

CHAPTER X

GODFREY BECOMES A HERO

The truth is that Godfrey was no true sportsman, really he did not enjoy exterminating other and kindred life to promote his own amusement. Like most young men, he was delighted if he made a good shot; moreover, he had some aptitude for shooting, but unlike most young men, to him afterwards came reflections. Who gave him the right to kill creatures as sentient, and much more beautiful in their way than himself, just because it was "great fun"? Of course, he was familiar with the common answer, that day by day his body was nourished upon the flesh of other animals destroyed for that purpose. But then this was a matter of necessity, so arranged by a law, that personally, he thought dreadful, but over which he had no manner of control. It was part of the hellish system of a world built upon the foundation stone of death.

Nature told him that he must live, and that to live, not being a vegetarian, which for most of us is difficult in a cold climate, he must kill, or allow others to kill for him. But to his fancy, perhaps meticulous, between such needful slaughter and that carried out for his own amusement, and not really for the purposes of obtaining food, there seemed to be a great gulf fixed. To get food he would have killed anything, and indeed, often did in later days, as he would and also often did in after days, have destroyed noxious animals, such as tigers.

But to inflict death merely to show his own skill or to gratify man's innate passion for hunting, which descends to him from a more primitive period, well, that was another matter. It is true, that he was not logical, since always he remained an ardent fisherman, partly because he had convinced himself from various observations, that fish feel very little, and partly for the reason that there is high authority for fishing, although, be it admitted, with a single exception, always in connection with the obtaining of needful food.

In these conclusions Godfrey was strengthened by two circumstances; first, his reading, especially of Buddhistic literature, that enjoins them so strongly, and in which he found a great deal to admire, and secondly, by the entire concurrence of the Pasteur Boiset, whom he admired even more than he did Buddhistic literature.

"I am delighted, my young friend," said the Pasteur, beaming at him through the blue spectacles, "to find someone who agrees with me. Personally, although you might not believe it, I love the chase with ardour; when I was young I have shot as many as twenty-five--no--twenty-seven blackbirds and thrushes in one day, to say nothing of thirty-one larks, and some other small game. Also, once I wounded a chamois, which a bold hunter with me killed. It was a glorious moment. But now, for the reasons that you mention, I have given up all this sport, which formerly to me was so great an excitement and relaxation. Yet I admit that I still fish. Only last

year I caught a large hatful of perch and dace, of which I persuaded Madame to cook some that Juliette would not eat and gave to the cat. Once, too, there was a big trout in the Lake Lucerne. He broke my line, but, my boy, we will go to fish for that trout. No doubt he is still there, for though I was then young, these fishy creatures live for many years, and to catch him would be a glory."

After Godfrey had given up his fox-shooting, not because in itself is a terrible crime, like fishing for salmon with herring roe, but for reasons which most of his countrymen would consider effeminate and absurd, he took to making expeditions, still in company with Juliette, for Madame stretched Continental conventions in his case, in search of certain rare flowers which grew upon the lower slopes of these Alps. In connection with one of these flowers an incident occurred, rather absurd in itself, but which was not without effect upon his fortunes.

The search for a certain floral treasure was long and arduous.

"If only I could find that lovely white bloom," exclaimed Juliette in exasperation at the close of a weary hour of climbing, "why, I would kiss it."

"So would I," said Godfrey, mopping himself with a pocket handkerchief, for the sun was hot, "and with pleasure."

"Hidden flower," invoked Juliette with appropriate heroic gestures,

"white, secret, maiden flower, hear us! Discover thyself, O shrinking flower, and thou shalt be kissed by the one that first finds thee."

"I don't know that the flower would care for that," remarked Godfrey, as they renewed their quest.

At length behind a jutting mass of rock, in a miniature valley, not more than a few yards wide that was backed by other rocks, this flower was found. Godfrey and Juliette, passing round either side of the black, projecting mass to the opening of the toy vale beyond, discovered it simultaneously. There it stood, one lovely, lily-like bloom growing alone, virginal, perfect. With a cry of delight they sprang at it, and plucked it from its root, both of them grasping the tall stem.

"I saw it first, and I will kiss it!" cried Juliette, "in token of possession."

"No," said Godfrey, "I did, and I will. I want that flower for my collection."

"So do I, for mine," answered Juliette.

Then they both tried to set this seal of possession upon that lily bloom, with the strange result that their young lips met through its fragile substance and with so much energy that it was crushed and

ruined.

"Oh!" said Godfrey with a start, "look what you have done to the flower."

"I! I, wicked one! Well, for the matter of that, look what you have done to my lips. They feel quite bruised."

Then first she laughed, and next looked as though she were going to cry.

"Don't be sad," said Godfrey remorsefully. "No doubt we shall find another, now that we know where they are."

"Perhaps," she answered, "but it is always the first that one remembers, and it is finished," and she threw down the stalk and stamped on it.

Just then they heard a sound of laughter, and looking up, to their horror perceived that they were not alone. For there, seated upon stones at the end of the tiny valley, in composed and comfortable attitudes, which suggested that they had not arrived that moment, were two gentlemen, who appeared to be highly amused.

Godfrey knew them at once, although he had not seen them since the previous autumn. They were Brother Josiah Smith, the spiritualist, and Professor Petersen, the investigating Dane, whom he used to meet at the

séances in the Villa Ogilvy.

"I guess, young Brother Knight," said the former, his eyes sparkling with sarcastic merriment, "that there is no paint on you. When you find a flower, you know how to turn it to the best possible use."

"The substance of flowers is fragile, especially if of the lily tribe, and impedes nothing," remarked the learned Dane in considered tones, though what he meant Godfrey did not understand at the moment. On consideration he understood well enough.

"Our mutual friend, Madame Riennes, who is absent in Italy, will be greatly amused when she hears of this episode," said Brother Smith.

"She is indeed a remarkable woman, for only this morning I received a letter in which she informed me that very soon I should meet you, young man, under peculiar circumstances, how peculiar she did not add. Well, I congratulate you and the young lady. I assure you, you made quite a pretty picture with nothing but that flower between you, though, I admit, it was rough on the flower. If I remember right you are fond of the classics, as I am, and will recall to mind a Greek poet named Theocritus. I think, had he been wandering here in the Alps to-day, he would have liked to write one of his idylls about you two and that flower."

"Because of the interruption give pardon, for it is owed an apology," said the solemn Professor, adding, "I think it must have been the

emanation of Madame Riennes herself which led us to this place, where we did not at all mean to come, for she is very anxious to know how you progress and what you are doing."

"Yes, young friend," broke in Brother Smith, not without a touch of malice, for like the rest he was resentful of Godfrey's desertion of their "circle," "and now we shall be able to tell her."

"Say then," said Juliette, "who are these gentlemen, and of what do they talk?"

"They--are--friends of mine," Godfrey began to explain with awkward hesitation, but she cut him short with:

"I like not your friends. They make a mock of me, and I will never forgive you."

"But Juliette, I----" he began, and got no further, for she turned and ran away. Anxious to explain, he ran after her, pursued by the loud hilarity of the intruding pair. In vain, for Juliette was singularly swift of foot, and he might as well have pursued Atalanta.

She reached the Maison Blanche, which fortunately was empty, a clear ten yards ahead of him, and shut herself in her room, whence, declaring that she had a headache, she did not emerge till the following morning.

Godfrey departed to the observatory where he often worked in summer, feeling very sore and full of reflections. He had not really meant to kiss Juliette, at least he thought not, and it was unthinkable that she meant to kiss him, since, so far as he was aware, no young woman ever wanted to do such a thing, being, every one of them, doubtless, as unapproachable and frigid as the topmost, snowy peak of the Alps. (Such was, and always remained his attitude, where the other sex was concerned, one not without inconvenience in a practical world of disillusion.) No, it was that confounded flower which brought about this pure accident--as though Nature, which designs such accidents, had not always a flower, or something equally serviceable, up her sleeve.

Moreover, had it not been for that accursed pair, sent, doubtless, to spy on him by Madame Riennes, the accident would never have mattered; at least not much. He could have apologized suitably to Juliette, that is, if she wanted an apology, which she showed no signs of doing until she saw the two men. Indeed, at the moment, he thought that she seemed rather amused.

He thought of searching out Brother Smith and Professor Petersen, and explaining to them exactly what had happened in full detail, and should they still continue their ribald jests, of punching their heads, which as a manly young fellow, he was quite capable of doing. Reflection showed him, however, that this course might not be wise, since such adventures are apt to end in the police-court, where the flower, and its fruit, would obtain undue publicity. No, he must leave the business

alone, and trust that Juliette would be merciful. Supposing that she were to tell Madame that he had tried to kiss her, though probably she would not mention that he had actually succeeded!

The mere idea made him feel cold down the back. He felt sure that Madame would believe the worst of him; to judge from their conversations, ladies, good as they all were, invariably did seem to believe the worst in such affairs. Should he throw himself upon the mercy of the Pasteur? Again, no. It would be so hard to make him comprehend. Also, if he did, he might suggest that the altar was the only possible expiation. And--and, oh! he must confess it, she was very nice and sweet, but he did not wish to marry Juliette and live with her all his life.

No, there was but one thing to be done: keep the burden of his secret locked in his own breast, though, unfortunately, it was locked as well in those of Juliette and of two uninvited observers, and probably would soon also be locked in the capacious bosom of Madame Riennes. For the rest, towards Juliette in the future, he would observe an attitude of strictest propriety; never more should she have occasion to complain of his conduct, which henceforth would be immaculate. Alas! how easy it is for the most innocent to be misjudged, and apparently, not without reason.

This reflection brought something to Godfrey's mind which had escaped it in his first disturbance, also connected with a flower. There came

before him the vision of a London square, and of a tall, pale girl, in an antique dress, giving a rose to a man in knight's armour, which rose both of them kissed simultaneously. Of course, when he saw it he had ruled out the rose and only thought of the kisses, although, now that he came to think of it, a rose is of a much thicker texture than a lily. As he had witnessed that little scene, and drawn his own conclusions, so others had witnessed another little scene that afternoon, and made therefrom deductions which, in his innocent soul, he knew to be totally false. Suppose, then, that his deductions were also false. Oh! it was not possible. Besides, a barrier built of rose leaves was not sufficient, which again, with perfect justice, he remembered was exactly what Brother Smith and Professor Petersen had thought of one composed of lily petals.

There for the time the matter ended. Juliette reappeared on the morrow quite cured of her headache, and as gay and charming as ever. Possibly she had confided in her mamma, who had told her that after all things were not so terrible, even if they had been seen.

At any rate, the equilibrium was restored. Godfrey acted on his solemn resolutions of haughtiness and detachment for quite an hour, after which Juliette threw a kitten at him and asked what was the matter, and then sang him one of her pretty chansonettes to the accompaniment of a guitar with three strings, which closed the incident. Still there were no more flower hunts and no new adventures. Tacitly, but completely, everything of the sort was dropped out of their

relationship. They remained excellent friends, on affectionate terms indeed, but that was all.

Meanwhile, owing to his doubts arising out of a singular coincidence concerned with flowers and kisses, Godfrey gradually made up his mind to write to Isobel. Indeed, he had half composed the epistle when at the end of one of his brief letters his father informed him that she had gone to Mexico with her uncle. So it came about that it was never posted, since it is a kind of superstition with young people that letters can only be delivered at the place where the addressee last resided. It rarely occurs to them that these may be forwarded, and ultimately arrive. Nor, indeed, did it occur to Godfrey that as Isobel's uncle was the British Minister to a certain country, an envelope addressed to her in his care in that country probably would have reached her.

She was gone and there was an end; it was of no use to think more of the matter. Still, he was sorry, because in that same letter his father had alluded casually to the death of Lady Jane, which had caused Hawk's Hall to be shut up for a while, and he would have liked to condole with Isobel on her loss. He knew that she loved her mother dearly, and of this gentle lady he himself had very affectionate remembrances, since she had always been most kind to him. Yet for the reasons stated, he never did so.

About a fortnight after the flower episode a chance came Godfrey's way of making an Alp-climbing expedition in the company of some mountaineers. They were friends of the Pasteur who joined the party himself, but stayed in a village at the foot of the mountains they were to climb, since for such exercise he had lost the taste. The first two expeditions went off very successfully, Godfrey showing himself most agile at the sport which suited his adventurous spirit and delighted him. By nature, notwithstanding his dreamy characteristics, he was fearless, at any rate where his personal safety was concerned, and having a good head, it gave him pleasure to creep along the edge of precipices, or up slippery ice slopes, cutting niches with an axe for his feet.

Then came the third attempt, up a really difficult peak which had not yet been conquered that year. The details of the expedition do not matter, but the end of it was that at a particularly perilous place one of the party lost his head or his breath and rolled from the path.

There he lay half senseless, on the brink of a gulf, with a drop of a thousand feet or more beneath him. As it happened, they were climbing in lots of three, each of which lots was roped together, but at some distance between the parties, that with the guide being a good way ahead.

Godfrey was leading his party along the track made by the other, but

their progress was not very rapid owing to the weakness of the man who had fallen who, as it afterwards transpired, suffered from his heart, and was affected by the altitude. The climber behind Godfrey was strong and bold; also, as it chanced at the moment of the fall, this man's feet were planted upon a lump of projecting rock, so firmly that by throwing himself forward against the snow slope, grasping another lump of rock with his left hand and bearing on to the alpenstock with his right, he was able to sustain the weight of their companion. But the rope which bound them together, though strong, was thin; moreover, at the point where most of the strain came it rested on a knife-like edge of ice, so sharp that there was momentarily danger of its fraying through as the movements of the weight beneath rubbed it against the edge.

When a shout and the stoppage warned Godfrey of what had happened, he turned round and studied the position. Even to his inexperienced eye it was obvious that a catastrophe was imminent. Now there were two things which might be done; one was to stay in his place and help to bear the strain of the swinging body, for almost immediately the fainting man slipped from the ledge, and hung above the gulf. The other was to trust to number two to hold his weight, and go to his assistance in the hope of being able to support him until the guide could return to the first party. As by a flash-like working of the mind Godfrey weighed these alternatives, his quick eye saw what looked like a little bit of fluff appear from the underside of the rope, which told him that one at least of the strands must have severed upon the edge of ice. Then almost

instinctively he made his choice.

"Can you hold him?" he said swiftly to number two, who answered, "Yes, I think so," in a muffled voice.

"Then I go to help him."

"If you slip, I cannot bear you both," said the muffled voice.

"No," answered Godfrey, and drawing the sheath knife he wore, deliberately cut the rope which joined him to number two.

Then he scrambled down to the ledge without much difficulty, reaching it, but just in time, for now the razor blade of the ice had cut half through the rope, and very soon the swinging of the senseless weight beneath must complete its work. This ledge, being broad, though sloping, was not a particularly bad place; moreover, on it were little hummocks of ice, resulting from snow that had melted and frozen again, against one of which Godfrey was able to rest his left shoulder, and even to pass his arm round it. But here came the rub. He could not get sufficient grip of the thin rope with his right hand beyond the point where it was cut, to enable him to support even half the weight that hung below. Should it sever, as it must do very shortly, it would be torn from his grasp.

What then could be done? Godfrey peered over the edge. The man was

swinging not more than two feet below its brink, that is to say, the updrawn loop of his stout leather belt, to which the rope was fastened, was about that distance from the brink, and on either side of it he hung down like a sack tied round the middle, quite motionless in his swoon, his head to one side and his feet to the other.

Could he reach and grasp that leather belt without falling himself, and if so, could he bear the man's weight and not be dragged over? Godfrey shrank from the attempt; his blood curdled. Then he pictured, again in a mind-flash, his poor companion whirling down through space to be dashed to pulp at the bottom, and the agony of his wife and children whom he knew, and who had wished to prevent him from climbing that day. Oh! he would try. But still a paralysing fear overcame him, making him weak and nervous. Then it was in Godfrey's extremity that his imagination produced a very curious illusion. Quite distinctly he seemed to hear a voice, that of Miss Ogilvy, say to him:

"Do it, Godfrey, at once, or it will be too late. We will help you."

This phantasy, or whatever it was, seemed to give him back his nerve and courage. Coolly he tightened the grip of his left arm about the knob of ice, and drawing himself forward a little, so that his neck and part of his chest were over the edge, reached his right hand downwards. His fingers touched the belt; to grasp it he must have another inch and a half, or two inches. He let himself down that distance. Oh! how easy it seemed to do so--and thrust his fingers beneath the belt. As he

closed them round it, the rope parted and all the weight that it had borne came upon Godfrey's arm!

How long did he support it, he often wondered afterwards. For ages it seemed. He felt as though his right arm was being torn from the socket, while the ice cut into the muscles of his left like active torture. He filled himself with air, blowing out his lower part so that its muscles might enable him to get some extra hold of the rough ground; he dug his toes deep into the icy snow. His hat fell from his head, rested for a moment in a ridiculous fashion upon the swinging body beneath, then floated off composedly into space, the tall feather in it sticking upwards and fluttering a little. He heard voices approaching, and above them the shouts of the guide, though what these said conveyed no meaning to him. He must loose his hold and go too. No, he would not. He would not, although now he felt as though his shoulder-joint were dislocated, also that his left arm was slipping. He would die like a brave man--like a brave man. Surely this was death! He was gone--everything passed away.

Godfrey woke again to find himself lying upon a flat piece of snow. Recollection came back to him with a pang, and he thought that he must have fallen.

Then he heard voices, and saw faces looking at him as through a mist,

also he felt something in his mouth and throat, which seemed to burn them. One of the voices, it was that of the guide, said:

"Good, good! He finds himself, this young English hero. See, his eyes open; more cognac, it will make him happy, and prevent the shock. Never mind the other one; he is all right, the stupid."

Godfrey sat up and tried to lift his arm to thrust away the flask which he saw approaching him, but he could not.

"Take that burning stuff away, Karl, confound you," he said.

Then Karl, a good honest fellow, who was on his knees beside him, threw his arms about him, and embraced him in a way that Godfrey thought theatrical and unpleasant, while all the others, except the rescued man, who lay semi-comatose, set up a kind of pæan of praise, like a Greek chorus.

"Oh! shut up!" said Godfrey, "if we waste so much time we shall never get to the top," a remark at which they all burst out laughing.

"They talk of Providence on the Alps," shouted Karl in stentorian tones, while he performed a kind of war-dance, "but that's the kind of providence for me," and he pointed to Godfrey. "Many things have I seen in my trade as guide, but never one like this. What? To cut the rope for the sake of Monsieur there," and he pointed to number two, whose

share in the great adventure was being overlooked, "before giving himself to almost certain death for the sake of Monsieur with the weak heart, who had no business on a mountain; to stretch over the precipice as the line parted, and hold Monsieur with the weak heart for all that while, till I could get a noose round him--yes, to go on holding him after he himself was almost dead--without a mind! Good God! never has there been such a story in my lifetime on these Alps, or in that of my father before me."

Then came the descent, Godfrey supported on the shoulder of the stalwart Karl, who, full of delight at this great escape from tragedy, and at having a tale to tell which would last him for the rest of his life, "jodelled" spontaneously at intervals in his best "large-tip" voice, and occasionally skipped about like a young camel, while "Monsieur with the weak heart" was carried in a chair provided to bear elderly ladies up the lower slopes of the Alps.

Some swift-footed mountaineer had sped down to the village ahead of them and told all the story, with the result that when they reached the outskirts of the place, an excited crowd was waiting to greet them, including two local reporters for Swiss journals.

One of these, who contributed items of interest to the English press also, either by mistake, or in order to make his narrative more interesting, added to a fairly correct description of the incident, a statement that the person rescued by Godfrey was a young lady. At

least, so the story appeared in the London papers next morning, under the heading of "Heroic Rescue on the Alps," or in some instances of, "A Young English Hero."

Among the crowd was the Pasteur, who beamed at Godfrey through his blue spectacles, but took no part in these excited demonstrations. When they were back at their hotel, and the doctor who examined Godfrey, had announced that he was suffering from nothing except exhaustion and badly sprained muscles, he said simply:

"I do not compliment you, my dear boy, like those others, because you acted only as I should have expected of you in the conditions. Still, I am glad that in this case another was not added to my long list of disappointments."

"I didn't act at all, Pasteur," blurted out Godfrey. "A voice, I thought it was Miss Ogilvy's, told me what to do, and I obeyed."

The old gentleman smiled and shook his head, as he answered:

"It is ever thus, young Friend. When we wish to do good we hear a voice prompting us, which we think that of an angel, and when we wish to do evil, another voice, which we think that of a devil, but believe me, the lips that utter both of them are in our own hearts. The rest comes only from the excitement of the instant. There in our hearts the angel and the devil dwell, side by side, like the two figures in a village

weather-clock, ready to appear, now one and now the other, as the breath of our nature blows them."

"But I heard her," said Godfrey stubbornly.

"The excitement of the instant!" repeated the Pasteur blandly. "Had I been so situated I am quite certain that I should have heard all the deceased whom I have ever known," and he patted Godfrey's dark hair with his long, thin hand, thanking God in his heart for the brave spirit which He had been pleased to give to this young man, who had grown so dear to one who lacked a son. Only this he did in silence, nor did he ever allude to the subject afterwards, except as a commonplace matter-of-course event.

Notwithstanding the "jodellings" which continued outside his window to a late hour, and the bouquet of flowers which was sent to him by the wife of the mayor, who felt that a distinction had been conferred upon their village that would bring them many visitors in future seasons, and ought to be suitably acknowledged, Godfrey soon dropped into a deep sleep. But in the middle of the night it passed from him, and he awoke full of terrors. Now, for the first time, he understood what he had escaped, and how near he had been to lying, not in a comfortable bed, but a heap of splintered bones and mangled flesh at the foot of a precipice, whence, perhaps, it would have been impossible ever to recover his remains. In short, his nerves re-acted, and he felt anything but a hero, rather indeed, a coward among cowards. Nor did he

wish ever to climb another Alp; the taste had quite departed from him. To tell the truth, a full month went by before he was himself again, and during that month he was as timid as a kitten, and as careful of his personal safety as a well-to-do old lady unaccustomed to travel.