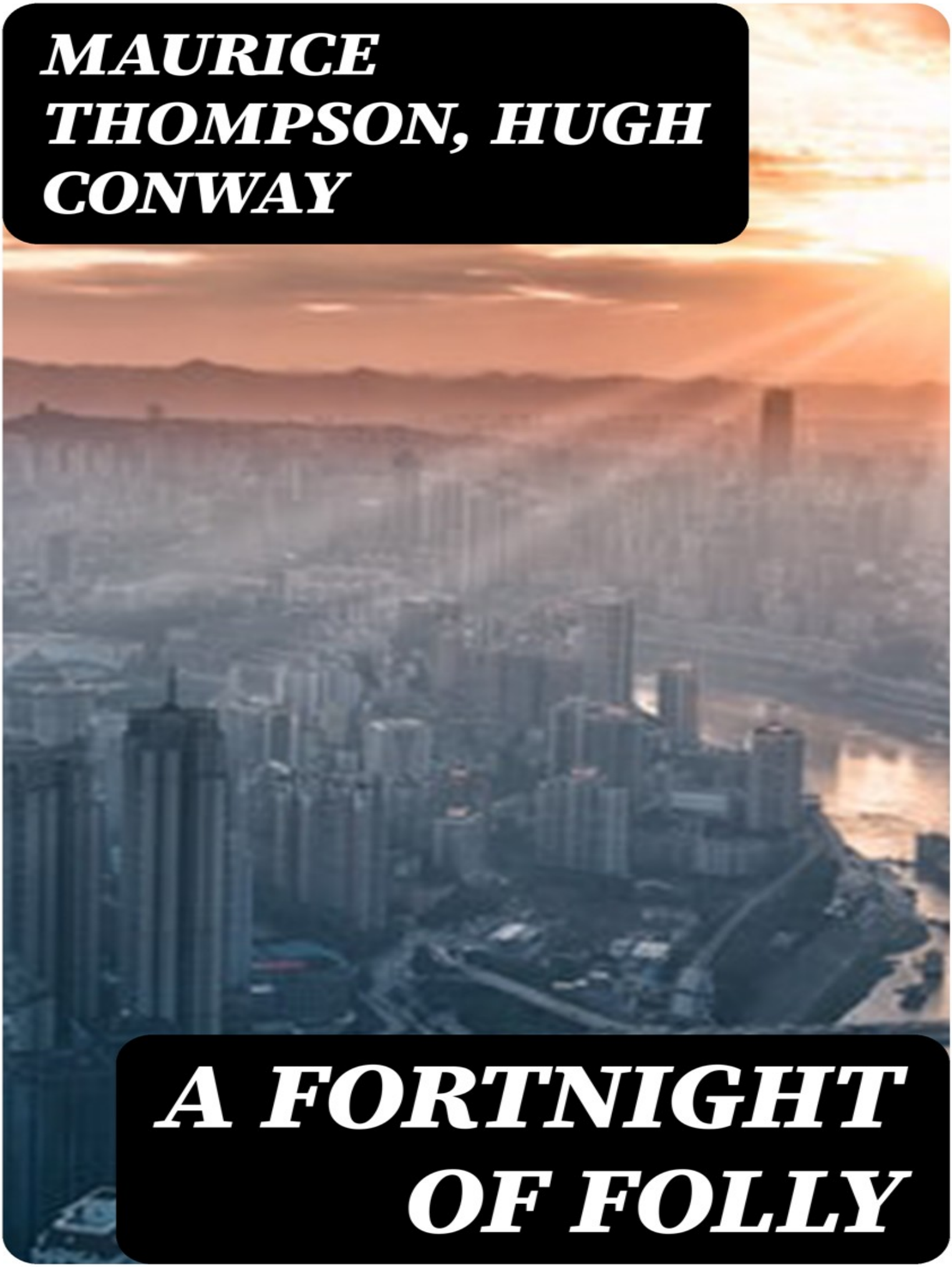
MAURICE THOMPSON, HUGH CONWAY
A FORTNIGHT OF FOLLY

Maurice Thompson, Hugh Conway

A Fortnight of Folly

EAN 8596547217015

DigiCat, 2022
Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

Table of Contents

I.

Table of Contents

The Hotel Helicon stood on a great rock promontory that jutted far out into a sea of air whose currents and eddies filled a wide, wild valley in the midst of our southern mountain region. It was a new hotel, built by a Cincinnati man who founded his fortune in natural gas speculations, and who had conceived the bright thought of making the house famous at the start by a stroke of rare liberality.

Viewing the large building from any favorable point in the valley, it looked like a huge white bird sitting with outstretched wings on the gray rock far up against the tender blue sky. All around it the forests were thick and green, the ravines deep and gloomy and the rocks tumbled into fantastic heaps. When you reached it, which was after a whole day of hard zig-zag climbing, you found it a rather plain three-story house, whose broad verandas were worried with a mass of jig-saw fancies and whose windows glared at you between wide open green Venetian shutters. Everything look new, almost raw, from the stumps of fresh-cut trees on the lawn and the rope swings and long benches, upon which the paint was scarcely dry, to the resonant floor of the spacious halls and the cedar-fragrant hand-rail of the stairway.

There were springs among the rocks. Here the water trickled out with a red gleam of iron oxide, there it sparkled with an excess of carbonic acid, and yonder it bubbled up all the more limpid and clear on account of the offensive sulphuretted hydrogen it was bringing forth. Masses of fern,

great cushions of cool moss and tangles of blooming shrubs and vines fringed the sides of the little ravines down which the spring-streams sang their way to the silver thread of a river in the valley.

It was altogether a dizzy perch, a strange, inconvenient, out-of-the-way spot for a summer hotel. You reached it all out of breath, confused as to the points of the compass and disappointed, in every sense of the word, with what at first glance struck you as a colossal pretense, empty, raw, vulgar, loud—a great trap into which you had been inveigled by an eloquent hand-bill! Hotel Helicon, as a name for the place, was considered a happy one. It had come to the proprietor, as if in a dream, one day as he sat smoking. He slapped his thigh with his hand and sprang to his feet. The word that went so smoothly with hotel, as he fancied, had no special meaning in his mind, for the gas man had never been guilty of classical lore-study, but it furnished a taking alliteration.

“Hotel Helicon, Hotel Helicon,” he repeated; “that’s just a dandy name. Hotel Helicon on Mount Boab, open for the season! If that doesn’t get ’em I’ll back down.”

His plans matured themselves very rapidly in his mind. One brilliant idea followed another in swift succession, until at last he fell upon the scheme of making Hotel Helicon free for the initial season to a select company of authors chosen from among the most brilliant and famous in our country.

“Zounds!” he exclaimed, all to himself, “but won’t that be a darling old advertisement! I’ll have a few sprightly newspaper people along with ’em, too, to do the

interviewing and puffing. By jacks, it’s just the wrinkle to a dot!”

Mr. Gaslucky was of the opinion that, like Napoleon, he was in the hands of irresistible destiny which would ensure the success of whatever he might undertake; still he was also a realist and depended largely upon tricks for his results. He had felt the great value of what he liked to term legitimate advertising, and he was fond of saying to himself that any scheme would succeed if properly set before the world. He regarded it a maxim that anything which can be clearly described is a fact. His realism was the gospel of success, he declared, and needed but to be stated to be adopted by all the world.

From the first he saw how his hotel was to be an intellectual focus; moreover he designed to have it radiate its own glory like a star set upon Mt. Boab.

The difficulties inherent in this project were from the first quite apparent to Mr. Gaslucky, but he was full of expedients and cunning. He had come out of the lowest stratum of life, fighting his way up to success, and his knowledge of human nature was accurate if not very broad.

Early in the summer, about the first days of June, in fact, certain well-known and somewhat distinguished American authors received by due course of mail an autograph letter from Mr. Gaslucky, which was substantially as follows:

CINCINNATI, O., May 30, 1887.

My dear Sir:

The Hotel Helicon, situated on the Lencadian promontory, far up the height of Mt. Boab and

overlooking the glorious valley of the Big Mash River, amid the grandest scenery of the Cumberland Mountains, where at their southern extremity they break into awful peaks, chasms and escarpments, is now thrown open to a few favored guests for the summer. The proprietor in a spirit of liberality (and for the purpose of making this charming hotel known to a select public) is issuing a few special invitations to distinguished people to come and spend the summer free of charge. You are cordially and urgently invited. The Hotel Helicon is a place to delight the artist and the *litterateur*. It is high, airy, cool, surrounded by wild scenes, good shooting and fishing at hand, incomparable mineral springs, baths, grottos, dark ravines and indeed everything engaging to the imagination. The proprietor will exhaust effort to make his chosen guests happy. The rooms are new, sweet, beautifully furnished and altogether comfortable, and the table will have every delicacy of the season served in the best style. There will be no uninvited guests, all will be chosen from the most exalted class. Come, and for one season taste the sweets of the dews of Helicon, without money and without price.

If you accept this earnest and cordial invitation, notify me at once. Hotel Helicon is at your command.

Truly yours,
Isaiah R. Gaslucky.

It is needless to say that this letter was the product of a professional advertising agent employed for the occasion by the proprietor of Hotel Helicon. The reader will observe the

earmarks of the creation and readily recognize the source. Of course, when the letter was addressed to a woman there was a change, not only in the gender of the terms, but in the tone, which took on a more persuasive color. The attractions of the place were described in more poetic phrasing and a cunningly half-hidden thread of romance, about picturesque mountaineers and retired and reformed bandits, was woven in.

Naturally enough, each individual who received this rather uncommon letter, read it askance, at first, suspecting a trick, but the newspapers soon cleared the matter up by announcing that Mr. Isaiah Gaslucky, of Cincinnati, had “conceived the happy idea of making his new and picturesque Hotel Helicon free this season to a small and select company of distinguished guests. The hotel will not be open to the public until next year.”

And thus it came to pass that in midsummer such a company as never before was assembled, met on Mt. Boab and made the halls of Hotel Helicon gay with their colors and noisy with their mirth. The woods, the dizzy cliffs, the bubbling springs, the cool hollows, the windy peaks and the mossy nooks were filled with song, laughter, murmuring under-tones of sentiment, or something a little sweeter and warmer, and there were literary conversations, and critical talks, and jolly satire bandied about, with some scraps of adventure and some bits of rather ludicrous mishap thrown in for variety.

Over all hung a summer sky, for the most part cloudless, and the days were as sweet as the nights were delicious.

II.

Table of Contents

In the afternoon of a breezy day, at the time when the shadows were taking full possession of the valley, the coach arrived at Hotel Helicon from the little railway station at the foot of Mt. Boab.

A man, the only passenger, alighted from his perch beside the driver and for a moment stood as if a little dazed by what he saw.

He was very short, rather round and stout, and bore himself quietly, almost demurely. His head was large, his feet and hands were small and his face wore the expression of an habitual good humor amounting nearly to jolliness, albeit two vertical wrinkles between his brows hinted of a sturdy will seated behind a heavy Napoleonic forehead. The stubby tufts of grizzled hair that formed his mustaches shaded a mouth and chin at once strong and pleasing. He impressed the group of people on the hotel veranda most favorably, and at once a little buzz of inquiry circulated. No one knew him.

That this was an important arrival could not be doubted; it was felt at once and profoundly. Great men carry an air of individuality about with them; each, like a planet, has his own peculiar atmosphere by which his light is modified. There was no mistaking the light in this instance; it indicated a luminary of the first magnitude.

Unfortunately the guests at Hotel Helicon were not required to record their names in a register, therefore the new comer could bide his own time to make himself known.

Miss Alice Moyne, of Virginia, the beautiful young author of two or three picturesque short stories lately published in a popular magazine, was in conversation with Hartley Crane, the rising poet from Kentucky, just at the moment when this new arrival caused a flutter on the veranda.

“Oh, I do wonder if he can be Edgar De Vere?” she exclaimed.

“No,” said Hartley Crane, “I have seen De Vere; he is as large and as fascinating as his romances. That little pudgy individual could never make a great romantic fiction like *Solway Moss*, by De Vere.”

“But that is a superb head,” whispered Miss Moyne, “the head of a master, a genius.”

“Oh, there are heads and heads, genius and genius,” replied Crane. “I guess the new-comer off as a newspaper man from Chicago or New York. It requires first-class genius to be a good reporter.”

The stranger under discussion was now giving some directions to a porter regarding his luggage. This he did with that peculiar readiness, or sleight, so to call it, which belongs to none but the veteran traveler. A moment later he came up the wooden steps of the hotel, cast a comprehensive but apparently indifferent glance over the group of guests and passed into the hall, where they heard him say to the boy in waiting: “My room is 24.”

“That is the reserved room,” remarked two or three persons at once.

Great expectations hung about room 24; much guessing had been indulged in considering who was to be the happy

and exalted person chosen to occupy it. Now he had arrived, an utter stranger to them all. Everybody looked inquiry.

“Who can he be?”

“It must be Mark Twain,” suggested little Mrs. Philpot, of Memphis.

“Oh, no; Mark Twain is tall, and very handsome; I know Mark,” said Crane.

“How strange!” ejaculated Miss Moyne, and when everybody laughed, she colored a little and added hastily:

“I didn’t mean that it was strange that Mr. Crane should know Mr. Twain, but——”

They drowned her voice with their laughter and hand-clapping.

They were not always in this very light mood at Hotel Helicon, but just now they all felt in a trivial vein. It was as if the new guest had brought a breath of frivolous humor along with him and had blown it over them as he passed by.

Room 24 was the choice one of Hotel Helicon. Every guest wanted it, on account of its convenience, its size and the superb view its windows afforded; but from the first it had been reserved for this favored individual whose arrival added greater mystery to the matter.

As the sun disappeared behind the western mountains, and the great gulf of the valley became a sea of purplish gloom, conversation clung in half whispers to the subject who meantime was arraying himself in evening dress for dinner, posing before the large mirror in room 24 and smiling humorously at himself as one who, criticising his own foibles, still holds to them with a fortitude almost Christian.

He parted his hair in the middle, but the line of division was very slight, and he left a pretty, half-curled short wisp hanging over the centre of his forehead. The wide collar that hid his short neck creased his heavy well-turned jaws, giving to his chin the appearance of being propped up. Although he was quite stout, his head was so broad and his feet so small that he appeared to taper from top to toe in a way that emphasized very forcibly his expression of blended dignity and jollity, youth and middle age, sincerity and levity. When he had finished his toilet, he sat down by the best window in the best room of Hotel Helicon, and gazed out over the dusky valley to where a line of quivering silver light played fantastically along the line of peaks that notched the delicate blue of the evening sky. The breeze came in, cool and sweet, with a sort of champagne sparkle in its freshness and purity. It whetted his appetite and blew the dust of travel out of his mind. He was glad when the dinner hour arrived.

The long table was nearly full when he went down, and he was given a seat between Miss Moyne and little Mrs. Philpot. By that secret cerebral trick we all know, but which none of us can explain, he was aware that the company had just been discussing him. In fact, someone had ventured to wonder if he were Mr. Howells, whereupon Mr. Crane had promptly said that he knew Mr. Howells quite well, and that although in a general way the new-comer was not unlike the famous realist, he was far from identical with him.

Laurens Peck, the bushy-bearded New England critic, whispered in someone’s ear that it appeared as if Crane knew everybody, but that the poet’s lively imagination had

aided him more than his eyes, in all probability. “Fact is,” said he, “a Kentuckian soon gets so that he *thinks* he has been everywhere and seen everybody, whether he has or not.”

Out of this remark grew a serious affair which it will be my duty to record at the proper place.

Little Mrs. Philpot, who wore gold eye-glasses and had elongated dimples in her cheeks and chin, dexterously managed to have a word or two with the stranger, who smiled upon her graciously without attempting to enter into a conversation. Miss Moyne fared a little better, for she had the charm of grace and beauty to aid her, attended by one of those puffs of good luck which come to none but the young and the beautiful. Mr. B. Hobbs Lucas, a large and awkward historian from New York, knocked over a bottle of claret with his elbow, and the liquor shot with an enthusiastic sparkle diagonally across the table in order to fall on Miss Moyne’s lap.

With that celerity which in very short and stout persons appears to be spontaneous, a sort of elastic quality, the gentleman from room 24 interposed his suddenly outspread napkin. The historian flung himself across the board after the bottle, clawing rather wildly and upsetting things generally. It was but a momentary scene, such as children at school and guests at a summer hotel make more or less merry over, still it drew forth from the genial man of room 24 a remark which slipped into Miss Moyne’s ear with the familiarity of well trained humor.

“A deluge of wine in a free hotel!” he exclaimed, just above a whisper. “Such generosity is nearly shocking.”

“I am sorry you mention it,” said Miss Moyne, with her brightest and calmest smile; “I have been idealizing the place. A gush of grape-juice on Helicon is a picturesque thing to contemplate.”

“But a lap-full of claret on Mt. Boab is not so fine, eh? What a farce poetry is! What a humbug is romance!”

The historian had sunk back in his chair and was scowling at the purple stain which kept slowly spreading through the fiber of the cloth.

“I always do something,” he sighed, and his sincerity was obvious.

“And always with *aplomb*,” remarked little Mrs. Philpot.

“It would be a genius who could knock over a claret bottle with grace,” added Peck. “Now a jug of ale——”

“I was present at table once with Mr. Emerson,” began the Kentucky poet, but nobody heard the rest. A waiter came with a heavy napkin to cover the stain, and as he bent over the table he forced the man from room 24 to incline very close to Miss Moyne.

“To think of making an instance of Emerson!” he murmured. “Emerson who died before he discovered that men and women have to eat, or that wine will stain a new dress!”

“But then he discovered so many things——” she began.

“Please mention one of them,” he glibly interrupted. “What did Emerson ever discover? Did he ever pen a single truth?”

> “Aloft in secret veins of air
> Blows the sweet breath of song,”

she replied. “He trod the very headlands of truth. But you are not serious——” she checked herself, recollecting that she was speaking to a stranger.

“Not serious but emphatically in earnest,” he went on, in the same genial tone with which he had begun. “There isn’t a thing but cunning phrase-form in anything the man ever wrote. He didn’t know how to represent life.”

“Oh, I see,” Miss Moyne ventured, “you are a realist.”

It is impossible to convey any adequate idea of the peculiar shade of contempt she conveyed through the words. She lifted her head a little higher and her beauty rose apace. It was as if she had stamped her little foot and exclaimed: “Of all things I detest realism—of all men, I hate realists.”

“But I kept the wine off your dress!” he urged, as though he had heard her thought. “There’s nothing good but what is real. Romance is lie-tissue. Reality is truth-tissue.”

“Permit me to thank you for your good intentions,” she said, with a flash of irony; “you held the napkin just in the right position, but the wine never fell from the table. Still your kindness lost nothing in quality because the danger was imaginary.”

When dinner was over, Miss Moyne sought out Hartley Crane, the Kentucky poet who knew everybody, and suggested that perhaps the stranger was Mr. Arthur Selby, the analytical novelist whose name was on everybody’s tongue.

“But Arthur Selby is thin and bald and has a receding chin. I met him often at the—I forget the club in New York,”

said Crane. “It’s more likely that he’s some reporter. He’s a snob, anyway.”

“Dear me, no, not a snob, Mr. Crane; he is the most American man I ever met,” replied Miss Moyne.

“But Americans are the worst of all snobs,” he insisted, “especially literary Americans. They adore everything that’s foreign and pity everything that’s home-made.”

As he said this he was remembering how Tennyson’s and Browning’s poems were overshadowing his own, even in Kentucky. From the ring of his voice Miss Moyne suspected something of this sort, and adroitly changed the subject.

III.

Table of Contents

It might be imagined that a hotel full of authors would be sure to generate some flashes of disagreement, but, for a time at least, everything went on charmingly at Hotel Helicon. True enough, the name of the occupant of room 24 remained a vexatious secret which kept growing more and more absorbing as certain very cunningly devised schemes for its exposure were easily thwarted; but even this gave the gentleman a most excellent excuse for nagging the ladies in regard to feminine curiosity and lack of generalship. Under the circumstances it was not to be expected that everybody should be strictly guarded in the phrasing of speech, still so genial and good-humored was the nameless man and so engaging was his way of evading or turning aside every thrust, that he steadily won favor. Little Mrs. Philpot, whose seven year old daughter (a bright and sweet little child) had become the pet of Hotel Helicon,

was enthusiastic in her pursuit of the stranger's name, and at last she hit upon a plan that promised immediate success. She giggled all to herself, like a high-school girl, instead of like a widow of thirty, as she contemplated certain victory.

"Now do you think you can remember, dear?" she said to May, the child, after having explained over and over again what she wished her to do.

"Yeth," said May, who lisped charmingly in the sweetest of child voices.

"Well, what must you say?"

"I muth thay: Pleathe write your—your——"

"Autograph."

"Yeth, your au—to—graph in my album."

"That's right, autograph, autograph, don't forget. Now let me hear you say it."

"Pleathe write your autograph in my book."

Mrs. Philpot caught the child to her breast and kissed it vigorously, and not long afterward little May went forth to try the experiment. She was armed with her mother's autograph album. When she approached her victim he thought he never had seen so lovely a child. The mother had not spared pains to give most effect to the little thing's delicate and appealing beauty by an artistic arrangement of the shining gold hair and by the simplest but cunningest tricks of color and drapery.

With that bird-like shyness so winning in a really beautiful little girl, May walked up to the stranger and made a funny, hesitating courtesy. He looked at her askance, his smiling face shooting forth a ray of tenderness along with a gleam

of shrewd suspicion, as he made out the album in her dimpled little hand.

“Good morning, little one,” he said cheerily. “Have you come to make a call?”

He held out both hands and looked so kindly and good that she smiled until dimples just like her mother’s played over her cheeks and chin. Half sidewise she crept into his arms and held up the book.

“Pleathe write your photograph in my book,” she murmured.

He took her very gently on his knee, chuckling vigorously, his heavy jaws shaking and coloring.

“Who told you to come?” he inquired, with a guilty cunning twinkle in his gray eyes.

“Mama told me,” was the prompt answer.

Again the man chuckled, and, between the shame he felt for having betrayed the child and delight at the success of his perfidy, he grew quite red in the face. He took the autograph album and turned its stiff, ragged-edged leaves, glancing at the names.

“Ah, this is your mama’s book, is it?” he went on.

“Yeth it is,” said May.

“And I must write my name in it?”

“No, your—your——”

“Well what?”

“I don’t ’member.”

He took from his pocket a stylographic pen and dashed a picturesque sign manual across a page.

While the ink was drying he tenderly kissed the child’s forehead and then rested his chin on her bright hair. He

could hear the clack of balls and mallets and the creak of a lazy swing down below on the so-called lawn, and a hum of voices arose from the veranda. He looked through the open window and saw, as in a dream, blue peaks set against a shining rim of sky with a wisp of vultures slowly wheeling about in a filmy, sheeny space.

“Mama said I muthn’t stay,” apologized the child, slipping down from his knee, which she had found uncomfortably short.

He pulled himself together from a diffused state of revery and beamed upon her again with his cheerful smile.

She turned near the door and dropped another comical little courtesy, bobbing her curly head till her hair twinkled like a tangle of starbeams on a brook-ripple, then she darted away, book in hand.

Little Mrs. Philpot snatched the album from May, as she ran to her, and greedily rustled the leaves in search of the new record, finding which she gazed at it while her face irradiated every shade of expression between sudden delight and utter perplexity. In fact she could not decipher the autograph, although the handwriting surely was not bad. Loath as she naturally was to sharing her secret with her friends, curiosity at length prevailed and she sought help. Everybody in turn tried to make out the two short words, all in vain till Crane, by the poet’s subtle vision, cleared up the mystery, at least to his own satisfaction.

“Gaspard Dufour is the name,” he asserted, with considerable show of conscious superiority. “A Canadian, I think. In fact I imperfectly recall meeting him once at a

dinner given by the Governor General to Lord Rosenthal at Quebec. He writes plays."

"Another romance out of the whole cloth by the Bourbon æsthete!" whispered the critic. "There's no such a Canadian as Gaspard Dufour, and besides the man's a Westerner rather over-Bostonized. I can tell by his voice and his mixed manners."

"But Mrs. Hope would know him," suggested the person addressed. "She meets all the Hub *literati*, you know."

"*Literati!*" snarled the critic, putting an end to further discussion.

A few minutes later Mr. Gaspard Dufour came down and passed out of the hotel, taking his way into the nearest ravine. He wore a very short coat and a slouch hat. In his hand he carried a bundle of fishing-rod joints. A man of his build looks far from dignified in such dress, at best; but nothing could have accentuated more sharply his absurd grotesqueness of appearance than the peculiar waddling gait he assumed as he descended the steep place and passed out of sight, a fish basket bobbing beside him and a red kerchief shining around his throat.

Everybody looked at his neighbor and smiled inquisitively. Now that they had discovered his name, the question arose: What had Gaspard Dufour ever done that he should be accorded the place of honor in Hotel Helicon. No one (save Crane, in a shadowy way) had ever heard of him before. No doubt they all felt a little twinge of resentment; but Dufour, disappearing down the ravine, had in some unaccountable way deepened his significance.

IV.

Table of Contents

EVERYBODY knows that a mountain hotel has no local color, no sympathy with its environment, no gift of making its guests feel that they are anywhere in particular. It is all very delightful to be held aloft on the shoulder of a giant almost within reach of the sky; but the charm of the thing is not referable to any definite, visible cause, such as one readily bases one's love of the sea-side on, or such as accounts for our delight in the life of a great city. No matter how fine the effect of clouds and peaks and sky and gorge, no matter how pure and exhilarating the air, or how blue the filmy deeps of distance, or how mossy the rocks, or how sweet the water, or how cool the wooded vales, the hotel stands there in an indefinite way, with no *raison d'etre* visible in its make-up, but with an obvious impudence gleaming from its windows. One cannot deport one's self at such a place as if born there. The situation demands—nay, exacts behavior somewhat special and peculiar. No lonely island in the sea is quite as isolated and out of the world as the top of any mountain, nor can any amount of man's effort soften in the least the savage individuality of mountain scenery so as to render those high places familiar or homelike or genuinely habitable. Delightful enough and fascinating enough all mountain hotels surely are; but the sensation that living in one of them induces is the romantic consciousness of being in a degree "out of space, out of time." No doubt this feeling was heightened and intensified in the case of the guests at Hotel Helicon who were enjoying the added novelty of entire freedom from the petty economies that usually dog the

footsteps and haunt the very dreams of the average summer sojourner. At all events, they were mostly a light-hearted set given over to a freedom of speech and action which would have horrified them on any lower plane.

Scarcely had Gaspard Dufour passed beyond sight down the ravine in search of a trout-brook, than he became the subject of free discussion. Nothing strictly impolite was said about him; but everybody in some way expressed amazement at everybody's ignorance of a man whose importance was apparent and whose name vaguely and tauntingly suggested to each one of them a half-recollection of having seen it in connection with some notable literary sensation.

"Is there a member of the French institute by the name of Dufour?" inquired R. Hobbs Lucas, the historian, thoughtfully knitting his heavy brows.

"I am sure not," said Hartley Crane, "for I met most of the members when I was last at Paris and I do not recall the name."

"There goes that Bourbon again," muttered Laurens Peck, the critic; "if one should mention Xenophon, that fellow would claim a personal acquaintance with him!"

It was plain enough that Peck did not value Crane very highly, and Crane certainly treated Peck very coolly. Miss Moyne, however, was blissfully unaware that she was the cause of this trouble, and for that matter the men themselves would have denied with indignant fervor any thing of the kind. Both of them were stalwart and rather handsome, the Kentuckian dark and passionate looking, the New Yorker fair, cool and willful in appearance. Miss Moyne

had been pleased with them both, without a special thought of either, whilst they were going rapidly into the worry and rapture of love, with no care for anybody but her.

She was beautiful and good, sweet-voiced, gentle, more inclined to listen than to talk, and so she captivated everybody from the first.

“I think it would be quite interesting,” she said, “if it should turn out that Mr. Dufour is a genuine foreign author, like Tolstoï or Daudet or——”

“Realists, and nobody but realists,” interposed Mrs. Philpot; “why don’t you say Zola, and have done with it?”

“Well, Zola, then, if it must be,” Miss Moyne responded; “for, barring my American breeding and my Southern conservatism, I am nearly in sympathy with—no, not that exactly, but we are so timid. I should like to feel a change in the literary air.”

“Oh, you talk just as Arthur Selby writes in his critical papers. He’s all the time trying to prove that fiction is truth and that truth is fiction. He lauds Zola’s and Dostoieffsky’s filthy novels to the skies; but in his own novels he’s as prudish and Puritanish as if he had been born on Plymouth Rock instead of on an Illinois prairie.”

“I wonder why he is not a guest here,” some one remarked. “I should have thought that our landlord would have had *him* at all hazards. Just now Selby is monopolizing the field of American fiction. In fact I think he claims the earth.”

“It is so easy to assume,” said Guilford Ferris, whose romances always commanded eulogy from the press, but

invariably fell dead on the market; “but I am told that Selby makes almost nothing from the sales of his books.”

“But the magazines pay him handsomely,” said Miss Moyne.

“Yes, they do,” replied Ferris, pulling his long brown mustache reflectively, “and I can’t see why. He really is not popular; there is no enthusiasm for his fiction.”

“It’s a mere vogue, begotten by the critics,” said Hartley Crane. “Criticism is at a very low ebb in America. Our critics are all either ignorant or given over to putting on English and French airs.”

Ferris opened his eyes in a quiet way and glanced at Peck who, however, did not appear to notice the remark.

“There’s a set of them in Boston and New York,” Crane went on, “who watch the *Revue de Deux Mondes* and the London *Atheneum*, ready to take the cue from them. Even American books must stand or fall by the turn of the foreign thumb.”

“That is a very ancient grumble,” said Ferris, in a tone indicative of impartial indifference.

“Take these crude, loose, awkward, almost obscene Russian novels,” continued Crane, “and see what a furor the critics of New York and Boston have fermented in their behalf, all because it chanced that a *coterie* of Parisian literary *roués* fancied the filthy imaginings of Dostoieffsky and the raw vulgarity of Tolstoï. What would they say of *you*, Ferris, if *you* should write so low and dirty a story as *Crime and Its Punishment* by Dostoieffsky?”

“Oh, I don’t know, and, begging your grace, I don’t care a straw,” Ferris replied; “the publishers would steal all my

profits in any event.”

“Do you really believe that?” inquired Peck.

“Believe it? I know it,” said Ferris. “When did you ever know of a publisher advertising a book as in its fiftieth thousand so long as the author had any royalty on the sales? The only book of mine that ever had a run was one I sold outright in the manuscript to George Dunkirk & Co., who publish all my works. That puerile effort is now in its ninetieth thousand, while the best of the other six has not yet shown up two thousand! Do you catch the point?”

“But what difference can printing a statement of the books sold make, anyway?” innocently inquired Miss Moyne.

Ferris laughed.

“All the difference in the world,” he said; “the publisher would have to account to the author for all those thousands, don’t you see.”

“But they have to account, anyhow,” replied Miss Moyne, with a perplexed smile.

“Account!” exclaimed Ferris, contemptuously; “account! yes, they have to account.”

“But they account to me,” Miss Moyne gently insisted.

“Who are your publishers?” he demanded.

“George Dunkirk & Co.,” was the answer.

“Well,” said he, “I’ll wager you anything I can come within twenty of guessing the sales up to date of your book. It has sold just eleven hundred and forty copies.”

She laughed merrily and betrayed the dangerous closeness of his guess by coloring a little.

“Oh, its invariably just eleven hundred and forty copies, no matter what kind of a book it is, or what publisher has

it," he continued; "I've investigated and have settled the matter."

The historian was suddenly thoughtful, little Mrs. Philpot appeared to be making some abstruse calculation, Crane was silently gazing at the ground and Peck, with grim humor in his small eyes, remarked that eleven hundred and forty was a pretty high average upon the whole.

Just at this point a figure appeared in the little roadway where it made its last turn lapsing from the wood toward the hotel. A rather tall, slender and angular young woman, bearing a red leather bag in one hand and a blue silk umbrella in the other, strode forward with the pace of a *tragedienne*. She wore a bright silk dress, leaf-green in color, and a black bonnet, of nearly the Salvation Army pattern, was set far back on her head, giving full play to a mass of short, fine, loosely tumbled yellow hair.

She was very much out of breath from her walk up the mountain, but there was a plucky smile on her rather sallow face and an enterprising gleam in her light eyes.

She walked right into the hotel, as if she had always lived there, and they heard her talking volubly to the servant as she was following him to a room.

Everybody felt a waft of free Western air and knew that Hotel Helicon had received another interesting guest, original if not typical, with qualities that soon must make themselves respected in a degree.

"Walked from the station?" Mrs. Philpot ventured, in querulous, though kindly interrogation.

"Up the mountain?" Miss Moyne added, with a deprecatory inflection.

“And carried that bag!” exclaimed all the rest.

V

Table of Contents

Gaspard Dufour, whose accumulations of adipose tissue appeared to serve him a good turn, as he descended the steep, rocky ravine, hummed a droll tune which was broken at intervals by sundry missteps and down-sittings and side-wise bumps against the jutting crags. He perspired freely, mopping his brow meantime with a vast silk kerchief that hung loosely about his short neck.

The wood grew denser as he descended and a damp, mouldy odor pervaded the spaces underneath the commingling boughs of the oaks, pines, cedars, and sassafras. Here and there a lizard scampered around a tree-hole or darted under the fallen leaves. Overhead certain shadowy flittings betrayed the presence of an occasional small bird, demurely going about its business of food-getting. The main elements of the surroundings, however, were gloom and silence. The breeze-currents astir in the valley and rippling over the gray peaks of Mt. Boab could not enter the leafy chambers of this wooded gorge. Heat of a peculiarly sultry sort seemed to be stored here, for as Dufour proceeded he began at length to gasp for breath, and it was with such relief as none but the suffocating can fully appreciate, that he emerged into an open space surrounded, almost, with butting limestone cliffs, but cut across by a noisy little stream that went bubbling down into the valley through a cleft bedecked with ferns and sprinkled with perennial dew from a succession of gentle cascades.