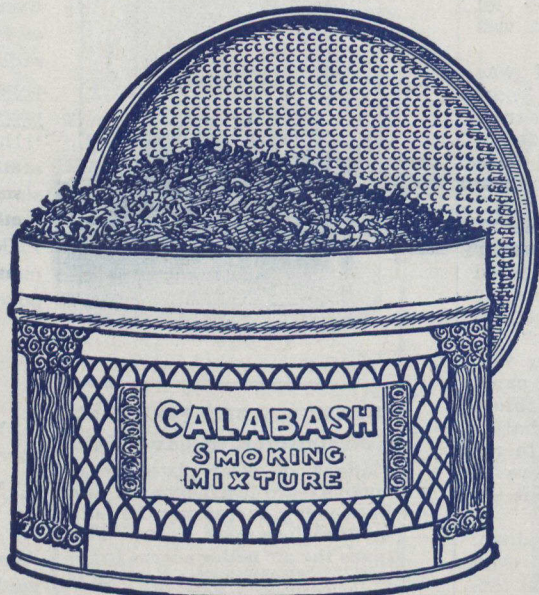


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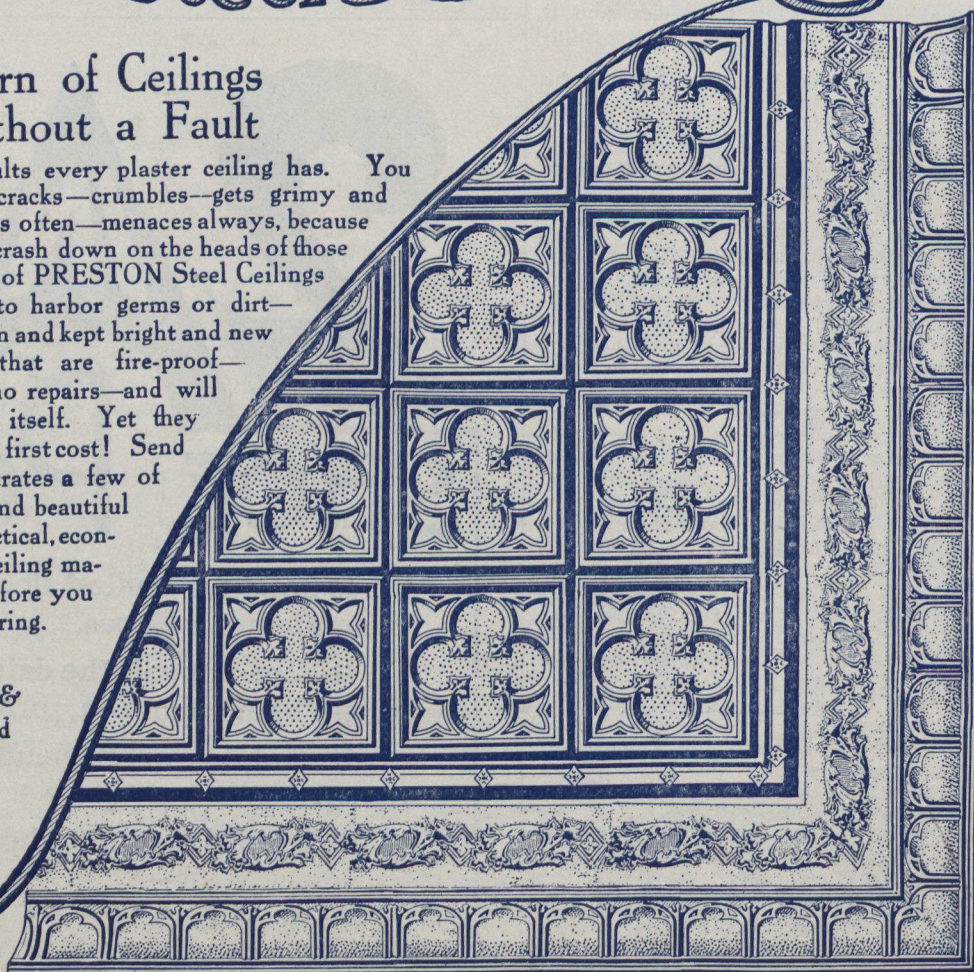
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at the fire. His face presented a marked contrast to that of his wife, who was radiant with joy.

But that she was the victor, and he was the vanquished.

CHAPTER XXVII.

BY the side of a lonely fiord in Norway a small white house gleamed in the moonlight. Behind it a great wall of rock rose almost sheer to the height of six hundred feet. In front there was a wooden landing-stage, and a few yards away to the left a large black shed, so close to the water that a man could have walked in five steps from the doorway into the fiord. The creek here was very narrow, and the base of the mountain on the other side, covered to the water's edge with pine trees, was not more than two hundred yards distant.

On a rough wooden bench outside the house sat Ralph Lowick and his wife. They were both looking down the fiord towards the sea. A small steamer stood out black against the path of moonlight. It was moving seawards, because its work was done. The machine was finished, and rested on a wheeled platform within the shed. It was ten feet square, and weighed three tons, but the ground sloped gently to the edge of the water, and a certain type of vessel could lie alongside the wall of rock, so that its deck was level with the ground. Such a vessel had been chartered and reconstructed for the purpose, and it was expected within twenty-four hours. There was nothing now to be done but to wait.

Yet it was no time for waiting; the blow might be struck at any moment, and if it proved fatal it would be hard to drive out the enemy without causing widespread destruction throughout the length and breadth of England—destruction that might take half a century to make good again. But Lowick and his wife were forced to wait. All the workmen had been dismissed; there was no servant in the house; they were alone by the edge of the desolate fiord with the destiny of a nation in their hands.

"We must make the experiment to-night," said Lowick, after a long silence.

"Yes, Ralph, to-night. Then you think—you have made up your mind that you will do this for England?"

"Yes—if you wish it, Joan."

"I do wish it. The news—this morning—the man brought it from Hemnas, didn't he?"

"Yes; another disaster—two battleships and two cruisers this time. Well, Joan, shall we try the machine now?"

"Yes, dear—if you think it's safe. You said you'd try it on the trees the other side of the fiord; but that will attract attention, won't it? The people think it is a new printing machine, don't they?"

He laughed. "Yes, dear," he replied. "That is why I have had to put all the parts together myself, and have had them made in twenty different workshops. But it doesn't matter if we do scorch a few trees."

She kissed him, and arm in arm they walked to the shed. Lowick unlocked the doors and flung them open. The moonlight fell on a large white box of plain unvarnished wood.

"A printing machine!" laughed Lowick. "I fancy it will print in letters of flame. Come here to my side, Joan."

She came to his side, and stood motionless as he lit the lantern and held it close to the switchboard.

"The writing on the wall," he said, when he had adjusted the levers. "Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin—in letters of flame."

He pulled the discharging-lever, and gazed at the opposite shore. Joan gripped his arm tightly, and stared with parted lips and wide-open eyes, watching for fire to leap from the wall of darkness.

Ten seconds passed, twenty seconds, half a minute, a minute, two minutes, and still nothing happened.

"Ralph!" Joan screamed in terror. "Ralph!"

"Heavens," he muttered, "I have failed!"

(To be concluded.)