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## THE PROFESSOR'S ADVENTURE.

Between eight and ten years ago, I engaged in a long vacation campaign among the Alps of Savoy. I was alone. My object was not amusement, but study. I occupy a Professor's Chair, and I was engaged in the collection of materials for a work on the Flora of the higher Alps; and, to this end, traveled chiefly on foot. My route lay away from the beaten paths and passes. I often journeyed for days through regions where there were neither inns nor villages. I often wandered from dawn till dusk among sterile steeps unknown even to the herdsmen of the upper pasturage and untroubled save by the chamois and the hunter. I thought myself fortunate at these times if, toward evening, I succeeded in steering my way down to the nearest chalet, where, in company with a half-savage mountaineer and a herd of milk goats, I might find the shelter of a rafter roof, and a supper of black bread and whey.

On one particular evening I had gone farther than usual, in pursuit of the Senecio uniflorus, a rare plant which I had hitherto never seen indigenous to the southern valley of Monte Rose, but of which I had succeeded in finding one or two different specimens. It was a wild and barren district, difficult to distinguish with any degree of precision on the map; but laying among the upper defiles of the Fal de Bagnes between the Mount Pleureur and the Grand Combin. On the waste of rock strewn mass to which I had climbed, there was no sign of human habitation. Above me, lay the great ice-fields of Corbassiere, surmounted by the silver summits of the Graffenire and Combin. To my left the sun was going down rapidly between an orrest of small peaks, the highest of which, as well as I could judge from Osterwald's map, was Mount Blanc de Chillon. In ten minutes more, these peaks would be crimson; in one short half-hour, it would be night.

To be benighted on an Alpine plateau towards the latter end of September is not a desirable position. I knew it by recent experience, and had no reason to repeat the experiment I therefore began retracing my route as rapidly as I could descending in an north-westerly direction and keeping a sharp look-out for any chalet that might offer a shelter for the night. Pushing forward thus, I found myself presently at the head of a little verdant ravine, channeled, as it were, in the face of the plateau. I hesitated. It seemed, through the gathering darkness, as if I could discern vague traces of a path trampled here and there in the deep grass. It also seemed as if the ravine trended down towards the upper pastures which were my destination. By following it I could scarcely go wrong. Where there is grass, there are generally cattle and a chalet; and I might possibly find a nearer resting place than I had anticipated. At all events I resolved to try it.

The ravine proved shorter than I had expected and, instead of leading immediately downward, opened upon a second plateau, through a well worn footway struck off abruptly to the left. Pursuing the footway with what speed I might, I came, in the course of a few minutes, to a sudden slope at the bottom of which is a basin almost surrounded by gigantic limestone cliffs, lay a small dark lake, a few fields, and a chalet. The rose tints had by this time come and gone; and the snow had put on that ghostly grey which precedes the dark. Before I could descend the slope, skirt the lake, and mount the little eminence on which the house stood sheltered by its back-grounds of rocks, it was already night, and the stars were in the sky.

I went up to the door and knocked; no one answered. I opened the door; all was dark. I paused—held my breath—listened—fancied I could distinguish a low sound, as of some one breathing. I knocked again. My second knock was followed by a quick noise, like the pushing of a chair, and a man's voice said, hoarsely:

"Who is there?"

"A traveler," I replied, "seeking shelter for the night."

A heavy footstep crossed the floor, a sharp flash shot through the darkness, and I saw by the flickering of tinder, a man's face bending over a lantern. Having lighted it, he said, with scarce a glance towards the door, "Enter, traveler," and

went back to his seat beside the empty hearth.

I entered. The chalet was of a better sort than those usually found at so great an altitude, consisting of a dairy and houseplace, with a loft overhead. A table, with three or four wooden stools occupied the center of the room. The rafters were hung with branches of dried herbs and long strings of Indian corn. A clock ticked in a corner; a kind of a rude pallet of trestles stood in a recess beside the fire-place; and through a lattice, at the farthest end, I could hear the cows feeding in the outhouse beyond.

Somewhat perplexed at the manner of my reception, I unstrapped my knapsack and specimen-box, took possession of the nearest stool, and asked if I could have supper.

My host looked up with the air of a man intent on other things. I repeated the inquiry.

"Yes," he said, wearily; "you can eat, traveler."

With this he crossed to the other side of the hearth stooped over a dark object which until now I had not observed, crouched in the corner, and muttered a word or two of unintelligible patois. The object moaned; lifted up a bewildered woman's white face; and rose slowly from the floor. The herdsman pointed to the table, and went back to his stool and his former attitude. The woman, after pausing helplessly, as if the effort to remember something, went out into the dairy, came back with a brown loaf and a pan of milk, and set them before me on the table.

As long as I live I shall never forget the expression of that woman's face. She was young and very pretty; but her beauty seemed turned to stone. Every feature bore the seal of unspeakable terror. Every gesture was mechanical. In the lines that furrowed her brow was a haggardness more terrible than haggardness of age. In the locking of her lips there was an anguish beyond the utterance of words. Though she served me, I do not think she saw me. There was no recognition in her eyes; no apparent consciousness of any object or circumstance external to the secret of her own despair. All this I noticed during the brief moments in which she brought me my supper. That done, she crept away, exactly, into the same dark corner, and sank down again a mere huddled heap of clothing.

As for her husband there was something unnatural in the singular immobility of his attitude. There he sat, his body bent forward, his chin resting on his palms, his eyes staring fixed at the blackened hearth, and not even the involuntary quiver of a nerve to show that he lived and breathed. I could not determine his age, analyze and observe his features as I might. He looked old enough to be fifty, and young enough to be forty; and was a fine muscular mountaineer, with that grave cast of countenance which is peculiar to the Valasian peasant.

I could not eat. The keenness of my mountain appetite was gone. I sat as if fascinated in the presence of this strange pair; observing both and apparently, by both as much forgotten as if I had never crossed their threshold. We remained thus, by the dim light of the lantern and the monotonous ticking of the clock, for some forty minutes or more as profoundly silent. Sometimes the woman stirred, as if in pain; sometimes the cows struck their horns against the manger in the outhouse. The herdsman alone sat motionless, like a man cast in bronze. At length the clock struck nine. I had by this time become so nervous that I almost dreaded to hear my own voice interrupt the silence. However, I pushed my plate noisily aside, and said, with as much show of ease as I could muster:

"Have you any place, friend, in which I can sleep to-night?"

He shifted his position uneasily and without looking round replied in the same form of words as before:

"Yes, you can sleep traveler."

"Where. In the loft above?"

He nodded affirmatively, took the lantern from the table and turned toward the dairy. As we passed, the light streamed for a moment over the crouched figure in the corner.

"Is your wife ill?" I asked pausing and looking back.

His eyes met mine for the first time, and a shudder passed over his body.

"Yes," he said, with an effort. "She is ill."

I was about to ask what ailed her, but something in his face arrested the question on my lips. I knew not, to this hour, what that something was. I could not define it then; I cannot describe it now; but I hope I may never see it in a living face again.

I followed him to the foot of a ladder the further end of the dairy.

"Up there," he said; placed the lantern in my hand, and strode heavily back into the darkness.

I went up, and found myself in a long garmary, stored with corn sacks, hay, onions, rock salt, cheeses, and farming implements. In one corner were the unusual luxuries of a mattress, a rug, and a three-legged stool. My first care was to make a systematic inspection of the loft and all that it contained; my next to open a little unglazed lattice with a sliding shutter, just opposite my bed.

The night was brilliant, and a stream of fresh air and moonlight poured in.—Oppressed by a strain, a undefined sense of trouble, I extinguished the lantern,

and stood looking out upon the solemn peaks and glaciers. Their solitude seemed to be more than usually awful; their silence more than usually profound. I could not help associating them in some vague way with the mystery in the house. I perplexed myself with all kinds of wild conjectures as to what the nature of that mystery might be. The woman's face haunted me like a dream. Again and again I went from the lattice, vainly listening for any sound in the rooms below. A long time went by thus, until at length, overpowered by the fatigues of the day, I stretched myself on the mattress, took my knapsack for a pillow, and fell fast asleep.

I can guess neither how long my sleep lasted, nor from what cause I awoke. I only know that my sleep was dreamless and profound; and that I started from it suddenly, unaccountably, trembling in every nerve, and possessed by an overwhelming sense of danger.

Danger! Danger of what kind? From what? From whence? I looked round—I was alone, and the quiet moon was shining in as serenely as when I fell asleep. I got up, walked to and fro, reasoned with myself; all in vain. I could not stay the beatings of my heart. I could not master the horror that oppressed my brain. I felt that I dared not lie down again; that I must get out of the house somehow and at once; that to stay would be death; that the instinct by which I was governed must at all costs be obeyed.

I could not bear it. I resolved to escape, or at all events to sell life dearly. I strapped on my knapsack, armed myself with my iron-headed alpenstock, took my large clasp-knife between my teeth, and began cautiously and noiselessly to descend the ladder. When I was about half way down, the alpenstock, which I was studiously keeping clear of the ladder, encountered some dairy vessel, and sent it clattering to the ground. Caution, after this, was useless. I sprang forward, reached the outer room at a bound, and found it, to my amazement, deserted, with the door wide open, and the moonlight streaming in. Suspecting a trap, my first impulse was to stand still, with my back against the wall prepared for a desperate defense. All was silent. I could only hear the ticking of the clock, and the heavy beating of my own heart. The pallet was empty. The bread and milk were still standing where I had left them on the table. The herdsman's stool still occupied the same spot by the desolate hearth. But he and his wife were gone—gone in the dead of night—leaving me, a stranger, in the sole occupation of their home.

While I was yet irresolute whether to go or stay, and while I was wondering at the strangeness of my position, I heard, or fancied I heard something that might have been the wind, save that there was no air stirring—something that might have been the wailing of a human voice. I held my breath—heard it again—followed it as it died away. \* \* \* I had not far to go. A line of light gleaming under the door of a shed at the back of the chalet, and a cry more bitter and more piercing than any I had yet heard, guided me direct to the spot.

I looked in—recoiled with horror—went back, as if fascinated; and so stood for some moments unable to move, to think, to do anything but stare helplessly upon

the scene before me. To this day, I cannot recall it without something of the same sickening sensation.

Inside the hut, by the light of a pine-torch thrust into an iron sconce against the wall, I saw the herdsman kneeling by the body of his wife; grieving over her, like an Othello; kissing her white lips, wiping the blood stains from her yellow hair, raving out inarticulate cries of passionate remorse, and calling down all the curses of Heaven upon his own head, and that of some other man who had brought this crime upon him! I understood it all now—all the mystery, all the terror, all the despair. She had sinned against him, and he had slain her. She was quite dead. The very knife, with its hideous testimony fresh upon the blade, lay near the door.

I turned and fled—blindly, wildly, like a man with bloodhounds on his track; now, stumbling over stones; now, torn by briars; now, pausing a moment to take breath; now, rushing forward faster than before; now, battling up hill with straining lungs and trembling limbs; now, staggering across the level space; now, reaching for the higher ground again, and casting never a glance behind! At length I reached a bare plateau above the line of vegetation, where I dropped exhausted. Here I lay for a long time, beaten and stupefied, until the intense coil of approaching dawn forced upon me the necessity of action. I rose and looked around on the scene, no feature of which was familiar to me. The very snow-peaks, though I knew they must be the same, looked unlike the peaks of yesterday. The very glaciers, seen from a different point of view, assumed new forms, as if on purpose to blind me. Thus perplexed I had no recourse but to climb the nearest height from which it was probable that a general view might be obtained. I did so, just as the last belt of purple mist turned golden in the east, and the sun rose.

A superb panorama lay stretched before me, peak beyond peak, glacier beyond glacier, valley and pine forest and pasture slope, all flushed and pulsating in the crimson vapors of the dawn. Here and there I could trace the foam of a waterfall, or the silver thread of a torrent; here and there the canopy of faint blue smoke that wavered upward from some hamlet among the hills. Suddenly my eye fell upon a little lake—a sullen pool—lying in the shade of an amphitheatre of rocks some eight hundred feet below.

Until that moment the night and its terrors appeared to have passed like a wicked vision; but now the very sky seemed darkened above me. Yes, there it lay at my feet. Yonder was the path by which I had descended from the plateau, and, lower still, the accursed chalet with its background of rugged cliff and overhanging precipices. Well might they lay in shadow! Well might the sunlight refuse to touch the ripples of that lake with gold, and to light up the windows of that house with an illumination direct from Heaven!

Thus standing, thus looking down, I became aware of a strange sound, a sound singularly distinct, but far away, a sound sharper and hollower than the fall of an avalanche, and unlike anything that I remembered to have heard. While I was yet asking myself what it was or whence it came, I saw a considerable fragment of rock detach itself from one of the heights overhanging the lake, bound rapidly from ledge to ledge, and fall with a heavy plash into the water below. It was followed by a cloud of dust, and a prolonged reverberation, like the rolling of distant thunder.

Next moment a dark fissure sprang into sight all down the face of the precipice—the fissure became a chasma—the whole cliff wavered before my eyes—wavered, parted, sent up a cataract of earth and stones, and slid slowly down, down into the valley.

Deafened by the crash, and blinded by the dust, I covered my face with my hands, and anticipated instant destruction. The echoes, however, died away, and were succeeded by a solemn silence. The plateau on which I stood, remained firm and unshaken. I looked up.

The sun was shining as serenely, the landscape sleeping as peacefully as before. Nothing was changed, save that a wide white scar now defaced all one side of the great limestone basin below, and a ghastly mound of ruin filled the valley to its foot. Beneath that mound lay buried all record of the crime to which I had been an unwilling witness.