

CHAPTER XVIII. - WHAT COULD HE DO?

This was another of Marriot's perplexities of the heart. He had been on the Continent, and I knew from his face, the moment he returned, that I would have a night of him.

"On the 4th of September," he began, playing agitatedly with my tobacco-pouch, which was not for hands like his, "I had walked from Spondinig to Franzenshohe, which is a Tyrolese inn near the top of Stelvio Pass. From the inn to a very fine glacier is only a stroll of a few minutes; but the path is broken by a roaring stream. The only bridge across this stream is a plank, which seemed to give way as I put my foot on it. I drew back, for the stream would be called one long waterfall in England. Though a passionate admirer of courage, I easily lose my head myself, and I did not dare to venture across the plank. I walked up the stream, looking in vain for another crossing, and finally sat down on a wilderness of stones, from which I happened to have a good view of the plank. In parties of two and three a number of tourists strolled down the path; but they were all afraid to cross the bridge. I saw them test it with their alpenstocks; but none would put more than one foot on it. They gathered there at their wit's end. Suddenly I saw that there was some one on the plank. It was a young lady. I stood up and gazed. She was perhaps a hundred yards away from me; but I could distinctly make out her swaying, girlish figure, her deer-stalker cap, and the ends of her boa (as, I think, those long, furry things are called) floating in the wind. In a moment she was safe on the other side; but on the middle of the plank she had turned to kiss her hand to some of her more timid friends, and it was then that I fell in love with her. No doubt it was the very place for romance, if one was sufficiently clad; but I am not 'susceptible,' as it is called, and I had never loved before. On the other hand, I was always a firm believer in love at first sight, which, as you will see immediately, is at the very root of my present sufferings.

"The other tourists, their fears allayed, now crossed the plank, but I hurried away anywhere; and found myself an hour afterward on a hillside, surrounded by tinkling cows. All that time I had been thinking of a plank with a girl on it. I returned hastily to the inn, to hear that the heroine of the bridge and her friends had already driven off up the pass. My intention had been to stay at Franzenshohe over night, but of course

I at once followed the line of carriages which could be seen crawling up the winding road. It was no difficult matter to overtake them, and in half an hour I was within a few yards of the hindmost carriage. It contained her of whom I was in pursuit. Her back was toward me, but I recognized the cap and the boa. I confess that I was nervous about her face, which I had not yet seen. So often had I been disappointed in ladies when they showed their faces, that I muttered Jimmy's aphorism to myself: 'The saddest thing in life is that most women look best from the back.' But when she looked round all anxiety was dispelled. So far as your advice is concerned, it cannot matter to you what she was like. Briefly, she was charming.

"I am naturally shy, and so had more difficulty in making her acquaintance than many travellers would have had. It was at the baths of Bormio that we came together. I had bribed a waiter to seat me next her father at dinner; but, when the time came, I could say nothing to him, so anxious was I to create a favorable impression. In the evening, however, I found the family gathered round a pole, with skittles at the foot of it. They were wondering how Italian skittles was played, and, though I had no idea, I volunteered to teach them. Fortunately none of them understood Italian, and consequently the expostulations of the boy in charge were disregarded. It is not my intention to dwell upon the never-to-be-forgotten days--ah, and still more the evenings--we spent at the baths of Bormio. I had loved her as she crossed the plank; but daily now had I more cause to love her, and it was at Bormio that she learned--I say it with all humility--to love me. The seat in the garden on which I proposed is doubtless still to be seen, with the chair near it on which her papa was at that very moment sitting, with one of his feet on a small table. During the three sunny days that followed, my life was one delicious dream, with no sign that the awakening was at hand.

"So far I had not mentioned the incident at Franzenshohe to her. Perhaps you will call my reticence contemptible; but the fact is, I feared to fall in her esteem. I could not have spoken of the plank without admitting that I was afraid to cross it; and then what would she, who was a heroine, think of a man who was so little of a hero? Thus, though I had told her many times that I fell in love with her at first sight, she thought I referred to the time when she first saw me. She liked to hear me say that I believed in no love but love at first sight; and, looking back, I can recall saying it at least once on every seat in the garden at the baths of Bormio.

"Do you know Tirano, a hamlet in a nest of vines, where Italian soldiers strut and women sleep in the sun beside baskets of fruit? How happily we entered it; were we the same persons who left it within an hour? I was now travelling with her party; and at Tirano, while the others rested, she and I walked down a road between vines and Indian corn. Why I should then have told her that I loved her for a whole day before she saw me I cannot tell. It may have been something she said, perhaps only an irresistible movement of her head; for her grace was ever taking me by surprise, and she was a revelation a thousand times a day. But whatever it was that made me speak out, I suddenly told her that I fell in love with her as she stood upon the plank at Franzenshohe. I remember her stopping short at a point where there had probably once been a gate to the vineyard, and I thought she was angry with me for not having told her of the Franzenshohe incident before. Soon the pallor of her face alarmed me. She entreated me to say it was not at Franzenshohe that I first loved her, and I fancied she was afraid lest her behavior on the bridge had seemed a little bold. I told her it was divine, and pictured the scene as only an anxious lover could do. Then she burst into tears, and we went back silently to her relatives. She would not say a word to me.

"We drove to Sondrio, and before we reached it I dare say I was as pale as she. A horrible thought had flashed upon me. At Sondrio I took her papa aside, and, without telling him what had happened, questioned him about his impressions of Franzenshohe. 'You remember the little bridge,' he said, 'that we were all afraid to cross; by Jove! I have often wondered who that girl was that ventured over it first.'

"I hastened away from him to think. My fears had been confirmed. It was not she who had first crossed the plank. Therefore it was not she with whom I had fallen in love. Nothing could be plainer than that I was in love with the wrong person. All the time I had loved another. But who was she? Besides, did I love her? Certainly not. Yes, but why did I love this one? The whole foundation of my love had been swept away. Yet the love remained. Which is absurd.

"At Colico I put the difficulty to her father; but he is stout, and did not understand its magnitude. He said he could not see how it mattered. As for her, I have never mentioned it to her again; but she is always thinking of it, and so am I. A wall has risen up between us, and how to get over it or whether I have any right to get over it, I know not. Will you help me--and her?"

"Certainly not," I said.