

## LOVE BELOW ZERO.

## AN ELOPEMENT ON SKATES.



WE were seated round the large, open fireside of the exceedingly old-fashioned drawing-room of the Castle of Drums, the antique neighbour of an ancient historical building known to all playgoers as Glamis, but which is pronounced "Glawns" by the natives—the castle in which was committed that fearful tragedy with the dagger which planted a rooted sorrow in the mind of Macbeth. Scarcely so old as the days of King Malcolm, Drums was on that memorable Christmas evening of 187-, the year in which our story was told, and some time after the romance happened, a fair specimen of old Scottish architecture—all corners, and turrets, and towers, while the drawbridge and portcullis still remained as in the days when they oft rolled back the tide of war. I say *was*, because the present proprietor is not much of an antiquarian in his tastes, and has built wings all round it, so that in order to get a good view of the old place, you have to get out on to the roof and spend half an hour among the jackdaws, who much prefer as a home an old ivy-clad tower, with its numerous nooks, crannies, and crevices, to the modern chimney-tops of fire-clay, with rattling, wriggling, revolving ventilators, quite as noisy as themselves. The drawing-room at Drums has now been completely changed, and possesses a modern fireside and chimney-piece, æsthetically carved and ornamented ; but let those who were there that happy evening speak out, and they will tell you that they preferred the old-fashioned windows cut loop-hole like into the thick walls, and from which Cupid shot as sharp darts at the soft hearts within as ever did the bowmen of old at the hard hearts of the foemen without. Prefer, too, no doubt, will they the great wide chimney, with its log-laden brazier in the centre, and the sparks hurrying brightly upward as if anxious to be out and rival the stars, with the ruddy weird flame casting its glow over faces which can never look more fair, and countenances which never knew less care.

Ah me! "Christmas comes but once a year, but when it comes it brings good cheer." Well, yes, to many, but sorrow and sickening to some, and memories one would like to dream over all the evening long, voices long, long hushed which sang us the Christmas carols of years ago, the merry laughers who rattled out their Christmas jokes so glibly and so cheerily, and merry faces which in trying hard to recall (just as if they would like to say "A Merry Christmas to you, old fellow") jump out of the log and go away up the chimney, to leave you sad and lonely; and thinking of the fair brow of her you kissed under the mistletoe when you were in your 'teens, but who is now the wife of an old rival and the mother of half-a-dozen as old as she herself was then. Then you think of the lips of another long since cold, and—ah, well! it is no use making Christmas sad because you are left alive.

"What's making old R—— feel so sad?—is it his gout or his gun? Has he been missing all day? He's usually so awfully cheery."

"What's wrong with you, R——, old fellow?" was the query which was fired right off at me in a brusque voice by the young fellow of whom the question was asked. "Pinch of your old friend, the ague; or that letter that came by the cart this afternoon; the house burned down; the mare lame; the banker bolted, or what?"

"Neither, my boy, neither; all's well at home as can be expected, but when you have as many silver threads amongst your gold as I have you will find that old banker, your memory, very much inclined to stay at home and just go over your little account with you. I was thinking of——"

"Tell us what you were dreaming about—some old love affair, eh? Some narrow escape from matrimony—some old Roger de Coverley partner? Do let us have it; it's better for you, you know, to tell it out than dream it inwardly."

As there was quite a chorus of entreaties from all the corners of the apartment, I saw there was no use refusing, and so I essayed to make a beginning:

Fourteen years ago we had one of the most severe winters ever experienced in the British Islands. It started off a dry wind in the end of November, just as folks had begun to get a good true appetite for hunting, and it lasted till the

invitations were out for snowdrops and crocuses in the spring-time. Horses had all grown stale for want of exercise, and hunting men had all gone wrong for want of something to do. Depend upon it a man must have a safety-valve somewhere about to let off the surplus steam, and a fox-hunter somehow should have a couple, as after a winter of long-standing frost the laws that regulate the manners and customs of good society seem to break and burst, like the very water-pipes themselves. Talk about sultry climates indeed; they're nothing to what our own is when there is two feet of six-weeks-old snow on the ground—the master scowling; the huntsman growling; the hounds literally howling, having lost the chord of their woodland tunes; and the foxes prowling round the hen-roosts as tame as starved cats.

Some of you, I dare say, in fact most of you, have been on Loch Laggan in the summer time, when the green fringes of the pine trees hang low upon its shores, and leave a dainty bit of the inner garment of bluebell and yellow primrose, stealing down modestly to the little wavelets which gently beat upon the pebbly beach. Beautiful as it is then, I do not think it is half so lovely as in winter, and certainly it never looked more lovely during any winter than on that of fourteen years ago. From base to summit the mountains on each side were clad with snow, which, with every hour's advance of the sun, brought out all the colours of the kaleidoscope, and their continued shifting in the glens and corries gave one the idea of a day playing *Aurora Borealis*. Heavy-laden, the boughs of the larches stooped low to the ground with spikelets of sun-thaw shining like crystals, while fretted silver-work as fine as the gossamer which spreads from flower stalk to stalk in the autumn fields, stretched from spray to spray. Gorse, thicket, and hedgerow were all in white—a silent, soundless white, for the babble of the streamlet was hushed, and the feathered minstrels had long been mute—mute in despair, while thinking of happy days in the past summer. Loch Laggan itself was bright as a silver shield, for the frost had not seized hold of it till after the heaviest of the snowstorms had been past, and the thinner showers had been swept before the gale to the banks on each side, just like spindrift before a squall to the seashore. With its ice so strong that it could have carried a full regiment of artillery—men, horses, guns, and all—

without giving the slightest signs of yielding, it was but natural that we should take to skating and the formation of ice-parties. A little of that, and then gala days were proposed, the fellows of the 150th, quartered at G—, twenty miles out, who had just come home from Canada, being anxious to have a taste of the life they had enjoyed the previous winter, while possibly also being desirous of showing off a little of their skating. So arrangements were made for a grand *fête* on one of the little islands. A snow fort was built, and stuck round with castellated spears of ice artificially frozen, and trees were cut and arranged so as to make a good bonfire. Laggan larders and Laggan cellars supplied a large amount of the good things which are more than ever indispensable in frosty weather and a more picturesque sight was never seen than on that merry Boxing Day fourteen years ago, when the band of the 150th, their red coats shining in the sun, played opposite the little snow-formed, ice-barbed fort.

Proudly the Major, who was as grim a veteran as ever wore a sword or squirmed under the gout, drove up and down in a sleigh which was yoked to a favourite Russian thoroughbred which had won more than one race in the ice-trotting matches at St. Petersburg, and which had been sent him as a present from an old Russian officer he had spared in the Crimea.

But, though everyone could not help admiring the style of the turn-out, the eyes of most of the 150th men were directed to his only daughter—a sweet, plump girl of nineteen, who in the daintiest of skating costumes, something quite unique, a dress very much like the kilt of the Laggan tartan, fronted by a sporran, with white shield and foxhead, with stockings of Laggan tartan, red and blue, silver buckles at sides, with cairngorms to match, fur-headed boots, a velvet tunic over a tartan vest or bodice, above and over all a Glengarry bonnet and feather. With large black eyes, a beautiful complexion, neat round features, a nose the least thing *retroussé*, and a form as plump as a November partridge, there is little wonder that more than one fine fellow was frostbitten in the region of the left breast that morning. Over at the little town where they were stationed they felt things go past very slowly; indeed, as I heard one remark, he never saw such a stableful of garrison hacks about a place in his life, and I daresay some of you know what a garri-

son hack is—if you don't, you young fellows will soon find out.

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Here my cough began to trouble me most annoyingly, and in order to relieve me for a moment or two, young Jack, with that ease which always characterises a young fellow in his father's drawing-room before strangers, started off with the song of

#### THE GARRISON HACK.

Did ever ye hear of the garrison hack,  
 She's a blonde, or brunette, or sometimes a black ?  
 As regiments do change she changes her hair,  
 And the colour depends on the facings you wear.  
 She's golden with gunners, she's fair with Hussars,  
 She alters her hue for each bold son of Mars ;  
 With the Colonel himself she will play the coquette,  
 She can chaff with the surgeon, or flirt with the vet.

Oh ! the garrison hack at the garrison ball  
 Has a pace that she suits to the lot of us all ;  
 She'll step slow through a set to suit a man's gout,  
 Then go off at a galop as smart's threes about ;  
 With the best of high action for showing a kilt,  
 She suits a big Highlander all to the hilt ;  
 E'en with the Marines she will show her heels,  
 As she lurches sea-legged through the Lancers Quadrilles.

Though no one remembers the day she was foaled,  
 Yet the garrison hack she never grows old ;  
 For you may be in barracks, in camp, or in dock.  
 Or marching all over or stuck on "The Rock,"  
 It matters not where, for as soon as you're back,  
 You'll be met on the pier by the garrison hack.  
 Oh ! there may be a wrinkle or two in her face,  
 But she still has her tongue, and she's not lost her pacc.

Oh ! the garrison hack's seen many a campaign,  
 Hard, hard has she fought a husband to gain ;  
 She's bombarded a man who blockaded a port,  
 She's laid siege to a man who has oft stormed a fort ;  
 Half-way to the altar, on purpose to wed,  
 Some leaders of forlorn hopes, too, she has led.  
 But a half-bodied "Sub.," who draws his half-pay,  
 Poor thing ! she now limps alongside of to-day.



All day the two flitted about hand in hand while Captain Evans looked on with angry eyes!

Well, any change from the company of the chameleon-like lady in your song, you may be certain, was gladly welcomed : There was one of our party, however, who could have wished the whole of the 150th fellows at the bottom of the loch, and this was Evans—Captain Evans, from the land of leeks, to whom the fair daughter of the Laird was engaged. He was a big ruddy-faced fellow, tall and straight, with very even features, and was what, indeed, most people would call handsome. He was very reserved in his manner, and was generally voted silent, though some said that he thought a great deal the time he was holding his tongue. Good with a gun or a bat, or even across country, he was no good on skates and it was almost pitiable to see him completely at the mercy of his steel-shod feet, tumbling and staggering over the ice while all the others were gliding about so nimbly backward and forward, on inside or outside edge, doing the cross roll, and, indeed, moving about as gracefully as swallows on a summer's evening. Best of all the skaters was Young Shiskan, who had won several of the prizes for fancy skating in the Canadian rink matches in the previous winter, and was considered as good on the ice as any of the natives in that country. With the fair heiress of Laggan he was much taken, and there could be no doubt whatever that, though he had determined to be a bachelor all his life, being a keen horseman, he was fairly smitten. All day the two flitted about together hand-in-hand and with hands at times crossed, while Evans, afraid to move lest he should fall, looked on with angry eyes from afar. They even waltzed together to the music, tried to cut out each other's initials linked together in monogram-fashion on the ice, and, to make a long story short, when the sun died down in the western horizon, and the hour of parting came, Young Shiskan and Miss Laggan of Laggan were madly in love with each other—at least, so they thought.

The next day the former dropped on to the ice as if by accident, and the next, and the next again ; and then I saw, and I think so did Evans and the old Major himself, that things were getting serious.

I was standing one evening late amongst the laurels close to the lake, when I heard the unmistakable ringing of skates on the ice, and, looking out, saw a dark form come sweeping forward like a heron skimming the water at twilight. A red

spot glowed on the top, and I knew that the figure was not that of one of the servants about the place ; it was a gentleman, and he was smoking a cigar. It could not be Evans, for I knew he could not skate, and any who could skate I had left in the billiard-room. I put the stopper in my pipe, and crept back into the laurels, determined to see what it meant. Steadily the figure approached, till it was between me and the last red light of the sinking sun, and then I saw unmistakably it was Shiskan. "Ho, ho!" I said to myself; "this is to be a moon-light serenade. I wonder what Evans or the old man would say to this." Flinging away his cigar, the young Sub. flung himself on to the outside edge of his right skate and ran gracefully to land. "What next?" thought I to myself. "Something on the guitar?" But no; a low whistle, such as the sentinel curlew gives when first disturbed, was all that broke the silence. In a minute it was answered by the placing of a light in the window of Miss Laggan's room. Shiskan then began to whistle a tune with which I was familiar, but for the life of me could not name. It was the tune of a Canadian skating song which I had heard him singing once in the little snow fort on the island.

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Another violent fit of coughing here checked me, and one of my fair hearers came to my relief by singing the skating song which I had forgotten, and which runs as follows :

#### COME UPON THE ICE, LOVE.

Pale are now the moonlit hills, snow-wreaths deck the bough,  
 Crystals white are hanging bright from the cascade's brow ;  
 Keen has woo'd the frosty knight, Nature's in a trance,  
 Fairies gay, with footsteps light, 'neath the moonbeams dance.  
     So come upon the ice, love, gaily let us glide,  
     Fleeting o'er the icy floor, gaily side by side ;  
     Skating 'neath the bright moonlight, so gentle and so free,  
     Come upon the ice, love, and glide along with me.

Above, the sky is clear, love, the water's pure below,  
 The icy floor is strong, love, untarnished is the snow ;  
 As cold now blows the breeze, love, so warms my blood to thine—  
 The wind it ne'er can freeze, love, between thy heart and mine.  
     So come upon the ice, love, &c.



Then through the world together, love, as o'er the icy plain,  
Let's hand and hand ne'er sever, love, nor heart and heart go twain :  
The circlings of our skates, love, our love they shall reveal,  
The ringing of our skates, love, shall be our wedding peal.  
    So come upon the ice, love, gaily let us glide,  
    Fleeting o'er the icy floor, gaily side by side ;  
    Skating 'neath the bright moonlight, so gentle and so free,  
    Come upon the ice, love, and glide along with me.

A few minutes after Shiskan had ceased whistling the tune, I saw the figure of a lady come round one of the corners of the castle and, after once looking behind, approach in the direction from which she had heard the whistle. Somehow she moved as if in irons, and I could not well make it out. She certainly walked with anything but the grace of the daughter of the Laird. Miss Laggan, however, it was, for in a few minutes afterwards I heard her address her serenader as Jack. She was more than usually heavily attired, even for an evening walk, and the cause of her ungraceful style of action was her skates, which Shiskan bent to strap more firmly. As he did so, I heard him say, "The night is going to be clear, the ice is keen, and we can do it in an hour. Once at Binnock station and we are as safe as if we were at Euston, London, to-morrow morning."

"Gracious heaven!" said I to myself, "this is a serious business. They mean to elope."

What was to be done? Burst upon the couple, or go and inform the father? Wiser thoughts came to my assistance. Let things alone, I said to myself; you are not supposed to be here.

"Lose no time," I heard the fair one say; "Papa has been suspicious for a few days, and I think some good-natured friend has told him to be on the look-out, as he has Mazeppa always standing ready to put into the sleigh." I heard no more save the clear ringing of their skates as, hand-in-hand, they struck out on to the open loch, then bent to the right under the shadow of the yew trees which fringed a peninsula. "A nice business this for a cold night!" I said to myself, not knowing what to say or think, "and a bonnie kettle of fish there will be to boil in the morning."

Reaching the castle by a back way, I had just got to the front entrance when the Major burst forth, with the foam at

his mouth. There was no doubt about it, the escape had been discovered, and there stood the discoverer, the head gamekeeper, who had witnessed a serenade a previous evening, and been on the watch ever since.

"You say the train leaves Binnock sharp at nine, Wilson, and catches the London mail at Storrs Junction?"

"It does, sir," was the reply.

"Then ere they reach Binnock we must overtake them, that is all. Ho! there; what keeps you with the mare?"

As he spoke the tinkling sound of sleigh bells was heard, and Mazeppa, hard driven by a groom, came round the corner. Tossing aside the wraps, the Major, without a word, motioned me to jump in, and the word he kept he gave to the mare; it was in Russe, and was one used on the trotting ice tracks of the Russian capital. Sweeping the lawn, and smashing the snow from the laurels, we dashed down the brow and on to the ice, close to where the two started out on their romantic journey. No whip was wanted for the well-bred mare, one of the most noted from the private haraz of a distinguished Russian nobleman. Forward she sprang till every sound re-echoed amongst the hills, while the bells tinkled as furiously as if rung for the fire that was bursting from her eyes and the eyes of the driver. Before the light breeze clouds of snow, which were raised by her hoofs and the shoes of the sleigh, swept away to leeward as, spectre-like, we dashed onward. Halting not in our speed, we rounded a bend in the loch, just as the first of the moon peeped out from beneath a cloud, and there we saw ahead the figures of two persons close together, while far away in the foreground we could discern the railway lights at Binnock.

"We will catch them yet," hissed the old warrior through his teeth, as with loosened reins he encouraged the little mare, which almost flew along the surface of the ice. Nearer, nearer, and nearer still we closed on them, till I could see that they saw they were being pursued. How I wished them to go faster every time the Major urged on the mare, but it was of no avail. Poor young Shiskan and his fair companion were evidently to be caught. With her left hand grasped in his, the young soldier launched out his feet right and left in long, strong sweeps, to which the heiress tried well to keep time; though doubtless, poor girl, she must have been well tired. Their flowing, freezing

breath against the Binnock lights I could fairly see in clouds, hanging in the frozen air ; the ringing of their skates was sharp, distinct, and metallic, and I could make out their every stroke ; but the grey-haired, grey-maned steed of Russia was not to be beaten, and so we closed till we were within 150 yards of them.

At that point we could see a long black line stretching out between them and the station.

"It is the course of the Binnock burn unfrozen," said the Major ; "that they cannot cross. Good God ! they are going to try to leap it !" was his next call, and half alarmed that he would press them to it, he raised up the mare till she slid along the ice. She was too late. I heard Shiskan say, "Together ! Now—whoop !" and with a bound they landed on the other side. Ere the Major had recovered his breath, and set the mare a-going again, we could see them clambering up the steps beyond to the station. As we could not follow, we had to try half a mile round ; but before we had crossed half that distance the train moved slowly out, Shiskan having prevailed upon the driver, seeing there were no other passengers, it being a terminus, to move on to the next station.

That they got to Euston and were married in due time I need not tell you. All I know is that old Laggan caught a cold that night, and died of it a fortnight afterwards, leaving the estate to the girl.

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"And of course it ended like all other Christmas stories," said young Jackanapes from the corner, "didn't it ? Peace, joy, happiness, and all that."

"Well, no, alas ! Poor Jack ! He fell——"

"While gloriously leading his men at Kassassin ?" asked one of my fair hearers.

"Majuba Hill, was it not ?" asked another, with tears in her big, soft eyes, as I tried to recover from my coughing.

"He fell while leading the field on the back of the favourite," I continued ; "and as he was carried home on a hurdle his wife bolted from the stand with the very man she jilted, Captain Evans, the Welshman !"

"The jade !" said horsey old Noggins, from the corner, who had been a silent and attentive listener. "I'd have put her in a

selling race for £20 if I had had her, and squared the remainder. What did Shiskan do? Divorce her, eh?"

"No, he did not. He merely sent Evans a kind note, saying that the course of true love never did ride smooth, and all that sort of thing; that if the old horse he was riding had kept his legs, he would have been glad to have seen him off; that he would send her some of her head-gear and stable fittings; and consider the thing square; and wished him all success, though he thought matrimony was far too long a course for a mare of such high mettle; and that he was certain she wouldn't stay. You see it was just as I tell you: when the thaw came she burst up completely, which shows the danger to all of making Love below Zero.

