

THE STRAND MAGAZINE.

Contents for June, 1922.

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Frontispiece: "Get across! Quick! Quick! All of you. I'll hold this devil off!" He had seized a stout stick and faced the madman, daring him to spring across.

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THE GIANT FIR-CONES

by

HAROLD STEEVENS

ILLUSTRATED BY
UGO MATANIA

WHEN, years ago, Richard Beltony made his will as he did, he certainly had no idea that he was within an ace of signing his little blue-eyed daughter's death-warrant. Had he known it, he would without a doubt have restrained his desire to stretch out his hand into the future and, in defiance of his own mortality, to ensure the eminence of his name and strain among the generations beyond his ken. For his wife and daughter were his passion, while money was merely his hobby, and the Beltony stock his whim. But of that more anon.

The trail of fate was irrevocably laid when I happened to meet that blue-eyed maid, now grown to entrancing womanhood, in a decent French hotel overlooking the Mediterranean Sea in the neighbourhood of Cap Martin. This was in May, 19—; you may perhaps recall the year when I mention that the summer was particularly hot and dry, and that the forest fires which are inevitable in such circumstances were numerous and devastating on the southern slopes of the

Alpes Maritimes and all along that sun-blessed seaboard.

At this late stage of the season the various hotels of the "palace" variety were already closed or closing. The northward stampede of *hiernants* had long since run its congested course, shops *de luxe* were putting up their shutters for the summer, and the Coast was settling down to somnolence and languorous enjoyment of the season's profits.

There were not more than a handful of us left at the *Hôtel du Sapin d'Or*, and, as people do in such circumstances, we dispensed with starch in both senses of the word and made friends all round in self-defence. Miss Beltony and I were the only English people in the "mess" and naturally gravitated towards one another. She was slightly but graciously built; her expression rather than her features commended her to notice; her voice, however, was extraordinarily alluring, and behind the sadness of her eyes vivacity and courage were enthroned.

Her mourning garb imposed restraint upon our conversation, and, flirtation being clearly out of bounds, we instinctively felt free to talk more confidentially about other things. I learned that she had lately lost her father and mother within a very short period of each other; her mother had really died of grief. She herself had been passionately devoted to both parents; they must have been an uncommonly close-knit trio.

So, after a peculiarly sheltered and happy, if rather solitary, girlhood, she had suddenly found herself alone in the world, and a desire to fly from the scene of her past happiness had seized her. Hence her presence here. She was vague about her relatives, and hardly seemed to know whether she had any or not.

Gladly would I have piloted her about the neighbourhood, but in the circumstances I did not care to press my company upon her. I usually got away to the hills in the morning and stayed there, tramping, climbing, and reading till late in the afternoon. She, poor girl, still lacked her natural energy, and seldom went farther than the ancient olive-wood, where the paths were still purple-stained with the fallen fruit of the veterans and their progeny—for an olive-wood need never die. There, one day, I happened to find her.

It was the first time I had ever seen her out of doors. She was dressed in white, with a sash of black ribbon round her slender waist, and a beam of sunshine, falling on her bare

head through an opening in the branches, filled her hair with golden lights. Sitting there in the crook of a low branch, with her back against the hoary trunk and her feet dangling, she looked like the very spirit of the wood.

She glanced up when she heard my footsteps coming towards her, then flushed slightly (I was glad of that sign of returning

life), but my matter-of-fact greeting quickly put her at her ease.

"You're looking better, Miss Beltony," I said.

"Thank you," she answered, with a little smile. "It is difficult to feel sad for ever in such a climate."

"Don't try," I said. "And in particular there's something very cheerful about this wood. Look at all

these jolly little chaps springing up round the old parents. Why, there's a regular ring of them over there, and a blank space in the middle where the ancestor used to stand. It is the law of life."

It was rather a rough thing to say to her, but she took no offence. She pondered a



Sitting in the crook of a low branch, she looked like the very spirit of the wood.

moment, then gave herself a mental shake and said, almost cheerfully:—

"I've found my long-lost cousin, Mr. Canning."

"Oh!" said I. "I did not know you had one. Is it a man or a woman?"

"A man," she said. "Look!" And she handed me a letter.

It was written in rather a foreign hand, but the English of it was good enough:—

"Dear Cousin Esterdine (it ran), I have only just heard that you are staying on this coast, and I was not aware until to-day of the great loss you have recently suffered. I hasten to offer you all my sympathy.

"I should like to know you; may I call one day? You know, I expect, that my poor father left England many years ago, when he was quite a young man, and drifted out of touch with his brother, though I have never heard that there was any disagreement between them, nor any ground for it. In any case, there need be none between us, need there?"

"Your affectionate cousin,

"CHARLES BELTONY."

"I am so glad!" she exclaimed, when I had come to the end of the letter. "It's so lonely without a family, you know, and I'm sure he's a nice man. Don't you think so?"

Her eyes were sparkling with new-found delight.

"It looks like it," I answered. "It's quite a proper letter."

We walked back together by the rough sea path above the rocks, where the scent of myrtle and rosemary blends subtly with the smell of the sea and the pines. It was a bitter-sweet hour for me, because, while the touch of her hand as I helped her over the bad places was ecstasy, I was experiencing for the first time in my life the tyrant power of jealousy. Still, I resolutely told myself, if he turns out to be a good fellow, so much the better. But down in the depths of me I wished that he had never been born.

She wrote to him that night, inviting him to lunch or dinner on the next day but two—a margin of time is always advisable where Riviera posts are concerned. He came to lunch, so I heard, and he stayed to dine. I kept to my own table, but studied him pretty closely from a distance.

He was a well-built, handsome fellow enough, and well-groomed—rather over-groomed, I thought. His hands were freshly manicured, and I caught a whiff of scent from their direction which I knew was not Esterdine's. Moreover, his good looks were on the coarse side, and, although he was naturally powerful, he was not in hard condition. His general appearance gave more than a hint of self-indulgent living—so, at

least, I summed him up, possibly with a jaundiced eye.

Esterdine seemed to like him, and certainly, judging by her laughter (she was giving him champagne), found him more amusing than she found me; along with his half-foreign style and appearance, he had obviously acquired the foreigner's liveliness, not to say audacity, in conversation. I loathed him for it.

THE days which followed were purgatory. Esterdine was just as frank and friendly as before, whenever I saw her, but that was just the rotten part of it: I never did see her by herself, or scarcely ever. That fellow Beltony was always about, and his standing as a relative gave him privileges which I, as a simple acquaintance, could not possibly claim. She seemed to place the entire daily round of her existence in his hands, confidently and even thankfully; I never realized before how a woman, for all her claims to independence, dearly loves to be taken charge of.

In similar circumstances I should probably have hated an archangel, but it was not long before I found reason to distrust, as well as to dislike, Beltony. She had introduced us, of course, and one evening after dinner he and I sat chatting in the *salle*. Beltony had done justice, as usual, to the hotel cellar.

"Do you know who she is, Canning, my boy?" he asked, in a confidential tone, with more than a hint of glee in it. "She's old Beltony's heiress. The old chap made pots of money—a regular wizard—and it's all come to her. She's worth winning, eh?"

He paused, in bibulous gloating, then went on, as much to himself as to me: "And there's another thing, though I doubt if she's thought of that"—he tapped himself on the chest—"Charles Beltony is—" He caught my stony eye and checked himself. I rose without a word and went out on to the balcony.

These careless words of his disgusted and disturbed me, yet, curiously enough, they acted as a tonic. The depressing sense of being "out of it" left me; perhaps there was a part for me in this little drama after all!

Three days later I was sure of it. I had been out at Gorbio, village of mules, and on my way back I left the regular mule-path, went on past the Caupière, and dropped down by an even rougher track into the Orta valley, reaching the high Corniche road at the point where it strikes deep into the mountains and passes round the head of the Ramingau gully. Then, in order to escape the dust and stench of the motor-cars, I took to the woods and marched in the pleasant shade. Ultimately I found myself on a sort

of knoll or cliff which projects over the road near the hill village of Roquebrune.

Far beneath, the blue Mediterranean sparkled in the sunshine. I sat down for a rest and a smoke; presently I edged back into the shade—the sun was burning hot—lay flat on the slithery pine-needles, and dozed.

I need not tell you what I was dreaming about when I became aware of voices on the road beneath—the harsh, heated voices of a quarrelling man and woman. The interruption vexed me, it was so incongruous, and I have no doubt I should have shut my ears to it but that the man's voice was familiar to me. It was Beltony's, I could swear.

"My dear girl"—he was talking rapidly and excitedly, with a queer, foreign twang to his words—"I can't help myself; I've told you that a dozen times. I'm in the devil of a mess, and you know it. I'm absolutely desperate. It's money or it's choky for me—and it's not going to be choky if I can help it. I'll stick at nothing, Céline, and if anybody interferes with my game—well, you know me! And remember, I'm only half an Englishman. My mother was *vraie Niçoise*—and when my brigand blood is up—"

The woman said something in a lower tone—I think she was crying—but the man burst out on her furiously:—

"Don't be a fool! Who's going to desert you? I tell you I don't. I don't care a fig for her!"

I was thoroughly awake now, and turned abruptly on my elbow to get to my feet, but I slipped on the pine-needles and shot down the steep bank towards the edge of the little cliff, sending a small avalanche of earth, dust, and stones flying before me. There was a startled oath from below: '*Sacré nom de—*' Then the voice broke off short.

My feet caught against a tough little rosemary bush growing at the brink, and as I brought up with a jerk I heard footsteps retreating on the hard Corniche road. I wriggled round until I could look over the edge.

They were just turning a bend in the road, and I only saw their backs, but it was Beltony, sure enough, and a showily-dressed woman, young and of good figure, so far as I could judge, was hurrying along beside him. Beltony glanced over his shoulder just before he went out of sight, but if he saw me at all—which I doubt—he could hardly have recognized me through the bushes and with the sun in his eyes. It was just as well that he did not.

Upon my word, he was a cool hand! There he was at Esterdine's table that night, smooth and entertaining as ever, though a shade haggard under his dark skin, I thought, and a little forced and wild in manner.

The night felt chilly after the great heat of the day, and an elderly French officer, home from Senegal, asked for a fire. The waiter brought in fir-cones and billets of olive-wood, and in a few minutes a little fire was roaring away behind the shutters in the safe-like recess which serves as a fire-place in those parts: it gives out no heat to notice, but it looks warm.

Esterdine had never seen that kind of fire before, and it amused her.

"Where do the big cones come from?" she asked the waiter when he brought round the dessert.

"From the mountains, madame," he answered, with a smile and a vague sweep of his arm in the direction of the hills.

"But they must look splendid hanging on the tree!" she exclaimed. "Where do they grow? Does anybody know?" The conversation usually became general as soon as the serious courses had received proper attention.

"Mostly in the back country," Beltony answered, quickly. "But you find them occasionally nearer the coast. There's one on that ridge behind Roquebrune, and I know a still better one on the Castellar side—a magnificent tree, really magnificent!"

"I *should* like to see it!" cried Esterdine. "Is it too far away, do you think, Cousin Charles?"

"Not a bit!" cried Beltony. "We should take mules, of course; I wouldn't think of asking you to walk."

"Oh," she answered, dubiously. Then she had an idea: "We'll make up a party, shall we? Who will come to Castellar on muleback to see the giant fir-cones?"

But before the company could reply Beltony broke in with a semblance of boyish enthusiasm:—

"I know a couple of first-rate mulewomen," he said, leaning forward confidentially; "decent, motherly souls—I am sure you'd love them. That is, if you don't mind a mixed collection of the younger generation as well; they generally manage to pick up a few of the family on the way up. Anyhow, we shouldn't be lonely."

So Esterdine's doubts were cleverly brushed aside.

ON the appointed day I made an excuse to walk down with them to Mentone.

I do not pretend that I had any actual presentiment of evil (I am *not* psychic), but I was pretty anxious in a general way, as you may imagine, after what I had overheard.

If I could not openly interfere, I could at least hold a watching brief, and that I resolved to do. If anything were to happen, Francis Canning would not be far away; that I swore.

A couple of well-tended mules were waiting under the palm trees on the Mentone promenade, and as they approached, two lean and sunburnt *muletiers*, wearing the picturesque native costume, came up and greeted us.

Beltony chaffed them in the *patois*, which I did not understand, while he helped Esterdine to mount. The cavalcade went off merrily, the mulewomen, staves in hand, footing it on the flank with long, loose strides. I continued my way along the seashore, turned up into the old town, and, by making a *détour*, in the course of an hour and a half or thereabouts I reached the mountain-side to the east of Castellar, whence I could look down upon the little village and the country round about. I was convinced, from Beltony's casually-worded invitation, that it was in this wild forest region that his giant fir-cones grew.

The stumps of many a stout tree showed that the timber-cutters had been busy during the winter and spring. Heavy logs still lay about haphazard just as they had fallen, in all sorts of grotesque positions. Close by, almost above my head, ran the aerial cable by means of which the cut logs are sent down to the valley. From where I stood I could see it stretching like a thread of black cotton over the tree-tops, while at the top of the clearing, some fifty yards up the slope, a log still hung suspended to the travelling cradle, just as it had been left when the woodmen knocked off work.

I watched the eastern exit of the village, because I guessed that the mule party would have halted for an early lunch in the garden of the little restaurant at Castellar. And, sure enough, I had just finished my sandwiches and fruit, and lit a caporal cigarette, when they came into sight.

In the clear mountain atmosphere Esterdine's white dress and broad black sash were unmistakable. She was riding side by side with Beltony and he was pointing with outstretched arm towards the country below me. Presently they turned a bend in the road and the contour of the country hid them from view.

I must admit that I felt rather a fool, and an unmannerly one at that. What on earth, I asked myself, could possibly happen amiss at full noontide on a glorious day in June, during a simple muleback excursion such as hundreds of visitors make every season with never a mishap? But then I went over in my mind once more the scene at Roquebrune and the remark which Beltony had incautiously made to me that night at the hotel when his tongue was loosened by drink. And there were other little things that I had noticed, all tending to the same conclusion—that he had some diabolical scheme in hand,

and that it had to do with Esterdine. He was certainly a scamp and no fit company for her, and, unmannerly fool or not, I would put a spoke in his wheel if I had half a chance.

Meanwhile, they were somewhere in the forest below me, and I was as near at hand as I could very well be without actually stalking them. So I sat back against a log with my legs stretched out, breathing the aromatic breeze which the parched land drew in to itself from the sea.

I CANNOT be sure what it was that made me look towards Castellar; I believe it was the strident bray of a mule. But anyhow, I looked, and what I saw brought me to my feet in an instant. Two mules were trotting briskly along the road towards the village, and some little distance behind them strode the mulewomen. Now, what startled me was this. Although they were too far away for me to recognize them in detail, nevertheless, by what I can only call a trick of ocular memory, I did recognize them, and with absolute certainty. They were the same that I had seen traversing that short stretch of road a few hours before; but this time they were returning and—the mules were riderless!

What could it mean? Where were Esterdine and her cousin? Of course, it was possible that they had sent the *muletiers* back to Castellar, with orders to wait for them there. Yet why should they do that? The mules could have waited just as well in the forest; moreover, the best of the afternoon was already gone, dusk came early in the woods, and the paths, as I knew from experience, were vague and misleading, as well as rough. Knowing, too, what I did of Beltony, I was alarmed and exasperated to think of his being alone with Esterdine in such circumstances.

To get down the mountain-side and search for them in about a square mile of woodland country would be like looking for a needle in a bottle of hay, but it was the only thing to do. I certainly could not stay still.

I was casting my eye over the ground to decide upon the best line of descent, when I became aware of a faint smell of burning, and, facing the breeze, I discerned, far down the slope in a dip of the wood, a thin film of bluish smoke entangled in the spiky tops of the pine trees. I did not think much of that; it might come from a tramp's bivouac, or even from a forester's hut, for aught I knew. Yet, as I looked, the smoke gathered substance and volume, and in a few seconds a thick white column was rolling upwards and spreading in a cloud of increasing density straight towards where I was standing.

Now, if the forest caught fire, it would

burn like a torch after such a spell of drought and heat; and if the wind held, the conflagration would sweep up the mountain-side and no earthly power could stop it until it burnt itself out on the barren rock above the timberline. Suppose that Esterdine were in the line of its march!

A tongue of flame flashed up in the thickest of the smoke, dropped back for an instant, then came again with other tongues, leapt higher, and went back no more.

I took one stride downwards, then checked myself and stood stock-still. From somewhere in the depths of the silent wood I had heard the sound of a woman's scream, followed instantly by a very explosion of shouted objurgation.

Another scream, more piercing than the first, and the demoniac tirade swelled into a tornado of yelling frenzy—a manifestation abominable, monstrous, obscene, a scandal to heaven.

With every nerve in my body quivering, I took my bearings from the sound as well as I could and plunged across the clearing. A quick glance over the tree-tops showed me that the fire was already moving forward in a widening path of up-shooting flames, and a vast drift of opaque dun smoke swept before it.

Scarcely had I taken a dozen paces when the infernal duetto ceased as suddenly as it had begun, and in the silence which fell once more upon the wood I heard the long blast of a woodman's horn.

A moment afterwards I was startled by an eerie rattle just above my head, and, looking up, I saw that the wire which hauls the cradle had begun to move. Puzzled and a little bit scared by this sign of human agency in a spot where I believed myself to be alone, I glanced along the cable on the chance of picking up some clue to what was happening in the dark mazes of the wood. And there below me I beheld an apparition which I shall never forget until my dying day.

Out of the pine-tops, out of a sea of fire, slowly rose a human figure dressed in white and black.

I would have known her a hundred miles away—Esterdine! But was it Esterdine or was it her spirit? Slowly, wearily, she rose until she was visible to her knees. Her head was bare, and her long, dishevelled hair streamed out upon the wind. Was she standing in the tree-tops? Impossible! Was she floating in air?

As I watched, astounded and aghast, dreading to see her swallowed up in fiery death, she raised her arms before her and stretched them wide to the smoke-laden sky as though in supplication.

"God give me wings!" I groaned, and I leapt towards the wood, intending to follow

along under the cable, if that were possible, until I reached her—her, or her poor, charred body.

As I leapt, a shadow moved beside me. I ducked involuntarily, and over my head, and within a yard of it, came gliding the log which I had seen suspended to the cradle when I came up the mountain-side.

On the impulse of the moment—my brain, I am sure, was half-distraught—I took three running strides after the dangling log and jumped for it.

With one hand I caught the chain which slung it to the cradle—another inch and I should have missed it, the ground dropped so sharply—then I brought up the other hand and got a double grip. A pine branch brushed my legs and almost knocked me off, but in another moment I was clear in mid-air and the wood was falling away beneath me.

I HAVE a fair head for mountain heights, but this was quite another thing. Deadly sickness came over me; my eyes went blind, all the strength drained out of my muscles in a moment, and I felt that I must drop, whatever was below. Then the picture of Esterdine flashed back into my mind, and what I can only liken to the savage rage of an animal at bay possessed me. I clenched my teeth, and with every atom of my will gripped the rusty iron chains as though I would crush them in my hands.

The sickness passed. I opened my eyes and nearly lost my hold again through sheer astonishment and joy, for there, a dozen yards away, was Esterdine herself.

She stood on a barren peak of rock which rose out of a dip in the wood to the level of the pine-tops; on three sides the ground dropped sheer, but the fourth side was a gradual incline, up which she must have fled for safety. Farther down the incline, the wood was an inferno of fire.

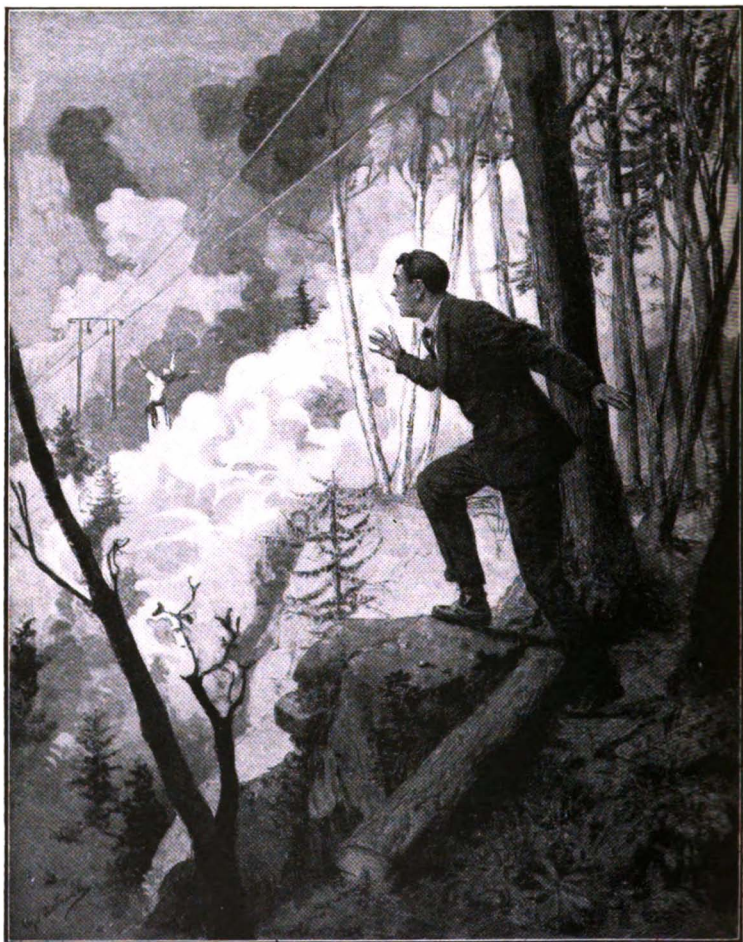
Calm and still she stood, with her face to the flames and her hands clasped behind her, while the speeding smoke made a majestic canopy above her head.

"Esterdine!" I shouted. "Esterdine!" She did not turn, but unclasped her hands and pressed them to her eyes.

"Esterdine!" I cried, almost in her ear. This time she started, but before she could look round I was close upon her.

The only thought that had possessed my mind all along had been to get to her as quickly as possible, and then to stand with her and, if it should so propitiously befall, defend her from any danger that might threaten.

Now, in my excitement and gladness, I loosened my hold on the chain and prepared to drop on to the ground beside her. But at that instant, by God's mercy, I saw the



Out of the pine-tops, out of a sea of fire, slowly rose a human figure.

folly of doing any such thing, for the pinnacle where she was standing was hemmed in by fire and precipice ; it was an absolute death-trap.

In a moment of crisis, when body and brain are at the utmost stretch, a man will often do things automatically which in his

normal state he would never dream of attempting. So I think it was with me.

I let go the chain with my right hand and, dropping to the full length of my left arm, swooped down and seized her by the sash and swept her off her feet.

The strain was horrible ; my arms were

well-nigh torn from their sockets. Luckily she was light, or I never could have held her; but the forward movement helped us, and with a desperate heave I swung her up until she could get her hands upon the log. Then I shifted my hold from her sash to her waist, and, with my right arm tight about her, grasped the chain again.

I was too breathless to speak, but it flashed through my mind that, with her beside me, I would gladly face the horrors of the pit. She turned her head and looked into my eyes; she was deadly pale, but her sensitive mouth curved into the beginning of a smile and her lips moved towards me. If my next moment had been death, I should have died rejoicing and triumphant.

AND indeed death was nearer to us than I knew. Slowly, inexorably as fate, the cable carried us towards the zone of fire. From our higher altitude we looked down upon a lake of raging flame, and we were plunging into it. Beyond, I knew, was the cool green forest, peaceful garden lands, and the blessed imperturbable sea, but could human flesh ever last through that consuming fiery belt?

A blast of heat struck us full in the face. I tightened my encircling arm and she, understanding, covered her face as well as she could against my chest. I was thankful that she did so, for it saved her from a spectacle as horrible as ever affronted the sight of man.

During these few tense seconds the inclined ground, over the summit of which the cable had mercifully passed, had dropped away beneath us; in another moment we should be in the tree-tops again and over the burning wood. A little while, perhaps a few instants, would then decide whether we were doomed to stifled, scorching, tortured death, or to win through to safety and life.

I bowed my head over Esterdine, my face against her hair—it was the last protection I could give her—and in my heart I prayed for strength to hold her fast. I braced my will and muscles to the utmost.

It was well that I was prepared. A frightful yell—half-scream, half-bellow; half-human and half-bestial—came hurling at me out of the very vortex of the humming, hissing, crackling fire. I felt Esterdine shudder and go altogether limp, and in the tree in front of me, directly in our path, I saw a figure which, but for its clothing, I would have taken for some gruesome simian monster. Its hands and face were smeared and blackened with smoke, its features were contorted with an indescribable ferocity of passion, and its eyes glowed with the blood-shot light of a beast of prey.

How he got there alive I cannot think.

The trunk on which he crouched had been lopped by the foresters to clear a passage for the cradle, and its flat surface gave him a footing, while he kept his balance by grasping the surrounding boughs; but the tree had already caught fire, and flames were licking round his feet.

As we passed over him he stood up straight, flung up his hands, and seized the chain on the side opposite to us.

The log lurched and rolled; but Beltony, clinging with one hand like a monkey, whipped out a dagger from the bosom of his shirt and struck furiously at me across the log.

There was no time to avoid the blow, even if my position had permitted it, but as the dagger came whirling down I moved my head aside instinctively. He missed my face, but the sharp edge of the dagger slashed my left shoulder, and his fist, gripped round the haft, struck me on the collar-bone and all but flung me from the log. The point of the dagger buried itself in the wood.

With frenzied strength he tore it out and flung up his hand to strike again. This time I could not hope to escape, and if I fell Esterdine would surely suffer awful death by dagger or by fire. Yet I was helpless to act. She was unconscious now, and I dared not loosen my grip.

The dagger was already falling when the animal which lives deep down in most of us surged up in me and, hauling myself up with desperate force until my teeth were level with his left hand, I bit into it with all the power of my jaws.

A savage thing to do? Bah! At that moment, to save the woman at my side, I would have gnawed his body piecemeal.

He screamed with pain, dashed down his dagger hand on to the log—instead of on to me—then snatched away his bitten left. So now he was hanging with both hands on the log and his legs dangling below. In that position he could not strike.

But his fury was not spent, and the malice of the fiend was in the glance he shot at me. His fingers tightened on the timber, and I saw his muscles stiffening for an upward spring.

Then I felt a jar that brought my heart into my mouth. A shower of red sparks flew up from beneath, Beltony's chest thumped against my feet, his hands shot off the rounded surface of the log, and he was gone! His heels had struck against the trees.

Looking down, I saw him turn over and crash head foremost into the heart of a blazing fir.

Then I must have gone into a partial swoon. I was not wholly unconscious, because I knew that a racking agony of heat was searing the very core and marrow of my brain. Then I came to the threshold of



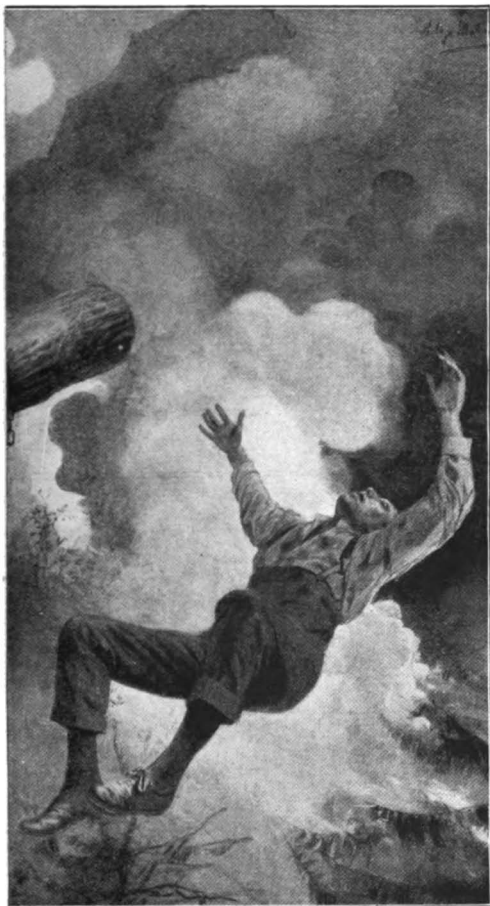
Beltony's hands shot off the rounded surface of the log, and he was gone! Looking down,

Nothingness, and within I heard a cool whispering of peace ineffable. Yet I would not enter, because I felt—I knew—that Esterdine was close beside me, waiting, watching. It was a test—that also I knew—and all the torments of hell should not make me fail!

After an infinity of time my agony slipped away; a heavenly coolness laved me and I was groping towards my ordinary self. My

aching head was resting on a soft and odorous pillow—it was Esterdine's hair. Thank Heaven! my arm was tight around her still. I opened my eyes, and we were gliding serenely down over a waving olive-garden. The air was sweet and clear.

Presently the cradle stopped, and I was looking into the pale, scared, sweating face of a rough-clad countryman. With his



I saw him crash head foremost into the heart of a blazing fir.

hands still on the crank handle with which he had wound us down, he stared from one to the other and back again; then he grunted out a strange ejaculation, picked up his coat, and made off. I shouted after him, but my voice was dry and cracked and he took no notice, but dropped over a bank and disappeared.

My hands and limbs were stiff and numb,

and I staggered like a drunken man, but I managed to lift Esterline off the log and lay her gently on the parched turf. I cooled her brow with water from a tank in the neighbouring olive-garden, and in a little while her blue eyes opened and looked into mine. Soon her inborn pluck prevailed and she sat up, straightening out the charred tatters of her skirt and smiling at me. Yet I saw from her wan, drawn face that she was in pain.

She tried to walk but could not, so I took her up in my arms and carried her through the deserted gardens to the shore road. In the dusk as I walked, with her cheek on my shoulder and her hair against my neck, she told me as well as she could what had happened in the forest.

"He broke off some cones for me and took them down to the mules. And when he came back he—made love to me."

Poor, shaken darling, I felt her sob; her tears were dropping on my hand. I pressed her closer, and presently she steadied herself and went on:—

"And when I wouldn't—promise to marry him, he got angry all of a sudden and shouted at me that I must die. He was mad—mad. It was dreadful! I tried to stop my ears, but he tore my hands away. Of course, it wasn't really Cousin Charles—it was a devil!" Her voice dropped to an awed whisper. "He set fire to the forest, to burn me to death! He said he would escape himself—and get all father's money. Then—he drove me up that slope and ran back into the smoke. I prayed, and then you called. Oh! I thought it couldn't really be you. Hold me—hold me fast—"

She was sobbing again. I soothed her as well as I could, and presently I heard a little sigh, and her gentle breathing told me she was asleep.

Next day I found Céline, the woman of the Corniche road. She was heart-broken

The Giant Fir-Cones

when I told her of Beltony's death—she had loved him. From her I learned that he was a hopeless gambler and had brought himself to utter ruin. He had seen the terms of Richard Beltony's will in the newspapers, and had noted the provision that if the testator and his daughter died without male issue the bulk of the money should go to the nearest relative who bore the name of Beltony. This, he knew, was himself.

The relief from all his embarrassments which such a contingency would afford became his obsession, and when he heard that Esterdine was on the Coast he conceived his ghastly plot to marry, or, failing that, to destroy, the woman who stood between him and the wealth he coveted.

Some days later, when the smouldering forest had cooled sufficiently, I went up the mountain with the *garde champêtre*. We found Beltony huddled at the foot of what had been a mighty tree, a real monarch of the forest, and as we lifted his body to lay it on the rough litter of branches that the peasants had prepared I saw beneath it the charred butt of a giant fir-cone. The tree

which he had used to lure another to her doom had sent him to his own.

When at last we found the woodman—he had been in hiding—he confessed, under the gentle persuasion of the *garde*, that Beltony had paid him fifty francs for his help. His part had been to wait by his windlass until he heard the signal horn, and then to bring down as quickly as he could the cradle by which Beltony intended to escape. He imagined that it was a mere escapade, and had no idea that he was to participate in a crime. Furthermore, he had not recovered his horn, which he valued at seven francs fifty.

Considering that, but for him, Esterdine would surely have been burnt to death, I induced the police to let the matter drop by urging the point, which they were quick to appreciate, that publicity in such a case would in no wise enhance the reputation of the Coast as a peaceful resort for invalids and pleasure-seekers. I also compensated the woodman liberally for the loss of his horn, while my Esterdine has insisted on making full provision for Céline.