

"You have already given me your strange ideas on this subject, and I tell you, you are nothing but a most fearful pantheist, attributing life and sentiment to these inanimate rocks and icy peaks, and clothing them with our human passions."

"I have grown up among the Scotch mountains," replied MacNey with excitement, "and I have had to struggle all my youth in the solitude of their high peaks. They never liked me. Man is odious to Nature, she defends herself against his encroachments. The struggle is ever renewed between these two powers. The forest takes vengeance on us, the brambles tear our faces, the trees dread the wood-cutter as their murderer. The snow-clad peaks await us with treacherous crevasse and slippery rock. How many times have I returned from our mountains with torn clothes and bleeding feet! But in spite of that I have crossed the wildest steppes of heather, my eye has discovered places till then unknown, the mountain had no more secrets from me, no more unexplored paths; I knew it, and had become its master!"

"You will have a good deal to do if you intend to know our Swiss Alps as thoroughly," said I to my Scotchman.

"Yes! They also resent man's domination. Three times have I started on the Bernina ascension, three times was I obliged to give it up; the fourth time I succeeded, but one of my guides was left behind in a crevasse. To-morrow I shall explore the glaciers around here; the mountain need hide itself in vain in the fog; if we have to cut each step in the ice, I will place my foot on its virgin summit! Mountain, I will be thy master!" added the young fool, brandishing his stick as he spoke.

Our guide made the sign of the cross.

"May the Holy Virgin protect us," he murmured in a low voice, "what's the use of blaspheming!"

"No later than to-morrow evening will I come back to Pontresina with a *rabiosa* in my button-hole!" continued MacNey.

This time the guide grew pale.

"Don't say that, sir, don't joke about the *rabiosa*, it is sure to bring us bad luck."

"What's that you say, fellow?" I asked him.

"It is a flower that grows on the heights," interrupted MacNey, with a laugh; "a legend of the country says that it belongs to the Genius of the

Mountain, and that whoever touches it, is immediately struck dead. There is not much danger of that, for you scarcely ever see this famous flower. I would be inclined to believe that it was only a myth, invented by the imaginative mountaineers, if I had not seen it with my own eyes."

"You saw it?" exclaimed Hans.

"And even picked it! which does not prevent me being here at your side in flesh and blood, and one of the steadiest of limb."

MacNey described to me this famous flower, which I thought must be the *Altica rubra* already described by Linnæus, a difficult flower to find, as, like the edelweiss, it frequents the high peaks and borders of precipices.

Our guide walked beside us in silence, but he seemed disturbed and anxious.

"As for me, I have only seen the *rabiosa* twice," he said, when Herbert had finished speaking, "and both times it was in the hands of a corpse. Some poor chamois hunters, attracted by its brilliancy, had gathered this flower of blood-red colour, and paid for it with their lives."

MacNey's brow clouded over:

"Listen," he said, in a more serious voice, "I must confess to you, that the day on which I picked the *Altica rubra*, as you call it, something strange happened to me. I wonder if this flower really brought me ill-luck?"

"Last year I was hunting chamois with some friends. It was the first time that I had explored the Engadine, and I made excursions on all sides from Pontresina, which I had chosen as head-quarters. Well, one day we had just crossed a glacier and were climbing a steep hill. The August sun beat down upon us from a cloudless sky. To the right and left were fields of dazzling snow. Before us, looking as if it defied our efforts, the head of the mountain lifted itself into the intense blue."

"My eyes were bloodshot, and I was beginning to suffer from the glare, when my attention was attracted by something which looked like a black spot, at the foot of a rocky wall. I left my companions, and, as you know I am very fond of botany, directed my steps towards the rocks, feeling sure that there, in that thin layer of mould, free of snow, I should find some one of those flowers of the heights, which are born, blossom and die, within a week or two. I was not mistaken."