

# **Mrs. Knollys**

Frederic J. Stimson

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## I

THE GREAT Pasterzen glacier rises in Western Austria, and flows into Carinthia, and is fourteen or seventeen miles long, as you measure it from its birth in the snow field, or from where it begins to move from the higher snows and its active course is marked by the first wrinkle. It flows in a straight, steady sweep, a grand avenue, guarded by giant mountains, steep and wide; a prototype, huge and undesigned, of the giants' stairway in the Venice palace. No known force can block its path; it would need a cataclysm to reverse its progress. What falls upon it moves with it, what lies beneath it moves with it down to the polished surface of the earth's frame, laid bare; no blade of grass grows so slowly as it moves, no meteor of the air is so irresistible. Its substantial ice curls freely, molds, and breaks itself like water, breaks in waves, plastic like honey, crested lightly with a frozen spray; it winds tenderly about the rocky shore, and the granite, disintegrated into crumbs, flows on with it. All this so quietly that busy, officious little Man lived a score of thousand years before he noticed even that the glacier moved.

Now, however, men have learned to congregate upon its shores, and admire. Scientists stick staves in the ground (not too near, lest the earth should move with it), and appraise the majesty of its motion; ladies, politely mystified, give little screams of pleased surprise; young men, secretly exultant, pace the yard or two between the sticks, a distance that takes the frozen stream a year to compass, and look out upon it half contemptuously. Then they cross it carefully, they have enough respect left for that with their cunningly nailed shoes and a rope; an hour or two they dally with it, till at last, being hungry and cold, they walk to the inn for supper. At supper they tell stories of their prowess, pay money to the guides who have protected them, and fall asleep after tea with weariness. Meantime, the darkness falls outside; but the white presence of the glacier breaks the night, and strange shapes unseen of men dance in its ashen hollows. It is so old that the realms of death and life conflict; change is on the surface, but immortality broods in the deeper places. The moon rises and sinks; the glacier moves silently, like a timepiece marking the centuries, grooving the record of its being on the world itself, a feature to be read and studied by far-off generations of some other world. The glacier has a light of its own, and gleams to stars above, and the great Glockner mountain flings his shadow of the planets in its face.

Mrs. Knollys was a young English bride, sunny-haired, hopeful-eyed, with lips that parted to make you love them, parted before they smiled, and all the soft regions of her face broke into attendant dimples. And then, lest you should think it meant for you, she looked quickly up to "Charles," as she would then call him even to strangers, and Charles looked down to her. Charles was a short foot taller, with much the same hair and eyes, thick flossy whiskers, broad shoulders, and a bass voice. This was in the days before political economy cut Hymen's wings. Charles, like Mary, had little money, but great hopes; and he was clerk in a government office,

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with a friendly impression of everybody and much trust in himself. And old Harry Colquhoun, his chief, had given them six weeks to go to Switzerland and be happy in, all in celebration of Charles Knollys's majority and marriage to his young wife. So they had both forgotten heaven for the nonce, having a passable substitute; but the powers divine overlooked them pleasantly and forgave it. And even the phlegmatic driver of their Einspänner looked back from the corner of his eye at the schöne Engländerin, and compared her mentally with the far-famed beauty of the Königssee. So they rattled on in their curious conveyance, with the pole in the middle and the one horse out on one side, and still found more beauty in each other's eyes than in the world about them. Although Charles was only one and twenty, Mary Knollys was barely eighteen, and to her he seemed godlike in his age, as in all other things. Her life had been as simple as it had been short. She remembered being a little girl, and then the next thing that occurred was Charles Knollys, and positively the next thing she remembered of importance was being Mrs. Charles Knollys; so that old Mrs. Knollys, her guardian aunt and his, had first called her a love of a baby, and then but a baby in love. All this, of course, was five and forty years ago, for you know how old she was when she went again to Switzerland last summer three and sixty.

They first saw the great mountains from the summit of the Schafberg. This is a little height, three-cornered between three lakes; a natural Belvedere for Central Europe. Mr. and Mrs. Knollys were seated on a couch of Alpine roses behind a rhododendron bush watching the sunset; but as Charles was desirous of kissing Mrs. Knollys, and the rhododendron bush was not thick enough, they were waiting for the sun to go down. He was very slow in doing this, and by way of consolation Knollys was keeping his wife's hand hidden in the folds of her dress. Undoubtedly a modern lady would have been talking of the scenery, giving word-color pictures of the view; but I am afraid Mrs. Knollys had been looking at her husband, and talking with him of the cottage they had bought in a Surrey village, not far from Box Hill, and thinking how the little carvings and embroideries would look there which they had bought abroad. And, indeed, Mrs. Charles secretly thought Box Hill an eminence far preferable to the Venediger, and Charles's face an infinitely more interesting sight than any lake, however expressive. But the sun, looking askance at them through the lower mist, was not jealous; all the same he spread his glory lavishly for them, and the bright little mirror of a lake twinkled cannily upward from below. Finally it grew dark; then there was less talking. It was full night when they went in, she leaning on his arm and looking up; and the moonbeam on the snowy shoulder of the Glockner, twenty leagues away, came over, straightway, from the mountain to her face. Three days later, Charles Knollys, crossing with her the lower portion of the Pasterzen glacier, slipped into a crevasse, and vanished utterly from the earth.

## II

All this you know. And I was also told more of the girl, bride and widow at eighteen; how she sought to throw herself into the clear blue gulf; how she refused to leave Heiligenblut; how she would sit, tearless, by the rim of the crevasse, day after day, and gaze into its profundity. A guide or man was always with her at these times, for it was still feared she would follow her young husband to the depths of that still sea. Her aunt went over from England to her; the summer waxed; autumn storms set in; but no power could win her from the place whence Charles had gone.

If there was a time worse for her than that first moment, it was when they told her that his body never could be found. They did not dare to tell her this for many days, but busied themselves with idle cranes and ladders, and made futile pretenses with ropes. Some of the big, simple-hearted guides even descended into the chasm, absenting themselves for an hour or so, to give her an idea that something was being done. Poor Mrs. Knollys would have followed them had she been allowed, to wander through the purple galleries, calling Charles. It was well she could not; for all Kaspar could do was to lower himself a hundred yards or so, chisel out a niche, and stand in it, smoking his honest pipe to pass the time, and trying to fancy he could hear the murmur of the waters down below. Meantime Mrs. Knollys strained her eyes, peering downward from above, leaning on the rope about her waist, looking over the clear brink of the bergschrund.

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It was the Herr Doctor Zimmermann who first told her the truth. Not that the good Doctor meant to do so. The Herr Doctor had had his attention turned to glaciers by some rounded stones in his garden by the Traunsee, and more particularly by the Herr Privatdocent Splüthner. Splüthner, like Uncle Toby, had his hobby horse, his pet conjuring words, his gods *ex machinâ*, which he brought upon the field in scientific emergencies; and these gods, as with Thales, were Fire and Water. Craters and flood were his accustomed scapegoats, upon whose heads were charged all things unaccountable; and the Herr Doctor, who had only one element left to choose from, and that a passive one, but knew, on general principles, that Splüthner must be wrong, got as far off as he could and took Ice. And Splüthner having pooh-poohed this, Zimmermann rode his hypothesis with redoubled zeal. He became convinced that ice was the embodiment of orthodoxy. Fixing his professional spectacles on his substantial nose, he went into Carinthia and ascended the great Venice mountains, much as he would have performed any other scientific experiment. Then he encamped on the shores of the Pasterzen glacier, and proceeded to make a study of it.

So it happened that the Doctor, taking a morning stroll over the subject of his experiment, in search of small things which might verify his theory, met Mrs. Knollys sitting in her accustomed place. The Doctor had been much puzzled, that morning, on finding in a rock at the foot of the glacier the impression, or sign—manual as it were, of a certain fish, whose acquaintance the Doctor had previously made only in tropical seas. This fact seeming, superficially, to chime in with Splüthnerian mistakes in a most heterodox way, the Doctor's mind had for a moment been diverted from the ice; and he was wondering what the fish had been going to do in that particular gallery, and secretly doubting whether it had known its own mind, and gone thither with the full knowledge and permission of its maternal relative. Indeed, the good Doctor would probably have ascribed its presence to the malicious and personal causation of the devil, but that the one point on which he and Splüthner were agreed was the ignoring of unscientific hypotheses. The Doctor's objections to the devil were none the less strenuous for being purely scientific.

Thus ruminating, the Doctor came to the crevasse where Mrs. Knollys was sitting, and to which a little path had now been worn from the inn. There was nothing of scientific interest about the fair young English girl, and the Doctor did not notice her; but he took from his waistcoat pocket a leaden bullet, molded by himself, and marked "Johannes Carpentarius, Juvavianus, A. U. C. 2590," and dropped it, with much satisfaction, into the crevasse. Mrs. Knollys gave a little cry; the bullet was heard for some seconds tinkling against the sides of the chasm; the tinkles grew quickly fainter, but they waited in vain for the noise of the final fall. "May the Splüthner live that he may learn by it," muttered the Doctor; "I can never recover it."

Then he remembered that the experiment had been attended with a sound unaccounted for by the conformity of the bullet to the laws of gravitation; and looking up he saw Mrs. Knollys in front of him, no longer crying, but very pale. Zimmermann started, and in his confusion dropped his best brass registering thermometer, which also rattled down the abyss.

"You say," whispered Mrs. Knollys, "that it can never be recovered!"

"Madam," spoke the Doctor, doffing his hat, "how would you recofer from a blace when the smallest approximation which I haf yet been able to make puts the depth from the surface to the bed of the gletscher at vrom sixteen hundred to sixteen hundred and sixty meters in distance?" Doctor Zimmermann spoke very good English; and he pushed his hat upon the back of his head, and assumed his professional attitude.

"But they all were trying " Mrs. Knollys spoke faintly. "They said that they hoped he could be recovered." The stranger was the oldest gentleman she had seen, and Mrs. Knollys felt almost like confiding in him. "Oh, I must have the the body." She closed in a sob; but the Herr Doctor caught at the last word, and this suggested to him only the language of scientific experiment.

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"Recofer it? If, madam," Zimmermann went on with all the satisfaction attendant on the enunciation of a scientific truth, "we take a body and drop it in the schrund of this gletscher; and the ice stream moves so slower at its base than on the upper part, and the ice will cover it, efen if we could reach the base, which is a mile in depth. Then, see you, it is all caused by the motion of the ice "

But at this Mrs. Knollys had given a faint cry, and her guide rushed up angrily to the old professor, who stared helplessly forward. "God will help me, sir," said she to the Doctor, and she gave the guide her arm and walked wearily away.

The professor still stared in amazement at her enthusiasm for scientific experiment and the passion with which she greeted his discoveries. Here was a person who utterly refused to be referred to the agency of ice, or even, like Splüthner, of Fire and Water; and went out of the range of allowable hypotheses to call upon a Noumenon. Now both Splüthner and Zimmermann had studied all natural agencies and made allowance for them, but for the Divine they had always hitherto proved an alibi. The Doctor could make nothing of it.

At the inn that evening he saw Mrs. Knollys with swollen eyes; and remembering the scene of the afternoon, he made inquiries about her of the innkeeper. The latter had heard the guide's account of the meeting; and as soon as Zimmermann had made plain what he had told her of the falling body, "Triple blockhead!" said he. "Es war ihr Mann." The Herr Professor staggered back into his seat; and the kindly innkeeper ran upstairs to see what had happened to his poor young guest.

Mrs. Knollys had recovered from the first shock by this time, but the truth could no longer be withheld. The innkeeper could but nod his head sadly, when she told him that to recover her Charles was hopeless. All the guides said the same thing. The poor girl's husband had vanished from the world as utterly as if his body had been burned to ashes and scattered in the pathway of the winds. Charles Knollys was gone, utterly gone; no more to be met with by his girl-wife, save as spirit to spirit, soul to soul, in ultramundane place. The fair-haired young Englishman lived but in her memory, as his soul, if still existent, lived in places indeterminate, unknowable to Doctor Zimmermann and his compeers. Slowly Mrs. Knollys acquired the belief that she was never to see her Charles again. Then, at last, she resolved to go to go home. Her strength now gave way; and when her aunt left she had with her but the ghost of Mrs. Knollys a broken figure, drooping in the carriage, veiled in black. The innkeeper and all the guides stood bareheaded, silent, about the door, as the carriage drove off, bearing the bereaved widow back to England.

### III

When the Herr Doctor had heard the innkeeper's answer, he sat for some time with his hands planted on his knees, looking through his spectacles at the opposite wall. Then he lifted one hand and struck his brow impatiently. It was his way, when a chemical reaction had come out wrong.

"Triple blockhead!" said he; "triple blockhead, thou art so bad as Splüthner." No self-condemnation could have been worse to him than this. Thinking again of Mrs. Knollys, he gave one deep, gruff sob. Then he took his hat, and going out, wandered by the shore of the glacier in the night, repeating to himself the Englishwoman's words: "They said that they hoped he could be recovered." Zimmermann came to the tent where he kept his instruments, and stood there, looking at the sea of ice. He went to his measuring pegs, two rods of iron: one sunk deep and frozen in the glacier, the other drilled into a rock on the shore. "Triple blockhead!" said he again, "thou art worse than Splüthner. The Splüthner said the glacier did not move; thou, thou knowest that it does." He sighted from his rods to the mountain opposite. There was a slight and all but imperceptible change of direction from the day before.

He could not bear to see the English girl again, and all the next day was absent from the inn. For a month he

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stopped at Heiligenblut, and busied himself with his instruments. The guides of the place greeted him coldly every day, as they started on their glacier excursions or their chamois hunting. But none the less did Zimmermann return the following summer, and work upon his great essay in refutation of the Splüthner.

Mrs. Knollys went back to the little cottage in Surrey, and lived there. The chests and cases she brought back lay unopened in the storeroom; the little rooms of the cottage that was to be their home remained bare and unadorned as Charles had seen them last. She could not bring herself to alter them now. What she had looked forward to do with him she had no strength to do alone. She rarely went out. There was no place where she could go to think of him. He was gone; gone from England, gone from the very surface of the earth. If he had only been buried in some quiet English churchyard, she thought, some green place lying open to the sun, where she could go and scatter flowers on his grave, where she could sit and look forward amid her tears to the time when she should lie side by side with him, they would then be separated for her short life alone. Now it seemed to her that they were far apart forever.

But late the next summer she had a letter from the place. It was from Dr. Zimmermann. There is no need here to trace the quaint German phrases, the formalism, the cold terms of science in which he made his meaning plain. It spoke of erosion; of the movement of the summer; of the action of the under-waters on the ice. And it told her, with tender sympathy oddly blended with the pride of scientific success, that he had given a year's most careful study to the place; with all his instruments of measurement he had tested the relentless glacier's flow; and it closed by assuring her that her husband might be found in five and forty years. In five and forty years the poor professor staked his scientific reputation on the fact in five and forty years she might return, and the glacier would give up its dead.

This letter made Mrs. Knollys happier. It made her willing to live; it made her almost long to live until old age that her Charles's body might be given back. She took heart to beautify her little home. The trifling articles she had bought with Charles were now brought out, the little curiosities and pictures he had given her on their wedding journey. She would ask how such and such a thing looked, turning her pretty head to some kind visitor, as she ranged them on the walls; and now and then she would have to lay the picture down and cry a little, silently, as she remembered where Charles had told her it would look best. Still, she sought to furnish the rooms as they had planned them in their mind; she made her surroundings, as nearly as she could, as they had pictured them together. One room she never went into; it was the room Charles had meant to have for the nursery. She had no child.

But she changed, as we all change, with the passing of the years. I first remember her as a woman middle-aged, sweet-faced, hardly like a widow, nor yet like an old maid. She was rather like a young girl in love, with her lover absent on a long journey. She lived more with the memory of her husband, she clung to him more than if she had had a child. She never married; you would have guessed that; but, after the professor's letter, she never quite seemed to realize that her husband was dead. Was he not coming back to her?

Never in all my knowledge of dear English women have I known a woman so much loved. In how many houses was she always the most welcome guest! How often we boys would go to her for sympathy! I know she was the confidante of all our love affairs. I cannot speak for girls; but I fancy she was much the same with them. Many of us owed our life's happiness to her. She would chide us gently in our pettiness and folly, and teach us, by her very presence and example, what thing it was that alone could keep life sweet. How well we all remember the little Surrey cottage, the little home fireside where the husband had never been! I think she grew to imagine his presence, even the presence of children: boys, curly-headed, like Charles, and sweet, blue-eyed daughters; and the fact that it was all imagining seemed but to make the place more holy. Charles still lived to her as she had believed him in the month that they were married; he lived through life with her as her young love had fancied he would be. She never thought of evil that might have occurred; of failing affection, of cares. Her happiness was in her mind alone; so all the earthly part was absent.

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There were but two events in her life that which was past and that which was to come. She had lived through his loss; now she lived on for his recovery. But, as I have said, she changed, as all things mortal change; all but the earth and the ice stream and the stars above it. She read much, and her mind grew deep and broad, none the less gentle with it all; she was wiser in the world; she knew the depths of human hope and sorrow. You remember her only as an old lady whom we loved. Only her heart did not change I forgot that; her heart, and the memory of that last loving smile upon his face, as he bent down to look into her eyes, before he slipped and fell. She lived on, and waited for his body, as possibly his other self who knows? waited for hers. As she grew older she grew taller; her eyes were quieter, her hair a little straighter, darker than of yore; her face changed, only the expression remained the same. Mary Knollys!

Human lives rarely look more than a year, or five, ahead; Mary Knollys looked five and forty. Many of us wait, and grow weary in waiting, for those few years alone, and for some living friend. Mary Knollys waited five and forty years for the dead. Still, after that first year, she never wore all black; only silvery grays, and white with a black ribbon or two. I have said she almost seemed to think her husband living. She would fancy his doing this and that with her; how he would joy in this good fortune, or share her sorrows which were few, mercifully. His memory seemed to be a living thing to her, to go through life with her, hand in hand; it changed as she grew old; it altered itself to suit her changing thought; until the very memory of her memory seemed to make it sure that he had really been alive with her, really shared her happiness or sorrow, in the far-off days of her earliest widow-hood. It hardly seemed that he had been gone already then she remembered him so well. She could not think that he had never been with her in their little cottage. And now, at sixty, I know she thought of him as an old person, too, sitting by their fireside, late in life, mature, deep-souled, wise with the wisdom of years, going back with her, fondly, to recall the old, old happiness of their bridal journey, when they set off for the happy honeymoon abroad, and the long life now past stretched brightly out before them both. She never spoke of this, and you children never knew it; but it was always in her mind.

There was a plain stone in the little Surrey churchyard, now gray and moss-grown with the rains of forty years, on which you remember reading: "Charles Knollys lost in Carinthia" This was all she would have inscribed; he was but lost; no one knew that he was dead. Was he not yet to be found? There was no grassy mound beside it; the earth was smooth. Not even the date was there. But Mrs. Knollys never went to read it. She waited until he should come; until that last journey, repeating the travels of their wedding days, when she should go to Germany to bring him home.

So the woman's life went on in England, and the glacier in the Alps moved on slowly; and the woman waited for it to be gone.

## IV

In the summer of 1882, the little Carinthian village of Heiligenblut was haunted by two persons. One was a young German scientist, with long hair and spectacles; and the other was a tall English lady, slightly bent, with a face wherein the finger of time had deeply written tender things. Her hair was white as silver, and she wore a long black veil. Their habits were strangely similar. Every morning, when the eastern light shone deepest into the ice cavern at the base of the great Pasterzen glacier, these two would walk thither; then both would sit for an hour or two and peer into its depths. Neither knew why the other was there. The woman would go back for an hour in the late afternoon; the man, never. He knew that the morning light was necessary for his search.

The man was the famous young Zimmermann, son of his father, the old Doctor, long since dead. But the Herr Doctor had written a famous tract, when late in life, refuting all Splüthners, past, present, and to come; and had charged his son, in his dying moments, as a most sacred trust, that he should repair to the base of the Pasterzen glacier in the year 1882, where he would find a leaden bullet, graven with his father's name, and the date A. U. C. 2590. All this would be vindication of his father's science. Splüthner, too, was a very old man, and Zimmermann



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the younger (for even he was no longer young) was fearful lest Splüthner should not live to witness his own refutation. The woman and the man never spoke to each other.

Alas, no one could have known Mrs. Knollys for the fair English girl who had been there in the young days of the century; not even the innkeeper, had he been there. But he, too, was long since dead. Mrs. Knollys was now bent and white-haired; she had forgotten, herself, how she had looked in those old days. Her life had been lived. She was now like a woman of another world; it seemed another world in which her fair hair had twined about her husband's fingers, and she and Charles had stood upon the evening mountain, and looked in one another's eyes. That was the world of her wedding days, but it seemed more like a world she had left when born on earth. And now he was coming back to her in this. Meantime the great Pasterzen glacier had moved on, marking only the centuries; the men upon its borders had seen no change; the same great waves lifted their snowy heads upon its surface; the same crevasse still was where he had fallen. At night, the moonbeams, falling, still shivered off its glassy face; its pale presence filled the night, and immortality lay brooding in its hollow.

Friends were with Mrs. Knollys, but she left them at the inn. One old guide remembered her, and asked to bear her company. He went with her in the morning, and sat a few yards from her, waiting. In the afternoon she went alone. He would not have credited you, had you told him that the glacier moved. He thought it but an English-woman's fancy, but he waited with her. Himself had never forgotten that old day. And Mrs. Knollys sat there silently, searching the clear depths of the ice, that she might find her husband.

One night she saw a ghost. The latest beam of the sun, falling on a mountain opposite, had shone back into the ice cavern; and seemingly deep within, in the grave azure light, she fancied she saw a face turned toward her. She even thought she saw Charles's yellow hair, and the selfsame smile his lips had worn when he bent down to her before he fell. It could be but a fancy. She went home, and was silent with her friends about what had happened. In the moonlight she went back, and again the next morning before dawn. She told no one of her going; but the old guide met her at the door, and walked silently behind her. She had slept, the glacier ever present in her dreams.

The sun had not yet risen when she came; and she sat a long time in the cavern, listening to the murmur of the river, flowing under the glacier at her feet. Slowly the dawn began, and again she seemed to see the shimmer of a face such a face as one sees in the coals of a dying fire. Then the full sun came over the eastern mountain, and the guide heard a woman's cry. There before her was Charles Knollys! The face seemed hardly pale; and there was the same faint smile a smile like her memory of it, five and forty years gone by. Safe in the clear ice, still, unharmed, there lay O God! not her Charles; not the Charles of her own thought, who had lived through life with her and shared her sixty years; not the old man she had borne thither in her mind but a boy, a boy of one and twenty lying asleep, a ghost from another world coming to confront her from the distant past, immortal in the immortality of the glacier. There was his quaint coat, of the fashion of half a century before; his blue eyes open; his young, clear brow; all the form of the past she had forgotten; and she his bride stood there to welcome him, with her wrinkles, her bent figure, and thin white hairs. She was living, he was dead; and she was two and forty years older than he.

Then at last the long-kept tears came to her, and she bent her white head in the snow. The old man came up with his pick, silently, and began working in the ice. The woman lay weeping, and the boy with his still, faint smile, lay looking at them, through the clear ice-veil, from his open eyes.

I believe that the professor found his bullet; I know not. I believe that the scientific world rang with his name and the thesis that he published on the glacier's motion, and the changeless temperature his father's lost thermometer had shown. All this you may read. I know no more.

But I know that in the English churchyard there are now two graves, and a single stone to Charles Knollys and Mary, his wife; and the boy of one and twenty sleeps there with his bride of sixty-three; his young frame with her

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old one, his yellow hair beside her white. And I do not know that there is not some place, not here, where they are still together, and he is twenty-one and she is still eighteen. I do not know this; but I know that all the pamphlets of the German doctor cannot tell me it is false.

Meantime the great Pasterzen glacier moves on, and the rocks with it; and the mountain flings his shadow of the planets in its face.