

# H.S.H.

by Algernon Blackwood

In the mountain Club Hut, to which he had escaped after weeks of gaiety in the capital, Delane, young travelling Englishman, sat alone, and listened to the wind that beat the pines with violence. The fire-light danced over the bare stone floor and raftered ceiling, giving the room an air of movement, and though the solid walls held steady against the wild spring hurricane, the cannonading of the wind seemed to threaten the foundations. For the mountain shook, the forest roared, and the shadows had a way of running everywhere as though the little building trembled. Delane watched and listened. He piled the logs on. From time to time he glanced nervously over his shoulder, restless, half uneasy, as a burst of spray from the branches dashed against the window, or a gust of unusual vehemence shook the door. Over-wearied with his long day's climb among impossible conditions, he now realised, in this mountain refuge, his utter loneliness; for his mind gave birth to that unwelcome symptom of true loneliness that he was not, after all, alone. Continually he heard steps and voices in the storm. Another wanderer, another climber out of season like himself, would presently arrive, and sleep was out of the question until first he heard that knocking on the door. Almost he expected some one.

He went for the tenth time to the little window. He peered forth into the thick darkness of the dropping night, shading his eyes against the streaming pane to screen the firelight in an attempt to see if another climber perhaps a climber in distress were visible. The surroundings were desolate and savage, well named the Devil's Saddle. Black-faced precipices, streaked with melting snow, rose towering to the north, where the heights were hidden in seas of vapour; waterfalls poured into abysses on two sides; a wall of impenetrable forest pressed up from the south; and the dangerous ridge he had climbed all day slid off wickedly into a sky of surging cloud. But no human figure was, of course, distinguishable, for both the lateness of the hour and the elemental fury of the night rendered it most unlikely. He turned away with a start, as the tempest delivered a blow with massive impact against his very face. Then, clearing the remnants of his frugal

supper from the table, he hung his soaking clothes at a new angle before the fire, made sure the door was fastened on the inside, climbed into the bunk where white pillows and thick Austrian blankets looked so inviting, and prepared finally for sleep.

"I must be over-tired," he sighed, after half an hour's weary tossing, and went back to make up the sinking fire. Wood is plentiful in these climbers' huts; he heaped it on. But this time he lit the little oil lamp as well, realising though unwilling to acknowledge it—that it was not over-fatigue that banished sleep, but this unwelcome sense of expecting some one, of being not quite alone. For the feeling persisted and increased. He drew the wooden bench close up to the fire, turned the lamp as high as it would go, and wished unaccountably for the morning. Light was a very pleasant thing; and darkness now, for the first time since childhood, troubled him. It was outside; but it might so easily come in and swamp, obliterate, extinguish. The darkness seemed a positive thing. Already, somehow, it was established in his mind—this sense of enormous, aggressive darkness that veiled an undesirable hint of personality. Some shadow from the peaks or from the forest, immense and threatening, pervaded all his thought. "This can't be entirely nerves," he whispered to himself. "I'm not so tired as all that!" And he made the fire roar. He shivered and drew closer to the blaze. "I'm out of condition; that's part of it," he realised, and remembered with loathing the weeks of luxurious indulgence just behind him.

For Delane had rather wasted his year of educational travel. Straight from Oxford, and well supplied with money, he had first saturated his mind in the latest Continental thought—the science of France, the metaphysics and philosophy of Germany—and had then been caught aside by the gaiety of capitals where the lights are not turned out at midnight by a Sunday School police. He had been surfeited, physically, emotionally, and intellectually, till his mind and body longed hungrily for simple living again and simple teaching—above all, the latter. The Road of Excess leads to the Palace of Wisdom—for certain temperaments (as Blake forgot to add), of which Delane was one. For there was stuff in the youth, and the reaction had set in with violent abruptness. His system rebelled. He cut loose energetically from all soft delights, and craved for severity, pure air, solitude and hardship. Clean and simple conditions he must have without delay, and the tonic of physical battling. It was too early in the year to climb seriously, for the

snow was still dangerous and the weather wild, but he had chosen this most isolated of all the mountain huts in order to make sure of solitude, and had come, without guide or companion, for a week's strenuous life in wild surroundings, and to take stock of himself with a view to full recovery.

And all day long as he climbed the desolate, unsafe ridge, his mind—good, wholesome, natural symptom—had reverted to his childhood days, to the solid worldly wisdom of his church-going father, and to the early teaching (oh, how sweet and refreshing in its literal spirit!) at his mother's knee. Now, as he watched the blazing logs, it came back to him again with redoubled force; the simple, precious, old-world stories of heaven and hell, of a paternal Deity, and of a daring, subtle, personal devil.

The interruption to his thoughts came with startling suddenness, as the roaring night descended against the windows with a thundering violence that shook the walls and sucked the flame half-way up the wide stone chimney. The oil lamp flickered and went out. Darkness invaded the room for a second, and Delane sprang from his bench, thinking the wet snow had loosened far above and was about to sweep the hut into the depths. And he was still standing, trembling and uncertain, in the middle of the room, when a deep and sighing hush followed sharp upon the elemental outburst, and in the hush, like a whisper after thunder, he heard a curious steady sound that, at first, he thought must be a footstep by the door. It was then instantly repeated. But it was not a step. It was some one knocking on the heavy oaken panels—a firm, authoritative sound, as though the new arrival had the right to enter and was already impatient at the delay.

The Englishman recovered himself instantly, realising with keen relief the new arrival at last.

"Another climber like myself, of course," he said, "or perhaps the man who comes to prepare the hut for others. The season has begun." And he went over quickly, without a further qualm, to unbolt the door.

"Forgive!" he exclaimed in German, as he threw it wide, "I was half asleep before the fire. It is a terrible night. Come in to food and shelter, for both are here, and you shall share such supper as I possess."

And a tall, cloaked figure passed him swiftly with a gust of angry wind from the impenetrable blackness of the world beyond. On the threshold, for a second, his outline stood full in the blaze of firelight with the sheet of darkness behind it, stately, erect, commanding, his cloak torn fiercely by the wind, but the face hidden by a low-brimmed hat; and an instant later the

door shut with resounding clamour upon the hurricane, and the two men turned to confront one another in the little room.

Delane then realised two things sharply, both of them fleeting impressions, but acutely vivid: First, that the outside darkness seemed to have entered and established itself between him and the new arrival; and, secondly, that the stranger's face was difficult to focus for clear sight, although the covering hat was now removed. There was a blur upon it somewhere. And this the Englishman ascribed partly to the flickering effect of firelight, and partly to the lightning glare of the man's masterful and terrific eyes, which made his own sight waver in some curious fashion as he gazed upon him. These impressions, however, were but momentary and passing, due doubtless to the condition of his nerves and to the semi-shock of the dramatic, even theatrical entrance. Delane's senses, in this wild setting, were guilty of exaggeration. For now, while helping the man remove his cloak, speaking naturally of shelter, food, and the savage weather, he lost this first distortion and his mind recovered sane proportion. The stranger, after all, though striking, was not of appearance so uncommon as to cause alarm; the light and the low doorway had touched his stature with illusion. He dwindled. And the great eyes, upon calmer subsequent inspection, lost their original fierce lightning. The entering darkness, moreover, was but an effect of the upheaving night behind him as he strode across the threshold. The closed door proved it.

And yet, as Delane continued his quieter examination, there remained, he saw, the startling quality which had caused that first magnifying in his mind. His senses, while reporting accurately, insisted upon this arresting and uncommon touch: there was, about this late wanderer of the night, some evasive, lofty strangeness that set him utterly apart from ordinary men.

The Englishman examined him searchingly, surreptitiously, but with a touch of passionate curiosity he could not in the least account for nor explain. There were contradictions of perplexing character about him. For the first presentment had been of splendid youth, while on the face, though vigorous and gloriously handsome, he now discerned the stamp of tremendous age. It was worn and tired. While radiant with strength and health and power, it wore as well this certain signature of deep exhaustion that great experience rather than physical experience brings. Moreover, he discovered in it, in some way he could not hope to describe, man, woman, and child.

There was a big, sad earnestness about it, yet a touch of humour too; patience, tenderness, and sweetness held the mouth; and behind the high pale forehead intellect sat enthroned and watchful. In it were both love and hatred, longing and despair; an expression of being ever on the defensive, yet hugely mutinous; an air both hunted and beseeching; great knowledge and great woe.

Delane gave up the search, aware that something unalterably splendid stood before him. Solemnity and beauty swept him too. His was never the grotesque assumption that man must be the highest being in the universe, nor that a thing is a miracle merely because it has never happened before. He groped, while explanation and analysis both halted. "A great teacher," thought fluttered through him, "or a mighty rebel! A distinguished personality beyond all question! Who can he be?" There was something regal that put respect upon his imagination instantly. And he remembered the legend of the countryside that Ludwig of Bavaria was said to be about when nights were very wild. He wondered. Into his speech and manner crept unawares an attitude of deference that was almost reverence, and with it whence came this other quality? A searching pity.

"You must be wearied out," he said respectfully, busying himself about the room, "as well as cold and wet. This fire will dry you, sir, and meanwhile I will prepare quickly such food as there is, if you will eat it." For the other carried no knapsack, nor was he clothed for the severity of mountain travel.

"I have already eaten," said the stranger courteously, "and, with my thanks to you, I am neither wet nor tired. The afflictions that I bear are of another kind, though ones that you shall more easily, I am sure, relieve."

He spoke as a man whose words set troops in action, and Delane glanced at him, deeply moved by the surprising phrase, yet hardly marvelling that it should be so. He found no ready answer. But there was evidently question in his look, for the other, continued, and this time with a smile that betrayed sheer winning beauty as of a tender woman:

"I saw the light and came to it. It is unusual at this time."

His voice was resonant, yet not deep. There was a ringing quality about it that the bare room emphasized. It charmed the young Englishman inexplicably. Also, it woke in him a sense of infinite pathos.

"You are a climber, sir, like myself," Delane resumed, lifting his eyes a moment uneasily from the

coffee he brewed over a corner of the fire. "You know this neighbourhood, perhaps? Better, at any rate, than I can know it?" His German halted rather. He chose his words with difficulty. There was uncommon trouble in his mind.

"I know all wild and desolate places," replied the other, in perfect English, but with a wintry mournfulness in his voice and eyes, "for I feel at home in them, and their stern companionship my nature craves as solace. But, unlike yourself, I am no climber."

"The heights have no attraction for you?" asked Delane, as he mingled steaming milk and coffee in the wooden bowl, marvelling what brought him then so high above the valleys. "It is their difficulty and danger that fascinate me always. I find the loneliness of the summits intoxicating in a sense."

And, regardless of refusal, he set the bread and meat before him, the apple and the tiny packet of salt, then turned away to place the coffee pot beside the fire again. But as he did so a singular gesture of the other caught his eyes. Before touching bowl or plate, the stranger took the fruit and brushed his lips with it. He kissed it, then set it on the ground and crushed it into pulp beneath his heel. And, seeing this, the young Englishman knew something dreadfully arrested in his mind, for, as he looked away, pretending the act was unobserved, a thing of ice and darkness moved past him through the room, so that the pot trembled in his hand, rattling sharply against the hearthstone where he stooped. He could only interpret it as an act of madness, and the myth of the sad, drowned monarch wandering through this enchanted region, pressed into him again unsought and urgent. It was a full minute before he had control of his heart and hand again.

The bowl was half emptied, and the man was smiling this time the smile of a child who implores the comfort of enveloping and understanding arms.

"I am a wanderer rather than a climber," he was saying, as though there had been no interval, "for, though the lonely summits suit me well, I now find in them only terror. My feet lose their sureness, and my head its steady balance. I prefer the hidden gorges of these mountains, and the shadows of the covering forests. My days—" his voice drew the loneliness of uttermost space into its piteous accents "—are passed in darkness. I can never climb again."

He spoke this time, indeed, as a man whose nerve was gone for ever. It was pitiable—almost to tears. And Delane, unable to explain the amazing contradictions, felt recklessly, furiously drawn to this trapped

wanderer with the mien of a king yet the air and speech sometimes of a woman and sometimes of an outcast child.

“Ah, then you have known accidents,” Delane replied with outer calmness, as he lit his pipe, trying in vain to keep his hand as steady as his voice. “You have been in one perhaps. The effect, I have been told, is—”

The power and sweetness in that resonant voice took his breath away as he heard it break in upon his own uncertain accents:

“I have fallen,” the stranger replied impressively, as the rain and wind wailed past the building mournfully, “yet a fall that was no part of any accident. For it was no common fall,” the man added with a magnificent gesture of disdain, “while yet it broke my heart in two.” He stooped a little as he uttered the next words with a crying pathos that an outcast woman might have used. “I am,” he said, “engulfed in intolerable loneliness. I can never climb again.”

With a shiver impossible to control, half of terror, half of pity, Delane moved a step nearer to the marvelous stranger. The spirit of Ludwig, exiled and distraught, had gripped his soul with a weakening terror; but now sheer beauty lifted him above all personal shrinking. There seemed some echo of lost divinity, worn, wild yet grandiose, through which this significant language strained towards a personal message for himself.

“In loneliness?” he faltered, sympathy rising in a flood.

“For my Kingdom that is lost to me for ever,” met him in deep, throbbing tones that set the air on fire. “For my imperial ancient heights that jealousy took from me—”

The stranger paused, with an indescribable air of broken dignity and pain.

Outside the tempest paused a moment before the awful elemental crash that followed. A bellowing of many winds descended like artillery upon the world. A burst of smoke rushed from the fireplace about them both, shrouding the stranger momentarily in a flying veil. And Delane stood up, uncomfortable in his very bones. “What can it be?” he asked himself sharply. “Who is this being that he should use such language?” He watched alarm chase pity, aware that the conversation held something beyond experience. But the pity returned in greater and ever greater flood. And love surged through him too. It was significant, he remembered afterwards, that he felt it incumbent upon himself to stand. Curious, too, how the thought

of that mad, drowned monarch haunted memory with such persistence. Some vast emotion that he could not name drove out his subsequent words. The smoke had cleared, and a strange, high stillness held the world. The rain streamed down in torrents, isolating these two somehow from the haunts of men. And the Englishman stared then into a countenance grown mighty with woe and loneliness. There stood darkly in it this incommunicable magnificence of pain that mingled awe with the pity he had felt. The kingly eyes looked clear into his own, completing his subjugation out of time. “I would follow you,” ran his thought upon its knees, “follow you with obedience for ever and ever, even into a last damnation. For you are sublime. You shall come again into your Kingdom, if my own small worship “

Then blackness sponged the reckless thought away. He spoke in its place a more guarded, careful thing:

“I am aware,” he faltered, yet conscious that he bowed, “of standing before a Great One of some world unknown to me. Who he may be I have but the privilege of wondering. He has spoken darkly of a Kingdom that is lost. Yet he is still, I see, a Monarch.” And he lowered his head and shoulders involuntarily.

For an instant, then, as he said it, the eyes before him flashed their original terrific lightnings. The darkness of the common world faded before the entrance of an Outer Darkness. From gulfs of terror at his feet rose shadows out of the night of time, and a passionate anguish as of sudden madness seized his heart and shook it.

He listened breathlessly for the words that followed. It seemed some wind of unutterable despair passed in the breath from those non-human lips:

“I am still a Monarch, yes; but my Kingdom is taken from me, for I have no single subject. Lost in a loneliness that lies out of space and time, I am become a throneless Ruler, and my hopelessness is more than I can bear.” The beseeching pathos of the voice tore him in two. The Deity himself, it seemed, stood there accused of jealousy, of sin and cruelty. The stranger rose. The power about him brought the picture of a planet, throned in mid-heaven and poised beyond assault. “Not otherwise,” boomed the startling words as though an avalanche found syllables, “could I now show myself to you.”

Delane was trembling horribly. He felt the next words slip off his tongue unconsciously. The shattering truth had dawned upon his soul at last.

"Then the light you saw, and came to?" he whispered.

"Was the light in your heart that guided me," came the answer, sweet, beguiling as the music in a woman's tones, "the light of your instant, brief desire that held love in it." He made an opening movement with his arms as he continued, smiling like stars in summer. "For you summoned me; summoned me by your dear and precious belief: how dear, how precious, none can know but I who stand before you."

His figure drew up with an imperial air of proud dominion. His feet were set among the constellations. The opening movement of his arms continued slowly. And the music in his tones seemed merged in distant thunder.

"For your single, brief belief," he smiled with the grandeur of a condescending Emperor, "shall give my vanished Kingdom back to me."

And with an air of native majesty he held his hand out to be kissed.

The black hurricane of night, the terror of frozen peaks, the yawning horror of the great abyss outside all three crowded into the Englishman's mind with a slashing impact that blocked delivery of any word or action. It was not that he refused, it was not that he withdrew, but that Life stood paralysed and rigid. The flow stopped dead for the first time since he had left his mother's womb. The God in him was turned to stone and rendered ineffective. For an appalling instant God was not.

He realised the stupendous moment. Before him, drinking his little soul out merely by his Presence, stood one whose habit of mind, not alone his external accidents, was imperial with black prerogative before the first man drew the breath of life. August procedure was native to his inner process of existence. The stars and confines of the universe owned his sway before he fell, to trifle away the dreary little centuries by haunting the minds of feeble men and women, by hiding himself in nursery cupboards, and by grinning with stained gargoyles from the roofs of city churches. . . .

And the lad's life stammered, flickered, threatened to go out before the enveloping terror of the revelation.

"I called to you . . . but called to you in play," thought whispered somewhere deep below the level of any speech, yet not so low that the audacious sound of it did not crash above the elements outside; "for . . . till now . . . you have been to me but a . . . coated boggy . . . that my brain disowned with laughter . . . and my

heart thought picturesque. If you are here . . . *alive!* May God forgive me for my . . ."

It seemed as though tears—the tears of love and profound commiseration drowned the very seed of thought itself.

A sound stopped him that was like a collapse in heaven. Some crashing, as of a ruined world, passed splintering through his little timid heart. He did not yield, but he understood—with an understanding which seemed the delicate first sign of yielding—the seductiveness of evil, the sweet delight of surrendering the Will with utter recklessness to those swelling forces which disintegrate the heroic soul in man. He remembered. It was true. In the reaction from excess he had definitely called upon his childhood's teaching with a passing moment of genuine belief. And now that yearning of a fraction of a second bore its awful fruit. The luscious Capitals where he had rioted passed in a coloured stream before his eyes; the Wine, the Woman, and the Song stood there before him, clothed in that Power which lies insinuatingly disguised behind their little passing show of innocence. Their glamour donned this domino of regal and virile grandeur. He felt entangled beyond recovery. The idea of God seemed sterile and without reality. The one real thing, the one desirable thing, the one possible, strong and beautiful thing was to bend his head and kiss those imperial fingers. He moved noiselessly towards the Hand. He raised his own to take it and lift it towards his mouth—

When there rose in his mind with startling vividness a small, soft picture of a child's nursery, a picture of a little boy, kneeling in scanty night-gown with pink upturned soles, and asking ridiculous, audacious things of a shining Figure seated on a summer cloud above the kitchen-garden walnut tree.

The tiny symbol flashed and went its way, yet not before it had lit the entire world with glory. For there came an absolutely routing power with it. In that half-forgotten instant's craving for the simple teaching of his childhood days, Belief had conjured with two immense traditions. This was the second of them. The appearance of the one had inevitably produced the passage of its opposite. . . .

And the Hand that floated in the air before him to be kissed sank slowly down below the possible level of his lips. He shrank away. Though laughter tempted something in his brain, there still clung about his heart the first aching, pitying terror. But size retreated, dwindling somehow as it went. The wind and rain obliterated every other sound; yet in that

bare, unfurnished room of a climber's mountain hut, there was a silence, above the roar, that drank in everything and broke, the back of speech. In opposition to this masquerading splendour Delane had set up a personal, paternal Deity.

"I thought of you, perhaps," cried the voice of self-defence, "but I did not call to you with real belief. And, by the name of God, I did not summon you. For your sweetness, as your power, sickens me; and your hand is black with the curses of all the mothers in the world, whose prayers and tears—"

He stopped dead, overwhelmed by the cruelty of his reckless utterance.

And the Other moved towards him slowly. It was like the summit of some peaked and terrible height that moved. He spoke. He changed appallingly.

"But I claim," he roared, "your heart. I claim you by that instant of belief you felt. For by that alone you shall restore to me my vanished Kingdom. You shall worship me."

In the countenance was a sudden awful power; but behind the stupefying roar there was weakness in the voice as of an imploring and beseeching child. Again, deep love and searching pity seared the Englishman's heart as he replied in the gentlest accents he could find to master:

"And I claim *you*" he said, "by my understanding sympathy, and by my sorrow for your God-forsaken loneliness, and by my love. For no Kingdom built on hate can stand against the love you would deny—"

Words failed him then, as he saw the majesty fade slowly from the face, grown small and shadowy. One last expression of desperate energy in the eyes struck lightnings from the smoky air, as with an abandoned movement of the entire figure, he drew back, it seemed, towards the door behind him.

Delane moved slowly after him, opening his arms. Tenderness and big compassion flung wide the gates of love within him. He found strange language, too, although actual; spoken words did not produce them further than his entrails where they had their birth:

"Toys in the world are plentiful, Sire, and you may have them for your masterpiece of play. But you must seek them where they still survive; in the churches, and in isolated lands where thought lies unawakened. For they are the children's blocks of make-believe whose palaces, like your once tremendous kingdom, have no true existence for the thinking mind."

And he stretched his hands towards him with the gesture of one who sought to help and save, then paused as he realised that his arms enclosed sheer

blackness, with the emptiness of wind and driving rain.

For the door of the hut stood open, and Delane balanced on the threshold, facing the sheet of night above the abyss. He heard the waterfalls in the valley far below. The forest flapped and tossed its myriad branches. Cold draughts swept down from spectral fields of melting snow above; and the blackness turned momentarily into the semblance of towers and bastions of thick beaten gloom. Above one soaring turret, then, a space of sky appeared, swept naked by a violent, lost wind an opening of purple into limitless distance. For one second, amid the vapours, it was visible, empty and untenanted. The next, there sailed across its small diameter a falling Star. With an air of slow and endless leisure, yet at the same time with terrific speed, it dived behind the ragged curtain of the clouds, and the space closed up again. Blackness returned upon the heavens.

And through this blackness, plunging into that abyss of woe whence he had momentarily risen, the figure of the marvellous stranger melted utterly away. Delane, for a fleeting second, was aware of the earnestness in the sad, imploring countenance; of its sweetness and its power so strangely mingled; of its mysterious grandeur; and of its pathetic childishness. But, already, it was sunk into interminable distance. A star that would be baleful, yet was merely glorious, passed on its endless wandering among the teeming systems of the universe. Behind the fixed and steady stars, secure in their appointed places, it set. It vanished into the pit of unknown emptiness. It was gone.

"God help you!" sighed across the sea of wailing branches, echoing down the dark abyss below. "God give you rest at last!"

For he saw a princely, nay, an imperial Being, homeless for ever, and for ever wandering, hunted as by keen remorseless winds about a universe that held no corner for his feet, his majesty unworshipped, his reign a mockery, his Court unfurnished, and his courtiers mere shadows of deep space. . . .

And a thin, grey dawn, stealing up behind clearing summits in the east, crept then against the windows of the mountain hut. It brought with it a treacherous, sharp air that made the sleeper draw another blanket near to shelter him from the sudden cold. For the fire had died out, and an icy draught sucked steadily beneath the doorway.

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