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(See page 10.)

NO. 6.

VOL. 1.

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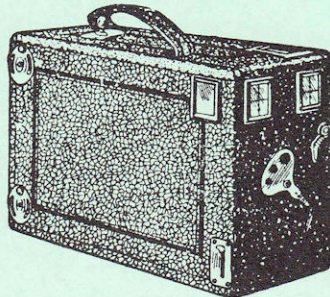
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none other had a right to be there, spoiled the atmosphere with their filthy reek of burning oil, and covered the hedge-rows with dust.

"I could kill the brute!" Stephen suddenly exclaimed, with savage intensity; and, laying down Swallow, he leaped to his feet and shook his clenched fist at the motor.

The car had been pulled up a hundred or so yards beyond where the accident had taken place, and the driver, having turned her round, was going back to see what damage was done.

"Must take some notice of these little things, now that I'm a landed proprietor here," he explained, by way of apology to his companion, a man of his own stamp, who had nodded a grudging assent.

Solomon Hirsch, Johannesburg speculator and diamond dealer, German Jew and son of a pedlar, believed he had become an English country squire, because he had purchased with some of his ill-gotten gains the ancient hall and estate of an impoverished East Anglian family.

"You brute! See what you have done!" exclaimed Stephen, as the car was pulled up beside where he stood.

One of Stephen Masters's weaknesses—everybody else called it a fault—was his practice of invariably saying in plain, unmistakable language precisely what he thought. There was no "hedging" about the lad; if he did not like anybody he was not afraid to say so. Older people called him opinionated and impudent, losing sight of his frank honesty, that would not allow him to say anything different from what he actually felt and thought, and open-mindedness. This quality, together with a somewhat vigorous and easily-aroused temper, had already brought Stephen into more than one scrape, and led to more than one—or a score—fierce, stand-up fights.

He shook his fist in the diamond dealer's face as he spoke. Fear was something of which Stephen had never known the meaning.

"I'd like to smash your wretched car into splinters!" he added viciously.

So menacing was his manner, so fierce his blue eyes, and emphatic his voice, Solomon Hirsch drew back his head.

"Come, come, my boy!" he said blusteringly. "What's all this trouble about? You ain't hurt, is it?"

"Hurt? I'm not hurt. But look what you've done!"

And he pointed to Swallow's motionless form. Mr. Hirsch peered at the dead dog from beneath his goggles.

"Well," he said blankly, "it's only a dog, ain't it?"

It was not the first time he had run over and killed an unfortunate dog, and, being no lover of animals, could not understand that a mere dog should possess any value, sentimental or otherwise.

"Yes, it is only a dog!" Stephen shouted. The contemptuous reference to his murdered favourite made him, if anything, more angry than ever. "Yes, it is only a dog! But you shall pay for having killed him, or my name isn't what it is. You careless, murdering scoundrel, couldn't you see the dog in the road? Couldn't you see me? You ought to be locked up for driving at such a pace. And why didn't you sound your horn? I—"

Mr. Hirsch's fat, pasty face crimsoned with anger at being thus addressed, and within a stone's-throw of his own land, the estate of which he was the proprietor. He had removed his goggles, and his little eyes twinkled angrily.

"What you mean, boy, talking to me like dat?" he demanded excitedly. "Do you know who I am?"

"Yes, I do; and you don't deserve to be spoken to any differently!" came the hot and ready answer.

"Then you ought to know better. But, come, I have killed your dog, and I will pay for it."

Mr. Hirsch withdrew his hand from the driving-wheel and thrust it into his trouser pocket. He would pay for the dead brute, and so impress his friend from South Africa with the open-handedness and generosity that distinguishes the English landed proprietor. His fat hand fumbled in the pocket for a few moments, and came out with half-a-crown. One need not be a spendthrift, even if a generous country squire.

"Here, boy," he said magnificently, "dat will pay for your dead cur."

Stephen took the coin, and, with a sudden outburst of fury, hurled it with all his force inside the car amongst the owner's feet. He came close to the side of the car, his clenched fist rested upon the edge of the door, and the words fell from his lips in a passionate, rapid torrent.

"You blackguard, you brute!" he shouted; and a labourer passing at that moment was so astounded at what was going on he paused, staring open-mouthed.

"You foreign scoundrel!" thundered the enraged lad. "You kill my poor dog, and you nearly kill me, and then you offer me your dirty half-a-crown as compensation. How dare you—how dare you! Yes, I do know you, Mr. Hirsch, and

everybody else shall know of this. You have the impudence to offer me that money!"

"What—what—how—" stammered Mr. Hirsch, fairly taken aback. And then an idea flashed into his brain. The half-a-crown was not sufficient. The boy wanted more!

He drew out a sovereign and held it towards Stephen.

"There!" he said, "I was joking with my half-crown. But I mean—"

What Mr. Hirsch did mean no one ever heard. A sharp blow on his wrist sent the piece of gold spinning in the air. The car door was wrenched open, and a hand laid on the collar of his leather coat. Before he could utter a word, or his astonished companion could interfere, he had been jerked bodily from the vehicle and was lying on his back in the dusty road, and Stephen Masters, beside himself with rage, his face white as chalk, and his whole frame trembling with excitement and passion was bending over him.

"You dare to insult me!" stormed the lad. "D'you think your rotten money can buy anything and everything? Don't you understand! But of course you don't, you dirty German pig! Go back to your own country. We don't want you here. Ugh! You scoundrel!"

Bidding the discomfited South African farewell with a kick in the ribs, Stephen picked up his dead favourite, and at a quick pace set off down a narrow lane leading to the sandhills that line the beach between Palling and Happisburgh. There in the dreary solitude of this lonely region, where scarcely a sound breaks the silence, except the low murmuring of the sea, and scarcely a living object is to be seen beyond the wheeling and dipping gulls and sea-birds, his hot passion died away.

For hours he sat unconscious of the flight of time, heedless of hunger, staring across the dancing sea, shining blue and green and gold under the rays of the sun; plucking at the wiry blades of the sea-grass that covers these low dunes, and now and then gently stroking the stiffening corpse of the dead lurcher.

Stephen was thinking, and his thoughts were not of the pleasantest. Ever since his father's death, seven years ago, he had lived with his uncle, a brother of his dead mother, and Mr. Cubitt and his nephew had not succeeded in getting on well together.

Mr. Cubitt had accepted the guardianship of his nephew for reasons of which the latter knew nothing. He was poor, though the estate on which he lived, about four miles from the town of Statham, was his own—that is, for so long as he was able to pay the interest on the mortgage he had raised. Leave or sell the estate he could not; and the interest on the money which Major Masters had left behind him for his son had come in very useful to Stephen's guardian. That he was entitled to anything the lad was quite ignorant. During the life of the other trustee he had been sent to school, but when that gentleman had died, two years ago, Stephen's schooling had ceased. Mr. Cubitt did not see the necessity of paying away money which might be advantageously used for his own benefit.

For these two years Stephen had done pretty much as he pleased, and he had contrived to enjoy himself immensely. Mr. Cubitt was quite satisfied provided Stephen did not trouble him, consequently the lad had been thrown on himself. Fond of all outdoor sports, he had become an expert shot and fisherman. No one knew better than he how to get fish from the great broads that lay within range of his sturdy legs; and from the associates and companions he had made—marshmen, gamekeepers, farmers' sons, and the like—he had acquired a knowledge of natural history, out-of-door life, and hunter's craft that would not have disgraced a man of twice his years.

Amongst the hardy fishermen of this dangerous coast, heroes of lifeboat work, he had made many friends. Scores of times he had been with them on their fishing expeditions, and had learned to handle a boat with the best of them.

What he was to do for a living he had no idea. Mr. Cubitt had never spoken to him on the subject, and Stephen had thought but little. That his father's wishes for his son to be trained for his own profession had been carefully disregarded by his guardian Stephen did not know. Hitherto he had been more or less happy and contented, without a thought for the future. But to-day, perhaps because of the adventure that had befallen him, and some slight misgiving as to its results, a vague feeling of unrest and dissatisfaction seized him. He wanted to get away—to go beyond that pearly-grey line where sea and sky met—to see other people and other places; the marshes and sandhills and broads and rivers that had been his world suddenly became small and petty to him mind.

Though he knew it not, Stephen had awakened to that love of wandering which, at some time or other, grips almost every boy with the true British blood in his veins, and sends Britishers to the four corners of the earth, eager to see, eager to do something, the spirit that has made the Anglo-Saxon race the finest colonisers the world has ever seen.

CHAPTER 2.

Alone!

"SO you've had the grace to come at last! And, now that you have come, what have you got to say for yourself?"

Such were the words that greeted Stephen as he stepped within the room; and the words, the tone in which they were uttered, and the look that accompanied them, were sufficient to awaken the lad's slumbering anger, and intensify the feeling of mutiny and rebellion that had been born in him during the afternoon. He raised his head and looked defiantly at his relative.

Mr. Cubitt was a tall, thin man, with irritable, wandering, light-blue eyes, and an expression of sourness and disagreeableness that became his sharp, mean features. He certainly appeared to be in a remarkably ill temper, and eyed his nephew with unconcealed dislike and anger.

"What have you got to say for yourself?" he repeated loudly.

"I had no idea you were wanting me, uncle," the lad replied steadily. "It isn't often you are anxious to see me."

"Don't be impudent!" thundered Mr. Cubitt. "Answer my question!"

"I don't know what you mean! I have done nothing to be ashamed of!"

"Done nothing, you say! You call it nothing to insult a gentleman—a rich gentleman, who is one of my friends? And, not content with that, you actually assault him, as if you were some rascally footpad or robber. If you're not ashamed of yourself I am of you. Men have gone to prison for doing less than you did to Mr. Hirsch!"

"I did not know Mr.—he—was one of your friends, uncle."

"What does that matter? What do you call yourself for acting as you did, I should like to know?"

"But he—"

"Oh, you need not trouble to excuse yourself! I have heard the whole story. Mr. Hirsch has been here and informed me of all that took place."

Stephen's face flushed angrily.

"I am not going to excuse myself, uncle; and I never lie," he added proudly. "Did he tell you that he killed my dog?"

"And what if he did kill your dog? A wretched, poaching cur that you should never have had if I'd known anything about it! You're a disgrace to my house, sir!"

"And did he tell you that he offered me money?"

"He said he had offered you proper compensation; more than even the matter warranted. And that you behaved like a lunatic and a blackguard. What do you mean by it—oh?"

"I did what I meant to do. And I'd do it again, to him, or to anybody who so insulted me. Do you think I ought to have taken his rotten money, uncle?"

"I think you ought not to have acted like a blackguard!"

"I'd do it again!" the lad asserted angrily.

"You'll do nothing of the sort! And just learn to speak with proper respect to your elders and your guardian."

There was silence for a few minutes. Mr. Cubitt stood with his back to the fireplace, covertly watching his nephew.

Stephen, straight as a dart, stood on the other side of the table, his frank, fearless eyes fixed on his uncle with an expression of surprise.

"Well," Mr. Cubitt said at last, "as I told you, Mr. Hirsch has been here and told me all about your disgraceful behaviour; but he is a kind-hearted man; he says he is quite willing to forgive you when you have apologised. Moreover, he will so far overlook—"

"Apologise!" the boy interrupted hotly. "Uncle, I'm not going to apologise! What have I to apologise for? I'll see myself at the bottom of the sea first! Apologise to that scoundrel!"

So fierce was the anger that came into his uncle's eyes the lad stopped. With a great effort Mr. Cubitt controlled his wrath, and, raising his hand to enforce silence, continued:

"Moreover, Mr. Hirsch is willing to overlook your offence, and receive you in his London office as a junior clerk, as I had previously arranged with him. You will go there next month, and I trust that by your conduct you will let your employer see that you have repented of your misdeeds."

If a thunderbolt had suddenly appeared on the library floor Stephen could not have been more utterly astounded. For several seconds he stared at his uncle, speechless, unable to believe he had heard correctly.

"Go into his office?" he stammered.

"Yes; and you can think yourself lucky Mr. Hirsch is generous-minded enough not to allow your folly to-day to interfere with the arrangement."

Very soberly Stephen walked around the broad table and stood before his uncle. There was no anger in his voice, only quiet resolution, and his relative's eyes turned away from his steady gaze.

"Uncle," he said distinctly, "I'm sorry to disappoint you,

It was early evening when Stephen awoke from his dreams and proceeded to go home. But first of all, finding a piece of driftwood, he dug in the soft sand a deep grave for poor Swallow. Many a time had the lurcher and his master hunted for rabbits amongst these sandhills, and Stephen had the fancy that amongst them, the scene of many triumphs and delightful excursions, the dog would be best pleased to rest.

It was with a heavy heart Stephen turned his steps homeward. Leaving the hills, he turned into a sandy lane that runs alongside the narrow strip of woodland behind which lies the tiny village of Brunstead. As he walked with downcast head along the lane, he was hailed in a loud voice by a blue-eyed, fair-skinned, stoutly-built young fellow, carrying a gun on his shoulder, and at whose heels trotted a couple of dogs.

"Coming along wi' me, Master Stephen, for a turn wi' the rabbits? Will be fine sport to-night; an' Swallow will ha' plenty to do," said the man, in the pleasant, sing-song voice characteristic of the East Anglian peasant.

"Hallo, Dick, is it you?" the lad answered heavily. "No, I'm not coming to-night, and Swallow'll have no more to do with rabbits or anything else."

"Not coming!" the man said, in a disappointed voice. "That be a pity. An' what be wrong wi' Swallow? Why bain't he wi' you?"

"Swallow'll do no more hunting, Dick," Stephen said sadly; "and you'll see him with me no more, because he's dead."

"Dead, Master Stephen? How's that? Why, he were lively as a cricket this mornin' when I see him along wi' you!"

"Yes; but he's dead now, Dick. He was run over by a motor and killed."

"Deed; but I'm sorry! An' who killed him, sir?"

"The man who bought Kingham Old Hall."

"The German fellow—Mr. Hirsch?"

"Yes; that's him, Dick. Ran over him and killed him. And then he called him a cur, and offered me a sovereign."

Dick muttered to himself fiercely. Then: "What did you say, sir?" he asked.

"I dragged him out of the car and threw him into the road."

Dick dropped the butt of his gun heavily on the ground, and came forward a step.

"Will you shake hands wi' me, sir?" he said excitedly. "I wish 'ee'd killed him, sir!" he said fiercely, as Stephen grasped his outstretched hand. "Many's the time I've seen him scooting an' racing by wi'out a thought for what might be in th' road, and I've longed to smash him up. Let him kill a dog o' mine, though, an' upon my soul, I'll do it, no matter what comes. Here"—he turned and whistled sharply to his straying dogs—"here, come wi' me back! Come up! To heel! I were going down to Batchelor's Place, but now it's Kingham I'm off to, an' if that greasy, Jew-faced varmint bain't a score o' rabbits an' hares short to-morrow, my name ain't Dick Garrett. Won't 'ee come, too, sir?"

But Stephen shook his head; he was feeling in no humour for sport, even at the expense of his enemy, and he followed the lane into the road that leads to Hapshipburgh, and thence continued on his way to his uncle's house, some two miles nearer Stalham.

An elderly man, Mr. Cubitt's indoor servant, who combined the duties of butler and footman, and sometimes gave a hand in the garden and the stable—met him as he passed through the gates and along the broad path leading to the quaint, old-fashioned, but plain flint-built house.

"Where ever have you been, Master Stephen?" inquired the old servant anxiously. "Mr. Cubitt be in a rare fine worry ever since the afternoon. He has been asking for you everywhere, storming and raging like as if he were mad. He be real angry about summat, I do fear. You're to go to him at once. But have you had anything to eat, sir? Lord save us, but 'ee don't look well, Master Stephen. What be the matter?"

"There's nothing the matter, Ben," the boy answered wearily. "And where's my uncle? I'll go to him at once, since he's so anxious."

"He's in the library, sir."

As Stephen went past him, the old fellow laid one hand on his arm.

"Trot him properly, sir," he said. "He be that mad, an'—"

Stephen smiled.

"All right, Ben," he said. "He won't eat me."

Entering the open doorway, Stephen passed through the hall, and, halting at a massive oak door, knocked none too gently.

"Come in!" a harsh, ungracious voice answered. And Stephen entered the library and faced his uncle.

but I'm not going into that man's office. I hate him—I hate the sight of him, and his very name, and I'd rather starve than take a penny from him, even if I'd earned it. I'm sorry; but I won't go—I can't go!"

Then Mr. Cubitt gave full rein to his long-restrained anger. He upbraided his nephew as an ungrateful young dog, who took no heed of the kindness and favours that had been showered on him; told him that he was a beggar and the son of a beggar; that he had lived at the Hall only on sufferance, a pauper dependent on his uncle's charity; and, finally, working himself up to a pitch of almost speechless fury declared that as he had said he would rather starve than accept Mr. Hirsch's kindness, starve he should. He was an ingrate, a fool; he washed his hands completely of him; henceforth he would take no heed or trouble of him; Stephen could sink or swim. The best had been done for him, and he had refused it. He should go—go that very night; not a moment longer should he stay in the house.

"Get away—get out of my sight this instant!" he shouted. "I have done with you! I never want to see you again! I am no longer your uncle, and if ever you show yourself at my doors again you shall be driven away like the beggar that you are."

Mr. Cubitt stopped, exhausted by his violence, glaring at his nephew with a vindictive fury that was appalling. And Stephen, very white, his lips firmly set to repress the words that threatened to break forth, his hands clenched, and his head held high in the air, turned on his heel, and, without a word, walked out from the room.

Old Benjamin met the lad as he went towards the staircase; there was a frightened look of inquiry and sympathy in the old servant's eyes; but, without a word, Stephen went steadily past him and up the stairs to his own bed-room. Here he stayed but a little while. There was nothing he had that he could call absolutely his own, except a few slight trinkets, mementoes of his parents, and he would take nothing that had come to him from his uncle, although—though of this he was unaware—everything that his uncle had given him—clothes, his gun, fishing-rod, and other possessions, had been purchased with his own money.

He was going to obey his uncle literally. He would leave the house that had been his home at once.

Thrusting into his jacket-pocket the few objects that he told himself were really his own, he went down the stairs again. Old Ben was in the hall, and he ventured to speak to him.

"Where are you going, sir?" the servant asked timidly.

"I'm going out," the lad answered quietly.

"But—"

"I'm going, Ben." And he smiled faintly.

"Won't you ha' summat to eat first?" the old man persisted.

"No, thank you!" He felt at that moment that food would have choked him. At the open door Stephen turned, and, by a sudden impulse, seized Ben's hand. "Good-bye, Ben!" he said. "Say good-bye for me to Bob and the rest."

Then he went out of the entrance and along the wide drive, and through the great iron gates, walking steadily, though he had not the remotest idea as to where he was going.

Fifty yards from the gates the sound of hurrying feet caught his ears, but he kept on. A few yards further Benjamin came running beside him. In the semi-darkness Stephen could see the tears glistening in the old man's eyes as he held out a small parcel towards his young master.

"It's just a bite," the old man panted. "Take it, sir—take it; and God bless you, sir!" And he thrust the package into Stephen's hands.

Silently the lad took it, and he found the old man's hand and wrung it again.

"Good-bye, Ben!" It was all he could trust himself to say, and then hurried forward.

Down the road towards the sea Stephen went. More than one passer, on foot or driving, gave him good-night as he went by, and to the salutations Stephen replied mechanically. Soon he reached the sandhills, and, flinging himself amongst the sea-grass and trailing convolvulus, buried his head in his arms and burst into tears. Why he wept he could not have said. Certainly they were not tears of sorrow, remorse, or regret, and self-pity, but rather of wounded pride and anger.

There he lay until it was quite dark, and the moon arose, flooding the sea spread out before him with silver radiance. He sat up, greatly relieved, his heart lighter, and filled with a certain satisfaction, if not actual joy. He had got his wish; he was going away as he had dreamed a few hours before. What might he not see? What might he not do? He recollected he was painfully hungry, and opening the parcel Ben had brought to him ate heartily of the contents.

The cold chicken and bread finished, Stephen rose to his feet. While eating he had noticed here and there, away to his right hand, tiny, ever-shifting points of light, and the

sight of them had given him an inspiration. The fishermen of Palling were about to start on their nightly excursion to the fishing-grounds. He would go with them. Perhaps he might be able to get one of the men to take him as apprentice. He might even get a job as third hand on one of the larger fisher-boats. So often had he been out he felt quite sure he knew the work sufficiently well.

At his best pace Stephen set out in the direction of the twinkling lights, and soon he was on the wide stretch of sand beneath the lifeboat-station. Two boats had not yet started, and one of the fishermen recognised the lad who came running down towards them.

"Comin' out for a night's fishin', Master Stephen?" the man asked heartily. "It's a fine night, though I doubt the moon'll soon be put to bed."

"That's what I'm here for, Joe," Stephen replied; and he entered the rowing-boat waiting to take them out to the scarcely-discernible smack, rocking gently to and fro thirty yards out.

Once on the fishing-boat, her big, patched sails spread out to catch the fresh south-west breeze, Stephen quickly forgot the unpleasant events of the early evening, and was soon busying himself in giving assistance in the hundred-and-one odd jobs that required doing.

As the fishermen had predicted, the moon did go to bed, obscured by a thick bank of drifting cloud. The breeze increased, and over the dark waves the smack plunged gaily forward until the spot was reached where the nets were to be cast. They were going a bit further out to-night, the skipper explained, and hoped to have a good catch.

There was too much to do until the nets were cast for any time to be wasted in thinking; but as the smack moved slowly around after the casting, Stephen sat still on a coil of rope, his back against the mast, and gave himself up to reflection. His regrets for the pleasant life to which he had said good-bye were overshadowed by his dreams of the future. He would go to foreign countries; whether he should be a sailor or no he could not decide. He loved the sea passionately, and seafaring gave little opportunity of becoming rich, and rich Stephen gave up his mind he would be—rich enough, at least, to repay to his uncle all the money that had been spent on his—Stephen's—behalf. Be beholden to his relative he would not. Seven years at fifty pounds a year; that was a fair sum, he thought. Yes; three-hundred-and-fifty pounds. And he would get it, somehow, somewhere—America, Australia, the Klondyke—Yes, that is where he would go, and—

A sudden, thundering crash; a violent jerk that hurled him half-way across the suddenly-inclined deck, hoarse and excited shouting, and the short, sharp cries of startled, frightened men, aroused the lad from his dreams. Before he could collect himself—before he could see what had happened, the smack was lifted bodily to the surface of the sea and hurled sideways as if it had been a matchbox.

The sudden immersion in the water, which followed so quickly upon the initial shock as to seem almost simultaneous, aroused Stephen's startled senses. Rising to the surface, with a powerful breast-stroke he swam blindly forward. What had happened he realised immediately. Without warning the smack had been run into by a passing vessel and all on board swept towards eternity.

It is a tragedy which the North Sea knows only too well—a tragedy by which the lives and happiness of scores of human beings are sacrificed annually, but the risk of which is cheerfully faced by the hardy deep-sea fishermen as part and parcel of the earning of their daily bread. Without warning, without time even for a prayer, the victims disappear, and the destroyer passes on, unconscious, sometimes heedless, of the loss and ruin she has accomplished.

Fortunately for Stephen, the captain of the vessel was not of the inhuman class who push on regardless of the fate of the victims, to whom the loss of a few minutes is of more importance than the saving of human lives. After swimming for what seemed an eternity, the lad heard a loud shout, to which he replied with a feeble "Aho!"

Again and again he shouted, and presently there came into his view the bows of a small boat, driven fast. In a short time it was alongside him; a couple of hands seized him, and he was dragged into the boat.

"Back again, men," someone gave the order; and the boat began to turn around.

"The others," Stephen gasped—"three of them!"

But no one heeded, and he repeated his words.

"Go on," ordered a gruff voice from a man sitting in the stern. "Give way, men! Look alive! We can't spend all night looking for anyone else. We've got one; the Almighty must take care of the rest. We've wasted too much time already."

Twenty minutes' hard rowing, and the boat came close to the side of the vessel, and Stephen had sufficiently recovered

to climb up the swinging rope-ladder that hung down her side and step upon the deck. In a trice the boat was swung aboard, and the order given for full steam ahead.

By a chance that was little short of a miracle Stephen had been saved. His companions—well, as the sailor had said, they were in the hands of God.

The vessel on which Stephen found himself was a tramp steamer, out from Sunderland and bound to Buenos Ayres and other South American ports, with a mixed cargo, a very mixed crew, comprising almost every nationality under the sun, with only three Englishmen amongst them, a truculent captain, and stores that would have passed no conscientious Government inspector in respect of quality and soundness.

In the morning, Captain Baker—a hard-featured man, with an English name, but unmistakably negro blood in his veins—sent for Stephen, and gave him to understand that, as he had come aboard the Magellan, there he would have to stay until port was reached. He, he explained with quite unnecessary force, wasn't going to lose any more time by setting the lad ashore. If he didn't like the arrangement—well, he would have to do the other thing. He would be fed and treated as one of the crew, and he—Captain Baker—would make it his personal business to see that an adequate amount of work was given by the lad in return.

That there should be no mistake as to his meaning, he ordered the lad to forthwith get a bucket and swab and commence cleaning down the deck, after which he might go to the galley and get some breakfast. And, to give point to his words, when Stephen attempted to proffer a request that he might be given the opportunity of exchanging into a passing vessel, Mr. Baker told him to "stow his jaw," and, taking him by the shoulder, gave him a push that sent him reeling six feet away, and further intimated that his orders, as he was master of the ship, were to be obeyed, and that he would take care they were obeyed.

Stephen, resenting such treatment, but having sufficient common-sense to realise his own powerlessness, went forward, obtained the bucket and swab, and did as he had been commanded.

Things might not have fallen out quite as he wished, but at least a part of his desires had been fulfilled. He was going abroad, to see things and do things of which he had dreamed while sitting on the sandhills of Palling.

CHAPTER 3.

In the Way of Adventure.

STEPHEN quickly found, as many another lad has found before him, that if a sailor's life carry with it incidents and pleasures peculiarly interesting, it also brings much that is undesirable, not to say distinctly unpleasant. The bullying and brutality of the officers of the Magellan aroused his sense of injustice and awakened his resentment, and the coarseness and inhumanity of the sailors sickened him. As for the food, he turned from it with loathing, and at first nought but the pain of sheer hunger forced him to swallow it.

But habit, and the necessity for taking Hobson's choice, will work wonders, and before the Magellan was three days' steam beyond sight of the Land's End Stephen had settled down. There is nothing like hardship and hard treatment to bring out the best of a man's character, if any best there be, to prove his grit and toughness, test his endurance, and fit him for the real living of his life. And Stephen, though he had plenty of faults, not the least of which was his fiery temper, had quite sufficient good qualities to come through the test with more than average credit.

That quick temper he owned brought him trouble before his sea-life had lasted twenty-four hours.

Going to the galley for his breakfast, he had been given a pannikin of scalding hot liquid which the cook assured him was coffee, and a ration of biscuit rather worse in appearance, Stephen considered, than he had been in the habit of feeding to his beloved lurcher.

He had eyed these viands with so great and so obvious disapprobation, that the cook, in a surly voice, inquired what was the matter.

"I can't eat this rotten stuff!" Stephen had answered.

"Then ye can go without."

And the man snatched the biscuit from his hand.

"Can't I have anything else?" the lad then inquired, seeing that the cook made no attempt to find anything further.

"Oh, yes, we'll give ye a twelve-course dinner, if ye'll only say what yer lordship'd like, an' when 'tyme it's to be served," the man sneered. "We can get ye 'sparagus an' oysters, an' salmon an' fried chicken, an' 'o'ouse grapes. Here, get outside!" he suddenly broke off roughly; and,

taking Stephen by the collar, he pushed him to the doorway and thrust him outside.

As ill-luck would have it, a sailor was passing as Stephen stumbled through the entrance, pannikin in hand, unable to stop. The two collided, and the scalding hot coffee was liberally and impartially distributed over their respective persons.

"Madre de Dios!" yelled the sailor, and uttered a shrill scream of pain and angry surprise.

He was a Chilean—a wiry, olive-complexioned fellow, of some twenty years of age—and, like all natives of tropical countries, gifted with a temper even more brittle and fiery than that Stephen himself possessed.

"Blind fool!" he shouted; and he struck at Stephen's face with his open hand.

It was a heavy, stinging blow upon the lad's cheek, and a brightened flush followed. Before the South American knew what had happened to him, he staggered backwards, half dazed, and for the moment wholly blinded.

Stephen had never in his life taken a blow without returning it with interest, no matter how big or formidable his antagonist might be, and had he reflected, which he had not, would have seen no reason for withholding his hand on this occasion. Dropping the empty pannikin, he shot his clenched fist forward, striking the Chilean fairly between the eyes.

Recovering himself, the sailor, spitting oaths like an angry cat, sprang at Stephen, showering blows upon him—downward, chopping blows, that fell upon Stephen's head and face and bruised him considerably. There was no place for the lad to step backward and place himself in a proper defensive attitude; besides, he was not fighting by rule now, as he had done under the watchful eye of the instructor in the gymnasium of the school at King's Lynn. Men in these chance encounters lose sight of, have no time for, the nice and exact rules of scientific boxing; they fight to do as much damage to the opponent as is possible in the shortest time—"to hit, to hit hard, and to keep on hitting," as the old pugilist said, is their business.

This is what Pedro was doing, although in a somewhat wild and barbarous manner. Stephen found himself doing the same, although he had a little skill and knowledge to assist him. With a vicious upper cut he jerked the sailor's head back, and then, lowering his body, he drove his right fist forward at that terribly vulnerable part spot just below the breastbone—the "mark," as it is styled in pugilistic parlance. There was all his weight behind the blow; his fist went home, and Pedro doubled up like a badly-filled bolster suddenly thumped in the centre. He went limp as a wet rag, and collapsed on the floor, giving vent to a gasping wheeze of pain as he fell, his hands clasped across his damaged anatomy.

"You're a peach, you are, an' no mistake! Here, come in, an' get another tin o' coffee!" exclaimed the cook, who had been an interested spectator of the battle. "Who was it taught ye to fight that way?"

Stephen went out of the galley with a fresh pannikin of coffee and some biscuits, to which the cook had added a lump of butter; and this time he made no comment on the quality of the fare.

This was by no means the last battle in which Stephen took part before the tragedy occurred which kept the Magellan from reaching Buenos Ayres, or any other port. The man or boy aboard ship who cannot take his own part, whose hands are not ready and able to take care of his head, is likely to have a bad time of it. But the other fights were fair, stand-up encounters, with more good feeling than malice behind them; to be forgotten when the resultant bruises had vanished. Of his scuffle with Pedro, Stephen thought no more eight-and-forty hours afterwards; but the Chilean did not forget it, neither did he forgive the lad; and more than once, when he was alone, during the night or middle watch, he would take out his long-bladed knife and put a still-keen edge on its shining blade.

Speed was not the strong point of the Magellan, but make haste was the order the master had received from his employers, and, fair weather or foul, the old tramp was pushed along at the best speed the almost worn-out engines could develop. A call was made at the Canary Islands, but only for an hour or two, insufficient time to allow any of the men to go ashore; and, in spite of their protests, and demands that a halt be made at the Cape Verde Islands, the master flatly refused to listen, and when the men's sullen grumbling changed to active disobedience, he forcibly demonstrated that he would stand no nonsense.

A big Scandinavian, who acted as spokesman, was laid out with a clip on the head from a capstan-bar, and the rest, overawed by the captain's fierce eyes and threatening revolver, retreated sullenly to the forecabin.

But they were not done with. During the middle-day watch, the second engineer, an Englishman, who was in charge of the stokehold, found himself surrounded by a

crowd of angry sailors, who threatened him with violence if he did not immediately reverse the engines and take the Magellan back to the Cape Verdes.

This Barrett stoutly refused to do; laughed at them; and when they proceeded to attempt to make their threats good, he felled two of his assailants with a coal-shovel, and, bursting through the rest, bounded up the staircase, and, unharmed, reached the door of the captain's cabin.

"Wake up, sir—wake up!" he shouted, banging on the door with the handle of his shovel. "There's mutiny aboard!"

The cabin-door then flew open, and Captain Baker appeared in his shirt and trousers, a revolver in each hand. Cutting short the second engineer's explanations, the skipper rushed on deck and ran forward.

Half-way he was met by the mutineers, who, having captured the stokehold, and so obtained command of the engines, were hurrying aft to settle with the officers, murder in their eyes, and in their hands such weapons as they had been able to get hold of—fire-shovels, capstan-bars, and their long knives.

"Stand back!" roared the master; and at the sight of his leveled revolvers the mutineers halted.

Fearless, the captain faced them, although he was alone. Somewhere on the deck was the first mate, who was taking the watch; but whether the man—a foreigner—was overcome with fear, or in secret sympathy with the sailors, he made no attempt to come to his superior's assistance.

"Get back to your work!" commanded the skipper.

A man stepped forward.

"We don't go back to work, cap'n," he cried, "unless ye turn th' ship round back to th' Verdes. Th' water's stink-in'; the food ain't fit to eat. Th' ship don't go on until there's fresh stores aboard!"

A growl of approval followed these words.

"Stores or no stores," answered the skipper, "we're going on. And when we do reach port every mother's son of ye shall see the inside of gaol."

"It's no port you'll ever see!" shouted a voice; and, simultaneously a heavy bar of wood flew through the air and struck the captain on the head.

The man staggered, and immediately the sailors were upon him, when there was a ringing English cheer, and into the thick of the fight plunged Stephen, blood streaming from a deep cut on his forehead. It was the knife of Pedro the Chilean that had inflicted that wound, but Stephen had stretched the man senseless with a blow from an iron fire-bar.

With Stephen came the second engineer, and before their furious charge the sailors gave way and the skipper regained his feet. But the men closed in again, and soon rescued and rescuers were fighting desperately for their lives.

Suddenly a shot rang through the air, and a mutineer dropped. The second mate had escaped from his cabin, in which he had been locked, and had opened fire with a Winchester carbine. There was another shot, another sailor fell; and then, just as the mate was about to press the trigger a third time, from the bridge, above the heads of the smiting, swaying crowd below, came the sharp, venomous crack of a revolver, and the second mate lurched forward, a bullet through his brain. A smile on his sallow face, Cortes, the first mate, leaned over the rail of the bridge, and watched the captain's fight for life.

And the end soon came. Three men, no matter how strong and courageous, cannot battle against a dozen. The engineer went down, a knife between his shoulder-blades, Stephen was bruised and bleeding, and then the captain, exerting his tremendous strength, shook himself free for a moment, and ran to where hung one of the smaller boats. Two slashes with his knife and the ropes that held it to the davits parted. Before, however, he could spring after the falling boat, an iron bar, thrown by a steady hand, struck him beneath the ear, and he fell like a log.

Stephen heard the splash of the falling boat, warded a blow at his head, felled a man who stood in his way, and ran to the bulwarks. Raising his hands, he dived overboard without hesitation, coming up a few yards from the floating boat. A few powerful strokes carried him to it, and he drew himself on board. Seizing the oars, he dipped them into the sea and sculled away from the Magellan. The mutineers had seized the ship; had he stayed there had been nothing for him to expect but death.

Madly, heedless of his direction, Stephen plied the oars until exhausted Nature gave way, and he fell back helpless. And as he lay still, panting, and conscious of the pain of his many wounds, there came to him the realisation of his position. Alone on the sea, at the entire mercy of wind and waves, without a drop of water or scrap of food, and ignorant of where he might be. Better to have stayed and met a short and sudden death at the hands of the mutineers.

The sun beat down on his upturned face, and soon the lad slipped into a state of semi-unconsciousness. When he

awoke, sore and stiff, night had fallen. Overhead the stars gleamed brightly, and a cool breeze ruffled the surface of the ocean. His throat was dry, his mouth parched, and already he was beginning to feel the first pangs of hunger.

Stephen picked up the oars and commenced to row, though it was more for the sake of something to distract his miserable thoughts than with any hope of moving nearer towards land. Foodless, waterless, a tiny speck adrift on the mighty ocean, his one hope lay in being seen and picked up by some passing vessels before he actually succumbed. Whether he was sufficiently within the track of vessels for this hope to have any good foundation he knew not.

Dawn came, and with it the scorching sun, and his agonies increased. At last he could row no longer. Stripping off his shirt, he fastened it to an oar, which he lashed upright, with the prayer that the mournful signal of distress might be seen. Then he cast himself, face-downwards, in the bottom of the boat, striving to drive from his memory the stories of shipwrecked sailors, who, after terrible sufferings, had perished, victims of thirst and starvation.

So the long day passed; night came, but he was too exhausted to use the oars any more. He lay helpless, heedless of the occasional splashes of sea water that enveloped him. The wind had risen, and the tiny boat tossed hither and thither. The wetting revived him somewhat; he felt fresher; but hour by hour the tormenting pangs of hunger and thirst became greater. Two days had passed. How much longer could he exist? Four days without water, so he had read, was the limit of human endurance. If no ship passed within forty-eight hours he would be a corpse.

Hour after hour he lay in the boat staring across the blackness of the ocean until the long night passed, the stars faded out of the heavens, and once again the sun arose—ah, how he hated the sight of it!—burning him, scorching into his very brain.

He became light-headed, and in his madness lapped at the sea water that washed to and fro within a few inches of his lips. His sufferings increased; violent pains twisted his body; he became sick; yet again and again sucked at the bilge-water. Then Nature failed. He fainted, and a merciful oblivion came to him.

There was the taste of something sweet and fiery in his mouth when Stephen again opened his eyes. Something soft lay beneath his hot head, and he could hear sounds which were not the lapping of the waves against the side of the rowing-boat. He tried to move his legs, his arms, but they were either too heavy or his muscles too weak to respond. He was in no pain, and his eyes, after remaining open for a few moments, wearily closed again.

"Touch an' go; but I think he's turned the corner," a deep voice exclaimed, in a satisfied tone.

"Wal, an' how goes the boy?" The voice asking this question was high-pitched, nasal, and drawing.

"Right-ho, skipper!" the first speaker answered cheerily.

"He's opened his eyes, an'—"

"Wal, I hope as he'll be worth all th' trouble you've taken!" was the rejoinder.

"I guess so, skipper; an' anyway, a human life's worth working for."

A grunt was the only answer.

"Don't you think so?" inquired the deep-voiced speaker.

"Some of 'em is; some of 'em ain't; and there's a good many that ain't, so far's my experience goes."

"Well, I guess this is one of 'em that is. He looks like it."

Another grunt, expressing but little confidence in any such result, escaped Silas Watson, master of the Virginian, and he left the cabin, where, for almost two days, John Rossiter, ex-medical student, and passenger on board the Virginian, had worked to save the life of Stephen Masters.

When the boat's crew from the Yankee brig had reached the cock-boat detected by John Rossiter's keen sight, in which lay Stephen, within arm's length of death, they had brought the lad back to the ship, although one and all declared that it wasn't worth while, as the boy was so far gone that he could not possibly recover. But Rossiter, who had accompanied them, had insisted so strenuously, that the seemingly dead body had been carried aboard and placed in his own cabin.

As Captain Watson had said, Rossiter had taken some trouble. So very feeble had been the spark of life burning in the lad's body that more than once a less-determined, or less obstinate man than Rossiter would have been tempted to relinquish the task of reviving it. Hour after hour had he sat by the motionless body, working on a theory of his own for the resuscitation of life, and taking no heed of the discouraging remarks that fell from the skipper or officers whenever they entered his cabin to inquire as to the progress he was making.

But Rossiter had continued his efforts, and twelve hours after the encouraging sign that had called forth his remark quoted before, he had the satisfaction of seeing Stephen wake

up from his trance-like condition. His brain was clear, and his pulse, though weak, was steady. He was feeble as a child, not having the strength to raise a finger, but his life was saved.

Day by day Stephen grew stronger, thanks to his own vitality, strength of constitution, and Rossiter's untiring care and attention. Before the Virginian reached Bahia he was able to walk the deck without assistance. From thence he picked up health and strength so rapidly that when the brig cleared from Rio Janeiro, the next port of call, he insisted upon being no longer considered an invalid, and offered his services to the skipper until San Francisco was reached.

The Virginian was on her homeward voyage from New York, and as she was not taking the outside route, having calls to make at every port of importance from Valparaiso to Panama, the voyage, though long, was of the greatest interest to Stephen. Captain Watson was only too willing to take him on, though only as a deck-hand, one of the crew having fallen overboard during a storm while off the mouth of the Amazon. It was this same westerly gale that had saved Stephen's life, for had not the Virginian been blown far out of her course, she had never reached the parallel of longitude where she had come across Stephen's drifting boat.

Nor did John Rossiter allow the acquaintance so tragically commenced to die because of the difference between his position and Stephen's. Five years older than the English lad, an American of the best type, of a disposition and character that won Stephen's heart, long before San Francisco was reached he and Stephen were firm friends.

CHAPTER 4.

Northward!

THE Virginian lay in San Francisco Harbour, having passed through the Golden Gate only three days overdue, and Captain Silas Watson had made an offer to Stephen to ship him for the outward voyage again on full man's wages, if he so desired. Stephen was undecided; he could not make up his mind to accept or reject the skipper's offer. The sum of money handed to him by the skipper as wages due—thirty dollars—was all the money he possessed in the world; and twelve dollars a month, with the daily risk of losing his life, was not the most alluring of prospects.

One day he strolled through the city towards the ferry which connects San Francisco with Oakland. As he stood watching the crowds of people moving to and fro, a hand suddenly fell upon his shoulder, and a hearty voice exclaimed:

"Hallo, Stephen; here you are, then! I've saved me a journey, I guess, for I was just coming to give you a look up on the Virginian, as I said I would. Hope you didn't think I'd forgotten my promise!"

Stephen turned, with a smile on his tanned young face, seized Jack Rossiter's outstretched hand, and wrung it warmly.

"Nothing of the sort!" he said frankly. "You said you'd come, and so I took it for granted you'd come. You're a gentleman, and I take it that a gentleman always keeps his word. Never to break a promise, and never to tell a lie, that's what I recollect my father telling me is the test of whether a man is a gentleman."

"And a real good test, too," Rossiter answered. "Now, what are you doing? That's what I want to know."

"Nothing in particular. To tell the truth, I'm trying to make up my mind whether to accept Captain Watson's offer or no."

"And do you intend to?" the young American asked anxiously.

"I don't know. It's something definite; but—"

"Then you come along with me, and listen to a proposition I'm going to make you; and if it doesn't kick all my thoughts of sailing in the Virginian way over to Jericho, I'm a nigger, and you're not the lad I take you for. Oh, it's great, I tell you! And I'm willing to bet my bottom dollar right away that I've only got to say two words of it to you, and I'll be having hard work to keep you from making tracks at once!"

"What is it?" Stephen inquired, smiling at his friend's enthusiasm, though a trifle excited himself, for by this time he knew Rossiter sufficiently well to be aware that he was no fool to be led away by any wild-goose, mad-brained idea.

"What is it?"

"Have you lunched? No. Well, we'll go and get some grub at once, and I'll put you on to the game right now. Oh, it's great, man!"

"Well, but what is it?"

"Man, it's just the mightiest streak of real, blazing, honest Injun good luck that you'd come across in a thousand years! It's something that's going to make you and me and old Dave millionaires."

"Now, Stevie," he said, when the pair were seated in a restaurant, discussing the good things the American had ordered—"now I'll try to talk intelligently. But, my word, the news is that good a man may be excused if he does get a bit above himself! D'you know Klondyke?"

"Heard of it," Stephen answered. "A place in British Columbia, isn't it, where there was a big discovery of gold made? I read of it a little before I left home—England."

"Not far out; it's in Yukon, to the north of British Columbia. And there has been a gold strike. Great Jehoshaphat, man, California in '49 isn't going to be in it with Klondyke. There's gold there by the million tons. Men are rushing up there just as fast as they can put one leg in front of the other, fighting to get there first. But there's a lot of it, and it won't all be staked out just yet awhile; only, as you understand, those who get there first stand the best chances. Now, what d'you say of making for Yukon? It'd be better to pick up, or shovel up, five hundred dollars a day in Klondyke, even if it is a bit cold, I guess, than sweating and slaving and killing yourself for ten dollars a month on the Virginian—eh?"

Rossiter's excitement had seized him again; he had forgotten the food on the plate before him, and was talking in a hurried, nervous voice, which he kept so low, however, that none sitting anywhere near could hear a word of what he was saying.

"Is it a go, Stevo?" he said anxiously.

But the more phlegmatic Englishman did not answer him at once; he went on eating quietly, and his silence irritated Rossiter.

"It's as safe as the bank," he insisted. "Cold, I know; but the gold's there O K, and it only wants getting. And, what's more—his voice dropped to a whisper—"I know where to go and lay my hands on enough to make our fortune, all three of us, in about two years. Why don't you answer, man?"

"Because, Jack, for my part, there's nothing to say," Stephen answered at last. "You go, and good luck—the best of luck—to you. But I can't."

Rossiter stared in sheer amazement.

"But why?" he gasped. "Surely you ain't—"

"Because it's going to take money, to get up there—money for outfit and the rest. And, besides the clothes I stand up in, about twelve dollars represents every penny I've got in the world. You go, and if I see a chance of working my way up there, I'll follow, and—"

A shout of laughter, so loud that the waiter came hurrying up to see if one of the guests were ill, interrupted Stephen.

"Why, is that the reason you can't go?" laughed Rossiter, as soon as he had recovered his breath. "Why, you stupid old jackass, we're all three going shares. Dave's going to take us there. I'll find the dollars, or some of 'em, and you and I are going to put in the work to get the gold out. We're partners, Stevie, if you'll only say the word; and partners out West here means a lot. It doesn't mean going in with a man, each putting an equal sum of money and taking half the profits; it's more than that; it's two or more men going together, chumming—pals, I guess you'd call them on your side—men who share and share alike, no matter what each puts in, taking the rough with the smooth; never grumbling or shirking, or going back on each other, but sticking together through thick and thin, not for a day or a week, but for years—a lifetime. That's what we call partners out West; and I guess you're the fellow I'd rather have as partner than any other I've run up against. Don't you say no, Stevo—that is," he added slowly, "unless you think I'm not the man you could be partner to."

There was no slackness about Stephen then. His eyes glowing, he stretched his right arm across the table and seized Jack Rossiter's hand.

"It wasn't that, Jack," he said quietly, "and you know it. Don't I owe my life to you? And that's not everything. We'll be partners, as you say, come fair weather or foul, good luck or bad; and if I go back on you, as you call it—well, I hope you'll kill me, for I shall deserve it. I'm with you now, until death, as I'm a gentleman!"

"We're partners now, Stevo, you and I; and, if you've finished, I'll take you around to our third chum. He's an old chap, named Dave; been up in Alaska, and Yukon, and Behring Straits, and the Klondyke, and Heaven only knows where. He'd made a pile, and was coming back with it; but the steamer he was on, with all his dust, went down just outside the Golden Gate, and now he's penniless. I saved the poor fellow from a couple of rascally toughs a few nights back, and, in gratitude, he's told me of this rich strike that's to be made. Come, we'll go to him."

And together the two chums went to the lodgings which Rossiter had found for Alaskan Dave, and there they talked earnestly until far into the evening. When they separated it was with plans carefully prepared for the locating and win-

ning of the gold which was to make them rich "beyond the dreams of avarice."

But one doesn't travel twelve hundred miles in a day or two. Steamers, though every one was being snapped up by Yukon-bound gold-seekers, were none too many, and for every berth there were a hundred anxious applicants; and it was very many weeks after the night of the long talk in Old Dave's bed-room that the three partners found themselves within sight of the promised land.

Juneau was the destination of the steamer on which the three adventurers had embarked, and from Juneau they travelled by boat to Skagway, in company with hundreds of excited gold-seekers, waiters, dock labourers, cowboys from the western plains, professional miners, lawyers, doctors, soldiers, sailors—men of all classes, all professions, all nationalities—men whose talk ran only on gold, the gold they meant to win, the gold for the spending of which they were already making plans, though yet they were no nearer than six hundred miles to the region where the precious metal was to be taken from the earth. Of the dangers, the probabilities of failure, they knew nothing; they had no time to stay to consider them; that they would all be millionaires was a foregone conclusion.

Old Dave Burnham, the man who had already experienced the pains and dangers of Klondyke, listened to these chatters, and said nothing; now and again he smiled to himself. Already he had impressed on his two partners that it was anything but a picnic on which they were setting out. He had told them of the awful cold; the terrible dreariness; the violent storms, to which all but the strongest succumbed; the terrible difficulty of the work; the hardships and the privations they would be called upon to undergo. Consequently, both Stephen and Rossiter looked to what lay before them with very different eyes from those of the light-hearted but terribly excited men with whom they found themselves in company.

A three days' halt was to be made at Skagway, where the real business of the journey would begin; but the three friends had not been in that town six hours before something occurred which threatened disaster to them at the outset.

They were in the smoking-room of the hotel where they had taken temporary lodgings, Rossiter and Stephen talking together, Dave some distance away, smoking quietly, and listening to the noisy conversation of those around him.

Suddenly Stephen swung round and gripped the wrist of an individual—a squat, dark-faced man—who had been standing a little in his rear.

"You thief!" he said, in a voice sufficiently loud for every man in the room to hear.

The fellow started back, but he could not release his wrist from Stephen's strong grip. Everyone turned and stared.

"What yer playin' at, kid?" the man growled, striving to twist his hand away.

"You had your hand in my pocket," Stephen asserted loudly.

"Aw, get out; yer dreamin'! Go to bed, kid; an' just don't talk that way again, or there'll be trouble for you. Leggo! D'yer hear?"

"I'm not dreaming!" cried Stephen. "You had your hand in my pocket, I say. Look here!"

And with a quick, forcible movement he opened the closed fingers of the fellow's hand, and displayed to the eyes of those in the room, who had crowded around, a small gold locket. This was one of the few treasures Stephen had brought from his uncle's house, and contained miniatures of his father and mother.

"Say, does this look as if I were dreaming?" Stephen demanded. "That locket's mine. I felt you take it."

With an oath, the man wrenched his hand away, letting the locket fall to the ground. Before, however, he could back through the crowd, Stephen's left hand shot forward, struck the fellow on the point of the jaw, and he dropped like a log.

"What's the trouble?" inquired a smooth, gentle voice; and a tall, slim, well and carefully groomed man, dressed in strong contrast to those around him, who had been leaning carelessly against the bar counter, apparently quite out of place, and attentive to nothing that was going on, suddenly lounged his way through the crowd, who, directly they heard his voice, began to drift slowly backwards.

"What's the trouble, my lad?" the well-dressed man inquired again, addressing himself to Stephen, who had risen, after searching for his locket.

"Why, that rascal just picked my pocket, and I have knocked him down," Stephen replied.

"Ah-h!"

The man's keen, steady, grey eyes fixed themselves upon the English lad's flushed, fearless face. For a few moments he regarded him with some interest. The crowd eyed both

with curious, half-fearful glances, and edged a little further backwards. Unseen by Stephen, Old Dave had left his seat and had forced himself into the front rank of the crowd, where he stood, hands in pockets, intently looking at the well-dressed gentleman.

"And this is the way you resent such attempts," went on the latter. "His voice was suave and pleasant, but there was an underlying note that Stephen, in his excitement, did not heed.

"It is. And I'd do the same to any man," Stephen rejoined.

"Ah! You are a bold lad, seemingly. But it is a dangerous thing to make enemies in Skagway. It is a—"

"Enemies!" the lad interrupted hotly. "I have no wish to be friends with thieves and scoundrels!"

The well-groomed man laughed.

"There are many such in Skagway," he said. "And, as I was going to say, Skagway is a rough place. Men here are apt to do as you did just now—take the law into their own hands; and they're not very particular as to the results of their actions. Men here carry guns, my boy, and they're not afraid of using them."

"Perhaps so; but the fear of that isn't going to prevent me from knocking a thief down when I catch him red-handed, as I did this fellow."

"But you don't want to get shot, surely?"

"I don't." And Stephen laughed. "But, all the same—"

"All the same, I venture to think that, maybe, one day you will regret your over-hastiness. What is there to prevent the man you just knocked down from shooting you in revenge for your blow?"

"My own hands, and my own head," was the lad's confident answer.

"I would not be too sure." And the man shook his head warningly. "Still, you are a plucky lad, and I hope you will not come to harm. Good-night! Hope I see you again before you leave Skagway."

With a polite inclination of his head, the well-dressed stranger bade Stephen good-bye, and walked out from the smoking-room, the rest making way for him deferentially, and looking after him with glances that expressed as much of fear as of respect.

Then the crowd turned towards Stephen, but before anyone could speak, Old Dave came forward and laid one of his huge hands on Stephen's shoulder.

"I guess it's time we went upstairs," he said quietly.

And Stephen, greatly wondering, allowed himself to be led away by the old miner, followed by Rossiter, who was no less surprised.

Dave said not a word until they reached the one room which served as sleeping-chamber for all three, bed-rooms in Skagway being just then at a premium, and only to be secured at a price that would have made even one accustomed to the charges of the most fashionable and expensive hotels of America or the Continent, open his eyes very widely.

"My lad," Dave said solemnly, when he had fastened the door closely and lighted the one tallow dip which served for illumination—"my lad, I thought you were a goner!"

Both Stephen and Rossiter eyed the old miner with frank surprise.

"I did," went on Dave. "I reckoned to see you movin' towards kingdom come; an' let me tell yer, yer was a long way on the road to there."

"Think that crook was going to shoot Steve?" inquired Rossiter.

"Him? No!" the miner answered contemptuously. "It was 't'other one!"

"The other one?" Rossiter echoed.

"What, that well-dressed, well-spoken man who was talkin' to me?" exclaimed Stephen.

"Yes; him. I was watchin' him d'rectly I see him come up to yer, an' I was ready to send a bullet through him any moment. I had my hand on th' gun in my pocket, though I guess he'd ha' finished me before I'd got in a second shot."

"Why, who in thunder is he?" burst out Rossiter. And Stephen's eyes asked the same question.

"He's Soapy Smith," Dave answered simply.

"Well?"

"Well, boys, if either of yer know Skagway as I do, yer wouldn't need to ask who Soapy Smith is. He's just about th' biggest thief an' murderer an' scoundrel in Skagway, or anywhere. That man yer knocked down was one of his pals."

"And d'you mean to say no one ever attempted to arrest him?" asked Stephen incredulously.

"No; all afraid of him. He'll shoot just so quick as a mule can kick, an' everyone's scared to death of him. He just owns Skagway, does Smith."

Old Dave was quite correct, and the individual referred to was in truth so curious and prominent a character, he deserves some slight mention.

CHAPTER 5.

Klondyke.

FROM where Soapy Smith had come, no one knew. He was certainly a gentleman, as far as education, manners, speech, and dress go; and, as Dave Burnham had said, he was a murderer, and the greatest scoundrel unhung. Getting together a band of confederates, he had practically taken possession of Skagway. The police were in his pay, all the town officials were of his nomination, and his creatures were to be found in every hotel, saloon, and theatre in the town.

The end of him, it may here be mentioned, was quite in accordance with poetic justice. A party was formed to fight Smith, and a town marshal was appointed who was a man not to be frightened or bribed. So obnoxious did he make himself to Smith that it was resolved to put him out of the way, the "Terror" undertaking to do the business himself.

One day the two men met in a drinking-saloon, and Smith deliberately raised a quarrel, in the middle of which he suddenly drew his revolver and fired point-blank at the marshal.

But for once Smith ran up against a man as quick as himself. The marshal drew his gun at the same moment, and two shots rang out simultaneously. Through the smoke one of the combatants was seen to fall headlong to the ground. It was Soapy Smith. He had been shot through the brain, and was stone dead. But the marshal was quite un hurt.

All this, however, was to happen long after the three partners had departed from Skagway. Smith's supremacy in the town was at its zenith, and Stephen realised, when Alaskan Dave had finished speaking, the peril in which he had placed himself, and which could by no means be considered as past.

The following morning, while purchasing clothes and other necessary parts of their required outfit at one of the numerous stores in the main street of Skagway, Soapy Smith entered the shop. He nodded to Stephen, and said "Good morning!" in his quiet, pleasant voice to the lad, and passed the time of day with Rossiter and Dave. He was in the shop but five minutes, selecting and walking out with a high-priced revolver of the latest and best kind and workmanship. He made no pretence of paying, nor did the storekeeper seem to expect payment; the man looking quite relieved when his customer left.

As they were returning with their purchases, Stephen suddenly halted.

"I've left my knife in the shop," he said. "I must go back for it. You go on; I'll soon catch you up."

But the knife was not to be found easily; it had become buried under piles of garments, "maekinaws," rubber boots, blankets, and fur garments; and when at last it was recovered half an hour had passed, and Stephen's friends had strolled on out of sight.

Passing the door of a gambling-saloon, which, though it was still the forenoon, was thronged with customers, Stephen collided violently with a fellow who came lurching out of the doorway with unsteady steps. To save himself, the man seized Stephen's arm, almost pulling him off his feet.

"Seuse me—me lad!" the man muttered thickly. "Here, give us a hand!"

He was clutching Stephen's arm in a firm grip, and as the lad attempted to regain his balance, another man came out from the saloon, and two or three passers-by stopped beside them. Before Stephen could release himself someone behind struck him violently upon the head. Although half dazed, the lad did not lose his wits. Shaking off the apparently drunken man, he placed his back against the gaudy front of the saloon and clenched his fists. In a moment he found himself attacked by half a dozen men. One struck at him with a short, thick stick; but, catching the descending weapon on his open palm, Stephen wrenched it from his grasp.

Swinging his weapon around him, Stephen forced his assailants backward a trifle; then he leaped forward, and struck at the outside of the knee of the man within range. The stick was loaded with lead, and the fellow, with a scream of pain, fell to the ground. But the others closed in, and one man at the side thrust at Stephen's exposed ribs with a long knife. Before he could repeat the blow a clip from the

loaded stick fell upon his wrist, and the knife clattered on the ground, the owner's wrist hanging limp and broken.

Thankful did Stephen feel for the hours he had spent while at his Norfolk home in learning the handling of a cudgel from the reprobate, Bob Batchelor. He knew how to guard himself with the upper part of the stick, and where to strike to do the greatest possible damage to his adversaries. At knee and elbow, wrist and jaw, he directed his blows; and, though he took more than half a dozen severe blows himself, he quickly had three men disabled.

The fight had attracted but scant attention, though the crowd around the young man now numbered half a score. No one thought of interference; to interfere with Soapy Smith's ruffianly adherents brought unpleasant consequences which were not to be risked.

Suddenly Stephen charged at the assailants. One man

weakest part of the surrounding dropped with a cracked head.

A stick fell on Stephen's shoulder, leaving it numb, and a knife-point jagged the back of his coat. But he burst through the ring, and at top speed dashed down the street. A revolver cracked behind him, and he heard the whistle of the bullet as it flew over his head; but, unhurt, he gained the hotel, where he found Dave and Rossiter awaiting him.

"I don't like running," observed the latter, when Stephen had finished relating his adventure, "but I guess the sooner we leave this town the better it'll be for our health. It's altogether too exciting to be pleasant."

And Alaskan Dave agreed with him. "You two keep quiet indoors," the old miner said, "and I'll step around and get together what other truck we want. If it was man to man, I'd see Soapy Smith at the North Pole before I ran from him; but it ain't, an' it ain't no sense gettin' one's throat cut out of obstinacy."

Dave was as good as his word, and that same evening, without any further molestation from Soapy Smith and his gang, the three chums left Skagway and took the track—now

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ABSORBING!

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beaten into a noticeable road by the hundreds of feet that had passed over it—that leads through the White Pass to Lake Bennett.

Once across the lake Stephen began to get a real taste of the dangers and hardships to be experienced. It was early autumn, and already the cold was greater than Stephen had known in England even in mid-winter. But it was a dry cold, not moist, as that to which he was accustomed, and the lowness of the temperature did not, as yet, cause him any real discomfort.

On foot they made the journey to Lake Labarge. There a boat was procured, and thence they travelled by water along various tributaries of the great Yukon River, until the line of mountains known as the Upper Ramparts was reached.

Their journey had been the reverse of uneventful. Navigation of their craft was no easy matter, in spite of the experienced advice of old Dave, and more than one narrow escape from destruction disturbed the monotony of hard and continuous work. And the work was hard, for it was necessary to get as far as possible before the terrible cold of the coming winter chained the waters of the streams in fetters of glittering ice. But, in spite of their toil, winter was upon them before their destination was reached.

One night, ere they turned into their blankets spread around the fire, Old Dave looked long and anxiously at the sky. The heavens were wonderfully bright and clear, the moon like silver, and the stars twinkling into myriads of points of light. But on the northern horizon the sky, above the long, dark line that marked the mighty mountains wherein the gold-bearing region of the Klondyke is enclosed, seemed curiously near and light-coloured, not as it was overhead, of intensely dark-blue velvety hue.

"Snow," said Dave laconically.

"To-morrow?" asked Rossiter.

"No, not to-morrow, thank God; nor th' next, nor th' next, perhaps. But it's comin'; an' if we ain't up to Fort Selkirk to git hold o' some dogs, we'll just have to give in. Without dogs we'd be just useless."

Rossiter and Stephen worked like demons the next day, being urged to still greater efforts by the appearance of another rowing-boat, which they overtook many hours below Fort Selkirk. This boat was manned by two men; and frantic were the efforts of both crews, the one to overtake and the other to prevent being overtaken. First into Fort Selkirk meant first choice of the dogs; the taking of all of these indispensable animals if there happened to be but one team available; and the second in the race would need to sit down and twiddle their thumbs until another team might be collected, which might or might not happen for weeks or months.

The leading boat flew through the water, and swift in pursuit went the other. But foot by foot the pursuers crept up. Their boat might be heavier and more loaded, but the advantage of a third person to use the rudder-lines, unhampered by being compelled to work the oars, more than made good this disadvantage, and few more clever steersmen than Alaskan Dave ever guided a boat.

Soon the larger boat was alongside, and the straining muscles, flushed faces, and panting breathing of the oarsmen gave proof of the violence of their efforts. Every nerve was being strained; no crew that ever fought for the blue riband of English amateur rowing worked with such desperate strength and vigour. Those in the lighter craft were men—men in the prime of life, strong and long enduring, with muscles toughened to the consistency of steel by years of toil and hardship; while of the two oarsmen in the other boat one was but a lad of eighteen years of age—a strong lad, a determined lad, but lacking the set and firm development of muscle and bone and sinew of those against whom he was opposing himself. But he was a British lad; one of that breed and blood that never knows when it is beaten, that will fight doggedly, inch by inch, to the very last gasp, and will die, but not admit defeat.

Rowing in perfect time, Rossiter and Stephen not only held, but increased their advantage. Inch by inch they gained, until Old Dave was abreast the first rower in the lighter boat. Twenty yards further he was alongside the second. And then this man, uttering a gasping cry of rage, used his paddle in such manner as to deliberately attempt to bring about a collision. But Dave's eyes were sharp, and a dexterous turn of his wrist brought the craft out of danger.

Ahead, at a part where the river banks narrowed considerably, jutted a huge black rock from the waters that swirled in foam-crested waves around it. On the one side of this rock the channel between it and the wall of rock forming the river bank was too narrow to admit the passage of any boat. To reach the right-hand channel first was now the aim of both pairs of rowers, for the boat that passed through first would be given an advantage which would decide the issue of this desperate race to the fort.

The men in the other boat evidently knew of this, and by the most violent efforts attempted to regain the lost ground and reach the practicable channel first. Rowing like demons, they reduced Dave's lead, and again were level. Then the old miner, for the first time, spoke to his crew, calling upon them for a spurt.

"Shove her in, boys," he said, in a low, tense voice. "It's life and death now!"

And Rossiter and Stephen, though each was feeling that his arms would fall off from sheer weariness, that his grip was weakening, and that terrible tightness across chest and throat which attacks the rower whose efforts have gone beyond his powers was creeping over him, responded to the call.

The rock was now only a few yards ahead; the boats side by side, the larger's sharp prow a little in advance, and both fairly leaping through the water. Then half a dozen wild, despairing strokes from Steve and his comrade sent their boat's nose past the black rock and into the channel of rushing, tumbling water; and their opponents, to avoid collision with the rock, suddenly stopped and used their paddles in the contrary direction.

A hoarse cry of rage that drowned the noise of the waters broke from the defeated men as their rivals glided into safety and success; but neither Rossiter nor Stephen heard it. They had collapsed where they sat, the paddles falling from their nerveless fingers. They were utterly exhausted, played out; nor did the sharp crack of a rifle behind them, and the splashing aboard of a jet of water as a bullet struck the surface of the river within a foot of the boat's gunwale arouse them. There was another shot; and Alaskan Dave, uttering an exclamation, picked up the paddles and drove the boat onward.

Another bullet sang through the air; and Dave, laying down his paddle, picked up his own rifle, and, kneeling in the boat, sent a bullet in reply—a bullet so well directed that it struck the levelled rifle in the hands of the man who had fired at them, the shock hurling the holder backwards. A second bullet from the miner's weapon made a hole in the side of the boat, through which the water instantly commenced to rush.

"Their lives or ours!" the old man said grimly, as he laid down his rifle and resumed paddling.

Two hours later the three partners had reached Fort Selkirk, and were bargaining for the only team of dogs that was to be had.

The snow came, as Dave had predicted. Two days after leaving the fort it commenced to fall, and, though the dogs struggled bravely, progress in face of the blinding storm was impossible, and the partners were obliged to form a camp and halt until the snow had ceased and been frozen sufficiently hard to make travelling over its surface possible.

Three days the storm lasted, and on the fourth day, when Stephen came from out the little wood wherein the camp had been made, he found the whole face of the country around him, as far as the eye could reach, hidden beneath a spotlessly white covering three feet in thickness, that had blotted out every landmark. To find one's way across this snow desert seemed an impossibility; not even when he had found himself adrift on the open Atlantic had he been sensible of so acute a feeling of utter helplessness and lonesomeness. This glittering white mantle of snow seemed of even greater immensity than the waste of waters. Quiet, silent, boundless, it seemed a living menace to anyone so daring as to attempt its conquest. For the first time he became distressed, miserable.

But when the dogs were harnessed to the sledges, and, under Old Dave's confident direction, trotted across the hard, bright ground, growling merrily, and overjoyed that the period of inaction was passed, and he found himself trotting along with them, his blood glowing and tingling in his veins, his depression passed away, his spirits rose, and he joined in Rossiter's jokes and light-hearted conversation with a zest and glee that surprised himself.

The hundred-mile journey to Dawson City was made in six days—long days of hard work, when men and dogs and sledges were tumbled into snowdrifts that had gathered in the hollows, and dragged themselves or had to be dragged out, wet, shivering, and freezing. Then the dogs had to be saved, and loads humped by their masters for mile upon weary mile. No wonder Dave had said this was a game that only the strongest could play and hope to see the end of. But they saw the end at last—the immediate end, that is, for Dawson was really only the beginning of their search for the gold—and drove into the dirty, garish, ill-built, evil-smelling, crowded street of Dawson, with its stores, saloons, gambling palaces, music-halls, hotels, and shanties, full of health and

strength and hope. They had reached their goal. What next was to happen would depend on luck, weather, their own sturdy muscles and resolution, and Alaskan Dave's knowledge.

CHAPTER 6.

Winning the Gold.

NO longer stay in Dawson City than was absolutely necessary was made. A few stores had to be purchased—beans, bacon, flour, tinned goods, and tea—a few sticks of blasting compound, and a blank form or two obtained from the recorder of mining claims, completed their stock of necessities.

Three days' journey out of Dawson, in the direction of the grant. Mount Campbell was their destination, but the exact locality where they intended to begin operations Dave kept to himself. It was a region that the majority of gold-seekers had avoided, so terribly difficult was the journey, and so unimpressive the surroundings; but Dave knew what he was doing.

"It's a gamble, pards," the old man said; "but I guess, if we can stick to it, it'll show up trumps. Th' gold's there for sure; th' trouble is in locatin' it. Yer musn't think, neither, that it's lyin' just on th' ground, an' all yer've got to do is just to stoop down an' pick it up, because it ain't so. It means real hard work, wi' weeks, perhaps months, of disappointment, not a speck o' yeller metal to show for all yer labour, an'— By th' livin' thunder! what in th' name o' Sam Hill is th' meanin' o' this?"

The dogs were walking up a somewhat steep incline—a ridge that formed the watershed of numerous small streams, now one solid mass of ice—and the object that had caught the old man's eyes, and induced the sudden change in his speech, was a round piece of tin, about the size of a teacup mouth, jagged at the edges.

"What's the trouble, Dave?" Stephen inquired.

"Look!" And the miner pointed to the disc of metal.

"Well?" And the two young men looked interrogatively at their companion.

"It ain't well; it's blamed bad! Means someone else is on this trail. Who th' dickens can it be?"

Very carefully three pairs of eyes searched the ground as they proceeded, but nothing occurred from which they could derive any information concerning those whom Dave feared had forestalled them. But when they reached a deep, rock-walled canon, which Dave pronounced as the place where they should begin their search, their curiosity was satisfied. In a deep cleft in the cliff side stood a wooden shanty, and outside it was a man, watching their arrival with glances of extreme dissatisfaction.

"If it's gold yer after yer can just go back," he shouted, when they had arrived within speaking distance.

"So!" Dave Burnham answered. "Well, I guess we'll stay, anyway, till we find that out."

"Won't do any good. Me an' my pal's been here months, an' we ain't had a smell of it."

"That's a lie," Dave said aside to his companions. "That tin lid we found was dropped there since th' snow came, or it'd been buried. Sorry for yer, pard," he said aloud, "but I guess we'll try for a bit."

"More fools you!" the man said rudely; and he turned into his shanty.

The first thing to be done was to erect a shanty, and this, with three pairs of willing hands to work, was not a long job. On the third morning after arrival all three turned out to begin their first job of prospecting, Rossiter and Stephen excited beyond description. But they quickly met with opposition. Scarcely had they made preparations for their first assault on the frozen ground when the man they had seen before put in his appearance.

"Yer can't dig there!" he shouted angrily.

Old Dave straightened his back, and his eyes gleamed dangerously.

"What's to prevent us—eh?" he demanded.

"Because yer can't. That ground yer on belongs to me an' my pardner."

"Ain't nothin' to show it." Dave answered, looking round.

"Tell yer it does." And the man came closer. "Clear off!"

"I guess we ain't goin' until we have better proof than what yer say—eh, pards?" said Dave, turning to his companions.

"I guess we won't!" Stephen answered readily.

"Th' claim is ours!" the man repeated angrily.

"Then show us yer ticket." The form signed by the recording agent of the Government, giving a miner having located gold his title to a claim.

"Show nothin'! Are ye goin'?"

"Guess not!"

With a furious oath, and the promise "that he'd soon make 'em," the man turned away and disappeared within his shanty. Inside two minutes he was out again, a rifle in his hand, and his companion behind him similarly armed.

"Now, are ye goin' to quit?" he shouted, at twenty yards' distance.

The man's intentions were so obviously violent, his right to make good his demand for their quitting so evidently bad, that force was only to be met with force. More than once in the Klondyke had men lost their lives to stronger opponents who would not stick at murder to realise the gain from another's lucky strike; and more than once had legitimate miners been driven from prosecuting their researches for gold by others who wished to keep likely gold-bearing ground within their own hands. Claims in the Klondyke may not be given until gold has been actually discovered. Hence the reason for such violent and selfish attempt to keep possible sharers in a lucky strike out of the field.

But this time the attempt failed. Dave and his two friends had their revolvers handy, and before the two men had realised the kidney of those whom they sought to terrorise into leaving, they found themselves covered by three shining muzzles.

"Put down yer gun an' listen to reason!" Dave ordered. And, seeing their position hopeless, the two men sullenly obeyed.

"Now, see here!" went on the old miner. "Yer ain't found gold yet, an' so ain't got any claim granted. Now, we're not greedy, if yer are. We're goin' to mine here, that's certain, an' yer ain't goin' to prevent us, not none. But we ain't goin' to hinder yer, neither. There's room enough for all of us. Yer go on with yer prospectin', we'll get ahead with ours, an' good luck to them as strikes gold first. 'Sides," he added meaningly, "there's three of us; an' if yer ain't content to agree square an' reasonable, I guess we're able an' willin' to clear ye out altogether. Say, is it a go?"

And the two men agreed that it should be so, though sulkily, and with no good will. But the persuasion of the three revolvers, and the resolution in the eyes of those behind them was not to be withstood.

"I reckon we'll see you," one of them answered slowly.

"No choice!" added his chum, with a harsh, grating laugh; "only—"

"I thought yer'd prove reasonable," Dave said quietly. "But there's to be no funny business, mind! An' I reckon yer wants to keep yer good health."

"We'll have trouble yet, I believe," observed Stephen when the two men had gone off, and the three partners prepared again for work. "I guess we'll have to trust those fellows only just so far as we can see them."

"That's so," Rossiter agreed. Then he slapped Stephen on the back. "Say, this isn't going to be any picnic, is it, Steve? But I reckon we'll win out. It's up to us to do our best; and I know where my gold's going when I've got it. There's a little girl way back in Virginia who won't be slow to hear of it when we locate the precious stuff. And what are you going to do?"

"Bless me if I know!" Steve answered, laughing. "I haven't thought of it. Only there's no little girl waiting for me."

"Ah, you wait a bit, my boy!" his comrade said sententiously. "You're luckier than I ah, for you'll have got your money before you begin to look for a wife, not t'other way round."

"We shall see."

Digging for gold in the Klondyke, and particularly during the winter months, isn't quite such an easy job as digging up one's garden. It is slow—terribly slow, and terribly hard work.

Of the thousands whom the hope of getting rich quickly attracted to the Klondyke, but a very small minority left the country as good men—good in every way, mentally, morally, and physically—as they entered it.

Without loss of time, Rossiter and Stephen, under Dave's direction and supervision, set to work sinking shafts. It was laborious working, this delving into the ground. First the snow had to be cleared away with pickaxe and shovel, and then the frozen earth beneath softened by means of the gasoline heater, and the thawed soil removed. All this took time, and the small accumulation of rock and soil and stones seemed but a meagre result for the work of three able-bodied men.

But they stuck to it cheerfully and confidently, and day by day the shaft deepened, though each succeeding morning, so terribly did it freeze during the nights, the gasoline thawer was required. Soon the shaft became so deep it was necessary to rig up a small windlass arrangement, by means of which Dave, who remained above-ground, was enabled to haul up the bucketfuls of soil that Rossiter and his chum

excavated. As each bucket was hauled up the contents would be tipped into a shallow iron pan, mixed with water obtained by melting the snow, and thoroughly washed out. But no bright, sparkling grains of gold amongst the gravel and sand rewarded the experienced miner's keen eyes. "No luck yet!" he would call out down the shaft, and Stephen and Rossiter would grip their tools afresh and dig out another consignment to undergo washing and searching.

It was the long evenings that bothered Stephen. Although it was quite light enough to go on working during what was the night, the necessity of not exhausting themselves by over-labour prevented so doing, and the time hung heavily upon Stephen's hands.

He could not smoke, as did Old Dave, who could pass hour after hour staring at the smoke curling from the bowl of his ancient pipe. He could not write letters, as would Jack Rossiter, to the little girl in Virginia, night after night—letters that were never posted, but the writing of which was a source of delight and contentment, for he had no one to whom to write. He could not read, for they had, neither books nor papers.

Sometimes he would play a game of cards—Dave having a dirty, much-mutilated pack in his possession—but this amusement was not satisfying. At last he took to making long drives with the sled dogs.

The first shaft proving without result, others were dug. But week succeeded week, Christmas passed, and still the gold remained as far off as ever. The most curious Christmas it was within Stephen's recollection.

No work was done that day. Rossiter, the light-hearted, insisted upon something taking place to give a festive air to the occasion, and, contriving an instrument from a comb and a piece of thin paper from one of the preserved-meat tins, played what he called a musical accompaniment to Steve's carol singing, Old Dave looking on in silent amazement.

Then Rossiter gave the "Star Spangled Banner" and "Hail, Columbia!" followed up with "Marching through Georgia," and Steve responded with "Hearts of Oak" and "The Poacher." This so awakened Old Dave's musical fancies that he treated the company to a war-song, sung in the dialect of the Sitka Indians, a performance that, as Rossiter declared, nearly split the walls of the shanty.

Finally they had "The Old Folks at Home," and wound up with "Auld Lang Syne," retiring to their sleeping-bags the better for the break thus provided in their monotonous existence.

It was February the 24th—Dave Burnham's birthday—when Steve and Rossiter, down in the shaft, were startled by a loud yell, followed by a series of blood-curdling whoops. Up the shaft they came in a frantic hurry, expecting to find Dave being murdered by Indians, one or two of whom had been seen during their stay in the canon. Instead, they found the old miner very much alive and dancing nimbly about, while of Indians there was no sign.

"We've got her, boys!" he shouted, as he caught sight of his partners. "I told yer we should—I told yer! Here she is—yeller, and shinin' like di'mon's; an' so thick as peas in a pod! Who-o-o-p! I knew we'd find her if we only kept on long enough! Say, what d'ye think o' this?" And he held out the washing-pan, at the bottom of which, amongst a handful or two of fine sand, glittered a score or more of tiny golden specks.

"See 'em?" he shouted. "Gee whiz, there's enough there to buy yer a bran' new outfit, Stevie, my lad! Jack, if ye can turn up such another shovelful, ye'll go home to yer little gal a gold man!"

Bending eagerly forward, the two young men stared at the grains of precious metal, to win which they had risked health and strength, and life itself. To the one it meant joy and lifelong happiness; to the other—well, as Stephen had said, if the gold were found, he wouldn't know what to do with it. But these yellow fragments represented the rewards of toil and labour herculean, and a strange thrill of happiness and gratification made Stephen's heart throb quickly.

So interested were all three that they did not see a man—his head and shoulders revealed above the top of a huge square boulder—watching them with wonder written in his eyes. Nor did they see the wonder change to anger, jealousy, and hatred, and the man disappear and run rapidly towards the shanty in the cleft in the canon side.

Old Dave recovered his self-possession quickly. Suddenly pausing in his wild antics, he faced his partners.

"Boys," he said quickly, "someone's got to get down to Dawson City right away and record this; an' there ain't no time to be lost. Which of yer'll go?"

"I'll go!" both Stephen and Rossiter exclaimed together. "No, no; only one o' yer!" Dave said quickly. "There's two galoots over yonder who'd give their ears to know of this, an' if there's only one of us left here, I guess his health'll suffer. Now, then, which is it to be? Just settle it between yer while we're goin' back to th' shanty to get th' form."

All three started hurriedly for their shack, both Stephen and Rossiter disputing loudly as to which should have the honour—and the danger—of travelling to Dawson to record the claim.

It was Dave who settled it. "Say, boys," he said impatiently, "toss for it! I'll snap up a cent."

He did so, both men called, and the decision of Fortune rested with Steve.

"Never mind, pard," the old miner said, clapping the disappointed Rossiter on the shoulder, "maybe yer won't find things very slack here. D'rectly those yonder see Stevie start, they'll guess what's afoot, an' you an' me may see things get lively. I know 'em!"

And the prospect of coming trouble which should include a fight cheered Jack Rossiter against his disappointment.

"Glad luck was with yer," whispered Dave, as he accompanied Stephen outside to get the dog-sled ready. "Yer can handle a dog team a sight better than Jack, good man as he is."

Within a quarter of an hour, Stephen, with four days' provisions fastened on his sled, and well muffled, cracked his whip, and the dogs bounded forward over the iron-hard ground, straining at the traces, and yapping with delight.

"Don't spare 'em, lad!" shouted Dave, by way of farewell; "an' for God's sake don't lose the trail!"

"And don't forget there's that little girl in Virginia waiting for me!" added Rossiter.

Stephen laughed, and urged on his dogs. Glad he was now that he had turned the long, light evenings to such profitable account. Thanks to the many hours he had spent in driving them he had come to handle a team of dogs with the skill and sureness of an old hand. Moreover, he had won the hearts—such hearts as these savage, half-wild "malamutes" possess—of his dogs, and of what value is this on a long and dangerous journey only those accustomed to the fierce, sullen brutes can fully appreciate.

As Stephen gained the edge of the canon and settled himself into his seat, his eyes, sweeping the mighty expanse of rough, snow-covered ground spread out before him, detected a moving object, dark against the surrounding whiteness, more than half a mile ahead. For a moment he stood motionless, staring, incredulous; then he shaded his eyes and strained his vision. The dark object was moving fast, and rapidly becoming smaller.

Suddenly Stephen uttered a cry, and leaped into his seat in the sled. Brandishing his long whip, he cracked it loudly over the heads of the two leading dogs, calling to them sharply by name, and urging them to topmost speed.

He knew now what that black, moving figure was; he guessed, and his guess was a conviction, who it was; and he knew that its presence ahead of him spelt disaster to his own important mission, and consequent ruin and misfortune and unhappiness to those who remained in the canon, and also to a "certain little girl way back in Virginia."

CHAPTER 7.

The Claim is Recorded.

WITH whip and voice Steve urged his team onward, but no nearer did he seem to draw to that black figure ahead, which, although sometimes in full view, although sometimes hidden by the rocky, frozen, snow-covered hummocks that lined the trail, never seemed to draw nearer. A mile, two miles were covered; one, two hours passed, and the sullen sun, a dull, crimson globe, dropped suddenly towards the west; but still that black speck was as far ahead as ever.

On and on over the frozen snow the sleds continued. No witnesses were there of this long, stern chase, save the crimson sun, shrunk to one-half its normal size. No sound broke the awful silence, save the encouraging cries of the two drivers, and the loud cracking of their long-lashed, black whips. Overhead the leaden sky, with darker, greasy-looking masses of cloud drifting sullenly southward.

No sign of life or movement showed across that panorama of utter and complete desolation, save the two narrow black strips that marked the sleds and their shaggy, iron-muscled drawers. Never, perhaps, had the Yukon seen a chase so curious, so persistent, and so prolonged.

His advantage, reduced by the loss of two dogs, Saunders gained no more ground. Both were on level terms now, and they continued at a less heading speed. The dogs must be considered, for if aught went wrong with them the men were as good as dead. Stephen used his whip no more; he would attempt nothing now whereof the result was so uncertain.

Through the long day the chase went on. Halts were made for rest and food, and again each man camped. But when

Steve arose next morning it was with the determination to bring things to an issue. To his dogs he doled out an extra ration of food, removed from his sled every article that might be dispensed with, and filled up the magazine of his rifle. Some time during the next twelve hours the fates should decide which man should reach Dawson and the recording-agent first, or at all.

Almost simultaneously the sleds started, Saunders a furlong ahead; but after two hours racing Stephen began to close in. The lightening of his vehicle was beginning to have effect.

Slowly the lead was cut down to two hundred yards—a hundred yards—fifty yards. Half a mile further the noses of Stephen's leaders were within ten yards of the end of Saunders's sleigh. But Stephen could not shoot, even for the sake of those whom he had left behind in the canon he could not commit deliberate, cold-blooded murder, though he doubted if Saunders, had the positions been reversed, would have been stayed by a similar scruple.

"Stop!" suddenly he shouted; and, as if obeying a command, Saunders pulled his team to a standstill. He turned his head and looked his pursuer squarely in the face.

"By thunder, kid, but I like yer grit!" he exclaimed; "but if yer think yer'll git to Dawson before me ye're mistaken!"

"We'll see!" Stephen answered shortly. "I know your business in Dawson, and I'm here to prevent you."

"Sorry, but yer won't. Yer a plucky kid; but we ain't goin' to lose our chance for that. This claim is goin' in in our name, an' don't worry yerself it won't. It's rough on yer, kid; but each one for himself in th' Klondyke!"

"Why, you rascally thief!" ejaculated Stephen, quite taken aback by this impudent confession.

"Maybe," Saunders answered composedly. "But that claim's goin' to be ours, anyway."

"That remains to be seen." And Stephen picked up his rifle.

Saunders did likewise; and, as if each man could read his opponent's mind, thus making no spoken words of arrangement necessary, but were following out a previously-agreed-upon plan, both made ready for the duel. A hundred yards along the track Saunders drove his team, halted, turned his dogs round, and faced Stephen, who had not moved.

Then began the most curious duel that ever the world has seen. From either sled a rifle cracked, a streak of fire spurted through the still atmosphere, and the first of the winged messengers of death were sped on their journey. Each shooter lay stretched at full length on his sled, crouching so as to offer the very slightest mark to his antagonist. Careful shooting was necessary, so that the dogs might not suffer, and these had squatted, bellies to ground, glad of the rest, and heedless of the bullets that sang and whistled over their heads.

Half a dozen shots were exchanged without any apparent damage being done, although one of Saunders's bullets had gone so close it had ripped away the heel from one of Stephen's boots. The Englishman became impatient. Suddenly he called to his dogs, stirring them into motion, and, crouched on his knees, the reins in one hand and his rifle in the other, he bore down on Saunders like an avalanche. Often in his own country he had practised shooting with one hand alone, and, with the muzzle of his rifle pushed over the forepart of the sled, he waited his opportunity to fire.

A stream of bullets met him as he thundered down. One drove the high fur cap from his head, a second snipped the top of his left ear, and another bored a hole through the shoulder of the thick outer garment he was wearing. But the speed at which he came disconcerted Saunders. As he reached the motionless sled he whirled his dogs to the left and swept aside, firing point-blank as he passed at the small white patch, amid a mass of dark fur, that was Saunders's face.

Fifty yards ahead he went; then he swung the dogs round and drove back again. A bullet raised the hair on his bare head; and, his blood afire and the lust of battle within him, Stephen suddenly sprang upright, disclaiming the concealment of the sled. The reins were in his teeth, and both hands grasped his rifle. Another bullet struck him, somewhere in the ribs; but, though he was sensible of the shock, he felt not the pain. Saunders, on his knees at the tail of the sled, squinting along his rifle for another shot.

Then Stephen fired. He could see a crimson smear across Saunders's face, showing that his first shot had not quite missed, but this time he fired at the body. He saw Saunders double up and pitch forward on his face, the rifle slipping from between his relaxed fingers, and then there was a violent collision as his dogs dashed into the sled, hurling him to the ground, and becoming inextricably confused with the other team, which had risen to their feet, and, with shaggy hair bristling and jaws wide open, had viewed the onslaught as a challenge to battle directed against themselves.

Half stunned, Stephen stumbled to his feet to find the two sleds lying together, and the dogs a tumbling mass of moving hair and red, snapping jaws. The malamutes were fighting desperately between themselves; but before his eyes had taken more than a glance at their battle, a dark, clumsy figure raised itself from the mass of wreckage and lurched towards him. It was Saunders; and, badly wounded as he was, the man's intention had not weakened. He had a revolver in his hand, and, with the muzzle within inches of Stephen's fur coat, pressed the trigger. Before he could do so again a blow from a clubbed rifle fell upon his head, and he dropped, lying perfectly still.

For a few seconds Stephen looked down at him; then a deadly sickness came over him, his head became giddy, his knees slackened, and he dropped in a heap. By a strong effort of will, however, he drove the faintness from him. His purpose was not yet accomplished. Dawson remained to be reached.

With boot and rifle-butt he restored order amongst the dogs, harnessed all of them to one of the sleds, and, firmly securing Saunders's body beside him, started onwards. Alive or dead, he could not leave the man, nor could he spare the time to ascertain his condition. Indeed, he knew not whether his own strength would last until Dawson was reached.

Loungers in the main street of Dawson City were considerably astonished, a few hours later, when there appeared a sled drawn by a couple of dozen dogs, all more or less torn and blood covered, and driven by a hatless, smooth-faced lad, on whom, too, blood appeared, and who swayed, with half-shut eyes, from side to side. Heedless of those near, he called again and again to the dogs, moving his long whip mechanically across their backs. His face and ears were touched by the frost; half dying he appeared; but his lips were closed firmly over hard-clenched teeth, and his whole face set into an expression of dogged resolution.

He could not speak, but looked mutely in the faces of those who gathered round him, feebly flourishing a flimsy sheet of paper he drew from his breast.

"It's the record-office he's wantin'!" one man at last cried. And the lad, comprehending his words, nodded.

"This way," said the friendly man. "Thunder, but he's lookin' almighty bad! Does anyone know him? Who is he, anyway?"

But the men that gathered round shook their heads. With an effort the lad rose from the sled, and feebly groped his way past those who stared dumbly at him towards the building which the man had pointed out to him as the Government official's dwelling. He moved stiffly, all in one piece, as it were, for his frozen joints would not bend. The very spectre of a man he seemed.

All at once he stopped, and jerked a stiff arm at a shapeless bundle that still lay on the floor of the sled.

"See to him," he contrived to whisper. But at first the men neither heard nor understood. When at last they uncovered the body of Jake Saunders their wonderment increased.

Stumbling into the recorder's office, Stephen silently handed over his precious scrap of paper.

The official stared at him curiously, but said nothing. Many times before he had seen men come into his office to record a claim in sad and dismal plight, though never one who looked as did this bareheaded youth. But he read the paper through without comment. It was properly filled in, and he signed and stamped the paper with the Government stamp.

"Done up more than a bit, my lad," he said kindly, as he gave the paper back. "Is there anyone—?"

"I am; but it's all right now," Stephen whispered; and then he fell in his tracks, and lay, quite motionless, in a dead faint.

CHAPTER 8.

Stephen Finds Another Friend.

STEVE awoke from his swoon to find himself wrapped in a buffalo robe, and his whole body and limbs were enveloped in paraffin bandages. From the crown of his head to the soles of his feet, with the exception of one or two toes, the fingers of his left hand, his ears, and his nose, every square inch of him seemed the seat of agonising pain. The parts that did not ache had no feeling whatever. A man was sitting beside him, in fact, scrubbing vigorously with a lump of ice at his left hand, but he was quite unconscious of the operation except through the medium of his eyes.

It was owing to such prompt and drastic treatment that Stephen recovered from the effects of that awful three days' journey across the frozen steppes. Had he not been dealt

with immediately, and in such fashion, he must have died, for the frostbite had seized his extremities and was creeping slowly onward. Had Dawson been fifty miles further it would have been a corpse the dogs had drawn into the town.

But as it was, and thanks to his recent hard life, his perfect health of body and mind, and a naturally robust and sound constitution, a fortnight saw Stephen himself again, well and good again, except for a certain numbness that at intervals seized the affected toes and fingers, and, indeed, continued to do so during every winter throughout his life at the first touch of frost. His wounded ribs had healed, the bullet Saunders had fired at him having, luckily, neither smashed the bones nor entered the body; and, though he had not yet regained all his normal strength, he declared himself to be strong enough to make the return journey, and so relieve his anxious partners.

Nor did he go alone. The registering of the claim had informed the miners in Dawson of a fresh strike, and, despite the fearful weather, there were half a dozen trains following Stephen's dog sled back to the canon.

Half a mile from the entrance to the canon Stephen was met by Old Dave, whose joy at seeing his young partner back safe and sound, his mission accomplished, more than overcame the disgust that arose in him when he caught sight of the dog trains following behind.

"Boy, yer true grit!" exclaimed the old miner enthusiastically, when Steve had finished the brief recital of his adventures. "I guess there ain't no man alive as'd have done as well as yer have. Yer th' real stut, yer are! I knew it soon as I saw yer when we was racin' them two skunks up t' th' fort, an' now I'd uphold it on my Bible oath. Blame me, yer oughter be an Amurrican! We kinder suspicioused suthin' was wrong when we didn't see no Saunders with his mate—I'll tell yer in a minute—an' afterwards, when we found he wasn't there, I knew just what he'd done. An' I don't mind tellin' yer now, but we'd made up our minds as Saunders 'd eched yer. Neither Jack nor me guessed as yer'd ever lick th' cuss! So sure was we that I've been layin' for Jake every day for th' last week. Thered' ha' been a bullet through him soon as ever he'd ha' showed his carcass along this trail. An' ter think as yer beat him!"

And the old man seized Steve's hand and almost wrung his arm off.

"So yer got in first, after all," he said, as they walked on side by side. "Where'd yer leave Saunders?"

"Took him along with me," Stephen said quietly. "He's in Dawson Gaol now."

Old Dave stopped and looked at the boy long and hard.

"My lad," he said very slowly, "yer white—too white. A skunk like that weren't worth savin', even to be hanged."

"Well," Stephen said hurriedly, "I couldn't leave him to be frozen to death. And now, how have you been doing?"

"Oh, we've been busy, too," Dave replied. "Day after yer'd gone Alec McLeod, that Saunders's pardner, he sees Rossiter strollin' about, an' drops him a bullet in his neck; nothin' serious, though another half inch an' there'd ha' been only you an' me to share. I hear th' shootin', an' goes to investigate, an' Alec backs down to his shanty; an' there Jack an' me kep' him until his ice gave out an' he'd nothin' to drink. But we had a bit of a scuffle, an' Alec's quiet with a bullet in his thigh. I'll tote him down to Dawson Gaol in a day or two, when th' dogs are rested a bit."

"And the gold, Dave?"

"Rich as mince-pie, an' plentiful as fleas on an Indian. We got up a hundred an' fifty-seven bucket loads while yer been away, an' I reckon there'll be about fourteen hundred dollars apiece when we divide up to-night, as we sure will now yer back again. Jack an' me ain't handled it yet."

Three days afterwards Alaskan Dave took the prisoner down to Dawson and handed him over to the authorities, who made it their business to see that he and his partner received the just punishment of their crime.

Old Dave had, too, another charge, from Stephen Masters, and this was the exchanging of gold-dust to the value of seventeen hundred and fifty dollars, the whole of Stephen's share of the "clean-up," into a draft for three hundred and fifty pounds, payable to one Alfred Cubitt. This was to be enclosed in a letter Stephen had written to his uncle to the effect that he—Stephen—was returning what he judged to be a fair estimate of the expense to which Mr. Cubitt had been put by reason of his nephew's residence at Kingham Old Hall.

Stephen breathed freely when he heard that the letter was despatched.

"Now I can go ahead," he said to himself. "All I can get now is for myself, or anyone else to whom I may choose to give it."

Courage Rewarded Claim—for so old Dave insisted upon

naming it; he had at first wanted it Stephen's Courage Rewarded, and only withdrew after warm opposition—may not have been the El Dorado which Jack Rossiter's imagination had painted it, but it proved quite rich enough to give the three chums all they wanted. For sixteen months they worked it, taking out over half a million in dust; and though other claims sprung up around them thick as mushrooms, theirs proved to be the richest claim on the field. At the end of that time they sold out their several interests to a company; and when they at last turned their backs on the Yukon, which they did without any great regret, or with any strong desire to return, it was with some £300,000 apiece to their credit.

Together they travelled as far as San Francisco. From here Dave struck south. He had heard of a gold strike in Mexico, and, as he said, he was too old to settle down. But he left behind him a promise to come to England to see Stephen—if he lived long enough.

Stephen journeyed as far as Virginia with Rossiter, who, much to Steve's dismay, insisted upon him acting as best man at his wedding with "the little girl" who had so patiently awaited his coming. This ceremony over, Stephen took train for New York, from which he intended taking the first quick steamer back to the old country. No reply had he received to the letter he had written to his uncle, no acknowledgment, even, of the enclosure, and for more than one reason he was anxious to return to the place which he had left under such hurried and such disagreeable circumstances over three years before. Before he reached Liverpool, his anxiety had increased a hundredfold.

In the smoking-room of the great liner were English and American magazines and newspapers by the score, and the first day out from New York, Stephen, while idly turning over the pages of one of these, came upon an advertisement in the Personal Column that startled him pretty considerably. There were only a few lines, but they were sufficient to arouse his interest and curiosity to the highest degree.

"Stephen Masters, son of Major Gerald Masters, residing in 1895 in the village of Kingham, Norfolk, is requested to communicate at once with J. A. Arbuthnot, solicitor, 141, Newark Street, Nottingham."

Stephen read the notice through a dozen times before he put down the paper. That he himself was the person referred to, he had not the remotest doubt. Why he should be required was a matter beyond him. But he lost no time in journeying to Nottingham, once the liner reached Liverpool Docks.

Newark Street was not difficult to find; and within an hour of leaving Victoria Station, Stephen was admitted into Mr. Arbuthnot's private office. The solicitor, a grey-whiskered, shrewd-looking Scot, having heard his visitor's name, bade him sit down, and looked him up and down with unexpressive eyes.

"You are Stephen Masters, son of Major Gerald Masters?" was his first remark.

"I shouldn't be here if I were not," Stephen said, with a slight smile.

"Can you prove it?"

"Prove it!" The doubt implied by the question at first struck the young man as being somewhat funny. Prove that he was who he was! The necessity for so doing had never occurred to him. Then he became a trifle angry. "Prove it!" he exclaimed again. "Of course I'm Stephen Masters! What proof d'you want? How can I be anyone else?"

"I don't know who you may be. Your uncle, if you really are Stephen Masters, says you are dead." And the lawyer looked Stephen steadily in the eyes.

"How does Mr. Cubitt know that? He hasn't seen me for four years!" the young man said hotly.

"No; he says you were drowned when a Falling smack was lost four years ago."

Then Stephen, still wondering, gave a hasty sketch of his adventures since the event referred to, concluding with a demand for the reason of the advertisement he had seen. The solicitor listened attentively, and when Stephen had finished, asked:

"Do you know of any reason why your uncle should desire to believe in your death?"

"None whatever, except that he doesn't like me. We parted in anger—in fact, he turned me out of his house."

"Would you be surprised to learn that if you were to die before you reach one-and-twenty—that is, if you are Stephen Masters—your uncle will come into ten thousand pounds?"

"I should be, very considerably. From whom would he inherit it?"

"Under Major Masters' will."

"And if I live to twenty-one?"

"Why, the money comes to you, of course."

Stephen stared at Mr. Arbuthnot in sheer amazement.

"D'you mean to say that my—"

"Major Masters left £10,000 when he died; the interest was drawn by your uncle, who became your guardian, to be disposed of for your education and upbringing. This amount would be yours when you came to man's estate; if you died before so doing, the money went to your uncle, but only upon your twenty-first birthday, or what would be that birthday, being reached. If you are Stephen Masters, you will be twenty-one in three months' time. But you are dead, so your uncle has informed me—your father did not see fit to make me, his solicitor, one of the trustees—went down with the crew of a fishing-smack. Merely as a matter of form, for his story of your death was most circumstantial, I have advertised for you since three months ago. And, if you are Major Masters' son, you have turned up in very good time—for yourself, but badly for your uncle."

Stephen went out from Mr. Arbutnot's office in a white heat of rage. The duplicity, treachery, and wickedness of his relative roused his quick temper to a state of fury. Without stopping to think, without even halting to obtain food, he went back to the station, meaning to make his way, if it were possible, to Stalham that very evening, go to Kingham Old Hall, confront his uncle, and charge him with the villainy of which he was already guilty, and his intended greater crime.

The cross journey, with its many changes of trains, and long waits, would be irritating to the most amiable; to Stephen's anger it acted as oil upon fire. The fierceness of his rage had sunk to a dull, bitter fury more dangerous than the fiercest anger. He swung into the main street of Stalham town, his jaw grim and menacing, and implacable resolution burning in his eyes. The life he had led during the past four years, the hardships and dangers through which he had passed, the sights he had seen, and the deeds he had done, the companionships he had made, had aged him before his time. His thoughts and ideas were no longer those of a boy, but of a man; and he had a man's courage and a man's will.

More than one head was turned to watch the broad, well-knit, well-set-up figure, with its stiffly-poised head, and tanned, scarred, hard features. He walked quickly, heedless of those whom he passed; his mind was set upon the old, plain, flint-built house four miles away, at which he would be before the soft, golden, September sun had sunk amid orange, scarlet, and saffron flames over the great marshes and broads that lie at the back of Stalham.

Past the ancient church, with its curious entrance-way from the main street, he went, and on towards the lane on the left hand, which leads to Kingham. A loose-limbed, shambling figure idling by the guide-post at the cross roads, with a dog at its heels, saw the young man coming, glanced carelessly at him, straightened up for a moment, and then became limp again, growling a curse at the dog, which had run forward with ears pricked up and tail wagging hesitatingly.

"Come back, 'ee fool!" the man said; but the dog trotted on behind the fast-walking man, looking up now and again as if seeking recognition. Bob Batchelor's old dog was more intelligent than his master.

As Stephen turned into the road that leads to the Old Hall, a motor-car rushed past, covering him with dust, and filling his nostrils with the scent of heated oil. There came to Stephen the recognition of that morning when Swallow was killed by one of these hateful contrivances, and his hands clenched the tighter at the memory.

The same car was waiting outside the well-remembered iron gates as Stephen reached them; but he paid no heed, and walked straight up to the old door and rang the long-handled bell. Immediately the door was opened, by Benjamin, the old servant, a little thinner, a little more bleary-eyed than of yore, but otherwise unchanged. The old man did not recognise the athletic, moustached man with the hard, dark eyes, and keen face, that stood before him.

"Mr. Cubitt at home?"

"Yes, sir; but you can't see him—beg pardon, sir."

"I must, and at once."

"Begging pardon, sir, you can't. Mr. Hirsch, he said—"

"Hirsch!" Stephen strode into the hall. "It's me, Ben—Stephen, you know," he said, bending his head to the old man's face, and for the moment his voice became gentle.

Then he went forward to the library door, behind which he could hear voices, leaving the old servant staring after him.

With a quick turn of his wrist, Stephen threw the door open and stepped into the room.

"And with that ten thousand, mine friend, and the shares that I have mineself, we shall have an interest so big—"

A sharp, decided footfall on the threadbare old carpet cut short the precious explanation Mr. Solomon Hirsch was about to give to his friend, and both he and Mr. Cubitt swung round to face, with startled, frightened eyes, the stern, accusing eyes of Stephen Masters.

For several moments the three gazed at each other. It was plain neither of the two precious friends recognised their visitor, and presently Mr. Cubitt found his voice.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"Who are you dat come into this gentleman's house?" demanded Mr. Hirsch, with great vigour.

Stephen turned his eyes to the Jewish financier, then he stepped towards him and seized him firmly by the collar. In the young man's iron grip the Jew was but as a child. He protested; but, like a cur, dragged by the scruff of his neck, he was hauled from the room and placed in the hall.

"You stay there, and don't dare to return," said Stephen grimly, and Mr. Hirsch understood.

Stephen returned to the library.

"You don't know me?" he said; and his uncle made no reply.

"I am your nephew, and I have come back just in time to prevent you adding wholesale robbery to the petty thieving you carried on while I was with you. That ten—"

A shriek from Mr. Cubitt interrupted him. "Stephen!" he screamed, and fell back into a chair, regarding his nephew with staring, glassy eyes.

"Yes, Stephen," repeated the young man, and his eyes were fixed relentlessly upon his uncle. "You robbed me all my life while I was with you. Oh, I have found out all—you needn't deny anything! You brought me up in the belief that I was a beggar, an object of your charity. And now, so that you might get the money that is rightly mine, you have declared that I am dead!"

"I believed it, Stephen—I believed it!" broke in the wretched man. He was completely broken down; there was fear in his wide-open eyes and loose lips, and he was trembling from head to foot like a man with the ague. "I swear to you that I believed you were dead—honestly believed it! I knew you had gone out in the smack that was cut down, and I thought you were drowned—I did, indeed!"

"You believed it because you wanted to," sneered Stephen—"because believing it would bring you ten thousand pounds! But you shall not rob me! I am alive! I am not yet twenty-one, but if there is justice in this country you shall not escape scot-free, because—"

"Stephen—Stephen, I am your uncle, your mother's brother!" wailed the broken creature. "You would not send me to harm? I wronged you, I know it. But it was so that this estate should not go out of our family—your mother's family. Your money paid the interest. And the ten thousand pounds! It was to save me. Mr. Hirsch has bills; he has bought up the mortgage, and threatens to foreclose. I gave him a cheque, but I had no money, and now he— Oh, I am lost! My name, your mother's name, Stephen, will be disgraced, and I—"

"Will be in prison, I hope!" exclaimed Stephen harshly. "Why should I care? And when you say you believed me dead, you lie again! Did I not send you money—the money I believed I had cost you? Ha, ha! Returned to you my own money!"

Mr. Cubitt sat silent. Even his dulled and frightened brain read no mercy in the young man's terrible, stern eyes. For a minute Stephen watched him. Then from outside the door came a low, impatient, eager whine, and a scraping against the woodwork. Again and again it was repeated, but Stephen paid no heed. Then the door flew open, and an old dog sprang into the room, and, leaping to Stephen, bounded around him, licking his hand, and whining with joy. Bob Batchelor's dog, the mother of dead Swallow, had not forgotten. From the cross roads she had followed Steve, and, despite all efforts, had entered the house to find the boy whom she had known years before.

And at the touch of her hot tongue, the feel of her soft, friendly paws, Stephen's harshness went from him.

Suddenly he stepped towards his uncle.

"Keep the money," he said gently. "Thank God I have plenty. You are safe from me. Come, lass!" And with a pat and a whistle to Swallow's mother, he walked quietly from the Hall. "I shall be no worse, and he will be the better," he muttered.

THE END.

(Another long, complete tale next Thursday, "Our Captain." Don't miss it!)

DAILY MAIL

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By Maurice Merriman.

THE FIRST CHAPTERS.

Rex Allingham kicks the winning goal for Stormpoint College in an important match, and so gets in favour of Hal Trehearn, the captain of the school. But Jardon, a Fifth Former, bullies Rex, with his two chums, Jim and Bob, break bounds one night and row out to sea to fish. They smash the boat, and the next morning during class, Mr. Ford, the owner of the boat, calls and complains to Mr. Salmon. (Now go on with the story.)

The Three Chums are Punished.

"You three boys will each write a thousand lines in Latin, and will be gated for next half-holiday," said Mr. Salmon.

The chums did not like this arrangement at all, neither did Ford, for that matter. He was pretty sure of getting their custom on the half holiday, and now that was lost to him; while he did not see how he was going to get adequate compensation for his damaged boat, if Mr. Salmon was to check the bill.

Jim suggested that they should be allowed out if they got their lines finished before the next half holiday, but Mr. Salmon would not listen to this.

"I have punished you very lightly, because you told me the truth," he said. "Had you spoken falsely, I should have asked Dr. Andale to deal with the matter; as it is, he must, of course, be informed."

The chums did not feel at all comfortable concerning this. They fought shy of the doctor; and when at last he suddenly came upon them, they scarcely dared to look at him. Bob was the only one who did not appear much affected.

"Nice sort of day, isn't it, sir?" he ventured.

"Extremely! It is so bright, and it is freezing hard. If it continues there will be skating on Saturday afternoon. I think it will continue."

"He will be right, too!" groaned Jim. "He's always right about the weather. It's too awful to contemplate. I shouldn't wonder if it's the only skating we get this year."

"You mean the only skating we sha'n't get, Jim," said Rex.

"Rats!" growled Bob. "Of course, we shall get some skating. I'll show you! Get your skates ready, and finish those thousand lines."

"Old Seaslugg will never change his mind," said Jim.

"Who wants him to change it? I don't believe he has got one to change!" declared Bob. "All the same, I'm going to have a shot at him."

"We are frightfully unlucky," observed Rex. "If it had been a pouring wet afternoon it would not have mattered; but fancy losing the skating!"

"We are not going to lose it!" declared Bob. "I'm going to have a friendly chat with him, and if I can't convince him—why, we will get the skating all the same, provided there is any to be had."

Bob waited till the Saturday morning, and then, as the ice would bear, he went to Mr. Salmon's study, and tried every argument he could think of, but that gentleman was obdurate.

"How did you get on, old chap?" inquired Rex.

"Not at all. He's obstinate as a mule. He's more fitted to be a seaside mope than a schoolmaster. Well, I

don't care. I've made up my mind to skate, and that's what we are going to do."

"They say the ice on the lake is in grand condition."

"It doesn't matter. We are going skating, and that's all we have got to consider. Hallo, Porker! You ought to be in your porter's lodge, and not waddling all over the place like an overfed pig. If I were the doctor I should feed you on hogwash for a month or so. You are getting disgustingly fat."

"If I was the doctor I'd flog you within an inch of your life!" declared Porker.

"Go home you bad Porker!" exclaimed Jim. "You ought to have a ring put through your nose!"

"The ice on the lake is just lovely."

"It is a pity you can't follow its example, and be lovely, too. Cook never tells you that you are lovely, does she, Porker?"

"You varmint! You'll get no skating!"

"I say, wouldn't Porker look graceful skating," exclaimed Rex. "He would be like a dainty little fairy tripping over the ice!"

"I'll see as you don't get out, my beauties!" growled Porker. "They are going to have a grand time of it. There's two miles of the loveliest ice you ever saw. They are going to have lanterns, and all that, and ain't coming home to tea. The doctor has made arrangements to get that at Ford's. Haw, haw, haw! Ain't I jolly glad!"

"All right," said Bob. "If we can't enjoy ourselves in our own sweet way, I don't know who can. You go back to your sty, Porker. I'm off. I have one or two arrangements to make."

After that Bob was very much missing, and when the comrades saw him talking to a small boy, and tried to learn his plans, he became very mysterious.

Directly after dinner every boy, both big and little, trooped off to the great lake, for those who could not skate could at least amuse themselves by sliding. Even the doctor and the masters went, while Rex and Jim began to think that Bob's fishing expedition was a frost.

"Now, get your skates!" said Bob. "We are going to skate on the duck-pond. It's not as large as it might be, but the ice bears, and that's not breaking bounds."

"The doctor will send us off," said Jim.

"He can't. He's gone skating, and won't be in till long after we have done. There's something to follow this, too. Come on; I'll show you!"

Now, the duck-pond was surrounded by trees, and consequently the ice was not by any means strong. However, it bore the comrades all right, and they were soon having a jolly time of it.

Meantime, Porker was peacefully sleeping in his lodge, having locked the gates, so that the comrades could not possibly have got out unless they had scaled the wall; and he would have been rather glad had they done this, because of the row they would be sure to get into; but at about four o'clock Porker awoke from his sleep, and he was in a very bad temper.

Had he been a wise man, he would have taken matters coolly until tea-time; but, being an utter idiot, he went to chaff the chums, and gloat over their disappointment. He spent upwards of half an hour in searching for them, and then, hearing their shouts of laughter, he made his way to the pond.

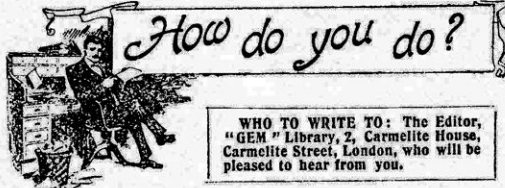
"You young vagabonds!" he roared. "Come hurf that hicc!"

"I say, Porker," exclaimed Rex, circling round and facing him, "how is it you always speak of a horse as 'an orse', and an ass as 'a hass'? You shove your h's in the wrong place, my man."

"I'll break your neck for you if you don't come off that hicc!"

"Not 'hicc', but 'ice,'" taunted Rex.

(Another long instalment of this splendid school story next Thursday. Order your GEM in advance.)



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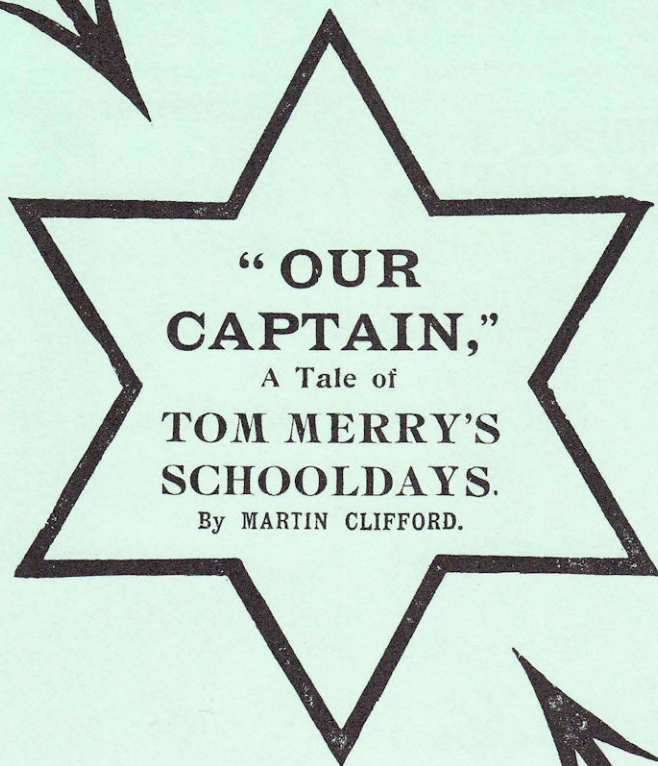
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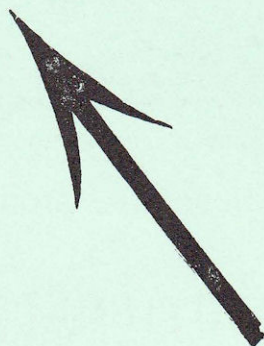
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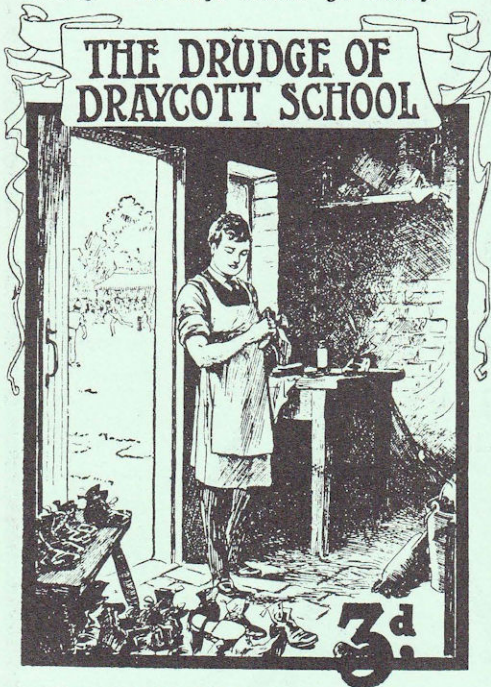
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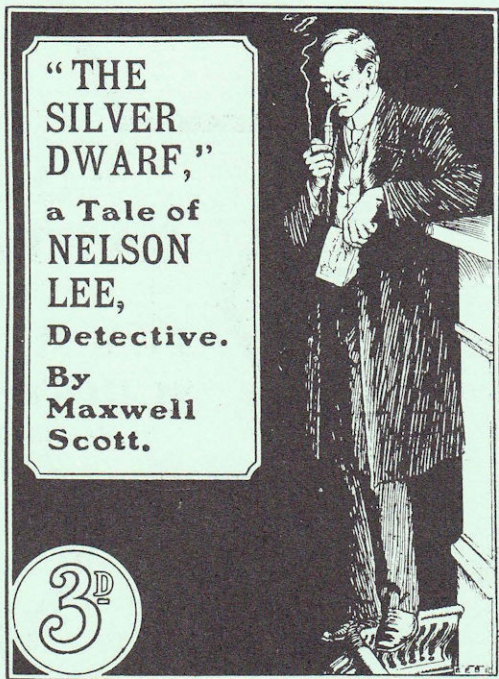
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