ROBERT MICHAEL BALLANTYNE

THE GARRET AND THE GARDEN; OR, LOW LIFE HIGH UP

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Содержание

R. M. Ballantyne
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Chapter One.
The Garret And The Garden Or Low Life High Up. Sudden Friendships

In the midst of the great wilderness—we might almost say the wilds—of that comparatively unknown region which lies on the Surrey side of the Thames, just above London Bridge, there sauntered one fine day a big bronzed seaman of middle age. He turned into an alley, down which, nautically speaking, he rolled into a shabby little court. There he stood still for a few seconds and looked around him as if in quest of something.

It was a miserable poverty-stricken court, with nothing to commend it to the visitor save a certain air of partial-cleanliness and semi-respectability, which did not form a feature of the courts in its neighbourhood.

"I say, Capting," remarked a juvenile voice close at hand, "you've bin an sailed into the wrong port."

The sailor glanced in all directions, but was unable to see the

owner of the voice until a slight cough—if not a suppressed laugh—caused him to look up, when he perceived the sharp, knowing, and dirty face of a small boy, who calmly contemplated him from a window not more than a foot above his head. Fun, mischief, intelligence, precocity sat enthroned on the countenance of that small boy, and suffering wrinkled his young brow.

"How d'ee know I'm in the wrong port—monkey?" demanded the sailor.

"'Cause there ain't no grog-shop in it—gorilla!" retorted the boy.

There is a mysterious but well-known power of attraction between kindred spirits which induces them to unite, like globules of quicksilver, at the first moment of contact. Brief as was this interchange of politenesses, it sufficed to knit together the souls of the seaman and the small boy. A mutual smile, nod, and wink sealed, as it were, the sudden friendship.

"Come now, younker," said the sailor, thrusting his hands into his coat-pockets, and leaning a little forward with legs well apart, as if in readiness to counteract the rolling of the court in a heavy sea, "there's no occasion for you an' me to go beatin' about—off an' on. Let's come to close quarters at once. I haven't putt in here to look for no grog-shop—"

"W'ich I didn't say you 'ad," interrupted the boy.

"No more you did, youngster. Well, what I dropped in here for was to look arter an old woman."

"If you'd said a young 'un, now, I might 'ave b'lieved you,"

returned the pert urchin.

"You *may* believe me, then, for I wants a young 'un too."

"Well, old salt," rejoined the boy, resting his ragged arms on the window-sill, and looking down on the weather-beaten man with an expression of patronising interest, "you've come to the right shop, anyhow, for that keemodity. In Lun'on we've got old women by the thousand, an' young uns by the million, to say nuffin o' middle-aged uns an' chicks. Have 'ee got a partikler pattern in yer eye, now, or d'ee on'y want samples?"

"What's your name, lad?" asked the sailor.

"That depends, old man. If a beak axes me, I've got a wariety o' names, an' gives 'im the first as comes to 'and. W'en a gen'leman axes me, I'm more partikler—I makes a s'lection."

"Bein' neither a beak nor a gentleman, lad, what would you say your name was to *me*?"

"Tommy Splint," replied the boy promptly. "Splint, 'cause w'en I was picked up, a small babby, at the work'us door, my left leg was broke, an' they 'ad to putt it up in splints; Tommy, 'cause they said I was like a he-cat; w'ich was a lie!"

"Is your father alive, Tommy?"

"'Ow should *I* know? I've got no father nor mother—never had none as I knows on; an' what's more, I don't want any. I'm a horphing, *I* am, an' I prefers it. Fathers an' mothers is often wery aggrawatin'; they're uncommon hard to manage w'en they're bad, an' a cause o' much wexation an' worry to child'n w'en they're good; so, on the whole, I think we're better without

'em. Chimleypot Liz is parent enough for me."

"And who may chimney-pot Liz be?" asked the sailor with sudden interest.

"H'm!" returned the boy with equally sudden caution and hesitancy. "I didn't say *chimney-pot* but *chimley-pot* Liz. W'at is she? W'y, she's the ugliest old ooman in this great meetropilis, an' she's got the jolliest old 'art in Lun'on. Her skin is wrinkled equal to the ry-nossris at the Zoo—I seed that beast once at a Sunday-school treat—an' her nose has been tryin' for some years past to kiss her chin, w'ich it would 'ave managed long ago, too, but for a tooth she's got in the upper jaw. She's on'y got one; but, my, that *is* a fang! so loose that you'd expect it to be blowed out every time she coughs. It's a reg'lar grinder an' cutter an' stabber all in one; an' the way it works—sometimes in the mouth, sometimes outside the lip, now an' then straight out like a ship's bowsprit—is most amazin'; an' she drives it about like a nigger slave. Gives it no rest. I do declare I wouldn't be that there fang for ten thousand a year. She's got two black eyes, too, has old Liz, clear an' bright as beads—fit to bore holes through you w'en she ain't pleased; and er nose is ooked—. But, I say, before I tell you more about 'er, I wants to know wot you've got to do with 'er? An' w'at's your name? I've gave you mine. Fair exchange, you know."

"True, Tommy, that's only right an' fair. But I ain't used to lookin' up when discoorsin'. Couldn't you come down here an' lay alongside?"

"No, old salt, I couldn't; but you may come up here if you

like. You'll be the better of a rise in the world, won't you? The gangway lays just round the corner; but mind your sky-scraper for the port's low. There's a seat in the winder here. Go ahead; starboard your helm, straight up, then 'ard-a-port, steady, mind your jib-boom, splice the main-brace, heave the main-deck overboard, and cast anchor 'longside o' me!"

Following these brief directions as far as was practicable, the sailor soon found himself on the landing of the stair, where Tommy was seated on a rickety packing-case awaiting him.

"Now, lad," said the man, seating himself beside his new friend, "from what you tells me, I think that chimney-pot—"

"Chimley," remarked the boy, correcting.

"Well, then, chimley-pot Liz, from your account of her, must be the very woman I wants. I've sought for her far an' wide, alow and aloft, an' bin directed here an' there an' everywhere, except the right where, 'till now. But I'll explain." The man paused a moment as if to consider, and it became evident to the boy that his friend was labouring under some degree of excitement, which he erroneously put down to drink.

"My name," continued the sailor, "is Sam Blake—second mate o' the *Seacow*, not long in from China. I didn't ship as mate. Bein' a shipwrecked seaman, you see—"

"Shipwrecked!" exclaimed the boy, with much interest expressed in his sharp countenance.

"Ay, lad, shipwrecked; an' not the first time neither, but I was keen to get home, havin' bin kep' a prisoner for an awful long

spell by pirates—"

"Pints!" interrupted the boy again, as he gazed in admiration at his stalwart friend; "but," he added, "I don't believe you. It's all barn. There ain't no pints now; an' you think you've got hold of a green un."

"Tommy!" said the sailor in a remonstrative tone, "did I ever deceive you?"

"Never," replied the boy fervently; "leastwise not since we 'come acquaint 'arf an hour back."

"Look here," said Sam Blake, baring his brawny left arm to the elbow and displaying sundry deep scars which once must have been painful wounds. "An' look at this," he added, opening his shirt-front and exposing a mighty chest that was seamed with similar scars in all directions. "That's what the pirates did to me an' my mates—torturin' of us afore killin' us."

"Oh, I say!" exclaimed the urchin, in a tone in which sympathy was mingled with admiration; "tell us all about it, Sam."

"Not now, my lad; business first—pleasure arterwards."

"I prefers pleasure first an' business arter, Sam. 'Owever, 'ave it yer own way."

"Well, you see," continued the sailor, turning down his, "w'en I went to sea *that* time, I left a wife an' a babby behind me; but soon arter I got out to China I got a letter tellin' me that my Susan was dead, and that the babby had bin took charge of by a old nurse in the family where Susan had been a housemaid. You may be sure my heart was well-nigh broke by the news, but I comforted

myself wi' the thought o' gittin' home again an' takin' care o' the dear babby—a gal, it was, called Susan arter its mother. It was at that time I was took by the pirates in the Malay Seas—now fifteen long years gone by."

"W'at! an' you ain't bin 'ome or seed yer babby for fifteen years?" exclaimed Tommy Splint.

"Not for fifteen long year," replied his friend. "You see, Tommy, the pirates made a slave o' me, an' took me up country into the interior of one o' their biggest islands, where I hadn't a chance of escapin'. But I did manage to escape at last, through God's blessin', an' got to Hong-Kong in a small coaster; found a ship—the *Seacow*-about startin' for England short-handed, an' got a berth on board of her. On the voyage the second mate was washed overboard in a gale, so, as I was a handy chap, the cap'en he promoted me, an' now I'm huntin' about for my dear little one all over London. But it's a big place is London."

"Yes; an' I suspect that you'll find your little un raither a big un too by this time."

"No doubt," returned the seaman with an absent air; then, looking with sudden earnestness into his little companion's face, he added, "Well, Tommy Splint, as I said just now, I've cruised about far an' near after this old woman as took charge o' my babby without overhaulin' of her, for she seems to have changed her quarters pretty often; but I keep up my hopes, for I do feel as if I'd run her down at last—her name was Lizbeth Morley—"

"Oho!" exclaimed Tommy Splint with a look of sharp

intelligence; “so you think that chimleypot Liz may be your Lizbeth and our Susy your babby!”

“I’m more than half inclined to think that, my boy,” returned the sailor, growing more excited.

“*Is* the old woman’s name Morley?”

“Dun know. Never heard nobody call her nothin’ but Liz.”

“And how about Susan?”

“That’s the babby?” said the boy with a grin.

“Yes—yes,” said Sam anxiously.

“Well, that babby’s about five fut four now, without ’er boots. You see ’uman creeturs are apt to grow considerable in fifteen years—ain’t they?”

“But is her name Blake?” demanded the seaman. “Not as I knows of. Susy’s wot we all calls ’er—so chimley-pot Liz calls ’er, an’ so she calls ’erself, an’ there ain’t another Susy like her for five miles round. But come up, Sam, an’ I’ll introduce ee—they’re both over’ead.”

So saying the lively urchin grasped his new friend by the hand and led him by a rickety staircase to the “rookeries” above.

Chapter Two.
Flowers in the Desert

Beauty and ugliness form a contrast which is presented to us every day of our lives, though, perhaps, we may not be much impressed by the fact. And this contrast is presented in ever-varying aspects.

We do not, however, draw the reader's attention to one of the striking aspects of the contrast—such as is presented by the hippopotamus and the gazelle, or the pug with the "bashed" nose and the Italian greyhound. It is to one of the more delicate phases that we would point—to that phase of the contrast wherein the fight between the two qualities is seen progressing towards victory, and ugliness is not only overborne but overwhelmed by beauty.

For this purpose we convey the reader to a scene of beauty that might compare favourably with any of the most romantic spots on this fair earth—on the Riviera, or among the Brazilian wilds, or, for that matter, in fairyland itself.

It is a garden—a remarkably small garden to be sure, but one that is arranged with a degree of taste and a display of fancy that betokens the gardener a genius. Among roses and mignonette, heliotrope, clematis and wallflower, chrysanthemums, verbenas and sweet-peas are intertwined, on rustic trellis-work, the rich

green leaves of the ivy and the graceful Virginia creeper in such a manner that the surroundings of the miniature garden are completely hidden from view, and nothing but the bright blue sky is visible, save where one little opening in the foliage reveals the prospect of a grand glittering river, where leviathans of the deep and small fry of the shallows, of every shape and size, disport themselves in the blaze of a summer sun.

Beauty meets the eye wherever turned, but, let the head of the observer be extended ever so little beyond the charmed circle of that garden, and nearly all around is ugliness supreme! For this is a garden on the roof of an old house; the grand river is the Thames, alive with the shipping of its world-wide commerce, and all around lies that interminable forest of rookery chimneys, where wild ungainly forms tell of the insane and vain efforts of man to cope with smoke; where wild beasts—in the form of cats—hold their nightly revels, imitating the yells of agonised infants, filling the dreams of sleepers with ideas of internal thunder or combustion, and driving the sleepless mad!

Susy—our Susy—is the cause of this miracle of beauty in the midst of misery; this glowing gem in a setting of ugliness. It is her modest little head that has bent over the boxes of earth, which constitute her landed property; her pretty little fingers which have trained the stems and watered the roots and cherished the flowers until the barren house-top has been made to blossom like the rose. And love, as usual, has done it all—love to that very ugly old woman, chimney-pot Liz, who sits on the rustic chair in

the midst of the garden enjoying it all.

For Liz has been a mother to that motherless bairn from her earliest years. She has guarded, fed, and clothed her from infancy; taught her from God's Book the old, old story of redeeming love, and led her to the feet of Jesus. It would be strange indeed if Susy did not love the ugly old woman, until at last she came to regard the wrinkles as veritable lines of beauty; the nut-cracker nose and chin as emblems of persistent goodness; the solitary wobbling tooth as a sign of unconquerable courage; and the dark eyes—well, it required no effort of imagination to change the character of the old woman's eyes, for they had always been good, kindly, expressive eyes, and were at that date as bright and lively as when she was sweet sixteen.

But chimney-pot Liz was poor—desperately poor, else she had not been there, for if heaven was around and within her, assuredly something very like pandemonium was underneath her, and it not unfrequently appeared as if the evil spirits below were surging to and fro in a fierce endeavour to burst up the whole place, and hurl the old woman with her garden into the river.

Evil spirits indeed formed the dread foundation of the old woman's abode; for, although her own court was to some extent free from the curse, this particular pile of building, of which the garden formed the apex, had a grog-shop, opening on another court, for its foundation-stone. From that sink of iniquity, literal and unmitigated—though not unadulterated—spirits of evil rose

like horrid fumes from the pit, and maddened the human spirits overhead. These, descending to the foundation-den, soaked themselves in the material spirit and carried it up, until the whole tenement seemed to reek and reel under its malign influence.

But, strange to say, the riot did not rise as high as the garden on the roof—only the echoes reached that little paradise.

Now it is a curious almost unaccountable fact, which no one would ever guess, that a teapot was the cause of this—at least a secondary cause—for a teapot was the chief instrument in checking, if not turning, the tide of evil. Yes, chimney-pot Liz held her castle in the very midst of the enemy, almost single-handed, with no visible weapon of offence or defence but a teapot! We say visible, because Liz did indeed possess other and very powerful weapons which were not quite so obvious—such as, the Word of God in her memory, the love of God in her heart, and the Spirit of God in her soul.

To the outside world, however, the teapot was her weapon and shield.

We have read of such a weapon before, somewhere in the glorious annals of city missions, but just now we are concerned only with the teapot of our own Liz of chimney-pot notoriety.

Seated, as we have said, in a rustic chair, gazing through the foliage at the busy Thames, and plying her knitting needles briskly, while the sun seemed to lick up and clear away the fogs and smoke of the great city, chimney-pot Liz enjoyed her thoughts until a loud clatter announced that Susy had knocked

over the watering-pot.

"Oh! granny" (thus she styled her), "I'm *so* sorry! So stupid of me! Luckily there's no water in it."

"Never mind, dear," said the old woman in a soft voice, and with a smile which for a moment exposed the waste of gums in which the solitary fang stood, "I've got no nerves—never had any, and hope I never may have. By the way, that reminds me—Is the tea done, Susy?"

"Yes, not a particle left," replied the girl, rising from her floral labours and thereby showing that her graceful figure matched well with her pretty young face. It was a fair face, with golden hair divided in the middle and laid smooth over her white brow, not sticking confusedly out from it like the tangled scrub on a neglected common, or the frontal locks of a Highland bull.

"That's bad, Susy," remarked old Liz, pushing the fang about with her tongue for a few seconds. "You see, I had made up my mind to go down to-night and have a chat with Mrs Rampy, and I wouldn't like to visit her without my teapot. The dear old woman is so fond of a cup of tea, and she don't often get it good, poor thing. No, I shouldn't like to go without my teapot, it would disappoint her, you know—though I've no doubt she would be glad to see me even empty-handed."

"I should just think she would!" said Susy with a laugh, as she stooped to arrange some of the fastenings of her garden, "I should just think she would. Indeed, I doubt if that *dear* old woman would be alive now but for you, granny."

The girl emphasised the "dear" laughingly, for Mrs Rampy was one of those middle-aged females of the destitute class whose hearts have been so steeled against their kind by suffering and drink as to render them callous to most influences. The proverbial "soft spot" in Mrs Rampy's heart was not reached until an assault had been made on it by chimney-pot Liz with her teapot. Even then it seemed as if the softness of the spot were only of the gutta-percha type.

"Perhaps not, perhaps not my dear," returned old Liz, with that pleased little smile with which she was wont to recognise a philanthropic success a smile which always had the effect of subduing the tooth, and rendering the plain face almost beautiful.

Although bordering on the lowest state of destitution—and that is a remarkably low state in London!—old Liz had an air of refinement about her tones, words, and manner which was very different from that of the poor people around her. This was not altogether, though partly, due to her Christianity. The fact is, the old woman had "seen better days." For fifty years she had been nurse in an amiable and wealthy family, the numerous children of which seemed to have been born to bloom for a few years in the rugged garden of this world, and then be transplanted to the better land. Only the youngest son survived. He entered the army and went to India—that deadly maelstrom which has swallowed up so much of British youth and blood and beauty! When the old couple became bankrupt and died, the old nurse found herself alone and almost destitute in the world.

It is not our purpose to detail here the sad steps by which she descended to the very bottom of the social ladder, taking along with her Susan, her adopted daughter and the child of a deceased fellow-servant. We merely tell thus much to account for her position and her partial refinement—both of which conditions she shared with Susan.

"Now then," said the latter, "I must go, granny. Stickle and Screw are not the men to overlook faults. If I'm a single minute late I shall have to pay for it."

"And quite right, Susy, quite right. Why should Stickle and Screw lose a minute of their people's work? Their people would be angry enough if they were to be paid a penny short of their wages! Besides, the firm employs over two hundred hands, and if every one of these was to be late a minute there would be two hundred minutes gone—nigh four hours, isn't it? You should be able to count that right off, Susy, havin' been so long at the Board-school."

"I don't dispute it, granny," said the girl with a light laugh, as she stood in front of a triangular bit of looking-glass tying on her poor but neatly made hat. "And I am usually three or four minutes before my time, but Stickle and Screw are hard on us in other ways, so different from Samson and Son, where Lily Hewat goes. Now, I'm off. I'll be sure to be back by half-past nine or soon after."

As the girl spoke, footsteps were heard ascending the creaky wooden stair. Another moment and Tommy Splint entering with

a theatrical air, announced—

"A wisitor!"

He was closely followed by Sam Blake, who no sooner beheld Susy than he seemed to become paralysed, for he stood gazing at her as if in eager but helpless amazement.

Susy was a good deal surprised at this, but feeling that if she were to wait for the clearing up of the mystery she would infallibly be late in reaching the shop of the exacting Stickle and Screw, she swept lightly past the seaman with a short laugh, and ran down-stairs.

Without a word of explanation Sam sprang after her, but, although smart enough on the shrouds and ladders of shipboard, he failed to accommodate himself to the stairs of rookeries, and went down, as he afterwards expressed it, "by the run," coming to an anchor at the bottom in a sitting posture. Of course the lithe and active Susy escaped him, and also escaped being too late by only half a minute.

"Never mind, she'll be back again between nine and ten o'clock, unless they keep her late," said old Liz, after Sam had explained who he was, and found that Susy was indeed his daughter, and chimney-pot Liz the nurse who had tended his wife to her dying day, and afterwards adopted his child.

"I never was took aback so in all my life," said the seaman, sitting down beside the old woman, and drawing a sigh so long that it might have been likened to a moderate breeze. "She's the born image o' what her dear mother was when I first met her.

My Susy! Well, it's not every poor seaman as comes off a long voyage an' finds that he's fallen heir to a property like *that*!"

"You may well be proud of her," said old Liz, "and you'll be prouder yet when you come to know her."

"I know it, and I'm proud to shake your hand, mother, an' thankee kindly for takin' such care o' my helpless lassie. You say she'll be home about ten?"

"Yes, if she's not kep' late. She always comes home about that time. Meanwhile you'll have something to eat. Tommy, boy, fetch out the loaf and the cheese and the teapot. You know where to find 'em. Tommy's an orphan, Cap'n Blake, that I've lately taken in hand. He's a good boy is Tommy, but rather wild."

"Wot can you expect of a horphing?" said the boy with a grin, for he had overheard the latter remark, though it was intended only for the visitor's ear. "But I say, granny, there ain't no cheese here, 'cept a bit o' rind that even a mouse would scorn to look at."

"Never mind, bring out the loaf, Tommy."

"An' there ain't no use," continued the boy, "o' bringin' out the teapot, 'cause there ain't a grain o' tea nowheres."

"Oh! I forgot," returned old Liz, slightly confused; "I've just run out o' tea, Cap'n Blake, an' I haven't a copper at *present* to buy any, but—"

"Never mind that old girl; and I ain't quite captain yet, though trendin' in that direction. You come out along wi' me, Tommy. I'll soon putt these matters to rights."

Old Liz could not have remonstrated even if she had wished

to do so, for her impulsive visitor was gone in a moment followed by his extremely willing little friend. They returned in quarter of an hour.

"There you are," said the seaman, taking the articles one by one from a basket carried by Tommy; "a big loaf, pound o' butter, ditto tea, three pound o' sugar, six eggs, hunk o' cheese, paper o' salt—forgot the pepper; never mind."

"You've bin an' forgot the sassengers too—but here they are," said Tommy, plucking the delectable viands from the bottom of the basket with a look of glee, and laying them on the table.

Chimney-pot Liz did not look surprised; she only smiled and nodded her head approvingly, for she felt that Sam Blake understood the right thing to do and did it.

Soon the celebrated teapot was going the round, full swing, while the air was redolent of fried sausage and cheese mingled with the perfume of roses and mignonette, for this meal, you must know, was eaten in the garden in the afternoon sunshine, while the cooking—done in the attic which opened on the garden —was accomplished by Sam assisted by Tommy.

"Well, you *air* a trump," said the latter to the former as he sat down, greasy and glowing, beside the seaman at the small table where old Liz presided like a humble duchess.

We need hardly say that the conversation was animated, and that it bore largely on the life-history of the absent Susy.

"You're quite sure that she'll be here by ten?" asked the excited father for the fiftieth time that afternoon.

"Yes, I'm sure of it—unless she's kep' late," answered Liz.

But Susy did *not* return at the usual hour, so her impatient father was forced to conclude that she *had* been "kep' late"—too late. In his anxiety he resolved to sally forth under the guidance of Tommy Splint to inquire for the missing Susy at the well-known establishment of Stickle and Screw.

Let us anticipate him in that quest. At the usual hour that night the employés of Stickle and Screw left work and took their several ways home ward. Susy had the company of her friend Lily Hewat as far as Chancery Lane. Beyond that point she had to go alone. Being summer-time, the days were long, and Susy was one of those strong-hearted and strong-nerved creatures who have a tendency to fear nothing.

She had just passed over London Bridge and turned into a labyrinth of small streets on the Surrey side of the river, when a drunken man met her in a darkish and deserted alley through which she had to pass. The man seized her by the arm. Susy tried to free herself. In the struggle that ensued she fell with a loud shriek, and struck her head on the kerb-stone so violently that she was rendered insensible. Seeing this, the man proceeded to take from her the poor trinkets she had about her, and would have succeeded in robbing her but for the sudden appearance on the scene of a lowland Scot clad in a homespun suit of shepherd's plaid—a strapping ruddy youth of powerful frame, fresh from the braes of Yarrow.

Chapter Three.
A Visitor from the North

How that Lowland Scot came to the rescue just in the nick of time is soon told.

"Mither," said he one evening, striding into his father's dwelling—a simple cottage on a moor—and sitting down in front of a bright old woman in a black dress, whose head was adorned with that frilled and baggy affair which is called in Scotland a mutch, "I'm gawin' to Lun'on."

"Hoots! havers, David."

"It's no' havers, mither. Times are guid. We've saved a pickle siller. Faither can spare me for a wee while—sae I'm aff to Lun'on the morn's mornin'."

"An' what for?" demanded Mrs Laidlaw, letting her hands and the sock on which they were engaged drop on her lap, as she looked inquiringly into the grave countenance of her handsome son.

"To seek a wife, maybe," replied the youth, relaxing into that very slight smile with which grave and stern-featured men sometimes betray the presence of latent fun.

Mrs Laidlaw resumed her sock and needle with no further remark than "Hoots! ye're haverin'," for she knew that her son was only jesting in regard to the wife. Indeed nothing was further

from that son's intention or thoughts at the time than marriage, so, allowing the ripple to pass from his naturally grave and earnest countenance, he continued—

"Ye see, mither, I'm twunty-three noo, an' I *wad* like to see something o' the warld afore I grow aulder an' settle doon to my wark. As I said, faither can spare me a while, so I'll jist tak' my fit in my haund an' awa' to see the Great Bawbylon."

"Ye speak o' gaun to see the warld, laddie, as if 'ee was a gentleman."

"Div 'ee think, mother, that the warld was made only for *gentlemen* to travel in?" demanded the youth, with the gentlest touch of scorn in his tone.

To this question the good woman made no reply; indeed her stalwart son evidently expected none, for he rose a few minutes later and proceeded to pack up his slender wardrobe in a shoulder-bag of huge size, which, however, was well suited to his own proportions.

Next day David Laidlaw took the road which so many men have taken before him—for good or ill. But, unlike most of his predecessors, he was borne towards it on the wings of steam, and found himself in Great Babylon early the following morning, with his mother's last caution ringing strangely in his ears.

"David," she had said, "I ken ye was only jokin', but dinna ye be ower sure o' yersel'. Although thae English lassies are a kine o' waux dolls, they have a sort o' way wi' them that might be dangerous to lads like you."

"H'm!" David had replied, in that short tone of self-sufficiency which conveys so much more than the syllable would seem to warrant.

The Scottish youth had neither kith nor kin in London, but he had one friend, an old school companion, who, several years before, had gone to seek his fortune in the great city, and whose address he knew. To this address he betook himself on the morning of his arrival, but found that his friend had changed his abode. The whole of that day did David spend in going about. He was sent from one place to another, in quest of his friend, and made diligent use of his long legs, but without success. Towards evening he was directed to a street on the Surrey side of the Thames, and it was while on his way thither that he chanced to enter the alley where poor Susan was assaulted.

Like most Scotsmen of his class and size David Laidlaw was somewhat leisurely and slow in his movements when not called to vigorous exertion, but when he heard the girl's shriek, and, a moment later, saw her fall, he sprang to her side with one lithe bound, like that of a Bengal tiger, and aimed a blow at her assailant, which, had it taken effect, would have interrupted for some time—if not terminated for ever—that rascal's career. But the thief, though drunk, was young, strong, and active. It is also probable that he was a professional pugilist for, instead of attempting to spring back from the blow—which he had not time to do—he merely put his head to one side and let it pass. At the same instant David received a stinging whack on the right eye,

which although it failed to arrest his rush, filled his vision with starry coruscations.

The thief fell back and the Scot tripped over him. Before he could recover himself the thief was up like an acrobat and gone. At the same moment two policemen, rushing on the scene in answer to the girl's shriek, seized David by the collar and held him fast.

There was Highland as well as Lowland blood in the veins of young Laidlaw. This sanguinary mixture is generally believed to possess effervescing properties when stirred. It probably does. For one moment the strength of Goliath of Gath seemed to tingle in David's frame, and the vision of two policemen's heads battered together swam before his eyes—but he thought better of it and restrained himself!

"Tak' yer hands aff me, freens," he said, suddenly unclosing his fists and relaxing his brows. "Ye'd better see after the puir lassie. An' dinna fear for me. I'm no gawn to rin awa'!"

Perceiving the evident truth of this latter remark, the constables turned their attention to the girl, who was by that time beginning to recover.

"Where am I?" asked Susy, gazing into the face of her rescuer with a dazed look.

"Yer a' right, puir bairn. See, tak' ha'd o' my airm," said the Scot.

"That's the way, now, take hold of mine," said one of the constables in a kindly tone; "come along—you'll be all right in a

minute. The station is close at hand."

Thus supported the girl was led to the nearest police station, where David Laidlaw gave a minute account of what had occurred to the rather suspicious inspector on duty. While he was talking, Susan, who had been provided with a seat and a glass of water, gazed at him with profound interest. She had by that time recovered sufficiently to give her account of the affair, and, as there was no reason for further investigation of the matter, she was asked if her home was far off, and a constable was ordered to see her safely there.

"Ye needna fash," said David carelessly, "I'm gawn that way mysel', an' if the puir lassie has nae objection I'll be glad to—"

The abrupt stoppage in the youth's speech was caused by his turning to Susy and looking full and attentively in her face, which, now that the colour was restored and the dishevelled hair rearranged, had a very peculiar effect on him. His mother's idea of a "waux doll" instantly recurred to his mind, but the interest and intelligence in Susy's pretty face was very far indeed removed from the vacant imbecility which usually characterises that fancy article of juvenile luxury.

"Of course if the girl wishes you to see her home," said the inspector, "I have no objection, but I'll send a constable to help you to take care of her."

"Help *me* to tak' care o' her!" exclaimed David, whose pride was sorely hurt by the distrust implied in these words; "man, I could putt her in my pooch an' *you* alang wi' her."

Of this remark Mr Inspector, who had resumed his pen, took no notice whatever, but went on writing while one of the constables prepared to obey his superior's orders. In his indignation the young Scot resolved to fling out of the office and leave the police to do as they pleased in the matter, but, glancing at Susy as he turned round, he again met the gaze of her soft blue eyes.

"C'way, lassie, I *wull* gang wi' ye," he said, advancing quickly and offering his arm.

Being weak from the effects of her fall, Susy accepted the offer willingly, and was supported on the other side by a policeman.

In a short time the trio ascended the rookery stair and presented themselves to the party in the garret-garden just as Sam Blake and Tommy Splint were about to leave it.

It is impossible to describe adequately the scene that ensued—the anxiety of the poor seaman to be recognised by his long lost "babby," the curious but not unnatural hesitancy of that "babby" to admit that he *was* her father, though earnestly assured of the fact by chimney-pot Liz; the surprise of David Laidlaw, and even of the policeman, at being suddenly called to witness so interesting a domestic scene, and the gleeful ecstasy of Tommy Splint over the whole affair—flavoured as it was with the smell and memory of recent "sassengers."

When the constable at last bid them good-night and descended the stair, the young Scot turned to go, feeling, with intuitive

delicacy, that he was in the way, but once again he met the soft blue eyes of Susy, and hesitated.

"Hallo, young man!" cried Sam Blake, on observing his intention, "you ain't agoin' to leave us—arter saving my gal's life, p'raps—anywise her property. No, no; you'll stop here all night an'—"

He paused: "Well, I do declare I forgot I wasn't aboard my own ship, but—" again he paused and looked at old Liz.

"I've no room for any of you in the garret," said that uncompromising woman, "there ain't more than one compartment in it, and that's not too big for me an' Susy; but you're welcome, both of you, to sleep in the garden if you choose. Tommy sleeps there, under a big box, and a clever sea-farin' man like you could—"

"All right, old lady," cried the seaman heartily. "I'll stop, an' thankee; we'll soon rig up a couple o' bunks. So you will stop too, young man—by the way, you—you didn't give us your name yet."

"My name is David Laidlaw; but I won't stop, thankee," replied the Scot with unexpected decision of manner. "Ye see, I've been lookin' a' this day for an auld freen' an' I *must* find him afore the morn's mornin', if I should seek him a' nicht. But, but—maybe I'll come an' speer for 'ee in a day or twa—if I may."

"If you mean that you will come and call, Mr Laidlaw," said old Liz, "we will be delighted to see you at any time. Don't forget the address."

"Nae fear—I'll putt it i' my note-buik," said David, drawing a substantial volume from his breast pocket and entering the address—'Mrs Morley, Cherub Court'—therein.

Having shaken hands all round he descended the stair with a firm tread and compressed lips until he came out on the main thoroughfare, when he muttered to himself sternly:

"Waux dolls, indeed! there's nane o' thae dolls'll git the better o' me. H'm! a bonny wee face, nae doot but what div *I* care for bonny faces if the hairt's no' richt?"

"But suppose that the heart *is* right?"

Who could have whispered that question? David Laidlaw could not stop to inquire, but began to hum—

> "Oh, this is no my ain lassie,
> Kind though the lassie be,—"

In a subdued tone, as he sauntered along the crowded street, which by that time was blazing with gas-light in the shop-windows and oil-lamps on the hucksters' barrows.

The song, however, died on his lips, and he moved slowly along, stopping now and then to observe the busy and to him novel scene, till he reached a comparatively quiet turning, which was dimly lighted by only one lamp. Here he felt a slight twitch at the bag which contained his little all. Like lightning he turned and seized by the wrist a man who had already opened the bag and laid hold of some of its contents. Grasping the poor wretch

by the neck with his other hand he held him in a grip of iron.

Chapter Four.
Dangers Threaten

The man who had been thus captured by David was one of those wretched forlorn creatures who seem to reach a lower depth of wretchedness and degradation in London than in any other city in the world. Although young and strongly made he was pale, gaunt and haggard, with a look about the eyes and mouth which denoted the habitual drunkard. The meanness of his attire is indescribable.

He trembled—whether from the effects of dissipation or fear we cannot say—as his captor led him under the lamp, with a grip on the collar that almost choked him, but when the light fell full on his haggard face a feeling of intense pity induced the Scot to relax his hold.

"Oh, ye puir meeserable crater!" he said, but stopped abruptly, for the man made a sudden and desperate effort to escape. He might as well have struggled in the grasp of a gorilla!

"Na, na, my man, ye'll no twust yersel' oot o' my grup sae easy! keep quiet noo, an' I'll no hurt 'ee. What gars ye gang aboot tryin' to steal like that?"

"Steal!" explained the man fiercely, "what else can I do? I *must* live! I've just come out of prison, and am flung on the world to be kicked about like a dog and starve. Let me go, or I'll kill you!"

"Na, 'ee'll no kill me. I'm no sae easy killed as 'ee think," returned David, again tightening the grasp of his right hand while he thrust his left into his trousers-pocket.

At that moment the bull's-eye light of an advancing constable became visible, and the defiant air of the thief gave place to a look of anxious fear. It was evident that the dread of another period of prison life was strong upon the trembling wretch. Drawing out a handful of coppers, David thrust them quickly into the man's hand, and said—

"Hae, tak' them, an' aff ye go! an' ask the Lord to help 'ee to dae better."

The strong hand relaxed, another moment and the man, slipping round the corner like an unwholesome spirit, was gone.

"Can ye direck me, polisman," said the Scot to the constable, as he was about to pass, "t' Toor Street?"

"Never heard of it," said the constable brusquely, but civilly enough.

"That's queer noo. I was telt it was hereaboots—Toor Street."

"Oh, perhaps you mean *Tower* Street" said the constable, with a patronising smile.

"Perhaps I div," returned the Scot, with that touch of cynicism which is occasionally seen in his race. "Can 'ee direck me tilt?"

"Yes, but it is on the other side of the river."

"Na—it's on *this* side o' the river," said David quietly yet confidently.

The conversation was here cut short by the bursting on their

ears of a sudden noise at some distance. The policeman turned quickly away, and when David advanced into the main street he observed that there was some excitement among its numerous and riotous occupants. The noise continued to increase, and it became evident that the cause of it was rapidly approaching, for the sound changed from a distant rumble into a steady roar, in the midst of which stentorian shouts were heard. Gradually the roar culminated, for in another moment there swept round the end of the street a pair of apparently runaway horses, with two powerful lamps gleaming, or rather glaring, above them. On each side of the driver of the galloping steeds stood a man, shouting like a maniac of the boatswain type. All three were brass-helmeted, like antique charioteers. Other helmets gleamed behind them. Little save the helmets and the glowing lamps could be seen through the dark and smoky atmosphere as the steam fire-engine went thundering by.

Now, if there was one thing more than another that David Laidlaw desired to see, it was a London fire. Often had he read about these fires, for he was a great reader of books, as well as newspapers, and deeply had his enthusiasm been stirred (though not expressed) by accounts of thrilling escapes and heroic deeds among the firemen. His eyes therefore flashed back the flame of the lamps as the engine went past him like a red thunderbolt, and he started off in pursuit of it.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.