

## CHAPTER V.

### THE DISAGREEABLE MAN.

ROBERT ALLITSEN told Bernardine that she was not likely to be on friendly terms with the English people in the Kurhaus.

"They will not care about you, and you will not care about the foreigners. So you will thus be thrown on your own resources, just as I was, when I came."

"I cannot say that I have any resources," Bernardine answered. "I don't feel well enough to try to do any writing, or else it would be delightful to have the uninterrupted leisure."

So she had probably told him a little about her life and occupation; although it was not likely that she would have given him any serious confidences. Still, people are often surprisingly frank about themselves, even those who pride

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themselves upon being the most reticent mortals in the world.

"But now, having the leisure," she continued, "I have not the brains."

"I never knew any writer who had," said the Disagreeable Man grimly.

"Perhaps your experience has been limited," she suggested.

"Why don't you read?" he said. "There is a good library here. It contains all the books we don't want to read."

"I am tired of reading," Bernardine said. "I seem to have been reading all my life. My uncle, with whom I live, keeps a second-hand book-shop, and ever since I can remember, I have been surrounded by books. They have not done me much good, nor any one else either."

"No, probably not," he said. "But now that you have left off reading, you will have a chance of learning something, if you live long enough. It is wonderful how much one does learn when

one does not read. It is almost awful. If you don't care about reading now, why do you not occupy yourself with cheese-mites?"

"I do not feel drawn towards cheese-mites."

"Perhaps not, at first; but all the same they form a subject which is very engaging. Or any branch of bacteriology."

"Well, if you were to lend me a microscope perhaps I might begin."

"I could not do that," he answered quickly.

"I never lend my things."

"No, I did not suppose you would," she said.

"I knew I was safe in making the suggestion."

"You are rather quick of perception in spite of all your book reading," he said. "Yes, you are quite right. I am selfish. I dislike lending my things, and I dislike spending my money except on myself. If you have the misfortune to linger on as I do, you will know that it is perfectly legitimate to be selfish in small things, *if one has made the one great sacrifice.*"

"And what may that be?"

She asked so eagerly that he looked at her, and then saw how worn and tired her face was and the words which he was intending to speak died on his lips.

"Look at those asses of people on toboggans," he said brusquely. "Could you manage to enjoy yourself in that way? That might do you good."

"Yes," she said, "but it would not be any pleasure to me."

She stopped to watch the toboggans flying down the road. And the Disagreeable Man went his own solitary way, a forlorn figure, with a face almost expressionless, and a manner wholly impenetrable.

He had lived nearly seven years at Petershof, and, like many others, was obliged to continue staying there if he wished to continue staying in this planet. It was not probable that he had any wish to prolong his frail existence, but he did his duty to his mother by conserving his life; and this feeble flame of duty and affection

was the only lingering bit of warmth in a heart frozen almost by ill-health and disappointed ambitions. The moralists tell us that suffering ennobles, and that a right acceptance of hindrances goes towards forming a beautiful character. But this result must largely depend on the original character; certainly, in the case of Robert Allitsen, suffering had not ennobled his mind, nor disappointment sweetened his disposition. His title of "Disagreeable Man" had been fairly earned, and he hugged it to himself with a triumphant secret satisfaction.

There were some people in Petershof who were inclined to believe certain absurd rumors about his alleged kindness. It was said that on more than one occasion he had nursed the suffering and the dying in sad Petershof, and, with all the sorrowful tenderness worthy of a loving mother, had helped them to take their leave of life. But these were only rumors, and there was nothing in Robert Allitsen's ordinary bearing to justify such talk. So the foolish people

who, for the sake of making themselves peculiar, revived these unlikely fictions, were speedily ridiculed and reduced to silence. And the Disagreeable Man, remained the Disagreeable Man, with a clean record for unamiability.

He lived a life apart from others. Most of his time was occupied in photography, or in the use and study of the microscope, or in chemistry. His photographs were considered to be most beautiful. Not that he showed them specially to any one; but he generally sent a specimen of his work to the *Monthly Photograph Portfolio*, and hence it was that people learned to know of his skill. He might be seen any fine day trudging along in company with his photographic apparatus and a desolate dog, who looked almost as cheerless as his chosen comrade. Neither the one took any notice of the other; Allitsen was no more genial to the dog than he was to the Kurhaus guests; the dog was no more demonstrative to Robert Allitsen than he was to any one in Petershof.

Still, they were "something" to each other; that unexplainable "something" which has to explain almost every kind of attachment.

He had no friends in Petershof, and apparently had no friends anywhere. No one ever wrote to him except his old mother; the papers which were sent to him came from a stationer's.

He read all during meal-time. But now and again he spoke a few words with Bernardine Holme, whose place was next to him. It never occurred to him to say good morning, nor to give a greeting of any kind, nor to show a courtesy. One day during lunch, however, he did take the trouble to stoop and pick up Bernardine Holme's shawl, which had fallen for the third time to the ground.

"I never saw a female wear a shawl more carelessly than you," he said. "You don't seem to know anything about it."

His manner was always gruff. Every one complained of him. Every one always had

complained of him. He had never been heard to laugh. Once or twice he had been seen to smile on occasions when people talked confidently of recovering their health. It was a beautiful smile worthy of a better cause. It was a smile which made one pause to wonder what could have been the original disposition of the Disagreeable Man before ill-health had cut him off from the affairs of active life. Was he happy or unhappy? It was not known. He gave no sign of either the one state or the other. He always looked very ill, but he did not seem to get worse. He had never been known to make the faintest illusion to his own health. He never "smoked" his thermometer in public; and this was the more remarkable in an hotel where people would even leave off a conversation and say: "Excuse me, sir or madam, I must take my temperature. We will resume the topic in a few minutes."

He never lent any papers or books; and he never borrowed any.

He had a room at the top of the hotel, and he lived his life, amongst his chemistry bottles, his scientific books, his microscope and his camera. He never sat in any of the hotel drawing-rooms. There was nothing striking nor eccentric about his appearance. He was neither ugly nor good-looking, neither tall nor short, neither fair nor dark. He was thin and frail, and rather bent. But that might be the description of any one in Petershof. There was nothing pathetic about him, no suggestion even of poetry, which gives a reverence to suffering, whether mental or physical. As there was no expression on his face, so also there was no expression in his eyes; no distant longing, no far-off fixedness; nothing, indeed to awaken sad sympathy.

The only positive thing about him was his rudeness. Was it natural or cultivated? No one in Petershof could say. He had always been as he was; and there was no reason to suppose that he would ever be different.

He was, in fact, like the glacier of which he

had such a fine view from his room; like the glacier, an unchanging feature of the neighborhood.

No one loved it better than the Disagreeable Man did; he watched the sunlight on it, now pale golden, now fiery red. He loved the sky, the dull grey, or the bright blue. He loved the snow forests, and the snow-girt streams, and the ice cathedrals, and the great firs patient beneath their snow-burden. He loved the frozen waterfalls, and the costly diamonds in the snow. He knew, too, where the flowers nestled in their white nursery. He was, indeed, an authority on Alpine botany. The same tender hands which plucked the flowers in the spring-time, dissected them and laid them bare beneath the microscope. But he did not love them the less for that.

Were these pursuits a comfort to him? Did they help him to forget that there was a time when he, too, was burning with ambition to distinguish himself, and be one of the marked men of the age?

Who could say?

## CHAPTER VI.

### THE TRAVELLER AND THE TEMPLE OF KNOWLEDGE.

COUNTLESS ages ago a Traveller, much worn with journeying, climbed the last bit of rough road which led to the summit of a high mountain. There was a temple on that mountain. And the Traveller had vowed that he would reach it before death prevented him. He knew that the journey was long, and the road rough. He knew that the mountain was the most difficult of ascent of that mountain chain, called "The Ideals." But he had a strongly-hoping heart and a sure foot. He lost all sense of time, but he never lost the feeling of hope.

"Even if I faint by the way-side," he said, to himself, "and am not able to reach the summit, still it is something to be on the road which leads to the High Ideals."

That was how he comforted himself when he

was weary. He never lost more hope than that; and surely that was little enough.

And now he had reached the temple.

He rang the bell, and an old white-haired man opened the gate. He smiled sadly when he saw the Traveller.

"*And yet another one,*" he murmured. "What does it all mean?"

The Traveller did not hear what he murmured.

"Old white-haired man," he said, "tell me; and so I have come at last to the wonderful Temple of Knowledge. I have been journeying hither all my life. Ah, but it is hard work climbing up to the ideals."

The old man touched the Traveller on the arm. "Listen," he said gently. "This is not the Temple of Knowledge. And the Ideals are not a chain of mountains; they are a stretch of plains, and the Temple of Knowledge is in their centre. You have come the wrong road. Alas, poor Traveller!"

The light in the Traveller's eyes had faded. The hope in his heart died. And he became old and withered. He leaned heavily on his staff.

"Can one rest here?" he asked wearily.

"No."

"Is there a way down the other side of these mountains?"

"No."

"What are these mountains called?"

"They have no name."

"And the temple—how do you call the temple?"

"It has no name."

"Then I call it the Temple of Broken Hearts," said the Traveller.

And he turned and went, but the old white-haired man followed him.

"Brother," he said, "you are not the first to come here, but you may be the last. Go back to the plains, and tell the dwellers in the plains that the Temple of True knowledge is in their very midst; any one may enter it who

chooses; the gates are not even closed. The Temple has always been in the plains, in the very heart of life, and work, and daily effort. The philosopher may enter, the stone breaker may enter. You must have passed it every day of your life; a plain, venerable building, unlike our glorious cathedrals."

"I have seen the children playing near it," said the Traveller. "When I was a child I used to play there. Ah, if I had only known! Well, the past is the past."

He would have rested against a huge stone, but that the old white-haired man prevented him.

"Do not rest," he said. "If you once rest there you will not rise again. When you once rest you will know how weary you are."

"I have no wish to go farther," said the Traveller. "My journey is done; it may have been in the wrong direction, but still it is done."

"Nay, do not linger here," urged the old man. "Retrace your steps. Though you are broken-hearted yourself, you may save others

from breaking their hearts. Those whom you meet on this road you can turn back. Those who are but starting in this direction you can bid pause and consider how mad it is to suppose that the Temple of True Knowledge should have been built on an isolated and dangerous mountain. Tell them that although God seems hard, He is not as hard as all that. Tell them that the ideals are not a mountain range, but their own plains, where their great cities are built, and where the corn grows, and where men and women are toiling, sometimes in sorrow and sometimes in joy."

"I will go," said the Traveller.

And he started.

But he had grown old and weary. And the journey was long; and the retracing of one's steps is more tiresome than the tracing of them. The ascent, with all the vigor and hope of life to help him, had been difficult enough; the descent, with no vigor and no hope to help him, was almost impossible.

So that it was not probable that the Traveller lived to reach the plains. But whether he reached them or not, still he had started.

And not many Travellers do that.



## CHAPTER VII.

### BERNARDINE.

THE crisp mountain air and the warm sunshine began slowly to have their effect on Bernardine, in spite of the Disagreeable Man's verdict. She still looked singularly lifeless, and appeared to drag herself about with painful effort; but the place suited her and she enjoyed sitting in the sun listening to the music which was played by a scratchy string band. Some of the Kurhaus guests, seeing that she was alone and ailing, made some attempt to be kindly to her. She always seemed astonished that people should concern themselves about her; whatever her faults were, it never struck her that she might be of any importance to others, however important she might be to herself. She was grateful for any little kindness which was shown her; but at first she kept very much to herself, talking chiefly with the Disagreeable Man, who,

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by the way, had surprised every one—but no one more than himself—but his unwonted behavior in bestowing even a fraction of his companionship on a Petershof human being.

There was a great deal of curiosity about her, but no one ventured to question her since Mrs. Reffold's defeat. Mrs. Reffold herself rather avoided her, having always a vague suspicion that Bernardine tried to make fun of her. But whether out of perversity or not, Bernardine never would be avoided by her, never let her pass by without a few words of conversation, and always went to her for information, much to the amusement of Mrs. Reffold's faithful attendants. There was always a twinkle in Bernardine's eye when she spoke with Mrs. Reffold. She never fastened herself on to any one; no one could say she intruded. As time went on, there was a vague sort of feeling that she did not intrude enough. She was ready to speak if any one cared to speak with her, but she never began a conversation except with Mrs. Reffold. When people did talk to

her, they found her genial. Then the sad face would smile kindly, and the sad eyes speak kind sympathy. Or some bit of fun would flash forth, and a peal of young laughter ring out. It seemed strange that such fun could come from her.

Those who noticed her, said she appeared always to be thinking.

She was thinking and learning.

Some few remarks roughly made by the Disagreeable Man had impressed her deeply.

"You have come to a new world," he said, "the world of suffering. You are in a fury because your career has been checked, and because you have been put on the shelf; you, of all people. Now you will learn how many quite as able as yourself, and abler, have been put on the shelf too, and have to stay there. You are only a pupil in suffering. What about the professors? If your wonderful wisdom has left you with any sense at all, look about you and learn."

So she was looking, and thinking, and learn-

ing. And as the days went by, perhaps a softer light came into her eyes.

All her life long, her standard of judging people had been an intellectual standard, or an artistic standard: what people had done with outward and visible signs; how far they had contributed to thought; how far they had influenced any great movement, or originated it; how much of a benefit they had been to their century or their country; how much social or political activity, how much educational energy they had devoted to the pressing need of the times.

She was undoubtedly a clever, cultured young woman; the great work of her life had been self-culture. To know and understand, she had spared neither herself nor any one else. To know, and to use her acquired knowledge intellectually as teacher, and perhaps, too, as writer, had been the great aim of her life. Everything that furthered this aim won her instant attention. It never struck her that she was selfish.

One does not think of that until the great check comes. One goes on, and would go on. But a barrier rises up. Then, finding one can advance no farther, one turns round; and what does one see?

Bernardine saw that she had come a long journey. She saw what the Traveler saw. That was all she saw at first. Then she remembered that she had done the journey entirely for her own sake. Perhaps it might not have looked so dreary if it had been undertaken for some one else.

She had claimed nothing of any one; she had given nothing to any one. She had simply taken her life in her own hands and made what she could of it. What had she made of it?

Many women asked for riches, for position, for influence and authority and admiration. She had only asked to be able to work. It seemed little enough to ask. That she asked so little placed her, so she thought, apart from the common herd of eager askers. To be cut off

from active life and earnest work was a possibility which never occurred to her.

It never crossed her mind that in asking for the one thing for which she longed, she was really asking for the greatest thing. Now, in the hour of her enfeeblement, and in the hour or the bitterness of her heart, she still prided herself upon wanting so little.

"It seems so little to ask," she cried to herself time after time. "I only want to be able to do a few strokes of work. I would be content now to do so little, if only I might do some. The laziest day-laborer on the road would laugh at the small amount of work which would content me now."

She told the Disagreeable Man that one day.

"So you think you are moderate in your demands," he said to her. "You are a most amusing young woman. You are so perfectly unconscious how exacting you really are. For, after all, what it is you want? You want to have that wonderful brain of yours restored so that you

may begin to teach, and, perhaps, write a book. Well, to repeat my former words: you are still at phase one, and you are longing to be strong enough to fulfill your ambitions and write a book. When you arrive at phase four, you will be quite content to dust one of your uncle's books instead: far more useful work and far more worthy of encouragement. If every one who wrote books now would be satisfied to dust books already written, what a regenerated world it would become!"

She laughed good temperedly. His remarks did not vex her; or, at least, she showed no vexation. He seemed to have constituted himself as her critic, and she made no objections. She had given him little bits of stray confidence about herself, and she received everything he had to say with that kind of forbearance which chivalry bids us show to the weak and ailing. She made allowances for him; but she did more than that for him; she did not let him see that she made allowances. Moreover, she recognized

amidst all his roughness a certain kind of sympathy which she could not resent, because it was not not aggressive. For to some natures the expression of sympathy is an irritation; to be sympathized with means to be pitied, and to be pitied means to be looked down upon. She was sorry for him, but she would not have told him so for worlds; he would have shrunk from pity as much as she did. And yet the sympathy which she thought she did not want for herself, she was silently giving to those around her, like herself, thwarted, each in a different way perhaps, still thwarted all the same.

She found more than once that she was learning to measure people by a standard different from her former one; not by what they have *done* or *been*, but by what they have *suffered*. But such a change as this does not come suddenly, though, in a place like Petershof it comes quickly, almost unconsciously.

She became immensely interested in some of the guests; and there were curious types in the

Kurhaus. The foreigners attracted her chiefly, a little Parisian danseuse, none too quiet in her manner, won Bernardine's fancy.

"I so want to get better, *cherie*," she said to Bernardine. "Life is so bright. Death; ah, how the very thought makes one shiver! That horrid doctor says I must not skate; it is not wise. When was I wise? Wise people don't enjoy themselves. And I have enjoyed myself, and will still."

"How can you go about with that little danseuse?" the Disagreeable Man said to Bernardine one day. Do you know who she is?"

"Yes," said Bernardine; "she is the lady who thinks you must be a very ill-bred person because you stalk into meals with your hands in your pockets. She wondered how I could bring myself to speak to you."

"I daresay many people wonder at that," said Robert Allitsen, rather peevishly.

"Oh, no," replied Bernardine; "they wonder

that you talk to me. They think I must either be very clever or else very disagreeable."

"I should not call you clever," said Robert Allitsen grimly.

"No," answered Bernardine pensively. "But I always did think myself clever until I came here. Now I am beginning to know better. But it is rather a shock, is n't it?"

"I have never experienced the shock," he said.

"Then you still think you are clever?" she asked.

"There is only one man my intellectual equal in Petershof, and he is not here any more," he said gravely. "Now I come to remember, he died. That is the worst of making friendships here; people die."

"Still, it is something to be left king of the intellectual world," said Bernardine. "I never thought of you in that light."

There was a slight smile about her lips as she spoke, and there was the ghost of a smile on the Disagreeable Man's face.

"Why do you talk with that horrid Swede?" he said suddenly. "He is a wretched low foreigner. Have you heard some of his views?"

"Some of them," answered Bernardine cheerfully. "One of his views is really amusing; that it is very rude of you to read the newspaper during meal-time; and he asks if it is an English custom. I tell him it depends entirely on the Englishman, and the Englishman's neighbor."

So she, too, had her raps at him, but always in the kindest way.

He had a curious effect on her. His very bitterness seemed to check in its growth her own bitterness. The cup of poison of which he himself had drunk deep, he passed on to her. She drank of it, and it did not poison her. She was morbid, and she needed cheerful companionship. His dismal companionship and his hard way of looking at life ought by rights to have oppressed her. Instead of which she became less sorrowful.

Was the Disagreeable Man, perhaps, a reader

of character? Did he know how to help her in his own grim gruff way? He himself had suffered so much; perhaps he did know