

HIS HAIR WAS RED.

(Continued.)

So we set our faces westward and downward, and in due course of time reached the outskirts of the woods where we supposed that our companions would be.

I don't think we had been five minutes off the snow when I heard something crashing among the trees beneath us. I caught a momentary glimpse of a great, lumbering body, and directly afterwards I distinctly saw a half-grown cub dashing helter-skelter after it. I fired almost at random, and I need hardly add that I missed. The crashing sound grew fainter and fainter, and then I looked at Jean-Pierre and Jean-Pierre looked at me, and then we both whistled.

Well might we whistle! I prefer to draw a veil over our meeting with Percival, which speedily ensued. I could not say much. My behavior had certainly been bad enough to provoke anybody, and "d——d unsportsmanlike" was perhaps not too severe a description to give of it; still I don't think he would have been quite so infuriated had I not been compelled to acknowledge that I had not only robbed him of his share of the day's sport, but had previously been quite successful in securing my own. When he heard that his indignation knew no bounds. He swore the whole thing had been done on purpose; he vowed he would never go out with me again so long as he lived; he stamped and danced about, and I must say made a great fool of himself. I am quite sure that, if I had conducted myself after that fashion, everybody present would simply have roared with laughter; but none of us laughed at Percival. The fact is, that there was something rather terrible about the man, though I don't know that I could exactly say in what it consisted.

At length his fury spent itself, and we set off sadly and solemnly to return to the valley, Jean-Pierre and I hanging our heads like naughty boys, the rest of the Jeans and Pierres and Jean-Pierres slouching after us with somewhat scared faces, and Percival striding along by himself in deep dudgeon.

The day was not to end without another breeze. In the course of the afternoon it was suddenly discovered that we were out of every thing. There was no tea left, no bread, and not a drop of wine. Why these deficiencies had not been mentioned to us before we set out for Luchon, where we could easily have laid in a fresh stock of provisions, I don't know, but Jean said he thought Pierre had told us, and Pierre thought Jean had spoken, and Jean-Pierre had not considered it his business to interfere; and so there was a good all-round wrangle, in the midst of which Percival worked himself up into one of his paroxysms. All that was necessary was that one man should be sent down to Venasque, the nearest Spanish town, to get what we required; but this would not satisfy him. He declared that every one of them should go, and that they should walk all night, so as to be back before our breakfast hour in the morning.

"Allez-vous-en, the whole lot of you!" he shouted. "Entendez vous? —je veux être seul. Take yourselves off, you lazy, garlic-eating devils, and let's have a little peace for one night!"

The whole troop marched away without much protestation. I dare say they were not sorry to escape from this raving Englishman. Afterwards I wondered whether Percival had had a deliberate design in his mind when he dismissed them; but, looking back upon it all, I am inclined to think that he had not, and that what followed was the result of mere accident and opportunity.

He was quiet enough, though portentously gloomy, until the time came for us to partake of our evening meal. We had to collect the wood for our bonfire ourselves, and we had to cook our soup ourselves, and a nice mess we made of it. All this was sufficiently uncomfortable, and did not serve to improve my friend's temper; but the worst was to come.

Being without wine, we were obliged to fall back upon brandy-and-water for our drink, and I noticed, with some uneasiness, that Percival was making no use of the water at all. At last I rather foolishly ventured upon a gentle remonstrance, whereupon he promptly filled his glass with raw brandy, and tossed it off at a draught.

"You're a devilish hard fellow to please, Oliver, I must say," he remarked. "One would have thought you'd have been satisfied with spoiling my sport, and not wanted to spoil my dinner into the bargain. Deuce take it all, man, you don't suppose I'm going to let you tell me what I'm to drink, do you?"

The upshot of it was that by the time that we turned in he was anything but sober, though he was able to keep his legs and to talk without knocking his words together.

"Got your revolver?" he called out, just as I was dropping off to sleep. We thought it as well to have revolvers always handy, for we had heard no very good report of the sparse inhabitants of those valleys.

"Oh, yes; all right," I replied. "Good night." And I rolled over on my side.

But I had hardly closed my eyes before he disturbed me again by asking suddenly: "I say, Oliver, did you ever fight a duel?"

"Fight a duel?" I repeated, drowsily. "No, never; did you?"

"No," he answered in a cool, casual sort of tone; "but I don't see why I shouldn't fight one now. I think I will."

That woke me up. "What are you talking about?" I exclaimed.

"Who are you going to fight with here?"

"Why, with you, of course," said he. "I'm not afraid. Now, then—mind yourself." And without more ado he suited the action to the word.

A flash, a loud report, and the whistling of a bullet past my ear brought me to a realizing sense of the pleasant position that I was in. I was out of

that tent and behind the biggest rock that I could find before you could have said 'Knife!' My nimbleness astonished myself. Mercifully there was no moon, and the red glare of our camp fire only served to make the shadows blacker.

Percival blundered out after me, cursing and swearing. "Stand up, you skulking devil!" he roared. "Why don't you stand up and fight like a man?" And bang went another barrel.

"Now, this time," said he, with tipsy solemnity, "I'm going to take a careful aim and hit you. Oh, I see you, you beggar! don't you flatter yourself that you're invisible."

The worst of it was that I was by no means sure that he didn't see me. He advanced with slow, unsteady steps, and began prowling round my rock, while I, crouching upon all fours, dodged him by a succession of noiseless hops, like a hugh toad. Bang! bang! went two more barrels. "That makes four thinks I." Whether he saw me or not, I saw him plainly enough, and I had my own loaded revolver in my hand all the time. I don't think I ever felt more tempted to shoot a man in my life. Fortunately he let off his last two barrels before the temptation became too strong for me. One of the bullets passed over my head, and I heard the other strike the ground beside me. Then I rose erect, feeling myself master of the situation.

"Now, Percival," I said, "I could shoot you six times over, if I choose; but of course I shall do nothing of the kind. Go and lie down. You're very drunk, you know, and—"

"That's a lie!" he interrupted.

"Very well. Lie down and go to sleep, anyhow. Perhaps you'll have the grace to beg my pardon to-morrow morning."

He growled and blustered a good deal; but eventually he did return to the tent, and threw himself down. I then proceeded to take certain precautionary measures; after which I, too, stretched myself on the ground. But no sooner had I done so than up the brute jumped again.

"No good trying to sleep," he said; "Slow work sleeping. Let's have another duel. Where's the cartridges?"

"Every single cartridge that we possess is safe at the bottom of the stream," answered I, with a chuckle; for I had just had time to anticipate that danger. I cared very little for his cries and threats, knowing that, if the worst came to the worst, I had it in my power to disable him; and I suppose he was sober enough to understand that too, for he desisted after a time, and apparently went off to sleep at last. I don't think I was many minutes in following his example. I wonder now at my temerity; but the fact was I was so dead tired that it was as much as I could do to hold my eyes open until he began to snore; and, besides, I didn't see that he could do me any harm, now that I was possessed of the one effective firearm that remained to us.

That only shows what an ass I was. The next thing of which I was conscious was that Percival was standing over me in the grey light of the dawn with my revolver in his hand. "And now, Master Oliver," said he, "I think I've pretty well turned the tables upon you."

Indeed he had! I gave myself up for lost, and I hope I may never again feel as frightened as I did at that moment. But Percival burst out laughing.

"You stupid old fool!" he said quite amiably; "do you take me for a murderer? It was all a joke, my firing at you last night. I only wanted to scare you, and I was no more drunk than you are."

I didn't in the least believe him; but it seemed more polite to pretend to do so.

"Come along up the hills and see the sun rise," he went on. "A breath of fresh air will do us both good."

I demurred to this proposition, alleging, what was perfectly true, that I hadn't had half my fair share of sleep; but I added politely that I hoped he wouldn't let me prevent him from climbing to any height that he pleased.

"Confound you!" he exclaimed angrily. "I believe you're in a funk of me. Look here, then." He caught me by the arm, dragged me rather roughly out of the tent, and flinging my revolver into the torrent, "Will that satisfy you?" he asked.

It was a pretty cool way of disposing of my property; but then, to be sure, I had drowned his cartridges. The end of it was that I had to go with him. Anything for peace, I thought; and I reflected with comfort that the guides would be back in the course of a few hours, after which my final farewell to this red-haired ruffian should very soon be spoken.

Percival led the way across to the northern side of our narrow valley, and we were soon scrambling up over bowlders and slippery shale at a great pace, he whistling and singing, apparently in the highest spirits, and I silent, sulky, and out of breath. From time to time I suggested that we had mounted high enough; but he always replied briskly, "Oh, dear, no! we shall have to do another five hundred feet at least before we can get anything of a view, and there's heaps of time." And then he went on sniggering to himself, as though at some first-rate joke.

It was horribly unpleasant. I was beginning to have a very strong suspicion that the man was off his head. Drunk he was not; for he never made a false step, and we had already passed some places which demanded a steady head; but his manner was decidedly odd, and, when he turned to speak to me, I saw a light in his eyes which I didn't like. I suppose it must have taken us the best part of two hours to reach the edge of the glacier, which sloped upwards towards the summit of the ridge that separated us from Franco. By that time the sun had caught the higher peaks and the fleecy clouds around and below them; and I dare say the spectacle was a very exquisite one. Some people, I know, go into raptures over a sunrise; but I am not one of those people. I always loathe everything until I have had my breakfast; and the circumstances of this particular occasion were such that the snow and the sky might have clothed themselves in all the