The Battery And The Boiler

By

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The Battery and the Boiler

Chapter One

In which the Hero makes his First Flash and Explosion

Somewhere about the middle of this nineteenth century, a baby boy was born on the raging sea in the midst of a howling tempest. That boy was the hero of this tale.

He was cradled in squalls, and nourished in squalor—a week of dirty weather having converted the fore-cabin of the emigrant ship into something like a pig-sty. Appreciating the situation, no doubt, the baby boy began his career with a squall that harmonised with the weather, and, as the steward remarked to the ship's cook, "continued for to squall straight on end all that day and night without so much as ever takin' breath!" It is but right to add that the steward was prone to exaggeration.

"Stooard," said the ship's cook in reply, as he raised his eyes from the contemplation of his bubbling coppers, "take my word for it, that there babby what has just bin launched ain't agoin' to shovel off his mortal coil—as the play-actor said—without makin' his mark some'ow an' somew'eres."

"What makes you think so, Johnson?" asked the steward.

"What makes me think so, stooard?" replied the cook, who was a huge good-natured young man. "Well, I'll tell 'ee. I was standin' close to the fore hatch at the time, a-talkin' to Jim Brag, an' the father o' the babby, poor feller, he was standin' by the foretops'l halyards holdin' on to a belayin'-pin, an' lookin' as white as a sheet—for I got a glance at 'im two or three times doorin' the flashes o' lightnin'. Well, stooard, there was lightnin' playin' round the mizzen truck, an' the main truck, an' the fore truck, an' at the end o' the flyin' jib-boom, an' the spanker boom; then there came a flash that seemed to set afire the entire univarse; then a burst o' thunder like fifty great guns gone off all at once in a hurry. At that identical moment, stooard, there came up from the fore-cabin a yell that beat—well, I can't rightly say what it beat, but it minded me o' that unfortnit pig as got his tail jammed in the capstan off Cape Horn. The father gave a gasp. 'It's born,' says he. 'More like's if it's basted,' growled Jim Brag. 'You're a unfeelin' monster, Brag,' says I; 'an' though you are the ship's

carpenter, I will say it, you 'aven't got no more sympathy than the fluke of an anchor!' Hows'ever the poor father didn't hear the remark, for he went down below all of a heap—head, legs, and arms—anyhow. Then there came another yell, an' another, an' half a dozen more, which was followed by another flash o' lightnin' an' drownded in another roar o' thunder; but the yells from below kep' on, an' came out strong between times, makin' no account whatever o' the whistlin' wind an' rattlin' ropes, which they riz above—easy.—Now, stooard, do you mean for to tell me that all that signifies nothink? Do you suppose that that babby could go through life like an or'nary babby? No, it couldn't—not even if it was to try—w'ich it won't!"

Having uttered this prophecy the cook resumed the contemplation of his bubbling coppers.

"Well, I suppose you're right, John Johnson," said the steward.

"Yes, I'm right, Tom Thomson," returned the cook, with the nod and air of a man who is never wrong.

And the cook was right, as the reader who continues to read shall find out in course of time.

The gale in which little Robin Wright was thus launched upon the sea of Time blew the sails of that emigrant ship—the Seahorse—to ribbons. It also blew the masts out of her, leaving her a helpless wreck on the breast of the palpitating sea. Then it blew a friendly sail in sight, by which passengers and crew were rescued and carried safe back to Old England. There they separated—some to re-embark in other emigrant ships; some to renew the battle of life at home—thenceforward and for ever after to vilify the sea in all its aspects, except when viewed at a safe distance from the solid land!

Little Robin's parents were among the latter. His father, a poor gentleman, procured a situation as accountant in a mercantile house. His mother busied herself—and she was a very busy little creature—with the economics of home. She clothed Robin's body and stored his mind. Among other things, she early taught him to read from the Bible.

As Robin grew he waxed strong and bold and lively, becoming a source of much anxiety, mingled with delight, to his mother, and of considerable alarm, mixed with admiration and surprise, to his father. He possessed an inquisitive mind.

He inquired into everything—including the antique barometer and the household clock, both of which were heirlooms, and were not improved by his inquiries. Strange to say, Robin's chief delight in those early days was a thunderstorm. The rolling of heaven's artillery seemed to afford inexpressible satisfaction to his little heart, but it was the lightning that affected him most. It filled him with a species of awful joy. No matter how it came—whether in the forked flashes of the storm, or the lambent gleamings of the summer sky—he would sit and gaze at it in solemn wonder. Even in his earliest years he began to make inquiries into that remarkable and mysterious agent.

"Musser," he said one day, during a thunderstorm, raising his large eyes to his mother's face with intense gravity,—"Musser, what is lightenin'?"

Mrs Wright, who was a soft little unscientific lady with gorgeous eyes, sat before her son, perplexed.

"Well, child, it is—it—really, I don't know what it is!"

"Don't know?" echoed Robin, with surprise, "I sought you know'd everysing."

"No, not everything, dear," replied Mrs Wright, with a deprecatory smile; "but here comes your father, who will tell you."

"Does he know everysing?" asked the child.

"N–no, not exactly; but he knows many things—oh, ever so many things," answered the cautious wife and mother.

The accountant had barely crossed his humble threshold and sat down, when Robin clambered on his knee and put the puzzling question.—"Fasser, what is lightenin'?"

"Lightning, my boy?—why, it's—it's—let me see—it's fire, of course, of some sort, that comes out o' the clouds and goes slap into the earth—there, don't you see it?"

Robin did see it, and was so awestruck by the crash which followed the blinding flash that he forgot at the moment to push his inquiries further, much to his father's satisfaction, who internally resolved to hunt up the Encyclopaedia Britannica that very evening—letter L—and study it.

In process of time Robin increased in size. As he expanded in body he developed in mind and in heart, for his little mother, although profoundly ignorant of electricity and its effects, was deeply learned in the Scriptures. But Robin did not hunger in vain after scientific knowledge. By good fortune he had a cousin—cousin Sam Shipton—who was fourteen years older than himself, and a clerk at a neighbouring railway station, where there was a telegraphic instrument.

Now, Sam, being himself possessed of strongly scientific tendencies, took a great fancy to little Robin, and sought to enlighten his young mind on many subjects where "musser's" knowledge failed. Of course he could not explain all that he himself knew about electricity—the child was too young for that,—but he did what he could, and introduced him one day to the interior of the station, where he filled his youthful mind with amazement and admiration by his rapid, and apparently meaningless, manipulation of the telegraph instrument.

Cousin Sam, however, did a good deal more for him than that in the course of time; but before proceeding further, we must turn aside for a few minutes to comment on that wonderful subject which is essentially connected with the development of this tale.

Chapter Two

Refers to a Notable Character

Sparks, as a rule, are looked upon as a race of useless and disreputable fellows. Their course is usually erratic. They fly upward, downward, forward, and backward—here, there, and everywhere. You never know when you have them, or what will be their next flight. They often create a good deal of alarm, sometimes much surprise; they seldom do any good, and frequently cause irreparable damage. Only when caught and restrained, or directed, do sparks become harmless and helpful.

But there is one Spark in this world—a grand, glowing, gushing fellow—who has not his equal anywhere. He is old as the hills—perhaps older—and wide as the world—perchance wider. Similar to ordinary sparks in some respects, he differs from them in several important particulars. Like many, he is "fast," but immeasurably faster than all other sparks put together. Unlike them, however, he submits to be led by master minds. Stronger than Hercules, he can rend the mountains. Fleeter than Mercury, he can outstrip the light. Gentler than Zephyr, he can assume the condition of a current, and enter our very marrow without causing pain. His name is Electricity. No one knows what he is. Some philosophers have said that he is a fluid, because he flows. As well might they call him a wild horse because he bolts, or a thief because he lurks! We prefer to call him a Spark, because in that form only is he visible—at least when handled by man.

Talking of that, it was not until the last century that master minds found out how to catch and handle our Spark. In all the previous centuries he had been roaming gaily about the world in perfect freedom; sometimes gliding silently to and fro like an angel of light; sometimes leaping forth with frightful energy in the midst of raging tempest, like a destructive demon—ripping, rending, shattering all that attempted to arrest his course. Men have feared and shunned him since the beginning of time, and with good reason, for he has killed many of the human race.

But although uncaught and untamed by them, our Spark was not altogether unknown to the ancients. So far back as the year 600 before the Christian era, Thales, one of the Greek sages, discovered that he hid himself in amber, a substance which in Greek is named electron—hence his name Electricity; but the ancients knew little about his character, though Thales found that he could

draw him from his hiding-place by rubbing him with silk and some other substances. When thus rubbed he became attractive, and drew light creatures towards him—not unlike human sparks! He also showed himself to be fickle, for, after holding these light creatures tight for a brief space, he let them go and repelled them.

It was not till the days of good Queen Bess, towards the end of the sixteenth century, that a Dr Gilbert discovered that the wild fellow lay lurking in other substances besides amber—such as sulphur, wax, glass, etcetera. It is now known that Electricity permeates all substances more or less, and only waits to be roused in order to exhibit his amazing powers. He is fond of shocking people's feelings, and has surprised his pursuers rather frequently in that way. Some of them, indeed, he has actually shocked to death!

It would take a huge volume to give a detailed account of all the qualities, powers, and peculiarities of this wild Spark. We will just touch on a few facts which are necessary to the elucidation of our tale.

A great event in the world's history happened in the year 1745. It was nothing less than the capture and imprisonment of wild, daring, dashing Electricity. To the Dutch philosophers belongs the honour of catching him. They caught him—they even bottled him, like ordinary spirits, and called his prison a Leyden Jar.

From that date our Spark became the useful and obedient slave of man. Yet is he ever ready, when the smallest conceivable door, hole, or chink is left open, to dash out of the prison-house man has made for him, and escape into his native earth.

He has no hope now, however, of escaping altogether, for he cannot resist the allurement of rubbing, by which, as well as by chemical action and other means, we can summon him, like the genii of Aladdin's lamp, at any moment, from the "vasty deep," and compel him to do our work.

And what sort of work, it may be asked, can this volatile fellow perform? We cannot tell all—the list is too long. Let us consider a few of them. If we fabricate tea-pots, sugar-basins, spoons, or anything else of base metal, he can and will, at our bidding, cover the same with silver or yellow gold. If we grow dissatisfied with our candles and gas, he will, on being summoned and properly directed by the master minds to whom he owns allegiance, kindle our lamps and fill our

streets and mansions with a blaze of noonday splendour. If we grow weary of steam, and give him orders, he will drive our tram-cars and locomotives with railway speed, minus railway smoke and fuss. He is a very giant in the chemist's laboratory, and, above all, a swift messenger to carry the world's news. Even when out and raging to and fro in a wild state, more than half-disposed to rend our mansions, and split our steeples, and wreck our ships, we have only to provide him with a tiny metal stair-case, down which he will instantly glide from the upper regions to the earth without noise or damage. Shakespeare never imagined, and Mercury never accomplished, the speed at which he travels; and he will not only carry our news or express our sentiments and wishes far and wide over the land, but he will rush with them, over rock, sand, mud, and ooze, along the bottom of the deep deep sea!

And this brings us to a point. Some of the master minds before mentioned, having conceived the idea that telegraphic communication might be carried on under water, set about experimenting. Between the years 1839 and 1851 enterprising men in the Old World and the New suggested, pondered, planned, and placed wires under water, along which our Spark ran more or less successfully.

One of the difficulties of these experiments consisted in this, that, while the Spark runs readily along one class of substances, he cannot, or will not, run along others. Substances of the first class, comprising the metals, are called conductors; those of the second class, embracing, among other things, all resinous substances, are styled non-conductors. Now, water is a good conductor. So that although the Spark will stick to his wires when insulated on telegraph-posts on land, he will bolt from them at once and take to flight the moment he gets under water. This difficulty was overcome by coating the wires with gutta-percha, which, being a non-conductor, imprisoned the Spark, and kept him, as it were, on the line.

A copper wire covered in this manner was successfully laid between England and France in 1850. When tested, this cable did not work well. Minute imperfections, in the form of air-holes in the gutta-percha, afforded our Spark an opportunity to bolt; and he did bolt, as a matter of course—for electricity has no sense of honour, and cannot be trusted near the smallest loop-hole. The imperfections were remedied; the door was effectually locked, after which the first submarine cable of importance was actually laid down, and worked well. French and English believers turned up hands and eyes in delighted

amazement, as they held converse across the sea, while unbelievers were silenced and confounded.

This happy state of things, however, lasted for only a few hours. Suddenly the intercourse ceased. The telegraphists at both ends energised with their handles and needles, but without any result. The cable was dumb. Our Spark had evidently escaped!

There is no effect without a cause. The cause of that interruption was soon discovered.

Early that morning a French fisherman had sauntered down to the port of Boulogne and embarked in his boat. A British seaman, having nothing to do but smoke and meditate, was seated on a coil of rope at the time, enjoying himself and the smells with which that port is not unfamiliar. He chanced to be a friend of that French fisherman.

“You’re early afloat, Mounseer,” he said.

“Oui, monsieur. Vill you com’? I go for feesh.”

“Well, wee; I go for fun.”

They went accordingly and bore away to the northward along the coast before a light breeze,—past the ruined towers which France had built to guard her port in days gone by; past the steep cliffs beyond Boulogne; past the lovely beach of Wimereux, with its cottages nestled among the sand-hills, and its silted-up harbour, whence Napoleon the First had intended to issue forth and descend on perfidious Albion—but didn’t; past cliffs, and bays, and villages further on, until they brought up off Cape Grisnez. Here the Frenchman let down his trawl, and fished up, among other curiosities of the deep, the submarine cable!

“Behold! fat is dis?” he exclaimed, with glaring eyes, uplifted brows, shoulders shrugged, hands spread out, and fingers expanded.

“The sea-sarpint grow’d thin,” suggested the Englishman.

“Non; c’est seaveed—veed de most ’strordinair in de vorld. Oui, donnez-moi de hache, de hax, mon ami.”

His friend handed him the axe, wherewith lie cut off a small portion of the cable and let the end go. Little did that fisherman know that he had also let our Spark go free, and cruelly dashed, for a time at least, the budding hopes of two nations—but so it was. He bore his prize in triumph to Boulogne, where he exhibited it as a specimen of rare seaweed with its centre filled with gold, while the telegraph clerks at both ends sat gazing in dismay at their useless instruments.

Thus was the first submarine electric cable destroyed. And with the details of its destruction little Robin was intimately acquainted, for cousin Sam had been a member of the staff that had worked that telegraph—at least he had been a boy in the office,—and in after years he so filled his cousin's mind with the importance of that cable, and the grandeur and difficulty of the enterprise, that Robin became powerfully sympathetic—so much so that when Sam, in telling the story, came to the point where the Frenchman accomplished its destruction, Robin used to grieve over it as though he had lost a brother, or a kitten, or his latest toy!

We need scarcely add that submarine cable telegraphy had not received its death-blow on that occasion. Its possibility had been demonstrated. The very next year (1851) Mr T.R. Crampton, with Messrs Wollaston, Küper, and others, made and laid an improved cable between Dover and Calais, and ere long many other parts of the world were connected by means of snaky submarine electric cables.

Chapter Three

Early Aspirations

One pleasant summer afternoon, Mr Wright, coming in from the office, seated himself beside his composed little wife, who was patching a pair of miniature pantaloons.

"Nan," said the husband, with a perplexed look, "what are we to do with our Robin when he grows up?"

"George," answered the composed wife, "don't you think it is rather soon to trouble ourselves with that question? Robin is a mere child yet. We must first give him a good education."

"Of course, I know that," returned the perplexed husband, "still, I can't help thinking about what is to be done after he has had the good education. You know I have no relation in the world except brother Richard, who is as poor as myself. We have no influential friends to help him into the Army or the Navy or the Indian Civil Service; and the Church, you know, is not suitable for an imp. Just look at him now!"

Mrs Wright looked through the window, over one of those sunny landscapes which are usually described as "smiling," across a winding rivulet, and at last fixed her gorgeous eyes on a tall post, up which a small black object was seen to be struggling.

"What can he be up to?" said the father.

"He seems to be up the telegraph-post," said the mother, "investigating the wires, no doubt. I heard him talking about telegraphy to Madge this morning—retailing what cousin Sam tries to teach him,—and I shouldn't wonder if he were now endeavouring to make sure that what he told her was correct, for you know he is a thorough investigator."

"Yes, I know it," murmured the father, with a grim pursing of his lips; "he investigated the inside of my watch last week, to find out, as he said, what made the noise in its 'stummick,' and it has had intermittent fever ever since. Two days ago he investigated my razor,—it is now equal to a cross-cut saw; and

as to my drawers and papers, excepting those which I lock up, there is but one word which fully describes the result of his investigations, and that is—chaos."

There was, in truth, some ground for that father's emotions, for Master Robin displayed investigative, not to say destructive, capacities far in advance of his years.

"Never mind, George," said Mrs Wright soothingly, "we must put up with his little ways as best we may, consoling ourselves with the reflection that Robin has genius and perseverance, with which qualities he is sure to make his way in the world."

"He has at all events made his way up the telegraph-post," said Mr Wright, his smile expanding and the grimness of it departing; "see! the rascal is actually stretching out his hand to grasp one of the wires. Ha! hallo!"

The composed wife became suddenly discomposed, and gave vent to a scream, for at that moment the small black object which they had been watching with so much interest was seen to fall backward, make a wild grasp at nothing with both hands, and fall promptly to the ground.

His father threw up the window, leaped out, dashed across the four-feet-wide lawn, cleared the winding rivulet, and cut, like a hunted hare, over the smiling landscape towards the telegraph-post, at the foot of which he picked up his unconscious though not much injured son.

"What made you climb the post, Robin?" asked his cousin Madge that evening as she nursed the adventurous boy on her knee—and Madge was a very motherly nurse, although a full year younger than Robin.

"I kimed it to see if I could hear the 'trissity," replied the injured one.

"The lek-trissity," said Madge, correcting. "You must learn to p'onounce your words popperly, dear. You'll never be a great man if you are so careless."

"I don't want to be a g'eat man," retorted Robin. "I on'y want t'understand things whats puzzlesum."

"Well, does the telegraph puzzle you?"

“Oh! mos’ awfully,” returned Robin, with a solemn gaze of his earnest eyes, one of which was rendered fantastic by a yellow-green ring round it and a swelling underneath. “I’s kite sure I’s stood for hours beside dat post listin’ to it hummin’ an hummin’ like our olianarp—”

“Now, Robin, do be careful. You know mamma calls it an olian harp.”

“Yes, well, like our olian harp, only a deal louder, an’ far nicer. An’ I’s often said to myself, Is that the ’trissity—?”

“Lek, Robin, lek!”

“Well, yes, lek-trissity. So I thought I’d kime up an’ see, for, you know, papa says the ’trissity—lek, I mean—runs along the wires—”

“But papa also says,” interrupted Madge, “that the sounds you want to know about are made by the vi— the vi—”

“Bratin’,” suggested the invalid.

“Yes, vibratin’ of the wires.”

“I wonder what vi-bratin’ means,” murmured Robin, turning his lustrous though damaged eyes meditatively on the landscape.

“Don’no for sure,” said Madge, “but I think it means tremblin’.”

It will be seen from the above conversation that Robert Wright and his precocious cousin Marjory were of a decidedly philosophical turn of mind.

Chapter Four

Extraordinary Result of an Attempt at Amateur Cable-Laying

Time continued to roll additional years off his reel, and rolled out Robin and Madge in length and breadth, though we cannot say much for thickness. Time also developed their minds, and Robin gradually began to understand a little more of the nature of that subtle fluid—if we may venture so to call it—under the influence of which he had been born.

"Come, Madge," he said one day, throwing on his cap, "let us go and play at cables."

Madge, ever ready to play at anything, put on her sun-bonnet and followed her ambitious leader.

"Is it to be land-telegraphs to-day, or submarine cables?" inquired Madge, with as much gravity and earnestness as if the world's welfare depended on the decision.

"Cables, of course," answered Robin, "why, Madge, I have done with land-telegraphs now. There's nothing more to learn about them. Cousin Sam has put me up to everything, you know. Besides, there's no mystery about land-lines. Why, you've only got to stick up a lot o' posts with insulators screwed to 'em, fix wires to the insulators, clap on an electric battery and a telegraph instrument, and fire away."

"Robin, what are insulators?" asked Madge, with a puzzled look.

"Madge," replied Robin, with a self-satisfied expression on his pert face, "this is the three-hundred-thousandth time I have explained that to you."

"Explain it the three-hundred-thousand-and-first time, then, dear Robin, and perhaps I'll take it in."

"Well," began Robin, with a hypocritical sigh of despair, "you must know that everything in nature is more or less a conductor of electricity, but some things conduct it so well—such as copper and iron—that they are called conductors, and some things—such as glass and earthenware—conduct it so very badly that they scarcely conduct it at all, and are called non-conductors. D'ee see?"

“Oh yes, I see, Robin; so does a bat, but he doesn’t see well. However, go on.”

“Well, if I were to run my wire through the posts that support it, my electricity would escape down these posts into the earth, especially if the posts were wet with rain, for water is a good conductor, and Mister Electricity has an irresistible desire to bolt into the earth, like a mole.”

“Naughty fellow!” murmured Madge.

“But,” continued Robin impressively, “if I fix little lumps of glass with a hole in them to the posts, and fix my wires to these, Electricity cannot bolt, because the glass lumps are non-conductors, and won’t let him pass.”

“How good of them!” said Madge.

“Yes, isn’t it? So, you see,” continued Robin, “the glass lumps are insulators, for they cut the electricity off from the earth as an island is, or, at all events, appears to be, cut off from it by water; and Mister Electricity must go along the wires and do what I tell him. Of course, you know, I must make my electricity first in a battery, which, as I have often and often told you, is a trough containing a mixture of acid and water, with plates or slices of zinc and copper in it, placed one after the other, but not touching each other. Now, if I fix a piece of wire to my first copper slice or plate, and the other end of it to my last zinc slice or plate, immediately electricity will begin to be made, and will fly from the copper to the zinc, and so round and round until the plates are worn out or the wire broken. D’ee see?”

“No, Robin, I don’t see; I’m blinder than the blindest mole.”

“Oh, Madge, what a wonderful mind you must have!” said Robin, laughing. “It is so simple.”

“Of course,” said Madge, “I understand what you mean by troughs and plates and all that, but what I want to know is why that arrangement is necessary. Why would it not do just as well to tempt electricity out of its hiding-hole with plates or slices of cheese and bread, placed one after the other in a trough filled with a mixture of glue and melted butter?”

“What stuff you do talk, Madge! As well might you ask why it would not do to make a plum-pudding out of nutmegs and coal-tar. There are some things that no fellow can understand, and of course I don’t know everything!”

The astounding modesty of this latter remark seemed to have furnished Madge with food for reflection, for she did not reply to it. After a few minutes’ walk the amateur electricians reached the scene of their intended game—a sequestered dell in a plantation, through which brawled a rather turbulent stream. At one part, where a willow overhung the water, there was a deep broad pool. The stream entered the pool with a headlong plunge, and issued from it with a riotous upheaval of wavelets and foam among jagged rocks, as if rejoicing in, and rather boastful about, the previous leap.

The game was extremely simple. The pool was to be the German Ocean, and a piece of stout cord was to serve as a submarine cable.

The boy and girl were well-matched playmates, for Madge was ignorant and receptive—in reference to science,—Robin learned and communicative, while both were intensely earnest.

“Now, this is the battery,” said Robin, when he had dug a deep hole close to the pool with a spade brought for the purpose.

“Yes, and the muddy water in it will do for the mixture of acid and water,” said Madge.

As she spoke, Robin’s toe caught on a root, and he went headlong into the battery, out of which he emerged scarcely recognisable. It was a severe, though not an electric, shock, and at first Robin seemed inclined to whimper, but his manhood triumphed, and he burst into a compound laugh and yell, to the intense relief of Madge, who thought at first that he had been seriously injured.

“Never mind, Madge,” said Robin, as he cleansed his muddy head; “cousin Sam has often told me that nothing great was ever done except in the face of difficulties and dangers. I wonder whether this should be counted a difficulty or a danger?”

“At first I thought it a danger,” said Madge, with a laugh, “but the trouble you now have with the mud in your hair looks like a difficulty, doesn’t it?”

“Why, then, it’s both,” cried Robin. “Come, that’s a good beginning. Now, Madge, you get away round to the opposite side of the pool, and mind you don’t slip in, it’s rather steep there.”

“This is England,” cried Robin, preparing to throw the line over to his assistant, who stood eager to aid on the other side, “and you are standing on—on—what’s on the other side of the German Ocean?”

“I’m not sure, Robin. Holland, I think, or Denmark.”

“Well, we’ll say Denmark. Look-out now, and be ready to catch. I’m going to connect England and Denmark with a submarine cable.”

“Stay!” cried Madge, “is that the way submarine cables are laid, by throwing them over the sea?”

“N–no, not exactly. They had a steamboat, you know, to carry over the telegraph from England to France; but we haven’t got a steamer—not even a plank to make-believe one. Cousin Sam says that a good workman can do his work with almost any tools that come to hand. As we have no tools at all, we will improve on that and go to work without them. Now, catch!”

Robin made a splendid heave—so splendid indeed that it caused him to stagger backward, and again he stumbled into his own battery! This time, however, only one leg was immersed.

“Another danger!” shouted Madge in great glee, “but I’ve caught the cable.”

“All right. Now make fast the shore-end to a bush, and we’ll commence telegraphing. The first must be a message from the Queen to the King of Denmark—Or is it the President?”

“King, I think, Robin, but I’m not sure.”

“Well, it won’t matter. But—I say—”

“What’s wrong now?”

“Why, the cable won’t sink. It is floating about on the top of the pool, and it can’t be a submarine cable, you know, unless it sinks.”

“Another difficulty, Robin.”

“We will face and overcome it, Madge. Cast off the shore-end and I’ll soon settle that.”

Having fastened a number of small stones to the cable, this persevering electrician would certainly have overcome the difficulty if the line had not, when thrown, unfortunately caught on a branch of the willow, where it hung suspended just out of Madge’s reach.

“How provoking!” she said, stretching out her hand to the utmost.

“Take care—you’ll—ha!”

The warning came too late. The edge of the bank gave way, and Madge went headlong into the pool with a wild shriek and a fearful plunge.

Robin stood rooted to the spot—heart, breath, blood, brain, paralysed for the moment—gazing at the spot where his playmate had disappeared.

Another moment and her head and hands appeared. She struggled bravely for life, while the circling current carried her quickly to the lower end of the pool.

Robin’s energies returned, as he afterwards said, like an electric shock, but accompanied with a terrible sinking of the heart, for he knew that he could not swim! His education in this important particular had been neglected. He sprang round to the lower end of the pool just in time to hold out his hand to the drowning girl. He almost touched her outstretched hand as she swept towards the turbulent waters below, but failed to grasp it.

For the first time in his life our little hero was called on to face death voluntarily. Another moment and Madge would have been caught in the boiling stream that rushed towards the fall below. He was equal to the occasion. He sprang right upon Madge and caught her in his arms. There was no need to hold on to her. In the agony of fear the poor child clasped the boy in a deadly embrace. They were whirled violently round and hurled against a rock. Robin caught it with one hand, but it was instantly torn from his grasp. The waters overwhelmed them, and again sent them violently towards the bank. This time Robin caught a rock with both hands and held on. Slowly, while almost choked

with the water that splashed up into his face, he worked his right knee into a crevice, then made a wild grasp with the left hand at a higher projection of the rock. At the same moment his left foot struck the bottom. Another effort and he was out of danger, but it was several minutes ere he succeeded in dragging Madge from the hissing water of the shallows to the green sward above, and after this was accomplished he found it almost impossible to tear himself from the grasp of the now unconscious girl.

At first poor Robin thought that his companion was dead, but by degrees consciousness returned, and at last she was able to rise and walk.

Drenched, dishevelled, and depressed, these unfortunate electricians returned home.

Of course they were received with mingled joy and reproof. Of course, also, they were forbidden to go near the pool again—though this prohibition was afterwards removed, and our hero ultimately became a first-rate swimmer and diver.

Thus was frustrated the laying of the first submarine cable between England and Denmark!

Chapter Five

Prospects of Real Cable-Laying—Robin meets with his First Electrical Acquaintances

Circumstances require that we should shift the scene and the date pretty frequently in this tale. We solicit the reader's attendance at an office in London.

The office is dingy. Many offices are so. Two clerks are sitting in it making faces at each other across their desk. They are not lunatics. They are not imbeciles or idlers. On the contrary, they have frequent spells of work that might throw the toils of an Arab ass into the shade. They are fine strapping young fellows, with pent-up energies equal to anything, but afflicted with occasional periods of having nothing particular to do. These two have been sitting all morning in busy idleness. Their muscular and nervous systems rebelling, have induced much fidgeting and many wry faces. Being original, they have turned their sorrows into a game, and their little game at present is to see which can make a face so hideous that the other shall be compelled to laugh! We have deep sympathy with clerks. We have been a clerk, and know what it is to have the fires of Vesuvius raging within, while under the necessity of exhibiting the cool aspect of Spitzbergen without.

But these clerks were not utterly miserable. On the contrary, they were, to use one of their own familiar phrases, rather jolly than otherwise. Evening was before them in far-off but attainable perspective. Home, lawn-tennis, in connection with bright eyes and pretty faces, would compensate for the labours of the day and let off the steam. They were deep in their game when a rap at the door brought their faces suddenly to a state of nature.

"Come in," said the first clerk.

"And wipe your feet," murmured the second, in a low tone.

A gentleman, with an earnest countenance, entered.

"Is Mr Lowstoft in his office?"

"He is, sir," said the first clerk, descending from his perch with an air of good-will, and requesting the visitor's name and business.

The visitor handed his card, on which the name Cyrus Field was written, and the clerk, observing it, admitted the owner at once to the inner sanctum where Mr Lowstoft transacted business.

“There’s something up,” murmured the clerk, with a mysterious look at his comrade, on resuming his perch.

“Time’s up, or nearly so,” replied the comrade, with an anxious look at the clock:

“The witching hour which sets us free

To saunter home and have our tea—

“approaches.”

“D’you know that that is Cyrus Field?” said the first clerk.

“And who is Cyrus Field?” demanded the second clerk.

“O ignoramus! Thy name is Bob, and thou art not worth a ‘bob’—miserable snob! Don’t you know that Cyrus Field is the man who brought about the laying of the great Atlantic Cable in 1858?”

“No, most learned Fred, I did not know that, but I am very glad to know it now. Moreover, I know nothing whatever about cables—Atlantic or otherwise. I am as blind as a bat, as ignorant as a bigot, as empty as a soap-bubble, and as wise as Solomon, because I’m willing to be taught.”

“What a delicious subject to work upon!” said Fred.

“Well then, work away,” returned Bob; “suppose you give me a discourse on Cables. But, I say—be merciful. Don’t overdo it, Frederick. Remember that my capacity is feeble.”

“I’ll be careful, Bob.—Well then, you must know that from the year 1840 submarine cables had been tried and laid, and worked with more or less success, in various parts of the world. Sir W. O’Shaughnessy, I believe, began it. Irishmen are frequently at the root of mischief! Anyhow, he, being Superintendent of Electric Telegraphs in India in 1839, hauled an insulated

wire across the Hooghly at Calcutta, and produced what they call 'electrical phenomena' at the other side of the river. In 1840 Mr Wheatstone brought before the House of Commons the project of a cable from Dover to Calais. In 1842 Professor Morse of America laid a cable in New York harbour, and another across the canal at Washington. He also suggested the possibility of laying a cable across the Atlantic Ocean. In 1846 Colonel Colt, of revolver notoriety, and Mr Robinson, laid a wire from New York to Brooklyn, and from Long Island to Correy Island. In 1849—"

"I say, Fred," interrupted Bob, with an anxious look, "you are a walking dictionary of dates. Haydn was nothing to you. But—couldn't you give it me without dates? I've got no head for dates; never could stomach them—except when fresh off the palm-tree. Don't you think that a lecture without dates would be pleasantly original as well as instructive?"

"No, Bob, I don't, and I won't be guilty of any such gross innovation on time-honoured custom. You must swallow my dates whether you like them or not. In 1849, I say, a Mr Walker—"

"Any relation to Hookey?"

"No, sir, none whatever—he laid a wire from Folkestone to a steamer two miles off the shore, and sent messages to it. At last, in 1851. Mr Brett laid down and successfully wrought the cable between Dover and Calais which had been suggested by Wheatstone eleven years before. It is true it did not work long, but this may be said to have been the beginning of submarine telegraphy, which, you see, like your own education, Bob, has been a thing of slow growth."

"Have you done with dates, now, my learned friend?" asked Bob, attempting to balance a ruler on the point of his nose.

"Not quite, my ignorant chum, but nearly. That same year—1851, remember—a Mr Frederick N. Gisborne, an English electrician, made the first attempt to connect Newfoundland with the American continent by cable. He also started a company to facilitate intercourse between America and ireland by means of steamers and telegraph-cables. Gisborne was very energetic and successful, but got into pecuniary difficulties, and went to New York to raise the wind. There he met with Cyrus Field, who took the matter up with tremendous enthusiasm. He expanded Gisborne's idea, and resolved to get up a company to

connect Newfoundland with Ireland by electric cable. Field was rich and influential, and ultimately successful—"

"Ah! would that you and I were rich, Fred," interrupted Bob, as he let fall the ruler with a crash on the red-ink bottle, and overturned it; "but go on, Fred, I'm getting interested; pardon the interruption, and never mind the ink, I'll swab it up.—He was successful, was he?"

"Yes, he was; eminently so. He first of all roused his friends in the States, and got up, in 1856, the 'New York, Newfoundland, and London Telegraph Company,' which carried a line of telegraph through the British Provinces, and across the Gulf of Saint Lawrence to Saint John's, Newfoundland—more than 1000 miles—at a cost of about 500,000 pounds. Then he came over to England and roused the British Lion, with whose aid he started the 'Atlantic Telegraph Company,' and fairly began the work, backed by such men as Brett, Bidden, Stephenson, Brunel, Glass, Eliot, Morse, Bright, Whitehouse, and a host of others. But all this was not done in a day. Cyrus Field laboured for years among preliminaries, and it was not until 1857 that a regular attempt was made to lay an Atlantic cable. It failed, because the cable broke and was lost. A second attempt was made in 1858, and was successful. In that year, my boy, Ireland and Newfoundland were married, and on the 5th of August the first electric message passed between the Old World and the New, through a small wire, over a distance of above 2000 miles. But the triumph of Field and his friends was short-lived, for, soon after, something went wrong with the cable, and on the 6th September it ceased to work."

"What a pity!" exclaimed Bob; "so it all went off in smoke."

"Not quite that, Bob. Before the cable struck work about 400 messages had been sent, which proved its value in a financial point of view, and one of these messages—sent from London in the morning and reaching Halifax the same day—directed that 'the 62nd Regiment was not to return to England,' and it is said that this timely warning saved the country an expenditure of 50,000 pounds. But the failure, instead of damping, has evidently stimulated the energies of Mr Field, who has been going about between America and England ever since, stirring people up far and near to raise the funds necessary for another attempt. He gives himself no rest; has embarked his own fortune in the affair, and now, at this moment, in this year of grace 1865, is doing his best, I have no doubt, to induce our governor, Mr Lowstoft, to embark in the same boat with himself."

It would seem as if Fred had been suddenly endowed with the gift of second-sight, for at that moment the door of his employer's room opened, and Mr Lowstoft came out, saying to his visitor, in the most friendly tones, that he had the deepest sympathy with his self-sacrificing efforts, and with the noble work to which he had devoted himself.

Bob, in a burst of sudden enthusiasm, leaped off his stool, opened the office-door, and muttered something as the distinguished visitor passed him.

"I beg pardon," said Mr Field, checking himself, "what did you say?"

"I—I wish you good luck, sir, with—with the new cable," stammered the clerk, blushing deeply.

"Thank you, lad—thank you," said Mr Field, with a pleasant smile and nod, as he went away.

"Mr Sime," said Mr Lowstoft to Bob, turning at the door of his room, "send young Wright to me."

"Yes, sir," replied the obedient Bob, going to a corner of the room and applying his lips to a speaking-tube.

Now young Wright was none other than our hero Robin grown up to the mature age of fifteen.

He was perched on the top of a three-legged stool, and, from the slow and intensely earnest manner in which his head turned from side to side as he wrote, it was quite evident that he dotted all his i's and stroked all his t's with conscientious care. As he sat there—a sturdy little broad-shouldered fellow, so deeply engrossed with his work that he was oblivious of all around—he seemed the very beau-idéal of a painstaking, hard-working clerk. So deeply was he engrossed in his subject—the copying of an invoice—that he failed to hear the voice of his fellow-clerk, although the end of the speaking-tube was not far from where he sat. After listening a few seconds at the other end of the tube, Bob Sime repeated the summons with such vigour that Robin leaped from his stool as though he had received one of his favourite electric shocks. A minute later he stood in the presence of the Head of the House.

“Robert Wright,” said the Head, pushing his spectacles up on his brow, “I shall be sorry to lose your services, but—”

He paused and turned over the papers before him, as if searching for something, and Robin’s heart sank. Was he going to be dismissed? Had he done anything wrong, or had he unwittingly neglected some duty?

“Ah! here it is,” resumed Mr Lowstoft, “a letter from a friend who has come by a slight injury to his right hand, and wants a smart amanuensis and general assistant. Now I think of sending you to him, if you have no objection.”

As the Head again paused while glancing over the letter, Robin ventured timidly to state that he had very strong objections; that he was very much satisfied with his situation and work, and had no desire to change.

Mr Lowstoft did not appear to listen to his remarks, but said suddenly—“You’ve studied the science of electricity, I believe?”

“Yes, sir—to some extent,” answered the lad, with a look of surprise.

“I know you have. Your father has told me about your tastes and studies. You’ve heard of Mr Cyrus Field, I presume?”

“Indeed I have,” said Robin, brightening up, “it was through his efforts that the Atlantic Cable was laid in 1858—which unfortunately went wrong.”

“Well, my boy, it is through his efforts that another cable is to be laid in this year 1865, which we all hope sincerely won’t go wrong, and my friend, who wants an assistant, is one of the electricians connected with the new expedition. Would you like to go?”

Robin’s eyes blazed, and he could scarcely find breath or words to express his willingness—if his father did not object.

“Go home at once, then, and ask leave, for the Great Eastern is almost ready for sea, and you have to hasten your preparations.”

Robin stroked no more t’s and dotted no more i’s that day. We fear, indeed, that he even left the invoice on his desk unfinished, with the last i imperfect.

Bursting into his father's house, he found Madge—now become a pretty little slip of feminine thread-paper—seated at the piano agonising over a chord which her hand was too small to compass.

"Madge, Madge, cousin Madge!" he shouted, seizing both the extended little hands and kissing the musical wrinkles from her brow, "why am I like a magnet? You'll never guess."

"Because you attract everybody to you," said Madge promptly.

"Pooh! not at all. A magnet doesn't attract every body. It has two poles, don't you know, and repels some bodies. No, Madge, it's because I have been electrified."

"Indeed? and what has electrified you, Robin?"

"The Atlantic Cable, Madge."

"Well, that ought to be able to do it powerfully," returned Madge, with a laugh; "but tell me all about it, and don't make more bad conundrums. I'm sure something has happened. What is it?"

Mrs Wright, entering at the moment, her son calmed himself as well as he could, and sat down to tell his tale and talk the matter over.

"Now, what think you, mother? Will father consent?"

"I think he will, Robin, but before going into the matter further, I will lay it before our Father in heaven. He must show us the way, if we are to go right."

According to invariable custom, Robin's mother retired to her own room to consider the proposal. Thereafter she had a long talk with her husband, and the result was that on the following day our hero found himself in a train with a small new portmanteau by his side, a new billy-cock hat on his head, a very small new purse in his pocket, with a remarkably small sum of money therein, and a light yet full heart in his breast. He was on his way to the Nore, where the Great Eastern lay, like an antediluvian macaroni-eater, gorging itself with innumerable miles of Atlantic Cable.

To say truth, Robin's breast—capacious though it was for his size—could hardly contain his heart that day. The dream of his childhood was about to be realised! He had thirsted for knowledge. He had acquired all that was possible in his father's limited circumstances. He had, moreover, with the valuable assistance of Sam Shipton, become deeply learned in electrical science. He had longed with all his heart to become an electrician—quite ready, if need were, to commence as sweeper of a telegraph-office, but he had come to regard his desires as too ambitious, and, accepting his lot in life with the quiet contentment taught him by his mother, had entered on a clerkship in a mercantile house, and had perched himself, with a little sigh no doubt, yet cheerfully, on the top of a three-legged stool. To this stool he had been so long attached—physically—that he had begun to regard it almost as part and parcel of himself, and had made up his mind that he would have to stick to it through life. He even sometimes took a quaint view of the matter, and tried to imagine that through long habit it would stick to him at last, and oblige him to carry it about sticking straight out behind him; perhaps even require him to take it to bed with him, in which case he sometimes tried to imagine what would be the precise effect on the bedclothes if he were to turn from one side to the other. Thus had his life been projected in grey perspective to his mental eye.

But now—he actually was an electrician-elect on his way to join the biggest ship in the world, to aid in laying the greatest telegraph cable in the world, in company with some of the greatest men in the universe! It was almost too much for him. He thirsted for sympathy. He wanted to let off his feelings in a cheer, but life in a lunatic asylum presented itself, and he refrained. There was a rough-looking sailor lad about his own age, but much bigger, on the seat opposite, (it was a third class). He thought of pouring out his feelings on him—but prudence prevented. There is no saying what might have been the result, figuratively speaking, to his boiler if the sailor lad had not of his own accord opened a safety-valve.

"You seems pretty bobbish this morning, young feller," he said, after contemplating his vis-à-vis, for a long time in critical silence. "Bin an' took too much, eh?"

"I beg your pardon," said Robin, somewhat puzzled.

"You're pritty considerable jolly, I say," returned the lad, who had an honest, ugly face; and was somewhat blunt and gruff in manner.

“I am indeed very jolly,” said Robin, with a bland smile, “for I’m going to help to lay the great Atlantic Cable.”

“Wot’s that you say?” demanded the lad, with sudden animation.

Robin repeated his remark.

“Well, now, that is a go! Why, I’m goin’ to help lay the great Atlantic Cable too. I’m one the stooard’s boys. What may you be, young feller?”

“Me? Oh! I’m—I—why, I’m on the electrical staff—I’m—” he thought of the word secretary, but a feeling of modesty induced him to say—“assistant to one of the electricians.”

“Which ’un?” demanded the lad curtly.

“Mr Smith.”

“Mr Smith, eh? Well—it ain’t an unusual name—Smith ain’t. P’r’aps you’ll condescend on his first name, for there’s no less than three Smiths among the electricians.”

“Ebenezer Smith, I believe,” said Robin.

“Ebbysneezer Smith—eh? well, upon my word that’s a Smith-mixtur that I’ve never heerd on before. I don’t know ’im, but he’s all right, I dessay. They’re a rum lot altogether.”

Whether this compliment was meant for the great Smith family in general, or the electrical branch in particular, Robin could not guess, and did not like to ask. Having thus far opened his heart, however, he began to pour out its contents, and found that the ugly sailor lad was a much more sympathetic soul than he had been led to expect from his looks. Having told his own name, he asked that of his companion in return.

“My name—oh! it’s Slagg—Jim Slagg; James when you wants to be respeckful—Slagg when familiar. I’m the son o’ Jim Slagg, senior. Who he was the son of is best known to them as understands the science of jinnylology. But it don’t much matter, for we all runs back to Adam an’ Eve somehow. They called me after father, of course; but to make a distinction they calls him

Jimmy—bein' more respeckful-like,—and me Jim. It ain't a name much to boast of, but I wouldn't change it with you, young feller, though Robert ain't a bad name neither. It's pretty well-known, you see, an' that's somethin'. Then, it's bin bore by great men. Let me think—wasn't there a Robert the Great once?"

"I fear not," said Robin; "he is yet in the womb of Time."

"Ah, well, no matter; but there should have bin a Robert the Great before now. Anyhow, there was Robert the Bruce—he was a king, warn't he, an' a skull-cracker? Then there was Robert Stephenson, the great engineer—he's livin' yet; an' there was Robert the—the Devil, but I raither fear he must have bin a bad 'un, he must, so we won't count him. Of course, they gave you another name, for short; ah, Robin! I thought so. Well, that ain't a bad name neither. There was Robin Hood, you know, what draw'd the long-bow a deal better than the worst penny-a-liner as ever mended a quill. An' there was a Robin Goodfellow, though I don't rightly remember who he was exactly."

"One of Shakespeare's characters," interposed Robin.

"Jus' so—well, he couldn't have bin a bad fellow, you know. Then, as to your other name, Wright—that's all right, you know, and might have bin writer if you'd taken to the quill or the law. Anyhow, as long as you're Wright, of course you can't be wrong—eh, young feller?"

Jim Slagg was so tickled with this sudden sally that he laughed, and in so doing shut his little eyes, and opened an enormous mouth, fully furnished with an unbroken set of splendid teeth.

Thus pleasantly did Robin while away the time with his future shipmate until he arrived at the end of his journey, when he parted from Jim Slagg and was met by Ebenezer Smith.

That energetic electrician, instead of at once taking him on board the Great Eastern, took him to a small inn, where he gave him his tea and put him through a rather severe electrical examination, out of which our anxious hero emerged with credit.

"You'll do, Robin," said his examiner, who was a free-and-easy yet kindly electrician, "but you want instruction in many things."

“Indeed I do, sir,” said Robin, “for I have had no regular education in the science, but I hope, if you direct me what to study, that I shall improve.”

“No doubt you will, my boy. Meanwhile, as the big ship won’t be ready to start for some time, I want you to go to the works of the Telegraph Construction and Maintenance Company, see the making of the cable, learn all you can, and write me a careful account of all that you see, and all that you think about it.”

Robin could not repress a smile.

“Why, boy, what are you laughing at?” demanded Mr Smith, somewhat sternly.

Robin blushed deep scarlet as he replied—

“Pardon me, sir, but you said I am to write down all that I think about it.”

“Well, what then?”

“I—I’m afraid, sir,” stammered Robin, “that if I write down all I think about the Atlantic Cable, as well as all that I see, I shall require a very long time indeed, and a pretty large volume.”

Mr Smith gazed at our hero for some time with uplifted brows, then he shook his head slowly and frowned, then he nodded it slightly and smiled. After that he laughed, or rather chuckled, and said—

“Well, you may go now, and do what I have told you—only omitting most of what you think. A small portion of that will suffice! Don’t hurry back. Go home and make a fair copy of your observations and thoughts. I’ll write when I require you. Stay—your address? Ah! I have it in my note-book. What’s your first name, Mister Wright?”

Robin grew two inches taller, or more, on the spot; he had never been called Mister before, except in jest!

“Robert, sir,” he replied.

“Robert—ha! h’m! I’ll call you Bob. I never could stand ceremony, so you’ll accustom yourself to the new name as quickly as you can—but perhaps it’s not new to you?”

“Please, sir, I’ve been used to Robin; if you have no objection, I should—”

“No objection—of course not,” interrupted Mr Smith; “Robin will do quite as well, though a little longer; but that’s no matter. Good-bye, Robin, and—and—don’t think too hard. It sometimes hurts digestion; good-bye.”

“Well, what d’ee think of Ebbysneezer Smith, my electrical toolip?” asked Jim Slagg, whom Robin encountered again at the station. “He’s a wiry subject, I s’pose, like the rest of ’em?”

“He’s a very pleasant gentleman,” answered Robin warmly.

“Oh, of coorse he is. All the Smiths are so—more or less. They’re a glorious family. I knows at least half a dozen of ’em in what superfine people call the ‘slums’ of London.”

“And I know more than half a dozen of ’em,” retorted Robin, somewhat sharply, “in what unrefined people call the haristocracy of London.”

“Whew!” whistled Mister Slagg, gazing at Robin in silent surprise.

What the whistle implied was not explained at that time, because the locomotive whistle took up the tune with intense violence, causing a rush to the train, in which the two lads—like many other friends—were abruptly parted for a season.

Chapter Six

Tells of our Hero's Visit to the Great Cable

Robin Wright returned home with a bounding heart. Since his electrical appointment he had become, figuratively speaking, an indiarubber ball—a sort of human "squash." His heart bounded; his feet bounded; if his head had fallen off, it also would have bounded, no doubt.

On arriving he found his father's elder brother—a retired sea-captain of the merchant service—on a visit to the family.

There was not a more favourite uncle in the kingdom than uncle Rik—thus had his name of Richard been abbreviated by the Wright family. Uncle Rik was an old bachelor and as bald as a baby—more so than many babies. He was good-humoured and liberal-hearted, but a settled unbeliever in the world's progress. He idolised the "good old times," and quite pleasantly scorned the present.

"So, so, Robin," he said, grasping our hero by both hands (and uncle Rik's grasp was no joke), "you're goin' in for batteries—galvanic batteries an' wires, are you? Well, lad, I always thought you more or less of a fool, but I never thought you such a born idiot as that comes to."

"Yes, uncle," said Robin, with a pleasant laugh, for he was used to the old captain's plain language, "I'm going to be an electrician."

"Bah! pooh!—an electrician!" exclaimed uncle Rik with vehemence, "as well set up for a magician at once."

"Indeed he won't be far short of that," said Mrs Wright, who was seated at the tea-table with her husband and Madge—"at least," she added, "if all be true that we hear of this wonderful science."

"If only half of it be true," interjected Mr Wright.

"But it ain't true," said Captain Rik firmly. "They talk a deal of stuff about it, more than nine-tenths of which is lies—pure fable. I don't believe in electricity; more than that, I don't believe in steam. Batteries and boilers are both bosh!"

"But, uncle, you can't deny that they exist," said Robin.

“Of course not,” replied the captain. “I know as well as you do—maybe better—that there’s a heap o’ telegraph-wires rove about the world like great spiders’ webs, and that there are steamboats hummin’ an’ buzzin’—ay, an’ bu’stin’ too—all over the ocean, like huge wasps, an’ a pretty mess they make of it too among them! Why, there was a poor old lady the other day that was indooced by a young nephy to send a telegraphic message to her husband in Manchester—she bein’ in London. She was very unwillin’ to do it, bein’ half inclined to regard the telegraph as a plant from the lower regions. The message sent was, ‘Your lovin’ wife hopes you’ll be home to-morrow.’ It reached the husband, ‘Your lowerin’ wife hopes you’ll be hung to-morrow.’ Bad writin’ and a useless flourish at the e turned home into hung. The puzzled husband telegraphs in reply, ‘Mistake somewhere—all right—shall be back three o’clock—to-morrow—kind love.’ And how d’ye think this reached the old lady?—‘Mistake somewhere—all night—stabbed in back—through cloak—two more rows—killed, love.’ Now, d’you call that successful telegraphing?”

“Not very,” admitted Robin, with a laugh, “but of the thousands of messages that pass to and fro daily there cannot be many like these, I should think.”

“But what did the poor wife do?” asked Madge anxiously.

“Do?” repeated Rik indignantly, as though the misfortune were his own—for he was a very sympathetic captain—“do? Why, she gave a yell that nigh knocked the young nephy out of his reason, and fell flat on the floor. When she came to, she bounced up, bore away for the railway station under full sail, an’ shipped for Manchester, where she found her husband, alive and hearty, pitchin’ into a huge beefsteak, which he very properly said, after recovering from his first surprise, was big enough for two.”

“But what objection have you to steamers, uncle Rik?” asked Mrs Wright; “I’m sure they are very comfortable and fast-going.”

“Comfortable and fast-goin’!” repeated the old sailor, with a look of supreme contempt, “yes, they’re comfortable enough when your berth ain’t near the paddles or the boilers; an’ they’re fast-goin’, no doubt, specially when they bu’st. But ain’t the nasty things made of iron—like kitchen kettles? and won’t that rust? an’ if you knock a hole in ’em won’t they go down at once? an’ if you clap too much on the safety-valves won’t they go up at once? Bah! pooh!—there’s nothin’ like the wooden walls of old England. You may take the word of

an old salt for it,—them wooden walls will float and plough the ocean when all these new-fangled iron pots are sunk or blowed to atoms. Why, look at the Great Eastern herself, the biggest kettle of 'em all, what a precious mess she made of herself! At first she wouldn't move at all, when they tried to launch her; then they had to shove her off sidewise like a crab; then she lost her rudder in a gale, an' smashed all her cabin furniture like a bad boy with his toys. Bah! I only hope I may be there when she bu'sts, for it'll be a grand explosion."

"I'm sorry you have so bad an opinion of her, uncle, for I am appointed to serve in the Great Eastern while layin' the Atlantic Cable."

"Sorry to hear it, lad; very sorry to hear it. Of course I hope for your sake that she won't blow up on this voyage, though it's nothin' more or less than an absurd ship goin' on a wild-goose chase."

"But, uncle, submarine cables have now passed the period of experiment," said Robin, coming warmly to the defence of his favourite subject. "Just consider, from the time the first one was laid, in 1851, between Dover and Calais, till now, about fifteen years, many thousands of miles of conducting-wire have been laid along the bottom of the sea to many parts of the world, and they are in full and successful operation at this moment. Why, even in 1858, when the first Atlantic Cable was laid, the Gutta-percha Company had made forty-four submarine cables."

"I know it, lad, but it won't last. It's all sure to bu'st up in course of time."

"Then, though the attempt to lay the last Atlantic Cable proved a failure," continued Robin, "the first one, the 1858 one, was a success at the beginning, no one can deny that."

"Ay, but how long did it last?" demanded the skipper, hitting the table with his fist.

"Oh, please, have pity on the tea-cups, uncle Rik," cried the hostess.

"Beg pardon, sister, but I can't help getting riled when I hear younkers talkin' stuff. Why, do you really suppose," said the captain, turning again to Robin, "that because they managed in '58 to lay a cable across the Atlantic, and exchange a few messages, which refused to travel after a few days, that they'll

succeed in layin' down a permanent speakin' trumpet between old England and Noof'nland—2000 miles, more or less—in spite o' gales an' currents, an' ships' anchors, an' insects, an' icebergs an' whales, to say nothing o' great sea-sarpints an' such like?"

"Uncle Rik, I do," said Robin, with intensely earnest eyes and glowing cheeks.

"Bravo! Robin, you'll do it, I do believe, if it is to be done at all; give us your hand, lad."

The old sailor's red countenance beamed with a huge smile of kindness as he shook his enthusiastic nephew's hand.

"There," he added, "I'll not say another word against iron kettles or Atlantic cables. If you succeed I'll give batteries and boilers full credit, but if you fail I'll not forget to remind you that I said it would all bu'st up in course of time."

With note-book and pencil in hand Robin went down the very next day to the works of the Telegraph Construction and Maintenance Company, where the great cable was being made.

Presenting his letter of introduction from Mr Smith, Robin was conducted over the premises by a clerk, who, under the impression that he was a very youthful and therefore unusually clever newspaper correspondent, treated him with marked respect. This was a severe trial to Robin's modesty; nevertheless he bore up manfully, and pulling out his note-book prepared for action.

The reader need not fear that we intend to inflict on him Robin's treatise on what he styled the "Great Atlantic Cable," but it would be wrong to leave the subject without recording a few of those points which made a deep impression on him.

"The cable when completed, sir," said the clerk, as he conducted his visitor to the factory, "will be 2300 nautical miles in length."

"Indeed," said Robin, recording the statement with solemn gravity and great accuracy; "but I thought," he added, "that the exact distance from Ireland to Newfoundland was only 1600 miles."

“You are right, sir, but we allow 700 miles of ‘slack’ for the inequalities of the bottom. Its cost will be 700,000 pounds, and the whole when finished will weigh 7000 tons.”

Poor Robin’s mind had, of course, been informed about ton-weights at school, but he had not felt that he realised what they actually signified until the thought suddenly occurred that a cart-load of coals weighed one ton, whereupon 7000 carts of coals leaped suddenly into the field of his bewildered fancy. A slightly humorous tendency, inherited from his mother, induced 7000 drivers, with 7000 whips and a like number of smock-frocks, to mount the carts and drive in into the capacious hold of the Great Eastern. They turned, however, and drove instantly off his brain when he came into the august presence of the cable itself.

The central core of the cable—that part by which the electric force or fluid was to pass from the Old World to the New, and vice versa, was made of copper. It was not a solid, single wire, but a strand composed of seven fine wires, each about the thickness of a small pin. Six of these wires were wound spirally round the seventh. This was in order to prevent what is termed a “breach of continuity,” for it will be at once perceived that while a single wire of the core might easily break in the process of laying the cable, and thereby prevent the flow of electricity, the probability of the seven small wires all breaking at the same spot was so remote as to be almost impossible, and if even one wire out of the seven held, the continuity would remain. Nay, even all the seven might break, but, so long as they did not all break at the same place, continuity would not be lost, because copper would still continue to touch copper all throughout the cable’s length.

In the process of construction, the central wire of the copper core was first covered with a semi-liquid coating of gutta-percha, mixed with tar—known as “Chatterton’s Compound.” This was laid on so thick that when the other wires were wound round it all air was excluded. Then a coating of the same compound was laid over the finished conductor, and thus the core was solidified. Next, the core was surrounded with a coating of the purest gutta-percha—a splendid non-conductor, impervious to water—which, when pressed to it, while in a plastic state, formed the first insulator or tube to the core. Over this tube was laid a thin coat of Chatterton’s Compound for the purpose of closing up any small flaws or minute holes that might have escaped detection. Then came a second coating of gutta-percha, followed by another coating of

compound, and so on alternately until four coats of compound and four of gutta-percha had been laid on.

This core, when completed, was wound in lengths on large reels, and was then submerged in water and subjected to a variety of severe electrical tests so as to bring it as near as possible to a state of perfection, after which every inch of it was examined by hand while being unwound from the reels and re-wound on the large drums on which it was to be forwarded to the covering works at East Greenwich, there to receive its external protecting sheath.

All this, and much more besides, did Robin Wright carefully note down, and that same evening went home and delivered a long and luminous lecture, over which his mother wondered, Madge rejoiced, his father gloried, and uncle Rik fell asleep.

Next day he hastened to the covering works, and, presenting his credentials, was admitted.

Here he saw the important and delicate core again carefully tested as to its electrical condition, after which it received a new jacket of tanned jute yarn to protect it from the iron top coat yet to come. Its jute jacket on, it was then coiled away in tanks full of water, where it was constantly kept submerged and continuously tested for insulation. Last of all the top coat was put on. This consisted of ten wires of peculiarly fine and strong iron. Each of these ten wires had put on it a special coat of its own, made of tarred Manilla yarn, to protect it from rust as well as to lighten its specific gravity. The core being brought from its tank, and passed round several sheaves, which carried it below the factory floor, was drawn up through a hole in the centre of a circular table, around the circumference of which were ten drums of the Manilla-covered wire. A stout iron rod, fastened to the circumference of the table, rose from between each drum to the ceiling, converging in a cone which passed through to the floor above. Our core rose in the middle of all, and went through the hollow of the cone. When all was put in noisy and bewildering motion, the core which rose from the turning-table and whirling drums as a thin jute-clad line, came out in the floor above a stout iron-clad cable, with a Manilla top-dressing, possessing strength sufficient to bear eleven miles of its own length perpendicularly suspended in water—or a margin of strength more than four and a half times that required,—and with a breaking strain of seven tons fifteen hundredweight.

When thoroughly charged and primed, Robin went off home to write his treatise.

Then he received the expected summons to repair on board the Great Eastern, and bade adieu to his early home.

It was of no use that Robin tried to say good-bye in a facetious way, and told Madge and his mother not to cry, saying that he was only going across the Atlantic, a mere fish-pond, and that he would be home again in a month or two. Ah! these little efforts at deception never avail. Himself broke down while urging Madge to behave herself, and when his mother gave him a small Bible, and said she required no promise, for she knew he would treasure and read it, he was obliged hastily to give her a last fervent hug, and rush from the house without saying good-bye at all.

Chapter Seven

The Big Ship—First Night Aboard

When our hero at last reached the Great Eastern, he soon found himself in what may be termed a lost condition. At first he was disappointed, for he saw her at a distance, and it is well-known that distance lends deception as well as "enchantment to the view." Arrived alongside, however, he felt as if he had suddenly come under the walls of a great fortress or city.

Presently he stood on the deck of the Big Ship, as its familiars called it, and, from that moment, for several days, was, as we have said, in a lost condition. He was lost in wonder, to begin with, as he gazed at the interminable length and breadth of planking styled the deck, and the forest of funnels, masts, and rigging, and the amazing perspective, which caused men at the further end from where he stood to look like dolls.

Then he was lost in reality, when he went below and had to ask his way as though he were wandering in the labyrinths of a great city. He felt—or thought he felt—like a mere mite in the mighty vessel. Soon he lost his old familiar powers of comparison and contrast, and ere long he lost his understanding altogether, for he fell down one of the hatchways into a dark abyss, where he would probably have ended his career with electric speed if he had not happily fallen into the arms of a human being, with whom he rolled and bumped affectionately, though painfully, to the bottom of the stair.

The human being, growled intense disapprobation during the process, and Robin fancied that the voice was familiar.

"Come, I say," said the being, remonstratively, "this is altogether too loving, you know. Don't squeeze quite so tight, young 'un, whoever you be."

"Oh, I beg your pardon," gasped Robin, relaxing his grasp when they stopped rolling; "I'm so sorry. I hope I haven't hurt you."

"Hurt me!" laughed Jim Slagg, for it was he; "no, you small electrician, you 'aven't got battery-power enough to do me much damage; but what d'ye mean by it? Is this the way to meet an old friend? Is it right for a Wright to go wrong at the wery beginnin' of his career? But come, I forgive you. Have you been introdooced to Capting Anderson yet?"

“No! Who is he?”

“Who is he, you ignorant crokidile! why, he’s the capting of the Great Eastern, the commander o’ the Big Ship, the Great Mogul o’ the quarter-deck, the king o’ the expedition. But, of course, you ’aven’t bin introdooced to him. He don’t associate much with small fry like us—more’s the pity, for it might do ’im good. But come, I’ll take you under my wing for the present, because your partikler owner, Ebbysneezer Smith, ain’t come aboard yet—ashore dissipatin’, I suppose,—an’ everybody’s so busy gettin’ ready to start that nobody will care to be bothered with you, so come along.”

There was same truth in this eccentric youths’ remarks, for in the bustle of preparation for an early start every one on board seemed to be so thoroughly engrossed with his own duty that he had no time to attend to anything else, and Robin had begun to experience, in the absence of his “partikler owner,” an uneasy sensation of being very much in people’s way. As he felt strangely attracted by the off-hand good-humoured impudence of his new friend, he consented to follow him, and was led to a small apartment, somewhere in the depths of the mighty ship, in which several youths, not unlike Slagg, were romping. They had, indeed, duties to perform like the rest, but the moment chanced to be with them a brief period of relaxation, which they devoted to skylarking.

“Hallo who have you got here?” demanded a large clumsy youth, knocking off Slagg’s cap as he asked the question.

“Come, Stumps, don’t you be cheeky,” said Slagg, quietly picking up his cap and putting it on; “this is a friend o’ mine—one o’ the electricians,—so you needn’t try to shock his feelin’s, for he can give better than he gets. He’s got no berth yet, so I brought ’im here to show him hospitality.”

“Oh, indeed,” said Mr Stumps, bowing with mock respect; then, turning to the comrade with whom he had been skylarking, “Here, Jeff, supply this gentleman with food.”

Jeff, entering into Stumps’ humour, immediately brought a plate of broken ship-biscuit with a can of water, and set them on the table before Robin. Our hero, who had never been accustomed to much jesting, took the gift in earnest,

thanked Jeff heartily, and, being hungry, set to work with a will upon the simple fare, while Stumps and Jeff looked at each other and winked.

“Come, I can add something to improve that feast,” said Slagg, drawing a piece of cheese from his pocket, and setting it before his friend.

Robin thanked him, and was about to take the cheese when Stumps snatched it up, and ran out of the room with it, laughing coarsely as he went.

“The big bully,” growled Slagg; “it’s quite obvious to me that feller will have to be brought to his marrow-bones afore long.”

“Never mind,” said Jeff, who was of a more amiable spirit than Stumps, “here’s more o’ the same sort.” He took another piece of cheese from a shelf as he spoke, and gave it to Robin.

“Now, my young toolip,” said Slagg, “havin’ finished your feed, p’r’aps you’d like to see over the big ship.”

With great delight Robin said that he should like nothing better, and, being led forth, was soon lost a second time in wonderment.

Of what use was it that Slagg told him the Great Eastern was 692 feet long by 83 feet broad, and 70 feet deep? If he had said yards instead of feet it would have been equally instructive to Robin in his then mentally lost condition. Neither was it of the slightest use to be told that the weight of the big ship’s cargo, including cable, tanks, and coals, was 21,000 tons.

But reason began to glimmer again when Slagg told him that the two largest vessels afloat could not contain, in a convenient position for passing out, the 2700 miles then coiled in the three tanks of the Great Eastern.

“This is the main tank,” said Slagg, leading his friend to a small platform that hung over a black and apparently unfathomable gulf.

“I see nothing at all,” said Robin, stretching his head cautiously forward and gazing down into darkness profound, while he held on tight to a rail. “How curious!—when I look down everything in this wonderful ship seems to have no bottom, and when I look up, nothing appears to have any top, while, if I look

backward or forward things seem to have no end! Ah! I see something now. Coming in from the light prevented me at first. Why, it's like a huge circus!"

"Yes, it on'y wants hosses an' clowns to make it all complete," said Slagg. "Now, that tank is 58 feet 6 inches in diameter, and 20 feet 6 inches deep, an' holds close upon 900 miles of cable. There are two other tanks not much smaller, all choke-full. An' the queer thing is, that they can telegraph through all its length now, at this moment as it lies there,—an' they are doing so continually to make sure that all's right."

"Oh! I understand that," said Robin quickly; "I have read all about the laying of the first cable in 1858. It is the appearance of things in this great ship that confounds me."

"Come along then, and I'll confound you a little more," said Slagg.

He accordingly led his friend from one part of the ship to another, explaining and commenting as he went, and certainly Robin's wonder did not decrease.

From the grand saloon—which was like a palatial drawing-room, in size as well as in gorgeous furniture—to the mighty cranks and boilers of its engines, everything in and about the ship was calculated to amaze. As Slagg justly remarked, "It was stunnin'."

When our hero was saturated with the "Big Ship" till he could hold no more, his friend took him back to his berth, and left him there for a time to his meditations.

Returning soon after, he sat down on a looker.

"I say, Robin Wright," he began, thrusting his hands into his trousers-pockets, "it looks a'most as if I had smuggled you aboard of this ship like a stowaway. Nobody seems to know you are here, an' what's more, nobody seems to care. Your partikler owner ain't turned up yet, an' it's my opinion he won't turn up to-night, so I've spoke to the stooard—he's my owner, you know—an' he says you'd better just turn into my berth to-night, an' you'll get showed into your own to-morrow."

"But where will you sleep?" asked Robin, with some hesitation.

“Never you mind that, my young electrician. That’s my business. What you’ve got to do is to turn in.”

Jeff and another lad, who were preparing to retire for the night at the time, laughed at this, but Robin paid no attention, thanked his friend, and said that as he was rather tired he would accept his kind offer.

Thereafter, pulling out the small Bible which he had kept in his pocket since leaving home, he went into a corner, read a few verses, and then knelt down to pray.

The surprise of the other lads was expressed in their eyes, but they said nothing.

Just then the door opened, and the lad named Stumps entered. Catching sight of Robin on his knees he opened his eyes wide, pursed his mouth, and gave a low whistle. Then he went up to Robin and gave him a slight kick. Supposing that it was an accident, Robin did not move, but on receiving another and much more decided kick, he rose and turned round. At the same moment Stumps received a resounding and totally unexpected slap on the cheek from Jim Slagg, who planted himself before him with clenched fists and flashing eyes.

“What d’ye mean by interferin’ wi’ my, friend at his dewotions, you monkey-faced polypus?” he demanded fiercely.

The monkey-faced polypus replied not a word, but delivered a right-hander that might have felled a small horse. Jim Slagg however was prepared for that. He turned his head neatly to one side so as to let the blow pass, and at the same moment planted his knuckles on the bridge of his opponent’s nose and sent him headlong into Jeff’s bunk, which lay conveniently behind. Jumping furiously out of that, and skinning his shins in the act, Stumps rushed at Slagg, who, leaping lightly aside, tripped him up and gave him a smack on the left ear as he passed, by way of keeping him lively.

Unsubdued by this, Stumps gathered himself up and made a blind rush at his adversary, but was abruptly stopped by what Jeff called a “dab on the nose.” Repeating the rush, Stumps was staggered by a plunging blow on the forehead, and he paused to breathe, gazing the while at his foe, who, though a smaller youth than himself, was quite as strong.

“If you’ve had enough, monkey-face,” said Slagg, with a bland smile, “don’t hesitate to say so, an’ I’ll shake hands; but if you’d prefer a little more before goin’ to bed, just let me know, and—”

Slagg here performed some neat and highly suggestive motions with his fists by way of finishing the sentence.

Evidently Stumps wanted more, for, after a brief pause, he again rushed at Slagg, who, stepping aside like a Spanish matador, allowed his foe to expend his wrath on the bulkhead of the cabin.

“You’ll go through it next time, Stumps, if you plunge like that,” said Jeff, who had watched the fight with lively interest, and had encouraged the combatants with sundry marks of applause, besides giving them much gratuitous advice.

Regardless alike of encouragement and advice, the angry youth turned round once more and received a buffet that sent him sprawling on the table, off which he fell and rolled under it. There he lay and panted.

“Now, my sweet polypus,” said the victor, going down on one knee and patting the vanquished on his shoulder, “next time you feels tempted to kick a gentleman—specially a electrician—at his dewotions, think of Jim Slagg an’ restrain yourself. I bear you no ill-will however—so, good-night.”

Saying this, Robin’s champion left the room and Stumps retired to his berth growling.

Before passing from the subject, we may add that, the next night, Robin—whose owner was still absent—was again hospitably invited to share the cabin of his friend and protector. When about to retire to rest he considered whether it was advisable to risk the repetition of the scene of the previous, night, and, although not quite easy in his conscience about it, came to the conclusion that it would be well to say his prayers in bed. Accordingly, he crept quietly into his berth and lay down, but Jim Slagg, who was present, no sooner saw what he was about than he jumped up with a roar of indignation.

“What are you about?” he cried, “ain’t you goin’ to say your prayers, you white-livered electrician? Come, git up! If I’m to fight, you must pray! D’ye hear? Turn out, I say.”

With that he seized Robin, dragged him out of bed, thrust him on his knees, and bade him “do his dooty.”

At first Robin’s spirit rose in rebellion, but a sense of shame at his moral cowardice, and a perception of the justice of his friend’s remark, subdued him. He did pray forthwith, though what the nature of his prayer was we have never been able to ascertain, and do not care to guess. The lesson, however, was not lost. From that date forward Robin Wright was no longer ashamed or afraid to be seen in the attitude of prayer.

Chapter Eight

Laying The Cable—"Faults" and Fault-Finding—Anxieties, Accidents, and other Matters

Come with us now, good reader, to another and very different scene—out upon the boundless sea. The great Atlantic is asleep, but his breast heaves gently and slowly like that of a profound sleeper.

The Great Eastern looks like an island on the water—steady as a rock, obedient only to the rise and fall of the ocean swell, as she glides along at the rate of six knots an hour. All is going well. The complicated-looking paying-out machinery revolves smoothly; the thread-like cable passes over the stern, and down into the deep with the utmost regularity.

The shore-end of the cable—twenty-seven miles in length, and much thicker than the deep-sea portion—had been laid at Valentia, on the 22nd of July, amid prayer and praise, speech-making, and much enthusiasm, on the part of operators and spectators. On the 23rd, the end of the shore cable was spliced to that of the main cable, and the voyage had begun.

The first night had passed quietly, and upwards of eighty miles of the cable had gone out of the after-tank, over the big ship's stern, and down to its ocean-bed, when Robin Wright—unable to sleep—quietly slipped into his clothes, and went on deck. It was drawing near to dawn. A knot of electricians and others were chatting in subdued tones about the one subject that filled the minds of all in the ship.

"What! unable to sleep, like the rest of us?" said Ebenezer Smith, accosting Robin as he reached the deck.

"Yes, sir," said Robin, with a sleepy smile, "I've been thinking of the cable so much that I took to dreaming about it when I fell asleep, and it suddenly turned into the great sea-serpent, and choked me to such an extent that I awoke, and then thought it better to get up and have a look at it."

"Ah! my boy, you are not the only one whom the cable won't let sleep. It will be well looked after during the voyage, for there are two sets of electricians aboard—all of them uncommonly wide awake—one set representing the Telegraph Construction and Maintenance Company, under Monsieur de Sauty;

the other set representing the Atlantic Telegraph Company, under Mr Varley and Professor Thomson. The former are to test the electrical state of the cable, and to keep up signals with the shore every hour, night and day, during the voyage, while the latter are to watch and report as to whether the cable fulfils her conditions, as specified in the contract. So you see the smallest fault or hitch will be observed at once."

"Do you mean, sir," asked Robin in surprise, "that telegraphing with the shore is to be kept up continually all the voyage!"

"Yes, my boy, I do," answered Smith. "The lengths of the cable in the three tanks are joined up into one length, and telegraphing—for the purpose of testing it—has been kept up with the shore without intermission from the moment we left Ireland, and began to pay out. It will be continued, if all goes well, until we land the other and in Newfoundland. The tests are threefold,—first, for insulation, which, as you know, means the soundness and perfection of the gutta-percha covering that prevents the electricity from escaping from the wires, through the sea, into the earth; secondly, for continuity, or the unbroken condition of the conductor or copper core throughout its whole length; and, thirdly, to determine the resistance of the conductor, by which is meant its objection to carry our messages without vigorous application of the spur in the form of increased electrical power in our batteries. You see, Robin, every message sent to us from the shore, as well as every message sent by us in reply, has to travel through the entire length of the cable, namely about 2400 miles, and as every mile of distance increases this unwillingness, or resistance, we have to increase the electrical power in the batteries in proportion to the distance to which we want to send our message. D'you understand?"

"I think I do, sir; but how is the exact amount of resistance tested?"

Mr Smith smiled as he looked at the earnest face of his young questioner.

"My boy," said he, "you would require a more fully educated mind to understand the answer to that question. The subtleties of electrical science cannot be explained in a brief conversation. You'll have to study and apply to books for full light on that subject. Nevertheless, although I cannot carry you into the subject just now, I can tell you something about it. You remember the testing-room which I showed you yesterday—the darkened room between the captain's state-room and the entrance to the grand saloon?"

“Yes, sir, I remember it well,” responded Robin,—“the room into which the conducting-wires from the ends of the cable are led to the testing-tables, on which are the curious-looking galvanometers and other testing machines.”

“Just so,” returned Smith, pleased with his pupil’s aptitude. “Well, on that table stands Professor Thomson’s delicate and wonderful galvanometer. On that instrument a ray of light, reflected from a tiny mirror suspended to a magnet, travels along a scale and indicates the resistance to the passage of the current along the cable by the deflection of the magnet, which is marked by the course of this speck of light. Now, d’you understand that, Robin?”

“I—I’m afraid not quite, sir.”

“Well, no matter,” rejoined Smith, with a laugh.

“At all events you can understand that if that speck of light keeps within bounds—on its index—all is going well, but if it travels beyond the index—bolts out of bounds—an escape of the electric current is taking place somewhere in the cable, or what we call a fault has occurred.”

“Ah, indeed,” exclaimed Robin, casting a serious look at the cable as it rose from the after-tank, ran smoothly over its line of conducting wheels, dropped over the stern of the ship and glided into the sea like an an endless snake of stealthy habits. “And what,” he added, with a sudden look of awe, “if the cable should break?”

“Why, it would go to the bottom, of course,” replied Smith, “and several hearts would break along with it. You see these two gentlemen conversing near the companion-hatch?”

“Yes.”

“One is the chief of the electricians; the other the chief of the engineers. Their hearts would probably break, for their position is awfully responsible. Then my heart would break, I know, for I feel it swelling at the horrible suggestion; and your heart would break, Robin, I think, for you are a sympathetic donkey, and couldn’t help yourself. Then you see that stout man on the bridge—that’s Captain Anderson—well, his heart would—no—perhaps it wouldn’t, for he’s a sailor, and you know a sailor’s heart is too tough to break, but it would get a

pretty stiff wrench. And you see that gentleman looking at the paying-out gear so earnestly?"

"What—Cyrus Field?" said Robin.

"Yes; well, his heart and the Atlantic Cable are united, so as a matter of course the two would snap together."

Now, while Smith and his young assistant were conversing thus facetio-scientifically, the electricians on duty in the testing-room were watching with silent intensity the indications on their instruments. Suddenly, at 3:15 a.m., when exactly eighty-four miles of cable had been laid out, he who observed the galvanometer saw the speck of light glide to the end of the scale, and vanish!

If a speck of fire had been seen to glide through the key-hole of the powder-magazine it could scarcely have created greater consternation than did the disappearance of that light! The commotion in the testing-room spread instantly to every part of the ship; the whole staff of electricians was at once roused, and soon afterwards the engines of the Great Eastern were slowed and stopped, while, with bated breath and anxious looks, men whispered to each other that there was "a fault in the cable."

A fault! If the cable had committed a mortal sin they could scarcely have looked more horrified. Nevertheless there was ground for anxiety, for this fault, as in moral faults, indicated something that might end in destruction.

After testing the cable for some time by signalling to the shore, Monsieur de Sauty concluded that the fault was of a serious character, and orders were at once given to prepare the picking-up apparatus at the bow for the purpose of drawing the cable back into the ship until the defective portion should be reached and cut out.

"O what a pity!" sighed Robin, when he understood what was going to be done, and the feeling, if not the words, was shared by every one on board with more or less intelligence and intensity; but there were veterans of submarine telegraphy who spoke encouragingly and treated the incident as a comparatively small matter.

Two men-of-war, the Terrible and the Sphinx, had been appointed to accompany and aid the Great Eastern on her important mission. A gun was

fired and signals were made to acquaint these with what had occurred while the fires were being got up in the boilers of the picking-up machinery.

Electricians as well as doctors differ, it would seem, among themselves, for despite their skill and experience there was great difference of opinion in the minds of those on board the big ship as to the place where the fault lay. Some thought it was near the shore, and probably at the splice of the shore-end with the main cable. Others calculated, from the indications given by the tests, that it was perhaps twenty or forty or sixty miles astern. One of the scientific gentlemen held that it was not very far from the ship, while another gentleman, who was said to be much experienced in "fault"-finding, asserted that it was not more than nine or ten miles astern.

While the doctors were thus differing, the practical engineers were busy making the needful preparations for picking-up—an operation involving great risk of breaking the cable, and requiring the utmost delicacy of treatment, as may be easily understood, for, while the cable is being payed out the strain on it is comparatively small, whereas when it is being picked up, there is not only the extra strain caused by stoppage, and afterwards by hauling in, but there is the risk of sudden risings of the ship's stern on the ocean swell, which might at any moment snap the thin line like a piece of packthread.

The first difficulty and the great danger was to pass the cable from the stern to the bow, and to turn the ship round, so as to enable them to steam up to the cable while hauling it in. Iron chains were lashed firmly to the cable at the stern, and secured to a wire-rope carried round the outside of the ship to the picking-up apparatus at the bows. The cable was down in 400 fathoms of water when the paying-out ceased, and nice management was required to keep the ship steady, as she had now no steerage-way; and oh! with what intense interest and curiosity and wonder did Robin Wright regard the varied and wonderful mechanical appliances with which the whole affair was accomplished!

Then the cable was cut, and, with its shackles and chains, allowed to go plump into the sea. Robin's heart and soul seemed to go along with it, for, not expecting the event, he fancied it was lost for ever.

"Gone!" he exclaimed, with a look of horror.

“Not quite,” said Jim Slagg, who stood at Robin’s elbow regarding the operations with a quiet look of intelligence. “Don’t you see, Robin, that a wire-rope fit a’most to hold the big ship herself is holdin’ on to it.”

“Of course; how stupid I am!” said Robin, with a great sigh of relief; “I see it now, going round to the bows.”

At first the rope was let run, to ease the strain while the ship swung round; then it was brought in over the pulley at the bow, the paddles moved, and the return towards Ireland was begun. The strain, although great, was far from the breaking-point, but the speed was very slow—not more than a mile an hour being considered safe in the process of picking-up.

“Patience, Robin,” observed Mr Smith, as he passed on his way to the cabin, “is a virtue much needed in the laying of cables. We have now commenced a voyage at the rate of one mile an hour, which will not terminate till we get back to Owld Ireland, unless we find the fault.”

Patience, however, was not destined to be so severely tried. All that day and all night the slow process went on. Meanwhile—as the cable was not absolutely unworkable, despite the fault—the chief engineer, Mr Canning, sent a message to Mr Glass in Ireland, asking him to send out the Hawk steamer, in order that he might return in her to search for the defect in the shore-end of the cable, for if that were found he purposed sacrificing the eighty odd miles already laid down, making a new splice with the shore-end, and starting afresh. A reply was received from Mr Glass, saying that the Hawk would be sent out immediately.

Accordingly, about daybreak of the 25th the Hawk appeared, but her services were not required, for, about nine that morning, when the cable was coming slowly in and being carefully examined foot by foot—nay, inch by inch—the fault was discovered, and joy took the place of anxiety. Ten and a quarter miles of cable had been picked up when the fault came inboard, and a strange unaccountable fault it turned out to be—namely, a small piece of wire which had been forced through the covering of the cable into the gutta-percha so as to injure, but not quite to destroy, the insulation. How such a piece of wire could have got into the tank was a mystery, but the general impression was that it had been carried there by accident and forced into the coil by the pressure of the paying-out machinery as the cable flew through the jockey-wheels.

Signals were at once made to the fleet that the enemy had been discovered. Congratulatory signals were returned. The fault was cut out and a new splice made. The Hawk was sent home again. The big ship's bow was turned once more to the west, and the rattling of the machinery, as the restored and revived cable passed over the stern, went merrily as a marriage bell.

The detention had been only about twelve hours; the great work was going on again as favourably as before the mishap occurred, and about half a mile had been payed out, when—blackness of despair—the electric current suddenly ceased, and communication with the shore was ended altogether.

Chapter Nine

In which Joys, Hopes, Alarms, Ghosts, and Leviathans Take Part

That man who can appreciate the feelings of one who has become suddenly bankrupt may understand the mental condition of those on board the Great Eastern when they were thus tossed from the pinnacle of joyous hope to the depths of dark despair. It was not, however, absolute despair. The cable was utterly useless indeed—insensate—but it was not broken. There was still the blessed possibility of picking it up and bringing it to life again.

That, however, was scarcely an appreciable comfort at the moment, and little could be seen or heard on board the Great Eastern save elongated faces and gloomy forebodings.

Ebenezer Smith and his confrères worked in the testing-room like Trojans. They connected and disconnected; they put in stops and took them out; they intensified currents to the extent of their anxieties they reduced them to the measure of their despair—nothing would do. The cable was apparently dead. In these circumstances picking-up was the only resource, and the apparatus for that purpose was again rigged up in the bows.

In the meantime the splice which had been made to connect the tanks was cut and examined, and the portions coiled in the fore and main tanks were found to be perfect—alive and well—but the part between ship and shore was speechless.

So was poor Robin Wright! After Mr Field—whose life-hope seemed to be doomed to disappointment—the blow was probably felt most severely by Robin. But Fortune seemed to be playfully testing the endurance of these cable-layers at that time, for, when the despair was at its worst, the tell-tale light reappeared on the index of the galvanometer, without rhyme or reason, calling forth a shout of joyful surprise, and putting an abrupt stoppage to the labours of the pickers-up!

They never found out what was the cause of that fault; but that was a small matter, for, with restored sensation in the cable-nerve, renewed communication with the shore, and resumed progress of the ship towards her goal, they could afford to smile at former troubles.

Joy and sorrow, shower and sunshine, fair weather and foul, was at first the alternating portion of the cable-layers.

“I can’t believe my eyes!” said Robin to Jim Slagg, as they stood next day, during a leisure hour, close to the whirling wheels and never-ending cable, about 160 miles of which had been laid by that time. “Just look at the Terrible and Sphinx; the sea is now so heavy that they are thumping into the waves, burying their bows in foam, while we are slipping along as steadily as a Thames steamer.”

“That’s true, sir,” answered Slagg, whose admiration for our hero’s enthusiastic and simple character increased as their intimacy was prolonged, and whose manner of address became proportionally more respectful, “She’s a steady little duck is the Great Eastern! she has got the advantage of length, you see, over other ships, an’ rides on two waves at a time, instead of wobblin’ in between ’em; but I raither think she’d roll a bit if she was to go along in the trough of the seas. Don’t the cable go out beautiful, too—just like a long-drawn eel with the consumption! Did you hear how deep the captain said it was hereabouts?”

“Yes, I heard him say it was a little short of two miles deep, so it has got a long way to sink before it reaches its oozy bed.”

“How d’ee know what sort o’ bed it’s got to lie on?” asked Slagg.

“Because,” said Robin, “the whole Atlantic where the cable is to lie has been carefully sounded long ago, and it is found that the ocean-bed here, which looks so like mud, is composed of millions of beautiful shells, so small that they cannot be distinguished by the naked eye. Of course, they have no creatures in them. It would seem that these shell-fish go about the ocean till they die, and then fall to the bottom like rain.” See note one.

“You don’t say so!” returned Slagg, who, being utterly uneducated, received suchlike information with charming surprise, and regarded Robin as a very mine of knowledge. “Well now, that beats cock-fighting. But, I say, how is it that the electricity works through the cable? I heerd one o’ your electrical fellers explaining to a landlubber t’other evenin’ that electricity could only run along wires when the circuit was closed, by which he meant to say that it would fly from a battery and travel along a wire ever so far, if only that wire was to turn right round and run back to the same battery again. Now, if that’s

so, seems to me that when you've got your cable to Newfoundland you'll have to run another one back again to Ireland before it'll work."

"Ah, Slagg, that would indeed be the case," returned Robin, "were it not that we have discovered the important fact that the earth—the round globe on which we stand—itself acts the part of a grand conductor. So we have only to send down earth-wires at the two ends—one into the earth of Ireland, the other into the earth of Newfoundland, and straightway the circuit is closed, and the electricity generated in our batteries passes through the cable from earth to earth."

"Robin," said Slagg doubtingly, "d'you expect me for to believe that?"

"Indeed I do," said Robin simply.

"Then you're greener than I took you for. No offence meant, but it's my opinion some o' these 'cute electricians has bin tryin' the width of your swallow."

"No, you are mistaken," returned Robin earnestly; "I have read the fact in many books. The books differ in their opinions as to the causes and nature of the fact, but not as to the fact itself."

It was evident that Robin looked upon this as an unanswerable argument, and his friend seemed perplexed.

"Well, I don' know how it is," he said, after a pause, "but I do believe that this here wonderful electricity is fit for a'most anything, an' that we'll have it revoloosionising everything afore long—I do indeed."

The intelligent reader who has noted the gigantic strides which we have recently made in electric lighting of late will observe that Slagg, unwittingly, had become almost prophetic at this time.

"We're going along splendidly now," said Mr Smith, coming up to Robin that evening while he was conversing with Slagg, who immediately retired.—"Who is that youth? He seems very fond of you; I've observed that he makes up to you whenever you chance to be on deck together."

"He is one of the steward's lads, sir; I met him accidentally in the train; but I suspect the fondness is chiefly on my side. He was very kind to me when I first

came on board, and I really think he is an intelligent, good fellow—a strange mixture of self-confidence and humility. Sometimes, to hear him speak, you would think he knew everything; but at the same time he is always willing—indeed anxious—to listen and learn. He is a capital fighter too."

Here Robin related the battle in the boys' berth, when Slagg thrashed Stumps, whereat Mr Smith was much amused.

"So he seems a peculiar lad—modest, impudent, teachable, kindly, and warlike! Come below now, Robin, I have some work for you. Did you make the calculations I gave you yesterday?"

"Yes, sir, and they corresponded exactly with your own."

"Good. Go fetch my little note-book: I left it in the grand saloon on the furthest aft seat, port side."

Robin found the magnificent saloon of the big ship ringing with music and conversation. Joy over the recent restoration to health of the ailing cable, the comfortable stability of the ship in rough weather, and the satisfactory progress then being made, all contributed to raise the spirits of every one connected with the great work, so that, while some were amusing themselves at the piano, others were scattered about in little groups, discussing the profounder mysteries of electric science, or prophesying the speedy completion of the enterprise, while a few were speculating on the probability of sport in Newfoundland, or planning out journeys through the United States.

"There's lots of game, I'm told, in Newfoundland," said one of the youthful electricians, whose ruling passion—next to the subtle fluid—was the gun.

"So I've been told," replied an elder and graver comrade. "Polar bears are quite common in the woods, and it is said that walrus are fond of roosting in the trees."

"Yes, I have heard so," returned the youthful sportsman, who, although young, was not to be caught with chaff, "and the fishing, I hear, is also splendid. Salmon and cod are found swarming in the rivers by those who care for mild occupation, while really exciting sport is to be had in the great lakes of the interior, where there are plenty of fresh-water whales that take the fly."

“The swan, you mean,” said another comrade. “The fly that is most killing among Newfoundland whales is a swan fastened whole to a shark hook—though a small boat’s anchor will do if you haven’t the right tackle.”

“Come, don’t talk nonsense, but let’s have a song!” said a brother electrician to the sporting youth.

“I never sing,” he replied, “except when hurt, and then I sing out. But see, our best musician has just seated himself at the instrument.”

“I don’t talk shop, Nimrod; call it the piano.”

Most of those present drew towards the musical corner, where Ebenezer Smith, having just entered the saloon in search of Robin, had been prevailed on to sit down and enliven the company. Robin, who had been delayed by difficulty in finding the note-book, stopped to listen.

Smith had a fair average voice and a vigorous manner.

“You wouldn’t object to hear the cook’s last?” asked Smith, running his fingers lightly over the keys.

“Of course not—go on,” chorused several voices.

“I had no idea,” lisped a simple youth, who was one of a small party of young gentlemen interested in engineering and science, who had been accommodated with a passage,—“I had no idea that our cook was a poet as well as an admirable chef de cuisine.”

“Oh, it’s not our cook he means,” explained the sporting electrician; “Mr Smith refers to a certain sea-cook—or his son, I’m not sure which—who is chef des horse-marines.”

“Is there a chorus?” asked one.

“Of course there is,” replied Smith; “a sea-song without a chorus is like a kite without a tail—it is sure to fall flat, but the chorus is an old and well-known one—it is only the song that is new. Now then, clear your throats, gentlemen.”

Song—The Loss of the Nancy Lee.

I.

'Twas on a Friday morning that I went off,
An' shipped in the Nancy Lee,
But that ship caught a cold and with one tremendous cough
Went slap to the bottom of the sea, the sea, the sea,
Went slap to the bottom of the sea.

Chorus.—Then the raging sea may roar,
An' the stormy winds may blow,
While we jolly sailor boys rattle up aloft,
And the landlubbers lie down below, below, below
And the landlubbers lie down below.

II.

For wery nigh a century I lived with the crabs,
An' danced wi' the Mermaids too,
An' drove about the Ocean in mother o' pearl cabs,

An’ dwelt in a cavern so blue, so blue, so blue,

An’ dwelt in a cavern so blue.

Chorus.—Then the raging sea, etcetera.

III.

I soon forgot the sorrows o’ the world above

In the pleasures o’ the life below;

Queer fish they made up to me the want o’ human love,

As through the world o’ waters I did go, did go, did go;

As through the world o’ waters I did go.

Chorus.—Then the raging sea, etcetera.

IV.

One day a horrid grampus caught me all by the nose,

An’ swung me up to the land,

An’ I never went to sea again, as everybody knows,

And as everybody well may understand, ’derstand, ’derstand,

And as everybody well may understand.

Chorus.—Then the raging sea, etcetera.

The plaudits with which this song was received were, it need scarcely be remarked, due more to the vigour of the chorus and the enthusiasm of the audience than to intrinsic merit. Even Robin Wright was carried off his legs for the moment, and, modest though he was, broke in at the chorus with such effect—his voice being shrill and clear—that, he unintentionally outyelled all the rest, and would have fled in consternation from the saloon if he had not been caught and forcibly detained by the sporting electrician, who demanded what right he had to raise his steam-whistle in that fashion.

"But I say, young Wright," he added in a lower tone, leading our hero aside, "what's this rumour I hear about a ghost in the steward's cabin?"

"Oh! it is nothing to speak of," replied Robin, with a laugh. "The lad they call Stumps got a fright—that's all."

"But that's enough. Let us hear about it."

"Well, I suppose you know," said Robin, "that there's a ghost in the Great Eastern."

"No, I don't know it from personal experience, but I have heard a report to that effect."

"Well, I was down in Jim Slagg's berth, having a chat with him about the nature of electric currents—for he has a very inquiring mind,—and somehow we diverged to ghosts, and began to talk of the ghost of the Great Eastern.

"'I don't believe in the Great Eastern ghost—no, nor in ghosts of any kind,' said Stumps, who was sitting near us eating a bit of cheese.

"'But I believe in 'em,' said the boy Jeff, who was seated on the other side of the table, and looked at us so earnestly that we could scarce help smiling—though we didn't feel in a smiling humour at the time, for it was getting dark, and we had got to talking in low tones and looking anxiously over our shoulders, you know—

"'Oh yes, I know,' replied the sportsman, with a laugh; 'I have shuddered and grue-oo-ed many a time over ghost-stories. Well?'

"'I don't believe in 'em, Jeff. Why do you?' asked Stumps, in a scoffing tone.

"'Because I hear one every night a'most when I go down into the dark places below to fetch things. There's one particular spot where the ghost goes tap-tap-tapping continually.'

"'Fiddlededee,' said Stumps.

"'Come down, and you shall hear it for yourself,' said Jeff.

"Now, they say that Stumps is a coward, though he boasts a good deal—"

"You may say," interrupted the sportsman, "that Stumps is a coward because he boasts a good deal. Boasting is often a sign of cowardice—though not always."

"Well," continued Robin, "being ashamed to draw back, I suppose, he agreed to accompany Jeff.

"'Won't you come too, Slagg?' said Stumps.

"'No; I don't care a button for ghosts. Besides, I'm too busy, but Wright will go. There, don't bother me!' said Jim.

"I noticed, as I went last out of the room, that Slagg rose quickly and pulled a sheet off one of the beds. Afterwards, looking back, I saw him slip out and run down the passage in the opposite direction. I suspected he was about some mischief, but said nothing.

"It was getting dark, as I have said, though not dark enough for lighting the lamps, and in some corners below it was as dark as midnight. To one of these places Jeff led us.

"'Mind how you go now,' whispered Jeff; 'it's here somewhere, and there's a hole too—look-out—there it is!'

"'What! the ghost?' whispered Stumps, beginning to feel uneasy. To say truth, I began to feel uneasy myself without well knowing why. At that moment I fell over something, and came down with a crash that shook Stumps's nerves completely out of order.

"'I say, let's go back,' he muttered in a tremulous voice.

"'No, no,' whispered Jeff seizing Stumps by the arm with a sudden grip that made him give a short yelp, 'we are at the place now. It's in this dark passage. Listen!'

"We all held our breath and listened. For a few seconds we heard nothing, but presently a slight tapping was heard.

"'I've heard,' whispered Jeff in a low tone, 'that when the big ship was buildin', one o' the plate-riveters disappeared in some hole between the two skins o' the ship hereabouts, and his comrades, not bein' able to find him, were obliged at last to rivet him in, which they did so tight that even his ghost could not get out, so it goes on tappin', as you hear, an' is likely to go on tappin' for ever.'

"'Bosh!' whispered Stumps; thus politely intimating his disbelief, but I felt him trembling all over notwithstanding.

"At that moment we saw a dim shadowy whitish object at the other end of the dark passage. 'Wha'—wha'—what's that?' said I.

"Stumps gasped. I heard his teeth chattering, and I think his knees were knocking together. Jeff made no sound, and it was too dark to see his face. Suddenly the object rushed at us. There was no noise of footsteps—only a muffled sound and a faint hissing. I stood still, unable to move. So did Jeff. I felt the hair of my head rising. Stumps gasped again—then turned and fled. The creature, whatever it was, brushed past us with a hideous laugh. I guessed at once that it was Jim Slagg, but evidently Stumps didn't, for he uttered an awful yell that would have roused the whole ship if she had been of an ordinary size; at the same moment he tripped and fell on the thing that had upset me, and the ghost, leaping over him, vanished from our sight.

"To my surprise, on returning to our cabin, we found Slagg as we had left him, with both hands on his forehead poring over his book. I was almost as much

surprised to see Jeff sit down and laugh heartily.—Now, what do you think it could have been?"

"It was Slagg, of course," answered the sporting electrician.

"Yes, but what causes the tapping?"

"Oh, that is no doubt some little trifle—a chip of wood, or bit of wire left hanging loose, which shakes about when the ship heaves."

A sudden tramping of feet overhead brought this ghostly discussion to an abrupt close, and caused every man in the saloon to rush on deck with a terrible feeling in his heart that something had gone wrong.

"Not broken?" asked an electrician with a pale face on reaching the deck.

"Oh no, sir," replied an engineer, with an anxious look, "not quite so bad as that, but a whale has taken a fancy to inspect us, and he is almost too attentive."

So it was. A large Greenland whale was playing about the big ship, apparently under the impression that she was a giant of his own species, and it had passed perilously close to the cable.

A second time it came up, rolling high above the waves. It went close past the stern—rose again and dived with a gentle flop of its great tail, which, if it had touched the cable, would have cut it like a thread. At that trying moment, as they saw its huge back glittering in the moonlight, the hearts of the helpless spectators appeared absolutely to stand still. When the monster dived its side even touched the cable, but did not damage it. Being apparently satisfied by that time that the ship was not a friend, the whale finally disappeared in the depths of its ocean home.

Those who visited the Crystal Palace at Sydenham during the recent Electrical Exhibition had an opportunity of seeing the shells here referred to under a powerful microscope.

Chapter Ten

Tells of Great Efforts and Failures and Grand Success

Thus happily and smoothly all things went, with little bursts of anxiety and little touches of alarm, just sufficient, as it were, to keep up the spirits of all, till the morning of the 30th July. But on that morning an appearance of excitement in the testing-room told that something had again gone wrong. Soon the order was given to slow the engines, then to stop them!

The bursting of a thunder-clap, the explosion of a powder-magazine, could not have more effectually awakened the slumberers than this abrupt stoppage of the ship's engines. Instantly all the hatchways poured forth anxious inquirers.

"Another fault," was the reply to such.

"O dear!" said some.

"Horrible!" said others.

"Not so bad as a break," sighed the hopeful spirits.

"It is bad enough," said the chief electrician, "for we have found dead earth."

By this the chief meant to say that insulation had been completely destroyed, and that the whole current of electricity was escaping into the sea.

About 716 miles had been payed out at the time, and as signals had till then been regularly received from the shore, it was naturally concluded that the fault lay near to the ship.

"Now then, get along," said an engineer to one of the cable-men; "you'll have to cut, and splice, and test, while we are getting ready the tackle to pick up."

"I don't like that cuttin' o' the cable, Bill," said one of the sailors, as he went forward, "it seems dangerous, it do."

"No more do I, Dick," replied his mate; "I feel as if it never could be rightly spliced again."

“Why, bless you, boys,” said a cable-man near them, “cables is used to that now, like eels to bein’ skinned; and so are we, for that matter. We think nothin’ of it.”

Clearly the cable-man was right, for, while the picking-up apparatus was being got ready, the cable was cut in no fewer than three places, in order to test the coils that lay in the tanks. These being found all right, the picking-up was begun with anxious care. The moment of greatest danger was when the big ship was swinging round. For a few but apparently endless moments the cable had to bear the strain, and became rigid like a bar of steel. Then it was got in over the bows, where all was bustle, and noise, and smoke, as the picking-up machinery panted and rattled.

All day the work went on. Night descended, but still the cable was coming in slowly, unwillingly,—now jerkily, as if half inclined to yield, anon painfully, as if changing its mind, until the strain was equal to two and a half tons. A row of lanterns lighted it, and the men employed watched and handled it carefully to detect the “fault,” while the clattering wheels played harsh music.

“We’ll never find it,” growled an impatient young electrician.

As if to rebuke him for his want of faith, the “fault” came in then and there—at 9:50 p.m., ship’s time.

“Ah!” said Mr Field, whose chief characteristic was an unwavering faith in ultimate success, “I knew we should find it are long. I have often known cables to stop working for two hours, no one knew why, and then begin again.”

“Well now, Mr Wright, it floors me altogether, does this here talkin’ by electricity.”

The man who made this remark to our hero was one who could not have been easily “floored” by any other means than electricity. He was a huge blacksmith—a stalwart fellow who had just been heaving the sledge-hammer with the seeming powers of Vulcan himself, and who chanced to be near Robin when he paused to rest and mop the streaming perspiration from his brow, while a well-matched brother took his place at the anvil.

“You see,” he continued, “I can’t make out nohow what the electricity does when it gits through the cable from Ireland to Noofun’land. Of course it don’t

actooally speak, you know—no more does it whistle, I suppose; an' even if it did I don't see as we'd be much the wiser. What do it do, Mr Wright? You seem to be well up in these matters, an' not above explainin' of 'em to the likes o' us as ha'n't got much edication."

Few things pleased Robin more than being asked to impart what knowledge he possessed, or to make plain subjects that were slightly complex. He was not always successful in his attempts at elucidation, partly because some subjects were too complex to simplify, and partly because some intellects were obtuse, but he never failed to try.

"You must know," he replied, with that earnest look which was apt to overspread his face when about to explain a difficulty, "that a piece of common iron can be converted into a magnet by electrifying it, and it can be unconverted just as fast by removing the electricity. Well, suppose I have a bit of iron in America, with an electric battery in Ireland, or vice versa—"

"W'ot's wicey wersa, Mr Wright?"

"Oh, it means the terms being changed—turned the other way, you know—back to the front, as it were—in short, I mean the battery being in America and the bit of iron in Ireland."

"Well, well, who'd a thought there was so much in wicey wersa; but go on, Mr Wright."

"Now, you must suppose," continued Robin, "that a needle, like the mariner's compass needle, hangs beside my bit of iron, close to it, and that a wire, or conductor of electricity, connects the iron with my electric battery in Ireland. Well, that makes a magnet of it, and the suspended needle, being attracted, sticks to it. Then I disconnect the wire from my battery by touching a handle, the bit of iron ceases to be a magnet, and the needle was free. Again I connect the battery, and the needle flies to the remagnetised bit of iron. Thus, as fast as I choose, I can make the needle wag, and by a simple arrangement we can make it wag right or left, so many beats right or left, or alternately, representing letters. By varying the beats we vary the letters, and thus spell out our messages. Now, do you understand it?"

"I ain't quite sure that I does," replied Vulcan; "I've got a hazy notion that by touchin' and removin' the touch from a conductor, connecting and

disconnecting wires and batteries, you can make electricity flow just as you let on or stop water by turnin' a stopcock—"

"Not exactly," interrupted Robin, "because, you see, electricity does not really flow, not being a substance."

"Not a substance, sir! w'y, w'ot is it then?"

"Like light and sound, it is merely an effect, an influence, a result," answered Robin. "We only use the word flow, and talk of electricity as a fluid, for convenience' sake."

"Well, w'otever it is or isn't," continued the puzzled Vulcan, gazing at vacancy for a few seconds, "when you've set it agoin'—or set agoin' the things as sets it agoin'—you make a suspended needle wag, and when you stop it you make the needle stop waggin', and by the way in which that there needle wags you can spell out the letters o' the alphabit—so many wags to the right bein' one letter, so many wags to the left bein' another letter, an' so on,—so that, what between the number o' wags an' the direction o' the waggin's, you—you come for to—there, I'm lost again, an' I must go in for another spell wi' the sledge, so we'll have to tackle the subject another time, Mr Wright."

Thus speaking, Vulcan seized the ponderous hammer in his powerful grasp and proceeded to beat form into a mass of glowing metal with much greater ease than he had been able to thump telegraphy into his own brain.

In the discovery of the "fault" and the cutting out of the injured part of the cable, twenty-six hours were lost. During all the time Captain Anderson was obliged to remain on deck, while the minds and bodies of the engineers and electricians were subjected to a severe strain for the same period. They had scarcely begun to breathe freely again, and to congratulate each other on being able to continue the voyage, when they received another shock of alarm by the cable suddenly flying off the drum, while it was being transferred from the picking-up machinery in the bow to the paying-out arrangements in the stern. Before the machinery could be stopped, some fathoms of cable had become entangled among the wheels and destroyed. This part having been cut out, however, and new splices made, the paying-out process was resumed.

"I'll turn in now and have a snooze, Robin," said Ebenezer Smith, "and you had better do the same; you look tired."

This was indeed true, for not a man or boy in the ship took a more anxious interest in the cable than did our little hero; he had begun to regard it as a living creature, and to watch over it, and dream about it, as if it were a dear friend in extreme danger. The enthusiastic boy was actually becoming careworn and thin, for he not only performed all the duties required of him with zealous application, but spent his leisure, and much of the time that should have been devoted to rest, in the careful study of his idol—intensely watching it, and all that was in the remotest way connected with it.

"You're a goose," said Stumps, in passing, when he heard Robin decline to retire as Smith had advised him.

"It may be so, and if so, Stumps, I shall continue to cackle a little longer on deck while they are examining the fault."

That examination, when finished, produced a considerable sensation. The process was conducted in private. The condemned portion was cut in junks and tested, until the faulty junk was discovered. This was untwisted until the core was laid bare, and when about a foot of it had been so treated, the cause of evil was discovered, drawing from the onlookers an exclamation of horror rather than surprise, as they stood aghast, for treachery seemed to have been at work!

"An enemy in the ship!" murmured one.

"What ship without an enemy?" thought another.

That mischief had been intended was obvious, for a piece of iron wire, bright as if cut with nippers at one end and broken off short at the other, had been driven right through the centre of the cable, so as to touch the inner wires—thus forming a leak, or conductor, into the sea. There could be no doubt that it had not got there by accident; neither had it been driven there during the making or shipping of the cable, for in that case the testings for continuity would have betrayed its presence before the starting of the expedition. The piece of wire, too, was the same size as that which formed the protecting cover, and it was of the exact diameter of the cable. There was also the mark of a cut on the Manilla hemp, where the wire had entered. It could have been done only by one of the men who were at work in the tank at the time the portion went

over, and, strange to say, this was the same gang which had been at work there when the previous “fault” occurred.

“Call all the men aft,” was the order that quickly followed this discovery.

The piece of cable was handed to them, and they were allowed to examine it in silence. They did so in great surprise, mingled with indignation.

“It’s bin done a’purpose, an’ driven in by a skilful hand,” said one.

“You’re right, Joe,” said another.

“I knows,” whispered a third, “that one of the men expressed satisfaction when the last fault occurred, an’ I’ve heard say that we’ve got enemies to the makers o’ the cable aboard.”

The man thus darkly referred to, whoever he was, of course looked as innocent and as indignant as the most virtuous among them; the guilt, therefore, could not be brought home to him. Woe betide him if it had been, for there was a serious talk of lynching some one among the wrathful men, each of whom was now subject to suspicion.

In these trying circumstances, the chief engineer accepted an offer made by the gentlemen in the ship, to take turn about in superintending the men at work in the tank paying-out the cable.

“It’s not pleasant, of course,” replied one of the men, speaking for the rest, “but we feel it to be justifiable, as well as necessary, and are very glad the plan has been adopted.”

Once more the big ship went merrily on her way, and the great cable went down to its ocean-bed so smoothly and regularly, that men began to talk of speedy arrival at Heart’s Content—their destination in Newfoundland—which was now only about 600 miles distant; but their greatest troubles still lay before them. About eight o’clock in the morning of 2nd August another bad fault was reported, and they had once again to resort to the wearisome process of picking-up.

At first all seemed about to go well. A gale was indeed blowing at the time, but that did not much affect the colossal ship. The cable was cut, fastened to its

iron rope, passed to the bow, and got in over the pulleys. Then, and very slowly, it was drawn on board. When a mile or so had been recovered, the gearing of one of the engines got a little out of order, and the process had to be temporarily stopped; then something went wrong with the boilers, but soon these difficulties were removed. Immediately after, the Great Eastern drifted, so that it was impossible to prevent the cable from chafing against her bows. Equally impossible was it to go astern, lest the strain should be too great. Then the wind suddenly shifted, making matters worse. Suddenly the chain shackle and wire-rope attached to the cable came in over the wheel at the bows with considerable violence. Another moment and the cable parted, flew through the stoppers, and, with one bound, flashed into the sea and disappeared!

Now, at last, the fatal climax so much dreaded had arrived. The days and nights of anxious labour had been spent in vain. The cable was lost, and with it went not only hundreds of thousands of pounds, but the hopes of hundreds of thousands of people, whose sanguine expectations of success were thus rudely dispelled.

Need it be said that something very like despair reigned for the moment on board the Great Eastern?

Most of the gentlemen on board—never dreaming of catastrophe—were at luncheon, when Mr Canning entered the saloon with a look that caused every one to start.

“It is all over!—it is gone!” he said, and hastened to his cabin.

Mr Field, with the composure of faith and courage, though very pale, entered the saloon immediately after, and confirmed the chief engineer’s statement.

“The cable has parted,” he said, “and has gone overboard.”

From the chiefs down even to Stumps and his fraternity all was blank dismay! As for our hero Robin Wright, he retired to his cabin, flung himself on his bed, and sobbed as though his heart would break.

But such a state of things could not last. Men’s spirits may be stunned and crushed, but they are seldom utterly overwhelmed so long as life endures.

Recovering from the shock, Mr Canning set about the process of grappling for the lost cable with persistent energy. But fishing in water two and a half miles deep is no easy matter. Nevertheless, it was done. Again and again, and over again, were two monster hooks in the shape of grapnels let down to the bottom of the sea, with an iron rope for a line, and the Great Eastern for a float!

The plan, of course, was to go back a few miles on their course and then drag across the known position of the lost treasure.

We say known, because good observations had fortunately been obtained by Captain Anderson just before the accident.

Two hours did the grapnels descend before they reached the bottom of the sea! All night did the cable-layers fish, with the characteristic patience of fishermen, but did not get a nibble. Towards morning, however, there was a decided bite, and the line became taut.

“Got him!” exclaimed an enthusiast eagerly.

“Don’t be too sure,” replied a philosopher cautiously.

“It may be a bit of wreck,” suggested Ebenezer Smith, who was a natural doubter.

“Or a whale, or the great sea-serpent,” said the sporting electrician, who was everything by turns and nothing long.

“We shall very soon know,” remarked a matter-of-fact engineer. “If it is a loose object the strain will decrease as it nears the surface, but if it be the cable the strain will certainly increase, because its weight will be greater the more of it we lift off the bottom.”

Earnestly did every one regard the dynamometer which told the exact amount of strain on the iron fishing-line, and to their joy the strain increased until the object caught had been raised three-quarters of a mile from the bottom. Then a swivel gave way, and the cable went back to its ocean-bed.

But those plucky engineers were not to be overcome by a first failure. Having started with five miles of fishing-line, they proceed at once to make a second attempt.

“Oh, I do hope they will hook it again!” said Robin Wright.

“And so they will,” said Ebenezer Smith.

And so they did. Late in the afternoon of the Monday following, their fish was again hooked and raised a full mile from the bottom, when another swivel gave way, and down it went a second time!

The fishing-line was now getting short. It behoved them to act with more caution. New bolts were put in each shackle and swivel, and the capstan was increased in diameter, being belted with thick plates of iron. To effect these alterations the forges had to be erected on deck, and at night these cast a lurid glare on the busy workers, bringing out every near object in vivid relief against the ebony background of space behind, while they made preparations for a third cast of the fishing-line. The cast was made successfully, it was thought, but one of the grapnels had caught the line with one of its flukes, so that it could not catch anything else, and the result was—nothing.

A fourth attempt was then made. It was to be the last. The fishing-line seemed too weak, and its frequent breakings had reduced it so much that other chains had to be attached to it. With this thing of shreds and patches the cable was once more hooked and brought up nearly eight hundred fathoms, when the line gave way once more, and the cable went down for the last time.

Nothing more could be done. The Great Eastern turned her large bows to the east and steered grandly though sadly, away for old England.

But don’t imagine, good reader, that these cable-layers were beaten. They were baffled, indeed, for that year (1865), but not conquered. Cyrus Field had resolved that the thing should be done—and done it was the following year; for the laying of the cable had been so nearly a success, that great capitalists, such as Brassey, Gooch, Barclay, Campbell, Pender, and others, at once came forward. Among these were the contractors, Glass and Elliot, who agreed not only to make and lay a new cable, but to pick up and complete the old one. Cyrus Field himself, besides energising like Hercules to push the matter on, was one of ten subscribers who each contributed 10,000 pounds. Thus 230,500 pounds were privately subscribed before a prospectus was issued.

Our little hero was at the laying of that (1866) cable, when the same great ship, with the same captain and most of the engineers and electricians who had gone out on the previous voyage, landed the end of the 1820-mile rope on the shores of Newfoundland, on Friday, 27th July. He cheered with the rest in wild enthusiasm when the Great Eastern dropped anchor in “Heart’s Content.” He accompanied Captain Anderson and the officers of the fleet when they went in a body to the little church there, to thank God for the successful completion of the great enterprise. He was present when the big ship, having received from other ships 8000 tons of coal, and some six hundred miles of the old cable, went back to mid-ocean to grapple for the lost cable of 1865. He assisted and watched with the deepest interest the amazing efforts of scientific and mechanical power put forth in the mere matter of dragging for the cable from the bottom, and observed with reverence, amounting almost to awe, the great moving spirit of the whole affair, the indomitable Mr Field, as he went to the bow and sat on the rope to feel the quiver which told him it was dragging the bottom of the sea two miles below. He was present, with blazing cheeks and eyes and bated breath, when, on the 17th of August, the cable was caught, dragged to the surface, and actually seen, and broke and sank again as deep as ever—though not so deep as the hearts of those who saw it go! He shared in the weary delays that followed, and in the final triumph when the cable was fairly caught and at last brought on board, and carried to the testing-room, amid intense excitement, lest it should prove to have been damaged by its rough treatment; and his voice helped to swell the roar of enthusiastic cheering that greeted the announcement that the old cable was still alive!

But all this we must leave, and carry the reader back to old England faster than the Great Eastern could have rushed—ay, faster than the message on the flashing cable itself could have sped, for mind is more subtle than matter, and thought is swifter than even the Atlantic Telegraph.

Chapter Eleven

Home!

“At last!” exclaimed Robin, bursting into his old home and seizing his mother in his arms.

Robin had just returned home after the laying of the 1866 Atlantic Cable, as briefly narrated in the last chapter.

It may be said with some truth that the old home became, during the next few days, a private lunatic asylum, for its inmates went mildly mad with joy.

Chief among the lunatics was uncle Rik, the retired sea-captain. That madman’s case, however, was not temporary derangement, like the others’. It was confirmed insanity, somewhat intensified just then by the nephew’s return.

“So, young man,” he said, one evening at supper, when the family traveller was dilating to open-eyed-and-mouthed listeners, “you actually believe that these cables are goin’ to work?”

“Of course I do, uncle. They are working now, and have been working for many years.”

“Well, now, the gullibility o’ some people is stupendous!” returned Rik. “Don’t you know, Robin, that everything a’most works for a time, and then, sooner or later—usually sooner—the ridiculous thing bursts up?”

“But, uncle, you beg the question in classing submarine cables among ridiculous things. Besides, have not dozens of cables been working satisfactorily for many years, without showing signs of bursting up as yet?”

“Pooh! bah! boh!” replied uncle Rik, by which he meant to say that though convinced against his will he was of the same opinion still.

At that moment cousin Sam Shipton entered with an eager, excited look.

“It’s all settled,” he said, taking Robin by the hand.

“What is settled?” asked Mrs Wright, somewhat anxiously.

“Mother, don’t be angry,” said Robin, laying his hand on his mother’s shoulder, and speaking tenderly, “I meant to have told you the moment I came in to-day, but uncle Rik with his argumentative spirit drove it and everything else except cables out of my head—”

“Well, but what is it?” interrupted Madge impatiently; “why do you keep us in suspense?”

“I have some prospect, mother, of being appointed to go with a telegraph-laying party to the East, but Sam is wrong when he says it is all settled. Whatever he may have to tell us, it is by no means settled until I have your and father’s opinion.”

“Well, you horribly good but ungrateful boy,” returned Sam, “it is at least settled as far as I have do with it. I have made application at head-quarters, and they are willing to take you on my recommendation. Moreover, I am myself going.”

“You’re joking, Sam!” exclaimed Robin, with a flush of joy; “I thought you had neither intention nor desire to go far from home.”

“You thought wrong, Robin. I always had desire, and now have intention—and I go as second in command. So, Miss Mayland,” he continued, turning to Madge, “I shan’t be able to continue those electrical lectures which you were so fond of once, but have lately seemed to grow tired of.”

Madge was at that tender age of budding womanhood when sensitive girls are apt to misunderstand a jest. She blushed, stammered something, then forced a laugh, and turned to speak to Robin; but Sam perceived that tears rose to her eyes, and he instantly sank in his own estimation to the condition of a loathsome reptile.

“Well, now, that is good news,” cried Robin, applying himself to the viands on the table with renewed zest. “You cannot have the smallest objection or anxiety, mother, I should think, when you know I shall be under so able a guide.”

“I have not yet thought it over, Robin.”

“And you, father?”

“Go, my boy, and my blessing go with you,” said Mr Wright, all but choking the blessing with a huge oyster.

“Are any labourers to go with us?” asked Robin.

“One or two picked ones.”

“Then you must allow me to pick one, Sam. My friend Jim Slagg is at present cast adrift with a considerable part of the Great Eastern’s crew. He will be delighted to go, I know, and is a first-rate, hard-working, willing, conscientious youth.”

“He ought to be proud of having so warm a friend and advocate,” said Sam, “but I have no power to choose the men.”

“O yes, you have, Sam. If you could get me appointed, you can get him appointed; and you must, for, if you don’t, I won’t go.”

“You are hard on me, Robin, but I’ll try.”

“But you have not yet told us where it is that they are going to send you,” said Mrs Wright.

“Ah! that’s not fixed,” replied Sam; “they are laying down lines in Turkey; and Egypt is talked of, and telegraph to India itself is even hinted at. All I know is that we shall be sent to the East somewhere.”

“Bah! boo! Why does nobody ask for my opinion on the matter?” said uncle Rik, as he gazed at the company over a goose drumstick, which was obviously not tender.

“Your opinion, brother,” said Mr Wright, “is so valuable, that no doubt your nephew has been keeping it to the last as a sort of tit-bit—eh, Robin?”

“Well, uncle; come, let us have it,” said Robin.

“You don’t deserve it,” returned Rik, with a wrench at the drumstick, “but you shall have it all the same, free, gratis. Was this bird fed on gutta-percha shavings, sister Nan?”

“Perhaps—or on violin strings, I’m not sure which,” replied Mrs Wright blandly.

“Well,” continued the captain, “you youngsters will go off, I see, right or wrong, and you’ll get half-drowned in the sea, roasted in the East, smothered in the desert, eaten alive by cannibals, used-up by the plague, poisoned by serpents, and tee-totally ruined altogether. Then you’ll come home with the skin of your teeth on—nothing more.”

“I sincerely hope it will be summer at the time,” said Sam, laughing; “but we are grateful to you for prophesying that we shall return, even though in such light clothing.”

“That’s what’ll happen,” continued the captain, regarding the other drumstick with some hesitation; “you may take the word of an old salt for it. I’ve lived in the good old times, lads, and I know that all these new-fangled notions are goin’ to burst up—and that’s what’ll come of it.”

Whether that was what came of it remains to be seen.

Chapter Twelve

A Great Dynamo-Electric Sea-Fight

A few weeks after the utterance of Captain Rik's famous prophecy, Robin, Sam, Stumps, and Slagg found themselves on board of a large submarine cable steam-ship, named the Triton, ploughing the billows of the Southern Ocean.

A few weeks later and they were drawing near to that great concourse of islands known as the Malay Archipelago, where nature is exceptionally beautiful, but man is rather vile. At all events, that region of the ocean lying to the south of China has been long infamous for the number and ferocity of its pirates, who, among the numerous islands, with their various channels, creeks, and rivers, have found a suitable field for their bloody and remorseless game.

"D'you know, I don't believe in pirates?" said Robin to Sam, as they stood at the bow of the cable-ship, conversing about these sea-robbers.

"They believe in you nevertheless, as you'd find out to your cost if we came across one just now."

The voice that replied was not Sam's, but that of the captain, who had come forward to get a clearer sweep of the horizon ahead with his glass.

"Do you think it likely, sir, that we may meet with any of the rascals?" asked Sam.

"Not at all unlikely," replied the captain, fixing his glass and putting it to his eye, "though I don't think it likely that we shall be attacked, as we are large and don't look like a richly freighted merchant-man. However, there is no saying. These scoundrels fear nothing, and when hard up will attack anything but a man-of-war, I half suspect that I am looking at one of them now."

This latter announcement, calmly uttered, threw all who heard it into quite a flutter of excitement.

The captain was a big, dark-skinned, bearded man, with a quiet, half-humorous, half-sarcastic expression of countenance.

“Do you really think it is a pirate?” asked Robin, eagerly.

“I really do,” replied the captain, “and I fear we may have to run out of our course to avoid her. You see, I am a man of peace, and abhor bloodshed, therefore I won’t fight if I can help it.”

Saying this he gave orders to have the course of the steamer changed.

Just then there occurred one of those contretemps which don’t often happen, but which, when they do, are often prolific of disaster; an important part of the machinery broke down, and the engine, for the moment, was rendered useless. It was most unfortunate, for the suspicious craft lay to windward, and a light breeze was blowing carried it steadily towards them, although all the sail the steamer possessed was crowded on her.

“Come aft here, Mr Shipton, and tell your chief to come with you. I want to hold a council of war,” said the captain.

Summoning the first mate and chief engineer, as well as the electricians, the captain went to the after part of the quarter-deck, where, seated on the taffrail, he deliberated with the extemporised council measures for repelling an expected attack.

What these deliberations tended to, those not of the council could not tell, but from the energy of the members, and an occasional burst of laughter from the group, it was obvious, as Jim Slagg remarked, that “mischief o’ some sort was in the wind.”

Presently the council broke up, and the members went actively below, as men do who have a purpose to carry out promptly.

Meanwhile the pirate vessel came within range and fired a shot which missed them. The fire was not repeated. Evidently they meant to get within easy range before trying another shot.

In a few minutes the electricians came on deck with several large coils of copper wire, which they uncoiled and distributed mysteriously about the sides of the vessel. At the same time several lengths of leathern pump hose were laid along the deck, and fire-branches or nozzles attached to them.

“Run out our stern-guns now,” said the captain, with a grim smile, “and give it ’em hot. It won’t do to seem to give in too easy. Run up the Union Jack. Don’t take aim. I want more noise and smoke than mischief—d’ye understand?”

The officer to whom this was addressed, said, “Ay, ay, sir,” in the usual tone of ready obedience, adding, however, in an undertoned growl, “but I don’t understand, for all that!”

He obeyed the orders literally, being well disciplined, and the result was a sudden and most furious cannonade, for the pirate replied with vigour, using all the guns he could bring to bear; but no damage was done on either side for some time, until at last a ball from the enemy went crash through the smoke funnel of the Triton with a most sonorous bang!

“That’ll do now,” cried the captain, “cease firing and haul down the colours.”

If the captain had said, “Cut away the rudder and heave the boilers overboard,” he could scarcely have caused more surprise in his crew, who, by his orders, had assembled on deck, every man being armed with musket, cutlass, and revolver. His orders were strictly and promptly obeyed, however.

By this time the light breeze had fallen and a dead calm prevailed, so that the sails of the pirate flapped idly against her masts, and her crew were seen busily lowering her boats.

“We could have soon got out of her way if our engines had not broke down,” growled the captain, as he went toward the front of the quarter-deck and looked down on the armed men in the waist. “My lads,” he said, “the blackguards are Malay pirates. They are lowering their boats, and will be alongside in less than half an hour. I don’t need to tell you what you’ll have to expect if they take us. We must beat ’em off or die; for it’s better to die sword in hand than to be tortured or strangled. Those of you, however, who prefer the latter modes of going under may show the white feather and enjoy yourselves in your own way. Now, lads, you know me. I expect obedience to orders to the letter. I hate fighting and bloodshed—so don’t kill unless you can’t help it. Also, take care that you don’t touch these copper wires on the sides with either finger or foot. If you do you’ll repent it, for electricians don’t like their gear handled.”

Turning abruptly round, for the oars of the approaching boats could now be distinctly heard, the captain asked Sam if his batteries were well charged.

“Chock-full, sir,” replied Sam with a broad grin; “there’s not a bit of iron all round the ship that a man could lay hold of without receiving his due!”

“Good,” said the captain, turning to the chief engineer; “are the hose attached and the boilers hot?”

“Bubblin’ up fit to burst, sir. I’ve weighted the safety-valves to give it force?”

Without another word the captain stepped to the port gangway, and took off his hat to the advancing pirates. The pirate captain, not to be outdone in civility, took off his fez and bowed as the boat ranged alongside. The captain carefully held out one of the man-ropes to his enemy. He grasped it and seized the other.

An instantaneous yell of the most appalling nature issued from his mouth, and never before, since ship-building began, were a couple of man-ropes thrown off with greater violence! The pirate captain fell back into his boat, and the captain of the steamer stepped promptly back to avoid the storm of bullets that were let fly at his devoted head. At the starboard gangway the chief mate performed the same ceremony to another boat with a like result.

The pirates were amazed and enraged, but not cowed. With a wild cheer they made a simultaneous dash at the ship’s sides all round. With a wilder yell they fell back into their boats,—shocked beyond expression! A few of them, however, chanced to lay hold of ropes or parts of the vessel that were not electrified. These gained the bulwarks.

“Shove in some more acid,” said the chief electrician in suppressed excitement to Sam Shipton, who stood beside the batteries below.

“Stir up the fires, lads,” cried the chief engineer to his men at the boilers beneath, as he stood holding a fire-nozzle ready.

Intensified yells all round told that chemical action had not been applied in vain, while the pirates who had gained the bulwarks were met with streams of boiling water in their faces. Heroes may and do face shot and shell coolly without flinching, but no hero ever faced boiling water coolly. The pirates turned simultaneously and received the streams in rear. Light cotton is but a

poor defence in such circumstances. They sloped over the sides like eels, and sought refuge in the sea. Blazing with discomfiture and amazement, but not yet dismayed, these ferocious creatures tried the assault a second time. Their fury became greater, so did the numbers that gained a footing on the bulwarks, but not one reached the deck! The battery and the boiler played a part that day which it had never before entered into the brain of the wildest scientist to conceive. The hissing of the hot shower and the vigour of the cold shock were only equalled by the unearthly yelling of the foe, whose miraculous bounds and plunges formed a scene that is altogether indescribable.

The crew of the steamer stood spell-bound, unable to fight even if there had been occasion for so doing. The dark-skinned captain became Indian-red in the face from suppressed laughter.

Suddenly a tremor ran through the steamer, as if she too were unable to restrain her feelings. During the fight—if we may so call it—the engineers had been toiling might and main in the buried depths of their engine-room; the broken parts of the engine had been repaired or refitted, and a throb of life had returned to the machinery. In its first revolution the screw touched the stern of a pirate-boat and turned it upside down. Another boat at the bow was run over. The crews of both swam away like ducks, with their long knives between their teeth. The other boats hauled off.

“Now, captain,” cried Robin Wright, who, during the whole time, had stood as if transfixed, with a cutlass in one hand, a pistol in the other, and his mouth, not to mention his eyes, wide open; “Now, captain, we shall get away without shedding a drop of blood!”

“Yes,” replied the captain, “but not without inflicting punishment. Port your helm—hard a port!”

“Port it is, sir—hard over,” replied the man at the wheel, and away went the steamer with a grand circular sweep which speedily brought her, bow-on, close to the pirate vessel.

“Steady—so!” said the captain, at the same time signalling “full steam” to the engine-room.

The space between the two vessels quickly decreased. The part of the pirate crew which had been left on board saw and understood. With a howl of

consternation, every man sprang into the sea. Next moment their vessel was cut almost in two and sent fathoms down into the deep, whence it rose a limp and miserable remnant, flattened out upon the waves.

“Now,” observed the captain, with a pleasant nod, “we’ll leave them to get home the best way they can. A boat voyage in such fine weather in these latitudes will do them good.”

Saying which, he resumed his course, and steamed away into the regions of the far East.

Chapter Thirteen

Tells of a Sudden and Unlooked-for Event

How often it has been said, “Good for man that he does not know what lies before him.” If he did we fear he would face his duty with very different feelings from those which usually animate him. Certain it is that if Robin Wright and Sam Shipton had known what was before them—when they stood one breezy afternoon on the ship’s deck, casting glances of admiration up at the mountain waves of the southern seas, or taking bird’s-eye views of the valleys between them—their eyes would not have glistened with such flashes of delight, for the fair prospects they dreamed of were not destined to be realised.

What these prospects were was made plain by their conversation.

“Won’t it be a splendid opportunity, Sam, to become acquainted with all the outs and ins of telegraphy, this laying of lines from island to island in the China Seas?”

“It will, indeed, Robin,—a sort of compound or alternating land-and-submarine line. At one time we shall be using palm-trees for posts and carrying wires through the habitations of parrots and monkeys, at another we shall be laying them down among the sharks and coral groves.”

“By the way,” said Robin, “is it true that monkeys may prove to be more troublesome to us in these regions than sparrows and crows are at home?”

“Of course it is, my boy. Have you never heard that on some of our Indian lines, baboons, vultures, and other heavy creatures have sometimes almost broken down the telegraphs by taking exercise and roosting on the wires?”

“Indeed, I hope it won’t be so with us. At all events, sharks won’t be much tempted, I should fancy, by submarine cables.”

“There’s no saying, Robin. They are not particular when hungry. By the way, I saw you talking with unusual earnestness this morning to Jim Slagg; what was the matter with him?”

“Poor fellow! you’d scarcely believe it, to look at him,” replied Robin, “but the lad is actually home-sick.”

“Home-sick! Why, how’s that? If we were only a few days out from port, or even a week or two, I could understand it, but seeing that we are now drawing near to the China Seas, I should have thought—”

“Oh, that’s easily explained,” interrupted Robin. “This is his mother’s birthday, it seems, a day that has always been kept with much rejoicing, he tells me, by his family, and it has brought back home and home-life with unusual force to him. With all his rough off-handedness, Slagg is a tender-hearted, affectionate fellow. Somehow he has taken it into his head that this voyage will be disastrous, and that he will never see his mother again. I had great difficulty in showing him the unreasonableness of such a belief.”

“No doubt you had. It is unreasonable beliefs that people usually hold with greatest tenacity,” replied Sam, with a touch of sarcasm. “But tell me, have he and Stumps never once quarrelled since leaving England?”

“Never.”

“I’m amazed—they are so unlike in every way.”

“You would not be surprised if you knew them as I do,” returned Robin. “Ever since Slagg gave him that thrashing on board the Great Eastern in 1865, Stumps has been a changed man. It saved him from himself, and he has taken such a liking to Slagg that nothing will part them. It was that made me plead so hard for Stumps to be taken with us, because I felt sure Slagg would not go without him, and although we might easily have done without Stumps, we could not have got on so well without Slagg.”

“I’m not so sure of that, my boy. Your opinion of him is too high, though I admit him to be a first-rate youth. Indeed, if it were not so, he should not be here.—Was that a shark’s fin alongside?”

“Yes, I think so. Cook has been throwing scraps overboard, I suppose.—See, there goes an empty meat-tin.”

As he spoke the article named rose into the air, and fell with a splash in the water. At the same time Jim Slagg was seen to clamber on the bulwarks and look over.

“Come here—look alive, Stumps!” he shouted.

Stumps, whose proper name, it is but fair to state, was John Shanks, clambered clumsily to his friend’s side just in time to see a shark open its horrid jaws and swallow the meat-tin.

“Well now, I never!” exclaimed Slagg. “He didn’t even smell it to see if it was to his taste.”

“P’r’aps he’s swallowed so many before,” suggested Stumps, “that he takes for granted it’s all right.”

“Well it’s on’y flavour; and he has caught a Tartar this time,” returned the other, “unless, maybe, tin acts like pie-crust does on human vitals.”

The low deep voice of the captain was heard at this moment ordering a reef to be taken in the top-sails, and then it began to strike Robin and Sam that the breeze was freshening into something like a gale, and that there were some ominous-looking clouds rising on the windward horizon. Gazing at this cloud-bank for a few minutes, the captain turned and ordered the top-sails to be close-reefed, and most of the other sails either furled or reduced to their smallest size.

He was in good time, and the vessel was ready for the gale, when it rushed down on them hissing like a storm-fiend.

The good ship bent before the blast like a willow, but rose again, and, under the influence of able seamanship, went bravely on her course, spurning the billows from her swelling bows.

“What a thing it is to know that there is a good hand at the helm in times of danger!” remarked Sam as he and our hero stood under the shelter of the starboard bulwarks, holding on with both hands to the rigging, while the rushing waves tossed them on high or let them drop in the troughs of the seas; “I should feel safe with our captain in any circumstances.”

“So should I,” said Robin with enthusiasm, his eyes glistening with delight as he gazed on the angry ocean.

There was no thought of danger in the mind of any one at that moment. A good ship, ably commanded, well manned, and with plenty of sea-room,—what more could be desired? Nevertheless, deadly peril was close at hand.

That marvellous little creature—which, in the southern seas, builds its little cell, works its little day and dies, leaving to succeeding generations of its kind to build their little cells and die, each using its predecessor's mansion as a foundation for its own, until pile on pile forms a mass, and mass on mass makes a mountain—the coral insect, had reared one of its submarine edifices just where the cable-ship Triton had to pass that day. For ages man had traversed that sea without passing exactly over that mountain, and even if he had, it would not have mattered, for the mountain had been always many fathoms below the surface. But now the decree had gone forth. The conjunction of events predestined had come about. The distance between the mountain summit and the ocean surface had been reduced to feet. The Triton rose on the top of a mighty billow as she reached the fated spot. The coral peak rose near the bottom of the water-hollow beyond, and down on it the doomed ship went with an awful crash!

Her speed was checked only an instant, for the top of the rock was knocked off by the force of the blow, and the ship passed swiftly on, but there could be no mistaking the significance of that shock. An involuntary shout of alarm from some,—a gasp, halt of surprise, half of horror, from others,—then a rush of active effort when the captain gave orders to man the pumps.

There was urgent need for haste. The mass of coral rock had stuck in the hole it had made, else had they gone down in a few minutes. As it was, the water rushed in furiously, so much so that the captain detailed a party of men to construct a raft, while the rest relieved each other at the pumps. No doubt he was partly urged to this course by the consideration that a vessel weighted with telegraph-cables and other heavy material connected therewith could not float long in a leaky condition.

"Keep close to me, Robin; we must sink or swim together."

It was Sam who spoke. He was very pale, but his firmly-compressed lips showed no sign of unmanly fear. Robin, on the contrary, taken by surprise, and too inexperienced to correctly estimate sudden danger, was flushed with the feeling that now was the time to do and dare whatever should be required

of him! They went to the pumps together, where Stumps and Slagg were already at work with many others.

It is surprising how fast and hard men will toil when life depends on the result. There was a cat-like activity about the carpenter and his mates as they cut, sawed, lashed, and bolted together the various spars and planks which formed the raft. In a marvellously short space of time it was ready and launched over the side, and towed astern by the strongest cable on board, for the danger of parting from it in such weather was very great. Knowing this they had lashed some casks of pork and other provisions to it before launching.

Still they laboured with unflagging resolution at the pumps, for many of those on board were picked men, whose sense of honour urged them to strive to the uttermost to save the ship, for it was no ordinary merchant-man, freighted with an ordinary cargo, which could easily be replaced as well as insured, but a vessel freighted with those magic wires which couple continents and unite humanity, whose loss might delay, though it could not ultimately arrest, the benign and rapid intercourse of man with man in all parts of the globe.

“Keep your eye on Sam and me,” whispered Robin to Jim Slagg, finding himself alongside that worthy during a spell of rest. “Let us keep together, whatever happens.”

Robin did not quite believe that anything serious was going to happen. Some spirits find it as difficult to believe in impending disaster as others find it to believe in continued safety. It seemed so impossible to Robin, in his inexperience, that the strong and still buoyant vessel which had borne them so long and bravely should sink! Nevertheless, like the rest, he laboured with a will.

Slagg took the opportunity to give a similar caution to his friend Stumps.

“She’s sinking, sir,” said the carpenter, who had been sounding the well, to the captain, about an hour later.

“I know it; stand by to have the raft hauled alongside. Knock off now, lads, there’s no use in pumping any more.”

The men ceased, with a deep sigh, and by that act the death-warrant of the cable-ship was signed.

During the next quarter of an hour the crew were busy slipping down the cable that held the raft. A few ran below to fetch small articles that they valued, but by that time the vessel was so low in the water, that there was little time to spare, and the captain began to urge haste.

“Now then, lads, over the side with you,” he said, chancing to look at Sam Shipton as he spoke!

That spirit of heroism which induces men to resolve to be the last to quit a sinking ship, came over Sam just then, and he shrank back. He and his chief were in charge of the telegraph apparatus. It would be disgraceful to quit until all on board had left. He laid his hand on the strong cable that held the raft and said, “I’ll stay to the last, sir, and cast off the rope, if you’ll allow me.”

“We don’t cast off ropes in such circumstances,” replied the captain; “we cut ’em.”

Sam was silenced, but not the less resolved to hold to his point, if possible. He still held back, while the captain, being busy with the others, some of whom were rather too eager to go, paid no further attention to him. Robin, Slagg, and Stumps, recognising Sam as their leader, fell behind him and kept close.

At last all were on the raft except the captain and the four friends.

“Now, then, come along,” said the former, somewhat impatiently.

“After you, sir,” said Sam, with a polite bow.

“Overboard, sir!” shouted the captain, in a voice that would brook no denial, and Sam at once stepped on the bulwark, for he was not naturally rebellious.

Just as he spoke the rope broke, and the raft fell astern.

“Jump! jump! it’s your only chance,” cried the captain, at the same moment springing into the sea.

Sam was on the point of following, when an exclamation from Slagg checked him. Looking quickly back, he saw that Robin was not there.

Our hero, while modestly standing behind his comrades, had suddenly remembered that the small bible given him by his mother was lying on the shelf at the side of his berth. He would have lost anything rather than that. There was yet time to fetch it, so, without a word, he turned and sprang below, supposing that he had ample time.

“Robin! Robin!” shouted Sam and Slagg together, at the top of their voices.

“Coming! coming!” reached them faintly from below, but Robin did not come. The hasty summons induced him to leap over a chest in returning. He struck his head violently against a beam, and fell back stunned.

With another wild shout his friends rushed down the companion-hatch to hasten his movements by force. They found him almost insensible. Lifting him quickly, they carried, him on deck, and bore him to the stern of the vessel.

“Robin! Robin!” cried Sam, in an agony of impatience—for the raft was by that time far astern, besides which the shades of evening were beginning to descend—“do try to rally. We must swim. We’re almost too late. Can you do it?”

“Yes, yes, I can swim like a duck,” cried Robin, rising and staggering towards the bulwarks.

“But I can’t swim at all!” cried Stumps in a voice of horror.

Sam stopped as if suddenly paralysed. Then, laying hold of Robin, held him back. He felt, as he looked at the dark heaving sea and the now distant raft, that it was not possible for him and Slagg to save both their injured and their helpless comrade.

“Too late!” he said in a voice of despair, as he sat down and for a moment covered his face with his hands. Slagg looked at him with a bewildered rather than a despairing expression.

“So, we’ll have to sink together since we can’t swim together,” he said at last, with a touch of reckless vexation, as he gazed at the naturally stupid and by that time imbecile face of his friend Stumps.

“Come, only cowards give way to despair,” cried Sam, starting up. “We have one chance yet, God be praised, but let’s work with a will, boys, for the time is short.”

Chapter Fourteen

The Raft

Sam Shipton's one chance did not seem a bright one, but, with characteristic energy, he proceeded to avail himself of it at once.

When the raft was launched over the side, as described, the carpenters had embarked upon it with the rest of the ship's crew, dropping their tools on the deck beside the mass of unused material of ropes, spars, planks, etcetera, as they left. Four of the spars were pretty equal in length. Sam selected them hastily and laid them on the deck in the form of a square, or oblong frame. Then he seized an axe.

"Unravel some of the ropes, Robin," he cried. "You two select some planks as near ten feet long as possible. Quick—ask no questions, but do what I tell you."

Sam Shipton was one of those who hold the opinion that every man born into the world, whether gentle or simple, should learn a trade. He had acted on his belief and taught himself that of a carpenter, so that he wielded the axe with skill, and gave his orders with the precision of one who knows what he is about. His comrades, although not trained to any special trade, were active handy fellows, with the exception, indeed, of John Shanks, whose fingers were usually described as "thumbs," and whose general movements were clumsy; but Stumps had a redeeming quality to set against defects—he was willing.

With a few powerful well-directed blows, Sam cut four deep notches into the two longest of the selected spars, near their ends, at equal distances from each other. Into these he laid the ends of the two shorter spars, thus forming a frame-work.

"Twelve feet by ten, not a bad raft," he muttered, as if to himself, while he snatched a rope from the bundle of those disentangled by Robin. "Take a rope of same size, you two, and lash the opposite corners as you see me doing. Stumps will go on selecting the planks."

Sam jerked out his words with as much rapidity and force as he applied to the labour of his hands. There was something quite tremendous in his energy, and little wonder—for, as he glanced now and then along the deck he saw that the

ship was rapidly settling down to her final dive, and that the closing scene would be sudden.

Powerfully impressed by his example, the others worked in total silence and with all their might, for Sam's conduct, far more than the appearance of things, convinced them of their danger.

"The planks now, Stumps! Drive in as many of these clamps as you can find, Slagg—so," (he set the example)—"we've no time to bore holes for bolts. A plank now; that's it! Hand some nails—no, the biggest nails and the big hammer. Mind your fingers!"

Down came the heavy hammer on a four-inch nail, which went half through the thick plank. Two more such blows and the iron head was buried in the wood. Six planks sufficed to cover the frame. They were laid lengthwise with nails just sufficient to hold them. A piece of thick rope passed four times round the entire fabric still further secured them in position.

"Tie a lot of these nails in a bit of sail-cloth, Slagg, and fix 'em to the raft—to one of the spars, not the planks. Do the same with a saw, hammer, axe, and cask of biscuit,—water, too; don't forget water. Make a belt of a bit of rope, Robin, and stick that small axe in it. Have it handy."

While he spoke Sam did not look up, but gave all his attention to the tightening, with a hand-spike, of the knot on the thick rope that bound the raft together; for we may as well inform those who don't know it, that the tying of a knot on a cable is not managed in the same way or with the same ease that a similar operation is performed on a piece of twine.

"But how shall we lift it over the side?" asked Stumps, becoming suddenly alive to a difficulty.

"Help me to haul on this rope and you shall see," said Sam.

He ran to the side, lifted a coil of rope off its belaying-pin, threw it on the deck, cut the rope clear, and hauled it to the raft, to one end of which he made it fast.

It was the strong rope, by means of which one of the mizzen yards was braced, and was rove through a block attached to the outward end of the yard.

“Hoist away now—with a will!”

“Hold on,” cried Slagg, stuffing a mass of sail-cloth violently, by means of a hand-spike, underneath the binding rope of the raft.

“There now—yo ho! heave ho-o!”

Up went the end of the little ark of safety, and when one end was raised very little force was required to push it over.

“Hold on! hold on! hold o–o–on!” yelled Stumps, straining to prevent the raft from leaving the ship.

“No, no.—Let go! let go! let go-o-o!” roared Sam.

Stumps did let go and almost fell from the combined effect of his efforts and despair, as the raft swung off, splashed into the sea far out of reach, and hung half suspended from the yard-arm.

“It’s all up with us,” gasped Stumps.

“Not yet, but it will be all up with us in two minutes,” returned Sam, unable to repress a smile even at that moment.

“What d’ye mean?” said Stumps in amazement. “How can we ever git at it now?”

“Why, stoopid,” said Slagg, “don’t you see that we’ve only to go up the mast, out on the yard-arm, and slip down the rope.”

While he was speaking, Robin, by Sam’s orders, was performing the feat referred to.

“Look sharp!” he cried, turning to the others.

A heavy lurch of the ship caused their breasts to leap almost as fast as their bodies, for they were all more or less aware of the danger of the ship sinking before they could get clear of her. The darkness, too, was, as we have said,

increasing by that time, though it was still light enough to enable them to see what they were about.

In a few minutes they all had gained the end of the yard-arm, slipped down the rope, and got upon the raft, but it was difficult to hold on, because at each heave of the ship, the fore-end of the raft was raised quite out of the sea, and then let fall with considerable violence. As soon as Sam reached it, he bade Robin cut adrift with his axe, so great was the heave; but at the moment the raft hung almost perpendicularly in the air, and Robin could do nothing but cling to the rope that bound it. Next instant it again fell flat on the sea.

"Now—cut!" cried Sam.

The rope was severed with one blow; almost at the same instant the stern of the Triton flew up with a degree of violence that no wave could account for. It was her last fling. Instantly after she went down head foremost. The masts, by good fortune, leaned away from the raft at the time, else they would have been struck by the yards, or involved in the rigging. As it was they did not escape. The vast whirlpool caused by the sinking ship drew them in with irresistible power. For one moment the horrified youths saw a dark green vortex towards which they rushed. Another moment, and they beheld a green funnel whirling round them as they sank into midnight darkness, while an ocean of roaring water filled their ears.

Who shall attempt to describe, the feelings or sensations of that moment! The one absorbing idea of self-preservation was of course dominant, coupled with an intolerable feeling that the upper air could never be regained.

It was reached, however, by all of them. First by Sam Shipton, who shot waist-high above the sea with a loud gasp, and struck out wildly. Then, recovering presence of mind, he swam more gently, and looked eagerly round. He was immediately followed by Robin and Slagg. Last of all by Stumps, who came up legs foremost, and, on turning other end up, saluted them with a roar that would not have shamed a monster of the deep. But the roar was cut short by a gurgle, as, in his frantic struggles, he sank himself again.

Observing this, and seeing that the others were comparatively self-possessed, Sam made towards his drowning comrade. The poor fellow, catching sight of him as he came near, made a clutch at him, but Sam was well aware of the danger of being grasped by a drowning man. He swerved aside, and Stumps

sank with a gurgle of despair. Twice again did he rise and sink. Once more he rose. With a rapid stroke Sam swam behind him and caught him under the armpits. Violently did the poor fellow strive to turn round and clasp his preserver, but Sam, treading water, held him easily at arm's-length with his head just above the surface. As long as he struggled nothing more could be done for him; Sam therefore put his mouth as near to his ear as possible and shouted:—

"Stop struggling!—else I'll let you go!"

It was probably as much the tone of Sam's voice as the sense of these words that calmed Stumps. At all events he instantly lay, or rather hung, perfectly limp and still.

"Now," continued Sam, "you are quite safe if you do what I tell you. If you don't you're a dead man! D'you understand?"

"Yes," gasped Stumps.

"Let your hands and arms lie flat on the water! Don't try to raise your head farther than I let you! Keep your feet still! Let yourself hang helpless while I hold you and look round for the raft."

It was obvious that Stumps had regained self-command, for as each of these orders was shouted in his ear, in the tones of a sergeant-major, he obeyed with eager, almost ludicrous, promptitude.

"The raft is here, close at hand," said a voice close to Sam's ear.

It was Robin who had discovered him at that moment.

"Is Slagg safe?" asked Sam.

"Here he is, all right," said the worthy referred to, puffing and choking as he swam up.

"Keep off—don't get in front of him," said Sam, in a warning voice. "He mayn't have recovered self-restraint enough yet to refrain from grasping you. Guide me to the raft, Robin, while I swim on my back, and see that you don't let it hit me

on the head when I come close. You and Slagg help each other on, and then help me with Stumps."

Nothing could have calmed Stumps more than the cool, firm way in which these orders were given, so that he allowed himself to lie like a log while his deliverer drew him gently backwards until the back of his head rested on his bosom. Sam then struck out gently with his legs; Robin turned him with a push in the right direction, and thus, swimming on his back, he reached the raft. Slagg and Robin having already helped each other upon it, grasped his hair. At once he freed one hand and caught the rope that bound the raft. Stumps naturally slewed round, so that his mouth and nose went for a moment under water. Fancying that he was forsaken, he caught Sam round the neck, drew himself up, and gave a terrific yell.

"Ha! you may choke me now, if you can," muttered Sam, as he grasped the rope with both hands, "only, the longer you hold on to me the longer you will be of getting out of the water."

The terrified lad still retained sufficient sense to appreciate the force of the remark. Looking up as well as he could through his dishevelled hair, he held out one hand to Slagg, who grasped it firmly. Releasing Sam, with some hesitation he made a convulsive grasp at Robin with the other hand. Robin met him half-way. A loud "heave ho!" and a mighty pull brought him out of the sea, and sent him with a squash on the boards of the raft, where he lay gripping the ropes with his hands as with a vice.

Before his rescuers could turn to aid Sam, he stood panting beside them.

"Thank God," said Sam, "for this deliverance!"

"Amen!" was the earnest and prompt response from the others.

Yet it seemed but a temporary deliverance, for when these castaways looked around them, they saw nothing but a heaving ocean and a darkening sky, with the tiny raft as the only visible solid speck in all the watery waste. Compared, however, with the extremity of danger though which they had just passed, the little platform on which they stood seemed to them an ample refuge—so greatly do circumstances alter our estimate of facts!

But they had not time to think much, as may be easily understood, for a great deal still remained to be done. Their little ark was by no means secure. We have said that only enough of nails had been driven into it to hold the planks to the frame-work, but not to withstand rough treatment. Indeed, during the plunge two of the planks had been torn off, but the binding rope held them to their places, as Sam had foreseen.

Very little daylight now remained, so that not a moment was to be lost.

“No sign of the big raft,” said Sam, stooping to unfasten the hammer and packet of nails, after taking one quick, anxious glance round the horizon.

“But it may be not far-off after all,” said Slagg, kneeling down to aid his comrade, while Stumps, by that time recovered, assisted Robin to tighten the ropes that held the pork-barrel. “With such poor light it ’ud be hard to make out a flat thing like that a-kickin’ in the hollows of the seas.”

“But you forget,” returned Sam, “that it must be a-kickin’ on the top o’ the sea as well as in the hollows. Another nail—thanks. However, I don’t expect to see it again.”

“Well, now, I expects to see it in the mornin’ not far-off,” said Slagg. “Is the water-cask fast, Robin?”

“All right—and the pork too.”

“And the sail. Just give it an extra shove under the ropes, Robin. We’d be badly off if we lost it.”

“I don’t see what good a sail can do us,” said Stumps, who had now quite recovered.

“Not as a sail, Stumpy,” replied Slagg, whose spirit soon recovered elasticity, “though even in that way it may help us, but as a blanket we shall appreciate it before long.”

Slagg was right. After the planking had been secured and the rope refastened, those unfortunates found themselves in an unenviable position. The gale had indeed abated somewhat, though the heaving of the great waves was little less tremendous, but the night had settled down into a state of pitchy darkness, so

that they could barely see each other's faces, while the seas continually washed over them, obliging them to hold on to the ropes for fear of being washed away.

In such circumstances sleep was out of the question, yet they stood sorely in need of rest.

"Now we'll see what's to be done wi' the sail," said Slagg, after they had been seated some time doing nothing. "Sleep I want, an' sleep I'll have, so lend a hand, boys."

He drew out the sail with some trouble, so well had it been stuffed in, and bade the others hold and prevent it from flapping while he fastened the corners down. He did not arrange it like a tent, but spread it as flat as possible, doubling the superfluous edges inward, so that it presented little or no obstruction to the free passage of wind or water over them.

This done, they all crept underneath, and found it to be a much snugger den than they had expected, for the two casks prevented their heads from being pressed down when a few tons of water rolled over them—as occasionally happened.

Still they did not dare to sleep until each had fastened a rope round his waist and bound himself to the flooring. Having done so, each laid himself alongside of a turn of the binding-cable, and, embracing that affectionately with both arms, laid his head on the planks and shut his eyes.

Many and varied are the conditions under which healthy members of the human family seek and find repose, but we venture to think that few conditions have ever been found which were more unfavourable to sleep than that which has just been described.

Nevertheless, they were met promptly by slumber most profound, as they lay wet and weary on the little raft that disastrous night, on the dark and surging breast of the Southern Sea.

Chapter Fifteen

Life on the Raft

To awake “all at sea”—in other words, ignorant of one’s locality—is a rather common experience, but to awaken both at and in the sea, in a similar state of oblivion, is not so common.

It was the fortune of Robin Wright to do so on the first morning after the day of the wreck.

At first, when he opened his eyes, he fancied, from the sound of water in his ears, that it must have come on to rain very heavily, but, being regardless of rain, he tried to fall asleep again. Then he felt as if there must be a leak in his berth somewhere, he was so wet; but, being sleepy, he shut his eyes, and tried to shut his senses against moisture. Not succeeding, he resolved to turn on his other side, but experienced a strange resistance to that effort. Waxing testy, he wrenched himself round, and in so doing kicked out somewhat impatiently. This, of course, woke him up to the real state of the case. It also awoke Slagg, who received the kick on his shins. He, delivering a cry of pain straight into Sam Shipton’s ear, caused that youth to fling out his fist, which fell on Stumps’s nose, and thus in rapid succession were the sleepers roused effectually to a full sense of their condition.

“It’s cold,” remarked Stumps, with chattering teeth.

“You should be thankful that you’re alive to feel the cold, you ungrateful creetur,” said Slagg.

“I am thankful, Jim,” returned the other humbly, as he sought to undo the rope that held him fast; “but you know a feller can scarcely express thanks or—or—otherwise half asleep, an’ his teeth goin’ like a pair o’ nut-crackers.”

“The wind is evidently down,” remarked Sam, who had already undone his lashings. “Here, Robin, help me to untie this corner of the sail. I had no idea that sleeping with one’s side in a pool of water would make one so cold and stiff.”

“If it had bin a pool, Mr Shipton,” said Slagg, “it wouldn’t have made you cold; ’cause why? you’d have made it warm. But it was the sea washin’ out and in fresh that kep’ the temperater low—d’ee see?”

“What a cargo o’ rheumatiz we’ve been a-layin’ in this night for old age,” said Stumps ruefully, as he rubbed his left shoulder.

Throwing off the sail, Sam stood up and looked round, while an exclamation of surprise and pleasure broke from him. The contrast between the night and morning was more than usually striking. Not only had darkness vanished and the wind gone down, but there was a dead calm which had changed the sea into a sheet of undulating glass, and the sun had just risen, flooding the sky with rosy light, and tipping the summit of each swell with gleaming gold. The gentle, noiseless heaving of the long swell, so far from breaking the rest of nature, rather deepened it by suggesting the soft breathings of slumber. There were a few gulls floating each on its own image, as if asleep, and one great albatross soared slowly in the bright sky, as if acting the part of sentinel over the resting sea.

“How glorious!” exclaimed Robin, as, with flashing eyes, he gazed round the scarce perceptible horizon.

“How hard to believe,” said Sam, in a low voice, “that we may have been brought here to die.”

“But surely you do not think our case so desperate?” said Robin.

“I hope it is not, but it may be so.”

“God forbid,” responded Robin earnestly.

As he spoke his arm pressed the little bible which he had rescued from the wreck. Thrusting his hand into his bosom he drew it out.

“Darling mother!” he said, “when she gave me this she told me to consult it daily, but especially in times of trouble or danger. I’ll look into it now, Sam.”

He opened the book, and, selecting the verse that first met his eye, read: “In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them; in his

love and in his pity he redeemed them; and he bare them and carried them all the days of old."

"That's a grand word for us, isn't it?—from Isaiah," said Robin.

"Well, what do you make of it?" asked Sam, whose religious education had not been attended to as well as that of his friend.

"That our God is full of love, and pity, and sympathy, so that we have nothing to fear," said Robin.

"But surely you can't regard that as a message to us when you know that you turned to it by mere chance," said Sam.

"I do regard it as a special message to us," returned Robin with decision.

"And what if you had turned up an entirely unsuitable or inapplicable verse?" said Sam.

"Then I should have concluded that God had no special message for us just now, but left us to that general comfort and instruction contained throughout the whole word. When, however, special comfort is sought and found, it seems to me ungrateful to refuse it."

"But I don't refuse it, Robin," returned Sam; "I merely doubt whether it is sent to us or not."

"Why, Sam, all the bible was sent to us for comfort and instruction."

"True—true. I have not thought much on that subject, Robin, but I'll try to believe at present that you are right, for we stand much in need of strong hope at all events. Here we are, none of us knows how far from the nearest land, with little food and less water, on a thing that the first stiff breeze may knock to pieces, without shelter and without compass!"

"Without shelter and compass, Mr Shipton!" said Jim Slagg, who had hitherto listened in silence to the conversation; "why, what d'ye call this?" (taking hold of the sail). "Ain't that shelter enough, and won't the sun guide us by day and the stars by night. It seems to me that you are too despondin', Mr Shipton."

“Don’t ‘mister’ me any more, Slagg. It was all very well aboard ship where we had our relative positions, but now we are comrades in distress, and must be on an equal footing.”

“Very good,” replied Slagg, looking round in his comrades’ faces, and raising his voice as if making a speech. “Bein’ equal, as you say, I takes the liberty o’ callin’ a general meetin’ o’ this free and—if I may be allowed the expression—easy Republic. Moreover, I move myself into the chair and second the motion, which, nobody objectin’, is carried unanimously. Gentlemen, the business of this here meetin’ is to appoint a commander to this here ship, an’ what could be more in accordance with the rule o’ three—not to mention the rules o’ four and common sense—than a Shipton takin’ command. Who’s goin’ to make the first reslootion?”

Entering into the spirit of the thing, Robin moved that Samuel Shipton be appointed to command the ship and the party, with the title of captain.

“And without pay,” suggested Slagg.

“And I move,” said Stumps, who was just beginning to understand the joke, though a little puzzled by the fact that it was done in earnest, “I move that Robin Wright be first leftenant.”

“Brayvo, Stumps!” cried Slagg, “your intellec’ is growin’. It on’y remains to appoint you ship’s monkey and maid-of-all-work—specially dirty work—and, then, with a hearty vote o’ thanks to myself for my conduct in the chair, to vacate the same an’ dissolve the meetin’.”

These matters having been satisfactorily settled, the castaways proceeded to prepare breakfast, and while this was being done the recently appointed captain looked once more anxiously round in the hope of seeing the large raft with their late shipmates on it, but it was not to be seen. Neither raft, ship, nor any other sign of man wos visible on all the glittering sea.

Breakfast was not a tempting meal. The biscuits were, indeed, as good as ship’s biscuits ever are, and when moistened with sea water formed a comparatively pleasant as well as strengthening food; but the barrel of pork was raw; they had no means of cooking it, and had not yet experienced those pangs of hunger which induce men to luxuriate in anything that will allay the

craving. They therefore breakfasted chiefly on biscuit, merely making an attempt, with wry faces, to swallow a little pork.

Observing this, Sam said, in a half-jocular manner:—

“Now, my lads, it is quite clear to me that in taking command of this ship, my first duty is to point out the evils that will flow from unrestrained appetite for biscuit;—also to insist on the cultivation of a love for raw pork. You have no notion how good it is when fairly believed in. Anyhow you’ll have to try, for it won’t do to eat up all the biscuit, and have to feed at last on pure pork.”

“I calls it impure pork,” said Slagg; “hows’-ever, capting, you’ve on’y to give the word and we obey. P’r’aps the best way’ll be to put us on allowance.”

This suggestion was at once acted on, and a considerable part of that bright day was spent by Sam and Robin in calculating how much pork should go to a biscuit, so that they should diminish in an equal ratio, and how much of both it would be safe to allow to each man per diem, seeing that they might be many days, perhaps even weeks, at sea. While the “officers” were thus engaged, Slagg and his friend Stumps busied themselves in making a mast and yard out of one of the planks—split in two for the purpose—and fitting part of their sail to the same.

Evening found them with the work done, a small sail hoisted on the rude mast, the remaining part of the canvas fitted more securely as a covering, and the apportioned meal before them. But the sail hung idly from its yard and flapped gently to and fro as the little ark rose and sank on the swell, for the calm still prevailed and the gorgeous sunset, with its golden clouds and bright blue sky, was so faithfully reflected in the sea, that they seemed to be floating in the centre of a crystal ball which had been dipped in the rainbow.

When night descended, the scene was, if possible, still more impressive, for although the bright colours had vanished, the castaways still floated in the centre of a dark crystal universe, whose unutterable depths were radiant with stars of varied size and hue.

Long they sat and gazed in solemn admiration at the scene, talking in subdued tones of past, present, and future, until their eyes refused to do their office and the heavy lids began to droop. Then, reluctantly, they crept beneath the sail-cloth covering and lay down to rest.

The planks were hard, no doubt, but our castaways were hardy; besides, a few folds of the superfluous portions of the large sail helped to soften the planks here and there.

“Now, boys,” said Slagg, as he settled himself with a long-drawn sigh, “the on’y thing we wants to make us perfectly happy is a submarine telegraph cable ’tween this an’ England, to let us say good-night to our friend, ashore, an’ hope they won’t be long in sending out to search for us.”

It is sad to be obliged to record that, Slagg’s companions being already asleep, this tremendous and original piece of pleasantry was literally cast upon the waters, where it probably made no impression whatever on the inhabitants of the slumbering sea.

Chapter Sixteen

In which will be found more Surprises than one

Events of the most singular description are often prefaced by incidents of the most commonplace character. Who is so inexperienced in the vicissitudes of life as not to know this!

Early in the morning that succeeded their second night on the raft, Robin Wright awoke with a very commonplace, indeed a vulgar, snore; we might almost call it a snort. Such as it was, however, it proved to be a most important link in the chain of events which it is our province to narrate.

To explain: It must be understood that John Shanks, or Stumps, among other eccentricities, practised sprawling in his sleep, spreading himself abroad in inconceivable attitudes, shooting out an arm here, or a leg there, to the alarm or indignation of bedfellows, insomuch that, when known, bedfellows refused to remain with him.

Aware of Stumps's propensity, Slagg had so arranged that his friend should lie at the stern of the raft with two strands of the binding-cable between him and Robin, who lay next to him. During the first part of the night, Stumps, either overcome by weariness or subdued by his friends' discourses on the stellar world, behaved pretty well. Only once did he fling out and bestow an unmerited blow on the pork-barrel. But, about daybreak, he began to sprawl, gradually working his way to the extreme edge of the raft, where a piece of wood, nailed there on purpose, prevented him from rolling off altogether. It did not, however, prevent his tossing one of his long legs over the edge, which he accordingly did. The leg and foot were naked. He preferred to sleep so, even when bedless, having been brought up in shoe-and-stockingless society. With his foot dipping lightly in the wave, he prolonged his repose.

They were slipping quietly along at the time under the influence of a steady though gentle breeze, which had sprung up and filled their sail soon after they lay down to rest. An early shark, intent on picking up sea-worms, observed Stumps's foot, and licked his lips, no doubt. He sank immediately for much the same reason that little boys retire to take a race before a leap. Turning on his back, according to custom, he went at the foot like a submarine thunderbolt.

Now, it was at that precise moment that Robin Wright snored, as aforesaid. The snore awoke Stumps, who had another sprawl, and drew up his leg gently—oh, how gently compared with what he would have done had he known what you know, reader! Nevertheless, the action was in time, else would he have had, for the rest of his life, a better title than heretofore to his nickname. As it was, the nose and lips of the slimy monster struck the youth's foot and slid up the side of his leg.

Hideous was the yell with which Stumps received the salute. Acrobatic was the tumble with which he rolled over his comrades, and dire was the alarm created in all their hearts as they bounced from under the respective corners of their covering, and stood up, aghast!

"You twopenny turnip," said Slagg, "why did you screech like—"

He stopped. There was no need to finish the question, for the fin of the disappointed shark, describing angry zig-zags in the water close by, furnished a sufficient answer.

"He has only grazed me," said Stumps, feeling his leg anxiously.

"Only grazed you! rather say crazed you," returned Sam, "for a cry like that could only come from a madman. What were you doing?—washing your feet in the sea?"

"No, not exactly," replied Stumps, somewhat abashed, "but one of my legs got over the end of the raft somehow, and was trailing in the water."

"Hallo! I say, look there, Sam!" said Robin, with sudden animation, pointing to the horizon straight ahead of them; "is that the big raft or a ship?"

"Neither, Robin," replied Sam, after a prolonged and earnest gaze; "it must be an island. What do you think, Slagg?"

The incident of the shark was almost totally forgotten in the excitement caused by this new discovery. For some time Slagg and all the others gazed intently without uttering a word. Then Slagg looked round with a deep sigh.

"Yes, it's a island," he said; "no doubt about that."

“What a blessing!” exclaimed Robin, with heartfelt emotion.

“Well, that depends,” said Sam, with a shake of the head. “Islands in the China seas are not always places of refuge—at least for honest people.”

“By no means,” added Slagg; “I’ve heard say that the pirates there are about the wust set o’ cut-throats goin’—though I don’t myself believe there’s much difference atween one set and another.”

The light wind which had carried the raft slowly over the sea, while they were asleep, now freshened into a stiff breeze, and tested the qualities of their craft, severely; but, with a little strengthening—an extra turn of a rope or an additional nail—here and there, it held pretty well together. At breakfast, which was served according to regulation, they discussed their situation.

“You see,” said Sam, “this may turn out to be a small barren island, in which case we shall have to leave it and trust to falling in with some vessel; or it may be inhabited by savages or pirates, in which case we shall have to leave it from prudential motives, if they will allow us to do so. In any case, we won’t begin by being extravagant with the provisions to-day.”

As they drew near to the island, the probability of its being inhabited became greater, because, although solitary, and, according to Sam’s amateur calculations, far remote from other lands, it presented a bold and fertile aspect. It was not, indeed, large in circumference, but it rose to a considerable height, and was covered with rich vegetation, above which waved numerous groups of the cocoa-nut palm. A band of light yellow sand fringed the shore, on which the waves roiled in a still lighter fringe of foam, while two or three indentations seemed to indicate the existence of creeks or openings into the interior.

With eager gaze the castaways watched this island as they slowly approached it—the minuter beauties of rock and dell and leafy copse brightening into view as the sun mounted the clear blue sky.

“What I have thought or dreamed of sometimes, when dear mother used to speak of heaven,” murmured Robin, as if communing with himself.

“Well, I have not thought much of heaven,” said Sam, “but I shouldn’t wonder if it’s something like the paradise from which Adam and Eve were driven.”

“There’s no sign o’ natives as yet,” said Slagg, who, regardless of these remarks, had been gazing at the island with eyes shaded by his hand.

“Yes there is; yonder is one sitting on the rocks,” said Stumps; “don’t you see him move?”

“That’s not a native,” returned Slagg, “it’s too long in the back for a human being. It’s a big monkey—a gorilla, maybe. Did you ever hear tell of gorillas being in them regions?”

“I rather think not,” said Sam; “and to my mind it looks more like a rock than anything else.”

A rock it proved to be, to the discomfiture of Slagg and Stumps; but the rock was not without interest, for it was soon seen that a rope was attached to it, and that the rope, stretching across the entrance to a creek, was lost in the foliage on the side opposite to the rock.

“Why, I do believe,” said Sam, suddenly, in an impressive whisper, “that there is a vessel of some sort at the other end of that rope, behind the point, partly hid by the trees. Don’t you see the top of her masts?”

After long and earnest gazing, and much whispered conversation—though there was no occasion for caution at such a distance from the land—they came to the conclusion that a vessel lay concealed just within the mouth of the creek towards which the wind was driving them, and that, as they apparently had not been discovered by those who owned the vessel, their wisest course would be to land, if possible without attracting attention, somewhat farther along the coast.

“But how is that to be done,” asked Robin, “as we have neither oar nor rudder?”

“Nothing easier,” returned Slagg, seizing the axe and wrenching up the plank that had prevented Stumps from finding a watery grave, “I’ve on’y got to cut a handle at one end, an’ we’ve got an oar at once.”

In a few minutes the handy youth converted the piece of plank into a rude oar, with which he steered the raft, so that it gradually drew to the southward of the

creek where the strange vessel lay, and finally took the land in another inlet not far distant.

It was evident, from the silence around, that no one was stirring in the vessel, and that their approach had not been perceived. Congratulating themselves on this piece of good fortune, they lowered their sail, drew the raft under the bushes, which in some parts of the inlet came close down to the sea, and then hurried stealthily through a palm-grove towards the vessel. They reached the margin of the grove in a few minutes, and there discovered that the stranger was apparently a Chinese craft, but whether a trading-vessel, or smuggler, or pirate, they had no means of knowing.

As they lay flat on their faces in the rank grass, peeping through the luxuriant undergrowth, they could see that two men paced the deck with musket on shoulder as if on guard, but no other human beings were visible.

“Shall we go forward and trust them as honest traders?” asked Sam in a whisper.

“I think not,” replied Slagg; “if all’s true that one hears, there is not much honesty afloat in them seas. My advice is to stay where we are and see what turns up.”

“What think you, Robin?”

Robin was of opinion that they should trust the strangers and go forward. Stumps agreed with him, but Sam thought with Slagg. Their indecision, however, was cut short by a most startling occurrence.

While they were yet whispering together, the sound of voices was heard in the distance. Our castaways at once sank flatter into the grass, and became mute.

In a few minutes the voices drew gradually nearer, until they were quite close to the alarmed watchers. Suddenly, from among the bushes on the other side of an open space just in front of them, there issued a band of men, walking in single file. Their appearance might have aroused grave anxiety in the most unsuspecting breast, for, besides possessing faces in which the effects of dissipation and evil passions were plainly stamped, they were armed—as the saying is—to the teeth, with short swords, cavalry pistols, and carbines. They

were dressed in varied Eastern costume, and appeared to be of Malay origin, though some bore closer resemblance to the Chinese.

The man who marched in advance—evidently the leader of the band—was unusually tall and powerful, with a remarkably stern, but not altogether forbidding, countenance.

“Pirates!” whispered Slagg.

“Looks like them, but may be smugglers,” replied Sam in the same cautious tone.

Even Robin’s unsuspecting and inexperienced nature would not permit him to believe that they were honest traders. Had any doubts on the subject lingered in their minds, these would have been effectually cleared away by the scenes which immediately followed.

While the pirates were still at some distance from the shore, sudden shouts and yells came from the vessel, which had, up to that time, been lying so peacefully at anchor, and it was at once clear that a furious hand-to-hand fight was taking place upon her deck.

“It must be the poor slaves who have risen,” whispered Sam.

The pirates had drawn their swords and pistols at the first sound of the fight, and rushed to the rescue. They well knew that, while they had been on shore, the unfortunate captives chained in the vessel’s hold had succeeded in freeing themselves, and were endeavouring to overcome the few men left to guard them.

Slaves captured at various times by the scoundrels who infest those seas, are sometimes made to work at the oars—which are much used during calm weather—until they die, or become so worn out as to be useless, when they are mercilessly thrown overboard. That the slaves referred to on this occasion, animated probably by despair, had effected their release, and plucked up heart to assault the armed guard, was a matter of some surprise to the pirates: not so, however, to our adventurers, when they saw, foremost among the mutineers, a man clad in the garb of a European sailor.

“That’s the boy as has put ’em up to it,” said Jim Slagg, in a suppressed but eager voice, “they’d never have had the pluck to do it of themselves.”

“We’d better go an’ help ’em,” said Stumps, whose usually stupid face was lighted up with excitement.

“Right, lad,” exclaimed Slagg, starting up; but Sam laid his hand firmly on his arm.

“Too late,” he said; “don’t you see that the guard have prevailed. Besides, the pirate crew are in their boats—almost at the vessel. See, they swarm up the side.”

“Poor, poor sailor!” said Robin Wright, in a voice of the deepest pity.

“You may well say that; no doubt he is killed by this time,” said Slagg; “but no—he is fightin’ still!”

This was indeed true. Some of the slaves, rendered desperate no doubt, were still maintaining the hopeless fight with handspikes and such arms as they had succeeded in wresting from the guard at the first onset, and the stalwart figure of the European sailor was seen swaying aloft a clubbed musket and felling a pirate at every blow. Animated by his example, the other slaves fought with resolute bravery, but when the rest of the pirate crew joined the guard and surrounded them, they were instantly overpowered. Then those who had not been already slain were led hastily to the side, a sword was drawn across their throats, or thrust through them, and the bodies were tossed into the sea. Among those led thus to the side was the brave sailor. Although his features could not be distinguished at such a distance by those in ambush, it could be clearly seen that he came boldly forward, resolved, no doubt, to meet his fate like a man.

“Oh, God, spare him!” burst in a voice of agony from Robin, who sprang up as if with the intention of rushing to the rescue, regardless of consequences, but a second time Sam Shipton’s restraining hand was ready.

“What could we do, with the sea between us and the ship? Even if we were on the deck could we four deliver him from a hundred?”

Robin sank down again with a groan, but his fascinated eyes still gazed at the pirate vessel. To his great surprise, the sailor at that moment uttered a long and ringing cheer! The act seemed to overawe even the bloodstained pirates, for they hesitated an instant. Then one of them pointed his sword at the sailor's back, but at the same moment the leader of the band was seen to strike up the sword and give some hurried directions. A rope was instantly brought, with which the arms and legs of the seaman were secured, and he was carried below.

"Our prayer has been answered!" exclaimed Robin with renewed excitement; "they are going to spare him."

Sam shook his head. "I fear not, Robin; at least, if I may judge from what I have read of these villains, they have only spared him for a time for the purpose of torturing him."

Robin shuddered. "Well, I don't know," he said, "whatever they may do, God has answered our prayer, for they have spared him; and if God could deliver him thus at the last moment, surely He can deliver him altogether. But was it not remarkable that he should give such a cheer when—as he must have thought—at the point of death, for it sounded more like a cheer of triumph than defiance?"

"It was strange indeed. The effect of strong excitement, I fancy."

While they were conversing, the pirates were busily engaged in getting up the anchor and hoisting the sails of their craft. At the same time the long oars or sweeps were manned by such of the slaves as remained alive, and the vessel slowly glided out of the creek, and put to sea. Fortunately the fight had engrossed the attention of those on board so much that they had failed to observe the little raft, which, although partially concealed by bushes, might not otherwise have escaped detection.

Our voyagers were still congratulating themselves on their good fortune in this respect, when the pirate-ship was observed to change her course, turn completely round and return towards the land!

"They've seen us!" ejaculated Robin in consternation.

"Our doom is fixed," said Sam in a tone of bitter despair.

Slagg and his friend were so much overwhelmed that they could not speak.

On came the vessel—under oars—straight for the creek where the raft lay. There could be no doubt now that they had been seen.

While they gazed in blank dismay, utterly unable to decide on any course of action, an event occurred which totally altered the aspect of affairs. Suddenly, as if by magic, the pirate-ship was converted into a great black-and-white cloud, from out of which there shot an indescribable mass of broken spars and wreckage which fell in all directions in a heavy shower into the sea. Two seconds later and there came a roar as if a crash of the loudest thunder had rent the sky. The powder-magazine had been fired, and the pirate-ship had been blown literally to atoms!

When the last of the terrible shower had fallen, nothing whatever of the vessel was to be seen save the floating morsels of the wreck. It was, we might say, a tremendous instance of almost absolute annihilation.

Recovering from the shock of horror and surprise, Sam Shipton ran swiftly down to the spot where the raft lay, followed by his companions.

“There may be some left alive!” he cried. “Quick—shove her off. Yonder’s a pole, Robin, fetch it.”

Another minute and they were afloat. Pushing with the pole, sculling with the rude oar, and paddling with a plank torn off, they made for the scene of the explosion.

“I see something moving,” said Stumps, who, having no implement to work with, stood up in front and directed their course.

Soon they were in the midst of the débris. It was an awful sight, for there, mingled with riven spars and planks and cabin furniture, and entangled in ravelled cordage, lay the torn lifeless remains of the pirates. Sharks were already swimming about in anticipation of a feast.

“Did you not see symptoms of life somewhere?” asked Sam, as he stood beside Stumps, and looked earnestly round.

“Yes, I did, but I don’t now—O yes! there it is again. Give way, Slagg, give way. There!”

The raft was soon alongside of the moving object. It was the body of the gallant sailor who had fought so well that day. His limbs were still fast bound, excepting one arm, with which now and then he struck out feebly, as if trying to swim. Lying on his back his mouth and nose were above water.

“Gently, gently, boys,” said Robin, as they lifted the head out of the water and slowly drew the shoulders up; “now, a good heave and—that’s it.”

The body slid heavily on the raft, and the motion seemed to rouse the seaman’s spirit, for he uttered a faint cheer, while they knelt round him, and tried in various ways to restore him to consciousness.

“Hurrah for old England!” he cried presently, in an imbecile manner, making an abortive effort to lift his loose arm; “never say die—s’long’s there’s—a shok in th’ lotter.”

“Well done, old saltwater!” cried Slagg, unable to restrain a laugh; “you’ll live to fight yet, or I’m mistaken.”

There was indeed some prospect that the poor fellow would recover, for, after a short time, he was able to gaze at his rescuers with an intensity of surprise that betokened the return not only of consciousness but of reason.

“Well, well,” he said, after gazing around for some time in silence as he lay with his head supported on the sail, “I s’pose it’s all right, and I’ll wake up all square in the mornin’, but it’s out o’ sight the most comical dream I’ve had since I was a babby. I only hope it’ll take a pleasanter turn if it’s agoin’ to continue.”

With this philosophical reflection the sailor shut his eyes, and disposed himself to sleep until the period of real waking should arrive.

Thinking this the best thing he could do in the circumstances, his rescuers turned to examine whether any of the others had survived the explosion, but, finding that all were dead or had sunk, they returned to the land.

Here, after securing the raft, they made a sort of litter, with the sail spread on the oar and a plank, on which they carried the sailor to the sheltered spot

whence they had witnessed the fight. As the poor man had by that time fallen into a genuine slumber—which appeared to be dreamless—he was left under the care of Stumps and Slagg, while Sam and Robin went off to ascertain whether or not the island was inhabited.

“We will go straight up to the highest point at once, so as to get a bird’s-eye view of it,” said Sam. “I can’t help thinking that it must be inhabited, for these scoundrels would not care to land, I should fancy, unless there was some one to rob.”

“It may be so, Sam. But if they had come to rob, don’t you think they would not have returned to their ship without captives or booty?”

“There is something in that, Robin. Come; we shall see.”

Chapter Seventeen

Strange Discoveries on Pirate Island

On reaching the first rising-ground that lay before them, Robin and his friend received a great disappointment, for, instead of a richly wooded country, which the coast scenery where they landed had led them to expect, they found an exceedingly barren region, as far, at least, as the next ridge in advance.

“No use to go further,” said Sam, despondingly; “nothing but barren rocks and a few scrubby bushes here. Evidently there are no inhabitants, for it would be almost impossible to live on such a place.”

“But it may be better further inland,” said Robin. “I can’t think that the pirates would come here for nothing. At all events let us go to the next ridge.”

Without replying, Sam followed Robin, but the next ridge revealed nothing more hopeful. Indeed the prospect thence was, if possible, more depressing, for it was seen that the island was small, that its sides were so steep all round, as far as the eye could reach, that there was apparently no landing-place except at the spot where they had been driven on shore. The elevated interior seemed as barren as the circumference, and no neighbouring island was to be seen in all the wide field of vision. The only living creatures visible were innumerable sea-birds which circled round the cliffs, and which, on espying the intruders, came clamouring overhead, as if to order them angrily away.

“Having come thus far we may as well go to the top and have a look all round,” said Robin, “and see—here is something like a track worn on the rock.” Sam’s drooping spirits revived at once. He examined the track carefully and pronounced it a “human” track. “The sea-gulls could not make it, Robin. Goats, sheep, and cows cannot live without grass, therefore it was not made by them. A track is not usually worn on hard rock by the passage of pirates only once or twice over them. There is mystery here, Robin. Come on!”

It will be observed that Robin’s spirit was more hopeful than that of his friend, nevertheless Sam being physically more energetic, was, when not depressed, prone to take the lead. He walked smartly forward therefore, followed humbly by his friend, and they soon reached what proved to be the summit of the island.

Here supreme astonishment was the chief ingredient in their feelings, for they stood on the edge of a slope, at the foot of which, as in a basin, lay what seemed to be a small cultivated garden in the midst of a miniature valley covered with trees and shrubs, through which a tiny rivulet ran. This verdant little gem was so hemmed in by hills that it could not be seen from the sea or any low part of the island. But what surprised the discoverers most was the sight of an old woman, bent nearly double, who was busily at work in the garden. Not far from her was an old man, who, from his motions while at work, appeared to be blind. Their costume being nondescript, besides ragged, did not betoken their nationality.

Sam and Robin glanced at each other in silence, then turned to have another gaze at the scene.

"We've found," said Sam, slowly and impressively, "a robber's nest!"

"D'you think so, Sam?"

"Think so! I'm sure of it. Just think. There is nothing on such an island as this to attract any one at all—much less robbers or pirates—except the fact that it is unattractive, and, apparently, far removed from the haunts of honest men. Depend upon it, Robin, that the pirates whom we saw have made this their head-quarters and place of deposit for their booty—their bank as it were, for it's too small for their home; besides, if it were such, we should see a colony of women and children. No—this is the great Pirate Bank of the Southern Seas, and yonder we behold the secretary and cashier!"

"And what," said Robin with a laugh, "if there should be a few clerks in the bank? We might perhaps find them troublesome fellows to deal with."

"We might, Robin. Would it not be wise to return and let Slagg and Stumps know what we have discovered, and take counsel together before we act."

"Agreed," said Robin. "Isn't it strange though," he added, as they turned to retrace their steps, "that there are no buildings of any kind—only a little garden."

"It is somewhat puzzling, I confess, but we shall—"

He stopped abruptly, and stood rooted to the ground, for there, on a rock in front of him, with her light, graceful figure, and flowing golden hair, pictured against the blue sky, stood a little girl, apparently about six or seven years of age—an angel as it seemed to the amazed youths!

She had caught sight of the strangers at the very moment they had observed her, and stood gazing at them with a half eager, half terrified look in her large lustrous eyes.

With a sudden and irresistible impulse Robin extended his arms towards her. She made a little run towards him, then stopped, and the look of fear again came over her beautiful face. Robin was afraid to advance lest he should frighten her. So, with an earnest look and smile, he said, “Come here, little one.”

She answered the invitation by bounding towards our hero and clasping him round the neck, causing him to sit down rather abruptly on a rock which lay conveniently behind.

“Oh! I’m so glad you’ve come at last!” said the child, in English so good that there could be no question as to her nationality. “I was quite sure mamma would send to fetch me away from this tiresome place, but you’ve been so long of coming—so very very long.”

The thought of this, and perhaps the joy of being “sent for” at last, caused her to sob and bury her face in Robin’s sympathetic bosom.

“Cheer up, little one, and don’t cry,” said Robin, passing his hand over her sunny hair, “your Father, at all events, has sent for you, if not your mother.”

“I have no father,” said the child, looking up quickly.

“Yes you have, little one; God is your father.”

“Did He send you to fetch me?” she asked in surprise.

“I have not the smallest doubt,” answered Robin, “that He sent us to take care of you, and take you to your mother if that be possible. But tell me, little one, what is your name?”

“Letta.”

“And your surname?”

“My what!” exclaimed Letta, opening her large eyes to their widest, causing both Sam and Robin to laugh.

“Your other name, dear,” said Sam.

“I have no other name. Mamma always called me Letta—nothing else.”

“And what was mamma’s name?” asked Robin.

“It was mamma, of course,” replied Letta, with a look of wonder that so silly a question should be asked.

Sam and Robin exchanged looks, and the former shook his head. “You’ll not get much information out of her, I fear. Ask her about the pirates,” he whispered.

“Letta,” said Robin, settling the child more comfortably on his knee—an attention which she received with a sigh of deep contentment,—“are the people here kind to you?”

“Yes, very kind. Old Meerta is as kind to me almost as mamma used to be, but I don’t love her so much—not nearly so much,—and blind Bungo is a dear old man.”

“That’s nice. And the others—are they kind to you?”

“What others? Oh, I suppose you mean the men who come and stay for a time, and then go off again. O no! They are not kind. They are bad men—very naughty; they often fight, and I think call each other bad names, but I don’t understand their language very well. They never hurt me, but they are very rough, and I don’t like them at all. They all went away this morning. I was so glad, for they won’t be back again for a good long while, and Meerta and Bungo won’t get any more hard knocks and whippings till they come back.”

“Ha! they won’t come back in a hurry—not these ones at least,” said Sam in a voice that frightened Letta, inducing her to cling closer to Robin.

“Don’t be afraid, little one,” said the latter, “he’s only angry with the bad men that went away this morning. Are there any of them still remaining here?”

“What, in the caves?”

“Ay, in the caves—or anywhere?”

“No they’re all away. Nobody left but me and Meerta and blind Bungo.”

“Is it a long time since you came here?”

“O yes, very very long!” replied the child, with a sad weary look; “so long that—that you can’t think.”

“Come, dear; tell us all about it,” said Robin in a coaxing tone,—“all about mamma and how you came here.”

“Very well,” said Letta, quite pleased with the request. Clearing her little throat with the emphasis of one who has a long story to tell, she began with the statement that “mamma was a darling.”

From this, as a starting-point, she gave an amazing and rambling account of the joys and toys of infancy, which period of life seemed to have been spent in a most beautiful garden full of delicious fruits and sunshine, where the presiding and ever present angel was mamma. Then she told of a dark night, and a sudden awaking in the midst of flames and smoke and piercing cries, when fierce men seized her and carried her away, put her into a ship, where she was dreadfully sick for a long long time, until they landed on a rocky island, and suddenly she found herself “there,”—pointing as she spoke to the little garden below them. While she was yet describing her feelings on arrival, a voice shouting Letta was heard, and she instantly struggled from Robin’s knee.

“O let me go!” she cried. “It’s Meerta calling me, and I never let her call twice.”

“Why? Would she be angry?”

“No, but she would be sorry. Do let me go!”

“But won’t you let us go too?” asked Sam.

“O yes, if you want to come. This is the road,” she added, as she took Robin by the hand; “and you must be very careful how you go, else you’ll fall and hurt yourselves.”

Great was the amazement, and not slight the alarm of Meerta, when she beheld her little charge thus piloting two strangers down the hill. She spoke hurriedly to her blind companion, and at first seemed disposed to hide herself, but the man evidently dissuaded her from such a course, and when Letta ran forward, seized her hard old hands and said that God had sent people to take her back to mamma, she dismissed her fears and took to laughing immoderately.

It soon became evident to our adventurers that the woman was in her dotage, while the old man was so frail that only a few of the sands of life remained to run. They both understood a little English, but spoke in such a remarkably broken manner, that there was little prospect of much additional information being obtained from them.

“You hungry—hungry?” asked the old woman, with a sudden gleam of hospitality. “Come—come—me gif you for heat.”

She took Robin by the hand and led him towards a cavern, the mouth of which had not been visible higher up the mountain. Sam followed, led by Letta.

The interior of the cavern was lofty and the floor level. Besides this, it was sumptuously furnished in a fashion singularly out of keeping with the spot and its surroundings. Pictures hung on the walls, Persian rugs lay on the floors. Ottomans, covered with silk and velvet, were strewn about here and there, among easy-chairs of various kinds, some formed of wicker-work—in the fantastic shapes peculiar to the East—others of wood and cane, having the ungainly and unreasonable shapes esteemed by Western taste. Silver lamps and drinking-cups and plates of the finest porcelain were also scattered about, for there was no order in the cavern, either as to its arrangement or the character of its decoration. In the centre stood several large tables of polished wood, on which were the remains of what must have been a substantial feast—the dishes being as varied as the furniture—from the rice and egg messes of Eastern origin, to the preserved sardines of the West.

“Ha! ha!” laughed the weird old creature who ushered the astonished youths into this strange banqueting hall, “the rubberts—rubbers—you calls dem?”

“Robbers, she means; that’s the naughty men,” explained Letta, who seemed to enjoy the old woman’s blunders in the English tongue.

“Yis, dats so—roberts an’ pyrits—ha! ha! dems feed here dis mornin’. You feed dis afternoons. Me keeps house for dem. Dey tinks me alone wid Bungo an’ Letta, ho! ho! but me’s got cumpiny dis day. Sit down an’ grub wat yous can. Doo you good. Doo Letta and Bungo good. Doos all good. Fire away! Ha! ha–a! Keep you’s nose out o’ dat pie, Bungo, you brute. Vous git sik eff you heat more.”

Regardless of this admonition, the poor old man broke off a huge mass of pie-crust, which he began to mouth with his toothless gums, a quiet smile indicating at once his indifference to Meerta and consequences, while he mumbled something about its not being every day he got so good a chance.

“Das true,” remarked the old woman, with another hilarious laugh. “Dey go hoff awful quick dis day.”

While Sam and Robin sat down to enjoy a good dinner, or rather breakfast, of which they stood much in need, Letta explained in a disjointed rambling fashion, that after a feed of this kind the naughty men usually had a fight, after which they took a long sleep, and then had the dishes cleaned up and the silver things locked away before taking their departure from the cave for “a long, long time,” by which, no doubt, she indicated the period spent on a pilfering expedition. But on this particular occasion, she added, while the naughty men were seated at the feast, one of their number from their ship came hastily in and said something, she could not tell what, which caused them at once to leap up and rush out of the cave, and they had not come back since.

“And they’re not likely to come back, little one,” said Robin through a mouthful of rice.

“Ha! ha–a!” laughed Sam through a mouthful of pie-crust.

“Ho! ho!” cried the old woman, with a look of surprise, “yous bery brav boy, I dessay, but if dem roberts doos kum back, you soon laugh on wrong side ob de mout’, for dey screw yous limbses off, an’ ho! skrunch yous teeth hout, an’ roast you ’live, so you better heat w’at yous can an’ go hof—fast as you couldn’t.”

“I say, Robin,” said Sam, unable to restrain a smile at the expression of Letta’s face, as she listened to this catalogue of horrors, “that speech might have taken away our appetites did we not know that the ‘roberts’ are all dead.”

“Dead!” exclaimed the old woman with a start and a gleam of serious intelligence, such as had not before appeared on her wrinkled visage; “are de roberts all dead?”

“All,” replied Sam, who thereupon gave the old pair a full account of what had been witnessed on the shore.

Strange to say, the old man and woman were much depressed by the news, although, from what they afterwards related, they had been very cruelly treated by the pirates, by whom they had been enslaved for many years. Nay, old Meerta even dropped a tear or two quietly to their memory, for, as she remarked, by way of explanation or excuse, “dey wasn’t all so bad as each oder.”

However, she soon recovered her composure, and while Sam Shipton returned to the shore to fetch their comrades to the cave, she told Robin, among other things, that the pirates had brought Letta to the island two years before, along with a large quantity of booty, but that she did not know where she came from, or to whom she belonged.

Sam Shipton resolved to give his comrades the full benefit of the surprise in store, therefore, on returning to them, he merely said that he had left Robin in a rather curious place in the interior, where they had discovered both food and drink in abundance, and that he had come to conduct them to it.

By that time the seaman whom they had rescued had recovered considerably, and was able to walk with assistance, though still rather confused in his mind and disposed to be silent. At first he expressed a desire to be left to sleep where he was, but on being told that the place they were going to was not far-off and that he would be able to rest longer and much more comfortably there than where he was, he braced himself up and accompanied them, leaning on Sam and Jim Slagg as he staggered along.

Need it be said that both Slagg and Stumps shouted with surprise when they came suddenly in sight of the garden; that they lost the power of utterance on

beholding Robin holding familiar converse with an old hag, a blind man, and a small angel; and that they all but fell down on entering the pirate's cave?

No, it need not be said; let us pass, therefore, to the next scene in this amazing drama.

Of course Robin had prepared the inhabitants of the garden for the arrival of his friends. He had also learned that the pirates, in the hurry of departure, had not only left everything lying about, but had left the key of their treasure-cave in the lock. Old Meerta offered to show him the contents, but Robin determined to await the arrival of his friends before examining the place.

When Slagg and Stumps had breakfasted, and the sailor had been laid on a comfortable couch, where he immediately fell fast asleep, Robin pulled the key of the treasure-cave out of his pocket and asked his comrades to follow him. Wondering at the request, they did so.

The cave referred to lay at the inner extremity of the banqueting cavern, and was guarded by a massive door of wood. Opening this, Robin allowed the old woman to enter first and lead the way. She did so with one of her wild "ho! ho's!" being obviously much excited at the opportunity of showing to the visitors the contents of a cavern which she had never before been permitted to enter, save in the company of the pirates. Entering the small doorway, through which only a subdued light penetrated, she went to a ledge or natural shelf of rock and took down a silver lamp of beautiful workmanship, which had probably belonged to a church or temple. Lighting it, she ushered them through a natural archway into an inner cavern, round the walls of which were heaped in piles merchandise and wealth of all kinds in great profusion and variety. There were bales of broadcloth and other fabrics from the looms of Tuscany; tweeds from the factories of Scotland; silks, satins and velvets in great rolls, mingled with lace, linen, and more delicate fabrics. Close beside these piles, but not mixed with them, were boxes of cutlery and other hardware, and, further on, chests of drawers containing spices from the East, chests of tea and coffee, barrels of sugar, and groceries of all kinds.

These things were not thrown together in confusion, but arranged in systematic order, as if under the management of an expert store-keeper, and a desk with business-books on it seemed to indicate that a careful record was kept of the whole.

Among the miscellaneous merchandise stood several large and massive chests of ancient material and antique form. Taking a bunch of small keys from a nail on the wall, the old woman proceeded to open these and exhibit their contents with much of the interest and simple delight exhibited by a child in displaying her treasures to new companions.

Handing the silver lamp to Robin, who with his comrades looked on in silent surprise, she opened the first chest. It was loaded to the lid with jewellery of all kinds, which sparkled in the light with dazzling brilliancy, for even to the inexperienced eyes of the observers, many of the gems were obviously of the finest quality, and almost priceless in value. There was no order in the arrangement of these—bracelets, ear-rings, watches, etcetera, of European manufacture lying side by side with the costly golden wreaths and tiaras of India, and the more massive and gorgeous brooches, nose-rings, neck-rings, and anklets peculiar to semi-barbaric lands.

The next chest was filled with gold, silver, and bronze drinking-cups and goblets, lamps, vases, and urns, that had been gathered from the ships of many countries. Then there were chests which contained little barrels full of gold and silver coin of every realm, from the huge golden doubloon of Spain to the little silver groschen of Germany. Besides all this varied wealth, there were piles of arms of all nations—richly chased scimitars of Eastern manufacture, the clumsy cutlasses of England, long silver-handled pistols of Oriental form, bluff little “bull-dog” revolvers, cavalry sabres, breech-loading rifles, flint-lock muskets, shields, spears, bows and arrows—in short, a miscellaneous armoury much too extensive to be described.

It was interesting to observe the monkey-like countenance of old Meerta as she watched the effect produced on her visitors, her little black eyes sparkling in the lamp-light more brightly than the finest gems there; and not less interesting was it to note the half-amused, more than half-amazed, and partially imbecile gaze of the still silent visitors. Little Letta enjoyed their looks quite as much as Meerta.

“Haven’t we got lots of pretty things here?” she said, looking up into Robin’s face.

“Yes, little one,—wonderful!”

Robin revived sufficiently to make this reply and to glance at Sam, Slagg, and Stumps, who returned the glance. Then he relapsed.

Snatching the lamp from his hand, old Meerta now led the party to a remote corner of the cave, where a number of large casks were ranged at one end, and covered with a sheet of leather.

“Ha! ha!” laughed their wild guide, in a sort of screech, “here be de grandest jools, de finest dimunds of all, what buys all de rest!”

She lifted a corner of the skin, removed the loose head of a cask, and holding the lamp close over the opening, bade them look in. They did so, and the effect was powerful as well as instantaneous, for there, only a few inches below the flaring light, lay an open barrel of gunpowder!

The senses of Sam Shipton returned like a flash of lightning—interest, surprise, admiration vanished like smoke, as he uttered a shout, and, with one hand seizing the wrist of the withered arm that held the lamp, with the other he hastily drew the leathern cover over the exposed powder and held it down.

“You old curmudgeon!” he cried; “here, Robin, take the lamp from her, and away with it into the outer cave.”

Our hero promptly obeyed, while the other two, under an instinct of self-preservation, had already fled in the same direction, followed by a shrill and half-fiendish laugh from the old woman.

“Well, I never had such a narrow escape,” said Sam, as he issued from the cave, still holding Meerta firmly, though not roughly, by the wrist.

“Why, there’s enough powder there, I do believe,” said Jim Slagg, “to split the whole island in two.”

“There, it’s all safe now,” said Sam, as he locked the heavy door and thrust the key in his pocket; “and I will take care of your treasures for you in future, old lady.”

“Wass you frighted?” asked the old woman with a low laugh, in which even Letta joined.

“Frighted, you reckless old thing,” replied Sam, seizing a tankard of water and draining it, “of course I was; if a spark had gone down into that cask, you would have been considerably frighted too.”

“I’m not so sure of that,” said Stumps; “she wouldn’t have had time to get a fright.”

“O no!” said Meerta; “I’s niver frighted. Many time me stan’ by dat keg, t’inkin’, t’inkin’, t’inkin’ if me stuff de light in it, and blow de pyrits vid all dere tings to ’warsl smash; but no—me tinks dat some of dem wasn’t all so bad as each oder.”

This thought seemed to have the effect of quieting the roused spirit of the poor old woman, for thereafter a softened expression overspread her wrinkled face as she went silently about clearing away the débris of the recent feast.

Chapter Eighteen

The Pirate's Island—Continued

Next morning Sam Shipton awoke from a sound and dreamless slumber. Raising himself on the soft ottoman, or Eastern couch, on which he had spent the night, he looked round in a state of sleepy wonder, unable at first to remember where he was. Gradually he recalled the circumstances and events of the preceding day.

The forms of his companions lay on couches similar to his own in attitudes of repose, and the seaman still slept profoundly in the position in which he had been laid down when brought in.

Through the mouth of the cavern Sam could see the little garden, glowing like an emerald in the beams of the rising sun, and amongst the bushes he observed the old couple stooping quietly over their labour of gathering weeds. The warm air, the bright sunshine, and the soft cries of distant sea-birds, induced Sam to slip into such of his garments as he had put off, and go out quietly without rousing his companions.

In a few minutes he stood on the summit of the islet and saw the wide ocean surrounding him, like a vast sparkling plain, its myriad wavelets reflecting now the dazzling sun, now the azure vault, the commingling yellow and blue of which resulted in a lovely transparent green, save where a few puffs of wind swept over the great expanse and streaked it with lines of darkest blue.

"Truly," murmured Sam, as he gazed in admiration at the glorious expanse of sea and sky, "Robin is right when he says that we are not half sufficiently impressed with the goodness of the Almighty in placing us in the midst of such a splendid world, with capacity to appreciate and enjoy it to the full. I begin to fear that I am a more ungrateful fellow than I've been used to think."

For some time he continued to gaze in silence as if that thought were working.

From his elevated position he could now see that the islet was not quite so barren as at first he had been led to suppose. Several little valleys and cup-like hollows lay nestling among the otherwise barren hills, like lovely gems in a rough setting. Those, he now perceived, must have been invisible from the sea, and the rugged, almost perpendicular, cliffs in their neighbourhood had

apparently prevented men from landing and discovering their existence. One of the valleys, in particular, was not only larger than the others, but exceptionally rich in vegetation, besides having a miniature lake, like a diamond, in its bosom.

Descending the hill and returning to the cave, Sam found his comrades still asleep. Letta was assisting old Meerta in the preparation of a substantial breakfast that would not have done discredit to a first-class hotel.

“Oh, I’m so glad you’ve come!” said Letta, running up, to him and giving him both hands to shake, and a ready little mouth to kiss, “for I didn’t like to awaken your friends, and the sailor one looks so still that I fear he may be dying. I saw one of the naughty men die here, and he looked just like that.”

Somewhat alarmed by this, Sam went at once to the sailor and looked earnestly at him.

“No fear, Letta,” he said, “the poor fellow is not dying; he is only in a very profound sleep, having been much exhausted and nearly killed yesterday. Hallo, Robin! awake at last?”

Robin, who had been roused by the voices, rubbed his eyes, yawned vociferously, and looked vacantly round.

“Well, now, that’s most extraordinary; it isn’t a dream after all!”

“It’s an uncommon pleasant dream, if it is one,” remarked Jim Slagg, with a grave stare at Robin, as he sat up on his couch. “I never in all my born days dreamt such a sweet smell of coffee and fried sausages. Why, the old ’ooman’s a-bringin’ of ’em in, I do declare. Pinch me, Stumps, to see if I’m awake!”

As Stumps was still asleep, Slagg himself resorted to the method referred to, and roused his comrade. In a few minutes they were all seated at breakfast with the exception of the sailor, whom it was thought best to leave to his repose until nature should whisper in his ear.

“Well now,” said Slagg, pausing to rest for a few seconds, “if we had a submarine cable ’tween this and England, and we was to give ’em an account of all we’ve seen an’ bin doin’, they’d never believe it.”

“Cer’nly not. They’d say it wos all a passel o’ lies,” remarked Stumps; “but I say, Mr Sam—”

“Come now, Stumps, don’t ‘Mister’ me any more.”

“Well, I won’t do it any more, though ’tain’t easy to change one’s ’abits. But how is it, sir, that that there electricity works? That’s what I wants to know. Does the words run along the cable,—or ’ow?”

“Of course they do, Stumpy,” interrupted Slagg, “they run along the cable like a lot o’ little tightrope dancers, an’ when they come to the end o’t they jumps off an’ ranges ’temselves in a row. Sometimes, in coorse, they spells wrong, like bad schoolboys, and then they’ve to be walloped an’ set right.”

“Hold your noise, Slagg, an’ let your betters speak,” returned Stumps.

“Well, if they don’t exactly do that,” said Sam Shipton, “there are people who think they can do things even more difficult. I remember once, when I was clerk at a country railroad station and had to work the telegraph, an old woman came into the ticket office in a state of wild despair. She was about the size and shape of Meerta there, but with about an inch and a half more nose, and two or three ounces less brain.

“‘What’s wrong, madam?’ I asked, feeling quite sorry for the poor old thing.

“‘Oh! sir,’ said she, clasping her hands, ‘I’ve bin an’ left my passel,—a brown paper one it was,—on the seat at the last station, an’ there was a babby’s muffler in it—the sweetest thing as ever was—an’ f–fi’ pun t–ten, on’y one sh–shillin’ was b–bad—boo-hoo!’

“She broke down entirely at this point, so, said I, ‘Madam, make your mind quite easy, sit down, and I’ll telegraph at once,’ so I telegraphed, and got a reply back immediately that the parcel had been found all right, and would be sent on as soon as possible. I told this to the old lady, who seemed quite pleased, and went on to the platform to wait.

“I was pretty busy for the next quarter of an hour, for it was market day at the next town, but I noticed through the window that the old lady was standing on the platform, gazing steadily up at the sky.

"'Broxley—third class,' said a big farmer at that moment, with a head like one of his own turnips.

"I gave him his ticket, and for five minutes more I was kept pretty busy, when up came the train; in got the struggling crowd; whew! went the whistle, and away went the whole affair, leaving no one on the platform but the porter, and the old woman still staring up at the sky.

"'What's the matter, madam?' I asked.

"'Matter!' she exclaimed, 'a pretty telegraph yours is to be sure! wuss than the old carrier by a long way. Here 'ave I bin standin' for full 'alf-an-hour with my neck nigh broke, and there's no sign of it yet.'

"'No sign of what, madam?'

"'Of my brown paper passel, to be sure. Didn't you tell me, young man, that they said they'd send it by telegraph as soon as possible?'

"'No, madam,' I replied, 'I told you they had telegraphed to say they would send it on as soon as possible—meaning, of course, by rail, for we have not yet discovered the method of sending parcels by telegraph—though, no doubt, we shall in course of time. If you'll give me your address I'll send the parcel to you.'

"'Thank you, young man. Do,' she said, giving me an old envelope with her name on it. 'Be sure you do. I don't mind the money much, but I couldn't a-bear to lose that muffler. It was such a sweet thing, turned up with yaller, and a present too, which it isn't many of 'em comes my way.'

"So you see, Stumps, some people have queer notions about the powers of the telegraph."

"But did the old lady get the parcel all right?" asked Stumps, who was a sympathetic soul.

"Of course she did, and came over to the station next day to thank me, and offer me the bad shilling by way of reward. Of course I declined it with many expressions of gratitude."

While they were thus adding intellectual sauce to the material feast of breakfast, the rescued sailor awoke from his prolonged sleep, and stretched himself.

He was a huge, thick-set man, with a benign expression of countenance, but that phase of his character was somewhat concealed at the time by two black eyes, a swollen nose, a cut lip, and a torn cheek. Poor fellow, he had suffered severely at the hands of the pirates, and suddenly checked the stretch in which he was indulging with a sharp groan, or growl, as he sat up and pressed his hand to his side.

"Why, what's the matter with me, an' where am I?" he exclaimed, gazing round the cave, while a look of wonder gradually displaced the expression of pain.

"You're all right—rescued from the pirates at all events," answered Sam Shipton, rising from table and sitting down beside the seaman's couch.

"Thank God for that!" said the man earnestly, though with a troubled look; "but how did I escape—where are the rascals?—what—"

"There, now, don't excite yourself, my man; you're not quite yourself in body. Come, let me feel your pulse. Ah, slightly feverish—no wonder—I'll tell you all about it soon, but at present you must be content merely to know that you are safe in the hands of friends, that you are in the pirates' cave, and that the pirates and their vessel are now at the bottom of the sea."

"That's hardly c'rect, Mr Shipton," murmured Slagg; "I would have said they was blow'd to hatoms."

The seaman turned and looked at the speaker with what would have been a twinkle if his swelled visage would have permitted, but the effort produced another spasm of pain.

"I must examine you, friend," said Sam; "you have been severely handled. Help me to strip him, Robin."

The poor man at once submitted.

"You're a doctor, sir, I suppose?" he asked.

“No,” said Sam, “only an amateur; nevertheless I know what I’m about. You see, I think that every man in the world, whatever his station or profession, should be at least slightly acquainted with every subject under the sun in connection with which he may be called on to act. In other words, he should know at least a little about surgery, and physic, and law, and carpentering, blacksmithing, building, cooking, riding, swimming, and—hallo! why, two of your ribs are broken, my man!”

“Sorry to hear it, sir, but not surprised, for I feels as if two or three o’ my spines was broken also, and five or six o’ my lungs bu’sted. You won’t be able to mend ’em, I fear.”

“Oh, yes, I shall,” said Sam cheerily.

“Ah! that’s well. I’d thowt that p’r’aps you wouldn’t have the tools ’andy in these parts for splicin’ of ’em.”

“Fortunately no tools are required,” returned Sam. “I’ll soon put you right, but you’ll have to lie still for some time. Here, Robin, go into the store-cave and fetch me a few yards of that white cotton, you remember, near the door. And, I say, mind you keep well clear of the powder.”

When the cotton was brought, Sam tore it up into long strips, which he wound somewhat tightly round the sailor’s huge chest.

“You see,” he observed, as he applied the bandages, “broken ribs are not necessarily displaced, but the action of breathing separates the ends of them continually, so that they can’t get a chance of re-uniting. All we have to do, therefore, is to prevent your taking a full breath, and this is accomplished by tying you up tight—so. Now, you can’t breathe fully even if you would, and I’d recommend you not to try. By the way—what’s your name?”

“Johnson, sir,—John Johnson.”

“Well, Johnson, I’ll give you something to eat and drink now, after which you’ll have another sleep. To-morrow we’ll have a chat on things in general.”

“I say,” asked Robin that night, as he and Sam stood star-gazing together beside a small fire which had been kindled outside the cavern-mouth for

cooking purposes, “is it true that you have studied all the subjects you mentioned to Johnson this morning?”

“Quite true. I have not indeed studied them long or profoundly, but I have acquired sufficient knowledge of each to enable me to take intelligent action, as I did this morning, instead of standing helplessly by, or, what might be worse, making a blind attempt to do something on the chance that it might be the right thing, as once happened to myself when a bungling ignoramus gave me a glass of brandy to cure what he called mulligrumps, but what in truth turned out to be inflammation.”

“But what think you of the saying that ‘a little knowledge is a dangerous thing,’ Sam.”

“I think that, like most of the world’s maxims, it is only partially, or relatively, true. If Little Knowledge claims the position and attempts to act the part of Great Knowledge, it becomes dangerous indeed; but if Little Knowledge walks modestly, and only takes action when none but Ignorance stands by, it is, in my opinion, neither dangerous nor liable to be destructive.”

While they were speaking, little Letta came out of the cavern and ran towards them.

“It is like a dream of the Arabian Nights to meet such a little angel here,” murmured Robin; “what a dreadful blow the loss of her must have been to her poor mother!”

“O! come to Johnson, please,” she said, taking Sam by the hand with a very trustful look and manner.

“Why; he’s not worse, is he?”

“O no! he has just awakened, and says he is very much better, and so peckish. What does he mean by that?”

“Peckish, my dear, is hungry,” explained Robin, as they went into the cave together.

They found that Johnson was not only peckish but curious, and thirsting for information as well as meat and drink. As his pulse was pronounced by Dr

Shipton to be all right, he was gratified with a hearty supper, a long pull at the tankard of sparkling water, and a good deal of information and small-talk about the pirates, the wreck of the Triton, and the science of electricity.

“But you have not told us yet,” said Sam, “how it was that you came to fail into the hands of the pirates.”

“I can soon tell ’ee that,” said the seaman, turning slowly on his couch.

“Lie still, now, you must not move,” said Sam, remonstratively.

“But that not movin’, doctor, is wuss than downright pain, by a long way. Hows’ever, I s’pose I must obey orders—anyhow you’ve got the whip hand o’ me just now. Well, as I was sayin’, the yarn ain’t a long ’un. I sailed from the port o’ Lun’on in a tea-clipper, of which I was the cook; got out to Hong-Kong all right, shipped a cargo, and off again for old England. We hadn’t got far when a most horrible gale blew us far out of our course. When it fell calm, soon arter, we was boarded by a pirate. Our captain fought like a hero, but it warn’t of no use. They was too many for us; most of my shipmates was killed, and I was knocked flat on the deck from behind with a hand-spike. On recoverin’, I found myself in the ship’s hold, bound hand and futt, among a lot of unfortunits like myself, most of ’em bein’ Chinese and Malays. The reptiles untied my hands and set me to an oar. They thrashed us all unmercifully to make us work hard, and killed the weak ones to be rid of ’em. At last we came to an anchor, as I knew by the rattlin’ o’ the cables, though, bein’ below, I couldn’t see where we was. Then I heard the boats got out, an’ all the crew went ashore, as I guessed, except the guard left to watch us.

“That night I dreamed a deal about bein’ free, an’ about former voyages—specially one when I was wrecked in the Atlantic, an’ our good ship, the Seahorse, went down in latitude—”

“The Seahorse!” echoed Robin, with an earnest look at the sailor; “was she an emigrant ship?”

“Ay, that’s just what she was.”

“Was she lost in the year 1850?” continued Robin, with increasing excitement.

“Jus’ so, my lad.”

“And you were cook?”

“You’ve hit the nail fair on the head,” replied the sailor, with a look of surprise.

“Well, now, that is most remarkable,” said Robin, “for I was born on board of that very ship.”

“You don’t mean it,” said Johnson, looking eagerly at our hero. “Was you really the babby as was born to that poor miserable sea-sick gentleman, Mr Wright—you’ll excuse my sayin’ so—in the middle of a thunder-clap an’ a flash o’ lightnin’ as would have split our main-mast an’ sent us to the bottom, along wi’ the ship, if it hadn’t bin for the noo lightnin’ conductor that Mr Harris, the inventor, indooced our skipper to put up!”

“Yes, I am that very baby,” said Robin, “and although, of course, I remember nothing about the thunder and lightning, or anything else. My father and mother have often told me all about it, and the wonderful deliverance which God mercifully sent when all hope had been given up. And many a time did they speak of you, Johnson, as a right good fellow and a splendid cook.”

“Much obleedged to ’em,” said Johnson, “an’ are they both alive?”

“They were both alive and well when I left England.”

“Come now, this is pleasant, to meet an old shipmate in such pecooliar circumstances,” said the sailor, extending his hand, which Robin shook warmly; “quite as good as a play, ain’t it?”

“Ay,” observed Jim Slagg, who with the others had witnessed this meeting with deep interest, “an’ the babby has kep’ the lighten’ goin’ ever since, though he’s dropped the thunder, for he’s an electrician no less—a manufacturer of lightnin’ an’ a director of it too.”

The sailor wass good deal puzzled by this remark, but when its purport was explained to him, he gave vent to a vigorous chuckle, notwithstanding Sam’s stern order to “lie still.”

“Didn’t I say so?” he exclaimed. “Didn’t I say distinctly, that night, to the stooard—Thomson was his name—‘Stooard,’ said I, ‘that there babby what has just bin born will make his mark some’ow an’ somew’eres.’”

“Well, but I have not made my mark yet,” said Robin, laughing, “so you’re not a true prophet, at least time has not yet proved your title.”

“Not yet proved it!” cried Johnson with vehemence, “why, how much proof do you want? Here you are, not much more than a babby yet—any’ow hardly a man—and, besides havin’ bin born in thunder, lightnin’, wind, an’ rain, you’ve laid the Atlantic Cable, you’ve took up lightnin’ as a profession—or a plaything,—you’ve helped to save the life of John Johnson, an’ you’ve got comfortably located in a pirate’s island! If you on’y go on as you’ve begun, you’ll make your mark so deep that it’ll never be rubbed out to the end of time. A prophet, indeed! Why, I’m shuperior to Mahomet, an’ beat Nebuchadnezzar all to sticks.”

“But you haven’t finished your story, Johnson,” said Jim Slagg.

“That’s true—where was I? Ah, dreamin’ in the hold of the pirate-ship. Well, I woke up with a start all of a suddent, bent on doin’ suthin’, I scarce knew what, but I wriggled away at the rope that bound me till I got my hands free; then I freed my legs; then I loosed some o’ the boldest fellows among the slaves, and got handspikes and bits o’ wood to arm ’em with. They was clever enough to understand signs, an’ I couldn’t speak to ’em, not knowin’ their lingo, but I signed to ’em to keep quiet as mice. Then I crep’ to the powder-magazine, which the reckless reptiles fastened very carelessly, and got a bit paper and made a slow match by rubbin’ some wet powder on it, and laid it all handy, for I was determined to escape and put an end to their doin’s all at once. My plan was to attack and overpower the guard, free and arm all the slaves, blow up the ship, escape on shore, an’ have a pitched battle with the pirate crew. Unfortunately there was a white-livered traitor among us—a sort o’ half-an’-half slave—very likely he was a spy. Anyhow, when he saw what I was about, he slipped over the side and swam quietly ashore. Why he didn’t alarm the guards I don’t know—p’r’aps he thought we might be too many for ’em, and that if we conquered he stood but a small chance. Anyhow he escaped the sharks, and warned the crew in good time, for we was in the very middle of the scrimmage when they suddintly turned up, as you saw, an’ got the better of us. Hows’ever I managed to bolt below and fire the slow match, before they saw what I was after. Then I turned and fought my way on deck again, so that they

didn't find out. And when they was about to throw me overboard, the thought of the surprise in store for 'em indooced me to give vent to a hearty cheer. It warn't a right state o' mind, I confess, and I was properly punished, for, instead o' killin' me off quick an' comfortable, they tied me hand and futt, took me below, an' laid me not two yards from the slowly burnin' match. I felt raither unhappy, I assure you; an' the reptiles never noticed the match because o' the smoke o' the scrimmage. I do believe it was being so near it as saved me, for when the crash came, I was lifted bodily wi' the planks on which I lay, and, comin' down from the sky, as it appeared to me, I went clean into the sea without damage, except the breakin' o' one o' the ropes, which, fortunately, set my right arm free."

"Come now, Johnson, you must go to sleep after that," said Sam. "You're exciting yourself too much; remember that I am your doctor, and obedience is the first law of nature—when one is out of health."

"Very good, sir," returned the seaman; "but before I turn over Mr Wright must read me a few verses out o' that bible his mother gave him."

"Why, how do you know that my mother gave me a bible?" asked Robin in great surprise.

"Didn't I know your mother?" replied the sailor with a flush of enthusiasm; "an' don't I know that she would sooner have let you go to sea without her blessing than without the Word of God? She was the first human bein' as ever spoke to me about my miserable soul, and the love of God in sendin' His Son to save it. Many a one has asked me about my health, and warned me to fly from drink, and offered to help me on in life, but she was the first that ever asked after my soul, or tried to impress on me that Eternity and its affairs were of more importance than Time. I didn't say much at the time, but the seed that your mother planted nigh twenty years ago has bin watered, thank God an' kep' alive ever since."

There was a tone of seriousness and gratitude in this off-hand seaman's manner, while speaking of his mother, which touched Robin deeply. Without a moment's hesitation he pulled out his bible and read a chapter in the Gospel of John.

“Now you’ll pray,” said the sailor, to Robin’s surprise and embarrassment, for he had never prayed in public before, though accustomed from a child to make known his wants to God night and morning.

But our hero was morally as well as physically courageous—as every hero should be! He knelt at once by the sailor’s couch, while the others followed his example, and, in a few simple sentences, asked for pardon, blessing, help, and guidance in the name of Jesus Christ.

Thus peculiarly was bible-reading and family worship established on the pirates’ island in the year eighteen hundred and sixty-eight.

Chapter Nineteen

An Exploration and an Accident

For the first few days of their stay on what they styled Pirate Island, our castaways were too much taken up with the wondrous and varied contents of the robbers' cave, and the information Meerta and Letta had to give, to pay much regard to the island itself, or the prospect they had of quitting it. But when their interest and curiosity began to abate, and the excitement to decrease, they naturally bethought them of the nature and resources of their now home.

Of course they did not for a moment regard it in the light of home. It was merely a resting-place,—a refuge, where, after their escape from the sea, they should spend a few weeks, perhaps months, until a passing vessel should take them off. They did not know, at that time, that the islet was far removed from the usual track of ships, and that, like the Pitcairn Islanders, they might be doomed to spend many years, perchance a lifetime, on it. Indeed, a considerable time elapsed before they would admit to themselves that there was a possibility of such a fate, although they knew, both from Meerta and Letta, that no ship of any kind, save that of the pirates, had been seen for the last eighteen months, and the few sails that did chance to appear, were merely seen for a few hours like sea-gulls on the horizon, from which they arose and into which they vanished.

Having then, as we have said, bethought them of examining the resources and nature of the island, they one morning organised an expedition. By that time the sailor, although by no means fit for it, insisted that he was sufficiently restored to accompany them. Letta, who was active and strong like a small gazelle, besides being acquainted with the whole region, agreed to act as guide. Stumps, having sprained his ankle slightly, remained at the cave, for the purpose, as he said, of helping Meerta with the garden, but Jim Slagg gave him credit for laziness.

"You see," said Sam Shipton, as Letta led them down the rugged mountain-side, "we may as well make ourselves comfortable while we remain here, and I'm inclined to think that a hut, however rough, down in one of these charming valleys, will be more agreeable than the gloomy cavern on the mountain-top."

“Not so sure o’ that, doctor,” said Johnson; “the cave is at all events dry, and a good stronghold in case of a visit from pirates.”

“But pirates what have bin blow’d to atoms,” said Slagg, “ain’t likely to turn up again, are they?”

“That’s so, lad; but some of their friends might pay us a visit, you know.”

“I think not,” rejoined Sam; “there is honour among thieves here, no doubt, as elsewhere. I daresay it is well-known among the fraternity that the island belongs to a certain set, and the rest will therefore let it alone. What think you, Robin?”

“I’m inclined to agree with you, Sam, but perhaps Letta is the best authority on that point. Did you ever see any other set of pirates land here, little one, except your—your own set?”

“Only once,” answered the child, “another set came, but they only stayed one day. They looked at everything, looked at me an’ Meerta an’ laughed very much. An’ they ate and drank a good deal, and fought a little; but they took nothing away, and never came back.”

“I thought so,” rejoined Sam; “now, all we’ve got to do is to hoist a flag on the highest peak of the mountain, and when a vessel comes to take us off, load her with as much of the booty as she can carry—and then, hurrah for old England!”

“Hooray!” echoed Jim Slagg, “them’s exactly my sentiments.”

“But the booty is not ours to take,” objected Robin.

“Whose is it, then?” asked Sam; “the rightful owners we don’t know, and the wrongful owners are defunct.”

“I tell ’ee what it is, mates,” said Johnson, “the whole o’ the booty is mine, ’cause why? it was me as blowed up the owners, so I’m entitled to it by conquest, an’ you needn’t go to fightin’ over it. If you behave yourselves, I’ll divide it equally among us, share an’ share alike.”

“It seems to me, Johnson,” said Robin, “that in strict justice the booty belongs to Letta, Meerta, and blind Bungo, as the natural heirs o’ the pirates.”

“But they’re not the heirs, they are part of the booty,” said the seaman, “and, as sitch, falls to be divided among us.”

“If that’s so,” said Slagg, “then I claim Letta for my share, and you, Johnson, can have your pick of Meerta and blind Bungo.”

“Nay, Letta is mine, because I was the first to discover her,” said Robin. “Whom will you go with, Letta?”

“With you, of course,” replied the child quite earnestly. “Haven’t you promised to take me back to mamma?”

“Indeed I have, little one, and if I ever get the chance, assuredly I will,” said Robin, with equal earnestness.

“I say, doctor,” said Johnson to Sam, sitting down on a mossy bank, “I’ll stop here and wait for you. That rib ain’t all square yet.”

“Wilful man,” said Sam, “didn’t I advise you not to come? There, lie down and take it easy. We’ll bring you some fruit on our return.”

By this time the party had reached the valley in which the lakelet lay, and beautiful indeed was the scene which presented itself as they passed under the grateful shade of the palm-trees. Everywhere, rich tropical vegetation met their gaze, through the openings in which the sunshine poured like streams of fire. On the little lake numerous flocks of ducks and other fowl were seen swimming in sportive mood, while an occasional splash told of fish of some sort below the surface.

Leaving the sailor in a position whence he could observe them for a long distance, the rest of the party pushed on. During their rambles they found the valley to be much richer in vegetation, and more beautiful, than the distant view from the mountain-top had led them to expect. Small though the valley was, it contained, among other trees, the cocoa-nut palm, the bread-fruit, banana, and sandal-wood. There were also pine-apples, wild rice, and custard-apples, some of which latter delicious fruit, being ripe, was gathered and

carried back to Johnson, whom they found sound asleep and much refreshed on their return.

The expedition proved that, barren though the island appeared from the sea, it contained quite enough of the good things of this life to render it a desirable abode for man.

On the coast, too, where the raft had been cast ashore, were discovered a variety of shell-fish, some of which, especially the oysters, were found to be excellent food. And some of the sea-fowl turned out to be very good eating, though a little fishy, while their eggs were as good as those of the domestic fowl.

“It seems to me,” said Robin to Letta one day when they were out on a ramble together, “that this is quite a little paradise.”

“I don’t know what paradise is like,” said the child.

“Well, no more do I,” returned Robin, with a laugh, “but of course everybody understands that it is the place where everything is perfect, and where happiness is complete.”

“It cannot be like paradise without mamma,” said Letta, shaking her pretty head sadly. “I would not go to heaven unless mamma was there.”

Robin was silent for some time, as he thought of his own mother and the talks he used to have with her on this same subject.

“Letta,” he said at length, earnestly, “Jesus will be in heaven. It was His Spirit who taught you to love mamma—as you do, so you are sure to meet her there with Him.”

“Nobody taught me to love mamma,” returned the child quietly; “I couldn’t help it.”

“True, little one, but it was God who made you to—‘couldn’t help it.’”

Letta was puzzled by this reply. She raised her bright eyes inquiringly into Robin’s honest face, and said, “But you’ve promised to take me to her, you know.”

“Yes, dear little one, but you must not misunderstand me,” replied the youth somewhat sadly. “I promise that, God helping me, I will do the best I can to find out where your mother is; but you must remember that I have very little to go on. I don’t even know your mother’s name, or the place where you were taken from. By the way, an idea has just occurred to me. Have you any clothes at the cave?”

“Of course I have,” answered Letta, with a merry laugh.

“Yes; but I mean the clothes that you had on when you first came here.”

“I don’t know; Meerta knows. Why?”

“Because your name may be marked on them. Come, let us go back at once and see. Besides, we are wasting time, for you know I was sent out to shoot some ducks for dinner.”

Rising as he spoke, Robin shouldered the shotgun which had been supplied from the robbers’ armoury, and, descending with his little companion towards the lake, soon began to stalk the birds as carefully as if he had been trained to the work by a Red Indian. Stooping low, he glided swiftly through the bushes, until he came within a hundred yards of the margin of the lakelet, where a group of some thirty or forty fat ducks were feeding. Letta had fallen behind, and sat down to watch.

The distance being too great for a shot, and the bushes beyond the spot which he had reached being too thin to conceal him, Robin lay flat down, and began to advance through the long grass after the fashion of a snake, pushing his gun before him. It was a slow and tedious process, but Robin’s spirit was patient and persevering. He screwed himself, as it were, to within sixty yards of the flock, and then fired both barrels almost simultaneously. Seven dead birds remained behind when the affrighted flock took wing.

“It is not very scientific shooting,” said Robin, apologetically, to his fair companion, as she assisted him to tie their legs together; “but our object just now is food, not sport.”

On the way back to the cavern they had to pass over a narrow ledge, on one side of which a precipice descended towards the valley, while the other side

rose upwards like a wall. It was not necessarily a dangerous place. They had passed it often before in safety, none of the party being troubled with giddiness; but at this time Robin had unfortunately hung his bundle of ducks on the side which had to brush past the rocky wall. As he passed, the bunch struck a projection and threw him off his balance. In the effort to recover himself he dislodged a piece of rock under his left foot, and, without even a cry, went headlong over the precipice!

Poor Letta stood rooted to the spot, too horrified to scream. She saw her friend, on whom all her hopes were built, go crashing through the foliage immediately below the precipice edge, and disappear. It was the first terrible shock she had ever received. With a convulsive shudder she ran by a dangerously steep route towards the foot of the precipice.

But Robin had not yet met his doom, although he had descended full sixty feet. His fall was broken by several leafy trees, through which he went like an avalanche; and a thick solid bush receiving him at the foot, checked his descent entirely, and slid him quietly off its boughs on to the grass, where he lay, stunned, indeed, but otherwise uninjured.

Poor Letta of course was horrified, on reaching the spot, to find that Robin could not speak, and was to all appearance dead. In an agony of terror she shrieked, and shook him and called him by name—to awaken him, as she afterwards said; but Robin's sleep was too deep at that moment to be dispelled by such measures. Letta therefore sprang up and ran as fast as she could to the cavern to tell the terrible news and fetch assistance.

Robin, however, was not left entirely alone in his extremity. It so chanced that a remarkably small monkey was seated among the boughs of a neighbouring tree, eating a morsel of fruit, when Letta's first scream sounded through the grove. Cocking up one ear, it arrested its little hand on the way to its lesser mouth, and listened. Its little black face was corrugated with the wrinkles of care—it might be of fun, we cannot tell. The only large features of the creature were its eyes, and these seemed to blaze, while the brows rose high, as if in surprise.

On hearing the second scream the small monkey laid hold of a bough with its tail, swung itself off, and caught another with its feet, sprang twenty feet, more or less, to the ground, which it reached on its hands, tumbled a somersault

inadvertently, and went skipping over the ground at a great rate in the direction of the cries.

When it reached the spot, however, Letta had fled, but Robin still lay motionless on his back. It was evident that the small monkey looked on the prostrate youth with alarm and suspicion, yet with an intense curiosity that no sense of danger could restrain. It walked slowly and inquiringly round him several times, each time drawing closer, while its crouched back and trailing tail betokened abject humility. Then it ventured to put out a small black hand and touch him, drawing it back again as if it had got an electric shock. Then it ventured to touch him again, with less alarm. After that it went close up, and gazed in his face.

Familiarity, says the proverb, breeds contempt. The truth of proverbs can be verified by monkeys as well as men. Seeing that nothing came of its advances, that small monkey finally leaped on Robin's chest, sat down thereon, and stared into his open mouth. Still the youth moved not, whereupon the monkey advanced a little and laid its paw upon his nose! Either the touch was more effective than Letta's shaking, or time was bringing Robin round, for he felt his nose tickled, and gave way to a tremendous sneeze. It blew the monkey clean off its legs, and sent it shrieking into a neighbouring tree. As Robin still lay quiet, the monkey soon recovered, and returned to its former position, where, regardless of consequences, it again laid hold of the nose.

This time consciousness returned. Robin opened his eyes with a stare of dreamy astonishment. The monkey replied with a stare of indignant surprise. Robin's eyebrows rose still higher. So did those of the monkey as it leaped back a foot, and formed its mouth into a little O of remonstrance. Robin's mouth expanded; he burst into an uncontrollable fit of laughter, and the monkey was again on the eve of flight, when voices were heard approaching, and, next instant, Letta came running forward, followed at some distance by Sam and the others.

"Oh! my dear, sweet, exquisite darling!" exclaimed Letta.

It did much for the poor youth's recovery, the hearing himself addressed in such endearing terms, but he experienced a relapse when the monkey, responding to the endearments, ran with obvious joy into the child's bosom, and submitted to a warm embrace.

“Oh, you darling!” repeated Letta; “where have you been? why did you go away? I thought you were dead. Naughty thing!”

Recollecting Robin with a shock of self-reproach, she dropped the monkey and ran to him.

“It is an old friend, I see,” he said with a languid smile, as she came up.

“Yes, yes; an old pet. I had lost him for a long time. But you’re not killed? Oh! I’m so glad.”

“Killed!” repeated Sam, who was down on his knees carefully examining the patient; “I should think not. He’s not even bruised—only stunned a little. Where did you fall from, Robin—the tree top?”

“No; from the edge of the precipice.”

“What! from the ledge sixty or seventy feet up there? Impossible! You would certainly have been killed if you had fallen from that.”

“So I certainly should,” returned Robin, “if God had not in his mercy grown trees and shrubs there, expressly, among other purposes, to save me.”

In this reply Robin’s mind was running on previous conversations which he had had with his friend on predestination.

The idea of shrubs and trees having been expressly grown on an island of the Southern Seas to save an English boy, seemed doubtful to Sam. He did not, however, express his doubts at the time, but reserved the subject for a future “theological discussion.”

Meanwhile, Slagg, Stumps, and Johnson, having spread some palm branches on a couple of stout poles, laid our hero thereon, and bore him in safety to the pirates’ cave, where, for several days, he lay on one of the luxurious couches, tenderly nursed by Letta and the old woman, who, although she still pathetically maintained that the “roberts an pyrits wasn’t all so bad as each oder,” was quite willing to admit that her present visitors were preferable, and that, upon the whole, she was rather fond of them.

Chapter Twenty

Various Subjects treated of, and a Great Fight detailed

It was the habit of Robin and his friends at this time, the weather being extremely fine and cool, to sit at the mouth of their cavern of an evening, chatting about the events of the day, or the prospects of the future, or the experiences of the past, while old Meerta busied herself preparing supper over a fire kindled on the ground.

No subject was avoided on these occasions, because the friends were harmoniously minded, in addition to which the sweet influences of mingled star-light and fire-light, soft air, and lovely prospect of land and sea—to say nothing of the prospect of supper—all tended to induce a peaceful and forbearing spirit.

"Well, now," said Robin, continuing a subject which often engaged their intellectual powers, "it seems to me simple enough."

"Simple!" exclaimed Johnson, with a half-sarcastic laugh, "w'y, now, you an' the doctor 'ave tried to worrit that electricity into my brain for many months, off an' on, and I do believe as I'm more muddled about it to-night than I was at the beginnin'."

"P'r'aps it's because you hain't got no brains to work upon," suggested Slagg.

"P'r'aps it is," humbly admitted the seaman. "But look here, now, doctor," he added, turning to Sam with his brow knotted up into an agony of mental endeavour, and the forefinger of one hand thrust into the palm of the other,—"look here. You tells me that electricity ain't a substance at all."

"Yes, that's so," assented Sam with a nod.

"Wery good. Now, then, if it ain't a substance at all, it's nothin'. An' if it's nothin', how can you go an' talk of it as somethin' an' give it a name, an' tell me it works the telegraph, an' does all manner of wonderful things?"

"But it does not follow that a thing must be nothing because it isn't a substance. Don't you see, man, that an idea is something, yet it is not a substance. Thought, which is so potent a factor in this world, is not a

substance, yet it cannot be called nothing. It is a condition—it is the result of brain-atoms in action. Electricity is sometimes described as an 'invisible imponderable fluid,' but that is not quite correct, because a fluid is a substance. It is a better definition to say that electricity is a manifestation of energy—a result of substance in action."

"There, I'm muddled again!" said Johnson, with a look of hopeless incapacity.

"Small blame to you, Johnson," murmured Slagg who had done his best to understand, while Stumps sat gazing at the speakers with an expression of blank complacency.

"Look here, Johnson," said Sam, "you've often seen men shaking a carpet, haven't you?"

"In coorse I have."

"Well, have you not observed the waves of the carpet that roll along it when shaken!"

"Yes, I have."

"What are these waves?"

"Well, sir, I should say they was the carpet," replied Johnson.

"No, the waves are not the carpet. When the waves reach the end of the carpet they disappear. If the waves were the carpet, the carpet would disappear. The same waves in a whip, soft and undulating though they be, result in a loud crack, as you know."

"Muddled again," said Johnson.

"Ditto," said Slagg.

"Why, I'm not muddled a bit!" suddenly exclaimed Stumps, with a half-contemptuous laugh.

"Of coorse you're not," retorted Slagg. "Brainless things never git into that state. You never heard of a turnip bein' muddled, did you?"

Stumps became vacant, and Sam went on.

“Well, you see, the waves are not substance. They are a condition—a result of atoms in motion. Now, when the atoms of a substance are disturbed by friction, or by chemical action, they get into a state of violent commotion, and try wildly to fly from, or to, each other. This effort to fly about is energy. When the atoms get into a very intense state of commotion they have a tendency to induce explosion, unless a way of escape is found—escape for the energy, not for the atoms. Now, when you cause chemical disturbance in an electric battery, the energy thus evolved is called electricity, and we provide a conductor of escape for it in the shape of a copper or other metal wire, which we may carry to any distance we please, and the energy runs along it, as the wave runs along the carpet, as long as you keep up the commotion in the battery among the excited atoms of copper and zinc.”

“Mud—no, not quite. I have got a glimmer o’ su’thin’,” said Johnson.

“Ditto,” said Slagg.

“Supper,” said old Meerta.

“Ha! that’s the battery for me,” cried Stumps, jumping up.

“Not a bad one either,” said Robin, as they entered the cave; “alternate plates of beef and greens, steeped in some such acid as lemonade, cause a wonderful commotion in the atoms of the human body.”

“True, Robin, and the energy thereby evolved,” said Sam, “sometimes bursts forth in brilliant sparks of wit—to say nothing of flashes of absurdity.”

“An’ thunderin’ stoopidity,” added Slagg.

Further converse on the subject was checked at that time by what Sam termed the charging of the human batteries. The evening meal went on in silence and very pleasantly for some time, but before its close it was interrupted in an alarming manner by the sudden entrance of Letta with wild excitement in her eyes.

“Oh!” she cried, pointing back to the entrance of the cave, “a ship!—pirate-ship coming!”

A bombshell could scarcely have produced greater effect. Each individual leaped up and darted out, flushing deep red or turning pale, according to temperament. They were not long in verifying the statement. A ledge of rocks concealed the entrance to the cavern from the sea. Over its edge could be seen the harbour in which they had found the vessel whose total destruction has been described; and there, sure enough, they beheld a similar vessel, though considerably smaller, in the act of furling her sails and dropping anchor. There could be no doubt as to her character, for although too distant to admit of her crew being distinguished by star-light, her rig and general appearance betrayed her.

“Not a moment to be lost, Robin,” said Sam Shipton hurriedly, as he led the way back to the tavern, where old Meerta and blind Bungo, aided by Letta, had already cleared away all evidence of the late feast, leaving only three tin cups and three pewter plates on the table, with viands appropriate thereto.

“Ha! you’re a knowing old lady,” exclaimed Sam, “you understand how to help us, I see.”

“Me tink so!” replied Meerta, with an intelligent nod. “On’y us t’ree here. All de pyrits gone away. Dem sinners on’y come here for a feed—p’r’aps for leetil poodre. Soon go away.”

“Just so,” said Sam, “meanwhile we will hide, and return after they are gone, or, better still, if you, Letta, and Bungo will come and hide with us, I’ll engage to lay a train of powder from the barrels inside to somewhere outside, and blow the reptiles and the whole mountain into the sea! There’s powder enough to do it.”

“You tink me one divl?” demanded the old woman indignantly. “No, some o’ dem pyrits not so bad as each oder. You let ’em alone; me let you alone.”

This gentle intimation that Meerta had their lives in her hand, induced Sam to ask modestly what she would have him do.

“Go,” she replied promptly, “take rifles, swords, an’ poodre. Hide till pyrits go ’way. If de finds you—fight. Better fight dan be skin alive!”

“Unquestionably,” said Sam, with a mingled laugh and shudder, in which his companions joined—as regards the shudder at least, if not the laugh.

Acting promptly on the suggestion, Sam armed himself and his comrades each with a good breech-loading rifle, as much ammunition as he could conveniently carry, and an English sword. Then, descending the mountain on the side opposite to the harbour they disappeared in the dark and tangled underwood of the palm-grove. Letta went a short distance with them.

“They won’t kill Meerta or blind Bungo,” she said, on the way down. “They’re too useful, though they often treat them badly. Meerta sent me away to hide here the last time the strange bad men came. She thinks I go hide to-night, but I won’t; so, good-night.”

“But surely you don’t mean to put yourself in the power of the pirates?” said Robin.

“No, never fear,” returned the child with a laugh. “I know how to see them without they see me.”

Before further remonstrance could be made, the active child had bounded up the pathway and disappeared.

Not long after Sam and his comrades had taken their departure, the pirates came up to the cavern in a body—about forty of them—well armed and ready to fight if need be. They were as rascally a set of cut-throats as one could desire to see—or, rather, not to see—of various nationality, with ugly countenances and powerful frames, which were clothed in more or less fantastic Eastern garb. Their language, like themselves, was mixed, and, we need scarcely add, unrefined. The little that was interchanged between them and Meerta we must, however, translate.

“What! alive still!” cried the ruffian, who appeared to be the leader of the band, flinging himself down on a couch with the air of a man who knew the place well, while his men made themselves at home.

Meerta merely smiled to the salutation; that in to say, she grinned.

“Where are they?” demanded the pirate-chief, referring of course to those who, the reader is aware, were blown up.

“Gone away,” answered Meerta.

“Far away?” asked the pirate.

“Yes, very far away.”

“Goin’ to be long away?”

“Ho! yes, very long.”

“Where’s the little girl they took from Sarawak?”

“Gone away.”

“Where away?”

“Don’t know.”

“Now, look here, you old hag,” said the pirate, drawing a pistol from his belt and levelling it, “tell the truth about that girl, else I’ll scatter your brains on the floor. Where has she gone to?”

“Don’t know,” repeated Meerta, with a look of calm indifference, as she took up a tankard and wiped it out with a cloth.

The man steadied the pistol and pressed the trigger.

“You better wait till she has given us our grub,” quietly suggested one of the men.

The leader replaced the weapon in the shawl which formed his girdle, and said, “Get it ready quick—the best you have, and bring us some wine to begin with.”

Soon after that our friends, while conversing in low tones in the grove, heard the unmistakeable sounds of revelry issue from the cave.

“What think you, boys,” said Sam suddenly, “shall we go round to the harbour, surprise and kill the guard, seize the pirate-ship, up anchor and leave these villains to enjoy themselves as best they may?”

“What! and leave Letta, not to mention Meerta and Bungo, behind us? Never!”

“I forgot them for the moment,” said Sam. “No, we can’t do that.”

As he spoke the noise of revelry became louder and degenerated into sounds of angry disputation. Then several shots were heard, followed by the clashing of steel and loud yells.

“Surely that was a female voice,” said Robin, rising and rushing up the steep path that led to the cavern, closely followed by his comrades.

They had not gone a hundred yards when they were arrested by hearing a rustling in the bushes and the sound of hasty footsteps. Next instant Letta was seen running towards them, with glaring eyes and streaming hair. She sprang into Robin’s arms with a convulsive sob, and hid her white face on his breast.

“Speak, Letta, dear child! Are you hurt?”

“No, O no; but Meerta, darling Meerta, she is dead! They have shot her and Bungo.”

She burst again into convulsive sobbing.

“Dead! But are you sure—quite sure?” said Sam.

“Quite. I saw their brains scattered on the wall.—Oh, Meerta!—”

She ended in a low wail, as though her heart were broken.

“Now, boys,” said Johnson, who had hitherto maintained silence, “we must go to work an’ try to cut out the pirate-ship. It’s a good chance, and it’s our only one.”

“Yes, there’s nothing to prevent us trying it now,” said Robin, sadly, “and the sooner the better.”

“Lucky that we made up the parcels last night, warn’t it?” said Jim Slagg as they made hasty arrangements for carrying out their plan.

Jim referred to parcels of rare and costly jewels which each of them had selected from the pirate store, put into separate bags and hid away in the woods, to be ready in case of any sudden occasion arising—such as had now actually arisen—to quit the island. Going to the place where these bags were concealed, they slung them over their shoulders and set off at a steady run, or trot, for the harbour, each taking his turn in carrying Letta, for the poor child was not fit to walk, much less to run.

Stealthy though their movements were, however, they did not altogether escape detection. Two bright eyes had been watching Letta during all her wanderings that night, and two nimble feet had followed her when she ran affrighted from the pirates’ stronghold. The party was overtaken before half the distance to the harbour had been gained, and at length, with a cry of satisfaction.

Letta’s favourite—the small monkey—sprang upon her shoulder. In this position, refusing to move, he was carried to the coast.

As had been anticipated, the pirate vessel was found lying in the pool where the former ship had anchored. Being considerably smaller, however, it had been drawn close to the rocks, so that a landing had been effected by means of a broad plank or gangway instead of a boat. Fortunately for our friends, this plank had not been removed after the pirates had left, probably because they deemed themselves in a place of absolute security. As far as they could see, only one sentinel paced the deck.

“I shouldn’t wonder if the guard is a very small one,” whispered Sam to Robin, as they crept to the edge of the shrubs which lined the harbour, and surveyed their intended prize. “No doubt they expected to meet only with friends here—or with nobody at all, as it has turned out,—and have left just enough to guard their poor slaves.”

“We shall soon find out,” returned Sam. “Now, boys,” he said, on rejoining the others in the bush, “see that your revolvers are charged and handy, but don’t use them if you can avoid it.”

“A cut over the head with cold steel will be sufficiently effective, for we have no desire to kill. Nevertheless, don’t be particular. We can’t afford to measure our

blows with such scoundrels; only if we fire we shall alarm those in the cave, and have less time to get under weigh."

"What is to be done with Letta while we attack?" asked Robin.

"I'll wait here till you come for me," said Letta, with a sad little smile on her tear-bedewed face; "I'm quite used to see fighting."

"Good, keep close, and don't move from this spot till we come for you, my little heroine," said Sam. "Now, boys, follow me in single file—tread like mice—don't hurry. There's nothing like keeping cool."

"Not much use o' saying that to a feller that's red-hot," growled Slagg, as he stood with a flushed face, a revolver in one hand and a cutlass in the other.

Sam, armed similarly, glided to the extreme verge of the bushes, between which and the water there was a space of about thirty yards. With a quiet cat-like run he crossed this space, rushed up the plank gangway, and leaped upon the deck, with his comrades close at his heels. The sentinel was taken completely by surprise, but drew his sword nevertheless, and sprang at Sam with a shout.

The latter, although not a professional warrior, had been taught single-stick at school, and was an expert swordsman. He parried the pirate's furious thrust, and gave him what is technically termed cut Number 1, which clove his turban to the skull and stretched him on the deck. It was a fortunate cut, for the shout had brought up seven pirates, five from below and two from the fore-part of the vessel, where they had been asleep between two guns. With these his comrades were now engaged in mortal combat—three of them having simultaneously attacked Johnson, while two had assailed Jim Slagg.

When Sam turned round the stout sailor had cut down one of his foes, but the other two would probably have proved too much for him if Sam had not instantly engaged one of them. He was a powerful, active man, so that for nearly a minute they cut and thrust at each other without advantage to either, until Sam tried a feint thrust, which he followed up with a tremendous slash at the head. It took effect, and set him free to aid Slagg, who was at the moment in deadly peril, for poor Slagg was no swordsman, and had hitherto foiled his two antagonists by sheer activity and the fury of his assaults. He was quite collected, however, for, even in the extremity of his danger, he had refrained from using his revolver lest he should thereby give the alarm to the pirates on

land. With one stroke Sam disposed of one of the scoundrels, and Slagg succeeded in cutting down the other.

Meanwhile our hero, Robin, and Stumps had attacked the two pirates who chanced to be nearest to them. The former thought of Letta and her wretched fate if this assault should fail. The thought filled his little body with such a gush of what seemed to him like electric fire, that he leaped on his opponent with the fury of a wild cat, and bore him backward, so that he stumbled over the combings of a hatchway and was thrown flat on the deck—hors de combat.

But Stumps was not so fortunate. Slow in all his movements, and not too courageous in spirit, he gave way before the villain who assailed him. It was not indeed much to his discredit, for the man was much larger, as well as more active and fierce, than himself. A cut from the pirate's sword quickly laid him low, and his antagonist instantly turned on Robin. He was so near at the moment that neither of them could effectively use his weapon. Robin therefore dashed the hilt of his sword into the man's face and grappled with him. It was a most unequal struggle, for the pirate was, as we have said, a huge fellow, while Robin was small and slight. But there were several things in our hero's favour. He was exceedingly tough and wonderfully strong for his size, besides being active as a kitten and brave as a lion. The way that Robin Wright wriggled in that big man's embrace, hammered his nose and eyes with the iron hilt of his cutlass, stuck his knees into the pit of his stomach, and assaulted his shins with the toes of boots, besides twisting his left hand into his hair like a vice, was wonderful to behold.

It was all Letta's doing! The more hopeless the struggle felt, the more hapless did Letta's fate appear to Robin, and the more furious did the spirit within rise above its disadvantages. In the whirl of the fight the pirate's head chanced for one moment to be in proximity to a large iron block. Robin observed it, threw all his soul and body into one supreme effort, and launched his foe and himself against the block. Both heads met it at the same moment, and the combatants rolled from each other's grasp. The pirate was rendered insensible, but Robin, probably because of being lighter, was only a little stunned.

Recovering in a moment, he sprang up, glanced round, observed that the pirates were almost, if not quite, overpowered, and leaped over the bulwarks. A few moments later and he had Letta in his arms. Just then a pistol shot rang in the night air. The last of the pirates who was overpowered chanced to use his fire-arm, though without success. It was fortunate the fight was over, for,

now that the alarm had been given, they knew that their chance of escaping was greatly lessened.

“Cut the cable, Slagg. Out with a boat-hook, Johnson, ready to shove off. I’ll fetch Letta,” cried Sam, springing to the side.

He was almost run down, as he spoke, by Robin with the child in his arms.

“Ha! Robin—well done, my boy. Here, Letta, you understand the language, tell the slaves below to out oars and pull for their lives. It’s their only chance.”

The poor creatures, who were bound to the thwarts below deck, had been listening with dull surprise to the fighting on deck—not that fighting was by any means unusual in that vessel, but they must have known that they were in harbour, and that the main body of the pirates were on shore. Still greater was their surprise when they received the above order in the sweet gentle tones of a child’s voice.

Whether they deemed her an angel or not we cannot tell, but their belief in her right to command was evinced by their shoving the oars out with alacrity.

A few seconds sufficed to cut the cable, and the gangway fell into the sea with a loud splash as the vessel moved slowly from the land, while Johnson, Robin, and Slagg thrust with might and main at the boat-hooks. The oars could not be dipped or used until the vessel had been separated a few yards from the land, and it was during the delay caused by this operation that their greatest danger lay, for already the pirates were heard calling to each other among the cliffs.

“Pull, pull now for life, boys,” shouted Sam as he seized the helm.

“Pull, pull now for life, boys,” echoed the faithful translator in her silvery tones.

The oars dipped and gurgled through the water. There was no question as to the energy of the poor captives, but the vessel was heavy and sluggish at starting. She had barely got a couple of hundred yards from the shore, when the pirates from the cavern came running tumultuously out of the woods. Perceiving at once that their vessel had been captured, they rushed into the water and swam off, each man with his sword between his teeth.

They were resolute villains, and swam vigorously and fast. Sam knew that if such a swarm should gain the side of the vessel, no amount of personal valour could prevent recapture. He therefore encouraged the slaves to redoubled effort. These responded to the silvery echo, but so short had been the distance gained that the issue seemed doubtful.

“Give ’em a few shots, boys,” cried Sam, drawing his own revolver and firing back over the stern. The others followed his example and discharged all their revolvers, but without apparent effect, for the pirates still came on.

One of the sails had fortunately been left unfurled. At this moment a light puff of air from the land bulged it out, and sensibly increased their speed.

“Hurrah!” shouted Johnson, “lend a hand, boys, to haul taut.”

The sail was trimmed, and in a few minutes the vessel glided quickly away from her pursuers.

A loud British cheer announced the fact alike to pirates and slaves, so that the latter were heartened to greater exertion, while the former were discouraged. In a few minutes they gave up the chase with a yell of rage, and turned to swim for the shore.

About a hundred yards from the mouth of the harbour there lay a small islet—a mere rock. Here Sam resolved to leave the pirate guard, none of whom had been quite killed—indeed two of them had tried unsuccessfully to rise during the fight.

“You see,” said Sam, as he steered for the rock, “we don’t want to have either the doctoring or the killing of such scoundrels. They will be much better with their friends, who will be sure to swim off for them—perhaps use our raft for the purpose, which they will likely find, sooner or later.”

They soon ranged up alongside of the island, and in a few minutes the bodies of the pirates were landed and laid there side by side. While they were being laid down, the man who had fought with Robin made a sudden and furious grasp at Johnson’s throat with one hand, and at his knife with the other, but the seaman was too quick for him. He felled him with a blow of his fist. The others, although still alive, were unable to show fight.

Then, hoisting the mainsail, and directing their course to the northward, our adventurers slipped quietly over the sea, and soon left Pirate Island far out of sight behind them.

Chapter Twenty One

Departure from Pirate Island and Hopeful News at Sarawak

The vessel of which Robin and his friends had thus become possessed, was one of those numerous native pirate-ships which did, and we believe still do, infest some parts of the Malay Archipelago—ships which can assume the form and do the work of simple trading-vessels when convenience requires, or can hoist the black flag when circumstances favour. It was not laden with anything valuable at the time of its capture. The slaves who wrought at the oars when wind failed, were wretched creatures who had been captured among the various islands, and many of them were in the last stage of exhaustion, having been worked almost to death by their inhuman captors, though a good many were still robust and fresh.

These latter it was resolved to keep still in fetters, as it was just possible that some of them, if freed, might take a fancy to seize the ship and become pirates on their own account. They were treated as well as circumstances would admit of, however, and given to understand that they should be landed and set free as soon as possible. Meanwhile, no more work would be required of them than was absolutely necessary. Those of them who were ill were freed at once from toil, carefully nursed by Letta and doctored by Sam.

At first Robin and his comrades sailed away without any definite purpose in view, but after things had been got into order, a council was held and plans were discussed. It was then that Letta mentioned what the pirates in the cavern had said about her having been taken from Sarawak.

“Sarawak!” exclaimed Robin, “why, that’s the place that has been owned and governed for many years by an Englishman named Brooke—Sir James Brooke, if I remember rightly, and they call him Rajah Brooke. Perhaps your mother lives there, Letta.”

“Where is Sarawak?” asked Stumps, whose injuries in the recent fight were not so severe as had at first been supposed.

“It’s in the island of Borneo,” replied Sam; “you’re right, Robin—”

“No, he’s Robin Wright,” interrupted Slagg.

“Be quiet, Jim. I think it is highly probable that your parents are there, Letta, and as we have no particular reason for going anywhere else, and can’t hope to make for England in a tub like this, we will just lay her head for Sarawak.”

This was accordingly done, their new course being nor’-east and by east.

It would extend our tale to undue proportions were we to give in detail all the adventures they experienced, dangers they encountered, and hairbreadth escapes they made, between that point on the wide southern ocean and the Malay Archipelago. The reader must be content to skip over the voyage, and to know that they ultimately arrived at the port of Sarawak, where they were kindly treated by a deputy, the Rajah himself being absent at the time.

During the voyage, the subject of finding Letta’s parents became one of engrossing and increasing interest,—so much so, indeed, that even electricity and telegraph-cables sank into secondary importance. They planned, over and over again, the way in which they would set about making inquiries, and the various methods which they would adopt in pursuit of their end. They even took to guessing who Letta’s parents would turn out to be, and Sam went so far as to invent and relate romantic stories, in which the father and mother of Letta played a conspicuous part. He called them Colonel and Mrs Montmorenci for convenience, which Slagg reduced to Colonel and Mrs Monty, “for short.”

In all this Letta took great delight, chiefly because it held the conversation on that source of undying interest, “mamma,” and partly because she entered into the fun and enjoyed the romance of the thing, while, poor child, her hopeful spirit never for a moment doubted that in some form or other the romance would become a reality through Robin, on whom she had bestowed her highest affections—next, of course, to mamma.

On landing at Sarawak, Sam Shipton went direct to the Government offices to report the capture of the pirate vessel and to make inquiries as to Letta’s parents, leaving Robin and the others to watch the vessel.

“Isn’t it strange,” said John Johnson to Robin, as they leaned over the side and looked down into the clear water, “that a Englishman should become a Rajah, and get possession o’ this here country?”

“I can give you only a slight reply to that question,” replied Robin, “but Sam will enlighten you more than I can; he seems to be acquainted with the Rajah’s strange career. All I know is, that he is said to govern the country well.”

“Coorious,” said Johnson; “I shouldn’t like to settle down in sitch a nest o’ pirates. Hows’ever, every man to his taste, as Jack said when the shark swallowed his sou’-wester. D’ee think it’s likely, sir, that we’ll find out who the parents o’ poor Miss Letta is?”

Robin shook his head. “I’m not very hopeful. We have so little information to go upon—just one word,—Sarawak! Nevertheless, I don’t despair, and I’ll certainly not be beat without trying hard. But here comes Sam; he looks pleased. I think—I hope, he has good news for us.”

“I’ve got something, but not much,” replied Sam to the eager inquiries with which he was assailed. “The gentleman whom I saw knew nothing about a little girl having been kidnapped from this region within the last two or three years, but an old clerk or secretary, who heard us talking about it, came up scratching his nose with the feather of his quill, and humbly said that he had heard something about a girl disappearing at a fire somewhere, though he couldn’t recollect the name of the place, as he was ill at the time, besides being new to the country, but he thought there was a Malay, a drunken old fellow, living some five miles inland, who used to talk about something of the sort, and who had, he fancied, been in the service of the people whose house had been burned. But, altogether, he was very hazy on the subject.”

“Then we must go and ferret out this old man instantly,” said Robin, buttoning up his coat, as if about to commence the journey at once.

“Too late to-night, Robin,” said Sam; “restrain your impatience, my boy. You forget that it sometimes gets dark in these latitudes, and that there are no street lamps on the country roads.”

“True, true, Sam. And what said they about our capture?”

“That we must leave it in their hands at present; that they did not know exactly what the Rajah might have to say about it, but that he would be there himself in a few weeks, and decide the matter.”

"'Pon my word, that's cool," said Slagg, who came up at the moment; "an' suppose we wants to continue our voyage to England, or Indy, or Chiny?"

"If we do we must continue it by swimming," returned Sam; "but it matters little, for there is a steamer expected to touch here in a few days on her way to India, so we can take passage in her, having plenty of funds—thanks to the pirates!"

"It's all very well for you to boast of bein' rich," growled Stumps, "but I won't be able to afford it."

"Oh! yes you will," returned Robin with a laugh. "The Jews will advance you enough on your jewellery to pay your passage."

"Sarves you right for bein' so greedy," said Slagg.

The greed which Slagg referred to had been displayed by Stumps at the time the parcels of coin and precious stones were made up in the cavern for sudden emergency, as before mentioned. On that occasion each man had made up his own parcel, selecting such gems, trinkets, and coin from the pirate horde as suited his fancy. Unfortunately, the sight of so much wealth had roused in the heart of Stumps feelings of avarice, which heretofore had lain dormant, and he stuffed many glittering and superb pieces of jewellery into his bag in a secretive manner, as if half ashamed of his new sensations, and half afraid that his right to them might be disputed.

Afterwards, on the voyage to Borneo, when the bags were emptied and their costly contents examined, it was discovered that many of Stumps's most glittering gems were mere paste—almost worthless—although some of them, of course, were valuable. Stumps was much laughed at, and in a private confabulation of his comrades, it was agreed that they would punish him by contrasting their own riches with his glittering trash, but that at last they would give him a share which would make all the bags equal. This deceptive treatment, however, wrought more severely on Stumps than they had expected, and roused not only jealous but revengeful feelings in his breast.

Next morning, Sam and Robin set off with Letta to search for the old Malay, leaving their comrades in charge of the vessel.

There is something inexpressibly delightful to the feelings in passing through the glades and thickets of tropical forests and plantations after a long sea voyage. The nostrils seem to have been specially prepared, by long abstinence from sweet smells, to appreciate the scents and odours of aromatic plants and flowers. The soft shade of foliage, the refreshing green, and the gay colours everywhere, fill the eye with pleasure, not less exquisite than that which fills the ears from the warblings and chatterings of birds, the gentle tones of domestic animals, and the tinkling of rills. The mere solidity of the land, under foot, forms an element of pleasure after the tossings of the restless sea, and all the sweet influences put together tend to rouse in the heart a shout of joy and deep gratitude for a world so beautiful, and for powers so sensitively capable of enjoying it.

Especially powerful were the surrounding influences on our three friends as they proceeded, mile after mile, into the country, and little wonder, for eyes, and nostrils, and ears, which had of late drunk only of the blue heavens and salt sea and the music of the wind, naturally gloated over a land which produces sandal-wood, cinnamon, turmeric, ginger, benzoin, camphor, nutmeg, and a host of other gums and spices; a land whose shades are created by cocoa-nut palms, ebony, banana, bread-fruit, gutta-percha, upas, sesamum, and a vast variety of other trees and shrubs, the branches of which are laden with fruits, and flowers, and paroquets, and monkeys.

Little Letta's heart was full to overflowing, so much so that she could scarcely speak while walking along holding Robin's hand. But there was more than mere emotion in her bosom—memory was strangely busy in her brain, puzzling her with dreamy recognitions both as to sights and sounds.

"It's so like home!" she murmured once, looking eagerly round.

"Is it?" said Robin with intense interest. "Look hard at it, little one; do you recognise any object that used to be in your old home?"

The child shook her head sadly. "No, not exactly—everything is so like, and—and yet not like, somehow."

They came just then upon a clearing among sugar-cane, in the midst of which stood a half-ruined hut, quite open in front and thatched with broad leaves. On a bench near the entrance was seated an old grey-haired Malay man with a bottle beside him. Nearer to the visitors a young girl was digging in the ground.

“That’s the old Malay, for certain,” said Sam; “see, the old rascal has gone pretty deep already into the bottle. Ask the girl, Letta, what his name is.”

Sam did not at first observe that the child was trembling very much and gazing eagerly at the old man. He had to repeat the question twice before she understood him, and then she asked the girl, without taking her eyes off the old man.

“Who is he?” responded the girl in the Malay tongue, “why, that’s old Georgie—drunken Georgie.”

She had scarcely uttered the words when Letta uttered a wild cry, ran to the old man, leaped into his arms, and hugged him violently.

The man was not only surprised but agitated. He loosened the child’s hold so as to be able to look at her face.

“Oh, Georgie, Georgie!” she cried almost hysterically, “don’t you know me—don’t you know Letta?”

Georgie replied by uttering a great shout of mingled astonishment and joy, as he clasped the child in his arms. Then, setting her down and holding her at arm’s-length, he cried in remarkably broken English—

“Know you! W’at? Vous hold nuss—hold Georgie—not know Miss Letty. Ho! Miss Letty! my hold ’art’s a-busted a’most! But you’s come back. T’ank do Lor’! Look ’ere, Miss Letty.” (He started up, put the child down, and, with sudden energy seized the bottle of ruin by the neck.) “Look ere, yous oftin say to me afore you hoed away, ‘Geo’gie, do, do give up d’inkin’,’—you ’members?”

“No, I don’t remember,” said Letta, smiling through her tears.

“Ho! yes, but you said it—bery often, an’ me was used to say, ‘Yes, Miss Letty’—de hold hippercrit!—but I didn’t gib ’im up. I d’ink away wuss dan ebber. But now—but now—but now,” (he danced round, each time whirling the bottle above his head), “me d’ink no more—nebber—nebber—nebber more.”

With a mighty swing the old man sent the rum-bottle, like a rocket, up among the branches of an ebony-tree, where it was shattered to atoms, and threw an

eaves-dropping monkey almost into fits by raining rum and broken glass upon its inquisitive head.

When the excitement of the meeting had somewhat subsided, Letta suddenly said, “But where is mamma? Oh! take me to mamma, Georgie.”

The old man’s joy instantly vanished, and Letta stood pale and trembling before him, pressing her little hands to her breast, and not daring, apparently, to ask another question.

“Not dead?” she said at length in a low whisper.

“No—no—Miss Letty,” replied the man hastily, “Ho! no, not dead, but goed away; nigh broked her heart when she losted you; git berry sick; t’ought she was go for die, but she no die. She jis turn de corner and come round, an’ when she git bedder she hoed away.”

“Where did she go to?” asked Robin, anxiously.

“To Bumby,” said old George.

“To where?”

“Bumby.”

“I suppose you mean Bombay?” said Sam.

“Yes, yes—an’ me say Bumby.”

“Is she alive and well?” asked Robin.

“Don’ know,” replied old George, shaking his head; “she no write to hold Geo’gie. Nigh two years since she goed away.”

When the excitement of this meeting began to subside, Sam Shipton took the old Malay aside, and, after prolonged conversation, learned from him the story, of which the following is the substance.

Mrs Langley was the widow of a gentleman who had died in the service of Rajah Brooke. Several years before—he could not say exactly how many—the widow

had retired with her only child, Letta, to a little bungalow on a somewhat out-of-the-way part of the coast which Mr Langley used to be fond of going to, and called his "shooting-box." This had been attacked one night by Labuan pirates, who, after taking all that was valuable, set fire to the house. Mrs Langley had escaped by a back door into the woods with her old man-servant, George. She had rushed at the first alarm to Letta's bed, but the child was not there. Letta had been awake, had heard the advance of the pirate crew, and had gone into a front room to see who was coming. Supposing that old George must have taken charge of the child, and hearing him calling to her to come away quickly, the widow ran out at the back door as the pirates entered by the front. Too late she found that George had not the child, and she would have returned to the house, regardless of consequences, if George had not forcibly restrained her. When George returned at daybreak, he found the house a smouldering ruin, the pirates gone, and Letta nowhere to be found.

The shock threw Mrs Langley into a violent fever. She even lost her reason for a time, and when at last she was restored to some degree of health, she went away to Bombay without saying to any one what were her intentions. She could never entirely forgive old George for having prevented her returning to the house to share the fate of her child, and left Sarawak without bidding him farewell, though, as old George himself pathetically remarked, "Me couldn't 'elp it, you knows. De scoundrils kill missis if she goed back, an' dat doos no good to Miss Letty."

This was all the information that could be obtained about Mrs Langley, and on the strength of it Sam and Robin resolved to proceed to Bombay by the first opportunity. But their patience was severely tried, for many months elapsed ere they obtained berths in a vessel bound direct to Bombay.

Of course Jim Slagg determined to go with them, and so did Stumps, though a slight feeling of coldness had begun to manifest itself in that worthy's manner ever since the episode of the division of jewels. John Johnson, however, made up his mind to take service with the Rajah, and help to exterminate the nests of pirates with which those seas were infested.

"Depend upon it, sir," said Johnson to Robin at parting, "that you'll turn out somethin' or other afore long. As I said to our stooard on the night that you was born, 'Stooard,' says I, 'take my word for it, that there babby what has just been launched ain't agoin' under hatches without makin' his mark somehow

an' somewheres,' an' you've begun to make it, sir, a'ready, an' you'll go on to make it, as sure as my name's John Johnson."

"I'm gratified by your good opinion," replied Robin, with a laugh. "All I can say is, that whatever mark I make, I hope may be a good one."

Poor Robin had little ambition at that time to make any kind of mark for himself on the world. His one desire—which had grown into a sort of passion—was to find Letta's mother. Nearly all his thoughts were concentrated on that point, and so great was his personal influence on his comrades, that Sam and Slagg had become almost as enthusiastic about it as himself, though Stumps remained comparatively indifferent.

Chapter Twenty Two

Bombay—Where Stumps comes to Grief

Once again we must beg the patient reader to skip with us over time and space, until we find ourselves in the great city of Bombay.

It is a great day for Bombay. Natives and Europeans alike are unusually excited. Something of an unwonted nature is evidently astir. Down at the sea the cause of the excitement is explained, for the Great Eastern steam-ship has just arrived, laden with the telegraph cable which is to connect England with her possessions in the East. The streets and quays are crowded with the men of many nations and various creeds, to say nothing of varied costume. Turbans and chimney-pots salaam to each other, and fezzes nod to straw hats and wide-awakes. Every one is more than usually sympathetic, for all have their minds, eyes, and hopes, more or less, centred on the "big ship," with her unique and precious cargo.

But it is with neither the Great Eastern nor the people—not even with the cable—that we have to do just now. Removing our eyes from such, we fix them and our attention on a very small steamer which lies alongside one of the wharves, and shows evidence of having been severely handled by winds and waves.

At the time we direct attention to her, a few passengers were landing from this vessel, and among them were our friends, Sam Shipton, Robin Wright, Jim Slagg, John Shanks, alias Stumps, and Letta Langley. Most of the passengers had luggage of some sort, but our friends possessed only a small bag each, slung over their shoulders. A letter from the authorities of Sarawak certified that they were honest men.

"Now, Robin," said Sam, as they pushed through the crowds, "there seems to me something auspicious in our arriving about the same time with the Great Eastern, and I hope something may come of it, but our first business is to make inquiries for Mrs Langley. We will therefore go and find the hotel to which we have been recommended, and make that our head-quarters while we are engaged in our search."

“Can I lend you a hand, Mr Shipton?” asked Slagg, who had become, as it were, irresistibly more respectful to Robin and Sam since coming among civilised people.

“No, Slagg; our mission is too delicate to admit of numbers. If we require your services we’ll let you know.”

“Ah! I see—too many cooks apt to spoil the broth. Well, my mission will be to loaf about and see Bombay. You and I will pull together, Stumps.”

“No,” said Stumps, to the surprise of his companions, “I’ve got a private mission of my own—at least for this evening.”

“Well, please yourself, Stumpy,” said Slagg with a good-humoured laugh, “you never was the best o’ company, so I won’t break my heart.”

At the hotel to which they had been recommended two rooms were engaged,—a small single room for Letta, and one with two beds and a sofa for themselves.

Having breakfasted and commended Letta to the landlady’s care, Sam and Robin sallied forth together, while Slagg and Stumps went their separate ways, having appointed to meet again in the evening for supper.

We will follow the fortunes of Mr John Shanks. That rather vacant and somewhat degenerate youth, having his precious bag slung from his shoulders, and his left arm round it for further security, sauntered forth, and began to view the town. His viewing it consisted chiefly in looking long and steadily at the shop windows of the principal streets. There was a slight touch of cunning, however, in his expression, for he had rid himself, cleverly as he imagined, of his comrades, and meant to dispose of some of the contents of his bag to the best advantage, without letting them know the result.

In the prosecution of his deep-laid plans, Stumps attracted the attention of a gentleman with exceedingly black eyes and hair, a hook nose, and rather seedy garments. This gentleman followed Stumps with great care for a considerable time, watched him attentively, seemed to make up his mind about him, and finally ran violently against him.

“Oh! I do beg your pardon, sir. I am so sorry,” he said in a slightly foreign accent, with an expression of earnest distress on his not over-clean

countenance, “so very, very, sorry; it was a piece of orange peel. I almost fell; but for your kind assistance I should have been down and, perhaps, broke my legs. Thank you, sir; I do hope I have not hurt you against the wall. Allow me to dust your sleeve.”

“Oh! you’ve done me no damage, old gen’l’man,” said Stumps, rather flattered by the man’s attention and urbanity. “I’m all right; I ain’t so easy hurt. You needn’t take on so.”

“But I cannot help take on so,” returned the seedy man, with an irresistibly bland smile, “it is so good of you to make light of it, yet I might almost say you saved my life, for a fall to an elderly man is always very dangerous. Will you not allow me to give my benefactor a drink? See, here is a shop.”

Stumps chanced to be very hot and thirsty at the time; indeed he had been meditating some such indulgence, and fell into the trap at once. Accepting the offer with a “well, I don’t mind if I do,” he entered the drinking saloon and sat down, while his new friend called for brandy and water.

“You have come from a long voyage, I see,” said the seedy man, pulling out a small case and offering Stumps a cigar.

“How d’ee know that?” asked Stumps bluntly.

“Because I see it in your bronzed face, and, excuse me, somewhat threadbare garments.”

“Oh! as to that, old man, I’ve got tin enough to buy a noo rig out, but I’m in no hurry.”

He glanced unintentionally at his bag as he spoke, and the seedy man glanced at it too—intentionally. Of course Stumps’s glance let the cat out of the bag!

“Come,” said the stranger, when the brandy was put before them, “drink—drink to—to the girls we left behind us.”

“I left no girl behind me,” said Stumps.

“Well then,” cried the seedy man, with irresistible good humour, “let us drink success to absent friends and confusion to our foes.”

This seemed to meet the youth's views, for, without a word of comment, he drained his glass nearly to the bottom.

"Ha! that's good. Nothin' like brandy and water on a hot day."

"Except brandy and water on a cold day, my dear," returned the Jew—for such he was; "there is not much to choose between them. Had you not better take off your bag? it incommodes you in so narrow a seat. Let me help—No?"

"You let alone my hag," growled Stumps angrily, with a sudden clutch at it.

"Waiter! bring a light. My cigar is out," said the Jew, affecting not to observe Stumps's tone or manner. "It is strange," he went on, "how, sometimes, you find a bad cigar—a very bad cigar—in the midst of good ones. Yours is going well, I think."

"Well enough," answered Stumps, taking another pull at the brandy and water.

The seedy man now launched out into a pleasant light discourse about Bombay and its ways, which highly interested his poor victim. He made no further allusion to the bag, Stumps's behaviour having betrayed all he required to know, namely, that its contents were valuable.

Soon the brandy began to take effect on Stumps, and, as he was unaccustomed to such potent drink besides being unused to self-restraint, he would speedily have made himself a fit subject for the care of the police, which would not have suited his new friend at all. When, therefore, Stumps put out his hand to grasp his tumbler for another draught, his anxious friend inadvertently knocked it over, and then begged his pardon profusely. Before Stumps could decide whether to call for another glass at the risk of having to pay for it himself, the Jew pointed to a tall, sallow-faced man who sat in a corner smoking and reading a newspaper.

"Do you see him!" he asked, in a low mysterious whisper.

"Yes; who is he? what about him?" asked the youth in a similar whisper.

"He's an opium-smoker."

“Is he?” said Stumps with a vacant stare. “What’s that?”

Upon this text the seedy man delivered a discourse on the pleasures of opium-smoking, which quite roused the interest and curiosity of his hearer.

“But is it so very nice to smoke opium?” he asked, after listening for some time.

“Nice, my dear? I should think it is—very nice, but very wrong—oh! very wrong. Perhaps we ought not even to speak about it.”

“Nonsense!” said the now half-tipsy lad with an air of determination. “I should like to try it. Come, you know where I could have a pipe. Let’s go.”

“Not for worlds,” said the man with a look of remonstrance.

“Oh, yes you will,” returned Stumps, rising.

“Well, you are a wilful man, and if you will I suppose you must,” said the Jew.

He rose with apparent reluctance, paid the reckoning, and led his miserable victim into one of the numerous dens of iniquity which exist in the lowest parts of that city. There he furnished the lad with a pipe of opium, and, while he was in the state of semi-stupor resulting therefrom, removed his bag of treasure, which he found, to his delight, contained a far richer prize than he had anticipated, despite the quantity of trash with which it was partly filled.

Having secured this, he waited until Stumps had partially recovered, and then led him into one of the most crowded thoroughfares.

“Now, my boy,” he said affectionately, “I think you are much better. You can walk alone.”

“I should think I could,” he replied, indignantly shaking off the man’s grasp. “Wh–what d’ee take me for?”

He drew his hand across his eyes, as if to clear away the cloud that still oppressed him, and stared sternly before him, then he stared, less sternly, on either side, then he wheeled round and stared anxiously behind him. Then clapping his left hand quickly to his side, he became conscious that his bag

was gone, and that his late friend had taken an abrupt departure without bidding him farewell.

Chapter Twenty Three

Stumps in Despair—And Bombay in Raptures

When Mr John Shanks realised the full extent of his loss, his first impulse was to seize hold of the nearest passer-by and strangle him; his next, to dash down a narrow street close beside him in pursuit of some one; his next, to howl “stop thief!” and “murder!” and his next, to stare into a shop window in blank dismay, and meditate.

Of these various impulses, he gave way only to the last. His meditations, however, were confused and unsatisfactory. Turning from them abruptly, he hurried along the street at a furious walk, muttering, “I’ll go an’ tell Slagg.” Then, pausing abruptly, “No, I won’t, I’ll go an’ inform the pleece.”

Under this new impulse he hurried forward again, jostling people as he went, and receiving a good deal of rough-handling in return. Presently he came to a dead halt, and with knitted brows and set teeth, hissed, “I’ll go and drown myself.”

Full of this intention he broke into a run, but, not being acquainted with the place, found it necessary to ask his way to the port. This somewhat sobered him, but did not quite change his mind, so that when he eventually reached the neighbourhood of the shipping, he was still going at a quick excited walk. He was stopped by a big and obviously eccentric sea-captain, or mate, who asked him if he happened to know of any active stout young fellow who wanted to ship in a tight little craft about to sail for old England.

“No, I don’t,” said Stumps, angrily.

“Come now, think again,” said the skipper, in no degree abashed, and putting on a nautical grin, which was meant for a winning smile. “I’m rather short-handed; give good wages; have an amiable temper, a good craft, and a splendid cook. You’re just the active spirited fellow that I want. You’ll ship now, eh?”

“No, I won’t,” said Stumps, sulkily, endeavouring to push past.

“Well, well, no offence. Keep an easy mind, and if you should chance to change it, just come and see me, Captain Bounce, of the Swordfish. There she lies, in all her beauty, quite a picture. Good-day.”

The eccentric skipper passed on, but Stumps did not move. He stood there with his eyes riveted on the pavement, and his lips tightly compressed. Evidently the drowning plan had been abandoned for something else—something that caused him to frown, then to smile, then to grow slightly pale, and then to laugh somewhat theatrically. While in this mood he was suddenly pushed to one side by some one who said—

"The track's made for walkin' on, not standin', young—Hallo!"

It was Slagg who had thus roughly encountered his mate.

"Why, Stumps, what's the matter with yon?"

"Nothing."

"Where 'ave you bin to?"

"Nowhere."

"Who's bin a-frightenin' of you!"

"Nobody."

"Nothin', nowhere, an' nobody," repeated his friend; "that's what I calls a coorious combination for a man who's as white as a sheet one moment, and as red as a turkey-cock the next."

"Well, Slagg," said Stumps, recovering himself a little, "the fact is, I've been taken in and robbed."

Hereupon he related all the circumstances of his late adventure to his astonished and disgusted comrade, who asserted roundly that he was a big booby, quite unfit to take care of himself.

"Hows'ever, we must do the best we can for you," he continued, "so come along to the police-office."

Information of the robbery was given, and inquiries instituted without delay, but without avail. Indeed the chief officer held out little hope of ultimate

success; nevertheless, Slagg endeavoured to buoy up his friend with assurances that they must surely get hold of the thief in the long-run.

“And if we don’t,” he said to Robin and Sam, during a private conversation on the subject that same night, “we must just give him each a portion of what we have, for the poor stoopid has shared our trials, and ought to share our luck.”

While Stumps was being thus fleeced in the lower part of the city, Robin and Sam had gone to make inquiries about Mrs Langley, and at the Government House they discovered a clerk who had formerly been at Sarawak, and had heard of the fire, the abduction of the little girl, and of Mrs Langley having afterwards gone to Bombay; but he also told them, to their great regret, that she had left for England six months before their arrival, and he did not know her address, or even the part of England to which she had gone.

“But,” continued the clerk, who was a very friendly fellow, “I’ll make inquiries, and let you know the result, if you leave me your address. Meanwhile you can amuse yourself by paying a visit to that wonderful ship, the Great Eastern, which has come to lay a submarine telegraph cable between this and Aden. Of course you have heard of her arrival—perhaps seen her.”

“O yes,” replied Robin. “We intend to visit her at once. She is an old acquaintance of mine, as I was in her when she laid the Atlantic cable in 1865. Does Captain Anderson still command her?”

“No,” answered the clerk, who seemed much interested in what Robin said. “She is now commanded by Captain Halpin.”

That evening Robin tried to console poor Letta in her disappointment at not finding her mother, and Sam sought to comfort Stumps for the loss of his treasure. Neither comforter was very successful. Letta wept in spite of Robin, and Stumps absolutely refused to be comforted!

Next day, however, the tears were dried, and Letta became cheery again in the prospect of a visit to the Great Eastern.

But Stumps was no better. Indeed he seemed worse, and flatly refused to accompany them on their trip, although all the world of Bombay was expected to go.

“Stumps, Stumps,

Down in the dumps!

Down in the dumps so low—O!”

Sang Jim Slagg as he waved his hand in farewell on quitting the hotel. “Good-bye, my boy, and get your spirits up before we return, if you can.”

“I’ll try,” replied Stumps with a grim smile.

The event which stirred the city of Bombay to its centre at this time was indeed a memorable one. The connecting of India with England direct by a deep-sea cable was a matter of the greatest importance, because the land telegraph which existed at the time was wretchedly worked, passing, as it did, through several countries, which involved translation and re-translation, besides subjecting messages to needless delay on the part of unbusiness-like peoples. In addition to the brighter prospects which the proposed cable was opening up, the presence of the largest ship that had ever yet been constructed was a point of overwhelming attraction, and so great were the crowds that went on board to see the marine wonder, that it was found somewhat difficult to carry on the necessary work of coaling and making preparations for the voyage.

“Robin,” said Sam, an they walked along with Letta between them, “I’ve just discovered that the agent of the Telegraph Construction and Maintenance Company is an old friend of mine. He has been busy erecting a cable landing-house on the shores of Back Bay, so we’ll go there first and get him to accompany us to the big ship.”

“Good,” said Robin, “if it is not too far for Letta to walk.”

The landing-house, which they soon reached, stood near to the “green” where the Bombay and Baroda Railway tumbled out its stream of cotton until the region became a very sea of bales. It was a little edifice with a thatched roof and venetian blinds, commanding a fine view of the whole of Back Bay, with Malabar Point to the right and the governor’s house imbedded in trees. Long lines of surf marked the position of ugly rocks which were visible at low water, but among these there was a pathway of soft sand marked off by stakes, along which the shore-end of the cable was to lie.

For the reception of the extreme end of the cable there was provided, in the cable-house, a testing table of solid masonry, with a wooden top on which the testing instruments were to stand; the great delicacy of these instruments rendering a fixed table indispensable.

When our friends reached the cable-house, native labourers, in picturesque Oriental costume, were busy thatching its roof or painting it blue, while some were screwing its parts together; for the house, with a view to future telegraphic requirements, was built so as to come to pieces for shipment to still more distant quarters of the globe.

Sam's friend could not go with him, he said, but he would introduce him to a young acquaintance among the working engineers who was going on with a party in half an hour or so. Accordingly, in a short time they were gliding over the bay, and ere long stood on the deck of the big ship.

"Oh, Letta!" said Robin, with a glitter of enthusiasm in his eyes, as he gazed round on the well-remembered deck, "it feels like meeting an old friend after a long separation."

"How nice!" said Letta.

This "how nice" of the child was, so to speak, a point of great attraction to our hero. She always accompanied it with a smile so full of sympathy, interest, and urbanity, that it became doubly significant on her lips. Letta was precocious. She had grown so rapidly in sympathetic capacity and intelligence, since becoming acquainted with her new friends, that Robin had gradually come to speak to her about his thoughts and feelings very much as he used to speak to cousin Madge when he was a boy.

"Yes," he continued, "I had forgotten how big she was, and she seems to me actually to have grown bigger. There never was a ship like her in the world. Such huge proportions, such a vast sweep of graceful lines. The chief difference that I observe is the coat of white paint they have given her. She seems to have been whitewashed from stem to stern. It was for the heat, I fancy."

"Yes, sir, it wor," said a bluff cable-man who chanced to overhear the remark, "an' if you wor in the tanks, you'd 'ave blessed Capt'n Halpin for wot he done. W'y, sir, that coat o' whitewash made a difference o' no less than eight degrees

in the cable-tanks the moment it was putt on. Before that we was nigh stooed alive. Arter that we've on'y bin baked."

"Indeed?" said Robin, but before he could say more the bluff cable-man had returned to his bakery.

"Just look here," he continued, turning again to Letta; "the great ships around us seem like little ones, by contrast, and the little ones like boats,—don't they?"

"Yes, and the boats like toys," said Letta, "and the people in them like dolls."

"True, little one, and yonder comes a toy steamer," said Sam, who had been contemplating the paying-out gear in silent admiration, "with some rather curious dolls on it."

"Oh!" exclaimed Letta, with great surprise, "look, Robin, look at the horses—just as if we were on shore!"

Among the many surprising things on board of the big ship, few were more striking for incongruity than the pair of grey carriage-horses, to which Letta referred, taking their morning exercise composedly up and down one side of the deck, with a groom at their heads.

The steamer referred to by Sam was one which contained a large party of Hindu and Parsee ladies and children who had come off to see the ship. These streamed into her in a bright procession, and were soon scattered about, making the decks and saloons like Eastern flower-beds with their many-coloured costumes—of red, pink, white, and yellow silks and embroideries, and bracelets, brooches, nose-rings, anklets, and other gold and silver ornaments.

The interest taken by the natives in the Great Eastern was naturally great, and was unexpectedly illustrated in the following manner. Captain Halpin, anticipating difficulties in the matter of coaling and otherwise carrying on the work of the expedition, had resolved to specify particular days for sight-seers, and to admit them by ticket, on which a small fee was charged—the sum thus raised to be distributed among the crew at the end of the voyage. In order to meet the convenience of the "upper ten" of English at Bombay, the charge at first was two rupees (about 4 shillings), and it was advertised that the ship would afterwards be thrown open at lower rates, but to the surprise of all, from an early hour on the two-rupee day the ship was beset by Parsees, Hindus, and

Mohammedans, so that eventually, on all sides—on the decks, the bridge, the paddle-boxes, down in the saloon, outside the cable-tanks, mixed up with the machinery, clustering round the huge red buoys, and at the door of the testing-room—the snowy robes, and strange head-dresses, bright costumes, brighter eyes, brown faces, and turbans far outnumbered the stiff and sombre Europeans. These people evidently regarded the Great Eastern as one of the wonders of the world. "The largest vessel ever seen in Bombay," said an enthusiastic Parsee, "used to be the Bates Family, of Liverpool, and now there she lies alongside of us looking like a mere jolly-boat."

While Sam and his friends were thus standing absorbed by the contemplation of the curious sights and sounds around them, one of the engineer staff, who had served on board during the laying of the 1866 Atlantic cable, chanced to pass, and, recognising Robin as an old friend, grasped and shook his hand warmly. Robin was not slow to return the greeting.

"Frank Hedley," he exclaimed, "why, I thought you had gone to California!"

"Robin Wright," replied the young engineer, "I thought you were dead!"

"Not yet," returned Robin; "I'm thankful to report myself alive and well."

"But you ought to be dead," persisted Frank, "for you've been mourned as such for nigh a couple of years. At least the vessel in which you sailed has never been heard of, and the last time I saw your family, not four months since, they had all gone into mourning for you."

"Poor mother!" murmured Robin, his eyes filling with tears, "but, please God, we shall meet again before long."

"Come—come down with me to the engine-room and have a talk about it," said Frank, "and let your friends come too."

Just as he spoke, one of the little brown-faced Mohammedan boys fixed his glittering eyes on an opening in the bulwarks of the ship, through which the water could be seen glancing brightly. That innate spirit of curiosity peculiar to small boys all the world over, induced him to creep partly through the opening and glance down at the sparkling fluid. That imperfect notion of balance, not infrequent in small boys, caused him to tip over and cleave the water with his head. His Mohammedan relatives greeted the incident with shrieks of alarm.

Robin, who had seen him tip over, being a good swimmer, and prompt to act, went through the same hole like a fish-torpedo, and caught the brown boy by the hair, as he rose to the surface with staring eyes, outspread fingers, and a bursting cry.

Rope-ends, life-buoys, and other things were flung over the side; oars were plunged; boats darted forward; fifty efforts at rescue were made in as many seconds, for there was wealth of aid at hand, and in a wonderfully brief space of time the brown boy was restored to his grateful friends, while Robin, enveloped in a suit of dry clothes much too large for him, was seated with his friend the engineer down among the great cranks, and wheels, and levers, of the regions below.

“It’s well the sharks weren’t on the outlook,” said Frank Hedley, as he brought forward a small bench for Letta, Sam, and Jim Slagg. “You won’t mind the oily smell, my dear,” he said to Letta.

“O no. I rather like it,” replied the accommodating child.

“It’s said to be fattening,” remarked Slagg, “even when taken through the nose.”

“Come now, let me hear all about my dear mother and the rest of them, Frank,” said Robin.

Frank began at once, and, for a considerable time, conversed about the sayings and doings of the Wright family, and of the world at large, and about the loss of the cable-ship; but gradually and slowly, yet surely, the minds and converse of the little party came round to the all-absorbing topic, like the needle to the pole.

“So, you’re actually going to begin to coal to-morrow?” said Sam.

“Yes, and we hope to be ready in a few days to lay the shore-end of the cable,” answered the young engineer.

“But have they not got land-lines of telegraph which work well enough?” asked Robin.

“Land-lines!” exclaimed Frank, with a look of contempt. “Yes, they have, and no doubt the lines are all right enough, but the people through whose countries

they pass are all wrong. Why, the Government lines are so frequently out of order just now, that their daily condition is reported on as if they were noble invalids. Just listen to this," (he caught up a very much soiled and oiled newspaper)—"'Telegraph Line Reports, Kurrachee, 2nd February, 6 p.m.—Cable communication perfect to Fao; Turkish line is interrupted beyond Semawali; Persian line interrupted beyond Shiraz.' And it is constantly like that—the telegraphic disease, though intermittent, is chronic. One can never be sure when the line may be unfit for duty. Sometimes from storms, sometimes from the assassination of the operators in wild districts through which the land wires pass, and sometimes from the destruction of lines out of pure mischief, the telegraph is often beaten by the mail."

"There seems, indeed, much need for a cable direct," said Sam, "which will make us independent of Turks, Persians, Arabs, and all the rest of them. By the way, how long is your cable?"

"The cable now in our tanks is 2375 nautical miles long, but our companion ships, the Hibernia, Chiltern, and Hawk, carry among them 1225 miles more, making a total of 3600 nautical miles, which is equal, as you know, to 4050 statute miles. This is to suffice for the communication between Bombay and Aden, and for the connecting of the Malta and Alexandria lines. They are now laying a cable between England, Gibraltar, and Malta, so that when all is completed there will be one line of direct submarine telegraph unbroken, except at Suez."

"Magnificent!" exclaimed Robin, "why, it won't be long before we shall be able to send a message to India and get a reply in the same day."

"In the same day!" cried Sam, slapping his thigh; "mark my words, as uncle Rik used to say, you'll be able to do that, my boy, within the same hour before long."

"Come, Sam, don't indulge in prophecy. It does not become you," said Robin. "By the way, Frank, what about uncle Rik? You have scarcely mentioned him."

"Oh! he's the same hearty old self-opinionated fellow as ever. Poor fellow, he was terribly cut up about your supposed death. I really believe that he finds it hard even to smile now, much less to laugh. As for Madge, she won't believe that you are lost—at least she won't admit it, though it is easy to see that anxiety has told upon her."

“I wonder how my poor old mother has took it,” said Slagg, pathetically. “But she’s tough, an’ can’t be got to believe things easy. She’ll hold out till I turn up, I dessay, and when I present myself she’ll say, ‘I know’d it!’”

“But to return to the cable,” said Sam, with an apologetic smile. “Is there any great difference between it and the old ones?”

“Not very much. We have found, however, that a little marine wretch called the teredo attacks hemp so greedily that we’ve had to invent a new compound wherewith to coat it, namely, ground flint or silica, pitch, and tar, which gives the teredo the toothache, I suppose, for it turns him off effectually. We have also got an intermediate piece of cable to affix between the heavy shore-end and the light deep-sea portion. There are, of course, several improvements in the details of construction, but essentially it is the same as the cables you have already seen, with its seven copper wires covered with gutta-percha, and other insulating and protecting substances.”

“It’s what I calls a tremendious undertakin’,” said Slagg.

“It is indeed,” assented Frank, heartily, for like all the rest of the crew, from the captain downwards, he was quite enthusiastic about the ship and her work. “Why, when you come to think of it, it’s unbelievable. I sometimes half expect to waken up and find it is all a dream. Just fancy. We left England with a freight of 21,000 tons. The day is not long past when I thought a ship of 1000 tons a big one; what a mite that is to our Leviathan, as she used to be called. We had 5512 tons of cable, 3824 tons of fuel, 6499 tons of coal and electric apparatus and appliances when we started; the whole concern, ship included, being valued at somewhere about two millions sterling. It may increase your idea of the size and needs of our little household when I tell you that the average quantity of coal burned on the voyage out has been 200 tons a day.”

“It’s a positive romance in facts and figures,” said Sam.

“A great reality, you should have said,” remarked Robin.

And so, romancing on this reality of facts and figures in many a matter-of-fact statement and figurative rejoinder, they sat there among the great cranks, and valves, and pistons, and levers, until the declining day warned them that it was time to go ashore.

Chapter Twenty Four

Shows the Dreadful Depravity of Man, and the Amazing Effects of Electrical Treatment on Man and Beast

Meanwhile Stumps went back to the hotel to brood over his misfortunes, and hatch out the plan which his rather unfertile brain had devised.

Seated on a chair, with his elbows on his knees, his chin in his hands, and his nails between his teeth, he stared at a corner of the room, nibbled and meditated. There was nothing peculiar about the corner of the room at which he stared, save that there stood in it a portmanteau which Sam had bought the day before, and in which were locked his and Robin's bags of treasure.

"If I could only manage to get away by rail to—to—anywhere, I'd do it," he muttered.

Almost simultaneously he leaped from his chair, reddened, and went to look-out at the window, for some one had tapped at the door.

"Come in," he said with some hesitation.

"Gen'l'man wants you, sir," said a waiter, ushering in the identical captain who had stopped Stumps on the street that day.

"Excuse me, young man," he said, taking a chair without invitation, "I saw you enter this hotel, and followed you."

"Well, and what business had you to follow me?" demanded Stumps, feeling uneasy.

"Oh, none—none at all, on'y I find I must sail this afternoon, an' I've took a fancy to you, an' hope you've made up your mind to ship with me."

Stumps hesitated a moment.

"Well, yes, I have," he said, with sudden resolution. "When must I be on board?"

“At four, sharp,” said the captain, rising. “I like promptitude. All right. Don’t fail me.”

“I won’t,” said Stumps, with emphasis.

When the captain was gone, Stumps went nervously to the door and peeped out. Nothing was visible, save the tail of a waiter’s retiring coat. Cautiously shutting and bolting the door, he took up a strong walking-cane, and, after some difficulty, forced the lock of the portmanteau therewith. Abstracting from it the two bags containing the treasures of his mates Robin and Sam, he wrapped them in a handkerchief, and put them into a canvas bag, which he had purchased for the reception of his own wardrobe. Taking this under his arm he went quietly out of the hotel into the street and disappeared.

He was closely followed by a waiter who had taken the liberty of peeping through the key-hole when he committed the robbery, and who never lost sight of him till he had seen him embark in a vessel in the harbour, named the Fairy Queen, and heard him give his name as James Gibson. Then he returned to the hotel, giving vent to his sentiments in the following soliloquy—“Of course it is no business of yours, John Ribbon, whether men choose to open their comrades’ portmantys with keys or walkin’-sticks, but it is well for you to note the facts that came under your observation, and to reveal them to them as they concern—for a consideration.”

But the waiter did not at that time obtain an opportunity to reveal his facts to those whom they concerned, for Sam, Robin, Slagg, and Letta did not return to the hotel, but sent a pencil note to Stumps instead, to the effect that they had received an invitation from a telegraph official to pay him a visit at his residence up country; that, as he was to carry them off in his boat to the other side of the bay, they would not have an opportunity of calling to bid him, Stumps, a temporary farewell; that he was to make himself as happy as he could in Bombay during their absence, keep on the rooms at the hotel, and settle the bills, and that all expenses would be paid by them on their return.

As the youth by whom this message was sent knew nothing about the senders or whither they had gone, and as Stumps did not again make his appearance, the landlord seized the few things that had been left by the supposed runaways.

The invitation that had thus suddenly been given and accepted, was received from a gentleman named Redpath, an official in the Indian telegraph service. They had been introduced to him on board of the Great Eastern by Sam's friend, Frank Hedley, and he became so interested in their adventurous career that he begged them to visit his bungalow in a rather out-of-the-way part of the country, even if only for a few days.

"It won't take us long to get there," he said, "for the railway passes within thirty miles of it, and I'll drive you over as pretty a piece of country as you could wish to see. I have a boat alongside, and must be off at once. Do come."

"But there are so many of us," objected Sam Shipton.

"Pooh! I could take a dozen more of you," returned the hospitable electrician; "and my wife rejoices—absolutely rejoices—when I bring home unexpected company."

"What a pattern she must be," said Slagg; "but excuse me, sir, since you are so good as to invite us all, may I make so bold as to ax if you've got a servants'-'all?"

"Well, I've not got exactly that," replied Redpath, with an amused look; "but I've got something of the same sort for my servants. Why do you ask?"

"Because, sir, I never did sail under false colours, and I ain't agoin' to begin now. I don't set up for a gentleman, and though circumstances has throwed me along wi' two of 'em, so that we've bin hail-feller-well-met for a time, I ain't agoin' to condescend to consort wi' them always. If you've got a servants'-'all, I'll come and thank 'ee; if not, I'll go an' keep company wi' Stumps till Mr Shipton comes back."

"Very well, my good fellow, then you shall come, and we'll find you a berth in the servants'-hall," said Redpath, laughing.

"But what about Stumps?" said Robin; "he will wonder what has come over us. Could we not return to the hotel first?"

"Impossible," said the electrician; "I have not time to wait. My leave has expired. Besides, you can write him a note."

So the note was written, as we have shown, and the party set out on their inland journey.

Before starting, however, Frank Hedley, the engineer, took Sam and Robin aside.

“Now, think over what I have mentioned,” he said, “and make up your minds. You see, I have some influence at head-quarters, and am quite sure I can get you both a berth on board to replace the men who have left us. I think I can even manage to find a corner for Slagg, if he is not particular.”

“We shall only be too happy to go if you can manage it,” replied Robin; “but Stumps, what about him? We can’t leave Stumps behind, you know.”

“Well. I’ll try to get Stumps smuggled aboard as a stoker or something, if possible, but to say truth, I don’t feel quite so sure about that matter,” replied Frank.

“But shall we have time for this trip if you should prove successful?” asked Sam.

“Plenty of time,” returned his friend; “coaling is a slow as well as a dirty process, and to ship thousands of tons is not a trifle. I daresay we shall be more than a week here before the shore-end is fixed and all ready to start.”

“Well then, Frank,” said Sam; “adieu, till we meet as shipmates.”

The railway soon conveyed our adventurers a considerable distance into the interior of the country.

At the station where Redpath and his guests got out, a vehicle was procured sufficiently large to hold them all, and the road over which they rapidly passed bore out the character which the electrician had given to it. Every species of beautiful scenery presented itself—from the low scrubby plain, with clumps of tropical plants here and there, to undulating uplands and hills.

“You must have some difficulties in your telegraph operations here,” said Robin to Redpath, “with which we have not to contend in Europe.”

“A few,” replied his friend, “especially in the wilder parts of the East. Would you believe it,” he added, addressing himself to Letta, “that wild animals frequently give us great trouble? Whenever a wild pig, a tiger, or a buffalo, takes it into his head to scratch himself, he uses one of our telegraph-posts if he finds it handy. Elephants sometimes butt them down with their thick heads, by way of pastime, I suppose, for they are not usually fond of posts and wire as food. Then bandicoots and porcupines burrow under them and bring them to the ground, while kites and crows sit on the wires and weigh them down. Monkeys, as usual, are most mischievous, for they lay hold of the wires with tails and paws, swinging from one to another, and thus form living conductors, which tend to mix and confuse the messages.”

“But does not the electricity hurt the monkeys?” asked Letta.

“O no! It does them no injury; and birds sitting on the wires are never killed by it, as many people suppose. The electricity passes them unharmed, and keeps faithfully to the wire. If a monkey, indeed, had a tail long enough to reach from the wire to the ground, and were to wet itself thoroughly, it might perhaps draw off some of the current, but fortunately the tails of monkeys are limited. We often find rows of birds lying dead below our telegraph lines, but these have been killed by flying against them, the wires being scarcely visible among trees.”

“And what about savages, sir?” asked Jim Slagg, who had become deeply interested in the telegraphist’s discourse; “don’t they bother you sometimes?”

“Of course they do,” replied Redpath, with a laugh, “and do us damage at times, though we bother them too, occasionally.”

“How do you manage that, sir?” asked Jim.

“Well, you must know we have been much hindered in our work by the corruptness and stupidity of Eastern officials in many places, and by the destructive propensities and rapacity of Kurds and wandering Arabs and semi-savages, who have found our posts in the desert good for firewood and our wires for arrow-heads or some such implements. Some of our pioneers in wild regions have been killed by robbers when laying the lines, while others have escaped only by fighting for their lives. Superstition, too, has interfered with us sadly, though sometimes it has come to our aid.”

“There was one eccentric Irishman—one of the best servants I ever had,” continued Redpath, “who once made a sort of torpedo arrangement which achieved wonderful success. The fellow is with me still, and it is a treat to hear Flinn, that’s his name, tell the story, but the fun of it mostly lies in the expressive animation of his own face, and the richness of his brogue as he tells it.

“‘I was away in the dissert somewheres,’ he is wont to say, ‘I don’t rightly remimber where, for my brain’s no better than a sive at geagraphy, but it was a wild place, anyhow—bad luck to it! Well, we had sot up a line o’ telegraph in it, an’ wan the posts was stuck in the ground not far from a pool o’ wather where the wild bastes was used to dhrink of a night, an’ they tuk a mighty likin’ to this post, which they scrubbed an’ scraped at till they broke it agin an’ agin. Och! it’s me heart was broke intirely wi’ them. At last I putt me brains in steep an’ got up an invintion. It wouldn’t be aisy to explain it, specially to onscientific people. No matter, it was an electrical arrangement, which I fixed to the post, an’ bein’ curious to know how it would work, I wint down to the pool an’ hid mesilf in a hole of a rock, wid a big stone over me an ferns all round about. I tuk me rifle, av coorse, just for company, you know, but not to shoot, for I’m not bloodthirsty, by no means. Well, I hadn’t bin long down whin a rustle in the laves towld me that somethin’ was comin’, an’ sure enough down trotted a little deer—as purty a thing as you could wish to see. It took a dhrink, tremblin’ all the time, an’ there was good cause, for another rustlin’ was heard. Off wint the deer, just as a panther o’ some sort jumped out o’ the jungle an’ followed it. Bad luck go wid ye says I; but I’d scarce said it whin a loud crashing in the jungle towld me a buffalo or an elephant was comin’. It was an elephant. He wint an’ took a long pull at the pool. After that he goes straight to the post. Ha! says I, it’s an owld friend o’ yours, I see. When he putt his great side agin’ it, for the purpose of scratchin’, he got a shock from my electrical contrivance that caused his tail to stand upon end, and the hairs at its point to quiver. Wid a grunt he stood back an’ gave the post a look o’ surprise, as much as to say, Did ye do that a-purpose, ye spalpeen? Then he tried it again, an’ got another shock that sot up his dander, for he twisted his long nose round the post, goin’ to pull it down, no doubt, but he got another shock on the nose that made him squeal an’ draw back. Then he lowered his great head for a charge. It’s all over wid ye now, me post, says I; but the baste changed its mind, and wint off wid its tail an’ trunk in the air, trumpetin’ as if it had got the toothache. Well, after that nothin’ came for some time, and I think I must have gone off to slape, for I was awoke by a most tremendious roar. Lookin’ up I saw a tiger sprawlin’ on his back beside the post! Av coorse the shock wasn’t enough to have knocked

the baste over. I suppose it had tripped in the surprise. Anyhow it jumped up and seized the post with claws an' teeth, whin av coorse it got another shock that caused it to jump back about six yards, with its tail curled, its hair all on end, all its claws out, an' its eyes blazin'. You seem to feel it, says I—into meself, for fear he'd hear me. He didn't try it again, but wint away into the bush like a war-rocket. After that, five or six little wild pigs came down, an' the smallest wan wint straight up to the post an' putt his nose to it. He drew back wid a jerk, an' gave a scream that seemed to rend all his vitals. You don't like it, thinks I; but, faix, it looked as if I was wrong, for he tried it again. Another shock he got, burst himself a'most wid a most fearful yell, an' bolted. His brothers didn't seem to understand it quite. They looked after him in surprise. Then the biggest wan gave a wriggle of his curly tail, an' wint to the post as if to inquire what was the matter. When he got it on the nose the effect was surprisin'. The curl of his tail came straight out, an' it quivered for a minute all over, wid its mouth wide open. The screech had stuck in his throat, but it came out at last so fierce that the other pigs had to join in self-defence. I stuck my fingers in my ears and shut me eyes. When I opened them again the pigs were gone. It's my opinion they were all dissolved, like the zinc plates in a used-up battery; but I can't prove that. Well, while I was cogitatin' on the result of my little invintion, what should walk out o' the woods but a man! At first I tuk him for a big monkey, for the light wasn't very good, but he had a gun on his shoulder, an' some bits o' clothes on, so I knew him for a human. Like the rest o' them, he wint up to the post an' looked at it, but didn't touch it. Then he came to the pool an' tuk a dhrink, an' spread out his blanket, an' began to arrange matters for spendin' the rest o' the night there. Av coorse he pulled out his axe, for he couldn't do widout fire to kape the wild bastes off. An' what does he do but go straight up to my post an' lift his axe for a good cut. Hallo! says I, pretty loud, for I was a'most too late. Whew! What a jump he gave—six futt if it was an inch. Whin he came down he staggered with his back agin the post. That was enough. The jump he tuk before was nothin' to what he did after. I all but lost sight of him among the branches. When he returned to the ground it was flat on his face he fell, an', rowlin' over his head, came up on his knees with a roar that putt the tigers and pigs to shame. Sarves you right, says I, steppin' out of my hole. Av coorse he thought I was a divil of some sort, for he turned as white in the face as a brown man could, an' bolted without so much as sayin' farewell. The way that nigger laid his legs along the ground was a caution. Ostriches are a joke to it. I picked up his blanket an' fetched it home as a keepsake, an' from that day to this the telegraph-posts have been held sacred by man an' baste all over that part of the country.'"

“I’d like to meet wi’ the feller that told that yarn,” said Jim Slagg.

“So should I,” said Letta, laughing.

“You shall both have your wish, for there he stands,” said Redpath, as they dashed round the corner of a bit of jungle, on the other side of which lay as pretty a bungalow as one could wish to see. A man-servant who had heard the wheels, was ready at the gate to receive the reins, while under the verandah stood a pretty little woman to receive the visitors. Beside her was a black nurse with a white baby.

“Here we are, Flinn,” said Redpath, leaping to the ground. “All well, eh?”

“Sure we’re niver anything else here, sor,” replied Flinn, with a modest smile.

“I’ve just been relating your electrical experiences to my friends,” said the master.

“Ah! now, it’s drawin’ the long bow you’ve been,” returned the man; “I see it in their face.”

“I have rather diluted the dose than otherwise,” returned Redpath. “Let me introduce Mr Slagg. He wishes to see Indian life in the ‘servants’-hall.’ Let him see it, and treat him well.”

“Yours to command,” said Flinn, with a nod as he led the horses away. “This way, Mr Slug.”

“Slagg, if you please, Mr Flinn,” said Jim. “The difference between a a an’ a u ain’t much, but the results is powerful sometimes.”

While Slagg was led away to the region of the bungalow appropriated to the domestics, his friends were introduced to pretty little Mrs Redpath, and immediately found themselves thoroughly at home under the powerful influence of Indian hospitality.

Although, being in the immediate neighbourhood of a veritable Indian jungle, it was natural that both Sam and Robin should wish to see a little sport among large game, their professional enthusiasm rose superior to their sporting tendencies, and they decided next day to accompany their host on a short trip

of inspection to a neighbouring telegraph station. Letta being made over to the care of the hostess, was forthwith installed as assistant nurse to the white baby, whom she already regarded as a delicious doll—so readily does female nature adapt itself to its appropriate channels.

Not less readily did Jim Slagg adapt himself to one of the peculiar channels of man's nature. Sport was one of Slagg's weaknesses, though he had enjoyed very little of it, poor fellow, in the course of his life. To shoot a lion, a tiger, or an elephant, was, in Slagg's estimation, the highest possible summit of earthly felicity. He was young, you see, at that time, and moderately foolish! But although he had often dreamed of such bliss, he had never before expected to be within reach of it. His knowledge of sport, moreover, was entirely theoretic. He knew indeed how to load a rifle and pull the trigger, but nothing more.

"You haven't got many tigers in these parts, I suppose?" he said to Flinn as they sauntered towards the house after seeing the electrical party off. He asked the question with hesitation, being impressed with a strange disbelief in tigers, except in a menagerie, and feeling nearly as much ashamed as if he had asked whether they kept elephants in the sugar-basin. To his relief Flinn did not laugh, but replied quite gravely—"Och! yes, we've got a few, but they don't often come nigh the house. We have to thravel a bit into the jungle, and camp out, whin we wants wan. I heard master say he'd have a try at 'em to-morrow, so you'll see the fun, for we've all got to turn out whin we go after tigers. If you're fond o' sport in a small way, howiver, I can give ye a turn among the birds an' small game to-day."

"There's nothing I'd like better," said Slagg, jumping at the offer like a hungry trout at a fly.

"Come along, then," returned the groom heartily; "we'll take shot-guns, an' a spalpeen of a black boy to carry a spare rifle an' the bag."

In a few minutes the two men, with fowling-pieces on their shoulders, and a remarkably attenuated black boy at their heels carrying a large bore rifle, entered the jungle behind the electrician's bungalow.

Chapter Twenty Five

A Great Field-day, in which Slagg distinguishes himself

Now, although we have said that Jim Slagg knew how to pull a trigger, it does not follow that he knew how to avoid pulling that important little piece of metal. He was aware, of course, that the keeping of his forefinger off the trigger was a point of importance, but how to keep it off when in a state of nervous expectation, he knew not, because his memory and the forefinger of his right hand appeared to get disconnected at such times, and it did not occur to him, just at first, that there was such an arrangement in gun-locks as half-cock.

Flinn reminded him of the fact, however, when, soon after entering the jungle, his straw hat was blown off his head by an accidental discharge of Slagg's gun.

"Niver mention it," said Flinn, picking up his riven headpiece, while poor Slagg overwhelmed him with protestations and apologies, and the black boy stood behind exposing his teeth, and gums and the whites of his eyes freely; "niver mention it, Mr Slagg; accidents will happen, you know, in the best regulated families. As for me beaver, it's better riddled than whole in this warm weather. Maybe you'd as well carry your gun at what sodgers call 'the showlder,' wid the muzzle pintin' at the moon—so; that's it. Don't blame yoursilf, Mr Slagg. Sure, it's worse than that I was when I begood, for the nasty thing I carried wint off somehow of its own accord, an' I shot me mother's finest pig—wan barrel into the tail, an' the other into the hid. You see, they both wint off a'most at the same moment. We must learn by exparience, av coorse. You've not had much shootin' yet, I suppose?"

Poor, self-condemned Slagg admitted that he had not, and humbly attended to Flinn's instructions, after which they proceeded on their way; but it might have been observed that Flinn kept a corner of his eye steadily on his new friend during the remainder of that day, while the attenuated black kept so close to Slagg's elbow as to render the pointing of the muzzle of his gun at him an impossibility.

Presently there was heard among the bushes a whirring of wings, and up flew a covey of large birds of the turkey species. Flinn stepped briskly aside, saying, "Now thin, let drive!" while the attenuated black fell cautiously in rear.

Bang! bang! went Slagg's gun.

“Oh!” he cried, conscience-stricken; “there, if I haven’t done it again!”

“Done it! av coorse ye have!” cried Flinn, picking up an enormous bird; “it cudn’t have bin nater done by a sportin’ lord.”

“Then it ain’t a tame one?” asked Slagg eagerly.

“No more a tame wan than yoursilf, an’ the best of aitin’ too,” said. Flinn.

Jim Slagg went on quietly loading his gun, and did not think it necessary to explain that he had supposed the birds to be tame turkeys, that his piece had a second time gone off by accident, and that he had taken no aim at all!

After that, however, he managed to subdue his feelings a little, and accidentally bagged a few more birds of strange form and beautiful plumage, by the simple process of shutting his eyes and firing into the middle of flocks, to the immense satisfaction of Flinn, who applauded all his successes and explained away all his failures in the most amiable manner.

If the frequent expanding of the mouth from ear to ear, the exposure of white teeth and red gums, and the shutting up of glittering eyes, indicated enjoyment, the attenuated boy must have been in a blissful condition that day.

“Why don’t ye shoot yerself, Mister Flinn?” asked Slagg on one occasion while reloading.

“Bekaise it shuits me better to look on,” answered the self-denying man. “You see, I’m used to it; besides, I’m a marciful man, and don’t care to shoot only for divarshion.”

“What’s that?” cried Slagg, suddenly pointing his gun straight upwards at two brilliant black eyes which were gazing straight down at him.

“Howld on—och! don’t—”

Flinn thrust the gun aside, but he was too late to prevent the explosion, which was followed by a lamentable cry, as a huge monkey fell into Slagg’s arms, knocked him over with the shock, and bounded off his breast into its native woods, shrieking.

“Arrah! he’s niver a bit the worse,” cried Flinn, laughing, in spite of his native politeness, “it was the fright knocked him off the branch. If you’d only given him wan shot he might have stud it, but two was too much for him. But plaise, Mister Slagg, don’t fire at monkeys again. I niver do it mesilf, an’ can’t stand by to see it. It’s so like murther, an’ the only wan I iver shot in me life was so like me own owld gran’mother that I’ve niver quite got over it.”

Slagg willingly promised never again to fire at monkeys, and they proceeded on their way.

They had not gone far, when another whirring of wings was heard, but this time the noise was greater than on other occasions.

“What is it?” asked Slagg eagerly, preparing for action.

“Sure it’s a pay-cock,” said Flinn.

“A what-cock?” asked Slagg, who afterwards described the noise to be like the flapping of a mainsail.

“A pay-cock. Splendid aitin’. Fire, avic!”

“What! fire at that?” cried Slagg, as a creature of enormous size and gorgeous plumage rose above the bushes. “Ye must be jokin’. I couldn’t fire at that.”

“Faix, an’ ye naidn’t fire at it now,” returned Flinn with a quiet smile, “for it’s a mile out o’ range by this time. Better luck—och! if there isn’t another. Now, thin, don’t be in a hurry. Be aisy. Whatever ye do, be aisy.”

While he spoke another huge bird appeared, and as Slagg beheld its size and spreading wings and tail, he took aim with the feelings of a cold-blooded murderer. That is to say, he shut both eyes and pulled both triggers. This double action had become a confirmed habit by that time, and Flinn commended it on the principle that there was “nothin’ like makin’ cocksure of everything!”

Re-opening his eyes and lowering his gun, Slagg beheld the peacock sailing away in the far distance.

“Sure ye’ve missed it, but after all it’s a most awkward bird to hit—specially when ye don’t pint the gun quite straight. An’ the tail, too, is apt to throw even a crack-shot out—so it is. Niver mind; there’s plenty more where that wan came from.”

Thus encouraged, our sportsman reloaded and continued his progress.

It is said that fortune favours the brave, and on that occasion the proverb was verified. There can be no question that our friend Jim Slagg was brave. All Irishmen are courageous, therefore it is equally certain that Flinn was brave, and the attenuated black could not have been otherwise than brave, else he would not have continued to enjoy himself in the dangerous neighbourhood of Slagg’s gun. As a consequence, therefore, fortune did favour the sportsmen that day, for it brought them unexpectedly into the presence of the king of India’s forests—a royal Bengal tiger—tawny skin, round face, glaring eyes, and black stripes complete from nose to tail!

There was no doubt in Flinn’s mind about it, as his actions proved, but there were considerable doubts in Slagg’s mind, as was evinced by his immediate petrifaction—not with fear, of course, but with something or other remarkably similar.

Slagg chanced to be walking in advance at the time, making his way with some trouble through a rather dense bit of jungle. He had by that time recovered his self-possession so much that he was able to let his mind wander to other subjects besides sport.

At the moment when the rencontre occurred he chanced to be wandering in spirit among the groves of Pirate Island. On turning sharp round a bend in the track, he found himself face to face with the tiger, which crouched instantly for a spring. As we have said, the sportsman was instantly petrified. He could not believe his eyes! He must have believed something, however, else he would not have gazed with such dreadful intensity. Yes, there, a few feet before him, crouched the tenant of the menagerie, without the cage—the creature of picture story-books endued with life!

Had Slagg’s life depended on his putting his gun to his shoulder he would have lost it, for he could not move. His fingers, however, were gifted with independent action. They gave a spasmodic jerk, and both barrels, chancing to be levelled correctly, sent their charges full into the tiger’s face.

Small shot may tickle a tiger but it cannot kill. With a roar like thunder the brute sprang on its audacious enemy. Fortunately Slagg made an involuntary step to the rear at the moment, and fell on his back, so that the animal, half-blinded by shot and smoke, went over him, and alighted almost at the feet of Flinn.

That worthy was equal to the occasion. At the sound of his friend's double shot he had seized the large rifle and leaped forward in time to meet the baffled tiger. Quick as light his practised hand discharged the heavy bullet, which, passing over the animal's head, went into its spine near the haunches, so that when it tried a second spring its hind legs refused their office, and it rolled over fuming and struggling in an agony of pain and rage.

Flinn ran a few paces backward so as to reload in comparative safety, while Slagg followed his example, but in desperate haste. Before he had half charged the first barrel, a second shot from the heavy rifle laid the royal monster dead on the ground.

"Well done!" cried Flinn, seizing his friend's hand and wringing it. "It's Nimrod you are, no less. I niver saw a purtier shot. An', faix, it's not every man that kills a tiger his first day out."

"But I didn't kill it," said Slagg modestly.

"Sure but ye drew first blood, me boy, so the tiger's yours, an' I wish you joy. Come, we'll go home now an' git help to fetch the carcass. Won't they open their two eyes aich of them whin they see it! Here, ye black spalpeen, take the rifle an' give me the gun."

In a few minutes the fortunate hunters were wending their way rapidly homeward, and that night the whole party, while enjoying their supper, feasted their eyes on the magnificent form of the royal Bengal tiger as it lay on the verandah, in front of the electricians' bungalow.

Chapter Twenty Six

Begins with a Disappointment, continues with a Great Reception, and ends with a Series of Surprises

At the breakfast-table next morning a telegram was handed to Redpath. There was nothing unusual in this. On the contrary, it seemed peculiarly natural that telegrams should be frequent visitors at the house of a telegraphist, but it was not so natural that Redpath should first look at the missive with surprise, and then toss it across the table to Sam.

“It is for you, Mr Shipton.”

“For me? Impossible! I am supposed to be dead at home,” exclaimed Sam, tearing it open. “Oh, it’s from Frank Hedley, and—well, he has been successful after all! Listen, Robin. Excuse me, Mrs Redpath. May I read it aloud?”

“By all means,” answered the pretty little woman, who would probably have answered the same if he had asked leave to go to bed in his boots.

“‘Your affair settled’”—continued Sam, reading.

“‘Great Eastern starts almost immediately. Come without delay.’”

“How provoking!” exclaimed the pretty little woman. “I had counted on having you a fortnight at least.”

“And I had counted on showing you some capital sport in our jungles, where we have all sorts of large game. But of course you cannot do otherwise than obey the summons at once.”

“Of course not,” said Sam and Robin together.

Flinn left the room and entered the servants’ quarters with something like a groan.

“Sure it’s bad luck has followed me iver since I left owld Ireland.”

“What’s wrong with you?” asked Slagg, looking up from the slice of peacock breast with which he was regaling himself.

“The matter? Och, it’s bad luck’s the matter. Hasn’t our frindship only just begood, an’ isn’t it goin’ to be cut short all of a suddint, niver more to be renewed?”

In pathetic tones, and with many Hibernian comments, the poor man communicated the news brought by the telegram. But regrets were of no avail; the orders were peremptory; the chance of returning to England in such circumstances too good to be lightly thrown away; so that same forenoon saw the whole party, with the skin of the royal tiger, on their way back to the city of Bombay.

It is easier to imagine than to describe the state of mind into which they were thrown when, on returning to their hotel, they discovered the perfidy of Stumps. Fortunately, they had enough of money left to discharge the hotel bill, and redeem their property.

“You’re quite sure of the name of the vessel he sailed in?” asked Sam of the waiter who had so cleverly obtained and so cautiously retained his information as to the proceedings of Stumps.

“Quite sure, sir,” replied the waiter. “The ship’s name was Fairy Queen, bound for the port of London, and the thief—the gen’lem’n, I mean—shipped in the name of James Gibson.”

Having received the “consideration” which he had anticipated, and had afterwards given up as lost, the waiter retired, and Sam, with his friends, went to inquire after the great cable with which they now felt themselves to be specially connected.

“Letta,” said Robin, as they went along, “you and I must part for a time.”

“Oh! must we?” asked the child, with a distressed look.

“Yes, but only for a very short time, dear,” returned Robin. “You know we cannot get you a berth on board the Great Eastern. They won’t even take you as chief engineer or captain!”

“But why not as the captain’s daughter—or his wife?” said Letta, who thoroughly understood and enjoyed a joke.

“Because, Letta, you are engaged to me,” replied Robin, with an offended look.

“O, yes; I forgot that. Well?”

Well, what we have arranged is this. I have met with many kind people here, some of whom have been greatly interested in your story, and one of them—a very nice lady, who is going home—has offered to take you with her, and deliver you safely to my mother in England, there to wait till I come home and marry you.

“How nice!” exclaimed Letta; “and you’ll be sure to come home soon?”

“Yes, quite sure, and very soon.”

This arrangement, being deemed satisfactory, was afterwards carried into effect, and Letta sailed a few days later in one of the regular steamers for England via the Suez Canal.

Meanwhile the Great Eastern still lay at her moorings, completing the arrangements for her voyage.

During this period our hero lived in a whirl of excitement. It seemed to himself as if he were the subject of an amazing but by no means unpleasant dream, the only dark spots in which were the departure of Letta and the depravity of John Shanks, alias James Gibson, alias Stumps.

“Oh! Stumps, Stumps,” he soliloquised, sadly, one day while standing on “the green” in the unromantic shade of a huge bale of cotton, “how could you behave so after being our trusted comrade so long!”

“Never mind Stumps just now,” said Sam Shipton, making his appearance at the moment, “but come along with me at once, for we have received an invitation, through my good and remarkable friend Frank Hedley, to the grand entertainment to be given to-night at the palace of the chief and Bahee Sahib of Junkhundee.”

“And who may that be?” asked Robin, with an incredulous smile.

“What! know you not the great chief whose praise is in the mouths of all—Hindu, Mohammedan, Jew, and Gentile, because he feeds and entertains them all like a prince?”

“He is the creation of your own brain, Sam. I fancy.”

“No, indeed,” protested Sam, earnestly, “I do not jest. The Bahee Sahib is a wealthy young Mahratta chieftain, who has been consistently loyal to us, and who entertains mixed parties of Englishmen and natives in European style, and does his best to break down the barriers of prejudice and caste. He has been hospitably received on board the Great Eastern, it seems, and is now getting up a grand affair in honour of Captain Halpin and his officers. So, come along.”

“But, my dear Sam, you forget, we have not a dress suit between us, and in the present condition of our finances it would be folly to—”

“Fiddlesticks, Robin. We have only to make a couple of turbans out of bath-towels and a few peacock feathers; turn Persian shawls, which we can borrow, into kilts, put on slippers, bare our legs and paint them with red and blue stripes crossed, to indicate something of Scottish Highland origin, anoint our noses with blue bear’s-grease, and—”

“Nonsense, Sam; be serious if you can, and consider what we are really to do.”

“You’re so impatient, Robin. The thing has all been considered for us. We have nothing to do but accept our fate. Frank Hedley, who is exactly your size, has a dress suit which he will lend you, and a friend of his, who happens to be exactly and conveniently my size, has also a suit, and is equally accommodating. Come now, for time presses, and I am told the Bahee’s wife loves punctuality—but she’s liberal-minded like her husband, and makes allowance for laziness, especially in hot weather. She is a regular trump, it seems, and quite amazed our electricians, during her visit to the big ship, by her intelligent comprehension of all they explained to her. She is an accomplished equestrian, and dresses as a native princess, with a huge ornament in her nose, but does not disdain to mingle with English ladies in the Bombay Rotten Row, and uses a European saddle.”

The account which Sam had thus slightly sketched was more than borne out by the facts that evening. The young Rajah’s reception-rooms, blazing with

light, were decorated with all that the wealth of fancy could suggest or the wealth of precious metal procure, while music and perfume filled the air and intoxicated the senses.

For some time Sam and Robin moved slowly about in the crowded rooms, finding themselves rubbing shoulders, now with Eastern aristocrats in richest costume and glittering jewels, now with England's warriors in scarlet and blue; sometimes with Parsees, Hindus, Mohammedans, and Jews in their characteristic garbs; at other times with European civilians, like themselves, in sober black.

It was a bewildering scene, and the loud continuous murmur of many voices, chattering in many tongues, did not tend to decrease the bewilderment.

"What are they about over there?" said Robin, directing his companion's attention to a room in which the people appeared to be observing something with great attention.

"I don't know. Let's go and see," said Sam.

A little polite pushing brought them into an apartment in which an English professor of conjuring, who had been engaged for the occasion, was exhibiting his tricks. They were poor enough, and would not have commanded much applause from any audience, except one that had met to enjoy whatever chanced to be provided.

In another room, however, they found a performer of much greater capacity—a man who possessed considerable powers as a musician, low comedian, and local satirist; he was noted for his delineations of native character, and succeeded in making the Parsees laugh heartily at his caricature of the Hindus, while he convulsed the Hindus with his clever skits on the Parsees. He also made effective reference to the Great Eastern and her work, bringing out the humorous aspects of telegraphy and of quick communication between India and England.

"Come, let's go and see if we can find anything to eat," said Sam, when tired of this man.

"Who is that?" asked Robin, as they moved through the crowd.

“Why, that’s the Bahee himself. See, he has got hold of Captain Halpin, and seems greatly pleased to lead him about.”

The Rajah did indeed exhibit much satisfaction in his beaming brown face at having got hold of so noted a character as the commander of the monster ship, and it was pleasant to see the almost childlike glee with which, taking the captain by the hand, he threaded his way through the crowd, introducing him right and left to his friends. Not less pleasant was it to observe the lively interest with which the natives regarded the captain when they learned who he was.

At this point in the evening’s proceedings, a gentleman in civilian costume came up to Sam Shipton, and asked him if he were acquainted with Mr Davis—one of the petty officers of the Great Eastern.

“I know him slightly,” said Sam.

“He has got into trouble, sir,” said the stranger, “and begged me to find you, if possible, and take you to him. I have been on board the Great Eastern looking for you, and was directed here.”

“That’s strange,” returned Sam, “I have seldom spoken to the man. Are you sure he did not send you for some one else—one of his mess-mates?”

“Quite sure, sir. And he bade me urge you to go quickly, else you may be too late.”

“Well—lead the way. Come, Robin, I’m sorry to quit this gay and festive scene—especially before supper—but it can’t be helped. You’ll go with me, and we can return together.”

The stranger seemed to hesitate a moment, as if annoyed at Robin being thus asked to go, but, as if quickly making up his mind, led them out of the Rajah’s residence, and, after a smart walk, conducted them into one of the poorer districts of the city.

“What sort of trouble has the man got into?” asked Sam as they went along.

“I really do not know. He will tell you when you see him, I suppose. I am only a casual acquaintance of his, and came on this errand to oblige him, solely because he seemed in great mental distress and was very urgent.”

Soon the conversation turned upon cable-laying, and, finding that Robin had been at the laying of the Atlantic cable of 1856, the stranger inquired about the attempts that had been made to injure that cable.

“Tell me, now, would you think it a sin,” he said, with a peculiar look at Sam, “to drive a nail into the cable so as to destroy it, if you were offered the sum of ten thousand pounds?”

“Of course I would,” said Sam, looking at his conductor with surprise. “I wonder that you should ask the question.”

“Why should you wonder,” returned the man with a smile, “at any question which aims at the investigation of that great enigma styled the human mind? I am fond of the study of character, and of those principles of good and evil which influence men. Under given circumstances and conditions, the commission of a certain sin is greatly more blameworthy than the commission of the same sin under different conditions and circumstances. Do you not think so?”

“Of course I do,” said Sam. “The man who, having been born and brought up among pickpockets, and under strong temptation commits a theft, is not nearly so guilty as the man would be who, having been trained under refined and Christian influences, should commit a similar theft; but I do not see the application of your argument, for your question did not refer to the relative depth of guilt, but to the sinfulness or innocence of a certain dastardly act for a tempting sum of money.”

“I may not have put my question very philosophically,” returned the stranger, “but I would like to have your opinion as to whether you think, under any circumstances of distress—poverty, for instance, with those dependent on one dying of hunger—a man would be justified in destroying the power of a telegraph cable for a sum of money—part, let us suppose, paid in advance, and the remainder after the deed had been accomplished.”

“My opinion is that no circumstances whatever would justify such an act,” said Sam with indignation. “Don’t you agree with me, Robin?”

“Of course I do,” said Robin with even greater indignation.

“And I quite agree with you, gentlemen,” said the stranger, with a wider smile than before; “but I like to have my opinions corroborated or combated by other minds. We have now reached our destination; please follow me, and stoop a little, for the ceiling of the passage is rather low, and the poor people here cannot afford to light it.”

The recent discussion had diverted Sam’s mind from the character of the place into which he had been led, but a suspicion which had been growing now assailed him forcibly.

“Keep your stick handy,” he whispered to Robin, at the same time grasping more firmly a stout cudgel which he carried.

These precautions seemed needless, however, for the stranger, opening with a latch-key a door at the further end of the dark passage, ushered them into a dimly lighted room, where about a dozen men were seated round a table drinking and smoking.

The men rose on the entrance of the visitors and received them with courtesy.

“Mr Davis will be glad to see you, sir,” said one; “he has been in much anxiety, but here he comes and will speak for himself.”

A door at the other end of the room opened, and a tall slightly-built man entered. Sam saw at once that he was not Davis.

“Fool!” growled the man, with a savage look at the stranger who had conducted them there, “you have brought the wrong man!”

“I had already begun to suspect as much,” returned the other, with a light laugh.

Swallowing his disgust, apparently with an effort, the slim man turned to Sam and said, “A mistake has been made, sir. One or two of my friends here will conduct you to any part of the city you may wish to go to.”

“I require no assistance,” said Sam, flushing with sudden indignation. “I believe that you are conspirators, and will take particular note of your dwelling, in order that I may spoil your game.”

He was about to turn and quit the room, when he was suddenly seized from behind by two powerful men, who seemed to have come on the scene by rising through the floor! At the same moment Robin was similarly secured. They did not, however, submit tamely. Both were strong-bodied as well as high-spirited, and Sam was large as well as strong.

But what were their powers against such odds! For a few seconds they struggled furiously. Then, feeling that their efforts were fruitless, they ceased.

“It is as well to go quietly, my fine fellows,” said the slim man in a slightly sarcastic tone. “We are not only more than a match for you, but we happen to belong to a class of gentlemen who don’t allow trifles to stand in their way. At the same time we object to murder when we can get along without it. Some of us will therefore conduct you to another part of the city. Now, I give you fair warning, if you struggle or try to make a noise on the way, we will silence you in a manner that will effectually keep you quiet for ever. Just have your knives handy, men, and don’t exercise forbearance if these gentlemen turn out to be fools.”

A prick in their necks by the point of some sharp instrument emphasised these words to Robin and Sam, and, at the same time, proved that the subordinates were quite ready, perhaps even anxious, to obey their superior. They suffered themselves, therefore, to be blindfolded, and led out of the house.

Of course once or twice they both thought of making a sudden struggle and endeavouring to throw off their captors, but the vice-like strength of the fingers that held them, and the recollection of the sharp instruments near their necks induced discretion; besides, the absence of the sound of footsteps told them that they could not count on aid from passers-by, even if the dwellers in such a region had been willing to assist them, which was not probable.

After passing quickly along several streets, the men who led them stopped and relaxed their hold.

“Now, you stand quiet for half a minute,” said one of them gruffly; “there’s a knife close to each of your spines at this moment.”

Thus warned, the captives stood still for nearly a minute. Then Sam lost patience.

“Well,” he said, angrily, “how long do you mean to keep us here?”

Receiving no reply, he suddenly pulled the handkerchief from his eyes and assumed the pugilistic attitude with the celerity of one whose life may depend on his action, but the only enemy to be seen was Robin, who, having also pulled down the handkerchief, stood staring at his comrade in mute surprise.

“They’re gone!” cried Sam, bursting into a fit of laughter. “The villains! The scoundrels! But who can they be? I fear there can be little doubt as to what mischief they are up to.”

“We have not the smallest clue to trace them by,” said Robin, with a vexed expression.

“Not the smallest. I don’t even know what quarter of the town we are in now,” returned Sam.

“The handkerchiefs!” exclaimed Robin with sudden animation.

“Well, what of them?”

“They—they may have names in the corners.”

Again the risible Sam burst into a loud laugh, as the idea of scoundrels possessing any handkerchiefs of their own at all, much less having their names marked in the corners; and poor Robin, whose memories of maternal care had prompted the thought, felt some degree of confusion, which was deepened when he discovered that the kerchiefs, with which their eyes had been bound, were their own.

They were startled by a gruff voice demanding to know what they were laughing at and kicking up such a row at that time of the morning!

It was one of the guardians of the night, who became very polite on drawing nearer and being informed, in a mild voice, by Sam that they had lost their way and would be much indebted for guidance, for Sam thought it best to say

nothing about their adventure until they had had ample time to think it over and decide what was best to be done.

Having been directed how to go, having lost themselves a second time, and been directed again by another guardian, they found themselves at last in the neighbourhood of the port, and here the sound of loud voices, as if engaged in some nocturnal orgies, was heard in the distance.

“As we seem in for a night of adventure,” said Sam, “we may as well accept our fate, and go see what it’s all about.”

“Agreed,” said Robin.

Hurrying forward, they came upon a remarkable and picturesque scene. The engineers of the Great Eastern had chosen the previous day for the laying of the mile of land-line with which the cable was to be connected. The burying of it in its appointed home had commenced at half-past six in the evening and had continued all through the night. It was about 2 a.m. when our adventurers came upon the scene. The trench was cut through ground on which a number of soldiers were encamped, whose white tents looked ghostlike in the feeble star-light, and lines of naked natives were seen, waving lanterns, pushing along the mysterious cable, or, with hands and feet busily pressing down the loose soil that covered the buried portion.

The whole operation was conducted with a superabundance of noise, for the burying of a rope in a trench three feet deep was in itself such a tremendous joke to the coolies, that they entered upon it with much excitement as a sort of unusual piece of fun. That they were in some degree also impressed with the mysterious and important object of their work might have been gathered from their chant:— “Good are the cable-wallahs, great are their names; good are the cable-wallahs, wah! wah! wah! great are the cable-wallahs, wah!” which they continued without intermission all through the night, to their own intense delight and to the annoyance no doubt of the military unfortunates who were encamped on the ground.

Besides the naked fellows who, in their excitement and activity, resembled good-humoured, brown demons, there were many other figures in English dress moving about, directing and encouraging, running from point to point, flitting to and fro like wills-o’-the-wisp, for all bore lights, and plunged ever and anon out of sight in the trench. Between three and four o’clock the work was

completed; tests were taken, the portion of cable was pronounced perfect, and communication was thus established between the cable-house and Rampart Row. This was the first link in the great chain of submarine telegraphy between India and England.

“Now, Robin,” said Sam, with a tremendous yawn, “as we’ve seen the first act in the play, it is time, I think, to go home to bed.”

With a yawn that rivalled that of his comrade, Robin admitted the propriety of the proposal, and, half an hour later, they turned in, to sleep—“perchance to dream!”

Chapter Twenty Seven

Describes Several Important Events

The laying of this thick shore-end of the cable was an important point in the great work.

By that time Robin and cousin Sam had been regularly installed as members of the expedition, and were told off with many others to assist at the operation.

The Chiltern carried the great coil in her tanks. After rounding Colaba Point into Back Bay, she found a barge waiting to receive some two-and-a-half miles of the cable, with which she was to proceed to the shore. The barge resembled a huge Noah's Ark, having a canvas awning to protect the cable, which was very sensitive to heat.

A measure of anxiety is natural at the beginning of most enterprises, and there were some who dreaded a "hitch" with superstitious fear, as if it would be a bad omen. But all went well.

"Now then, boys—shove her along; push her through," said an experienced leader among the cable-hands, who grasped the great coil and guided it. The men took up the words at once, and, to this species of spoken chorus, "shove her along, push her through," the snaky coil was sent rattling over the pulley-wheels by the tank and along the wooden gutter prepared for it, to the paying-out wheel at the Chiltern's stern, whence it plunged down into the barge, where other experienced hands coiled it carefully round and round the entire deck.

It is difficult to describe the almost tender solicitude with which all this was done. The cable was passed carefully—so carefully—through all the huge staples that were to direct its course from the fore-tank to the wheel at the stern. Then it was made to pass over a wheel here and under a wheel there, to restrain its impetuosity, besides being passed three times round a drum, which controlled the paying-out. A man stood ready at a wheel, which, by a few rapid turns, could bring the whole affair to a standstill should anything go wrong. In the fore-tank eight men guided each coil to prevent entanglement, and on deck men were stationed a few feet apart all along to the stern, to watch every foot as it passed out. Three hours completed the transfer. Then the barge went slowly shoreward, dropping the cable into the sea as she went.

It was quite a solemn procession! First went a Government steam-tug, flaunting flags from deck to trucks as thick as they could hang. Then came the barge with her precious cargo. Then two boats full of cable-hands, and an official gig pulled by a Chinaman, while the steam-launch Electric kept buzzing about as if superintending all.

When the tug had drawn the barge shoreward as far as she could with safety, the smaller "Electric" took her place. When she also had advanced as far as her draught allowed, a boat carried to the shore a hawser, one end of which was attached to the cable. Then the cable-hands dropped over the sides of the barge up to waist, chest, or neck, (according to size), and, ranging themselves on either side of the rope and cable, dragged the latter to the shore, up the trench made for its reception, and laid its end on the great stone table, where it was made fast, tested by the electricians, as we have said, and pronounced perfect.

A few more days had to pass before the insatiable Great Eastern was filled with coal and reported ready for sea. Then, as a matter of course, she wound up with a grand feast—a luncheon—on board, at which many of the leading authorities and merchants of Bombay were present, with a brilliant company which entirely filled the spacious saloons.

"Owing to circumstances," said Sam to Robin that day, "over which we have no control, you and I cannot be included among the guests at this approaching feast."

"I'm sorry for that, Sam," said our hero.

"Why so, Robin? Does a morbid devotion to chicken and ham, or sweets, influence you?"

"Not at all, though I make no pretence of indifference to such things, but I should so much like to hear the speeches."

"Well, my boy, your desire shall be gratified. Through the influence of our, I might almost say miraculous, friend, Frank Hedley, we shall be permitted to witness the proceedings from a retired corner of the saloon, in company with crockery and waiters and other débris of the feast."

At the appointed time the company assembled, and enjoyed as good a luncheon as money could procure.

“How some people do eat!” murmured Robin from his corner to Sam, who sat beside him.

“Yes, for it is their nature to,” replied Sam.

After the first toast was drunk the company braced themselves to the mental work of the afternoon, and although, as a matter of course, a good deal of twaddle was spoken, there was also much that threw light on the subject of ocean telegraphy. One of the leading merchants said, in his opening remarks: “Few of those present, I daresay, are really familiar with the history of ocean telegraphy.”

“Ah!” whispered Robin to Sam, “that’s the man for me. He’s sure to tell us a good deal that we don’t know, and although I have been ransacking Bombay ever since I arrived, for information, I don’t yet feel that I know much.”

“Hold your tongue, Robin, and listen,” said Sam.

“Mind your foot, sir,” remonstrated one of the steward’s assistants, who had a lugubrious countenance.

Robin took his foot out of a soup tureen, and applied himself to listen.

“When I reflect,” continued the merchant, “that it is now fourteen years since the first ocean telegraph of any importance was laid,—when I remember that the first cable was laid after an infinity of personal effort on the part of those who had to raise the capital,—when I mention that it was really a work of house-to-house visitation, when sums of 500 pounds to 1000 pounds, and even 10,000 pounds were raised by private subscription, with a view to laying a telegraph cable between England and America, when I reflect that the Queen’s Government granted the use of one of its most splendid vessels, the Agamemnon (Hear! hear! and applause), and that the American Government granted the use of an equally fine vessel, the Niagara—” (Hear! hear! and another round of applause, directed at the American Consul, who was present.)

(“Five glasses smashed that round,” growled the lugubrious waiter.)

“When I reflect,” continued the merchant, “that the expedition set out in 1857 with the greatest hopefulness, but proved a total failure—that the earnest men

(Hear! hear!) connected with it again set to work the following year, and laid another cable (Applause), which, after passing through it a few messages of great importance to England and America (Hear!) also ceased communication, which so damped the courage of all concerned, that for seven or eight weary years nothing was attempted—no, I should not say nothing, for during that period Mr Cyrus Field," (thunders of long-continued applause, during which the lugubrious waiter counted the demolition of six glasses and two dessert plates), "without whose able and persevering advocacy it is a question whether to this day we should have had ocean telegraphy carried out at all—during that period, I say, Mr Cyrus Field never gave himself rest until he had inspired others with some of the enthusiasm that burned so brightly in himself, which resulted in the renewed effort of 1865, with its failure and loss of 1213 miles of cable,—when I think of the indomitable pluck and confidence shown by such men as Thomas Brassey, Sir Samuel Canning, Sir James Anderson, Sir Daniel Gooch, Sir Richard Glass, Mr George Elliot. Mr Fender, Captain Sherard Osborn, and others—men of mind, and men of capital, and men who could see no difficulties—and I like men who can see no difficulties," (Hear! hear! and loud applause.)

("You'll see more difficulties than ye bargain for, if ye go through life makin' people smash crockery like that," growled the lugubrious waiter.)

"When I think of these men, and of the formation of the Telegraph Construction and Maintenance Company (Applause), and the successful laying of the 1866 cable, and the picking-up and completion of the old cable," (Loud cheers),—("Hm! a decanter gone this time. Will you take your foot out of the soup tureen, sir," from the lugubrious man, and an impatient "hush!" from Robin.)

"When I think of all these things, and a great deal more that I cannot venture to inflict on the indulgent company (Go on!) I feel that the toast which I have the honour to propose deserves a foremost place in the toasts of the day, and that you will heartily respond to it, namely, Success to the Telegraph Construction and Maintenance Company, for that Company has laid scores of cables since its formation, and has now successfully commenced, and will doubtless triumphantly complete, the laying of the cable which we have met to celebrate to-day—the fourth great enterprise, I may remark, which the Company has undertaken—the cable that is soon to connect India with England."

The merchant sat down amid thunders of applause, during which the reckoning of breakages was lost, and finally abandoned by the lugubrious waiter.

At first Robin and Sam listened with great interest and profound attention, and the former treasured in his memory, or made pencil notes of, such facts and expectations as the following:— That only nine months previously had they commenced the construction of the cable which was now about to be laid; that Captain Halpin in the Great Eastern had laid the French Atlantic cable; that in a few weeks they hoped to connect Bombay with Malta, and two months later with England; that, a few months after that, England would be connected with the Straits of Malacca and Singapore. “In short,” said one gentleman at the close of his speech, “we hope that in 1871 India will be connected, chiefly, by submarine telegraph, with China, Australia, Europe, and America, and that your morning messages will reach home about the same hour at which they are sent from here, allowing, of course, for the difference in time; and that afternoon and evening messages from Europe will be in your hands at an early hour next morning.”

At this point the heat and unpleasant fumes around him began to tell upon Robin, and he suggested that they had better go on deck for a little fresh air.

“I’ll not budge,” said Sam, positively. “Why, the best is yet to come.”

Saying this, to the surprise of Robin, Sam rose, went forward to the table, and asked permission to make a few remarks.

“Who is he?—what? eh!” exclaimed the chairman. “Turn him out,” cried one. “Sit down,” cried another. “No, no, let him speak,” cried a third. “Don’t you know it is Samuel Shipton, the great electrician?”

“Bravo! go on! speak out!” cried several voices, accompanied by loud applause.

“Gentlemen,” began Sam in his softest voice, “I regard this as one of the greatest occasions of—of—my life,” (Hear! hear! from a fussy guest; and Hush! hush! and then we shall hear here better, from an angry one). “I little thought,” continued Sam, warming apparently with his subject—or the heat, “little thought that on this great occasion I could—could—I could—” (would or should; go on, man, from an impatient guest).

“Oh, Sam, don’t stick!” cried Robin, in an agony of anxiety.

“Who’s that? Put him out!” chorused several voices indignantly.

“There, sir, you’ve put your foot in it at last,” said the lugubrious waiter.

Robin thought he referred to the interruption, but the waiter’s eyes and forefinger directed his attention to the soup tureen, which, in his eagerness, he had sacrificed with a stamp. Finding that no further notice was taken of the interruption, he listened, while Sam continued:—

“Yes, gentlemen, I have some difficulty in starting, but, once set agoing, gentlemen, I can keep on like an alarum clock. What nonsense have some of you fellows been talking! Some of you have remarked that you shall be able to exchange messages with England in a few hours. Allow me to assure you that before long you will accomplish that feat in a few minutes.”

“Pooh! pooh!” ejaculated an irascible old gentleman with a bald head.

“Did you say ‘pooh!’ sir?” demanded Sam, with a terrible frown.

“I did, sir,” replied the old gentleman, with a contemptuous smile.

“Then, sir, take that.”

Sam hurled a wine decanter at the old gentleman, which, missing its mark, fell with a loud crash at the feet of Robin, who awoke with a start to find Sam shaking him by the arm.

“Wake up, Robin,” he said; “man, you’ve lost the best speech of the evening. Come—come on deck now, you’ve had quite enough of it.”

“Yes, an’ done enough o’ damage too,” growled the lugubrious waiter.

So Robin became gradually aware that Sam’s speech was a mere fancy, while the smashing of the soup tureen was a hard fact.

It may not, however, be out of place to remark here that the prophecy made by Sam in Robin’s dream, did afterwards become a great reality.

Chapter Twenty Eight

The Cable Laid

“I say, Robin,” said Samuel Shipton, as he encountered our hero and Slagg that same evening in the streets of Bombay, “the government land telegraph was reported this morning to have recovered its health.”

“Well, what of that?”

“I have taken advantage of the lucid interval to send a telegram to uncle Rik. No doubt your father has by this time received the telegram we sent announcing our safety and arrival here, so this one won’t take them by surprise.”

“But what is it about?” asked Robin.

“It is sent,” replied Sam, “with the intention of converting uncle Rik into a thief-catcher. That stupid waiter told me only this morning that the time he followed Stumps to the harbour, he overheard a sailor conversing with him and praising a certain tavern named the Tartar, near London Bridge, to which he promised to introduce him on their arrival in England; so it struck me that by telegraphing to uncle Rik to find out the owners of the Fairy Queen and the position of the Tartar, he might lay hold of Stumps on his arrival and recover our stolen property.”

“But I hope he won’t put him in limbo, sir,” said Jim Slagg. “I’ve no objection to recover our property, but somehow I don’t like to have the poor fellow transported. You see I can’t help thinkin’ he was half-cracked when he did it.”

“He must take his chance, I suppose,” said Sam, thoughtfully. “However, the telegram is off, and, if it ever reaches him, uncle Rik will act with discretion.”

“I agree with Jim,” said Robin, “and should be sorry to be the means of ruining our old comrade.”

“It did not strike me in that light,” returned Sam, a little troubled at the thought. “But it can’t be helped now. In any case I suppose he could not be tried till we appear as witnesses against him.”

“I ain’t much of a lawyer,” said Slagg, “but it do seem to me that they couldn’t very well take him up without some proof that the property wasn’t his.”

“It may be so,” returned Sam; “we shall see when we get home. Meanwhile it behoves us to square up here, for the Great Eastern starts early to-morrow and we must be on board in good time to-night.”

Now, you must not imagine, good reader, that we intend to drag you a second time through all the details of laying a deep-sea cable. The process of laying was much the same in its general principles as that already described, but of course marked by all the improvements in machinery, etcetera, which time and experience had suggested. Moreover, the laying of the Indian cable was eminently, we might almost say monotonously, successful, and, consequently, devoid of stirring incident. We shall therefore merely touch on one or two features of interest connected with it, and then pass on to the more important incidents of our story.

When Robin and his comrades drew near to the big ship, she was surrounded by a perfect fleet of native boats, whose owners were endeavouring to persuade the sailors to purchase bananas and other fruits and vegetables; paroquets, sticks, monkeys, and fancy wares.

Next morning, the 14th of February 1870, the Great Eastern lifted her mighty anchor, and spliced the end of the 2375 miles of cable she had on board to the shore-end, which had been laid by the Chiltern. This splice was effected in the presence of the Governor of Bombay, Sir Seymour Fitzgerald, who, with a small party, accompanied the Great Eastern a short distance on its way. Then, embarking in his yacht, they bade God-speed to the expedition, gave them three ringing cheers, and the voyage to Aden began.

Soon the cable-layers were gliding merrily over the bright blue sea at the rate of five or six knots an hour, with the cable going quietly over the stern, the machinery working smoothly, the electrical condition of the cable improving as the sea deepened, and flocks of flying-fish hovering over the crisp and curly waves, as if they were specially interested in the expedition, and wished to bear it company.

All went well, yet were they well prepared for accident or disaster, as Sam informed Robin on the morning of the 16th while sitting at breakfast.

“They have got two gongs, as you’ve observed, no doubt,” he said, “which are never to be sounded except when mischief is brewing. The first intimation of fault or disaster will be a note from one of these gongs, when the ship will be instantly stepped, the brakes put on, and the engines reversed.”

“Everything is splendidly prepared and provided for,” said Robin; “hand me the sugar, Sam.”

“The elasticity and good behaviour of the big ship are all that could be desired,” remarked one of the engineers, “though she carries 3000 tons more dead-weight than when she started with the Atlantic cable in 1865.”

At that moment there was a lull of consternation round the breakfast-table, for a drumming upon metal was heard! For one instant there was a gaze of doubt round the table. Then they rose en masse; cups were upset, and chairs thrown over; the cabin was crossed at racing speed,—Captain Halpin leading—the stair-case surmounted, and a rush made to the testing-room.

There all was quiet and orderly; the operators placidly pursuing their labours, working out their calculations, or watching the tell-tale spot of light on the scale, and all looking up in silent surprise at the sudden hubbub round their door. It was a false alarm, caused by the steady dripping of a shower-bath on its metal bottom! That was all, but it was sufficient to prove how intensely men were on the qui vive.

It was a wonderful scene, the deck of the Great Eastern—incomprehensible by those who have not seen it. The cabins, offices, workshops, and machinery formed a continuous line of buildings up the centre of the vessel’s deck, dividing it into two streets an eighth of a mile long. At the end of one of these were the wheels and drums running from the top of the aft-tank to the stern; and between them and the two thoroughfares were wooden houses which shut them out from view. There was a farmyard also, where cattle were regularly turned out for exercise; there were goats which were allowed to go free about the decks, and chickens which took the liberty of doing so, sometimes, without leave; there were parrots being taken home by the sailors which shrieked their opinions noisily; and there were numerous monkeys, which gambolled in mischievous fun, or sat still, the embodiment of ludicrous despair; while, intermingling with the general noise could be heard the rattle of the paying-out wheels, as the cable passed with solemn dignity and unvarying persistency over the stern into the sea, it seemed almost unheeded, so perfect and self-

acting was the machinery; but it was, nevertheless, watched by keen sleepless eyes—as the mouse is watched by the cat—night and day.

The perfection not only achieved but expected, was somewhat absurdly brought out by the electrician in the cable-house at Bombay, who one day complained to the operators on board the Great Eastern that the reply to one of his questions had been from three to twelve seconds late! It must be understood, however, that although the testing of the cable went on continuously during the whole voyage, the sending of messages was not frequent, as that interfered with the general work. Accordingly, communication with the shore was limited to a daily statement from the ship of her position at noon, and to the acknowledgment of the same by the electrician at Bombay.

One of the greatest dangers in paying-out consists in changing from tank to tank when one is emptied, and a full one has to be commenced. This was always an occasion of great interest and anxiety.

About midnight of the 19th the change to the fore-tank was made, and nearly every soul in the ship turned out to see it. The moon was partially obscured, but darkness was made visible by a row of lanterns hung at short intervals along the trough through which the cable was to be passed, making the ship look inconceivably long. As Robin Wright hurried along the deck he observed that both port and starboard watches were on duty, hid in the deep shadow of the wheels, or standing by the bulwark, ready for action. Traversing the entire length of the deck—past the houses of the sheep and pigs; past the great life-boats; past the half-closed door of the testing-room, where the operators maintained their unceasing watch in a flood of light; past the captain's cabin, a species of land-mark or half-way house; past a group of cows and goats lying on the deck chewing the cud peacefully, and past offices and deck-cabins too numerous to mention,—he came at last to the fore-tank, which was so full of cable that the hands ready to act, and standing on the upper coil, had to stoop to save their heads from the deck above.

The after-tank, on the contrary, was by that time a huge yawning pit, twenty-five feet deep, lighted by numerous swinging lamps like a subterranean church, with its hands, like Lilliputians, attending to the last coil of the cable. That coil or layer was full four miles long, but it would soon run out, therefore all was in readiness. The captain was giving directions in a low voice, and seeing that every one was in his place. The chiefs of the engineers and electricians were on the alert. Every few minutes a deep voice from below announced the number of

“turns” before the last one. At last the operation was successfully accomplished and the danger past, and the cable was soon running out from the fore-tank as smoothly as it had run out of the other.

The tendency of one flake or coil of cable to stick to the coil immediately below, and produce a wild irremediable entanglement before the ship could be stopped, was another danger, but these and all other mishaps of a serious nature were escaped, and the unusually prosperous voyage was brought to a close on the 27th of February, when the Great Eastern reached Aden in a gale of wind—as if to remind the cable-layers of what might have been—and the cable was cut and buoyed in forty fathoms water.

The continuation of the cable up the Red Sea, the successful termination of the great enterprise, and the start of our hero and his companions for Old England after their work was done, we must unwillingly leave to the reader’s imagination.

Chapter Twenty Nine

Uncle Rik's Adventures

Uncle Rik seated in Mr Wright's drawing-room; Mr Wright in an easy-chair near the window; Mrs Wright—with much of the lustre gone out of her fine eyes—lying languidly on the sofa; Madge Mayland at work on some incomprehensible piece of netting beside her aunt,—all in deep mourning.

Uncle Rik has just opened a telegram, at which he stares, open eyed and mouthed, without speaking, while his ruddy cheeks grow pale.

"Not bad news, I trust, brother," said poor Mrs Wright, to whom the worst news had been conveyed when she heard of the wreck of the Triton. Nothing could exceed that, she felt, in bitterness.

"What is it, Rik?" said Mr Wright, anxiously.

"Oh! nothing—nothing. That is to say, not bad news, certainly, but amazing news. Boh! I'm a fool."

He stopped short after this complimentary assertion, for uncle Rik had somewhere read or heard that joy can kill, and he feared to become an accomplice in a murder.

"Come, Rik, don't keep us in suspense," said his brother, rising; "something has happened."

"O yes, something has indeed happened," cried Rik, "for this telegram is from Sam Shipton."

"Then Robin is alive!" cried Mrs Wright, leaping up, while Madge turned perfectly white.

"No—that is to say—yes—it may be so—of course must be so—for,—bah! what an ass I am! Listen."

He proceeded to read Sam's telegram, while Mrs Wright covered her face with her hands and sank trembling on the sofa.

The telegram having suffered rather severe mutilation at the hands of the foreigners by whom it was transmitted, conveyed a very confusing idea of the facts that were intended, but the puzzling over it by the whole party, and the gradual, though not perfect, elucidation of its meaning, had perhaps the effect of softening the joyful intelligence to a bearable extent.

"Now," said uncle Rik, while the perspiration of mental effort and anxiety stood on his bald forehead, "this is the outcome of it all. Sam clearly says 'all well,' which means, of course, that Robin is alive—thank God for that! Then he refers to a previous telegram, which, of course, must be lost, for it hasn't come to hand. Bah! I wonder the nasty things ever do come to hand. Anyhow, that telegram must have been meant to announce their safe arrival at Bombay, undoubtedly."

"Of course—I see it now," said Mrs Wright, with a deep sigh.

"Of course," echoed Rik. "Then there's some queer reference to a ship and a Fiery Queen, and a Stamps and a Shunks, and a Gibson, and a thief, and three bags, and the port of London, which of course means London, and a public-house named, apparently, Torture—"

"Tartar, I think, uncle," said Madge.

"Well, Tartar if you like, it's much the same if you catch him. And it winds up with a girl—which is not surprisin'—who is to be expectorated—"

"Expected, surely," said Madge, with a rather hysterical laugh, for the conflicting feelings within her tended rather to tears.

"So be it, Madge—expected, with an unreadable name beginning with an L,—and that's all; and a pretty penny he must have paid to send us such a lot o' rubbish."

"It has brought the oil of gladness to our hearts, brother," said Mr Wright, "and is worth its cost. But, now, what do you intend to do?"

"Do!" exclaimed Rik, who was never happier than when he could explode his feelings in action. "I'll go this moment to the port of London, find out the owners of the Fiery Queen, make particular inquiries about the Stampses, Shunkses, and Gibsons, visit Torture public-houses—though they're all that,

more or less—and see if I can hear anything about girls to be expectorated, with names beginning with L. There—these are my sailing directions, so—up anchor and away!"

Uncle Rik immediately obeyed his own commands, and spent the remainder of that day in what he styled cruising. And he cruised to some purpose, for although he failed to obtain any information as to the girl, he discovered the owners of the Fairy—not Fiery—Queen, who said that she was expected home in a few weeks, but that they knew nothing whatever about the rather remarkable names which he submitted for their consideration. With this amount of information he was fain to rest content, and returned in an elevated state of mind to his brother's house.

Some weeks after these events, the Wright family was again seated round the social board, as uncle Rik called it, when two visitors were announced. The social meal happening to be tea, and the drawing-room at that time in dishabille, owing to carpet disturbances, the visitors were shown into the dining-room—a lady, accompanied by a pretty little girl.

"Excuse my calling at an unusual hour," said the lady, "but I trust the occasion of my visit will be a sufficient excuse. I have just arrived from Bombay, and hasten to present a letter from your son, and to deliver over my interesting charge, this dear child, Letta Langley, whom—"

"The expectorated girl!" shouted uncle Rik, leaping up, "begins with an L,—two L's indeed. Bah, I'm an idiot! Excuse my excitement, madam—pray go on."

Slightly surprised, but more amused, the lady went on to tell all she knew about Robin and his friends, while the happy mother read snatches of Robin's letter through her tears, and Mr Wright and Madge plied the lady with questions and tea, and Letta, taking at once to uncle Rik, ecstatified, amazed and horrified that retired sea-captain with her charming earnest little ways, her wonderful experiences, and her intimate acquaintance with pirates and their habits.

A letter from Robin to his mother, and another from Sam to Mr Wright, arrived next morning, and proved to be those which had been written immediately after their landing at Bombay, and had been posted, so the writers thought, at the time their first telegram was despatched. But the letters had been given to Stumps to post, and Stumps was not blessed with a good memory, which may

account for the delay in transmission. These letters corroborated all the lady had said. Thus was Letta formally installed in the Wright family, and uncle Rik solemnly charged himself with the discovery of her mother!

"Depend upon it, my dear," he said, with an amount of self-sufficient assurance and indomitable resolution that carried sweet consolation to the child's heart, "that I'll find your mother if she's above ground, though the findin' of her should cost me the whole of my fortune and the remainder of my life."

And nobly did Rik redeem his promise. He obtained special introduction to the British Museum, consulted every Directory in existence, hunted up every widow of the name of Langley in the kingdom, and found the right one at last, not three miles distant from his own door in London. Captain Rik, it must be known, had a room in London furnished like a cabin, which he was wont to refer to as his "ship" and his "bunk," but he paid that retreat only occasional visits, finding it more agreeable to live with his brother.

It was a fine Sabbath morning when Rik took Letta's hand and led her into the presence of her mother. He would not let himself be announced, but pushed the child into the drawing-room and shut the door.

With similar delicacy of feeling we now draw a curtain over the meeting of the mother and the long-lost child.

"It's almost too much for me, tough old sea-dog though I am, this perpetual cruisin' about after strange runaway craft," said uncle Rik, as he and Letta walked hand in hand along the streets one day some weeks later. "Here have I been beatin' about for I don't know how long, and I'm only in the middle of it yet. We expect the Fairy Queen in port to-night or to-morrow."

"But you won't hurt poor Stumps when you catch him, will you?" pleaded Letta, looking earnestly up into her companion's jovial face. "He was very nice and kind to me, you know, on Pirate Island."

"No, I'll not hurt him, little old woman," said Rik. "Indeed, I don't know yet for certain that Stumps is a thief; it may be Shunks or it may be Gibson, you see, who is the thief. However, we'll find out before long. Now then, good-bye, I'll be back soon."

He shook hands with Letta at Mr Wright's house, she and her mother having agreed to reside there until Robin's return home.

Wending his way through the streets until he reached one of the great arteries of the metropolis, he got into a 'bus and soon found himself on the banks of the Thames. Arrived at the docks, one of the first vessels his eyes fell on was the Fairy Queen.

Going on board, the first man he met was the captain, to whom he said, touching his hat—

"Excuse me, captain; may I ask if you have a man in your crew named Stumps?"

"No, sir, no such name on my books."

"Nor one named Shunks?"

"No, not even Shunks," replied the captain, with a sternly-humorous look, as if he thought the visitor were jesting.

"Nor Gibson?" continued Rik.

"Yes, I've got one named Gibson. What d'ye want with him?"

"Well, I have reason to believe that he is—or was—a friend of a friend of mine, and I should like to see him."

"Oh! indeed," responded the captain, regarding his visitor with a doubtful look. "Well, Gibson has just got leave to go ashore, and I heard him say to one of his mates he was going to the Tartar public-house, so you'll see him there, probably, for he is not invisible or'narily. But I don't know where the Tartar is."

"But I know," returned Captain Rik; "thank you. I'll go seek him there."

Stumps sat alone in one of the boxes of the Tartar public-house, which at that hour chanced to be nearly empty. His face was buried in his hands, and a pot of untasted beer stood at his elbow. Poor Stumps! Conscience had been remarkably busy with him on the voyage home. He would have given worlds to

have got back to Bombay, return the ill-gotten bags, and confess his guilt, but it was too late—too late.

There is something very awful in these words, too late! We read of and hear them often, and we use them sometimes, lightly it may be, but it is only when they can be used by ourselves with reference to something very serious, that we have a glimmering of their terrible significance. There is a proverb, "It is never too late to mend," which is misleading. When the dream of life is over, and the doom is fixed, it is too late to mend. No doubt the proverb is meant to refer to our condition while this life lasts, but even here it is misleading. When the murderer withdraws the knife and gazes, it may be, horror-struck at the expressionless face of his victim, it is too late. He cannot mend the severed thread of life. When the reckless drunkard draws near the end of his career, and looks in the mirror, and starts to see the wreck of his former self, it is too late. Health will never more return. Not too late, blessed be God, for the salvation of the soul, but too late for the recovery of all that was held dear in the life of earth.

Yes, Stumps had many a time while on the sea muttered to himself, "Too late!" He did so once again in that low public-house near the docks. Uncle Rik overheard him, and a feeling of profound pity arose within him.

"I beg pardon," he said, and at the first word Stumps looked quickly, almost fiercely, up, "your name, I believe, is Gibson."

"No, it isn't—I, that is to say—Well, yes it is. Sailors has got aliases, you know, sometimes. What d'ye want wi' me?"

"You were acquainted in Bombay," resumed Captain Wright, very quietly, as he sat down opposite to Stumps, "with a young man named Wright—Robin Wright?"

Stumps's face became deadly pale.

"Ah! I see you were," resumed the captain; "and you and he had something to do, now, with bags of some sort?"

The captain was, as the reader knows, profoundly ignorant of everything connected with the bags except their existence, but he had his suspicions, and thought this a rather knowing way of inducing Stumps to commit himself. His

surprise, then, may be imagined when Stumps, instead of replying, leaped up and dashed wildly out of the room, overturning the pot of beer upon Captain Rik's legs.

Stumps shot like an arrow past the landlord, a retired pugilist, who chanced to be in the doorway. Captain Rik, recovering, darted after him, but was arrested by the landlord.

"Not quite so fast, old gen'l'man! As you've had some of your mate's beer, you'd better pay for it."

"Let me go!—stop him!" cried the captain, struggling.

As well might he have struggled in the grasp of Hercules. His reason asserted itself the instant the fugitive was out of sight. He silently paid for the beer, went back to the Fairy Queen to inform the captain that his man Gibson was a thief—to which the captain replied that it was very probable, but that it was no business of his—and then wandered sadly back to tell the Wright family how Gibson, alias Stumps, alias Shunks, had been found and lost.

Chapter Thirty

The Wright Family reunited, and Sam becomes highly Electrical

That much-abused and oft-neglected meal called tea had always been a scene of great festivity and good-fellowship in the Wright family. Circumstances, uncontrollable of course, had from the beginning necessitated a dinner at one o'clock, so that they assembled round the family board at six each evening, in a hungry and happy frame of body and mind, (which late diners would envy if they understood it), with the prospect of an evening—not bed—before them.

In the earlier years of the family, the meal had been, so to speak, a riotous one, for both Robin and Madge had uncontrollable spirits, with tendencies to drop spoons on the floor, and overturn jugs of milk on the table. Later on, the meal became a jolly one, and, still later, a chatty one—especially after uncle Rik and cousin Sam began to be frequent guests.

But never in all the experience of the family had the favourite meal been so jolly, so prolific of spoony and porcelain accidents, so chatty, and so generally riotous, as it was on a certain evening in June of the year 1870, shortly after the return home of Robin and his companions.

Besides the original Wright family, consisting of father, mother, Robin, and Madge, there were assembled uncle Rik, Sam Shipton, Mrs Langley, Letta, and—no—not Jim Slagg. The circle was unavoidably incomplete, for Jim had a mother, and Jim had said with indignant emphasis, "did they suppose all the teas an' dinners an' suppers, to say nothin' o' breakfasts, an' mess-mates an' chums an' friends, crammed and jammed into one enormous mass temptation, would indooce him to delay his return to that old lady for the smallest fraction of an hour?" No, Jim Slagg was not at the table, but the household cat was under it, and the demoralising attentions that creature received on that occasion went far to undo the careful training of previous years.

The occasion of the gathering was not simple. It was compound. First, it was in commemoration of Robin's birthday; second, it was to celebrate the appointment of Sam Shipton to an influential position on the electrical staff of the Telegraph Construction and Maintenance Company, and Sam's engagement to Marjory Mayland; third, to celebrate the appointment of Robin Wright to a sufficiently lucrative and hopeful post under Sam; and, lastly, to enjoy the passing hour.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” said uncle Rik, getting on his feet with some difficulty, when the tea, toast, muffins, eggs, and other fare had blunted the appetites, “I rise to propose the toast of the evening, and mark you, I don’t mean to use any butter with this toast,” (Hear, from Sam), “unless I’m egged on,” (Oh!), “to do it—so I charge you to charge your cups with tea, since we’re not allowed grog in this tee-total ship—though I’m free to confess that I go in with you there, for I’ve long since given, up the use o’ that pernicious though pleasant beverage, takin’ it always neat, now, in the form of cold water, varied occasionally with hot tea and coffee. My toast, ladies and gentlemen, is Rob—” (Rik put his hand to his throat to ease off his necktie), “is Robin Wright, whom I’ve known, off an’ on, as a babby, boy, an’ man, almost ever since that night—now twenty years ago, more or less—when he was launched upon the sea in thunder, lightning, and in rain. I’ve known him, I say—ever since—off an’ on—and I’m bound to say that—”

The captain paused. He had meant to be funny, but the occasion proved too much for him.

“Bless you, Robin, my lad,” he gasped, suddenly stretching his large hand across the table and grasping that of his nephew, which was quickly extended. After shaking it with intense vigour he sat promptly down and blew his nose.

The thunders of applause which burst from Sam and Mr Wright were joined in even by the ladies, who, in the excess of their sympathy, made use of knife-handles and spoons with such manly vigour that several pieces of crockery went “by the board,” as the captain himself remarked, and the household cat became positively electrified and negatively mad,—inasmuch as it was repelled by the horrors around, and denied itself the remaining pleasure of the tea-table by flying wildly from the room.

Of course, Robin attempted a reply, but was equally unsuccessful in expressing his real sentiments, or the true state of his feelings, but uncle Rik came to the rescue by turning sharply on Sam and demanding—

“Do you really mean to tell me, sir, that, after all your experience, you still believe in telegraphs and steamboats?”

Sam promptly asserted that he really did mean that.

“Of course,” returned the captain, “you can’t help believing in their existence—for facts are facts—but are you so soft, so unphilosophical, so idiotical as to believe in their continuance? That’s the point, lad—their continuance. Are you not aware that, in course o’ time, rust they must—”

“An’ then they’ll bu’st,” interpolated Robin.

“Hee! hee! ha!” giggled Letta, who, during all this time, had been gazing with sparkling eyes and parted lips, from one speaker to another, utterly forgetful of, and therefore thoroughly enjoying, her own existence.

“Yes, then they’ll bu’st,” repeated Rik, with an approving nod at Robin; “you’re right, my boy, and the sooner they do it the better, for I’m quite sick of their flashings and crashings.”

“I rather suspect, Sam,” said Mr Wright, “that the gentlemen with whom you dined the other day would not agree with uncle Rik.”

“Whom do you refer to, George?” asked Mrs Wright.

“Has he not yet told you of the grand ‘inaugural fête,’ as they call it, that was given at the house of Mr Fender, chairman of the Telegraph Construction and Maintenance Company, to celebrate the opening of direct submarine telegraphic communication with India?”

“Not a word,” replied Mrs Wright, looking at Sam.

“You never mentioned it to me,” said Madge, with a reproachful glance in the same direction.

“Because, Madge, we have been so busy in talking about something else,” said Sam, “that I really forgot all about it.”

“Do tell us about it now,” said Mrs Langley, who, like her daughter, had been listening in silence up to this point.

“A deal o’ rubbish was spoken, I daresay,” observed the captain, commencing to another muffin, and demanding more tea.

“A deal of something was spoken, at all events,” said Sam, “and what is more to the point, an amazing deal was done. Come, before speaking about it, let me propose a toast—Success to Batteries and Boilers!”

“Amen to that!” said Robin, with enthusiasm.

“If they deserve it,” said the captain, with caution.

The toast having been drunk with all the honours, Sam began by saying that the fête was a great occasion, and included brilliant company.

“There were present, of course,” he said, “nearly all the great electrical and engineering lights of the day, also the Prince of Wales and the Duke of Cambridge, with a lot of aristocrats, whom it is not necessary to mention in the presence of a democratic sea-dog like uncle Rik.”

“Don’t yaw about to defame me, but keep to your course, Sam.”

“Well, you have no idea what an amount of interest and enthusiasm the affair created. You all know, of course, that the Indian cable, which Robin and I had a hand in laying, is now connected with the lines that pass between Suez, Alexandria, Malta, Gibraltar, Lisbon, and England; and the company assembled at Mr Pender’s house witnessed the sending of the first messages direct from London to Bombay; and how long, do you think, it took to send the first message, and receive a reply?—only five minutes!”

“You don’t mean it, Sam!” exclaimed Rik, getting excited, in spite of his professed unbelief.

“Indeed I do,” replied Sam, warming with his subject. “I tell you the sober truth, however difficult it may be for you to believe it. You may see it in the papers of the 24th or 25th, I suppose. Here is my note-book, in which I jotted down the most interesting points.

“The proceedings of the evening were opened by the managing director in London sending a telegram to the manager at Bombay.

“‘How are you all?’ was the brief first telegram by Sir James Anderson. ‘All well,’ was the briefer first reply from Bombay. The question fled from London at 9:18 exactly—I had my watch in my hand at the time—and the answer came back at

9:23—just five minutes. I can tell you it was hard to believe that the whole thing was not a practical joke. In fact, the message and reply were almost instantaneous, the five minutes being chiefly occupied in manipulating the instruments at either end. The second message between the same parties occupied the same time. After that Sir Bartle Frere sent a telegram to Sir Seymour Fitzgerald, the Governor of Bombay, as follows:— 'Sir Bartle Frere wishes health and prosperity to all old friends in Bombay.' This was received by the Company's superintendent at Bombay, and the acknowledgment of its receipt sent back in four minutes and fifty seconds! But the reply from the Governor, 'Your old friend returns your good wishes,' did not come to us for thirty-six minutes, because the message had to be sent to the Governor's house, and it found his Excellency in bed.

"Next, a message was sent by Lady Mayo in London to Lord Mayo at Simla, which, with the acknowledgment of it, occupied 15 minutes in transmission. Of course time was lost in some cases, because the persons telegraphed to were not on the spot at the moment. The Prince of Wales telegraphed to the Viceroy of India, 'I congratulate your Excellency on England and India being now connected by a submarine cable. I feel assured this grand achievement will prove of immense benefit to the welfare of the Empire. Its success is thus matter of imperial interest,' which telegram passed out, and the acknowledgment of its receipt in India was returned to London, all within eleven minutes, but, as in the former case, the Viceroy was in bed, so that his reply was not received till forty-five minutes had elapsed. Had the Viceroy been at the Indian end of the wire, he and the Prince could have conversed at an average rate of five minutes a sentence.

"Many other messages were sent to and fro," continued Sam, turning over the leaves of his note-book, "not only from London to India, but to each of the intermediate stations on the cable line, so that we had direct intercourse that night with the King of Portugal, the Governors of Gibraltar, Malta, and Aden, and the Khedive of Egypt. But that was not all. We put the old and the new world into communication, so that the 'press of India sent salaam to the press of America.' Sir James Anderson also telegraphed to Cyrus W. Field, Esquire, the father of submarine telegraphy in my estimation," (Hear, hear, from Robin), "and he sent a reply, which began, 'Your message of this evening received by me before five o'clock this afternoon.' Mark that, Captain Rik, the message received before it was sent, so to speak!"

"Ay, ay, lad—I know—difference of longitude,—fire away."

“Well, I have fired away most of my ammunition now,” returned Sam, “and if you don’t haul down your colours, it must be because you have nailed them to the mast and are blind to reason. I may add, however, that the Viceroy of India sent a telegram to the President of the United States, to which he got a reply in seven hours and forty minutes, but the slowness of this message was accounted for by the fact of accidental and partly unavoidable delay in transmission both in Washington and London. At 1:30 a.m. of the 24th the traffic of the line became pressing, and all complimentary messages ceased with one from Bombay, which said, ‘Sun just risen; delightfully cool; raining.’”

“Doesn’t it seem as if the Baron Monkhausen’s tales were possible after all?” remarked Mrs Wright, looking as if her mind had got slightly confused.

“The Baron’s tales are mere child’s-play, mother,” said Robin, “to the grand facts of electricity.”

“That’s so, Robin,” said Sam, still turning over the leaves of his note-book, “and we had some magnificent experiments or illustrations at the fête, which go far to prove the truth of your remark—experiments which were so beautiful that they would have made the eyes of Letta sparkle even more gorgeously than they are doing at present, if she had seen them.”

Letta blushed, returned to self-consciousness for a moment, looked down, laughed, looked up as Sam proceeded, and soon again forgot herself in a fixed and earnest gaze.

“The two telegraph instruments communicating with India and America, which stood on two tables, side by side, in Mr Pender’s house, were supplied by two batteries in the basement of the building. Eighty cells of Daniel’s battery were used upon the Penzance circuit for India, and 100 cells on the Brest circuit for America. The ordinary water-pipes of the house served to connect the batteries with the earth, so as to enable them to pump their electricity from that inexhaustible reservoir.”

“I was not aware that electricity had to be pumped up through pipes like water,” interrupted Mrs Wright, on whose mild countenance a complication of puzzled expressions was gradually gathering.

“It is not so pumped up,” said Sam. “The pipes were used, not because they were pipes, but because they were metal, and therefore good conductors.”

“But you haven’t told us about the beautiful experiments yet,” murmured Letta, a little impatiently.

“I’m coming to them, little one,” said Sam. “One battery exhibited the power as well as the beauty of that mysterious force which we call electricity. It was the large Grove battery. A current passed from it to copper wires, in a certain manner, produced a dazzling green light, and the copper melted like wax. With silver a still brighter and purer green flame was the result. With platinum an intense white light was given off, and the molten metal fell in globules of exceeding brilliancy. With iron lovely coruscations were exhibited, the boiling vapour flying and burning in all directions; and a platinum wire three feet long was in an instant melted into thousands of minute globules. All this showed the power of electricity to produce intense heat when resistance is opposed to its passage.”

“It is remarkably human-like in that respect,” said Captain Rik, in an under-tone.

“Then its power to produce magnetism,” continued Sam, “was shown by Lord Lindsay’s huge electro-magnet. This magnet, you must know, is nothing but a bit of ordinary metal until it is electrified, when it becomes a most powerful magnet. But the instant the current is cut off from it, it ceases to be a magnet. If you understood much about electricity,” said Sam, looking round on his rapt audience, “I might tell you that it is upon this power of making a piece of iron a magnet or not at pleasure, that depend the Morse and Digné telegraph instruments; but as you don’t understand, I won’t perplex you further. Well, when a piece of sheet copper was passed between the poles of Lord Lindsay’s giant magnet, it was as difficult to move as if it had been sticking in cheese—though it was in reality touching nothing!—influenced only by attraction.” (“That beats your power over Sam, Madge,” whispered Robin. “No it doesn’t,” whispered Madge in reply.) “Then, one most beautiful experiment I could not hope to get you to understand, but its result was, that a ten-gallon glass jar, coated inside and out with perforated squares of tinfoil, was filled with tens of thousands of brilliant sparks, which produced so much noise as completely to drown the voices of those who described the experiment. A knowledge of these and other deep things, and of the laws that govern them, has enabled Sir William Thomson and Mr Cromwell F. Varley to expedite the transmission of

messages through very long submarine cables in an enormous degree. Then the aurora borealis was illustrated by a large long exhausted tube—”

“I say, Sam,” interrupted Rik, “don’t you think there’s just a possibility of our becoming a large long-exhausted company if you don’t bring this interesting lecture to a close?”

“Shame! shame! uncle Rik,” cried Robin.

As the rest of the company sided with him, the captain had to give way, and Sam went on.

“I won’t try your patience much longer; in fact I have nearly come to an end. In this long exhausted tube, ten feet in length and three inches in diameter, a brilliant and beautiful crimson stream was produced, by means of an induction coil. In short, the occasion and the proceedings altogether made it the most interesting evening I have ever spent in my life, e–except—”

Sam paused abruptly, and looked at Madge. Madge blushed and looked down under the table,—presumably for the cat,—and the rest of the company burst into an uproarious fit of laughter, in which condition we will leave them and convey the reader to a very different though not less interesting scene.

Chapter Thirty One

Describes a Happy Home and a Happier Meeting

In a small wayside cottage in the outskirts of one of those picturesque villages which surround London, an old woman sat at the head of a small deal table, with a black teapot, a brown sugar-basin, a yellow milk jug, and a cracked tea-cup before her.

At the foot of the same table sat a young man, with a large knife in one hand, a huge loaf of bread in the other, and a mass of yellow butter in a blue plate in front of him.

The young man was James Slagg; the old woman was his mother. Jim had no brothers or sisters, and his father chanced to be absent at market, so he had the "old lady" all to himself.

"Well, well, Jim," said Mrs Slagg, with a loving look at her son's flushed face, "you've told me a heap o' wonderful tales about telegrumphs, an' tigers, an' electricity an' what not. If you was as great a liar as you was used to be, Jim, I tell 'ee plain, lad, I wouldn't believe one word on it. But you're a better boy than you was, Jim, an' I do believe you—indeed I do, though I must confess that some on it is hard to swallow."

"Thank 'ee, mother," said Jim, with a pleasant nod, as he cut an enormous slice from the loaf, trowelled upon it a mass of the yellow butter, and pushed in his cup for more tea.

"It was good of ye, Jim," said the old woman, "to leave all yer fine friends and come straight away here to see your mother."

"Good o' me!" ejaculated Jim, with his mouth full—too full, we might say—"what goodness is there in a feller goin' home, eh? Who's finer, I should like to know, than a feller's mother?"

"Well, you are a good boy, Jim," said the old woman, glancing at a superannuated clock, which told of the moments in loud, almost absurd solemnity; "but if you don't stop talkin' and go on wi' your eatin', you'll lose the train."

“True, mother. Time and tide, they say, wait for no man; but trains is wuss than time or tide, they won’t even wait for a woman.”

“But why go at all to-day, Jim; won’t to-morrow do?”

“No, mother, it won’t do. I didn’t mean to tell ’ee till I came back, for fear it should be a mistake; but I can’t keep nothin’ from you, old lady, so I may as well ease my mind before I go. The fact is, I’ve just heard of the whereabouts of John Shanks—Stumps, you know—my old mate, that I’ve told you bolted with all our treasure from Bombay. Ah! mother, if I’d only brought that treasure home wi’ me, it’s a lady you’d have bin to-day. I had all sorts o’ plans for you—a coach an’ six was—”

“Never mind your plans, Jim, but tell me about poor Stumps.”

“Well, mother, a tramp came past here, an’ had a bit of a talk wi’ me yesterday. You know I ginerally have a bit of a chat wi’ tramps now, ever since that city missionary—God bless him—pulled me up at the docks, an’ began talkin’ to me about my soul. Well, that tramp came here early this mornin’, sayin’ he’d bin in a poor woman’s house in the city, where there was a man dyin’ in a corner. While he was talkin’ with some o’ the people there he chanced to mention my name, an’ observed that the dyin’ man got excited when he heard it, and called to the tramp and asked him about me, and then begged him, for love and for money, which he offered him, to come and fetch me to him as fast as he could, sayin’ that his name was Stumps, and he knew me. So, you see, as the next train is the first that—you needn’t look at the clock so often, old lady; it’s full ten minutes yet, and I’ll back my legs to do it in three.”

“Don’t forget to take your Bible wi’ you, dear boy.”

Jim Slagg rose with a pleasant nod, slapped the breast of his coat, on which the oblong form of a small book in the pocket could be traced, said “Good-day, mother,” and left the cottage.

It was not long before he stood in the dark passage which led to the room described to him by the tramp. The old woman who rented it gave him her unasked opinion of her lodger before admitting him.

“You’ve got no notion, sir, what a strange character that young man is.”

“O yes, I have; let me see him,” said Slagg.

“But, sir,” continued the landlady, detaining him, “you must be careful, for he ain’t hisself quite. Not that he’s ever done anythink wiolent to me, poor young man, but he’s strong in his fits, an’ he raves terribly.”

“Has no doctor bin to see him?” asked Slagg.

“No; he won’t let me send for one. He says it’s o’ no use, an’ he couldn’t afford to pay for one. An’ oh! you’ve no notion what a miser that poor young man is. He must have plenty of money, for the box as he takes it out on—an’ it’s at his head he keeps it, day and night, ginerally holdin’ it with one hand—seems full o’ money, for it’s wonderful heavy. I could see that when he brought it here, an’ there’s no clo’es in it, that I can see, when he opens it, to get at the few pence he wants now an’ again. An’ he starves hisself, an’ says he’s not fit to live, an’ calls hisself sitch awful names, an’—”

“Well, well, show me his room,” said Slagg, with as much decision in his tone as compelled immediate obedience.

In the corner of a small room, on a truckle-bed, with scant bedding, lay the emaciated form of John Shanks, alias Stumps, alias James Gibson. He had raised himself on one elbow, and was gazing with great lustrous invalid eyes at the door, when his old comrade entered, for he had been watching, and heard the first sound of footsteps in the passage.

“Oh! Jim Slagg,” he cried, extending a hand which bore strong resemblance to a claw, it was so thin. “Come to me, Jim, How I’ve wished an’ longed, an’—”

He stopped and burst into tears, for he was very weak, poor fellow, and even strong men weep when their strength is brought low.

“Come now, Stumps,” said Slagg, in a serious voice, as he sat down on the bed, put an arm round his old comrade’s thin shoulders, and made him lie down, “if you go to excite yourself like that, I’ll—I’ll—quit the room, an’ I won’t come back for an hour or more.”

“No! O no!” exclaimed the sick man; clutching Slagg’s arm with a trembling grip, “don’t leave me, Jim—don’t, don’t! I shall die if you do! I’m dyin’ anyhow, but it will kill me quicker if you go.”

“Well, I won’t go. There, keep quiet, my poor old Stumps.”

“Yes, that’s it—that’s it—I like to hear the old name,” murmured the sick man, closing his eyes. “Say it again, Jim—say it again.”

“Stumps,” said Slagg, getting down on his knees, the better to arrange and grasp his former comrade, “don’t be a fool now, but listen. I have come to look after you, so make your mind easy.”

“But I’ve been such a beast to you, Jim; it was so awful shabby,” cried Stumps, rousing himself again, “and I’ve been so sorry ever since. You can’t think how sorry. I have repented, Jim, if ever a man did. An’ I’d have come back and confessed long ago, if I’d had the chance, but I can get no rest—no peace. I’ve never spent a rap of it, Jim, except what I couldn’t help—for you know, Jim, body an’ soul wouldn’t stick together without a little o’ suthin’ to eat an’ drink; an’ when I was ill I couldn’t work, you know. See, it’s all here—all here—except what little—”

He stopped abruptly, having raised himself to open the lid of the box at his elbow, but his strength failed, and he sank on the pillow with a groan.

“Stumps,” said Slagg, “come, old boy, you an’ me will have a bit of prayer together.”

The sick man opened his great eyes in astonishment. It was so unlike his old friend’s brusque rollicking character to propose prayer, that he fancied he must be dreaming, and the possibility of the visit turning out unreal, induced an expression of distress on his haggard countenance. On being ordered, however, in the peremptory and familiar tones of former days, to shut his eyes, he felt reassured and became calm, while his friend prayed for him.

It was not a set or formal prayer by any means. It sounded strangely like a man asking a friend, in commonplace terms, but very earnestly, to give him what he stood in great need of; and what Jim asked for was the salvation of his friend’s soul and his restoration to health. The petition, therefore, was remarkably brief, yet full of reverence, for Jim, though naturally blunt and straightforward, felt that he was addressing the great and blessed God and Saviour, who had so recently rescued his own soul.

After saying "Amen!" which the sick man echoed, Slagg pulled out his Bible and read through the fourteenth chapter of John's gospel, commenting quietly as he went along, while his comrade listened with intense earnestness. At the first verse Jim paused and said, "This wasn't written to holy and sinless men. 'Let not your heart be troubled,' was said to the disciples, one o' them bein' Peter, the man who was to deny Jesus three times with oaths and curses, and then forsake Him. The Lord came to save sinners. It would be a poor look-out for you, Stumps, if you thought yourself a good man."

"But I don't—oh! I don't, and you know I don't!" exclaimed the sick man vehemently.

"Then the Lord says, 'Let not your heart be troubled,' and tells you to believe in God and Himself."

At the second verse Slagg remarked that it would be a sad, sad thing if the mansion prepared, among the many mansions, for his friend were to be left empty.

"But how am I to get to it, Jim; how am I ever to find the way?"

"Just what the disciple named Thomas asked—an' he was a very doubting follower of Jesus, like too many of us. The Master said to him what He says to you and me, 'I am the way and the truth and the life; no one cometh unto the Father but by me.'"

At the ninth verse the sailor-missionary said, "Jesus is God, you see, so we're safe to trust Him," and, at the thirteenth verse, "Whatsoever ye shall ask in my name that will I do," he said. "Now, we have asked Jesus to save you, and He will do it, by His Holy Spirit, as He has saved me—has saved millions in time past, and will save millions more in time to come. Why, you see, in the sixteenth verse He tells you He will pray the Father to send you a Comforter, who will stay with you for ever. Has He not reason then for beginnin' with 'let not your heart be troubled'? And that same Comforter, the Holy Spirit, is to 'teach us all things,' so, you see, every difficulty is taken out of our way. 'Arise, let us go hence.' Now, my old messmate, I have arisen. Will you not arise and go with me, both of us looking unto Jesus?"

"I will—God helping me!" cried the sick man, literally arising from his couch and raising both arms to heaven.

“There, now—thank the Lord; but you must lie down again and keep quiet,” said Jim, gently and kindly forcing his friend backward.

Stumps did not resist. He closed his eyes, and the restful feeling that had suddenly arisen in his heart when he said the momentous words, “I will,” coupled with exhaustion, resulted almost instantaneously in a quiet slumber.

“When did he eat last?” asked Slagg of the old woman, in a low voice, for he had been taught, or had learned intuitively, that few things are more disheartening in a sick-room than a whisper.

“This morning he breakfasted at six, but it was on’y a hap’orth o’ bread and a drink o’ cold water.”

“And how dare you starve your lodger in that way?” demanded Slagg, leading the astonished woman into the passage and closing the door. “Don’t you know that starving a man is equal to murdering him, and that you’ll be liable to be hung if he dies? There, take this half-sov, and be off to the nearest shop, an’ buy—let me see—sassengers and steaks and—oh, you know better than me what a sick man wants. Get along with you, and be back sharp. Stay! where are your matches? Ah! Any coals? Good, now away with you and fetch a doctor too, else I’ll fetch a policeman, you bolster of bones.”

Thus ordered, threatened, and adjured, the landlady, half-amused, and more than half-frightened at the visitor’s gushing energy, hurried from the house, while Slagg returned to the miserable room, and did his best to render it less miserable by kindling a splendid fire.

It is, perhaps, unnecessary to add, that a breakfast soon filled that room with delicious odour, such as had not been felt in that lowly neighbourhood for many years; that Stumps, after a refreshing sleep, partook of the feast with relish; that Jim Slagg also partook of it—of most of it, indeed—and enjoyed it to the full; that the old landlady was invited to “fall to,” and did fall to with alacrity; that the domestic cat also managed to fall to, surreptitiously, without invitation, and not the less enjoyably on that account; that a miserable semi-featherless but unconquerable canary in a cage in the window took care that it was not forgotten; and that several street boys, smelling the viands from afar, came round the outer door, became clamorous, and were not sent empty away.

It may, however, be advisable to add, that Stumps did not die; that joy of heart, good feeding, and—perhaps—the doctor, brought him round, and that he afterwards went to the country to spend the period of convalescence in the cottage by the roadside, with Slagg's mother.

Chapter Thirty Two

In which the Story finds a "Fault," and the Electrical Current ends

Now, it is not in the nature of things that man, in his present state, should attain to full satisfaction. He may, indeed he should, attain to contentment, but as long as there are higher and better things within his reach, he must of necessity remain in some degree unsatisfied.

Some such idea must have been passing through Robin Wright's brain one fine morning, as he slowly paced the deck of a small schooner with his friend Sam Shipton, for he suddenly broke a prolonged silence with the following remark:—

"I don't know how it is, Sam, but although I am surrounded with everything that should make a fellow happy, I'm—I'm not happy. In fact, I'm as miserable as it is possible to be!"

"Come now, Robin, don't exaggerate," said Sam in a remonstrative tone. "Hyperbole is very objectionable, especially in young men. You know that if you were tied to a huge gridiron over a slow fire, you would be more miserable than you are at present."

Robin smiled and admitted the truth of this, but nevertheless reiterated his assertion that he was decidedly unhappy.

This conversation, we may remark, took place on board of Sam Shipton's yacht, off the west coast of Scotland, several years after the events narrated in the previous chapter.

"Well, now, it is strange," said Sam, with an earnestly sympathetic air and tone of voice, but with the faintest possible twinkle in the extreme corner of one of his eyes. "Let me see—everything, as you justly remark, ought to make you happy here. The weather, to begin with—people always begin with the weather, you know—is splendid, though there is a thundery look about the horizon to the west'ard. Then our yacht, the Gleam, is a perfect duck, both as to her sea-going and sailing qualities, and Captain James Slagg is a perfect seaman, while Stumps is a superlative steward and cook. Our time is our own, and the world before us where to choose. Then, as to our companionship, what female society could be more agreeable than that of my wife Madge, and her bosom friend Letta, who, since she has grown up, has become one of the most beautiful,

fascinating, charming,—but why go on, when, in the language of the poet, 'adequate words is wantin'!' And Letta's mother is second only to herself. Then as to the men, could there be found anywhere finer fellows than uncle Rik and Ebenezer Smith, and Frank Hedley—to say nothing of myself and our splendid little boy Sammy? I can't understand it, Robin. You're not ill, are you?"

"Ill? no. Never was better in my life."

"Well, then, what is it? Be confidential, my boy. The witching hour of sunrise is fitted for confidential communications. You're not in love, are—"

"Hush, Sam! the skylight is open. Come forward to the bows. Yes, Sam, I am in love."

"Well, Robin, I can't pretend ignorance, for I know it—at least I have seen it."

"Seen it!" echoed Robin, "how is that? I have never by word or look given the slightest indication to any one of the state of my feelings."

"True, Robin, as regards words, but there are other modes of indication, as must be well-known to a celebrated electrician like yourself. The fact is, my dear boy, that you and Letta have been rubbing your intellects together for so many years, that you have electrified each other—the one positively, the other negatively; and even a Manx cat with an absent mind and no tail could hardly fail to observe the telegraphic communication which you have established by means of that admirable duplex instrument, a pair of eyes."

"You distress me very much, Sam," returned Robin, seriously. "I assure you I have never consciously done anything of the sort, and I have never opened my lips to Letta on the subject—I dare not."

"I believe you as to your consciousness; but, to be serious, Robin, why should being in love make you miserable?"

"Because it makes me doubt whether Letta cares for me."

"Nonsense, Robin. Take my advice, put an end to your doubts, and make sure of your ground by taking heart and proposing to Letta."

“I dare not, Sam. It is all very well for a fine manly fellow like you to give such advice, but I am such a poor, miserable sort of—”

“Hallo, fasser!” cried a merry voice at that moment, “how red de sun am!”

The owner of the voice—a mere chip of a child, in perfect miniature middy costume—ran up to its father and was hoisted on his shoulder.

“Yes, the sun is very red, like your own face, Sammy, my boy, to say nothing of cousin Robin’s. Where is mamma?”

The question was answered by mamma herself, our old friend Madge Mayland, coming up the companion-hatch,—tall, dark, beautiful, like the spirit of departed night. She was followed by Letta,—graceful, fair, sunny, like the spirit of the coming morn.

“Sunbeam, ahoy!” came up through the cabin skylight at that moment, like the sonorous voice of Neptune.

“Well, grunkle Rik, w’at is it?” shouted Sammy, in silvery tones, from his father’s shoulder.

“Grunkle” was the outcome of various efforts made to teach Sammy to call the old captain grand-uncle.

“Where have you stowed away my hair-brush, you rascal?” cried the voice of thunder.

“It’s under my bunk, grunkle; I was bracking yous boots with it.”

The thunder subsided in tempestuous mutterings, and Sammy, feeling that he had begun the day well, struggled out of his father’s arms and went careering round the deck into every possible position of danger. He kept them all lively until Stumps caught him and extinguished him, for a time, with breakfast.

“Uncle Rik,” said Sam, while that meal was being discussed in the snuggest little cabin that could be imagined, “did you hear of the extraordinary manner in which a whale was caught by a telegraph cable lately?”

“No, I didn’t, Sam, an’ what’s more, I wouldn’t believe it if I did.”

“It is true, nevertheless,” said Sam, breaking his fifth egg—sea breezes being appetising.

“How did it happen, Sam?” asked Madge.

“In a very curious manner Madge. It will amuse Letta, for I know she takes a deep interest in cables.”

“Indeed it will,” said Letta, who was the soul of earnest simplicity; “I delight in electric cables.”

Robin looked at Letta, and wished that he were an electric cable!

“It happened to the Persian Gulf cable, quite recently,” continued Sam, addressing himself to Letta. “The cable between Kurrachee and Gwadur, a distance of 300 miles, suddenly failed one evening. Now, you must know that electrical science has advanced with such rapid strides of late, that we have the power to discover pretty nearly the exact position of a fault in a cable. Of course I cannot expect a young lady to understand the technical details of the mode in which this is done, but you will understand that by tests taken at either end the damage appeared to be about 118 miles from Kurrachee, and a telegraph steamer was sent with an electrical and engineering staff to repair it. The steamer reached the supposed locality early on the morning of the second day out, and proceeded at once to grapple for the cable, though a thick fog prevailed at the time, and a heavy sea was running.

“The soundings at the place were very irregular, implying a rugged bottom of submarine mountain-tops and valleys. On winding in the cable unusual resistance was experienced, as if it were foul of rocks, and when, after great difficulty, they drew it up they found that this was caused by the body of an immense whale, with two and a half turns of the cable round it immediately above the tail.”

“Pooh! boh!” exclaimed uncle Rik, “I don’t believe it.”

“But I do, uncle,” returned Sam, as he opened his sixth egg, “for I read the account of it in one of the engineering journals, in which dates and names were given. The steamer was the Amber Witch, commanded by Captain Bishop, and the staff of operators were under Mr Harry Mance. The body of the huge

creature was found to be rapidly decomposing, the jaws falling away as it reached the surface, and sharks had evidently been devouring it. The tail, which measured twelve feet across, was covered with barnacles at the extremities."

"But how could it have entangled itself so?" asked Mrs Langley.

"They suppose that at the time the whale had found a part of the cable hanging in a deep loop over a submarine precipice, and, thinking the chance a good one no doubt for scraping off the barnacles and other parasites that annoy whales very much, had probably twisted the cable round him with a flip of his tail. Anyhow, the fact is unquestionable that it held him fast until he was fished up dead by the electricians and engineers."

"How strange!" murmured Letta.

"It is indeed," responded Robin, "the most extraordinary case I ever heard of, though cables are subject to many singular accidents. I remember one case of accident to the cable across the river Yar, in the Isle of Wight. A bullock fell from the deck of a vessel, and, in its struggles, caught the cable and broke it."

"I have read of several very singular cases," said Sam, "in which cables have been attacked and damaged by inhabitants of the sea. The Cuba and Florida cable was once damaged by the bite of some large fish, and a similar accident happened to the China cable. In the Malta-Alexandria cable, a piece of the core from which the sheathing had been worn was found to have been bitten by a shark, and pieces of the teeth were found sticking in the gutta-percha."

"I thought it was to the Singapore cable that that happened," said Robin.

"No, but something similar happened to it. That cable was laid in December. In the following March a stoppage occurred. The fault was spotted at 200 miles from Singapore. When hauled up, the cable was found to have been pierced, and bits of crushed bone were sticking in the hole. The piece was cut out and sent to Mr Frank Buckland, who, after long and careful examination, came to the conclusion that it had been the work of a saw-fish."

"Dear me, Mr Shipton," said Mrs Langley, "you speak as if every part of the world were connected by electric cables."

“And such is the case,” said Sam; “we have now direct communication by submarine cable and land telegraph with every part of Europe; with Canada and the United States; down South America, nearly to Cape Horn; with Africa from Algiers to the Cape of Good Hope; with India from Afghanistan to Ceylon; with China from Pekin to Hong-Kong; and down through the Malacca Archipelago, Australia, and Tasmania.”

“I say, Sam, are you a member of the Royal Geographical Society, or a walking atlas?” asked uncle Rik.

“In short,” continued Sam, not heeding the interruption, “there isn’t a civilised quarter of the globe which is not tied to us by telegraph, and from which we might not hear any morning of the events of the preceding day.”

“Always excepting Central Africa and the two poles,” said the captain.

“I said civilised quarters,” retorted Sam, “and, as far as I know, the poles are inhabited only by bears.”

“True, I forgot, the poles are barely civilised,” said uncle Rik.

“Now, Master Sammy,” growled a deep voice from the adjoining galley, “you keep your hands out o’ that copper.”

“Fasser,” shouted a silvery voice from the same region, “’Tumps is naughty. I wants to wass my hands in de soup, an’ he won’t let me.”

“Quite right. Keep him in order, Stumps,” said the unfeeling Sam, senior.

“Dere—pa says I’s kite right, an’ to keep you in order, ’Tumps,” said the silvery voice. (Then, after a few minutes), “Grunkle Rik, is you finish bekfist?”

“Ay, ay, Sunbeam, quite finished.”

“Den come on deck an’ p’ay vid me.”

Uncle Rik rose with a laugh, and obediently went on deck to play. But the play did not last long, for that day ominous clouds rose in the west, and, overspreading the sky, soon drenched the little yacht with rain. Towards evening the rain ceased, but the wind increased to a gale, and the weather

showed signs of becoming what is known among seamen, we believe, as dirty. Ere long the low mutterings of thunder increased to mighty peals, and the occasional gleams of lightning to frequent and vivid flashes, that lit up the scene with the brilliancy of full moonlight.

“I wish we were nearer shore,” said Letta, timidly, to Robin, as they stood looking over the bulwarks; “what is the land we see far away on our left?”

“The Island of Mull,” returned Robin.

“Better if it was further away,” growled Captain Rik, who overheard the remark. “We want plenty of sea-room on a night like this.”

“We’ve got sea-room enough,” observed “Captain” Slagg, with the confidence of a man who knows well what he is about, as he stood by the tiller, balancing himself with his legs well apart.

“You’ve got a lightning conductor on the mast, of course?” observed Captain Rik to Sam.

“No,” replied Sam.

“Sam!” exclaimed the captain in a tone of intense surprise, “you, of all men, without such a safeguard.”

“Well, uncle Rik,” replied Sam with a laugh, “yachts are not always fitted with conductors. But I’m not so bad as you think me. I had ordered a special conductor with some trifling novelties of construction for the yacht, but it was not ready when we started, so we had to sail without it. However, it is not once in a thousand times that a vessel is struck by lightning.”

While Sam was yet speaking, a flash of lightning almost blinded them, and the little schooner received a shock which told of disaster. Next moment the roar of reverberating thunder drowned the crash of timber as the topmast went overboard, carrying the bowsprit and its gear along with it.

Fortunately no one was hurt, but the schooner became unmanageable, owing to the mass of wreckage which hung to her.

Jim Slagg, seizing an axe, sprang to the side to cut this away, ably seconded by all the men on board, but before it could be accomplished the Gleam had drifted dangerously near to the rocks on the coast of Mull. To add to the confusion, the darkness became intense.

Captain Rik, forgetting or ignoring his years, had thrown off his coat and was working like a hero with the rest. The ladies, unable to remain below, were clinging to the stern rails, Madge holding her little boy tightly in her arms, and the spray dashing wildly over all.

Another moment and the Gleam struck on the rocks with tremendous violence. Only by the lightning could they see the wild rocky shore on which they had drifted.

Instinctively each member of the little crew drew towards those nearest and dearest.

“Get out the boat!” shouted Captain Slagg; but the men could not obey, for a heavy sea had anticipated them, and the little dinghy was already careering shoreward, bottom up.

The next wave lifted the Gleam like a cork, and let her down on the rocks like fifty-six tons of lead. A flash of lightning revealed for a moment a range of frowning cliffs, as if to add horror to a scene that was already sufficiently appalling. Then all was again dark as Erebus.

In a frenzy of resolution Captain Rik seized an axe with the view of extemporising a raft, when the Gleam parted amidships, and we might almost say went out, leaving her crew struggling in the waves.

Sam had seized his wife with his strong left arm—he happened to be left-handed—and buffeted the waves with his right. Madge held on to Sammy with the power of maternal love. Sam was aware of that, and felt comparatively at ease in regard to his first-born.

Robin’s arm had been round Letta’s waist—unknown to himself or her!—when the Gleam struck. It did not relax when he felt that they were afloat. Frank Hedley gallantly offered to take charge of Mrs Langley.

Ebenezer Smith, being unable to swim, confessed the fact, with something of a gasp, to Captain Rik, who considerately told him never to mind.

“I can swim for both,” he said, tying a piece of rope-yarn tight round his waist, for he had long before cast off coat, vest, and braces; “but you ought to be ashamed of yourself, a man come to your time o’ life, an’ not able to swim!”

“I never lived near the sea, and had no one to teach me,” pleaded Ebenezer in a tremblingly apologetic voice, for the roar of united wind, waves, and thunder was really tremendous even to those who could swim.

“What o’ that?” returned Captain Rik, sternly. “Was there no river or pond nigh? Even a horse-trough or a washing-tub would have sufficed to make a man of you. As for teaching—what teaching did you want? Swimmin’ ain’t Latin or Greek. It ain’t even mathematics—only aquatics. All the brute beasts swim—even donkeys swim without teaching. Boh! bah! There, lay hold o’ me—so. Now, mind, if you try to take me round the neck with your two arms I’ll plant my fist on the bridge of your nose, an’ let you go to Davy Jones’s locker.”

A flash of lightning revealed Captain Rik’s face in such a way that Ebenezer Smith resolved to obey him to the letter.

It was at this point of their conversation that the Gleam went down—or out—and they sank with a gurgle, coming up next moment, however, with a gasp.

Strange to say, after the first plunge and overthrow amid the boiling waves, the swimmers found themselves in almost still water.

“You’d better let me take Sammy, ma’am,” said Captain Slagg, swimming quietly alongside of Madge, and speaking in the calm tone of a man taking an evening stroll.

“Is that you, Slagg?” asked Sam, who was striking out vigorously.

“Yes, sir, it is,” said Slagg. “You’ve no need to exert yourself, sir, so violently. I know the spot well. We’ve bin washed clean over the reef by the wave that sank us, into a sort o’ nat’ral harbour, an’ we ain’t far from shore. I can feel bottom now, sir, which, bein’ a six-footer, you’ll touch easy.”

“So I do!” exclaimed Sam, letting down his feet. “Madge, darling, cheer up, we’ve got soundings. Give Sammy to Slagg. There, we’ll do famously now.”

Only those who have been for a few moments in deadly peril can understand the feeling of intense relief that came to Sam Shipton’s heart when he felt his toes touch ground on that eventful night. The feeling was expressed in his tone of voice as he asked Slagg whether he had seen any of the others.

“No, sir, I ain’t seen ’em for want o’ light, but I’ve heerd ’em. Stumps is splutterin’ behind us like a grampus. If you’ll hold on a bit an’ listen you’ll hear him. He’s a bad swimmer, and it’s all he can do to save hisself. If he only knowed he could reach bottom with his long legs, he’d find it easier. Not quite so tight, Sammy, my boy, and keep off the wind-pipe—so; you’re quite safe, my lad. As for the rest of ’em, sir, they all swim like ducks except Mr Ebbysneezer Smith, but he’s took charge on by Captin Rik, so you may keep your mind easy. There’s a bit o’ flat beach hereabouts, an’ no sea inside the reef, so we’ll git ashore easy enough—let’s be thankful.”

Jim Slagg was right. They got ashore without difficulty, and they were thankful—profoundly so—when they had time to think of the danger they had escaped.

After a few minutes’ rest and wringing of salt water from their garments, they proceeded inland to search for shelter, and well was it for the shipwrecked party that the captain of the lost yacht was acquainted with the lie of the land, for it was a rugged shore, with intermingled fields and morasses, and wooded rocky heights, among which it would have been difficult, if not impossible, to thread one’s way in the dark without severe damage to the shins. But Jim Slagg led them to a cottage not far from the sea, where they received from the family resident there at the time a warm and hearty Scottish welcome.

It is not uncommon, we suspect, for eccentric natures to undertake the most important matters at the most unsuitable times and in the most ridiculous manners. At all events Robin Wright, while stumbling among the rocks and rugged ground of that midnight march in Mull, dripping wet and with the elements at war around him, conceived the idea of declaring his unalterable, not to say unutterable, attachment to Letta Langley, who leant heavily on the arm of her preserver. But Robin was intensely sensitive. He shrank from the idea, (which he had only got the length of conceiving), as if it had been a suggestion from beneath. It would be unfair, mean, contemptible, he thought,

to take advantage of the darkness and the elemental noise to press his suit at such a time. No, he would wait till the morrow.

He did wait for the morrow. Then he waited for the morrow afterwards, and as each morrow passed he felt that more morrows must come and go, for it was quite obvious that Letta regarded him only as a brother.

At last, unable to bear it, our unhappy hero suddenly discovered that one of the morrows was the last of his leave of absence, so he said good-bye in despair, and parted from his companions, who could not resist the genial hospitality of their new friends in the cottage on the west of Mull.

Ten days later Sam got a letter from Robin, telling him that he had received a cable-telegram from India, from their friend Redpath, offering him a good situation there, and that, having reached the lowest depths of despair, he had resolved to accept it, and was sorry he should not have an opportunity of saying good-bye, as he was urged to start without a day's delay.

Sam was staying with his friends at the Oban Hotel at the time, having at last managed to tear himself away from the cottage in Mull.

He instantly ran out and telegraphed—

"Don't accept on any account."

Then he sought Mrs Langley, and opened Robin's case to her. Mrs Langley listened with a smile of intelligence, and soon after went to her daughter's room, the window of which commanded a splendid view of the western sea.

"Letta, dear, are you moralising or meditating?"

"Both, mamma."

"Well, I will try to help you," said Mrs Langley, seating herself by the window. "By the way, did you hear that Mr Wright has been offered a lucrative appointment in the Telegraph Department of India, and is going off at once;—has not time even to say good-bye to his old friend Sam Shipton?"

Letta turned very pale, then extremely red, then covered her face with both hands and burst into tears.

“So, Letta, you love him,” said her mother, gently. “Why did you not let me know this sooner?”

“Oh, mamma!” said poor Letta, “why do you put it so—so—suddenly. I don’t love him—that is—I don’t know that I love him. I’ve never thought about it seriously. He has never opened his lips to me on the subject—and—and—”

“Letta, dear,” said her mother, tenderly, “would you wish to prevent his going away if you could? Open your heart to your mother, darling.”

Letta laid her head on her mother’s shoulder, but spoke not.

A few minutes later Mrs Langley went to Sam and said—

“Robin must not go to India.”

Sam instantly went by the shortest conceivable route to London, where he found Robin in his room feverishly packing his portmanteau, and said—

“Robin, you must not go to India.”

From that text he preached an eloquent lay-sermon, which he wound up with the words, “Now, my boy, you must just propose to her at once.”

“But I can’t, Sam. I haven’t got the pluck. I’m such a miserable sort of fellow—how could I expect such a creature to throw herself away on me? Besides, it’s all very well your saying you have good ground for believing she cares for me; but how can you know? Of course you have not dared to speak to her?”

Robin looked actually fierce at the bare idea of such a thing.

“No, I have not dared,” said Sam.

“Well, then. It is merely your good-natured fancy. No, my dear fellow, it is my fate. I must bow to it. And I know that if I were to wait till I see her again, all my courage would have oozed away—”

“But I don’t intend that you shall wait, Robin,” interrupted Sam. “You need not go on talking so selfishly about yourself. You must consider the girl. I’m not

going to stand by and see injustice done to her. You have paid marked attention to her, and are bound in honour to lay yourself at her feet, even at the risk of a refusal."

"But how, Sam? I tell you if I wait—"

"Then don't wait,—telegraph."

Robin gazed at his friend in stupefied amazement. "What! make a proposal of marriage by telegraph?"

"Even so, Robin. You began life with electricity, so it is quite in keeping that you should begin a new departure in life with it."

Sam rose, sought for paper, and with pencil wrote as follows:— "From Mr R. Wright, London, to Miss Letta Langley, — Hotel, Oban.—I can stand it no longer. May I come to see you?"

Presenting this to his friend, Sam said, "May I despatch it?"

Robin nodded, smiled, and looked foolish.

An hour later Mrs Langley, sitting beside her daughter, took up a pen, and wrote as follows:—

"From Miss Letta Langley, Oban, to R. Wright, London.—Yes."

Presenting this to her daughter, she said. "May I send it?"

Letta once more covered her face with her hands, and blushed.

Thus it came to pass that our hero's fate in life, as well as his career, was decided by the electric telegraph.

But the best of it was that Robin did go to India after all—as if to do despite to his friends, who had said he must not go. Moreover, he took Letta with him, and he hunted many a day through the jungles of that land in company with his friend Redpath, and his henchman Flinn. And, long afterwards, he returned to England, a sturdy middle-aged man, with a wife whose beauty was unabated

because it consisted, chiefly, in that love of heart to God and man which lends never-fading loveliness to the human countenance.

Awaiting them at home was a troop of little ones—the first home-instalment of a troop of lesser ones who accompanied the parent stems. All of these, besides being gifted with galvanic energy and flashing eyes, were impressed with the strong conviction, strange to say, that batteries, boilers, and submarine cables, were the most important things in the whole world, and the only subjects worth being played at by reasonable human children.

The End