

Stables Gordon

Born to Wander: A Boy's Book of Nomadic Adventures



Gordon Stables

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Book One – Chapter One

Grayling House, and the Wildery around it

“It was, I ween, a lovely spot of ground,
Half-prankt with spring with sommer half imbrowned.”

Scene: An old baronial hall, showing grey over the woods near to the banks of a tributary of the silvery Tweed.

It wasn't the month for the Michaelmas daisies, for it was November.

And when the chrysanthemums opened their great eyes, and turned their faces upwards to meet the light, they felt quite put about to see those flowers still in bloom. They would have been angry, but it is not in the nature of our garden, or indeed of our wild flora and hedgerow pets, to be so. For flowers are ever meek, albeit they are lovely, and methinks that meekness and beauty, hand in hand, are inexpressibly charming.

No, the chrysanthemums were not angry, but they could not help saying to each other —

“Why have the Michaelmas daisies not gone to sleep? Is not their time gone by, and is not this our month in which to bloom and beautify the garden landscape?”

Little Effie came trotting round. It was quite early yet. The sun had just got high enough to peep over the almost leafless linden trees. And wherever his beams fell on bush or brake or fern, he melted the hoar-frost, and resolved it into drops of dew, in each of which a miniature rainbow might have been seen. But round at the back of the big stone mansion, where its shadow fell athwart the old-fashioned terraced lawn, the hoar-frost still lay thick and fast.

Out from among the shrubbery somewhere came Effie Lyle. She might, as likely as not, have dropped out of a yew tree for anything any one knew to the contrary.

She stood for a moment looking up at the blue sky, – her own eyes were quite as blue, – her pretty lips half-parted in a smile, and her golden hair somewhat dishevelled, afloat on her shoulders; as fresh and pure as the morning itself she was, the one thing that had been wanting to complete the beauty of the wildery in which she stood.

Effie glanced down at the chrysanthemums with love and admiration, at the pure white ones, and the pink-and-white, and the crimson, and the bright, bright yellow; she gently smoothed their gorgeous petals that looked so like nodding plumes.

“I love you all,” she cried, “and I am going to kiss the Michaelmas daisies!”

But these grew on such long, long stalks – for they had to creep high to meet the sun – that Effie had to stand on tiptoe, and bend down their mauve clusters to her face.

A momentary sadness crept over her, because one of her pet flowers had left a drop of dew on her cheek.

“Why are my darlings crying?” she said. “Oh, I know!” she added, after a second's thought. “Because they soon must die. The wicked frost will kill my pets, and then – oh yes, then, I'll have the chrysanthemums to love.”

An additional ray of sunshine seemed to fall over these flowers when she said this. But a chill crept over the daisies, and their petals began to fold, as fold the wings of insects when night begins to fall.

The gardens around Grayling House were indeed a wildery, yet not a wilderness. It was the pleasure of their owner to let all growing things have a good deal of their own way. For he loved nature even more than art. So in summer time the big lawn that stretched down as far as the quiet river's bank – where the trailing willows kissed the water, and the splendidly bedecked kingfishers darted in and out from sunshine and shade – was carpeted with flowers, buttercups and daisies and nodding plumes of grasses, and clover white and red. Yet the sun had such access to this lawn, despite the bordering trees, that those wild things never grew high, but spread and spread, and intertwined, as if they really loved each other, and would not be parted for the world. A favourite lawn this for bees of every size and colour, and for a thousand strangely-shaped and gaudily-coloured beetles, which on cloudy days were content to climb up and down the grass stems and take exercise as acrobats do, but who, when the sun burst out, opened the little cupboards on their shoulders, where their wings had been carefully stowed away from the wet, unfolded these gauzy appendages, and flew away in search of wild adventures.

There were paths through this wildery that seemed to lead nowhere, and as often as not made pretence of taking you straight back towards the house again, but landed you at last perhaps in a greenwood glade, with broad-leaved sycamores, and elms around, in which blackbirds fluted in spring, thrushes piped, and the chaffinch tried to drown the notes of every other bird with his mad merry melody. And here perhaps was a rockery, with a fountain playing and a streamlet trickling away riverwards, through the greenest of grass. On this rockery dwelt ferns that loved moisture, and creeping saxifrages, with pretty flowerets of deepest crimson, but not a bit bigger than a bee's head.

Had you wished to return from this delightful lonesome glade – and sooner or later you would be sure to wish to go back, notwithstanding its beauty – you would probably have taken a wrong turning, and after a while found yourself in a rose-covered, heather-roofed, rustic summer-house, with a little window opening over the river itself, and seats and lounges inside.

Here, on a summer's day, if possessed of a nice book, you would have found it a pleasure indeed to enjoy a rest. Not that you would have read much, had the book been ever so nice, for as soon as you had got fairly settled, and animated nature around you had got used to your presence, there would have been quite a deal to watch and wonder at. Bright-eyed birds, who had sung in the boughs till their throats were dry, would have come down to slake their thirst and bathe and plash in the sandy-bottomed shallows, scaring the gladsome minnows away into deeper, darker water, where under the weeds lived fate in the shape of a gruesome pike, with terrible teeth and eyes that never closed. Or while you were trying to read, a rabbit or even a hare would come hopping along, and stand up to stare at you. A weasel would sneak past bent on no good. A beautiful squirrel would leap to the ground, and run around on the moss, with his wondrous tail like a train behind him. Bees and beetles would go droning past, or come in by the door, and fly out through the open window, making the great spider that had his web in the corner move his horizontal jaws in hungry expectancy. Meanwhile every now and then a glad fish would leap up and ripple the stream, and the stream itself would keep on chatter-chattering, and telling the nodding, listening trees such a long story in so drowsy a monotone, about where it had been, and where it was going, and what it had seen, that presently you would get listening to the story yourself, and nodding like the trees till the book would drop out of your grasp, and *you* would be at the back of the north wind.

When you wakened at last, you would be unable for a time to tell where you were, till on looking out you saw the trees again, and the green moss, with the squirrel on it still seeming to look for something, and the tall crimson foxgloves smiling at you through the greenery of ferns; then you would remember that you had fallen asleep while trying to read on a summer's day in a cosy, drowsy summer cot by the banks of one of the most lovely streams that roll their waters into the silvery Tweed.

But at the time our story opens autumn, not summer, was reigning in the lovely wildery round Grayling House.

The leaves were nearly all gone off the trees, except from the oaks, those sturdiest children of our soil. Their leaves were withered and yellow, but would remain on for months to come. The oak and the beech are the wisest of all our broad-leaved trees; they put not forth their green leaves till spring sunshine has warmed the air, and long after the powdery snow has begun to fall, and other trees are bare and shivering in the blast, they still are clothed in their weather-stained garments of leaves.

Effie stooped once more to kiss and caress the chrysanthemums, then she hurried away, because she had heard her brother's voice calling, —

“Effie, Effie, Effie!”

“Coming, Leonard – coming – coming – coming!” was Effie's reply, as she ran round through the shrubbery to the terraced lawn behind.

“Come and see me jump from winter into spring,” cried Leonard, making a bound like a young antelope right off the lowest terrace, still white and crisp with frost, to the lawn where the grass was wet with dew, and green.

“Oh, Leonardie, Leonardie!” said Effie, pouting with her rosy lips, “why so cruel as to call me away from my flowers to see you jump?”

“*You* couldn't do it, Effie,” said Leonard, nodding his head.

“Oh, I could! You see now.”

Next moment both were at it, running up and running down, leaping from winter into spring, bounding up from sunshine into shade, and keeping up the merry game till the cheeks of each were as red as roses, and their eyes as bright as drops of dew.

As handsome a boy was Leonard at the age of ten as one could wish to see. Twins the two were, though he was the taller, as became his sex, and I do not think they had been one hour parted since the bells of the village church were set ringing to announce the double birth.

Leonard threw himself down to rest on the frosty grass, and Effie stood laughingly looking down at him.

The boy was a young Scot, and wore that most picturesque of all costumes, the garb of old Gaul, but he was not afraid of getting his bare knees frozen as he lay there. In fact, I do not think that Leonard was afraid of anything.

As I have said the lad was a Scot, there is little need to add that Grayling House and the beautiful river that went wimpling by it were on the *northern* side of the Tweed.

It was very still and quiet all round Grayling House to-day, and the sky was very bright and almost cloudless. There was not wind enough to bend the course of the spiral wreaths of smoke that rose straight up into the frosty air, higher than the dark-roofed pines, before it melted away into a white haze across the woods.

High up yonder among the sturdy arms of the elms were many huge nests, but the rooks were far away foraging in some farmer's field. In the other trees many an old nest was visible that could not have been seen in summer – nests of the chattering magpies, in the moss and lichen-covered larches; nests of the tree-sparrows everywhere high or low, great untidy wisps of weeds, with feathers sticking here and strings hanging there, nests that any other bird except a sparrow would feel ashamed to enter or go near. Then there were nests of the bold, bright-voiced cheery chaffinch close to the trunk of beech or elm, little gems of nests tricked out with lichens white and red, and looking all over like shapely bits of coral; and nests of the missel-thrush, so sturdily fixed between the tree forks that storm or tempest could not blow them down.

“I say, Effie,” said Leonard, looking up, “the birds are almost too clever for me. I can count dozens of nests now up there that I couldn't find in summer. Wait till spring comes – I'll be wiser then.

“Listen,” he continued, “was that a mole?”

“No,” said his sister, “it was only a sycamore leaf; I saw it falling.”

“Hullo! here comes another, and another, and another.” And off he flew, cap in hand, to catch the leaves as they fell.

He soon tired, however.

“I say, Effet, I don’t call this keeping a holiday. Let’s have some real fun.”

“Shall we go to Castle Beautiful, and read a story to the menagerie?”

“No, not yet. Let us try to hook old Joe.”

Old Joe was a monster pike, who lived in a monster pond or pool, big enough almost to be called a lake, for it covered three acres of ground, and one part of it, right in the centre, was said to be deep enough to bury the village church and steeple. It was down at the bottom of this deep dark hole that Joe lived.

Now it was somewhat funny, but nobody about Grayling House – with one solitary exception, namely, Peter the butler, who had been at the mansion, man and boy, for fifty years – could tell where this monster pike had come from, or when or why he had come.

The facts are these: the loch was fed by springs, and the only outlet for the water was a lead that had to pass over a big mill-wheel, that ground oats and barley for every one in the parish. The pike could not have come over the mill-wheel. Again, he had not been there ten years, and as he weighed, to all appearance, full thirty pounds, he must have been a monster when he got there.

Captain Lyle, Leonard’s and Effie’s father, believed he had scrambled over the grass some dark, dewy night, and taken up his quarters in the loch. This was strange if true, and it might have been, because, at the time the pike first appeared, a tenant of the same kind was missed from a deep tree-shaded pool in the river.

The country people, however, would not share the captain’s belief. There was something uncanny about the beast, they averred, and the less any one had to do with him the better.

He was a very matter-of-fact pike, at all events; for no sooner had he taken possession of his new quarters than he proceeded at once to turn out all the old tenants. Or rather – to speak more to the point – he turned them in, for he ate them. Captain Lyle had, years before the reign of this king-pike, stocked the water with trout, and they had done well, but now none were ever seen.

Sometimes the pike condescended to show himself, or even to take a bait, when some person more daring and less superstitious than his fellows tried to catch him. More than once he had been pulled above the water, but disappeared again, hook and all, with a splash.

When he had swallowed a hook it was Joe’s custom to sulk for a fortnight at the bottom of his pool, and having duly digested the morsel of blue steel, he appeared again livelier and more audacious than ever.

His size was reported to be something enormous by those who had raised him. They said his head was as big as that of Farmer Kemp’s great mastiff-dog.

It was also said that Joe had once upon a time swallowed a sow and a litter of young. This tale was always retailed to strangers who happened to come to the district to fish. It was, in fact, a catch, for Joe really had done this deed; but then the sow was a guinea pig, and the young ones mere hop-o’-my-thumbs.

“Yes, Leonardie,” said Effie, “let us go and try to hook old Joe.”

So while Effie ran to the hall for the fishing tackle, her brother went and dug some great garden worms, and half an hour afterwards they were both in the middle of the lake, with the line sunk, and sitting patiently in the little boat to see whether or not Joe would condescend to bite.

Book One – Chapter Two.

Glen Lyle

“I foraged all over this joy-dotted earth,
To pick its best nosegay of innocent mirth,
Tied up with the bands of its wisdom and worth, —
And lo! its chief treasure,
Its innermost pleasure,
Was always at Home.”

Tupper.

Scene: An old-fashioned parlour in Grayling House. The walls are hung with faded tapestry, the furniture is ancient, and a great fire of logs and peat is burning on the low hearth. In front lies a noble deerhound. At one side, in a high-backed chair, sits a lady still young and beautiful. Some lacework rests on her lap, and she listens to one who sits near her reading – her husband.

Captain Lyle reading —

“Soldier, rest! thy warfare o’er,
Sleep the sleep that knows not breaking;
Dream of battle-fields no more,
Days of danger, nights of waking.

“In our isle’s enchanted hall,
Hands unseen thy couch are strewing,
Fairy strains of music fall,
Every sense in slumber dewing.

“Soldier, rest! thy warfare o’er,
Dream of fighting fields no more;
Sleep the sleep that knows not breaking,
Morn of toil nor night of waking.”

Lyle looked up. There were tears in his wife’s blue eyes.

“Is it not beautiful, Ethel?” he said. “There is the true ring of martial poesy about every line that Walter writes.”

“Yes,” said Ethel, with a sigh, “it is beautiful; but oh, dear Arnold! I wish you were not quite so fond of warlike verses.”

“Ethel, I am a soldier.”

“Yes, poor boy, and must soon go away to the wars again. I cannot bear to think of it, Arnold. When last you were gone, how slowly went the time. The days and weeks and months seemed interminable. I do not wish to think of it. Let us be happy while we may. Put away that book.”

Lyle did as he was told. He took one of his wife’s fair tresses in his hand and kissed it, and looked into her face with a fond smile.

Man and wife – but lovers yet.

“Heigho!” he said, getting up and pulling aside the heavy crimson curtains to look out, “heigho! these partings must come. It must be sad sometimes to be a soldier’s wife.”

"It would be less sad, Arnold, if I could share your wanderings."

"What, Ethel! you, my tender, too fragile wife? Think what you say, child."

She let the work that she had resumed drop once more in her lap, and gazed up at him as he bent over the high-backed chair.

"Why not I as well as others?"

"Our children, dear one. My beautiful Effie and bold Leonard."

"They have your blood and mine in their veins, Arnold. They are wise and they are brave."

Arnold mused for a little.

"And we," he said, "have few friends, and hardly a relative living."

"All the more reason, Arnold, I should be near you, that we should be near each other. No, dear, I have thought of it all, planned it all; and if your colonel will but permit Captain Lyle's wife to be among the chosen few who accompany their gallant husbands to the seat of war, I shall rejoice, and you may believe me when I say our children shall not be unhappy."

Captain Lyle put his arm around her, and drew her closer towards him.

"I never refused any request you made, Ethel, and if the colonel, as you say, will but permit, I will not refuse you this."

"Oh, thank you, Arnold! thank your kind and good unselfish heart. You have indeed taken a load off mine. I feel happy now, I feel younger, Arnold; for truly I was beginning to grow old."

She laughed a half-hysterical laugh of joy.

"You may read to me now," she added, re-seating herself in the high-backed chair, "and it can be all about war if you like."

He took up the book and commenced at random —

"'Tis merry, 'tis merry, in Fairyland,
When fairy birds are singing,
When the court doth ride by their monarch's side,
With bit and bridle ringing.
And gaily shines the Fairyland."

Captain Lyle got no further just then. Hurried steps were heard in the hall, the door was thrown unceremoniously open, and in rushed old Peter the butler, pale as death, and wringing his shining hands.

"Augh!" he gasped, clutching at the wall, "they've done it noo! They've done it noo! Oh that I should hae lived to see this day o' wreck and ruin to the old hoose o' Lyle. Ochone! ochone! o-chrie!"

"In the name of goodness, Peter, are you crazy, or is the house on fire? Speak, man!" cried Captain Lyle.

"Hoose on fire? Na, na; it's waur and waur than that. But still there's hope, sir. I have him in a tub, and though he is lying on his side he's gasping yet. Hallo! there they come."

In rushed Effie and Leonard, bright-eyed and rosy with joy and excitement.

Effie ran to her father's arms.

Leonard ran to his mother.

"We've caught Joe!" they both cried at once.

"I hooked him," cried Effie.

"I hauled him up," cried Leonard.

"And we both hauled him out."

"Dool¹ on the day for the hoose o' Glen Lyle," exclaimed Peter, rolling his eyes.

"Come, father, come. Peter put him in a tub."

¹ Dool, *Scottie*— Grief or sorrow.

Captain Lyle followed Effie. There, sure enough, in the tub of water lay Joe, the monarch of the loch. Peter pointed to the animal's tail.

"How strange!" said Captain Lyle, as well he might, for a huge gold ring ran through the last vertebrae, and attached to this a plate, with the letters L.L., and the date 17 – plainly visible.

A few minutes afterwards Joe seemed to recover all of a sudden, and began tearing round and round the tub, his huge jaws snapping and his eyes glaring like a demon's.

Every one started back astonished, but old Peter's antics were a sight to see.

He seized a big wooden lid and clapped it over the tub, and set himself on top thereof. Then he addressed himself to the cook —

"Run, ye auld roodas," he roared; "run to the kitchen, and fetch the biggest kettle-pot ye can lay yer claws on!"

The pot was duly fetched, and clapped upside down on top of the lid on the tub.

Then Peter flung his cap to the roof of the hall, and shouted, "Saved, saved! The auld hoose is saved yet."

Now after that Captain Lyle drew old Peter aside. What the old man communicated to his young master the reader may learn in good time; but certain it is, that in less than half an hour Joe found himself back once more in his old quarters, not very much the worse for his singular adventure, and that within a week a high wooden palisade was placed all round the lake, with only one gate, and that padlocked. Leonard wondered, and so did his gentle sister. They looked at each other in silence at first, then Effie shook a serious little head, and said solemnly, —

"We mustn't touch papa's pike any more."

"No," replied Leonard, thoughtfully, "Joe *is* papa's pike, and he mustn't be touched."

Leonard and Effie were the only children of their parents, who loved them very much indeed. Captain Lyle was proud of his boy, and, I fear, made almost too much of a pet of his girl Effie. He indulged them both to their hearts' content, when they had done their duty for the day – that is, when they had both returned from the village school, for in those good old days in Scotland the upper classes were not above sending their boys and girls to the parish schools; there were of course no paupers went there, only the sons and daughters of farmers and tradespeople – when duty was over, then, Captain Lyle encouraged his children to play. Indeed, he seemed more like a big boy – a brother, for instance – than a father. He was always planning out new measures of enjoyment, and one of the best of these was what Leonard called *The Miniature Menagerie*.

I do most sincerely believe that the planning and building of this delightful little fairy palace saved the life of Captain Lyle. He had been invalided home in the month of January 1810 – about ten months before the opening scene of our tale – and it was judged that a year and a half at least must elapse before he would be again fit for service. War-worn and weary though he was, having served nearly a dozen years, he soon began, with returning health, to pine for activity, when the happy thought struck him to build a palace for his children's pets.

He communicated his ideas to Leonard and Effie, and they were delighted.

"Of course," said Leonard, "we must assist."

"Assuredly you must," said Captain Lyle; "the pie would be no pie at all unless you had a finger in it."

The first thing that the head of the house of Glen Lyle had done was to sit down in his study one evening after dinner, with the great oil lamp swinging in front of him, a huge bottle of ink, and a dozen pens and pencils lying on the table, to say nothing of a whole regiment of mathematical instruments that had been all through the French war, compasses, rules, squares, triangles, semi-circles, and what not.

The second thing that Captain Lyle had done was, with a pencil, to fill a big page of paper with all kinds of droll faces and figures.

Little Effie climbed up behind his chair before long and had a peep over his shoulder.

“Oh, papa dear!” she cried, “that is not making a menagerie.”

“I know it isn’t, Effie. I think my thoughts had gone a wool-gathering.”

“Well,” said Effie, considering, “we may want some wool for nests and things; but don’t you think, papa, that we should build the house first, and look for the wool afterwards?”

“Oh!” cried Leonard, “don’t worry about the wool. Captain Lyle, your son Leonard, who stands before you, knows where to find lots of it. For whenever a sheep runs through a hedge – and they’re always, running through hedges, you know – they leave a tuft of wool on every thorn.”

“Well, my son, we’ll leave the wool out of the question for the present.” Then he walked about smiling to himself for a time and thinking, while the boy and girl amused themselves turning over the leaves of an old-fashioned picture-book.

“Hush!” said Effie several times when Leonard laughed too loud. “Hush! for I’m sure papa is deep in thought.”

“I have it!” cried papa.

And down he sat.

Words, and figures, and little morsels of sketches came very fast now, the secret of his present success being that he did not try to force himself to think, and my readers will find that our best thoughts come to us when we do not try to worry after them.

Yes, Captain Lyle’s ideas were flowing now, so quickly that he had to jot them down, or sketch them down here and there all over a great sheet of paper, and in about an hour’s time the rush of thought had, in a measure, expended itself. He leant back in his chair, and gave a sigh of relief.

Once more Effie came stealing up on tiptoe and peeped over his shoulder.

“Oh, what a scrawl!” she cried.

“My dear Eff,” said her father, “that is only the crude material.”

“Leonardie,” cried Effie, “come and see the rude material.”

“Well, it does seem rude enough material,” said Leonard.

“Yes,” said Effie, “but I’m sure my clever papa will make something out of it before he has done.”

Book One – Chapter Three

Castle Beautiful

“The poet may tread earth sadly,
Yet is he dreamland’s king;
And the fays, at his bidding, gladly
Visions of beauty bring.”

Mortimer Collins.

Scene: A green hill or knoll rising with a gentle sweep from the woods near Grayling House, on one side gigantic elm trees, with rooks busy nest-making. On the other, at the rock foot, the dark deep loch. Behind the hill, as far as the eye can see, a forest dotted with spring-green larches and dark waving pines; blue mountains beyond, and a bright sun shining down on all from a sky of cloudless blue.

It is early morning, but those rooks have been at it long before the beams of the rising sun capped the hills with crimson. There are many other voices in the woods; indeed, every tree is alive with song, but you would have to walk a long distance into the forest before you could listen with pleasure to either the merle or the mavis, so loud-voiced are those rooks with their everlasting but senseless song of “Caw – caw – caw.”

But listen! – if indeed it be possible to listen to anything – there is evidently a merry party coming towards the mound here, from the direction of Grayling House.

There is a manly voice singing, and there is the merry laughter of children, with every now and then the sharp ringing bark of a collie, or the deeper bay of a hound in the woods.

And now they burst into view. At the head of the procession, hatchet in hand, marches Captain Lyle himself, flanked on the right by Leonard, on the left by Effie. Behind them come men carrying baskets of tools and spades and shovels, and bringing up the rear, and limping somewhat, is old Peter himself.

What are they all doing here? Why, they are going to complete the building of the Miniature Menagerie. And if you now look behind you, and to the top of the little green hill, you will notice rising therefrom a structure of such fairy-like dimensions, but of such grace and beauty withal, that no one could have been blamed for mistaking it for the palace of some elfin king.

Externally, and seen from a distance, it looked already complete, but a closer inspection showed that the rooms were all unfurnished as yet, and the place void of tenants.

There was much to do, but there was a merry, busy crew to do it, and what with shouting and what with talking and singing, I must say that if the din at the building of the Tower of Babel was anything in comparison to this, it must have been very great indeed.

I do not know that Effie did much to assist – assist the work, I mean, for she *did* add to the din most considerably – but Leonard proved an able lieutenant in running here and there, conveying his father’s commands, and seeing that they were executed promptly.

Well, everybody worked, and worked, and *worked*, and not on this particular day only, but for many days, for it happened to be a school holiday, and so, by-and-bye, everything was completed, even to the satisfaction of Captain Lyle himself, who, being a soldier, was very particular indeed.

And after everything was done and finished, and the trees and flowers in the grounds that surrounded Castle Beautiful had nothing to do but to grow, then the animals and pets were taken to this beautiful home, and duly installed therein.

And old Peter the butler, whose labours at the house itself were really not worth speaking about, he being kept as a kind of human heirloom and nothing else, was appointed custodian of the castle. For Peter, being so very old, and having been always in the country, in the woods and in the wilds, since the days of his boyhood, not only knew a deal about every kind of animal, but was also fond of all things living. It had often been remarked of Peter by the other servants that he would, if in ever so great a hurry, step on one side rather than trample a garden worm on the footpath.

“Hae!” he would say sometimes when he found one of these on the gravel, “whaur are gaun ye crawling ferlie? Whaur are ye hurryin’ to sae fast? I’ll put you out of harm’s way at the risk o’ even displeasing ye.” Then he would lift it, and gently deposit it on the grass.

On a shelf in one of the rooms lay a note-book, and in this book Captain Lyle had written – so plainly that even Peter could see to read it without those immense spectacles he used to wear when droning over the Good Book of an evening to the servants – all that it was necessary to know about the feeding and comfort of the poor wee animals who lived in Castle Beautiful. And Leonard and Effie, being Scotch, had learned to read very early, and soon could tell by heart everything in the book.

Leonard had a very high sense of what duty meant, and even Effie knew that if we keep animals to minister to our pleasure, we ought to do our best to make them as happy as the summer’s day is long.

Well, let us take a glance at Castle Beautiful and the Menagerie three months after that busy, bright spring morning I have just described. Leonard and Effie come with us to answer questions and explain things in general, and old Peter goes hobbling on in front, in a great hurry, though with little speed, to open the gates for us.

The palisade that surrounds the hill there is quite a rustic one, and so is the gate that opens through it. Even the bark has been left on the branches that compose it.

Once through this gate – and mind you, old Peter takes good care to lock it behind him – we find ourselves in quite a little shrubbery, though laid down with exquisite taste and without any overcrowding. And upwards, through the grass and miniature trees, the path goes winding and zig-zag-zagging till it lands us on the flat roof of the hill, in front of the little palace.

We observe that the gravel on the path, and all round the palace, as we may well call it, is as white as snow. It is a mixture of shells and sea sand, brought all the way from the beach at the mouth of the Tweed, and being so white, it looks in charming contrast to the greenery of trees and grass.

But what strikes a grown-up person most here, is that everything about him is in miniature, dwarfed, as it were; the very bushes and shrubs have the appearance of being old, and yet they are excessively small. Here, for example, is a little forest of pine trees and larches which, as far as shape goes, might be a hundred years old, and here again is a thicket of spruce, so ancient looking, yet so tiny, that if pigeons flew about in it no bigger than humble-bees, we would not be a bit astonished, and if, flitting from bough to bough of these dwarfed elms and oaks, we saw thrushes and blackbirds not a whit larger than blue-bottle flies, we should not raise our brows in wonder.

Again, when we look around us at the tiny rockeries and flower beds and the Liliputian fountains, and then glance at the fairy-like palace itself, why, we – that is, we grown-up folks – begin to think we are giants and ogres, or that all we see around us is due to some kind of enchantment. If a regiment of real fairies came trooping out of the miniature palace, we would not be rude enough to look as if there were anything particularly strange in the matter.

But behold, Peter, who does look tall amid such surroundings, opens the hall door of the Castle, and out step Don Caesar de Bazan and the Hon. Lady Purr-a-meow.

Don Caesar shakes hands with everybody all round, and her ladyship does the same. The Don is a poodle with his hair cut in the most fantastic Frenchified fashion, and her Ladyship is a cat of the tabby persuasion, who condescends to accept bed and board at Castle Beautiful. Don Caesar and Lady Purr-a-meow go off for a scamper round the hill and through the miniature woods, and Peter, preceded by Leonard and Effie, enters the porch, and we follow, feeling all the while as big as giants.

The verandah is just under the tower where the pigeons dwell, and a couple of tame jackdaws have built a nest and brought out young.

And the very first or ante-room we reach is the private apartment of Don Caesar and Lady Purr-a-meow. I really ought to have put Lady P. before Don C. in that last sentence of mine, for she alone rules king and priest in this charming little room.

Of course Don Caesar has a couch in one corner, in which he is graciously permitted to sleep at night, or enjoy a siesta during the day. Lady Purr-a-meow does not object to that, and she even allows him to have his meals here so long as he behaves himself. She does not object either to have a game at romps with Don Caesar when *she* has a mind to; I emphasise the *she* because it makes all the difference in the world if Don Caesar himself proposes the game. She whacks him at once, and sends him to bed, and she knows exactly all his tender points, and where a claw hurts most, on his nose, for example, or on his closely-shaven loins. She whacks him if he goes too near her dish, she whacks him if he barks, and sometimes whacks him because he doesn't. She whacks him if he comes too near to the window, and whacks him if he stops too far away from it. She whacks him sometimes for looking at her. If he doesn't look at her she says he is sulky, and whacks him for that; she whacks him for fun and for exercise, and to show her authority, so that, upon the whole, Don Caesar de Bazan gets a good deal more whacking than he deserves.

In this room is Leonard's and Effie's library of old-fashioned picture-books, and many toys, and a little couch near the nicely-curtained window, on which it is delightful to recline on a lovely summer evening and read while dreamy, old-fashioned music is being played by a huge musical box that stands on a table, and while a breeze, laden with the odours of the woods and the wild flowers, is stealing in at the open window, and toying with the crimson curtains.

This window opens right on the lawn, that is, on the back lawn, and here a strange sight may be seen – namely, half a score of snow-white, smutty-nosed, garnet-eyed Himalayan rabbits, brought home first by a sailor uncle, and the same number of daft-looking little piebald guinea pigs. These have houses outside, and a monstrous owl called Tom is watching them half asleep from his cage near a window, and thinking how nice one or two of them would be to eat.

But we re-enter the ante-room through the casement window, and pass on into a kind of hall lighted from the roof.

In this place there are so many pets of different kinds that it is impossible to know which to admire or wonder at first. This hall communicates with another room with a larger window, which looks over the precipice right down into the lake, where lives Joe the monster pike, and the inmates of both rooms are free to scamper or fly – for here we have both fur and feathers – from one to the other.

In these rooms are perches and cages and pens, and shelves and nests and comfortable cosy corners of every description, and all kinds of seed and food dishes, and abundance of water and an allowance of milk; and everything – thanks to the little owners, and to worthy old Peter – is as clean and sweet as though nothing dwelt in the rooms. This is the home *par excellence* of the happy family. The secret is, that every creature must be young when placed therein, so that they soon come to know that though they may play together, they must study each other's feelings, and neither hurt each other nor be rude to one another.

Right in the centre of the square room is a fountain playing, the spray falling down upon a charming little rockery in the middle of a stone basin. The fountain can be turned on at the will of the owner, and whenever it plays the birds take advantage of it, and fly across and across through the spray, and so enjoy a shower bath. But the white rats do not care for a bath, and when the birds, thoroughly wet and thoroughly tired of the sport, sit down on a perch to preen their draggled feathers, the cosy white rats in their garments of ermine look up at them with crimson eyes, in which dwells a kind of pity, and seem to say, "We really wouldn't be you for all the world."

What other pets are there in this happy family, did you ask? Well, there are pet pigmy pigeons, and pet kittens, a tame duck, who is greatly bullied, a sea-gull who talks like a Christian, half-a-dozen

starlings, who inquire into everything, and a jackdaw who is never out of mischief, and whom Effie has serious thoughts of sending into exile.

As soon as Leonard and she appear they are surrounded, and the din is for a time indescribable. The dwarf or pigmy pigeons hover round them and alight on their shoulders and hands; the kittens chase the rats, who squeak, and pretend to be terribly afraid; the sea-gull struts about crying, "Oh! you pretty, pretty, pretties;" the jackdaw whistles "Duncan Grey;" all the starlings start singing at once; and the idiotic duck can't think of anything better to do than stand flapping his wings in a corner and crying, "What, what, what, what!"

We tear ourselves away from this happy family at last, and make tracks for the bird rooms, or aviaries. One room is devoted to British, the other to foreign birds, all nicely assorted and sized, so that they live in the utmost unison. There are soft-billed birds and hard-billed birds, so there are both seeds and mash to suit their palates. Here again we have fountains, one in each aviary, and these, when playing, are a source of never-ending delight.

When the sun is shining upon the foreign aviary, what a sight it is to see those birds, in all their brilliancy of colour and beauty, flitting from bough to bough in their bonnie home; but if you want music you must enter the adjoining room, where the birds of Britain dwell. Gaudy their plumage may not be but, oh! their voices are very sweet.

All round both these rooms grow trailing plants, that hang over the aviaries like great green plumes, and when night falls and the Chinese lanterns are lit, and the fountains all playing, the whole place is indeed like a fairy palace.

But it is summer on the occasion of this visit of ours, the grass is green, and flowers are everywhere out of doors, in beds and rockeries, peeping through the moss, hiding under trees, and covering every porch and verandah with masses of foliage and lovely flowers.

Book One – Chapter Four

Gipsy Life

“Calmly the happy days flew on,
Unnumbered in their flight.”

Anon.

“Moon the shroud shall lap thee fast,
And the sleep be on thee cast,
That shall ne’er know waking.
Haste thee, haste thee to be gone!
Earth flits fast, and time draws on —
Gasp thy gasp, and groan thy groan,
Day is near the breaking.”

Scott: “The Dying Gipsy’s Dirge.”

Scene: The ante-room of the fairy palace, Effie reading, Leonard listening. Don Caesar de Bazan and Lady Purr-a-Meow all attention.

Man never *is* but always to be blest. The delightful and happy life our Leonard and Effie had lived all the long sweet summer through could surely – one would think – have left nothing to be desired.

Both were little naturalists in their way, though they did not know it; both were poets also, though they wrote no verses, for their hearts were attuned to the music of the wild woods, the song of birds, the rippling laughter of the rill, the whisper of the low wind through the trees, or even the dash of the cataract and roar of the storm. No beetle or other insect was there, in all the romantic country through which they passed on their way to and from school, that they did not know all about; every wild flower was a friend; and the little furry denizens of the forest, that dwelt in old tree stumps, or had their cosy nests among the verdant moss or the beds of pine-needles – all knew them, and never fled at their approach.

Curious children both were, for they cared but little for company in their rambles; they were indeed all in all to each other. And even though they knew well that a welcome-home awaited them every day, they made no great hurry, and hardly ever went back from school without a bagful of delicacies for their pets in the fairy palace – green food and seeds for the birds, worms and dead mice or dead birds for the owl, and nuts for all who cared for them.

They ought to have been very happy, and so they were, yet Leonard was continually planning strange adventures.

The kind of books they read had much to do with the formation of the boy’s character, as they have on the minds of all boys. But in those good old times there were fewer writers for the young than we have now, so poetry was more in fashion, and books of travel and weird tales of ghost and goblin, and old, old, strange stories of romance.

Sometimes Effie read while Leonard listened, but just as often it was the other way.

“I tell you what I should like to have,” said Leonard, one day, throwing down his book. “What do you think, Effie?”

“Oh! I could never guess. Perhaps a balloon.”

"N-no," said Leonard, thoughtfully; "some day we might perhaps get a balloon, and fly away in it, and see all those beautiful countries that we read of, but that isn't it. Guess again."

"A large, large eagle, like what Sinbad the Sailor had, to carry us away, and away, and away through the skies and over the clouds and the sea."

"No, you're not right yet. Guess again."

"A real live fairy, who would strike on the black rock where they say all the treasure is buried, and open up a door and take us down into the caves of gold and gems and everything beautiful."

"No," said Leonard. "I see you can't get at it."

"Well, tell me."

"Why, a real gipsy-waggon to wander away in, when summer days are fine, and see strange people and strange places."

"And tell fortunes, Leonie?"

"Well, we might do that, you know."

"Ah! but summer isn't anywhere near yet; the chrysanthemums have only just begun to blow. Then we couldn't go far away, because poor papa and mamma would miss us quite a deal, and who would feed our pets?"

"Why, Peter, to be sure. He does more than half now. And although winter *will* come soon, summer will return, Eff, and the woods grow green again, and the birds begin to sing once more, and the streams be clear as crystal, instead of brown as they now are."

"Well," said Effie, "it is worth thinking about. Would Don do?"

Don was the donkey.

"Yes, I think Don would do first-rate. I'm sure he wouldn't run off."

Effie laughed at this idea.

"Don would do. Don must do," continued Leonard, "and the carpenter would help Peter to build us a cart – no, a van, with a canvas roof. It would be no end of good fun. And really, Eff, I'm so full of the notion that I must run right away and tell father."

Leonard burst into the room where Captain Lyle was writing.

"Father," he said, "what can I do for you?"

"Nothing at present. Oh! yes, you can though."

"Well, I'll do it."

"Leave me alone."

Leonard's face fell, and his father began to laugh.

"Father," said Leonard, "when I grow a great big big man, and you are old, old, and white-haired, and crawling about on crutches like Admiral Boffin, with perhaps a wooden leg and a hook for an arm –"

"Thank you for the prospect," said Captain Lyle.

"How can you imagine such things?" said his mother, much amused.

"Oh! because I wish him to be just like that."

"Indeed, sir, why?"

"Why, to give me the chance to be so good to him, you know, because he is so good to me."

"Well, now," Captain Lyle said, "let us come to the point. I don't admire the prospect of crutches, hook arm, and a wooden leg, and I hope you're not a true prophet, but you've got some new scheme in your noddle, and you've come to ask a favour. Anything in reason, Leonie. Sit down, lad."

Then the boy took a seat and unfolded his plans, and coaxed, and teased, and what not, till he had gained his father's consent, and then off back to Castle Beautiful he went. As he scrambled over the fence Effie knew he had succeeded, because he was singing, and because he had not troubled to open the gate.

Spring returned. The snow left the woods and the fields; it lingered long in the ditches and by the wayside, and made one last sturdy stand on the hill-tops, but was forced to fly from even there at

last. Then the honeysuckle on the hedgerows unfolded its leaves, the blackthorn itself began to bud, and the larch woods grew green. The dormouse and hedgehog, who had slept through all the wild weather, rolled in leaves at the tree foot, showed their pinched and weary wee faces at their holes, wondering if there was anything yet to eat. The squirrel had eaten his very last nut, and stretched himself on a bough to enjoy the glorious sunshine.

The rook and the mavis, the blackbird and hedge-sparrow had built their nests, and laid their eggs ever so long ago, only the chaffinch and the green linnet were waiting for still warmer weather, and the lark wanted the grass or corn to be just a little higher, while the rose-linnets sang for more leaves to hide their nests from prying eyes.

But the brooklets, bright and clear now, went singing along over their pebbly beds, the river rolled softly on, and the silver sallows and weeping willows bent low over the water, and westerly winds were blowing, and sunshine was everywhere.

Leonard's waggon or caravan was built and ready. It was the lightest thing and the neatest thing ever seen in the shape of a one-horse conveyance, that horse, be it remembered, being a donkey. The little house-upon-wheels had not two but four small wheels, and instead of being built of wood its sides and roof were canvas.

It was a gipsy cart of the neatest description, and Effie as well as Leonard was delighted with it, and as for Don, the donkey, so proud was he when put into the shafts that he wanted to gallop away with it, instead of walking at that slow and solemn pace which respectable thinking donkeys usually affect. But Don was no common ass, I can assure you. He was not called Don as short for donkey. No, but because he had been brought from Spain by Captain Lyle, and there, I may tell you, they have the very best donkeys in the world. Don was very strong and sturdy, and very wise in his day and generation; his colour was silver-grey, with a great brown cross on his shoulders and back, while his ears must have been fully half a yard long. Need I say he was well-kept and cared for, or that he dearly loved his little master and mistress, and was, upon the whole, as quiet and docile as a great sheep?

Well, even while the spring lasted, Leonard and Effie had many a long delightful ramble in their little caravan, and were soon as well known all over the country for miles around as the letter-carrier himself, and that is saying a good deal.

But in the bonnie month of May Captain Lyle, and Mrs Lyle as well, had to make a long, long journey south. In fact, they were going all the way to London, and in those days this was not only a slow journey but a dangerous one as well, for many parts of the road were infested by foot-pads, who cared not whom they killed so long as they succeeded in getting their money and their valuables.

Farewells were spoken with many tears and caresses, and away went the parents at last, and Leonard and Effie were left alone.

When they had fairly gone, poor Effie began to cry again.

"Oh, Leonie!" she said, "the house seems so lonely now, so cold and still, with only the ticking of the dreadful clocks."

But Leonard answered, and said, – "Why, Effie dear, haven't you me? And am I not big enough to protect you? Come along out and see the Menagerie."

It was not half so lonesome here, at least, so they thought. They were high above the woods, and the sun shone very brightly, and all their curious pets seemed doubly amusing to-day, so before long both were laughing as merrily as if they were not orphans for the time being.

Three days passed away, and on the morning of the fourth, when, after breakfast, old Peter the butler came shuffling in, Leonard said, —

"Now, Peter, of course you are aware that I am now master of the house of Glen Lyle?"

Peter bowed and bowed and bowed, but I think he was laughing quietly to himself.

"Very well, Peter; straighten yourself up, please, and listen. Miss Lyle here – "

"That's me," said Effie, in proud defiance of grammar.

“And myself,” continued Leonard, “are going away for a week in our caravan in search of – ahem! the picturesque.”

“Preserve us a’!” cried Peter, turning his eyes heavenwards. “What’ll your parents say if I allow it?”

“We will write to them, Peter. Don’t you worry. We start to-morrow. You will look after the Menagerie till we return. And we will want your assistance to-day to help us to pack.”

“Will naething prevail upo’ ye to stop at hame?” cried Peter, wringing his hands.

“Nothing. I’m master, don’t forget that.” This from Leonard.

“And I’m mistress,” said Effie.

So poor Peter had to give in.

They spent a very busy afternoon, but next morning the caravan was brought to the door, the brass work on Don’s new harness being polished till it looked like gold. Effie sprang lightly in, Ossian, the big deerhound, who stood nearly as high as Don, went capering about, for he was to be one of the party.

Up jumped Leonard. Crack went his whip, and off they all were in a hand-clap.

And poor old Peter fell on his knees and prayed for their safety, till on a turn of the road the woods seemed to swallow them up.

“Now we’re free! It’s glorious, isn’t it, Effie?”

“It’s delightful.”

“Aren’t you glad you’ve come?”

“Yes, aren’t you?”

“Yes. Which way shall we go?”

“Oh, away and away and away, through the forests and fens, through the woods and the wilds, on and on and on.”

“I say,” said Leonard, after a pause, “it would be a good thing to give Don quite a deal of his own way, and if he wants particularly to go along any road, just to let him go.”

“O yes, that will be such fun. I’m so happy, hungry. I feel it coming on now.”

“Well, by-and-bye we’ll dine. Agnes made such a splendid pie; it will last us quite two days.”

At noon they found themselves in a dark pine wood, the bare stems of the trees looking like the pillars supporting the roof of some majestic cavern. Here they stopped and unlimbered, because there was a little stream where Don and the deerhound could drink, besides nice, long, green grass for the donkey.

They had a portion of the pie for dinner, and it was more delicious, they thought, than anything they had ever eaten. So thought Ossian. But of course hunger is sweet sauce.

Then they tied Don to the wheel of the cart, and hand in hand went off to cull wild flowers. They gathered quite a garland, and put this round Don’s neck on their return, then turned him loose again to eat for an hour, while Leonard took a volume from a little book-shelf, and read to Effie a few chapters of a beautiful tale.

But the sun began to decline in the west, so they now put Don to, and off they went once more.

They came to cross roads soon, and as Don evinced a desire to turn to the right, they allowed him to do so.

In the Deep Dark Forest

The sun sank, and set at last, and they hurried on more quickly now, for though they intended to sleep in the caravan, still they wanted to be near a house. But gloaming fell, and the wood grew deeper and darker, so at last Leonard, telling his sister not to be frightened, drew in off the road, so that the caravan was closely hidden among spruce trees.

There was light enough, and no more, to gather grass for Don, who was tied fast to the branch of a tree. Ossian was fastened to the axle so that he might keep guard over all, and Leonard and Effie prepared for bed, determined to get up as soon as it was sunrise.

This being their first night out, and the place being so lonesome and drear, they were afraid to have a light, lest it might attract evil-disposed persons to the caravan, although it was all forest land around them.

They were sitting quietly talking over the events of the day, when suddenly the voices of people chanting a hymn fell on their ears, and made them quake with dread.

“Who can it be?” whispered Effie, clinging to her brother.

“They cannot be bad people,” he said boldly, “singing a hymn; bad people do not sing hymns. I will go and see. I’ll take Ossian with me.”

“And I, too, will go,” cried Effie. So hand in hand, with the faithful dog by their side, and guided by the solemn song that rose on the night air at intervals, they walked slowly onwards through the wood.

All at once, on rounding a spruce thicket, the light of a fire gleamed over their faces and figures. They would have retreated, for they had come to see, not to be seen; but from a group of wild-looking men and women who were gathered round the log fire in this clearing, a little gipsy girl not bigger than Effie sprang up and rushed towards them.

She was bare-footed and bare-legged, and her black eyes sparkled like diamonds in the firelight. Round her head and shoulders she wore a ragged little tartan shawl.

“Walk gently,” she whispered, or rather hissed. “Hush, hush! do not speak. Granny is dying.”

She took Leonard’s half-unwilling hand as she spoke, and led them forward to the light.

There was silence for a little while, for all eyes were turned upon the new-comers.

Gipsies all undoubtedly, and of the very lowest caste, dark, swarthy, ragged, and wild-looking.

Lying with her head in the lap of a tall woman was an aged crone, her face almost as black as a negro’s with age and exposure.

The fire blazed higher, its gleams reaching to the highest pine trees, and lighting up the faces of all around.

It was a strange, a weird scene, almost awful in its impressiveness. Once again the voices rose and swelled on the night air. Even bold Leonard felt his heart beat faster, while Effie’s hand trembled in his.

Book One – Chapter Five

Strange Adventures in Wood and Wild

“How sweet it is when mother fancy rocks
The wayward brain, to saunter through a wood;
An old place full of many a lovely brook,
Tall trees, green arbours, and ground flowers in flocks.”

Wordsworth.

Scene: Still in the forest around the log fire, but the dying gipsy has raised herself to nearly a sitting position, her dim and hollow eyes are fixed on Leonard, and she beckons him to her side. As if under a strange spell, the boy obeys, leaving Effie kneeling by Ossian, and clasping his great neck in her terror.

“Fear not,” the gipsy gasps, “I knew – your – father. And his father. Kind, kind to me and mine were both.”

She took Leonard’s little white hand in her dark claws, and opened its palm towards the firelight. “Never – never – will old Nell Bayne read another fortune. But look; that line will lead you far ayont the seas. You are *born to wander*, born to roam over the ocean, by mountain, stream, and plain. Yet list! the water is not made to drown you, nor hemp nor lead to take your life, yet list! again, —

“When dead yon lordly pike shall float,
While loud and hoarse the ravens call,
Then grief and woe shall be thy lot,
Glen Lyle’s house must fall.”

The aged crone dropped the hand she held, and sunk back into the arms of her nurse, while the other gipsies, with scared faces, gathered closer round and knelt beside her.

Neither Leonard nor Effie saw nor heard anything more. They fled away from the firelight out into the darkness of the woods, which they much preferred to the solemn scene they had just witnessed.

They walked in the direction, as they thought, of their caravan, but after a while Ossian, whom Effie held by the collar, stopped short, and then began pulling them in quite another direction. The noble dog knew the road though they did not.

They were soon back now at their house-on-wheels. It was a gloomy night’s experience, but they slept none the less soundly, and when they awoke in the morning Leonard felt as happy as if he were king of Elfinland, and Effie his little queen. The sun was shining in a sky of unusual brightness, and the woods all around were musical with the songs of a thousand joyous birds.

Leonard made a fire of sticks, and boiled his kettle in true gipsy fashion, and after everybody, including Don and Ossian, had enjoyed breakfast, away they went again.

The country soon grew more open, and they were not at all sorry to leave the darksome pine woods. They had nothing whereby to tell the time, except the sun, and this was, in some measure, their guide also as to the direction they were taking, but of course they left a deal to Don.

Sometimes, on coming to cross-roads, Don, as if he was quite aware of the responsibility that lay on his pretty striped shoulders, would stop short and eye all the three roads that lay before him. Ossian would then caper round him and bark, upon which Don would shake his long ears as much as to say, —

“Don’t you be quite so fast, master; I know well enough what I’m about. Catch me going wrong if I can help it.”

Then having made up his mind Don would tramp on again.

Now Don was a wily old donkey, and I’m not sure that in choosing a road he did not consult his own interest much more than that of his little owners. For Effie soon noticed that if one road was hilly and the other level, Don chose the latter. Again, he kept going northwards and east, for he was very partial to a nice fresh green juicy thistle, just sufficiently thorny to tickle his tongue, and the farther north and the nearer the sea he got the fatter and finer the thistles grew.

“But it doesn’t matter, Eff, you know,” Leonard would say, “one road is as good as another.”

Next evening found them bivouacked near a pretty wee country cottage. The good-wife of this humble home made them come in and sit by the fire, and she regaled them on barley scones and butter with delicious milk to wash it down, and made them tell their story over and over again.

Then the children all came round Effie, and she told their fortunes, something good for each of them, and sent them all to bed happy.

The wanderers slept as before, but the good-wife of the cottage was up before them, and had boiled fresh eggs for their breakfast, and made them coffee. And so good was she, that she even packed a little hamper and put it in their caravan, and blessed them and wished them God-speed. And the children gathered round the door, and all of them cheered with might and main as the caravan rolled away from the door.

A Dismal Night

But though the morning was bright and blue and lovely, clouds banked up over the sky soon after noon, and just as they found themselves once more in a pine forest, where also grew great oaks and elms, behold, big drops of rain began to patter down on the dry road, sending up cloudlets of dust, and before they could draw into the shelter of the trees, the storm was on them with all its force.

It was not a still summer storm, for while the thunder pealed and crashed, and the lightning hissed among the falling rain, the wind blew with terrible force, bending the trees like fishing rods, and strewing the road with broken branches.

Nor did the rain cease when the squall blew over, but continued to pour down.

Night came on this evening a full hour before its time, and still the rain rained on.

The bivouac was once more in a wood, and oh! what a fearful night it was – the thunder deafening, the rain looking like streams of fire in the glare of the lightning. But our tired little wanderers fell soundly to sleep amidst it all, and though some drops came through the canvas, and even fell upon their faces, it did not wake them. Only when the birds had been singing for fully two hours they opened their eyes, and wondered where they were now.

The day was very hot and close, and the sun so bright that the roads, much to Don’s joy, soon dried up.

The country through which they were now passing was very grand and wildly picturesque. Hills on hills successively rose on every side around them; they crossed romantic single-arched bridges, over deep ravines, far down at the bottom of which streams went foaming on through a chaos of great dark boulders, which had fallen from the beetling cliffs below, and to which wild flowers clung in patches, with here and there a dwarf pine or silver-stemmed birch.

Slowly, but surely, the roots of these tiny trees were loosening the rocks.

What a lesson this reads one of the virtues of perseverance! For listen to this: the thickness of the rootlets that do the work is no greater than that of a stocking wire, the rate of their growth in length is not a hundredth part of that of the motion of a watch’s hour-hand, the strength they expend in a given second would not be enough to lift or move the tiniest midge or fly that alights upon the page you are reading. But these rootlets have faith, and faith moves mountains. They keep on growing

and creeping into every crevice, and in time, lo and behold! tons of solid rock are detached, a thunder shower perhaps being the last straw to break the camel's back, and down it thunders to the bottom of the ravine, smashing trees and crunching other rocks, till it all reaches the bottom with the force and speed of a little avalanche.

Sometimes they passed over broad open moors, the heather on which was still green, and would be for months to come, but patched all throughout with low flat bushes of golden furze, the scent from which perfumed the air all round, and must have penetrated even to the clouds. The lark, high in air, thrilling out his wild melody, and the rose-breasted wee linnet were the only songsters on these lonely moorlands.

They went very slowly to-day, often stopping to let Don rest, and to cull the wild flowers that grew everywhere in glorious luxuriance.

Little toddling children ran from cottage doors and waved their caps and cheered them, and called them show gipsies, and all sorts of funny names. Sometimes they stopped at these houses to get water for Don and Ossian; then the bairnies came all in a crowd, holding out tiny palms to have their fortunes told.

Effie, in her saucy little straw hat, and her long cloak of crimson, did not look at all unlike a real Romany. She always told good fortunes. The boys were to grow up into bold, brave, good men, and go and fight for their king and country, and come back with hats and plumes on their heads, stars on their manly breasts, spurs on their heels, and great swords jangling at their sides. The girls were to grow up good and kind and truthful, and some were to marry princes, who would come riding for them on white palfreys with scarlet trappings and manes and tails that touched the ground. Some were to marry great warriors, and others would have to be content to wed with honest John Ploughman, or perhaps to marry the miller.

Effie was the house-provider, and often wanted to buy eggs and butter and bread and milk, and she was very much, astonished at the kindness of all these cottagers, for none of them could be prevailed upon to accept any money.

"Bless the dear wee innocent," a woman would say, "so far away from its mammie. I won't have this money."

"Isn't she wise-looking?" another would add.

"Just like a wee witchie."

Thus on and on and on went these amateur gipsies for a whole week, and I do not know really which enjoyed this strange wandering tour the most, Leonard, Effie, Ossian, or Don.

But it was not all humble folks they came across, though nearly all; for the fact is they avoided big houses. Leonard said he wanted to mingle with the people. And so they did; but once, and once only, two ladies came up to them in a wood just as they were harnessing up, and about to start on the afternoon journey.

Effie had made all the outside front of the caravan quite gay with wild flowers, and a great garland of primroses, ivy, and wild hyacinths, and was tying it round Don's neck, when the ladies alighted from their horses, and came to speak to her.

"You are not an ordinary gipsy child, I know," said one. Effie only opened her blue eyes wider, and looked at the lady, who was young and most pleasant to behold.

But Leonard lifted his hat, and replied boldly, —

"We are wanderers, lady."

"How romantic! Is this little Red Riding-Hood? How beautiful she is! How my father would like to see her! Could you ride on my horse, dear, and come to the Hall with me?"

"No, thank you," said Effie. "I would not ride without a habit."

"Quite right, dear," said the other lady, laughing.

"But," said Effie, afraid she had spoken unkindly, "if we come to the Hall, we must all come."

"Delightful! And my brother shall paint you. Is this the wolf?"

“That is Ossian, my father’s deerhound.”

“What a noble fellow! Where does your father live, and what are your names?”

Leonard lifted his hat again. “Pardon me, lady,” he said, “for replying instead of my sister. Father lives in London, at present. My name is Incognitus, and my sister’s name Incognita. My sister has already introduced you to the dog, permit me to introduce you to the donkey. His name is Don.”

The young ladies pouted, and looked half-inclined to be cross, but finally laughed such a pleasant, merry, ringing laugh, that Don pricked up his ears, and joined in with such a terrible lion-like roar, that the very hills rang for a mile around. It was not often that Don did give way to a fit of merriment, but when he did nobody else was able to get in a word until the strength of his lungs was quite exhausted.

He stopped presently, and helped himself to a fresh green thistle that was growing handy.

Meanwhile Ossian jumped up and kissed one of the ladies, as much as to say, —

“Don’t be afraid, Don often makes that row. He is only an ass, you know, but there isn’t a bit of harm in the whole of his body.”

“Come on then, my dears. Why, Lily, this is quite an adventure. What a providence it was that we rode in this direction! I would not have missed such an adventure for anything I can think of.”

Book One – Chapter Six

In a Smuggler's Cave

“But now we go,
See, see we go,
To the deepest caves below.”

Dibdin.

Scene: The interior of a cave on a lonely hillside; a huge fire of wood and peat is burning in a kind of recess hewn from the solid rock. A large cauldron is boiling over it, and the smoke and flames are roaring up the chimney. Wild-looking men, unkempt and unshorn, are eating and drinking on stone benches around the cave. There is a big oil lamp hanging from the roof, and that and the firelight shed a dim uncertain light throughout the cave.

“And so,” said one of the men, who appeared to be captain of this gang of smugglers, “Captain Bland and his fellows have promised to be here to-night.”

“That is what he told me,” said another. “The lugger has been dodging off and on the coast for days, and there is a sloop all ready down at the steps near St. Abb’s waiting to take the stuff off.”

“Well,” said the first speaker, “it is long past midnight, and as dark as pitch. No bothering moon to-night to interfere with the work. We should turn a pretty penny by this cargo. Ha! ha!” he laughed, “you Scotchmen didn’t know how to work the oracle on this hillside till we Saxons crossed the border and showed you. Scotchmen are – ”

Five men sprang to their feet in a moment, and dirks were flashing in the lamplight.

“Hold, you scoundrels, hold!” cried a tall and handsome man in the garb of a sailor, rushing into the cave, and throwing himself, sword in hand, between the belligerents.

“What!” he continued, “quarrelling when we should be busy at work. I came in good time, it seems.”

The Scotchmen sheathed their dirks, but sulkily.

“Right, Captain Bland,” said Rob McLure, “only Long Bill there thought fit to insult us wi’ his Saxon brag. We had the cave afore him, and did weel in it, and we’re independent yet, and fit to clear the English bodies out o’ the country, tho’ we’re but five and they are two to one – ay, and give their bodies to the corbies to pick.”

“Bill,” said Captain Bland, “you began this unseemly squabble; it is for you to apologise.”

“I do so heartily,” said Bill; “I bear no grudge against the Scotch.”

“Nor I, nor I, nor I,” cried half-a-dozen voices. Then hands were shaken all round, and peace restored.

Bland pitched down his cap – long black ringlets floating over his shoulder as he did so – and sank into a seat, as if weary.

“Give me food and drink; the long walk has quite tired me. Your Scottish hills, McLure, are hard on Saxon legs. By the way,” he added, “two of my fellows are outside, and they’ve caught a couple of gipsy creatures; they may or may not be spies. Bring them in, the little ones may be cold and hungry.”

In a minute more Leonard and poor Effie stood trembling before the smuggler chief.

We left them about three days ago in a lovely wood, with the greenery of trees, the song of birds, sunshine, and flowers all around them. They had gone to the Hall, as the young ladies called their home, and had created quite a sensation.

There was such an air of romance about the whole affair that everybody at the great house was charmed with them. Leonard and Effie were the hero and heroine of that evening, at all events, while Ossian made himself quite at home on the hearthrug, very much to the disgust of a beautiful Persian cat, whose place he had coolly usurped.

The young ladies again cross-questioned the little wanderers, in the prettiest and most insinuating way possible, but succeeded in obtaining no further information. But Effie read their fortunes without having her hand crossed with either gold or silver. No prince on gaily-caparisoned palfrey was to come riding to the Hall to beg for the hand of either, nor soldiers with sword and spear and nodding plumes come riding their way. Effie disposed of both in quite a humdrum fashion, which, although it did not please the young ladies, set every one in the room laughing at their expense. Their future spouses would be celebrated rather for negative than positive virtues.

“For neither would be guilty of any great crime,
Such as murder, rebellion, or arson;
One lady would wed with a wealthy old squire,
And the other would marry the parson.”

Leonard and Effie left the Hall that night, and a powdered servant carried a hamper to the caravan. Both insisted on bidding their kindly entertainers good-bye that night, saying it was certain they would be off very early next morning.

And so they were, long before a single wreath of smoke had begun to up-curl from even the kitchen chimneys of the great Hall.

The weather had continued fine, and although the nights were very dark, the wanderers did not mind that a bit, because they could hide their caravan under trees, so that, although they could see no one approaching, no one could see them. In two days' time they bivouacked for the night near the cave in which we now find them prisoners, the faithful dog standing guard by their side.

About sunset they had started off to climb the hill, which was very high. They lost their way coming back, and got belated. Where they had wandered to they never knew. But much to their sorrow they were met and captured by these terrible men, who looked so fierce and ugly that Effie was afraid to let her eyes rest upon them.

Captain Bland asked them many questions, which Leonard answered faithfully and truthfully. Then a consultation was held in a corner of the cave. Captain Bland soon returned.

“Now, young squire,” he said. “We have made up our minds what we are going to do with you.”

“I hope, sir,” said Leonard, boldly, “you will send Effie home, even if you kill me.”

The smuggler smiled.

“We won't have any killing in the matter, but just answer me one question now, for you are too brave a lad to tell a lie. What do you think we are?”

“Why, smugglers, of course,” replied Leonard. “I have often read of such people as you. Those men make whisky in the cave, and you take it away in a ship and sell it.”

“I see you know about all. Yes, I take this whisky away in a ship to France, where they make it into brandy, and then I bring it back and sell it. Well, you've seen so much, and know so much, that I'm going to take you and your sister away in my ship with me.”

“And Ossian?” said Effie, anxiously.

“Well, he can go too. I couldn't make you into brandy,” he continued, laughing, “else I would, but we will turn you into gold.”

“Oh, sir!” said Effie, with round wondering eyes.

“Don't be afraid, little Red Riding-Hood. I'm not going to eat you, and you won't be hurt, and in good time I trust you will be landed once again at your father's house. Now keep your minds easy.

There is a room in there with plenty of skins and plaids, and a lamp burning, where you can sleep soundly and safely till morning.”

“Pray, sir, what about Don and our caravan?”

“I’m going to send one of our brave and gallant fellows back with it to your father’s house.”

“Oh! tell him to haste then, and to be so good to Don,” Effie implored.

“There, there, my little maiden, go to bed, and all will be right.”

The apartment into which this robber captain showed them was well removed from the larger cave. The passage that led to it was so concealed by a door, painted and fashioned so as to resemble the rocks, that no one could have guessed at its existence.

Having bade them good-night, and wished them sound repose and pleasant dreams, Captain Bland left them, and they now began to gaze around them and wonder. Although lofty, it was by no means a very large apartment, but it was furnished in a style of luxuriance that quite astonished our little wanderers. The walls were draped all round with tapestry, the floor covered with thick soft carpets; there were chairs and couches, and a library of books, near which stood a harp, while the light from coloured lamps diffused a soft radiance around. Nor had creature comforts been forgotten, for here, on a little sideboard, stood a joint of meat, a game pasty, and cruets of wine.

“You heard what the robber captain said, didn’t you, Effie? We are quite safe, and I’m hungry. Sit in, Eff, and have some supper. This pasty tastes splendid.”

For a time, however, Effie could not be prevailed upon to eat, but she finally relented so far as to taste a tiny morsel. Then, as eating only wants a beginning, she allowed Leonard to help her freely.

In about half an hour the door of the apartment was opened after a knock, the curtain that hid it was drawn aside, and Captain Bland himself came in.

“Ha!” he said, “I’m glad to see you enjoying yourselves. I’m going away.”

Effie’s face fell, and he noticed it.

“Not for long, my little Red Riding-Hood,” he said, kindly. “I’ll be back early in the morning. I only came to tell you that if you want anything, you are to go to the door at the other end of the passage, and knock. Don’t be afraid. You are quite safe. Good-night, again.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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