

Jack and Jill

By Bernard Capes

My friend, Monsieur —, absolutely declines to append his name to these pages, of which he is the virtual author. Nevertheless, he permits me to publish them anonymously, being, indeed, a little curious to ascertain what would have been the public verdict as to his sanity, had he given his personal imprimatur to a narrative on the face of it so incredible.

“How!” he says. “Should I have believed it of another, when I have such astonishing difficulty at this date in realizing that it was I—yes, I, my friend—this same little callow *poupon*—that was an actual hero of the adventure? Fidèle” (by which term we cover the identity of his wife)—“Fidèle will laugh in my face sometimes, crying, ‘Not thou, little cabbage, nor yet thy faithful, was it that dived through half the world and came up breathless! No, no—I cannot believe it. We folk, so matter-of-fact and so comical. It was of Hansel and Gretel we had been reading hand-in-hand, till we fell asleep in the twilight and fancied this thing.’ And then she will trill like a bird at the thought of how solemn Herr Grabenstock, of the Hôtel du Mont Blanc, would have stared and edged apart, had we truly recounted to him that which had befallen us between the rising and the setting of a sun. We go forth; it rains—my faith! as it will in the Chamounix valley—and we return in the evening sopped. Very natural. But, for a first cause of our wetting. Ah! there we must be fastidious of an explanation., or we shall find ourselves in peril of restraint.

“Now, write this for me, and believe it if you can. We are not in a conspiracy of imagination—I and the dear courageous.”

Therefore I *do* write it, speaking in the person of Monsieur —, and largely from his dictation; and my friend shall amuse himself over the nature of its reception.

* * *

“One morning (it was in late May),” says Monsieur —, “my Fidèle and I left the Hôtel du Mont Blanc for a ramble amongst the hills. We were a little adventurous, because we were innocent we took no guide but our commonsense; and that served us very ill—or very well, according to the point of view. Ours was that of the birds, singing to the sky and careless of the snake in the grass so long as they can pipe their tune. Of a surety that is the only course. If one would make provision against every chance of accident, one must dematerialize. To die is the only way to secure oneself from fatality.

“Still, it is a wise precaution, I will admit, not to eat of all hedge fruit because blackberries are sweet. Some day, after the fiftieth stomach-ache, we shall learn wisdom, my Fidèle and I.

“ ‘Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.’ That, I know, comes into the English gospel. Well, I will tell you, I am content to be considered of the first; and my Fidèle is assuredly of the second. Yet did she fear, or I rush in? On the contrary, I have a little laughing thought that it was the angel inveighed against the dulness of caution when the fool would have hesitated.

“Now, it was before the season of the Alps; and the mountain aubergistes were, for the most part, not arrived at their desolate hill-taverns. Nor were guides at all in evidence, being yet engaged, the sturdy souls, over their winter occupations. One, no doubt, we could have procured,

had we wished it; but we did not. We would explore under the ægis of no cicerone but our curiosity. That was native to us, if the district was strange.

“Following, at first, the instructions of Herr Baedeker, we traveled and climbed, chattering and singing as we went, in the direction of the Montenvert, whence we were to descend upon the Mer de Glace, and enjoy the spectacle of a stupendous glacier.

“ ‘And that, I am convinced,’ said Fidèle, ‘is nothing more nor less than one of those many windows that give light to the monsters of the under-earth.’

“ ‘Little imbecile! In some places this window is six hundred feet thick.’

“ ‘So?’ she said. ‘That is because their dim eyes could not endure the full light of the sun.’

“We had brought a tin box of sandwiches with us; and this, with my large pewter flask full of wine, was slung upon my back. For we had been told the Hôtel du Montenvert was yet closed; and, sure enough when we reached it, the building stood black in a pool of snow, its shuttered windows forlorn, and long icicles hung from the eaves.

“The depression induced by this sight was momentary. We turned from it to the panorama of majestic loveliness that stretched below and around us. The glacier—that rolling sea of glass—descended from the enormous gates of the hills. Its source was the white furnace of the skies; its substance the crystal refuse of the stars; and from its margins the splintered peaks stood up in a thousand forms of beauty. Right and left, in the hollows of the mountains, the mist lay like ponds, opal and translucent; and the shafts of the pine trees standing in it looked like the reflections of themselves.

“It made the eyes ache—this silence of greatness; and it became a relief to shift one’s gaze to the reality of one’s near neighbourhood—the grass, and the rhododendron bushes, and even the dull walls of the deserted auberge.

“A narrow path dipped over the hill-side and fled into the very jaws of the moraine. Down the first of this path we raced, hand in hand; but soon, finding the impetus overmastering us, we pulled up with difficulty, and descended the rest of the way circumspectly.

“At the foot of the steep slope we came upon the little wooden hutch where, ordinarily, one may procure a guide (also rough socks to stretch over one’s boots) for the passage of the glacier. Now, however, the shod was closed and tenantless; and we must e’en dispense with a conductor, should we adventure further.

“Herr Baedeker says, ‘Guide unnecessary for the experienced.’

“ ‘Fidèle, are we experienced?’

“ ‘We shall be, *mon ami*, when we have crossed. A guide could not alter that.’

“ ‘But it is true, *ma petite*. Come, then!’

“We clambered down amongst huge stones. Fidèle’s little feet went in and out of the crannies like sand-martins. Suddenly, before we realized it, we were on the glacier.

“Fidèle exclaimed.

“ ‘*Mon Dieu!* Is this ice—these blocks of dirty alabaster?’

“Alas! she was justified. This torrent of majestic crystal—seen from above so smooth and bountiful—a flood of the milk of Nature dispensed from the white bosom of the hills! Now, near at hand, what do we find it? A medley of opaque blocks, smeared with grit and rubbish; a vast ruin of avalanches hurled together and consolidated, and of the colour of rock salt.

“ ‘*Peste!*’ I cried. ‘We must get to the opposite bank, for all that.’

“*Mignonne, allons voir si la rose,
Qui ce matin avoit desclose. . . .*”

“We clasped hands and set forth on our little *traversée*, our landmark an odd-shaped needle of spar on the further side. My faith! it was simple. The *paveurs* of Nature had left the road a trifle rough, that was all. Suddenly we came upon a wide fissure stretched obliquely like the mouth of a sole. Going glibly. we learnt a small lesson of caution therefrom. Six paces, and we should have tumbled in.

“We looked over fearfully. Here, in truth, was real ice at last—green as bottle-glass at the edges, and melting into unfathomable deeps of glowing blue.

“In a moment, with a shriek like that of escaping steam, a windy demon leapt at us from the underneath. It was all of winter in a breath. It seemed to shrivel the skin from our faces—the flesh from our bones. We staggered backwards.

“ ‘*Mon ami! mon ami!*’ cried Fidèle, ‘my heart is a stone; my eyes are two blisters of water!’

“We danced as the blood returned unwilling to our veins. It was minutes before we could proceed.

“Afterwards I learned that these hellish eruptions of air betoken a change of temperature. It was coming then shortly in a dense rainfall.

“When we were recovered, we sought about for a way to circumambulate the crevasse. Then we remarked that up a huge boulder of ice that had seemed to block our path recent steps, or toe-holes, had been cut. In a twinkling we were over. Fidèle—no, a woman never falls.

“ ‘For all this,’ she says, shaking her head, ‘I maintain that a guide here is a sinecurist.’

“Well, we made the passage safely, and toiled up the steep, loose moraine beyond—to find the track over which was harder than crossing the glacier. But we did it, and struck the path along the hillside, which leads by the *Mauvais Pas* (the *mauvais quart d’heure*) to the little cabaret called the *Chapeau*. This tavern, too, was shut and dismal. It did not matter. We sat like sparrows on a railing, and munched our egg-sandwiches and drank our wine in a sort of glorious stupefaction. For right opposite us was the vast glacier-fall, whose crashing foam was towers and parapets of ice, that went over and rolled into the valley below, a ruin of thunder.

“Far beyond, where the mouth of the gorge spread out littered with monstrous destruction, we saw the hundred threads of the glacier streams collect into a single rope of silver, that went drawn between the hills, a highway of water. It was all a majestic panorama of grey and pearly white—the sky, the torrents, the mountains; but the blue and rusty green of the stone pines, flung abroad in hanging woods and coppices, broke up and distributed the infinite serenity of the snow fields.

“Presently, having drunk deep of rich content, we rose to retrace our steps. For, spurred by vanity, we must be returning the way we had come, to show our confident experience of glaciers.

“All went well. Actually we had passed over near two-thirds of the ice-bed, when a touch on my arm stayed me, and *ma mie* looked into my eyes, very comical and insolent.

“ ‘Little cabbage,’ she said; ‘will you not put your new knowledge to account?’

“ ‘But how, my soul?’

“She laughed and pressed my arm to her side. Her heart fluttered like a nestling after its first flight.

“ ‘To rest on the little prowess of a small adventure! No, no! Shall he who has learnt to swim be always content to bathe in shallow water?’

“I was speechless as I gazed on her.

“ ‘Behold, then!’ she cried. ‘We have opposed ourselves to this problem of the ice, and we have mastered it. See how it rears itself to the inaccessible peaks, the which to reach the poor

innocents expend themselves over rocks and drifts. But why should one not climb the mountain by way of the glacier?’

“ ‘Fidèle!’ I gasped.

“ ‘Ah!’ she exclaimed, nodding her head; ‘but poor men! They are mules. They spill their blood on the scaling ladders when the town gate is open.’

“Again I cried ‘Fidèle!’

“ ‘But, yes,’ she said, ‘it needs a woman to see. It is but two o’clock. Let us ascend the glacier, like a staircase; and presently we shall stand upon the summit of the mountain. Those last little peaks above the ice can be of no importance.’

“I was touched, astounded by the sublimity of her idea. Had no one, then, ever thought of this before?

“We began the ascent.

“I swear we must have toiled upwards half a mile, when the catastrophe took place.

“It was raining then—a dense small mist; and the ice was as if it had been greased. We were proceeding with infinite care, arm in arm, tucked close together. A little doubt, I think, was beginning to oppress us. We could move only with much caution and difficulty; and there were noises—sounds like the clapping of great hands in those rocky attics above us. Then there would come a slamming report, as if the window of the unknown had been burst open by demons; and the moans of the lost would issue, surging down upon the world.

“These thunders, as we were afterwards told, are caused by the splitting of the ice when there comes a fall in the barometer. Then the glacier will yawn like a sliced junket.

“My faith! what a simile! But again the point of view, my friend.

“All in a moment I heard a little cluck. I looked down. Alas! the fine spirit was obscured. Fidèle was weeping.

“ ‘ *Chut! chut!*’ I exclaimed in consternation. ‘We will go back at once.’

“She struggled to smile, the poor *mignonne*.

“ ‘ It is only that my knees are sick,’ she said piteously.

“I took her in my strong arms tenderly.

“We had paused on a ridge of hard snow.

“There came a tearing clang—an enormous sucking sound, as of wet lips opening. The snow sank under our feet.

“ ‘My God!’ shrieked Fidèle.

“I held her convulsively. It happened in an instant, before one could leap aside. The bed of snow on which we were standing broke down into the crevasse it had bridged, and let us through to the depths.

“Will you believe what follows? Pinch your nose and open your mouth. You shall take the whole draught at a breath. *The ice at the point where we entered was five hundred feet thick; and we fell to the very bottom of it.*

“Ha! ha! Is it difficult to swallow? But it is true—it is quite true. Here I sit, sound and safe, and eminently sane, and that after a fall of five hundred feet.

“Now, listen.

“We went down, welded together, with a rush and a buzz like a cannon-ball. Thoughts? Ah! my friend, I had none. Who can think even in a high wind? And here the wind of our going would have brained an ox. Only one desperate instinct I had, one little forlorn remnant of humanity—to shield the love of my heart. So my arms never left her; and we fell together. I dreaded nothing, feared nothing, foresaw no terror in the inevitable mangling crash of the end.

For time, that is necessary to emotion, was annihilated. We had outstripped it, and left sense and reason sluggishly following in our wake.

“Sense, yes; but not altogether sensation. Flashingly I was conscious here of incredibly swift transitions, from cold to deeper wells of frost; thence down through a stratum of death and negation, between mere blind walls of frigid inhumanity, to have been stayed a moment by which would have pointed all our limbs as stiff as icicles, as stiff as those of frogs plunged into boiling water. But we passed and fell, still crashing upon no obstruction; and thought pursued us, tailing further behind.

“It was the passage of the eternal night—frozen, self-contained; awful as any fancied darkness that is without one tradition of a star. Yet, struggling hereafter to, in some shadowy sense, renew my feelings of the moment, it seemed to me that I had not fallen through darkness at all; but rather that the friction of descent had kindled an inner radiance in me that was independent of the vision of the eyes, and full of promise of a sudden illumination of the soul.

“Now, after falling what depths God knows, I become numbly aware of a little griding sensation at my back, that communicated a whistling small vibration to my whole frame. This intensified, became more pronounced. Perceptibly, in that magnificent refinement of speed, our enormous pace I felt to decrease ever so little. Still we had so far outstripped intelligence as that I was incapable of considering the cause of the change.

“Suddenly, for the first time, pain made itself known; and immediately reason, plunging from above, overtook me, and I could think.

“Then it was I became conscious that, instead of falling, we were rising, rising with immense swiftness, but at a pace that momentarily slackened—rising, slipping over ice and in contact with it.

“The muscles of my arms, clasped still about Fidèle, involuntarily swelled to her. My God! there was a tiny answering pressure. I could have screamed with joy; but physical anguish overmastered me. My back seemed bursting into flame. The suffering was intolerable. When, at last, I thought I should go mad, in a moment we took a surging swoop, shot down an easy incline, and *stopped*.

“There had been noise in our descent, as only now I knew by its cessation—a hissing sound as of wire whirring from a draw-plate. In the profound enormous silence that, at last, enwrapped us, the bliss of freedom from that metallic accompaniment fell on me like a balm. My eyelids closed. Possibly I fainted.

“All in a moment I came to myself, to an undefinable sense of the tremendous pressure of nothingness. Darkness! it was not that; yet it was as little light. It was as if we lay in a dim, luminous chaos, ourselves an integral part of its self-containment. I did not stir; but I spoke: and my strange voice broke the enchantment. Surely never before or since was speech exchanged under such conditions.

“ ‘Fidèle!’

I can speak, but I cannot look. If I hide so for ever I can die bravely.’

“ ‘*Ma petite!* oh, my little one! Are you hurt?’

“ ‘ I don’t know. I think not.’

“Her voice, her dear voice was so odd; but, *Mon Dieu!* how wonderful in its courage! That, Heaven be praised! is no monopoly of intellect. Indeed, it is imagination that makes men cowards; and to the lack of this possibly we owed our salvation.

“Now, calm and freed of that haunting jar of descent, I became conscious that a sound, that I had at first taken for the rush of my own arteries, had an origin apart from us. It was like the wash and thunder of waters in a deep sewer.

“ ‘Fidèle!’ I said again.

“ ‘ I am listening.’

“ ‘Hear, then! Canst thou free my right arm, that I may feel for the lucifers in my pocket?’

“She moved at once, never raising her face from my breast. I groped for the box, found it; and manipulating with one hand, succeeded in striking a match. It flamed up—a long wax vesta.

“A glory of sleek fires sprang on the instant into life. We lay imprisoned in a house of glass at the foot of a smooth incline rising behind us to unknown heights. A wall of porous and opaque ice-rubbish, into which our feet had plunged deep, had stayed our progress.

“I placed the box by my side ready for use. Our last moments should be lavish of splendour. Stooping for another match, to kindle from the flame of the near-expired one, a thought struck me. Why had we not been at once frozen to death? Yet we lay where we had brought up, as snug and glowing as if we were wrapped in bedclothes.

“The answer came to me in a flash. We had fallen sheer to the glacier bed, which, warmed by subterraneous heat, was ever in process of melting. Possibly, but a comparatively thin curtain of perforated ice separated us from the under torrent.

“The enforced conclusion was astounding; but as yet it inspired no hope. We were none the less doomed and buried.

“I lit a second match, turned about, and gave a start of terror. There, imbedded in the transparent wall at my very shoulder, was something—the body of a man.

“A horrible sight—a horrible, horrible sight— crushed, flattened—a caricature; the very gouts of blood that had burst from him held poised in the massed congelations of water.

“For how long ages had he been travelling to the valley, and from what heights? He was of a bygone generation, by his huge coat cuffs, his metal buttons, by his shoe buckles and the white stockings on his legs, which were pressed thin and sharp, as if cut out of paper. Had he been a climber, an explorer—a contemporary, perhaps, of Saussure and a rival? And what had been his unrecorded fate? To slip into a crevasse, and so for the parted ice to snap upon him again, like a hideous jaw? Its work done, it might at least have opened and dropped him through—not held him intact to jog us, out of all that world of despair, with his battered elbow!

“Perhaps to witness in others the fate he had himself suffered!

“I dropped the match I was holding. I tightened my clasp convulsively about Fidèle. Thank God she, at any rate, was blind to this horror within a horror!

“All at once—was it the start I had given, or the natural process of dissolution beneath our feet?—we were moving again. Swift—swifter! Fidèle uttered a little moaning cry. The rubbish of ice crashed below us, and we sank through.

“I knew nothing, then, but that we were in water—that we had fallen from a little height, and were being hurried along. The torrent, now deep, now so shallow that my feet scraped its bed, gushed in my ears and blinded my eyes.

“Still I hugged Fidèle, and I could feel by her returning grasp that she lived. The water was not unbearably cold as yet. The air that came through cracks and crevasses had not force to overcome the under warmth.

“I felt something slide against me—clutched and held on. It was a brave pine log. Could I recover it at this date I would convert it into a flagstaff for the tricolour. It was our raft, our refuge; and it carried us to safety.

“I cannot give the extravagant processes of that long journey. It was all a rushing, swirling dream—a mad race of mystery and sublimity, to which the only conscious periods were wild,

flitting glimpses of wonderful ice arabesques, caught momentarily as we passed under fissures that let the light of day through dimly.

“Gradually a ghostly radiance grew to encompass us; and by a like gradation the water waxed intensely cold. Hope then was blazing in our hearts; but this new deathliness went nigh to quench it altogether. Yet, had we guessed the reason, we could have foregone the despair. For, in truth, we were approaching that shallower terrace of the glacier beyond the fall, through which the light could force some weak passage, and the air make itself felt, blowing upon the beds of ice.

“Well, we survived; and still we survive. My faith, what a couple! Sublimity would have none of us. The glacier rejected souls so commonplace as not to be properly impressed by its inexorability.

“This, then, was the end. We swept into a huge cavern of ice—through it—beyond it, into the green valley and the world that we love. And there, where the torrent splits up into a score of insignificant streams, we grounded and crawled to dry land and sat down and laughed.

“Yes, we could do it—we could laugh. Is that not bathos? But Fidèle and I have a theory that laughter is the chief earnest of immortality.

“To *dry* land I have said. *Mon Dieu!* the torrent was no wetter. It rains in the Chamounix valley. We looked to see whence we had fallen, and not even the *Chapeau* was visible through the mist.

“But, as I turned, Fidèle uttered a little cry.

“ ‘The flask, and the sandwich-box, and your poor coat!’

“ ‘*Comment?*’ I said; and in a moment was in my shirt-sleeves.

“I stared, and I wondered, and I clucked in my throat.

“Holy saints! I was adorned with a breastplate on my back. The friction of descent, first welding together these, the good ministers to our appetite, had worn the metal down in the end to a mere skin or badge, the heat generated from which had scorched and frizzled the cloth beneath it.

“I needed not to seek further explanation of the pain I had suffered—was suffering then, indeed, as I had reason to know when ecstasy permitted a return of sensation. My back bears the scars at this moment

“ ‘It shall remain there for ever!’ I cried, ‘like the badge of a *cocker de fiacre*, who has made the fastest journey on record. ‘Coachman! from the glacier to the valley.’ ‘*Mais oui, monsieur.* Down this crevasse, if you please.’

“And that is the history of our adventure.

“Why we were not dashed to pieces? But that, as I accept it, is easy of elucidation. Imagine a vast crescent moon, with a downward nick from the end of the tail. This form the fissure took, in one enormous sweep and drop towards the mouth of the valley. Now, as we rushed headlong, the gentle curve received us from space to substance quite gradually, until we were whirring forward wholly on the latter, my luggage suffering the brunt of the friction. The upward sweep of the crescent diminished our progress—more and yet more—until we switched over the lower point and shot quietly down the incline beyond. And all this in ample room, and without meeting with a single unfriendly obstacle.

“ ‘*Voilà, mes chers amis, ce qui me met en peine.*’

“Fidèle laughs, the rogue!

“ ‘*Ta, ta, ta!*’ she says. ‘But they will not believe a word of it all.’”