

THE ADVENTURE OF THE IMPROMPTU MOUNTAINEER

Grant Allen

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THE explosion and evaporation of Dr. Fortescue—Langley (with whom were amalgamated the Comte de Laroche—sur—Loiret, Mr. Higginson the courier, and whatever else that versatile gentleman chose to call himself) entailed many results of varying magnitudes.

In the first place, Mrs. Evelegh ordered a Great Manitou. That, however, mattered little to the firm,' as I loved to call us (because it shocked dear Elsie so); for, of course, after all her kindness we couldn't accept our commission on her purchase, so that she got her machine cheap for L15 from the maker. But, in the second place I declare I am beginning to write like a woman of business she decided to run over to England for the summer to see her boy at Portsmouth, being certain now that the discoloration of her bangle depended more on the presence of sulphur in the india—rubber bottle than on the passing state of her astral body. 'Tis an abrupt descent from the inner self to a hot—water bottle, I admit; but Mrs. Evelegh took the plunge with grace, like a sensible woman. Dr. Fortescue—Langley been annihilated for her at one blow: she returned forthwith to common—sense and England.

'What will you do with the chalet while you're away?' Lady Georgina asked, when she announced her intention. 'You can't shut it up to take care of itself. Every blessed thing in the place will go to rack and ruin. Shutting up a house means spoiling it for ever. Why, I've got a cottage of my own that I let for the summer in the best part of Surrey a pretty little place, now vacant, for which, by the way, I want a tenant, if you happen to know of one: and when it's left empty for a month or two '

'Perhaps it would do for me?' Mrs. Evelegh suggested, jumping at it. 'I'm looking out for a furnished house for the summer, within easy reach of Portsmouth and London, for myself and Oliver.'

Lady Georgina seized her arm, with a face of blank horror. 'My dear,' she cried. 'For you! I wouldn't dream of letting it to you. A nasty, damp, cold, unwholesome house, on stiff clay soil, with detestable drains, in the deadliest part of the Weald of Surrey, why, you and your boy would catch your deaths of rheumatism.'

'Is it the one I saw advertised in the _Times_ this morning, I wonder?' Mrs. Evelegh inquired in a placid voice. "'Charming furnished house on Holmesdale Common; six bedrooms, four reception—rooms; splendid views; pure air; picturesque surroundings; exceptionally situated.'" I thought of writing about it.'

'That's it!' Lady Georgina exclaimed, with a demonstrative wave of her hand. I drew up the advertisement myself. Exceptionally situated! I should just think it was! Why, my dear, I wouldn't let you rent the place for worlds; a horrid, poky little hole, stuck down in the bottom of a boggy hollow, as damp as Devonshire, with the paper peeling off the walls, so that I had to take my choice between giving it up myself ten years ago, or removing to the cemetery; and I've let it ever since to City men with large families. Nothing would induce me to allow you and your boy to expose yourself to such risks.' For Lady Georgina had taken quite a fancy to Mrs. Evelegh. 'But what I was just going to say was this: you can't shut your house up; it'll all go mouldy. Houses always go mouldy, shut up in summer. And you can't leave it to your servants; I know the baggages; no conscience no conscience; they'll ask their entire families to come and stop with them en bloc, and turn your place into a perfect piggery. Why,

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when I went away from my house in town one autumn, didn't I leave a policeman and his wife in charge a most respectable man only he happened to be an Irishman. And what was the consequence? My dear, I assure you, I came back unexpectedly from poor dear Kynaston's one day at a moment's notice having quarrelled with him over Home Rule or Education or something poor dear Kynaston's what they call a Liberal, I believe got at by that man Rosebery and there didn't I find all the O'Flanagans, and O'Flahertys, and O'Flynnns in the neighbourhood camping out in my drawing-room; with a strong detachment of O'Donohues, and O'Dohertys, and O'Driscolls lying around loose in possession of the library? Never leave a house to the servants, my dear! It's positively suicidal. Put in a responsible caretaker of whom you know something like , Lois here, for instance.'

'Lois!' Mrs. Evelegh echoed. 'Dear me, that's just the very thing. What a capital idea! I never thought of Lois! She and Elsie might stop on here, with Ursula and the gardener.'

I protested that if we did it was our clear duty to pay a small rent; but Mrs. Evelegh brushed that aside. 'You've robbed yourselves over the bicycle,' she insisted, 'and I'm delighted to let you have it. It's I who ought to pay, for you'll keep the house dry for me.'

I remembered Mr. Hitchcock 'Mutual advantage: benefits you, benefits me' and made no bones about it. So in the end Mrs. Evelegh set off for England with Cecile, leaving Elsie and me in charge of Ursula, the gardener, and the chalet.

As for Lady Georgina, having by this time completed her 'cure' at Schlangenbad (complexion as usual; no guinea yellower), she telegraphed for Gretchen 'I can't do without the idiot' and hung round Lucerne, apparently for no other purpose but to send people up the Brunig on the hunt for our wonderful new machines, and so put money in our pockets. She was much amused when I told her that Aunt Susan (who lived, you will remember, in respectable indigence at Blackheath) had written to expostulate with me on my 'unladylike' conduct in becoming a bicycle commission agent. 'Unladylike!' the Cantankerous Old Lady exclaimed, with warmth. 'What does the woman mean? Has she got no gumption? It's "ladylike," I suppose, to be a companion, or a governess, or a music-teacher, or something else in the black-thread-glove way, in London; but not to sell bicycles for a good round commission. My dear, between you and me, I don't see it. If you had a brother, now, he might sell cycles, or corner wheat, or rig the share market, or do anything else he pleased, in these days, and nobody'd think the worse of him as long as he made money; and it's my opinion that what is sauce for the goose can't be far out for the gander and vice-versa. Besides which, what's the use of trying to be ladylike? You are a lady, child, and you couldn't help being one; why trouble to be like what nature made you? Tell Aunt Susan from me to put that in her pipe and smoke it!'

I did tell Aunt Susan by letter, giving Lady Georgina's authority for the statement; and I really believe it had a consoling effect upon her; for Aunt Susan is one of those innocent-minded people who cherish a profound respect for the opinions and ideas of a Lady of Title. Especially where questions of delicacy are concerned. It calmed her to think that though I, an officer's daughter, had declined upon trade, I was mixing at least with the Best People!

We had a lovely time at the chalet two girls alone, messing just as we pleased in the kitchen, and learning from Ursula how to concoct pot-au-feu in the most approved Swiss fashion. We pottered, as we women love to potter, half the day long; the other half we spent in riding our cycles about the eternal hills, and ensnaring the flies whom Lady Georgina dutifully sent up to us. She was our decoy duck: and, in virtue of her handle, she decoyed to a marvel. Indeed, I sold so many Manitous that I began to entertain a deep respect for my own commercial faculties. As for Mr. Cyrus W. Hitchcock, he wrote to me from Frankfort: 'The world continues to revolve on its axis, the Manitou, and the machine is booming. Orders romp in daily. When you ventilated the suggestion of an agency at Limburg, I concluded at a glance you had the material of a first-class business woman about you; but I reckon I did not know what a traveller meant till you started on the road. I am now enlarging and altering this factory, to meet increased demands. Branch offices at Berlin, Hamburg, Crefeld, and Dusseldorf. Inspect our stock before dealing elsewhere. A liberal discount allowed to the trade. Two hundred agents wanted in all towns

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of Germany. If they were every one of them like you, miss well, I guess I would hire the town of Frankfort for my business premises.'

One morning, after we had spent about a week at the chalet by ourselves, I was surprised to see a young man with a knapsack on his back walking up the garden path towards our cottage. 'Quick, quick, Elsie!' I cried, being in a mischievous mood. 'Come here with the opera-glass! There's a Man in the offing!'

'A what?' Elsie exclaimed, shocked as usual at my levity.

'A Man,' I answered, squeezing her arm. 'A Man! A real live Man! A specimen of the masculine gender in the human being! Man, ahoy! He has come at last the lodestar of our existence!'

Next minute, I was sorry I spoke; for as the man drew nearer, I perceived that he was endowed with very long legs and a languidly poetical bearing. That supercilious smile that enticing moustache! Could it be? yes, it was not a doubt of it Harold Tillington!

I grew grave at once; Harold Tillington and the situation were serious. 'What can he want here?' I exclaimed, drawing back.

'Who is it?' Elsie asked; for, being a woman, she read at once in my altered demeanour the fact that the Man was not unknown to me.

'Lady Georgina's nephew,' I answered, with a tell-tale cheek, I fear. 'You remember I mentioned to you that I had met him at Schlangenbad. But this is really too bad of that wicked old Lady Georgina. She has told him where we lived and sent him up to see us.'

'Perhaps,' Elsie put in, 'he wants to charter a bicycle.'

I glanced at Elsie sideways. I had an uncomfortable suspicion that she said it slyly, like one who knew he wanted nothing of the sort. But at any rate, I brushed the suggestion aside frankly. 'Nonsense,' I answered. 'He wants me, not a bicycle.'

He came up to us, waving his hat. He did look handsome! 'Well, Miss Cayley,' he cried from afar, 'I have tracked you to your lair! I have found out where you abide! What a beautiful spot! And how well you're looking!'

This is an unexpected ' I paused. He thought I was going to say, 'pleasure,' but I finished it, 'intrusion.' His face fell. 'How did you know we were at Lungern, Mr. Tillington?'

'My respected relative,' he answered, laughing. 'She mentioned casually ' his eyes met mine 'that you were stopping in a chalet. And as I was on my way back to the diplomatic mill, I thought I might just as well walk over the Grimsel and the Furca, and then on to the Gotthard. The Court is at Monza. So it occurred to me that in passing I might venture to drop in and say how-do-you-do to you.'

'Thank you,' I answered, severely but my heart spoke otherwise 'I do very well. And you, Mr. Tillington?'

'Badly,' he echoed. 'Badly, since you went away from Schlangenbad.'

I gazed at his dusty feet. 'You are tramping,' I said, cruelly. 'I suppose you will get forward for lunch to Meiringen?'

'I did not contemplate it.'

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'Indeed?'

He grew bolder. 'No; to say the truth, I half hoped I might stop and spend the day here with you.'

'Elsie,' I remarked firmly, 'if Mr. Tillington persists in planting himself upon us like this, one of us must go and investigate the kitchen department.'

Elsie rose like a lamb. I have an impression that she gathered we wanted to be left alone.

He turned to me imploringly. 'Lois,' he cried, stretching out his arms, with an appealing air, 'I may stay, mayn't I?'

I tried to be stern; but I fear 'twas a feeble pretence. 'We are two girls, alone in a house,' I answered. 'Lady Georgina, as a matron of experience, ought to have protected us. Merely to give you lunch is almost irregular. (Good diplomatic word, irregular.) Still, in these days, I suppose you may stay, if you leave early in the afternoon. That's the utmost I can do for you.'

'You are not gracious,' he cried, gazing at me with a wistful look.

I did not dare to be gracious. 'Uninvited guests must not quarrel with their welcome,' I answered severely. Then the woman in me broke forth. 'But indeed, Mr. Tillington, I am glad to see you.'

He leaned forward eagerly. 'So you are not angry with me, Lois? I may call you Lois?'

I trembled and hesitated. 'I am not angry with you. I like you too much to be ever angry with you. And I am glad you came just this once to see me Yes, when we are alone you may call me Lois.'

He tried to seize my hand. I withdrew it. 'Then I may perhaps hope,' he began, that some day '

I shook my head. 'No, no,' I said, regretfully. 'You misunderstand me. I like you very much; and I like to see you. But as long as you are rich and have prospects like yours, I could never marry you. My pride wouldn't let me. Take that as final.'

I looked away. He bent forward again. 'But if I were poor?' he put in, eagerly.

I hesitated. Then my heart rose, and I gave way. 'If ever you are poor,' I faltered, 'penniless, hunted, friendless come to me, Harold, and I will help and comfort you. But not till then. Not till then, I implore you.'

He leant back and clasped his hands. 'You have given me something to live for, dear Lois,' he murmured. 'I will try to be poor –penniless, hunted, friendless. To win you I will try. And when that day arrives, I shall come to claim you.'

We sat for an hour and had a delicious talk about nothing. But we understood each other. Only that artificial barrier divided us. At the end of the hour, I heard Elsie coming back by judiciously slow stages from the kitchen to the living-room, through six feet of passage, discoursing audibly to Ursula all the way, with a tardiness that did honour to her heart and her understanding. Dear, kind little Elsie! I believe she had never a tiny romance of her own; yet her sympathy for others was sweet to look upon.

We lunched at a small deal table in the veranda. Around us rose the pinnacles. The scent of pines and moist moss was in the air. Elsie had arranged the flowers, and got ready the omelette, and cooked the chicken cutlets, and prepared the junket. 'I never thought I could do it alone without you, Brownie; but I tried, and it all came right by magic, somehow.' We laughed and talked incessantly. Harold was in excellent cue; and Elsie took to him. A

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livelier or merrier table there wasn't in the twenty-two Cantons that day than ours, under the sapphire sky, looking out on the sun-smitten snows of the Jungfrau.

After lunch, Harold begged hard to be allowed to stop for tea. I had misgivings, but I gave way he was such good company. One may as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb, says the wisdom of our ancestors: and, after all, Mrs. Grundy was only represented here by Elsie, the gentlest and least censorious of her daughters. So he stopped and chatted till four; when I made tea and insisted on dismissing him. He meant to take the rough mountain path over the screes from Lungern to Meiringen, which ran right behind the chalet. I feared lest he might be belated, and urged him to hurry.

'Thanks, I'm happier here,' he answered.

I was sternness itself. 'You promised me!' I said, in a reproachful voice.

He rose instantly, and bowed. 'Your will is law even when it pronounces sentence of exile.'

Would we walk a little way with him? No, I faltered; we would not. We would follow him with the opera-glasses and wave him farewell when he reached the Kulm. He shook our hands unwillingly, and turned up the little path, looking handsomer than ever. It led ascending through a fir-wood to the rock-strewn hillside.

Once, a quarter of an hour later, we caught a glimpse of him near a sharp turn in the road; after that we waited in vain, with our eyes fixed on the Kulm; not a sign could we discern of him. At last I grew anxious. 'He ought to be there,' I cried, fuming.

'He ought,' Elsie answered.

I swept the slopes with the opera-glasses. Anxiety and interest in him quickened my senses, I suppose. 'Look, Elsie,' I burst out at last. 'Just take this glass and have a glance at those birds, down the crag below the Kulm. Don't they seem to be circling and behaving most oddly?'

Elsie gazed where I bid her. 'They're wheeling round and round,' she answered, after a minute; 'and they certainly do look as if they were screaming.'

'They seem to be frightened,' I suggested.

'It looks like it, Brownie,'

'Then he's fallen over a precipice!' I cried, rising up; 'and he's lying there on a ledge by their nest. Elsie, we must go to him!'

She clasped her hands and looked terrified. 'Oh, Brownie, how dreadful!' she exclaimed. Her face was deadly white. Mine burned like fire.

'Not a moment to lose!' I said, holding my breath. 'Get out the rope and let us run to him!'

'Don't you think,' Elsie suggested, 'we had better hurry down on our cycles to Lungern and call some men from the village to help us? We are two girls, and alone. What can we do to aid him?'

'No,' I answered, promptly, 'that won't do. It would only lose time and time may be precious. You and I must go; I'll send Ursula off to bring up guides from the village.'

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Fortunately, we had a good long coil of new rope in the house, which Mrs. Evelegh had provided in case of accident. I slipped it on my arm, and set out on foot; for the path was by far too rough for cycles. I was sorry afterwards that I had not taken Ursula, and sent Elsie to Lungern to rouse the men; for she found the climbing hard, and I had difficulty at times in dragging her up the steep and stony pathway, almost a watercourse. However, we persisted in the direction of the Kulm, tracking Harold by his footprints; for he wore mountain boots with sharp-headed nails, which made dints in the moist soil, and scratched the smooth surface of the rock where he trod on it.

We followed him thus for a mile or two, along the regular path; then of a sudden, in an open part, the trail failed us. I turned back, a few yards, and looked close, with my eyes fixed on the spongy soil, as keen as a hound that sniffs his way after his quarry. 'He went off here, Elsie!' I said at last, pulling up short by a spindle bush on the hillside.

'How do you know, Brownie?'

'Why, see, there are the marks of his stick; he had a thick one, you remember, with a square iron spike. These are its dints; I have been watching them all the way along from the chalet.'

'But there are so many such marks!'

'Yes, I know; I can tell his from the older ones made by the spikes of alpenstocks because Harold's are fresher and sharper on the edge. They look so much newer. See, here, he slipped on the rock; you can know that scratch is recent by the clean way it's traced, and the little glistening crystals still left behind in it. Those other marks have been wind-swept and washed by the rain. There are no broken particles.'

'How on earth did you find that out, Brownie?'

How on earth did I find it out! I wondered myself. But the emergency seemed somehow to teach me something of the instinctive lore of hunters and savages. I did not trouble to answer her. 'At this bush, the tracks fail,' I went on; 'and, look, he must have clutched at that branch and crushed the broken leaves as the twigs slipped through his fingers. He left the path here, then, and struck off on a short cut of his own along the hillside, lower down. Elsie we must follow him.'

She shrank from it; but I held her hand. It was a more difficult task to track him now; for we had no longer the path to guide us. However, I explored the ground on my hands and knees, and soon found marks of footsteps on the boggy patches, with scratches on the rock where he had leapt from point to point, or planted his stick to steady himself. I tried to help Elsie along among the littered boulders and the dwarf growth of wind-swept daphne: but, poor child, it was too much for her: she sat down after a few minutes upon the flat juniper scrub and began to cry. What was I to do? My anxiety was breathless. I couldn't leave her there alone, and I couldn't forsake Harold. Yet I felt every minute might now be critical. We were making among wet whortleberry thicket and torn rock towards the spot where I had seen the birds wheel and circle, screaming. The only way left was to encourage Elsie and make her feel the necessity for instant action. 'He is alive still,' I exclaimed, looking up; 'the birds are crying! If he were dead, they would return to their nest Elsie, we must get to him!'

She rose, bewildered, and followed me. I held her hand tight, and coaxed her to scramble over the rocks where the scratches showed the way, or to clamber at times over fallen trunks of huge fir-trees. Yet it was hard work climbing; even Harold's sure feet had slipped often on the wet and slimy boulders, though, like most of Queen Margherita's set, he was an expert mountaineer. Then, at times, I lost the faint track, so that I had to diverge and look close to find it. These delays fretted me. 'See, a stone loosed from its bed he must have passed by here.... That twig is newly snapped; no doubt he caught at it.... Ha, the moss there has been crushed; a foot has gone by. And the ants on that ant-hill, with their eggs in their mouths a man's tread has frightened them.' So, by some

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instinctive sense, as if the spirit of my savage ancestors revived within me, I managed to recover the spoor again and again by a miracle, till at last, round a corner by a defiant cliff with a terrible foreboding, my heart stood still within me.

We had come to an end. A great projecting buttress of crag rose sheer in front. Above lay loose boulders. Below was a shrub-hung precipice. The birds we had seen from home were still circling and screaming.

They were a pair of peregrine hawks. Their nest seemed to lie far below the broken scar, some sixty or seventy feet beneath us.

'He is not dead!' I cried once more, with my heart in my mouth. 'If he were, they would have returned. He has fallen, and is lying, alive, below there!'

Elsie shrank back against the wall of rock. I advanced on my hands and knees to the edge of the precipice. It was not quite sheer, but it dropped like a sea-cliff, with broken ledges.

I could see where Harold had slipped. He had tried to climb round the crag that blocked the road, and the ground at the edge of the precipice had given way with him; it showed a recent founder of a few inches. Then he clutched at a branch of broom as he fell; but it slipped through his fingers, cutting them; for there was blood on the wiry stem. I knelt by the side of the cliff and craned my head over. I scarcely dared to look. In spite of the birds, my heart misgave me.

There, on a ledge deep below, he lay in a mass, half raised on one arm. But not dead, I believed. Harold! I cried. 'Harold!'

He turned his face up and saw me; his eyes lighted with joy. He shouted back something, but I could not hear it.

I turned to Elsie. 'I must go down to him!'

Her tears rose again. 'Oh, Brownie!'

I unwound the coil of rope. The first thing was to fasten it. I could not trust Elsie to hold it; she was too weak and too frightened to bear my weight: even if I wound it round her body, I feared my mere mass might drag her over. I peered about at the surroundings. No tree grew near; no rock had a pinnacle sufficiently safe to depend upon. But I found a plan soon. In the crag behind me was a cleft, narrowing wedge-shape as it descended. I tied the end of the rope round a stone, a good big water-worn stone, rudely girdled with a groove near the middle, which prevented it from slipping, then I dropped it down the fissure till it jammed; after which, I tried it to see if it would bear. It was firm as the rock itself. I let the rope down by it, and waited a moment to discover whether Harold could climb. He shook his head, and took a note-book with evident pain from his pocket. Then he scribbled a few words, and pinned them to the rope. I hauled it up. 'Can't move. Either severely bruised and sprained, or else legs broken.'

There was no help for it, then. I must go to him.

My first idea was merely to glide down the rope with my gloved hands, for I chanced to have my dog-skin bicycling gloves in my pocket. Fortunately, however, I did not carry out this crude idea too hastily; for next instant it occurred to me that I could not swarm up again. I have had no practice in rope-climbing. Here was a problem. But the moment suggested its own solution. I began making knots, or rather nooses or loops, in the rope at intervals of about eighteen inches. 'What are they for?' Elsie asked, looking on in wonder.

'Footholds, to climb up by.'

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'But the ones above will pull out with your weight.'

'I don't think so. Still, to make sure, I shall tie them with this string. I must get down to him.'

I threaded a sufficient number of loops, trying the length over the edge. Then I turned to Elsie, who sat cowering, propped against the crag, 'You must come and look over, and do as I wave to you. Mind, dear, you must! Two lives depend upon it.'

'Brownie, I daren't? I shall turn giddy and fall over!'

I smoothed her golden hair. 'Elsie, dear,' I said gently, gazing into her blue eyes, 'you are a woman. A woman can always be brave, where those she loves are concerned; and I believe you love me.' I led her, coaxingly, to the edge. 'Sit there,' I said, in my quietest voice, so as not to alarm her. 'You can lie at full length, if you like, and only just peep over. But when I wave my hand, remember, you must pull the rope up.'

She obeyed me like a child. I knew she loved me.

I gripped the rope and let myself down, not using the loops to descend, but just sliding with hands and knees, and allowing the knots to slacken my pace. Half-way down, I will confess, the eerie feeling of physical suspense was horrible. One hung so in mid-air! The hawks flapped their wings. But Harold was below; and a woman can always be brave where those she loves well, just that moment, catching my breath, I knew I loved Harold.

I glided down swiftly. The air whizzed. At last, on a narrow shelf of rock, I leant over him. He seized my hand. 'I knew you would come!' he cried. 'I felt sure you would find out. Though, how you found out, Heaven only knows, you clever, brave little woman!'

'Are you terribly hurt?' I asked, bending close. His clothes were torn.

'I hardly know. I can't move. It may only be bruises.'

'Can you climb by these nooses with my help?'

He shook his head. 'Oh, no. I couldn't climb at all. I must be lifted, somehow. You had better go back to Lungern and bring men to help you.'

'And leave you here alone! Never, Harold; never!'

'Then what can we do?'

I reflected a moment. 'Lend me your pencil,' I said. He pulled it out his arms were almost unhurt, fortunately. I scribbled a line to Elsie. Tie my plaid to the rope and let it down.' Then I waved to her to pull up again.

I was half surprised to find she obeyed the signal, for she crouched there, white-faced and open-mouthed, watching; but I have often observed that women are almost always brave in the great emergencies. She pinned on the plaid and let it down with commendable quickness. I doubled it, and tied firm knots in the four corners, so as to make it into a sort of basket; then I fastened it at each corner with a piece of the rope, crossed in the middle, till it looked like one of the cages they use in mills for letting down sacks with. As soon as it was finished, I said, 'Now, just try to crawl into it.'

He raised himself on his arms and crawled in with difficulty. His legs dragged after him. I could see he was in great pain. But still, he managed it.

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I planted my foot in the first noose. 'You must sit still,' I said, breathless. 'I am going back to haul you up.'

'Are you strong enough, Lois?'

'With Elsie to help me, yes. I often stroked a four at Girton.'

'I can trust you,' he answered. It thrilled me that he said so.

I began my hazardous journey; I mounted the rope by the nooses one, two, three, four, counting them as I mounted. I did not dare to look up or down as I did so, lest I should grow giddy and fall, but kept my eyes fixed firmly always on the one noose in front of me. My brain swam: the rope swayed and creaked. Twenty, thirty, forty! Foot after foot, I slipped them in mechanically, taking up with me the longer coil whose ends were attached to the cage and Harold. My hands trembled; it was ghastly, swinging there between earth and heaven. Forty-five, forty-six, forty-seven I knew there were forty-eight of them. At last, after some weeks, as it seemed, I reached the summit. Tremulous and half dead, I prised myself over the edge with my hands, and knelt once more on the hill beside Elsie.

She was white, but attentive. 'What next, Brownie?' Her voice quivered.

I looked about me. I was too faint and shaky after my perilous ascent to be fit for work, but there was no help for it. What could I use as a pulley? Not a tree grew near; but the stone jammed in the fissure might once more serve my purpose. I tried it again. It had borne my weight; was it strong enough to bear the precious weight of Harold? I tugged at it, and thought so. I passed the rope round it like a pulley, and then tied it about my own waist. I had a happy thought: I could use myself as a windlass. I turned on my feet for a pivot. Elsie helped me to pull. 'Up you go!' I cried, cheerily. We wound slowly, for fear of shaking him. Bit by bit, I could feel the cage rise gradually from the ground; its weight, taken so, with living capstan and stone axle, was less than I should have expected. But the pulley helped us, and Elsie, spurred by need, put forth more reserve of nervous strength than I could easily have believed lay in that tiny body. I twisted myself round and round, close to the edge, so as to look over from time to time, but not at all quickly, for fear of dizziness. The rope strained and gave. It was a deadly ten minutes of suspense and anxiety. Twice or thrice as I looked down I saw a spasm of pain break over Harold's face; but when I paused and glanced inquiringly, he motioned me to go on with my venturesome task. There was no turning back now. We had almost got him up when the rope at the edge began to creak ominously.

It was straining at the point where it grated against the brink of the precipice. My heart gave a leap. If the rope broke, all was over.

With a sudden dart forward, I seized it with my hands, below the part that gave; then one fierce little run back and I brought him level with the edge. He clutched at Elsie's hand. I turned thrice round, to wind the slack about my body. The taut rope cut deep into my flesh; but nothing mattered now, except to save him. 'Catch the cloak, Elsie!' I cried; 'catch it: pull him gently in!' Elsie caught it and pulled him in, with wonderful pluck and calmness. We hauled him over the edge. He lay safe on the bank. Then we all three broke down and cried like children together. I took his hand in mine and held it in silence.

When we found words again I drew a deep breath, and said, simply, 'How did you manage to do it?'

'I tried to clamber past the wall that barred the way there by sheer force of stride you know, my legs are long and I somehow overbalanced myself. But I didn't exactly fall if I had fallen, I must have been killed; I rolled and slid down, clutching at the weeds in the crannies as I slipped, and stumbling over the projections, without quite losing my foothold on the ledges, till I found myself brought up short with a bump at the end of it.'

'And you think no bones are broken?'

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'I can't feel sure. It hurts me horribly to move. I fancy just at first I must have fainted. But I'm inclined to guess I'm only sprained and bruised and sore all over. Why, you're as bad as me, I believe. See, your dear hands are all torn and bleeding!'

'How are we ever to get him back again, Brownie?' Elsie put in. She was paler than ever now, and prostrate with the after-effects of her unwonted effort.

'You are a practical woman, Elsie,' I answered. Stop with him here a minute or two. I'll climb up the hillside and halloo for Ursula and the men from Lungern.'

I climbed and halloosed. In a few minutes, worn out as I was, I had reached the path above and attracted their attention. They hurried down to where Harold lay, and, using my cage for a litter, slung on a young fir-trunk, carried him back between them across their shoulders to the village. He pleaded hard to be allowed to remain at the chalet, and Elsie joined her prayers to his; but, there, I was adamant. It was not so much what people might say that I minded, but a deeper difficulty. For if once I nursed him through this trouble, how could I or any woman in my place any longer refuse him? So I passed him ruthlessly on to Lungern (though my heart ached for it), and telegraphed at once to his nearest relative, Lady Georgina, to come up and take care of him.

He recovered rapidly. Though sore and shaken, his worst hurts, it turned out, were sprains; and in three or four days he was ready to go on again. I called to see him before he left. I dreaded the interview; for one's own heart is a hard enemy to fight so long; but how could I let him go without one word of farewell to him?

'After this, Lois,' he said, taking my hand in his and I was weak enough, for a moment, to let it lie there 'you cannot say No to me!'

'Oh, how I longed to fling myself upon him and cry out, 'No, Harold, I cannot! I love you too dearly!' But his future and Marmaduke Ashurst's half million restrained me: for his sake and for my own I held myself in courageously. Though, indeed, it needed some courage and self-control. I withdrew my hand slowly. 'Do you remember,' I said, 'you asked me that first day at Schlangenbad' it was an epoch to me now, that first day 'whether I was mediaeval or modern? And I answered, "Modern, I hope." And you said, "That's well!" You see, I don't forget the least things you say to me. Well, because I am modern my lips trembled and belied me 'I can answer you No. I can even now refuse you. The old-fashioned girl, the mediaeval girl, would have held that because she saved your life (if I did save your life, which is a matter of opinion) she was bound to marry you. But I am modern, and I see things differently. If there were reasons at Schlangenbad which made it impracticable for me to accept you though my heart pleaded hard I do not deny it those reasons cannot have disappeared merely because you have chosen to fall over a precipice, and I have pulled you up again. My decision was founded, you see, not on passing accidents of situation, but on permanent considerations. Nothing has happened in the last three days to affect those considerations. We are still ourselves: you, rich; I, a penniless adventuress. I could not accept you when you asked me at Schlangenbad. On just the same grounds, I cannot accept you now. I do not see how the unessential fact that I made myself into a winch to pull you up the cliff, and that I am still smarting for it '

He looked me all over comically. 'How severe we are!' he cried, in a bantering tone. 'And how extremely Girtony! A System of Logic, Ratiocinative and Inductive, by Lois Cayley! What a pity we didn't take a professor's chair. My child that isn't you! It's not yourself at all! It's an attempt to be unnaturally and unfemininely reasonable.'

Logic fled. I broke down utterly. 'Harold,' I cried, rising, 'I love you! I admit I love you! But I will never marry you while you have those thousands.'

'I haven't got them yet!'

'Or the chance of inheriting them.'

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He smothered my hand with kisses for I withdrew my face, 'If you admit you love me,' he cried, quite joyously, 'then all is well. When once a woman admits that, the rest is but a matter of time and, Lois, I can wait a thousand years for you.'

'Not in my case,' I answered through my tears. Not in my case, Harold! I am a modern woman, and what I say I mean. I will renew my promise. If ever you are poor and friendless, come to me; I am yours. Till then, don't harrow me by asking me the impossible!

I tore myself away. At the hall door, Lady Georgina intercepted me. She glanced at my red eyes. 'Then you have taken him?' she cried, seizing my hand.

I shook my head firmly. I could hardly speak. No, Lady Georgina,' I answered, in a choking voice. 'I have refused him again. I will not stand in his way. I will not ruin his prospects.'

She drew back and let her chin drop. 'Well, of all the hard-hearted, cruel, obdurate young women I ever saw in my born days, if you're not the very hardest '

I half ran from the house. I hurried home to the chalet. There, I dashed into my own room, locked the door behind me, flung myself wildly on my bed, and, burying my face in my hands, had a good, long, hard-hearted, cruel, obdurate cry exactly like any other mediaeval woman. It's all very well being modern; but my experience is that, when it comes to a man one loves well, the Middle Ages are still horribly strong within us.