Stockton Frank Richard

The Dusantes

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Stockton F.

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Содержание

Frank Richard Stockton
The Dusantes A Sequel to «The Casting Away of Mrs. Lecks and Mrs. Aleshine»

PART I

When the little party, consisting of Mrs. Lecks and Mrs. Aleshine, Mr. Enderton, my newly made wife, and myself, with the red-bearded coxswain and the two sailor men, bade farewell to that island in the Pacific where so many happy hours had been passed, where such pleasant friendships had been formed, and where I had met my Ruth and made her my wife, we rowed away with a bright sky over our heads, a pleasant wind behind us, and a smooth sea beneath us. The long-boat was comfortable and well appointed, and there was even room enough in it for Mr. Enderton to stretch himself out and take a noonday nap. We gave him every advantage of this kind, for we had found by experience that our party was happiest when my father-in-law was best contented.

Early in the forenoon the coxswain rigged a small sail in the bow of the boat, and with this aid to our steady and systematic work at the oars we reached, just before nightfall, the large island whither we were bound, and to which, by means of the coxswain's pocket-compass, we had steered a direct course. Our arrival on this island, which was inhabited by some white traders and a moderate population of natives, occasioned great surprise, for when the boats containing the crew and passengers of our unfortunate steamer had reached the island, it was found that Mrs. Lecks, Mrs. Aleshine, and myself were missing. There were many suppositions as to our fate. Some persons thought we had been afraid to leave the steamer, and, having secreted ourselves on board, had gone down with her. Others conjectured that in the darkness we had fallen overboard, either from the steamer or from one of the boats; and there was even a surmise that we might have embarked in the leaky small boat – in which we really did leave the steamer – and so had been lost. At any rate, we had disappeared, and our loss was a good deal talked about, and, in a manner, mourned. In less than a week after their arrival the people from the steamer had been taken on board a sailing vessel and carried westward to their destination.

We, however, were not so fortunate, for we remained on this island for more than a month. During this time but one ship touched there, and she was western bound and of no use to us, for we had determined to return to America. Mrs. Lecks and Mrs. Aleshine had given up their journey to Japan, and were anxious to reach once more their country homes, while my dear Ruth and I were filled with a desire to found a home on some pleasant portion of the Atlantic seaboard. What Mr. Enderton intended to do we did not know. He was on his way to the United States when he left the leaking ship on which he and his daughter were passengers, and his intentions regarding his journey did not appear to have been altered by his mishaps.

By the western-bound vessel, however, Mrs. Aleshine sent a letter to her son.

Our life on this island was monotonous, and to the majority of the party uninteresting; but as it was the scene of our honeymoon, Mrs. Craig and I will always look back to it with the most pleasurable recollections. We were comfortably lodged in a house belonging to one of the traders, and although Mrs. Lecks and Mrs. Aleshine had no household duties to occupy their time, they managed to supply themselves with knitting materials from the stores on the island, and filled up their hours of waiting with chatty industry. The pipes of our sailor friends were always well filled, while the sands of the island were warm and pleasant for their backs, and it was only Mr. Enderton who showed any signs of impatient repining at our enforced stay. He growled, he grumbled, and he inveighed against the criminal neglect of steamship companies and the owners of sailing craft in not making it

compulsory in every one of their vessels to stop on every voyage at this island, where, at any time, intelligent and important personages might be stranded.

At last, however, we were taken off by a three-masted schooner bound for San Francisco, at which city we arrived in due time and in good health and condition.

We did not remain long in this city, but soon started on our way across the continent, leaving behind us our three sailor companions, who intended to ship from this port as soon as an advantageous opportunity offered itself. These men heard no news of their vessel, although they felt quite sure that she had reached Honolulu, where she had probably been condemned and the crew scattered. As some baggage belonging to my wife and my father-in-law had been left on board this vessel, I had hopes that Mr. Enderton would remain in San Francisco and order it forwarded to him there; or that he would even take a trip to Honolulu to attend to the matter personally. But in this I was disappointed. He seemed to take very little interest in his missing trunks, and wished only to press on to the East. I wrote to Honolulu, desiring the necessary steps to be taken to forward the baggage in case it had arrived there; and soon afterwards our party of five started eastward.

It was now autumn, but, although we desired to reach the end of our journey before winter set in, we felt that we had time enough to visit some of the natural wonders of the California country before taking up our direct course to the East. Therefore, in spite of some petulant remonstrances on the part of Mr. Enderton, we made several trips to points of interest.

From the last of these excursions we set out in a stage-coach, of which we were the only occupants, towards a point on the railroad where we expected to take a train. On the way we stopped to change horses at a small stage station at the foot of a range of mountains; and when I descended from the coach I found the driver and some of the men at the station discussing the subject of our route. It appeared that there were two roads, one of which gradually ascended the mountain for several miles, and then descended to the level of the railroad, by the side of which it ran until it reached the station where we wished to take the train. The other road pursued its way along a valley or notch in the mountain for a considerable distance, and then, by a short but somewhat steep ascending grade, joined the upper road.

It was growing quite cold, and the sky and the wind indicated that bad weather might be expected; and as the upper road was considered the better one at such a time, our driver concluded to take it. Six horses, instead of four, were now attached to our stage, and as two of these animals were young and unruly and promised to be unusually difficult to drive in the ordinary way, our driver concluded to ride one of the wheel horses, postilion fashion, and to put a boy on one of the leaders. Mr. Enderton was very much afraid of horses, and objected strongly to the young animals in our new team. But there were no others to take their places, and his protests were disregarded.

My wife and I occupied a back seat, having been ordered to take this comfortable position by Mrs. Lecks and Mrs. Aleshine, who had constituted themselves a board of instruction and admonition to Mrs. Craig, and, incidentally, to myself. They fancied that my wife's health was not vigorous and that she needed coddling; and if she had had two mothers she could not have been more tenderly cared for than by these good women. They sat upon the middle seat with their faces towards the horses, while Mr. Enderton had the front seat all to himself. He was, however, so nervous and fidgety, continually twisting himself about, endeavoring to get a view of the horses or of the bad places on the road, that Mrs. Lecks and Mrs. Aleshine found that a position facing him and in close juxtaposition was entirely too uncomfortable; and consequently, the back of their seat being adjustable, they turned themselves about and faced us.

The ascent of the mountain was slow and tedious, and it was late in the afternoon when we reached the highest point in our route, from which the road descended for some eight miles to the level of the railroad. Now our pace became rapid, and Mr. Enderton grew wildly excited. He threw open the window and shouted to the driver to go more slowly, but Mrs. Lecks seized him by the coat and jerked him back on his seat before he could get any answer to his appeals.

"If you want your daughter to ketch her death o' cold you'll keep that window open!" As she said this, she leaned back and pulled the window down with her own strong right arm. "I guess the driver knows what he is about," she continued, "this not bein' the first time he's gone over the road."

"Am I to understand, madam," said Mr. Enderton, "that I am not to speak to my driver when I wish him to know my will?"

To this question Mrs. Lecks made no answer, but sat up very straight and stiff, with her back square upon the speaker. For some time she and Mr. Enderton had been "out," and she made no effort to conceal the fact.

Mr. Enderton's condition now became pitiable, for our rapid speed and the bumping over rough places in the road seemed almost to deprive him of his wits, notwithstanding my assurance that stage-coaches were generally driven at a rapid rate down long inclines. In a short time, however, we reached a level spot in the road, and the team was drawn up and stopped. Mr. Enderton popped out in a moment, and I also got down to have a talk with the driver.

"These hosses won't do much at holdin' back," he said, "and it worries 'em less to let 'em go ahead with the wheels locked. You needn't be afraid. If nothin' breaks, we're all right."

Mr. Enderton seemed endeavoring to satisfy himself that everything about the running-gear of the coach was in a safe condition. He examined the wheels, the axles, and the whiffletrees, much to the amusement of the driver, who remarked to me that the old chap probably knew as much now as he did before. I was rather surprised that my father-in-law subjected the driver to no further condemnation. On the contrary, he said nothing except that for the rest of this down-hill drive he should take his place on the driver's unoccupied seat. Nobody offered any objection to this, and up he climbed.

When we started again Ruth seemed disturbed that her father should be in such an exposed position, but I assured her that he would be perfectly safe, and would be much better satisfied at being able to see for himself what was going on.

We now began to go down-hill again at a rate as rapid as before. Our speed, however, was not equal. Sometimes it would slacken a little where the road was heavy or more upon a level, and then we would go jolting and rattling over some long downward stretch. After a particularly unpleasant descent of this kind the coach seemed suddenly to change its direction, and with a twist and an uplifting of one side it bumped heavily against something and stopped. I heard a great shout outside, and from a window which now commanded a view of the road I saw our team of six horses, with the drivers pulling and tugging at the two they rode, madly running away at the top of their speed.

Ruth, who had been thrown by the shock into the arms of Mrs. Aleshine, was dreadfully frightened, and screamed for her father. I had been pitched forward upon Mrs. Lecks, but I quickly recovered myself, and as soon as I found that none of the occupants of the coach had been hurt, I opened the door and sprang out.

In the middle of the road stood Mr. Enderton, entirely uninjured, with a jubilant expression on his face, and in one hand a large closed umbrella.

"What has happened?" I exclaimed, hurrying around to the front of the coach, where I saw that the pole had been broken off about the middle of its length.

"Nothing has happened, sir," replied Mr. Enderton. "You cannot speak of a wise and discreet act, determinately performed, as a thing which has happened. We have been saved, sir, from being dashed to pieces behind that wild and unmanageable team of horses; and I will add that we have been saved by my forethought and prompt action."

I turned and looked at him in astonishment. "What do you mean?" I said. "What could you have had to do with this accident?"

"Allow me to repeat," said Mr. Enderton, "that it was not an accident. The moment that we began to go down-hill I perceived that we were in a position of the greatest danger. The driver was reckless, the boy incompetent, and the horses unmanageable. As my remonstrances and counsels had no effect upon the man, and as you seemed to have no desire to join me in efforts to restrain him to

a more prudent rate of speed, I determined to take the affair into my own hands. I knew that the first thing to be done was to rid ourselves of those horses. So long as we were connected with them disaster was imminent. I knew exactly what ought to be done. The horses must be detached from the coach. I had read, sir, of inventions especially intended to detach runaway horses from a vehicle. To all intents and purposes our horses were runaways, or would have become so in a very short time. I now made it my object to free ourselves from those horses. I got out at our first stop and thoroughly examined the carriage attachments. I found that the movable bar to which the whiffletrees were attached was connected to the vehicle by two straps and a bolt, the latter having a ring at the top and an iron nut at the bottom. While you and that reckless driver were talking together and paying no attention to me, the only person in the party who thoroughly comprehended our danger, I unbuckled those straps, and with my strong, nervous fingers, without the aid of implements, I unscrewed the nut from the bolt. Then, sir, I took my seat on the outside of the coach and felt that I held our safety in my own hands. For a time I allowed our vehicle to proceed, but when we approached this long slope which stretches before us, and our horses showed signs of increasing impetuosity, I leaned forward, hooked the handle of my umbrella in the ring of the bolt, and with a mighty effort jerked it out. I admit to you, sir, that I had overlooked the fact that the other horses were attached to the end of the pole, but I have often noticed that when we are discreet in judgment and prompt in action we are also fortunate. Thus was I fortunate. The hindermost horses, suddenly released, rushed upon those in front of them, and, in a manner, jumbled up the whole team, which seemed to throw the animals into such terror that they dashed to one side and snapped off the pole, after which they went madly tearing down the road, entirely beyond the control of the two riders. Our coach turned and ran into the side of the road with but a moderate concussion, and as I looked at those flying steeds, with their riders vainly endeavoring to restrain them, I could not, sir, keep down an emotion of pride that I had been instrumental in freeing myself, my daughter, and my traveling companions from their dangerous proximity."

The speaker ceased, a smile of conscious merit upon his face. For the moment I could not say a word to him, I was so angry. But had I been able to say or do anything to indicate the wild indignation that filled my brain, I should have had no opportunity, for Mrs. Lecks stepped up to me and took me by the arm. Her face was very stern, and her expression gave one the idea of the rigidity of Bessemer steel.

"I've heard what has been said," she remarked, "and I wish to talk to this man. Your wife is over there with Mrs. Aleshine. Will you please take a walk with her along the road? You may stay away for a quarter of an hour."

"Madam," said Mr. Enderton, "I do not wish to talk to you."

"I didn't ask you whether you did or not," said Mrs. Lecks. "Mr. Craig, will you please get your wife away as quick and as far as you can?"

I took the hint, and, with Ruth on my arm, walked rapidly down the road. She was very glad to go, for she had been much frightened, and wanted to be alone with me to have me explain to her what had occurred. Mrs. Lecks, imagining from the expression of his countenance that Mr. Enderton had, in some way, been at the bottom of the trouble, and fearing that she should not be able to restrain her indignation when she found how he had done it, had ordered Mrs. Aleshine to keep Ruth away from her father. This action had increased the poor girl's anxiety, and she was glad enough to have me take her away and tell her all about our accident.

I did tell her all that had happened, speaking as mildly as I could of Mr. Enderton's conduct. Poor Ruth burst into tears.

"I do wish," she exclaimed, "that father would travel by himself! He is so nervous, and so easily frightened, that I am sure he would be happier when he could attend to his safety in his own way; and I know, too, that we should be happier without him."

I agreed most heartily with these sentiments, although I did not deem it necessary to say so, and Ruth now asked me what I supposed would become of us.

"If nothing happens to the driver and the boy," I replied, "I suppose they will go on until they get to the station to which we were bound, and there they will procure a pole, if such a thing can be found, or, perhaps, get another coach, and come back for us. It would be useless for them to return to our coach in its present condition."

"And how soon do you think they will come back?" she said.

"Not for some hours," I replied. "The driver told me there were no houses between the place where we last stopped and the railroad station, and I am sure he will not turn back until he reaches a place where he can get either a new pole or another vehicle."

Ruth and I walked to a turn at the bottom of the long hill down which our runaway steeds had sped. At this point we had an extended view of the road as it wound along the mountain-side, but we could see no signs of our horses nor of any living thing. I did not, in fact, expect to see our team, for it would be foolish in the driver to come back until he was prepared to do something for us, and even if he had succeeded in controlling the runaway beasts, the quicker he got down the mountain the better.

By the time we had returned we had taken quite a long walk, but we were glad of it, for the exercise tranquilized us both. On our way back we noticed that a road which seemed to come up from below us joined the one we were on a short distance from the place where our accident occurred. This, probably, was the lower road which had been spoken of when we changed horses.

We found Mr. Enderton standing by himself. His face was of the hue of wood ashes, his expression haggard. He reminded me of a man who had fallen from a considerable height, and who had been frightened and stupefied by the shock. I comprehended the situation without difficulty, and felt quite sure that had he had the choice he would have much preferred a thrashing to the plain talk he had heard from Mrs. Lecks.

"What is the matter, father?" exclaimed Ruth. "Were you hurt?"

Mr. Enderton looked in a dazed way at his daughter, and it was some moments before he appeared to have heard what she said. Then he answered abruptly: "Hurt? Oh, no! I am not hurt in the least. I was just thinking of something. I shall walk on to the village or town, whichever it is, to which that man was taking us. It cannot be more than seven or eight miles away, if that. The road is down-hill, and I can easily reach the place before nightfall. I will then personally attend to your rescue, and will see that a vehicle is immediately sent to you. There is no trusting these ignorant drivers. No," he continued, deprecatingly raising his hand, "do not attempt to dissuade me. Your safety and that of others is always my first care. Exertion is nothing."

Without further words, and paying no attention to the remonstrances of his daughter, he strode off down the road.

I was very glad to see him go. At any time his presence was undesirable to me, and under the present circumstances it would be more objectionable than ever. He was a good walker, and there was no doubt he would easily reach the station, where he might possibly be of some use to us.

Mrs. Lecks was sitting on a stone by the roadside. Her face was still stern and rigid, but there was an expression of satisfaction upon it which had not been there when I left her. Ruth went to the coach to get a shawl, and I said to Mrs. Lecks:

"I suppose you had your talk with Mr. Enderton?"

"Talk!" she replied. "I should say so! If ever a man understands what people think of him, and knows what he is, from his crown to his feet, inside and outside, soul, body, bones, and skin, and what he may expect in this world and the next, he knows it. I didn't keep to what he has done for us this day. I went back to the first moment when he began to growl at payin' his honest board on the island, and I didn't let him off for a single sin that he has committed since. And now I feel that I've done my duty as far as he is concerned; and havin' got through with that, it's time we were lookin' about to see what we can do for ourselves."

It was indeed time, for the day was drawing towards its close. For a moment I had thought we would give Mr. Enderton a good start, and then follow him down the mountain to the station. But

a little reflection showed me that this plan would not answer. Ruth was not strong enough to walk so far; and although Mrs. Aleshine had plenty of vigor, she was too plump to attempt such a tramp. Besides, the sky was so heavily overcast that it was not safe to leave the shelter of the coach.

As might have been expected, Mrs. Lecks and Mrs. Aleshine took immediate charge of the personal comfort of the party, and the first thing they did was to make preparations for a meal. Fortunately, we had plenty of provisions. Mrs. Aleshine had had charge of what she called our lunch-baskets, which were, indeed, much more like market-baskets than anything else; and having small faith in the resources of roadside taverns, and great faith in the unlimited capabilities of Mr. Enderton in the matter of consuming food on a journey, she had provided bounteously and even extravagantly.

One side of the road was bordered by a forest, and on the ground was an abundance of dead wood. I gathered a quantity of this, and made a fire, which was very grateful to us, for the air was growing colder and colder. When we had eaten a substantial cold supper and had thoroughly warmed ourselves at the fire, we got into the coach to sit there and wait until relief should come. We sat for a long time; all night, in fact. We were not uncomfortable, for we each had a corner of the coach, and we were plentifully provided with wraps and rugs.

Contrary to their usual habit, Mrs. Lecks and Mrs. Aleshine did not talk much. When subjected to the annoyances of an ordinary accident, even if it should have been the result of carelessness, their disposition would have prompted them to take events as they came, and to make the best of whatever might happen to them. But this case was entirely different. We were stranded and abandoned on the road, on the side of a lonely, desolate mountain, on a cold, bleak night; and all this was the result of what they considered the deliberate and fiendish act of a man who was afraid of horses, and who cared for no one in the world but himself. Their minds were in such a condition that if they said anything they must vituperate, and they were so kindly disposed towards my wife, and had such a tender regard for her feelings, that they would not, in her presence, vituperate her father. So they said very little, and, nestling into their corners, were soon asleep.

After a time Ruth followed their example, and, though I was very anxiously watching out of the window for an approaching light, and listening for the sound of wheels, I, too, fell into a doze. It must have been ten or eleven o'clock when I was awakened by some delicate but cold touches on my face, the nature of which, when I first opened my eyes, I could not comprehend. But I soon understood what these cold touches meant. The window in the door of the coach on my side had been slightly lowered from the top to give us air, and through the narrow aperture the cold particles had come floating in. I looked through the window. The night was not very dark, for, although the sky was overcast, the moon was in its second quarter, and I could plainly see that it was snowing, and that the ground was already white.

This discovery sent a chill into my soul, for I was not unfamiliar with snows in mountain regions, and knew well what this might mean to us. But there was nothing that we could now do, and it would be useless and foolish to awaken my companions and distress them with this new disaster. Besides, I thought our situation might not be so very bad after all. It was not yet winter, and the snowfall might prove to be but a light one. I gently closed the window, and made my body comfortable in its corner, but my mind continued very uncomfortable for I do not know how long.

When I awoke, I found that there had been a heavy fall of snow in the night, and that the flakes were still coming down, thick and fast. When Ruth first looked out upon the scene she was startled and dismayed. She was not accustomed to storms of this kind, and the snow frightened her. Upon Mrs. Lecks and Mrs. Aleshine the sight of the storm produced an entirely different effect. Here was a difficulty, a discomfort, a hardship, but it came in a natural way, and not by the hand of a dastardly coward of a man. With naturally happening difficulties they were accustomed to combat without fear or repining. They knew all about snow, and were not frightened by this storm. The difficulties which it presented to their minds actually raised their spirits, and from the grim and quiet beings of the last evening they became the same cheerful, dauntless, ready women that I had known before.

"Upon my word," exclaimed Mrs. Aleshine, as she clapped her face to a window of the coach, "if this isn't a reg'lar old-fashioned snow-storm! I've shoveled my own way through many a one like it to git to the barn to do my milkin' afore the men folks had begun makin' paths, an' I feel jus' like as though I could do it ag'in."

"Now, Barb'ry Aleshine," said Mrs. Lecks, "if you're thinkin' of shovelin' your way from this place to where your cows is, you'd better step right out and get at it, and I really do think that if you felt they were sufferin' for want of milkin' you'd make a start."

"I don't say," answered Mrs. Aleshine, with an illuminating grin, "that if the case was that way I mightn't have the hankerin' though not the capableness, but I don't know that there's any place to shovel our way to jus' now."

Mrs. Lecks and I thought differently. Across the road, under the great trees, the ground was comparatively free from snow, and in some places, owing to the heavy evergreen foliage, it was entirely bare. It was very desirable that we should get to one of these spots and build a fire, for, though we had been well wrapped up, we all felt numbed and cold. In the boot at the back of the coach I knew that there was an ax, and I thought I might possibly find there a shovel. I opened the coach door and saw that the snow was already above the lower step. By standing on the spokes of the back wheel I could easily get at the boot, and I soon pulled out the ax, but found no shovel. But this did not deter me. I made my way to the front wheel and climbed up to the driver's box, where I knocked off one of the thin planks of the foot-board, and this, with the ax, I shaped into a rude shovel with a handle rather too wide but serviceable. With this I went vigorously to work, and soon had made a pathway across the road. Here I chopped off some low dead branches, picked up others, and soon had a crackling fire, around which my three companions gathered with delight.

A strong wind was now blowing, and the snow began to form into heavy drifts. The fire was very cheery and pleasant, but the wind was cutting, and we soon returned to the shelter of the coach, where we had our breakfast. This was not altogether a cold meal, for Mrs. Aleshine had provided a little tea-kettle, and, with some snow-water which I brought in boiling from the fire in the woods, we had all the hot and comforting tea we wanted.

We passed the morning waiting and looking out and wondering what sort of conveyance would be sent for us. It was generally agreed that nothing on wheels could now be got over the road, and that we must be taken away in a sleigh.

"I like sleigh-ridin'," said Mrs. Aleshine, "if you're well wrapped up, with good horses, an' a hot brick for your feet, but I must say I don't know but what I'm goin' to be a little skeery goin' down these long hills. If we git fairly slidin', hosses, sleigh, an' all together, there's no knowin' where we'll fetch up."

"There's one comfort, Barb'ry," remarked Mrs. Lecks, "and that is that when we do fetch up it'll be at the bottom of the hills, and not at the top; and as the bottom is what we want to get to, we oughtn't to complain."

"That depends a good deal whether we come down hindpart foremost, or forepart front. But nobody's complainin' so fur, specially as the sleigh isn't here."

I joined in the outlooking and the conjectures, but I could not keep up the cheerful courage which animated my companions; for not only were the two elder women bright and cheery, but Ruth seemed to be animated and encouraged by their example, and showed herself as brave and contented as either of them. She was convinced that her father must have reached the railroad station before it began to snow, and, therefore, she was troubled by no fears for his safety. But my mind was filled with many fears.

The snow was still coming down, thick and fast, and the wind was piling it into great drifts, one of which was forming between the coach and a low embankment on that side of the road near which it stood.

About every half hour I took my shovel and cleared out the path across the road from the other side of the coach to the wood. Several times after doing this I made my way among the trees, where the snow did not impede my progress, to points from which I had a view some distance down the mountain, and I could plainly see that there were several places where the road was blocked up by huge snow-drifts. It would be a slow, laborious, and difficult undertaking for any relief party to come to us from the station; and who was there, at that place, to come? This was the question which most troubled me. The settlement at the station was, probably, a very small one, and that there should be found at that place a sleigh or a sledge with enough men to form a party sufficiently strong to open a road up the mountain-side was scarcely to be expected. Men and vehicles might be obtained at some point farther along the railroad, but action of this kind would require time, and it was not unlikely that the railroad itself was blocked up with snow. I could form no idea, satisfactory to myself, of any plan by which relief could come to us that day. Even the advent of a messenger on horseback was not to be expected. Such an adventurer would be lost in the storm and among the drifts. On the morrow relief might come, but I did not like to think too much about the morrow; and of any of my thoughts and fears I said nothing to my companions.

At intervals, after I had freshly cleared out the pathway, the three women, well bundled up, ran across the road to the fire under the trees. This was the only way in which they could keep themselves warm, for the coach, although it protected us from the storm, was a very cold place to sit in. But the wind and the snow which frequently drove in under the trees made it impossible to stay very long by the fire, and the frequent passages to and from the coach were attended with much exposure and wetting of feet. I therefore determined that some better way must be devised for keeping ourselves warm; and, shortly after our noonday meal, I thought of a plan, and immediately set to work to carry it out.

The drift between the coach and the embankment had now risen higher than the top of the vehicle, against one side of which it was tightly packed. I dug a path around the back of the coach, and then began to tunnel into the huge bank of snow. In about an hour I had made an excavation nearly high enough for me to stand in, and close to the stage door on that side; and I cleared away the snow so that this door could open into the cavern I had formed. At the end opposite the entrance of my cave, I worked a hole upwards until I reached the outer air. This hole was about a foot in diameter, and for some time the light unpacked snow from above kept falling in and filling it up; but I managed, by packing and beating the sides with my shovel, to get the whole into a condition in which it would retain the form of a rude chimney.

Now I hurried to bring wood and twigs, and having made a hearth of green sticks, which I cut with my ax, I built a fire in this snowy fire-place. Mrs. Lecks, Mrs. Aleshine, and Ruth had been watching my proceedings with great interest; and when the fire began to burn, and the smoke to go out of my chimney, the coach door was opened, and the genial heat gradually pervaded the vehicle.

"Upon my word," exclaimed Mrs. Aleshine, "if that isn't one of the brightest ideas I ever heard of! A fire in the middle of a snow-bank, with a man there a-tendin' to it, an' a chimney! 'T isn't every day that you can see a thing like that!"

"I should hope not," remarked Mrs. Lecks, "for if the snow drifted this way every day, I'd be ready to give up the seein' business out-an'-out! But I think, Mr. Craig, you ought to pass that shovel in to us so that we can dig you out when the fire begins to melt your little house and it all caves in on you."

"You can have the shovel," said I, "but I don't believe this snow-bank will cave in on me. Of course the heat will melt the snow, but I think it will dissolve gradually, so that the caving in, if there is any, won't be of much account, and then we shall have a big open space here in which we can keep up our fire."

"Oh, dear!" exclaimed Ruth, "you talk as if you expected to stay here ever so long, and we certainly can't do that. We should starve to death, for one thing."

"Don't be afraid of that," said Mrs. Aleshine. "There's plenty of victuals to last till the people come for us. When I pack baskets for travelin' or picnickin', I don't do no scrimpin'. An' we've got to keep up a fire, you know, for it wouldn't be pleasant for those men, when they've cut a way up the mountain to git at us, to find us all froze stiff."

Mrs. Lecks smiled. "You're awful tender of the feelin's of other people, Barb'ry," she said, "and a heart as warm as yourn ought to keep from freezin'."

"Which it has done, so far," said Mrs. Aleshine complacently.

As I had expected, the water soon began to drip from the top and the sides of my cavern, and the chimney rapidly enlarged its dimensions. I made a passage for the melted snow to run off into a hollow, back of the coach; and as I kept up a good strong fire, the drops of water and occasional pieces of snow which fell into it were not able to extinguish it. The cavern enlarged rapidly, and in a little more than an hour the roof became so thin that while I was outside collecting wood it fell in and extinguished the fire. This accident, however, interrupted my operations but for a short time. I cleared away the snow at the bottom of the excavation, and rebuilt my fire on the bare ground. The high snow walls on three sides of it protected it from the wind, so that there was no danger of the flames being blown against the stage-coach, while the large open space above allowed a free vent for the smoke.

About the middle of the afternoon, to the great delight of us all, it stopped snowing, and when I had freshly shoveled out the path across the road, my companions gladly embraced the opportunity of walking over to the comparatively protected ground under the trees and giving themselves a little exercise. During their absence I was busily engaged in arranging the fire, when I heard a low crunching sound on one side of me, and, turning my head, I saw in the wall of my excavation opposite to the stage-coach and at a distance of four or five feet from the ground an irregular hole in the snow, about a foot in diameter, from which protruded the head of a man. This head was wrapped, with the exception of the face, in a brown woolen comforter. The features were those of a man of about fifty, a little sallow and thin, without beard, whiskers, or mustache, although the cheeks and chin were darkened with a recent growth.

The astounding apparition of this head projecting itself from the snow wall of my cabin utterly paralyzed me, so that I neither moved nor spoke, but remained crouching by the fire, my eyes fixed upon the head. It smiled a little, and then spoke.

"Could you lend me a small iron pot?" it said.

I rose to my feet, almost ready to run away. Was this a dream? Or was it possible that there was a race of beings who inhabited snow-banks?

The face smiled again very pleasantly. "Do not be frightened," it said. "I saw you were startled, and spoke first of a familiar pot in order to reassure you."

"Who, in the name of Heaven, are you?" I gasped.

"I am only a traveler, sir," said the head, "who has met with an accident similar, I imagine, to that which has befallen you. But I cannot further converse with you in this position. Lying thus on my breast in a tunnel of snow will injuriously chill me. Could you conveniently lend me an iron pot?"

I was now convinced that this was an ordinary human being, and my courage and senses returned to me, but my astonishment remained boundless. "Before we talk of pots," I said, "I must know who you are and how you got into that snow-bank."

"I do not believe," said my visitor, "that I can get down, head foremost, to your level. I will therefore retire to my place of refuge, and perhaps we can communicate with each other through this aperture."

"Can I get through to your place of refuge?" I asked.

"Certainly," was the answer. "You are young and active, and the descent will not be so deep on my side. But I will first retire, and will then project towards you this sheep-skin rug, which, if kept under you as you move forward, will protect your breast and arms from direct contact with the snow."

It was difficult to scramble up into the hole, but I succeeded in doing it, and found awaiting me the sheep-skin rug, which, by the aid of an umbrella, the man had pushed towards me for my use. I was in a horizontal tunnel barely large enough for the passage of my body, and about six feet in length. When I had worked my way through this and had put my head out of the other end, I looked into a small wooden shed, into which light entered only through a pane of glass set in a rude door opposite to me. I immediately perceived that the whole place was filled with the odor of spirituous liquors. The man stood awaiting me, and by his assistance I descended to the floor. As I did so I heard something which sounded like a titter, and looking around I saw in a corner a bundle of clothes and traveling-rugs, near the top of which appeared a pair of eyes. Turning again, I could discern in another corner a second bundle, similar to, but somewhat larger than, the other.

"These ladies are traveling with me," said the man, who was now wrapping about him a large cloak, and who appeared to be of a tall though rather slender figure. His manner and voice were those of a gentleman extremely courteous and considerate. "As I am sure you are curious – and this I regard as quite natural, sir – to know why we are here, I will at once proceed to inform you. We started yesterday in a carriage for the railway station, which is, I believe, some miles beyond this point. There were two roads from the last place at which we stopped, and we chose the one which ran along a valley and which we supposed would be the pleasanter of the two. We there engaged a pair of horses which did not prove very serviceable animals, and, at a point about a hundred yards from where we now are, one of them gave out entirely. The driver declared that the only thing to be done was to turn loose the disabled horse, which would be certain, in time, to find his way back to his stable, and for him to proceed on the other animal to the station to which we were going, where he would procure some fresh horses and return as speedily as possible. To this plan we were obliged to consent, as there was no alternative. He told us that if we did not care to remain in the carriage, there was a shed by the side of the road, a little farther on, which was erected for the accommodation of men who are sometimes here in charge of relays of horses. After assuring us that he would not be absent more than three hours, he rode away, and we have not seen him since. Soon after he left us I came up to this shed, and finding it tight and comparatively comfortable, I concluded it would give us relief from our somewhat cramped position in the carriage, and so conducted the ladies here. As night drew on it became very cold, and I determined to make a fire, a proceeding which of course would have been impossible in a vehicle. Fortunately I had with me, at the back of the carriage, a case of California brandy. By the aid of a stone I knocked the top off this case, and brought hither several of the bottles. I found in the shed an old tin pan which I filled with the straw coverings of the bottles, and on this I poured brandy, which, being ignited, produced a fire without smoke, but which, as we gathered around it, gave out considerable heat."

As the speaker thus referred to his fuel, I understood the reason of the strong odor of spirits which filled the shed, and I experienced a certain relief in my mind.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.