Tracy Louis

The Silent Barrier

Louis Tracy

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Tracy L.

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
THE WISH

"Mail in?"

"Yes, sir; just arrived. What name?"

"Charles K. Spencer."

The letter clerk seized a batch of correspondence and sorted it with nimble fingers. The form of the question told him that Spencer was interested in letters stamped for the greater part with bland presentments of bygone Presidents of the United States. In any event, he would have known, by long experience of the type, that the well dressed, straight limbed, strong faced young man on the other side of the counter was an American. He withdrew four missives from the bundle. His quick eyes saw that three bore the Denver postmark, and the fourth hailed from Leadville.

"That is all at present, sir," he said. "Would you like your mail sent to your room in future, or shall I keep it here?"

"Right here, please, in No. 20 slot. I could receive a reply by cable while I was going and coming along my corridor."

The clerk smiled deferentially. He appreciated not only the length of the corridor, but the price paid by the tenant of a second floor suite overlooking the river.

"Very well, sir," he said, glancing again at Spencer, "I will attend to it;" and he took a mental portrait of the man who could afford to hire apartments that ranked among the most expensive in the hotel. Obviously, the American was a recent arrival. His suite had been vacated by a Frankfort banker only three days earlier, and this was the first time he had asked for letters. Even the disillusioned official was amused by the difference between the two latest occupants of No. 20, – Herr Bamberger, a tub of a man, bald headed and bespectacled, and this alert, sinewy youngster, with the cleancut features of a Greek statue, and the brilliant, deep set, earnest eyes of one to whom thought and action were alike familiar.

Spencer, fully aware that he was posing for a necessary picture, examined the dates on his letters, nipped the end off a green cigar, helped himself to a match from a box tendered by a watchful boy, crossed the entrance hall, and descended a few steps leading to the inner foyer and restaurant. At the foot of the stairs he looked about for a quiet corner. The luncheon hour was almost ended. Groups of smokers and coffee drinkers were scattered throughout the larger room, which widened out below a second short flight of carpeted steps. The smaller anteroom in which he stood was empty, save for a few people passing that way from the restaurant, and he decided that a nook near a palm shaded balcony offered the retreat he sought.

He little dreamed that he was choosing the starting point of the most thrilling adventure in a life already adventurous; that the soft carpet of the Embankment Hotel might waft him to scenes not within the common scope. That is ever the way of true romance. Your knight errant may wander in the forest for a day or a year, – he never knows the moment when the enchanted glade shall open before his eyes; nay, he scarce has seen the weeping maiden bound to a tree ere he is called in to couch his lance and ride a-tilt at the fire breathing dragon. It was so when men and maids dwelt in a young world; it is so now; and it will be so till the crack of doom. Manners may change, and costume; but hearts filled with the wine of life are not to be altered. They are fashioned that way, and the world does not vary, else Eve might regain Paradise, and all the fret and fume have an end.

Charles K. Spencer, then, would certainly have been the most astonished, though perhaps the most self possessed, man in London had some guardian sprite whispered low in his ear what strange hazard lay in his choice of a chair. If such whisper were vouchsafed to him he paid no heed. Perhaps his occupancy of that particular corner was preordained. It was inviting, secluded, an upholstered backwash in the stream of fashion; so he sat there, nearly stunned a waiter by asking for a glass of water, and composed himself to read his letters.

The waiter hesitated. He was a Frenchman, and feared he had not heard aright.

"What sort of water, sir," he asked, – "Vichy, St. Galmier, Apollinaris?"

Spencer looked up. He thought the man had gone. "No, none of those," he said. "Just plain, unemotional water, —*eau naturelle*, – straight from the pipe, – the microbe laden fluid that runs off London tiles most days. I haven't been outside the hotel during the last hour; but if you happen to pass the door I guess you'll see the kind of essence I mean dripping off umbrellas. If you don't keep it in the house, try to borrow a policeman's cape and shoot a quart into a decanter."

The quelled waiter hurried away and brought a carafe. Spencer professed to be so pleased with his rare intelligence that he gave him a shilling. Then he opened the envelop with the Leadville postmark. It contained a draft for 205 pounds, 15 shillings, 11 pence, and the accompanying letter from a firm of solicitors showed that the remittance of a thousand dollars was the moiety of the proceeds of a clean-up on certain tailings taken over by the purchasers of the Battle Mountain tunnel. The sum was not a large one; but it seemed to give its recipient such satisfaction that the movement of chairs on the floor of the big room just beneath failed to draw his attention from the lawyer's statement.

A woman's languid, well bred voice broke in on this apparently pleasant reverie.

"Shall we sit here, Helen?"

"Anywhere you like, dear. It is all the same to me. Thanks to you, I am passing an afternoon in wonderland. I find my surroundings so novel and entertaining that I should still be excited if you were to put me in the refrigerator."

The eager vivacity of the second speaker – the note of undiluted and almost childlike glee with which she acknowledged that a visit to a luxurious hotel was a red letter day in her life – caused the man to glance at the two young women who had unconsciously disturbed him. Evidently, they had just risen from luncheon in the restaurant, and meant to dispose themselves for a chat. It was equally clear that each word they uttered in an ordinary conversational tone must be audible to him. They were appropriating chairs which would place the plumes of their hats within a few inches of his feet. When seated, their faces would be hidden from him, save for a possible glimpse of a profile as one or other turned toward her companion. But for a few seconds he had a good view of both, and he was young enough to find the scrutiny to his liking.

At the first glance, the girl who was acting as hostess might be deemed the more attractive of the pair. She was tall, slender, charmingly dressed, and carried herself with an assured elegance that hinted of the stage. Spencer caught a glint of corn flower blue eyes beneath long lashes, and a woman would have deduced from their color the correct explanation of a blue sunshade, a blue straw hat, and a light cape of Myosotis blue silk that fell from shapely shoulders over a white lace gown.

The other girl, – she who answered to the name of Helen, – though nearly as tall and quite as graceful, was robed so simply in muslin that she might have provided an intentional contrast. In the man's esteem she lost nothing thereby. He appraised her by the fine contour of her oval face, the wealth of glossy brown hair that clustered under her hat, and the gleam of white teeth between lips of healthy redness. Again, had he looked through a woman's eyes, he would have seen how the difference between Bond-st. and Kilburn as shopping centers might be sharply accentuated. But that distinction did not trouble him. Beneath a cold exterior he had an artist's soul, and "Helen" met an ideal.

"Pretty as a peach!" he said to himself, and he continued to gaze at her. Indeed, for an instant he forgot himself, and it was not until she spoke again that he realized how utterly oblivious were both girls of his nearness.

"I suppose everybody who comes here is very rich," was her rather awe-stricken comment.

Her companion laughed. "How nice of you to put it that way! It makes me feel quite important. I lunch or dine or sup here often, and the direct inference is that I am rolling in wealth."

"Well, dear, you earn a great deal of money – "

"I get twenty pounds a week, and this frock I am wearing cost twenty-five. Really, Helen, you are the sweetest little goose I ever met. You live in London, but are not of it. You haven't grasped the first principle of social existence. If I dressed within my means, and never spent a sovereign until it was in my purse, I should not even earn the sovereign. I simply must mix with this crowd whether I can afford it or not."

"But surely you are paid for your art, not as a mannikin. You are almost in the front rank of musical comedy. I have seen you occasionally at the theater, and I thought you were the best dancer in the company."

"What about my singing?"

"You have a very agreeable and well trained voice."

"I'm afraid you are incorrigible. You ought to have said that I sang better than I danced, and the fib would have pleased me immensely; we women like to hear ourselves praised for accomplishments we don't possess. No, my dear, rule art out of the cast and substitute advertisement. Did you notice a dowdy creature who was lunching with two men on your right? She wore a brown Tussore silk and a turban – well, she writes the 'Pars About People' in 'The Daily Journal.' I'll bet you a pair of gloves that you will see something like this in to-morrow's paper: 'Lord Archie Beaumanoir entertained a party of friends at the Embankment Hotel yesterday. At the next table Miss Millicent Jaques, of the Wellington Theater, was lunching with a pretty girl whom I did not know. Miss Jaques wore an exquisite,' etc., etc. Fill in full details of my personal appearance, and you have the complete paragraph. The public, the stupid, addle-headed public, fatten on that sort of thing, and it keeps me going far more effectively than my feeble attempts to warble a couple of songs which you could sing far better if only you made up your mind to come on the stage. But there! After such unwonted candor I must have a smoke. You won't try a cigarette? Well, don't look so shocked. This isn't a church, you know."

Spencer, who had listened with interest to Miss Jaques's outspoken views, suddenly awoke to the fact that he was playing the part of an eavesdropper. He had all an American's chivalrous instincts where women were concerned, and his first impulse was to betake himself and his letters to his own room. Yet, when all was said and done, he was in a hotel; the girls were strangers, and likely to remain so; and it was their own affair if they chose to indulge in unguarded confidences. So he compromised with his scruples by pouring out a glass of water, replacing the decanter on its tray with some degree of noise. Then he struck an unnecessary match and applied it to his cigar before opening the first of the Denver letters.

As his glance was momentarily diverted, he did not grasp the essential fact that neither of the pair was disturbed by his well meant efforts. Millicent Jaques was lighting a cigarette, and this, to a woman, is an all absorbing achievement, while her friend was so new to her palatial surroundings that she had not the least notion of the existence of another open floor just above the level of her eyes.

"I don't know how in the world you manage to exist," went on the actress, tilting herself back in her chair to watch the smoke curling lazily upward. "What was it you said the other day when we met? You are some sort of secretary and amanuensis to a scientist? Does that mean typewriting? And what is the science?"

"Professor von Eulenberg is a well known man," was the quiet reply. "I type his essays and reports, it is true; but I also assist in his classification work, and it is very interesting."

"What does he classify?"

"Mostly beetles."

"Oh, how horrid! Do you ever see any?"

"Thousands."

"I should find one enough. If it is a fair question, what does your professor pay you?"

"Thirty shillings a week. In his own way he is as poor as I am."

"And do you mean to tell me that you can live in those nice rooms you took me to, and dress decently on that sum?"

"I do, as a matter of fact; but I have a small pension, and I earn a little by writing titbits of scientific gossip for 'The Firefly.' Herr von Eulenberg helps. He translates interesting paragraphs from the foreign technical papers, and I jot them down, and by that means I pick up sufficient to buy an extra hat or wrap, and go to a theater or a concert. But I have to be careful, as my employer is absent each summer for two months. He goes abroad to hunt new specimens, and of course I am not paid then."

"Is he away now?"

"Yes."

"And how do you pass your time?"

"I write a good deal. Some day I hope to get a story accepted by one of the magazines; but it is so hard for a beginner to find an opening."

"Yet when I offered to give you a start in the chorus of the best theater in London, – a thing, mind you, that thousands of girls are aching for, – you refused."

"I'm sorry, Millie dear; but I am not cut out for the stage. It does not appeal to me."

"Heigho! Tastes differ. Stick to your beetles, then, and marry your professor."

Helen laughed, with a fresh joyousness that was good to hear. "Herr von Eulenberg is blessed with an exceedingly stout wife and five very healthy children already," she cried.

"Then that settles it. You're mad, quite mad! Let us talk of something else. Do you ever have a holiday? Where are you going this year? I'm off to Champèry when the theater closes."

"Champèry, – in Switzerland, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Ah, that is the dream of my life, – to see the everlasting snows; to climb those grand, solemn mountains; to cross the great passes that one reads of in the travel books. Now at last you have made me envious. Are you going alone? But of course that is a foolish question. You intend to join others from the theater, no doubt?"

"Well – er – something of the sort. I fear my enthusiasm will not carry me far on the lines that would appeal to you. I suppose you consider a short skirt, strong boots, a Tyrolese hat, and an alpenstock to be a sufficient rig-out, whereas my mountaineering costumes will fill five large trunks and three hat boxes. I'm afraid, Helen, we don't run on the same rails, as our American cousins say."

There was a little pause. Millicent's words, apparently tossed lightly into the air after a smoke spiral, had in them a touch of bitterness, it might be of self analysis. Her guest seemed to take thought before she answered:

"Perhaps the divergence is mainly in environment. And I have always inclined to the more serious side of life. Even when we were together in Brussels – "

"You? Serious? At Madam Bérard's? I like that. Who was it that kicked the plaster off the dormitory wall higher than her head? Who put pepper in Signor Antonio's snuff box?"

Spencer saw the outer waves of a flush on Helen's cheeks. "This is exceedingly interesting," he thought; "but I cannot even persuade myself that I ought to listen any longer. Yet, if I rise now and walk away they will know I heard every word."

Nevertheless, he meant to go, at the risk of their embarrassment; but he waited for Helen's reply. She laughed, and the ripple of her mirth was as musical as her voice, whereas many women

dowered with pleasantly modulated notes for ordinary conversation should be careful never to indulge in laughter, which is less controllable and therefore natural.

"That is the worst of having a past," she said. "Let me put it, then, that entomology as a pursuit sternly represses frivolousness."

"Does entomology mean beetles?"

"My dear, if you asked Herr von Eulenberg that question he would sate your curiosity with page extracts from one of his books. He has written a whole volume to prove that the only true entoma, or insects, are Condylopoda and Hexapoda, which means – "

"Cockroaches! Good gracious! To think of Helen Wynton, who once hit a Belgian boy very hard on the nose for being rude, wasting her life on such rubbish! And you actually seem to thrive on it. I do believe you are far happier than I."

"At present I am envying you that trip to Champèry. Why cannot some fairy godmother call in at No. 5, Warburton Gardens, to-night and wave over my awed head a wand that shall scatter sleeping car tickets and banknotes galore, or at any rate sufficient thereof to take me to the Engadine and back?"

"Ah, the Engadine. I am not going there this year, I think."

"Haven't you planned your tour yet?"

"No – that is, not exactly."

"Do you know, that is one of my greatest pleasures. With a last year's Continental Bradshaw and a few tattered Baedekers I journey far afield. I know the times, the fares, and the stopping places of all the main routes from Calais and Boulogne. I could pass a creditable examination in most of the boat and train services by way of Ostend, Flushing, and the Hook of Holland. I assure you, Millie, when my ship does come home, or the glittering lady whom I have invoked deigns to visit my lodgings, I shall call a cab for Charing Cross or Victoria with the assurance of a seasoned traveler."

For some reason, Miss Jaques refused to share her friend's enthusiasm. "You are easily pleased," she said listlessly. "For my part, after one shuddering glance at the Channel, I try to deaden all sensation till I find myself dressing for dinner at the Ritz. I positively refuse to go beyond Paris the first day. Ah, bother! Here comes a man whom I wish to avoid. Let us be on the move before he sees us, which he cannot fail to do. Don't forget that I have a rehearsal at three. I haven't, really; but we must escape somehow."

Spencer, who had salved his conscience by endeavoring to read a technical letter on mining affairs, would be less than human if he did not lift his eyes then. It is odd how the sense of hearing, when left to its unfettered play by the absence of the disturbing influence of facial expression, can discriminate in its analysis of the subtler emotions. He was quite sure that Miss Jaques was startled, even annoyed, by the appearance of some person whom she did not expect to meet, and he surveyed the new arrival critically, perhaps with latent hostility.

He saw a corpulent, well dressed man standing at the foot of the stairs and looking around the spacious room. Obviously, he had not come from the restaurant. He carried his hat, gloves, and stick in his left hand. With his right hand he caressed his chin, and his glance wandered slowly over the little knots of people in the foyer. Beyond the fact that a large diamond sparkled on one of his plump fingers, and that his olive tinted face was curiously opposed to the whiteness of the uplifted hand, he differed in no essential from the hundreds of spick and span idlers who might be encountered at that hour in the west end of London. He had the physique and bearing of a man athletic in his youth but now over-indulgent. An astute tailor had managed to conceal the too rounded curves of the fourth decade by fashioning his garments skillfully. His coat fitted like a skin across his shoulders but hung loosely in front. The braid of a colored waistcoat was a marvel of suggestion in indicating a waist, and the same adept craftsmanship carried the eye in faultless lines to his verni boots. Judged by his profile, he was not ill looking. His features were regular, the mouth and chin strong, the forehead

slightly rounded, and the nose gave the merest hint of Semitic origin. Taken altogether, he had the style of a polished man of the world, and Spencer smiled at the sudden fancy that seized him.

"I am attending the first act of a little play," he thought. "Helen and Millicent rise and move to center of stage; enter the conventional villain."

Miss Jaques was not mistaken when she said that her acquaintance would surely see her. She and Helen Wynton had not advanced a yard from their corner before the newcomer discovered them. He hastened to meet them, with the aspect of one equally surprised and delighted. His manners were courtly, and displayed great friendliness; but Spencer was quick to notice the air of interest with which his gaze rested on Helen. It was possible to see now that Millicent's unexpected friend had large, prominent dark eyes which lent animation and vivacity to a face otherwise heavy and coarse. It was impossible to hear all that was said, as the trio stood in the middle of the room and a couple of men passing up the stairs at the moment were talking loudly. But Spencer gathered that Millicent was explaining volubly how she and Miss Wynton had "dropped in here for luncheon by the merest chance," and was equally emphatic in the declaration that she was already overdue at the theater.

The man said something, and glanced again at Helen. Evidently, he asked for an introduction, which Miss Jaques gave with an affability that was eloquent of her powers as an actress. The unwished for cavalier was not to be shaken off. He walked with them up the stairs and crossed the entrance hall. Spencer, stuffing his letters into a pocket, strolled that way too, and saw this pirate in a morning coat bear off both girls in a capacious motor car.

Not to be balked of the dénouement of the little comedy in real life for which he had provided the audience, the American grabbed the hall porter.

"Say," he said, "do you know that gentleman?"

"Yes, sir. That is Mr. Mark Bower."

Spencer beamed on the man as though he had just discovered that Mr. Mark Bower was his dearest friend.

"Well, now, if that isn't the queerest thing!" he said. "Is that Mark? He's just gone round to the Wellington Theater, I guess. How far is it from here?"

"Not a hundred yards, sir."

Off went Spencer, without his hat. He had intended to follow in a cab, but a sprint would be more effective over such a short distance. He crossed the Strand without heed to the traffic, turned to the right, and, to use his own phrase, "butted into a policeman" at the first corner.

"I'm on the hunt for the Wellington Theater," he explained.

"You needn't hunt much farther," said the constable good humoredly. "There it is, a little way up on the left."

At that instant Spencer saw Bower raise his hat to the two women. They hurried inside the theater, and their escort turned to reënter his motor. The American had learned what he wanted to know. Miss Jaques had shaken off her presumed admirer, and Miss Wynton had aided and abetted her in the deed.

"You don't say!" he exclaimed, gazing at the building admiringly. "It looks new. In fact the whole street has a kind of San Francisco-after-the-fire appearance."

"That's right, sir. It's not so long since some of the worst slums in London were pulled down to make way for it."

"It's fine; but I'm rather stuck on antiquities. I've seen plenty of last year's palaces on the other side. Have a drink, will you, when time's up?"

The policeman glanced surreptitiously at the half-crown which Spencer insinuated into his palm, and looked after the donor as he went back to the hotel.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" he said to himself. "I've often heard tell of the way some Americans see London; but I never came across a chap who rushed up in his bare head and took a squint at any

place in that fashion. He seemed to have his wits about him too; but there must be a screw loose somewhere."

And indeed Charles K. Spencer, had he paused to take stock of his behavior, must have admitted that it was, to say the least, erratic. But his imagination was fired; his sympathies were all a-quiver with the thought that it lay within his power to share with a kin soul some small part of the good fortune that had fallen to his lot of late.

"Wants a fairy godmother, does she?" he asked himself, and the quiet humor that gleamed in his face caused more than one passerby to turn and watch him as he strode along the pavement. "Well, I guess I'll play a character not hitherto heard of in the legitimate drama. What price the fairy godfather? I've a picture of myself in that rôle. Oh, my! See me twirl that wand! Helen, you shall climb those rocks. But I don't like your friend. I sha'n't send you to Champèry. No – Champèry's off the map for you."

CHAPTER II
THE FULFILLMENT OF THE WISH

Explanations of motive are apt to become tedious. They are generally inaccurate too; for who can reduce a fantasy to a formula? Nor should they ever be allowed to clip the wings of romance. But the painter who bade his subject sit under a sodium light would justly be deemed a lunatic, and any analysis of Spencer's character drawn from his latest prank would be faulty in the extreme.

In all London at that moment there was not a more level headed man of his years. He was twenty-eight, an expert mining engineer, and the successful pioneer of a new method of hauling ore. Even in Western America, "God's own country," as it is held to be by those who live there, few men "arrive" so early in life. Some, it is true, amass wealth by lucky speculation before they are fitted by experience to earn the price of a suit of clothes. But they are of the freak order. They are not to be classed with one who by hard work wrests a fortune out of the grim Colorado granite. Spencer had been called on to endure long years of rebuff and scorn. Though scoffed at by many who thought he was wrong, he persisted because he knew he was right.

Ofttimes Fate will test such a man almost to breaking point. Then she yields, and, being feminine, her obduracy is the measure of her favors, for she will bestow on her dogged suitor all, and more than all, that he desired.

The draft from Leadville, crammed so carelessly into a pocket when he followed the three to the door, was a fair instance of this trick of hers. A tunnel, projected and constructed in the teeth of ridicule and financial opposition, had linked up the underground workings of several mines, and proved conclusively that it was far cheaper to bring minerals to the rail in that manner than to sink expensive shafts, raise the ore to the top of a mountain, and cart it to its old level in the valley.

Once the thing was indisputable, the young engineer found himself rich and famous. To increase the feeders of the main bore, he drove another short gallery through a mining claim acquired for a few dollars, – a claim deemed worthless owing to a geological fault that traversed its whole length. That was Fate's opportunity. Doubtless she smiled mischievously when she gave him a vein of rich quartz through which to quarry his way. The mere delving of the rock had produced two thousand dollars' worth of ore, of which sum he took a moiety by agreement with the company that purchased his rights.

People in Leadville soon discovered that Spencer was a bright man, – "yes, sir, a citizen of whom the chief mining city of the Rocky Mountains has every reason to be proud," – and the railway magnate who had nearly ruined him by years of hostility buried the past grandiloquently with a *mot*.

"Charles K. Spencer can't be sidetracked," he said. "That K isn't in his name by accident. Look at it, – a regular buffer of a letter! Tell you what, you may monkey with Charles; but when you hit the K look out for trouble."

Whereupon the miners laughed, and said that the president was a mighty smart man too, and Spencer, who knew he was a thief, but was unwilling to quarrel with him for the sake of the company, thought that a six months' vacation in Europe would make for peace and general content.

He had no plans. He was free to wander whithersoever chance led him. Arriving in London from Plymouth late on a Thursday evening, he took a bus-driver's holiday on Friday. Finding a tunnel under the Thames in full progress near the hotel, he sought the resident engineer, spoke to him in the lingua franca of the craft, and spent several dangerous and enjoyable hours in crawling through all manner of uncomfortable passages bored by human worms beneath the bed of the river.

And this was Saturday, and here he was, at three o'clock in the afternoon, turning over in his mind the best way of sending on an expensive trip abroad a girl who had not the remotest notion of his existence. It was a whim, and a harmless one, and he excused it to his practical mind by the

reflection that he was entitled to one day of extravagance after seven years of hard labor. For his own part, he was weary of mountains. He had wrought against one, frowning and stubborn as any Alp, and had not desisted until he reached its very heart with a four thousand foot lance. Switzerland was the last place in Europe he would visit. He wanted to see old cities and dim cathedrals, to lounge in pleasant lands where rivers murmured past lush meadows. Though an American born and bred, there was a tradition in his home that the Spencers were once people of note on the border. When tired of London, he meant to go north, and ramble through Liddesdale in search of family records. But the business presently on hand was to arrange that Swiss excursion for "Helen," and he set about it with characteristic energy.

In the first instance, he noted her name and address on the back of the Leadville envelop. Then he sought the manager.

"I guess you know Switzerland pretty well," he said, when a polite man was produced by a boy.

The assumption was well founded. In fact, the first really important looking object the manager remembered seeing in this world was the giant Matterhorn, because his mother told him that if he was a bad boy he would be carried off by the demons that dwelt on its summit.

"What sort of places are Evian-les-Bains and Champèry?" went on Spencer.

"Evian is a fashionable lakeside town. Champèry is in the hills behind it. When Evian becomes too hot in August, one goes to Champèry to cool down."

"Are they anywhere near the Engadine?"

"Good gracious, no! They are as different as chalk and cheese."

"Is the Engadine the cheese? Does it take the biscuit?"

The manager laughed. Like all Londoners, he regarded every American as a humorist. "It all depends," he said. "For my part, I think the Upper Engadine is far and away the most charming section of Switzerland; but there are ladies of my acquaintance who would unhesitatingly vote for Evian, and for a score of other places where there are promenades and casinos. Are you thinking of making a tour there?"

"There's no telling where I may bring up when I cross the Channel," said Spencer. "I have heard some talk of the two districts, and it occurred to me that you were just the man to give me a few useful pointers."

"Well, the average tourist rushes from one valley to another, tramps over a pass each morning, and spends the afternoon in a train or on board a lake steamer. But if I wanted a real rest, and wished at the same time to be in a center from which pleasant walks, or stiff climbs for that matter, could be obtained, I should go by the Engadine Express to St. Moritz, and drive from there to the Maloja-Kulm, where there is an excellent hotel and usually a number of nice people."

"English?"

"Yes, English and Americans. They select the best as a rule, you know."

"It sounds attractive," said Spencer.

"And it is, believe me. Don't forget the name, Maloja-Kulm. It is twelve miles from everywhere, and practically consists of the one big hotel."

Spencer procured his hat, gloves, and stick, and called a cab. "Take me to 'The Firefly' office," he said.

"Beg pawdon, sir, but where's that?" asked the driver.

"It's up to you to find out."

"Then w'at is it, guv'nor? I've heerd of the 'Orse an' 'Ound, the Chicken's Friend, the Cat, an' the Bee; but the Firefly leaves me thinkin'. Is it a noospaper?"

"Something of the sort."

"All right, sir. Jump in. We'll soon be on its track."

The hansom scampered off to Fleet-st. As the result of inquiries Spencer was deposited at the entrance to a dingy court, the depths of which, he was assured, were illumined by "The Firefly." There

is nothing that so mystifies the citizen of the New World as the hole-and-corner aspect of some of the business establishments of London. He soon learns, however, to differentiate between the spidery dens where money is amassed and the soot laden tenements in which the struggle for existence is keen. A comprehensive glance at the exterior of the premises occupied by "The Firefly" at once explained to Spencer why the cabman did not know its whereabouts. Three small rooms sufficed for its literary and commercial staff, and "To let" notices stared from several windows in the same building.

"Appearances are deceptive ever," murmured he, as he scanned the legends on three doors in a narrow lobby; "but I think I'm beginning to catch on to the limited extent of Miss Helen's earnings from her scientific paragraphs."

He knocked at each door; but received no answer. Then, having sharp ears, he tried the handle of one marked "Private." It yielded, and he entered, to be accosted angrily by a pallid, elderly, bewhiskered man, standing in front of a much littered table.

"Confound it, sir!" came the growl, "don't you know it is Saturday afternoon? And what do you mean by coming in unannounced?"

"Guess you're the editor?" said Spencer.

"What if I am?"

"I've just happened along to have a few quiet words with you. If there's no callers Saturdays, why, that's exactly what I want, and I came right in because you didn't answer my knock."

"I tell you I'm not supposed to be here."

"Then you shouldn't draw corks while anybody is damaging the paint outside."

Spencer smiled so agreeably that the editor of "The Firefly" softened. At first, he had taken his visitor for an unpaid contributor; but the American accent banished this phantom of the imagination. He continued to pour into a tumbler the contents of a bottle of beer.

"Well," he said, "now that you are here, what can I do for you, Mr. – "

"Spencer – Charles K. Spencer."

Instantly it struck the younger man that little more than an hour had elapsed since he gave his name to the letter clerk in the hotel. The singularity of his proceedings during that hour was thereby brought home to him. He knew nothing of newspapers, daily or weekly; but commonsense suggested that "The Firefly's" radiance was not over-powering. His native shrewdness advised caution, though he felt sure that he could, in homely phrase, twist this faded journalist round his little finger.

"Before I open the ball," he said, "may I see a copy of your magazine?"

Meanwhile the other was trying to sum him up. He came to the conclusion that his visitor meant to introduce some new advertising scheme, and, as "The Firefly" was sorely in need of advertisements, he decided to listen.

"Here is last week's issue," he said, handing to Spencer a small sixteen-page publication. The American glanced through it rapidly, while the editor sampled the beer.

"I see," said Spencer, after he had found a column signed "H. W.," which consisted of paragraphs translated from a German article on airships, – "I see that 'The Firefly' scintillates around the Tree of Knowledge."

The editor relaxed sufficiently to smile. "That is a good description of its weekly flights," he said.

"You don't use many cuts?"

"N-no. They are expensive and hard to obtain for such subjects as we favor."

"Don't you think it would be a good notion to brighten it up a bit – put in something lively, and more in keeping with the name?"

"I have no opening for new matter, if that is what you mean," and the editor stiffened again.

"But you have the say-so as to the contents, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes. The selection rests with me."

"Good. I'm sort of interested in a young lady, Miss Helen Wynton by name. She lives in Warburton Gardens, and does work for you occasionally. Now, I propose to send her on a month's trip to Switzerland, where she will represent 'The Firefly.' You must get her to turn out a couple of pages of readable stuff each week, which you will have illustrated by a smart artist at a cost of say, twenty pounds an article for drawings and blocks. I pay all expenses, she gets the trip, and you secure some good copy for nothing. Is it a deal?"

The editor sat down suddenly and combed his whiskers with nervous fingers. He was a weak man, and a too liberal beer diet was not good for him.

"Are you in earnest, Mr. Spencer?" he queried in a bewildered way.

"Dead in earnest. You write the necessary letter to Miss Wynton while I am here, and I hand you the first twenty in notes. You are to tell her to call Monday noon at any bank you may select, and she will be given her tickets and a hundred pounds. When I am certain that she has started I undertake to pay you a further sum of sixty pounds. I make only two conditions. You must guarantee to star her work, as it should help her some, and my identity must not be disclosed to her under any circumstances. In a word, she must regard herself as the accredited correspondent of 'The Firefly.' If she appears to be a trifle rattled by your generosity in the matter of terms, you must try and look as if you did that sort of thing occasionally and would like to do it often."

The editor pushed his chair away from the table. He seemed to require more air. "Again I must ask you if you actually mean what you say?" he gasped.

Spencer opened a pocketbook and counted four five-pound notes out of a goodly bundle. "It is all here in neat copperplate," he said, placing the notes on the table. "Maybe you haven't caught on to the root idea of the proposition," he continued, seeing that the other man was staring at him blankly. "I want Miss Wynton to have a real good time. I also want to lift her up a few rungs of the journalistic ladder. But she is sensitive, and would resent patronage; so I must not figure in the affair at all. I have no other motive at the back of my head. I'm putting up two hundred pounds out of sheer philanthropy. Will you help?"

"There are points about this amazing proposal that require elucidation," said the editor slowly. "Travel articles might possibly come within the scope of 'The Firefly'; but I am aware that Miss Wynton is what might be termed an exceedingly attractive young lady. For instance, you wouldn't be philanthropic on my account."

"You never can tell. It all depends how your case appealed to me. But if you are hinting that I intend to use my scheme for the purpose of winning Miss Wynton's favorable regard, I must say that she strikes me as the kind of girl who would think she had been swindled if she learned the truth. In any event, I may never see her again, and it is certainly not my design to follow her to Switzerland. I don't kick at your questions. You're old enough to be her father, and mine, for that matter. Go ahead. This is Saturday afternoon, you know, and there's no business stirring."

Spencer had to cover the ground a second time before everything was made clear. At last the fateful letter was written. He promised to call on Monday and learn how the project fared. Then he relieved the cabman's anxiety, as the alley possessed a second exit, and was driven to the Wellington Theater, where he secured a stall for that night's performance of the Chinese musical comedy in which Miss Millicent Jaques played the part of a British Admiral's daughter.

While Spencer was watching Helen's hostess cutting capers in a Mandarin's palace, Helen herself was reading, over and over again, a most wonderful letter that had fallen from her sky. It had all the appearance of any ordinary missive. The King's face on a penny stamp, or so much of it as was left uninjured by a postal smudge, looked familiar enough, and both envelop and paper resembled those which had brought her other communications from "The Firefly." But the text was magic, rank necromancy. No wizard who ever dealt in black letter treatises could have devised a more convincing proof of his occult powers than this straightforward offer made by the editor of "The Firefly." Four articles of five thousand words each, – tickets and 100 pounds awaiting her at a bank, –

go to the Maloja-Kulm Hotel; leave London at the earliest possible date; please send photographs and suggestions for black-and-white illustrations of mountaineering and society! What could it possibly mean?

At the third reading Helen began to convince herself that this rare stroke of luck was really hers. The concluding paragraph shed light on "The Firefly's" extraordinary outburst.

"As this commission heralds a new departure for the paper, I have to ask you to be good enough not to make known the object of your journey. In fact, it will be as well if you do not state your whereabouts to any persons other than your near relatives. Of course, all need for secrecy ceases with the appearance of your first article; but by that time you will practically be on your way home again. I am anxious to impress on you the importance of this instruction."

Helen found herein the germ of understanding. "The Firefly" meant to boom itself on its Swiss correspondence; but even that darksome piece of journalistic enterprise did not explain the princely munificence of the hundred pounds. At last, when she calmed down sufficiently to be capable of connected thought, she saw that "mountaineering" implied the hire of guides, and that "society" meant frocks. Of course it was intended that she should spend the whole of the money, and thus give "The Firefly" a fair return for its outlay. And a rapid calculation revealed the dazzling fact that after setting aside the fabulous sum of two pounds a day for expenses she still had forty pounds left wherewith to replenish her scanty stock of dresses.

Believing that at any instant the letter might dissolve into a curt request to keep her scientific jottings strictly within the limits of a column, Helen sat with it lying open on her lap, and searched the pages of a tattered guidebook for particulars of the Upper Engadine. She had read every line before; but the words now seemed to live. St. Moritz, Pontresina, Sils-Maria, Silvaplana, – they ceased to be mere names, – they became actualities. The Julier Pass, the Septimer, the Forno Glacier, the Diavolezza Route, and the rest of the stately panorama of snow capped peaks, blue lakes, and narrow valleys, – valleys which began with picturesque chalets, dun colored cattle, and herb laden pastures, and ended in the yawning mouths of ice rivers whence issued the milky white streams that dashed through the lower gorges, – they passed before her eyes as she read till she was dazzled by their glories.

What a day dream to one who dwelt in smoky London year in and year out! What an experience to look forward to! What memories to treasure! Nor was she blind to the effect of the undertaking on her future. Though "The Firefly" was not an important paper, though its editor was of a half-forgotten day and generation, she would now have good work to show when asked what she had done. She was not enamored of beetles. Even the classifying of them was monotonous, and she had striven bravely to push her way through the throng of would-be writers that besieged the doors of every popular periodical in London. It was a heartbreaking struggle. The same post that gave her this epoch marking letter had brought back two stories with the stereotyped expression of editorial regret.

"Now," thought Helen, when her glance fell on the bulky envelops, "my name will at least become known. And editors very much resemble the public they cater for. If a writer achieves success, they all want him. I have often marveled how any author got his first chance. Now I know. It comes this way, like a flash of lightning from a summer sky."

It was only fit and proper that she should magnify her first real commission. No veteran soldier ever donned a field marshal's uniform with the same zest that he displayed when his subaltern's outfit came from the tailor. So Helen glowed with that serious enthusiasm which is the soul of genius, for without it life becomes flat and gray, and she passed many anxious, half-doubting hours until a courteous bank official handed her a packet at the appointed time on Monday, and gave her a receipt to sign, and asked her how she would take her hundred pounds – did she want it all in notes or some in gold?

She was so unnerved by this sudden confirmation of her good fortune that she stammered confusedly, "I – really – don't know."

"Well, it would be rather heavy in gold," came the smiling comment. "This money, I understand, is paid to you for some journalistic enterprise that will take you abroad. May I suggest that you should carry, say, thirty pounds in notes and ten in gold, and allow me to give you the balance in the form of circular notes, which are payable only under your signature?"

"Yes," said Helen, rosy red at her own awkwardness, "that will be very nice."

The official pushed across the counter some banknotes and sovereigns, and summoned a commissionaire to usher her into the waiting room till he had prepared the circular notes. The respite was a blessing. It gave Helen time to recover her self possession. She opened the packet and found therein coupons for the journey to and from St. Moritz, together with a letter from the sleeping car company, from which she gathered that a berth on the Engadine Express was provisionally reserved in her name for the following Thursday, but any change to a later date must be made forthwith, as the holiday pressure was beginning. It was advisable too, she was reminded, that she should secure her return berth before leaving London.

Each moment the reality of the tour became more patent. She might feel herself bewitched; but pounds sterling and railway tickets were tangible things, and not to be explained away by any fantasy. By the time her additional wealth was ready she was better fitted to guard it. She hurried away quite unconscious of the admiring eyes that were raised from dockets and ledgers behind the grille. She made for the court in which "The Firefly" had its abode. The squalor of the passage, the poverty stricken aspect of the stairs, – items which had prepared her on other occasions for the starvation rate of pay offered for her work, – now passed unheeded. This affectation of scanty means was humorous. Obviously, some millionaire had secured what the newspapers called "a controlling interest" in "The Firefly."

She sought Mackenzie, the editor, and he received her with a manifest reluctance to waste his precious time over details that was almost as convincing as the money and vouchers she carried.

"Yes, Thursday will suit admirably," he said in reply to her breathless questions. "You will reach Maloja on Friday evening, and if you post the first article that day week it will arrive in good time for the next number. As for the style and tone, I leave those considerations entirely to you. So long as the matter is bright and readable, that is all I want. I put my requirements clearly in my letter. Follow that, and you cannot make any mistake."

Helen little realized how precise were the instructions given two hours earlier to the editor, the bank clerk, and the sleeping car company. Mackenzie's curt acceptance of her mission brought a wondering cry to her lips.

"I am naturally overjoyed at my selection for this work," she said. "May I ask how you came to think of me?"

"Oh, it is hard to say how these things are determined," he answered. "We liked your crisp way of putting dull facts, I suppose, and thought that a young lady's impressions of life in an Anglo-Swiss summer community would be fresher and more attractive than a man's. That is all. I hope you will enjoy your experiences."

"But, please, I want to thank you – "

"Not a word! Business is business, you know. If a thing is worth doing, it must be done well. Good-by!"

He flattered himself that he could spend another man's money with as lordly an air as the youngest journalist on Fleet-st. The difficulty was to find the man with the money, and Mackenzie had given much thought during the Sabbath to the potentialities that lay behind Spencer's whim. He was sure the incident would not close with the publication of Miss Wynton's articles. Judiciously handled, her unknown benefactor might prove equally beneficial to "The Firefly."

So Helen tripped out into Fleet-st., and turned her pretty face westward, and looked so eager and happy that it is not surprising if many a man eyed her as she passed, and many a woman sighed to think that another woman could find life in this dreary city such a joyous thing.

A sharp walk through the Strand and across Trafalgar Square did a good deal toward restoring the poise of her wits. For safety, she had pinned the envelop containing her paper money and tickets inside her blouse. The mere presence of the solid little parcel reminded her at every movement that she was truly bound for the wonderful Engadine, and, now that the notion was becoming familiar, she was the more astonished that the choice of "The Firefly" had fallen on her. It was all very well for Mr. Mackenzie to say that the paper would be brightened by a woman's views on life in the high Alps. The poor worn man looked as if such a holiday would have done him a world of good. But the certain fact remained that there was no room for error. It was she, Helen Wynton, and none other, for whom the gods had contrived this miracle. If it had been possible, she would have crossed busy Cockspur-st. with a hop, skip, and a jump in order to gain the sleeping car company's premises.

She knew the place well. Many a time had she looked at the attractive posters in the windows, – those gorgeous fly sheets that told of winter in summer among the mountains of Switzerland and the Tyrol, and of summer in winter along the sunlit shores of the Côte d'Azur. She almost laughed aloud at the thought that possessed her as she waited for a moment on the curb to allow a press of traffic to pass.

"If my luck holds till Christmas, I may be sent to Monte Carlo," she said to herself. "And why not? It's the first step that counts, and 'The Firefly,' once fairly embarked on a career of wild extravagance, may keep it up."

Under the pressure of that further inspiration she refused to wait any longer, but dodged an omnibus, a motor car, and some hansoms, and pushed open the swing doors of the Bureau de la Campagnie des Wagons-Lits. She did not notice that the automobile stopped very quickly a few yards higher up the street. The occupant, Mark Bower, alighted, looked at her through the window to make sure he was not mistaken, and followed her into the building. He addressed some question to an attendant, and heard Helen say:

"Yes, please. Thursday will suit admirably. I am going straight through to St. Moritz. I shall call on Wednesday and let you know what day I wish to return."

If Bower had intended to speak to her, he seemed to change his mind rather promptly. Helen's back was turned. She was watching a clerk writing out a voucher for her berth in the sleeping car, and the office was full of other prospective travelers discussing times and routes with the officials. Bower thanked his informant for information which he could have supplied in ampler detail himself. Then he went out, and looked again at Helen from the doorway; but she was wholly unaware of his presence.

Thus it came about, quite simply and naturally, that Mark Bower met Miss Helen Wynton on the platform of Victoria Station on Thursday morning, and learned that, like himself, she was a passenger by the Engadine Express. He took her presence as a matter of course, hoped she would allow him to secure her a comfortable chair on the steamer, told her that the weather report was excellent, and remarked that they might expect a pleasant crossing in the new turbine steamer.

Then, having ascertained that she had a corner seat, and that her luggage was registered through to St. Moritz (Helen having arrived at the station a good hour before the train was due to start), he bowed himself away, being far too skilled a stalker of such shy game to thrust his company on her at that stage.

His attitude was very polite and friendly, and Helen was almost grateful to the chance which had brought him there. She was feeling just a trifle lonely in the midst of the gay and chattering throng that crowded the station. The presence of one who was not wholly a stranger, of a friend's friend, of a man whose name was familiar, made the journey look less dreamlike. She was glad he had not sought to travel in her carriage. That was tactful, and indeed his courtesy and pleasant words during her first brief meeting with him in the Embankment Hotel had conveyed the same favorable impression.

So when the hour hand of the big clock overhanging the center of the platform pointed to eleven, the long train glided quietly away with its load of pleasure-seekers, and neither Helen nor her new acquaintance could possibly know that their meeting had been witnessed, with a blank amazement

that was rapidly transmuted into sheer annoyance, by a young American engineer named Charles K. Spencer.

CHAPTER III
WHEREIN TWO PEOPLE BECOME BETTER ACQUAINTED

Mackenzie, of course, was aware that Miss Wynton would leave London by the eleven o'clock train on Thursday, and Spencer saw no harm in witnessing her departure. He found a good deal of quiet fun in noting her animated expression and businesslike air. Her whole-souled enjoyment of novel surroundings was an asset for the outlay of his two hundred pounds, and he had fully and finally excused that piece of extravagance until he caught sight of Bower strolling along the platform with the easy confidence of one who knew exactly whom he would meet and how he would account for his unbidden presence.

Spencer at once suspected the man's motives, not without fair cause. They were, he thought, as plain to him as they were hidden from the girl. Bower counterfeited the genuine surprise on Helen's face with admirable skill; but, to the startled onlooker, peering beneath the actor's mask, his stagy artifice was laid bare.

And Spencer was quite helpless, a condition that irritated him almost beyond control. He had absolutely no grounds for interference. He could only glower angrily and in silence at a meeting he could not prevent. Conjecture might run riot as to the causes which had given this sinister bend to an idyl, but perforce he must remain dumb.

From one point of view, it was lucky that Helen's self appointed "godfather" was in a position not to misjudge her; from another, it would have been better for Spencer's peace of mind were he left in ignorance of the trap that was apparently being laid for her. Perhaps Fate had planned this thing – having lately smiled on the American, she may have determined to plague him somewhat. At any rate, in that instant the whole trend of his purpose took a new turn. From a general belief that he would never again set eyes on one in whose fortunes he felt a transient interest, his intent swerved to a fixed resolve to protect her from Bower. It would have puzzled him to assign a motive for his dislike of the man. But the feeling was there, strong and active. It even gave him a certain satisfaction to remember that he was hostile to Bower before he had seen him.

Indeed, he nearly yielded to the momentary impulse that bade him hasten to the booking office and secure a ticket for St. Moritz forthwith. He dismissed the notion as quixotic and unnecessary. Bower's attitude in not pressing his company on Miss Wynton at this initial stage of the journey revealed a subtlety that demanded equal restraint on Spencer's part. Helen herself was so far from suspecting the truth that Bower would be compelled to keep up the pretense of a casual rencontre. Nevertheless, Spencer's chivalric nature was stirred to the depths. The conversation overheard in the Embankment Hotel had given him a knowledge of the characteristics of two women that would have amazed both of them were they told of it. He was able to measure too the exact extent of Bower's acquaintance with Helen, while he was confident that the relationship between Bower and Millicent Jaques had gone a great deal further than might be inferred from the actress's curt statement that he was one whom she "wished to avoid." These two extremes could be reconciled only by a most unfavorable estimate of Bower, and that the American conceded without argument.

Of course, there remained the possibility that Bower was really a traveler that day by idle chance; but Spencer blew aside this alternative with the first whiff of smoke from the cigar he lit mechanically as soon as the train left the station.

"No," he said, in grim self communing, "the skunk found out somehow that she was going abroad, and planned to accompany her. I could see it in the smirk on his face as soon as he discovered her whereabouts on the platform. If he means to summer at Maloja, I guess my thousand dollars was expended to no good purpose, and the quicker I put up another thousand to pull things straight the

happier I shall be. And let me tell you, mother, that if I get Helen through this business well and happy, I shall quit fooling round as godfather, or stage uncle, or any other sort of soft-hearted idiot. Meanwhile, Bower has jumped my claim."

His glance happened to fall on an official with the legend "Ticket Inspector" on the collar of his coat. He remembered that this man, or some other closely resembling him, had visited the carriage in which Bower traveled.

"Say," he cried, hailing him on the spur of the moment, "when does the next train leave for St. Moritz?"

"At two-twenty from Charing Cross, sir. But the Engadine Express is the best one. Did you miss it?"

"No. I just blew in here to see a friend off, and the trip kind of appealed to me. Did you notice a reserved compartment for a Mr. Mark Bower?"

"I know Mr. Bower very well, sir. He goes to Paris or Vienna twenty times a year."

"To-day he is going to Switzerland."

"So he is, to Zurich, I think. First single he had. But he's sure to bring up in Vienna or Frankfort. I wish I knew half what he knows about foreign money business. I shouldn't be punching tickets here very long. Thank you, sir. Charing Cross at two-twenty; but you may have difficulty about booking a berth in the sleeper. Just now everybody is crossing the Channel."

"It looks like that," said Spencer, who had obtained the information he wanted. Taking a cab, he drove to the sleeping car company's office, where he asked for a map of the Swiss railways. Zurich, as Bower's destination, puzzled him; but he did not falter in his purpose.

"The man is a rogue," he thought, "or I have never seen one. Anyhow, a night in the train doesn't cut any ice, and Switzerland can fill the bill for a week as well as London or Scotland."

He was fortunate in the fact that some person wished to postpone a journey that day, and the accident assured him of comfortable quarters from Calais onward. Then he drove to a bank, and to "The Firefly" office. Mackenzie had just opened his second bottle of beer. By this time he regarded Spencer as an amiable lunatic. He greeted him now with as much glee as his dreary nature was capable of.

"Hello!" he said. "Been to see the last of the lady?"

"Not quite. I want to take back what I said about not going to Switzerland. I'm following this afternoon."

"Great Scott! You're sudden."

"I'm built that way," said Spencer dryly. "Here are the sixty pounds I promised you. Now I want you to do me a favor. Send a messenger to the Wellington Theater with a note for Miss Millicent Jaques, and ask her if she can oblige you with the present address of Miss Helen Wynton. Make a pretext of work. No matter if she writes to her friend and the inquiry leads to talk. You can put up a suitable fairy tale, I have no doubt."

"Better still, let my assistant write. Then if necessary I can curse him for not minding his own business. But what's in the wind?"

"I wish to find out whether or not Miss Jaques knows of this Swiss journey; that is all. If the reply reaches you by one o'clock send it to the Embankment Hotel. Otherwise, post it to me at the Kursaal, Maloja-Kulm; but not in an office envelop."

"You'll come back, Mr. Spencer?" said the editor plaintively, for he had visions of persuading the eccentric American to start a magazine of his own.

"Oh, yes. You'll probably see me again within six days. I'll look in and report progress. Good by."

A messenger caught him as he was leaving the hotel. Mackenzie had not lost any time, and Miss Jaques happened to be at the theater.

"Sorry," she wrote, in the artistic script that looks so well in face cream and soap advertisements, "I can't for the life of me remember the number; but Miss Wynton lives somewhere in Warburton Gardens." The signature, "Millicent Jaques," was an elegant thing in itself, carefully thought out and never hurried in execution, no matter how pressed she might be for time. Spencer was on the point of scattering the note in little pieces along the Strand; but he checked himself.

"Guess I'll keep this as a souvenir," he said, and it found a place in his pocketbook.

Helen Wynton, having crossed the Channel many times during her childhood, was no novice amid the bustle and crush on the narrow pier at Dover. She had dispensed with all accessories for the journey, except the few articles that could be crammed into a handbag. Thus, being independent of porters, she was one of the first to reach the steamer's gangway. As usual, all the most sheltered nooks on board were occupied. There seems to be a mysterious type of traveler who inhabits the cross-Channel vessels permanently. No matter how speedy may be the movements of a passenger by the boat-train, either at Dover or Calais, the best seats on the upper deck invariably reveal the presence of earlier arrivals by deposits of wraps and packages. This phenomenon was not strange to Helen. A more baffling circumstance was the altered shape of the ship. The familiar lines of the paddle steamer were gone, and Helen was wondering where she might best bestow herself and her tiny valise, when she heard Bower's voice.

"I took the precaution to telegraph from London to one of the ship's officers," he said, and nodded toward a couple of waterproof rugs which guarded a recess behind the Captain's cabin. "That is our corner, I expect. My friend will be here in a moment."

Sure enough, a man in uniform approached and lifted his gold laced cap. "We have a rather crowded ship, Mr. Bower," he said; "but you will be quite comfortable there. I suppose you deemed the weather too fine to need your usual cabin?"

"Yes. I have a companion to-day, you see."

Helen was a little bewildered by this; but it was very pleasant to claim undisputed possession of a quiet retreat from which to watch others trying to find chairs. And, although Bower had a place reserved by her side, he did not sit down. He chatted for a few minutes on such eminently safe topics as the smooth sea, the superiority of turbine engines in the matter of steadiness, the advisability of lunching in the train after leaving Calais, rather than on board the ship, and soon betook himself aft, there to smoke and chat with some acquaintances whom he fell in with. Dover Castle was becoming a gray blur on the horizon when he spoke to Helen again.

"You look quite comfortable," he said pleasantly, "and it is wise not to risk walking about if you are afraid of being ill."

"I used to cross in bad weather without consequences," she answered; "but I am older now, and am doubtful of experiments."

"You were educated abroad, then?"

"Yes. I was three years in Brussels – three happy years."

"Ah! Why qualify them? All your years are happy, I should imagine, if I may judge by appearances."

"Well, if happiness can be defined as contentment, you are right; but I have had my sad periods too, Mr. Bower. I lost my mother when I was eighteen, and that was a blow under which I have never ceased to wince. Fortunately, I had to seek consolation in work. Added to good health, it makes for content."

"You are quite a philosopher. Will you pardon my curiosity? I too lead the strenuous life. Now, I should like to have your definition of work. I am not questioning your capacity. My wonder is that you should mention it at all."

"But why? Any man who knows what toil is should not regard women as dolls."

"I prefer to look on them as goddesses."

Helen smiled. “I fear, then, you will deem my pedestal a sorry one,” she said. “Perhaps you think, because you met me once in Miss Jaques’s company, and again here, traveling *de luxe*, that I am in her set. I am not. By courtesy I am called a ‘secretary’; but the title might be shortened into ‘typist.’ I help Professor von Eulenberg with his – scientific researches.”

Though it was on the tip of her tongue to say “beetles,” she substituted the more dignified phrase. Bower was very nice and kind; but she felt that “beetles” might sound somewhat flippant and lend a too familiar tone to their conversation.

“Von Eulenberg? I have heard of him. Quite a distinguished man in his own line; an authority on – moths, is it?”

“Insects generally.”

She blushed and laughed outright, not only at the boomerang effect of her grandiloquent description of the professor’s industry, but at the absurdity of her position. Above all else, Helen was candid, and there was no reason why she should not enlighten a comparative stranger who seemed to take a friendly interest in her.

“I ought to explain,” she went on, “that I am going to the Engadine as a journalist. I have had the good fortune to be chosen for a very pleasant task. Hence this present grandeur, which, I assure you, is not a usual condition of entomological secretaries.”

Bower pretended to ward off some unexpected attack. “I have done nothing to deserve a hard word like that, Miss Wynton,” he cried. “I shall not recover till we reach Calais. May I sit beside you while you tell me what it means?”

She made room for him. “Strictly speaking, it is nonsense,” she said.

“Excellent. That is the better line for women who are young and pretty. We jaded men of the world hate to be serious when we leave business behind. Now, you would scarce credit what a lively youngster I am when I come abroad for a holiday. I always kiss my fingers to France at the first sight of her fair face. She bubbles like her own champagne, whereas London invariably reminds me of beer.”

“Do I take it that you prefer gas to froth?”

“You offer me difficult alternatives, yet I accept them. Though gas is as dreadful a description of champagne as entomological is of a certain type of secretary, I would venture to point out that it expands, effervesces, soars ever to greater heights; but beer, froth and all, tends to become flat, stale, and unprofitable.”

“I assure you my knowledge of both is limited. I had never even tasted champagne until the other day.”

“When you lunched with Millicent at the Embankment Hotel?”

“Well – yes. She was at school with me, and we met last week by accident. She is making quite a success at the Wellington Theater, is she not?”

“So I hear. I am a director of that concern; but I seldom go there.”

“How odd that sounds to one who saves up her pennies to attend a favorite play!”

“Then you must have my address, and when I am in town you need never want a stall at any theater in London. Now, that is no idle promise. I mean it. Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to think you were enjoying something through my instrumentality.”

“How exceedingly kind of you! I shall take you at your word. What girl wouldn’t?”

“I know quite a number who regard me as an ogre. I am not a lady’s man in the general sense of the term, Miss Wynton. I might tell you more about myself if it were not for signs that the next five minutes will bring us to Calais. You are far too independent, I suppose, that I should offer to carry your bag; but will you allow me to reserve a joint table for *déjeuner*? There will be a rush for the first service, which is the best, as a rule, and I have friends at court on this line. Please don’t say you are not hungry.”

“That would be impolite, and horribly untrue,” laughed Helen.

He took the implied permission, and hurried away. They did not meet again until he came to her carriage in the train.

"Is this where you are?" he cried, looking up at her through the open window. "I am in the next block, as they say in America. When you are ready I shall take you to the dining car. Come out on the platform. The corridors are simply impassable. And here are baskets of peaches, and ripe pears, and all manner of pleasant fruits. Yes, try the corridor to the right, and charge resolutely. If you inflict the maximum injury on others, you seldom damage yourself."

In a word, Mark Bower spoke as lightheartedly as he professed to feel, and Helen had no cause whatever to be other than thankful for the chance that brought him to Switzerland on the same day and in the same train as herself. His delicate consideration for her well being was manifested in many ways. That such a man, whom she knew to be a figure of importance in the financial world, should take an interest in the simple chronicles of her past life was a flattering thing in itself. He listened sympathetically to the story of her struggles since the death of her mother. The consequent stoppage of the annuity paid to the widow of an Indian civilian rendered it necessary that Helen should supplement by her own efforts the fifty pounds a year allotted to her "until death or marriage."

"There are plenty of country districts where I could exist quite easily on such a sum," she said; "but I declined to be buried alive in that fashion, and I made up my mind to earn my own living. Somehow, London appeals to young people situated as I was. It is there that the great prizes are to be gained; so I came to London."

"From – " broke in Bower, who was peeling one of the peaches bought at Calais.

"From a village near Sheringham, in Norfolk."

He nodded with smiling comprehension when she detailed her struggles with editors who could detect no originality in her literary work.

"But that phase has passed now," he said encouragingly.

"Well, it looks like it. I hope so; for I am tired of classifying beetles."

There – the word was out at last. Perhaps Bower wondered why she laughed and blushed at the recollection of her earlier determination to suppress von Eulenberg's "specimens" as a topic of conversation. Already the stiffness of their talk on board the steamship seemed to have vanished completely. It was really a pleasant way of passing the time to sit and chat in this glass palace while the train skimmed over a dull land of marshes and poplars.

"Beetles, though apt to be flighty, are otherwise dull creatures," he said. "May I ask what paper you are representing on your present tour?"

It was an obvious and harmless question; but Helen was loyal to her bond. "It sounds absurd to have to say it, but I am pledged to secrecy," she answered.

"Good gracious! Don't tell me you intend to interview anarchists, or runaway queens, or the other disgruntled people who live in Switzerland. Moreover, they usually find quarters in Geneva, while you presumably are bound for the Engadine."

"Oh, no. My work lies in less excitable circles. 'Life in a Swiss hotel' would be nearer the mark."

"Apart from the unusual surroundings, you will find it suspiciously like life in a quiet Norfolk village, Miss Wynton," said Bower. He paused, tasted the peach, and made a grimace. "Sour!" he protested. "Really, when all is said and done, the only place in which one can buy a decent peach is London."

"Ah, a distinct score for Britain!"

"And a fair hit to your credit. Let me urge in self defense that if life in France bubbles, it occasionally leaves a bitter taste in the mouth. Now you shall go and read, and sleep a little perhaps, if that is not a heretical thing to suggest. We have the same table for afternoon tea and dinner."

Helen had never met such a versatile man. He talked of most things with knowledge and restraint and some humor. She could not help admitting that the journey would have been exceedingly dull without his companionship, and he had the tact to make her feel that he was equally indebted to

her for passing the long hours. At dinner she noticed that they were served with dishes not supplied to others in the dining car.

"I hope you have not been ordering a dreadfully expensive meal," she ventured to say. "I must pay my share, you know, and I am quite an economical person."

"There!" he vowed. "That is the first unkind word you have uttered. Surely you will not refuse to be my guest? Indeed, I was hoping that to-day marked the beginning of a new era, wherein we might meet at times and criticize humanity to our hearts' content."

"I should feel unhappy if I did not pay," she insisted.

"Well, then, I shall charge you table d'hôte prices. Will that content you?"

So, when the attendant came to the other tables, Helen produced her purse, and Bower solemnly accepted her few francs; but no bill was presented to him.

"You see," he said, smiling at her through a glass of golden wine, "you have missed a great opportunity. Not one woman in a million can say that she has dined at the railway company's expense in France."

She was puzzled. His manner had become slightly more confidential during the meal. It needed no feminine intuition to realize that he admired her. Excitement, the sea air, the heated atmosphere, and unceasing onrush of the train, had flushed her cheeks and lent a deeper shade to her brown eyes. She knew that Bower's was not the only glance that dwelt on her with a curious and somewhat unnerving appraisement. Other men, and not a few women, stared at her. The mirror in her dressing room had told her that she was looking her best, and her heart fluttered a little at the thought that she had succeeded, without effort, in winning the appreciation of a man highly placed in the world of fashion and finance. The conceit induced an odd feeling of embarrassment. To dispel it she took up his words in a vein of playful sarcasm.

"If you assure me that for some unexplained reason the railway authorities are giving us this excellent dinner for nothing, please return my money," she said.

"The gifts of the gods, and eke of railway companies, must be taken without question," he answered. "No, I shall keep your pieces of silver. I mean to invest them. It will amuse me to learn how much I can make on an initial capital of twelve francs, fifty centimes. Will you allow that? I shall be scrupulously accurate, and submit an audited account at Christmas. Even my worst enemies have never alleged dishonesty against me. Is it a bargain?"

"Y-yes," she stammered confusedly, hardly knowing what he meant. He was leaning over the small table and looking steadfastly at her. She noticed that the wine and food had made his skin greasy. It suddenly occurred to her that Mark Bower resembled certain exotic plants which must be viewed from a distance if they would gratify the critical senses. The gloss of a careful toilet was gone. He was altogether cruder, coarser, more animal, since he had eaten, though his consumption of wine was quite moderate. His big, rather fierce eyes were more than prominent now; they bulged. Certain Jewish characteristics in his face had become accentuated. She remembered the ancient habit of anointing with oil, and laughed at the thought, for that was a little trick of hers to conceal nervousness.

"You doubt me, then?" he half whispered. "Or do you deem it beyond the power of finance to convert so small a sum into hundreds – it may be thousands – of pounds in six months?"

"Indeed I should credit you with ability to do that and more, Mr. Bower," she said; "but I was wondering why you made such an offer to a mere acquaintance, – one whom it is more than likely you will never meet again."

The phrase had a harsh and awkward sound in her ears. Bower, to her relief, seemed to ignore it.

"It is permissible to gratify an impulse once in awhile," he countered. "And not to mention the audited accounts, there was a matter of theater tickets that should serve to bring us together again. Won't you give me your address, in London if not in Switzerland? Here is mine."

He produced a pocketbook, and picked out a card. It bore his name and his club. He added, in pencil, "50 Hamilton Place."

"Letters sent to my house reach me, no matter where I may happen to be," he said.

The incident brought fresh tremors to Helen. Indeed, the penciled address came as an unpleasant shock; for Millicent Jaques, on the day they met in Piccadilly, having gone home with Helen to tea, excused an early departure on the ground that she was due to dinner at that very house.

But she took the card, and strove desperately to appear at ease, for she had no cause to quarrel with one whose manners were so courteous.

"Thank you very much," she said. "If you care to see my articles in the – in the paper, I shall send you copies. Now I must say good by. I am rather tired. Before I go let me say how deeply indebted I feel for your kindness to-day."

She rose. Bower stood up too, and bowed with smiling deference. "Good night," he said. "You will not be disturbed by the customs people at the frontier. I have arranged all that."

Helen made the best of her way along the swaying corridors till she reached her section of the sleeping car; but Bower resumed his seat at the table. He ordered a glass of fine champagne and held it up to the light. There was a decided frown on his strong face, and the attendant who served him imagined that there was something wrong with the liqueur.

"*N'est-ce pas bon, m'sieur?*" he began.

"Will you go to the devil?" said Bower, speaking very slowly without looking at him.

"*Oui, m'sieur, Je vous assure*," and the man disappeared.

It was not the wine, but the woman, that was perplexing him. Not often had the lure of gold failed so signally. And why was she so manifestly startled at the last moment? Had he gone too far? Was he mistaken in the assumption that Millicent Jaques had said little or nothing concerning him to her friend? And this commission too, – there were inexplicable features about it. He knew a great deal of the ways of newspapers, daily and weekly, and it was not the journalistic habit to send inexperienced young women on costly journeys to write up Swiss summer resorts.

He frowned still more deeply as he thought of the Maloja-Kulm Hotel, for Helen had innocently affixed a label bearing her address on her handbag. He peopled it with dozens of smart young men and not a few older beaux of his own type. His features relaxed somewhat when he remembered the women. Helen was alone, and far too good-looking to command sympathy. There should be the elements of trouble in that quarter. If he played his cards well, and he had no reason to doubt his skill, Helen should greet him as her best friend when he surprised her by appearing unexpectedly at the Maloja-Kulm.

Then he waxed critical. She was young, and lively, and unquestionably pretty; but was she worth all this planning and contriving? She was by way of being a prude too, and held serious notions of women's place in the scheme of things. At any rate, the day's hunting had not brought him far out of his path, Frankfort being his real objective, and he would make up his mind later. Perhaps she would remove all obstacles by writing to him on her return to London; but the recollection of her frank, clear gaze, of lips that were molded for strength as well as sweetness, of the dignity and grace with which the well shaped head was poised on a white firm neck, warned him that such a woman might surrender to love, but never to greed.

Then he laughed, and ordered another liqueur, and drank a toast to to-morrow, when all things come to pass for the man who knows how to contrive to-day.

In the early morning, at Basle, he awoke, and was somewhat angry with himself when he found that his thoughts still dwelt on Helen Wynton. In the cold gray glimmer of dawn, and after the unpleasant shaking his pampered body had received all night, some of the romance of this latest quest had evaporated. He was stiff and weary, and he regretted the whim that had led him a good twelve hours astray. But he roused himself and dressed with care. Some twenty minutes short of Zurich he sent an attendant to Miss Wynton's berth to inquire if she would join him for early coffee at that station, there being a wait of a quarter of an hour before the train went on to Coire.

Helen, who was up and dressed, said she would be delighted. She too had been thinking, and, being a healthy-minded and kind-hearted girl, had come to the conclusion that her abrupt departure the previous night was wholly uncalled for and ungracious.

So it was with a smiling face that she awaited Bower on the steps of her carriage. She shook hands with him cordially, did not object in the least degree when he seized her arm to pilot her through a noisy crowd of foreigners, and laughed with utmost cheerfulness when they both failed to drink some extraordinarily hot coffee served in glasses that seemed to be hotter still.

Helen had the rare distinction of being quite as bright and pleasing to the eye in the searching light of the sun's first rays as at any other hour. Bower, though spruce and dandified, looked rather worn.

"I did not sleep well," he explained. "And the rails to the frontier on this line are the worst laid in Europe."

"It is early yet," she said. "Why not turn in again when you reach your hotel?"

"Perish the thought!" he cried. "I shall wander disconsolate by the side of the lake. Please say you will miss me at breakfast. And, by the way, you will find a table specially set apart for you. I suppose you change at Coire?"

"How kind and thoughtful you are. Yes, I am going to the Engadine, you know."

"Well, give my greetings to the high Alps. I have climbed most of them in my time. More improbable things have happened than that I may renew the acquaintance with some of my old friends this year. What fun if you and I met on the Matterhorn or Jungfrau! But they are far away from the valley of the inn, and perhaps you do not climb."

"I have never had the opportunity; but I mean to try. Moreover, it is part of my undertaking."

"Then may we soon be tied to the same rope!"

Thus they parted, with cheery words, and, on Helen's side, a genuine wish that they might renew a pleasant acquaintance. Bower waited on the platform to see the last of her as the train steamed away.

"Yes, it is worth while," he muttered, when the white feathers on her hat were no longer visible. He did not go to the lake, but to the telegraph office, and there he wrote two long messages, which he revised carefully, and copied. Yet he frowned again, even while he was paying for their transmission. Never before had he taken such pains to win any woman's regard. And the knowledge vexed him, for the taking of pains was not his way with women.

CHAPTER IV
HOW HELEN CAME TO MALOJA

At Coire, or Chur, as the three-tongued Swiss often term it – German being the language most in vogue in Switzerland – Helen found a cheerful looking mountain train awaiting the coming of its heavy brother from far off Calais. It was soon packed to the doors, for those Alpine valleys hum with life and movement during the closing days of July. Even in the first class carriages nearly every seat was filled in a few minutes, while pandemonium reigned in the cheaper sections.

Helen, having no cumbersome baggage to impede her movements, was swept in on the crest of the earliest wave, and obtained a corner near the corridor. She meant to leave her handbag there, stroll up and down the station for a few minutes, mainly to look at the cosmopolitan crowd, and perhaps buy some fruit; but the babel of English, German, French, and Italian, mixed with scraps of Russian and Czech, that raged round a distracted conductor warned her that the wiser policy was to sit still.

An Englishwoman, red faced, elderly, and important, was offered a center seat, facing the engine, in Helen's compartment. She refused it. Her indignation was magnificent. To face the engine, she declared, meant instant illness.

"I never return to this wretched country that I do not regret it!" she shrilled. "Have you no telegraphs? Cannot your officials ascertain from Zurich how many English passengers may be expected, and make suitable provision for them?"

As this tirade was thrown away on the conductor, she proceeded to translate it into fairly accurate French; but the man was at his wits' end to accommodate the throng, and said so, with the breathless politeness that such a *grande dame* seemed to merit.

"Then you should set apart a special train for passengers from England!" she declared vehemently. "I shall never come here again – never! The place is overrun with cheap tourists. Moreover, I shall tell all my friends to avoid Switzerland. Perhaps, when British patronage is withdrawn from your railways and hotels, you will begin to consider our requirements."

Helen felt that her irate fellow countrywoman was metaphorically hurling large volumes of the peerage, baronetage, and landed gentry at the unhappy conductor's head. Again he pointed out that there was a seat at madam's service. When the train started he would do his best to secure another in the desired position.

As the woman, whose proportions were generous, was blocking the gangway, she received a forcible reminder from the end of a heavy portmanteau that she must clear out of the way. Breathing dire reprisals on the Swiss federal railway system, she entered unwillingly.

"Disgraceful!" she snorted. "A nation of boors! In another second I should have been thrown down and trampled on."

A stolid German and his wife occupied opposite corners, and the man probably wondered why the *Englischer frau* glared at him so fiercely. But he did not move.

Helen, thinking to throw oil on the troubled waters, said pleasantly, "Won't you change seats with me? I don't mind whether I face the engine or not. In any case, I intend to stand in the corridor most of the time."

The stout woman, hearing herself addressed in English, lifted her mounted eyeglasses and stared at Helen. In one sweeping glance she took in details. As it happened, the girl had expended fifteen of her forty pounds on a neat tailor made costume, a smart hat, well fitting gloves, and the best pair of walking boots she could buy; for, having pretty feet, it was a pardonable vanity that she should wish them well shod. Apparently, the other was satisfied that there would be no loss of caste in accepting the proffered civility.

"Thank you. I am very much obliged," she said. "It is awfully sweet of you to incommode yourself for my sake."

It was difficult to believe that the woman who had just stormed at the conductor, who had the effrontery to subject Helen to that stony scrutiny before she answered, could adopt such dulcet tones so suddenly. Helen, frank and generous-minded to a degree, would have preferred a gradual subsidence of wrath to this remarkable *volte-face*. But she reiterated that she regarded her place in a carriage as of slight consequence, and the change was effected.

The other adjusted her eyeglasses again, and passed in review the remaining occupants of the compartment. They were "foreigners," whose existence might be ignored.

"This line grows worse each year," she remarked, by way of a conversational opening. "It is horrid traveling alone. Unfortunately, I missed my son at Lucerne. Are your people on the train?"

"No. I too am alone."

"Ah! Going to St. Moritz?"

"Yes; but I take the diligence there for Maloja."

"The diligence! Who in the world advised that? Nobody ever travels that way."

By "nobody," she clearly conveyed the idea that she mixed in the sacred circle of "somebodies," carriage folk to the soles of their boots, because Helen's guidebook showed that a diligence ran twice daily through the Upper Engadine, and the Swiss authorities would not provide those capacious four-horsed vehicles unless there were passengers to fill them.

"Oh!" cried Helen. "Should I have ordered a carriage beforehand?"

"Most decidedly. But your friends will send one. They know you are coming by this train?"

Helen smiled. She anticipated a certain amount of cross examination at the hands of residents in the hotel; but she saw no reason why the ordeal should begin so soon.

"I must take my luck then," she said. "There ought to be plenty of carriages at St. Moritz."

Without being positively rude, her new acquaintance could not repeat the question thus shirked. But she had other shafts in her quiver.

"You will stay at the Kursaal, of course?" she said.

"Yes."

"A passing visit, or for a period? I ask because I am going there myself."

"Oh, how nice! I am glad I have met you. I mean to remain at Maloja until the end of August."

"Quite the right time. The rest of Switzerland is unbearable in August. You will find the hotel rather full. The Burnham-Joneses are there, – the tennis players, you know, – and General and Mrs. Wragg and their family, and the de la Veres, nominally husband and wife, – a most charming couple individually. Have you met the de la Veres? No? Well, don't be unhappy on Edith's account if Reginald flirts with you. She likes it."

"But perhaps I might not like it," laughed Helen.

"Ah, Reginald has such fascinating manners!" A sigh seemed to deplore the days of long ago, when Reginald's fascination might have displayed itself on her account.

Again there was a break in the flow of talk, and Helen began to take an interest in the scenery. Not to be balked, her inquisitor searched in a *portmonnaie* attached to her left wrist with a strap, and produced a card.

"We may as well know each other's names," she cooed affably. "Here is my card."

Helen read, "Mrs. H. de Courcy Vavasour, Villa Menini, Nice."

"I am sorry," she said, with a friendly smile that might have disarmed prejudice, "but in the hurry of my departure from London I packed my cards in my registered baggage. My name is Helen Wynton."

The eyeglasses went up once more.

"Do you spell it with an I? Are you one of the Gloucestershire Wintons?"

"No. I live in town; but my home is in Norfolk."

"And whose party will you join at the Maloja?"

Helen colored a little under this rigorous heckling. "As I have already told you, Mrs. Vavasour, I am alone," she said. "Indeed, I have come here to – to do some literary work."

"For a newspaper?"

"Yes."

Mrs. Vavasour received this statement guardedly. If Helen was on the staff of an important journal there was something to be gained by being cited in her articles as one of the important persons "sojourning" in the Engadine.

"It is really wonderful," she admitted, "how enterprising the great daily papers are nowadays."

Helen, very new to a world of de Courcy Vavasours, and Wraggs, and Burnham-Joneses, forgave this hawklike pertinacity for sake of the apparent sympathy of her catechist. And she was painfully candid.

"The weekly paper I represent is not at all well known," she explained; "but here I am, and I mean to enjoy my visit hugely. It is the chance of a lifetime to be sent abroad on such a mission. I little dreamed a week since that I should be able to visit this beautiful country under the best conditions without giving a thought to the cost."

Poor Helen! Had she delved in many volumes to obtain material that would condemn her in the eyes of the tuft hunter she was addressing, she could not have shocked so many conventions in so few words. She was poor, unknown, unfriended! Worse than these negative defects, she was positively attractive! Mrs. Vavasour almost shuddered as she thought of the son "missed" at Lucerne, the son who would arrive at Maloja on the morrow, in the company of someone whom he preferred to his mother as a fellow traveler. What a pitfall she had escaped! She might have made a friend of this impossible person! Nevertheless, rendered wary by many social skirmishes, she did not declare war at once. The girl was too outspoken to be an adventuress. She must wait, and watch, and furbish her weapons.

Helen, whose brain was nimble enough to take in some of Mrs. Vavasour's limitations, hoped that the preliminary inquiry into her caste was ended. She went into the corridor. A man made room for her with an alacrity that threatened an attempt to draw her into conversation, so she moved somewhat farther away, and gave herself to thought. If this prying woman was a fair sample of the people in the hotel, it was obvious that the human element in the high Alps held a suspicious resemblance to society in Bayswater, where each street is a faction and the clique in the "Terrace" is not on speaking terms with the clique in the "Gardens." Thus far, she owned to a feeling of disillusionment in many respects.

Two years earlier, a naturalist in the Highlands had engaged von Eulenberg to classify his collection, and Helen had gone to Inverness with the professor's family. She saw something then of the glories of Scotland, and her memories of the purple hills, the silvery lakes, the joyous burns tumbling headlong through woodland and pasture, were not dimmed by the dusty garishness of the Swiss scenery. True, Baedeker said that these pent valleys were suffocating in midsummer. She could only await in diminished confidence her first glimpse of the eternal snows.

And again, the holiday makers were not the blithesome creatures of her imagination. Some were reading, many sleeping, and the rest, for the most part, talking in strange tongues of anything but the beauties of the landscape. The Britons among them seemed to be brooding on glaciers. A party of lively Americans were playing bridge, and a scrap of gossip in English from a neighboring compartment revealed that some woman who went to a dance at Montreux, "wore a cheap voile, my dear, a last year's bargain, all crumpled and dirty. You never saw such a fright!"

These things were trivial and commonplace; a wide gap opened between them and Helen's day dreams of Alpine travel. By natural sequence of ideas she began to contrast her present loneliness with yesterday's pleasant journey, and the outcome was eminently favorable to Mark Bower. She missed him. She was quite sure, had he accompanied her from Zurich, that he would have charmed

away the dull hours with amusing anecdotes. Instead of feeling rather tired and sleepy, she would now be listening to his apt expositions of the habits and customs of the places and people seen from the carriage windows. For fully five minutes her expressive mouth betrayed a little moue of disappointment.

And then the train climbed a long spiral which gave a series of delightful views of a picturesque Swiss village, – exactly such a cluster of low roofed houses as she had admired many a time in photographs of Alpine scenery. An exclamation from a little boy who clapped his hands in ecstasy caused her to look through a cleft in the nearer hills. With a thrill of wonder she discovered there, remote and solitary, all garbed in shining white, a majestic snow capped mountain. Ah! this was the real Switzerland! Her heart throbbed, and her breath came in fluttering gasps of excitement. How mean and trivial were class distinctions in sight of nature's nobility! She was uplifted, inspirited, filled with a sedate happiness. She wanted to voice her gladness as the child had done. A high pitched female voice said:

"Of course I had to call, because Jack meets her husband in the city; but it is an awful bore knowing such people."

Then the train plunged into a noisome tunnel, and turned a complete circle in the heart of the rock, and when it panted into daylight again the tall square tower of the village church had sunk more deeply into the valley. Far beneath, two bright steel ribbons – swallowed by a cavernous mouth that belched clouds of dense smoke – showed the strangeness of the route that led to the silent peaks. At times the rails crossed or ran by the side of a white, tree lined track that mounted ever upward. Though she could not recall the name of the pass, Helen was aware that this was one of the fine mountain roads for which Switzerland is famous. Pedestrians, singly or in small parties, were trudging along sturdily. They seemed to be mostly German tourists, jolly, well fed folk, nearly as many women as men, each one carrying a rucksack and alpenstock, and evidently determined to cover a set number of kilometers before night.

"That is the way in which I should like to see the Alps," thought Helen. "I am sure they sing as they walk, and they miss nothing of the grandeur and exquisite coloring of the hills. A train is very comfortable; but it certainly brings to these quiet valleys a great many people who would otherwise never come near them."

The force of this trite reflection was borne in on her by a loud wrangle between the bridge players. A woman had revoked, and was quite wroth with the man who detected her mistake.

At the next stopping place Helen bought some chocolates, and made a friend of the boy, a tiny Parisian. The two found amusement in searching for patches of snow on the northerly sides of the nearest hills. Once they caught a glimpse of a whole snowy range, and they shrieked so enthusiastically that the woman whose husband was also in the city glanced at them with disapproval, as they interrupted a full and particular if not true account of the quarrel between the Firs and the Limes.

At last the panting engine gathered speed and rushed along a wide valley into Samaden, Celerina, and St. Moritz. Mrs. Vavasour seemed to be absorbed in a Tauchnitz novel till the last moment, and the next sight of her vouchsafed to Helen was her departure from the terminus in solitary state in a pair-horse victoria. It savored somewhat of unkindness that she had not offered to share the roomy vehicle with one who had befriended her.

"Perhaps she was afraid I might not pay my share of the hire," said Helen to herself rather indignantly. But a civil hotel porter helped her to clear the customs shed rapidly, secured a comfortable carriage, advised her confidentially as to the amount that should be paid, and promised to telephone to the hotel for a suitable room. She was surprised to find how many of her fellow passengers were bound for Maloja. Some she had encountered at various stages of the journey all the way from London, while many, like Mrs. Vavasour, had joined the train in Switzerland. She remembered too, with a quiet humor that had in it a spice of sarcasm, that her elderly acquaintance had not come from England,

and had no more right to demand special accommodation at Coire than the dozens of other travelers who put in an appearance at each station after Basle.

She noticed that as soon as the luggage was handed to the driver to be strapped behind each vehicle, the newcomers nearly all went to a neighboring hotel for luncheon. Being a healthy young person, and endowed with a sound digestion, Helen deemed this example too good not to be followed. Then she began a two hours' drive through a valley that almost shook her allegiance to Scotland. The driver, a fine looking old man, with massive features and curling gray hair that reminded her of Michelangelo's head of Moses, knowing the nationality of his fare, resolutely refused to speak any other language than English. He would jerk round, flourish his whip, and cry:

"Dissa pless St. Moritz Bad; datta pless St. Moritz Dorp."

Soon he announced the "Engelish kirch," thereby meaning the round arched English church overlooking the lake; or it might be, with a loftier sweep of the whip, "Piz Julier montin, mit lek Silvaplaner See."

All this Helen could have told him with equal accuracy and even greater detail. Had she not almost learned by heart each line of Baedeker on the Upper Engadine? Could she not have reproduced from memory a fairly complete map of the valley, with its villages, mountains, and lakes clearly marked? But she would not on any account repress the man's enthusiasm, and her eager acceptance of his quaint information induced fresh efforts, with more whip waving.

"Piz Corvatsch! Him ver' big fellow. Twelf t'ousen foots. W'en me guide him bruk ze leg."

She had seen that he was very lame as he hobbled about the carriage tying up her boxes. So here was a real guide. That explained his romantic aspect, his love of the high places. And he had been maimed for life by that magnificent mountain whose scarred slopes were now vividly before her eyes. The bright sunshine lit lakes and hills with its glory. A marvelous atmosphere made all things visible with microscopic fidelity. From Campfer to Silvaplana looked to be a ten minutes' drive, and from Silvaplana to Sils-Maria another quarter of an hour. Helen had to consult her watch and force herself to admit that the horses were trotting fully seven miles an hour before she realized that distances could be so deceptive. The summit of the lordly Corvatsch seemed to be absurdly near. She judged it within the scope of an easy walk between breakfast and afternoon tea from the hotel on a tree covered peninsula that stretched far out into Lake Sils-Maria, and she wondered why anyone should fall and break his leg during such a simple climb. Just to make sure, she glanced at the guidebook, and it gave her a shock when she saw the words, "Guides necessary," – "Descent to Sils practicable only for experts," – "Spend night at Roseg Inn," – the route followed being that from Pontresina.

Then she recollected that the lovely valley she was traversing from beginning to end was itself six thousand feet above sea level, – that the observatory on rugged old Ben Nevis, which she had visited when in Scotland, was, metaphorically speaking, two thousand feet beneath the smooth road along which she was being driven, and that the highest peak on Corvatsch was still six thousand feet above her head. All at once, Helen felt subdued. The fancy seized her that the carriage was rumbling over the roof of the world. In a word, she was yielding to the exhilaration of high altitudes, and her brain was ready to spin wild fantasies.

At Sils-Maria she was brought suddenly to earth again. It must not be forgotten that her driver was a St. Moritz man, and therefore at constant feud with the men from the Kursaal, who brought empty carriages to St. Moritz, and went back laden with the spoil that would otherwise have fallen to the share of the local livery stables. Hence, he made it a point of honor to pass every Maloja owned vehicle on the road. Six times he succeeded, but, on the seventh, reversing the moral of Bruce's spider, he smashed the near hind wheel by attempting to slip between a landau and a stone post. Helen was almost thrown into the lake, and, for the life of her, she could not repress a scream. But the danger passed as rapidly as it had risen, and all that happened was that the carriage settled down lamely by the side of the road, with its weight resting on one of her boxes.

The driver spoke no more English. He bewailed his misfortune in free and fluent Italian of the Romansch order.

But he understood German, and when Helen demanded imperatively that he should unharness the horses, and help to prop the carriage off a crumpled tin trunk that contained her best dresses, he recovered his senses, worked willingly, and announced with a weary grin that if the *gnädische fräulein* would wait a little half-hour he would obtain another wheel from a neighboring forge.

Having recovered from her fright she was so touched by the poor fellow's distress that she promised readily to stand by him until repairs were effected. It was a longer job than either of them anticipated. The axle was slightly bent, and a blacksmith had to bring clamps and a jackscrew before the new wheel could be adjusted. Even then it had an air of uncertainty that rendered speed impossible. The concluding five miles of the journey were taken at a snail's pace, and Helen reflected ruefully that it was possible to "bruk ze leg" on the level high road as well as on the rocks of Corvatsch.

Of course, she received offers of assistance in plenty. Every carriage that passed while the blacksmith was at work pulled up and placed a seat therein at her command. But she refused them all. It was not that she feared to desert her baggage, for Switzerland is proverbially honest. The unlucky driver had tried to be friendly; his fault was due to an excess of zeal; and each time she declined the proffered help his furrowed face brightened. If she did not reach the hotel until midnight she was determined to go there in that vehicle, and in none other.

The accident threw her late, but only by some two hours. Instead of arriving at Maloja in brilliant sunshine, it was damp and chilly when she entered the hotel. A bank of mist had been carried over the summit of the pass by a southwesterly wind. Long before the carriage crawled round the last great bend in the road the glorious panorama of lake and mountains was blotted out of sight. The horses seemed to be jogging on through a luminous cloud, so dense that naught was visible save a few yards of roadway and the boundary wall or stone posts on the left side, where lay the lake. The brightness soon passed, as the hurrying fog wraiths closed in on each other. It became bitterly cold too, and it was with intense gladness that Helen finally stepped from the outer gloom into a glass haven of warmth and light that formed a species of covered-in veranda in front of the hotel.

She was about to pay the driver, having added to the agreed sum half the cost of the broken wheel by way of a solatium, when another carriage drove up from the direction of St. Moritz.

She fancied that the occupant, a young man whom she had never seen before, glanced at her as though he knew her. She looked again to make sure; but by that time his eyes were turned away, so he had evidently discovered his mistake. Still, he seemed to take considerable interest in her carriage, and Helen, ever ready to concede the most generous interpretation of doubtful acts, assumed that he had heard of the accident by some means, and was on the lookout for her.

It would indeed have been a fortunate thing for Helen had some Swiss fairy whispered the news of her mishap in Spencer's ears during the long drive up the mist laden valley. Then, at least, he might have spoken to her, and used the informal introduction to make her further acquaintance on the morrow. But the knowledge was withheld from him. No hint of it was even flashed through space by that wireless telegraphy which has existed between kin souls ever since men and women contrived to raise human affinities to a plane not far removed from the divine.

He had small store of German, but he knew enough to be perplexed by the way in which Helen's driver expressed "beautiful thanks" for her gift. The man seemed to be at once grateful and downhearted. Of course, the impression was of the slightest, but Spencer had been trained in reaching vital conclusions on meager evidence. He could not wait to listen to Helen's words, so he passed into the hotel, having the American habit of leaving the care of his baggage to the hall porter. He wondered why Helen was so late in arriving that he had caught her up on the very threshold of the Kursaal, so to speak. He would not forget the driver's face, and if he met the man again, it might be possible to find out the cause of the delay. He himself was before time. The federal railway authorities at Coire,

awaking to the fact that the holiday rush was beginning, had actually dispatched a relief train to St. Moritz when the second important train of the day turned up as full as its predecessor.

At dinner Helen and he sat at little tables in the same section of the huge dining hall. The hotel was nearly full, and it was noticeable that they were the only persons who dined alone. Indeed, the head waiter asked Spencer if he cared to join a party of men who sat together; but he declined. There was no such general gathering of women; so Helen was given no alternative, and she ate the meal in silence.

She saw Mrs. Vavasour in a remote part of the salon. With her was a vacuous looking young man who seldom spoke to her but was continually addressing remarks to a woman at another table.

"That is the son lost at Lucerne," she decided, finding in his face some of the physical traits but none of the calculating shrewdness of his mother.

After a repast of many courses Helen wandered into the great hall, found an empty chair, and longed for someone to speak to. At the first glance, everybody seemed to know everybody else. That was not really the case, of course. There were others present as neglected and solitary as Helen; but the noise and merriment of the greater number dominated the place. It resembled a social club rather than a hotel.

Her chair was placed in an alley along which people had to pass who wished to reach the glass covered veranda. She amused herself by trying to pick out the Wraggs, the Burnham-Joneses, and the de la Veres. Suddenly she was aware that Mrs. Vavasour and her son were coming that way; the son unwillingly, the mother with an air of determination. Perhaps the Lucerne episode was about to be explained.

When young Vavasour's eyes fell on Helen, the boredom vanished from his face. It was quite obvious that he called his mother's attention to her and asked who she was. Helen felt that an introduction was imminent. She was glad of it. At that moment she would have chatted gayly with even a greater ninny than George de Courcy Vavasour.

But she had not yet grasped the peculiar idiosyncrasies of a woman who was famous for snubbing those whom she considered to be "undesirables." Helen looked up with a shy smile, expecting that the older woman would stop and speak; but Mrs. Vavasour gazed at her blankly – looked at the back of her chair through her body – and walked on.

"I don't know, George," Helen heard her say. "There are a lot of new arrivals. Some person of no importance, rather déclassée, I should imagine by appearances. As I was telling you, the General has arranged – "

Taken altogether, Helen had crowded into portions of two days many new and some very unpleasant experiences.

CHAPTER V
AN INTERLUDE

Helen rose betimes next morning; but she found that the sun had kept an earlier tryst. Not a cloud marred a sky of dazzling blue. The phantom mist had gone with the shadows. From her bed room window she could see the whole length of the Ober-Engadin, till the view was abruptly shut off by the giant shoulders of Lagrev and Rosatch. The brilliance of the coloring was the landscape's most astounding feature. The lakes were planes of polished turquoise, the rocks pure grays and browns and reds, the meadows emerald green, while the shining white patches of snow on the highest mountain slopes helped to blacken by contrast the somber clumps of pines that gathered thick wherever man had not disputed with the trees the tenancy of each foot of meager loam.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.