

"Don't let any consideration for me stop you," replied Hardy gallantly; "but, perhaps, if you could get me a towel the operation would be pleasanter for both of us."

Nina had tripped away before he finished, and soon returned with the towel. But instead of giving it to Hardy, she began to signal with it. This was too much, and he took it from her.

"Please postpone your signals for a moment, my little maiden," he said, but she took no notice.

"Why does he turn away and go on still?" she asked.

"Who?"

"Walter."

"I give it up, perhaps because he sees me."

Nina ran away in the direction of the goats, and was soon out of sight.

"Corydon and Phyllis have had a slight row," mused Hardy; "however, I suppose they will make it up again; it must be a serious business to quarrel with the only available lover within twenty miles. Hallo! here's the lazy fellow crawling up at last. Come along, old tortoise!"

A handsome young man, with light wavy hair and mustache, came slowly up, and sat down on the bench with a sigh of relief.

"I've been resting, Jack," he said.

"'Twould be more worthy of remark if you hadn't."

"You walk at such a pace, you know."

"So do you, and a jolly slow one it is. Where's my week? Lend me your knapsack. Lock here, you sit out here for five minutes and recruit yourself with some milk while I shave."

Hardy disappeared into the house, but a moment after his head appeared out of the window, over the bench on which his chum was lying.

"This is first-rate," he remarked; "I can go on shaving and listen to your inspiring conversation at the same time."

"What beautiful scenery!" exclaimed Linton, looking down the valley.

"Al" returned Hardy, "and the milk is on a level with it."

"We shall have this view from our room."

"Yes, but a little more furniture and a little less scenery would be more my form. Look at this looking-glass—one eye at the time please; there isn't room for more on it."

"This valley always brings happy thoughts to me," said Linton half to himself.

"Can't wonder at it," returned Hardy as he gave a finishing touch to his chin. "You were laid up for a week with a sprained ankle somewhere about here, I think, two years ago, weren't you? And we nearly lost ourselves last night trying a short cut."

"That was a happy time, Jack."

"Which?"

"When I sprained my ankle. I was nursed by the most charming girl. I wonder if she lives here now. We were like brother and sister before I went away."

"I've seen her, my boy. But you must take care; she's got a strapping young fellow hanging around who's as jealous as Othello. I'm afraid I've caused a little heart-burning already. Oh, I am a sad dog!"

"What a fool you are, Jack."

"All right, don't you make yourself one as well. Here's the old dragon."

Fraulein Schwartz had heard voices, and came out to welcome the new arrival. She well remembered Linton, and received him with effusion.

"Nina will be back in a minute or two, Sir; she has only gone to milk the goats. She has grown since you saw her, Sir."

"Ah, she was a girl, then; I suppose she is a woman now."

"You shall see, Sir—here she comes."

Linton watched her as she came down the road, not altogether pleased to see a tall young fellow with her.

On the other hand, Walter was so vexed at seeing two strangers, evidently waiting her return, that he had half a mind to turn back and retreat over the pass in anger. But his jealousy kept him near his betrothed; he could not let her out of his sight.

"Well, Nina," said Linton, as she came up, "I've come back, you see, as you asked me two years ago."

"I am glad to see you, Sir," she replied demurely, for she felt that Walter's eyes were on her.

"Fraulein Schwartz made me expect to find you quite a woman, but you are still my little Nina, I see. Are you grown too big to be kissed now?"

"Don't be a fool, Charlie," whispered Hardy to him; "can't you see that fellow looks as if he would like to murder you?"

But the question had been already decided by Nina's drawing back her hand from Linton's and walking up to Walter. The latter, however, did not look at her, but gazed moodily across the valley.

"A sweet youth that," remarked Linton carelessly.

In the meantime Walter was clenching his hands in his pockets, and muttering to himself:

"She told me that she did not know where he was, and he was in the house all the time. And he would have kissed her."

CHAPTER II.

"Well, Charlie, I suppose we are to push on to Werhausen to-day," said Hardy as they sat outside the cottage next morning over their breakfast.

"Yes, I suppose so. Where's Nina vanished? I want some more milk."

"You've about a pint left; let Nina alone, my boy. As it is, that fellow Walter seems to be unable to make up his mind whether to be angrier with you or with Nina. Look at him now, his scowl is enough to turn the milk sour."

"Oh, bother Walter; I've come twenty miles to see Nina, and I shall ignore Walter's existence for the next hour. I suppose we ought to start at nine."

"Yes and we shall have all our work cut out for I don't mean to try any more short cuts without a guide."

"Perhaps Nina can tell us whether we can get one. I'm going to see, at any rate, Nina."

She came running out, and Linton made her sit down while he questioned her about the possibility of obtaining a guide to Werhausen. His excuse for detaining her was

not a very happy one, for she at once said that Walter was returning in that direction to-day and would be glad to guide them.

Hardy looked at Linton interrogatively.

"I wish, Jack, you'd try to arrange it with him," said the latter; "he won't do it if I ask him, I'm afraid, and time is an object now."

"All right, I'll try what I can do," replied Hardy. "I think he'll come if only to insure our being at a distance from Nina."

Walter was not very tractable; at first he refused, but presently yielded, apparently because of some idea which had struck him. He recommended that a start should be made at once, to which no objection could be well made, so the friends packed up their knapsacks and were soon ready.

"Good-bye, Nina," said Hardy, holding out his hand, "don't forget me before this afternoon."

"Good-bye, Nina," echoed Linton. "Come, Hardy, I'm ready. By Jove! though, I've left my alpenstock in our room. Just get it for me, Walter."

Walter had brought out the baggage from the room, so he could not refuse as he was requested. The moment he disappeared Linton drew Nina to him and kissed her.

"That's a good-bye kiss, Nina, for I suppose you'll be married long before I come to Switzerland again. Mind you don't tell Walter."

But, as Hardy knew, there was no need to tell Walter. The bedroom window overlooked the group, and the lover had been a spectator of what had happened. Hardy saw his face for a moment with an angry flush upon it, but he did not see the intense hatred which shot from his eyes as he drew back into the room. However, in a few moments he came out apparently calm. He kissed Nina and the fraulein, who only came out at the last minute with the bill which she had been concealing, and soon the travelers were only a speck in a distance to the inhabitants of the cottage.

Linton did not give a thought to the jealousy which he had excited in Walter's mind; in fact, he was scarcely aware of its existence. He did not know that the guide's was an intensely passionate and suspicious temperament; that for one thing he knew he imagined a dozen; that he always made his visits to Nina unexpectedly in order to know whether she had any other admirers than himself.

Had he known all this, he might have taken seriously the taciturn way in which the guide plodded on, never offering an observation, and replying as little as possible to what was said. He even refused a cigar which Hardy offered him, a very rare thing for a guide to do.

"I shan't be sorry when we drop our new acquaintance," remarked Linton; "he is very uninteresting."

"I shan't care if that's his worst fault," remarked Hardy.

"He certainly has one rather more annoying; he seems to be able to pick out the worst bits of ground in the district. I'm getting tired already, and we haven't walked three hours."

"And with one rest. This is a most wretched sort of wilderness. Have you ever been near here before?"

"Never. I'm utterly out of my reckoning."

"It seems to me," said Hardy, "that Werhausen lies a good deal more to the north, while he is working us continually to the west."

Hardy did so, but elicited no answer except that the way they were going was the right one.

"But look here," exclaimed Linton, testily, as they had to help each other up a rock; "we don't want to do any climbing to-day; we want to get to Werhausen, and the road can't be over a mountain."

"If you are not content to follow me," replied Walter surlily, "it would be best for you to go your own road."

This was a finish to the conversation, for, as the tourists had already supposed, they were utterly out of the ordinary track, and neither of them had an idea of their position. Linton received the man's impertinent answer with a philosophic shrug, resigning himself to the unpleasantness of a harder walk than he had anticipated, but Hardy, who had caught sight of his face as he spoke, began to feel seriously uneasy.

"I say, Charlie," he said, "don't do anything to make that fellow angry."

"Make him angry? It's the other way, I think. I'm getting fairly savage with him for leading us this dance."

"I wouldn't tell him so if I were you."

"Why not?"

"Well, you see, if he were to become unpleasant it would be rather awkward for us, wouldn't it?"

"I don't see that; we are two to one. Besides, why should he turn unpleasant?"

"He saw you kissing Nina this morning."

"Did he? I can't help it; he shouldn't have been looking."

"Unfortunately, he was, and I can't help thinking he means to pay us out."

"You think he is taking us this round by way of administering a lesson to us? By Jove! if I thought so—"

"Do keep still, Charlie; don't make him angry."

"Why, what on earth's come over you, Jack? Surely you aren't afraid of that fellow?"

"Yes, I am, I confess it."

"Why, I believe I could tackle him single-handed, and I'm sure you could."

"Yes, but we are in his power. If he means mischief he has nothing to do but to choose his time for doing it."

"Good heavens, Jack! do you mean that he thinks of losing us on the mountain?"

"I don't say he does, but I fear it. And if he does, how can we prevent him? All he has to do is to suddenly run off; we can never overtake him, as he knows the way well. In half an hour he would be out of sight, and we—where should we be?"

Linton grew pale, but recovered himself. They were now walking along the side of a buttress of the mountain, up which they had been toiling. The ascent was very gradual, and they could talk without undue exertion.

Walter was a couple of yards in front, stolidly striding along.

"What shall we do, Jack?" asked Linton, who recog-

nized in his companion a stronger mind. "Is it any good to tell him that I meant nothing by kissing Nina, and that I shall never see her again?"

"No, no; we must not let him suspect us or it is all up. When we come to a good place we will propose stopping to eat something; one of us must keep near him all the time. Or, better still, you must get faint and insist on taking his arm. You must never let it go; as long as he is with us we are safe, for I scarcely expect his wish for revenge is strong enough to let him risk his own safety."

"I believe he means to thoroughly tire us out before he does anything, and that won't take long, so far as I am concerned; my legs are beginning to give way, and he is going on as fresh as paint. Let's bring matters to a crisis."

"Hi, Walter!" shouted Hardy; "we're getting hungry. We'll stop here and have some bread and cheese."

"There is a much better place a little further on," replied the guide, "where there is a spring."

"Shall we go on?" whispered Hardy to Linton. "Be as careless as you can."

"As you like; if there is a spring it will be a blessing."

"All right, let's go on if it isn't far," said Hardy aloud.

"But my friend is knocked up; you must give him your arm, and I'll take that knapsack, if you like."

Linton moved forward to take his arm. Hardy had already taken hold of the knapsack so quickly that the guide had no time to move away, even if he had wished.

He made no objection to the proposal, and Linton put his arm through his, Hardy keeping close in the rear. They could still talk to each other, for they knew that Walter did not understand English.

In this manner they plodded wearily on for another mile, no slight distance when the path is over rocks and loose stones. The scene was a most impressive one, but at present its exceeding desolation was the characteristic which the two friends felt most strongly. Not a house was in sight, and scarcely a tree; nothing but bare rocks and earth.

Below them lay a deep dark valley, with a rushing torrent which now looked a mere white thread; above them black rocks, capped with everlasting snows. For all that they could tell theirs were the first human footsteps that had ever fallen in this desolate spot.

Walter had spoken truth. There was a spring ahead of them, and the sight of it revived their spirits. They took it in turns to drink, one filling his cup while the other mounted guard over the guide. The latter seemed to be conscious by this time that he was the object of suspicion, but his action and look did not alter. He ate his crust and drank the water without making any attempt to move away from them, and Hardy half began to hope that he had been wronging him. At any rate, he determined to make one more attempt at conciliation.

"What time shall we reach Werhausen, Walter," he asked.

"I shall get there about six," he replied.

"Allowing how long for rest?" asked Hardy, purposely of taking no notice of his using the word "I."

"You can't rest as long as you like," was the answer, "but I am going on."

"What do you mean? We've hired you as our guide, and you'll have to stop or go on as we wish."

"I am not your guide. I would not take money from you if I were starving. I only brought you here to take you away from Nina. It will be a long time before you find your way back there again, my fine young gentleman."

This was a declaration of war, and all felt it to be so. Walter rose and faced them, standing about two paces off. Hardy looked straight at him and said: "Do you mean that you have brought us out of our way because of some harmless flirting with Nina?"

"Yes," shouted Walter, losing all command of himself, and making his voice echo down the mountain, "yes, you would come with your full purses and your smiling faces to turn her away from me, who love her and work for her, and live from week to week on the chance of seeing her. You give her fine presents which she wears, and she tells me with an innocent smile that she does not know where the gentleman who gave them to her has gone, and ten minutes afterwards I find him at the cottage and wanting to kiss her. She little thinks I saw him kiss her this morning when he sent me in to fetch his alpenstock. But now it is my turn, you are in my power."

Hardy stepped forward to seize him, but he stretched out his hand.

"Did you hear that?" he asked. "Look down the valley."

A roll of thunder reverberated from mountain to mountain, and instinctively the two friends looked down into the dark valley below them. At the same moment, with a mocking laugh, Walter sprang down the rock. His ruse had succeeded, and they were alone on the mountain.

But his triumph was a short one. Exasperated beyond measure at the trick, desperate as the state of affairs was, Hardy seized a stone as large as his two fists and threw it after the retreating guide. He was a good cricketer and his missile sped truly, hitting Walter on the left shoulder. With a cry he fell forward, rolling over several times before he stopped. The two friends leaped wildly down the mountain in pursuit, reaching him while he was still on the ground. Linton seized him with a grip that showed that he meant to give him no further chance of escape, when a groan broke from the guide's lips.

"Gently, Charlie," said Hardy, "you're hurting him; I'm afraid he's broken something. What's the matter, Walter?"

"My arm," replied the guide feebly; "I think it is broken."

Hardy knew something of surgery, so he examined the arm, and found it was broken below the elbow. It had become doubled up underneath him as he fell. Hardy tore up their handkerchiefs and bound the arm up after setting it as well as he could; a shirt from his knapsack was made into a tolerable sling, and when all had been done that could be done, they helped Walter back to the spring and lashed his shoulder and head, the one bruised by the stone, the other by the fall. He received their attentions without thanks, but without any objections.