

The Moon Stricken

By Bernard Capes

It so fell that one dark evening in the month of June I was belated in the Bernese Oberland. Dusk overtook me toiling along the great Chamounix Road, and in the heart of a most desolate gorge, whose towering snow-flung walls seemed—as the day sucked inwards to a point secret as a leech's mouth—to close about me like a monstrous amphitheatre of ghosts. The rutted road, dipping and climbing toil-fully against the shouldering of great tumbled boulders, or winning for itself but narrow foothold over slippery ridges, was thawed clear of snow; but the cold soft peril yet lay upon its flanks thick enough for a wintry plunge of ten feet, or maybe fifty where the edge of the causeway fell over to the lower furrows of the ravine. It was a matter of policy to go with caution, and a thing of some moment to hear the thud and splintering of little distant icefalls about one in the darkness. Now and again a cold arrow of wind would sing down from the frosty peaks above or jerk with a squiggle of laughter among the fallen slabs in the valley. And these were the only voices to prick me on through a dreariness lonely as death.

I knew the road, but not its night terrors. Passing along it some days before in the glory of sunshine, broad paddocks and islands of green had comforted the shattered white ruin of the place, and I had traversed it merely as a magnificent episode in the indifferent history of my life. Now, as it seemed, I became one with it—an awful waif of solemnity, a thing apart from mankind and its warm intercourse and ruddy inn doors, a spectral anomaly, whose austere epitaph was once writ upon the snow coating some fallen slab of those glimmering about me. I thought the whole gorge smelt of tombs, like the vault of a cathedral. I thought, in the incomprehensible low moaning sound that ever and again seemed to eddy about me when the wind had swooped and passed, that I recognized the forlorn voices of brother spirits long since dead and forgotten of the world.

Suddenly I felt the sweat cold under the knapsack that swung upon my back; stopped, faced about and became human again. Ridge over ridge to my right the mountain summits fell away against a fathomless sky; and topping the furthestmost was a little paring of silver light, the coronet of the rising moon. But the glory of the full orb was in the retrospect; for, closing the savage vista of the ravine, stood up far away a cluster of jagged pinnacles—opal, translucent, lustrous as the peaks of icebergs that are frozen music of the sea.

It was the toothed summit of the Aiguille Verte, now prosaically bathed in the light of the full moon; but to me, looking from that grim and passionless hollow, it stood for the white hand of God lifted in menace to the evil spirits of the glen.

I drank my fill of the good sight, and then turned me to my tramp again with a freshness in my throat as though it had gulped a glass of champagne. Presently I knew myself descending, leaving, as I felt rather than saw, the stark horror of the gorge and its glimmering snow patches above me. Puffs of a warmer air purred past my face with little friendly sighs of welcome, and the hum of a far-off torrent struck like a wedge into the indurated fibre of the night. As I dropped, however, the mountain heads grew up against the moon, and withheld the comfort of her radiance; and it was not until the whimper of the torrent had quickened about me to a plunging roar, and my foot was on the striding bridge that took its waters at a step, that her light broke through a topmost cleft in the hills, and made glory of the leaping thunder that crashed beneath my feet.

Thereafter all was peace. The road led downwards into a broadening valley, where the smell of flowers came about me, and the mountain walls withdrew and were no longer overwhelming. The slope eased off, dipping and rising no more than a ground swell; and by and by I was on a level track that ran straight as a stretched ribbon and was reasonable to my tired feet.

Now the first dusky chalets of the hamlet of Bel-Oiseau straggled towards me, and it was music in my ears to hear the cattle blow and rattle in their stalls under the sleeping lofts as I passed outside in the moonlight. Five minutes more, and the great zinc onion on the spire of the church glistened towards me, and I was in the heart of the silent village.

From the deep green shadow cast by the graveyard wall, heavily buttressed against avalanches, a form wriggled out into the moonlight and fell with a dusty thud at my feet, mowing and chopping at the air with its aimless claws. I started back with a sudden jerk of my pulses. The thing was horrible by reason of its inarticulate voice, which issued from the shapeless folds of its writhings like the wet gutturizing of a back-broken horse. Instinct with repulsion, I stood a moment dismayed, when light flashed from an open doorway a dozen yards further down the street, and a woman ran across to the prostrate form.

‘Up, graceless one!’ she cried; ‘and carry thy seven devils within doors!’

The figure gathered itself together at her voice, and stood in an angle of the buttress quaking and shielding its eyes with two gaunt arms.

‘Can I not exchange a word with Mere Pettit,’ scolded the woman, ‘but thou must sneak from behind my back on thy crazed moon-hunting?’

‘Pity, pity,’ moaned the figure; and then the woman noticed me, and dropped a curtsy.

‘Pardon,’ she said, ‘but he has been affronting Monsieur with his antics?’

‘He is stricken, Madame?’

‘Ah, yes, Monsieur. Holy Mother, but how stricken!’

‘It is sad.’

‘Monsieur knows not how sad. It is so always, but most a great deal when the moon is full. He was a good lad once.’

Monsieur puts his hand in his pocket. Madame hears the clink of coin and touches the enclosed fingers with her own delicately. Monsieur withdraws his hand empty

‘Pardon, Madame.’

‘Monsieur has the courage of a gentleman. Come, Camille, little fool! a sweet goodnight to Monsieur.’

‘Stay, Madame. I have walked far and am weary. Is there an hotel in Bel-Oiseau?’

‘Monsieur is jesting. We are but a hundred of poor chalets.’

‘An auberge, then—a cabaret—anything?’

‘Les Trois Chèvres. It is not for such as you.’

‘Is it, then, that I must toil onwards to Châtelard?’

‘Monsieur does not know? The Hotel Royal was burned to the walls six months since.’

‘It follows that I must lie in the fields.’

Madame hesitates, ponders, and makes up her mind.

‘I keep Monsieur talking, and the night wind is sharp from the snow. It is ill for a heated skin, and one should be indoors. I have a bedroom that is at Monsieur’s disposition, if Monsieur will condescend?’

Monsieur will condescend. Monsieur would condescend to a loft and a truss of straw, in default of the neat little chilly chamber that is allotted him, so sick are his very limbs with long

tramping, and so uninviting figures the further stretch in the moonlight to Châtelard, with its burnt-out carcass of an hotel.

This is how I came to quarter myself on Madame Barbière and her idiot son, and how I ultimately learned from the lips of the latter the strange story of his own immediate fall from reason and the dear light of intellect.

By day Camille Barbière proved to be a young man, some five and twenty years of age, of a handsome and impressive exterior. His dark hair lay close about his well-shaped head; his features were regular and cut bold as an Etruscan cameo; his limbs were elastic and moulded into the supple finish of one whose life has not been set upon level roads. At a speculative distance he appeared a straight specimen of a Burgundian youth—sinewy, clean-formed, and graceful, though slender to gauntness; and it was only on nearer contact that one marvelled to see the soul die out of him, as a face set in the shadow of leafage resolves itself into some accident of twisted branches as one approaches the billowing tree that presented it.

The soul of Camille, the idiot, had warped long after its earthly tabernacle had grown firm and fair to look upon. Cause and effect were not one from birth in him; and the result was a most wistful expression, as though the lost intellect were for ever struggling and failing to recall its ancient mastery. Mostly he was a gentle young man, noteworthy for nothing but the uncomplaining patience with which he daily observed the monotonous routine of simple duties that were now all-sufficient for the poor life that had 'crept so long on a broken wing'. He milked the big, red, barrel-bodied cow, and churned industriously for butter; he kept the little vegetable garden in order and nursed the Savoyards into fatness like plumping babies; he drove the goats to pasture on the mountain slopes, and all day sat among the rhododendrons, the forgotten soul behind his eyes conning the dead language of fate, as a foreigner vainly interrogates the abstruse complexity of an idiom.

By and by I made it an irregular habit to accompany him on these shepherdings; to join him in his simple midday meal of sour brown bread and goat-milk cheese; to talk with him desultorily, and study him the while, inasmuch as he awakened an interest in me that was full of speculation. For this was not an imbecility either hereditary or constitutional. From the first there had appeared to me something abnormal in it—a suspension of intelligence only, a frost-bite in the brain that presently some April breath of memory might thaw out. This was not merely conjectural, of course. I had the story of his mental collapse from his mother in the early days of my sojourn in Bel-Oiseau; for it came to pass that a fitful caprice induced me to prolong my stay in the swart little village far into the gracious Swiss summer.

The 'story' I have called it; but it was none. He was out on the hills one moonlight night, and came home in the early morning mad. That was all.

This had happened some eight years before, when he was a lad of seventeen—a strong, beautiful lad, his mother told me; and with a dreamy 'poet's corner' in his brain, she added, but in her own better way of putting it. She had no shame that her shepherd should be an Endymion. In Switzerland they still look upon Nature as a respectable pursuit for a young man.

Well, they had thought him possessed of a devil; and his father had at first sought to exorcise it with a chamois-hide thong, as Munchausen flogged the black fox out of his skin. But the counter-irritant failed of its purpose. The devil clung deep, and rent poor Camille with periodic convulsions of insanity.

It was noted that his derangement waxed and waned with the monthly moon; that it assumed a virulent character with the passing of the second quarter, and culminated, as the orb reached its

fulness, in a species of delirium, during which it was necessary to watch him carefully; that it diminished with the lessening crescent until it fell away into a quiet abeyance of faculties that was but a step apart from the normal intelligence of his kind. At his worst he was a stricken madman acutely sensitive to impressions; at his best an inoffensive peasant who said nothing foolish and nothing wise.

When he was twenty, his father died, and Camille and his mother had to make out existence in company

Now, the veil, in my knowledge of him, was never rent; yet occasionally it seemed to me to gape in a manner that let a little momentary finger of light through, in the flashing of which a soul kindled and shut in his eyes, like a hard-dying spark in ashes. I wished to know what gave life to the spark, and I set to pondering the problem.

‘He was not always thus?’ I would say to Madame Barbieri.

‘But no, Monsieur, truly. This place—bah! we are here imbeciles all to the great world, without doubt; but Camille—he was by nature of those who make the history of cities—a rose in the wilderness. Monsieur smiles?’

‘By no means. A scholar, Madame?’

‘A scholar of nature, Monsieur; a dreamer of dreams such as they become who walk much with the spirits on the lonely mountains.’

‘Torrents, and avalanches, and the good material forces of nature Madame means.’

‘Ah! Monsieur may talk, but he knows. He has heard the *föhn* sweep down from the hills and spin the great stones off the house-roofs. And one may look and see nothing, yet the stones go. It is the wind that runs before the avalanche that snaps the pine trees; and the wind is the spirit that calls down the great snow-slips.’

‘But how may Madame who sees nothing, know then a spirit to be abroad?’

‘My faith; one may know one’s foot is on the wild mint without shifting one’s sole to look.’

‘Madame will pardon me. No doubt also one may know a spirit by the smell of sulphur?’

‘Monsieur is a sceptic. It comes with the knowledge of cities. There are even such in little Bel-Oiseau, since the evil time, when they took to engrossing the contracts of good citizens on the skins of the poor jew-beards that give us flesh and milk. It is horrible as the Tannery of Meudon. In my young days, Monsieur, such agreements were inscribed upon wood.’

‘Quite so, Madame, and entirely to the point. Also one may see from whom Camille inherited his wandering propensities. But for his fall—it was always unaccountable?’

‘Monsieur, as one trips on the edge of a crevasse and disappears. His soul dropped into the frozen cleft that one cannot fathom.’

‘Madame will forgive my curiosity.’

‘But surely. There was no dark secret in my Camille’s life. If the little head held pictures beyond the ken of us simple women, the angels painted them of a certainty. Moreover, it is that I willingly recount this grief to the wise friend that may know a solution.’

‘At least the little-wise can seek for one.’

‘Ah, if Monsieur would only find the remedy!’

‘It is in the hands of fate.’

Madame crossed herself.

‘Of the *Bon Dieu*, Monsieur.’

At another time Madame Barbieri said:

‘It was in such a parched summer as this threatens to be that my Camille came home in the mists of the morning possessed. He was often out on the sweet hills all night—that was nothing.’

It had been a full moon, and the whiteness of it was on his face like leprosy, but his hands were hot with fever. Ah, the dreadful summer! The milk turned sour in the cows' udders and the tufts of the stone pines on the mountains fell into ashes like Dead Sea fruit. The springs were dried, and the great cascade of Buet fell to half its volume.'

'This cascade; I have never seen it. It is in the neighbourhood?'

'Of a surety Monsieur must have passed the rocky ravine that vomits the torrent, on his way hither.'

'I remember. I will explore it. Camille shall be my guide.'

'Never.'

'And why?'

Madame shrugged her plump shoulders.

'Who may say? The ways of the afflicted are not our ways. Only I know that Camille will never drive his flock to pasture near the lip of that dark valley'

'That is strange. Can the place have associations for him connected with his malady?'

'It is possible. Only the good God knows.'

But *I* was to know later on, with a little reeling of the reason also.

'Camille, I want to see the Cascade de Buet.'

The hunted eyes of the stricken looked into mine with a piercing glance of fear.

'Monsieur must not,' he said, in a low voice.

'And why not?'

'The waters are bad—bad—haunted!'

'I fear no ghosts. Wilt thou show me the way, Camille?'

'I!' The idiot fell upon the grass with a sort of gobbling cry. I thought it the prelude to a fit of some sort, and was stepping towards him, when he rose to his feet, waved me off and hurried away down the slope homewards.

Here was food for reflection, which I mumbled in secret.

A day or two afterwards I joined Camille at midday on the heights where he was pasturing his flocks. He had shifted his ground a little distance westwards, and I could not find him at once. At last I spied him, his back to a rock, his hand dabbled for coolness in a little runnel that trickled at his side. He looked up and greeted me with a smile. He had conceived an affection for me, this poor lost soul.

'It will go soon,' he said, referring to the miniature streamlet. 'It is safe in the woods; but tomorrow or next day the sun will lap it up ere it can reach the skirt of the shadow above there. A farewell kiss to you, little stream!'

He bent and sipped a mouthful of the clear water. He was in a more reasonable state than he had shown for long, though it was now close on the moon's final quarter, a period that should have marked a more general tenor of placidity in him. The summer solstice, was, however, at hand, and the weather sultry to a degree—as it had been, I did not fail to remember, the year of his seizure.

'Camille,' I said, 'why today hast thou shifted thy ground a little in the direction of the Buet ravine?'

He sat up at once, with a curious, eager look in his face.

'Monsieur has asked it,' he said. 'It was to impel Monsieur to ask it that I moved. Does Monsieur seek a guide?'

'Wilt thou lead me, Camille?'

‘Monsieur, last night I dreamed and one came to me. Was it my father? I know not, I know not. But he put my forehead to his breast, and the evil left it, and I remembered without terror. “Reveal the secret to the stranger,” he said; “that he may share thy burden and comfort thee; for he is strong where thou art weak, and the vision shall not scare him.” Monsieur, wilt thou come?’

He leapt to his feet, and I to mine.

‘Lead on, Camille. I follow.’

He called to the leader of his flock: ‘Petitjean! stray not, my little one. I shall be back sooner than the daisies close.’ Then he turned to me again. I noticed a pallid, desperate look in his face, as though he were strung to great effort; but it was the face of a mindless one still.

‘Do you not fear?’ he said, in a whisper; and the apple in his throat seemed all choking core.

‘I fear nothing,’ I answered with a smile; yet the still sombreness of the woods found a little tremor in my breast.

‘It is good,’ he answered, regarding me. ‘The angel spoke truth. Follow, Monsieur.’

He went off through the trees of a sudden, and I had much ado to keep pace with him. He ran as one urged on by a sure sense of doom, looking neither to right nor left. His mountain instincts had remained with him when memory itself had closed around like a fog, leaving him face to face and isolated with his one unconfessed point of terror. Swiftly we made our way, ever slightly climbing, along the rugged hillside, and soon broke into country very wild and dismal. The pastoral character of the scene lessened and altogether disappeared. The trees grew matted and grotesquely gnarled, huddling together in menacing battalions—save where some plunging rock had burst like a shell, forcing a clearing and strewing the black moss with a jagged wreck of splinters. Here no flowers crept for warmth, no sentinel marmot turned his little scut with a whistle of alarm to vanish like a red shadow. All was melancholy and silence and the massed defiance of ever-impending ruin. Storm, and avalanche, and the bitter snap of frost had wrought their havoc year by year, till an uncrippled branch was a rare distinction. The very saplings, of stunted growth, bore the air of thieves reared in a rookery of crime.

We strode with difficulty in an inhuman twilight through this great dark quickset of Nature, and had paused a moment where the thronging trunks thinned somewhat, when a little mouthing moan came towards us on the crest of a ripple of wind. My companion stopped on the instant, and clutched my arm, his face twisting with panic.

‘The Cascade, Monsieur!’ he shook out in a terrified whisper.

‘Courage, my friend! It is that we come to seek.’

‘Ah! My God, yes—it is that! I dare not—I dare not!’

He drew back livid with fear, but I urged him on.

‘Remember the dream, Camille!’ I cried.

‘Yes, yes—it was good. Help me, Monsieur, and I will try—yes, I will try!’

I drew his arm within mine, and together we stumbled on. The undergrowth grew denser and more fantastic; the murmur filled out, increased and resolved itself into a sound of falling water that ever took shape, and volume, and depth, till its crash shook the ground at our feet. Then in a moment a white blaze of sky came at us through the trunks, and we burst through the fringe of the wood to find ourselves facing the opposite side of a long cleft in the mountain and the blade’s edge of a roaring cataract.

It shot out over the lip of the fall, twenty feet above us, in a curve like a scimitar, passed in one sheet the spot where we stood, and dived into a sunless pool thirty feet below with a thunderous boom. What it may have been in full phases of the stream, I know not; yet even now it was sufficiently magnificent to give pause to a dying soul eager to shake off the restless horror of the

world. The flat of its broad blade divided the lofty black walls of a deep and savage ravine, on whose jagged shelves some starved clumps of rhododendron shook in the wind of the torrent. Far down the narrow gully we could see the passion of water tossing, champed white with the ravening of its jaws, until it took a bend of the cliffs at a leap and rushed from sight.

We stood upon a little platform of coarse grass and bramble, whose fringe dipped and nodded fitfully as the sprinkle caught it. Beyond, the sliding sheet of water looked like a great strap of steel, reeled ceaselessly off a whirling drum pivoted between the hills. The midday sun shot like a piston down the shaft of the valley, painting purple spears and angles behind its abutting rocks, and hitting full upon the upper curve of the fall; but halfway down the cataract slipped into shadow.

My brain sickened with the endless gliding and turmoil of descent, and I turned aside to speak to my companion. He was kneeling upon the grass, his eyes fixed and staring, his white lips mumbling some crippled memory of a prayer. He started and cowered down as I touched him on the shoulder.

‘I cannot go, Monsieur; I shall die!’

‘What next, Camille? I will go alone.’

‘My God, Monsieur! the cave under the fall! It is there the horror is.’

He pointed to a little gap in the fringing bushes with shaking finger. I stole gingerly in the direction he indicated. With every step I took the awful fascination of the descending water increased upon me. It seemed hideous and abnormal to stand mid-way against a perpendicularly rushing torrent. Above or below the effect would have been different; but here, to look up was to feel one’s feet dragging towards the unseen—to look down and pass from vision of the lip of the fall was to become the waif of a force that was unaccountable.

I had a battle with my nerves, and triumphed. As I approached the opening in the brambles I became conscious of a certain relief. At a little distance the cataract had seemed to actually wash in its descent the edge of the platform. Now I found it to be further away than I had imagined, the ground dropping in a sharp slope to a sort of rocky buttress which lay obliquely on the slant of the ravine, and was the true margin of the torrent. Before I essayed the descent, I glanced back at my companion. He was kneeling where I had left him, his hands pressed to his face, his features hidden; but looking back once again, when I had with infinite caution accomplished the downward climb, I saw that he had crept to the edge of the slope, and was watching me with wide, terrified eyes. I waved my hand to him and turned to the wonderful vision of water that now passed almost within reach of my arm. I stood near the point where the whole glassy breadth glided at once from sunlight into shadow. It fell silently, without a break, for only its feet far below trod the thunder.

Now, as I peered about, I noticed a little cleft in the rocky margin, a minute’s climb above me. I was attracted to this by an appearance of smoke or steam that incessantly emerged from it, as though some witch’s cauldron were simmering alongside the fall. Spray it might be, or the condensing of water splashed on the granite; but of this I might not be sure. Therefore I determined to investigate, and straightway began climbing the rocks—with my heart in my mouth, it must be confessed, for the foothold was undesirable and the way perilous. And all the time I was conscious that the white face of Camille watched me from above. As I reached the cleft I fancied I heard a queer sort of gasping sob issue from his lips, but to this I could give no heed in the sudden wonder that broke upon me. For, lo! it appeared that the cleft led straight to a narrow platform or ledge or rock right underneath the fall itself, but extending how far I could not see, by reason of the steam that filled the passage, and for which I was unable to account.

Footing it carefully and groping my way, I set step in the little water-curtained chamber and advanced a pace or two. Suddenly, light grew about me, and a beautiful rose of fire appeared on the wall of the passage in the midst of what seemed a vitrified scoop in the rock.

Marvelling, I put out my hand to touch it, and fell back on the narrow floor with a scream of anguish. An inch farther, and these lines had not been written. As it was, the fall caught me by the fingers with the suck of a catfish, and it was only a gigantic wrench that saved me from slipping off the ledge. The jerk brought my head against the rock with a stunning blow, and for some moments I lay dizzy and confused, daring hardly to breathe, and conscious only of a burning and blistering agony in my right hand.

At length I summoned courage to gather my limbs together and crawl out the way I had entered. The distance was but a few paces, yet to traverse these seemed an interminable nightmare of swaying and stumbling. I know only one other occasion upon which the liberal atmosphere of the open earth seemed sweeter to my senses when I reached it than it did on this.

I tumbled somehow through the cleft, and sat down, shaking, upon the grass of the slope beyond; but, happening to throw myself backwards in the reeling faintness induced by my fright and the pain of my head, my eyes encountered a sight that woke me at once to full activity.

Balanced upon the very verge of the slope, his face and neck craned forward, his jaw dropped, a sick, tranced look upon his features, stood Camille. I saw him topple, and shouted to him; but before my voice was well out, he swayed, collapsed, and came down with a running thud that shook the ground. Once he wheeled over, like a shot rabbit, and, bounding thwack with his head against a flat boulder not a dozen yards from me, lay stunned and motionless.

I scrambled to him, quaking all over. His breath came quick, and a spurt of blood jerked from a sliced cut in his forehead at every pump of his heart.

I kicked out a wad of cool moist turf, and clapped it in a pad over the wound, my handkerchief under. For his body, he was shaken and bruised, but otherwise not seriously hurt.

Presently he came to himself; to himself in the best sense of the word—for Camille was sane.

I have no explanation to offer. Only I know that, as a fall will set a long-stopped watch pulsing again, the blow here seemed to have restored the misplaced intellect to its normal balance.

When he woke, there was a new soft light of sanity in his eyes that was pathetic in the extreme.

‘Monsieur,’ he whispered, ‘the terror has passed.’

‘God be thanked! Camille,’ I answered, much moved.

He jerked his poor battered head in reverence.

‘A little while,’ he said, ‘and I shall know. The punishment was just.’

‘What punishment, my poor Camille?’

‘Hush! The cloud has rolled away. I stand naked before *le bon Dieu*. Monsieur, lift me up; I am strong.’

I winced as I complied. The palm of my hand was scorched and blistered in a dozen places. He noticed at once, and kissed and fondled the wounded limb as softly as a woman might.

‘Ah, the poor hand!’ he murmured. ‘Monsieur has touched the disc of fire.’

‘Camille,’ I whispered, ‘what is it?’

‘Monsieur shall know—ah! yes, he shall know; but not now. Monsieur, my mother.’

‘Thou art right, good son.’

I bound up his bruised forehead and my own burnt hand as well as I was able, and helped him to his feet. He stood upon them staggering; but in a minute could essay to stumble on the homeward journey with assistance. It was a long and toilsome progress; but in time we accomplished it. Often we had to sit down in the blasted woods and rest awhile; often moisten

our parched mouths at the runnels of snow-water that threaded the undergrowth. The shadows were slanting eastwards as we reached the clearing we had quitted some hours earlier, and the goats had disappeared. Petitjean was leading his charges homewards in default of a human commander, and presently we overtook them browsingly loitering and desirous of definite instructions.

I pass over Camille's meeting with his mother, and the wonder, and fear, and pity of it all. Our hurts were attended to, and the battery of questions met with the best armour of tact at command. For myself, I said that I had scorched my hand against a red-hot rock, which was strictly true; for Camille, that it were wisest to take no early advantage of the reason that God had restored to him. She was voluble, tearful, half-hysterical with joy and the ecstasy of gratitude.

'That a blow should effect the marvel! Monsieur, but it passes comprehension.'

All night long I heard her stirring and sobbing softly outside his door, for I slept little, owing to pain and the wonder in my mind. But towards morning I dozed, and my dreams were feverish and full of terror.

The next day Camille kept his bed and I my room. By this I at least escaped the first onset of local curiosity, for the villagers naturally made of Camille's restoration a nine-days' wonder. But towards the evening Madame Barbière brought a message from him that he would like to see Monsieur alone, if Monsieur would condescend to visit him in his room. I went at once, and found him, as Haydon found Keats, lying in a white bed, hectic, and on his back. He greeted me with a smile peculiarly sweet and restful.

'Does Monsieur wish to know?' he said in a low voice.

'If it will not hurt thee, Camille.'

'Not now—not now; the good God has made me sound. I remember, and am not terrified.'

I closed the door and took a seat by his bedside. There, with my hand shading my eyes from the level glory of sunset that flamed into the room, I listened to the strange tale of Camille's seizure.

'Once, Monsieur, I lived in myself and was exultant with a loneliness of fancied knowledge. My youth was my excuse; but God could not pardon me all. I read where I could find books, and chance put an evil choice in my way, for I learned to sneer at His name, His heaven, His hell. Each man has his god in self-will, I thought in my pride, and through it alone he accepts the responsibility of life and death. He is his own curse or blessing here and hereafter, inheriting no sin and earning no doom but such as he himself inflicts upon himself. I interpret this from the world about me, and knowing it, I have no fear and own no tyrant but my own passions. Monsieur, it was through fear the most terrible that God asserted Himself to me.'

The light was fading in the west, and a lance of shadow fell upon the white bed, as though the hushed day were putting a finger to its lips as it withdrew.

'I was no coward then, Monsieur—that at least I may say. I lived among the mountains, and on their ledges the feet of my own goats were not surer. Often, in summer, I spent the night among the woods and hills, reading in them the story of the ages, and exploring, exploring till my feet were wearier than my brain. Strangers came from far to see the great cascade; but none but I—and you, too, Monsieur, now—know the track through the thicket that leads to the cave under the waters. I found it by chance, and, like you, was scorched by the fire, though not badly.'

'Camille—the cause?'

'Monsieur, I will tell you a wonderful thing. The falling waters there make a monstrous burning glass, when the hot sun is upon them, which has melted the rock behind like wax.'

‘Can that be so?’

‘It is true—dear Jesus, I have fearful reason to know it.’

He half rose on his elbow, his face, crossed by the bandage, grey as stone in the gathering dusk. Hereafter he spoke in an awed whisper.

‘When the knowledge broke upon me, I grew great to myself in the possession of a wonderful secret. Day after day I visited the cave and examined this phenomenon—and yet another more marvellous in its connection with the first. The huge lens was a simple accident of curved rocks and convex water, planed smooth as crystal. In other than a drouthy summer it would probably not exist; the spouting torrent would overwhelm it—but I know not. Was not this astonishing enough? Yet Nature had worked a second miracle to mock in anticipation the self-sufficient plagiarism of little man. I noticed that the rays of the sun concentrated in the lens only during the half-hour of the orb’s apparent crossing of the ravine. Then the light smote upon a strange little fan of water, that spouted from a high crevice at the mouth of the shallow vitrified tunnel, and devoured it, and played upon the rocks behind, that hissed and spluttered like pitch, and the place was blind with steam. But when the tooth of fire was withdrawn, the tiny inner cascade fell again and wrought coolness with its sprinkling.

‘I did not discover this all at once, for at first fright took me, and it was enough to watch for the moment of the light’s appearance and then flee with a little laughter. But one day I ventured back into the cave after the sun had crossed the valley, and the steam had died away, and the rock cooled behind the miniature cascade.

‘I looked through the lens, and it seemed full of a great white light that blazed into my eyes, so that I fell back through the inner fan of water and was well soused by it; but my sight presently recovering, I stood forward in the scoop of rock admiring the dainty hollow curve the fan took in its fall. By and by I became aware that I was looking out through a smaller lens upon the great one, and that strange whirling mists seemed to be sweeping across a huge disc, within touch of my hand almost.

‘It was long before I grasped the meaning of this; but, in a flash, it came upon me. The great lens formed the object glass, the small, the eyeglass, of a natural telescope of tremendous power, that drew the high summer clouds down within seeming touch and opened out the heavens before my staring eyes.

‘Monsieur, when this dawned upon me I was wild. That so astonishing a discovery should have been reserved for a poor ignorant Swiss peasant filled me with pride wicked in proportion with its absence of gratitude to the mighty dispenser of good. I came even to think my individuality part of the wonder and necessary to its existence. “Were it not for my courage and enterprise,” I cried, “this phenomenon would have remained a secret of the Nature that gave birth to it. She yields her treasures to such only as fear not.”

‘I had read in a book of Huyghens, Guinand, Newton, Herschel—the great high-priests of science who had striven through patient years to read the hieroglyphics of the heavens. “The wise imbeciles,” I thought. “They toiled and died, and Nature held no mirror up to them. For me, the poor Camille, she has worked in secret while they grew old and passed unsatisfied.”

‘Brilliant projects of astronomy whirled in my brain. The evening of my last discovery I remained out on the hills, and entered the cave as it grew dusk. A feeling of awe surged in me as dark fell over the valley, and the first stars glistened faintly. I dipped under the fan of water and took my stand in the hollow behind it. There was no moon, but my telescope was inclined, as it were, at a generous angle, and a section of the firmament was open before me. My heart beat fast as I looked through the lens.

‘Shall I tell you what I saw then and many nights after? Rings and crosses in the heavens of golden mist, spangled, as it seemed, with jewels; stars as big as cart-wheels, twinkling points no longer, but round, like great bosses of molten fire; things shadowy, luminous, of strange colours and stranger forms, that seemed to brush the waters as they passed, but were in reality vast distances away.

‘Sometimes the thrust of wind up the ravine would produce a tremulous motion in the image at the focus of the mirror; but this was seldom. For the most part the wonderful lenses presented a steady curvature, not flawless, but of magnificent capacity.

‘Now it flashed upon me that, when the moon was at the full, she would top the valley in the direct path of my telescope’s range of view. At the thought I grew exultant. I—I, little Camille, should first read aright the history of this strange satellite. The instrument that could give shape to the stars would interpret to me the composition of that lonely orb as clearly as though I stood upon her surface.

‘As the time of her fulness drew near I grew feverish with excitement. I was sickening, as it were, to my madness, for never more should I look upon her willingly, with eyes either speculative or insane.

At this point Camille broke off for a little space, and lay back on his pillow. When he spoke again it was out of the darkness, with his face turned to the wall.

‘Monsieur, I cannot dwell upon it—I must hasten. We have no right to peer beyond the boundary God has drawn for us. I saw His hell—I saw His hell, I tell you. It is peopled with the damned—silent, horrible, distorted in the midst of ashes and desolation. It was a memory that, like the snake of Aaron, devoured all others till yesterday—till yesterday, by Christ’s mercy.’ It seemed to me, as the days wore on, that Camille had but recovered his reason at the expense of his life; that the long rest deemed necessary for him after his bitter period of brain exhaustion might in the end prove an everlasting one. Possibly the blow to his head had, in expelling the seven devils, wounded beyond cure the vital function that had fostered them. He lay white, patient, and sweet-tempered to all, but moved by no inclination to rise and re-assume the many-coloured garment of life.

His description of the dreadful desert in the sky I looked upon, merely, as an abiding memory of the brain phantasm that had finally overthrown a reason, already tottering under the tremendous excitement induced by his discovery of the lenses, and the magnified images they had presented to him. That there was truth in the asserted fact of the existence of these, my own experience convinced me; and curiosity as to this alone impelled me to the determination of investigating further, when my hand should be sufficiently recovered to act as no hindrance to me in forcing my way once more through the dense woods that bounded the waterfall. Moreover, the dispassionate enquiry of a mind less sensitive to impressions might, in the result, do more towards restoring the warped imagination of my friend to its normal state than any amount of spoken scepticism.

To Camille I said nothing of my resolve; but waited on, chafing at the slow healing of my wounds. In the meantime the period of the full moon approached, and I decided, at whatever cost, to make the venture on the evening she topped her orbit, if circumstances at the worst should prevent my doing so sooner—and thus it turned out.

On the eve of my enterprise, the first fair spring of rain in a drought of two months fell, to my disappointment, among the hills; for I feared an increase of the torrent and the effacement of the mighty lens. I set off, however, on the afternoon of the following day, in hot sunshine, mentally

prognosticating a favourable termination to my expedition, and telling Madame Barbière not to expect me back till late.

In leisurely fashion I made my way along the track we had previously traversed, risking no divergence through overhaste, and carefully examining all landmarks before deciding on any direction. Thus slowly proceeding, I had the good fortune to come within sound of the cataract as the sun was sinking behind the mountain ridges to my front; and presently emerged from the woods at the very spot we had struck in our former journey together.

A chilly twilight reigned in the ravine, and the noise that came up from the ruin of the torrent seemed doubly accented by reason of it. The sound of water moving in darkness has always conveyed to me an impression of something horrible and deadly, be it nothing of more moment than the drip and hollow tinkle of a gutter pipe. But the crash in this echoing gorge was appalling indeed.

For some moments I stood on the brink of the slope, looking across at the great knife of the fall, with a little shiver of fear. Then I shook myself, laughed, and without further ado took my courage in hand, and scrambled down the declivity and up again towards the cleft in the rocks.

Here the chill of heart gripped me again—the watery sliding tunnel looked so evil in the contracting gloom. A false step in that humid chamber, and my bones would pound and crackle on the rocks forty feet below. It must be gone through with now, however; and, taking a long breath, I set foot in the passage under the curving downpour that seemed taut as an arched muscle.

Reaching the burnt recess, a few moments sufficed to restore my self-confidence; and without further hesitation I dived under the inner little fan-shaped fall—which was there, indeed, as Camille had described it—and recovered my balance with pulses drumming thicker than I could have desired.

In a moment I became conscious that some great power was before me. Across a vast, irregular disc filled with the ashy whiteness of the outer twilight, strange, unaccountable forms misty and undefined, passed, and repassed, and vanished. Cirrus they might have been, or the shadows flung by homing flights of birds; but of this I could not be certain. As the dusk deepened they showed no more, and presently I gazed only into a violet fathomless darkness.

My own excitement now was great; and I found some difficulty in keeping it under control. But for the moment, it seemed to me, I pined greatly for free commune with the liberal atmosphere of earth. Therefore, I dipped under the little fall and made my cautious way to the margin of the cataract.

I was surprised to find for how long a time the phenomenon had absorbed me. The moon was already high in the heavens, and making towards the ravine with rapid steps. Far below, the tumbling waters flashed in her rays, and on all sides great tiers of solemn trees stood up at attention to salute her.

When her disc silvered the inner rim of the slope I had descended, I returned to my post of observation with tingling nerves. The field of the great object lens was already suffused with the radiance of her approach.

Suddenly my pupils shrank before the apparition of a ghastly grey light, and all in a moment I was face to face with a segment of desolation more horrible than any desert. Monstrous growths of leprosy that had bubbled up and stiffened; fields of ashen slime—the sloughing of a world of corruption; hills of demon fungus swollen with the fatness of putrefaction; and, in the midst of all, dim, convulsed shapes wallowing, protruding, or stumbling aimlessly onwards, till they sank and disappeared.

Madame Barbieri threw up her hands when she let me in at the door. My appearance, no doubt, was ghastly. I knew not the hour nor the lapse of time covered by my wanderings about the hills, my face hidden in my palms, a drawn feeling about my heart, my lips muttering— muttering fragments of prayers, and my throat jerking with horrible laughter.

For hours I lay face downwards on my bed.

‘Monsieur has seen it?’

‘I have seen it.’

‘I heard the rain on the hills. The lens will have been blurred. Monsieur has been spared much.’

‘God, in His mercy, pity thee! And me—oh, Camille, and me too!’

‘He has held out His white hand to me. I go, when I go, with a safe conduct.’

He went before the week was out. The drought had broken and for five days the thunder crashed and the wild rain swept the mountains. On the morning of the sixth a drenched shepherd reported in the village that a landslip had choked the fall of Buet, and completely altered its shape. Madame Barbieri broke into the room where I was sitting with Camille, big with the news. She little guessed how it affected her listeners.

‘The *bon Dieu*,’ said Camille, when she had gone, ‘has thundered His curse on Nature for revealing His secrets. I, who have penetrated into the forbidden, must perish.’

‘And I, Camille?’

He turned to me with a melancholy sweet smile, and answered, paraphrasing the dying words of certain noble lips—

‘Be good, Monsieur; be good.’