

Choice Literature.

UNDER THE SNOW.

CHAPTER IV.

The two men had been digging for an hour, yet it seemed as if they made no impression on the enormous mass of snow at which they laboured.

When it became known that the count had gone up to the chalets some lads who had come down with the cattle followed him, and there were soon almost a dozen at work with picks and shovels, but the snow was so hard and deep that it seemed as if they might go on for hours. They had pushed Andre's mother aside when she asked to help them, but Monsieur von Erlach took a spade and worked with a will.

Now and then Elisa walked up and down below them, but the chalets had stood on the exposed side of the mountain, and the snowfall, after overwhelming them, had drifted down on one side, so that only a small space of path was left, thinly covered. Lately she had stood still, muffled in her shawl, watching the diggers.

All at once she moved to the left where the snow lay thickly heaped, and when Monsieur von Erlach looked up she had passed out of sight. He thought she had gone down to the lower chalets, to which he had already sent a lad to make all ready to receive those they hoped to rescue. The sun was gaining power over the snow on this side, and as Elisa plunged resolutely into it she sank to her knees. She tried to go on, but this seemed impossible. She felt rooted in the snow. At last, with much effort and long pauses between each step, she struggled forward. As she advanced her footing became firmer, for she had circled round the vast mound, and on this side the snow had not melted. She had quite lost sight of the diggers, and, crouching down, she listened. Then a wailing cry sounded over the snow,—

"Andre, Andre, I am here."

The terrible cry startled the diggers; they looked around them in alarm; the count with some help climbed up to the top of the mound.

He saw Andre's mother lying crouched on the top of the snow.

"What is it?" he cried, too much astonished to realize the courage and daring which had enabled her to reach the spot where she lay.

"They are here, monsieur," she said, her eyes glistening with hope. "The men waste their labour on that side; the chalet is here, and some one still lives there under the snow."

Monsieur von Erlach climbed down till he reached her. "You must not stay here," he said. "You will perish in the snow, and you can do no good."

She gave him a look which puzzled him. She was wondering how it could be possible that Andre yet lived, if mere contact with the snow was so harmful.

"Listen!" she held up her hand and bent her head. Truly it seemed as if there was a far-off, muffled cry. Monsieur von Erlach still held the shovel with which he had been working, and with a loud shout he tried to thrust it down in the direction of the sound.

Presently he raised his head with a look of relief.

"The snow is hard below," he said, "but I believe it is only snow, the rock has not fallen."

"No, sir," Elisa rose up and pointed overhead; "you can see that from here. Except for the snow the mountain has not changed."

And as he followed the direction of her finger he saw that she was right. The place where they stood was so altered in aspect that no one would have recognized it. The winding path which had curved outside the flank of the mountain had disappeared with the chalets of the herdsmen; a new projecting spur in the shape of an enormous snow-hill had taken their place barring all upward progress, and on one side it spread downward, but above, except that it was white with snow, the mountain was unchanged.

"You must come with me," the count said imperatively. "I will bring the men here, but you must come away—come, do you hear me?"

She was stooping down. Now she cried out again, in a wail that sounded strangely sad,—

"Andre, Andre, I am here."

While she bent down listening for an answer, she was firmly drawn away, carried off her feet and set down again, where the snow lay only a few inches deep on the ground.

Then as the count told his news to the men there rose a hearty shout; they were soon digging rapidly on the spot where Elisa had crouched.

She stood waiting; she had done what she could, but it seemed terrible that while her darling lay, perhaps dying, she could do nothing. Since that day, when she had fallen insensible at the foot of the snow mountain, where her husband had perished, she had rarely shed tears; something had congealed them. Now she could only stand praying that her boy might yet live—her loving Andre. No one but she knew how good and tender, how self-denying he had been.

Clouds had risen and now they reached the sun and obscured his light, and an icy wind swept round Elisa, but she did not even shiver; she could only think of her boy.

The digging went on silently; it seemed to her the men were digging a grave. How far off it was since her boy had come down to her, and she had seen his hopes and how he strove against them for fear of grieving her!

Oh, how good and loving her Andre had ever been to her! He had never wilfully given her an hour of sorrow, and she—what had she done? Because she had yielded to her fear, she had given him a constant secret grief, she had checked the flow of his confidence in her, and she had taught him that his mother exacted the sacrifice of his dearest wish, while in words she lived only for his happiness.

And now perhaps the end had come. She could not be

sure that the cry she had heard was Andre's, and presently the men might bring out from under the snow—. The thought shaped itself with terrible reality; the hard pain at her heart tightened, and then a burst of tears came. How blind she had been, she was able to see it now. What was the use of faith and trust if she did not think his Father in heaven could better care for Andre than she could? She stood silent after this; she gave up even her longing to help; she tried to accept that she must yield up her own will, and when the count called out to her to move about, or go down to the chalets or she would get frozen by the wind, she began to hurry backwards and forwards along the narrow ledge on which she stood.

Time was slipping by quickly, yet it seemed to her slow-footed. The snow had made all below look monotonous, but as Elisa turned she saw on the white expanse dark objects in movement. Soon she made them out to be a body of men climbing up the road by which she had come.

"Monsieur, Monsieur le Comte," she cried loudly, "there is help coming to you."

It was, in truth, the party of soldiers for whose help Monsieur von Erlach had sent to ask, and behind them came Hans Christen. He had evidently been schooling them as to the manner in which they were to proceed; but when Monsieur von Erlach came forward, Hans stopped short.

"I am glad to see you, Christen," the count said. "You must take care of this poor woman, she is cold and weary with watching."

Her old friend had not seen her. Now he pulled off his spectacles, and blew his nose; and then he frowned at her severely.

"You have given us all a nice fright, Elisa Engemann," he said sternly. "Who would have thought a woman arrived at your years would run away from home? You made me feel like a fool when I found your cottage empty."

A wan smile came over her face.

"I could not help it, neighbour, I was wanted here," she said quietly, and then she turned back to the snow.

Christen caught her by the shoulder.

"You must come away with me," he said. "Did you not hear the count say so just now? What will you be fit for by the time Andre is found?"

Her eyes brimmed over at his words.

"God bless you, old friend," she sobbed. "I will go with you by and by."

Christen turned away his head; secretly he was as unwilling to leave the place as she was. He tried to get round behind the diggers; but he found the snow too deep, and on this side it seemed to him not hard enough to climb over unaided, although since the sun had disappeared it had been freezing.

It grew colder and colder.

After half-an-hour's waiting, Christen went up to Andre's mother.

"Come, neighbour," he said, "let us go down and see that all is ready against he is found."

She followed him in silence; turning her head as she went she felt that part of her lay under the snow.

Elisa turned away from the blazing fire, beside which Christen sat lecturing the lad who had been sent to kindle it. She had seen that all was ready, and now she sat down near the window; her body felt heavy and inert, but she was not sleepy; her faculties were awake and strained in the effort of listening.

More than once she had gone outside the hut, but now she had come in again—waiting—waiting. Yes, it was true what Christen had said to her: when Andre came his mother must be there to meet him.

What was that sound? This time surely it was not as Christen had said just now—the wind murmuring in the chimney. The sound came again, a dull, soft tread, and a murmur of voices—nearer now—nearer still. Elisa looked round; her companions did not hear; the boy stood listening to Christen's talk.

She could not move; the terrible dread kept her still. Now the dull tread grew more distinct, but still Christen went on talking.

Which was real, the woman asked herself, the man talking there by the fire, or the soft, dull sound on the snow path? Was it, after all, her fancy that had heard it?

All at once the sound ceased, and then the spell that kept Elisa still broke. She rose up and opened the door. Outside was Monsieur von Erlach.

"They are bringing them," he said, in a hushed voice. Then he stood aside and the soldiers passed him, carrying their burdens into the hut.

The snow still lies on the lower mountains, but it will be there till spring sunshine comes to melt it, for winter is everywhere; the trees are leafless, except on the pine-clothed ridge behind the village, and though the water of the lake is not frozen over, the river beyond it is a long stretch of ice.

It is evening now, and red light gleams here and there from a chalet; but generally the heavy outside shutters are closed, and these keep in the firelight and glow. Elisa has just shut the door that leads into the balcony, and she goes back into the room where Andre is lying on a sheepskin in front of the fire. The room looks warm in the dim, ruddy light, and the soup-pot over the fire sends out an appetizing smell.

"Shall I light the lamp?" his mother says to Andre. "You will spoil your sight, my boy, if you read by fire-light."

Andre catches at her skirt as she goes to light the lamp. "Not yet, little mother," he says; "sit down and be idle a while; it is good for you to have a change and help me to be idle. I am to begin work to-morrow. Hans Christen says so."

She sits down, and then he rises and kneeling beside her leans his head on her bosom.

"Mother dear," he says softly, "I want to tell you something."

She smiles fondly at him. Ever since the day when she

was allowed to bring Andre home exhausted, but alive, it had seemed to Elisa as if life were too full of blessing. She does not talk much to her boy, but her eyes rest on him with loving contented glances.

He has been some weeks in recovering from his burial under the snow; his poor little comrade was dead, but now Andre is as strong as ever; his godfather, Hans Christen, has offered to teach him his trade.

"Mother," says Andre, "did you guess that I was keeping a secret from you?" Elisa's heart gives a big throb, and the lad feels it as he leans against her; for a moment the struggle goes on in her heart, for she knows that she has long ago guessed Andre's secret; and then there comes vividly before her the huge snow hill across the lake, and the lesson she learned as she walked to and fro on the ledge below.

"You will tell me your secret now," she says timidly; for as she looks at him she feels puzzled, there is such a gleam of mirth in his eyes.

Andre puts both arms round her.

"Darling mother," he says, "you must not be hard on me, I was very childish then, I thought only of myself. I know it was not kind. I used to want to grow up so fast to be a strong man like father, that I might guide travellers across the glaciers."

He felt her tremble, but she kept her face still. He clasped her still closer, and kissed her.

"Mother, dear," he went on, "that is all over now. I told you that while I was lying there under the snow it seemed like years. I went on thinking and thinking more than I ever thought before, and then all at once I left off thinking about myself and poor little Heinrich, and I thought of you instead. 'This grief will kill her,' I said. 'Precious little mother! she has suffered so sadly; she cannot stand this.' And then presently I began to see how the mountain life I wanted would have been just as bad a trial to her as this one—what do I say?—it would have been worse! for it would have given her the anguish again and again. Mother," he rose up and took both her hands in his, "I knew then for a certainty I could not be happy while you were sad, and I wondered how it was I had been so dull; it all came so clear"—he paused an instant; then he broke into a merry laugh. "You will have me to plague you always now. I mean to be a better carpenter than there is even in Dort before I'm as old as neighbour Hans."

Andre's mother strained her boy to her heart, as though she would make him grow there, and he felt her hot tears on his neck.

THE END.

WANTED, A READING PUBLIC.

This is what the publishers say is needed—that is, serious readers, those who care enough about books to buy them, own them and really possess themselves of their contents. This is what the writers say is needed—the writers who are becoming almost more numerous than the readers. Nearly every body writes for publication; it is impossible to provide vehicles enough for their contributions, and the reading public to sustain periodicals does not increase in proportion. Every body agrees that this is the most intelligent, active-minded age that ever was, and in its way the most prolific and productive age. Is there a glut and overproduction in the literary world as well as in other departments? Isn't it an odd outcome of diffused education and of cheap publications, the decline in the habit of continuous serious reading? We have heard a great deal, since Lord Brougham's time and the societies for the diffusion of knowledge, of the desirability of cheap literature for the masses. The Congressmen place cheapness above honesty in their sincere desire to raise the tone of the American people. There is no product that men use which is now so cheap as newspapers, periodicals and books. For the price of a box of strawberries or a banana, you can buy the immortal work of the greatest genius of all time in fiction, poetry, philosophy or science. But we doubt if the class that were to be specially benefited by this reduction in price of intellectual food are much profited. Of course some avail themselves of things placed within their reach which they could not own formerly, but it remains true that people value and profit only by that which it costs some effort to obtain. We very much doubt if the mass of the people have as good habits of reading as they had when publications were dearer. Who is it who buys the five, ten and twenty cent editions? Generally those who could afford to buy, and did buy, books at a fair price, to the remuneration of author and publisher. And their serious reading habit has gone down with the price. We have an increasing leisure class. When does it read? Not much in the winter, for the demands of society are too exigent then. For private reading there is no time, and a short-cut to information is sought by means of drawing-room lectures and clubs, which are supposed to give to social life, without interfering with it, a lacquer of culture. In summer it is impossible to read much; what is called the mind needs rest by that time, and the distractions of outdoor life in the mountains and by the sea forbid anything but the most desultory skimming of the very lightest products of the press. To be sure, the angel of the Atlantic Ocean sees a row of pretty girls on the coast, seated on rocks or on the sand, from Campobello to Cape May, with novels in their hands—one of the most pleasing imitations of intellectual life ever presented in the world. It is perfect when there is breeze enough to turn over the leaves. And the young men—those who are in business, or who are supposed to be getting a more or less "conditional" education—do they read as much as the young ladies? It is a curious comment on the decay of the reading habit in households, the blank literary condition of the young men who come up to the high schools and colleges. Is it owing entirely to the modern specialization of knowledge that they usually have read little except their text-books?

Now we are not trying to defend the necessity of reading. They say that people got on in the Middle Ages very well without much of it, and that the women then were as