head on the nearest tree stump, and you can smite me with your ax, good and hard," said Spencer.

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She laughed angrily. "I don't know what evil influence is possessing us," she cried. "Everything is awry. Even the sun refuses to shine. Here am I storming at one to whom I owe my life——"

"No," he broke in decisively. "Don't put it that way, because the whole credit of the relief expedition is due to Stampa. Say, Miss Wynton, may I square my small services by asking a favor?"

"Oh, yes, indeed."

"Well, then, if it lies in your power, keep Stampa and Bower apart. In any event, don't intervene in their quarrel."

"So you are quite serious in your belief that there is a quarrel?"

The American saw again in his mind's eye the scene in the crevasse when Bower had raised his ax to strike. "Quite serious," he replied, and the gravity in his voice was so marked that Helen placed a contrite hand on his arm for an instant.

"Please, I am sorry if I was rude to you just now," she said. "I have had a long day, and my nerves are worn to a fine edge. I used to flatter myself that I hadn't any nerves; but they have come to the surface here. It must be the thin air."

"Then it is a bad place for an American."

"Ah, that reminds me of something I had forgotten. I meant to ask you how you came to remain in the Maloja. Is that too inquisitive on my part? I can account for the presence of the other Americans in the hotel. They belong to the Paris colony, and are interested in tennis and golf. I have not seen you playing either game. In fact, you moon about in solitary grandeur, like myself. And—oh, dear! what a string of questions!—is it true that you wanted to play baccarat with Mr. Bower for a thousand pounds?"

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"It is true that I agreed to share a bank with Mr. Dunston, and the figure you mention was suggested; but I backed out of the proposition."

"Why?"

"Because your friend, Mr. Hare, thought he was responsible, in a sense, having introduced me to

Dunston; so I let up on the idea,—just to stop him from feeling bad about it.”

“You really meant to play in the first instance?”

“Yes.”

“Well, it was very wicked of you. Only the other day you were telling me how hard you had to work before you saved your first thousand pounds.”

“From that point of view my conduct was idiotic. But I would like to carry the story a little further, Miss Wynton. I was in a mood that night to oppose Mr. Bower for a much more valuable stake if the chance offered.”

“It is rather shocking,” said Helen.

“I suppose so. Of course, there are prizes in life that cannot be measured by monetary standards.” [Pg 208]

He was not looking at the Orlegna now, and the girl by his side well knew it. The great revelation that flooded her soul with light while crossing the Forno came back with renewed power. She did not pretend to herself that the words were devoid of a hidden meaning, and her heart fluttered with subtle ecstasy. But she was proud and self-reliant, so proud that she crushed the tumult in her breast, so self-reliant that she was able to give him a timid smile.

“That deals with the second head of the indictment, then,” she said lightly. “Now for the first. Why did you select the Engadine for your holiday?”

“If I could tell you that, I should know something of the occult impulses that govern men’s lives. One minute I was in London, meaning to go north. The next I was hurrying to buy a ticket for St. Moritz.”

“But——” She meant to continue, “you arrived here the same day as I did.” Somehow that did not sound quite the right thing to say. Her tongue tripped; but she forced herself to frame a sentence. “It is odd that you, like myself, should have hit upon an out-of-the-way place like Maloja. The difference is that I was sent here, whereas you came of your own free will.”

“I guess you are right,” said he, laughing as though she had uttered an exquisite joke. “Yes, that is just it. I can imagine two young English swallows, meeting in Algeria in the winter, twittering explanations of the same sort.” [Pg 209]

“I don’t feel a bit like a swallow, and I am sure I can’t twitter, and as for Algeria, a home of sunshine—well, just look at it!” She waved a hand at the darkening panorama of hills and pine woods, all etched in black lines and masses, where rocks and trees and houses broke the dead white of the snow mantle.

They happened to be crossing a bridge that spans the Orlegna before it takes its first frantic plunge towards Italy. Bower, who had quickened his pace, took the gesture as a signal, and sent an answering flourish. Helen stopped. He evidently wished to overtake them.

“More explanations,” murmured Spencer.

“But he was mistaken. I was calling Nature to witness that your simile was not justified.”

“Tell you what,” he said in a low voice, “if this storm has blown over by the morning, meet me after breakfast, and we will walk down the valley to Vicosoprano for luncheon. There is a diligence back in the afternoon. We can stroll there in three hours, and I shall have time to clear up this swallow proposition.”

“That will be delightful, if the weather improves.”

“It will. I will compel it.”

Bower was nearing them rapidly. A constrained silence fell between them. To end it, Helen cried:

“Well, are you feeling duly humbled, Mr. Bower?” [Pg 210]

He did not seem to understand her meaning. Apparently, he might have forgotten that Stampa still lived. Then he roused his wits with an effort. “Not humbled, but elated,” he said. “Have I not led you to feats of derring-do? Why, the Wragg girls will be green with envy when they hear of your exploits.”

He swung round the corner to the bridge. After a smiling glance at Spencer’s impassive face, he turned to Helen. “You have come out of the ordeal with flying colors,” he said. “That flower you picked on the way up has not withered. Give it to me as a memento.”

The words were almost a challenge. The girl hesitated.

“No,” she said. “I must find you some other souvenir.”

“But I want that—if——”

“There is no ‘if.’ You forget that I took it from—from the boulder marked by a cross.”

“I am not superstitious.”

"Nor am I. Nevertheless, I should not care to give you such a symbol."

She caught Bower and Spencer exchanging a strange look. These men shared some secret that they sedulously kept from her. Perhaps the American meant to enlighten her during their projected walk to Vicosoprano.

Stampa and the others approached. Together they climbed the little hill leading to the summit of the pass. In the village they said "Good night" to the two guides and Karl. [Pg 211]

Helen promised laughingly to make the acquaintance of Johann Klucker's cat at the first opportunity. She was passing through a wicket that protects the footpath across the golf links, when she heard Stampa growl:

"Morgen früh!"

"Ja!" snapped Bower.

She smiled to herself at the thought that things were going to happen to-morrow. She was right. But she had not yet done with the present day. When she entered the cozy and brilliantly lighted veranda of the hotel, the first person her amazed eyes alighted upon was Millicent Jaques.



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CHAPTER XI

WHEREIN HELEN LIVES A CROWDED HOUR

"Millicent! You here!" Helen breathed the words in an undertone that carried more than a hint of dismay.

It was one of those rare crises in life when the brain receives a presage of evil without any prior foundation of fact. Helen had every reason to welcome her friend, none to be chilled by her unexpected presence. Among a small circle of intimate acquaintances she counted Millicent Jaques the best and truest. They had drifted apart; but that was owing to Helen's lack of means. She was not able, nor did she aspire, to mix in the society that hailed the actress as a bright particular star. Yet it meant much to a girl earning her daily bread in a heedless city that she should possess one friend of her own age and sex who could speak of the golden years when they were children together,—the years when Helen's father was the prospective governor of an Indian province as large as France; when the tuft hunters now gathered in Maloja would have fawned on her mother in hope of subsequent recognition. [Pg 213]

Why, then, did Helen falter in her greeting? Who can tell? She herself did not know, unless it was that Millicent rose so leisurely from the table at which she was drinking a belated cup of tea, and came toward her with a smile that had no warmth in it.

"So you have returned," she said, "and with both cavaliers?"

Helen was conscious of a queer humming noise in her head. She was incapable of calm thought. She realized now that the friend she had left in London was here in the guise of a bitter enemy. The veranda was full of people waiting for the post. The snow had banished them from links and tennis court. This August afternoon was dark as mid-December at the same hour. But the rendezvous was brilliantly lighted, and the reappearance of the climbers, whose chances of safety had been eagerly debated since the snow storm began, drew all eyes. Someone had whispered too that the beautiful woman who arrived from St. Moritz half an hour earlier, who sat in her furs and sipped her tea after a long conversation with a clerk in the bureau, was none other than Millicent Jaques, the dancer, one of the leading lights of English musical comedy.

The peepers and whisperers little dreamed that she could be awaiting the party from the Forno. Now that her vigil was explained, for Bower had advanced with ready smile and outstretched hand, the Wraggs and Vavasours and de la Veres—all the little coterie of gossips and scandalmongers—were drawn to the center of the hall like steel filings to a magnet. [Pg 214]

Millicent ignored Bower. She was young enough and pretty enough to feel sure of her ability to deal with him subsequently. Her cornflower blue eyes glittered. They held something of the quiet menace of a crevasse. She had traveled far for revenge, and she did not mean to forego it. Helen, whose second impulse was to kiss her affectionately, with excited clamor of welcome and inquiry, stood rooted to the floor by her friend's strange words.

"I—I am so surprised—" she half stammered in an agony of confused doubt; and that was the only lame phrase she could utter during a few trying seconds.

Bower frowned. He hated scenes between women. With his first glimpse of Millicent he guessed her errand. For Helen's sake, in the presence of that rabbit-eared crowd, he would not brook the unmerited flood of sarcastic indignation which he knew was trembling on her lips.

"Miss Wynton has had an exhausting day," he said coolly. "She must go straight to her room, and rest. You two can meet and talk after dinner." Without further preamble, he took Helen's arm.

Millicent barred the way. She did not give place. Again she paid no heed to the man. "I shall not detain you long," she said, looking only at Helen, and speaking in a low clear voice that her stage training rendered audible throughout the large hall. "I only wished to assure myself that what I was told was true. I found it hard to believe, even when I saw your name written up in the hotel. Before I go, let me congratulate you on your conquest—and Mr. Mark Bower on his," she added, with clever pretense of afterthought.

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Helen continued to stare at her helplessly. Her lips quivered; but they uttered no sound. It was impossible to misunderstand Millicent's object. She meant to wound and insult in the grossest way.

Bower dropped Helen's arm, and strode close to the woman who had struck this shrewd blow at him. "I give you this one chance!" he muttered, while his eyes blazed into hers. "Go to your room, or sit down somewhere till I am free. I shall come to you, and put things straight that now seem crooked. You are wrong, horribly wrong, in your suspicions. Wait my explanation, or by all that I hold sacred, you will regret it to your dying hour!"

Millicent drew back a little. She conveyed the suggestion that his nearness was offensive to her nostrils. And she laughed, with due semblance of real amusement. "What! Has she made a fool of you too?" she cried bitingly.

Then Helen did exactly the thing she ought not to have done. She fainted.

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Spencer, in his own vivid phrase, was "looking for trouble" the instant he caught sight of the actress. Had some Mahatma-devised magic lantern focused on the screen of his inner consciousness a complete narrative of the circumstances which conspired to bring Millicent Jaques to the Upper Engadine, he could not have mastered cause and effect more fully. The unlucky letter he asked Mackenzie to send to the Wellington Theater—the letter devised as a probe into Bower's motives, but which was now cruelly searching its author's heart—had undoubtedly supplied to a slighted woman the clew to her rival's identity. Better posted than Bower in the true history of Helen's visit to Switzerland, he did not fail to catch the most significant word in Millicent's scornful greeting.

"And with *both* cavaliers!"

In all probability, she knew the whole ridiculous story, reading into it the meaning lent by jealous spleen, and no more to be convinced of error than the Forno glacier could be made to flow backward.



“No,” said Spencer, “ring for the elevator.”

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But if his soul was vexed by a sense of bygone folly, his brain was cool and alert. He saw Helen sway slightly. He caught her before she collapsed where she stood. He gathered her tenderly in his arms. She might have been a tired child, fallen asleep too soon. Her limp head rested on his shoulder. Through the meshes of her blue veil he could see the sudden pallor of her cheeks. The tint of the silk added to the lifelessness of her aspect. Just then Spencer's heart was sore within him, and he was an awkward man to oppose.

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George de Courcy Vavasour happened to crane his neck nearer at the wrong moment. The American sent him flying with a vigorous elbow thrust. He shoved Bower aside with scant ceremony. Millicent Jaques met a steely glance that quelled the vengeful sparkle in her own eyes, and caused her to move quickly, lest, perchance, this pale-faced American should trample on her. Before Bower could recover his balance, for his hobnails caused him to slip on the tiled floor, Spencer was halfway across the inner hall, and approaching the elevator.

An official of the hotel hastened forward with ready proffer of help. “This way,” he said sympathetically. “The lady was overcome by the heat after so many hours in the intense cold. It often occurs. She will recover soon. Bring her to a chair in the office.”

But Spencer was not willing that Helen's first wondering glance should rest on strangers, or that, when able to walk to her own apartments, she should be compelled to pass through the ranks of gapers in the lounge.

“No,” he said. “Ring for the elevator. This lady must be taken to her room,—No. 80, I believe,—then the manageress and a chambermaid can attend to her. Quick! the elevator!”

Bower turned on Millicent like an angry bull. “You have chosen your own method,” he growled. “Very well. You shall pay for it.”

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Her venom was such that she was by no means disturbed by his threat. “The other man—the American who brought her here—seems to have bested you throughout,” she taunted him.

He drew himself up with a certain dignity. He was aware that every tongue in the place was stilled, that every ear was tuned to catch each note of this fantastic quartet,—a sonata appassionata in which vibrated the souls of men and women. He looked from Millicent's pallid face to the faces of the listeners, some of whom made pretense of polite indifference, while others did not scruple to exhibit their eager delight. If nothing better, the episode would provide an abundance of spicy gossip during the enforced idleness caused by the weather.

“The lady whom you are endeavoring to malign, will, I hope, do me the honor of becoming my wife,” he said. “That being so, she is beyond the reach of the slanderous malice of an ex-chorus girl.”

He spoke slowly, with the air of a man who weighed his words. A thrill that could be felt ran through his intent audience. Mark Bower, the millionaire, the financial genius who dominated more than one powerful group in the city, who controlled a ring of theaters in London and the provinces, who had declined a knighthood, and would surely be created a peer with the next change of government,—that he should openly declare himself a suitor for the hand of a penniless

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girl was a sensation with a vengeance. His description of Millicent as an ex-chorus girl offered another *bonne bouche* to the crowd. She would never again skip airily behind the footlights of the Wellington, or any other important theater in England. So far as she was concerned, the musical comedy candle that succeeded to the sacred lamp of West End burlesque was snuffed out.

Millicent was actress enough not to flinch from the goad. "A charming and proper sentiment," she cried with well simulated flippancy. "The marriage of Mr. Mark Bower will be quite a fashionable event, provided always that he secures the assent of the American gentleman who is paying his future wife's expenses during her present holiday."

Now, so curiously constituted is human nature, or the shallow worldliness that passes current for it among the homeless gadabouts who pose as British society on the Continent, that already the current of opinion in the hotel was setting steadily in Helen's favor. The remarkable change dated from the moment of Bower's public announcement of his matrimonial plans. Many of those present were regretting a lost opportunity. It was obvious to the meanest intelligence—and the worn phrase took a new vitality when applied to some among the company—that any kindness shown to Helen during the preceding fortnight would be repaid a hundredfold when she became Mrs. Mark Bower. Again, not even the bitterest of her critics could allege that she was flirting with the quiet mannered American who had just carried her off like a new Paris. She had lived in the same hotel for a whole week without speaking a word to him. If anything, she had shown favor only to Bower, and that in a way so decorous and discreet that more than one woman there was amazed by her careless handling of a promising situation. Just give one of them the chance of securing such a prize fish as this stalwart millionaire! Well, at least he should not miss the hook for lack of a bait.

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Oddly enough, the Rev. Philip Hare gave voice to a general sentiment when he interfered in the duel. He, like others, was waiting for his letters. He saw Helen come in, and was hurrying to offer his congratulations on her escape from the storm, when the appearance of Millicent prevented him from speaking at once. The little man was hot with vexation at the scene that followed. He liked Helen; he was unutterably shocked by Millicent's attack; and he resented the unfair and untrue construction that must be placed on her latest innuendo.

"As one who has made Miss Wynton's acquaintance in this hotel," he broke in vehemently, "I must protest most emphatically against the outrageous statement we have just heard. If I may say it, it is unworthy of the lady who is responsible for it. I know nothing of your quarrel, nor do I wish to figure in it; but I do declare, on my honor as a clergyman of the Church of England, that Miss Wynton's conduct in Maloja has in no way lent itself to the inference one is compelled to draw from the words used."

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"Thank you, Mr. Hare," said Bower quietly, and a subdued murmur of applause buzzed through the gathering.

There is a legend in Zermatt that Saint Theodule, patron of the Valais, wishing to reach Rome in a hurry, sought demoniac aid to surmount the impassable barrier of the Alps. Opening his window, he saw three devils dancing merrily on the housetops. He called them. "Which of you is the speediest?" he asked. "I," said one, "I am swift as the wind."—"Bah!" cried the second, "I can fly like a bullet."—"These two talk idly," said the third. "I am quick as the thought of a woman." The worthy prelate chose the third. The hour being late, he bargained that he should be carried to Rome and back before cockcrow, the price for the service to be his saintly soul. The imp flew well, and returned to the valley of the Rhone long ere dawn. Joyous at his gain, he was about to bound over the wall of the episcopal city of Sion, when St. Theodule roared lustily, "*Coq, chante! Que tu chantes! Ou que jamais plus tu ne chantes!*" Every cock in Sion awoke at his voice, and raised such a din that the devil dropped a bell given to his saintship by the Holy Father, and Saint Theodule was snug and safe inside it.

The prelate was right in his choice of the third. The thoughts of two women took wings instantly. Mrs. de la Vere, throwing away a half-smoked cigarette, hurried out of the veranda. Millicent Jaques, whose carriage was ready for the long drive to St. Moritz, decided to remain in Maloja.

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The outer door opened, with a rush of cold air and a whirl of snow. People expected the postman; but Stampa entered,—only Stampa, the broken survivor of the little band of guides who conquered the Matterhorn. He doffed his Alpine hat, and seemed to be embarrassed by the unusually large throng assembled in the passageway. Bower saw him, and strode away into the dimly lighted foyer.

"Pardon, '*sieurs et dames*,'" said Stampa, advancing with his uneven gait, a venerable and pathetic figure, the wreck of a giant, a man who had aged years in a single day. He went to the bureau, and asked permission to seek Herr Spencer in his room.

Helen was struggling back to consciousness when Mrs. de la Vere joined the kindly women who were loosening her bodice and chafing her hands and feet.

The first words the girl heard were in English. A woman's voice was saying cheerfully, "There, my dear!" a simple formula of marvelous recuperative effect,—"*there now!* You are all right again. But your room is bitterly cold. Won't you come into mine? It is quite near, and my stove has been alight all day."

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Helen, opening her eyes, found herself gazing up at Mrs. de la Vere. Real sympathy ranks high among good deeds. The girl's lips quivered. Returning life brought with it tears.

The woman whom she had regarded as a social butterfly sat beside her on the bed and placed a friendly arm round her neck. "Don't cry, you dear thing," she cooed gently. "There is nothing to cry about. You are a bit overwrought, of course; but, as it happens, you have scored heavily off all of us—and not least off the creature who upset you. Now, do try and come with me. Here are your slippers. The corridor is empty. It is only a few steps."

"Come with you?"

"Yes, you are shivering with the cold, and my room is gloriously warm."

"But—"

"There are no buts. Marie will bring a basin of nice hot soup. While you are drinking it she will set your stove going. I know exactly how you feel. The whole world is topsyturvy, and you don't think there is a smile in your make-up, as that dear American man who carried you here would say."

Helen recovered her senses with exceeding rapidity. Mrs. de la Vere was already leading her to the door.

"What! Mr. Spencer—did he—"

"He did. Come, now. I shall tell you all the trying details when you are seated in my easy chair, and wrapped in the duckiest Shetland shawl that a red headed laird sent me last Christmas. Excellent! Of course you can walk! Isn't every other woman in the hotel well aware how you got that lovely figure? Yes, in that chair. And here is the shawl. It's just like being cuddled by a woolly lamb."

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Mrs. de la Vere turned the keys in two doors. "Reggie always knocks," she explained; "but some inquisitive cat may follow me here, and I am sure you don't wish to be gushed over now, after everybody has been so horrid to you."

"You were not," said Helen gratefully.

"Yes, I was, in a way. I hate most women; but I admired you ever since you took the conceit out of that giddy husband of mine. If I didn't speak, it arose from sheer laziness—a sort of drifting with the stream, in tow of the General and that old mischief maker, Mrs. Vavasour. I'm sorry, and you will be quite justified to-morrow morning in sailing past me and the rest as though we were beetles."

Then Helen laughed, feebly, it is true, but with a genuine mirth that chased away momentarily the evergrowing memory of Millicent's injustice. "Why do you mention beetles?" she asked. "It is part of my every day work to classify them."

Mrs. de la Vere was puzzled. "I believe you have said something very cutting," she cried. "If you did, we deserve it. But please tell me the joke. I shall hand it on to the Wraggs."

"There is no joke. I act as secretary to a German professor of entomology—insects, you know; he makes beetles a specialty."

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The other woman's eye danced. "It is all very funny," she said, "and I still have my doubts. Never mind. I want to atone for earlier shortcomings. I felt that someone really ought to tell you what took place in the outer foyer after you sank gracefully out of the act. Mr. Bower—"

A tap on the door leading into the corridor interrupted her. It was Marie, armed with chicken broth and dry toast. Mrs. de la Vere, who seemed to be filled with an honest anxiety to place Helen at her ease, persuaded her to begin sipping the compound.

"Well, what did Mr. Bower do?" demanded Helen, who was wondering now why she had fainted. The accusation brought against her by Millicent Jaques was untrue. Why should it disturb her so gravely? It did not occur to her that the true cause was physical,—a too sudden change of temperature.

"He sat on that young woman from the Wellington Theater very severely, I assure you. From her manner we all imagined she had some sort of claim on him; but if she was laboring under any such delusion he cured her. He said—Are you really strong enough to stand a shock?"

"Twenty shocks. I can't think how I could have been so silly—"

"Nerves, my dear. We all have 'em. Sometimes, if I didn't smoke I should scream. No woman really likes to see her husband flirting openly with her friends. I'm no saint; but my wickedness is defensive. Now, are you ready?"

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"Quite ready."

"Mr. Bower told us, *tout le monde*, you know, that he meant to marry you."

"Oh!" said Helen.

During an appreciable pause neither woman spoke. Helen was not sure whether she wanted to

laugh or be angry. Mrs. de la Vere eyed her curiously. The girl's face was yet white and drawn. It was impossible to guess how the great news affected her. The de la Veres were poor on two thousand a year. What did it feel like to be the prospective bride of a millionaire, especially when you were—what was it?—secretary to a man who collected beetles!

"Did Mr. Bower assign any reason for making that remarkable statement?" said Helen at last.

"He explained that the fact—I suppose it is a fact—would safeguard you from the malice of an ex-coryphée. Indeed, he put it more brutally. He spoke of the 'slanderous malice of an ex-chorus girl.' The English term sounds a trifle harsher than the French, don't you think?"

It began to dawn on Helen that Mrs. de la Vere's friendliness might have a somewhat sordid foundation. Was she tending her merely to secure the freshest details of an affair that must be causing many tongues to wag?

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"I am acquiring new theories of life since I came to Maloja," she said slowly. "One would have thought that I might be the first person to be made aware of Mr. Bower's intentions."

"Oh, this is really too funny. May I light a cigarette?"

"Please do. And now it is my turn to ask you to point out the exquisite humor of the situation."

"Don't be vexed with me, child. You needn't say another word if you don't wish it; but surely you are not annoyed because I have given you the tip as to what took place in the hall?"

"You have been exceedingly good——"

"No. I haven't. I was just as nasty as the others, and I sneered like the rest when Bower showed up a fortnight since. I was wrong, and I apologize for it. Regard me as in sackcloth and ashes. But my heart went out to you when you dropped like a log among all those staring people. I've—I've done it myself, and my case was worse than yours. Once in my life I loved a man, and I came home one day from the hunting field to read a telegram from the War Office. He was 'missing,' it said—missing—in a rear-guard action in Tirah. Do you know what that means?"

A cloud of smoke hid her face; but it could not stifle the sob in her voice. There was a knock at the door.

"Are you there, Edith?" demanded Reginald de la Vere.

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"Yes. Go away! I'm busy."

"But——"

"Go away, I tell you!"

Then she jerked a scornful hand toward the door. "Six months later I was married—men who are missed among the Afridis don't come back," she said.

"I'm more sorry than I can put into words!" murmured Helen.

"For goodness' sake don't let us grow sentimental. Shall we return to our sheep? Don't be afraid that I shall pasture the goats in the hall on your confidences. Hasn't Bower asked you?"

"No."

"Then his action was all the more generous. He meant to squelch that friend of yours—is she your friend?"

"She used to be," said Helen sadly.

"And what do you mean to do about it? You will marry Bower, of course?"

Helen's heart fluttered. Her color rose in a sudden wave. "I—I don't think so," she breathed.

"Don't you? Well, I like you the better for saying so. I can picture myself putting the same questions to one of the Wragg girls—to both of 'em, in fact. I am older than you, and very much wiser in some of the world's ways, and my advice is, Don't marry any man unless you are sure you love him. If you do love him, you may keep him, for men are patient creatures. But that is for you to decide. I can't help you there. I am mainly concerned, for the moment, in helping you over the ice during the next day or two—if you will let me, that is. Probably you have determined not to appear in public to-night. That will be a mistake. Wear your prettiest frock, and dine with Reggie and me. We shall invite Mr. Bower to join us, and two other people—some man and woman I can depend on to keep things going. If we laugh and kick up no end of a noise, it will not only worry the remainder of the crowd, but you score heavily off the theatrical lady. See?"

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"I can see that you are acting the part of the good Samaritan," cried Helen.

"Oh, dear, no—nothing so antiquated. Look at your future position—the avowed wife of a millionaire. Eh, what? as Georgie says."

"But I am not anything of the kind. Mr. Bower——"

"Mr. Bower is all right. He has the recognized history of the man who makes a good husband, and you can't help liking him, unless—unless there is another man."

"There, at least, I am——" Helen hesitated. Something gripped her heart and checked the modest protestation of her freedom.

Mrs. de la Vere laughed. "If you are not sure, you are safe," she said, with a hard ring in her utterance that belied her easygoing philosophy. "Really, you bring me back a lost decade. Now, Helen—may I call you Helen?" [Pg 230]

"Yes, indeed."

"Well, then, don't forget that my name is Edith. You have just half an hour to dress. I need every second of the time; so off you run to your room. As I hear Reggie flinging his boots around next door, I shall hurry him and arrange about the table. Call for me. We must go to the foyer together. Now kiss me, there's a dear."

Helen was wrestling with her refractory tresses—for the coiffure that suits glaciers and Tam o'Shanters is not permissible in evening dress—when a servant brought her a note.

"DEAR MISS WYNTON," it ran,— "If you are able to come down to dinner, why not dine with me? Sincerely,

"CHARLES K. SPENCER."

She blushed and laughed a little. "I am in demand," she thought, flashing a pardonable glance at her own face in the mirror. She read the brief invitation again. Spencer had a trick of printing the K in his signature. It caught her fancy. It suggested strength, trustworthiness. She did not know then that one of the shrewdest scoundrels in the Western States had already commented on certain qualities betokened by that letter in Spencer's name.

"I cannot refuse," she murmured. "To be candid, I don't want to refuse. What shall I do?"

Bidding the servant wait, she twisted her hair into a coil, threw a wrap round her shoulders, and tapped on Mrs. de la Vere's door. [Pg 231]

"*Entrez!*" cried that lady.

"I am in a bit of difficulty," said Helen. "Mr. Spencer wishes me to dine with him. Would you——"

"Certainly. I'll ask him to join us. Reggie will see him too. Really, Helen, this is amusing. I am beginning to suspect you."

So Spencer received a surprising answer. He read it without any sign of the amusement Mrs. de la Vere extracted from the situation, for Helen took care to recite the whole arrangement.

"I'm going through with this," he growled savagely, "even if I have to drink Bower's health—damn him!"



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CHAPTER XII

THE ALLIES

Seldom, if ever, has a more strangely assorted party met at dinner than that which gathered in the Hotel Kursaal under the social wing of Mrs. de la Vere. Her husband, while being coached in essentials, was the first to discover its incongruities.

"Where Miss Wynton is concerned, you are warned off," his wife told him dryly. "You must console yourself with Mrs. Badminton-Smythe. She will stand anything to cut out a younger and prettier woman."

"Where do you come in, Edie?" said he; for Mrs. de la Vere's delicate aristocratic beauty seemed to be the natural complement of her sporting style, and to-night there was a wistful charm in her face that the lively Reginald had not seen there before.

She turned aside, busying herself with her toilet. "I don't come in. I went out five years ago," she cried, with a mocking laugh. [Pg 233]

"Do you know," he muttered, "I often wonder why the deuce you an' I got married."

"Because, sweet Reginald, we were made for each other by a wise Providence. What other woman of your acquaintance would tolerate you—as a husband?"

"Oh, dash it all! if it comes to that——"

"For goodness' sake, don't fuss, or begin to think. Run away and interview the head waiter. Then you are to buttonhole Bower and the American. I am just sending a chit to the Badminton-Smythes."

"Who is my partner?"

"Lulu, of course."

De la Vere was puzzled, and looked it. "I suppose it is all right," he growled. "Still, I can't help thinking you've got something up your sleeve, Edie."

She stamped a very pretty foot angrily. "Do as I tell you! Didn't you hear what Bower said? He will be everlastingly obliged to us for coming to the rescue in this fashion. Next time you have a flutter in the city, his friendship may be useful."

"By gad!" cried Reginald, beginning, as he fancied, to see light, "something seems to have bitten you this evening. Tell you what—Lulu is a non-runner. Get Bower to put you on to a soft thing in Africans, an' you an' I will have a second honeymoon in Madeira next winter. Honor bright! I mean it."

She seized a silver mounted brush from the dressing table with the obvious intent of speeding his departure. He dodged out, and strolled down the corridor. [Pg 234]

"Never saw Edie in that sort of tantrum before," he said to himself. "If she only knew how sick I was of all this jolly rot, perhaps we'd run better in double harness."

So it came to pass, when the company assembled in the great dining room, that Bower sat on Mrs. de la Vere's left, and Spencer on her right. Beyond them, respectively, were Lulu Badminton-Smythe and her husband, and between these latter were de la Vere and Helen. Thus, the girl was separated from the two men whom her shrewd eyed hostess had classed as rivals, while the round table made possible a general conversation.

The talk could hardly fail to turn on the day's adventures. Spencer, who had never before in his life thrust himself forward in a social gathering, did so now with fixed purpose. He meant to eclipse Bower in a territory where that polished man of the world was accustomed to reign unchallenged. But he had the wisdom to wait. He guessed, not without good cause, that more than one late arrival would pause beside their table and make polite inquiries as to the climbers' well being. These interruptions were fatal to Bower's well balanced periods. The journey to the hut, therefore, was dealt with jerkily.

When Spencer took up the thread, he caught and held the attention of his hearers. In this he was helped considerably by his quaint idioms. To English ears, American expressions are always amusing. Spencer, of course, could speak quite as correct English as anyone present; but he realized that in this instance a certain amount of picturesque exaggeration would lend itself to humor. His quick ear too had missed none of the queer mixture of prayers and objurgations with which Karl and the two guides hailed every incident. His selections set them all in a roar. In fact, they were the liveliest party in the room. Many an eye was drawn by a merriment that offered such striking contrast to the dramatic episode in the outer hall. [Pg 235]

"The one person missing from that crowd is the stage lady," was Miss Gladys Wragg's caustic comment, when Badminton-Smythe evoked a fresh outburst by protesting that he forgot to eat his fish owing to Spencer's beastly funny yarn.

And Miss Wragg's criticism was justified. It only needed Millicent's presence to add a wizard's touch to the amazement with which Mrs. Vavasour and others of her kind regarded the defection of the de la Veres and the Badminton-Smythes. But Millicent was dining in her own room. The last thing she dreamed of was that Helen would face the other residents in the hotel after the ordeal she had gone through an hour earlier. She half expected that Bower would endeavor to meet her privately while dinner was being served. She was ready for him. She prepared a number of sarcastic little speeches, each with a subtle venom of its own, and even rehearsed a pose or two with a view toward scenic effect. But she had neither taken Bower's measure nor counted on Mrs. de la Vere's superior strategy. All that happened was that she ate a lukewarm meal, and was left to wonder at her one-time admirer's boldness in accepting a situation that many a daring man would have striven to evade. [Pg 236]

After dinner it was the custom of the habitués to break up into small groups and arrange the night's amusement. Dancing claimed the younger element, while card games had their devotees. Mrs. de la Vere danced invariably; but to-night she devoted herself to Helen. She was under no illusions. Bower and Spencer were engaged in a quiet duel, and the victor meant to monopolize the girl for the remainder of the evening. That was preventable. They could fight their battle on some other occasion. At present there was one thing of vital importance,—the unpleasant

impression created by the actress's bitter attack must be dissipated, and Mrs. de la Vere, secretly marveling at her own enthusiasm, aimed at the achievement.

"Don't be drawn away from me on any pretext," she whispered, linking her arm through Helen's as they passed out into the foyer. "And be gracious to everybody, even to those who have been most cattish."

Helen was far too excited and grateful to harbor animosity. Moreover, she dreaded the chance of being left alone with Bower. As he had already declared his intentions publicly, she was sure he would seize the first opportunity to ask her to marry him. And what would be her answer? She hardly knew. She must have time to think. She must search her own heart. She almost flinched from the succeeding thought,—was it that her soul had found another mate? If that was so, she must refuse Bower, though the man she was learning to love might pass out of her life and leave her desolate.

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She liked Bower, even respected him. Never for an instant had the notion intruded that he had followed her to Switzerland with an unworthy motive. To her mind, nothing could be more straightforward than their acquaintance. The more she reflected on Millicent Jaques's extraordinary conduct, the more she was astounded by its utter baselessness. And Bower was admirable in many ways. He stood high in the opinion of the world. He was rich, cultured, and seemingly very deeply enamored of her undeserving self. What better husband could any girl desire? He would give her everything that made life worth living. Indeed, if the truth must be told, she was phenomenally lucky.

Thus did she strive to silence misgivings, to quell doubt, to order and regulate a blurred medley of subconscious thought. While laughing, and talking, and making the most successful efforts to be at ease with the dozens of people who came and spoke to Mrs. de la Vere and herself, she felt like some frail vessel dancing blithely in a swift, smooth current, yet hastening ever to the verge of a cataract.

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Once Bower approached, skillfully piloting Mrs. Badminton-Smythe; for Reginald, tiring of the rôle thrust on him by his wife, had gone to play bridge. It was his clear intent to take Helen from her chaperon.

"It is still snowing, though not so heavily," he said. "Come on the veranda, and look at the landscape. The lake is a pool of ink in the middle of a white table cloth."

"The snow will be far more visible in the morning, and we have a lot of ice to melt here," interposed Mrs. de la Vere quickly.

The man and woman, both well versed in the ways of society, looked each other squarely in the eye. Though disappointed, the man understood, was even appreciative.

"Miss Wynton is fortunate in her friends," he said, and straightway went to the writing room. He felt that Helen was safe with this unexpected ally. He could afford to bide his time. Nothing could now undo the effect of his open declaration while flouting Millicent Jaques. If he gave that wayward young person a passing thought, it was one of gladness that she had precipitated matters. There remained only an unpleasant meeting with Stampa in the morning. He shuddered at the recollection that he had nearly done a foolish thing while crossing the crevasse. What sinister influence could have so weakened his nerve as to make him think of murder? Crime was the last resource of impaired intellect. He was able to laugh now at the stupid memory of it.

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True, the American—

By the way, what did Millicent mean by her shrewish cry that Spencer was paying for Helen's holiday? So engrossed was he in other directions that his early doubts with regard to "The Firefly's" unprecedented enterprise in sending a representative to this out-of-the-way Swiss valley had been lulled to sleep. Of course, he had caused certain inquiries to be made—that was his method. One of the telegrams he dispatched from Zurich after Helen's train bustled off to Coire started the investigation. Thus far, a trusted clerk could only ascertain that the newspaper had undoubtedly commissioned the girl on the lines indicated. Still, the point demanded attention. He resolved to telegraph further instructions in the morning, with Spencer's name added as a clue, though, to be sure, he was not done with Millicent yet. He would reckon with her also on the morrow. Perhaps, if he annoyed her sufficiently, she might explain that cryptic taunt.

Could he have seen a letter that was brought to Spencer's room before dinner, the telegram would not have been written. Mackenzie, rather incoherent with indignation, sent a hurried scrawl.

"DEAR MR. SPENCER," it ran,— "A devil of a thing has happened. To-day," the date being three days old, "I went out to lunch, leaving a thick headed subeditor in charge. I had not been gone ten minutes when a stage fairy, all frills and flounces, whisked into the office and asked for Miss Wynton's address. My assistant succumbed instantly. He was nearly asphyxiated with joy at being permitted to entertain, not unawares, that angel of musical comedy, Miss Millicent Jaques. His maundering excuse is that you yourself seemed to acknowledge Miss Jaques's right to be acquainted with her friend's whereabouts. I have good reason to believe that the frail youth not only spoke of Maloja, but supplied such details as

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were known to him of your kindness in the matter. I have cursed him extensively; but that can make no amends. At any rate, I feel that you should be told, and it only remains for me to express my lasting regret that the incident should have occurred."

This letter, joined to certain lurid statements made by Stampa, had induced Spencer to accept Mrs. de la Vere's invitation. Little as he cared to dine in Bower's company, it was due to Helen that he should not refuse. He was entangled neck and heels in a net of his own contriving. For very shame's sake, he could not wriggle out, leaving Helen in the toils.

Surely there never was a day more crammed with contrarities. He witnessed his adversary's rebuff, and put it down to its rightful cause. No sooner had he discovered Mrs. de la Vere's apparent motive in keeping the girl by her side, than he was buttonholed by the Rev. Philip Hare.

"You know I am not an ardent admirer of Bower," said the cleric; "but I must admit that it was very manly of him to make that outspoken statement about Miss Wynton." [Pg 241]

"What statement?" asked Spencer.

"Ah, I had forgotten. You were not present, of course. He made the other woman's hysterical outburst supremely ridiculous by saying, in effect, that he meant to marry Miss Wynton."

"He said that, eh?"

"Yes. He was quite emphatic. I rebuked Miss Jaques myself, and he thanked me."

"Everything was nicely cut and dried in my absence, it seems."

"Well—er—"

"The crowd evidently lost sight of the fact that I had carried off the prospective bride."

"N-no. Miss Jaques called attention to it."

"Guess her head is screwed on straight, *padre*. She made a bad break in attacking Miss Wynton; but when she set about Bower she was running on a strong scent. Sit tight, Mr. Hare. Don't take sides, or whoop up the wrong spout, and you'll see heaps of fun before you're much older."

Mightily incensed, the younger man turned away. The vicar produced his handkerchief and trumpeted into it loudly.

"God bless my soul!" he said, and repeated the pious wish, for he felt that it did him good, "how does one whoop up the wrong spout? And what happens if one does? And how remarkably touchy everybody seems to be. Next time I apply to the C.M.S. for an Alpine station, I shall stipulate for a low altitude. I am sure this rarefied air is bad for the nerves." [Pg 242]

Nevertheless, Hare's startling communication was the one thing needed to clear away the doubts that beset Spencer at the dinner table. He had seen Mrs. de la Vere enter Helen's bedroom when he left the girl in charge of a gesticulating maid; but an act of womanly solicitude did not explain the friendship that sprang so suddenly into existence. Now he understood, or thought he understood, which is a man's way when he seeks to interpret a woman's mind. Mrs. de la Vere, like the rest, was dazzled by Bower's wealth. After ignoring Helen during the past fortnight, she was prepared to toady to her instantly in her new guise as the chosen bride of a millionaire. The belief added fuel to the fire already raging in his breast.

There never was man more loyal to woman in his secret meditations than Spencer; but his gorge rose at the sight of Helen's winsome gratitude to one so unworthy of it. With him, now as ever, to think was to act.

Watching his chance, he waylaid Helen when her vigilant chaperon was momentarily absorbed in a suggestion that private theatricals and the rehearsal of a minuet would relieve the general tedium while the snow held.

"Spare me five minutes, Miss Wynton," he said. "I want to tell you something."

Mrs. de la Vere pirouetted round on him before the girl could answer. [Pg 243]

"Miss Wynton is just going to bed," she informed him graciously. "You know how tired she is, Mr. Spencer. You must wait till the morning."

"I don't feel like waiting; but I promise to cut down my remarks to one minute—by the clock." He answered Mrs. de la Vere, but looked at Helen.

Her color rose and fell almost with each beat of her heart. She saw the steadfast purpose in his eyes, and shrank from the decision she would be called upon to make. Hardly realizing what form the words took, she gave faint utterance to the first lucid idea that presented itself. "I think—I must really—go to my room," she murmured. "You wouldn't—like me—to faint twice in one evening—Mr. Spencer?"

It was an astonishing thing to say, the worst thing possible. It betrayed an exact knowledge of his purpose in seeking this interview. His eyes blazed with a quick light. It seemed that he was answered before he spoke.

"Not one second. Go away, do!" broke in Mrs. de la Vere, whisking Helen toward the elevator without further parley. But she shot a glance at Spencer over her shoulder that he could not fail to interpret as a silent message of encouragement. Forthwith he viewed her behavior from a more favorable standpoint.

"Guess the feminine make-up is more complex than I counted on," he communed, as he bent over a table to find a match, that being a commonplace sort of action calculated to disarm suspicion, lest others might be observing him, and wondering why the women retired so promptly.

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"I like your American, my dear," said Mrs. de la Vere sympathetically, in the solitude of the corridor.

Helen was silent.

"If you want to cry, don't mind me," went on the kindly cynic. "I'm coming in with you. I'll light up while you weep, and then you must tell me all about it. That will do you a world of good."

"There's n-n-nothing to tell!" bleated Helen.

"Oh yes, there is. You silly child, to-morrow you will have to choose between those two men. Which shall it be? I said before dinner that I couldn't help you to decide. Perhaps I was mistaken. Anyhow, I'll try."

At midnight the snow storm ceased, the wind died away, and the still air deposited its vapor on hills and valley in a hoar frost. The sun rose with a magnificent disregard for yesterday's riot.

Spencer's room faced the southeast. When the valet drew his blind in the morning the cold room was filled with a balmy warmth. A glance through the window, however, dispelled a germ of hope that Helen and he might start on the promised walk to Vicosoprano. The snow lay deep in the pass, and probably extended a mile or two down into the Vale of Bregaglia. The rapid thaw that would set in during the forenoon might clear the roads before sunset. Next day, walking would be practicable; to-day it meant wading.

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He looked through the Orlegna gorge, and caught the silvery sheen of the Cima di Rosso's snow capped summit. Hardly a rock was visible. The gale had clothed each crag with a white shroud. All day long the upper reaches of the glacier would be pelted by avalanches. It struck him that an early stroll to the highest point of the path beyond Cavloccio might be rewarded with a distant view of several falls. In any case, it provided an excellent pretext for securing Helen's company, and he would have cheerfully suggested a trip in a balloon to attain the same object.

The temperature of his bath water induced doubts as to the imminence of the thaw. Indeed, the air was bitterly cold as yet. The snow lay closely on roads and meadow land. It had the texture of fine powder. Passing traffic left shallow, well defined marks. A couple of stablemen swung their arms to restore circulation. The breath of horses and cattle showed in dense clouds.

For once in his life the color of a tie and the style of his clothes became matters of serious import. At first, he was blind to the humor of it. He hesitated between the spruce tightness of a suit fashioned by a New York tailor and the more loosely designed garments he had purchased in London. Then he laughed and reddened. Flinging both aside, he chose the climber's garb worn the previous day, and began to dress hurriedly. Therein he was well advised. Nothing could better become his athletic figure. He was that type of man who looks thinner when fully clothed. He had never spared himself when asking others to work hard, and he received his guerdon now in a frame of iron and sinews of pliant steel.

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Helen usually came down to breakfast at half-past eight. She had the healthy British habit of beginning the day with a good meal, and Spencer indulged in the conceit that he might be favored with a tête-à-tête before they started for the projected walk. Neither Bower nor Mrs. de la Vere ever put in an appearance at that hour. Though Americans incline to the Continental manner of living, this true Westerner found himself a sudden convert to English methods. In a word, he was in love, and his lady could not err. To please her he was prepared to abjure iced water—even to drink tea.

But, as often happens, his cheery mood was destined to end in disappointment. He lingered a whole hour in the *salle à manger*, but Helen came not. Then he rose in a panic. What if she had breakfasted in her room, and was already basking in the sunlit veranda—perhaps listening to Bower's eloquence? He rushed out so suddenly that his waiter was amazed. Really, these Americans were incomprehensible—weird as the English. The two races dwelt far apart, but they moved in the same erratic orbit. To the stolid German mind they were human comets, whose comings and goings were not to be gaged by any reasonable standard.

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No, the veranda was empty—to him. Plenty of people greeted him; but there was no Helen. Ultimately he reflected that their appointment was for ten o'clock. He calmed down, and a pipe became obvious. He was enjoying that supremest delight of the smoker—the first soothing whiffs of the day's tobacco—when a servant brought him a note. The handwriting was strange to his eyes; but a premonition told him that it was Helen's. Somehow, he expected that she would write in a clear, strong, legible way. He was not mistaken. She sent a friendly little message that she was devoting the morning to work. The weather made it impossible to go to Vicosoprano, and in

any event she did not feel equal to a long walk. "Yesterday's events," she explained, "took more out of me than I imagined."

Well, she had been thinking of him, and that counted. He was staring at the snow covered tennis courts, and wondering how soon the valley would regain its summer aspect, when Stampa limped into sight round the corner of the hotel. He stood at the foot of the broad flight of steps, as though waiting for someone. Spencer was about to join him for a chat, when he recollected that Bower and the guide had an arrangement to meet in the morning.

With the memory came a queer jumble of impressions. Stampa's story, told overnight, was a sad one; but the American was too fair minded to affect a moral detestation of Bower because of a piece of folly that wrecked a girl's life sixteen years ago. If the sins of a man's youth were to shadow his whole life, then charity and regeneration must be cast out of the scheme of things. Moreover, Bower's version of the incident might put a new face on it. There was no knowing how he too had been tempted and suffered. That he raged against the resurrection of a bygone misdeed was shown by his mad impulse to kill Stampa on the glacier. That such a man, strong in the power of his wealth and social position, should even dream of blotting out the past by a crime, offered the clearest proof of the frenzy that possessed him as soon as he recognized Etta Stampa's father.

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Not one word of his personal belief crossed Spencer's lips during the talk with the guide. Rather did he impress on his angry and vengeful hearer that a forgotten scandal should be left in its tomb. He took this line, not that he posed as a moralist, but because he hated to acknowledge, even to himself, that he was helped in his wooing by Helen's horror of his rival's lapse from the standard every pure minded woman sets up in her ideal lover. Ethically, he might be wrong; in his conscience he was justified. He had suffered too grievously from every species of intrigue and calumny during his own career not to be ultra-sensitive in regard to the use of such agents.

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Yet, watching the bent and crippled old man waiting there in the snow, a sense of pity and mourning chilled his heart with ice cold touch.

"If I were Stampa's son, if that dead girl were my sister, how would *I* settle with Bower?" he asked, clenching his pipe firmly between his teeth. "Well, I could only ask God to be merciful both to him and to me."

"Good gracious, Mr. Spencer! why that fierce gaze at our delightful valley?" came the voice of Mrs. de la Vere. "I am glad none of us can give you the address of the Swiss clerk of the weather—or you would surely slay him."

He turned. Convention demanded a smile and a polite greeting; but Spencer was not conventional. "You are a thought reader, Mrs. de la Vere," he said.

"One of my many attractions,' you should have added."

"I find this limpid light too critical."

"Oh, what a horrid thing to tell any woman, especially in the early morning!"

"I have a wretched habit of putting the second part of a sentence first. I really intended to say—but it is too late."

"It is rather like swallowing the sugar coating after the pill; but I'll try."

"Well, then, this crystal atmosphere does not lend itself to the obvious. If we were in London, I should catalogue your bewitchments lest you imagined I was blind to them."

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"That sounds nice, but——"

"It demands analysis, so I have failed doubly."

"I don't feel up to talking like a character in one of Henry James's novels. And you were much more amusing last night. Have you seen Miss Jaques this morning?"

"No. That is, I don't think so."

"Do you know her?"

"No."

"It would be a kind thing if someone told her that there are other places in Switzerland where she will command the general admiration she deserves."

"I am inclined to believe that there is a man in the hotel who can put that notion before her delicately."

Spencer possessed the unchanging gravity of expression that the whole American race seems to have borrowed from the Red Indian. Mrs. de la Vere's eyes twinkled as she gazed at him.

"You didn't hear what was said last night," she murmured. "Where Millicent Jaques is concerned, delicacy is absent from Mr. Bower's make-up—is that good New York?"

"It would be understood."

This time he smiled. Mrs. de la Vere wished to be a friend to Helen. Whatsoever her motive, the

wish was excellent.

"You are severe," she pouted. "Of course I ought not to mimic you——"

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"Pray do. I had no idea I spoke so nicely."

"Thank you. But I am serious. I have espoused Miss Wynton's cause, and there will be nothing but unhappiness for her while that other girl remains here."

"I hope you are mistaken," he said slowly, meeting her quizzing glance without flinching.

"That is precisely where a woman's point of view differs from a man's," she countered. "In our lives we are swayed by things that men despise. We are conscious of sidelong looks and whisperings. We dread the finger of scorn. When you have a wife, Mr. Spencer, you will begin to realize the limitations of the feminine horizon."

"Are you asking me to take this demonstrative young lady in hand?"

"I believe you would succeed."

Spencer smiled again. He had not credited Mrs. de la Vere with such fine perceptiveness. If her words meant anything, they implied an alliance, offensive and defensive, for Helen's benefit and his own.

"Guess we'll leave it right there till I've had a few words with Miss Wynton," he said, dropping suddenly into colloquial phrase.

"A heart to heart talk, in fact." She laughed pleasantly, and opened her cigarette case.

"Tell you what, Mrs. de la Vere," he said, "if ever you come to Colorado I shall hail you as a real cousin!" [Pg 252]

Then a silence fell between them. Bower was walking out of the hotel. He passed close in front of the glass partition, and might have seen them if his eyes were not as preoccupied as his mind. But he was looking at Stampa, and frowning in deep thought. The guide heard his slow, heavy tread, and turned. The two met. They exchanged no word, but went away together, the lame peasant hobbling along by the side of the tall, well dressed plutocrat.

"How odd!" said Mrs. de la Vere. "How exceedingly odd!"



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CHAPTER XIII

THE COMPACT

"Now, what have you to say? We are safe from meddlers here."

Bower spoke curtly. Stampa and he were halfway across the narrow strip of undulating meadow land which shut off the hotel from the village. They had followed the footpath, a busy thoroughfare bombarded with golf balls on fine mornings, but likely to be unfrequented till the snow melted. Receiving no answer, Bower glanced sharply at his companion; but the old guide might be unaware of his presence, so steadily did he trudge onward, with downcast, introspective eyes. Resolved to make an end of a silence that was irksome, Bower halted.

Then, for the first time, Stampa opened his lips. "Not here," he said.

"Why not? We are alone."

"You must come with me, Herr Baron."

"That is not my title."

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"It used to be. It will serve as well as any other."

"I refuse to stir a yard farther."

"Then," said Stampa, "I will kill you where you stand!"

Neither in voice nor feature did he exhibit any emotion. He merely put forward an all-sufficing reason, and left it at that.

Bower was no coward. Though the curiously repressed manner of the threat sent a wave of blood from his face to his heart, he strode suddenly nearer. Ready and eager to grapple with his adversary before a weapon could be drawn, he peered into the peasant's care lined face.

"So that is your plan, is it?" he said thickly. "You would entice me to some lonely place, where you can shoot or stab me at your own good pleasure. Fool! I can overpower you instantly, and have you sent to a jail or a lunatic asylum for the rest of your life."

"I carry no knife, nor can I use a pistol, Herr Baron," was the unruffled answer. "I do not need them. My hands are enough. You are a man, a big, strong man, with all a man's worst passions. Have you never felt that you could tear your enemy with your nails, choke him till the bones of his neck crackled, and his tongue lolled out like a panting dog's? That is how I too may feel if you deny my request. And I will kill you, Marcus Bauer! As sure as God is in Heaven, I will kill you!"

Fear now lent its blind fury to the instinct of self preservation. Bower leaped at Stampa, determined to master him at the first onslaught. But he was heavy and slow, inert after long years of physical indolence. The older man, awkward only because of his crippled leg, swung himself clear of Bower's grip, and sprang out of reach.

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"If there be any who look, 'tis you who risk imprisonment," he said calmly, with a touch of humor that assuredly he did not intend.

Bower knew then how greatly he had erred. It was a mistake ever to have agreed to meet Stampa alone—a much greater one not to have waited to be attacked. As Stampa said truly, if anyone in the village had seen his mad action, there would be testimony that he was the aggressor. He frowned at Stampa in a bull-like rage, glowering at him in a frenzy of impotence. This dour old man opposed a grim barrier to his hopes. It was intolerable that he, Mark Bower the millionaire, a man who held within his grasp all that the material world has to give, should be standing there at the mercy of a Swiss peasant. Throughout the dreary vigil of the night he had pondered this thing, and could find no loophole of escape. The record of that accursed summer sixteen years ago was long since obliterated in the history of Marcus Bauer, the emotional youth who made love to a village belle in Zermatt, and posed as an Austrian baron among the English and Italians who at that time formed the select band of climbers in the Valais. But the short-lived romance was dead and buried, and its memory brought the taste of Dead Sea ashes to the mouth.

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Marcus Bauer had become a naturalized Englishman. The mock barony was replaced by a wealth that might buy real titles. But the crime still lived, and woe to Mark Bower, the financial magnate, if it was brought home to him! He had not risen above his fellows without making enemies. He well knew the weakness and the strength of the British social system, with its strange complacency, its "allowances," its hysterical prudery, its queer amalgam of Puritanism and light hearted forbearance. He might gamble with loaded dice in the City, and people would applaud him as cleverer and shrewder than his opponents. His name might be coupled with that of a pretty actress, and people would only smile knowingly. But let a hint of his betrayal of Etta Stampa and its attendant circumstances reach the ears of those who hated him, and he would sink forthwith into the slough of rich parvenus who eke out their lives in vain efforts to enter the closely guarded circle from which he had been expelled.

If that was the only danger, he might meet and vanquish it. The unscrupulous use of money, backed up by the law of libel, can do a great deal to still the public conscience. There was another, more subtle and heart searching.

He was genuinely in love with Helen Wynton. He had reached an age when position and power were more gratifying than mere gilded Bohemianism. He could enter Parliament either by way of Palace Yard or through the portals of the Upper House. He owned estates in Scotland and the home counties, and his Park Lane mansion figured already in the address books of half the peerage. It pleased him to think that in placing a charming and gracious woman like Helen at the head of his household, she would look to him as the lodestar of her existence, and not tolerate him with the well-bred hauteur of one of the many aristocratic young women who were ready enough to marry him, but who, in their heart of hearts, despised him. He had deliberately avoided that sort of matrimonial blunder. It promised more than it fulfilled. He refused to wed a woman who deemed her social rank dearly bartered for his money.

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Yet, before ever the question arose, he knew quite well that this girl whom he had chosen—the poorly paid secretary of some harmless enthusiast, the strangely selected correspondent of an insignificant journal—would spurn him with scorn if she heard the story Stampa might tell of his lost daughter. That was the wildest absurdity in the mad jumble of events which brought him here face to face with a broken and frayed old man,—one whom he had never seen before the previous day. It was of a piece with this fantasy that he should be standing ankle deep in snow under the brilliant sun of August, and in risk, if not in fear, of his life within two hundred yards of a crowded hotel and a placid Swiss village.

His usually well ordered brain rebelled against these manifest incongruities. His passion

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subsided almost as quickly as it had arisen. He moistened his cold lips with his tongue, and the action seemed to restore his power of speech.

"I suppose you have some motive in bringing me here. What is it?" he said.

"You must come to the cemetery. It is not far."

This unlooked-for reply struck a new note. It had such a bizarre effect that Bower actually laughed. "Then you really are mad?" he guffawed harshly.

"No, not at all. I was on the verge of madness the other day; but I was pulled back in time, thanks to the Madonna, else I might never have met you."

"Do you expect me to walk quietly to the burial ground in order that I may be slaughtered conveniently?"

"I am not going to kill you, Marcus Bauer," said Stampa. "I trust the good God will enable me to keep my hands off you. He will punish you in His own good time. You are safe from me."

"A moment ago you spoke differently."

"Ah, that was because you refused to come with me. Assuredly I shall bring either you or your lying tongue to Etta's grave this morning. But you will come now. You are afraid, Herr Baron. I see it in your eyes, and you value that well-fed body of yours too highly not to do as I demand. Believe me, within the next few minutes you shall either kneel by my little girl's grave or tumble into your own."

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"I am not afraid, Stampa. I warn you again that I am more than a match for you. Yet I would willingly make any reparation within my power for the wrong I have done you."

"Yes, yes—that is all I ask—reparation, such as it is. Not to me—to Etta. Come then. I have no weapon, I repeat. You trust to your size and strength; so, by your own showing, you are safe. But you must come!"

A gleam of confidence crept into Bower's eyes. Was it not wise to humor this old madman? Perhaps, by displaying a remorse that was not all acting, he might arrange a truce, secure a breathing space. He would be free to deal with Millicent Jaques. He might so contrive matters that Helen should be far removed from Stampa's dangerous presence before the threatened disclosure was made. Yes, a wary prudence in speech and action might accomplish much. Surely he dared match his brain against a peasant's.

"Very well," he said, "I shall accompany you. But remember, at the least sign of violence, I shall not only defend myself, but drag you off to the communal guardhouse."

Without any answer, Stampa resumed his steady plodding through the snow. Bower followed, somewhat in the rear. He glanced sharply back toward the hotel. So far as he could judge, no one had witnessed that frantic spring at his tormentor. At that hour, nearly every resident would be on the sunlit veranda. He wondered whether or not Helen and Millicent had met again. He wished now he had interviewed Millicent last night. Her problem was simple enough,—a mere question of terms. Spite had carried her boldly through the scene in the foyer; but she was far too sensible a young woman to persist in a hopeless quarrel.

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It was one of the fatalities that dogged his footsteps ever since he came to Maloja that the only person watching him at the moment should happen to be Millicent herself. Her room was situated at the back of the hotel, and she had fallen asleep after many hours of restless thought. When the clang of a bell woke her with a start she found that the morning was far advanced. She dressed hurriedly, rather in a panic lest her quarry might have evaded her by an early flight. The fine panorama of the Italian Alps naturally attracted her eyes. She was staring at it idly, when she saw Bower and Stampa crossing the open space in front of her bed room window.

Stampa, of course, was unknown to her. In some indefinable way his presence chimed with her fear that Bower would leave Maloja forthwith. Did he intend to post through the Vale of Bregaglia to Chiavenna? Then, indeed, she might be called on to overcome unforeseen difficulties. She appreciated his character to the point of believing that Helen was his dupe. She regretted now that she was so foolish as to attack her one-time friend openly. Far better have asked Helen to visit her privately, and endeavor to find out exactly how the land lay before she encountered Bower. At any rate, she ought to learn without delay whether or not he was hiring post horses in the village. If so, he was unwilling to meet her, and the battle royal must take place in London.

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A maid entered with coffee and rolls.

"Who is that man with the English monsieur?" inquired Millicent, pointing to the two.

The servant was a St. Moritz girl, and a glance sufficed. "That? He is Christian Stampa, madam. He used to drive one of Joos's carriages; but he had a misfortune. He nearly killed a lady whom he was bringing to the hotel, and was dismissed in consequence. Now he is guide to an American gentleman. My God! but they are droll, the Americans!"

The maid laughed, and created a clatter with basin and hot water can. Millicent, forcing herself to eat quickly, continued to gaze after the pair. The description of Stampa's employer interested her. His drollery evidently consisted in hiring a cripple as guide.

"Is the American monsieur named Charles K. Spencer?" she said, speaking very clearly.

"I do not know, madam. But Marie, who is on the second, can tell me. Shall I ask?"

"Do, please."

Léontine bustled out. Just then Millicent was amazed by Bower's extraordinary leap at Stampa and the guide's agile avoidance of his would-be assailant. The men faced each other as though a fight was imminent; but the upshot was that they walked on together quietly. Be sure that two keen blue eyes watched their every motion thenceforth, never leaving them till they entered the village street and disappeared behind a large chalet.

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"And what did it all mean? Mark Bower—scuffling with a villager!"

Millicent's smooth forehead wrinkled in earnest thought. How queer it would be if Bower was trying to force Spencer's guide into the commission of a crime! He would stop at nothing. He believed he could bend all men, and all women too, to his will. Was he angered by unexpected resistance? She hoped the maid would hurry with her news. Though she meant to go at once to the village, it would be a point gained if she was certain of Stampa's identity.

She was already veiled and befurred when Léontine returned. Yes, Marie had given her full information. Madam had heard, perhaps, how Herr Bower and the pretty English mademoiselle were in danger of being snowed up in the Forno hut yesterday. Well, Stampa had gone with his *voyageur*, Monsieur Spensare, to their rescue. And the young lady was the one whom Stampa had endangered during his career as a cab driver. Again, it was droll.

Millicent agreed. For the second time, she resolved to postpone her journey to St. Moritz.

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Bower was surprised when Stampa led him into the main road. Having never seen any sign of a cemetery at Maloja, he guessed vaguely that it must be situated close to the church. Therein, in a sense, he was right. It will be remembered how Helen's solitary ramble on the morning after her arrival in Maloja brought her to the secluded graveyard. She first visited the little Swiss tabernacle which had attracted her curiosity, and thence took the priest's path to the last resting place of his flock. But Stampa had a purpose in following a circuitous route. He turned sharply round the base of a huge pile of logs, stacked there in readiness for the fires of a long winter.

"Look!" he said, throwing open the half door of a cattle shed behind the timber. "They found her here on the second of August, a Sunday morning, just before the people went to early mass. By her side was a bottle labeled 'Poison.' She bought it in Zermatt on the sixth of July. So, you see, my little girl had been thinking a whole month of killing herself. Poor child! What a month! They tell me, Herr Baron, you left Zermatt on the sixth of July?"

Bower's face had grown cold and gray while the old man was speaking. He began to understand. Stampa would spare him none of the horror of the tragedy from which he fled like a lost soul when the news of it reached the hotel. Well, he would not draw back now. If Stampa and he were destined to have a settlement, why defer it? This was his day of reckoning,—of atonement, he hoped,—and he would not shirk the ordeal, though his flesh quivered and his humbled pride lashed him like a whip.

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The squalid stable was peculiarly offensive. Owing to the gale, the cattle that ought to be pasturing in the high alp were crowded there in reeking filth. Yesterday, not long before this hour, he was humming verses of cow songs to Helen, and beguiling the way to the Forno with a recital of the customs and idyls of the hills. What a spiteful thing was Fate! Why had this doting peasant risen from the dead to drag him through the mire of a past transgression? If Stampa betrayed anger, if his eyes and voice showed the scorn and hatred of a man justly incensed because of his daughter's untimely death, the situation would be more tolerable. But his words were mild, biting only by reason of their simple pathos. He spoke in a detached manner. He might be relating the unhappy story of some village maid of whom he had no personal knowledge. This complete self effacement grated on Bower's nerves. It almost spurred him again to ungovernable rage. But he realized the paramount need of self control. He clenched his teeth in the effort to bear his punishment without protest.

And Stampa seemed to have the gift of divination. He read Bower's heart. By some means he became aware that the unsavory shed was loathsome to the fine gentleman standing beside him.

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"Etta was always so neat in her dress that it must have been a dreadful thing to see her laid there," he went on. "She fell just inside the door. Before she drank the poison she must have looked once at the top of old Corvatsch. She thought of me, I am sure, for she had my letter in her pocket telling her that I was at Pontresina with my voyageurs. And she would think of you too,—her lover, her promised husband."

Bower cleared his throat. He tried to frame a denial; but Stampa waved the unspoken thought aside.

"Surely you told her you would marry her, Herr Baron?" he said gently. "Was it not to implore you to keep your vow that she journeyed all the way from Zermatt to the Maloja? She was but a child, an innocent and frightened child, and you should not have been so brutal when she came to

you in the hotel. Ah, well! It is all ended and done with now. It is said the Madonna gives her most powerful aid to young girls who seek from her Son the mercy they were denied on earth. And my Etta has been dead sixteen long years,—long enough for her sin to be cleansed by the fire of Purgatory. Perhaps to-day, when justice is done to her at last, she may be admitted to Paradise. Who can tell? I would ask the priest; but he would bid me not question the ways of Providence.”

At last Bower found his voice. “Etta is at peace,” he muttered. “We have suffered for our folly— both of us. I—I could not marry her. It was impossible.” [Pg 266]

Stampa did look at him then,—such a look as the old Roman may have cast on the man who caused him to slay his loved daughter. Yet, when he spoke, his words were measured, almost reverent. “Not impossible, Marcus Bower. Nothing is impossible to God, and He ordained that you should marry my Etta.”

“I tell you—” began Bower huskily; but the other silenced him with a gesture.

“They took her to the inn,—they are kind people who live there,—and someone telegraphed to me. The news went to Zermatt, and back to Pontresina. I was high up in the Bernina with my party. But a friend found me, and I ran like a madman over ice and rock in the foolish belief that if only I held my little girl in my arms I should kiss her back to life again. I took the line of a bird. If I had crossed the Muretto, I should not be lame to-day; but I took Corvatsch in my path, and I fell, and when I saw Etta’s grave the grass was growing on it. Come! The turf is sixteen years old now.”

Breaking off thus abruptly, he swung away into the open pasture. Bower, heavy with wrath and care, strode close behind. He strove to keep his brain intent on the one issue,—to placate this sorrowing old man, to persuade him that silence was best.

Soon they reached a path that curved upward among stunted trees. It ended at an iron gate in the center of a low wall. Bower shuddered. This, then, was the cemetery. He had never noticed it, though in former years he could have drawn a map of the Maloja from memory, so familiar was he with every twist and turn of mountain, valley, and lake. The sun was hot on that small, pine sheltered hillock. The snow was beginning to melt. It clogged their feet, and left green patches where their footprints would have been clearly marked an hour earlier. And they were not the only visitors that day. There were signs of one who had climbed the hill since the snow ceased falling. [Pg 267]

Inside the wall the white covering lay deep. Bower’s prominent eyes, searching everywhere with furtive horror, saw that a little space had been cleared in one corner. The piled up snow was strewn with broken weeds and tufts of long grass. It bore an uncanny resemblance to the edges of a grave. He paused, irresolute, unnerved, yet desperately determined to fall in with Stampa’s strange mood.

“There is nothing to fear,” said the old man gently. “They brought her here. You are not afraid—you, who clasped her to your breast, and swore you loved her?”

Bower’s face, deathly pale before, flamed into sudden life. The strain was unbearable. He could feel his own heart beating violently. “What do you want me to do?” he almost shouted. “She is dead! My repentance is of no avail! Why are you torturing me in this manner?” [Pg 268]

“Softly, son-in-law, softly! You are disturbed, or you would see the hand of Providence in our meeting. What could be better arranged? You have returned after all these years. It is not too late. To-day you shall marry Etta!”

Bower’s neck was purple above the line of his white collar. The veins stood out on his temples. He looked like one in the throes of apoplexy.

“For Heaven’s sake! what do you mean?” he panted.

“I mean just what I say. This is your wedding day. Your bride lies there, waiting. Never did woman wait for her man so still and patient.”

“Come away, Stampa! This thing must be dealt with reasonably. Come away! Let us find some less mournful place, and I shall tell you—”

“Nay, even yet you do not understand. Well, then, Marcus Bauer, hear me while you may. I swear you shall marry my girl, if I have to recite the wedding prayers over your dead body. I have petitioned the Madonna to spare me from becoming a murderer, and I give you this last chance of saving your dirty life. Kneel there, by the side of the grave, and attend to the words that I shall read to you, or you must surely die! You came to Zermatt and chose my Etta. Very well, if it be God’s will that she should be the wife of a scoundrel like you, it is not for me to resist. Marry her you shall, here and now! I will bind you to her henceforth and for all eternity, and the time will come when her intercession may drag you back from the hell your cruel deed deserves.” [Pg 269]

With a mighty effort, Bower regained the self-conceit that Stampa’s words, no less than the depressing environment, had shocked out of him. The grotesque nature of the proposal was a tonic in itself.

“If I had expected any such folly on your part, I should not have come with you,” he said, speaking with something of his habitual dignity. “Your suggestion is monstrous. How can I marry

a dead woman?"

Stampa's expression changed instantly. Its meek sorrow yielded to a ferocity that was appalling. Already bent, he crouched like a wild beast gathering itself for an attack.

"Do you refuse?" he asked, in a low note of intense passion.

"Yes, curse you! And mutter your prayers in your own behalf. You need them more than I."

Bower planted himself firmly, right in the gateway. He clenched his fists, and savagely resolved to batter this lunatic's face into a pulp. He had a notion that Stampa would rush straight at him, and give him an opportunity to strike from the shoulder, hard and true. He was bitterly undeceived. The man who was nearly twenty years his senior jumped from the top of a low monument on to the flat coping stones of the wall. From that greater height he leaped down on Bower, who struck out wildly, but without a tithe of the force needed to stop the impact of a heavily built adversary. He had to change feet too, and he was borne to the earth by that catamount spring before he could avoid it. For a few seconds the two writhed in the snow in deadly embrace. Then Stampa remained uppermost. He had pinned Bower to the ground face downward. Kneeling on his shoulders, with the left hand gripping his neck and the right clutching his hair and scalp, he pulled back the wretched man's head till it was a miracle that the spinal column was not broken.

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"Now!" he growled, "are you content?"

There was no reply. It was a physical impossibility that Bower should speak. Even in his tempest of rage Stampa realized this, and loosened his grip sufficiently to give his opponent a moment of precious breath.

"Answer!" he muttered again. "Promise you will obey, you brute, or I crack your neck!"

Bower gurgled something that sounded like an appeal for mercy. Stampa rose at once, but took the precaution to close the gate, since they had rolled into the cemetery during their short fight.

"*Saperlotte!*" he cried, "you are not the first who deemed me helpless because of my crooked leg. You might have run from me, Marcus Bauer; you could never fight me. Were I at death's door, I would still have strength left to throttle you if once my fingers closed round your throat."

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Bower raised himself on hands and knees. He cut an abject figure; but he was beyond all thought of appearances. For one dread moment his life had trembled in the balance. That glimpse of death and of the gloomy path beyond was affrighting. He would do anything now to gain time. Wealth, fame, love itself, what were they, each and all, when viewed from the threshold of that barrier which admits a man once and for ever?

In deep, laboring gasps his breath came back. The blood coursed freely again in his veins. He lived—ah, that was everything—he still lived! He scrambled to his feet, bare headed, yellow skinned, dazed, and trembling. His eyes dwelt on Stampa with a new timidity. He found difficulty in straightening his limbs. He was quite insensible of his ridiculous aspect. His clothing, even his hair, was matted with soft snow. In a curiously servile way, he stooped to pick up his cap.

Stampa lurched toward the tiny patch of grass from which he had cleared the snow soon after daybreak. "Kneel here at her feet!" he said.

Bower approached, with a slow, dragging movement. Without a word of protest, he sank to his knees. The snow in his hair began to melt. He passed his hands over his face as though shutting out some horrific vision.

Stampa produced from his pocket a frayed and tattered prayer book—an Italian edition of the *Paroissien Romain*. He opened it at a marked page, and began to read the marriage ritual. Though the words were Latin, and he was no better educated than any other peasant in the district, he pronounced the sonorous phrases with extraordinary accuracy. Of course, he was an Italian, and Latin was not such an incomprehensible tongue to him as it would prove to a German or Englishman of his class. Moreover, the liturgy of the Church of Rome is familiar to its people, no matter what their race. Bower, stupefied and benumbed, though the sun was shining brilliantly, and a constant dripping from the pine branches gave proof of a rapid thaw, listened like one in a trance. He understood scattered sentences, brokenly, yet with sufficient comprehension.

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"*Confiteor Deo omnipotenti,*" mumbled Stampa, and the bridegroom in this strange rite knew that he was making the profession of a faith he did not share. His mind cleared by degrees. He was still under the spell of bodily fear, but his brain triumphed over physical stress, and bade him disregard these worn out shibboleths. Nevertheless, the words had a tremendous significance.

"*Pater noster qui es in caelis, sanctificetur nomen tuum ... dimitte nobis debita nostra sicut et nos dimittimus debitoribus nostris...*"

It was quite easy to follow their general drift. Anyone who had ever recited the Lord's Prayer in any language would realize that he was asking the Deity to forgive him his trespasses as he forgave those who trespassed against him. And there came to the kneeling man a thrilling consciousness that Stampa was appealing for him in the name of the dead girl, the once blushing and timid maid whose bones were crumbling into dust beneath that coverlet of earth and herbage. There could be no doubting the grim earnestness of the reader. It mattered not a jot to

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Stampa that he was usurping the functions of the Church in an outlandish travesty of her ritual. He was sustained by a fixed belief that the daughter so heartlessly reft from him was present in spirit, nay, more, that she was profoundly grateful for this belated sanctifying of an unhallowed love. Bower's feelings or convictions were not of the slightest consequence. He owed it to Etta to make reparation, and the duty must be fulfilled to the utmost letter.

Strong man as he was, Bower nearly fainted. He scarce had the faculty of speech when Stampa bade him make the necessary responses in Italian. But he obeyed. All the time the devilish conviction grew that if he persisted in this flummery he might emerge scatheless from a ghastly ordeal. The punishment of publicity was the one thing he dreaded, and that might be avoided—for Etta's sake. So he obeyed, with cunning pretense of grief, trying to veil the malevolence in his heart.

At last, when the solemn "*per omnia secula seculorum*" and a peaceful "Amen" announced the close of this amazing marriage service, Stampa looked fixedly at his supposed son-in-law. [Pg 274]

"Now, Marcus Bauer," he said, "I have done with you. See to it that you do not again break your plighted vows to my daughter! She is your wife. You are her husband. Not even death can divide you. Go!"

His strong, splendidly molded face, massive and dignified, cast in lines that would have appealed to a sculptor who wished to limn the features of a patriarch of old, wore an aspect of settled calm. He was at peace with all the world. He had forgiven his enemy.

Bower rose again stiffly. He would have spoken; but Stampa now fell on his knees and began to pray silently. So the millionaire, humbled again and terror stricken by the sinister significance of those concluding words, yet not daring to question them, crept out of the place of the dead. As he staggered down the hillside he looked back once. He had eyes only for the little iron gate, but Stampa came not.

Then he essayed to brush some of the clinging snow off his clothes. He shook himself like a dog after a plunge into water. In the distance he saw the hotel, with its promise of luxury and forgetfulness. And he cursed Stampa with a bitter fury of emphasis, trying vainly to persuade himself that he had been the victim of a maniac's delusion.



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CHAPTER XIV

WHEREIN MILLICENT ARMS FOR THE FRAY

Millicent was wondering how she would fare in the deep snow in boots that were never built for such a test. She was standing on the swept roadway between the hotel and the stables, and the tracks of her quarry were plainly visible. But the hope of discovering some explanation of Bower's queer behavior was more powerful than her dread of wet feet. She was gathering her skirts daintily before taking the next step, when the two men suddenly reappeared.

They had left the village and were crossing the line of the path. Shrinking back under cover of an empty wagon, she watched them. Apparently they were heading for the Orlegna Gorge, and she scanned the ground eagerly to learn how she could manage to spy on them without being seen almost immediately. Then she fell into the same error as Helen in believing that the winding carriage road to the church offered the nearest way to the clump of firs and azaleas by which Bower and Stampa would soon be hidden. [Pg 276]

Three minutes' sharp walking brought her to the church, but there the highway turned abruptly toward the village. As one side of the small ravine faced south, the sun's rays were beginning to have effect, and a narrow track, seemingly leading to the hill, was almost laid bare. In any event, it must bring her near the point where the men vanished, so she went on breathlessly. Crossing the rivulet, already swollen with melting snow, she mounted the steps cut in the hillside. It was heavy going in that thin air; but she held to it determinedly.

Then she heard men's voices raised in anger. She recognized one. Bower was speaking German, Stampa a mixture of German and Italian. Millicent had a vague acquaintance with both languages; but it was of the Ollendorf order, and did not avail her in understanding their rapid, excited words. Soon there were other sounds, the animal cries, the sobs, the labored grunts of men engaged in deadly struggle. Thoroughly alarmed, more willing to retreat than advance, she still clambered on, impelled by irresistible desire to find out what strange thing was happening.

At last, partly concealed by a dwarf fir, she could peer over a wall into the tiny cemetery. She was too late to witness the actual fight; but she saw Stampa spring upright, leaving his prostrate opponent apparently lifeless. She was utterly frightened. Fear rendered her mute. To her startled eyes it seemed that Bower had been killed by the crippled man. Soon that quite natural impression yielded to one of sustained astonishment. Bower rose slowly, a sorry spectacle. To her woman's mind, unfamiliar with scenes of violence, it was surprising that he did not begin at once to beat the life out of the lame old peasant who had attacked him so viciously. When Stampa closed the gate and motioned Bower to kneel, when the tall, powerfully built man knelt without protest, when the reading of the Latin service began,—well, Millicent could never afterward find words to express her conflicting emotions.

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But she did not move. Crouching behind her protecting tree, guarding her very breath lest some involuntary cry should betray her presence, she watched the whole of the weird ceremonial. She racked her brains to guess its meaning, strained her ears to catch a sentence that might be identified hereafter; but she failed in both respects. Of course, it was evident that someone was buried there, someone whose memory the wild looking villager held dear, someone whose grave he had forced Bower to visit, someone for whose sake he was ready to murder Bower if the occasion demanded. So much was clear; but the rest was blurred, a medley of incoherences, a waking nightmare.

Oddly enough, it never occurred to her that a woman might be lying in that dreary tenement. Her first vague imagining suggested that Bower had committed a crime, killed a man, and that an avenger had dragged him to his victim's last resting place. That Stampa was laboriously plodding through the marriage ritual was a fantastic conceit of which she received no hint. There was nothing to dissolve the mist in her mind. She could only wait, and marvel.

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As the strange scene drew to its close, she became calmer. She reflected that some sort of registry would be kept of the graves. A few dismal monuments, and two rows of little black wooden crosses that stuck up mournfully out of the snow, gave proof positive of that. She counted the crosses. Stampa was standing near the seventh from a tomb easily recognizable at some future time. Bower faced it on his knees. She could not see him distinctly, as he was hidden by the other man's broad shoulders; but she did not regret it, because the warm brown tints of her furs against the background of snow and foliage might warn him of her presence. She thanked the kindly stars that brought her here. No matter what turn events took now, she hoped to hold the whip hand over Bower. There was a mystery to be cleared, of course; but with such materials she could hardly fail to discover its true bearings.

So she watched, in tremulous patience, quick to note each movement of the actors in a drama the like to which she had never seen on the stage.

At last Bower slunk away. She heard the crunching of his feet on the snow, and, when Stampa ceased his silent prayer, she expected that he would depart by the same path. To her overwhelming dismay, he wheeled round and looked straight at her. In reality his eyes were fixed on the hills behind her. He was thinking of his unhappy daughter. The giant mass of Corvatsch was associated in his mind with the girl's last glimpse of her beloved Switzerland, while on that same memorable day it threw its deep shadow over his own life. He turned to the mountain to seek its testimony,—as it were, to the consummation of a tragedy.

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But Millicent could not know that. Losing all command of herself, she shrieked in terror, and ran wildly among the trees. She stumbled and fell before she had gone five yards over the rough ground. Quite in a panic, confused and blinded with snow, she rose and ran again, only to find herself speeding back to the burial ground. Then, in a very agony of distress, she stood still. Stampa was looking at her, with mild surprise displayed in every line of his expressive features.

"What are you afraid of, *signorina*?" he asked in Italian.

She half understood, but her tongue clove to the roof of her mouth. Her terror was manifest, and he pitied her.

He repeated his question in German. A child might have recognized that this man of the benignant face and kindly, sorrow laden eyes intended no evil.

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"I am sorry. I beg your pardon, Herr Stampa," she managed to stammer.

"Ah, you know me, then, *signorina*! But everybody knows old Stampa. Have you lost your way?"

"I was taking a little walk, and happened to approach the cemetery. I saw——"

"There is nothing to interest you here, madam, and still less to cause fear. But it is a sad place, at the best. Follow that path. It will lead you to the village or the hotel."

Her fright was subsiding rapidly. She deemed the opportunity too good to be lost. If she could win his confidence, what an immense advantage it would be in her struggle against Bower!

Summoning all her energies, and trying to remember some of the German sentences learned in her school days, she smiled wistfully.

"You are in great trouble," she murmured. "I suppose Herr Bower has injured you?"

Stampa glanced at her keenly. He had the experience of sixty years of a busy life to help him in summing up those with whom he came in contact, and this beautiful, richly dressed woman did not appeal to his simple nature as did Helen when she surprised his grief on a morning not so long ago. Moreover, the elegant stranger was little better than a spy, for none but a spy would have wandered among the rocks and shrubs in such weather, and he was in no mood to suffer her inquiries.

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"I am in no trouble," he said, "and Herr Bauer has not injured me."

"But you fought," she persisted. "I thought you had killed him. I almost wish you had. I hate him!"

"It is a bad thing to hate anyone. I am three times your age; so you may, or may not, regard my advice as excellent. Come round by the corner of the wall, and you will reach the path without walking in the deep snow. Good morning, madam."

He bowed with an ease that would have proclaimed his nationality if he had not been an Italian mountaineer in every poise and gesture. Stooping to recover his Alpine hat, which was lying near the cross at the head of the grave, he passed out through the gate before Millicent was clear of the wall. He made off with long, uneven, but rapid strides, leaving her hot with annoyance that a mere peasant should treat her so cavalierly. Though she did not understand all he said, she grasped its purport. But her soreness soon passed. The great fact remained that she shared some secret with him and Bower, a secret of an importance she could not yet measure. She was tempted to go inside the cemetery, and might have yielded to the impulse had not a load of snow suddenly tumbled off the broad fronds of a pine. The incident set her heart beating furiously again. How lonely was this remote hilltop! Even the glorious sunshine did not relieve its brooding silence.

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Thus it came about that these three people went down into the valley, each within a short distance of the others, and Spencer saw them all from the high road, where he was questioning an official of the federal postoffice as to the method of booking seats in the banquette of the diligence from Vicosoprano.

That he was bewildered by the procession goes without saying. Where had they been, and how in the name of wonder could the woman's presence be accounted for? The polite postmaster must have thought that the Englishman was very dense that morning. Several times he explained fully that the two desired seats in the diligence must be reserved from Chiavenna. As many times did Spencer repeat the information without in the least seeming to comprehend it. He spoke with the detached air of a boy in the first form reciting the fifth proposition in Euclid. At last the postmaster gave it up in despair.

"You see that man there?" he said to a keenly interested policeman when Spencer strolled away in the direction of the village. "He is of the most peculiar. He talks German like a parrot. He must be a rich American. Perhaps he wants to buy a diligence."

"*Wer weiss?*" said the other. "Money makes some folk mad."

And, indeed, through Spencer's brain was running a Bedlamite jingle, a triolet of which the dominant line was Bower, Stampa, and Millicent Jaques. The meeting of Bower and Stampa was easy of explanation. After the guide's story of the previous evening, nothing but Stampa's death or Bower's flight could prevent it. But the woman from the Wellington Theater, how had she come to know of their feud? He was almost tempted to quote the only line of Molière ever heard beyond the shores of France.

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Like every visitor to the Maloja, he was acquainted with each of its roads and footpaths except the identical one that these three descended. Where did it lead to? Before he quite realized what he was doing, he was walking up the hill. In places where the sun had not yet caught the snow there was a significant trail. Bower had come and gone once, Stampa, or some man wearing village-made boots, twice; but the single track left by Millicent's smart footwear added another perplexing item to the puzzle. So he pressed on, and soon was gazing at the forlorn cemetery, with its signs of a furious struggle between the gateposts, the uncovered grave space, and Millicent's track round two corners of the square built wall.

It was part of his life's training to read signs. The mining engineer who would hit on a six-inch lode in a mountain of granite must combine imagination with knowledge, and Spencer quickly made out something of the silent story,—something, not all, but enough to send him in haste to the hotel by the way Millicent had arrived on the scene.

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"Guess there's going to be a heap of trouble round here," he said to himself. "Helen must be recalled to London. It's up to me to make the cable hot to Mackenzie."

He had yet to learn that the storm which brought about a good deal of the preceding twenty-four hours' excitement had not acted in any niggardly fashion. It had laid low whole sections of the telegraph system on both sides of the pass during the night. Gangs of men were busy repairing the wires. Later in the day, said a civil spoken attendant at the *bureau des postes*, a notice would be exhibited stating the probable hour of the resumption of service.

"Are the wires down beyond St. Moritz?" asked Spencer.

"I cannot give an assurance," said the clerk; "but these southwest gales usually do not affect the Albula Pass. The road to St. Moritz is practicable, as this morning's mail was only forty minutes behind time."

Spencer ordered a carriage, wrote a telegram, and gave it to the driver, with orders to forward it from St. Moritz if possible. And this was the text:

"MACKENZIE, 'FIREFLY' OFFICE, FLEET-ST., LONDON. Wire Miss Wynton positive instructions to return to England immediately. Say she is wanted at office. I shall arrange matters before she arrives. This is urgent. SPENCER."

A heavy weight gradually lifted off his shoulders as he watched the wheels of the vehicle churning up the brown snow broth along the valley road. Within two hours his message would reach a telegraph office. Two more would bring it to Mackenzie. With reasonable luck, the line repairers would link Maloja to the outer world that afternoon, and Helen would hie homeward in the morning. It was a pity that her holiday and his wooing should be interfered with; but who could have foretold that Millicent Jaques would drop from the sky in that unheralded way? Her probable interference in the quarrel between Stampa and Bower put Mrs. de la Vere's suggestion out of court. A woman bent on requiting a personal slight would never consent to forego such a chance of obtaining ample vengeance as Bower's earlier history provided.

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In any case, Spencer was sure that the sooner Helen and he were removed from their present environment the happier they would be. He hoped most fervently that the course of events might be made smooth for their departure. He cared not a jot for the tittle-tattle of the hotel. Let him but see Helen re-established in London, and it would not be his fault if they did not set forth on their honeymoon before the year was much older.

He disliked this secret plotting and contriving. He adopted such methods only because they offered the surest road to success. Were he to consult his own feelings, he would go straight to Helen, tell her how chance had conspired with vagrom fancy to bring them together, and ask her to believe, as all who love are ready to believe, that their union was predestined throughout the ages.

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But he could not explain his presence in Switzerland without referring to Bower, and the task was eminently distasteful. In all things concerning the future relations between Helen and himself, he was done with pretense. If he could help it, her first visit to the Alps should not have its record darkened by the few miserable pages torn out of Bower's life. After many years the man's sin had discovered him. That which was then done in secret was now about to be shrieked aloud from the housetops. "Even the gods cannot undo the past," said the old Greeks, and the stern dogma had lost nothing of its truth with the march of the centuries. Indeed, Spencer regretted his rival's threatened exposure. If it lay in his power, he would prevent it: meanwhile, Helen must be snatched from the enduring knowledge of her innocent association with the offender and his pillory. He set his mind on the achievement. To succeed, he must monopolize her company until she quitted the hotel en route for London.

Then he thought of Mrs. de la Vere as a helper. Her seeming shallowness, her glaring affectations, no longer deceived him. The mask lifted for an instant by that backward glance as she convoyed Helen to her room the previous night had proved altogether ineffective since their talk on the veranda. He did not stop to ask himself why such a woman, volatile, fickle, blown this way and that by social zephyrs, should champion the cause of romance. He simply thanked Heaven for it, nor sought other explanation than was given by his unwavering belief in the essential nobility of her sex.

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Therein he was right. Had he trusted to her intuition, and told Millicent Jaques at the earliest possible moment exactly how matters stood between Helen and himself, it is only reasonable to suppose that the actress would have changed her plan of campaign. She had no genuine antipathy toward Helen, whose engagement to Spencer would be her strongest weapon against Bower. As matters stood, however, Helen was a stumbling block in her path, and her jealous rage was in process of being fanned to a passionate intensity, when Spencer, searching for Mrs. de la Vere, saw Millicent in the midst of a group composed of the Vavasours, mother and son, the General, and his daughters.

Mrs. de Courcy Vavasour was the evil spirit who brought about this sinister gathering. She was awed by Bower, she would not risk a snubbing from Mrs. de la Vere, and she was exceedingly annoyed to think that Helen might yet topple her from her throne. To one of her type this final consideration was peculiarly galling. And the too susceptible Georgie would be quite safe with the lady from the Wellington Theater. Mrs. Vavasour remembered the malice in Millicent's fine eyes when she refused to quail before Bower's wrath. A hawk in pursuit of a plump pigeon would not turn aside to snap up an insignificant sparrow. So, being well versed in the tactics of these social skirmishes, she sought Millicent's acquaintance.

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The younger woman was ready to meet her more than halfway. The hotel gossips were the very persons whose aid she needed. A gracious smile and a pouting complaint against the weather were the preliminaries. In two minutes they were discussing Helen, and General Wragg was drawn into their chat. Georgie and the Misses Wragg, of course, came uninvited. They scented scandal as jackals sniff the feast provided by the mightier beasts.

Millicent, really despising these people, but anxious to hear the story of Bower's love making, made no secret of her own sorrows. "Miss Wynton was my friend," she said with ingenuous pathos. "She never met Mr. Bower until I introduced her to him a few days before she came to Switzerland. You may guess what a shock it gave me when I heard that he had followed her here. Even then, knowing how strangely coincidence works at times, I refused to believe that the man who was my promised husband would abandon me under the spell of a momentary infatuation. For it can be nothing more."

"Are you sure?" asked the sympathetic Mrs. Vavasour.

"By gad!" growled Wragg, "I'm inclined to differ from you there, Miss Jaques. When Bower turned up last week they met as very old friends, I can assure you." [Pg 289]

"Obviously a prearranged affair," said Mrs. Vavasour.

"None of us has had a look in since," grinned Georgie vacuously. "Even Reggie de la Vere, who is a deuce of a fella with the girls, could not get within yards of her."

This remark found scant favor with his audience. Miss Beryl Wragg, who had affected de la Vere's company for want of an eligible bachelor, pursed her lips scornfully.

"I can hardly agree with that," she said. "Edith de la Vere may be a sport; but she doesn't exactly fling her husband at another woman's head. Anyhow, it was amazing bad form on her part to include Miss Wynton in her dinner party last night."

Millicent's blue eyes snapped. "Did Helen Wynton dine in public yesterday evening?" she demanded.

"Rather! Quite a lively crowd they were too."

"Indeed. Who were the others?"

"Oh, the Badminton-Smythes, and the Bower man, and that American—what's his name?"

Then Millicent laughed shrilly. She saw her chance of delivering a deadly stroke, and took it without mercy. "The American? Spencer? What a delightful mixture! Why, he is the very man who is paying Miss Wynton's expenses."

"So you said last night. A somewhat—er—dangerous statement," coughed the General. [Pg 290]

"Rather stiff, you know—Eh, what?" put in Georgie.

His mother silenced him with a frosty glance. "Of course you have good reasons for saying that?" she interposed.

Spencer passed at that instant, and there was a thrilling pause. Millicent was well aware that every ear was alert to catch each syllable. When she spoke, her words were clear and precise.

"Naturally, one would not say such a thing about any girl without the utmost certainty," she purred. "Even then, there are circumstances under which one ought to try and forget it. But, if it is a question as to my veracity in the matter, I can only assure you that Miss Wynton's mission to Switzerland on behalf of 'The Firefly' is a mere blind for Mr. Spencer's extraordinary generosity. He is acting through the paper, it is true. But some of you must have seen 'The Firefly.' How could such a poor journal afford to pay a young lady one hundred pounds and give her a return ticket by the Engadine express for four silly articles on life in the High Alps? Why, it is ludicrous!"

"Pretty hot, I must admit," sniggered Georgie, thinking to make peace with Beryl Wragg; but she seemed to find his humor not to her taste.

"It is the kind of arrangement from which one draws one's own conclusions," said Mrs. Vavasour blandly. [Pg 291]

"But, I say, does Bower know this?" asked Wragg, swinging his eyeglasses nervously. Though he dearly loved these carpet battles, he was chary of figuring in them, having been caught badly more than once between the upper and nether millstones of opposing facts.

"You heard me tell him," was Millicent's confident answer. "If he requires further information, I am here to give it to him. Indeed, I have delayed my departure for that very reason. By the way, General, do you know Switzerland well?"

"Every hotel in the country," he boasted proudly.

"I don't quite mean in that sense. Who are the authorities? For instance, if I had a friend buried in the cemetery here, to whom should I apply for identification of the grave?"

The General screwed up his features into a judicial frown. "Well—er—I should go to the communal office in the village, if I were you," said he.

Braving his mother's possible displeasure, George de Courcy Vavasour asserted his manliness for Beryl's benefit.

"I know the right Johnny," he said. "Let me take you to him, Miss Jaques—Eh, what?"

Millicent affected to consider the proposal. She saw that Mrs. Vavasour was content. "It is very kind of you," she said, with her most charming smile. "Have we time to go there before lunch?"

"Oh, loads."

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"I am walking toward the village. May I come with you?" asked Beryl Wragg.

"That will be too delightful," said Millicent.

Georgie, feeling the claws beneath the velvet of Miss Wragg's voice, could only suffer in silence. The three went out together. The two women did the talking, and Millicent soon discovered that Bower had unquestionably paid court to Helen from the first hour of his arrival in the Maloja, whereas Spencer seemed to be an utter stranger to her and to every other person in the place. This statement offered a curious discrepancy to the story retailed by Mackenzie's assistant. But it strengthened her case against Helen. She grew more determined than ever to go on to the bitter end.

A communal official raised no difficulty about giving the name of the occupant of the grave marked by the seventh cross from the tomb she described. A child was buried there, a boy who died three years ago. With Beryl Wragg's assistance, she cross examined the man, but could not shake his faith in the register.

The parents still lived in the village. The official knew them, and remembered the boy quite well. He had contracted a fever, and died suddenly.

This was disappointing. Millicent, prepared to hear of a tragedy, was confronted by the commonplace. But the special imp that attends all mischief makers prompted her next question.

"Do you know Christian Stampa, the guide?" she asked.

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The man grinned. "Yes, *sigñora*. He has been on the road for years, ever since he lost his daughter."

"Was he any relation to the boy? What interest would he have in this particular grave?"

The custodian of parish records stroked his chin. He took thought, and reached for another ledger. He ran a finger through an index and turned up a page.

"A strange thing!" he cried. "Why, that is the very place where Etta Stampa is buried. You see, *sigñora*," he explained, "it is a small cemetery, and our people are poor."

Etta Stampa! Was this the clew? Millicent's heart throbbed. How stupid that she had not thought of a woman earlier!

"How old was Etta Stampa?" she inquired.

"Her age is given here as nineteen, *sigñora*; but that is a guess. It was a sad case. She killed herself. She came from Zermatt. I have lived nearly all my life in this valley, and hers is the only suicide I can recall."

"Why did she kill herself, and when?"

The official supplied the date; but he had no knowledge of the affair beyond a village rumor that she had been crossed in love. As for poor old Stampa, who met with an accident about the same time, he never mentioned her.

"Stampa is the lame Johnny who went up the Forno yesterday," volunteered Georgie, when they quitted the office. "But, I say, Miss Jaques, his daughter couldn't be a friend of yours?"

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Millicent did not answer. She was thinking deeply. Then she realized that Beryl Wragg was watching her intently.

"No," she said, "I did not mean to convey that she was my friend; only that one whom I know well was interested in her. Can you tell me how I can find out more of her history?"

"Some of the villagers may help," said Miss Wragg. "Shall we make inquiries? It is marvelous how one comes across things in the most unlikely quarters."

Vavasour, whose stroll with a pretty actress had resolved itself into a depressing quest into the records of the local cemetery, looked at his watch. "Time's up," he announced firmly. "The luncheon gong will go in a minute or two, and this keen air makes one peckish—Eh, what?"

So Millicent returned to the hotel, and when she entered the dining room she saw Helen and Spencer sitting with the de la Veres. Edith de la Vere stared at her in a particularly irritating way. Cynical contempt, bored amusement, even a quizzical surprise that such a vulgar person could be so well dressed, were carried by wireless telegraphy from the one woman to the other. Millicent countered with a studied indifference. She gave her whole attention to the efforts of the head waiter to find a seat to her liking. He offered her the choice between two. With fine self control, she selected that which turned her back on Helen and her friends.

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She had just taken her place when Bower came in. He stopped near the door, and spoke to an under manager; but his glance swept the crowded room. Spencer and Helen happened to be almost facing him, and the girl was listening with a smile to something the American was saying.

But there was a conscious shyness in her eyes, a touch of color on her sun browned face, that revealed more than she imagined.

Bower, who looked ill and old, hesitated perceptibly. Then he seemed to reach some decision. He walked to Helen's side, and bent over her with courteous solicitude. "I hope that I am forgiven," he said.

She started. She was so absorbed in Spencer's talk, which dealt with nothing more noteworthy than the excursion down the Vale of Bregaglia, which he secretly hoped would be postponed, that she had not observed Bower's approach.

"Forgiven, Mr. Bower? For what?" she asked, blushing now for no assignable reason.

"For yesterday's fright, and its sequel."

"But I enjoyed it thoroughly. Please don't think I am only a fair weather mountaineer."

"No. I am not likely to commit that mistake. It was feminine spite, not elemental, that I fancied might have troubled you. Now I am going to face the enemy alone. Pity me, and please drink to my success."

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He favored Spencer and the de la Veres with a comprehensive nod, and turned away, well satisfied that he had claimed a condition of confidence, of mutual trust, between Helen and himself.

Millicent was reading the menu when she heard Bower's voice at her shoulder. "Good morning, Millicent," he said. "Shall we declare a truce? May I eat at your table? That, at least, will be original. Picture the amazement of the mob if the lion and the lamb split a small bottle."

He was bold; but chance had fenced her with triple brass. "I really don't feel inclined to forgive you," she said, with a quite forgiving smile.

He sat down. The two were watched with discreet stupefaction by many.

"Never give rein to your emotions, Millicent. You did so last night, and blundered badly in consequence. Artifice is the truest art, you know. Let us, then, be unreal, and act as though we were the dearest friends."

"We are, I imagine. Self interest should keep us solid."

Bower affected a momentary absorption in the wine list. He gave his order, and the waiter left them.

"Now, I want you to be good," he said. "Put your cards on the table, and I will do the same. Let us discuss matters without prejudice, as the lawyers say. And, in the first instance, tell me exactly what you imply by the statement that Mr. Charles K. Spencer, of Denver, Colorado, as he appears in the hotel register, is responsible for Helen Wynton's presence here to-day."

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CHAPTER XV

A COWARD'S VICTORY

"It is a queer story," said Bower.

"Because it is true," retorted Millicent.

"Yet she never set eyes on the man until she met him here."

"That is rather impossible, isn't it?"

"It is a fact, nevertheless. On the day I arrived in Maloja, a letter came from the editor of 'The Firefly,' telling her that he had written to Spencer, whom he knew, and suggested that they

should become acquainted."

"These things are easily managed," said Millicent airily.

"I accept Miss Wynton's version." Bower spoke with brutal frankness. The morning's tribulation had worn away some of the veneer. He fully expected the girl to flare into ill suppressed rage. Then he could deal with her as he liked. He had not earned his repute in the city of London without revealing at times the innate savagery of his nature. As soon as he had taunted his adversaries into a passion, he found the weak joints in their armor. He was surprised now that Millicent should laugh. If she was acting, she was acting well.

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"It is too funny for words to see you playing the trustful swain," she said.

"One necessarily believes the best of one's future wife."

"So you still keep up that pretense? It was a good line in last night's situation; but it becomes farcical when applied to light comedy."

"I give you credit for sufficient wit to understand why I joined you here. We can avoid unpleasant explanations. I am prepared to bury the hatchet—on terms."

"Terms?"

"Yes. You are a blackmailer, a somewhat dangerous one. You tempt me to revise the wisest of La Rochefoucauld's maxims, and say that every woman is at heart a snake. You owe everything to me; yet you are not content. Without my help you would still be carrying a banner in the chorus. Unless I continue my patronage, that is what you must go back to. Don't imagine that I am treating with you out of sentiment. For Helen's sake, for her sake only, I offer a settlement."

Millicent's eyes narrowed a little; but she affected to admire the gleaming beads in a glass of champagne. "Pray continue," she said. "Your views are interesting."

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There was some danger lest Bower should reverse his wonted procedure, and lose his own temper in this unequal duel. They both spoke in low tones. Anyone watching them would find the smiles of conventionality on their lips. To all outward seeming, they were indulging in a friendly gossip.

"Of course, you want money," he said. "That is the be-all and end-all of your existence. Very well. Write a letter to Miss Wynton apologizing for your conduct, take yourself away from here at three o'clock, and from St. Moritz by the next train, and I not only withdraw my threat to bar you in the profession but shall hand you a check for a thousand pounds."

Millicent pretended to consider his proposal. She shook her head. "Not nearly enough," she said, with a sweetly deprecatory moue.

"It is all you will get. I repeat that I am doing this to spare Helen's feelings. Perhaps I am ill advised. You have done your worst already, and it only remains for me to crush you. But I stick to the bargain—for five minutes."

"Dear, dear!" she sighed. "Only five minutes? Do you get rid of your troubles so quickly? How nice to be a man, and to be able to settle matters with such promptitude."

Bower was undeniably perplexed; but he held to his line. Unwavering tenacity of purpose was his chief characteristic. "Meanwhile," he said, "let us talk of the weather."

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"A most seasonable topic. It was altogether novel this morning to wake and find the world covered with snow."

"If the Maloja is your world, you must have thought it rather chilling," he laughed.

"Yes, cold, perhaps, but fascinating. I went for a walk. You see, I wanted to be alone, to think what I should do for the best. A woman is so helpless when she has to fight a big, strong man like you. Chance led me to the cemetery. What an odd little place it is? Wouldn't you hate to be buried there?"

It was now Millicent's turn to be surprised. Not by the slightest tremor did Bower betray the shock caused by her innuendo. His nerves were proof against further assault that day. Fear had conquered him for an instant when he looked into the gate of darkness. With its passing from before his eyes, his intellect resumed its sway, and he weighed events by that nicely adjusted balance. None but a man who greatly dared would be sitting opposite Millicent at that moment. None but a fool would have failed to understand her. But he gave no sign that he understood. He refilled his glass, and emptied it with the gusto of a connoisseur.

"That is a good wine," he said. "Sometimes pints are better than quarts, although of the same vintage. Waiter, another half bottle, please."

"No more for me, of course," murmured Millicent. "I must keep my head clear,—so much depends on the next five minutes."

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"Three, to be exact."

"Ah, then, I must use them to advantage. Shall I tell you more about my early stroll?"

"What time did you go out?"

"Soon after ten o'clock."

"You saw—what?"

"A most exciting struggle—and—what shall I call it?—a ceremony."

Bower was silent for an appreciable time. He watched a waiter uncorking the champagne. When the bottle was placed on the table he pretended to read the label. He was thinking that Stampa's marriage service was not so futile, after all. It had soon erected its first barrier. Millicent, who had qualities rare in a woman, turned and looked at a clock. Incidentally, she discovered that Spencer was devoting some attention to the proceedings at her table. Still Bower remained silent. She stole a glance at him. She was conscious that an abiding dread was stealing into her heart; but her stage training came to her aid, and she managed to say evenly:

"My little ramble does not appear to interest you?"

"It does," he said. "I have been arguing the pros and cons of a ticklish problem. There are two courses to me. I can either bribe you, or leave you to your own devices. The latter method implies the interference of the police. I dislike that. Helen would certainly be opposed to it. I make the one thousand into five; but I want your answer now."

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"I accept," she said instantly.

"Ah, but you are trembling. Queer, isn't it, how thin is the partition between affluence and a prison? There are dozens of men who stand high in commercial circles in London who ought to be in jail. There are quite as many convicts in Portland who reached penal servitude along precisely the same road. That is the penalty of being found out. Let me congratulate you. And do try another glass of this excellent wine. You need it, and you have to pack your belongings at once, you know."

"Thank you."

Her eyes sparkled. Her well modulated voice was hardly under control. Five thousand pounds was a great deal of money; but the tragedy of Etta Stampa's life might have been worth more. How could she find out the whole truth? She must accomplish that, in some way.

Therein, however, she greatly miscalculated. Bower divined her thought almost before it was formed. "For goodness' sake, let us put things in plain English!" he said. "I am paying you handsomely to save the woman I am going to marry from some little suffering and heartache. Perhaps it is unnecessary. Her fine nature might forgive a man a transgression of his youth. At any rate, I avert the risk by this payment. The check will be payable to you personally. In other words, you must place it to your own account in your bank. Any breach of our contract in letter or spirit during the next two days will be punished by its stoppage. After that time, the remotest hint on your part of any scandalous knowledge affecting me, or Helen, or the causes which led to my present weakness in allowing you to blackmail me, will imply the immediate issue of a warrant for your arrest. Need I explain the position at greater length?"

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"No," said Millicent, who wished now that she had bitten off the end of her tongue before she vented her spleen to the Vavasours and the Wraggs.

"On second thoughts," went on Bower unconcernedly, "I forego the stipulation as to a letter of apology. I don't suppose Helen will value it. Assuredly, I do not."

The cheapening of her surrender stung more than she counted on. "I have tried to avoid the appearance of uncalled for rudeness to-day," she blurted out.

"Well—yes. What is the number of your room?"

She told him.

"I shall send the check to you at once. Have you finished?"

He accompanied her to the door, bowed her out, and came back. Smiling affably, he pulled a chair to Mrs. de la Vere's side.

"I quite enjoyed my luncheon," he said. "You all heard that stupid outburst of Millicent's last night; so there is no harm in telling you that she regrets it. She is leaving the hotel forthwith."

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Helen rose suddenly. "She is one of my few friends," she said. "I cannot let her go in anger."

"She is unworthy of your friendship," exclaimed Bower sharply. "Take my advice and forget that she exists."

"You cannot forget that anyone exists, or has existed," said Spencer quietly.

"What? You too?" said Bower. His eyes sought the American's, and flashed an unspoken challenge.

He felt that the world was a few hundred years too old. There were historical precedents for settling affairs such as that now troubling him by means that would have appealed to him. But he opposed no further hindrance to Helen's departure. Indeed, he perceived that her meeting with

Millicent would provide in some sense a test of his own judgment. He would soon learn whether or not money would prevail.

He waited a little while, and then sent his valet with the check and a request for an acknowledgment. The man brought him a scribbled note:

“Was rather taken aback by appearance of H. She says you told her I was leaving the hotel. We fell on each other’s neck and wept. Is that right? M. J.”

He cut the end off a cigar, lit the paper with a match, and lit the cigar with the paper.

“Five thousand pounds!” he said to himself. “It is a lot of money to one who has none. I remember the time when I would have sold my soul to the devil for half the amount.” [Pg 306]

But that was not a pleasing notion. It suggested that, by evil hazard, some such contract had, in fact, been made, but forgotten by one of the parties to it. So he dismissed it. Having disposed of Stampa and Millicent, practically between breakfast and lunch, there were no reasons why he should trouble further about them. The American threatened a fresh obstacle. He was winning his way with Helen altogether too rapidly. In the light of those ominous words at the luncheon table his close association with Stampa indicated a definite knowledge of the past. Curse him! Why did he interfere?

Bower was eminently a selfish man. He had enjoyed unchecked success for so long a time that he railed now at the series of mischances that tripped the feet of his desires. Looking back through recent days, he was astonished to find how often Spencer had crossed his path. Before he was four hours in Maloja, Helen, in his hearing, had singled out the American for conjecture and scrutiny. Then Dunston spoke of the same man as an eager adversary at baccarat; but the promised game was arranged without Spencer’s coöperation, greatly to Dunston’s loss. A man did not act in such fashion without some motive. What was it? This reserved, somewhat contemptuous rival had also snatched Helen from his company many times. He had undoubtedly rendered some service in coming to the Forno hut; but Bower’s own lapse from sanity on that occasion did not escape his notice. Finally, this cool mannered, alert youngster from the New World did not seem to care a fig for any prior claim on Helen’s affections. His whole attitude might be explained by the fact that he was Stampa’s employer, and had won the old guide’s confidence. [Pg 307]

Yes, the American was the real danger. That pale ghost conjured from the grave by Stampa was intangible, powerless, a dreamlike wraith evoked by a madman’s fancy. Already the fear engendered myopia of the morning was passing from Bower’s eyes. The passage of arms with Millicent had done him good. He saw now that if he meant to win Helen he must fight for her.

Glancing at his watch, he found that the time was a quarter to three. He opened a window in his sitting room, which was situated in the front of the hotel. By leaning out he could survey the carriage stand at the foot of the long flight of steps. A pair-horse vehicle was drawn up there, and men were fastening portly dress baskets in the baggage carrier over the hind wheels.

He smiled. “The pretty dancer travels luxuriously,” he thought. “I wonder whether she will be honest enough to pay her debts with my money?”

He still hated her for having dragged him into a public squabble. He looked to the future to requite him. A year, two years, would soon pass. Then, when funds were low and engagements scarce, she would appeal to him again, and his solicitors would reply. He caught himself framing curt, stinging sentences to be embodied in the letter; but he drew himself up with a start. Surely there was something very wrong with Mark Bower, the millionaire, when he gloated over such paltry details. Why, his reflections were worthy of that old spitfire, Mrs. de Courcy Vavasour. [Pg 308]

His cigar had gone out. He threw it away. It had the taste of Millicent’s cheap passion. A decanter of brandy stood on the table, and he drank a small quantity, though he had imbibed freely of champagne at luncheon. He glanced at a mirror. His face was flushed and care lined, and he scowled at his own apparition.

“I must go and see the last of Millicent. It will cheer me up,” he said to himself.

When he entered the foyer, Millicent was already in the veranda, a dainty picture in furs and feathers. Somewhat to his surprise, Helen was with her. A good many people were watching them covertly, a quite natural proceeding in view of their strained relations overnight.



**“It will paralyze the dowager brigade
if we hug each other.”**

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Millicent's first action after quitting the *salle à manger* had been to worm out of Léontine the full, true, and particular history of Etta Stampa, or so much of the story as was known to the hotel servants. The recital was cut short by Helen's visit, but resumed during packing operations, as Millicent had enlarged her store of knowledge considerably during the process of reconciliation.

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So, alive to possibilities going far beyond a single check, even for five thousand pounds, at the last moment she sent a message to Helen.

“Come and see me off,” she wrote. “It will simply paralyze the dowager brigade if we hug each other on the mat.”

Helen agreed. She was not sorry that her critics should be paralyzed, or stupefied, or rendered incapable in some way of inflicting further annoyance. In her present radiant mood, nearly all her troubles having taken unto themselves wings, she looked on yesterday's episode in the light of a rather far fetched joke. Bower stood so high in her esteem that she was sure the outspoken announcement of his intentions was dictated chiefly by anger at Millicent's unfair utterances. Perhaps he had some thought of marriage; but he must seek a wife in a more exalted sphere. She felt in her heart that Spencer was only awaiting a favorable opportunity to declare his love, and she did not strive to repress the wave of divine happiness that flooded her heart at the thought.

After much secret pondering and some shy confidences intrusted to Mrs. de la Vere, she had resolved to tell him that if he left the Maloja at once—an elastic phrase in lovers' language—and came to her in London next month, she would have an answer ready. She persuaded herself that there was no other honorable way out of an embarrassing position. She had come to Switzerland for work, not for love making. Spencer would probably wish to marry her forthwith, and that was not to be thought of while “The Firefly's” commission was only half completed. All of which modest and maidenly reasoning left wholly out of account Spencer's strenuous wooing; it is chronicled here merely to show her state of mind when she kissed Millicent farewell.

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It is worthy of note also that two young people who might be expected to take the liveliest interest in each other's company were steadfast in their determination to separate. Each meant to send the other back to England with the least possible delay, and both were eager to fly into each other's arms—in London! Whereat the gods may have laughed, or frowned, as the case may be, if they glanced at the horoscopes of certain mortals pent within the mountain walls of the Upper Engadine.

While Helen was still gazing after Millicent's retreating carriage, Bower came from the darksome foyer to the sunlit veranda. “So you parted the best of friends?” he said quietly.

She turned and looked at him with shining eyes. “I cannot tell you how pleased I am that a stupid misunderstanding should be cleared away!” she said.

“Then I share your pleasure, though, to be candid, I was thinking that a woman's kiss has infinite gradations. It may savor of Paradise or the Dead Sea.”

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"But she told me how grieved she was that she had behaved so foolishly, and appealed to me not to let the folly of a day break the friendship of years."

"Ah! Millicent picks up some well turned sentiments on the stage. Come out for a little stroll, and tell me all about it."

Helen hesitated. "It will soon be tea time," she said, with a self-conscious blush. She had promised Spencer to walk with him to the *château*; but her visit to Millicent had intervened, and he was not on the veranda at the moment.

"We need not go far. The sun has garnished the roads for us. What do you say if we make for the village, and interview Johann Klucker's cat on the weather?"

His tone was quite reassuring. To her transparent honesty of purpose it seemed better that they should discuss Millicent's motive in coming to the hotel and then dismiss it for ever. "A most excellent idea," she cried lightly. "I have been writing all the morning, so a breath of fresh air will be grateful."

They passed down the steps.

They had not gone more than a few paces when the driver of an empty carriage pulled up his vehicle and handed Bower a telegram.

"They gave it to me at St. Moritz, Herr Bower," he said. "I took a message there for Herr Spencer, and they asked me to bring this to you, as it would reach you more quickly than if it came by the post."

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Bower thanked the man, and opened the envelop. It was a very long telegram; but he only glanced at it in the most cursory manner before putting it in a pocket.

At a distant corner of the road by the side of the lake, Millicent turned for a last look at the hotel and waved a hand at them. Helen replied.

"I almost wish now she was staying here a few days," she said wistfully. "She ought to have seen our valley in its summer greenery."

"I fear she brought winter in her train," was Bower's comment. "But the famous cat must decide. Here, boy," he went on, hailing a village urchin, "where is Johann Klucker's house?"

The boy pointed to a track that ran close to the right bank of the tiny Inn. He explained volubly, and was rewarded with a franc.

"Do you know this path?" asked Bower. "Klucker's chalet is near the waterfall, which should be a fine sight owing to the melting snow."

It was Helen's favorite walk. She would have preferred a more frequented route; but the group of houses described by the boy was quite near, and she could devise no excuse for keeping to the busy highway. As the path was narrow she walked in front. The grass and flowers seemed to have drawn fresh tints from the snow, which had cleared away with magical rapidity from this sheltered spot. But the little rivulet, usually diamond bright, was now a turbulent and foaming stream. Care was needed not to slip. If anyone fell into that miniature torrent, it would be no easy matter to escape without broken bones.

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"Would you ever believe that a few hours' snow, followed by a hot sun, would make such a difference to a mere ribbon of water like this?" she asked, when they were passing through a narrow cleft in a wall of rock through which the Inn roared with a quite respectable fury.

"I am in a mood to believe anything," said Bower. "Do you remember our first meeting at the Embankment Hotel? Who would have imagined then that Millicent Jaques, a few weeks later, would rush a thousand miles to the Maloja and scream her woes to Heaven and the multitude. Neither you nor I, I fancy, had seen her during the interval. Did she tell you the cause of her extraordinary behavior?"

"No. I did not ask her. But it scarce needed explanation, Mr. Bower. I—I fear she suspected me of flirting. It was unjust; but I can well conceive that a woman who thinks her friend is robbing her of a man's affections does not wait to consider nice points of procedure."

"Surely Millicent did not say that I had promised to marry her?"

Though Helen was not prepared for this downright plunge into an embarrassing discussion, she managed to evade a direct answer. "There was more than a suggestion of that in her words last night," she said. "Perhaps she thought so in all seriousness. You seem to have undeceived her to-day, and I am sure you must have dealt with her kindly, or she would not have acknowledged her mistake in such frank terms to me. There, now! That is the end of a very disagreeable episode. Shall we say no more about it?"

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Helen was flushed and hurried of speech: but she persevered bravely, hoping that Bower's tact would not desert him at this crisis. She quickened her pace a little, with the air of one who has said the last word on a difficult topic and is anxious to forget it.

Bower overtook her. He grasped her shoulder almost roughly, and drew her round till she faced him. "You are trying to escape me, Helen!" he said hoarsely. "That is impossible. Someone must

have told you what I said to Millicent in the hearing of all who chose to listen. Her amazing outburst forced from me an avowal that should have been made to you alone. Helen, I want you to be my wife. I love you better than all the world. I have my faults,—what man is flawless?—but I have the abiding virtue of loving you. I shall make your life happy, Helen. For God's sake do not tell me that you are already promised to another!"

His eyes blazed into hers with a passion that was appalling in its intensity. She seemed to lose the power to speak or move. She looked up at him like a frightened child, who hears strange words that she does not comprehend. Thinking he had won her, he threw his arms about her and strained her fiercely to his breast. He strove to kiss away the tears that began to fall in piteous protest; but she bent her head as if in shame.

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"Oh, please let me go!" she sobbed. "Please let me go! What have I done that you should treat me so cruelly."

"Cruelly, Helen? How should I be cruel to you whom I hold so dear?"

Still he clasped her tightly, hardly knowing what he did in his transport of joy at the belief that she was his.

She struggled to free herself. She shrank from this physical contact with a strange repulsion. She felt as a timid animal must feel when some lord of the jungle pulls it down and drags it to his lair. Bower was kissing her cheeks, her forehead, her hair, finding a mad rapture in the fragrance of her skin. He crushed her in a close embrace that was almost suffocating.

"Oh, please let me go!" she wailed. "You frighten me. Let me go! How dare you!"

She fought so wildly that he yielded to a dim sense that she was in earnest. He relaxed his grip. With the instinct of a hunted thing, she took a dangerous leap for safety clean across the swollen Inn. Luckily she alighted on a broad boulder, or a sprained ankle would have been the least penalty for that desperate means of escape.

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As she stood there, with tears streaming down her face and the crimson brand of angry terror on her brow, the dreadful knowledge that he had lost her smote Bower like a rush of cold air from a newly opened tomb. Between them brawled the tiny torrent. It offered no bar to an active man; but even in his panic of sudden perception he resisted the impulse that bade him follow.

"Helen," he pleaded, stretching forth his hands in frenzied gesture, "why do you cast me off? I swear by all a man holds sacred that I mean no wrong. You are dear to me as life itself. Ah, Helen, say that I may hope! I do not even ask for your love. I shall win that by a lifetime of devotion."

At last she found utterance. He had alarmed her greatly; but no woman can feel it an outrage that a man should avow his longing. And she pitied Bower with a great pity. Deep down in her heart was a suspicion that they might have been happy together had they met sooner. She would never have loved him,—she knew that now beyond cavil,—but if they were married she must have striven to make life pleasant for him, while she drifted down the smooth stream of existence free from either abiding joys or carking sorrows.

"I am more grieved than I can tell that this should have happened," she said, striving hard to restrain the sob in her voice, though it gave her words the ring of genuine regret. "I little dreamed that you thought of me in that way, Mr. Bower. But I can never marry you—never, no matter what the circumstances! Surely you will help me to dispel the memory of a foolish moment. It has been trying to both of us. Let us pretend that it never was."

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Had she struck him with a whip he could not have flinched so visibly beneath the lash as from the patent honesty of her words. For a time he did not answer, and the sudden calm that came quick on the heels of frenzy had in it a weird peacefulness.

Neither could ever again forget the noisy rush of the stream, the glad singing of birds in a thicket overhanging the bank, the tinkle of the cow bells as the cattle began to climb to the pastures for a luxurious hour ere sundown. It was typical of their lives that they should be divided by the infant Inn, almost at its source, and that thenceforth the barrier should become ever wider and deeper till it reached the infinite sea.

He seemed to take his defeat well. He was pale, and his lips twitched with the effort to attain composure. He looked at Helen with a hungry longing that was slowly acknowledging restraint.

"I must have frightened you," he said, breaking a silence that was growing irksome. "Of course I apologize for that. But we cannot leave things where they are. If you must send me away from you, I may at least demand a clear understanding. Have no fear that I shall distress you further. May I join you, or will you walk to the bridge a little higher up?"

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"Let us return to the hotel," she protested.

"No, no. We are not children. We have broken no law of God or man. Why should I be ashamed of having asked you to marry me, or you to listen, even though it be such a hopeless fantasy as you say?"

Helen, deeply moved in his behalf, walked to a bridge of planks a little distance up stream. Bower joined her there. He had deliberately resolved to do a dastardly thing. If Spencer was the cause

of Helen's refusal, that obstacle, at any rate, could be smashed to a pulp.

"Now, Helen," he said, "I want you to believe that your happiness is my only concern. Perhaps, at some other time, you may allow me to renew in less abrupt manner the proposal I have made to-day. But when you hear all that I have to tell, you will be forced to admit that I placed your high repute above every other consideration in declaring my love before, rather than after, you learned how and why you came to Switzerland."

His manner was becoming more calm and judicial each moment. It reacted on Helen, who gazed at him with a very natural surprise in her still tear-laden eyes.

"That, at least, is simple enough," she cried.

"No. It is menacing, ugly, a trick calculated to wound you sorely. When first it came to my ears I refused to credit the vile meanness of it. You saw that telegram which reached my hands as we quitted the hotel? It is a reply to certain inquiries I caused to be made in London. Read it."

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Helen took the crumpled sheets of thin paper and began to read. Bower watched her face with a maleficent confidence that might have warned her had she seen it. But she paid heed to nothing else at that moment save the mysterious words scrawled in a foreign handwriting:

"Have investigated 'Firefly' incident fully. Pargrave compelled Mackenzie to explain. The American, Charles K. Spencer, recently residing at Embankment Hotel, is paying Miss Helen Wynton's expenses, including cost of publishing her articles. He followed her on the day of her departure, and has since asked Mackenzie for introduction. Pargrave greatly annoyed, and holds Mackenzie at your disposal.

"KENNETT."

Helen went very white; but she spoke with a firmness that was amazing, even to Bower. "Who is Kennett?" she said.

"One of my confidential clerks."

"And Pargrave?"

"The proprietor of 'The Firefly.'"

"Did Millicent know of this—plot?"

"Yes."

Then she murmured a broken prayer. "Ah, dear Heaven!" she complained, "for what am I punished so bitterly?"

Karl, the voluble and sharp-eyed, retailed a bit of gossip to Stampa that evening as they smoked in Johann Klucker's chalet. "As I was driving the cattle to the middle alp to-day, I saw our *fräulein* in the arms of the big *voyageur*," he said.

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Stampa withdrew his pipe from between his teeth. "Say that again," he whispered, as though afraid of being overheard.

Karl did so, with fuller details.

"Are you sure?" asked Stampa.

Karl sniffed scornfully. "*Ach, Gott!* How could I err?" he cried. "There are not so many pretty women in the hotel that I should not recognize our *fräulein*. And who would forget Herr Bower? He gave me two louis for a ten francs job. We must get them together on the hills again, Christian. He will be soft hearted now, and pay well for taking care of his lady."

"Yes," said Stampa, resuming his pipe. "You are right, Karl. There is no place like the hills. And he will pay—the highest price, look you! *Saperlotte!* I shall exact a heavy fee this time."



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CHAPTER XVI

SPENCER EXPLAINS

A sustained rapping on the inner door of the hut roused Helen from dreamless sleep. In the twilight of the mind that exists between sleeping and waking she was bewildered by the darkness, perhaps baffled by her novel surroundings. She strove to pierce the gloom with wide-open, unseeing eyes, but the voice of her guide broke the spell.

"Time to get up, *signora*. The sun is on the rock, and we have a piece of bad snow to cross."

Then she remembered, and sighed. The sigh was involuntary, the half-conscious tribute of a wearied heart. It needed an effort to brace herself against the long hours of a new day, the hours when thoughts would come unbidden, when regrets that she was fighting almost fiercely would rush in and threaten to overwhelm her. But Helen was brave. She had the courage that springs from the conviction of having done that which is right. If she was a woman too, with a woman's infinite capacity for suffering—well, that demanded another sort of bravery, a resolve to subdue the soul's murmurings, a spiritual teeth-clenching in the determination to prevail, a complete acceptance of unmerited wrongs in obedience to some inexplicable decree of Providence.

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So she rose from a couch which at least demanded perfect physical health ere one could find rest on it, and, being fully dressed, went forth at once to drink the steaming hot coffee that filled the tiny hut with its fragrance.

"A fine morning, Pietro?" she asked, addressing the man who had summoned her.

"*Si, signora*. Dawn is breaking with good promise. There is a slight mist on the glacier; but the rock shows clear in the sun."

She knew that an amiable grin was on the man's face; but it was so dark in the *cabane* that she could see little beyond the figures of the guide and his companion. She went to the door, and stood for a minute on the narrow platform of rough stones that provided the only level space in a witches' cauldron of moss-covered boulders and rough ice. Beneath her feet was an ultramarine mist, around her were masses of black rock; but overhead was a glorious pink canopy, fringed by far-flung circles of translucent blue and tenderest green. And this heaven's own shield was ever widening. Eastward its arc was broken by an irregular dark mass, whose pinnacles glittered like burnished gold. That was the Aguagliouls Rock, which rises so magnificently in the midst of a vast ice field, like some great portal to the wonderland of the Bernina. She had seen it the night before, after leaving the small restaurant that nestles at the foot of the Roseg Glacier. Then its scarred sides, brightened by the crimson and violet rays of the setting sun, looked friendly and inviting. Though its base was a good mile distant across the snow-smoothed surface of the ice, she could discern every crevice and ledge and steep couloir. Now, all these distinguishing features were merged in the sea-blue mist. The great wall itself seemed to be one vast, unscalable precipice, capped by a series of shining spires.

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And for the first time in three sorrowful days, while her eyes dwelt on that castle above the clouds, the mysterious grandeur of nature healed her vexed spirit, and the peace that passeth all understanding fell upon her. The miserable intrigues and jealousies of the past weeks were so insignificant, so far away, up here among the mountains. Had she only consulted her own happiness, she mused, she would not have ordered events differently. There was no real reason why she should have flown from the hotel like a timid deer roused by hounds from a thicket. Instead of doubling and twisting from St. Moritz to Samaden, and back by carriage to a remote hotel in the Roseg Valley, she might have remained and defied her persecutors. But now the fume and fret were ended, and she tried to persuade herself she was glad. She felt that she could never again endure the sight of Bower's face. The memory of his passionate embrace, of his blazing eyes, of the thick sensual lips that forced their loathsome kisses upon her, was bitter enough without the need of reviving it each time they met. She was sorry it was impossible to bid farewell to Mrs. de la Vere. Any hint of her intent would have drawn from that well-disposed cynic a flood of remonstrance hard to stem; though nothing short of force would have kept Helen at Maloja once she was sure of Spencer's double dealing.

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Of course, she might write to Mrs. de la Vere when she was in calmer mood. It would be easier then to pick and choose the words that would convey in full measure her detestation of the American. For she hated him—yes, hatred alone was satisfying. She despised her own heart because it whispered a protest. Yet she feared him too. It was from him that she fled. She admitted this to her honest mind while she watched the spreading radiance of the new day. She feared the candor of his steady eyes more than the wiles and hypocrisies of Bower and her false friend, Millicent. By a half-miraculous insight into the history of recent events, she saw that Bower had followed her to Switzerland with evil intent.

But the discovery embittered her the more against Spencer, who had lured her there deliberately, than against Bower who knew of it, nor scrupled to use the knowledge as best it marched with his designs. It was nothing to her, she told herself, that Spencer no less than Bower had renounced his earlier purpose, and was ready to marry her. She still quivered with anger at the thought that she had fallen so blindly into the toils. Even though she accepted Mackenzie's astounding commission, she might have guessed that there was some ignoble element underlying it. She felt now that it was possible to be prepared,—to scrutinize

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occurrences more closely, to hold herself aloof from compromising incidents. The excursion to the Forno, the manifest interest she displayed in both men, the concealment of her whereabouts from friends in London, her stiff lipped indifference to the opinion of other residents in the hotel,—these things, trivial individually, united into a strong self indictment.

As for Spencer, though she meant, above all things, to avoid meeting him, and hoped that he was now well on his way to the wide world beyond Maloja, she would never forgive him—no, never!

“I am sorry to hurry you, *sigñora*, but there is a bit of really bad snow on the Sella Pass,” urged Pietro apologetically at her shoulder, and she reentered the hut at once, sitting down to that which she deemed to be her last meal on the Swiss side of the Upper Engadine.

It was in a hotel at St. Moritz that she had settled her route with the aid of a map and a guidebook. When, on that day of great happenings, she quitted the Kursaal-Maloja, she stipulated that the utmost secrecy should be observed as to her departure. Her boxes and portmanteau were brought from her room by the little used exit she had discovered soon after her arrival. A closed carriage met her there in the dusk, and she drove straight to St. Moritz station. Leaving her baggage in the parcels office, she sought a quiet hotel for the night, registering her room under her mother’s maiden name of Trenholme. She meant to return to England by the earliest train in the morning; but her new-born terror of encountering Spencer set in motion a scheme for evading pursuit either by him or Bower.

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By going up the Roseg Valley, and carrying the barest necessaries for a few days’ travel, she could cross the Bernina range into Italy, reach the rail at Sondrio, and go round by Como to Lucerne and thence to Basle, whither the excellent Swiss system of delivering passengers’ luggage would convey her bulky packages long before she was ready to claim them.

With a sense of equity that was creditable, she made up her mind to expend every farthing of the money received from “The Firefly.” She had kept her contract faithfully: Mackenzie, therefore, or Spencer, must abide by it to the last letter. The third article of the series was already written and in the post. The fourth she wrote quietly in her room at the St. Moritz hotel, nor did she stir out during the next day until it was dark, when she walked a few yards up the main street to buy a rucksack and an alpenstock.

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Early next morning, close wrapped and veiled, she took a carriage to the Restaurant du Glacier. Here she met an unforeseen check. The local guides were absent in the Bernina, and the hotel proprietor—good, careful man!—would not hear of intrusting the pretty English girl to inexperienced villagers, but persuaded her to await the coming of a party from Italy, whose rooms were bespoke. Their guides, in all probability, would be returning over the Sella Pass, and would charge far less for the journey.

He was right. On the afternoon of the following day, three tired Englishmen arrived at the restaurant, and their hardy Italian pilots were only too glad to find a *voyageur* ready to start at once for the Mortel hut, whence a nine hours’ climb would take them back to the Val Malenco, provided they crossed the dangerous névé on the upper part of the glacier soon after daybreak.

Pietro, the leader, was a cheery soul. Like others of his type in the Bernina region, he spoke a good deal of German, and his fund of pleasant anecdote and reminiscence kept Helen from brooding on her own troubles during the long evening in the hut.

And now, while she was finishing her meal in the dim light of dawn, and the second guide was packing their few belongings, Pietro regaled her with a legend of the Monte del Diavolo, which overlooks Sondrio and the lovely valley of the Adda.

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“Once upon a time, *sigñora*, they used to grow fine grapes there,” he said, “and the wine was always sent to Rome for the special use of the Pope and his cardinals. That made the people proud, and the devil took possession of them, which greatly grieved a pious hermit who dwelt in a cell in the little Val Malgina, by the side of a torrent that flows into the Adda. So one day he asked the good Lord to permit the devil to visit him; but when Satan appeared the saint laughed at him. ‘You!’ he cried. ‘Who sent for you? You are not the Prince of the Infernal Regions?’—‘Am I not?’ said the stranger, with a truly fiendish grin. ‘Just try my powers, and see what will happen!’—‘Very well,’ said the saint, ‘produce me twenty barrels of better wine than can be grown in Sondrio.’ So old Barbariccia stamped his hoof, and lo! there were the twenty barrels, while the mere scent of them nearly made the saint break a vow that he would never again taste fermented wine. But he held fast, and said, ‘Now, drink the lot.’—‘Oh, nonsense!’ roared the devil. ‘Pooh!’ said the hermit, ‘you’re not much of a devil if you can’t do in a moment what the College of Cardinals can do in a week.’ That annoyed Satan, and he put away barrel after barrel, until the saint began to feel very uneasy. But the last barrel finished him, and down he went like a log, whereupon the holy man put him into one of his own tubs and sent him to Rome to be dealt with properly. There was a tremendous row, it is said, when the cask was opened. In the confusion, Satan escaped; but in revenge for the trick that had been played on him, he put a blight on the vines of the Adda, and from that day to this never a liter of decent wine came out of Sondrio.”

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“I guess if that occurred anywhere in Italy nowadays, they’d lynch the hermit,” said a voice in English outside.

Helen screamed, and the two Italians were startled. No one was expected at the hut at that hour. Its earliest visitors should come from the inner range, after a long tramp from Italy or Pontresina.

"Sorry if I scared you," said Spencer, his tall figure suddenly darkening the doorway; "but I didn't like to interrupt the story."

Helen sprang to her feet. Her cheeks, blanched for a few seconds, became rosy red. "You!" she cried. "How dare you follow me here?"

In the rapidly growing light she caught a transitory gleam in the American's eyes, though his face was as impassive as usual. And the worst of it was that it suggested humor, not resentment. Even in the tumult of wounded pride that took her heart by storm, she realized that her fiery vehemence had gone perilously near to a literal translation of the saintly scoff at old Barbariccia. And, now if ever, she must be dignified. Anger yielded to disdain. In an instant she grew cold and self collected.

"I regret that in my surprise I spoke unguardedly," she said. "Of course, this hut is open to everyone——" [Pg 330]

"Judging by the look of things between here and the hotel, we shall not be worried by a crowd," broke in Spencer. "I meant to arrive half an hour earlier; but that slope on the Alp Ota offers surprising difficulties in the dark."

"I wished to say, when you interrupted me, that I am leaving at once, so my presence can make little difference to you," said Helen grandly.

"That sounds more reasonable than it really is," was the quietly flippant reply.

"It conveys my intent. I have no desire to prolong this conversation," she cried rather more flurriedly.

"Now, there I agree with you. We have started on the wrong set of rails. It is my fault. I ought to have coughed, or fallen down the moraine, or done any old thing sooner than butt into the talk so unexpectedly. If you will allow me, I'll begin again right now."

He turned to the Italians, who were watching and listening in curious silence, trying to pick up an odd word that would help to explain the relations between the two.

"Will you gentlemen take an interest in the scenery for five minutes?" he asked, with a smile.

Though the valley of the Adda may have lost its wine, it will never lose its love of romance. The polite Italians raised their hats and went out. Helen, drawing a long breath, withdrew somewhat into the shadow. She felt that she would have more command over herself if the American could not see her face. The ruse did not avail her at all. Spencer crossed the floor of the hut until he looked into her eyes. [Pg 331]

"Helen," he said, "why did you run away from me?"

The tender reproach in his voice almost unnerved her; but she answered simply, "What else would you have me do, once I found out the circumstances under which I came to Switzerland?"

"It may be that you were not told the truth. Who was your informant?"

"Mr. Bower."

"None other?"

"What, then? Is my pitiful story the property of the hotel?"

"It is now. I took care of that. Some of the people there had been spreading a misleading version, and it was necessary to correct it. The women, of course, I could not deal with. As the General was an old man, I picked out George de Courcy Vavasour as best fitted to digest the wrong edition. I made him eat it. It seemed to disagree with him; but he got through with an effort."

Helen felt that she ought to decline further discussion. But she was tongue tied. Spencer was regarding her so fixedly that she began to fear lest he might notice the embarrassed perplexity that she herself was quite conscious of. [Pg 332]

"Will you be good enough to explain exactly what you mean?" she said, forcing the question mechanically from her lips.

"That is why I am here. I assure you that subterfuge can never again exist between you and me," said he earnestly. "You can accept my words literally. Acting for himself and others, Vavasour wrote on paper the lying insinuations made by Miss Jaques, and ate them—both words and paper. He happened to use the thin, glazed, Continental variety, so what it lost in bulk it gained in toughness. He didn't like it, and said so; but he had to do it."

She was nervously aware of a wish to laugh; but unless she gave way to hysteria that was not to be thought of. Trying to retreat still farther into the friendly shade, she backed round the inner end of the table, but found the way blocked by a rough bench. Something must be said or done to extricate herself. The dread that her voice might break was becoming an obsession.

"You speak of a false version, and that implies a true one," she managed to say constrainedly. "How far was Mr. Bower's statement false or true?"

"I settled that point too. Mr. Bower told you the facts. The deduction he forced on you was a lie. [Pg 333]

To my harmless notion of gratifying a girl's longing for a holiday abroad he added the motive that inspired his own journey. I overheard your conversation with Miss Jaques in the Embankment Hotel; I saw Bower introduced to you; I saw him looking for you in Victoria Station, and knew that he represented the meeting as accidental. I felt a certain responsibility on your account; so I followed by the next train. Bower played his cards so well that I found myself in a difficult position. I was busy guessing; but was unable to prove anything, while the one story I was sure of was not in the game. And then, you see, he wanted to make you his wife, which brought about the real complication. I haven't much use for him; but I must be fair, and Bower's only break was when he misrepresented my action in subsidizing 'The Firefly.' I don't deny he was pretty mad at the idea of losing you, and jealousy will often drive a man to do a mean thing which might otherwise be repugnant to his better nature——"

"Jealousy!" shrilled Helen, her woman's wit at last finding a joint in his armor. Yet never did woman err more than she in thinking that her American suitor would flinch beneath the shaft.

"That is the word," was the quiet reply.

She flared into indignant scorn. "Pray tell me why he or any other man should feel jealous of you where I am concerned," she said.

"I am going to tell you right away—Helen. But that is the last chapter. There is quite a long record as to the way I hit on your track in St. Moritz, and heard of you by telephone last night. Of course, that part of the story will keep——"

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"Is it necessary that I should hear any portion of it?" she interrupted, hoping to irritate him, and thus lessen the strain imposed by his studiously tranquil manner.

"Well, it ought to interest you. But it has humorous points to which I can't do justice under present conditions. You are right, Helen—you most always are. The real question at issue is my position in the deal, which becomes quite clear when I say that you are the only woman I have ever loved or ever shall love. More than that, you are the only woman to whom I have ever spoken a word of love, and as I have set about loving the dearest and prettiest and healthiest girl I have ever seen, it is safe to figure that you will have sole claim on all the nice things I can try to say to any woman during the remainder of my life."

He hesitated a moment. He did not appear to notice that Helen, after a rebellious gasp or two, had suddenly become very still.

"I suppose I ought to have fixed up a finer bit of word painting than that," he continued slowly. "As a matter of fact, I don't mind admitting that ever since eleven o'clock last night, when the proprietor of the hotel below there telephoned to me that Miss Trenholme had gone to the Mortel hut with two guides, I have been rehearsing X plus Y multiplied by Z ways of telling you just how dear you are to me. But they all vanished like smoke when I saw your sweet face. You tried to be severe with me, Helen; but your voice didn't ring true, and you are the poorest sort of prevaricator I know. And the reason those set forms wouldn't work at the right moment is that they were addressed to the silent air. You are near me now, my sweet. You are almost in my arms. You are in my arms, Helen, and it sounds just right to keep on telling you that I love you now and shall love you for ever. Oh, my dear, my dear, you must never, never, run away again! Search the dictionary for all the unkindest things you can say about me; but don't run away ... for I know now that when you are absent the day is night and the night is akin to death."

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Guide Pietro was somewhat a philosopher. Stamping about on the tiny stone plateau of the hut to keep at bay the cold mists from the glacier, he happened to glance through the open door. He drew away instantly.

"Bartelommeo," he said to his companion, "we shall not cross the Sella to-day with our charming *voyageur*."

Bartelommeo was surprised. He looked at the clean cut crest of the rock, glowing now in vivid sunlight. Argument was not required; he pointed silently with the stem of his pipe.

"Yes," murmured Pietro. "We couldn't have a better day for the pass. It is not the weather."

"Then what is it?" asked Bartelommeo, moved to speech.

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"She is going the other way. Didn't you catch the tears in her voice yesterday? She smiled at my stories, and carried herself bravely; but her eyes were heavy, and the corners of her mouth drooped when she was left to her thoughts. And again, my friend, did you not see her face when the young *siñor* arrived?"

"She was frightened."

Pietro laughed softly. "A woman always fears her lover," he said. "That is just the reason why you married Caterina. You liked her for her shyness. It made you feel yourself a man—a devil of a fellow. Don't you remember how timid she was, how she tried to avoid you, how she would dodge into anybody's chalet rather than meet you?"

"But how do you know?" demanded Bartelommeo, waking into resentful appreciation of Pietro's

close acquaintance with his wooing.

"Because I married Lola two years earlier. Women are all the same, no matter what country they hail from—nervous as young chamois before marriage—but after! Body of Bacchus! Was it on Wednesday that Caterina hauled you out of the albergo to chop firewood?"

Bartelommeo grunted, and put his pipe in his mouth again.



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CHAPTER XVII

THE SETTLEMENT

Though Helen was the better linguist, it was left to Spencer to explain that circumstances would prevent the lady from going to Malenco that day. He did not fully understand why the men should exchange glances of darksome intelligence when he made this statement. He fancied they were disappointed at losing a good customer; so he went on brokenly:

"You are in no hurry, eh? Well, then, take us across the glacier to the Aguagliouls. We should obtain a fine view from the summit, and get back to the hotel for luncheon. I will pay the same rates as for the Sella."

Both guides were manifestly pleased. Pietro began a voluble recital of the glories that would meet their enraptured gaze from the top of the mighty rock.

"You will see the Bernina splendidly," he cried, "and Roseg too, and the Glüschaint and Il Chapütschin. If the lady will trust to us, we can bring her down the Tschierva glacier safely. You are a climber, *signor*; else you could never have crossed the Ota before dawn. But let us make another cup of coffee. The middle Roseg ice is safe at any hour, and if we are on the rock by nine o'clock that will be perfect for the sun."

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Already a grand panorama of glaciers and peaks was unfolding itself. A cloudless sky promised a lovely August day, and what that means in the high Alps the mountaineer alone can tell. But Spencer turned his back on the outer glory. He had eyes only for Helen, while she, looking mistily at the giant rock across the valley, saw it not at all, for she was peering into her own soul, and found the prospect dazzling in its pure delight.

So they sat down to a fresh brew of coffee, and Spencer horrified Helen by a confession that he had eaten nothing since the previous evening. Her tender solicitude for his needs, her hasty unpacking of rolls and sandwiches, her anxiety that he should endeavor to consume the whole of the provisions intended for the day's march, were all sufficing guerdon for the sufferings of those miserable days since the hour when Mrs. de la Vere told him that Helen had gone. It was a new experience for Spencer to have a gracious and smiling woman so greatly concerned for his welfare; but it was decidedly agreeable. These little attentions admitted so much that she dared not tell—as yet. And he had such a budget of news for her! Though he found it difficult to eat and talk at the same time, he boldly made the attempt.

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"Stampa was the genius who really unraveled the mystery," he said. "Certainly, I managed to discover, in the first instance, that you had deposited your baggage in your own name. Had all else failed, I should have converted myself into a label and stuck to your boxes till you claimed them at Basle; but once we ascertained that you had not quitted St. Moritz by train, Stampa did the rest. He knows St. Moritz like a book, and it occurred to him that you had changed your name—"

"Why, I wonder?" she broke in.

"That is rather hard to say." He wrestled valiantly with the leg of a tough chicken, and thus was able to evade the question.

Poor Stampa! clinging tenaciously to the belief that Helen bore some resemblance to his lost daughter, remembered that when Etta made her sorrowful journey from Zermatt she gave

another name at the little hostelry in Maloja where she ended her life.

"Anyhow," went on Spencer, having dexterously severed the joint, "he tracked you from St. Moritz to the Roseg. He even hit on the shop in which you bought your rucksack and alpenstock. Then he put me on to the telephone, and the remainder of the chase was up to me."

"I am sorry now that the dear old man did not come with you," cried Helen. "I look on him as the first of my friends in Switzerland, and shall be more than pleased to see him again." [Pg 340]

"I pressed him to come along; but he refused. I don't wish to pain you, dearest, but I guess he wants to keep track of Bower."

Helen, who had no inkling of the tragedy that linked those two, blushed to her ears at the recollection of her parting from the millionaire.

"Do you—do you know that Mr. Bower proposed to me?" she stammered.

"He told me that, and a lot more."

"Did you quarrel?"

"We—said things. But I couldn't treat Bower as I handled Georgie. I was forced to admit his good taste, you see."

"Well, dear, promise me——"

"That I sha'n't slay him! Why, Helen, if he is half the man I take him for, he will come to our wedding. I told Mrs. de la Vere I should bring you back, and she agreed that there was nothing else to be done."

The color ebbed and flowed on Helen's face at an alarming rate. "What in the world are you talking about?" she asked, with a calm severity that her fluttering heart denied.

Spencer laughed so happily that Pietro, who understood no word of what his voyageurs were saying, gave Bartelommeo a sapient wink.

"Well, now," he cried, "wouldn't we be the queerest pair of zanies to go all that long way to London to get married when a parson, and a church, and all the needful consular offices are right here under our noses, so to speak. Why, we have a ready-made honeymoon staring us in the face. We'll just skate round Switzerland after your baggage and then drop down the map into Italy. I figured it all out last night, together with 'steen methods of making the preliminary declaration. I'll tell you the whole scheme while we—Oh, well, if you're in a real hurry to cross the glacier, I must defer details and talk in headlines." [Pg 341]

For Helen, absolutely scarlet now, had risen with a tragic air and bade the guides prepare for instant departure.

The snow lay deep on the Roseg, and roping was essential, though Pietro undertook to avoid any difficult crevasses. He led, Spencer followed, with Helen next, and Bartelommeo last. They reached the opposite moraine in half an hour, and began to climb steadily. The rock which looked so forbidding from the hut was by no means steep and not at all dangerous. They had plenty of time, and often stopped to admire the magnificent vistas of the Val Roseg and the Bernina range that were gradually unfolding before their eyes. Soon they were on a level with the hut, the Alpine palace that had permitted their first embrace.

"When we make our next trip to St. Moritz, Helen, we must seek out the finest and biggest photograph of the Mortel that money can buy," said Spencer. [Pg 342]

Helen was standing a little above him on a broad ledge. Her hand was resting on his shoulder.

"Oh, look!" she cried suddenly, pointing with her alpenstock to the massive mountain wall that rose above the *cabane*. A few stones had fallen above a widespread snow slope. The stones started an avalanche, and the roar of the tremendous cascade of snow and rock was distinctly audible.

Pietro uttered an exclamation, and hastily unslung a telescope. He said something in a low tone to Bartelommeo; but Spencer and Helen grasped its meaning.

The girl's eyes dilated with terror. "There has been an accident!" she whispered. Bartelommeo took the telescope in his turn and evidently agreed with the leading guide.

"A party has fallen on Corvatsch," said Pietro gravely. "Two men are clinging to a ledge. It is not a bad place; but they cannot move. They must be injured, and there may be others—below."

"Let us go to their assistance," said Spencer instantly.

"*Per certo, sigñor*. That is the law of the hills. But the *sigñora*? What of her?"

"She will remain at the hut."

"I will do anything you wish," said Helen sorrowfully, for her gladness had been changed to mourning by the fearsome tidings that two, if not more, human beings were in imminent danger on the slopes of the very hill that had witnessed the avowal of her love. They raced back over the glacier, doubling on their own track, and were thus enabled to travel without precaution. [Pg 343]

Leaving Helen at the hut, the men lost no time in beginning the ascent. They were gone so long that she was almost frantic with dread in their behalf; but at last they came, slowly, with the tread of care, for they were carrying the body of a man.

While they were yet a couple of hundred feet above the hut, Spencer intrusted the burden to the Italians alone. He advanced with rapid strides, and Helen knew that he brought bad news.

"Come, dear one," he said gently. "We must go to the inn and send help. Our guides are bringing an injured man to the hut, and there is one other whom we left on the mountain."

"Dead?"

"Yes, killed instantly by a stone. That was all. Just a mishap—one of the things that can never be avoided in climbing. But come, dear. More men are needed, and a doctor. This poor fellow is badly hurt."

"Can I do nothing for him?" she pleaded.

A species of fright twitched his grave face for an instant. "No, no, that is not to be thought of," he urged. "Pietro says he has some little skill in these matters. He can do all that is needed until a doctor arrives. Believe me, Helen, it is imperative that we should reach the hotel without delay."

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She went with him at once. "Who is it?" she asked. He steeled himself to answer according to his intent. Though he had vowed that never again would he utter a syllable to his love that was not transparently true, how could he tell her then that Stampa was stretched lifeless on the broad bosom of Corvatsch, and that the Italians were carrying Bower, crushed and raving in delirium, to the hut.

"An Englishman and his guide, I am sorry to say," was his prepared reply. "The guide is dead; but his employer can be saved, I am sure, if only we rush things a bit. Now, Helen, let us go at top speed. No talking, dear. We must make the hotel under the hour."

They did it, and help was soon forthcoming. Then Spencer ordered a carriage, and insisted that Helen should drive to Maloja forthwith. He would stay at Roseg, he said, to make certain that everything possible was done for the unfortunate climber. Indeed, when his beloved was lost to sight down the winding road that leads to the main valley of the Engadine, he accompanied the men who went to the Mortel. Halfway they met Pietro and Bartelommeo carrying Bower on an improvised stretcher, ice axes and a blanket.

By this time, under the stimulus of wine and warmth, Bower had regained his senses. He recognized Spencer, and tried to speak; but the American told him that even the least excitement must be avoided.

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Once the hotel was reached, and they were waiting for the doctor, Bower could not be restrained.

"It was you who rescued me?" he said feebly.

"I, and two Italian guides. We saw the accident from the other side of the Roseg glacier."

"Yes. Stampa pointed you out to me. I could not believe my eyes. I watched you till the thought came that Stampa had befooled me. Then he pushed me off the rock where we were standing. I broke my leg in the fall; but he held me there on the rope and taunted me. Great God! how I suffered!"

"You really ought not to talk about it," said Spencer soothingly.

"Why not? He brought me there to kill me, he said. The cunning old fox told me that I would find Helen in the Mortel hut, and offered to take me to her by a short cut over Corvatsch. And I believed him! I was mad, I suppose. We did the Marmoré ascent by the light of the stars. Do you realize what that means? It is a hard climb for experts in broad daylight. But I meant to beat you, Spencer. Stampa vowed you were in St. Moritz. And again I believed him! Think of it—I was hoodwinked by an old peasant."

"Hush! Try and forget things till your broken limb is fixed."

"What does it matter? Confound it! you've won; so let me tell my story. I must have lost my senses when I saw you and Helen leaving the glacier with two strange guides. I forgot all else in my rage. I stood there, frozen, bewitched. Stampa was watching me all the time, and the instant I turned to revile him he threw me off my balance with a thrust of his ax. 'Now you are going to die, Marcus Bauer!' he said, grinning at me with a lunatic's joy. He even gloated over the unexpected injury I received in falling. My groans and cries were so pleasing to him that he did not cut the rope at once as he meant to do, but kept me dangling there, listening to his reproaches. Then the stones fell, and pinned him to the ledge; but not one touched me, and I hauled myself up, broken leg and all, till I crawled on to the big rock that rested on his body. You found me there, eh?"

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"Yes."

"Well, I wish you luck. I meant to snatch Helen from you, even at the twelfth hour; but Stampa over-reached me. That mock marriage of his contriving had more power than I counted on. Curse it! how these crushed bones are beginning to ache! Give me some brandy. I want to drink Helen's health, and my own, and yours, damn you! See that you treat her well and make her life happy!"

She is worthy of all your love, and I suppose she loves you, whereas I might have striven for years to win her affection and then failed in the end."

Late that night Spencer arrived at the Maloja. Helen was waiting for him, as he had telephoned the hour he might be expected. Rumor had brought the news of Stampa's death and Bower's accident. Then she understood why her lover had sent her away so quickly. She was troubled all day, blaming herself as the unconscious cause of so much misery. Spencer saw that the full truth alone would dispel her self reproach. So he told her everything, even showing her Millicent's letter and a telegram received from Mackenzie, in which the editor of "The Firefly" put it quite plainly that the proprietor of the magazine had forbidden him (Mackenzie) from taking any steps whatever with regard to Helen's return to England without definite instructions.

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The more she learned of the amazing web of intrigue and misunderstanding that surrounded her movements since she left the Embankment Hotel after that memorable luncheon with Millicent, the less inclined she was to deny Spencer's theory that Fate had brought them together.

"I cleared out of Colorado as though a tarantula had bitten me," he said. "I traveled five thousand miles to London, saw you, fooled myself into the belief that I was intended by Providence to play the part of a heavy uncle, and kept up that notion during another thousand-mile trip to this delightful country. Then you began to reach out for me, Helen——"

"I did nothing of the kind!" she protested.

"Oh, yes, you did,—just grabbed me good and hard,—and when Bower showed up I stacked my chips on the table and sat down to the game. What am I talking about? I don't know. Kiss me good night, sweetheart, and don't you give a red cent who's looking. For once in a way, I don't mind admitting that I'm tired—all in. I could sleep on a row of porcupines."

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Stampa was buried in the grave that held his daughter's remains. Spencer purchased the space for a suitable monument, and the inscription does not fail to record the fact that one of the men who first conquered the Matterhorn had paid tribute to the mountains by meeting his death on Corvatsch.

The American went many times to visit Bower at the Roseg inn. He found his erstwhile rival resigned to the vagaries of fortune. The doctors summoned from St. Moritz deemed his case so serious that they brought a specialist from Paris, and the great surgeon announced that the millionaire's leg would be saved; but there must remain a permanent stiffness.

"I know what that means," said Bower, with a wry smile. "It is a legacy from Stampa. That is really rather funny, considering that the joke is against myself. By the way, did I tell you I gave Millicent Jaques a check for five thousand pounds to stop her tongue?"

"I guessed the check, but couldn't guess the amount."

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"She wrote last week, threatening all sorts of terrible things because I withheld payment. You will remember that when you and I placed on record our mutual opinion of each other, we agreed at any rate that it was a mean thing on her part to give away our poor Helen to the harpies in the hotel. So I telegraphed at once to my bankers, and Miss Millicent didn't make good, as you would put it. Now she promises to 'expose' me. Humorous, isn't it?"

"I think you ought to marry her," said Spencer, with that immobile look of his.

"Perhaps I may, one of these days. But first she must learn to behave herself. A nice girl, Millicent. She would look decorative, sitting beside an invalid in a carriage. Yes, I'll think of it. Meanwhile, I shall chaff her about the five thousand and see how she takes it."

Millicent behaved. Helen saw that she did.

On a day in September, after a wedding that was attended by as many people as could be crowded into the little English church at Maloja, Mr. and Mrs. Charles K. Spencer drove over the pass and down the Vale of Bregaglia en route to Como, Milan, and Venice. At the wedding breakfast, when Mrs. de la Vere officiated as hostess, the Rev. Philip Hare amused the guests by stating that he had taken pains to discover what the initial "K" represented in his American friend's name.

"His second name is Knox," said the vicar, "and I understand that he is a direct descendant of a famous Scottish divine known to history as a very stubborn person. Well, it has been said by a gentleman present that Mr. Spencer has a backbone of cast steel, so the 'K' is fully accounted for, while the singular affinity of steel of any variety for a magnet gives a ready explanation of the admirable union which has resulted from the chance that brought the bride and bridegroom under the same roof."

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Everybody said that Hare was much happier on such occasions than in the pulpit, and even the Wragg girls were heard to admit that Helen looked positively charming.

So it is clear that many hatchets were blunted in Maloja, which is as it should ever be in such a fairyland, and that Helen, looking back at the mighty chain of the Alps from the deck of a steamer on Lake Como, had no reason to regret the day when first she crossed that solemn barrier.

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