

ROBERT

MICHAEL

BALLANTYNE

RIVERS OF ICE

Robert Michael Ballantyne

Rivers of Ice

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R. M. Ballantyne

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Chapter One.

The Rover's Return

On a certain summer morning, about the middle of the present century, a big bluff man, of seafaring aspect, found himself sauntering in a certain street near London Bridge. He was a man of above fifty, but looked under forty in consequence of the healthful vigour of his frame, the freshness of his saltwater face, and the blackness of his shaggy hair.

Although his gait, pilot-cloth coat, and pocketed hands proclaimed him a sailor, there were one or two contradictory points about him. A huge beard and moustache savoured more of the diggings than the deep, and a brown wide-awake with a prodigiously broad brim suggested the backwoods.

Pausing at the head of one of those narrow lanes which—running down between warehouses, filthy little rag and bone shops, and low poverty-stricken dwellings—appear to terminate their career, not unwillingly, in the Thames, the sailor gazed before him with nautical earnestness for a few seconds, then glanced at the corner house for a name; found no name; cast his eyes up to the strip of blue sky overhead, as if for inspiration; obtained none; planted his legs wide apart as if he had observed a squall coming, and expected the lane to lurch heavily—wrinkled his eyebrows, and pursed his lips.

“Lost yer bearin’s, capp’n?” exclaimed a shrill pert voice at his side.

The seaman looked down, and beheld a small boy with a head like a disorderly door-mat, and garments to match. He stood in what may be styled an imitative attitude, with his hands thrust into his ragged pockets, his little legs planted wide apart, his cap thrust well back on his head, and his eyebrows wrinkled. He also pursed his lips to such an extent that they resembled a rosebud in a dirty bush.

“Yes, imp,” replied the seaman—he meant to have said “impudence,” but stopped at the first syllable as being sufficiently appropriate—“yes, imp, I *have* lost my bearings, and I’ll give you a copper if you’ll help me to find ’em.”

“Wot sort o’ copper?” demanded the urchin, “there’s three sorts of ’em, you know, in this ’ere kingdom—which appears to be a queendom at present—there’s a farding and a ha’penny and a penny. I mention it, capp’n,” he added apologetically, “in case you don’t know, for you look as if you’d come from furrin parts.”

The seaman’s look of surprise melted into a broad grin of amusement while this speech was being fluently delivered. At its conclusion he pulled out a penny and held it up.

“Well, it ain’t much,” said the small boy, “and I ain’t used to hire myself out so cheap. However, as you seem to be rather poorly off, I don’t mind if I lend you a hand for that. Only, please, don’t mention it among your friends, as it would p’raps lower their opinion of you, d’you see? Now then w’ot d’you want to know?”

To this the “capp’n,” still smiling at the small boy’s precocious insolence, replied that he was in search of an old woman who dwelt in a small court styled Grubb’s Court, so he was told, which lay somewhere in that salubrious neighbourhood, and asked if he, the imp, knew of such a place.

“Know’s of it? I should think I does. W’y, I lives there. It’s right down at the foot o’ this ’ere lane, an’ a very sweet ’ristocratik spot it is—quite a perninsular, bein’ land, leastwise mud, a’most surrounded by water, the air bein’ ighly condoosive to the ’ealth of rats, likewise cats. As to old women, there’s raither a broad sprinklin’ of ’em in the court, rangin’ from the ages of seventy to a hundred an twenty, more or less, an’ you’ll take some time to go over ’em all, capp’n, if you don’t know your old woman’s name.”

“Her name is Roby—,” said the seaman.

“O, Roby? ah,” returned the small boy, looking sedately at the ground, “let me see—yes, that’s the name of the old ’ooman, I think, wot ’angs out in the cabin, right-’and stair, top floor, end of the passage, w’ere most wisiters flattens their noses, by consekince of there bein’ no light, and a step close to the door which invariably trips ’em up. Most wisiters to that old ’ooman begins their acquaintance with her by knocking at her door with their noses instead of their knuckles. We calls her place the cabin, ’cause the windows is raither small, and over’angs the river.”

“Well then, my lad,” said the seaman, “clap a stopper on your tongue, if you can, and heave ahead.”

“All right, capp’n,” returned the small boy, “foller me, an’ don’t be frightened. Port your helm a bit here, there’s a quicksand in the middle o’ the track—so, steady!”

Avoiding a large pool of mud with which the head of the lane was garnished, and which might have been styled the bathing, not to say wallowing, quarters of the Grubb’s Court juveniles, the small boy led the bluff seaman towards the river without further remark, diverging only once from the straight road for a few seconds, for the purpose of making a furious rush at a sleeping cat with a yell worthy of a Cherokee savage, or a locomotive whistle; a slight pleasantry which had the double effect of shooting the cat through space in glaring convulsions, and filling the small boy’s mind with the placidity which naturally follows a great success.

The lane presented this peculiarity, that the warehouses on its left side became more and more solid and vast and tall as they neared the river, while the shops and dwellings on its right became poorer, meaner, and more diminutive in the same direction, as if there were some mysterious connection between them, which involved the adversity of the one in exact proportion to the prosperity of the other. Children and cats appeared to be the chief day-population of the place, and these disported themselves among the wheels of enormous waggons, and the legs of elephantine horses with an impunity which could only have been the result of life-long experience.

The seaman was evidently unaccustomed to such scenes, for more than once during the short period of his progress down the lane, he uttered an exclamation of alarm, and sprang to the rescue of those large babies which are supposed to have grown sufficiently old to become nursing mothers to smaller babies—acts which were viewed with a look of pity by the small boy, and called from him the encouraging observations, “Keep your mind easy, capp’n; *they’re* all right, bless you; the hosses knows ’em, and wouldn’t ’urt ’em on no account.”

“This is Grubb’s Court,” said the boy, turning sharply to the right and passing through a low archway.

“Thank ’ee, lad,” said the seaman, giving him a sixpence.

The small boy opened his eyes very wide indeed, exclaiming, “Hallo! I say, capp’n, wot’s this?” at the same time, however, putting the coin in his pocket with an air which plainly said, “Whether you’ve made a mistake or not, you needn’t expect to get it back again.”

Evidently the seaman entertained no such expectations, for he turned away and became absorbed in the scene around him.

It was not cheering. Though the summer sun was high and powerful, it failed to touch the broken pavement of Grubb’s Court, or to dry up the moisture which oozed from it and crept up the walls of the surrounding houses. Everything was very old, very rotten, very crooked, and very dirty. The doorways round the court were wide open—always open—in some cases, because of there being no doors; in other cases, because the tenements to which they led belonged to a variety of families, largely composed of children who could not, even on tiptoe, reach or manipulate door-handles. Nursing mothers of two feet high were numerous, staggering about with nurslings of a foot and a half long. A few of the nurslings, temporarily abandoned by the premature mothers, lay sprawling—in some cases squalling—on the moist pavement, getting over the ground like large snails, and leaving slimy tracks behind them. Little boys, of the “City Arab” type, were sprinkled here and there, and one or

two old women sat on door-steps contemplating the scene, or conversing with one or two younger women. Some of the latter were busy washing garments so dirty, that the dirty water of old Father Thames seemed quite a suitable purifier.

“Gillie,” cried one of the younger women referred to, wiping the soap-suds from her red arms, “come here, you bad, naughty boy. W’ere ’ave you bin? I want you to mind baby.”

“W’y, mother,” cried the small boy—who answered to the name of Gillie—“don’t you see I’m engaged? I’m a-showin’ this ’ere sea-capp’n the course he’s got to steer for port. He wants to make the cabin of old mother Roby.”

“W’y don’t you do it quickly, then?” demanded Gillie’s mother, “you bad, naughty, wicked boy. Beg your parding, sir,” she added, to the seaman, “the boy ’an’t got no sense, besides bein’ wicked and naughty—’e ain’t ’ad no train’, sir, that’s w’ere it is, all along of my ’avin’ too much to do, an’ a large family, sir, with no ’usband to speak of; right up the stair, sir, to the top, and along the passage-door straight before you at the hend of it. Mind the step, sir, w’en you gits up. Go up with the gentleman, you bad, wicked, naughty boy, and show—”

The remainder of the sentence became confused in distance, as the boy and the seaman climbed the stair; but a continuous murmuring sound, as of a vocal torrent, conveyed the assurance that the mother of Gillie was still holding forth.

“’Ere it is,” said the young pilot, pausing at the top of the staircase, near the entrance to a very dark passage. “Keep ’er ’ead as she goes, but I’d recommend you to shorten sail, mind your ’elm, an ’ave the anchor ready to let go.”

Having thus accommodated his language to the supposed intelligence of the seaman, the elfin youth stood listening with intense eagerness and expectation as the other went into the passage, and, by sundry kicks and bumps against wooden walls, gave evidence that he found the channel intricate. Presently a terrible kick occurred. This was the seaman’s toe against the step, of which he had been warned, but which he had totally forgotten; then a softer, but much heavier blow, was heard, accompanied by a savage growl—that was the seaman’s nose and forehead against old Mrs Roby’s portal.

At this, Gillie’s expectations were realised, and his joy consummated. With mischievous glee sparkling in his eyes, he hastened down to the Court to exhibit his sixpence to his mother, and to announce to all whom it might concern, that “the sea-capp’n had run his jib-boom slap through the old ’ooman’s cabin-door.”

Chapter Two.

The Seaman Takes the “Cabin” by Surprise and Storm

Without having done precisely what Gillie had asserted of him, our seaman had in truth made his way into the presence of the little old woman who inhabited “the cabin,” and stood there gazing round him as if lost in wonder; and well he might be, for the woman and cabin, besides being extremely old, were exceedingly curious, quaint, and small.

The former was wrinkled to such an extent, that you could not have found a patch of smooth skin large enough for a pea to rest on. Her teeth were all gone, back and front, and her nose, which was straight and well-formed, made almost successful attempts to meet a chin which had once been dimpled, but was now turned up. The mouth between them wore a benignant and a slightly humorous expression; the eyes, which were bright, black, and twinkling, seemed to have defied the ravages of time. Her body was much bent as she sat in her chair, and a pair of crutches leaning against the chimney-piece suggested the idea that it would not be much straighter if she stood up. She was wrapped in a large, warm shawl, and wore a high cap, which fitted so close round her little visage, that hair, if any, was undistinguishable.

The room in which she sat resembled the cabin of a ship in more respects than one. It was particularly low in the roof so low that the seaman’s hair touched it as he stood there looking round him; and across this roof ran a great beam, from which hung a variety of curious ornaments, such as a Chinese lantern, a Turkish scimitar, a New Zealand club, an Eastern shield, and the model of a full-rigged ship. Elsewhere on the walls were, an ornamented dagger, a worsted-work sampler, a framed sheet of the flags of all nations, a sou’-wester cap and oiled coat, a telescope, and a small staring portrait of a sea-captain in his “go-to-meeting” clothes, which looked very much out of keeping with his staring sunburnt face, and were a bad fit. It might have been a good likeness, and was certainly the work of one who might have raised himself to the rank of a Royal Academician if he had possessed sufficient talent and who might have painted well if he had understood the principles of drawing and colour.

The windows of the apartment, of which there were two very small square ones, looked out upon the river, and, to some extent overhung it, so that a man of sanguine temperament might have enjoyed fishing from them, if he could have been content to catch live rats and dead cats. The prospect from these windows was, however, the best of them, being a wide reach of the noble river, crowded with its stately craft, and cut up by its ever-bustling steamers. But the most noteworthy part of this room, or “cabin,” was the space between the two windows immediately over the chimney-piece, which the eccentric old woman had covered with a large, and, in some cases, inappropriate assortment of objects, by way of ornament, each article being cleaned and polished to the highest possible condition of which it was susceptible. A group of five photographs of children—three girls and two boys, looking amazed—formed the centrepiece of the design; around these were five other photographs of three young ladies and two young gentlemen, looking conscious, but pleased. The spaces between these, and every available space around them, were occupied by pot-lids of various sizes, old and battered, but shining like little suns; small looking-glasses, also of various sizes, some square and others round; little strings of beads; heads of meerschaums that had been much used in former days; pin-cushions, shell-baskets, one or two horse-shoes, and iron-heels of boots; several flat irons belonging to doll’s houses, with a couple of dolls, much the worse for wear, mounting guard over them; besides a host of other nick-nacks, for which it were impossible to find names or imagine uses. Everything—from the old woman’s cap to the uncarpeted floor, and the little grate in which a little fire was making feeble efforts to warm a little tea-kettle with a defiant spout—was scrupulously neat, and fresh, and clean, very much the reverse of what one might have expected to find in connection

with a poverty-stricken population, a dirty lane, a filthy court, a rickety stair, and a dark passage. Possibly the cause might have been found in a large and much-worn family Bible, which lay on a small table in company with a pair of tortoiseshell spectacles, at the old woman's elbow.

On this scene the nautical man stood gazing, as we have said, with much interest; but he was too polite to gaze long.

"Your servant, missis," he said with a somewhat clumsy bow.

"Good morning, sir," said the little old woman, returning the bow with the air of one who had once seen better society than that of Grubb's Court.

"Your name is Roby, I believe," continued the seaman, advancing, and looking so large in comparison with the little room that he seemed almost to fill it.

The little old woman admitted that that was her name.

"My name," said the seaman, "is Wopper, tho' I'm oftener called Skipper, also Capp'n, by those who know me."

Mrs Roby pointed to a chair and begged Captain Wopper to sit down, which he did after bestowing a somewhat pointed glance at the chair, as if to make sure that it could bear him.

"You was a nuss once, I'm told," continued the seaman, looking steadily at Mrs Roby as he sat down.

"I was," answered the old woman, glancing at the photographs over the chimney-piece, "in the same family for many years."

"You'll excuse me, ma'am," continued the seaman, "if I appear something inquisitive, I want to make sure that I've boarded the right craft d'ee see—I mean, that you are the right 'ooman."

A look of surprise, not unmingled with humour, beamed from Mrs Roby's twinkling black eyes as she gazed steadily in the seaman's face, but she made no other acknowledgment of his speech than a slight inclination of her head, which caused her tall cap to quiver. Captain Wopper, regarding this as a favourable sign, went on.

"You was once, ma'am, I'm told, before bein' a nuss in the family of which you've made mention, a matron, or somethin' o' that sort, in a foundlin' hospital—in your young days, ma'am?"

Again Mrs Roby admitted the charge, and demanded to know, "what then?"

"Ah, jus' so—that's what I'm comin' to," said Captain Wopper, drawing his large hand over his beard. "You was present in that hospital, ma'am, was you not, one dark November morning, when a porter-cask was left at the door by some person unknown, who cut his cable and cleared off before the door was opened,—which cask, havin' on its head two X's, and bein' labelled, 'This side up, with care,' contained two healthy little babby boys?"

Mrs Roby, becoming suddenly grave and interested, again said, "I was."

"Jus' so," continued the captain, "you seem to be the right craft—'ooman, I mean—that I'm in search of. These two boys, who were supposed to be brothers, because of their each havin' a brown mole of exactly the same size and shape on their left arms, just below their elbows, were named 'Stout,' after the thing in which they was headed up, the one bein' christened James, the other Willum?"

"Yes, yes," replied the little old woman eagerly, "and a sweet lovely pair they was when the head of that barrel was took off, lookin' out of the straw in which they was packed like two little cheruphims, though they did smell strong of the double X, and was a little elevated because of the fumes that 'ung about the wood. But how do you come to know all this, sir, and why do you ask?"

"Excuse me, ma'am," replied the sailor with a smile, which curled up his huge moustache expressively,—“you shall know presently, but I must make quite sure that I'm aboard of—that is to say, that you *are* the right 'ooman. May I ask, ma'am, what became of these two cheruphims, as you've very properly named 'em?"

"Certainly," answered Mrs Roby, "the elder boy—we considered him the elder, because he was the first took out of the barrel—was a stocious lad, and clever. He got into a railway company, I believe, and became a rich man—married a lady, I'm told,—and changed his name to Stoutley, so 'tis

said, not thinkin' his right name suitable to his circumstances, which, to say truth, it wasn't, because he was very thin. I've heard it said that his family was extravagant, and that he went to California to seek his brother, and look after some property, and died there, but I'm not rightly sure, for he was a close boy, and latterly I lost all knowledge of him and his family."

"And the other cheruphim, Willum," said the sailor, "what of him?"

"Ah!" exclaimed Mrs Roby, a flush suffusing her wrinkled countenance, while her black eyes twinkled more than usual, "he was a jewel, *he* was. They said in the hospital that he was a wild good-for-nothing boy, but *I* never thought him so. He was always fond of me—very fond of me, and I of him. It is true he could never settle to anythink, and at last ran away to sea, when about twelve year old; but he didn't remain long at that either, for when he got to California, he left his ship, and was not heard of for a long time after that. I thought he was dead or drowned, but at last I got a letter from him, enclosing money, an' saying he had been up at the noo gold-diggings, an' had been lucky, dear boy, and he wanted to share his luck with me, an would never, never, forget me; but he didn't need to send me money to prove that. He has continued to send me a little every year since then;—ah! it's many, many years now,—ay, ay, many years."

She sighed, and looked wistfully at the spark of fire in the grate that was making ineffectual attempts to boil the little tea-kettle with the defiant spout; "but why," she continued, looking up suddenly, "why do you ask about him?"

"Because I knew him," replied Captain Wopper, searching for something which appeared to be lost in the depths of one of his capacious pockets. "Willum Stout was a chum of mine. We worked together at the Californy gold-mines for many a year as partners, and, when at last we'd made what we thought enough, we gave it up an' came down to San Francisco together, an' set up a hotel, under the name of the 'Jolly Tars,' by Stout and Company. I was the Company, ma'am; an', for the matter o' that I may say I was the Stout too, for both of us answered to the Stout or the Company, accordin' as we was addressed, d'ee see? When Company thought he'd made enough money to entitle him to a holiday, he came home, as you see; but before leavin', Willum said to him, 'Company, my lad, w'en you get home, you'll go and see that old 'oom of the name of Roby, whom I've often told you about. She lives in Lunun, somewheres down by the river in a place called Grubb's Court. She was very good to me, that old 'oom was, when she was young, as I've told you before. You go an' give her my blessin'—Willum's blessin'—and this here bag and that there letter.' 'Yes,' says I, 'Willum, I'll do it, my boy, as soon as ever I set futt on British soil.' I did set futt on British soil this morning, and there's the letter; also the bag; so, you see, old lady, I've kep' my promise."

Captain Wopper concluded by placing a small but heavy canvas bag, and a much-soiled letter, in Mrs Roby's lap.

To say that the little old woman seized the letter with eager delight, would convey but a faint idea of her feelings as she opened it with trembling hands, and read it with her bright black eyes.

She read it half aloud, mingled with commentary, as she proceeded, and once or twice came to a pause over an illegible word, on which occasions her visitor helped her to the word without looking at the letter. This circumstance struck her at last as somewhat singular, for she looked up suddenly, and said, "You appear, sir, to be familiar with the contents of my letter."

"That's true, ma'am," replied Captain Wopper, who had been regarding the old woman with a benignant smile; "Willum read it to me before I left, a-purpose to enable me to translate the ill-made pot-hooks and hangers, because, d'ee see, we were more used to handlin' the pick and shovel out there than the pen, an' Willum used to say he never was much of a dab at a letter. He never wrote you very long ones, ma'am, I believe?"

Mrs Roby looked at the fire pensively, and said, in a low voice, as if to herself rather than her visitor, "No, they were not long—never very long—but always kind and sweet to me—very sweet—ay, ay, it's a long, long time now, a long time, since he came to me here and asked for a night's lodging."

“Did you give it him, ma’am?” asked the captain. “Give it him!” exclaimed Mrs Roby, with sudden energy, “of course I did. The poor boy was nigh starving. How could I refuse him? It is true I had not much to give, for the family I was with as nuss had failed and left me in great distress, through my savings bein’ in their hands; and that’s what brought me to this little room long, long ago—ay, ay. But no blame to the family, sir, no blame at all. They couldn’t help failin’, an’ the young ones, when they grew up, did not forget their old nuss, though they ain’t rich, far from it; and it’s what they give me that enables me to pay my rent and stay on here—God bless ’em.”

She looked affectionately at the daguerreotypes which hung, in the midst of the sheen and glory of pot-lids, beads, and looking-glasses, above the chimney-piece.

“You gave him, meanin’ Willum, nothing else, I suppose?” asked the captain, with a knowing look; “such, for instance, as a noo suit of clothes, because of his bein’ so uncommon ragged that he looked as if he had bin captured in a clumsy sort of net that it would not have been difficult to break through and escape from naked; also a few shillin’s, bein’ your last, to pay his way down to Gravesend, where the ship was lyin’, that you had, through interest with the owners, got him a berth aboard?”

“Ah!” returned Mrs Roby, shaking her head and smiling gently, “I see that William has told you all about it.”

“He has, ma’am,” replied Captain Wopper, with a decisive nod. “You see, out in the gold-fields of Californy, we had long nights together in our tent, with nothin’ to do but smoke our pipes, eat our grub, and spin yarns, for we had no books nor papers, nothin’ to read except a noo Testament, and we wouldn’t have had even that, ma’am, but for yourself. It was the Testament you gave to Willum at partin’, an’ very fond of it he was, bein’ your gift. You see, at the time we went to Californy, there warn’t many of us as cared for the Word of God. Most of us was idolaters that had run away from home, our chief gods—for we had many of ’em—bein’ named Adventure, Excitement and Gold; though there was some noble exceptions, too. But, as I was saying, we had so much time on our hands that we recalled all our past adventures together over and over again, and, you may be sure, ma’am, that your name and kindness was not forgotten. There was another name,” continued Captain Wopper, drawing his chair nearer the fire, crossing his legs and stroking his beard as he looked up at the dingy ceiling, “that Willum often thought about and spoke of. It was the name of a gentleman, a clerk in the Customs, I believe, who saved his life one day when he fell into the river just below the bridge.”

“Mr Lawrence,” said the old woman, promptly.

“Ah! Mr Lawrence; yes, that’s the name,” continued the Captain. “Willum was very grateful to him, and bid me try to find him out and tell him so. Is he alive?”

“Dead,” said Mrs Roby, shaking her head sadly.

The seaman appeared much concerned on hearing this. For some time he did not speak, and then said that he had been greatly interested in that gentleman through Willum’s account of him.

“Had he left any children?”

“Yes,” Mrs Roby told him; “one son, who had been educated as a doctor, and had become a sort of a city missionary, and was as pleasant a young gentleman as she ever knew.”

“So, then, you know him?” said the Captain.

“Know him! I should think so. Why, this is the district where he visits, and a kind friend he is to the poor, though he *is* bashful a bit, an’ seems to shrink from pushin’ himself where he’s not wanted.”

“Not the less a friend to the poor on that account,” thought Captain Wopper; but he said nothing, and Mrs Roby went on:—

“You see, his father before him did a great deal for the poor in a quiet way here, as I have reason to know, this district lying near his office, and handy, as it were. Long after the time when he saved Willum’s life, he married a sweet young creeter, who helped him in visitin’ the poor, but she caught fever among ’em and died, when their only son George was about ten year old. George had been goin’ about with his mother on her visits, and seemed very fond of her and of the people, dear child; and after she died, he used to continue coming with his father. Then he went to school and college and

became a young doctor, and only last year he came back to us, so changed for the better that none of us would have known him but for his kindly voice and fine manly-looking manner. His shyness, too, has stuck to him a little, but it does not seem to hinder him now as it once did. Ah!" continued Mrs Roby, in a sympathetic tone, "it's a great misfortune to be shy."

She looked pensively at the little fire and shook her tall cap at it, as if it or the defiant tea-kettle were answerable for something in reference to shyness.

"Yes, it's a great misfortune to be shy," she repeated. "Were you ever troubled with that complaint, Captain Wopper?"

The Captain's moustache curled at the corners as he stroked his beard, and said that really, on consideration, he was free to confess that he never had been convicted of that sin.

Mrs Roby bestowed on him a look of admiration, and continued, "Well, as I have said—"

She was interrupted at this point by the entrance of an active little girl, with the dirtiest face and sweetest expression imaginable, with garments excessively ragged, blue eyes that sparkled as they looked at you, a mouth that seemed made for kissing, if only it had been clean, and golden hair that would have fallen in clustering curls on her neck, if it had not been allowed to twist itself into something like a yellow door-mat which rendered a bonnet unnecessary.

Bestowing a glance of surprise on the seaman, but without uttering a word, she went smartly to a corner and drew into the middle of the room a round table with one leg and three feet, whose accommodating top having been previously flat against the wall, fell down horizontal and fixed itself with a snap. On this the earnest little woman, quickly and neatly, spread a fairish linen cloth, and proceeded to arrange thereon a small tea-pot and cup and saucer, with other materials, for an early tea.

"Two cups, Netta, my dear," said Mrs Roby.

"Yes, grannie," replied Netta, in a soft quick, little voice.

"Your grandchild?" asked the Captain.

"No; a neighbour's child, who is very kind to me. She calls me grannie, because I like it. But, as I was saying," continued Mrs Roby, "young Dr Lawrence came back last year and began to visit us in the old way, intending to continue, he said, until he got a situation of some sort in the colonies, I believe; but I do hope he'll not be obliged to leave us, for he has bin a great blessin' to this neighbourhood, only he gets little pay for his work, I fear, and appears to have little of his own to live on, poor young man.—Now, Captain Wopper, you'll stop and have a cup of tea with me. I take it early, you see,—in truth, I make a sort of dinner of it,—and we can have a talk about William over it. I'm proud to have a friend of his at my table, sir, I do assure you, though it *is* a poor one."

Captain Wopper accepted the invitation heartily, and thought, though he said nothing, that it was indeed a poor table, seeing that the only food on it besides the very weak tea in the wonderfully small pot, consisted of one small loaf of bread.

"Netta," exclaimed Mrs Roby, with a look of surprise, "there's no butter! Go, fetch it, dear."

Mrs Roby was, or thought herself, a remarkably deep character. She spoke to Netta openly, but, in secret, bestowed a meaning glance on her, and slipped a small coin into her hand. The dirty, sweet-faced damsel replied by a remarkably knowing wink—all of which by-play, with the reason for it, was as clear to Captain Wopper as if it had been elaborately explained to him. But the Captain was a discreet man. He became deeply absorbed in daguerreotypes and sauce-pan lids above the fireplace, to the exclusion of all else.

"You've forgotten the bag, ma'am," said the Captain, drawing his chair nearer the table.

"So I have; dear me, what is it?" cried Mrs Roby, taking it up. "It's heavy."

"Gold!" said the Captain.

"Gold?" exclaimed the old nurse.

"Ay, nuggets," said the seaman, opening it and emptying its contents on the table.

As the old nurse gazed on the yellow heap her black eyes glittered with pleasure, as though they had derived additional lustre from the precious metal, and she drew them towards her with a trembling, almost greedy, motion, at sight of which Captain Wopper's countenance became troubled.

"And did Willie send this to me, dear boy?"

"He did, ma'am, hoping that it would be of use in the way of making your home more comfortable, and enabling you to keep a better table."

He glanced uneasily round the poor room and at the small loaf as he spoke, and the old woman observed the glance.

"It is very kind of him, very kind," continued Mrs Roby. "What may it be worth, now?"

"Forty pounds, more or less," answered the Captain.

Again the old woman's eyes sparkled greedily, and again the seaman's countenance fell.

"Surely, ma'am," said the Captain, gravely, "things must be uncommon dear in London, for you tell me that Willum has sent you a deal of money in time past, but you don't seem to be much the better for it."

"Captain Wopper," said Mrs Roby, putting her hand lightly on the Captain's arm as it lay on the table, and looking earnestly into his face, "if you had not been an old and valued friend of my dear Willie—which I learn that you are from his letter—I would have said your remark was a rude one; but, being what you are, I don't mind telling you that I save up every penny I can scrape together for little Netta White, the girl that has just gone out to fetch the butter. Although she's not well cared for,—owing to her mother, who's a washerwoman, bein' overburdened with work and a drunken husband,—she's one of the dearest creeters I ever did see. Bless you, sir, you'd be amazed if you knew all the kind and thoughtful things that untrained and uncared for child does, and never thinks she's doing anything more than other people. It's all along of her mother's spirit, which is as good as gold. Some months ago Little Netta happened to be up here when I was at tea, and, seeing the difficulty I had to move about with my old rheumatic limbs, she said she'd come and set out my tea and breakfast for me; and she's done it, sir, from that time to this, expecting nothing for it, and thinking I'm too poor to give her anything. But she's mistaken," continued Mrs Roby, with a triumphant twinkle in her black eyes, "she doesn't know that I've made a confidant of her brother Gillie, and give him a sixpence now and then to give to his mother without telling where he got it, and she doesn't know that I'm saving up to be able to leave something to her when I'm called home—it can't be long, now; it can't be long."

"Old 'ooman," cried Captain Wopper, whose face had brightened wonderfully during this explanation, "give us your flip—your hand. I honour your heart, ma'am, and I've no respect whatever for your brain!"

"I'm not sure that that's a compliment," said Mrs Roby, with a smile.

Captain Wopper assured her with much solemnity that it might or might not be a compliment, but it was a fact. "Why, look here," said he, "you go and starve yourself, and deny yourself all sorts of little comforts—what then? Why, you'll die long before your time, which is very like taking the law into your own hands, ma'am, and then you won't leave to Netta nearly as much as you might if you had taken care of yourself and lived longer, and saved up after a reasonable fashion. It's sheer madness. Why, ma'am, you're starving *now*, but I'll put a stop to that. Don't you mind, now, whether I'm rude or not. You can't expect anything else from an old gold-digger, who has lived for years where there were no women except such as appeared to be made of mahogany, with nothing to cover 'em but a coating of dirt and a blue skirt. Besides, Willum told me at parting to look after you and see that you wanted for nothing, which I promised faithfully to do. You've some regard for Willum's wishes, ma'am?—you wouldn't have me break my promises to Willum, would you?"

The Captain said this with immense rapidity and vigour, and finished it with such a blow of his heavy fist on the little table that the cups and plates danced, and the lid of the little tea-pot leaped up as if its heart were about to come out of its mouth. Mrs Roby was so taken by surprise that she

could not speak for a few seconds, and before she had recovered sufficiently to do so, Little Netta came in with the butter.

“Now, ma’am,” resumed the Captain, when the girl had retired, “here’s where it is. With your leave I’ll reveal my plans to you, and ask your advice. When I was about to leave Californy, Willum told me first of all to go and find *you* out, and give you that letter and bag of nuggets, which I’ve done. ‘Then,’ says he, ‘Wopper, you go and find out my brother Jim’s widow, and give ’em my love an’ dooty, and this letter, and this bag of nuggets,’—said letter and bag, ma’am, bein’ now in my chest aboard ship. ‘So,’ says I, ‘Willum, I will—trust me.’ ‘I do,’ says he; ‘and, Wopper,’ says he, ‘keep your weather eye open, my boy, w’en you go to see ’em, because I’ve my suspicions, from what my poor brother said on his deathbed, when he was wandering in his mind, that his widow is extravagant. I don’t know,’ Willum goes on to say, ‘what the son may be, but there’s that cousin, Emma Gray, that lives in the house with ’em, *she’s* all right. *She’s* corresponded with me, off an’ on, since ever she could write, and my brother bein’ something lazy, poor fellar, through havin’ too much to do I fancy, got to throw all the letter-writin’ on her shoulders. You take special note of *her*, Wopper, and if it should seem to you that they don’t treat her well, you let me know.’ ‘Willum,’ says I, ‘I will—trust me.’ ‘Well, then,’ says Willum, ‘there’s one other individooal I want you to ferret out, that’s the gentleman—he must be an old gentleman now—that saved my life when I was a lad, Mr Lawrence by name. You try to find *him* out and if you can do him a good turn, do it.’ ‘Willum,’ says I, ‘I’ll do it—trust me.’ ‘I do,’ says he, ‘and when may I expect you back in Californy, Wopper?’ ‘Willum,’ says I, ‘that depends.’ ‘True,’ says he, ‘it does. Give us you’re flipper, old boy, we may never meet again in these terrestrial diggings. Good luck to you. Don’t forget my last will an’ testimony as now expressed.’ ‘Willum,’ says I, ‘I won’t.’ So, ma’am, I left Californy with a sacred trust, so to speak, crossed the sea, and here I am.”

At this point Captain Wopper, having warmed in his subject, took in at one bite as much of the small loaf as would have been rather a heavy dinner for Mrs Roby, and emptied at one gulp a full cup of her tea, after which he stroked his beard, smiled benignantly at his hostess, became suddenly earnest again, and went on—chewing as he spoke.

“Now, ma’am, I’ve three questions to ask: in the first place, as it’s not possible now to do a good turn to old Mr Lawrence, I must do it to his son. Can you tell me where he lives?”

Mrs Roby told him that it was in a street not far from where they sat, in a rather poor lodging.

“Secondly, ma’am, can you tell me where Willum’s sister-in-law lives,—Mrs Stout, *alias* Stoutley?”

“No, Captain Wopper, but I daresay Mr Lawrence can. He knows ’most everythink, and has a London Directory.”

“Good. Now, in the third place, where am I to find a lodging?”

Mrs Roby replied that there were plenty to be found in London of all kinds.

“You haven’t a spare room here, have you?” said the Captain, looking round.

Mrs Roby shook her head and said that she had not; and, besides, that if she had, it would be impossible for her to keep a lodger, as she had no servant, and could not attend on him herself.

“Mrs Roby,” said the Captain, “a gold-digging seaman don’t want no servant, nor no attendance. What’s up aloft?”

By pointing to a small trap-door in the ceiling, he rendered the question intelligible.

“It’s a garret, I believe,” replied Mrs Roby, smiling; “but having no ladder, I’ve never been up.”

“You’ve no objection to my taking a look, have you?” asked the Captain.

“None in the world,” replied the old woman. Without more ado the seaman rose, mounted on a chair, pushed open the trap-door, thrust his head and shoulders through, and looked round. Apparently the inspection was not deemed sufficiently close, for, to the old woman’s alarm and inexpressible surprise, he seized the edges of the hole with his strong hands, raised himself up, and finally disappeared in the regions above! The alarm of the old woman was somewhat increased by the sound of her visitor’s heavy tread on the boards overhead as he stumbled about. Presently his

head appeared looking down through the trap. In any aspect, Captain Wopper's shaggy head was an impressive one; but viewed in an upside-down position, with the blood running into it, it was peculiarly striking.

"I say, old lady," he shouted, as if his position recalled the action and induced the tones of a boatswain, "it'll do. A capital berth, with two portholes and a bunk."

The Captain's head disappeared, and immediately his legs took its place, suggesting the outrageous idea that he had thrown a somersault. Next moment his huge body slid down, and he stood on the floor much flushed and covered with dust.

"Now, old girl, is it to be?" he said, sitting down at the table. "Will you take me as a lodger, for better and for worse? I'll fit up the berth on the main-deck, and be my own servant as well as your's. Say the word."

"I can refuse nothing to Willie's friend," said old Mrs Roby, "but really I—"

"Done, it's a bargain," interrupted the Captain, rising abruptly. "Now, I'll go visit young Mr Lawrence and Mrs Stoutley, and to-morrow I'll bring my kit, take possession of my berth, and you and I shall sail in company, I hope, and be messmates for some time to come."

Chapter Three.

Difficulties among the Social Summits

In one of the many mansions of the “west end” of London, a lady reclined one morning on a sofa wishing that it were afternoon. She was a middle-aged, handsome, sickly lady. If it had been afternoon she would have wished that it were evening, and if it had been evening she would have wished for the morning; for Mrs Stoutley was one of those languid invalids whose enjoyment appears to be altogether in the future or the past, and who seem to have no particular duties connected with the present except sighing and wishing. It may be that this unfortunate condition of mind had something to do with Mrs Stoutley’s feeble state of health. If she had been a little more thoughtful about others, and less mindful of herself, she might, perhaps, have sighed and wished less, and enjoyed herself more. At all events her doctor seemed to entertain some such opinion, for, sitting in an easy chair beside her, and looking earnestly at her handsome, worn-out countenance, he said, somewhat abruptly, being a blunt doctor.

“You must go abroad, madam, and try to get your mind, as well as your body, well shaken up.”

“Why, doctor,” replied Mrs Stoutley, with a faint smile; “you talk of me as if I were a bottle of physic or flat ginger-beer.”

“You are little better, silly woman,” thought the doctor, but his innate sense of propriety induced him only to say, with a smile, “Well, there is at least this much resemblance between you and a bottle of flat ginger-beer, namely, that both require to be made to effervesce a little. It will never do to let your spirits down as you have been doing. We must brighten up, my dear madam—not Brighton up, by the way, we’ve had enough of Brighton and Bath, and such places. We must get away to the Continent this summer—to the Pyrenees, or Switzerland, where we can breathe the fresh mountain air, and ramble on glaciers, and have a thorough change.”

Mrs Stoutley looked gently, almost pitifully at the doctor while he spoke, as if she thought him a well-meaning and impulsive, but rather stupid maniac.

“Impossible, my dear doctor,” she said; “you know I could not stand the fatigues of such a journey.”

“Well, then,” replied the doctor, abruptly, “you must stop at home and die.”

“Oh! what a shocking naughty man you are to talk so.”

Mrs Stoutley said this, however, with an easy good-natured air, which showed plainly that she did not believe her illness likely to have such a serious termination.

“I will be still more naughty and shocking,” continued the doctor, resolutely, but with a twinkle in his eyes, “for I shall prescribe not only a dose of mountain air, but a dose of mountain exercise, to be taken—and the patient to be well shaken while taken—every morning throughout the summer and autumn. Moreover, after you return to England, you must continue the exercise during the winter; and, in addition to that, must have an object at the end of your walks and drives—not shopping, observe, that is not a sufficiently out-of-door object; nor visiting your friends, which is open to the same objection.”

Mrs Stoutley smiled again at this, and said that really, if visiting and shopping were forbidden, there seemed to be nothing left but museums and picture-galleries.

To this the doctor retorted that although she might do worse than visit museums and picture-galleries, he would prefer that she should visit the diamond and gold fields of the city.

“Did you ever hear of the diamond and gold fields of London, Miss Gray?” he said, turning to a plain yet pretty girl, who had been listening in silence to the foregoing conversation.

“Never,” answered Miss Gray, with a look of surprise.

Now, Miss Gray’s look of surprise induces us to state in passing that this young lady—niece, also poor relation and companion, to Mrs Stoutley—possessed three distinct aspects. When grave,

she was plain,—not ugly, observe; a girl of nineteen, with a clear healthy complexion and nut-brown hair, cannot in any circumstances be ugly; no, she was merely plain when grave. When she smiled she was decidedly pretty, and when she laughed she was captivating—absolutely irresistible! She seldom laughed, occasionally smiled, and was generally grave. There was something quite incomprehensible about her, for she was not an unusually good girl, and by no means a dashing girl, neither was she an intensely modest girl—and yet, plain Emma Gray had perhaps driven more young men into a condition of drivelling imbecility than any acknowledged beauty of the metropolis.

Observe, we say “perhaps,” because we lay claim to no superhuman knowledge in regard to such matters.

“They are rather extensive fields,” continued the doctor, “scattered here and there about the metropolis, but lying chiefly in the city and on the banks of the Thames. They comprise many picture-galleries, too, and museums; the latter containing wonderful specimens of old bones and fossil remains, filth, and miscellaneous abominations, in which the gold and diamonds are imbedded—sometimes buried,—and the former being hung with subjects—chiefly interiors—incomparably superior, in respect of graphic power, to the works of Hogarth.”

“Oh! I know what you mean,” said Miss Gray, with a little smile.

“Your wits are sharper than mine, Emma,” said Mrs Stoutley, with a sigh and a placid look. “What *do* you refer to, Doctor Tough?”

“I refer to those districts, madam, chiefly inhabited by the poor, where there are innumerable diamonds and gold nuggets, some of which are being polished, and a good many are glittering brightly, though not yet fixed in their proper setting, while by far the greater number of them are down in the earth, and useless in the meantime, and apt to be lost for want of adventurous diggers. They are splendid fields those of London, and digging is healthful occupation—though it might not seem so at first sight. Did you ever visit the poor, Mrs Stoutley?”

With a slight elevation of her eyebrows, and the application of a scent-bottle to her delicate nose, as if the question had suggested bad smells, the lady said that—Well, yes, she had once visited a poor old gardener who had been a faithful creature in the family of a former friend, but that her recollection of that visit did not tend to induce a wish for its repetition.

“H’m!” coughed the doctor, “well, the taste of physic is usually bad at first, but one soon gets used to it, and the after effects, as you know, are exceedingly beneficial. I hope that when you visit the London diggings you may find the truth of this; but it will be time enough to speak of that subject when you return from rambling on the glaciers of Switzerland, where, by the way, the dirt, rubbish, and wrack, called moraines, which lie at the foot of the glaciers, will serve to remind you of the gold-fields to which I have referred, for much of what composes those moraines was once solid rock in a fixed position on the heights, or glittering ice which reflected the sun’s dazzling rays on surrounding high life, though it lies low in the earth now. To a lady of your intelligence, madam, I need not expound my parable. There are many avalanches, great and small, in English society as well as among the Swiss mountains; and, whether by gradual subsidence or a tremendous rush, we must all find our places in the moraine at last.”

“Really, doctor,” said Mrs Stoutley, with a light laugh, “you seem to have already wandered much among these moral moraines, and to have acquired some of their ruggedness. How *can* you talk of such dismal things to a patient? But are you really in earnest about my going abroad?”

“Indeed I am,” replied the doctor, firmly, “and I advise you to begin your preparations at once, for you must set out on your travels in less than a month. I lay the responsibility of seeing my orders carried into effect on your shoulders, Miss Gray.”

So saying, the doctor rose and took his leave. Mrs Stoutley and her niece immediately began to discuss the subject of Switzerland—the one languidly, the other with animation. It was plain enough that, although the invalid protested to the doctor her inability to travel, she really had no objection,

perhaps felt some desire, to go abroad, for when Miss Gray mentioned the fact that there was a difficulty in the shape of insufficient funds, she replied with more warmth than usual—

“Now, Emma, what is the use of always bringing up that ridiculous idea?”

“No doubt, auntie,” the maiden replied, “it is a little ridiculous to run short of ready money, considering the style in which we live; but it would be still more ridiculous, you know, to go to Switzerland without the means of paying our expenses while there.”

“What’s that you say about expenses, cousin?” exclaimed a tall handsome stripling who entered at the moment, and seated himself on the sofa at his mother’s feet.

“Oh, bother the expense!” he exclaimed, when the difficulty had been explained to him, “it can’t cost so much to spend a few months in Switzerland,—besides, we can do it cheap, you know. Didn’t Mr What’s-his-name, our man of business, say that there was a considerable balance at the banker’s, and that if the What-d’ee-call-’em mines paid a reasonable dividend, we should easily get over our difficulties?”

“He said something of that sort, I believe,” replied Mrs Stoutley, with a sigh.

“I rather think, cousin Lewis,” said Emma, endeavouring to repress a smile, “that he said there was an inconsiderable balance at the bankers, and that *unless* the Gorong mine paid a reasonable dividend, we shouldn’t easily get over our difficulties.”

Both Lewis and his mother laughed at the quiet way in which this was said, but, while both admitted that Emma’s view of the matter might perhaps be correct, Lewis held that there was no good reason for supposing there would be any difficulty in the meantime in obtaining from their “man-of-business” the paltry sum that was required for a short tour on the Continent. Indeed Mrs Stoutley regarded this man-of-business as a mere sponge, who required only to be squeezed in order to the production of what was desired, and the man-of-business himself found it no easy matter to convince her that she held erroneous views on this subject, and that at her present rate of progress, she would, to use the doctor’s glacial simile, very soon topple from the pinnacle of fashion, on which she sat, and fall with the crash of a social avalanche into the moraine of ruin.

“What a wise little woman you are, cousin Emma,” said Lewis, gaily. “You ought to have been bred to the law, or trained an accountant. However, we won’t be guided by your advice just now, first, because the doctor has *ordered* mother abroad for her health, which is our chief consideration; and, second, because I wish of all things to see Switzerland, and climb Mont Blanc. Besides, we are not so poor as you think, and I hope to add a little to our general funds in a day or two. By the way, can you lend me ten pounds just now, mother?”

“Why do you want it?” asked Mrs Stoutley, sternly, as if she meant to refuse, but at the same time opening her purse.

“Don’t ask me just now. I will repay you tomorrow, with interest and shall then explain.”

With an easy, languid smile, the carelessly amiable invalid handed her last ten-pound note to her hopeful son, who had just transferred it to his pocketbook, when a footman entered and presented a scrap of dirty paper, informing his lady that the person who sent up the “card” desired to see her.

“What is this?” said Mrs Stoutley, holding the paper gingerly with the tips of her fingers, “Wip—Wap—Wopper! What is Wopper? Is the person a man or a woman?”

The footman, who, although well-bred, found it difficult to restrain a smile, intimated that the person was a man, and added, that he said he had come from California, and wanted to see Mrs Stoutley very particularly.

On hearing this, the lady’s manner changed at once, and, with more animation than she had yet exhibited, she desired that he should be shown in.

With his large wide-awake in one hand, and a canvas bag in the other, Captain Wopper entered the drawing-room, and looked around him with a beaming and rather bashful smile.

“Mrs Stoutley, I believe,” he said, advancing, “and Miss Emma Gray, I suppose,” he added, turning with a beaming glance towards the young lady.

Mrs Stoutley admitted that he was right, and expressed some surprise that he, a perfect stranger, should be so well acquainted with their names.

“I am indeed a stranger personally, ma’am,” said Captain Wopper, smoothing the hair down on his rugged brow, “but I may be said to know you pretty well, seeing that I have for many years been the friend and messmate of your late husband’s brother in Californy.”

“Indeed!” exclaimed Mrs Stoutley, with increasing animation, as she rose and held out her hand; “any friend of my brother-in-law is heartily welcome. Be seated, Mr Wopper, and let me hear about him. He was very kind to my dear husband during his last illness—very kind. I shall never forget him.”

“No doubt he was,” said the Captain, accepting the chair which Emma Gray handed to him, with looks of great interest. “Thank ’ee, Miss. Willum Stout—excuse my familiarity, ma’am, I always called him Willum, because we was like brothers—more than brothers, I may say, an’ very friendly. Yes, Willum Stout *was* kind to his brother in his last days. It would have bin shame to him if he hadn’t for your husband, ma’am, was kind to Willum, an’ he often said to me, over the camp-fires in the bush, that he’d never forget *his* kindness. But it’s over now,” continued the seaman in a sad tone, “an’ poor Willum is left alone.”

“Is my uncle *very* poor?” asked Lewis, who had been paying more attention to the appearance of their rugged visitor than to what he had said.

“Ay, *very* poor,” replied the seaman, “as regards near relations, leastwise such as he has seen and known in former days, but he an’t poor as regards gold. He’s got lots of that. He and I worked not far from each other for years, an’ he used to hit upon good claims somehow, and shovelled up the nuggets like stones.”

“Indeed! I wish he’d send a few of them this way,” exclaimed Lewis, with a careless laugh.

“No doubt he might do so, young man, if he knew you were in need of ’em, but your father gave him to understand that his family was rich.”

“Rich!” exclaimed Lewis, with a smile, in which there was a touch of contempt. “Well, yes, we were rich enough once, but when my father was away these wretched mines became—”

“Lewie!” exclaimed his mother, hastily, “what nonsense you do talk! Really, one would think from your account that we were paupers.”

“Well, mother, so we are—paupers to this extent at least, that we can’t afford to take a run to Switzerland, though ordered to do so for your health, because we lack funds.”

Lewis said this half petulantly, for he had been a “spoilt child,” and might probably have been by that time a ruined young man, but for the mercy of his Creator, who had blessed him with an amiable disposition. He was one of those youths, in short, of whom people say that they can’t be spoiled, though fond and foolish parents do their best to spoil them.

“You mis-state the case, naughty boy,” said Mrs Stoutley, annoyed at being thus forced to touch on her private affairs before a stranger. “No doubt our ready cash is what our man-of-business calls ‘locked up,’ but that, you know, is only a matter of temporary inconvenience, and cannot last long.”

As Mrs Stoutley paused and hesitated, their visitor placed on the table a canvas bag, which, up to this point he had rested on one knee.

“This bag,” he said, “of nuggets, is a gift from Willum. He desired me to deliver it to you, Miss Gray, as a *small* acknowledgment of your kindness in writin’ so often to him. He’d have bought you a silk gown, or a noo bonnet, so he said, but wasn’t sure as to your taste in such matters, and thought you’d accept the nuggets and buy it for yourself. Leastwise, that’s somethin’ like the speech Willum tried to tell me to deliver, but he warn’t good at speech-makin’ no more than I at remembrin’, and hoped you’d take the will for the deed.”

With a flush of surprise and pleasure, Emma Gray accepted both the will and the deed, with many expressions of gratitude, and said, that as she did not require either a silk dress or a bonnet just then, she would invest her little fortune; she would lend it at high interest, to a lady under temporary inconvenience, who was ordered by her doctor to Switzerland for the benefit of her health. To this

Mrs Stoutley protested very earnestly that the lady in question would not accept the loan on any consideration; that it must not be diverted from its destined use, but be honestly expended on silk-dresses and new bonnets. To which Emma replied, that the destiny of the gift, with interest (she was very particular on that head), should be fulfilled in good time, but that meanwhile it must be lent out.

In the midst of a cross-fire of this kind the bag was opened, and its contents poured on the table, to the immense admiration of all the company, none of whom had, until that day, beheld gold in its native condition.

“How much may it be worth, Mr Wopper?” asked Lewis, weighing one of the largest lumps.

“About two hundred pound, I should say, more or less,” replied the seaman.

“Indeed!” exclaimed the youth in surprise—an exclamation which was echoed by his mother and cousin in modified tones.

While they sat thus toying with the lumps of gold, the conversation reverted to the sender of it, and the Captain told such entertaining anecdotes of bush life, in all of which “Uncle Willum” had been an actor, that the afternoon arrived before Mrs Stoutley had time to wish for it. They also talked of the last illness of the deceased father of the family; and when it came out that Captain (they had found out by that time that their visitor had been a skipper, and, by courtesy, a captain), had assisted “Willum” in nursing Mr Stoutley, and had followed him to the grave, Mrs Stoutley’s gratitude was such that she insisted on her visitor staying to dinner.

“Thank ’ee, ma’am,” he said, “I’ve dined. I always dines at one o’clock if I can manage it.”

“But we don’t dine till eight,” said the lady, “so it will just suit for your supper.”

“Do come,” said Emma Gray, “we shall be quite alone, and shall have a great spinning of yarns over Uncle William and the gold-fields.”

“Well, I don’t mind if I do,” said the Captain, “but before supper I must go to the docks for my kit and settle my lodgings.”

“I am going to the Strand, and shall be happy to give you a lift,” said Lewis.

The Captain accepted the offer, and as they drove along, he and his young friend became very intimate, insomuch that Lewis, who was lighthearted, open, and reckless, let him into his confidence, and spoke quite freely about his mother’s difficulties. It is only justice to add that the Captain did not encourage him in this. When, however, the youth spoke of himself, he not only encouraged him, but drew him out. Among other things, he drew out of him the fact that he was in the habit of gambling, and that he fully expected—if his usual luck attended him—to assist in adding to the fund which was to take the family abroad.

The Captain looked at the handsome stripling for a few seconds in silent surprise.

“You don’t mean to tell me,” he said slowly, “that you gamble?”

“Indeed I do,” replied Lewis, with a bland smile, and something of a twinkle in his eye.

“For money?” asked the Captain.

“For money,” assented the youth; “what have you to say against it?”

“Why, I’ve to say that it’s mean.”

“That’s strong language,” said Lewis, flushing.

“It an’t strong enough by a long way,” returned the Captain, with indignation, “it’s more than mean, it’s contemptible; it’s despicable.”

The flush on Lewis’s face deepened, and he looked at his companion with the air of one who meditates knocking another down. Perhaps the massive size and strength of the Captain induced him to change his mind. It may be that there occurred to him the difficulty—if not impossibility—of knocking down a man who was down already, and the want of space in a cab for such violent play of muscle. At all events he did nothing, but looked “daggers.”

“Look ’ee here, my lad,” continued the Captain, laying his huge hand on his companion’s knee, and gazing earnestly into his face, “I don’t mean for to hurt your feelin’s by sayin’ that *you* are mean, or contemptible, or despicable, for I don’t suppose you’ve thought much about the matter at all, and are

just following in the wake of older men who ought to know better; but I say that the *thing*—gambling for money—is the meanest thing a man can do, short of stealing. What does it amount to? Simply this—I want another man’s money, and the other man wants mine. We daren’t try open robbery, we would be ashamed of that; we’re both too lazy to labour for money, and labour doesn’t bring it in fast enough, therefore we’ll go *play* for it. I’ll ask him to submit to be robbed by me on condition that I submit to be robbed by him; and which is to be the robbed, and which the robber, shall depend on the accidental turn of a dice, or something equally trifling—”

“But I don’t gamble by means of dice,” interrupted Lewis, “I play, and bet, on billiards, which is a game of skill, requiring much practice, judgment, and thought.”

“That makes no odds, my lad,” continued the Captain. “There is no connection whatever between the rolling of a ball and the taking away of a man’s money, any more than there is between the turning of a dice and the taking of a man’s money. Both are dishonourable subterfuges. They are mere blinds put up to cover the great and mean fact, which is, that I want to get possession of my neighbour’s cash.”

“But, Captain,” retorted Lewis, with a smile—for he had now entered into the spirit of the argument—“you ignore the fact that while I try to win from my friend, I am quite willing that my friend should try to win from me.”

“Ignore it? no!” cried Captain Wopper. “Putt it in this way. Isn’t it wrong for me to have a longing desire and itching fingers to lay hold of *your* cash?”

“Well, put in that simple form,” said Lewis, with a laugh, “it certainly is.”

“And isn’t it equally wrong for you to have a hungering and thirsting after *my* cash?”

“Of course that follows,” assented Lewis.

“Well, then,” pursued the Captain, “can any agreement between you and me, as to the guessing of black or white or the turning of dice or anything else, make a right out of two wrongs?”

“Still,” said Lewis, a little puzzled, “there is fallacy somewhere in your argument. I cannot see that gambling is wrong.”

“Mark me, my lad,” returned the Captain, impressively, “it is no sufficient reason for the doing of a thing that you *cannot see* it to be wrong. You are not entitled to do anything unless you *see* it to be right. But there are other questions connected with gambling which renders it doubly mean—the question, for instance, whether a man is entitled to risk the loss of money which he calls his own, but which belongs to his wife and children as much as to himself. The mean positions, too, in which a gambler places himself, are numerous. One of these is, when a rich man wins the hard-earned and much-needed gains of a poor one.”

“But one is not supposed to know anything about the affairs of those from whom one wins,” objected Lewis.

“All the more reason,” replied Captain Wopper, “why a man should never gamble, lest, unwittingly, he should become the cause of great suffering—it might be, of death.”

Still Lewis “could not see” the wrong of gambling, and the discussion was cut short by the sudden stopping of the cab at a door in the Strand, over which hung a lamp, on which the Captain observed the word “Billiards.”

“Well, ta-ta, old fellow,” said Lewis, gaily, as he parted from his new friend, “we’ll finish the argument another day. Meanwhile, don’t forget the hour—eight, sharp.”

Chapter Four.

Shows how the Captain came to an Anchor, and conceived a Deep Design

When Captain Wopper parted from his young friend, he proceeded along the Strand in an unusually grave mood, shaking his head to such a degree, as he reflected on the precocious wickedness of the rising generation, that a very ragged and pert specimen of that generation, observing his condition, gravely informed him that there was an hospital for incurables in London, which took in patients with palsy and St. Wituses' dance werry cheap.

This recalled him from the depths of sorrowful meditation, and induced him to hail a cab, in which he drove to the docks, claimed his chest—a solid, seamanlike structure, reminding one of the wooden walls of Old England—and returned with it to the head of the lane leading to Grubb's Court. Dismissing the cab, he looked round for a porter, but as no porter appeared, the Captain, having been accustomed through life to help himself, and being, as we have said, remarkably strong, shouldered the nautical chest, and bore it to the top of Mrs Roby's staircase.

Here he encountered, and almost tumbled over, Gillie White, who saluted him with—

“Hallo! ship aho—o—oy! starboard hard! breakers ahead! Why, Capp'n, you've all but run into me!”

“Why don't you show a light then,” retorted the Captain, “or blow your steam-whistle, in such a dark hole? What's that you've got in your arms?”

“The baby,” replied Gillie.

“What baby?” demanded the Captain.

“*Our* baby, of course,” returned the imp, in a tone that implied the non-existence of any other baby worth mentioning. “I brought it up to show it to the sick 'ooman next door but one to Mrs Roby's cabin. She's very sick, she is, an' took a great longing to see our baby, cos she thinks it's like what her son was w'en *he* was a baby. If he ever was, he don't look much like one now, for he's six-feet nothin' in his socks, an' drinks like a fish, if he don't do nothin' wuss. Good-night Capp'n. Baby'll ketch cold if I keep on jawin' here. Mind your weather eye, and port your helm when you reach the landin'. If you'll take the advice of a young salt, you'll clew up your mainsail an' dowse some of your top-hamper—ah! I thought so!”

This last remark, delivered with a broad grin of delight, had reference to the fact that the Captain had run the corner of his chest against the low roof of the passage with a degree of violence that shook the whole tenement.

Holding his breath in hopeful anticipation, and reckless of the baby's “ketching cold,” the small boy listened for more. Nor was he disappointed. In his progress along the passage Captain Wopper, despite careful steering, ran violently foul of several angles and beams, each of which mishaps sent a quiver through the old house, and a thrill to the heart of Gillie White. In his earnest desire to steer clear of the sick woman's door, the luckless Captain came into collision with the opposite wall, and anxiety on this point causing him to forget the step on which he had “struck” once before, he struck it again, and was precipitated, chest and all, against Mrs Roby's door, which, fortunately for itself, burst open, and let the avalanche of chest and man descend upon Mrs Roby's floor.

Knowing that the climax was now reached, the imp descended the stair filled with a sort of serene ecstasy, while Captain Wopper gathered himself up and sat down on his nautical portmanteau.

“I tell 'ee what it is, old 'ooman,” said he, stroking his beard, “the channel into this port is about the wust I ever had the ill-luck to navigate. I hope I didn't frighten 'ee?”

“Oh, dear no!” replied Mrs Roby, with a smile.

To say truth, the old woman seemed less alarmed than might have been expected. Probably the noise of the Captain's approach, and previous experience, had prepared her for some startling visitation, for she was quite calm, and a humorous twinkle in her eyes seemed to indicate the presence of a spirit somewhat resembling that which actuated Gillie White.

"Well, that's all right," said the Captain, rising and pushing up the trap-door that led to his private berth in the new lodging; "and now, old lady, havin' come to an anchor, I must get this chest sent aloft as fast as I can, seein' that I've to clean myself an' rig out for a dinner at eight o'clock at the west end."

"Dear me," said Mrs Roby, in surprise, "you must have got among people of quality."

"It won't be easy to hoist it up," said the Captain, ignoring the remark, and eyeing the chest and trap-door in the roof alternately.

Just then a heavy step was heard in the passage; and a young man of large and powerful frame, with a gentle as well as gentlemanly demeanour, appeared at the door.

"Come in—come in," said Mrs Roby, with a bright look, "this is only my new lodger, a friend of dear Wil—"

"Why, bless you, old 'ooman," interrupted Captain Wopper, "*he* knows me well enough. I went to him this morning and got Mrs Stoutley's address. Come in, Dr Lawrence. I may claim to act the host here now in a small way, perhaps, and bid visitors welcome—eh! Mrs Roby?"

"Surely, surely," replied the old woman.

"Thank you both for the welcome," said the visitor with a pleasant smile, as he shook hands with Mrs Roby. "I thought I recognised your voice, Captain Wopper, as you passed Mrs Leven's door, and came out to see how you and my old friend here get on together."

"Is she any better to-night, sir?" asked Mrs Roby, anxiously.

Lawrence shook his head sadly and said she was no better, and that he feared she had little chance of getting better while her dissipated son dwelt under the same roof with her. "It is breaking her heart," he added, "and, besides that, the nature of her disease is such that recovery is impossible unless she is fed on the most generous diet. This of course she cannot have, because she has no means of her own. Her son gambles away nearly all his small salary, and she refuses to go to an hospital lest her absence should be the removal of the last restraining link between him and destruction. It is a very sad case—very."

Captain Wopper was struck with this reference to gambling coming so soon after his recent conversation on that subject, and asked if there were no charitable societies or charitable people in London who would help in a case so miserable.

Yes, there were plenty of charitable institutions, Lawrence told him, but he feared that this woman had no special claim on any of them, and her refusal to go to an hospital would tell against her. There were also, he said, plenty of charitable people, but all of those he happened to be acquainted with had been appealed to by him so often that he felt ashamed to try them again. He had already given away as much of his own slender means as he could well spare, so that he saw no way out of the difficulty; but he had faith in Providential supervision of human affairs, and he believed that a way would yet be opened up.

"You're right, sir—right," said Captain Wopper, with emphasis, while he looked earnestly into the face of the young doctor. "This world wasn't made to be kicked about like a foot-ball by chance, or circumstances, or anything of the sort. Look 'ee here, sir; it has bin putt into my heart to feel charitable leanings, and a good bit o' cash has bin putt into my pocket, so that, bein' a lone sort o' man, I don't have much use for it. That's on the one hand. On the other hand, here are you, sir, the son of a friend o' my chum Willum Stout, with great need of aid from charitable people, an' here we two are met together—both ready for action. Now, I call that a Providential arrangement, so please putt me down as one of your charitable friends. It's little I can boast of in that way as yet but it's not

too late to begin. I've long arrears to pull up, so I'll give you that to begin with. It'll help to relieve Mrs Leven in the meantime."

As he spoke, the Captain drew a black pocketbook from his breast pocket and, taking a piece of paper therefrom, placed it in the doctor's hands.

"This is a fifty-pound note!" said Lawrence, in surprise.

"Well, what then?" returned the Captain. "You didn't expect a thousand-pound note, did you?"

"Not quite that," replied Lawrence, laughing, "but I thought that perhaps you had made a mistake."

"Ah! you judged from appearances, young man. Don't you git into the way of doin' that, else you'll be for ever sailin' on the wrong tack. Take my advice, an' never look as if you thought a man gave you more than he could afford. Nobody never does that."

"Far be it from me," returned Lawrence, "to throw cold water on generous impulses. I accept your gift with thanks, and will gladly put you on my list. If you should find hereafter that I pump you rather hard, please to remember that you gave me encouragement to do so."

"Pump away, sir. When you've pumped dry, I'll tell you!"

"Well," said Lawrence, rising, "I'll go at once and bring your liberality into play; and, since you have done me so good a turn, remember that you may command my services, if they can ever be of any use to you."

The Captain cast a glance at the trap-door and the chest.

"Well," said he, "I can scarcely ask you to do it professionally, but if you'd lend a hand to get this Noah's ark o' mine on to the upper deck, I'd—"

"Come along," cried Lawrence, jumping up with a laugh, and seizing one end of the "ark."

Captain Wopper grasped the other end, and, between them, with much puffing, pushing, and squeezing, they thrust the box through the trap to the upper regions, whither the Captain followed it by means of the same gymnastic feat that he performed on his first ascent. Thrusting his head down, he invited the doctor to "come aloft," which the doctor did in the same undignified fashion, for his gentle manner and spirit had not debarred him from the practice and enjoyment of manly exercises.

"It's a snug berth, you see," said the Captain, stumbling among the dusty lumber, and knocking his head against the beams, "wants cleaning up, tho', and puttin' to rights a bit, but I'll soon manage that; and when I git the dirt and cobwebs cleared away, glass putt in the port-holes, and a whitewash on the roof and walls, it'll be a cabin fit for an admiral. See what a splendid view of the river! Just suited to a seafarin' man."

"Capital!" cried Lawrence, going down on his knees to obtain the view referred to. "Rather low in the roof, however, don't you think?"

"Low? not at all!" exclaimed the Captain. "It's nothin' to what I've been used to on the coastin' trade off Californy. Why, I've had to live in cabins so small that a tall man couldn't keep his back straight when he was sittin' on the lockers; but we didn't *sit* much in 'em; we was chiefly used to go into 'em to lie down. This is a palace to such cabins."

The doctor expressed satisfaction at finding that his new "charitable contributor" took such enlarged views of a pigeon-hole, and, promising to pay him another visit when the "cabin" should have been put to rights, said good-bye, and went to relieve the wants of the sick woman.

As the captain accompanied him along the passage, they heard the voice and step of poor Mrs Leven's dissipated son, as he came stumbling and singing up the stair.

He was a stout good-looking youth, and cast a half impudent half supercilious look at Captain Wopper on approaching. He also bestowed a nod of careless recognition on Dr Lawrence.

Thinking it better to be out of the way, the Captain said good-bye again to his friend, and returned to the cabin, where he expressed to Mrs Roby the opinion that, "that young feller Leven was goin' to the dogs at railway speed."

Thereafter he went “aloft,” and, as he expressed it, “rigged himself out,” in a spruce blue coat with brass buttons; blue vest and trousers to match; a white dicky with a collar attached and imitation carbuncle studs down the front. To these he added a black silk neckerchief tied in a true sailor’s knot but with the ends separated and carefully tucked away under his vest to prevent their interfering with the effulgence of the carbuncle studs; a pair of light shoes with a superabundance of new tie; a green silk handkerchief, to be carried in his hat, for the purpose of mopping his forehead when warm, and a red silk ditto to be carried in his pocket for the benefit of his nose. In addition to the studs, Captain Wopper wore, as ornaments, a solid gold ring, the rude workmanship of which induced the belief that he must have made it himself, and a large gold watch, with a gold chain in the form of a cable, and a rough gold nugget attached to it in place of a seal or key. We class the watch among simple ornaments because, although it went—very demonstratively too, with a loud self-asserting tick—its going was irregular and uncertain. Sometimes it went too slow without apparent cause. At other times it went too fast without provocation. Frequently it struck altogether, and only consented to resume work after a good deal of gentle and persuasive threatening to wind it the wrong way. It had chronic internal complaints, too, which produced sundry ominous clicks and sounds at certain periods of the day. These passed off, however, towards evening. Occasionally such sounds rushed as it were into a sudden whirr and series of convulsions, ending in a dead stop, which was an unmistakeable intimation to the Captain that something vital had given way; that the watch had gone into open mutiny, and nothing short of a visit to the watchmaker could restore it to life and duty.

“I’m off now,” said the Captain, descending when he was fully “rigged.” “What about the door-key, mother?—you’ve no objection to my calling you mother, have you?”

“None whatever, Captain,” replied Mrs Roby, with a pleasant smile, “an old friend of William may call me whatever he pleases—short,” she added after momentary pause, “of swearin’.”

“Trust me, I’ll stop short of that. You see, old lady, I never know’d a mother, and I should like to try to feel what it’s like to have one. It’s true I’m not just a lad, but you are old enough to be my mother for all that, so I’ll make the experiment. But what about the key of the door, mother? I can’t expect you to let me in, you know.”

“Just lock it, and take the key away with you,” said Mrs Roby.

“But what if a fire should break out?” said the Captain, with a look of indecision.

“I’m not afraid of fire. We’ve got a splendid brigade and plenty of fire-escapes, and a good kick from a fireman would open my door without a key.”

“Mother, you’re a trump! I’ll lock you in and leave you with an easy mind—”

He stopped abruptly, and Mrs Roby asked what was the matter.

“Well, it’s what I said about an easy mind that threw me all aback,” replied the Captain, “for to tell ’ee the truth, I haven’t got an easy mind.”

“Not done anything wicked, I hope?” said Mrs Roby, anxiously.

“No, no; nothin’ o’ that sort; but there *is* somethin’ lyin’ heavy on my mind, and I don’t see why I shouldn’t make a confidant o’ you, bein’ my mother, d’ee see; and, besides, it consarns Willum.”

The old woman looked eagerly at her lodger as he knitted his brows in perplexity and smoothed down his forelock.

“Here’s where it is,” he continued, drawing his chair closer to that of Mrs Roby; “when Willum made me his exikooter, so to speak, he said to me, ‘Wopper,’ says he, ‘I’m not one o’ them fellers that holds on to his cash till he dies with it in his pocket. I’ve got neither wife nor chick, as you know, an’ so, wot I means to do is to give the bulk of it to them that I love while I’m alive—d’ee see?’ ‘I do, Willum,’ says I. ‘Well then,’ says he, ‘besides them little matters that I axed you to do for me, I want you to take partikler notice of two people. One is the man as saved my life w’en I was a youngster, or, if he’s dead, take notice of his child’n. The other is that sweet young creeter, Emma Gray, who has done the correspondence with me so long for my poor brother. You keep a sharp look-out an’ find out how these two are off for money. If Emma’s rich, of course it’s no use to give her what she don’t

need, and I'll give the most of what I've had the good fortune to dig up here to old Mr Lawrence, or his family, for my brother's widow, bein' rich, don't need it. If both Emma and Lawrence are rich, why then, just let me know, and I'll try to hit on some other plan to make away with it, for you know well enough I couldn't use it all upon myself without going into wicked extravagance, and my dear old Mrs Roby wouldn't know what to do with so much cash if I sent it to her. Now, you promise to do this for me?" says he. 'Willum,' says I, 'I do.'

"Now, mother," continued the Captain, "what troubles me is this, that instead o' findin' Miss Emma rich, and Mr Lawrence poor, or *wice versa*, or findin' 'em both rich, I finds 'em both poor. That's where my difficulty lies."

Mrs Roby offered a prompt solution of this difficulty by suggesting that William should divide the money between them.

"That would do all well enough," returned the Captain, "if there were no under-currents drivin' the ship out of her true course. But you see, mother, I find that the late Mr Stoutley's family is also poor—at least in difficulties—although they live in great style, and *seem* to be rich; and from what I heard the other day, I know that the son is given to gamblin', and the mother seems to be extravagant, and both of 'em are ready enough to sponge on Miss Emma, who is quite willin'—far too willin'—to be sponged upon, so that whatever Willum gave to her would be just thrown away. Now the question is," continued the Captain, looking seriously at the kettle with the defiant spout, "what am I to advise Willum to do?"

"Advise him," replied Mrs Roby, promptly, "to give *all* the money to Dr Lawrence, and get Dr Lawrence to marry Miss Gray, and so they'll both get the whole of it."

A beaming smile crossed the Captain's visage.

"Not a bad notion, mother; but what if Dr Lawrence, after gettin' the money, didn't want to marry Miss Gray?"

"Get him to marry her first and give the money afterwards," returned Mrs Roby.

"Ay, that might do," replied the Captain, nodding slowly, "only it may be that a man without means may hesitate about marryin' a girl without means, especially if he didn't want *her*, and she didn't want *him*. I don't quite see how to get over all these difficulties."

"There's only one way of getting over them," said Mrs Roby, "and that is, by bringin' the young people together, and givin' 'em a chance to fall in love."

"True, true, mother, but, so far as I know, Dr Lawrence don't know the family. We couldn't," said the Captain, looking round the room, dubiously, "ask 'em to take a quiet cup of tea here with us—eh? You might ask Dr Lawrence, as your medical man, and I might ask Miss Emma, as an old friend of her uncle, quite in an off-hand way, you know, as if by chance. They'd never see through the dodge, and would fall in love at once, perhaps—eh?"

Captain Wopper said all this in a dubious tone, looking at the defiant kettle the while, as if propitiating its favourable reception of the idea, but it continued defiant, and hissed uncompromisingly, while its mistress laughed outright.

"You're not much of a match-maker, I see," she said, on recovering composure. "No, Captain, it wouldn't do to ask 'em here to tea."

"Well, well," said the Captain, rising, "we'll let match-makin' alone for the present. It's like tryin' to beat to wind'ard against a cyclone. The best way is to square the yards, furl the sails, and scud under bare poles till it's over. It's blowin' too hard just now for me to make headway, so I'll wear ship and scud."

In pursuance of this resolve, Captain Wopper put on his wide-awake, locked up his mother, and went off to dine at the "west end."

Chapter Five.

In which Several Important Matters are arranged, and Gillie White undergoes some Remarkable and hitherto Unknown Experiences

It is not necessary to inflict on the reader Mrs Stoutley's dinner in detail; suffice it to say, that Captain Wopper conducted himself, on the whole, much more creditably than his hostess had anticipated, and made himself so entertaining, especially to Lewis, that that young gentleman invited him to accompany the family to Switzerland, much to the amusement of his cousin Emma and the horror of his mother, who, although she enjoyed a private visit of the Captain, did not relish the thought of his becoming a travelling companion of the family. She pretended not to hear the invitation given, but when Lewis, knowing full well the state of her mind, pressed the invitation, she shook her head at him covertly and frowned. This by-play her son pretended not to see, and continued his entreaties, the Captain not having replied.

"Now, do come with us, Captain Wopper," he said; "it will be such fun, and we should all enjoy you *so* much—wouldn't we, Emma?" ("Yes, indeed," from Emma); "and it would just be suited to your tastes and habits, for the fine, fresh air of the mountains bears a wonderful resemblance to that of the sea. You've been accustomed no doubt to climb up the shrouds to the crosstrees; well, in Switzerland, you may climb up the hills to any sort of trees you like, and get shrouded in mist, or tumble over a precipice and get put into your shroud altogether; and—"

"Really, Lewie, you ought to be ashamed of making such bad puns," interrupted his mother. "Doubtless it would be very agreeable to have Captain Wopper with us, but I am quite sure it would be anything but pleasant for him to travel through such a wild country with such a wild goose as you for a companion."

"You have modestly forgotten yourself and Emma," said Lewis; "but come, let the Captain answer for himself. You know, mother, it has been your wish, if not your intention, to get a companion for me on this trip—a fellow older than myself—a sort of travelling tutor, who could teach me something of the geology and botany of the country as we went along. Well, the Captain is older than me, I think, which is one of the requisites, and he could teach me astronomy, no doubt, and show me how to box the compass; in return for which, I could show him how to box an adversary's nose, as practised by the best authorities of the ring. As to geology and botany, I know a little of these sciences already, and could impart my knowledge to the Captain, which would have the effect of fixing it more firmly in my own memory; and every one knows that it is of far greater importance to lay a good, solid groundwork of education, than to build a showy, superficial structure, on a bad foundation. Come, then, Captain, you see your advantages. This is the last time of asking. If you don't speak now, henceforth and for ever hold your tongue."

"Well, my lad," said the Captain, with much gravity, "I've turned the thing over in my mind, and since Mrs Stoutley is so good as to say it would be agreeable to her, I think I'll accept your invitation!"

"Bravo! Captain, you're a true blue; come, have another glass of wine on the strength of it."

"No wine, thank 'ee," said the Captain, placing his hand over his glass, "I've had my beer; and I make it a rule never to mix my liquor. Excuse me, ma'am," he continued, addressing his hostess, "your son made mention of a tooter—a travellin' tooter; may I ask if you've provided yourself with one yet!"

"Not yet," answered Mrs Stoutley, feeling, but not looking, a little surprised at the question, "I have no young friend at present quite suited for the position, and at short notice it is not easy to find a youth of talent willing to go, and on whom one can depend. Can you recommend one?"

Mrs Stoutley accompanied the question with a smile, for she put it in jest. She was, therefore, not a little surprised when the Captain said promptly that he could—that he knew a young man—a doctor—who was just the very ticket (these were his exact words), a regular clipper, with everything about him trim, taut, and ship-shape, who would suit every member of the family to a tee!

A hearty laugh from every member of the family greeted the Captain's enthusiastic recommendation, and Emma exclaimed that he must be a most charming youth, while Lewis pulled out pencil and note-book to take down his name and address.

"You are a most valuable friend at this crisis in our affairs," said Lewis, "I'll make mother write to him immediately."

"But have a care," said the Captain, "that you never mention who it was that recommended him. I'm not sure that he would regard it as a compliment. You must promise me that."

"I promise," said Lewis, "and whatever I promise mother will fulfil, so make your mind easy on that head. Now, mother, I shouldn't wonder if Captain Wopper could provide you with that other little inexpensive luxury you mentioned this morning. D'you think you could recommend a page?"

"What's a page, lad?"

"What! have you never heard of a page—a page in buttons?" asked Lewis in surprise.

"Never," replied the Captain, shaking his head.

"Why, a page is a small boy, usually clad in blue tights, to make him look as like a spider as possible, with three rows of brass buttons up the front of his jacket—two of the rows being merely ornamental, and going over his shoulders. He usually wears a man's hat for the sake of congruity, and is invariably as full of mischief as an egg is of meat. Can you find such an article?"

"Ha!" exclaimed the Captain. "What is he used for?"

"Chiefly for ornament, doing messages, being in the way when not wanted, and out of the way when required."

"Yes," said the Captain, meditatively, "I've got my eye—"

"Your weather eye?" asked Lewis.

"Yes, my *weather* eye, on a lad who'll fit you."

"To a tee?" inquired Emma, archly.

"To a tee, miss," assented the Captain, with a bland smile.

Lewis again pulled out his note-book to enter the name and address, but the Captain assured him that he would manage this case himself; and it was finally settled—for Lewis carried everything his own way, as a matter of course—that Dr George Lawrence was to be written to next day, and Captain Wopper was to provide a page.

"And you'll have to get him and yourself ready as fast as possible," said the youth in conclusion, "for we shall set off as soon as my mother's trunks are packed."

Next morning, while Captain Wopper was seated conversing with his old landlady at the breakfast-table—the morning meal having been just concluded—he heard the voice of Gillie White in the court. Going to the end of the passage, he ordered that imp to "come aloft."

Gillie appeared in a few seconds, nodded patronisingly to old Mrs Roby, hoped she was salubrious, and demanded to know what was up.

"My lad," said the Captain—and as he spoke, the urchin assumed an awful look of mock solemnity.

"I want to know if you think you could behave yourself if you was to try?"

"Ah!" said Gillie, with the air of a cross-examining advocate, "the keewestion is not w'ether I could behave myself if I wos to try, but, w'ether I *think* I could. Well, ahem! that depends. I think I could, now, if there was offered a very strong indoocement."

"Just so, my lad," returned the Captain, nodding, "that's exactly what I mean to offer. What d'ee say to a noo suit of blue tights, with three rows brass buttons; a situation in a respectable family; a fair wage; as much as you can eat and drink; and a trip to Switzerland to begin with?"

While the Captain spoke, the small boy's eyes opened wider and wider, and his mouth followed suit, until he stood the very picture of astonishment.

"You *don't* mean it?" he exclaimed.

"Indeed I do, my lad."

"Then *I'm* your man," returned the small boy emphatically, "putt me down for that sitooation; send for a lawyer, draw up the articles, *I'll* sign 'em right *off*, and—"

"Gillie, my boy," interrupted the Captain, "one o' the very first things you have to do in larnin' to behave yourself is to clap a stopper on your tongue—it's far too long."

"All right, Capp'n," answered the imp, "I'll go to Guy's Hospital d'rectly and 'ave three-fourths of it amputated."

"Do," said the Captain, somewhat sternly, "an' ask 'em to attach a brake to the bit that's left."

"Now, lad," he continued, "you've got a very dirty face."

Gillie nodded, with his lips tightly compressed to check utterance.

"And a very ragged head of hair," he added.

Again Gillie nodded.

The Captain pointed to a basin of water which stood on a chair in a corner of the room, beside which lay a lump of yellow soap, a comb, and a rough jack-towel.

"There," said he, "go to work."

Gillie went to work with a will, and scrubbed himself to such an extent, that his skin must undoubtedly have been thinner after the operation. The washing, however, was easy compared with the combing. The boy's mop was such a tangled web, that the comb at first refused to pass through it; and when, encouraged by the Captain, the urchin did at last succeed in rending its masses apart various inextricable bunches came away bodily, and sundry teeth of the comb were left behind. At last, however, it was reduced to something like order, to the immense satisfaction of Mrs Roby and the Captain.

"Now," said the latter, "did you ever have a Turkish bath?"

"No—never."

"Well, then, come with me and have one. Have you got a cap?"

"Hm—never mind, come along; you're not cleaned up yet by a long way; but we'll manage it in course of time."

As the Captain and his small *protégé* passed along the streets, the former took occasion to explain that a Turkish bath was a species of mild torture, in which a man was stewed alive, and baked in an oven, and par-boiled, and scrubbed, and pinched, and thumped (sometimes black and blue), and lathered with soap till he couldn't see, and heated up to seven thousand and ten, Fahrenheit and soused with half-boiling water, and shot at with cold water—or shot into it, as the case might be—and rolled in a sheet like a mummy, and stretched out a like corpse to cool. "Most men," he said, "felt gaspy in Turkish baths, and weak ones were alarmed lest they should get suffocated beyond recovery; but strong men rather enjoy themselves in 'em than otherwise."

"Hah!" exclaimed the imp, "may I wentur' to ax, Capp'n, wot's the effect on *boys*?"

To this the Captain replied that he didn't exactly know, never having heard of boys taking Turkish baths. Whereupon Gillie suggested, that if possible he might have himself cleaned in an ordinary bath.

"Impossible, my lad," said the Captain, decidedly. "No or'nary bath would clean you under a week, unless black soap and scrubbin' brushes was used."

"But don't be alarmed, Gillie," he added, looking down with a twinkle in his eyes, "I'll go into the bath along with you. We'll sink or swim together, my boy, and I'll see that you're not overdone. I'm rather fond of them myself, d'ee see, so I can recommend 'em from experience."

Somewhat reassured by this, though still a little uneasy in his mind, the imp followed his patron to the baths.

It would have been a sight worth seeing, the entrance of these two into the temple of soap-and-water. To see Gillie's well-made, but very meagre and dirty little limbs unrobed; to see him decked out with the scrimpest possible little kilt, such as would, perhaps, have suited the fancy of a Fiji islander; to see his gaze of undisguised admiration on beholding his companion's towering and massive frame in the same unwonted costume, if we may so style it; to see the intensifying of his astonishment when ushered into the *first* room, at beholding six or seven naked, and apparently dead men, laid round the walls, as if ready for dissection; to see the monkey-like leap, accompanied by a squeal, with which he sprang from a hot stone-bench, having sat down thereon before it had been covered with a cloth for his reception; to see the rapid return of his self-possession in these unusual circumstances, and the ready manner in which he submitted himself to the various operations, as if he had been accustomed to Turkish baths from a period long prior to infancy; to see his horror on being introduced to the hottest room, and his furtive glance at the door, as though he meditated a rush into the open air, but was restrained by a sense of personal dignity; to see the ruling passion strong as ever in this (he firmly believed) his nearest approach to death, when, observing that the man next to him (who, as it were, turned the corner from him) had raised himself for a moment to arrange his pillow, he (Gillie) tipped up the corner of the man's sheet, which hung close to his face in such a manner that he (the man), on lying down again, placed his bare shoulder on the hot stone, and sprang up with a yell that startled into life the whole of the half-sleeping establishment with the exception of the youth on the opposite bench, who, having noticed the act, was thrown into convulsions of laughter, much to the alarm of Gillie, who had thought he was asleep and feared that he might "tell;"—to see him laid down like a little pink-roll to be kneaded, and to hear him remark, in a calm voice, to the stalwart attendant that he might go in and win and needn't be afraid of hurting him; to observe his delight when put under the warm "douche," his gasping shriek when unexpectedly assailed with the "cold-shower," and his placid air of supreme felicity when wrapped up like a ghost in a white sheet, and left to dry in the cooling-room—to see and hear all this, we say, would have amply repaid a special journey to London from any reasonable distance. The event, however, being a thing of the past and language being unequal to the description, we are compelled to leave it all to the reader's imagination.

Chapter Six.

A Lesson Taught and Learned

Two days after the events narrated in the last chapter, rather late in the evening, Dr George Lawrence called at “the cabin” in Grubb’s Court, and found the Captain taking what he called a quiet pipe.

“I have been visiting poor Mrs Leven,” he said to Mrs Roby, sitting down beside her, “and I fear she is a good deal worse to-night. That kind little woman, Netta White, has agreed to sit by her. I’m sorry that I shall be obliged to leave her at such a critical stage of her illness, but I am obliged to go abroad for some time.”

“Goin’ abroad, sir!” exclaimed Mrs Roby in surprise, for the Captain had not yet told her that Lawrence was to be of the party, although he had mentioned about himself and Gillie White.

“Yes, I’m going with Mrs Stoutley’s family for some weeks to Switzerland.”

Captain Wopper felt that his share in the arrangements was in danger of being found out. He therefore boldly took the lead.

“Ah! I know all about that, sir.”

“Indeed?” said Lawrence.

“Yes, I dined the other day with Mrs Stoutley; she asked *me* also to be of the party, and I’m going.”

Lawrence again exclaimed, “Indeed!” with increasing surprise, and added, “Well, now, that *is* a strange coincidence.”

“Well, d’ee know,” said the Captain, in an argumentative tone, “it don’t seem to me much of a coincidence. You know she had to git some one to go with her son, and why not you, sir, as well as any of the other young sawbones in London? If she hadn’t got you she’d have got another, and that would have been a coincidence to *him*, d’ee see? Then, as to me, it wasn’t unnatural that she should take a fancy to the man that nussed her dyin’ husband, an’ was chum to her brother-in-law; so, you see, that’s how it came about and I’m very glad to find, sir, that we are to sail in company for a short time.”

Lawrence returned this compliment heartily, and was about to make some further remark, when little Netta White rushed into the room with a frightened look and pale cheeks, exclaiming, “Oh, Dr Lawrence, sir, she’s *very* ill. I think she’s dying.”

Without waiting for a reply, the child ran out of the room followed by Lawrence and Mrs Roby, who was assisted by the Captain—for she walked with great difficulty even when aided by her crutches. In a few seconds they stood beside Mrs Leven’s bed. It was a lowly bed, with scant and threadbare coverings, and she who lay on it was of a lowly spirit—one who for many years had laid her head on the bosom of Jesus, and had found Him, through a long course of poverty and mental distress, “a very present help in trouble.”

“I fear that I’m very ill,” she said, faintly.

“No doubt you feel rather low just now,” said the doctor, “but that is very much owing to your having lived so long on insufficient diet. I will give you something, however, which will soon pull you up a bit. Come, cheer up. Don’t let your spirits get so low.”

“Yes,” she murmured, “I *am* brought very low, but the Lord will lift me up. He is my strength and my Redeemer.”

She clasped her hands with difficulty, and shut her eyes.

A silence followed, during which Captain Wopper drew Lawrence into the passage.

“D’you think she is near her end, doctor?”

“She looks very like it,” replied the doctor. “There is a possibility that she might recover if the right medicine could be found, namely, ease of mind; but her dissipated son has robbed her of that,

and is the only one who can give it back to her—if indeed he has the power left now. She is dying of what is unprofessionally styled a broken heart. It is unfortunate that her son is not with her at present.”

“Does no one know where to find him?” asked the Captain.

“I fear not,” replied the doctor.

“Please, sir, I think *I* know,” said a subdued voice behind them.

It was that of Gillie White, who had drawn near very silently, being overawed by the sad scene in the sick-room.

“Do you, my lad? then get along as fast as you can and show me the way,” said the Captain, buttoning up his pilot-coat. “I’ll bring him here before long, doctor, if he’s to be found.”

In a few minutes the Captain and Gillie were at the head of the lane, where the former hailed a passing cab, bade the boy jump in, and followed him.

“Now, my lad, give the address,” said the Captain.

“The Strand,” said the boy, promptly.

“What number, sir?” asked the cabman, looking at the Captain.

“Right on till I stop you,” said Gillie, with the air of a commander-in-chief—whom in some faint manner he now resembled, for he was in livery, being clothed in blue tights and brass buttons.

In a short time Gillie gave the order to pull up, and they got out in front of a brilliantly-lighted and open door with a lamp above it, on which was written the word Billiards. The Captain observed that it was the same door as that at which he had parted from Lewis Stoutley some days before.

Dismissing the cab and entering, they quickly found themselves in a large and well-lighted billiard-room, which was crowded with men of all ages and aspects, some of whom played, others looked on and betted, a good many drank brandy and water, and nearly all smoked. It was a bright scene of dissipation, where many young men, deceiving themselves with the idea that they went merely to practise or to enjoy a noble game of skill, were taking their first steps on the road to ruin.

The Captain, closely attended by Gillie, moved slowly through the room, looking anxiously for Fred Leven. For some time they failed to find him. At last a loud curse, uttered in the midst of a knot of on-lookers, attracted their attention. It was followed by a general laugh, as a young man, whose dishevelled hair and flushed face showed that he had been drinking hard, burst from among them and staggered towards the door.

“Never mind, Fred,” shouted a voice that seemed familiar to the Captain, “you’ll win it back from me next time.”

Ere the youth had passed, the Captain stepped forward and laid his hand on his arm.

Fred uttered a savage growl, and drew back his clenched hand as if to strike, but Captain Wopper’s size and calm look of decision induced him to hold his hand.

“What d’you mean by interrupting me?” he demanded, sternly.

“My lad,” said the Captain, in a low, solemn voice, “your mother is dying, come with me. You’ve no time to lose.”

The youth’s face turned ashy pale, and he passed his hand hastily across his brow.

“What’s wrong?” exclaimed Lewis Stoutley, who had recognised the Captain, and come forward at the moment.

“Did he lose his money to *you*?” asked the Captain, abruptly.

“Well, yes, he did,” retorted Lewis, with a look of offended dignity.

“Come along, then, my lad. I want *you* too. It’s a case of life an’ death. Ask no questions, but come along.”

The Captain said this with such an air of authority, that Lewis felt constrained to obey. Fred Leven seemed to follow like one in a dream. They all got into a cab, and were driven back to Grubb’s Court.

As they ascended the stair, the Captain whispered to Lewis, “Keep in the background, my lad. Do nothing but look and listen.”

Another moment and they were in the passage, where Lawrence stopped them.

“You’re almost too late, sir,” he said to Fred, sternly. “If you had fed and clothed your mother better in time past, she might have got over this. Fortunately for her, poor soul, some people, who don’t gamble away their own and their parents’ means, have given her the help that you have refused. Go in, sir, and try to speak words of comfort to her *now*.”

He went in, and fell on his knees beside the bed.

“Mother!” he said.

Fain would he have said more, but no word could he utter. His tongue seemed to cleave to the roof of his mouth. Mrs Leven opened her eyes on hearing the single word, and her cheek flushed slightly as she seized one of his hands, kissed it and held it to her breast. Then she looked earnestly, and oh! so anxiously, into his face, and said in a low tone:—

“Fred, dear, are you so—”

She stopped abruptly.

“Yes, yes,” cried her son, passionately; “yes, mother, I’m sober *now*! Oh mother, dearest, darling mother, I am guilty, guilty; I have sinned. Oh forgive, forgive me! Listen, listen! I am in earnest now, my mother. Think of me as I used to be long ago. Don’t shut your eyes. Look at me, mother, look at Fred.”

The poor woman looked at him with tears of gladness in her eyes.

“God bless you, Fred!” she murmured. “It is long, long, since you spoke like that. But I knew you would. I have always expected that you would. Praise the Lord!”

Fred tried to speak, and again found that he could not, but the fountain of his soul was opened. He laid his face on his mother’s hand and sobbed bitterly.

Those who witnessed this scene stood as if spellbound. As far as sound or motion went these two might have been in the room alone. Presently the sound of sobbing ceased, and Fred, raising his head, began gently to stroke the hand he held in his. Sometime in his wild career, he knew not when or where, he had heard it said that this slight action had often a wonderful power to soothe the sick. He continued it for some time. Then the doctor advanced and gazed into the invalid’s countenance.

“She sleeps,” he said, in a low tone.

“May I stay beside her?” whispered Fred.

Lawrence nodded assent, and then motioning to the others to withdraw, followed them into Mrs Roby’s room, where he told them that her sleeping was a good sign, and that they must do their best to prevent her being disturbed.

“It won’t be necessary for any one to watch. Her son will prove her best attendant just now; but it may be as well that some one should sit up in this room, and look in now and then to see that the candle doesn’t burn out, and that all is right. I will go now, and will make this my first visit in the morning.”

“Captain Wopper,” said Lewis Stoutley, in a subdued voice, when Lawrence had left, “I won this ten-pound note to-night from Fred. I—I robbed him of it. Will you give it to him in the morning?”

“Yes, my lad, I will,” said the Captain.

“And will you let me sit up and watch here tonight?”

“No, my lad, I won’t. I mean to do that myself.”

“But do let me stay an hour or so with you, in case anything is wanted,” pleaded Lewis.

“Well, you may.”

They sat down together by the fireside, Mrs Roby having lain down on her bed with her clothes on, but they spoke never a word; and as they sat there, the young man’s busy brain arrayed before him many and many a scene of death, and sickness, and suffering, and sorrow, and madness, and despair, which, he knew well from hearsay (and he now believed it), had been the terrible result of gambling and drink.

When the hour was past, the Captain rose and said, “Now, Lewis, you’ll go, and I’ll take a look at the next room.”

He put off his shoes and went on tiptoe. Lewis followed, and took a peep before parting.

Fred had drawn three chairs to the bedside and lain down on them, with his shoulders resting on the edge of the bed, so that he could continue to stroke his mother’s hand without disturbing her. He had continued doing so until his head had slowly drooped upon the pillow; and there they now lay, the dissipated son and the humble Christian mother, sleeping quietly together.

Chapter Seven.

The Great White Mountain

We are in Switzerland now; in the “land of the mountain and the flood”—the land also of perennial ice and snow. The solemn presence of the Great White Mountain is beginning to be felt. Its pure summit was first seen from Geneva; its shadow is now beginning to steal over us.

We are on the road to Chamouni, not yet over the frontier, in a carriage and four. Mrs Stoutley, being a lady of unbounded wealth, always travels post in a carriage and four when she can manage to do so, having an unconquerable antipathy to railroads and steamers. She could not well travel in any other fashion here, railways not having yet penetrated the mountain regions in this direction, and a mode of ascending roaring mountain torrents in steamboats not having yet been discovered. She might, however, travel with two horses, but she prefers four. Captain Wopper, who sits opposite Emma Gray, wonders in a quiet speculative way whether “the Mines” will produce a dividend sufficient to pay the expenses of this journey. He is quite disinterested in the thought, it being understood that the Captain pays his own expenses.

But we wander from our text, which is—the Great White Mountain. We are driving now under its shadow with Mrs Stoutley’s party, which, in addition to the Captain and Miss Gray, already mentioned, includes young Dr George Lawrence and Lewis, who are on horseback; also Mrs Stoutley’s maid (Mrs Stoutley never travels without a maid), Susan Quick, who sits beside the Captain; and Gillie White, *alias* the Spider and the Imp, who sits beside the driver, making earnest but futile efforts to draw him into a conversation in English, of which language the driver knows next to nothing.

But to return: Mrs Stoutley and party are now in the very heart of scenery the most magnificent; they have penetrated to a great fountain-head of European waters; they are surrounded by the cliffs, the gorges, the moraines, and are not far from the snow-slopes and ice-fields, the couloirs, the seracs, the crevasses, and the ice-precipices and pinnacles of a great glacial world; but not one of the party betrays the smallest amount of interest, or expresses the faintest emotion of surprise, owing to the melancholy fact that all is shrouded in an impenetrable veil of mist through which a thick fine rain percolates as if the mountain monarch himself were bewailing their misfortunes.

“Isn’t it provoking?” murmured Mrs Stoutley drawing her shawl closer.

“Very,” replied Emma.

“Disgusting!” exclaimed Lewis, who rode at the side of the carriage next his cousin.

“It might be worse,” said Lawrence, with a grim smile.

“Impossible,” retorted Lewis.

“Come, Captain, have you no remark to make by way of inspiring a little hope?” asked Mrs Stoutley.

“Why, never havin’ cruised in this region before,” answered the Captain, “my remarks can’t be of much value. Hows’ever, there *is* one idea that may be said to afford consolation, namely, that this sort o’ thing can’t last. I’ve sailed pretty nigh in all parts of the globe, an’ I’ve invariably found that bad weather has its limits—that after rain we may look for sunshine, and after storm, calm.”

“How cheering!” said Lewis, as the rain trickled from the point of his prominent nose.

At that moment Gillie White, happening to cast his eyes upward, beheld a vision which drew from him an exclamation of wild surprise.

They all looked quickly in the same direction, and there, through a rent in the watery veil, they beheld a little spot of blue sky, rising into which was a mountain-top so pure, so faint so high and inexpressibly far off, yet so brilliant in a glow of sunshine, that it seemed as if heaven had been opened, and one of the hills of Paradise revealed. It was the first near view that the travellers had obtained of these mountains of everlasting ice. With the exception of the exclamations “Wonderful!”

“Most glorious!” they found no words for a time to express their feelings, and seemed glad to escape the necessity of doing so by listening to the remarks of their driver, as he went into an elaborate explanation of the name and locality of the particular part of Mont Blanc that had been thus disclosed.

The rent in the mist closed almost as quickly as it had opened, utterly concealing the beautiful vision; but the impression it had made, being a first and a very deep one, could never more be removed. The travellers lived now in the faith of what they had seen. Scepticism was no longer possible, and in this improved frame of mind they dashed into the village of Chamouni—one of the haunts of those whose war-cry is “Excelsior!”—and drove to the best hotel.

Their arrival in the village was an unexpected point of interest to many would-be mountaineers, who lounged about the place with macintoshes and umbrellas, growling at the weather. Any event out of the common forms a subject of interest to men who wait and have nothing to do. As the party passed them, growlers gazed and speculated as to who the new-comers might be. Some thought Miss Gray pretty; some thought otherwise—to agree on any point on such a day being, of course, impossible. Others “guessed” that the young fellows must be uncommonly fond of riding to “get on the outside of a horse” in such weather; some remarked that the “elderly female” seemed “used up,” or “*blasée*,” and all agreed—yes, they *did* agree on this point—that the thing in blue tights and buttons beside the driver was the most impudent-looking monkey the world had ever produced!

The natives of the place also had their opinions, and expressed them to each other; especially the bronzed, stalwart sedate-looking men who hung about in knots near the centre of the village, and seemed to estimate the probability of the stout young Englishmen on horseback being likely to require their services often—for these, said the driver, were the celebrated guides of Chamouni; men of bone and muscle, and endurance and courage; the leaders of those daring spirits who consider—and justly so—the ascent to the summit of Mont Blanc, or Monte Rosa, or the Matterhorn, a feat; the men who perform this feat it may be, two or three times a week—as often as you choose to call them to it, in fact—and think nothing of it; the men whose profession it is to risk their lives every summer from day to day for a few francs; who have become so inured to danger that they have grown quite familiar with it, insomuch that some of the reckless blades among them treat it now and then with contempt, and pay the penalty of such conduct with their lives.

Sinking into a couch in her private sitting-room, Mrs Stoutley resigned herself to Susan’s care, and, while she was having her boots taken off, said with a sigh:—

“Well, here we are at last. What do you think of Chamouni, Susan?”

“Rather a wet place, ma’am; ain’t it?”

With a languid smile, Mrs Stoutley admitted that it was, but added, by way of encouragement that it was not always so. To which Susan replied that she was glad to hear it, so she was, as nothink depressed her spirits so much as wet and clouds, and gloom.

Susan was a pretty girl of sixteen, tall, as well as very sedate and womanly, for her age. Having been born in one of the midland counties, of poor, though remarkably honest, parents, who had received no education themselves, and therefore held it to be quite unnecessary to bestow anything so useless on their daughter, she was, until very recently, as ignorant of all beyond the circle of her father’s homestead as the daughter of the man in the moon—supposing no compulsory education-act to be in operation in the orb of night. Having passed through them, she now knew of the existence of France and Switzerland, but she was quite in the dark as to the position of these two countries with respect to the rest of the world, and would probably have regarded them as one and the same if their boundary-line had not been somewhat deeply impressed upon her by the ungallant manner in which the Customs officials examined the contents of her modest little portmanteau in search, as Gillie gave her to understand, of tobacco.

Mrs Stoutley had particularly small feet, a circumstance which might have induced her, more than other ladies, to wear easy boots; but owing to some unaccountable perversity of mental constitution, she deemed this a good reason for having her boots made unusually tight. The removal

of these, therefore, afforded great relief, and the administration of a cup of tea produced a cheering reaction of spirits, under the influence of which she partially forgot herself, and resolved to devote a few minutes to the instruction of her interestingly ignorant maid.

“Yes,” she said, arranging herself comfortably, and sipping her tea, while Susan busied herself putting away her lady’s “things,” and otherwise tidying the room, “it does not always rain here; there is a little sunshine sometimes. By the way, where is Miss Gray?”

“In the bedroom, ma’am, unpacking the trunks.”

“Ah, well, as I was saying, they have a little sunshine sometimes, for you know, Susan, people *must* live, and grass or grain cannot grow without sunshine, so it has been arranged that there should be enough here for these purposes, but no more than enough, because Switzerland has to maintain its character as one of the great refrigerators of Europe.”

“One of the what, ma’am?”

“Refrigerators,” explained Mrs Stoutley; “a refrigerator, Susan, is a freezer; and it is the special mission of Switzerland to freeze nearly all the water that falls on its mountains, and retain it there in the form of ice and snow until it is wanted for the use of man. Isn’t that a grand idea?”

The lecturer’s explanation had conveyed to Susan’s mind the idea of the Switzers going with long strings of carts to the top of Mont Blanc for supplies of ice to meet the European demand, and she admitted that it *was* a grand idea, and asked if the ice and snow lasted long into the summer.

“Long into it!” exclaimed her teacher. “Why, you foolish thing, its lasts all through it.”

“Oh indeed, ma’am!” said Susan, who entertained strong doubts in her heart as to the correctness of Mrs Stoutley’s information on this point.

“Yes,” continued that lady, with more animation than she had experienced for many months past, so invigorating was the change of moral atmosphere induced by this little breeze of instruction; “yes, the ice and snow cover the hills and higher valleys for dozens and dozens of miles round here in all directions, not a few inches deep, such as we sometimes see in England, but with thousands and millions of tons of it, so that the ice in the valleys is hundreds of feet thick, and never melts away altogether, but remains there from year to year—has been there, I suppose, since the world began, and will continue, I fancy, until the world comes to an end.”

Mrs Stoutley warmed up here, to such an extent that she absolutely flushed, and Susan, who had heretofore regarded her mistress merely as a weakish woman, now set her down, mentally, as a barefaced story-teller.

“Surely, ma’am,” she said, with diffidence, “ice and snow like that doesn’t fill *all* the valleys, else we should see it, and find it difficult to travel through ’em; shouldn’t we, ma’am?”

“Silly girl!” exclaimed her preceptress, “I did not say it filled *all* the valleys, but the *higher* valleys—valleys such as, in England and Scotland, would be clothed with pasturage and waving grain, and dotted with cattle and sheep and smiling cottages.”

Mrs Stoutley had by this time risen to a heroic frame, and spoke poetically, which accounts for her ascribing risible powers to cottages.

“And thus you see, Susan,” she continued, “Switzerland is, as it were, a great ice-tank, or a series of ice-tanks, in which the ice of ages is accumulated and saved up, so that the melting of a little of it—the mere dribbling of it, so to speak—is sufficient to cause the continuous flow of innumerable streams and of great rivers, such as the Rhone, and the Rhine, and the Var.”

The lecture received unexpected and appropriate illustration here by the sudden lifting of the mists, which had hitherto blotted out the landscape.

“Oh, aunt!” exclaimed Emma, running in at the moment, “just look at the hills. How exquisite! How much grander than if we had seen them quite clear from the first!”

Emma was strictly correct, for it is well known that the grandeur of Alpine scenery is greatly enhanced by the wild and weird movements of the gauze-like drapery with which it is almost always partially enshrouded.

As the trio stood gazing in silent wonder and admiration from their window, which, they had been informed, commanded a view of the summit of Mont Blanc, the mist had risen like a curtain partially rolled up. All above the curtain-foot presented the dismal grey, to which they had been too long accustomed, but below, and, as it were, far behind this curtain, the mountain-world was seen rising upwards.

So close were they to the foot of the Great White Monarch, that it seemed to tower like a giant-wall before them; but this wall was varied and beautiful as well as grand. Already the curtain had risen high enough to disclose hoary cliffs and precipices, with steep grassy slopes between, and crowned with fringes of dark pines; which latter, although goodly trees, looked like mere shrubs in their vast setting. Rills were seen running like snowy veins among the slopes, and losing themselves in the masses of *débris* at the mountain-foot. As they gazed, the curtain rose higher, disclosing new and more rugged features, on which shone a strange, unearthly light—the result of shadow from the mist and sunshine behind it—while a gleam of stronger light tipped the curtain's under-edge in one direction. Still higher it rose! Susan exclaimed that the mountain was rising into heaven; and Emma and Mrs Stoutley, whose reading had evidently failed to impress them with a just conception of mountain-scenery, stood with clasped hands in silent expectancy and admiration. The gleam of stronger light above referred to, widened, and Susan almost shrieked with ecstasy when the curtain seemed to rend, and the gleam resolved itself into the great Glacier des Bossons, which, rolling over the mountain-brow like a very world of ice, thrust its mighty tongue down into the valley.

From that moment Susan's disbelief in her lady's knowledge changed into faith, and deepened into profound veneration.

It was, however, only a slight glimpse that had been thus afforded of the ice-world by which they were surrounded. The great ice-fountain of those regions, commencing at the summit of Mont Blanc, flings its ample waves over mountain and vale in all directions, forming a throne on which perpetual winter reigns, and this glacier des Bossons, which filled the breasts of our travellers with such feelings of awe, was but one of the numerous rivers which flow from the fountain down the gorges and higher valleys of the Alps, until they reach those regions where summer heat asserts itself, and checks their further progress in the form of ice by melting them.

"Is it possible," said Emma, as she gazed at the rugged and riven mass of solid ice before her, "that a glacier really *flows*?"

"So learned men tell us, and so we must believe," said Mrs Stoutley.

"Flows, ma'am?" exclaimed Susan, in surprise.

"Yes, so it is said," replied Mrs Stoutley, with a smile.

"But we can see, ma'am, by lookin' at it, that it *don't* flow; can't we, ma'am?" said Susan.

"True, Susan, it does not seem to move; nevertheless scientific men tell us that it does, and sometimes we are bound to believe against the evidence of our senses."

Susan looked steadily at the glacier for some time; and then, although she modestly held her tongue, scientific men fell considerably in her esteem.

While the ladies were thus discussing the glacier and enlightening their maid, Lewis, Lawrence, and the Captain, taking advantage of the improved state of the weather, had gone out for a stroll, partly with a view, as Lewis said, to freshen up their appetites for dinner—although, to say truth, the appetites of all three were of such a nature as to require no freshening up. They walked smartly along the road which leads up the valley, pausing, ever and anon, to look back in admiration at the wonderful glimpses of scenery disclosed by the lifting mists. Gradually these cleared away altogether, and the mountain summits stood out well defined against the clear sky. And then, for the first time, came a feeling of disappointment.

"Why, Lawrence," said Lewis, "didn't they tell us that we could see the top of Mont Blanc from Chamouni?"

"They certainly did," replied Lawrence, "but I can't see it."

“There are two or three splendid-looking peaks,” said Lewis, pointing up the valley, “but surely that’s not the direction of the top we look for.”

“No, my lad, it ain’t the right point o’ the compass by a long way,” said the Captain; “but yonder goes a strange sail a-head, let’s overhaul her.”

“Heave a-head then, Captain,” said Lewis, “and clap on stun’s’ls and sky-scrapers, for the strange sail is making for that cottage on the hill, and will get into port before we overhaul her if we don’t look sharp.”

The “strange sail” was a woman. She soon turned into the cottage referred to, but our travellers followed her up, arranging, as they drew near, that Lawrence, being the best French scholar of the three (the Captain knowing nothing whatever of the language), should address her.

She turned out to be a very comely young woman, the wife, as she explained, of one of the Chamouni guides, named Antoine Grennon. Her daughter, a pretty blue-eyed girl of six or so, was busy arranging a casket of flowers, and the grandmother of the family was engaged in that mysterious mallet-stone-scrubbing-brush-and-cold-water system, whereby the washerwomen of the Alps convert the linen of tourists into shreds and patches in the shortest possible space of time.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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