

WHITE MOTLEY

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WHITE MOTLEY

A NOVEL

BY

MAX PEMBERTON

AUTHOR OF "THE LITTLE HUGUENOT," "THE
GARDEN OF SWORDS," ETC., ETC.

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WHITE MOTLEY

PROLOGUE

THE NEW HOUSE AT HOLMSWELL

The New House at Holmswell lies, far back from the road, upon the great highway to Norwich. Local topographers delight to tell you that it is just forty-five miles from that city and five from the Cesarewitch course at Newmarket. They are hardly less eloquent when they come to speak of its late owner, Sir Luton Delayne, and of that unforgotten and well-beloved woman, the wife he so little deserved.

To be sure, the house is not new at all, for it was built at the very moment when the great Harry put his hands into the coffers of the monasteries and called upon high Heaven to witness the justice of his robberies. They faced it with wonderful tiles some years ago, and stamped the Tudor rose all over it; but the

people who first called it "new" have been dead these four hundred years, and it is only the local antiquary who can tell you just where the monastery (which preceded it) was built.

Here, the master of a village which knows more about the jockeys of the day than about any Prime Minister, here lived Sir Luton Delayne and that gentle woman who won so many hearts during her brief tenure of the village kingdom. Well the people knew her and well they knew him. A florid, freckled-faced man with red hair and the wisp of an auburn moustache, the common folk said little about his principles and much about his pugnacity. Even these dull intellects knew that he had been "no gentleman" and were not afraid to tell you so. His fame, of a sort, had culminated upon the day he thrashed the butcher from Mildenhall, because the fellow would halt on the high road just when the pheasants were being driven from the Little Barton spinneys. That was no famous day for the House of Delayne; for the butcher had been a great bruiser in his time, and he knocked down the baronet in a twinkling without any regard at all for his ancestry or its dignities. Thereafter, Sir Luton's violent speech troubled the vulgar but little, and when he rated Johnny Drummond for wheeling a barrow over the tennis-court, the lad fell back upon the price of mutton and took his week's notice like a man.

To Lady Delayne local sympathy went out in generous measure. If little were known of the sorrows of her life, much was surmised. The "county" could tell you many tales and would tell them to intimates. These spoke of a ruffian who had sworn at that gentle lady before a whole company at the meet; who openly snubbed her at her own table; who had visited upon her the whims and the temper of a disposition at once vicious and uncontrollable. Darker things were said and believed, but the sudden end surprised no one; and when one day the village heard that she had gone for good, when a little while afterwards the bailiffs came to the New House and Sir Luton himself disappeared, it seemed but the sudden revelation of a tragedy which all had expected.

Whither had Lady Delayne gone, and what was the truth of the disaster? Few could speak upon matters so uncertain, but amongst the few the name of Redman Rolls, the bookmaker, stood high. Report from Newmarket said that Luton Delayne had lost twenty-seven thousand pounds upon the Cambridgeshire and that this loss, following extensive and disastrous speculation in American insecurities, had been the immediate instrument of disaster. As to Lady Delayne's hurried flight from the New House, that was a delicate affair upon which no one could throw much light. She had relatives in the North, and was believed to possess a small fortune of her own; but no news of her came to Holmswell, and the far from curious village had no particular interest in the whereabouts of a man who had browbeaten and bullied it for more than ten years. He had

gone to Somaliland to join his brother who was out after big game, the parson said. It meant little to the simple folk, who had not the remotest idea where Somaliland was unless it lay somewhere beyond Norwich—a conclusion to which they arrived in the kitchen of the ancient inn.

To be sure, there were many tales told of the final separation of these unhappy people, and some of them were sad enough. The servants at the New House well remembered how Sir Luton had come home upon that unlucky day; and what he had done and what he had said upon his arrival. To begin with, Martin, the motor-man, could speak of a savage, silent figure, driving blindly through the twilight of an October afternoon, of the narrow escape from accident at the lodge gate and of the oaths with which his attentions were received. Morris, the butler, would tell how Sir Luton had almost knocked him down when he opened the door, and had cursed her ladyship openly when he heard she had company. There was the maid Eva, to tell of her mistress half dressed for dinner and of a scene which in some part she had witnessed. Few believed her wholly when she said that her master had attributed his misfortunes to the day when he met his wife, and had told her that "he had done with her, by Heaven!" And then upon that there would be Morris's further story of the table laid for dinner, the candles lighted, the soup hot and steaming—and not a soul in the great room where dinner was served. They waited a long time, this faithful old gossip and the lean footman with the dull eyes; but neither Sir Luton nor her ladyship came down. And then, shortly before nine, the old horse and the single brougham were ordered—and the kindest lady they would ever know went from them and they heard of her no more.

But the man remained, though he had become but a shadow in the house. All night he drank in the little study behind the billiard room, and a light still burned there at six o'clock next morning, as Jelf, the under-gardener, could testify. If he made any effort to recall the wife, who would willingly have stood by him in the darkest hour, none knew of it. For a few days, Morris carried his meals to the study and would discover him there, sitting at a table and staring blankly over the drear park as though dim figures of his own life's story moved beneath the stately trees. Then, following an outburst which surpassed all the servants could remember, an outburst of passion and of obscenity inconceivable, he was driven one morning to Mildenhall Station, and Holmswell heard with a satisfaction it made no attempt to conceal that this was the end.

The New House was the scene of a great sale shortly afterwards, and brokers came from London to buy the porcelain and the pictures, while many a country gentleman drove in to bid for the well-proved '63 port and the fine bin of Steinberg Cabinet. Few in the village could be more than spectators at such a scene as that; but the old clergyman, Mr. Deakins, bought Lady Delayne's mir-

ror for three pounds fifteen shillings, and when they asked him why, had a ready answer.

"An old man's fancy," he said; "and yet—who knows that some day it may not show me again the face of the gentlest lady I have ever known?"

CHAPTER I

THE GRAND PRIX AT ANDANA

The sleigh climbed the heights laboriously, jolting heavily in the ruts which last night's frost had hardened. Minute by minute now new pictures were revealed. The Rhone valley appeared to be shaping itself more clearly at every zigzag; so that, while Sierre below had become but a toy village upon a child's board, the majestic Weisshorn now stood up in detached sovereignty and all the encircling peaks could be named with assurance.

There had been a blizzard blowing for thirty hours, and it had detained the little company at Sierre; but the morning of the day broke gloriously fine, so that the travellers set off at eight o'clock and were to reach the hotel at Andana before eleven.

A truly British company, some of them had come to winter in Switzerland for the first time. Others were veterans, who brought their own skis, talked knowingly of Vermala and the Zaat, and could show you, even when far down the valley, exactly where the Palace Hotel lurked behind a forest of pines. Of these the gentle old clergyman, Harry Clavering, was the most prominent—and he, as one of whom much was expected, offered generous and courtly help to the more timid of the wayfarers.

But even Harry Clavering, despite his seven and fifty years, was not insensible to the charm of the "little widow," and his conscience found a ready excuse when he craved permission to share a sleigh with her—and obtained it, to the great annoyance of Sir Gordon Snagg, the coal-merchant from Newcastle, who had already confided to his intimates of the company the unnecessary information that the "little woman" in violet was the best "view" he hoped to see in Switzerland.

There were five sledges in all taking the company to Andana, and two of them devoted to ungovernable youth. These lads from the universities and the schools, convinced that Switzerland existed as a republic merely by their pa-

tronage, hastened at every turn to give some demonstration of their superiority, either as performers upon the bugle, or as "yoodlers," or merely as marksmen, with the passers-by on the slopes below for their targets. The newly-fallen snow delighted them by its promise of good ski-ing for some days to come. But for the glorious panorama of the Rhone, for the wonder of height and valley, they cared not a straw.

Of the others, a fat man in a well-made suit of tweeds, and a bright little woman, whose luggage was marked "Lady Coral-Smith," were the subjects of some mischief in the other sleighs and of not a little gossip. They were old friends, as they were careful to tell everyone who did not ask; and by the oddest coincidence in the world, they met on the platform at the Gare de Lyon. So they were travelling to Andana together—where, as Lady Coral-Smith explained, her poor dead husband, who had thrice been mayor of Brampton-upon-Sea, died after a long illness some four years ago. She would tell this with the air of one who invited sympathy for what she had gone through and some tolerance for a gaiety of spirit natural to the circumstance. Nor was she without a certain measure of good looks, bravely as her "art" strove to disguise them.

The Major on his part—Major Boodle to be exact—was an excellent example of the half-pay officer, who is driven to a perpetual conflict between his desires and his pension. He had seen a little service in the South African War and in Egypt, and spoke of it good humouredly, but without any sense of proportion. To him, the Boers were still "those d—d Dutchmen," and he remembered little about the campaign apart from the attack of enteric which kept him three months at Colesberg. His laugh was loud, his face fat and without distinction, and his chief concern the absence of any restaurant between Sierre and the hotel. Someone, he thought, should write to the *Times* about that, and he had said as much to the "little widow" before they started—and would have said more but for the sharp eyes of the mayor's relict, who called him to her side with the asperity of a colonel on parade.

This was the little company which left Sierre at eight o'clock upon the morning of the first day of February and searched with eager eyes for the first glimpse of the plateau of Andana and its destination. The most part of them, newly come out of England, discussed the glorious sunshine to begin with, and upon that the fog and rain which would then be exasperating their own countrymen. By here and there, they paused to cast backward glances at the genial parson and the "little widow"; while Bob Otway, a mature philosopher of one-and-twenty, remarked to his friend, Dick Fenton, a practised cynicist of like years, that "old Harry" was certainly "going it." Which reflection he capped by the assurance that Andana was a "devilish mouse-trap" for the men, and that a fellow was wise to be careful.

"It's perfectly impossible not to propose to a girl if her Q's are all right," he said—and then, by way of illustration—"look at Mondy Thurl, who was here last year. He married that Toogood girl just because she could hold out the tails of her threes. Rotten idea, I call it—"

Dick Fenton, who was tramping doggedly by the side of his sledge, admitted that there was something in it—but he spoke of consolations.

"Anyway, my boy, she didn't hold out the tails of your threes, and that's something. Poor old Mondy! I expect he's wondering what he did it for now. He must have thawed a bit before he got back to town. A man can't be expected to know what he's doing out here—and that Toogood girl could fall down. Why, I believe she practised it before the glass just to show what a pretty ankle she had got. She always used to come down just when old Mondy was there to pick her up."

"Of course she did. She specialised in him, just as those Rider girls would specialise in you, Dick, if they got the chance. You heard they came over from Caux on Thursday?"

"Yes, the parson told me—what an old dear he is, making love to the 'little widow' at his time of life! Why, she can't be five-and-twenty—"

"And she is undoubtedly 'it.' I'm beginning to be sorry for the Rider girls, Dick."

Dick sighed.

"It's the way they take the last corner on the ice-run," he said sorrowfully, "I know I shall be done for if I win the doubles with Marjory. She holds my neck so tight that I believe she'll strangle me some day—"

"She'll do that unless you propose to her; you'd better get it over, old chap, and I'll write to your people. By Jove, though, it's hot, isn't it?—couldn't you drink a lager beer?"

He stopped to wipe his forehead and to look back for an instant at the valley below and the little town of Sierre, now become more toy-like than ever, but for its skating rink, which sparkled like a jewel dropped from the heights. Even the pines carried a burden of the hoar to-day, and every thicket upon the steep slopes, every wood through which the sleighs carried them, had some picture more fantastic than its predecessors to show them. The air was keen as a breath of life itself; it had brought the colour anew to the "widow's" pale cheeks, and her eyes were dancing while she listened to the rhapsodies of the genial old clergyman, who knew and loved the scene and delighted to dwell upon it. Twenty times already had he named the different peaks to her, but his enthusiasm was unabated.

"Vermala is up above the forest," he said, "we often take luges and have tea up there. You can see the Matterhorn from the plateau before the tea-house.

Oh, yes, and Mont Blanc; there's a fine view of that and of the Dents Blanches from the Park Hotel. Beginners always go there to learn to ski—I suppose you are already an expert?"

The "little widow" shook her head.

"It's all quite new to me. I have been to Switzerland many times in the summer; but never in the winter—I had expected something quite different. All this is very beautiful—but is it not just a little too exciting? Would not one have to be something of an acrobat to enjoy it thoroughly?"

Harry Clavering laughed.

"Ah," he said, "everyone thinks that when he first comes out. But we all become acrobats and do the most wonderful things before we have been here a week. Why, even I have been down the ice-run at my age—dear, dear, to think of it—and I am fifty-seven.

"Do you not believe, then, that a man is as old as his capacities?"

The parson beamed beneath his glasses—she certainly was a delightful woman to travel with, and he had yet to learn her name.

"I believe in thinking of pleasant things," he said, "old age is pleasant enough if you forget it. And we all become young here; the air inspires us—I think it makes us quite mad sometimes. Then the scenery is so beautiful, so very, very beautiful. Look at those peaks—how the sun shines upon them! And I have wasted one whole week in London when I might have been here. Deplorable! That week has gone forever—"

She liked his enthusiasm, yet could not forbear to intrude upon it.

"But I hear of blizzards," she exclaimed. "Whatever do you do at Andana when there is a blizzard?"

"We grumble and are happy. Snow is as necessary to us here as water to the Arab of the desert. We are thankful to see the snow falling, and we go into our corners and play bridge. I suppose you will join us there? I felt sure you played bridge directly I saw you."

She laughed, showing him how white were her teeth, and how deeply the blue of her eyes contrasted with the azure of the cloudless sky.

"Oh," she said, "one has to do the necessary things. But I am a dreadful player, and the old ladies get very angry with me. I should never have the courage to play with strangers—"

He hastened to correct her.

"No one is a stranger here. That is the best of it. In a way, we are all friends—though, of course, there are people we like better than others."

"Which means to say that you find yourself already devoted heart and soul to Lady Coral-Smith, and the intimate acquaintance of that dreadful person in the yellow suit, Sir Gordon Snagg."

He shook his head as one who would not do battle with her.

"Come, come," he said. "We must not be unkind. Some give and take is necessary in a society like this—and we can always choose our own road if we prefer. Sometimes, I wander by myself all day—once, when I felt the need of rest, I went over to Grindelwald—with a guide for my companion."

She turned upon him with a face grown suddenly white.

"Grindelwald! But we are not near Grindelwald? It can't be."

"Indeed," he said, quite unconscious of her embarrassment, "it is quite near for the climbers, though men of my age generally prefer to go by train. Do you know Grindelwald, by chance?"

She feigned an answer, glad to think that her betrayal had escaped the ears of her kindly cicerone.

"I stayed there three nights; it seems a century ago, but I was on my honeymoon, and you will understand—"

"Perfectly, perfectly; I should not have put the question. You must forgive me."

The "little widow" replied with a commonplace, but both were silent for a full mile or more, and when next Clavering spoke, they had come out upon a wide plateau of the snow and were within twenty minutes of their destination. Here the scene changed in a measure, for there were woods upon the right hand, while the broad expanse of the snow hid the valley from their sight. A little village with a winding street and houses that should have come out of a child's play-box, stood between the plateau and the hotel; and when they had passed it, they entered the forest itself, following a tortuous path amid the pines and already meeting many of the revellers. From these, news of Andana was to be had, especially from a delightful woman of the world, whose age was thirteen and whose uncle was a Cabinet Minister. Skis permitted her to follow the sledge gracefully, and she talked as though the end of the world were at hand and would find her budget undelivered.

"Keith Rivers is here and he's winning everything," she said. "I'm in for the doubles with him to-morrow, and it's a certainty. Dr. Orange came yesterday. Of course, everyone is more in love with him than ever. The ice has been beastly, but we've put in a protest—in fact, we've riddled the enemy with potholes, and I suppose he'll do something. Do you know Ian Kavanagh, I wonder? He was a blue, and his father left him thousands and thousands. It's awful to start life with that on your shoulders, isn't it? But he seems strong. Of course, he can't skate a bit, but we forgive him, because he can do other things. Then I must tell you, there's Benny—do you know Benny? If you do not, you have missed the joy of your life. He's the most good-natured, stupidest, obstinate creature I ever met in all my days. Think of it—he'd never been on skis before, and he went out the day

before the blizzard and actually tried to jump. I thought he was going to fall over the edge of the world before he'd stop. Oh, he is such a dear, and I do wish he'd move into the hotel, and not stop at that awful villa—"

An empty sleigh, drawn by two sturdy horses tandem fashion, came cantering down the path and the business of passing in so difficult a place stilled the ravenous tongue for a moment. When they got on again, Harry Clavering ventured upon an introduction:

"This is our philosopher and reigning monarch," he said genially—"Miss Elizabeth Bethune. Permit me to introduce her"; and he turned and waited, remembering that he had not yet the "little widow's" name. She remembered it also, and her face was crimson when she said:

"I am Mrs. Kennaird—I am glad to meet my sovereign."

"Oh, indeed," exclaimed Miss Elizabeth with a pretty pout; "this is not a golden age, I assure you, Mrs. Kennaird, and Mr. Clavering never will be sensible; I don't believe he could be if he tried. It would serve him right if I said nothing about the ghost—"

They both looked at her.

"The ghost! Here at Andana?"

"I should think so; everybody's seen it but Mr. Benny, and, of course, he's blind. Do you know the people in the villages are so frightened that some of them are going down to Sierre? Well, it's true, and even that horrid Dr. Orange, who believes in nothing but his 'brackets,' why, he's in a dreadful way about it. We're to have a picnic after dinner to-night, just to see if we can find it."

"I shall certainly come," rejoined Clavering; and then to Mrs. Kennaird he said:

"Perhaps you will join the expedition?"

But the "little widow" shook her head sadly.

"No," she said, "I think not—my life is too full of ghosts. I would not add to the number."

And that was the end of it, for the drivers whipped up their horses at the moment, and with a jangling of bells and guttural cries from the men, they emerged from the wood, and the Palace Hotel was before them. Here Dr. Orange and a few others were gathered, waiting the bell for luncheon. They greeted such of the new-comers as were known to them with an exuberant welcome; nor did they fail to bestow their interest upon the "little widow."

"A devilish dainty little woman," said that condescending young gentleman, Keith Rivers.

Dr. Orange, however, a slim, good-looking man of forty, had become suddenly preoccupied.

"By Jove!" he said, "I know that face almost as well as my own. Now

where—?”

CHAPTER II

A DARK HORSE GOES DOWN

The morning of the following day surpassed the expectation even of those who wrote the story of Andana for the English newspapers. People who were out of the hotel by nine o'clock returned to tell their friends that the sun was broiling. Others went to the little bazaar for blue glasses at one franc fifty.

There had been mist in the Rhone valley at dawn and wisps of it still hung about the entrance to the Simplon. Weather prophets detected a good omen here, and stood before the porch of the hotel to peer down into that unsurpassable ravine and to say that the cluster of black dots immediately below them stood for the church and streets of Sierre. To the right and left were the great clefts of the mighty chasm, a vast pit digged by the waters that flowed before man was, and were now sown with towns and villages and the iron links of civilisation.

The hotel at Andana stands upon the brink of the valley at a height of five thousand feet. Immediately facing it upon the farther side are the twin peaks of the Weisshorn with its sheer and glistening precipices, and a little to the right of that, the Rothhorn and the shining glaciers which are the windows to that supreme escarpment. Look farther to the right across the vast abyss, and you have Sion in the hollow and for your heights the Becs de Bosson—or farther yet, the Aiguilles Rouges and all their story of hazard and achievement. These stand up amid countless peaks, while from the lesser mountains of the Simplon upon the one hand, right away to Mont Blanc upon the other, the eye is spellbound both by the number and the grandeur of these dominating summits.

Deep in the valley lies the Rhone, but a thread of silver to those upon the heights. Andana stands high above its right bank, and the mountains behind it, lacking something in variety, are yet incomparable in the delights they afford to the winter sportsman. Here the climber seeks the wider fields of untrodden snows, the gentler valleys and the vanquished summits. And here in the woods there is a solitude of winter whose charm is not readily to be forgotten.

The "little widow" had slept well after her long journey, and she awoke to the delights of this unfamiliar scene just when the clocks were striking nine. Lying a little while to speculate upon the events of the long journey from Egypt and

to wonder if any in the hotel would know her, presently her ears became aware of an unusual clatter below her window. When she looked out she discovered a party on skis about to set out for a paper chase, and announcing the fact with the boisterous spirit of the mountains.

There they were, fathers of families and their sons; generals who had cast off the shackles of Whitehall; colonels from India; merchants waxed fat; boys from the universities—all dressed in the once-white sweaters, the short knee-breeches and the regulation boots. Troops of girls and of ladies of uncertain age accompanied them—gliding, sliding, staggering upon the ungainly runners; and thus, in splendid disorder, the motley march began.

When they were gone, the two young gentlemen who had come up with the party from Sierre yesterday appeared upon the plateau with Miss Bessie Bethune, and having bestowed upon her the gift of a few buckets of snow applied chiefly to the nape of her neck, began to ask ironically when the "show" would begin.

"Rivers said nine o'clock. I put my three-and-six-penny watch down the back of the customs' man at Pontarlier, so I don't know, but I'll bet it's nearly ten. Beastly shame to keep the cracks waiting. Snagg ought to ask a question in Parliament about it."

To which Dick Fenton replied that Rivers was certainly "a nut" and that they had better go up and crack him—which suggestion, adopted *nem. con.*, left Miss Bessie to herself for an instant and then to a duologue with the "little widow," whom she espied at the window.

"Aren't you coming down to see the races, Mrs. Kennaird?"

"Oh, I hope so; what time do they begin?"

"That's what I want to know. If they don't come down soon, I shall race by myself, and then they'll have to give me a prize. Do come and help me. I'm in a dreadful minority."

"Then I must certainly come to your assistance. Is Mr. Clavering down yet?"

"I haven't seen him; but, of course, we don't want the Church until Sunday. There's no one on the run at all but Benny, and he doesn't count. Have you seen Benny? Then it's a thing to dream about. He lives all by himself in the chalet up there—such a wonderful man, and always going about as though he were looking for his own soul. You'll see him in a minute, for he's just gone up—but I don't suppose he'll come down on the luge—I really can't believe that Benny would be faithful to anything for more than five minutes. And, oh! here's Mr. Kavanagh—I would like to introduce you, for he is such a dear!"

A tall, fair-haired man emerged from the hotel door at the moment, and Miss Bessie immediately took possession of him, to his apparent satisfaction, for they were gossiping like two old women when next the "little widow" saw them.

Immediately afterwards, someone shouted "*Achtung!*" and a figure came flying down the ice-run which finishes at the very door of the hotel. Roughly clad in a grey sweater and check breeches, wearing no hat, and showing a thick crop of black hair, Mr. Benjamin Benson, for it was he, clung to his toboggan wildly, his teeth set and his eyes staring. When at last it flung him violently to the snow, he got up with the smile of a child, and looked at it for many minutes almost reproachfully. Then, patiently and laboriously he set out to climb the hill again to have another try.

When he had gone, the "little widow" dressed herself without further delay, and by a quarter to ten she also joined the throng before the hotel door, and was immediately recognised by Harry Clavering, who told her that the races were about to begin.

"Perhaps you would like to go up with me," he suggested a little nervously. "I am time-keeper to-day, and I can show you just how it is done. Everyone toboggans here, and you will like to begin as soon as possible. Shall we go now?"

She offered no objection, and they set out at once, climbing steep steps cut in the snow to a little bridge above the final straight of the course. To his question whether she had discovered any friends at Andana, she replied in the negative; but added that Mrs. Allwater and her daughter Pansy were coming on from Caux in a few days' time—"and they," she said, "are very old friends of mine."

When they arrived at the bridge they found quite a concourse of people, that very self-conscious person, Ian Kavanagh, among the number. Hardly had he set eyes on the "little widow" when he begged the parson to introduce him.

"Do you do this sort of thing, Mrs. Kennaird?" he asked her, as he took his stand near by. She answered with a smile that she was quite unaccomplished on the ice.

"Prefer hunting, I suppose? Well, so do I, though what my twenty nags are doing just now I won't ask. Eating their heads off, I suppose. Let me get you a seat; this sun takes it out of one, and some of the girls are staggering. You'll want all your courage, I can tell you."

He brought a cane chair, and set it upon the high bank so that she could see the toboggans as they passed under the little bridge. Harry Clavering watched all this ceremony with some impatience, and hastened to cut in before the thing went any farther.

"I think they are wanting you, Mr. Kavanagh, at the starting-post," he said with a smile of entreaty. "There's no flag there, and we must have one. Would you very much object?"

"I should indeed, but, of course, if you command—" And the man, with a look at the "little widow" which he meant to be unutterable, set out for the unwelcome duty. Then the parson spoke.

"I don't understand Kavanagh," he said; "no energy at all—so listless—and he is only twenty-seven, I believe. They say he has a large fortune; it really is a great pity if it is true. Young men with much money are dreadfully handicapped in the race for happiness—but there, it is not my business after all, and I have no right to mention it. Can you see quite well, Mrs. Kennard?—the start is up there, you know, by the little white cottage. I take the time directly the red flag is lowered, and the man at the finish signals to me with his flag when the course is finished. This is what we call an ice-run. They flood the surface every night, and that makes it very fast. These high banks are to guard the corners. If it were flat, they could not get round at all. Some of them are very clever—Mr. Rivers, for instance. He is standing over there, just by Lady Coral-Smith—the thin man in the sweater with our Trinity colours."

He babbled on as though she had been a child; nor could her ignorance quarrel with the lesson. Not for many a month had she felt so much alive as out here upon the mountain-side, with the valley at her feet and the whited woods above. The sense of vast space and dominion delighted her—the merry people; the skaters upon the rink to the right of her; the curlers upon the rink to the left; the sunshine, the feeling that all the men and women in the world had suddenly become children and were at play, combined to suggest an ecstasy of repose and forgetfulness.

"Tell me, for I am very ignorant," she said, "do two people come down the slide together?"

Harry Clavering was startled.

"We don't call it a slide—an 'ice-run' is the proper name," he said almost apologetically. "There is only room for one runner at a time, as you will see presently. They go so very fast. Why, it's more than a mile from the cottage up there to the door of the hotel, and they do it in a minute and a half! You must watch them as they take the corners; that's the real fun—that's where they generally fall off."

"So we are here to support their miseries. How very noble of us! And the man with the red flag up on the hillside?"

"He is the starter. Now see, there is young Bob Otway just about to come down."

He was very excited, and watched the starting-box with restless eyes, while she tried to follow him and to trace the serpentine course of the run which might have been just a wide stretch of the ice extending from the pine-woods above to the door of the hotel upon the plateau. Half-way down, the track swept suddenly to the right, and then to the left again—and here were the high banks of snow to ease the corners and make them possible at high speeds. The "little widow" had just fallen to a memory of her own girlhood and of the joy such a game would

have afforded her before the dark days, when Harry Clavering waved his red flag violently and there was a general shout:

"He's off!"

"Only Bob Otway," said some kindly friend in the crowd who was an optimist. "He's sure to take a toss." And it was a true saying, for Master Bob came at the corner like a bull and was clean up and over it before many realised that he started at all.

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear!" exclaimed the old parson, quite as excited as any boy about it. "He should not have taken the bank so high. Poor boy, I hope he has not hurt himself." A comment which provoked a muttered "D—d fool!" from a choleric colonel, who had seen the thing done in Canada, and did not believe it possible to do it better in Switzerland. Then a second competitor, Dick Fenton, started, and he came down prettily enough, riding low at the banks and getting a splendid course in the final straight. It was quite thrilling to see him, the "little widow" declared; and when Harry Clavering announced the time as one minute thirty-one seconds, she believed that Fenton must have won. Not so the others. "Wait until Rivers has been down," they said. That splendid personage obviously was their *pièce de resistance*.

Meanwhile, there were "heats" for the ladies, and these found the men a little nearer to the edge of the bank and frankly enjoying themselves. Some of the girls rode very well—and, significantly, Marjory Rider, whose name suggested proficiency, acquitted herself with hardly less aplomb than her sister Nellie. Tall girls, and excessively thin, it remained for an artist in the background to suggest that they never would have got their living as "models." But they flashed down the ice-run with a bravado that was incontestable, and their corners were, in Bob Otway's words, "divine." They were followed by a pretty little girl with a superb figure, who considerably parted company with her toboggan on the second bank and went half-way down the straight with her face to the heights and her back toward the winning post. Even this, however, was capped by a mature lady of forty-three, who rolled over and over at the first turn and had to be helped up the slope with a curler's besom. In no way daunted, she set out immediately for the summit to repeat a performance so diverting to the company.

The "little widow" found all this new enough to be pleasing, and there was a curious fascination in watching this whirring from the heights; while the prone figures, the drone of the runners, the leap at the corners, the hard set faces, suggested that conquest of space and time which never fails to be exciting. When they told her that Keith Rivers was about to perform, she craned forward in her chair to see that dashing youth, with his curly brown hair and his frank open face and his contempt of other rivals. He had just left Eton and was going into the army, they told her. And none at Andana could keep pace with him, whether

upon skis or skates. To be sure, he rode magnificently, taking the corners with unerring judgment, and making a sweep into the straight which dazzled the company. When the time was announced—one minute twenty-nine seconds—it seemed that there was nothing for his friends to do but to throw their caps into the air and claim the stakes. None was left in now but Benny, and to think of Mr. Benjamin Benson as the winner of the Grand Prix at Andana was too ridiculous.

Benny had just gone up to the starting-post, a well-made figure of a man enough, with the kindest eyes in all Switzerland. He walked with the lurch of the sailor ashore; and the chaff that followed him was like hail upon a penthouse roof. To Bess Bethune, who asked him if he were going to beat record, he shouted back over his shoulder that he meant to try. It was evident that he had little skill in repartee; and when anyone wished him luck he took the words as he found them and missed the irony. To Bob Otway, who recommended him to tie himself on with a rope, he retorted that he would be the better for the loan of a monkey's tail; and quite satisfied with the shot, he went plodding on up the hill to the amusement of every superior person in the company.

There was a little delay at the post, for Benny would fall off his toboggan before he got on to it, as the starter declared; and when they did get him going, he leaped high into the air and fell with such a thud upon the cushion of the machine that any other man's bones would have been broken. From that moment his performance became entirely astonishing. No one at Andana had ever taken the earlier bends of the course so fast and so furiously, and it seemed quite impossible that he could remain upon the course at all. Benny, however, was a sticker. "Where I drop, there I lie," was one of the maxims of his life, and so he lay very close to his toboggan, hugging it as though it were a pretty girl, and never lifting his eyes from a form so attractive. Approaching the corner he began to attain a speed which delighted the *cognoscenti*. Uproarious applause mingled with mocking laughter. All said and done, the world likes a butt—and what other role could such a man have filled?

"Stick to it, old chap!" "Hang on, Benjamin!" "Give him his head!" "Now we're jumping!" "Benny's a nut!" "Oh, my hat, see that!" "Hard to starboard, Benjamin!"—such were the cries that were to be heard above the din as the rider approached the corner. Here, surely, the gallery believed that this meteoric display must terminate. The leap from the second bank to a long straight run carried Benny to the first of the monstrous corners, and here he must be unshipped. As the flash of a blackbird against a curtain of the snow, he rushed the straight and struck the great mound which defended the bend. People saw him shoot high into the air, then fall again with hands gripping the bars of the runners, and eyes which stared from his head. A great "Oh!" went up, a murmur of wonder and amazement. Someone said that he was round the second bank, but no one be-

lieved it until a cry from the final straight turned all eyes thither, and Benny was espied leaping to the goal. Then the red flag fell. The race was over—and more wonderful to tell, Benny had won it!

No one believed the thing at first. Even Harry Clavering felt very dubious about it, and looked at his watch a good many times before daring to announce the result. "One minute twenty-seven and four-fifth seconds," the chronograph said, and, to be sure, it was no good disputing that. So the kindly little man admitted almost apologetically at last that he really believed Mr. Benson had won. Upon which a curious, half-mocking silence fell upon the company. In a way its pride of judgment was hurt, and it had not the manliness to say so. That the Grand Prix, the race of the year, should be won by a half-savage sailor-man, who knew no more of the science of the game than a heathen Chinese, was surely an insult to the elect of Andana! And then all the fine talk on the part of men like Ian Kavanagh and Keith Rivers, the attitudes and devotions of the Rider girls, were those to count for nothing? An unspoken resentment against the dark horse, who certainly had gone down, left Benny without a cheer. There was only one person in the crowd who spoke an honest word to him, and she was the "little widow."

"I'm so glad you won," she said, meeting him in the veranda of the hotel, and quite regardless of the formalities. Benny's eyes lighted up like lamps when he heard her.

"Do you really mean that, Mrs. Kennaird?"

"I mean every word of it. Pride has had many falls to-day. I am not at all sorry."

"Thank you very much," he said; and then, as simply as a boy, he added: "I knew I should do it if I could stick on."

"That's why you won," she rejoined; "because you knew you would," and with a smile that he would never forget she passed on into the hall.

The "little widow" had awarded Benny his prize. He fell there and then to wondering if it were the last he would ever win from her.

CHAPTER III

CONCERNING A DISOBLIGING GHOST

The "little widow" had come to Andana under the mistaken notion that it was a

nook in the backwoods of Switzerland where none might discover her. She was very much astonished and not a little dismayed to discover a middle-class society of an exuberant order and a noisy frivolity which could not but amuse her.

In such a company it was hardly possible for her to remain undiscovered, and she had not been in the hotel many hours when that Admirable Crichton, Dr. Orange, invited her to his own table. There she speedily began to reign to the satisfaction of a little coterie of the elect. If she, in her turn, shrank from the greatness thus thrust upon her, she was grateful for the compliment, and hastened to accept it. She had been alone so many months—she who was but seven-and-twenty, and had the heart of a child.

It was a great dinner that night, and merry the mood of the company. The "little widow" herself wore a dress of black velvet with a glorious "what-do-you-call-it" of white silk beneath it, as Bob Otway told his sister when describing it. Her diamonds were undoubtedly magnificent. Obviously a woman of fashion and of the world, she racked the animosities of prim misses from the suburbs and positively exasperated their mammas. These were of the "blouse" order, and obviously sober both in the matter of habit and of fashion. They dined with their eyes upon the "little widow" and their ears bent to every breath of gossip which stirred in an atmosphere odorous of dinner and cheap scents.

Dr. Orange, meanwhile, was hardly conscious of the envy he excited. He had not heard the rhapsodies of the males or the conviction, general when the fish was served, that her eyes were divine. He saw a charming woman, with a skin that Greuze would have copied, a mouth that a suburban poet would have likened to a "rosebud," and hair so fine and silky and bewitching in its play of browns that another woman would have been tempted to ask immediately for the name of the hairdresser who supplied it. Her nose was *retroussé* and just a little flat; her forehead spoke of intellect; her neck and arms of a figure which an artist alone might have criticised. And so back to the eyes again—those eyes divinely blue, which looked into a man's soul (if he had one) or sent the devil flying out of him as though holy-water had been sprinkled round about.

The doctor was aware of all this, and so was Bess, who really rather despised middle-class folk and consorted with them merely because her uncle, the Cabinet Minister, was a Radical. But despite their knowledge, the usual conversation was eschewed altogether, and they discussed neither the magnificence of the latest production at His Majesty's, nor the fashionable intelligence from Monte Carlo. Andana and its excitements were topic enough—for was not this a day of prize-giving, and was not the doctor at his wits' end to find a prize-giver?

"I would like you to do it," he said to the beautiful woman at his side, "but they will have a title here. I suppose it must be that amusing person, Lady Coral-Smith—her husband made his money out of red herrings, and we shall have to

draw one across the scent. All this kind of thing devolves upon me. I have to run everything: the hotel, the races, the invalids—and even Miss Elizabeth here. Do you wonder I am growing older?”

”No one should grow older in the company of a clever woman,” said Miss Bessie, pouting. ”It is only the consciousness of intellectual inferiority which can say such a thing. I am angry with you, Dr. Orange. Pass me the chocolates immediately.”

”You see,” said the doctor, appealing to them generally, ”she covers me with scorn and then dies for my sake. I shall have to prescribe for her to-morrow.”

”But I shall leave an imperishable memory behind me, and if anyone remembers that such a person as Dr. Orange lived, they will say that he was my doctor. Thank you, sir—your chocolates are beastly. I shall keep them for the ghost.”

Here was a new topic, and one to which they turned with gusto. Andana was not so well amused that it had not a corner to spare for this particularly disobliging phantom, who had scared the peasants out of their wits and had actually appeared to a party coming down from Vermala at midnight. Miss Bessie told the story with a sense of drama all admirable; but she prefaced her narrative with the assurance that she would as soon believe in it as in the doctor at her side.

”There isn’t any ghost, and so we are going out to look for it,” she said; ”the doctor wouldn’t dress because he thinks he looks nicer in the green tie. The ghost might be feminine, you know. Perhaps she wants votes for women, and so appeals first to the weaker intelligence. They say that no end of people have seen her, including the Swan; but he doesn’t count. Do you know the Swan? Oh, he’s a dear, and he thinks he’s swimming when he waltzes. He went up to Vermala to dinner the other night and saw the ghost as he came down. It’s a great big black bird and makes a noise like a windmill. Dr. Orange says that it is troubled by asthma, but Mr. Benny says that its bones want greasing. He is an engineer, you know. He told me so yesterday. He is an engineer in principle, but in practice they won’t have him, for he cannot pass the exams. Some men are so unlucky, while others—well, no one knows how they manage to get through. There is Dr. Orange, for instance; I think they must have passed him because they couldn’t stand the green bow. There could not be any other reason. Well, as I was saying—what, are you going to begin already, and I haven’t finished my ice? Monster!”

But the doctor had risen and now announced very briefly that Lady Coral-Smith had kindly offered to present the prizes to the winners in the various competitions held during the past week; so that brisk little woman, dressed like a Grecian shepherdess, with little white daisies all over her gown, came nodding and smiling to the table and began to hand out various ridiculous presents to the

winners in question. Of these, the most conspicuous were the Rider girls, now resplendent in muslin dresses with bright blue bows, and their frequent appearances at the table gave rise to resounding cheers, not unaccompanied by kindly comments of an amiably derisive order.

Ian Kavanagh, that golden youth with the flaxen hair, had conducted his conversation chiefly in monosyllables during dinner; but he was a trifle more condescending at this stage, and declared it to be a pity that these accomplished young ladies had not to get their living at the Coliseum!—or other popular resort where acrobatic performances were properly rewarded. He thought that Andana was unworthy of them.

"They came here to win pots," he said scornfully. "The man who marries them is sure of a hundred or more *objets d'art*—to say nothing of virtue—all bought in the bazaar for one franc fifty. That ought to console him—"

"Is he going to marry them both?" Miss Elizabeth asked.

The golden youth smiled.

"Two go to a pattern, I suppose. I shouldn't know one from the other in the dark."

"But you'd have to know the one you married!"

"Ah, so I should! Why don't you write a story about it: 'The Bride Who Wasn't,' or something of that sort? Kipling would do it finely."

"Well, but I'm not Kipling—and here's Mr. Rivers. Why, of course, we won the doubles together. And is it poor little me they want?—Oh, dear!"

There were loud cries for Miss Elizabeth, and she rose, blushing very much at the outburst of cheering which attended her appearance—and obviously a great popular favourite. When she had received one Teddy Bear upon skis from the fat hands of the mayor's relict, she returned to the table and implored them to make plans for the ghost hunt.

"You're all coming, of course," she said. "We'll take luges and have coffee at Vermala. If the ghost does not appear for me, he will never appear at all. Now don't you think so, Mr. Kavanagh?"

"Oh, I think whatever the ladies think. Is Mrs. Kennaird coming?"

He turned to the "little widow," and the doctor joined in the appeal. She would accompany them, of course. It would be a beautiful moonlight night, and they would come down on luges. It was the very thing to do: and as the amiable doctor said emphatically, so very much better than the outside edge backwards in the ball-room with a partner who could not dance. There could be but one answer to such unanimity.

A brief interval for the securing of the necessary wraps and the party was away. Mrs. Kennaird had changed her dress hurriedly, and when she reached the hall she found the whole hotel restless and awakened to nomadic instincts. No

one seemed to care at all for the wretched bandsmen who were, as Bob Otway put it, blowing the "Merry Widow" into three keys in the ball-room upstairs. Rather, the guests turned with expectant interest to the exquisite scene without, the snow plateau gleaming in the moonlight, the mellow radiance of the heights, the silent moonlit woods. Few of the men had dressed for dinner, and many were now garbed in the heavy sweaters and hobnailed boots indispensable to the climb. The girls were dressed as practically, and with their white woolly caps, their short skirts and heavy boots, looked like so many madcaps just let out from a seminary for young ladies where hockey was the chief study.

Miss Bessie had invited the "little widow" to be of her party; but being an impulsive young lady, she herself ultimately sought the society of Mr. Robert Otway; and somehow, but not of her own will, Mrs. Kennaird found herself enjoying a *tête-à-tête* with Kavanagh, and mounting slowly with him toward the heights. She had hoped that the old parson would have espied her and made one of the party; but he was playing bridge with a trio of matrons when she came down, and certainly Kavanagh showed no disposition to release her from her promise. He followed her like a dog, and they had not walked a hundred yards before she became aware that it was his intention to make love to her.

And why not? as he himself would have asked. Could the scene have been matched in all Switzerland? The sweet stillness of the bewitching night; the glory of the full round moon in the azure sky; the great white peaks standing out in majestic solitude; the stillness of the woods—what purpose could they serve so well as that of an amiable and meaningless flirtation with a pretty woman, who was already the well-desired of the whole community? Kavanagh had been greatly smitten at dinner, though his silence might not have been so interpreted. Who was she, and whence did she come? Upon his part, he had not spoken twenty sentences to her on the hillside before he managed to let her know that his father was Sir John Kavanagh, of Bolton, and that the heir to that ancient baronetcy now stood before her.

"You meet a very weird lot in these places," he began in a patronising tone. "I don't know what kind of an ark lets them loose. When at Rome, don't do as Bayswater does is my motto. It's astonishing how the nice people sort themselves, though. Why, I saw you before you got out of your sleigh, and I said, 'Thank Heaven.' We wanted reinforcements, and you came just in time. Kennaird's a name I couldn't help but know. Yorkshire, isn't it?—we're neighbours so to speak, for my old gov'nor's Sir John Kavanagh, of Bolton, and poor little me is all he's got in the world. You do come from Yorkshire, don't you?"

She said that she did, and happily the darkness of the way hid the blush upon her cheek when she spoke. Oblivious of the dangerous nature of the subject, Kavanagh plunged on.

"I came out here just to see what this ice rot is all about. I suppose you did the same? One has to put up with something to learn, and we're paying our footing. Mine's pretty dicky on anything but good honest skates; but it's no good skating here in the 'village pond champion' style. I tried skis and resigned. It makes a fellow feel an awful fool to have one of his legs round his neck and the other at the bottom of a crevasse. All right at twenty-one, perhaps; but I'm no chicken, and I don't like to make a fool of myself for nothing. If you skate, we might have some good times here—and we can always go down the Vermala run in the afternoon—or at night if you like. I call it top notch at night, and you'll do the same, I hope. Just look at the old Weissshorn—looks like a Chinese god on a fancy ottoman, doesn't he? We can't beat that in Yorkshire, can we? Well, I'm glad you're a neighbour, anyway, and we must find out all the people we know. Do you hunt, by the way?—I've got twenty nags at home, and what they're doin' Heaven only knows. Eatin' their heads off, I suppose."

She remembered that he had told her the same thing earlier in the day, and looked at him curiously from the depths of her blue eyes, grown black here in the solitude of the woods. What an amiable imbecile he was, and how odd that her lot should be cast with him. Possibly he was the only Yorkshireman in all the company, and fate had thus thrown them together at the very beginning. And with this thought there was just another, passing as a flash upon the white ground of memory, of one whose face had flushed when she spoke to him that morning, the butt of an amiable company, the derided Benny. She knew not why she wished for Mr. Benjamin's company, here upon the hillside; but the fact that she did wish for it could not be kept back.

"Is it far to the hotel at Vermala?" she asked presently—any question served to turn the dangerous talk. Kavanagh answered with the pride of knowledge acquired some sixty hours ago.

"It's just above the clump of pines there. They make top-notch coffee and have got some decent cigarettes. We've climbed about a thousand feet since we started. You'd never think it, would you; and doesn't the old show look just like the White City?—eh, what? Upon my life, I never saw such a resemblance. We might be up in the flip-flap."

She smiled at his preposterous imagery, and yet words might well have failed such an intellect upon such a scene. The place where they stood was a little thicket of trees at the last bend below Vermala. All around were the frozen pines, magic in their suggestion of fairyland, enchanting in the infinite variety of their matchless tracery. Below them Andana lay like an oasis of light upon a bleak hillside. Great arc-lamps waned and waxed upon the narrow road by the skating rink and again downwards toward the village. The hotel itself blazed with radiance and suggested the antithesis to this solitude of the woods. Far, far

down in the black hollow of the valley there were the lamps of Sierre and the railway; and high above them, as though uplifted to the heavens, the moonlit peaks, a very forest of them running in unbroken majesty to the great flat dome of Mont Blanc.

The human side of this entrancing picture was voiced by the ripples of laughter, the joyous cries which came floating up on the still night air. A romancer would have espied lovers in the thickets, and heard the whispers of their sighs. By here and there stragglers were to be perceived upon the great plateau of the snow or plodding upward to the heights. In sharp contrast to this leisure of the climb would come the swift descent of a luge towards Andana, the loud cry, "*Achtung!*" the passing of the prone figure, and the lantern jolting at every rut. These cries became more frequent as the climbers neared Vermala. Some of the toboggans were bedecked gloriously with Chinese lanterns, which gave a rare splash of colour to the monotony of silhouettes, or turned the snow blood red. And dominating all was the eternal spirit of youth; the *joie de vivre*; the consciousness of the present; the will to blot all else but this fulness of life which ran in the veins like fire.

There was a fine crowd of people up at the little hotel at Vermala, and conspicuous among them the Rider girls and Bess Bethune. Bess, in fact, furnished the place, as someone remarked—it must have been Bob Otway—and her high spirits were so infectious that the doctor sat down to the piano and played a magnificent fantasia upon "Our Miss Gibbs," arranged as a sonata in the fashion of Schubert. Everyone took coffee, and the ladies sipped *crème de menthe* under protest. The ghost received less attention than he merited—and when the best part of the company trooped out to look for him, and did not find him, not a few took advantage of the opportunities presented by Japan (in the form of screens) and Africa (in the matter of palms) to continue discussions of a momentous nature. The "little widow," however, found herself once more with Ian Kavanagh at the head of the path, and she realised that she must make her first run on a luge or be derided by the company.

How ridiculous it all seemed to her, that she should be playing a girl's part, she whose life had been so tragic and so womanly. She had the will to forget, God knows; and if the mountains had any message for her, the silent woods their consolation, it was that forgetfulness might be won, and upon forgetfulness, peace. Let there be a truce, however brief the day of it. The kingdom of a joyous childhood called her with a sweet voice—she tried to believe that she had become a child again.

"I have never done this before," she said to Kavanagh almost pleadingly, when he offered her the luge he had dragged up from Andana and showed her what she must do with it. "Is it so dreadful? Shall I really be able to manage it?"

He assured her that it was the easiest thing in all the world.

"Just guide yourself with your feet. Lean over when you come to the corners and round you go. I'd better get on ahead, for I shall be faster. I'll wait at the path where we go down to the rink. You can't hurt yourself—it's just like falling into an iced blanket—now see me do it."

He squatted on the luge, and going with as much dignity as he could command—which was not a great deal—he set off down the path and rounded the first of the corners successfully. Great flat hands pushed him off from the banks; his progress, if not melancholy, was certainly slow, and in the end became remote. The "little widow" heard him calling to her to "come on," and at last she seated herself and essayed to obey his interjectory instructions. But the dazzle and glory of the thing seemed less when she had started, and she reflected with irony that she could have walked much faster. Then the luge was so uncomfortable; just a few bars of wood, a cushion and two steel runners. And "the thing" would go up the banks in the most shameless way—first to the right, then to the left, now half round, now frightening her by a sudden plunge. At the corner she failed altogether, and ran high over the bank and into the soft snow upon the other side. Her white gloves were wet through by this time, her shoes full of snow, and her general condition one of misery. She picked herself up and laughed with a truer note than she had done for years. Yes, she had become a child again, and had a child's sense of irresponsibility.

Kavanagh had disappeared altogether by this time. Other tobogganers came flying down the mountainside; but none pulled up because of the lonely little woman standing between the trees at the "hairpin" bend. She heard voices above and below; the wood might have been full of the spirits of dead children rejoicing. But she had lost all taste for the miserable contraption which behaved so shabbily, and it had become a burden to her. Trying to set it going again, she ran a little way and lost hold of it; and then, as a horse which has lost its rider in a steeple-chase, it went on gaily, rounding the corners upon its own account, and disappearing as her guide and philosopher had done. She was quite alone now, and very pleased to be so—at least, she thought so until she espied a black figure creeping up between the trees, and, as it were, stalking her in the shelter of the wood. This frightened her a little and she tried to go on; but her heart beat fast and she was really quite afraid. Why did the man not speak? Was he a Swiss or one of the guests at the hotel? She was just about to shout for help when the crouching figure cried out:

"Mrs. Kennaird, is that you? Well, I'm Benson—you remember me?"

She burst out laughing.

As though anyone who had known him could forget "Benny."

CHAPTER IV

THE MAN WHO KNEW

"Oh," she exclaimed, recovering herself, though her heart still drummed the echoes of a panic, "oh, I thought you were the ghost."

Benjamin Benson was immensely tickled.

"I've been taken for many things in my life," he said, "but never for a ghost. I wonder if it would be nice to be that? We always think of it from the mortal point of view. We never ask if the ghost has a good time—and yet I don't see why he shouldn't. There might be sociable ghosts—now don't you think so, Mrs. Kennaird?"

She did not feel disposed to argue it.

"They tell me the peasants have seen a great bird in the sky. Everyone up at Vermala is looking for it. Of course they will not find it. I am not a least bit superstitious, but I must say that the idea of a great bird pleases me—even if it's untrue."

"Then you are quite sure it is untrue, Mrs. Kennaird?"

"Now, could it be anything else? You are not serious."

He laughed a little nervously.

"It would be a splendid thing to fly over the mountains, wouldn't it? If I have a spirit, I would sooner it played about here than in an old vault, as most of them do. Why, how it suggests power—power above men, doesn't it?"

And then almost with an apology:

"But I suppose you think all this is just nonsense? I'm not the kind of man who ought to be ambitious, am I? Everyone tells me that."

"But you do not lose your ambition because of them?"

He drew himself up—Benny could be a tower of dignity when he chose.

"Yes," he said, with real earnestness, "I am ambitious, and some day I shall attain my goal."

They walked a little way down the hillside in silence after that. There was no sign of Ian Kavanagh, who had taken a bad "toss" at the last of the bends above Andana and was trying to get the snow out of his hair at that very moment. Benny had a toboggan with him, but it was different from the others, much

longer and made of steel. He trailed it behind him indifferently, thinking that his companion wished to walk down to the hotel; but when he discovered her own luge anchored in the snow he understood the situation.

"Halloa!" he said, "a derelict."

She told him with some shame that it was hers.

"A case of bolting—I suppose it wanted the curb. And now I shall have to drag it back to the hotel."

"Don't do anything of the kind. We leave these things all over the place—the hotel sledges pick them up as far down as the Sanatorium sometimes. Just let it lie there. I'll take you down if you like—there's plenty of room for two, and—and—I should like it, Mrs. Kennaird; I should think it an honour."

It was so simply said, the blunt words of a schoolboy speaking to the mature woman, that she forbore to smile. It would have been absurd, however, to respond in a similar vein, for the idea of a flirtation with Mr. Benjamin Benson was quite out of the question. So she accepted without any compliment at all.

"It's very good of you—and really I am beginning to feel the cold. Will you show me where to sit? I am absolutely ignorant, and it is so many years since I played games."

He understood that.

"Life's a game all through. We all say it, but what else can we say? We're in the long field most of the time, and when we get an innings, Fate goes and bowls us a curly one. I've never had an innings in my life, and I've been fielding for fifteen years—since I was seventeen—and my poor old father played on in Mark Lane and lost his house the 'ashes.' That's my story, and I don't tell it to everyone. Perhaps I have no right to tell it to you—but you seem so different, Mrs. Kennaird; I feel I can talk to you, and that's what I feel about very few people."

"You pay me a great compliment," she said, and then, "But we are both quite strangers here. This is my first visit to Switzerland in the winter; I know nobody."

He nodded his head.

"But I thought that I knew you directly I saw you—I shall remember where we met by and by. Had you relatives down Newmarket way, I wonder—people who used to live at Holmswell?"

She shook her head.

"Then I'm quite wrong; now let's get going. You sit in front and I'll steer—don't be afraid, I shan't upset you. They laugh at me in the hotel, but I'm going to have some fun with them before I get through. Are you quite ready—shall we let her rip?"

She said "Yes," and he pushed the toboggan off the bank. Had he been less nervous, he would have said that the "little widow" trembled; but Benny was anxious to make a fine run and had no idea how many would have envied

him his burden. And truly it was wonderful how he steered on that dark and tortuous road. To the woman the whole thing was an ecstasy, a mad rush down the mountain-side; a wonderful journey into fairyland; a magician's leap through the realms of darkness to the enchanted vales of the fables. When they stopped, Benny had steered them right down to the cross roads by the Sanatorium, and they must tramp ten minutes through the woods before they reached the hotel again. It was here that he harked back to the dangerous topic.

"It's odd about those Newmarket people—I could have sworn Lady Delayne was your sister," he said; "really the likeness is wonderful. I went to Holmswell from Norwich when I was in the motor shops trying to make myself an engineer. The electric light engine went wrong over at the house, and Sir Luton—that was his name—Sir Luton Delayne sent to our people. I remember him well, a little rat of a man whose temper used to go off like a cracker. It makes me laugh when I remember that he tried to bully me, until I said a word or two in my own way. He was very civil after that and showed me over the house. There was a picture of a lady in the drawing-room as like you as two peas. I thought of it directly I saw you to-day. 'She'll be a relative,' I said. You quite surprised me just now when you said you were not."

She merely rejoined, "Indeed?" A problem involving tremendous issues had presented itself suddenly to her mind, and she had not the remotest idea how to deal with it. But she felt that her previous answer had been a mistake and one that was almost irreparable. Why had she made it? She did not quite know.

Benny, on his part, was a little puzzled by her silence. He thought that he had pursued a subject which could be of no interest to her; and he would not have mentioned it again but for the question she put to him just before the Palace Hotel came into sight.

"Have you heard of Sir Luton Delayne since that date?" she asked. He replied as one greedy for the opportunity to tell her.

"Why, everyone in Switzerland has heard of him. He's been staying at Grindelwald, painting the place red. There was a regular row there the other night. Some fellow in the Fusiliers accused him of cheating at bridge, and Sir Luton knocked him down in the hall. They say he wouldn't fight it out, and bolted next morning. Now the police are after him, and there'll be a pretty to do if he's caught. I wonder you didn't hear of it?"

She tried to smile, but the effort was vain. "I have been on a steamer, from Egypt, you know. Women do not read the papers as men do. I don't think they understand the meaning of the word 'news,' unless it concerns their own circle. When I arrived at Brindisi I was naturally anxious to get on here. I see that I am very much out of date."

"Of course you are. The hotel talked about nothing else yesterday. There

was a rumour that the man intended coming on here. I guess there would have been some moving if he had. But the people won't have him. The little French secretary Ardlot, who runs the Palace, told me this morning they would have no vacant room if Sir Luton Delayne presented himself."

"Then he has left Grindelwald finally?"

"I should think he has, and wisely too. Barton of the Fusiliers would have shot him if he had stayed. Luton Delayne's the kind of man who doesn't like playing tame pheasant. He gets out of the wood before the beaters are in. I shouldn't wonder if he is a hundred miles the other side of Pontarlier this morning."

"Wisdom in this case being the better part of valour—but is not this the hotel? I hope it is, for I am deadly tired, and thank you so much for your great kindness."

Benny said that the evening had been the best he had ever spent at Andana—and he meant it.

"I'm not staying at the Palace, you know," he ran on; "my brother and I took the chalet up by the Park. I come in to lunch and dinner, that's all. I'm not a sociable person, Mrs. Kennaird. Sometimes I think the best thing in life is being alone. But, of course, I didn't think that to-night. Will you let me bring you down from Vermala again? I hope so. It's been a happy opportunity for me, I assure you."

She smiled very sweetly and held out her hand. They were at the hotel door by this time, and Ian Kavanagh, hearing her voice, came forward with those expletives of apology which suited an unceremonious occasion. He was "most frightfully sorry," but how had he managed to miss her? The "little widow" declared as frankly that she did not know.

"I am a dreadful bungler," she said, with some reserve; "undoubtedly it was all my fault; please don't think any more about it, Mr. Kavanagh."

"Oh, but I couldn't help it—I shall dream about it all night."

"Then Dr. Orange must prescribe a sleeping draught for you," and with this for his consolation she left him and went to her room.

How foolish she had been; how poor her courage to persist in a foolish denial which might cost her so much.

CHAPTER V

THE GHOST TAKES WINGS

A sense of elation quite foreign to the somewhat methodical order of his daily life accompanied Benny to the chalet, where he found his brother Jack awaiting him with some anxiety. Jack had been the baby of the family from the beginning, and this somewhat precocious infant of twenty-six lifted a shaggy head above the bedclothes upon Benjamin's entry, and asked him with real solicitude what had kept him. He would have been surprised to the point of wonder had the answer been "A woman."

Possibly Jack Benson was the only human being who understood his brother wholly and had no doubt about his future. He himself was a somewhat lazy youth with few affections and no enthusiasms, unless it were for his wire-haired terrier Toby; but he knew that Benjamin Benson was a genius of whom the world would hear one day to its profit. In his own dull way he tried to serve his brother; and this was very proper, for all the legacy that Benjamin ever received from his kindly old father was one thousand pounds sterling and the care of "the baby." That charge he had undertaken faithfully. The brothers were inseparable; and if the younger added little but encouragement to the common stock, his faith was precious to the shy, reserved man who wrought so strenuously for the common good.

"Wherever have you been, Benny? It's after twelve o'clock, isn't it?" Jack asked as he lifted his head from the pillow. Benjamin replied by setting the candlestick down upon the table and laughing in the most ridiculous way possible.

"I've been up to Vermala on a luge," he said as though the idea tickled him immensely; "imagine me at the game! Well, I've been there sure enough, Jack. Do you remember the pretty little woman in violet—the one with the sad face and the dreamy eyes? You do remember her; well, then, that's all right, for I brought her down. She was a derelict, and the hee-haw man, who went up with her, had an engagement on a drift. He was getting the snow out of his neck as I went by—so, you see, I brought her down—and, well, it makes me laugh to think about it, that's all."

Jack stared as though he had seen the ghost of whom the peasants spoke. He was almost tempted to prescribe hot blankets. "Benny," he exclaimed at last, "what's the matter with you? What are you going on like that for? Is it something they said to you—was it the woman, Benny?"

Benny became serious in a moment. No oyster shut his shell more surely.

"No, she's not in it, Jack," he rejoined hastily. "I was just thinking that it was odd I should have brought her down, that's all. She's Mrs. Kennaird, one of the Yorkshire lot, I guess, though she wouldn't own up. I suppose she didn't want anyone to know too much about her—that would be very natural, eh?"

"But it wasn't much of a compliment to you, Benny."

"Do you think so, Jack? Well, I didn't look at it in that light. Perhaps it

wasn't, after all. She might have been afraid that I would go down to her house in Yorkshire and try to see her. She might have done so—and, of course, it wouldn't have done; would it, Jack?"

Jack sat up in bed again. He was used to this kind of talk, and it never failed to anger him.

"Why wouldn't it have done? Aren't you good enough for her? You're always crying us down, Benny. Wasn't our grandfather a Brerton, and wasn't he a d—d sight better than any Kennaird in Yorkshire? Why shouldn't you call on her if you wanted to?"

Benny threw himself into a chair and took a very black briar pipe from his pocket.

"Oh," he said almost impatiently, "the world's a funny place. The cannibals get on best, Jack—those who live on their dead ancestors. You can't draw bills on futurity nowadays; no one honours them. A man's either up or down; there's no middle course. If I were to make a hit, people would remember that I had a history. If I fail, they won't even say 'Poor devil.' Birth and breeding are all right, but you must have the trappings if they are to be any good to you. While I'm just Benjamin Benson, engineer, the little woman in violet will regard me as she does her motor driver or the man who works the lift in the hotel. She wouldn't remember that she had done it if I made my mark—they never do."

He spoke with an intensity of feeling quite beyond the circumstance, and Brother Jack was altogether puzzled.

"I never heard you talk like this before," he said questioningly; "surely to Heaven, Benny, you're not bitten with the society craze? For goodness' sake don't tell me you're going to buy a new silk hat!"

Benny laughed.

"The old one will do yet awhile, Jack. It's up in London, packed away with the cylinder castings we had from Anzini. No, I'm not going in for that line, old boy; but when a man does meet a pretty woman, one he's likely to remember, why then, I suppose, these thoughts will come. That's what old Shakespeare says, and he knew women better than most of us. Wasn't it the same old Billy who told us to fling away ambition, for by that sin fell the angels? Well, I hope I shan't fall to-night, for I'm going to try the Zaat again."

"The Zaat—but you never told me!"

"The idea came as I walked along. I want to see how the new propeller is working. It's only three weeks to the day, Jack, and if I let some Frenchman in before me, you know you'd never forgive me. Ten thousand pounds, my boy—and that's fortune. Let me win them and I will be one of the richest men in Europe in five years' time. You believe that, Jack, don't you?"

Jack believed every word of it. His faith had never faltered. The great prize,

offered to the man who first flew from the summit of the Weisshorn round Mont Blanc to the valley of Chamonix, would be won by his brother or it never would be won at all. Such a victory would change the course of their lives in an instant. It would lift them from the ruck of mere adventurers to the high places of fame. And Benny's genius would accomplish it—the day would come speedily when the world would acknowledge him for what he was. This Brother Jack believed faithfully; this was his whole creed, with an anathema upon any Frenchman who differed from him.

"It's a dead certainty, Benny," he said with a real ring in his voice; "you couldn't fail if you tried."

Benny shook his head at that. "I could fail right enough if I played the fool, Jack; and then there's the weather to be reckoned with. What's going to happen if I start in a blizzard? The magneto may give out on short circuit—that's one of the chances if it's wet. When it begins to do that you may sally forth with a stretcher—not before. What I'm going 'no trumps' on is the snow. If that keeps soft and I come down, there'll be a new start. And anyway, it doesn't much matter, for there'll only be one flying man less in the world; and, like the folks in Gilbert's opera, he really won't be missed. You go to sleep and don't worry over it, Jack. It will be time enough to do that when I take a toss."

He stood up as upon a sudden impulse and, laughing at his brother's remonstrances, filled his pipe again and went quickly down the stairs. A moment later he shut the door of the chalet softly and turned to the wooden shed upon his right hand. Here his machine was harboured; this was his hangar, wherein he guarded secrets so precious that he believed they would revolutionise the art of aviation, youthful as it was. For three years, since the day when he first heard of the Wrights and their achievements at Pau, had Benny dreamed the dreams by night and slaved at the bench by day. And now the harvest had come to fruition and the sickle was at hand. An offer by an English newspaper of ten thousand pounds to the man who first flew over the great peaks of the Pennine Alps sent Benny to Andana with the determination to win it or court the ultimate ignominy. He worked feverishly in the dread that he might be forestalled. The day and the hour were at hand—he believed that he was ready.

The moon had waned a little when he opened the door of his shed, and the night fell bitter cold. He chose such an hour purposely, that he might prove his engines under all temperatures, and know that they would serve him in that rare atmosphere. Unlike the majority of others, Benny's machine was in the shape of a light steel torpedo with a whale's snout and the fins of a monstrous fish. He sat snug within this shell, and could raise or depress the great wings by the slightest touch upon the pedals at his feet. His elevating planes were cunningly placed above the rudder at the tail, and were connected to a lever at his right hand. He

had designed the seven-cylindered engines himself, and while they embodied in some part the principles of the gyroscope, they had a power and reliability he had discovered in no other. Perhaps, however, the chief merit of the design was its neatness and its response in every particular to the scientific theory upon which human flight is based. In the air it looked like some monster, half fish, half bird. But on land it was a very beautiful thing, as every expert had admitted.

Upon this night of events he dressed himself in leather clothes by the aid of the powerful electric lamps in his hangar; then, pushing the machine out, he climbed to his seat and started the engine by the powerful air-pump he had designed for that purpose. Permitting it to run free for a few moments, at length he gave a cheery "Good night" to Brother Jack at the window; then, letting in a clutch, he glided swiftly over the frozen snow and was lifted almost immediately from the ground. Thereafter he towered as some monstrous eagle; and the motor running at a great speed, he drove upwards, high above the plateau of Andana to the woods of the Zaat.

This miracle of flight—assuredly its secret lay in his keeping! The world and men were vanquished at his feet. He was no cramped and cabined automaton, no soulless machine, but the dominating arbiter of his own destinies. To tower upwards as a bird that drives against the blast; to swoop downwards as a hawk upon the quarry; to swing hither, thither, as his fancy chose—all this his own brain had contrived for him. And who shall wonder if a pride in his achievements attended his lonely triumphs, spake in his ear while he soared and gave him soft words when he descended? Had he not become mightier than the very mountains? The earth beneath him stood typical of the dead ages; the vista above him seemed to open the infinite to man's understanding.

Benny took a wide sweep upwards from the chalet and then swung his machine about and hovered for a little while above the Park Hotel. The waning moon had robbed the scene of much of its charm, but the lights in the windows of the hotel became brighter by contrast, and he could believe that one blind at least was drawn while he rested. When next he set his motor going, it was to cross the plateau before the Palace Hotel at Andana, which he did at the bidding of a futile hope he would have been at a loss to express. Here he glided downwards almost to the level of the pinnacles upon the summit of the lofty building, and passed so close to the windows that more than one tale of his coming would be told next day. Benny laughed to himself when he recalled the stories of "the ghost"; his pride was quickened when he reflected that the secret would be known before many days had passed, and his name linked to it. It may be that there lurked in his mind some desire that Mrs. Kennaird should know the truth before the others; but he put that by as a foolish thought and, regretting his boldness and the inspiration of it, he now swung rapidly to the left and again towered upwards.

The night air was intensely still and bitter cold. The woods glowed with jewels of the frost; the valleys had become but profound cavities in a mist of wavering light. Just as at the hour of sunset the weird kaleidoscope of changing lights fascinated the stranger, so now, as Benny mounted upwards to the high peak of the Zaat, did the play of the moonlight upon the summits of the giants reveal new glories to him and bewitch him by its wantonness. Here would the hollow of a glacier become for a brief instant a river of molten gold; there a needle of the rock turned to solid silver; or again a mighty circle of glittering radiance with a heart grown ashen grey. Towns were now but the tiniest of stars in a fathomless abyss. The hotels upon the heights stood for children's houses set in mockery upon a gigantic plateau. The night wind stirred rarely, and when it stirred it burned as with the breath of fire.

Benny had mounted to the summit of the Zaat twice since he came to Andana, and he told himself with a laugh that the third time paid for all. The mountain itself is inconsiderable, but there is a fine view over the Wildstrubel from its summit, and the prospect of the Simplon is very fine. Chiefly, however, Benny chose it because he had determined to make it his starting point when he set out to win the great prize of ten thousand pounds; and now, when he hovered lightly above it for some minutes and then touched the snow as gently as any bird, his first thought was of this venture.

To-morrow he must give notice to the English editor, who would appoint judges and send them south. Assuredly the attempt would draw aviators from all quarters of Europe—there would be special trains from Paris, from Berne, and from Milan.

Benny's heart warmed when he depicted the great crowds upon the plateau of Andana; the enthusiasm he must excite and the criticism to which he would be subject. Some, no doubt, would deride him—he was prepared for that. A few would be openly incredulous, but he hoped none the less to win friendship by his initiative, and the possibilities of victory remained. Let it come to that and his fortune was made. He believed that by money his genius would conquer the world. The humblest of men as he appeared to others, his secret ambitions surpassed all reason, and were of themselves an ironic commentary upon an ancient text.

He was vain, truly, and yet vanity ceased to afflict him when the need of other qualities arose. Standing there upon the summit of the Zaat, a lonely figure of the night, apart from men and the world, Benny quickly dismissed the phantom multitude and settled down to the cold logic of his task.

A powerful electric lamp, fixed to the snout of the machine, focused an aureole upon his map of the Pennine Alps and confirmed its verities. He began to think of winds and weather, of what he would do in a west wind and what in a

south. Determined to start very early in the day, he thought he would steer right across the plateau toward Mont Blanc; then head for the Matterhorn and, passing high above Zermatt, would return by the Weisshorn to Sierre and the plateaus. One of the conditions of flight stipulated that he must cross a high peak and start once unaided from any spot he cared to choose. Benny determined to choose Chamonix for this purpose; to descend at the foot of Mont Blanc, and thence to begin the second stage across the Matterhorn. Perilous truly such a flight must be, perilous beyond any in the story of aviation; but of peril he thought little for he had lived for such an hour as this—and it mattered not what befell him if he failed.

He smoked a pipe at the summit of the Zaat and tried to forget how very cold it was. Far from being a romantic person in the abstract sense of the term, his imagination delighted in the isolation of his position and the mastery which genius had conferred upon him. Other men climbed to this height laboriously. He had heard them talking about it in the hotels, planning excursions upon skis and calculating the hours necessary for the expedition. Often they had left the Palace at eight o'clock of the morning and returned when it was quite dark. He himself had been six minutes in attaining the same position, and he could descend to the chalet in three if he chose. Pardonable vanity became something very like egotism of an unpleasant nature at that particular moment; and when he put his pipe into his pocket and spread his wings again, he was a different person from the nervous hesitating nobody who had addressed Mrs. Kennaird that morning.

Had he not conquered, and would not all the world acknowledge his attainments? So he said as he started his motor once more and the whir of it droned a slumber song upon the still air. If the "little widow" could see him on this height! No schoolboy, aping a conquerer in his dreams, could have hugged a thought more tenaciously; it may be added that no schoolboy could have experienced a disappointment so swift.

There is a great slope of the snow, free of wood and rock, and running down at an easy angle, perhaps a third of the way, from the summit of the Zaat to the hotel at Vermala. Over this Benny would have flown to reach the chalet; and he never could quite say why he should have bungled in such a place of all others. Bungle he did, none the less; and bending an aileron too sharply, he came round just like a yacht when the helm is put hard down. An ominous lurch, a startled cry, and he knew he was done for. He felt himself dragged downward and still downward, sliding and twisting and turning at last upon his face. Then the soft snow overwhelmed him; it was as though someone put a hand suddenly upon his mouth and defied him to breathe a full breath.

His eyes perceived nothing now but a glaring whiteness; he suffered intolerable pain and believed himself to be choking. When the sensation passed, a

deadly chill struck him as though his body had turned to solid ice. He understood that he had forced himself upwards by a great effort, and that he was now lying upon his chest. Such an attitude was insupportable and must quickly give place to another which would suffocate him—at least he thought so as he put forth all his strength to lift himself and failed hopelessly at the attempt.

In the end he lay back and tried to reason it out. One wing of the two remained to him, and had buried itself deeply in the soft snow; and upon this was the weight of the shell and of the engine. These must drag him down, inch by inch, but down unpitifully to the depths of the crevasse. To-morrow Jack would find him—surely he would search the slopes about the Zaat—and so the end of the story would be written. Well, it was foreordained, and he had done his best. If the curse of failure lay upon his life, better that he were dead.

All this, to be sure, was accompanied by a sane review of the situation which such a man might have been expected to make. Benny did not hide it from himself that he had been staring down at the Palace Hotel at the very moment when he lost control of the machine, and he could calculate just what the accident would cost him if he were saved.

All hope of winning the great prize must be abandoned. Slave as he might, this night's work was irreparable. He had never trusted unfamiliar hands upon his machine and would not do so now. The great prize must go, and that hope of success which meant so much to him. It was a heavy price to pay for the sympathy of a woman to whom he had spoken for the first time yesterday, and it made strange appeals to his sense of irony. That he should have played the fool, he, "Benny the philosopher," who used to say that the Greeks were right when they kept their women in sheds at the bottom of the garden!

How she would laugh when she heard the truth! He was quite sure of it, and dwelt upon it almost savagely as though he were destined to bear the world's contempt whatever he did. The "little widow" would call it an excellent joke and narrate the story in the hotel. Benny could almost pick and choose the words she would employ. He could hear the music of her laugh and read the story in her eyes—at least he thought that he could; and that was much the same thing to a man who might have an hour to live if luck stood by him.

He had managed to get almost free of the cage by this time, but not of the wings themselves, and they held him tenaciously, though he did not quite understand what new thing was happening to him. Anyone familiar with skis would have told him that the smaller ailerons fixed to the tail were holding the machine in the snow, while his head and shoulders were being dragged down by the weight of it, inch by inch, with a subtlety of cruelty defying description. When Benny realised this his courage quavered, and he uttered a loud cry, more in despair than in the hope that anyone could possibly hear him. For who should

be on the Zaat at such an hour of the night, and what absurd chance of ten million would bring peasants to the woods when the new day was not an hour old?

Benny knew it to be impossible; but the cry was forced from him nevertheless, and upon it another and another as the machine pulled him down without pity, and the snow began to close about his ears and neck. In five minutes or in ten it would cover his mouth; but whether sooner or later, he must suffer a lingering death, dying as a man held up a little while upon the surface of lake or river and then drawn down imperceptibly but irresistibly to the depths. So much Benny understood at the crisis of it, and so much his brother, who had watched him from the window of the bedroom, perceived in a flash when he detected the black speck upon the distant slope and knew that Benny indeed had fallen.

Jack was as clever upon skis as Benny was clumsy, and he was out of the house and climbing almost as soon as the truth of the accident had dawned upon his somewhat slow intelligence. Luckily he had been unable to sleep, and had dressed himself with the idea of going out to meet his brother when he returned from the Zaat. So it came about that he had but to put on his boots and skis to be up and away—the height for his goal, Benny's need for his spur.

Calculating the time at a rough guess, he thought he would be at least three hours upon the journey—three hours of desperate endeavour to accomplish what the white wings had attained in six minutes. If this reflection vindicated his brother's genius, it did little to make his own heart lighter. He thought of Benny lying there in the snow, dying, perhaps dead, and he cursed the limitations of his own ignorance.

In ten, in twenty, years this age of stagnant incredulity would have passed—such men as Benny were heaping contempt upon it—and the golden years would be at hand. Altogether a fine philosophic commentary, helpful in its place, but of no service whatever to the panting youth who climbed the steeps laboriously and felt the icy cold freezing his very heart. Benny had fallen in the wide snow-fields above Vermala. How far off they were, how cruel were these hours of delay!

But here Pity had a word to say upon it, for Brother Jack had been but an hour upon the road when he heard voices in the wood, and presently, peering through the trees, he espied the figures of two men, and could say that one of them was his brother and the other that pleasant little abbé from the Sanatorium, who had so often accompanied him to the Zaat upon skis, and was quite the

kindest little priest in all Valais.

CHAPTER VI

A LESSON UPON SKIS

The "ghost" had been seen by many of the guests in the Palace Hotel, but not by the "little widow," despite her wakefulness. For her the night was fruitful of other thoughts, and chiefly the thought of her own situation, of its difficulties and its dangers.

They had christened her the "little widow" down at Sierre, and the embarrassing distinction of a pardonable error had followed her to Andana. So much she had achieved by her desire to obliterate the past and to recall, if it were possible, the innocence and the freedom of her girlhood. But she knew now that the attempt had failed, and that she stood upon the brink of a discovery which must be attended by shame. Luton Delayne would come to Andana sooner or later, and all would know the truth.

It is true that she did not lack courage, and had the perception to see that worldly sympathy, so far as she cared to win it, must be upon her side; but the ordeal through which she must pass, in a sense the exposure, affrighted her and robbed her even of a desire to sleep. The morning of the day might bring the man to the hotel; the evening might send her upon her way again, a derelict upon a lonely sea which offered no safe harbourage.

There had been no child of her marriage, and thus no chain upon her desire for freedom. Her father, Sir Frederick Kennaird, had married again at the age of fifty-seven; and while the gates of the old home were not shut against her, she shrank from the thought of such a shelter. Her only brother, Harold, was with his regiment in India, and had already condemned her conduct in strenuous letters full of childish complaints. "Would she drag her story into the papers? Wash their dirty linen in public?"—and all that sort of thing. To these she made answer that she would be the arbiter of her own fortune, and that if the family honour depended upon her tolerance of such a man as Luton Delayne, she would not lift a finger to save it.

This was well enough as an expression of her promise, but more difficult as a practice. Enjoying an allowance of three thousand a year from her father, whose collieries brought him ten times that sum, she discovered presently that

candour is a factor in the due enjoyment of life, and that the world has little love of anonymity. Go where she would, to remote cities of Europe, to the East, even to America, there were some who knew her story and would sell secrecy at a price. She made no friends, won no sure refuge, could find no sanctuary. Sometimes she regretted her determination to be known henceforth as Lily Kennaird, and wondered if her brother were not right when he described such a subterfuge as madness. Sacrifice carried her into a new world, and one with which she was unfamiliar. She missed the amenities of the state she had abandoned, its overt dignities, its influence and power. Mrs. Kennaird was merely the "little widow" to the multitude. It had been otherwise when she was Lady Delayne.

All this troubled her during the night, and the new day found her afflicted by apprehensions to which she had long been a stranger. Twice in as many years she had seen her husband, Luton, and upon each occasion at a crisis of his life. A wanderer like herself, he lived chiefly upon the allowance of one thousand a year which she made him, and when that was exhausted, upon his wits, which were considerable. The latter occupation was not unattended by danger and the curiosity of the police. Lily wondered sometimes at her patience.

And now he had followed her to Switzerland, and unquestionably would visit her at Andana. What shameful story lay behind the pursuit she could not imagine; but of the existence of such a story she was sure. Luton Delayne rarely troubled her unless his case were desperate—and desperate indeed it must be for him to abandon the purlieu of Monte Carlo at such a season. She resolved, upon her part, to refuse him audience if that were possible; and if it were not possible, then to summon all her courage and insist that this interview should be final. The day for compromise was past.

It had been her promise to the parson, Harry Clavering, that she would submit to the ordeal of the skis on this morning; and when, with Kavanagh, she met him on the veranda of the hotel, he reminded her pleasantly of her obligations.

Unwilling to disappoint, she professed her readiness to face the ordeal, and skis having been commanded from the hotel porter, the parson upon one side and Kavanagh upon the other set to work to imprison the smallest pair of feet in Andana and to tell the owner the news while they did so.

"You've heard that the ghost has been seen?" asked Clavering, a little excitedly. She shook her head incredulously.

"Oh, but it's quite true. Miss Nellie Rider saw it from her bedroom window and so did her sister. Sir Gordon Snagg is another. He declares it was a man in a flying machine. I shouldn't wonder if he were right."

Kavanagh was of this opinion.

"There are fools in the world who will do anything," he said. "Some idiot out of Hanwell may have brought his aeroplane here to scare the natives; and

jolly well he's succeeded. I hope he may break his neck, that's all. He deserves to, that's sure."

He thought that the "little widow" would agree with him as a matter of course, and her answer rather astonished him.

"Then you think that pioneers are very wicked people?" she remarked; "you have no sympathy with them, Mr. Kavanagh?"

"Oh, I won't say that—good for science and all that sort of thing. What I mean is, let's keep the mountains anyway. We don't want ginger-beer bottles on our heads up here—do we now? I'm sure Mr. Clavering agrees to that."

The parson dissented altogether.

"I think it would be a brave thing to fly here," he said quietly, "a very brave thing. And I hope the day when we cannot admire courage is distant. If there had been no pioneers in the world, I should not be travelling through the Simplon Tunnel to Bellagio in three weeks' time, and you would not be smoking that excellent tobacco. If there is an aeroplane at Andana, it must be owned by one of the men who is about to fly for the great prize offered by the English daily paper. I hope he will win it."

"But you wouldn't go up in one yourself?" Kavanagh insisted.

"Not for a thousand sovereigns, poor as I am."

Kavanagh laughed, but found no support from Lily Kennaird. She, grown a little less pale in the glorious freshness of the morning, was more concerned with the difficulties of the uncouth implements they had strapped to her boots than with any question of flight and its consequences. How awkward she felt! How impossible it seemed to do anything at all with those great wooden skates, so much taller than she was, and so exceedingly slippery.

"Now," said the parson, who had fixed his own skis and become a little more anxious when he had done so, "just shuffle along without lifting your feet, if you can; it's quite easy to walk up—the coming down is the difficulty. We'll go to the slopes by the Park Hotel and find a very gentle one. I'm sure you'll like it when you become accustomed to the balance. The great thing is not to be afraid."

Kavanagh seconded this, and was in the act of showing her exactly how to place her feet, when he sat down without warning, and having remained some moments in an attitude of despair, explained that he had done it to show the ease with which one can rise when the boots and straps are all right. This process he repeated at intervals on their way to the Park Hotel; indeed, he proved a paragon of good nature in the matter.

The fine weather of the previous day favoured them again, and the famous slopes were merry with the gambols of the players. Here there is a great basin of the snow with a lake at its depths and the white mountains towering high above it. The banks themselves are often gentle and rarely difficult; and hither

go the inexperienced to be tutored by kindly masters, who are themselves but children at the game. On every side you hear the injunction not to be afraid—so pompously uttered, so difficult to obey. Elderly gentlemen, who would be more at home upon a rocking-horse, glide down gentle declivities and are proud of the success which follows them to the bottom. Spinsters, of far from mature aspect, sit down upon less than no provocation at all, and declare it to be glorious. The great white kindergarten is the merriest place in all the world—and the world is far distant from it.

Parson Clavering had an excellent eye for an easy slope, and he chose one just suited to his own capacities. It was about three hundred yards from the chalet which Benny had hired, and that excellent fellow, looking out of the window and blaming his hard luck, forgot the latter employment when he espied the "little widow." How he envied the cheery parson, who was holding her arm; how he detested that gilded popinjay (Benny had got the expression from a novel) who stood by her side and smoked a cigarette as though he had hired the parson to do the manual work of which he himself would reap the fruit. But Benny carried his arm in a sling to-day, and even his zeal prompted no thought of skis. He was lucky to be alive.

Meanwhile he could watch the lesson—and instructive it was. First Clavering would show his pupil exactly how to stand, with one leg slightly before the other and the arms, which carried the trailing sticks, held well behind the body. Then the amiable little man would proceed to slide down the slope himself, perhaps sitting hurriedly at the foot of it, or arriving triumphantly at his goal as a man who has achieved greatness. When his pupil essayed to do the same and sank immediately into the soft snow, he assured her that such a proceeding was correct, and that by tribulation only would perfection be attained.

"They tell boys who hunt that they must fall forty times before they can ride—anyone who skis must fall four hundred times," he said reassuringly. "Now don't be afraid—we are all in the same boat, and we sink together. You are not hurt, I hope?"

She told him that she was not hurt at all—though, as a fact, she had dashed a little wildly down the slope and fallen heavily upon her side at the bottom. A fine effort to save her upon Kavanagh's part resulted in that lordly person falling headlong and in such a position that his skis held him immobile, and he had to cry for help. When he was rescued and had brushed the snow from his immaculate collar, he asked her if she did not find it "rather rotten"; but being answered in the negative, he retired to the path again and watched her a little jealously. That "infernal parson" was having the time of his life—really it was too ridiculous.

In plain truth, Lily had begun already to enjoy herself exceedingly. The keenness of the air, the glorious sunshine, the delight of this new exercise drove

all other thoughts from her head; and for the time being she was a child again with all a child's ardour. This ski-ing must be the most fascinating thing on earth, she thought, while she watched those experts, Bob Otway and Keith Rivers, sailing down the mountain-side with a dexterity which amazed her. Patience would teach her to imitate them, and then the heights would be open to her. A vain desire whispered that the mountains might be her safe refuge after all, and that they would harbour her—an altitude of dreams upon which Bob Otway's hard voice intruded painfully: "I say, Kavanagh," he roared, "come up and jump. Miss Rivers wants to see you do it; you aren't going to disappoint her?"

Kavanagh retorted by fixing his glass in his eye and turning upon that wild youth a glance which deserved the attribute "stony."

"I am not an acrobat," he snapped severely. "If you will tell me how much you require to begin, I will put something into your hat."

Bob Otway turned away with a laugh.

"By Jove, old chap, it would want a precious big hat to make you start," and with that for a shot he began to climb up the mountain-side toward the chalet where Nellie Rivers was waiting for him.

"Otway's a fine jumper," said the parson, "I believe he learned in Norway. It's quite impossible to do what he does unless you are caught young. Shall we watch him come down? It is really a fine thing to see."

She assented willingly, and they watched the "happy pair," who were now far up the slope by the Park Hotel and preparing to take the jump which has been fashioned about half-way down the valley. This was nothing more nor less than a kind of diving board of snow, from which the runners would take off as they dashed down the steep. "A clever performer," said the parson, "would jump ninety or a hundred feet before his skis touched ground again"; but the proceeding was hazardous, and some wonderful falls resulted. However, he had no fears about Bob Otway, and when that young gentleman started with a flourish, he followed him with expectant eyes. Alas for his hopes! Master Bob flew high into the air, missed his footing as he landed, and rolled over and over as though he would never stop. Then he sat motionless for many minutes—the situation required some thinking about, and Bob was rapidly becoming a philosopher.

Nellie Rivers was more successful. A graceful performer at Alpine games, there was no prettier figure upon skis then in the mountains. And her jumping was, as Bob would tell you, divine. Hardly seeming to leave the track, she shot through the air at a tremendous pace, and landed so evenly and with such perfect balance that the run was resumed as though it had never been interrupted. Then she skimmed by the parson, and raising one foot suddenly and bringing the other round, she "telemarked" most gracefully and stood laughingly before him.

"Bob always falls when I am coming down," she said, "I suppose it's to make

a soft place for me. Mr. Kavanagh would not be so obliging—I can see it in his eye.”

Kavanagh said that he would prefer to dig a hole with a spade; but he admitted that Master Bob was an obliging fellow enough.

”If nobody cut capers, this would be a rotten place. It’s a man’s duty to do something of the sort,” he said, ”but, of course—um—er—mere youth has the responsibility!”

”And the glory,” said Clavering, who thought that the lesson might well be resumed upon so inspiring an example and immediately turned a somersault to demonstrate his aptitude as a pupil. The little man was wonderfully active from this time forth, and when half-past twelve came and they heard the bell calling them back to the Palace for lunch, he resolutely refused to go indoors. Had he not brought baskets packed with chicken and the mysterious sausage in which ”Chic,” the cook, delighted? They would bivouac up there in the woods—perhaps that generous person, Mr. Benjamin Benson, would permit them to use the table in the garden of his chalet—a suggestion which annoyed Kavanagh, but made an instantaneous appeal to Madame Lily. Yes, she would like it, she said, and having said it, repented immediately of the admission. What right had she to think with pleasure of any friendship of the kind?

Nevertheless, they went up to the chalet and received the warm welcome they expected. Benny himself, his arm in a sling and his sallow face paler than ordinary, busied about the place with amazing ardour directly he heard that Mrs. Kennaird was of the party. His brother, apologising for the black-handled knives and the forks which matched them, declared that the kitchen fire was at their service; but he did so rather knavishly and with a glance aside at the beautiful woman who had intruded upon their privacy. It remained for the Abbé Villari to join the party, and he cut the oddest figure of all, for his cassock was girdled high about his waist while the sleeves of it were tucked up to his elbow. Moreover, he was exceedingly black, and when Benny explained with a very red face that the abbé had a penchant for amateur mechanics, it was easy to believe him.

”The gospel of the hammer, I suppose,” said Kavanagh, staring fixedly at them as he spoke.

Benny replied that some heads were very thick and that a corkscrew was the only implement to let a joke into them—a correct rendering of the great doctor’s *bon mot*, which made but a poor appeal to his enemy. Then they all sat down to lunch, and a merrier meal was not known that day at Andana.

Lily could hardly believe in this sense of contentment which now came upon her. The magic power of the mountains as an antidote to ill had never been wholly understood by her before; she realised it as she sat there in the glowing sunshine and looked up to a sky infinitely blue. The great fields of the dazzling

snow, the beauty of the woods, the grandeur of the prospect spoke of peace and rest as no other scene she could remember. And with it there came the idea that one man's good will contributed not a little to this gift of self-deception, and that in the humanity and good nature of such a personality as Benny the true secret was to be found. Much had the great world of artificiality and of false ideals taught her in her youth, but here was something different, something to be learned with gratitude, and being learned, not to be forgotten.

Benny, for his part, hovered about her as a shadow, and when she inquired with a woman's gentleness of his hurt, he blushed like any schoolgirl.

"It was nothing—nothing at all," he said—but his brother Jack muttered that it was everything—and as he said it, he glanced at the "little widow" and wondered what evil fortune had sent her to Andana.

CHAPTER VII

AN ULTIMATUM

It had just grown dark when Lily returned to the Palace Hotel, and the hall was quite full of muffled folk, whose arguments upon the events of the day waxed hot and eloquent. Some of these turned their heads as the "pretty little woman" went by; but the many were too interested in their narration of particular exploits to notice her. Upstairs, she found her sitting-room in darkness, but she knew, even before she had switched on the electric light, that it was not untenanted, and presently she discovered her husband, Luton, sitting by the window and smiling a little sardonically while he waited for her to speak.

Eight months had passed since they had met, and time had not been kind to him. He looked very old, she thought, and his red hair was sown with grey. A fine man physically, he had lost flesh, and his clothes bagged upon his arms and chest. One characteristic remained—the evil of a face which had expressed little but evil since his childhood.

"Well," he said—and he had never been famous for his eloquence—"well, Lil, you didn't expect to see me, I suppose. Rather an unpleasant surprise for you, isn't it?"

She took off her furs and laid them upon a chair. The room had become insufferably hot, and she would have opened the window had he not barred the way. But all her instinct forbade her to approach him, and she had need of her

courage that he might not see her trembling.

"What do you want of me?" she rejoined in a cold voice—and then: "Why do you come here?"

He liked the idea of it, and leaning back in the chair, laughed as though it were the drollest of notions.

"A man comes to see his wife, and she doesn't offer him the tips of her beautiful fingers! 'Pon my word, Lil, you look splendid when you stand like that—and since you press me, I will take a whisky-and-soda and a cigar just for luck."

She ignored the request and advancing a little nearer to him, repeated the question:

"Why do you come to me? Was it not understood that you should not come; was not that part of the bargain?"

He shrugged his shoulders, but his face flushed none the less.

"Bargain be d—d! I'm in a hole—nine thousand four hundred pounds with Bothand and Co.—you remember them? I bought your emeralds there. Well, they talk of fraud and all that sort of stuff. I'll have to pay them, Lil—it's jail if I don't."

She knew that it would be some story of this kind, and was relieved, it may be, to find it no worse. His exaggerations had ceased to alarm her, and she believed little of what he told her.

"You have had five thousand pounds from me in two years," she said quietly. "I am now making you an allowance of a thousand a year. If there is a duty in the matter, God knows I have done it. More I will not, whatsoever the consequences—you know that I cannot; it is quite impossible."

He nodded his head, and, failing the cigar, took a cigarette from his case and lighted it.

"Why don't you ask the old man?" he retorted. "I tell you, Lil, this is business, and if I don't pay in ten days' time, there'll be mischief. You don't mean to say you'd send me to prison for nine thousand pounds—your beautiful father wouldn't disgrace his daughter for a trifle like that? I've been pretty considerate, I must say. It's nearly a year since I came to you, and then for twopence-halfpenny which I had to beg on my knees. By —, you're becoming a Jew, my dear, a devilish pretty little Jew—that's what it is."

She turned from him with contempt.

"You have my answer," she said. "I will continue to pay you a thousand a year while you leave me as I am. But I will not pay more, whatever the consequences. That is final and irrevocable. If you come to me at this hotel again, you shall never receive another penny. The understanding was made, and I will have it kept. Have I not suffered enough at your hands; is there to be no end to a woman's patience? You have ceased to be anything to me but a name—take care

that I do not forbid you even that right.”

He smiled provokingly.

”You dare not do it, my dear; the old man wouldn’t have it. Devilish proud old boy, Sir Frederick Kennaird, eh? His hair would turn grey if you talked about the courts—he told me so himself. He’ll have to pay Bothand and look pleased. I shall write to him myself if you don’t; tell him you’re sailing under false colours here, and the men dancing at your heels. Eh, what, wouldn’t that be the truth? Why, I saw you on the snow with two of them this morning, and I laughed. This paragon of virtue nods sometimes, eh? Well, I don’t complain; I’m meek as a lamb. And I’m going to have nine thousand four hundred inside ten days, or there’ll be a story at the New Bailey and you’ll figure in it, my dear—for, you see, I used your name and they’re not the kind of people to forget it. No, by gad, we’ll sink or swim together—so help me Heaven!”

Her anger had been growing while he spoke and now quite mastered her. The gentle lady had become the proud woman, full of courage and resolution.

”You are one of the worst of men,” she said in a low voice. ”I thought and believed that you had gone from my life; I now see how much I was mistaken. But I shall live now for nothing else. If you come here again, I will appeal to the people of the hotel for protection. You tell me that you have been guilty of fraud, and I can quite believe it. But understand: I will write no letter to my father, take no steps whatever to save you, and if you are punished, I will be the first to rejoice. Go now, and let that be my answer.”

He was not at all alarmed.

”Oh,” he said, rising jauntily, ”I’m going all right; but I’m up at Vermala if you want me. Remember it’s nine thousand four hundred, and the old man can pay Bothand and Co. direct if he likes. I pawned the stuff in your name, and they say it’s fraud. Well, we shall have the ’tecs out here in a day or two and there’ll be some fun. They can extradite the pair of us, and you’d have to go back with me. I say, Lil, that would make the old man sit up, wouldn’t it? There’d be a harvest home at Kennaird Court, now wouldn’t there? I’d write to him, if I were you—there’s a day or two yet; but the game will be up if they get a warrant. Think it over, my sweet love, take the advice of the little bounder in black, who was holding you so tight this morning, if you like. He’ll tell you what to do better than I can. A man will know that I wouldn’t take it so lightly if the money were coming to me; no, by the Lord, I’d be singing another tune then, and one you’d understand. But these d—d jewellers must have their bit—there’s no help for it.”

He laughed again at the idea; and repeating the intimation that he was staying at the hotel at Vermala under the name of Faikes, who had been an old valet of his, he held out his hand to her; and when she would not take it, he

laughed loudly at the rebuff. But he did not remain with her, and when he had passed out of the hotel, he stood a little while looking up at her window, and his face became grave and wistful. What a beautiful woman she was, and what a mess he had made of his own life! Perchance his hatred against her welled up because of that great gulf between them; the gulf of a woman's will and character, of her pity and patience bestowed upon him once as a priceless gift, but now forever withdrawn. His own future lay in the chasms; he would tread the high paths no more.

Lily, his wife, stood meanwhile just where he had left her. This new story of shame rang in her ears as a knell. No longer doubtful, she knew that it was true, and she believed him when he said that he would drag her also to the abyss. Her father remained their last hope; but what would Sir Frederick Kennaird say to such a letter as she must now write him? What would his answer be?

Assuredly the old baronet would declare that the arrangement entered into with his daughter had been final and that Luton Delayne must answer for his own dishonesty. She believed it would be so; and it seemed to her, as her tears fell upon the page, that the sins of the man lay heavy upon her, and that she must make atonement.

CHAPTER VIII

BENNY BECOMES AN OPTIMIST

There were two men who recognised Luton Delayne when he left the Palace Hotel, and one was that master of all the courtiers, Dr. Orange. The other was Benny, who met the baronet at the turn of the road and understood in a flash why he had come to Andana.

"Luton Delayne, by all that's unholy!" said he to himself, and turning, he watched the stooping figure of the man until the little wood of pines hid the apparition from his sight.

Dr. Orange treated the matter a little more cavalierly. He had Bess Bethune by his side, and she had been in the act of giving him a definition of beauty—which he had just declared that even Aristotle could not define—when the baronet passed him in the hall, and he uttered a sharp exclamation.

"Do you know who that is?" he said to Bess. She replied that she neither knew nor cared.

"Oh, but we shall all care if he comes here," the doctor ran on; "that's the greatest scoundrel in Switzerland at the present moment, Luton Delayne, who used to live at Holmswell. Surely, the hotel people know—"

Bess laughed.

"I wonder you didn't introduce me. My uncle says that the study of crime is necessary to virtue; but, of course, I know you, and that's something. Are you coming upstairs to play 'hearings,' or are you not? Really, Dr. Orange, you are getting very difficult."

The doctor said that it must be old age; but he was contemplative, and his enthusiasm for a child's game had waned. Excusing himself to Bess, who promised him lasting displeasure, he went off to the little French secretary, Ardlot, to discover, if he could, what that worthy knew about it. Ardlot was as dumb as a drum with a hole in it, and fearing the consequences of a premature disclosure, the doctor retired to his own room to think of it. Of course, he knew the "little widow" now. She was Lady Delayne, and he could well understand that she was ashamed of her name. At the same time he foresaw how difficult her position in the hotel must become, and he wondered that she had sought the critical society of Andana when a city would have shielded her more successfully.

Benny's problem was of a different kind altogether. He, too, knew the "little widow" now, and knowing her, a hundred castles came tumbling down with a crash and threatened to leave a brave heart sadly crushed beneath their ruins. Benny would have admitted nothing of the kind to himself; but such was the truth.

Meanwhile, he could but stare after the retreating figure of the baronet, and when that had disappeared from his view, he trudged back heavily toward the chalet, quite forgetful that he carried in his hand a fur tippet which Madame Lily had left behind her that afternoon of blessed memory.

Benny was a good philosopher and in part a historian, so that it was quite easy for him to sum up the events of the last few hours and to carry a clear impression of them in his mind. Yesterday he had seen a beautiful woman for the first time, and for the sake of her unforgettable eyes he had rolled over and over on the slopes of the Zaat last night, and had been dragged out headlong by a miracle of a priest, the Abbé Villari. Had not one of the patients at the Sanatorium providentially fallen ill during the small hours, the abbé would not have been on the mountain road at all, and he, Benny, would now be making the best he could of a new and unfamiliar world. But the priest had saved him—and, more wonderful to tell, had confessed, as they came down the mountain-side together, that he also had dabbled in this new and wonderful science of aviation, and often delighted the monastery with the model of a "Bleriot" which would fly. To all of which the wounded man had listened indifferently, for what was the

meaning of all this eloquence to him, who had lost the whole world an hour ago on the slopes of the Zaat?

The priest, however, persisted and, word by word, he dragged Benny's story from him. The Englishman, he said, would be competing for the great prize offered by the English editor. It was a fine ambition, and one to deserve a blessing. Let him not despair because the machine was broken. There were clever lads at the monastery, and he, Felix Villari, was no mean mechanic. He would guard the secrets as his own, and pledge his word that the machine should be ready. Grown almost angry at his optimism, and deriding his pretensions, Benny lifted his bruised arm and asked for what kind of a prize that would fly. It was idle to speak of flight to such a man at such a time.

Here was the state of the game when Benny met Luton Delayne upon the mountain road, and stood gaping at "the ghost." His first idea was to get away from the place altogether, to cut Andana, and to forget both his disappointment and the source of it. Then a better spirit came to his aid, and he began to remember the many stories which Holmswell had told of the baronet, and to wonder how many of them were true. Lily Delayne was quite alone in this place; she herself had told him that she had no friends. He knew that his own good-will might be worth something to her; but for quite a long time he had no courage to pursue the idea. A sense of finality attended this amazing discovery as a sense of finality had been associated with his mishap in the earlier hours of the day.

Had Benny's mind been absolutely commonplace, and had he been hide-bound by the conventions, perchance the matter would have ended there and then. An early train would have carried him from Sierre to London, and he might very well have lived out his life as a very ordinary mechanic in a very ordinary workshop. In this way has the story of hundreds of good fellows, blessed with no common measure of talent, been written; and this might have been his own fate but for a certain hardening of determination which failure provoked.

The great prize was lost for a certainty, the new and dazzling hope which had come into his life yesterday had been shattered beyond all belief: and yet, when he had communed with himself for the best part of an hour on the narrow road which led up to the chalet, he took a sudden resolution and acted upon it without an instant's delay. He would see Lily Delayne immediately and hear from her own lips any story she might have to tell him. That she would have a story he firmly believed, and quickened by the pleasing idea of a friendship which must be beyond all question altruistic, he returned at once to the hotel and sent up a message to her. Five minutes later he was in her room, and he perceived at a glance that she had been weeping.

"I beg your pardon, Mrs. Kennaird," he said, "but I think you left this at the chalet?"

Lily took the tippet without a word. Her heart was beating fast, and the colour had returned as upon a freshet of understanding to her cheeks. A woman's sure instinct told her why he had come to the room. He knew that she had lied to him, and he understood the reason.

Benny handed over the fur, but showed no intention to go. She thought that he had changed very much since they had parted an hour ago, and he wore a certain dignity of manhood which was sure, but indefinable. When he spoke, the note of cringing banter had left him, and he had a man's tone, encouraging and not a little masterful.

"I thought I would bring the thing down," he said, with a kindly smile, "I shan't be in to dinner to-night, and you might want it. The doctor says I oughtn't to be out at all; but it doesn't do to listen overmuch to the medicine men. You see, I had a pretty bad spill, and the muscles of my arm are playing tricks. It wouldn't matter in an ordinary way, but just now—"

She looked up quickly.

"You had a fall on skis, had you not?" she asked.

Benny laughed.

"You can keep a secret, can't you, Mrs. Kennaird? Well, I'm going to tell you one; I fell out of an aeroplane—that's the truth!"

"You fell out of an aeroplane!—then you were the ghost, Mr. Benson?"

He nodded his head.

"Yes, I'm the ghost, but I don't want anyone to know it just yet. There's a prize of ten thousand offered for a flight down the Simplon Valley and over the big mountains. My machine would have won it if I hadn't come down last night. There's where luck figures. I don't think I can be ready now, and I suppose Paulhan or Bleriot will get it. But I wanted an Englishman to win, and I believe I have the machine. It's not like anybody else's—something different altogether. They tell me I look just like a double-headed eagle when I'm up. That's true, I suppose, for my machine is a bit of a curiosity in its way. You wouldn't understand, perhaps, but if you will come to the chalet sometime, I'll show you. You ought to come just to see an extraordinary thing—and that's a priest with his cassock tucked up, working like one of the best. I left him there when I came along; and, just by the way, I met a man I knew outside the hotel door—Sir Luton Delayne, of Holmswell. We were talking about him last night, you'll remember?"

She flushed scarlet.

"Yes," she said in a low voice, "he is my husband—he has been here to-night."

Benny drew a little nearer still.

"You will forgive me for what I said last night, Lady Delayne. I ought to have known; my good sense should have told me. What I really came here for was not to excuse myself, but to ask your forgiveness. A man should never speak

all that is in his mind to anybody except himself. When he begins to judge other people, he is putting a fool's cap on his head. I am old enough to have learned that lesson, and I think shame to have forgotten it. Will you let me say as much to-night?"

She answered him with wondering eyes which declared her perplexity. There is an elementary simplicity of thought and character which women find irresistible, and Benny was the possessor of it. To such a man, women impart strange confidences. Lily needed all her self-control.

"There is no need to say anything," she rejoined with an effort, "men will be judged when they invite judgment. I am sure you meant no harm, and intention is all that matters."

And then, with a shrug of her shoulders and a want of sequence entirely feminine, she exclaimed:

"Women have few real friends, Mr. Benson; they make no mistake when they discover one."

"Ah!" he said, "I was hoping you would know that. It's very true, Lady Delayne—perhaps the truest thing in life. Women make few friends—men forbid them to do so. But they need friends sometimes, need them very badly. Some day you might care to remember it. I would give a great deal to be at Andana should that day come—that is, if you are staying here?"

She did not attempt to disguise the meaning of the question.

"I must stay some days yet; but not in this hotel, I think. It may be impossible for me to do so; in which case I must imitate you and take a chalet. Do you know if there is one to let?"

He was delighted to become her confidant.

"There's the very place for you, just by the Park Hotel. I looked over it, but it was too dear for me. They've left the servants—you can have it to-morrow, if you like. I'm sure you'd be very comfortable there."

"You are very good," she said. "We shall be meeting in the morning. May I tell you then?"

Benny would have permitted her to tell him at any hour of the twenty-four, any season of the year, or any century which might find him alive. He left her room like a schoolboy who has dared an ordeal and returned triumphant. The stars had never shone so brightly over Andana as they shone that night; the moon had never looked down so gloriously upon the majesty of the mountains. He had become her confidant; he shared her secret; he was permitted to be her friend!

And all this at the nadir of his fortunes—when the great machine had been wrecked utterly, and the master-key of his ambitions lost beyond hope. Yesternight, he believed that his name was about to go out to the world as one of its pioneers; the name of a man who had dared and had achieved. To-day, he doubted

if such an hour would ever come. Others would win the great prize; he might preach to them the wonders of his own inventions, but few would listen. The gates of success lay far from him, and the lantern which burned above them had become but a star upon his horizon.

And yet all sadness had left him. Jack stared open-eyed when Benny entered the chalet and began to caper about like a boy. The little abbé himself, understanding nothing, shook his head reproachfully, and complained of the delay.

"The hours are precious," he said; "we cannot work unless you direct us. What has kept you, monsieur?"

"A lady's tippet," retorted Benny, delighted at the childish sally—and then, as one inspired, he began to tell them what to do.

There was just a chance by the Lord Harry! It came to Benny as he stood there that the thing might yet be done—the machine made good, the flight achieved. Long hours of unremitting toil would be necessary; but what of that? Ten thousand pounds would recreate the world for him, and change the course of his life as surely as though he were born again.

And for that gentle lady also—

But here Benny felt himself upon difficult ground and, turning aside, he contented himself with that wholly uplifting thought, that even now, at the eleventh hour, he might achieve the victory!

CHAPTER IX

IN WHICH WE BAG A BRACE

The weekly paper-chase upon skis took place upon the third day after Luton Delayne's visit to the Palace Hotel, and was not wanting in the customary excitements.

Youths, garbed in heavy sweaters and the monstrous boots which are necessary to a delightful accomplishment, hailed each other uproariously from their bedroom windows about the hour of nine o'clock and declared emphatically that the outlook was "rotten." Young ladies of ages varying from eighteen to two-and-fifty, hobbled about the precincts crying for John, the porter, to "come and strap them on." The cooks in the kitchen, not less busy, carved sandwiches with amazing dexterity and packed mysterious lengths of sausage as though they were well

hidden from the human eye. Few thought of anything but the weather, and all the talk turned upon that well-worn topic.

The morning had broken with some promise, but the mists were heavy, and now the whole of the great valley of the Simplon was filled by cloud.

Standing upon the plateau before the Palace Hotel, a stranger might have imagined himself upon the brink of an inland sea, whose feathery waves rolled noiselessly to his feet. Nothing could be seen of the panorama below, not a vineyard, nor a cottage; and while the Weisshorn reared itself majestically from the white fog, the lesser peaks were wreathed about as by trailing pillars of smoke.

In one hour or in two, said the experts, this sea of mist would drift up and envelop the heights. It might also be relied upon to obscure the fleeting forms of "the hares," and to play subtle tricks with the panting hounds—a prospect which was full of terror to the majority, but of great interest: (1) to a certain Bob Otway, who had persuaded Nellie Rider to be his partner in the promise of the day; and (2) to his friend, Dick Fenton, who had promised to fly with her sister Marjory, if not to the ends of the earth, at least to the chalet where lunch would be found at one o'clock precisely.

Fenton, as will be gathered from the foregoing, had been chosen for a hare, sharing the honour with Keith Rivers and that engaging performer, Miss Marjory Rider. Allowed five minutes' grace, these three, who wore fine scarlet sashes, set out at nine o'clock precisely, and quickly disappeared in the direction of the Park Hotel. Immediately they were gone, the concourse of indifferents, tempered by a few such experts as Bob Otway, lined up before the porch of the hotel, and prepared to carry itself with what grace it could. The light of it, conversationally considered, was Miss Bess Bethune, who, moving like a sprite amidst the company, assured each and all that something dreadful was about to happen at the Palace, and that the night would bear witness. When she had thus breakfasted upon horrors, she sought out Dr. Orange, and attached herself firmly to him, until she discovered that he preferred the seclusion of the skating rink, where he might hold out the tails of his threes to the delight of the elect. Bess hated him in the instant of that avowal; and, oh! the malignity of Fate, she was left to enjoy the society of Sir Gordon Snagg, who insisted upon treating her as a child, despite her thirteen years.

Perhaps Bess would have captured Bob Otway, but for the expert tactics of his *vis-à-vis*, Nellie Rider. Three seasons had Miss Nellie (and her sister) pirouetted vainly at Andana, and she was determined that the fourth should pay for all. The gossip of chosen friends, feeding upon the inflated estimates of rumour, declared that Master Bob had just come into a fortune of fifteen hundred a year—a tale, by the way, told also of his friend, Dick Fenton—and this sum being clearly in her mind and sweet romance, as it were, jangling the silver bells upon the

neck of that good horse, Matrimony, she attached herself to Bob with the tenacious grip of an octopus (the words were Bess's), and so led him instanter to the heights, as to the place of execution duly appointed.

To be sure, they cared little for the paper-chase. Both were experts, and the delight of climbing could not be marred by any thought of direction or rendezvous. Sufficient to know that they were mounting far above the mists, winning their way steadily to the entrancing slopes and the golden fields of unbroken sunshine. When, at last, Bob discovered that they were lost, he added the intimation that it was a good thing too!

"We should have old Gordon Snagg on our backs if we'd stayed down there," he said. "I know the old boulder well—he always stops to tell you some yarn about his brother, the brewer, and falls down in the middle of it. He got me yesterday. That nut, Major Boodle, was with him and the lady, of course. Lady Coral-Smith's a pretty good weight when she's round your neck, but I'd sooner see her round the major's. Did you hear her trying to tell something about the 'little widow' this morning? Beastly shame, I call it—the little thing's all alone, and worth about two hundred of the rest of them. Now don't you think so yourself, Nellie?"

He had not called her Nellie before, and she remarked the circumstance, and pronounced it to be of good omen. Fearing no possible rival in the "little widow," Nellie could afford to be generous.

"She is very pretty, and very nice," she said. "I am sorry for her, because she has lost her husband—at least I should be, if I knew what kind of a husband he was. It's all guess-work with widows; you never quite know whether to be sorry or glad."

Bob laughed loudly.

"They're saying in the hotel that she hasn't lost him. Bess Bethune hints that he wouldn't be lost. That's a new sort of game, I suppose: trying to lose a husband and counting points against yourself when he turns up! Do you think you would like to play it when you are married?"

She was horribly shocked. The word "husband" was sacrosanct, and such trifling seemed to her next door to a sacrilege.

"Oh, do let's talk of something sensible," she exclaimed petulantly. "Wherever there is a pretty woman, there will people tell untruths about her. What is it to us? We don't care, do we?"

Bob shook his head; he liked to pose as a man of the world.

"I think we ought to stand by her," he said. "Suppose you had been in the case, Nellie; wouldn't you expect me to stand by you?"

"Of course I should—but you wouldn't do it; you would begin to talk about widows instead. I'm quite sorry I came with you—"

He looked up appealingly.

"But we're having such a jolly time together. You don't mean to say you would sooner have been with old Gordon Snagg?"

"I would sooner be with somebody who talked about sensible things, so there! Are you going to stand here all day looking down at nothing? I didn't come out for that; I came to ski. Perhaps you would like to go back to the paper-chase?"

Bob hastened to say that he hoped the paper-chase might be swallowed up by an avalanche before he overtook it. Having insisted upon the point, he seized her hand without so much as a by-your-leave or any other unnecessary absurdity, and began to run down the slope with her. Here was something to live for; they were as two who had conquered the world and returned its proud heights upon wings of azure.

Down, down, the skis hissing in the splendid snow, the keen air bringing hot blood to their cheeks, the speed surpassing dreams of flight—so toward the woods which would hide them again, and permit them to forget that towns and hamlets, to say nothing of the inhabitants thereof, existed. Both were gasping for breath as they sailed down the last of the steeps and swung to the left at the bottom. Both were too sensible of the obvious fitness of things to utter one complaint when Miss Nellie tripped and fell right into Master Bob's arms upon the very verge of the wood. Is not the left an unlucky turn to make at any time? But who believes in luck when a pretty girl tumbles headlong into his arms and refuses to budge an inch?

"I say, Nellie, I wish you'd do that every day. Now, don't get angry—you know you rather like it."

She sat up and tried to push him from her.

"Whatever do you mean, Bob? It was your fault; you pushed me down."

"Of course I did. Let's lie here a month, just as we are—only I should like your arms a little closer round my neck. Never mind about your skis—I'll take them off."

He was as good as his word, unbuckling the straps and regretted that the monstrous boots forbade him to admire her pretty ankles. When he had removed his own impedimenta, he coolly put his arms about her waist, and lifted her from the deep snow.

"Let's sit down a bit and talk over things," he said. "There's a grand view from here, Nellie—I could see Brigue, if it wasn't for the cloud."

"Do you want to see Brigue, Bob?"

"Do I want to see Brigue?—when I can look at you! I say, Nellie, how silky your hair is—and I do believe your lips are cold. Well, that ought to warm them anyway! Shall I do it again? I will if you like!"

She shook her head; but her colour was high, and her heart beat fast.

"Why do you treat me like this, Bob?"

"Because I love you, Nellie."

"Do you mean it—every word of it?"

"I'll swear a thousand oaths if you like."

"And you'll never love anyone else?"

She put both her hands upon his shoulders, and looked straight into his eyes.

Bob admitted in confidence to his friend Dick, whom he met presently, that it was the look which did it.

"I'll never love anybody else, if I live to two hundred, Nellie. You'll just be my little girl, and when we're married—"

He paused abruptly, wondering what he had said. Nellie, however, sealed the compact instantly. She gave him a smacking kiss on his lips, and held him so tightly that he could not utter a single word.

"I'll have to tell mother, Bob—I'll have to tell her when we get back. I'm sure she'll be kind about it. I know she likes you. Wasn't it lucky we came up here to-day? Wouldn't it have been dreadful to have gone with all those people? Oh, why didn't we bring our lunch—I'm sure I ought to have thought of it. Now, I suppose, we'll have to go down."

Bob shook his head. It really was very nice to be kissed like that, and he didn't mind how long the process continued. The future became as misty as the wraith of cloud floating over Mont Blanc. After all, things might be fixed up somehow, and his two hundred a year would be all right if they didn't get married until he got something to do.

"Anyway," he said, upon reflection, "we needn't move just yet, Nellie—let's stop up here and talk. Perhaps we shall see the hares. I wonder what Marjory will say when we tell her. You know Dick Fenton's awfully gone on her. It would be a game if he had proposed, wouldn't it?"

Nellie didn't like the flippant tone, and looked a little serious. Her keen eyes were roving the valley below; but not a sign either of hares or hounds did they detect. What she did see was a man walking to and fro upon the narrow bridle-track, near Vermala, and another man who dodged upon his heels, but took good care not to be discovered. The pantomime was so engaging that she pointed it out to Bob, despite her desire to pursue that singularly interesting subject, matrimony and its preliminaries.

"Look at that man," she exclaimed in her surprise. "He's being followed by the soldier. I'm quite sure of it. Bob, look at him!"

Bob had no particular curiosity in the matter—so he put his arm about her waist, and peeped over the steep as she desired. Sure enough, the play was going

on just as she had indicated. A man walked leisurely upon the path, while another dodged him in the security of the woods. Such a game of hide-and-seek carried its own explanations. There were two who played it, and one spied upon the other.

"Why, it's a gendarme from Sierre!" exclaimed Bob presently. "I should know the fellow anywhere. What's he up to, I wonder; and who's the man? It must be one of the Vermala people—and look, he's dropped to it now—he knows what's going on!"

It really was vastly curious. The man who had been spied upon detected his enemy suddenly and stood quite still, as though meditating a plan. Presently he turned about, and began to climb the height in a direction which would have carried him to the very wood which now sheltered the lovers. This manoeuvre, closely observed by the gendarme, was not immediately answered by him; but presently he turned about and set off as though to return to the hotel at Vermala. So he became lost to view, and the wood hiding the other, the little comedy terminated abruptly.

"That's a queer game," Bob remarked presently.

Nellie, upon her part, could make nothing of it, nor had she any desire to do so. Suddenly, as they stood there, the hounds burst into view, in more or less full cry, according to their agility. Gliding, shuffling, sprawling, the thin white line made what haste it could toward the village of Andana, where lunch was waiting. No one cared very much about the hares; elderly ladies, repenting of their rashness, would have paid precious gold to have been carried to any destination; the girls desired only that the men should admire their dexterity; the men, that their tricks should not go unobserved by the girls. Here and there, a fine performer rejoiced in the magic of the exercise and swooped down the mountain-side with the dash of an eagle upon its prey. But dash—except as an expression of the language employed—was in the main lacking to the *cortège*, which moved as though in lingering agony.

Bob hazarded the opinion that they had better go down immediately to the "bun-scrap" in the village, and reluctantly, with a last prolonged embrace which threatened the stability of the feminine superstructure, they turned and began to ski gently down through the wood. Hardly, however, had they made a start, when there came, not from below but from above, a loud and prolonged cry, which echoed in the very heights of the Zaat, and brought them to a stand in an instant. Someone had fallen, up yonder, from one of the dangerous precipices—there could not be a doubt of it!

"It must have been that fellow who dodged the gendarme," said Bob, after a little interval of waiting. Nellie did not know what to make of it. The cry was not repeated, and the pines hid the truth from their view. Nevertheless both were

a little awed, and it was impossible not to believe that something untoward had happened.

"I wonder if we ought to go up?" Bob asked her. She replied, with a very white face, that it was not their business.

"There are always plenty of people at Vermala, and I know some of ours have gone up to the Zaat to-day. We could do no good, Bob—I'm sure I would go, if I thought that we could—but is it our business, when there are so many others about?"

"And the whole thing just spoof, perhaps. By George, though; if it were not!—if it were murder, Nellie?"

"Murder?—you make me shudder. How can you be so horrid, Bob?"

Bob hastened to protest that horrors were what most girls doted on; but he was obviously ill at ease, and neither said much while they went down through the wood. A little further on they disturbed, maladroitly, a pair of lovers, who started up in guilty fashion to reveal the red face of a certain Mr. Richard Fenton, and the tousled hair of that amiable and athletic nymph, Miss Marjory Rider. It was the merriest meeting in all the world, and Nellie's "Oh!" when she espied her sister would have done credit to a lady of the theatre.

"Oh, Margy, how can you look me in the face—?"

"But we're engaged, Nell—I'm going to marry Dick."

Dick looked under his eyes at Bob, but he seemed rather abashed, and by no means a lover who would have done credit to the heroics of the poets.

Upon his part, Bob said never a word about his own predicament; but Nellie had it out in a twinkling, and there the four of them stood, giggling and laughing and blushing. It remained for Bob to set matters straight by a resounding cheer, which he did presently to the great scandal of his *fiancée*, and the surprise of all in the vicinity of the wood. Then he discovered that he was hungry—a meagre lover sighing for baked meats.

"We shall miss the bun-scrap if we don't buck up," he said. "I'm sure old Gordon Snagg will eat all the sandwiches within half a mile of him. Let's make a dash for it, Nellie; these two will stop here spooning all day. It makes me sick to see them."

He did not wait for his friend to put on his skis, but taking Nellie by the hand, sailed with her down the nearest slope, and presently came out just above Benny's cottage. Here a little Frenchman, standing on the path which debouches from the woods below Vermala, waved his hand to them in a frantic and demoralised appeal, and when they approached him, began to tell them an excited tale which even one of his own countrymen might not have followed. As for Bob, who had forgotten the only irregular verb he ever knew, and Nellie, whose French hardly represented the guinea expended upon it per quarter, they were

at their wits' end, until Benson himself came to their assistance; as he did almost immediately, lurching down from the chalet and asking gruffly what was up. To him the Frenchman now addressed himself, while Benny listened with an amused smile. Then he interpreted the rigmarole to the others.

"He says a man's fallen down from the height up yonder. That's steep, anyway; a baby would walk the path. Do you know anything of it? Did you see anything, Mr. Otway?"

"We saw a man and another following him," Bob said in a halting way. "I think the little man was a gendarme, for he had something bright on his hat. They went off toward the Zaat, and then we heard one of them shout out. I shouldn't wonder if this gentleman were right"—pointing to the Frenchman—"it's very likely the pair may have had a row."

To their great surprise and wonder, Benny turned as pale as a sheet. Muttering something about a silly tale, he, nevertheless, went about, and returned almost immediately to his chalet, leaving the young couple to appease the excited Frenchman as best they could. That worthy, perceiving their lack of understanding, renewed his appeals, this time to Dick Fenton and Marjory, who had just emerged from the wood.

"What does he say?" Dick asked his friend. Bob assumed an air of reproving superiority, and replied:

"Oh, a man has fallen off the Zaat—!"

Marjory said "Oh!" and turned very pale. Dick was not so sentimental.

"Well," he exclaimed rather pettishly, "why doesn't he go and pick him up? I expect it's all my eye; people don't fall off the Zaat, of all places. Why don't you tell him so, Bob?"

"He speaks *patois*—mine's no good to him. You have a shot, Dick, or perhaps Miss Marjory will?"

They laughed at this, and the Frenchman turned away in despair. These English assuredly were mad and without pity. He had told his story to half a dozen of them already, and all the answer he got was the gibberish of a tongue spoken neither in heaven nor on earth. Obviously, he must find one of his own countrymen, and they must go together to the slopes above. Failing that, he would return, and telephone to the police; an alternative which so pleased him that he was already half-way down to the hotel, when Benny, who had appeared on the scene again, overtook him and entered immediately into an exciting argument. Benny spoke French like a true Parisian—the stranger had no difficulty in understanding him.

The others, meanwhile, had gone down to the village of Andana. There in a little café, ordinarily shut during the winter, the hares and hounds browsed upon a common pasture. And curiously enough, while Bob and Dick ate with

good appetite, their mood was hardly as joyous as it should have been; while those interesting young ladies, Miss Marjory and Miss Nellie Rider, wore already something of the staid demeanour of the married woman.

It was not until after lunch and much good Malvoisie that the young men drew aside to debate the situation in anxious whispers. Assuredly, as Bob admitted, they had "done it," and time alone and that far from amiable old lady, Mrs. Rider, could show them the way out.

In short, as Dick added savagely: "they were in a devil of a mess."

CHAPTER X

A SPECIALIST IS CONSULTED

The amiable discussion, begun in the interval after lunch, was continued at the Palace Hotel during that pleasant hour when tea is a memory and dinner an expectation.

The girls had gone up to their room by this time, hand in hand, and tremulous with the powers of suppressed narration. For them the supreme issue concerned an amiable lady who was quite in ignorance of the surprise prepared for her, and would certainly shed tears when the amatory bombshell exploded. For the youths it was another matter altogether. Conscience had begun to twit them with melancholy gibes upon their rashness. Or, as Bob put it tersely, a couple of wives and three hundred and ninety pounds a year between the pair of them. That was the bald truth. It had seemed otherwise in the woods when the sun shone, and the great mountains looked down kindly upon the lovers.

"What we want," said Dick resolutely, "is someone to advise us." He was a sentimental person, and given to idealism. "We ought to know how we stand before the thing goes any further. Marjory's a dear little girl, and I shall never marry anybody else. But that doesn't say I have the right to marry her on a hundred and ninety a year—you'll admit that, Bob?"

Bob admitted it, and ordered a "mixed Vermouth." They were sitting in the bar at the time, and could hear Bess Bethune scolding the doctor in the passage outside. Distantly, from the drawing-room came the strains of one of Schubert's nocturnes, played by a "half-back" from Harrow, who had some difficulty with the bass. The charming Swiss girl, who served them, did not understand much English, but they would have consulted her for two pins, so dreadful was the

emergency.

"It's my opinion, we were just rushed into it," said Bob, taking up the conversation from an unobservable point, "I like Nellie better than any girl I ever saw, but I confess it's rather a knock to hear she's been engaged three times already. Suppose I were to meet one of the other fellows when we're married! He'd have the laugh of me, anyway."

Dick sighed.

"Marjory's been engaged once—she told me so. I don't think a girl can be expected to know her own mind until she's two or three and twenty. We'd have to take a little flat somewhere, and cut it deuced close; do you think she is the girl to do that, Bob?"

Bob was far from thinking it.

"She proposes to run a motor, Dick, she told me so. You've got fifteen hundred a year and a shooting-box in Scotland, so the hotel says. My place is in Norfolk—I suppose they mean the tent Jack Stevens and I pitched by Horsey Mere last autumn. I didn't say so, though; let's keep it up as long as we can; in for a penny, in for fifteen hundred pound, you know."

Dick drained his glass and appeared to cogitate. Presently he said, almost as though it were an inspiration:

"I tell you what, Bob, let's talk to the 'little widow' about it. I'm sure she's a woman of the world. She'd put us straight, right enough; let's go up and see her."

Bob looked at him scornfully.

"Why, where do you think she is, then?"

"Who, Mrs. Kennaird? Why, in Number 43, of course. It's on the board, isn't it?"

"The board be hanged! She's left the hotel—she left this morning, and went up to the chalet, near Benny's."

"Then let's go to the chalet after her. I'm sure she's one of the nicest little women in the place. And she's been married herself; she'd know what we ought to do. Let's go and see her now."

He stood up, excited by the idea; and, really, when he came to reflect upon it, Bob did not find the notion displeasing. It was true that there had been ugly talk in the hotel concerning this very person; true that she had left under circumstances so mysterious that a hundred versions were already current, both of her past life and the promise of her future. In these the boys had taken little part, except to say that it was a pity people had nothing better to do than to slander so charming a lady; and their abstention made the proposed visit to her chalet seem quite chivalrous. Five minutes later they were climbing up the steps of the skating-rink; whence it was but a little way to the bungalow.

There were lights in the lower windows of the house, and when they knocked, a solemn-looking Swiss maid opened to them and listened as a freckled automaton to their far from coherent explanations. They wished to see Mrs. Kennaird—for they were still in ignorance of her true name—upon a private matter, and one to be explained to no other. To which Dick added the rider, that they would be very grateful to Mrs. Kennaird if she would see them, and would waste as little as possible of her valuable time; a rigmorole at which Bob would have laughed had he not been so very nervous. But, as he was nervous, he stood first upon one foot and then upon the other and never said a word until the maid returned and ushered them into the drawing-room where the "little widow" awaited them. Bob did not know quite why it was, but from that very moment he felt as though his troubles were at an end; while as for Dick, he declared afterwards that all his anxiety vanished like the mists directly he set eyes on that gracious lady.

Lily was surprised to see the boys, for she had been awaiting another—perhaps she welcomed them with a greater cordiality upon that account. Very charming, in a loose gown of black lace, it was not her beauty but her womanhood which cast a spell wherever she went; and to be sure, she was as much out of place in that mediocre medley of Andana as a diamond in a setting of German silver.

"Yes," she said, encouraging Bob to speak, "I remember you perfectly, Mr. Otway; were we not fellow-prisoners at Sierre during the blizzard? And Mr. Fenton: why, you rode in the same sleigh the day we came here."

Fenton said that it was so, and apologised at the same time for certain frivolities upon the journey, particularly for the votive offering of snow hurled at the shrine of one Sir Gordon Snagg. When this had provoked the kindly lady to a smile, Bob took up the running.

"Everyone at the hotel is beastly sorry that you have left," he exclaimed, and then qualified it by saying: "That is, everyone who counts. The place seems quite different since you went."

"Oh, but I only left this morning, and you were paper-chasing, were you not?"

"Of course he was," cried Dick, "and proposing to Nellie Rider at the same time. That's what he came to tell you, Mrs. Kennaird."

"While Bob wants to say that he is engaged to Marjory, and doesn't know what to do about it."

"To do about it! Oh, my dear Mr. Fenton, what do you mean?"

They were both blushing very much by this time, and it was quite a charity to ask them to sit down. Lily herself took a seat upon the sofa, and, enjoying the situation immensely, encouraged them to go on.

"So I must congratulate you both; how good of you to take me into your

confidence so soon. Why, it was only this morning, was it not?"

"In the woods below the Zaat," interposed Bob quickly; "I could show you the place."

"And I was just a quarter of a mile away. Was it not a coincidence, Mrs. Kennaird? We were both done for when we met."

She looked from one to the other, asking herself whether this was said in jest, or was indeed the very far from sentimental confession of a not unsentimental youth. And that was a riddle she could not read. It seemed to her that she was listening to boys from a public school, who had all the fine airs and the sporadic idiom of the city, but were at heart as simple as any Corydon from remote pastures.

"Really," she said, with just a suspicion of reproach in her tone. "Really, you must be serious, Mr. Fenton."

"I was never more serious in my life. We're both engaged, and we've got three hundred and ninety pounds a year between us; that's why we've come to you. You can tell us what we ought to do about it."

She laughed—it was so droll.

"Then you regard it altogether as a matter of money?"

Bob looked rueful.

"We don't, but Mrs. Rider will. These old girls are regular nuts on the cash; she's sure to want to know what we've got."

"Then, of course, you will tell her everything?"

They looked at each other a little sorrowfully. It was Dick who made answer.

"If we do, the engagements will be off. We shall have to cut the girls tomorrow, and it would make it awkward for them. Don't you think we could have a truce or something—lie low until the night before we go? Don't you think that, Mrs. Kennaird?"

Lily shook her head.

"I think you are a pair of babies," she said emphatically. "You don't seem to know whether you wish to marry or not. That enters into the question, I think; you certainly ought to make up your minds."

They nodded their heads as though perfectly in accord with so obvious a truth. Presently, Bob, who hugged his knee during the harangue—not under the delusion that it was Nellie Rider's waist, but because he did not know what to do with his hands—spoke for the pair of them.

"You see," he said—and Lily saw nothing but the humour of it—"you see it's this way. Dick's a sentimentalist, and I'm a philosopher, and we've tumbled into the same boat somehow. I would like to marry Nellie if I could make her happy, and all that sort of thing; but it's rotten beginning on two hundred a year, and

Dick's only got a hundred and ninety. Now what I feel is this: Is it quite fair to the girls?"

"Did you think of that when you proposed to them this morning?"

Dick shook his head.

"I was never more in love in my life," he said. "I forgot everything else in heaven or earth but Marjory. I would marry her to-morrow, if it wasn't for the beastly cash."

"And you, Mr. Otway?"

"I say the same, but I don't think I should care to begin so soon. She might give me a year's grace."

Lily nodded her head; she understood now.

"I think you will have your year," she said a little merrily. "To tell you the truth, Mr. Otway, I should not be surprised if you remained a bachelor. As to Mr. Fenton, well, I think that will depend upon Mrs. Rider. Would you like me to speak to her for you, for both of you if you wish it?"

They jumped at the idea. She was a regular brick, and so very much superior to anyone at Andana that the thing was as good as done if she became their ambassador. The promise put them in the seventh heaven.

"If she says 'No,' we can let bygones be bygones," Bob added enthusiastically. "I will treat Nellie as a sister, and the hotel need know nothing about it. You don't know what a load you've taken off my back, Mrs. Kennaird; I shall never forget it."

She rejoined that it was a pleasure to help two silly boys in love, and having said it, the boys in their turn perceived that the interview must terminate. Reluctantly, they shook hands with her, and then, as she stood with them a moment at the door of the chalet, Dick Fenton remarked the presence of two gendarmes, who were going up toward Vermala, carrying lanterns in their hands. He bethought him immediately of the comic-tragedy of the morning, and began to tell her about it, just to show that he could speak of other things than matrimony.

"They say there's been a murder up in the woods," he declared cheerfully; "that's the very latest intelligence at Vermala. Bob saw an Englishman being followed by one of the Swiss police, and he heard a weird cry a little while afterwards. Then we met an old Frenchman, who declared that he saw the gendarme fall on the slope below the Zaat. Those fellows would be going up to look for him, I suppose. There'll be a pretty hullabaloo if they find him."

She did not speak a word; they mistook her silence for lack of interest, and fearing to stay longer, said "good night" once more, and went with boyish steps

down the hillside together.

CHAPTER XI

THE VIGIL OF TRAGEDY

Lily watched the boys go down the hillside, and when they were lost to view she did not move from the door of the chalet. An onlooker might have said that her eyes searched the heights for tidings they alone could give her. A bitter wind blowing up the valley, a sky pregnant with omens of tempest, did not drive her back to the shelter of the house. She was unconscious of the cold, and took a cloak from the saturnine maid with a smile and a protest.

"I really do not want it, Louise—I don't feel the cold."

"But, Madame, it is going to snow; you will be ill, Madame, and no one to nurse you."

Lily put the cloak about her shoulders, and then asked the girl another question.

"Can you see a lantern upon the hillside, Louise, up there below Vermala?" The maid, grown curious, came and stood with her, but declared she could see nothing.

"There were gendarmes by here just now, Madame. I know them both, Albert and Philip, from Sion; there will have been trouble at the hotel, then; they would not send Monsieur Albert if it were not so."

Lily nodded her head.

"You do not often have trouble up here, Louise?"

"Ah, Madame, the world is all the same whether you are up in the mountains or down in the valleys. There are wicked people at Andana, just as anywhere else. It would be one of the waiters who has robbed his master. There are Germans at Vermala, and they are all thieves—so, you see, the police must be here."

Lily made no reply. The lanterns had come into view by this time, and could be seen dancing to and fro upon the high path which leads up to the hotel perched upon the plateau below the Zaat. It was apparent that the men were not searching the hillside as she had supposed; and, when she was sure of this, she shut the door and went back to the little library. Louise, meanwhile, had returned to the kitchen to prepare the modest supper which should be served

at eight o'clock. Perhaps the gendarmes would pay the chalet a visit upon their return, in view of which possibility some culinary diligence was necessary.

In the library, Lily sat down to her writing-table to finish a letter to her brother Harold, laid aside upon the appearance of the boys, and now taken up with reluctance.

She had been trying to tell her brother to concern himself less with her affairs, and to be sure that whatever she might do, due regard would be paid to the interests and the scruples of others. Such a theme had been difficult enough before the boys appeared; but she found it quite impossible when they had left. Not a line could she write; not a sentence frame. A shadow had enveloped her suddenly, and she could not escape it.

Word by word she pieced together the story she had heard and tried to give it a meaning. A man pursued upon the mountain road and another following him! Then a loud cry heard by several people, and the belief, expressed openly, that murder had been done. Shrinking from her own dread of a terrible truth, she could not quiet the voice which told her that there was but one man at Vermala in whom, the probabilities being considered, the police might be interested—and that man, her husband, Luton! Why, the whole trend of his life pointed to such an end as this. And she had feared and dreamed of it since the day she first learned to know him and to realise the tragedy of her own fate. The end would come before all the world, she had said—and the day of it was at hand!

She put the letter into the blotting book, and went to the window again. The lanterns were no longer to be seen, and the night had come down with a darkness so intense that even the nearer slopes were invisible. Shut from her eyes, the hidden woods were revealed to a keen imagination which filled them with alien figures, searching here and there for a truth which must so alter her own life (if such a truth existed) that hereafter the whole world would hardly offer her a harbourage from the shame of it.

As in a vision, she saw the dead man lying there, deep in the snow, and the white flakes falling anew upon his face. A glow from a lantern searched it out, and declared the horror of the secret. And up there at the hotel another waited, dreading the instant of discovery—perchance preparing already for flight in the hope that discovery might never come.

It was all hysterical, and out of harmony with her good common sense, as she admitted when she turned from the window, and, looking at the clock, discovered it to be half-past six precisely. At seven, Luton had promised to come down from Vermala to see if there were a telegram from Sir Frederick Kennaird—letter there could hardly be for another four and twenty hours. If he came, and assuredly he would come, he might very well give an account of the affair which would so deride her fancies that she would be ashamed even to remember them.

Or, he might say that he knew nothing of the affair at all, had taken no part in it, and had not heard it named. The latter was quite an optimistic version, to which she clung tenaciously, sitting again at her writing-table and composing quite a satisfactory epistle upon Andana and its people; to which she added excellent reasons for her preference of the chalet she occupied. The hotel, she declared, was far too noisy—her nerves were no longer equal to the exigencies of distracted youth, nor could she support the banalities of a middle-age which sought to stamp out the years by a grotesque display of elephantine energies. From these she had fled to the solitude of the chalet—a half-truth which entirely overlooked the personal element and skimmed over the broken ground where the seeds of slander had fallen.

Seven o'clock struck while she was still at the table, but there was no sign of Luton, nor any message from him at the quarter past the hour. If he were late, then, she thought, that was the first occasion she could remember when he had neglected an appointment to his own advantage and the benefit of his creditors. He had told her that his need was urgent, and had sent letters from Bothand and Co. confirming his statements. Nine thousand four hundred pounds must be paid if he would stave off those "further proceedings" with which they threatened him; and if he did not pay, then it was clear that the firm would discover at a later date excellent reasons for a criminal prosecution. In such a case, extradition would not be refused, nor would it be difficult for the police to trace a man who was at so little pains to act prudently as Luton Delayne.

The clock struck the three-quarters, and Lily put on her cloak and went to the door again. It was snowing heavily by this time, and the wind almost raging in the pass. Despite the rigours of the night, she determined to go a little way upon the road in the hope that she might meet Luton; and she set out bravely, afraid that the wrathful Louise might detect her and yet determined in her purpose. Two hundred yards from the chalet, a burst of light upon the hillside marked the spot where the brothers Benson were living, and by this she must go upon her way to Vermala. It chanced, however, that Jack Benson stood at the door of the shed when she approached, and it was natural to ask him how his brother did. Jack thought little of women, as a rule, and he dreaded this particular woman's influence with Benny; but he could not answer her uncivilly, and like the others, he was, metaphorically, at her feet before she had spoken twenty words to him.

"Is that you, Mrs. Kennaird; what a night, isn't it? Aren't you rather daring to be out?"

"Oh!" she said, "I had no idea there was such a wind blowing. Will you let me shelter a moment? I'm really quite out of breath. That's the shed where your brother keeps his aeroplane, is it not? He told me all about it, you know. I'm very much interested."

Jack muttered to himself that Benny was losing his wits, or he would never have talked about the machine to a woman; but a moment's reflection reminded him that the sex is rarely of a mechanical turn, and would hardly profit by the confidence. So he threw the door open wide, and the electric lamps blazing within cast a warm aureole upon the snow and upon Lily's pale face. Perhaps Jack understood his brother's infatuation then, if he could not condone it.

"You'll find us rather upside down," he said apologetically. "We're always like that when Benny's away—we haven't his idea of order. But we're pretty useful in our way, and the abbé's as good as any mechanic from Bleriot's. He's just turning up the planes, if you understand what that is, Mrs. Kennaird; sewing them up with steel wire, so to speak. I assure you, we'd have gone to pot without the abbé."

The little priest looked up and smiled pleasantly. He wore a white apron over his cassock, and sat with one of Benny's planes over his knee, repairing and relaying the canvas with the skill of a trained workman. Jack himself was enveloped in engineer's overalls, and had been working at a forge in the far corner; he, too, was liberally decorated with choice smuts, and had a very chart of carbon upon his cheeks.

"Do you say Mr. Benson is away?" Lily asked him. Jack responded as one who had a personal grievance.

"He was off before lunch. Wouldn't eat anything for some reason which he'll have forgotten by the time he comes back. I don't know where he is, I'm sure. He always goes away just when we want him most."

"But, surely, this is a dreadful night to be out; he should have returned by this time?"

The abbé nodded his head.

"Madame is quite right," he said; "he should have returned. It is very necessary for him to be here these days; he will lose a great deal of money if he behaves so foolishly; would that Madame told him as much!"

"I?" exclaimed Lily, turning her large eyes upon him. "But, surely, Mr. Benson would not listen to a woman?"

"He would listen to you," Jack rejoined with emphasis. "He thinks a good deal of your opinion—he told me so."

She smiled, but turned away her eyes nevertheless. "And what am I to say to your brother?"

"Tell him that he can do it yet, if he will only believe as much. Say that it's not the game for him to be here, there and everywhere when his future depends on what we're doing for him. If he wins the ten thousand pounds put up by the London daily paper, he's a made man for life. There's nothing Benny could not do with capital, nothing on earth, I do believe. Why, he's invented a dozen machines

as clever as this, and all of them are just so many drawings, because he hasn't got the money to build them. And here's ten thousand going begging, so to speak, and he's dreaming all the time; acting like some moonsick shepherdess, and got just about as much sense in his head. If you'd tell him that, you'd be doing him a very great kindness, Mrs. Kennaird. There's no one else at Andana who could do it, I assure you."

Lily looked from one to the other: her face was very pale, her manner unusually earnest.

"And what does Monsieur l'Abbé say?"

The abbé ceased to work at the canvas upon his knee.

"I think that Madame is the only person who could help us," he said at length; and having said it he cast down his eyes and went on with his work. She was a clever woman, and she would understand that, he thought. Nor was he mistaken. Madame understood him perfectly.

"I see Mr. Benson so rarely," she said. "Now that I have left the hotel my opportunities will be fewer. But that is not to say that I will not do my best when I do see him, if you care to tell him so."

Jack was delighted.

"I'll send him down to your place in the morning," he exclaimed; "that is, with your permission, he shall come directly after breakfast. Perhaps you will be going skating or something. If so, he might meet you on the rink?"

She smiled at his eagerness.

"I shall be pleased to see your brother any time. Now I fear I must go. Is not that eight o'clock striking? My cook will never forgive me."

A miserable cuckoo-clock shrieked the hour with intolerable emphasis, and reminded them all of the flesh-pots. Jack, however, remembered his manners sufficiently to escort her down the hillside, and it was a quarter past eight when he left her at her own door. The snow still fell fast, and the wind howled dismally up the valley. It was going to be a dreadful night.

"You won't forget," he said as he turned at her gate and drew the collar of his heavy coat about his ears. She answered that she would expect Benny sometime during the morning, and immediately went in to ask her servant if anyone had come. When Louise retorted with a shrug of the shoulders and the inquiry, "Who would come upon such a night?" Madame had nothing to say.

The hours were making it very difficult for her to believe the best. The dawn found her still awake, and quite prepared for that hour of crisis which such

a life as Luton's had made inevitable.

CHAPTER XII

FLIGHT

The Abbé Villari slept at Benny's chalet that night, fearful of the storm, and not a little concerned at the absence of its master. This anxiety he shared with Jack, who suggested a hundred reasons which might have taken Benny to Sierre, but none which could have kept him there—unless it were the storm, which in the case of such a man seemed altogether insufficient.

"He'll have gone down to see if the stuff has come," Jack declared with conviction; "they say at the stables that he engaged a sleigh shortly after ten o'clock. I know he's ordered a lot of things, and he was particularly anxious to have the new steel arms for the frame. If the snow's very bad down there, the fellow who drives the sleigh may have refused to come up, and then Benny would be on his own. That wouldn't matter much to him, though, for he's as tough as old leather, and would just as soon walk up as ride. I can't think why he hasn't done it, Abbé."

The abbé agreed, although he had a poor opinion of some of the coachmen at Andana.

"The fellows like to spend a night in the town," he said, with a suggestion of ascetic regret. "It is difficult for a stranger to think of Sierre in such a light, but, after all, these things are a question of opportunity. A showman with a bear is a great person in a village where they have never seen bears, and so a man with a fiddle is an orchestra for people who have no music. I should imagine that André has refused to come back, and that your brother will remain at the Terminus Hotel. If so, he will be very comfortable, for the wines are excellent, and nobody would quarrel with the cooking. I think we had better say that he has done so, and go on with our work. There is nothing so unprofitable as speculation when time alone can tell us the truth."

Jack admitted the good sense of it, but he did little work, and after they had supped he went some way down to the road toward the village of Andana in the hope that he might discover Benny and the sleigh. It was a vain quest, however, and he returned to tell the abbé that the wind had nearly blown him off his legs, and that if Benny had refused to return from Sierre, he was no fool for his choice.

Thereafter they ceased to speak about it, but neither suggested bed; and although they slept a little after twelve o'clock, the dawn found them wide awake and alert for tidings of the wanderer.

Benny was at Sierre—their guess was perfectly correct. Where they were at fault was in the matter of motive, which they failed entirely to comprehend. Which mystery is the better understood by harking back to the bridle track below Vermala, at an hour when a certain foreigner spoke of a strange affair upon the hillside, and those two masters of idiomatic but obsolete French, Bob Otway and Dick Fenton, responded incoherently to his vain appeals.

Benny, it will be remembered, had heard the Frenchman's story, and immediately understood its meaning. His knowledge of Luton Delayne convinced him that such an act of folly was to be expected from a man famous in two counties for the violence of his temper. He perceived that some scandalous affair had set the police upon the baronet's track, that one of them had been set to watch him and had been detected in the act. There had been an exchange of angry words, of abuse upon the one hand and of insolence upon the other—and then the blow. Just as Luton Delayne had invited the contempt of his neighbours at Holmswell by descending to a vulgar arena in which a butcher figured not ingloriously, so here in Switzerland had his temper got the better of him and this blow been struck. What the consequences might be, Benny did not care to ask himself; but he realised that they might be momentous, and remembering that the man was Lily's husband, he went up to Vermala at once and began to search the hillside. Was it possible that the affair had been nothing but an idle fracas after all? Had the gendarme gone off to report the matter to his superiors, as one calling for a prosecution which would amuse the community? It might be that, he said, and disbelieving it utterly, he turned to the heights.

The snow was firm and hard upon the narrow track, and revealed little even to his keen eyes. He perceived that luges had gone up to the hotel, and he could almost say how many. The track itself disclosed but gentle slopes, and none which could be called a precipice even by an imaginative person. The woods harboured deep drifts of snow, and were scarred here and there by the trails of skis; but at one spot alone was there any possible scene for such a drama as the Frenchman had described. This lay immediately below the hotel; a plateau upon which two men could stand side by side, with a sheer wall of rock falling fifty or sixty feet away from it and an arbour of the pines, which the sun could hardly penetrate, at its foot.

Benny climbed to the plateau, and kneeling there he peered down to the depths. A great drift of snow had culminated about the trunks of three trees which appeared to grow straight out of the hillside. On the plateau itself there were footprints which clearly indicated that two people had faced each other, and

that a scuffle had taken place. But, and this was the more remarkable thing, save for a curious wraith of snow some twenty feet down the abyss, there was no scar upon the unbroken sheet of white which stretched from the plateau to the trees; not a mark which would have invited the suspicions of the most watchful. Many men, satisfied with the scrutiny, would have gone on at once, convinced that the glen could tell them nothing; but Benny was not that kind of man, and when he had reflected upon it a little while, and had made sure that his acts would not be observed, an idea came to him, and he put it into practice immediately. It was nothing less than this: to descend the precipice by the help of the trees, and to discover for himself the secret of the snow wraith, if secret there were.

The feat was not a little difficult, perhaps really dangerous. But here was a man who had ploughed the "roaring forties" in an old Scotch brig, and had the foot of a goat upon a height. Swinging himself out upon a branch, to which he leaped, Benny climbed over to other branches; then he slid down the trunk of a pine as a sailor down a pole. He was five minutes in the hollow below the plateau, and a quarter of an hour making his way back through the heavy drifts to the path he had quitted. Then he went straight on to the hotel at Vermala—a silent man, with set face and eyes which saw nothing but the track before him.

To the porter who told him that the Englishman, Mr. Faikes, was engaged in his private room Benny merely replied: "Go back, and say he'll have to see me." Thereafter, he waited, standing immobile in the hall, and quite unconscious of the guests who studied him with critical eyes. Some of these knew him for the winner of the Grand Prix down at Andana, and wondered that such a man should interest himself in Alpine sports; but others made a jest upon his earnestness, and said, behind their papers, that he looked like the impersonification of tragedy.

Luton Delayne had a sitting-room looking over toward the Weissshorn, and here Benny discovered him a few moments later. A whisky-and-soda stood at his side, and the ends of innumerable cigarettes lay in a tawdry Swiss ash-tray. Evidently he had but recently returned from the open, for he still wore heavy boots and puttees, and these were wet with the snow. His manner was characteristically aggressive, and his question, "Well, what the devil do you want with me?" quite in the expected tone.

Benny shut the door of the room carefully behind him, and then crossed it on tip-toe, an unnecessary proceeding, but one in keeping with his own desire for secrecy. His hands were thrust deep in his trousers pockets, and he had quite forgotten to take off the old Alpine hat without which his best friends at Andana would not have recognised him. Delayne could not but see that this man had a right to come to him as he did, and his face blanched suddenly.

"You know why I have come here, Sir Luton—none but a d—d fool would ask that question. I've come to save your neck!"

Delayne puffed hard at his cigarette, and then laid the end of it down with the others.

"Oh," he exclaimed in the grand manner; "so you know about the row, then?"

Benny went to the window and looked out. The plateau lay a hundred yards from the hotel, but was hidden by a belt of trees. He wondered if others had already made their way there—searching for what he had found. The minutes were precious if he would save this madman for a woman's sake.

"Yes," he said, swinging round on his heel, "I know about the row. Half the place is talking about it. I suppose you'll be joining in yourself just now—when the police come along. That should be before morning with any luck—it won't be much later anyway."

The baronet rose and walked across to the window. Benny could see that his hands were twitching, while his eyes almost danced in his head.

"The man followed me," he said inconsequently. "It was the most damnably impertinent thing I ever saw in all my life. When I asked him what he wanted, he wouldn't say a word. I warned him to keep off, and he was on my heels again in five minutes. Would you stand that yourself? You're a man, and can judge between us? Would you stand it?"

Benny shrugged his shoulders.

"What we have to stand depends on our footing. The man who grubs in dirty soil mustn't complain that his hands are black. You came to blows, I suppose, and he went over. Is that what you would say?"

"I struck him on the face, and he tried to draw a revolver on me—we were on the plateau, and he went over. If he's hurt, I'll pay compensation. What more do you want?"

Benny looked at him curiously. Was he lying outright, or merely reciting a defence he had rehearsed in the interval? It was difficult to say. The truth must be told without delay, for the truth alone could move him.

"You say the man went over. Did you see him after he fell?"

"See him! What do you mean?"

"I ask if you saw him after he fell—he might have been injured, you know?"

Delayne returned to the table, and took a deep draught from the tumbler there.

"You know something," he said, averting his eyes. "Well, I'm not a child; tell me."

Benny crossed over, and looked him full in the face.

"It's a pity you didn't stop," he said quietly—"the man's dead—!"

Delayne began to tremble, a little at first and then as one stricken by an ague. Reaction had come in an instant—the man's hands were as cold as ice, he

could not keep still.

"How do you know he's dead?"

"I have seen him, touched him! He's stone dead at the foot of the clump of pines: that's what I came here to tell you."

Delayne said: "My God!" and sank into the chair. He began to blubber like a child; his whole body twitched in a nervous collapse to be expected of such a temperament. The truth had stricken him; it prevailed above any thought of his own safety, which was left to the man who had come to him with so little ceremony.

"You have twenty hours at the best, six at the worst," Benny said, ignoring the outbreak and knowing that it would pass. "If the little Frenchman who saw him fall doesn't blab, the police may not be here until the morning. You'll have to answer for this sooner or later, but you'll answer it better across the frontier. Are you going to start at once, or wait for them to come for you? Take another drop of that whisky, and then tell me. I can give you that long."

The man obeyed him like a child. He was already trying to excuse himself, to make a case which might be put to a jury subsequently.

"It's no more than mischance, look at it how you like. He provoked me—I had no intention to kill him. If he'd have gone away, it would have been all right. What business had he to follow me, I ask you, what business had he? Is this a free country? Then why did he spy on me? Let the police answer that: what right had he to spy on me?"

Benny became contemptuous now.

"They'll answer it sharp enough when they are here. You'll learn pretty quick whether it's a free country or not. If I were you, I would choose another, and let my lawyers do the talking from there. You could catch the afternoon train through the tunnel, if you were quick about it. You'd be in Italy to-morrow, and in my house opposite Magadino the day after. There's nobody there but an old Italian woman, and she couldn't pronounce your name if she knew it. I have the shanty until the winter—the hydroplanes I was running in the fall are still there, and some other stuff. Say you come on my business, and no one will question you. That's what I would do if I were you, and I wouldn't be long in doing it either."

He stood waiting for an answer, his arms still thrust deep into his trousers pockets and his hat awry. The expression of low cunning which crept upon the baronet's face did not deter him in any way. He cared not a straw for any imputations of motive, whatever they might be. A determination to save Lily Delayne from the shame of this madness drove him as a spur. Had it been otherwise he would not have crossed the street at this man's beck.

Delayne understood the situation perfectly, and was upon the point of con-

fessing as much. He knew how sure was his wife's influence over men, and for an instant a savage impulse of jealousy impelled him to turn on the man who would have befriended him for his wife's sake and to say all that was in his mind. From this an instinct of prudence saved him at the last moment. He remembered the words: "The man is dead," and began to shudder. Yes, flight was his only chance—but flight must imply guilt!

"Oh," he exclaimed, after a moment's hesitation, "that's all very well, but if I go, what will they say? And my valet, Paul—what of him? Is he ready to hold his tongue, do you think?"

"I think nothing. Send him to Paris by the Simplon to-night. Tell him you're following later. You're not going to say that you've been mad enough to take him into your confidence?"

"Nothing of the kind; but he's a Swiss. They may question him about me?"

"In Paris—"

Delayne shrugged his shoulders.

"If I go, I admit that the police had the right to molest me."

"If you stay, by God, they'll guillotine you. Don't you understand that—don't you see that this man was in the service of the State? Lord, a child would know better. And you're losing the minutes. I say, the minutes; and every one may be the most precious you'll ever live."

Delayne still hesitated, pacing the room, and muttering all the jargon of defence he had recited a hundred times since the instant of his passion. Despite his dilemma, certain instincts of his pride remained. How should he tell this bulldog of an engineer that he was at his wits' end to pay his hotel bill? He would never have told him had not Benny guessed it from the first.

"You want money, perhaps?" he said, speaking in a new tone, which a sense of delicacy forced upon him. "Well, I'll see you through this, and you can pay me when you like. I'll give you a hundred at Brigue, and you can run the shanty with that until I come. Ten pounds should see your man to Paris—let him go to a back-street hotel until you come. You know the place well enough for that, and can direct him. I'm going down to order the sleigh. It'll be at the cross-roads above the Palace in half an hour. If you're not there when I bring it, a telegram will go to Sierre. As sure as I stand here, I'll dispatch that if you keep me waiting five minutes. Now go, and do what I tell you—you've played the fool long enough."

He strode from the room and the hotel. Half an hour afterwards, Luton Delayne and the valet, Paul, met him at the cross-roads above Andana, and stepped aboard the sleigh he had hired from Karl Meyer, the jobmaster at the Park. Benny's excuse, that he wished to go down alone to bring up "stuff" from Sierre, satisfied the phlegmatic German, who had a good customer in this active Englishman. He promised to telephone for a second horse to be at the Terminus

Hotel in the valley that night, and gave no further thought to the matter.

Benny, in the meantime, discovered powers of prevision which were quite remarkable. His immediate object was to get this madman across the Pass, and to harbour him in his own shanty on Lake Maggiore without the loss of an hour. He foresaw that the departure of a certain Mr. Faikes from the hotel at Vermala, and the journey of that worthy's valet to Paris, would be in his favour. Luton Delayne must take his own name at Domo d'Ossola, where his presence would be of no concern to the Swiss authorities, and would never be associated with such a crime. The better to attain this object, he set down the valet, Paul, at the station in Sierre, and then, under the pretence that he himself and Sir Luton were to pass a few days at the Terminus Hotel, he returned at once to the great high road through the valley of the Simplon, and set out boldly for Visp.

Here, and here only, luck went with him. He had been but three hours upon the road when the storm overtook him—another hour brought him to a hamlet, where the lights of a railway station shone warmly through the blinding haze of snow. He inquired of the station-master, and learned that a train would leave for Milan within the hour. Nothing could be more opportune; he believed that he had succeeded in his task beyond all hope, and that the story of the tragedy at Vermala would never be known to the world.

"Go straight through to Domo d'Ossola without a word to anybody," he said to Delayne. "I will telegraph instructions to the old woman at the shanty to-morrow, and you can make your way there as soon as you please. If there is any danger, I will warn you of it. That's my part of the business: yours is to hold your tongue, whatever the consequences."

Sir Luton hardly answered him. A certain contempt for himself because he had let this masterful personage persuade him to an ignominious flight now took possession of him, and entirely banished any thought of gratitude. The money which was thrust upon him he received with the air of a master borrowing from a servant. Distance had dwarfed his understanding of danger, and he had forgotten already his own platitudes of defence. Was he not an Englishman, and what right had that d—d fool to spy upon him? For two pins he would have returned to Sierre and told the authorities as much.

Of this resolution he quickly repented, and, being bundled into the train for Milan, condescended to offer his hand to the man who had saved him. It chanced, however, that Benny had turned his back at this particular moment, and thus missed the proffered grasp which was to be the laurel upon his altruism. Five minutes later he set out through the blinding storm for Sierre, where he arrived at the Terminus Hotel in time for dinner. All thoughts of going up to Andana that night had now been abandoned. He decided to sleep at the hotel, and to return as soon as daylight would let him.

Perhaps such a change from his normal way of life was not unwelcome. There is bustle of a kind at Sierre, where stranded tourists are wont to gather and excited English folk to indulge in the platitudes of travel. This pleasant little town, too, is honoured by the great Simplon express, which calls after nine o'clock, and is to be stopped by the station-master's whistle when there are passengers to take up. Benny dined at his leisure, and having lighted a cigar, he strolled over to the station and waited for the express to come in. The snow fell heavily, and the wind moaned in the heights; but there was good shelter here at the heart of the valley and a sense of sanctuary very welcome. Benny knew that he had done as good a day's work as he would ever do; and, perhaps, he began to think that after all he was not such an unlucky mortal—for, surely, the greatest of good luck is the possibility to help others.

Half an hour passed in optimistic reflections, and then the express from Milan came in. There were three English passengers, and the station-master ran out on the rails and blew a shrill whistle when the great flaming headlights of the engine appeared round the bend. Then the English folk were hauled up into a wagon-lit and the train went on, scattering flaming sparks into the haze of snow. When all was silent in the station, Benny returned toward the hotel, and had taken some twenty steps across the courtyard when he came almost face to face with Paul, the valet, who walked arm-in-arm with a diminutive gendarme, to whom he was talking earnestly. Benny watched him as though he had seen a ghost. Should not the fellow have been on his way to Paris three hours or more ago!

He did not know what to do: whether to speak to the man or merely to watch him. Delayne had spoken little of this servant, nor did Benny know whether he were to be trusted or feared. On the face of it, the latter opinion should have been preferred; for what had a valet to do with the police, and how came it that this particular valet postponed his visit to Paris to confab with one of them? Benny detected danger and drew back into the shadows.

"They may take him at the frontier after all," he said.

CHAPTER XIII

AFTER THE STORM

Bob Otway was down very early upon the morning after the great storm, and

he was not a little surprised to find Dick Fenton waiting upon the plateau before the hotel, whence he surveyed the newly-fallen snow with greedy eyes. In truth, Dick was telling himself that he would take Marjory up to the wood again, and compel her to confess that she loved him; an unnecessary repetition of an ancient story, but pleasant enough when white arms go with it.

Bob Otway was less sentimental. He confessed that he felt a little down, and he added the information that the concierge was a "nut." There had been great "events" last night after Dick went to bed to dream of Marjory; much damage had been done. All this would be charged for when the weekly bills were sent on, and as Bob asked ruefully: "What do you think a 'cello's worth, Dick; is it worth thirty shillings?" By which he implied the destruction of such an instrument and his own share therein.

"It was Rivers who began it," he explained, as they strolled about arm in arm, waiting for the bell to announce morning coffee: "He tried to hang up the big clock in the hall with a drawing pin, and when the concierge spotted him, Billy Godeyer was doing the same for the picture of the Battle of Sedan. Then Rivers found that the band had left their instruments behind in the drawing-room, and we had a concert. Never saw such rot; I played the 'cello and all the hair came out of the bow before I'd sawed out half a tune. They say we smashed five notes in the piano, but I don't believe it. Old Gordon Snagg doesn't like noise, so we played on his account; he'd pay the damage if he were a gentleman."

Dick agreed to that, but didn't much care to talk about music. The night had brought pleasant dreams of Marjory. He really was rather sorry that they had chosen the "little widow" for their ambassador.

"We were in too much of a hurry," he said, arguing in a philosophical if amatory vein. "Why not let it run until we get back to England? It's beastly to think about money in such a place as this, and I'm sure Marjory would hate me for doing it. I'll speak to my uncle when I get back, and he might do something for me. Perhaps he'll send me out to Canada; there's lots of cash to be made there, and why shouldn't we make some of it? Let's have some fun, Bob. You're such a gloomy beggar; you always look at things in the worst light."

Bob retorted that it depended upon the age of the lady; a vague and half-truthful remembrance of the havoc which the sun had played with the otherwise peach-like skin of a nameless nymph. The morning found him in a dubious-mood about Nellie, but less alarmed about the enormity of the offence. She really was a "jolly little girl," and it had been quite impossible not to propose to her in the circumstances. With good luck, her views upon the final step of matrimony might be as distant as his own. And who could say that something would not turn up?

"Mrs. Rider will make the devil of a row about it, and we shall have to clear

out," he said musingly. "I know she brought the girls here to get 'em off, but she won't think very much of the particular planks for this particular plunge. I'm sorry, too, that we spoke to the 'little widow.' It's rather jolly to be thought rich, though it wouldn't be honest to the girls to leave them under that impression. I shall tell Nellie just what I've got when we're up in the wood this morning. Two hundred a year sounds all right when someone else is paying your hotel bill. It's when you come to running a pug dog and a motor-car that you find where the slice pinches."

"But one would begin in a small way, Bob."

Bob shook his head.

"That's what the modern girl tells you; she follows it up with the hint that she'd like a flat overlooking the park, and really couldn't live in Bayswater. It's a day of big ideas and little balances. I believe my old guv'nor was right when he said that money was the greatest curse that ever came into the world. There'd be a lot of happiness if it wasn't for money, Dick. Think of it, if fashion wasn't so rotten, we might camp out the first year, live in a tent for two, and sleep by the roadside. I'm told it's healthy, and I know Mecredy did it. There'd be no rent to pay, and we might sell our portraits as an advertisement for a tonic. As it is, we've just got to own up that we're paupers; and if the girls take pity on us—well, we'll feel smaller than ever."

Dick was not so sure of it. Ancient fables concerning the angelic qualities of the sex still buoyed him up with youthful hopes.

"Oh," he said loftily, "that's all rot, Bob. Money's something, of course, but lots of girls don't think much about it. Look at old Gordon Snagg. He's supposed to be worth half a million; they say he paid ten thousand for his knighthood; do you think Marjory would have had him if he'd have proposed to her? Give sentiment half a chance. Surely, it is possible to believe that the girl you're going to marry has some other ideas but those of your bank balance?"

Bob would not give in.

"Wait until old Mrs. Rider gets going," he exclaimed sententiously. "We shall hear some home truths then, old chap, and just when we were beginning to enjoy ourselves. By Jove, isn't it a day! Look at the sun on the old Rothhorn; isn't it splendid, Dick? and it rises upon our hour of woe. Well, I suppose the ancient martyrs went through this kind of thing; but I'm hanged if I wouldn't sooner go to the dentist any day. What shall we say to the old girl? How shall we tell her that the truth—?"

"I shall tell her for Marjory's sake. Why, I believe she's up at the window there, and Nellie as well. Don't you see them, Bob?"

The girls were giggling behind the sun-blind of a third-floor window, but they disappeared almost instantly when their object of attracting attention had

been achieved. It still wanted ten minutes to the first breakfast-bell, and a few active folk had now appeared to enjoy the sunshine, or to drag luges up the ice-run and have a "canter" down before the coffee. The latter idea appealed to the boys; and getting their luges from the hall, they went up to the starting-point. This was the moment, however, when a little procession appeared upon the mountain track above them; and being attracted by the novelty of the spectacle, they stood to see it pass.

"They're soldiers, aren't they, Bob?"

"Looks very much like it. What can they be doing up here?"

"Would it be about the story? Surely, they can't have found the man?"

"I wouldn't wonder; why, here's our little Frenchman, who wanted to tell us all about it yesterday. He'll know what's up; let's ask him."

"But he doesn't understand your French!"

Bob was not to be daunted. Walking across the snow to the edge of the wood, he took off his hat to the Frenchman, and asked him the question: "What are they doing up there, monsieur?"

The reply overwhelmed the young man by its velocity. He caught the word *un mort*, or thought that he did; but so great was the stranger's desire to tell him that a flood of terrible English followed upon the outbreak. The soldiers had been searching the snow for the body of a comrade, so much Bob made of it; and not only had they been searching, but the quest had been successful. They were now carrying the dead man down to Andana, whence the body would be conveyed in a sleigh to Martigny. With which intimation, and some incoherent reflections upon the whole tragedy, the Frenchman turned upon his heel and left them. His own curiosity would take him some distance in the wake of the procession. Like all his race, the psychology of crime fascinated him beyond any other study.

The youths, in their turn, were not a little awed by this gruesome spectacle, nor could they remain insensible to its romance. Down below, upon the plateau, were the first of the merrymakers, the outposts of a vigorous life, the careless creatures of laughter and the sunshine. Here upon the height, beneath a tracery of silver, upon a path still in shadow, were the emblems of death and eternal sleep. Stern figures, whose footfalls fell soft upon the untrodden snow, moved with military rhythm about the body of their comrade. None spoke, none paused, the faces of all were hard set and expressionless. To-morrow the whole of Switzerland would be talking of this crime; to-day it was but a muttered whisper, which hardly echoed in the woods which harboured it.

But of this the lads knew nothing, and when the procession disappeared from their view they went racing down to the Palace; where they arrived at the precise moment of Miss Marjory and Miss Nellie Rider's appearance, in virginal white.

The "girls" were dreadfully important people this morning. And how little they thought of the married women!

CHAPTER XIV

THE GENDARME PHILIP

Lily was usually an early riser, but the night of storm had wearied her, and it was nearly ten o'clock when she rang for her maid to bring her coffee.

This was the hour of the day she preferred to any other in a general way. Then she had letters from her English friends, and journals, often long delayed upon their voyage, but none the less welcome. To open the windows wide and breathe the air blowing straight into the room from the glaciers of the Weisshorn, to sup tea at her leisure and hear of this person and of that who groped their muggy way in London's chill atmosphere, were pleasures of the day she would not readily forgo. Just as the ascetic believes that the joy of the blessed is to rejoice upon the sufferings of the damned, so did Lily realise her own opportunities the better when contemplating the despair of the pilgrims she had quitted. London was "awful," one woman said; "you could hardly see how badly dressed the other women were."

The morning of the flight brought Louise to the room in a querulous mood. She had quite expected that there would be gendarmes in the kitchen, and was disappointed when none came. True, a postman had told her strange things and had hinted at this and that in a way which irritated her dull understanding; but of news she had none, save that which Madame's letters implied—and, to be sure, it was a pity she could not read them. Failing the opportunity, she banged them down on the bed as an act of protest, and with the intimation that the sun would close the skating rink at twelve, bounced out of the room with no more grace than she had bounced in.

There were three letters for Lily, all addressed to Mrs. Kennaird; but of the three, the handwriting of one alone arrested her immediate attention. This was from her father, Sir Frederick Kennaird; a long and rambling epistle, expressing all the petulance, the anger and the selfishness of a rich man called upon to surrender a portion of his riches.

Reciting the family story from the moment when she had married Luton Delayne, his first charge concerned her choice of such a man, when it ignored

altogether the paternal satisfaction which the marriage had awakened at the moment of its inception. These particular Delaynes, Sir Frederick wrote, had been bad eggs since old General Delayne of Huddlesmere played the knave in the American War, and was shot by a Yankee whose house he had outraged. Nothing was to be hoped from such a family; nor was anything more to be hoped from the writer, should a further request on Luton's behalf be made.

As to Bothand and Co. and the alleged fraud, Sir Frederick had little sympathy for the West-End jewellers, the majority of whom he declared to be rascals who batted on the folly and the vanity of unfledged boys and vulgar parvenus. Luton's hint that his wife's name had been used was received with the derision which, perhaps, it deserved. It was a device, he said, to extort money under a species of blackmail permitted by the law. Should such an allegation be made seriously, it would be met in a way which would surprise these people. Luton's debt was another thing, and not to be taken lightly. The amount of it he considered incredible; this firm must be nothing less than money-lenders in disguise, and should be treated accordingly. Sir Frederick promised to set his solicitors, Welis and Welis, to work to see what could be done. At the same time, he concluded his reference to an unpleasant affair by the assurance that his son-in-law would yet make a beggar of him, and that Lily owed it to him to see that at his age some consideration was shown for a man who had done so much for them both.

She did not fail to observe that her father said nothing upon the more vital matter of her own unhappiness; nor did he invite her to Benham Priory, whither he had taken his young American wife, Edna. Lily did not need this oversight to assure her that the Priory had ceased to be her home, and that of all the houses she knew, there would the coldest welcome be offered her. These letters from Sir Frederick were so stereotyped in their expressions that they provoked no longer those bitter memories once associated with them. He had ceased to remember any obligations toward his children save those which their importunities thrust upon him; to write to him, who should have been her best friend, had become a humiliation.

She crushed the letter in her hand, and pulling on her dressing gown, she went to the window and looked out. The superb morning had sent a merry throng to the skating rink, where Dr. Orange and Bess Bethune were delighting an envious crowd by a sedate performance in the "English" school; while upon the opposite side of the rink, Keith Rivers pirouetted and pranced in the "International" fashion, to the satisfaction of the inexpert, who thought the English manner dull. A few beginners were in remote corners, and were as ungoverned ships upon a crowded waterway; but they fell in solemn silence, for it is heresy here to laugh at that ignorance which, even when firmly seated, is so far from bliss.

Cheek by jowl with the skating rink lay the little lake whereon the curlers performed. From this a babel of sounds arose; an awful jargon from which the Esperanto school would have fled in terrified despair. Generals of divisions here roared at soulless "stanes," as though their salvation depended upon a besom. Cries of "bring her along," "up cows," "well sweepit," or "man, you're a curler," rent the air as the battle cries of warriors. In the intervals of storm there fell the calm of comedy. "Will ye crack an egg on this, Sandy, dear?" a Scotchman was heard to remark; but when Sandy did not "crack an egg" upon it, his compatriot roared: "Ah! ye red-headed little deevil, wait till I get down the rink and catch haud o' ye"—a threat which occasioned no surprise, and hardly moved a member of the solemn-faced company to the ghost of a sad smile.

Merry or solemn, it certainly was a scene to remember and to dwell upon. All these healthy people might have been groping in the London fogs but for those wonder-workers who rediscovered Switzerland some twenty years ago. Some of them had been so groping perhaps but yesterday; and here they were, basking in a sunshine hardly known to an English July, reborn to energies they had forgotten, playing the fool in the finest spirit of the Horatian precept. Lily said it was wonderful; and then it occurred to her that she had no part or lot in it. The events of the night were remembered in an instant of wonder that she could have forgotten them even during this idle hour.

In one way the placid ebb and flow of the tides of recreation reassured her. She feared no longer an aftermath of the fracas at Vermala—or, verily, there would be some bruit of it at this early hour of the day. It was impossible for her to believe that a tragedy of moment would be attended in this remote place by no overt manifestation; and of that there was not a sign. To-day, as yesterday, and all the days, the pilgrims set out for the heights on skis; the skaters waltzed and pirouetted to the strains of the tenth-rate orchestra generously provided by the *proprietaire*; the curlers heaved the "stanes" and complained of the sweltering sunshine. None of these suggested a knowledge of drama, remote or intimate. One man alone, the little gendarme, Philip, could have spoken, and he had already passed on toward the Park Hotel. These were hours of respite for this gracious lady, and her gratitude was not feigned.

As to Luton, she had grown accustomed to his habit of procrastination and his incurable levity of life. Any excuse, however trivial, would have kept him from her last night; and she had to admit that he might have been physically unable to come, for this also was one of the shameful secrets. In the latter case, he would visit her this morning; and her imagination already depicted him, sitting in the chair by the window, and pulling ceaselessly at his long red moustache, while he asked her news and complained that it was not what he had expected.

Here, of course, she was at fault, and the only visitor who presented himself

at the chalet was Mr. Benjamin Benson, who, in the language of seamen, had "cleaned himself" and donned a suit of clothes which astonished both his brother and the abbé. To their many questions, Benny replied that the storm kept him at Sierre, and that the "stuff" had not come; and when this was said, he heard their tale about the "little widow," and her desire to see him, and marched off to the chalet without another word. He found her dressed rather prettily in a heavy jacket of white wool and a violet hat which showed the many perfections of her pale face, and did not hide the beauty of her eyes. Benny thought her so beautiful that he was almost afraid to look her in the face when he spoke to her; but he knew that he had a part to play, and must play it bravely if he would succeed.

She met him at the gate of the chalet, but did not suggest that they should return there. It seemed wicked, as both admitted, to be indoors upon such a morning; and she fully believed that she could deliver his brother's message as eloquently upon the hillside as in her own drawing-room. Concerning his own absence she had little curiosity, for she was unaware that he knew of the affair at Vermala, and would never have associated it with his visit to Sierre. At the same time, she thought that he might have some news of Luton, and was anxious to hear it.

"So you were caught in the storm, Mr. Benson?"

He said that it was so, and then he asked a question in his turn.

"You'd never guess who went with me to Sierre, Lady Delayne?"

"Why should I guess it?"

He looked round about him and turned deliberately toward the deserted path which led to the Park Hotel.

"Let's go this way," he said evasively. "There are too many human gramophones at Andana to my way of thinking, and some of them must have known Ananias. Well, about Sierre? Sir Luton was my fellow passenger—"

"My husband—then he—!"

She stood quite still, and her face had become waxen in its pallor. Benny did not look at her, and recited his story to the woods upon his right hand.

"Yes, Sir Luton. There was a bit of a row up at Vermala yesterday, and his temper got the better of him. They tell me he struck one of the gendarmes from Martigny; you can't do that sort of thing with impunity hereabouts. If there's a fuss, he's better across the frontier, and so I told him. That's what took him down to the town with me—I thought the climate of the lakes would suit him better for a day or two—and there he is as safe and sound as a bird in a nest. If you hear any stories, don't you believe a word of them. It's my advice to you to return to England to your father's house as soon as you can do it conveniently. These foreigners make a rare hullabaloo if you lay a finger on them. They'll ask you ten thousand questions if you'll let them. Don't give them the opportunity, Lady

Delayne—say your father wants you back, and you are going. That's my advice, and it's good common sense. I'll drive you down to Sierre this afternoon, if you like. You could catch the Simplon to-night, and be in London to-morrow; I hope you'll let me, for if they find out that Mr. Faikes is really Sir Luton Delayne, then there'll be no end to the trouble. Now, will your ladyship think of it?"

He spoke with unwonted earnestness, as though her case were his own, and she really must be led to see the importance of it. If any other had told her such a story, Lily would have disbelieved every word of it; but here was a very apostle of candour, and who would doubt him?

"Do you mean to say that I am to return to England because my husband has had a foolish quarrel with the authorities? Do you mean that, Mr. Benson?"

He nodded his head almost savagely.

"Foreigners are all right when you keep the right side of them. Sir Luton's temper got the better of him, and there would have been the devil to pay if he had not cleared off. I don't want you to be troubled about it, and so I say: Go back to England at once. I shall be stopping on here, and I can put matters right if anything is said. Don't you think I am wise, Lady Delayne; now, really, don't you think so?"

"I think you are kind, very kind, to interest yourself in those who are comparative strangers to you. And if it was but a fracas as you say—"

He laughed it off, clenching his hands and pursing his lips to the boldest lie he had ever told in all his life:

"Just a vulgar row and nothing more. We should laugh at it in England, but they've other notions here. I don't want you to be bothered about it, and so I'm all for the journey to Sierre and the Simplon to-night. Give me leave, and I'll telephone for tickets right away. You'd be wise to do that, Lady Delayne—I'm sure you'd be wise—"

"But, my dear Mr. Benson, I have friends coming from Caux this afternoon. I could not go away in such a hurry; it would be too ridiculous in the circumstances."

Benny did not know what to say. His anxiety for her had become almost pitiful. Perhaps he would have betrayed himself altogether, but for the sudden appearance of the gendarme, Philip, who emerged from the wood upon their left hand, and sauntered down toward them with his eyes searching the ground and his hands crossed behind his back. This was a ghost to stem the flood of eloquence suddenly. Benny turned pale when he saw Philip, and his agitation was not to be hidden from his companion.

"Who is that?" she asked him with awakened curiosity. He shook his head.

"One of the gendarmes from Martigny. I saw him at the station last night."

"Then why do you see him with displeasure this morning?"

"He may be here on our affair. I've told you what I think. They'll be questioning you about it if you stay."

"But, surely, I shall be able to answer them! Is a woman responsible for her husband's follies—even in Switzerland? I do not think so, Mr. Benson; you are not quite honest with me—there is something yet to come?"

He shook his head.

"I have told you what I think, Lady Delayne. It's for you to decide. I can quite understand that you may not be able to go away this afternoon, but tomorrow, or the next day, perhaps? Will you think it over, and let me know? I shall be round this way after dinner to-night, and I'll look in, with your-permission. Now I must run away, for I see the abbé throwing his arms about up yonder, and that's to say the lunch is on the table. Isn't it wonderful that a man cannot go three or four hours without food and remain in his right senses? It's true, though, so, you see, I'll just run away. But you'll think of what I've said, won't you?—and you'll know that I'm your friend, come what may!"

He held put his hand to her with an awkward gesture, and felt her soft fingers lying for an instant in his own. The look which she gave him was a reward beyond his expectations; he returned to the chalet with the step of a boy, and was hoping and believing a hundred good things when he met the gendarme, Philip, almost at his own door.

"Ah, my lad, I am glad to see you again," he said. "Were you not at Sierre last night with the valet of my friend, Mr. Faikes?"

Philip looked up quickly.

"Of your friend, Sir—?"

Benny did not appear to notice it.

"The Englishman staying at Vermala," he persisted; and then he asked: "Do you know him also?"

Philip answered as quickly.

"Yes, I know this Englishman, sir; he killed my brother, Eugène. Am I to understand that he is a friend of yours?"

Benny grabbed the man by the arm, and began to walk him to and fro upon the narrow path. He was acting now with all the art he could command. Yes, he had seen the Englishman several times; was he the man who struck the officer, Eugène Gaillarde, on the hillside? Who would have thought it? But then, to be sure, no one knew the fellow very well: a sour-tempered bully, who had come from Cannes, and gone, they said, to Paris. Had Monsieur Philip heard that the Englishman had gone to Paris? Well, it was so, and he, Benny, had seen him at the station—indeed, he had driven him some way on the road. It would be useful to remember that. Perhaps Monsieur Philip would be glad of the information?

The young man heard the strange tale to the end, but he expressed neither

surprise nor gratitude. He had come to Andana to learn what he could, and when his work was done he would know the Englishman's story and where to seek him. "And then, monsieur," he added with almost savage conviction, "I shall arrest him with my own hands."

Benny did not argue with him; he saw that this idea obsessed him, and that words were vain. His own acting, clever as it was, appeared to have made no impression whatsoever upon the gendarme, and when the man left him, it was to go on with the same quiet step and unchanging resolution, up toward the height where his brother had perished. Benny, however, stood for a little while at the door of the chalet looking down toward Lily's house. Did she believe the story he had told her with such poor wit?

He knew not what to think. It was hardly a week ago she had come to Andana; but the days had changed his own life beyond all knowledge, and had left him with but one ambition in the world. He would lift the burden from her shoulders if he could—the burden of shame which threatened to overwhelm her utterly.

CHAPTER XV.

THE CORTÈGE

The siesta at Andana is an event of the day and differs from other siestas chiefly in the fact that no one goes to sleep.

Visiting the plateau before the Palace Hotel upon an afternoon of February a stranger will discover the arts, the professions and the industries of Great Britain in some disorder and not a little comfort. Accrediting the best chairs to generals and colonels, whom a gracious King employs no longer upon active service, mere lawyers and persons who write will be found in accommodating attitudes which a diversity of luges, camp-stools and even rugs make possible; while commerce, stiff-backed and upright, flirts amiably in amatory markets and appears to think little of Protection.

Everyone has done something during the morning, and this make-believe of a siesta is the due reward. Here upon the brink of the valley topographers yawn and discover mountains; matrons remember their complexions; mere youth its volatility.

All bask in a wonderful sunshine and are tolerant of evil. There is no protest

upon the projectile aimed erringly and discovering unsought targets. The prettiest girls do not always show the prettiest ankles, nor the middle-aged ladies the least desirable qualities. There is flippancy of talk and act, a craving for ease not always gratified, and a worship of the glories of Switzerland as honest as any article in the social creed. If a subject be chosen and pursued, it is haltingly and at intervals. Men yawn upon other men's *bons-mots*—they have quick ears chiefly for the whispers.

They were discussing Lily Delayne upon the afternoon of this particular day, and not without that charity which remembered her as a baronet's wife. Led by Bess Bethune—whose father had known Sir Frederick Kennaird—and kept in order by Dr. Orange, who was a man of the world with good perceptions, it was unanimously resolved by the meeting that her ladyship had been foolish to go to the chalet and would be more foolish if she remained there. Had she not been a baronet's wife, the assembly might have arrived with justice at another conclusion; but the daughter of Burnham Priory was a desirable acquisition, and as Lady Coral-Smith remarked: "Not in any way responsible for the vices of an irresponsible man." So the meeting carried the resolution *nem. con.*, and having carried it, settled down to remember all the "good things" about Sir Luton which ready tongues and readier newspapers had recorded these ten years.

Dr. Orange said very little, except to admit that Lady Delayne was a very charming person, and to express his surprise that she had not divorced the baronet long ago. This remark escaped him at a moment when Bess Bethune had deserted the study of social jurisprudence for that of the velocity of snow when obstructed by the bald head of a choleric sleeper. When the young lady returned from her occupation, Lady Coral-Smith took up the running with the observation that the measure of a woman's endurance is often the measure of her intellect, and that bad men should certainly marry fools. This remark, directed to the dull understanding of Major Boodle, pleased that worthy mightily, and he echoed it with a succession of "Eh, what's," which trilled like the warblings of an asthmatic bird.

Thereafter silence fell and endured until the major thought that he remembered a good story concerning the Delaynes, and was about to tell it, when what should happen but that her ladyship appeared suddenly among the company, and brought the men to their feet as though a bombshell had fallen amongst them.

Social credulity is a curious thing, and is apt to become incredulity on next to no provocation at all. The man or woman, whom all discuss, remains just the man, or the woman, when introduced to the company. All the stories concerning him or her seem to be forgotten in a moment; nothing is remembered but the personality of the intruder, and should that be satisfying, the recording finger ceases to write. So, at Andana, this little company would now have been prepared to

swear in any court that none but the most flattering observations concerning her ladyship had fallen from its lips, and that it was ready to welcome this charming lady with the cordiality her position (and her father's money) demanded.

To this happy state of things Lily's own charm contributed not a little. She was, for some of these good middle-class folk, as an ambassador from another kingdom, and one which they might not hope to enter. Her unaffected manner, her gentleness, conquered the men, and did not provoke the women. Had she been of their own sphere, they would have envied her beauty and complained of it. But being of a race apart, even the mayor's relict could grant her some natural "advantages." As for homely Mrs. Rider, particularly honoured by her ladyship's attentions, she, good soul, was in the seventh heaven. This would make a fine story in Bayswater when she got back. "My friend, Lady Delayne, travelling incognito"—how well it sounded. Her lips were already prepared for that delicacy.

Lily drew a chair close to the prospective mother of "the boys," and began to talk to her in low tones. Sir Gordon, after a vain attempt to join in, had the wit to perceive that he was making no impression, and turned his attention to "the little savage," as he called Mistress Bess. When he was gone, Lily approached the dangerous topic of Messrs. Robert Otway and Richard Fenton. She thought that they were pleasant young men and would start in life with some pecuniary advantages.

Had Mrs. Rider known them long—were they very old friends? To which that good lady replied with warmth that this was her third season at Andana, and that the boys had been there on each occasion. Then, with an aside of some moment, she hastened to confess that it was embarrassing to be the mother of two grown-up daughters at her age: "For I am but nine-and-thirty, Mrs. Kennaird, and my poor husband has been dead these five years."

Lily expressed her sympathy in a kindly way and led the good soul insensibly to other confessions. Each of the girls had three hundred a year in her own right, and, naturally, their mother would like to see them happily married. She, herself, was not too old to resign "all the pleasures of life," as she put it naïvely; but what could she do with these great grown-up girls and their perpetual activities? Men naturally thought a woman as old as her children believed her to be; and young people nowadays have such strange notions about years.

As to the young men, she liked them well enough. They were noisy, to be sure; but, then, might not others say the same with justice of Nell and Marjory?

"I'm ashamed of their boisterousness sometimes," the good lady admitted. "I'm sure I was never like that when I was a girl, and what happiness they can find in it, I don't know. Believe me, Mrs. Kennaird, they never are at rest. When it's not skating and sliding, it's golf and hockey. If you ask them to read a book,

they think you want to do them an injury. I gave Marjory the 'Pilgrim's Progress' on her last birthday, and all she said was that 'Christian won on the last green.' There's levity for you—there's improper behaviour. Oh, I shall be sorry to lose them, but sorrier still for the man who marries them—indeed I shall. You couldn't understand it yourself, for you have no daughters of your own, they tell me; but I've a mother's heart, and they wound it every day that I live. Oh, yes, I shall be sorry for the man who marries them."

Lily smiled, but did not comment upon the grammar of the observation, or its suggestions. The situation was now quite plain to her. Here was a good woman who would enter the holy bonds for the second time, one who found a serious obstacle in the presence of these hoydens who proclaimed their mother's age *urbi et orbi*. Little it mattered to her whether the worldly prospects of likely suitors were good or ill. Lily perceived that the boys were already married, so far as Mrs. Rider was concerned, and she determined to push the suggestion no further. So she led the conversation to more general topics, and finally turned to Dr. Orange, who had been waiting for an opportunity to speak to her.

Lily confessed to the doctor that she had come out with the intention of doing a little shopping in the village of Andana, and he, with ready gallantry, offered to accompany her thither. His art in mundane affairs was considerable, and no one who overheard their talk would have guessed that he knew this lady's story to the last line. Not until the narrow path carried them to the heart of the wood by the Sanatorium did he begin to speak of intimate affairs at all, and then in so general a way that it was impossible not to be frank with him.

"By the way," he said—joining her after the passage of a bob sleigh steered by that dashing pilot, Keith Rivers, who rarely broke his collar-bone more than twice in any season—"by the way, do you know a person of the name of Paul Lecroix—I think he is a gentleman's servant, and has been staying at Andana, recently—do you know anything of him?"

Lily guessed the object of the question and would not fence with it.

"Yes," she said in a low voice, "he was my husband's valet; what of him, Dr. Orange?"

The doctor continued as though it were an ordinary affair.

"He has been recently in the employment of a Mr. Faikes, also staying at Vermala. The fellow has a long tongue, and is not to be encouraged. I fear he has said many things in the hotel here which you would not wish him to have said. They make no difference to any of us, of course, it goes without saying; but should you be perplexed by them, I hope you will give the credit where it is due."

"You mean, that people know my real name—the name under which I choose not to travel?"

The doctor was surprised by her candour.

"Yes," he said slowly, "that is what I wanted to say. Your incognito is an incognito no longer—if it concerns you that it should not be. Most possibly it does not. I have often taken a *nom de voyage* myself and found it useful. I can understand that it might be helpful to a lady, especially to the daughter of one so influential as Sir Frederick Kennaird. If you wish it to be respected at Andana, you have but to say the word. Perhaps, however, you will think that it has served its purpose in Egypt and the Balkans. I was almost expecting you to tell me so when I first mentioned it."

This was subtly put, and it pleased her. He expected her to say that it mattered no longer whether anyone called her Lady Delayne or Mrs. Kennaird, and she met him as readily. It was a matter of indifference to her. In any case, she did not expect to be many days in Andana, and would be returning almost immediately to London. Perhaps the doctor would come and see her in town?

"I am on the north side of the Park, and that is quite reprehensible," she said with a smile. "My address is Upper Gloucester Place, but I will give you a card. Doctors find themselves in strange places, and cultivate an uncritical attitude, I suppose. But I shall be very glad to see you, if you care to come, and perhaps some of my Italian curiosities will interest you."

He admitted an interest: it would have been the same had she said that the golden gods of Burma were her hobby; and when he had informed her that he was now living at Hastings, which proposed shortly to indulge in the luxury of a pageant, they came to the little village of Andana and to its bazaar.

The latter was situated picturesquely enough at the summit of the narrow winding street, and was itself a gabled chalet which would have served for a picture book. An ancient dame, whose English ran to half a dozen inaccurate phrases, here vended grotesque knick-knacks at prices still more grotesque. There were post cards embracing every possible view of Andana at every possible season; fabulous distortions of the Matterhorn; panoramas showing the whole of the Rhone Valley, and portraits of peasants, who seemed to have dressed themselves especially for the stage of the Gaiety Theatre. Elsewhere, the stock was hardly more attractive. Cheap jewellery from Birmingham; cheap glass from Italy; German ingenuity vended for "two francs-fifty," lay cheek by jowl with skis to be sold for twice their market value, and luges upon which a child could sit with difficulty. The carved wooden trifles alone represented the genius of Switzerland, and were to be valued. Lily bought some half a dozen of them as an excuse—her real object had been the quest of writing-paper—and then remembering that it was growing dark, she paid her bill hastily, and set out to return to her chalet.

The night falls swiftly and often with bitter cold in the Rhone Valley. It had been twilight when they entered the shop; it was quite dark when they emerged.

The village street, usually the resort of gossips, now welcomed men of more serious aspect, who were clustered round three sleighs about to go down to Sierre. Lily delighted in these sleighs, as a rule, in the music of their bells, and the primitive caparison of their long-suffering horses; and when she came thus face to face with an unexpected *cortège*, she stopped, despite the cold, to remark upon it. Hardly had the words been spoken when she regretted them. This was no common spectacle. She perceived in a moment that it was the harbinger of death.

"Oh," she had exclaimed, "how very picturesque," and then with the truth of it arresting her, she turned upon the doctor inquiring eyes.

"What are they doing, Doctor Orange? Why are they here?"

He answered as frankly that he did not know.

"Have you heard of any death in Andana? Has there been any illness?"

He shook his head.

"It would be a soldier's funeral. There have been rumours in the hotel about an accident up at Vermala. I will speak to them, if you like—"

He crossed over to one of the officers and exchanged a few words with him. Other gendarmes emerged from the little café, carrying lanterns. A captain, whose sword jangled upon the flags, uttered an order in a commanding tone, and sent some of his men to the horses' heads. He also exchanged a brusque word with the doctor, and saluted Madame when he passed her. The bells swung musically as the procession set out and disappeared slowly round the bend upon its way to the valley.

Dr. Orange meanwhile had returned to Lily's side, and ignorant that his news had any meaning for her, he hastened to tell her what had been told to him.

"They say that a gendarme from Martigny has been killed up on the Zaat. I heard something about it this morning, but did not pay much attention. The officer was not very communicative. We shall have to wait until we get to the Palace before we hear the whole story. Perhaps it will not be very exciting after all. These accidents are not so common as English people believe. Five or six bodies of men who have been lost on the heights are discovered under the snow every spring, when the great thaw comes. The Alpine chasseurs, too, have a good deal of trouble with some of the rogues who haunt the passes. Shall we walk on? I am sure you must be feeling the cold."

Lily had not stirred from the spot; but now, with a determination which surprised her, she set out for her house, and did not betray even by a word the tumultuous thoughts which afflicted her.

As for the doctor, he dismissed the affair almost immediately, and continued to gossip of lighter things. There would be a dance at the Palace that night; would she care to come down? Or perhaps she would like him to make up a rubber at bridge? Old Gordon Snagg played well, but parsimoniously, and Lady Coral-

Smith was the terror in petticoats. Failing that, there would be some passable music in the drawing-room—he confessed that he himself played, but did not tell her what a very fine pianist he really was—nor did he notice her indifference and the effort it cost her to answer him at all. When they parted it was at the door of her own chalet, where he stood a moment to light a cigarette in the shelter of the porch. And there for the first time a suggestion of the truth flashed upon him from the darkness, and spoke both of the living and of the dead in one instant, of utter bewilderment.

Lily had entered her house and gone straight to the sitting-room upon the right-hand side of the door. There she switched on the electric light, and the blinds being drawn up, the doctor saw the whole room quite plainly, and the figure of the woman as she laid aside her cloak and threw back her head to unpin her hat. Attracted by the grace of her attitudes, and perplexed by the extraordinary pallor of her face, he continued to stand until she turned about suddenly, and pressing both her hands to her forehead, sank suddenly into a chair, and burst into a passionate flood of weeping. Then he understood, and fearing to be detected, set off instantly toward the hotel.

”By God!” he said as he went, ”Luton Delayne is the man!”

CHAPTER XVI

TWO OPINIONS

Benny arrived at the chalet at a quarter to nine, and was shown immediately into the sitting-room. There he found Lily seated before her writing-table; but she had written no letters, and the note-paper was covered by meaningless hieroglyphics which her pen inscribed ceaselessly.

Men are rarely observant when it is a question of knowing whether a woman is well or ill, and this good-natured engineer was no exception to a common rule. Had anyone called his attention to the extraordinary pallor of Lily’s face, he would have admitted its significance; but, as it was, his desire to resume their conversation of the morning blinded him to the truth. He had come to know if she were ready to return to England; he found her determined upon another purpose altogether.

”I thought you’d have done dinner by this time, Lady Delayne,” he explained, ”and so I ventured to come in. It’s a fine night outside, and good for

walking. I half expected you to be down with the Palace people. They're dancing to-night, and they tried to run me in. But I'm too old to prance round with yearlings, and so I told them. I'd sooner drive an airship across the Mediterranean than steer some of the heavy-weights down yonder—yes, a hundred times. But I thought it might be different in your case."

She did not smile; her manner arrested his words, and was an omen of her answer. Benny watched her rising from her chair as he would have watched an accusing figure about to approach him. She had discovered the truth—he was sure of it.

"Mr. Benson," she said slowly, "why did you not deal more generously with me this morning?"

He did not shrink from it. The question appealed to his manhood, and resolution made him strong. He was glad, moreover, that the hour of suspense had passed; he would keep nothing from her now.

"I wanted to shield you," he rejoined very naturally. "It was a man's part to do that. I wanted to keep trouble from you. Now I see my own foolishness. It couldn't be done, Lady Delayne. The whole place is talking of the affair; you were bound to hear of it. But I did my best, because I wanted to be your friend."

She knew that it was true, and his frankness disarmed her. The irony of life had left her with but one friend in the world, and he a man she had seen for the first time a week ago. It needed some resolution to keep her courage in the face of that.

"It was not friendship to deceive me," she said, against her convictions; "so much might have happened. I am grateful to you, none the less. Will you now tell me all you know?"

She sat upon a sofa near to him, a lamp behind her, and her face in shadow. He perceived that she breathed heavily; but there was no other overt testimony either of fear or grief.

"I'll tell you willingly, every word," he rejoined. "There's no doubt that Bothand and Co. got out a warrant in England against Sir Luton, and that the Swiss police, acting on instructions from Scotland Yard, traced him here. They sent an officer, Eugène Gaillarde, from Martigny, to ascertain if their man was at Vermala; he watched your husband for a couple of days. I think he may have followed him over from Grindelwald, but I do not know for sure. If they had established his identity, word would have been sent to London; most likely they would have arrested him, and applied for extradition. Anyway, it seems clear that Sir Luton knew he was being followed, and that he resented the fact just in the way such a man would resent it. As bad luck would have it, he seems to have met Gaillarde face to face on the plateau below the hotel. There were words passed between them, and then blows. What precisely befell we shall never know, but I

make no doubt that Gaillarde lost his footing and was thrown over. He must have fallen about thirty-five feet and struck the clump of trees at the foot. I saw him there myself, lying stone dead, and that's how I came to warn your husband. If Sir Luton hadn't gone away, it would have been a murder charge. We may avoid that if they don't trace him, and time will put the affair in another light. It would be manslaughter at the worst—though I can't keep it from you that, whichever it is, it's bad enough in a country like this. What you and I have to do is to keep the thing black dark while we can. I've sent Sir Luton where no police will find him, and if he's wise he will stay there until the worst has blown over. Then he ought to go to the East for a couple of years. We can tell a tale in the English papers if the truth ever does come out, and he won't want sympathisers. We hate bureaucrats in our country, and there's many who will understand just what happened in his case. It would be otherwise if they had taken him and brought the trial on immediately. I had to stop that at any cost—that's why I sent him into Italy. The same reason lay behind my idea that you should go to England. You are a danger to him here, Lady Delayne, so it seems to me. You are a danger every hour you remain, and if you would save him, you won't lose an hour in going away. I'm glad that I can tell you so freely, for I couldn't this morning, much as I wanted to—”

He paused, a little afraid of his own eloquence. What impression he had made he did not know; but one thing was plain, and that was the woman's courage. There was no hysterical outburst now, no expression of a vain regret—nothing but a quiet determination which astonished him.

”I could never forget my obligation to you,” she began; ”that must be life-long. You say that I should return to England to save my husband; but surely it would be the wiser thing to remain. If they do not know all the facts, why should they seek Sir Luton Delayne? May we not hope that this question of identity will protect him to the end? Indeed, I am beginning to believe that my first duty is to him, to go to him, Mr. Benson, and to forget! If he were really guilty of a monstrous crime, it would be another thing. But can we believe that he is?—unless passion itself be such a crime. I cannot say that; his sins have been greatly punished, and am I to judge him at such an hour? Not so, surely. I will go to Italy whatever the cost. I feel it is my duty.”

He was amazed to hear her. His primitive knowledge of woman had prepared him for an issue so very different. She would have been humbled utterly by the disclosure, he thought, overwhelmed and incapable of any clear purpose. And here she was prepared for an act of madness which, whatever its sublimity, must bring down the house of his hopes with a crash. Let her go to Italy and the end might be at hand. Which is to say, that he doubted his own hypothesis, and put little faith in identity as an ally. Had not Sir Luton been followed from

Grindelwald? Why, there would be twenty ready to bear witness.

"My dear lady," he said, hardly knowing how to put it to her, "your wish does you great credit, but do not forget that if you are followed from here to Locarno, it will not take the authorities very long to guess what is going on. Perhaps I was wrong to advise a journey at all. The Swiss police are no fools. They will remember that this English lady came to spend some weeks at Andana; she took a chalet; she appeared to have settled down. Then she goes without warning. Suppose, upon the top of that, they remember that a certain Sir Luton Delayne left Grindelwald in a hurry—don't you think they are capable of getting at the truth? Why, he might be arrested in the next four-and-twenty hours; and if he were, God help him. No, it would be madness to go—madness to think of it. He's safe where he is, and there will be just two people in all Europe who share this secret. Let us leave well alone—we have done our best and can do no more."

She saw the reason of it, but her distress was very great. All that she had suffered at her husband's hands went for nothing in the hour of cataclysm. In a way the defects of his character made a new appeal to her: his life might have been so very different; his intellect might have led him so far. And here he was, a veritable outcast, despised by all, a fugitive to be named with contempt, even by the vulgar.

"I know that you have done your best," she said, after some moments of silence, "but what have I done? Can I justify the story of my own life since I left him—can a woman ever justify herself for leaving a man in the hour of his misfortunes? While the world went well with him, I suffered in silence. Is it possible for me to forget that he is alone, without friends or help? The world would say that his own acts justify me. Should a woman be guided by the world, or by her own conscience? No, indeed, I cannot agree with you; and yet your advice is wise. If they know, there is the end of it. I can do nothing; I must wait and hope. My gratitude to you remains—it will never be told truly, Mr. Benson; it could not be."

He shrank from this expression as strong men ever shrink from a verbal recognition of their friendship. It may be that he perceived how much she really suffered, and what it cost her to hide the truth. The danger hovered about them both, and put a spell of its constraint upon their intercourse. In a spirited endeavour to make light of it, he told her that men would not judge Sir Luton hardly; and then he dwelt upon the security of his retreat in a villa upon the shore of Lake Maggiore. Though near to Locarno, its situation was one of some isolation, and it would serve their purpose beyond contention. The old woman who kept it had little English, and no curiosities. Generally speaking, he thought it as safe a haven as they were likely to find anywhere on the Continent, and, as he said, Sir Luton himself would use his eyes, and if there were danger, he would not fail

to meet it. In brief, if things fell out as they had been planned, the secret need never pass the doors of the chalet.

She agreed with this, though it was plain that her thoughts centred rather upon her own conception of duty than upon the peril of the situation. Insensibly she turned to the man where a man's work was to be done, and Benny encouraged her with a pride that burned. Yes, he would be the agent in the matter, if she would but leave it to him. He had no fear of the issue; let him enjoy her confidence and the rest was easy.

"We must keep his identity out of it," he repeated; "all depends upon that. There is a little gendarme here—the brother of the man who was killed, and he is to be watched. Trust me to do so. I have had my eye on him from the start, and I shall not sleep much until he is on his way to Martigny again. If you see him, beware of the man: a little pale-faced fellow, with a serious air and a mincing manner—not the sort of man you suspect, but one who could be very dangerous. I would say nothing to him—not that he is likely to think of you; but you might meet him accidentally. When he's done with, the rest will be easy. We shall keep Sir Luton at the shanty for a month; then send him down to Monte Carlo. If they don't suspect him, the trouble will be over pretty quickly. I hope to God it will be!"

His optimism was splendid, and fearing a new note, he ended the interview upon it. She might rely upon him to bring her all the news, and meanwhile courage was necessary. When he left her, it was just a quarter-past ten, and he could hear the music at the Palace floating up the mountain-side in a dreamy rhythm which seemed in odd contrast with the secrecy and the fears of that interview. How bravely she had suffered it, and what big promises he had made! If they were not justified, what of it? He had done his best, and she had thanked him. He could almost feel the pressure of her fingers in his great hand now.

He was alone upon the mountain-side and all the glory of the night about him. A flux of stars marked the Palace Hotel, every window of which paid tribute of warm light to the sheen of the spotless snow. Higher up there twinkled the minor constellations of Vermala; while away to the west arc-lamps marked the path to the Park and the slopes whereon the beginners kept carnival. These were the human aspects of the scene, but the majesty and solitude of the mountains remained impregnable, even in the half-lights; and looking out upon them, the man recalled his ambitions, the task he had set himself, and the hope which had deluded him. Would he find inspiration anew because of this thing which had come into his life?

He turned with a sigh, and went on to his own house. A light burned in the workshop, and he discovered Jack and the abbé still at work there, but they put down their tools immediately and watched him with eager eyes. Had the woman

spoken? Had she remembered her promise? They were all agog, and their desire to know would not be restrained.

"Well, Benny, and what did she say, my boy?"

"Oh, we had a little talk about everything. What did you expect her to say, Jack?"

"Then she didn't mention the prize?"

He opened his eyes wide.

"Why should she mention it?"

"Well, you see, she promised to. She wants you to win it. We sent you down there on purpose. Do you mean to say she forgot all about it? How like a woman! And you thought she was interested; eh, Benny? you could have sworn she was."

The abbé nodded his head sagely; then he sighed and resumed his work. Benny continued to look at them with wonder. A conspiracy. And she was interested and had forgotten. Well, after all, that was very natural in the circumstances—but if she had remembered!

He did not answer Jack directly; but declaring that he was very tired, went off to bed. When he was gone, the abbé confessed to Jack that "it was finished," and he also laid down his tools.

"We waste our time," he said. "Your brother has lost interest. It is a pity, for he might have been one of the greatest men of our time."

Jack thought so too. He would have given a good deal to have heard that this high and mighty lady was about to quit Andana.

CHAPTER XVII

HERALDS OF GREAT TIDINGS

Bob Otway and Dick Fenton were coming down the Vermala slopes together, when they espied the "little widow" on the path below the hotel. Her appearance reminded them that more than a week had passed since they had seen her at the chalet, and that it had been a time of events never to be forgotten. To be candid, the boys had changed very much during these wonder-working days. They had even come, as Bob admitted ruefully, to speak of such mysteries as drainage and water supply. The realities were gripping them and romance already cried out.

"Why, it's Lady Delayne, Bob—don't you see her? We really ought to pull

up and tell her what has happened."

Bob agreed, and, as a testimony to his approval, did a wonderful telemarque which came near to dashing out his brains against a tree. It was just twelve o'clock of a glorious day, and both the boys hungering for lunch.

But they could not pass by Lily Delayne, even at the bidding of a mountain appetite, and so they shot down wildly to the path and confronted her, as two loping bears emerging suddenly upon their prey.

Lily was dressed in black, and wore a wide motor hat and a heavy veil. For an instant she smiled kindly upon the boys, then relapsed to that pensive air which seemed inseparable from her natural mood.

"Why," she said, "here are the truants. Let me see, ten days, yes, just ten days since the embassy, is it not, Mr. Otway? And black silence all this time; now, really, is not that ingratitude?"

Bob admitted that it was; Dick hung his head and looked sheepish.

"You see," said the former, "we found it was all right, and so we didn't want to trouble you. It's a beastly thing to have to speak about money, and I wouldn't have any girl believe that it's her money I want. When I heard from Mrs. Rider that Nellie had three hundred a year, I knew we could just rub along, and what more does any fellow want? Of course, we can't keep a motor on that, and I shall have to play golf once a week, instead of twice. But it's something to be able to pay your way these hard times, and the fellow who can't give up something for the sake of a pretty girl isn't much good."

Dick was more explicit.

"I'm rather sorry Marjory has the money," he said with conviction. "I don't believe marriages are made in heaven, or that sort of nonsense; but I do believe that young people should be content to start in a small way, and that if a man is to get on, his own brains should push him. It can't be helped, of course, and Mrs. Rider is so pleased about it that I believe she'd double their allowance for a nod. She's flirting like one o'clock with old Gordon Snagg, and it wouldn't astound me if she married him."

"And struck another!" interposed Bob, whose alternations of melancholy and gladness were a delight to hear. Lily was so much amused by them that she encouraged him to talk; and saying that she, also, was returning to lunch, they all set off down the mountain together.

"We're going to live out at Hampstead to begin with," Bob explained, cheerily. "I suppose it must be flats, for it won't run to a house. Dick thinks we might share a big one, but I know the girls would quarrel, and when sisters do quarrel, then you hear things. I shall go into a motor-car business, and open a garage somewhere. Dick is going to write books when he can afford the paper—and I'm sorry for Thackeray and those fellows. Perhaps you'll come and see us when

we're settled down, though I say it's the settling up that's the trouble. Hampstead's not a bad place, and they don't charge anything for the empty ginger-beer bottles on the Heath. I wonder if you really would come, Lady Delayne?"

Lily said it would be a pleasure to do so, though her secret doubt as to the establishment of this particular *ménage* remained unspoken. Concerning Dick, however, she had no afterthought. He had grown sentimental in an hour, and saw nothing but a vision of Marjory in his brightest heaven.

"I've always wanted to write a book," he said, "but a man needs a spur. It's impossible for a fellow to do anything when he's a bachelor and men are coming in every five minutes to look over his shoulder. I could have finished a play last year, if it hadn't been for the Scratch Medal at Neasden, but I was so keen to win it that I never got further than the prologue. Now, however, I mean to take my coat off."

"And to fly—like Benny, the wonderful Benny," Bob added. He was surprised to learn that her ladyship had heard nothing of this. Did she not know that a regular mob was expected at the Palace to-morrow to see that amazing hero, Mr. Benjamin Benson, try for the great prize offered by the *Daily Recorder* of London? Well, it was so. They were even making up beds on the billiard table, and what sort of a game was a man expected to play on a mattress?

"It's the most amazing get-back I ever heard of," he ran on, delighted to interest her so much. "Benny's the last man in Switzerland we should have looked to for this, and here he is, cock-a-whoop in the papers, and as famous as a prize-fighter. In London they're talking of nothing else. He's invented a new kind of aeroplane, and one which must be the machine of the future, so they say. That's why he didn't come into the hotel. We thought him a secret kind of bird, and all the time he was just working away to bag the £10,000 offered by the London editor. If he gets it, it will be an eye-opener; but old Gordon Snagg, who has been hanging about the chalet, declares he will get it, and that he deserves to. Don't you see, Lady Delayne, that Benny has been the ghost? It was his machine over the Zaat which scared the people so. Fancy, old Benny—mustn't he have a head, and didn't he think a lot when he heard us talking about him?"

Dick took a more serious view of it.

"Benny is a genius," was his testimony. "He's just one of those born strong men you can't keep back. If we had more of him in England, there wouldn't be all this talk about decadence. We're just falling behind as pioneers, and that's the whole truth. If you speak to the manufacturers about it, they say it doesn't matter, because we can always imitate the foreigners when they have invented things. I'm sure that's all nonsense. The same brains which lead the way will hold it in the long run. Look how long it took us to overtake the French in the motor-car business; have we done it even now? Benny is one of our national

assets, and if he succeeds, no honour is too big for him.”

”Then you think he will succeed, Mr. Fenton?”

Dick shook his head.

”Bob knows more about machinery—he’ll tell you. If it depends on the man and not on a bag of tricks, I’m sure he will succeed. That remains to be seen: we shall know to-morrow, anyway.”

”And make a night of it if our man wins,” Bob added with conviction. More than that he was reticent to say. Whatever were the secrets of Benny’s aeroplane, they had been guarded closely.

”He must be the cleverest chap alive,” he continued. ”Not a soul at Andana had an idea of it. He’s been flying about here for weeks, and all the time we thought him a good-natured crank, to be chaffed and rotted as much as we pleased. Now he looks like becoming one of the most famous men in the world. Sir Gordon says he will, and he’s had his eye to the keyhole. Perhaps he wants to float Benny as a company; I shouldn’t be surprised. If his machine is what he claims it to be, there’ll not be a rival in the market in a month. Sir Gordon is sure of it.”

”Then it is a very wonderful machine, Mr. Otway?”

”So wonderful that you could pack it up in a hair-trunk, they tell me. The engine’s a gem—just like a toy. The frame looks like a torpedo—it’s as light as feathers. We shall see something to-morrow, Lady Delayne, and I’m jolly glad I’m at Andana, anyway. They start from the slope before the Park at nine o’clock. Benny has to fly right over Mont Blanc, then to Zermatt, and back across the Weisshorn. He should be here before dark to win. If he does it—well, I hope the Palace will not catch fire; but I shouldn’t wonder if it did. You’ll be coming, of course. We shall see you there in the morning?”

She answered, ”Certainly.” She would not miss it on any account. The news had surprised her very much; she did not add that, although she had seen Benny every day, he had said no word to her. This was for her own thoughts, which now engrossed her so that she was very glad when they came down to her chalet and she could say ”Good-bye.” Even there it was possible to remark the number of the sleighs now driving up the valley from Sierre. And the flags and the bunting! She had been blind to them hitherto. But now they spoke eloquently of a man who had befriended her beyond any she had known. And to his hopes and ambitions she had hardly given a thought during that long week of watching and waiting! This was the truth, and it was not unaccompanied by regret. She remembered her promise to Brother Jack and wondered that she could have broken it.

To be sure, there had been excuse enough. Long days of a terrible doubt had left her at the last almost beyond the influence of fear or hope. Luton himself had not written to her—she was glad of his silence. All the tidings that Benny had

was a brief note from him in which he described his arrival at Locarno, and his occupation of the shanty. The threatened inquisition upon the part of the Swiss police had not become a reality. The crime at Vermala appeared to be already forgotten by the authorities, as it had ceased to interest the visitors. Probably most people now believed that it had been an accident. Lily could almost persuade herself that this view was right. Luton would remain a little while at the lakeside, and then go South. The accusing hours, when the truth would not be hidden, were to be combatted with new courage in the face of this unexpected respite.

It was a quarter to two when she entered the chalet and nearly half an hour later when the post arrived from Sierre; to her great surprise there was a letter from Italy—the only letter that day—and she perceived immediately that it was in Luton's handwriting. Letters from him during recent years had been rare events and coincided with his pecuniary needs; but she had not read many lines of this particular epistle before she detected a new note. Here was an *apologia pro vita sua*; she knew not at first whether to believe it serious or a jest.

He spoke of his departure from Andana, and of the terrible circumstance of it. Like all men who fall foul of the world, he was eloquent in self-defence and could make out a pretty case.

What he seemed to feel acutely was the degradation of the tragedy. Had it been different, an affair in which honour had been compromised, it would have been defensible; but this poor devil of a soldier, against whom he had no possible grudge, that was humiliation enough. From which he passed on to deplore his heritage of character, naming himself as a man predestined to the enmity of his fellows, and without that power of will which alone could have saved him.

Did not Lily understand this? Had she never taken it into account upon a day of reckoning? He saw himself as the sport of the Almighty—mocked by his inheritance. All that he had done he must do again if he began life anew under the same set of circumstances. He had been without a friend, misunderstood always, even by her who had been at no pains to understand him. Did she think she had done her duty toward him—had she stood by him as a true wife should have done? Then came incoherent rhapsodies of love from which she shrank. He swore to God that there had never been but one woman in the story of his life. She knew it to be true. And here he was, an outcast among men and alone, while she had money enough and to spare. His poverty had brought him to this. Did she think upon reflection that none of the responsibility was hers?

As to the actual position at the moment, he confessed himself in some danger. He thought it possible that the Swiss police would trace him, but he declared that he would face the matter lightly enough if she were with him. Would she come to Locarno and help him? He wanted courage, the power to understand

the meaning of his own life, some hope for the future which she might inspire. She was a clever woman, but had never used her cleverness on his behalf. He implored her to hear him and have pity.

Such an idea, recurring again and again, betrayed a mind which had lost stability and a physical condition which was ominous. And yet Lily read a deeper meaning into the screed, and her early contempt was chastened. Just as she had asked herself a week ago if she had done her duty by this man, so could she repeat the question with insistence. Phrases of his letter appealed to her pity, despite a lack of faith; perhaps she was less influenced by them than by the judgment pronounced at the tribunal of her own conscience. She would go to him; but having gone, what then? Must the old way of life be taken once more? Could she contemplate a future as his wife, living out the long days of sacrifice without complaint?

The afternoon passed and found her unable to come to a decision. Sitting at her window she could see the stir and bustle before the Palace Hotel, the arrival of sleighs, and the coming and going of strangers. Her hope that she might receive a visit from the object of all this interest was not to be gratified. Benny did not come to the chalet; he contented himself with a pencilled note brought down by a lad during the afternoon, and containing just three words, "All goes well." She saw him for a moment walking with Dr. Orange and Sir Gordon Snagg toward the Park at about four o'clock, but after that the dark fell and her day was over.

Was it to be her last night in Switzerland? she wondered, as she sat by the window with Luton's letter still in her hand.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE EVE OF THE GREAT ATTEMPT

The reporters, who arrived from London shortly after midday, were astonished to hear that Benny knew little of the excitement which his entry for the great prize had occasioned in London.

Some of them had written very pleasantly of this unknown aspirant; others had been severely derisive, a fact they overlooked when they called at the chalet later on and took out their note-books as a matter of course.

He, good man, had but a dim understanding of later-day journalism, and these attentions overwhelmed him. Some of his replies were quite unconven-

tional. They asked him where he was educated, and he answered "anywhere." An interrogation concerning his favourite pursuits obtained the response "doing nothing." Generally, he said that if the engine kept going, he would win the money; but that if the engine stopped, he would not win it, and this was written down as an item of great importance, and cabled to London for the next day's issue.

Now all this had carried the man into a new world, and so swiftly that it seemed but yesterday he was a plodder in a dull workshop, without prospects and unknown. He had dreamed of fame, but not of this kind of fame, which came to him, note-book in hand, and desired to hear whether he flew on whisky or cold water. The world he would conquer was a shadow world; the great vague universe, wherein so many ambitions are interred. To be a newspaper hero was well enough, but he reflected a little sadly that even an acrobat may be that. He wondered already if he would find the fruits of success to be bitter; and this speculation set him thinking of Lily Delayne. Did he owe it to her indifference that flight to-morrow was possible? In truth, he believed that he did.

Brother Jack, upon the other hand, welcomed the reporters with real cordiality. He delighted to talk of his clever brother; to tell them impossible anecdotes of Benny's youth, and to insist that he himself had always known he was a genius. Jack spent a long afternoon in this employment, and when he varied it, his activities carried him up to the plateau whence the start was to be made, and back again to the shed wherein the machine was housed. What hours of strenuous labour it stood for; how they had worked to get everything ready! And now their work was done. Not a wire that had not been overhauled; not a stay which had not been tested.

Of those who had come from England to witness the great attempt, Sir John Perinder, the proprietor of the *Daily Recorder*, was the most eminent. A well-built, clear-eyed man, his manner was volatile to a ridiculous extent, and had earned for him the title of the greatest hustler in the universe. Naturally he asked Benny to dinner at the Palace, and with him Brother Jack and the Abbé Villari, of whom he heard with much interest. These had been but a little while at the table when they discovered that their host knew a great deal about aviation, and had the clearest perceptions as to the future of flying. At the same time he did not deceive himself by any of those futile prophecies in which unthinking men delight.

"You fellows are about to give us a new sport," he said bluntly, "young men will fly because they are tired of motoring. There will be a fine trade with the war-offices of Europe, but the rest I don't see. None of us now living will take aeroplanes where we now take cabs. That's foolish talk; the world will prefer *terra firma* to the air, just as it prefers *terra firma* to the sea. Do you think I would

go to America on a ship if I could travel in a train? You know that I wouldn't. And so with your airships, good enough for their own purposes, but limited by the factor of personal courage. Why, I wouldn't go up in one for a thousand, and I'll warrant Monsieur l'Abbé here wouldn't go up for two."

Here, however, he met a tough adversary. The abbé had followed the movement with interest from the beginning. He had even built a machine of his own, and purposed to show it at Rome in the spring of the year. His optimism baffled the blunt baronet, who brushed it aside with a jest, and went on to speak of to-morrow's flight.

"If you win," he said to Benny, "you'll do the greatest thing ever done by man. I've been a climber for twenty years, and never did I think that a man would look down on what I've looked up to with awe. You'll do that to-morrow if you succeed. You're going to see the Alps as no man has ever seen them since the world dropped out of the sun. That's something to sleep on, Mr. Benson; it's something to take with you on your journey. I'd give ten thousand pounds to see it myself—twenty thousand for the courage which would let me do what you are going to do. It's a safe offer. There isn't a greater coward living where a height is concerned, and yet I climb mountains. Explain that if you can."

Benny would have explained it if he had been given half a chance, but he had hardly opened his mouth when the baronet was off again, saying how the affair must be "boomed" in this or the other way; the reports which must be given of it; the particular points which the aviator must note during his voyage. He declared that the public liked sensation, but must have it first hand nowadays. The man who has seen another man eaten by a lion in Africa is of no use—he must be eaten himself. Few mechanical minds were capable of conveying mechanical sensations, and that was the difficulty. He hoped that Benny would prove the exception to the rule, and give them a story for their money. Commercialism intruded when he added that no other paper in Europe would have put up such a sum, and that he relied upon Benny not to let him down. This the inventor modestly offered not to do if he could help it. "We ride in the same boat," he explained, and added, in imitation of Douglas Jerrold, "but we use different sculls."

The party was gay enough, and broke up early. The bright light which beat suddenly upon this quite modest throne somewhat alarmed Benny, and set him hungering for the solitude of the chalet. He had left gendarmes in charge of his machine, but he was anxious none the less; and upon that was all the fulsome adulation now lavished upon him by good-natured folk who had just discovered his existence.

He could detect a change everywhere, a new respect paid to him, and a desire to be seen in his company. Even such athletic aristocrats as Keith Rivers patronised him no longer; while it began to be plain that he had lighted a candle

which failure alone would put out. That was the rub which must be present in his reckoning. It would be a mighty humiliation to fail before the thousands who were coming to Andana to see him start. He knew that there would be thousands, for the hotel people said as much; and when he managed to escape his host and to steal as a fugitive from the Palace, the night bore witness to the truth of such prophecies.

Surely such a spectacle had never been seen in this place before. Scores of great arc lamps illuminated the scene. Workmen from Sierre, from Martigny, and from Lausanne were busy erecting shelters for the people and building barriers. Sleighs came up the mountain-side, so many that he wondered whence they had been conjured up. Averse to all such trappings of spectacle himself, he guessed that Sir John Perinder had contrived this aspect of tournament, and had set the lists that the *Daily Recorder* might be glorified. He imagined that the affair had been largely advertised both in Switzerland and in Italy, and this was the case. All joined willingly in such an emprise; the hotel-keepers to begin with, then the railway companies. Excursions were to be run from Milan, from Geneva, even from Paris. The flight across the Alps appealed to the imagination of all.

Benny had a great deal of courage, but this new aspect of life filled him with dread. At the same time it was not unattended by a certain pride which spoke of many emotions. He realised that he had yet to earn the homage now paid to him. After all, he was but a tyro in achievement, and the world had taken him at his own estimate. If he failed to succeed, he would be forgotten in three days, and no one would listen to him afterwards. This he remembered as he took his way up the mountain-side toward his own chalet. He might be leaving Switzerland a broken man to-morrow, and the contempt of the multitude would attend him. Vain to accomplish in secret that which he had promised to do in public. The world is credulous where the inventor is concerned and seldom gives him a second chance.

He wondered if all were really as well as Brother Jack and the abbé believed it to be. They had done wonders during those long days, worked heroically, and with true devotion. He himself had set them no mean example when he had discovered a woman's indifference and the true meaning of her lightly-spoken words. Why should he think of her? What part had she to play in the story of his life? His very friendship might be misconstrued, and he resolved to terminate it so soon as his self-invited obligation had been fulfilled. For the moment she was alone and without a friend—this great lady who was of a world apart, whom he had worshipped in secret as his own type of true womanhood. He remembered the day when he had first seen her at Holmswell, her gentle bearing, her sweet courtesy. What right had he to expect her interest? Reason answered, none.

He was approaching her chalet at this time, and perceived that a light shone

from the window of her sitting-room. When he drew a little nearer, he discerned Lily herself, dressed in a gown of white lace, and seated at the writing-table by the window. She was not writing, however, and her profound reverie appeared to be unbroken by any knowledge of the stir without. In such an attitude there were aspects of her beauty he had yet to mark, a grace of pose and bearing as inimitable by the divinities of his own world as they were inherent in hers. Benny stood a long while, as though a single step would warn her and shut the vision from his sight. He would have wanted words to convey his impressions, and would have contented himself, perhaps, by the one word "queenly." She was born to reign, this mistress of a heritage of woe; life had dealt hardly with her when it shut her from her kingdom.

Men rarely confess to their most secret thought, even in the confessional of the intimate hours. Benny would have been ashamed to tell his oldest friend that he had dwelt for an instant there, at the gate of the chalet, in a shadowland of dreams, and that it had shown him this gracious lady as his wife. His destiny linked to hers, imagination led him to the high places of the world. He shared her kingdom in his thoughts, and wore the armour of a chivalry as true as any in the human story. Recreated by the dream, he struck off the shackles of birth and obliterated the scars of a mean heritage. For such a woman, a man could give life itself, he thought; for her there would be no sacrifice from which the mind would shrink. Nor could calamity cast down this idol from its pedestal. He worshipped more surely because she no longer commanded worship as a right. The world's contempt would dower her anew in his eyes, would give him a title which otherwise he had not possessed.

For a little while these vain thoughts afflicted him, to give place to others of a very different order. So many strangers were at Andana that he was not surprised to discover an intruder even here upon the mountain path, but when that intruder emerged suddenly from the shadows, and Benny saw that it was the little gendarme, Philip, his interest was awakened while his false gods were shattered. The gendarme, on his part, recognised him immediately, and with hardly a gesture of apology set out to follow him to his house.

"I wish you success for to-morrow, sir," he said, and then, as simply, "I may not be here, unfortunately, to offer my compliments then."

Benny looked at him with curiosity.

"You are going away, Monsieur Philip?"

"Yes, sir, into Italy; the man who killed my brother is there."

Benny walked a little faster, but he did not turn his head.

"How do you know that he is in Italy, Monsieur Philip?"

"Because I have discovered that he left the hotel at Brigue on the night of the murder. I have a friend here, and he knows. The man did not go to Paris;

then he has gone to Milan, and I shall find him.”

”Do you know who he is?”

The lad stood still and repeated the words very slowly.

”He is an Englishman. They call him Sir Luton Delayne, and his wife is at the chalet down yonder.”

Benny stopped also. They stood together, looking down to the window whence the light shone out upon the snow.

”Oh, but that is nonsense. Sir Luton Delayne is a great man in his own country. What do your superiors say to it?”

Monsieur Philip answered without emotion.

”They will give me leave of absence, sir. I am to go to Milan.”

”And if you do not find him at Milan?”

”Then the Italian police will help me. I have their promise. It is impossible now that he will escape arrest, sir. I thought you would be glad to know that.”

He saluted respectfully and went down toward the valley.

Benny, however, did not move from the place. The light shone upon the glistening snow as a beacon which must guide him, even if it were to the house of his illusions.

CHAPTER XIX

THE THIEF

Lily closed her day upon a resolution to set off to Maggiore early on the following morning. She arrived at a decision reluctantly, and each hour made the self-appointed task more difficult. It had seemed heroic when first contemplated—a tribute to duty, and a very real sacrifice; but as the hours sped, she shrank from it and sought the old excuses. What claim had Luton upon her generosity? She knew that he had none.

As a further obstacle there was the chalet, and the restful days she would abandon so reluctantly.

How pleasant the life might have been in the sunshine of the beautiful valley! Everyone had been so kind to her here. These simple folk, seeking simple pleasures, had shown her a new world and taught her elementary truths of which her own philosophy made no account. She thought that she knew them all as friends already; the admirable doctor; little Bess, who was the good fairy of the

Palace; the boys, with their tales of woe; the girls, who devoted the interludes to the measurement of imaginary carpets. And then, to be remembered before them all, was there not Benny, the incomparable Benny, a creature so unlike any she had ever known that he came to her as a very apostle of a new revelation?

Here was a prophet, who had been without honour yesterday, but who stood to-night upon the brink of that kingdom of success which few may enter. A woman of the world, she understood what all this might mean to the honest fellow who had befriended her so staunchly. She saw him fêted and honoured, grown rich in an hour, a leader among men. Her perception discovered the soul of the man, that soul which a woman—perhaps but one woman in all the world—might fathom.

What ironical destiny had brought these two together? She reflected upon it, contrasting him with others she had known, the ornaments of her world and the drones. Many of these would hardly enter a room which harboured Benny to-night, but she knew that they would fawn upon him to-morrow, for such are the concessions of sycophants to success. He in turn would come to despise the humbler circles in which he had moved and to lose some of those rare qualities which were his strength. Of one thing, however, she had no doubt, and it was this—that a woman's love would be necessary to such a career as his, and that without it mere material success might carry him but a little way.

She had not answered Luton's letter, and it was still unanswered when she went to bed at half-past eleven. The plateau of Andana, usually so still after ten o'clock, then echoed the music of the sleigh bells with a persistence almost intolerable. She heard the cries of workmen, the lumbering of heavy vehicles, the muffled sounds of hammering. And all this contrasted so strangely with the great mountains across the valley, where the moon shone clear upon the giant Weisshorn, and the lesser peaks paid to the greater the homage of a glorious iridescence. A white and silent world it was, mocking the ambitions of men—yet not of all men, for would not one conquer them to-morrow? Such ambition appealed to her womanly instincts unerringly. She trembled when she made the silent confession that this man loved her, but that his love would remain unspoken to the end.

It would have been about one o'clock when the last of the sleighs arrived at the Palace Hotel, and a little later when the workmen had finished their labours. She sank to a dreamless sleep about this time, but awoke almost immediately with the conviction that someone had entered the chalet. A vague intuition of unwonted sounds set her heart beating and held her almost breathless. Someone had entered the little sitting-room, and was not twenty paces from the bed in which she lay. She could hear the man's footsteps as he crossed the room, and believing that he was at her own door she began to tremble violently. A

realisation of her lonely situation afflicted her with a sense of inevitability which robbed her of every shred of her courage. She lay quite still, afraid to move a hand. The silence of the night without surpassed belief.

The man had crossed the room and was now at her writing-table. She could hear the rustle of papers and the click as of a lock. In a sense this was a relief, and gave her the necessary respite. She began to remember how unlikely it was that any thief would visit so poor a house as this chalet, or, if he did visit it, would trouble himself about letters. The excellent reputation well earned by the people of Andana occurred to her, and would have reassured her but for the alternative. For if this man were not a common thief, what then? Instantly she recalled the affair at Vermala, and a new fear came upon her. Yes, she understood it all in an instant and, creeping from her bed, she dressed herself with tremulous fingers.

Surely the man must hear her and take alarm. This was her idea as her clothes rustled in her hand, and her tiny feet shuffled upon the polished boards. The man would hear her and burst through the folding doors presently. When, however, he made no sign, she became a little emboldened, and being now quite dressed, she went to the interstice of the doors and looked through. Then she perceived her husband's valet, Paul Lacroix, who was searching her writing-table by the aid of an electric torch, whose aureole fell weirdly upon the scattered papers.

Paul Lacroix! That it should be he! She remembered that she had last seen him at Holmswell on the eve of the debacle. He had always been a silent, civil fellow whom it was a pleasure to have in the house. Luton, she knew, trusted him entirely, and the others gave a very good account of him. When the crash came, he had followed his master without complaint, to Africa and then to the East. She believed him staunch, and would have named him as one of the few in her own house who had done his duty loyally both to master and to mistress. And here he was at Andana, prying among her papers! The very fact robbed her of all fear and, opening the door immediately, she asked him what he was doing.

He was a man of the middle height, clean-shaven, and with crisp black hair, which contrasted sharply with a very pale face. It may be that he was not unprepared for interruption; for he merely looked up as Lily entered, and then, shutting down the desk with a click, he held his hand upon it while he answered her.

"Madame," he said, "I am seeking Sir Luton's address."

The effrontery of it astonished her. She switched on the electric light and came a little further into the room.

"You are seeking my husband's address, but why did you not come to me?"

He smiled a little contemptuously.

"I did not come, Madame, because you would not have given me what I

wanted.”

There was a threat here, and she could not mistake it. The peril of her situation occurred to her immediately. He had offered no opposition when she switched on the light; he knew, then, that she dare not summon assistance, and was content with the knowledge for his security.

“I do not understand you,” she said with wonder. “Why are you not with Sir Luton?”

He laughed openly.

“You know that, Madame—you and the other. Why do you ask me the question?”

She thought upon it, trying to recall the account of the flight as it had been given to her.

“You were to go to Paris,” she said presently, “you were to await Sir Luton there?”

He did not deny it. His shoulders were lifted in a characteristic gesture, his hands outspread when he rejoined:

“But, Madame, my master will never go to Paris—not while the police of Switzerland are looking for him.”

She began to breathe as one distressed. Little had been said, but that was sufficient. She knew the character of this man now; there was no need to ask another question.

“Be plain,” she said, after an interval of hesitation, “what is your object, what do you mean by this intrusion?”

He bowed his head.

“I wish to go to London. I have an offer of employment from an American there. Sir Luton must give me a character—and one hundred pounds. If I cannot have the character, I must have one hundred pounds. Then I shall be ready to say that my master has gone away, and that I am unable to apply to him. Madame, if you can help me in this?”

She reflected, trembling a little in the night air, and greatly afraid now both for herself and for her husband. Certainly she must not give Luton’s address—that would be a madness surpassing belief. And if she paid the hundred pounds—why, she had not such a sum in her possession at the moment.

“How can I give you the money here in Switzerland?” she asked. “You know that it is impossible.”

He was prepared for such an answer.

“Madame, no doubt, would have her jewellery with her—there would be something she could offer me. It would be very unfortunate if there were not, for then I must go to Martigny to the police. Will not Madame think of it?”

He advanced a step and stood quite close to her. She could see his clear

eyes looking her through and through, and she quailed before their scrutiny. A call for help would bring those white hands to her throat—she was quite sure of it.

"I will give you what you want," she said, "if you will wait here."

He bowed again, and she returned to her bedroom. She had little jewellery with her; but a basket brooch of rubies and diamonds was worth far more than the sum he demanded, and for the sacrifice of that she was not quite prepared. Trembling hands unlocked her jewel case, and trembling fingers searched it. Then she heard a step behind her, and turning about swiftly, she discovered the valet at her elbow. The expression upon his face had changed altogether. It had become that of a wolf seeking prey.

Lily knew that this was the most dangerous moment she had lived. The man's quick breathing, his crouching gesture, the strange light in his eyes, betrayed him beyond recall. He was about to spring upon her, to crush out her life with iron fingers. He would have done so but for an intervention which one night, and perhaps one only in the story of Andana, made possible. A sleigh was coming up the mountainside; the bells rang out musically; the voices of men were to be heard. They brought the valet to his senses instantly. He did not reason that the sleigh would pass and that his opportunity would recur. Crime had not been in his thoughts when he entered the chalet; he shivered at its near approach, and, drawing back, he waited for her to speak.

"Take this," she said; "if you have any sense of honour, leave Andana immediately. I have friends here, and I shall acquaint them with what has occurred. Now go."

He went without a word, striding through the sitting-room and turning into the little hall. She heard the front door shut after him, then the echo of light steps upon the snow. Her first thought was to wake the maid, Louise, and to send her for help, but she corrected that immediately, and set to work to bolt and bar the place to the limit of its resources. When that was done, she returned to the desk which the man had been about to rifle and examined its contents closely. Luton's letter was untouched. It lay at the bottom of the drawer, and it was unlikely that the man had seen it.

But granting that he had not, what then? She knew something of the story of blackmail as society has written it, and she perceived her danger. This man would return; or, if he did not return, he would send his agents.

The false step, if it were a false step, could never be retrieved. Upon the other side stood the hard truth that, had she not refused him, the whole story would have been made public to-morrow. She was sure of it. The Swiss police would have been told that Sir Luton Delayne had murdered Eugène Gaillarde and had not gone to Paris. All her hope lay in the belief that Paul Lacroix knew

nothing more than this. If he did know more, the end was at hand.

She slept no more that night, for now an ordered imagination could tell her just what would happen in case the worst should befall. They would arrest Luton and bring him across the pass. Every paper in Europe would tell the sordid story of his life. Tried by an alien jury, he would be convicted, and the extreme penalty might follow conviction. For herself, there would be the contemptuous sympathy of the world. Her life would have been lived, and what a life! Had she known one hour of true happiness since her childhood? Even her wedding trip had been a story of disillusion. A lover's kisses were still warm upon her lips when she had awakened to the truth that she could never love him. Thereafter her existence had been that almost of a recluse. The magnificent gifts with which her father dowered her had been squandered with the mad profligacy of the born gambler. She had descended the ladder of humiliation step by step—to this!

What would Paul Lacroix do? This was a question engrossing above any other. If he held his tongue, how long would it be before he returned to Andana?

She perceived that she must go away—must not delay an hour. She resolved to set out for Sierre as soon as she could make her arrangements and travel thence to Milan. It would be time enough afterwards to decide whether she should or should not go on to Locarno.

Paul Lacroix, meanwhile, had left the chalet and returned to the village of Andana, where he shared a room in the little café with the gendarme Philip. The influx of visitors kept this rude cabaret open all night upon the eve of the flight, and Lacroix came and went without observation. He found the lad Philip in bed, but not asleep; and when he had shut the door of their room carefully he blurted out his tidings.

"It is well, my friend; I have done what you wished."

Philip sat up and stared at him with dreamy eyes.

"You know where he is, Monsieur Paul?"

The valet seated himself upon the edge of the bed, and regarded the young man's face closely.

"For what will this reward be paid?" he asked without premise. Philip opened his eyes.

"For intelligence which will lead to the arrest of the Englishman," he said.

Paul thought upon it.

"It would make no difference whether he were arrested by the Swiss police or the Italian?"

Philip agreed.

"A reward of two thousand francs is offered by the Government—another two thousand will be paid by the English soldier, the Captain Barton, who is now at Grindelwald. That would make four thousand francs altogether."

"Which will be earned by the man who gives the information. Very well, Monsieur Philip, we understand each other. I am going to Paris to-morrow—you will go to this address. You will find Sir Luton Delayne in the house which is named."

He searched out a piece of paper from many scraps in his pocket, and wrote down the address carefully. Then he stuck a pin through it, and affixed it to the bare wooden dressing-table where all could see it.

"You will claim the reward, and will pay me one-half, Monsieur Philip? I am generous, for I could go myself to Martigny and get the money. But I have some business in Paris, so I leave it to you. This is between men of honour—you will pay me my share?"

Philip merely nodded his head. He was staring at the paper as though afraid of it. But Paul Lacroix undressed himself quickly and got into bed.

There would not be much more to be got out of Lady Delayne, he thought. He knew women well enough to foresee that she would tell her friends to-morrow—most probably the black-haired engineer about whom the people were making such a fuss. And he was a man to be avoided. Paul Lacroix was already resolved to remove himself as soon as might be from any possibility of a reckoning with this fellow.

CHAPTER XX

THE FLIGHT IS BEGUN

Benny had dreamed that he fell in the Val d'Hérens after an ignoble start from the plateau of Andana. He woke upon this to find it was but a dream, and that the little abbé stood by his bedside with a steaming bowl of coffee in his hand. Here was a man who had been up all night, and who would not sleep until the issue were known. Never was there such an enthusiast.

"It is nothing," he said apologetically. "I have often watched for thirty hours at the Hospice when there has been a storm. We make little difference between night and day up there. The poor people who fall in the snow would not thank us if we did."

Benny laughed, and sitting up in bed, he drank his coffee willingly.

"What time is it, Abbé?"

"It is half-past six o'clock; you have two hours yet. Your brother is already

dressed; you will find him in the shed.”

Benny put on his engineer’s overalls and went down. He felt a little excited; perhaps he was actually nervous, but no one would have guessed as much. Whistling a few bars of an ancient waltz almost in as many keys as there were notes, he went out to the shed and set to work to help his brother. It was still black dark, and the great arc lamp shone out weirdly at such an hour of the morning.

Jack Benson carried an electric torch in one hand and an oil-can in the other. He said that all was well. He had been over the ”ship” from stem to stern—there was not a nut which a spanner could tighten a hair’s-breadth, not a wire that was not taut. The machine itself seemed to bear witness to the truth of this. Benny himself admitted that she was a picture, while a stranger would have likened her to a great steel bird, with the head of a snout-faced whale and the fins of a ravening shark. Another image would have made of her a shining torpedo, with great wings thrust out on either side and a monster propeller large enough to have moved a steamship at her stern. It seemed ridiculous that those slight stays, those ridiculous bicycle wheels supported her as she stood. Yet that was the truth, for she was light to the point of miracle.

”Shall we run the engine now, Jack?”

Jack thought that they might.

”I’m not too sure of that union we made yesterday, Benny. You’d look handsome if the petrol gave out. Let’s run her, and see if it’s leaking. You’ve a good hour yet before you need go up. There’s breakfast, too—you’ll have to let the Abbé fill you up, for he’s cook this morning. Are you ready, old boy? Then let her rip.”

He switched off the magnet, gave a few sharp turns to the propeller, and the engine started. Had not the machine been anchored, she would have glided off at once, but, being anchored, she heaved and tossed as a ship at sea. Jack was satisfied with the union, and declared that it was not leaking, upon which Benny announced his intention to take a short flight as a final precaution.

They ran the machine out of the shed, and he climbed into his seat, to which a light steel door in the side of the torpedo-like body admitted him. Once again Jack started the engine. Benny glided swiftly over the snow for some thirty yards, then rose swiftly and circled the Park Hotel. There was no wind and it was bitter cold. Of all the visitors, he did not espy a single one upon the slopes beneath him. An intense silence prevailed—a silence that was almost ominous.

They sat to breakfast upon his return, and the abbé served an excellent omelet and some eggs which he had captured in the village last night. If their talk was a little constrained and nervous, the circumstances more than justified it. Here they were, with their eyes upon a goal so distant that its attainment seemed impossible. All the dangers, the risks, the difficulties of such an enterprise

stared them in the face, and would be remembered. A man's life might be the price of success. Secretly in his heart, Jack wondered if he were speaking to his beloved brother for the last time. It might be that.

Benny, upon his part, said very little. He had a map of the Pennine Alps on the white cloth before him and he studied it closely. His questions concerned the arrangements and the names of the committee of the Aero Club of England, who would be present. He understood that his flight was to be checked at Chamonix and again in the Val d'Anniviers as he returned. There were to be watchers at Zermatt and at the Weisshorn hut, if it could be reached. Twice he was permitted to land for petrol. He made it out that they were sixty-three miles from Mont Blanc as the crow flies, and that would be his first halting-place.

"Marfan and Collot from Paris are to be there," he said, "I had a letter from them. I hope there will be good landing somewhere near the hotel—it wouldn't do to mow down the crowd. I've got a spot in my mind, but they may not have in theirs. The petrol, of course, will be all right. Émile is seeing to that, and he's a man to trust."

Jack agreed to it. Émile was the cleverest airman he knew.

"If you want anything at all, Benny, it may be a couple of plugs. Mind you see they don't blow. The oil's gone through from London, and I had an advice from Chamonix yesterday saying they had stored it. Mind you keep alive in the valley from the Matterhorn, and remember to come up pretty far before you swing and drop. The wind looks like being an easter; you'll have to take care in the last hour."

He agreed, and consented under compulsion to eat his breakfast. Day had broken now at the far end of the Rhone Valley, and the higher peaks were shaping above the mists to pinnacles of rose and silver and many shades of purple. Clouds drifted toward Sion and the west; the great chasm below them was so filled by the rolling white vapour that it might have been a sea of downy billows; but the day promised warm sunshine and little wind despite Jack's prophecy. Benny liked the look of it altogether; and when, without warning, strains of ridiculous music were to be heard on the path below the chalet, he pushed on his hat and went out.

All the world about him was astir now and eager for the day. Hatless men had emerged from the Palace Hotel, and were darting hither and thither on skis, or crying the news to girls hidden at their bedroom windows. Caterers for an expected multitude flocked towards the booths they had erected on the mountain-side, and prepared to set out their wares. A perpetual going and coming, the jangling of sleigh bells and the neighing of horses spoke of unusual activity at the stables.

Higher up on the slope whence the actual start was to be made, a little

throng had already gathered. It surveyed the ground, and looked wonderingly toward distant Mont Blanc veiled in the mists. Was it possible that this mad Englishman would attempt to fly as far as that? Incredible! A thing undreamed of—perhaps an affront to the Almighty, who had created the mountains to speak of His power and dominion.

Benny saw these people as he wheeled his aeroplane out of the shed at eight o'clock, and began to push it up toward the plateau. He thought very little of them, and remembered few of his friends at Andana. A certain pleasure at the interest he had awakened was mingled already with the desire to hear if Lily Delayne would be present at the start. He knew not quite why it was, but his desire that she should be there became rather a superstition than a sentiment. He blamed her no longer for the indifference she had displayed during the week, for that was natural to the circumstance; but he associated her presence with the success of his attempt, and was almost ready to say that it would not succeed if she failed him.

Of Lily, however, there was no sign at present. He had to be content with the gossip of Bess Bethune, who was early on the scene, and ready with a thousand questions. Bess promised to tell her uncle, the Cabinet Minister, all about the wonderful machine; and, as she said, "Of course, the Government will buy thousands, especially if you don't do it, because Governments always buy things which fall down." When this offer failed to excite the stolid engineer as much as it might have done, she turned to Dr. Orange, and asked him if he were not going to lend Mr. Benson his surgical instruments? Her chatter was not unmusical, and her presence welcome amid the gloom which now fell upon the company. Perhaps many shared the child's fears. This Englishman was going to his death—there could hardly be a doubt about it.

Benny moved in and out among the people, exchanging a word here, bestowing a nod there. He was wrapped up like an Arctic explorer, and resembled a shaggy bear more than a man; but his black eyes were very bright, and his pale cheeks carried a flush of colour foreign to them. Chiefly, perhaps, his attention centred upon the narrow path by which Lily Delayne must come up from her chalet, if she came at all; and he searched it at brief intervals, even pushing his way through the press of the people that he might inspect it more surely, but always to his disappointment. Of Lily herself there was not a sign, the very blinds of her sitting-room were drawn down. He fell to wondering if she had left Andana altogether, and he might have rested upon his opinion but for a message brought to him from the chalet just five minutes before the signal to start was given. This was nothing less than a little horse-shoe carved out of wood and set with silver nails. To it was attached a card with the simple words, "Good Luck," and then the initials, "L. C." Benny resolved immediately to make it his "mascot,"

and he affixed it to the prow of his machine without a word to anyone.

Such an offering at the altar of superstition set other friends busy, and mascots were offered by many hands. Teddy-bears, brought in haste from the bazaar, squatted upon the aluminium shell of the aeroplane; pigs and elephants from the same merchant were tied by willing hands wherever a lodgment could be found. The occupation found the company in better mood, and as the moment drew near many who had been silent became eloquent enough and forgot their apprehensions. It was almost with impatience that the people heard the long-winded speech of the president for the day. Words would not help Benjamin Benson across the Pennine Alps, they remembered, and some of them did not hesitate to say so aloud. Fortunately, the address came to an end just when the patience of the malcontents was quite exhausted; and then, with a last salute and a word of good cheer to Brother Jack and the Abbé, Benny climbed to his seat and roared to them to let go.

In a sense, it was an undramatic start, and pleased the excitable Frenchmen but little. Their tastes would have dictated a flourish of trumpets or a salute of twenty-one guns; whereas, in fact, there was no music whatever at this particular moment, and the solitary gun which denoted the start boomed heavily and almost with menace. Its echoes had hardly died away in the heights above Vermala when the roar of Benny's engine was to be heard, and immediately upon that the machine, flashing silver in the sunshine, soared above the plateau, and was gone in an instant straight across the mighty chasm of the Rhone Valley. Five minutes later the same machine was but a speck against the azure of the sky.

Benny had made a good ascent, and was pleased enough with the way his engine ran. The exhaust was firm and regular; he knew the firing to be even; while, as for the lifting power, he was off the ground in twenty yards and had mounted five hundred feet the very first time he circled above the spectators. This gave him confidence, and sent him straight across the valley without further preliminary. To be sure, he cast down one quick glance at the black ring of spectators upon the plateau before the Palace Hotel, searched out for an instant Lily's chalet and tried to believe that the figure in the garden was that of a woman who had inspired him to this day's work; but his reward was a vague impression of a blurred scene, and it gave place almost immediately to the wonder and ecstasy of the flight itself, and to that desire of a goal which burned him as a fever.

His course lay almost directly to the southwest. Upon his left hand were the tremendous precipices of the Janus-faced Weisshorn, the gentler arrête of the Rothhorn, and, behind that again, the black rocks of the Matterhorn. More directly before him were the Bets de Bossons, and the black defile of the lower Valley; while the Aiguilles Rouges, clear and sharp, stood to his right at the mo-

ment of departure. Heading for a while down the Valley of the Rhone, he saw the range of the Pennine Alps opening away to the south to disclose Mont Blanc and the triple domes, now lightly veiled by cloud, but plainly to be discerned at the altitude he had chosen. Here Nature seemed a little kinder, showing him low, rounded mountains upon either side of the valley and great woods of the pines which were but black scars upon the sheer rock. Deeper down lay the heart of the chasm, the towns, which were but so many dots upon a sepia ground, the silver thread of the Rhone itself, and Sion with its puny heights whereon proud bishops had built their palaces. Over these he passed at a tremendous speed, watched from below by thousands who were invisible to him. He felt already that he was the master even of this majesty—that man had conquered, and to him henceforth must be the dominion.

The day had broken fine, and the sun shone gloriously when he crossed the actual valley and began to fly high above the mountains upon the other side. Warned that height would be his salvation, he now soared to a great altitude that he might be sure of stable currents and not be drawn down by any of those eddies in which aeroplanes founder so quickly. Of the latter he had a momentary experience at the mouth of the Black Valley, where the cross winds caught him and turned him completely about before he could recover control, so that he was facing Brigue again and looking toward Italy and not toward France. This salutary warning found him more watchful afterwards; and when he had put the machine straight he mounted still higher, and found a dead calm, wherein he ignored the bitter cold and quickly left the valley behind him.

Now for the first time Lake Lemman was visible to the northwest. He could see its waters shining in the sun and thought he could locate the heights of Caux; but of this he was not sure, and his knowledge of the Alps being very limited, he but guessed at his precise environment. Of Mont Blanc, however, he never lost a clear vision, and heading his ship for that, had eyes for little else.

There were glaciers shaping at this point of the journey, and the sun showed him desolate fields of snow slashed with the jagged bands of ice and often cut by the black rocks of some fearsome arrête. The loneliness of his situation was emphasised by this vision of a world apart; of ravines which the foot of man had never trodden; of heights which the foot of man had never conquered. Descending a little, he searched out the dark places with curious eyes, tried to make villages of the tracery below him; said that the zig-zags stood for vines upon the hillside and the black lines for railways. When he heard quite distinctly the whistle of a locomotive upon its way to Martigny, the message appeared to come out of the unknown, a voice from a house of his dreams. It recalled him to a sense of his own situation, to the possibilities of failure and of death. He remembered that he was very cold, and wondered if he would have the physical

strength to continue.

It was an unhappy foreboding, and he shook it off as well as he could and tried to remember the speed at which he was flying and the hour at which it would bring him to the Valley of Chamonix. The mighty shape of Mont Blanc had begun to emerge more plainly from the mists at this time, and to show its sloping summit, with the attendant needles very distinctly to be seen. He knew that he must pass right across the great mountain, and then find what landing he could in the valley, and the desire to do this with credit put other thoughts from his head. The Val d'Hauderes was behind him at this time, and the head of his ship pointed almost directly to the Aiguilles Rouges, beyond which lay the Valley of Chamonix. When he looked at the chronometer, fixed upon the right-hand side of the frame, he learned that he had already been flying for one hour and twenty minutes; but of his actual direction he could glean nothing by the compass, which swung to every point as the ship sagged and recovered in the varying currents. This mattered little while the weather remained clear; and when, almost with the swiftness of a vision, the valley came into view he believed his object to be already attained.

What a glorious revelation was that—the revelation of countless spires and needles of rock, all dwarfed by his altitude, and seeming but a magic forest rising from the eternal snows. Had he been a mountaineer, he would have named many of them, and before all others the Aiguille du Géant, with its numberless satellites. But he had no knowledge of the valley, and all his interest centred upon Mont Blanc. Viewed at such a height, the mighty monarch appeared rather a great mound of snow above diverging rivers of ice than the proud mountain of the school-day fables; but such was the truth; and when he looked down upon the grand plateau, that spreading field of snow where so many have perished, it reminded him of nothing so much as the plateau at Andana, where his friends awaited him. Benny thought of them with a smile as he headed the ship right over the mountain. It seemed impossible to believe that he had left them just an hour and a half ago.

He flew very close to the summit of Mont Blanc and dropped upon it three weighted bags, each containing his message to the Aero Club of Switzerland. A sense of humour reminded him that those bags would hardly be sought by any climber at this season of the year, and that their very fabric might be rotted when the great thaw came; but he liked the idea of a message, and would scatter others before the flight was done. When they were delivered, he wheeled his machine right-about, and espying the white buildings of the valley, he began to go down toward them. Now, for the first time that day, he could realise the immensity of the precipices he had defied and their danger. Vast walls of rock appeared to engulf him as he descended; he could feel a bitter cold wind rising up from the

monster glaciers which had become lakes of the clearest blue ice; pine-woods shaped and declared the contours of trees. He became aware of the presence of people in the valley—thousands of them, moving in great throngs, now this way, now that, as they attempted to follow his movements. In the end he heard a roar of voices swelling upward, and this magnified in notes of a falsetto often ridiculous, but unmistakable. Called as by a messenger, he sought out a landing-place, and his eyes searched the snow-fields ceaselessly. Where was Émile—the faithful Émile? Ah, he stood yonder where the flags were waving. And thither the willing machine swept downward, gliding at last with wings outstretched and touching the snow as caressingly as a young girl may kiss her lover.

The chosen ground was about a mile from the village itself, near Les Pres, on the banks of the Arve. Here a fine spread of snow made descent comparatively safe, and here Benny found his allies, those clever workmen from the French shops whom he had engaged especially for his venture. Immediately they swarmed about him, driving the strangers back and appealing to the breathless gendarmes. As for little Émile, he threw himself into the Englishman's arms and kissed him on both cheeks, which resounding thwacks would not have disgraced a pantomime. He was followed by normally sane members of the Aero Clubs of France and London, who, forgetting their sanity, capered like goats upon the mountain, and uttered incoherent witticisms in unknown tongues. Behind them lay the spectators whose "bravos" echoed far up in the mountains—the honest acclamations of those who had seen miracles and would never forget the day. Indeed, it was said that some of the peasants had fled to the churches when the aeroplane first appeared over Mont Blanc. The priests themselves, taught to know better by the Abbé Villari, sent them forth with ridicule. Was there not a lunch to be eaten? And why should they delay?

Benny was frozen to the marrow when he rolled out of the shell, and his first request was for a hot drink. When Monsieur Collot of the Swiss Club shrugged his shoulders in pitiful desperation, Benny mumbled something about a Thermos under the driving seat, and Émile understanding, the flask was brought out and the hot draught proffered. Then the bluff engineer, striding to and fro upon the snow, tried to answer all their questions at a breath, while a photographer from the *Daily Recorder* made frantic efforts to snapshot him, and almost cried when he could not.

Yes, Benny admitted it had been a great day. He found the air currents very sure, but had suffered a good deal from the scorching sun. There would be no skin on his face for a month, but that did not matter. He could hardly tell them how the big mountains looked from above—his eyes had been too much on his engine; but he thought very little of Mont Blanc as a show when seen up aloft, and he was astonished how flat a country an aeroplane could make even of

this Switzerland. As to his prospects, he would finish if the engine held out and the cold was not too much for him. He had his doubts on the latter score, not upon the former. Pressed to say if his sensations had not been quite abnormal, he admitted that they might have been, and that he had known moments of fear, especially when he came down into the valley. The ether, he said, was a good friend to man when it was warm enough. He quite understood why parsons told them to look upward, for there was nothing like the peace of the heights in all the human story. But for the danger, no man who had known what it was to fly would ever wish to get back to the earth again. Sometimes at great heights he thought he had lost the earth altogether, and might drift away to another planet—which our great great grandchildren may be doing, he added, with a laugh. This Valley of Chamonix was just like a prison for the time being; he felt cabined and confined, wanted to be off and into the blue again; but he would take some food first if they didn't mind, and he hoped the police would keep all hands off his machine. To which Émile responded that he would shoot anyone who touched it, and with this amiable sentiment, continued his feverish task of replenishment and overhaul.

Benny, meanwhile, was led away to the Hotel Londres, where a luncheon had been prepared. His appearance, when he had discarded his furs, was droll enough; and, surely, this was the first time that high officials of Switzerland had sat down to banquet a man in engineer's overalls! But they did so with pride, and the speech in which the Mayor of Lausanne proposed the aviator's health did credit alike to his discernment and to his generosity.

It was nearly mid-day when the meal was done, and a quarter-past twelve when Benny pushed his way through the crowds of people and took his seat once more at the tiller of his ship. A hot sun then blazed in the sky, but a murmur of winds stirred ever and anon in the valley and warned him that the Rubicon had yet to be crossed. There would be dangerous moments above the Zermatt glaciers, and still graver dangers when he re-entered the Simplon. But he was in better heart to face them, and with a few honest words to the people he arose swiftly, amid a storm of wild cheering, straight up above the River Arve to the west, and the goal.

CHAPTER XXI

THE FLIGHT IS FINISHED

There is no more impressive fact of aviation than the speed at which the airman loses touch with *terra firma*.

At one moment the subject of congratulations amid a press of people, a familiar landscape about him, hills for his horizon, a great plain for his environment; at the next, he is high above the earth, the familiar landmarks are almost blotted out, the people have disappeared from his sight.

Benny had shaken hands perhaps with five hundred worthy souls at Chamonix, had written his name in fifty books, posed for his picture to excited acrobats who held quaking cameras, addressed blunt little speeches to the deputies, quaffed a stirrup-cup of hot spiced wine, been conscious of an environment of mighty mountains and majestic peaks, and then, in a flash, the picture was changed, the people had disappeared, the voices were lost to him, the very scene transformed.

He rose a little to the north of the forbidding Aiguille du Géant and experienced just for an instant the sensation that he had not attained a sufficient altitude and must strike the dread pinnacles of the rock. This was an unnecessary alarm, for the ship responded quickly to a touch of the elevating plane, and he cleared the mountain by three hundred feet or more. Then he headed almost due east, as he had been told to do. The wind, capricious ever in the Valley of Chamonix, here became almost boisterous; and for the first time that day he discovered a vacuum, as it were a whirlpool of the ether, into which he was drawn, and for a few moments whirled about with a velocity which appalled him. One less skilful might have wrecked all at such a moment, and had it been so he would have gone down headlong amid the pinnacles of rock which stand attendant to the famous peak. Benny, however, was always prepared for such a happening as this, and despite that crude sensation of the swift descent he covered his balance almost immediately and put the ship due east again.

He had saved himself, but for how long? The dread mountains, above which he must sail henceforth, would be fertile in such perils as this; the valleys he must cross would be death-traps to any but the most vigilant. Pride in his swift flight to Mont Blanc had seduced him to this easy confidence, which might undo all if uncorrected. He resolved to apply all the mental concentration of which he was capable to the one purpose of success, and taking the wheel firmly in his hands, he set his eyes toward the great mountains about Zermatt and would heed no other spectacle.

It has been said that he was quite ignorant of the Alps, and, truly, a man more familiar with the scene would have better understood the wonder of the deed.

Here below him were the steeps and slopes, the dread arrêtes, the gleaming precipices which climbers had dared since Switzerland first called them to

her wonders. Observed from that immense altitude he had now attained, the precipices had become but slabs of snow, steps in a puny wall above which the pinnacles soared; the steeps were but mild hills whereon children should have played; the glaciers but silver threads in whitened moraines which pierced the woods. Hotels and huts—he could hardly distinguish one from the other; the valleys were flattened out until they resembled the plateaus, and all with such a grotesque effect that sometimes the very earth would appear to be turned inside out as it were, the valleys made heights and the heights pressed down to valleys. Going on a little way, a cloud would shut the whole scene from his view, and he would imagine himself in the boundless ether, a wanderer apart from all worlds and voyaging toward the Eternal.

Engineers seldom lack imagination, and he of them all had a soul above the mechanics of things material. Despite his desire to accomplish the task he had set himself, this phantasy of the cloud inspired him to wonderful thoughts of life and death and the transit of the soul. Let this new science of flight continue, and who could name its limitations? He laughed at the folly of the notion, and then remembered that he must breast Zermatt according to the conditions.

Had he lost count of the Matterhorn? He peered down anxiously through the mist, descended a little and received the first real fright since the beginning. For a mountain loomed suddenly before him; he swung instantly to the left, and was then almost abreast of a fearsome precipice which suggested the whole measure of that height. The terror of it set him shuddering. He soared again desperately, and listened to the beat of his engine as to a message of life or death. Would it fail him? If it did, death must be the end of it. He laughed at his own cowardice when the rattle of the exhaust made music for his ears again, and the drifting vapour showed him all the wonders of the Riffelberg, as no living man but he had seen it.

Here for the first time he could look down upon the smiling face of Italy, and discern the gentler country between the chain of the Pennines and Biella. Despite the altitude, a warmer breath was breathed upon him from the southern valleys. The vast bulk of Monte Rosa, approached as he swung about to regain the Simplon, warned him that the respite was but brief, and that all the rigour of the northern range must be faced anew if he would reach Andana. But he was cheered by this break in the vista of eternal snows; and bringing his machine about, he searched the wilderness of ice below for any sign of those who must observe his passing.

He had crossed the sloping peak of the Matterhorn by this time, and could spy the precipices of the Weisshorn once more. The Valley of Zermatt running down to the pass was but a trench in a desolation from which the eyes must shrink. Knowing little of the place, he had few landmarks; but the Gorner Glacier

was one of them, and he traced it with precision. There he perceived great tendrils of pure ice, bent and gnarled as the trunks of trees; black rocks upon which no snow could rest; fathomless depths of ice so blue that a magic river should lie beneath them. And there, as elsewhere, the stillness appalled him. He was glad that it was so, for wind was the enemy. Let the weather change, and he might still be defeated. He knew it, and his heart sank at the remembrance.

A great endeavour is chiefly a story of great hopes. This man had dreamed of such an opportunity as this—he knew not in what phase of his calling—but he had dreamed that some day the world would hail him as a victor, and that his name would be known to men. Now it seemed that the moment was at hand. The immensity of his achievement was hardly present to his mind. Sometimes he was almost afraid for himself, saying, "I am jesting with my fellow-men; it is the machine and not the man which counts in the story of the sciences." At other times a great pride in what he had done ran like fire through his veins. The whole world must know his name to-morrow. If he fell dead then and there upon the black rocks of the Matterhorn, they must still say that he of all living men had first crossed the summit of Mont Blanc. He knew it, and flushed at the knowledge. He had not lived in vain; perchance, should the supreme prize be his, he was about to enter upon a new life whose rewards he would not dwell upon. Others had told him so; he was content to believe them.

And so great hopes went with him, and the smallest check upon them could set his heart beating. Of these the most considerable came at the moment when he headed his machine for the twin-peaked Weisshorn. His brother and the abbé had warned him against the currents of the Valley of Zermatt; but so triumphant had been his progression to this time that he had forgotten the warnings or derided them. Now they returned as an echo to which he must listen. Suddenly, and without any warning at all, he felt himself sinking toward the valley. It was just as though the whole machine dropped rapidly, had lost stability, and would go hurtling down to the abyss as a bird that is shot. In vain he raised his elevating plane to its full capacity. The shell continued its headlong flight, its nose dipped downwards, its engine raced wildly. Then, as suddenly, he regained his balance, went a little way upon an even keel, and discovered that his engine had almost ceased to run. It ebbed away as a life that gasps for air—sobbed out a requiem. And that drove him almost mad with terror; for a spell his wit failed him altogether; he sat back in his chair and looked death in the face.

But it was for an instant, no more. There is this in the instinct of a true mechanic, that whatever the emergency, his mind will grasp the meaning of it before the minds of others, and he will be the first to act. Even as death looked him in the face, Benny could say that the engine had ceased to run because the petrol supply had failed. Turning in his seat he lifted the needles valve, and then

struck the side of his tank a fierce blow. As swiftly as the engine had failed, as swiftly it took up the drive again. He heard the hum of it; watched the great propeller racing, and then looked ahead of him to regain his course. There had been a margin of ten seconds perhaps between salvation and the ultimate calamity. He was as white as the snow beneath him when he understood the truth.

A vast black precipice of rock loomed up the third of a mile away. Unable to see more than its jagged face, Benny swung his machine to port, then soared without a break until he had lost all sense of locality, and the air was so bitterly cold that his very breath turned to ice. Now a great white cloud enveloped him. He looked vainly to his compass for help, but the needle oscillated so violently that north and south had no meaning. Descending a little way, he discovered that he was circling about Monte Rosa, and that the plains of Italy called him once more. Then despair seized upon him—the despair of a man who wanders by night, lost to all sense of direction, and vainly seeking lights upon a strange horizon.

In a measure this dread had been inspired by the fall. He waited with ear intent for any sound that the engine would fail a second time, and shuddered at any variation of its rhythm. When the vista became clear again he was astonished to find that the scene was just as it had been when first he crossed the summit of the Matterhorn. All the great peaks—the Dent Blanche, the Rothhorn, the Grand Gorner, the Weissthor—stood in the same relation to his course as when he had set it at the beginning. And at this he took new courage, and with a counsel of prudence which sent him eastward across the mouth of the valley. He would not enter that trap for the second time; he knew that in altitude lay his salvation.

His flight now lay in some part along the Italian frontier. He skirted Monte Rosa and flew straight across the Gorner Grat, kept to the right of the Horner, and henceforth found a kindlier country. Had he persisted he would have come to the lesser peaks which fend the Simplon Pass; but he swung again before he reached them, and so, with the wind at his back, he headed at last straight for Andana and the goal. Half an hour, he thought, would bring the end, if the weather held and the mists were but local.

The latter was now his only doubt, and he could not shake it off despite the magnitude of his attainment. He had reached a point where he should have been able to look right up the Valley of the Rhone; but the view was obscured by those banks of white cloud which had drifted in the valley since dawn, and were still to be reckoned with. He entered the first of them, and was subject once more to all the dread and despair which had afflicted him at Zermatt. A sense of direction was lost as heretofore; vast shadows appeared to pursue him; he raced his engine that he might escape them, but they pressed on the more. Then, in an instant, the way would be clear, the sun shining brightly, the valley below him a

smiling scene to summon him to victory.

It was but such a little way, and victory stood so near. When the cloud enveloped him for the third time that day, he tried to soar above it, and succeeded for a little while; but the vapour was mounting also and it would interpose a curtain between him and the earth, so that direction was alternately lost and found, while he himself became soaked to the skin and began to lose the use of his hands. Now, surely, he thought that he was done for; but still he headed for Andana and the slopes, and said that all must be risked in that final descent. Henceforth, it was a race between the endurance of the man and the machine, and the magnitude of the cloud. He heard an ominous misfire in his engine, and shivered as though a cold hand had touched him. The great white sea of vapour below forbade him to see whether he were then above Visp or Sierre; nor did the contour of the valley shape as he had expected. So a woful sense of defeat took possession of him anew; his numbed hands permitted the ship to rock horribly; he went down a hundred feet, but feared the walls of the valley; rose again, and reeled in his seat. He was a beaten man by now, hardly able to raise a hand to a lever; the great white sea had done for him, and he knew it.

Here irony stepped in, and with a weird interposition which would have delighted a cynic. While his machine rolled and sagged in the mists a sound of human voices came up to him from below. He thought that he heard cheers, the hooting of horns, and the crack of a revolver shot. As swiftly as the sounds arose they died away, and the stillness became supreme. He felt that he must come down whatever the cost. The great prize was lost, and with it the hope of the years. And at this tears of a bitter sorrow welled to the man's eyes. Defeated! Yes, that was the truth, and the world would know the story to-morrow, and forget him in a week. What mattered it that he had done so much? Was not victory his all in all? And he was beat—dead beat—by the cloud which mocked him. Almost with a sob he made a last effort and began to come down. The ground below him, emerging suddenly, showed a steep bank of snow with pinewoods above it. There he ran his ship, and as she came to rest he buried his face in his hands and wept aloud.

CHAPTER XXII

THE EMPTY HOUSE

The fit of weakness passed swiftly to give place to a finer measure of courage than any which had inspired him hitherto.

The prize was lost. What then? He had been robbed of it, not by any failure of the machine he had created, but by the caprice of nature, against which he was powerless. Those who criticised him would be compelled to admit as much. And, all said and done, he had been the first man to cross Mont Blanc in an aeroplane, and no tongue could rob him of the credit.

These were early impressions, and not a little vague. He was bitterly cold and so cramped in every limb that when he rolled out of his seat at last he could not stand upright. Utterly exhausted in mind and body, he held as well as he could to the shell of the ship, and tried to drag himself to his feet. Then he remembered that there was a flask of brandy among his "stores," and finding it with maladroit hand, he took a heavy draught. The potent liquor revived him immediately. Circulation came back at last. He stood upright and looked about him.

He was on a steep slope of the snow, and there were woods above him. When he had searched them a little while with patient eyes, he began to think that they were not unfamiliar. A further scrutiny showed him a gabled building above the woods, and he could have sworn that it was the well-known hotel at Vermala. Turning to the valley below, he perceived a clump of pines emerging from the mists, and they fitted into the picture he had imagined. Yes, they would be the woods standing between Vermala and the plateau of Andana, and if they were, his chalet lay below them. But at that thought he shrugged his shoulders and laughed in an odd way. He would not think about a chance so preposterous.

His machine had escaped all damage in the swift descent, and lay across the bank; one wing just tipping the froth of the snow, the other poised high above the white ground. His difficulty was to reach solid ground, for the drifts were deep hereabouts, and he sank up to his knees at every step he took. It occurred to him that he must carry skis with him in future against such a mishap as this; and resolving to make a note of it, he began to examine the engine and propellers to see if all were well with them. This scrutiny still occupied him when he heard a loud shouting from the woods below, and picked up his ears as a hare that is warned.

There were cries in the wood, incoherent salvos as of a mob whose hearts might be in unison, but whose lungs were out of tune. Listening intently, Benny thought that he could distinguish the raucous voices of boys, the shrill piping of girls, and the deep baying of men excited abnormally. A moment later and a man emerged from the wood, and set out to cross the snow toward him, and this man was up to his waist in the drift immediately, while strong arms were thrust out to help him, and a roar of laughter proffered as his reward.

"Good God!" cried Benny, "it's the little priest!" And, in truth, it was.

The Abbé Villari, with his cassock tucked up to his waist, his arms waving wildly, hatless and with tousled hair, he had been first before them all. No runner at Stamford Bridge could have had much the better of him in that mad striving for the first prize in the race. And, worthy soul, the snow engulfed him immediately, and it remained for the parson, Harry Clavering, to drag him out and set him, sobered, upon his feet. Meanwhile, others had snatched the prize from him, and before them all the Admirable Crichton of Andana, Dr. Orange, the immaculate.

Benny steadied himself by the shell of his ship while he watched this advance; nor could his wit make anything of it. Why were all these people in such a hurry to thrash a dead horse? Had they come to tell what he knew so well, that his endeavour had failed, and that the prize must go to another? He could make nothing of it, and he stood and stared while men and women on skis debouched from the woods by twenty paths and came racing over the snow toward him.

Dr. Orange was quite out of breath when he reached the place, and he stood for a little while holding to the ship and trying to find words. Before he had recovered, Bob Otway, Dick Fenton, and Keith Rivers had joined him, and these were eloquent enough, though they spoke a strange tongue to Benny. In truth, their greeting was an incoherent salvo of wild words among which he distinguished such homely phrases as, "You've got them stiff"; "Bravo old Benny!" and "Perinder pays, by thunder!" An instant later and Bob had suggested that it was a case for "chairing"; and there being no chair handy, he and Rivers laid violent hands upon the astonished victor and lifted him bodily to their shoulders.

His protest went for nothing. He cried out that it was "damned nonsense!" but no one seemed to hear him. Perchance a man has never been carried shoulder-high by other men on skis before. They would establish a precedent, as Bob declared, and calling the parson and Dick Fenton to his aid, set off bravely for the Palace.

"Where is my brother?" Benny asked them in an interlude. The doctor answered that he had fainted when the gun announced the victory; but that was an enigma to the engineer, and kept him quiet awhile. "When the gun announced his victory. Good God! What victory?"

"I lost it," he stammered presently, "because the mist took me. It seems I was nearer than I thought. Another ten minutes and I would have done it."

Nobody listened to this. They were in the woods now, and went on in a triumph characteristic of Andana. If the music were chiefly of horns and bugles, it mattered little. Major Boodle, among others, had devoted a master intellect to the acquisition of the "yoodle" in various keys, and he practised it relentlessly. There was one fellow who had borrowed a drum in the village, and beat a tattoo with real cleverness. A few mild youths, who always carried revolvers when "on

the Continent," produced those far from formidable weapons and shot down the branches from the trees. But, in the main, the voice was the instrument, and was to be heard in a stentorian cheer, or the less musical and more joyous chant of victory.

Some hundreds of the spectators had gone up to Vermala, but many thousands remained on the plateau and were discovered suddenly as the odd procession emerged from the woods. The drift of cloud, which had tricked the aviator into the belief that he had failed, was now but a wall of vapour flanking the precipices across the valley, all the scene stood out, revealed in magic glory.

Heaven knew whence all the flags had come. It was said that the bunting erected by the *Daily Recorder* had been pulled down by excited hands and distributed among the people. Certainly, every other man carried a flag and waved it perpetually. In their turn, the women waved handkerchiefs while the children ran to and fro hardly understanding what it was all about, and caring very little. Meanwhile, the band blared incessantly, and down at the village the church bell tolled as gaily as an ancient bell-ringer could persuade it to do.

The crowd had waited patiently for its hero to come down from the heights, and directly it perceived the outposts of the procession, all bonds were broken and a wild tumult ensued. A hundred hands fought for the burden, and were repulsed with difficulty. A frenzy of cheers succeeded the intermittent salvos. Men, and women too, fell in the snow and were rolled over and over by the heedless feet of other runners. The one desire was to see the man who had done this thing, and, if it might be, to touch his hand. He, in turn, implored those who carried him to make an end of it.

"Take me to the chalet," he said. And the doctor commanding, they carried him there in triumph, and shut and barred the door against the multitude.

* * * * *

Brother Jack had been sitting before the fire in their little sitting-room when Benny came tumbling in. His face was very pale and his eyes wide open. It was true that he had fainted when the signal-gun announced his brother's victory, and the reaction of joy could be detected in the quiver of his lips and his restless hands. Had he been a Frenchman he would have kissed Benny on both cheeks prior to a flourish of words in which platitudes of sentiment abounded. But as it was, he just stood up and cried, "Hallo, Benny!" while Benny said, "Hallo, Jack!" and came and slapped him on the shoulder. The others in the room at this time were at the Abbé Villari, Harry Clavering and the doctor, and these three stood apart that the brothers might talk.

"I thought you were done, Benny, old boy. I heard the engine down the

valley, and thought you'd miss us. How did you manage it? How did you do it, old fellow?"

"That's what I'm asking myself, Jack. I must have done it, or these people wouldn't be making such a noise. Luck, I suppose. I thought I was a good ten miles from the place when I came down. Well, I suppose I wasn't, and that's all."

Jack laughed. The colour was returning to his cheeks.

"It's not all by a long way, Benny. You flew right over our heads just as though you were making a bee line. Not that it mattered. What you had to do was to get back to the starting-point, and here you are. Come and warm yourself, old boy. You're stiff with the cold."

Benny agreed to that.

"Never was so cold in all my life, Jack. You could cut me up in lengths, if you liked! I've had a hard time, old boy—a d—d hard time! And now it's over, eh? Well, that's something; and if none of you mind, I think I'll go to bed for a spell. Dr. Orange would prescribe that, I know. Just a snooze, doctor, eh, and a drop of something warm!"

He turned and went up the little staircase to his bedroom. Jack and the doctor following. The crowd was still gathered about the house, and from time to time it cheered lustily; but when Dr. Orange went out and said the aviator was resting, the people drew back respectfully, while the gendarmes posted sentries before the chalet, and forbade anyone to approach it. Among them was the little gendarme, Philip, waiting impatiently for his chief's permission to go into Italy.

* * * * *

It had been arranged that the cheque for ten thousand pounds should be handed over by Sir John Perinder, the proprietor of the *Daily Recorder*, at a banquet to be given at the Palace Hotel at seven o'clock that night. Lavish according to his habit, Sir John invited all the residents at the hotel to be his guests, and prepared also a high table at which the victor might meet his intimates.

Aided by the staff of the Palace, the great dining-room was quickly prepared for this novel function. The flags of many nations adorned its whitewashed walls; there were ridiculous streamers and words of welcome both in French and English. Bizarre ornaments from the bazaar decorated the long tables, but the high table itself carried the monster silver cup with which the Aero Club of Switzerland commemorated the achievement, and this was a veritable work of art.

Benny found this dinner one of the most uncomfortable entertainments at which he had yet assisted. It is true that he was received by a round of cheers when he entered the room, but he could not but remember that many who now applauded had derided him but a week ago.

For himself, he would have been hard put to it to say just what he did feel. That the whole world would tell the story of the flight to-morrow, he knew full well. It would have been absurd to have put aside so self-evident a fact. The nations would honour him, and his own people welcome a British victory. Looking further afield, he perceived that his social position had changed in a flash, and that he, who had called himself a beggar that morning, was now a rich man, with every prospect of adding enormously to his riches in the immediate future. Already the cable had brought offers which dazed him by their generosity. He was to fly at this meeting, to fly at that. A firm in London offered him two thousand pounds just to show his machine. Surely, this implied a permanence of fortune. And he had but begun to use those amazing brains which God had given him.

Here were things to be remembered subtly as the waiters filled his glass with champagne, and boisterous diners asked to drink wine with him. He found the speeches tedious enough, and thought Sir John a dreadful windbag. When the great moment came, and the cheque was handed over to him, it seemed such a sorry strip of paper to stand for so much, and he thrust it into his pocket carelessly, as though it were the visiting-card of an acquaintance. None the less, he was conscious of it being there during the rest of the dinner; and despite his desire not to do so, he touched it more than once with his fingers to be quite sure that he had not lost it.

His own speech amazed the company. No one expected an engineer to be also an orator, and yet his simple words had the stamp of true oratory. He spoke to the hearts of those who heard him, concealing none of his aims and ambitions, and confessing how greatly he had desired success. His honesty was inspiring. He believed that they would be glad to have this news in England. It was natural that he should think of his own country at such a moment. But he could give every credit to France, and the brains of those Frenchmen who had carried this art to such lengths. In conclusion, he hoped that his many friends at Andana would hold some memory of him in their affections.

There were rousing cheers at this—the cheers of those who had grown suddenly conscious of their own littleness, and knew that they had met a man. When the dinner broke up, young and old swarmed about Benny again, begging his experiences, proffering their books, congratulating him in volatile phrases. To all he pleaded that he was dead tired and must get to bed. The supreme day of his life had ended! He was about to say "good-bye" to it.

It was eleven o'clock then, and few were abroad. The excursionists had already returned to Sierre and the railway; the keepers of carnival had surrendered to the snow and a bitter wind arisen at sundown. What should have been an *al fresco* fête upon the skating rink had become but a collection of shivering impre-

sarios gathered about ebbing fires. The pathway to the Park Hotel was deserted, nor could you have counted twenty people on the road to Vermala.

Benny had set out in the company of his brother Jack and the Abbé Villari, and the three pursued their way in silence toward the house. Usually, there would have been a beacon light to guide them, a lamp shining from the window of Lily Delayne's chalet; but no such lamp shone out to-night, and the gables shaped amid the snowflakes as the grey and silent towers of some deserted citadel. When they drew a little nearer they saw that the blinds were drawn, and that the whole chalet was in darkness: a fact which the abbé explained by saying that the English lady had left for Sierre earlier in the day, and that he did not believe she would return. To this Benny made no other answer than to suggest that she must have found the presence of so many strangers unwelcome, and perhaps had done well to go.

But he rested a moment at the door of the chalet for all that, and when he turned away neither of the others had the courage to mention the matter again.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE NIGHT MAIL

Lily Delayne had left Andana at midday in an interlude when it was possible to get sleighs from the stable.

They had told her that she would not be able to reach the valley at all that day if she left it until the afternoon; and this fell in with her own resolution, which was to go at once while she had the courage.

So she set out when the excitement was at its height, and no one else in the village thought of anything but the mad Englishman. There were thousands grouped upon the plateau when the sleigh came for her; every commanding slope of snow was black with the people who stared into the ether as though their eyes might win a far vision if they had but the patience. She could hear the music of bands, the ebb and flow of carnival and a murmur of voices which betokened a great throng at its pleasures. When the sleigh came for her at length, André the driver, complained bitterly that he should be compelled to go down to Sierre at such a moment.

"It is a thing no man will ever see again," he said almost pathetically. "Madame should have stayed until her countryman returned."

She made no comment, and when she had settled everything with the dour maid, who was to return to Brigue, they began their drive, making their way carefully through the press, and arousing no comment where so many strangers were gathered. André, for his part, drew up more than once at the roadside to show her just where the madman had flown and by what height he would return.

"It was over there," he cried dramatically, indicating Mont Blanc with a flourish of his long whip. "I saw him myself, madame—like the eagle we see in the picture books. He was gone before a man could have counted ten. If he comes again, it will be over the Weissshorn. Just think of that—and we have lived to see it! He will come over the Weissshorn like a flash of light, and to-morrow all the world will hear of it. Well, we may not be too late after all, if we keep our eyes open. It is a pity, though, that madame must go to-day."

She made no reply. Her eyes had followed vaguely the course of the flight, and she had tried to realise the wonder of it. But her deeper thoughts forbade her to do so. Had she been honest with herself, she would have said that she was going away just because of this man's victory—fleeing from his success, because she believed that it was her duty to do so.

Here she proved once more that a woman's heart is impregnable to the assaults of reason. Luton Delayne had not a shadow of claim upon her. The world would say, "Well done!" if she carried her case to the courts and ended forever the tragedy of the years. She intended to do nothing of the kind. Behind her intention lay the traditions of centuries, the habit of mind which the ancient Faith had fostered, and the resolution of unnumbered millions of good women who had lived and suffered such a life as this. At their bidding she fled from another and from his victory. A certain resentment against the honours he had won possessed her. He would be famous before the world to-morrow!

It was warmer in the depths of the valley, and the sun shone with great power. Sierre, that odd little town where all Englishmen travelling to the Simplon gather at some time or other, was deserted to the point of wonder. Even the hall-porter at the Terminus Hotel had gone a little way up the hillside in the hope of seeing something of the flight. The officials at the railway station were gathered in the yard, staring skywards until their necks ached. When Lily obtained a hearing at last, they told her it would be almost impossible to go through to Italy to-night by any ordinary train, and that all the places in the sleeping-cars were booked. Far better, said the amiable old lady who received her at the Terminus, far better to stay until to-morrow, when the excitement would be over. Yes, she could have a bed. An English family had left unexpectedly for Caux that morning, and its rooms were vacant.

Lily decided to accept this wise advice, but prudence restrained her from sending a telegram to Luton. She spent the afternoon in wandering about the

little town and listening to the wild tales of the gossips at the street corners, each of whom had some new version of the flight. The excellent telephone service in Switzerland spread the news rapidly enough, and it was soon known that the aviator had reached Mont Blanc, that he had descended safely, and gone on towards Zermatt amid scenes of almost frantic enthusiasm. Later on, there was a sudden bustle in the streets, men running hither and thither, and an exodus from the station and from every café. Someone said that the machine had been seen high over the northern slopes; but Lily herself could make nothing of it, and when she returned for a cup of afternoon tea the excitement had subsided as quickly as it arose, and all was quiet in the town again.

This was merely a lull, as events proved, and she quickly perceived the wisdom of the advice offered by the landlady. No sooner was it known that the Englishman had succeeded than the sleighs began to return to the station. One would not have believed that there were so many horses in the Rhone Valley, and this was to say nothing of the thousands of excursionists who came down on foot besieging the railway station, and filling every café to the point of riot. Lily was glad that she had abandoned all idea of a journey to Locarno until to-morrow, and she went to bed early, avoiding her loquacious countrymen in the corridor of the hotel, and trying to believe that she was little interested in their excited stories of the day. When she arose next morning, it was snowing hard, and the wind had attained some force. She did not dare to venture out, and kept her own room until after dinner, when the news reached her that there was a delay upon the line at Brigue, and it was doubtful if the evening express could reach Milan at all that night.

Everyone seemed sure of this—the hall-porter, who spoke English like a German, and the amiable landlady, who spoke French like an Italian. Exactly what had happened no one could say with certainty, and the stories were so contradictory that Lily put on her hat about nine o'clock and went over to the station to hear the news for herself.

It was snowing heavily and the wind bitterly cold. She found a little group of officials upon the dimly-lighted platform and two or three English people, who, like herself, had been on the point of going into Italy. One of these was no other than Harry Clavering, who recognised her immediately, and came forward with both hands outstretched. She remembered that he had been the first of the guests at Andana to offer friendship upon her arrival, and she thought it an odd coincidence that she should meet him here at such an hour.

"They told me you had returned to England," he exclaimed, "but you never said good-bye to anyone. We did not even have an opportunity to snowball you. Why, everyone who goes away from Andana is snowballed. The more snow you get down your neck, the more popular you are. I was nearly smothered to-day.

Yes, they were very kind to me. But it was a real disappointment to us all that you should go without a word."

She told him that urgent private business had summoned her to Italy, and expressed her pleasure to meet him.

"The hotel is full of English people," she said, "therefore one knows nobody. Of course, you have heard the news? The express runs no further than Brigue to-night—there is some trouble on the line. We should have gone by the slow train earlier in the day, it appears; but I am always so shy of slow trains in Italy. Now they will not promise to take us until to-morrow, and perhaps not then. I have just been speaking to the station-master about it, and learned the truth so far as he is capable of telling it. Poor man, one would think the end of the world was at hand."

Harry Clavering did not seem at all upset.

"It is quite unusual," he explained, trotting by her side as she began to pace the long platform; "the express runs usually with the regularity of a clock, though some clocks, by the way, strike at all the stations. I expect there has been a heavy fall of snow and one of the galleries is giving trouble; or there may have been a slight accident. They tell me that the gale last night was very severe on the other side. Was it not lucky that your friend, Mr. Benson, won the prize when he did? He would never have done it to-day."

She did not fail to notice that he spoke of "her friend, Mr. Benson," and she wondered that he had done so. Some women would have disclaimed the association; but Lily Delayne held the little hypocrisies of life in some contempt, and rarely stooped to them. So she accepted the charge, and found herself talking of Benny's victory.

"Is he not a very remarkable man?" she said. "I guessed it the first day I saw him, though that did not appear to be the common opinion. The Englishman is so often judged by the partialities of his critics that many such mistakes are made. Surely, of all the people in Europe, we are the slowest to discover those who do us most honour. Now don't you agree with that, Mr. Clavering?"

"With every word of it, my dear lady. Our study of mankind finds us rare dunces. I think most of us would be ploughed if our degrees depended upon it. We are shrewd judges of results, but children in estimating the mind by which results are achieved. And we have ceased, alas! to be pioneers. Even Mr. Benson cannot claim to have invented the aeroplane. He is but an imitator, though a very clever one, I admit."

He perceived that she was interested, and went on to tell her all that had been said of Benny during the day. Totally destitute of the commercial mind himself, and wofully ignorant of finance, he repeated Sir Gordon Snagg's loquacious prophecies. It would be odd if Mr. Benson did not make a hundred thousand

pounds in the course of the year, and that, surely, was a very big sum for such a man. Why, he would never know what to do with it. Then there would be all the fame attending—just fame, and well earned. Already a message had come from the King, and the French President had conferred the Grand Cordon upon the victor. It was said that Mr. Benson had received offers which would carry him to every quarter of the globe. He was to leave Switzerland immediately, it was understood, going straight to London, where a great reception had been prepared for him by Sir John Perinder.

Lily heard him with an occasional word of comment, but did not question him further. Presently the great express came steaming into the station; the gongs rang musically, and the English people flocked across the rails to take their places. This was the northern-bound train. But the night express for Milan followed it almost at once, and a rare confusion followed. Everyone bawled the news to everyone else who would listen. There had been an accident at Domo d'Ossola, and the line was quite blocked; they had to transfer the passengers to the southern-bound train, which was held up beyond the tunnel; it had not been a serious accident, and nobody was hurt. When the trains departed at length, the flare from their furnaces could be seen for many miles, the great funnels vomiting flame, and the wind carrying the sparks high above the valley. Then, as by magic, the little station appeared to settle down to sleep; the officials vanished; the English people returned to their hotel; the red and green lanterns stood sentinels of the night.

It was just after ten o'clock when Lily re-entered the corridor of the Terminus. She had no desire to go to bed, and when the parson begged permission to smoke his "lastly" with her, she assented very willingly. This kindly, gentle soul, the world appeared to have cast him out also, for he was without kith or kin, a lonely bachelor in this wilderness of mountains, desiring nothing so much as the good of mankind, but deprived by the subtleties of the ecclesiastical system from any performance which would have done him credit before the people. Naturally, he delighted in the society of a beautiful woman, who stood to him for a type of all that was highest and holiest in the human story. At a look from her he would have revealed the most sacred truths of his life—for so are men led to the confessional; but the opportunity passed, and he spoke again of things he believed to be commonplace.

"By the way," he said, "do you remember the strange affair at Vermala?"

She looked up astonished.

"Yes, indeed; and what of it?"

"Well, I chanced to meet one of the gendarmes this morning, a mere boy, whom they call Philip Gaillarde. He tells me that the affair is no longer a mystery. It was his brother who was killed on the Zaat—I believe by an Englishman who

has been in trouble. The young man had just obtained leave from his superiors to go into Italy—I think he must have started by the morning train. He says that the assassin is near Locarno on Lake Maggiore. He has gone there to-day to arrest him.”

Lily made what reply she could, but she did not speak again of it. The night had been very cold, and now that they were under shelter again she began to fear that she had taken a chill. A shivering fit was succeeded by a little faintness, which caused the parson great concern. He advised her to go to bed immediately, and she welcomed the suggestion.

Philip Gaillarde in Italy! What, then, had prevented her going that morning? An excuse of the trains. She knew that it was not so, but rather the hope that she might yet see a man who loved her, and say "farewell" to him.

CHAPTER XXIV THE DOCTOR INTERVENES

The world is as little interested in the harvest another reaps of his success as in the dinner he ate yesterday.

Benny's flight for the great prize had been a pleasant interlude at Andana, an excitement which might be permitted to postpone for a day the necessary operations of skating, ski-ing and curling. But when the flight had been accomplished, the little colony returned with what zest it could to its pleasures. These, unhappily, were pursued but sadly on the day following the great event. A cold bitter wind blew up the valley from Visp, and the snow fell incessantly during the morning and again at night, as has been told.

Benny was not sorry that things should turn out so. He dreaded a new invasion of the chalet, and had very much to do before he could leave the country. It was true, as Harry Clavering had said, that splendid offers had been made to him by his own people, but there were other offers both from France and from Switzerland, and he spent a good deal of his morning trying to plan out a campaign which should satisfy all concerned. A little later on Dr. Orange came in as though by accident, and when Brother Jack had gone upstairs to begin the packing, the doctor broached a private affair in which he presupposed a mutual interest.

”By the way,” he said, ”you know that Lady Delayne has left here?”

Benny, who was in the act of lighting his pipe, threw the match into the fireplace and looked at the doctor sharply.

"Gone to London, hasn't she?"

The doctor thought not.

"No," he said, "they tell me it is to Italy. Her husband is there, you know."

Benny made no attempt to evade it.

"Yes," he said, "I do know he's there. The question is, how did you find out, Doctor?"

"Oh, doctors hear everything. To begin with, I recognised Luton Delayne outside the Palace Hotel just as you did. He must have come to us after the affair at Grindelwald. Directly his wife arrived here I thought her face very familiar. I remember meeting them at a dinner party in Onslow Square—it must be three or four years ago. She's a woman you could not forget. We all think that."

Benny did not say that he thought it. A shrewd judge of men, he believed that a spirit of friendship had sent the doctor to the chalet, and he was grateful to him.

"Why, yes," he enjoined. "I guess the whole place would be about unanimous if that lady were in the case. But you haven't answered my question, Doctor; you haven't told me how you knew she was going into Italy. I'm curious, for I knew nothing about it. In fact, I didn't quite expect her to go at all."

The doctor took a cigarette from his case and lighted it carefully. His eyes had a curious trick of looking first to the right of him and then to the left, as though seeking inspiration from the carpet, and he twisted his shadow of a moustache quite fiercely while he pondered a reply.

"Well," he said, "I think that our objects are quite the same. Suppose I say that it was the gendarme here, the man they call Philip Gaillarde; would you be astonished at that?"

"I should be astonished at nothing in Luton Delayne's case. When did you get the news?"

"Oh, in the café this morning. There is a girl there named Susette; the young man is interested, it appears, and she is one of my patients. I have been attending her some days for a little hysteria—nothing serious, but quite alarming to the love-sick swain. Somehow she learned that he is going away, and is in a great state about it. She thinks he is in danger."

"Of what?"

"Of never returning to Andana—which is to say that she knows—"

He looked at his friend shrewdly, and seemed to be waiting for the fuller confession to come from him. Benny debated it an instant, his teeth gnawing the stem of his pipe. Then he spoke.

"You mean to say that Philip Gaillarde has gone into Italy to arrest Sir Lu-

ton?"

"That is exactly how I would put it."

"And that he knows the whole story?"

"I don't think there's any doubt about it. He has been told that Luton Delayne was the man, and he has obtained permission to go to Locarno and to help the police there. It is his own idea—though the local police should be very well able to help themselves. The question for us is one of social jurisprudence. Is it good for the other English, for the people who come here every year, to have this scandal to their discredit? I would go further, and ask, is it at any time wise to push such a case against such a family as the Delaynes? Speaking for myself, I don't think it is. Luton Delayne is a modern type; I suppose in New York they would understand him very well; but here we are educated slowly. The Swiss police are a little more ignorant than ourselves. I have had a chat with Ardlot, the French secretary at the hotel, and he tells me that they will be merciless if they succeed in arresting the man. We know what that means; perhaps we are interested enough to ask how others might take it."

Benny pulled heavily at his pipe. When he removed it from his lips it was to say:

"Wouldn't the singular number be better, Doctor? Shouldn't we say 'one other'?"

"If you like it so, by all means. But, let me tell you, I am talking quite in the dark; I don't know where Gaillarde speaks the truth; I am quite unaware if Delayne is in Italy, or no. That's why I came to you—"

"Then you believe that I know?"

"I am sure you do."

For a spell the two men sat looking at each other in silence. Benny neither denied nor affirmed the charge. His eyes searched the flickering fire as though for an inspiration. The problem was clear enough; he wondered if the doctor knew how much it meant to him.

"I guess you're a bit of a thought reader, Doctor," he exclaimed of a sudden, taking up the conversation exactly as it was left. "I do know where Luton Delayne is, and that's a fact. Let me be as plain with you. What you came here to do was to warn me. You wish me to know that the police are inquiring after him. Don't you think it's a little late for that? Gaillarde will be half-way to Brigue by this time. He'll be in Milan before we've done our second breakfast. What's the good of all this then, knowing what we do? Isn't it a bit foolish?"

Orange hardly understood him.

"My dear fellow," he protested, "I was not thinking anything of the kind. Will not the telegraph serve our purpose just as well?"

Benny shook his head.

"Look all round it, and then decide," he said quietly. "This lad has heard that Delayne is in Italy. Does he know where he is? If he does not, we may be right enough. If he does, a telegram may be the thing, or it may not. I'll have to calculate the chances. Before I can do that I must see this girl, Susette. Would she be still at the café, do you think? Should I find her there if I went down this afternoon? If so, I'll see her and let you know. There's time enough anyway; we can't run after the morning train to Milan, and I don't suppose either of us is going to try. What I would say before all is that I like the friendship which sent you here, Doctor. I shan't forget that, nor will Lady Delayne, when she hears about it. Did you say, by the way, that she has gone across the frontier? Don't I remember something about that?"

"It is quite true, or will be true. She was at Sierre last night waiting for an opportunity. I should not wonder if she went this morning by the same train as Gaillarde. Ardlot told me how it was; he saw her at the Terminus, and heard what she was doing."

"Then she certainly will have gone through this morning. I am very much obliged to you. Whatever is done, shall be done after a talk with you. It would be about half-past two or three, I suppose?"

They assented, and parted upon it, the doctor returning to the Palace, Benny calling Brother Jack and the abbé down to lunch. When the repast was finished he made some excuse, and taking his rough sweater and snow helmet, he set off for the village of Andana and the café where the girl, Susette, was to be found. It was a little after two o'clock, and the plateau quite deserted. He remembered that the guests at the Palace would hardly have finished their coffee, and hurried on with an anxiety very foreign to his nature.

Where did his duty lie, and to whom? It was true that the gendarme, Philip, had spoken of this visit to Italy on the eve of the flight; but it had been a tentative proposal, and depended upon the permission of his superiors. Then, as now, Benny perceived that if the lad did not know the whereabouts of the shanty, there would be no risk whatever, and Philip might be less dangerous at Milan than at Andana. If, on the other hand, the story of the shanty were known, then that was the end of it. Why, Sir Luton might be arrested that very night. And if he were, Lily Delayne must be a free woman before many weeks had passed. Benny shuddered a little when he remembered this, and walked on the faster. The victor's laurel suited him but ill, and many a poor wretch by the wayside might have pitied him.

She would be a free woman! He repeated the words often, dwelling upon them with an interest which frightened him. Not for the first time did he understand how little victory meant to him, and how bitter were the fruits of success. He must lead a lonely life, whatever the honour of it. He saw himself slaving

in study or workshop, a man without a definite goal, one whose interest had no corner-stone. And it were idle to say that there was a woman who could change all this and breathe anew upon a dead inspiration. His ideas were old and built upon an ancient faith. Fate had set a barrier between Lily and himself, and none but Almighty God could remove it.

She would be a free woman! Yes, surely, that could be brought about easily enough. He had but to forbear, to return to his house as he had come, or simpler, just to whisper a word or two to the Chief of Police at Sierre, and there would be no difficulty about the matter. When he thought of this he laughed aloud because he had dared to think of it. In the same mood the best of men have asked themselves what would happen if they committed murder or robbed a bank or began to starve their children.

It was less easy to deal with the subtle question of what could or could not be done. How if it were impossible to stop this mad youth, who would avenge his brother? It might be so; the chances were that Philip was already on the way to Locarno, and would do his work before any could interfere. Benny thought of this, and hurried on to the café. The girl, Susette, would help him—he was quite confident about it.

Here luck favoured him, for old Maître Rousset, the proprietor of the café, declared that his daughter had just gone down to the post-office, and would be back inside five minutes. He was delighted to welcome Monsieur Benson, the great Englishman, to his house; and he began to ask him a thousand questions about his art and achievement. Like many others, he had devised a flying machine twenty years ago, and he called for a glass of vermouth while he unfolded its wings, so to speak, and drew, with the stem of a brier pipe, a plan upon the table before him. When Susette came in, it needed all Benny's ingenuity to get a word with her; but he managed it at last by sending her father upon an errand to the telephone, and promising him that he should see the machine if he came up to the chalet later on.

Susette was a brunette, with the figure of a woman and the face of a child. Her skin was very white, her cheeks inordinately red, when she returned from her errand down the village street. It was plain that she had been running in her eagerness to return. Someone had told her that the hero of the day was at the café, and knowing him to be the friend of her lover, Philip, she ran all the way from the post-office that she might not miss him. A few kindly words upon Benny's part put her quite at her ease. Oh, yes, she knew that Monsieur Philip had gone into Italy; he would be back in three or four days at the most, for that was his promise.

"He has gone to Locarno, Monsieur. I am quite sure of it. He went by the first train this morning, and should reach his destination to-night. I have just

posted a letter to him, which he will receive to-morrow. It is lonely to be so far away from us all. I do not think he has any friends in Italy."

"Then you do not know why he has gone there, Susette?"

Susette opened her black eyes.

"Of course, I know, Monsieur; it is to arrest the Englishman who killed his brother on the Zaat!"

"Do you think he will be able to find the fellow?"

Susette peeped through the door to be sure that no one heard her, and then drew a little nearer.

"I am glad that you came, Monsieur. You are a brave gentleman, and will tell me truly. There was a servant here, a Monsieur Paul Lacroix. He gave my Philip an address upon a piece of paper—one he got from the chalet where the English lady was staying. I have never liked Paul Lacroix; I do not think he means well to Philip. That is what makes me so anxious. I think he has been serving his own purpose, and that he feared to do the work himself. So he has sent my Philip. You will tell me truly, Monsieur, if that was right or just?"

Benny had no idea how to answer her. Her news astonished him beyond any he had expected to hear. It was as though the whole of the plot had been revealed in an instant, and being revealed, her news said that all was lost.

"I will see what we can do," he rejoined, evading it in despair. "Perhaps I shall be visiting Italy myself. Your father has gone to the telephone to book a place for me to-night. We will think about what is to be done directly we hear where Monsieur Philip is. Meanwhile, don't you fret about it, Susette. Your boy is all right, and I will bring him back to you."

She began to cry at this; it is the office of friendship to provoke the tears which are hidden from the unsympathetic. When old Rousset returned, he found the Englishman pacing the room like a caged lion, while Susette dried her tears on the corner of a far from clean apron. His rebuke to her was harsh and commanding; she slunk from the room as though fearing a new humiliation.

"That girl is becoming a nuisance to me," the old man said. "I shall have to send her to England to work, as her sisters are doing. It is the loneliness of the mountains, Monsieur; even I suffer from that sometimes. You English people stay here such a little while; you do not know what it is to see those great white walls shutting out the world always. Well, well, Susette will be better in England; and I, perhaps, may go to Paris and remember that I have been young."

He laughed, and looked at the paper in his hand. The trains to Italy—had he not been sent to inquire about them? Well, there were no trains. There had been an accident beyond Brigue, and it was doubtful when the line would be cleared.

"I am quite sure about it, Monsieur, for the chief answered me himself. You cannot go to-night; it is out of the question."

Benny stood for an instant rocking upon his heels. His cheeks had flushed suddenly, and his fists were clenched almost convulsively.

"When did this accident happen?"

"At midday, I think."

"Do you know if the morning train got through to Milan?"

"I am able to say so; it was mentioned by the superintendent, and the last train to reach Italy, I believe."

"Ah, then, that is all, Maître Rousset. Thank you very much. I shall see you later on."

He waited for no reply, but hurried from the café like one possessed. So swiftly did he walk, that he had almost passed the door of the Palace Hotel before he remembered his promise to the doctor and the necessity of keeping it. The hour was favourable to that, for the players were out on the mountains again, and the doctor entertained a little company in the drawing-room, where he played one of Chopin's nocturnes with an exquisite touch and a feeling for the music of it quite beyond ordinary. Nor would Benny interrupt him. The haunting melody lingered as a memory of children's voices; the pathos of life stood expressed in it; the hope, and fear, and dread which afflicted his mind at this very moment. Such chords were struck by the Master of human destiny when the souls of men were offered upon the altars of life. Benny trembled while he heard them, and, trembling, he saw the woman's face as in a vision.

Dr. Orange came out presently and heard his news with interest. The story of the mishap at Brigue had not entered into his calculations. It seemed to say that nothing could be done to further their ends, unless they sent a telegram to the shanty in the hope that it would be in time. On the other hand, there was a possibility that Susette might not have been correctly informed, and that the gendarme, Philip, had but a vague idea of Delayne's whereabouts. If this were the case, it would be madness to employ the telegraph, open as it was to the scrutiny of the police. In the end the doctor agreed that it would be wiser to wait; and then he asked if it would not be possible to drive across the pass?

"You might be at Locarno to-morrow night," he suggested, and bethought him in the same breath that the trains would be running through the tunnel from the point where the accident had happened. This suggested another course. Why not take the train to Brigue, and learn just what had happened? To which Benny responded in his quiet way that it was neck or nothing. Either Philip knew, or he did not know. If he knew, Sir Luton would be in a prison before nightfall, and England would have the story to-morrow!

"Unless a man can buy a magic carpet," he remarked with a shrug, "there's nothing further to be said. I'd drive across the pass willingly if I thought it would do any good. You know that it won't. Doctor, and that's the end of it."

"Then there is no other way?"

"None at all, unless I run out my machine, and get there over the mountains."

"You could do it, Benson; I think you would do it if your own wife or sister were concerned. Have you thought about it? I see the wind has dropped. It would not take you very long, would it now? Well, I must leave it to you. It's for you to decide, and you know what can be done so much better than I do. If I see Lady Delayne, I shall not forget to tell her how much trouble you took. She is the kind of woman who remembers."

Benny said he thought that she was, but they had no other chance to speak of it, for the Rider girls came galloping into the conservatory at that moment and carried off the doctor triumphantly. It was about three o'clock then, and already growing dark. Benny perceived that the wind had fallen, and that a dead calm had come down. There would be an interval merely of hours, he thought, before it began to blow again. He must make up his mind immediately. The weather would have nothing to do with argument.

He must go and warn Luton Delayne, and must warn him for Lily's sake. If he did not go, she might be a free woman before the summer came, and it might lie no longer against his conscience that he loved her. Permitting his thoughts to run on, he would say that by such a woman's love would his future be assured. He saw himself working for her, devoting all his genius to her service and raising himself above the class into which he had been born. The world knew his name already; but that was merely the beginning of things. He had worshipped the very ground this woman trod, and she must be the guiding star of his life to the end. What then carried him to Locarno—what paradox of duty or service? He could not answer the question, but the vision remained and haunted him.

To cross the Simplon Valley and descend to Italy. It was a child's task for a man who had circled the great Pennine chain. True, the storm might come down again, and if it did come down, the unfortunate who was caught aloft in it would lose his life! Well, and what had life in store on this side? Again, the voice said, she will be a free woman.

He stood at the chalet which had been her home, and looked across toward Brigue and the mountains. They jutted out in bold relief, showing their whitened domes clearly in the still air, and catching waning rays of the sinking sun. Beyond them lay Italy and the lake. Perchance—but of that he had no sure knowledge—Lily was already with her husband; she would witness his shame and be, in a sense, a partner of it. He remembered her as he had seen her at the door of the chalet—a woman without a friend. Had she not called herself that? He turned away at the remembrance, and went on toward his own house.

The mechanics were waiting to pack the aeroplane and send it through to

Paris. Benny went in among them and began to speak of delay.

CHAPTER XXV

THE LIGHTS OF MAGADINO

The cold was less as he began to descend amid the gentle mountains of the Ticino, and he knew that the night was won.

Behind him, far away where the white caps marked the encircling mountains of the Simplon, the storm must be raging furiously, he thought. More than once a gust of the wind, tearing through a breach of the southern spurs, had flung him headlong, as a leaf is whirled by the winter blast. There had been a time when all sensation left him, when hands and feet were stiff and powerless; when the very skin of his face was as dried parchment. He made light of that, for the kindlier country lay before him, and if he gained it, this were not too high a price to pay.

His landmarks were few. He had set off from Sierre while the twilight remained and had crossed the pass above Brigue at a great height and remote from danger of the peaks. He turned thence a little to the southward, and saw the smiling country for an instant as the sun sank finally, and the night crept about him. For an hour afterwards there had been the black darkness, the biting cold, the anger of the winds. Then a spell of silence intervened. He seemed to be lost in the shadows, gone from the world, drifted to the eternal darkness. But he held on resolutely, praying for the light.

When the light came at last, no panorama of a splendid imagination could have surpassed the wonder of it. It was as though an unseen hand cleft a wall before him and showed him a magic city. Countless stars glowed beneath a panoply of mountains. To the right, to the left, look where he would, the lamps shone a welcome—here in clusters to speak of a town; there apart to tell of a high road. And Benny knew that they were lights about Lake Maggiore, and that the battle was won.

Such good fortune as this had been in his mind from the outset, and he reckoned upon the chance. Let him espy the lights of the lake from a sufficient altitude, and his own skill would do the rest. The shanty lay almost opposite to Magadino, and if a man could not name Magadino when the lake lay illuminated far beneath him, then was he no fit pilot for an airship.

Benny placed the town at once, working up from the southward, past the islands of the Borromeos to Locarno and the mountains. He thought that he could have dropped a stone upon the very shanty—and laughed at himself for the boast.

There was a great acetylene lamp at the prow of his ship, and it burned brightly enough as he began to sweep down toward the lake. Long afterwards the simple folk were to tell how a star had fallen from the north and shone gloriously above the Virgin's Church at Ascona. Others would have it that a fireball, monstrous beyond any of the fables, had come down and settled a while upon the slope of the mountain opposite Magadino. The whole country round about was golden with the flame of it, they said, while the sounds attending it were unlike anything earthly. But one old fellow, and he a fisherman of Losone, actually saw the machine descend; he believed that the veritable dragon, which the saint slew, had come to life again, and he ran headlong.

Benny landed about a third of a mile from the chalet. He chose a gentle slope of the hill, and came down without much damage—but he could not help the reflection that the flight might cost him a good deal of money before he had done with it, and that it would be no light undertaking to get the machine across the pass again. This, however, was the thought of an instant, and when he had seen to his engine, turned off the petrol, and done what he could to make things ship-shape, he went on to the shanty without further delay, and was at its garden gate in less than twenty minutes from the time of his descent.

It was a pretty little house, gabled and covered in summer with the great flowers of the begonia. Possessing a good frontage to the lake, there was also a boathouse and landing-stage—the former having a smoking-room built right out over the water. On the other side there ran the high road to Losone on the one hand, and to Ronco on the other. In summer this road was alive with the motor cars of the Americans doing Europe in five-and-twenty minutes; but a night of winter found it deserted enough, and not a soul was to be discerned, either in the little village above the shanty or upon the highway itself. Benny had hoped to meet some friend or neighbour among the villagers who would have helped him to guard the airship; but finding none, he determined to telephone to Ascone directly it was safe to do so—and with that in his head he opened the garden gate and went in.

The consummation of a perilous emprise is often commonplace to the point of banality, and this is especially the case when the quest of man or woman is the objective. Benny had crossed the Simplon that he might reach the lake before another—and having reached it, might warn a madman of his danger. To do that, he had imperilled his own life as many times as there had been minutes in his journey; he had run the risk of being frozen alive or dashed to instant death in

the chasms of the pass. And now that it was done he went up to the door of the house like any ordinary traveller, stood an instant while his eyes searched the unlighted windows, then rang the bell upon the right-hand side of the porch, and waited quietly. All the excitement of the quest appeared to have subsided at this time. He thought nothing of his victory; he did not even remember that it had been a victory!

The bell was unanswered, not a little to his surprise. He had looked at his watch before he left the ship, and had discovered that it was just a quarter-past seven. By all rights, Sir Luton should have been then at his dinner, and it occurred to him that the old woman who kept the shanty might be so busy in her kitchen that she did not hear him. Against this was the black fact of the unlighted windows, and the silence. Benny could hear the splash of the waves as they ebbed and flowed upon the shore of the lake, but no other sound save that of the distant bells of Losone. It began to force itself upon his mind that this silence was prophetic, and, with a shiver of apprehension different from any he had yet experienced, he rang a second time, and listened to the jangling reverberations and their diminuendos. Again the summons was unanswered. It was plain that there was no one in the house, and that his errand had been in vain.

He would not admit this at the beginning, or even contemplate a house of shadows. Knowing Luton Delayne, he thought it very likely that he had gone to one of the neighbouring towns for his dinner; while the old woman, taking advantage of his absence, would have run down to the village to her home there. Going round to the back of the house, which looked upon the lake, he found it shut and barred, and no evidence of occupation whatever—but the bars were no obstacle to such a wit as his, and forcing the kitchen window, he climbed in and began to search the place. A fleck of fire reddened in the grate; there were dirty plates upon a bare table, with a candle and a box of matches. Benny lit the candle, and passed on into the hall. The shanty had been occupied that day, so much was evident.

It was here that a strange hallucination took possession of him, and one he had some little difficulty to stifle. Suddenly, and without warning, he thought that he heard Luton Delayne's voice from one of the inner rooms; but when he entered it there was no sign of occupation whatever, no evidence that it had been used for many months. This should have set his mind at rest, but no such result followed upon the discovery. For the second time he heard the voice calling him from another quarter of the house; and, refusing to believe that he could be mistaken a second time, he crossed the narrow hall, and entered the room he had used as his study. Here at last were those visible evidences of occupation he had sought vainly elsewhere. The remains of such a meal as a man would have ordered were still upon the table. A fire burned in the grate, and a flask of red

wine stood upon a side table. Whoever had occupied this room had left it during the day, and, what was more, he had written a letter shortly before he left.

Benny set down the candle upon the side table, and knelt to warm himself before the fire, upon which he heaped fresh logs. The window showed him the broad expanse of the lake with the mountains upon the far side of it, and the star cluster of Magadino at their feet. A man of indomitable courage, he was astonished to discover how greatly the hallucination of the voice had shaken him, and how real it had seemed when it called him. He had never realised the remoteness of the shanty before, nor its isolation from the towns by the lakeside. Presently a fit of shivering seized him, and he started up fearing that he was about to be ill, and determined that his will should master the situation. He heaped up the logs until the fire roared in the chimney, and then searching the kitchen for candles made such an illumination as that little room had never witnessed before. The light cheered him—he drank what was left of the wine in the flask, and ate of the bread and butter upon the table.

He had pipe and tobacco, and these had ever been his good friends in every kind of emergency. A long smoke by the fireside cleared his brain of the cobwebs, and gave him a clearer vision. And first he said that Luton had left the house, and it was doubtful if he would return. Had it been otherwise, had he gone across to dine at one of the neighbouring towns, assuredly the beldame would have returned to her kitchen by this time and made her preparations for the night. So it was clear that Delayne had left the shanty, and that he, Benny, had come too late. Whether this were a good thing or a bad he had as yet no means of knowing. The darker suggestion that the man had been arrested by the police, and that the old woman had fled the shanty in consequence, was not to be put aside. That seemed a very likely thing to have happened; but if it had happened, he would hear of it soon enough, and so would every newspaper in Switzerland.

This latter thought grew with the minutes and awakened every instinct to the danger. He wondered that it had not occurred to him directly he found the shanty deserted, and was going on to say that it was the absolutely obvious thing, when a sound arose which chilled him to the very marrow. A moment later he laughed aloud, and picked up one of the candles. Of course, the telephone still ran to the shanty. There is hardly a decent house in Switzerland which does not possess it.

A telephone bell ringing clearly in the silence of the house! Well, it was a thing to give a man a start—and his nerves were not what they should be! Not until he had the receiver in his hand, and began to reply to the unknown at the other end of the wire, did he bethink him that here was companionship of a sort after all. This telephone would summon help from Ascona, if he needed it. He took heart at the thought, and cried "Halloa" in his old tone. This was the Benny

of yesterday—the man who had done what no man had ever done before.

”Halloa—halloa!—this is the Villa Favorita—who do you say you are?—I don’t hear you!—Halloa—halloa!—the Abbé Villari?—Good God! Abbé—how did you know that I was here?—What, you didn’t know?—then that’s the rummest go of all—You wanted Sir Luton Delayne—Well, I’m d—d!”

He dropped the instrument and laughed aloud. His talk had been half in French, half in English, and he remembered that the abbé understood both tongues perfectly. But it was no time to apologise. The news was too astounding; he would not lose a word of it.

”You heard all about it from Susette—yes, I suppose she would tell a priest—And you warned the man this morning?—I wish you’d told me, Abbé—it would have saved me a matter of five thousand pounds. Of course, it was done for the best—all that’s granted.—Did you say you were at Brigue?—going up to the Hospice?—Yes, I remember, now—well, he’s away all right—the bird has flown.—Oh, I don’t know where—I hope it’s south—you’ll understand that—You haven’t seen Lady Delayne?—Ah! you never did like that charming lady, did you, Reverence?—Speak up a little, I don’t quite catch that.—The boy, Philip, has gone over the pass, did you say?—He might have been here, for all I know—I shall try to find out in the morning—Let me know if you hear anything of Lady Delayne—It was a big thing for you to do, and a very kind thing under the circumstances.—She won’t forget it, nor will I.—Good night, sir—and don’t forget to ring up in the morning.”

He stood a little while when the abbé had ceased to speak, holding the instrument in his hand, and realising anew the weird stillness of the house. It was as though he remained incredulous, and could not grasp the meaning of the few words which had come across the mountains upon the frail wire—words which revealed in a twinkling the acumen of the little abbé and the reality of his friendship. Benny could have sworn that the priest did not know one word of the story, had hardly heard Sir Luton’s name, and would as soon have thought of connecting it with the episode upon the Zaat as with his own flight across Mont Blanc. And now the abbé had undeceived him in an instant, and spoken of his own shrewdness and perception beyond possibility of question.

Of course, the girl, Susette, would have told him. Benny recollected that she was a Catholic, and his odd notions about the ancient faith included the belief that nothing is kept secret, not even the most trivial things of a common day. So he argued that Susette would have ”confessed,” and the gendarme, Philip, have done the same, putting the abbé in possession of all the facts, and dictating this friendly intervention. The priest had been the man to warn Sir Luton. Possibly he had done so directly Philip Gaillarde left Andana. And if it were so, then the baronet was safe, and this journey had been vain indeed.

He had come to this conclusion anew when he heard someone open the front door of the shanty, and presently recognised the hacking cough of the bel-dame who should have been keeping it. Her feminine outburst when she discovered him, the muttered oath and then the trembling recognition were brushed aside while he asked her of his guest and heard her garrulous answer. Ah, that Englishman!—what she had suffered at his hands! And now he had gone—he went at eleven o'clock. This very morning, Bajazet, the postboy from the inn, had driven him; he would know all about it. For her part, Mother of God, she was glad that the house was quit of him. Such a man to serve—such anger, such words! She hoped that he would never return; but now that the master was come again she could be content. Which being said, she began with the method of a Swiss to set the house in order, and to justify her existence. It blazed with lights from garret to kitchen before half an hour had passed; fires roared in the grates; pots were steaming upon the hob. And while she worked she repeated her story that the Englishman had driven away at eleven o'clock, and that Bajazet could say where he had gone.

Benny let her have her say, and then went to the telephone to ring up the inn as she advised him. Being answered immediately, he asked for help to get his airship into shelter, and begged them to send up Cordivet, the gendarme, and as many young fellows of the place as they could summon. As to Bajazet, he must come to the villa immediately, if he could; and there would be ten francs for him if he hurried. Which being done, and the woman instructed to have supper ready within the hour, he went out to the lakeside and there waited for the postboy.

The night had fallen clear and the heavy clouds were now breaking to show a monstrous moon, shining full and round upon the sleeping water. By here and there the siren of a steamer could be heard, and the voices of young people who sang as they rowed; while from the village inn, some third of a mile up the road, the music of fiddles and a harp floated down upon the still air. Such a contrast to the rigour and cold of the heights was hardly to be imagined, and it seemed to Benny to stand for such a haven of rest as a man might win when he had crossed the pass and emerged victorious.

For himself, he knew that he was at the crisis of his life, and faced it with all the resolution he could command. To-night, or if not to-night, to-morrow, would tell him plainly enough whither his road lay, and to what house of fortune it would lead. Luton Delayne's possible flight had been in his calculations vaguely when he set out for Andana. He knew that his desire for this man's safety was honest, and that he would have contrived it whatever the sacrifice had cost him. Henceforth these people must lead their own lives. He perceived that it would be better that he should not see Lily again, and that she had been wise to leave Andana without a word to him. If the very fact led also to another conclusion,

he strove to turn from it at such a moment. The vanity of his secret hopes was not to be disguised. Sometimes he had been ready to say that this sense of inglorious defeat, this merciless rebuke which fortune administered to him was well deserved. What had he, born to so humble a station, to do with such a friendship or its privileges? When he answered that his attainments had given him every right, he flushed secretly, as though someone overheard him. Success found him a shy lover, though he had wooed her daringly enough.

This passed at the lakeside, but the interlude of waiting galled him, and he found himself impelled resistlessly to act—he knew now how. When the coachman, Bajazet, appeared, he was greeted as an old friend: taken apart and made much of, and wine commanded for him. It seemed good to be talking to a man who had played a part, however humble, in the drama of the day. Benny led him to the little study and poured out a tumbler of red wine with his own hands, while he asked him twenty questions and hardly waited for an answer.

"So milord went away at eleven o'clock, Bajazet?"

"He did, Monsieur—it was just before the hour."

"He was very anxious to go?"

Bajazet raised his eyes to the ceiling.

"All the time, all the time, he gave me no rest! I know your countrymen, but not many such as he, thanks be to God! He is at Domo d'Ossola this night. May he remain there many years!"

Benny looked at him as though he had been lying.

"At Domo d'Ossola? But you are not speaking wisely, Bajazet; you make some mistake? A man who goes to Domo d'Ossola is returning to Switzerland. It is impossible to believe it—of my friend! Think again, and tell me truly."

The fellow shook his head, and drank a little more wine.

"I know what I am saying. Milord wished to go by the railway, but the trains were not running. Very well, then, he will cross the pass. Why should he not do so, Monsieur? There are many who wish to see it; why should not your countryman be among the number? I tell you, I left him at the posthouse. He was engaging horses for the journey; perhaps he is at the Hospice to-night. Should you wish to know that the telephone will inform you. What I have said is of my own knowledge, Monsieur; the rest is with God!"

He laughed, and reached out his hand to the flask. Upon the road without the light of many lanterns was to be seen, and, anon, the voice of Cordivet, the gendarme, to be heard. A little company of men and boys had come up from the inn to do the Englishman's bidding, and Cordivet marshalled them as though they had been an army. Soon these were grouped about the airship; their eyes staring at the glistening steel of its tubes; their tongues loosed in wonder. Had they been English the buffoons among them would have worked a mischief; but the love of

things mechanical waxed strong among the Swiss even in the villages to-day, and these youths understood very well what was asked of them. Willing lads were sent hither and thither for tarpaulins to cover the machinery; strong arms helped to wheel the ship down toward the garden by the lake. These good folk had heard of the great Flight, and they stood awed before the master who held the key to the secrets. Every word they spoke was a tribute to his achievement—every gesture honoured him.

Benny saw the machine safely anchored, and then went in to eat the supper prepared before him. His mind was already made up, and he had determined that the worthy Bajazet should drive him immediately to Domo d'Ossola, and afterwards, if need be, to the summit of the Simplon. For had not the fellow said that Luton Delayne would cross the pass, and if that mad purpose were filled, who would save the man from the penalties of his folly?

Benny had the vague idea that he might yet be in time—he knew not how! But he promised Bajazet a hundred francs if his work were well done, and they went at a gallop, blindly in the silence of the night toward the mighty high road which must speak eternally of Napoleon and his genius.

CHAPTER XXVI

AT THE HOSPICE

It was three in the morning when Bajazet turned into the yard of the Hôtel de Ville at Domo d'Ossola and ordered a sleepy ostler to prepare horses for Brigue.

In summer the place would have been wide awake even at such an hour, for the summer would have found it alive with motorists about to cross the pass according to the regulations which forbid them to travel at the height of the day. But being the month of February, the town was as silent as the grave when the carriage drove in, and even the ostler could be discovered with difficulty. When twenty questions had recalled his understanding, he remembered that an Englishman had set out for Brigue yesterday, but had no idea who he was. His description, however, answered to that of Luton Delayne, and Benny quickly came to the conclusion that the baronet had persisted in his madness, and had returned to Switzerland upon an impulse no one else might pretend to understand.

And yet, was it so difficult to be understood? Luton Delayne knew the best

and the worst that life had in store for him. Of all his fortune, good or ill, fortune of character and of possessions, there remained to him but the supreme desire to seek out the woman who had been his wife, and to throw himself upon her pity. Desperately, and with almost a child's trust, he had come to believe that she would save him. The unanswered letter, the hours of loneliness by the lakeside, the alternations of hope and despair, so drove him at the last, that, flinging all reason to the winds, he determined to go to her and hear the worst. And he had set off immediately when the abbé sent him a warning message. What mattered it, if he could win a hearing from her? The good that was in him claimed audience now. He believed that she would judge him lightly if all were known; and, determined that it should be known, he drove to Iselle and the pass.

Perhaps Benny guessed something of this when he commanded horses for the journey to Brigue, and announced his determination to depart immediately. He understood men in many moods, and could almost sympathise with this broken man who thus flung down the gauntlet to the world and did not stop to consider that it might be picked up—not by a chivalrous enemy, but by the police. For himself, his task was plain, and events had not changed the trend of it. He would save Luton Delayne from a public exposure if he could, and would save him for the woman's sake. What happened afterwards must be as destiny decided. It would be enough for him that he had done his duty to one who claimed his friendship, and for whom he would measure no sacrifice.

There was a considerable delay before the carriage could leave the hotel, and he was glad of the hot coffee which the maids prepared for him. Early as it was, the great road to the pass now became alive with peasants coming down into Italy or returning to the Valley of the Rhone. These seldom travel by the train, and for them the Hospice upon the summit of the pass is kept open during the winter months. Benny watched them as they tramped stolidly through the darkness, their eyes set upon a visionary city, and their faces pinched with the cold. When he spoke to one of them at the door of the inn yard, an old man whose sister was ill at Baveno, the veteran told him that there had been a dreadful storm on the heights last night, and that a bruit of accidents was abroad. He also spoke of the railway, and of the mishap above Brigue; but that, he said, had now been put right, and the trains were running as usual. When he left, with a five-franc piece for his gratuity, he confessed that it was seldom an Englishman was met upon the pass nowadays—bad luck to all this craze for railway travelling which robbed so many of their dues.

Benny was pleased at the news about the trains, for it fitted in very well with the idea which had come to him at the shanty, and had not been abandoned during the journey. He perceived that all now depended upon what the gendarme Philip had done—whether the lad had attempted to reach Italy by the pass, or had

waited for the line to Milan to be reopened. In the former case, nothing could save Luton Delayne from arrest—or worse. In the latter, it might very well be that the baronet would reach Sierre, and, having met his wife, would be persuaded to take the express to Paris. Should that be done, his escape was almost assured, for the heat of the hue and cry had subsided by this time, and but for Philip Gaillarde might have been forgotten altogether. The gendarme, truly, was the key to the whole situation, and Benny was almost tempted to ring up the abbé at the Hospice and ask if he had news of him. This, however, would have been a concession to mere curiosity, and, set upon his purpose of overtaking the baronet if he could, he entered his carriage about four o'clock and departed immediately for Brigue.

Many know the Simplon Pass by name, but to few of this generation is it more than a name. Sometimes, in the history lesson, the boy learns that the great road was built at Napoleon's command immediately after the battle of Marengo, and that it took no fewer than six years to construct. By here and there in an old painting there are pictures of the Ponto Alto, or, more commonly, of the Gallery of Gondo, with its wondrous black-mouthed tunnel and arched bridge, and mighty ramparts uplifted, as it were, to the very heavens. But these things are but traditions to the flitting tourist, who climbs mountains in a railway carriage and would have his waterfalls illuminated.

Benny knew nothing of the pass, but insensibly the wonders of it grew upon him as the day dawned and the fertile valleys of Italy began to give place to the grandeur and desolation of the heights. What mind had conceived these things—what hand had planned them? An engineer by every instinct of his being, he tried to understand the spirit in which this great work was conceived and the labour which had accomplished it. And from that he passed to the sheer fascination of it all; of these frail bridges spanning the very jaws of hell; of the galleries wrought in the face of the iron rock; of the vast aqueducts bringing black torrents, and the mighty roofs which defied the thundering avalanche. By one man's genius this had come to be; the gates had been opened, the goal attained. And with that man he crossed the pass in spirit, and lifted his eyes to the stars, and dwelt in the infinite.

Upward and still upward—to what end, to what humour of destiny? Must all this grandeur of the road melt ultimately to a vulgar truth of life; must it give place to a man's shame and a woman's tears? He tried to think that it could not be, and yet the inevitableness of it all seemed written upon every rock which towered above him. He believed no longer that Philip Gaillarde had gone down into Italy. The lad, he thought, would be advised by others, and all that had been done at the villa would be well known to the authorities. Possibly, and this was to be reckoned with, Philip had himself gone up to the Hospice and would there

meet the baronet face to face. And if he did so it might well be that a new page in this sordid tragedy would be written that very day. Benny would not dwell upon this, but he encouraged Bajazet with new promises, while that good fellow urged on his horses with wild cries and a great cracking of his whip, which echoed in the hills like a pistol shot.

They were at the Gallery of Gondo by this time, and its black mouth shaped bell-like at the break of day. The open valley here closed in until it became but a tremendous cañon; the towering heights were uplifted as the spires of a Gargantuan cathedral; the road itself seemed to disappear into the very bowels of the rock. Upon the right hand, what would have been a roaring torrent in the spring was but a runnel cut in the cliff's face; upon their left hand was the abyss whose black depths no eye could fathom. Here no living thing stirred—there was no sound but that of the water dripping; the very bridge should have been built for fabled demons of the Simplon and not for human travellers.

They passed on by the seventh refuge, and set out across the dreary tableland, beyond which lay the village of Simplon itself. They had out-distanced other travellers, and were alone upon this waste, which breaks into the hills as an oasis whose icy mirage mocks the wayfarer. Here, for the first time, they perceived the effects of last night's storm: the profound drifts; the scarred rocks—even relics of the pilgrims who had dared the journey. A little farther on, and they entered the village, and heard the warning that the road to the Hospice was unsafe. No sleighs would be allowed to pass: there had been accidents upon the road, and the snow was not yet cleared. Some hours must intervene before permission could be given, they said, but Benny heard them with scorn, for he was determined to make the Hospice, and to hear the abbé's news, cost him what it might. When he had talked a little way with one of the soldiers at the inn, it appeared that nothing would be said to those who cared to set out on foot, and this he did immediately, instructing Bajazet to follow him directly the road was open that they might continue the journey to Brigue.

To Brigue—was that his destination? Lily, he remembered, should be at Sierre; it was even possible that her husband had joined her there, and that they would leave for England by the express to-night. He himself would follow after, but not for many weeks. The triumphs which awaited him in England had ceased to interest him. He had lost, as it were, in an hour the ambitions which had sustained him through the years, and the inspiration by which they had been gratified. It would be well enough to think of his future when all this were over, and he knew the best or the worst of it. The brain refusing to contemplate any other issue, it brought him back to the starting-point: would he be in time to save Delayne, or was the gendarme, Philip, already avenged?

He pressed on over a barren road which has been likened to a waterless

lake in the hollow of the mountains. The snow lay heavy and the walking was difficult. By here and there he passed wayfarers coming down from the Hospice, but telling ever the same story of hardship and distress. When, at length, he espied the monastery buildings, it was at a moment when an avalanche crashed down on the road before him, and its thunders echoed in the heights with the booming of a thousand cannon. Such appalling sounds affrighted him beyond all reason, for he knew little of Switzerland in the winter, save what Andana had taught him. Grimly and with satisfaction, he remembered how little all this terror of the hills had meant to him last night, and how little it would mean to the men of to-morrow. Give him his ship, and he would be but a speck above these imprisoning peaks—as free as an eagle, and as kingly. To go as he must go—battling with the snow and often almost conquered by it, was a humiliation his genius derided. But it was in keeping with the truth of the quest; and presently, when a second avalanche thundered down, and the snow sprayed above a gallery as foam upon a seashore, he shuddered at its reality and wondered if his courage were equal to the ordeal.

He was but a quarter of a mile from the gate of the Hospice by this time, and he perceived that those who had gone before him here deserted the pass itself and went downward a little way toward the abyss. So many feet had trodden out a path that prudence bade him take it. Striking out boldly, he found himself presently in a magic sea whose billows rose above his head but never engulfed him. At this time the monastery disappeared from his view entirely; the landmarks by which he might have guided himself to its doors vanished to give place to this monstrous and unbroken curtain of the snow. He had the sense of being lost beyond hope, of being a man adrift upon an ocean whose waters were white with an icy foam. All idea of direction was blotted out immediately in this blinding waste. He found the path and lost it ten times in as many minutes, and then fell to bitter self-reproach because he had deserted the high road. Vain lament—that desertion was his salvation!

A great dog came battling through the snow, and, anon, a monk with a cassock tucked up to his waist, and skis upon his feet. He was quite a youth, and he laughed and nodded to the stranger as one who would say: "All is well; we knew you were coming to us." At his direction Benny turned up the hillside again, and there he found the rope by which travellers pull themselves up to the gates of the Hospice. They were now but fifty yards from its door, and he could hear a bell calling the priests to terce. The monk, in his turn, pointed to the high road, and to the mountains of snow which rested upon its galleries.

"You were wise to come as you did," he said. "Many lose their lives up there; three have done so this week, Monsieur."

No answer was made, and they entered the monastery. The bell still tolled,

and the brethren were crossing the court toward the chapel. The Englishman, however, was conducted immediately to the guest hall, where a great fire blazed and a table was spread. The monk had already told him that the Abbé Villari was at the Hospice, and the desire to see him brooked no control. Benny had almost forgotten where he was; the events of the night and the journey of the day were as nothing when the abbé at last entered the room and greeted him with hand uplifted and a hushed word upon his lips.

"Yes, yes, I had expected you," he said, nodding his head slowly while he spoke. "It was natural that you should not have heard. We found him lying just above the seventh shelter. He was quite dead; he had been dead for some hours."

Benny drew a step nearer, as though afraid of the sound of his voice.

"You found him—are you speaking of Luton Delayne?"

The abbé looked bewildered.

"Of whom, then? They would have kept him at Iselle, but he would not hear reason. He tried to cross on foot at the height of the storm. I had an idea that it might be so. Yes, yes, the Almighty God made this known to me, and so I came."

And then he said, turning away:

"She will be here this afternoon—I have spoken to her myself; she is now upon her way from Sierre."

There was no response. Benny stood at the window and looked down the valley as though fearing to see her carriage already upon the high road.

CHAPTER XXVII

BENNY SETS OUT FOR ENGLAND

He left the hospice at three o'clock, while it was yet light, and the journey to Brigue could be made in safety.

He had not spoken to her, but he knew that she was then in the chapel where the dead lie, and that she was aware of his presence. An instinct told him that it were better they should not meet in such a house of shadows. He had already determined to set out for England that night, and to think of Switzerland no more. In his own country he would find the place and the hour.

Of the future, his ideas were vague and indefinable. A call of ambition had returned in the interlude of reckoning, and found him resolute in response. A

new world opened to his vision, a world which should recognise his genius and bid him profit by it. he would go to England this night and make himself known to those who would honour him. Thereafter strenuous days must follow, and the reaping of the harvest. He was as one whose life's task began upon a foundation of success; the stones of whose house were already hewn. In England he would come to his own. They waited for him impatiently there.

Just for an instant, as he crossed the courtyard, he saw her kneeling before the altar, her head bent in prayer and all her figure shrouded in the gloom. A dim light of tapers flickered in the little building and stood as symbols of the woe it harboured. She did not hear his step upon the stone, and he passed by unnoticed. But that was not the vision he carried with him upon his journey, nor the face the clear heaven showed him when the gate was closed and he set upon his journey.

It was growing dark then, and twilight had already come down upon the pass. The night fell still with a wonderful heaven of stars. He drove on in silence, saying no word to the man which did not bid him hasten.

THE END.

*** END OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK WHITE MOTLEY ***

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