ACTION

I

WHEN Christopher Bell was just fifty-two he woke up one September morning to feel a slight numbness all down his right side. Some of the numbness was in his right arm; a good deal of it in his right thigh, along its outside, rather less in his right foot; and just a little in his head—all over the hinterland of his right ear.

It seemed a big percentage of a man to 'go to sleep' at one time. He lay still for a minute, to let it pass off. But it didn't. So he began to speculate. When he got up, would he be able to stand? And to walk straight? Would his head go on working all right, with that bit of it stiff? Just how hard a punch would it turn out to be, that some god or devil had given him in the night?

He tried. Yes, he could stand, walk, dress and shave. No portion of him was absolutely on strike. But the numbness went on. And somehow he couldn't feel sure that some part of the right flank of his body or brain would not give way, without notice, and give him a cropper. You never know how deliciously sure you have been of yourself, of every scrap of yourself, all the days of your health, till some small gadget inside you is put out of action: Bell made this deep reflection while going downstairs to his solitary breakfast. He kept one hand on the banisters.

II

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embraces. He had read with understanding and relish, and he had travelled with open eyes. He could value the great things in the arts and in science—indeed, in the whole ampler life of the race. And always, till now, his blood had pretty well bubbled with health. He had rowed, run, swum and ridden well. To his body, at forty years old, the War had brought a second boyhood of happy absorption in efforts merely physical.

Half-way through the war, the wife he had loved in every tissue of body and soul had died of something brought on by too passionate overwork for the cause. The news came to Bell in a hospital where he had just begun to grow a new skin on a face and hands well flayed and charred by chemical warfare. He could not see at the time, so a nurse read the telegram out. His face was buried deep in a canary-coloured mask of wadding stained with picric acid, so the nurse could not see how he took it—only knew that he thanked her very civilly through the little blow-hole left for his mouth. I fancy Bell was hanging on hard to the thought that he still had two children, a boy and a girl, both in their teens. Soldiers, even educated ones, are apt to grow sentimental, especially when wounded. Bell, the war widower, lay, week by week, behind his fancy-dress mask, staying his mind on an ingenuous vision of an improved world, to come after the war. He saw it as a young man and a young woman standing in summer twilight, under the stars, with their eyes all a-shine at the loveliness of the life which it had taken so much pain and shame to make possible for them.

Many soldiers hugged these quaint fancies, in their bad times. They helped, for the moment. It was afterwards that they had to be paid for. In the foul enervatory air that filled England and Europe just after the war Bell's boy and girl drifted feebly into failure. Both were married lovelessly now,

each to another small waste product of that waste-producing time. Somewhere out of Bell's sight these forfeited objects of his pride and joy were shuffling punily through life. He gathered that they were rather ashamed of him as an old slow-coach provincial.

Bell was not given to wallowing in self-pity. Still, as you see, he had had his losses, like another.

III

Your merchant prince, in these days, is prone to lose heart, get himself up as an owner of land and beeves, and melt weakly into the common herd of squires who know not, poor fellows, what it is to go on 'Change. Bell was different. He had pride. He stuck, as his father had done, to his post among the garrison of the smutty city that had done well by them. He lived where he could hear the Town Hall clock strike twelve when the traffic was quiet at night, and a North wind blowing. He liked the sound, he was so oddly civic a person.

To this old-fashioned hobby Bell added some cheap habits less rare in rich men. He stood on guard against his wealth, lest it should cut him off from the sight and sound of ordinary and unprincely men, for whom his regard had been re-doubled by four years of living with them in the war. Because of this fad he nearly always went in to the city by tram. This morning he walked the three hundred yards from his house to the tram's stopping-place with deliberate caution. He could not be sure of that sleepy right leg. He was still distrusting it temperately when he had taken his seat and was tendering his fare to town.

The conductor rejected the tender, at sight. 'We doan't taäke boottons,' he said with civil composure.

Bell examined the bright disc that he had offered as a sixpence.

Behold! a silvery trouser-button. Last night it had come off and he had slipped it into a pocket. He put his finger-tips ruefully up to his eyes. 'I'm sorry,' he said to the man, as he gave the right coin.

'It's aal reet, Sir,' the conductor said quietly. Once he saw that no pulling of legs had been intended, his tact and sympathy were perfect.

He passed on to collect other fares. But a new care remained in Bell's mind. Sight, too? Was that going? Sight, touch, the whole sensory business, losing precision, entering on the long slope to decay—the silver cord going loose and the golden bowl cracking? When a man who has known how to read feels the first clap of the hand of Time on his shoulder, he has plenty of ready prompters to ruefulness; so many excellent poets have found handsome words for the mists and mellow poignancy of man's autumn, the lapse from old vigour and vision into mere drug-takers' dreams while we are led down the avenue lined with overblown roses, to lie in the dust at its end.

Bell kept his head. But his memory was beginning to bulge with lovely quotations not conducive to high spirits—'Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang,' and all that lot.

IV

The morning's office work did him good, while it lasted. He had more than most men of the gift of forgetting himself in the excitement of getting a job to come right—any old job, the dictating of letters, anything. And just now the affairs of his firm were of quite stirring interest. Like many others it

had been making large losses for several years. Bell's game was to keep these losses as low as he could without stopping the work and wages of a moorland village-ful of people who spun and wove cotton for Bell to sell for less than it cost to make it. This unacquisitive practice brought Bell into great infamy. Most of his fellow-employers wanted to close all the factories down, or half close them down, and leave the work-people to live on their fat. So Bell was an arrant traitor to them. Still, he was an employer: and so, to ardent Socialist eyes, he was a sucker of blood, *ex officio*. This lively crossfire of censures braced Bell. If it had to be woe unto you when all men spoke well of you, it might be safer when everyone slated you hard. Anyhow it livened you up, like a good stinging wind that has blown across snow. While he schemed to find some not quite ruinous sale for the stuff that piled itself up at the mills, Bell could forget the thing that had clawed him in its clutch during the night.

But the clouds return after the rain: luncheon-time set his mind free to worry, the way your sore tongue returns and returns to the amusement of hurting itself on the sharp point of a tooth lately broken. He lunched at the club; and twice in the one hour it took him, his mind accused younger members of paying him the pestilential kind of un-arguing deference which is really the civil refusal of youth to keep its communications open with age. Could they have noticed the way he walked down the stairs—a canny way, like a horse's when it is afraid on a slippery slope? One younger man opened the door of the billiard-room for him. Damn these good manners that ain't good at all.

Going home at twilight, in the tram, Bell thought over all this so absorbedly that he kept his legs crossed the whole way. So, when he stood up, to get off, his right leg had gone clean

asleep. It was only asleep in the common and blameless way. Still, he couldn't know that, at first. For all he could tell, a second stroke might have fallen, and this time a real knock-out. Of course he kept his fears dark; still, he stepped off the car with such unconcealable care that the conductor slipped a friendly hand under his arm and led him slowly to the safety of the footpath, like a blind man or a drunk.

When Bell had walked a few yards by himself the extra numbness was gone. But the other numbness remained. And so did the feel of that patiently guarding hand under his arm. Of course he had not needed it. Still, perhaps he would, presently, ' Mene, mene, etc.'—every wall seemed to be covered with sinister shreds of writing. An object for everybody's protection, a call on everyone's forbearance—that was the kind of pest that he might become. Soon, too, perhaps. This kind of plague crept on and on. It never turned back. Five years might bring an invalid-chair and a male nurse to put him to bed and to see that he was carted securely about from place to place, to sprawl in the sun—Mentone, the Canaries, Egypt, all the places to which the *passés* butterflies of our commonwealth were brought to lie out and doze in the warmth when too much eating and idling had brought them back all the way to the status of larvae. Disgusting!

V

Bell gazed steadily into this smiling future, while eating his dinner alone. From the table he went straight, like a man who knew what he needed, to that shelf in his study on which there were all his pet Alpine books. No other sport had ever so wholly ravished his soul as mountaineering. On the high snows it seemed as if magical fires were lit in your blood; the

flame of life burned amazingly; something was added unto a man as divine as whatever it is that makes its way into the vapid juice of a fruit and turns it to wine. Nowhere else in the world was the taste of success so wholly and indefeasibly sweet as it was on the tip of some spire of granite and ice that had all but turned you back in despair by the Daphnean rigour of its resistance. There, uplifted on the swell of the round earth, you could see how men had come to dream Gardens of Eden and Ages of Gold.

He took from the shelf a great climber's narratives of his greatest adventures. Two of these, in especial, could always entrance Bell as soon as he had read a few lines: their vividness gave him an almost physical sense of what they described. Each was a case of cutting steps up a long and extremely steep slope of ice. And in each case the slope had, at one point, ceased even to slope. For just a few feet of its height it had become as vertical as the wall of a house: each man of the party had had to hold himself in to the perpendicular wall by sheer strength and good hand-hold, against gravitation.

In each case the party had come safely through. But with how big a margin of safety, as engineers say? Bell wondered. A pretty big one, he fancied. Few good climbers slipped in really difficult places; all their faculties were bent up too intently for that, with danger about; they were above their own everyday form. But what if such a party were to try paring and paring away at that pretty wide margin? Something like an experiment, that! To what untold heights of achievement might not the party attain before all the margin was gone! And of course the party might be a party of one.

Bell had once had a holiday dream of climbing a crag that grew steeper and steeper till it was vertical first, and then overhung, more and more, but still he climbed on and on

because the crag beetled out over a warm summer sea, so that, when he lost hold in the end, he would only fall from one pleasure into another, out of a mountaineer's paradise into a swimmer's. Cut out the old fear of death in that way, or some other, and—why, you could do anything.

As he sat back with the open book on his knees, a light wind stirred the trees in the garden. It may have been this that called up another old notion of his. This one had visited him in a wood close to Arras, in 1916. During some dark windless weeks of that autumn the unfallen leaves had been fading inertly from green to a dull rusty red, and so down to a dead russet brown; the whole burning heart of the year was collapsing into shabby ashes. Then a night of frost came and then a gale on a day of broken sunshine thrown wildly about between clouds. As the gale stripped the trees it had seemed almost to blow them aflame; sparks of brave yellow flew in the air; the dun beech-leaves took light and fell lustrously. Somehow the sight had filled Bell, at the time, with a wish that, when he had to go, he might do it like that—all a-stir and a-glow, by one of the ' violent ' deaths, as most of the easy ones seemed to be called. Anything but to lie on a bed in a hushed room, with the lights low and life's jolly noises shut out, and people whispering among the shadows. One wrench for the undecayed body, and then unbreakable sleep—what end could equal it?

Now, almost suddenly, these several notions ran into one, as rain-drops do on a newly wet window. Here was the moment to put into practice that old and sound choice of his between the long decrepitude of the flesh and the one clean cut and summary pang that save you it all. Suicide? Oh! no. But just to carry on, right to the end, the piquant experiment of paring and paring away that limiting and restraining

margin of safety which mountaineers, even the boldest, keep in reserve. Had not all things conspired to free him from too much love of remaining alive—bereavement and baulked hope and now this first lick of fire from heaven, soon to blast the whole of him by degrees? Why, fate had brought him the fulfilment of his old dream. No precipice in the world would now have an abhorred death waiting at its foot—merely a warm quiet sea of painless forgetfulness.

Only—he must be quick, before the accursed thing that was setting to work on him could pith so much of the vigour out of his body that he could not make his own way to a place—already he had a good place in his mind—where he might try the thing out.

VI

At the end of September a savoursome blend of jollity and melancholy pervades the little Val d'Anniviers. The summer hotels of Zinal, at the head of the valley, are closing. Down the bridle-path, through forests of fir, the hotel staffs stream along joyously, laden with the year's vintage of tips, to their snug winter homes in the Rhone Valley below. Reconverted, after four months of restraint and disguise, into young, natural Swiss men and women, they caper like Alpine cows let out in the spring. Shouting, chaffing and singing, they seem to flout with their merriment Nature's yearly menace to marmots and men. And Nature answers them back. Almost hour by hour the new snow creeps down the forested slopes of the valley and grizzles more of its firs; the morning dew lies late, and even at noon the weakening sun hangs lazily low above the main chain of the Alps. You feel, all about you, a big closing-in, the rustle of a heavy curtain falling upon a good time that is played out at last.

ACTION

As Bell walked the six miles up from Vissoye to Zinal, he breasted that jovial current of waiters and chamber-maids thawed and re-humanised. Jove! they were good to see and to hear, with their jokes and catches and bold, friendly, unobsequious looks at any man and brother they met. But everything was good in this place. Even the smell of Vissoye and its pigs, as he passed, had been the smell of the best holiday of his boyhood. How he had liked life—every bit of it, coloured or plain, the high lights and the low! Even the jars had been part of the makings of the incomparable adventure. He wondered whether the mere feel of things—common things, all sorts of things—could ever have given anyone else such raptures of secret contentment as they had given to him.

He had made sure of a room at Zinal. He dined by the light of one lamp in a corner of the hotel's dining-room, now empty and shadowy. An elderly woman waited upon him; everyone else in the house had gone down the valley; she had been left for a week or two more, to cook, wait, make a bed and draw out a bill for anyone mad enough to turn up so belatedly. Bell had known her for thirty years—ever since her marriage to an old guide of his, recently killed on the Meije. She told him how their son Pierre was now a guide too, rather to her alarm. She seemed amazingly glad to see Bell, as if he were a bit of some good old world that had been slipping away. And he——? she asked. Was he making a *grande course*, as always? Surely not, at this time of year?

He fenced with her apt, friendly questions. He felt like a liar. Indeed, he was one, pretty well; for he fully meant to deceive. He would go for a walk by himself, he said, after breakfast to-morrow—perhaps to the Arpitetta Alp only, perhaps rather further.

She looked at him sadly, with peasant directness. 'All

alone now!' she said simply. 'And once it was you and Madame—and Gaspard and me. Ah! the good times.' She had all humanity's fate in her face, like an old woman drawn by Rembrandt—hopes and happy love and then the dust of the day, dimming the roses, and then great loneliness and unconsolable tears. Would Monsieur have coffee she asked.

Bell could face her no longer. It was too treacherous. No, he said, he would want nothing more. Let her go to bed early, like all the good marmots. So would he too, when he had smoked a little end of tobacco.

When she was gone, he sat by a fire of logs she had lit for him in the small smoking-room. To his surprise he found he had nothing to do. There could be no saying good-bye, no specious last letter to write, no will to be made, no manifesto of any sort to be left. People do not do such things just before unforeseen accidents—for the wood must look raw at the break. A real good tip for the widow of Gaspard would have to be left in an obvious place: that was all.

It went beyond having nothing to do. There was nothing to think. He had no fear of *post mortem* torture to busy his brain, for the God of his faith was no fiend. He was equally void of covetous hopes of a sensational 'good time' when the breath should be out of his body. So far he might have expected his mind to be free. The strange thing was to find how much of one's usual matter for thought is taken away if, in twenty hours or so, one will have nothing whatever to fix up or to see to, no house or business to run, no social beat to patrol, no arts or letters to care for, nor 'public duties' to mind. It was a release. But it was a queer one—a kind of vacuous and disquieting freedom, such as a man might attain who was suddenly let off the pressure of gravitation, so that he needn't keep his feet down to the earth any more—in fact

couldn't press on it hard if he tried, and so couldn't get any purchase for putting forth his strength upon anything at all. Bell's released mind did its best to think firmly of what he was going to do the next day. But no firmness came: the levers of thought could not find any fulcrum; they worked at a loss feebly and fumblingly.

He brought over the lamp to review the Inn's tiny library —two shelves freakishly peopled with the printed leavings of guests lettered, half-lettered, unlettered, conventional, independent and odd. There was the common aphrodisiac novel of commerce; there was *The Vicar of Wakefield*, all golden sunshine and wit; there were Nat Gould and the wise, humane book of the great William James on the incessant endeavour of men to find or to imagine some larger life on which to rest the frail and soon-tired figure of their own. Yes, that was it: something to lean against: something sure not to give when you put your whole weight on it, in any state of yourself: that was where peace and strength were to be had ; nowhere else. So he fancied, at least: he could not be sure: he was still in that vacuum where his thoughts had no pivot to work on: the wheels did not bite on the road; the cogs would not engage; he thought and he felt, but gropingly, not with the sure and eager drive of a mind and heart that have found themselves by forgetting themselves.

VII

The place that Bell had picked for his purpose was on the West side of the Schallijoch. The Schallijoch, as you may know, is a dip in the ridge that joins the Weisshorn to the Schallihorn. Even the lowest point of the dip is more than 12,000 feet high. The last part of the rise to the ridge from

the West is up one of the steepest slopes of ice that are climbed. That is if you mount it where it is least steep. At some other points it is steeper than any slope that is climbed, or thought to be climbable. The surface of this wall of ice undulates like a sheet of hammered copper—here a concave patch and there a convex one. Though the wall, at its steepest, leans back from the straight, as a whole, it has parts—the upper halves of these hollows and lower of these bulges—at which it is vertical for some feet at a time; and at two or three parts it even overhangs slightly. These last, avoided by climbers happily wedded to life, were what Bell had in mind. He would start up the wall at the steepest part he could find; as he went on, he would make, at each stage, for the point where there seemed to be most an overhang. He would do the thing honestly—try all that was in him to bring the climb off, reach the ridge and prove that, in this small matter, man could do more than he knew. With careful timing he would be up, if up at all, about dusk. In that unlikely event he would carry the test a step further and try to come down his ice ladder by feel, in the dark, instead of descending the gentle snow slopes on the Eastern side of the pass.

He worked out a time-table. Three hours' walk up to the Arpitetta Alp from Zinal. Three more up from the Alp to the foot of the final ice-wall. Half an hour for eating; another half hour for sundries and lateage. Four for the ultimate work on the wall. Eleven hours in all. To-morrow's evening dusk would be over by seven. He would push off at eight in the morning.

VIII

Probably you would have thought him rather a pleasant sight as he quitted Zinal—the outward figure of a hale, fit

mountaineer; just a little stricken with years, but vigorous; brindled but not at all bald; leanly and brownly good-looking, turning out by himself, with his axe under his arm and a little luncheon in his pocket, for a walk among the feet of sporting old friends like the Weisshorn and Roth-horn. How can you tell by the looks of a man that he would not feel the point of a pin if you ran it into his thigh, or that this exemption from pain is causing any disturbance of his spirits?

Nobody was to be seen at the emerald Alp of Arpitetta. Like the almost deserted Zinal, like yesterday's valley path streaming with walkers carrying bundles, the empty hovels on the Alp recalled the sight of a whole countryside in flight before the army of an invader. The ashes left from the cheese-maker's fire were wet with drippings from the roof; the rough wooden crane used for swinging the cauldron over the flames flapped in a draught from the door. Outside, the intoxicant beauty of gentian and orchis was over for the year; the rich grass had spread back over the trodden mud of the milking-place; but snow was lying a few hundred feet higher up. The invader was near.

Bell's legs were liking the work. The numb one was numb, but it did not give out: it would not let him down. By one o'clock he had reached the tail end—some would call it the snout—of the big Weisshorn Glacier, eaten his rations and set a first foot on the rough convex swell of honey-combed ice with water flushing out its millions of cells; for the sun was on it. He pawed the stuff tenderly with his axe. Perdition catch his soul but he did love it—strong as iron, carvable as cheese: what genius could have conceived so delicious a union of opposites if, by some disaster, no glaciers had been made?

By three o'clock he was through the freak shapes of the ice-fall, across the snowfield above it and close to the wall that he

sought. Yes, its great width and height had the wavy surface that he remembered. It showed like a vast relief map of some low rolling downland, modelled in ice and then set up to stand on its edge. Off to his right, as he looked up, the general angle was easiest. That was the regular way—very steep but quite practicable. That was of no use for his purpose. Far away to his left the slope looked ferocious enough. But down it an almost continuous fall of stones of all sizes, broken away from the sun-warmed rocks of the Weisshorn, came sliding and hissing, or bounding and smashing explosively. That was no use either. That way would be suicide, not experiment.

He soon saw what he wanted—almost directly above him. There, nearly all the way up to the ridge, the ice was steep and bare and blue, and the face of it waved more at this place than anywhere else. Several broad bosses of rocks must have underlain the smooth surface. Over these the close-fitting ice swelled like a stocking upon a bent knee. Up to the centre of each of these bosses it bulged out overhangingly; just above each centre it would recede at a more merciful angle; but nowhere in the whole thousand feet of ascent would a man have a foothold to stand on, unless he made it.

Bell conscientiously tightened each boot-lace and puttee-string. Then he set off for the point where he had descried the best overhangs. It was half-way, as he judged, to the top of the wall. If he should conquer that one, then he would look for another, more bulgy.

He cut his steps with almost fanatical care. He had a disagreeable sense of doing something furtive: he couldn't help asking himself, against his own will, 'What if somebody saw?' Damn somebody, another part of him said. Still, he cut every step as if he defied the whole solar system to say that it was not the work of a good craftsman bent upon keeping alive. So

he rose slowly. It took a good two hours' work to mount a third of the way to the ridge. But then he was close to what mattered more—the great bulge that he was making for.

The bulge stood out like a gigantic blister upon the face of the ice. It must have been forty feet in diameter and it jutted so much that a stone dropped from its outermost point would only have touched the slope again some fifty feet lower. So the climax had come. To reach that outermost point he would have to climb for about twenty feet as you climb up the under side of a ladder that leans against a wall. And he would have to make the ladder, rung by rung, as he climbed it—fashion each rung out of the ice with his axe, held in one hand, while with the other hand and both feet he clung to three of the rungs made already, and held up the body against the drag of its weight. Every rung would have to be made like a letter-box in a door, big enough for the toe of a boot to go in, but so shaped that, when a hand entered, the fingers could bend down inside and grip as you grip the top of a fence. The grand, the crucial question was how long one hand and one arm could hold the body in to the projecting ice-wall. For what part of the two hours or so that the other labouring hand might require to cut that fantastical staircase? Of course, if his axe should slip out of his hand, or if one step should break, that would end the affair. But away with the thought of any such bungling.

The moment the overhang started Bell discovered the theory of gravitation to be exceedingly true. The work was amazingly hard. When he had carved five letter-boxes, and used them, an hour had gone. He carved five more and observed that daylight was failing. Behind his back an unsensational sunset was going on at its ease. His left hand was chilled almost dead with all the ice it had gripped; his right

wrist was swollen and sore with the intensity of the axe-work; his right knee had begun to shake as uncontrollably as chattering teeth; he heard his breath as if it were somebody else's: it made a dry rustling noise, like a bird struggling silently in the hand.

The centre of the boss was now, he reckoned, some eight feet above his head. Beyond it he could see nothing as yet, but a tranquil sky with a rose-coloured flush dying out of it. Five letter-boxes more, he thought, might take him up to the nipple of this frozen breast and bring the receding slope of its upper half into his sight. It was just at this point that it struck him as a clear, sober matter of fact that he could not get up those eight feet. His strength was running out fast: one more good letter-box was all that he could conceive himself able to make. He made it, hacking away with slow, painful strokes, his axe-handle slippery with his sweat. He reached up his left hand to grab the new hold and dragged a foot up to its new place below. Then, just to go down fighting, he went through the movements of starting to chip out yet another step. Second by second the effort held out; his strokes were the taps of a child; his wrist felt like breaking; yet somehow he finished the hole and forced his left hand to rise up to it: then he even hauled up in its turn a right foot of infinite weight: the poor quivering knee had to straighten out next, and did it, after a long, doubtful struggle. But that was the end, he felt, of all possible effort.

By this time all his senses had the morbid exultation that will sometimes come of fierce physical effort. His mind was at leisure, after a fashion. He was fully aware of the sunset; he did not miss the charm of its sabbatical calm: the majesty and mystery of mountains were still there, all right. A verse he had liked as a boy came into his head, as beautiful things

that have built themselves into your mind are apt to do at a crisis—as people who once went to church will cry out 'Oh! God!' when a smash comes.

> And here indeed might death be fair
> If death be dying into air
> And souls evanished mix with the
> Illumined sky, eternal sea.

But no pretty dying for him, if death could be still headed off. He started desperately to try again, sweating and straining. No good: the feeble strokes of his axe scarcely scratched the bare ice; his left hand was frost-bitten now, past feeling anything. Only five feet to relative safety, but five more than any spur worn by his will could drive the spent body. 'I'm done,' he said, and ceased to struggle upwards.

IX

Some innate impulse to take the thing well and not let human dignity down at a pinch kept him resolved to hold on, foot and hand, to the last moment possible.

While he clung so, the sun left him. A high Alpine sunset is sudden, like tropical ones. A cold, sharp-edged shadow raced up from the valley, chasing the sunlight before it. Pursuer and fugitive scudded up over the tops of the firs and across the bright green of the Alp Bell had passed, and then up the ice-fall and on up the wall till the shadow came down like a great frigid hand on the sweaty back of his neck. Next moment the last warmth and light fleeted up out of sight, over the bulge. As his gaze followed, his cheeks felt the sting of a few falling granules of ice; little chips of it, rather; even a few rather big ones. A trickle of ice scraps seemed to be

sliding down the upper half of the bulge, to dive into space on reaching its centre—most of them clear of his back.

Queer! Was an ice avalanche coming? No need to suppose it, though. Glaciers, crushed and huddled things, always heaving and cracking, played curious tricks and ground out all sorts of freak rubbish. Oh! let the ice do what it liked, all his business with it was done; all that he could now attend to was a kind of dream noise, big, muted and almost asleep, that the torrent was making, enormously far off, down in the blackening trench of the valley—that and a kind of emotional dream of himself, the dying man doing his best to take leave as was meet—a figure at which he could look, as it were, from outside, and dreamily feel it to be rather touching.

Into this semi-dream there managed to enter, also, a sound more abrupt—a little noise like the low startled cry that some women give when they see a horse fall or a big window is smashed. The cry worked itself into his dream, but also it roused him. 'Getting light-headed,' he thought. But he wasn't. Almost as quick as that thought, a new sound, a light hissing rub, rushed down to his ears and an ice-axe slid over the bulge overhead and out into the air: it whizzed past the back of his head.

To anyone versed in high mountains an ice-axe loose and falling in any such place is a portent of horror, like a child's pony galloping riderless home or a boat adrift, bottom uppermost in a Thames lasher. It means that somebody may have just lost the power to move, without help, at a place where a man unable to move will soon be unable to live. Suddenly Bell's mind took eyes to itself; it saw a party of some sort above him, trying to cut its way down the ice wall, straight towards the deadly bulge that now beetled over himself. At this hour! And by such a route! They must be mad; so he

thought—forgetting himself. And now one of them was disabled—perhaps had disabled the whole of his party—tethered it to the ice-wall. The idea was frightful to Bell.

Another sound came. From somewhere not far overhead there broke, like an explosion, the singular cry that Swiss peasants and some mountaineers employ as a long-distance hail. No other noise of purely human production will carry so far. Harsh, wild and long, it starts, as the noise of a rocket does, at its maximum loudness, and then wails itself out in a dying fall that has an effect of collapse into despair. Though commonly uttered on quite cheerful occasions, it might be the passionate scream of some wretched animal terrified by the solitude of a desolate place and trying to empty into one impetuous lamentation all its burden of loneliness and desire.

Bell held his breath as the sinking shriek thinned away into silence. Then he counted off the seconds half-aloud, by guess work, as bomb-throwers learnt how to do in the war. The count ran to seven—eight—nine—and, just as Bell was muttering 'Ten,' the great yell smashed into the silence again. Yes: he had expected that. Someone above was in the last extremity of danger—was trying the last shift of all, the most all-but-hopeless of all—was sending out the Alpine signal of distress into this stone and snow desert where autumn and night had joined to make it utterly certain that no answer could come. It was like praying to God, for dear life, that a well of fresh water might open itself in the dry middle of the Sahara.

X

Up to that point of time, as you have seen, Bell had been the kind of dual creature that most of us are for nearly the whole of our days. Part of him had toiled, sweated and ached, and

another part of him had been sorry for that one. But, from the moment the second yell came, this twofold arrangement was somehow abolished. All craving or need for any part of himself to be troubled about any other was over; now there was nothing at all to work out any more, no next move to be consciously planned, nor hesitant will to be coaxed or hustled, nor any plaguey choice to be made. All of the man was one unit at last, and it lived intently and intensely, moved by some force which it had no more desire to question than flames have to ask 'Why burn upward?'

The next mystery was that out of the mind so suddenly lightened there seemed, as it were, to overflow lightness into Bell's body of lead. Strangely empowered, his left foot was rising already to thrust itself into the next letter-box; almost gaily his right arm, freed from its preoccupation with pain, was beginning to hack a new hand-hold above. How long it took him to make he could not have told, then or after. For time, too, was abolished; long trains of executive, practical thought could run on to their end instantaneously; courses, whole courses, of study of relevant things—of the state of the ice, minute changes of gradient, the swift re-gelation following sundown—were carried out without any sense of duration. One of the revelatory trances had come, in which even a plain man sees for once that an eternity need not be long and that in a single moment he may have everlasting life.

A minor, but still a piquant, discovery was that he had never really known till now what it was to cut a good sizable strip off that old margin of safety which he had imagined himself to have all but used up. His new letter-boxes were marvels of sketchy adequacy; they were high art in the skimpiness of the means that they took to their end; triumphs of confident 'cheek' to Nature, they bluffed that august power quite

wittily. Almost before the vocalist overhead had completed the long S.O.S. of the mountains—it takes three minutes in all—Bell had his chest up to the dead centre of the bulge and saw what he had come for.

Some thirty feet higher up, a woman in mountain kit, with no axe and no hold for hand or foot, was dangling at a long rope's end. Her body revolved a little as it hung against the steep ice, but she was making no voluntary movement. The rope constricting her chest was held with one straining hand by a man perched eighty feet higher up. He was clearly unable to move, hand or foot, without being dragged off his stance by the weight of the woman. He stood on one foot—his right: it seemed to be firmly placed, on a tiny step; and a little above his hand, he had the pick of his axe driven well into the ice. To the steel bracket thus formed by the axe-head the man was holding on stoutly with his right hand.

The sorry sight explained itself. The woman must have been cutting steps down the slope; she must have slipped from a step, and dropped her axe with the shock. The man had checked her fall well, but both were hung up as immovably as a couple of stoats nailed to a gamekeeper's door. And now the rope must be slowly killing the woman. Just as Bell's head topped the bulge she called out in a strangled voice to the man, 'Can you cut the rope, Teddy? I'm done, anyhow. Think of the kiddies. You *must*.' The man held on.

Bell gave tongue as loud as the dry brown fur lining his mouth would allow. 'Well held, Sir,' he roared. 'It's all right, I'm coming.'

Not once in a long and respectable Alpine career had Bell thought he would ever entrust his person to ledges quite so narrow as those on which he made the rest of his way up to that pendant woman. And yet he had never, in any hard

place, felt such absolute freedom from any uneasiness. As he romped up, he sang out, at intervals 'There in three minutes,' 'Just two minutes more,' 'Only one minute more,' 'Half a shake—I'm just there.' Then he arrived. He cut a big step close to where the woman's feet hung, planted his own firmly on it, and then stooping and straightening up again, took the weight of her, sitting, on his right shoulder. Lest she be fainting he put up his right hand behind her, to hold her in place.

She was no fainter, though she was white, yellow, greenish all the bad colours that beauty itself may have to put on in bad times. 'She's a good 'un,' Bell thought, as she sat quiet, panting.

'*You're* a great sportsman,' she gasped, when she had breath enough.

Feeling all the weight off the rope of a sudden, the man above shouted down thickly, 'Sure you have got her, Sir?'

'Right as rain,' she called up from her perch.

Bell added, 'Leave the rope slack, and dig in. We'll come up when you're comfy.'

The man gave a tuneless yodel of joy and was plying his axe the same instant; chips and wedges of ice came pelting down from the great step that he must be cutting, from which to make the whole caravan fast. In five minutes he ceased hacking, braced himself, drew in the slack of the rope and announced that now he could hold up a cow for a day.

Bell let the woman cannily down till her feet found a trim ledge that he had managed to scratch out while holding her up. But some four or five feet of smooth ledgeless ice intervened between this and the lowest step the woman had cut, coming down, before she slipped off. Some new ones had to be made. 'Care to cut 'em?' Bell asked. 'Or shall I?'

She ruefully opened the hands in which no axe was now held. 'I dropped it,' she said, 'like a mug. I feel sick with shame.'

'Have mine,' he said holding it out.

Her open boy face shone with joyous relief, as if at a gift of free absolution from sin. Even now their lives hung on this axe that he was entrusting to her, the convicted axe-dropper. She took it. 'You are a very generous person,' she said. 'Now I'll unrope, and go up by myself, and you shall tie on.'

He shook his head firmly. 'You mustn't unrope.'

Her eyes broke out in a quick sparkle of anger. 'You've *got* to rope up,' she said, flushing. 'I know that I've done a dud thing and can't preach. But what about you? Climbing alone! coming up out of nowhere, almost at night. Up a worse slope than this beast! Think it bears looking into? Eh? Well, do you mean to rope up, or shall both of us climb in this way that you seem to think right?'

Bell fairly funked the scrutiny of the young woman's spirited simplicity. When once simplicity sets out to inquire, what else is so penetrating? 'Well, you tie on in the middle,' he said, 'and I at the end.'

'That's fair,' she agreed. A few feet of spare rope were let down by her husband. In two or three minutes, at most, the man who would have shuffled off the mortal coil was securely girt with the most delectable of its loops, the cheerfullest symbol of human determination not to withdraw from the banquet of life—only to salt a dish now and then with a few little hazards.

XI

The last daylight was gone when the three stood safe on the level roof of the ridge, scrunching its gritty granular snow

somewhat shyly, though partly kept in countenance by the dark, which is itself a shy, friendly thing. Bell, now a mere dual creature again, had been wondering, all the way up the last flight of ice stairs, how he should give these married lovers a chance to re-assert their lately threatened right to possession of each other's lips. Best, he thought, just to turn his back on them when he got up, and try to look busy, coiling the rope.

But they also seemed to have some sort of plan. The man was waiting above the last step, to shake Bell by the hand—really to shake him—and mumbling something which Bell did not desire to make out more clearly. The cup of his consternation was filled when the lady raised his disengaged hand to her lips, a gesture for which he had not been prepared by her vivacity lower down.

Then, with one silent consent, they all stampeded away from the key of emotion. 'You travel light, Sir,' said Bell, just to say something trivial. The other two seemed to carry not so much as a prune or a biscuit between them.

'Well—' said the man, and then Bell imagined the man must be having a quiet laugh in the dark.

'Oh! I know I can't talk,' Bell admitted. 'The fact is I didn't expect to be coming right over the Pass.'

'Same here,' said the man. 'We just walked up from Randa—meant to go only as far as the hut for the Weisshorn, eat our sandwiches there and go back to dinner. Then—it *was* rather mad, but the snow was so toppingly good—we thought we might just rush the Schallijoch before dark, sleep at Zinal and come back to-morrow.'

'Gosh! it was rash!' exclaimed Bell, off his guard. He felt sure the next instant, the man was quite seeing the humour of such a rebuke from such a sinner. Hastily trying to cover

the slip, Bell made another. He asked, ' How on earth did you miss the way down? '

The man didn't exactly say, ' How did *you* miss the way up? ' but he did say, ' Yes, it was stupid, but—well you know how it isn't so easy to see a way down from above as it is from below? '

' Hadn't we better push off? ' said Bell rather hurriedly. ' We'll be getting friz, up here.' But it was not the cold that he minded. It was the heat. It felt as if he couldn't move his tongue without burning his fingers.

The three truants had luck. Just such a full moon as they needed, not having a lantern, was on the point of rising from behind the snowy mass of the Mischabel, beyond the forest glen of the Visp. The mounting light could no longer contain itself. Its bright animation was pulsing up the dark violet of the sky in tremulous waves. It would be easy, by such a light as was coming, to follow the downward track left by the couple, on their way up, almost to the door of the old Weisshorn hut, a refuge squat, squalid, flea-haunted and cramped, but divinely rich in raw materials for manufacturing heat, against a long night of hard frost.

At any time it is rather exciting to walk in the dark, and in silence, with anyone whom you like but don't yet know very well. What is he thinking about? You? And, if so, in what way? Barring you? Liking you? Wanting to throw down the conventional fence and talk frankly? An hour or two of this blindfold contact between mind and mind may so work on them both that when their eyes meet under a lamp at the end of the walk it may feel as if they had had a long and intimate conversation, leaving each of them just slightly anxious to know that the other has taken nothing amiss. Even thus, with friendly and deprecatory looks, did Bell and

the strangers regard each other by candle-light two hours later, among the strong shadows and smells of the hut.

In ten minutes more the man's wife, who had walked like a true Joan of Arc, was exercising the blessed privilege of healthy and tired young people of thirty or so. While she slept like a prosperous babe, her man and Bell smoked as they lay in the hay at the big sleeping-shelf's other end. Smoking helps to keep talk good. A man can puff at his pipe between each thing he really wants to say and the next. No gap-filling rubble is required.

Bell ascertained first that the man's name was Gollen and that he was a doctor—the Harley Street species of doctor. Bell gave in return his own name and description. Then they enjoyed one of those unembarrassing pauses. Then Bell said, somewhat brusquely, 'There's one thing we have to get straight.'

'Go it,' said Gollen.

'You seem to imagine you're under some sort of obligation to me.'

'Well, you see, we're alive. And, before you appeared, our number was up.'

'So was mine.'

'Oh! everyone's is, in a sense. "All condemned to death," doesn't somebody say, "with an indefinite reprieve." But ours wasn't indefinite. We were booked to go West in five minutes.'

'I was to do it in one. In less. I should have dropped off my holds in ten seconds if you people hadn't blown in.'

'Hullo?'

'Sure thing. I was done. I had never known until then how far doneness could go. That's how it felt, anyhow. Then your wife's axe came along. That by itself held me on for a

jiffy or two. And then you hollered—gad! you *can* holler—and everything changed. There was something new in me, or round me, at work on me somehow. Every bit of soreness and worry and funk was taken right off me—nothing was left in the world but one energy—just an enveloping, mastering sort of a push. It went up like a flame and it took me along—it made everything easy and light. And it wasn't only a thing in the mind. Old brother body himself was roped into the movement: some of the waft of this impulse seemed to get itself into my muscles. D'you follow these ravings? '

' Rather. Physicians aren't the fools that they were. We don't go on missing out what the mind—or the soul, if you like—has to say to all the dynamic affairs of the body.'

Bell puffed his pipe for a while. Then he said ' See? That's how you two preserved me. So if thanking is what we're about, thanky kindly.'

Gollen, too, smoked in silence for the next minute or two, before asking ' The ice overhung where you were when I first caterwauled? '

' Can't tell you the angle. Hadn't got a clinometer thing. Of course it wasn't a motoring road.'

Gollen laughed. Bell liked Gollen's face when he laughed, so far as it could be seen among the tangle of wry shadows thrown about the hut by a small flame that still leapt in the stove. Gollen's face made Bell think of a trade term—' good ordinary.' He had blunt goodish features, strong and good-tempered. A straight, friendly man, you would say, and easily amused; a good man to be in a hole with. Bell enjoyed such men. They made the world go round. As he was thinking so, Gollen suddenly asked, ' I say—why did you do it? '

As Bell did not answer at once, Gollen added, ' Of course,

it's cheek—asking. Tell me to go to Hell, if you like, and I'll warmly approve. Only, well—I'm a doctor.'

Bell cut the thing short. He answered at once what Gollen might go on to ask in another few minutes. 'Yes—the spring's running dry. The salt losing its savour, you know—the wine going flat. And worse coming.'

Again Gollen did the bold thing. 'Any particular evil?' he said.

Bell liked the man. And when two men would both have been dead a few hours ago if either had failed at a pinch, they may soon get on terms. Bell avowed the whole business—his symptoms, his surmises and disgusts and his specious experiment.

Gollen listened as wise doctors do. 'Did that numbness cramp you to-day?' he asked at the end.

'No. But it was there all the day—except just the time—ten minutes or so, I suppose—when——' Bell hesitated for a moment.

'When you were in action?' said Gollen.

'Action?'

'Oh! I don't mean just doing violent things out of doors—pressing triggers or lassoing cows. I mean getting every Jack fibre there is in your nature alive and utterly turned on to something outside you—absorbed in it, lost in it—every bit of your consciousness taken up into some ecstasy of endeavour that's passion and peace.'

Bell nodded, and Gollen went on. 'I guess the great artists—all sorts of 'em—know how to bring the fit on, or it comes when they're at the top of their form—they seem to get further and further above 'emselves—hold the note out in a way that we can't—bring every tissue they have in their being to bear on the effort to get a wee touch to come right. Saints,

too, I suppose—the pukka ones, like Francis, the man at Assisi: they have the knack too: they can get more alive; they've found how to exist at a sort of top pressure. I fancy all of us get just a glimpse of the thing now and then—of what living might be, you know—at a great turn in a game, or when we're in love, or if some beautiful thing in a book bowls us over. Only, we can't hold the note, or we can't do it yet: the pitch is too high for our reach; so we flop back into flatness. But we shall get there. I do believe that. What we've done since we started as jelly-fish is to get more and more of ourselves into action, and we shall go on until we are as much more in action—real true action—than now, as we are now than when we were jelly-fish. Why, in a few thousand years we may all be able to live half our time as you lived to day for ten minutes.'

'Something in that,' Bell assented.

Gollen apologised meekly. 'Sorry to verge upon "uplift". Still, one can't always bother about the convention that talk has got to be pessimist piffle.'

Bell nodded. Reigning conventions had few less dutiful followers than he.

They smoked again for a while. Presently Gollen said, 'How goes the weather?' He rose and opened the door of the hut very quietly Bell followed him out to the hut's tiny terrace.

Nothing at all was wrong with that night. Beyond the queenly white shape of Mont Rose the moon rode gloriously high, burnished and flashing with frost, above sleeping Lombardy. Gowned in new snow and bejewelled with sparkles of light, the Weisshorn, the greatest great lady in Nature, looked as lovely to Bell as when the first sight of that pale supreme grace had taken his breath away in his youth. At the height

where they stood the frost had silenced every trickle of water, leaving all space to be filled with subtler challenges to the ear. The air almost crackled with crispness: it was alive with the massed animation of millions of infinitesimal crystallisations. The Schalliberg Glacier, a little away to their right, had its own living whisper, the sum of the innumerable tiny creaks and fractures of its jostling molecules of ice. Up here, where the quiet of night was suffused with this audible stir of the forces fashioning the earth, it felt as if some murmurous joint voice of all existence were abroad and life itself were trying to make its high urgency felt.

'Pretty good!' Gollen said presently.

'Yes, it's all right,' answered Bell.

Gollen waited a minute or two. Then he asked, 'Is it all right—enough?'

'Oh! yes,' said Bell. 'I'm sticking on.'