GUY BOOTHBY

THE RED RAT'S DAUGHTER

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CHAPTER I

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If John Grantham Browne had a fault—which, mind you, I am not prepared to admit—it lay in the fact that he was the possessor of a cynical wit which he was apt at times to use upon his friends with somewhat peculiar effect. Circumstances alter cases, and many people would have argued that he was perfectly entitled to say what he pleased. When a man is worth a hundred and twenty thousand pounds a year—which, worked out, means ten thousand pounds a month, three hundred and twenty-eight pounds, fifteen shillings and fourpence a day, and four-and-sixpence three-farthings, and a fraction over, per minute—he may surely be excused if he becomes a little sceptical as to other people's motives, and is apt to be distrustful of the world in general. Old Brown, his father, without the "e," as you have doubtless observed, started life as a bare-legged street arab in one of the big manufacturing centres—Manchester or Birmingham, I am not quite certain which. His head, however, must have been screwed on the right way, for he made few mistakes, and everything he touched turned to gold. At thirty his bank balance stood at fifteen thousand pounds; at forty it had turned the corner of a hundred thousand; and when he departed this transitory life, a young man in everything but years, he left his widow, young John's mother—his second wife, I may remark in passing, and the third daughter of the late Lord Rushbrooke—upwards of three and a half million pounds sterling in trust for the boy.

As somebody wittily remarked at the time, young John, at his father's death and during his minority, was a monetary Mohammed—he hovered between two worlds: the Rushbrookes, on one side, who had not two sixpences to rub against each other, and the Brownes, on the other, who reckoned their wealth in millions and talked of thousands as we humbler mortals do of half-crowns. Taken altogether, however, old Brown was not a bad sort of fellow. Unlike so many parvenus, he had the good sense, the "e" always excepted, not to set himself up to be what he certainly was not. He was a working-man, he would tell you with a twinkle in his eye, and he had made his own way in the world. He had never in his life owed a halfpenny, nor, to the best of his knowledge, had he ever defrauded anybody; and, if he *had* made his fortune out of soap, well—and here his eyes would glisten—soap was at least a useful article, and would wash his millions cleaner than a good many other commodities he might mention. In his tastes and habits he was simplicity itself. Indeed, it was no unusual sight to see the old fellow, preparatory to setting off for the City, coming down the steps of his magnificent town house, dressed in a suit of rough tweed, with the famous bird's-eye neck-cloth loosely twisted round his throat, and the soft felt hat upon his head—two articles of attire which no remonstrance on the part of his wife and no amount of ridicule from the comic journals could ever induce him to discard. His stables were full of carriages, and there was a cab-rank within a hundred yards of his front door, yet no one had ever seen him set foot in either. The soles of his boots were thick, and he had been accustomed to walk all his life, he would say, and he had no

intention of being carried till he was past caring what became of him. With regard to his son, the apple of his eye, and the pride of his old age, his views were entirely different. Nothing was good enough for the boy. From the moment he opened his eyes upon the light, all the luxuries and advantages wealth could give were showered upon him. Before he was short-coated, upwards of a million had been placed to his credit at the bank, not to be touched until he came of age. After he had passed from a dame's school to Eton, he returned after every holiday with sufficient money loose in his pocket to have treated the whole school. When, in the proper order of things, he went on to Christ Church, his rooms were the envy and the admiration of the university. As a matter of fact, he never knew what it was to have to deny himself anything; and it says something for the lad's nature, and the father's too, I think, that he should have come out of it the honest, simple Englishman he was. Then old John died; his wife followed suit six months later; and on his twenty-fifth birthday the young man found himself standing alone in the world with his millions ready to his hand either to make or mar him. Little though he thought it at the time, there was a sufficiency of trouble in store for him.

He had town houses, country seats, moors and salmon-fishings, yachts (steam and sailing), racehorses, hunters, coach-horses, polo-ponies, and an army of servants that a man might very well shudder even to think of. But he lacked one thing; he had no wife. Society, however, was prepared to remedy this defect. Indeed, it soon showed that it was abnormally anxious to do so. Before he was twenty-two it

had been rumoured that he had become engaged to something like a score of girls, each one lovelier, sweeter, and boasting blood that was bluer than the last. A wiser and an older head might well have been forgiven had it succumbed to the attacks made upon it; but in his veins, mingled with the aristocratic Rushbrooke blood, young John had an equal portion of that of the old soap-boiler; and where the one led him to accept invitations to country houses at Christmas, or to be persuaded into driving his fair friends, by moonlight, to supper at the Star and Garter, the other enabled him to take very good care of himself while he ran such dangerous risks. In consequence he had attained the advanced age of twenty-eight when this story opens, a bachelor, and with every prospect of remaining so. But the Blind Bow-Boy, as every one is aware, discharges his bolts from the most unexpected quarters; and for this reason you are apt to find yourself mortally wounded in the very place, of all others, where you have hitherto deemed yourself most invulnerable.

It was the end of the second week in August; Parliament was up; and Browne's steam-yacht, the *Lotus Blossom*, twelve hundred tons, lay in the harbour of Merok, on the Gieranger Fjord, perhaps the most beautiful on the Norwegian coast. The guests on board had been admirably chosen, an art which in most instances is not cultivated as carefully as it might be. An ill-assorted house party is bad enough; to bring the wrong men together on the moors is sufficient to spoil an otherwise enjoyable holiday; but to ask Jones (who doesn't smoke, who is wrapped up in politics, reads his leader in the *Standard* every morning, and who

has played whist every afternoon with the same men at his club for the last ten years) and De Vere Robinson (who never reads anything save the *Referee* and the *Sportsman*, who detests whist, and who smokes the strongest Trichinopolis day and night) to spend three weeks cooped up on a yacht would be like putting a kitten and a cat-killing fox-terrier into a corn-bin and expecting them to have a happy time together. Browne, however, knew his business, and his party, in this particular instance, consisted of the Duchess of Matlock, wife of the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, and her two pretty daughters, the Ladies Iseult and Imogen; Miss Verney, the beauty of the season; the Honourable Silas Dobson, the American Ambassador; his wife and daughter; George Barrington-Marsh, of the 1st Life; and little Jimmy Foote, a man of no permanent address, but of more than usual shrewdness, who managed to make a good income out of his friends by the exercise of that peculiar talent for pleasing which rendered him indispensable whenever and wherever his fellow-creatures were gathered together. In addition to those I have mentioned there was a man whose interest in this story is so great that it is necessary he should be described at somewhat greater length.

Should you deem it worth your while to make inquiries at any of the Chancelleries in order to ascertain whether they happen to be acquainted with a certain Monsieur Felix Maas, you would probably be surprised to learn that he is as well known to them as—well—shall we say the Sultan of Turkey himself? though it would be difficult to mention in exactly what capacity. One thing is quite certain; it would be no

easy task to find a man possessed of such peculiar characteristics as this retiring individual. At first glance his name would appear to settle his nationality once and for all. He would tell you, however, that he has no right to be considered a Dutchman. At the same time he would probably omit to tell you to which kingdom or empire he ascribes the honour of his birth. If you travelled with him you would discover that he speaks the language of every country west of the Ural Mountains with equal fluency; and though he would appear to be the possessor of considerable wealth, he never makes the least parade of it. In fact, his one and only idea in life would seem to be always irreproachably dressed and groomed, never to speak unless spoken to, and at all times to act as if he took no sort of interest whatever in any person or thing save that upon which he happened to be engaged at the moment. When necessity demands it he can be exceedingly amusing; he never allows himself to be seen with a man or woman who would be likely to cause him the least loss of prestige; he gives charming little dinners *à la fourchette* at his rooms in town twice or thrice during the season, and is rumoured to be the author, under a *nom de plume*, of one of the best works on Continental politics that has seen the light since Talleyrand's day. So much for Felix Maas.

At one time or another there have been a number of exquisite yachts built to satisfy the extravagances of millionaires, but never one so perfect in every detail, and so replete with every luxury, as Browne's *Lotus Blossom*. The state-rooms were large and airy; beds occupied the places of the usual uncomfortable bunks; the dining-saloon was

situated amidships, where the vibration of the screw was least felt; the drawing-room was arranged aft; and a dainty boudoir for the ladies extended across the whole width of the counter. The smoking-room was in a convenient position under the bridge, and the bathrooms, four in number, were luxury and completeness itself. Add to the other advantages the presence of Felicien, that prince of *chefs*, and little Georges, once so intimately connected with the English Embassy in Paris, and it is unnecessary to say more.

Browne himself was an excellent host; and by the time the Norwegian coast had been sighted the party had settled down comfortably on board. They visited Christiania, the Bukn, Hardanger, and Sogne, and eventually found themselves at anchor in the harbour of Merok, on the Gieranger Fjord. It is in this lovely bay, overshadowed by its precipitous mountains, that my story may be properly said to commence.

It is sometimes asserted by a class of people who talk of the Eiffel Tower as if it were a bit of natural scenery, and of the Matterhorn as though it were placed in its present position simply for the entertainment of Cook's tourists, that when you have seen one Norwegian fjord you have seen them all. But this statement is, as are the majority of such assertions, open to contradiction. The Ryfylke bears no sort of resemblance, save that they are both incomparably grand, to the Hardanger, or the Fjaerlands to the Gieranger. There is, of course, the same solemnity and the same overwhelming sense of man's insignificance about them all. But in every other essential they differ as completely as

Windermere does from the Bitter Lakes of Suez—shall we say?—or the Marble Arch from the Bridge of Sighs.

"Knowing what we know, and seeing what we see," Maas remarked confidentially to the Duchess of Matlock as they sat in their chairs on deck, gazing up at the snow-capped mountains at the head of the fjord, "one is tempted to believe that Providence, in designing Europe, laid it out with the express intention of pleasing the British tourist."

"I detest tourists," replied her Grace, as she disentangled the straps of her field-glasses. "They cheapen everything, and think nothing of discussing their hotel bills in the Temple of the Sphinx, or of comparing and grumbling at their *dhobie's* accounts under the façade of the Taj Mahal."

"The inevitable result of a hothouse education, my dear Duchess," said Jimmy Foote, who was leaning against the bulwarks. "Believe a poor man who knows, it is just those three annas overcharge in a *dhobie's* bill that spoil the grandeur of the Sphinx and cast a blight over the Great Pyramid; as far as I am personally concerned, such an imposition would spoil even the Moti Masjid itself."

"People who quarrel over a few annas have no right to travel," remarked Mrs. Dobson, with the authority of a woman who rejoices in the possession of a large income.

"In that case, one trembles to think what would become of the greater portion of mankind," continued Miss Verney, who was drawing on her gloves preparatory to going ashore.

"If that were the law, I am afraid I should never get beyond the white walls of Old England," said Jimmy Foote, shaking his head; "it is only by keeping a sharp eye on the three annas of which we have been speaking that I manage

to exist at all. If I might make a suggestion to the powers that be, it would be to the effect that a university should be founded in some convenient centre—Vienna, for instance. It would be properly endowed, and students might be sent to it from all parts of the world. Competent professors would be engaged, who would teach the pupils how to comport themselves in railway trains and on board steamboats; who would tell them how to dress themselves to suit different countries, in order that they might not spoil choice bits of scenery by inartistic colouring. Above all, I would have them instructed in the proper manner of placing their boots outside their bedroom doors when they retire to rest in foreign hotels. I remember a ruffian in Paris some years ago (truth compels me to put it on record that he was a countryman of yours, Mr. Dobson) who for three weeks regularly disturbed my beauty sleep by throwing his boots outside his door in the fashion to which I am alluding. It's my belief he used to stand in the centre of his room and pitch them into the corridor, taking particular care that they should fall exactly above my head."

"It seems to me that I also have met that man," observed Maas quietly, lighting another cigarette as he spoke. "He travels a great deal."

"Surely it could not be the same man?" remarked Mrs. Dobson, with an incredulous air. "The coincidence would be too extraordinary." A smile went round the group; for an appreciation of humour was not the lady's strong point.

"To continue my proposal," said Foote, with quiet enjoyment. "In addition to imparting instruction on the subjects I have mentioned, I would have my pupils

thoroughly grounded in the languages of the various countries they intend visiting, so that they should not inquire the French for Eau de Cologne, or ask what sort of vegetable *pâté de foie gras* is when they encountered it upon their menus. A proper appreciation of the beautiful in art might follow, in order to permit of their being able to distinguish between a Sandro Botticelli and a 'Seaport at Sunrise' by Claude Lorraine."

"A professor who could give instruction upon the intricacies of a Continental wine list might be added with advantage," put in Barrington-Marsh.

"And the inevitable result," said Browne, who had joined the party while Marsh was speaking, "would be that you might as well not travel at all. Build an enormous restaurant in London, and devote a portion of it to every country into which modern man takes himself. Hang the walls with tricky, theatrical canvases after the fashion of a cyclorama; dress your waiters in appropriate costumes, let them speak the language of the country in which you are supposed to be dining, let the tables be placed in the centre of the hall, have a band to discourse national airs, and you would be able to bore yourself to death in comfort, for the simple reason that every one would talk, eat, drink, and behave just as respectably as his neighbour. Half the fun of moving about the world, as I understand it, lies in the studies of character presented by one's fellow-creatures. But, see, the boat is alongside; let us go ashore while it is fine."

Beautiful as Merok undoubtedly is, it must be admitted that its amusements are, to say the least of it, limited. You can lunch at the hotel, explore the curious little octagonal

church, and, if you are a walker, climb the road that crosses the mountains to Grotlid. The views, however, are sublime, for the mountains rise on every hand, giving the little bay the appearance of an amphitheatre.

"What programme have you mapped out for us?" inquired Miss Verney, who, as was known to her companions, preferred an easy-chair and a flirtation on the deck of the yacht to any sort of athletic exercise ashore.

Browne thereupon explained that the Duchess, who was dressed in appropriate walking costume, had arranged everything. They were to visit the church, do the regulation sights, and, finally, make their way up the hillside to the Storfos Waterfall, which is the principal, and almost the only, attraction the village has to offer. The usual order of march was observed. The Duchess and the Ambassador, being the seniors of the party, led the way; the lady's two daughters, escorted by Barrington-Marsh and Jimmy Foote—who was too obvious a detrimental to be worth guarding against—came next; Maas, Mrs. and Miss Dobson followed close behind them; Miss Verney and Browne brought up the rear.

Everything went merrily as a marriage bell. After those who had brought their cameras had snap-shotted the church, and made the usual mistake with regard to the angles, the party climbed the hill in the direction of the waterfall. It was only when they reached it that those in front noticed that Miss Verney had joined the trio next before her, and that Browne had disappeared. He had gone back to the boat, the lady explained, in order to give some instructions that had been forgotten. From her silence, however, and from the expression of annoyance upon her

beautiful lace, the others immediately jumped to the conclusion that something more serious must have happened than her words implied. In this case, however, popular opinion was altogether at fault. As a matter of fact, Browne's reason for leaving his guests to pursue their walk alone was an eminently simple one. He strolled down to the boat which had brought them ashore, and, having despatched it with a message to the yacht, resumed his walk, hoping to overtake his party before they reached the waterfall. Unfortunately, however, a thick mist was descending upon the mountain, shutting out the landscape as completely as if a curtain had been drawn before it. At first he was inclined to treat the matter as of small moment; and, leaving the road, he continued his walk in the belief that it would soon pass off. Stepping warily—for mountain paths in Norway are not to be treated with disrespect—he pushed on for upwards of a quarter of an hour, feeling sure he must be near his destination, and wondering why he did not hear the voices of his friends or the thunder of the fall. At last he stopped. The mist was thicker than ever, and a fine but penetrating rain was falling. Browne was still wondering what Miss Verney's feelings would be, supposing she were condemned to pass the night on the hillside, when he heard a little cry proceeding from a spot, as he supposed, a few yards ahead of him. The voice was a woman's, and the ejaculation was one of pain. Hearing it, Browne moved forward again in the hope of discovering whence it proceeded and what had occasioned it. Search how he would, however, he could see nothing of the person who had given utterance to it. At last, in despair, he stood

still and called, and in reply a voice answered in English, "Help me; help me, please."

"Where are you?" Browne inquired in the same language; "and what is the matter?"

"I am down here," the voice replied; "and I am afraid I have sprained my ankle. I have fallen and cannot get up."

Browne has since confessed that it was the voice that did it. The accent, however, was scarcely that of an Englishwoman.

"Are you on a path or on the hillside?" he inquired, after he had vainly endeavoured to locate her position.

"I am on the hillside," she replied. "The fog was so thick that I could not see my way, and I slipped on the bank and rolled down, twisting my foot under me."

"Well, if you will try to guide me, I will do all in my power to help you," said Browne; and as he said it he moved carefully towards the spot whence he imagined the voice proceeded. From the feel of the ground under his feet he could tell that he had left the path and was descending the slope.

"Am I near you now?" he asked.

"I think you must be," was the reply. And then the voice added, with a little laugh, "How ridiculous it all is, and how sorry I am to trouble you!"

Had she known to what this extraordinary introduction was destined to lead, it is very doubtful whether she would have considered it so full either of humour or regret as her words implied.

Inch by inch Browne continued his advance, until he could just distinguish, seated on the ground below him, and

clinging with both her arms to a stunted birch-tree, the figure of the girl for whom he was searching. At most she was not more than five feet from him. Then, with that suddenness which is the peculiar property of Norwegian mists, the vapour, which had up to that moment so thickly enveloped them, rolled away, and the whole landscape was revealed to their gaze. As he took in the position, Browne uttered a cry of horror. The girl had wandered off the path, slipped down the bank, and was now clinging to a tree only a few feet removed from the brink of one of the most terrible precipices along the Norwegian coast.

So overwhelmed was he with horror that for a moment Browne found himself quite unable to say or do anything. Then, summoning to his assistance all the presence of mind of which he was master, he addressed the girl, who, seeing the danger to which she was exposed, was clinging tighter than ever to the tree, her face as white as the paper upon which I am now writing. For a moment the young man scarcely knew how to act for the best. To leave her while he went for assistance was out of the question; while it was very doubtful, active as he was, whether he would be able, unaided, to get her up in her injured condition to the path above. Ridiculous as the situation may have appeared in the fog, it had resolved itself into one of absolute danger now, and Browne felt the perspiration start out upon his forehead as he thought of what would have happened had she missed the tree and rolled a few feet farther. One thing was quite certain—something must be done; so, taking off his coat, he lowered it by the sleeve to her, inquiring at the same time whether she thought she could hold on to it while

he pulled her up to the path above. She replied that she would endeavour to do so, and thereupon the struggle commenced. A struggle it certainly was, and an extremely painful one, for the girl was handicapped by her injured foot. What if her nerve should desert her and she should let go, or the sleeve of the coat should part company with the body? In either case there could be but one result—an instant and terrible death for her.

Taken altogether, it was an experience neither of them would ever be likely to forget. At last, inch by inch, foot by foot, he drew her up; and with every advance she made, the stones she dislodged went tinkling down the bank, and, rolling over the edge, disappeared into the abyss below. When at last she was sufficiently close to enable him to place his arm round her, and to lift her into safety beside himself, the reaction was almost more than either of them could bear. For some minutes the girl sat with her face buried in her hands, too much overcome with horror at the narrowness of her escape even to thank her preserver. When she *did* lift her face to him, Browne became aware for the first time of its attractiveness. Beautiful, as Miss Verney was beautiful, she certainly could not claim to be; there was, however, something about her face that was more pleasing than mere personal loveliness could possibly have been.

"How did you come to be up here alone?" he inquired, after she had tried to express her gratitude to him for the service he had rendered her.

"It was foolish, I admit," she answered. "I had been painting on the mountain, and was making my way back to

the hotel when the fog caught me. Suddenly I felt myself falling. To save myself I clutched at that tree, and was still clinging to it when you called to me. Oh! how can I thank you? But for you I might now be——"

She paused, and Browne, to fill in the somewhat painful gap, hastened to say that he had no desire to be thanked at all. He insisted that he had only done what was fit and proper under the circumstances. It was plain, however, from the look of admiration he cast upon her, that he was very well satisfied with the part he had been permitted to play in the affair.

While, however, they were progressing thus favourably in one direction, it was evident that they were not yet at an end of their difficulties, for the young lady, pretend as she might to ignore the fact, was undoubtedly lame; under the circumstances for her to walk was out of the question, and Merok was fully a mile, and a very steep mile, distant from where they were now seated.

"How am I to get home?" the girl inquired. "I am afraid it will be impossible for me to walk so far, and no pony could come along this narrow path to fetch me."

Browne puckered his forehead with thought. A millionaire is apt to imagine that nothing in this world is impossible, provided he has his cheque-book in his pocket and a stylographic pen wherewith to write an order on his banker. In this case, however, he was compelled to confess himself beaten. There was one way out of it, of course, and both knew it. But the young man felt his face grow hot as the notion occurred to him.

"If you would only let me carry you as far as the main road, I could easily find a conveyance to take you the rest of the distance," he faltered.

"Do you think you *could* carry me?" she answered, with a seriousness that was more than half assumed. "I am very heavy."

It might be mentioned here, and with advantage to the story, that in his unregenerate days Browne had won many weight-lifting competitions; his modesty, however, prevented his mentioning this fact to her.

"If you will trust me, I think I can manage it," he said; and then, without waiting for her to protest, he picked the girl up, and, holding her carefully in his arms, carried her along the path in the direction of the village. It was scarcely a time for conversation, so that the greater portion of the journey was conducted in silence. When at last they reached the mountain road—that wonderful road which is one of the glories of Merok—Browne placed the girl upon the bank, and, calling a boy whom he could see in the distance, despatched him to the hotel for assistance. The youth having disappeared, Browne turned to the girl again. The pain she had suffered during that short journey had driven the colour from her face, but she did her best to make light of it.

"I cannot thank you enough for all you have done for me," she said, and a little shudder swept over her as the remembrance of how near she had been to death returned to her.

"I am very thankful I happened to be there at the time," the other replied with corresponding seriousness. "If you will

be warned by me, you will be careful for the future how you venture on the mountains without a guide at this time of the year. Fogs, such as we have had to-day, descend so quickly, and the paths are dangerous at the best of times."

"You may be sure I will be more careful," she replied humbly. "But do not let me keep you now; I have detained you too long already. I shall be quite safe here."

"You are not detaining me," he answered. "I have nothing to do. Besides, I could not think of leaving you until I have seen you safely on your way back to your hotel. Have you been in Merok very long?"

"Scarcely a week," the girl replied. "We came from Hellesylt."

Browne wondered of whom the *we* might consist. Was the girl married? He tried to discover whether or not she wore a wedding-ring, but her hand was hidden in the folds her dress.

Five minutes later a cabriole made its appearance, drawn by a shaggy pony and led by a villager. Behind it, and considerably out of breath, toiled a stout and elderly lady, who, as soon as she saw the girl seated on the bank by the roadside, burst into a torrent of speech.

"Russian," said Brown to himself; "her accent puzzled me, but now I understand."

Then turning to the young man, who was experiencing some slight embarrassment at being present at what his instinct told him was a wigging, administered by a lady who was plainly a past mistress at the art, the girl said in English:—

"Permit me to introduce you to my guardian, Madame Bernstein."

The couple bowed ceremoniously to each other, and then Browne and the villager between them lifted the girl into the vehicle, the man took his place at the pony's head, and the strange cortège proceeded on its way down the hill towards the hotel. Once there, Browne prepared to take leave of them. He held out his hand to the girl, who took it.

"Good-bye," he said. "I hope it will not be long before you are able to get about once more."

"Good-bye," she answered; and then, with great seriousness, "Pray, believe that I shall always be grateful to you for the service you have rendered me this afternoon."

There was a little pause. Then, with a nervousness that was by no means usual to him, he added:—

"I hope you will not think me rude, but perhaps you would not mind telling me whom I have had the pleasure of helping?"

"My name is Katherine Petrovitch," she answered, with a smile, and then as frankly returned his question. "And yours?"

"My name is Browne," he replied; and also smiling as he said it, he added: "I am Browne's Mimosa Soap, Fragrant and Antiseptic."

CHAPTER II

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When Browne reached the yacht, after bidding good-bye to the girl he had rescued, he found his friends much exercised in their minds concerning him. They had themselves been overtaken by the fog, and very naturally they had supposed that their host, seeing it coming on, had returned to the yacht without waiting for them. Their surprise, therefore, when they arrived on board and found him still missing was scarcely to be wondered at. In consequence, when he descended the companion ladder and entered the drawing-room, he had to undergo a cross-examination as to his movements. Strangely enough, this solicitude for his welfare was far from being pleasing to him. He had made up his mind to say nothing about the adventure of the afternoon, and yet, as he soon discovered, it was difficult to account for the time he had spent ashore if he kept silence on the subject. Accordingly he made the best excuse that occurred to him, and by disclosing a half-truth induced them to suppose that he had followed their party towards the waterfall, and had in consequence been lost in the fog.

"It was scarcely kind of you to cause us so much anxiety," said Miss Verney in a low voice as he approached the piano at which she was seated. "I assure you we have been most concerned about you; and, if you had not come on board very soon, Captain Marsh and Mr. Foote were going ashore again in search of you."

"That would have been very kind of them," said Browne, dropping into an easy-chair; "but there was not the least necessity for it. I am quite capable of taking care of myself."

"Nasty things mountains," said Jimmy Foote to the company at large. "I don't trust 'em myself. I remember once on the Rigi going out with old Simeon Baynes, the American millionaire fellow, you know, and his daughter, the girl who married that Italian count who fought Constantovitch and was afterwards killed in Abyssinia. At one place we very nearly went over the edge, every man-jack of us, and I vowed I'd never do such a thing again. Fancy the irony of the position! After having been poverty-stricken all one's life, to drop through the air thirteen hundred feet in the company of over a million dollars. I'm perfectly certain of one thing, however: if it hadn't been for the girl's presence of mind I should not have been here to-day. As it was, she saved my life, and, until she married, I never could be sufficiently grateful to her."

"Only until she married!" said Lady Imogen, looking up from the novel she was reading. "How was it your gratitude did not last longer than that?"

"Doesn't somebody say that gratitude is akin to love?" answered Foote, with a chuckle. "Of course I argued that, since she was foolish enough to show her bad taste by marrying somebody else, it would scarcely have become me to be grateful."

Browne glanced at Foote rather sharply. What did he mean by talking of life-saving on mountains, on this evening of all others? Had he heard anything? But Jimmy's face was all innocence.

At that moment the dressing gong sounded, and every one rose, preparatory to departing to their respective cabins.

"Where is Maas?" Browne inquired of Marsh, who was the last to leave.

"He is on deck, I think," replied the other; but as he spoke the individual in question made his appearance down the companion-ladder, carrying in his hand a pair of field-glasses.

For some reason or another, dinner that night was scarcely as successful as usual. The English mail had come in, and the Duchess had had a worrying letter from the Duke, who had been commanded to Osborne among the salt of the earth, when he wanted to be in the Highlands among the grouse; Miss Verney had not yet recovered from what she considered Browne's ill-treatment of herself that afternoon; while one of the many kind friends of the American Ambassador had forwarded him information concerning a debate in Congress, in order that he might see in what sort of estimation he was held by a certain portion of his fellow-countrymen. Never a very talkative man, Browne this evening was even more silent than usual. The recollection of a certain pale face and a pair of beautiful eyes haunted him continually. Indeed, had it not been for Barrington-Marsh and Jimmy Foote, who did their duty manfully, the meal would have been a distinct failure as far as its general liveliness was concerned. As it was, no one was sorry when an adjournment was made for coffee to the deck above. Under the influence of this gentle stimulant, however, and the wonderful quiet of the fjord, things

brightened somewhat. But the improvement was not maintained; the pauses gradually grew longer and more frequent, and soon after ten o'clock the ladies succumbed to the general inertness, and disappeared below.

According to custom, the majority of the men immediately adjourned to the smoking-room for cards. Browne, however, excused himself on the plea that he was tired and preferred the cool. Maas followed suit; and, when the others had taken themselves off, the pair stood leaning against the bulwarks, smoking and watching the lights of the village ashore.

"I wonder how you and I would have turned out," said Maas quietly, when they had been standing at the rails for some minutes, "if we had been born and bred in this little village, and had never seen any sort of life outside the Geiranger?"

"Without attempting to moralize, I don't doubt but that we should have been better in many ways," Browne replied. "I can assure you there are times when I get sick to death of the inane existence we lead."

"*Leben heisst träumen; weise sein heisst angenehm träumen*," quoted Maas, half to himself and half to his cigar. "Schiller was not so very far out after all."

"Excellent as far as the sentiment is concerned," said Browne, as he flicked the ash off his cigar and watched it drop into the water alongside. "But, however desirous we may be of dreaming agreeably, our world will still take good care that we wake up just at the moment when we are most anxious to go on sleeping."

"In order that we may not be disillusioned, my friend," said Maas. "The starving man dreams of City banquets, and wakes to the unpleasant knowledge that it does not do to go to sleep on an empty stomach. The debtor imagines himself the possessor of millions, and wakes to find the man-in-possession seated by his bedside. But there is one cure; and you should adopt it, my dear Browne."

"What is that?"

"Marriage, my friend! Get yourself a wife and you will have no time to think of such things. Doesn't your Ben Jonson say that marriage is the best state for a man in general?"

"Marriage!" retorted Browne scornfully. "It always comes back to that. I tell you I have come to hate the very sound of the word. From the way people talk you might think marriage is the pivot on which our lives turn. They never seem to realise that it is the rock upon which we most of us go to pieces. What is a London season but a monstrous market, in which men and women are sold to the highest bidders, irrespective of inclination or regard? I tell you, Maas, the way these things are managed in what we call English society borders on the indecent. Lord A. is rich; consequently a hundred mothers offer him their daughters. He may be what he pleases—an honourable man, or the greatest blackguard at large upon the earth. In nine cases out of ten it makes little or no difference, provided, of course, he has a fine establishment and the settlements are satisfactory. At the commencement of the season the girls are brought up to London, to be tricked out, regardless of expense, by the fashionable dressmakers of the day. They