ROBERT MICHAEL BALLANTYNE

IN THE TRACK OF THE TROOPS

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Ballantyne R.

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Содержание

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Chapter One.
A Tale of Modern War. Reveals the Explosive Nature of my Early Career

The remarkable—I might even say amazing—personal adventures which I am about to relate occurred quite recently.

They are so full of interest to myself and to my old mother, that I hasten to write them down while yet vivid and fresh in my memory, in the hope that they may prove interesting,—to say nothing of elevating and instructive—to the English-speaking portions of the human race throughout the world.

The dear old lady to whom I have just referred—my mother—is one of the gentlest, meekest, tenderest beings of my acquaintance. Her regard for me is almost idolatrous. My feelings towards her are tinged with adoration.

From my earliest years I have been addicted to analysis.

Some of my younger readers may not perhaps know that by analysis is meant the reduction of compound things to their elements—the turning of things, as it were, inside out and tearing them to pieces. All the complex toys of infancy I was wont to reduce to their elements; I turned them inside out to see what they were made of, and how they worked. A doll, not my own, but my sister Bella's, which had moveable eyelids and a musical stomach, was treated by me in this manner, the result being that I learned little, while my poor sister suffered much. Everything in my father's house suffered more or less from this inquiring tendency of my mind.

Time, however, while it did not abate my thirst for knowledge, developed my constructive powers. I became a mechanician and an inventor. Perpetual motion was my first hobby. Six times during the course of boyhood did I burst into my mother's presence with the astounding news that I had "discovered it at last!" The mild and trustful being believed me. Six times also was I compelled to acknowledge to her that I had been mistaken, and again she believed me, more thoroughly, perhaps, than at first. No one, I think, can form the least idea of the delight with which I pursued this mechanical will-o'-the-wisp.

Growing older, I took to chemistry, and here my love for research and analysis found ample scope, while the sufferings of my father's household were intensified. I am not naturally cruel—far from it. They little knew how much pain their sufferings caused me; how earnestly I endeavoured to lessen or neutralise the nuisances which the pursuit of science entailed. But I could not consume my own smoke, or prevent explosions, or convert bad and suffocating odours into sweet smells.

Settling down to this new pursuit with intense enthusiasm, I soon began to flow in my natural course, and sought to extend the bounds of chemical knowledge. I could not help it. The particular direction in which my interest ultimately became concentrated was that of explosives.

After becoming acquainted with gun-cotton, nitro-glycerine, dynamite, lithofracteur, and other combinations of powerfully-explosive agents, I took to searching for and inventing methods by which these might be utilised. To turn everything to good account, is a desire which I cannot resist.

Explosives naturally drew my attention to mines—tin-mines, coal-mines, and other commercial enterprises. They also suggested war and torpedoes.

At that time I had not reflected on the nature of war. I merely knew it to be a science, cultivated chiefly by the human race, and that in its practice explosives are largely used. To "blow-up" effectively,

whether in a literal or figurative sense, is difficult. To improve this power in war, and in the literal sense, I set myself to work. I invented a torpedo, which seemed to me better than any that had yet been brought out. To test its powers, I made a miniature fortification, and blew it up. I also blew up our groom, Jacob Lancey.

It happened thus:—

The miniature fortress, which was made of cardboard, earth, and bricks, was erected in a yard near our stables. Under its walls the torpedo was placed, and the match lighted.

It was night and very dark. I had selected the hour as being that most suitable to the destruction of an enemy's stronghold. The match was very slow in burning. Matches invariably are so in the circumstances. Suddenly I heard the sound of footsteps. Next moment, before I had time to give warning, Jacob Lancey came round the corner of the stables with a pitchfork on his shoulder, and walked right into the fortress. He set his foot on the principal gateway, tripped over the ramparts, and falling headlong into the citadel, laid its banner in the dust. At the same instant there came a terrific flash and crash, and from the midst of smoke and flames, the groom appeared to shoot into the air!

With feelings of horror I sprang to the rescue and dragged the poor fellow from the smoking débris. He was stunned at first, but soon recovered, and then it was found that one of the fingers of his left hand had been completely blown off. Words cannot describe my feelings. I felt as if I had become next thing to a murderer. Lancey was a tall powerful man of about thirty, and not easily killed. He had received no other injury worth mentioning. Although the most faithful of servants, he was irascible, and I anticipated an explosion of temper when he recovered sufficiently to understand the nature of his injury, but I was mistaken. The blowing-up seemed to have quite cured his temper —at least as regarded myself, for when I afterwards went to see him, with a very penitent face, he took my hand and said—

"Don't take on so, Master Jeffry. You didn't do it a purpus, you know, and, after all, it's on'y the little finger o' the left hand. It'll be rather hout o' the way than otherwise. Moreover, I was used to make a baccy stopper o' that finger, an' it strikes me that the stump'll fit the pipe better than the pint did, besides bein' less sensitive to fire, who knows? Any'ow, Master Jeffry, you've got no occasion to grieve over it so."

I felt a little comforted when the good fellow spoke thus, but I could not forgive myself. For some time after that I quite gave up my chemical and other experiments, and when I did ultimately resume them, I went to work with extreme caution.

Not long after this event I went to college, and studied medicine. My course was nearly completed when my dear father died. He had earnestly desired that I should enter the medical profession. I therefore resolved to finish my course, although, being left in possession of a small estate named Fagend, in Devonshire, and an ample income, it was not requisite that I should practise for a livelihood.

One morning, a considerable time after my studies were completed, I sat at breakfast with my mother.

"Jeff," she said (my name is Jeffry Childers); "Jeff, what do you think of doing now? Being twenty-four, you ought, you know, to have some fixed idea as to the future, for, of course, though independent, you don't intend to be idle."

"Right, mother, right," I replied, "I don't mean to be an idler, nevertheless I don't mean to be a doctor. I shall turn my mind to chemistry, and talking of that, I expect to test the powers of a particular compound today."

"And what," said my mother, with a peculiar smile, "is the nature of this compound?"

"Violently explosive," said I.

"Ah, of course, I might have guessed that, Jeff, for most of your compounds are either violently explosive or offensive—sometimes both; but what is the name of this one?"

"Before answering that," said I, pulling out my watch, "allow me to ask at what hour you expect Bella home to-day."

"She half promised to be over to breakfast, if cousin Kate would let her away. It is probable that she may arrive in less than an hour."

"Curious coincidence," said I, "that her lover is likely to arrive about the same time!"

"What! Nicholas Naranovitsch?"

"Yes. The ship in which he sailed from St. Petersburg arrived late last night, and I have just received a telegram, saying that he will be down by the first train this morning. Love, you know, is said to have wings. If the pair given to Naranovitsch are at all in keeping with his powerful frame, they will bear him swiftly to Fagend."

It may interest the reader at this point to know that my only sister, Bella, had been engaged the previous year to one of my dearest college friends, a young Russian, whose father had sent him to finish his education in England. My own father, having been a merchant, many of whose dealings were with Russia, had frequently visited St. Petersburg and twice my mother and sister and I accompanied him thither. While there we had met with the Naranovitsch family.

Young Nicholas was now in the army, and as fine-looking a fellow as one could wish to see. Not only was he strong and manly, but gentle in manner and tender of heart. My sister Bella being the sweetest—no, not quite that, for there *is* a pretty young—well, no matter—Bella being, as I may say, *one* of the sweetest girls in England, he fell in love with her, of course. So did she with him; no wonder! During a visit to our place in Devonshire at the end of his college career, he and Bella became engaged. Nicholas returned to St. Petersburg to obtain his parents' consent to the union, and to make arrangements. He was rich, and could afford to marry. At the time I write of, he was coming back, not to claim his bride, for his father thought him still too young, but to see her, and to pay us a visit.

"Now you know, mother," said I, "after the young people have seen each other for half-an-hour or so, they will naturally want to take a walk or a ride, and—"

"Only half-an-hour?" interrupted my mother, with one of her peculiar little smiles.

"Well, an hour if you like, or two if they prefer it," I returned; "at all events, they will want a walk before luncheon, and I shall take the opportunity to show them some experiments, which prove the power of the singular compound about which you questioned me just now."

"The explosive?"

"Yes. Its name is dynamite."

"And what may that be, Jeff? Something very awful, I daresay," remarked my mother, with a look of interest, as she sipped her tea.

"Very awful, indeed," said I; "at least its effects are sometimes tremendous."

"What! worse than gunpowder?"

"Ay, much worse, though I should prefer to say *better* than gunpowder."

"Dear me!" rejoined my mother, lifting her eyebrows a little, in surprise.

"Yes, much better," I continued; "gunpowder only bursts things—"

"Pretty well that, Jeff, in the way of violence, isn't it?"

"Yes, but nothing to dynamite, for while powder only bursts things, dynamite shatters them."

"How very dreadful! What *is* dynamite?"

"That is just what I am about to explain," said I. "You must know, then, that it is a compound."

"Dear, dear," sighed my mother; "how many compounds you have told me about, Jeff, since you took to chemistry! Are there no uncompounded things—no simple things in the world?"

"Why, yes, mother; *you* are a simple thing, and I only wish there were a good many more simple things like you in the world—"

"Don't be foolish, Jeff, but answer my question."

"Well, mother, there are indeed some simple elements in creation, but dynamite is not one of them. It is composed of an excessively explosive oil named nitro-glycerine (itself a compound), and

an earth called kieselguhr. The earth is not explosive, and is only mixed with the nitro-glycerine to render that liquid less dangerous; but the compound is named dynamite, in which form it is made up and sold in immense quantities for mining purposes. Here is some of it," I added, pulling from my pocket a cartridge nearly two inches in length, and about an inch in diameter. "It is a soft, pasty substance, done up, as you see, in cartridge-paper, and this little thing, if properly fired, would blow a large boulder-stone to atoms."

"Bless me, boy, be careful!" exclaimed my mother, pushing back her chair in some alarm.

"There is no danger," I said, in reassuring tones, "for this cartridge, if opened out and set on fire by a spark or flame, would not, in the first place, light readily, and, in the second place, it would merely burn without exploding; but if I were to put a detonator inside and fire it by means of *that*, it would explode with a violence that far exceeds the force of gunpowder."

"And what is this wonderful detonator, Jeff, that so excites the latent fury of the dynamite?"

I was much amused by the pat way in which my mother questioned me, and became more interested as I continued my explanation.

"You must know," I said, "that many powders are violently explosive, and some more so than others. This violence of explosion is called detonation, by which is meant the almost instantaneous conversion of the ultimate molecules of an explosive compound (i.e. the whole concern) into gas."

"I see; you mean that it goes off quickly," said my mother, in a simple way that was eminently characteristic.

"Well, yes; but much more quickly than gunpowder does. It were better to say that a powder detonates when it *all* explodes at the *same* instant. Gunpowder appears to do so, but in reality it does not. One of the best detonators is fulminate of mercury. Detonating caps are therefore made of this, and one such cap put into the middle of that cartridge of dynamite and set fire to, by any means, would convert the cartridge itself into a detonator, and explode it with a *shattering* effect.

"A human being," I continued, "sometimes illustrates this principle figuratively—I mean the violent explosion of a large cartridge by means of a small detonator. Take, for example, a schoolmaster, and suppose him to be a dynamite cartridge. His heart is a detonating cap. The schoolroom and boys form a galvanic battery. His brain may be likened to a conducting-wire. He enters the schoolroom; the chemical elements are seething in riot, books are being torn and thrown, ink spilt, etcetera. Before opening the door, the good man is a quiet piece of plastic dynamite, but the instant his eye is touched, the electric circuit is, as it were, completed; the mysterious current flashes through the brain, and fires his detonating heart. Instantly the gleaming flame shoots with lightning-speed to temples and toes. The entire man becomes a detonator, and he explodes in a violent hurricane of kicks, cuffs, and invective! Now, without a detonator—a heart—the man might have burned with moderate wrath, but he could not have exploded."

"Don't try illustration, Jeff," said my plain-spoken mother, gently patting my arm; "it is not one of your strong points."

"Perhaps not; but do you understand me?"

"I think I do, in a hazy sort of way."

Dear mother! she always professes to comprehend things hazily, and indeed I sometimes fear that her conceptions on the rather abstruse matters which I bring before her are not always correct; but it is delightful to watch the profound interest with which she listens, and the patient efforts she makes to understand. I must in justice add that she sometimes, though not often, displays gleams of clear intelligence, and powers of close incisive reasoning, that quite surprise me.

"But now, to return to what we were speaking of—my future plans," said I; "it seems to me that it would be a good thing if I were to travel for a year or so and see the world."

"You might do worse, my boy," said my mother.

"With a view to that," I continued, "I have resolved to purchase a yacht, but before doing so I must complete the new torpedo that I have invented for the navy; that is, I hope it may be introduced

into our navy. The working model in the outhouse is all but ready for exhibition. When finished, I shall show it to the Lords of the Admiralty, and after they have accepted it I will throw study overboard for a time and go on a cruise."

"Ah, Jeff, Jeff," sighed my mother, with a shake of her head, "you'll never leave off till you get blown up. But I suppose you must have your way. You always had, dear boy."

"But never in opposition to your wishes, had I? Now be just, mother."

"Quite true, Jeff, quite true. How comes it, I wonder, that you are so fond of fire, smoke, fumes, crash, clatter, and explosions?"

"Really," said I, somewhat amused by the question, "I cannot tell, unless it be owing to something in that law of compensation which appears to permeate the universe. You have such an abhorrence of fire, fumes, smoke, crash, clatter, and explosions, that your only son is bound, as it were, to take special delight in chemical analysis and combination, to say nothing of mechanical force and contrivance, in order that a balance of some sort may be adjusted which would otherwise be thrown out of order by your—pardon me—comparative ignorance of, and indifference to such matters."

"Nay, Jeff," replied my mother, gently, with a look of reproof on her kind face; "ignorance if you will, but not indifference. I cannot be indifferent to anything that interests you."

"True; forgive me; I should have said 'dislike.'"

"Yes, that would have been correct, Jeff, for I cannot pretend to like the bursting, smoking, and ill-smelling things you are so fond of; but you know I am interested in them. You cannot have forgotten how, when you were a boy, I used to run at your call to witness your pyrotechnic, hydraulic, mechanic, and chemic displays—you see how well I remember the names—and how the—"

"The acids," I interrupted, taking up the theme, "ruined your carpets and table-cloths, and the smoke stifled and blinded, while the noise and flames terrified you; no, mother, I have not forgotten it, nor the patient way you took the loss of your old silk dress, or—"

"Ah! yes," sighed the dear old lady, with quite a pitiful look, "if it had been any other than my wedding dress, which—but—well, it's of no use regretting now; and you know, Jeff, I would not have checked you for worlds, because I knew you were being led in the right way, though, in my folly, I sometimes wished that the way had been a little further removed from smoke and smells. But, after all, you were very careful, dear boy—wonderfully so, for your years, and your little accidents did not give me much pain beyond the day of their occurrence. The poisoning of the cat, to be sure, was sad, though unavoidable, and so was the destruction by fire of the cook's hair; but the flooding of the house, after the repairs you executed on the great cistern, and the blowing out of the laundry window at the time the clothes-boiler was cracked, with other trifles of that sort, were—"

The remainder of my mother's speech was cut short by a clattering of hoofs.

Next moment my sister Bella came round the corner of the house at full gallop, her fresh face beaming with the exercise, and her golden hair streaming in the breeze.

She pulled up, leaped off her pony, and ran into the room. As she did so, I observed a tall, soldierly man appear in the avenue, advancing with rapid strides. Well did I know his grave, handsome face.

"Here comes Nicholas!" said I, turning round; but Bella had fled.

I observed that my friend, instead of coming straight to the room from the window of which my mother and I had saluted him, turned sharp off to the library.

I was running to the door to welcome him, when my mother called me back. I turned and looked at her. She smiled. So did I. Without uttering a word we both sat down to finish our breakfast.

"Ah! Jeff," said my mother, with a little sigh, "how I wish you would fall in love with some one!"

"Fall in love, mother! What nonsense! How could I? No doubt there are plenty loveable girls, and there *is* one charming little—well, no matter—"

At that moment Nicholas entered the room, heartily saluted my mother, and cut short our conversation.

Chapter Two.
Is Still More Explosive than the First

Much to my surprise, I found that neither Nicholas Naranovitsch nor Bella nor my mother would consent to witness my experiments with dynamite that day.

As my old chum approached to greet me on the lawn before breakfast the day following, I could not help admiring his fine, tall, athletic figure. I don't know how it is, but I have always felt, somehow, as if I looked up at him, although we were both exactly the same height—six feet one without our boots. I suppose it must have been owing to his standing so erect, while I slouched a little. Perhaps my looking up to him mentally had something to do with it.

"You'll come to-day, won't you?" I said, referring to the experiments.

"Of course I will, old boy; but," he added, with a smile, "only on one condition."

"What may that be?"

"That you don't bother Bella with minute details."

Of course I promised not to say a word unless asked for explanations, and after breakfast we all went to a part of the grounds which I wished to bring under cultivation. It was at that time encumbered with several large trees, old roots, and a number of boulders.

"Come along with us, Lancey," I said to the groom, who was also my laboratory assistant, and whom I met in the stable-yard, the scene of his memorable blowing-up. "I am about to try the effect of an explosive, and wish you to understand the details."

"Yes, sir," replied Lancey, with a respectful touch of his cap; "I must say, sir, if you'll allow me, I never knowed any one like you, sir, for goin' into details except one, and that one—"

"Ah, yes, I know, that was your friend the Scotch boy," said I, interrupting; but Lancey was a privileged servant, and would not be interrupted.

"Yes, sir," he resumed, "the Scotch boy Sandy. We was at school together in Edinburgh, where I got the most o' my edication, and I never did see such a boy, sir, for goin' into—"

"Yes, yes, Lancey, I know; but I haven't time to talk about him just now. We are going to the bit of waste ground in the hollow; follow us there."

I was obliged to cut him short, because this Scotch hero of his was a subject on which he could not resist dilating on the slightest encouragement.

Arrived at the waste ground, we met the manager of a neighbouring mine, who was deeply learned in everything connected with blasting.

"I have brought my mother and sister, you see, Mr Jones," said I, as we approached. "They don't quite believe in the giant-power which is under your control; they seem to think that it is only a little stronger than gunpowder."

"We can soon change their views on that point," said the manager, with a slight bow to the ladies, while I introduced Nicholas as an officer of the Russian army.

"This is one of the stones you wish to blast, is it not?" said Mr Jones, laying his hand on an enormous boulder that weighed probably several tons.

"It is," I answered.

The manager was a man of action—grave of countenance and of few words. He drew a flask from his pocket and emptied its contents, a large quantity of gunpowder, on the boulder. Asking us to stand a little back, he applied a slow match to the heap, and retired several paces.

In a few seconds the powder went off with a violent puff and a vast cloud of smoke. The result was a little shriek of alarm from my mother, and an exclamation from Bella.

"Not much effect from that, you see," said the manager, pointing to the blackened stone, yet it was a large quantity of powder, which, if fired in a cavity inside the stone, would have blown it to

pieces. “Here, now, is a small quantity of dynamite.” (He produced a cartridge about two inches in length, similar to that which I had shown to my mother at breakfast.) “Into this cartridge I shall insert a detonator cap, which is fastened to the end of a Pickford fuse—thus.”

As he spoke, he inserted into the cartridge the end of the fuse, to which was attached a small cap filled with fulminate of mercury, and tied it tightly up. This done, he laid the cartridge on the top of the boulder, placed two or three similar cartridges beside it, and covered all with a small quantity of sand, leaving the other end of the fuse projecting.

“Why the sand?” asked Bella.

“Because a slight amount of confinement is advantageous,” replied Mr Jones. “If I were to bore a short hole in the stone, and put the dynamite therein, the result would be still more effective; but the covering I have put on it will suffice, and will serve all the better to show the great difference between this explosive and gunpowder.”

“But,” said my mother, who had a tendency to become suddenly interested in things when she began to have a faint understanding of them; “but, Mr Jones, you did not give the powder fair play. If you had covered *it* with sand, would not its effect have been more powerful?”

“Not on the stone, madam; it would only have blown off its covering with violence, that would have been all. Now, ladies and gentlemen, if you will retire behind the shelter of that old beech-tree, I will light the fuse.”

We did as we were desired. The manager lighted the fuse, and followed us. In a few moments there occurred an explosion so violent that the huge boulder was shattered into several pieces, which were quite small enough to be lifted and carted away.

“Most amazing!” exclaimed Bella, with enthusiasm.

It was quite obvious that she had no anticipation of such a thorough result. Nicholas, too, who I may mention had no natural turn of taste for such matters, was roused to a state of inquiry.

To a question put by him, Mr Jones explained that, taking its powers into consideration, dynamite was cheaper than gunpowder, and that it saved much labour, as it would have taken two men a considerable time to have bored an ordinary blasthole in the boulder he had just broken up.

I now led the way to another part of the ground on which grew a large beech-tree, whose giant roots took a firm grasp of the ground. It was a hundred years old at least; about twelve feet in circumference, and sixty feet high. One similar tree I had had cut down; but the labour had been very great, and the removal of the stump excessively troublesome as well as costly.

Mr Jones now went to work at the forest-giant. In the ground underneath the tree he ordered Lancey to make a hole with a crowbar. Into this he pressed some cartridges of dynamite with a wooden rammer. Then the cartridge, with the detonator inside of it; and the fuse, extending from its mouth, was placed in contact with the charge under the tree. The hole was next closed up with some earth, leaving about a foot of the fuse outside. The light was then applied, and we retired to a safe distance. In a few moments the charge exploded. The tree seemed to rise from its bed. All the earth under it was blown out, and the roots were torn up and broken, with the exception of four of the largest, which were fully ten inches in diameter. A small charge of dynamite inserted under each of these completed the work, and the old giant, slowly bowing forward, laid his venerable head upon the ground.

Another charge was next placed in the soil under some loose and decayed roots, which were easily broken to pieces, so as to permit of their removal. Thus, in a short time and at little cost, were trees and roots and boulders torn up and shattered.

“But is dynamite not very dangerous, Mr Jones?” asked my mother, as we walked slowly homeward.

“Not at all dangerous,—at least not worth speaking of,” replied the manager; “nitro-glycerine by itself is indeed very dangerous, being easily exploded by concussion or mere vibration; but when mixed with infusorial earth and thus converted into dynamite, it is one of the safest explosives in existence—not quite so safe, indeed, as gun-cotton, but much more so than gunpowder. Any sort

of fire will explode gunpowder, but any sort of fire will not explode dynamite; it will only cause it to burn. It requires a detonator to explode it with violence. Without its detonator, dynamite is a sleeping giant."

"Ay, mother," said I, taking up the subject, "the case stands thus: gunpowder is a big athlete, who slumbers lightly; any spark can wake him to violent action: but dynamite is a bigger athlete, who sleeps so soundly that a spark or flame can only rouse him to moderate rage; it requires a special shake to make him wide-awake, but when thus roused his fury is terrific, as you have just seen. And now," I added, as we drew near the house, "we will change the subject, because I have this morning received two letters, which demand the united consideration of our whole party. I will therefore call up Bella and Nicholas, who have fallen behind, as usual. Mr Jones will excuse my talking of family matters for a few minutes, as replies must be sent by return of post."

I then explained that one of the letters was an invitation to me and my mother and sister, with any friends who might chance to be visiting us, to go to Portsmouth to witness a variety of interesting experiments with torpedoes and such warlike things; while the other letter was an offer by a friend, of a schooner-built yacht for a moderate sum.

"Now, Nicholas," said I, apologetically, "I'm sorry to give you such an explosive reception, but it cannot be helped. If you don't care about torpedoes, you may remain here with my mother and Bella; but if you would like to go, I shall be happy to introduce you to one or two of my naval friends. For myself, I must go, because—"

"We will all go, Jeff," interrupted Bella; "nothing could be more appropriate as a sequel to this morning's experiments. A day among the torpedoes will be most interesting, won't it?"

She looked up at Nicholas, on whose arm she leaned. He looked down with that peculiar smile of his which seemed to lie more in his eyes than on his lips, and muttered something about a day anywhere being, etcetera, etcetera.

My mother remarked that she did not understand exactly what a torpedo was, and looked at me for an explanation. I confess that her remark surprised me, for during the course of my investigations and inventions, I had frequently mentioned the subject of torpedoes to her, and once or twice had given her a particular description of the destructive machine. However, as she had evidently forgotten all about it, and as I cannot resist the temptation to elucidate complex subjects when opportunity offers, I began:—

"It is a machine, mother, which—"

"Which bursts," interrupted Bella, with a little laugh.

"But that is no explanation, dear," returned my mother; "at least not a distinctive one, for guns burst sometimes, and soap-bubbles burst, and eggs burst occasionally."

"Bella," said Nicholas, who spoke English perfectly, though with a slightly foreign accent, "never interrupt a philosopher. Allow Jeff to proceed with his definition."

"Well, a torpedo," said I, "is an infernal machine—"

"Jeff," said my mother, seriously, "don't—"

"Mother, I use the word advisedly and dispassionately. It is a term frequently given to such engines, because of their horrible nature, which suggests the idea that they were originated in the region of Satanic influence. A torpedo, then, is a pretty large case, or box, or cask, or reservoir, of one form or another, filled with gunpowder, or gun-cotton, or dynamite, which is used chiefly under water, for blowing-up purposes. Sometimes men use torpedoes to blow up rocks, and sunken wrecks; and sometimes, I grieve to say it, they blow up ships and sailors."

"Dreadful! my dear," said my mother; "nevertheless I should like to go with you on this excursion, and see what devices men invent for the purpose of killing each other."

"Very well, that's settled," said I. "Now, as to the other letter about the yacht. I will buy it, mother, and go on a cruise to the Mediterranean, on one condition, namely, that you and Nicholas and Bella go with me."

"Impossible!" exclaimed my mother, firmly; "I never could bear the sea."

"But you've had little experience of it," said I.

"Well, not much—but I cannot bear it."

"Now, mother," said I, coaxingly, "here is Bella dying to go to sea, I know. Nicholas has loads of time, and cannot be left behind, and I wish very much to go; but all will fall to the ground if you refuse to accompany us. We cannot leave you in this house alone. The sea air will certainly do you good, and if it does not, we can land, you know, at Lisbon, Gibraltar, Nice,—anywhere, and return home overland."

"Well, then, I will go," returned my pliant mother.

"That's right," said I, sitting down to write. "Now, then, all of you get ready to go to London this afternoon. We shall spend a day or two there, because, before leaving, I must see the first Lord of the Admiralty on particular business. Afterwards we shall run down to Portsmouth by the afternoon express, spend the night there, and so be ready to face the torpedoes in the morning."

Chapter Three.
An Interview with Men in Power

There is something peculiarly exhilarating in bright sunshine and calm weather. This is no doubt a truism; but there are some truths of which one never tires, and in regard to which one feels ever-recurring freshness. Who ever wearied of a balmy breeze, or a bright sunrise? Even a glorious noon cannot pall upon us unless it be too hot.

When bright sunshine is associated with good health, pleasant company, a successful courtship, and the prospect of light on a favourite study, the reader will understand how it was that my mother and I, with Nicholas and Bella, formed a peculiarly happy quartette as we perambulated the streets of London prior to my visit to the Admiralty.

It was a Friday forenoon, and there were many holiday-keepers hastening to trains. At the corner of one of the main thoroughfares a crowd partly blocked the road. The cause of it became apparent to us when the head and arched neck of a black charger appeared, and then the white plume and polished cuirass of a Life Guardsman. We stood on a door-step, so that Bella might see the troop.

As they passed before us, with that stately bearing of man and horse which has always seemed to me peculiar to the Life Guards, and the sun flashed in dazzling gleams from breasts and helmets, I glanced at my friend Naranovitsch. His soldierlike form was drawn up to its full height, while the flashing eye, flushed countenance, distended nostrils, and compressed but slightly smiling lips told, I thought, of a strong feeling of martial joy. Doubtless he was thinking at the moment of his own regiment, to which he had been but recently appointed, and of his comrades-in-arms.

"Fine-looking fellows!" I whispered.

"Splendid! glorious!" he said, in a deep, low voice.

Bella looked quickly up at him, displaying an anxious, sorrowing face, and bright eyes, dimmed with ill-suppressed tears.

"You are not ill, Bella?" he whispered, bending down with a look of tenderness, not unmixed with surprise.

"No; oh, no," she replied, in a low tone; "but the sight of the Guards has made me very sad."

I knew full well the cause of her emotion, but the crowded street was not a suitable place for explanation.

"Come, follow me," I said, and walked quickly along in the direction of the Strand, where I turned abruptly into one of those quiet courts which form, as it were, harbours of refuge from the rattle and turmoil of the great city. Here, sauntering slowly round the quiet precincts of the court, with the roar of the street subdued to a murmur like that of a distant cataract, Bella told Nicholas, in tones of the deepest pathos, how a German lady, Elsie Goeben, one of her dearest friends, had been married to the handsomest and best of men in one of the Prussian cavalry regiments. How, only six months after their union, the Franco-Prussian war broke out, and Elsie's husband Wilhelm was sent with his regiment to the frontier; how in many engagements he had distinguished himself; and how, at last, he was mortally wounded during one of the sorties at the siege of Metz.

"They did not find him till next day," continued my sister, "for he had fallen in a part of the field so far in advance of the ground on which his dead comrades lay, that he had been overlooked. He was riddled with bullets, they say, and his noble face, which I had so often seen beaming with affection on his young wife, was so torn and disfigured that his friends could scarcely recognise him. He was still alive when found, and they knew his voice. When they raised him, he merely exclaimed, '*At last*, thank God!' with a deep sigh, as if of relief. The words were few, but they had terrible significance, for they told of a long, long night of agony and dreadful solitude; but he was not quite alone," my sister added, in a low voice, "for he was a Christian. He died before reaching the tents of his division."

Bella's voice faltered as she said, after a moment's pause, "Dear Elsie never recovered the shock. She joined her husband in heaven two months afterwards."

"Truly," said I, "war is a terrible curse."

"I hate it! I detest it!" cried Bella, with a sudden tone and look of energy, that was all the more impressive because of her natural character being gentle and retiring.

I saw that Nicholas was surprised and pained. He would fain have comforted Bella, but knew not what to say, for he had been trained to talk of "martial glory," and to look on war through the medium of that halo of false glitter with which it has been surrounded by too many historians in all ages. The young Russian had hitherto dwelt chiefly on one aspect of war. He had thought of noble and heroic deeds in defence of hearth and home, and all that man holds sacred. To fight for his country was to Nicholas an idea that called up only the thoughts of devotion, self-sacrifice in a good cause, duty, fidelity, courage, romance; while, in regard to the minor things of a warrior's life, a hazy notion of dash, glitter, music, and gaiety floated through his brain. Of course he was not *ignorant* of some of the darker shades of war. History, which told him of many gallant deeds, also recorded numberless dreadful acts. But these latter he dismissed as being disagreeable and unavoidable accompaniments of war. He simply accepted things as he found them, and, not being addicted to very close reasoning, did not trouble himself much as to the rectitude or wisdom of war in the abstract. Neither did he distinguish between righteous and unrighteous war—war of self-defence and war of aggression. Sufficient for him that he served his country faithfully. This was a good general principle, no doubt, for a youthful officer; but as one who expected to rise to power and influence in his native land, something more definite would ultimately be required of him. As yet, he had neither experienced the excitement, beheld the miseries, nor bathed in the so-called "glory" of war; and now that a corner of the dark cloud was unexpectedly flung over him in Bella's sorrow, he felt deeply sympathetic but helpless. A sad look, however, and a gentle pressure of the hand that rested on his arm, was quite sufficient for Bella.

To relieve my friend from his embarrassment, I pulled out my watch and urged that we should walk in the direction of the Admiralty, as the hour for my interview had nearly arrived.

At Charing-Cross we parted, and I proceeded on my mission with the plan of my torpedo, which Nicholas styled the "infernal machine," in my pocket, and a rather anxious heart in my breast, for although I was quite certain that my invention was superior to all others, inasmuch as it fulfilled several conditions which were not fulfilled by other torpedoes, I did not feel sure that the Lords of the Admiralty would take the same view of it that I did. Besides, the machine had only been tried as a model, and might not act perfectly when tested in actual warfare. But, of course, I knew that my inventive powers would readily overcome each weak point as it cropped into view in practice.

I met with a very gracious reception from the first Lord. Beside him were seated two elderly gentlemen, whom I judged to be brother Lords.

It were needless to recount all that passed during that memorable interview. Suffice it to say, that after I had given a most careful and clear explanation of my invention, to which the three Lords listened with marked attention, the first Lord said, with a bland smile—

"But what, Mr Childers, is the peculiar point of superiority over other torpedoes which you claim for yours?"

I confess that the question damped me a little, for I had been remarkably explicit in my explanations, which lasted nearly an hour. However, with the utmost alacrity, I went again over the chief points.

"You observe, my Lord," said I, pointing to my drawing, which lay spread out on the table, "that this watch-work arrangement in the heart of the machine is so intimately connected with that lever and screw on its exterior, that in passing out of the case from which it is launched into the sea, the machinery is set in motion, and the first act of the torpedo is to set or regulate itself for the special purpose for which it is designed. Thus it may be styled an automatic torpedo. The celebrated

Whitehead fish-torpedo, beautiful and cleverly contrived though it be, can only advance straight to its object at a certain depth below the surface; but mine, as you see, by this arrangement of the main pneumatic engine, which connects the watch-work regulator with an eccentric wheel or fin outside, causes the torpedo to describe a curve of any size, and in any direction, during its progress. Thus, if you wish to hit an enemy's vessel, but cannot venture to fire because of a friendly ship happening to lie between, you have only to set the eccentric indicator to the required curve, and send the torpedo on its mission of destruction right under the bottom of the friendly ship; or by laying the torpedo on its side, it will easily go round it, and afterwards hit the enemy."

"Ah! I see," said the first Lord, with a grave nod; "you have at last succeeded in making that which has so long been held impossible; an instrument which will shoot round the corner."

"Well, a—; yes, my Lord, although I confess it had not struck me in that light before. But," I continued, feeling my enthusiasm rise as the first Lord became more appreciative, "the weapon may be used even in attacking fortresses from the sea, for by making what I may call the inverted trajectory of the curve very high, the torpedo may be made to rush under the surface of the water, gradually curve upwards, then shoot right out of its native element, and go straight into a fort or town on a hill, at least a hundred feet above the level of the sea."

"Indeed!" exclaimed the first Lord.

I observed that the other two Lords were gazing at me, with looks from which were banished every expression except that of intense surprise. Regarding this as a sign that the merits of my invention were beginning to tell on them, I went on—

"Yes, my Lord, the action of the thing is absolutely certain, if the distance of the object aimed at be ascertained to a nicety, and the arrangements of the watch-work indicator adjusted to those of the eccentric wheel and the pneumatic engine with mathematical precision. This, of course, in these days of thorough education, can be easily done by even the youngest officer in a ship. I should have mentioned, however, that if it were required to send the torpedo into a citadel or fortress on a hill, it would be necessary to use a stronger explosive than any yet known,—gun-cotton and dynamite being too weak, and nitro-glycerine too dangerous, therefore inadmissible."

"Ha!" exclaimed the first Lord, "and where is such an explosive to be found?"

"In my laboratory down in Devonshire, my Lord," I answered, with a look of diffidence, feeling uncertain how he would take the announcement.

For a few moments he contemplated me in perfect silence, and I observed that the other two Lords smiled. I felt perplexed, but the awkwardness of the moment was quickly removed by the first Lord asking what my new compound was made of.

"That, my Lord," said I, "is a secret."

"Just so, and you wish to sell your secret to Government?"

"No, my Lord," I replied, with dignity; "I wish to let my Government possess any slight gift which it lies in my power to present to it, in addition to that of a loyal heart; but I cannot afford to let my secret be known, unless I have some assurance that it shall be held inviolable."

"That assurance you have," said the first Lord, "but I should have supposed that to so loyal a subject the character of the British Admiralty would have been sufficient guarantee, and that nothing further would have been required from me."

"I do *not* require further assurance, my Lord," said I, hastily; "I merely wish you to understand how important it is that secrecy should be observed. I will reveal it to you."

Here I rose and whispered in the first Lord's ear. He turned pale, as I sat down, and whispered to the other two Lords, who looked very grave, from which I augured good fortune to my invention. At the same time I was surprised, for my communication to him was in no way alarming, though connected with explosives.

Presently the first Lord touched a bell. A servant in uniform appeared, and after a few words, disappeared. I was puzzled, but silent.

"Mr Childers," said the first Lord, "I shall give your invention my best attention; but I must tell you that there are many others in this country, as well as yourself, who are exerting their minds to discover the most effectual method of spreading wholesale devastation among their fellow-creatures, and—"

"Forgive my interrupting you, my Lord," I exclaimed, with a look of horror, "but I repudiate entirely any intention to destroy my fellow-creatures. My motives in this matter have been purely scientific."

"I have no doubt of it," returned the first Lord, with a smile, "nevertheless the tendency of your labours is towards destruction; and my reference to the fact is merely for the purpose of informing you that there are many other inventors who have claimed my attention to their designs, and that you must not expect an immediate decision in regard to yours."

With this I was politely bowed out, and as I passed down the corridor, I could not help feeling disappointed at the rather faint success of my visit. The idea, too, that I was a would-be destroyer of my species had never before occurred to me, my whole soul and faculties having hitherto been engrossed in the simple idea of perfecting a chemical explosive and a mechanical contrivance. Thus, unintentionally, do we sometimes lend ourselves to that from which our hearts revolt.

I noticed, too, that the servant who had been summoned by the first Lord while we were discussing the torpedo, was particularly attentive to me, and very careful in seeing me off the premises; and then, for the first time, it flashed across my mind that I had been taken for a madman.

I was so tickled with the idea, that I burst into a sudden fit of hearty laughter, an act which induced a little boy, a policeman, and an old woman, who chanced to be passing, to imbibe the erroneous view of the first Lord.

However, although grievously disheartened, I was not subdued. Hope, which tells so many flattering tales, told me that after proper consideration the Admiralty would infallibly perceive the value of my invention; and in regard to the destruction of my fellow-creatures, I consoled myself with the reflection that torpedoes were much more calculated for defensive than offensive warfare.

Before quitting this subject, I may state that from that day to this, I have never heard from the Admiralty in reference to my invention. This fact gives me no pain now, although it did at first. I will explain why.

There is a friend of mine—a grave, kindly, young man, yet withal sarcastic and eccentric—who met me immediately after my visit to the Admiralty. He is a strange being this friend, who crops up at all sorts of unexpected times, and in divers places, when one least expects him. His name is U. Biquitous.

"My dear Childers," said he, when I had explained matters, "you are a victim;—you are the victim of self-delusion. You were victimised by self-delusion when I first met you, at the time you thought you had discovered perpetual motion. Your torpedo, as you have just described it to me, is an impossibility, and you yourself are—"

"An ass?" said I, looking up in his face.

"No, by no means," returned Biquitous, earnestly; "but you are an enthusiast without ballast. Enthusiasm is a fine, noble quality. The want of ballast is a grievous misfortune. Study mechanics, my boy, a little more than you have yet done, before venturing on further inventions, and don't theorise too much. You have been revelling of late in the regions of fancy. Take my advice, and don't do it."

"I wont," said I, fervently, "but I cannot give up my cherished pursuits."

"There is no reason that you should," returned my friend, grasping my hand, "and my earnest advice to you is to continue them; but lay in some ballast if possible."

With these cheery words ringing in my ears, I rejoined my mother and sister, and went off to Portsmouth.

It is well, however, to state here that my personal investigations in the matter of explosives had at this time received a death-blow. I went, indeed, with intense interest to see the display of our

national destructive powers at Portsmouth, but I never again ventured to add my own little quota to the sum of human knowledge on such subjects; and the reader may henceforth depend upon it, that in all I shall hereafter write, there shall be drawn a distinct and unmistakable line between the region of fact and fancy.

Chapter Four.
A Day with the Torpedoes

The sentence with which I finished the last chapter appears to me essential, because what I am now about to describe may seem to many readers more like the dreams of fancy than the details of sober fact.

When my mother and I, with Nicholas and Bella, arrived at Portsmouth, we were met by my naval friend, a young lieutenant, who seemed to me the *beau-idéal* of an embryo naval hero. He was about the middle height, broad, lithe, athletic, handsome, with a countenance beaming with good-will to, and belief in, everybody, including himself. He was self-possessed; impressively attentive to ladies, both young and old, and suave to gentlemen; healthy as a wild stag, and happy as a young cricket, with a budding moustache and a "fluff" on either cheek. Though gentle as a lamb in peace, he was said to be a very demon in war, and bore the not inappropriate name of Firebrand.

"Allow me to introduce my friend, Lieutenant Naranovitsch, Mr Firebrand, my mother and sister; not too late, I hope," said I, shaking hands.

"Not at all. In capital time," replied the young fellow, gaily, as he bowed to each. "Allow me, Mrs Childers—take my arm. The boat is not far off."

"Boat!" exclaimed my mother, "must we then go to sea?"

"Not exactly," replied Firebrand, with a light laugh, "unless you dignify Portchester Creek by that name. The *Nettle* target-ship lies there, and we must go on board of her, as it is around and in connection with her that the various experiments are to be tried, by means of gunboats, launches, steam-pinnaces, and various other kinds of small craft."

"How very fortunate that you have such a charming day," said my mother, whose interest was at once aroused by the youth's cheery manner. "Do you expect many people to witness the experiments, Mr Firebrand?"

"About five hundred invitations have been issued," answered the lieutenant, "and I daresay most of those invited will come. It is an occasion of some importance, being the termination of the senior course of instruction in our Naval Torpedo School here. I am happy to think," he added, with an arch smile, "that an officer of the Russian army will have such a good opportunity of witnessing what England is preparing for her enemies."

"It will afford me the greatest pleasure to witness your experiments," replied Nicholas, returning the smile with interest, "all the more that England and Russia are now the best of friends, and shall, I hope, never again be enemies."

In a few minutes we were conveyed on board the *Nettle*, on whose deck was a most animated assemblage. Not only were there present hundreds of gaily-dressed visitors, and officers, both naval and military, in bright and varied uniforms, but also a number of Chinese students, whose gaudy and peculiar garments added novelty as well as brilliancy to the scene.

"Delightful!" murmured Bella, as she listened to the sweet strains of the Commander-in-chief's band, and gazed dreamily at the sun-flashes that danced on the glassy water.

"Paradise!" replied Naranovitsch, looking down into her eyes.

"What are they going to do?" asked my mother of young Firebrand, who kept possession of her during the whole of the proceedings, and explained everything.

"They are going to illustrate the application of torpedo science to offensive and defensive warfare," said the lieutenant; and just now I see they are about to send off an outrigger launch to make an attack with two torpedoes, one on either bow, each being filled with 100 pounds of gunpowder. Sometimes gun-cotton is used, but this 100 pounds charge of powder is quite sufficient to send the

vessel in which we stand to the bottom in five or ten minutes. Come this way—we shall see the operations better from this point. Now, don't be alarmed, there is not the slightest danger, I assure you.

He spoke in reassuring tones, and led my mother to the side of the ship, whither I followed them, and became at once absorbed in what was going on.

The outrigger launch referred to was a goodly-sized boat, fitted with a small engine and screw propeller. Its chief peculiarities were two long poles or spars, which lay along its sides, projecting beyond the bows. These were the outriggers. At the projecting end of each spar was fixed an iron case, bearing some resemblance in shape and size to an elongated kettle-drum. These were the torpedoes. I heard the lieutenant explain to my mother that if one of these torpedoes chanced to explode where it hung, it would blow the boat and men to atoms. To which my mother replied, "Horrible!" and asked how, in that case, the crew could fire it and escape. Whereupon he responded, "You shall see presently."

Another peculiarity in the launch was that it had a species of iron hood or shield, like a broad and low sentry-box, from behind which protection the few men who formed her crew could steer and work the outriggers and the galvanic battery, without being exposed.

This little boat seemed to me like a vicious wasp, as it left the side of the ship with a rapid throbbing of its engine and twirling of its miniature screw.

When at a sufficient distance from the ship, an order was given by the officer in charge. Immediately the outrigger on the right or starboard side was run out by invisible hands to its full extent—apparently fifteen feet beyond the bow of the launch; then the inner end of the outrigger was tilted violently into the air, so that the other end with its torpedo was thrust down ten feet below the surface of the water. This, I was told, is about the depth at which an enemy's ship ought to be struck. The launch, still going at full speed, was now supposed to have run so close to the enemy, that the submerged torpedo was about to strike her. Another order was given. The operator gave the needful touch to the galvanic battery, which, like the most faithful of servants, *instantly* sent a spark to fire the torpedo.

The result was tremendous. A column of seething mud and water, twenty feet in diameter, shot full thirty feet into the air, overwhelming the launch in such a shower that many of the unprofessional spectators imagined she was lost. Thus an imaginary ironclad was sent, with a tremendous hole in her, to the bottom of the sea.

That this is no *imaginary* result will be seen in the sequel of our tale.

"Why, the shock has made the *Nettle* herself tremble!" I exclaimed, in surprise.

"Oh, the poor boat!" cried my mother.

"No fear of the boat," said young Firebrand, "and as to the *Nettle*—why, my good fellow, I have felt our greatest ironclad, the mighty *Thunderer*, of which I have the honour to be an officer, quiver slightly from the explosion of a mere five-pounds torpedo discharged close alongside. Few people have an adequate conception of the power of explosives, and still fewer, I believe, understand the nature of the powers by which they are at all times surrounded. That 100-pounds torpedo, for instance, which has only caused us to quiver, would have blown a hole in our most powerful ship if fired in *contact* with it, and yet the *cushion of water* between it and the tiny launch that fired it is so tough as to be quite a sufficient protection to the boat, as you see."

We did indeed "see," for the waspish little boat emerged from the deluge she had raised and, steaming swiftly on, turned round and retraced her track. On reaching about the same position as to the *Nettle*, she repeated the experiment with her second torpedo.

"Splendid!" exclaimed young Naranovitsch, whose military ardour was aroused.

"It means, does it not," said Bella, "a splendid ship destroyed, and some hundreds of lives lost?"

"Well—yes—" said Nicholas, hesitatingly; "but of course it does not always follow, you know, that so *many* lives—"

He paused, and smiled with a perplexed look. Bella smiled dubiously, and shook her head, for it did not appear to either of them that the exact number of lives lost had much to do with the question. A sudden movement of the visitors to the other side of the ship stopped the conversation.

They were now preparing to show the effect of a gun-cotton hand-grenade; in other words, a species of bomb-shell, meant to be thrown by the hand into an enemy's boat at close-quarters. This really tremendous weapon was an innocent-looking disc or circlet of gun-cotton, weighing not more than eight ounces. Innocent it would, in truth, have been but for the little detonator in its heart, without which it would only have burned, not exploded. Attached to this disc was an instantaneous fuse of some length, so that an operator could throw the disc into a passing boat, and then fire the fuse, which would *instantly* explode the disc.

All this was carefully explained by Firebrand to my astonished mother, while the disc, for experimental purposes, was being placed in a cask floating in the water. On the fuse being fired, this cask was blown "into matchwood"—a wreck so complete that the most ignorant spectator could not fail to understand what would have been the fate of a boat and its crew in similar circumstances.

"How very awful!" said my mother. "Pray, Mr Firebrand, what *is* gun-worsted—I mean cotton."

The young lieutenant smiled rather broadly as he explained, in a glib and slightly sing-song tone, which savoured of the Woolwich Military Academy, that, "gun-cotton is the name given to the explosive substance produced by the action of nitric acid mixed with sulphuric acid, on cotton fibre." He was going to add, "It contains carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, and oxygen, corresponding to—" when my mother stopped him.

"Dear me, Mr Firebrand, is a *popular* explanation impossible?"

"Not impossible, madam, but rather difficult. Let me see. Gun-cotton is a chemical compound of the elements which I have just named—a *chemical compound*, you will observe, not a mechanical *mixture*, like gunpowder. Hence it explodes more rapidly than the latter, and its power is from three to six times greater."

My mother looked perplexed. "What is the difference," she asked, "between a chemical compound and a mechanical mixture?"

Firebrand now in his turn looked perplexed. "Why, madam," he exclaimed, in modulated desperation, "the ultimate molecules of a mixture are only placed *beside* each other, so that an atom of gunpowder may be saltpetre, charcoal, or sulphur, dependent on its fellow-atoms for power to act; whereas a chemical compound is such a perfect union of substances, that each ultimate molecule is complete in its definite proportions of the four elements, and therefore an *independent* little atom."

"Now, the next experiment," continued Firebrand, glad to have an opportunity of changing the subject, "is meant to illustrate our method of countermining. You must know that our enemies may sometimes sink torpedoes at the entrance of their harbours, to prevent our ships of war entering. Such torpedoes consist usually of casks or cases of explosives, which are fired either by electric wires, like the telegraph, when ships are seen to be passing over them, or by *contact*. That is to say, an enemy's ship entering a harbour runs against something which sets something else in motion, which explodes the torpedo and blows it and the ship into what natives of the Green Isle call smithereens. This is very satisfactory when it happens to an enemy, but not when it happens to one's-self, therefore when *we* have to enter an enemy's harbour we *countermine*. This operation is now about to be illustrated. The last experiments exhibited the power of offensive torpedoes. There are several different kinds, such as Mr Whitehead's fish-torpedo, the Harvey torpedo, and others."

"Dear me," said my mother, with a perplexed air, "I should have thought, Mr Firebrand, that all torpedoes were offensive."

"By no means; those which are placed at the entrance of harbours and navigable rivers are defensive. To protect ourselves from the offensive weapon, we use crinolines."

My mother looked quickly up at her polite young mentor. "You play with the ignorance of an old woman, sir," she said, with a half-jocular air.

"Indeed I do not, madam, I assure you," returned Firebrand, with much earnestness. "Every iron-clad is provided with a crinoline, which is a powerful iron network, hung all round the ship at some distance from her, like—pardon me—a lady's crinoline, and is intended to intercept any torpedo that may be discharged against her."

Attention was called, at this point, to the counter-mining experiments.

It may be said, in regard to these, that they can be conducted in various ways, but always with the same end in view, namely, to destroy an enemy's mines by exploding others in their midst.

For the sake of illustration, it was supposed that the surrounding sea-bottom was studded with invisible torpedoes, and that the *Nettle* was a warship, determined to advance into the enemy's harbour. To effect this with safety, and in order to clear away the supposed sunken torpedoes, a counter-torpedo was floated between two empty casks, and sent off floating in the desired direction by means of the tide. This countermine consisted of an iron cylinder, containing 300 pounds of powder, and was electrically connected with the *Nettle*. A small charge of gun-cotton was fixed to the suspender that held the torpedo to its casks. When at a safe distance from the ship, this charge was fired. It cut the suspender and let the torpedo sink to the bottom. There it was exploded with terrific violence, as was quickly shown by the mighty fountain of mud, water, and smoke that instantly shot up into the air. It has been proved by experiment that 500 pounds of gun-cotton exploded below water, will destroy all the torpedoes that lie within a radius of 120 yards. It is obvious, therefore, that a warship could advance into the space thus cleared and then send a second countermine ahead of her in the same way. If neither tide, current, nor wind will serve to drift the casks, the operation might be accomplished by a small boat, which could back out of danger after laying each torpedo, and thus, step by step, or shot by shot, the advance could be made in safety through the enemy's defences.

After this, twelve small charges of gun-cotton were sunk in various directions, each representing a countermine of 500 pounds. These were discharged simultaneously, to demonstrate the possibility of extending the operations over a wide area. These miniature charges were sent down in small nets, and were quite unprotected from the water, so that the gun-cotton was wet when fired.

This fact caught the attention of my mother at once.

"How can it go off when *wet*?" she exclaimed, turning her bright little eyes in astonishment on her young companion.

"Ha, that is one of the strange peculiarities of gun-cotton," replied Firebrand, with an amused look; "you don't require to keep it dry like powder. It is only necessary that there should be one small lump of dry gun-cotton inside the wet stuff, with a detonator in its heart. A detonator, you must know—"

"Oh, I know what a detonator is," said my mother, quickly.

"Well then," continued Firebrand, "the exploding of the detonator and the dry disc causes the wet gun-cotton also to go off, as you have seen. Now they are going to exhibit one of the modes of defending harbours. They have sunk four mines, of 300 pounds of gunpowder each, not far from where you see yon black specks floating on the water. The black specks are buoys, called *circuit-closers*, because they contain a delicate contrivance—a compound of mechanism and galvanism—which, when the buoys are bumped, *close* the electric circuit and cause the mine to explode. Thus when a ship-of-war sails against one of these circuit-closers, she is immediately blown up."

"Is not that rather a sneaking way of killing one's enemies?" asked my mother.

Young Firebrand laughed, and admitted that it was, but pleaded that everything was fair in love and war.

In actual warfare the circuit-closers are placed just over the mines which they are designed to explode, but for safety on this occasion they were placed at a safe distance from their respective mines. A steam-launch was used to bump them, and a prodigious upheaval of water on each explosion showed clearly enough what would have been the fate of an iron-clad if she had been over the mine.

"Oh, shade of Nelson!" I could not help exclaiming, "how shocked you must be if you are permitted to witness such methods of conducting war."

"Ah, yes!" sighed Firebrand; "the bubble reputation, you see, is being transferred from the cannon's mouth to the torpedo."

I made no reply, for my mind reverted to my laboratory in Devonshire, where lay the working-model of the terrible weapon I had spent so much time in perfecting. It seemed strange to me now, that, in the eager pursuit of a scientific object, I had scarcely ever, if at all, reflected on the dire results that the use of my torpedo involved, and I felt as if I were really guilty of the intent to murder. Just before leaving home I had charged my model, which was quite a large one, capable of holding about 50 pounds of dynamite, in the hope that I might prevail on the First Lord of the Admiralty and some of his colleagues to come down and see it actually fired. I now resolved to throw the dynamite into the sea, break up my model, and have done with explosives for ever.

While my mind was running on this, I was startled by an explosion close alongside. On turning towards the side of the ship, I found that it was caused by the rending of a huge iron chain, the links of which were more than one and a quarter inch in thickness. This powerful cable, which could have held an iron-clad, was snapped in twain like a piece of thread by the explosion *against* it of only two and a half pounds of gun-cotton.

"Very well done," I said to Firebrand, "but I think that a much smaller quantity of dynamite would have done it as effectively."

"Now, Mrs Childers," said the young lieutenant, "the last experiment is about to be made, and I think it will interest you even more than the others. See, they are about to send off the electrical steam-pinnace."

As he spoke, a boat was being prepared alongside the ship.

"Why!" exclaimed my mother, almost speechless with surprise, "they have forgotten to send its crew in it."

"No, madam," said Firebrand, with one of his blandest smiles, "they have not forgotten her crew, but there are services so dangerous, that although the courage of the British sailor will of course enable him to face *anything*, it has been thought advisable not to put it to too severe a test, hence this automatic boat has been invented. It is steered, and all its other operations are performed, by means of electricity, applied not on board the boat but on board of the *Nettle*."

This was indeed the case. The electric pinnace went off as he spoke, her steam-engines, steering-gear, and all the other apparatus being regulated by electric wires, which were "paid out" from the ship as the boat proceeded on her mission of supposed extreme danger. Right under the withering fire of the imaginary enemy's batteries she went, and having scorned the rain of small shot that swept over her like hail, and escaped the plunging heavy shot that fell on every side, she dropped a mine over her stern, exploded it by means of a slow fuse, turned round and steamed back in triumph, amid the cheers of the spectators.

This last was really a marvellous sight, and the little boat seemed indeed to deserve the encomiums of Firebrand, who said, that, "If cool, calm pluck, in the face of appalling danger, merited anything, that heroic little steam-pinnace ought to receive the Victoria Cross."

I was still meditating on this subject, and listening to the animated comments going on around me, when I myself received a shock, compared to which all the explosions I had that day witnessed were as nothing.

It suddenly recurred to my memory that I had left a compound in my laboratory at home in a state of chemical preparation, which required watching to prevent its catching fire at a certain part of the process. I had been called away from that compound suddenly by Nicholas, just before we left for London, and I had been so taken up with what he had to tell me, that I had totally forgotten it. The mere burning of this compound would, in itself, have been nothing, for my laboratory was an old out-house, quite unconnected with the dwelling; but in the laboratory also lay my torpedo! The

worst of it was that I had inserted a detonator and affixed a fuse, feeling quite secure in doing so, because I invariably locked the door and carried the key in my pocket.

My face must have turned very pale, for Nicholas, who came up at the moment, looked at me with anxious surprise, and asked if I were ill.

"No," said I, hurriedly; "no, not ill—but—yes—it is a slow process at best, and not always certain—sometimes takes a day or two to culminate. The fusion may not have been quite completed, or it may have failed altogether. Too late, I fear, too late, but I cannot rest till I know. Tell my mother I'm off home—only business—don't alarm her."

Regardless of the amazed looks of those who stood near me, I broke from the grasp of Nicholas, leaped into one of the boats alongside, seized the oars, and rowed ashore in mad haste.

Fortune favoured me. The train had not left, though it was just in motion. I had no time to take a ticket, but leaping upon the moving footboard, I wrenched open a carriage-door and sprang in.

It was an express. We went at full sixty miles an hour, yet I felt as if we moved like a snail. No words can adequately explain the state of my mind and body—the almost uncontrollable desire I felt to spring out of the train and run on ahead. But I was forced to sit still and think. I thought of the nearness of the laboratory to our kitchen windows, of the tremendous energy of the explosive with which the model-torpedo was charged, of the mass of combustibles of all kinds by which it was surrounded, of the thousand and one possibilities of the case, and of my own inexcusable madness in not being more careful.

At last the train pulled up at the town from which our residence is about two miles distant. It was now evening; but it was summer, and the days were long. Hiring a horse at the nearest hotel, I set off at a break-neck gallop.

The avenue-gate was open. I dashed in. The laboratory was not visible from that point, being at the back of the house. At the front door I pulled up, sprang to the ground, let the horse go, and ran forward.

I was met by Lancey coming round the corner. I saw at once that all was over! His face and hands had been scorched, and his hair singed! I gasped for breath.

"No one killed?" I asked.

"No, sir, nobody killed, but most of us 'orribly scared, sir."

"Nobody hurt, Lancey?" I asked again, leaning against the side of the house, and wiping my forehead.

"No, sir, nor 'urt," continued my faithful groom, hastening to relieve my mind; "you've no need to alarm yourself, sir, for we're all alive and 'earty, though I must say it's about the wust buster, sir, that you've yet turned out of 'ands. It sent in the kitchen winders as if they'd bin made of tissue paper, sir, an' cook she went into highstericks in the coal-bunker, Margaret she swounded in the scullery, and Mary went into fits in the wash'us. But they're all right again, sir,—only raither skeery ever since. We 'ad some trouble in puttin' it out, for the cumbustibles didn't seem to care much for water. We got it under at last, early this morning."

"This morning?"

"Yes, sir. It blow'd up about two hours arter you left for London, an' we've bin at it ever since. We *was* so glad your mother was away, sir, for it *did* make an uncommon crack. I was just sayin' to cook, not 'alf an hour since, the master would have enjoyed that, he would; it was *such* a crusher."

"Any of—of—the torpedo left, Lancey?" I asked, with some hesitation.

"The torpedo, sir. Bless your 'art, it went up to the 'eavens like a sky-rocket, an' blowed the out-'ouse about to that extent that you couldn't find a bit big enough to pick your teeth with."

On hearing this I roused myself, and hastened to the scene of devastation.

One glance sufficed. The spot on which my laboratory had stood was a blackened heap of rubbish!

"Now, mother," said I next day, after relieving her mind by a full and rapid account of what had happened, "there is nothing that I know of to detain me at home. I will therefore see to having the yacht got ready, and we shall all go to sea without delay."

Chapter Five.
Terrible Torpedo Tales, Followed By Overturned Plans

Change of scene has almost always an invigorating effect on the mind. Whatever be the nature of your mind, variety, rest assured, will improve its condition.

So we thought, my mother and I, Nicholas and Bella, as we lay, one beautiful morning, becalmed in the English Channel.

The yacht turned out to be a most charming vessel. Schooner-rigged, with two cabins, one of which formed our *salon* during the day, and the gentlemen's bed-room by night, the other being set apart entirely for the ladies. It was quite full. My mother and Bella filled it. Another female would have caused it to overflow.

Contrary to all expectation, my mother turned out a capital sailor; better even than Bella, on whom she attended during the first part of the voyage when the latter was ill.

"D'you think we shall have a good passage across the far-famed Bay of Biscay?" asked Nicholas, as he sat on the cabin skylight, smoking a mild cigar. Talking of that, smoking was the only thing in which I could not join my future brother-in-law. I know not how it is, but so it is that I cannot smoke. I have often tried to, but it invariably makes me sick, for which, perhaps, I ought to be thankful.

"It is to be hoped we shall," I replied to his question; "but I am not a judge of weather. What think you, Mr Whitlaw?" I said, addressing my skipper.

"I hope we shall, sir," replied the skipper, with a deferential touch of his cap, and a glance round the horizon; "but I don't feel sure."

Mr Whitlaw was an American, and a splendid specimen of the nation to which he belonged, —tall, lanky, broad-shouldered, gentlemanly, grave, self-possessed, prompt, good-humoured: I have seldom met a more agreeable man. He had been in the Northern navy of America during the last war, and had already introduced some of the discipline, to which he had been accustomed, amongst my small crew.

Bella was up on deck enjoying the sunset; so was my mother. Lancey was busy cleaning my fowling-piece, near the companion-hatch.

"It is charming," exclaimed my mother.

"So calm," said Bella.

"And settled-looking," remarked Nicholas, flipping the end of his cigar over the side.

"Mr Whitlaw does not appear to think so favourably of the weather," I remarked.

The skipper, looking gravely at a particular point on the horizon, said, in a quiet tone—

"The clouds are heavy."

"From which you judge that the fine weather may not last?"

"It may be so, but the indications are not certain," was his cautious reply.

That night we were in a perfect chaos of wind and water. The storm-fiend seemed to have reserved all his favours in order to give us a befitting reception. The sea roared, the wind yelled, the yacht—but why repeat the oft-told tale that invariably ends with "Biscay, O!" A week later and we were in a dead calm, revelling in warmth, bathed in sunshine, within the straits of Gibraltar.

It was evening. All sail was set. Not a puff of wind rendered that display available. The reef-points pattered as the yacht rolled gracefully from side to side on the gentle heave of the Mediterranean's bosom.

Sitting on a rug on the deck, between my mother and Nicholas, Bella said, in a low quiet tone, "This is perfect felicity."

"Agreed," said Nicholas, in a similar tone, with a puff from his cigar.

Bella referred to the calm, of course!

A sea-captain, sitting astride the bulwarks of his ship in the "Doldrums," far far away from Bella, said, in reference to a similar calm which had beset him for three weeks, "This is perfectly maddening," with many other strong expressions which we would rather not record; but Bella, of course, did not know that, and could not be expected to reflect on it. She was taken up with her own comforts at the time.

"My dear," said Mrs Childers, "I think I shall go to bed. Come with me. Good-night, Nicholas. Will you keep the skylight off to-night, Jeffry? It was too hot in our cabin last night."

"Of course I will," said I; "why did you not ring, and let me know that you would like fresh air? But I shall see to it to-night."

About eleven o'clock that night, I lay on one of the lockers of the main cabin, in a wakeful mood. Nicholas lay on the other locker, in that profound slumber which is so characteristic of healthy youth. His regular breathing was the only sound I heard, except the soft footfall of our skipper, as he slowly paced the deck.

Presently I heard another step. It advanced, and a low "Fine night, sir," apprised me that it was Lancey, who had come on deck to air himself after the culinary and other labours of the day, for he served in the capacity of cook and steward to the yacht.

"I wish you'd tell me about that expedition you was speakin' off to the master this morning," said Lancey.

"With pleasure," replied the skipper; "sit down here, and I'll spin it off to you right away."

I knew by the sound of their motions that they had seated themselves at the foot of the main-mast, just between the skylights of the two cabins, and feared that their talk might disturb my mother; but, reflecting that she must have got to sleep long ago, I thought it better not to disturb them, unless their talk should become too loud. As for myself, in my wakeful mood, their converse could not annoy me. After a time it began to interest me deeply.

"It was about the blowing-up of Southern ironclads, was it not?" said the skipper. As he spoke I could distinctly hear the puff, puff, of his pipe between each half-dozen words.

"*Just* so," replied Lancey. "The master is uncommon fond of blowin's-up and inquirin' into the natur' of things. I never know'd another except one as beat 'im at inwestigation, but that one beat everybody I ever seen or heard of. He was a Scotch boy, named Sandy—"

"What was his other name?" asked the skipper.

"'Aven't a notion," replied Lancey. "We never called 'im anythink else. I don't believe he 'ad any other name. He said he was the son of an apothecary. No doubt the schoolmaster knew 'is other name, if he 'ad one, but he never used it, and we boys were content with Sandy. That boy, sir, seemed to me to know everythink, and was able, I believe, to do hanythink. He was a tremendous fighter, too, though not out o' the way as regards size. He could lick the biggest boy in the school, and when he made up his mind to do a thing, nothin' on earth could stop him a-doin' of it."

"Good," said the skipper, with an emphatic puff; "that's what we Americans call the power to go ahead. Did Sandy become a great man?"

"Don't know," answered Lancey. "He went a'ead too fast for me to foller. One day the master gave 'im a lickin'. He vowed he'd be revenged. Next mornin' early he got up an' smashed the school winders, redooced the master's desk to matchwood, an' walked away whistlin'. I never seed 'im since."

"Nor heard of him?"

"Nor 'eard of 'im."

"That was a pity," said the skipper, with a prolonged whiff.

"It was. But go on, Mister Whitlaw, with your hanecdotes. I couldn't rightly hear all you said to the master."

"It was about torpedo warfare we were talking," said the skipper. "You know that sort o' thing is only in its infancy, but the Americans, as usual, had the honour of starting it fairly into being."

"The 'honour,' eh?" said Lancey; "h'm! well, I'm not so sure about the honour, but go on."

"Well, whether it be an honour or no, I won't dispute," returned the skipper, with a puff; "but of this I am sure, that during the late war between the North and South in America, torpedo practice was regularly brought into play for the first time, and the case which I brought before Mr Childers yesterday is only one of many which I could describe. I'll not relate the same story, but another and a better.

"About the beginning of the war, in 1862, the Confederates—these were the Southern men—blew up our ironclad, the *Cairo*, in which I lost one of my most intimate friends; and in 1864 they attempted to blow up the *Wabash*, and myself along with it. The *Cairo* business was caused by sunk torpedoes. She was going up the Yazoo river at the time, and had lowered a boat to search for torpedoes, which were known to be sunk there. They succeeded in fishing up one, which was found to be an exploded one. Meanwhile the *Cairo*, having got rather too close in shore, backed out towards the middle of the stream, when two explosions occurred in quick succession, one close to the port-quarter, the other under the port-bow. The effect was tremendous. Some of the heavy guns were actually lifted from the deck. The captain instantly shoved the *Cairo* on the bank, and got a hawser out to a tree to keep her, if possible, from sinking in deep water. The pumps, steam and hand, were set going immediately; but her whole frame, ironclad though she was, had been so shattered, that nothing could save her. Twelve minutes afterwards she slipped down into six fathoms water, giving them barely time to get out the boats and save the sick men aboard, and the arms. My friend was one of the sick, and the moving was ultimately the death of him, though no lives were lost at the time."

"You're not tellin' me crackers, are you?" said Lancey, in an incredulous tone.

"My good fellow," returned the skipper, "I wish that I were. The story is only too true, and I would it were the only one of the sort I had to tell. You can find a book in London,[1] if you like, which tells all about this and the other torpedo work done during the late American war."

"Well, then," said Lancey, in the tone of an eager listener, while, by the tapping on the combings of the hatchway, I could distinguish that he was emptying his pipe, with a view, no doubt, to the enjoyment of another, "and what happened when they tried to blow *you* up?"

"Well, you must know," resumed the skipper, "it was long afterwards, near the end of the war. I was in the US steamer *Wabash* at the time. We were at anchor off Charleston, and we kept a sharp look-out at that time, for it was a very different state of things from the wooden-wall warfare that Nelson used to carry on. Why, we never turned in a night without a half sort of expectation of being blown into the sky before morning. It was uneasy work, too, for although American sailors are as good at *facing* death as any men, they don't like the notion of death coming in on them, like a sneak below the waterline, and taking them in the dark while asleep. We were always on the alert, and doubly so at that time, for only a short while previously, the Confederates had sunk another of our ironclads, the *Housatonic*, with one of their torpedo-Davids,—little boats that were so called because, compared with the great ironclads they were meant to attack, they somewhat resembled David when he went out against Goliath.

"Well, as I said, the *Wabash* was at anchor, and it was night—not very late, about ten; but it was very dark.

"Fortunately the deck was in charge that night of a young officer named Craven, and never was an officer worse named or better deserving to be called Courage. He had his wits about him. At the hour I have named, he observed something on the starboard-quarter, about 150 yards off. It resembled a plank on the water. In reality it was a torpedo-David. It was opposite the main-mast when first observed, going rapidly against the tide. At that moment it turned and made straight for the ship. Craven was up to the mark. He commenced with volleys of musketry; beat the gong for the

[1] "A Treatise on Coast-Defence … Compiled from official reports of officers of the United States. By Von Scheliha, Lieutenant-Colonel and chief engineer of the department of the Gulf of Mexico of the army of the late Confederate States of America."

crew to assemble at quarters; rang four bells for the engine to go ahead; opened fire with the watch and the starboard battery; and gave orders to slip the cable.

"His orders, you may be sure, were obeyed with promptitude. The gong sent every man from his hammock as if he had received an electric shock. Jack-in-the-box never came out of his box more promptly than each man shot up the hatchway. An exaggerated idea of the effect of torpedoes—if that were possible—had got possession of us. We were at our quarters in a moment; the ship moved ahead; the chain slipped; and the torpedo-boat passed us about forty yards astern. A round shot from us at the same moment appeared to strike it. We cheered. A second shot was fired, and appeared to send it to the bottom, for we saw it no more.

"But now *our* turn came," continued the skipper, refilling his pipe. "Puff! you see we were not so well situated as the Southerners for the use of this weapon, for we had to go in to attack their forts, while they had only to defend themselves, which they did largely with sunk torpedoes.

"We had long been desirous of revenging their attacks in a similar fashion, and at last we were successful on the 27th of October. I had the good luck to be one of the expedition. It was risky work, of course. We all knew that, but where is the nation worthy of the name that will not find men for risky work? People talk about the difference of courage in nations. In my opinion that is all gammon. Most nations that lie near to one another are pretty much alike as to courage. In times of trial among all nations, the men of pluck come to the front, and the plucky men, be they American, English, French, German, Russian, or Turk, do pretty much the same thing—they fight like heroes till they conquer or die."

"Better if they didn't fight at all," remarked Lancey.

"That's true, but if you're attacked you *must* fight. Anyhow, on this particular occasion we attacked the Confederate ironclad ram *Albemarle*, and sent her to the bottom. I had volunteered for the duty with some other men from the squadron, and we started in a steam-launch under Lieutenant Cushing. The distance from the mouth of the river to where the ram lay was about eight miles, the stream averaging 200 yards in width, and being lined with the enemy's pickets, so that we had to proceed with the utmost possible caution. We set out in the dead of night. There was a wreck on our way, which was surrounded by schooners, and we knew that a gun was mounted there to command the bend of the river. We had the good luck, however, to pass the pickets and the wreck without being discovered, and were not hailed until seen by the look-out of the ram itself.

"Without replying to the hail, we made straight at her under a full head of steam. The enemy sprang their rattles, rang their bell, and commenced firing. The *Albemarle* was made fast to a wharf, with a defence of logs around her about thirty feet from her side. A chance fire on the shore enabled us to see this, although the night was intensely dark, and raining.

"From the report afterwards published by the commander of the *Albemarle*, it seems that a good look-out had been kept. The watch also had been doubled, and when we were seen (about three in the morning) they were all ready. After hailing, a brisk fire was opened on us both by small arms and large guns; but the latter could not be brought to bear, owing to our being so close, and we partially disturbed the aim of the former by a dose of canister at close range. Paymaster Swan, of the *Otsego*, was wounded near me, and some others. My own jacket was cut in many places, and the air seemed full of bullets.

"Our torpedo-boom was out and ready. Passing close to the *Albemarle*, we made a complete circle round her, so as to strike her fairly. Then Lieutenant Cushing gave the order, and we went straight at her, bows on. In a moment we struck the logs, just abreast of the quarter-port, with such force that we leaped half over them, at the same time breasted them in. The boom was lowered at once. 'Now, lads, a vigorous pull!' said Cushing.

"We obeyed, and sent the torpedo right under the overhang of the ship. It exploded. At the same instant the *Albemarle's* great-gun was fired. A shot seemed to go crashing through the boat, and a dense mass of water rushed in from the torpedo. It seemed to me as if heaven and earth had come

together. Smoke and yells, with continued firing at only fifteen feet range, followed, in the midst of which I heard the commander of the ironclad summon us to surrender. I heard our lieutenant twice refuse, and then, ordering the men to save themselves, he jumped into the water. I followed him, and for some time swam in the midst of a shower-bath caused by plunging shot and bullets, but not one of them struck me. At last I reached the shore, and escaped.

"At the time I thought we must have failed in our purpose, but I was mistaken. Though we had lost one boat and some of our men, many of them being captured, I learned that the *Albemarle* had sunk in fifteen minutes after the explosion of the torpedo, only her shield and smoke-stack being left out of the water to mark the spot where a mighty iron-clad had succumbed to a few pounds of well-applied gunpowder!"

"If that be so," said Lancey, after a pause and deep sigh, "it seems to me no manner of use to build ironclads at all, and that it would be better, as well as cheaper, in time to come, to fight all our battles with torpedo-boats."

"It may be so," replied the skipper, rising, "but as that is a subject which is to be settled by wiser heads than ours, and as you have to look after the ladies' breakfast to-morrow morning, I'd strongly advise you to turn in."

Lancey took the hint, and as he slept in a berth close to the cabin, I quickly had nasal assurance that he had thrown care and torpedoes to the dogs.

It was not so with myself. Much of the information which Mr Whitlaw had unconsciously conveyed to me was quite new, for although I had, as a youth, read and commented on the late American war while it was in progress, I had not given to its details that amount of close study which is necessary to the formation of a reasonable judgment. At first I could not resist the conviction that my skipper must have been indulging in a small amount of exaggeration, especially when I reflected on the great strength and apparent invulnerability of such massive vessels as our *Thunderer*; but knowing the sedate and truthful character of Mr Whitlaw, I felt perplexed. Little did I think at the time that I should live to see, and that within the year, the truth of his statements corroborated with my own eyes. I meditated long that night on war and its results, as well as the various processes by which it is carried on; and I had arrived at a number of valuable conclusions, which I would have given worlds to have been able to jot down at the moment, when I was overtaken by that which scattered them hopelessly to the winds: I fell sound asleep!

The rest of this delightful voyage I am compelled to pass over, in order that I may come to matters of greater importance.

We had reached the neighbourhood of the beautiful town of Nice, when my dear mother, to my surprise and mortification, suddenly announced that she could not endure the sea any longer. She had kept pretty well, she admitted, and had enjoyed herself, too, except when listening to those dreadful stories of the captain about the American war, which had travelled to her down the after-cabin skylight, during wakeful hours of the night. Despite appearances, she said she had suffered a good deal. There was something, she declared, like a dumpling in her throat, which always seemed about to come up, but wouldn't, and which she constantly tried to swallow, but couldn't.

In these circumstances, what could I do? We had meant to land at Nice in passing. I now resolved to leave my mother and sister there and proceed eastward—it might be to Egypt or the Black Sea—with Naranovitsch. The latter had ordered his letters to be forwarded to Nice; we therefore ran into the port, and, while my mother and sister and I drove to "the Château" to see the splendid view from that commanding position, he went off to the post-office.

On returning to the yacht, we found poor Nicholas in deep distress. He had received a letter announcing the death of his father, and requiring his immediate return to Russia. As the circumstances admitted of no delay, and as my mother could not be prevailed on to go farther in the yacht, it was hastily arranged that she and Bella should return through France to England, and that Nicholas should take charge of them.

Our plans being fixed, they were at once carried into effect, and the same evening I found myself alone in my yacht, with no one but the skipper and crew and the faithful Lancey, to keep me company.

The world was now before me where to choose. After a consultation with my skipper, I resolved to go on a cruise in the Black Sea, and perhaps ascend the Danube, in spite of the rumours of possible war between the Russians and Turks.

Chapter Six.
Turk and Bulgarian—A Wrestling Match and a Dispute

River navigation is, to my mind, most captivating; but space forbids that I should enlarge on it, and on many other points of interest in this eventful voyage. I shall therefore pass over the Dardanelles and the Bosporus, leaving the great and classic Stamboul itself behind untouched, and transport the reader at once to one of those "touches of nature" which "make the whole world kin."

It is a little village on the Danube river—the mighty Danube, which bears the fleets of the world on its ample breast.

We had been a considerable time in the river, for we took things very leisurely, before reaching the village to which I refer. It was named Yenilik. While I had been rejoicing in the varied scenery —the lagoons and marshes of the several mouths of the great river, and the bolder prospects of hill and dale higher up—I had not been idling my time or making entire holiday of it, for I had devoted myself to the study of the Turkish language.

My powers as a linguist may not perhaps be above the average, nevertheless I confess to a considerable facility in the acquisition of languages. Russian I already knew very well, having, as before intimated, spent a considerable time in St. Petersburg.

Desiring to perfect myself in Turkish, I undertook to teach my man Lancey. Not that I had much opinion of his ability—far from it; but I entertain a strong belief in the Scriptural idea that two are better than one. Of course I do not hold that two fools are better than one wise man; but two men of average ability are, in nearly all circumstances, better than one, especially if one of them is decidedly and admittedly superior to the other. Lancey's powers were limited, but his ambition was not so, and I am bound to add that his application was beyond all praise. Of course his attainments, like his powers, were not great. His chief difficulty lay in his tendency to drop the letter *h* from its rightful position in words, and to insert it, along with *r* and *k*, in wrong places. But my efforts to impress Lancey's mind had the satisfactory effect of imbedding minute points of the language deeply in my own memory.

The village to which I have referred was in Bulgaria—on the right or southern shore of the Danube. It was a pretty spot, and the bright sunny weather lent additional charms to water, rock, and tree, while the twittering of birds, to say nothing of the laughter and song of men, women, and children working in the fields, or engaged in boisterous play, added life to it.

Towards the afternoon I landed, and, accompanied by Lancey, went up to the chief store or shop of the village. It was a primitive store, in which the most varied and incongruous articles were associated.

The owner of the shop was engaged in bargaining with, I think, one of the finest specimens of manhood I ever saw. His name I accidentally learned on entering, for the shopman, at that moment, said—

"No, Dobri Petroff, I cannot let you have it for less."

The shopman spoke in the Bulgarian tongue, which, being a kindred dialect of the Russian language, I understood easily.

"Too dear," said Petroff, as he turned over the article, a piece of calico, with a good-humoured affectation of contempt.

Dobri Petroff was a young man, apparently not more than twenty-five, tall, broad, deep-chested, small-waisted—a perfect study for an Apollo. Both dress and language betokened him an uneducated man of the Bulgarian peasantry, and his colour seemed to indicate something of gipsy origin; but there was an easy frank deportment about him, and a pleasant smile on his masculine countenance, which told of a naturally free, if not free-and-easy, spirit. Although born in a land where tyranny prevailed,

where noble spirits were crushed, independence destroyed, and the people generally debased, there was an occasional glance in the black eye of Dobri Petroff which told of superior intelligence, a certain air of natural refinement, and a strong power of will.

"No, Dobri, no; not a rouble less," repeated the shopman.

Petroff smiled, and shook back his black curly hair, as a lion might in sporting with an obstinate cub.

At that moment a Turk entered. His position in society I could not at the time guess, but he had the overbearing manner of one who might have been raised by favour from a low to a high station. He pushed Petroff rudely out of his way, and claimed the entire attention of the shopman, which was at once and humbly accorded.

A fine expression of fierce contempt flashed across Petroff's countenance; but to my surprise, he at once drew aside.

When the Turk was served and had gone out, the shopman turned to me.

"After Petroff," I said, bowing towards the man.

The surprise and pleasure of Petroff was evidently great, but he refused to take advantage of my courtesy, and seemed so overwhelmed with modest confusion at my persisting that he should be served before me, that he ultimately left the shop, much to my regret, without making his purchase.

To my inquiries, the shopman replied that Dobri was the blacksmith of the place, and one of its best and steadiest workmen.

After completing my purchases I left, and strolled through the village towards its further extremity.

"The Turks seem to 'ave it all their own way ere, sir," said Lancey, as we walked along.

"If the treatment we have seen that man receive were the worst of it," I replied, "the Bulgarians would not have very much to complain of, though insolence by superiors to inferiors is bad enough. They have, however, more than that to bear, Lancey; the story of Bulgarian wrongs is a long and a very sad one."

As we strolled beyond the village, and were engaged in earnest converse on this subject, we suddenly came on a group of holiday-makers. A number of the peasantry were assembled in a field, engaged in dances, games, and athletic sports. We mingled with the crowd and looked on. They were engaged at the time in a wrestling match. Little notice was taken of our appearing, so intent were they on the proceedings. Two strong men were engaged in what I may call a tremendous hug. Each was stripped to the waist. Their muscles stood out like those of Hercules, as they strained and tugged. At last they went down, one being undermost, with both shoulder-blades touching the ground, and a loud cheer greeted the victor as he stood up.

He was a splendid animal, unquestionably—over six feet, with immense chest and shoulders, and modest withal; but a man of about five feet eight stepped into the ring, and overthrew him with such ease that a burst of laughter mingled with the cheer that followed. The triumph of the little man was, however, short-lived, for a Bulgarian giant next made his appearance—evidently a stranger to those present—and after a prolonged struggle, laid the little man on his back.

For some time this giant strutted about defiantly, and it appeared as if he were to remain the champion, for no one seemed fit or willing to cope with him. At last some gipsy girls who were sitting in front of the ring, urged one of their tribe, a tall, strong, young fellow, to enter the lists against the giant.

The youth consented, and entered the ring; but a quick throw from the giant sent him sprawling, to the great disappointment of his brunette friends.

Amongst the girls present, there sat a remarkably pretty young woman, whom the others endeavoured to urge to some course of action, to which she at first objected. After a little persuasion, however, she appeared to give in, and, rising, left the circle. Soon after she returned with a magnificent specimen of humanity, whom she pushed into the ring with evident pride.

It was Dobri Petroff. The villagers greeted him by name with a ringing cheer as he advanced.

With a modest laugh he shook his huge antagonist by the hand.

He stripped to the waist, and each man presented a rounded development of muscular power, which would have done credit to any of the homeric heroes; but there was a look of grand intelligence and refinement in Petroff's countenance, which would probably have enlisted the sympathies of the villagers even if he had been an utter stranger.

Having shaken hands, the wrestlers began to walk round each other, eagerly looking for a chance to get the "catch." It seemed at first as if neither liked to begin, when, suddenly, the Bulgarian turned sharp on Petroff, and tried a favourite throw; but with the lithe easy motion of a panther, the blacksmith eluded his grasp. The excitement of the spectators became intense, for it now seemed as if the two huge fellows were well-matched, and that a prolonged struggle was about to take place. This, however, was a mistake. The villagers apparently had underrated the powers of their own champion, and the gipsy girls looked anxious, evidently fearing that the hitherto victorious stranger would again triumph.

For some moments the cautious walk-round continued, then there was a sudden exclamation of surprise from the crowd, for the blacksmith seized his adversary by the waist, and with a quick throw, caused him to turn almost a somersault in the air, and to come down on his back with stunning violence.

While the heavy fellow lay, as if slightly stunned, on the ground, Petroff stooped, again shook hands with him, and then lifting him high in the air, as though he had been but a boy, set him on his feet, and turned to resume his jacket, amid the enthusiastic cheers of the people.

Petroff's jacket was handed to him by a pretty dark-eyed girl of about five years of age, who bore so strong a resemblance to the young woman who had brought the blacksmith on the scene, that I at once set them down as sisters. The child looked up in the champion's face with such innocence that he could not resist the temptation to stoop and kiss her. Then, taking the little one's hand, he pushed through the crowd and left the ring. I observed that the young woman also rose and went with them.

Feeling interested in these people. Lancey and I followed, and overtook them before they had quitted the field. I said in Russian:—

"Good-day, Petroff; you overthrew that fellow with greater ease than I had expected."

The blacksmith gave me a look of pleased recognition as he returned my salutation.

"Well, sir," he said, "it was not difficult. The man is strong enough, but does not understand the art well. You are an Englishman, I think."

"I am," said I, somewhat surprised as well by the question as by the superior manner and address of the man.

"It was a man from your land," returned Petroff, with a grave earnest look, "who taught me to wrestle,—a man from Cornwall. He was a sailor—a stout fellow, and a good man. His vessel had been anchored off our village for some time, so that we saw a good deal of him. They had a passenger on board, who landed and went much about among the people. He was a German, and called himself a colporteur. He taught strange doctrines, and gave away many Bibles, printed in the Bulgarian tongue."

"Ah," said I, "no doubt he was an agent of the British and Foreign Bible Society."

"Perhaps so," returned Petroff, with a somewhat perplexed look, "but he said nothing about that. His chief desire seemed to be to get us to listen to what he read out of his Bible. And some of us did listen, too. He gave one of the Bibles to my wife here, and she has been reading it pretty eagerly ever since."

"What! this, then, is your wife?" I exclaimed.

"Yes, Marika is my wife, and Ivanka is my daughter," replied Petroff, with a tender glance at the little girl that trotted by his side.

"Perhaps, Marika, your Cornish friend may have taught you to speak English," said I, in my native tongue, turning to the woman.

Marika shook her pretty head, laughed, and blushed. She seemed to understand me, but would not consent to reply in English.

"The colporteur of whom you have spoken," said I, turning to the blacksmith, and again speaking Russian, "did you a great service when he gave your wife the Word of God."

Dobri Petroff assented, but a frown for a minute overspread his face. "Yes," he said, "I admit that, but he also taught me to think, and it might have been better for me—for many of us in this land—if we did not think; if we could eat and sleep and work like the brutes that perish."

I feared that I knew too well what the man referred to, and would gladly have dropped the subject, but could not do so without appearing rude.

"It is always well to think," said I, "when we think rightly, that is, in accordance with the teachings of the Bible, about which we have just been speaking. Marika has read much of it to you, no doubt?"

"She has," said the blacksmith, with a touch of sternness, "and among other things, she has read to me that 'oppression driveth even a wise man mad.' Am I to understand that as merely stating the fact, or justifying the madness?"

Without waiting for a reply to the question, he went on, hurriedly—

"You saw that Turk to-day, who pushed me aside as if I had been a dog? That showed you the *spirit* of the men in power here, but you little know their practices—"

"Petroff," said I, interrupting, and looking at the man earnestly, "forgive me if I say that we had better not discuss the subject now. I have just arrived in your land, and know little about it yet. When I have seen and heard and thought much, I will be better able to understand you."

Petroff admitted with ready grace that I was right, and thrusting his fingers through the wild clustering curls of his black hair, as if to let the air circle more freely about his head, he turned sharp round, and pointed to a cottage which stood at a short distance from the high-road, at the entrance to the village.

"That is our home, sir; we shall feel happy if you will enter it."

I willingly complied, and turned with them into the by-path that led to it.

The cottage was a mere hut, long and low, one end of which constituted the forge, the other end, divided into three compartments, being the dwelling-house. Here I found the hand of Marika very evident, in the neatness and cleanliness of everything in and around the place. The owners were very poor, but there was sufficient for comfort and health. On a shelf in a corner lay the Bible which the family had received from the colporteur. It was the only book in the house, and evidently a cherished treasure.

In another corner, on a rudely-made but warm couch, lay a treasure of a different stamp—a boy, apparently about two years of age. As I looked at the curly black hair, the well-shaped nose, the firm, rosy lips, and the broad brow, I turned to Petroff with a smile, and said—

"I need not ask if that boy is yours."

The man did not at once reply, but seized the child, which our entrance had awakened, and raised it high above his head.

"Do you hear that, little Dob? The gentleman knows who you are by your mother's eyes."

"Nay," said I, with a laugh, "by its father's nose. But now that you mention the eyes, I do recognise the mother's plainly. How old is he?"

This was the first of a series of questions which opened the hearts of these people to me. On the strength of these jet-black eyes and the well-shaped nose, to say nothing of the colporteur and the Bible, Lancey and I struck up quite an intimate friendship, insomuch that at parting, little Dob gave me a familiar dab on the face, and Ivanka turned up her sweet little mouth to be kissed—quite readily and of her own accord. There is nothing on earth so captivating as a trustful child. My heart was knit to little Ivanka on the spot, and it was plain that little Dob and Lancey were mutually attracted.

I remained at that village several days longer than I had intended, in order to cultivate the acquaintance of the blacksmith's family. During that time I saw a good deal of the other villagers, and found that Petroff was by no means a typical specimen. He was above his compeers in all respects, except in his own opinion; one of Nature's gentlemen, in short, who are to be found, not numerously perhaps, but certainly, in almost every land, with unusual strength of intellect, and breadth of thought, and power of frame, and force of will, and nobility of aspiration. Such men in free countries, become leaders of the good and brave. In despotic lands they become either the deliverers of their country or the pests of society—the terror of rulers, the fomentors of national discord. Doubtless, in many cases, where right principles are brought to bear on them, they learn to submit, and, sometimes, become mitigators of the evils which they cannot cure.

Most of the other inhabitants of this village, some of whom were Mohammedans, and some Christians of the Greek Church, were sufficiently commonplace and uninteresting. Many of them appeared to be simply lazy and inert. Others were kindly enough, but stupid, and some were harsh, coarse, and cruel, very much as we find the peasantry in other parts of the world where they are ill-treated or uncared for.

While staying here I had occasion to go on shore one morning, and witnessed a somewhat remarkable scene in a café.

Lancey and I, having made a longer excursion than usual and the day being rather hot, resolved to refresh ourselves in a native coffee-house. On entering we found it already pretty well filled with Bulgarians, of whom a few were Moslems. They were apparently of the poorer class. Most of them sat on low stools, smoking chibouks—long pipes, with clay heads and amber mouth-pieces—and drinking coffee. The Christians were all engrossed, at the moment of our arrival, with a stranger, who from his appearance and the package of books which lay open at his side, I at once judged to be a colporteur. Dobri Petroff, I observed, was near him, and interested so deeply in what was going on, that he did not at first perceive us.

Having selected some New Testaments and Bibles from his pack, the colporteur handed them round for inspection. These, I found, were printed in the modern Bulgarian tongue. The people greatly admired the binding of the volumes, and began to evince considerable interest in what the colporteur said about them. At last he proposed to read, and as no objection was made, he read and commented on several passages. Although a German, he spoke Bulgarian fluently, and ere long had aroused considerable interest, for the people had little or no knowledge of the Bible; the only one to which they had access being that which lay on the pulpit of the Greek Church of the village, and which, being written in the ancient Slavic language, was incomprehensible by them.

The priests in the Greek Church there are generally uneducated men, and their intoned services and "unknown tongue" do not avail much in the way of enlightenment. The schoolmasters, I was told by those who had good opportunity of judging, are much better educated than the priests. I observed that one of these, who had on a former visit been pointed out to me by my friend Dobri, sat not far from the colporteur smoking his chibouk with a grave critical expression of countenance.

At last the colporteur turned to the 115th Psalm, and I now began to perceive that the man had a purpose, and was gradually leading the people on.

It is well known that the Greek Church, although destitute of images in its religious buildings, accords the same reverence, or homage, to pictures which the Romish Church does to the former. At first, as the colporteur read, the people listened with grave attention; but when he came to the verses that describe the idols of the heathen as being made of, "silver and gold, the work of men's hands," with mouths that could not speak, and eyes that could not see, and ears that could not hear, several of the more earnest listeners began to frown, and it was evident that they regarded the language of the colporteur's book as applicable to their sacred pictures, and resented the implied censure. When he came to the eighth verse, and read, "They that make them are like unto them, so is every one that trusteth in them," there were indignant murmurs; for these untutored peasants, whatever their church

might teach about such subtleties as worshipping God *through* pictures, accepted the condemnatory words in simplicity.

"Why are you angry?" asked the colporteur, looking round.

"Because," answered a stern old man who sat, close to me, "your words condemn *us* as well as the heathen. They make out the pictures of our saints to be idols—images and pictures being one and the same thing."

"But these are not *my* words," said the colporteur, "they are the words of God."

"If these words are true," returned the old man, with increasing sternness, "then *we* are all wrong; but these words are not true—they are only the words of *your* Bible, about which we know nothing."

"My friends," returned the colporteur, holding up the volume from which he had been reading, "this is not only my Bible, it is also yours, the same that is read in your own churches, only rendered into your own modern tongue."

At this point Dobri Petroff, who, I observed, had been listening keenly to what was said, started up with vehemence, and exclaimed—

"If this be true, we can prove it. Our Bible lies in the neighbouring church, and here sits our schoolmaster who reads the ancient Slavic like his mother-tongue. Come, let us clear up the matter at once."

This proposal was heartily agreed to. The Bulgarians in the café rose *en masse*, and, headed by the village schoolmaster, went to the church, where they found the Bible that the priests were in the habit of reading, or rather intoning, and turned up the 115th Psalm. It was found to correspond exactly with that of the colporteur!

The result was at first received in dead silence, and with looks of surprise by the majority. This was followed by murmuring comments and some disputes. It was evident that the seeds of an inquiring spirit had been sown that day, which would bear fruit in the future. The colporteur, wisely forbearing to press his victory at that time, left the truth to simmer.[1]

I joined him as he went out of the church, and, during a brief conversation, learned from him that an extensive work is being quietly carried on in Turkey, which, although not attracting much attention, is nevertheless surely undermining the huge edifice of Error by means of the lever of Truth.

Among other things, he said that in the year 1876 so many as twenty-eight thousand Bibles, translated into the modern native tongue, had been circulated in the Turkish Empire and in Greece by the British and Foreign Bible Society, while the Americans, who are busily engaged in the blessed work in Armenia, had distributed twenty thousand copies.

Leaving the village of Yenilik and my Bulgarian friends with much regret, I continued the voyage up the Danube, landing here and there for a day or two and revelling in the bright weather, the rich prospects and the peaceful scenes of industry apparent everywhere, as man and beast rejoiced in the opening year.

Time passed rapidly as well as pleasantly. Sometimes I left the yacht in charge of Mr Whitlaw, and in company with my trusty servant travelled about the country, conversing with Turks wherever I met them, thus becoming more and more versed in their language, and doing my best, without much success, to improve Lancey in the same.

[1] The facts on which the above is founded were given to the author by the Reverend Doctor Thomson, who has resided in Turkey as the agent of the British and Foreign Bible Society for upwards of thirty years.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.