THE PROFESSOR'S ADVENTURE.

Between eight and ten years ago, I engaged in a long vacation campaign among the Alps of Savoy. I was alone. My object was not amusement but study. I occupy a Professor's Chair, and I was engaged in the collection of materials for a work on the Flora of the higher Alps; and, to this end, travelled chiefly on foot. My route lay far from the beaten paths and passes. I often journeyed for days through regions were there were neither inns or villages. I often wandered from dawn till dusk, among sterile steeps unknown even to the herdsmen of the upper pasturages, and untrodden save by the chamois and the hunter. I thought myself fortunate, at those times, it, towards evening, I succeeded in steering my way down to the nearest châlet, were, in company with a half-savage mountaineer and a herd of milch goats, I might find the shelter of a raftered roof, and a supper of black bread and whey.

On one particular evening I had gone further than usual, in pursuit of the Senecio uniflоris: a rare plant which I had hitherto believed indigenous to the southern valleys of Monte Rosa, but of which I here succeeded in finding one or two indifferent specimens. It was a wild and barren district, difficult to distinguish with any degree of precision on the map; but lying among the upper defiles of the Val de Bagnes, between the Mount Pleureur and the Grand Combin. On the waste of rock-strewn moss to which I had climed, there was no sign of human habitation. Above me lay the great ice-fields of Corbassière, surmounted by the silver summits of the Graffenière and Combin. To my left, the sun was going down rapidly behind a forest of smaller peaks, the highest of which, as well as I could judge from Osterwald's map, was the Mont Blanc de Cheilon. In ten minutes more, those peaks would be crimson; in one short half hour, it would be night.

To be benighted on an Alpine plateau towards the latter end of September is not a desirable position. I knew it by recent experience, and had no wish to repeat the experiment. I therefore began retracing my route as rapidly as I could, descending in a north-westerly direction, and keeping a sharp look-out for any châlet that might offer a shelter for the night. Pushing forward thus, I found myself presently at the head of a little verdant ravine, channelled, as it were, in the face of the plateau. I hesitated. It seemed, through the gathering darkness, as if I could discern vague traces of a path trampled here and there in the deep grass. It also seemed as if the ravine trended down towards the upper pastures which were my destination. By following it I could scarcely go wrong. Were there is grass, there are generally cattle and a châlet; and I might possibly find a nearer resting place than I had anticipated. At all events, I resolved to try it.

The ravine proved shorter than I had expected, and instead of leading immediately downward, opened upon a second plateau, through which a well-worn footway struck off abruptly to the left. Pursuing this footway with what speed I might, I came, in the course of a few more minutes, to a sudden slope, at the bottom of which, in a basin almost surrounded by gigantic limestone cliffs, lay a small dark lake, a few fields, and a châlet. The rose-tints had by this time come and gone, and the snow had put on that ghostly grey which precedes the dark. Before I could descend the slope, skirt the lake, and mount the little eminence on which the house stood, sheltered by its background of rocks, it was already night, and the stars were in the sky.

I went up to the door, and knocked; no one answered. I opened the door; all was dark. I paused—held my breath—listened—fancied I could distinguish a low sound, as of some one breathing. I knocked again. My second knock was followed by a quick noise, like the pushing back of a chair, and man's voice said hoarsely:

'Who is there?'

'A traveller,' I replied, 'seeking shelter for the night.'

A heavy footstep crossed the floor, a sharp flash shot through the darkness, and I saw by the flickering of tinder, a man's face bending over a lantern. Having lighted it, he said, with scarce a glance towards the door, 'Enter, traveller,' and went back to his stool beside the empty earth.

I entered. The châlet was of a better sort than those usually found at so great an altitude, consisting of a dairy and houseplace, with a loft overhead. A table with three or four wooden stools occupied the centre of the room. The rafters were hung with bunches of dried herbs, and long strings of Indian corn. A clock ticked in a corner; a kind of rude pallet upon trestles stood in a recess beside the fireplace; and through a lattice, at the furthest end, I could hear the cows feeding in the outhouse beyond.

Somewhat perplexed by the manner of my reception, I unstrapped my knapsack and specimen-box, took possession of the nearest stool, and asked if I could have supper?

My host looked up, with the air of a man intent on other things. I repeated the inquiry.

'Yes,' he said, wearily; 'you can eat, traveller.'

With this, he crossed to the other side of the hearth, stooped over a dark object which until now I had not observed, crouched in the corner, and uttered a word or two of unintelligible patois. The object moaned; lifted up a white bewildered woman's face; and rose slowly from the floor. The herdsman pointed to the table, and went back to his stool and his former attitude. The woman, after pausing helpless, as if in the effort to remember something, went out into the dairy, came back with a brown loaf and a pan of milk, and set them before me on the table.

As long as I live, I shall never forget the expression of that woman's face. She was young, and very pretty; but her beauty seemed turned to stone. Every feature bore the seal of an unspeakable terror. Every gesture was mechanical. In the lines that furrowed her brow, there was a haggardness more terrible than the haggardness of age. In the locking of her lips, there was an anguish beyond the utterance of words. Though she served me, I do not think she saw me. There was no recognition in her eyes; no apparent consciousness of any object or circumstance external to the secret of her own despair. All this, I noticed during the brief moments in which she brought me my supper. That done, she crept away, abjectly, into the same dark corner, and sank down again: a mere huddled heap of clothing.

As for her husband, there was something unnatural in the singular immobility of his attitude. There he sat, his body bent forward, his chin resting on his palms, his eyes staring fixedly at the blackened hearth, and not even the involuntary quiver of a nerve to show that he lived and breathed. I could not determine his age, analyse and observe his features as I might. He looked old enough to be fifty, and young enough to be forty; and was a fine muscular mountaineer, with that grave cast of countenance which is peculiar to the Valaisan peasant.

I could not eat. The keenness of my mountain appetite was gone. I sat, as if facinated in the presence of this strange pair; observing both, and, apparently, by both as much forgotten as if I had never crossed their threshold. We remained thus, by the dim light of the lantern and the monotonous ticking of the clock, for some forty minutes or more: all profoundly silent. Sometimes the woman stirred, as if in pain; sometimes the cows struck their horn against the manger in the outhouse. The herdsman alone sat motionless, like a man cast in bronze. At length the clock struck nine. I had by this time become so nervous that I almost dreaded to hear my own voice interrupt the silence. However, I pushed my plate noisily aside, and said, with as much show of ease as I could muster:

'Have you any place, friend, in which I can sleep to-night?'

He shifted his position uneasily, and without looking round, replied in the same form of words as before:

'Yes; you can sleep, traveller.'

'Where? In the loft above?'

He nodded affirmatively, took the lantern from the table, and turned towards the dairy. As we passed, the light streamed for a moment over the crouching figure in the corner.

'Is your wife ill?' I asked, pausing and looking back.

His eyes met mine for the first time, and a shudder passed over his body.

'Yes,' he said, with an effort. 'She is ill.'

I was about to ask what ailed her, but something in his face arrested the question on my lips. I know not to this hour what that something was. I could not define it; I cannot describe it now; but I hope I may never see it in a living face again.

I followed him to the foot of a ladder at the further end of the dairy.

'Up there,' he said; placed the lantern in my hand and strode heavily back into the darkness.

I went up, and found myself in a long low granary, stored with corn sacks, hay, onions, rock-salt, cheeses, and farming implements.—In one corner, were the usual luxuries of a mattress, a rug, and a three-legged stool.—My first care was to make a systematic inspection of the loft and all that it contained; my next, to open a little unglazed lattice with a sliding shutter, just opposite my bed. The night was brilliant, and a stream of fresh air and moonlight poured in. Oppressed by a strange undefined sense of trouble, I extinguished the lantern, and stood looking out upon the solemn peaks and glaciers. Their solitude seemed to me more than usually awful; their silence more than usually profund. I could not help associating them, in some vague way, with the mystery in the house. I perplexed myself with all kinds of wild conjectures as to what the nature of that mystery might be. The woman's face haunted me like an evil dream. Again and again I went from the lattice to the ladder, and from the ladder back to the lattice, vainly listening for any sound in the rooms below. A long time went by thus, until at length, overpowered by the fatigue of the day, I stretched myself on the mattrass, took my knapsack for a pillow, and fell fast asleep.

I can guess neither how long my sleep lasted, nor from what cause I awoke. I only know that my sleep was dreamless and profound; and that I started from it suddenly, unaccountably, trembling in every nerve, and possessed by an overwhelming sense of danger.

Danger! Danger of what kind? From whom? From whence? I looked round—I was alone, and the quiet moon was shining in as serenely as when I fell asleep. I listened—all was as still as when I fell asleep. I got up, walked to and fro, reasoned with myself, all in vain. I could not stay the beatings of my heart. I could not master the horror that oppressed my brain. I felt that I dared not lie down again; that I must get out of the house somehow, and at once; that to stay would be death; that the instinct by which I was governed must at all costs be obeyed.

I could not bear it. Resolved to escape, or, at all events, to sell life dearly, I strapped on my knapsack, armed myself with my iron-headed alpenstock, took my large clast-knife between my teeth, and began cautiously and noiselessly, to descend the ladder. When I was about half way down, the alpenstock, which I had been keeping studiously clear of the ladder, encountered some dairy vessel, and sent it, clattering, to the ground. Caution after this, was useless. I sprang forward, reached the outer room at a bound, and found it, to my amazement, deserted, with the door wide open and the moonlight streaming in.—Suspecting a trap, my first impulse was to stand still, with my back against the wall, prepared for a desperate defence. All was silent. I could only hear the ticking of the clock, and the heavy beating of my own heart. The pallat was empty. The bread and milk were still standing where I had left them on the table. The herdsman's tools occupied the same spot by the desolate hearth. But he and his wife were gone—gone in the dead of night—leaving me, a stranger in the sole occupation of their home.

While I was yet irresolute whether to go or stay, and while I was yet wondering at the strangeness of my position, I heard, or fancied I heard, something—something that might have been the wind, save that there was no air stirring—something that might have been the wailing of a human voice. I held my breath—heard it again—followed it, as it died away.... I had not far to go. A line of light gleaming under the door of a shed at the back of the chalet, and a cry bitterer and more piercing than any I had yet heard, guided me direct to the spot.

I looked in—recoiled, giddy with horror—went back, as if fascinated: and so stood for some moments, unable to move, to think, to do anything but stare helplesly upon the scene before me. To this day, I cannot recall it without something of the same sickening sensation.

Inside the hut, by the light of a pine-torch thrust into an iron sconce against the wall; I saw the herdsman kneeling by the body of his wife; grieving over her like another Othello; kissing her white lips, wiping blood-stains from her yellow hair, raving out inarticulate cries of passionate remorse, and calling down all the curses of Heaven upon his own head, and that of some other man who had brought this crime upon him! I understood it all now—all the mystery, all the terror, all the despair. She had sinned against him, and he had slain her. She was quite dead. The very knife, with its hideous testimony fresh upon the blade, lay near the door

I turned and fled—blindly, wildly, like a man with blood-hounds on his track; now, stumbling over stones; now, torn by briars; now, pausing a moment to take breath; now, rushing forward faster than before; now, battling up-hill with straining lungs and trembling limbs; now, staggering across a level space; now, making for the higher ground again, and casting never a glance behind! At length I reached a bare plateau above the line of vegetation, where I dropped exhausted. Here I lay for a long time, beaten and stupified, until the intense cold of approaching dawn forced upon me the necessity of action. I rose, and looked round on a scene no feature of which was familiar to me. The very snow-peaks, though I knew they must be the same, looked unlike the peaks of yesterday. The very glaciers, seen from a different point of view, assumed new forms, as if on purpose to baffle me. Thus perplexed, I had no resource but to climb the nearest height from which it was probable that a general view might be obtained. I did so, just as the last belt of purple mist turned golden in the east, and the sun rose.

A superb panorama lay stretched before me, peak beyond peak, glacier beyond glacier, valley and pine forest and pasture slope, all flushed and palpitating in the crimson vapours of the dawn. Here and there, I could trace the foam of a waterfall, or the silver thread of a torrent; here and there, the canopy of faint blue smoke that wavered upward from some hamlet among the hills. Suddenly my eyes fell upon a little lake—a sullen pool—lying in the shade of an amphitheatre of rocks some eight hundred feet below. Until that moment, the night and its terrors appeared to have passed away like a wicked vision; but now the very sky seemed darkened above me. Yes—there it all lay at my feet. Yonder was the path by which I had decended from the plateau, and, lower still, the accursed chalet, with its background of rugged cliff and over-hanging precipice. Well might they lie in shadow! Well might the sunlight refuse to touch the ripples of that lake with gold, and to light up the windows of that house with an illumination direct from heaven!

Thus standing, thus looking down, I became aware of a strange sound—a sound singularly distinct, but far away—a sound sharper and hollower than the fall of an avalanche, and unlike anything that I remembered to have heard. While I was yet asking myself what it could be, or whence it came, I saw a considerable fragment of rock detatch itself from one of the heights overhanging the lake, bound rapidly from ledge to ledge, and fall, wit a heavy plash, into the water below. It was followed by a cloud of dust and prolonged reverberation, like the rolling of distant thunder. Next moment, a dark fissure sprang into sight all down the face of the precipice—the fissure became a chasm—the whole cliff wavered before my eyes—wavered, parted, sent up a cataract of earth and stones—and slid slowly, down, down, down into the valley.

Deafened by the crash, and blinded by the dust, I covered my face with my hands, and anticipated instant destruction. The echoes, however, died away, and were succeeded by solemn silence. The plateau on which I stood, remained firm and unshaken. I looked up. The sun was shining as serenely, the landscape sleeping as peacefully, as before. Nothing was changed, save that a wide white scar now defaced the one side of the great limestone basin below, and a ghastly mound of ruin filled the valley at its foot. Beneath that mountain lay buried all record of the crime to which I had been an unwilling witness. The very mountains had come down and covered it—nature had obliterated it from the face of the Alpine solitude. Lake and chalet, victim and executioner, had disappeared for over, and the place thereof knew them no more.

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Tom Moore Nobody.—In 'Lady Morgan's Memoirs' we thus read:—'From her early childhood her path had been beset by lovers of every quality and degree. First amongst these was that wayward boy of promise, the vain and selfish poet, Thomas Dermody. 'Who,' writes this young minstrel to Miss Owenson's father, in 1801, 'who is the Mr. *Moore* Sydney mentions? He is nobody here, I assure you, of eminence.' Sydney (Sydney Owenson, subsequently Lady Morgan) seems to have reproached him for the small account he made of Moore; for in the same letter, he writes:—'You are mistaken if you imagine I have not the highest respect for your friend Moore.' There is an after-mention of Moore, when she is married and living in London:—'I had a little dinner got up in a hurry for Moore yesterday. It was got up thus:—I threw up my windows and asked the inmates of the cabs and carriages of my friends as they passed the windows, and sent out some penny posters, and lighted up my rooms. Moore was absolutely astounded when he saw my party! He sang some of his most beautiful songs in his most delightful manner, without stopping; some of them twice over, and all of them as if every word was applicable to the people around him. Many of his old friends were around him. I said 'If you stay a day or two longer, I'll do better this this.' 'No, no,' he said; 'never again can such a thing be done. This is one of the few happy accidents which occur rarely; besides I don't want to efface the impression even by something better.' I never saw him more natural or agreeable. He praised Murray to the skies, and said he was princely in his conduct to authors. Moore disliked me in my youth; he told me at Florence that he thought Byron did not wish to know *me*, and *did* wish to know Morgan.'

Tanic Acid in Tea.—Tannic acid, or tannin is a peculiar acid, which is found principally in every species of oak, especially in the bark, and in gall nuts. It derives its name from its property of combining with the skins of animals, and converting them into leather, or tanning them. It is found in tea, and Dr. Lankester thus speaks of its effects: 'Tea must contain a very considerable quantity at least two or three grains, of this substance in every cup of the first brewing. It cannot be supposed but that the effect of the agent is very considerable. Two most remarkable points of its action are its effects upon the food in the stomach and its effects as an astringent. I have so often seen dyspepsia removed by persons giving up the practice of taking tea at breakfast, that I have no doubt that the tannic acid of the tea renders the food taken with it more difficult of digestion. Of course, this would only occur in the case of persons in whom the digestive function was already impaired. Such persons may frequently take tea with advantage on an empty stomach."

Ned Shuter thus explained his reasons for preferring to wear stockings with holes to having them darned; 'a hole,' said he, 'may be the accident of a day, and will pass upon the best gentleman, but a darn is *premediated poverty*.

A young barrister, being reproached by his opponent for his extreme youth, said,—

'It is true that I am young, but my learned friend will find in the course of this trial that I read old books.'