

Henty George Alfred

Dorothy's Double. Volume 3

of 3



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Содержание

CHAPTER XVII	5
CHAPTER XVIII	14
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	18

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CHAPTER XVII

Higher and higher rose the flames as fresh sticks were constantly piled on. The blood again began to circulate through the veins, and enjoyable as the heat was, the sharp tingling in the hands and feet caused the girls acute pain. Then came a feeling of pleasant drowsiness.

'It will do them no harm to go to sleep, I suppose?' Mr. Hawtrey asked Giuseppe.

'No, monsieur. Now that they are warm it is the best thing for them. We will keep up the fire.'

Scarcely a word had yet been spoken. Both Mr. Hawtrey and his friend were completely exhausted. Since they had left the glacier they had staggered along in a half-stupefied condition, feeling that in spite of their exertions they were gradually becoming more and more chilled. As soon as the fire blazed up and there was nothing more to do for the girls, they had thrown themselves down near the fire, and a feeling of drowsiness, against which they had been fighting ever since the storm struck them, was now almost overpowering. Giuseppe produced from his wallet a bottle of wine and some cold meat and bread. These had formed part of the supply that had been brought up for lunch. The rest had been left behind, at the spot where they had started on the glacier.

'Let us eat, monsieur,' he said to Captain Armstrong.

'But the others will want something when they wake.'

'Conrad will start as soon as he has eaten, monsieur, to get help. It is two o'clock now; he will be down at the village in three hours, and will bring up porters and food. The ladies will not be able to walk. It has been a narrow escape.'

'It has indeed. We all owe our lives to you, my good fellows.'

'It is our business,' the man said simply; 'we were wrong in letting you go on to the glacier, but we did not think the storm would have come on so quickly. Sometimes the clouds will be like that for hours before they burst; but it is getting late in the season, and we ought to have run no risks.'

Just as they had finished their meal Giuseppe exclaimed, 'I hear a shout!'

The others listened, and above the roaring of the wind in the pines overhead they heard the sharp bark of a dog.

'It must be a rescue party,' Conrad said, leaping to his feet. 'They are sure to have seen the clouds rolling down the mountains, and would know that there was a storm raging up here,' and accompanied by Giuseppe he hurried away in the direction from which the sound had come, shouting occasionally as they went.

In five minutes Captain Armstrong heard them returning, and the sound of voices and of stumbling feet among the rocks showed that they had a party with them. He rose to his feet just as the figures of the guides, with three or four men, emerged from the mist.

'Thank God we have found you, Armstrong!' Lord Halliburn said, grasping his hand. 'We have had a terrible fright about you all. It was somewhere about eleven when one of the guides ran up to the hotel saying that there was a storm raging amongst the hills, that the clouds had swept across the Mer de Glace, and he was certain the party that had gone up this morning must have been overtaken by it. You may imagine that we lost no time. The guides knew what to do, and got together twenty men, with stretchers and ropes; then we got a lot of blankets from the hotel, and brandy, cold soup, and things of that sort, and started. Till we were more than half way up we were inclined to believe that the fears of the guides were exaggerated, for although we could see the clouds flying fast overhead there was not a breath of wind. However, for the last hour we have had a desperate fight for it. Though we had brought wraps with us, the wind and driving snow were

terrible, and we began to despair of ever seeing any of you alive again. We were almost as surprised as delighted when your guides met us and assured me that you were all safe. Where are the others?'

'There they are, sound asleep. The heat of the fire after the bitter cold sent them off at once.'

'Do not disturb them till we have heated some soup and got some boiling water ready,' Giuseppe said. 'Some hot soup for the ladies, and some of the same with some hot spirits and water for the men, will do wonders for them.'

A few minutes later Mr. Hawtrey was roused. He looked round in bewilderment at the men clustered on the other side of the fire.

'Thank you and your friends most heartily, Halliburn, for hurrying so promptly to our rescue,' he said, as soon as he understood the situation. 'One of the guides told me when we got here that he was going to start for help, but that would have meant six or seven hours' delay, and the sooner the girls are in bed the better for them.'

Mr. Fortescue was next aroused, and then he and Mr. Hawtrey woke the girls. They, however, were unable to rise to their feet, their limbs being completely stiffened by cold and fatigue. A basin of hot soup with bread broken into it restored them wonderfully.

'How are we to get down, father?' Dorothy asked.

'You will be carried, dear; the men have brought up stretchers and plenty of blankets and wraps, and there are mules for Fortescue and myself half a mile lower. We can manage to get as far as that, though I feel as if I had been beaten almost into a jelly. It is Lord Halliburn and his friends who have brought this party to our rescue, dear,' for the men had, at the suggestion of the guide, all retired a short distance from the fire when the girls were awakened, as he said that it was better that they should not be confused by seeing themselves surrounded by strange faces.

'It is very good of them,' Dorothy said. 'I was wondering vaguely while I was taking the soup where it had come from, and could not make out what you meant by the stretchers and mules, because I remember we sent those that we came up on, back to the hotel. Where is Lord Halliburn?'

'Halliburn, will you and your friends show yourselves,' Mr. Hawtrey said. 'The ladies are now ready to receive company.'

There was but a short chat, then the stretchers were brought up and the girls helped to take their places upon them. They were then covered up closely with blankets. The porters lifted them, and the party started down the hill, the older men being assisted by a porter on each side, for they were scarcely able to drag themselves along. Being urged by Mr. Hawtrey to go on at once, the rescue party and Captain Armstrong pushed forward at the top of their speed. Being now well wrapped up they felt the cold but little, and in half an hour reached the spot where the mules were awaiting them, and then proceeded quietly down the hill, the porters with the ladies being already far ahead.

On the way down Captain Armstrong related the incidents of their adventure.

'It was touch and go,' he said. 'Another quarter of an hour on that glacier would, I believe, have finished us all. It was not fatigue so much as it was the loss of heart that one felt. The wind seemed to go right through one, and to take all one's pluck out. I wonder the ladies are alive.'

'I can quite understand that,' Lord Halliburn said. 'I had no idea what it would be like until we got into it, and then, though the porters had brought up warm wraps for us, it was terrible. I should quite have given up hope had not the guides persisted that if you had got off the glacier you might have taken shelter somewhere under the lee of a rock, and that if so we might find you unharmed.'

'It was too late when we got off the glacier to think of it. The ladies were already almost insensible, and the rest of us so chilled to the bone that no shelter would have been of any use unless we could make a fire. That, of course, was out of the question, so our only chance was to make straight down the mountain. That was nothing to the work on the ice.'

'Hawtrey and Fortescue seem badly knocked up,' Lord Ulleswater said.

'Yes, they were completely exhausted by the time they got into that ravine. I don't think they could have gone much farther; they dropped off to sleep the instant we lighted the fire, and if we could not have done so I fancy they would never have woke again. The women bore up bravely as long as they had strength to struggle on. They literally went on until they dropped.'

'There is a mule here for you, Armstrong; indeed there are mules for all of us, for we brought six.'

'I am very glad to hear it, for I feel wonderfully shaky about the knees now it is all over.'

'No wonder,' Lord Ulleswater said; 'it is bad enough coming down the hill by oneself, but carrying a lady, it must have been hard work indeed.'

'I did not feel that much. The weight, well up on the shoulders, was nothing, and I kept so close behind the guide that I walked in his footsteps. I went on blindly, without thinking much about the path one way or the other; the thing that worried me most was that either Hawtrey or Fortescue might give out, and I could not think what we should do then. They stumbled very often, and I kept expecting to hear a fall. By the pace the guides went at I felt sure that we could carry the women down, and I thought that the warmth of our bodies would keep life in them; but if Hawtrey or Fortescue fell, I did not see what we should do. We could not leave him there to die, and yet to stop would have been death to all of us. Well, here are the mules, and I am not sorry for it.'

It was not until they were on something like level ground that they could quicken the pace of the animals. They were not long before they overtook the porters with the litters, and then, as they could do nothing there, they rode on ahead to see that everything was in readiness for their reception. With the exception of Captain Armstrong none of the party were able to leave their beds next day, but on the following morning Mr. Hawtrey and Mr. Fortescue were both up in time to say good-bye to Lord Halliburn and his friends, who were starting for Martigny. With the girls it was a longer matter. Clara Fortescue was delirious on the morning after their return, and an English doctor staying in the hotel at once pronounced it to be an attack of rheumatic fever; the other two had symptoms of the same malady, but these passed off, and on the fourth day both were able to get up, and on the following day were on sofas in the sitting-room.

'Well, you have made a nice business of it, young ladies,' Mr. Singleton said, when he paid them his first visit; 'this is what comes of mountaineering. You would have done much better to have stopped down here in the valley, instead of pretty nearly frightening us all to death, besides risking your own lives and injuring your health. I am glad to hear that your sister is a little better this morning, Miss Fortescue; the doctor thinks that the worst has passed, though she will still have a troublesome time of it.'

'I am sorry we frightened you all, Mr. Singleton,' Dorothy said.

'Well, Mrs. Fortescue and I had a bad time of it, Dorothy. Of course, we could not quite realise the danger, for down here the sun was shining brightly all the morning. I don't think Mrs. Fortescue did quite realise it until you arrived, but I knew the guides here would not have been so alarmed unless there had been real danger. I should have come up with the party but I knew that so far from being of the slightest use I should only have been a trouble to them. It was fortunate Halliburn and his two friends happened to be in the hotel; almost everyone else was out, and they took the management of the expedition in their hands, and hurried things up wonderfully. I never liked the man so much before as I did then. It was a tremendous relief when they rode in with Armstrong and brought us the news that you would be here in half an hour, and that although you were exhausted and worn out with the terrible time you had had they hoped that you would be none the worse for it. I think I realised what you had gone through most when your fathers came in, a quarter of an hour after you had been carried up to your rooms. They had to be lifted off their mules, and helped upstairs, where hot baths had been got ready for them, and if two strong, hearty men were so utterly exhausted, one could easily understand what a time you must have gone through.'

'Yes, but we were carried, Mr. Singleton,' Ada Fortescue said; 'I don't remember much about it, I was so cold and miserable, but I know that once I almost laughed at the thought that I was being carried like a package, on a guide's back, and what my mother would think of it if she saw me.'

'What did you feel, Dorothy?'

'I don't quite know what I felt,' she said reluctantly, and with somewhat heightened colour. 'I know I felt ashamed of myself; I used to think that I was as strong in my way as men are in theirs, and it seemed to me disgraceful that I should have to be carried. Then I could not help thinking, where the road was very steep, and I could hear the guide in front telling Captain Armstrong where he should step, that he might slip, and we should be both killed together. Otherwise, I felt safe, for I could tell that he was walking firmly, and was not feeling my weight too much. I don't think I lost consciousness at all; my body felt quite warm, but my hands and my feet were as if they were dead. I should not have been at all surprised to find that I had lost them altogether.'

In the afternoon Captain Armstrong was admitted to see the invalids. He at once laughed down Dorothy's attempt to thank him for having saved her life.

'I only did for you, Miss Hawtrey, exactly what the guides did for Miss Fortescue and her sister; there is nothing very terrible in carrying a weight when you get it comfortably fixed. Why, the porters in the Andes think nothing of carrying people right over the mountains; it is only a matter of getting weight properly balanced. I saw how the guides did; they knotted the shawls over their caps just above the peak. They carry weights here you know, as they do in most mountain countries, with a strap across the forehead. Coming over the ice I really did feel you heavy, though I had two others to help me with you, but the cold seemed to have taken all one's strength out of one, and the weight was all on one side; coming down was nothing in comparison. I believe I could have carried you right down to the hotel here with an occasional rest. I was as warm as a toast when we got into the wood. You must not think or say anything more about it; if you do I shall straightway pack up my kit and take my place in the next diligence wherever it may be going to. And now, were you able to walk into this room pretty easily?'

'We are both very stiff; I felt curiously weak, just as if I had had a long illness, but the doctor says it will soon pass off and that in a week we shall both be walking about again.'

'I rather think this will change our plans, Armstrong,' Mr. Hawtrey said; 'by the time we get back it will be far on in October and wetting damp and cold up in Lincolnshire, and the doctor advises me that it would be better to cross the Alps and spend a few weeks in Northern Italy, so as to set Dorothy completely up and to work the cold out of her system. I have not settled upon it yet, but I think that is probably what we will do. It is of no use running the risk of her getting rheumatism. But at any rate, we shall be here for another week or ten days, by which time I hope Clara Fortescue will have fairly turned the corner.' And so they lingered on.

In a week the two girls were able to get about again, to enjoy the sunshine in the valley. The hotel was nearly empty now, the season being over. Clara Fortescue was fairly through the fever, though still very weak; it was, however, only a question of time. Captain Armstrong still remained. Dorothy could no longer disguise from herself why he was staying. Up to the day of the expedition up to the Mer de Glace she had refused to admit the idea into her mind. She had before told him distinctly that she could never care for him in the way he wanted, and she had believed he had accepted the decision as final. They were great friends, and he had enjoyed their stay at Martigny just as she had done, and she had observed no difference in his manner to her or her two friends – in fact, if anything, she had thought, and was rather pleased than otherwise, that he was oftener by the side of Ada Fortescue than by her own.

There had been, however, something in his manner during that terrible time that had opened her eyes; something perhaps in the tone of his voice when he cheered her on, or in the clasp of his arm as he aided her father to carry her, that had told her the truth, and when he still lingered on at Chamounix she knew what was coming. What she did not know was what her answer would be.

She liked him very much; he had saved her life; she was sure he would do his best to make her happy; and yet she did not feel that she loved him as she thought a woman should love a man who was to be her husband. She had made one mistake and had regretted it bitterly. She had become engaged without feeling that love, and had vowed to herself that never again would she say 'Yes' unless her whole heart went with her words. She had had her girlish hero, and for years had thought that no one was like him. Had he come back a little earlier, and had he still remained her ideal, she would never have become engaged to Lord Halliburn.

She had fancied that he was unchanged until a moment when he had failed in the perfect trust she had thought he had placed in her. Now he had gone away for months to America and that dream was over altogether. She had felt his journey as a personal grievance. Of course, after the offence he had given, it made no difference to her; she did not wish to see him; it was unpleasant for both of them. Nevertheless, she was somewhat sore at his acquiescing so readily in her decision that their old relations were entirely a thing of the past. In fact, she was unreasonable, and was vexed with herself for being so. It was annoying to her now that she should think of him at all. He had gone altogether out of her life, and would in a few months be back in India again; but the thought of the breach and its cause brought back again strongly to her the events of the two months previous to her leaving England.

These had been almost forgotten of late, but she acknowledged, as she thought it over, that her position was practically the same as it had been. She was still exposed to the charge of theft, and although it had been arranged that there should be a compromise, yet in the minds of the two tradesmen who had been victimised and of their assistants she was a thief, and although those who knew her best were convinced of her innocence, a whisper of the affair might yet get abroad, and were the facts known she would be generally condemned. Besides, at any moment the system might be recommenced, she might again be branded as a thief, and the tale of the compromise effected in the first cases would add weight to the charge. It was for this reason that she had broken off her engagement with Lord Halliburn, and had then declared to herself that never would she place herself in a similar position until she was absolutely and entirely cleared from all suspicion, and freed from any chance of a repetition of it.

Nothing had occurred to shake that determination. She had no right to enter upon any engagement until she stood above all suspicion. The man himself might trust her blindly, might scoff at the idea of her doing a dishonourable action, but that would not suffice to shield either him or her from the consequences of the charge. What a life would theirs be were she generally believed to be a thief. Society would close its doors against them. A consciousness of her innocence might support them, but the life would be none the less painful and humiliating. Dorothy arrived at this conclusion not without a certain amount of unacknowledged sense of relief. It obviated the necessity for giving a direct answer to the question that was to be asked her. She felt that she could not again say 'No,' yet she shrank from saying 'Yes'; so when, the next day, Captain Armstrong, happening to find her alone, told her that his love was unchanged since he had spoken to her in the spring, except that he loved her more, and asked if she could not give him a different answer to that with which she had sent him away, she said:

'I am sorry – so sorry, Captain Armstrong. It was a great pain to me to say "No" before, and if I had dreamt when you joined us at Martigny that you still thought of me in that way, I should have told you frankly at once that it were better for us both that you should not stay there; but I thought you had come to regard me as a friend, and it was not until that day on the ice I felt it was not so. It was a great pain to me to say "No" before. I liked you very much then, but, as I told you, not enough for that. I like you even more now; it would be impossible that I could help it when we have been so much together, and you did so much for me that day. I like you so much that if I were free – ' he would have broken in but she checked him by a motion of her hand.

'I am not otherwise than free in that way,' she said; 'I have broken off with Lord Halliburn for good and all, and yet I am not free. Had I been so I do not know what my answer would have been. I don't think I could have brought myself to say "No"; I feel sure I could hardly have said "Yes." I think I must have said, "I do not quite know." I have made one mistake; I must not make another. I like you very much, but I do not think that it is the love that a woman should give to her husband. Give me a little more time to think before I answer you.'

'I should have been well content, Dorothy; I would have waited as long as you liked; but I don't understand how it is that you are not free.'

'You have a right to know. It is because I am disgraced; because as long as this disgrace hangs over me I can never marry.'

'You mean those ridiculous stories that were in the papers, Dorothy. Do you think that I should care for a moment for such things as those, or that they have brought the slightest taint of disgrace upon you in the minds of those that know you?'

'That was the beginning of it,' she said, 'but there was worse; and it was that made me break off my engagement. I doubt now whether in any case I could have held to it. I had begun to feel I had made a mistake before that came, but even had I not done so it would have been the same. I am accused of theft.'

'Of theft, Dorothy!' he repeated in incredulous scorn. 'You suspected of theft!'

'And on evidence so strong,' she went on quietly, 'that even my father for a moment suspected me, and my dear friend, Mr. Singleton, believed that I had been mixed up in some disgraceful transaction; and others, who I thought knew me well, and would have trusted me, as I know you would have done, believed me guilty – not of theft, but of the previous accusations. There are shopmen in London ready to swear in a court of law that I obtained diamonds and other goods from them, and to-morrow fresh charges may be made, and ere long I may stand in the dock as a thief.'

Captain Armstrong looked at her as if he doubted her sanity.

'But no one in his senses could think such a thing, Dorothy.'

'But I have told you that even those who knew me best did, for a moment, think so. Mr. Charles Levine, the lawyer, is a clear-headed man, and yet even he, after hearing all the facts, was convinced of my guilt. I will tell you more – it is fair that I should do so,' and she gave him the history of the postcards, then of the robbery at the jeweller's, of Mr. Singleton lending her the money, of the other robbery on the same day, and of Captain Hampton seeing her in conversation on that afternoon with the man they believed to be the author of the postcards.

'You see,' she said, 'that here is the evidence of three or four tradespeople, all of whom know me well by sight, and who recognised my dress as well as my face. Here is the evidence of Mr. Singleton, who has known me from a child, and that of Captain Hampton, who was at the time seeing me every day; and to all this I have but to oppose my own denial, and to declare that I never was at any of the four places that afternoon.'

'I should believe your word if a thousand swore to the contrary,' he said passionately.

'You may now when you have heard all these things,' she said, 'but you would not at the time. When the shopkeeper and his assistant told my father that story I could see that his face turned white, and that for a moment he believed that I must have taken these things in order to obtain money to bribe the man whom I had solemnly declared had no letters of mine. When I heard the story told, and that my very dress was recognised, I asked myself if I could have done it unconsciously, in a state of somnambulism or something of that sort. I was absolutely dazed and bewildered. With all your trust in me I am sure you must have been shaken when you heard that story, just as my own father was. Again, when my old and kindest friend, Mr. Singleton, declared that I had come to him sobbing and crying, and begging him to save me from disgrace, and that he had given me a cheque for a thousand pounds, could he be blamed for believing that the girl he knew and loved had been engaged in some scandalous affair? As to Captain Hampton, he believed

me absolutely in regard to the letters, but he doubted me afterwards. Try to put yourself in his place. If you had known about this affair of the letters, and you had seen me in an out-of-the-way part of London, engaged in a conversation with the man we were searching for as the author of the postcards, what would you have thought?' She asked the question a little wistfully.

'I can't say,' he said honestly. 'I suppose just for a moment I must have thought you had really got into some serious sort of scrape. I don't see how I could have helped it. I am sure I should never have thought you had done anything really wrong.'

'But in that case I should have been a liar.'

'I don't suppose I should have thought of that at the time, Dorothy. When I came to think it all over I should have said it was impossible, and should have doubted my own senses; but the robbery I never could have believed in, if a hundred shopkeepers had sworn to it. But what does it all really mean? There must be some explanation of it all.'

'The only explanation we can arrive at,' she replied, 'is that there is some other woman so like me that she can pass for me when dressed up in clothes like my own.'

'Of course, of course. What a fool I was not to think of that.'

'Yes, Captain Armstrong, you accept it, just as my father and Mr. Singleton accept it, because you and they would accept anything rather than believe me guilty; but would anyone else believe it if I went into court, and this mass of evidence was brought against me? What would my bare denial weigh against it? Would the suggestion of my counsel that the theft had been committed by some other woman, so like me that even those who knew me best had been deceived, unsupported as it would be by even a shadow of evidence, be accepted for an instant? You know well enough that the jury would return a verdict against me without a moment's hesitation, and that all the world, save some half-a-dozen people, would believe me guilty.'

'At present, the police all over England are endeavouring to find proofs of the existence of my double. A notice has been sent to every country in Europe. This has been going on ever since we left England, and, so far, without the slightest success. After having been so successful it is hardly likely that the thing will not be attempted again, and in that case it must come before the public. It will be terrible to bear the disgrace alone, but it would be ten times more so did it involve another in my disgrace. Do not pain me by saying more, Captain Armstrong,' and she laid her hand on his arm as he was about to speak, 'nothing could induce me to change my determination. If at any time this dreadful mystery is cleared up, should you come to me again, I will give you an honest answer. I do not say it will be "Yes." It must be as my heart will decide then. At present my hope is that you will not wait for that: the matter may never be cleared up. I believe, myself, that it never will be, and I would far rather know that you were married to some woman who would make you as happy as you deserve, than that you were wasting your life on me, and that even should I be cleared I might not be able to give you the answer you want.'

'I will wait for a time, at any rate, Dorothy,' he said quietly; 'but I will not say more now. You are very good to have spoken so frankly to me. I ought not to have allowed you to talk so much. I can see that it has been almost too great a strain for you. I think that I had better leave to-morrow morning.'

'I think it will be best,' she said; 'but promise me, Captain Armstrong, that in any case we shall always be good friends. You may think little of the act of saving my life, but I shall never forget it. You promised me before that I should find no change in your manner, and you kept your word well.'

'I promise you again, Dorothy,' he said, raising her hand to his lips, 'if I am never to regard you in a closer light, I shall always think of you as my dearest friend.'

'And I shall rejoice in your happiness as a sister might do, Captain Armstrong;' and in a minute he was gone, and Dorothy, sitting down, indulged in a long cry. She did not attempt to analyse her feelings; she was not sure whether she was glad or sorry, whether she had virtually refused him

or not; she was certainly relieved that she had not been obliged to make up her mind to give an answer from which there would have been no drawing back. Half an hour later her father came in.

'The carriage will be at the door in ten minutes, my dear. You are looking pale, child; are you not feeling so well?'

'I have rather a headache. I think instead of going for a drive I will lie down until dinner-time.'

She came down looking herself again. She knew that Captain Armstrong's intention of leaving the next morning would excite a certain amount of surprise, and that it possibly might be suspected that she was not unconnected with his departure. Certainly Ada Fortescue would have her suspicions, for during the last two or three days she had thrown out some little hints that showed that she was not blind as to his intentions. She was relieved to find as she sat down that the party were in ignorance of his approaching departure. It was not until the meal was nearly finished that Captain Armstrong said suddenly:

'I have been putting off tearing myself away from day to day, but my leave is up, and I am afraid I cannot possibly delay any longer. It goes awfully against the grain, but there is no help for it, and I have been to the office this afternoon and booked my place for Geneva to-morrow morning.'

There was a general chorus of regret.

'I mustn't grumble,' he said laughingly. 'I have had a very pleasant time indeed, though I have not gone in as I had intended for mountaineering. I think my one mild attempt that way has a good deal quenched my ardour. I ought to have gone ten days ago, but I did not like to do so until Miss Fortescue was up and fairly on the way to recover her strength. I am glad to have had the pleasure of seeing her to-day. That has, however, knocked from under me my last excuse for remaining here any longer. I shall get a severe wiggling as it is for exceeding my leave. Of course, I have written, making various excuses, but it won't do any longer, and I shall have to travel right through without a stay. I hope, Mrs. Fortescue, that I shall meet you all in London in a few weeks' time, and find your daughter quite herself again. I suppose, Mr. Hawtrey, I shall have to look forward to the beginning of the season before I see you and Miss Hawtrey?'

'I think it likely we shall not be in town until May,' Mr. Hawtrey replied. 'We shall probably work down so as to be at Rome at Easter, and shall have a month or two of quiet at home before we come up to town; still that must depend on circumstances. If you can get a few days' leave later on, I should be very pleased if you could run down to my place for a week's shooting. There has not been a gun fired there this season; take a couple of men down with you if you like. I will write to my housekeeper and the gamekeeper, saying that you are to be looked after just the same as if we were at home, and all you will have to do will be to send her a note, saying that you are coming, a couple of days beforehand. Her name is Brodrick – make a note of that in your pocket-book.'

'Thank you, I shall enjoy it very much if I can get away. I have my doubts whether I shall be able to; but if I can, I will certainly avail myself of your offer.'

'So it was "no," Dorothy,' Ada Fortescue whispered as they went upstairs together that night. 'I knew that by his face this afternoon; he tried to talk and laugh as usual, but I could see things had gone badly with him. You need not tell me if you don't like,' she went on, as Dorothy gave no answer. 'It is not a difficult riddle to guess for oneself.'

'I will tell you, but it must be quite to yourself, Ada; there were certain reasons why I could give him no answer at all. No, you don't understand it,' she went on, in answer to Ada's look of surprise. 'I don't suppose you ever will, but there are circumstances that render it impossible for me to give him an answer, and as far as I can see there is not likely to be any alteration in those circumstances; so please do not say anything more about it. He himself sees that I could not act differently, and I think most likely that the question will never be asked again. Perhaps some day or other I may tell you about it. We have got to be real friends now, and when you do hear you will acknowledge that I have done right. Good-night now; I am so glad to think that Clara is to be down to breakfast again in the morning.'

This was not the only conversation on the subject. Mr. Singleton, contrary to his usual custom, sat up until all but Mr. Hawtrey had retired.

'That has been a bit of a surprise, Hawtrey. There is no doubt that he has proposed, and that she has not accepted him, as I had quite made up my mind she would do.'

'Do you think so? The idea had not occurred to me. They both seemed just the same as usual.'

'You are as blind as a bat, Hawtrey. Didn't she stay at home with a headache this afternoon? and isn't he going away suddenly to-morrow? It does not require the smallest degree of penetration to discover what that means. It is a relief to me – a great relief; but I am afraid it is only a postponement. She has refused to accept him on the same grounds that she broke off her engagement to the other man. Now I think it over I see it is about the only thing she could have done. It would not have been right to have become engaged as long as this thing is hanging over her. It is all very well for you and I to feel that we are going to compromise the matter comfortably; but there it is still, and may break out afresh again at any moment. She has shaken it off a bit since we came away, but it must be on her mind, and I expect she frankly told Armstrong why she could give him no answer at present. Still, I am afraid it will come to the same thing in the long run.'

Mr. Hawtrey wisely held his tongue. He himself would have been in every way content with Captain Armstrong as a son-in-law, but as he had no wish to irritate his friend, he abstained from going farther into the subject.

CHAPTER XVIII

Mr. Singleton had gone out for a stroll after breakfast with Dorothy and Ada Fortescue. Mrs. Fortescue was with Clara, who had come down to breakfast for the first time and was now lying down for a bit as a preparation for going for a short drive later on. Mr. Hawtrey was smoking a cigar in front of the hotel with Mr. Fortescue, intending to follow the girls and Mr. Singleton after the post came in. After half an hour's waiting the bag for the hotel was brought in.

'They are principally yours, Fortescue,' Mr. Hawtrey said, as the clerk sorted them over. 'The inquiries after Clara's health must have materially benefited the postal revenue. As you are not coming I will put those four for Ada in my pocket. There is nothing for either of the others, and only one for me. I know what its contents are without opening it.'

Putting the five letters into his pocket, he strolled down the village. He knew exactly where he should find the others, as they almost always took their seat in a nook sheltered completely from the wind and exposed to the full rays of the sun.

'I suppose I had better look at the letter,' he said to himself. 'I would rather Danvers did not write so often. Dorothy looks up inquiringly whenever the post comes in, and I would rather say "No letter to-day," than to have to say, "There is a letter from Danvers, Dorothy, but he sends no news whatever." It comes to the same thing, no doubt, but no letter might mean that they had got some little clue and meant following it up. At any rate, she does not look so disappointed as when I tell her that there is a letter with nothing in it.'

'Hulloa!' he exclaimed, as he opened it, 'this is a much more lengthy epistle.' The first line or two were sufficient to cause him to burst into something like a shout of joy. They ran: – 'I am delighted to be able to give you the good news that the existence and whereabouts of the man and the counterfeit of Miss Hawtrey have been ascertained without a doubt. Hampton was right when he considered they would probably have made off to the United States directly they had secured their plunder. I received a letter from him this morning. Unfortunately I have been away shooting for a week, and it has been lying unopened since the day I left.' Then followed a copy of Captain Hampton's letter, together with copies of the various affidavits.

'These prove practically all we require. I have been round with them to Charles Levine. He is very much gratified, and says that he considers this testimony should be ample to enable us to defend any action on the part of Gilliat. He thinks the best plan will be to place Captain Hampton's letter and the depositions before Gilliat and say that we are prepared to defend the action and to bring over all these people as witnesses. Of course, it would be more satisfactory to have the adventuress and her accomplice in the dock or to produce their written confession. Such is evidently Hampton's opinion also. You see he has started for New Orleans and says he shall follow them if he has to cross the continent. This, however, I have not copied, as he has put that on a separate piece of paper and marked it private and confidential. From something he said to me the day before he started I imagine he has for some reason or other an objection to Miss Hawtrey's knowing that he is working on her behalf.

'You see, in the early part of the letter, which he thought would be sent to you, and doubtless shown to her, he treats the discovery he has made as a purely accidental matter, although he told me that he intended to make it his sole business to hunt them down, if it took him six months to do so. However, when he wrote he was certainly on the point of starting for New Orleans, and I own that I consider his undertaking to be a somewhat perilous one. This fellow must be a thorough-paced ruffian, and he will find no difficulty in getting together any number of reckless men who would, if they found he was in danger of arrest, hesitate at nothing. Of course, if he goes farther west his errand will be still more difficult. Hampton is so thoroughly good a fellow that I should feel grieved indeed did anything befall him.'

Mr. Hawtrey thrust the letter and enclosure into his pocket and hurried on; he hesitated for a moment, as he remembered that Ada Fortescue was with his daughter, but he said to himself, 'She is a good girl and a great friend of Dorothy's; we can trust her to hold her tongue – besides, we need not go much into the past.'

'Why, you've been running, father?'

'No, my dear, no; but I am a little excited over a letter I have just received. It is a family matter, Ada, but I know Dorothy will not wish you to go away, for I am sure we can trust you with our little secret.'

'Have you news, father?' Dorothy asked, springing to her feet. 'News about that?'

'Yes, dear; but first I must tell your friend that some tradesmen have been robbed by a person so strongly resembling you that she deceived even those that knew you well. The matter was so serious that we have had a number of detectives searching for this woman, as only by her being found could we prove that the orders for these goods were not given by you. Having told her that much I can go on with my news.'

'They have been found, Dorothy. Thank God they have been found!'

The girl threw her arms round her father's neck and burst into a passion of tears. Hitherto she had had nothing but her consciousness of innocence to support her. Until the suggestion had been made by Captain Hampton that some one had impersonated her, she had been in a state of complete bewilderment, and even this hypothesis seemed to her to be improbable in the extreme. Still as her father and Mr. Singleton had accepted it, she, too, had clung to it, but with less real hope than they had entertained, that it might prove to be true.

As the weeks had passed by without any shadow of proof that such a person existed being forthcoming, she had more than once told herself that she would have to pass all her life with this dark cloud over her. A few close friends might believe in her, but when the story was whispered about, as sooner or later it would be sure to be, everyone else would hold aloof from her. She had been feeling that morning in lower spirits than usual. Captain Armstrong had left early, and she was deeply sorry for him, more sorry for him than for herself. She had slept but little that night, and had come to the conclusion that were this weight ever removed and were he ever to ask her again, her life would be a happy one with him, even though she did not feel for him more than a very real liking. The sudden announcement of a fact she herself had begun to doubt, for a time completely upset her, and her father at last said, 'I will leave you here for a few minutes with your friend, Dorothy, and will stroll away with Singleton. By the time we return you will be able to listen calmly to the story.'

When they had gone a short distance away from the girls, he placed the copies of the letters and depositions in Mr. Singleton's hands.

'Hampton!' the latter exclaimed, as soon as he glanced over the first line or two; 'I am glad indeed. Let us sit down on that rock over there; the news is too pleasant to be lost by not being able to read it distinctly.'

'Well, Hawtrey, I congratulate you,' he said, when he had finished. 'Those letters are sufficient to prove to any unprejudiced person that Dorothy has been perfectly innocent throughout the whole business. It is a pity the birds had flown before Hampton arrived there. Even putting everything else aside, I would have given something to see that woman who humbugged me so completely. What will our young lady say now when she hears that it is Hampton who has thus cleared her? By the way, he writes as if it were a mere accident, his having discovered them.'

'I fancy he writes in that style because he has no doubt that she will see the letter. There is the letter Danvers sent me with the enclosure. Hampton seems to be just as obstinate about the matter as Dorothy is.'

Mr. Singleton read the letter with many grunts of disapprobation.

'Why couldn't he be satisfied with what he has done?' he exclaimed, when he had finished the letter. 'He had got enough evidence to satisfy any reasonable people; now he must needs go chasing them all over America, and as likely as not get shot for his pains. Why didn't he write over and ask whether that was not sufficient?'

'Because if he had done so, Singleton, he might never have been able to pick up the clue again. The evidence he has got may not be absolutely conclusive, but undoubtedly it will be very valuable. These affidavits prove conclusively that there was on a certain day a woman staying in a New York Hotel who was so like Dorothy that my daughter's portrait was believed by several people who had seen the woman to be hers. It could also be proved that she and the man with her had just come from Hamburg. But you see it does not in any way connect this woman with the robbery. There is the weak point of the business. The evidence is enough, as you say, to convince reasonable people; but as these shopmen are all ready to swear to Dorothy, the fact that we have found a woman exactly like her, but whom we cannot produce, is scarcely a satisfactory proof from a legal point of view that she is innocent. However, we can talk that over presently; we had better join the others; Dorothy will be wanting to hear the news. Be careful what you say; we may both think that Ned Hampton's views are foolish, but we are bound to respect them.'

Mr. Singleton made no reply, and mentally resolved that if it were necessary he would speak about it, whether or no.

'I am not going to see the young fool throw away his chances like that,' he said to himself; 'he does not know what has been going on here – that Dorothy has been within an ace of accepting some one else. All this foolery of his shows that he really cares for her. If he had not done so he would simply have laughed at her nonsense.'

They met the girls coming towards them.

'You have been an unconscionable time, father, I am burning with impatience to know how it has all come about.'

'Those papers will tell you, Dorothy. One is an extract from a letter written to Mr. Danvers by Ned Hampton, the others are copies of affidavits sworn in New York.'

Dorothy changed colour. She had been thinking of her former friend that night, and had very reluctantly come to the conclusion that she had been unduly hard upon him. She had asked Captain Armstrong what he would have thought had he seen her as Ned Hampton had supposed that he had done, and in spite of his love for her and his absolute confidence in her word, Captain Armstrong had admitted that he should at first have come to exactly the same conclusion – namely, that she had got into a scrape.

She had not felt either hurt or angry when he admitted this. Why, then, should she have been both in the case of her old playfellow? The question was altogether an unwelcome one, and she had dismissed it as speedily as possible, but the name coming upon her now so suddenly and unexpectedly had almost startled her. In some anger against herself for the involuntary flush, she took the papers and prepared to read them much more deliberately than she would otherwise have done.

However, her eyes ran over the lines more rapidly as she read on, and when she finished she exclaimed —

'What a wonderful piece of good fortune! It seems quite providential that Captain Hampton should have taken a fancy to go out to America, and should have inquired when he went through New York if this man and woman had lately arrived. He seems to have managed wonderfully well; it was lucky he got such a clever detective as the person he speaks of. Really, father, I feel very grateful to him.'

'So I think you ought to,' Mr. Hawtrey said somewhat sharply, 'considering that he has done what all the detectives in London have failed to do, even aided by the police all over the Continent,

and has gone a long way towards lifting a cloud, which, if it had not been for him, would have darkened your whole life.'

'I quite feel that, father; I have been thinking that over while you have been away, and have told Ada that no words can express what a relief it is to me. Of course, I am very, very grateful to Captain Hampton; it was very good of him, indeed, to think of me, and to take such trouble about me. What shall we have to do next?'

'That must depend upon what the lawyers say, Dorothy; I almost wish that we had been going back to London, so as to talk it over with them personally.'

'Why shouldn't we go, father? I am feeling quite well again now, and am wanting very much to be home again. I would infinitely rather do that than go to Italy. The Fortescues are talking of starting in a couple of days, why should we not all go back together?'

'I will think it over, my dear. Now, I think you had better be getting back to the hotel; the sun has gone in and the clouds are half-way down the mountains. I think that we are going to have another snowstorm, so you and Ada had better hurry. You have had experience of the suddenness with which storms come on here.'

'I suppose this was why you would give no answer yesterday?' Ada Fortescue said, as the two girls walked briskly back toward Chamounix, followed more leisurely by Mr. Hawtrey and his friend.

'Yes, partly, Ada.'

'What a pity the news did not come a day sooner.'

'I don't know, Ada, I really had not made up my mind. You see, all along I have been feeling that I could never get engaged again, and so I had an answer ready, and had not thought it over as I should have done otherwise. There is a snowflake. Do let us hurry, so as to be in before it begins in earnest.'

Ada did not see the snowflake, but she saw that her companion wanted to change the subject, and nothing more was said till they reached the hotel, just as the snow was really beginning to fall.

Dorothy remained for some time in her room. She was dissatisfied with herself for not feeling more elated at the discovery that had been made. It was everything to her, she told herself; the greatest event of her life; and yet, after the first burst of joy, it had not made her as happy as it should have done.

It was tiresome that it should have been made by Captain Hampton. She had requested him not to interfere farther in her affairs. He had done so, and with success.

Certainly she would much rather that this woman had been discovered by some one else. But this was not all. If the news had come a day earlier she supposed that she should have accepted Captain Armstrong, and there would have been an end of it. She had promised that she would let him know if this was ever cleared up. Now, in honour she ought to write to him. Anyhow, there was no occasion for that to-day. He had only left that morning; it would look ridiculous were he to get her letter the day he arrived in town. If they were going back she could wait until they were in England. It would be a difficult letter to write, most difficult; and she sat down for a time thinking, and ended by being as unjustly angry with Captain Armstrong as she had been with Ned Hampton.

'I believe I am getting quite idiotic,' she said, getting up impatiently. 'I shall begin to think that storm on the glacier has affected my brain. When I ought to be the happiest girl possible, here I am discontented with everything.'

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