THE CRUISE OF THE SNOWBIRD

BY

WILLIAM GORDON STABLES

The Cruise of the Snowbird by William Gordon Stables

Chapter One

The Young Chief of Arrandoon—The Rising Storm—Lost in the Snow

It was winter. Allan McGregor stood, gun in hand, leaning against a rock half-way down the mountain-side, and, with the exception of himself and the stately deer-hound that lay at his feet, there was no sign of any living thing in all the glen; and dreary and desolate in the extreme was the landscape all around him. Glentroom in the summer time, when the braes were all green with the feathery birches, and the hillsides ablaze with the purple bloom of the heather, must have been both pleasant and romantic; but the birch-trees were now leafless and bare, the mountains were clad in snow, and the rock-bound lake, that lay far beneath, was leaden and grey like the sky itself, except where its waves were broken into foam by the snow-wind. That snow-wind blew from the north, and there was a sound in its voice, as it sighed through the withered breckans and moaned fitfully among the rocks and crags, that told of a coming storm.

Allan was the young laird of Arrandoon. All the glen had at one time belonged to his ancestors—ay, and all the land that could be seen, and all the lochs that could be counted from the peaks of Ben Lona. His father, but two short years before the commencement of this strange story of adventure, had died, sword in hand, at the head of his regiment in distant Afghan, and left him—what? A few thousand sheep, a few thousand acres of heather land on which to feed them, the title of chief, and yonder ancient castle, where dwelt his widowed mother and his sister.

Although he was a good Highland mile from his home, the castle, visible in every line and lineament from where he stood, formed quite a feature in the landscape. A tall grey building, with many a quaint and curious window, and many a turret chamber, it was built on the spur of the mountain, around which swept a brown hill-stream, the third side, or base of the triangle, being bounded by a moat now dry, and a drawbridge never raised. Far down beneath it was the grey loch, to which the noisy stream was hurrying.

Every old castle has its old story, and Arrandoon was no exception. It had been built in troublous times—built when the wild clans of the McGregors were in their glory. There the chiefs had dwelt, thence had they often sallied to tread the war-path or arouse the chase, and in its ancient halls many a gay revel had been held; but peace with the Lowlands, strange to say, had wrought the downfall of the chiefs of Arrandoon. The country had been thrown open, Englishmen had visited the glens, and friendships had

been formed between those who once were deadly foes. In their own Highland homes the McGregors had entertained strangers in a regal fashion. Herein was pride—the pride that goes before a fall. When the chieftains went south, there, too, they would lord it, and herein lay more pride—the pride that caused the fall—for, alas and a lack-a-day! for the want of money land must be sold. Thus the stranger crept into the country of the Gael, and gold did for the proud McGregors, what the sword itself could never achieve—it laid them low.

That was one chapter of this castle's story; the second is even a sadder one, for it tells of the days when, bereft of their lands, the proud chiefs of the McGregors, scorning trade, placed their claymores at the service of the reigning monarch, and fell in many a foreign land, fighting in a cause that was not their own, because fighting, they thought, was honourable, and fighting gave them bread. And their wives and their little ones were left at home to mourn. But no stranger saw the tears they shed.

It was towards this castle that the eyes of Allan McGregor were turned when first we see him; it was of the mournful history of his family he was thinking, as he stood on the hillside on this bleak, cold wintry evening.

"Bah!" he said to himself, "the very game seem to forsake the glen. Just look here," he continued, addressing the dog, who looked up, wagging his tail, "only two hares and a brace or two of birds, with a wild cat that we shot at hazard, didn't we, Bran? And I'm sure we've walked fully twenty miles, haven't we, Bran?"

"Twenty miles fully," Bran seemed to say, speaking with his eyes and his tail.

"And really, Bran, when my English college friends come to see me—as they will to-night, you know—I'll hardly have anything to give them to eat, leaving sport out of the question; will I, Bran?"

Bran looked very serious at this, for he knew every inflection of his master's voice.

"Ah, Bran, Bran! my dear old dog! it is very hard being a Highland chieftain with nothing to support one's dignity on. Dignity, indeed! Why, Bran, I have positively to put mine in the pot and boil it for dinner. Now rouse up, Bran; I want to speak to you, because I must have somebody to open my heart to."

Bran sat up on his haunches, and young Allan placed his hand on his head.

“Yes, Bran, my heart seems strangely full of something, and I think, old dog, that it is hope! hope for better times to come. You see our castle home down yonder, Bran?”

The noble hound looked in the direction indicated, and again moved his tail.

“Well, Bran, for many, many years there hasn’t been a single wreath of smoke seen above any of the chimneys of that bonnie old house, except those that rise from the southern wing—the smallest wing, Bran, remember—and all the rest of the castle is going to wreck and ruin. No wonder you half close your eyes, Bran; it is a sad serious business, and fine times the mice and the rats and the owls and the bats have been having in it, I can tell you!

“But now just listen, old fellow! All the time that you have been snoozing among the snow there, with your nose on top of the game-bag, I have been standing here thinking—thinking—thinking.

“You would like to know what I have been thinking about, wouldn’t you? Well, as you’re a good, faithful dog, I’ll tell you. I’ve been thinking about the past, and old, old times, when McGregor of Arrandoon was the proudest chief that ever trod the heather. That is more than a hundred years ago, Bran. The present chief of Arrandoon is a very different sort of an individual. To tell you the truth, my friend, your master is just as poor as peastraw, and there isn’t much substance in that. But, oh! Bran, I’ve been thinking that, what if I myself, by my own exertions, could go somewhere and do something that would earn me wealth and fame? To be sure I would like to be a soldier, but then mother says I must not leave her for the wars, and my poor father fought and bled for twenty long years, and there was nothing to send home but his sword. Heigho! No, I cannot be a soldier, even if I would. But something, Bran, I mean to do; something I mean to be, Bran. I don’t know yet, though, what that something will be, but my mother shall not die in poverty; of that I feel quite certain. Pride caused the fall of the chiefs of Arrandoon; pride shall raise us once again. The song says,—

“‘Whate’er a man dares be can do.’

“And I mean to dare and I mean to do, even if I go off to the gold-diggings. But, oh! Bran, only to think of getting back even a portion of my lands, that are now turned into shooting-grounds for the alien and stranger, to see sheep and lowing kine grazing where now only the heather grows, and the smoke curling upwards once more, from every chimney of our dear old home! Isn’t it a glorious thought, Bran?”

Bran jumped up at once and shook himself. Poor dog! he had no knowledge of a world beyond the glen, and probably the words in his master's heroic speech that he understood the best, were those about going somewhere and doing something.

So he shook himself, wagged his tail, looked up to the sky, down at the castle, then all round him, and finally up into his master's face, saying plainly enough,—

"By all means, master. I'm ready if you are. What is it to be—hares, rabbits, deer, or wild cat? I'm ready."

Young Allan laughed aloud, and again patted the rough honest head of the faithful hound. And a very nice picture he and the dog would, just at that moment, have made, had an artist been there to transfer it to canvas. McGregor was poor, I grant you, but he owned something better even than riches: he had youth and health and beauty—the beauty of manliness, and his were a face and figure that once seen were sure to be remembered.

"Tall and stately, and strong as the oak, graceful as the bending willow,"—this is something like the language that Ossian, or any other ancient Celtic bard, might have used in describing him. I am sorry that I am not a Celtic bard, and that I must content myself with prosaically saying that Allan was handsome, and that the Highland garb which he wore—perhaps the most romantic of all costumes—well became him.

Reader, did ever you run down a mountain-side? I can tell you that it is glorious fun. You must know your mountain well though, and be sure no precipices are in your way. Having made certain of this, off you go, just as Allan and his hound went now, with wild skips, and hops, and jumps; it is not running, it is positive kangarooing, and when you do leave the ground in a leap, you think you will never touch it again. But no fear must dwell in your heart during this mad race. Once commenced, nothing can stop your wild career, till you find yourself at the foot and on level ground; and even then you have to run a goodly distance to expend the impulse that carried you downwards, or else you will tumble. But when you have stopped at last, and gazed upwards, "Is it possible," you say to yourself, "that I can have descended from such a height in so short a space of time?"

I do not know whether Bran or his master was at the foot of the mountain first, but I do happen to know that they both disappeared in a wreath of snow as soon as they got there, and that both of them emerged therefrom laughing. After that, Allan McGregor sloped his gun and walked on more sedately, as became the chief of Arrandoon.

And now he approached the old castle, which looked ever so much higher and more imposing as one stood beneath it. He fired both barrels of his gun in the air, and the sound reverberated from hill and crag, rolling far away over the loch itself in a thousand echoes, as if the fairies were engaged at platoon-firing. Bran barked, and his bark was re-echoed too, not only from the rocks around, but from the interior of the castle walls. This last, I must tell you, was an Irish echo; it was no ghostly recoil of Bran's own voice, but the genuine outcome from canine lungs; and lo! yonder come the owners of them, pouring over the bridge, a perfect hairy hurricane, to welcome Bran and his master home. Two Highland collies, a lordly Saint Bernard, a whole pack of what looked like stable brooms, but were in reality Skye terriers, and last, but not least, Bran's old mother.

When the hubbub and din were somewhat settled, and the greetings over, Allan proceeded to cross the bridge, and McBain, his foster-father, advanced with a kindly smile to meet him.

I must introduce McBain to the reader without more ado—that is, I must give you some idea of his appearance; as to his character, that will develop itself as the story proceeds. He was about the middle height, then, and clad, like Allan, in the Highland dress of McGregor tartan—or plaid, as the English and Lowland Scotch erroneously call it. Though far from old, McBain was grey in beard and furrowed in brow; yet there are but few young men, I ween, who, had they ventured on a tussle with that broad-shouldered, wiry Highlander, would have cared to repeat the experiment for a week to come at least.

This was Allan's foster-father. He had been in the family since he was a child, and his ancestors, like himself, had been chief retainers to the lairds of Arrandoon. He was a right faithful fellow, and a Scotchman in everything, thinking no people so good or brave or powerful as his own, nor any other country in the world worth living in; and from this you will readily infer that he had never mixed very much with the peoples of the earth. This is true; and still he had travelled when a young man, but it was towards the desolate regions of the North Pole. It was pride had taken him there—a cross word that his father had said to him, and young McBain had gone to sea. Only, a few years of the wild, rough life he had led on the icy ocean around Spitzbergen had taught him that there was no place like home, so he returned to it and received his father's pardon, and, later on, his blessing.

"Aha, Allan, boy!" cried McBain; "so you've got back at last. Indeed—indeed we thought you were lost, and Bran and all. What sport, boy—what sport?"

"There is the bag," said Allan, "and precious little you'll find in it."

“Ah! But, boy, half a loaf is better than no bread. When I was in Spitzbergen—”

“There, there,” said Allan, interrupting him, “never mind about Spitzbergen now; but tell me, have Ralph and Rory come, there’s a good old foster-father.”

“Ralph and Rory come!” replied McBain, with an air of surprise. “Why, they are English, Allan; and do you think they’d leave the hospitality and good cheer of an Inverness hotel, to visit Glentroom in such weather as this? It isn’t likely!”

Allan was silent; he had turned away his head and was gazing skywards, with something very like a frown on his face.

McBain laid a kindly hand on his shoulder. “You are piqued, son,” he said; “you are angry. There is the proud, defiant look of the McGregor chiefs on your countenance. Let it pass, Allan; let it pass. Do not forget for a moment what the McBains have ever been to your people. Have they not served them well, and fought and bled for them too? Were they not ever the first at the castle walls, when the fiery cross was sent through the glen? Do not forget that I have been a true foster-father to you, my son? Haven’t I taught you all you know? on the hills, on the lochs, and by the river? and would you get angry with the old man because he says your guests will hardly dare turn up to-night?”

Allan passed his hand quickly across his brow, as if to brush away a cloud.

“No, no!” he replied; “I’m not angry. Only—only you don’t know my English friends; you will alter your opinion of them when you do. They are brave and manly fellows, McBain. Ralph rowed stroke oar in his boat at Cambridge, and Rory is the best bowler in the three royal counties.”

McBain laughed.

“Allan! Allan!” he said; “think you for a moment they could do what I have taught you to do? Could either of them cross Loch Kreenan in a cobble when the waves are houses high, when their white crests cut the face like a Highland dirk? Could they bring the eagle from the clouds with a single bullet, or the windhover from the sky? Could they grapple with and gralloch a wounded red deer? Nay; and even if they could, if they were as brave and strong and fierce as the wild cat of the mountain, it would take all their strength and all their courage to face the storm that is brewing to-night. See, Allan, the clouds are already settling down on the hills, the peak of Melfourvounie is buried in mist, there is a mournful sough in the rising wind, and ere five hours are over the boddach will be shrieking among the crags of Drontheim.”

(Boddach—A spirit, believed in by many, who takes the shape of an old man, sometimes seen by night in the woods, but always heard shrieking among the rocks that he haunts whenever storms are raging.)

“All the more reason,” cried Allan, talking rapidly, “that I should go and meet them. Tell mother and sister I have gone a little way down the glen to meet Ralph and Rory, and we’ll all be back to dinner. Bran and Oscar will go with me. But stay, don’t you hear the bagpipes? It is Peter, and very likely my friends are with him.”

The sound came nearer and nearer, and presently out from the shadows of the dark pine-wood strode Peter—all alone.

Both went quickly to meet him, and Peter’s story was soon told.

“The Sassenach gentlemans,” he said, “had both left Inverness with him in the morning, and fine young gentlemans they were, and might have been Highlanders for the matter of that. But och and och! they would take the high road for sake of the scenery, bless you, and he had to take the low; but for all that they ought to have been at the castle hours and hours ago.”

Young Allan and his foster-father said never a word; they did but tighten their hands, and glance for a moment in each other’s eyes, yet both understood that the simple action implied a promise on either side to stand together, shoulder to shoulder, whatever might happen.

Presence of mind in emergency is a gift that seems peculiar to the Scottish Highlander. Born in a mountain land, and accustomed from his very infancy to face every danger in hill or glen, in flood or fell or field, his true character is never better seen than in times of danger. McBain waited for a few minutes in the castle courtyard until Allan, who had hurried away, should have time to communicate with his mother and sister; then he struck a gong, and while yet its thunders were reverberating among the hills, he was surrounded by every servant in the place, old Janet, the cook, not excepted; then the orders that fell calmly and yet quickly from his lips showed at once that he was master of the situation.

“Janet, old woman,” he said, “run away to the house like a good creature and get ready the dinner; the best that ever you made, do ye hear? Peter, run, lad, and get a rope, the crooks, and lanterns. Here, take the chief’s gun. Yes, certainly, bring the bagpipes, and don’t forget the flask. Donald Ogg, get the pony put in the trap, with rugs and plaids galore. Take the high road to Inverness and follow us soon. Thank you, Peter. Now for

the dogs. No, no; not a pack. Back with them all to the kennel save Oscar, Bran, and Kooran the collie. Here we are, Allan, boy, all ready for a start."

And in less time than it takes me to tell it, the little expedition was equipped and started. A few minutes more and they had disappeared in the pine forest from which Peter had so lately emerged, and the old Castle of Arrandoon was left to silence and the gloom of quickly-descending night.

The Cruise of the Snowbird by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Two.

Saved—Rory and Ralph—McBain has an Idea.

There is probably no music in the world more spirit-stirring—when heard amongst the native hills—than that of the Highland bagpipe. How often it has led our Scottish troops to victory, and cheered their drooping hearts in times of trouble, let history tell. In the London streets the sound of the pipes may be something vastly different, and then the pipers get undue blame.

The little party who left the Castle of Arrandoon to go in search of Ralph and Rory did well to have Peter and his bagpipes included in their number, for, so long as they were within hearing distance of the castle, the music would give hope to those left behind; and when beyond that, it would not only serve to while away the time of the searchers, but even in the darkness it might perchance be heard by the sought.

The road they had taken led upwards through the pine forest for more than a mile, and even when it left the wood it still ascended, until it at last joined the old highway to Inverness. This was quite high up among the mountains—so high, indeed, that even the most distant peaks were visible on the other side of the lake.

“Surely,” said McBain, “we shall meet your friends ere long.”

“I fear the very worst,” said Allan, gloomily, “for, had they not left the road for some purpose or another, they would have reached the glen long before this time. Rory would have his sketch-book, and both of them are fond of wild scenery.”

“Wild scenery indeed!” said McBain; “they needn’t leave the road to search for that.”

His words were surely true, for a grander scene than that around them it would be difficult to imagine.

It was a toilsome road they had to trace though, for the untrodden snow lay a good foot deep on the path, and, albeit they cast many a longing look ahead, they had but little time and little heart to look around to admire the scenery. And the snow was dry and treacherous. It lay lightly on the brae-sides, and on the bending heather stems, apparently awaiting only the breath of the storm to raise it into clouds of whirling drift, and drive it into deep and impassable wreaths.

For more than an hour they trudged onwards without catching sight or hearing sound of life, whether of man, or bird, or beast. The wind, too, was beginning to rise, a few flakes of snow had begun to fall, and night and darkness were already settling down in the hollows and glens, and only on the hilltops did daylight remain.

At last they came to a shepherd's hut, and McBain knocked loudly at the door.

"Are you in, Donald? Are you in?" he cried.

"To be surely I'm in," said a tall, plaided Highlander, opening the little door; "to be surely I'm in, Mr McBain, and where else is it I'd be, I wonder, in such a night as it soon will be?"

"Have you been abroad to-day, Donald?" asked Allan.

"Abroad? Yes, looking after the sheepies, to be surely."

"Have you seen or met any one?"

"Yes, yes; two English bodies, to be surely. One would be sitting on a stone, making a picture, and the other would be looking over his shoulder, as it were. Och! Yes, to be surely."

"Would you go with us, Donald?" asked Allan, "and show us the spot where you saw them."

"Would I go with you? Is it that you are asking me?" cried Donald; "and what for do you ask me? Why didn't you tell us to go? Didn't my poor brother go with your father? ay, and die by his side. Yes, Donald will go with you to the end of the world if you'll want him. Wait till I get my crook; to be surely I'll go."

Donald disappeared as he spoke, but after about a minute he joined our friends, and they journeyed on together.

"It will be an awful night, to be surely," said Donald, "and troth, it is more than likely the two English bodies are dead, or drowned, or frozen by this time. An' och! it's a blessing they are only English bodies."

Such a speech as this did not tend to reassure young Allan. In very truth it almost quenched the hopes that were beginning to rise in his heart.

Donald was now their guide, and they were not surprised to observe that before very long he deserted the main road entirely, for a steep and craggy path that led downwards towards the distant lake. Along this narrow footway Donald bounded along with almost the speed of a red deer. Nor were Allan and his trusty companions slow to follow, for all felt how precious were the few minutes of daylight that were left to them.

And now the shepherd stops, removes his cap, and, passing his fingers through his hair in a puzzled kind of manner, stares around him in some surprise.

“Yes, yes,” he says at last; “this is the place, to be surely, but I don’t see a sign of the English bodies whatsomever.”

But if he does not, Allan McGregor, quicker of eye, does. He springs lightly forward, and picks something up that lies half-buried among the snow.

“It is Rory’s sketch-book,” he says, “Alas! poor Rory.”

But what is that mournful wail that now rises up towards them, apparently from the very bosom of the dark lake itself?

“It’s the boddach of Drontheim,” falters the shepherd, trembling like an aspen leaf. “It’s the boddach, to be surely, och! and och! What will become of us whatsomever?”

“Silence, Donald, silence?” cries McBain, as the strange sound falls once more on their listening ears. “Where is Oscar? Not here? Why, it is he! Come, men! Come, Allan, for, dead or alive, your friends are down yonder.”

They follow the footprints of the noble dog, although they are hardly visible, but Kooran, the collie, takes up the scent and does excellent service. So down the steep and craggy hill they rush, often stumbling, sometimes falling, but still going bravely on, and cheering Oscar with their voices as they run. At the foot at last, and on level ground, they hasten forward, welcomed by the Saint Bernard to a spot where lie two inanimate human forms, partly hidden by the lightly drifting snow.

Dead? No, thank Heaven! they are not dead, and what joy for Allan McGregor, when stalwart Ralph sits up, rubs his eyes, and gazes vacantly and wildly around him.

“Drink,” says McBain, holding a flask to his lips. The young Englishman swallows a mouthful almost mechanically, then staggers to his feet Allan and McBain steady him by the arms till he comes a little more to himself.

“Ralph, old fellow,” says Allan, “don’t you know me?”

“Yes, yes,” he mutters, hardly yet sensible of his surroundings, “I remember all now. Rory—the cliff—I could not raise him—sleep stole my senses away. But we are saved, are we not, and by you, good Allan, and by you strangers? But see to Rory, see to Rory.”

McBain was chafing Rory’s hands, and rubbing his half-frozen limbs.

“No,” he said, “not saved by us. You have Providence to thank, and yonder brave dog. Had he not found you, the sleep that had overcome you would have been your last.”

It was a long time, and it seemed doubly long to Allan and Ralph, ere Rory showed the slightest signs of returning life. At length, however, the blood began to trickle slowly from a wound he had received in the forehead in his fall over the cliff, and next moment he sighed deeply, then opened his eyes.

“God be praised?” said McBain, fervently; “and now, my friends, let us carry him.”

This was very easily done, for Rory was a light weight. So with Donald in front, and the dogs capering and barking all around them, the party commenced the ascent, and half-an-hour afterwards they were safe at the shepherd’s hut. And none too soon, for night was now over all the land, and the snow fell thick and fast.

Rory was laid upon the shepherd’s dais, and Allan and Donald proposed moving it close to the fire. But McBain knew better.

“No, no, no!” he cried, “leave him where he is. Never take a frozen man near the fire. I learned that at Spitzbergen. He has young blood in his veins, and will soon come round.”

But Rory, for a time, lay quiet enough. He was very white too, and but for his regular and uninterrupted breathing, and the tinge of red in his lips, one might have thought him dead.

“Poor little Rory!” said Allan, smoothing his dark hair from off his brow. “How cold his forehead is!”

Very simple words these were, yet there was something in the very tone in which they were uttered that would have convinced even a stranger, that Allan McGregor bore for the youth before him quite a brother’s love.

And who was Rory, and who was Ralph? These questions are very soon answered. Roderick Elphinston and Ralph Leigh were, or had been, students at the University of Cambridge. They had been "inseparables" all through the curriculum, and firm friends from the very first day they had met together. And yet in appearance, and indeed in character, they were entirely different. Ralph was a great broad-shouldered, pleasant-faced young Saxon Rory was small as to stature, but lithe and wiry in the extreme; his face was always somewhat pale, but his eyes had all the glitter and fire of a wild cat in them. Well, then, if you do not like the "wild cat," I shall say "poet"—the glitter and fire of a poet. And a poet he was, though he seldom wrote verses. Oh! it is not always the verses one writes that prove him to be a poet. Very often it is just the reverse. I know a young man who has written more verses than would stretch from Reading to Hyde Park, and there is just as much poetry in that young man's soul as there is in the flagstaff on my lawn yonder. But Rory's soul was filled with life and imagination, a gladsome glowing life that could not be restrained, but that burst upwards like a fountain in the sunlight, giving joy to all around. Everything in nature was understood and loved by Rory, and everything in nature seemed to love him in return; the birds and beasts made a confidant of him, and the very trees and the tenderest flowerets in garden or field seemed to whisper to him and tell him all their secrets. And just because he was so full of life he was also full of fun.

When silent and thinking, this young Irishman's face was placid, and even somewhat melancholy in expression, but it lighted up when he spoke, and it was wonderfully quick in its changes from grave to gay, or gay to grave. It was like a rippling summer sea with cloud-shadows chasing each other all over it. Like most of his countrymen, Rory was brave even to a fault. Well, then, there you have his description in a few words, and if you will not let me call him poet, I really do not know what else to call him.

Ralph Leigh I must dismiss with a word. But, in a word, he was in my opinion everything that a young English gentleman should be; he was straightforward, bold and manly, and though very far from being as clever as Rory, he loved Rory for possessing the qualities he himself was deficient in. Thoroughly guileless was honest Ralph, and indeed, if the truth must be told, he was not a little proud of his companion, and he was never better pleased than when, along with Rory in the company of others, the Irishman was what Ralph called "in fine form."

At such times Ralph would not have interrupted the flow of Rory's wit for the world, but the quiet and happy glance he would give round the room occasionally, to see if other people were listening to and fully appreciating his adopted brother, spoke volumes.

McBain was right. The young blood in Rory's veins soon reasserted itself, and after half-an-hour's rest he seemed as well as ever. His first action on awaking was to put his hand to his brow, and his first words were,—

"What is it at all, and where am I? Have I been in any trouble?"

"Trouble, Rory?" said Allan, pressing his hand. "Well, you and Ralph went tumbling over a cliff."

"Only fifty feet of a fall, Rory," said Ralph.

Rory sat bolt upright now, and opened his eyes in astonishment.

"Och! now I remember," he said, "that we had a bit of a fall—But fifty feet! do you tell me so? Indeed then it's a wonder there is one single whole bone between the two of us. But where is my sketch-book?"

"Here you are," said Allan.

"Oh!" said Rory, opening the book, "this is worse than all; the prettiest sketch ever I made in my life all spoiled with the snow."

"Now, boys," continued Rory, after a pause, "I grant you this is a very romantic situation—everything is romantic bar the smoke; but what are we waiting for? and is this your Castle of Arrandoon, my friend?"

"Not quite," replied Allan, laughing. "We are waiting for you to recover, and—"

"Well, sure enough," cried Rory, "I have recovered."

He jumped up as he spoke, kicked out his legs, and stretched out his arms.

"No; never a broken bone," he said.

Now it had been arranged between Allan and McBain that Rory should ride in the cart, while they and Ralph should walk.

But Rory was aghast at such a proposal.

"What," he cried; "is it a procession you'd make of me? Would you put me on straw in the bottom of a cart, like an old wife coming from a fair?"

“But,” persisted Allan, “you must be weak from the loss of blood.”

“Loss of blood,” laughed Rory, “don’t be chaffing a poor boy. If you’d seen the blood I lost at the last election, and all in the cause of peace and honour, too! No, indeed; I’ll walk.”

The storm was at its very worst when they once more emerged from the pine-wood, but every now and then they could see the light glimmering from one of the castle turrets, to guide them through the darkness. They sent the dogs on before to give notice of their approach; then Peter tuned up, and high above the roaring of the snow rose the scream of the great Highland bagpipe.

A few hours afterwards, the three friends had all but forgotten their perilous adventure among the snow, or remembered it only to make merry over it. It is needless to say that Allan’s mother and sister welcomed his friends, or that Ralph and Rory were charmed with the reception they received.

“Well,” said Rory, after the ladies had retired for the night, “I fully understand now what your poet Burns meant when he said—

“‘In heaven itself I’ll ask nae mair Than just a Highland welcome.’”

And now they gathered round the cosy hearth, on which great logs were blazing. McBain was relegated to an armchair in a corner, being the oldest Rory, who still felt the effects of his fall, reclined on a couch in front, with Ralph seated on one side and Allan on the other. Bran, the deer-hound, thought this too good a chance to be thrown away, so he got upon the sofa and lay with his great, honest head on Rory’s knees, while Kooran curled himself up on the hearthrug, and Oscar watched the door.

“Well,” said Ralph, “I call this delightful; and the idea of doing the Highlands in mid-winter is decidedly a new one, and that is saying a great deal.”

“Yes,” said Rory, laughing; “and a beautiful taste we’ve had of it to begin with. I fall over a cliff in the snow and Ralph comes tumbling after, just like Jack and Jill, and then we go to sleep like lambs, and waken with a taste of spirits in our mouths. Indeed yes, boys, it is romantic entirely.”

“Everything now-a-days,” said Ralph, with half a yawn, “is so hackneyed, as it were. You go up the Rhine—that is hackneyed. You go down the Mediterranean—that is hackneyed. You go here, there, and everywhere, and you find here, there, and

everywhere hackneyed. And if you go into a drawing-room and begin to speak of where you've been and what you've done, you soon find that every other fellow has been to the same places, and done precisely the same things."

"Sure, you're right, Ralph," said Rory; "and I do believe if you were to go to the moon and come back, some fellow would meet you on your return and lisp out, 'Oh, been to the moon, have you! awfly funny old place the moon. Did you call on the Looneys when you were there? Jolly family the Looneys.'"

"There is a kind of metaphorical truth in what you say, Rory," Ralph replied; "but I say, Allan, wouldn't it be nice to go somewhere where no one—no white man—had ever been before, or do something never before accomplished?"

"It would indeed," said Allan; "and I for one always looked upon Livingstone, and Stanley, and Gordon Cumming, and Cameron, and men like them, as the luckiest fellows in the world."

"Now," said Ralph, "I'm just nineteen. I've only two years more of what I call roving life, and if I don't ride across some continent before I'm twenty-one, or embark at one end of some unknown river and come out into the sea at the other, I'll never have a chance again."

"Why, how is that?" said McBain.

"Well," replied Ralph, "Sir Walter Leigh, my father, told me straight that we were as poor as Church mice, and that in order to retrieve our fortunes, as soon as I came of age I must marry my grandmother."

"Marry your grandmother!" exclaimed McBain, half rising in his chair.

"Well, my cousin, then," said Ralph, smiling; "she is five-and-forty, so it is all the same. But she has oceans of money, and my old father, bless him! is very, very good and kind. He doesn't limit me in money now; though, of course, I don't take advantage of all his generosity. 'Go and travel, my boy,' he said, 'and enjoy yourself till you come of age. Just see all you can and thus have your fling. I know I can trust you.'"

"Have your fling?" cried Rory; "troth now that is exactly what my Irish tenants told me to do. 'The sorra a morsel av rint have we got to give you,' says they, 'so go and have your fling, but 'deed and indeed, if we see you here again until times are mended, we'll shoot ye as dead as a Ballyshannon rabbit.'"

“Well, young gentlemen,” said McBain, after a pause in the conversation, during which nothing was heard except the crackling of the blazing logs and the mournful moaning of the wind without, “you want to do something quite new. Well, I’ve got an idea.”

“Oh, do tell us what it is?” cried Ralph and Rory, both in one breath.

“No, no; not to-night,” said McBain, laughing; “besides, it wants working out a bit, so I’m off to bed to dream about it. Good night.”

“Depend upon it,” said Allan McGregor, as he parted with his friends at their chamber door, “that whatever it is, McBain’s idea is a good one, and he’ll tell us all about it to-morrow. You’ll see.”

The Cruise of the Snowbird by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Three.

Life at the Old Castle—McBain Explains his "Idea"—Allan's Dream.

To say that our heroes, Ralph and Rory, were not a little impatient to know something about the scheme McBain was to propose for the purpose of giving them pleasure, would be equivalent to saying that they were not boys, or that they had men's heads upon boys' shoulders. So I willingly confess that it was the very first thing they thought about next morning, immediately after they had drawn up the blinds, to peep out and see what kind of a day it was going to be.

But this peeping out to ascertain the state of the weather was not so easily accomplished, as it would have been in the south of England. For fairy fingers seemed to have been at work during the night, and the panes were covered with a frost-work of ferns and leaves, more beautifully traced, more artistically finished, than the work of any human designer that ever lived. The whole seemed floured over with powdered snow. It was a pity, so thought Rory, to spoil the pattern on even one of the panes, but it had to be done, so by breathing on it for quite half a minute, a round, clear space was obtained; and gazing through this he could see that it was a glorious morning, that the clouds had all fled, that the sky was bluer than ever he had seen a sky before, that the wind was hushed, and the sun shining brightly over hills of dazzling white. The stems of the leafless trees looked like pillars of frosted silver, while their branches were more lovely by far than the coral that lies beneath the blue waves of the Indian Ocean.

"How different this is," said Rory, "from anything we ever see in England! Ah! sure, it was a good idea our coming here in winter."

"I wonder where McBain is this morning?" said Ralph.

"And I know right well," said Rory, "what you're thinking about."

"Perhaps you do," Ralph replied.

"Ay, that I do," said Rory; "but don't be an old wife, Ralph—never evince undue curiosity, never exhibit impatience. In other words, don't be a squaw."

"Oho!" cried Ralph, "now I see where the land lies. 'Don't be a squaw,' eh? You've been reading Fenimore Cooper, you old rogue, you! The centre of a great forest in the Far

West of America—midnight—a council of war—chiefs squatting around the camp fire—smoking the calumet—enter Eagle-eye—scats himself in silence—everybody burning to hear what he has to say, but no one dares ask for the world—ugh! and all that sort of thing. Am I right, Rory?"

"Indeed you are," said the other, laughing; "you've bowled me out, I confess. But, after all, you know, it will be just as well not to seem impatient, and so I move that we never speak a word to McBain about what he said last night until he is pleased to open the conversation."

"Right," said Ralph; "and now let us go down to breakfast."

Both Mrs McGregor and Allan's sister Helen were very different from what Ralph and Rory had expected to find them. They had taken their notions of Highland ladies from the novels of Walter Scott and other literary worthies. Before they had come to Glentroom they had pictured to themselves Mrs McGregor as a kind of Spartan mother—tall, stately, dark, and proud, with a most exalted idea of her own importance, with an inexorable hatred of all the Saxon race, and an inordinate love of spinning. Her daughter, they had thought, must also be tall, and, if beautiful, of a kind of majestic and stately beauty, repellent more than attractive, and one more to be feared than loved. And they felt sure that Mrs McGregor would be almost constantly bending over her spinning-wheel, while Helen, if ever she condescended to bend over anything, which they had deemed a matter of doubt, would be bending over a very ancient piece of goods in the shape of a harp.

These were their imaginings prior to their arrival at the castle, but these ideas were all wrong, and very delighted were the young men to find them so. Here in Mrs McGregor was no stiff fastidious lady; she was a very woman and a very mother, loving her children tenderly, and devoted to their interests, and rejoiced to hold out the hand of welcome to her children's friends. On the sunny side of fifty, she was slightly inclined to embonpoint, extremely pleasant both in voice and manner as well as in face. Rory first, and Ralph soon afterwards, felt as much at home in her presence and company as if they had known her all their lives.

As to Helen Edith, I do not think that any one would have been able to guess her nationality had they met her in society in town. She had been educated principally abroad, and could speak both the Italian and French languages, not only fluently, but, if I may be allowed the expression, mellifluently, for she possessed perfection of accent as well as exceeding sweetness of voice. She was rather small in stature, with pretty and shapely hands, and a nice figure.

Was she beautiful? you may ask me. Well, had you asked her brother he would have said, “Indeed, I never gave the matter a thought,” but Rory and Ralph would have told you that she was beautiful, and they would have added the words, “and sisterly.” I do not know whether or not Helen was a better or a worse musician than most young girls of her age—she was just turned seventeen. She sang sweetly, though not loudly; she never screamed, but sang with expression, as if she felt what she sang; and she accompanied herself on the harp. But as for Mrs McGregor’s spinning-wheel, why, our young heroes cast their eyes about in vain for it.

The portion of the castle now occupied by the McGregors was furnished in a far more luxurious style than probably accorded with their fallen fortunes, but everywhere there was evidence of refinement of taste. The old hall and the picture gallery delighted Rory most; he could fit a romance into every rusty coat of mail, and fix a poem to every spear and helmet.

“What a grand thing,” he said to Allan, “it is to have had ancestors! Never one had I, that I know of—leastways, none of them ever troubled themselves to sit for their portraits. More by token, perhaps, they couldn’t afford it.”

If Ralph enjoyed himself at the castle—and I might say that he undoubtedly did—he did not say a very great deal about it. To give vocal expression to his pleasure was not much in Ralph’s line, but it was in Rory’s, who, by the way, although nearly as old as his companion, was far more of a boy.

The feelings of the young chief of the McGregors, while showing his friends over the old castle, the ancient home of his fathers, were those of sadness, mingled with a very little touch of pride. Every room had its story, every chamber its tale—often one of sorrow; and these were listened to by Ralph and Rory with rapt attention, although every now and then some curious or quaint remark from the lips of the latter would set the other two laughing, and often materially damage some relation of events that bordered closely on the romantic.

“If ever I’m rich enough,” said Allan, leading the way into the ancient banqueting-hall, “I mean to re-roof and re-furnish the whole of the older portion of the castle.”

“But wherever has the roof gone to?” asked Rory, looking upwards at the sky above them.

“Fire would explain that,” replied Allan; “the whole of this wing of the building was burned by Cumberland in ’45—he who was surnamed the Bloody Duke, you know.”

“Were your people ‘out,’ as you call it, in ’45?” asked Ralph.

Allan nodded, and bit his lips; the memory of that terrible time was not a pleasant one to this Highland chief.

The little turret chambers were a source of both interest and curiosity to Allan’s companions.

“Bedrooms and watch-towers, are they?” said Ralph, viewing them critically. “Well, you catch a beautiful glimpse of the glen, and the hills, and woods, and lake from that little narrow window, with its solitary iron stanchion; but I say, Allan—bedrooms, eh? Aren’t you joking, old man? Fancy a great tall lanky fellow like me in a bedroom this size; why, I’d have to double up like a jack-knife!”

“Oh! look, Ralph, at these dark, mysterious stains on the oaken floor,” cried Rory—“blood, of course? Do you know, Allan, my boy, what particular deed of darkness was committed in this turret chamber?”

“I do, precisely,” replied Allan.

“Och! tell us, then—tell us!” said Rory.

“Ay, do,” said Ralph. “I shall lean against the window here and look out, for the view is delightful, but I’ll be listening all the same.”

“Well, then,” said Allan, “I made this little room my study for a few months last summer, and I spilt some ink there.”

“Now, indeed, indeed,” cried romantic Rory, “that is a shame to put us off like that. Never mind, Ralph; we know it is a blood-stain, and if Allan won’t tell us the story, then, we’ll invent one. Sure, now,” he continued, “I’d like to sleep here.”

“You’d catch your death of cold from the damp,” said Allan.

Rory wheeled him right round to the light, and gazed at him funnily from top to toe, and from toe to top.

“You’re a greater curiosity than the fine old castle itself,” said Rory; “and I don’t believe there is an ounce of romance in the whole big body of you. Now, if the place was mine, there isn’t a room—why, what is that?”

“That’s the gong,” said Allan, “and it says plainly enough, ‘Get r-r-r-r-ready for dinner.’”

“Well, but,” persisted Rory, “just before we go down below show us the corridor where the ghost walks at midnight, and the door through which it disappears.”

“A ghost!” said Allan; “indeed, I never knew there was one.”

“Ah! but,” Rory continued, “you never knew there wasn’t. Well, then, say probably there is a ghost, because you know, old fellow, in an ancient family like yours there must be a ghost. There must be some old fogey or another who didn’t think he was very well done by in this world, and feels bound to come back and walk about at midnight, and all that sort of thing. Pray, Allan, don’t break the spell. You’re welcome to the stains if you please, but ’deed and indeed, I mean to stick to the ghost.”

The first few days of their stay in Glentroom were spent in what Allan called “doing nothing,” for unless he left the castle for the hill, the river, or the lake, he did not consider he was doing anything. Within the castle walls, however, Rory for one was not idle. There was, in his opinion, a deal to be seen and a deal to be done: he had to make acquaintance with every living thing about the place—ponies and dogs, cattle and pigs, ducks, geese, fowl, and pigeons.

Old Janet averred that she had never seen such a boy in all her born days—that he turned the castle upside down, and kept all the “beasties” in an uproar; but at the same time she added that he was the prettiest boy ever she’d seen, and “Heaven bless his bonnie face,” which put her in mind of her dear dead boy Donald, and she couldn’t be angry with him, for even when he was doing mischief he made her laugh.

The parish in which Glentroom lies is a very wide one indeed, and contained at the time our tale opens many families of distinction. Nearly all of these were on visiting terms with the McGregors, and many a beautifully-fitted sledge used to drive over the drawbridge of Arrandoon Castle during the winter months—wheels, of course, were out of the question when the snow lay thick on the ground—so that life in Allan’s family, although it did not partake of the gaiety of the London season, was by no means a dull one, and both Ralph and Rory thought the evenings spent in the drawing-room were very enjoyable indeed. Ralph was a good conversationalist and a good listener: he delighted in hearing music, while Rory delighted to play, and, for his years, he was a violinist of no mean order. He had never been known to go anywhere—not even on the shortest of holiday tours—without the long black case that contained his pet instrument.

Now, as none of “the resident gentry,” as they were called, who visited at the castle have anything at all to do with our story, I shall not fatigue my readers by introducing them.

And why, it may be asked, should I trouble myself about describing life at the castle at all? And where is the Snowbird?—for doubtless you have guessed already that it is a ship of some kind. The Snowbird ere very long will sail majestically up that Highland lake before you, and in her, along with our heroes, you and I, reader, will embark, and together we will journey afar over the ocean wave, to regions hitherto but little known to man. Our adventures there will be many, wild, and varied, and some of them, too, so far from pleasant, that while exiled in the frozen seas of the far North, our thoughts will oftentimes turn fondly homewards, and we will think with a joy borrowed from the past of the quiet and peaceful days we spent in bonnie Arrandoon.

Ralph and Rory had kept the promise they had made to each other on the morning succeeding their arrival at Arrandoon; they left McBain to dream over his "idea" in peace. They did not behave like squaws, and I think it was the third or fourth evening before Allan's foster-father said another word about it. They were then all around the fire, as they had been before; the ladies had retired, and the dogs were making themselves as snug and comfortable as dogs know how to whenever they get a chance.

"Well," said McBain, after there had been a lull in the conversation for some little time, "we've been all so happy and jolly here for the last few days, that we haven't had time to think much or to look ahead either; but now, if you don't mind, young gentlemen, I will tell you what I should propose in the way of spending a few of the incoming spring and summer months, in what I should call a very pleasant fashion."

"Yes," cried Rory, "do tell us, we are burning to hear about it, and if it be anything new it is sure to be nice."

"Very well," said McBain. "Allan there tells me he means to stick to you both for a time—to keep you prisoners in Glentroom. He will trot you about for all that; you'll be on parole, and roam about wherever you like; and you can fish and shoot and sketch just as much as ever you have a mind to. Meanwhile, buy a boat; I know where there is one to sell that will suit us in every way—a grand, big, strong, open boat. She belongs to Duncan Forbes, of Fort Augustus, and can be bought for an old song. We can have her round into the loch here. I'm a bit of a sailor, as Allan knows, and I'll show you how to deck her over, set up rigging and mast, and make her complete, and I'll make bold to say that before we have done with her she will be as neat and pretty a little craft as ever hauled the wind."

"I say, boys," said Rory, "I think the idea is a glorious one."

"I must say, I like it immensely," said Ralph.

“And so do I,” said Allan, “if—if we can all afford it.”

“Oh! but stop a little,” said McBain, “you haven’t heard all my proposal yet; the best of it is to come. Your cruising ground will be all up and down among the Western Islands, where the wildest and finest scenery in Europe exists. You’ll get any amount of fishing and shooting too, for wherever you three smart-looking young yachtsmen land on the coast, people will vie with each other in offering you Highland hospitality. And all the while you can make your pleasure pay you.”

“How—how—tell us how?”

“Why,” continued McBain, “around the rocky and rugged islands where you will be cruising are the finest lobsters in the world. You have only to sink a few cages every night when at anchor; you will draw them up full in the morning, and place them in a well in your hold. As soon as you have enough to make a paying voyage, round you will run to Greenock, where is always a ready market and good prices.”

Here Ralph jumped up and rubbed his hands; and Rory, forgetting his bruised shoulder and still bandaged head, hopped off the sofa to cry “Hurrah!” and this made Kooran bark, and of course Bran chimed in for company’s sake, and McBain wagged his beard and laughed with delight at the pleasure his suggestion seemed to afford the three young men; and, indeed, for the time being he felt quite as youthful as either of them.

“And I’ll be the crew of the craft,” said McBain. “Allan ought to be captain, and you others naval cadets.”

“Yes,” said Rory, “that will suit us excellently, and we can take lessons from you and Allan in seamanship, and by-and-bye be just as clever sailors as either of you.”

“Ay, that you can,” said McBain.

Allan laid his hand on Ralph’s shoulder, for the latter was gazing quietly and dreamily firewards.

“What are you thinking about?” said Allan.

Ralph smiled as he made reply.

“I was thinking,” he said, “that our adventures as amateur yachtsmen will not begin and end with cruising among the Western Isles of Scotland, pleasant and romantic enough

though that may be. Listen to me, boys. It has been the one dream of my life to be able to be master of a beautiful yacht, and to sail away to far countries, and to see the world in earnest. Now I know I shall have an opportunity of doing so. My good, kind old father will baulk me in nothing that is reasonable; and if, after a few months' cruising in this boat, I can convince him that I have mastered the rudiments of seamanship, he will, I believe, let me have a real yacht, capable of voyaging to any part of the world!"

"Ah! that would indeed be glorious, boys," cried Rory, with enthusiasm.

"If we could only arrange it," said Allan, "so as to all go together."

"Of course," said Ralph; "there would not be half the pleasure else. And we would sail to some country, if possible, where Englishmen had never been, or never lived before."

"To the countries and islands around the Pole, for example," suggested McBain.

"Yes," Ralph said; "from all I have read of the Sea of Ice, it seems to me the most fascinating place in the world."

"Ay," said McBain; "to me it possesses a strange charm; for everything connected with the countries and seas beyond the Arctic circle is as different from anything one sees elsewhere as though it belonged to some other planet."

For hours before retiring to rest they talked about Greenland; and McBain told them of many a wild adventure in which he himself had been the principal hero. And among other things he told them of the mammoth caves of Alba Isle, where an untold wealth of ivory lay buried.

For hours after they had retired Allan lay awake, thinking only of that buried treasure. Then he slept, and dreamt he had returned from the far north a wealthy man—that Arrandoon was re-furnished and re-roofed, that he had regained all the proud acres which his fathers had squandered, and that his dear mother and sister were reinstated in the rank of life they, were born to adorn, and which was the right of birth of the chiefs of Glentroom.

Do dreams ever come true? At times.

The Cruise of the Snowbird by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Four.

The “Flower of Arrandoon”—Old Ap’s Cottage—Trial Trips and Useful Lessons.

I do not think that, during any period of his former life, Allan McGregor’s foster-father was much happier than he was while engaged, with the help of his boy friends, in getting the cutter they had bought ready for her summer cruise among the Western Islands.

They were not quite unassisted in their labours though; no, for had they not the advantage of possessing skilled labour? Was not Tom Ap Ewen their right-hand man; to guide, direct, and counsel them in every difficulty? And right useful they found him, too.

Thomas was a Welshman, as his name indicates; he had been a boatbuilder all his life. He lived in a little house by the lake-side, and this house of his bore in every respect a very strong resemblance to a boat turned upside down. All its furniture and fittings looked as though at one time they had been down to the sea in ships, and very likely they had. Tom’s bed was a canvas cot which might have been white at one time, but which was terribly smoke-begrimed now; Tom’s cooking apparatus was a stove, and, saving a sea-chest which served the double purpose of dais and tool-box, all the seats in his cottage were lockers, while the old lamp that hung from the blackened rafters gave evidence of having seen better days, having in fact dangled from the cabin deck of some trusty yacht.

Tom himself was quite in keeping with his little home. A man of small stature was Tom. I will not call him dapper, because you know that would imply neatness and activity, and there was very little of either about Tom. But he had plenty of breadth of beam, and so stiff was he, apparently, that he looked as if he had been made out of an old bowsprit, and had acted for years in the capacity of figure-head to an old seventy-four. Seen from the front, Tom appeared, on week-days, to be all apron from his chin to his toes; his hard wiry face was bestubbled over in half its length with grey hairs, for Tom found the scissors more handy and far less dangerous than a razor; and, jauntily cocked a little on one side of his head, he wore a square paper cap over a reddish-brown wig. Well, if to this you add a pair of short arms, a pair of hard horny hands, and place two roguish beads of hazel eyes in under his bushy eyebrows, you have just as complete a description of Thomas Ap Ewen as I am capable of giving.

This wee wee man generally went by the name of Old Ap. Of course there were ill-natured people who sometimes, behind Tom’s back, added an e to the Ap; but, honestly

speaking, there was not a bit of the ape about him, except, perhaps, when taking snuff. Granting that his partiality for snuff was a fault, it was one that you could reasonably strive to forgive, in consideration of his many other sterling qualities.

Well, Tom was master of the yard, so to speak, into which the purchased cutter was hauled to be fitted, and although McBain did not take all the advice that was tendered to him, it is but fair to say that he benefited by a good deal of it.

It would have done the heart of any one, save a churl, good to have seen how willingly those boys worked; axe, or saw, or hammer, plane or spokeshave, nothing came amiss to them. Allan was undoubtedly the best artisan; he had been used to such work before; but generally where there's a will there's a way, and the very newness of the idea of labouring like ordinary mechanics lent, as far as Ralph and Rory were concerned, a charm to the whole business.

"There is nothing hackneyed about this sort of thing, is there?" Ralph would say, looking up from planing a deck-spar.

"There is a deal to learn, too," Rory might answer. "Artisans mustn't be fools, sure. But how stiff my saw goes!"

"A bit of grease will put that to rights." Ralph's face would beam while giving a bit of information like this, or while initiating Rory into the mysteries of dovetailing, or explaining to him that when driving a nail he must hit it quietly on the head, and then it would not go doubling round his finger.

Old Ap and McBain were both of them very learned—or they appeared to be so—in the subject of rigging, nor did their opinions in this matter altogether coincide. Old Ap's cottage and the yard were quite two miles—Scotch ones—from the castle, so on the days when they were busy our heroes would not hear of returning to lunch.

"Isn't good bread and cheese, washed down with goat's milk, sufficient for us?" Ralph might say.

And Rory would reply, "Yes, my boy, indeed, it's food fit for a king."

After luncheon was the time for a little well-earned rest. The young men would stroll down towards the lake, by whose banks there was always something to be seen or done for half-an-hour, if it were only skipping flat stones across its surface; while the two elder ones would enjoy the dolce far niente and their odium cum dignitate seated on a log.

“Well,” said old Ap, one day, “I suppose she is to be cutter-rigged, though for my own part I’d prefer a yawl.”

“There is no accounting for tastes,” replied McBain; “and as to me, I don’t care for two masts where one will do. She won’t be over large, you know, when all is said and done.”

“Just look you,” continued Ap, “how handy a bit of mizen is.”

“It is at times, I grant you,” replied McBain.

“To be sure,” said Ap, “you may sail faster with the cutter rig, but then you don’t want to race, do you, look see?”

“Not positively to race, Mr Ewen,” replied McBain, “but there will be times when it may be necessary to get into harbour or up a loch with all speed, and if that isn’t racing, why it’s the very next thing to it.”

“Yes, yes,” said old Ap, “but still a yawl is easier worked, and as you’ll be a bit short-handed—”

“What!” cried McBain, in some astonishment; “an eight-ton cutter, and four of us. Call you that short-handed?”

“Yes, yes, I do, look see,” answered Ap, taking a big pinch of his favourite dust, “because I’d call it only two; surely you wouldn’t count upon the Englishmen in a sea-way.”

McBain laughed.

“Why,” he said, “before a month is over I’ll have those two Saxon lads as clever cuttersmen as ever handled tiller or belayed a halyard. Just wait until we return up the loch after our summer’s cruise, and you can criticise us as much as ever you please.”

Now these amateur yacht-builders, if so we may call them, took the greatest of pains, not only with the decking and rigging of their cutter, but with her painting and ornamentation as well. There were two or three months before them, because they did not mean to start cruising before May, so they worked away at her with the plodding steadiness of five old beavers. In their little cabin, where it must be confessed there was not too much head room, there was nevertheless a good deal of comfort, and all the painting and gilding was done by Rory’s five artistic fingers. In fact, he painted her

outside and in, and he named her the Flower of Arrandoon, and he painted that too on her stern, with a great many dashes and flourishes, that any one, save himself, would have deemed quite unnecessary.

It was only natural that they should do their best to make their pigmy vessel look as neat and as nice as possible; but they had another object in view in doing so, for as soon as their summer cruise was over they meant to sell her. So that what they spent upon her would not really be money thrown to the winds, but quite the reverse. Young Ralph knew dozens of young men just as fond of sailing and adventure as he was, and he thought it would be strange indeed if he himself, assisted by the voluble Rory, could not manage to give such a glowing account of their cruise, and of all the fun and adventures they were sure to have, as would make the purchase of the Flower of Arrandoon something to be positively competed for.

When she was at last finished and fitted, and lying at anchor, in the creek of Glentroom, with the water lap-lapping under her bows, her sails all nicely clewed, and her slender topmast bobbing and bending to the trees, as if saluting them, why I can assure you she looked very pretty indeed. But there was something more than mere prettiness about her; she looked useful. Care had been taken with her ballasting, so she rode like a duck in the water. She had, too, sufficient breadth of beam, and yet possessed depth of keel enough to make her safe in a sea-way, and McBain knew well—and so, for that matter, did Allan—that these were solid advantages in the kind of waters that would form their cruising ground. In a word, the Flower of Arrandoon was a comfortable sea-worthy boat, well proportioned and handy, and what more could any one wish for?

And now the snow had all fled from the hills and the glens, only on the crevices of mountain tops was it still to be seen—ay, and would be likely to be seen all the summer through, but softly and balmily blew the western winds, and the mavis and blackbird returned to make joyous music from morning's dawn till dewy eve. Half hidden in bushy dells, canary-coloured primroses smiled over the green of their leaves, and ferns and breckans began to unfold their brown fingers in the breeze, while buds on the silvery-scented birches that grew on the brae-lands, and verdant crimson-tipped tassels on the larches that courted the haughs, told that spring had come, and summer itself was not far distant.

And so one fine morning says McBain, "Now, Allan, if your friends are ready, we'll go down to the creek, get up our bit of an anchor, and be off on a trial trip."

Trial trips are often failures, but that of the boys' cutter certainly was not. Everything was done under McBain's directions, Allan doing nearly all the principal work, though assisted by old Ap; but if Ralph and Rory did not work, they watched. Nothing escaped

them, and if they did not say much, it was because, like Paddy's parrot, they were "rattling up the thinking."

The day was beautiful—a blue sky with drifting cloudlets of white overhead, and a good though not stiff breeze blowing right up the loch; so they took advantage of this, and scudded on for ten miles to Glen Mora. They did not run right up against the old black pier, and smash their own bowsprit in the attempt to knock it down. No, the boat was well steered, and the sails lowered just at the right time, the mainsail neatly and smartly furled, and covered as neatly, and the jib stowed. Old Ap was left as watchman, and McBain and his friends went on shore for a walk and luncheon.

In the evening, after they had enjoyed to the full their "bit of a cruise on shore," as McBain called it, they returned to their boat, and almost immediately started back for Glentroom. The wind still blew up the loch; it was almost, though not quite, ahead of them. This our young yachtsmen did not regret, for, as their sailing-master told them, it would enable them to find out what the cutter could do, for, tacking and half-tacking, they had to work to windward.

It was gloaming ere they dropped anchor again in the creek, and McBain's verdict on the Flower of Arrandoon was a perfectly satisfactory one.

"She'll do, gentlemen," he said, "she'll do; she is handy, and stout, and willing. There is no extra sauciness about her, though she is on excellent terms with herself, and although she doesn't sail impudently close to the wind, still I say she behaves herself gallantly and well."

It wanted nothing more than this to give Allan and his friends an appetite for the haunch of mountain mutton that awaited them on their return to the castle. They were in bounding spirits too; it made every one else happy just to see them happy, so that everything passed off that night as merrily as marriage bells.

The loch near the old Castle of Arrandoon is one of the great chain of lakes that stretch from east to west of Scotland, and are joined together by a broad and deep canal, which gives passage to many a stately ship. This canal, once upon a time, was looked upon as one of the engineering wonders of the world, leading as it does often up and over hills so high and wild that in sober England they would be honoured with the title of mountains.

For a whole week or more, ere the cutter turned her bows to the southward and west, and started away on her summer cruise, almost every day was spent on this loch. It is big enough in all conscience for manoeuvres of any kind, being in many places betwixt two and three miles in width, while its length is over twenty.

It might be said, with a good deal of truth, that Allan McGregor had spent his life in boats upon lakes, for as soon as his little hand was big enough to grasp a tiller he had held one. He knew all about boats and boat-sailing, and was, on the whole, an excellent fresh-water sailor. With Ralph and Rory it was somewhat different, good oarsman though the former at all events was. However, they were apt pupils, and, with good health and willingness to work, what is it a boy will not learn?

In old Ap's cottage were models of several well-rigged vessels of the smaller class, the principal of them being a sloop, a cutter, and a yawl. Ap delighted to give lectures on the peculiar merits and rigging of these, interspersed with many a "Yes, yes, young shentlemen, and look you see," spoken with the curious accent which Welshmen alone can give to such simple words. These models our heroes used to copy, so that, theoretically speaking, they knew a great deal about seamanship before they stepped on board the cutter to take their first cruise.

Practice alone makes perfect in any profession, and although experience is oftentimes a hard and cruel teacher, there is no doubt she docet stultos, and her lessons are given with a force there is no forgetting. Of such was the lesson Rory got one morning; he had the tiller in his hand, and was bowling along full before the wind. It seemed such easy work sailing thus, and Rory was giving more of his time than he ought to have done to conversation with his companions, and even occasionally stealing a glance on shore to admire the scenery, when all at once, "Flop! flop! crack! harsh!" cried the sail, and round came the boom. The wind was not very fresh, so there was little harm done; besides, McBain was there, and I verily believe that had that old tar gone to sleep, he would have been dozing in dog fashion with his weather eye open. But on this occasion poor Rory was scratching and rubbing a bare head.

"Crack, harsh!" he said, looking at the offending sail; "troth and indeed it is harsh you crack, I can tell you."

"Ah!" said McBain, quietly, "sailing a bit off, you see."

"'Deed and indeed," replied Rory, "but you're right, and by the same token my hat's off too, and troth I thought the poor head of me was in it."

It will be observed that Rory had a habit of talking slightly Irish at times, but I must do him the credit of saying that he never did so except when excited, or simply "for the fun of the thing."

Another useful lesson that both Ralph and Rory took some pains to learn was to look out for squalls. They learned this on the loch, for there sometimes, just as you are quietly passing some tree-clad bank or brae, you all at once open out some beautifully romantic glen. Yes, both beautiful and romantic enough, but down that gully sweeps the gusty wind, with force enough often to tear the sticks off the sturdiest boat, or lay her flat and helpless on her beam ends. But the lesson, once learned, was taken to heart, and did them many a good turn in after days, when sailing away over the seas of the far North in their saucy yacht, the Snowbird.

The time now drew rapidly near for them to start away to cruise in earnest. They had spent what they termed “a jolly time of it” in Glentroom. Time had never, never seemed to fly so quickly before. They had had many adventures too; but one they had only a day or two before sailing was the strangest. As, however, this adventure had so funny a beginning, though all too near a fatal ending, I must reserve it for another chapter.

The Cruise of the Snowbird by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Five.

Showing how Royalty Visited Arrandoon, and how our Heroes Returned the Call.

The windows of the double-bedded chamber occupied by Allan McGregor's guests overlooked both lake and glen. At one corner of it was a kind of turret recess; this had been originally used as a dressing-room, but Allan had gone to some trouble and expense in fitting it up as an own, own room for Rory. Ralph called it Rory's "boudoir," Rory himself called it his "sulky." The floor of the curious little room was softly carpeted; the walls were hung with ancient tapestry; the windows neatly draped. There was a little bookcase in it, in which, much to his surprise, the young man found all his favourite poets and authors. His fiddle and music were in this turret as well; so it was all very nice and snug indeed.

Scarcely a day passed that Rory did not spend an hour or two in his "sulky," generally after luncheon, when not on or at the lake; and even while reclining on his lounge the view that he could catch a glimpse of was just as romantic and beautiful as any boy poet could wish. There was no door between this and the bedchamber, only a curtain which could be drawn at pleasure.

Now, as I happen to love the truth for its own simple sake, I must tell you that neither Rory nor Ralph was very fond of early rising, practically speaking—theory being another thing. Allan was often away at the river hours and hours before breakfast, and the beautiful dishes of mountain trout that lay on the table, so crisp and still, had been frisking and gambolling only a short time before in their native streams. But Allan's friends—well, it may have been the Highland air, you know, which is remarkably strong and pure, but anyhow, neither of them thought of stirring until the first gong pealed its thunders forth. It was not that they did not get a good example set them by the sun, for, it being now the month of May, that luminary deemed it his duty to get up himself, and to arouse most ordinary mortals, shortly after four o'clock.

The list of ordinary mortals, so far as the castle was concerned, included old Janet the cook, and most of the other servants and retainers, and all the dogs, and all the cocks and hens, and ducks and geese, and turkeys, to say nothing of pigs and pigeons, sheep and cattle; and as every single mortal among them felt himself bound as soon as his eyes were open to express his feelings audibly, and in his own peculiar fashion, you can easily believe that the din and the hubbub around Arrandoon at early morning were something considerable. Whether asleep or awake, Ralph had an easy mind, nothing bothered him.

I believe he could have slept throughout general quarters at sea, with cannon thundering overhead, if he had a mind to; but with Rory it was somewhat different, and the cock-crowing used to fidget him in his dreams. If there had been only one cock, and that cock had crowed till his comb fell off, it would have been merely monotonous, and Rory would have slumbered on in peace, but there were so many cocks of so many strains. The game-cocks crowed boldly and bravely, and their tones clearly proved them kings of the harem; the bantams shrieked defiance at every other cock about the place, but no cock about the place took any heed of them; the cowardly Shanghais kept at a safe distance from the game-birds, and shouted themselves hoarse; and besides these there was the half-apologetic, half-formed crow of the cockerels, who got thrashed a dozen times everyday because they dared to mimic their betters.

These sounds, I say, fidgeted our poetic Rory; but when half a dozen fantail pigeons would alight outside the window, and strut about and cry, "Coo, coo, troubled with you, troubled with you," then Rory would become more sensible, and he would open one eye to have a look at the clock on the mantelpiece. Mind you, he wouldn't open both eyes for the world, lest he should awaken altogether.

"Oh!" he would think to himself, "only five o'clock; gong won't go for three hours yet. How jolly!"

Then he would turn round on the other side and go to sleep again. The cocks might go on crowing, and the pigeons might preen their feathers and "coo-coo" as much as they pleased now. Rory heard no more until "Ur-ur—R-Rise, Ur-ur—R-Ralph and Rory," roared the gong.

One particular morning Rory had opened his one eye just as usual, had his look at the clock, had rejoiced that it was still early, and had turned himself round to go off once more to the land of Nod, when, suddenly, there arose from beneath such an inexpressible row, such an indefinable din, as surely never before had been heard around the Castle of Arrandoon. The horses stamped and neighed in their stables, the cattle moaned a double bass, the pigs squeaked a shrill tenor, the fowl all went mad.

"Whack, whack, whack!" roared the ducks.

"Kank, kank, kank?" cried the geese.

"Hubbub—ub—ub—bub!" yelled the turkeys.

Rory sat bolt upright in bed, with both eyes open, more fully awake than ever he had felt in his life before.

“Hubbub, indeed!” says Rory; “indeed, then, I never heard such a hubbub before in all my born days. Ralph, old man, Ralph. Sit up, my boy. I wonder what the matter can be.”

“And so do I,” replied Ralph, without, however, offering to stir; “but surely a fellow can wonder well enough without getting out of bed to wonder.”

“Ooh! you lazy old horse!” cried Rory; “well, then, it’s myself that’ll get up.”

Suiting the action to the word, Rory sprang out of bed, and next moment he had thrown open his “sulky” window and popped his head and shoulders out. He speedily drew them in again and called to Ralph, and the words he used were enough to bring even that matter-of-fact hero to his side with all the speed he cared to expend.

What they saw I’ll try to explain to you.

Eagles had been far more numerous this season than they had been for years. McBain knew this well, and Allan McGregor knew it to his cost, for in an eyrie on a distant part of his estate a pair of these kingly birds had established themselves, and brought forth young, and, judging from the number of lambs they had carried off, a terribly rapacious family they were. Although five miles from the castle, Allan had several times gone to the place at early morn for the purpose of getting a ride-shot at these birds; but although he knew the very ledge on which the nest was laid—there is little building about an eagle’s nest—he had always been unsuccessful, for the favourites of Jove were wary, and could scent danger from afar.

So day by day the lambs went on diminishing, and the shepherds went on grumbling, but they grumbled in vain. Upwards and upwards in circling flight the eagles would soar, as if to hide themselves in the sun’s effulgence, until they were all but invisible to the keenest eye. They would then hover hawk-like over their innocent prey, until chance favoured them, when there would be a swift, unerring, downward rush, and often before the very eyes of the astonished keepers the lamb was seized and borne in triumph to the eyrie.

The glen, or rather gorge, which the eagles had chosen for their home, is one of the wildest and dreariest I ever traversed; at the bottom of it lies a brown and weird-looking loch about two miles long, one side of which is bounded by birch-trees, through which a road runs, and if you gaze across this loch, what think you do you see beyond? Why, a black and beetling wall of rock rising sheerly perpendicular up out of the water, and towering to a height of over one thousand feet. Although the loch is five hundred yards wide, you can hardly get rid of the impression that this immense wall of rock is bending

towards you from the top, and about to fall and crush your pigmy body to atoms. No wonder the loch itself is still and dark and treacherous-looking, and no wonder the natives care not to traverse the glen by day, or that they give it a wide berth at night, for the place has an evil name, and they say that often and often at the hour of midnight the water-kelpie's fiendish laugh is heard at the foot of the rock, followed by the plash and sullen plunging sound which a heavy body always emits when sinking in very deep water.

Remember that I do not myself believe in water-kelpies, nor any other kelpies whatever, and I have fished for char (the Salmo umbla) in the loch, and traversed the glen in the starlight, yet I never came across anything much worse-looking than myself—so there!

Now it was in the middle of this rocky precipice, on a ledge of stone, that the kingly birds had made their nest of sticks and turf, with just as little regard to the laws of avine architecture as the cushat of the English copse evinces. It was an airy abode, yet for all that a prettier pair of young ones than the two that lay therein, both the father and mother eagle averred, had never yet been seen or hatched. It is needless to say that they were very fond of their progeny, and also very fond of each other, so that when one lovely morning the she-eagle said to the he one,—

"What is for breakfast, dear?" it was only natural that the he one should reply, "Anything you like, my love."

"Well then," said she, "we've been having nothing but mutton, mutton, mutton for weeks. I'm sure the children would like a change, and I know I should."

Then the royal eagle lowered his eyebrows, and scratched his ear with one great toe, as if very deep in thought, and then his countenance cleared all at once, a grim smile stole over his face, and he said,—

"I have it. Babies are scarce, you know, but I'll bring you a turkey."

"Oh!" said her royal highness, "that will be nice, and the feathers will help to keep the children warm."

So away the eagle soared, and about ten minutes afterwards he alighted with a rush right in the middle of the poultry yard at Arrandoon Castle. Hence the hubbub which had aroused both Ralph and Rory.

Now had the bird of Jove not been so greedy, I feel bound to believe he could have left the yard almost as quickly as he had entered it one turkey the richer, and his royal

helpmeet and children would not have been disappointed in their breakfast. But no, “I may just as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb,” he thought to himself, and so he alighted on the back of the oldest and biggest turkey cock he could see. But he did not find this bird so easy a prey as he could have wished; indeed the turkey at once made up his mind to have a tussle for it; he did not mean to accept so hasty an invitation to breakfast—in an eyrie of all places. So by hook and by crook he managed to scramble half-way under the wooden grain-house, eagle and all. Next moment the eagle bitterly repented of his rashness, for every bird in the place attacked him, and Ralph and Rory were roaring success to them from the “sulky” window. An old turkey is usually a tough one, and do what he would the eagle could only disengage one talon from the back of his captive, if captive he could now be called, and with this and his beak he had to do battle.

Now, that discretion is the better part of valour, even an eagle knows, so when at last he did manage to disengage his other talon, although several of his foes lay dead and dying around, the eagle had had quite enough turkey, and prepared to soar.

But behold! quite an unexpected combatant makes his appearance, and goes to work at once on the eagle’s breast, and this was none other than Allan’s pet Skye, a little dog of determination, for whenever he made up his mind to lay hold of anything he did it, and stuck to it. With such a weight attached to him in such a way, rapid flight was out of the question; the eagle had only strength enough left to flutter out of the yard, and fall on the ground on the other side, there to meet—pity me, reader, for how shall I name it? Were I not writing facts this brave but discomfited eagle should have a nobler end—there to meet old Janet with a broom-handle!

“Hold, Janet, hold?” cried our gallant English Ralph from the “sulky” window; “fair play, Janet, fair play.”

Too late! The king of birds lies dead.

“Ten feet from tip to tip of his wings,” said McBain, as he stood over him about an hour after. Allan, and Ralph, and Rory were all there. “Eagle, eagle,” Rory was saying,—

“Thou hast bowed
From thine empire o’er the cloud;
Thou that hadst ethereal birth,
Thou hast stooped too near the earth,
And the hunter’s shaft hath found thee;
And the toils of Death have bound thee.”

“Hunter’s shaft, indeed,” laughed Ralph; “old Janet’s broom-handle; but come, boys, I know you are both of you game enough for anything, so I propose we go and try to bag

the disconsolate widow of this royal bird. We can capture the young ones and rear them."

"It would indeed be a pity to leave the widow to mourn," said Rory.

"It's a sad pity my sheep must mourn," said Allan. When at the breakfast-table that morning, Allan said, in a seemingly unconcerned voice,—

"Mother, we mean to have a day among the eagles; they have commenced it, you know." His mother knew well he was asking her consent, and she gave it because she would not see him unhappy. But nevertheless, she whispered to him as he left the room,—

"Oh, child! do take care of yourself, and take care of Rory. I had strange dreams about you last night."

Our three heroes, accompanied by men carrying the wooden well-windlass with a plank or two, and plenty of length of rope, made their way over the mountain to the top of the precipice before described. McBain with his trusty rifle went down the glen, among the birch-trees at the other side of the lake. He was not only eagle-slayer, but signalman to the expedition. Keeping close to the loch, he walked onwards for fully three-quarters of a mile, then he stopped and fired his rifle in the air. He stood now as still as a statue, and so remained for fully half-an-hour, until his party had fixed the windlass to the brink of the cliff. Had this latter been flat at the top the danger would have been but small, but the ground sloped towards the brink, so that a false step or a slip meant something too awful to contemplate. Right down beneath them is the eyrie, quite one hundred feet from the top. Circling high in air, far, far above them, is the she-eagle. She is watching and wondering. If any one dares descend she will rend them in pieces. But see, something leaves the cliff-top, and goes downwards and downwards nearer and nearer to her nest. With a scream of rage she rushes from her hover, passes our friends swift as a thunderbolt, and is lost to view. She is expending her anger now, she is having revenge, and fragments of a torn garment flutter down towards the lake. McBain has thrown himself on his face; he is no mean marksman, but he will need all his skill and steadiness now, and this he knows right well.

Seconds, long, long seconds of suspense—so at least they seem to those on the cliff. Then a puff of white smoke and at the very moment that the crack of the rifle falls on their ears, McBain is on his legs again, and waving his gun in joy aloft. The eagle is slain, and downwards with drooping head and outstretched pinions is falling lakewards. Then the lure, rent in ribbons, is drawn back, and Rory, the lightest of the three, prepares to descend. He laughs as he puts his limbs through the bight.

“Troth, I’ll have the youngsters up in a brace of shakes,” he says, “now the ould mother of them is slain. And there isn’t a taste of danger in the whole business. Lower away.”

And they do lower away slowly and steadily. Rory disappears, and Allan’s heart sinks and seems to descend with his friend. A thousand times rather would he have gone down himself, but Rory had opposed this wish with the greatest determination; he was the lightest weight, and it was his privilege.

They watch the signalman; he stands with one arm aloft, and they lower away until that arm falls suddenly by his side. Then they stop, and the “pawl” holds the windlass fast. Rory has reached the eyrie, he grasps the rock, and scrambles on to the projecting ledge.

“Shut your mouths now, and be quiet with you,” he says to the woolly young eaglets; “there’s neither bite nor sup shall go into the crops of you until you’re safe in Arrandoon.”

He placed the birds in the basket, tied it to the rope, signalled to McBain, who signalled to the cliff by raising two arms, and up to the brink went the precious burden. A few minutes afterwards and the rope once more dangled before Rory’s eyes.

But why does poor Rory turn so pale, and why does he tremble so, and crouch backward against the wet rock’s side?

The rope dangles before his eyes, it is true, but it dangles a goodly foot beyond his reach. The top of the cliff projects farther than the eyrie itself; in his descent the rope had oscillated with his weight, and he had unknowingly been swung on to the ledge of rock. But who now will swing him the empty bight of rope?

Rory recovered himself in a few moments. “Action, action,” he said aloud, as if the sound of his own voice would help to steel his nerves. “Action alone can save me, I must leap.”

As he spoke he cleared the ledge of rock of the rotting sticks and of the bones, for these might perchance impede his feet, and signalled to McBain to lower the rope still farther. Then he stood erect and firm, leaning backwards, however, against the precipice, for nearly a minute. Rory is no coward, but see, he is kneeling down with his face to the cliff; he is seeking strength from One more powerful than he.

Reader, at five bells in the morning watch on board a man-o’-war, the midshipmen are roused from their hammocks, and many of them kneel beside their sea-chests for some

minutes before they dress, and not one of these did I ever know who was not truly brave at heart, or who failed to do his duty in the hour of danger.

Now Rory is erect again, his elbows and back are squared, his hands half open, his face is set and determined, and now he—he springs.

Has he caught it? Yes; but he cannot hold it. It is slipping through his grasp, struggle as he may; but now, oh! joy, his foot gets in the bight, and he is saved!

He is soon to brink, and his comrades receive him with a joyful shout Rory says but little; but when they reach the head of the glen he runs forward at the top of his speed to meet McBain.

“McBain,” he says, quickly, “not one word of what you saw, to either Ralph or Allan.”

“Give me your hand, dear boy,” replied McBain, with a strange moisture in his eyes; “I appreciate your kindly motive as much as I admire the brave heart that prompts it.”

The Cruise of the Snowbird by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Six.

Cruising round the Hebrides—Caught in a "Puff"—Man Overboard—Dinner on the Cliff—Bright Prospects.

Three months have passed away since the adventure at the eagle's nest. So swiftly, too, they have fled that it seems to our heroes but yesterday that the little cutter spread her white sails to the wind, and headed down the loch for Fort Augustus. And all the time they have been cruising, with varied fortunes, up and down among the Western Isles. When I say that the time has passed swiftly, it is equivalent to telling you that the brave crew of the Flower of Arrandoon have enjoyed themselves, and this again you will readily guess is equivalent to saying that it had not been all plain sailing with them; had it been so, the very monotony of such a cruise, and the lack of adventure, would have rendered it distasteful to them. In this bright, beautiful world of ours you may find seas in which, during the months of summer, you can cruise in the most flimsy of yachts, among islands, too, as lovely as dreamland, where the wind is never higher than a gentle breeze, nor the waves than a ripple, and where danger is hardly ever to be encountered; but such a dolce far niente existence is not for youth; youth should be no lotus-eater, and so McBain had done well in choosing for his young pupils the cruising ground on which they now were sailing. They had had a taste of all kinds of Highland summer weather—true it had been mostly fine—but many a stiff breeze they had had to face nevertheless, and they soon learned to do so cheerily, and to feel just as happy under their glittering oilskins and sou'-westers, with half a gale tearing through the rigging, and the spray dashing most uncomfortably in their teeth and eyes, as they did when, with all sail set, they glided calmly over the rippling sea, the sun shining brightly overhead, and the purple mist of distance half hiding the rugged mountains. McBain knew exactly what the cutter could do, and to use his own phrase, he just kept her at it. In fact he got to love the boat, and he used to talk about her as a living thing. And so she really appeared to be, for although she almost invariably did all that was required of her, there were days when she seemed to evince a will and determination of her own, and to want to shake herself free of all control.

"Wo, my beauty?" McBain would say when she was particularly disobedient, talking to her as if she were a restless hunter; but he would smile quaintly as he spoke, for the vessel's little eccentricities only served to show off his seamanship. He said he knew how to manage her, and so he did. So he used to play with her, as it were, while in a sea-way or on a wind, and delighted in showing off her good qualities. Not that he did a great deal of the manual labour himself. Was he not master, and were not Ralph, Allan, and

Rory not only his crew, but his pupils as well? It would have been unfair to them, then, if they had not been allowed to do all they had a mind to, and that, I assure you, was nearly everything that was to be done. But McBain had all the orders to give when sailing, especially if there was a bit of a blow on.

I am rambling on with my tale now in a kind of a gossiping fashion; but it is not without a purpose. I wish you to know as clearly as possible what manner of man McBain was, because you will see him in several different strange positions before he finally disappears from off the boards.

Well, then, when giving his orders, he never talked a bit louder nor quicker than there was any occasion for. He knew by experience that a command given in a sharp, loud key, was very likely to cause nervousness and slight confusion in obeying it. Woe is me for your officers on board big ships—and there are many of them too—who, while giving orders, strut about the decks, and stamp and yell at their men; they do but excite them, and cause them to give proof of the proverb, "The more hurry the less speed." More than once have I seen a good ship's safety jeopardised in a squall, and all through this fault in the officer carrying on duty. But you see McBain loved the crew—he loved "his boys," as he was fond of calling them, and he was wishful to impart to them in a friendly way all the knowledge of boats that he himself possessed.

If you had called McBain a sailor, he would have replied,—

"No, sir, I'm not a sailor; I'm only a boatman, or a fisherman if you like it better."

But this was only McBain's modesty. A sailor by profession he certainly was not, although he had, as I before told you, spent a portion of his younger life at sea; but from his infancy he was used to rough it, not only on the stormy lakes of the inlands, but in open or half-decked boats all along the western shores of romantic Scotland, and that, too, in winter as well as in summer; nor was there a loch, nor cape, nor kyle he did not know every bearing of, from Handa Isle in the north, southwards as far as the Ross of Mull. And that is saying a great deal, for on that wild, indented coast, exposed as it is to the whole force of the wide Atlantic, stormy seas are met with and sudden squalls, such as are happily but little known on the shores of Merrie England.

"He is a good seaman, isn't he?" Rory had said one day to old Ap, referring, of course, to McBain.

"Is it seamanship you talk of?" old Ap replied. "Look, you see, sir; I'd rather be in a herring boat with McBain in half a gale of wind, although he was managing the sails by

himself look, you see, and steering with his teeth or knees, so to speak, than I'd be in a 200-ton schooner, with a score of dandified yachtsmen; yes, yes, indeed."

Hearing old Ap talk thus enthusiastically about quiet, non-assuming McBain, the latter gained an ascendency in Rory's estimation that he never after lost.

Often, in fact as a rule, McBain smiled when he gave an order to his boys, but his was not a stereotyped smile. His smile played not only around his lips, but it danced around his eyes and lighted up all his face. It was not, however, so much the smile of mirth as that of genuine good-heartedness.

Often, even when in a difficult position, he would allow the young men to handle the boat according to their own judgment, but at the same time his grave grey eyes would be cautiously watching their every movement, and his hand would be ready at a moment's notice to grasp a sheet or rectify a foul, and so prevent unpleasantness. I am not sure that McBain's method of teaching was not somewhat unique in many ways, but it was at times very effective.

"I'm not sorry that this should have happened, my boys," was one of McBain's favourite expressions, after any little accident or mishap. His crew knew well that he meant that a lesson given roughly, and sent well home, was likely to be remembered.

One day, for example, with Rory as steersman, their course led them pretty close to the passenger boat Crocodile. Perhaps they needn't have gone near enough to have most of the wind taken out of their sails, and their way considerably lessened; perhaps, though, Rory was just a little proud of his pretty vessel, and of being looked at by the lady passengers, looked at and probably admired; be this as it may, he forgot a warning that McBain had often given him, to have an easy sheet for the sudden rush of wind that would meet them, immediately after passing to leeward of anything, and so, on this particular day, his pride had a most disagreeable fall, and he himself, with the rest of his companions, had a good wetting, for down went the Flower of Arrandoon on her beam ends as soon as they had cleared the Crocodile. But she was well ballasted, the sliding hatch was on, and when sheets were eased she righted again, though it was a considerable time before Rory righted again.

McBain shook himself a bit, much in the same way that a Newfoundland dog does.

"I'm not sorry that this should have happened," he said, quietly.

Rory was, though. Especially when Ralph laughed pointedly at, or towards him.

Well, but another day Rory had his revenge, and the laughing was all on the other side.

It happened thus: they were cracking on nicely with every inch of canvas spread, sailing pretty close to the wind. The light breeze was on to the land, from which they were distant about a mile and a half, and although the sea was very far from being rough, there was a bit of a swell rolling in. Now Ralph was tall, and stout, and strong; he was no feather-weight therefore, but for all that the cutter did not require him to sit upon her weather gunwale, in order to keep her from capsizing. She could have done just as well had he kept on the seat, and by so doing he would have been consulting his own safety. Many a time and oft had McBain pointed this out to him, but he seemed forgetful on this particular point, and so, on the day in question, he was lazily occupying the forbidden quarter. One would have thought that the saucy wee yacht had done it on purpose; be that as it may—when down in the trough between two seas she simply gave a kind of a swing—hardly a lurch—in the wrong direction for Ralph's stability, and over he went, literally speaking, heels over head, into the sea, a most ungraceful and unscientific way of taking to the water.

Both Allan and Rory knew well that their friend could swim, and the latter at all events seemed to treat the affair as a very pretty piece of entertainment.

"Man overboard?" he shouted. "Let go the life-buoy, Allan."

Instinctively Allan did as he was told, and sent the big cork ring flying after Ralph, but seeing the merry twinkle in Rory's eye, and knowing there was no necessity for it, he repented having done so next minute.

"Lower away your dinghy," cried McBain to Allan, as he hauled the headsails to windward and stopped the cutter's way, "it will be a bit of practice for you."

Allan was pulling away astern two minutes after in the little boat, dignified by the undignified name of dinghy, for she was very tiny indeed, but Allan could have sculled a wash-tub.

He soon met Ralph coming ploughing and spluttering along, breasting the billows, for he was a powerful young swimmer, with the life-buoy in front of him, which, however, he scorned to make use of.

"Take your little joke on board," he cried laughing. Allan picked up the buoy and threw Ralph a rope.

“That’s better,” said Ralph, and in a few minutes more they were alongside and on board.

Rory was singing “A life on the ocean wave,” and the merry twinkle had not left his eyes.

When Ralph had changed his dripping clothes for dry ones, and reappeared looking somewhat blue, Rory had his laugh out, and all hands were fain to join.

“I caught a crab indeed,” said poor Ralph.

“Caught a crab is it?” cried Rory. “It wasn’t a crab but a turtle you turned. Och! it was the beautifulest sight ever I saw in the world to see the long legs of you go up. You know, Ralph, my brother tar, you couldn’t see it yourself, or it’s delighted you’d have been entirely!” and Rory laughed again till the tears came into his eyes.

“I’m not sorry that this happened,” said McBain, “after all.”

For her size I do not think there was a more comfortable little yacht afloat than the Flower of Arrandoon. Small though the box was they called by courtesy the saloon, it was fitted with every comfort, and there was not an inch of space from stem to stern that was not well economised for some useful purpose. One useful lesson in yacht life our heroes were not long in learning, and that was to put everything back again in its proper place as soon as it was done with; in other words, the circumstances under which they were placed taught them tidiness, so that there was no lubberliness about their little ship. And everything in and about her was the perfection of cleanliness and neatness, for they were not only the crew, but the cook and the cabin-boy as well. And so, plain woodwork was as white as snow, paint-work clean, polished wood looked as bright as the back of a boatman beetle, and brass shone like burnished gold. Their meals they managed to serve up to time, and cooking was performed by means of a spirits-of-wine-canteen.

But it is not the cruise of the Flower of Arrandoon I am writing, else would I love to tell you of all the adventures our heroes had among these islands, and how thoroughly they enjoyed themselves. No wonder they felt well, and happy, and jolly; no wonder that Allan said to his companions, one beautiful day early in August, “I do wonder that more fellows don’t go in for this sort of life.”

They had just been dining gipsy-fashion on shore when he made the remark. They were reclining on the top of a high cliff on the western coast of Skye. Far down beneath them was the sea, the blue Minch, bounded on the distant horizon by the rugged mountains of Harris and Lewis. To their right lay the rocks of the Cave of Gold; beyond that, on a lofty

promontory, the ruins of Duntulm Castle; then green hills; while downwards to the left sloped the land until quite on a level with the water; and there in a little natural harbour of rock lay the yacht, looking, as Rory always said, as tidy and neat as nine pins, but wonderfully diminutive as seen from the spot where Allan McGregor and his friends were indolently lounging.

The day was exceedingly bright and beautiful, the sun shone with unclouded splendour, the hills were purple-painted with the heather's bloom, and the air was laden with the perfume of the wild thyme.

No one answered Allan's remark; perhaps everybody was thinking how pleasant it all was, nevertheless.

"Boys!" said Ralph, at length.

"Hullo!" cried all hands, but nobody moved a muscle.

"Boys!" said Ralph, in a louder key.

"That means 'attention,'" said Allan, sitting up. All hands followed his example.

"Och! then," cried Rory, "just look at Ralph's face. Sure now if we could believe that the dear boy possesses such a thing as a mind, we'd think there was something on it."

"Well," said Ralph, smiling, "I sha'n't keep you longer in suspense; the letter I got to-day from Uig brought me—that is, brought us—glorious news."

"And you've kept it all this time to yourself?" said Rory. "Och! you're a rogue."

"I confess," said Ralph, "it was wrong of me, but I thought we could talk the matter ever so much more comfortably over after dinner, especially in a place like this.

"I've got the best father in the world," said Ralph, with an emphasis, and almost an emotion, which he did not usually exhibit.

"No one doubts it," said Allan, somewhat sadly; "I wish I had a father."

"And I," said Rory.

"Well, would you believe it, boys?" continued Ralph, "he now in this letter offers me what we all so much desire a real yacht, a big, glorious yacht, that may sail to any—clime

and brave the stormiest seas. He said that though I had never even hinted my wishes, he gathered from my letters that my heart was bent upon sailing a yacht, and that his son should own one worthy of the family name he bore. Oh! boys; aren't you happy? But what ails you?"

He looked from the one to the other as he spoke.

"What ails you? What ails you both, boys? Speak."

"Well!" said Rory, "then the truth is this, that the same thought is running through both our two minds at once. And there is only one way out of the trouble. We won't go with you, there! We won't go in your yacht, in your yacht. Mind you, Ralph, dear boy, I say we won't go in your yacht."

"That's it," said Allan, repeating Rory's words; "we won't go in your yacht."

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed Ralph, right heartily. Then he jumped to his feet, and smilingly doffing his cap, "I respect your Celtic pride, gentlemen," he said. "It shall not be my yacht. It shall be our yacht, and we'll go shares in expenses."

"Spoken like men, every one of you," roared McBain, no longer able to restrain himself. "I'm proud of my boys. Indeed, indeed, old McBain is proud of his pupils."

And he shook hands with them all round. This is Highland fashion, you know, reader.

They spent fully four hours longer on that cliff-top; they had so much to talk of now, for new prospects were opening out before them, and they determined to try at least to turn them to good account.

The sun was setting ere they reached their little vessel once again, and prepared to turn in for the night.

The Cruise of the Snowbird by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Seven.

A Summer's Day at Sea—Strange Scenery—The Squall—Adventure among Bottle-Nosed Whales—The "Snowbird."

The cutter yacht had been riding at anchor for two whole days and nights in the beautiful little bay of Talisker. This bay lies on the west-by-south side of the wonderful Isle of Wings, which we call Skye, and forms, in fact, the mouth or entrance to one of the prettiest glens in all the Highlands. (It is called in the Gaelic language "the winged island," owing to its peculiar formation.) Let me try to describe it to you then in a few words, but I shall be very clever indeed if I can give you anything like a just conception of its beauty. Suppose you have been standing in from the sea, and have just dropped anchor at the mouth of the glen, which is not more than half a mile in width, you will find on your right hand and on your left tall beetling cliffs, the tops of which are often hidden by the clouds. You may judge of their height when I tell you that the eagles have built their nests for ages on the southern rock. The bay itself is perfectly crescentic, receiving in its centre the waters of a fine salmon stream, while its waves break upon silver sand instead of the usual shingle. The bottom of the glen is perfectly flat, and occupied by well-tilled land; its sides descend precipitously from the table-land above, so much so that the burns or streamlets that form after every summer shower come roaring down over them in white foaming cascades. The upper end of the glen is wooded, and from above the trees peep out the white chimneys of the mansion house of Talisker. This glen or ravine ends in a sugar-loaf mountain of great height, the little pathway to the top of which winds round and round, so that looking at it from below it reminds you forcibly of the pictures of the Tower of Babel, as seen in old-fashioned illustrated Bibles.

Our heroes had been enjoying themselves, fishing in the stream all day, dining with the hospitable squire in the evenings, and going off at nights to sleep on board their little yacht.

"Boys," said McBain, early in the morning of the third day, "rouse out like good fellows."

Rory and Allan were soon stirring. Ralph contented himself with simply turning himself round in his oblong hammock, and feebly inquiring,—

"What's the matter?"

“What’s the matter?” said McBain, sitting down near him; “this is the matter—the morning is far too bright to please me; there is a little wind from the nor’ard, and it seems increasing, and the glass is tumbling down, and we can’t lie here unless we want to leave the bones of the Flower of Arrandoon to bleach on the sands.”

“Och!” cried Rory, in his richest brogue; “it’s very wrong of you to bother the poor English crayture so much. Bring him a cup of tea and leave him alone.”

But Ralph was now fully aroused, and three minutes afterwards the three friends were splashing and dashing in the sea, mounting the rollers, diving and treading water, laughing and joking, and making more noise than all the gulls and kittywakes that screamed around them.

McBain had stopped on board to cook the breakfast, and it was all ready by the time they were dressed—fresh salmon steaks, new-laid eggs, and fragrant coffee.

“Now then, my lads,” cried McBain, “on deck all of you, and stand by to get the anchor up. I’ve sent a message to the squire, saying we must start, and bidding him good-bye for the present.

“Which way are we going, captain?” asked Rory.

“Up north, my lad,” was the reply. “Portree is our destination, and though by going south we would have a favouring wind at first, we would never get past Loch Alsh; besides, if you look at the chart you’ll find that northwards is nearer. And now, Rory, please, no more talk; you just untie the mainsail cover and undo the tyers, that’s your work, because you’re neat.”

“Thank you,” said Rory.

“Mainsheet all right?”

“All right, sir.”

“Well, heave away and shorten cable.

“So—top the boom, hook on, hoist together. Up goes the gaff. Well done, lads, and handily. Belay—why, I have hardly to speak. Well done again. Now, if your sheets are shipshape, up with the jib and foresail.

“Trip the anchor, and on board with it. There we are, Rory; we’re going on the starboard tack a little way; just cant her head. Now she feels it. Belay halyards, and coil the slack. That’s right and not lubberly. Rory, you’ll make the best sailor of the lot of us. No, never mind the topsail for a bit. Presently though. Now I’ll steer for a little. We may have a puff when we clear the cliffs. Meanwhile, hoist your morsel of ensign, and, Rory, fire that farthing gun of yours.”

“The farthing gun made a deal of noise for the price of it, anyhow,” said Rory.

Hardly had the sound ceased reverberating from among the cliffs, when two white puffs of smoke rose up from under the nearest tree, and then, bang! bang! came the sound towards them. “Good-bye” it seemed to say. It was Macallum, the keeper, with his double-barrelled gun.

There was not much of a breeze after all, and plenty of sail being carried, they bowled along beautifully on the starboard tack, sailing moderately, but not too close to the wind. Although every now and then the cutter elevated her bows, and brought them down again with a peevish thud that sent the spray flying from stem to stern, nobody minded that a bit; the weather was warm, the water was warm, and besides they were all encased in oilskins.

Indeed it was one of the most enjoyable cruises they had ever had, counting from their departure from Glen Talisker to their arrival at Portree. McBain knew the coast well. He did not hug it, neither did he put far out to sea; he put her about on the other tack shortly, as if he meant to go up Loch Bacadale. Presently they were not far off Idrigail Point, and the cutter was once more laid on the starboard tack, and sails being trimmed, and everything working well, there was time for conversation.

“Shall I steer?” said Rory, who was never happier than when he was “the man at the wheel.”

“Not just yet,” said McBain; “when we’re round Point Aird, very likely I’ll let you do as you please; but, boys, I’ve got that falling glass on the brain, and I want to take every advantage, and fight for every corner.”

“Look now, Ralph and Rory, you’ve never been so close in-shore before. Allan, don’t you speak, you have. The day is bright and clear; do you see McLeod’s Table?”

“The never a table see I,” said Rory.

“Well,” continued McBain, “that lofty mountain with the flat top is so called.”

“And a precious big feast McLeod could spread there too,” said Allan.

“And a precious big feast he did one time spread,” replied McBain, “if an old Gaelic book of mine is anything to go by.”

“Tell us,” cried Rory, who was always on tiptoe to hear a tale.

“It would seem, then, that the McLeods and the McDonalds were, in old times, deadly foes; although at times they appeared to make it up, and vowed eternal friendship. The chief McLeod invited the McDonalds once to a great ‘foy,’ and after eating and drinking on the top of that great hill, until perhaps they had had more than enough, three hundred armed Highlanders sprang from an ambush among the rocks and slew the McDonalds without mercy. Their flesh was literally given to the eagles, as Walter Scott expresses it, and their bones, which lay bleaching on the mountain top, have long since mouldered to dust.

“On another occasion,” continued McBain, “the McLeods surprised two hundred McDonalds at worship, in a cave, and building fires in front of it, smothered them. The poor half-burned wretches that leapt out through the flames speedily fell by the edge of the sword.”

“What cruel, treacherous brutes those McLeods must have been,” remarked Ralph.

“Well,” said McBain, “war is always cruel, and even in our own day treachery towards the enemy is far from, uncommon; but, mind you, the McDonalds were not sinless in this respect either. A chief of this bold clan once invited a chief of the McLeods to dinner in his castle of Duntulm.”

“I wouldn’t have gone a step of my toe,” cried Rory.

“But McLeod did,” said McBain, “and he went unarmed.”

“Ha! ha!” laughed Allan; “it strikes me they were playing the rogue’s game of ‘confidence.’”

“Something very like it, but McDonald apparently didn’t know how kind to be to his guest, and pressed him to eat and drink galore, as we say. McDonald even showed McLeod to his bedroom, and, for the first time perhaps in his lifetime, poor McLeod began to quake when he found himself within the donjon-keep.

"'There is your bedroom,' said the stern McDonald. 'Yonder is where your body will lie, and yonder is where your bones will repose when the rats have done with them.'

"McLeod would have tried to rush out, but strong arms were there to thrust him back. No one came near the prisoner for two days, then through the barred window food was handed him, salt-sodden flesh and a flask of water. He ate greedily, then applied the jar to his lips to quench his thirst. Horror! the water was seawater."

"And he perished of thirst?" inquired Ralph.

"So the story goes," replied McBain.

"A chief of the McLeods," said McBain, "one of the very, very oldest of the chiefs, had a large family of grown-up daughters, and they wouldn't always obey the old man, and one day, instead of attending upon him—for he was blind—they went to bathe and disport themselves among the billows, but a sea-nymph came and turned them all into stone."

"And served them right," said Rory.

"And there they stand; those tall black rocks, well in towards the point yonder, with the white waves dashing among their feet. They are called McLeod's maidens until this day."

"Well," said Ralph, with a quiet smile, "there is no mistake about it—there were giants in those days."

They were nearly at Dunvegan Head by this time, standing, in fact, well in towards it on the port tack, for the waters are deep even close in-shore. When they had left it on the beam they opened out broad Loch Follart, when McBain, pointing landwards, said,—

"In there is a little bay, called Loch Bay, and by it a rural hamlet or village, which is claimed as the real capital of Skye. It is called Stein."

"But see, see," cried Rory. "Is that a geyser rising out of the sea between us and the shore?"

"Why, it is very like a fountain," said Ralph.

"It is very like a whale," said Allan, and McBain laughed.

“It is a whale,” he added. “It is the solitary, or caa’in’ whale, and the rascal is in there after the herrings. A more independent brute doesn’t swim in the sea. He ignores a boat. He looks upon mankind as poor, miserable, puny creatures, and I don’t think he would go very far out of his way for a line-of-battle ship.”

An hour or two afterwards they came in sight of Duntulm Castle, previously having passed the little church of Kilmuir, with its bleak-looking stone-built manse. Near it is a graveyard, which had very great interest for poetic Rory.

“Poor Flora McDonald!” he almost sighed. “I always think that Prince Charlie should have taken her away with him to sunny Italy and married her. How beautifully the story of the ill-fated prince would have read had it ended thus!”

“Rory,” said Ralph, “I’ll leave you to dream and romance while I go and see about the luncheon.”

“So like an Englishman,” said Rory.

“Never mind,” replied Ralph; “we can’t be all alike. What if I do prefer roly-poly to romance; don’t the English win all their battles on beefsteak?”

“Yes, it is time for you to dive in,” said Rory, laughing; “but there, hand out my fiddle and I’ll forgive you. If the sea-nymphs will only be kind now,” he continued, “and keep me dry, I’ll play and sing you something appropriate.”

He did, in his sweet tenor voice, accompanying himself with his favourite instrument. He sang them the old song that begins:

“Far over the hills and the heather so green,
And down by the corrie that sings to the sea,
The bonnie young Flora sat weeping alane,
The dew on her plaid and the tear in her e’e.
She looked at a boat with the breezes that swung,
Away on the wave like a bird of the main,
And ay as it lessened, she sigh’d and she sung,
‘Fareweel to the lad I shall ne’er see again.’”
“’Deed, indeed,” said Rory, in his richest brogue, and with a moisture in his eye, “it is very pretty, and would be romantic entirely if the frizzle, frizzle, frizzle of that Saxon’s frying-pan wouldn’t join in the chorus.”

“Ham and eggs, boys; ham and eggs?” cried Ralph. “Away with melancholy.”

Not far from Duntulm Castle was a house, of which our friends bore the kindliest of recollections, for here they had been most hospitably entertained.

“I wonder,” said Ralph and Rory, almost in the same breath, “if they’ll see us and know us.”

“Fire your gun again, anyhow, Rory,” said McBain.

The gun was run in, loaded and fired, and they had the satisfaction of seeing their friends in the garden waving welcome to them with a Highland plaid. Then the ensign was dipped, the headsails hauled to leeward again, and away they went.

But see, it is getting wonderfully dark ahead, and a misty cloud seems rapidly nearing them, with a long white line right under it.

“Stand by the jib-sheet,” cried McBain. “Ease away; now luff, my lady.”

The cutter was laid nearly lee-rail under, but she bore it wonderfully well. Then sail was taken in, for, said McBain, “We’ll have more of these gentry.” And so they had, and it was more than an hour ere they doubled Ru-Hunish Point, and bore away for the Aird. Once round here the danger was over, and they were no longer on a lee shore.

I myself never could see the good of a squall, either white or black, and either of them are dangerous enough in all conscience when they take you unawares, but it is said there is good in all things. Be this as it may, the squalls the cutter had gone through seemed to clear the summer air in a remarkable manner, for even the glass began to rise, and with it the spirits of those on board.

It was a fair wind now all the way to Portree, and they made the best of it, Rory being once more in his favourite seat with tiller in hand. Past that mysterious mountain called Quiraing, onwards and past the tartan rock, over the precipitous sides of which a cataract was pouring into the sea, so that you might have sailed a boat between the water and the cliff; past the bay of Steinscholl, past the point of Braddan, past the strange weird rocks of Storr, with Rona Isle and Raasay on the weather beam, and the wild white hills of Cuchullin in full view in the far distance, and past Prince Charlie’s cave itself, and now they keep her in more towards the shore, for they are not far from the loch of Portree. Just past the cave they sail through a fleet of fishing boats. The men on board seem greatly excited. They have hauled in their oars, and stand by with great stones in their hands—part of the boat’s ballast—as if watching for a coming foe. But where is this foe? Why, look ahead, the whole sea for half a mile is darkened with an

immense shoal of porpoises, driving straight towards the cutter and the boats, turning neither to right nor left, leaping from the water, splashing and dashing, and apparently wild with glee. Small respect have these “sea pigs,” as they are termed in the native language, for the poor fishermen’s nets; if the nets happen to come in their way, through they go, and there is an end of it. How the men shout and scream, to be sure! The bottle-noses take not the slightest heed of them; they are in their own element, so on they come and on they go, the wild shouts of the fishermen are nothing to them, and the stones thrown glide harmlessly off their greasy backs; but they are gone at last, gone like a whirlwind, and the boatmen are left lamenting over their bad luck and their broken nets.

Three hours after this the storm came on in earnest, but the little yacht lay snug at her moorings, and her owners were sipping their coffee after a good dinner in peace.

It was quite late that night before they retired. It mattered little in one way at what time they turned in, for there was small likelihood that the storm now raging across the island would abate before twelve hours at least. And what do you think they talked about? Why, the sea, the sea, and nothing but the sea, and wild adventures here and there in many lands. Again and again they plied McBain with questions about that strange country up in the frozen north, where it was said the mammoth caves lay. And McBain told them all he knew, and all he had ever heard concerning them. It was determined that northwards they should sail and nowhere else.

“What shall we call our coming queen?” said Rory. “What shall we name the yacht?”

“Oh! wait till we see her first,” said Allan.

“Ridiculous!” cried the impetuous Rory. “No, let us call her the Snowbird.”

The Cruise of the Snowbird by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Eight.

Rolling Home—A Rough Passage—The Welcome Back—The Way a Sailor Sleeps.

When the royal eagle, the bird of Jove, paid a visit to the Castle of Arrandoon, and dropped so daringly into the poultry yard, intent only on turkey, it will be remembered that his presence created no little commotion, but I question if the din of even that memorable morning equalled the hubbub that arose when Allan and his friends returned from their four months' cruise in the cutter.

A letter from Oban had reached Mrs McGregor three days beforehand, so that they were quite expected, and even the probable hour of their arrival in the creek in Glentroom was known.

The voyage from Portree to Oban had been an uneventful one. The wind was favourable all the way, but strong enough to make a glorious passage with a close-reefed mainsail and storm-jib, so they bowled along, impatient now to get back to bonnie Arrandoon. But they did not mind the roughness of the passage; they did not mind the tumbling and the tossing they got; they despised even the danger of being pooped. They made heavy weather just off Ardnamurchan Point McBain stuck to the tiller, and for a whole hour, or more, perhaps, there was not a word spoken by any one. They are fearful cliffs, those around the wild highlands of Ardnamurchan, black and wet and fearful; the largest ship that ever floated would be dashed to pieces in a few minutes if it had the misfortune to run amongst them. Perhaps our heroes were thinking how little chance their cockle-shell of a cutter would have, if she got carried where near them, but they kept their thoughts to themselves, and meanwhile the yacht was behaving like the beauty she was. Indeed she seemed positively to enjoy rolling homewards over these great, green, foam-crested seas; for she bobbed and she bowed to the waves; she curtseyed to them and she coquetted with them as if she were indeed a nymph of the sea and a flirt as well. Sometimes she would dip her bowsprit into a wave, as if she meant to go down bows first, but in a moment she had lifted her head again, and tossed the water saucily off, ere ever it had time to reach the well; next she would flood the lee-rail, and make the waves believe they could board her there, then righting again in an instant, after a nod or two to the seas ahead, as much as to say, "Please to observe what I shall do now," she would sink herself right down by the stern, with the foam surging around her like a boiling cauldron, but never admitted a drop. There were times though, when she sank so far down in the trough of the sea that her sails began to shiver, yet for all that she was uphill again in a second or two, and scudding onwards as merrily as ever.

The seas were shorter in Loch Sunart, they were choppy in the Sound of Mull, and seemed to get bigger and rougher every other mile of the journey; the crew were not sorry, therefore, when the anchor was let go, and the mainsail clewed, in the Bay of Oban.

"Why," said Ralph, after dinner that day, "we haven't had such a tossing all the cruise. I declare to you, boys, that every bone of my body aches from top to toe." McBain laughed.

"You ought to go out," he said, "for a few nights with the herring boats."

"Is it rougher," queried Ralph, "than what we have already gone through?"

"Ten times," replied McBain.

"Then, if you please," said Ralph, "don't send me. I'd rather be excused, Captain McBain, I do assure you."

"And so our summer cruise is ended," said Allan, with something very like a sigh.

"And haven't we enjoyed it too!" said Rory, who was lying on the sofa locker, book in hand. "Troth, boys," he added, "I didn't notice, till this very minute, that my book was upside down. It is dreaming I was entirely. Oh! those, beautiful mountains of the Cuchullin, raising their diamond tops into the summer air, with the purple haze beneath them, and the blue sea flecked with white-winged birds! Scenery like this I'll never get out of my head, and what is more I never wish to, and if ever it does attempt to slip away, sure I've only to shut my eyes and play that sweetest of old reveries, 'Tha mi tinn leis a ghoal,' (The Languor of Love), and it will all, all come back again."

"And we've had the very best of eating and drinking all the time, you know," Ralph said.

"And it hasn't cost us much," added Allan.

Rory looked first at one and then at the other of his friends, apparently more in sorrow than in anger; then he resumed his book, this time with the right side up.

"I've been keeping tally," continued Allan, addressing himself more particularly to McBain, "of all that our voyage has cost us, and taking everything into consideration, I find that we couldn't have travelled half so cheaply on shore, nor could we have lived as

cheaply even at home. We did not pay much for the cutter and all her fittings, and if we had cared to do a little more fishing, and sent more boxes of lobsters down with the southern steamers, I think we would positively have made a good deal of profit."

"You are thoroughly practical," said Ralph; "I like you for that."

"Well, but," said Allan, half apologetically, "neither of us, you know, is extra rich, and I think it is some satisfaction to look back to a time spent most pleasantly and enjoyably, without either extra expenditure, or—or—what shall I say?"

"Prodigality," suggested Ralph.

"That word will do," said Allan; "but I do declare I'm nearly half asleep."

"I expect," said McBain, trying to repress a yawn, "that we will all sleep to-night without rocking."

Two hours afterwards they were all asleep, and the yacht rose and fell gently on the rippling water, the moon shone over the mountains, making the houses in the little town all look as if their walls were marble and their slated roofs were burnished gold.

They would have gone right up Loch Linnhe, instead of calling at Oban, only Rory wished to do a little extra varnishing and gilding before their return, so they stopped here for two days.

Yes, there is no mistake about it, there was a commotion in and around the old castle. As Allan and his friends came filing up the glen, headed by Peter, who had gone to meet them with the bagpipes, in true Highland fashion, I think the dogs were the first to hear the wild joyous notes of the pibroch. Every one of them found his way out into the courtyard; the inner gate of the drawbridge was closed, so Oscar and Bran stood and barked at it, just as if that would open it; the smaller dogs yapped at their heels, for whatsoever Bran and Oscar did, the collie and Skyes followed suit; every feathered biped about the place joined in the chorus, and then, for just a moment, there was a slight lull, and Allan's favourite pony was heard laughing loud and shrill to himself in the stables.

"Och! and och!" cried old Janet, rushing out to open the gate for the dogs, "it's the happy day for old Yonish (Janet) and it's the happy day for the whole of us. Go doggies, go craytures, and meet the dear master!"

The dogs needed no pressing. Headed by Bran, with Oscar in the rear—for these dogs always kept up a certain decorum in presence of the others—out they rushed, and next moment Allan was in the midst of them.

He would not check them in their glee for all the world, but, with Bran on one side of him, and Collie on the other, and all the Skyes dancing round his feet, it must be confessed that for fully five minutes he had rather a rough time of it. Oscar, after kissing his master on the ear, picked off his hat, and trotted away back with it to the castle.

So Allan returned bareheaded, but laughing, to receive the affectionate greetings of his mother and sister. But who is that tall, handsome, elderly gentleman in company with the latter? You would have required no answer to that question had you but seen the rich blood mantling in Ralph's cheeks the moment he saw him, or marked the glad glitter in his eyes. He seemed to clear the drawbridge at a couple of bounds.

"Father! father!"

"Ralph, boy!"

"Your runaway son," said Ralph, laughing.

"My sailor boy!" said his father, smiling in his turn.

Those last words made Ralph's heart bound with joy. He knew his father well, and he knew when he said "my sailor boy" that he did not mean to repent his promise anent the yacht.

Allan was talking to his mother and sister, Helen McGregor hanging on his arm, and looking fondly up in his face.

But poor Irish Rory stood shyly by himself, close by the drawbridge gate. At present there was nobody to speak to him; for the time being, at all events, there was no one to bid him welcome back.

"Och!" he said to himself, with a sigh, "the never a father nor mother have I. Sure I never remember feeling before that I was an orphan entirely."

A big cold nose was thrust into his hand. Then a great dog rubbed its shoulder with rough but genuine kindness against his legs. It was Bran's mother, and her behaviour affected him so that he was almost letting fall a tear on her honest head, when he suddenly spied old Janet, and off went the cloud from his brow in a moment—and off

went he, to pump-shake the old lady by the hand, and vow to her that this was the happiest day in his life.

And old Janet must needs wipe her eyes with her apron as she called him, much to his amusement, “mo chree” and “mo ghoal” (love), and “the bonnie boy that he was,” and a hundred other flattering and endearing epithets, that made Rory laugh and pump-shake her hand again, and feel on the whole as merry as a cricket. But when Helen herself came running towards him, and placed both her hands in his and welcomed him “home,” then his cup of joy was about full, and he entirely forgot he was an orphan. Then she dragged him over to her mother, and the first greetings over—

“Isn’t he sunburnt?” said Helen; “but do, mamma, look at Allan and his friend.”

“Well,” said Allan, “what colour are we?”

“Oh, just like flower-pots,” said Helen, laughing.

That same afternoon Allan was sitting talking to Rory in his “sulky,” when in burst Ralph. He had just returned from a long walk with his father, and he was looking all over joyous.

“Why, what do you think, boys?” he cried, rubbing his hands, and then making believe to punch Allan in the ribs; “what do you think, old man?” he added.

“Something very nice, I’ll be bound,” said Allan, “or staid steady Ralph would not be so far off his balance.”

“It is pleasant in the extreme,” said Ralph, taking a seat in front of them, “and so very unexpected too.

“Now guess what it is.”

“Oh; but we can’t, we never could,” said his friends.

“Out with it, Ralph,” cried Allan, “don’t keep us in ‘tig-tire.’”

“Yes, don’t be provoking, Ralph,” added Rory.

“Well, then,” said Ralph, speaking very slowly, just a word at a time, “father—has—been—down—to Cowes—and—bought—”

“The yacht!” cried Allan, interrupting him. “Hurrah!”

“Just one moment, my boys,” cried Rory. “I must blow off steam or I’ll burst.” So saying, he seized his violin and commenced playing one of the wildest, maddest Irish melodies ever they had listened to. You might have called the air a jig, but there was a certain sadness in it, as there is in even the merriest of Ireland’s melodies; tenderness breathed through every bar of it. You might have imagined while Rory played that you saw his countrymen dancing at a wake, and heard even their wild “Hooch!” but at the same time you could not help fancying you saw the mourners crooning over the coffin, and heard the broken-hearted wail of the coronach.

Both Allan and Ralph were pretty well used to all Rory’s queer, passionate, and impulsive ways, and so they always gave him what sailors call “plenty of rope,” and landsmen call “latitude.”

When he had finished and quieted down, then did Ralph explain to his friends all about the purchase of the yacht.

“Not a toy, mind you,” he said, “a really first-rate seagoing schooner-yacht, A1 at Lloyd’s, and all that sort of thing. New only three years ago, copper fastenings, wire rigging, and everything complete.”

“And what is her size?” said Allan.

“Oh?” said Ralph, “there is plenty of room to swing a cat in her, I can assure you; she is nearly two hundred tons.”

“Two hundred tons! why she’ll take some managing, won’t she?”

“Father says she will be as easily sailed with the crew we will have, and with ordinary caution, as our little cutter yacht.”

“Of course,” said Rory, “we will have trial trips and all that sort of thing.”

“Ay, ay, lad,” said Ralph; “but don’t you imagine that my father will trust this fine yacht in such juvenile hands as ours, without an experienced sailing-master being on board.”

“And I wonder who that will be,” said Rory, “for you know we wouldn’t take to every stranger.”

“Boys,” said Allan, “I don’t think we will have a stranger over us as sailing-master. I can tell you a bit of a secret; or perhaps, Ralph, you can guess it, if I ask you a question or two. Well, then, what do you think McBain has been studying his Rosser so earnestly for these last many months?”

“I have it,” cried Rory, “sure he’s going to take out a Board of Trade certificate as master.”

“You’re right,” said Allan, “and I think he could take one now even, for he is well up in navigation. He is well up in logarithms, and a capital arithmetician, I won’t say mathematician, though he knows something of mathematics as well. He can take his latitude and longitude, and can lay the place of a vessel on the chart. He knows how to use his sextant well, and can adjust it by the sun; he can take lunars and find his latitude by a star, and he knows everything about compasses and chronometers, and mind you that is saying a good deal. And he can observe azimuths too, and he knows many things more that I can’t tell you about; he says himself he can work a day’s work well, and I for one wouldn’t mind sailing anywhere with him; but he doesn’t mean going up yet for three months. McBain may be slow, but he is sure.”

“And we know,” said Rory, “he can pass in seamanship.”

“I should think he could,” said Allan; “in that respect I’m proud of my foster-father; he can make sail and take it in, and work a ship in the stormiest weather; he can secure a mast, or cut one adrift, and he can rig a jury, and I needn’t tell you he knows all about the lead and the log-line. Oh yes, he is a thorough seaman, and he is well up in something else too, which I don’t think the Board of Trade ever think of examining people on. He is a good weather prognosticator; he knows the signs of the clouds, and from which direction the wind is likely to blow, and by looking at the sea he can tell you the wind’s force, and whether the sea is going down or rising, and also the rate the ship is going at. Nor is the barometer a mere toy with him, it is a friend in need, and positively seems to speak to him. Well, boys, what else would you have? He is a sailor every inch, and dearly loves the sea; he tells me, too, he can sleep like a sailor.”

“How should a sailor sleep?” asked Ralph.

“Why, with one eye open, figuratively speaking,” replied Allan. “He ought to be able to sleep soundly through all natural and legitimate noises. He ought to know the position of the ship before he lies down, how her head is, what sail she carries, how the wind is, and how it is likely to be, and whether the glass is rising, falling, or steady. With this knowledge, commending himself to the kind God who rules and governs all things, his slumbers will be deeper and sweeter, I do verily believe, than any that ever a landsman

knows. Rocked in the cradle of the deep, the creaking of the ship's rudder will not awake him, nor the labouring of her timbers, nor the dull thud of striking seas, nor the howling of the wind itself; but let anything go wrong, let a sail carry away, ay, or a rope itself, or let her ship more water than she ought to with a good man at the wheel, then your sailor awakes, and very likely his head will appear above the companion hatch about five seconds afterwards."

"Allan," said Rory, "you're quite eloquent. Troth, it strikes me you're a sailor yourself, every inch of you."

"I should like to be," said Allan, earnestly.

"And so should we all," said Rory; "but, Ralph, dear boy," he added, "where is this yacht? Where is the Snowbird?"

"She is called the Sappho at present," replied Ralph, "and she is safely in dock at Dundee."

"Dundee?" exclaimed Rory, in some amazement.

"Yes, Dundee," repeated Ralph; "that is the place to fit out ships for the far north. You see, she'll want an extra skin on her to withstand the ice, and she must be fortified, strongly fortified in the bows, inside with wood and outside with iron. Father told me all about it. Father is very clever."

"And I know he is very, very good," said Rory; "but did you tell him where we purposed cruising?"

"I did, of course," replied Ralph; "that was the reason he sent the yacht to be fortified. In my very last letter I explained all our hopes and wishes to him."

"And what does he say?"

"Why, that an English gentleman, with youth on his side, ought to be able to go anywhere and do anything."

"Bravely spoken," cried Allan.

"Bravely indeed," said Ralph; "but father added that in this great cruise of ours we must not be rash."

“We will look upon that wish of your father’s,” said Allan, “as a sacred command, never to be broken.”

“That will we,” said Rory, enthusiastically.

“And he advised us, when thoroughly fitted and ready for sea, not to go right up icewards all at once, but to take Shetland on our way.”

“That would indeed be nice,” said Rory. “I’ll warrant we’ll find many things well worth seeing in both places.”

“Yes,” said Ralph, “and he says we should then bear up for Baffin’s Bay, and not attempt the far northern ice till we have done some exploring there, and got acclimatised, and well versed in the knowledge and nature of the ice. ‘Working a ship,’ he says, ‘among ice is very different from ordinary seamanship.’ But look, there is father down in the courtyard, playing with the dogs. Let us all go down and join him.”

The Cruise of the Snowbird by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Nine.

The "Snowbird" at Anchor—Preparations for Departure—Farewell to the Land of the Rock and the Wild Wood.

The Snowbird lay at anchor in the lake, not far from the creek where the cutter used to swing, and just beneath the birch-clad braes of Arrandoon. A steady breeze was blowing from the west-sou'-west, a breeze that made the landsman's heart glad. It was a balmy wind and a drying wind—a wind that chased away the winter from the glens, that breathed encouragement to the green and tender corn peeping shyly up from the brown earth; a wind that went sighing through the woods, and whispered to the trees that spring had come; ay, and a breeze that rejoiced the heart of the sailor; a breeze he liked to stand against, and feel, and wave his arms in, as he gazed skywards, and longed to be "up anchor and away."

And the saucy Snowbird never felt a bit more saucy than she did that morning. She felt impatient, and she showed it, too, in many little ways. She pulled and "titted," as Ap phrased it, at her anchor; she bent forwards and she bent sternwards; then she would roll, perhaps once to port and twice to starboard, or vice versâ, as the thought struck her; then she would positively stop steady for a few moments, as if listening for an order.

"What can the captain be thinking about?" she seemed to say. "Why don't they hoist the Blue Peter? Oh! shouldn't I like to spread my wings in this beautiful wind and be off!"

But we must leave the Snowbird to herself for a little while, impatient though she be, and pay a visit to the castle, from the higher windows of which the yacht could be seen, both masts and hull. Had we come here about two weeks ago, we would have found a great deal of bustle and stir going on, especially among the female portion of the establishment, for Mrs McGregor and her gentle daughter Helen had, with the help of their maids, undertaken the superintendence not only of the upholstering and decoration of the cabins and staterooms of the Snowbird, but of all the purely domestic arrangements therein. This had cost them months of work, and entailed besides a great many journeys, not only to Inverness, but to Glasgow itself. The duties they had undertaken had been instigated by love, and they were not without good results to the performers. They had kept them from thinking. An only son and an only brother, Allan had never been very for away from home as yet, and it is needless to say that he was very dearly loved indeed. But now that he was to leave his home and leave his country, and to journey far over the sea, to lands unknown, where dangers were to be encountered, the

nature of which could hardly be guessed at, or even dreamt of, it is no wonder that his mother and sister felt sad and sorrowful as the time drew near for parting.

Ah! these partings, reader! Surely one of the joys of heaven will be to think we never again will have to breathe the painful word “Farewell.”

And the Snowbird was now ready for sea; all was done to her, inside and out, that could be done. Even the crew were on board, and, as soon as Ralph should return with his father from the south, they would weigh anchor, and the cruise would be begun in earnest. If I were to analyse the feelings uppermost in Mrs McGregor’s mind at this time, I should find sorrow without doubt, but no regrets at granting her boy permission to roam over sea and land for a year or two. Why, she reasoned, should not she suffer bereavement for a little while as well as many other mothers, when it would be for Allan’s advantage and good? So her sadness never found vent in tears—at least nobody ever saw them. She went about as cheerfully, to all appearance, as before, only—and this Allan felt and knew—she tried now to have her boy near her as often as she could. Helen was less brave. Helen was but a girl, little more than a child, and if the truth must be told, she very often cried herself to sleep of nights. Her mother used to find the pillow wet in the morning, and well knew the cause.

But there was one thing they both could do—they could pray. And what a comfort that was! Oh! what a weary, dreary wilderness this world of ours would be if this power of praying were denied us, if we could not appeal in times of grief or danger to our kind Friend, who is nigh us everywhere, whether we are at peace and at home, or amidst the din and strife of battle, or far away at sea, fighting for life ’mid billows and tempest. I myself have travelled much and far, and I have oftentimes had reason to thank Him who gave me a mother who taught me to pray.

Rat, tat, tat! at the red parlour door, where the McGregor family and Rory are enjoying quiet conversation. Rat, tat, tat! and enter Peter, as Rory more than once lately remarked, not looking like the same Peter at all, at all; in fact, he was now a blue Peter, for he was rigged out from top to toe in a suit of bran new pilot, cut shipshape and sailor fashion, and very gay and sprightly Peter looked.

“Well, Peter,” said Allan, “what is it? You look as if you had seen a ghost.”

“And I’m not so sure I haven’t; but pray, sir, come to the window in the staircase, and look for yourself.”

Rory and Allan both followed Peter.

“What call you that?” cried the latter, pointing to a white sail that came skimming like a sea-bird across the dark bosom of the lake.

“Why, that is the cutter?” said Allan, in amazement.

“Or her ghost,” said Peter, with a long face.

“Come on, Rory, to the creek,” cried Allan, “and we’ll meet her.”

And they were just in time to see Ralph and his father land.

“Glad to see you both at last,” said Allan; “but tell us what is the meaning of this? You went away to sell the Flower, and behold you come back in her.”

“My father,” Ralph replied, “wouldn’t part with her; he has bought her.”

“Yes,” said the knight smiling; “she is far too good to part with. When you sail, I will accompany you a few miles on your voyage. And, please God, when you return, I will be the first to welcome you in that same boy’s yacht.”

Even my youngest readers know how quickly time flies when one wishes it to linger, and the few days that intervened betwixt Ralph’s return and the sailing of the Snowbird passed on eagle’s wings. Helen McGregor, with a tiny bottle of wine that might have been sent from Elfinland for the occasion, named the beautiful yacht. Then there was a dinner on board, at which every one tried to seem gay, but failed for all that.

Next day the wind was fair, and no time was lost in getting the anchor up and setting sail for Inverness. The ladies accompanied the expedition so far in the Snowbird, then farewells were said, blessings murmured, and once again the good yacht’s foresails were filled, and she bore bravely away up the Moray Firth, the little cutter keeping her company until right off Fort George, when waving them once more a fond adieu, the Flower of Arrandoon was put about, and very soon the point of land hid her from their view.

The cruise of the Snowbird had begun in earnest.

The breeze was light, but well aft, so all sail was clapped on her, and with her head north and by east, she glided slowly onwards as if loth to leave the land. We will take this opportunity of having a look over the goodly yacht, that is destined to be the home of our heroes for many a day to come.

The Snowbird then was a schooner-yacht of nearly two hundred tons, as well fitted and found for cruising in the northern seas as ingenuity could make her. Rising and falling, rocking and nodding on the waves, with her white canvas spread out to the breeze, she looked a very pretty craft indeed. She had just enough free-board and enough breadth of beam to make her safe and comfortable in a sea-way. Her hull was painted black, her ports only being picked out with vermilion; her masts were rakish, but not too much so; her jibboom had the graceful bend that sailors love to see, and every bit of her rigging, fore and aft, running and standing, was as taut and trim as hands could make it, or eyes wish to gaze upon.

Her deck was flush both fore and aft, with never a cabin or house thereon, for the seas they would probably ship, in the wild ocean they were about to traverse, would be little likely to brook obstruction. Her decks were as white as snow, her brass-work shone like burnished gold, her binnacle would have been an ornament even in a drawing-room, every rope-end was neatly coiled, and not a bar nor a marling-spike was out of its place.

Light and graceful though the Snowbird appeared, she was nevertheless well fortified and strong. Hers was a double skin, one that would be likely to resist the dread embrace of the ice king, while her bows were of triple strength, and shod with bars of steel. Her ballast was water in unshiftable iron tanks. Her boats were three in number, but of these I may speak again, merely saying here that they were unique of the kind.

Let us go between decks and have a look at the living-rooms. Entering by the after companion, then, we find ourselves in the passage that leads to the dining-saloon. Here are the cabins of Ralph and Rory, and, as the door of each stands invitingly open, we take a peep in. They are large and roomy; the sofas are covered with crimson velvet, the curtains on the berths are of the same colour, and the pillows and counterpanes therein are white as the driven snow. There is a bookshelf in each, filled with the owner's favourite authors, a little swing table, and a silver spring-candlestick hung in gymbals, and the nattiest of marble basin-stands; there is every comfort and luxury in these cabins, and the bulkheads are adorned with pictures, and, wonderful to say, these cabins do not even smell of varnish—no, but of sweet spring flowers, and I need not tell you who placed the vases there. Passing forward we enter the saloon (see plan). Here is a comfortable table, luxurious ottoman, side-board, cushioned lockers, chairs, and stove, and everywhere around us taste and luxury are displayed. It was the hand of an artist that painted those panels, that devised and positioned the mirrors, and that hung those polished circular swing-tables, radiant as the rainbow with sparkling coloured glass—there are three of these in all, and so cunningly are they devised that they look like bouquets of beautiful flowers pendent from stems of sterling silver. The hanging lamps, ay, and even the stoves and coal-vases in this saloon and in the drawing-room, were

works of art, but space warns me that I must enlarge no more on the fittings of the rooms; in a word, then, comfort and refinement reigned supreme in the between decks of the Snowbird.

The third mate and old Ap, with the second officer of the ship, had a mess-place to themselves, and very snug it was. The men messed forward, and here, in the forecastle, a few hammocks were hung at night, but the bulk of the crew slept under, where was plenty of room for bunks, and plenty of warmth, with no lack of ventilation. The cooking-range, or galley-fire, was abaft the foremast, adjoining Ap's room and that of the steward and third mate; and at sea, around this same galley-fire, both men and second officers would find a snug retreat in many a long, long winter's night in the stormy regions of the north; for here, when the ship was snug, they would gather together and spin many a yarn about their own adventurous lives, and their homes far away in Scotland.

But, so far as our heroes were concerned, the snuggest corner of the ship was the drawing-room right aft. Here was the library, and here the piano, and a stove in the centre of the room, that all could sit around and make themselves happy and generally jolly.

Captain McBain's room was next in size to the saloons, as befitted his position.

The crew were twenty hands all told. Ap was boatswain and carpenter; our friend Peter was steward. In addition to his duties as captain or master of the yacht, McBain had been duly elected supercargo. He had seen to the victualling department, and the catering for all hands, both fore and aft. Rory got hold of his list one morning, and from the extracts he read therefrom to his companions, it was evident that Captain McBain had done his work right well.

"Why," said Rory, "I wouldn't mind a bit living forward among the crew, for, in addition to preserved meats, and biscuits and butter, and barley, and bacon and beans, they have pork and potatoes, and pepper, and pickles, and peas, and raisins for pudding, and suet for dumplings, and oatmeal and sugar, and coffee and tea. But oh! boys! aren't we going to live like fighting-cocks! We have all the good things they've got forward, and lots of cabin luxuries besides—potted milk and potted meats, and potted fish of every name, and almonds and arrowroot, and curries and capers, and all kinds of fruit, and jellies and jams galore. But what is this? I can understand the dried herbs and celery seed, but Birmingham wares! Old guns and beads!"

It was McBain's turn to laugh, as poor Rory, with a puzzled countenance, looked beseechingly at him for an explanation.

“Indeed,” was his reply, “it is those same old guns and those beads we’ll maybe have to eat when our stock of fresh provisions wears down.”

“Oh! I see,” said Rory, a light suddenly breaking in on him. “You mean we’ll barter them with the natives for food.”

“Just so.”

“Just so; and here is an item that proves how good an officer you are, Captain McBain. You are like a king, indeed, who is mindful of the welfare and necessities of even his meanest subjects. The item speaks for itself: Dog biscuits, ten sacks.”

Yes, reader, for independent of the crew all told there were on board two passengers of the race canine—namely, honest Oscar, the Saint Bernard, and Spunkie, the wildest and weirdest-looking Skye terrier that ever barked in the kennels at Arrandoon. These two dogs lived in the forecastle, and very useful they ultimately proved, as the sequel will show.

Two days more and our heroes had gathered on the quarter-deck, to have the last look they would have for a long time on their native land.

Most of them gazed in silence at the rugged and wild scene to windward. Their hearts were rather full to speak; but Rory, leaning on the taffrail—he were nothing unless he were romantic, so he must needs say, or sigh, or sing, I do not know which it was,—

“‘Farewell to the land of the rock and the wild wood,
The hill and the forest, and proud swelling wave,
To the land where bliss smiled on the days of our childhood,—
Farewell to dear Scotland, the land of the brave.’”
Then the breeze freshened, and the sails flapped as she leaned steadily over to it.

“Keep her away,” cried McBain, waving his hand to the helmsman.

And when they came on deck again, after dinner that evening, great seas were rolling in from the Pentland Firth, from which came the glorious wind. Nor was there any land visible in the west, where the sun was dipping down into the waves like a great vermilion shield, his beams making a bright red pathway betwixt them and the horizon. Long grey

clouds were floating in the sky above, clouds of a dark and bluish grey, and yet every cloud was bound with a fringe of silver and gold.

Ere darkling some sails were taken in, and a couple of reefs in the mainsail, but shortened even thus the good yacht seemed to fly over the waves, bounding along like a thing of life, as if she positively loved the sea and felt made for it, but in all her glee she behaved herself well, and hardly shipped a drop of water.

Next morning there was a terrible noise and row on deck, and a dire rattling of chains, and a shouting of words of command, and when Rory ran up to see what was the matter he found that the anchor had just been let go, and that they were lying in Bressay Sound, right abreast of the strangely picturesque little town of Lerwick.

“As soon,” said Captain McBain, “as we’ve had breakfast we’ll go on shore. You can make the best of your time, and enjoy yourselves all you can. There is lots to see, and ponies to ride that I reckon will tax all your equestrian powers, but mind you’re off by three o’clock. There is nothing to keep us here, and we’ll weigh again this afternoon.”

“But aren’t you going to be with us?” asked Rory.

“Nay, boy, nay,” replied McBain. “I go to pick up another passenger; and one, too, whose presence on board is bound to affect for evil or for good our voyage to the far north.”

“Dear me!” said Rory, “a bit of mystery, is it? Well, that makes it all the more romantic; but get ready, boys, get ready. I, for one, mean to make a regular forenoon of it. I want to see the pony I can’t ride, that’s all.”

The Cruise of the Snowbird by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Ten.

Onshore in Shetland—A Family of Guides—A Wild Ride and a Primitive Lunch—Westward Ho!—Racing a Whale.

"What shall we do and where shall we go?" These were the questions which naturally presented themselves for solution to our three heroes, on first stepping out of their boat on Lerwick beach.

"We'll take a turn up the town," suggested Allan, "and see the place."

"And then go and have lunch somewhere," said Ralph.

"To be sure," said Rory. "An Englishman will never be long without thinking about eating. But let us take pot-luck for the lunch. We'll just get a quarter of a dozen of Shetland ponies, that'll be one to every one of the three of us, and ride away over the island. We'll fall on our feet, never fear."

"More likely," said Allan, with a laugh, "to fall on our heads and break our necks; but never mind, I'm ready."

There were many listeners to this conversation. The town "loafers" of Lerwick are not a whit more polite than town "loafers" anywhere else, and seeing three smartly-dressed young yachtsmen, evidently the owners of the beautiful vessel that lay at anchor in the harbour, they gathered around them, crowded them in fact, and were profuse in their offers of their services as guides to either town or country. But for the present our friends declined their assistance, and set off on a brisk walk away up the curious straggling narrow street. Here were few shops worth a second look; the houses stand end on to the pavements, not in a straight row, but simply anyhow, and seem to shoulder the passengers into the middle of the road in the most unceremonious fashion. The street itself was muddy and fishy, and they were not a bit sorry when they found themselves out in the open country, quite at the other end of it. By this time they had shaken themselves clear of the crowd, or almost, for they still had four satellites. One of these was quite a giant of a fellow, with a pipe in his mouth and a tree in his right hand by way of a walking-stick, and looking altogether so rough and unkempt that he might have been taken for the presiding genius of this wild island. In striking contrast with this fellow there stood near him a pretty and interesting-looking young girl, with a little

peat-creel on her back, and knitting materials in her hand, which betokened, industry. She had yellow hair floating, over her shoulders, and eyes as blue as summer seas.

“My daughter, gentlemen,” said the giant, “and here is my son.”

Our heroes could not refrain from laughing when they looked at the latter. Such a mite he was, such a Hop-o’-my-thumb, such a mop of a head, the hair of which defied confinement by the old Tam o’ Shanter stuck on the top of it! This young urchin was rich in rags but wreathed in smiles.

This interesting family were engaged forthwith as guides.

They would all three go, not one would be left behind: the father and son would run, the daughter would ride, and the price of their services would be half-a-crown each, including the use of the ponies.

Oh! these ponies, I do so wish I could describe them to you. They were so small, to begin with, that Ralph and Allan looked quite ridiculous on their backs, for their feet almost touched the ground. Rory looked better on his charger. The ponies’ tails swept the heather, their coats were like the coats of Skye terriers, and their morsels of heads were buried in hair, all save the nose. Cobby as to body were these diminutive horses, and cunning as to eye—that is, whenever an eye could be seen it displayed cunning and mischief.

Rory mounted and rode like a Centaur, the young lady guide sat like a Shetland-queen. But woe is me for Ralph and Allan,—they were hardly on when they were off again. It must be said for them, however, that they stuck to their bridles if they couldn’t stick to the saddles, and again and again they mounted their fiery steeds with the same ignominious results. Two legs seemed enough for those ponies to walk, upon, and it did not matter for the time being whether they were, hind legs or fore legs. They could stand, on their heads too, turn somersaults, and roll over on their backs, and do all sorts of pretty tricks.

“It’s only their fun,” cried Rory, “they’ll shake down presently.”

“Shake down!” said Ralph, rubbing his leg with a wry face. “I’m pretty well shaken down. Why, I don’t believe there is a whole bone in my body.—Whoa! Whoa! Whoa!”

But when the ponies had gone through their performances to their own entire satisfaction, and done quite enough to maintain their name and fame as wild Shetland

ponies, they suffered their riders to keep their seats, but tossed their manes in the air, as if to clear their eyesight for the run they were now determined to have.

Then off started the cavalcade, rushing like a hairy hurricane along the mountain road. Swiftly as they went, however, lo! and behold, at every turn of the road the giant and his little boy were visible, the former vaulting along on his pole, the latter running with the speed of a wild deer.

It was early summer in Shetland; the top of lonely Mount Bressay was still shrouded in snow, but all the moorlands were green with grass and heather, and gay with wild hyacinth and crimson-belled bilberry bushes; the light breeze that blew over the islands and across the blue sea was balmy and yet bracing—it was a breeze that raised the spirits; yes, and it did something else, it appealed to the inner man, as Ralph expressed, and so, when after a ride of over a dozen miles a well-known roadside hostelry hove in wight, our heroes positively hailed it with a cheer. What mattered it that the little parlour into which they were shown was destitute of a carpet and possessed of chairs of deal? It was clean and quiet, the tablecloth was spotless as the snows of Ben Rona, the cakes were crisp, the bread was white, the butter was redolent of the fragrant herbage that the cows had browsed, and the rich milk was purer and better far than any wine that could have been placed before them; and when hot and steaming smoked haddocks were added to the fare, why they would not have changed places with a king in his banqueting-hall.

All confessed they had never spent a more enjoyable forenoon. The ride back was especially delightful. Before they left their guides to return on board, little Norna, the giant's lovely daughter, produced from the mysterious depths of her peat-creel quite a wonderful assortment of gauzy mits and gauntlets, and tiny little shawls, and queer old-fashioned head-dresses, all knitted by her own fair fingers. Of course they bought some of each as souvenirs of their visit to the sea-girdled mainland of Shetland, and they paid for them so liberally too, that the tears stood in the girl's blue eyes as they bade her good-bye. Norna had never been so rich in her life before.

Captain McBain was in his cabin poring over a chart when our heroes returned.

"Bravo! boys," he said, heartily; "you're up to time, and now, as the breeze is from the south with a point or two of east in it, I think we'd better make sail without delay. We'll work her quietly through the sound. We'll keep to the south of Yell, but once past Fiedland Point, good-bye to the British Islands for many a day. What more can we wish, boys, than a fair wind and a clear sea, light hearts, and a ship that can go?"

"What more indeed?" said Rory.

“Are we going to touch at Faroe and Iceland?” asked Ralph.

“That,” said McBain, “is, of course, as you wish. I’m at and in your service.”

“Yes, yes,” said Ralph; “but we don’t forget you are our adviser as well, and our sea-father.”

“Well,” replied McBain, “I’ve taken the liberty of writing to your real father to say that we thought it better to leave Faroe out of the chart, for the voyage out, at all events. We don’t know what may be before us, boys, nor how precious time may be.”

That evening about sunset old Ap’s boatswain’s pipe was heard high above the whistling wind; the breeze had freshened, and sail was being taken in, and the starboard courses were hauled farther aft. They passed very close to some of the numerous outlying islands, the last land their eyes would rest upon for some time. The tops of these isles were smooth and green, their sides were beetling cliffs and rocks of brown, with the waves breaking into foam at the foot, and white-winged gulls wheeling high around them. Little sandy alcoves there were too, where dun seals lay basking in the evening sunshine, some of whom lazily lifted their heads and gazed after the yacht, wondering probably whether she were not some gigantic gannet or cormorant. And the Snowbird sailed on and left them to wonder. The sun sank red behind the waves, the stars shone brightly down from a cloudless sky, and the moon’s pale crescent glimmered faintly in the west, while the wind kept steady to a point, the yacht rising and falling on the waves with a motion so uniform, that even Ralph—who, as regards walking, was the worst sailor of the three—felt sure he had his sea-legs, and could walk as well as any Jack Tar that ever went afloat. The night was so fine that no one cared to go below until it was quite late.

They needed their pea-jackets on all the same.

When morning broke there was not a bit of land to be seen, not even a distant mountain top for the eye to rest upon.

“Well, boys,” said McBain, when they all met together on the quarter-deck, “how did you enjoy your first night on blue water? How did you sleep?”

“I slept like a top,” said Rory.

“I believe,” said Allan, looking at Ralph, “we slept like three tops.”

“Like three tops, yes,” assented Ralph.

“Oh! I’m sure you didn’t, Ralph,” said Rory; “I wakened about seven bells in the morning watch, just for a moment, you know, and you were snoring like a grampus. And tops don’t snore, do they?”

“And how do you know a grampus does?” asked McBain, smiling.

“Troth,” said Rory, “it’s a figure of speech entirely.”

“But isn’t Rory getting nautical?” said Ralph; “didn’t you observe he said ‘seven bells’ instead of half-past three, or three-thirty?”

“Three-thirty indeed!” cried Rory, in affected disdain. “Ha! ha! ha! I can’t help laughing at all at all; 3:30! just fancy a fellow talking like an old Bradshaw, while standing on the white deck of a fine yacht like this, with a jolly breeze blowing and all sail set alow and aloft.

“Poor little Ralph!” continued Rory, patting his friend on the shoulder, and looking quizzingly up into his face, “and didn’t he get any letters this morning! Do run down below, Allan, my boy, and see if the postman has brought the morning paper.”

“Hurrah?” shouted Allan, so loudly and so suddenly that every one stared at him in astonishment.

“Hurrah!” he shouted again, this time flinging his cap in true Highland fashion half-way up to the maintop.

“Gentlemen,” he continued, in mock heroic tones, “the last mail is about to leave—the ship, bound for the distant Castle of Arrandoon.”

And away he rushed below, leaving Ralph and Rory looking so comically puzzled that McBain burst out laughing.

“Is it leave of his seven senses,” said Rory, seriously, “that poor Allan is after taking? And can you really laugh at such an accident, Captain McBain? it’s myself that is astonished at you?”

“Ah! but lad,” said McBain, “I’m in the secret.”

Allan was on deck again in a minute.

He was waving a basket aloft.

“Helen’s pigeon, boys! Helen’s pigeon!” he was crying, with the tears actually in his eyes. “I’d forgotten Peter had it till now.”

Ten minutes afterwards the tiny missive, beginning “At sea” and ending “All’s well,” was written, and attached to the strong bird’s leg. It was examined carefully, and carefully and cautiously fed, then a message was whispered to it by Rory—a message such as a poet might send; a kiss was pressed upon its bonnie back, and then it was thrown up, and almost immediately it began to soar.

“The bravest bird that ever cleaved the air,” said Allan, with enthusiasm. “I’ve flown it four hundred miles and over.”

In silence they watched it in its circling flight, and to their joy they saw it, ere lost to view, heading away for the distant mainland of Scotland. Then they resumed walking and talking on deck.

That was about the only incident of their first day at sea. Towards evening a little stranger came on board, and glad he seemed to be to reach the deck of the Snowbird, for he must have been very tired with his long flight.

Only a yellowhammer—the most persecuted bird in all the British Islands—that was what the little stranger was. McBain had caught him and brought him below with him to the tea-table, much to the wonderment of his messmates.

“It is a common thing,” said McBain, “for land birds to follow ships, or rather to be blown out to sea, and take refuge on a vessel.” A cage was constructed for the bird, and it was hung up in the snuggery, or after-saloon.

“That’ll be the sweet little cherub,” said Rory, “that will sit up aloft and look after the life of poor Jack.”

Westwards and northwards went the Snowbird, the breeze never failing nor varying for three whole days. By this time the seagulls that had followed the ship since they left the isles, picking up the crumbs that were cast overboard from the galley, had all gone back home. They probably had wives and little fledgling families to look after, and so could not go any farther, good though the living was.

“When I see the last gull flying far away astern,” said McBain, “then I think myself fairly at sea. But isn’t it glorious weather we are having, boys? I like to begin a voyage like this, and not with a gale.”

“Why?” said Rory, “we’re all sea fast now, we wouldn’t mind it much.”

“Why?” repeated McBain, “everything shakes itself into shape thus, ay, and every man of the crew gets shaken into shape, and when it does come on to blow—and we cannot always expect fine weather—there won’t be half the rolling nor half the confusion there would otherwise be.”

“Give me your glass,” cried Rory, somewhat excitedly; “I see something.”

“What is it?” said Allan, looking in the same direction; “the great sea-serpent?”

“Indeed, no,” replied Rory, “it’s a whale, and he is going in the same direction too.”

“It’s my whale, you know,” continued Rory, when everybody had had a good peep at him, “because I saw him first.”

“Very well,” said McBain, “we are not going to dispute the proprietorship. We wish you luck with your whale; he won’t want to come on board, I dare say, and he won’t cost much to keep out there, at any rate.”

All that day Rory’s whale kept up with the ship; they could see his dark head and back, as he rose and sank on the waves; he was seldom three-quarters of a mile off, and very often much nearer.

Next day at breakfast, “How is your whale, Rory?” said Ralph.

“Oh!” said Rory, “he is in fine form this morning; I’m not sure he isn’t going to give us the slip; he is right away on the weather bow.”

“Give us the slip!” said McBain; “no, that she won’t, unless she alters her course. Steward, tell Mr Stevenson I want him.”

Stevenson was the mate, and a fine stalwart sailor he was, with dark hair and whiskers and a face as red as a brick.

“Do you think,” said McBain, “you can take another knot or two out of her without carrying anything away?”

“I think we can, sir.”

“Very well, Mr Stevenson, shake a few reefs out.”

Ap’s pipe was now heard on deck, then the trampling of feet, and a few minutes afterwards there was a saucy lurch to leeward, and, although the fiddles were across the table, Rory received the contents of a cup of hot coffee in his lap.

“Now the beauty feels it,” said McBain, with a smile of satisfaction.

“So do I,” said Rory, jumping up and shaking himself; “and its parboiled that my poor legs are entirely.”

“Let us go on deck,” said Allan, “and see the whale.”

Before the end of the forenoon watch they had their strange companion once more on the weather quarter.

“It is evident,” said McBain, “we could beat her.”

Racing a whale, reader, seems idle work, but sailors, when far away at sea, do idler things than that. They were leaning over the bulwarks after dinner that day gazing it this lonely monster of the deep, and guessing and speculating about its movements.

“I wonder,” said Ralph, “if he knows where he is going?”

“I’ve no doubt he does,” said Allan; “the same kind Hand directs his movements that makes the wind to blow and the needle to point to the north.”

“But,” said Ralph, “isn’t there something very solemn about the great beast, ploughing on and on in silence like that, and all alone too—no companion near?”

“He has left his wife in Greenland, perhaps,” said Rory, “and is going, like ourselves, to seek his fortune in the far west.”

“I wonder if he’ll find her when he returns.”

“Yes, I wonder that; for she can’t remain in the same place all the time, can she?”

“Now, boys,” said Allan, “you see what a wide, wide world of water is all around us—we must be nearly a thousand miles from land. How, if a Great Power did not guide them, could mighty fishes like that find their way about?”

“Suppose that whale had a wife,” said Ralph, “as Rory imagines, and they were journeying across this great ocean together, and supposing they lost sight of each other for a few minutes only, does it not seem probable they might swim about for forty or fifty years yet never meet again?”

“Oh, how vast the ocean is!” said Rory, almost solemnly. “I never felt it so before.”

“And yet,” said Allan, “there is One who can hold it in the hollow of His hand?”

“Watch, shorten sail.”

McBain had come on deck and given the order.

“The glass is going down,” he said to Allan, “and I don’t half like the look of the sea nor the whistle of the wind. We’ll have a dirty night, depend upon it.”

The Cruise of the Snowbird by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Eleven.

The Storm—A Fearful Night—The Pirates—A Fight at Sea.

"All hands shorten sail."

The glass had not gone "tumbling down," as sailors term it, which would have indicated a storm or hurricane in violence equal perhaps to the typhoons of lower latitudes, but it went down in a slow determined manner, as if it did not mean to rise again in a hurry, so McBain resolved to be prepared for a spell of nasty weather. The wind was now about south-west by south, but it did not blow steadily; it was gusty, not to say squally, and heavy seas began to roll in, the tops of which were cut off by the breeze, and dashed in foam and spray over the rigging and decks of the Snowbird.

It increased in force as the sun went down to something over half a gale, and now more sail was taken in and the storm-jib set. McBain was a cautious sailor, and left no more canvas on her than she could carry with comparative safety.

The Snowbird began to grow exceedingly lively. She seemed on good terms with herself, as the captain expressed it. All hands, fore and aft, had found the necessity of rigging out in oilskins and sou'-westers; the latter were bought at Lerwick, and were just the right sort for facing heavy weather in these seas. They were capacious enough, and had flannel-lined side-pieces, which came down over the ears and cheeks.

"I think I've made her pretty snug for the night," said McBain, coming aft to where Allan and Rory stood on the weather side of the quarter-deck, holding on to the bulwarks to prevent themselves from falling. "How do you like it, boys? and where is Ralph?"

"Oh, we like it well enough," said Rory, "but Ralph has gone below, and is now asleep on the sofa."

"Sleepy is he?" said McBain, smiling; "well, that is just the nearest approach to sea-sickness. We won't disturb him, and he'll be all right and merry again to-morrow."

"What do you think of the weather, captain?" asked Allan.

McBain gave one glance round at sea and sky, and a look aloft as if to see that everything was still right there, ere he replied,—

“The wind is fair, Allan, that’s all I can say, but we’ll have enough of it before morning; the only danger is meeting ice; it is often as far south as this, at this time of the year.”

The night began to fall even as he spoke, for great grey clouds had rolled up and hidden the sinking sun; sky and sea seemed to meet, and the horizon was everywhere close aboard of them. The motion of the Snowbird was an unpleasant jerky one; she pitched sharply into the hollows and as quickly rose again; she took little water on board, but what little she did ship, made decks and rigging wet and slippery. Presently both Allan and Rory were advised to go below for the night, and feeling the same strange sleepiness stealing over them that had overcome Ralph, they made a bolt for the companion. Allan succeeded in fetching it at once, and when half-way down he stopped to laugh at Rory, who was rolling porpoise-fashion in the lee scuppers. But Rory was more successful in his next attempt. In the saloon they found Ralph sound enough and snoring, and Peter, the steward, staggering in through the doorway with the supper. The lamp was lighted, and both that and the swing-tables were apparently trying to jump out of their gymbals, and go tumbling down upon Ralph’s prostrate form. In fact everything seemed awry, and the table and chairs were jerking about anyhow, and, as Rory said, “making as much creaking as fifty pairs of new boots.”

“Ah! Peter, you’re a jewel,” cried Rory, as the steward placed on the table, between the fiddle bars, a delicious lobster salad and two cups of fragrant coffee. “Yes, Peter,” continued Rory, “it’s a jewel you are entirely; there isn’t a man that ever I knew, Peter, could beat ye at making a salad. And it isn’t blarney either that I’m trying to put upon you.”

With supper the sleepy feeling passed away, and Rory said he felt like a giant refreshed, only not quite so tall.

“Bring my dear old fiddle, Peter,” he cried, “like a good soul. This is just the night for music.”

He played and Allan read for two hours at least, both steadying themselves as best they could at the weather side of the table; then they wakened Ralph, and all three turned in for the night and were soon fast asleep.

It was early summer, and Ralph, so he thought in his dream, was reclining, book in hand, on a sweet wild-thyme-scented green bank in Glentroom. A blue sky was reflected from the broad bosom of the lake, the green was on the birch, the milk-white flowers on the thorn, and the feathery larch-trees were tasselled with crimson; bees went droning

from wild flower to wild flower, and the woodlands resounded with the music of a thousand joyous birds.

Ding-dong, ding-dong!

“It is the first dinner-bell from the Castle of Arrandoon,” said Ralph to himself; “Allan and his sister will be waiting, I must hurry home.”

Ding-dong, ding-dong-ding!

Ralph was wide awake now, and sitting up in his little bed. It was all dark; it must be midnight, he thought, or long past.

Ding-dong, ding-dong-ding again, followed by a terrible rush of water and a quivering of the vessel, the like of which he had never known before.

Ding, ding, ding! It was the seas breaking over the Snowbird and ringing her bell.

“What an awakening!” thought poor Ralph, and he shivered as he listened, partly with cold and partly, it must be confessed, with an undefinable feeling of alarm. And no wonder!

It was, indeed, a fearful night!

The gale had burst upon them in all its fury, and, well prepared though she was aloft to contend with it, it would require all the vessel’s powers of endurance and all the skill of the manly hearts on board of her, to bring her safely through it. Every time a sea struck her it sounded below like a dull, heavy thud; it stopped her way for a moment or two. It was then she quivered from stem to stern, like some creature in agony, and Ralph could hear the water washing about the decks overhead and pouring down below. The seas, striking the ship, gave him the idea of blows from something soft but terribly strong, and, ridiculous though it may seem, for the life of him Ralph could not help thinking of the bolster fights of the days of his boyhood. What other sounds did he hear? The constant and incessant creaking of the yacht’s timbers, the rattle of the rudder chains, and, high over all, the roar of the tempest in the rigging aloft. In the lull of the gale every now and then, he could hear the trampling of feet and voices—voices giving and voices answering words of command.

“Starboard a little! Steady?”

“Starboard it is, sir. Steady!”

“Hard down!”

“Hurrsh-sh!” A terrible sea seemed here to have struck her; the din below was increased to a fearful extent by the smashing of crockery and rattling of furniture and fittings.

“Another man to the wheel! Steady as you go. Steady.”

Then there was a sound like a dreadful explosion, with a kind of grating noise, followed by a rattling as if a thousand men were volley-firing overhead; meanwhile the good ship heeled over as if she never would right again. It was a sail rent into ribbons!

“I can’t stand this!” said Ralph, aloud. “Up I must get, and see if Allan and Rory be awake. They must be.”

Getting out of bed he discovered was a very simple proceeding, for he had no sooner begun the operation than he found himself sprawling on the deck. The floor was flooded, and everything was chaos. Feeling for his clothes, he could distinguish books by the dozen, a drawer, a camp-stool, and a broken glass. At last he managed to find a dressing-gown, and also his way along to the saloon. Here a lamp was burning, and here were Allan and Rory both, and the steward as well.

All three were somewhat pale. They were simply waiting—but waiting for what? They themselves could hardly have told you, but at that time something told everyone in the saloon the danger was very great indeed.

On deck McBain and his men were fighting the seas; two hands were at the wheel, and it needed all their strength at times to keep the vessel’s head in the right direction, and save her from broaching-to. In the pale glimmer of the sheet lightning every rope and block and stay could at one moment be seen, and the wet, shining decks, and the men clustering in twos and threes, lashed to masts or clinging to ropes to save themselves from destruction. Next moment the decks would be one mass of seething foam. It was by the lightning’s flash, however, or the pale gleam of the breaking waves, and by these alone, that McBain could guide his vessel safely through this awful tempest.

So speedily had the gale increased to almost a hurricane, that there was no time to batten down; but with the first glimpse of dawn the wind seemed to abate, and no time was lost in getting tarpaulins nailed down, and only the fore companion was left partially unprotected for communication between decks.

Soon after the captain came below, looking, in his wet and shining oilskins, like some curious sea-monster, for there was hardly a bit of his face to be seen. “What!” he cried, “you boys all up?”

“Indeed,” said Rory, who was nearly always the first to speak, “we thought it was down we soon would all be instead of up?”

The captain laughed, and applied himself with rare zest to the coffee and sandwiches the steward placed before him. “Don’t give us cups at breakfast to-morrow, Peter,” he said, “but the tin mugs; we’re going to have some days of this weather. And now, boys, I’m going to have a caulk for an hour. You had better follow my example; you will be drier in bed, and, I believe, warmer too.”

Breakfast next day was far from a comfortable meal. The gale still continued, though to a far less extent, and the fire in the galley had been drowned out the night before, and was not yet re-lit. But every one was cheerful.

“Better,” said McBain, “is a cold sardine and a bit of ship biscuit where love is, than roast beef and—”

“Roast beef and botheration!” said Rory, helping him out “That’s it! Thank ye,” said McBain. “And now, who is going on deck to have a look at the sea?”

“Ha! what a scene is here!” said Allan, looking around him, as he clung to the weather rail.

Well might he quote Walter Scott. The green seas were higher than the maintop, their foaming, curling tops threatening to engulf the yacht every minute.

“I may tell you, my boys,” said McBain, grasping a stay and swaying to and fro like a drunken man, “that if the Snowbird weren’t the best little ship that ever floated, she couldn’t have stood the storm of last night. And look yonder, that is all the damage.”

From near her bows, aft as far as the mizen-mast, the bulwarks were smashed and torn by the force of the waves.

“We have two men hurt, but not severely, and the pump’s at work, but only to clear her of the drop of water she shipped; and we’ll soon mend the bulwarks.”

All that day and all the next night the gale continued to blow, and it was anything but comfortable or pleasant below; but the morning of the third day broke brightly enough,

albeit the wind had forged round and was now coming from the west; but McBain did not mind that.

“We made such a roaring spin during the gale,” he said, “although scudding under nearly bare poles, that we can afford to slacken speed a little now.”

The sea was still angry and choppy, but all things considered the Snowbird made goodly way.

The forenoon was spent in making good repairs and in getting up the crow’s-nest, a barrel of large dimensions, which in all Greenland-going ships is hoisted and made fast, as high as high can be, namely, alongside the main truck. A comfortable place enough is this crow’s-nest when you get there, but you need a sailor’s head to reach it, for at the main-top-gallant crosstrees the rattlins leave you, and you have a nasty corner to turn, round to a Jacob’s-ladder, up which you must scramble, spider fashion, and enter the nest from under. You need a sailor’s head to reach it and a sailor’s heart to remain there, for if there is any sea on at all, the swinging and swaying about is enough to turn any landsman sick and giddy.

Hardly was the crow’s-nest in position when the look-out man hailed the deck below.

“A vessel in sight, sir.”

Here was some excitement, anyhow.

“Where away?” bawled the captain.

“On the weather quarter, sir; I can just raise her topmasts; she is holding the same course as ourselves.”

Shortly after, Mr Stevenson, who had gone aloft, came below to report.

“She is no whaler, sir, whatever she is,” he said.

“But what else can she be?” said Captain McBain. “She might have been blown out of her course, to be sure, but with this wind she could make up her leeway. Keep our yacht a bit nearer the wind, Mr Stevenson, we’ll give her a chance of showing her bunting anyhow.”

Dinner-hour in the saloon was one o’clock, and it was barely over when Mr Stevenson entered, and with him a being that made our heroes start and stare in astonishment. What or who was he? They had never seen him before, and knew not he was on board—a

very little, thin, wiry, weazened old man, all grey hairs, parchment skin, and wrinkles. Was he the little old man of the sea?

McBain saw their bewilderment and hastened to explain.

“My worthy friend Magnus Green,” he said, “the passenger I took on board at Lerwick.”

“There is precious little green about him,” thought Rory.

“The ship is not far off, she is flying a flag of distress, but Magnus says he knows her, and bids us keep clear of her.”

“Well, Magnus, what do you know about her?” asked McBain.

The little old man talked fast, almost wildly,—it was a way he had,—and gesticulated much.

“What do I know?” he cried; “why, this,—she is a Spaniard, and a thief. She came into Lerwick two weeks before you, took stores on board, sailed in the night, and paid nobody. She is armed to the teeth, and in my opinion is after you. Keep away from her, keep away, keep away.”

“But how could she be after us?” asked McBain, incredulous.

“How? ha! ha!” laughed Magnus; “you speak like a child. She herself sailed from Inverness to Lerwick: she’d heard of you, a gentleman’s yacht, with everything good on board. She couldn’t tackle you near shore, but out here on the high sea, ha! ha! the case in different.”

“There is something in what Magnus says,” said McBain. “Let us go on deck. Hoist the flag, Mr Stevenson.”

Up went the roll of bunting, one touch to the lanyard, and out on the breeze floated the red ensign of England.

(The white ensign is flown by the Royal Navy only, the blue by the Naval Reserve, the red by merchantmen and others.)

The Spaniard was hardly a mile to windward, a long, low, rakish craft, as black as a Mother Carey’s chicken. She had ports as if for guns; and though there was no answering signal, she was seen to alter her course and bear down on the Snowbird.

“She’s too like a hawk to be honest,” said McBain, “and too big for us to fight. We’ll try how she can sail; keep her away, Stevenson.”

The Snowbird began to pay off, but not before a white puff of smoke was seen rising from the stranger’s bows. Next moment down the wind came a cannon’s roar, and a shot ricocheted past the bows of the yacht.

“Ha! ha! ha!” shrieked little Magnus, “yon’s the answering signal—ha! ha! ha!”

At the same moment down went the flag of distress, and up went the black flag that pirates like to display when they really mean mischief. Something else went up at the same time, namely, Captain McBain’s Highland blood. This is no figure of speech; you could have seen pride and anger mantling in his cheek and glancing like fire from his eye.

“The black flag, indeed!” he growled; “only cowards hoist it; they think it startles their would-be prey, like the hiss a cat or a goose emits, or the images and figures idiot savages carry in their battle-van. They will not frighten us. Stevenson, load the six-pounder Armstrong. Lucky we took that little tool with us. Tell Ap to see to the small arms. We’ll show them the metal we’re made of ere we surrender the Snowbird. Stand by tacks and sheets, we’ll put her before the wind. A stern chase is a long chase; we may give her the slip after nightfall.”

There was a cheeriness in McBain’s voice as he spoke, that communicated itself to all hands fore and aft. There was no bombast about the captain, mind you, no vulgar jingoism. He merely meant to hold his own, even if he had to fight for it.

All sail was set that the Snowbird could carry, both below and aloft, an example that was speedily followed by the pirate, for pirate she seemed, from her bunting, to even brag in being, and so the chase began in earnest. The stranger fired once or twice only, but the shots falling short she gave it up, and concentrated all her attention in endeavouring to get within reach.

For the next hour there was silence on board the Snowbird, except for some brief words of command given in quiet quick tones, and just as speedily obeyed. Rory, Ralph, and Allan were clustered astern, watching the pirate. This was a kind of danger to which they had never dreamed they would be exposed; yet still the confidence they had in brave, cool McBain banished all fear from their hearts.

But the captain's anxiety was extreme, and his eyes roved incessantly from the Snowbird to the vessel in chase, not without many a glance at the fast-declining sun.

"Are we quite prepared?" he asked Stevenson.

"All ready, sir," was the reply, with an uneasy glance astern, "but I think she is coming up, sir, hand over hand and now she is actually setting stunsails."

"Then God help us, Stevenson, for that chap is bound to win the battle if he can only win the race."

The stunsails set by the stranger, however, were no sooner set than they were blown away, booms and all.

"Hullo?" cried the captain, "that is providential. Now Stevenson, get the Armstrong aft."

This was soon accomplished.

"Here, Magnus Green," cried McBain, "come on you're the best shot in the ship. Many a harpoon gun I've seen you fire. Pepper away at that pirate till you're tired. Cripple her if you can. It's our only chance."

The fire was briskly returned from the bows of the pirate, and it was soon evident that she was getting nearer and nearer to them, for the shots went over the Snowbird, and some even pierced the sails, proof positive that it was not her intention to sink but to capture the beautiful yacht.

The captain whistled low to himself.

"This is awkward," he muttered, gloomily. He was gazing aloft, wondering if he could do nothing else to keep clear of the pirate until nightfall, when a shout behind him, followed by a ringing cheer from all hands, made him turn hastily round. Old man Magnus was capering around the quarter-deck wild with glee, rushing hither and thither, only returning every moment to pat the little Armstrong, as though it were a living thing.

"He! he! he!" he cried, "I've done it, I've done it."

He had indeed done it. The stranger's foremast had gone by the board, mast and sails and rigging lay about her forepart in dire confusion, burying guns and gunners.

“Glorious old Magnus!” shouted McBain, rubbing his hands with glee. “Now, Stevenson, ready about.”

The yacht came round like a bird, and sailing wonderfully close to the wind, began rapidly to near the smitten pirate. Presently it was “ready about” again on the other tack, and all the while never a shot came from the foe, but the dastardly flag still floated sullenly aloft.

Ten men were stationed in the weather bow of the Snowbird with rifles, their orders being to fire wherever they saw a head.

“Now then, Magnus,” cried McBain, “fifty guineas are yours if you’ll splinter the enemy’s mainmast. I want to let her have two jury masts to rig instead of one.” McBain carried the Snowbird cruelly near to the pirate, dangerously near too, for presently there was an answering fire of small arms, and two men fell wounded.

Crang! went the Armstrong. Faithfully and well had Magnus done his work, and down went the pirate’s other mast.

“We’ll leave her the mizen,” said McBain; “down with the helm.”

His voice was almost drowned in that deafening shout of victory. Even Oscar the Saint Bernard and the wiry wee Skye felt bound to join it, and Peter the steward rushed below for his bagpipes.

And when the moon rose that night and shone quietly down on the waters, the Snowbird was bravely holding on her course, and the discomfited pirate was far away.

The Cruise of the Snowbird by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Twelve.

Containing a Strange, Strange Story, Told by the Snuggery Fire.

"It never rains but it pours," said McBain, entering the saloon rubbing his hands, and smiling as he seated himself at the breakfast-table. "Steward, I hope it is beefsteak this morning, with boiled eggs to follow, for I declare to you honestly I don't think I ever felt half so hungry in my born days before! Bravo, steward! bravo, Peter! Be thankful, boys, for all His mercies, and fall to?"

"One would think, captain," said Ralph, "that you had got good news this morning."

"Why, it makes one laugh just to look at you," said Rory.

"Laugh away, lad?" said McBain; "laugh and grow fat, but eat as well, boys! And why haven't you been on deck, eh?"

"Overslept ourselves," observed Allan; "Well, no wonder! You're young, and the excitement of the past few days has been great: even I have felt it. But to-day, my boys, there isn't a pirate in sight; the wind has gone back to the south-east, and in five more days, if it holds we'll be on shore shooting the denizens of the scented pine forests of the farthest north lands of America."

Our heroes were soon on deck, the Snowbird was bounding along before a beautiful breeze, with all her fair-weather sails set and nicely trimmed. Every one on board seemed joyful; the laugh and the joke were heard from the second officer's cabin, and the men in the forecastle were trolling a song.

That same evening a very happy group were assembled around a bright fire in the cosy snuggery. They were our heroes three, squatted or reclining on mats before the stove, not sitting on chairs—certainly not, they knew a trick worth two of that. The captain occupied a rocking-chair, as became his dignity; Oscar the Saint Bernard's nose was turned stovewards; and Rory was making a pillow of him. Oscar was eyeing the cheerful blaze, but every other eye was directed upon wee weazen-faced Magnus Green, the mysterious little stranger that McBain had picked up in Lerwick, and who had done them such noble service in crippling the pirate. He was seated on a camp-stool in the corner.

“Now, Magnus!” cried McBain, “we’re all waiting for your yarn.”

“Jan Jansen, then,” said Magnus, after a moment’s pause or two—“Jan Jansen, gentlemen, was first mate of a merchant brig, as neat and tight a little craft as ever sailed the seas. He had been in her, man and boy, for nearly twenty years—in the same ship and with the same captain. This captain was a Dane, but he hailed and he sailed from a little town in Shetland. And dearly did this sailor captain love his profession; he was never really at home except when afloat on the billowy ocean, when he was as happy as the sea-birds.

“Many a long and prosperous voyage he had made to distant lands, and never as yet had misfortune—apart from the usual ups and downs of a sailor’s life—befallen him. He had a wife—ay, and a family. Before the latter had increased the skipper’s wife had used to sail with her husband, but latterly she had stayed at home. And now that she could no longer share his perils, all she could do—and that wasn’t little, either—was to pray for him, and teach his dear children to do so likewise. But she thought that if her house were only close to the sea it would seem like living nearer to the loved one. So the captain built a house on the slope of a hill, and planted pine-trees thereon to shelter it from the cutting winds, that in winter and spring swept downwards from the north and north-east. And the windows of the house looked away over the broad Atlantic. In his outward voyages the captain’s ship, after leaving the port of embarkation, passed within two miles of his cottage door, and his wife and children used to watch the trim-built brig as she glided away from the land, lessening and lessening, until she looked but like a bird on the horizon, and finally disappeared. On stormy nights, when the wind howled around the cottage, and the angry waves lashed themselves into foam against the dark cliffs that bounded the sea-beach, the little lonely family would assemble in the parlour to pray for poor father, far at sea, to Him who can quiet the raging of the winds, and say to the troubled ocean, ‘Peace, be still!’

“But the Danish captain was not only a fortunate sailor but a very ambitious man as well, and ever after each successful voyage his wife would entreat him to remain on shore now for the rest of his life. Several times indeed the husband had acceded to her wishes, and settled down on shore. But only for a time, for woe is me! the heart of a true sailor is often as restless as the great sea itself.

“The pet of the captain’s household was his only daughter, a bright-faced, lovely girl of sweet seventeen. With her fair flowing hair, her laughing blue eyes, her cheerful voice, and her winsome ways, no wonder Nanette was a favourite. But why did she so love to roam down by the rocks where the seagulls screamed, and why, when her father was abroad, did her eyes so often fill with tears as she gazed across the sea? She was her father’s darling, it is true; but she was something else—she was brave Jan Jansen’s

promised bride. And his thoughts were always on shore with Nanette, and hers were on the little barque with Jan. When he was at sea the months seemed to her like long gloomy years, and the few weeks he was at home like bright short hours of sunshine and joy.

“And they were going to be married after the very next voyage; then Jan was to have a ship of his own, and take her away with him to the sunny lands he was so fond of describing to her, and about which she so loved to hear, as they walked arm in arm on the breezy cliff-tops.

“If previous voyages had seemed long to Nanette, this last appeared an age in itself. But one summer’s morning when Nanette, awoke and opened her window to admit the sweet sea air and the song of the lark, oh! joy, there was the dear old brig with her sea-washed sides, standing close in towards the land, and she was sure—yes, there was no mistake about it—those were her father and Jan waving their handkerchiefs to attract her attention. How quickly did Nanette dress that morning and hurry out; and how speedily did she bend on and hoist the red flag on the garden staff, to tell her anxious father and lover that all was well at home!

“Then away stood the brig on the starboard tack, and next day Nanette had beside her all that she loved on earth—father, mother, her brothers, and Jan.

“There seemed to be a cloud on the captain’s brow, which his wife was not slow to notice, and even honest Jan appeared to be possessed of some gloomy secret, that sat but uneasily on his mind. Yet each when asked had only replied,—

“‘’Tis nothing, you will hear it all in good time.’

“But that evening, after supper was cleared away, and Jan with the captain sat beside the fire in the cosy parlour,—

“‘Wife,’ said the mariner, ‘I have news for you that is both good and bad. Tell them, Jan, I can’t.’

“Jan dared not meet the loving eyes of poor Nanette, but gazed dreamily into the fire as he told them the news that some shipwrecked sailors had brought to the port of Katrinesand, from which they had last sailed, of wealth immeasurable to be made on an island far away in the frozen ocean, and of mines of ivory to be had for the gathering, and of the captain’s resolve to make one last—certainly the last—Jan little knew how prophetically he spoke—voyage in the brig, and that this voyage was to be to the Arctic

regions; and that neither he nor the captain doubted that this single voyage would make wealthy men of them both.

“The wife was the first to reply, for poor Nanette was sobbing as if her heart would break.

“‘Oh!’ cried the captain’s wife, ‘it is ever, ever thus. Do not go, I beseech you, oh! my husband. Do not rashly brave the terrors of that dreadful sea of ice. There has been a cloud on my heart for weeks that I could not understand till now, and both Nanette and myself have dreamed dreams that bode no good to us or ours. Husband, husband, stay at home!’

“But a determined man will have his way, and the captain’s mind was so bent on the new project that nothing would induce him to give it up. What his wife must suffer, but Nanette even more, for wherever her father went Jan was bound to follow, and the danger would be the same to both!

“On the twenty-first day of April, in seventeen hundred and ninety-six, there sailed away from Shetland the sturdy brig Danish Queen, well manned, mated, found and commanded, and with it went the hearts of the gentle Nanette and her mother.

“The day was mild and balmy. A soft south wind blew over the sea and filled the sails, and wafted the brig—oh! how fast she seemed to fly—away and away and away, till she disappeared on the northern horizon, and the poor bereaved ones, clasped in each other’s arms, wept in silence now, for neither could find a word of comfort for the other; hope itself had fled from their hearts.

“And the Danish Queen returned again no more to Shetland shores.

“Two years and a half had barely passed since she sailed away, and the autumn leaves were mingling with the long green grass in the little churchyard of Dergen, when two new-made graves might have been seen there, side by side. One was that of little Nanette, the other the grave of her heartbroken mother.

“And the time flew by, and the Danish Queen was soon forgotten, and people had ceased to speak of her, and the friends of her brave sailors had doffed the garb of mourning for five long years.

“But one day there arrived in Shetland the whaling barque Clotho, direct from the Greenland Ocean, and one passenger, the sole survivor, by his own account, of the ill-fated Danish Queen. If it were indeed as he said, there must be some strange mystery

about his existence for so many years on the sea of ice, which even Jan Jansen himself—for it was he—could not, or rather would not, then explain. He was found dressed in bear-skins, a young man, but with snow-white hair and beard, wandering purposelessly on the ice, and taken on board. All that he would tell was that his unfortunate vessel had been dashed to pieces against the ice just three months after he had left Shetland, and that he alone of all on board had been saved from a watery grave.

"Jan Jansen never shed a tear when he heard of the death of the two beings he had loved far better than any one else on earth, but he never smiled again. He built himself a small cottage and tilled a little farm quite close to the graveyard of Dergen, and in sight of the sea. Years softened the poor man's grief, and to many an earnest child-listener, not a few of whom have long ago gone grey and passed away from earth, he used to tell the tale of his strange adventures in the far-off sea of ice.

"It was on winter evenings, when the snow was sifting in beneath Jan Jansen's cottage door, and the roar of the wind mingling with the dash of the waves on the cliffs beneath, that Jan would draw closer to the fire, and rake the blazing peat together till the shadows danced and flickered on the walls: then his little friends felt sure that he was going to repeat to them his strange, strange story.

"'But I never told you, did I,' old Jan would say, 'of the lonely island of Alba, in the frozen ocean?'

"He had told them scores of times, but the tale never palled upon them.

"'Yes, yes, Father Jan,' they would cry, 'but we have quite forgotten a great deal that you told us. Do tell us once again of that wonderful island, and all the strange things you saw there.'

"And Jan would begin, keeping his eyes on the fire, as if the curling smoke and the blazing peat aided his recollections.

"'It was almost summer when the good brig Danish Queen left Shetland. A favouring breeze filled our sails, and in less than fourteen days we made the ice, and the ripple left the water, but still the wind blew fair. Onward we ploughed our way in the sturdy brig, now through fields of floating slush and snow, now through streams of small bergs, but little larger than sheep or swans. Farther north still, and the bergs grew as large as oxen, then as big as elephants, then bigger than houses, then bigger than churches; and as they rose and fell on the smooth dark billows they threatened us every moment with destruction. Then we knew we had at last reached the sea of perpetual ice; 'twas the season of the year when the sun never sets, but goes on day and night, round and round

in the cold blue sky, where never a cloud is seen. We saw strange birds and beasts in the water and on the ice, beasts that glared at us with a stony fearless stare, and birds that floated so close we could have captured them by hand. The beautiful snowbird, with plumage more white than the lily's petal, with eyes and legs of crimson, and bill of jet; the wild pilot bird, and a hundred curious gulls, and little sparrow-like birds that fluttered from berg to berg in the breeze, as if it were very much against their will they were there at all; and flocks of curious blackbirds with white mottled breasts, that laughed in the air as they flew around us, with a sound like the voices of little children just let loose from school. We saw the lonely narwhal, the unicorn of the sea, with his one long ivory horn appearing and disappearing in the black waters as he pursued his prey. Seals in thousands popped their heads above the water to stare at us with their beautiful eyes; sea cows basked on the snowy bergs; whales played their gigantic fountains on every side of us; and the great Greenland bear, king of these regions of ice, stalked majestically around on many a floe, waiting a chance to pounce on some unwary seal.

"'Northwards still, and now we sailed into an open sea, where no icebergs were anywhere visible—nothing but water, water, wherever we looked, except on the northern horizon, where was one small snowy cone, no bigger it would seem than a sugar-loaf. Taller and taller and broader and broader it grew, as we sailed towards it, till it formed itself into a lofty table-land, and we found ourselves under the ice-bound cliffs of the Isle of Alba.

"'Imagine if you can a large and mountainous island covered with the snows of ages, with one gigantic cone, the shaft of an extinct volcano, towering upwards until lost in the heavens; imagine all around an ocean of inky blackness, a sky above of cloudless blue, with a sun like a rayless disc of molten silver; imagine neither sight nor sound of life, saving the mournful cry of the wheeling sea-bird, or the sullen plunge of the narwhal and whale; and imagine if you can the feeling of being all alone in such a place, where foot of mortal man had never been planted before.

"'But for all this, little recked the brave crew of the Danish Queen, for we found the ivory we had braved every danger to seek.

"'Caves full of it!

"'Mines of it!

"'For days and weeks our boats did nothing but ply between ship and shore, laden to the gunwale with our pearly treasure. We had but room for one more ton. It was ready packed on shore, and I was left to watch. Alas and alas! that same night it came on to

blow great guns from off the ocean. I could not see our brig for the foam and spray that dashed over the cliffs. But, ah me! I soon heard a mournful and piercing shriek, rising high over wail of wind and wash of wave, and I knew then she had gone down and all on board had perished. Shuddering with cold and horror, I sheltered myself in the inner recesses of a cave, careless even of falling a victim to a bear. I wandered in, and I wandered on and on, till I could no longer hear the surging of the storm-lashed waves, and the light behind me was swallowed up in obscurity. And now I could distinctly perceive a glimmering light and a rising mist far away ahead, while at the same time the air around me waxed sensibly warmer; still a spirit of curiosity seemed to impel me forward, until I found myself standing in front of a vast waterfall, which disappeared in the bowels of the earth beneath my feet, while floating in the vapoury mist above me were beings the most lovely I had ever imagined, in gauzy garments of pink and green.

"'With their strange eyes bent pityingly on me, those water-spirits floated nearer and nearer. Then I felt lifted off my feet and borne gently but swiftly upwards through the luminous haze, upwards and into day once more; and what a blissful day!

"'In this lovely land, where I dwelt so long, there was no alloy of sorrow, and the strange, bright beings that inhabited it were as happy and joyous as the birds that sang on every bough, or the flowers that wooed the wind and the sunshine.

"'Five years passed away like one long and happy dream; then one day my spirit-friends came towards me with downcast looks and tear-bedimmed eyes. They came to tell me that, as with joy they had found me, so in sorrow they must now part with me—that no mortal must stay longer in their land than my allotted time. Then they clad me in skins and conveyed me up the mountain-side, even to the top of the highest cone. Looking down from this height, I could behold all the sea of ice spread out like a map before me, with sealers at work on the southern floes.

"'"Yonder are your countrymen," said the beautiful spirits; then sadly they bade me farewell.

"'It must have been days afterwards when I was picked up by the Clotho's men, who had gone to look for fresh-water ice.'

"The old man," continued Magnus Green, "used to sigh as he finished his story, and we—for I, gentlemen, was one of his child-listeners—just whispering adieu, would steal away homewards through the winter's night, seeing as we went spirits in every curling snowdrift, and hearing voices in every blast."

“And what do you now think,” asked McBain, after a pause, “of this old man’s strange story?”

“Of the spirit portion of it,” said Magnus, “I cannot give an opinion, but that a sea of open water does lie to the far north, my experience as sealer and whaler has long since convinced me. The Isle of Alba is known to many Norwegian narwhal and walrus-hunters, and I know the mammoth caves of ivory to be not only probable, but a fact.”

“And you think,” continued McBain, “you could guide us and pilot us to these strange regions?”

“Yes, yes?” cried Magnus, producing from his bosom an old and much stained parchment chart, and tapping it with his skinny hand as he spoke, “it is all here, even if my memory failed me. Yes, yes; I can guide you, if the hearts of your crew do not fail them before the dangers to be encountered.”

“I could answer for the hearts of my crew,” said McBain, smiling; “they are hearts of oak, my Magnus! You will know that before you are long with us. As to the mammoth caves Magnus, if we ever attempt to reach them, I promise you that you shall be our pilot.”

The Cruise of the Snowbird by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Thirteen.

Was it an Old Man's Dream?—Sunday on Mid-Ocean—Land Ho!—A Strange Adventure—Lost in the Great Forest.

Captain McBain and our heroes stayed up for hours that night after old man Magnus left, talking and musing upon the strange story they had just been listening to.

"Think you," said Ralph, "there is much in it, or is it merely an old man's dream?"

"An old man's dream!" said McBain. "No, I do not; old men do not dream such dreams as those, but, like Magnus himself, I put little faith in the spirit part of the story."

"The question then to be answered," said Allan, "is, where did Jan Jansen stay during the four or five years of his sojourn in the polar seas?"

"Well," said McBain, "I have thought that over too, and I think it admits of a feasible enough answer, without having recourse to the spirit theory. There is a mystery altogether about the regions of the Pole that has never been revealed."

"In fact," said Rory, "nobody has ever been there to reveal it."

"That is just it," contained McBain; "our knowledge of the country is terribly meagre, and merely what we have gleaned from sealers or whalers—men, by the way, who are generally too busy, looking after the interests of their owners, to bother their heads about exploration—or from the tales of travellers who have attempted—merely attempted, mind you—to penetrate as far north as they could."

"True," said Ralph.

"England," continued McBain, "has not all the credit to herself, brave though her sailors be, of telling us all we know about the Pole and the country—lands and seas—around it. Why, I myself have heard tales from Norwegian walrus-hunters, the most daring fellows that ever sailed the seas, that prove to my facile satisfaction that there is an open ocean near the North Pole, that there are islands in it—the Isle of Alba if you like—and that these islands are inhabited. You may tell me it is too cold for human beings to live there; you may ask me where they came from. To your first assertion I would reply that the inhabitants may depend to a great extent for heat on the volcanic nature of the islands

themselves, just as they depend in winter for light on the glorious aurora, or the radiant light of stars and moon. When you ask me where they came from, I have but to remind you that Spitsbergen and the islands around it were, before their glacial period, covered with vegetation of the most luxuriant kind, that mighty trees grew on their hills and in their dales, and that giants of the lower animal kingdom roamed through the forests, the wilder beasts preying on the flocks and herds that came down at mid-day to quench their thirst in the streams and in the lakes; Man himself must have lived there too, and if he still exists in the regions of the Pole, he is but the descendant of a former race.

"With some of these tribes Jan Jansen no doubt lived: they were good to him, perhaps so good that he got lazy and wouldn't work, and so they were glad to get rid of him."

"And what about the mammoth caves—do you believe in them too?" said Allan.

"Ah! ha!" cried Ralph, laughing; "our brother Allan has an eye to the main chance, you see; he wants to 'malt' money."

"I want to see all I can see on this cruise," said Allan, reddening a little as he spoke, "and I want if possible to make the voyage pay. Well, bother take you, Ralph, call it 'makin' money' if you like."

"The gigantic mammoth," continued McBain, "used inhabit the far northern regions, where they existed in millions. Now human nature is the same all over the world, and, I suppose, always has been. Man is a collecting animal; the North American Indians collect scalps—"

"Misers collect money," said Rory, "and little boys stamps."

"In some parts of the world," McBain went on, "the natives make giant pyramids of the antlers of deer; the King of Dahomey prefers human skulls, and if there be caves filled with mammoth tusks, as the traditions of the Norwegians would lead us to believe, they were doubtless collected by the natives as trophies of the hunt, and stowed away in caves. The mammoth you know was the largest kind of elephant—"

"Och!" cried Rory, interrupting McBain; "what an iconoclast you are to be sure; what a breaker of images?"

"Explain, my boy," said McBain, smiling, for he could spy fun in Rory's eye.

"You say the mam-moth was an elephant," said Rory. "Och! sure it was myself was thinking all the time it was a kind of a bhutterfly."

“Indeed, indeed, Rory,” said Ralph, “I think it is time little boys like you were in bed.”

“Well, boys,” said McBain, rising, “maybe it is time we all turned in, and thankful we have to be for a quiet night, for a fair wind, and a clear sea. Dream about your ‘bhutterfly,’ Rory, my son, for depend upon it we’ll see him yet.”

Next day was Sunday. How inexpressibly calm and delightful, when weather is fine and wind is fair, is a Sunday at sea. It is then indeed a Sabbath, a day of quiet rest.

On this particular morning, saving a few fleecy cloudlets that lay along the southern horizon, there was no cloud to be seen in all the blue sky, and the sun shone warmly down on the snowy canvas and white decks of the Snowbird, as she coquetted over the rippling sea. The men, dressed in their neatest suits, were assembled aft on the quarter-deck, near the binnacle, so that even the man at the wheel could join in the beautiful Form of Prayer to be used at Sea, read by McBain in rich and manly tones. Had you climbed into the maintop of that yacht, that white speck on the ocean’s blue, and gazed around you on every side, you would have scanned the horizon in vain for a sight of a single living thing. They were indeed alone on the wide ocean. Alone, yet not alone, for One was with them to whom they were now appealing. “One terrible in all His works of wonder, at whose command the winds do blow, and who stilleth the raging of the tempest.”

Prayers over, Ap pipes down, the men move forward to read or to talk, and by-and-bye it will be the dinner-hour; this is “plum-dough” day, and, mind you, sailors are just like schoolboys, they think about this sort of thing. Oscar, the Saint. Bernard, has mounted on top of the skylight—his favourite resting-place in fine weather—and laid himself down to sleep in dog fashion, with one eye a little open, and one ear on half-cock to catch the faintest unusual sound.

“Do you know,” said Ralph, looking over the bulwarks and down at the gliding water, “I think I should like to live at sea.”

“Ay, ay,” said Rory, “if it was always like this, O! thou fair-weather sailor, but when we’re lying-to in a gale of wind, Ralph, that is the time I like to see you, fast in your armchair, with the long legs of you against the bulkheads to steady yourself, and trying in vain to swallow a cup of tea. Oh! then is the time you look so pleasant.”

Ralph looked at this teasing shipmate of his for a moment or two with a kind of amused smile on his handsome face, then he pulled his ear for him and walked away aft.

About five days after this Rory came on deck; he had been talking to Captain McBain in his cabin. The captain was working out the reckoning, during which I don't think Rory helped him very much.

"Well, Rory," said Allan, "you've been plaguing the life out of poor McBain, I know. But tell us the news—where are we?"

"Indeed," said Rory, with pretended gravity, "we're in a queer place altogether, and I don't know that ever we'll get out of it."

"Out of what?" cried Ralph; "speak out, man—anything gone wrong?"

"Indeed then," replied Rory, "there has been a collision."

"A collision?"

"Yes, a collision between the latitude and the longitude, and they're both standing stock still at 60."

"I'll explain," said McBain, who had just joined them. "The good ship Snowbird, latitude 60 degrees North, longitude 60 degrees West."

"Now do you see, Mr Obtuse?" said Rory.

"I do," said Ralph, "but no thanks to you."

Next morning land was in sight on the lee bow, and by noon they had cast anchor and clewed sails in a small bay near a creek.

"Not a very hospitable-looking shore, is it?" said McBain; "but never mind, here are birds in plenty, and no doubt we'll find fur as well as feather. So be ready by to-morrow for a big shoot."

"I'm ready now," said Rory, "just for a small 'explore,' you know, and we'll come back by sunset and report."

"And I'll go with him," said Allan.

"Mind you don't get lost," cried McBain; "and we don't expect a big bag, you know."

Rory carried his rifle, Allan his gun; they were armed for anything, and felt big enough to tackle a bear for that matter. They pulled straight in-shore and up the creek, and to their joy they found at the head of it a nice stream; not a river by any means, but still navigable enough for more than a mile for their little craft. They soon came to a rapid, almost a waterfall, indeed, and not thinking it expedient to carry their boat, or to proceed farther on water, they landed, made her fast to the stump of an old tree, and trudged on in quest of adventure, with their guns over their shoulders.

"Now," said Rory, pausing to gaze around him, after they had walked on in silence over a wild and scraggy heath for more than an hour, "if we had merely come in quest of the beautiful and the picturesque, and if I had brought my sketch-book with me, it strikes me we would have been rewarded, but as for shooting, why, we would have done well to have stopped on the seashore and kept potting away at the gulls."

The scenery about them was indeed lovely, with a loveliness peculiarly its own. It was summer in this wild northern land; everywhere the moorlands and plains were carpeted with the greenest of grass, or bedecked with mosses and lichens of every hue imaginable, from the sombrest brown to the brightest scarlet. Of wild flowers there were but few, but heaths, still green, there were in abundance, and many curious wild shrubs they had never seen before; but they knew the juniper-plant and the sweet-scented wild myrtle. Why, it was the same that adorned the braes of Arrandoon! Then there were fruit-trees of various kinds, and trees that bore large pink and white flowers. It seemed odd to our heroes to see big flowers growing on tree-tops, but this, and indeed everything else around them, only served to remind them that they were in a foreign land. What they missed the most were the wild flowers and the song of birds. Birds there were, but they were silent: they would rush out from a bush, or flutter down from a tree, to gaze curiously at them, then be off again. The horizon was bounded by rugged hills, surrounded by a forest of pine-trees.

"I think," said Rory, "we should climb that sugar-loaf hill. What a grand view we would get. Let us walk towards the wood; we are sure to find game there."

"Do you know in what direction our ship lies?" said Allan.

"That I don't," said Rory; "but if we follow the stream we are sure to find the boat."

"But we have left the stream. Do you think you know in what direction that lies?"

"Pooh! no!" cried Rory. "Oh, look, Allan! look at that lovely blue and crimson bird! Fire, boy, fire!"

Allan fired and Rory bagged the beauty.

Then on they went, firing now at some strange bird and now at a weasel or polecat, taking little heed of where they were going, just as heedless as youth so often is.

There was a ravine between them and the forest, which the purple haze of distance had hidden from their view, but, as they were bent on reaching the pines by hook or by crook, they descended. The grass grew greener at the bottom of this dale, and here they found a stream of pure water, with a bottom of golden sand and boulders. This was a temptation not to be resisted, so they threw themselves down on the bank after quenching their thirsty and proceeded, in a languid and dreamy kind of manner, to watch the movements of the shoals of speckled trout that gambolled in the stream, chasing each other round the stones, and poking each other in the ribs with their round slimy noses.

“Don’t they look happy?” said Rory, “and wouldn’t they eat nicely?”

“Which reminds me,” said Allan, “that I’ve something good in my bag.”

“And ain’t I hungry just!” Rory said; and his eyes sparkled as Allan produced, all neatly begirt with a towel of sparkling whiteness, a dish containing a pie of such delicious flavour that when it was finished, and washed down with what Rory, mimicking the rich brogue of his countrymen, called “a taste of the stramelet,” they both thought they had never dined so well before.

Half-a-dozen wood-pigeons flew hurriedly over them. Rory seized Allan’s gun and fired, and one dropped dead within a dozen yards of them. Such a beauty, so plump and so large.

“That is our game,” cried Rory; “let us on to the wood. We’ll get such bags as will make Ralph chew his tongue with regret that he wasn’t with us.”

“Hoo-hoo-hooo-o!” resounded from the spruce thickets as they neared the woods.

“Here, at them?” cried Allan, excitedly. “Now for it, my boy!”

“Yes,” said Rory; “it’s all very well, but I can’t pot them so well with the rifle.”

“Then in all brotherly love and fairness we’ll exchange guns every twenty minutes.”

As it was arranged so it was carried out. They crept along under the trees.

“Hoo-hoo-hooo-o!” cried the great blue-grey birds, rising in the air on flapping wings. Bang, bang, bang! Down they came thick and fast. The sportsmen had many little mishaps, and tore their clothes considerably, but the fun was so “fine” they did not mind that much.

After about three hours of this,—

“I say,” says Rory, “isn’t it getting duskish!”

“Bless me!” cried Allan, looking at his watch, “I declare it is long past seven o’clock. Let us start for the brook at once and find our boat.”

“You mustn’t shout,” said Rory, “till you’re out of the wood.”

“We came this way, I know,” said Allan.

They went that way, but only seemed to get deeper and deeper into the forest. They tried another direction with the same result; another and another, but all to no purpose. Then they looked at each other in consternation.

“We’re lost!” cried Allan. “How could we have been so mad?”

“We can gain nothing, though,” said Rory, “by crying about it;” and down he sat.

“I see nothing for it but to follow your example,” said Allan, dolefully; and down he sat also.

“What a pretty little pair of babes in the wood we make, don’t we?” continued Allan, after a pause.

“What a pity we ate all Peter’s pie, though,” says Rory; “but we won’t let down our hearts. The moon will be up ere long, but sleep here to-night we’ll have to. If we tried now to find our way we’d only be going round and round, with no more chance of finding our way than a dog has of catching his tail.”

Presently there was a whirring noise, and a great black bird, apparently as big as a Newfoundland, alighted on an adjoining tree.

“It is an eagle,” said Rory. “Down with him.”

“It’s a wild turkey,” said Allan, coming back with the spoil.

He had hardly laid it down when an immense, great, gaunt, and hungry-looking wolf seemed to start from the very earth in front of them. Rory fired, but missed.

“In case,” said Allan, “we have a visit from any more of these gentry, let us light a fire.”

This was soon done, and the blaze from the burning wood caused the gloom of the forest to close around them like a thick black pall, and, lit up by the glare of the fire, their faces and figures stood out in bold relief. It was like a picture of Rembrandt’s.

“In the morning, you know,” Allan remarked, “we will find our way out of the wood by blazing the trees.”

“What, would you set fire to the forest?” laughed Rory.

“No, Mr Greenhorn,” said Allan, “only chip a bit of bark here and there off the trees’ stems to prevent us from going round in a circle.”

“Well,” said Rory, “you know how the thing is done, I don’t.”

The night wore on; it was very quiet in that gloomy pine-wood. The moon rose slowly over the horizon, but her beams could hardly penetrate the thick branches of the spruce firs. The fire burnt low, only starting occasionally into a fitful blaze; the two friends from talking fell to nodding, then their weary heads dropped on their arms, and they slept.

But is this forest quite so deserted as the two friends imagined? No; for behold that dark figure gliding swiftly from tree to tree through the chequered moonlight; and now the branches are pushed aside, and he stands erect before them. Tall he is, gaunt and ungainly, dressed from the crown of the head to his moccasined feet in skins, and armed with gun, dagger, and revolver. He stands for a moment in silence, then quite aloud, and with a strong Yankee nasal twang,—

“Well, I’m skivered!” he says.

Rory rose on his feet first, and had his rifle at the stranger’s neck in the twinkling of an eye.

“Who are you?” he cries. “Speak quick, or I fire!”

“Seth,” was the reply. “Now put aside that tool, or see if I don’t put a pill through you.”

“What seek you here?”

“Well!” said Seth, “I do like cheek when it is properly carried out. Here you two chaps have been a-prowling round my premises all day, and a-potting at my pigeons; you’ve been and shot my pet turkey, and you’ve fired at my mastiff, and now you ask me what I want on my own property. I’ve heard of cheek before, but this licks all.”

“Well, well, well!” cried Allan, laughing, “I declare we thought the land uninhabited.”

“So it is,” said the Yankee; “there ain’t a soul within three days’ journey o’ here, bar old trapper Seth that you see before you.”

“And we took your mastiff for a wolf,” said Rory, “and your turkey for a gaberlunzie. Troth, it’s too bad entirely.”

(Gaberlunzie, Scottice for an old beggar man. Rory no doubt meant to say capercailzie, the wild turkey of the Scottish woods.)

“You see there are no game laws in this land, and no trespass laws either,” said Seth, “else I’d take you prisoners; but if you’ll come and help old Seth to eat his supper, it’ll be more of a favour than anything else, that’s all.”

“That we will, with pleasure,” said Rory and Allan, both in one breath.

Seth’s cottage was about as wild and uncouth as himself or his mastiff. No wonder, by the way, they took the latter for a wolf, but the trapper made them right welcome. The venison steaks were delicious, and although they had to “fist” them, knives and forks being unknown in Seth’s log hut, they enjoyed them none the less. After supper this solitary trapper, who felt civilised life far too crowded for him, entertained them with tales of his adventures till long past midnight; then he spread them couches of skins, and their slumbers thereon were certainly sweeter than they would have been in the centre of the cold forest.

The Cruise of the Snowbird by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Fourteen.

Oscar Finds the Truants—Breakfast for Seven—Seth Spins a Yarn—The Walrus-Hunters—The Indians—Beautiful Scenery—A Week's Good Sport.

Rap—rap—rap! Rat—tat—tat—tat!

"What, ho! within there." Rat—tat—tat!

Bow—wow—wow.

Old Seth had been up hours ago, and far away in the forest, but sleep still sealed the eyelids of both Allan and Rory, although it must have been pretty nearly eight bells, in the morning watch.

Rat—tat—tat! "Hi! hi! any one within?"

After a considerable deal of the silly sort of dreaming that heavy sleepers persist in conducting on such occasions, when you are trying your very best to awake them, Rory first, then Allan heard the sound, became sensible at once, and sprang from their couches of skins.

"Why," cried Rory, "it is McBain's voice as sure as a gun is a gun."

"That it is," said the gentleman referred to, entering the wigwam, accompanied by Ralph and Oscar, "and if I had known the door was only latched, it is in I would have been to shake you. Pretty pair of truants you are."

"Indeed," said Ralph, "we had almost given you up for lost, and a weary night of suspense we have had."

You may be sure Oscar the Saint Bernard was not slow in expressing his delight at this reunion. Some large dogs are not demonstrative, but Oscar was an exception; he was not even content with simply leaping on Allan's shoulders and half smothering him with caresses. No, this would not satisfy a dog of his stamp; he must let off the steam somehow, so he seized Allan's hat, and next moment he was careering round and round among the forest trees, in a circle with a radius of about fifty yards, and at the rate of

twenty knots an hour. Having thus relieved himself of his extra excitement, he returned to the hut, gave up the hat, and lay quietly down to look at his master.

“Yes,” said McBain, “but there was no good starting a search expedition last night, you know, so we left the yacht at daybreak and here we are.”

“And here we wouldn’t be,” added Ralph, “but for that honest dog.”

While they were talking, Seth returned with dog and gun, bearing on his shoulders a young doe, its eyes not yet glazed, so recently had it been shot.

“Well, gentlemen,” he said, throwing down his burden at the door, while Oscar ran out to say “How d’ye do?” to the mastiff, “I’m skivered. A kind o’ right down skivered.”

“Well,” said McBain smiling, “I trust it is a pleasant sensation.”

“Sensation?” said Seth, “here’s where the sensation lies. I go out to shoot a doe for breakfast, and when I come back, if I don’t find three more on ye. Seven of us and only one doe! But never mind, the old trapper’ll do his level utmost. But I say, though, seven of us to one doe. Well, I am skivered!”

When men of the world meet in foreign lands, especially in wild foreign forests, they can dispense with a deal of ceremony, and the old trapper was soon talking away as free-and-easily, and as merrily, with our travellers as if he had known them all his life.

But it would have done your heart good to have seen Seth preparing breakfast. He built a log fire outside the hut and placed an immense tripod over it; on this he hung an immense pot, all in gipsy-fashion. This was what Seth called the “dirty work.” That finished, this curious old trapper at once set about transforming himself into chef, first and foremost placing a basin and spoon handy for each of his visitors, not forgetting the dogs, and the former were surprised to see everything scrupulously clean. Seth retired for a few minutes with the deer, and in a surprisingly short time reappeared with a large wooden tray, containing evidently everything that would be required for the morning’s meal, and old Seth had divested himself of his coat and skin cap, and now wore an immense leathern apron, with a clean linen cap, while his sleeves were rolled up above the elbows.

Our heroes lay on the grass talking and laughing and looking lazily on, but enjoying the sight nevertheless. It was evidently a curry on a grand scale that Seth was going to give them, and he soon had about a dozen sliced onions simmering in fat; when they were enough done the doe’s, flesh was added, and then Seth set about compounding his curry

out of freshly-grated turmeric and many curious herbs. His pestle and mortar were rude but efficient. This was the longest part of the operation, and he had to pause often to take off the lid and stir up the flesh, and every time he did this the two dogs, who had sworn eternal friendship when first they met, must needs walk round to the lee side of the old trapper, and hold their heads high in the air to sniff the fragrant steam.

And now Seth added the goat's milk, then the curry, and lastly the flour; after this he left the mess to simmer while he busied himself in preparations for dishing up. Our heroes were intensely hungry, but they were also intensely happy, and when hunger and happiness both go together, it is a sure sign that a man is in health.

"Well, I do declare," said Ralph, passing his dish for the third if not the fourth time, "I don't think I ever enjoyed a breakfast more in my life."

"Nor I either; and fancy getting freshly-baked bread," said Allan.

"And the drink," said McBain, lifting a foaming mug to his lips, "what a glad surprise!"

Simple heather ale it was, reader, made from the heath-tops and sweetened with wild honey.

"And you tell us," said McBain, "that you've been alone in this forest for twelve long years?"

"Not alone," said Seth, pointing with his foot to the mastiff. "I had he, and his father and mother before him."

"And you're your own baker and brewer?"

"Blame me," replied Seth, "if I ain't my own everything, and bar a couple of journeys a year of a hundred odd miles to sell my furs, and buy powder and an old newspaper, I never sees a soul save the Yack Injuns. A little civilisation goes a long way with Seth."

"I dare say," says Rory, "you built your house yourself?"

"Shouldn't wonder if I did," said Seth. "And I cleared all the space you see around; I knocked the forest about a bit, I can tell you, gentlemen; the spruce pines that grow to the north and east of the wigwam are left on purpose for shelter, for in winter it does blow a bit here—ay, and snow a bit as well, and there is sometimes a week and more that old Seth can't put his nose over the threshold. And that's just the time, gentlemen, that I receives visitors, skiver 'em!"

“What, Indians?” asked Rory.

“Oh! no, sirree,” said the Yankee trapper; “’tain’t likely any Injun could live in a storm that Seth couldn’t stand. No, b’ars, sir, b’ars.”

“Ah! bears! yes, I see, and I suppose you give them a warm reception?”

Seth chuckled to himself as he replied, “Whatever I gives ’em, gentlemen, I serves it up hot. Then their skins come in handy for blankets and such, you see.”

“And the Indians—when do they pay you a visit?”

“After the first fall of snow,” said Seth—“soon as they can chivey along in their caribou sledges.”

“It must be grand fun,” said Allan, “that chiveying along, as you call it, in a caribou sledge.”

“It is,” said Seth, “when once you get used to it, and you have a deer you can trust. I remember the time when the Yacks knew nothing at all about training deer for the work. A party of Norwegians, in a tub of a walrus brig, got stranded round north here some years ago. Well, sir, the Injuns were going to kill every man Jack of them.”

“Savage are they, then?” said McBain. “Not a bit of it!” replied Seth; “they were going to kill them for fun, that was all!”

“Troth?” says Rory, “they must have a drop of the rale ould Oirish blood in them, these same Yacks?”

“They ain’t Yacks quite, though,” says Seth, “though I calls ’em so; they ain’t so indolent as a Yack; they are bigger, too, and a deal more treacherous.”

“Did they kill the poor fellows?” asked McBain. “Not a bit of it!” Seth replied. “Nary a one o’ them. Seth interceded. Though I say it,” continued the trapper, “as mebbe shouldn’t say it, and wouldn’t say it if there was anybody else to say it for me, Seth had some little influence with these wily blueskins—it ain’t red that they be, mind you, but blue. They’ll never forget the first taste of my temper they had. Plunket’s mother were livin’ then, and a fine dog she was, and so was Plunket himself, although not much more’n a year old. The old lady was left to keep the house one day, and Plunket and I went to look for caribou. When we returns in the evening I could tell at a glance the

Injuns had been on to us. Everything was upside down; everything was taken away they could carry, and poor Ino was lying wounded and bleeding in a corner; the scoundrels had tomahawked her. You should have seen the way Plunket set his back up and ran round and round the place. But his turn didn't come then for a bit. We just kept quiet for a few weeks, and nursed Ino back to life. We knew they'd return, and they did. Lying awake I was one morning, when I hears Plunket give a low growl. I knew something was up, so I kept the dogs still and waited to see what the next move would be. Half-an-hour and more passed, then a great brown bare arm stole in through the hole in the door-top; in the hand was a knife, which was moved across the leathern hinges. Gentlemen, Plunket had a mouthful of that arm ere ever you'd say 'axe'! 'Hold on, Plunket!' I cried, and the good dog didn't need two biddings, I can tell you; he stuck to his prisoner like grim Death to a dead nigger, until, with a bar and a rope, I had made sure the arm couldn't be withdrawn. Well, you should have heard the yell that blueskin gave. But a louder yell than his rang all around the hut next minute, and I knew then, gentlemen, it was to be war to the knife-hilt. My windows are small, but the walls are strong, and I was safe enough for a bit. I fired through each shutter as a kind of warning to 'em; then I crept upstairs to the little garret and prepared to give them pepper! Fifteen I could count in all, armed with tomahawks and spears; fifteen, and Plunket's prisoner. Sixteen in all, and only three of us! No use their trying to get in in an ordinary way, they soon gave up that game, and drew off and held a council. I didn't want to begin the game of killing, gentlemen, or now I could have had three with one bullet. The conclusion they came to was to burn this old trapper out. But you see, gentlemen, this old trapper didn't mean to be burnt out if he could help it. Shame on the wretches! they didn't mind even burning the poor Injun who was fast to the door. Well, when they began to make the faggots, I just let them have it as hot as ever I could. It was my six-shooting rifle, and it didn't seem a moment ere three had bit the dust, and a fourth, wounded, jumped over the ravine yonder. Well, after this it 'peared to me the fight just began in real earnest. They tried to scale the hut, and they tried to scale the trees. From both positions they came down faster than they went up. They threw their hatchets and they threw their spears, but, worse than all, they fired and threw their faggots. In that case, thinks I, it's time I brought out my reserves, so, giving them one other rattling volley, I got down as quick as feet would take me. 'Come, good dogs!' I cried; 'now to give them fits!' Gentlemen, I was about as "mad" (a Yankeeism signifying angry) as ever I was in my life, and the dogs were madder, and the way I laid around me with my club when I got out must have been fine to see; but the way that mastiff went for them blueskins was finer. The field was all our own in five minutes; the garrison was unscathed, the enemy had six killed, and it must have taken the others weeks to mend their dog-holes."

"What about Plunket's prisoner?" asked Rory.

“Plunket’s prisoner,” said Seth, “came in very handy. It was spring, you see, and there were potatoes to plant and maize and onions to sow, and what not I tied the creature to Plunket for safety. He had plenty of rope, and when he saw I didn’t mean to kill him he started and worked away like a New Hollander. When everything was in the ground—and that took us three weeks—I started him off with a message to Quimo, his chief, and I can tell you, gentlemen, no Yack Injun has ever drawn knife on old Seth since.”

“But,” said Rory, “weren’t you going to tell us about the Norwegian walrus-hunters?”

“Oh!” said Seth, “it was like this. I heard of the shipwreck, and I went right away over with Plunket to see if I could be of any service. And it was well for those hunters I did. I found fires alight to torture them, and irons heating to make them skip and jump. The blueskin chief was in high glee; he was expecting rare fun, he told me, ‘Well, Quimo,’ says I to him, ‘you always was about the peskiest old idgit ever I came across.’ ‘How now,’ says he, ‘great and mighty hunter?’ ‘You’re an almighty squaw,’ says I; ‘why don’t you wear a “neenak” and carry an “awwee”? Come now, Quimo, let me be master of ceremonies, I’ll show you better fun than you could make.’ ‘My white brother,’ said Quimo, ‘is very wise.’ ‘And you’re an old fool,’ says I. This wasn’t flattery, gentlemen, I own, but old Seth knows the Indian character well.”

(Neenak: the short apron of sealskin the women of some tribes of Yack Indians wear.)

(Awwee: baby or young one, applied to animals as well as human beings.)

“I goes straight to where the Norwegians were lying bound, and cuts their cords. ‘Now,’ says I to them, ‘you’ve got to dance and sing and do all you can to please these Injuns; and, mind, you’re doing it for dear life!’ Gentlemen, I laugh to myself sometimes even yet when I think of the capers them four poor chaps cut. Old Quimo roared again, and laughed till the tears rolled down his dirty cheeks; then he vowed by the sun (the god of the Yack), that the hatchet should be buried for ever between him and the white man.

“But these Norwegians stopped and settled down among the tribe, and they have taught them caribou sleighing and hunting the walrus with iron-shod spears, instead of the old caribou-horn toasting-forks they used to use. But come, gentlemen, old Seth would keep you talking here all day. Let us get up and be doing, for I reckon you came ashore for a bit of a shoot.”

“That we did!” said McBain, “and if you’ll be our guide, you shall have as much tobacco as will last you for a year.”

The tears seemed to stand in Seth's eyes with delight at the prospect. "I guess," he said, "this old trapper knows where the best caribou are to be had, and so does Plunket too."

With Seth, to make up his mind was to act, and in five minutes he had rehabilitated himself in his skins, slung on his shot-belt, and shouldered his rifle. Rory was now bemoaning his fate in not having brought his rifle instead of a fowling-piece, but Seth soon got him over that difficulty. He strode into the wigwam, and presently reappeared with a very presentable weapon indeed, and soon after, in true Indian file, they were threading their way through the forest, the mastiff first and Oscar second, seeming determined to follow the lead and do whatever the other dog did. The road—or rather, I should say, their way, for path there was none—led upwards and inland, and after a walk of fully an hour they came out into a broad open plain. This they crossed, and then wound round some hills—high enough to have been called mountains in England—when suddenly, on rounding a spur of one of these, a scene was opened out before them that my pen is powerless to describe. They stood at the mouth of a beautiful glen, or ravine, the whole bottom of which was a sheet of water that reflected the sky's blue and the cloudlets that floated like foam flakes above, while the lofty and rugged cliffs that surrounded the lake were green-fringed with trees, the silvery birch and the white-flowered mountain ash showing charmingly out against the more sombre hues of pine and firs; and above all were the everlasting hills, their jagged peaks white-tipped with snow, on which the sun shone with silver radiance. Patches of colour here and there relieved the green of the trees, for yonder was a bold bluff, covered with scarlet lichens, and closer to the water were patches of crimson and white foxglove. Cascades, too, formed by the melting snows, could be descried here and there, and the noise they made as they joined the lake fell upon the ear like the hum that arises from a distant city.

They stood entranced, and Rory was thinking he would rather be armed with sketch-book than rifle, when—

"Hist!" cried Seth.

They followed his eye. On a rock right above them stood boldly out against the sky a tall stag; you might have counted every branch in his antlers.

"Don't fire!" cried Seth.

It was too late. Bang went Rory's rifle, and the echoes reverberated from rock to rock, fainter and more faint, till they were lost in the distance. Down rolled the stag.

"I guess that has spoiled our day's sport," said Seth, quietly. "Listen."

What is it they hear? The whole earth seems to tremble, and there is a sound comes from the woods like that of far-off thunder?

“They’re off,” said Seth; “that was a general stampede. In half-an-hour more we’d have had some fine skirmishing. They had been down to drink and were resting afterwards.”

Rory had to pay for his experience anyhow in a three hours’ manoeuvring march. They did outflank the deer at last, but they were somewhat wild, and the sport was only fair.

It was nightfall ere they reached Seth’s wigwam once more, and they were thoroughly tired, and glad to rest while Seth cooked the supper in a way that only Seth could.

That night they spent in the wigwam; next day they went on board, and Seth went with them, their object being to organise a little expedition against the caribou. McBain meant to make a week’s stay here to replenish his larder fore and aft, ere they tripped anchor and made sail for wilder regions to the westward and north.

You may be sure Rory did not forget his sketch-book, nor a light canoe he had which one man could carry on his back.

They had a week of such glorious sport, both in fishing and shooting, that when the last evening came round both Ralph and Rory averred that they would like to stay among these wooded hills for ever.

“I guess,” said Seth, “you’d get tired of it.”

“Do you ever tire of it?” asked McBain, and he asked the question with a purpose.

“There are times,” said Seth, looking into the log fire around which they sat, and giving a kind of sigh, “when I think that a little change would do myself and Plunket a power of good.”

“You shall have it,” cried McBain, jumping up and catching the old man by the hand, “you and Plunket too. Come with us in the Snowbird, we’ll make you as comfortable and happy as the day is long.”

“If I thought I’d be of any use—” began Seth.

“Of use, man,” cried McBain; “you’re the handiest fellow ever I met in my life.”

“And that you’d bring me home again.”

“If we don’t we’ll never return more ourselves,” said McBain.

“Then, gentlemen,” said the trapper, “I’ll accept your offer. There!”

The Cruise of the Snowbird by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Fifteen.

The Old Trapper Buries his Valuables—The "Snowbird" Goes on her Voyage—Ice—A Whale in Sight—A Fall! A Fall!—In at the Death—The "Trefoil" on Fire.

Old Seth the trapper had a deal to do before he could accompany our heroes on board the Snowbird. "For ye see, gentlemen," he explained to them, "as soon's they find out that the Old Bear, as they somewhat irreverently nominate this child, has left his wigwam, I guess the Yacks'll pretty quickly come skooting around here, to pick up whatever they're likely to lay their dirty hands on, so I reckon I'll just bury my valuables."

A very practical individual was Seth, and when once he made up his mind to do a thing he just did it straight away; so, as soon as they had eaten their last breakfast at his wigwam, assisted by one or two of the yachtsmen, the burial of the valuables commenced. A large hole was dug not far from the door of the hut, and this was carefully lined with hay, and on the hay were piled Seth's household goods, in the shape of pots and pans, and plates and dishes, and every variety of cooking and kitchen utensil, with the greater portion of the old man's armoury plus his wardrobe. Not the best portion of the latter, however; no, only some of his skin suits, for shortly before these were deposited in their temporary grave, Seth had retired for a space to the privacy of his garret.

"I reckon," he said to himself, with a smile, as he began to undress, "that old Seth'll kinder astonish the weak nerves of these English sailors." Don't suppose they'd guess the old trapper was in possession of anything decent to put on. He reckoned upon astonishing our travellers, and he certainly was not far out of his reckoning, for when he again appeared in their midst, arrayed in a long blue coat with brass buttons, shoes with silver buckles, silk stockings, and knee-breeches, white collar up to his eyes, and crowned with a beaver hat of immense longitude, and with a face as serious and long as your own, reader, when you look into the bowl of a silver spoon, Rory, whose risibility was never under the most perfect control, simply rolled on the grass and screamed. Allan was the next to go off, and then Ralph exploded, and finally McBain. Even Oscar joined the chorus in a round of bow-bows, and the only two of the whole party that contained themselves were Seth and his mastiff.

"Guess," said Seth, quietly recommencing the burial of his valuables, "you're kinder 'stonished to find Seth can be civilised when he likes."

Well, as soon as more hay had been placed in the grave, and the earth packed down over all.

“P’r’aps,” said Seth, “you gentlemen think the funeral’s over now.”

“It’s finished now, isn’t it?” asked McBain.

“Nary a bit of it,” said the old man; “I know the Yacks too well to leave the grave like that. They’d spot it at once, and have ’em up before you’d say bullet.”

The trapper’s wisdom was well shown in his next move. This was to heap a quantity of brushwood and logs on the top of all, and set fire to them.

He watched the progress of the fire until it was well alight, and the biggest logs began to crackle.

That same forenoon the first and second mates of the Snowbird were leaning over the bulwarks, looking at the shore, when the sound of oars fell upon their ears, and next minute the yacht’s cutter hove in sight round the point.

“Why,” said Stevenson, “who on earth have they got on board?”

“Old John Brown, I should think,” said the second mate.

“Well,” continued Stevenson, “I do wonder how many queer old customers the captain will pick up before the end of the cruise. Ap ain’t a chicken, and Magnus isn’t a youth, but this new old one beats all. Shouldn’t wonder if it ain’t Methuselah himself. Anyhow, Mitchell, if we do happen to want to rig a jury mast one of these days, this venerable old bit o’ timber in the long hat will be just the thing.”

When the anchor was up once more, sail set, and the Snowbird again holding on her voyage, bowling along under a ten-knot breeze, Stevenson approached to where Seth stood against the capstan.

“I say,” says Stevenson.

“Sir to you,” says Seth.

“You’re a friend o’ the captain’s, ain’t you?”

“That’s so,” from Seth.

“Well, that makes you a friend of mine,” from Stevenson. “Shake hands.”

Seth did shake hands, and Stevenson winced as he pulled his hand away.

“What an iron-fisted old sinner you are!”

“I reckon,” said Seth, quietly, “I can hold pretty tight for an old ’un.”

“Now,” continued Stevenson, “let me give you a piece of advice.”

“Spit it out,” said Seth.

“Well then, it is this: get rid of these antediluvian togs o’ yours. I won’t say you look a guy, but the suit ain’t shipshape, I assure you, and it makes you look—well, just a little remarkable; and mind you, if it comes on to blow only just a little bit, that venerable tile o’ yours’ll go overboard—sharp, and your wig too, if you wear one.”

“Look here, young man,” said Seth, “you talk pretty straight, you do; but as far as the wig is concerned, I wear my own hair as yet; as regards the togs, as you call ’em, I hain’t got nothing else to put on but skins. Skins wouldn’t suit a civilised ship. So unless you can fix me up decent and different, don’t talk, that’s all.”

“That’s fair, that’s right, Methus—I mean, Mr Seth.”

“Bother your misters,” said the old trapper; “I’m Seth, simply Seth.”

“Well, Seth,” said Stevenson, “see here, I can fix you in a brace of shakes; you ain’t much more’n a yard taller than me. Come below, Methus—ahem! Seth. Mind your hat. It would be a pity to crush that, you know.”

When Seth appeared on deck again, rigged out in a suit of Stevenson’s, albeit his legs stuck rather far through their covering, and his long bony wrists were nicely displayed, it must be confessed that he did look a little less remarkable.

Where was Seth to sleep at night? Was he to be a cabin passenger? Nay, Seth himself decided the matter by simply taking the big mastiff in his arms, and lying down on a skin in front of the galley-fire.

As for the dog himself, he began to improve in condition from the very day he came on board, and before he was a week at sea he was positively getting fat. But the Yankee trapper remained as lanky as ever. Do not think, however, that honest Seth was of no service on board; old as he was, he proved a very useful fellow. He assisted the cook, the cooper, and the sailmaker all in turns; and when he was not assisting them he was squatting on deck, making and mending fishing-tackle, and busking fishhooks with feathers, to make them represent flies.

The Snowbird had now got so far into the northern and western bays that, summer although it was, the weather was far from warm, but it continued fine. Immense snow-clad pieces of ice were to be seen daily, sometimes even hourly, and the yacht often sailed so closely to them that the very blood and marrow of the onlookers felt as if suddenly frozen into ice itself.

One morning a berg was reached larger than any they had yet seen, and the vessel had to alter her course considerably in order to avoid it. To all appearance it was an island in the midst of the dark sea, and quite an hour elapsed ere it was rounded, and the ship could again be kept away on the right tack. Hardly had she been put so, when,—

"A sail!" was the shout from the crow's-nest—"a sail on the weather bow."

Captain McBain went aloft himself to have a look at her, the yacht in the meantime being kept close to the wind. When he came down Rory and Allan went eagerly to meet him.

"What is she?" said the former. "Our old friend the pirate?"

"Nay," said McBain, "not this time; it's a whaler, right enough; all her boats are hanging handy, and she is evidently on the outlook for blubber. Peter!" he cried, speaking down the main hatch, "have lunch ready in a couple of hours. I think," he continued, addressing our heroes, "we'll board her. Would any of you like to go?"

Of course they would, every one of the three of them.

While they were discussing luncheon Stevenson came below.

"We're nearly close abreast of her," he said, "and I've been signalling. She's an English barque—the Trefoil, from Hull."

"Been whaling, I suppose?" said McBain.

“Yes, sir,” said Stevenson; “she’s been wintered, and is now engaged at the summer fishing. She’s dodging now; and I’ve had the foreyard hauled aback.”

“Thank you, Mr Stevenson. Call away the gig if the men have dined. Let them dress in their smartest. We’ll be up in a few minutes.”

It was a lovely day; a gentle swell was on, broken into myriads of rippling wavelets by a southern wind, and on it the tall-masted barque rocked gently to and fro. The gig was soon lowered and manned, and, with Rory as coxswain, they left the Snowbird’s side. How pretty she looked! This thought must have been in every one’s mind as they gazed on her beautiful lines, and thence at the large but cumbersome vessel they were rapidly approaching. Hard weather and hard usage she must have experienced since leaving England. The paint was planed and ploughed off her bows and sides in all directions, and the woodwork itself deeply furrowed and indented.

“It is evident enough she has been in the nips,” said McBain, “pretty often, too.”

A Jacob’s-ladder was thrown overboard as they approached, and a rope, when up they sprang, and next moment stood on the deck of the Greenlandman, lifting their hats with true sailor courtesy as soon as they touched her timbers.

Rough and unkempt both the seamen and officers looked beside our smart, gaily-dressed yachtsmen, but they accorded them a kindly welcome nevertheless. They were invited down below, and found themselves in a little octagon-shaped saloon, with a stove on one side, and doors opening off every other. So small was this crib, as one might call it, that, with the captain and the mate, our friends quite filled it.

The captain was a tall, stout, blustering fellow of about forty years of age, who welcomed them in, roughly but not unkindly, and showered upon them about a dozen questions without waiting for an answer to either. What was the latest from England? Were we at war? Was Hool (Hull) still in the same place? Had they brought newspapers? What would they drink? Ending up with—

“Steward, bring the bottles—confound you! what are you standing grinning there at, like a vixen fox? Sharp’s the word, quick’s the motion.”

There were many words in this sailor’s vocabulary that I do not think it right to repeat, as they were not fit for ears polite.

“What!” he cried, when McBain assured him they neither of them cared to drink—“what, a teetotal ship! Why, how the humpty-dumpty do you manage to keep the cold out, then?”

“Coffee,” was the laconic reply.

“Well, well, well!” said the Greenland captain, filling himself up half a tumblerful of rum, and drinking it off at one gulp. “But sit down all the same, and give us all the news.”

That they would, and that they did, and they answered all his questions with extreme politeness, and were just on the eve of asking him some in return anent his own adventures, when that cry, so musical and exciting to the ear of the Greenland whaler, was shouted from the mast-head, and taken up by those below, and resounded all over the ship from stem to stern, and back again—“A fall! a fall! a fall!”

The captain sprang to his feet, almost capsizing the bottles in his excitement.

“Hurrah, men! hurrah!” he roared, as he sprang up the companion, “luck’s going to turn after all. Hurrah, men! a fall!—yes, a fall in good earnest! Away, boats! Tumble in, lads! tumble in!”

Our friends were left in the Trefoil’s saloon, all staring in blank astonishment save McBain. “Listen!” said the latter.

They did, and could hear every now and then three blows struck on the deck, as if by a sledge-hammer, followed immediately by a sentence bellowed from stentorian lungs, but of which they could only distinguish the first word and the last. These were “Away!” and “Ahoy!”

“Whatever is up?” cried Rory at last; “is the ship going down, or has everybody taken sudden leave of his senses?”

“There’s a whale in sight; that’s it!” McBain replied.

“But what is the knocking?” continued Rory.

“Oh, that is to awaken the sleepers,” explained McBain; “they have no boatswain’s pipe in these ships, so they knock with their booted feet. But come, let us go on deck and see the fun.”

The captain met them at the top of the companion.

“We’re off, you see!” he cried, hurriedly. “Come on board and dine with me. I’m going to spear that fish myself; I haven’t a harpooner worth a dump. Keep in the rear of my boat if you’re going to follow, and you’ll see the fun and be in at the death?”

In at the death! Strangely prophetic were the captain’s words; our heroes remembered them afterwards for many a long day.

“A fall! a fall! Yonder she rips! yonder she spouts! A fall! a fall!”

The men were tumbling up the hatches—pouring up. You could hardly have believed so many men had been below. They ran along the decks and trundled into the hanging boats like so many monkeys; the tackles are let go, blocks creak, and one by one they disappear beneath the bulwarks and reach the water, with a flop and a plash that tell of speed and excitement. And now they are off. The men bend well to their oars, and, encouraged by the shouts of the coxswain and harpooner, they fly over the water—together first, but soon in a line, for it is a race, and the first harpooner that strikes the fish will be well rewarded.

But where is the whale? Why, yonder; two goodly miles to leeward. You can only see three parts of it—black dots above the water; the skull, the back, and the tail tip.

McBain and his boys were left almost alone, for here were hardly men enough to work the ship, and the silence that had succeeded the noise and shouting was intense in its gloominess.

“Come, lads!” cried McBain, “we mustn’t stop here; let us see the fun; let us follow the hunt, and be in at the death!”

The Snowbird’s gig was speedily alongside, and in a few minutes more was bounding over the rippling waters to where the other boats were. It needed not McBain’s “Give way, my lads! give way with a will!” to make the men do their utmost. They too were wild with excitement.

But see, the boats are spreading out; they are no longer together; the whale has dived, and there is no saying where she may come up. Ten, fifteen, twenty minutes of suspense creep slowly away; the crew of the gig have been lying on their oars. But look! there she is again! her huge bulk appears in the very midst of the boats. Let her go either way, or any way, she is sure of a shot. She makes a dash for it. Bang, bang, bang! from the bows of three of the boats. She is struck—twice struck—but she but increases her speed, the

line goes spinning over the bows; there is blood in her wake, and the men bend now to their oars with the fury of maniacs. She is badly hurt; she is confused; she stops for a moment to lash the water madly with her tail, then dives once more. But she cannot sulk long, breathe she must. And the boats still go tearing on, and the lines are being coiled in again. The other boats move on ahead, too; they want to surround "the fish." One of these is the captain's boat; they can see his burly form in the bow. Mindful of his words, the gig keeps on in her wake.

"Back astern, men!" cries McBain, as the giant whale rises almost under their very bows. "Back, back for your lives!"

To say that our heroes were astonished at the size and strength of the angry monster, would but poorly express the amount of their surprise. Their hearts seemed to stand still with awe. They were thunderstruck. Ah! and here was thunder too, those awful blows! The sound may be heard miles and miles away on a still day. I know, reader, of nothing in nature that gives one a greater idea of vastness, of strength and power, than a whale's body raised high in air and curved round in the attitude of striking; the skin seems tightened over, it glitters like a gigantic piston-rod, and it seems trebly powerful. But oh! to be under that dreadful tail.

When, awestruck and half-drowned with spray, our heroes managed to look around them, the thunder had ceased, the whale was gone; there were blood and foam in front of them, beyond that the wreck of the captain's boat. She was so smashed up that she hadn't even sunk; her timbers lay all about, and clinging to them the drowning and maimed wretches that had not been killed outright. The gig and two other boats made haste to assist. In at the death! They were indeed in at the death. The captain was among the slain. His body was found floating, strange to say, at some considerable distance from the wreck. He seemed in a deep quiet sleep. Alas! it was a sleep from which he would awake no more in this world.

And the whale had gone. She had made direct for the island of ice and dived beneath it, and there the lines were cut.

But hark! adown the wind comes the sound of a signal-gun; a minute goes by, then there is another. All eyes are turned towards the Trefoil, and now smoke can be distinctly seen rolling slowly up from her decks, near the bows.

Once again the signal-gun.

The Trefoil is on fire!

The Cruise of the Snowbird by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Sixteen.

Old Seth Becomes Surgeon—A Terrible Danger—Ralph Floods the Magazine—Fighting the Fire—Wreck of the "Trefoil"—Buried at Sea—"Land Ho!"

The second mate had been left in charge of the Trefoil when the boats left the vessel to go in pursuit of the whale. How sadly that pursuit ended the reader has already been told. Besides this officer, when the fire broke out there were only on board the cook, the steward, and three or four ordinary seamen. Smoke was first seen issuing from the fore hold, and, whether for good or for bad, the mate at once ordered the hatches to be battened down, then he hoisted the boat's recall, and commenced firing minute-guns as a signal of distress.

It had been a race for wealth with the Trefoil's boats when leaving her. As they sped back again to their burning ship it was a race for life itself, or at all events for all they held dear in life. Yonder, with the smoke hanging like a dark and ominous cloud over her forecastle, and rolling slowly upwards hiding yards and shrouds, was their home upon the waters, the good ship in which they had sailed from England more than a year ago. If anything were to happen to her, how were they ever to reach their native shores, where wives and children, fathers, mothers, and sisters, were even now pining for the return of the absent sailors?

The bold, straightforward character of McBain was never so well seen as in times of emergency and danger, and then, too, the goodness of the man's heart shone forth. Our heroes' boat was among the first, if not the first, to render assistance, after the terrible wreck of the captain's whale-boat, as described in the last chapter; and as soon as it was discovered that the Trefoil was on fire, McBain had an interview with the mate.

"A burning ship," he said, "is no place, sir, to convey wounded men to, nor dead either. Place them in my boat, they will receive every attention on board our little craft. Meanwhile, you speed away to your ship, and presently we will follow you, bringing to your assistance all the men we can spare from the Snowbird."

"God bless you, sir!" said the mate, much affected. "What a blessing that your vessel was here! It shows me that He has not altogether deserted us, bad though our fortunes have been."

Out of the crew of the lost whale-boat, numbering eight in all, including the harpooner, the captain himself, and the coxswain, only three escaped intact, while three were killed outright, and the remaining two badly hurt, one having both bones of a leg broken, the other sustaining a grievous wound in the forearm. In solemn silence, and with all due respect, the captain and his two brave fellows who had lost their lives were laid side by side on the quarter-deck, and their bodies covered over with the Union Jack—the sailors' pall, for surely it is meet and proper that the flag a man sails or fights under while alive shall cover his poor body when life has fled, and ere yet it is committed to the cold, dark, fathomless ocean.

The wounded men were carried below, and placed in comfortable cots between decks.

"I daresay," said McBain, "my duty for a time will keep me here by these two poor fellows, though I would like to be hastening away to the assistance of that unhappy ship."

"Nary a duty, sir," said trapper Seth.

McBain looked up. Here was this tall, ungainly Yankee, with the lantern jaws and the iron fists, standing forth in quite a new light, namely, that of surgeon. He had stripped off coat and waistcoat and rolled up his sleeves. Beside him stood little Magnus, holding in his two hands a basin of warm water, in which a sponge floated, holding under his arm a bundle of hastily-manufactured bandages.

"Nary a duty!" repeated Seth. "I guess you'd better leave the wounded to the care of the two old 'uns here. Seth has done up more cuts and skivers in his time, than there are days in leap year. As for the broken leg, we'll soon cooper that, won't we, Magnus?"

"That will we!" Magnus replied, cheerfully.

Nothing loth to be relieved of a somewhat unpleasant duty, McBain at once called for volunteers, and was considerably surprised to be almost immediately surrounded by every man in the ship except the man at the wheel.

"I didn't pipe all hands," he said, with a quiet smile.

However, he picked out twelve of the sturdiest of his fellows, and with these in the cutter—he himself holding the tiller—he was soon alongside the Trefoil.

The pumps had been already manned and the hoses rigged, and two lines of men were ranged along the decks, drawing water in buckets from the starboard and port sides. The

smoke was spewing up the forehatch, the decks were wet and slippery, and the men, stripped to the waist with the exception of their guernseys, were working away with such a will that the perspiration stood in beads on their arms, and trickled down their smoke-begrimed faces.

Something like a cheer arose when our heroes and their volunteers sprang on deck, and at once set about preparations for work. McBain beckoned the mate aft, and a consultation was held, at which Rory, Ralph, and Allan were present.

Very much to his surprise, the captain of the Snowbird speedily discovered that the mate of the Trefoil had completely lost his head, as the saying is.

“This is a bad business, sir,” McBain began. “Oh, it is dreadful—it is fearful!” cried the mate; “it is—it is—whatever shall we do?”

“We’ll keep cool to begin with,” said McBain; “nothing is to be gained by hurry or excitement. Tell me this: How did the fire originate?”

The mate gave him a strange glance. “It is not for me to guess even,” he said. “There is one, perhaps, on board who could tell you.”

“Then where did it originate?”

“Ah! that I can tell you,” said the mate. “Among the coals—under the galley in the hold. The fire is confined to that place now; but look you, sir! smashed up among those coals are the bodies of six pigs that we took out with us. For warmth on the voyage out they buried themselves among the coals, and were killed by the roll of the ship. Their bodies are, we know, cut into piecemeal and intimately mixed with the coals. No wonder they burn!”

“But you are simply pouring water into the ’tween decks,” said McBain; “you’re not even sure if it be reaching the fire.”

“I didn’t think of that,” said the poor confused mate. “But,” he continued, “there is worse to tell you!”

“Go on, and quickly!” cried McBain. “What is the worse?”

The mate’s reply was gasped out rather than spoken, and he turned as pale as death as he uttered the words.

“The magazine is not flooded, and it is close to where the fire is raging!”

The blood sprang to McBain’s cheek, the fire seemed to flash from his eye, as he brought his fist down with a ringing crash upon the hatchway, near which he stood.

“What sinful folly!” he cried. “Call for volunteers at once. Call for volunteers, I say, and flood your magazine, man!”

“Stay!” said the mate, now fully aroused, and regaining a little common sense—“stay! You little know my men; they are not picked Englishmen like yours, they are principally stevedores and fishermen. Did they know the magazine was not flooded it would be sauve qui peut. They’d take to the boats and leave the Trefoil to her fate. I have myself been down below, and had to be dragged up through the smoke, fainting. Besides, it needs two hands, and I’ve no one to trust.”

“But the danger is imminent; we may all be blown to pieces without a moment’s warning,” said McBain.

“See here, mate!”

It was Ralph who spoke—brave, quiet, English Ralph—and bravely and quietly did he speak, while his comrades looked on astonished. Courageous they all knew he was, in a fine old lazy Saxon fashion; but to see him stand forth in the hour of need, six feet and over of brawny stalwart heroism, ready and willing to lead a forlorn hope, took his friends aback.

“See here, mate. I’ll go with you to flood the magazine. If it’s only the smoke you fear, I know how to steer clear of that. I was at the burning of Castle Bryn Mawr, and gained an experience there that will last me a lifetime. Come below with me quickly. Now get me towels and a basin of water. Thanks! now watch what I do. Your handkerchief, Rory; yours, Allan. See here now—with this tiny pair of scissors I first cut two small eyeholes in the towel. Then I wet it in the water. Now I tear a handkerchief in two, and wet the parts and fold them into pads. Sit down, mate, sit down. One little pad I place at each side of the nose, the towel I bind firmly round the head and fasten behind. Now, mate, you can only breathe through the wet towel, and no smoke can harm you. Now, boys, here is the other wet towel and the pads, do the same by me.”

In less time than it has taken me to describe them, these simple operations were completed, and next minute Ralph was stepping manfully forward to the forehatch, followed by the mate.

The latter seized the hose with his left hand, and took Ralph's left hand in his own right. He could thus guide him, for the mate knew where the magazine lay, but Ralph could not. Then they disappeared.

The bucket-men had, at the mate's orders, ceased to work for a time, and took their turn at the pumps to relieve the others. They stood quietly with their backs to the bulwarks and with folded arms. Something they knew was being done below—something connected with the safety of the ship, and they were content.

Minutes, long minutes of terrible suspense to McBain and his two boys, went slowly, slowly by. Rory, who was passionately fond of Ralph, thought the time would never end, and all kinds of horrible fancies kept creeping into his mind. But look—they come at last; the heroes come. They stagger to where their friends are standing, and Rory notices that Ralph's hands are sadly blackened, and that his finger-nails drip blood. It had been trying work. The magazine lid had fouled, and it took them fully five minutes to wrench it off, and five minutes more to flood the compartment. But it is done at last, and safety, for a time at least, is insured.

And now to fight the fire, to flood the hold, without admitting too much air to feed the flames.

McBain's proposal was carried unanimously. It was to scuttle the lower deck, and fasten into the hole so made, the end of the long copper ventilator which stood between the fore and the main masts, and was used for giving access to air into the men's living and sleeping rooms.

Ralph determined to go down again, and could not be restrained from doing so. His work, he averred, was but half finished; the mate and he between them could scuttle the deck with adzes and axes, and fix the funnel-shaped ventilator, in a quarter of an hour. They were too anxious to stop long for refreshment. Only a draught of water, and seizing their implements, down they went once more.

So perfect were the simple face-guards they wore, that they might have stopped below until the work was completed, had it not been necessary to come on deck to have them removed and re-rinsed in clean water. Happily the fire was not raging immediately beneath the spot where they cut the hole, or the flames might have defied all their efforts to fix the copper funnel. It was no easy task to do so as it was, for the smoke rolled up in blinding volumes, and the heat was intense. But they finished the work nevertheless, and finished it well, carefully surrounding the end of the ventilator with wet swabs.

With pumps and with buckets the water was now poured down the communication thus effected with the hold, and surely men never worked harder for dear life itself than did the crew of the Trefoil and the Snowbird volunteers, to save that burning ship. The danger was very urgent, for if the water were not constantly kept pouring down in volumes the heat must soon melt the end of the ventilator, and the fire gain access to the 'tween decks.

At first volumes of sparks flew upwards, and it was feared this might fire the sails. Hands were told off, therefore, to clew them. Then came volumes of dense smoke only, and this for a whole hour without abatement; but gradually the smoke grew less and the steam more.

Gradually the 'tween decks cleared of smoke; and ere long steam alone, and but little of that, came up the ventilator. Then they knew the fire was mastered, that the danger was past.

McBain parted that evening from the mate, now master of the Trefoil, with the promise that the Snowbird would keep near his barque for a day or two at least, until the chance of the fire once more breaking out was no longer to be dreaded. Although the sun sets every night, even at midsummer time, in the latitude in which the yacht was now sailing, there is very little darkness, only just a few hours of what might be called a deepened twilight, then day again.

The breeze had freshened. Just before turning in for good, our heroes noticed they were approaching a stream of somewhat heavy ice. They were but little alarmed at this, however; they were used to the sight of ice by this time, and could sleep through the din of "boring" through fields of it.

"I'm glad the wind keeps strong, Stevenson," McBain said, previously to going below. "Keep her stem-on to the big pieces, and don't bump her amidships, if possible. Call me if anything unusual occurs."

It was precisely three bells in the middle watch when the mate entered Captain McBain's room.

"Well, Stevenson," said McBain, sitting up in bed, for he was a light sleeper; "we're clear of the ice, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir," said Stevenson. "We're in open water. We're dodging, sir. I've hauled the foreyard aback, to wait for the Trefoil."

“She’s in sight, then, of course?” asked McBain.

“No, sir, that is the curious part of it. I can’t see a sign of her; not a vestige, even from the crow’s-nest.”

“What?” cried McBain.

“It is true, sir,” continued the mate. “We were both working through the ice-stream just before darkling. I was too busy to look much about me till we got outside; then I missed her. There are two or three large bergs among the smaller. She may be hidden by one of these. If she isn’t I greatly fear, sir, something has happened to her.”

The captain was on deck in a few minutes, and found the mate’s words were sadly true.

He tacked up and down for hours, so as to see both sides of every large berg in the stream, but no Trefoil was there. She was gone. Never more would this goodly barque sail the northern seas.

Towards noon that day one solitary boat was seen to emerge from the bergs of the ice-stream, and begin advancing towards the Snowbird. One boat—eleven men and the first mate—were all the survivors of the ill-fated ship. She had been struck amidships. A three-cornered piece of ice had gone half-way through her, then receded, and in three minutes’ time she had filled and gone down, the mate and the watch on deck having barely time to cut a boat away.

(The same fate befell the Innuit, of Peterhead, some fifteen years ago; she went down in the short darkling of a summer’s night, a very few minutes after being struck. She had been lying beset, with my own ship and several others, in an ice-pack, to the south-west of Jan Mayen. The hands, however, were saved.—The Author.)

That day, after dinner, the mate told the short but sad history of the Trefoil’s cruise.

“The same captain was in her,” he said, “for three years, and never yet succeeded in getting a paying voyage. His owners weren’t pleased, you may be well sure. Unscrupulous men they are, every one of them. They told him, and they told me and our second mate, before we left England last, that if we were a clean ship this voyage they would rather never see the ‘Trefoil’ again! We knew what that meant. We knew the Trefoil was heavily insured. But the captain was a gentleman; he would have died sooner than harm a timber of the dear old Trefoil. But the second mate—ah! it is wrong, I know, to speak ill of the dead, but I have reasons, strong reasons, for believing that it was he who fired the ship.

“We had bad luck last summer; we never struck a fish. Then we got beset among such terrible ice as I had never seen before, and there we had to winter. There was another ship not far off in the same predicament, though she lay on an evener keel.

“It was because our poor captain was so unhappy that, during the winter, he began to acquire sadly intemperate habits. We could not see him dying by inches before our faces; we loved the man, and tried to save him. We mutinied—ay! it was mutiny, but if ever mutiny was excusable it was in this case. We marched aft and seized the keys of the room where the grog was stored, and, with the exception of a few gallons, which we kept for the spring fishing, we poured every drop down the ice-hole. Two weeks after that the captain sent for me and thanked me before the men for what I had done. You know the rest of our story, gentlemen.”

Next morning it had fallen calm again; the sky was of a deeply azure blue, the sea a sea of glass, with one or two beautiful Arctic birds floating lazily on its surface. And thus lazily floated the good yacht Snowbird, rising and falling on the gentle swell. All hands were aft at an early hour listening to the solemn words of the Burial Service. The bodies had been sewn in hammocks and weighted with portions of iron, and at the words, “Earth to earth, dust to dust,” the flag was quietly withdrawn, the grating on which they lay was tilted, and, one by one, they were allowed to drop into the depths of that dark mysterious ocean, where shall repose the bodies of so many of England’s bravest sons, till the sea gives up its dead.

By noon the glassy surface of the water was touched here and there by what sailors term “cat’s-paws.” Half-an-hour later the sea was all of a ripple; then the Snowbird’s sails filled again, and she bore away to the west. And so west and west she went for several weeks, only altering her course at times to avoid the heavier ice, or when compelled to do so by a change of wind. Then for days and days they kept nearly south and by west, till one morning there was a shout from the mast-head that thrilled every heart with joy,—

“Land ho!”

The Cruise of the Snowbird by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Seventeen.

On Shore for a Run—Noontide on the Seashore—A Natural Harbour—The Land of Adventure and Sport—After the Antelope—Face to Face with a Grizzly.

Yes, yonder lay the land. A mere cloud-land as yet, though; a long streak of darkish blue, higher at some places than at others, and running all along one half of the southern horizon. There was much speculation on board as to what the country they were approaching would turn out to be, whether or not they would find inhabitants in it, and what their reception would be, what their adventures, and what their chance of sport. Judging from his latitude and longitude McBain put it down as some portion of the northern shores of British America, and old Seth "guessed" and "calculated" that if there were any inhabitants they would be "blueskin Injuns," and they would have to make a welcome for themselves if they wanted one.

Before many hours were over, however, they had sailed near enough to scan the coast with their glasses. The foreshore was low and rocky; beyond that was a wilderness of wood and forest as far as the eye could reach, but no signs of smoke, no signs of human life. Everything seemed as peaceful and still as though it were a world newly evolved from the hands of its Creator.

"I'm very much mistaken," said McBain, "if this isn't just the kind of country you boys wished to find."

"The land of our dreams," said Rory.

"The land," said Ralph, "on which the ubiquitous Englishman has never yet set foot. There is nothing hackneyed about this country, I'll wager."

"Well, then," said Rory, who was always the first to suggest something new, "if Captain McBain will call away a boat, Allan and I will go on shore for a walk, and if we do find anything hackneyed we'll come on board and let you know, Ralph."

McBain laughed.

"I don't mind," he said. "We came out from England bent on enjoying ourselves, so off you go, but mind you don't get lost this time. You won't find a trapper Seth everywhere

to look after you. I'll give you four hours, and expect you to bring something fresh and nice for dinner."

Allan and Rory were delighted to find themselves once more in their own little boat, and bounding away shore-wards over the blue and rippling sea. It was a gladsome and joyous day, and its joy seemed to instil itself into their hearts, and cause them to feel in unison with all nature.

When near the shore they pulled in their oars, and allowed the boat to drift or float as she pleased, for, on rounding a point of land they came upon a scene of animation that, although I have gazed on many like it, I never could find words in which to describe. It was noontide on that peaceful seashore, and both beasts and birds were enjoying themselves to the full, each in his own fashion. Although they must have wondered what species of animal Rory and Allan were, and where they had dropped from all of a sudden, of fear they evinced not the slightest vestige. Here, in the foreground, a pair of young seals gazed at them with their marvellous eyes, but seemed hardly to care to move.

"They are curious-looking creatures, I admit," one seal seemed to be whispering to the other; "but they are just as tame as we are, and I'm sure they won't harm us."

Malleys and gulls came floating around them, nearer and nearer, tack and half tack, so close at last that they could have stretched out their hands and touched them on their beautiful breasts. Fulmars trotted about, nodding their heads and looking for the little fishes the tide had left in the pools. Looms, love-making on stone tops, stared at them with a kind of sleepy surprise. Great auks and penguins, that lined the shore in rows, flapped their apologies for wings, but never dreamed of making their escape. High in air, too, circled their friend and namesake the snowbird; and not far off the restless allan and the jet-black boatswain bird; while on the land itself were dozens of strange fowl that they could not even name.

The very tameness of all these creatures seemed proof, that they had never before been disturbed in their haunts by the presence of man.

Allan and Rory rowed into a beautifully-wooded bay, and inland along a quiet, broad-bosomed river. They landed on many parts of its banks, but remembering McBain's words, they did not venture too far into the forest, but nevertheless they found track of deer, and trace, too, of heavier and wilder game. They did not make much of a bag, only a few birds and a hare or two (probably the Lepus Americanus, or Jack Rabbit), but they were quite satisfied with their four hours on shore, and were off to time, much to McBain's joy and satisfaction.

In the saloon that day, while the Snowbird lay quietly at anchor in-shore, there was a dinner-party, at which were present not only the two mates belonging to the yacht, but the mate of the unfortunate Trefoil.

“Farther to the west,” McBain observed, “the land gets much more wild and hilly, and with the glass I can from the crow’s-nest see rugged mountains covered with snow. To the west, then, I purpose going; but I have not forgotten,”—this to the mate of the Trefoil—“that you, Mr Hill, and your men, are passengers. I would fain send you home, but how can I do so?”

“You can’t, that is evident,” said Mr Hill, “and both myself and my men have made up our minds to stop in your ship as long as you’ll let us—all the voyage, indeed, and return with you to England.”

“Well, I’m glad of that,” McBain said, “it relieves me of all anxiety.”

So it was arranged that both Mr Hill and the rest of the shipwrecked mariners should sign articles, and become part and parcel of the crew of the Snowbird. It must be remembered that she was a roomy yacht, and that the addition of twelve or thirteen new hands could hardly crowd her.

Ralph’s father was right when he advised our heroes to seek for adventures in the far west before journeying onwards to the more desolate and mysterious regions of the far north. He was a man of experience, and as such knew well that the sportsman, unlike the poet, is not born but made. But the wild land in which the travellers found themselves a day or two after their little dinner-party in the saloon, was just the place to brace the nerves and steel the muscles, for here was game of every kind, and it only wanted a certain amount of daring to bring it to bag.

The Snowbird was brought to anchor in a land-locked arm of the sea, a natural harbour large enough for the combined fleets of the whole world to ride with safety in. As there would be barely three months before the onset of the severe Arctic winter, McBain lost no time in preparing for the rigours they would doubtless have to encounter, before spring would once more return and release them from their self-chosen imprisonment. The vessel was anchored as close to the shore as was compatible with her safety. Here she could ride and here she could swing, until King Frost descended from the distant mountains and locked her in his icy embrace.

About half a mile from where she lay there fell into the sea a broad and placid river. They found this navigable, even to the cutter, for many miles inland, and the scenes that

lay before them, as reach after reach and bend after bend of it was opened out, was romantic and beautiful in the extreme. The stream ran through the centre of a lovely glen or gorge, "o'erhung," as the poet says, "by wild woods thickening green." Here was every variety of foliage—trees, and shrubs, and flowers. At times it would be a dense forest all around them, but in the very next reach perhaps, the banks would be green-carpeted with moss and grass, with rocks rising upwards here and there be-draped with wild vines. On the higher lands commenced a forest of pines; far beyond these weird-looking trees the snow-clad peaks of rugged mountains could be seen. In exploring this river they were much struck at the multitude of tributaries it had, little streamlets that stole down through bosky ravines, following the course of any of which brought the travellers to the table-land above. Here was the forest, and here too were broad tracks of a kind of prairie land covered with a carpet of buffalo-grass.

In a country like this it would be patent to any one that there existed unlimited scope for sport of all kinds, for while the woods and jungles and plains abounded in game of every sort, from the strange little rock rabbit to the lordly elk and bison, the rivers they soon found out teemed with fish. They were not long, however, in making a discovery of not quite so pleasing a character. This was due to Seth's sagacity.

"I guess," he said one evening, "we've got some of my old friends here."

"What! not Indians?" asked Rory, opening wide his eyes.

"I don't allude to them 'xactly," said Seth; "but I does allude to the grizzlies."

"Oh! I should like to have an adventure with one of these chaps, shouldn't you, Ralph?"

"I don't know," replied Ralph, with a quiet smile; "I think I should rather run from one than fight him, if all stories I've heard about them be true."

"What is your opinion of their character?" asked McBain of Seth.

"They're the all-firedest fellows to fight, when they do fight," said Seth, "in creation! I've had a bit of fun in my time with pumas and panthers both, down south, but I'd rather fight a dozen o' either than one grizzly after he turns rusty."

"Do you mean rusty in coat?" asked Rory.

"No, sir," said the Yankee, "I guess I means rusty in temper. But then it ain't often that that occurs, for he'll run like a deer if he gets a chance; but just wound him, then is the time to see him with his birse on end, I can tell you! But I don't like 'em. Down in Texas

a companion o' mine, when out shooting, ran right agin one o' these gentry; a great she one it was, with two cubs alongside of her. That was what made her so touchy, I reckon. Howsomever, she didn't give my poor friend Obadiah Johnson much time to prepare. I never seed such a sight in my life! She was on to him, and downed him before you'd say 'bullet.' One great claw had gone right over his shoulder and ripped his side clean open. With the two hind claws of her she just about tore his legs into piecemeal. I fired right down her throat. Then she was on to me, and my knife was into her. But she didn't seem to have a kill. I don't remember very much more o' that fight—kind o' fainted, I reckon. Anyhow, we were all found in a heap, maybe an hour afterwards. Obadiah was dead, and so were the b'ar, and trapper Seth had only as much life in his body as saved him from being buried. 'Twere two months ere I got over that skivering, and I guess I'll bear the marks to my grave unless I loses both arms and legs afore I goes there."

Little thought Ralph when frankly confessing that he would rather run from than fight a grizzly, and listening to the story of old Seth's adventure, that not two days thereafter he himself would be the subject of an attack by one of these terrible monsters. But so it turned out, and well was it for him that assistance was at hand, or one of my heroes would have dropped out of the tale.

They had enjoyed an unusually fine day's sport, principally among the antelope, away up among the plains. I allude, of course, to the North American antelope, that saucy little fellow, so sprightly and graceful, yet so curiously impudent withal as to sometimes bring himself needlessly into trouble. With the exception of the saddle-back seal of the Greenland seas, I know of no wild animal that evinces a larger degree of inquisitiveness. Perhaps it was this very trait of antelope character that led to the size of our heroes' bag on the day in question. They had found the animals principally in spruce and cedar thickets, and here one or two fell to their guns, while others escaped into the open, across which there was nothing in the world except their inquisitiveness to prevent their having got clear away, but they must needs stop to have a look at their hunters.

"I reckon they hav'n't been shot at all their little lives before," said Seth. "Now you just creep round behind while I keep their 'ttention occupied."

One way or another, Seth had managed to "keep their 'ttention occupied," and so venison had been the result, and plenty of it too.

It was near evening, the men had already shouldered their game and had begun the homeward march; McBain himself, with Allan and Rory, had also had enough of hunting for one day, and were preparing to follow. Ralph and Seth were invisible, so was their little companion the Skye terrier. No dog, I daresay, ever enjoyed sport more than did this little morsel of canine flesh and fury. Even before the adventure I am going to

relate it had been the custom to take him out with the shooting party almost constantly, but after the adventure it was constantly, without any almost.

While they were yet wondering where Ralph and his companions were, bang went a rifle from the wooded gorge beneath them.

“They’ve got another of some kind,” said McBain.

“I expect,” said Allan, “it is a black tail, for if it were antelopes some of them would be already seeking the open, and Seth tells me the black tails prefer hiding when in danger.”

(The black-tailed or “mule” deer is one of the largest and most gracefully beautiful animals to be found in the hunting-grounds of the far west.)

A few minutes afterwards there came up out of that gorge a sound that made our heroes start, and stand to their rifles, while their hearts almost stood still with the dread of some terrible danger. It was not for themselves but for Ralph they feared. It was a deep, appalling, coughing roar, or bellow—the bellow of some mighty beast that has started up in anger. A minute more, and Ralph, breathless and bareheaded, with trailing rifle, rushed into the open, closely followed by an immense grizzly bear. He was on his hind legs, and in the very act of striking Ralph down with his terrible paw.

The danger was painfully imminent, and for either of his friends to fire was out of the question, so close together were bear and man. But lo! at that very moment, when it seemed as if no power on earth could save Ralph, the grizzly emitted a harsh and angry cry, and turned hastily round to face another assailant. This was no other than Spunkie, the Skye terrier, who had seized on Bruin by the heel. Oh! no mean assailant did the bear find him either. But do not imagine, pray, that this little dog meant to allow himself to be caught by the powerful brute he had tackled. No; and as soon as he had bitten Bruin he drew off far enough away to save his own tiny life. You see, in his very insignificance lay his strength. A dog of Oscar’s size would have been at once grappled and torn in pieces. Feint after feint did the terrier make of again rushing at the grizzly, but meanwhile Ralph had made good his escape, and next minute bullets rained on the grizzly, for Seth’s rang out from the thicket, and McBain’s and Rory’s and Allan’s from the open, so he sank to rise no more.

Ralph determined to learn a lesson from this little adventure; he made up his mind that he would never follow a wounded deer into a thick jungle without, at all events, previously reloading his rifle.

The Cruise of the Snowbird by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Eighteen.

Rory Poet, Dreamer, and Merchant-Minstrel—Who Says Shore?—All among the Buffalo—"A Big Shoot"—Preparations for Winter.

"Would you believe it, boys," said McBain one morning, "that we have been here just two months to-morrow?"

They were seated at breakfast, and had you cast your eye over that table, reader, and seen the dainties and delicious dishes "seated" thereon, as Rory called it, you would hardly have believed you were in a far-off foreign land. Here were cold joints of venison, and pasties of game, and pies of pigeon, and the most delicious fish that ever smoked on a board, to say nothing of eggs of wild fowl and sea-birds, the very colours of which were so charming it seemed a sin to crack the shell. But how Seth basted those broiled fish, or what those fish were, only Seth himself knew. But Seth would be out in a boat in blue water, just as the first breakfast bugle went—and that was Peter and the pipes playing a pibroch—and in five minutes more he was back with the fish—Arctic salmon, our heroes called them, for want of a better name. The life was barely out of them ere they were split down the back, and nailed to a large hard wood board and done before the fire, but Seth himself served them ready to eat. It was a magic performance, and when amber tears from a slice of lemon were shed over it, lo! a dish fit for a king.

"How speedily time wings its flight!" said Ralph, looking wise; "and it never flies more quickly than when people are happy."

"Not that there is anything very original in your remark, my grave old Ralph," said Rory, smiling mischievously.

Ralph pinched Rory's ear, and told him he was always the same—saucy.

"Steward," continued Ralph, "send to Seth for another hot fish; but be sure to say it's for the captain."

"That's right, Ralph," said Irish Rory; "salmon and sentiment go well together."

"You're wonderfully bright this morning, Rory," Allan put in.

“And it’s myself that’s glad I look it then, for I feel bright,” quoth Rory. “I feel it all over me, and sure if I’d wings I’d fly.”

“You didn’t want any wings to help you along,” remarked McBain, with his eyes bent on his plate, “last week when that Cinnamon bear went for you.”

“Be easy now,” says Rory; “bother the bear! Sure I feel all of a quiver when I think of him. He was Ralph’s grizzly’s father, I believe. I ought to have had my fiddle with me. You remember what Shakespeare says:

“‘Music hath charms to soothe the savage beast,
A hungry Scotchman or a butcher’s dog.’”
“It wasn’t Shakespeare at all,” said Ralph.

“Och! no more it was. I remember now. It was the fellow who makes the matches; what’s his name?”

“Lucifer?” suggested Allan.

“No,” cried Rory; “I have it. It was Congreve. But sure I shot the beast right enough, and it was only his fun chasing me after he was dead.”

Poor Rory could laugh and make light of his adventure now, but it had been a narrow escape for him. There is no animal in the world more fierce than that dweller among rocks, the Cinnamon bear (Ursus ferox), but there is no heart more brave than an Irishman’s, and our light-hearted boy had followed one up and fired. Then, though desperately wounded, the monster gave chase. He had struck Rory down without wounding him. They were both found together, and both seemingly dead. Rory soon came round, and the bear’s skin was a beauty.

“What are you going to do with that skin, boy Rory?” asked McBain.

“Indeed, then,” replied boy Rory, “it’s a mat I’ll be after making of it for Bran’s mother.”

“Ah! you haven’t forgotten the poor old hound, then?” said Allan.

“I never forget a dog,” said Rory; “but won’t the old lady look famous lying on it before the fire of a winter’s evening!”

“We’ll have quite a cargo of furs,” said Allan.

“Yes,” McBain said, “and a priceless one too. They will more than pay for our trip north.”

“What a valuable old fellow that Seth is, to be sure!” Ralph remarked; “I really don’t know what we would have done without him.”

There was a pause, during which neither the captain nor Ralph, nor Allan was idle, as the music of their knives and forks could testify; but poetic Rory was leaning his chin upon his hand, and evidently his thoughts were far away.

“I say, boys,” he said, at last, “if I had lived in the days of yore—some hundreds of years ago, you know—do you know what I should have liked to have been?”

“No,” said Ralph; “something very bright, I’ll wager my gun. More coffee, steward.”

“I’d have been,” continued Rory, “a wandering merchant-minstrel.”

“A what!” cried Ralph, looking up from his plate.

“He means a packman,” said Allan.

“No,” said Ralph; “he means a hawker.”

“Oh! bother your hawkers and your packmen!” cried Rory; “sure, you send all the romance out of the soul of me! You serve me as the colleens served the piper, who was playing so neat and so pretty, till—

“A lass cut a hole in the bag
And the music flew up to the moon,
With a fa la la lay.”
“Well,” persisted Allan, “but tell us about your merchant-minstrel. If it isn’t a pack-merchant selling German concertinas, I don’t know what he can be.”

“Well, then, I’ll tell you; but, troth,” said Rory, “neither of you deserve it for chaffing a poor boy as you chaff me. Listen, then. It is two hundred years ago and more, and a calm summer gloaming. In the great tartan parlour of Arrandoon Castle, whose windows overlook all the wild wide glen, are seated the wife of the chief McGregor of that golden age, and her lovely daughter Helen. The young girl is bending over her harp, playing one of the sweet sad airs of Scotland, while her mother sits before a tall frame quietly embroidering tapestry. And now the music ceases, and with a gentle sigh the fair musician moves to the window. There is the blue sky above, and the green waving birches on the braes, with distant glimpses of the bonnie loch, and there are sheep

browsing among the purple. The wail of Peter's pipes comes sounding up the glen—the Peter of two hundred years ago, you know—but no living soul is to be seen. Oh, yes! some one issues even now from the pine forest, and comes slowly up the winding road towards the castle. 'Mother, mother!' cries the girl, clapping her hands with joy, 'here comes that dear old merchant-minstrel.' And her mother puts away her work, and presently the Janet of a bygone age ushers me in, and I place my bundle of wares on the floor."

"Your pack," said Allan.

"My bundle of wares," continued Rory, "and kneel beside it as I undo it. How eagerly they watch me, and how Helen's bright eyes sparkle, as I spread my silks and my furs before her, and my glittering jewels rare! And how rejoiced I feel as I watch their happy faces; and sure I let them have everything they want, cheaper than anybody else would in all the wide world, because of their beautiful eyes. And then I tell them all the news of the outer world, and then—yes, then I take my fiddle, and for an hour and more I hold them enthralled."

"What a romancist you'd make?" said Allan. "But stay!" cried Rory, waving his hand, "the two hundred years have rolled away, but I'm still the wandering merchant-minstrel. The Snowbird is lying once more, with sails all furled, in the old place in the loch; we're home again, boys—home again, and I've had that big, big box that you've seen Ap making for me brought up to the castle; and your dear mother and sweet sister, Allan boy, are bending over me as I open it; and don't their eyes sparkle as I spread before them the curios I've been collecting for months—my best skins and my stuffed birds, my ferns and my mosses, my collection of eggs and my ivory and precious stones!"

"So ho!" said Allan, "and that is what that mighty box is for, is it?"

"Yes, indeed," said Rory; "but don't you like my picture?"

"Will you try this potted tongue?" said Ralph; "it's delicious."

"So are you, bedad," quoth Rory, "with your chaff and your chaff."

"Boys," cried McBain, "it is sweet to dream of home sometimes; it is one of the greatest pleasures of a traveller's life. But we've many more wild adventures to come through yet, ere the Snowbird sails up the loch. Who says shore?"

Shore! That was indeed a magic word. Allan and Rory jumped up at once. Ralph had some marmalade to finish, but he soon followed them. He found Seth fully equipped,

and the bear-hound, as they called the Skye terrier, all alive and full of fun. The men, too, were ready. They were going off for a three days' hunt on the rocky plains, miles and miles beyond the forest.

It was only one of many such they had enjoyed; and there is, in my opinion, no life in the world to compare for genuine enjoyment with that of the wild hunter, especially if he be lucky enough to find pastures new, as did our heroes. For the first few days of roughing it in forest and plain one feels a little strange, and often weary; but the free fresh air, the constant exercise, and the excitement, soon banish such feelings as these, and before you are a week out your muscles get hard, your skin gets brown, and your nerves are cords of steel; if on horseback, you fear not to ride anywhere; if on foot you will follow the lion to his lair, or the panther to his cave in the rocky hillside, and never think once of danger. It is a glorious life.

On hunting expeditions like that on which we find our friends starting to-day, they went out with no intention of sticking to any one kind of game. They made what they called "harlequin bags;" they were armed, prepared for anything, everything, fur or feather, fish or snake. They had fowling-pieces for the smaller game, express rifles for bigger, and bone-smashers for the wild buffalo of the plains. These latter they shot for their skins. The sport was at all times exciting, and, as our heroes were on foot, sometimes even dangerous, as when one day Stevenson, who had fired at and only wounded a sturdy bull, was chased by the infuriated animal and narrowly escaped with his life. Do these animals think the flashing and cracking of the rifles some kind of a thunderstorm, I wonder? I do not know, but certain it is that often, on a herd being fired into, it will take closer rank and stand in stupid bewilderment, instead of dashing away at once; and thus hundreds may be killed in an hour or two.

As an experienced trapper, old Seth had the whole management of these hunting expeditions.

He often made our heroes wonder at the amount of tact and wisdom he displayed, as a plainsman and wild hunter.

"I guess we'll have moosie to-night," he said, one evening. It was the first day they had fallen among buffalo.

"What kind, Seth?" asked McBain. They were seated round the camp fire, having just finished dinner.

"Wolves," said Seth.

“Have you seen their tracks?” inquired McBain.

“Nary a track,” answered Seth. “They don’t make much, but they’ll come a hundred miles to feast off dead buffalo. They’ll be at the crangs (skinned carcasses) afore two hours more is over.”

And Seth was right; and night was made musical by their howling and growling, fighting and snarling.

On this particular day they had very fine sport indeed; bears principally—not grizzlies—and a few bison. This latter is usually a wild and wary animal, with ten times more sense under his horns than that “bucolic lout” the buffalo; but never having seen man before, they were, as Seth said, “a kind o’ off their guard.” About a dozen wolves followed them at a respectable distance whenever they got trail of a bison. When the hunters advanced the wolves advanced, when the hunters stopped they stopped, generally in a row, and licked their chops and yawned, and tried all they possibly could to look quite unconcerned.

“Never mind us,” they seemed to say. “Take your time; you’ll find the bison by-and-bye, and then we’ll have a bit, but don’t hurry on our account.”

Once or twice Ralph or Allan would take a pot-shot at one of them. This Seth declared was a waste of good powder and lead.

“’Cause,” he added, “their skins aren’t any mortal use for nothin’.”

Towards afternoon they approached a woody ravine, in which the stream they had been following lost itself in a world of green. In here went Master Spunkie first, and came quickly back, mad with excitement and joy. He wagged his tail so quickly you could hardly see it; then his tail seemed to wag him, and he quivered all over like a heather besom bewitched.

“I guess it’s b’ars,” said Seth, and in went Seth next, and then there was a most appalling roaring, that seemed to shake the hills.

“Hough-oa-ah-h!” They might roar as they liked, but Seth’s rifle was telling tales. Crack, crack, went both barrels, and soon after crack, crack, again. This was the signal for our heroes to file in. It was dark, and even cold among the pines—dark, ay, and dangerous. They found that the whole of the little glen, which was of no very great extent, formed the residence of a colony of black bears. They had not gone far before one sprang from under a spruce-tree full tilt at McBain. The brute seemed to repent of the action in the

very act of springing, and well for the captain he did. He swerved aside, and was shot not two rifle lengths away. This little incident taught our heroes caution, and the great danger of rushing into spruce thickets, where a wild beast has all the odds against the hunter, being used to the dim light under the cool green boughs. The Skye was in his glory. He had become quite a little adept at leg-biting, and here was a splendid field for the display of his skill, and he certainly made the best of it, for over twenty skins were bagged in less than three hours.

The days were getting short, and even cold, so they had to go early to camp. The skins of the day would be stretched and cleaned, and well rubbed with a composition made by Seth's own hands. Then they would, at the end of the big shoot, be taken on board and undergo further treatment before being carefully put away in the hold.

The camp-kettle was an invention of McBain's. It was, indeed, a multum in parvo, for in it could be stored not only the saucepans and a frying-pan, but the plates, and knives and forks, and spoons, and even the saucers and salt. Seth was cook, and when I have told you that, it is a waste of ink to say that about dinner-time a wolf or two would generally drop round. They would not come too near, but would stand well down to leeward, sniffing all the fragrance they could, smacking their lips and licking their chops in the most comical way imaginable. This was what Rory called "dining on the cheap." After dinner it was very pleasant, rolled in Highland plaids, to lounge around the camp fire for an hour or two before turning in. What wonderful stories of a trapper's life Seth used to tell them, and with what rapt attention Rory used to listen to them.

"Wherein he spake of most disastrous chances,
Of moving accidents by flood and field,
Of hair-breadth 'scapes,
On rocks and hills whose heads touch heaven."
Perhaps the greatest charm about these yarns of Seth's was their truthfulness. They were as far above your ordinary traveller's tales as the moon in the sky is from the moon in the mill-dam—as substance from shadow.

When gloaming deepened into night, when the call of the wild drake resounded far beneath them, and the cry of the white owl fell on the ear, when the north star looked down on them with its bright, clear, kindly eye, then, spreading their blankets under the tents, and wrapping their plaids more closely around them, they committed themselves to Heaven's protection, and sweetest dreamless slumber.

The few days succeeding a "big shoot" were nearly always spent in fishing. Strange to say, the fish in the river, of which there were abundance, could not be got to look at the

flies our heroes had brought with them from home, so Seth came to the front again. He busked great gaudy flies, that the daintiest trout hadn't the heart to resist.

It was autumn now, the leaves in the forest had first turned a dingier green, then the sunset of life stole over them. Rory had never seen such tinting before. You may be sure our dreamy boy couldn't resist a temptation like this. He was painter as well as poet, and so he forgot to fish, forgot to shoot, forgot everything in his wanderings except the gorgeous scenery around him. He sketched and sketched, and stored his portfolio.

"How delighted she will be!" he often caught himself thinking, if not saying, when he succeeded with some happier effect than usual.

Autumn waned apace.

They went less often now to the distant shooting-grounds, but they went to the forest, McBain and all his merry men—at least, all that could be spared. They went to fell the trees and bring them home, for the captain had an idea, and this idea became a plan, and the plan was to build a house close to the shore near which lay the Snowbird—not a living-house, but a hall in which the men could take exercise, during the short and stormy days of the long Arctic winter that would very soon surround them. So every morning now a party went to the woods, with axe and adze, to fell and trim the pine-trees. The portion of the forest which was chosen stood high over a little green and bosky glen, adown which a streamlet ran, joining the great river about a mile below. One by one the trees were hurled down the steep sides of the glen, and dragged to the rivulet; they were then floated on to the river, and here formed into a raft, which could be guided seawards with long poles; the rest of the journey was easily accomplished by help of the cutter and gig. And so the work went cheerily on.

Old Ap was in his element now; his turn seemed to have come for enjoyment. He had rehabilitated himself in that wonderful old head-to-feet apron and his paper cap, and bustled about as lively as a superannuated cricket from "morning's sun till dine," giving orders here and orders there, and always humming a song, and never without his snuff-box.

The days grew shorter and shorter, winds moaned through the woods and brown leaves fell, and soon they sighed through leafless trees; then the birds of migration were found to have fled, even the buffaloes and the bisons went southwards after the sun, and the bears were no longer seen in the woods. But the building of the new hall went steadily on, and soon the roof was up and the flooring laid; and a fine strong structure it looked, though, as far as shape and architecture went, a stranger would have been puzzled to know what it was—whether church or market, mill or smithy. Never mind, there it was,

and inside, at one end, there was a large fireplace built, big enough to accommodate a bull bison if he wanted roasting whole.

Ap was proud of his work, I can assure you, and after he had built a few forms for seats, he waxed still more ambitious, and commenced making chairs.

I am sorry to say a death occurred on board about this time: it was that of the yellowhammer, that had flown aboard after they had left Shetland. It was universally lamented, for though not much of a singer, it did what it could, and its little humble song could at any time recall to memory broomy braes and moorlands clad in golden-scented gorse.

The mornings were cold and sharp now, and in the long fore-nights the big lamp was lit in the snuggery, and a roaring fire in the stove was quite a treat.

On coming on deck one evening about sunset, this is what they saw on looking skywards. All around the horizon, for two spear-lengths high, was a slate-coloured haze; above this the mist was of a yellow hue, gradually merging into the blue of the open sky; and the sun was going down, looking like a great molten gong, his upper two-thirds a deep blood-red, the lower a lurid purple. The sea was waveless, yellow and glassy. A change was coming.

The Cruise of the Snowbird by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Nineteen.

Winter Comes Apace—New Visitors from the North—A "Perwision o' Natur'"—A Mad but Merry Scene—The Downfall of Snow-Stars—An Adventure, but where will it End?

In the far north—up in the high latitudes, as sailors are wont to call them—winter often comes on with startling rapidity. Nobody unaccustomed to these regions would believe that there could be so short an interval between the beautiful Indian summer, and the stern and rigorous Arctic winter. A few bright and almost balmy windless days, perhaps, herald its approach—days when there is a deep-abiding silence on mountain, plain, and sea, and silence in the great forests themselves, where all nature seems to be breathless, expectant, waiting for something to happen, something to come. The softer-leaved trees, the willows and water-ashes, the planes and the mountain mahoganies, that erst clad the glens in a cloud-land of green, are now stripped and bare, and the few brown leaves that cling here and there on some of the branches, tremble in the uncertain air, just as if the trees were things of life and were nervous, and were whispering to each other and saying, "Oh! we all know what is coming; would that we could be up and be off like the beasts and the birds of the forest that have all fled south! But we cannot, and our branches will be rent, our limbs will be torn and severed by the stormy breath of swift-advancing winter!" But those giants of the woodlands and hilltops, the cedars and tamaracs, the spruces and pines, stood forth bold and stately as in summer. No nervousness about them, their roots were fixed in the rocks themselves, and their sturdy limbs, still clothed in black and green, could bid defiance to every blast that could blow.

The beasts had not all gone away, though; there were bears in the woods, and wolves, and many kinds of smaller game, still left to afford sport for our wanderers; and there were gulls and guillemots, and innumerable wild fowl as well: and lo! here were several new visitors from the regions of the Pole itself; an Arctic fox or two might sometimes be seen skipping hither and thither, and in the water four or five different kinds of seals often came up to stare and marvel at the Snowbird, A whale, with her calf, was seen ploughing through the still waters of the bay, probably going still farther south for the winter months. A narwhal came quite a mile out of his lonely way to gaze at the yacht. He did not like her; he tossed his ivory spear angrily in the air, and plunged sullenly down into the depths again; and giant walruses would suddenly pop their terrible tusked and bearded heads, high out of the water to have a look at the intruder. But there were many more signs and wonders that told our heroes, in language that could not be mistaken, that King Winter would soon sweep down from his icy caves in the frozen north, and claim all the land and the sea round them as his own. Many of the denizens

of the forest, for instance, got greyer in colour, and some even white, while every bird and every beast became sensibly larger.

"You see, young gentlemen," said Seth, explainingly, to Allan and Rory, "here is how it be: soon's they sniffs the change in the air they kinder knows winter is coming, so they just begins to tuck in and tuck in, and the more they tucks in the fatter they grows; and the fatter they grows, the longer and softer the fur or the feather grows. It's a sort of a perwision o' Natur', ye see, to help them to stand the cold."

"But," said Rory, "this development of fat and fur or feather isn't confined to wild animals and birds; just look at our dogs!"

The great Saint Bernard was coming trotting along the deck as Rory spoke, and all eyes were immediately bent upon him. Oscar seemed intensely pleased about something, but he really had got fat, and the coat which he had developed—all in one week, apparently—was simply marvellous to behold. And now Seth's wolf, as he was called, came aft, and Oscar seemed actually to laugh all over, so did everybody else when they saw him; Plunket was no longer a wolf, all gaunt and lean and grim, there was not a rib to be seen in him, his skin was soft and sheeny, his gait no longer an ambling shamble, but a stately "pedal progression." No wonder Oscar laughed; but when Spunkie joined the group, the Saint Bernard could not contain himself, and he must needs roll the terrier into the lee scuppers. "Just look at him!" Oscar seemed to cry; "why, he's all coat together; no eyes, no tail, no nothing! Who's for a game at football? Hurrah!" At this moment Ralph came on deck, and joined the group to see what all the fun was about. He had been down below having a bit of lunch. His presence seemed at once to bring the merriment to a sudden climax, for there was no mistake about it, Ralph had been getting stouter of late, though it had never struck anybody before. But now the moment they glanced at him both his friends went into fits. Allan laughed till the tears ran out of his eyes, and he had to lean against the bulwarks and hold his sides. Rory was worse; he was bent double like a jack-knife, and had to raise his right leg and slap his knee a dozen times before he was anything like composed. Meanwhile, poor quiet Ralph's face, as he gazed wonderingly first at one and then at the other, was a perfect study.

"Have you both gone out of your minds?" he inquired at last.

"No, no?" cried Rory, "we're laughing at you; you've got so fa—fa—fat! Ha! ha! ha!"

"You're perfectly obese?" laughed Allan.

"He's perfectly podgy, bedad!" cried Rory, turning Ralph round and round to examine him.

Seth looked on at the fun, chewing the end of a capstan bar, and Oscar kept on rolling Spunkie in the scuppers, but when McBain joined the group order was somewhat restored.

“Boys,” said McBain, smiling, “I declare to you I see a change in you all; one needn’t laugh at the other. Oh, don’t look at me! I know I’m adding inches to my waist, and so is Allan. And as for you, boy Rory—”

“Yes,” said Rory, “as for me?”

“You’re rotund already,” said McBain.

“No more shape than a sun-fish,” added Ralph, revengefully.

Of course, after so daring a remark Ralph had to run for it, and so away he went, scampering along the deck with Rory in hot pursuit, but he had to save himself by making a back, over which Rory vaulted, and placed himself in position a few yards beyond.

“Oh?” cried Allan, “if it’s leapfrog, I’m in too.”

And off he went, bounding like a deer over Ralph, and over Rory.

“Keep the pot a-boiling!” cried Ralph.

And so, with many a shout and many a joke, round and round the Snowbird’s deck vaulted and ran our merry boy-heroes; but when it came to shoulders high, then their increase in bulk—the “perwision o’ Natur’,” as Seth termed it—told a tale. Ralph cleared Rory, but floundered over Allan, then Rory jumped on top of them both, and the whole three went rolling over on the deck, and Oscar and the wolf and the little Skye, who had been making bears of them, and legging them, all got mixed.

They extricated themselves at last, and then settled seriously to work. Off went their jackets.

“No more high leaps,” cried Ralph.

But behold, the fun gets infectious. McBain has joined the group, then Stevenson and Mitchell, and the mate of the Trefoil, and in less time than I take to tell it, there was a complete circle round the deck of the Snowbird. Every man Jack was there; it was

pleasure without end; it was wonderful. But to see the performance of old Ap! In his flight around the charmed circle he leaped all in a piece, as it were, but he seemed positively to rebound like a cricket-ball; to ricochet like as shot upon water. Even Seth, with his long legs, who went about the game as if it were a matter of life and death, confessed afterwards that neither kids nor kangaroos were a circumstance to Ap.

And so on they went for half-an-hour and over; and had you gazed on that mad, merry scene, you would have declared that all hands had taken leave of their senses. No, you wouldn't, though, for you would have joined the fun yourself.

"I reckon," said Seth, after the ship had resumed its wonted calm, "that although we are going to be soldered up up here all winter, we ain't going to let down our hearts about it."

Now although the new hall was complete, and Ap had almost finished the last chair in it, it must not be supposed that the officers and crew of the Snowbird were idle. By no means; every day was now precious. They were as busy laying up stores as the Alpine hare. Stores of wood to burn, and stores of fresh provisions in case of emergency. The deer they shot, and one or two of the younger and smaller bison, were cut up with great precision and exactness by the old trapper, and the carcasses afterwards lashed against the masts in the fore and main tops to be frozen, and thus to remain fresh throughout the coming winter.

One morning, just after such a sunset as I tried to describe in last chapter, when Rory and Allan went on deck for their matutinal run before breakfast, they found, to their astonishment, that the shore and the trees, ay, and the ship itself, were clad in dazzling white. Not snow, though, but hoar-frost; only it was a hoar-frost such as it had never entered into their minds to imagine the like of. The sky seemed overcast with a strange purplish haze that hid the distant hills, and only revealed the scenery in the immediate neighbourhood. There wasn't a breath of wind. There was silence everywhere shoreward, broken only now and then by the sullen splash of some giant sea mammal diving into the dark waters. And the hoar-frost kept falling, falling, falling.

It was a downfall of snow-stars and their spiculae; but these alighted on everything—on the sheets and shrouds and every horizontal spar, making them look five times their usual thickness; and the whole ship appeared as if enchanted; the men's caps were white, their clothes were white, and their beards and hair, so that they looked like old, old men.

A great silvery-haired animal crept softly along the deck. Was it a polar bear? No, it was Oscar. He looked up in their faces with his plaintive brown eyes, as if beseeching them to tell him what it all meant.

But when, about an hour afterwards, they came on deck again and looked about them, they found that the purple mist had all cleared off, and that the sun was shining in a bright blue sky, towering high into which were the dazzling hills. The scene was extraordinary; it was magical, glorious. No snow that ever fell could have changed the landscape as those falling snow-stars had; for every twiglet, stem, and branch was white and silvery, and radiant as the sun itself, and the pines and soft-leaved trees were clad in a foliage more beautiful than that of summer itself.

It was a scene such as few men ever behold, and which but once to see is to remember for ever and ay.

It faded at last, though, as everything lovely does fade in this world, and before twelve of the clock the hoar-frost had melted and fallen from the branches, like showers of radiant diamonds.

Away through the dripping woodlands went Rory, Ralph, and Allan, in pursuit of game. Seth was to spend the day in fishing, for ere long the waters would be frozen over, and but few fish to be had, so all those that had been taken during the past week had been carefully salted, dried in smoke, and stored away.

With our three heroes this afternoon went a party of men with a rudely-constructed sledge, to bring back a load of logs for the general store.

“Who is the laziest of us three, I wonder?” said Ralph, as soon as they had got to the high ground, and the men had commenced to wood.

“Oh, I am, I think,” said Allan. “That leapfrog business is too much for a fat old fellow like me.”

“Very well,” said Ralph, “for once in a way we’ll grant that you are right, so you just stop and keep the ‘b’ars’ from the working party, and Rory and I will go down to the creek and see if we can’t find a duck or two.”

“All right,” said Allan; and down he sat on a fallen tree, and pulling a book from his pocket he began to read. So Allan sat there reading, and some fifty or sixty yards beneath him the men worked, singing and laughing as they plied the axe and saw. A whole half-hour was thus passed.

“This is slow work,” he thought at last, placing the book in his pocket. “I’ll creep quietly over to that bit of jungle—I’m sure to get a shot at something.”

If there was anything to shoot in the jungle the wind was all in his favour. He was down to leeward.

When he neared the thicket he threw himself on his hands and knees, and approaching, entered with caution.

There is no sport in the world a Scottish Highlander loves so much as that of deer-stalking. Is it any wonder, then, that when he found himself within fifty yards of a tall an tiered red deer his heart jumped for joy?

“One hundred and fifty pounds,” he said to himself, “if he weighs an ounce.”

He was just about to raise his rifle, when a dead branch snapped under him, and next moment the quarry had glided silently away.

“Anyhow,” thought Allan, “I’ll follow him up a little way. I’ve done a bit of this work at home, and he is a wary scamp, indeed, if he escapes me.”

He searched all through the piece of jungle first. This led him a goodly mile along the ravine, and into the forest, and he was about to give up the quest when he caught a glimpse of the animal’s white flag about a hundred yards away, but quickly getting farther off, though seeming in no great hurry. Keeping well under cover, Allan went on and on, determined if possible not to go back without a lordly haunch of venison on his shoulder. Before very long he found himself on the brink of a ravine. This puzzled him not a little. It was a ravine, but was it the ravine at the end of which he was sure to find his comrades? He did not care whether it was or not; he would cross and risk it, for yonder, on the opposite “brae,” were antlers; not one pair but many pairs.

So down he went, and, to his joy, found the stream was fordable.

Upwards now, with all the caution imaginable, crept this enthusiastic sportsman, upwards to where the all-unconscious herd were browsing. He was near them now, and was pushing the boughs aside to obtain a view, when, as ill luck would have it, a twig caught the trigger, the rifle went off, the deer stampeded, and poor Allan was left to mourn.

“Back homewards now, Allan,” a voice seemed to whisper to him. “Back, back; it isn’t the first time a deer has brought misfortune to the house of Arrandoon.”

Allan was a good mountaineer, and an excellent walker; he felt sure he could regain his party in an hour at most, but would daylight hold out as long? He feared it would not, and he knew it would get dark much sooner under the pine-trees, so he determined to follow the course of the stream. If it flowed at the bottom of the right ravine he was bound soon to rejoin his party. “Oh, of course it is the right ravine!” He found himself making this remark to himself a dozen times in a minute, as he commenced hurrying along the banks of the rivulet.

But now the shades of night began to fall, great black clouds rolled up and obscured the sky’s blue; there would neither be moon nor stars to guide him, so he increased his pace to as nearly a run as the rough nature of the ground would permit. But presently the trees got thicker and darker overhead, and he could no longer see the stream, and to advance farther were but madness.

He pauses now, and the dread of some coming evil falls like a shadow over his heart. In vain he shouts. There is no answer from the hills above; no answer from the dark woods. He fires his rifle again, it reverberates from rock to rock as if a volley had been fired. But the echo is the only response.

The Cruise of the Snowbird by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Twenty.

Alone in the Beast-Haunted Wilderness—The Search Party—Agony of Thought—A Midnight Visitor—The Forest on Fire.

The feeling of consternation on the minds of Ralph and Rory, when they returned to the working party and found that Allan was missing, may be better imagined than described. Mitchell was in command of the woodcutters, and not only he, but every one of the men, was interrogated as to what they knew or could tell of the sudden disappearance. They had all the self-same story to relate. They simply missed him, all at once as it were, from his seat. They had not noticed which way he had gone. They certainly did not hear the crack of his rifle; he had disappeared as quietly and suddenly as if he had been spirited away, and they very naturally imagined that he had got tired of waiting, and had gone along down to the river and creek to meet his friends.

Any search for a trail was altogether a waste of time. Had Seth himself been there, hardly could he have picked it up, for the gloom of night was fast settling down over mountain, and forest, and sea.

One thing, however, they could and did do. Coming speedily to the conclusion that Allan had gone more inland, probably after big game of some kind, they took a middle course, ’twixt east and south, and in a body marched upon a high bluff of barren ground, that rose up like an island in the centre of the spruce pines. Once on the top they could hear from all directions, if anything were to be heard. But alas! there was no answering shout to theirs, and the only reply to their firing was the faint echo of the rifles among the distant hills. Then a hopeless kind of sorrow seemed to settle down on every heart.

Neither Ralph nor Rory dared to express their thoughts in words. Allan their beloved companion was gone. The chances of their ever seeing him alive again were few, for what might not have happened to him already, or what might not happen to him during the night, all alone in this beast-haunted wilderness!

Was there any comfort to be had from the thought that he was simply lost? None. For how could they forget the many stories trapper Seth had told them of men lost on the prairies, on the plains, or in the woods and jungles; of how some suddenly lose all hope and heart, throw themselves on the ground, fall into a stupor, shiver and die; of how others lose all control over themselves, and rush hither and thither like wild beasts in

confinement, and others who, instead of keeping cool and waiting for friendly help, become the victims of a restless mania?

It is strange how two people in an emergency like the present may be, at precisely the same moment of time, thinking of exactly the same thing, so that almost without the aid of words they may read each other's soul. I have seen many instances of this, but am not psychologist enough to be able to account for it; but here now we have Ralph turning suddenly round to his companion, and looking for a brief moment inquiringly into his face, and Rory replying, "No, he left his compass in his cabin this morning, with his watch and chain."

This was an answer to the very question Ralph was about to ask.

"Heaven help him, then!" said Ralph, with one brief glance skywards. Perhaps, reader, Heaven even then helped the utterer of that little prayer himself, and granted him presence of mind.

Anyhow, he at once began to give orders. Ralph had what might be called a larger and more grasping mind than Rory; the latter was as brave as brave could be, but Ralph was ever the better man in an emergency.

"Mitchell," said our English hero, "there is no time to be lost. Take a few men with you, and go on board at once, and report this sad business to Captain McBain. He will know what to do as soon as it is daylight."

"Ay, ay, sir," said Mitchell, and choosing three men he ran quickly down the side of the hill, and the spruce forest swallowed them up.

"Now, lads," continued Ralph, "go to work and collect wood, there is plenty about; we'll build a fire on the hill here, and trust the rest to Providence."

The men were glad to set to work, it revived hope in their hearts.

From the deck of the Snowbird, the eminence which Ralph and Rory occupied could be seen by daylight, so the fire could be seen burning steadily all the livelong night. Just after midnight McBain threw himself wearily on his cot to snatch a few hours' rest. He was up again before daybreak, the fire was burning brightly then.

Trapper Seth was on deck even before McBain. He was quite ready to go over the side as soon as the order was given, so were the dogs. The mastiff would go with his master as a

matter of course, who on this particular occasion had resumed his former useful, if not picturesque, costume of skins.

Had one of even those few individuals in this world who neither care for nor admire man's true friend, the dog, been on the Snowbird's deck and witnessed the quiet, eager anxious looks of great Oscar, as he took his seat in the boat along with McBain, he could not have begrudged a word of pity for the poor fellow.

Meanwhile, how fared it with Allan in the solitude of the forest? Brave as he was, he could not help experiencing a feeling of awe as night deepened around him. He determined, however, to make the most of his position, and selecting a spot close under a rock, he collected wood and lit a fire; there was some comfort in that, and its fitful light, although it seemed to deepen the darkness all around him, made him feel more cheerful. He rolled himself in his Highland plaid, and placing his rifle handy, lay down to watch the blazing logs, without, however, any very serious intention of going to sleep. He felt more sorry for his companions than for himself, for when daylight returned he never doubted for a moment that he would be able to find his way, but he would have given a good deal to be able to relieve their anxiety. It was some consolation to him in his loneliness to have the companionship of a book. But reading by the firelight made him drowsy, and it was not very long ere the book dropped from his powerless grasp, and he fell fast asleep. When he awoke it was broad daylight, the fire had gone out, and he felt very cold and stiff and tired. But he was sure now he would soon regain the creek.

But the mistake he fell into was a very terrible one. He had forgotten that he had crossed the stream, or rather that he had not re-crossed it. When he left the ravine, therefore, and commenced walking in a direct line north-west as he imagined, he was in reality going quite the opposite way. He hurried along, too, at a very rapid rate, sometimes even running, so that by the time McBain and Seth reached the hill-top, where Rory and Ralph were, and the search was begun in earnest, there must have been a distance of at least fifteen miles between himself and his anxious companions.

It was probably an hour longer before Seth found the trail and Oscar took it up. Both dogs started off on the same scent apparently, but they had not followed it for a mile ere they seemed to disagree, the mastiff going up to the higher ground, the Saint Bernard keeping far lower down. Both animals were right, only the former was on the track of deer, following the bent he had been trained to; the latter was on his master's trail. This put Seth out, however; he naturally had more faith in the wisdom of his own dog, so Oscar was called away, and it was not until deer were seen that the mistake was discovered, and steps had to be retraced in order to seek once again for the right trail, and thus much valuable time was lost.

When, about five hours after this, Allan found himself once again at the top of a ravine, adown which a stream meandered, “I declare,” he said to himself, “this is provoking; I’ve been going round in a circle, and here I am very near the spot where I started from.”

Now this was not the case. He had been walking almost in a bee-line, and had struck quite another river.

The probability that this might be the case did cross his mind, but, he reasoned with himself, this stream must reach the sea, and if I follow it I am bound to come upon the beach; then, if I am not in sight of the Snowbird, I have only to walk along until I do see her. But little did he know then that the course of this river was a very winding one indeed, and that it fell into the sea after running among a ridge of high mountains, twenty good leagues to the eastward of the bay in which lay the yacht. To make a resolve, however, was with Allan to keep it, so he recommenced his journey and hurried onwards as before. He walked all day, and as the shades of evening began to fall he found himself very tired and weary, having eaten nothing for over four-and-twenty hours. He had the good fortune, however, to find food in the shape of a jack rabbit. This, after being cleaned, he rolled in clay and cooked gipsy-fashion in the fire he had built. Then, once again rolling himself in his plaid, he lay down to rest and to think. It must be confessed that his position was far from an enviable one, and his thoughts anything but pleasant. He began to fear he had made some strange mistake, for why, if he were indeed going in the right direction, were there no signs that his friends were seeking for him, as he knew they must be? Should he start to-morrow and walk again up-stream, or should he leave this river that seemed endless and plunge once again into forest and hill? Or should he remain stationary? This last was precisely what one in his situation ought to have done, but already the spirit of unrest had taken possession of his mind, and he longed for the night and the darkness to wear away, that he might resume his toilsome march, albeit the probability dawned upon his mind that he might wander in this wilderness until he died. Would this be the end of all his ambitions? Would he never again sail up his own lovely lake in the Scottish Highlands, and receive the tender greetings of his mother and sister? He asked himself such questions over and over again till they almost maddened him, and he was obliged at last to start up and pace rapidly up and down in front of the fire. He walked thus for hours, until ready to drop, then he heaped more logs on the burning pile, and again sat down. The sounds that issued from the forest were far from reassuring. There was a whisper of wind through the branches of the pine-trees, there was the mournful cry of some night bird, or the scream of some frightened bird trying in vain to escape the clutches of the owl, and there was the barking yelp of the great grey wolf.

Again and again poor Allan threw himself down in front of the fire, and attempted to compose himself to sleep, but all in vain. He tried to read, but there was no connection

between the author's words and his own thoughts, so he threw the book aside at last, and pressed his palm to his burning brow. His head ached and his eyes felt like balls of fire. Was he going mad? The very thought that he might be caused him such agony, that the sweat stood in on beads his forehead. He found his way to the river side and bathed his face and head in the cool water; this soothed him; then his troubled mind found solace in prayer, and laying himself down once more, just like a tired child, he began to repeat to himself psalm after psalm, and hymn after hymn, that he had learned at school. And so gradually his eyes began to droop, and troubled dreams took the place of waking thoughts.

And the night wore on, and on, and on.

But it still wanted many hours of morning.

So light were Allan's slumbers that the snapping of a twig or branch, some distance away in the thicket, caused him to spring up at last and seize his rifle. He listened, but there was no unusual sound to alarm him. The forest he knew was filled with wolves, but he also knew from experience that the courage of the brutes is of no very high standing, and unless they came in numbers they would hardly dare to attack him.

He heaped branches of wood and logs on the fire nevertheless. While so engaged there fell upon his startled ear the sounds of hurried breathing close behind him, and next moment, even before he had time to raise his rifle to defend himself, an animal bigger and more powerful than a buffalo-wolf had sprung upon and rolled him to the ground.

And this animal, reader, was none other than his own great honest Oscar. When McBain and his party, still on Allan's trail, had encamped for the night, this good dog had stolen away and left them. Night and darkness were nothing to him, nor did he fear bears or wolves, or anything else that makes a forest dangerous to traverse after sundown. He was instigated by the love he bore for his master, and guided by scent alone.

But what a change his presence made on Allan's mind!

He felt no longer gloomy and hopeless, and as he hugged the giant Saint Bernard, he could not help dropping tears upon his broad brow. Only they were tears of joy, and tears that relieved his pent-up feelings and cooled his burning brain.

If the dog could only have spoken, a most animated conversation would have ensued forthwith.

But as soon as Oscar had relieved his feelings by a series of wild gambols and quixotic performances that are simply indescribable, Allan plied him with a hundred questions, and talked to him just as if the poor animal knew every word he uttered.

“And how did you find me, dear old boy? What a blessing you are, to be sure! But do you know I took you for a great wolf, and it is a wonder I didn’t shoot you? Oh! think what a thing it would have been if I had killed my dear kind Oscar. It won’t bear thinking about. And where did you leave our friends? They are coming to seek for me, I know; but you, you impatient boy! you must give them the slip and come paddling along through the dark dreary forest to look for your beloved master. Heigho! but I am so glad you’re here. I am so happy, and I am so hungry too. And, by the way, that reminds me I roasted a rabbit last night, Oscar, and could hardly touch it. But we’ll have it now. What have you got in the little barrel at your collar? Coffee, I declare! Well, well, well!”

Talking thus, Allan shared his supper with his friend, and then laid himself down by his side, using the dog as his pillow, just as he had often done when resting at home, among the blooming heather on the braes of Arrandoon. That was the sweetest and most refreshing hour’s slumber ever he remembered having enjoyed.

He awoke at last like the proverbial giant refreshed, and found his pillow sitting up alongside of him, and gazing down at him with loving hazel eyes.

“Hullo, Oscar!” he said: “day is breaking yonder in the east; it is almost time we were moving.”

The dog shook himself as much as to say,—

“I’m ready at a moment’s notice to guide you safely home.”

There was a broad belt of red light in the distant horizon and towards this Oscar attempted to lead his master, with many a bound and many a bark.

But Allan wouldn’t budge.

“Not in that direction, Oscar, old boy,” he said; “our road lies towards the setting, not the rising sun.”

“Bow, wow!” barked Oscar, as if reasoning with him, “bow, wow, wow, wow!”

There was something in the dog’s demeanour that set Allan a-thinking. Could the animal really be right and he wrong? He examined the belt of red light more carefully

now. Was that the east? Was that indeed the crimson clad vanguard that heralds the coming day? Nay, it could not be, the red was a more lurid red, the light was a fitful light, and as he gazed he could distinctly make out a confused rolling of great clouds over it. Then all at once the truth flashed across his mind.

The forest was on fire!

How this happened the reader may at once be told: sparks from McBain's camp fire had towards morning ignited the withered needles that had fallen from the pine-trees, the brushwood had caught, and next the underwood of the spruce-trees, and at the very moment that Allan was gazing skywards his friends were rushing headlong through the woods, pursued by the devouring element.

Would they ever meet Allan again?

The Cruise of the Snowbird by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Twenty One.

Narrow Escape—A Terrible Scene—Allan and Oscar—A Gloomy Evening—Reunion—Seth's Adventure—A Welcome Back.

For a minute or more escape from the terrible fire seemed to our heroes an utter impossibility. The smoke that curled and swirled around them was blinding, the roar of the flames was deafening. No wonder they hesitated what to do or which way to flee. Their camp fire had been lit not far from the river's brink, but the stream at this part ran deep, and dark, and sullen; to plunge into it was only to court death in a different form. But all at once the wind seemed to increase to almost a gale; it blew in their faces cold and fierce, the smoke lifted off, and suddenly their senses and presence of mind were restored; and while behind them the flames mounted higher and higher, and seemed to rage more fiercely every moment, they dashed off and away against that wind. It was terribly strong now; they felt as if they were breasting the waves against the tide, but it was their only chance. Farther down the stream they would doubtless find a ford, and once across the river they were safe.

It was indeed a race for life, and for fully half-an-hour it was doubtful if they would win it. The withered heath and grass, and the stunted shrubs which grew next to the banks of the stream, caught fire even against the wind, and this communicated with the forest, so that the flames seemed to chase them, and to keep alongside of them, at one and the same time. But at last they reach a spot where the river widens out, and they know by the ripple on it that it cannot be deep, so in they plunge and begin to ford, and they have not gone ten yards ere the fire has taken possession of the bank they left. There can be no going back now, but the current is strong, and deeper in some places than their waists, yet they stem it manfully, holding their rifles high, and supporting each other whenever a slip is made. They reach the opposite bank at last, and Seth is the first to clamber out and to help the others up. They climb to the top of the ravine, ere ever they pause to gaze behind them.

The scene they looked upon was awful in its sublimity.

The flames were doing their work with fearful speed. The fire had rolled backwards and appeared embracing all the wooded country. The spruce thickets seemed to suffer the worst; from them the flames rose the highest, shooting hundreds of feet into the air in great gleaming tongues of fire, that fed upon and licked up the very clouds of smoke themselves. The air, for miles to leeward, was filled with sparks as dense as snowflakes.

But strangest sight of all was to see the tall alpine pines. Other trees tottered and crashed and fell as the fierce heat attacked them; not so they, they seemed to defy the flames, and as the fire rolled back seeking for more pliant material on which to vent its fury, and the wind blew round their stems, their bark caught fire and they stood forth against the blackness like trees of molten gold.

There were here and there in the forest bold rocky bluffs, rising hundreds of feet above the trees. These were lighted up as the fire swept past them, as with the brightness of the noontide sun, and on their summits our heroes could distinctly perceive flocks of tall antlered deer, and near them frightened cowering wolves and even bears; all alike had taken refuge on these heights from the fury of the flames that held sway beneath them.

For a short time only the scene held the little party spellbound. Ralph was the first to speak.

“Alas! poor Oscar!” he said in a mournful tone, “he must have perished in the flames.”

It was only natural they should come to this conclusion, but at that moment Oscar and Allan too were safe enough, and journeying onwards in hopes of finding them.

Allan could now understand perfectly and clearly every phase of the situation. His friends if alive were some miles, many miles in all probability, up-stream, the dog had escaped from their camp fire, the fire hid originated at their camp, and to escape destruction they must have crossed the stream. Allan had never seen a forest on fire before, but he had seen the heather, and he knew something about the dangerous rapidity with which flames can spread along in the open. As soon, therefore, as there was a glimmering of daylight, he stripped at the river’s brink, tied his clothes into a bundle with his plaid, and swam to the other side, the dog following as if he understood the move entirely and quite approved of it.

It was well he had done so, for another hour’s journey along that winding river’s banks brought him face to face with the raging fire. But wind as it might, Allan determined not to lose sight of it again; he made all speed nevertheless. He knew his friends must wait now until the charred and blackened ground cooled down before they re-crossed the river and recommenced the search.

Yet, reader, we who know that Allan is safe cannot fully sympathise with his friends in the gloom and anxiety that settled down on their hearts. When the excitement caused by the fire and their narrow escape from destruction wore off, it left behind it an utter hopelessness and despair, which it is difficult to describe. When they had lain down to sleep on the previous evening, they were full of confidence that they would soon come

up with Allan. Seth had pronounced the trail a fresh one, and assured them he would find the lost boy before another sunset. Rory was full of fun, even pronouncing Allan a "rogue of a runaway," and saying that "sure the search for him was only a wild-goose chase after all said and done, and Allan the goose."

But now where was that confidence? Where was hope? Dead. Dead, just as they had not a single doubt Allan and his poor dog were at that moment. And oh! to think that it was their own carelessness that had caused that dreadful fire, which they felt sure must have cost Allan his precious life. They would, however, so they determined, resume the search; but what an aimless one it would be now, with track and trail gone for ever!

Seth lit a fire; he even cooked food, but no one cared to speak, much less to eat! and so the day wore gloomily away. The wind, which had gone down at noon, began to rise again and moan mournfully among the swaying branches, and a few drops of rain fell. There would be neither moon nor stars to-night. The sky was overcast with grey and leaden cumulus drifting before the restless wind, and night was coming on a good hour before its time.

They crept closer together. They gathered more closely to the log fire.

"Boys," said McBain, and he spoke with some difficulty, as if his heart were very full indeed—"boys, the shieling (Highland cot) where I lived when a child on the braes of Arrandoon was a very humble one indeed; my father was a poor man, but a brave and pious one; not that I mean to boast of that, but there wasn't a morning passed without a prayer being said, and a song being sung in praise of Him we children were all taught to fear, and reverence, and trust. He taught us to say those beloved words, 'Thy will be done.' Oh! boys, it is easy to breathe that prayer when everything is going well with us, but in gloom and trouble like the present, it is true courage and true worship if we can speak the words not with lips but with hearts."

After a pause,—

"I think," McBain continued, "if anything has happened to poor Allan, it will be our duty to get back as speedily as may be to Scotland, and forego our voyage farther north."

Now, at that very moment Allan and his dog were within sight of the camp fire; he was holding Oscar by the collar, and meditating what would be the best and least startling way to make known his presence.

Should he fire his rifle in the air? That would be better than suddenly appearing like a ghost among them.

But Oscar settled the difficulty in a way of his own. He bounded away from his master's grasp with a joyful bark, and next moment was careering like a mad thing round and round the group at the fire.

This way of breaking the intelligence of Allan's safety was very abrupt, but it was very satisfactory.

When the surprised greetings with which Allan was hailed had in some measure subsided—when he had explained the part that Oscar had played, and told them that but for the great fire he never would have believed that he had been going eastwards instead of west—then McBain said, in his old quiet manner,—

"You see, boys, there is a Providence in all things, and, on the whole, I'm not sorry that this should have happened."

But twenty years at the very least seemed to have fallen off the load of the trapper's age.

Seth knew what men were, and so he heaped more wood on the fire, and set about at once getting supper ready.

Sapper would never have suggested itself to anybody if Allan had not returned.

The journey "home," as the good yacht was always called, was commenced the very next morning, and accomplished in eight-and-forty hours.

A red deer fell to Allan's gun by the way.

"I do believe," said Allan, "it is the self-same rascal that led me such a dance."

"We'll have a haunch off him, then," said McBain, "to roast when we go back, and so celebrate your return."

"The chief's return," said Ralph, laughing.

"The prodigal son's bedad," said Rory; "but I'm going to have that stag's head. Isn't he a lordly fellow, with his kingly antlers! I'll stuff it, an oh! sure, if we ever do get back to Arrandoon, it's myself will hang it in the hall in commemoration of the great wild-goose chase."

By means of their compasses and trapper Seth's skill they were able to march in almost a bee-line upon what they termed their own ravine. But not during any portion of the journey was Seth idle. He was scanning every yard of the ground around him, studying every feature of the landscape, and making so many strange marks upon the trees, that at last Rory asked him,—

"Whatever are you about, friend Seth? Is it a button off your coat you've lost, or what is the meaning of your strange earnestness?"

Seth smiled grimly.

"I guess," he replied, "we may have to make tracks across this bit of country once or twice after the snow is on the ground. Shouldn't like to be lost, should you?"

Rory shrugged his shoulders.

When they were having their mid-day meal Rory returned to the charge.

"Were ever you lost in the snow?" he said to Seth.

"More'n once," replied Seth.

"Tell us."

"Once in partikler," said Seth, "three of us were movin' around in a wild bit o' country. It were skootin' after the b'ars we were, with our snow-shoes on, for the snow were plaguey deep. I was a bit younger then, and I calculate that accounted for a deal of my headlong stupidity. Anyhow, we lost our way, and when we got our bearings again, night was beginning to fall, and as we didn't fancy passing it away from the log fire, we just made about all the haste we knew how to. I knew every tree, even with snow on 'em, but I hadn't taken correct note of the rocks and gullies and such. And presently, blame me, gentlemen, if I didn't miss my footing and go tumbling down to the bottom of a pit, twenty feet deep if it were an inch. I didn't go quite alone, though. No, I just drops my gun and clutches Jager by the hand, and down we goes together in the most affectionate manner ever you could wish to see.

"Nat Weekley was a-comin' sliding up some ways in the rear. He was lookin' at his toes like, and didn't see us disappear, but he told us afterwards he kind o' missed us all of a suddint, you see, and guessed we'd gone somewheres down into the bowels o' the earth. He was an amoosin kind of a 'possum, was old Nat. Presently he discovered our hole,

and laying himself cautiously down on the lower side of it, so's he shouldn't fall, he peers over the brink. He couldn't see us for a bit, with the blinding snow-powder we'd raised. But Nat wasn't going to be done.

"'Anybody down there?' says Nat, quite unconcernedly.

"'To be sure there is,' says we; 'didn't you see us go in?'

"'No,' said Nat; 'what did you go in for?'

"'Don't know,' said I, sulkily.

"'How are you going to get out?' says Nat.

"'Nary a bit o' me knows,' I says; 'we came down so plaguey fast we didn't take time to consider.'

"'Went to look for summut, I reckon?'

"'Oh!' cries Jager, 'cease your banter, Nat.'

"'A pretty pair o' babes in the wood you'll make, won't you! Do you know it'll soon be dark?'

"'Poor consolation that,' I says.

"'Pitch dark,' roars Nat, 'and nary a morsel o' fire you'll be able to light. And I reckon too it's in a b'ar's hole you are, and presently the b'ar will be coming home, and then there'll be the piper to pay. There'll be five minutes of a rough house down there, I can tell ye.'

"We felt kind o' riled now, and didn't reply, and so Nat went on:

"'I kind o' sees ye now,' he says. 'I can just dimly descry ye, you looks about as frisky as a pair o' bull buffaloes. Ha! ha! ha! You'll be precious cold before long, though,' Nat continues. 'Now don't say Nat's a bad old sort. He's going to throw ye down his flask; maybe ye can't catch it, so behold, Nat puts it in the pocket of his big skin coat, and pitches it down into your hole. Don't think it's the b'ar, cause he won't come home till it's just a trifle darker, and then—ha! ha! ha!—I thinks I sees the dust he'll raise. Good-bye, my sylvan beauties. Good night, babies. Take care of your little selves; don't catch cold whatever ye do.'

“But all this was only Nat’s fun, ye see. He carried a right good heart within him, I can tell you, and he wasn’t above five hours gone when back he comes with two more of our friends carrying a big lantern, a long rope, and an axe, and in about ten minutes more Jager and I were both on the brink; but I can tell ye, gentlemen, it was about the coldest five hours ever trapper Seth spent in his little existence.”

The anxiety on board the yacht for the past few days had been very deep indeed, but as our heroes drew once more near to their home, and Stevenson made sure they were all there, dogs and all.

“Hurrah, boys!” he cried to his men; “man the rigging!”

Ay, and they did too, and it would have done your heart good to have heard that ringing cheer, and it wasn’t one cheer either, but three times three, and one more to keep them whole.

McBain and his little party made noble response, you may be well sure; and meanwhile Peter, with his bagpipes, had mounted into the foretop and played them Highland welcome as they once more jumped on board of the saucy Snowbird.

What a delightful evening they spent afterwards in the snuggery! They were often in the habit of inviting one of the mates aft, or even weird little Magnus, with his budget of wonderful tales, but to-night they must needs have it all to themselves, and it was quite one bell in the middle watch ere they thought of retiring, and even after that they must all go on deck to have a look around.

Not a breath of wind, not a cloud in the sky, and stars as big as saucers.

“Jack Frost has come while we’ve been talking,” said McBain. “Look here, boys.”

He threw a bit of wood overboard as he spoke; it rang as it alighted on the surface of the Ice.

The Cruise of the Snowbird by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Twenty Two.

Frost and no Skates!—Rory Disconsolate—McBain to the Rescue—A Roaring Day and a Merry Night—A Mysterious Pool.

King Frost had come—and come, too, with a will, for when Rory went on deck next morning the ice was all around the yacht, hard and smooth and black.

"It is frozen in we are," said Rory—"frozen in entirely, and never a vestige of a skate in the ship. Just look, Allan, that ice is bearing already! What could have possessed us to leave Scotland without skates?"

"It is provoking," remarked Allan, looking at the ice with a rueful countenance.

"Well, we can't go back home for them, that is certain sure. D'ye think, now, that old Ap could manufacture us a few pairs?"

"He is very handy," Allan said; "but I question if he could manufacture skates."

"However," said Rory, "the ice is bearing; we can slide if we can't skate. So I, for one, am going over the side presently."

"Not to-day, Rory boy," said a quiet voice behind him, while at the same time a hand was laid gently on his shoulder—"not to-day, Rory, it wouldn't be safe," said McBain. "I know you would risk it, but I love you too well to allow it."

"And sure, isn't your word law, then?" replied Rory.

McBain smiled, and no more was said on the subject; but for all that Rory had the ice on his mind all day, and that accounted for his having been seen in close confab with old Ap for a whole hour, during which pieces of wood and bits of iron were critically looked at, and many strange tools examined and designs drawn on paper by Rory's deft artistic fingers. But the result of all this may be summed up in the little word nil. Ap had taken much snuff during this consultation, but, "No, no; look, you see," he said, at last, "if it were a box now, or a barrel, or a boat, I could manage it; but skates, look you, is more science than art."

So Rory had rather a long face when he came aft again, which was something most unusual for Rory. But his was the nature that is easily cast down, and just as easily elevated again. His spirits were about zero before dinner; they rose somewhat during that meal, and fell once more when the cloth was removed.

“Do you think,” asked Ralph of McBain, “that the frost will hold?”

“Oh,” cried Rory, “don’t talk of the frost! sure it is the provokingest thing that ever was, that the three of us should have forgotten our skates. I’m going to get my fiddle.”

“Wait a moment,” said McBain.

“Steward,” he continued, “serve out warm clothing to-morrow for these young gentlemen, and remind them to put on their pea-jackets; we are going to have such a frost as you never even dreamt of in Scotland. Don’t forget to put them on, boys; and Peter, ‘dubbing’ for the boots mind, no more paste blacking.”

“Ay, ay, sir!” said Peter.

“And don’t forget the paper blankets.”

“That I won’t, sir!” from Peter.

Now while McBain was speaking Rory’s face was a study; the clouds were fast disappearing from his brow, his eye was getting brighter every moment. At last, up he jumped, all glee and excitement.

“Hurrah!” he cried, seizing the captain by the hand. “It is true, isn’t it? Oh! you know what I’d be saying. The skates, you know! Never expect me to believe that the man who thought beforehand about warm clothes for his boys, and dubbing and paper blankets, was unmindful of their pleasures as well.”

“Peter, bring the box,” said McBain, quietly laughing.

Peter brought the box, and a large one it was too.

Three dozen pairs of the best skates that ever glided over the glassy surface of pond or lake.

Rory looked at them for a moment, then admiringly at McBain.

“I was going to get my fiddle,” says Rory, “and it would be a pity to spoil a good intention; but troth, boys, it isn’t a lament I’ll be playing now, at all, at all.”

Nor was it. Rory’s fiddle spoke—it laughed, it screamed; it told of all the joyousness of the boy’s heart, and it put everybody in the same humour that he himself and his fiddle were in.

Next morning broke bright and clear; Rory and Allan were both up even before the stars had faded, and by the time they had enjoyed the luxury of the morning tub—for that they meant to keep up all the year round, being quite convinced of the good of it—and dressed themselves, laughing and joking all the time, Peter had the breakfast laid and ready.

The ice was hard and solid as steel, and glittered like crystal in the rays of the morning sun, and you may be sure our heroes made the best of it, and not they alone, but one half at least of the yacht’s officers and crew. The whole day was given up to the enchanting amusement of skating, and to frolic and fun. Wonderful to say, old Ap proved himself quite an adept in the art, and the figures this little figure-head of a man cut, and the antics he performed, astonished every one.

But Seth, alas! was but a poor show; he never had had skates on his feet before, so his attempts to keep upright were ridiculous in the extreme. But Seth did not mind that a bit, and his pluck was of a very exalted order, for, much as his anatomy must have been damaged by the innumerable falls he got, he was no sooner down than he was up again. Allan and Ralph took pity on him at last, and taking each a hand of the old man, glided away down the ice with him crowing with delight.

“But, sure, then,” cried Rory, “and it’s myself will have a partner too.”

And so he linked up with old Ap, old Ap in paper cap and immensity of apron, Rory in pilot coat and Tam o’ Shanter. What a comical couple they looked! Yes, I grant you they looked comical, but what of that? Their skating far eclipsed anything in the field, and there really was no such thing as tiring either Ap or Rory.

And hadn’t they appetites for dinner that day! Allan’s haunch of venison smoked on the board; and Stevenson, Mitchell, and the mate of the Trefoil had been invited to partake, as there was plenty for everybody, and some to send forward afterwards.

“Now,” said McBain, after the cloth had been removed, and cups of fragrant coffee had been duly discussed, “what say you, gentlemen, if we leave the Snowbird to herself for an hour or two, pipe all hands over the side, and go on shore and open the new hall?”

“A grand idea!” cried Ralph and Allan in a breath. “Capital!” said Rory.

And in less than an hour, reader, everything was prepared: a great fire of logs and coals was cracking and blazing on the ample hearth of the hall, a fire that warmed the place from end to end, a fire at which an ox might have been roasted. The piano had been transported on shore; at this instrument Ralph presided, and near him stood Rory, fiddle in hand. McBain was duly elected chairman, and the impromptu concert had commenced. The officers occupied the front seats, the men sat respectfully on forms in the rear. Had you been there you would have observed, too, that the crew had paid some little attention to their toilet before coming on shore; they had doffed their work-a-day clothing, and donned their best. Even Ap had laid aside his immensity of apron, and came out in navy blue, and Seth was once again encased in that brass-buttoned coat of his, and looked, as Rory said, “all smiles, from top to toe.”

McBain felt himself in duty bound to make a kind of formal speech before the music began. He could be pithy and to the point if he couldn’t be eloquent.

“Officers and men,” he said, “of the British yacht, Snowbird,—We are met here to-night to try,—despite the fact, which nobody minds, that we are far from our native land,—if we can’t spend a pleasant evening. We have been together now for many months, together in sunshine and storm, together in our dangers, together in our pleasures, and I don’t think there has ever been an unpleasant word spoken fore or aft, nor has a grumbler ever lifted up his voice. But we have a long dreary winter before us, and perils perhaps to pass through which we little wot of. But as we’ve stood together hitherto, so will we to the end, let it be sweet or let it be bitter. And it is our duty to help keep up each other’s hearts. I purpose having many such meetings here as the present, and let us just make up our minds to amuse and be amused. Everybody can do something if he tries; he who cannot sing can tell a story, and if there be any one single mother’s son amongst us who is too diffident to do anything, why just let him keep a merry face on his figure-head, and, there, we’ll forgive him! That’s all.”

McBain sat down amidst a chorus of cheers, and the music began. Ralph played a battle piece. That suited his touch to a “t,” Rory told him, and led an encore as soon as it was finished. Then Rory himself had to come to the front with his fiddle, and he played a selection of Irish airs, arranged by himself. Then there was a duet between Allan and Ralph; then McBain himself strode on the stage with a stirring old Highland song, that brought his hearers back to stirring old Highland times in the feudal days of old, when men flew fiercely to sword and claymore, as the fiery cross was borne swiftly through the glen, and wrong had to be righted in the brave old fashion. Stevenson followed suit with

a sea song; he had a deep bass voice, and his rendering of “Tom Bowling” was most effective.

It was Rory’s turn once more. He brought out a real Irish shillalah from somewhere, stuck his hat, with an old clay pipe in it, on one side of his head, and gave the company a song so comical, with a brogue so rich, that he quite brought down the house. It was not one encore, but two he got; in fact, he became the hero of the evening. Both Mitchell and the mate of the Trefoil found something to sing, and Ap and Magnus something to say if they couldn’t sing. Magnus’s story was as weird and wild as he looked himself while telling it; Ap’s was a simple relation of a daring deed done at sea during the herring-fishery season. After this Seth spun one of his trapper yarns, and the music began again. A sailor’s hornpipe this time—a rattling nerve-jogging tune that set the men all on a fidget. They beat time with their fingers, they tapped a tattoo with their toes; and when they couldn’t stand it a moment longer, why they simply started up in a bold and manly British fashion, cleared the floor, and gave vent to their feelings through their legs and their feet.

The dancing became fast and furious after that, and when Ralph and Rory were tired of playing they came to the floor, and Peter took their place with his bagpipes. But the longest time has an end, and at last Ap’s shrill pipe summoned all hands on board.

There was little need of sleeping-draughts for any one on board the Snowbird that night.

The frost held, our heroes could tell that before they left their beds, so intensely cold was it. Glad were they now of the addition of the paper blankets served out by Peter; eider-down quilts could hardly have made them feel more comfortable.

The frost held, they could tell that when they went to their tubs. Peter had placed the water in each bath only an hour before, but the ice was already so hard that instead of getting in at once Rory squatted down to look at it, and he did not like the looks of it either. The sponge was as hard as a sledge-hammer, so he took that to break the ice with. Then he tried one foot in, and quickly drew it out again and shook it. The water felt like molten lead.

“I wonder now,” he said to himself, “if brother Ralph will venture on a cold plunge on such a morning as this.”

And, wondering thus, he rolled his shoulders up in his door-curtain, and, poking his head into the passage, hailed Ralph.

“Hullo, there!” he cried; “Ralph! Porpy!”

“Hullo!” cried Ralph; “I’ll Porpy you if I come into your den!”

“Well, but tell me this, old man,” said Rory; “I want to know if you’re going to do a flounder this morning?”

“To be sure!” said Ralph. “Listen!”

Rory listened, and could hear him plashing.

McBain passed along at the moment, and, hearing the conversation, he took part in it to this extent,—

“Boys that don’t have their baths don’t have their breakfasts.”

“In that case,” said Rory, “I’m in too!” And next moment he was plashing away like a live dolphin. But hardly was he dressed than there came all over him such a glorious warm glow, that he would have gone through the same ordeal again had there been any occasion. At the same time he felt so exhilarated in spirits that nothing would serve him but he must burst into song.

The frost held, they could tell that when they met in the saloon and glanced at the windows; the tracery thereon was so beautiful, that even at the risk of letting his breakfast get cold, Rory must needs run for his sketch-book and make two pictures at least. Meanwhile, Ralph had settled down to serious eating. You see, there was very little poetry about honest Ralph, he was more solid than imaginative.

After breakfast our trio took to the ice again. They soon had evidence that some one had been there before them, for about a mile along the shore, and a little way out to sea, they saw that several poles had been planted, and on each pole fluttered a red flag. They looked inquiringly at McBain.

“You wonder what the meaning of that is?” said McBain; “and I myself cannot altogether explain it.”

“But you had the flags placed there?”

“True,” said McBain; “and they are placed around a pool of open water.”

“Open water!” exclaimed Rory, “and the sea frozen everywhere all around!”

“Ah, yes!” replied McBain; “that is the mystery. But we are in the land of mysteries. This pool of open water may be situated over a warm spring, or it may be there is some kind of a whirlpool there which prevents the formation of the ice, only there it is, sure enough, and howsoever hard the frost should become, or howsoever long it may last, I think that that pool will never, never close and freeze.

“The ice,” he continued, “was thin at the edge, but I have had it broken off, and will try to keep it so, and thus you will be enabled to go quite close to the water’s edge; and if my experience is anything to go by, you’ll see many a startling apparition there before the winter is past and gone.”

“You astonish me,” said Rory.

“And me,” said Allan.

“But what,” persisted Rory, “will the apparitions be like?”

“Nothing that can harm us, I think,” said McBain. “But as the ice extends farther seaward, sea-monsters will come to the pool to breathe and to disport themselves in the sunshine.”

“Perhaps the sea-serpent, for instance?” said Rory.

“Perhaps,” said McBain.

“Och! sure then,” cried Rory, losing all his seriousness at once, “we’ll have a shot at the old boy, that’s all?”

The Cruise of the Snowbird by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Twenty Three.

The Great Black Frost—Funny Jack Frost—The Cold Half-Hour—A Terrible Apparition under the Ice—Blowing Soap-Bubbles—Strange Effect—Snow and Snow-Shoes.

For week after week the great black frost continued, seeming only to wax more and more intense as the time went on. With the exception of the mysterious pool, mentioned in last chapter, and the small hole kept open alongside the yacht, there was no water to be met with anywhere. The sea, as far as the eye could reach, was a smooth unbroken sheet of glass, two feet in thickness if a single inch. If there was any ripple or swell in the now far-off blue water, it did not affect the ice for miles around the Snowbird in the slightest. There was never a crack and never a flaw in it. It was hard, solid, and black, adamantine one might almost say in its extreme hardness. The chips broken off from the edge of the ice-hole looked like pieces of greenish rock crystal. The ice-hole itself required to be broken every time a bucket was dipped in it.

Meanwhile the days grew shorter and shorter, but there was never a breath of wind, and never a cloud in the sky. And the sun looked cold and rayless, yet at night the stars shone out with extraordinary brilliancy.

Breakfast was now a meal to be partaken of by lamplight, and so too was dinner, but they both passed off none the less pleasantly for that.

“It seems to me,” said Allan one morning, “that one of these days the sun won’t trouble to get up at all.”

“We are just in the latitude,” remarked McBain, “where even at midsummer there is a little night, and at mid-winter a little day.”

“But we will never be positively in the dark, I should think, while the stars are so brilliant?” Allan asked.

“We’ll have the glorious aurora borealis by-and-bye,” said McBain, “to say nothing of long spells of moonlight; but we are, as I said before, in the very centre of a land of wonders, and there will doubtless be nights when the storm spirit will be abroad in all his might and majesty, clothed in clouds and darkness, a darkness more intense and terrible than any we have ever experienced in our own country.”

“It is a good thing,” said Rory, “that you thought of taking such an array of beautiful lamps.”

Yes, Rory was right, it was a beautiful array. As Ralph re narked, “the Snowbird was strong in lamps.”

They hung in the passage, they hung in the snuggery, and four of them lit up the saloon, with a brightness almost equal to that of day itself.

And those lamps gave heat as well as light, but large fires were kept constantly roaring in the stoves. The stove that stood in the snuggery was a very large one, and to make the place all the more comfortable the deck was almost buried in skins—trophies of the prowess of our heroes in the hunting-field. And yet with all this it must be confessed that at times the cold was felt to be very severe; indeed, the thermometer kept steadily down many degrees below zero. There was one way of defying it during the day, however, and that way lay in action.

“Keep moving is my motto,” said Rory one day on the ice.

“Indeed, Rory boy,” said McBain, “you act well up to it; if I were asked to define you now, do you know the words I would use?”

“No,” said Rory.

“Perpetual motion personified,” said McBain.

“Thank you,” Rory said, lifting his cap.

There was an excellent way of keeping out the cold after dinner, and that was to make a circle round the snuggery stove, reclining on the skins with cups of warm fragrant coffee, and engaging in pleasant conversation. There was another way of keeping out the cold in the long evenings, and that was to retire to the new hall and give a dance. This was the favourite plan with the crew at all events, and McBain, well knowing the value of healthful happy exercise, was always delighted when Rory professed himself ready and willing to discourse sweet music to the men tripping it on the light fantastic toe.

But the time of all others when our heroes really did feel the effects of the excessively low temperature, was the cold half-hour immediately after turning into bed. Of course the curtains would be carefully and closely drawn, ay, and heads carefully covered with bedclothes, but for all that, shiver they must for the cold half-hour. But gradually the

feeling wore away, warmth stole over them, then noses could be protruded over the quilts, and by-and-by sleep sealed up their senses.

When they awoke in the morning, lo and behold they were lying in caves of snow! Top and bottom of the bed, back and roof, were covered with snow to the depth of half an inch; and so were the curtains, and so were the quilts. Where in the name of mystery had the snow come from? The explanation is easy enough. The snow was nothing more nor less than their frozen breath.

I do not think a single day passed that Rory did not, during this black frost, make a sketch from a frozen pane of glass. The frost effects on the frozen glass were simply magical, and it was very curious to notice that some of the panes had been but lightly touched with the frost; they were unfinished sketches, so to speak, while others represented whole landscapes, mountain and forest and sky as well.

"Look at this pane," said Rory, one morning. "Now I wonder what Jack Frost meant to have filled that picture in with?"

"Jack seems to have been having a frolic," said Allan. "Why, there is only one long white thread down the centre of the pane, and this is all hung over with battle-axes and crosses. Jack's a funny fellow."

"Jack is," said Rory.

"Poor Seth!" he continued; "d'ye know the trick he played him yesterday?"

"No," said Allan.

"Oh! then," said Rory, "what should John Frost, woe worth him! do but go and freeze the poor man's nose, and sure enough to-day it is as big as the teapot; there is no looking at him without laughing."

"Poor fellow!" Allan remarked.

Frost-biting was far from a rare accident now, and when on the ice it was found necessary for both men and officers to keep a sharp look-out on each other's faces; a white spot represented a sudden frost-bite, unfelt by the person most interested, and only visible to his companion. But it had at once to be rubbed with ice to gradually restore the circulation, else the part, after the lapse of some hours, would mortify.

Here is a strange thing. For the first day or two of frost, while the ice was still comparatively thin, by lying flat down and gazing beneath, they were in a short time able to perceive fishes and other denizens of the deep close underneath them. Even sharks, and creatures with shapes still more dreadful, at times appeared. There was a strange fascination in this to Rory, these dark, turning, twisting shapes close under him, that stared at him with their terrible eyes, or mouthed at the ice as if they would fain swallow him, appearing and disappearing in the dark water; it was fascinating, yet fearful.

When coming from the shore on the evening of the second day, “Let us skate for a mile or two in the starlight,” said Rory.

“Agreed!” said Allan, and off they went.

They skated quite a mile from the shore.

“Now,” said Rory, “let us have a peep through the ice.”

“We can’t see anything in the dark,” replied Allan.

But Rory was of a different opinion, and no sooner had he lain down than, “Oh, Allan, Allan! look, look!” he cried.

Allan saw it too—a terrible shape, seemingly made of fire, wriggling up from the dark depths and approaching the spot where they lay, until they could see it easily. A gigantic snake apparently, as big as the stem of the tallest oak, all quivering and phosphorescent, with crimson eyes and a mouth of awful teeth! The boys felt fear now if they never felt it before. They were spellbound, too; they could not remove their gaze from the apparition, and a kind of nightmare dread took possession of their hearts.

But the thing disappeared at last; it vanished as it had come, leaving only the blackness of darkness. The spell was broken, and they skated back again towards the yacht in silence, but wondering greatly at what they had seen.

The country around them, with its hills and its forests, looked dismal enough now at times. There was no cloud scenery, and consequently no lovely sunrises or sunsets, but just in the gloaming hour, soon after the sun had gone down, the lower part of the sky all round, between the immediate horizon and the upper vault of blue, used to assume a strange sea-green hue, in which the bright stars sparkled and shone like diamonds of the purest water.

“Hallo!” said Rory, one day, “I’ve got an idea.”

The day was one of intensest frost—probably the coldest they had ever yet experienced.

“Yes, an idea,” he continued—“and that is more than ever you had, you know, Ralph.”

“Well, then, tell us,” said Ralph; “but I should think it will get frozen hard if you attempt to put it into words.”

“But I won’t,” said Rory; “I mean to put it into action.”

Rory dived down below, and his two companions remained on deck, wondering what he was going to be up to.

But presently Rory returned, bearing long clay pipes and a basin of soapsuds. “The idea is a very ridiculous one,” he said, “but a funny one. Fancy, old sailors like ourselves, and mighty hunters, blowing soap-bubbles like so many babies! But here, boys, take your pipes and heave round.”

Next moment both Ralph and Allan entered into the business with spirit, and everybody looked on astonished, for, strange to say, the beautiful soap-bubbles were no sooner blown than they were frozen, and instead of floating away and fading shortly, they remained in existence. The boys blew them by the score and by the hundred, until the deck of the yacht and the top of the companion, and even the bulwarks, were laden with them.

“Now then,” cried Rory, in ecstasy; “what d’ye think of that, captain? Troth! there is a beautiful cargo for you.”

“It’s a very fragile one,” said McBain.

“Ah! but,” said Rory, “it is poetic in the extreme, and entirely new, and I’m sure nobody ever saw such a sight before.”

“Nobody but yourself,” said McBain, “could have conceived so very strange an idea.”

“Truly,” said Rory, “Jack Frost is a funny fellow.”

“Jack Frost and you are a pair then, Rory; but I’ve got news for you.”

“What is it?”

“The glass is going down, and I think we’ll soon have a change.” McBain was right. That same day, shortly before sundown, a strange mist or fog gathered in the sky all around them, but not close aboard of them; the country was nowhere obscured, only the sky itself; and through this mist the great sun glared ruddy and angry-like.

“It is the snow-mist,” said McBain.

But still there was no wind; all nature was hushed, as if she held her breath and waited expectant.

The powdery snow began to fall as soon as the sun went down, and ere nightfall it lay inches deep on the decks, and on all the sea of ice beside them. It soon changed in its character—from being powdery it now came down in huge flakes; and when the morning broke, so deep was the fall, that there was little to be seen of the yacht save her tall and tapering masts. She was now, indeed, a Snowbird!

The fall had seemingly stopped, however, but the clouds with which the sky was now overcast were dark and threatening.

It was now “all hands on deck to clear the ship of snow,” and in less than an hour the yacht looked quite herself again, only all around her was the white waste of snow. There would be no more skating for a time, at least. A look of disappointment crept over Rory’s face, and he sighed as he saw Peter restoring the now useless skates to their box and putting them away. He had to fly to his fiddle for relief. That, at all events, was a never-failing source of comfort to this strangely-tempered Irish boy.

The men were very busy now for a few days. A road had to be dug through the deep snow to the shore, and a clearance made all around the new hall, as well as around the ice-hole. Had Rory had his will, he would have set the men to work on the ice itself, to clear roads all over it, so that he might still enjoy his favourite pastime, skating.

The snow was soft and powdery, and when he got over the side and attempted to walk on it, he almost disappeared entirely, but there was a remedy for even this evil.

From his store-room McBain produced half-a-dozen pairs of snow-shoes, and old Ap and his assistant were invited aft to study their construction, with the intention of imitating them, and making many more pairs, for all hands must be furnished with these curious “garments,” as Rory called them.

Our heroes felt very awkward in them at first, especially Ralph, but Seth came to the rescue and volunteered a few lessons.

“I guess,” he said to Rory, “you imagines you’ve got a pair of dancing-pumps on, and you wants to do a hornpipe. It ain’t a mortal bit of use trying that. You mustn’t lift your feet so high; you must just skoot along as I do, so, and—so.”

“Why, I wish I could skoot along like you,” said Rory, picking himself up the best way he could, for in trying to imitate the old trapper he had gone over and almost disappeared, shoes and all. “Troth, Seth, my bright young boy, these pedal appliances don’t suit me at all. Och! my poor ankles. I do believe the whole lot of the two of them is fairly out of joint. But one can’t learn anything useful without trying, so here goes again. Come along, Porpy. Cheerily does it. Hullo! Where is Porpy?”

There was at that present moment nothing of Porpy, as Rory often facetiously called his companion Ralph, to be seen except a pair of legs with snow-shoes at the end of them, and these were waggling most expressively.

But Ralph soon got up and alongside again, and then Rory did not call him Porpy any longer, because he did not like to have his ears pulled.

“I say, Ralph,” he said, slyly, “you’ve no idea what a pair of elegant legs you have.”

“Indeed!” said Ralph.

“Yes,” continued his tormentor, “and eloquent as well as elegant. They are a speaking pair. Had you only seen yourself two minutes ago, when there was nothing of you visible at all, at all, but just them same pair of beautiful limbs, you’d—”

But Rory never finished his sentence. He had stuck the toe of one of his snow-shoes into the snow, and away he went next.

Well, you see this learning to “skoot along,” as Seth called it, was not devoid of interest and fun, but in a few days they could skoot as well as Seth himself, and even carry their guns under their arms in the most approved fashion.

It was well for them that they had learned to hold their guns while walking with snow-shoes, for one day the trio had an adventure with some illustrious strangers, that taxed all their skill both in walking and shooting. I will introduce them to you in the next chapter.

The Cruise of the Snowbird by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Twenty Four.

The Dogs and the Snow—The Sledge-Dog—Training Caribou—A Dinner-Party Interrupted—The Race for Life.

"What's 'agley'?" asked Rory of Allan, on the morning after the great snowfall.

"What is what?" Allan replied, looking at his friend in some surprise.

"What's 'agley'?" repeated Rory. "Sure, now, can't you speak your own language?"

"Oh yes," said Allan; "but I don't know that anything in particular is agley this morning. Is there anything agley with you?"

"Be easy with a poor boy," said Rory. "Troth, it is the meaning of the word I'd be after getting hold of."

"Ah! now I see," said Allan. "Well, 'agley' means 'deviation from a straight line;' 'out of the plumb,' in other words."

"I thought as much," Rory remarked in a thoughtful manner, "and it is your own darling poet that says,—

"'The best-laid schemes of mice and men
Gang aft agley,
And leave us nought but grief and pain
For promised joy.'"
Rory finished the quotation with a bit of a sigh, that caused McBain to say,—

"What is the matter with you, boy Rory? Have you received a disappointment of any kind?"

"Indeed, and I have then," replied boy Rory, "and I suppose I must confess, for haven't Ap and myself been busy at it for the last three weeks, making an ice-ship, and hadn't we got her all complete, keel and hull and sails and all? and troth, she would have gone gliding over the surface of the ice like a thing of life. It was only the wind we were waiting for, and then we would have given you such a surprise, but instead of the wind the snow comes. Isn't it a pity?"

“Oho!” cried Ralph, “and so that accounts for Rory’s mysterious disappearances; that accounts for Ap and he being closeted together for an hour or two every day for weeks back. Sly Rory!”

“Yes,” said Rory; “sly if you like, but it would have been such fine fun, you know; and there isn’t one of the three of you that wouldn’t have followed my example and gone in for ice-yachts too. And from all I can learn it is the rarest sport in existence. Seth knows all about it, and he says skating isn’t a circumstance to it. Fancy gliding along over the ice, on the wings of the wind, boys, at the rate of twenty knots an hour!”

“It would have been nice, I must confess,” said Ralph. “Something else will turn up, though,” McBain said. “What?” cried Rory, all excitement; “are you going to invent a new pleasure for us, captain?”

“Your ice-yacht,” replied McBain, “would have been a glorious idea if the snow hadn’t fallen, and in calm days I had meant to have got up games of curling on the ice; and that, you know, is the most charming game in the world.”

“Without exception,” said Allan, enthusiastically. “But the snow, the snow!” sighed Rory. “The beautiful snow has fallen and spoiled everything.”

“Not quite so bad as that,” said McBain, with an amused smile. “In a day or two the snow will harden; we can then go long journeys and resume our hunting expeditions.” Walking on snow-shoes soon became not only easy to our heroes, but positively pleasurable, so that they were able to enjoy their rambles over the snow-clad country very much indeed.

As for the dogs, they seemed to feel that they could not possibly get enough of the snow. The exuberance of great Oscar’s joy when he went out with his mister for a walk, the first thing every morning, was highly comical to witness. Out for a walk, did I say? Nay, dear reader, that word but poorly expresses the nature of Oscar’s pedal progression. It was not a walk, but a glorious compound of dance, scamper, race, run; gallop, and gambol. Had you been ever so old it would have made you feel young again to behold him. He knew while Allan was dressing that he meant to go out, and begin at once to exhibit signs of impatience. He would yawn and stretch himself and wriggle and shake; then he would open his mouth and endeavour to round a sentence in real verbal English, and, failing in this, fall back upon dog language pure and simple. Or he would stand as steady as a pointer, looking up at Allan with his beautiful head turned on on? side, and his mouth a little open, just sufficiently so to show the tip of his bright pink tongue, and his brown eyes would speak to his master. “Couldn’t you,” the dog would seem to ask—

“couldn’t you get on your coat a little—oh, ever so little!—faster? What can you want with a muffler? I don’t wear a muffler. And now you are looking for your fur cap, and there it is right before your very eyes!”

“And,” the dog would add, “I dare say we are out at last,” and he would hardly give his mister time to open the companion door for him.

But once over the side, “Hurrah!” he would seen to cry, then away he would bound, and away, and away, and away, straight ahead as crow could fly, through the snow and through the snow, which rose around him in feathery clouds, till he appeared but a little dark speck in the distance. This race straight ahead was meant to get rid of his super-extra steam. Having expended this, back he would come with a rush and a run, make pretence to jump his master down, but dive past him at the very last moment. Then he would gambol in front of his master in such a daft and comical fashion that made Allan laugh aloud; and, seeing his master laughing, Oscar would laugh too, showing such a double regiment of white, flashing, pearly teeth, that, with the quickness of the dog’s motions, they seemed to begin at his lips and go right away down both sides of him as far as the tail.

Hurroosh! hurroosh! Each exclamation, reader, is meant to represent a kind of a double-somersault, which I verily believe Oscar invented himself. He performed it by leaping off the ground, bending sideways, and going right round like a top, without touching the snow, with a spring like that of a five-year-old salmon getting over a weir.

Hurroosh! hurroosh!

Then Allan would make a grab at his tail.

“Oh, that’s your game!” Oscar would say; “then down you go!”

And down Allan would roll, half-buried in the powdery snow, and not be able to get up again for laughing; then away Oscar would rush, wildly round and round in a complete circle, having a radius of some fifty yards, with Allan McGregor on his broad back for a centre.

After half-an-hour of such furious fun, is it any wonder that Allan and Oscar returned to breakfast with appetites like hunters?

The Skye terrier enjoyed the snow quite as much in his own little way as Oscar did, and, indeed, he used to live in under it a goodly part of his time every day. He in a manner

buried himself alive. Plunket, the mastiff, on the other hand, was always in the habit of taking his pleasures in a quiet and dignified manner.

“Now, gentlemen,” said old Seth one day, “I guess I can a kind o’ prove to you that my dog Plunket is useful, if he ain’t ornamental.”

And so the trapper set himself to manufacture a light sledge, and when he had done so, and harnessed the great dog thereto, and seated himself among the skins, it seemed about the most natural thing in the world for that dog to draw the sledge, and Seth had never seemed so much at home before as he did sitting behind him.

Oscar took very great interest in the yoking of the sledge-dog, as Plunket soon came to be called, so much so that the happy thought occurred to Rory to try him in harness too, and this was accordingly done. He was made tracer to Plunket, and although he managed sometimes to capsize the sledge in the snow, he soon became less rash, and settled quietly down to the work.

A larger and very lightly-constructed sledge was then made, and in this both Allan and Rory could travel over the snow with great ease, dragged along by the two faithful dogs.

“What a glorious thing it would be,” said Allan one day, “if we could tame and harness a real caribou!”

“We can if we try, I think,” said McBain. “Love and kindness will tame almost any animal.”

“First catch your hare,” said Ralph.

But through Seth’s skill a week had not passed before they were in possession of not only one, but a pair of deer. A rude kind of a stable was built for them on shore, and the taming commenced, and with such good results that in little over three weeks they were both broken to harness. Sledging now became quite a pastime, and great fun they found it.

Although, owing to the rugged nature of the ground, it was impracticable to venture far inland with the deer-sledge, they were able to take quite long journeys along the seashore, and here many strange birds and beasts fell to their guns, and they met with many adventures.

It is doubtful whether there is any animal in the world, that, for strength and ferocity combined can be compared, to the polar bear, the king of the sea of ice. I do not say that

he is the bravest animal ever I have met, but he is nevertheless daring enough in all conscience. Daring and cunning too. A bear will attack one man, and even come out of his way a long distance to do so, but I have never known an instance of a single bear attacking a party of even two, unless he were chased, and had to stand at bay.

Hitherto our heroes had not met, nor ever seen, this gigantic monster. But the time came.

Allan and Rory were one morning very early astir, for in the company of trapper Seth they were to make a long journey in pursuit of game, the game in question being a smaller kind of seal, to be found in abundance some distance along the coast to the east. So sledges were got out and harnessed, a long time before the stars paled before the light of the short Arctic winter day. The deer had been well fed, and were consequently in fine form; they tossed their tall antlers in the air, and seemed to spurn the very ground on which they trod.

It was a glorious morning for a sledge-drive; the snow was hard, and just sufficiently packed to make an easy path. They skirted a great forest that at times grew almost close to the edge of the sea, and long before the sun gleamed up from the north-east, to sink again in the north-west in little over an hour, they had put twenty goodly miles between them and the Snowbird.

They were now at the scene of action—their shooting-ground—and, much to their joy, they found the creatures they had come so far to seek. The seals had come up out of the water to bask in the sun, and therefore lay close, so that in little over an hour they had possessed themselves of as many skins as they could conveniently carry, and were on the eve of returning to the wood, where they had tied up their deer and left their sledges.

“I wonder,” said Rory, “what is at the other side of that far-off point of land yonder, and what we would see if we rounded it.”

“What a fellow you are for wondering, Rory!” said Allan. “Suppose now, instead of wondering, we go and have a look?”

“Agreed,” said Rory; and off they set, Seth preferring to stay behind and get the skins packed.

It was a long road and a rough one; the snow was deeper than they could have believed, but they had donned their snow-shoes, and so they reached the point at last, just as the setting sun was tipping the far-off hills with gold.

The scene beyond the point was indeed a strange one; as far as the eye could reach it was a sea of ice, but ice entirely different from the smooth unbroken snow-clad plain that lay around the Snowbird. For here the ice, exposed to the whole force of the heaving billows, had been broken up into a chaos of pieces of every conceivable size and shape. Nor was this ice quite untenanted. On the contrary, Allan and Rory had arrived in time to be witnesses of a very busy scene indeed, and one that they would be unlikely ever to forget. Half-a-dozen enormous bears were feasting on the body of an immense whale, not fifty yards from where Rory and Allan now stood.

“Down, Rory!” cried Allan, throwing himself on his face; “here is a chance for a bag, the like of which we never even dreamt of.”

It was evident that the bears had not become aware of their presence, either by sight, or scent, or sound; they kept on with their ghastly feast.

Not quietly, though, but with much snarling and growling.

“Just hear them,” whispered Rory. “Wouldn’t you think they’d be content with a whole whale? But, big and all as they are, it will be many a day before they finish their dinner.”

“They never will finish it,” said Allan, “unless I have lost the art of holding my rifle straight. Are you ready, Rory? Well, you take the nearest Mr Bruin; aim straight for the skull. I mean to give that centre gourmand a pill to aid his digestion.”

They both fired at once, and with this result—the centre bear sprang into the air, then fell dead on the snow; the near bear was only wounded, he sprang on one of his fellows, and a most desperate combat ensued. Another volley from behind the rock put a different complexion on the matter, and one more bear dropped never to rise.

“Hand me a cartridge,” said Rory, “I’ve just fired my last.”

“In that case,” cried Allan, in some alarm, “let us be off, for I have only two more cartridges; and look you, we have irritated these monsters, they are making directly for us.”

This was true. A polar bear is at no time an animal of a very sweet temper, but only just interrupt him at his dinner, and he will have revenge if he possibly can.

“Shall we fire again?” said Rory.

“No, Rory, no. Come on quick, boy, there isn’t a moment to lose.”

Even as he spoke the foremost bear had gained the shore, and as soon as he spied our heroes he uttered a growl of rage that seemed to awaken every echo in the rocks, and with head down he came ferociously and quickly on to the attack.

It was to be a race for life, that was evident from the first. On level ground I think the advantage would have been all on the side of the men, but here on the snow, and encumbered with their snow-shoes, the odds were all on the side of the pursuers. Before they had run a hundred yards this was evident. The bears were gaining, and there was fully a mile to be covered.

“Come on quicker if you can,” said Allan, who was the better runner.

“Couldn’t we stop and drop the foremost?” said Rory.

“No, no; that would be madness. The others would have all the more time to come up.”

Presently Allan had recourse to a ruse which he had read of, but never thought he would have to put in practice in order to save his life. He took off his jacket and threw it upon the snow. The bears stopped to sniff at it, and the temptation was now strong to fire, but he resisted it. They had only two cartridges between them and death, so to speak, and they did well to reserve them.

When old Seth had quietly stowed away the skins, he sat down to rest himself on the edge of one of the sledges, and so, dreaming and musing, a whole half-hour passed away. Then he began to get uneasy at the non-appearance of the boys.

“And it’s getting late, too,” he said, as he shouldered his rifle. “Seth will even go and seek them. Why,” he added, after he had gone some distance, “if yonder isn’t both on ’em coming runnin’. And what is that behind them? Why, may I be skivered if it ain’t b’ars! Hurrah! Seth to the rescue!”

And, so saying, the old trapper increased his walk to a run, and the distance between him and the boys was rapidly lessened.

And dire need too, for both Allan and Rory were well-nigh exhausted, and the foremost bear was barely forty yards behind them.

But Allan’s time had come for decisive action. He threw himself on his face, the better to make sure of his aim, and almost immediately after the foremost bear came tumbling

down. And now Seth came up, and another Bruin speedily followed his companion into the land of darkness. The others escaped into the forest.

It had been a very narrow escape, but McBain told Allan that very evening that he was not sorry for it, as the adventure would surely teach him caution.

The Cruise of the Snowbird by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Twenty Five.

The Dead Leviathan—The Mate of the "Trefoil" Makes a Proposal—A Rich Harvest—Christmas Cheer—Something like a Dinner.

The mate of the Trefoil was a quiet and sober-minded man, as old travellers in the Arctic regions are sometimes wont to be, but when Allan McGregor told him the story of the bears and the dead whale stranded in the frozen bay, he evinced a considerable deal of genuine excitement. He sought out the captain.

"I would fain see the fish, captain."

(Greenland sailors always call a whale a "fish," although, as must be well-known, it is a gigantic mammal.)

"Well, my dear sir," said McBain, "that is a desire that can very easily be gratified. We can start for the bay to-morrow early."

"I shall be so pleased," said the mate.

This expedition consisted of three guns—McBain himself, Allan, and the mate of the Trefoil.

There were still one or two bears prowling around the spot where the dead leviathan lay, but they seemed to scent danger from afar, and made off as soon as the expedition hove in sight. Probably they remembered the events of yesterday, and cared not to renew so unequal a combat.

The mate was evidently a man of business, for no sooner had they got on to the ice alongside the whale, than he proceeded to open a small parcel he carried, and to extract therefrom a pair of spiked sandals.

"I'm going on board of her," he said to McBain, with a quiet smile.

Next moment, pole in hand, he was walking about on top of the dead leviathan, probing here and probing there with as much coolness as though he had been a fanner taking stock in a patch of potatoes.

He smiled as he jumped on shore again.

“That is what doctors would call a post-mortem examination,” said McBain, smiling too. “Now, sir, can you tell us the cause of death?”

“Oh! bother the cause of death,” said the mate, laughing, as he stooped down to undo his sandals. “Do you think I came all this way to ascertain the cause of death in a dead fish? But if you really want to know, I’ll tell you. You see from the state of the ice there has been a heavy swell on here, and the ice has been knocked about anyhow; that shows there has been a gale away out at sea. Well then, the fish,”—here the mate poked his stick at the whale’s ribs in a manner that, had the monster been alive, must have tickled him immensely—“this fish, look you, came nearer land to avoid the broken water, and ran ashore in the dark; he hadn’t got any steam, you know, to help him to back astern, and he couldn’t hoist sail, so he had to be content to lie on his little stomach until—”

“Until death relieved him of his sufferings,” put in McBain.

The conversation concerning the whale was renewed after dinner that evening, the mate and Mr Stevenson having been, as was usual when anything extra was on the tapis, invited to partake of that meal.

Since they left the bay the mate had been unusually silent; he had been thinking, and now his thoughts took the form of speech. He spoke slowly, and with many a pause, as one speaks who well weighs his words, toying with his coffee as he did so, and often changing the position of the cup. Indeed, it was the cup he seemed to be addressing when he did speak.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “as man and boy, as harpooner, second officer, or mate, I have been back and fore to Greenland for little less than twenty years. I’ve been shipwrecked a time or two, you may easily guess, and I’ve come through many a strange danger in the wild, mysterious regions around the Pole. But it is not of these things I would now speak, it is about the last sad affair—my poor dear ship Trefoil, whose charred ribs lie deep in the Arctic Ocean. Oh, gentlemen! oh, men! that was a sad blow to me. Had we been a full ship we would have been home ere now, and I would have been wedded to one of the sweetest girls in all England. Now she is mourning for me as for one dead. But blessed be our great Protector that sent the Snowbird to our assistance in our dire extremity! Where, now, would we—the survivors of the Trefoil—have been else? Our fate would have been more terrible, than the fate of those that went down in that doomed ship.

“I can assure you, my dear friends,” he continued, “I have felt very grateful, and have longed for some way of showing that gratitude. I can never prove it sufficiently. But I have a suggestion to make.”

“Well, we are willing to hear it,” said McBain; “but really, sir, you owe us no gratitude, we only did our duty.”

“That ‘fish,’” said the mate—“what do you reckon its value to be?”

“I know,” said McBain, smiling, “that if we could tow it along to London it would fetch a long price; but if we could tow an iceberg there about ten millions of people would come to see it?”

“How romantic that would be?” said Rory; “and fancy the Union Jack floating proudly from the top of it!”

“Charge them a shilling a head,” said Allan, “and land 500,000 pounds!”

“And spoil the romance!” said our boy-bard.

“Oh, bother the romance!” said Ralph, “think of the cash!”

“Well, but,” said McBain, laughing, “we can no more tow the whale than we can the iceberg.”

“That fish,” said the mate, “myself and my men can flensh, cut up, and refine. The produce will be worth three thousand pounds in the English market; and beside, it will be work for the men for the winter months.”

“But you and your men must accept a share,” said McBain.

“If,” replied the mate of the Trefoil, “you but hint at such a thing again, that fish may lie there till doomsday. No, captain, it is but a poor way of showing our gratitude.”

Once convinced of the feasibility of the mate’s proposal, McBain lost no time in setting about carrying the plan into execution. It would be a sin, he argued, to leave so much wealth to waste, when they had ample room for carrying it. Even romantic Rory came to the same conclusion at last.

“Had it been base blubber now,” he said, “you’d have had to excuse me, Captain McBain, from sailing in the same ship with it I’d have asked you to have built me a cot in these

beautiful wilds, and here I'd have stopped, sketching and shooting, until you returned with a clean ship to take me back to bonnie Scotland. But refined oil, sweet and pure,—indeed I agree with you, it would be a sin entirely to leave it to the bears."

A busy time now ensued for the officers and men of the Snowbird; they had to be up early and to work late. Nor was the work free from hardship. Had the bay where lay the monster leviathan—which the mate of the Trefoil averred was one of the largest "fishes" he had ever seen—lain anywhere near them, the task would have been mere play to what it was. First and foremost, sledges had to be built—large, light, but useful sledges. The building of these occupied many days, but they were finished at last, and then the working party started on its long journey to Bear Point, as our heroes had named the place—Bear Point and Good Luck Bay.

As during the flenshing and the landing of the cakes of blubber, the men would have to remain all night near their work, every precaution was taken to protect them from cold in the camping-ground. Rory, Allan, and Ralph must needs make three of the party, with Seth to guide them in the woods, where they meant to spend the short day shooting.

By good fortune, the weather all the time remained settled and beautiful, and the four guns managed easily enough to keep the camp well supplied with game of various kinds. The cold at night time, however, was intense, and the roaring fires kept up in the hastily-constructed huts, could scarcely keep the men warm. This was the only time during the whole cruise of the Snowbird that McBain deemed it necessary to serve out to his men a rum ration. The time at which it was partaken may seem to some of my readers an odd one, but it was, nevertheless, rational, and it was suggested by the men in camp themselves. It was served at night, just at that hour when Arctic cold becomes almost insupportable. They did not require it by day, they could have hot coffee whenever they cared to partake of it, but at half-past two in the morning all hands seemed to awake suddenly. This was the coldest time, and the fires, too, had died low, and the men's spirits, like the thermometer, were below zero. But when more logs were heaped upon the fires, and the coffee urn heated, and the ration mixed with a smoking bowl of it and handed round, then the life-blood seemed to return to their hearts, and re-wrapping themselves in their skins, they dropped off to sleep, and by seven o'clock were once more astir.

Several days were spent in the work of landing the treasure-trove, then the tedious and toilsome labour of conveying it to the Snowbird commenced. There was in all nearly thirty tons of it to be dragged in the sledges over a rough and difficult country, yet at last this was safely accomplished, and the mate of the Trefoil had the satisfaction of seeing it stored in one immense bin, where it could await the process of boiling down and refining, previously to being conveyed into the tanks of the yacht.

“I feel happier now,” said Mr Hill, as he quietly contemplated the result of their labours. “It is a goodly pile, thirty tons there if there is an ounce; it will take us two good months’ hard work to refine it.”

“Meanwhile,” said McBain, “we must not forget one thing.”

“What is that?” said Mr Hill.

“Why,” replied the captain, “that to-morrow is Christmas. You must rest from your labours for a few days at least, there is plenty of time before us. It will be well on to the middle of May ere the ice lifts sufficiently to permit us to bear up for the east once more.”

“Well,” said the mate, “the truth is, I had forgotten the season was so far advanced.”

“You have been thinking about nothing but your ‘fish,’” said McBain, laughing.

“I have been full of that fish,” replied the mate; “full of it, and that is a curious way to speak. Why, that fish is a fortune in itself. And I do think, captain, it is a sad thing to go home in a half-empty ship.”

“Ah!” McBain added, “thanks to you, and thanks to our own good guns, we won’t do that.”

“Talking about fortunes,” said Allan, who had just come on deck, “we ought to have a small fortune in skins alone.”

“In fur and feather,” said Rory.

“There is more of that to come,” quoth McBain. “As soon as the days begin to lengthen out we will have some glorious hunting expeditions, and the animals our good Seth will lead us against, are never in better condition than they are during the early spring months.”

Christmas Day came. McBain resolved it should be spent as much as possible in the same way as if they were at home. There was service in the morning on shore in the hall. Was there one soul in that rough log hut, who did not feel gratitude to Him who had brought them through so many dangers? I do not think there was.

After service preparations for dinner were commenced. It was to be a banquet. There was to be no sitting below the salt at this meal; all should be welcome, all should be equal. I am afraid my powers of description would utterly fail me if I attempted to give the reader an idea of the decorations of the new hall. Almost every lamp in the Snowbird was pressed into the service. The hall was a galaxy of light then, it was a galaxy of evergreens too, and everywhere on the walls were hung trophies of the chase, and the part of the room in which the table stood was bedded with skins. But how Peter, the steward, managed to get the tablecloth up to such a pitch of snowy whiteness, or how he succeeded in getting the crystal to sparkle and the silver to shine in the marvellous manner they did, is more than I can tell you. And if you asked me to describe the viands, or the glorious juiciness of the giant joints, or the supreme immensity of the lofty pudding, I should simply beg to be excused. Why that pudding took two men to carry it in and to place it on the table, and when it was there it quite hid the smiling face of Captain McBain, whose duty it was to confront it. If you had been sitting at the other end of the table you couldn't have seen him. Ah! but McBain was quite equal to the occasion, and I can assure you that the hearty way he attacked that pudding soon brought him into view again.

Well, everybody seemed, and I'm sure felt, as happy as happy could be. Old man Magnus looked twenty years younger, old Ap's face was wreathed in smiles, and Seth looked as bright as the silver. I can't say more. Rory was in fine form, his merry sallies kept the table in roars, his droll sayings were side-splitting; and Ralph and Allan kept him at it, you may be sure. Yes, that was something like a dinner. And after the more serious part of the business was over, mirth and music became the order of the evening; songs were sung and stories told, songs that brought them back once more in heart and mind to old Scotland, where they knew that at that very time round many a fireside dear friends were thinking of them and wondering how they fared.

The Cruise of the Snowbird by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Twenty Six.

Hockey with Snow-Shoes on—The Ice Breaks up—Change of Quarters—Going on a Big Shoot—The Great Snow Lake—Indians—The Fight in the Forest.

Winter wore away. Did our people in the Snowbird think it long and dreary? They certainly did not. To begin with, every one on board was as healthy as a summer's day is long. It was mindful and provident of McBain to have laid in a good supply of medicines, and these were about the only stores in the ship that had never been as yet applied to.

The captain was a good and a wise disciplinarian, however. He well knew the value of exercise in keeping illness far away, so he kept his men at work. On dry days they would be sent in parties to the forest, to cut down and drag home wood to keep up roaring fires in the ship and in the hall as well. When snow was falling, which was less often than might be imagined, he had them under cover in the hall, where there was room enough for games of many kinds, and these were varied by regular exercise with clubs in lieu of dumb-bells. In open weather games were not forgotten out of doors, you may be quite sure. Rory proposed lawn tennis.

"We could easily get it up, you know," he said.

"Nothing would be more simple," was McBain's reply, "but it is far too slow with the thermometer at zero. There isn't chase enough in it."

"I have it," cried Allan, joyously.

"What?" asked Rory, eagerly.

"Why, hockey, to be sure; what we in Scotland call shinty, or shinny."

"It is shinny enough at times," added McBain, laughing; "but how would you set about it? You'd need a large ball, a small one would get lost in the snow."

"Yes," said Allan, "a large cork ball as big as a football, covered with laced twine. Ap can make the balls, I know."

"And we can go off to the woods and cut our hockey sticks," said Rory; "it will be capital fun."

There was no mistake about it, it was capital fun, Hockey is at all times a glorious game, but hockey on the snow with snow-shoes on! Why it beggars description. No wonder all hands entered into it with a will. The amusement and excitement were intense, the fun and the frolic immense, the tumbling and the scrimmaging and scrambling were something to see, and having seen, to go to sleep and dream about and awake laughing, and long to go to sleep and dream about it all over again. The game ended at the goal in a mad mêlée, a medley of laughter and shouting, a mixture of legs in the air, arms in the air, snow-shoes and hockey clubs in the air, and heads and bodies anywhere. No wonder the short winter's day wore to a close before they knew where they were. No wonder that at the end of the games Allan McGregor, the inventor, was dubbed the hero of the day, that he was cheered until the welkin rang, that he was mounted shoulder high, and borne triumphantly back to the Snowbird, Rory marching on in front with brandished hockey club, leading a chorus which he had composed on the spot and for the occasion.

But it must not be supposed that their life was all play; no, for independent of long hours spent in the forest in quest of game, Rory, Ralph, and Allan set themselves with a will to clean, dress, and arrange the many hundreds of beautiful and valuable skins they had possessed themselves of. This was a labour of love. These skins were part of the cargo with which they hoped to reach their native land once more in safety. Some of the smallest and prettiest of them Rory took extra pains with, and when he had got them as soft and pliable as silk, he perfumed them and stowed them in the big box Ap had made for him, and where his sketch-book—well-filled by this time—lay, and a host of curious nameless pebbles and crystals, polished horns, strange moths, butterflies and beetles, beautifully-stuffed birds and rare eggs. It was a splendid collection, and Rory's eyes used to sparkle as he gazed upon them, and thought of the time when in the old castle he would show all these things to Helen McGregor and her mother.

"Just look at him," Ralph would say at times like these; "he hasn't got the pack-merchant idea out of his head yet."

Winter wore away. It was nearly three months since they had all sat down together to their Christmas dinner in the hall. The mate of the Trefoil, and the men more immediately under his command, hadn't been idle all this time. They had been busy refining the oil, and a grand lot they made of it, and it was now carefully stowed away in the Snowbird's tanks. The mate had not been disappointed in the size of his fish, it had turned out even better than he expected, and would greatly add to the wealth of the cargo of the lucky yacht. The water had to be pumped from the tanks to make room for it, but that was no loss, for fresh-water ice was procurable in any quantity. It lay on the decks of the Snowbird abaft the foremast in gigantic pieces, and a very pretty sight it looked when the sun shone on it.

Fresh food and game of various kinds were now to be had in abundance. Ay, and fish as well. Old Seth still continued to act as fisherman. He caught them in that mysterious pool, which all the winter long had never shown a single sign of freezing.

When all was quiet of a night, probably in the moonlight or under the light from the splendid aurora, our heroes used to take a walk sometimes towards the strange pool. They took their guns with them, but only to protect themselves from prowling bears. Awful-looking heads used to appear over the surface of the pool. In daylight these creatures never showed—only when all was still at night. What they were they could not tell; nor can I. Probably they were merely gigantic specimens of bearded seals or sea-lions come up to breathe, and looked larger and more dreadful in the uncertain light of moon or aurora.

Many though our heroes' adventures were, and thoroughly though they enjoyed themselves, when the days began to get longer, when the snow began to melt, and whistling winds blew softer through the forest trees, and everything told them spring was on ahead, the thoughts that ere long the Snowbird would burst her icy bounds, that they would be once more free, once more at sea, were very far from unpleasant to them.

On days now when there was but little frost in the air, and a breeze of wind with sunlight, the Snowbird's sails would be unstowed, bent, and partially unfurled, to air them. Even this made the saucy yacht look quite coquettish again. "Ho! ho!" she seemed to say to herself, "so there is a possibility, is there, that some of these days I may once more sport my beauty in waters blue? Oh! then, blow, breezes, blow, and melt the ice and snow, for indeed I'm heartily tired of it."

It would almost seem that the country around where the Snowbird lay was chosen as a winter residence par excellence for the great Polar bear. Perhaps the winter in the faraway and desolate regions around the Pole is too rigorous for even his constitution; be this as it may, here they were by the score, and all in all, well-nigh a hundred fleeces were bagged in little over two months.

These snow-bears got more chary at last, however, and when the March winds blew they entirely disappeared.

One day the beginning of the end of the ice came; a wind blew strong from the east, and by noon all the bay behind the yacht was one heaving mass of snow-clad pieces. It was well for the Snowbird she was sturdy and strong; the grinding bergs, small though they were, tried her stability to the utmost, but the wind went down and the swell ceased; yet fearing a repetition of the rough treatment, McBain determined to seek a less exposed

position farther to the west. The ice was now loose, so as soon as there was enough wind to fill her sails progress was commenced. It was slow hard work, but by dint of great exertion and no little skill, a portus salutis was found at last fifty miles farther west, and here the captain determined to rest until the spring was more advanced, and there was a likelihood of getting safely out to sea:

The region in which they now found themselves was even more romantic and wild than that which they had left. There was still room for more skins in the Snowbird, so a big shoot was organised—quite a big shoot in fact, for it would probably be the last they would enjoy in this strange country.

The season was now sufficiently mild to render camping out to such weather-beaten wanderers as the people of the Snowbird practicable, not to say enjoyable. So everything being got in readiness, the start was made for up country, McBain himself taking charge of the expedition, which mustered twenty men in all, ten or more of whom carried rifles, but every one of whom was well armed. The principal tent was taken, and the largest camping-kettle, a wonderful multum-in-parvo, that Seth described as "a kind of invention that went by spirits-o'-wine, and was warranted to cook for fifty hands, and wash up the crockery arterwards."

Rory did not forget his sketch-book, nor his wonderful boat, which one man could carry—not in his waistcoat pocket, as Rory banteringly averred, but on his back, and three men could row in.

They followed a gorge or canon, which led them gradually upwards and inland. I call it "gorge," because I cannot call it glen or valley. The bottom of it was in width pretty uniformly about the eighth part of a mile, almost level, though covered with boulders and scanty scrub, which rendered walking difficult. At each side rose, towering skywards, black, wet, beetling cliffs, so perpendicular that not even a shrub, nor grass itself, could find roothold on them, but on the top tall weird pine-trees fringed the cliffs all along, and as they ascended, this Titanic cutting so wound in and out, that on looking either back or away ahead, nothing could be seen but the bare pine-fringed wall of rocks.

Seth laughed.

"You never seed such a place before, I reckon," he said, "but I have; many's the one. You ain't likely to lose your way in a place like this, anyhow."

It was almost nightfall ere the cliffs began to get lower and lower at each side of them, and soon after they cleared the gorge, and came out upon a broad buffalo-grass prairie, which must have been over a thousand feet above the level of the sea.

And not far from the head of the gorge, near a clump of spruce firs, the tent was pitched and the camp fire built, and Seth set about preparing a wonderfully savoury stew. Seth's dinners always had the effect of putting the partakers thereof on the best of terms with themselves. After dinner you did not want to do much more that evening, but, well wrapped in your furs, recline around the log fire, listen to stories and sing songs, till sleep began to take your senses away, and then you did not know a whit more until next morning, when you sprang from your couch as fresh as a mountain trout.

If they had meant this expedition for a big shoot they were not disappointed. The country all around was everything a sportsman could wish. There was hill and dale, woodland, jungle, and plain, and there was beauty in the landscape, too, and, far away over the green and distant forest rose the grand old hills, raising their snowy heads skywards, crag over crag and peak over peak, as far as eye could reach.

A week flew by, a fortnight passed, and the pile of skins got bigger and bigger. They only now shot the more valuable furs, but skin of bear, nor deer, nor lordly elk, was to be despised, while the smaller game were killed for food.

Another week and it would be time to be returning, for spring comes all at once in the latitudes they were now in. There was still a portion of the country unexplored. Rory, from a hill-top, had caught sight of a distant lake, and was fired with the ambition to launch his fairy boat on its waters. On the very morning that Seth, Rory, and Allan set out to seek for this lake, with two of the brawniest hands of the crew to bear the boat, McBain came a little way with them.

"Take care of the boys, Seth," he said, with a strange, melancholy smile playing over his face. "I had a queer dream last night. Be back to-morrow, mind, before nightfall." The little party had their compasses, and therefore struck a bee-line through the forest in the direction in which they fancied the lake lay. On and on they went for miles upon miles, and at last reached the banks of a broad river, and here they encamped for lunch. Feeling refreshed, and hearing the roar of a cataract, apparently some way down the stream, they took their road along the banks to view it. They had not gone very far when they stood, thunderstruck, by the brink of a tremendous subterranean cavern. Thence came the roar of the cataract. The whole river disappeared suddenly into the bowels of the earth (a phenomenon not unknown to travellers in the wilds of America).

Marvelling much, they started off up-stream now, to seek for the lake.

After an hour's walking, the forest all at once receded a good mile from the river, and the banks were no longer green, but banks of boulders mixed with silver sand and patches of

snow. Here and there a bridge of solid snow spanned the river to great banks and hills of snow on the other side. As they climbed higher and higher, the river by their right met them with nearly all the speed of a cataract. But they can see the top of the hill at last, and yonder is the half-yellow, half-transparent stream leaping downwards as if over a weir.

And now they are up and the mystery is solved; the river is bursting over the lip of a great lake, which stretches out before them for many miles—forest on one side, hills beyond, and on the right a gigantic ridge of snow. They call the lake the Great Snow Lake.

They took their way to the left along its banks, going on through the woods that grew on its brink, until they came at last to an open glade, green and moss-covered. Here they encamped for rest, and soon after embarked on the strange lake, leaving the men to look after the preparation of dinner against the time of their return.

Rory was charmed with his boat; he sat in the bows sketching. Allan rowed, and Seth was busy fishing—no, trying to fish; but he soon gave up the attempt in despair, and almost at the same time Rory closed his sketch-book. Silence, and a strange indefinable gloom, seemed to settle down on the three. But there is silence everywhere around. Not a ripple is on the leaden lake, not a breath sighs through the forest. But, hark! a sullen plash in the water just round the point, and soon another and another.

“There is some water-monster bathing round yonder,” said Rory; “and indeed I believe it’s the land of enchantment we’re in altogether.”

They rounded the point, and found themselves in a bay surrounded by high banks of sand and gravel, portions of the sides of which, loosened by the thaw, were every now and then falling with a melancholy boom into the deep black water beneath. Sad, and more silent than ever, with a gloom on their hearts which they could not account for, they rowed away back to the spot where they had left their men.

There was no smoke to welcome them, and when they pushed aside the branches and rushed into the open, their hearts seemed to stand still with dread at the sight that met their eyes. Only the embers of a smouldering fire, and near it and beside it the two poor fellows they had left happy and well—dead and scalped!

They say that some of the Highlanders of Scotland possess the strange gift, second sight. I know not, but McBain began to feel uneasy the very moment his party had gone, and as the day wore on he became more so.

“Ralph, boy,” he said at last, “let us break up camp at once and follow the boys.”

“I’m ready now!” cried Ralph, alarmed at his captain’s manner.

A meal was hastily served out, and in ten minutes more the start was commenced.

The men marched in silence, partaking in a measure of the gloom of their leader. There was no thought of shooting the game that crossed their pathway. But the trail was easy. They reached the Great Snow Lake, and bore round to the right, and soon entered the dark forest. Here in the gloom the trail was more difficult to follow, and they soon lost it. While they were waiting and doubting, the stillness of the forest was broken by a yell, that not only startled the listeners, but chilled them to the very marrow. Again and again it was repeated, mingled with shouting and the sharp ring of rifles. It was a dread sound; it was as—

“Though men fought upon the earth,
And fiends in upper air.”
“On, men, on!” cried McBain; “our boys are yonder; they are being foully massacred!”

As he spoke he dashed forward in the direction whence the sound proceeded, followed by his brave fellows, and in a few minutes more had cleared the forest and gained the glade where the unequal strife was proceeding. And none too soon. Here were brave young Allan and stately Seth, their backs against a tree, defending themselves, with rifles clubbed, against a cloud of skin-clad savages armed with bows and arrows, but brandishing only spear and tomahawk.

High o’er the din of the strife rang our people’s British cheer. One well-aimed volley, then McBain charged the very centre of the crowd, and blows fell and men fell like wintry rain.

So quick and unexpected had been the onslaught that the savages were beaten back in less time almost than it takes me to describe it—beaten back into the forest and pursued as far as their own encampment. Here they made a stand, and the battle raged for a whole hour; but when did ever savages hold their own very long against the white man?

Let us draw a curtain on the scene that followed—the rout and the pursuit, and the return to the glade where the fight commenced. Stillness once more prevailed as our people re-entered it.

McBain glanced hastily and anxiously around. Where was Rory? Alas! he had not far to look. Yonder he lay, where the fight had raged the fiercest, on his back, quiet and still, with purple upturned face.

It was a painful scene, and down from the sky looked the round rising moon, while daylight slowly faded into gloaming.

As the giant oak is bent before the gale, so bowed was McBain in his grief. He knelt him down beside poor Rory and covered his face with his hands. “My boy! my poor boy!” was all he could say.

Seth had taken but one glance at Rory’s dark swollen face and another at the rising moon. “I guess,” he muttered, “there has been pizened arrows flying around.”

Then he disappeared in the forest.

The Cruise of the Snowbird by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Twenty Seven.

The Search for an Antidote—Can Rory be Dead?—Seth to the Rescue—Seth as Doctor and Nurse.

"I reckon," said Seth to himself, "that there'll be just about light enough to find 'em. Good thing now that the moon is full, for they do say that gathered under the full moon their virtue is increased fourfold, and what is more, old Seth believes it. Hullo! it strikes me Rory is in luck. Here they grow as large as life, and twice as natural."

They were a deal bigger than Seth at all events. Tall and graceful stems with an immensity of leaf, probably a plant belonging to the Solanaceae family.

"I won't spare you," continued this curious Yankee trapper.

Nor did he. He quite filled his arms with both stems and leaves, and hastened back to the glade where lay poor Rory, to all appearance dead, and surrounded by his sorrowing friends.

"Clear the course," cried Seth, "for once in a way, gentlemen; Seth will save the boy if there be a save in him. Carry him along to the lake. Gently with him."

There was little need of the latter precaution. McBain, hoping against hope, took him up in his arms as tenderly as if he had been a child, and apparently with as much ease, and carried him after Seth to the Great Snow Lake. Here he was laid softly down, and the trapper proceeded in the most masterly manner to bathe and rinse Rory's terrible wounds. The white milky juice from the fleshy stem of the curious plant was then dropped into them, and they were carefully covered over with bruised leaves.

"There is little else we can do now," said Seth, "but set us down to watch."

"And pray," murmured McBain. Then he said aloud, "I do not doubt your skill, friend Seth, but here I fear there is more to contend with than mortal power can hope to cope with. The poor boy is dead."

For well-nigh an hour they sat beside him; gloaming had deepened into night, and a fire had been lighted which brought forth Rembrandtine shadows from the woods, and cast its beams far over the broad lake, until they were swallowed up in the darkness. An

hour, and yet no signs of returning life—a whole hour, and they still seemed to look on poor Rory as on the face of the dead.

But see! can they be mistaken? Did not his lips move? They did, and now they move again. A sigh is breathed, and presently one faint word is ejaculated.

The word was “Water.”

“He’ll live,” cried Seth; “he’ll live! This is the proudest day for the old trapper in the whole course of his born existence.”

And the cry of Rory for water was indeed the first sign of returning life. A few drops of the juice of that wonderful plant were squeezed into the wounded boy’s mouth, and, ten minutes after, the colour had returned to his face, and he was sleeping as sweetly and soundly as ever he had slept in his life.

McBain squeezed the hand of the honest trapper. In silence he pressed the trapper’s hand. Perhaps he could not have spoken at that moment had he wished to do so, for there was a moisture in his eyes that he had no need to be ashamed of.

While Rory sleeps calmly by the rude log fire, there is other and sadly mournful work to be attended to, for three of the Snowbird’s brave crew lie stark and stiff. So the dead had to be laid out, and the graves dug, where, as soon as sunrise, they would lie side by side with those who had so lately been their foes.

Two more men were wounded, but none so severely as Rory.

There was little sleep for any one in the camp that night, for they were constantly in dread of a renewed attack by the savages. Even the luxury of a fire was a danger, and yet upon this depended Rory’s very existence; but patrols were kept constantly moving through the forest near to prevent surprises.

“Yet I don’t think,” said Seth, “that them bothering blueskins will come around again. We’ve given them such a taste of our steel and our shooting-irons that it ain’t likely they’ll have an appetite for more for some days to come.”

“Shall you hunt them up in the morning,” asked Allan, “and have revenge?”

“No,” said McBain; “no, Allan. The principle is a bad one. People should fight in defence of their homesteads, fight for life and honour, but never to simply show their superiority or for mere revenge.”

Very simple was the service conducted by McBain by the graves of the fallen men. Very simple, and yet, methinks, none the less impressive. A psalm from the metrical version of Israel's sweetest singer, and a prayer—that was all; then the graves were covered in and left, and there they lie by the side of that Great Snow Lake, with never a stone to mark the spot. Oh! but those three poor fellows will live for many a day and many a year in the memory of their messmates.

The march back to the Snowbird was a mournful one. The skins they had collected did not seem to have the same value now. McBain would not leave them behind, however. Duty must not be neglected, even in the midst of grief.

And Rory? Would he live? Would the blood ever bound again through his veins as of yore? Would he ever again be the bright-smiling, sunny-faced lad he had been? For weeks this was doubted. He lay on his bed, so pallid and worn that every one save Seth thought he was wearing away to the land o' the leal. Seth would not give him up, though, and many a herb and balsam he gathered for him in the forest, and many a strange fish, cooked by Seth himself, was brought to tempt his appetite.

Seth came on board one day rejoicing.

"I have it now," he cried; "the old trapper has done it at last. Now, boy Rory, as everybody calls you, you have nothing earthly to do in this wide world but get well. And you'll eat what I brings, and nice you'll find them, too." And Seth proceeded to open a handkerchief and display to the astonished gaze of our heroes a lovely collection of large truffles.

"Why, truffles, I do declare!" exclaimed McBain. "I never imagined, friend Seth, that the geographical disposition of the truffle extended to these wild regions."

"The trapper don't speak a word o' Greek," said Seth, looking at McBain amusedly; "but them's the truffles, right enough, and they are bound to send the last remnant o' that vile blueskin's pisen out o' boy Rory's blood."

It was a magical stew that Seth concocted that day with those truffles. It even made Rory smile. Something of the old good-humour and happiness began to settle down on the hearts of the people of the Snowbird from that very hour, and when, a day or two after, Rory joined his mess mates at dinner, reclining on a sofa, all doubts for his safety were completely dispelled. Dr Seth, as he insisted upon calling the trapper, was invited to join the party, and not only he, but the three mates, and a pleasant evening, if not a merry one, was passed.

The Cruise of the Snowbird by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Twenty Eight.

One Last Day on Shore—Bearing up for the East and North—Farewell, Old Seth; Farewell, Plunket.

When at last Rory was so far recovered that he could go on deck with safety, he gazed around him with delight. And well he might, for a more wildly beautiful scene it has been the lot of very few travellers to feast their eyes upon.

"Why," he cried, with the old glad smile in his eyes, "summer has come again while I have been ill. Oh! such beauty! such grandeur! All the trees in leaf and the flowers in bloom, and not a bit of ice to be seen in the bay. Shouldn't I like to go on shore once more before we start, to cull a flower, or make a sketch."

"Well, Rory," said McBain, smiling at his enthusiasm, "that is a wish we can easily gratify if you really think you are strong enough."

"Strong!" said Rory, "why, I'm strong enough to fell an ox. You've no idea how strong I feel; nor how happy at being strong again."

"Happy and thankful at the same time, I trust," said McBain.

"Ay," put in Allan, "and you've no idea, Rory, how delighted we all are to have you on deck again, and really with us, you know."

Rory smiled with pleasure. He felt the genuineness of the words spoken.

They spent that day on shore quietly, and very pleasurably. They sought for no wild adventures, they sought but to saunter about and enjoy the beauties of the landscape; it would be the last ever they would spend in that lovely land, and they meant to leave it in peace. They would neither draw a bead upon a bird, nor fire at a bear, nor lure a fish from the river.

It was not without a certain feeling of sadness they embarked at last, when the day was far spent; and the same feeling stole over them when, next day, they got the anchor up and slowly sailed away a-down the bay with the jibboom pointing east and by north. By mid-day they were opposite the spot where they had anchored all the winter. The new

hall which Ap had been so proud of constructing still stood there in all its pristine beauty and pride.

“It does seem a pity,” said Ap, “to leave it to the Indians.”

“Ah! but,” said McBain, who had overheard him, “it would be a greater pity to land and burn it, wouldn’t it, Ap?”

“Yes, look, you see,” was Ap’s reply, his eyes still fondly resting on the building, “I wouldn’t think of that for a moment. Better the Indians than that Yes, yes.”

When the sun set that day the land was far away on the lee quarter; by morning it had entirely disappeared, and all the adventures they had enjoyed on shore seemed to our heroes like one long wild romantic dream. Ere the second day had come to a close every one on board had quite settled down again to the old yachting roving life, at once so jolly and so free. Watches were kept as before, the dinner-hour was changed to an earlier one, as it usually is at sea and a regular lookout was kept at the bows, as well as a man at the mast-head in the crow’s-nest.

There was need for this, too, for the ice they soon found themselves among was both heavy and dangerous. On this account the Snowbird’s head was changed a few points nearer to the west, and very soon afterwards the sea became more open and clear.

A goodly ten-knot breeze blew steadily for days from the east, and carried them well over to the land that bounds the opposite shores of the Hudson Bay, and the course had once more to be changed for a northerly one, to seek for the straits, and the icebergs again towered around, mountains high, great gomerils of snow, that at times took the wind quite out of their sails. This passage through the straits was at once exciting and dangerous, and for three whole days and nights McBain never slept, and very seldom did he sit more than a few minutes at table.

But open water came at last, and they would probably see no more of the ice until they rounded Cape Farewell, and neared the shores of Iceland. But something had to be done long before then. It must not be forgotten that on the far northern coast of Labrador, in a wild and mountainous lonely land, was the home of honest but eccentric old trapper Seth. McBain had promised to take him back, and a sailor’s promise is, or ought to be at all events, a sacred thing. McBain’s was.

“But, for all that,” said McBain, addressing Seth, “we shall be unfeignedly sorry to part with you; we would far rather you came home with us, and took up your abode at

Arrandoon. We'd find you something to do, something to shoot at times, though nothing to compare with the glorious sport we've enjoyed in your society."

"And, thanking you a thousand times," replied Seth, "but I guess and calculate that at his time of life, civilisation would kind o' go against the grain of old Seth."

"And yet," persisted McBain, "it does seem sad for you to go away back again to that lone wilderness into voluntary exile. What will you do when you fall ill? We all must die, you know."

"Bless you, sir," said Seth, "we old trappers don't mind dying a bit. We're just like the deer of the forest. We seldom sicken for more than about an hour. We simply falls quietly asleep and wakes no more under the moon."

So no more was said to Seth in order to dissuade him from his intention of going home, as he called it. But when Seth's cape was sighted at last, it was quite evident that our heroes had no intention of permitting him to go away empty-handed. They could not pay him for his services in coin. That would have been of little avail for a man in his position.

But a boat-load of stores of every kind was sent on shore with him, and Seth found himself richer by far than ever he had expected to be in his life.

"Hurrah!" cried Seth, when he had reached his clearing and found his cot still standing, "hurrah! the blueskins have been here, I can see their trails all about. What a blessing I buried my waliables. They hain't been near the place."

The crew of the Snowbird helped the old man to dig up "his waliables," and he pronounced them all intact and untouched. They also did all they could to reinstate him in comfort in his cottage.

Then, with three ringing cheers, and many a hearty good-bye and hand-shake, away they went to their yacht, and left poor Seth and Plunket to their loneliness.

The Cruise of the Snowbird by William Gordon Stables

Chapter Twenty Nine.

The Consultation—Bearing up for Home—The Wanderers' Return.

On the twentieth day of July, eighteen hundred and ever so much, but just one month from the day they had landed the Yankee trapper in the wild country in which he was monarch of all he surveyed, the brave yacht Snowbird, after many never-to-be-forgotten dangers and trials, had reached the latitude of 81 degrees north, and was far to the east of Spitzbergen. It is a month since we have seen her, and how she is lying-to in front of a tremendous bar of ice, through which she has tried, but tried in vain, to force a passage. All that men could do has been done to penetrate farther towards the mysterious regions around the Pole, and now a group of anxious men are assembled deep in consultation in the saloon. The centre figures of this group are McBain and weird old Magnus. The former is standing, with arms folded and lowered brow, gazing calmly down on the table, where is spread out an old and tattered chart,—an old and tattered chart, tapped fiercely by the thin skinny fingers of Magnus, as leaning over the table he gazes up almost wildly at the deep, thoughtful countenance of his commander.

Allan and Ralph are leaning over the backs of chairs, and Rory is leaning on the shoulder of Ralph, but every eye is fixed upon the captain.

Stevenson and the mate of the Trefoil form a portion of the group; they are seated a little way from the others, but are none the less earnest in looks and appearance.

"Behold what we have already borne!" Magnus was saying excitedly, in fierce, fast words. "See what we have already come through in our good yacht; storms have howled around us; tempests have raged; the sea has been churned into foam, blown into whitest smoke, like the surf of the wild Atlantic when the storm spirit shrieks among the crags of Unst, but has she not come bravely through it all? Mighty bergs have tried to clutch her, but she has eluded their slippery grasp, and now, though her planks are scraped by their sides, till, fore and aft, she is as white as the Snowbird you call her, is she not as strong and as dauntless as ever? What is there to come through, that we have not already come through? What is it the yacht has to dare, that she has not already dared? You sent for old Magnus to ask his advice; he gives it. Here in that spot lies the Isle of Alba in a sea of open water. And wealth untold lies there! Eastward—I say eastward still—and eastward, for only by going eastward as heretofore, can you get north. Magnus has spoken."

“I will weigh all you have said, my good friend Magnus,” was McBain’s reply. He spoke quietly and distinctly, with head a little on one side; “but, before coming to a conclusion of any kind, I should like to hear the opinions of our shipmates. The mate of the unfortunate Trefoil there has had longer experience of these regions than any of us, bar yourself, bold Magnus. What says he? Does he think there is a sea of open water around the Pole?”

“It is my humble belief there is,” said the mate; “and, leaving aside all selfish reasons, I am with you, heart and soul, if you attempt to reach it this season.”

“Spoken like a man,” said McBain; “but do you think that, with ice before us, like what you see, there is a possibility of reaching it in a sailing-ship?”

“You ask me a straightforward question,” said the mate, “and in the same fashion I answer you. I do not believe there is the slightest chance of our doing so. Brave hearts can do a great deal in this world, but, unaided by science, they cannot do everything. Hannibal, when he crossed the Alps, did not melt the rocks with vinegar. Science alone can aid us in reaching the Pole. Sledges we need, balloons are needed, and last, but not least, a ship with steam.”

“I entirely concur with you,” said McBain. “What say you, boys?”

“I think the mate of the Trefoil is right,” said Ralph and Allan.

“’Tis not in mortals to command success,” said Rory; “but I think we’ve done rather more—we’ve deserved it.”

“Well said,” cried Allan.

“Yes, well said,” added McBain; “and, after all, who shall say that we may not return to these seas again. None of us are very old, and wonders never cease. Why, I do declare that bold Magnus here looks fully ten years younger with the good the cruise has done him?”

“Ha! ha! ha!” laughed the weird old man, gathering up that chart that seemed so sacred a thing in his eyes; “and if ever you do, and old man Magnus is still alive, and has one leg left to hop upon, if it’s only a wooden one, he’ll trust to sail with you for the land he loves so well.”

“The land we all love so well,” said McBain; “the seas to which no one ever yet sailed without wishing to revisit them.”

There was a faint double knock at the saloon door as the captain ceased speaking, and Mitchell entered.

“Well, Mr Mitchell, come in, but not so doubtingly; we have done talking, and have come to the unanimous conclusion that the time has arrived for us to bear up.”

“Hurrah! to that,” said Mitchell, striking his left palm with his right fist in a very solid manner indeed.

“And now, sir,” continued Mitchell, “I come to tell you that quite a wall of mist is rolling down upon us from the nor’-east. It is as close and black as factory smoke, and it is now close aboard of us.”

“Any wind?”

“Not much, sir, but what little there is is coming down along with the mist.”

“Then fill the foreyard, Mr Mitchell. Set every stitch she’ll bear, studding-sails if you like, so long as it isn’t too dark and close, and the bergs are anything like visible. I’ll be on deck myself presently.”

“Well, Rory,” said Captain McBain, entering the snuggery that same night, rubbing his hands and beaming with smiles, “so we have borne up at last; how do you like the idea of returning to your native land after all your long journeyings and wild adventures?”

“Indeed, I like it immensely,” replied Rory, “barring the difference that it isn’t my native land I’ll be going to after all, but the land o’ the mountain and the flood. Oh! won’t I be happy to meet Allan’s dear mother and sister again! And even Janet, the dear old soul!”

“Well,” said McBain, taking up Rory’s fiddle and thoughtfully bringing some very discordant notes out of it, “I sincerely hope they will be all alive to meet us: if the meeting be all right I don’t fear for the greeting.” Then brightening up and putting down the instrument, he continued, “I’ve been leaning over the bows for the last hour, and thinking, and I’ve come to the conclusion that we haven’t done so badly by our cruise after all.”

“We haven’t filled up with ivory from the mammoth caves though,” said Ralph, with a sigh.

“Why that plaintive sigh, poor soul?” asked Rory.

“Ah! because, you know,” replied Ralph, pinching Rory’s ear, “we haven’t made wealth untold, and I’ll have to marry my grandmother after all.”

“Oh!” cried McBain, “your somewhat antiquated cousin; I had forgotten all about her.”

“I hadn’t,” said Ralph.

“Never mind,” said Rory, “something may turn up, and even if the worst comes to the worst, I’ll be at the wedding, and play the Dead March in Saul.”

“Ah!” said Ralph, “it is just as well for you that you moved out of my reach, you saucy boy?”

“There are two thousand pounds to a share,” continued McBain, “if we sell our furs and oils only indifferently well.”

“And sure,” said Rory, “even that is better than a stone behind the ear. And look at all the fun we have had, and all the adventures; troth, we’ll have stories to tell all our lives, if we never go to sea any more, and live till we’re as old as the big hill o’ Howth.”

“But I think, you know, boys,” McBain went on, “we have gained a deal more than the simple pecuniary value of what lies in our tanks and lockers. Increased health and strength, for instance.”

“Ah?” added Allan, “strength of mind as well as body, for, positively, before I left Glentroom, I did little else but mope—now, I think I won’t do anything of the kind again. With the little capital I have obtained, I will begin and cultivate my glen—it is worth more than rabbits’ food.”

“Yes,” said McBain, “there is gold in the glen.”

“Speaking figuratively, yes.”

“It only needs perseverance to make it yield it. What a grand thing that perseverance is! I think, boys, we’ve learned a little of its virtue, even in this cruise of ours, though we haven’t done everything we had hoped. But perseverance builds names and fortunes—it builds cities too.”

“It builds continents,” said Rory, looking very wise—for him; “just look what a midge of a creature the coral zoophyte is, but look at the work it is doing every day, the worlds it is throwing up almost, for future millions to inhabit.”

Thus continued our heroes talking till long past midnight; and even after they had retired, one at least did not fall all at once asleep. That one was Allan. He began to believe that his dreams of restoring his dear old roof-tree, Arrandoon Castle, would yet be realised. That a time would soon come when his mother and sister would sit in halls as noble as any his forefathers had occupied, and mingle among a peasantry as happy and content as they were in the good old years of long, long ago. Perseverance would do it; and, happy thought, he would adopt a new badge, and it would neither be a flower, nor a fern, nor a feather, but simply a piece of coral. Then presently he found himself deep down in the green translucent waters of the Indian Ocean, in a cave, in a coral isle, conversing with a mermaid as freely as if it were the most natural thing in all the world; then he awoke, and behold it was broad daylight.

At least it was just as broad daylight as it was likely to be, while the good yacht was still enveloped in the bosom of that dense mist.

The Snowbird evidently did not think herself the best used yacht in the world. They would not give her sail enough to let her fly along as she wanted to, and, more than that, she was constantly being checked by the pieces of ice that struck and hammered at her on both bow and quarter. Sometimes she seemed to lose her temper and stop almost dead still, as much as to say, “I do think such treatment most ungrateful after all I’ve gone through, and, if it continues, I declare I won’t go another step of my toe towards home.”

Ah! but when a week passed away, and when all at once the yacht sailed out from this dark and pitiless mist, and found herself in a blue rippling sea, with a blue and cloudless sky overhead, and never a bit of ice to be seen, then she did regain her temper.

“Well,” she said, “this is nice, this is perfectly jolly; now for a trifle more sail, and won’t I go rolling home!”

Sunlight seemed to bring joy to every heart. Our heroes walked the deck arrayed in their best, walked erect with springy steps and smiling faces. They had laid aside their winter and donned their summer clothing, and summer was in their hearts as well.

But the Snowbird, the once beautiful Snowbird, now all scraped with ice and bare, should she have holiday attire likewise? She was not forgotten, I do assure you. For days and days men were slung in ropes overboard, on all sides of her, scraping, and painting,

and polishing; men were hung like herrings aloft, scraping and varnishing there; and soon the decks were scrubbed to a snowy whiteness, and every bit of brass about her shone like burnished gold. She seemed a spick-and-span new Snowbird, and, what is more, she seemed to feel it too, and give herself all the additional airs and graces she could think of.

At long last the seagulls came sailing to meet her, and a day or two thereafter,—

“Land, ho!” was the glad cry from the outlook aloft. Only a long blue mist on the distant horizon, developing itself soon however, into a black line capped with green. Presently the dark line grew bigger, and then it became fringed beneath with a line of snowy white.

Shetland once again; and when it opened out more, and began to fall off to the bow, the primitive cottages could be descried, and the diminutive cattle and the sheep that browsed on its braes.

Even great Oscar, the Saint Bernard, must needs put his paws on the bulwarks, and gaze with a longing sniff towards the land, then jumping on deck go bounding along, barking for very joy; and as the little Skye looked so miserable because he could only have a sniff through the lee scuppers, Rory lifted him on to the capstan, and pointed out the land to him.

Then rough sea-dogs of men pulled off from a little village to greet them, dressed in jackets like the coats of bears. Rough though they looked, the foreyard was hauled aback all the same.

“No,” they said, “they didn’t think the country was at war.” That was all they could say; but they gave the captain a week-old newspaper and fish for all hands, in return for a few cakes of tobacco.

Then away they pulled, and the Snowbird sailed on. Lerwick was reached in good time, and here they cast anchor for five hours; here weird old Magnus bade them all an affectionate adieu, and here our heroes landed to telegraph to their friends.

How anxiously the replies were waited for, and with what trembling hands and beating hearts they opened them when they did arrive, only those can know who have been years absent from their native shores, without hearing from those they hold dear.

The gist of the despatches was as follows:—Number 1 to Allan from Arrandoon. “All alive and well.” Number 2 to Ralph. “Father alive and well, will meet you at Oban. Your cousin, alas! no more. Fortune falls to you.”

“Hurrah!” cried Ralph, “my cousin is dead!”

McBain could not restrain a smile.

“What a strange equivocal way of expressing your grief!” he said.

“Och!” said Rory, “excuse the poor boy; he won’t have to marry his grandmother nevermore.”

Rory’s own telegram was the least satisfactory. It was from his agents. It was all about rents, and they didn’t advise him to return to Ireland “just yet.”

“I’m right glad of that,” said Allan; “you shall stop with me till ‘just yet’ blows over.”

There was nothing to keep them much longer at Shetland. Yet the moors were all purple with heather. Allan suggested gathering a garland to hang at the Snowbird’s main truck, where the crow’s-nest had been through all the Arctic winter.

“So romantic a proposal,” said Rory, “deserves seconding, though ’deed and in troth, when you spoke, Allan, of gathering heather, I fancied it would be a broom you’d be after making. There is a spice of poetry in you after all.”

Two days after this, on a lovely balmy August afternoon, with just wind enough to fill the sails, the Snowbird, looking as white in canvas as her namesake, looking as clean and as taut and as trim as though she had never left the Scottish shores, rounded the point of Ardnamurchan, and stood in towards Loch Sunart. Hardly had they opened out the broad blue lake when McBain exclaimed, with joyous excitement in his every tone,—

“Boys, come here, quick!”

The boys came bounding.

“Look yonder, what is that?” As she spoke he pointed towards a tidy little cutter yacht that came rushing towards them over the water as if she couldn’t come quickly enough.

“The Flower of Arrandoon!” every one said in a breath. And so it was. Too impatient to remain any longer at Oban, our heroes’ friends had set sail to meet them. In fifteen minutes more they were all together on board the Snowbird.

I would much rather leave it to the reader’s imagination than tell of the joyous greetings that followed, of the pleasant passage up the canal and through the lake, till once more anchored in sight of the dear old castle, surrounded with its hills of glorious purple heather; of the return to Arrandoon, and the wildness of the dogs, and the ecstasies of poor old Janet, for as the chain rattles over the bows and the anchor drops in the waters of the lake—the Cruise of the “Snowbird” ends.

It remains only for me, the author, to briefly breathe that little word, which never yet was spoken without some degree of tender sorrow, and say Adieu.


Freeditorial