

"Ah! that's true, that's true. But suppose, now, you had fallen off—what, then?"

"I should then have sent for a surgeon."

"Yes! one who would have crept down on all fours to you. Probably the surgeons of Antiparos are extra skilful. But suppose you had broken your neck—what then? Oh, what an abyss!"

Willwitz smiled. "The danger was, nevertheless, greater coming back than it was going. One had to be cautious, indeed! More than once, I slipped upon the smooth, rock-floor; and that where it was most perilous. And yet all this was nothing in comparison with what happened to us while we were on the ladder. You remember about the ladder which we set up against the perpendicular rock. It was here that—"

The Baron had a new attack of vertigo. With lips pressed close together, and holding his breath, he shrank back like one about to jump down from a great height.

"Here, to my great horror, one of the rounds broke, and what was worse, when I had not got a firm hold upon the upper one."

"O God!" screamed out the Baron, while he seized his friend convulsively by the arm, as if to prevent him from falling.

Willwitz smiled, and then added, "I am above ground, my friend."

The Baron sprang up in a way that made the glasses dance, and in his joy almost knocked over the table.

"Are you, are you really, above ground—again on the firm ground? Now God be thanked! (warmly embracing him.) O, always stay above ground. The deuce take all subterranean pits! Stay here, friend. Keep above ground!"

"Your joy makes you quite loveable in my eyes."

"Yes, by heaven, Baron, I love you—I love you like my own life. And do you know that out of pure friendship I feel quite angry with you, because you went into that accursed grotto—a hole where there was everything to be lost, and nothing gained. What devil put it into your head?"

"Curiosity! Baron, curiosity! We live in the world in order that we may look about us!"

"But not at the cost of *danger*. Otherwise, look about you as much as you please."

"Still, it gives one consideration, and argues a brave spirit. What's the need of talking! In fine, one gratifies his curiosity, goes down, sees the grotto for a few moments, and then—"

"Breaks his neck! and that's the end of it!"

"So then, Baron, if you had been with me, you would hardly have left me to my fate?"

"I leave you? I'd have pulled you up by the hair." He stood up, and gave him his hand.

"Yes, by heaven! Willwitz, if I had had to have a fight with you to do it, I would have pulled you out by the hair."

"Indeed! then you make me feel ashamed that I let you show towards me more true friendship than I have exhibited towards you. You said you had a weak head, did you not?"

"That's a fact, Baron. What of it?"

"You have turns of vertigo?"

"Now and then. They remind me of my youthful indiscretions."

"Well and good. You said, even if I had to have a fight with you, Baron." He got up—a step backward—and—the "*Système de la Nature*" lay in the fire!

The Baron was so astonished that he lost, for a moment, his presence of mind. At last, he made a snatch into the flame—but it was too late, the book was already half consumed.

"Sir!" he exclaimed, after a short silence, and with great indignation, "did a good spirit, or did the devil impel you to this?"

"The spirit of friendship, Baron, is a good spirit. Just now, you showed yourself anxious for my preservation. It is my duty to be equally so for yours."

"But what do you mean? You, in that cursed grotto, might have broken your neck—while I—"

"Something far worse than that might have happened to *you*. You might have learned to doubt in God and Providence; and to take from a virtue, which at the best is weak, all power of constancy, you might have lost all ground for comfort in time of misfortune and death; in short, all which is of most worth and moment to a rational and perishable creature like man. All this, Baron, I call worse than breaking one's neck."

"You are raving! I lose all this?"

"You *might*. You have complained of your weak head, and of occasional dizziness. Let me tell you that for such a head as that, the '*Système de la Nature*' is not intended. It requires firm nerves, and an unflinching gaze into the depths. He who has not these, will not be likely to come back. There is great similarity between the two cases, Baron. In my grotto there was nothing, as you have remarked, to be gained, and everything to be lost. So, in the speculations of this book, there is for *you* nothing to be gained, and everything to be lost; and so, too, to carry on further the comparison, you think no physician would