

The Ice Grotto.

1.

“THERE is nothing so high that it cannot be conquered; nothing so beautiful that it cannot be won.”

“But you have not conquered the mountain though you have stood on its summit, nor have you won the mountain lily though you have gathered it.”

The first remark was made by a big laughing-eyed stranger from Europe, after his return from the climbing of Sefton: the second by Max, a dweller in the valleys, and a lover of them and the peaks above them.

“What more would you have?” said the climber: “for my part, once I have reached the top, the mountain interests me no further; it has given me all it can;—or rather, I have taken from it all that it has to give,—and I seek others to conquer.”

“Yet I have lived for years among them; and though I have seldom climbed them, they are for ever giving and giving.”

“Oh, as for that,” laughed the other, “I am no poet, you know,” and the company laughed with him; “I cannot see something in nothing;” and he strode off in high good humour.

The climbing season was half over when the stranger came: there had been many visitors; and among them was a slight grey-eyed English girl, named Marjorie, to whom Max had shewn many of the more hidden beauties of the neighbourhood; many a little scene of beauty, over-shadowed by the greater and more wonderful beauties round about, yet appealing and delightful.

They rambled together, in the glens opening here and there from the great valleys, and on the mountain slopes; and more than once he had taken her along the Tasman Valley, to the hut below the Ball Glacier. The track lay between the great moraine of the glacier and the mountain; and whilst it was now formed and easily traversed, over the valley floor once grew an impenetrable jungle of thorny wild-irishman, and stiff needle-bladed spaniard. Through this growth he told her the first explorer Haast had forced his way in 1862,

and the climber Green twenty years later. “Green was obliged to build camp after camp,” said he, “carrying food and tent and instruments from one camp to the next; his fifth camp was in the place where the Ball Hut now stands. From that camp he attempted to climb Mount Cook, and almost succeeded in spite of all the difficulties.” He told her of the many attempts by New Zealanders to climb that great peak, and how at last three young New Zealanders actually did reach the summit on Christmas Day, 1895.

“And have you never tried?” asked Marjorie, who had herself climbed in the playground of Europe, as Switzerland is called.

“No; I have climbed a few of the lower peaks,” he answered; “but there are many that look too beautiful, or too majestic, to be trodden by man. I know that man can leave no impression on the lofty peaks,—cannot in any way destroy their loveliness, but it seems good to think there are heights that are more glorious in being admired than in being trodden under foot.”

They stood wondering before the great gulches, torn from the sides of the Mount Cook Range by the swiftly descending snow-waters—huge fans of broken rock absorbing the water as it fell, so that a foaming waterfall might dash down the sides of gleaming rock, yet it formed no pool, and from it no stream flowed; it sank in the broken rock, flowing along the valley underground. Rocky shoulders leaned out here and there; shoulders that seemed bowed to support the huge mass of mountain above. Everything was on a giant scale, vast and silent, save for the murmuring of water and the sighing of wind.

“But the silence is broken in the time of thaw,” said Max; “then the mountain voices echo; ice and snow-avalanches rumble and roar; rock-avalanches rattle and clatter; there is booming of waterfalls, and rushing of great rivers. The yellow Tasman, spouting from deep sources below the ice of the glacier, boils along, a swirl of rock and water.”

“It seems strange to me,” said Marjorie, “that the floods here come in the spring; in England they come in the winter.”

“Yes, for in England the floods are caused by the rains; here the great rivers are fed by the glaciers, and not until the sun warms in spring can the



wells be set free. In winter even the waterfalls freeze, and the trickles of water lay sheath after sheath over the frozen fall, until it becomes many times its summer size. You may see by the great rifts, the canyons, the precipitous gorges, how fiercely the rock-laden water tears down the mountains in the thaws;—but in winter the snow lays a mantle of silence over mountain and valley; and in summer, after the violence of the spring has passed, the mantle is withdrawn to the tops, leaving the lower slopes and valleys to break into flower. Yes, spring is fierce in the mountains, but the sun draws sweetness from the fierceness."

The Blue Lake never lost its enchantment; it seemed an oasis in the midst of desolation. The lilies were in full bloom, swaying with fluttering petals in a breeze that whispered through the tussock. On the hill-side were giant silver-leafed daisies, and sheltering among the tussocks tiny white violets.

"How different from their deep-hued English cousins the violets are," said Marjorie, as she uptilted the face of one; "and they look frightened and lonely here."

He climbed a short distance up a bluff of rock and picked a spray of clustering, daisy-like flower. Offering it to Marjorie, he said, "It is an *olearia*, most sweet-scented, as you have discovered;—but it has no name by which it is commonly known. England has a great advantage in having common names for most of her wild flowers, and stories connected with them;—but here, few have names by which they may become familiar. It seems strange that the giving of a name should help a flower to become known and loved, but it is so."

They had climbed the great loose-rocked moraine of the glacier, and had reached the clear ice towards the middle of the rock-strewn surface;—ice honey-combed in places with deep holes of all sizes, though few above a span in width;—holes, some of which were filled with water, some dry. When filled, the water seemed ethereal sapphire in colour, and often it tinkled with needles of ice on the hand being thrust in. Running water bubbled and babbled everywhere, upon the ice and beneath it. There was singing with the running water; singing, far down, as of birds, and music as of organ pipes;—a wonderful harmony if one bent to the ice, listening.

"What is going on in the hollows below there?" whispered Marjorie.

"None but the mountain-lilies can tell us that," answered Max.

They entered an ice-cave, and the hues of blue, sapphire, green, even rose, mingling and melting in opalescent shimmer, filled Marjorie with delight and wonder.

"And these beauties are hidden from all but a few," she exclaimed.

"Most prefer to climb the peaks above us," said he; "and of those who do see them, how many regard them as veils, or windows, as they are, behind which at times glimpses may be caught of other and greater wonders?"

"I am afraid that I see nothing through these windows, though their colouring is beautiful," said Marjorie.

"I think that you already see beyond the colouring," said Max; and as they came from the cave, the sunlight glimmering in her brown hair, he thought that beyond the veil called Marjorie there also lived wonders, fleeting glimpses of which he caught now and again as the dark pupils of her eyes brightened when turned towards the beauties around her. "It is because you do see beyond the colouring that I find pleasure in bringing you to the windows," said he.

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And now this smiling stranger had come, with his saying, "There is nothing so high that it cannot be conquered; nothing so beautiful that it cannot be won."

He had been at the Hermitage but a few days when he climbed Sefton, and had a fascinating tale to tell of the treachery of the ice; the danger of the rocks; the uncertainty of the weather; the failing of the light at a critical moment;—but after all the gaining of the top, and the drinking of the health of the conquered mountain;—all told with keen pleasure and in picturesque language, so that no one could do otherwise than listen with interest.

"Have you climbed a peak?" he said to Marjorie.

"No," she answered; "I have seen many beautiful things though; not only the high peaks, but beauties in the valleys."

"Nothing to what you could see from a good peak," he assured her;—"Oh, but you should experience the thrill of a good climb," said he;—"will you try one?—Cook himself now!—with help you could do it well enough."

"After practice on other peaks," suggested the guides.

"No doubt; no doubt;—and we will take the Ball Pass for a beginning; and the Wakefield group will be as nothing; and Sealy?—yes, we should soon be at Sealy;"—and before she could agree or disagree a course of training was set out for her, with Cook to be tried in due time if all went well.

And if climbing were all, all went well. She had nerve; and her rambles with Max, whilst apparently easy, had hardened her body and limbs for the other climbs; and the enthusiasm that seizes on all climbers sooner or later, seized on her and urged her on.

The stranger's programme found no place for Max however;—but if Marjorie found enjoyment, what more was to be said?

The day for the climb of Cook came, and the party set out; the stranger, Marjorie, and a guide. "Now we shall see," said the stranger as they laughed good-bye. They must spend at least one night on the mountains, bivouacing high up so as to be well started at earliest dawn; the second night might be spent in the Ball Hut. But the second night was not spent there, as Max knew; for he was there to meet them. Either they had slept at the high bivouac, or—but his thought refused to give form to his apprehension. The memory of Marjorie was with him, and in the early morning, he started up the route to the bivouac. As he went, he heard now and again fragments falling from above, loosened by the early sun;—one of these fragments struck him, leaving him lying insensible. On his breast lay his hand, still holding a mountain lily, picked as he passed the Blue Lake the day before.

2.

Where was he?—how had he come there?—In a dazed way, like one half-awakened from sleep, he seemed to be on the Tasman ice again.—There was the frail-looking ice bridge that one day he had shewn to Marjorie;—an arching bridge of several spans that had been sun-fretted across a cold, blue, unruffled glacier tarn, all the spans, fantastic, ethereal, meeting in the centre. Thin ice needles hung from their curves; ice jewels encrusted their sides;—it looked light and fragile, as if made of frozen vapours.

He approached the bridge; he slowly crossed to the midmost point; and then he perceived how one span led to a low-arched blue cave, invisible except to one standing where the arches keyed in the centre. He entered the cave; when, with a quiet crackling, needle by needle and crystal by crystal, the arches melted away, leaving him without means of recrossing the cold-eyed tarn. But it did not appear to concern him at all; he bent, and moved onwards into the dimmer depths of the cave.

It was no ordinary cave; it lengthened to a gallery; at times he could walk upright, ever and again he must stoop as he paced along the gently descending floor. Nor did the dimness ever become darkness: from the roof, and from the sides, came a shimmer as though the sunlight were trembling

through the thickness of ice. On and on he went, and ever gradually downwards; the music of water was around him. He heard the booming of falls, the rushing of rivers; and these sounds coming nearer, soon the gallery widened and heightened, and he came to an ice bridge, stout and massive, set across a rushing torrent. A very Tasman it seemed, born within the glacier. On his right, leaping from icy cliff to cliff, it descended in a foaming fall, far into a dim and roaring darkness.

He crossed the bridge, when it too disappeared, rolling and rumbling with the impetuous water into the gloom below. He went on, until the gallery broadened, and the sides swept out abruptly to right and left in wide curves, the roof springing upwards in a lofty arch. He stood in a dimly lit dome, the roof and sides covered with pulsing luminous points that filled it with thin ethereal light. He saw beings moving about; he felt they were not human beings though they had their shape; and they were very human in their subdued chatter and laughter.

"A stranger," cried one, in a voice that seemed to come from far away,—and "A stranger;—a stranger," passed from lip to lip as he stood in their midst. Several approached him—"No stranger," they cried, "for he bears the emblem; let him pass on;"—"The emblem;—pass on;" echoed the others.

What was the emblem of which they spoke?—and to what place was he passing?—yet as though he had been awaiting the word, he went on. He left the dome by another narrowing gallery, along whose sides stood shapes; and their words, murmured from one to another as he passed by, were still, "The emblem."

At the gallery's end hung a drape, rich as if woven of dimmed starbeams and silver mist. It parted noiselessly as he approached, opening to a splendour beyond. He entered a second domed hall, but greater than the first; indeed, the far dome seemed lost in a thin haze, as the sky itself is sometimes lost in a high haze through which the blue shines dimly. It was clouded, as an opal, through which the fiery colours play as the gem is moved this way and that; for as he moved here and there, flashes of radiance fell around, as if indeed the hall were a great jewel into which he had entered, like a spirit into sunny air.

When his eyes were no longer dazzled by the strangely beaming lights, he saw that the hall was thronged with beings; and they, like the hall itself, seemed unsubstantial as the misted mountains of evening, before the sun hides them in the treasure-house of the night.

All were speaking in subdued voices, the murmuring sounding like the drowsy hum of insects on a bright summer midday. He noted, on a dais, a seat like a crystal throne. But the crystal was filled with flowers, like flowers frozen into ice; only these moved and fluttered as though the crystal were sunlit air, through which an unfelt wind passed gently. The floor, whilst smooth, seemed carpeted with thick mosses and gold-sprinkled lichens; and he saw that these too grew within the crystal, and it yielded to the foot as did the honey-flowered cushion-plants on the riverbeds. The walls were not smooth, but were fretted into long waving columns like the columns of frozen waterfalls and mist-veils; they were irregularly placed, were of all shapes and sizes, and arched here and there over clearer spaces, semi-transparent, like dim great twilight windows. It was as though in dream he saw through them slope after slope of mountain, range after range, icy peak and snowy brow; and nearer at hand, fold on fold of verdant valleys, jewelled with mountain lilies, white and yellow; Silverlan-daisies; mountain-bells;—all the hundreds of flowers that filled the mountains with points or splashes of brightness. The heights were softened with cloud; the valleys with thinnest mist; there was music of falls and running water and wandering winds;—and more, of wandering beings. He saw them in glimpses, here and there among the groves, or on the slopes; and he could feel their happiness, as he could feel the freshness of the places where they moved. But over all, as with a cold gust, passed a cloud, and in his breast swelled a pain; for he thought of Marjorie.

The domed hall itself grew dim; the valleys, the mountains, slowly faded away; the jewel was clouded;—but for a short time only. On the cloud dispersing, he saw that the crystal throne, and the spaces about the throne, were occupied; a queen and her court had slid through the shadow, and smiled to see his wonder. A faint but increasing rumble sounded from far above, and the dome trembled as with earthquake, or as a dewdrop in a newly wakened dawn-wind.

"My welcome from the avalanches above there," said the queen; "have you none for me?"

"You came as a sudden flower on the mountain-side," said Max; "and as I would welcome the flower, I welcome you."

"Not all queens would be pleased with such a welcome," said she, leaning towards him; "you do not recognize me?"

"No," answered Max.

"Yet you bear my emblem," and her blue eyes were fixed on the mountain lily in his hand.

Then he understood; her yellow hair was the colour of the heart of the flower; her snowy flowing robe was pure as its petals; her girdle was the colour of the great leaves, bright in sunshine; she was the spirit of the mountain lily.

"Then," said he, "you are able to tell me all I wish to know."—

"Yes,—I or my sisters," she answered; "and you shall hear."

Looking out towards the distant valleys, she bent towards them crooning a low song to the underhum of those about her:—

"From steep of the mountain,
And verge, where desire
Of mist-eyed young morning
Dews all with her fire,—
Put by the robed petals
And tiring of green,
To dull ears unheard
And to dim eyes unseen,—

"Float hither like dreams
That as verity fall
More wondrous than wonder,
Of echo the call,—
Come sisters, of sunlight
Mist-woven in fire,
Of dreaming the dreamer,
Of sleep the desire."

It seemed as though the mists of the valley-heads grew denser, trailing in slow drifts and whirls along the broken sides, for a time obscuring trees and flowers. As he watched, Max heard the voice of the queen, distant-sounding to his ears as the mists appeared to his eyes:

"The winter-palace of the flowers is this; and on the coming of the tempestuous days, all gather together in this place of peace, hastening and tarrying as you now see them."

The trailing mists became clouds, and the clouds dancing drifts of snow-flakes;—the flakes grew and grew, many changing from white to pale blue, to star-gold, to deep blue;—they became flowers; real flowers grown from flowers of crystal. They hastened by the ravines, the frowning steeps; they hovered on the sunny slopes;—the hearts of the flowers became laughing beings; the flake-petals became fluttering robes, half concealing flashing and twinkling limbs and feet, as the beings neared and neared, and skimming over the bending tussock, the lichened stone, like spinning thistle-down.

In through the wonderful windows, flight after flight from all the flowering valleys, they skipped and floated;—

through the windowed walls that opened as air opens to receive the flying bird, in danced the joyous spirits of the mountain flowers. White and warm as foamy new milk were their bare arms and shoulders, their twinkling knees and nimble feet; many-hued were their sparkling eyes, and long-tressed was their floating hair.

As company after company fluttered about him. Max knew them; — the fragrant celmisias; the many coloured veronicas; the yellow oxalis; the white violets; the yellow forget-me-nots; the euphrasias, and seeing their starry eyes he thought how well they were named eye-brights. Last of all, and most beautiful of all where all were beautiful, came drifts of the tall graceful mountain lilies, yellow-haired, in green-girdled purest white. Now the hall seemed more than ever an opal, so full was it of changing and mingling colours, varied and perfectly blended. Their voices were merry and tuneful as distant bells; but in the ear of Max there throbbed a discord,—as he thought of Marjorie.

"We have come," they cried, "though well we know the days of tempest are not yet at hand," and they fluttered about the queen like butterflies about a bending flower.

"No; the clouds of the south still huddle among the bergs; but a mortal friend wishes to know," said the queen, "what you have seen in the past days."

"We have seen the great cloud-gardens carried on the winds," said the violets; "and we have lifted and lifted our heads to see the glories of which the tussocks have told us. 'We came from those gardens,' they have said, 'gardens whose paths are trodden by the feet of the stars,' and they have sighed, bending to earth as the winds passed over them. We have thought in windy morns and quiet eves that we have caught glimpses of the glories; but telling of them to the tussocks they have sighed—'They were lovelier than that;—lovelier than that.' Yet some day we shall see them."

"Beautiful they must be," said the mountain bells; "for we have seen the singing lark mounting up and up towards them; up and up, and singing ever; yet his home, and his nest, and his love, are low upon earth, at the foot of the sheltering tussock."

"We," said the forget-me-nots, "have seen, morning by morning, the sleepy mists stealing up the valleys as if to rest on the white bosoms of the mountains; but evening by evening they steal back to the valleys, softening them and kissing them into a thousand flowers.

"We have seen the springing deer," said the celmisias, "snuffing the air, and gazing with wide eyes as the shapes

of men moved in the valley below; and away, lightly bounding, over rushing torrents and high into wilder solitudes."

"But of these men," said the queen; "what have you seen of the climbers?"

"What should we note of them?" asked the flowers; "they are neither beautiful nor kindly."

"You see how little they have seen of human hearts," said the queen, as she smiling turned to Max.

"Three there were," said a lily, "that passed by our lake-garden; and the two seemed to wish the third away, so they sent him on before: he whistled as he went, gazing to the summits, here and there away to the right; for those on the left were hidden by the cliffs at whose feet he walked: and the two came slowly, laughing and talking, looking nowhere so much as at each other."

"What like were they?" asked Max, though he feared the answer.

"Beside him she was small; and he could tell you if her eyes were grey or no, for oftener they were fixed upon him than upon us by her path."

"But have they not returned?"

"Not yet," said the lilies.

"Would you wish to see, as well as to hear?" asked the queen, "then behold;—yet tell me; do you think the seeing will increase your happiness, or increase your sorrow?"

"That I cannot say," answered Max; "nor would my wish to see her be less, though I knew my sorrow should be more."

"No brave heart should fear the fate it dares," murmured she; and pointing to a hollow in the intertwining arches above them, "You may see where even now she comes, rosy from the conquest of my most majestic mountain."

Max looked: the hollow pulsed; the clouded lights withdrew like shadows; and far above them he saw the climbers, roped together, slowly descending a steep icy slope; — first the guide, cutting steps with his ice-axe, then Marjorie, and last the laughing stranger;—and ever and again, as she set her foot firmly in the step cut by the guide, Marjorie would look up smiling or laughing at some remark of her companion. Yes; she seemed happy enough;—and when, having reached the foot of the slope, they stood on a wide white snow-field, and the stranger came to her side; and she stood looking up in his face whilst he spoke leaning towards her, Max wished to look no more; and as if in obedience to his wish, the clouded lights stole again into the hollow and faded out the picture.

He still stood, gazing upwards; upwards, where his heart was;—till his head sank, as though his heart too sank with hope failing.

"Well?" said the soft voice near him, "are you happier?"

He shook his head, but did not speak.

"Yet she is happy."

"And may she ever be so."

"And he?"

"I remember he said, 'There is nothing so high that it cannot be conquered; nothing so beautiful that it cannot be won.' He has conquered the most majestic of your mountains."

"And won the most beautiful of maidens?"

"It may be."

"Yet you yourself told him that he had not conquered the mountain though he had stood on its summit, nor won the mountain lily though he had gathered it?"

"I do not begrudge him his standing on the mountain—"

"But you begrudge him his gathering of the flower?"

He did not answer.

"Yet, if you have learned more of the mountains than he has learned, and more of the flower too, — why regret leaving the flower with him when the memory of its spirit is with you?"

"If she had known;—if only she had known."

Dimmer grew the beings around him, dwindling away to flowers, to snow-flakes, to mists: they floated away, away as if into twilight valleys, gloaming before the star-shine, and with them, too, floated his consciousness: the harmony of their voices ebbed away in whispered melodies; there was an undertone of murmuring waters; a tiny tinkling as of trickling water-drops;—the melodies died away; the murmurings;—the light failed; darkness and terrible silence numbed his heart. He recovered consciousness hearing a pitying voice say, "He has been struck by a rock from the mountain side;" and a cheerful voice reply, "That is the folly of wandering about these treacherous places without someone who knows all about them and their tricky ways." His eyes opened to see the guide bending over him, Marjorie looking at the stranger with reproach in her grey eyes, and the stranger looking at her, unabashed and smiling.

3.

"I must speak before she goes," said Max to himself; and the bells on the mountain side nodded in the early morn-

ing wind; "speak before she goes," he repeated; though his heart seemed to answer with a dark question,— "What hope in speaking now?"

Speak?—little opportunity was given him for that:—for after the successful climb, Marjorie must go here, go there, with the indomitable stranger;—no difficulty was insurmountable; no peak too dangerous;—and the last week of her stay at the Hermitage was a week of triumph.

Before the spirit of the stranger, the spirit of Max, too, rose: he would not be dominated, and the stranger had enough to do to win his will. He was fertile in expeditions; and never did Max suggest one but he had a better. Max proved as bold, as successful a climber; he even outdid the other, but only to be laughingly rebuked as foolhardy. The stranger had won the lead, and he was sufficiently strong to be able to keep it. Under this spur, Max proved a finer man than any had thought him; he was congratulated on the awakening of his mountaineering spirit;—"Soon," said they, "you will have won the real love of the mountains; you begin to understand them." Well it was for the stranger that the contest lasted no more than the week:—he was even exultant when the day of departure was at hand.

"We have accomplished wonders for a season," said he; "our record will be a hard one to beat;"—and he laughed as he glanced momentarily towards Max.

Not until the last moment would Max relinquish hope. The visitors were seated in the motor, the stranger at the side of Marjorie; and as the word to start was called, he turned to Max;—"you remember what I told you?" said he; "There is nothing so high that it cannot be conquered; nothing so beautiful that it cannot be won;" and as if by chance, he touched the hand of Marjorie. Her glance, which was turning to Max, turned swiftly instead to the stranger;—but Max thought there was a feeling more intense than reproach in it; and he was sure that her lips trembled as the car carried her from him, away, away,—and with her the light of the quiet, shining mountains.