

A Question of Courage

By Dora Sigerson Shorter

“We know who you are looking at, Miss Roche!”

But Miss Roche only answered with a blush, and gazed through the telescope more earnestly than before. Those who watched her suddenly saw her stiffen, her face grow ghastly, and her hands clench together, as though she were stricken with death. They sprang up and surrounded her, as she rushed from her place screaming.

“Help! help!” she cried; and then, seeing nothing but the far-off snow peaks before her, returned to her place, roughly pushing back the gathering crowd. Those who had for the moment of her absence looked through the telescope saw, on the far-away snow mountain, three struggling human beings, sliding, sliding, sliding down to their death. Along the icy slope they went, clutching the crumbling snow, gliding ever downward to the mouth of a purple crevasse. The end of the tragedy had not come before the girl was back at the glass. She put the others who crowded around her, back with rough hands; they did not resent her passage or dare usurp her place, for she was engaged to one of those three men who they had for a moment seen so near, and yet were too far off to help.

The girl never moved during the awful minutes of the tragedy which she alone could see. She swayed, moaning and crying for some one to aid the poor victims, and, at last, with a choking cry, fell to the ground, from whence she was tenderly lifted and carried into the house. The moment her eyes left the glass others had taken her place, as full of pity as she, perhaps, yet anxious not to miss the morbid excitement of looking at least upon the disaster, since they were too far away to be of use.

The man who had taken the telescope in his hands, prepared as he was for what he should see, started back at the first glance, then settled to watch in pitiful uselessness.

“They have slipped to the edge of a crevasse,” he said. “Three men. My God! Two of them are over, the third man is trying to keep them up; but he can’t do it—he can’t do it! He is slipping—slipping—no! he has stopped; he has driven his axe into the ground—it holds. One of the fallen men is struggling to mount the rope, but cannot! The other is still—perhaps unconscious, dead! The rope is twisting and turning them round and round in the awful air. O God! the third man is giving way—his axe is broken, or has lost its hold. He is slipping towards the edge—he is on the edge. Heaven help him! he is over. No! The rope has broken; he saves himself—he saves himself! He lies in the snow, like one dead, poor chap!”

Here the watcher was pushed aside by a frantic woman, who took his place. She looked through the glass, trying to focus it to eyes dimmed with agony.

“There is one safe, you say!” she cried; “it is my son! is it not—my only son?”

The men draw her aside. No one could be sure at the distance, they tell her, trying to calm her. Pray God it be her son. Then, seeing the other woman near, pale and wild, repeat, No one can be sure who it is—better wait.

Ah! the suspense of waiting. The whole population of the vast hotel were as anxiously watching for the return of the one survivor as though they were related to him. Lunch was hastily eaten with little conversation, and that little the one absorbing subject of the accident. Telescopes and glasses were levelled for hours at the snow-peak where the tragedy had been. But they saw nothing; after the accident, the man remaining had crawled out of sight.

At dawn next morning the rescue party returned with the one living creature they had found and the bodies of the mangled dead. Those who had forgotten in sleep the tragedy of the day before were awakened by a woman's cry, and sprang up alarmed. But one girl who had not lain down to sleep, but trod the floor all night, pressed her hands above her heart, hearing the scream. "It is not her son!" she said. "Thank God!"

* * *

Edward Rounds recovered slowly from the shock and exposure which he had suffered, and when he came amongst his friends again they could see lines of suffering upon his face that had never been there before.

He had gone amongst these companions for a few days before it became evident to him that there was some coldness in their attitude towards him since the accident. At first he could not believe that it was not his imagination. He remembered the enthusiastic welcome they had given him upon his appearance with the rescue party, how they had cheered him from their windows, and hurried down in the dawn to congratulate him on his escape. Thinking thus, he went amongst them as formerly, but soon found he was firmly, though almost imperceptibly, snubbed, and set aside. The dozen friends who had joined with him to spend their holidays in Switzerland were avoiding him. His neighbours at the table moved their places, one saying the draught was too much, the other, not hearing the excuse, that the heat that end of the table was oppressive. Before he realized it, Edward had strangers beside him when he ate. After a week or so these strangers had forgotten their excitement in his escape from death, or only remembered it if a son or a friend begged to go on the same eventful climb. Then Edward was pointed out as a warning of its danger, and was begged to tell his story over again. How he shrank from the telling nobody knew, but the limpness and coldness of his replies soon froze the friendliness of those beside him. He was left to himself and silence. For some time Edward refused to believe that his friends shunned him. Yet their awkwardness in meeting him, their various excuses to get away, their refusal to walk with him for many inadequate reasons, his difficulty in keeping up conversation with them when he found them alone, his own very isolation amongst the strangers at the hotel, could not but open his eyes to the fact that, without a word of explanation, he was being put away from the friendships he desired, and from the affection that had been his.

The bitterest drop in this cup of bitterness was the coldness of the girl whom he had hoped to make his wife. He had known her a year, and had prevailed on her father—she was motherless—to join the trip that he and his friends were making to Switzerland. And the old man, one of his dearest friends, had willingly consented. He smiled on the youth when he asked for his company, and Edward answered the unspoken thought :—"I hope to ask something from you before the holiday is through, but I do not know if she cares for me yet."

The old General had wished him good luck, with a warm grasp of the hand. Now he was one of those who seemed to Edward to avoid him most. The girl appeared to share her father's dislike, or whatever it was, and Edward could now never meet or speak with her alone—never could prevail on her to walk with him, or get her to converse.

"She does not care for me," he thought; but the memory of certain looks and words of hers came to him. "She has grown tired, or loves another." His hands clenched at the possibility. The shadow of his friends' unkindness fell darkly upon him in his weakness. His strength had not come back to him since his adventure in the snow, and the short, severe fever that followed. The holidays were drawing to a close; he dreaded to go back to the city with the consciousness of this

entanglement with his companions. He dreaded the desolation of his life amongst the crowd, without love or friendship; he made friends so slowly, and had always dreaded strangers. He dreaded most of all to go back to the little house he had hoped to make a home with the woman he loved.

On one day he would breakfast in his room, take his lunch out to eat alone upon the hillside, dine in silence, without looking up from his plate, and disappear to his room the moment he left the table. The next morning he would wake with the strong conviction that he was imagining grievances, and that it was his own folly that made his friends seem heartless. So rising, he would go to them with the frankness and affection with which he always met them, only to meet again the repulse he could feel; though he neither heard nor saw any sign to mention, even to himself.

One day he sat with his head upon his hands, alone in the wood. He was so still that a girl half passed before she became aware of his presence. At her start of surprise he woke from the sadness of his dreaming, and looking into her face, saw her wish to pass unnoticed. A sudden anger seized him; he sprang to his feet and stood in her path, he caught her dress in his hands as she turned to go back.

“You shall not go!” he cried, half in anger, half in entreaty, “not till you tell me what all this coldness means.”

“I am not aware of any coldness,” she said, her face flushed and half turned away. “It’s later than I thought. I must go back; Father will expect me.”

“You will not go back,” he answered, “till you tell me what it all means? Why have my friends turned from me? Why am I sent to Coventry? What have I done? Alice,” he continued, as she tried to face him with a look of surprise, so badly feigned on her honest face that she blushed at her own deception, “don’t pretend not to understand me; be true to yourself—to me. Tell me what I have done.”

“Done!” she echoed. “I don’t know that you have done anything wrong; it’s only—only it’s a matter of feeling.”

“A matter of feeling!” He caught her hands as she turned to go. “*You must* tell me, Alice! You know what I hoped—you know what I meant to ask you. Is it that—that is keeping you from me? Is it that you do not care now? You did once, Alice; you did once.”

“Oh, let me go!” she said, half crying. “Perhaps that’s it; I did care—and I do not care now. Let me go!”

He loosed her hands at once, and she went sobbing homeward through the woods; but he crouched there till darkness came, when he rose and followed her.

His friends were deep in a loud discussion when he entered the smoking-room, which they had all to themselves that evening. They did not hear the door open till his appearance chilled them all to silence. It was unusual of late for him to come among them, and the look upon his face was unusual too. One of the more merciful of them rose to leave the room, saying he was tired. He knew the snubs that would follow Edward’s arrival, and dreaded having to contribute to them.

But Edward stood against the door and faced the room. There was a stern purpose in his eyes as they dwelt upon his friends.

“Before you go, gentlemen,” he said, “there is something I have to say to you—something you have to answer to me. I have known you all for years—you have all known me. You owe me, I think, for the sake of our friendship—our past friendship, I expect you would wish to say—an explanation of your conduct to me lately.” He paused. Only one man spoke.

“Our conduct, Edward?” he said awkwardly; “what on earth is wrong with our conduct to you lately?”

Edward turned upon him bitterly.

“Don’t pretend you don’t know what I mean,” he said; “out with it, some of you! What have I done?”

The men moved uneasily. Some one muttered, “That is no way to speak.”

Edward lowered his voice at the rebuke; he spoke more gently, but held his position at the door.

“No one leaves the room till I know my fault. Why have you thrust me from you without even the justice of knowing what I have done? If I cared for your friendship less, I would not trouble you to ask; but you were my friends, my only companions: if I lose you I shall make no new affections. Why have you turned against me? The loneliness is horrible.”

There was silence for a moment, then one man leant forward to strike a match, and, shielding it with his fingers to keep it alight, he turned his shoulder to the young man. Edward thought he meant it as a snub. The truth was, the man was trying to break an awkward silence, and his movement was only to hide from the gaze he felt fasten on his face.

“You, General! do not turn away from me. For God’s sake, what have I done?”

The old man knocked the dead ashes from his pipe.

“What have you done?” He looked round at his companions as if for an answer. “I don’t know that you have exactly done anything.”

Edward flushed with fresh anger.

“Out with it! What have I done?” He spoke roughly. “Why have you all avoided me?”

“Have the others avoided you?” man looked around him. “I did not know. If I avoided you it was unknown to myself—at least, I did not know I put my feeling into any expression.”

“Your feeling—what feeling?”

A young man at the other end of the room leaned forward. He spoke as though to put an end to the suspense.

“If I have shown you any coldness, I apologize,” he said slowly. “If I have avoided you, it has been because of a feeling that I cannot explain—ever since you returned from that terrible day on the ice.”

“Yes”—Edward turned to him—“it is since that day. What have I done since that day?”

The young man flushed. “It wasn’t since that day,” he said; “it was on that day.”

He moved uneasily; some one else muttered “Yes! on that day”; and he resumed,—

“I don’t know if it’s the same thing that we all feel since we heard—since we heard—”

“Go on!” Edward cried hoarsely, his face losing its red flush of anger and growing pale.

“But I know that with me it’s only a certain feeling I have. I dare say that I am all wrong—I dare say that we should all have done what you did.”

“What did I do?” Edward’s voice came in a rough whisper.

“Well, they say, you know—the guides who found you—that the rope did not break—was cut, you know; and, I suppose, we all feel—the same about it. We know you would not have done it, only there was no chance for the others. But, all the same, we feel queer about it. Is that it, you fellows?”

There was a movement of assent in the room.

Edward leaned against the door, his face ghastly. He spoke at last, slowly and as if with difficulty.

“Yes,” he said, “I cut the rope. It was to cut it or die; it made no difference to them. It is only a matter of feeling, as you say. I should have gone with them. Do you think,” he cried, clenching his hands together, “do you think I do not know it now? Night after night I lie awake, and go through the agony again: I feel the rope tighten on my chest, and those dead men pulling me down. I was one of the three. They have not forgiven me for leaving them; why should you? They haunt me—I hear their voices, I feel their hands. Did you know when you banished me all that I was suffering—how I have thought of it till it almost maddened me? did you think I had forgotten the sound of their cries, the tearing of their fingers upon the ice, the thud of their falling bodies going down, down, down, the bite of the rope across my chest, the slackening of it? Do you think I can forget? A matter of feeling, it is nothing else. Was I bound to kill myself, when I had one little chance of escape?—hardly a chance I thought at the time. Listen! Do you know how we fell? The guide went first,—I think he was ill; there was no reason for his fall,—and he lay helpless when he was down. Robertson went next, and I was drawn after them. We slid a man’s length and stopped. I had my axe in the ground. The guide never stirred; he was a heavy man, and the strain was awful. Robertson tried to get a hold, and his struggles loosened the axe; we slid again, and again I got my blade in the ice. I held as long as I could, but, under the weight, the handle of my axe broke; then we slid downward again. My God! how awful it was! We clung to each other, we tore at the iron ground with our naked hands; we tried to get our feet into the ice, to fasten our teeth into the snow; but we rolled and slipped down, down, the guide, helpless, dragging us the quicker to our death. I do not know how long it was till we reached the end—hours it seemed—and then the two went over into the horrible emptiness, and I alone remained to save them. I tore with my nails, I thrust my teeth into the ice; I had my feet on a tiny ridge, and for a moment I held them up. I heard Robertson calling to me to hold on and he would climb the rope. But he could not, he was in the middle. I heard the guide call out feebly something I did not understand; then he was quiet. Robertson could not move. There was no time to think before I began to slip again.”

He stopped and thrust his hands out. The nails were half torn away, and upon the hands were the signs of a cruel struggle.

“Look here! See how I held! I was slipping again, and there was no chance of recovery. Oh, you fellows, sitting there in judgment, I swear before God if it had been a question of the faintest—the faintest chance of saving them, I would have given my life upon that chance. I would have died for them, if there was a possibility of their rescue by doing so. But it is not asked of us to die with a comrade, though we may give our lives for his rescue. If there had been no rope and they had slipped over, would you have expected me to jump over after them? No, you would not. My hands were powerless, the rope bit into my flesh. I was half over the edge. I thought life was fairer than it is. I saved myself by a miracle—I cut the rope. I fought hard for them.”

He dragged his shirt open at the breast as he spoke, showing them so cruel a bruise that some of the men turned away in pity.

“My wounds speak for me. Oh,” he continued, with a sudden cry of appeal, “you are men with wives, sweethearts, sisters, mothers, homes; I am a solitary man without a relative in the world, with loneliness mistress in my home; I cannot make new friends”—he looked towards the General—“I cannot make new loves. Do not turn your faces from me. You see how weak I am to speak to you like this—how I value you all.”

In the silence that followed the door opened and Alice entered, followed by her dog, a pretty Russian poodle.

“Is my father here?” she said.

And the strain upon the nerves of the company was broken by her voice. The men rose to their feet with a deep breath of relief, some bidding her come in, others seizing the moment of disturbance to slip out of the room, glad to escape the unusual atmosphere of awkwardness. Edward stood beside the door and let them pass. They slunk by him as if he were the judge and they the condemned. Some said, “Good-night.” One muttered he would see him in the morning, with a secret resolution to be up and catch an early train before any one was moving; another had to give orders for an excursion next day; a couple, feeling indisposed, went to order breakfast in their rooms. All passed without the offer of a hand, till only Alice and her father were left.

The young man and the old faced each other.

“Well, sir, and you?” The young man spoke bitterly.

The other moved towards the door.

“I have to see a man about that drive to-morrow, or I shan’t get a carriage” Then, seeing the look on the young man’s face, he added: “You see, my boy, nothing you can say or do just now makes any difference. It’s a feeling one has about it all. I dare say we are wrong, and in time it will wear away; but there’s a feeling about these things one can’t get over just at first.”

He hastily left the room, forgetting his daughter.

Edward turned to her.

“You, Alice?”

“I only came to ask Dr. Thornton how to use this; it’s poison.” She held up a little bottle. “I have such neuralgia, and I am so busy; we leave in the morning. I have so many letters to write.” Then she cried, as if afraid, “Oh, let me go—I am so busy.”

“I am not detaining you,” he said; and opened the door for her.

He sat down in the empty room and took up the phial she had dropped in her haste.

“Life was so sweet, I was afraid to die.” He held the bottle to the light—it was quite full.

“Life was so sweet.”

He laughed aloud, and the dog who lay upon the hearth rose and came to him, laying its head upon his knees with a long, low whine.