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Mitford B.

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Содержание

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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The said "dog" had withdrawn some yards from the speaker, and was standing with his back against the bulwarks apparently lost in contemplation of the scenery of the Savoy side.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.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.