

Stables Gordon

Wild Adventures in Wild Places



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Chapter One

Part I – The Moors and Fens of England In the Depths of the Forest – Frank and his Toad – A Day with the Hounds – The Furies’ Leap – “That Fox was my Fate.”

There is no doubt at all that when young Frank Willoughby brought out his book with him, and seated himself on the trunk of the old fallen tree, he meant to read it; but this intention had soon been abandoned, and, at the moment our tale commences, the book lay on the grass at his feet, and Frank was dreaming. He was not asleep, not a bit of it; his eyes were as wide open as yours or mine are at this moment; but there was a far-away look in them, and you could tell by the cloud that seemed to hang on his lowered brow that his thoughts were none of the pleasantest. He was not alone, at least not quite, for, not a yard away from his feet, there sat gazing up into his face – why, what do you think? A great toad! Do not start; men in solitude have taken up with stranger companions than this. And Frank was solitary, or at least he conceived himself to be so; and day after day he left his home on the borders of the great forest of Epping, and wandered down here into the depths of the wood, and seated himself idly on that log as we see him now. The toad had come to know him, and he to know the toad. He even brought crumbs for him, which the batrachian never failed to discuss, and seemed to enjoy. So the two took a kindly interest in each other’s welfare.

On this particular forenoon the summer sun was very bright; it shimmered down through the trees like a shower of gold, it glittered on the grass-stems, it brightened the petals of the wild flowers, and burnished the backs of myriads of beetles, as they opened their cloaks and tried to fly in it. No wonder that on this glorious morning the birds sang in every tree, and that the happy hum of insect life was everywhere around.

“Well, old gentleman,” said Frank at last, addressing the toad, “you are like myself, I think; you are not over happy.”

“Pooh!” the toad seemed to reply. “I’m enjoying the sunshine and the free, fresh air, ain’t I? My house isn’t many yards round the corner. I’m a jolly old bachelor, that’s what I am, and there’s no life like it. No, I’m not unhappy, if you are. Pooh!”

“Heigho!” sighed Frank.

But list! There is some one singing, some one hidden at present by the trees, but evidently coming nearer and nearer to where Frank is sitting – a rich, mellow, manly voice; and the song comes directly from the heart, that you can easily tell, and from a gladsome heart, too, and one in unison with the freshness and brightness to be seen on every hand —

“I wish I were as I have been,
Hunting the hart in forests green.
With bended bow and bloodhound free;
For that’s the life that’s meet for me.”

Next moment, brushing the boughs aside, a tall, handsome young man of some five-and-twenty years appeared upon the scene. Brown he was as to beard and whiskers, bronzed as to cheeks and brow, and clear in eye as a little child.

“Why, Chisholm!” cried Frank, starting up and grasping his friend’s extended hand.

“Why, Frank!” cried Chisholm, “you terrible old recluse; and so I have found you at last, have I? Fairly ferreted you out. Sit down, old man, and give an account of yourself.”

“Well, you see,” said Willoughby, “I – I want to go up for my degree, and I – the fact is I’ve been reading.”

“Ha, ha, ha!” roared Chisholm, laughing till the forest rang again. “Been reading, have you?” As he spoke he kicked the book that lay on the grass. “Been reading Byron – ha, ha, ha! I do believe the boy’s in love.”

Young Frank turned red all over.

“Why, how do you know?” he said, “and how did you find me out, here in the forest? Chisholm, you’re a wizard, or something worse.”

“Been to your father’s house, dear boy,” replied Chisholm, explaining. “Splendid fellow, your father, by the way. Enjoyed some rare sport and fun – but missed you sadly, you may be sure; but your father told me everything. ‘My young rascal,’ – these are his very words, Frank – ‘my young rascal,’ he said, ‘has fallen in love, and wants to marry right away; of course I couldn’t give my consent, because he is only a boy, you know, so he went into a pet, and has taken lodgings somewhere on the borders of Epping Forest, under the pretence of reading.’ And that, Frank, was the only clue to your whereabouts that I could get; but you see I’ve found you, my boy. And now tell me all about it.”

“A most modest request, I do declare,” said Frank, with a smile; “but never mind, I never did have a secret from you, and it may do me good to unburden my mind.”

“That it will,” said Chisholm; “but before you begin just pitch Byron at that ugly toad there, will you?”

“That I certainly won’t; he has been my only companion for weeks.”

“Well, well, well,” said Chisholm, “buried in the depths of Epping Forest, his only companion a toad, the once gay and jolly Frank Willoughby. Why you must be *deeply* in love.”

“I am, and that is a fact, and if you only saw the object of my affections, I do not think you would wonder much. She is – ”

“Now Frank, dear boy,” Chisholm said, “I must apologise for interrupting you; but pray do not begin to dilate on the charms of your fair enslaver. I know she must be everything that is good and beautiful, else she never could have captivated you. Just tell me how it happened, and where it happened.”

“It happened down in Wales,” replied Frank, “that is *where* it happened; but the day, Chisholm, that was big with my fate, was a day with the hounds. You know how fond I am of hunting, don’t you?”

“I know,” said Chisholm, laughing, “that there used not to be a better man than yourself, Frank, in the field; that you crossed the very stiffest country at the very heels of the hounds, and though you often said you didn’t like to see a poor fox broken up, you managed, nevertheless, to be always in at the death. That is what you *used* to be, my boy. What you are now may be quite another thing, since a lady has come to be woven up in the web of your history. Remember the story of Hercules, Frank.”

“Oh! bother Hercules,” cried Frank impatiently; “pray let me get on with my own story.”

“Heave round then,” said Chisholm.

“Well, then, when I arrived this year, early in spring, back from my little trip to Malta, I brought with me a letter of introduction to General Lyell, of Penmawr Castle, in Brecknockshire. He keeps a nice little pack of smallish foxhounds – oh! such rare ones for a run – they can puzzle out the coldest scent, and when they find, they follow in such beautiful form, that it seems to me you could cover the pack with the mainsail of my father’s yacht.”

“Go on,” cried Chisholm, “you’re warming to your subject; there’s life in you yet.”

“You may be sure,” continued Frank, “that I did not take long to forward my letter, and in due course an invitation followed. ‘Hounds meet at the Three Cross Roads,’ ran the epistle, ‘on Tuesday, the 9th. Come and spend the Easter holidays with us, and take us as you find us.’ There were three clear days before the 9th, but my impatience would not let me wait. I sent Bob, my man, down with my mare the next morning, and followed on the same evening. My man had chosen the best inn in the village, for I meant to meet the general for the first time with the hounds, and show him what sort of metal my mare and I were made of.

“Next morning, to my sorrow, the ground was hard with frost, the sky clear and blue, and the wind blowing high from the east. The day after there was no improvement, and my heart sank to zero; but my spirits rose that day, because down went the glass, and the wind veered round to about a south and by west. The sunset was a gorgeous one, and long after the god of day had sunk behind the hills, crimson clouds lying along in a sky of palest, purest yellow, shading off into the blue dome above, where bright stars shone, gave token of a beautiful to-morrow. I was up betimes, you may be certain, and found to my joy that a little rain had fallen. I ate a huntsman’s breakfast, and then dressed. I donned a new coat of scarlet – in fact, it was so new that I felt ashamed of it, and had half a mind to make Bob splash it a bit with mud. It was well splashed before night, I can tell you.

“The meet wasn’t a large one, but men and hounds and horses all looked as if they had plenty of go in them, and they required it too. The country is a rough, rolling one, and there is no want of stone fences; so you need pith and pluck if you’d keep the hounds in view.

“Not knowing any one, I kept aloof for a time until they drew a cover or two, until the mellow music of the hounds, mingling with the cheering notes of the huntsman’s horn, told me they had found, and that the run had commenced. Across country, straight almost as the crow could fly, for ten miles, that old fox led us. Then he changed course near a plantation, and took us five miles in another direction. Then, doubling round, he took us almost straight away back, so that the stragglers once more had a chance of joining the hunt. But the terribly rough state of the country told on all but the best of us, and if we were few in number to start, we were still less numerous when the fox finally took to earth and refused to show again. A fine old gentlemanly fox, I can assure you, who had apparently enjoyed the run as much as any of us, and having done so, bade us good-morning and retired.

“I had made acquaintance with the general, and we were laughing and talking together when he suddenly started and turned pale.

“‘Great heavens!’ he cried, ‘it is Eenie, my daughter. Black Bess, her mare, has bolted with her, and is heading straight for the Furies’ Leap. She is lost! she is lost!’

“I hardly heard the last word. I had struck the spurs into my own good mare, and was off like a meteor. I could see the lady’s terrible danger. She was heading for an awful precipice. I saw I might intercept her if I crossed her bows, as a sailor would say. It was a ride for life – we near each other, riding swift as arrows. Onward she comes – onwards I dash, and we are barely fifty yards from the Furies’ Leap, when our horses come into collision with fearful force.

“I remember nothing more until I open my eyes and find myself in bed, powerless to move. But a beautiful young girl rose from a seat near the window, and, approaching the bed, gave me to drink, but enjoined me to be still. This was Miss Lyell; she nursed me back to life, and the next few weeks seemed all one happy dream.”

“She loves you?”

“She does, and has promised never to be another’s.”

“And she’ll be yours, Frank, my boy. Come, I’ve news to give you. Neither your father nor her father object, except on the score of your youth and hers, and your inexperience of the world. Now, depend upon it, Frank, what your father advises is best. He wants you to spend your next few years in travelling.”

“And I will,” cried Frank; “I’ll seek adventures and dangers in every part of the globe – among the snows of the north, amidst the jungles of India, in Afric’s bush, and the wild plain-lands of far distant Australia. I care not if I am killed; life without my Eenie is not worth having.”

“Bravo! Frank,” cried Chisholm, jumping up and shaking him by the hand. “I’ll go with you; and my friend, Fred Freeman, will go too. There’s luck in odd numbers. But don’t talk about being killed; it is time that we want to kill, and all the wild beasts we can draw a bead upon.”

Frank left the gloomy forest a happier man than he had entered it. He was laughing right merrily too.

“Bless that dear old fox, though,” he was saying; “may he always be jolly and fat and frolicsome ’mid summer’s sunshine or winter’s snow. That fox was my fate.”

Chapter Two

Frank undergoes the Process of “Hardening Off” – Camp-life on the Banks of the Thames – A Week among Rabbits – “Ware Hare.”

There was something about Fred Freeman which is difficult to describe, but which caused everybody to like him. He had the manners of a high-bred English gentleman, but that did not, of course, constitute the something that made him a favourite, because *bon ton*, manners are happily not rare. However, there's no harm in my trying to describe him to you, because he is one of our three heroes. Fred wasn't much, if any, above the middle height; he had a short dark beard and moustache – they were not black, however. He was very regular in features – handsome, in fact, handsome when he was in his quiet moods, which he very frequently was, and even more so when merry, for then he was simply all sunshine, and it made you laugh to look at him. He was very unobtrusive. He was a capital shot, and a daring hunter and sportsman, but never boasted about his own doings. His constitution was as tough as india-rubber, and as hard as nails. If there be anything wanting in this description, the reader must supply it himself. Anyhow, Fred was a genuine good fellow. He had hitherto travelled a good deal, sport-intent, chiefly on the Continent; but he jumped at the proposal to go round the world on “a big shoot,” as he called it.

Freeman was a bachelor, and said he would always remain so; Chisholm O’Grahame was also a bachelor. Perhaps he was seen to the best advantage when his foot was on his native heath, and a covey of grouse ahead of him. He was one of the so-called “lucky dogs” of this world. On the death of an uncle, he would come into a fine old Highland estate. Meanwhile he had nothing to do, and plenty of time to do it in. After his visit to Frank, he went back to see Frank’s father, who was delighted at the success of his mission.

“Ah,” said he, “I’m so pleased! And so you must take the young dog off, and show him the world. But look here, he’s in your charge, mind you; and if you take my advice, you’ll show him some shooting in England before you go abroad. He’s only a hot-house plant as yet; he wants hardening off.”

Chisholm laughed. “I’ll harden him off,” he said.

And so the hardening-off process commenced at once. Frank was not sorry, after all, to leave the gloom of Epping Forest, and commence a sportsman’s life in earnest. The plan adopted by Chisholm and his friend, Fred, to “break young Frank in, and to harden him off,” was, I think, a good one. They were to travel a good deal in England, be here to-day and away to-morrow, and visit any of the fens or moors or shores where there was the chance of a week or two of good shooting.

That was one part of the plan. The other was that they were, as Fred called it, “to forswear civilisation, and to live in tents;” in other words, to do a deal of camping out, instead of living in hotels or houses of any kind.

“How do you think you will like that kind of thing?” asked Chisholm.

“Oh, I think it will be perfectly delightful,” said Frank, enthusiastically.

“But Frank *is* a bit of a shot, isn’t he?” asked Fred.

“Always during vacation times,” said Frank, speaking for himself. “I used to potter around my father’s property. I have done so ever since I was a boy.”

“Ha! ha!” laughed Chisholm. “Why, you’re only a boy yet.”

“All stuff,” said Frank stoutly. “I’ll be twenty next birthday.”

“Well, well,” said Chisholm; “but tell Fred what you used to shoot.”

“Oh, anything about the farms, you know, bar the song-birds; father thought it cruel to kill them. But there were rats, such lots of rats, and sometimes a hawk or a rabbit, or even a hare. Then there were the wild pigeons – wary beggars they are, too; I used to wait for them under the fir-trees.”

“What, and kill them sitting?” asked Fred.

“Well,” said Frank, “it isn’t sportsman-like, I know; but I could hardly ever get near them else. Then the young rooks were great fun in spring; and mind you, there is many a worse dish to set before a hungry man than rook-pie.”

“I believe you, lad,” said Fred.

“Well, I’ve shot stoats and weasels by the score; and I once shot a polecat, and another day an otter, and another day an owl.”

“Well, well, well,” cried Fred. “What bags you must have made, to be sure! Never mind, you’ve got the makings of a good sportsman in you. Chisholm and I will bring you out, never fear. Did you often go owl-shooting?”

“No,” replied Frank; “I only remember one owl, and I don’t know which of the two of us had the bigger fright – Ponto the pointer, or myself. I had killed nothing that day but one old rook, a few field-mice, and a snake or two, and we were coming home in the dusk, when some great bird flew heavily out of the ivy-covered old tree near the churchyard. ‘Down you come, whatever you are,’ says I; and bang! bang! went both barrels. He flew a goodly way, but finally fell; and off went Ponto, and off went I in search of him. Ponto *was* in a way, I can tell you; he wasn’t pointing half prettily. ‘Hoo! hoo! hoo!’ the owl was screaming. ‘Come a bit nearer, and out come both your eyes.’ ‘I’ll stand here, anyhow,’ Ponto seemed saying, ‘till master comes up.’ Well, Chisholm, when I came up and saw the creature, it looked so like one of the winged images you see on tombstones, that, troth, I thought I’d shot a cherub of some sort.”

“Well done, Frank,” cried Chisholm, laughing. “Now,” he continued, pulling a letter from his pocket, “How will this suit? It is from a farmer friend of mine in Berkshire, a rough and right sort of a fellow. He farms about five hundred acres close to the Thames. He invites us down for a rabbit shoot, shall we go?”

“Oh! by all means,” cried Frank.

“I’m ready,” said Fred quietly.

And that “rabbit shoot” began Frank Willoughby’s sporting adventures. They had a whole week of it, and very much they enjoyed it. Chestnut Farm was a dear old-fashioned, rustic, rumble-tumble of a place, with a rolling country all around it, and the river quietly meandering through its midst. They pitched their tent not far from the river; under canvas they lived and ate and slept. Fred Freeman was a capital cook; he built his fire of wood and hung his kettle-pot gipsy fashion on a tripod, and the curries and stews he used to turn out were quite delightful. The farmer and his wife would fain have had them to live in their hospitable dwelling, but being told that Frank was undergoing the process of hardening off and general tuition in camp and sporting life, the good farmer looked at the young man for a moment or two from top to bottom, just as if he had been a colt.

“Oh!” he said, with a grunt of satisfaction, “bein’ broke, is he? Well, a rare, fine, upstanding one he be. He’ll do.”

But the farmer’s wife sent to the tent every day the freshest of butter and sweetest of creamy milk, with eggs that never had time to get cool, and so, on the whole, they were very well off.

It was deliciously comfortable, so thought Frank, this camping out. His bed was a hammock, and, though there were at first some things he looked upon as drawbacks, he soon got used to them. If a heavy shower came on it made noise enough to waken the seven sleepers, and large drops used to ooze in through the canvas. The gnats’ bites were hard to put up with, but Chisholm comforted him by bidding him “just wait until he went to India and had a touch of the jungle bugs.” Early to bed and early to rise was our heroes’ motto; early to bed to calm and dreamless slumber, such as your dwellers within brick walls never know; early to rise to have a header in the river, and to return to breakfast as

fresh as a jack; early to rise to get the lines and punt clear and ready for a few hours' fishing; early to rise if only to hear the birds singing, to watch the squirrels skipping about aloft among the trees, or to observe the thousand-and-one queer ways of the tiny dwellers by the river side, friends in fur and friends in feather. Why, in one week Frank felt himself growing quite a naturalist.

They had come down to shoot rabbits, but it must not be supposed that this was all the sport they had down by the charming river; for many wild-fowl fell to Frank's gun, and he procured a good many beautiful specimens of birds, which he took the pains to skin and preserve for the purpose of having them stuffed. A good deal of their time was spent in fishing. They did not catch a Thames salmon, it is true, and grayling were not in season; but there were trout and perch and jack in abundance, and one day, greatly to his joy, Frank landed a lordly pike.

"I must tell you this, Mr O'Grahame and gen'l'm'n all," said the farmer to our friends on the very first day of their arrival, "I have an order to kill five hundred to seven hundred rabbits, so there is plenty of sport for you all, and 'specially for the young 'un that's bein' broke; but mind, gen'l'm'n, 'ware hare, that's wot I says, 'ware hare. My man'll go with ye and see it is all right like, and my boys will carry the bags."

"Whatever does he mean by "ware hare"?" asked Frank afterwards.

"Why, that we mustn't shoot a hare on any account," replied Chisholm; "rabbits and nothing but rabbits."

"Gearge," the farmer's man, went with them every day to help to carry the rabbits our sportsmen killed. On the other hand, there were boys in the rear to help Gearge. Besides Gearge and the boys, there were two dogs – a beautiful setter and a pointer, but good useful country dogs – dogs that did not think it beneath their dignity to retrieve as well as set and point. The most curious part of the whole business to young Frank, was the fact that these dogs knew a hare from a rabbit at first sight far better than he did. Well, to a young sportsman, to see a beautiful hare pass within easy shooting distance was a great temptation to fire. Frank had his doubts whether Gearge always knew one from the other, or t'other from which, because, no matter what it was, if Gearge saw only a bit of brown fur flitting from one bush to another, he sang out in stentorian tones, "Ware hare."

So it was "Ware hare" all day long with Gearge. But once Frank did make a mistake, or his gun did, for the latter seemed to rise to his shoulder of its own accord, and next moment a hare was dead.

The pointer brought it and laid it solemnly down at Frank's feet, and looked up into his face.

"See what you've done," he seemed to say; "here is a pretty kettle of fish. What do you think of yourself? and how do you feel?"

And when Gearge came up and saw the result of the accident, his red, round face, which, as a rule, was wreathed in smiles, got long, and his jaw fell, while his eyes seemed wanting to jump out of their sockets.

"Well, I never?" said Gearge, rubbing the palms of his hands nervously in his cow-gown, "and I warned ye sir, too."

"Bag him," said Frank, "and never mind."

"Bag 'im!" cried Gearge, aghast. "Bag *he*, bag a *hare*! No, sir, not if I knows it. Master'd give me the sack myself. We'll leave 'im to the blue-bottles and the beetles; but oh! sir, in future, 'ware hare."

"You seem fond of hare-shooting," said Fred that evening, when Frank told him his adventure, or rather misadventure. "Why, if you had been where I was last winter you would have had hare-shooting to your heart's content."

"Beaters was it you had?" asked Chisholm.

"Yes, we had no dogs; but good sport, mind you – right and left sometimes, and one to each barrel if you only chose to hold straight."

About the third morning, when Gearge came to the tent as usual, his face seemed rounder and redder than ever; his eyes, too, were so wreathed in smile-begotten wrinkles that they had almost disappeared. It was moreover observed that the pockets of his cow-gown were more bulky than usual.

“We’ll have a rare lark to-day,” said Gerge, pulling out first one polecat ferret and then another.

And so they had; for what with working the banks all the morning and shooting the rabbits in the open that succeeded in running the blockade, they had wonderful bags. Though Frank didn’t say much, he was glad to get back to the tent; his feet were swollen, and he could hardly carry his gun. He was certainly “bein’ broke” with a vengeance.

Chapter Three

Frank is thoroughly “Hardened Off” – Deer-stalking in the Highlands – Partridge, Pheasant, and Duck Shooting – “Good-bye” – “None but the Brave deserve the Fair.”

“How does he harden, Fred?” cried Chisholm, bursting all unannounced one morning into the dining-room of a North Wales hotel, where Freeman and young Willoughby were just putting the finishing touches to a glorious breakfast, with boiled eggs and mountain trout. Chisholm had been absent for a whole week. “How does he harden?”

“I think he is getting on famously. He’s curing nicely.”

“I declare,” said Frank, laughing, “you talk of me as if I were a ham or something; and Chisholm asks about me in the same tone of voice he would use if he wanted to know how your meerschaum coloured.”

“Cause we’re interested in you, dear boy,” said Chisholm, feeling Frank’s arm. “But, bless my heart,” he continued, “there is a biceps for you; why, it’s as hard as a hawser! And there’s a sunburnt face for you! Waiter, bring the beef. And what are you doing, boys?”

“Well,” said Fred, “you know we’ve been two months now under canvas, so we thought we would try a week of civilisation. But we’ve had rare sport enough, fishing in river and fishing in lake, and shooting almost whatever we came across – rabbits, leverets, pigeons, plovers, anything.”

“Bad boys,” said Chisholm. “But never mind, we’re off to-morrow.”

“Where away?”

“To the Highlands, the stern Scottish Highlands,” said Chisholm. “I’m promised a week among the deer. You’re hard enough for that now, Frank.”

“What a ubiquitous trio we are, to be sure!” said Fred.

They certainly seemed so, reader; for two days after the foregoing conversation they were dining at a quiet little hotel in Beauley, and by four of the clock next morning they were on their way to the house of Duncan McPhee, the head keeper of the great forest of Cairntree, one of the wildest tracts of country in the wild North. Though termed a forest, it is only partially wooded; for gigantic hills, bare and rugged, tower skywards every here and there from amidst the pine-trees, and there are, too, vast tracts of bare brae or moorland, covered only with heather, the home of the grouse and the ptarmigan. Deer abound in this forest in countless herds; but, saving the houses of the keepers, you might journey for days in all directions without seeing the smoke from a single habitation.

Early as our heroes were abroad, Duncan and his dogs were there to meet them. But their first day was a blank, and they returned very tired and somewhat disheartened to the keeper’s house, where, putting up with Highland fare, they determined to stay all night. The next day they were rewarded with the sight of deer in hundreds, but that was all; the deer were too wild and wary to reach. More than once that day, as some noble stag stood for a moment on knoll or brae-top, scenting the wind, then dashing wildly off adown the glen, the words of Walter Scott came to Frank’s mind —

“The crested leader, proud and high,
Tossed his beamed frontlet to the sky,
A moment gazed adown the dale,
A moment snuffed the tainted gale;
Then, as the headmost foe appeared.
With one brave bound the copse he cleared,
And stretching forward free and far,

Sought the wild heaths of Uam Var.”

But the third was a never-to-be-forgotten day, for Frank brought down his first stag, and it was a “royal.” Luck seemed to set in after this. It never rains but it pours, you know, and nobody had any reason to be dissatisfied with that week spent among the red deer in the wilds of Cairntree.

I wish I had space wherein to tell you of one-half of the delightful sporting adventures our heroes had during the many months Frank was “bein’ broke,” or of the many happy, pleasant days they had to look back to, when afterwards sojourning with wild beasts and wilder men – of days spent among the partridges, or with the cockers at work, or following the pheasants. They all agreed that there was but little true sport attached to pheasant-shooting, the birds are so tame.

“It’s just like shooting hens,” Chisholm remarked.

But perhaps their dearest recollections went back to the time they spent in duck shooting. These were days they might have marked in their diaries with a red cross – spent entirely under canvas they were, in true gipsy fashion; for although the season was autumn, the weather was still bright and warm, and the nights just cool enough to be pleasant. By marshes or lonely moorlands, by inland lakes and ponds, or by wooded friths and estuaries, following up the wild-fowl never failed to give them the very greatest of pleasure and sport. In these adventures their chief companion was a dog of the Irish water-spaniel type, and Pattie by name. Red all over was Pattie, and one mass of ringlets, which even a whole day’s swimming in sea or river failed to unravel; he even had a fringe or top-knot over his bonnie brow, which quite set off his peculiar style of beauty. Pattie’s style of beauty was what would be designated in Scotland “the daft.” Mind, you couldn’t help loving Pattie – I defy you not to love him if you tried; but he had such queer ways, and such a funny face, that you couldn’t look at him long without laughing. Pattie was truly Irish, but grand at his work nevertheless, whether retrieving a dead duck or a maimed one. When plunging into the water after the latter, “Be quiet wid yer skraiching,” Pattie would seem to say. “Sure I’ll fetch you out, and you’ll never feel it at all, at all.” But you ought to have seen Pattie coming up out of the river with a dead duck that he probably had had to swim a long distance against the tide for; there was a pride in his beaming eye that my pen would attempt in vain to depict. “What do ye think av me now?” Pattie would seem to say.

But summer and autumn and the first months of winter wore away, and, after spending a whole fortnight at the white hare-shooting among the mountains of Perthshire – and harder work I defy you to find – Frank was at last declared thoroughly broken in, completely hardened off.

“A man,” said Chisholm, “that can stand a week or two among white hares, and not feel too tired to sleep at night, is fit for anything. Now, boys,” he added, “what do you say to a run right away up to the polar ice-fields?”

“I’m in,” said Fred quietly.

“Oh!” said Chisholm, “you’re always in for anything. If I asked you to take a trip to the moon you’d jump at it.”

“Or over it,” said Fred, smiling, “like the cow in the poem of ‘Hey, diddle diddle;’ but are you in earnest about the ice-fields?”

“Downright.”

“Well,” said Frank, with assumed modesty, “if you think I’m ‘broke’ enough, please I’d like to go too.”

“Bravo!” cried Chisholm O’Grahame, “that settles the question.”

They made arrangements to sail in a seal-and-whale ship in February. They got an introduction to a captain of one of these, and he gladly undertook to convey them to Greenland and back, “free, gratis, and for nothing, except the pleasure of their company, and the skins and blubber they would no doubt kill.” That was how the captain expressed it. “But, mind you,” he said, “you’ll have to rough it a bit.”

“We don’t mind that,” said Chisholm.

Before he left for the far distant north, Frank Willoughby spent some weeks at General Lyell's castle. Happy, happy weeks they were, and how quickly, too, they fled away! I could make you feel very sentimental and "gushive," reader, if I told you all that passed between the lovely young Eenie and our hero Frank, but I never tell tales out of school, so there. I may just say, however, that, when the last moment *did* come, poor Eenie could hardly breathe the fond "good bye" for the tears that she could not repress.

The General's adieu was a hearty one.

"Good-bye," he said, "keep up a good heart, and," he added laughingly, as he patted Frank on the back, "remember —

"None but the brave deserve the fair."

Chapter Four

Part II – The Polar Ice-Fields

Outward bound – Night in the Pack – The Aurora – The awful Silence of the Ice-fields – Seals! Seals! – The Battle with the Bladder-noses – Jack in the Box with a Vengeance – A Fight with Walruses

The good ship *Grampus* slipped away from her moorings on the 13th of February, 18 – , and steamed slowly seaward from the port of Peterhead, North Britain, hound for the wild and desolate regions that surround the pole. She steamed slowly away in the very teeth of a breeze of winds that might have frightened a man of less daring and pluck than Captain Anderson, for the sea was grey and stormy, the sky was leaden and threatening, and the very sea-birds that screamed around the vessel's bows seemed to warn him that there was danger on the deep. But the Captain heeded them not. He had said he would sail on this day, and he did, for well he knew what his vessel could now do, and had done before; besides, he was a true sailor, and had all a sailor's impatience to begin the voyage.

"It looks a bit squally," he said to the pilot as he bade him adieu, "and we may have a dirty day or two, but the *Grampus* can stand it, and I'm not the man to linger in the harbour one half-hour after I'm ready to start. Good-bye, old man."

The *Grampus* was a steam brig of some three hundred and fifty tons, fitted with powerful engines, and a screw that could be hoisted up out of the water when sail was on her. Built of wood, she was as stout and strong a ship as ever clove the waves. And she needed all her strength too – there was a wide and stormy ocean to cross, and there was ice to plough through that no fragile ship dare ever face. The captain was the owner of the vessel; and many a voyage, and not unsuccessful ones either, had he made to the polar ice-fields, but the present one was fated to be the most eventful of all.

From the very commencement of the cruise, until the first ice was sighted, the wind kept steadily ahead, and the seas kept washing over the brave brig from stem to stern. But she was not to be daunted, so steadily she steamed on northwards, ever northwards.

A week after the last of the lonely isles of Shetland had sunk like a little cloud beneath the southern horizon they were far away at sea – indeed, there was nothing to be seen from the masthead, only the great tumbling seas that dashed their sprays high over the funnel. Even the birds had left them, all save that strange mysterious creature that is ever seen wheeling around ships sailing over the broad Atlantic, or crossing the northern seas, and which naturalists call the stormy petrel, and mariners Mother Carey's chicken. No wonder sailors look upon this bird with something akin to superstition and awe, so dark and dusky is the creature, the very little white about it serving but to make its blackness visible; it flits from stormy wave to stormy wave like a veritable evil spirit.

Our friend Frank, in his voyage to the polar ice-fields, suffered somewhat from *mal de mer* – it sounds far nicer in French than in English – but he bravely stuck to the deck. He was more than once washed into the lee scuppers, but he had on an oilskin suit of fear-nothing dimensions; so he just scrambled up again, or in other words, like the cork leg of the merchant of Rotterdam, he got up "and went on as before."

The farther north the *Grampus* got, the shorter grew the days. Indeed, they seemed to be sailing into the home of eternal night, only it must be remembered that the season was yet early, and that in the polar regions for three months of the year the sun never appears above the horizon. If the nights were long, however, it cannot be said they were dark; they were lighted up with a magnificence never seen in more southern latitudes. The sky itself was at times of a deep and indescribably dark-blue

colour, and the stars were great wheels of sparkling light. This was in itself a beautiful sight, and our heroes used to linger on deck till far on in the night, as if under some pleasant spell. But what pen can describe the gorgeous splendour of the northern lights, or Aurora. Imagine if you can a vast and broad bow, or arc of a circle, stretched athwart the heavens, twenty times as broad as any rainbow, and seeming to be ever so much farther away; imagine this bow to be composed of spears or needles of light – green, blue, crimson, and yellow – and imagine these spears in constant motion, shooting upwards and downwards, changing places incessantly, changing colours constantly, and this too with inconceivable rapidity, and you will be able to form some faint notion of the wonderful sight the Aurora presented to the eyes of our astonished travellers.

Reader, I have been alone in the ice-fields by night, while the Aurora was playing in the heavens above. You cannot conceive of the solitude and lonesomeness of such a situation, nor can you form any conception of the deep, the indescribable silence that reigns in the frozen ocean. Well, upwards as I gazed at the northern lights, I have heard sounds emanating from them. That I do not remember having ever read of anywhere. A line of spears would advance from the east and another from the west; they would meet and commingle with a subdued clashing and hissing noise, such as you might make by rubbing the palms of the hands rapidly together. What this strange sound can be is a mystery that may never be revealed.

Captain Anderson told our heroes that he never thought the voyage had begun until the crow's-nest, or out-look barrel, was hoisted to the mainmast head.

One morning our travellers were awakened by the sound of singing and shouting, and on going on deck they found the brave skipper rubbing his hands with glee, as he gazed up at the ascending nest.

“Cheerily does it!” he was crying. “Heave, lads! heave, heave, and she goes. Now, young gentlemen,” he continued, “are your rifles in order? In two days more, if all goes well, I'll show you such sport as you couldn't even have dreamt of before.”

And sure enough, in two days' time they had made “the country,” as the ice-fields are termed. If, however, any one on board had expected to find wealth, in the shape of plump seals, lying thereon ready for the gathering, he was much mistaken. There was the ice, to be sure, but never a seal in sight, neither in the water nor out of it, for it seemed that the country was unusually open that year.

“Well,” said Anderson, one day, “I'm tired of this north Greenland work; I'll bear away for the west land.”

A week's steaming through fields of slushy ice and floating snow, and streams of flat snow-clad bergs, brought them into open water, and they sighted the lofty and desolate shores of Greenland West, and much to their surprise, found a large three-masted Dutchman quietly lying at anchor in a bay, sails all clewed up, and men away on the ice. It was not long ere the *Grampus* had followed her example, so far as letting go the anchor went, and making all snug and ready for action. A great bear – always a sign seals are about – stood sniffing on the edge of a floe. Perhaps he had never seen a steamship before, or perhaps he was wondering what the crew were having for breakfast. Frank got his Henri-Martini up, and began potting at him with a long-range sight, and presently Master Bruin remembered an appointment he had, and made tracks to keep it.

It was a glorious morning when the boats were called away. All hands were half frantic with joy at the thought they would soon be among the seals. In they trundle, and down go the boats with a splash into the water, and next moment they are off. Frank and Chisholm are in one boat, Fred Freeman in another, and there is a grand race between the two to see who shall first touch the ice and fire the first shot. The boats seemed to fly over the water, and when they at last ran alongside the floe and the crew jumped on shore, there was hardly a yard's length between them; but Fred was declared winner.

And now the day's work was begun. Warily at first, the riflemen had to creep towards their prey on hands and knees, taking advantage of every hummock or boulder to screen themselves from view. On each piece of ice some forty or fifty seals lay, and each “patch” had a sentry set. When

they succeeded in killing him, the others were very much at their mercy; but oftentimes the seal on watch would succeed, even before his eyes closed in death, in giving his companions warning. Then, almost ere another bullet could reach them, they had leapt helter-skelter into the water. But when the sun got higher, the seals seemed to get almost too lazy to move; they could then be approached very much more closely, and the work of death was carried on with an earnestness and energy that was terrible to behold. Indeed, a kind of madness to shed blood seemed to take possession of every man on the ice. There was no thought but to slay. The excitement was intense – awful in its intensity. The sun went slowly round and down, and as he set behind the rugged hills, his disc seemed to reflect the blood on the ice. Even his parting beams had borrowed the self-same hue, and the tops of the highest icebergs looked as if dipped in gore.

When the shadows fell, tired and weary enough now, our heroes went slowly back towards the boats.

“Oh! boys,” cried Fred, “don’t you remember how bright and lovely the snow was in the morning? Behold it now!”

“Ay, behold it now,” said Chisholm. “Indeed, Fred, this is murder. I don’t feel I can call it by any other name, and I’m half ashamed of myself.”

“So am I,” said Frank, “for a seal can’t defend itself.”

“But the bladder-nosed seals can,” said the first mate, who had just joined the trio. “They are terrible beasts to deal with. I’d rather fight a bear single-handed than I would one of these. Once they fill that kettle-pot-like bladder over their noses, they mean mischief, I can tell you. A rifle bullet has no more effect on it than a pea from a pea-shooter.”

“Is that so?” said Fred.

“Five years ago,” continued the mate, “I was one of the crew of a boat, of ten men in all, that were attacked by these monsters of the deep. They seemed mad with rage and fury; they swarmed up from the sea to the ice where we stood, with blazing eyes and flashing teeth, by the dozen and by the score. We all fought like fiends; we fought with spears and axes and our rifles clubbed, but the faster we killed them the faster – they came. Our shouts brought assistance from the ship, but not before a whole hour was spent in this battle with the bladder-noses, and not until we were quite exhausted, with three of our number lying dead on the ice.”

They were walking over a floe of thick bay ice as the mate told his story. No sooner had he spoken the last words than —

“Down, men, down!” he cried; “the ice is rising ahead.”

They followed the mate’s advice, and threw themselves on their faces.

In two places the ice was heaving and rising. Then all at once it gave way, with a noise like the firing of great guns, and up from the depths of the dark sea rose two gigantic forms, with wild eyes and yard-long tusks, and of such fearful aspect that Frank’s heart almost stood still with dread.

“By George!” cried Chisholm, “this is playing at Jack in the box with a vengeance.”

Bang, bang, bang went the rifles, and down sank the apparitions, leaving the broken ice all red with blood.

“They are only wounded,” said the mate; “they’ll have revenge if it is a month hence, depend on that.”

The *Grampus*, sealing intent, steamed farther and farther north, and the nearer to the pole they got, the heavier grew the ice. There was shooting every day now for three months and more – seals and bears, and sometimes a fox – and, when there was nothing else to go for, they brought down gulls for their feathers, and looms for the sake of fresh meat. Sometimes they were rewarded by the sight of the lonely narwhal, or giant unicorn of the sea – a creature which always makes direct for a boat as soon as it spies one, and has been known to attack and sink a whaler or gig.

They were after the looms one day, Chisholm and Frank being as usual in one boat, with the first mate steering.

Suddenly, “Stand by your clubs and guns, men!” cried the mate; “Here they come. Now we’re in for it. I knew they’d seek revenge.”

The sea around them seemed alive with the great tusked heads of walruses, coming from all directions and making straight for the boat.

“In oars, and keep cool, lads,” said the mate, seizing an axe; “but for mercy’s sake keep the boat trimmed. If she capsizes we are all dead men.”

How long they fought with those desperate brutes Frank could never tell; but it seemed to him an age ere the other boats came to their relief, and poured volley after volley into the midst of the pack of walruses. Then they disappeared, and but for the sea around them, all reddened with blood, and the floating corpses – which, however, speedily sank – there was not a sign of the fearful hand-to-hand and all-unequal contest.

Chapter Five

The West Land of Greenland – A Fall! a Fall! – Danger on all Sides – “Man the Ice-saws” – Working for Life – Beset in the Dreary Pack

“I feel,” said the captain one day, at breakfast, “that I am making a dangerous experiment. I am keeping far in to the west land; I am all but hugging the shore; and if it were to come on to blow from seawards, we would – Steward, I’ll have another cup of coffee.”

“You think,” said Chisholm, “our chances of further cups of coffee wouldn’t be very great, eh?”

“I don’t think they would,” said the captain. “Well, lads, I’ve shown you a bit of sport, haven’t I? And if we had only a little more blubber in her, troth, I’d bear up for bonnie Scotland. I’ve just come down from the crow’s-nest, and what do you think I’ve spied? Why, open water for miles ahead, stretching away to the north as far as eyes can reach. There are whales there, boys, if we can but wait for them.”

After breakfast it was, “All hands assist ship!”

Up sprang the men, and ere one could wink, so to speak, half the crew were at the side with poles, pressing on the ice to make room for the *Grampus*. It was strange work, and it seemed at first impossible that twenty men with a spar could move a floe. But they did, and three hours afterwards they were in this mysterious open sea.

“Why,” cried Frank, “I declare there is the Dutchman dodging yonder with foreyard aback. A sailing ship beat a steamer!”

“Ay, she’s got the pull on us, boys,” the captain said. “And see, she is flensing (skinning) a whale; the crang (the skinned corpse) lies beside her. She has met with a lane of open water, and taken advantage of it.”

Just at that moment came the cry, “A fall! a fall! on the weather quarter!”

“A fall! a fall!” Surely never was excitement seen like this before, thought Frank.

There was no waiting for orders. The ship seemed to stop of her own accord, and the escaping steam roared uselessly through the funnel.

“A fall! a fall!” Up tumble the men, many undressed, with their clothes in a bundle. They spring to the boats, our heroes follow the example, and in three minutes more are tearing through the water towards the coveted leviathan. The Dutchman has spied the monster too, and her boats are soon afloat. Who shall be first?

(The origin of this cry is this, I think. “Whaol” is the ordinary Scotch for “whale,” but Aberdonians use the “f” instead of the “wh” in such words as “what,” “where,” etc, which they pronounce “fat” and “far.” Hence “whale” would become “faul,” or “fall.”)

“Pull, lads, pull! Hurrah, lads, hurrah! We’ll never let a Dutchman beat us!”

Is the whale asleep, that she lies so quietly? Nay, for now she scents the danger, and, lashing her tail madly skywards, is off; but not before the roar of the harpoon gun from the foremost boat has awakened the echoes of the Greenland sea.

“A fall! a fall! She is struck! she is struck!” Vainly now she dashes through the surging sea; another boat pulls around to intercept her, and again she is struck; the lines whirl over the gunwale of Frank’s boat till it smokes again. There is blood now in the great beast’s wake, and her way is not so swift; she dives and dives again, but she is breathless now. Dreadful her wound must be – for see, she is spouting water mingled with blood; and now she lies still on the surface of the ocean.

“In line, men!” cries the mate, springing up and seizing his long lance, and standing bravely up in the bows. “Pull gently alongside, and stand by to back water the moment I spear the fall.”

“How bold and daring he looks!” thinks Frank; all thought of danger swallowed up in admiration of the man who stands, spear in hand, in the boat’s bows.

They are close now. Swish! Quick as lightning the spear is sent home; quickly it is turned, to sever the carotid; next moment the backing boat is almost swamped in blood. But not quickly enough can they back, I fear, to save the boat from destruction, themselves from speedy death. High, high in air is raised that dreadful tail; half the animal seems out of the water; they are under the shadow of it; and now it descends, and every oar on the port-side of the boat is broken off close to the rowlocks. But the boat is saved. For fully half an hour the whale flaps the sea in her dying agony, and the noise may be heard for miles around, while the waters around her are churned into crimson foam. Then there is one more terrible convulsion; her great jaw opens and shuts again. The leviathan is dead. The men of the brig and the men in the boats answer each other with boisterous cheers; but the Dutchman fills her sails, puts about, and bears sullenly up for the south.

Well would it have been for the *Grampus* had Captain Anderson followed her example; but he would not.

“She can go,” he said; “she is a full ship, and only a sailing ship. Now let us get but two other ‘fish,’ then hey for the sunny south, boys.”

For a whole month they remained dodging about in that open sea, but without seeing another whale. All their good luck seemed to have gone with the Dutchman, and the captain was about to bear up, and force his way once more out through the southern ice to the open sea beyond, when suddenly a change came o’er the spirit of the scene. To their surprise, if not to their horror, the ice began to close in around them in all directions. Nearer and nearer came the mighty floes. They came from the north; they came from the south and the east; they even deployed into two long lines, or horns, that crept along the land until they met. At the same time a heavy swell began to roll in from seawards.

“There is a gale of wind outside,” the captain said to Chisholm, “and this is the result; but come, I don’t mean to be caught like a mouse in a trap.” Then, addressing the mate, “Call all hands, Mr Lewis. Get out the ice-saws and anchors.”

“Ay, ay, sir,” replied the mate.

“Now, my lads,” continued the captain, when the men came aft in a body, “you’ve all been to Greenland before, and you know the danger we are in as well as I can tell you. If we are caught between two floes in that heaving pack, we’ll be crunched like a walnut-shell. So we’ll have to work to make a harbour. That alone can save us. Call the steward. Steward! we’ll splice the main brace.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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