

Brother Ambrose

By H. F. W. Tatham

Brother Ambrose walked steadily and quickly up the mountain path that led over the open fells to the abbey in the valley beyond. His face was that of a determined and ambitious man; he was still vigorous, despite his forty years, and his monkish life did not seem to have diminished his strength or capacity for open-air exercise. So he pushed on as rapidly as might be, for his experienced eye told him that the weather promised unfavourably. On either side the hills rose steeply, and their tops were buried in angry-looking clouds, which brooded even on the dip between them through which the pass lay. A sleety rain was falling, and a very little way above the place where Ambrose was walking the slopes were grey with powdered snow, which gave place to a dense white mantle that gleamed spectrally wherever the clouds made it possible to catch a glimpse of the higher slopes. And very soon Ambrose found himself within the mists, with the snow falling thickly round him, and covering the ground more and more deeply as he rose higher.

He had relied on the path to direct him if the mist grew thick, but very soon it was plain to him that the snow had rendered the path quite invisible and he was left with nothing to guide him but the direction of the wind and his own instincts. No one who has not been in a mist on a mountain can form any conception of the confusion it brings to mind and eye, and the consequent difficulty of keeping a straight course. The ordinary landmarks are invisible, the view is confined to a distance of thirty or forty yards, and the most familiar objects lose all resemblance to their ordinary aspect. A great peak will apparently loom through the mist, but in a few seconds will prove to be nothing but an isolated rock or insignificant knoll. A valley will appear for a moment through a rift in the clouds, but will present no recognisable feature before in a tantalising manner the curtain is drawn over it again. A steep slope will sink like a precipice falling into an unfathomable gulf. Then the wind, eddying among the gorges, will seem to blow from all quarters successively; sometimes, moreover, it may really shift its direction. This was what must have happened to Ambrose; unless, indeed, there were some other power working in an incomprehensible way. Otherwise, despite the weather and the absence of a compass, he might have kept his direction right. But it became by degrees more and more certain to him that he had lost his way.

By and by the slope began to descend; but it led him, as far as he could see, into no valley that he could recognise. Instead of the softly rounded slopes that fenced in the glen down which the path to the abbey lay, there rose on either hand bare black walls of rock, too steep for the snow to lie upon; and the gorge between fell sharply, leaving scarcely room for the feet to find a place to tread beside the rushing torrent which hurried down it. But there was nothing to be done but to go forward. The snow was falling more thickly than ever, the wind blowing more coldly and with greater force, and there was danger of frost-bite, and, still worse, of falling into some deep drift, if one lingered on the hilltops searching for the path. Moreover, darkness was coming on; so by whatever route, it was imperatively necessary to leave the higher ground and reach the valley as soon as might be.

Presently, with startling suddenness, Ambrose came out of the mist. But to his surprise, the scene that met his eye was quite unfamiliar to him, though he knew all the hills and dales for miles around. The valley ran on between the hills, narrow and fenced by crags, and turned a

corner about half-a-mile from where Ambrose stood, so that the view was circumscribed; but even so, he felt sure that he would have recognised the place, despite the waning light, if he had ever seen it before. But it was quite strange to him, and he felt almost afraid to push on. However, the impossibility of return, coupled with the fact that a light suddenly appeared at the bend of the valley, made him swallow down his instinctive fears, and once more hurry forward.

The light did not move, and as he came near he saw that it came from the window of a little cottage, that was barely distinguishable against the rocks, constructed as it was of stone of the same colour. The light had plainly just been kindled. Ambrose soon reached the door, and knocked. There was no answer, so he repeated his knock; but only after a third attempt did the door silently open, and even then there was no voice to bid him enter, nor indeed, as far as he could see, had any hand lifted the latch. He passed through, and came into a kitchen, lit by a lamp, with a fire burning feebly on the hearth. On a chair by the fire sat a crouching figure, that presently revealed itself as that of an old man; so old that his back was arched, and his face lined with innumerable wrinkles, and his head and hands shook as he turned towards the newcomer. His hair and beard were snow-white; but his eyes were bright, and he looked at Ambrose with an inscrutable but somewhat malignant expression.

The latter bade him good evening, but the old man answered no word; however, he made no objection when Ambrose, after a pause, advanced to the fire and warmed his cold hands and dried his wet garments before it. He even pointed to a heap of straw in a corner, on which Ambrose was presently glad to throw himself, hungry as he was, for the old man made no offer of entertainment. Luckily a dry crust that he found in his wallet was enough to stay the monk's stomach for a while, and after he had said a prayer he presently fell asleep.

He must have slept for some hours; for when he woke, the moon was high in the sky, shining between flying masses of clouds and lighting the white hill-slopes that were visible through the window of the cottage. Mists still hung over the higher summits, and as before, Ambrose could not recognise the view.

But he did not look at it for long. The room, he soon noticed, was empty, but what attracted his attention was a bright line of light that was visible under a door at the back of it. Ambrose rose from his corner and, crossing to this door, listened to hear if there was any sound from beyond. Hearing none, he carefully opened the door a little way, and looked in.

There lay before him a huge room, so large that it plainly must run back some way into the rock against which the house was built. At the further end a kind of hook hung from the ceiling, and a little way in front of this the ground was marked by a line of jagged teeth that rose from the floor. Opposite in the roof Ambrose could see a corresponding line, but he could not clearly discern what it was.

The room was lighted brightly, though there was no visible lamp, and the old man did not seem to notice Ambrose, who, with the door almost shut, peered at him through the chink with a feeling of apprehension. Presently the man, who had been feeling in a large sack that stood by him, drew from it a crown and, advancing carefully, hung it on the hook. Then, drawing back, he waved his arms, and immediately a figure shaped itself out of nothing close to Ambrose. He could see the face as it stood. It was that of a young man, with something royal in his aspect, but haggard and wild-looking. With faltering step he moved forward—forward across the line, and up to the hook. For a moment he hesitated, then put out his hand and seized the crown, pulling it towards him. But as he did so there was a grating sound; something fell from the roof, and with a clang the jaws of the trap met, shutting off the inner part of the room with a wall of iron, and imprisoning the youth within it.

Ambrose stared with horror; but in a few moments there was again a grating sound, and the wall drew slowly up, revealing the room empty as before, with the hook unbaited hanging from the roof.

It were long to tell of what followed. Ambrose saw many enter—men and women, young and old; persons famous in the state, others known privately to himself; and among these his own brother. The trap was baited in various ways; but none returned.

But at last there came a figure at the sight of which his hair rose on his head and his body trembled with fear.

The old man had hung an abbot's mitre upon the hook; and slowly there grew out of nothing the form and face, unmistakable to the watcher's eye, of Ambrose himself. It advanced slowly, slowly, across the fatal line, and raised its hand to seize the mitre. As it touched it, the spell that had bound the horror-struck monk in its iron grip was broken; and falling on his knees, he gasped out, 'Lord have mercy on me a sinner!' And at that the figure leaped wildly back, backward across the jagged teeth; but even so, scarce quickly enough; for the jarring jaws came together and seized the toe of the right foot.

Ambrose saw no more; with a cry of terror he slammed the door, burst from the cottage, and fled wildly out through the mist and snow and darkness, up the gorge, anywhere from that accursed valley. On the open hilltop he fell exhausted over a stone, and lay half-stupefied and paralysed with fear. How long he lay he knew not. The cold north wind blowing on his face roused him; and he lifted his eyes to see the mist rolling away like a curtain, the sun climbing in the east, and the old familiar pass close to him, leading down into the dale where the abbey lay. Of the valley of his nightly vision he could see nothing; nor did he ever come on it again.

Lame and weary, he stumbled down the bill to the abbey, where he was received by the brothers with joy. But there were two things in the future different in him; firstly, he was much more contented and less ambitious than of old; secondly, he walked lame with his right foot, the toes of which, the doctor said, had never recovered a frost-bite experienced on that night when he lay out on the open snowy fell. To this Ambrose said nothing; but he thought there might be another reason; and it was when he thought of that reason that his ambitions died in his heart.