

***BERNARD EDWARD  
JOSEPH CAPES***



***AT A WINTER'S  
FIRE***

**Bernard Edward Joseph Capes**

# **At a Winter's Fire**

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**THE MOON STRICKEN**

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It so fell that one dark evening in the month of June I was belated in the Bernese Oberland. Dusk overtook me toiling along the great Chamounix Road, and in the heart of a most desolate gorge, whose towering snow-flung walls seemed—as the day sucked inwards to a point secret as a leech's mouth—to close about me like a monstrous amphitheatre of ghosts. The rutted road, dipping and climbing toilfully against the shouldering of great tumbled boulders, or winning for itself but narrow foothold over slippery ridges, was thawed clear of snow; but the cold soft peril yet lay upon its flanks thick enough for a wintry plunge of ten feet, or may be fifty where the edge of the causeway fell over to the lower furrows of the ravine. It was a matter of policy to go with caution, and a thing of some moment to hear the thud and splintering of little distant icefalls about one in the darkness. Now and again a cold arrow of wind would sing down from the frosty peaks above or jerk with a squiggle of laughter among the fallen slabs in the valley. And these were the only voices to prick me on through a dreariness lonely as death.

I knew the road, but not its night terrors. Passing along it some days before in the glory of sunshine, broad paddocks and islands of green had comforted the shattered white ruin of the place, and I had traversed it merely as a magnificent episode in the indifferent history of my life. Now, as it seemed, I became one with it—an awful waif of solemnity, a thing apart from mankind and its warm intercourse and ruddy inn doors, a spectral anomaly, whose austere epitaph was once writ upon the snow coating some fallen slab of those glimmering about me. I thought the whole gorge

smelt of tombs, like the vault of a cathedral. I thought, in the incomprehensible low moaning sound that ever and again seemed to eddy about me when the wind had swooped and passed, that I recognised the forlorn voices of brother spirits long since dead and forgotten of the world.

Suddenly I felt the sweat cold under the knapsack that swung upon my back; stopped, faced about and became human again. Ridge over ridge to my right the mountain summits fell away against a fathomless sky; and topping the furthestmost was a little paring of silver light, the coronet of the rising moon. But the glory of the full orb was in the retrospect; for, closing the savage vista of the ravine, stood up far away a cluster of jagged pinnacles—opal, translucent, lustrous as the peaks of icebergs that are the frozen music of the sea.

It was the toothed summit of the Aiguille Verte, now prosaically bathed in the light of the full moon; but to me, looking from that grim and passionless hollow, it stood for the white hand of God lifted in menace to the evil spirits of the glen.

I drank my fill of the good sight, and then turned me to my tramp again with a freshness in my throat as though it had gulped a glass of champagne. Presently I knew myself descending, leaving, as I felt rather than saw, the stark horror of the gorge and its glimmering snow patches above me. Puffs of a warmer air purred past my face with little friendly sighs of welcome, and the hum of a far-off torrent struck like a wedge into the indurated fibre of the night. As I dropped, however, the mountain heads grew up against the moon, and withheld the comfort of her radiance; and it was

not until the whimper of the torrent had quickened about me to a plunging roar, and my foot was on the striding bridge that took its waters at a step, that her light broke through a topmost cleft in the hills, and made glory of the leaping thunder that crashed beneath my feet.

Thereafter all was peace. The road led downwards into a broadening valley, where the smell of flowers came about me, and the mountain walls withdrew and were no longer overwhelming. The slope eased off, dipping and rising no more than a ground swell; and by-and-by I was on a level track that ran straight as a stretched ribbon and was reasonable to my tired feet.

Now the first dusky châteaux of the hamlet of Bel-Oiseau straggled towards me, and it was music in my ears to hear the cattle blow and rattle in their stalls under the sleeping lofts as I passed outside in the moonlight. Five minutes more, and the great zinc onion on the spire of the church glistened towards me, and I was in the heart of the silent village.

From the deep green shadow cast by the graveyard wall, heavily buttressed against avalanches, a form wriggled out into the moonlight and fell with a dusty thud at my feet, mowing and chopping at the air with its aimless claws. I started back with a sudden jerk of my pulses. The thing was horrible by reason of its inarticulate voice, which issued from the shapeless folds of its writhings like the wet gutturizing of a back-broken horse. Instinct with repulsion, I stood a moment dismayed, when light flashed from an open doorway a dozen yards further down the street, and a woman ran across to the prostrate form.

"Up, graceless one!" she cried; "and carry thy seven devils within doors!"

The figure gathered itself together at her voice, and stood in an angle of the buttresses quaking and shielding its eyes with two gaunt arms.

"Can I not exchange a word with Mère Pettit," scolded the woman, "but thou must sneak from behind my back on thy crazed moon-hunting?"

"Pity, pity," moaned the figure; and then the woman noticed me, and dropped a curtsy.

"Pardon," she said; "but he has been affronting Monsieur with his antics?"

"He is stricken, Madame?"

"Ah, yes, Monsieur. Holy Mother, but how stricken!"

"It is sad."

"Monsieur knows not how sad. It is so always, but most a great deal when the moon is full. He was a good lad once."

Monsieur puts his hand in his pocket. Madame hears the clink of coin and touches the enclosed fingers with her own delicately. Monsieur withdraws his hand empty.

"Pardon, Madame."

"Monsieur has the courage of a gentleman. Come, Camille, little fool! a sweet good-night to Monsieur."

"Stay, Madame. I have walked far and am weary. Is there an hotel in Bel-Oiseau?"

"Monsieur is jesting. We are but a hundred of poor châteaux."

"An auberge, then—a cabaret—anything?"

"*Les Trois Chèvres*. It is not for such as you."

"Is it, then, that I must toil onwards to Châtelard?"

"Monsieur does not know? The *Hôtel Royal* was burned to the walls six months since."

"It follows that I must lie in the fields."

Madame hesitates, ponders, and makes up her mind.

"I keep Monsieur talking, and the night wind is sharp from the snow. It is ill for a heated skin, and one should be indoors. I have a bedroom that is at Monsieur's disposition, if Monsieur will condescend?"

Monsieur will condescend. Monsieur would condescend to a loft and a truss of straw, in default of the neat little chilly chamber that is allotted him, so sick are his very limbs with long tramping, and so uninviting figures the further stretch in the moonlight to Châtelard, with its burnt-out carcass of an hotel.

This is how I came to quarter myself on Madame Barbière and her idiot son, and how I ultimately learned from the lips of the latter the strange story of his own immediate fall from reason and the dear light of intellect.

\* \* \* \* \*

By day Camille Barbière proved to be a young man, some five and twenty years of age, of a handsome and impressive exterior. His dark hair lay close about his well-shaped head; his features were regular and cut bold as an Etruscan cameo; his limbs were elastic and moulded into the supple finish of one whose life has not been set upon level roads. At a speculative distance he appeared a straight specimen of a Burgundian youth—sinewy, clean-formed, and graceful, though slender to gauntness; and it was only on nearer contact that one marvelled to see the soul die out of him, as

a face set in the shadow of leafage resolves itself into some accident of twisted branches as one approaches the billowing tree that presented it.

The soul of Camille, the idiot, had warped long after its earthly tabernacle had grown firm and fair to look upon. Cause and effect were not one from birth in him; and the result was a most wistful expression, as though the lost intellect were for ever struggling and failing to recall its ancient mastery. Mostly he was a gentle young man, noteworthy for nothing but the uncomplaining patience with which he daily observed the monotonous routine of simple duties that were now all-sufficient for the poor life that had "crept so long on a broken wing." He milked the big, red, barrel-bodied cow, and churned industriously for butter; he kept the little vegetable garden in order and nursed the Savoy into fatness like plumping babies; he drove the goats to pasture on the mountain slopes, and all day sat among the rhododendrons, the forgotten soul behind his eyes conning the dead language of fate, as a foreigner vainly interrogates the abstruse complexity of an idiom.

By-and-by I made it an irregular habit to accompany him on these shepherdings; to join him in his simple midday meal of sour brown bread and goat-milk cheese; to talk with him desultorily, and study him the while, inasmuch as he awakened an interest in me that was full of speculation. For his was not an imbecility either hereditary or constitutional. From the first there had appeared to me something abnormal in it—a suspension of intelligence only, a frost-bite in the brain that presently some April breath of memory might thaw out. This was not merely conjectural, of course. I

had the story of his mental collapse from his mother in the early days of my sojourn in Bel-Oiseau; for it came to pass that a fitful caprice induced me to prolong my stay in the swart little village far into the gracious Swiss summer.

The "story" I have called it; but it was none. He was out on the hills one moonlight night, and came home in the early morning mad. That was all.

This had happened some eight years before, when he was a lad of seventeen—a strong, beautiful lad, his mother told me; and with a dreamy "poet's corner" in his brain, she added, but in her own better way of putting it. She had no shame that her shepherd should be an Endymion. In Switzerland they still look upon Nature as a respectable pursuit for a young man.

Well, they had thought him possessed of a devil; and his father had at first sought to exorcise it with a chamois-hide thong, as Munchausen flogged the black fox out of his skin. But the counter-irritant failed of its purpose. The devil clung deep, and rent poor Camille with periodic convulsions of insanity.

It was noted that his derangement waxed and waned with the monthly moon; that it assumed a virulent character with the passing of the second quarter, and culminated, as the orb reached its fulness, in a species of delirium, during which it was necessary to carefully watch him; that it diminished with the lessening crescent until it fell away into a quiet abeyance of faculties that was but a step apart from the normal intelligence of his kind. At his worst he was a stricken madman acutely sensitive to impressions; at his

best an inoffensive peasant who said nothing foolish and nothing wise.

When he was twenty, his father died, and Camille and his mother had to make out existence in company.

Now, the veil, in my first knowledge of him, was never rent; yet occasionally it seemed to me to gape in a manner that let a little momentary finger of light through, in the flashing of which a soul kindled and shut in his eyes, like a hard-dying spark in ashes. I wished to know what gave life to the spark, and I set to pondering the problem.

"He was not always thus?" I would say to Madame Barbière.

"But no, Monsieur, truly. This place—bah! we are here imbeciles all to the great world, without doubt; but Camille!—*he* was by nature of those who make the history of cities—a rose in the wilderness. Monsieur smiles?"

"By no means. A scholar, Madame?"

"A scholar of nature, Monsieur; a dreamer of dreams such as they become who walk much with the spirits on the lonely mountains."

"Torrents, and avalanches, and the good material forces of nature, Madame means."

"Ah! Monsieur may talk, but he knows. He has heard the *föhn* sweep down from the hills and spin the great stones off the house-roofs. And one may look and see nothing, yet the stones go. It is the wind that runs before the avalanche that snaps the pine trees; and the wind is the spirit that calls down the great snow-slips."

"But how may Madame who sees nothing; know then a spirit to be abroad?"

"My faith; one may know one's foot is on the wild mint without shifting one's sole to look."

"Madame will pardon me. No doubt also one may know a spirit by the smell of sulphur?"

"Monsieur is a sceptic. It comes with the knowledge of cities. There are even such in little Bel-Oiseau, since the evil time when they took to engrossing the contracts of good citizens on the skins of the poor jew-beards that give us flesh and milk. It is horrible as the Tannery of Meudon. In my young days, Monsieur, such agreements were inscribed upon wood."

"Quite so, Madame, and entirely to the point. Also one may see from whom Camille inherited his wandering propensities. But for his fall—it was always unaccountable?"

"Monsieur, as one trips on the edge of a crevasse and disappears. His soul dropped into the frozen cleft that one cannot fathom."

"Madame will forgive my curiosity."

"But surely. There was no dark secret in my Camille's life. If the little head held pictures beyond the ken of us simple women, the angels painted them of a certainty. Moreover, it is that I willingly recount this grief to the wise friend that may know a solution."

"At least the little-wise can seek for one."

"Ah, if Monsieur would only find the remedy!"

"It is in the hands of fate."

Madame crossed herself.

"Of the *Bon Dieu*, Monsieur."

At another time Madame Barbière said:—

"It was in such a parched summer as this threatens to be that my Camille came home in the mists of the morning possessed. He was often out on the sweet hills all night—that was nothing. It had been a full moon, and the whiteness of it was on his face like leprosy, but his hands were hot with fever. Ah, the dreadful summer! The milk turned sour in the cows' udders and the tufts of the stone pines on the mountains fell into ashes like Dead Sea fruit. The springs were dried, and the great cascade of Buet fell to half its volume."

"This cascade; I have never seen it. Is it in the neighbourhood?"

"Of a surety. Monsieur must have passed the rocky ravine that vomits the torrent, on his way hither."

"I remember. I will explore it. Camille shall be my guide."

"Never."

"And why?"

Madame shrugged her plump shoulders.

"Who may say? The ways of the afflicted are not our ways. Only I know that Camille will never drive his flock to pasture near the lip of that dark valley."

"That is strange. Can the place have associations for him connected with his malady?"

"It is possible. Only the good God knows."

But I was to know later on, with a little reeling of the reason also.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Camille, I want to see the Cascade de Buet."

The hunted eyes of the stricken looked into mine with a piercing glance of fear.

"Monsieur must not," he said, in a low voice.

"And why not?"

"The waters are bad—bad—haunted!"

"I fear no ghosts. Wilt thou show me the way, Camille?"

"I!" The idiot fell upon the grass with a sort of gobbling cry. I thought it the prelude to a fit of some sort, and was stepping towards him, when he rose to his feet, waved me off and hurried away down the slope homewards.

Here was food for reflection, which I mumbled in secret.

A day or two afterwards I joined Camille at midday on the heights where he was pasturing his flocks. He had shifted his ground a little distance westwards, and I could not find him at once. At last I spied him, his back to a rock, his hand dabbled for coolness in a little runnel that trickled at his side. He looked up and greeted me with a smile. He had conceived an affection for me, this poor lost soul.

"It will go soon," he said, referring to the miniature streamlet. "It is safe in the woods; but to-morrow or next day the sun will lap it up ere it can reach the skirt of the shadow above there. A farewell kiss to you, little stream!"

He bent and sipped a mouthful of the clear water. He was in a more reasonable state than he had shown for long, though it was now close on the moon's final quarter, a period that should have marked a more general tenor of placidity in him. The summer solstice, was, however, at hand, and the weather sultry to a degree—as it had been, I did not fail to remember, the year of his seizure.

"Camille," I said, "why to-day hast thou shifted thy ground a little in the direction of the Buet ravine?"

He sat up at once, with a curious, eager look in his face.

"Monsieur has asked it," he said. "It was to impel Monsieur to ask it that I moved. Does Monsieur seek a guide?"

"Wilt thou lead me, Camille?"

"Monsieur, last night I dreamed and one came to me. Was it my father? I know not, I know not. But he put my forehead to his breast, and the evil left it, and I remembered without terror. 'Reveal the secret to the stranger,' he said; 'that he may share thy burden and comfort thee; for he is strong where thou art weak, and the vision shall not scare him.' Monsieur, wilt thou come?"

He leaped to his feet, and I to mine.

"Lead on, Camille. I follow."

He called to the leader of his flock: "Petitjean! stray not, my little one. I shall be back sooner than the daisies close." Then he turned to me again. I noticed a pallid, desperate look in his face, as though he were strung to great effort; but it was the face of a mindless one still.

"Do you not fear?" he said, in a whisper; and the apple in his throat seemed all choking core.

"I fear nothing," I answered with a smile; yet the still sombreness of the woods found a little tremor in my breast.

"It is good," he answered, regarding me. "The angel spoke truth. Follow, Monsieur."

He went off through the trees of a sudden, and I had much ado to keep pace with him. He ran as one urged on by a sure sense of doom, looking neither to right nor left. His mountain instincts had remained with him when memory itself had closed around like a fog, leaving him face to face

and isolated with his one unconfessed point of terror. Swiftly we made our way, ever slightly climbing, along the rugged hillside, and soon broke into country very wild and dismal. The pastoral character of the scene lessened and altogether disappeared. The trees grew matted and grotesquely gnarled, huddling together in menacing battalions—save where some plunging rock had burst like a shell, forcing a clearing and strewing the black moss with a jagged wreck of splinters. Here no flowers crept for warmth, no sentinel marmot turned his little scut with a whistle of alarm to vanish like a red shadow. All was melancholy and silence and the massed defiance of ever-impending ruin. Storm, and avalanche, and the bitter snap of frost had wrought their havoc year by year, till an uncrippled branch was a rare distinction. The very saplings, of stunted growth, bore the air of thieves reared in a rookery of crime.

We strode with difficulty in an inhuman twilight through this great dark quickset of Nature, and had paused a moment where the thronging trunks thinned somewhat, when a little mouthing moan came towards us on the crest of a ripple of wind. My companion stopped on the instant, and clutched my arm, his face twisting with panic.

"The Cascade, Monsieur!" he shook out in a terrified whisper.

"Courage, my friend! It is that we come to seek."

"Ah! My God, yes—it is that! I dare not—I dare not!"

He drew back livid with fear, but I urged him on.

"Remember the dream, Camille!" I cried.

"Yes, yes—it was good. Help me, Monsieur, and I will try—yes, I will try!"

I drew his arm within mine, and together we stumbled on. The undergrowth grew denser and more fantastic; the murmur filled out, increased and resolved itself into a sound of falling water that ever took shape, and volume, and depth, till its crash shook the ground at our feet. Then in a moment a white blaze of sky came at us through the trunks, and we burst through the fringe of the wood to find ourselves facing the opposite side of a long cleft in the mountain and the blade's edge of a roaring cataract.

It shot out over the lip of the fall, twenty feet above us, in a curve like a scimitar, passed in one sheet the spot where we stood, and dived into a sunless pool thirty feet below with a thunderous boom. What it may have been in full phases of the stream, I know not; yet even now it was sufficiently magnificent to give pause to a dying soul eager to shake off the restless horror of the world. The flat of its broad blade divided the lofty black walls of a deep and savage ravine, on whose jagged shelves some starved clumps of rhododendron shook in the wind of the torrent. Far down the narrow gully we could see the passion of water tossing, champed white with the ravening of its jaws, until it took a bend of the cliffs at a leap and rushed from sight.

We stood upon a little platform of coarse grass and bramble, whose fringe dipped and nodded fitfully as the sprinkle caught it. Beyond, the sliding sheet of water looked like a great strap of steel, reeled ceaselessly off a whirling drum pivoted between the hills. The midday sun shot like a piston down the shaft of the valley, painting purple spears and angles behind its abutting rocks, and hitting full upon

the upper curve of the fall; but half-way down the cataract slipped into shadow.

My brain sickened with the endless gliding and turmoil of descent, and I turned aside to speak to my companion. He was kneeling upon the grass, his eyes fixed and staring, his white lips mumbling some crippled memory of a prayer. He started and cowered down as I touched him on the shoulder.

"I cannot go, Monsieur; I shall die!"

"What next, Camille? I will go alone,"

"My God, Monsieur! the cave under the fall! It is there the horror is."

He pointed to a little gap in the fringing bushes with shaking finger. I stole gingerly in the direction he indicated. With every step I took the awful fascination of the descending water increased upon me. It seemed hideous and abnormal to stand mid-way against a perpendicularly-rushing torrent. Above or below the effect would have been different; but here, to look up was to feel one's feet dragging towards the unseen—to look down and pass from vision of the lip of the fall was to become the waif of a force that was unaccountable.

I had a battle with my nerves, and triumphed. As I approached the opening in the brambles I became conscious of a certain relief. At a little distance the cataract had seemed to actually wash in its descent the edge of the platform. Now I found it to be further away than I had imagined, the ground dropping in a sharp slope to a sort of rocky buttress which lay obliquely on the slant of the ravine, and was the true margin of the torrent. Before I essayed the descent, I glanced back at my companion. He was kneeling

where I had left him, his hands pressed to his face, his features hidden; but looking back once again, when I had with infinite caution accomplished the downward climb, I saw that he had crept to the edge of the slope, and was watching me with wide, terrified eyes. I waved my hand to him and turned to the wonderful vision of water that now passed almost within reach of my arm. I stood near the point where the whole glassy breadth glided at once from sunlight into shadow. It fell silently, without a break, for only its feet far below trod the thunder.

Now, as I peered about, I noticed a little cleft in the rocky margin, a minute's climb above me. I was attracted to this by an appearance of smoke or steam that incessantly emerged from it, as though some witch's caldron were simmering alongside the fall. Spray it might be, or the condensing of water splashed on the granite; but of this I might not be sure. Therefore I determined to investigate, and straightway began climbing the rocks—with my heart in my mouth, it must be confessed, for the foothold was undesirable and the way perilous. And all the time I was conscious that the white face of Camille watched me from above. As I reached the cleft I fancied I heard a queer sort of gasping sob issue from his lips, but to this I could give no heed in the sudden wonder that broke upon me. For, lo! it appeared that the cleft led straight to a narrow platform or ledge of rock right underneath the fall itself, but extending how far I could not see, by reason of the steam that filled the passage, and for which I was unable to account. Footing it carefully and groping my way, I set step in the little water-curtained chamber and advanced a pace or two. Suddenly,

light grew about me, and a beautiful rose of fire appeared on the wall of the passage in the midst of what seemed a vitrified scoop in the rock.

Marvelling, I put out my hand to touch it, and fell back on the narrow floor with a scream of anguish. An inch farther, and these lines had not been written. As it was, the fall caught me by the fingers with the suck of a cat-fish, and it was only a gigantic wrench that saved me from slipping off the ledge. The jerk brought my head against the rock with a stunning blow, and for some moments I lay dizzy and confused, daring hardly to breathe, and conscious only of a burning and blistering agony in my right hand.

At length I summoned courage to gather my limbs together and crawl out the way I had entered. The distance was but a few paces, yet to traverse these seemed an interminable nightmare of swaying and stumbling. I know only one other occasion upon which the liberal atmosphere of the open earth seemed sweeter to my senses when I reached it than it did on this.

I tumbled somehow through the cleft, and sat down, shaking, upon the grass of the slope beyond; but, happening to throw myself backwards in the reeling faintness induced by my fright and the pain of my head, my eyes encountered a sight that woke me at once to full activity.

Balanced upon the very verge of the slope, his face and neck craned forward, his jaw dropped, a sick, tranced look upon his features, stood Camille. I saw him topple, and shouted to him; but before my voice was well out, he swayed, collapsed, and came down with a running thud that