Fordham's Feud

By

Bertram Mitford

FORDHAM'S FEUD

Chapter One.

At First Sight.

The steamer Mont Blanc was sweeping round the rather dangerous promontory just beyond La Tour de Peilz.

The fine vessel was a brave sight as she sped arrowlike over the turquoise breast of Lake Léman, her straight stem shearing up a great scintillating blade of water on either side, her powerful paddles lashing up a long line of creaming rollers, hissing and curving away in her wake. From stem to stern she was gay with bunting, for this was but her second trip after being laid up through the winter season, and there was a spick-and-span newness about everything, from the whiteness of her commodious hurricane deck to the dazzling glass and luxurious lounges of her airy and spacious saloon.

The day was perfect. Not a cloud was in the arching heavens, not a ripple on the blue surface of the lake, which mirrored forth the hoary crowns of the Savoy Alps as though they were cut in steel. The great forest-clad slopes were rich in their velvety verdure, rising from the water's edge on the Savoy side; and a dazzling snow shroud still covered the Dent du Midi half-way down to its base. On the Swiss shore the straggling towns and multitudinous villas lying among the fresh greenery of vineyards looked mere pigmy toys beneath the slopes of the great mountains. And from the same bosky slopes came ever and anon the glad, joyous shout of the cuckoo. It was June—but only just June—and the air, balmy and life-giving, knew no suspicion of sultriness.

"I say, Phil, my boy, it's about time to collect our traps. We go off at the next stage but one—Hallo! What has become of the fellow?" broke off the speaker, turning to discover that his friend had left his side. "Ah! there he is. At it again too. By George, the dog's irreclaimable!"

The said "dog" had withdrawn some yards from the speaker, and was standing with his back against the bulwarks apparently lost in contemplation of the scenery of the Savoy side. But he had chosen a very odd place for his study of Nature, for between the latter and himself, in the direction of his gaze, were multifold heads—and hats, and between these heads—and hats—and the canvas awning was a space of barely half a yard. Yet he seemed to gaze with rapt attention at something—or somebody. "I say, Phil, who is she, this time?" The suddenness of the question, the dry chuckle, the faintly sneering intonation, produced much the same effect on the gazer as the lash upon the half-broken thoroughbred. He started.

“Confound it, Fordham, you needn’t make a fellow jump so,” he retorted petulantly, with a slight flush. “Can’t a fellow look around him, I should like to know?”

“Oh, certainly he can. This is a free country—in fact ‘Liberté et Patrie’ is the Cantonal motto. You may even see it displayed at this moment—in triplicate too—among the bunting adorning this gallant craft. Ah—I see the point of attraction now—and this time, ’pon my life, Phil, I think there’s some excuse—for you,” he added, sticking his glass into his eye and sending a critical look into an apparently unconscious group opposite.

Philip Orlebar laughed, his good-humour quite restored. Indeed, it was never for long that he and that enviable attribute parted company.

Although the regular tourist season had not yet set in, the steamer’s decks still contained a sprinkling of all those nationalities which you would be sure to find represented there at that time of the day and of the year. Keen-faced Americans “doing” Europe with infinite zest and a Gladstone bag apiece; stolid Germans in long black coats—a duplicate of the latter invariably slung through the strap of their double field-glasses; a stray Muscovite noble, of refined manner and slightly blasé aspect; a group of English youths equipped with knapsack and alpenstock, bound for some mountain expedition with their Swiss tutor; and last but not least—in their own estimation at any rate—great in the importance of their somewhat aggressive sense of nationality, a muster of Britons numerically equalling all the other races and kindreds put together. There was the inevitable clergyman with his inevitable wife—the latter austere of visage, as became a good Evangelical in a land where the shops were kept open on the Sabbath. There was the British matron clucking around with her posse of daughters—which guileless damsels were being convoyed about the Continent to a like end as that which caused their mammas and grandmammas to be shipped off on the voyage round the Cape in the days of good old John Company. There were the regulation old maids, of the blue-stocking persuasion, Byron in hand, gazing yearningly upon the distant but gradually nearing walls of classic Chillon. And here and there, elderly but erect, natty of attire, and countenance darkly sunburnt beneath the turbanlike puggaree enshrouding his summit, stalked unmistakably the half-pay Anglo-Indian.

Upon one face in the group Fordham’s eyeglass, following his companion’s gaze, critically if somewhat contemptuously, came to a standstill. It was in profile at that moment, but whether in profile or full it was a face bound to attract attention. The regular features and short upper lip fully satisfied every requirement exacted by the canons of beauty. The eyes, large and earnest, now blue, now grey, according to the light under which they shone, rather imparted the idea that their possessor was inclined to take life seriously, and there was character in the strongly marked arching brows. A

sheen of dark-brown hair rippled back in waves beneath a broad-brimmed sailor hat to roll into a heavy knot over the back of the neck.

"Well, you cynical old humbug," said Orlebar, emphasising his words with an almost imperceptible nudge of the elbow. "Isn't that about good enough to meet with even your approval?"

"H'm! No doubt. But what I wanted to impress upon you was that in less than ten minutes we shall have to quit this ship. So that if you've any loose gear among your traps—and I believe you have—now is the time to make it fast."

The bell hanging in the steamer's bows now began to peal, to the accompaniment of the slackening beat of her paddles as, slowing down to half-speed, she glided majestically up to the Clarens landing-stage. Philip Orlebar, turning a deaf ear to his companion's warning, had left that mentor's side, and was strolling with finely assumed carelessness towards the gangway—for the object of his attention, and already more than incipient adoration, had risen and was moving in the same direction. If she was about to land there, as seemed probable, might he not, by standing nigh at hand, obtain some chance clue as to her identity and destination?

But they met face to face in the little crowd—met with a suddenness which brought a slightly disconcerted look to his somewhat speaking countenance. Her large eyes encountered his, however, fearlessly and with an air of surprised inquiry, for in his eagerness she might be excused for thinking him on the point of addressing her.

There were few passengers to be landed at Clarens, and she was not one of them; fewer still to embark, and in barely a couple of minutes the Mont Blanc was speeding on her way again.

"Heavens alive, man?" said Fordham, veiling the faint sneer with which he had been watching the movements of his impressionable friend. "If you don't collect your traps the chances are all in favour of half of them being left on board. We shall be at Montreux in three minutes."

Again the bell gave forth its warning note, again the beat of the paddles slackened, as the Mont Blanc—sweeping so close in shore that any one of the groups lounging about in the gardens of the villa-like pensions, sloping down to the water's edge, could have chucked a walnut on to her decks as she sped by—rapidly neared the poplar-fringed landing-stage. Then a great splashing of paddle-wheels as the engines were reversed, a throwing of warps and a mighty bustling, and the vessel was stationary.

“Confound that fellow!” grumbled Fordham, as his friend did not appear. “Directly his eye lights upon a fresh ‘skirt’ his wits are off woolgathering on the spot.”

“Embarquement!” sung out the bronzed skipper from the bridge. “Allons, allons, messieurs et mesdames! Dépêchez vous, s’il vous plaît. Nous sommes déjà en retard!” he added, testily.

The last embarking passenger was on board, and while the gangway plank was in the act of withdrawal the defaulter emerged from below, laden with loose luggage. He was not slow about his movements then. A couple of leaps and he stood panting and flurried on the pier beside his companion, who had taken the precaution of landing everything that he could lay hands on.

“I s-say, old man,” stuttered Philip Orlebar, relinquishing to the care of mother earth—or rather the pavement of the landing-stage—the impedimenta which he had rescued at the cost of such flurry and risk. “W-w-what became of her? Did she come ashore?”

“What became of her? Why by this time she’s half-way to Territet, laughing fit to die over the ridiculous figure you cut; in short, the wholly astonishing attitudes you struck, hurtling through the air with a Gladstone under each arm and half a score of telescopes and bundles and flying straps dancing about you like a kettle of beans tied to a dog’s tail.”

“Did I look such a fool as that? Hang it, I suppose I must have looked a bit grotesque though, eh, Fordham?”

“Infernally so,” was the consoling reply. “In fact, I noticed her looking over the side, taking particular stock of you in your admirably acted rôle of escaped lunatic. Ah, bonjour, François! Ca va bien, hein!” broke off the speaker in response to the smiling commissionaire who stepped forward at that moment to take charge of their luggage.

“Tenez, François,” went on Fordham, at the conclusion of the string of hearty inquiries with which the man had greeted him, for they were old acquaintances. “Vous allez nous emballer ces colis là sur la poste des Avants. Faut qu’ils nous réjoignent demain. Sans faute, mon brave, n’est ce pas?”

“Mais oui, Monsieur Fordhamme. Restez seulment tranquille. Vous pouvez y compter. Ah, vous allez monter par le Chauderon? Et bien—belle promenade, messieurs, et je vous remercie bien. Au revoir, messieurs!”

“That seems a good sort of chap,” began Philip Orlebar, dubiously, as they turned away. “But, hang it all, is it safe—don’t cher know?”

“What? The luggage? Rather. You may trust François to see a matter of this kind through. He is a good chap—most of these fellows are. They have a name among the British for being keen on pourboires—in a word, grasping. But show me the true-born Briton of the same class who in a race for gratuities couldn’t give them long odds, and beat them at that. It’s not to be done, I tell you. And now, Phil, we’ve plenty of time. First a cool lager at yonder café, then for our stroll up the Chauderon. And that said stroll on an afternoon like this is enough to make a man feel the pleasure of living, if anything is.”

Chapter Two.

Two Unlikes.

In his eulogy of the beauties of that fairy glen, the Gorge du Chauderon, Fordham was not exaggerating one whit; and while our two friends are pursuing their way along its winding path, under the cool shelter of a wealth of luxuriant greenery meeting overhead, and the roar and rush of the mountain stream leaping through a succession of black, rock-girt caldrons in their ears, we will take the opportunity of improving their acquaintance.

Philip Orlebar was a tall, fair, well-built young fellow of six and twenty, who had devoted the four years which had elapsed since he left college to sowing his wild oats; though, in justice to him, we must say that his crop was of the most moderate dimensions, in spite of his opportunities, for a sunny lightheadedness of manner, combined with a more than ordinarily prepossessing exterior, rendered him popular with everybody. This especially held good as regarded the other sex, and was bad both for it and for himself; in fact, his susceptibility in that line was a source of chronic misgiving to his friends, who never knew into what sort of entanglement it might plunge him.

He was the only son of a baronet, who doted on him. But his expectations were not great, for Sir Francis Orlebar, who had been a widower since a year or two after Philip's birth, had recently endowed himself with a second wife, and taking this with the fact that his income did not exceed by a shilling 2,000 pounds per annum, it follows that a superfluity of spare cash was never a distinguishing feature in the Orlebar household.

But if Sir Francis doted on his son, his new spouse did not. She grudged the allowance of five hundred a year which that fortunate youth enjoyed. She would have grudged it just as much if it had been fifty. Two thousand a year to keep up the title and the house upon was a mere pittance, declared Lady Orlebar the Second—who, by the way, had never possessed a shilling of her own—and a quarter of that was to be thrown away upon an idle young man, who squandered it all on his own selfish pleasures. But on this point Sir Francis was firm. He refused to reduce his son's allowance by one single penny.

So Philip came and went as he chose, and took life easily. He had no expensive tastes, and with a sufficiency of cash, good looks, excellent spirits, and an unlimited capacity for enjoyment, little is it to be wondered at if he found the process of "seeing the world" a very pleasant experience indeed. And he did so find it.

Richard Fordham was the exact antipodes to his friend both in appearance and disposition, which may have accounted for the excellent relations existing between the

two. Externally he was of medium height and well-proportioned. His dark, almost swarthy countenance was handsome too, for his features were good and regular. But there was something sinister in his expression, something ruthless in the glitter of his keen black eyes as he emitted one of his pungent sarcasms; and he was a man to whom sarcasm was as the very breath of life. One peculiarity about him was that, though possessed of an abnormal sense of humour, he never laughed. At most he would break into a short dry guffaw which had more of a sneer in it than of mirth; and although he could send a roomful of people into roars whenever he chose, not a muscle of his own saturnine countenance would relax.

He was a good many years older than his travelling companion—how many it would have puzzled most people to determine, for he was one of those men whose ages are hard to guess. And what constituted the bond of union between them was also a poser, unless their utter dissimilarity. Anyhow, light-hearted Phil was wont enthusiastically to declare that "Old Fordham was the best fellow in the world. Only wanted knowing a bit. Why, there never was a fellow easier to get on with, by Jove—once you knew him."

It is only fair to say that in his own experience the encomium was wholly deserved. They had been travelling companions for some time now, and yet had never had a difference, which is something to be able to say. The dry, caustic sparkle of the older man's conversation had a great charm for the younger. "He could take any amount of chaff from Fordham," the latter was wont to declare; "for he was a chap whose head was screwed on the right way, and, moreover, thoroughly knew his way about," a qualification sure to inspire respect in the young.

We have said that Philip Orlebar was more than popular with the other sex, and here again the dissimilarity between the friends held good. Women detested Fordham uniformly and instinctively. There is something in the theory of reciprocity; Fordham, for his part, cordially and unaffectedly detested women.

"By Jove!" cried Philip, when they had covered rather more than half their distance—"By Jove! but this place is well named—'Kettle,' isn't it, eh, Fordham?"

"No, 'Caldron,' to be accurate."

"Well, it's pretty steamy just here. Let's call a halt under that big rock and poke a smipe. What d'you say?"

"Just as you like," was the tranquil reply. They had reached that part of the gorge where two great perpendicular cliffs, their black surface thickly grown with ferns and trailers, form a huge natural portal, narrowing the way to the road itself and the brawling,

leaping mountain torrent which skirts it. A delightfully cool resting-place—almost too cool—for the whirl of the spray reached them even there. Soon the blue curl from a brace of pipes mingled fragrantly with the scent of pine resin and damp fern.

Hardly were they seated than a sound of approaching voices was heard, and two girls appeared in sight round the bend in the path. One carried a basket filled with wild flowers, eke a large handful of the same; the other a bag of sketching materials. Both shot a rapid glance at the two smokers as they walked swiftly by.

“Rather good-looking, eh?” said Phil, as soon as they were out of sight. “English, of course?”

“No mistake. The whole lake-side from Lausanne eastwards simply grows Britishers. I predict we shall soon be for annexing it.”

“They’re bound in the same direction as ourselves,” went on Philip. “At least there’s no other place than Les Avants up this way, is there?”

The other’s mouth drew down at the corners in a faint sneer.

“Don’t be alarmed, Phil. They’re bound there all right—in fact they’re quartered there. They’ve just been down into the gorge; one to pick a lot of daisies and buttercups, over which she and a pet parson will enjoy a not altogether scientific tête-à-tête this evening—the other to execute a hideous libel on the existing scenery.”

“Now how the deuce do you know all this, Fordham?”

“Oh, I know all their little ways. I know something more, viz, that in forty-eight hours’ time you will be the chosen and privileged bearer of the truss of hay and the daubing bag—I mean the wild flowers and the sketching gear.”

“Oh, you don’t know everything, old chap,” cried Philip, with a laugh.

“Don’t I? By the bye, if you’re not eager to catch a chill, we’d better start again. I know this much: there will be a flutter of rejoicing in the dovecote when those two arrive, brimful of the intelligence that a couple of new men—one, rather, for I don’t count—are ascending to Les Avants, for at this time of year our estimable sex is almost exclusively represented in these hotels by invalids, parsons, or half-pay veterans. With some of whom, by the way, I shall have to fraternise, unless I want to do my expeditions alone, for you will be in such demand as universal porter in the matter of shawls and wraps

and lunch-baskets, up the Rochers de Naye or the Dent de Jaman, or any other point of altitude to which the ambition of the enterprising fair may aspire, that we had better take a formal and affecting farewell of each other as soon as we arrive at the door."

"Shut up, you old fraud," was the jolly retort. "At present all my aspirations are of the earth earthy, for they are of the cellar. I hope they keep a good brew up there, for I feel like breeding a drought in the hotel the moment we arrive."

"Well, the brew's first-rate, and now the sooner we get over this bit of heavy collar-work the sooner we shall reach it."

"Right. Excelsior's the word," assented Phil, with a glance at the steep and rugged path zigzagging above at a frightfully laborious angle.

There may be more attractive spots than Les Avants as you arrive there within an hour or two of sunset in the early summer, but there cannot be many. The golden rays of the sinking sun light up the frowning Rochers de Naye and the mighty precipice which constitutes the face of the Dent de Jaman with a fiery glow. The quiet reposeful aspect of the hollow, which the aforesaid sunbeams have now abandoned, lying in its amphitheatre of bold sweeping slopes crowned with black pine forests, is soothing, tranquillising of effect; and the handsome, plentifully gabled hotel, rearing up among a sprinkling of modest chalets, is suggestive of comfort and abundance. But what is this milk-white carpet spread in snowy sheen over the meadows, covering the green of the adjoining slopes to a considerable height? Is it snow? Not it. That white and dazzling expanse consists of nothing less than a mass of the most magnificent narcissus blossoms, growing in serried profusion, distilling in heavy fumes a fragrance of paradise upon the balmy evening air. Such was the aspect of Les Avants as our two friends arrived there on that evening in early June.

"By Jove, Fordham, but this is a sweet place!" cried Philip Orlebar, moved to real earnestness as they emerged from the wooded path suddenly upon the beautiful scene. "A perfect Eden!"

"Plenty of Eves, anyhow?" was the characteristic and laconic retort.

But Philip had already noted a flutter of light dresses, though still some little distance off. Tennis racket in hand, a number of girls in groups of twos and threes, here and there a male form interspersed, were wending along a gravel path leading from the tennis-court towards the hotel, for the first dinner-bell was just ringing. The sight called up a sneer to Fordham's lip.

“Look at that, Phil, and note the vagaries of the British idiot abroad. Fancy coming to the Swiss mountains to play lawn tennis.”

“Well, old man, and if they like it?”

“Ah, yes, quite so; I forgot!” was the significant answer.

Chapter Three.

Breaking the Ice.

“We sha’n’t be intolerably crowded here, Phil,” remarked Fordham, as they sat down to table d’hôte. “It’s early in the season yet, you see.”

But although the long tables running round the fine dining-hall—the latter occupying the whole ground-floor of one wing—were only laid half-way down the room, yet there was a good concourse flowing in. Portly matrons with bevies of daughters, clergymen and clergywomen with or without daughters, spectacled old maids hunting in couples, an undergraduate or two abroad for the “Long,” here and there a long-haired German, and a sprinkling of white-whiskered Anglo-Indians, by the time they had all taken their seats, constituted a gathering little short of threescore persons. A pretty cheerful gathering, too, judging from the clatter of tongues; for the Briton abroad is a wholly expansive animal, and as great a contrast to his or her—especially her—starch and buckram personality at home as the precept of the average professor of faith and morals is to his practice.

Our two friends found themselves at the transverse table at the lower end of the room, with their backs to the bulk of the diners. But in front of them were the open windows, no small advantage in a room full of dining fellow-creatures. The sunset glow fell redly on the purple heads of the Savoy Alps, and the thick, heavy perfume of narcissus came floating in, triumphing over the savoury odours of fleshpots.

The room had just settled down steadily to work through the menu when Phil’s neighbour, a lady of uncertain age with spinster writ large, opened fire upon him in this wise:

“How very thick the scent of the narcissus is this evening.”

“It is. A sort of Rimmel’s shop turned loose in the Alps.”

“But such a heavy perfume must be very unhealthy, must it not?”

“Possibly.”

“But don’t you think it must be?”

“I really can’t give an opinion. You see, I don’t know anything about the matter,” replied Phil, good-humouredly, and in something like desperation as the blank truth dawned

upon him that he was located next to a bore of the first water, and the worst kind of bore at that—the bore feminine. His persecutor went on:

“But they say that flowers too strongly scented are very unhealthy in a room, don’t they?”

“Do they? I don’t know. But, after all, these are not in the room; they are outside.”

“But don’t you think it comes to the same thing?” Heavens! What was to be the end of this? Instinctively he stole a glance at Fordham, but that worthy’s impassive countenance betrayed nothing, unless it were the faintest possible appreciation, in his grim, saturnine way, of the humour of the thing. He mumbled something not very intelligible by way of reply, and applied himself with extra vigour to the prime duty of the gathering. But he was not to escape so easily.

The lady was intently scrutinising the menu. Then to Phil:

“Don’t you think ferras is an extremely bony fish?”

This was too much even for Fordham. The corners of his mouth dropped perceptibly, and a faintly audible chuckle escaped him.

“I—I—’pon my life I don’t know,” stuttered poor Phil. “The fact is I never knew the scheme of creation comprised such a fish.”

“Didn’t you really? How very odd. But do you really mean it though?”

“Oh, yes; it’s a fact,” he declared, wearily.

“Ah! they are bringing it round now. You will soon be able to give me your opinion.”

Phil was deciding that he would die rather than prosecute any investigations into the osseously reputed ferras, and was on the point of asserting that he loathed the whole finny race, when a diversion occurred. Three chairs opposite had remained vacant, and into these three persons were now seating themselves. Looking up suddenly, Phil found himself face to face with the girl who had so strongly attracted his attention on board the Mont Blanc.

The old couple were her parents, of course, he decided straight out of hand. Military and Indian, he went on, pursuing his verdict, and a fine-looking old man. The elder lady seemed in frail health. Of course they were the girl’s parents—not a doubt about it. But

what a piece of luck! She to be his vis-à-vis at the table! He quite forgot the existence of the exemplary bore at his elbow, now.

The girl herself, as soon as she was seated, sent a searching glance all down the room, as if appraising the style of people who were to be their fellow-sojourners. This he noted; also her perfect and graceful self-possession. But for all the interest taken in the new arrivals by Fordham, they might just as well not have come in.

Dinner was more than half through, and still he had found no opportunity of utilising the pleasant unconventionality afforded by the table d'hôte system. If only they had been next to him; but being opposite tended to hinder matters. He could not even volunteer the salt or the mustard, and under cover of that flimsy advance work up a conversation, for both those condiments—and everything needful—were as lavishly supplied on the other side of the table as on his own. What the deuce was he to say? For once in his life, easy-going Philip Orlebar felt his normal stock of assurance fail him.

"Alma, child," the elder lady was saying in a low tone, but audible across the table, "hadn't you better change places with your uncle and come next to me? I don't think he ought to sit with his back to the window."

"Not her parents, by Jove!" thought Phil. "'Alma.' That's a name I never heard before."

"'Tisn't that," grumbled the veteran, before his niece could reply. "There's no draught—none at all. But what the deuce do they mean by sticking us up in this corner with our backs to the view? I don't want to look at a lot of other animals feeding. I want to get the benefit of the mountains opposite, and the sunsets and all that."

"But, uncle," struck in the girl—and Phil noted that she had a sweet voice, beautifully modulated and clear—"we can look at the mountains opposite all day long, but this grand opportunity of studying a considerable collection of our fellow-creatures all off their guard is only vouchsafed at table d'hôte time. And I was just congratulating myself on having the whole population in front of me."

"Pooh-pooh, child! When you get to my age you'll have had quite enough of studying your fellow-creatures—more than enough, I'll lay a guinea. And confound it, we come to this country to study Nature," added the old man, relapsing into his original growl.

Now this conversation, though carried on in a low tone, was distinctly audible across the table—a fact of which the parties to it should have been aware but for that inconceivable fatuity peculiar to our fellow-countrymen when abroad, a conviction that everybody but themselves is either deaf or afflicted with an opacity of understanding which could

hardly exist outside an asylum for imbeciles. So they were not a little surprised and slightly perturbed when Fordham, looking up, said quietly:

“If you will allow me, sir, I shall be happy to exchange seats. It is perfectly immaterial to me which way I face.”

The trio looked astonished, but the relief on one countenance could hardly dissemble itself.

“Er—you are very kind,” stuttered the veteran. “But—er—really—I hardly like—er—unfair advantage to take of your good-nature.”

“It is kind of you, indeed,” struck in the old lady, somewhat hurriedly, as though she feared the offer would be allowed to drop. “But the fact is the General never can bear to sit with his back to the light. And, if it is really all the same to you—”

“It is, I assure you. I am delighted to be of service. So I’ll mention the matter to the head waiter, and you may consider it settled.”

The girl was placed between her uncle and aunt. This change would result in Fordham being placed next to her. “What the deuce is the fellow driving at now?” thought Philip, in mingled wrath and alarm. Then it dawned upon him that his friend was driving at nothing less than the securing of that coveted position for him, Philip. “Good old Fordham! What a brick he is!” he mentally resolved, with a glow at his heart. “Best fellow that ever lived, by Jove?”

But the ice thus broken, our two friends and the new arrivals were soon chatting away as if they had known each other for at least some time.

“I noticed you on board the Mont Blanc this afternoon,” said Phil to the old General, with magnificent mendacity—the fact being that he was unaware of that veteran’s very existence. “But you didn’t land at Montreux, did you?”

“No. We went on to Territet. The ladies drove, with the luggage. I took the funicular railway up to Glion and walked the rest.”

“Don’t you think that Glion railway is very dangerous?” struck in Philip’s neighbour, seeing her opportunity.

“Oh, dear no. Perfectly safe, they tell me,” answered the old gentleman. “I daresay, though, it’s rather a trying affair for you ladies, finding yourselves let straight down the steep side of a mountain in a thing for all the world like a bucket in a well.”

“But don’t you think it may one of these days come to grief?” pursued the Infliction.

“But, my dear madam, just consider the number of times it has gone up and down in perfect safety.”

“Ah, but don’t you think it may break down just that one time you may happen to be in it?”

It was dreadful. The octopus-like tenacity of this bore was enough to paralyse the most mercurial. There fell a kind of languid despair upon the countenances of the group, and each looked helplessly at the other, as if to ascertain who was equal to the titanic task of warding off this terrible person. But, meeting the large eyes of his vis-à-vis, Phil at any rate found comfort. They would have something to laugh at between them, anyway.

“Here! I say—you! What are you doing?” called out Fordham, as at that moment a waiter came bustling up and began to shut the window.

“I shut de window, sir. Dere is one German gentleman at de oder end of de room say dat de window must be shut.”

“Oh, indeed! Well, then, give my compliments to the one German gentleman at the other end of the room and tell him the window won’t be shut. We’ll see him in Halifax first.”

The waiter paused a moment, then skipped away to deliver the message.

“Confound the fellow’s cheek!” cried Philip, indignantly. “Likely we are going to have our window bossed by some cadaverous brass-band player at the other end of the room.”

And one and all in the vicinity of the disputed window seconded, in varying terms, his protest.

Just then the waiter reappeared.

“Ver’ sorry, sir; but de German gentleman say it must be shut.”

“Does he?” said Fordham. “Well, look here. Tell him—this time without my compliments—that there are a few people at this end of the room whose convenience is of as much importance as his own, and that they are equally resolved that this window shall stand open. There—leave it alone. If you do shut it we shall open it again at once.”

The waiter paused again very irresolute, shrugged his shoulders, smirked, shrugged his shoulders again, then skipped away. Watching him, they had no difficulty in locating the offender—a lank-haired bespectacled Teuton occupying the remotest possible seat from the window in dispute. He, in wrath, vehemently evoked the proprietor, who, however, at that moment was not on hand.

“That Battle of the Windows is an oft-recurring phase of hotel life out here,” remarked Fordham. “No man is more absolutely unprejudiced against Continental nationalities than myself: yet it is a fact that whenever there is anything like a respectable sprinkling of Germans or Frenchmen in these hotels, they invariably insist upon having the room hermetically sealed all through dinner-time.”

“The deuce they do!” growled the old General. “But do you mean to tell me, sir, that a few of these unbarbered music-masters are going to cram their confounded love of fustiness down our throats?”

“Well, I’ve seen more than one lively episode over that window question,” replied Fordham. “And the fact of that one fellow trying it on just now is sufficient proof that the tradition exists—and exists pretty strongly too.”

“But don’t you think they may perhaps, after all, be more susceptible to cold than we English?” struck in the Infliction.

“Undoubtedly,” assented Fordham, blandly, preparing to beat a retreat from the table under cover of his reply, for the dessert had already gone round, and the room was emptying fast.

“By Jove, Fordham, but isn’t it a deuced rum thing they should have turned up here?” said Phil, as the two made their way to the promenoir for a cigar.

“She, I suppose you mean. No, it isn’t particularly rum. I knew they were bound here all along.”

“What—on board the steamer? No. How did you know?”

“Oh, while you were taking particular stock of the chick, I happened to overhear tags of the old birds’ conversation,” said Fordham, acidly, as if the subject bored him.

“Well, and why didn’t you tell a fellow?”

“Why didn’t I? Hang it all, it’s bad form to repeat what you hear by accident, you know. Besides, it was rather sport to watch your face under the pleasant little surprise.”

“Oh, that be hanged for a yarn?” cried Philip, impatiently. “But I say, who are they, I wonder? What’s their name?”

“Don’t know. Easily found out though.”

“But how?”

“Why, go and look at the arrival book in the bureau. I’ll wait for you here. I’m not interested in the matter.”

Away went Philip without a word. Turning the pages of the book, the last entry of all, freshly made, read:

“Major-General and Mrs Wyatt.”

“Miss Wyatt.”

Chapter Four.

Alma.

Everybody visiting at Les Avants for the first time while the narcissus is in full bloom, is apt to grow more than enthusiastic over that lovely and fragrant flower, even as in higher localities everybody is bound to gush inordinately over that other blossom which is like unto a gun-wad picked into fluff, and is neither lovely nor fragrant—to wit, the edelweiss. This being so, it is not surprising that Alma Wyatt should have seized the very first opportunity of escaping from the house with intent to cull as huge a bunch of the beautiful blossoms as she could possibly carry.

It was a radiant morning. The sky a deep and dazzling blue, such as is never to be seen over this uncertain and watery England of ours, was unflecked by a single cloud, and the air, mellow and balmy in the early forenoon, distilled a most exquisite perfume. To Alma it seemed as if all the glories of Paradise lay spread around her as she wandered on through the white and shining fields, drinking in the floods of fragrance diffused by the breath of a million snowy petals. Opposite, the great slopes were all aglow with green and gold, relieved by the sombre plumage of shaggy pines straggling up to the frowning scarp of the Dent de Jaman as though they aspired to scale that grim and forbidding wall, and had been forced to yield sullenly in the attempt. A mellow haze rested upon the soaring peaks beyond the fragment of blue lake just visible—blue as the sky above; and from his pent-up prison far down in the deep and wooded gorge the hoarse thunder of the mountain torrent was borne upward in subdued and unending cadence, to mingle with the hum of bees culling their sweet stores from the luscious cells of the narcissus blossoms. Small wonder that to this girl with the large, earnest eyes and poetic temperament—small wonder that to this girl, but two days out from damp and cockneyfied Surbiton, the majesty of the great mountains, the hoary cliffs still flaked with snow towering on high, the black and stately pines, the vernal pastures and the far-away echo of melodious cow-bells, the blue lake and the golden splendour of this radiant Swiss summer, should be as something more than a glimpse of the glories of Paradise.

She was glad that she had come out alone, glad that she had not met any of the other girls with whom she had made acquaintance the evening before. It was delicious to be free to drink in all the wealth of this Elysium without feeling constrained to talk, to reply to commonplaces which should let in the outside world, vulgar by comparison, upon the illimitable charm of this fairy scene. For this was her first experience of Switzerland—almost of the Continent—and it in nowise fell short of the ideal she had formed.

Alma Wyatt had been left fatherless at an early age. Better for her had she been orphaned altogether. Her childhood had been wholly uncared for, and, as far as her

mother was concerned, unloved. For she had a younger sister upon whom that mother's love was concentrated to doting point. All the bitterness of home life had fallen to Alma, all the sweets thereof to her sister. Their mother, a selfish, domineering woman, whose redeeming qualities were infinitesimal even to vanishing point, simply made the elder girl's life wretched within that semi-detached villa at cockneyfied Surbiton, but for the younger the slender resources of a cramped income were strained to the uttermost. No wonder that the beautiful face was seldom free from a tinge of sadness; no wonder that her character had acquired a concentrativeness and reserve beyond her short twenty years of life.

We said that it would have been better for her were she an orphan indeed, and in saying this we are not exaggerating. Her uncle and aunt, under whose care we first make her acquaintance, looked upon her almost as their own child—would have been only too glad to have adopted her as such, for they were childless. But her mother would not hear of this. Alma was necessary as, figuratively speaking, a whipping-post for Constance, the younger girl. She could not part with her altogether—besides, she was useful in other ways. But the General and his wife managed to have her with them as frequently as they could, and the widow, who could not afford to quarrel with her brother-in-law, dared not oppose his wishes in the matter beyond a certain point. So here was Alma, with a prospect of two months to spend with her dearly-loved and indulgent uncle and aunt; two months of easy travel and varying sojourn among the fairest and most inspiring scenes that this world can show; two months of unconventional life as near to perfect freedom as the trammels of civilisation will allow; and above all, two months of emancipation from home worries and suburban semi-detached pettinesses, and the galling fetter of a show of "duty" towards those whom she could neither love nor honour.

Standing there among the narcissus, gazing around upon the radiant scenes spread in lustrous splendour about her, she made a wondrously beautiful picture. Her eyes shone with a light of gladness, and the normally calm regularity of the patrician features had given way to a slight flush of eagerness which was infinitely winsome. But as her glance suddenly met that of another the glad light vanished as by magic, yielding place to a look of vexation, coldness, reserve. She had been surprised in the midst of a rhapsody—taken off her guard.

But as though he read her thoughts, Philip Orlebar was not the man to add to her discomfiture. He was thoroughbred, aux bouts des ongles, and with all his lightheadedness and devil-may-care jollity, was endowed with tact beyond the endowment of most Englishmen—young Englishmen at any rate.

"Good morning, Miss Wyatt," he said, snatching the pipe from between his teeth. "Out among the narcissus already, I see. Just what I've been doing myself—though, as a rule,

flower gathering isn't much in my line. I only pick up an extra fine blossom now and again as I stroll along, which may account for the meagreness of my bunch," exhibiting a small handful containing some dozen of stalks. "But you—you have got a grand bouquet."

The unaffectedness of his address, the breezy lightheadedness of his tone, was not without its influence even upon her. The gravity of her reserve melted into a smile.

"They are so lovely," she answered; "I couldn't remain indoors a moment longer."

"Just the state of the case with me. Surprising how great minds always jump together. But to be serious, I believe the blossoms up above there are larger than these. Some one or other in the hotel told me I ought to go and look at them, and I did," added mendacious Phil. "That lazy dog, Fordham, wouldn't move—planted himself at the end of a pipe in a cane chair in one of those arbours. I couldn't stand that, so I started a stroll in a small way. Let me carry those for you." And in a twinkling he had possessed himself of the two huge bunches of narcissus which she had gathered.

"Thanks. It's a shame to burden you, though. Isn't this a beautiful place?"

"Rather. Old Fordham is enthusiastic about it, and I don't much wonder. He knows it well, you see. I never was here before in my life, but now I am here I'm in no hurry to move on. There are some grand walks and first-rate climbs to be had. You were saying last night you were looking forward to that sort of thing. I hope we shall be able to show you the way about a little. We must make up a party for a climb somewhere before this splendid weather changes. Fordham is worth any round dozen of guides."

"But—we can hardly lay your friend's good-nature under such a heavy contribution," she said, with a queer little smile.

"Oh, can't we! Old Fordham is the best fellow in the world—only wants knowing a bit. He'll do anything he's asked."

That queer smile broadened round Alma's lips. She had sat opposite the now eulogised Fordham during the whole of dinner-time; and, be it remembered, she was given to studying character. But she said nothing, and by this time they had regained the hotel.

A cool fountain was playing in the terraced garden in front of the promenoir, shooting high in the air and falling back into its basin in a shower of scattering diamond drops. Beside this, leaning on an alpenstock, a big meerschaum in his mouth, stood General Wyatt.

“Well, Alma. Been ravaging the narcissus fields?” he said, as they came up. “But what on earth will you do with all that lot? A trifle too strong, won’t it be, for any ordinary-sized room?”

“I don’t think so, uncle. Why, in England people would give anything for such magnificent blossoms as these, and here we are already beginning to think them nothing very great. But I’ll go and put them in water for the present.”

“Well, don’t be long, dear, or we sha’n’t get our walk,” he called after her.

“Grand day, General?” said Philip, re-lighting his pipe.

“It is, indeed. By the bye, since I’ve heard your name, are you in any way related to Francis Orlebar—Sir Francis he is now?”

“Rather closely. He happens to be my father. Did you know him well?”

“You don’t say so! Well, well! It’s a small world, after all. Know him well? I should think I did. I was some years his senior though, and he wasn’t long in the service. But that must have been before you were born.”

“And have you never met since, General?”

“Only once—just about the time he got into that—er—ah.” And the old man, remembering who he was talking to, suddenly pulled himself up and launched forth into a tremendous sneeze. The slip was not lost upon Phil, but he came to the rescue promptly.

“Think we are like each other, General?” he said.

“N-no! Don’t know though. There is a likeness. You’re the finer built fellow of the two—taller and broader. Bless my soul, though, but the world is a small one. To think of Frank Orlebar’s son turning up in this way?”

“I hope I’m not interrupting, General Wyatt,” said a feminine and tentative voice. “Your niece was saying last night she was a perfect stranger here, and we thought she might like to go with us. We are going to the Cubly. It isn’t far, and we shall be back to lunch. We hope you will come too.”

The speaker was one of the two girls who had passed our friends in the Gorge du Chauderon. Phil had already made a little conversation with her the evening before. So now she turned and extended the invitation to him. He gladly accepted, while the General answered for Alma and himself that nothing would give them greater pleasure. And at that moment Alma reappeared and they started. The Miss Ottleys were pleasant well-bred girls of artistic tastes and plenty of conversation, and the walk promised to be a success.

We shall not, however, follow the party to the pine-crowned height sheering up from the vine-clad slopes immediately behind Montreux, nor share in the magnificent panorama which it affords. Sufficient to say that at the end of three hours they returned, in the highest spirits and on the best of terms with themselves and each other. In such free and easy fashion are acquaintanceships formed and often consolidated into friendships, amid the pleasant unconventionally of life in mountain hotels.

Chapter Five.

Fordham Philosophises.

"I say, Fordham. We're getting up an expedition for to-morrow, and you've got to come," cried Phil, bursting into his friend's room just before dinner one evening.

"Have I?" replied the latter leisurely, turning round with a half-soaped visage, and razor arrested in mid-air. "But, Phil, it's rather lucky you didn't swoop down in such hurricane method upon a more nervous man than yours truly, or it's wildly hunting for sticking plaster he'd be at this moment. And now, for my enlightenment, who's we?"

"Oh, the Ottleys and the Wyatts and one or two more. We want to start early, cross the lake by steamer and get as far up that valley on the other side as we can."

"To Novèl? Yes, and then?"

"Why then we are going to charter a boat and row back in the cool of the evening."

"Not a bad scheme. Who do you say are going, beside the inseparables?"

"One of the Miss Milnes—the pretty one—and that fellow Scott."

"Scott, the devil-dodger?"

"Yes. The Ottleys have asked him. I can't think why, for he's a rank 'outsider.'"

"Most of the 'shepherds' appointed to administer 'Dearly beloved brethren' to their countrywomen in this otherwise favoured land are, my dear chap. But it's all the better for you. He can take the two Ottley nymphs off your hands while you offer latria to the fair Inkermann—no Alma—I beg your pardon."

"But—but hang it, that's just what the beggar won't do," blurted Phil in desperation. "Fact is he's always in the way, and really it's contemptible, you know; but what's to be done with a cad like that, who ignores a snub that another fellow would knock you down for—or try to? You'll come along, old man, won't you?"

"Let's see. There's the General, he's too old and don't count. Then there's yourself and the parson; and they want a third donkey—I mean beast of burden. Two won't be enough to sling all the panniers they'll want along. I'm afraid, Phil, you mustn't count upon me, unless you can manage to supply the missing steed first."

“Bosh, Fordham! You won’t be wanted to carry anything.”

“Not, eh? Let’s see again. Four females—that means eight wraps, putting it at the lowest computation. Add to that the delicate creatures’ rations—for you can’t get anything eatable or drinkable at Novèl—and sunshades, which they must have for crossing the lake, don’t you know, and which they’ll discard directly they begin to walk. And there’s all the amateur-commissionaire business into the bargain. No, no, Phil. Having given the matter my most careful consideration, I regret to say that I am unable to undertake it—as the publisher said when he ‘chucked’ the budding author’s MS.”

“You old savage! If you weren’t shaving I’d ‘chuck’ all the boots and bolsters in the room at your head.”

“Well, I’ve done now, so you can begin. But, I say, Phil,” he went on, tranquilly, “how long have we been here?”

Philip Orlebar’s handsome head was well through the open window at that moment. His friend therefore found it necessary to repeat the question.

“Eh—what? How long? Oh, about ten days, haven’t we?”

“I believe we have,” rejoined the other in the same silky tone. “And, my dear boy, doesn’t it strike you that you are getting on ra-ather rapidly?”

“No. Why?”

“Nothing. Only that even the charm of my improving conversation does not avail to keep your head within that window, when some inexplicable instinct—for you couldn’t possibly have seen her—warns you that your divinity is on the terrace below. And yet, in a few minutes more you will be seated by her side for at least an hour—such being unfortunately the length of table d’hôte, and after that may safely be counted upon to pass the residue of the evening not a hundred yards apart from her by any means.”

“Well, I’m only one of a crowd then,” retorted Philip, with a dash of irritation. “Those confounded Ottley girls are always on hand—a good deal too much so.”

“Are they? Look here now, Phil. What is there about that girl that makes a difference between her and any other girl?”

“Ah! You—even you, you old ruffian, own that there is a difference?”

“Not so fast, my dear chap. I asked you the question. But if you want me to answer it myself, I reply ‘Nothing.’”

“What? You don’t see any difference?”

“Not a particle,” responded his tormentor, blandly. Philip stared for a moment. He hardly knew what to say. Then:

“Well, with all your shelliness, you crustaceous old cuss, I gave you credit for more discrimination. Why, confound it all, look at her alongside the rest of the crowd here. Isn’t she a head and shoulders above them all—in every particular?”

“H’m, h’m! Oh, yes! no doubt. But that isn’t saying very much. She looks thoroughbred, I admit, and talks well, and has some ideas—not bad ones, either; not that I’ve ever been favoured with them myself, for I’ve never laid myself out for that honour. Women, you see, are like children. As long as you keep them at arm’s length they respect you. Directly you have ever so little to do with them, then good-bye to your peace, for they will allow you none; then, presto, the collar is round your neck and you find yourself cast for the rôle of general poodle before you know where you are. It’s fetch-and-carry, will-you-do-this and would-you-mind-doing-that. And then you are expected to act the sympathetic listener to all their infernal egotistic fads; and God help you if at any moment you forget the sympathetic part of it. But to return to our sheep. You think this particular girl an angel, because she’s good-looking and thoroughbred, and has a hovering sort of suggestion about her of being an ill-used mortal and welcoming a sympathetic spirit, and all that sort of thing. Then, again, you run against her up here, where you’re both of you showing at your best because you’ve neither of you anything in the world to put you out—splendid weather, lovely country, good old times all round—sort of paradise in which she stands out as the Eve to you, and I daresay you as the Adam to her. That’s not life, my dear fellow; that’s not life. A mere summer idyll and no more. Can’t possibly last, you know.”

“And why the deuce can’t it last?” said Phil, who had been listening somewhat impatiently to this harangue.

Fordham emitted a short, dry guffaw.

“Well now, can it? I put it to you. Just run over all the ‘happy couples’ within the circle of your acquaintance: to how many of them is life a summer idyll, or any sort of idyll at all? You needn’t go further than this house, which at present contains a good few ‘yoke-fellows,’ to use a thoroughly expressive term. If you haven’t yet found time to observe

them, just keep your eyes open for the next day or two—if you can divert those killing orbs from the adorable Alma, that is—and a place like this is good for observations of the kind, because the subjects of them are always more or less off their guard. Putting it at the lowest computation, eight marriages out of every ten are abject failures—the other two very dubious."

"Oh, indeed! And how many are there that turn out satisfactorily?" said Phil, ironically.

"Perhaps one in five thousand."

"Oh—well—it's something to have got you to admit that much. Now why shouldn't I, for instance, hit off that one?"

"Why shouldn't you? Well now, Phil, I put it to you as one not wholly unacquainted with sporting matters. What would you say to a fellow who should ask you to take tickets in a lottery where the chances were five thousand to one against you—or rather to take one ticket, and that at the price of all you were worth? You'd vote him drunk, of course. Yet if I know anything of my fellow-creatures, you are in a fair way towards perpetrating that identical suicidal imbecility. Now, what do you say? Chuck your expedition across the lake to-morrow, and let's go on to Zermatt now instead of a week or so later. That, or your fate is sealed."

"No you don't, old chap; no you don't," said Phil, who, far from being offended by the other's ill-conditionedness, was hugely pleased thereat, since it confirmed and encouraged certain hopes he had already more than half shaped. "By Jove, I never had such a good time in my life as I've been having here. Too soon to cut it just yet."

Fordham's shoulders went up in an expressive shrug as he turned away to the door.

"Don't say you weren't shown the cliff you proposed to jump over," he said. "Jump now, and be—blessed to you."

"By the way, Fordham," said Phil, "isn't it a deuced rum thing? The old General knows my governor well—or rather did, years ago."

"Did he?" was the sharp reply, as the speaker faced suddenly round. "Ah well—yes—it is queer. But the world's a pretty small one. There goes the second bell," he added, in his normally unconcerned tones, as he again turned to the door.

His manner struck even Philip, though faintly. But for the fact that Fordham was literally a man in an iron mask, Philip could have sworn that the tone was a startled one.

That, however, was absurd, anyhow. Fordham was not even acquainted with Sir Francis. The two had met and become intimate merely as travelling companions.

“Well, Mr Fordham, what do you think of these young people’s plan for to-morrow?” said General Wyatt as they met at table.

“Not a bad one. The valley of the Morge is well worth walking up, but you must start from here so as to catch the early steamer.”

“Make old Fordham go with us. He says he won’t,” said Phil, in an undertone, to Alma Wyatt, next to whom he was seated, for the change of places had been effected satisfactorily to all parties concerned. “You can get round him if any one can.”

“I don’t know so much about that,” she answered, with a smile. “I’ll try, though.” Then across the table, “Why do you say ‘you must start early,’ Mr Fordham, as if you weren’t going with us? You really must come. The gentians, they say, are lovely up that valley. We are quite reckoning on you.”

“To carry the gentians?” he rejoined drily. “Or to pick them?”

“Neither. You shall talk to us while we pick them. And you shall not carry anything, and we’ll promise to be very good and give no trouble.”

Few men could have stood this appeal, or the look which accompanied it. Phil felt quite hot. Though used to his friend’s ways, he thought him an ill-conditioned dog at that moment. Had he not unequivocally snubbed his—Phil’s—divinity? But the said divinity rather enjoyed it than otherwise. For, in spite of the extremely derogatory deliverances we have just heard from Fordham’s lips concerning her, Alma Wyatt was the only woman in the hotel to whom he had addressed a spontaneous remark; and she, so far from being offended at his brusqueness or taciturnity, looked upon him as a character, to be studied with avidity.

“To put it on other grounds,” she went on gaily. “Uncle will be quite lost without you. What will become of him all day with no one to argue with?” She could not have ventured upon safer ground. Fordham, though he detested women, by no means extended his antipathy to his own sex, and when away from the obnoxious skirts no man was better company. He was a power in the smoking-room, and as a travelling companion very nearly perfect. He and General Wyatt had become great friends during their short acquaintance, and now as it struck him that the old man had probably been relying upon his company for the proposed undertaking, his mind was made up.

“Well, General, I shall be happy to make one of the party,” he said. “And after all, if it’s a case of rowing back across the lake, another oar won’t come out of place.”

“Don’t you think it very dangerous to cross the lake in a small boat?” struck in the Infliction, at his elbow.

“Not if the weather’s fine.”

“Ah, but don’t you think storms come up very suddenly on this lake?”

“Oh, Lord,” said Phil in an undertone, “the Gadfly is getting her sting into old Fordham.”

“Be quiet, she’ll hear you,” replied Alma, trying to hide a laugh. “Besides, I want to enjoy the fun.”

But while Fordham was ruminating over a suitable extinguisher, a mild clergyman on the opposite side of the table struck in eagerly, and requested to know if that was really the case, and further manifested such a desire for information on that particular subject that the Infliction turned to him with reinvigorated purpose, and the rest were spared. The good man had only arrived that evening, and little knew what floodgates he was opening.

Chapter Six.

The Fire of the Live Coal.

“I believe we are all here now,” remarked Fordham, ironically, sending a significant glance round the little group assembled on the débarcadère at Montreux.

“Better count and make sure,” responded Scott, the parson, with an asinine guffaw.

The first remark was evoked by the recollection that, even as they now stood watching the swift, shearing approach of the Mont Blanc sweeping up to the jetty, so had they arrived on that spot some three hours earlier, just in time to gaze after the steamer preceding, as she disappeared round the promontory previous to standing in for Territet. And for having missed their boat, and lost three hours of the day, they had to thank the Miss Ottleys, or rather the maternal parent of those young ladies, who, with the usual feminine lack of a sense of the eternal fitness of things, had instructed them to combine business with pleasure, and execute sundry commissions for her in Montreux, on the way to the steamer. Wherefore they—and the parson—had arrived at the pier in time to find the residue of the party gazing discontentedly after the receding boat.

But no one would fall in with Fordham’s suggestion to return. If they had lost three hours’ the days were long and the evenings moonlight. All agreed that they would wait for the next boat.

“En route!” shouted the skipper, with his lips to the speaking-tube. The gangway was withdrawn with a bang—the great paddle-wheels churned the blue water into creamy foam, and the fine vessel, panting and snorting like a courser impatient of the momentary restraint, plunged forward as she swung round obedient to the hand of the helmsman.

“What a disagreeable chap that man Fordham is,” remarked Scott to the Miss Ottleys, with whom he had withdrawn to a comfortable corner of the deck.

“He can be about as rude as any man I ever knew,” returned the younger of the two girls, who had a hazy sort of idea that any man ought to think it rather an honour than otherwise to have all his arrangements thrown out by her dilatoriness.

“I don’t think we can blame him this time,” objected the elder. “It must have been very provoking to the dear old General as well.”

“Ah, he’s different,” said Scott. “But that fellow Fordham just thinks the world was made to suit his convenience. By the bye, who asked him to come to-day?”

“Well, you see, it was Mr Orlebar who suggested the trip, and it isn’t likely he’d leave his friend out.”

“Oh, ah—I see! Pity he didn’t though. The fellow is a regular wet blanket.”

There was reason in the speaker’s venom. Scott, who held the proud position of English chaplain at Les Avants for that month, was a fair specimen of the young “masher” parson. He wore a carefully-trimmed moustache and talked with a drawl. He affected lawn tennis in preference to any other form of exercise because it enabled him to array his graceful five foot six of dimensions in faultlessly fitting flannels, and when so arrayed he was under the impression that Apollo himself might take a back seat. He was not a gentleman by birth, and, having all the exuberant assurance of the self-estimating “ranker,” was a standing offence to those who were. Though made much of by a large section of the ladies, always ready to constitute a pet tame cat of a young parson, the men abhorred him. His bumptiousness and chronic infringements of good form met with systematic snubbing, and on more than one occasion nothing but his “cloth” had saved him from being incontinently kicked. Now of all the “setting down” he had received since his arrival at the hotel, that which he had encountered at the hands of Fordham had been the most merciless and exhaustive.

The latter and General Wyatt were leaning against the taffrail smoking their cigars.

“Have you known young Orlebar long?” the old man was saying. “I gathered from what he told me that you had been travelling together for some years.”

“Well, we have only been a couple of months together this summer. Last autumn, though, we returned from a thirteen months’ trip to China and Japan, then home across the Rockies.”

“Indeed! You ought to know of what sort of stuff a fellow is made after a trip of that kind with him.”

“Yes. Phil is a good fellow enough, and he and I suit each other admirably. He always does what he’s told, and can stand being chaffed for his own good. Not many fellows of his age can do that.”

“I like the boy,” went on General Wyatt, “like him immensely. He’s a fine fellow—a finer fellow than his father was. But it’s a thousand pities he has no sort of profession, for

when he comes into Claxby and the title he won't have too much to keep up either upon."

"I suppose not," assented Fordham, indifferently. "But then he hasn't got any expensive tastes or habits."

"That's a very good point about him. Still, if his father had put him into some profession instead of allowing him ample means to lead an idle life, it would have been all the better for him. But that's Frank Orlebar all over. He dotes upon the boy, and so feels bound to indulge him in every particular. That sort of sentimentality was always a grave weakness in Frank Orlebar's character. His heart was always stronger than his head, and it invariably led him into some serious blunder."

"Didn't he come rather to grief once and have to go abroad for a time?" said Fordham, meditatively trimming the ash of his cigar with his thumbnail. "Phil never mentioned it, but I seem to remember the case some twenty years back."

"Oh, you remember it?" said the General, looking furtively around and lowering his voice. "Well, it wasn't a 'case' exactly—never came to that, luckily. But there was the devil of a scandal, and Orlebar went abroad for a time. It was said that he went to exchange shots with the injured party, and I believe he did, but whether either of them winged his man I'll be hanged if I know."

On one of the benches in the forepart of the hurricane deck, gazing dreamily at the great wooded slopes sliding by as the steamer passed the storm-beaten walls of grim Chillon, revelling in the gorgeous magnificence of the flying scenery while keeping an ear for her companion's remarks, sat Alma Wyatt.

"Do you know you answered me quite at random?" said Philip, with a laugh.

"Did I? Oh, how rude of me! But—you must make allowances. I find it quite impossible to take my attention entirely off these lovely shores and the mountains changing every minute as we go rushing through the water. Look at them—all green and gold in this exquisite sunlight! Look at the dazzling white of the Dent du Midi there, in sharp contrast to the vivid blue of the sky! And the lake—I have just counted no less than thirteen different shades on its surface where each tiny catspaw of wind sweeps it—thirteen, from the richest ultramarine to gold and plum colour and scarlet. There, I am very gushing—am I not?—and you may laugh at me accordingly."

“I certainly shall do nothing of the sort,” he replied, eagerly. “Do you suppose I am such a boor, such a Vandal that I can’t enter into your ideas? Perhaps I was thinking just the same things, only could not for the life of me express myself so beautifully.”

She looked him steadily in the face for a moment as though to read his thoughts, as though to detect the slightest trace of make-believe about his reply. But his tones rang true and she was satisfied.

“Then I shall proceed with my gush, and really end in making you laugh,” she resumed. “But I do think that this eastern end of the Lake of Geneva must have been hewn out of a corner of Paradise.”

“And yet, there stands an eternal reminder to the contrary,” he replied, pointing to the grim towers of Chillon which lay mirrored in clear-cut reflection upon the sapphire waters. “Think of the numberless wretches racked and thumbscrewed and burnt within those walls in past centuries. Have you so soon forgotten that ghastly oubliette they were driven down under a fraudulent promise of liberty? It is said that remains occasionally come to light even to this day.”

“Ah, now you have drawn a sort of black line across my fair picture. You are upsetting my ideal just as Mr Fordham kept trying to do the other day when we were going over the castle. Do you remember he pronounced the torture stake a fraud of the first magnitude, declaring that it had been renewed since he visited Chillon five years ago, and that Byron’s name on the pillar in Bonivard’s dungeon was probably a despicable sham and the work of some latter-day ’Arry?”

“Yes, but we all agreed that even if it were genuine it was a rank act of ’Arrydom on the part of the bard, and by no means a thing to fall down in adoration before.”

“So we did. As to the other things I don’t like being disturbed in my illusions. But a visit to these old castles and prisons with their hideous and varied appliances of torture and mutilation and death invariably tempts me seriously to wonder whether the world was not for centuries under the sway of some malignant fiend instead of a beneficent Ruler. Just think a moment, as you were saying just now, over the unutterable horrors perpetrated in that castle alone, not to mention our own Tower of London and thousands of similar places scattered about the ‘civilised’ world. Why, it seems as if the one thought animating the mind of every one in authority was how to inflict the greatest and most ingenious forms of suffering upon his fellow-creatures. Does not that look as if the world was under Satanic sway? But there, you will be thinking me a very heterodox, not to say a wicked person.”

“I shall think you neither the one nor the other,” he protested, warmly. The sweet seriousness and depth of thought characterising this girl constituted by no means the least of her attractions, and with all his sunny spirits and light-hearted susceptibility Philip Orlebar was poles apart from the ruck of contemporaneous jeunesse dorée whose talk is of the green room and the daily habits of this or that star actress. He had ideas and a serious side, and could well appreciate the same in others. And if in others, how much more in this one who was now exhibiting them.

“But come,” she resumed, gaily, changing her tone and manner with a suddenness as of the sunlight breaking through a cloud, “we had better turn our backs on gloomy Chillon, and only look upon and remember my ‘corner hewn out of Paradise.’ There—that little idea is all my own.”

Remember it? thought Philip. Would he ever forget it? The radiant glories of the summer day, the swift gliding movement over the flashing water, the great mountains around soaring up to the eternal blue, the sense of exhilaration in the mere delight of living—and tingeing, gilding all, touching with the fire of the live coal this fairyland of entrancing glow and sunlight, the magic of a subtle presence here at his side. And the fire of that live coal was Love.

Yes, it had come to this with him. In spite of his friend’s cynical warnings and more or less envenomed banter; in the teeth of all prudential considerations, of future advantage, ways and means, and such; in the face of the awkward fact that his acquaintanceship with her was one of barely ten days, Philip had come to admit to himself that life apart from Alma Wyatt would be but a dead and empty pretence at living.

Barely ten days! Could it be? Less than one brief fortnight since his glance had first rested upon her, here on this very deck! It seemed incredible.

But she? Her splendid eyes met his in conversation fully and fearlessly, their heavy dark lashes never drooping for a moment beneath his ardent gaze. Never the faintest tinge of colour came into the warm paleness of the beautiful patrician face; never a tremor shook the sweetly modulated voice in response to his most eager efforts to please, in recognition of his most unmistakable “signs of distress.” Could she not guess?

“I think the idea is a very sweet one,” he rejoined, earnestly. “A little corner of Paradise—that’s just what it is.”

“Ahem! We shall be at Bouveret in five minutes,” struck in a drawling voice, not wholly guiltless of a cockney twang, recognisable as the property of Scott. “Do you feel prepared to mount Shanks’s mare, Miss Wyatt?”

Alma murmured a very frigid reply, while Philip was obliged to turn away to conceal the fury which blazed forth from his visage, and further to quell an overmastering impulse which moved him to take the speaker by the scruff of his neck and drop him there and then overboard—in front of the paddle-wheels. The free and easy patronising drawl of this insufferable cad made his blood surge again.

“By the way, Miss Wyatt,” went on the pachydermatous pastor, “I have a great mind to ask you to arbitrate. I must say Mr Fordham is a pretty cool hand. What do you think? Here am I with this huge knapsack full of things to carry, and he positively declines to take his share. That is—I’ve hinted to him pretty plainly that he ought to.”

“Fordham isn’t a man who deals largely in hints,” said Philip, facing round upon the speaker with a fierceness that almost made the latter recoil. “If he were, he would doubtless hint that one beast of burden is sufficient for the party.”

Scott looked affronted. Then his countenance suddenly cleared. “Oh! we are going to take a horse with us then?” he said, gleefully.

“No—an ass,” returned Philip, quickly.

Even the inflated layer of the other’s self-esteem was not proof against this shaft. It collapsed with its owner, who retired with a scowl to pour his grievance into haply more sympathising ears. And by that time the steamer had crossed the broad and turgid belt where the snow-waters of the Rhone cleft in a sharply defined pathway the blue surface of the lake, and was slowing down to half-speed as she approached Bouveret pier.

Chapter Seven.

The Storm on the Lake.

“Is there absolutely no way of getting on to St. Gingolph, Mr Fordham?” said the eldest Miss Ottley, ruefully.

“You may put it in that way,” was the tranquil reply. “Unless we walk.”

The party, gathered round Fordham on the wooden pier, were not a little disappointed. They had reckoned on changing steamers and going straight on without delay, for the Mont Blanc went no further than Bouveret. Now they discovered that there was no steamer to change on to.

“That’s what comes of missing the early boat,” resumed Fordham, mercilessly. “You will kindly remember that I warned you I doubted the accuracy of my horaire, and that we should probably not find any steamer on this side, when you elected to come on by the Mont Blanc.”

This was undeniable, but it didn’t seem to mend matters.

“And now two courses lie open to us,” he went on. “We can either walk to St. Gingolph along the high road, or take a short cut round the base of the Grammont for Novèl. I should recommend the latter. What do you say, General?”

“Oh, I’m entirely in your hands. What do the ladies think?”

But the ladies voting unanimously for this plan it was carried forthwith. Then suddenly it occurred to them that nobody knew the way. But they reckoned without Fordham. He had never been over that identical ground, but he undertook to act as guide, and fulfilled his undertaking with admirable accuracy. But they were not to reach their original destination, and it came about in this wise.

The day was hot, and the path winding upward round the mountain-side, though charming as it led through beech and oakwoods, affording many a glimpse of the blue lake below, was both steep and rugged. After about an hour the Miss Ottleys suggested a halt—and lunch.

“This is a very tiring way, Mr Fordham,” said one of them, “and it seems a very long one. Are you quite sure we are going right?”

“I see,” was the short reply. “You want me to say I am not quite sure. Well, what do you want to do—that’s the point?”

They looked at each other.

“I think we had almost better have our picnic here,” said the one who had first spoken.

“I believe we had,” said the other sister. “This is a lovely spot.”

“If we stop here now we sha’n’t get on to Novèl at all,” said Fordham.

“Oh, hang Novèl!” cut in Scott. “I’m for stopping here. What do you say, Miss Wyatt?”

“I am perfectly ready to do what every one else wishes,” answered Alma.

“Fordham, old man, I believe we none of us want to go any further,” said Philip. “It’s awfully hot, you know, and it’ll be no end of a grind. It’s a mistake, too, to make a toil of a pleasure. I propose that we bivouac here, feed, and poke a smipe, and drop down quietly on St. Jingo—or whatever you call it—afterwards. Let’s put it to the vote.”

“All right,” said Fordham, serenely. “It’s all one to me.”

Philip was right, the fact being that every one had had enough of it. So they ate their luncheon in the cool shade, and took their ease and were happy; and after a couple of hours or so started downward for the village, where they were to embark for the return voyage across the lake.

“We might have had some difficulty in getting a boat,” remarked Fordham. “As it happens, though, I saw my commissionaire, François Berthod, in Montreux, and he has a brother at St. Gingolph who owns one. So I made him wire him to look out for us.”

But when they reached St. Gingolph a fresh deadlock seemed likely to arise. There was not much demand for boatmen at the out-of-the-way, seldom-visited little village. Accordingly those amphibious worthies were, one and all, absent, following their other avocations, and among them Jules Berthod. To the whereabouts of the latter nobody seemed able to furnish a clue. The woman who managed the wineshop opined that he had gone over to Bouveret, and would not return till late; but in any case it didn’t matter, she being perfectly certain that neither Jules nor any other boat-owner would cross the lake that afternoon—an opinion abundantly backed up in unintelligible patois by more than one blue-bloused boozer lounging on the wooden seats.

But Fordham knew better, and he was right. For, as luck would have it, who should arrive at that very moment but the missing Jules—a cheery, copper-faced athlete, who, recognising Fordham, made no great difficulty about the undertaking. He glanced at the party, then at his boat; remarked dubiously that it was rather late in the day for crossing, and he should hardly get back that night; then shrugged his shoulders, ejaculated "Enfin," and straightway set off to haul in his craft.

The latter, though roomy, was somewhat narrow of beam, and not so heavy as it looked. There were seats for three rowers, each pulling a pair of sculls.

"I'll take stroke, if it's all the same to everybody," said Philip.

Fordham was about to demur, Philip being the heaviest man of the party, except perhaps the boatman, and there was abundance of weight in the stem; but remembering that Alma had been voted coxswain, he refrained. So Berthod was constituted bow, and Scott, eager to distinguish himself, took the remaining pair.

It was five o'clock when they pushed off. From St. Gingolph to Vevey the distance is about eight miles; therefore they reckoned upon barely two hours of easy pulling. Another two hours' walk in the cool of the evening would bring them back to Les Avants almost before it was dark.

"I don't think much of this sort of rowing," grumbled Scott, for about the third time as, with a final effort to scrape down some of the stars of heaven, he violently fouled Philip's oar. "They don't seem to know what it is in this country. Fancy having your oars hitched on to an iron peg, instead of running free in rowlocks. Why, you can't even feather."

"I suppose you went in for boating a good deal when you were at the 'Varsity, Mr Scott?" remarked Fordham, innocently. It was rather cruel, Scott being one of that rapidly increasing class of parson who has never kept terms at any university.

"Er—not a very great deal—a little, that is," was the somewhat confused reply.

"Didn't aspire to your college boat, eh?" said Philip, who ever since they started had been mentally anathematising this cockney 'Arry, whose alternate star-scraping and crab-catching efforts had kept him in a lively state of irritation and bad time.

"Won't some of you young ladies favour us with a song?" suggested the General. "Nothing like melody on the water."

“Rather,” said Philip. “It’ll send us along at twice the pace—inspire us, don’t you know. Make us keep time—if anything will,” he added, significantly.

There was some little demur among the girls, who were shy of singing without accompaniment. Then they started the Canadian boat-song, and the effect of the clear voices floating out over the mirror-like water was pretty enough, for the said voices certainly did “keep tune,” even though the oars—thanks to the star-scraping proclivities of the maladroit Scott—failed with exasperating frequency to “keep time.” And the scene was a lovely and a peaceful one, inspiring, too, if you came to contrast the utter insignificance of that cockleshell boat floating there on the blue expanse of lake, with the sombre grandeur of the great mountains—many a jagged and fantastic peak starting into view above and behind the abrupt forest-clad slopes sheering up from the water’s edge as the distance widened between them and the Savoy shore. Then, dominating the flat Rhone Valley, the towering Dent de Morcles, and further in the background the snowy head of the Mont Velan peeping round the volcano-like crest of the pyramid-shaped Mont Catogne, and above the green slopes around Les Avants, the rocky hump of the Naye shone red in the beams of the westering sun.

But in spite of the calm and peaceful stillness lying alike upon the water and the encircling mountains, Jules Berthod seemed not altogether at ease. There was a heavy loom of cloud over the purple Jura, which to the mind of the experienced boatman had no business to be there. At the same time a kind of lurid opacity crept over the hitherto radiant sun.

“Crr-rré nom! Si on allait nous flanquer un coup de vent, par exemple!” he muttered between his teeth as he sent more than one uneasy glance to the westward.

There was one upon whom that glance was not lost—who had also begun to read the face of the sky. That one was Fordham.

“What do you say to my taking your place, Mr Scott?” he said. “We must be nearly half-way across by now. If anything, rather more.”

Scott, who had had enough of it, jumped at this proposal, and sank down with a sigh of relief into the cushioned seat among the ladies.

“When are we to take our turn?” asked the youngest Miss Ottley.

“Better wait until we have broken the back of the work,” answered Fordham, who knew, however, that no feminine hand was destined to handle the oar that day.

“Bless my soul, but how chilly it has turned,” said General Wyatt.

It had—and more. The boat no longer slid smoothly over the glassy water. Something of a swell had arisen.

“By Jove! If only we had a sail we should slip along sweetly. There’s quite a little breeze getting up,” said Philip, resting a moment on his oars. “Well, we haven’t, so it’s of no use wishing. But how about another song? We want invigorating. Does any one know the Eton fourth of June song?”

It happened that nobody did, and Philip remarking that that inspiriting chorus was a thin affair if rendered as a solo, was urgently assured that he never was more mistaken in his life and as urgently pressed to give practical proof of the same. Then the disputants abruptly paused. For Jules Berthod was resting on his oars, and seemed deep in a hurried consultation with Fordham, who, it will be remembered, now occupied the middle seat.

“Nom de nom!” he growled. “Ça arrive—ça arrive. Je l’attendais bien—allez!”

“What is the matter?” exclaimed Marian Ottley, with a shade of alarm. “Is it going to be rough, or what?”

A heavy lumping swell was now running, into which the boat rose and fell with a plash and an angry hiss, as each well-timed, powerful stroke forced her through. But a marvellous and magical change had come over the whole scene. The great curtain of cloud seemed now to spread over half the lake, and was gliding on, on. It stole up over the Savoy mountains, and each hitherto shining summit now reared itself dark and threatening against the inky veil. It had thrown out an advance guard of flying scud, which already partially enshrouded the peaks and ridges dominating the Rhone Valley to the eastward, and still it crept on. The air was stirred in fitful puffs, moaning and chill, and the sun had disappeared. The sudden metamorphosis from golden unclouded afternoon to the brooding lurid gloom of half day was inexpressibly awesome—almost appalling.

“Do you mind taking a ‘trick at the wheel,’ General Wyatt?” said Fordham. “We shall want some masterly steering directly.”

“No, uncle. I can do it better than you,” objected Alma, firmly. “That’s one advantage my riverside dwelling has left me—handiness with the tiller ropes.”

“But you’ll have to keep us head to a tolerably heavy sea,” said Fordham. “That is, not straight at it, but as nearly so as possible. You must not let her fall away on any account.”

“I thoroughly understand boats—in smooth water or rough,” answered the girl, calmly.

“Hurrah!” cried Phil. “Three cheers for our coxswain!”

She spoke no more than the truth. There was strength in those supple young wrists and judgment within that well-shaped head, and all there realised that the General at his age would make the more indifferent helmsman of the two.

A whirring vibrating hum seemed to fill the air. Over the water not half a mile distant stretched a dark line. Nearer, nearer it came, and as it swept steadily on, those in the boat had no difficulty in making out a jagged, serrated ridge of leaping wave crests, banked up white and gleaming against the inky scud which seemed urging it on. On, on—nearer, nearer. It was a critical moment. Most of those in the boat held their breath. Could that cockleshell live a moment against that creaming surging wall of water rolling on to engulf it?

Nearer—nearer! The fearful roar of the advancing waves became stunning, deafening. It was a terrible moment, and to those awaiting the shock it seemed as hours. Philip, grasping his oars rigidly in the intensity of the crisis, cast one look over his shoulder at the advancing terror, then at the group in the stern-sheets. The two Ottley girls had buried their faces in their hands. Scott was livid, his eyes starting from his head. Even the old General’s face looked rigidly nerved for a desperate emergency. But she who sat holding the tiller ropes—not a quiver was in her countenance. There was the keenness of steel in her grey eyes, and the little hands seemed to conceal the strength of a vice, as the boat’s head swept round to meet the advancing shock.

It came. With a mighty roar the huge wall of water struck them. The little craft seemed literally flung into the air, then plashed down again, and those within her thought she had buried herself in the waves for good and all. She reeled and rocked, and but for those firm hands that held the tiller ropes would have spun round and sunk headlong. Several great seas swept beneath her, leaving her half full of water, and the terrified shrieks of the two thoroughly frightened girls, the million bellowing voices of the gale, the roaring, hissing tongues of the leaping billows, the weird darkness of the lowering scud out of which leapt each succession of towering curling seas thundering down upon the tiny craft like ravenous monsters sure of their prey, constituted a scene and surroundings well calculated to try the boldest nerves.

For awhile nobody spoke. Those in charge of the boat knew exactly what to do, and did it—fortunately so, or the fate of every soul there was sealed. In the teeth of the fierce tornado it was all the three strong men could do to keep steerage way on her, and well they knew that should she fall away for one instant the next would witness her capsize. And ever the huge waves flung her from crest to crest, drenching her occupants, while the air was filled with clouds of spray torn from the breaking summits and hurled away high overhead.

"Oh, my God!" shrieked Scott, his eyes starting from his wet and livid countenance, as a sudden volume of water struck him full on the neck, nearly knocking him overboard. "Oh, my God! We shall never see land again?"

"Shut your mouth, you snivelling sneak?" said Philip, exasperated beyond all patience. "Look at Miss Wyatt there and then heave your pitiful cowardly carcase overboard." At which remark Fordham laughed aloud, his short, dry guffaw more sardonic than ever.

But the wretched chaplain was impervious even to this humiliation, so abject, so overmastering was his terror. He cowered in the bottom of the boat, his face hidden in his hands, moaning.

"Get up, will you!" cried Fordham, savagely. "You're in Miss Wyatt's way. And make yourself useful if you can. Take that hat of yours and bale like the devil."

The peremptory tone had some effect, and the wretched man made an effort to obey. But a fresh sea dashed the hat from his hands and carried it away.

"This'll never do," muttered Fordham, in a tone only audible to Philip. "Why can't those two damned women rouse themselves and bear a hand, instead of screeching there like stuck pigs?"

The General had been baling away manfully, but it was terribly uphill work, for every wave that struck the boat sent a pouring, hissing stream right into her.

But if her two girl friends were cowering and trembling under the terror of death, no weakness of the kind had impaired the calm resolution of Alma Wyatt. With head bent slightly forward and brows knitted, she never removed her steadfast glance from the work before her. Her eyes full of blinding spray, her wrists stiff and aching with the terrible strain upon them, she watched the advance of each crushing billow, appalling, unnerving in its towering height, and the boat's head was held true, though her whole frame would tremble with the fearful exertion involved. Philip, tugging manfully at his

oars, noted all this. Even though they should go down he did not care greatly, in the excitement and ecstasy of the moment. They would die together, at any rate.

The flying wrack was so thick that they could not see fifty yards around on either side. Already it seemed darkening as with the closing in of twilight. To lie tossing about on the angry surging expanse all night would be a serious matter. Still, Fordham felt sure that the waves had somewhat abated in fierceness. But the muttered remark of Jules Berthod behind him shattered this hope just as he was on the point of expressing it.

“Nom de Dieu! Cochon de veni! Voilà que ça va nous accrocher de nouveau. Cette fois on va chavirer. Oui, cette fois on coulera—nom de nom!”

Again that terrible vibrating hum was in the air. A fresh gust was upon them. The boat half full of water, all hands nearly played out after their abnormal exertions—how could they live out a fresh tornado?

“All up, Phil. Stand clear for a swim directly,” he said, in an undertone.

Philip could hardly repress a start. Well he knew the other would not so have spoken without good reason. Besides, the hideous symptoms of renewed tempest were now manifest even to his ear. He looked hard at Alma, and his plans were laid. The instant the boat went over he would seize her and drag her clear of the struggling crowd. If possible he would secure an oar, which would help to keep them up. He was a strong swimmer and felt that they might stand a chance. At the same time he realised that it would be a very poor one.

On it came, the howling of the hurricane, the livid line of boiling seas. But this time not in that mountainous wall, for the windows of heaven were opened and a mighty rain descended with such violence as to beat down the heads of the waves, which, flattened beneath the terrific force of the downpour, had lost much of their power for peril. For a quarter of an hour this continued, then a red straggling glow stole athwart the livid scud.

“Bon!” muttered Jules. “Cette fois on ne coulera pas. Mais non!”

The red glow brightened. Suddenly as the parting of curtains, the dark wrack opened out, revealing a patch of blue sky. Then a golden sun-ray shot through, and lo! the whole ridge of the purple Jura, lying beyond the great heaving, tumbling mass of blue water dotted with myriads of white foamy crests.

“Hurrah!” roared Philip. “We’ve weathered it this time. Fordham, old chap, isn’t that our haven?” as a grey town about three miles distant stood disclosed by the retreating scud.

“Yes, that’s Vevey all right,” was the answer. “Give way. We shall be there in half an hour or so. I needn’t tell you how to steer now, Miss Wyatt. Hold up for a little while longer, Mr Scott. This company does not carry a steward.” For the unfortunate chaplain, relieved of his fears as to mortal extinction, began to show symptoms of falling a prey to the agonies of sea sickness.

There was still a pretty stiff sea running, and every now and then a wave would strike them, sousing them from head to foot. But it was little enough they cared for this after their recent experiences, and soon the boat was running in under the lee of the débarcadère.

Quite a little crowd had collected to witness the landing of these “mad English,” as they put it. Then, directing Berthod to call later for the very liberal remuneration awaiting him, the whole party started for the Hôtel Monnet to get their dripping clothes dried and to dine, causing quite a sensation as they hurried through the streets of the sleepy little town, in their capacity of shipwrecked castaways.

Chapter Eight.

An Inopportune Reminder.

Life at a mountain hotel affected by our compatriots is very much like life on board a passenger ship, with the difference and manifest advantages that the Johnsonian definition of the latter does not apply to the former, and you can generally steer clear of a bore—unless he, or she, should happen to be too near you at table, that is. But life on the whole is a free and easy unconventional thing, and as a rule everybody knows everybody, and people who as neighbours at home would take about two years to get beyond the rigid afternoon call, and cup-of-weak-tea stage of social intercourse, here become as "thick as thieves" in the same number of days. A chance walk does it, or a seat in proximity at table d'hôte; peradventure the fact that both venerate the same star Boanerges at home, or are alike enthusiastic believers in "General" Booth's scheme; or it may be that both hold in common a choice bit of scandal concerning some other person or persons in the house. And then, as our said compatriots are nothing if not clique-ish, coteries will abound wherever these may be gathered together. There will be the chaplain's clique and the worldly clique; the clique that won't tolerate bores at any price, and that in which they reign paramount, and so on, and so on. But with all these dubious elements of weak humanity in active operation, life at such an hotel is rather a pleasant thing than otherwise, and to him who can derive diversion from the study of a heterogeneous crowd of his compatriots off their guard, vastly amusing.

Now with a gathering of this sort, three-fourths of it composed of the other sex, such a fellow as Philip Orlebar was pretty sure to be in general request; and within forty-eight hours of his arrival he was on good terms with very nearly everybody in the house. In fact, he was in danger of becoming "the rage"; for, apart from his good looks and rather taking manners, the superior sex was almost entirely represented by two or three quiet university men, a sprinkling of parsons, and a few contemporaries of General Wyatt. So, as was his wont, he threw himself with zest into the thing, determined to get all the fun out of it he could; and, truth to tell, he managed to get a good deal.

When Fordham, on the day of their arrival, predicted for himself a series of solitary undertakings, as far as his friend's company was concerned, he was foretelling no more than the truth. For an expedition à deux, he, Fordham, being the second, Philip was never available. The Misses This wanted to be taken up the Cape-au-Moîne, or the Misses That had organised a picnic to the Folli or the Crêt de Molard; but why the deuce couldn't Fordham shake himself together and be sociable, and come too? To which the latter would tranquilly reply that the rôle of universal flunkey was not congenial to his temperament.

Of late, however, Master Phil's popularity had been on the wane. While he was an open question, each and all the damsels up there "on spec," with but few exceptions, vied with each other to make things pleasant for him, and their mammas showed unimpeachable dentist's fronts in beaming approval of their efforts. But when he devoted himself to one, and one only, manifestly and exclusively, then it became surprising how suddenly all these little attentions cooled down; how the dimpling smile became an acidulated sneer, and the bell-like voice rang a hard note; how the mammas aforesaid awoke to the fact that he seldom went to church, and when he did it was only to sit near that Miss Wyatt.

"That Miss Wyatt," however, must be held to constitute pre-eminently one of the few exceptions referred to above. If Philip Orlebar had concentrated all his attentions upon her with that blundering suddenness men will be guilty of under such circumstances, she certainly had not given him a lead; in fact, he was wont to complain bitterly to himself—and sometimes to Fordham—that she treated him rather too calmly, might give him a few more opportunities. But Alma Wyatt was not the sort of girl who gives "opportunities."

Fordham's comment was characteristic.

"Oh! the divinity has a fault, then? See here, Phil. Supposing she had never come here, you would have cut out one of those other girls as your divinity, pro tem, and have planted her on a pedestal in the usual way. Now you see what sort of a crowd they are. Why do you think the other one more endowed with god-like attributes than they? I tell you all women are deadly alike, in spite of the spurious philosophical cant which affects to stamp them as an unknown quantity, inscrutable, mysterious, and so forth. The fact being that there is nothing incomprehensible about them or their ways except to such of ourselves who are greater fools than they. Now to me it is a perfectly safe conjecture how any given woman will act under any given circumstances."

"How do you get at it?"

"By starting on the sure basis that she will act with cussedness, either overt or concealed, be it remembered. But what I want you to see is, that as long as you go on setting up these clay idols pro tem, it's all right. Only don't come to me and ask me to help you to hang one of them round your neck for life. You'll find it a lumping heavy burden, my boy, I don't care who it is, even if it doesn't throttle you at the start."

Two days after the boating incident Philip was strolling in the garden of the hotel with Alma and her aunt. It was Sunday, and they had just returned from the little tabernacle where, during his month of office, the irrepressible Scott dispensed spiritual

nourishment to his flock—or was supposed to—and whither it is to be feared that one of the trio had betaken himself in obedience to the vitiated motives ascribed to him by sundry disappointed mammas above mentioned.

"What do you think I heard some of them saying as we came out of church?" said Mrs Wyatt, with an amused smile. "That Mr Scott's sermon about the storm on Gennesaret was the finest ever preached."

"Ha-ha! So it was, in one sense," said Philip. "I know I was divided between an impulse to hurl a book at his head and to roar out laughing. You should have seen the fellow grovelling at the bottom of the boat and screaming—Wasn't he, Miss Wyatt?"

"The poor man was rather frightened, certainly," replied Alma. "But I never for a moment expected we should live through it. In fact, I was horribly frightened myself—quite shaken all day yesterday."

"You!" cried Philip, in a blending of admiration and tenderness and incredulity. "I never heard such a libel in my life. But for your splendid nerve we should all have gone to the bottom, to a dead certainty. Even old Fordham admitted that much."

"No—no?" expostulated Alma, a tinge of colour suffusing her face. "Please don't try and make a heroine of me. And, talking of Mr Fordham, you know I told you the other day I didn't like him, and you were very much offended with me."

"I might have been with any one else," he replied, meaningly.

"Well, now," she went on rather shyly, "I want to retract what I said then. I never saw a man behave so splendidly in an emergency as he did."

We dare not swear that the suspicion of a jealous pang did not shoot through Phil's loyal heart at this warmly-spoken eulogy. But if so, he did manful penance by promptly informing his friend. Fordham gave vent to a sardonic chuckle.

"That's a woman all over. She allows her deliberately-formed judgment to be clean overthrown by a mere fortuitous circumstance. From looking upon me with aversion and distrust the pendulum now swings the other way, and she invests me with heroic virtues because on one occasion I happen to demonstrate the possession of a negative quality—that of not being afraid, or seeming not to be. Faugh! that's a woman all over! All impulse and featherhead."

Which was all poor Alma's warm-hearted little retraction gained from this armour-plated cynic; but she had the negative consolation of never knowing it.

"It isn't the first time I've seen him all there at a pinch; in fact, he got me out of a queer corner once when we were in China. I shouldn't be here or any where to-day, but for him. But it was a horrid business, and I can't tell you how he did it; in fact, I hardly like to think of it myself."

The look of vivid interest which had come over Alma's face faded away in disappointment.

"Have you been roaming the world long together?" she said.

"Perhaps a couple of years, on and off. We ran against each other first in the course of knocking about. It was at a bull-fight in Barcelona. We had adjoining seats and got into conversation, and, as Britishers are few in the Peninsula, we soon became thick. But, you know, although he's the best fellow in the world once you know him, old Fordham has his cranks. For instance, he's a most thorough and confirmed woman-hater."

"I suppose he was badly treated once," said Mrs Wyatt. "Still, it strikes me as a foolish thing, and perhaps a little childish, that a man should judge all of us by the measure of one."

"I don't know, aunt," said Alma. "It may be foolish from a certain point of view, morbid perhaps; but I think it shows character. Not many men, I should imagine, except in books, think any of us worth grieving over for long; and the fact that one affair turning out disastrously should stamp its mark on a man's whole life shows that man to be endowed with a powerful capacity for feeling."

"Perhaps so," assented the old lady. "But, Alma, I don't know what Mr Orlebar will think of us taking his friend to pieces in this free-and-easy fashion."

"My dear Mrs Wyatt, there is really nothing to be uneasy about on that score," cried Philip. "We are not abusing him, you know, or running him down. And by the way, queer as it may seem, I know absolutely no more of Fordham's earlier life than you do. He may have had an 'affair,' or he may not. He has never let drop any clue to the mystery—if mystery there is."

"You see, auntie, how different men are to us poor girls," said Alma, with a queer little smile. "They know how to keep their own counsel. No such thing as pouring out confidences, even to their closest friends!"

There was a vague something about her tone and look which struck Philip uncomfortably. He could not for the life of him have told why, yet the feeling was there. Not for the first time either. More than once had Alma shown indications of a very keen tendency to satire underlying her normal openness of ideas and the fascination of her utterly unaffected manner. For a few moments he walked by her side in silence.

It was a lovely day. The air was heavy with the scent of narcissus and roses; languid and glowing with the rich warmth of early summer. Great bees drowsily boomed from flower to flower, dipping into the purple pansies, hovering round a carnation, and now and again unwarily venturing within the spray of the sparkling fountain. A swallow-tail butterfly on its broad embroidered wings fluttered about their faces so tamely, that by stretching out a hand they could almost have caught it. Cliff and abrupt slope, green pastureland and sombre pine forest, showed soft and slumbrous in the mellow glow; while overhead, her burnished plumage shining in the sun, floated a great eagle, the rush of whose pinions was almost audible in the noontide stillness as the noble bird described her airy circles in free and majestic sweep. An idyllic day and an idyllic scene, thought Philip, with more than one furtive glance at the beautiful face by his side.

Then, as usual at such moments, in came the prose of life in the shape of the post. A green-aproned porter, a sheaf of letters in his hand, drew near.

“Pour vous, Monsieur!” he said, handing one to Philip.

When a man starts, or describes a ridiculous pirouette at a street crossing because a hansom cabman utters a war-whoop in his ear, it is safe to assume that man’s nerves to be—well, not in the state they should be. But the war-whoop of the hansom cab fiend athirst for—bones, is nothing in the way of a test compared with the wholly unexpected receipt of an objectionable and unwelcome letter. When Philip took the missive from the porter’s hand, a glance at the superscription was enough. A very dismayed look came over his countenance. He held the obnoxious envelope as though it might sting him, then crushed it hurriedly into his pocket. But not before he, and peradventure his companion, had seen that it was directed in a very slanting, pointed, and insignificant feminine hand.

Then the luncheon bell rang.

Chapter Nine.

"Best to be off with the Old Love, Before..."

Philip was not up to his usual form during luncheon. Any one in the secret would have said that that letter was burning a hole in his pocket. It seemed to affect his appetite; it certainly affected his conversational powers. More than once he answered at random; more than once he relapsed into a spell of silence, almost of gloom, wholly foreign to his breezy and light-hearted temperament. Yet he was still in ignorance of its contents. He might have mastered them when he went up to his room at the ringing of the bell, yet he did not. Now, however, he wished that he had.

Fordham, glancing sharply at him across the table, more than three parts made up his mind as to the cause of this abnormal gravity and abstraction on the part of his volatile friend. He knew he had been wandering about with Alma Wyatt—the old lady had not been with them all the time—and was inclined to believe that the impulsive Phil had, contrary to his own advice, both hinted and outspoken, committed himself. At the same time he recognised that if that was so the answer had not been altogether satisfactory. In short, he decided that Master Phil had received a "facer," and chuckled internally thereat.

The lunch at last over, Philip gained his room. The first thing he did was to lock the door. Then, drawing the obnoxious missive from his pocket, he tore it open, with something that sounded very like a "cussword," and spread the sheet out on the table before him. The sheet? There were seven of them, all of the flimsiest paper, all closely written over on every side, in that thin, pointed, ill-formed hand. Well, he had got to go through them, so with a sort of effort he began.

"My own dear, dear old darling Phil,—It is just ages, months, years, centuries, since poor little I heard from you, you dreadfully awfully naughty, naughty boy!"

"Oh, Lord!" he ejaculated, turning the sheets over, in a kind of despair, as if to see how much more of this sort of thing was coming. But he derived no modicum of solace from his investigation, for there was a great deal more of it coming—in fact, the whole seven sheets full. Seven sheets of the sort of stuff that sets the court in a roar, and melts the collective heart of the dozen empanelled grocers and ironmongers gathered there to mulct the unwary of the substantial salve which should heal the wounds of the lovely and disconsolate—if slightly intriguing—plaintiff. And, as he read, an uncomfortable misgiving that it might ultimately come to this, invaded his mind more than once.

With a sigh of relief he turned the last page, but the feeling was promptly nipped in the bud as he read:—

"I've been at Pa again and again to take us abroad this year; how jolly it would be if we were to meet again in that love of a Switzerland, wouldn't it, dear boy? But no such luck, he won't, and we are going to St. Swithins instead, and it's the next best thing, and I do love St. Swithins, and I shall think the blue sea is the Lake of Geneva and you are there. But we will go all over it together soon, you and I alone, won't we, Phil, darling, you and your little Edie." Then followed half a dozen lines of appropriate drivel, and a postscript:—"Be sure you send me a big bunch of adleweis from the top of the Matterhorn."

If ever a man felt nauseated with himself and all the world, assuredly that man was Philip Orlebar, as he sat staring at this effusion. Its fearful style—or rather utter lack of it—its redundancy of conjunctions, its far from infrequent mis-spellings, its middle-class vulgarity of gush, would at any other time have been amusing, if painfully so; now it was all absolutely revolting. He took it up again. "'Adleweis!' (why couldn't the girl borrow a dictionary), and 'from the top of the Matterhorn' (ugh!) And St. Swithins, staring, cockneyfied, yahoo-ridden St. Swithins, with its blazer-clad 'Arries and shrimp-devouring 'Arriets, its nigger minstrels and beach conjurers! (faugh!) What sort of a mind—what sort of ideas had the girl got? Then again, 'dear boy'! Fancy Alma—" and at this suggestion he dropped the missive, and, starting up, began to pace the room.

"'We will go all over it together soon!' Will we, though!" he muttered bitterly. And then, with a savageness begotten of a feeling of being cornered, trapped, run to earth, he began to wonder whether he should suffer himself to be taken possession of in this slap-dash fashion. Had he really given himself away beyond recall! Old Glover entertained splendidly, and the sparkling burgundy was more than first-rate. What a fool he had been. Still it seemed impossible that Edith should have taken seriously all he said—impossible and preposterous! Yes, preposterous—if all that a man said while sitting out with a pretty girl, in a deliciously cool and secluded corner of the conservatory—after that first-rate sparkling burgundy too—was to be twisted into a downright proposal—an engagement. By Jove, it was—preposterous!

But through all his self-evolved indignation Philip could not disguise from himself that he had acted like a lunatic, had, in fact, given himself away. Between his susceptibility to feminine admiration and his laisser faire disposition, he had allowed his relations with Edith Glover to attain that stage where the boundary between the ordinary flirtatious society acquaintance and the affianced lover has touched vanishing point. The girl was pretty, and adored his noble self. Old Glover, who was a merchant-prince of some sort

or other and rolling in money, would be sure to "come down" liberally. On the whole he might do worse. So he had reasoned. But now?

Throughout his perusal of that trying effusion his mind's eye had been more than half absorbed in a vision of Alma Wyatt—Alma as he had last seen her—the sweet, patrician face, the grey earnest eyes, the exquisite tastefulness of her cool white apparel, the grace and poetry of her every movement, the modulated music of her voice. It seemed a profanation to contrast her—to place her on the same level with this other girl—this girl with her middle-class ideas, vile orthography, and exuberant gush.

What was he to do? that was the thing. Should he send a reply—one so chilling and decisive as to leave room for no further misapprehension? That would never do, he decided. The Glovers were just the sort of people to come straight over there and raise such a clamour about his ears that he might safely wish himself in a hornets' nest by contrast. This they might do, and welcome, were it not for Alma. But then, were it not for Alma it is probable to the last degree that he would have drifted on, contented enough with the existing state of things.

"Heavens and earth, I believe old Fordham is right after all?" he ejaculated at last. "Women are the devil—the very devil, one and all of them. I'll adopt his theory. Shot if I don't!"

But profession and faith are not necessarily a synonym. Between our would-be misogynist and the proposed mental transformation stood that bright and wholly alluring potentiality whose name was Alma Wyatt.

With an effort he locked away the obnoxious missive, wishing to Heaven he could lock up the dilemma he was in as easily and indefinitely. Should he consult Fordham? No, that wouldn't help matters; besides, he shrank from having to own that he had made a consummate ass of himself, nor did he feel disposed just then to open his heart even to Fordham. How beastly hot it had become! He would stay up in his room and take it easy—have a read and a smoke. Hang everybody! And with a growl he kicked off his boots, and, picking up a Tauchnitz novel, flung himself on the bed and lighted his pipe.

Rat-tat-tat-tat! Then a voice. "You there, Phil? The first dinner-bell has gone!"

He started up. The knock and the voice were Fordham's. It was a quarter-past six, and he had been asleep just three hours.

"We were afraid you had heard bad news, Mr Orlebar," said Mrs Wyatt, as he slid into his seat a quarter of an hour late. "You haven't, have you?"

“Oh, no,” he answered, with splendid mendacity. “I’ve been feeling a little pulled down to-day, and dropped off to sleep without knowing it.”

“The thunder in the air, I suppose,” said Alma, with a bright, mischievous glance. “We had such a nice walk up to the Cubly, when it began to get cool.”

“The Cubly?”

“Yes. Uncle was looking for you everywhere, but, as it happens, it was lucky we didn’t disturb you. Besides, we feared you might have had bad news.”

This was what he had missed then—all through that infernal letter too. He felt more savage than ever. Bad news? Yes he had, and no mistake. But the next moment he was destined to hear worse.

“I’m sorry to say we are obliged to cut short our stay here,” General Wyatt was saying to Fordham. “Some friends whom we had arranged to meet have wired us to join them at the Grindelwald—an old brother officer and his family. They have turned up sooner than we expected, and, reckoning on our promise to join them, have already engaged our rooms. In fact they could not have got them otherwise, for the hotel is filling up rapidly.”

“Sorry to hear that, General—very sorry. When do you leave?”

“Not later than Tuesday, I’m afraid. That’ll give this young person a day clear for a final walk or climb.”

Here was a bolt from the blue with a vengeance, thought Philip.

“I don’t want to go in the least,” said Alma. “Don’t you think,” she added, with a flash of merriment, “it’s hateful to leave a place just as you have become fond of it?”

“Hateful isn’t the word for it,” replied Philip, with savage vehemence.

“But don’t you think you may become just as fond of where you’re going?” struck in the eternal female opposite.

“I’m perfectly sure you won’t in this case,” said Fordham, speaking to, and answering for, the Wyatts at the same time. “The Grindelwald is about the most noisy, crowded, and cheap-tripper-ridden resort in the Alps. A chronic dust cloud overhangs the whole Lütschinen Thal by reason of a perennial string of vehicles ascending from and

descending to Interlaken with scarce a break of fifty yards. You can't go on a glacier without paying gate-money—a franc a head. Fancy that! Fancy reducing a glacier to the level of a cockney tea-garden! Then between the village and either of the said glaciers is an ever-moving stream of the personally conducted, mostly mounted on mules and holding umbrellas aloft."

"But don't you think you are painting poor Grindelwald in very unattractive colours?" expostulated the Infliction.

"Think? No, I'm sure of it," was the short reply. "And I haven't done yet. The place swarms with beggars and cadgers. Go where you will, you are beset by small ragamuffins pestering you to purchase evil-looking edelweiss blossoms or mobbing your heels to be allowed to show you the way, which you know a vast deal better than they do. Every fifty yards or so you come upon the Alpine horn fiend, prepared to make hideous melody for a consideration; or wherever a rock occurs which can by any chance produce an echo, there lurks a vagabond ready to explode a howitzer upon receipt of a franc. No. Taking it all in all, I don't think one is far out in defining Grindelwald as the Rosherville of Switzerland."

"That sounds truly dreadful," said Alma. "But were it the reverse I should still be sorry to leave here—very sorry."

"We must get up a jolly long walk to-morrow," said Philip, eagerly. "It'll be the last time, and we ought to have a good one. Let's go up the Cape au Moine."

"But isn't that a very dangerous climb?" objected Mrs Wyatt.

"Oh, no. At least, I believe not. Wentworth, who has been up ever so many times, says it's awfully over-rated. But we'll get him to come along and to show us the way."

Fordham looked quickly up, intending to throw cold water on the whole scheme. But Philip's boot coming in violent and significant contact with a rather troublesome corn, stifled in a vehement scowl the remark he was about to make, as his friend intended it should.

"That'll be delightful," assented Alma, gleefully. "Now who shall we ask to go? Mr Wentworth, the two Ottleys—they are sure to ask Mr Scott."

"Should have thought that boat experience would have choked him off any further enterprise," grunted Fordham.

“That’ll be four,” went on Alma, not heeding the interruption. “Then you two, uncle and myself—eight altogether. We ought to be roped. It’s a real climb, isn’t it?”

“Oh, very,” said Fordham. “So real that not half of us will reach the top.”

“Well, I mean to for one,” declared Alma. “And oh, I do hope it’ll be fine.”

Chapter Ten.

On the Cape au Moine.

Alma's wish was destined to be fulfilled, for the morning broke clear and cloudless. Starting in the highest spirits, a couple of hours' easy walking brought the party to the foot of the steep and grassy slope which leads right up to the left arête of the Cape au Moine.

Though the morning was yet young it was uncomfortably warm. The mighty grass slopes of the Rochers des Verreaux, of which the Cape au Moine is the principal summit, stood forth with the distinctness of a steel engraving, so clear was the air. A suspicious clearness which, taken in conjunction with certain light cloud streamers flecking the sky, and the unwonted heat of that early hour, betokened to the practised eye an impending change of weather.

"Wet jackets," remarked Wentworth, laconically, with a glance at these signs.

"Likely enough," assented Fordham. "Hallo! what's the row down there? They seem to be beginning already."

These two were leading the way up the steep, slippery path, and were a little distance ahead of the rest. The above remarks referred to a sudden halt at the tail of the party, caused by one of the Miss Ottleys finding her heart fail her: for the path at that point skirts the very brink of a precipice.

"Only what I expected," sneered Fordham. "Look at that, Wentworth. What sort of figure will all these women cut when we get them up on the arête yonder, if they can't stand an easy, beaten track up a grass slope? We shall have them squalling and hystericking and fainting, and perhaps taking a header over. Eh?"

Wentworth merely shrugged his shoulders. "Who is that new specimen they've caught?" he said, as, the difficulty apparently overcome, the group behind was seen to resume its way.

"That?" said Fordham, glancing at the person indicated, a tallish, loosely-hung youth in knickerbockers, who seemed to be dividing his time between squiring the Miss Ottleys and arguing with Scott, the parson. "Don't know who he is—and don't want to. Confound the fellow!—began 'Fordham-ing' me after barely a quarter of an hour's talk. Name's Gedge, I believe. I suppose some of the women cut him into this trip."

“Most probably,” replied Wentworth. “I haven’t exchanged any remarks with him myself. But he sits near me at table and talks nineteen to the dozen. It’s like having a full-sized cow-bell swinging in your ear just the time you are within his proximity.”

“They say everything has its use,” returned Fordham, meditatively. “I own to having discovered a use for friend Gedge—viz, to demonstrate that there can actually exist a more thoroughly self-sufficient and aggressive bore than even that fellow Scott.”

The other laughed. And by this time they had gained the dip where the path—a mere thread of a track—crosses the high ridge of the Chaîne des Verreaux at its extreme end, and sat down to await the arrival of the residue of the party.

The latter, broken up into twos and threes, was straggling up the slope. The temporary impediment had apparently been successfully overcome, and the trepidation of the fearful fair one removed. Still, to those unaccustomed to heights it was nervous work, for the path was, as we have said, a mere thread, intersecting the long, slippery grass, more treacherous than ice, of the frightfully steep mountain-side—and lying below was more than one precipice, comparatively insignificant, but high enough to mean a broken limb if not a broken neck.

“Well, Miss Wyatt, do you feel like going the whole way?” said Wentworth, as Alma, with her uncle and Philip Orlebar, gained the ridge where they were halted.

“Of course I do,” she answered gaily. “I always said I would get to the top if I got the chance—and I will.”

“There are five arêtes—three of them like knife-blades,” pursued Wentworth, who rather shared Fordham’s opinions regarding the other sex. “What if you begin to feel giddy in the middle of one of them?”

“But I’m not going to feel anything of the kind,” she answered, with defiant good-humour. “So don’t try and put me off, for it’s of no use.”

“I say, Fordham,” sung out a sort of hail-the-maintop voice, the property of the youth referred to as Gedge, as its owner climbed puffing up to where they sat, followed by the rest of the party. “I don’t think overmuch of this Cape au Moine of yours. Why one can dance up it on one leg.”

“And one can dance down it on one head—and that in a surprisingly short space of time—viz, a few seconds,” said Wentworth, tranquilly. “However, you’ll see directly.”

“Well, who’s going up and who’s going to wait for us here?” said Philip, after a rest of ten minutes or so.

“I don’t think we are,” said the elder Miss Ottley. “I more than half promised mamma we wouldn’t. And Monsieur Dufour says it’s such a dangerous mountain. We’ll stay here and take care of General Wyatt.”

There was some demur to this on the part of the more inexperienced section of the males. The experienced ones said nothing.

“You’d better stay with us, Alma,” said the General, with a shade of anxiety. “Remember there have been several people killed up there.”

“Just why I particularly want to go, uncle. I want to be able to say I have been up a mountain on which several people have been killed.”

“I think Miss Wyatt has a steady enough head, General,” said Wentworth, who was an experienced Alpine climber. “At least, judging from the way in which she stood looking over that precipice down yonder, I should say so. If she will allow me I will take care of her.”

“I’ll be hanged if you will though!” said Phil to himself. And then they started.

The mere climbing part of what followed was not hard. But what was apt to prove trying to the nerves of the uninitiated was when, after feeling their way carefully along the narrow ledge-like path which runs beneath the rocks near the crest of the ridge, they came right out upon the summit of the arête itself. Here, indeed, it was a good deal like walking on the edge of a knife-blade even as Wentworth had defined it, and here it was that two, at any rate, of the party began to feel dubious. On the right was a precipitous fall of rocks, then the steep, slippery, grassy slope—broken here and there by a cliff—which constituted the whole of that side of the mountain; on the left an unbroken drop of seven or eight hundred feet. And on the apex of this rock ridge, in single file, poised, like Mohammed’s coffin, between the heavens and the earth, the aspiring party had to walk or crawl.

“Well, Miss Wyatt, how do you feel now?” said Wentworth, who was leading the way. Alma was immediately behind him, then came Philip Orlebar, then Fordham, Scott and Gedge bringing up the rear. “Not giddy at all, I hope?”

“Not in the very least,” said Alma, brightly. “Quite sure? I can give you a hand if you like.”

“Not for the world. I assure you I’m thoroughly enjoying it. And what a view!”

“Well, look carefully where you’re going,” continued Wentworth. “Leave the view to take care of itself until you get to the top. It won’t run away.”

That the warning was by no means superfluous was shown by a sudden stagger on the part of Philip. He reeled for a moment, then, with a great effort, recovered his balance. He had been so absorbed in watching Alma’s progress in front, that he had quite neglected the attention due to his own footing. Now this cannot be done with impunity upon the edge of a knife-like ridge about one thousand feet in mid-air—as he learned when he found himself within an ace of plunging into space. Fordham, for a moment, thought he had gone.

“You’ll add to the record of this much maligned climb, Phil, if you don’t mind,” he said. “What’s the row? Feel heady?”

“Not a bit. Only made a slip. Sha’n’t do it again though. I say, Wentworth, how far would a fellow fall here—on this side?”

“Oh, about eight hundred feet. Then he’d go footballing two or three hundred more,” was the nonchalant reply. “I wouldn’t try it, though, if I were you.”

They were off the arête now, and paused to rest under the rocks to allow the others time to come up.

“Hallo, Gedge!” continued Wentworth, as the addressed came crawling along on all-fours, and that very gingerly. “I thought you felt like doing this climb on one leg, and instead of that it seems to take you all four.”

“You people go on at such a rate. Besides, I find I’m not up to much on a place like this. No, I’ll climb down from the ‘one-leg’ position, absolutely and unreservedly.”

“There’s another man who isn’t up to much on a place like this,” said Fordham, with a dry chuckle.

Scott, to whom this remark referred, had nearly reached the middle of the arête. He, too, was creeping on hands and knees. But suddenly his heart seemed to fail him, for there he sat, straddling the ridge, one leg on each side of the mountain, the very picture of wild panic. His hat had blown off, and hung by a string over his shoulder, and he dared

not move a finger to replace it. His hands shook as he grasped the rock in a strained, terror-stricken grasp, and his eyes seemed to start from his deadly white face.

“Oh, help me off!” he cried piteously. “For Heaven’s sake, some of you help me off!”

In vain they called out to him that he was perfectly safe—that if Miss Wyatt could get along the place without any difficulty surely he could. The poor man’s reasoning faculties seemed to have deserted him altogether.

“I suppose I must go back and salvage him!” said Wentworth, resignedly. “You had better wait here for me, though.” And in a moment he was beside the distressed chaplain.

“Hang it all, Mr Scott!” he said in an undertone, “do remember what an exhibition you are making of yourself before Miss Wyatt, and pull yourself together. You’re quite safe, I tell you. Now, turn round—carefully as you like—and then crawl back again as you came.”

When a man of Scott’s calibre is in a horrible funk, poised a thousand feet in mid-air, appeals to his reason or his sense of shame are apt to fall alike on deaf ears. To all Wentworth’s adjurations he only reiterated piteously, “I can’t move! What is to be done? I can’t move!”

What, indeed, was to be done? It was a position in which if a man will not help himself nobody can help him. Wentworth was in despair. Suddenly a happy thought struck him. His flask!

“Here, take a nip of this and pull yourself together. That’s right,” as Scott eagerly seized the proffered refreshment.

And soon the effects were felt. A liberal gulp or two having infused into his system a faint modicum of that artificial courage libellously termed “Dutch,” the panic-stricken cleric managed to turn round upon his aërial perch, and began to crawl gingerly back in the same ignominious posture as that in which he had come, stipulating eagerly that his succourer should keep just behind him in order to grab hold of him if he should show the least sign of falling. Wentworth was glad to get rid of him on any terms, and, depositing him in safety under a rock, solemnly enjoined upon him not to move therefrom until they should return.

“Well, Mr Fordham,” said Alma, wickedly, “we poor women are not always the ones who give the most trouble, you see.”

“No, by Jove, you’re not, Miss Wyatt,” struck in Gedge, characteristically eager to answer for everybody. “What an awful fool I must have looked myself. I’ll do the next arête on my hind legs like the rest of you.” And he was as good as his word.

Two more of these narrow rock-ridges, overhanging a dizzy height, then a particularly awkward “corner” where a very slight excrescence of the rock constituted the only foothold, and where Wentworth and Philip’s combined caution availed to render the danger for Alma practically nil, and they began the steep but easy climb of the grassy cone itself. A few minutes later they stood on the summit.

“Well, Miss Wyatt, I must in all due sincerity congratulate you,” said Wentworth, as they sat down to rest after their exertions. “No one could have got along better than you have done. And you have never climbed a mountain before?”

“Never. Why, I’ve never even seen a mountain before I came to this country a couple of weeks ago,” answered Alma, with a gratified smile.

“Wonderful I wonderful! Isn’t it, Fordham?”

“Very,” replied that worthy, drily.

“No chance of any one holding too good an opinion of herself when Mr Fordham is by,” said Alma, with mischievous emphasis on the “her.”

“Which is to say that everything—everybody, rather—is of some use,” was the ready rejoinder.

“I don’t see the point of that at all,” cried Phil, dimly conscious that his deity was being made the butt of his crusty friend’s satire. “No, I don’t. Come now, Fordham.”

“I suppose not. There is another point you don’t see either, which is that when a man has taken the trouble to shin up the Cape au Moine on a particularly hot and surpassingly clear day, he prefers the enjoyment of the magnificent view which a bountiful Providence has spread around him to the labour of driving this or that ‘point’ into the somewhat opaque brain-box of Philip Orlebar, Esq.”

“You had better take that as final, Mr Orlebar, ere worse befall you,” laughed! Alma, interrupting the derisive hoot wherewith her adorer had greeted the above contemptuous speech. “And Mr Fordham’s principle is a sound one in the main, for I

never could have imagined the world could show anything so glorious, so perfectly heavenly as this view. Let us make the most of it."

Her enthusiasm was not feigned, and for it there was every justification. The atmosphere balmy and clear, the lofty elevation at which they found themselves—these alone were enough to engender an unbounded sense of exhilaration. But what a panorama! Range upon range of noble mountains, the dazzling snow-summits of the giants of the Oberland reaching in a stately line across the whole eastern background of the picture, from the cloud-like Wetterhorn to the massive rock rampart of the Diablerets. Mountains, mountains everywhere—one vast rolling sea of tossing peaks, rock-ridges, and smooth, hump-like backs; of bold and sweeping slopes, here black with pine forest, there vividly green in the full blaze of unclouded sunlight; and, cleaving the heart of the billowy expanse, such a maze of sequestered and peaceful valleys resonant with the far-away music of cow-bells, at eventide sweet with the melodious jodel of the Ranz des Vaches. In the distance the turbid Sarine winding its way by more than one cluster of red roofs grouping around a modest steeple on its banks. This on the one hand. On the other, the rolling, wooded champaign and rich pasture-lands of the plain of Switzerland stretching away to the lakes of Neuchatel and Bienne, and historic Morat; and below, like a huge turquoise, the blue Lake Léman in its mountain-girt setting, between the far-away line of the purple Jura and the great masses of the Savoy Alps rearing up opposite. What a panorama, beneath a sky of deep and unclouded blue, lighted by the golden radiance of a summer sun! It was indeed something to make the most of—to store up within the treasure-house of the memory.

Seated upon the rank grass which carpeted the windswept summit of the narrow pinnacle, Alma was making Wentworth tell her the names of the sea of peaks, far and near, which lay around them. This he was well qualified to do, knowing them as he did by heart, and for nearly an hour the object lesson went on. Fordham lay on the grass, smoking a pipe, in an attitude of the most perfect repose, and the irrepressible Gedge was bearing his part in a bawled colloquy between himself and those they had left to await their return. Neither heard what the other said, but this was a secondary consideration. The great thing was to be saying something—anyhow as far as the volatile Gedge was concerned.

"It isn't the snow mountains that are responsible for the greatest number of smashes," said Wentworth, having pointed out two or three peaks which, like the one they were on, were responsible for having killed somebody. "The grass peaks like this are far the worst. It's this way. A fellow makes up his mind to do a regular climb—say the Matterhorn or the Jungfrau. All right. He makes up his mind that he's going to do a big thing, and from start to finish he's keenly on the look out. Besides, he has guides, who won't allow him to take any risk. Now, on a thing like this, that you can just hop up and down again

between the two table d'hôtes, why he thinks he is going to do it on one leg, like friend Gedge there."

"Well, but—Wentworth—you don't call this a small thing?" struck in he named. "The confounded—what d'you call 'em?—arêtes require a pretty strong head."

"Yes, that's so. This is, perhaps, a little more difficult than some of the other climbs that break fellows' necks. Take the old Jaman, for instance. You could almost ride a mule up and down it. Anyhow, the path, with ordinary care, is as safe as a church. But some day the know-everything Briton spots a rather fine gentian growing just off the path. Quite easy, of course. But he soon finds all the difference in the world between the path and the mountain-side. The grass is as slippery as ice, especially if it is a little wet. His feet slide from under him and away he goes. A toboggan's nothing to it. He shoots down the grass slope like a streak of lightning, then over the inevitable cliff—and—a sack of bones is brought back to the hotel, and a paragraph goes the round of the English papers, headed 'Another Alpine Accident.' Thus a mountain gets the name of being a dangerous one, whereas really it is a mere idiot-trap, sensible people being perfectly safe on it—in ordinarily decent weather, that is."

"Horrible!" said Alma, with a little shiver. "And at this height it all seems to come home to one so."

"I say, Wentworth," said Phil, "you'd better keep those bogey disquisitions of yours until we get down. You will spoil Miss Wyatt's nerve for the arêtes going back."

"Not at all," said Alma. "I am very much interested. Tell me, Mr Wentworth, don't people often come to grief by climbing down places that look easier than they are?"

"Of course they do. You notice, from below, a bit of rock that looks as if you could sit on it and then have your feet on the ground, but when you get to it it's a cliff fifty or sixty feet high. But I've taken the trouble to go into the cases, and in nine instances out of ten it is the little grass fiend that does for its victim, not the eternal snow-capped giant."

"Ever come up here in the snow, Wentworth?" said Gedge.

"Yes. It's dangerous, though—very dangerous indeed. I don't care about doing it again—in winter, I mean, not when there's a mere temporary powdering of it. Of course, you understand, the whole aspect of the mountain is changed, every feature as unfamiliar as if it was a new thing. And snow is apt to slide away in great masses, taking you with it. It's bad in wind, too. I've crossed those arêtes when I've had to lie flat and grab the rock

rather harder than we saw friend Scott doing just now. You have no idea of the force of the wind on a place like that."

Fordham and Gedge now started to go down. Alma, however, begged for a little longer time. She might never see such a view again in her lifetime, she urged, and they had still the best part of the day before them. So Wentworth had yielded—that is to say, he had remained behind too, ignoring Philip Orlebar's airy hint that he needn't bother to wait if he would rather go, for that he—Phil—would undertake to bring Miss Wyatt down safely. But Wentworth, who was a good-natured fellow, and whose inclinations in nowise moved him to cut out Master Phil even temporarily, was impervious to the latter's wishes now. He felt himself in a measure responsible, and Philip was comparatively inexperienced at mountain work.

So they sat and talked on, till suddenly Alma exclaimed, with a shiver—

"Why, the sun is going in. And look! we are almost in a cloud."

Wentworth, hitherto absorbed in a favourite topic, doubly attractive as shared by a new and interested listener, looked quickly round.

"Yes," he said, rising, "we had better go down."

Chapter Eleven.

Peril.

It had stolen upon them like an enemy unawares.

A moment ago they were in a full blaze of noonday radiance, revelling in its golden, undimmed splendour; now this had, as by the wave of a magic wand, given place to a semi-gloom, chill and depressing in its misty suddenness. A moment ago a panorama as of half a continent lay spread around them, now an object the size of a human being was invisible at twelve yards. Creeping up, swift, stealthy, and ghost-like, the cloud curtain was wreathing its dank and shadowy folds round the pinnacle-like cone of the Cape au Moine, and already imparting a rimy slipperiness to the rocks and grass.

"We had better go down," Wentworth had said, unconcernedly. Heartily now he wished they had done so half an hour earlier, for he, in common with the rest of them, was sensible of a sudden rising of the wind, which, taken with the fact that, so far from dispelling the cloud, it only seemed to be rolling it up thicker, pointed to the possibility of a gusty squall, the extent and suddenness of whose force it was impossible to predict.

The very features of the mountain seemed to have changed. As they got off the grassy cone on to the first arête, the summit, dimly visible as they looked back, seemed to tower up at least four times its actual height, and the vertical line of the great precipice which forms its eastern face stood forth black and forbidding against the opaque background of vapour. A pair of crows flapped forth from some rocky recess and, uttering a raucous croak, soared away into the misty space. The straight, narrow edge of their dizzy path disappeared in the cloud not a dozen yards in front.

No one knew better than Wentworth the utterly disconcerting effect of this sort of phenomenon upon even the most skilled mountaineer. Every well-known feature or landmark assumes a puzzling unfamiliarity—in fact, a complete metamorphosis of the whole scene appears to have taken place. So, with a dubious glance to windward, he remarked—

"It might be our best plan not to attempt the arêtes at present. We can get back on to the cone and wait until this blows over, in perfect safety. What do you think, Miss Wyatt?"

"Oh, let's try it, if it can be done," she exclaimed, eagerly. "My uncle will be so dreadfully frightened if we wait here. Only think of it. He will certainly imagine we have come to grief. No, let's go on; I am not in the least afraid."

Wentworth made no further objection, and they resumed their now perilous way. For the wind had gained in strength and volume with alarming rapidity, and, balanced there on that knife-like ridge, those three adventurous ones were exposed to its full force and fury. More than once they were obliged to take refuge on their hands and knees, and indeed were finally reduced to crawling ignominiously thereon. The shrill whistle of the blast tore past their ears, singing through the weather-beaten herbage which straggled upon the side of the arête. The mist swirled over the crest of the ridge in rimy puffs, and below, whenever they snatched half a glance from their precarious progress, the climbers could note a seething, whirling chaos of vapour filling up the great hollow whose bottom lay at a dizzy depth beneath.

"Not much further to go, is there?" said Philip, anxiously, as they stood resting beneath the rocks at the end of the second arête from the summit. It had devolved upon Wentworth as guide to help Alma down the steeper and more dangerous places, even to the placing of her feet; but this Philip had quite ceased to secretly resent. He himself was as bewildered as a child in this unaccustomed cloud-land.

"Not so very much," answered Wentworth, ambiguously and in fact somewhat absently, for often as he had been there before, the cloud had disconcerted him more than he chose to admit, and he was thinking whether it would not really be rank lunacy to resume their attempt. But a slight shiver of cold on Alma's part decided him.

"Had enough rest, Miss Wyatt?" he said. "Come along, then. We must not lose any time."

He stepped forth from their resting-place. The shrieking fury of the wind had become almost a gale. This arête was the worst of all, for whereas the path on the others ran here and there along the face of the slope, thus partially shielding them from the full force of the blast, here they would have to crawl along the very crest itself.

"It seems to be blowing harder than ever!" said Wentworth, imprudently standing upright upon the sharp ridge.

A perfect roar drowned his words. As though struck by some unseen power he staggered, made a frantic attempt to regain a recumbent posture, then clutching wildly at the ground he disappeared into space; while the horrified spectators who had not yet left their shelter, blown flat against the rock by the incredible force of the sudden gust, realised that but for this providential rampart they too would have met with the same fate.

For many minutes they gazed at each other in silence, too unnerved, too horror-stricken to speak. And that they were so is little to be wondered at. They had just seen their companion blown into the abyss within a few paces of them. At that very moment they pictured him lying far, far down where the boiling vapours swirled blackly through space—lying in scattered, mangled fragments, poor relics of the strong, cool-headed man who but a moment ago was guiding them with such skill and judgment. And their own position was sufficiently alarming. Here they were, up in the clouds, exposed to the force and fury of a mountain storm whose duration it was impossible to pre-estimate.

"How awful?" gasped Alma, at length, during a lull in the bellowing of the gale. "How truly awful! Is—is there no chance for him?"

Philip shook his head gloomily, and there was a shudder in his voice. "Not a shadow of a chance, I'm afraid. You saw, as we came along, the sort of drop there is on that side. But—try not to think of it."

"I cannot help thinking of it. Oh, it is too frightful!" and, thoroughly unnerved, she burst into a wild storm of tears.

It was too much for Philip. Not there on that lonely mountain height, enveloped in the black darkness of the cloud, witnessing her distress, her only protector, could he any longer restrain the tenderness which took possession of him with every glance from her eyes, every tone of her voice.

"Alma—darling"—he broke forth—"think only of yourself now. Keep up your spirits like your own brave self. Look. It may not last long, and once the wind drops we shall have no difficulty in finding the way."

His words of consolation—no less than those of love which had been drawn from him involuntarily as it were—seemed to fall on deaf ears. The shock of the horrible fate which had overtaken poor Wentworth before their very eyes was too overwhelming, and she continued to weep unrestrainedly, almost hysterically. The black peaty turf of the narrow space where they rested had grown wet and slippery, for it was beginning to rain, and overhead the grey crags loomed athwart the flying misty scud, breaking it up into long fantastic wreaths and streamers, where it swirled past the cloven and jagged facets of the rock.

"What are you doing?—No; I will not have that!" said Alma presently, resisting an attempt on his part to button around her shoulders his coat, which he had taken off for the purpose.

“You must have it. I saw you shiver,” he answered decisively, at the same time holding the garment around her in such wise as to make the very most of its warming powers.

“I will not. I am more warmly clad than you are. You will catch your death of cold yourself.”

“Now, it’s of no use arguing—you must have it. I have a will of my own sometimes, and I’ll fling the coat over the cliff rather than wear it myself. It is cold, as you say,” he added, with a violent shiver, “but I’m not made of sugar.”

It was cold indeed. The wind blew chill and piercing, and the rain, which was driving in upon them in a sleety penetrating shower, began to render things more and more uncomfortable for poor Phil in his shirtsleeves. And yet amid the cold and the wet, weatherbound up there in that weird noonday night, with the horror of a comrade’s fate still upon him—fear, uncertainty, and danger around them, Philip Orlebar was, strange to say, uncontrollably, blissfully happy. Stranger still, it might be that the day would come when he should look back to that period of doubt and horror spent in the semi-darkness of the mountain storm, and the fury of its icy blasts around their shelterless heads, with the same sad, aching hopelessness wherewith a lost soul might look upon the paradise it has forfeited by its own act.

The time went by—he standing before her in order that she might benefit by even that slight barrier from the force of the wind—talking ever, in order to keep up her spirits, to keep her mind from dwelling upon the horror they had both witnessed; but for which event, indeed, it is probable that he would have spoken all that was on his mind there and then. Even he, however, recognised that this was no time for anything of the kind; and indeed, in the fearless protectiveness of his demeanour, the tact and fixity of purpose wherewith he strove to take her out of herself, no one would have recognised the thoughtless, devil-may-care, and, truth to tell, somewhat selfish temperament of Philip Orlebar. His whole nature seemed transformed. He seemed a dozen years older. But the love tremor in his voice spoke the high pressure of restraint he had put upon himself. Did Alma detect it? We cannot say.

A faint halloo came through the opaque folds of the mist—then another much nearer. At the same time they realised that the force of the wind had materially abated; moreover it seemed to be getting much lighter.

“That’s Fordham,” said Philip, with a start. Then he answered the shout.

“Is Miss Wyatt all right?” sung out Fordham.

“Safe as a church,” roared Philip, and the welcome news was passed on to those waiting further back.

A ray of sunlight shot through the gloom, and lo, as if by magic, the opaque inky wall thus breached began to fall asunder, yielding before each successive piercing ray, and the patch of blue sky thus opened spread wider and wider till the whole of the arête lay revealed, wet and glistening in the sunshine, and beyond the gleaming crags the cloudcap around the apex of the cone grew smaller and beautifully less until it was whirled away altogether.

“Where’s Wentworth?” was Fordham’s first query on joining them. Philip looked very blank.

“Come this way, Fordham,” he said, leading the other to the spot, not many paces distant, where the unfortunate man had disappeared. “Look at that. What sort of a chance would a fellow have who went over there?”

Fordham looked at the speaker with a start of dismay, then at the line where the abrupt slope of the ridge broke into sheer precipice half a dozen yards below.

“I’m afraid he wouldn’t have the ghost of a shadow of a chance,” he muttered. “But—how was it?”

“Blown over,” answered Philip.

“The devil!”

Both men stood gazing down in gloomy silence. The strength of the wind was still a trifle too powerful to be pleasant up there on the arête; but below, sheltered from its force, the whole vast depth of the valley was filled with a sea of snowy vapour, slowly heaving itself up into round billowy humps.

“By Jove! Did you hear that?” suddenly exclaimed Philip, with a start that nearly sent him to share the fate of the luckless Wentworth.

“Yes, I did,” was the hardly less eager reply. “But—it isn’t possible. Wait—now—listen again!”

A faint and far-away shout from below now rose distinctly to their ears. Both listened with an intensity of eagerness that was painful.

“Only some native, herding cattle down there!” said Philip, despondently.

“Shut up, man, and listen again. Cattle-herds in this canton don’t as a rule talk good English,” interrupted Fordham. “Ah! I thought so,” he added, as this time the voice was distinctly audible—articulating, though somewhat feebly—“Any one up there?”

“Yes. Where are you?”

“About forty feet down. Get a rope quick. I can’t hold on for ever.”

“Now, Phil,” said Fordham, quickly, “you’re younger than I am, and you’ve got longer legs. So just cut away down to the Chalet Soladier, that one we passed coming up, and levy upon them for all the ropes on the premises. Wait—be careful though,” he added, as the other was already starting. “Don’t hurry too much until you’re clear of the arêtes, or you may miss your own footing. After that, as hard as you like.”

Away went Philip; Alma, her nerves in a state of the wildest excitement, dividing her attention between following with her eyes his dangerous course along the knife-like ridges, and listening to the dialogue between Fordham and Wentworth. The latter’s fall, it transpired, had fortunately been arrested by a growth of rhododendron bushes, anchored in the very face of the cliff. He had no footing to speak of, he said, and dared not even trust all his weight upon so precarious a hold as the roots of a bush or two, especially where there could be but the most insignificant depth of soil. He was distributing his weight as much as possible, upon such slight slope as this bushy projection afforded; indeed, so constrained was his position that he could not even give free play to his voice, hence the faint and far-away sound of his first hail. He hoped the rope would not be long coming, he added, for the bushes might give way at any moment; moreover he himself was becoming somewhat played out.

Alma felt every drop of blood curdle within her as she listened to this voice out of the abyss, and pictured to herself its owner hanging there by a few twigs, with hardly a foothold, however slight, between himself and hundreds of feet of grisly death. Even Fordham felt sick at heart as he realised the frightful suspense of the situation.

“Keep up your nerve, Wentworth,” he shouted. “Phil has nearly reached the châlet now. They can be here in half an hour.”

“He is there now,” said Alma, who was watching every step of his progress through his own glasses which he had left up there. “And the man is all ready for him—and—yes—he is meeting him with ropes. Now they are starting. Thank Heaven for that!”

Fortunate indeed was it for Wentworth that the châlet was inhabited at that time of year, and that its occupier happened to be there that day. The latter, who had watched the ascent, and had seen some of the party on the cone just before the cloud had hidden everything, was a trifle uneasy himself. But the sight of a tall athletic young Englishman tearing down the slope in his shirtsleeves confirmed his fears. He put two and two together, and, being a quick-witted fellow, had started to meet Philip with all the ropes his establishment could muster.

All this was shouted down to Wentworth for the encouragement of the latter. And the excitement of those on the arête, no less than that of the party left behind on the high col, became more and more intense as they watched the distance diminish between them and the bearers of the needful ropes, upon which depended a fellow-creature's life. Minutes seemed hours. But what must they have seemed to the man who hung there over that dizzy height—his strength ebbing fast—counting the very seconds to the time his rescue should begin!

By the time Philip and the cowherd had joined him, together with Gedge, who had come to render what help he could, Fordham's plan was laid. They could not all stand on the narrow arête in such wise as to obtain anything like the requisite purchase on the rope. But on the other side of the ridge a precipitous fall of rock, some ten or twelve feet, ended in an abrupt grass slope. Here two of them could stand, holding the end of the rope, while two more on the apex of the ridge could direct the ascent of the rescued man as well as assist in hauling.

"Now, Phil," he said, "if you've quite got back your wind"—for the two men were somewhat out of breath with their rapid climb—"get away down there with Gedge, and hold on like grim death. No, Miss Wyatt, not you," in response to an appeal on Alma's part to be allowed to help. "Four of us will be enough. We can manage easily."

There were two good lengths of rope, each about forty feet—for the peasants in mountain localities frequently adopt the precaution of tying themselves together when mowing the grass on some of the more dangerous and precipitous slopes. These were securely knotted together and manned as aforesaid.

"I don't like knots," muttered Fordham, as he let down the end, having first tied his flask to the same with a bit of twine the stopper being loosened so as to render the contents accessible without an effort—"I don't like knots, but there's no help for it. Now, Wentworth," he shouted, "is that right?"

"Little more to the left—about a yard and a half. There—so. All right. I've got it. Pay out a little more line."

“Take a pull at the flask, and then sing out when you’re quite ready,” bawled Fordham.

There was silence for a few minutes, then:

“Ready. Haul away,” cried Wentworth.

And they did haul away—those on the arête flat on their faces, carefully watching the ascent of the rope lest it should be worn through by any friction. In a very short time Wentworth appeared in sight where the line of the slope broke into the precipice; a moment more and he was beside them in safety.

Then what a stentorian cheer split the echoes of those craggy heights, conveying to the rest of the party, waiting in anxious, breathless suspense below, that the rescue had been safely effected. Wentworth himself seemed rather dazed, and said but little; nor did it add to his composure when he found Alma Wyatt wringing both his hands, and ejaculating, “Oh, I am so glad—I am so glad!” preparatory to breaking forth into a perfect paroxysm of unnerved crying.

“You’ve had a narrow squeak, old chap!” said Philip.

“Hurt at all?” asked the more practical Fordham.

“No. Don’t seem like it. Scratched a bit—nothing more.”

His face was badly scratched and covered with blood. One sleeve of his coat was nearly torn from the shoulder, and he had lost his watch.

“Vous vous y-êtes joliment tiré—Nom de nom!” said the cowherd oracularly. “Remplacer une montre c’est plus simple que de remplacer ses membres broyés—allez!”

Chapter Twelve.

Light.

"Wentworth, old man, here's to your lucky escape," cried Gedge, with his usual effusiveness, flourishing a brimming bumper of Beaune.

A roaring fire blazed in the wide chimney-place of the Châlet Soladier. The air was raw and chill, for another rain-gust had swept suddenly up; and seated around the cheerful glow our party was engaged in the comfortable and highly congenial occupation of assimilating the luncheon which had been brought along.

"That's a most appropriate toast, and one we ought all to join in," said the old General, approvingly. "Here, Philip, give the châlet man a full bumper. He is entitled to join if any one is, and, Alma—explain to him what it is all about."

This was done, and the toast drunk with a hearty cheer. The recipient of the honour, however, was in no responsive mood. That he, of all people, should have been fool enough to miss his footing; he an experienced climber, and who, moreover, was in a way the leader of the expedition! It was intolerable. And this aspect of the situation tended far more towards the somewhat silent and subdued demeanour he had worn ever since, than any recollection of the ghastly peril from which he had been extricated, than even the thought of the grisly death from which he had been saved almost by a miracle. Yes, he felt small, and said so unreservedly.

But Alma came to the rescue in no ambiguous fashion.

"You are not fair to yourself, Mr Wentworth," she declared. "The thing might have happened to anybody up there in that awful wind. Of course I don't know anything about mountain climbing, but what strikes me is that if, as you say, you considered yourself in a way responsible for us, the fact that you incurred the danger, while we have all come down safe and sound—incurred it, too, out of care for our safety—is not a thing to feel small about, but very much the reverse."

"Hear, hear!" sung out Gedge, lustily, stamping with his feet in such wise as to upset a whole heap of sandwiches and the residue of Fordham's beverage. But Wentworth shook his head.

"It's very kind of you to put it that way, Miss Wyatt. Still the fact remains that it oughtn't to have happened; and perhaps the best side of the affair is that it happened to me after all, and not to one of yourselves. By Jove! though," he added, with a laugh. "Friend

Dufour will score off me now for all time. We are always having arguments about the Cape au Moine. I always say it is an over-rated climb, and for the matter of that I say so still."

"That may easily be," struck in Philip. "I suppose any mountain is dangerous with a gale of five hundred hurricane power blowing."

"Of course. But where I blame myself, Orlebar, is in not starting to come down sooner. And I fancy that is the line Miss Wyatt's advocacy will take when she finds herself laid up with a bad cold after getting wet through up there."

"It will take nothing of the kind, Mr Wentworth," replied Alma, "for I am not going to be laid up with any cold at all. The walk down here almost dried my things, and this splendid fire has done the rest."

Luncheon over pipes were produced, indeed the suggestion to that effect originated with the representatives of the softer sex there present, who preferred the, at other times much-decried, narcotic to the somewhat rancid odour emanating from sundry tubs used in cheese-making, which stood in the corner of the room. The rain beat hard upon the roof without, but nothing could have been more snug than the interior of the châlet in its semi-darkness, the firelight dancing upon the beams and quaint appointments of this rough but picturesque habitation.

"Now, Gedge, you're by way of being a logician," said Wentworth, blowing out a cloud of smoke. "Can you tell us why a man can't keep his head just as well over a drop of a thousand feet as over one of six?"

"Do you mean when the wind is blowing," answered Gedge, suspecting a "catch."

"No. I mean when there's no apparent reason why he shouldn't."

"Because he gets confoundedly dizzy, I suppose."

"But why should he? He has the same foothold. Take that arête up there. If the drop on each side were only six feet, no fellow would hesitate to run along it like a cat along a wall."

"Not even Scott," muttered Fordham, in a tone just audible to Alma, who at the picture thus conjured up of the unfortunate chaplain straddling the arête, and screaming to be taken off, could hardly restrain herself from breaking forth into a peal of laughter.

“It’s a clear case of the triumph of mind over matter, I take it,” answered Gedge. “What do you say, Scott?”

“Oh, I’m no authority,” mumbled the latter hastily. “Don’t appeal to me. My head seems going round still.”

“Scott is no authority on matters outside the smoking-room,” said Fordham, mercilessly—thereby nearly causing Alma to choke again, and begetting inextinguishable resentment in the breast of the youngest Miss Ottley, who had taken the parson under her own especial wing. “Within those sacred precincts we all bow to him as supreme.”

“I don’t quite see where that comes in,” rejoined Wentworth, in answer to Gedge. “If anything it would be the other way about—triumph of matter over mind: the matter being represented by several hundred feet of perpendicularity, before, or rather above, which the ‘mind’ takes a back seat; or, in plainer English, gets in a funk.”

“That very fact proves the mind to be paramount; proves its triumph, paradoxical as it may sound,” argued Gedge. “An idiot, for instance, wouldn’t care twopence whether the drop was six feet or six hundred. As long as there was firm ground under him, he’d shuffle along it gaily. Why? Because he is incapable of thought—deficient in mind.”

“Upon that showing,” said General Wyatt, with a twinkle in his eye—“upon that showing, the Miss Ottleys and myself must be the most sensible people of the lot; for, unlike your hypothetical idiot, Gedge, we emphatically did care twopence whether the drop was six feet or six hundred. In other words, we funked it egregiously and stayed behind. Our minds, you see triumphed over matter in the most practical way of all.”

“I guess this argument’s going to end in a clean draw,” said Philip. “Hallo! the sun’s out again, and, by Jove, there isn’t a cloud in the sky,” he added, flinging the door open and going outside. “The day is young yet. How would it be to go over the Col de Falvay and work round home again by way of the Alliaz? It’s a lovely walk.”

But this, after some discussion, was voted too large an undertaking. At Alma’s suggestion it was decided that the party should stroll over the col into the next valley and pick flowers.

“It is our last day here, uncle,” she urged, in answer to the old General’s somewhat half-hearted objection that they would have had about enough walking by the time they reached home. “It is our last day, so we ought to make the most of it. And look how lovely it has turned out!”

It had. No sign was left now of the dour mist curtain which had swept the heavens but a short while before. Wandering in the golden sunshine, among fragrant pine woods and pastures, knee-deep in narcissus, the party soon split up as such parties will. Fordham and the General took it very easily; strolling a little, sitting down a little, they chatted and smoked many pipes, and were happy. Scott and his fair admirer paired off in search of floral and botanical specimens, and were also happy. The residue of the crowd assimilated themselves in like harmonious fashion, or did not—as they chose. Two units of it at any rate did, for crafty Phil seized an early opportunity of carrying off Alma to a spot where he knew they would find lilies of the valley. As a matter of fact they did not find any, but this was of no consequence to him. What was of consequence was the blissful fact that he had got her all to himself for the afternoon. And this was her last afternoon, their last afternoon together. And in consideration of this, the light-hearted, easy-going Phil became seized with an abnormal melancholy.

"You are a rank deceiver," said Alma, some three hours later, as, in obedience to a shout of recall, they turned to rejoin the rest of the party now taking the homeward way, but as yet some distance off. "You told me you knew we should find the lilies there—you knew, mind, not you thought. Then when we found none at the first place, you knew we should at another; and you dragged me from place to place, but yet I haven't found one. And now I must be content with the bundle of bell-gentians I gathered this morning. Poor things! how they have faded," she added, undoing a corner of the handkerchief containing them. "Ah! here is some water. I must freshen them up a bit."

"What a day this has been," said Philip, regretfully, as Alma stooped down to freshen the gentians with water from the tiny runnel which, dripping from the mossy undergrowth beneath the shadowy pines, sped at their feet with a bell-like tinkle. There was a moist fragrance as of crushed blossoms in the air, and the unearthly glow of a cloudless evening was upon the sunlit slopes, and the grey solemn faces of the cliffs across the valley.

"Yes, indeed," she answered, her wet, tapering hands plunged lightly among the rich blue blossoms of the bell-gentians.

"And it is your last!"

"Unfortunately it is. But—who would have thought, to look around now—who would have believed the awful time we went through up there only this morning! When Mr Wentworth was drawn up again safe and unhurt, I could not help crying for joy. Poor fellow! What must he have gone through all that time, with nothing but a rhododendron bush between him and a frightful death!"

“I reverse the usual order and begin to think I’d rather it was me than him,” said Philip, gruffly. “May I ask whether, in that case, you would have manifested the same delight?”

There was a flash of mischievous mirth in Alma’s great grey eyes as she looked up at him.

“You foolish boy! I sha’n’t answer that question. But, if you had been down there, how could you have taken such splendid care of me?”

“Oh, I did take care of you then?” he said quickly. “You did, indeed.”

“Let me take care of you for life then, Alma.” Just those few words, curt even to lameness. But there was a very volume of pent-up feeling in their tone as he stood there, his face a trifle paler, his fine frame outlined against the black background of the pines, his eyes dilated and fixed upon hers, as though to read there his answer.

She started. Her face flushed, then grew pale again. Released by the tremor of her hand, another corner of the handkerchief fell, and the bell-gentians poured down into her lap and on the ground. She did not answer immediately, and a troubled look came over her face. Yet the question could not have been such a surprising one. Reading every changing expression of the lovely face eagerly, hungrily, Philip continued, and there was a quaver of forestalled despair in his voice.

“Not to be—is it?” with a ghastly attempt at a laugh. “I’m a presumptuous idiot, and had better go my way rejoicing—especially rejoicing. Isn’t that it?”

But a radiantly killing smile was the answer now, scattering his despondency as the sun-ray had dispelled the dark storm-cloud which had overshadowed them up there on the arête.

“You are in a great hurry to answer your own question,” she said. “Doesn’t it strike you that I am the right person to do that—Phil?”

The very tone was a caress. The half-timid, half-mischievous way in which his Christian name—abbreviated too—escaped her was maddening, entrancing. Hardly knowing what he said in his incoherent transport of delight, he cast himself upon the bank beside her, regardless of bristling pine needles and the outpost prowlers of a large nest of red ants hard by. But Alma was not yet prepared to allow herself to be taken by storm in any such impetuous fashion.

“Now wait a minute, you supremely foolish creature,” holding up a hand warningly as he flung himself at her side—and her face flushed again; but there was a sunny light in her eyes, and a very sweet smile playing around her lips. “What I was going to say is this. You can’t decide any important question out of hand. It requires talking over—and—thinking over.”

“You darling! you tantalising enchantress!” he cried passionately. “Let us talk over it then, as much as you like. As for thinking over it—why, we’ve done enough of that already.”

“You have, you mean,” she corrected, archly. “Never mind. But—now listen, Phil. You think you are very, very fond of my unworthy self. Wait—don’t interrupt,” as the expression “you think” brought to his lips an indignant protest. “Yet you hardly know me.”

“I know you to be perfection,” he broke in hotly.

“That’s foolish,” she rejoined, but with a by no means displeased smile. “But, I say it again, you hardly know me. We meet here and see each other at our best, where everything is conducive to enjoyment and absolute freedom from worry, and then you tell me I am perfection—”

“So you are,” he interrupted emphatically.

“Well, we meet under the most favourable circumstances, wherein we show at our best. But that isn’t life. It is a mere idyll. Life is a far more serious thing than that.”

“Why, that’s just how that fellow Fordham talks,” exclaimed Philip, aghast.

“Mr Fordham is an extremely sensible man then,” she rejoined, with a queer smile. “No. What I want you to consider is, how do you know I could make you happy, only meeting as we do, up here and in this way? We must not fall into the fatal error of mistaking a mere summer idyllic existence for a sample of stern, hard life.”

“Oh, darling! you cannot really care for me if you can reason so coldly, so deliberately!” he exclaimed, in piteous consternation. “I am afraid you don’t know me yet, if you think me so shallow as all that.”

“I do know you, Phil, and I don’t think you shallow at all—know you better than you think—better, perhaps, than you know yourself,” she answered, placing her hand upon

his, which promptly closed over it in emblematical would-be possession of its owner. “I am a bit of a character-student, and I have studied you—among others.”

“Oh! only among others?”

She laughed.

“Is that so very derogatory? Well, for your consolation, perhaps my study has so far been satisfactory; indeed, we should hardly be talking together now as we are had it been otherwise. Now—what more do you want me to say?”

“What more! Why, of course I want you to say you will give me yourself—your own sweet, dear self, Alma, you lovely, teasing, tantalising bundle of witchery. Now, say you will.”

“Not now—not here. In a little more than a month I shall be at home again,” she answered, with a dash of sadness in her voice, as though the prospect of “home, sweet home” were anything but an alluring one. “Come and see me then—if you still care to. Who knows? You may have got over this—this—fancy—by that time.”

“Alma! You hurt me.” His voice betrayed the ring of real pain as he gazed at her with a world of reproach in his eyes.

“Do I? I don’t want to. But by then you will know your own mind better. Wait—let me have my say. By that time you will not have seen me for a month or more, as we are leaving this to-morrow. You may have more than half forgotten me by then. ‘Out of sight,’ you know. I am not going to take advantage of your warm, impulsive temperament now, and I should like to feel sure of you, Phil—once and for all—if we are to be anything to each other. So I would rather it remained that way.”

“You are hurting me, dearest, with this distrust. At any rate let me tell—er, ask—er, speak to your uncle to-night—”

“No. On that point I am firm,” she answered, rising. “When I am at home again I will give you a final answer—if you still want it, that is. Till then—things are as they were.”

“Hard lines!” he answered, with a sigh. “Still, one must be thankful for small mercies, I suppose. But—you will write to me when we are apart, will you not, love?”

“I don’t know. I ought not. Perhaps once or twice, though.”

For a moment they stood facing each other in silence, then his arms were round her.

“Alma, my dearest life!” he whispered passionately. “You are very cold and calculating, you know. You have not said one really sweet or loving thing to me through all this reasoning. Now—kiss me!”

She looked into his eyes with a momentary hesitation, and again the sweet fair face was tinged with a suffusing flush. Then she raised her lips to his.

“There,” she said. “There—that is the first. Will it be the last, I wonder? Oh, Phil, I would like to love you—and you are a very lovable subject, you know. There! Now you must be as happy as the day is long until—until—you know when,” she added, restraining with an effort the thrill of tenderness in her voice.

“And I will be, darling,” he cried. “The memory of this sweet moment will soon carry me over one short month. And you will write to me?”

“Not often—once or twice, perhaps, as I said before. And now we must pick up my gentians, and move on, or the others will be wondering what has become of us. Look; they are waiting for us now, on the col,” she added, as their path emerged from the cover of the friendly pines.

But by the time they gained that eminence—and we may be sure they did not hurry themselves—the rest of the party had gone on, and they were still alone together. Alone together in paradise—the air redolent with myriad narcissus blossoms, soft, sweet-scented as with the breath of Eden—alone together in the falling eve, each vernal slope, each rounded spur starting forth in vivid clearness; each soaring peak on fire in the westering rays; and afar to the southward, seen from the elevation of the path, the great domed summit of Mont Blanc, bathed in a roseate flush responsive to the last kisses of the dying sun. Homeward, alone together, amid the fragrant dews exhaling from rich and luscious pastures, the music of cow-bells floating upon the hush of evening; then a full golden moon sailing on high, above the black and shaggy pines hoary with bearded festoons of mossy lichens, throwing a pale network upon the sombre woodland path, accentuating the heavy gloom of forest depths, ever and anon melodious with the hooting of owls in ghostly cadence, resonant with the shrill cry of the pine marten and the faint mysterious rustling as of unearthly whispers. Homeward alone together. Ah, Heaven! Will they ever again know such moments as these?

Never, we trow. The sweet, subtle, enchanted spell is upon them in all its entrancing, its delirious fulness.

Chapter Thirteen.

Shadow.

Nearly a week had elapsed since the departure of the Wyatts, and yet, contrary to all precedent, the volatile Phil's normal good spirits showed no sign of returning. He was hard hit.

No further opportunity of meeting alone did Alma afford him after that one long, glowing evening. Her manner to him at parting had been very kind and sweet; and with a last look into her eyes, and a pressure of the hand a good deal more lingering on his part than etiquette demanded, let alone justified, the poor fellow was obliged to be contented, for of opportunities for taking a more affectionate farewell she would give him none. They would meet again, she said, and he must wait patiently until then. But to him such meeting seemed a very long way off, and meanwhile the residue of the bright summer, hitherto so joyously mapped out for walking and climbing and fun in general, to which he had been looking forward with all the delight of a sound organisation both physical and mental, seemed now to represent a flat and dreary hiatus—to be filled up as best it might, to be got through as quickly as possible.

Philip Orlebar was hard hit—indeed, very hard hit. He had never been genuinely in love in his life, though nobody had more often fancied himself in that parlous state. But now he was undergoing his first sharp attack of the genuine disorder, and the experience was—well, somewhat trying.

And the symptoms, like those of hydrophobia, manifested themselves diversely. Genial, sunny-tempered Phil became morose—"surly as a chained bulldog developing influenza," as the elastic Gedge tersely put it. He avoided his kind, and evinced a desire for wandering, by his own sweet self, into all manner of breakneck places. More especially did he avoid Fordham, whose continually cropping up sarcasms at the expense of the sex now ennobled and deified by the production of one Alma Wyatt, fairly maddened him.

"Damned cheap kind of cynicism, don't you know," he growled one day. "I wonder you don't drop it, Fordham." In fact, so confoundedly quarrelsome did he wax that it became a source of wonder how Fordham stood it so equably, and at last some one said so. The answer was characteristic.

"Look here, Wentworth. If you were down with fever, and delirious, you'd think me a mighty queer chap if I took mortal offence at anything you said in the course of your ravings. Now that poor chap is down with the worst kind of fever and delirium. By and

by, when he wakes up and convalesces, he'll ask shamefacedly whether he didn't act and talk like an awful fool during his delirium. No. You can't quarrel with a man for being off his nut. You can only pity him."

On the letter whose receipt had caused him such disquietude but a week ago Philip had since bestowed no further thought. It seemed such a far back event—it and the individual whose existence it so inopportunely recalled—and withal such an insignificant one. For beside the withdrawal of Alma Wyatt's daily presence, all other ills, past, present, and to come, looked incomparably small, and the contemplation of them not worth undertaking.

However indulgent might be Fordham with regard to his younger friend's disorder, secretly he hugged himself with mirth, and enjoyed the joke hugely in his own saturnine fashion as he read off the symptoms. How well he knew them all. How many and many a one had he seen go through them, and live to laugh at his own abject, if helpless, imbecility—to laugh in not a few instances with almost as much bitterness as he himself might do. He believed that it was in his power to comfort poor Phil, up to a certain point. As a looker on at the game, and a keen-sighted one, he felt pretty sure that Alma Wyatt was far more tenderly disposed towards her adorer than the latter dreamed. But it was not in accordance with his principles to do this. Richard Fordham turned matchmaker! More likely patchmaker! he thought, with a diabolical guffaw as the whimsicality of the idea and the jingle thereof struck him; for like the proverbial patching of the old garment with the new cloth would be the lifelong alliance of his friend with Alma Wyatt—or any other woman. No. His mission was, if anything, to bring about a contrary result, and thus save the guileless Philip from riveting upon his yet free limbs the iron fetters of a degrading and fraudulent bondage—for such, we grieve to say, was Fordham's definition of the estate of holy matrimony.

"Well, Phil," he said, as the latter, returned from a recent and solitary climb, tired and listless, took his seat a quarter of an hour late at table d'hôte, "does the world present a more propitious aspect from the giddy summit of the Corbex?"

"Oh, hang it, no! But, I say, Fordham—what a deuced slow crowd there is here now. Just look at that table over there."

"Nine old maids—no, eleven—in a row," said the other, putting up his eyeglass. "Four parsons—poor specimens of the breed, too. That is to say, three old maids and a devil-dodger; then three more ditto and two devil-dodgers; finally the balance, with the remaining sky-pilot mixed among them somewhere. Truly an interesting crowd!"

“By Jove, rather!” growled Philip. “And just look at that infernal tailor’s boy over there laying down the law.”

Following his glance, Fordham beheld a carroty-headed snobling fresh from the counter or the cutting-board, who, in all the exuberance of his hard-earned holiday and the enterprising spirit which had prompted him to enjoy the same among Alpine sublimities in preference to the more homely and raffish attractions of shrimp-producing Margate, was delivering himself on Church and State, the House of Peers and the Constitution in general, with a freedom which left nothing to be desired, for the edification of his appreciative neighbours—only they didn’t look appreciative. Philip contemplated this natural product of an age of progress and the Rights of Man with unconcealed disgust.

“Faugh! Are we going to be overrun with bounders of that description?” he growled.

“Later on we may drop across a sprinkling of the species,” said Fordham. “Even the Alps are no longer sacred against the invasion of the modern Hun.”

“Well, it’s no longer any fun sticking here, and I’m sick of it,” went on Phil.

“All right. Let’s adjourn to Zermatt or somewhere, and begin climbing. You want shaking up a bit.”

Chapter Fourteen.

Fordham Proves Accommodating.

“Dear me—how very disagreeable (sniff-sniff)—how exceedingly unpleasant this smoking is?”

The afternoon train was crawling up the Rhone valley, wending its leisurely way over the flat and low-lying bottom as though to afford its passengers, mostly foreigners, every opportunity of admiring its native marsh. In the corner of a second-class smoking-carriage sat the typical British matron whom her feelings had moved to unburden herself as above. Beside her, half effaced by her imposing personality, sat her spouse, a mild country parson. A great number of bundles and a great number of wraps completed the outfit.

“I must say it is most disagreeable,” went on the lady, with renewed sniffs. “And how ill-mannered these foreigners are, smoking in the presence of ladies.” This with a dagger-glance at the other two occupants of the carriage, who each, with a knapsack on the rack above his head and clad in serviceable walking attire, were lounging back on the comfortable seats, placidly blowing clouds.

“Hush, my dear!” expostulated the parson. “It’s a smoking-carriage, you know. I told you so before we got in at Martigny. Why not go into the other compartment? It’s quite empty.”

It was. On the Swiss lines the carriages are generally built on American principles; you can walk the entire length of them, and indeed of the whole train. They are, however, divided into two compartments, the smaller being reserved for the convenience of non-smokers, the other way about, as with us.

“No, I shall certainly not take the trouble to move,” replied the offended matron. “Smoking-carriage or not, those two men are most unmannerly. Suppose, Augustus, you go over to them and ask them to put out their cigars? Remind them that it is not usual in England to smoke in the presence of ladies.”

But the Rev. Augustus was not quite such a fool as that.

“Not a bit of use, my dear,” he said wearily. “They’d certainly retort that we are not in England—probably request us to step into the non-smoking compartment.”

Fordham, who at the first remonstrance had rapidly signalled his friend not to talk and thus betray their nationality, was leaning back enjoying the situation thoroughly.

“Que diable allait elle faire dans cette galère?” he murmured, rightly judging the other travellers’ command of modern languages to be of the limited order. Phil for his part was obliged to put his head out of the window in order to laugh undetected. Meanwhile the aggrieved British matron in her corner continued to fume and sniff and inveigh against the abominable manners of those foreigners, and otherwise behave after the manner of her kind when, by virtue of honouring it with their presence, they have taken some continental country under their august wing. Then the crawl of the train settled down to an imperceptible creep as it drew nearer and nearer to the old-world and picturesque capital of the Valais.

There was whispering between the pair. Then, in obedience to a conjugal mandate, the mild parson diffidently approached our two friends.

“Pardong, mossoor. Ais-ker-say See-ong?”

The last word came out with a jerk of relief.

“Sion? I believe it is,” replied Fordham, blandly. “We shall have a quarter of an hour to wait, if not longer.”

If ever a man looked a thorough fool, it was the first speaker. The faultless and polished English of the reply! Here had they—his wife rather—been abusing these two men in their own tongue and in her usually loud key for upwards of half an hour. He turned red and began to stammer.

But the poor man’s confusion was by no means shared by his spouse. That imposing matron came bustling across the carriage as if nothing had happened.

“Perhaps you can tell us,” she said, “which is the best way of getting to Evolena? There is a diligence, is there not?”

Philip, who had all a young man’s aversion for a fussy and domineering matron, would have returned a very short and evasive reply. The woman had been abusing them like pickpockets all the way, and now had the cheek to come and ask for information. But to Fordham her sublime impudence was diverting in the extreme.

“There is a diligence,” he answered, “and I should say you’ll still be in time for it. But I should strongly recommend you to charter a private conveyance. Coach passengers are apt to beguile the tedium of the road with tobacco.”

This was said so equably and with such an utter absence of resentment that the lady with all her assertiveness was dumbfoundered. Then, glaring at the speaker, she flounced away without a word, though, amid the bustle and flurry attendant upon the collecting of wraps and bundles, the offenders could catch such jerked-out phrases as “Abominable rudeness?”

“Most insulting fellow!” and so forth.

“Great Scott! What do you think of that for a zoological specimen, Phil?” said Fordham, as the train steamed slowly away from the platform where their late fellow-passengers still stood bustling around a pile of boxes and bundles. “The harridan deliberately and of her own free will gets into a tobacco cart—out of sheer cussedness, in fact, for there stands the non-smoker stark empty—and then has the unparalleled face to try and boss us out of it. And there are idiots with whom she would have succeeded too.”

“Well, you know, it’s beastly awkward when a woman keeps on swearing she can’t stand smoke, even though you know she has no business there. What the deuce are you to do?”

“Politely ask her to step into the next compartment, whose door stands yearningly open to receive her. Even the parson had wit enough to see that.”

“Yes, that’s so. But, I say, what an infernally slow train this is?”

“This little incident,” went on Fordham, “which has served to break the monotony of our journey, reminds me of a somewhat similar joke which occurred last year on my way back to England. We fetched Pontarlier pretty late at night, and of course had to turn out and undergo the Customs ordeal. Well, I was sharp about the business, and got back into my carriage and old corner first. It was an ordinary compartment—five a side—not like this. Almost immediately after in comes a large and assertive female with an eighteen-year-old son, a weedy, unlicked cub as ever you saw in your life, and both calmly took the other end seats. Now I knew that one of these seats belonged to a Frenchman who was going through, so sat snug in my corner waiting to enjoy the fun. It came in the shape of the Frenchman. Would madame be so kind, but—the seat was his? No, madame would not be so kind—not if she knew it. Possibly if madame had been young and pretty the outraged Gaul might have subsided more gracefully, for subside he had to—but her aggressiveness about equalled her unattractiveness, which is saying much. So a wordy war ensued, in the course of which the door was banged and the

deposed traveller shot with more vehemence than grace half-way across the compartment, and the train started. He was mad, I can tell you. Instead of his snug corner for the night, there the poor devil was, propped up on end, lurching over every time he began to nod.

"Well, we'd finished our feed—we'd got a chicken and some first-rate Burgundy on board—and were looking forward to a comfortable smoke. In fact, we'd each got a cigar in our teeth, and the chap who was with me—whom we'll call Smith—was in the act of lighting up, when—

"'I object to smoke. This isn't a smoking-carriage, and I won't have it.'

"We looked at the aggressive female, then at each other. Her right was unassailable. It was not a tobacco cart, but on French lines they are not generally too particular. Still, in the face of that protest we were floored.

"Smith was awfully mad. He cursed like a trooper under his breath—swore he'd be even with the harridan yet—and I believed him.

"Some twenty minutes went by in this way, Smith licking his unlit cigar and cursing roundly to himself. Presently she beckoned him over. He had half a mind not to go; however, he went.

"'I don't mind your smoking,' says she—'out of the window.'

"'Oh, thanks,' he says. 'It's rather too cold to stand outside on the footboard. Besides, it's risky.'

"'Well, I mean I don't mind if you have part of the window open. But I can't stand the place full of smoke and no outlet. And'—she hurries up to add—'I hope you won't mind if I draw the curtain over the lamp so that my boy can go to sleep.'

"Smith was on the point of answering that he preferred not to smoke, but intended to read the night through, and could on no account consent to the lamp being veiled, when it occurred to him that it was of no use cutting off his nose to spite his face. He was just dying for a smoke. So the bargain was struck, and we were soon puffing away like traction engines.

"Now the Frenchman who had been turned out of his seat was no fool of a Gaul. Whether suggested by the settling of our little difference or originating with himself, the idea seemed to strike him that he too might just as well obtain terms from the enemy to

his own advantage. The unlicked cub aforesaid was slumbering peacefully in his corner, his long legs straight across the compartment, for we were three on that side, and there was no room to put them on the seat. The first station we stop at, up gets the Frenchman, flings open the door, letting in a sort of young hurricane, and of course stumbling over the sleeper's legs. Aggressive female looks daggers. But when this had happened several times—for the stoppages were pretty frequent, and even though but for a minute the Frenchman took good care to tumble out—she began to expostulate.

"'It was cruel to disturb her poor boy's slumbers continually like that. Surely there was no necessity to get out at every station.'

"That Frenchman's grin was something to see. He was désolé; but enfin! What would madame? He had been turned out of his corner seat, and could not sleep sitting bolt upright. It was absolutely necessary for him to get a mouthful of fresh air and stretch his legs at every opportunity. But the remedy was in madame's hands. Let monsieur change places with him. Monsieur was young, whereas he was—well, not so young as he used to be. Otherwise he was sorry to say it, but his restlessness would compel him to take exercise at every station they stopped at.

"Heavens! that old termagant looked sick. But she was thoroughly bested. If she refused the enemy would be as good as his word, and her whelp might make up his mind to stay awake all night. So she caved in, sulkily enough, and with much bland bowing and smiling the Frenchman got back his corner seat, or one as good, and the cub snored on his dam's shoulder. Thus we all regained our rights again, and everybody was happy."

"Devilish good yarn, Fordham," said Phil. "But you be hanged with your Smith, old man. Why, that was you—you all over."

"Was it? I said it was Smith. But the point is immaterial, especially at this time of day. And now, Phil, own up, as you contemplate this howling, hungry crowd of the alpenstock contingent, that you bless my foresight which coerced you into posting on every stick and stone you possess, bar your trusty knapsack. If you don't now, you will when we get to Visp and tranquilly make our way through a frantic mob all shouting for its luggage at once. Here we are at Sierre. Sure to be a wait. I wonder if there's a buffet. Hallo! What now?"

For his companion, whose head was half through the window, suddenly withdrew it with a wild ejaculation, then rushed from the carriage like a lunatic, vouchsafing no word of explanation as to the phenomenon—or apology for having stamped Fordham's pet corn as flat as though a steam roller had passed over it. The latter, scowling, looked cautiously forth, and then the disturbing element became apparent. There, on the

platform, in a state of more than all his former exuberance, stood Philip, talking—with all his eyes—to Alma Wyatt, and with all his might to her uncle and aunt, who had just stepped out of the train to join her. And at the sight Fordham dropped back into his seat with a saturnine guffaw.

But the next words uttered by his volatile friend caused him to sit up and attend.

"This is a most unexpected pleasure, General," Philip was saying. "Why I thought you were a fixture at the Grindelwald for the rest of your time."

"Couldn't stand it. Far too much bustle and noise. No. Some one told us of a place called Zinal, and we are going there now."

"What an extraordinary coincidence!" cried Phil, delightedly. "The fact is we are bound for that very place."

"The devil we are!" growled Fordham to himself at this astounding piece of intelligence. "I have hitherto been under the impression, friend Phil, that we were bound for Visp—en route for Zermatt."

"But—where's Mr Fordham? Is he with you?" went on Mrs Wyatt.

"Rather. He's—er—just kicking together our traps. I'll go and see after him. Fordham, old chap, come along," he cried, bursting into the carriage again.

"Eh?" was the provokingly cool reply.

"Don't you see?" went on Phil, hurriedly. "Now be a good old chap, and tumble to my scheme. Let's go to Zinal instead."

"I don't care. How about our traps though? They're posted to t'other place."

"Hang that. We can send for 'em. And er—I say, Fordham, don't let on we weren't going there all along. I sort of gave them to understand we were. You know?"

"I do. I overheard you imperil your immortal soul just now, Philip Orlebar. And you want me to abet you in the utter loss thereof? It is a scandalous proposal, but—Here, hurry up if you're going to get out. The train is beginning to move on again."

“Delighted to meet you again, Fordham,” said the old General, shaking the latter heartily by the hand. “What are your plans? They tell us we ought to sleep here, in Sierre, to-night and go on early in the morning.”

“That’s what we are going to do.”

“A good idea. We might all go on together. They tell me there’s a capital hotel here. Which is it,” he went on, glancing at the caps of two rival commissionaires.

“The ‘Belle Vue.’ But it’s only a step. Hardly worth while getting into the omnibus.”

Chapter Fifteen.

In the Val d'Anniviers.

There are few more beautiful and romantic scenes than the lower end of the Val d'Anniviers as, having after a long and tedious ascent by very abrupt zig-zags reached Niouc, you leave the Rhone Valley with its broad, snake-like river and numberless watch-towers, its villages and whitewashed churches, and Sion with its cathedral and dominated by its castled rock in the distance—you leave all this behind and turn your face mountainwards.

Far below, glimpsed like a thread from the road, the churning waters of the Navigenze course through their rocky channel with a sullen roar, their hoarse raving, now loud, now deadened, as a bend of the steep mountain-side opens or shuts out the view beneath, and with it the sound. From the river the slopes shoot skyward in one grand sweep—abrupt, unbroken, well-nigh precipitous. Pine forests, their dark-green featheriness looking at that height like a different growth of grass upon the lighter hue of the pastures—huge rocks and boulders lying in heaped-up profusion even as when first hurled from the mountain-side above, seeming mere pebble heaps—châlets, too, in brown groups like toy chocolate houses or standing alone perched on some dizzy eyrie among their tiny patches of yellow cornland—all testify to the stupendous vastness of Nature's scale. And at the head of the valley the forking cone of the Besso, and beyond it, rising from its amphitheatre of snow, the white crest of the Rothhorn soaring as it were to the very heavens in its far-away altitude. And the air! It is impossible to exaggerate its clear exhilaration. It is like drinking in the glow of sunshine even as golden wine—it is like bathing in the entrancing blue of the firmament above.

"Alma, you have treated me shockingly," Philip was saying, while they two were seated by the roadside to rest and await the arrival of the others, who might be seen toiling up the zig-zags aforesaid, but yet a little way off. "Shockingly, do you hear. You never wrote me a line, as you promised, and but that by great good luck we happened to be in the same train I should never have known you were coming here at all."

"That's odd. Is the place we are going to of such enormous extent that we could both be in it without knowing of each other's proximity?" she said innocently, but with a mischievous gleam lurking in her eyes.

"No—er—why?"

Alma laughed—long and merrily. "You are a very poor schemer, Phil. Your friend would have had his answer ready—but you have regularly—er—'given yourself away'—isn't that

the expression? Confess now—and remember that it is only a full and unreserved confession that gains forgiveness. You were not going to Zinal at all—and you have hoodwinked my uncle shamefully?"

"What a magician you are!" was the somewhat vexed answer. And then he joined in her laugh.

"Am I? Well I thought at first that the coincidence was too striking to be a coincidence. Where were you going?"

"To Zermatt. But what a blessed piece of luck it was that I happened to put my head out of the window at that poky little station. But for that only think what we should have missed. Heavens! It's enough to make a fellow drop over the cliff there to think of it."

"Is it! But only think what an unqualified—er—misstatement you have committed yourself to. Doesn't that weigh on your conscience like lead?"

"No," replied the sinner, unabashed. "It's a clear case of the end justifying the means. And then—all's fair in love and war," he added, with a gleeful laugh.

"You dear Phil. You are very frivolous, you know," she answered, abandoning her inquisitorial tone for one that was very soft and winsome. "Well, as we are here—thanks to your disgraceful stratagem—I suppose we must make the best of it."

"Darling!" was the rapturous response—"Oh, hang it!"

The latter interpolation was evoked by the sudden appearance of the others around a bend of the road, necessitating an equally sudden change in the speaker's attitude and intentions. But the sting of the whole thing lay in the fact that during that alteration he had caught Fordham's glance, and the jeering satire which he read therein inspired him with a wildly insane longing to knock that estimable misogynist over the cliff then and there.

"Well, young people. You've got the start of us and kept it," said the General, as they came up. His wife was mounted on a mule, which quadruped was towed along by the bridle by a ragged and unshaven Valaisan.

"Alma dear, why didn't you wait for us at that last place—Niouc, isn't it, Mr Fordham?" said the old lady, reproachfully. "We had some coffee there."

“Which was so abominably muddy we couldn’t drink it—ha—ha!” put in the General. “But it’s a long way on to the next place—isn’t it, Fordham?”

“Never mind, auntie. I don’t want anything, really,” replied Alma. “I never felt so fit in my life. Oh!” she broke off, in an ecstatic tone. “What a grand bit of scenery!”

“Rather too grand to be safe just here?” returned Mrs Wyatt, “I’m afraid. I shall get down and walk.”

The road—known at this point as “Les Pontis”—here formed a mere ledge as it wound round a lateral ravine—lying at right angles to the gorge—a mere shelf scooped along the face of the rock. On the inner side the cliff shot up to a great height overhead on the outer side—space. Looking out over the somewhat rickety rail the tops of the highest trees seemed a long way beneath. Twelve feet of roadway and the mule persisting in walking near the edge. No wonder the old lady preferred her feet to the saddle.

Mere pigmies they looked, wending their way along the soaring face of the huge cliffs. Now and then the road would dive into a gallery or short tunnel, lighted here and there by a rough loophole—by putting one’s head out of which a glance at the unbroken sweep of the cliff above and below conveyed some idea as to the magnitude of the undertaking.

“A marvellous piece of engineering,” pronounced the General, looking about him critically. “Bless my soul! this bit of road alone is worth coming any distance to see.”

Philip and Alma had managed to get on ahead again.

“Oh, look!” cried the latter, excitedly. “Look—look! There’s a bunch of edelweiss, I declare!”

He followed her glance. Some twelve feet overhead grew a few mud-coloured blossoms. The rock sloped here, and the plant had found root in a cranny filled up with dust.

“No; don’t try it! It’s too risky, you may hurt yourself,” went on Alma, in a disappointed tone. “We must give them up, I suppose.”

But this was not Philip’s idea. He went at the steep rock bank as though storming a breach. There was nothing to hold on to; but the impetus of his spring and the height of his stature combined carried him within reach of the edelweiss. Then he slid back amid a cloud of dust and shale, barking his shins excruciatingly, but grasping in his fist four of the mud-coloured blossoms.

“Are you hurt?” cried Alma, her eyes dilating. “You should not have tried it. I told you not to try it.”

“Hurt? Not a bit! Here are the edelweiss flowers though.” And in the delighted look which came into Alma’s eyes as she took them, he felt that he would have been amply rewarded for a dozen similar troubles. But just then a whimsical association of ideas brought back to his mind the absurd postscript to that letter which had so sorely perturbed him. “Be sure you send me a big bunch of ‘adleweis’ from the top of the Matterhorn”; and the recollection jarred horribly as he contrasted the writer of that execrable epistle, and the glorious refined beauty of this girl who stood here alone with him, so appropriately framed in this entrancing scene of Nature’s grandeur.

“That is delightful,” said Alma, gleefully, as she arranged the blossoms in her dress. “Now I have got some edelweiss at last. When we get to Zinal I shall be the envied of all beholders, except that every one there will have hats full of it, I suppose.”

“I don’t know about that Fordham says it’s getting mighty scarce everywhere. But it’s poor looking stuff. As far as I can make out, its beauty, like that of a show bulldog, lies in its ugliness.”

“Shall I ever forget this sweet walk!” she said, gazing around as though to photograph upon her mind every detail of the surroundings. “You think me of a gushing disposition. In a minute you will think me of a complaining and discontented one. But just contrast this with a commonplace, and wholly uninteresting cockneyfied suburb such as that wherein my delectable lot is cast, and then think of the difference.”

“Dearest, you know I don’t think you—er—discontented or anything of the sort,” he rejoined, fervently. “But—I thought Surbiton was rather a pretty place. The river—and all that—”

“A mere romping ground for ’Arry and ’Arriet to indulge their horseplay. Philip, I—hate the place. There!”

“Then, darling, why go back to it? or anyhow, only to get ready to leave it as soon as possible,” he answered quickly.

“Phil, you are breaking our compact, and I won’t answer that question. No. What I mean is that it is lamentable to think how soon I shall be back in that flat, stale, and unprofitable place. Why this will seem like a different state of existence, looked back upon then—indeed, it is hard to believe that the same world can comprise the two.”

The road had now left its rocky windings and here entered the cool shade of feathery pine woods, the latter in no wise unwelcome, for the sun was now high enough to make himself felt. It might be that neither of them were destined to forget that walk in the early morning through an enchanted land. The soaring symmetry of the mighty peaks; the great slopes and the jagged cliffs; the fragrance of the pine needles and moist, moss-covered rocks; the golden network of sunlight through the trees, and the groups of picturesque châlets perched here and there upon the spurs; the sweet and exhilarating air, and the hoarse thunder of the torrent far below in its rocky prison—sights and sounds of fairyland all. And to these two wandering side by side there was nothing lacking to complete the spell. It was such a day as might well remain stamped upon their memory—such a day as in the time to come they might often and often recall. But—would it be with joy, or would it be with pain?

Meanwhile, the first half of the journey was over, for the picturesque grouping of châlets clustering around a massive church which suddenly came into sight announced that they had reached Vissoye, the most considerable place in the valley. Here a long halt was to be made; and the old people indeed were glad of a rest, for it had grown more than warm. So after breakfast in the cheerful and well-ordered hotel, the General lit his pipe and strolled forth to find a shady corner of the garden where he could smoke and doze, while his wife, spying a convenient couch in the empty salon, was soon immersed in the shadowland attained through the medium of "forty winks."

Left to themselves, Alma and Philip strolled out into the village, gazing interestedly upon the quaint architecture and devices which ornamented the great brown châlets. Then they wandered into the church—a massive parallelogram, with a green ash-tree springing from its belfry. Alma was delighted with the wealth of symbolism and rich colouring displayed alike upon wall and in window, roof and shrine; but Philip voted it crude and tawdry.

"There speaks the true John Bull abroad," she whispered. "As it happens, the very crudeness of it constitutes its artistic merit, for it is thoroughly in keeping. And the heavy gilding of the vine device, creeping around the scarlet ground-colour of those pillars, is anything but tawdry. It is quaint, bizarre, if you will, but striking and thoroughly effective. I suppose you want nothing but that desolate grey stone and the frightful wall tablets which give to our English cathedrals the look of so many deserted railway stations."

"Oh, I don't care either way. That sort of thing isn't in my line. But look, Alma, what are they putting up those trestles for? I suppose they are going to bury somebody."

“Where? Oh, very likely,” as she perceived a little old man, who, aided by a boy, was beginning to clear a space in front of the choir steps, with a view to arranging a pile of trestles which they had brought in. “We may as well go outside now.”

They went out on to the terrace-like front of the graveyard, and sat down upon the low wall overhanging the deep green valley, which fell abruptly to the brawling Navigenze beneath. Gazing upon the blue arching heavens, and the emerald slopes sleeping in the golden sunshine, Alma heaved a deep sigh of happy, contented enjoyment.

“Ah, the contrasts of life!” she remarked. “At this moment I am trying to imagine that I am in the same world as that hateful suburb, with its prim villas and stucco gentility—its dull, flat, mediocre pretensions to ‘prettiness.’ Yes, indeed, life contains some marvellous contrasts.”

“Here comes one of them, for instance,” said Philip. “This must be the funeral they were getting ready for.”

A sound of chanting—full, deep-throated, and melodious—mingled with the subdued crunch of many feet upon the gravelled walk as the head of a procession appeared, wending round the corner of the massive building. First came a little group of surpliced priests and acolytes, preceded by a tall silver crucifix and two burning tapers; then the coffin, borne by four men. Following on behind came a score of mourners—men, women, and children, hard-featured villagers all, but showing something very real, very subdued, in the aspect of their grief.

“Requiem aeternam dona et, Domine: et lux perpetua luceat et.” The massive plain-song chant wailed melodiously forth, swelling upon the sunlit air in a wave of sound. The two seated there had been discussing the contrasts of life. Here was a greater contrast still—the contrast of Death.

“Exultabunt Domino ossa humiliata” arose the chant again, as the cortège defiled within the church. And through the open door the spectators could see the flash of the silver cross and the starry glitter of the carried lights moving up the centre above the heads of the mourners.

“So even in this paradise-like spot we are invaded by—death,” said Alma, in a subdued voice, as having waited a moment or two they rose to leave. “Still, even death is rendered as bright as the living know how,” she went on, with a glance around upon the flower-decked graves between which they were threading their way. “Confess now, you British Philistine, isn’t all that more impressive than the black horses and plumes and hearses of our inimitable England?”

“I daresay it might be if one understood it,” answered Philip, judiciously. “But I say, Alma, it isn’t cheerful whatever way you take it!”

Mrs Wyatt was already on her mule as they regained the hotel, and the General, leaning on his alpenstock, stood giving directions—with the aid of Fordham—to the men in charge of the pack mules bearing their luggage.

“Alma, child,” he said reprovingly, while Philip had dived indoors to get his knapsack, “you’re doing a very foolish thing, walking about all the time instead of resting. You’ll be tired to death before you get there.”

“No, no I won’t, uncle dear!” she answered, with a bright smile. “You forget this isn’t—Surbiton. Why I could walk for ever in this air. I feel as fresh now as when we left Sierre this morning.”

Certainly she gave no reason to imagine the contrary as they pursued their way in the glowing afternoon—on past little clusters of châlets, through pine woods and rocky landslips, crossing by shaky log bridges the rolling, milky torrent, which had roared at such a dizzy depth beneath their road earlier in the day. The snow peaks in front drew nearer and nearer, the bright glow of the setting sun spread in horizontal rays over the now broadening out valley, and there on the outskirts of a straggling village, surrounded by green meadows wherein the peasants were busy tossing their hay crops, stood the hotel—a large oblong house, partly of brick, partly of wood, burnt brown by exposure to the sun, like the residue of the châlets around.

As they arrived the first bell was ringing for table d’hôte dinner, and people were dropping in by twos and threes, or in parties, returning from expeditions to adjacent glaciers or elsewhere. Some were armed with ice-axes, and one or two with ropes and guides. Nearly all had red noses and peeled countenances, and this held good of both sexes, more especially of that which is ordinarily termed the fair. But this—at first startling—phenomenon Fordham explained to be neither the result of the cup that cheers and does inebriate nor of any organic disorder of the cuticle, but merely the action of the sun’s rays reflected from the surface of the snow or ice with the effect of a burning glass. Alma made a little grimace.

“I think I shall confine my wanderings to where there’s no snow or ice—and I do so want to go on a glacier—rather than become an object like that,” lowering her voice as a tall, angular being of uncertain age—with a fearfully peeled and roasted countenance, and with her skirts tucked up to show an amount of leg which should have brought her

under the ban of the Lord Chamberlain—strode by with a mien and assurance as though she held first mortgage on the whole of the Alps, as Fordham graphically put it.

“You can patrol the glaciers for a week if you only cover your face with a veil,” answered the latter. “You may burn a little, but nothing near the horrible extent you would otherwise.”

“The house doesn’t seem crowded,” remarked Philip, when table d’hôte was half through. They had secured the end of the long table, and there was a hiatus of several empty chairs between them and their next neighbours. This and the stupendous clatter of knives and forks and tongues, enabled them to talk with no more restraint than a slight lowering of the voice.

“By Jove!” he went on, withdrawing his glance from an attentive scrutiny of the table, “it’s a mighty seedy crowd, anyhow. All British, too. Look at those half-dozen fellows sitting together there. Did any one ever see such an unshaven, collarless squad of bounders?”

The objects of the speaker’s somewhat outspoken scorn assuredly did their best to justify it. They answered exactly to his description as to their appearance. Moreover when they spoke it was in the dialect of Edgware Road rather than that of Pall Mall. Two or three gaudily-dressed females of like stamp seemed to belong to them. Beyond were other people in couples or in parties.

“Don’t you think you are rather hard on them, Philip?” objected Mrs Wyatt—for by virtue of the General’s former acquaintance with his father, and their now fast-growing intimacy with himself, the old people had taken to calling him by his Christian name.

Alma broke into a little laugh.

“Auntie, you remind us of ‘the Infliction’ at Les Avants. She always used to begin ‘Don’t you think.’”

“Mrs Wyatt used to sit opposite her,” said Phil, slily.

“You’re a naughty boy, Phil,” laughed the old lady, “and you’ve no business to poke fun at your grandmother. But I think you are too hard on those poor fellows. They may not have any luggage with them.”

“No more have we. Fordham and I will have to live in our knapsacks for the next week. And even if we had no clothes we’d manage by hook or by crook to beg, borrow, or steal a razor.”

“I don’t think much of the population, certainly,” put in the General. “There were a much better stamp of people at Les Avants.”

“Always are,” said Fordham. “It’s a place where people go to stay, and the same people go there again and again. Moreover, it isn’t enough of a show-place to attract the mere tourist. ’Arry itinerant patronises the higher resorts, where he can walk across a glacier and brag about it ever after. But this is an exceptionally weedy crowd, as Phil says,” he added, sticking up his eyeglass and taking stock of the same.

“Not all. I don’t think quite all,” objected Mrs Wyatt. “Those two ladies sitting next to the clergyman down there look rather nice. Don’t you think so, Mr Fordham?”

“Might discharge both barrels of a shot-gun down the table and not damage a social equal,” was the uncompromising reply.

But little it mattered to them in a general way what sort of a lot their fellow-countrymen there sojourning might or might not be. It was delightful to exchange the low stuffy salle-à-manger, with its inevitable reek of fleshpots, its clatter of knives and forks and its strife of tongues, for the sweet hay-scented evening air, with the afterglow reddening and fading on the double-horned Besso and the snowfields beyond, the stars twinkling forth one by one against the loom of the great mountain wall which seemed literally to overhang the valley. There was a lulling, soothing sense in the sequestered propinquity of the great mountains, in the dull roar of the ever-speaking torrent. Old General Wyatt, seated on a bench smoking his evening pipe, expressed unbounded satisfaction.

“It’s like a paradise after that abominably rackety Grindelwald,” he pronounced.

“Yes, dear,” assented his wife. “But what I want to know is,” she added in a low tone, “how is that going to end?”

“How is what?—Oh—ah—yes—um!” as he followed her glance.

The latter had lighted upon their niece and her now inseparable escort. They had returned from an evening stroll, and were standing looking about them as though loth to go in. Alma had thrown on a cloak, for there was a touch of sharpness in the air, and the soft fur seemed to cling caressingly round the lower part of her face, framing and throwing into greater prominence the luminous eyes and sweet, refined beauty. She was

discoursing animatedly, but the old people were too far off for the burden of her ideas to reach them.

“It is going to end in the child completely knocking herself up,” said the General with a disapproving shake of the head. “She must have walked twenty miles to-day if she has walked one. Now mind, she must stay at home to-morrow and rest thoroughly.”

“That isn’t what I mean, and you know it isn’t,” urged the old lady in a vexed tone.

“Ha-ha! I know it isn’t,” he answered with a growl that was more than half a chuckle.

“Well, and what do you think of it?”

“Um! ah! I don’t know what to think. If the young people like each other, I don’t see why they shouldn’t see plenty of each other—in a place like this. If they decide they don’t—well, there’s no harm done.”

“But I’ve always heard you say that Sir Francis Orlebar was a poor man—a poor man with a second wife,” said Mrs Wyatt, tentatively.

“So is Alma. I don’t mean with a second wife—ha-ha! But she hasn’t a sixpence, and it would be a blessed day for her that on which she got away from that mother of hers for good and all.”

“But isn’t that all the more reason she should marry somebody who is well off?”

“Well, yes, I suppose it is. But then, you can’t have everything. It’s seldom enough you get cash and every other desirable endowment thrown in. Now I like Phil Orlebar. I don’t know when I’ve seen a young fellow I’ve liked more. It’s a thousand pities, though, that his father didn’t put him into some profession or give him something to do; but it isn’t too late now, and Alma might do worse. Here—hang it all!” he broke off with a growl.—“What a couple of mischief-making old match-makers we are becoming. It’s getting cold. Time to go in.”

Chapter Sixteen.

"All in the Blue Unclouded Weather."

"When are we going to begin some real climbing—eh, Phil?"

"Oh, I don't know. By the way, Fordham, I'm not sure that real high climbing isn't a mistake. It seems rather a thin thing to put oneself to any amount of unmitigated fag, and go sleeping out under rocks or in huts and in all sorts of beastly places chock full of fleas, and turn out at ungodly hours in the morning—in the middle of the night, rather—merely for the sake of shinning up to the top of some confounded rock that scores of other fellows have shinned up already, and thousands more will. No; I believe there's far more sense in this sort of thing, and I'm certain it's far more fun."

"This sort of thing" being a long day's expedition of the nature of a picnic, a walk for the most part over the glacier to some point of interest or scenic advantage, which in the present instance was a trip to the Mountet Cabin, a structure erected by the Alpine Club high up among the rocks at the base of the Besso, for the convenience of parties ascending the Rothhorn or traversing one of the several difficult, and more or less dangerous, glacier passes leading into the next valley. The hour was early—before sunrise in fact—and our two friends were threading their way rapidly between the rows of brown châlets which constitute the picturesque hamlet of Zinal, intent on overtaking the rest of their party, who had "just strolled quietly on," a process which in nineteen cases out of twenty may be taken to mean that if the overtaker comes up with the advance guard within a couple of hours, he or she has progressed at a rate by no means pleasant or advisable as the start for a long day's walk or climb. This instance, however, was the twentieth, for whereas those in advance consisted of General Wyatt and his niece, two learned young ladies with short-cropped hair and spectacles, and a young clergyman, also in spectacles, the athletic pair had no difficulty in overhauling them in a very short time, and that with no inordinate effort.

"Well, Mr Fordham. It isn't always we poor women who keep everybody waiting," said Alma, mischievously, as they came up, with a glance at Phil, to whose reluctance to leave his snug couch until the very last moment was due the fact that the party had not started together.

"That's what comes of doing a good action—one always gets abused for it," replied Fordham. "If I hadn't acted as whipper-in you'd never have seen this lazy dog until you were half-way home again."

“Oh, the poor men! They never can bring themselves to leave their beds. And yet they call themselves the stronger sex,” put in one of the shock-headed young women, who, by virtue of being students at one of the seats of learning recently founded for their sex, looked down as from a lofty pedestal and with sublime pity upon the world at large. “The strong-minded sex, I should have said.”

“Not much use, are they, Miss Severn?” said the parson in playful banter.

“Except when the midnight mouse in the wainscotting suggests burglars, or the booming of the wind in the chimney, bogies,” rejoined Fordham, tranquilly. “In a thunderstorm, too, their presence is apt to be highly reassuring.”

To this the shock-headed one deigned no rejoinder. She and her sister had formed some slight acquaintance with the Wyatts, and had joined them in expeditions similar to the present one; in fact, were rather more glad to do so than the others were that they should. Like too many of their kind they imagined that disagreeable, not to say rude, remarks at the expense of the opposite sex demonstrated the superiority of their own in general, and such representatives of it as devoted their minds to conic sections in particular.

Nothing, as a rule, is more depressing to the poor creatures of an effete civilisation than an early morning start. Than the hour of summer sunrise in the Alps, however, nothing is more exhilarating. The cool, fresh, bracing air, the statuesque grandeur of the great mountains, the dash and sparkle of the swirling stream, the mingling aromatic fragrances distilling from opening wild flowers and resinous pines—it is a glimpse of fairyland, a very tonic to heart and brain, a reservoir of nerve power to limb and system.

And now beyond the huge projecting shoulder of the Alpe d’Arpitetta the rays of the newly-risen sun were flooding the snowfields with a golden radiancy. No more shade directly. But the air was crisp, and the sky of cloudless beauty. To two of those present it was but the beginning of a glowing halcyon day—one among many. Nearly a fortnight had gone by since their arrival, a fortnight spent in similar fashion—one day succeeding another, spent from dawn to dark amid the sublimest scenes of Nature on her most inspiring scale.

Philip Orlebar, the mercurial, the careless, had undergone a marked change. And it was a change which affected him for the better, was that brought about by this crisis of his life, in that it seemed to impart a not wholly unneeded ballast to his otherwise line character, a dignity to his demeanour which became him well, the more so that there was the stamp of a great and settled happiness upon his face, and in the straight, sunny

glance of the clear eyes, that was goodly to look upon. The Fire of the Live Coal burnt bright and clear.

“Alma, darling, why not let me say something to your uncle now instead of waiting until you go home again?” he said one day, when they were scrambling about among the rocks in search of the coveted edelweiss. “Then I shall feel that you do really belong to me.”

She looked at him for a moment—looked at him standing over her in his straight youthful strength and patrician beauty, and hesitated. She was growing very fond of him, and, more important still, very proud of him, which with a woman of Alma’s stamp means that her surrender is already a thing to be ranked among certainties. But the circumstances of her home life had been such as to impart to her character a vein of wisdom, of caution, which was considerably beyond her years.

“No, Phil—not yet,” she answered, with a little shake of her head; but beneath all the decision of her tone there lay a hidden caress. “This is a summer idyll—a mere holiday. Wait until it is over and life—real life—begins again. No, stop—I won’t have that—here,” she broke off suddenly, springing away from him with a laugh and a blush. “Remember how many people at the hotel have telescopes, not to mention the big one planted out in front of the door. We may constitute an object of special attention at the present moment, for all we know.”

Return we to our party now bound for the Mountet hut, viâ the Durand glacier. This was not the first time they had made this expedition, consequently they were able to dispense with a guide—and Fordham, at any rate, had had sufficient previous Alpine experience. The great silent ice river locked within the vast depths of its rock-bound bed rippled in a succession of frozen billows between its lofty mountain walls, the human figures traversing it looking the merest pigmies among the awful vastness of the Alpine solitude. Myriad threads of clear water gurgled with musical murmur through the blue smooth funnels they had worn for themselves in the surface of the ice, which glistened and sparkled in the sunlight in a sea of diamond-like facets. “Tables,” viz, stones of all shapes and sizes heaved up, by the action of the glacier, upon smooth round ice-pedestals—sometimes perfectly wonderful in their resemblance to the real article of furniture—abounded, and here and there the dull hollow roar of some heavier stream plunging between the vertical blue sides of a straight chimney-like shaft, which it had worn to an incredible depth by its action.

“What an extremely good-looking fellow that young Orlebar is,” remarked the clergyman, who had been observing the pair some little distance in front.

“I can’t say that handsome men are at all to my taste,” replied the elder of the two learned sisters, loyal to a recollection of evenings spent at meetings of various scientific societies in the company of an undersized, round-shouldered professor with a huge head of unkempt hair and a very dandruffy coat-collar. “There is never anything in them. They are invariably empty-headed to a degree.”

“And desperately conceited,” put in the younger, acidly.

“And this young Orlebar is the most empty-headed and conceited of them all,” rejoined the elder. “I consider him a perfectly odious young man.”

“Really? Now, do you know—I—er—I thought him rather a nice fellow,” said the clergyman timidly. “Very pleasant and taking manners, and a perfect gentleman.”

“There is no accounting for tastes, of course,” was the severely frigid reply; and the poor parson’s heart sank within him as he wondered whether this sort of thing was to be his lot all day, and whether it would be practicable to cut adrift from his present convoy and effect a juncture with Fordham and the General, now some few score yards in the rear.

“Alma dear, who on earth cut those awful Severns into our crowd to-day?” Philip was saying, moved doubtless by that extraordinary coincidence which inspires two people simultaneously with the same idea, though that idea be entirely irrelevant to any subject then under consideration or discussion.

Alma laughed.

“I think they more than three parts cut themselves in, and having done so, cut in Mr Massiter,” she answered.

“Oh, I don’t mind the parson! He’s an inoffensive chap, you know, and a good sort, I think. But those two fearful girls, with their ‘terms’ and their ‘triposes’ and the ‘dear Principal,’ and their shock heads, and ‘quite too-too’ get-up! Faugh! They never open their mouths without saying something tart and disagreeable. I suppose they think it a sign of erudition.”

“We mustn’t abuse other people, especially on a day like this—it’s a bad habit to get into. I agree with you though—they might make themselves a little more pleasant. However, they have their use. Didn’t it ever occur to you, you dear, foolish boy, that I may not always care to be the only girl in the party? Though it amounts almost to the same thing, for you never will let any one else come near me.”

“No, I won’t,” he assented, cheerfully. “I want you all to myself. It may not last much longer. And—what a time we have had. I would willingly go back and go through it all again.”

“But we are not going away to-morrow, or the next day either,” she replied, with a sunny laugh. “We shall have many more such days as this.”

“It is perfect!” he continued, now in a low tone. “Almost too perfect to last. When shall we be ever again together like this?”

The remark was made without a shadow of arrière pensée, yet it sounded almost prophetic. Why should it, however? No cloud was in their sky any more than in the firmament of deep blue spreading overhead. No shadow was across their path any more than upon the dazzling snowfields lying aloft in pure and unbroken stretches. The morrow would be but a reproduction of to-day—a heaven of youth and its warm pulsations, of sunny freedom from care, and—of love.

And now Fordham’s voice was heard behind.

“Hallo, Phil?” it shouted, characteristically addressing the stronger and, in its owner’s opinion, more important and only responsible member of the pair in advance. “Better hold on till we come up. We are getting among the séracs.”

They were. Great masses of ice, by the side of which a five-storey house would look puny, were heaving up to the sky. The glacier here made a steep and abrupt drop, falling abroad into wide, lateral chasms—not the black and grim crevasses of bottomless depth into which an army might disappear and leave no trace, such as the smooth, treacherous surface of the upper névés are seamed with, but awkward rifts for all that, deep enough to break a limb or even a neck. A labyrinthian course along the sharp ice-ridges overhanging these became necessary, and although Philip was armed with the requisite ice-axe and by this time knew how to wield it, Fordham satirically reflected that the mind of a man in the parlous state of his friend was not hung upon a sufficiently even balance to ensure the necessary equilibrium from a material and physical point of view. So he chose to rally his party.

A little ordinary caution was necessary, that was all. A little step-cutting now and then, a helping hand for the benefit of the ladies, and they threaded their way in perfect safety among the yawning rifts, the great blue séracs towering up overhead, piled in titanic confusion—here in huge blocks, there standing apart in tall needle-like shafts. One of these suddenly collapsed close to them, falling with an appalling roar, filling the air with

a shower of glittering fragments, causing the hard surface to vibrate beneath them with the grinding crash of hundreds of tons of solid ice.

“By Jove! What a magnificent sight?” cried the old General. “I wouldn’t have missed that for the world.”

“‘He casteth forth His ice like morsels,’” quoted the parson to himself, but not in so low a tone as not to be heard by Alma, becoming aware of which he was conscious of a nervous and guilty start, as of one who had allowed himself to be found preaching out of church. But he had in her no supercilious or scoffing critic.

“I think the vastness of this ice-world is the most wonderful thing in Nature, Mr Massiter,” she said.

“It is indeed, Miss Wyatt,” was the pleased reply.

And then, catching eagerly at this chance of relief from the somewhat depressing spell of the two learned ones, the good man attached himself to her side and engaged her in conversation, not altogether to the satisfaction of Philip, who, relinquishing the entrancing but somewhat boyish amusement of heaving boulders down the smooth, slippery slope of the ice, sprang forward to help her up the narrow, treacherous path of the loose moraine—for they had left the ice now for a short time. Virtue was its own reward, however—it and a stone—which, dislodged by Alma’s foot, came bounding down with a smart whack against the left ankle of the too eager cavalier, evoking from the latter a subdued if involuntary howl, instead of the mental “cuss-word” which we regret to say might have greeted the occurrence had it owned any other author.

Steep and toilsome as this little bit of the way was, the two strong-minded ones still found breath enough to discourse to the General—or, rather, through him at Fordham, upon the never-failing topic, the unqualified inferiority of the other sex, causing that genial veteran to vote them bores of the most virulent kind, and mentally to resolve to dispense with their company at whatever cost on all future expeditions which he might undertake.

“Why, you couldn’t get on for a day without us!” said Fordham, bluntly, coming to the rescue. “How would you have got along those séracs just now, for instance, if left to yourselves?”

“Life does not wholly consist in crossing glaciers, Mr Fordham,” was the majestic reply.

“It runs on a very good parallel with it though. And the fact remains, as I said before. You couldn’t be happy for a day without us.”

“Indeed?” said the elder and more acid of the two, with splendid contempt. “Indeed? Don’t you flatter yourself. We could be happy—perfectly happy—all our lives without you.”

“That’s fortunate, for I haven’t asked you to be happy all your lives with me,” answered Fordham, blandly.

The green eyes of the learned pair glared—both had green eyes—like those of cats in the dark. There was a suspicious shake in the shapely shoulders of Alma Wyatt, who, with the parson, was leading the way, and the General burst into such a frantic fit of coughing that he seemed in imminent peril of suffocation; while a series of extraordinary sounds, profuse in volume if subdued in tone, emanating from Philip’s broad chest, would have led a sudden arrival upon the scene to imagine that volatile youth to be afflicted with some hitherto undiscovered ailment, lying midway between whooping-cough and the strangles.

And now once more, the fall of the glacier surmounted, the great ice-field lay before them in smooth and even expanse. And what a scene of wild and stately grandeur was that vast amphitheatre now opening out. Not a tree, not a shrub in sight; nothing but rocks and ice—a great frozen plain, seamed and crevassed in innumerable cracks, shut in by towering mountains and grim rock-walls, the summits of which were crowned with layers of snow—the perilous “cornice” of the Alpine climber—curling over above the dizzy height—of dazzling whiteness against the deep blue of the heavens. In crescent formation they stood, those stately mountains encircling the glaciers, the snow-flecked hump of the Grand Cornier and the huge and redoubted Dent Blanche, whose ruddy ironstone precipices and grim ice-crowned arêtes glowed in the full midday sunlight with sheeny prismatic gleam; the towering Gabelhorn, and the knife-like point of the Rothhorn soaring away as if to meet the blue firmament itself. Gigantic ice-slopes, swept smooth by the driving gales, shone pearly and silver; and huge overhanging masses of blue ice, where the end of a high glacier had broken off, stood forth a wondrously beautiful contrast in vivid green. But this scene of marvellous grandeur and desolation was not given over to silence, for ever and anon the fall of a mighty sérac would boom forth with a thunderous roar. The ghostly rattle and echo of falling stones high up among those grim precipices was never entirely still, while the hoarse growling of streams cleaving their way far below in the heart of the glacier was as the voices of prisoned giants striving in agonised throes.

Chapter Seventeen.

The Writing on the Wall.

Not less imposing was the wild magnificence of this panorama as viewed from the Mountet cabin, which, from its eyrie-like position high up among the rocks, commanded the whole vast ice-amphitheatre. The last climb, after leaving the glacier, had been a steep and trying one, and to most of the party, at any rate, the first consideration on reaching their goal was a twofold one—rest and lunch.

"I suppose you don't get much sleep in these places, eh, Fordham?" said the General, looking round upon the plank shelves which, plentifully covered with straw, constituted the sleeping places. From the beams above hung rugs of a heavy, coarse texture.

"It depends on a good many things—the absence of fleas, or of a crowd. When there are three or four parties, with their guides, going the same way or coinciding here for the night, a box like this is apt to get crowded and the air thick."

"It is wonderfully ingenious," said Alma, taking in the solidity of the building and its contrivances for safety and comfort—every stick of which had to be dragged up there by mules and porters. "Where did they sleep before these cabins were built?"

"Under the rocks. Picked out a sheltered corner and rolled in. A coldish sort of a bedroom too," answered Fordham.

"And all for the sake of getting to the top of a peak that a hundred other fools have been up already, and a thousand more will go up afterwards," struck in the flippant Phil. "Throw one of those hard-boiled eggs at me, Fordham. Thanks."

"Is not that kind of reasoning—er—somewhat fatal to all enterprise?" said the parson.

"There is little enterprise, as such, in all this Alp climbing," interrupted one of the learned young women before anybody could reply. "Not one in a hundred of all the men who spend summer after summer mountaineering ever thinks of benefiting his species by his experiences. No branch of science is the gainer by it, for the poor creature is lamentably ignorant of science in any branch—almost that such a thing exists, in fact. To him a mountain is—a mountain, and nothing more—"

"But—what in the world else should it be, Miss Severn?" said Philip.

”—Just so many thousand feet to go up,” continued the oracle, severely ignoring the flippant interruptor.

“Or so many thousand feet to come down—and then return home in a sack,” said the latter, wickedly.

“Just one more peak to add to the number he can already boast of having scaled. Nobody the gainer by it. Grand opportunities thrown away. The only end effected, the aggravation of one man’s already inflated conceit.”

“I don’t know about nobody being the gainer by it, Miss Severn,” said the General. “I am disposed to think this rage for mountaineering by no means a bad thing—in fact a distinctly good one, as anything that calls forth pluck, determination, and endurance is bound to be. Now, by the time a man has done two or three of these gentry there,” with a wave of the hand in the direction of the surrounding peaks, “his nerve is likely to be in pretty good order, and his training and condition not very deficient. No, I don’t agree with you at all, Miss Severn.”

“The guides are very considerably the gainers by it, too,” said Fordham—“the gainers by enough cash to tide them comfortably through the winter.”

“These are all very secondary considerations,” was the lofty rejoinder. “Nobody touches my point after all. General Wyatt thinks that the object of penetrating the wonders of these stupendous ice-worlds has been gained when a man has got himself into the hard muscular training of a mere brutal prize-fighter; while Mr Fordham thinks it quite sufficient if a few hundred francs find their way into the pockets of a few Swiss peasants. But what does science gain by it? Of course I except the researches of such men as Tyndall—but they are the rare exceptions.” And the speaker looked around as if challenging a reply. She was disappointed, however. Nobody seemed to think it worth their while to undertake one. Presently Fordham said—

“It has often been remarked that we are not a logical nation. Hardly a day passes without emphasising that fact to the ordinarily wide-awake observer.”

“How so? Please explain. I don’t quite follow you,” said Miss Severn, briskly, fiercely elate that her challenge had been taken up.

“Well, we British are perennially grumbling at our abominably cold climate—winter all the year round, and so forth; and yet during the few weeks of summer vouchsafed to us away we rush to places like this, and stow ourselves as close to the snow and ice as we possibly can.”

“I—I really don’t see the connection,” said the would-be debater, in tart mystification. “Isn’t that rather a pointless remark—not to say irrelevant?”

“Oh, no. If anything, the reverse,” answered Fordham, tranquilly. “The idea was suggested by seeing several of us shiver, and it naturally occurred to me that we had probably sat as long as was safe if we wanted to avoid catching cold. For present purposes it may be taken to mean that we should be wise to think of going down, still wiser to go down and take the thinking as thought. What do you say, General?”

“I agree with you, Fordham. It doesn’t do to sit too long in this sharp air, after getting heated coming up, too.”

So the wisdom of the elders prevailed, and the party started upon the homeward way. Philip having found a long, steep snow-shoot, preferred the risky delights of a glissade to the more sober and gradual descent of a series of zig-zags. But the snow was soft, with the result that when half-way the adventurous one went head over heels, convulsing with mirth those who witnessed his frantic flounderings from the security of the zig-zag footpath aforesaid. Meanwhile the two erudite damsels were confiding to the parson their rooted conviction that Fordham was the most abominably disagreeable man they had ever met—which view, however, being that of the bulk of their sex on the same subject, was neither original nor striking.

And then as they gained the level of the glacier once more, again the wily Phil managed to pair off—to straggle indeed considerably from the main body—to straggle away almost to the base of the huge cliffs of the Grand Cornier. Here crevasses began to open in all directions—real ones, yawning black in the glistening surface.

“By Jove! look at that!” cried Phil, as a huge rift came into view right across the way they were following. It was overhung by a wreath of frozen snow, and the “lip” thus formed was fringed and festooned with gleaming icicles. It was a lovely and at the same time forbidding spectacle, as the sunlight fell upon the myriad smooth needles of ice—catching the star-like facets in gleaming scintillation—playing upon the translucent walls of the chasm in many a prismatic ray—roseate and gold, and richest azure. Then, below, the black, cold depths, as of the bottomless pit.

“It is splendid, but gruesome,” said Alma, peering tentatively into the silent depths—a process which needed a steadying, not to say supporting, hand. “I wonder how deep it is.”

“It’s a pity, in the interests of science—but on that ground alone—that we haven’t got our two learned friends along,” said Philip, proceeding to roll a big stone, of which there were several on the surface of the glacier, to the brink. “They could locate the depth by the time it takes to fall. Now, listen!”

He rolled over the stone. It was a large one, and spoke volumes for his excellent condition that he was able to move it at all. There was a crash and a shatter like the breaking of glass, as it crushed through the fringe of icicles—then a long pause, followed by a far-away and hollow clang.

“What an awful depth,” said Alma, with a shudder, instinctively drawing back. “Wait!” warned Philip. “There it goes again!” Another clang—this time very faint, together with a ghostly rumbling roar as the prisoned echo strove to break free—told that the crevasse was of appalling depth, even if its bottom was yet reached. The listeners looked at each other.

“Not much chance once over this little bit of crushed snow,” said Philip, breaking away the overhanging edge with the end of his ice-axe.

“Horrible!” rejoined Alma, with a shudder. “Now I think we had better go back to the others, for it seems to me we are getting more and more in among the crevasses, and it must be a trifle dangerous.”

It was even as she said. The whole surface of the glacier was seamed and criss-crossed with yawning rifts—many of them like the one before them—of unknown depth. To a fairly experienced man, and one of average gumption withal, the situation would have held no obstacle. To such the lay of the glacier would have been understood, and he could have threaded his way to safer ground without difficulty. But Philip was not experienced in Alpine features, and there was just a little too much of the bull-at-a-gate about his disposition for him to supplement this lack by ordinary prudence. So they got deeper and deeper into the labyrinth—and moreover the sun was already shut out behind the towering mountain walls rearing up immediately overhead.

Under these circumstances neither of the pair was sorry to hear a shout, and to make out a figure approaching at some distance over the ice.

“It’s Fordham,” cried Phil. “He’ll show us the right line. He’s about as good as a professional guide.”

Not the least lovable trait in Philip Orlebar’s character was his perfect readiness to yield to another’s superior knowledge, and this he was wont to do, not grudgingly or as one

making a concession, but fully, frankly, and as a matter of course. It did not, for instance, occur to him that his fortnight of knocking about among the mountains and glaciers in the neighbourhood of Zinal—said knocking about being mostly in picnic fashion, as in the present case—had rendered his experience a trifle superior to that of Fordham, who had done a good deal of serious Alpine climbing in times past; and in stating this we are not dealing with so obvious a truism as the uninitiated would assume. For to many of his age and temperament that very thing would have occurred, and does occur, not infrequently to their own ultimate discomfiture if not disaster. We speak of that which we know.

Philip therefore hailed the advent of his friend with genuine pleasure, not to say relief. But the other in no wise reciprocated that warming sentiment. He didn't see any fun in coming about two miles out of his way—and towards the end of the day, too—in order to benefit two people whom he had every reason to suppose would be wishing him in Halifax all the time.

"Tired of life already, Miss Wyatt?" he said sourly, as he came up, pointing to a great black crevasse the two were gingerly skirting. "Or do you want to anticipate death, and defeating his ravages and decay, ensure remaining beautiful for ever, although within the depths of a glacier?"

"What a weird style of compliment," answered Alma, with a little laugh. "But any sort of compliment coming from Mr Fordham should be duly treasured."

"Well, there's a far weirder fact underlying it. Look here! If you knew there were half a dozen even indifferent shots posted behind yonder séracs practising at you with rifles, I believe you'd think your run of life was held on exceedingly frail and uncertain tenure. Well, left to yourselves here, the same tenure is a good deal more uncertain than it would be under the other contingency—you two poor greenhorns."

"Oh, come; I say, Fordham?" exclaimed Philip, deprecatorily. But Alma broke into a ringing laugh.

"You think it a laughing matter, do you?" went on Fordham. "Now you wouldn't think that a dozen steps further of the line you're following would perform your own funerals? You'd never be seen again."

"Now you're cramming us, old chap," said Philip, airily, surveying the white unbroken surface in front.

"Am I? Very well. Now, look."

He counted exactly ten paces forward, then halted, advanced half a pace, and holding his ice-axe by the head, drove the point into the surface. In it went without resistance, as far as he allowed it to, which was almost to the head. Then working it round he made a hole about half a yard in diameter.

“Come, now, and look.” He went on cautiously knocking away more of the snow-crust.

They obeyed, and in a moment were peering through the hole into black depths. The sheeny surface of the opposite ice-wall glared at them through the aperture as with the disappointed glare of the eye of some evil beast baulked of its prey.

“By Jove!” cried Philip, aghast. “You never spoke a truer word, Fordham. There would have been an end of us, sure enough. But I say, old chap, how on earth did you know there was a crevasse there—a dev—, hum—I mean an awful one it is, too? There’s no sign or difference of colour in the surface.”

“I knew that there was bound to be one by the lay of the land. Now look,” he went on, pointing to the main crevasse, which yawned broadly parallel to the line they were pursuing, and out of which a lateral one sprung, and seeming to change its mind, had abruptly terminated—apparently so, at any rate. “I knew that this other crack wasn’t going to end there, although it seems to; it was too deep to start with. Consequently I knew that it was bound to run a considerable way under the surface, and so it does. A dozen more steps, I repeat, and one or both of you would have disappeared for ever.”

“By Jove!” ejaculated Phil again, in mingled admiration and dismay, while Alma shuddered, as she gazed into the ghastly death-trap with a horrible fascination.

“At the same time you’re wrong in saying there is no sign or difference of colour in the surface,” went on Fordham. “There is the last—faint I admit—but quite enough to catch a practised eye. And now, while we are prosing away here, the other people are waiting for us over on the moraine yonder. So keep close behind me, and let’s get out of this.”

Under such able and experienced pilotage they soon got clear of the more dangerous part of the glacier—doubling and zigzaging in the most labyrinthine fashion to avoid perils hidden or displayed.

“You can’t afford to go playing about among bottomless pits in any such careless way, Phil, still more among masked deathtraps like some of those we passed,” said Fordham, as they drew near their party. “So if you must go skylarking on dangerous ground, you’d

better have some one with you who knows the ropes rather more than you do, and not rather less."

But this recollection of peril past added something of a spice to the keen enjoyment of a delightful day as they took their way homeward. And then, as they left the wild wilderness of rocks and ice behind, the great silent glaciers and piled masses of rugged moraine, the westering sunlight flushing upon the soaring peaks as with a glow of fire, to these two it meant one more day closing as it had begun—in a golden unearthly beauty—closing into a brief night, which in its turn should soon melt into another glowing day, even as this one which had just fled. But—would it?

"Two people have arrived, sir," said the head waiter, meeting Philip in the hall. "Dey ask for you, sir, first thing. One gentleman and lady."

"Gentleman and lady?" echoed Phil, in amazement. "Who the deuce can it be? Who are they, Franz?"

"I not know, sir. Dey ask first for you; then they ask if we cannot send messenger to find you. I tell them you away to the Mountet cabin—you come back quick as the messenger."

"The deuce! Who can it be? By Jove—of course! The governor and her ladyship! It'll be right good getting the old man out here. Don't know about her ladyship though," he parenthesised, dubiously. "Where are they, Franz?"

"Here we are, Philip," cried a masculine voice, which was certainly not that of Sir Francis Orlebar, and a hand dropped upon his shoulder with would-be cordiality.

The recipient of this unceremonious salute started as if he had been shot. Then he turned—turned with what cordiality he could muster, to confront the speaker.

The latter was an elderly man of portentous aspect, ruddy of countenance, and keen of eye. A thick white beard hid the lower half of his face, and a crop of bristling white hair adorned his summit, which last, however, was now concealed by a large pith helmet and puggaree. He wore a great expanse of waistcoat, covering a redundancy of person which went far towards bearing out his sleek and aggressively prosperous appearance. He looked the sort of man who would be a law unto a roomful—the sort of man whose thumbs would oft seek the armholes of his waistcoat. He looked what he was—the prosperous, comfortable British merchant who had begun life a good deal lower down than that. But he did not look what he was not—viz, a gentleman.

“Why, how d’you do, Mr Glover?” blurted out Philip at last. “Who on earth would have thought of seeing you here?”

“Aha! who’d have thought it, indeed! But the little girl wouldn’t give me any peace. Said you hadn’t written to her for so long she didn’t know what had become of you, and we’d better go and see. So we left the rest of them at St. Swithins and started off, and here we are. Why, where is she? Edie—where have you got to?”

“All right, dad; here I am,” and the owner of the voice emerged from the bureau, where she had been arranging about rooms. “Why Phil, dear, this is nice!” she went on, advancing upon him with extended hand and a would-be effective blush.

“Ha ha!” chuckled the old man. “She wouldn’t give me any peace until I brought her here. Now you’ll find plenty to talk about, I’ll warrant.”

Heavens! this was fearful. The feelings of a wild bull in a net must be placidity itself compared with those of poor Philip on finding himself thus cornered and publicly taken possession of. Every soul in the hotel was getting the benefit of these effusive and affectionate greetings, for it was just that time before table d’hôte when everybody was coming in to change, and every head was more or less turned for a glance at the new-comers as its owner passed by. Why Alma herself, who was standing talking to some other ladies in the hall, was well within hearing! What would she think? What sort of construction would she put upon all the affection wherewith these people were bespattering him? Heavens! what would she think?

Ha! there was Fordham. Capital! He would plant the new arrivals upon him.

“Hullo, Fordham!” he sung out, as his friend at that moment passed through the hall. “I want to introduce you to Mr Glover here; just arrived, you know. Miss Glover—Mr Fordham. Knows the country like a book,” he went on, desperately.

But this manoeuvre, so far from helping him had precisely the opposite effect; for the old man, with effusive cordiality, at once buttonholed Fordham, leaving the girl free to take possession of Phil.

Well, what then? To all appearances the situation was the very reverse of an unenviable one—indeed, more than one man passing through the hall at the time looked upon the ill-starred Philip with eyes of downright envy as he grumbled to himself, “Is that conceited ass Orlebar going to monopolise every pretty girl who comes near the place?” Poor Phil! how willingly he would have yielded up this one to the attentions of each and all who might choose to offer them.

In one particular they were right. Edith Glover was a very pretty girl. She had large blue eyes, and profuse brown hair falling in a natural wavy fringe around her brows. She had a clear complexion, regular features, and a bright, laughing expression. She was of medium height, had a good figure, and dressed well. But with all these advantages she lacked one thing, in common with her father, and that was the hallmark of birth. There was no mistake about it. With all her engaging prettiness and tasteful attire there was this one thing painfully, obviously lacking. She would have looked far more in keeping—and therefore possibly more attractive—in the cap, apron, and print dress of a housemaid, and her speech would have agreed thereto.

It is an accepted saying that the letter "h" constitutes a crucial shibboleth to the individual of dubious birth and British nationality; but there is another letter to which this applies with almost equal force, and that is the letter "a". Now the first letter of the alphabet as enunciated by Edith Glover sounded uncommonly like the ninth—to wit, the letter "i."

"We will sit together at table, dear, of course," she murmured, sweetly, with a killing glance into his eyes.

"Um—ah—er," mumbled Philip. "Awful sorry, but afraid our end of the table's full up—in fact, crowded."

"Oh, but you can come down to ours."

"Er—hardly. You see I'm with some people—very jolly party—came up here together. Can't desert them, don't you know."

Edith Glover had a temper, but now she judiciously dropped her eyes so that he should not see the expression which had come into them.

"Oh, well," she said, with a little pout, and heaving up an attempt at a sob for the occasion; "of course, if you prefer to be with other people, when I have made Pa bring me all this way because I couldn't bear to be away from you any longer, I—I—" And the heave became very much more pronounced.

"This is gaudy!" thought Philip to himself. "They have been pretty well giving me away for the benefit of the whole hotel already, and now she is going to scare up a scene pro bono publico. A scene, by Jove!" he reflected, in dismay. And then, at this additional indication of her want of breeding, he felt hardened. Fancy Alma, for instance, making such an exhibition of her feelings in public! and this idea brought with it a dire

foreboding—what if he were to undergo some private but unmistakable indication of Alma's feelings, as a sequel to this abominable contretemps!

Just then the dinner-bell rang.

"There goes the second bell, and I'm still in my nailed boots and climbing gear. We left at six this morning, you know, to go up to the Mountet Hut, and are only just back," he added, with forced gaiety and unconcern. "I must really go and change. Sha'n't be down till dinner is half over as it is."

"Friends of yours, those new arrivals, aren't they, Philip?" said the General, soon after the latter had taken his seat.

"They are some people I used to know down at Henley. They had a big riverside place there, and gave dances."

"What a pretty girl!" said Mrs Wyatt, putting up her glasses to look over at the objects under discussion, who were seated at another table at the further end of the room. "Isn't she, Mr Fordham?"

"I'm afraid I'm not a competent judge on that point," was the reply.

"Mr Fordham won't be betrayed into saying anything in favour of any of us," said Alma, maliciously.

Poor Philip was in a state of mind which even his worst enemy might have commiserated. He had, with quick instinct, grasped the certainty that all was changed. There was a touch of frostiness in Alma's manner that betokened this only too plainly. Her serenity was absolutely unruffled, she was as brightly conversational as ever; but there was just that in her manner towards himself, imperceptible however to others, which told him only too unmistakably that the barrier was reared between them. Was she not within earshot during the horrible obtrusive suddenness of this most inopportune meeting! Her woman's wit had been prompt to put two and two together. He was done for.

Still he would not give up without a struggle. He would tell her all. She might see extenuating circumstances, and then—oh, he hardly dared think of a contingency so entrancing. Now was the time. He would dodge those hateful Glovers somehow, and get her to come out with him for that short twilight stroll which they two, in common with nearly everybody in the hotel, were in the habit of taking almost every night after table d'hôte.

“Which way shall we go to-night, Alma?” he said softly, as she rose from the table.

She paused and turned her glance upon him, her eyes full on his.

“Don’t you think you ought to go and do the civil to your—friends? I do,” she said. And without another word she left him—left him quickly and decisively, her very action, her manner of performing it, laying upon him a curt prohibition to follow.

Philip, however, did not obey her injunction as regarded the Glovers. Avoiding those ill-omened persons, he stole away into the darkness, choosing the most hilly, and therefore, to after-dinner promenaders, unfrequented way. There, in company with his pipe and his thoughts, he wandered, and the latter were very bitter. He saw through the situation only too clearly. There was no exaggerating the magnitude of the disaster. The Glovers were not the sort of people to hide their grievance under a bushel. Every one in the hotel would promptly be made free of it. Alma would never forgive him for putting upon her—however unintentionally—the most unpardonable slight of all—a public slight. No. It was the one unpardonable sin. She would never forgive it.

His estimate of the Glovers proved singularly accurate. Stung by his defection, his marked neglect of her—seeing, moreover, with woman’s instinct the real lay of the land—the fair Edith had by no means buried the secret of her relationship towards Philip within her own breast. Before bedtime it was whispered all over the hotel that the pretty girl who had arrived that evening was no other than his fiancée, whom he had heartlessly jilted in favour of Miss Wyatt.

No; assuredly this was not a thing that Alma was likely to forgive.

Chapter Eighteen.

Two Heads Better Than One.

“Fordham, old man, I’m in a devil of a mess,” announced Philip, dolefully, bursting into his friend’s room the following morning while the latter was shaving.

“I tell you what it is, Sir Philip Orlebar as is to be,” returned Fordham, who was in an abominably bad humour, pausing with his razor arrested. “You’ll be the death of me long before you arrive at that dignity unless you get out of a certain vile habit of crashing in upon a man during such critical moments as this. Do you think I’ve no nerves?”

“Well, I certainly did think so.”

“So it seems. But I have. So would you have if you had been expected to sleep beneath two parsons pounding about overhead in nailed boots half the night, and starting again at four o’clock this morning. The noisiest people in their rooms in these ramshackle hotels are invariably parsons and women; I imagine because the first are supposed to be professionally unselfish and the second traditionally so.”

“How do you know they were parsons?” said Philip. “Sent up the femme de chambre to ask them politely to take their boots off. She came back grinning, ‘Ce sont deux pasteurs anglais, M’sieu, qui viennent de passer le Trift-joch.’ Well, the avalanche that failed to engulph them was an avalanche in the wrong place, decidedly. I might just as well not have sent up; for though I’m not a sufficiently impartial witness to assert that they made more row thereafter, I’m fully prepared to swear that they didn’t make any less.”

“H’m! But I say, Fordham. I was saying, I’m in the very devil’s own mess.”

“That is not infrequently the case, the extent of my acquaintance with you warrants me in asserting. May I ask the nature of it this time?”

“I’ve had a devil of a row with old Glover.”

“The British merchant? Already? And the day so young! What, may I inquire, led to so decided a difference of opinion? Had you been discussing politics, or a rise in sugar?”

“Don’t chaff, Fordham. It’s no laughing matter to me. He says his daughter hasn’t had a wink of sleep all night.”

“No more has he, I should say, since he looses his combative instincts thus early. No more have I—thanks to the nailed boots of the gospel—grinders aforesaid. Well, the only thing I can suggest is that he should send down to Sierre and get her a sleeping draught.”

“He says she has lain awake all night, and is quite ill, and it’s entirely my doing.”

“Ah! I begin to see. Her room is underneath yours, I take it. Well, I always said you had rather a heavy hoof.”

“Fordham, do be serious. Don’t you see, man? You were there when they arrived yesterday—and er—er—he swears he’ll bring an action for breach of promise against me? Now do you see?”

“And he’s just the sort of animal who would do it too,” rejoined the other coolly, spreading a fresh lather upon his chin.

“Well, that’s not all—nor even the worst of it. I’m in a proper sort of hole, I can tell you,” said poor Phil, despairingly dropping into a chair and lighting up a Vevey cheroot.

“Wait a minute, Phil,” said Fordham, turning with his razor in mid-air. “There’s a time for all things and, it might be added, a place. Now I’ve a strong suspicion that the partition walls between these rooms are unconscionably thin, and that being so we had better postpone our council of war until we have got outside of our toast and coffee, and then adjourn with pipes to some sequestered spot where undisturbed we can concert plans for the discomfiture of the enemy. But, look here, you must pull yourself together. You are looking a cross between a scarecrow and a galvanised skull. Man alive, you’ll furnish sport to all the women in the house if they see you going about like this.”

“What a good chap you are, Fordham,” said poor Philip, gratefully. He was looking wretchedly pulled down and haggard, as the other had said, for he had had very little sleep. No one would have recognised the bright, handsome sunny face of yesterday. He looked a dozen years older. Even Alma, burning with outraged pride, must have pitied him.

But the Wyatts were not at table when the two came down, which was perhaps just as well. Old Glover was, but his daughter’s place was vacant. He frowned magnificently at Philip, and nodded in a stiff and patronising way to Fordham as they came in.

“Now Phil,” began Fordham, as having strolled up the meadow path behind the hotel, they sat down among a cluster of rocks and began to smoke, “Now Phil, we can talk to

our heart's content. What a chap you are. You were a semi-lunatic for the space of a week about one 'skirt,' and no sooner is that put right than another 'skirt' sails in unexpectedly and upsets the coach again."

"Upsets it, indeed!" muttered poor Phil.

"As I understand the case," went on Fordham, "and it's far from an uncommon one, you neglected to throw away your dirty water before you got your clean. Consequently the former has overlapped the latter and damaged it effectually. Do you follow me?"

Philip nodded.

"Well now, what do you want me to do?"

"I want you to advise me."

"H'm! The case stands thus. The appearance upon the scene of Number 1 has sheered Number 2 off in a deadly huff, which, under the circumstances, it was bound to do. Secondly, the British merchant and his offspring threaten to make themselves particularly disagreeable. Those are the two points upon which we must go to work."

"Yes."

"Very well. Now to begin with the first point. Have you squarely explained the whole affair to Miss Wyatt?"

"Don't I wish she'd give me the chance!" was the vehement reply.

"You must make the chance—by hook or by crook. That's all I've got to say. It is a matter between her and you exclusively, and one in which you must fight entirely to your own hand. Now as to the other, the—er—Glover side of the difficulty. Quite sure you wouldn't have the girl at any price?"

"Dead certain."

"That's so, eh?"

"Yes, it is."

"Well, I think you're right. I wouldn't myself—if I were you, I mean. How did you manage to get in tow with her?"

“Oh, it was just after that last cruise of ours, about six months ago,” said Philip, in the disgusted tone of a man who realises that he has made a fool of himself and is called upon to face the consequences of his folly. “I ran down to old Glover’s place with some other fellows to a dance, and—well—Edith and I got rather thick. Drifted into it, I suppose?”

“Used to go up the river a good bit, eh? Picnic and spoon on the eyots—and all that sort of thing?”

“Yes.”

“That river’s the very devil for getting fellows into messes of this kind. The rushes and the whispering-trees and the soft murmur of the water, don’t you know—and the champagne in the hamper—all this I suppose combines to work it. Now, did you ever propose to her in definite terms?”

“N-no. Once it struck me she thought I had. It was one evening at a dance. We were sitting out in a corner of the lawn—and the river and the moonlight on the water—”

“And the champagne,” murmured Fordham. “No; it was sparkling Burgundy. But don’t chaff, old man. Well, I hadn’t really said anything definite. But, you know, a fellow is apt to make rather a fool of himself on such occasions, isn’t he?”

“Oh, very. Now how long was this—this evening when you hadn’t really said anything definite—before we came abroad together?”

“About a month or six weeks.”

“And of course you have corresponded ever since?”

“Up till the time I—er—you know—”

“Yes, yes, I quite understand. Well now, have you said—written, rather—anything definite in the course of that correspondence?”

“N-no. I don’t think I can have.”

“Would you mind allowing me to judge?”

“I didn’t keep copies of the letters—Oh, I see. Hers you mean! Hang it, old man, I—er—don’t think that would be quite fair to her.”

“Just as you please,” was the perfectly unruffled rejoinder. “By the way, you didn’t perform the pleasing ceremony commonly known as ‘speaking to papa,’ did you?”

“Not I,” said Philip, with alacrity.

“Yet he came here prepared to give you his blessing—and gave it, too, in the most all-embracing fashion?”

“That’s it! That’s just it!” cried Philip, savagely. “It’s a put-up job! Yet what on earth could they want to hook me for? The dear old governor has got years and years to go on yet; and even then he won’t cut up for much, for he’s as poor as Job. Still it looks like a clear case of ‘standing in.’”

“I think it does. As for the motive, the British merchant may have had a fancy to be able to talk about ‘My daughter, Lady Orlebar—ah!’ and added to that you’re a personable dog enough, Phil. He ought to be able to supply the funds to counterbalance the title.”

“There the motive breaks down,” quickly interrupted the other. “Although he cuts great splashes with his entertainments, and is rolling in money, he has the reputation of being the most close-fisted screw extant.”

“Is that so? Ah! now I begin to see a little light. You don’t think he’d come down with a fat settlement?”

“Not the ghost of a chance of it.”

“Good. I think we may defeat him on that count. But let us again be certain on this head. You are sure you wouldn’t take the girl at any price—not if he offers to settle fifty thousand?”

“Not if he offered to settle five hundred thousand. But don’t have any misgivings on that score. He won’t come down with five, you’ll see.”

“Good again,” said Fordham. “Now, are there any other daughters?”

“Three.”

“Sons?”

“Three.”

“Seven in the family. Right. Now, Phil, your line is this. You must put a prohibitive price upon yourself. Tell him straight that you are not going to wreck all your prospects in life for a girl you don’t really care two straws about, and never will, and bring yourself down to beggary into the bargain. You can defeat him on the question of settlements—if you are only firm enough.”

“But isn’t that rather a shady standpoint to take up—eh, Fordham?” said Phil, dubiously. “Not quite one’s form—eh?”

Fordham’s dark brows came nearer together, and there was a sneer in the black, piercing eyes which were fixed on the younger man’s face.

“My dear Phil,” he replied, “if there is a phase of humanity in this latter-day world which invariably lays itself out to be kicked, hustled, jumped upon, bested all round, it is represented by the man whose ‘form’ rises up to bar him fighting the devil with fire. ‘Poor Satan!’ say such fellows as yourself. ‘It really isn’t fair!’ So, by way of equalising the chances, you surrender at discretion, and the enemy of mankind dances upon you ad lib. Here you have got to fight the devil with fire, and you won’t do it, because, forsooth, it is ‘not quite one’s form.’ You are simply the victim of a ‘plant’—a not very cunningly baited trap—and yet you are going to let the devil—who for present purposes may be taken to mean the paternal Glover—bind you hand and foot for all time. Could ever lunacy be more complete—more hopeless?”

“Well, what shall I tell him?” said Philip, desperately.

“Tell him, in unequivocal terms, to go hang.”

For a few moments Philip said nothing. He sat watching the smoke wreaths from his pipe curling up in blue circles upon the clear mountain air, a puzzled and helpless expression clouding his features. Then at last:

“I say, Fordham.”

“Well?”

“I wish—er—I wish, old chap, you’d pull me through this affair. I mean—er—I wish you’d interview old Glover for me. You’re so cool-headed, and I—well, I get in a rage and lose my nut. Why, this morning the old sinner and I were as nearly as possible coming to

fisticuffs. We shouted at and damned each other, but what we said I haven't the faintest recollection."

"I don't care to undertake anything of the kind, Phil, and so I tell you candidly," answered Fordham.

"Why not, old chap?" was the doleful rejoinder.

"Because it is dead in the teeth of every ruling principle of my life to poke my nose into what doesn't concern me. You may say I have already done so in advising you at all. So I have, and to that extent I plead guilty to having been inconsistent. But two wrongs don't make a right, which we may take to mean that I don't see why I should violate my principles still further. Were I to undertake what you want me to, old Glover would begin by asking what the devil business it was of mine, anyhow. And the worst of it is, he would be right—quite right."

"Not of necessity," rejoined Philip, eagerly. "Surely you have a right to act for a friend; and for all he knows you may be my legal adviser. I believe you must have been a lawyer once, you're so devilish coldblooded and logical. Now, say you'll do it."

Fordham's dark brows met, and he smoked silently for a few minutes. "Coldblooded—logical," had said this careless youngster, who was merely paltering with the very outskirts of the grim web of circumstances which go to make up the tragedies—and travesties—of the serious side of life. "Coldblooded" was he now pronounced; yet could he remember when his blood ran hot, surging and seething like the boiling and bubbling pitch. Now it lay still within his veins, cool and acrid as vinegar.

"And if I don't bring it off all right, or as you think all right, you'll turn round and abuse me," he said at last.

"You needn't be in the least afraid of that," answered Phil. "I'll give you a free hand to act as you think right."

"You will?"

"Of course."

"Now you're talking, as they say in the States. Well, Phil, I'll do what I can for you. But mind, you must leave everything in my hands unreservedly. None of your insane scruples about 'form,' or anything of that kind. Do you agree to this?"

“I do, unreservedly.”

“Well, it’s dead contrary to my principles, as I told you before; but for this once I’ll throw judgment overboard, especially as it is to turn the flank of an infernal scheming, crafty female creature,” added this misogynist, an acrid ring coming into his tone. “And now, Phil, you had better not go back to the hotel. Start off from here and walk somewhere till lunch-time—if you could make it till dinner-time, all the better. By then I shall have knocked what change I can out of the exasperated but knowing British parent.”

Chapter Nineteen.

Fighting the Devil with Fire.

Philip was only too ready to follow his friend's advice, and accordingly started away there and then—whither he did not care. His only thought was to get through the day somehow.

He had no wish to encounter old Glover again. In saying that he had had a considerable row with that worthy he had in no wise overstated matters. His marked abstention from the fair Edith's society the previous evening had been quite sufficient, and the old man had got up with the fixed determination of having it out with the defaulting swain, and withal giving the latter a very large piece of his mind. This was all very well. But old Glover, not being a gentleman himself, did not in the very least understand how to deal with gentlemen, and his method of handling his grievance was so much that of the triumphant trickster who has bested his neighbour over a bargain that it revolted Philip, unconsciously strengthening a resolve which was forming in his mind to avoid an alliance with connections of this sort at all costs and hazards.

Now, as he made his way up the mountain path with the quick elastic step of perfect physical condition, Philip began to feel more sanguine. Fordham would get him out of the mess somehow. From where he was he could make out two figures strolling out from the hotel. He had no glasses with him, but felt sure they were Fordham and old Glover. They were at it already. Fordham was a wonderful fellow, and could do anything if he chose. It would not be surprising if he were to succeed in getting rid of the obnoxious Glovers altogether, and he—Philip—were to find the field clear again when he returned that evening. He felt quite hopeful.

Not for long, however. For he remembered there was another horn to the dilemma. He might free himself from the awkward position in which circumstances and his own thoughtlessness had combined to land him; but the new sweet relationship with Alma—ah! that was a thing of the past, and this he recognised with a keen unerring instinct hardly to be looked for in his easy-going nature. This he recognised with a despairing pang, and again his heart was heavy as lead within him.

The first person Fordham encountered on returning to the hotel was old Glover himself. The latter was seated on a pile of saw-planks stacked against a chalet, smoking the pipe of solitude and sweet and bitter fancies—probably the latter, if the expression of his countenance was aught to go by. So far from being prepared to resent his intervention, there was an eager look in the old man's eyes as he perceived Fordham, which was by no means lost upon that astute reader of human nature.

“Er—er—Mr Fordham?” he called out, the other having passed him with a commonplace remark in re the weather.

Fordham turned with just a gleam of well-feigned astonishment in his face.

“Ar—Mr Fordham,” went on old Glover now more eagerly, “would you—ar—mind accompanying me for a short stroll? I should—ar—like to have a few words with you.”

“Certainly,” was the reply, and an additional touch was thrown into the well-feigned astonishment. “I am quite at your disposal. Doing nothing this morning. We might stroll along the level towards the head of the valley.”

The other assented with alacrity, and they started, Fordham keeping the conversation to strict commonplace until they had got clear of the clusters of châlets lining the path on either side. Then the valley opened out into wide, level meadows, and, crossing the log bridge over the swirling, rushing mountain torrent, Fordham led the way into one of these.

“Er—ar”—began old Glover, who had with difficulty restrained his eagerness up till now, “have you, may I ask, known young Orlebar for a considerable length of time?”

“A goodish while.”

“Do you—ar—considar—that you know him well—er—I may say intimately?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Er—now, Mr Fordham—you will—ar—excuse the question, I’m sure. Have you always found him—ar—straightforward?”

“Invariably. Too much so, in fact, for his own interests.”

“Ar—r!” The representative of British commerce drew himself up with a sidelong stare at his neighbour. This was a quality quite outside his comprehension. He began to suspect the other was making game of him. The expanse of waistcoat swelled, and the folds of a truly magnificent pomposity deepened around its wearer as he went on. “Ar—I am sorry I cannot agree with you, Mr—ar—Fordham—very sorry indeed. In his dealings with me—with me and mine—young Orlebar has, I regret to say, shown the—ar—very reverse of straightforwardness. Are you aware, sir, that he is engaged to my daughter?”

“I can’t say I am.”

The old man halted, turned round upon Fordham, and looked him full in the face as though he could hardly believe in his own sense of hearing.

“I—ar—beg your pardon, Mr—ar—Fordham. Did I—ar—understand you to say you were not aware of it?”

“Certainly, Mr Glover. I intended you to understand precisely that.”

Old Glover was nonplussed. He began to feel small and at a decided disadvantage, a most unwonted feeling with him. He stared wonderingly, inquiringly, distrustfully, into the dark, saturnine visage confronting him, but could read nothing there.

“It is an odd thing that Phil should not have informed me of the fact,” went on Fordham. “He is usually openness itself—indeed, too much so, as I said just now. Wears his heart on his sleeve, I always tell him. However, I shall have to congratulate him the next time I see him. By the way, I suppose his father is delighted? Philip is an only son, you know.”

Nothing could be more innocent than Fordham’s tone, nothing more unsuspecting than the look of half-amused wonder with which he received the intelligence. But his keen perception noted the disconcerted wave which passed over his interlocutor’s face at this allusion to Sir Francis Orlebar.

“Fathers have different ways of taking news of that kind,” he continued, innocently. “Now, partly as a student of character, partly by reason of some slight acquaintance with Sir Francis himself, I am curious to know how he took the news of his son’s engagement. How did he?”

The question was put with blunt and cruel directness. No slippery commercial instincts could avail here. It must be answered. Poor old Glover felt unprecedentedly small in the hands of his wily opponent. Those piercing dark eyes penetrated his poor coating of pomposity as a lance-head might penetrate the rind of a pumpkin.

“I am not aware how Sir Francis took the news,” he answered, stiffly.

“He was informed, of course?” pursued Fordham, remorselessly. “Really—ar—Mr Fordham. Your tone is—ar—very strange. I am at a loss to—ar—”

“Oh, a thousand pardons. I merely asked the question because I thought I understood you to say that Philip was engaged to your daughter. If I was mistaken—But I quite

understand. Of course the affair is no business of mine. At the same time allow me to remind you, Mr Glover, that the topic was broached by yourself, and, moreover, that you requested me to accompany you for a stroll with that object. It is naturally of far greater interest to you than to me, but if it is distasteful to you, we will drop it at once. So let us talk of something more congenial."

His manner was the perfection of ingenuous indifference. Thorough cynic as he was, Fordham was enjoying the embarrassment of this inflated old schemer, who he well knew had not brought him thus far in order to "drop the subject" at any such early stage of the conversation. And the next words proved it.

"You were not mistaken, sir. He is engaged to my daughter. And—ar—when you come to look at the matter in its right light, Mr Fordham, you will, I am sure, agree with me that he has acted with very great want of straightforwardness."

"Perhaps. But you know, Mr Glover, Philip is an only son. It does, I confess, appear strange to me that no reference should have been made to his father at the time he asked for your consent to the engagement. He did ask for it, I suppose?"

"Hang it, sir!" blared forth the other, goaded to fury by his own helpless flounderings, which only served to entangle him deeper and deeper within the net. "Hang it, sir! You know as well as I do that in these days young people don't trouble their heads about their fathers in matters of this kind. They take it all into their own hands—arrange it between themselves."

The expression of astonished disapproval upon Fordham's face as he received this announcement would have delighted the heart of the most confirmed stickler for the old-fashioned proprieties.

"Do they? I was not aware of it," he said, "Pardon my ignorance, but I still can't help thinking that, whatever may be the general rule, for the only son of a man of Sir Francis Orlebar's position to be allowed to drift into a tacit engagement without consulting either the young lady's father or his own, is—pardon me again—somewhat of an odd proceeding."

"What is a beggarly baronet?" cried old Glover, the coarse huckstering blood showing through the veneer of a would-be stately pomposity in his blind rage at finding himself outwitted at every point. "Pooh! I could buy up a dozen of them."

"True. I was not thinking so much, though, about what was due to a 'beggarly baronet' as to a gentleman and the son of a gentleman. However," he resumed, after a pause just

perceptible enough to carry that last shaft home, “let us now be frank with each other—talk as men of the world, in fact. I presume you had some object in seeking this interview with me, Mr Glover?”

Their stroll had brought them to a large rock which at some period more or less remote had fallen from above and embedded itself in the meadow. In the shade formed by this Fordham proposed that they should sit down. A beetling cliff sheered up behind to a great height, but in front and around the approaches to the place were open.

“You are right in your surmise, Mr—ar—Fordham. As an intimate friend of young Orlebar, a man, I believe, considerably older than himself, it occurred to me that you would be—ar—likely to have some influence over him—and—ar—might exert that influence towards inducing him to do what is right.”

“You may command any influence I may possess in that direction, Mr Glover,” said Fordham, suavely, though inwardly chuckling over the cool impudence of the proposal and the opacity of the mind which could propound it.

“I was sure of it—sure of it,” reiterated the other, much mollified at the prospect of so welcome an alliance. “As I said before, he is not behaving straightforwardly, and you will—ar—agree with me. Well, now, some months ago it was that he came first to my place. I’ve got a little crib down at Henley, you know, Mr Fordham—shall be happy to see you there if you are returning to England—very happy. Well, we had plenty of fun going on—parties and picnics and rowing and all that. I’m a man that likes to see young folks enjoying themselves. I don’t stint them—not I. Let them enjoy themselves when they are young, say I. Don’t you agree with me?”

“Undoubtedly,” murmured Fordham.

“Well, among other young fellows who came sparking around was this young Orlebar,” went on old Glover, forgetting his stilted pomposity in the thread of his narrative. “I was always glad to see him—ask him if I wasn’t. Soon it seemed to me that he was taking a fancy to my Edie. She’s my eldest, you know, as good a girl as ever was. She’s a pretty girl, too, and looks at home anywhere—in the Park, or wherever she may be. Now doesn’t she?”

“I quite agree with you on the subject of Miss Glover’s attractions,” said Fordham, gravely. “She would, as you say, look thoroughly at home in the Park—with a perambulator and a soldier,” he added to himself.

“All day and every day he made some excuse or other to run down. He’d take her out on the river by the hour, sit about the garden with her, be sending her flowers and things and all that. If that don’t mean intentions, I’d like to know what does. Well, I didn’t feel called upon to step in. I don’t believe in interfering with young folks’ inclinations. I liked the young fellow—we all did—and it seemed he was old enough to know his own mind. This went on for some time—some months. Then suddenly we heard he’d gone abroad, and from that day on heard no more about him by word or line. My poor Edie felt it dreadfully. She didn’t say anything at first, nor for a long time, and at last I got it all out of her. Now, that isn’t the way a girl should be treated, is it, Mr Fordham? If you had daughters of your own you would not like to see them treated like that, would you?”

“Certainly not. But pray go on—I am interested.”

He was—but in reading between the lines of this very ingenuous and pathetic tale of base and black hearted treachery. To the narrator his sympathetic tone and attitude conveyed the liveliest satisfaction, but that hoary plutocrat little guessed at what a dismally primitive hour it was requisite to rise in order to get the blind side of saturnine Richard Fordham.

“I’d taken the girls to the seaside for their summer outing,” continued the narrator—“a thing they generally go wild with delight over. But poor Edie this time said she hated the sea. She wanted to go abroad. Would I take her abroad? At first I wouldn’t, till she grew quite thin and pale. Then I knew why she wanted to go, and she told me. If she could find him out herself—make up a pleasant little surprise, she said—it would all come right. It would all be as before, and they would be as jolly as grigs. I hadn’t the heart to refuse her, and so we came. We found out where young Orlebar was, and dropped down on him with the pleasant little surprise we’d planned. But—it didn’t seem a pleasant surprise at all.”

“No, by Jove, it didn’t!” said the listener to himself, putting up his hand to hide a sardonic grin.

“You saw that it didn’t. You saw how he behaved. Didn’t seem at all glad to see us, hardly spoke to us. And that girl had been breaking her heart about him—yes, breaking her heart—and he’s never been near her since the moment she arrived. But I see how it is—he’s got another string to his bow. That high and mighty young woman that was sitting near you—Miss—what’s her name?—Miss Wyatt, isn’t it? Well—”

“Excuse me if I remind you, Mr Glover, that among ourselves it is not usual to drag ladies’ names into other people’s differences in that free-and-easy sort of fashion,” said

Fordham, stiffly, though inwardly convulsed with mirth at the idea of finding himself, of all people, taking up the cudgels on behalf of one of the detested sex.

“Eh—what? Why, they told me he was engaged to her.”

“Who told you he was?”

“Why, let me see—some of the people last night. I don’t quite recollect which of them. But perhaps you can tell me for certain. Is he?”

“Not that I am aware of.”

“Not—eh?” with a very distrustful look into Fordham’s face, and in no wise convinced; for to this representative of British commerce a man was bound to be lying, provided any adequate motive existed for mendacity, and here such motive undoubtedly did exist. “Well, they told me the pair of them were never apart, out together all day, sitting together all the evening—never apart, except at bedtime.”

“Pooh! that means nothing. Here you see, and in places like this, society is a pretty happy-go-lucky assortment, and the harmonious elements gravitate towards each other. And while we are on this subject, Mr Glover, I may as well remind you that Philip is young, a great favourite with women, and consequently a devil of a fellow to flirt. He’s always over head and ears in some flirtation or other—always has been ever since I’ve known him. But he means nothing by it, and it always comes to nothing.”

“Upon my word, Mr—ar—Fordham,” replied the other, again bristling up with pomposity, “you seem to treat this matter with strange—ar—levity. Whatever—ar—you may see fit to call it, I look upon this—ar—outrageous trifling with my daughter’s feelings as the act of an unprincipled scoundrel. Yes, sir, an unprincipled scoundrel,” he added, rolling the words, in his delight at having hit upon a good, sounding, double-barrelled epithet. “But what do you want him to do?”

“Well, really—ar—Mr Fordham, that is a strange question to come from a man of your—ar—knowledge of the world. What is the usual—ar—outcome of a young man’s winning a girl’s affection?”

“I am bound in candour to reply that its nature varies. Further it might be as well to approach this matter with caution and common sense. You are doubtless aware that Sir Francis Orlebar is not a rich man—for a man in his position a decidedly poor one, and Philip has not a shilling in the world beyond what his father allows him? Now if his

father should disapprove of this—er—engagement—as not having been consulted it is extremely likely he will—he may cut off that allowance summarily."

"In that case I should be prepared to allow the people—ar—something to go on with."

"What do you mean precisely by 'something to go on with,' Mr Glover?"

"Well—really now—ar—Mr Fordham. You must excuse my saying so, but you are—ar—I mean this is—"

"Taking a great liberty? I quite understand," was the perfectly unruffled rejoinder. "But then you must remember this, Mr Glover. You broached the subject. You called me into consultation, so to say. You asked me to use my influence with Philip in this matter. I need hardly tell you I have no interest in it one way or the other. We will drop the subject altogether if you like."

"I think you mistake me," said the other, hurriedly. "I did not—ar—say the words you were good enough to put into my mouth."

"Well, then, you must allow me, Mr Glover, to keep an eye upon my friend's interests. He is very young, remember, a mere thoughtless boy. Now we, as men of the world, are bound to look at everything from a practical point of view. Let us talk plainly then. How much are you prepared to settle in the event of Philip—er—fulfilling the engagement into which you say he has entered?"

"I should be, as I said before, prepared to make them a fairly liberal allowance," he jerked forth, with the air of a man who has just had a tooth drawn and has found the process less painful than he had expected.

But Fordham shook his head.

"The 'allowance' system is an unsatisfactory one," he said. "I have known people let into queer quandaries by trusting to it. Allowances may be cut off at the mere caprice of the allower. Now, don't be offended," he added, with the shadow of a smile. "We agreed to speak plainly and as men of the world. No—the thing must be a settlement. Now what are you prepared to settle?"

"I think I may say this. I will settle four hundred a year upon them now. At my death of course—Why what is the matter? Is that not enough?"

The last in an astonished and indignant tone. For an almost derisive shake of the head on the part of the other had cut short his words.

“Most certainly not. It is, in fact, ridiculous.”

“Many a young couple has begun life on less.”

“And many a man has ruined his life by beginning on far more. No. I think my young friend will rate himself at a far higher value than that. Why there are shoals of women with six times that income who would jump at him.”

“And are truth and honour to go for nothing?” spluttered old Glover, swelling himself out with virtuous wrath until the expanse of the white waistcoat was so tight that you could hear the seams crack. “Truth and honour and good faith—and a sweet girl’s broken heart?” he repeated, working up a highly effective sniffle.

“My dear sir, you can’t run a household, and a milliner, and a dressmaker, and a butcher and baker, and a pocket doctor, and a lawyer—in fact, an unlimited liability, upon truth and honour; nor can you pay the Queen’s taxes with a sweet girl’s mended heart. Now, can you?”

“You have a most—ar—peculiar way of putting things, I must say, Mr Fordham. Well, I’ll tell you what I’ll do—I’ll make it five hundred. There!”

“You might just as well make it five hundred pence, Mr Glover. I can’t advise my friend to throw himself away.”

“I consider five hundred a year ample,” said old Glover, magisterially inserting his thumbs in the arm-holes of his waistcoat. “If he wants more let him work for it. Let him go into some business.”

“Why should he? He is young, and has the world at his feet. Why should he grind away at some dingy and uncongenial money-grubbing mill just for the fun of supporting your, or any other man’s, daughter. It isn’t good enough, and I tell you so candidly. And remember this: he has everything to lose and nothing to gain by the transaction, and with yourselves it is the other way about.”

“And what amount would meet your friend’s views, Mr Fordham?” was the rejoinder, quick spoken, and with cutting irony.

“He will have a position and title to keep up by and by,” answered Fordham, tranquilly. “I should say, a capital sum representing three thousand a year—not one farthing less.”

Old Glover sprang to his feet with a snort and an activity one would hardly have credited him with. He stared wildly at Fordham, gasped for breath and snorted again. Then he spluttered forth.

“I never heard anything so monstrous—such an outrageous piece of impertinence in my life.”

“But, my dear sir, surely I’ve put the case plain enough—”

“Don’t talk to me any more about it, sir,” interrupted the other furiously, “I won’t hear of such a preposterous suggestion.”

“Do I understand that you refuse the condition, then?”

“Most emphatically you may understand that very thing. Three thousand a year—ha—ha! He must be mad! But I tell you what it is, sir,” he blared forth, stung by Fordham’s cool and indifferent demeanour. “That young scoundrel—yes—that young scoundrel, I say,” with a stamp of the foot, “shall be made to fulfil his engagement—shall be made to, I say.”

“Shall he? Excuse my reminding you of the old proverb concerning the horse which may be taken to the water.”

“Sha’n’t he! I’ll sue him for breach of promise. I’ll claim such swinging damages as never were asked for in a court of law yet. I’ll ruin him—yes, I’ll ruin him, by God!”

“You may obtain a few hundreds at the outside. But you said something just now about your daughter’s heart being broken. Do you propose to heal that fractured organ by exposing the young lady to the jeers of a not over particular crowd in a public court, and making her the laughing stock of every newspaper reader in the kingdom for the sake of a few hundred pounds?”

“That’s my business, sir—that’s my business,” was the savage reply.

“Even then you will have to prove any specific promise at all. Under the circumstances this will be a matter of some difficulty, I imagine. Why not think over the terms I have stated?”

“Never, sir I never! Such unheard-of impudence?” And he fairly danced at the idea.

“Well, then, I’ve no more to say. In my opinion a man is a fool who ties himself to any woman. A lion might as well make himself the slave of a cat. But when he is expected to embrace the exhilarating career of a mill-horse in order that the dear creature may own a conveniently supporting slave—if he does so, I say, he deserves to be hung on sight. I shall certainly advise Phil Orlebar not to marry anybody on a cent less than three thousand a year, and I believe he will take my advice.”

“Very well, sir. We shall see—we shall see. And, by the way, Mr—ar—Fordham”—and the trade mind of the successful huckster again rose to the surface—“you are really a most clever advocate, and I must—ar—congratulate you. But ‘nothing for nothing,’ you know. Now how much of this fabulous income was to have found its way into your pocket if obtained? Commission, you understand.”

There was such a lurid look in Fordham’s dark face as he quickly rose to his feet, that even old Glover, dancing with rage, quailed and stepped back a pace or two.

“I must congratulate you, Mr Glover, on your good fortune in being an old man at this moment. However,” and his tone resumed its normal sarcastic ring. “However, there are no witnesses present so we may as well speak our minds to each other. It is abundantly obvious that you have laid yourselves out to hook young Philip Orlebar, and have done it deucedly clumsily too—so clumsily, that luckily for himself the bird has seen the limed twig in time. Anyhow, to rush him as you have done, and bestow the paternal blessing before it was asked for—in public too—is just the way to choke off irrevocably a youngster of his stamp. I don’t know that there’s anything more to be said, except this. Bring your action by all means, but you will find it as hard a matter to prove a specific promise, as you will to persuade any jury that it is not a clear case of trying to entrap the son of a man of position and superior birth.”

To convey any idea of old Glover’s state as he listened to this harangue, would be impossible. At first he was speechless, and Fordham began to think he was on the verge of apoplexy. Eventually he found his tongue, and the great cliff in the background fairly echoed to the sound of a volley of strange and gurgling oaths. Then the full torrent of his wrath burst forth. He would sue the delinquent Phil—would ruin him—would sue them both—for conspiracy, libel—what not. There was nothing, in fact, that he would not do—shooting—horse-whipping—every form of violence was enumerated. He should rue the day—every one concerned should rue the day, etc, etc.

But Fordham, lighting a fresh pipe, leaned comfortably back against the rock, and waited with perfect unconcern until this human boiler should have blown off all its steam—or burst—it didn't matter which.

Chapter Twenty.

On The Summit.

A narrow apex of solid rock, surrounded by a little cairn of stones and four human figures. And around—what a panorama! Everywhere rolling billowy summits, snowy and hump-like, or rearing up sharp and defined in craggy pinnacles—everywhere they rise—north, south, east, or west, the eye wanders confused over a vast sea of them. Below, a mighty array of snowfields, great ice rivers flowing silently down between their rock-bound walls—divided, separated from each other by stupendous ramparts of cliff and snow. Further down still—far, far beneath the region of ice and snow—a confused labyrinth of tortuous valleys, green, and sprinkled here and there with clusters of brown specks, haply representing a town or village, the faintly glittering star above which resolves itself under the lens of the telescope into the metal-sheathed cupola of a church tower. The very immensity of the panorama is overwhelming in its bewildering vastness. The eye, the senses, are burdened with it—can hardly take it in. The whole world seems to lie spread out around and beneath, for this apex of rock soaring up in mid-air seems in very truth to tower above the rest of the world. It is the summit of the Rothhorn.

The two guides—good representatives of their class—with their thoughtful bronzed faces and horny hands, their quasi-uniform attire of grey frieze, and black-cock feather adorned hat—are busily engaged in examining the contents of a bottle, which they have extracted from its snug hiding-place in the heart of the cairn aforesaid—not in the hope of finding it to contain liquid refreshment, let us hasten to explain—nor are the contents precisely of a solid nature. They are calculated to appeal to the mind rather than the body, for they happen to consist, for the most part, of an assortment of visiting cards, bearing the names of such climbers as have hitherto gained this altitude, together with those of their guides, and any other remarks their owners may have seen fit to pencil thereon by way of record.

“Well, Phil? Think my prescription was good enough, eh?” says Fordham, cheerfully. “Worth while undergoing something to get such a view as this?”

But there is no cheerfulness about Philip Orlebar to-day, nor does he seem to take any interest in the view. Sprawling on his back, on the hard rock, with his hands behind his head, he is staring up at the sky—a phase of observation equally well undertaken at the bottom of a valley, thinks his companion. He merely growls in reply, and relapses into his abstraction.

It is the second day after the somewhat stormily concluding interview between Fordham and old Glover, but poor Philip’s prospects had in no wise been improved thereby—

indeed, he could not but realise that they were hopelessly ruined. The only result achieved was that of, so to say, drawing the teeth of the aggrieved but scheming parent. That crafty plutocrat had been left, in a manner of speaking, on his back. He had been met with a crisp, healthy decisiveness, which had left nothing to be inferred, whereas had Philip himself constituted the other party to the interview, we fear that a tendency to temporise might have wedged him into the morass firmer and deeper than ever. So far Fordham had rendered him yeoman's service.

But while released from one horn of the dilemma there was another upon which he remained firmly impaled, and whence it was beyond the power of any friend to extricate him, and that was a woman's outraged pride. Alma Wyatt's self-contained nature was a fearfully proud one, and it had been wounded to the quick. She, to allow herself to be deceived, fooled, made a plaything of, a mere pastime to add zest to a summer holiday—while all the time this man who had been whispering undying love to her was plighted to some one else! Her face fairly blanched with fierce wrath at the thought. And the insult, the publicity of the insult which he had put upon her—for his attentions were, of course, thoroughly understood by those around! No, she would never forgive him; never as long as he lived—or even on his deathbed!

Even then the natural fairness of her mind moved her to do him what justice she could. Her own heart told her that in his love for herself there was, at any rate, no make-believe. That, at any rate, was genuine. So much the worse. It argued weakness in her eyes, an unpardonable fault in a man. And, again—that he had dared to offer her a mere place in his affections—to suppose that she would share them with anybody, let alone the overdressed, underbred creature to whom he was already plighted, and who had come there and claimed him—publicly claimed him—under her eyes! It was an outrage which she could not bring herself so much as to think of condoning.

The only consolation was that she had all this time steadfastly refused to give him a definite answer—to allow him to give anybody to understand in definite terms that she was engaged to him. But what then? Had she not more than justified by implication such a conclusion on the part of those around her! Even now she was conscious of the exchanged glance, the hastily-stifled smile which her appearance evoked amid this or that group she happened to be passing, but this she could afford to treat with unconcern. Still the sting penetrated—penetrated and rankled. Her bitterness towards the chief offender hardened to white heat.

Nothing had been said between them. She took care to allow him no opportunity for that. No explanations were needed. The situation would admit of none—absolutely none. She made no external difference in her manner towards him—did not even change her place beside him at table. She was too proud to give him or the lookers-on to

suppose that she was sorely wounded. But there was a steeliness in her tone when she addressed him or answered any remark of his, which conveyed as severe a punishment as even she could have wished. He was miserable.

Then he wrote to her—a piteous and heartbroken letter—explaining, protesting, and, above all, entreating. To ensure her receipt of this he slipped it himself beneath her door at a time when it could not escape her observation. As a result she did afford him an opportunity of speaking with her alone—an interview of just sufficient duration to allow her deliberately to tear his letter into small fragments before his face, carefully letting him see that it was unopened. Not a word did she speak. She could not trust herself. Her great eyes blazing forth such scorn from her pale face seemed to sear and burn into his. Then she turned and left him.

After that he was desperate. Poor Phil, soft-hearted and sensitive, felt that he had wrecked his whole life. He wished he could get up a corresponding indignation. But he could not, not even the fraction of a semblance of it. His heart seemed turned to water—his brain was ablaze. He would relieve his feelings by undertaking some desperate feat—thank Heaven, it was always easy to break one's neck. And on this object intent he bounded upstairs three steps at a time in quest of his ice-axe.

But Providence, or his own forgetfulness, stood him in good stead that time, for the implement he sought was not in his room. He must have left it in Fordham's. Thither he repaired.

"What's the row, Phil?" said the latter, looking up quickly, taking in at the same time the obvious fact that things were not merely wrong with his unlucky friend, but very much more so than ever.

"Got my axe here? I'm just going for a—er—walk."

"Well, you can put it off then, for I've just been scheming out a promising climb. Got two first-rate Zermatt guides, who turned up last night and want to go back there. Everything is ready. What do you say to doing the Rothhorn? We can start for the Mountet cabin soon after lunch; sleep there, get to the top any time by midday, and go down the other side to Zermatt. What do you say?"

"I'm your man, Fordham. Just the very thing I should like. And, I say—while we are about it—we might stay at Zermatt a few days and do the Matterhorn and two or three others, eh?"

Fordham looked at him curiously.

“Just the very thing I was going to suggest,” he said, “only I doubted whether you’d cotton. A smart shaking up and a change will do you all the good in the world, just now, Phil. We’ll start half an hour after lunch—there goes the second bell!—and go up to the hut quietly.”

This they had done, and now after an excruciatingly early start from that convenient tarrying-place, and about six hours of really difficult climbing, of scrambling from rock to rock, worming round “corners” overhanging dizzy heights—work that called into full play every muscle and braced every nerve—here they were on the summit with the world at their feet.

During the actual process of ascent Philip’s spirits seemed to return. The hard, and, in places, really hazardous, nature of the undertaking demanded all his attention, and whether clinging spreadeagled against the face of the cliff with no real hold to speak of, or balancing with one foot upon a rock projection about the size of a walnut, the other dangling over nothing, what time the next man above should secure a footing, or skirting gingerly the treacherous line of a curling snow cornice, where the thrust of the handle of an ice-axe left a hole through which lay viewed the awful depth of space which it overhung—all this constituted such a strain upon his faculties as to leave room for no other thought. Though strong and active, and in good training all round, Philip, be it remembered, was a novice at this sort of thing, consequently he found enough to do in ensuring his own safety, and, relatively, that of his companions. At one point of their progress a cloud had come over the mountain, rendering the rocks rimy and slippery, throwing out the ridge of ice crowning a sharp arête spectral and drear against the misty murk, magnifying the cliffs to gigantic proportions in their uncertain and ill-defined outlines. Gazing down upon the snow-flecked rocks far, far beneath, losing themselves in the swirling vortex of vapour, Philip felt rather small as he remembered his reckless intentions of the day before. Life, strange to say, seemed still worth having; at any rate such a way of ending it as a sudden dash through space on to those hideous black and white rocks struck him as grim and horrible in the extreme.

But the excitement and physical exertion over, and the summit attained, his depression returned. More over he was tired, for he had hardly slept the night before, was, in fact, just dropping off, when roused by his indefatigable friend at 2 a.m. to make a pretence at devouring the breakfast which the guides were preparing over the weather-beaten stove. Now the magnificence and extent of the view was nothing to him. It seemed to lie outside his gaze. In spirit he was back again at the hotel at Zinal. Was Alma beginning to miss him—to think more kindly of him, now that they would not see each other for some days? Would those execrable Glovers have left by the time he returned? And would all come right again? If only it might!

But if his younger friend's thoughts were far-away down in the valley they had come up out of, Fordham's were not. That saturnine individual was, for him, in high spirits. He had got out an excellent map—in the production of such Switzerland stands in the foremost place—and with the guides was busy verifying the topographical details of the stupendous panorama lying beneath and around. The cloud which had overshadowed them during their ascent had long since vanished, and now the sky was blue and clear, and the air like an elixir of life. The only clouds were those from three pipes, for the two guides and Fordham were smoking like chimneys.

But they had been an hour on the summit, and the air, though exhilarating, was uncommonly chill. It became time to start downwards. The guides were beginning to repack the haversacks.

"Have a pull at this, Phil," said Fordham, handing him a flask. "And—I tell you what it is, man. You don't know when you're well off."

"Oh, I don't?"

"Rather not. Look at this," with a comprehensive sweep of the hand. "Think what a splendid climb we had to get up here. Think what a splendid one we are going to have to get down, better, in fact, because less of sheer fag, and then think how many poor devils there are who would give their heads to be here to-day, instead of slaving their hearts out all their lives to support some snarling, ungrateful female, and a mob of more or less dirty and wholly detestable brats."

"Candidly, my dear chap," returned Philip, "you are becoming somewhat of the nature of a bore. I seem to have heard something very like that before—not once, nor yet twice. The salutary instructions of the immortal Mr Barlow, of 'Sandford and Merton' fame, shine forth as very masterpieces of sparkling pungency when contrasted with your latter-day harangues. I want to know what the devil all this has to do with me."

"You shall! The gist of the parable is this. You are thinking all this time that Paradise lies at present in the Zinal valley in general, and very particularly in the Hôtel Durand; whereas in actual fact, so far as any semblance of that institution may be said to exist, it lies around and before you. For you are free at present, Phil, free as the air up here which is making us shiver, your freedom is as boundless as this rolling view of half a continent upon which we look down. You have the world at your feet as literally as we have it before us now."

"Go on, Mr Barlow. Pray proceed."

“I will. At present you are thinking what a Paradise every moment of life would be if coupled with the charmer down yonder. You are drawing all manner of glowing mental pictures of the bliss of a home illumined by her divine presence. All fustian, my dear fellow, all fustian! These superstitions are encouraged by the women from obvious motives. But they have no foundation in actual fact. Now what I am thinking of is this. I am thinking of you in two or three years’ time, caged up with your charmer in some shabby-genteel suburban semi-detached—for she hasn’t a shilling of her own, I believe—I am thinking of you, I say, the proud possessor of two or three unruly brats—who may or may not be kept clean—thus caged up, with a domineering, bad-tempered woman, who has parted with her illusions, in proportion as she has contributed towards populating this interesting orb. I am thinking of you toiling the day through, week in week out, at some sordid and uncongenial drudgery for a mere pittance. You can never be well off, my dear Phil, for to do you justice, you lack the essential qualities of rascality and sycophancy which are requisite to the manufacture of the ‘successful man.’ And while your scanty leisure is taken up policing a series of ever-changing and refractory domestics, or carrying on epistolary war with your landlord, in re his inevitable refusal to observe the most obvious provisions of his agreement, your much-needed slumbers will be invaded by the piercing and colicky yells of the last overfed cherub, and your night devoted to hospital duties in regard to that same. And then when you look back to—this day, for instance—I am not far out in asserting that you will catch yourself wondering whether such an unparalleled ass is even worth the sixpenny-worth of laudanum which should send him in search of the decisive change which may possibly be for the better, but can hardly be for the worse. There—that’s the other side of the orange, and now you can’t say it hasn’t been shown you.”

“That all, Fordham?”

“Nearly. But think it over, think it over, my dear chap. The gift of freedom is a grand and a glorious one. Don’t throw it away for the traditional mess of pottage—a comestible which may or may not be an excellent thing, but cannot in my humble judgment maintain its savour if subsisted on for the term of one’s natural life to the exclusion of all other articles of diet.”

“I appreciate the point of that highly finished hyperbole—at its true valuation,” returned Philip, ironically. “And, look here, Fordham, I feel it necessary to amend my former comment. A man who will undertake to deliver such an unconscionably prosy preachment, on the very apex of a high Alp, is no longer merely becoming a bore, but has become one—in fact is a bore, and that of the first magnitude.”

Chapter Twenty One.

The Falling Stone.

"Peter," said Fordham, interrupting a story over which the guides were guffawing among themselves, and which related to a certain rash tourist who had undertaken to cross the Gorner glacier alone, giving Herr Baedeker as his authority for dispensing with the services of their fraternity, and how the adventurous one being eventually missed was duly sought for, which search resulted in the discovery of him at the bottom of a small crevasse in company with a sprained ankle and a Baedeker, and how some of them in resentment of the fancied slur upon their craft had grimly suggested that, whereas Baedeker had got him into his present quandary, it was only fair that Baedeker should get him out. "Peter, how long shall we take to get down to Zermatt?"

The man thus addressed stared gravely at the sky, then down at the valley, then at the surrounding heights, then at his colleague. The latter went through precisely the same formula. Then he replied—

"If de gentleman"—with a look at Philip—"go down so well as he did come up, then we shall get there in about seven or eight hours."

"Right you are, Peter. You may put it at that," cried Phil, with alacrity. "I'll go down like a chamois, my buck. We'll be in easy time for table d'hôte." But the other did not enter into this spirit of exuberance. There was a touch of grimness in his reply, given with characteristic deliberation.

"You had better be late for de table d'hôte than not get to de table d'hôte ever again," he said.

"That's a damper, anyway," rejoined Phil.

"It's a well earned one," said Fordham. "He wants you to realise that you can no more afford to be careless going down than you could coming up. And you can't. You're a heavyish chap, Phil, and there are places where if you lose your footing we are extremely likely to be unable to hold you up. And although your return to the valley we have just left may be welcome enough, I doubt if it will be adequately so if effected in fragmentary form. So don't imagine you can afford to skip down the Rothhorn on one leg, that's all."

Peter Anderledy, the head guide, was a swarthy, thick-set fellow, black-bearded, and Italian looking—of apparently about forty, but in reality ten years younger. The other, Conrad Spinner, was about the same age but of a different build, being tall and straight,

and of the Northern type. His bronzed face was almost as dark as that of his colleague, but his hair and moustache were blonde. The countenances of both men wore the sedate almost melancholy expression common to those of their calling, but the glance of their eyes was straight and quick. Both were addicted to the unlimited consumption of tobacco—also in common with those of their craft—a consideration by the way which is difficult to reconcile with the popular notion that the soothing weed is detrimental, not to say disastrous to the nerves, for if there is one class of men which combines the most consummate coolness and courage with an unlimited supply of sheer physical endurance and quickness of resource, assuredly that class is represented by the qualified Alpine guide.

Few Alpine peaks are perpendicular, even on their most precipitous side. The Rothhorn, however, is one of these, for its eastern face, if anything, slightly overhangs, falling in a magnificent drop of ironstone precipice, a depth of about fifteen hundred feet to the glacier beneath. Its summit is in reality in two peaks, one slightly lower than the other. The way lies not over but round the lower of these, effecting what is termed in mountaineering parlance a "corner." There is excellent hold both for hand and foot, but whereas the climber at the moment of rounding this projection can neither see nor be seen by the rest of his party, and whereas, further, his body is slightly inclined outward over the dizzy height before mentioned, it follows that the novice, unless endowed with perfect steadiness of head and nerve, is apt to find the position a somewhat trying one.

Now this is just what befell Philip Orlebar. At the worst point of the projection, while hanging on, thus outwardly inclined, curiosity moved him to turn his face over his shoulder and look down. The effect of the stupendous height was disastrous. His hands, gripping the rock overhead, began to tremble. A coldness ran through his legs. He could not move. He felt that if he did so he must let go. Nor could he withdraw his gaze from that awful abyss.

"What on earth are you doing, Phil?" sung out Fordham, from behind, noticing that the rope had ceased moving.

"I'm looking down," came the reply.

"You must not look down. You must come on," called out the head guide, who was leading.

The voices broke the spell. With an effort he pulled himself together, and in a minute stood beside Peter. The others promptly followed.

“By Jove! That’s a grisly sort of place—eh, Peter?” he said. “I suppose it’s the worst of all?”

“No; it is not de vorst—but it looks de vorst,” was the slow reply. “But—you are all right. You have only to be careful—very careful.”

A slight change had been made in their position on the rope for the downward climb. Peter Anderledy, the head guide, took the lead as before. Philip as the novice, came next—the theory being that as he was more likely to make a false step than Fordham, there should be two above him to increase the chances of his safety—and indeed that of the whole party—for there are two or three places during the first hour’s descent of the Rothhorn on the Zermatt side where it is difficult to believe the rope would save anybody, so steep is the face of the rock, so slight the hold.

And now the work began in earnest. Almost immediately they got into a narrow gully—a mere indenture in the surface of the rock, going straight down for a considerable distance, and just sufficiently out of the perpendicular to enable them to scramble down it slowly and with infinite trouble—now sprawling face to the surface, now in ungainly, half-squatting attitude, knees almost on a level with the chin. There was hardly any hold as such; the climber preserving his position almost entirely by pressure against the snow and ice-encrusted sides of the shoot, much as an old-fashioned chimney sweeper in the prosecution of his trade. It was an ugly place, and in the slippery precariousness of the position with the whole height of the mountain to fall, was an extremely trying one.

“I say, Peter,” gasped Philip, as at a peremptory call from above to halt he was striving to make good his stability. “This is a devil of a bit, you know. I suppose if a fellow were to fall he wouldn’t stop till he got right down on the Durand glacier, eh?”

“Do not talk,” came the severe reply. “Take care of what you are doing. And mind de shtones.”

None too soon was the warning. Hardly were the words uttered than a large flat stone, as big as a full-sized photograph album—upon which Philip had reckoned as a secure support—gave way beneath his feet with a startling suddenness that made his blood run cold, and went crashing and bounding straight for Peter. The latter, however, had seen the catastrophe almost before it had occurred. With incredible celerity he rolled aside, and, clinging to the face of the rock like a fly on the wall, felt the air of the impromptu projectile as it shot by within a foot of him and right through what a fraction of a second before had been occupied by his body. Away it went, splitting to fragments, as in a series of leaps and bounds it disappeared from sight.

“I say, though, I’m awfully sorry,” said Philip, while Peter muttered some very bad language—secreta—and Fordham sung out a warning to him to be more careful and not to trust any stone until he had first well tested it.

At length the gully ended and was succeeded by some very pretty rock climbing. The side of the mountain here bore the aspect of being plated with huge slabs, and it was mainly upon the projections formed by what should have been the “joints” of these, together with cracks running across their surface, that the climbers were able to make their way.

“A steeple-jack’s work is a fool to this,” commented Phil, gazing at the two high above him as they descended cautiously and with cool deliberation from point to point.

With ordinary care there was no risk here. Each man securing his foothold before the others moved they descended slowly but surely. It was a delightful climb, and, indeed, no form of mountaineering is more interesting than rockwork of the kind. They arrived without accident at the point where the way lies through a gap in the high rock ridge, and sat down for a short rest as well as to refresh the inner man.

Experienced climbers prescribe the latter process for every two hours. Certain it is that such recuperation is exceedingly welcome no less often, thanks to the keen air of those high latitudes. But lack of time and the risk of catching a chill precludes anything but the briefest halt; wherefore, if the exertion immediate upon feeding resulteth not in excruciating indigestion, the subject may congratulate himself on an extra well-ordered internal economy. This poor Philip was destined to learn at the hands of that hardest of all preceptresses, experience. His normally buoyant spirits had deserted him, and as they resumed their way down the rugged rock-face of the mountain he felt altogether bad.

“This Alpineering is a fraud, Fordham,” he pronounced. “I know I’ve got a splitting headache, and feel as if there was a ball of string in my diaphragm. I guess the little grass climbs are good enough for me.”

“Look where you are going! Never mind de talking till we get down,” put in Peter Anderledy.

The peremptoriness of the rebuke brought Phil’s head back from over his shoulder with the celerity of a recruit at the word “eyes right!” Then he growled. But this expression of his dissatisfaction made upon the stolid guide not the faintest impression.

“Herr Gott!” imprecated the latter presently, with set teeth and a savage glance upward as he stopped to listen. “De shtones are falling.”

High above among the cliffs, but slightly in front of their line of march, a hollow rattle became audible. There was something weird and uncanny about the sound. No mortal hand, no mortal agency had loosened those rocks and sent them hurtling down into the depths below. It was almost as if the demons of the air were abroad.

The party was descending a long couloir or gully, which traversed obliquely the iron face of the mountain. The crannies of the rocks were filled with snow and the footing was good. Here and there a bit of sloping ice necessitated the cutting of a step or two, but, on the whole, the way was easy. Yet the guides seem to cast anxious glances upward, and ever and anon that ghostly echoing rattle was heard.

“Sunshine is a delightful thing,” quoth Fordham. “But like everything else to which that term applies it is bound to have its obverse side. I could wish just now it had been cloudier and colder.”

“Why the deuce should you wish that?” said Philip.

“Because then there wouldn’t be so many stones flying. You see, they’re frozen to the rock by a thin cementing of ice. As soon as the sun has any power that ice melts and they slide off. All these rock mountains are the very devil for falling stones. On the Matterhorn you hear them rattling all day long—”

A vehement imprecation from both guides simultaneously, interrupted them. There was a rushing sound in the air very like the “whigge” of a shell, and a shadow seemed to swoop over their heads. Looking upward they beheld a solid mass of rock of at least two tons’ weight, sailing through the air. It had shot outward from the last projecting portion of the cliff upon which it had struck, and now describing a lofty arc it whizzed directly over their position, and striking the rocks some hundred feet lower split into fragments, which went crashing and roaring down to the glacier beneath.

Fordham, contemplating this occurrence, shook his head slightly and said nothing. Philip opened his eyes wide and ejaculated, “By Jove!” The guides swore with renewed energy. Each action was characteristic.

For any such edifying notions as that the average man feels subdued and reverential in the presence of impending danger may safely be relegated to the Sunday school. In nine cases out of ten he relieves his feelings pretty much as these Alpine guides did theirs—or feels inclined to—presumably as the outcome of an unwonted excitement not unmixed

perhaps with a sort of irritation against the powers that be, which have, in a manner of speaking, “cornered” him.

“We must get on so quick as we can. De shtones are going to fall to-day like a devil,” remarked Peter. This comparison as it stood was a correct one and graphic withal. But in point of fact no thought of the fall of Lucifer entered the honest guide’s head. He was merely reproducing a time-honoured and highly colloquial simile, the unconscious variation of which made Philip laugh.

For a quarter of an hour all went well. Suddenly that ominous rattle was heard again—right overhead. The three foremost were on a small but steep slope of hard ice, nor could they move out of the steps which had been cut by the foremost guide’s axe. It follows, therefore, that the attitudes struck by them were grotesque in the extreme as they stood glaring wildly upward at a rumbling shower of stones coming down straight at them, as though the power of the human eye might at a pinch avail to deflect the dreaded volley. On it came, whizzing and ricochetting by—the three men staring at it in the most ludicrous state of helplessness, Fordham ducking violently as a small chip rebounding from the ice grazed his ear like a slug. It was but a shower of small stones—none larger than a cricket ball. But a bullet is as potent for evil as a cannon shot, as Philip was destined to learn. He was seen to pick up his right leg with a howl of pain, and then to go rather white in the face.

“Are you hurt?” said the head guide, somewhat anxiously.

“Oh, not much, I suppose,” was the rather doleful reply. “I believe my ankle’s broken, that’s all.”

Peter, without a word, turned back to help him, but he declined any aid.

“The sooner we are out of this the better,” he said. “I can hop along somehow. Hand us your flask, Fordham. That’s better!”

And he was as good as his word. Though his foot was frightfully painful he found that he could still use it, and at length they left the rock-face of the mountain and gained the high ice arête which forms one of the spurs of the latter.

It was an awkward place wherein to be incapacitated. The way lay right along the very edge of the arête, where there was not room for two to walk abreast. But Phil was very game. The pain of his bruised ankle increased with every step, but he was not going to hamper his companions by collapsing. He took another liberal pull at Fordham’s flask,

and started again manfully, trying to persuade himself that he was in reality more frightened than hurt.

But apart from this casualty the view as seen from the apex of the dizzy arête was a thing to make the very pulses bound with delight in the sheer exhilaration of living. Behind rose the stupendous cliffs of the eastern face of the Rothhorn, soaring up to its twin-peaked summit against the deep and cloudless blue. Immediately beneath, webbed and criss-crossed by innumerable cracks, lay an amphitheatre of vast glaciers flowing down from a crescent of grim and frowning cliffs culminating in the Ober-Gabelhorn, a tower of precipitous rock. Right opposite, the huge Matterhorn, a dark monolith, frowning, defiant—then a white sublimity of dazzling snow mountains, the broad hump of the Breithorn, and the two smaller ones known as Castor and Pollux—the perilous Lyskamm and the sheeny mass of the beautiful Monte Rosa. Glaciers, innumerable and vast, mighty rivers of rolling white waves, whatever way the eye should turn.

There was a sudden boom as of a heavy thunderpeal—a dull, roaring rush as of a mighty torrent. A grand avalanche was pouring down the dark perpendicular precipices which shut in the head of the Trift glacier, a cataract of powdery whiteness, which, when the glass was brought to bear, revealed hundreds of tons of frozen snow and huge ice blocks, falling into a frightful chasm at the foot of the cliff, whence arose a column of powdery spray for many minutes afterward. As this vast volume flowed down the metallic face of the dark rock, each peak and precipice around re-echoed the thunderous boom in a hundred differing reverberations.

Scarcely had this ceased than there came a sound of yodelling—cheery, melodious, distant. Far down in the centre of the white and crevassed plain, four specks, equidistant, were moving in a downward course.

“It is a caravan who has come over de Trift-joch,” pronounced Conrad Spinner. And then he and his colleagues lifting up their voices, answered the yodel, while Philip, being unskilled in that art but moved by a British and youthful desire to make a noise of some sort, lifted up his in an ear-splitting and quite unmelodious yell.

The ice arête came to an end at last and was succeeded by a long descent over loose rocks, which, piled and packed together by the hand of Nature, made a very tedious and difficult descent at the best of times. To poor Philip with his bruised ankle it became excruciating. At length he could endure it no longer and sank to the ground with an agonised groan.

“Off with your boot, and let’s appraise the damage,” said Fordham. “Yes, it’s a bad whack,” he went on, as the extent of the injury became manifest—for the whole ankle

was frightfully swollen. It had been struck on the inside, and the least touch made the sufferer wince. Both guides shook their heads gloomily as they marked the angry and inflamed aspect of the contusion, and Peter Anderledy fired off a few invocations of his Maker in terms far more forcible than reverential. Even for this there might have been found some extenuation. Besides a rough and steep descent over the loose rocks aforesaid, there yet remained a bit of cliff to be climbed down, the end of a glacier to cross, then at least half an hour down a high moraine, whose edge, sharp and knife-like, entailed single file progress, before they reached a point from which a mule or a litter might be used, and even that point was some hours distant from the village.

This, however, was accomplished at last—the descent of the cliff being avoided by a long détour. With the help of Conrad's stalwart shoulder poor Phil managed to get along with a minimum of pain. But it took them rather more than twice the ordinary time to accomplish the traject, nor did they arrive at the point whence artificial transport could be used until long after the hour when they had reckoned upon sitting safe and snug at table d'hôte in the Hôtel Mont Cervin at Zermatt.

"I say, Conrad, this is a right royal sell," said Philip, as they sat round a handful of fire which the guide had built—for Peter and Fordham had hurried on to procure a mule or a chaise-à-porteur, and could not return for some hours. "Sell isn't the word for it. We reckoned on doing the Matterhorn the day after to-morrow. I suppose there's no chance of it now."

"If you can walk as far as de Riffel in one week you can tink you are very lucky," answered the guide.

Poor Philip groaned.

"It's deuced rough," he said. "I didn't come over to Zermatt to lie up a week in a confounded hotel."

"It would be worse to lie up for ever in de churchyard," answered Conrad oracularly, as he lit his pipe.

"I suppose it would—but, I say, Conrad, how is it you fellows all talk such good English? Where the dickens do you learn it?"

"We learn it in de vinter. We make a class."

"But who teaches you? Do you get hold of an Englishman?"

“No. It is a Swiss—a Swiss who has been five years in America. But,” added the guide, naïvely, “I don’t tink his pronunciation is very good.”

Meanwhile, Fordham and Peter were making their way down the wild and desolate Trift-thal in the moonlight.

“I never did see de Rothhorn so bad for de shtones as to-day,” grumbled the latter. “Dey come down, oh, like a devil.”

“It’s unfortunate, but one consolation is that it was nobody’s fault. It was sheer ill-luck, Peter, and you or Conrad might equally well have been hit.”

“No, it is nobody’s fault,” assented Peter. “But, if anyting goes wrong with de gentleman dere are always peoples what say it is de guide’s fault. But dat is just de very ting no guide can help—de falling shtones. We get over de place as quick as we can, but we can’t run. Ach!” he concluded, with a disgusted shake of the head.

There was reason in what he said. An Alpine guide under the circumstances is in much the same position as the captain of a ship. There are casualties which can be averted neither by the skill of the one nor the seamanship of the other, nor the courage of both. Yet when such occur public opinion is equally hard on both.

It was midnight before the sufferer was safely housed. The local practitioner looked grave, very grave, when he examined the injury. He peremptorily forbade the patient to set foot to the ground until he gave him leave, and that under pain of almost certainly losing his foot altogether.

“Great events from little causes spring.” The little cause in this instance was that little stone. There was a grim literalness in Peter Anderledy’s unconscious variation of a well-worn simile when he predicted that the stones were going to fall “like a devil”—for the falling of that little stone was destined to alter the course of Philip Orlebar’s whole life. Its effect might well have been the result of satanic intervention.

Chapter Twenty Two.

A Weapon to Hand.

“Hallo, Wentworth?”

“Hallo, Fordham!”

“Hot, isn’t it?”

“Beastly hot.”

Thus characteristically did these two Britons greet each other, meeting unexpectedly on the steps of one of the hotels at Zermatt. The bell was ringing for table d’hôte luncheon, and the sojourners in that extensive caravanserai were dropping in by twos and threes; ladies—ruddy of countenance, the result of sunburn—sketch-book and alpenstock in hand; spectacled Teutons in long black coats with the inevitable opera-glass slung around them; English youths armed with butterfly net or tennis racket, and a sprinkling of the ubiquitous Anglican parson whose nondescript holiday attire, which its wearer flattered himself savoured of the real mountaineer while not entirely disguising his “cloth,” imparted to him very much the aspect of a raffish undertaker in attenuated circumstances. The usual line of guides, taciturn and melancholy, roosted upon the low wall just outside the hotel, or stood in a knot in front of the wood-carving shop opposite, their normal stolidity just awakened into a gleam of speculative interest by the appearance of a string of vehicles heaving in sight amid a cloud of dust, upon the road which leads up from St. Nicolas. For this was before the days of the railway, and Zermatt, still uncockneyfied, retained most of its pristine picturesqueness in spite of the monster hotels dominating its quaint brown chalets. And then the majestic cone of the Matterhorn, towering up from its plinth of rock and glacier.

“Are you staying in this house, Wentworth?” pursued Fordham. “I thought the ‘Monte Rosa’ was the hotel patronised by all you regular climbing fellows.”

“It is, as a rule. But I thought I’d come here for a change. Besides, when I’m not climbing I like to be among ordinary people. One gets a little sick of hearing nothing but guide-and-rope ‘shop’ talked. Where have you turned up from now?”

“Zinal. Came viâ the top of the Rothhorn. Orlebar got rather a nasty whack from a falling stone. He’ll have to lie by for a day or two.”

“Did he? By Jove! Now you mention it, I heard there had been a one-horse kind of accident yesterday. I think they said it was on the Trift-joch. But I didn’t believe it, and then, you see, I started early this morning to walk up to the Stockje hut and am only just back. Poor chap! I say, though, is he badly hit?”

“Between you and me and yonder mule, he is rather. Badly enough to knock him out of any more climbing this season. He’ll have to get all the brag he can out of the Rothhorn alone until next year, at any rate. It’s rough on him, too, as he was keen on doing a few of the bigger things.”

“Rough it is. Poor chap! I must go upstairs and see him after tiffin. But, come along, Fordham, we had better go in. You can sit by me; there are a lot of empty places around my end of the room.”

From their place at table—a remote corner—they could watch the room filling. The bulk of the people were of the order already referred to, but there were some new arrivals, mostly uninteresting—a parson or two; a thick-set Scotchman with a blowsy wife and a whole tribe of wooden-faced, flaxen-haired children; a couple of undergraduates in neckties of vivid hue, presumably their college colours; item, a pair of grim spinsters of uncertain age and tract-disseminating principles; in short, the average ruck of our fellow-countrymen abroad.

“Rather a pretty girl, that,” murmured Wentworth.

Fordham, who was critically inspecting the wine-list, looked up. Two ladies had just entered the room, and it was to the younger of these that Wentworth had referred. Both were dark, and the elder bore traces of having been at one time strikingly handsome—the younger was so. In their remarkable duplication of each other Nature had unmistakably ticketed them mother and daughter.

Upon Fordham the entry of these two produced an astonishing effect. All the colour faded from his swarthy cheek, leaving a sallow livid paleness. His lips were drawn tightly against his teeth, and his black piercing eyes, half-closed, seemed to dart forth lurid lightnings, as he watched the unconscious pair moving down the long room towards their seat. Would they discover his presence? Surely there was something magnetic in that burning glance—a something to which the objects of it could hardly remain unconscious. Yet they did.

He saw them take their places. His back was to the light. They had not seen him. But had they caught the devilish, awful, surging hate expressed in that fearful scrutiny it is doubtful whether they would have eaten their luncheon with so tranquil an appetite.

“Good-looking, isn’t she?” pursued Wentworth, too intent on his own observation to perceive the change that had come over his friend. “For the matter of that, so is the mother—if it is her mother. They might easily be sisters. What do you think, Fordham?”

“So they might,” replied the latter tranquilly, sticking up his eyeglass. He had entirely recovered his self-possession, although there lurked within his glance a snake-like glitter. “Older one needn’t be a day more than forty, and the girl half that. But I say, Wentworth, I thought you were past admiring that sort of cattle.”

“Well, I am in a general way. But that’s a splendid-looking girl. Even you must admit that.”

If a slight shrug of the shoulders amounted to admission, Wentworth was welcome to it. The object of his eulogy had all the dazzling “points” of a perfect brunette. Hair and eyelashes dark as night—and abundance of both—large clear eyes, and regular, white teeth which gleamed every now and then in a bewitching smile as their owner responded to some remark on the part of her right-hand neighbour with whom she had entered into conversation. While she was in full view of the two men her mother was not, being screened by the ample dimensions and exuberant cap strings of a portly British matron opposite.

The confused clatter and buzz of a babel of tongues at length began to suffer abatement, then gave way to the rasping pandemonium of chairs pushed back by the dozen along the polished wooden floor. Fordham, watching his opportunity, left the room under cover of two large groups of people already flitting from his neighbourhood. As he did so, a sidelong glance towards the two new arrivals satisfied him that his identity was still unperceived by them, which, for reasons of his own, he particularly desired. Having thus effected his retreat undiscovered, he paused and took up his position in the passage within a few yards of the dining-room door as if awaiting the exit of somebody.

The passage, unlighted by windows, was in shade—in a grateful and refreshing gloom, deepened and intensified by the glare of the midday sunshine in the room beyond. As he thus stood, his back to the wall, that expression of deadly vindictive hatred returned to his face. Standing back in the semi-gloom, he resembled some lurking beast of prey in the diabolical passions impacted upon his countenance.

“What an exceedingly disagreeable-looking man,” had remarked more than one of the passers by who had noted this expression. “Whoever he is waiting for will have an

unpleasant surprise, anyhow." This was true, but not in the superficial and commonplace sense in which it was enunciated.

Nearly everybody had left the room but those two. Would they sit there all day? Ah! Now!

They were advancing up the room, the glowing and graceful beauty of the girl in striking contrast to the maturer and time-worn charms of the matron, who was still wonderfully handsome. It was a pleasing picture to look upon.

But the effect upon him now standing there was assuredly far from a pleasing one. The expression of his countenance had become positively devilish. The two were in the doorway now—the girl making some light laughing remark to her mother.

But just then the latter looked up—looked up full into Fordham's face, into the burning, sunken eyes glowering in the shadow, and the effect was startling. A look of the most awful terror came over her face, and she put up her hands wildly as if to ward off some appalling object. Then with a quick, gasping shriek, she fell heavily to the floor in a dead faint.

The shriek was echoed by another, as the girl flung herself wildly down beside her mother, adjuring the latter by every endearing name. But the poor woman lay in a ghastly and livid unconsciousness that was more like death.

The lounging, chatting groups—mostly ladies—which had been scattered about the hall, startled by the shrieking, came crowding up in dubious, half-frightened fashion. Waiters came pouring out of the dining-room door. To the head of these Fordham spoke.

"Is there a doctor staying in the house, Alphonse? The lady seems to be rather unwell. And—I say, Alphonse," he added, "is Mr Wentworth still in the dining-room? I've been waiting for him ever so long."

"Here I am, Fordham," answered a voice behind him. "Why, man, I've been out for at least ten minutes. But what's the row?"

Meanwhile the sufferer was being cared for by several of her own sex. As it happened, too, there was an English doctor staying in the house, who now appeared on the scene.

"Stand back, please," he ordered, authoritatively. "She'll soon come round. But give her some air at any rate. What caused it?" he added to the sobbing, frightened girl. "She has had a shock of some sort."

“She couldn’t have,” was the answer. “She—she—screamed and fell down. There was n-n-nothing to startle her—in fact, there was a strange gentleman standing there as if waiting for somebody. But he was a perfect stranger.”

All this Fordham—who had drawn out of the crowd and was out of sight, but not of hearing—caught. The doctor made no direct reply to the statement, though on the point of the utter unfamiliarity of the stranger’s appearance it is highly probable that he formed his own opinion.

“Let’s go and look at the visitors’ book,” suggested Wentworth. “I want to see if there’s any one I know.”

They strolled into the bureau and the book was produced. While Wentworth ran his eye attentively down the list of names, Fordham, standing behind him, hardly seemed to look at it. Anyhow, he evinced no interest whatever in the identity of anybody. But in reality the fact was the other way.

“The same name,” he said to himself. “The same name! That simplifies matters all round. Now I see daylight. At last—at last!”

Half an hour later Fordham strolled round to the village post-office and mailed a batch of letters. This was not in itself an extraordinary circumstance. But in the midst of that batch was one addressed to ‘Mrs Daventer,’ and he knew it would be delivered that same afternoon.

“What sort of a crowd at lunch, Fordham?” said Philip, as the door of his room opened to admit that worthy. “Any one new? Hullo, Wentworth! Where have you dropped from?”

“Oh, I’ve been around here about a week. But I say, Orlebar, it’s rather hard lines getting yourself knocked out of time this way.”

“Hard lines isn’t the word for it. And—what do you think? That confounded ass of a doctor says I sha’n’t be able to do any climbing this season. But he’s only a Swiss,” he added, with the youthful John Bull’s lordly contempt for talent or attainments encased in other than an Anglo-Saxon skull.

“You may depend upon it he knows his business,” responded Wentworth. “But you do as he tells you and keep your hoof up, old man, or you may be pinned up in this lively chamber for a month.”

“I suppose you’ve been doing some big climbs?” said Philip, wistfully.

“Not yet. Been taking it easy. I started to do the Deut Blanche the day after I came here, but the weather worked up bad and we had to turn back. I say, Orlebar, you’d better look sharp and get right. There was a deuced pretty girl at table d’hôte. Her mother fainted in the passage directly after, and there was a devil of an uproar. I believe Fordham made faces at her and scared her into a fit. He was the only person there at the time—”

“Ha! ha!” laughed Philip. “Scowled at her ‘like a devil,’ as Peter would say. Eh, Fordham?”

But the latter, who was lighting a cigar, made no reply.

“By the way, Orlebar,” said Wentworth. “Seen anything more of that girl you were so gone on at Les Avants, Miss—Miss—”

The speaker broke off with a start that was comical, for Fordham, while endeavouring to convey a mild and warning kick unseen of the third party—a thing which nobody ever succeeded in doing yet, and in all probability never will—had brought his hoof in contact with a corn, imparting to poor Wentworth the sensation as of a red-hot needle suddenly driven into his toe. In a measure it served him right, for his blundering had touched poor Philip on a very sore place. Lying there all the morning—with the prospect of a good many mornings and afternoons too, destined to be similarly spent—the poor fellow had found ample time for thought.

“What a chap you are, Wentworth!” he retorted, irritably. “Here is a poor devil tied by the leg in an infernal room for Heaven knows how long, and you can find nothing better to liven him up with than a lot of feeble and second-hand chaff. Let’s have something a little more amusing. Tell us some mountaineering lies for instance.”

And Wentworth spent the best part of the afternoon telling him some.

Chapter Twenty Three.

Forging the Link.

A pile of rocks overgrown with stunted rhododendron bushes and shaggy, weather-beaten pines, also stunted. Among these a foaming mountain torrent cleft its way, dashing through the deep, narrow chasm which walled it in some fifty feet below. A seldom-frequented path wound around the base of the rocks, passing over a crazy wooden bridge.

On the morning subsequent to the events just detailed Richard Fordham sat among the rocks aforesaid, smoking a cigar. He had lighted it on first arriving at this sequestered spot, and now the glowing end was almost burning his fingers. This showed that he had been waiting there for some time—half an hour at least.

Waiting? That was just what he was doing. But there was no impatience attendant on the process. His gaze had scarcely wandered from the stretch of open meadowland lying between his position and the brown roofs of Zermatt nearly a mile away—yet in it there was no concern, no anxiety.

An object was approaching along the path—a grey sunshade. Beneath this was a human figure—a female figure. Watching its approach, the expression of his countenance underwent a change; but in it there was still no impatience. The expression of that dark, saturnine countenance was one of exultant ferocity, such as might animate that of the concealed leopard as it watches the unsuspecting antelope advance step by step within easy springing distance of its lurking-place.

The new arrival continued to advance slowly until she had reached the rickety wooden bridge. There she paused and looked around as though puzzled.

At the sound of a cough above she started and changed colour, then catching sight of another path, began to ascend to where he stood. This was a platform of rock on the edge of the chasm. It was shut in by the trees in such fashion that any one standing there would be scarcely discernible from without, while commanding the approaches from the quarter whence any one would be in the least likely to advance.

The new-comer was an extremely well-preserved woman of middle age. She was slightly above the medium height, and her dark, flashing eyes and strongly marked brows gave her an imperious look which it needed not the firm jaw and erect figure to confirm. But the expression stamped upon her pale features at that moment was not that of power, rather it was one of apprehension—of undisguisable dread, dashed with strong

abhorrence. As she stood there, panting with the exertion of the ascent, or agitation, or both, a chance observer might have discovered in her countenance a curious likeness to that of Fordham himself.

The latter made no gesture, uttered no word of greeting. The evil expression in his face was qualified by a thin, cold sneer. Thus they confronted each other—the one pale, apprehensive, yet with strong aversion and defiance in her eyes; the other self-possessed, thoroughly conscious of power, and returning hate for hate in fullest measure.

"Well?" broke from her at last, to the accompaniment of a half-checked stamp of the foot.

"Well?"

"What have you got to say to me?" she said curtly; adding, in a repressed volcano-storm of wrath and bitterness. "I have obeyed orders, you see."

"You could not have done otherwise. Even you have the sense thoroughly to realise that."

"But I didn't know you were here," she went on; "not yet, anyhow. When I saw you I got something of a shock, for my system is not what it was. You quite took me by surprise."

"I believe you—for once. Finished actress as you are, even you could hardly have counterfeited the tragic effect produced by my unexpected appearance yesterday. The devil himself could hardly have scared you more."

"Of the two it is the devil himself that I should have preferred to see."

"Undoubtedly. But the malevolent powers commonly attributed to that functionary are nothing to those I shall bring to bear on you if you neglect to carry out my instructions implicitly. On you and yours, I should have said."

Was it there that the secret of his power lay? An involuntary spasm passed through her frame as if she had received a stab.

"Perhaps, then, you will oblige me by communicating them," she hastened to reply. "For it happens I have made arrangements to leave here this very day—or to-morrow at latest."

“Those arrangements you will have the trouble of cancelling, then.”

“Indeed! And may I ask why?”

“Certainly. Your appearance here yesterday is going to supply the weapon I have been working to forge for years. Nothing is now wanting to complete the chain. Yours is the hand that shall do so. To that end you will remain here—as long as I require your presence.”

“That is a very odd turn for events to take—that you should require my presence,” she said, with a bitter sneer.

“Very. In fact, the irony of the situation is unique. And yet there are people who say there is no such thing as poetic justice.”

“But now, suppose you begin by giving one some idea as to the nature of this wonderful plan of yours. I take for granted it is for nobody’s good, anyhow.”

“You are wrong there. It will tend most distinctly to the good of two people. And—calm your amazement—one of those people is yourself.”

“Your warning is wholly needed. The idea that any action of yours could tend to my advantage is sufficient to justify the wildest amazement, were there room for any other emotion than complete incredulity,” she answered, with a scornful smile.

“You shall see directly. But, first of all, let me congratulate you on the extremely fascinating appearance of—your daughter. It really does you the greatest credit—”

“We will leave her out of the question, if you please,” she interrupted, speaking quickly.

“But I don’t please—and that for the best possible reason. I said just now that the scheme in which I require your aid will tend to the advantage of two persons, one of them being yourself. The other is—your daughter.”

“Then you will certainly not obtain my aid. In anything that tends to involve my child in co-operation—however indirect—with yourself, I flatly refuse to have any hand.”

The sardonic smile deepened around Fordham’s mouth. He opened his cigar-case, took out a fresh cigar, and lighted it with the greatest deliberation.

“It is always a pity to commit oneself to a rash statement,” he said. “The determination just expressed you will directly see reason to reconsider—certainly before you leave this delightful spot.”

“Never!”

“Oh, but you will! You are, to do you justice, far too much a woman of the world—life has been far too comfortable, too prosperous for you—for you both—during, we’ll say, the last twenty years, for you to face the alternative now.”

“Has it? I will risk anything—face any alternative.”

“Even that of starvation?”

“Even that. But it will not come to that. Poverty it may be—but—we can work—we can live somehow.”

“Ha! ha! ha! Can you? Only try it. I see I was giving you undue credit just now when I defined you as a woman of the world. Those who talk airily of poverty are always the ones who have spent life in luxury. Think of it in all its aspects—of being on the very verge of starvation, of the fireless grate, and weeks of north-east wind and snowstorm, of the foul, insanitary den—kennel rather—covered by the same roof as that which shelters the most debased two-legged animals which ever bore semblance to the stamp of humanity. Think of the sights and sounds, the mad-drunk ruffians, and the fighting, clawing, screaming, harpies; the ‘language of the people,’ and nights made hideous with the yells of some one being murdered. This is what poverty is going to mean in your case. This is what you and your—child will come to. Stay a moment. You think I am exaggerating? You think, no doubt, you have friends who will help you—who will never see you come to this? But don’t flatter yourself. I will prevent them from helping you. I will cause them to spurn you from their doors—both of you. In fact, I will hunt you down into utter and complete ruin—both of you. Both of you—mark it well! Why do I not do so in any case? I don’t know. But oppose me in the slightest particular—neglect in the minutest detail the scheme I am going to set you to carry out—and this—and more than all this shall come upon you—shall come upon you both—as sure as I am a living man.”

Her face was as white as a sheet, and in her flashing eyes there was the look of a tigress whose whelps are menaced, as she advanced a step nearer to him, her breast heaving violently.

“Dare you boast that you are a living man?” she panted, clenching and unclenching her hands. “Are you not afraid I shall kill you where you stand? I shall some day—I know it!”

“Do—if you can. And, by the way, this would have been an excellent opportunity. In the first place, you would be entirely free from interruption, for I have already scouted the whole of this covert to ensure the absence of the regulation dauber intent on evolving the pictorial presentment of a dissipated-looking sugar-loaf, under the impression that he or she is sketching the Matterhorn. In the next, this country has practically abolished the death penalty, so that you would get a dozen years at most, and your child would have the honour of being the daughter of a convict as well as—But drop these melodramatics, and return to sound sense. Heavens, woman! I wonder you dare talk to me like this.” And as his memory leaped back his deep voice took the snarling rumble of an enraged wild beast.

Man and Nature are ever offering the most vivid and jarring contrasts. The brown roofs of the village, dominated by the white cubes of the great hotels, lay nestling amid the green meadows, against a background of stately mountains. The hoarse rush of the torrent, pent up in the narrow fissure at their feet, joined with the deeper roar of the churning Visp, gathering hourly in volume as the midday sun told in power upon its feeder, the great Gorner glacier, whose sheeny séracs reared their dazzling battlements in a blue and white line above the vernal pastures at the head of the valley, while the stately monolith of the giant Matterhorn towered aloft into the vivid blue of the cloudless heavens. Yet there, amid the sequestered solitude of the jagged pines, stood these two, confronting each other with deadly rage in their hearts, with bitterest hate and defiance flashing from their set faces and burning eyes—a very hell of evil passions surging alike in both.

“Now take your choice,” he went on. “Carry out my plan as I am about to lay it before you, and you will benefit yourself in doing so. Refuse, or mar it in the slightest detail, either by bungling or of set design, and I will utterly crush you both, beginning from this day. You know me.”

She made no answer. She never removed her eyes from his, and her breath came in quick, hard gasps. Her aspect was that of some dangerous animal cornered, driven to bay. Barely a couple of yards behind him was the brink of the narrow fissure by which the churning torrent cleft its way through the heart of the rocks. The sneering, mocking smile which came into his face as he read her thoughts was devilish in its maddening provocation.

“No go,” he said. “You couldn’t do it. I am much too firm on my pins. You would be extremely likely to go over yourself, and then what would become of Laura, left to my tender mercies?”

“You fiend! I think Satan himself must be a god compared with you.”

“Am I to take that as a compliment? Well, now to business. Sit down.”

“Thank you. I prefer to stand.”

“I don’t,” seating himself upon a boulder and puffing deliberately at his cigar. “Please yourself, however. And now kindly give me your best attention.”

Then for the next twenty minutes he did all the talking, though every now and then an ejaculation of anger, disgust, or dissidence would escape her. This, however, affected him not in the slightest degree. The cold, cutting, sarcastic tones flowed evenly on, laying down the details of what was to her a strange and startling plan. Not until he had unfolded it in all its bearings did he pause, as though to invite comment.

But by that time it was noticeable that the horror and decisiveness in her refusal to co-operate with which the woman had first received his suggestion had undergone a very marked abatement. She could even bring herself to discuss the scheme in some of its details.

“Now,” he concluded—“now you see I am practically proposing to be Laura’s greatest benefactor; yours, too, in a secondary degree, for the event will render you, to a large extent, free from my bondage.”

“That indeed would be to benefit me,” she answered, with a return of the old, rancorous aversion. “But even now the motive you have given is not above suspicion. It is too inadequate.”

“Not so. If you look at it all round you will perceive it is complete. I am of a revengeful disposition, and now, after half a lifetime, I see my opportunity for taking a most sweeping revenge. But I like my retribution to be as original as it is far-reaching. This one is. In fact, it is unique.”

How unique it was even she could not at the moment fathom. But she was destined to learn it later, in all its grim and undreamed-of horror.

“I hope I may be allowed to change my mind,” said Mrs Daventer, sweetly, as she entered the bureau of the hotel that afternoon. “I wish to counter-order the arrangements I made for leaving to-morrow. It can be managed, I hope?”

“I will see immediately, madame,” said the civil employé, looking up from the pile of letters he was sorting, and which had just come in. “I tink de mules are already ordered. One moment—I will just inquire.”

He went out, leaving Mrs Daventer alone in the bureau. She turned over some of the letters. Among the uppermost in the half-sorted pile was one addressed “Philip Orlebar, Esq.” The handwriting was rather large and bold, but distinctly feminine, and the envelope bore the Zinal postmark. At sight of this Mrs Daventer’s pulses quickened and her eyes dilated. Then she heard the employé’s steps returning.

“It will be all right, madame,” he said. “Another party is going down who will be very glad of de mules.”

She thanked him, entered into a few pleasant commonplaces as to the attractions of the locality, the number of people abroad that year, the fineness of the season, and so forth, and expressing a little disappointment at the man’s reply that the pile of letters just delivered contained none for her or her daughter, she went out.

Philip Orlebar received several letters that afternoon, but they did not comprise one bearing the Zinal postmark, which circumstance, however, conveyed no disappointment, inasmuch as he had never expected they would.

Chapter Twenty Four.

Sir Francis Orlebar.

Claxby Court, Sir Francis Orlebar's seat, was a snug country box, rather modern in architecture and unpretentious of aspect. A long, winding carriage-drive led up to the front portico, entering which you found yourself in a spacious central hall, lit from above by a skylight. The effect of this hall, with its carved furniture and quaint oak cabinets, its walls covered with weapons and trophies of many lands, was extremely good. A gallery ran round it above, and the dining and drawing-room, morning-room and library, opened out from it on the ground-floor.

The stabling and gardens were of proportionately modest dimensions. The house stood in a park of about fifty acres, and, being on a slight eminence, commanded a charming view of field and woodland stretching away to a line of green downs to the southward. The estate consisted of about three thousand acres, but it was not all good land, and there was always a farm or two lying unlet. The former possessor had been a careful man, but although times were better in his day, he had found it all he could do to steer clear of serious embarrassment. The present one found it hardly less difficult, but he had two things in his favour. He was a man of simple and inexpensive tastes, and, with the exception of one son, he was childless. His liability was, therefore, a strictly limited one.

Sir Francis Orlebar stood in his library window, thinking. It was a bright summer morning—bright and cheerful enough to have exercised a corresponding effect upon the spirits. Yet in this instance it did not seem to.

He was a slight, well-proportioned man of medium height, but his slight build and erect carriage made him seem taller than he really was. There was a look of almost ultra-refinement in his face, and he was still strikingly handsome. His hair and moustache were grey, but his eyes looked almost young. Not in their light-hearted expression, however, for there was a tinge of melancholy never wholly absent from them, but in their wonderful penetrating clearness. It was a most contradictory face, and withal, to the student of physiognomy, a most provoking one, for as a set-off to the high forehead and straight, clear eyes there was a shade of weakness, of over-sensitiveness in the set of the lower jaw. But it was the face of a many-generation-descended gentleman.

As we have said, there was nothing in this bright, mellow summer morning to conduce to depression. Yet the cloud upon the thinker's face deepened.

It would be safe to hazard a conjecture that the cause of his melancholy was purely subjective. His was just the temperament which delights in retrospect, which is given to tormenting its owner with speculative musings upon what might have been—to raising the ghosts of dead and buried events.

He looked back upon his life and derived no pleasure from the process. With his opportunities—always with the best intentions—what a poor affair he seemed to have made of it! Better indeed for him had those intentions been less free from alloy, since nothing which borders on perfection has the slightest chance in this world of snares, and pitfalls, and rank growths. Best intentions, indeed, had been his undoing all along the line. His own inclinations were rather against the profession of arms, but he had sacrificed them and accepted a commission, in accordance with his father's strongly expressed wish. He had married his first wife from motives of chivalry rather than affection—out of pity for the life of toil and grinding poverty otherwise mapped out for her. Then had followed disillusion, unappreciativeness, ingratitude, misery, till her early death freed him from the ill-assorted and blighting tie. Caught at the rebound, his too soft heart and aesthetic nature had led him into an intrigue which proved disastrous to all concerned—but, there, he did not care to dwell upon that. Again, in a fit of disgust and sensitiveness, brought about by the éclat and scandal, he had sold out—always with the best intentions—where another would simply have shown a bold front until the nine days' wonder had abated, and was left early in life without a profession. He had embarked in literature, always of a delicate, not to say dilettante nature; had dabbled in art, and a little in a science or two, but had never got his head above the level of the swaying, striving, pushing—shall we say cringing?—multitude of heads, all fighting for that proud and lucrative pre-eminence. But he had always the interests and occupations of a country gentleman to fall back upon, and perhaps, on the whole, these suited him as well as anything else. And then, after about twenty years wherein to reflect on the scant advantages which he had reaped from his former matrimonial venture, he had suffered himself to be again bound with the iron chain, and his second partner—as is curiously enough not unfrequently the case under the circumstances, presumably through some ironical freak of Nature which decrees that when a man of an age and experience to know better does make a fool of himself he shall do it thoroughly—possessed neither attractions, nor wealth, nor suitability of temperament to recommend her. And having arrived at this stage of his retrospection, poor Sir Francis could not but own to himself—we fear, not for the first time—that in taking this step to counteract the growing loneliness of advancing age he had performed the metaphorical and saltatory feat popularly known as "jumping out of the frying-pan into the fire."

But there was one bright influence shining in upon the shaded events of his anything but cheerful introspection, and its name was Philip. The baronet's heart glowed with pride at the thought of his fine, open-hearted, handsome son, upon whom he lavished an

almost feminine affection. Here again came in that fatal motor, “best intentions.” Better, perchance, had a little more steel and a little less velvet gloved the hand which had had the bringing up of that sunny-natured youth. But Sir Francis was the last person to whom this was likely to occur, and now, as he thought that the time for his idolised son’s return could not be very far distant, there stole over his features an unconscious smile of pleasurable anticipation.

Immersed in such congenial musing, he hardly heard the subdued knock at the door, the almost noiseless footsteps of the well-trained butler. The latter bore some letters on a salver.

“Put them on the table, Karslake,” said the baronet, unwilling to be disturbed in his pleasant reverie.

“Beg pardon, Sir Francis,” said the man, who was of long standing and privileged—“beg pardon, Sir Francis, but I think one of ’em’s from Mr Philip.”

The change in the baronet’s demeanour was striking.

“Eh—what?” he cried, wheeling round and making what almost amounted to a snatch at the letters. Then, having pushed the others contemptuously aside, he resumed his position in the window, hurriedly tearing open the envelope.

The butler meanwhile was busying himself about the room, putting things tidy that had got out of their places or were otherwise disarranged. A quick gasp of dismay which escaped his master caused him to pause in his occupation.

“Karslake,” said the latter, in explanation, for the old butler was, as we said, privileged, having been in the household almost since Philip’s birth, “you will be sorry to hear that Mr Philip has met with an accident—climbing those infernal mountains,” he added, more to himself than the servant.

“Not serious, I trust, Sir Francis?” said the latter, in real anxiety, for Philip was a prime favourite in the Claxby household, save with one, and that not the least important member of it.

“No, thank God! He got hit by a falling stone, and can’t put his foot to the ground. Confined to his room, he says.”

“I hope he’ll be properly taken care of in them foreign parts, Sir Francis,” said Karslake, shaking his head in John Bull-like scepticism as to any such possibility.

“Oh, yes. There’s an English doctor attending him as well as the foreign one. Thank Heaven it’s no worse. Is her ladyship down yet? But never mind—I’ll find her anyhow,” he added to himself, going to the door. And as he did so it was noticeable that he walked with a slight limp.

Lady Orlebar was up but not down, which apparently paradoxical definition maybe taken to mean that, arrayed in a dressing-gown, she reposed comfortably in a big armchair by her bedroom window. Her occupation was of a twofold character, in that she was assimilating coffee and reading Truth.

In externals she was a large well-built woman of middle age, handsome after a coarse, rubicund fashion, though a purplish hue which had succeeded in her cheeks the roseate flush of youth, would almost excuse the severe verdict of that hypercritic who should define her charms as somewhat “blowsy.” Her temper could not even be described as “uncertain,” for there was no element of uncertainty about it, as poor Sir Francis had already realised, to his sorrow. Her disposition was domineering and exacting to the last degree, and she would do nothing for herself that she could get anybody else to do for her—presumably to make up, if somewhat late in the day, for half a lifetime spent in perforce doing everything for herself. From such a one as this it was hardly likely Sir Francis would meet with much sympathy in the flurry and anxiety into which the news of his son’s accident had thrown him.

“Mercy on us! Is that all?” was her comment as soon as he had given her particulars. “Here you come bursting in upon me regardless of my poor nerves, and I in such pain all night, as I always am. You come rushing in upon me, I say, as if the house was on fire.”

The fact being that Lady Orlebar was as strong as a horse. The only pain she ever suffered from was of that nature, which a daily hour’s walk, combined with a little discrimination at table, would have conjured away like magic. But it was a useful affectation to assume that life was a perpetual martyrdom—a highly efficient buttress to her ascendency.

“And all about what?” she went on. “Merely to tell me that an idle, good-for-nothing boy, who ought to be hard at work earning his living instead of skylarking about the world amusing himself, has sprained his ankle. Really, Francis, I wonder the absurdity of it doesn’t strike even you!”

“Well it’s a pity I said anything about it, I admit,” he answered coldly. “Perhaps I shouldn’t have—but—how would you like a trip abroad, Alicia?”

“What, at this time of year, when you have to sit five a side in a railway compartment, and to make one of a clamouring, struggling rabble, beseeching the hotel-keepers to allow you even a garret at a charge that is rather more than would be required to keep a yacht? No, thank you, not for me.”

“Well, I don’t mind a little of that sort of thing, so I think I shall take a run over myself.”

“Over where—may I ask?”

“Over to Zermatt. I should like to be sure the boy is getting proper care—efficient attendance. An injury of that sort, though insignificant in itself, may become serious if not properly taken care of at the time. And Philip is so reckless.”

The colour deepened in Lady Orlebar’s highly coloured face, and the sneer upon her lips was not pleasant to look upon.

“Did I hear you aright, Sir Francis? It cannot be possible that I understood you to say you purposed to leave me alone here—to leave me all alone in my wretched state of health—while you go rushing off to the Continent to look after this boy, who is surely old enough to take care of himself, and who will probably laugh over you and your fussiness with his friends for your pains.”

“Whatever may be your opinion of Philip, you can at least credit him with being a gentleman,” was the icy reply to this rally.

But ice thrown into a boiling copper produces a mighty hissing, a prodigious letting off of steam. And such was the effect entailed upon the lady by this rejoinder. Of indifferent birth herself she imagined the reply to contain a gird at that circumstance, and rushed into the battle—horse, foot, and artillery.

“Pah! An idle, good-for-nothing scamp is what I credit him with being,” she retorted furiously. “A fellow who allows his parents to pinch and starve themselves in order that he may revel in the luxury of idleness. And, I tell you what it is, Francis, I won’t be neglected in any such fashion! I won’t be left alone here! No, that is a thing I will not stand! Isn’t it enough that I am ground down and forced to live on a mere pittance because you choose to spoil your son? Is that not enough, I say? And now you propose to go away and leave me alone for an indefinite time. But you will find I am not to be so easily shelved. I have my rights, and I know thoroughly well how to look after them. And look after them I shall—rest assured of that! Go—go by all means! But the consequences be upon your own head.”

Of attempting to reason with her in this mood, or indeed in any mood, Sir Francis had long since learned the futility. Indeed, at that moment he felt little inclination to attempt anything of the kind. Apart from the coarseness of her temper, which revolted his more refined instincts, her venomous abuse of his son aroused in him the bitterest resentment. He was no match for an adversary of this fibre, for his refined and sensitive nature shrank with loathing and horror from violent scenes. So now he adopted the wise, if somewhat ignominious, course of beating a retreat. He simply walked out of the room.

This was not precisely what his wife desired. Like all women of her kind, and a good many not of her kind, she dearly loved a battle, and the sort of battle she loved most was that wherein victory was assured. By fleeing at the sound of the first gun the enemy had effected a retreat which was three parts of a victory. She returned to the perusal of Truth—an extra pungent number—with an angry frown, yet she could not quite reconcentrate her mind upon the spicy contents of the journal. The slave had shown signs of rebellion. He must be made to feel that rebellion was not going to answer.

Poor woman! Her grievances were very great—very real—were they not? She had brought her husband neither wealth, looks, nor connections when she had condescended to take possession of him and his position and title, yet her convenience was ever to be uppermost, her word law. She claimed the right to control his every movement. She had, we say, brought him not a shilling, yet to rule his means and expenditure was of course her indubitable right. As, for instance, that he should persist in making an allowance to his own son, instead of turning that fortunate youth penniless out of doors and pouring out the cash thus saved at her feet, was an act of flagrant and shameful ill-treatment of her that cried aloud to Heaven for vengeance. But whether Heaven listened, and looked upon it in the same light or not, certain it was that it constituted the sum and crown of all her grievances, and they were not few.

That a man of Sir Francis Orlebar's temperament should ever have taken such a woman to wife—rather, we ought to say, should ever have suffered himself to be taken possession of by her—was marvellous, would have been incredible but that we know the same sort of thing happens every day. And having once succumbed he was bound hand and foot. No power on earth could save him. A man more coarse fibred would have held his own, even at the cost of a diurnal battle royal. One less sensitive would have cut the knot of the difficulty by the simple expedient of undertaking a tour round the world, or any other method of separation which should commend itself to him. Or one of slippery principle would have laid himself out to effect an emancipation in the method most approved of by the lawyers and by newspaper editors in want of acceptable "copy." But to Sir Francis each and all of these courses were equally repugnant—the latter, indeed,

not to be thought of. His bondage was complete. He was a slave to that most tyrannical of despots—a thoroughly selfish, domineering, coarse-natured woman.

With an instinctive idea of placing it beyond his wife's power to renew the last encounter he had taken himself out of the house. As he strolled through the park the limp in his left leg became more pronounced, as curiously enough it invariably did whenever he was vexed or agitated, and now he was both.

But by that evening the resolution he had formed to proceed to his son's bedside was considerably shaken. He had telegraphed, and the replies had been in every way satisfactory. Perhaps his presence there would be unnecessary after all. This might or might not have been the sensible way of looking at it. But continual dropping wears away stones, which for present purposes may be taken to mean that the tongue of a violent woman is a pretty effective weapon against the strongest resolution formed by an irresolute nature. There had been another battle royal, and the baronet had retreated under cover of the satisfactory replies to his telegrams. It was better to avoid any more violent scenes, and accordingly he had succumbed—had yielded for the sake of peace—that is to say, "with the very best intentions."

But the violent tongue of his stepmother, coupled with his father's sensitive horror of the same, was destined to work such woe in poor Philip's eventual fate as even that vindictive matron little dreamed. Strange are the trivialities that combine together for stupendous results. Had Sir Francis adhered to his first and laudable resolve what widespread ruin might have been averted. But he did not. He abandoned it for the sake of peace, of course with the best intentions.

Chapter Twenty Five.

Taken at the Rebound.

When Philip at length managed to leave his room and hobble downstairs with the aid of a stick and one of the hotel porters he realised to the full that it was high time he did.

He realised further that all thoughts of mountain climbing, for this season at any rate, must be abandoned. Not that he cared about that, however; for after more than a week of confinement to his room, and that in the loveliest of summer weather, all inclination towards the reaping of further mountaineering laurels seemed to have left him. His main ambition now was to get well as soon as possible and move away to fresh scenes. The lovely aspect of mountain and glacier shining in the golden summer sun was now as gall to him, intertwined as it was with recollections of Eden before his wholly unexpected and crushing expulsion therefrom. The bright laughter and cheerful voices of parties setting forth or returning—on sightseeing bent—grated irritably on his nerves, for it brought back to him the time so recent, but now divided by such an impassable gulf, when he himself was among the cheeriest of the cheery. So now as he sat in his comfortable cane chair—his injured foot propped up on another—in a sunny spot outside the hotel, his thoughts were very bitter.

Needless to say they ran upon the subject which had afforded him ample food for reflection during these long days of his irksome and enforced stagnation. To the first blank and heart-wrung sense of his loss had succeeded by degrees a feeling of angry resentment. Alma had meted out to him very harsh measure. She had allowed him no opportunity of explanation, and surely he was entitled to that amount of consideration, not to say fair play. But no. She had condemned him unheard. After all Fordham was right. The less one had to do with the other sex the better. It was all alike. And a very unwonted sneer clouded the beauty of the ordinarily bright and sunny face.

This, no doubt, was very good reasoning—would have been had the reasoner but numbered a dozen or so more years of life. In that case it would doubtlessly have afforded him abundant consolation. As things were, however, he was fain to own to himself that it afforded him very little indeed. However he might pretend to himself that Alma was not worth wrecking his life over, the poor fellow knew perfectly well that were she to appear at that moment before him with but one kind word on her lips, all his rankling resentment and cynical communings would be scattered to the winds. Those wretched Glovers—underbred, shop-keeping adventurers as they were—to come there wrecking his life by their infernal malice! And then as in a mental flash he compared the two girls, the pendulum swung back again, and he reflected that however harsh and peremptory had been Alma's way of looking at things, he had got no more than he had

deserved. But this idea, while it brushed aside the flimsy attempts he had been making to harden his heart towards her, left him rather more unhappy than before.

"Well, Mr Orlebar, I am glad to see you down at last," said a very pleasing feminine voice, whose owner suddenly appeared round an angle of the house.

"You're awfully good, Mrs Daventer," he replied. "But if you're only half as glad to see me down as I am to be down, why then you're—you're—er—still more good."

"It must be delightful to feel yourself out of doors again, after being shut up all that time," she went on. "Still, it won't do to hurry matters. You must make up your mind to have a little patience."

"Just what I'm doing. Job isn't in it with me for that quality."

She laughed—and a very attractive laugh it was. So Phil thought, and he reckoned himself a judge. "A devilish nice woman, and a devilish nice-looking one," had been his verdict to Fordham, and he saw no reason to retract any part of it now.

"I shouldn't give you credit for much of the quality at any rate," she said. "You seem far too impulsive. For instance, just now you were looking anything but philosophical. However, it is slow work being a prisoner, and a lonely prisoner too. What has become of your friend?"

"Who? Fordham? Oh, he's away for a few days. He and Wentworth have gone over to Chamounix by the glacier route. I miss the chap no end. I believe he'd have put it off if I had wanted him to, but, as it is, I've been feeling a selfish dog keeping him in the best part of the day yarning to me, when he might have been having a high old time on his own account. I tell you what it is, Mrs Daventer, he's a rare good chap is Fordham."

This was amusing—rich, in fact. She did not even turn away her head to conceal a bitter curl of the lips, for she flattered herself she was past showing the faintest sign of feeling. But a ruling passion is difficult to conceal entirely, especially when it consists of a surging, deadly hatred.

"Is he?" she said vacantly.

"Rather. I see you don't believe it though. But, between ourselves, he is a good bit of a woman-hater. So I suppose the sex instinctively reciprocates the compliment. But, I say, Mrs Daventer. It was awfully good of you to come and see me as you did—and the other

people too," added Phil, in the half-shamefaced way in which nineteen men out of twenty are wont to express their thanks or appreciation as regards a kindness rendered.

"That was nothing. Mrs Wharton's very nice, isn't she? I'm very sorry they're leaving to-morrow."

"Are they? I hope I shall see them again before they go. Wharton's a rare good sort although he's a parson. Don't look shocked. I'm afraid I don't get on with 'the cloth' over well. I daresay it's my own fault though."

"I daresay it is," she returned with a laugh.

During the latter days of his captivity Philip had not been without visitors. The British subject, when outside his (or her) native land, is the proprietor of a far more abundant and spontaneous fount of the milk of human kindness than when hedged around by the stovepipe-hat-cum-proper-introductions phase of respectability within the confines of the same. Several of the people sojourning in the hotel had looked in upon the weary prisoner to lighten the irksomeness of his confinement with a little friendly chat, and foremost among them had been Mrs Daventer.

"Are you doing anything particular this morning, Mrs Daventer? Because, if not, I wish you'd get a chair—I can't get one for you, you see—and sit and talk to me," said Phil, in that open, taking manner of his that rendered him almost as attractive to the other sex as his handsome face and fine physique.

"Well, I suppose I must," she answered with a smile.

"It would be a real act of Christian charity. And—"

He broke off in confused amazement, caused by the arrival of a third person upon the scene. "A good-looking girl," was his mental verdict. "Wentworth was right, by Jove!"

"Laura, dear, see if there are any chairs in the hall," said Mrs Daventer. "Thanks, love," she went on, as her daughter returned, bearing a light garden-chair. "Mr Orlebar claims that it is a Christian duty on our part to sit and gossip with him. I suppose one must concede him the privileges of an invalid."

"I am glad your ankle is so much better," said the girl, quite unaffectedly, but with the slightest possible tinge of shyness, which added an indescribable piquancy to her rich Southern type of beauty. "It must be so hideously trying to see every one else going about enjoying themselves, while you feel yourself literally chained."

“That’s just how it is,” assented Philip. “And they say it’s the best climbing season that has been known for ten years.”

“You are a great climber, I suppose?”

“No. A rank greenhorn, in fact. The Rothhorn was the first—the first real high thing—I’ve done, and it seems likely to be the last.”

“We heard about your accident the morning after we arrived. It made quite a little excitement.”

“I suppose so,” said Philip, with a laugh. “‘Terrible tragedy. A cow fell over the bridge and broke one horn,’ as the country reporter put it.”

“Get yourself a chair, dear,” said Mrs Daventer. And as the girl moved away with that intent, Philip could not, for the life of him, keep his glance from following the graceful, lithe gait. She was a splendid-looking girl, he told himself.

“How is it you are not away among the glaciers this lovely day, Miss Daventer?” he asked, when she had returned.

“I don’t know. I suppose I felt lazy. Some of the people near us at table have gone up to the Théodule to-day, and wanted me to go with them. But I should have had to decide last night; besides, they were going to make such a woefully early start. So I didn’t want to tie myself.”

“Quite right,” said Philip. “That early start side of the question takes half the edge off the fun of any undertaking here. Still, once you are squarely out it’s all right, and you feel all the better for it.”

“Always provided you have had a fair night’s rest. But these big hotels are apt to be very noisy—people getting up at all hours and taking abundant pains to render the whole house aware of the fact.”

“Rather,” said Philip. “Every one turns in ridiculously early, but what’s the good of that when just as you are dropping off to sleep somebody comes into the room above you and practices for the next day’s walk during about two hours, in a pair of regulation nail boots? I’ve been having a bad time of late. Getting no exercise in the daytime, I find it hard to sleep at night, and there’s always some one stumping about overhead. I was obliged to ring up the night porter at last and send him up to inform the gentleman

overhead that I should take it as very kind of him if he would defer his rehearsal of step-cutting, jumping crevasses, etc, until he could practise upon real ice the next day. Well, the porter went, for I heard his voice through the floor. I asked him in the morning if the gentleman had sworn a great deal or only a little. 'Gentleman?' he said, in mild surprise. 'It was not a gentleman, it was a lady.'"

"Wasn't she awfully sorry?" said Laura.

"She may have been, but she didn't seem so. By way of impressing me with the honour I ought to consider it to be lulled to sleep by the tread of her fairy feet, I am bound to record that she made rather more row than before."

"Who was it? Do you know?"

"I don't. I had my suspicions, but they were only suspicions."

"Well, it couldn't have been either of us," laughed Mrs Daventer, "for we happen to be on the same floor. But to whom do your suspicions point?"

"I fancy it must have been one of those two grim spinsters who have been keeping me supplied with sacred literature."

"No—have they?" said the girl, a swift laugh darting from her dark eyes. "I know who you mean, though I don't know their names. They are dreadful old people. I notice at table they never have the same next-door neighbours two days running. I suppose they force their ideas on that head upon everybody, judging from the scraps of conversation that float across."

"I ought to be grateful to them," went on Philip. "Every day I found a fresh tract slipped under my door. The titles, too, were uniformly appropriated to the sojourner in Zermatt. 'Where are you going to climb to-day?' or 'Looking Upward.' 'The Way that is Dark and Slippery,' which reminded me of that high moraine coming down from the Rothhorn the other night. But what really did hurt my feelings was one labelled, 'On whomsoever it Shall Fall it shall Grind him to Powder.' It seemed too personal. I felt that they were poking fun at my misfortune, don't you know, and it didn't seem kind. But it occurred to me that they meant well. They meant to amuse me, and assuredly they succeeded. By the way, these interesting documents bore the injunction: 'When done with, pass this on to a friend.' Wherefore, Miss Daventer, I shall feel it my duty to endow you with the whole lot."

“I must decline the honour. I couldn’t think of depriving you of so valuable a possession,” was the laughing reply. “But we are wandering dreadfully from the point. Why do you think it was one of those old things who was walking about over your head?”

“It is only bare suspicion, mind, and founded upon circumstantial evidence—acreage, I mean. I have become observant since my enforced detention, and while contemplating the populace—from a three-storey window—I have noticed that nobody else could show such an acreage of shoeleather.”

“Your imprisonment has rendered you satirical, Mr Orlebar,” said Mrs Daventer, in mild reproof, though at heart joining in the laugh wherewith the remark was received by her daughter, as, indeed, nineteen women out of twenty are sure to do whenever a man makes a joke at the expense of another member of their own sex.

Thus they sat, exchanging the airiest of gossip, laughing over mere nothings. Then the luncheon bell rang. Philip’s countenance fell. It was surprising how soon the morning had fled. He said as much—but dolefully.

“Why, what’s the matter?” said the elder lady, as she rose to go indoors.

“Oh, nothing. Only that I shall be left all alone again.”

“Poor thing!” said Laura, mischievously. “But perhaps, if you promise to be very entertaining, we’ll come and take care of you again. Shall we, mother?”

“Perhaps. And now, Mr Orlebar, is there anything you want? Anything I can tell them to do for you—or to bring you out?”

“You’re awfully good, Mrs Daventer. They know they’ve got to bring me something to pick at out here; but they may have forgotten. Yes, if you don’t mind just sending Alphonse here. And—I say—Mrs Daventer—you’ll—you’ll come around again presently yourselves—won’t you?”

“Perhaps—only perhaps!” answered Laura for her mother, with a mischievous, tantalising glance, which, however, said as plainly as possible, “Why, you old goose, you know we will.”

His face brightened. “Thanks awfully,” he mumbled. And then, as they left him, the sun did not seem to shine quite so brightly as before. However, he would not be left alone for long.

What had become of all the dismal and bitter reflections which had been crowding in upon him when he first took up his position in that chair barely two hours ago? Well, the cause of them existed still, but somehow, however reluctant to own it he might be, there was no disguising altogether a sneaking idea that the sting might be dulled. Somehow, too, his anxiety to be able to get about had become greatly enhanced, but not so his eagerness to seek out fresh scenes. That, curiously enough, had proportionately abated.

Chapter Twenty Six.

One Nail Drives Out Another.

"That there are as good fish in the sea as any that ever came out may or may not be a sound proverb, but it's one that our friend Orlebar seems to believe in—eh, Fordham?"

Beyond a grunt, his companion made no answer, and Wentworth continued—

"Just look at the fellow now. The widow and daughter mean 'biz,' if ever any one did. And Orlebar is such an easy fish to hook, provided they don't allow him too much play. If they do, the chances are ten to one he'll break away and rise to another fly."

It was a warm, sunshiny Sunday afternoon, about a fortnight after Philip's first appearance downstairs. The two thus conversing were strolling along the road which leads to the Zmutt-thal, and in the green meadows beyond the roaring, churning Visp, walked three figures which, in spite of the distance, they had no sort of difficulty in identifying with the objects under discussion.

"Yes, Orlebar is a fish that requires prompt landing," pursued Wentworth. "They have had a fortnight to do it in. If they don't effectually gaff him within the next week, they may give it up. Some one else will happen along, and he will think it time for a change. The fair Laura will get left. Do you a bet on it, Fordham, if you like."

"Not worth betting on, is it?" was the languid reply. "I have done what I could for the boy—kept him out of numberless snares and pitfalls. I'm a trifle tired of it now. If he is such a fool as to plunge in headlong—why, he must."

In spite of this admirable indifference, the speaker was, in fact, watching the game keenly, and so far it was progressing entirely to his own satisfaction. Did his female accomplice—in obedience to her better instincts, or to a natural tendency to revolt against dictation—show any signs of slackness, there he was, ruthless, unswerving, at hand to remind her of the consequences of failure. She must succeed or fail. In the latter alternative no palliation that she had done her best would be admitted, and this she knew. No such excuse—indeed, no excuse—would avail to save her and hers from the consequences of such failure, and the result would be dire. She was in this man's power—bound hand and foot. She might as well expect mercy from a famished tiger as one shade of ruth from him did the task which he had set her to fulfil fail by a hair's breadth. And she judged correctly.

Not by accident was Fordham strolling there that afternoon. The strongest of all passions—in a strong nature—the vindictive, vengeful hate of years thoroughly awakened in him, he watched the puppets dancing to his wires. His accomplice must be kept alive to the fact that his eye was ever upon her, that she dare not do, or leave undone, anything, however trivial, that might risk the game. And now his companion's remarks only went to confirm his previously formed decision. It was time the curtain should be rung down upon the first act of the three-act drama—time that the second should begin.

"The most susceptible youngster that ever lived! I believe you're right, Wentworth," he pursued, in reply to one of the aforesaid remarks. "And the worst of it is he takes them all so seriously—throws himself into the net headlong. Then, when he finds himself caught—tied tight so that no amount of kicking and swearing will get him out—he'll raise a great outcry and think himself very hardly used. They all do it. And I'm always warning him. I warned him against this very girl who's trying all she knows to hook him now."

"The deuce you did. I should be curious to know in what terms," said Wentworth.

"In what terms? I preached to him; I spake parables unto him; I propounded the choicest and most incisive metaphors. No use—all thrown away. 'A woman, my dear chap,' I said—'an attractive woman, that is—is like a new and entertaining book, delightful—for a time. But when you have got from cover to cover you don't begin the book again and go through it a second time, and then a third, and so on. Even the few books that will bear going through twice, and then only after a decent interval, will not keep you in literary pabulum all your life. So it is with a woman. However attractive, however entertaining she may be, she is bound to pall sooner or later—some few later, but the vast majority, like the general run of books—sooner. So that in chaining yourself to one woman all your life, as you seem bent upon doing, you are showing about as much judgment as you would be in condemning yourself to read one book all your life. Less, indeed, for, if the book bores you, you can chuck it out of the window; but if the woman bores you, or leads you the life of a pariah dog, you can't chuck her out of the window, because if you do you'll likely be hanged, and she certainly will see you so before she'll walk out of the door, once in it. Philip, my son, be warned.'"

"And how did he take that undoubtedly sound counsel?" said Wentworth, with a laugh.

"Oh, abused me, of course—swore I was a brute and a savage—in fact, he rather thought I must be the devil himself. That's always the way. Show a man the precipice he's going to walk over, and ten to one he turns round and damns you for not minding your own business. And as a general rule he's right. Talking of precipices, Wentworth, did you

hear that man's idea at table d'hôte when we were talking of the difficult state the Dent Blanche was in this year?"

"No. It must have been after I went out."

"Why, he suggested, in the most matter-of-fact way, fixing a hawser from the top of it to the glacier below. Gaudy idea, wasn't it, doing the Dent Blanche by means of a hawser? And, just as we had done guffawing over the notion, he added that the only drawback to the scheme was that somebody would be sure to creep up and steal it. Whereupon that sheep-faced parson on the other side of the table cut in with a very aggrieved and much hurt amendment to the effect that he was sure the mountain people were much too honest. We all roared in such wise as to draw the attention of the whole room upon us, including an overheard remark from one of the tract-dispensing old cats that some people were never happy unless they were making a noise—even upon a Sunday."

Philip meanwhile was assuredly doing everything to justify the observations of our two misogynists aforesaid. The expression of his face as he walked beside Laura Daventer, the tone of his voice as he talked to her, told quite enough. The past fortnight of daily companionship had done its work. Already there was a familiar, confidential ring in his tone—a semi-caressing expression in his eyes, which told unmistakably that he more than half considered her his own property. And what of Laura herself?

She, for her part, seemed disposed to take kindly to this state of affairs. She had tacitly acquiesced in the gradual proprietorship he had set up over her—had even abetted his efforts to glare off any presumptuous intruder who should seek to infringe his monopoly. The present arrangement suited her very well—on the whole, very well indeed.

"Do you really mean, Mrs Daventer," Philip was saying, talking across Laura to her mother—"do you really mean you are going away at the end of this week?"

"I'm afraid so. We have been a long time abroad already, and we can't remain away from home for ever."

"N-no, I suppose not," he assented, ruefully. "But what on earth shall I do here when you're gone?"

"Just what you did before we came," answered Laura, mischievously. "There are plenty more people here."

“Just as if that’s the same thing! I don’t believe I’ll stay on myself. In fact, I should have gone back before now if it hadn’t been for my confounded ankle.”

“And that same ‘confounded ankle’ would have been a great deal more ‘confounded’ but for us,” rejoined Laura. “You would have used it again too soon—much too soon—only we wouldn’t let you. You would have started up the Matterhorn, or done something equally insane, if we hadn’t taken care of you and kept you quiet at home.”

There was more than a substratum of truth underlying this statement. The speaker had indeed done all she said. To one of Phil’s temperament it was infinitely more congenial to lounge through the days, sitting about in sequestered nooks in the fields and woods with a very attractive girl who chose to make much of him, than to undertake sterner forms of pastime in the company of such unsympathetic spirits as Fordham and Wentworth. And therein lay an epitome of the last fortnight. These two had been thrown together. When Philip’s ankle had improved sufficiently to admit of moderate locomotion it was Laura who had been his constant companion during his earlier and experimental hobbles. Indeed, it is to be feared that the sly dog had more than once exaggerated his lameness, in justification of an appeal for support on the ground of the insufficiency of that afforded by his stick, though somehow, when the said support was very prettily accorded, the weight which he threw upon his charming prop was of the very lightest. So the bright summer days of that fortnight had passed one by one, and it was astonishing what a large proportion of the hours composing each had been spent à deux.

Thus had come about that good understanding, that sense of proprietorship definite on the part of the one, dissimulated, yet tangible and existent, on that of the other, which reigned between them. But if she intended that proprietorship to become permanent—in fact, lifelong, neither by word or sign did Laura do anything to proclaim such intention. Kind, sympathetic, companionable as she was, she could not with fairness be accused of doing anything to “throw herself at his head.” She was a perfect model of tact. When he waxed effusive, as it was Phil’s nature to do upon very slight provocation, she would meet him with a stand-offishness the more disconcerting that it was wholly unexpected. Sometimes, even, she would invent some excuse for leaving him alone for half a day—just long enough to cause him grievously to miss her, yet not long enough to render him disgusted and resentful. But withal she had managed that her presence should be very necessary to him, and now her forethought and cleverness had their reward, for she knew she could bring him to her feet any moment she chose.

“Yes, I should have gone back before now,” repeated Philip. “I sha’n’t stay on after you leave. It’ll be too dismal all round. By Jove! I don’t see why—er—why we shouldn’t go

back together. It would be awfully jolly for me having some one to travel with, and I could help you looking after the boxes and things—eh, Mrs Daventer?"

"But what about your friend, Mr Orlebar? He doesn't want to go back yet; and, even if he did, I think I see him travelling with a pair of unprotected females."

"Fordham? Oh, he and Wentworth have got together now, and they'll be swarming up every blessed alp within fifty miles around before they think of moving from here. No; on the whole I think my escort may be of use to you—in fact, I think you ought to have it."

"I believe ours is far more likely to be of use to you—in your present state," answered Mrs Daventer, with a smile. "Well, Mr Orlebar, I was going to ask you to spend a few days with us on your return, and if you care to do so, you may as well come straight home with us now—that is, of course, unless you have anything more important or attractive among your plans."

But this he eagerly protested he had not. Nothing would give him greater pleasure, and so on.

"Ours is a very quiet little place on the Welsh coast," went on Mrs Daventer. "I don't know how we shall amuse you—or rather how you will amuse yourself."

Here again Philip raised his voice in protest. He did not want amusing. He was sure it would be quite delightful. He was tired of the abominable racket of hotel life. Quiet, and plenty of it, was just the thing he wanted. It would do him more good than anything else in the world.

"Well, then, we may look upon that as settled," was the gracious rejoinder—and Mrs Daventer could be very gracious, very fascinating, when she chose. "If you are half as pleased with your stay as we shall be to have you, we shall consider ourselves fortunate. And now, Laura, I think we had better be turning back. I really must put in an appearance at church this afternoon, especially as I missed it this morning and last Sunday as well."

The girl's face clouded. "Why, mother, the best part of the afternoon is only just beginning," she objected. "Such a heavenly afternoon as it is, too."

"Let church slide, Mrs Daventer," urged Phil, impulsively. "Besides, if you're going away what does it matter!"

“That is a very earthly view to take of it, you unprincipled boy?” was the laughing reply. “Never mind, I needn’t drag you two children back with me; so continue your walk while I go and sacrifice myself to save appearances. Perhaps I’ll meet you somewhere about here afterwards, as you come back.”

“I do think that mother of yours is one of the sweetest women I ever met—Laura,” said Phil, as they turned to resume their stroll.

The girl’s face flushed with pleasure. “You never said a truer thing than that,” she replied.

“Rather not. Hallo! she’ll be late. At least a quarter of an hour’s walk, and there’s that cracked old tin-kettle whanging away already.”

A bell sounded upon the clear, pine-scented air. It was not a melodious bell—rather did it resemble the homely implement irreverently suggested. Then they continued their walk through the sunlit pastures; but Philip, whose ankle was by no means cured, began to limp.

“Stop. We must not go any further,” said Laura. “You have been walking too much to-day as it is. We will sit down and rest.”

“Let us get up on top of these rocks then,” he suggested, as their walk had brought them to a pile of broken rocks overgrown with rhododendrons and bilberry bushes. These they clambered up, and came to a shut-in, mossy nook. One side was riven by a deep fissure through which a torrent roared. It was the very spot which had witnessed that stormy interview between Fordham and Mrs Daventer. Strange, indeed, was the irony of fate which had led these two hither.

“I tell you what it is, Laura,” said Philip, throwing himself upon the ground; “it was awfully jolly of your mother to give me that invitation. We’ll have no end of a good time down there together—won’t we, dear?” and reaching out his hand he closed it upon hers. But this, after a momentary hesitation, she drew away.

“I hope we will,” she answered, and over the dark, piquante face there crept a most becoming flush. Very attractive too at that moment was that same face, with its luminous eyes and delicate, refined beauty. Still to the physiognomist there was a certain hardness about the ripe red lips which was not altogether satisfactory. But this fault he who now looked upon them failed to realise.

He turned round quickly and fixed his eyes upon her face. There was something in her tone, her gesture, that disquieted him.

“Why, Laura! what is the matter? You speak as if you did not believe we would—have a good time, I mean. Why should we not? We shall be together, and I don’t know what I should do if you were to go away from me now—darling.”

“Stop, Phil. Don’t say any more—at least not here,” she added hurriedly. “You are much too impulsive, and you don’t know me yet, although you think you do. Yes, we will have a good time—but—don’t begin to get serious, that’s a good boy.”

Philip stared. But her unexpected rejoinder had its effect. Did she intend that it should? The fervour of his tone deepened as he replied—

“I won’t say a word that you would rather I did not, dear. Not now, at any rate.”

“You had better not, believe me,” she replied, in a tone that was almost a caress, and with a smile that set all his pulses tingling. Very alluring she looked, her dark beauty set off by her dress of creamy white, by the languorous attitude, so harmonious with the sunshine and surroundings. Overhead and around the great mountains towered, the mighty cone of the giant Matterhorn dominating them all as he frowned aloft from the liquid blue; the dull thunder of the seething Visp churning its way through emerald pasture-lands; the picturesque brown roofs of the châlets; the aromatic scent of the pines—all harmonising in idyllic beauty with the figure to which they constituted a frame, a background. Did it recall that other soft golden summer evening, not so very long ago either, when he listened to much the same answer framed by another pair of lips? Who may tell? For one nail drives out another, and a heart taken at the rebound is easily caught. Yet assuredly it was a strange, a grim, irony of fate, that which brought these two hither, to this spot of all others, to enact this scene. But in such cycles do the events of life move.

Chapter Twenty Seven.

The Droop of a Sunshade.

Alma Wyatt was at home again—was once more an inmate of the much-decried semi-detached which was an exact counterpart of all the Rosebanks, and Hollybanks, and Belmonts, and Heathfields, which go to line the regulation suburban road.

The said regulation road was ankle-deep in dust—even the foliage of the trees and garden patches, which fronted each monotonous row of villas, was dried and gasping, and sprinkled with the same powdery substance. The atmosphere was of the stuffy, moist, enervating character inseparable from low-lying riverside resorts. Small wonder, then, that Alma, at home again now, should find herself drawing bitter contrasts between commonplace, cockneyfied Surbiton, and the bounteous glories of the mighty Alps—the thunder of the mountain torrent, and the cool fragrance of the shadowy pine forest; the cloudless skies and the soaring peaks; the sheeny ice-slopes, and the blue, castellated masses of the séracs, and, not least, the bracing exhilaration of the air.

"At home again! At home again!"—as she kept bitterly repeating to herself. At home again, to enact the part of a butt for her mother's nagging and ever-discontented tongue; at home again, to fall into the old rôle of self-obliteration, to hold herself in readiness to sacrifice every inclination of her own, to devote all her time, all her energies, to the convenience of the family idol, her younger sister, and especially to look for no appreciation of, or thanks for, the same. And such is home!

How her soul sickened as she looked around on the mediocrity of it all—the flat, ditchwater circumstances of life, the stagnation, the deadly monotony. There was the same narrow round, the same bi-weekly run up to Town on shopping intent, the same local gossip and feeble attempts at entertainment, the same evening visits from the same bevy of Constance's admirers—City youths mostly, all as like each other as the immaculacy of their collars, the sheen of their hats, the lack of expression in their countenances and the inanity of their conversation, could render them. These would redeem the time with some feeble singing and feebler wit, and evening after evening would Alma be called upon to sit it all out and endeavour to make herself agreeable. Constance on such occasions was in her element, but to the sucking Couttses and Barings and Rothschilds Alma was a stumbling-block and a wet blanket.

"Sort of garl, baai Jove, who ought to have a chappie built to her ordar, don't cher know. Ordinary fellar not good enough," the principal dry wag of the coterie was wont to remark.

When she had told Philip Orlebar she detested the place and everything to do with it, Alma had spoken no more than the literal truth. But if she detested it then, it strikes her now as ten times more detestable. The suburban mediocrity, the much-belauded river—a mere muddy playground for 'Arry and 'Arriet—pall upon her with nauseous monotony. Never did the hideous Cockney twang grate more offensively upon her ears, never did the obtrusive vulgarity of the low-class Briton—the most irredeemably vulgar animal in the world—revolt her sensibilities as now, when contrasted with the pleasant speech and innately refined manners of the same class of Continental peoples. Assuredly with no feeling of gladness or even contentment did Alma Wyatt return home. This may have been wrong; it was undoubtedly lamentable. But, under the circumstances, it was very natural.

We should be sorry to make oath that apart from this pardonable discontent with her most uncongenial surroundings there was not another phase of canker eating into her mind and destroying its peace. We have, elsewhere, and more than once, emphasised the fact that a certain young reprobate, hight Philip Orlebar, was one of those dangerous persons of whom the opposite sex is prone to become very fond. Now Alma's opportunities of doing so had been exceptional and many—and, in point of fact, she had so become.

Often now, in the stagnant monotony of her home life, does that bright young face rise up before her, as she first saw it, gazing with scarcely disguised admiration upon her own, as she has so frequently, so constantly seen it since—the sunny blue eyes, with their straight, frank glance, lighting up with a world of welcoming gladness when meeting her for the first time in the day or after a few hours' absence. She sees it, too, as she saw it in the black, driving cloud, high up on the perilous rock arête of the Cape au Moine, anxious on her account, otherwise fearless and resolute—she sees it, as she saw it in the sinking sunshine of that same day, tender, apprehensive, as its owner hung upon the reply which her lips should frame—but, oh, so attractive! Again, she sees it as she saw it last—crushed, hopeless, despairing, and as it appears thus before her the proud, self-contained nature partially breaks down, and, being alone, she cannot repress a convulsive sob or two, and a few tears damp the handkerchief which she passes rapidly over her eyes.

Does she ever regret—repent of her haste in thus giving him his congé! Does it ever occur to her that she may have judged him hastily, harshly—in fact, unheard? Well, her nature is a fearfully proud, a fearfully sensitive one. Did he not put a public slight upon her, make her the laughing stock of a number of nondescript people? Yet even here she cannot further justify herself in the idea that he had merely been amusing himself at her expense. The feeling was there, warm and genuine—as to that there could be no mistake

whatever. Characteristically, however, she proceeds to impale him upon the other horn of the dilemma. He had shown weakness. If that other girl had really any claim upon him, if there was really any engagement between them, he ought to have broken it off definitely and decisively before presuming to offer his affection to herself. Yes, he had been guilty of lamentable weakness—an unpardonable fault in Alma Wyatt's eyes.

There is even more behind, however, than all this. On hearing of his accident, did she not write him a letter of condolence—a really kind letter of sympathy and interest, asking to be informed how he got on—a letter, indeed, in which it was just possible for any man not actually a born fool to "read between the lines," affording him, with a little diplomacy, a chance of crying "Peccavi," and eventually reinstating himself? But how had he answered it? He had not answered it at all!

No, from that day to this he had not answered it. There could be no explanation. She had learned indirectly through those who were in the same hotel at the time, that his accident, though tiresome, was not serious—never sufficiently serious to incapacitate him for writing. And she had been at Zinal long enough to have heard from him over and over again; added to which, every letter which had arrived there for her uncle and aunt, even some time after their departure, had been scrupulously forwarded and safely received. The postal arrangements could not be to blame; clearly, then, he had deliberately and of set purpose elected to take no notice of her letter.

Well, that dream was over. She felt a little hard—a little bitter. It was no easy matter to gain Alma's good opinion, but of Philip Orlebar she had managed to become very fond—more so, in fact, than she herself had suspected at the time. And sometimes now a satirical smile would curve her lips as she reflected bitterly that after all he had certainly shown no weakness in choosing to ignore her own gracious advance, and the reflection did not tend in any degree to restore either peace or contentment to herself.

Bearing in mind Alma's character and general temperament, it need hardly be said that concerning this, the great event of her trip abroad, she let fall neither word nor hint. She would, indeed, sometimes smile bitterly to herself as she pictured her mother's wrath and disgust did the latter become aware that she had refused the heir to a baronetcy—a poor one certainly, but still a baronetcy. Why, life would thenceforth cease to be worth living. It would be the last straw. And for this, in her heart of hearts, she admitted that, looking at it from a strictly mundane point of view, there was some excuse. The chances matrimonial, to a girl situated as she was, were poor enough, in fact they were mainly confined to the City youths of mediocre lineage and strictly limited incomes, who constituted her sister's sworn admirers, or a delicate handed and mustachioed curate who had for some time evinced an unmistakable partiality for herself. Still she was nothing if not characteristic. She was not going to sacrifice her clearly-formed judgment

upon the altar of expediency. So she strove to dismiss Philip Orlebar from her mind, and to fall back into her old groove with what contentment she might.

That Alma did not "get on well at home" was not surprising—indeed, the wonder would have come in had things been the other way. The problematical amalgamation of oil and water was a trifle more conceivable than the existence of any cordiality or even a good understanding between herself and her mother. For the latter was not a lovable person. To start with, her brain power was of the scantiest order, her mind of the narrowest; it follows, therefore, that she was intensely, aggressively obstinate. And in the art of nagging she was a past mistress. She was one of those women to whom battle is as the air they breathe, and she had a knack of starting a fray gently, insidiously, sorrowfully even, as though marvelling herself that there should ensue any hostilities at all. Her younger daughter, Constance, then just eighteen, was an excellent replica of her in disposition—that is to say, had not a single redeeming point in her character; and, pace the gushing philanthropist, there are such persons. But the girl, with her blue eyes and smooth skin, her golden hair and fresh complexion, was extremely pretty; and in stating this we have said all there is to be said for her; for as a set-off against these advantages she was selfish, wilful, and conceited to the last degree, as, indeed, was only natural, seeing that from her birth upward she had been thoroughly and consistently spoiled.

There were those who wondered whence Alma had inherited her fine character. Those in a position to speak—old General Wyatt for instance—declared that she had inherited all her father's good qualities and none of her mother's bad ones, whereas in the case of Constance the positions were exactly reversed.

"Alma, I want you to get on your hat, quick, and come along up the river," cried Constance, bursting in upon her sister one bright summer afternoon. The latter had sought out the coolest corner of the stuffy little drawing-room, and was busily engaged in the—to her in her then frame of mind—very congenial task of sticking a number of Alpine views into an album. She had a touch of headache, and was not in the most amiable frame of mind herself. In fact the above invitation struck within her no responsive chord, and she said as much.

"Of course!" snapped the younger girl. "Isn't that always the way! Here one has been indoors the whole day, and directly it gets cool enough to move you say you wont. Just because you know I want to. Well—well. One never can get to the bottom of the selfishness of some people."

"Speak for yourself, Constance!" returned Alma, quickly but quietly. "Does it never strike you that I may now and then feel tired, or disinclined for exertion. And I certainly feel that way this afternoon."

But the other's rejoinder was a shrill, jeering, ringing laugh.

"All very well," she cried, flinging her sailor hat into the air and catching it. "All very well. But that won't go down with me. Can't tear yourself away from those old Swiss photos. I know all about it. By the way, which is the place you met him in?" she jeered, going over to the table and feigning a deep interest in the views which lay ranged upon it ready for sticking in the book. "Which was it? You might as well tell a fellow, instead of being as close as Death itself. Which was it, Alma, and what's he like? You needn't keep it all so dark. I won't let on."

For the life of her, Alma could not restrain the colour which came into her face. She was in a rather unamiable mood just then, as we have said, and now she felt stung to retort.

"Whoever 'he' is, or isn't, which is nearer the truth, I should be sorry to scrape together such a tenth-rate brigade as you seem to delight in gathering round you. And now having shown how intensely and objectionably silly you can make yourself, Constance, how would it be to start off on your walk and leave me in peace?"

"Well, that is a nice way to talk to your sister, I must say, Alma," said Mrs Wyatt, entering the room in time to hear the latter half of the above remark.

"Pooh, mother. What odds!" cried Constance, maliciously. "Alma's only mad because I chaffed her about her mysterious 'mash.'"

"My dear Connie, don't use those vulgar words," expostulated the mother, but in a very different tone to that employed when speaking to her elder daughter. The younger went on—

"It's a fact, mother. Alma has made a mysterious 'mash' while she was away. She's as close as death about it, but I've drawn her at last. Don't you see now why she can't tear herself loose from her beloved Swiss views? All enchanted land, don't you know."

Mrs Wyatt sniffed, and up went her virtuous nose into the air, sure prelude to the coming storm.

"Ah well, my dear," she said, in her most aggrieved and acidulated tone. "Ah well, we can't all have uncles and aunts to think that nothing's good enough for us, to take us frisking round the world. And I'm afraid such changes are not for everybody's good. Apt to make them return home more dissatisfied, more discontented than ever." And

emitting another sniff, Mrs Wyatt paused and awaited the reply which she expected and ardently hoped for.

But it did not come. More and more repellent to Alma did these almost daily wrangles become. The girl's fine nature scorned and loathed them, recognising their tendency to degrade and lower the self-respect of all parties concerned; indeed, there were times when it was as much as she could do to keep herself from extending that scorn and loathing to their originator.

Thus disappointed, Mrs Wyatt nagged on, saying a few of the most stinging things she could think of—stinging because unjust and untrue—to move her daughter to a reply; but still it didn't come. At last, pushing back her chair, with a sigh Alma said—

"Where do you want to go to, Constance? I suppose I may as well go with you as"—stay here to be reviled, she was nearly saying, but put it—"as not."

"All right, come along then," was the reply. And this compliance having the effect of damming up the stream of the maternal eloquence, the two girls sallied forth.

At any other time, moved by the sheer and wanton contrariety of her disposition, Constance would have declined to profit by this concession—would have delighted to stand by and deftly add fuel to the fire. To-day, however, she had a reason for acting otherwise. And as they gained the tow-path of the river that reason took definite shape—the shape of a youth.

He who stood there waiting for them was a medium-sized youth of about twenty, a good-looking boy, on the whole, with dark hair and eyes of a Jewish type, but remarkable for nothing in particular, unless it was a full, free, and perfectly unaffected conceit—on which latter account Alma was inclined to dislike him; but among Constance's galaxy of adorers he held, just then, a foremost place. He rejoiced in the name of Ernest Myers.

That he was there by appointment was obvious. He was clad in flannels, and in one hand held the bow rope of a light boat which he had drawn up to the side. With a half smile, Alma understood now her sister's disgust when she had refused to come out. She, Alma, was wanted to make a third. Well, she didn't mind that. If it amused Constance to carry on a harmless flirtation with young Myers—for it was not likely she could think seriously of a bank clerk with an extremely limited salary—why should she baulk her? Besides, what were they but a couple of children, after all. So she was gracious to the young man, and allowed Constance to monopolise his conversation and attentions to her heart's

content, earning a subsequent encomium from her sister to the effect that when she chose she could be the very ideal of a perfect “gooseberry.”

They paddled up-stream in the evening sunshine. Alma, by common consent, was voted to the tiller ropes, but as it was neither Saturday nor Sunday, and the personality of ’Arry was comparatively absent, her skill and attention were by no means overtaxed. There was nothing in the clearness of one of the four and a half fine days, which go to make up an English summer, to suggest it—and she had often handled the tiller ropes since—nothing in the green glow of the emerald meadows, or the droop of the pollard willows, to recall the furious, misty, leaden surface of a storm-lashed lake. Yet the recollection did come back to her that evening, and with unaccountable vividness, of the day when, tossing before the howling wrath of the tempest, they had given themselves up for lost. Even the varying demeanour of the different members of their boat’s crew, when thus brought face to face with death—from the cynical indifference of Fordham, to the abject, craven terror displayed by the chaplain, Scott—rose up clearly before her mind’s eye, and looking back upon it all, and upon the days that followed, she was conscious of a strangely blank feeling as of a want unsupplied.

“Hallo!—By Jove! Look out! Excuse me, Miss Wyatt. But you as nearly as possible took us right bang into that boat.”

It was young Myers who spoke. Upon Alma the warning was needed. In the middle of his words she had pulled her right rope only just in time. But as the boat, which they had so narrowly grazed, shot by she obtained a distinct view of its occupants. And they were two, the one a fine-looking, well-built specimen of young English manhood, who was sculling, the other a dark, handsome girl seated in the stern-sheets.

The boats had passed each other, as it were, in a flash. But in that brief moment the faces of both its occupants were vividly stamped upon Alma’s vision. And that of the man was that of none other than Philip Orlebar.

She had seen him, but he had not recognised her. He was bending forward talking to his companion in that airy, half-caressing, half-confidential tone that Alma knew so well. She had seen him clearly and distinctly, but he had failed to recognise her, and for this the droop of her sunshade might account.

The droop of a sunshade! On such frail pivots do the fortunes of mankind turn! But for the droop of that sunshade the end of this story might, we trow, have to be written very differently.

“Why, Miss Wyatt! You do look startled!” exclaimed young Myers. “We are well out of it now, though, and a miss is as good as a mile when all’s said and done. But it was a near thing.”

He might well remark on her aspect. The suddenness of the interruption, the unexpectedness of the recognition, had startled every trace of colour from her face. Looking back, cautiously at first, and still under cover of the parasol, she gazed after the receding boat, now a long way astern. Yes, it was him. But who was his companion? Well he had not been slow to console himself, she thought bitterly.

“How very stupid of me,” she replied. “It was, as you say, a near thing. I must not neglect my responsible duties again though.”

But while the two younger members of the trio were in high spirits and laughed and chatted, and bantered each other for the rest of the time they were out, Alma was silent and distraite. And an hour or so later when they landed at the tow-path in the dusk and bade good-bye to their escort and chief oarsman it seemed to Alma that that day had somehow drawn down a curtain across her life. For this brief glimpse of her former lover had stirred her heart with a dull and aching sense of void. She recognised now that she had been fonder of Philip Orlebar than she had chosen to admit, had, in fact, loved him. Well, it was too late now for regrets. She it was who in her scorn and bitter anger had sent him away from her, and now he had already begun to console himself.

Chapter Twenty Eight.

"...For His House an Irredeemable Woe."

"Well, Francis, and what do you think of that idle, good-for-nothing boy of yours now? He seems in no great hurry to come and see his father—in rather less of a hurry than his father was to go and see him."

Thus Lady Orlebar one evening as she sat at dinner with her husband some few weeks after we last saw them together. There was just sufficient point in the ill-conditioned and therefore characteristic sneer to give it effect. Nearly a month had gone by since Philip's return from the Continent, but somehow he had not found time to pay his father a visit. He was still in Wales, still staying with Mrs Daventer, where he had been ever since his return aforesaid.

"He seems tolerably happy where he is," went on Lady Orlebar, maliciously, having failed to provoke a reply. "Of course there is a girl in the case, and that with one of Philip's temperament can lead to but one result. So make up your mind to hear by any post that you are endowed with a daughter-in-law of the least desirable kind."

Still Sir Francis made no reply. He was, in fact, very sore, very hurt, by Philip's want of consideration, and his wife's gibing sneers were probing the wound. This she failed not to see, and, seeing, enjoyed thoroughly, after the manner of her kind.

"Failing the daughter-in-law I prophesy the outcome will be an action for breach of promise," she went on, characteristically eager to provoke a battle of words in order to enjoy the triumph of crushingly defeating the enemy. "Philip is just the sort who is sent into the world to constitute an easy prey for rogues and adventuresses. The boy is simply a born fool."

Dinner was over, and the servants had withdrawn. The dessert was on the table—had been for some time—and Sir Francis was wistfully wondering how long it would be before his wife thought fit to follow the example of the servants. Just then a footman entered bearing some letters on a salver. The evening post had arrived.

Welcoming any diversion, Sir Francis proceeded to open his. But at sight of the contents of one of them, his face changed, and an exclamation escaped him. His wife looked quickly up, then without a moment's hesitation she stretched forth her hand and seized the letter, which in his first bewilderment he had let fall upon the table. A harsh, sneering laugh escaped her as she ran her eye down the contents, and then proceeded to read them aloud:—

“Capias Chambers, Golden Fleece Lane, E.C.

“September 2 3, 188-.

“Glover versus Orlebar.

“Dear Sir,—Instructed by our client, Miss Edith Glover, we have written to your son, Mr Philip Orlebar, claiming from him the sum of 10,000 (ten thousand) pounds damages by reason of non-fulfilment of his promise to marry our aforesaid client.

“Up till now we have received no reply; but we think it may be in the interest of the young gentleman himself that you should be made aware of this claim against him.

“Trusting that by adopting this course further steps may be rendered unnecessary—

“We are, dear Sir,

“Yours faithfully,

“Swindell and Shears.

“To Sir Francis Orlebar, Bart.,

“Claxby Court, Rushtonborough.”

“Ha-ha! Didn’t I say so?” she cried. “And scarcely are the words out of my mouth than here it is—an action for breach of promise! Well, and what are you going to do now, Francis?”

“Nothing. Take no notice of it whatever. The thing is a mere attempt at a swindle—a clumsy, impudent swindle. I sha’n’t give it another moment’s thought.”

Easily said—far less easily done, especially by a nervous highly strung temperament such as that of the speaker.

“But who is this person?” went on Lady Orlebar, again scanning the letter. “The people he is with now are named Daventer—not Glover. Do you know who it can be?”

“Honestly, I don’t. To the best of my belief I never heard the name before in my life. All the more does it look like a try-on—an impudent and barefaced try-on. On second

thoughts, however, I'll send it up to Stretton in the morning, and tell him to see if he can make anything out of it, or to act as he thinks fit. Yes, that's what I'll do."

"Why don't you send for Philip himself and make him explain. It appears to me that he would be the proper person to throw what light he could upon the matter."

"Oh, it's of no use worrying the boy. He may be here any day now. It'll be time enough then."

Lady Orlebar gave a snort of defiance. The above remark was as a direct challenge to her to renew the battle. But her husband looked so anxious, so worried himself, that even she forebore, for once, to worry him further.

There was silence in the room. Sir Francis sat abstractedly gazing upon the table in front of him—in reality seeing nothing at all. His whole mind was filled up with this scrape that his son had got into. It was not the amount of the claim that affected him—on that point he felt fairly secure. Philip was of age, but had not a shilling in the world of his own; out of him, therefore, nothing could be got. But that his name should once more be dragged through the mud, and that at the instance of a harpy, an adventuress, this was where the sting of it all lay. "Once more," we said. For Sir Francis had very good reasons of his own for avoiding anything that should drag his name into notoriety.

So unpleasantly absorbing were his reflections, so rapt was he in his reverie, that the entrance of the butler was wholly unnoticed. Not until the man had twice drawn his attention to the card which lay upon a salver did he awake from his abstraction, and then it was with a start, for the card was inscribed—"Mr Richard Fordham."

Fordham!—Phil's friend, whom he had more than once pressingly invited to make a stay at Claxby Court, which invitation had persistently been declined upon one ground or another. Fordham—the man who had been Philip's travelling companion, guide, philosopher, and friend during the past year. Surely if any one knew anything of this unfortunate affair, Fordham was the man. True, it would have struck him at any other time that to arrive after dinner unannounced and unexpected was somewhat of an odd proceeding, but Phil had always described his friend as an out-and-out eccentricity. Besides, his visit might relate to this very affair. The baronet saw light. "Where is this gentleman, Karslake?" he said eagerly. "I showed him into the library, Sir Francis. He said he would not detain you long, and his fly is waiting for him at the door."

The library was lighted only by one shaded lamp in the centre of the table; consequently it was in semi-gloom. The visitor was seated in a low chair with his back to the door, and

Sir Francis on entering hardly perceived him. Then, closing the door behind him and giving a slight cough, the baronet began—

"Mr Fordham, I believe—Garcia! Oh, good God!"

And then, with a low cry of amazement and horror, he stopped short, staggered back a pace or two, and stood gazing helplessly at his visitor.

For the latter, as soon as he heard the door close, had risen and wheeled round rapidly to face the other. Now, as he stood there, the light full upon him, the saturnine features wreathed into a smile that was more than half a sneer; the look of triumphant malice upon that dark countenance was positively satanic.

"The name on the card was Fordham," said Sir Francis, vacantly. "I recognised it as that of my son's friend. What does it all mean?"

"It means this, Francis Orlebar. Your son's friend of to-day, hight Fordham, is the same individual as your friend of years ago, hight Garcia. Are you beginning to see?"

The question was scarcely needed. As the whole truth burst in upon him that this man, whose ruthless hate he had incurred—not wrongfully either—long years ago, had been his son's confidant and constant travelling companion now, the look of horror and repulsion upon the baronet's countenance was in itself sufficient answer.

"You do!" went on the other. "Quite so—I knew you would. And now you are wondering what on earth was my object in constituting myself guide, philosopher, and friend to your son, for no man can be more certain than yourself that that object was not likely to be to Philip's advantage. Do you follow me?"

"I do. But Garcia, though I wronged you—wronged you unpardonably, I admit—years ago, you would surely not extend your rancour, just as that may be as regards myself—your revengeful bitterness—to an innocent boy—one who is incapable of harming anybody. Surely even you would stop short at this. We are both comparatively near the end of our lives—his is all before him. Surely even you would shrink from doing anything to poison that life."

"Did you shrink from poisoning mine, Francis Orlebar? Still, upon my soul, I believe you were more sinned against than sinning. I almost think, if it concerned you alone, I would have let it pass. But in striking you I shall equally well strike her—that she-devil. I had almost decided to bury the whole affair, but I could not let her escape. She should supply the weapon—the weapon I wanted. I forced her to be the instrument of revenge upon

herself equally as upon you. That sort of revenge was too appetising, too wholly unique, to be thrown away."

Never a strong man at any time, when he was unnerved Sir Francis was as weak as water. He was now thoroughly unnerved. His face was as white as death and his voice shook.

"Man—man!" he gasped, "what are you driving at? What have you done? Speak out—or are you too great a coward?"

But Fordham only smiled—the same cruel, satanic smile, which consisted of little else than the droop of the corners of his mouth. He was enjoying the other's anguished suspense—gloating over these mental writhings—as he had come there intending to do. But before he could frame an answer, an interruption occurred. The door opened suddenly, and there entered no less a personage than Lady Orlebar.

The fact was, she reckoned the time had come for her to bear her share in the interview. There should be no mysteries apart from her cognisance in that house, while she was in it. So allowing sufficient time to float them into the swing of the discussion, she had swooped down upon them, suddenly, decisively, as was her wont. But disappointment awaited. Beyond a stiff bow, Fordham's attitude underwent no change—nor did he utter a single word. He stood, unmistakably, ostentatiously, waiting for her to go out again.

But this she had no intention of doing. One glance at her husband satisfied her that a stronger spirit was needed to cope with the man before her.

"Sir Francis has not been very well lately," she began, looking at Fordham. "He is anything but strong, and this news about his son has sadly upset him."

It was Fordham's turn to look astonished. To what news did she allude? He himself had certainly not imparted any—not yet.

"Of course it is a very tiresome and disconcerting thing," she went on, "although likely to prove all sheet-and-turnip—for one can hardly believe it genuine or likely to stand the test of a court of law."

"I hope you may not be mistaken in that last surmise," remarked Fordham grimly, and in a tone which implied that he very much hoped she might. They were at cross purposes.

“Well, it’s an annoying thing, anyway. Who are these Glovers, Mr Fordham, and how did Philip manage to get into their clutches? Of course you know they have brought an action for breach of promise against him?”

“I didn’t. I know, however, that they threatened to. In fact, I was instrumental in rescuing him from their clutches. They are an underbred lot, anyway.”

“I thought so?” cried Lady Orlebar eagerly, while Sir Francis started, and stared bewildered at his visitor. If the latter had stood Philip’s friend in this affair surely he had no intention of injuring him. But this world is one of cruel contrasts.

“I am surprised you have heard nothing of this, Mr Fordham,” she went on. “We thought it was upon this subject that you had done us the favour to call. May I ask, then—what is the nature of your business with Sir Francis?”

If Fordham was inwardly bursting with sardonic mirth, he was not going to show it. The unbounded impudence of the woman, practically asking him what the devil he wanted there at all—and expecting he was going to tell her—struck him as the richest thing he had heard for a very long time.

“Pardon me, Lady Orlebar, if I seem rude,” he answered, shortly; “but the nature of my business happens to concern Sir Francis alone. We had only just begun to enter upon it when you came in; but if Sir Francis is not equal to hearing my communication to-night I shall be happy to call again in the morning, or in a day or two.”

But Sir Francis was equal—very much so. The suspense he was undergoing was far too real—sickening in fact. So he turned upon his spouse with an energy that astonished that now irate personage.

“I think, my dear, you had perhaps better leave us. Our business is private and important—in fact, very important.” And going over to the door he held it open for her in such wise as to leave her no alternative.

“Very well, Sir Francis,” she spluttered, fairly beside herself with rage. “I am turned out of the room, mind, and by you! Very well. But I have no wish to hear your secrets. They are sure to be of a discreditable nature, anyhow.”

With this parting shot she disappeared. Fordham, looking after her, slightly shook his head, and reflected that if he had thought to chastise his old enemy with whips, assuredly Fate had elected to do so with scorpions. Anybody under the heel of such a

woman as this, had about come to the bottom of the cup of misfortune. Surely he had nothing worse left to fear.

“And now that we are alone,” said Sir Francis, coming back from the door which he had closed after his wife, “perhaps you will er—enlighten me as to the nature of this communication.”

He looked so unstrung, so worn, so piteous in his agony of suspense, that even a ray of ruth may have entered the heart of his implacable enemy. But if so, it was quickly quenched.

“Did it never strike you as odd?” said the latter, “that Philip should have been back all these weeks, and yet not have thought it worth his while running over to see you?”

Just what his wife had said. Sir Francis felt his apprehensions deepening; but he made no reply. Perhaps he could not.

“Well, he is more attractively employed, at any rate—for the time being,” emphasised Fordham. “In proof whereof—look at this.”

He produced a telegram from his pocket; deliberately unfolded it, then handed it to the other. Sir Francis’ face grew deathly white as he read it, and he gave a sort of gasp. He could only stare at the paper, then at Fordham, then at the paper again.

Thus ran the latter:—

“Married this morning to Laura Daventer. Congratulate me, old chap. Phil.”

“Is this a practical joke of yours?” gasped the baronet at length, as soon as he could find words.

“By no means. It is just as I received it. Look at the date of the office stamp—the 22nd. It was yesterday the affair came off. I only returned this morning from a few days’ absence, and found the wire awaiting me in my quarters. Yet it is news to you. Very inconsiderate on Phil’s part, I must say. He might have let you know.”

“Who—what—are these people—these Daventers?”

“Well, the young lady is his social equal, at all events, as you will probably be the first to admit,” answered Fordham, the cruel sneer deepening on his countenance. All the

satanic ruthlessness of his implacable rancour had returned. He was pouring out the very life blood of his enemy now. All thoughts of pity, of compunction, had passed away.

"On her mother's side the girl is undoubtedly his social equal," he continued. "On that of her father—well, you must be the best judge."

"I!" echoed Sir Francis, wonderingly. "Who, then, is her father?"

Fordham gazed full at him for a moment. Then his lips framed in a whisper one single word. And, hearing it, Sir Francis dropped back into his chair, his eyes staring, his face white as with the dews of death, shaking in every limb.

"Look well at the date of this," pursued his relentless tormentor, holding out the telegram. "September 22nd. And this is the twenty-third. They have been married more than twenty-four hours. By the time you can communicate with them it will be forty-eight."

But the unhappy man could articulate no word. The faculty of speech seemed to have left him. He saw it all now—saw the whole plot in all its diabolical horror.

"I told you once that my vengeance would follow you to the very grave," went on Fordham. "Did you think because it had slept for years that therefore it was dead? Now you had better wire for Philip the first thing in the morning, for it will be too late to-night. And when he comes give him this. It will save you the trouble of explaining."

He threw down what looked like a bulky letter carefully sealed and directed. Mechanically Sir Francis clutched it, but of any further reply he seemed incapable. Had his reason given way beneath the shock? It almost looked like it. Then with one more glance at his stricken enemy—a glance burning with hate, and long cherished rancour, and sated vengeance—Fordham left the room—and the house.

Chapter Twenty Nine.

"The Sins of the Fathers."

The telegram which Fordham had shown Sir Francis told no more than the truth. Philip had riveted about himself that chain which only death can break. He and Laura Daventer were married.

How had it come about—the haste, the secrecy, too? Well, it was all very simple. Given one of Philip Orlebar's temperament—given three or four weeks of close and daily companionship with a very attractive girl deadly in earnest in her designs upon him; given the accessories of a highly amiable and accommodating mother; of glorious summer weather; of cool rambles beneath shaded rocks, and strolls à deux on the moonlit beach—given all these things, we say, and small wonder is it that Philip's susceptible heart—then very much at the rebound—should be triumphantly captured, and with it his hand.

Laura had played her cards well—had played them with a consummate coolness beyond her years. She had determined to win him, almost from the very first, yet she would rather risk failure than show herself over-eager to grasp success. Hence she had nipped his too premature declaration in the bud on that last occasion when we saw them together at Zermatt. She had even done this again with equal judiciousness—her point being that he should never think he was going to have an easy walk over—then had as suddenly capitulated, so sweetly, so entrancingly, as to bind him to her there and then with tenfold ardour.

In all of this she had been most skilfully and efficiently abetted by her mother. However reluctant the latter had been when the scheme was first propounded to her, the pendulum had now swung round the other way. It would be altogether to Laura's advantage, and nothing need ever be known. The girl herself was in complete ignorance, and as for the Mephistophelian originator of the idea, it was not likely that he would disclose the secret. Perhaps, after all, she had judged him too harshly. Perhaps he had really been moved to plan out this in Laura's interest and, at the same time, to enjoy the sport of, in a measure, turning the tables on his old enemy. And then, again, her mind would be shaken by a great disquietude, or more than misgiving. For if ever she could commit herself to a grave mistake, it would be when she should credit Fordham with motives and intentions otherwise than entirely evil—in his dealings with her and hers that is. Still she would not abandon her share in the plot—in the first place she dared not—in the next she lacked inclination. And meanwhile matters had gone too far.

Clever, scheming, as she was, to do her justice, Laura's whole heart was in the plan. In progress of her manoeuvring she had conceived a great affection for this bright, open-hearted admirer of hers; an affection which was destined to blaze forth into a burning, deep-rooted, lifelong passion. And the motor which should work this transformation was very near at hand. Even then she stood on the verge of its shadow. But—Heaven help her when it should enshroud her entirely—for then might she sit down and cast ashes upon her head, and think no more of life.

Even in that brief, fleeting hour of her triumph—of her happiness—there was always one misgiving which, like the skeleton at the feast, would never be entirely banished. A heart caught at the rebound may constitute an easy capture, but it is doubtful whether it constitutes a safe one. And that her capture was of this nature Laura was fully aware. Given one of Philip's expansive, sympathy-craving temperament, it was impossible she could have been otherwise. Indeed, it was very much the knowledge of this that constituted the trump card in her far from unfavourable hand; and it was a far from unfavourable one, for Laura Daventer could be very winning, very sympathetic, in short, very dangerously attractive when she chose.

They had travelled home to England together, and during the tediousness and worry of a long journey—no small test of patience and temper—Laura had shown at her best; helpful, ready, unselfish. They had spent three or four days in London together, and Philip had found her a delightful companion; and while Mrs Daventer rested or shopped, they two would go off upon a long day's expedition—mostly up the river—returning in the best of spirits, and more wrapped up in each other than ever. It was a bright and happy time—an idyllic time—and there seemed no reason why it should not last. Yet, deep down in her heart, Laura was conscious of that gnawing, cankering misgiving. Without underrating her own charms—her own powers of attractiveness—she instinctively felt that one glance from Alma Wyatt's great grey eyes would suffice to scatter her own fair house of cards to the four winds of heaven. "On revient toujours," etc, may be, and in fact is, a saw of doubtful, not to say baseless, foundation, but this last experience of the volatile Phil's was of far too recent occurrence, she decided. The wound could not actually be healed in so short a time; but, given a fair field, under her own soft and sympathetic hand, it eventually should be.

Once they had got him safe home, Laura breathed more freely. In or around the quiet and somewhat remote little Welsh seaport the prospects of any chance meeting with Alma Wyatt seemed so minute as to be practically non-existent. Ynys-cwm-barweg was not much of a place in the matter of attractions; but given cloudless summer weather, bracing sea air, and unbounded freedom, to two young people in love with each other such a place is apt to become a very Eden.

The rest was easy. To a clever woman like Mrs Daventer, the process of "drawing" the ingenuous Philip was the merest child's play. Before he had been a week her guest, she knew all about him and his family—its circumstances, idiosyncrasies, and surroundings—as well as he did himself. The chances seemed good enough. Laura should marry him, and eventually become Lady Orlebar. Then the irony of the situation would be complete, but they two would never know.

That a chain is no stronger than its weakest link is proverbial. Clever as she was, as success attended her shrewdness and manoeuvring, Mrs Daventer closed her eyes more and more to one point. The scheme had been one of Fordham's originating—could it therefore have for its object anybody's good? Yet so promising did everything look that, woman-like, she almost began to believe she had originated it herself, and so thoroughly was she acting upon this idea that it became unnecessary for the real author to apply from time to time a refreshing spur, which, being the skilful tactician that he was, he forebore to do.

But if her astuteness failed her as to the bonâ fides of the plan, in the execution of the same she showed skill and generalship. She read Philip's character like a book. If Laura was to marry him, it must be now. Once away, once at home again, absence, family influences, possibly unforeseen circumstances, such as counter-attractions, would do their work. Once away, it would be—never. Wherein she was most probably right.

Never did sheep walk so confidingly to the slaughter, never did condemned so readily place the noose around his own neck. What Mrs Daventer was cudgelling her wits to bring about Philip himself shortly suggested. Then came some exquisite card-playing. She was horrified. He must never suggest such a thing again. Great Heavens, the boy must be mad! Of course he must do everything en règle and in a proper way, and the first step in that direction was of course to consult his family. Why, what would be said? Of course that they had led him into it—entrapped him. No, she would not hear of anything of the kind.

Whereat the guileless Phil had laughed inordinately. Led him into it! That was a good joke, and he even thought of retailing for Mrs Daventer's amusement Fordham's characteristic parting words—

"You're walking into the trap with your eyes open, Phil, my boy. Don't come to me to get you out of it, that's all, for I won't. I wash my hands of you. You're hopeless."

Now Fordham, we need hardly say, was perfectly aware that this warning would have precisely the same effect upon Philip as endeavouring to pull back a pig by the tail has

upon that homely and generally useful quadruped—that of strengthening the spirit of opposition, to wit.

Quem Deus vult perdere. It is just possible that some similar idea as that which had carried conviction to Mrs Daventer ran through Philip's mind. He feared opposition in delay—knowing his own weakness, he may have feared for the result. And the present was so insidiously sweet, so seductively entrancing, why think of the future? Others would put before him all sorts of hard, repellant contingencies—would unsettle him—would, in fact, drag him, and that rudely, from his fool's paradise? And why should they? It did not follow that everybody else knew everything, while he, Philip Orlebar, was bound to remain a consummate ass. It did not follow either that his paradise was a fool's paradise. He was surely old enough to know his own business best; other people's interference could do no good, but very likely plenty of mischief. No, this was entirely his own affair, and as such he intended it should remain. Thus the sheep went quite blithely to the slaughter.

It was done—was done at last. The mother's horrified opposition went down at the last moment before the daughter's quiet, determined persistency and a special licence—went down with a completeness that to an unprejudiced and strictly impartial observer might have looked ever so slightly suspicious. It was arranged that Philip should break the news to his father immediately afterwards, and on that condition only would Mrs Daventer be brought to yield a most reluctant consent; and, in accordance with this, Philip, leaving his bride in the care of her mother, was to travel down to Claxby alone.

Yet very happy were these two—very happy in their fool's paradise. To Laura especially it seemed too good to be true—too good to last. She seemed to move as in a waking dream. And now they must part, though only for forty-eight hours, perhaps less—must part immediately upon their union. It did not seem right. It seemed ominous.

"Come back to me the moment you can break away, Phil, my darling," she said, as she bade him a final good-bye in the early morning on the platform of the seldom-used little station. "I have no fear but that you will be able to talk over Sir Francis. Who could resist you?" she parenthesised with an inflexion of tender pride. "But do not remain away from me a moment longer than you are obliged. We have only just begun to belong to each other remember, and I have only just begun to live. Good-bye, my own."

Then the train moved off from the platform, and soft-hearted Phil felt a corresponding lump rise in his throat as he watched those beautiful eyes, brimming over with love for him, fade into the dimness of distance, till even the white waving handkerchief became as a mere speck. Then a turn in the embankment hid the whole from view.

Thus they parted, there on the wooden platform of the deserted little country station. And those last words were as the knell of a life—of two lives.

Chapter Thirty.

After Fordham's Visit.

After Fordham had left the room Sir Francis hardly seemed aware of his visitor's departure. He sat there like one turned to stone, the full horror of the recent disclosure weighing him down. First had come the lawyer's letter threatening an action against his son. That seemed very trivial now—very far-away. Then the shock of confronting so unexpectedly his old enemy, and following that the pain and resentment of learning that Philip had taken the most important step in life without a word to him. But all this was nothing—less than nothing—when compared with the nature of that fearful disclosure.

Why had the long-turned-down pages of that dark chapter in his past so suddenly been flung open before him now? Why should this man pursue him with such vengeful hate? He had wronged him, it was true, but equally true was it that he had never shrunk from the consequences. He had given him satisfaction, and bore the mark of that meeting even yet, would carry it to his grave. Why, then, should he be thus relentlessly pursued—why should his transgression be visited upon the head of his innocent son? Surely the retribution was out of all proportion to the offence. But reason as he would, rebel as he would, the horrible fact remained. For years he and his had unconsciously been the objects of a devilish, vindictive plot. And at the thought of the craft and cleverness of the plan a ray of hope shone in upon his mind. The whole thing might be annulled. It should be. But could it? He could no more prove the relationship now than Fordham could have done at the time. Besides, the publicity of such an attempt, and they had already been married more than twenty-four hours—horrible—horrible! Whichever way he looked at it there was a dead blank wall confronting him.

"So make up your mind to hear by any post that you are endowed with a daughter-in-law of the least desirable kind," had been his wife's sneering words but a short half-hour ago. Prophetic indeed, so much so that a brief suspicion crossed his mind lest she might be already in the secret—very brief though, only to be succeeded by a fixed determination that she must at all costs be kept out of it—out of that part of it which contained the whole sting of the grisly reality at any rate; for the bare fact of the marriage was of course public property. No; it must remain a secret between himself and Philip, while they should arrive at some decision as to what ought to be done.

It may readily be surmised that Lady Orlebar did not leave her husband alone for long, once Fordham had departed. Even her damaged dignity had to give way before the intense curiosity which was consuming her, and accordingly she swooped down upon him determined to arrive at the torturing secret. But, for once, she failed—only for the present though, she told herself—for so ill, so prostrated did he look that expediency

supplying the place of feeling, moved her to refrain from worrying him further—moved her even to show some solicitude on his behalf. If ever there was a valuable life, from her way of looking at it, in this world, it was that of Sir Francis, for should it cease she would be left well-nigh penniless. He could not put by any thing now because she persisted in living up to the income, and at his death everything would go to the obnoxious Philip, against whom her ire raged secretly but hot.

Wherefore, we say, expediency moved her to show some consideration for her husband, and of a truth he needed it. Piteous indeed he looked, white and ill as a man who has received a knock-down blow. At first a horrible fear crossed her mind, that he had been speculating, but a hurried assertion that money had nothing to do with the affair had infinitely relieved it. If it was not that it didn't matter, she reasoned. Of course it had to do with his scamp of a son, but that need not affect her.

"You had better go to bed, Francis, and take a sleeping draught," she said, after several ineffectual attempts at eliciting the burden of the recent interview. "We can talk things over to-morrow. But, goodness gracious, what is the use of worrying? As if anything mattered at this time of life—anything short of the smash up of a bank—and you say it is no question of money. Come, now. The best thing you can do is to go to bed."

But on this point Sir Francis was not compliant. By a curious coincidence a new idea struck him, viz, that Philip not having communicated with him, was coming in person to break the news of his marriage. And he might arrive at any moment. No, he would not go to bed, late as it was. And then, as if to add point to his resolve, there came a grinding of wheels on the drive, followed by a loud ring at the front door. The baronet started up in his chair, and his face became more ashy white than before.

"Goodness gracious! Whatever is it all about?" cried Lady Orlebar, as, following on a sound of voices outside, the door was thrown open, and Philip entered without waiting to be announced. "Shall we ever get to the bottom of all this mystery?" And then she stopped. For, at sight of her, the joyous, radiant look on Philip's face had changed to one of cold sternness as he discounted her furious opposition in advance. Even she was overawed. She felt almost afraid of him.

"Pardon me," he said to her, after the cold handshake of greeting. "I must see my father—alone. Would you mind?"

There was no mistaking the gesture as he moved towards the door. The bluntness of the request—the insult of it—thought Lady Orlebar as she swept majestically out. For the second time that evening she was turned out of the room. Well, let them talk over their

infamous secrets. They need look for no help from her, she determined, fairly shaking with rage.

Sir Francis did not meet his son's gaze as he extended one trembling hand. The other still clutched mechanically the packet which Fordham had thrust into it. Philip's heart smote him, and all the brightness went out of his face. Had his father already heard the news which he had come to break?

"I say, dad, what's the row? Dear old dad," he went on, obtaining no answer but a sigh—bending down and placing his arm round his father's shoulders—"you're looking deucedly cut up. Have you been—er—hearing anything?"

"Hearing anything?" echoed Sir Francis, in a hollow, far-away tone, and turning to his son with a wild stare. "Hearing anything? Philip, I have heard that which I—which we had both better have died than have lived to see happen."

"Come, come dad, don't take on about it like that! It was playing rather low down, I know, doing things all on the quiet. Still—I couldn't help it. Wait until you see my Laura—that's all! Why you'll fall in love with her yourself, and we'll all be as jolly as sandboys together. But, how did you hear about it? Who told you?"

For answer Sir Francis pointed to the telegram which Fordham had left on the table either by inadvertence or as not worth taking away.

"Hallo! So Fordham has been here?" cried Phil. "Hang it, I never authorised the old chap to break the news. I suppose, though, he thought you knew it already, and came to congratulate you. Still—it's odd—deuced odd. It isn't like him, anyhow."

"He left this for you," holding forth the bulky missive. "Philip, take it to your own room, where you will be quite alone, lock the door, and read it through from beginning to end. Oh, God! It is horrible—horrible?"

"Horrible! Fordham!" echoed Philip, in blank amazement. "Father, I don't understand. Tell me in a word—what's it all about? Why make me wade through twenty pages of Fordham's rigmarole when half-a-dozen words will do it?"

"Oh, I can't—I can't!" moaned poor Sir Francis. "Read it, Phil—read it! That will tell you." And with almost frantic gesture he waved his son from the room.

Philip's heart beat strangely as he went to seek the privacy enjoined. What on earth had Fordham to communicate that concerned himself—that availed to throw his father into

so pitiable a state of agitation? Under ordinary circumstances he would have suspected the package, so elaborately sealed and directed to himself, to contain a string of stale and would-be cynical platitudes on the situation, for which he felt in no sort of mood just then. Now a strange eerie foreboding of evil was upon him.

He gained his room, which was fireless, and cold and uncheery of aspect. Then, by the light of the solitary candle, he broke the seals and drew forth the contents of the envelope. These would keep him busy for some time in all conscience, he decided, noticing how closely written were the numerous sheets. But almost with the first glance, as he began to read, a start and a wild ejaculation escaped him. Then, as he read on, a deathly paleness spread over his countenance, and his hand clenched convulsively upon the rail of his chair. His attitude became rigid and his features hardened. His eyes dilated with a stare of intense horror and surprise as they travelled down each successive sheet of the fateful paper.

Where is the sunny, light-hearted youth, rejoicing in the strength of health and happiness and love, who entered this house such a short while ago? Not surely to be found in this being, whose ashy features are stamped with the set, grey look of a stricken despair; the frozen horror in whose eyes, as they seek alternately the shadowed objects around the half-darkened room and the rigidly grasped paper, is that of a man who suddenly realises that he has all involuntarily committed some appalling crime.

His dry lips move half unconsciously, and in husky, laboured gasps, frame the well-nigh inarticulate words—

“O God! such a hideous thing could never be! God in Heaven, it can’t be true! It can’t be true!”

Chapter Thirty One.

What was Revealed.

"There is a good deal of a surprise before you, Philip," began the paper, "but nevertheless, go patiently through this, from start to finish, and don't look at the end first, after the manner of the average woman reading a novel, for it would only detract from the full bearing of the narrative, and probably cloud and obfuscate the same at every issue.

"My real name is not Richard Fordham, but Richard Cecil Garcia. It suited me—no matter how—to take the other, to drop my real name, with which I was thoroughly sickened and disgusted. With what show of reason you will learn as you read on. But it is a strange, foreign-sounding name, is it not? Well, it is a foreign name, for I am of Corsican origin. That being so, it follows I have the hot, vindictive temperament of a Southern race in addition to a fair share of British tenacity of purpose. No man ever injured me but was requited sooner or later—requited to the full—requited, in fact, tenfold. The bearing of this upon what follows you will all too soon grasp.

"You and I have known each other now for something less than two years; but have known each other better, more intimately, than we should have done under ordinary circumstances in about half a lifetime. You thought our first meeting entirely a fortuitous one. It was not. It was deliberately brought about by me in pursuance of a matured and long-set plan.

"You have often wondered at my unutterable detestation of, contempt for, the other sex. It has amused you, and you have laughed at it as a 'crank.' You are young, and think that a very large percentage of angel abides within the average petticoat. Very good. I can't say I ever held that belief, for I always despised and distrusted the dear creatures from the very earliest time I can remember.

"'Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall,' may be only Scripture, but it is remarkably sound human nature. My 'fall' came—and an uncommonly far and hard one it was destined to prove. There is no need to go into all the sickening details—the how, or the when, or the where. Suffice it to say that the creature was well endowed with all the attractiveness (so-called) and the devilish arts and wizardry of her species. For a few months I thought myself in Paradise—had found the philosopher's stone, the elixir of life.

"In this disastrous mania, mind you, it was not I who took the initiative. For every reason on the face of the earth it was to this woman's advantage that my name and what

modest competence I possessed should become hers. It suited her vanity, too, that she alone should be the one to penetrate my armour-coat of invulnerable mail. And in those days when the blood ran hot such beauty as hers was calculated to bring down even my defences—though now I can look back to that hideous mockery of a time with nothing but horror and unmitigated disgust—can look upon the actress in that shameful travesty with loathing and unquenchable hate. And now at this day I hold her very life in the hollow of my hand. Some day I will close my fingers and crush it—but not yet—not yet.

"For some months, as I have said, I thought myself in Paradise. Then came disillusion—speedy when it did come. I knew myself then to be in inferno. Heavens! the life that she-devil led me—she of whom I had practically been the salvation! She slandered my character, and dragged my name in the mud. She ruined my chances in life and caused every friend I owned in the world to flee as from the plague. She did worse than that, for she sapped and well-nigh destroyed even my sense of self-respect. I often wondered, at the time, I did not kill her; looking back now I wonder still more.

"Mind you, it was not on account of this one creature alone that I have always held the whole of its sex in such intense abhorrence. But I have studied it—studied it carefully. I have thought, 'No one shall say that I, the thinker, the character-reader, the student of human nature all the world over, has judged a whole from a unit.' But the result of my observation is that in a greater or less degree it is wonderfully alike. You get the same littleness—the same gratuitous malice—the same eager, scheming, unscrupulous grasping after individual advantage—above all the same domineering spirit, the same utter disregard of truth, the entire absence of any sense of moral rectitude. If it were possible to roll the tiger, the ape, and the snake into one animal, you would get a perfect embodiment of the average civilised and Christian woman of the nineteenth century. The gentle sex! Pah! it sickens one!

"Now and again, but rarely, I think I find an exceptional unit. But then I thought so once before, to my ultimate disaster. And, Philip, the last instance in which I thought to discover such an exception was that of the girl named Alma Wyatt. Well, it is too late to think of that now—for you at any rate. You have gone further and fared infinitely worse. Yet I warned you—warned you plainly and unmistakably. My very last words to you were those of warning. And now let us return to my own record.

"'When things are at their worst, they mend,' says the proverb. Things were certainly at their worst with me. I had committed social and financial suicide, all but mental—and even seriously contemplated actual and physical. When I had reached that point; when every conscious moment of the twenty-four hours was absorbed in marvelling what besotted affliction of mania could have induced me to wreck my life by legally chaining it

to this demon, then, I say, came the proverbial ‘mend.’ It came in the shape of a third party.

“Why dwell upon circumstances and detail? The story was an utterly commonplace and ordinary one. She played off the whole stale bag of tricks upon the new man, who must have been nearly as great a fool as myself—in fact was. To cut the matter short, one fine day they went off together, levanted—also in the most commonplace and ordinary style. Then I sat down and chuckled—laughed as I had never laughed since I was idiot enough to forge my chain.

“But I was a curious tempered devil in those days—am so still you will no doubt say—and although I could not feel any serious resentment against one who had relieved me of an intolerable burden, by reason of that relief, still the act in itself was a deadly insult to me. I left the man alone for a few days, then I dropped down upon him when he least expected it. I raised no scene—not I. There was a better way of settling matters than that. It was easy enough if judiciously worked—is still at this very day. A meeting was arranged.

“It came off—in a wild out-of-the-way spot just across the Spanish border. We stood up, one lowering drizzling morning, when the clouds were sweeping the tree-tops of the beech-forests covering the Roncevallés plateau. We exchanged shots. I could have killed my man easily, but didn’t. I was only playing with him. He wasn’t a bad shot either, but I knew the game was entirely in my hands. I could have killed him, I say, but I never intended to do that. It occurred to me—knowing the man and having read off his character and temperament fairly accurately—that life itself would avenge me upon him far more than would his death. I would put my mark upon him, however. So when we stood up again to each other’s fire I planted my ball in the tendons of his left leg, just above the knee. My adversary dropped, and the seconds pronounced the affair at an end. But he was not dead; not even, with ordinary care, dangerously wounded. He would recover, but he would carry my mark—a mark apparent to all—with him to his grave. He would walk with a limp during the remainder of his life.

“No doubt, Philip, you will now have guessed this man’s identity. To avoid all chance of mistake, however, I will say that it was your own father.

“Now we will come to Act 2 in the drama.

“He soon had enough of the woman; very much more than enough, as, of course, was sure to be the case. But he found he had strapped a burden upon his back which it was in the last degree difficult to shake off. She, of course, fully expected I was going to free her, in which case she would undoubtedly have succeeded in marrying your father; for

he never was a strong man, Philip, and I believe he would have been weak enough even for that. But I merely sat still and laughed. Heavens! how I did laugh! For the joke was all on my side. To be sure, if I had taken action which should have enabled Francis Orlebar to marry her, I should have wreaked a far direr retribution upon him than ever I could have done at the pistol's mouth. But then I hated her far more than I did him, and I was not going to play into her hands. Not, however, that I had done with him, as you will, to your sorrow, learn. So no fees out of my pocket went to fatten the Divorce Court lawyers, and I sat still and laughed—laughed harder than ever. There was another consideration which militated against my taking any steps to free myself. Once legally free, I reasoned, so great a fool is man, who knows but that I might be tempted again to rivet that loathsome and degraded chain upon my emancipated limbs! So I resolved deliberately to leave it beyond my power again to perpetrate such an act of suicidal folly, and accordingly I have done so.

"Although, if empowered to do so, your father would, as I say, have been weak enough to give this woman the legal right to his name, when he—when they both—saw that such could never be the case while I lived, he mustered up sufficient resolution to break with her. Then she tried it on with me; took up a high-handed line, declaring that her legal right was to live with me; and that whereas nothing short of legal process could quash that right, and whereas I had taken no such process, she should assert her rights to the very uttermost. Again I only laughed, and—started off upon my travels.

"Then she tried another tack. A child was born to her—a daughter—whose paternity I, of course, denied. She initiated proceedings against me for maintenance, but these I stopped by pretending to fall in with her claim. It stipulated, however, that she should cease to use my name. This she promised; but of course the promise was not kept. So I cut off every shilling I allowed her, having previously placed my means beyond the jurisdiction of the British courts—a matter easily effected by secret and scattered investments in all parts of the world; and she and her child were reduced to absolute want. That brought her to her knees; that tamed the she-devil. I had things all my own way then. It was my prerogative to impose terms, and I did so most rigidly. She was to keep me regularly informed as to her place of residence, and not to make any radical change in the latter without my sanction, and under no circumstances was she to use my name, or let it be known that I had any acquaintanceship with her whatever. She was also to behave herself, and that thoroughly. Failing the observance of these conditions, I would inexorably cut off the supplies, and remove the child from her care in such wise that she should never set eyes on it again.

"Did she revolt? Of course she did—tried to, rather, more than once. But it didn't answer; no, not for a moment. She found that my eye was ever upon her, that not a movement of hers passed unknown to me. So she had the gumption to see that nothing

was gained by kicking, and that the wisest—in fact the only—plan was to make the best of it. But I hadn't done with her.

"For years things went on quietly enough. The child grew and throve; and for this child the woman seemed to entertain an extraordinary affection. This I did nothing to lessen; for I saw therein a weapon ready to hand whenever I should choose to require it. So I sat still and laughed; for I had not done with her, remember. She had wrecked my whole life and its chances, nor during the process, nor ever since, had she shown one single redeeming point in her character, one single sign of regret.

"All this took place many years ago, while you were hardly out of the cradle, certainly not out of the nursery, for I am a great deal older than you think, Philip. To a certain extent, I watched you grow up, unknown to your father or to yourself, for, I repeat, our meeting and subsequent acquaintanceship was the outcome of no mere chance. And this brings us to the third act of the drama.

"Years went by, and your father, never having seen nor of late heard of me since the day we stood up to each other's fire, ceased even to think of me as other than a somewhat tragical incident in the past history of his life. He little dreamed, however, that all this time I was watching him—was watching you. Yes, I watched you as you grew up. I knew that you were as the very apple of your father's eye. Through you I intended to strike him once more—to crush him.

"We met, you and I, as you remember. You thought it a chance meeting, but it was not. In a week I had read off your character thoroughly, exhaustively. I knew you a great deal better than you knew yourself.

"Well, we went globe-trotting together. And as you look back on it you will recollect more than one occasion upon which, but for my intervention, your father would have been rendered childless. Why did I intervene, you will say? Well, for two reasons. First, I chose to pull the wires myself. I intended to close my vendetta by a plan that should be perfectly unique. The hunter's instinct doesn't move him to say, 'No matter how the quarry falls, as long as it does fall.' No; he must bring it down himself, in his own way. So it was with me. The other reason will strike you as strange and incredible to the last degree. I had taken a liking to you.

"Yes, paradoxical as it may sound, paradoxical as it is, the fact remains. I had a sneaking weakness for you, Philip. You were so open-hearted, so ingenuous, so utterly helpless—in short, such an ass. It seemed to devolve on me to be ever pulling you out of some tangle. I began to waver in my purpose. There were times when I thought I would leave the whole thing, and had it been a matter concerning your father alone I think I should

have done so. But there was the woman. She was in my hand now. The time for her to feel its weight was near. She was living at ease, happy and contented, for, as I said before, she was entirely wrapped up in her daughter. She, happy and contented after having poisoned my life, ruined me, dragged my name in the mud—I don't mean in the mere act of relieving me of her presence—but more in the shameful scandal, the horrible hell she made of life while she was with me, so that wherever I went it was rendered impossible—she happy and contented! Decidedly the time had come to strike.

"Even then I found myself still wavering on your account. I wavered to the last. I honestly did my best to get you out of that Glover hobble, and I believe I succeeded. Had not chance upset your relations with Alma Wyatt I believe I should have spared you, for I should have been powerless against her counter-influence—or, at any rate, I should have preferred to think so, if only as a pretext for throwing up the whole scheme. Then we went over to Zermatt, and here chance stepped in again and took the reins a good deal out of my hands. But for your accident you could have returned to Zinal in a few days. Time and absence would have been all in your favour, and you would have been saved.

"It was part of my design to bring you to Zermatt. You remember we were going there in the first instance, but chance diverted our plan. Now, however, the time had come for me to draw in the circle of the net. I wavered no longer.

"We will touch briefly upon what followed. The Daventers arrived, and, caught at the rebound, you transferred your susceptible heart. Even then I warned you. You cannot say I did not give you every chance. My last words to you were words of warning. But they were utterly thrown away, as I knew they would be. Well, there is very little more to be said. You walked into the trap with your eyes open and—were caught.

"Do you know who this woman is who calls herself Mrs Daventer? She is no other than the woman whose infamies I have been detailing—she who was and still is legally bound to me by the marriage laws of the land. And her daughter—your bride—do you guess now whose child she is? Mine—you will say. No, you are wrong. Her father is your father, Philip Orlebar, and if you doubt me ask him."

At this stage the paper fell from Philip's hand. The whole world seemed going round with him. It was as if he had received a stunning blow, a numbing shock. The dead grim horror of the situation had not yet fully broken upon him.

With an effort he picked up the paper again and read on:—

“You will remember that earlier in my narrative I said I disputed the paternity of this child at the time of its birth. Well, before letting the matter go into court I obtained more than one opinion from eminent counsel. But every opinion was substantially in accord—to the effect that the question of time rendered the matter such a very near thing that I could not hope to contest the claim with the slightest chance of success. How does this affect you now, Philip Orlebar? Why, exactly as it affected me then. Your chances of obtaining a decree of nullity are so remote as to be practically non-existent—even if you care to throw the case open to the public—for remember, by the time you get this you will have been married two whole days, and a court of law is a pretty scathing ordeal. Nor will the plea of fraud avail you, while I know for a fact that Laura was totally unaware of the circumstances of her parentage, or that the name under which she was married—her surname, to wit, was rightly any other than Daventer.

“Well, you must accept the situation in all its bearings, and if you cannot—as I firmly believe—break the tie by which you are legally, but only legally, bound, you can console yourself, as I did, with the reflection that it is now out of your power ever again to make a fool of yourself. Nothing further remains to be said, except that I suppose never before did the strands of Fate weave together so complete a web of what is commonly called poetic justice, so unique an instance of retribution. And remember this. If your father ate sour grapes and your teeth are set on edge, you must blame him—not me.

“Should you wish to meet me to talk over anything, I am still to be found at my old quarters. Of course, I am using the name by which you have always known me.

“Richard Fordham.”

Chapter Thirty Two.

"That Sting Each Other Here in the Dust."

Father and son had the house to themselves, for the servants had long since gone to bed, and Lady Orlebar had done likewise, in a towering passion. Softly Philip returned to the library, where he had left his father, and then for a few moments they stood silently gazing into each other's faces, the expression of each equally wretched, equally blank, equally hopeless.

"He has told you—that infernal villain!" said Philip, at length. "I can see it." Sir Francis nodded. He could not speak just then. "And this," went on Philip, drawing forth Fordham's communication. "You know what he says here? Oh, father, for God's sake, is it true?"

"It is impossible to say for certain," gasped the baronet, in a strange, jerky tone, after several futile attempts to speak. "It is impossible to—prove anything—either way."

He did not upbraid his son, as many a father might and would have done. He did not say, "If you will go and throw your life away upon your own weak and foolish judgment, if you will go and do things in such hurried and hole-and-corner fashion, if you will go and buy a pig in a poke, you have got no more than you deserve—you have only yourself to thank?" But he did think—and that bitterly—that but for the hurry and secrecy on the part of Philip in the matter, the weight of this horror would never have fallen upon them at all.

"Father, what do you think—candidly? Do you think that scoundrel Fordham spoke the truth?"

It was the bitterest moment in Sir Francis's life. To answer in the negative would be but to perpetuate the horror; besides he could not so answer. His glance avoided that of his son, and his head drooped forward on his chest, as he faltered, like a man who talks in his sleep—

"I believe he did. I cannot say otherwise—I believe he did."

And then Philip knew that his life was ruined at the outset—wrecked almost before leaving port.

"Father!" he said, at last, breaking the terrible silence which had fallen between them. "What does this villain mean when he says, 'Remember by the time you get this you will

have been married two whole days…'? Has he given it me two days sooner than he meant to?"

"Oh no—oh no. This would make it just about the time," muttered Sir Francis, drearily.

"But how do you make that out? How can I have been married two whole days when I was only married this morning?"

The change in Sir Francis's demeanour was in the last degree startling.

"What?" he almost shrieked. "What's that you say, Phil? You were only married this morning?"

"Of course I was. I left Lau—I left her—almost at the church door." And then he went on to detail Mrs Daventer's inexorable insistence upon his breaking the news to his father at once.

"But the telegram, Phil? What of the telegram?" cried Sir Francis, wildly. "Look—look at the date. The 22nd—that was yesterday. And it says 'this morning.'"

Philip had caught up the slip of paper and was staring at it with a puzzled look. "It's as you say, father," he said. "The office stamp does give the 22nd. Well, it is a mistake, and Fordham has been so far sold, for the most awful side of his ghastly, diabolical plot has been spared me. What an infernal fiend, in the literal sense of the word, the man must be!"

"Oh, thank God! thank God?" ejaculated poor Sir Francis, falling back in his chair. "So you parted at the church door. Oh, thank God! that unutterable horror is spared us. But the rest. My poor boy—my poor boy! You can never see them again—it would be too fearful."

"Once, father—once I must," was the reply, accompanied by a hard-set frown. "Once—but once only."

Fordham's chambers were situated in a quiet street just off Park Lane. They were comfortable, but not luxurious, as became one who was a confirmed wanderer—here to-day, there to-morrow. He never cared to accumulate a collection of things, for that very reason. Here on the day after Philip's meeting with his father did Fordham sit. He was writing—answering a letter from Wentworth urging him to join the latter at Les Avants the following week—a suggestion which rather fell in with his own inclinations—for

London at the end of September was insufferably close, abominably dusty, and blatantly vulgar. He hardly knew himself why he had stayed so long.

Well, that was not quite accurate either. He did know. He wanted to watch the explosion of the infernal machine he had so craftily pieced together, to note its results.

His letter finished, he pushed his chair from the table and began to think. He was in one of his worst moods that morning—cool, cynical, utterly without ruth. As he thought on his interview of the previous evening he laughed at himself because of the temporary softening he had undergone. When others had got the drop on him, did they relent? Not they. Now he had got the drop on them, why should he feel any compunction? He would not. While in this vein he heard steps quickly ascending the stairs. The door opened and there entered—Philip.

The latter stopped short. At first it seemed as if he could not speak. His broad chest was heaving, and a red spot burned in each of his livid cheeks. Then, slowly, he brought out three words—

"You—infernal villain!"

Fordham slightly shrugged his shoulders, and the expression of his face was not goodly to look upon.

"Is that all you came here to say? Well, at any rate you can't say I didn't warn you—didn't give you every chance. Why, man, I did nothing but warn you."

"Yes—by the rule of contraries. And now what have you got to say? Putting myself aside for the present, for what you have done to my father you shall answer to me. Yes, to me!"

His tone had attained a loud and threatening pitch, and he made a step forward. Fordham, who had risen when he first came in, drew himself together with a nearly imperceptible movement which reminded one of nothing so much as a snake ready to strike. Thus they confronted each other, these two who had been such close, such intimate friends.

"What have I got to say?" repeated Fordham, dropping out his words with a steely deliberation. "The question ought rather to come from me. No; stop! Stand back!" he added, warningly, as the other made towards him, a move whose nature was unmistakably aggressive. "You'll do no good in that line, I promise you. Why remember, boy, all the best tricks you know with your hands I taught you, and there remain a great many better ones for you to learn. I'm the best man of the two in that way."

None knew this better than Philip, tall, powerful, and in good training as he himself was. The other was a splendid boxer, and all wire and whipcord. He would stand no chance against him.

“Will you meet me in the old-fashioned way, then?” he said, with difficulty restraining his rage. “We can cross the Channel and exchange a few shots. What! You won’t!” for the other had burst into a derisive chuckle. “Hang it, Fordham, you may pretend to laugh, but I never thought you were such an infernal coward!”

“You may well talk about hanging,” replied Fordham, with that same sardonic chuckle. “Do you know, you young fool—do you know that all this time you have been bellowing out enough to hang you a dozen times over in this happy contingency for which you are thirsting? Do you know, also, that in the event of my being the one to go under, one single word construable into an arrangement of the meeting, uttered by you over here would be enough to hang you as surely as if you had cut a man’s throat to steal his watch?”

It was Philip’s turn to look slightly foolish now; and in spite of his anger and misery he did so—such is the power of a master-mind and a sarcastic tongue.

“Just do me the favour to open that door suddenly, will you?” went on Fordham. “Ah! The coast’s clear, is it? Well, then”—as the door was shut again—“if you really mean business, this is how you ought to have put it: ‘Fordham, old man, are you really going to St. Jean-de-Luz this week or next? Because if so I might join you there.’”

Philip started, and stared. Then it dawned on him.

“And where the deuce is St. Jean-de-Luz?” he said.

“About equidistant between Biarritz and the Spanish border, and very near both,” was the tranquil answer. “Well, I was going to Les Avants, but if you prefer it I will alter my destination. Do you prefer it?” with a keen glance into the other’s eyes.

“I understand,” said Philip, slowly. “Yes, certainly, I do prefer it.”

“Very well, then. There is no more to be said. I will be at St. Jean-de-Luz by the middle of next week at the latest. And now a word of caution for your own sake. Do not breathe one syllable with regard to our—er—rendezvous, while you are on this side of the English Channel. Remember that on this side of that geographical feature we are both

within British jurisdiction. I suppose you don't want to spend the rest of your life in penal servitude in the event of gaining your object?"

"I understand," said Philip, again. "Till this day week, then—over there."

"You may rely upon me." And then the speaker rang the bell, and Philip, hardly knowing where he went, found himself following a manservant to the street door.

He had gone in there on violence intent. That was a mistake. Fordham was right to keep cool. It is what he ought to have done himself. Ah, well, he was learning his lesson gradually. He had acted upon impulse hitherto—the warm, generous impulse of youth. No more of that. But he would be cool enough that day week, when they two should meet.

No compunction did he feel—nothing but hate, and horror, and loathing towards his former friend. The diabolical and coldblooded cruelty which could predestine his life to shipwreck from the very cradle, which could watch him grow up, and then under the guise of friendship lure him to his ruin, effaced at one sweep all the recollection of their former intimacy, of many an act of kindness on the part of the older man, of strong and reliable comradeship in moments of danger. And his father—if he had injured Fordham in times past, he had given him full satisfaction. That ought to have closed the matter. And now this coldblooded villain, after all these years, rose again to persecute and hound him into the grave. Never while he was there. And then at the recollection of his father's white, stricken face and pitiable aspect, Philip clenched his fists and wished he had insisted upon an earlier meeting.

When he reached the Great Western terminus the Welsh train was already moving, but with an effort and at imminent risk to life and limb he managed to fling himself into a compartment, and then, speeding over the familiar landscape, his thoughts turned from those he was leaving behind to those to whom he was going. Why, it was very little more than twenty-four hours since he had parted from his bride, and what a cataclysm had taken place within that time. His bride! Horror! How should he even meet her, knowing what he did? How could he even bear to look at her? And then, as he sat there throughout the day, gazing out vacantly upon the flying trees and hedges, the scales seemed to drop from his eyes. He had fallen a prey—a contemptibly easy prey—to a couple of designing adventuresses. All the kind and gracious attentions of the mother—the winsome ways of the daughter—all struck him now as so many arts to lure him into their net, and they had succeeded. He had fallen a victim to a couple of the basest tools ever employed to carry out a base and villainous scheme. Well, after that night they should look upon his face no more.

Then another thought struck him. If the more horrible side of Fordham's scheme, as set forth in his revelation, were true, Mrs Daventer—so-called—could not be in ignorance of it. Could she, as a mother,—under no matter what pressure of circumstances—consent to become a party to so monstrous a crime? It did not seem possible. Yet, to poor Phil, now beginning to realise the sublimity of iniquity to which some will soar, it occurred that the woman acting under baser, stronger motives, might even have been brought to sacrifice her own daughter. Well, she would know, at any rate, and—she should tell.

Chance favoured him. It was late when he reached the house. Laura, having given him up for that night, had gone upstairs; but her mother was still sitting in the drawing-room reading. The French window, neither curtained nor shuttered, stood ajar, for the night was hot and stuffy. Standing there for a moment in the starlight, the fresh salt air fanning his brow, the murmur of the waves on the beach hard by, humming confusedly in his ears, Philip felt quite sick and faint. He had been continuously on the move since this horror had burst upon him—had eaten next to nothing, and had not slept a wink—and now it was all beginning to tell. Recovering himself, he pushed open the window and stepped into the room.

"Why, Philip! What a way to come back!" cried Mrs Daventer, recovering from the momentary start this unexpected invasion had thrown her into. "Laura will be delighted! Why—what is the matter? Has anything gone wrong?" she broke off, noting his haggard face and the miserable expression of his eyes; and her own cheeks grew livid with a horrible boding fear.

His first answer was to step to the door and turn the key.

"We had better not be interrupted for a few minutes," he said shortly. "Now I want you to tell me. What is Cecil Garcia to you?"

She started, swayed, as if to fall, then recovered herself, as if by an effort of will.

"You know, then?" she gasped. "He has told you?"

"Everything?"

"Everything! Oh, the infamous fiend! He was always that way."

"Maybe. Now I must have an answer to this! Who is Laura's father? Cecil Garcia or—Sir Francis Orlebar?"

She started from her chair, and stood gazing at him, unutterable horror in her eyes, her lips livid and shaking. Her next words were gulped out, as though between the gasps of strangulation.

“He—told you—?”

“That your daughter’s father is my father. That I had married my half-sister. Is it true?”

She tried to speak—the words would not come. The full horror—the diabolical ingenuity—of Fordham’s plan, burst upon her now—for the first time, and burst upon her with crushing force. This was the blow then. While the barest taint of such suspicion lurked in Philip’s mind, Laura might go through life alone. This was how Fordham had chosen to strike her. And she had half credited him with benevolent motives! Him, a devil in human shape!

“Is it true?” repeated Philip.

But his voice hummed in her ears with a far-away sound. She made a convulsive clutch at her throat, gasping as if to speak. No words would come. Then swaying heavily, with a low cry that was half a groan, she tottered and fell.

“She has answered the question,” said Philip to himself, as he caught her just in time and placed her on the sofa. “She has answered the question, and now I know the worst.”

Stepping to the door he unlocked it, just as Laura was turning the handle. She had heard her mother’s cry and the sound of voices. Among the latter she recognised that of Philip, and had flown down, grievously dreading that something had happened.

And at sight of him all her fears were realised. That pale, stern man with the haggard eyes, and the hand stretched forth as though to bar her approach, was that her bright-hearted Philip, who had left her so gaily, yet so lovingly, but the morning before? Heavens, what did it all mean?

“No; it is all over,” he said, putting forth his hand again, as she was about to fling herself upon his neck. “I know all now. Heavens—it is too horrible!” he added with a shudder. “But I suppose you are in the secret too. To think of it!”

“I think you have gone mad,” she answered, a defiant fierceness taking the place of the soft love tones wherein she had at first addressed him. “But—what have you been doing to my mother?” she added in half a scream, as she caught sight of the latter lying there white and still, and rushed over to her side.

“She has fainted. You had better see after her while I go for a doctor. The knowledge that I had been made aware of the infamous plot to which I have fallen a victim has been too much for her.”

Even in the midst of her attentions to her fainting mother the girl turned upon him with flashing eyes and a livid countenance.

“Infamous plot!” she cried. “You dare? Mark this, then. Never come near me again—never again until you have apologised most humbly to her and to me. I mean it! Do you hear?”

“That makes it easier,” he replied, with a faint sneer. “Now I am going for the doctor.” And he went out. “She is in it too,” he soliloquised as he sped along through the cool night. “It is a horrible business—horrible—horrible! But the mother? Well, she answered the question. Still, when she comes round, I shall insist upon her answering it again in words, or in writing.”

But his question was destined to remain unanswered, for Mrs Daventer never did come round. A couple of hours after Philip’s return with the medical man she died. But she never spoke again.

The doctors pronounced it a plain case of heart disease, though they wrapped their definition up in a layer of technical jargon that was anything but plain. So the only person who could have cleared up the doubt was silent for ever, and the true secret of Laura’s paternity lay buried in her mother’s grave.

Chapter Thirty Three.

"For a Brother's Blood."

The wind soughed mournfully through the great beech-forests which cover the slopes leading up to the Roncevallés plateau.

It was early morning—gloomy and lowering. The two occupants of the open carriage wending its way at a footpace up the steep mountain road were well wrapped up, for at that elevation, late summer as it was, the air was biting and chill.

"And so you are determined to go through with this, Orlebar?" one of them was saying. "Can it not be arranged even now?"

"Certainly not," was the brief, determined answer. "I am going to do my level best to rid the world of the most inhuman, damnable monster that ever disgraced it."

"You will have to be as cool as—as this air, then, Orlebar. Your friend—your enemy I should say rather—is something like a dead shot. By the way, your story is one of the strangest I ever heard in my life; and not the oddest part of it to me is that you should still persist in choosing this place."

"Because it is this place. You were here at the time of—of that other affair, Major. You will be able to place us upon the exact spot. I have a presentiment. On the very spot where that villain wounded my father I shall kill him. That is why I have chosen it."

The other shook his head gravely. He was an older man than he looked—and he looked past middle age. Major Fox's own career had been an eventful one. He had seen active service under the flag of two foreign powers severally, and, moreover, was reckoned an authority on hostile meetings of a private nature, at many of which he had assisted, not always in the character of second. That the object of this early drive was a hostile meeting the above fragment of conversation will clearly show.

Where is the sunny-tempered, light-hearted Philip Orlebar of old? Dead—dead and buried. He who now sits here, pale, stern, gloomy, with the aspect of a man upon whose life a great blow has fallen—whom that blow has aged a dozen years at least—surely these two personalities can have nothing in common?

Onward and upward, higher and higher wends the carriage. Then the acclivity ends, and surmounting the roll of its brow a great flat wooded space, with here and there the

distant hump of a mountain jutting against the sky, lies spread out in front. It is the Roncevallés plateau.

A bell clangs forth, slow and sepulchral upon the raw morning air. Its measured, intermittent toll, heard beneath the gloomy lour of the overcast heavens, would be depressing enough under ordinary circumstances. But now it strikes the hearers as immeasurably ominous, for it is the death-toll.

Standing up, the Major, speaking in fluent French, impresses a few directions upon the Basque driver. The latter nods and whips up his horses. As they trot past the quaint, old-world monastery, with its red roofs lying against an appropriate background of foliage, dark hooded figures could be seen gliding about.

"That changes the scene again, Orlebar," remarked Major Fox. "A few minutes ago one might almost have expected to meet Caesar and his legions emerging from the great beech-forests. Now this brings us to more mediaeval times again. Hallo! What is it?"

For the horses had been suddenly reined in. Then the driver drew them up to the side of the road.

A mournful, wailing, dirgelike sound was heard in front. Standing up in the vehicle, its occupants made out a number of white-clad figures advancing round a bend in the road. The dark-covered horizontal burden borne in the midst; the glitter of the crucifix moving slowly in front; the measured and solemn chant; the clang of the bell from the tower—all told the nature of that procession advancing along the desolate and lonely wooded plateau. Its errand was one of death; and they, the unlooked-for spectators, they, too, were bound upon an errand of death.

"Requiem aeternum dona ei Domine: et lux perpetua luceat ei" chanted the singers. The Basque driver doffed his beret and bent his head devoutly as the cortège went by, and the Major and Philip lifted their hats. But the words, the chant, struck upon the tatter's ear with indescribable import, for they brought back a very different scene. He saw again the arching blue of the cloudless heavens above the Val d'Anniviers, the rugged cliff and the feathery pine forest, the vernal slopes and the flower-strewn graves. Again the dull roar of the mountain torrent rose upon the air, and Alma Wyatt's voice was in his ears as upon that glowing morning in the churchyard at Vissoye. And now he heard it again, that chant for the dead, here in the wild solitudes of this Pyrenean forest country, swelling through the murk of the lowering heavens. And he himself was going forth to death—to meet death or to deal it out to another.

“Si iniquitates observaveris Domine: Domine quis sustinebit!” The chant rolled on, now sinking fainter as the funeral procession receded. Heavens! here was a comment on the errand of hate and vengeance—the errand of blood which had brought these two abroad that morning.

“If I were inclined to be superstitious, I should take that incident to be unlucky,” said the Major, with a jerk of his thumb in the direction followed by the receding cortège, “but I’m not, so it doesn’t matter. En avant, Michel.”

But the driver as he obeyed turned half round on his box to ask for directions, with the result that the carriage turned abruptly off into a bypath which penetrated deeper into the forest. A few hundred yards along this and the Major called a halt.

“We will leave the trap here, Orlebar. The place is close at hand, and the other party is sure to be on the spot.”

“You seem to know it well, Major,” said Philip. “Why, I couldn’t have ferretted it out to save my life.”

“My dear fellow, I have been here before—in times past,” was the answer, given with a touch of dryness.

Voices were now heard just ahead of them, and as they emerged into a sequestered open glade three figures were standing in a group chatting. They belonged to Fordham and two strangers—one mustachioed and grizzled, the other mustachioed and dark.

“Good morning—good morning,” said the Major, briskly, raising his hat as he stepped forward.

“M. le docteur Etchegaray—M. le Major Fox,” introduced Fordham.

The dark stranger bowed, and the Major bowed, and there was elaborate hat-lifting on both sides. Then the Major passed on the introduction to his principal, to whom he further effected that of the other stranger, who was Fordham’s second, and whom he named as “M. de Verrieux.”

Beyond a slight raising of the hat such as etiquette demanded, no recognition passed between the two principals. The seconds and the medical man drew apart for a few moments’ conference.

“Is it settled that the matter is to proceed, then?” said M. de Verrieux when this was ended. Both principals nodded. “Enfin—à l’affaire,” he went on.

On one side of the glade was a great dead tree trunk blazed by lightning. The seconds had decided to place their men twenty-five paces apart in such wise that the white trunk should be equidistant from either. The weapons were Colt’s revolvers, but each shot was to be fired by word of command.

The gloom of the morning deepened. A spot or two of rain fell upon the weapons as they were handed to the principals, and the wind moaned dismally among the tree-tops. They stood up, facing each other, those two who had been friends. They stood up, silent, motionless as that death which they were about to deal to each other. Again through the murky stillness there tolled forth from the monastery tower that distant dirge-bell.

“Attention, messieurs!” cried M. de Verrieux. “Un—deux—Trois!”

Both pistols cracked simultaneously. The hum of Philip’s ball passed just over his adversary’s head. Fordham, however, without moving his elbow from his side, had pointed his weapon almost vertically in the air, and had pressed the trigger. He stood cool, impassive, and motionless.

“The affair has proceeded with the greatest honour to both sides,” declared M. de Verrieux. “We may now, I presume, consider it closed?”

“I trust so,” said the Major, looking at Philip, whom he was heartily glad to get so well out of it. But the latter, to his dismay, replied shortly—

“By no means. I don’t consider it has begun.”

The seconds looked at each other, then at their principals. M. de Verrieux shrugged his shoulders.

“Enfin! Puisque Monsieur le désire,” he said.

“Take care he isn’t committing suicide,” said Fordham, with a queer flash in his eyes, and his brows met in that extraordinarily forbidding frown of his. But the remark was met by a somewhat sharp protest on the part of Major Fox, who declared that it was contrary to all precedent for one principal even to address the other under the circumstances, let alone utter what sounded uncommonly like a taunt. Fordham recognised frankly this infringement of etiquette, and apologised elaborately.

Again the two stood facing each other.

Never to his dying day would Philip forget that moment, and the still, sepulchral silence of the great forest, the faint earthy smell of moist vegetation, the sighing of the wind in the tree-tops, the mournful toll of the far-away dirge-bell. All the events of his later life swept through his mind in a flash—Alma Wyatt—the sweet, sunlit mountain slopes—the blue lake, and the shining glacier—then that other in her dark beauty—the dance and sparkle of the sea, and the expanse of yellow sand on the low-lying Welsh coast—then the frightful disclosure—his own horror—his father's agony—the parting—Mrs Daventer's death. All passed before him in vivid retrospect, as he stood there to receive the fire of the man whom up to a week ago he had reckoned his dearest friend.

The word was given. Again both pistols cracked together. Fordham only moving half his arm, had exactly repeated his former manoeuvre. He had fired straight up at the sky. At the same time he was seen ever so slightly to wince.

"Are you touched?" said the Frenchman, eagerly. "No? Ha—I thought—"

"It doesn't seem much like it," answered Fordham, slowly.

Then the seconds had their innings. On one point they were thoroughly agreed. The affair could be allowed to go no further. It had been conducted in a manner which was to the last degree creditable to both gentlemen concerned, pronounced M. de Verrieux animatedly, and he trusted they would both do each other the honour of shaking hands with each other. After which pleasing ceremony he, the speaker, would be delighted if they and the whole party would do him the honour of breakfasting with him, and doing justice to the best wines the cellar of the country inn could supply. This the Major emphatically seconded, though he knew too well there would be no handshaking or any such friendly parting between his two fellow-countrymen.

Philip, for his part, said nothing. The decision of the seconds was final. Nor could he, whatever his wrongs, bring himself to go on firing at a man who was determined not to return his fire. Even then—so desperately contradictory is human nature—even then, without in anywise detracting from his own wretchedness and desperation, he was conscious of a weakness towards his old friend, a strange sense of relenting. At that moment he rejoiced that he had not the other's death upon his hands.

"Well, since there is to be no more shooting," said Fordham, at length, speaking in an easy, careless tone, "I may as well convince you that I was not bragging just now. Look at that knot in the blazed tree—there about four feet from the ground."

He raised his pistol, and with scarcely a moment's aim fired. The knot, a flat one, and about the size of a crown piece, was seen to splinter. The ball had made a plumb centre.

"Look again," he went on, and again his pistol cracked. The knot split into a gaping gash and the splinters flew from it. He had planted his second bullet right upon the first one. Ejaculations broke from the spectators in their respective tongues.

"Well, Mr Fordham," said the Major, "I think I may say, on behalf of my principal and myself, that we appreciate your courtesy to the full. M. de Verrieux, if you will do me the pleasure of meeting me this evening or to-morrow morning at St. Jean-Pied-de-Port as arranged, we will draw up the usual procés-verbal. Gentlemen, I have the honour to salute you, and to wish you good morning."

Then, amid much elaborate hat-lifting, Major Fox and his principal walked away, while M. de Verrieux and the doctor lit their cigars and proceeded to put away the pistols. Suddenly a cry escaped the medico. It was echoed by the other. For Fordham was lying on the ground as pale as death. He was in a dead faint.

"And he said he wasn't hit?" ejaculated the doctor. "I could have sworn I saw him wince. Yes! look there," pointing to a hole in the fallen man's trousers just above the left knee. "There it is. He held his hand over it all the time, do you see, very cleverly too. Too proud to give way before the young one. Well, well; he is a man. But it is wonderful—wonderful."

All this while the speaker had been ripping up the leg of the prostrate man's trousers.

"Here it is," he went on triumphantly. "Ah, ça! But there will be no probing required. The ball has gone clean through."

"Is the wound a dangerous one?" said the other. "It doesn't seem to bleed much."

"C'est selon!" replied the doctor, with a shrug of the shoulders. "The haemorrhage is, as you say, slight; but the tendon is badly torn—and—he will carry the mark of this day with him to his grave. He will walk with a limp for the remainder of his life."

And Fordham waking up just then to consciousness under the influence of the cordial which his second was administering, heard the words, and smiled grimly to himself.

"Poetic justice, with a vengeance!" he thought.

Chapter Thirty Four.

At the End of his Life.

Midway between Nyon and Rolle, the steamer Mont Blanc was shearing her arrowy course through the blue waters of Lake Léman, heading for the latter place.

Her decks were covered with passengers, mostly of French nationality—light-hearted, chattering, cheerful souls, talking volubly and all at once—talking the harder apparently in inverse ratio to the interest of the topic under consideration.

Right in the stern of the boat, beneath the upper deck, his back against the end of the saloon, sat a solitary Englishman. He was smoking a cigar and pretending to read, but it was patent to the most casual observer that the book before him occupied very little of his attention indeed, for he was gazing out upon the sapphire surface of the lake and its green and gold setting of engirdling mountains, with an expression of settled sadness upon his extremely attractive countenance, which had no business to be seen upon the face of one so young.

Suddenly there was a rush of feet, and a hat came skimming along the lower deck, a broad-brimmed straw hat—a feminine hat. Springing from his seat he caught it, just in time to save it from going overboard, and turned to hand it to its pursuer and owner.

"Thanks so much," said a sweet voice. Then the speaker stopped short in amazement and changed colour. "Why, it's Mr Orlebar—pardon me—Sir Philip, I should have said."

"It used to be 'Philip' at one time, Alma," was the reply, with the ghost of a sad smile. And then these two stood looking into each other's eyes in silence. Neither seemed able to say a word.

It was as she had implied. Sir Francis Orlebar was no more. Never recovering from the prostration into which he had been thrown by Fordham's revelation, he had sunk into a decline and had succumbed three months later, tended by his son devotedly to the last. Then Philip, reserving enough for his modest wants, had apportioned the remainder between his stepmother and that other who had a legal claim upon him. This done, he had left Claxby Court and had started upon his travels again.

She who was his wife, in the eye of the law, he had never set eyes on since that fateful night. He had tried by every means in his power to find some channel through which the mystery might be cleared up, but in vain. The only person who could have done so was dead, and her last words, her last look, her last behaviour, conclusively confirmed him in

his very darkest conjectures. The bare recollection of the subject was unutterably nauseous and repulsive to him now.

Old Glover had in due course served him with a writ in the threatened breach of promise action. Nothing could be more repellent than to be dragged forth into notoriety thus, yet what could he do? He was too poor to offer any compromise, even if it were not the persistently rancorous intention of that estimable British merchant to exact his pound of flesh in spite of everything, and that pound of flesh the dragging of him—Philip—into notoriety and a court of law. But at the last moment chance had befriended him. For the beauteous Edith had succumbed to the prismatic attractions of a ritualistic parson of fine presence and ample means, and this cleric had, under pain of cancelling his own engagement, laid a stern embargo on his future bride making an exhibition of herself in a public court. So, whereas it is manifestly impossible to bring an action for breach of promise failing the consent of the interesting plaintiff, old Glover was obliged to deny himself the gratification of his rancour, and to console himself characteristically with the sound commercial reflection that, after all, they had got much the better bargain of the two. For the parson was well off, and would very likely be a bishop one day, or, at any rate an archdeacon, whereas Philip Orlebar, though now a baronet, would always have been as poor as Job, and would never have done any good for himself or anybody else. In which conjecture he was probably right.

“It’s an odd thing I should not have seen you all this time,” said Philip at last, realising that it was necessary to say something. “Yet you must have come on board at Geneva.”

“No—at Nyon.”

“At Nyon! That would account for it. I have been sitting here almost ever since we left Geneva, and, of course, I can’t see the gangway from here, or who lands, or who embarks. Have you been staying there?”

“Only a few days. The people I am with were there to see some friends of theirs. But—between ourselves—it was rather slow.”

“You are not with the General then?”

“Oh no! Don’t I wish I was!” she added, with an eager lowering of her voice. “But there, I ought not to say that. These are a very kind sort of people, but a trifle ‘heavy.’ I am only travelling with them, not their guest.”

Now what the deuce did Philip care about the estimability or other idiosyncrasies of the people she was travelling with? He saw only her—her as he remembered her in times

past—her as he had seen her many a time since, waking and in his dreams—her as he had seen her the first time of all, here on the deck of this very ship. He detected the sympathetic softening of the great grey eyes, the saddened inflection of that voice, the first note of which had thrilled his whole being, and his heart tightened. For, after all, he was young, and, in spite of the blow which had fallen upon his life, all possibilities for him were not dead.

And she? Knowing something of his history since they parted—though not the exact nature of the grim skeleton so carefully kept locked up—knowing something of his history, we say, for the world is small and tongues are long, she felt her heart go out to him as it had never done before, as she never thought possible that it could have done. The sunny laugh had gone out of his face for ever; leaving an expression, a stamp of hopelessness, which to her was infinitely pathetic. It was all that she could do to keep down the rush of tears which welled to her eyes as they looked up into his sad ones. What, we say, did he, did either of them, care about the heaviness or otherwise of the people she was travelling with? Yet of such trivialities will the lips force themselves to chatter while the heart is bursting.

“Where and how is the dear old General now?” he went on. “And your aunt?”

“They have gone to live at a place in the country—a few miles from Rushtonborough. That is near your home, is it not?”

“Yes,” he said eagerly, and the possibilities began to stir around and quicken into life. Then his tone relapsed again. “Do you ever go down there yourself?”

“I haven’t yet. They have only just gone there. And now”—hesitatingly, “I think I must go back to my people. They will be wondering what has become of me.”

“Not yet—Alma.”

The pleading tone melted her not very strongly formed resolution. She paused. The end of the saloon hid them effectually, though, of course, they only held this snug corner to themselves on the precarious tenure of chance.

“Tell me a little more about yourself,” he went on. “Are you still living at that place you hated so—Surbiton?”

“N-no,” as if the topic was distasteful. “By the way, I saw you there once.”

“But—I have never been there in my life,” he answered, very mystified.

“Not on land, perhaps—but by water. You were in a boat—and the one I was in as nearly as possible ran you down. I was steering—or rather, ought to have been,” she added with a little smile. “You didn’t see me, but I recognised you.”

“I remember now,” he said. “And was that you? Yes, I remember perfectly. Oh, Alma—if only I had seen you!”

It seemed to escape him in spite of himself, and it conveyed volumes. There had been just a spice of bitterness in the motive that had urged her to let him know she had seen him and with whom, but now she would have given worlds to withdraw the remark—such a turning of the knife in the wound did it seem. And now she realised plainer than words could tell, that if he had seen her on the occasion in question, it would have made all the difference in the world to her life and his.

“What is this place we are coming to?” he said, as the steamer’s bell begun to ring to the accompaniment of a sensible slackening of the paddles.

“Rolle. The next is Morges, and then Ouchy, where we land. We are going to stay a few days in Lausanne.”

“What, at this time of year? Why you will be roasted?”

“So we shall. But the Sitgreaves want to get some things there before going on to the mountains.”

“Are you going on to the mountains? Where? Perhaps we may meet again?” And once more the possibilities were all astir.

“Philip, I think we had better not,” she answered, with her eyes full upon his. “It would not be fair to—you.”

“Oh, I can keep myself in hand all right,” he replied, with a hard laugh from which he could not altogether eliminate the suspicion of a tremor. “Don’t be afraid. I’ve learnt a thing or two since we last had the pleasure of meeting.”

The steamer was under way again, skimming merrily over the sapphire surface. The chit-chat and laughter of the other passengers rose gleefully upon the air, and in the saloon the pop of corks, the clink of knives and forks. There is solitude in a crowd—stillness in noise.

“Where are you going to now, Philip?” she said.

“Oh, I don’t quite know! I’ve booked to Territet. Perhaps I’ll walk up and put in a few days at the old shop—perhaps I’ll go on to Saas or the Bel Alp and do some climbing. Can’t tell till I get there.”

She made no answer. This was not the easy, light-hearted talk of the old times. There was a bitter, reckless ring about it that was unmistakable. The speaker literally did not care where he went or what he did. Still she did not leave him.

“I wonder if it has ever occurred to you all this time Alma,” he went on in a softer tone, “that it was here—on board this very ship—we first met? Not exactly that perhaps, but first saw each other, which amounts to the same thing.”

“Yes, it has.”

“It has? Well, it seems a strange chance, a strange stroke of Fate, that we should meet here again—here of all places. How long ago was it? Ten years—twenty?”

“No; only three.”

“Well, it is like twenty to me. I tell you I feel as if I had come to the end of my life.”

“You must not say that—believe me you must not. Time will do wonders for you. You have a long life before you yet, and great opportunities.”

But although she spoke bravely she could hardly succeed in steadying her voice. All the old feeling, all the feeling which had lain dormant within her since that stray glimpse on the river, was surging into activity. Philip Orlebar, crushed, saddened, all the elasticity burned out of his young life by the searing irons of sorrow, reigned king in her heart, as Philip Orlebar, sanguine, buoyant, light-hearted, could never have done. And the change, sad, infinitely deplorable as it was, had solidified and stamped his character, not altogether to the disadvantage of that possession. But for that one tremendous impediment, in all human probability lifelong, Alma would have needed no pressure to have returned love for love in full and abundant measure.

“Great opportunities?” he echoed. “Yes, I may have had once—before you condemned me unheard. Great Heaven! you had no pity—no consideration for me then, and now it is too late.”

It was cruel. The tears which she had striven so heroically to repress brimmed, overflowed. They fell, each shining drop burning into the heart of the spectator as a drop of molten lead. And upon the blue radiant lake the measured paddle-stroke of the steamer beat strong and joyous, the laughter and chat of the holiday-seekers rang out light and cheery.

“Darling love—love of my life—my only love!” he uttered, in heartbroken tones, “what am I to say? Why—why were you so hasty? And now it is too late.”

“Yes, I was hasty; I know it now,” she replied. “But I tried to make amends. Oh, Philip! why did you not answer—take some notice of my letter?”

“Your—what?”

His face had turned deathly white. Already he saw that some horrible contretemps had served to divert from him a life’s happiness.

“My letter? I wrote to you at Zermatt directly I heard of your accident. You took no notice, so I concluded you did not want to hear of me any more.”

“Alma, as sure as I stand here a living man, I have never received a line of your writing in my life.”

It was her turn to grow pale now.

“But I did write. I directed to your hotel at Zermatt. What can it mean? You never received it?”

He burst into a harsh laugh—a laugh infinitely more moving than tears.

“What can it mean?” he repeated. “It means this: it is part of the whole hellish plot. That letter was intercepted by the hand that for its owner’s vile purposes lured me to my ruin. But that hand is burning now for that act of wickedness—that one act alone—that act which ruined my life. It is burning in another world—if there be another world—for the woman, its owner, is dead.”

“I begin to see,” she said, her eyes brimming with love and pity. “Yes, I can see it all now.”

The bell rang again, and the paddles slackened. The Mont Blanc was sweeping up to the débarcadère at Morges. The next stoppage would be Ouchy, and there they must part.

“Do you remember that day we were crossing over to Bouveret on this very boat?” he went on. “Do you remember our conversation as we passed Chillon Castle? You remarked then, à propos of all its mediaeval horrors, instruments of torture, and so forth—that there seemed a time when the world must have been under Satanic rule instead of under that of a good Providence. Do you remember that?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Well, the same thing holds good now. What have I done that those whom I have never harmed should lay themselves out to ruin my life—to render my days a hell and a curse to me? For it is a curse—a lifelong curse.”

“Not that—not that, God grant. Philip, be brave; you are young yet. Better days will dawn, dear.”

“But they will not bring me—you. No, something tells me it is not so—it never will be so. Nothing better will dawn for me but the grave. I told you before; I tell you again. I feel as if I had come to the end of my life.”

“Hush—hush,” she said, soothingly. “Your life is still your own; you are your own master. You must make an object in life for yourself. That is the only remedy.”

But he shook his head.

“No, no. The Satanic influence is everywhere. Was it not abroad that day on the river when one glimpse of you would have saved me? Had your parasol been held but a few inches higher I should have seen you, and the sight of you would have brought me back to you, back to myself, in time. Yet it was not to be.”

Again the bell rang, again the paddles slowed down. The massive red-tiled tower of Ouchy drew nearer and nearer. The Mont Blanc glided proudly up to the pier.

“Alma, darling—my lost love—we may never meet again. Something tells me we shall not. Give me—one kiss.”

His hands were holding hers. His sad eyes were full upon hers. And she loved him. What could she do?

“Would it be right?” she said, hesitatingly.

“Right or wrong, give it me. You will never regret it.”

Her lips met his, in one sweet, warm, clinging kiss. Then with a murmured, “God bless you, Philip, dear!” she had torn herself away, and was gone.

There was the usual stir and bustle of landing. Then as they were wending their way from the débarcadère in the wake of their luggage, which an hotel porter was hauling before them on a truck, one of Alma’s friends said—

“Who was the other party to the tête-à-tête, Alma? I declare your behaviour is positively scandalous, my dear girl. Do you know you were rather more than a whole hour hobnobbing with him? Come, who was he?”

“An old friend of mine,” she answered, trying to do so lightly, but of course failing abjectly.

“Why don’t you say a dear friend?” said another of the girls, maliciously. “Why, he was standing there on the lower deck as we landed, simply devouring the last of you with his eyes. And they were eyes, too. Come, now, his name? You are not going to get out of that, don’t think it. Who was he?”

“Sir Philip Orlebar.”

“Sir Philip Orlebar?” repeated the last who had spoken and who was by way of being the wag of the party. “And you did not bring him up and introduce him. A whole, real, live baronet—and such a good-looking one, too! Oh, Alma, I should never have thought it of—Gracious goodness!”

The last words were little better than a shriek. For a frightful sound had drowned the speaker’s utterance—a loud, vibrating, strident roar, and a crash as of a heavy missile tearing through planks and rafters. Turning towards it, the faces of the girls blanched with terror and their knees trembled under them, so that they could hardly stand. Those around behaved variously, but all were in a state of the wildest consternation and dismay.

“Mais il éclate—le bateau-à-vapeur!” cried one of the bystanders.

The Mont Blanc was still at the jetty. At first it was difficult to make out what had happened. Then dense masses of steam were seen to be issuing from the centre of the ship, and from the whole outside of the saloon spurted white, hissing jets.

The upper deck was the scene of a wild and frenzied panic. A mob of terror-stricken passengers surged to the gangway, fighting, shouting, swarming over each other and everything, at imminent peril of being precipitated into the water. And over and above this chaos, this rout and tumult, there arose a succession of the most appalling screams that ever human ear was condemned to listen to, for they issued from the throats of so many human beings shut up within the death-trap below—so many human beings, for whom all escape was cut off, and who were being literally parboiled alive.

This is what had happened. The steam reservoir had exploded, and the mass of iron covering it had been hurled along the lower deck, sweeping the saloon from end to end, and crashing through the stern of the vessel like the projectile from a piece of ordnance. And then an enormous volume of scalding steam had filled the apartment, and in a moment the light-hearted holiday-seekers, with which it was crowded, wrapped in that hell-blast from which there was no escape, were writhing in the throes of the most horrible, the most agonising of deaths.

Alma, recovering her presence of mind, left her friends, and hurried back to the scene of the catastrophe. But the gathering crowd barred her way; it in its turn being kept back by the arm and voice of Authority. Yet she got near enough to see the outside of the wrecked saloon, the twisted girders supporting the upper deck, the jagged breach in the stern where the iron plate had gone through. She saw the panic-stricken crowd swaying and surging. She saw one scalded wretch rush to the side and leap overboard, in the frenzy of his intolerable agony. What she did not see was him whom she sought. She did not see Philip Orlebar.

Not in the terrified, struggling crowd upon the upper deck did her eyes seek him; even at that moment she knew it was not thus he would be found in the hour of peril and alarm. Her anguished gaze, straining upon the spot where she had last seen him, met with no reward. He was not there. Oh, merciful Heavens! Could he have gone back to his seat in the stern of the boat, to that spot where they had stood together talking for a full hour.

For that spot was now enveloped in a cloud of white steam, which was pouring out through the hole knocked in the end of the saloon by the iron cover of the cistern. Had Philip returned to his seat his back would have rested against that very part of the panelling which was blown away.

It was long before the work of rescue could be begun, long before the fiery breath of that hell-blast had sufficiently abated its fury to admit of search. Still Alma stood there, and as each agonising minute of suspense went by she realised more certainly that there was no hope. She saw body after body—in life or in death—brought away from the fatal ship. She heard the heartrending groans of the sufferers, and the appalling yells of some

tortured wretch imploring the boon of death as a termination to his agony. These dreadful sights and sounds which at any other time would well-nigh have killed her with horror, seemed to be something outside her life now. He whom she sought was not among them—not yet.

She pressed forward. The crowd elbowed her backward. The voice of Authority warned her backward. To Authority she appealed.

Now Authority, even in a blue uniform and a sword, may still possess a heart, and Authority as there embodied, was young and presumably susceptible. The white eager face was passingly beautiful—the piteous glance and appealing voice correspondingly entrancing. Authority's heart melted. In the result the crowd elbowed her backward no more.

"Mademoiselle had a friend on board? A lady? No? A gentleman—an English gentleman? Good. He should be sought for."

Accordingly Alma learned the worst without undue delay. There was an English gentleman among the injured—a tall, good-looking gentleman with a blonde moustache. "He was hurt—very badly hurt," declared Authority, humanely mendacious, adding, "But he is not burned—oh, no—certainly he is not burned. Wait. They will disembark him in one little moment. Is he dead? Well, Mademoiselle must not give way. He is not burned—certainly—not in the least burned."

And the force of even that little crumb of well-meant comfort came home to Alma as, a few minutes later, she bent down over what had so recently contained the soul of Philip Orlebar, and regardless of the glances of three pairs of eyes or of three hundred, kissed the calm and placid face, so still and composed in death—kissed those lips hardly cold yet—the warmth of whose parting kiss in life seemed to glow upon hers—the sad, hopeless echo of whose parting words still seemed to linger in her ears. "Alma, darling. My lost love. We may never meet again. Something tells me we shall not." Well, they had not—in life.

As the douanier had said, Philip Orlebar was not burned, for he had met his death in the open air. He had, as Alma had first conjectured, resumed his seat in the stern of the boat—was on the point of doing so rather, when the explosion occurred, and the iron plate, bursting through the end of the saloon, had struck him on the spine and shattered it, killing him instantaneously—painlessly.

"I feel as if I had come to the end of my life," had been his words, twice used during that last sad conversation. Poor Philip! Had he uttered them in sheer bitterness of heart or

under the influence of a strange unerring presentiment? Verily it may have been a little of both.

Chapter Thirty Five.

A Day Too Late.

Not less radiantly did the sun shine upon the blue lake, in whose pellucid surface lay mirrored the great feathery slopes of the Savoy Alps; not less joyously did the cheerful sights and sounds of everyday life run their course after the terrible catastrophe of which that fairest of earth's scenes had been the theatre. Pleasure boats skimmed the placid waters; quarry barges, their white triangular sails hanging listless in the still air, were unlading their cargoes of stones brought thither from the Savoy shore; even a steamer swept up to the jetty, and, having discharged and received its human freight, went plashing on its way. The world still went on; but to Alma Wyatt, wandering there alone by the landing-place in the glad sunshine, the golden side of life was clouded over for evermore.

Nearly a month had gone by since poor Philip's remains had been carried back to the home of his fathers for burial. His successor, the new baronet, a distant cousin whom he had known but slightly, had hurried to the scene of the disaster, and much moved by his young kinsman's most lamentable fate had spared no trouble and expense to ensure that every honour and care should surround the last lugubrious arrangements. But the awful strain of that horrible experience had told upon Alma, and for three weeks she was so ill and prostrate that she was forbidden to leave her room.

When, eventually, she was able to appear again, she would not leave the place. With a persistency which her friends more or less strongly condemned as morbid—impressing upon her the thankfulness she ought to feel that the explosion had not taken place a few minutes earlier, while she herself was standing on the fatal spot—she would make her daily pilgrimage to the scene of the disaster, for to her it was holy ground. To her had been spoken the very last words he ever breathed, and they had been words of love. Her lips had received the last kiss it had been in his power to bestow. "You will never regret it," he had said. And did she? Not for worlds would she barter that sweet sad recollection. She loved him now—loved him with all her heart and soul and being. And it was too late. Too late! She might go to him, but never more could he return to her.

There in the noontide sunshine she stood, and, whatever way her eyes might turn, the whole scene around her brought back his memory. She could see the little white village of St. Gingolph sleeping beneath the great mountains on the opposite shore; and it brought back that day, when tossing on the furious billows of that sudden tempest, they had reckoned their hours as numbered—and there were times when in the bitterness of her soul she could find it in her heart to wish they had died together then. Again, there rose the green serrated ridges of the Chaîne des Verreaux, beneath whose shadow she

had received his first declaration of love. She could see the distant arête of the Cape-au-Moîne heaved up against the blue sky, could mark the exact spot where they had cowered for shelter when exposed to the wild fury of the blast, up there on those dangerous heights, now so green and smiling in the sunlight, and she could see him in the sweet golden evening of that eventful day, so appealing, so winning in his brave young beauty, as he poured out his love at her feet. Then she hardly knew her own heart. Now she knew it. But—too late.

"How do you do, Miss Wyatt?"

She started violently. That familiar voice even, fitted with the picture she had been drawing. Turning she encountered the dark, piercing eyes of Fordham.

He had raised his hat, but he did not offer his hand. He stood there contemplating her with grave, saturnine expression as of old.

"Wretched business this," he said, with a jerk of the head in the direction of the spot where the catastrophe had taken place. "Poor fellow, poor fellow! Well, I suppose even I can hardly be held so much as indirectly responsible for it."

"I hardly know whether I am speaking to his friend or his enemy," said Alma, who, while instinctively distrusting this strange being, yet was conscious of being in some degree held spell-bound, even as the historic wedding-guest, together with an unaccountable anxiety to hear what he had to say.

"Both, I suppose," answered Fordham, impassively. "Formerly that is to say. Now only the first. You have heard of such a thing as a vendetta, I suppose, Miss Wyatt?"

"Of course."

"Well, I come of the race among which that institution is pre-eminently supposed to flourish. Philip's father injured me, and I foredoomed the son from his cradle to be the means of avenging that injury upon the father. And when the time came—he did so."

"And you are such a monster as to come here and gloat over it!" said Alma, recoiling from him in a perfect horror of repulsion. But the other was unmoved. A wintry ghost of a smile drooped the corners of his mouth. He looked at her for a moment and went on.

"By no means. I saved his life more than once—and twice after that I gave him his life."

"Gave him his life?"

“Yes. Are you aware that he challenged me, and I met him?”

“I had heard of it.”

“Well, we exchanged shots twice; rather, I let him have two shots at me, while I—blazed away at the heavens. He could have had a dozen if he wished, but the seconds did not. I am a dead shot, and I was not going to fire at him. Now, am I such a monster?”

“Go on.”

“Well, his bullet hit me, and I shall never walk straight again. It hit me—exactly where I wounded his father when Philip himself was hardly out of his cradle. But I bore him not the slightest grudge for that—nor do I. My vendetta was accomplished. It had to be done, and it was done. Yet several times I wavered. The chances were even that I would spare him, for I had grown fond of the boy. And, Miss Wyatt, yours is the hand that turned the scale against him.”

“Mine? What do you mean?”

“Yours. I mean just that. You were in such a hurry to send him to the right-about, to condemn him unheard, that you threw him back into my power again. My power against him could not have stood against yours—but you threw yours away. Afterwards it was too late.”

Oh the anguish of her heart as she listened! This man was reiterating word for word what Philip himself had said. Why had she been in such a hurry to condemn him unheard? Well, her whole life now was destined to be an expiation of that one act of hard and merciless pride. Fordham, who had been watching her keenly, with a feeling, half grim, half sorrowful at his heart, continued:

“That marriage of his was brought about solely by me. You may or may not have guessed that, yourself apart, there was every reason why that particular alliance could have been nothing but absolutely disastrous to him. Well, into the particulars I need not go—especially for your enlightenment. Suffice it to say that the measure was brought about for the purposes of my lifelong feud, of which it was the crowning act. And now his wife is dead.”

Every vestige of colour forsook Alma’s cheeks. What infinite possibilities might not the future have opened out?

“Dead?” she echoed. “How? When?”

“Yes—dead. She died suddenly—the day before poor Philip’s own end. But it was a day too late. Had it occurred a day earlier he would have heard of it, and would not have been in the Mont Blanc blow-up.”

“Was she—was she—fond of him?” gasped Alma.

“Passionately, I am told; and that was a factor in the carrying out of my vendetta.” And then, backing against the iron railing of the jetty to rest his lame leg, Fordham continued deliberately, “So you see, if he had landed here at Ouchy, when you did, instead of deciding to go on further, Philip would now be a free man as well as a living one. But that is the way of the world—our blessings, when they come to us, invariably do so a day too late.”

Fordham was right.