Stables Gordon

Wild Life in the Land of the Giants: A Tale of Two Brothers

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Chapter One
Book I – Our Home by the Sea
The Old Home by the Sea – Aunt Serapheema

Reginald Augustus John Fitzmaurice Jones!

That is my name in full.

There is not the slightest occasion to remember it.

The name is far and away too long, and too tall for ordinary use. Twice only have I taken it to church with me, namely, on the day of my baptism, and on my wedding morn. On both these occasions it was written on a bit of paper, and folded up for future use.

On the first occasion it was carefully carried in my father's waistcoat pocket, and *I* brought it home.

On the second occasion it was carefully carried in my own

waistcoat pocket, and brought home by one far dearer to me than even a father.

But as regards a name or names rather, my brother did not fare a bit better than I did.

Rupert Domville Ffoljambe-Foley Jillard Jones!

That is my brother's name in full. And, indeed, I think it will be readily admitted that his was a harder case than even mine, and seeing that I was the elder, this seemed scarcely fair.

Reginald Augustus John Fitzmaurice Jones! Only fancy a spirited young man having to make his way in life, and drag through existence with such a name as that tagged on to him. For *one* young man even it would be bad enough, but there were two of us, and we always drove in couple.

What a deal maiden aunts have to account for, as often as not! Yes, it was all owing to Aunt Serapheema, and even to this day I cannot help thinking she owes us a very ample apology.

Here is how it occurred:

Father – he was Captain Jones then – was sitting all alone one evening in the room which was designated by courtesy the study, though, as far as literature is concerned, it contained little else save a few magazines, the newspapers, and – father's pipe rack. Well, father was enjoying a mild cigar by the open window – for it was spring, and the birds were singing in every bush – when there entered to him – Aunt Serapheema, who began to cough.

Father put his cigar hastily down on the outside sill of the window, with a little sigh, for it was one of the Colonel's –

Colonel McReady's – best, and only newly lit.

He hastened to place the high-backed armchair for the lady. It was like herself, this chair – straight, tall, dark, and prim.

"The smoke, I suppose, *would* have annoyed you?"

"It would have, Harold."

"And the open window?"

"That we can do with."

"Ahem!" continued my aunt, smoothing the long black silken mits she always wore on her hands and arms. "Ahem!"

"Yes, sister," said my father.

"Yes, *aunt*, if you please. Remember that in future, Harold; and it will be as well if, instead of calling Dora, your wife, by the ridiculous name of Dot, you *now* address her as 'mamma' or 'ma.'"

The "now" in aunt's last sentence referred to the birth of my brother and me.

"If you do not so address her, before very long the boys themselves will be calling their mother Dot."

"Certainly," said father, "as you wish, sist – I – I mean aunt."

"Well, and it is about the boys I have come to speak, if you will favour me with a moment's attention."

"Assuredly, sis – a – auntie dear." And my father pulled himself together, as if he had been on parade. "Nothing wrong with the twins, I trust?"

"No, nothing wrong – as yet. But you know they must be baptised at an early date. Have you considered what names to

give them?"

"Well, really – no – I – "

"Of course not. Men are – merely men. Luckily your wife and I have been considering for you. But have you any suggestion to make?"

"Ahem, well, a – my name has a John in it, and my brother's is Jim. Short and sweet. Simple and all the rest of it. Eh? What?"

I have been told that Aunt Serapheema did not answer him for fully half a minute, but subjected him to what might be called a process of ocular transfixion. Compared to such a punishment, to be face to face with Russian bayonets would have been child's play to poor father.

"John! and Jim!" she said at last, slowly rising. "You may resume your horrid cigar, Harold. I did not expect to get much sense out of you, and I am therefore not disappointed. On this sheet of paper you will find the names *we* have decided upon. You will note that – at the earnest request of your wife – the paternal name does find a place, but *Jim*!" She transfixed him again, then went gliding to the door, which father opened and bowed her away.

Then he almost ran to the window, and like the naughty old boy he must have been, I fear he relit that horrid cigar, singing lightly to himself as he hunted for the matches.

Now one's birth and baptism may seem very trivial matters to linger over, especially when one has a life-story like my brother's and mine to tell. But events and adventures too will crowd each

other fast enough ere long. For the brief present I am like some strong swimmer, who is about to commit himself to battle with the waves of a storm-tossed ocean, and who, before he takes the plunge, gazes once around and casts a longing, lingering look behind.

Besides, one's boyhood's days or childhood's hours are the happiest, without doubt, that ever fall to our lot here below, and we do not know this till they are for ever fled. Yes, I grant you that this stage of our existence is not exempt from grief and sorrow, and very real these look while they last, though they are easily chased away or kissed away as the case may be. Then there is stern education to come up day after day like a terrible task-master.

As far as my brother and I were concerned, education assumed the corporeal form of Aunt Serapheema. My father's study – properly dusted and disinfected in order to thoroughly exorcise the ghost of Colonel McReady's cigars – became our schoolroom, the high-backed armchair our prim preceptor's throne. Mind you, we always did think auntie somewhat prim, though it would be neither polite nor politic to tell her so. Auntie was not only fearfully and wonderfully made as regards angularity, but she was wonderfully clever as well. I tremble even yet when I think of how she used to come down upon us with dates – figuratively speaking, and how appallingly she used to hurl "ographies" and "ologies" at our poor little frightened faces. I always did think that dates – with the exception of the

sticky eating sort – and "ologies" and "ographies" were sent into the world like thorns and thistles, just to prick and punish unfortunate boys.

Auntie used to wear glasses – two pairs at once; and it was not when she looked at you right straight through these glasses that she appeared dreadful, but when she glanced sternly over them.

She carried, or swayed as a sceptre, a long oaken pointer. It was not very thick, but very hard and far-reaching, and when it came down on your knuckles – oh, it always left a red mark, and sounded as if the clock were striking one. It struck one very often every forenoon.

Even out of school auntie had a way of addressing any person that commanded attention, but alone with her in the schoolroom her voice was positively thrilling.

It was only natural that both my brother's attention and mine should waver or wander at times. Well, my father's first manly word in the barrack square used to make every soldier stiffen, as it were; but it was nothing to auntie's caution. Nowhere near it in regal pomposity.

"Reginald, look towards me!" or – "Rupert Domville, *I* am talking."

Oh, didn't poor Jill used to jump!

Yes, by Jill I mean my brother. We had got tired of calling each other Regie and Bertie, and one night held a consultation in our attic bedroom.

"Your name," said my brother, "shall be boiled down to plain

Jack."

"Well, Master Rupert Domville Ffoljambe-Foley Jillard Jones," I replied, "if I'm to be boiled down to Jack, you shall be boiled down to Jill."

"Oh, I don't mind a bit. It's short. But – a – isn't Jill an old lady's name?"

"Well, I rather think it is, because Jack and Jill went up the hill, you know, and I've seen pictures of them, and one was an old lady. But that doesn't matter, does it?"

"No, Jack."

"Silly thing, though, to go up a hill to fetch a pail of water. Was the well on top of the hill, I wonder?"

"I couldn't say. But, Jack?"

"Yes, Jill."

"Suppose we play at Jack and Jill to-morrow, just to inoculate our names, you know."

"Inaugurate, you mean, you silly old Jill."

"Well, it's much the same. Won't it be fun?"

"Yes, and I'll do it. Let's fall asleep, and maybe dream about it."

"Let's make some metre first." This was a favourite pastime of ours – and we always did have some fun of some kind before we fell asleep. Our "poetry," as we called it, certainly was not of much account; but the play was this: whatever two or three words one of us said, the other had to match in metre. To-night it ran as follows – I put our names before our lines: —

Jack. "Our Auntie Prim,"
Jill. "She's got so slim,"
Jack. "And her eyes are so dim,"
Jill. "That I'll wager a limb"
Jack. "She can't see over her spectacle rim."

"Bravo! Jack," cried Jill, "that's famous."

Then we had a chorus of laughing. But it was checked as completely and suddenly as if that traditional pail of water had come souse on both our heads, for auntie's voice rang up the stair —

"Reginald and Rupert, *I* am listening."

We covered our heads with the bedclothes, and were as mute as mice, till the sunshine streamed in at the window next morning, and Sally knocked with our drop of hot water.

But immediately after school hours we went off with a rush and a run to the stable, where we found Robert washing Aunt Serapheema's pony's white feet.

"Robert, we want a pail of water."

"Whatever be ye goin' to do wi' th' pail o' water, lads?"

"Oh, we'll soon tell you," cried I: "I'm Jack, and he's Jill now, and we're going to play at it real. We're going to roll down the green mount same's we often do, you know, only we must have a pail of water."

"Well, well, well," said Robert, "I never! But sha'n't Oi carry it up for thee?"

"No, no, that wouldn't leave us half the fun."

The green mount, as it was called, was a grassy hill near the sea, on which we used to have no end of fun in summer. It was pretty steep, and right in view of the dining-room window.

At this window our darling mother, as we always called her, and Aunt Serapheema were sitting talking quietly, while Sally laid the cloth, and they were not a little astonished to see us boys lugging painfully up the hill with a pail of water. Of course the real Jack and Jill had gone to *fetch* water, but we could only carry our programme out in the way we were doing.

Both mamma and auntie watched us with no little curiosity; while Sally, near by, stood looking too.

"Are you ready now?" said Jill, when we were near the top, "because you've got to tumble first, you know."

"I'm ready," I cried.

Down I toppled.

Over went the bucket, and over went Jill.

"Sakes-a-mussy!" shrieked Sally. "Sakes-a-mussy! missus, they're all tumbling down together."

Mother cried, "Oh! the dear boys."

Aunt lifted her eyes and mittened palms cloudwards.

But for all that, down we rolled in fine form, —

Jill over Jack,
The bucket over Jill,
Right to the bottom
Of the big green hill.

That is how we metred it, that evening after the row was all over, and we were sent to bed.

But it would have defied all the art of metre to describe the plight we were in when Robert and Sally picked us up, and led us at arm's length into the kitchen. For I was soused from head to foot, and Jill had got it second hand, and as for mud and rents – the least said the soonest mended.

We didn't play any more at Jack and Jill with real water.

Chapter Two
While Walking on the Sea-Beach

Everybody loved auntie, for with all her strictness, and – to our young eyes her strange old-world ways, she was so good and so genuine. Goodness was no penance with auntie; it was not put on and off like a dress-coat, a silk hat, or a sealskin jacket; it was part and parcel of her very nature. I believe that if auntie ever cloaked her real soul's self at all, it was when she was apparently exceedingly wroth with us, after some of our little escapades; which we could no more help than a bird can help flying. But sitting there in that weird black chair, lecturing Jill and me with uplifted forefinger, and steadfast glances *over*, not through, the two pairs of glasses, she certainly did look thrillingly stern. And she had a way, too, of making us feel thoroughly ashamed of ourselves, without saying much or without scolding.

So our love was mingled with a good deal of reverence. Really I laugh now when I think of it, but whether you can understand the feeling or not, we – that is Jill and I – almost revered the chair in which auntie sat, even when she wasn't sitting in it. You see we were allowed to play and dance and jump in the schoolroom on wet days, or when the wind blew high from the south and west, and dashed the sea's spray over beach and gardens. And do what we might, we never could disabuse our minds of the notion that

the chair was a living thing, and took notes of all we said and did, and would whisper things to auntie when she sat down again.

At ordinary times, when we might be merely squatting together on a goatskin rug, reading "Robinson Crusoe," or turning over the leaves of a huge "Arabian Nights" to look at the pictures, it did not matter much. But always when I proposed a game at anything very ridiculous – and it was always I who did make the proposition – before we began, I would say —

"Wait half a minute, Jill, let's play at the chair being naughty first."

This was only an excuse, of course, to have the chair turned round with its back to us.

Then I would walk up to it, and with my forefinger raised chidingly —

"You are a naughty old chair," I would say; "you cannot be at rest five minutes at a time, and I am afraid you are showing your brother a bad example. Go into the corner, sir, until I tell you to come out."

"Now then," I would continue, mimicking the fishermen we listened to hoisting their yawls from the beach and surf. "Now then, Jill, lend a hand here, and look lively, lad. Tackle on to her. Merrily matches it. Together. Heave with a will. Up with her. Round she goes, and up she is, and we go rolling home. Hurrah!"

When we got the chair fairly round with its back to us we felt at peace to do as we liked. We could stand on our heads till our faces got blue and our eyes felt ready to burst; I could make a go-

cart of Jill, and haul him all round the room with the skipping-rope; he could make a ship's mast of me, and squirm up and stand on my shoulders to give three cheers for the Queen and the Royal Navy; we could build a tower with the chairs, and in fact do anything or everything except spill the ink. When we did that it cast a damp gloom over our spirits just as it spread an inky pall over a portion of the table-cloth.

My father was our friend and playmate whenever he came home. This was not oftener than twice or thrice a week, for he was doing duty with his regiment at the somewhat distant naval and military port of P – . He would fain have come oftener, but dared not offend so kindly a superior officer as Colonel McReady.

Now auntie did not actually complain to father, but she used to mention some of the maddest of our escapades, and with Jill climbing over the back of his chair, and I, perhaps, standing bolt upright on his knees, balanced by his hands, father would say —

"You young rascals, what did you do it for? Eh?"

And this made us laugh like mad things, for we knew father was not angry.

"Ah, well, auntie dear," he would say, "boys will be boys."

"True," she would reply; "but boys needn't be monkeys, need they, Harold?"

"And really, Harold," she would add, "the boys would be so different if you were to show just a little more parental authority."

This always made dear daddie laugh. I don't know why. The

"parental authority" somehow tickled him, for, as mother used to say, he looked more a boy himself than a wise old parent.

But father loved auntie as much as any of us did, and looked up to her too. As she was his sister-in-law he needn't have done that, only she was ever so much older, and, as father would add, "wiser as well."

Here is one proof that she had a deal of power over him:

Father did not hate his uniform; no real soldier does, although I have heard some say they did; but he did not see the fun, as he called it, of wearing it when off duty. He was off duty going to church on Sundays, but he went in uniform, nevertheless. Why? Because auntie like to see him dressed so.

Mother did not always go to church, because she was delicate; but father and auntie and we boys invariably did.

Let me think a moment. How old would we have been then? Oh, about nine. Dressed exactly alike – black jackets alike, broad white collars alike, tall silk hats alike – the hats were auntie's notion of the severely genteel – and little rattan canes alike.

Faces and eyes and hair all alike. So much alike were we, indeed, on a Sunday morning, that if any one, except mamma and auntie, who I daresay had their own private marks, called us by our correct names, it was just guesswork or merely chance.

Father made no attempt at distinguishing us on Sundays and holidays. If, for example, he had given Jill a penny with a view to lollipops, and I came round soon after, he would say:

"Let me see, now – I gave you a penny before, didn't I?"

Or he would quiz me, and say, "Are you Jack, or are you Jill?"

It will be observed that father had taken to call us Jack and Jill, though auntie rather objected.

But hardly any one else knew us apart even on week-days; even Sally was puzzled, and Robert never made any attempt at nomenclature.

In fact we were a kind of Corsican brothers in similitude, for, if I remember rightly, they were twins like Jill and me.

On the Sunday afternoons my brother and I were sent, if the weather was fine, to take a stroll along by the windings and bendings of the beach, between the green rising hills and banks and the sea. We went all alone, and were recommended by auntie to think about all good things as we walked, to study the strange objects strewn on the sand or left by the receding waves, to gaze upon the sea, the sky, the rocks, and the beautiful birds, and to remember our Father in heaven made them all. We were not to think our week-day thoughts, but rigidly to banish and exclude therefrom, tops, whips, balls, and boats; we were not to fling pebbles, nor jump on seaweed; we must walk erect not too close to the water, for fear of our boots, and if a shower came on we were to wrap our pocket-handkerchiefs round our hats and make straight for home.

All these injunctions we did our best to obey, except one which I have forgotten to name: we were not to laugh. Now we would have obeyed auntie even in this, but sometimes we were carried away by curious things occurring. Anyhow, it did not take much

to make us laugh, I fear, even on Sunday. Take one walk as an example.

It was a lovely summer's afternoon, hardly any wind, the sea almost glassy or glossy – use which word you please; far out were vessels with all kinds of queer rigs half-becalmed, and close in the foreground the breakers rolling in so lazily that it seemed a stress for them to break at all. There was a dreamy stillness in the air, and even the sea-birds seemed to feel its influence, and floated half asleep on the sleeping billows.

Jill and I were walking a little apart when we met a big red dog. He half started when he saw the pair of us, glanced quickly from one to the other, gave a short bark which appeared forced out of him, and trotted off with his tail between his hocks. He must have seen, or thought he saw, something odd about us.

We laughed, but thought of auntie.

Then we went on and on and came to a cottage where there was a very wise game-cock with a flock of very wise-looking hens. We always stopped to look at them, they had such a contented and happy, stay-at-home look about them. And, strange to say, this cock used to march his hens down the garden path, and then they all stopped to study Jill and me. And the cock used to eye us with one side of his red head and cry, "Kr-rr-rr-rr – !" in so droll a way that we laughed again, and this time forgot all about auntie.

A little farther on we met a whole bevy of schoolgirls, and they all looked at us, and while the youngest giggled outright, the

oldest put their fingers to their lips to hide their smiles, and we heard one of them say "hats." Jill did not like this I know, for he pursed up his mouth and presently said, "Jack, if it only came on to rain, I'd soon roll my hat up, wouldn't you?" I laughed alone this time.

People, older common-people I mean, stopped and stared after us, and some said queer things, and some called us queer names. A fisherwoman, for instance, sang out —

"Hullo! my chickabiddies. Got out, then? W'y you looks as much alike as pigeons' eggs."

A swarthy old sailor hailed us with —

"Whither away, my pirates bold?" Jill laughed at this. We loved pirates. Then we came to a place where two fishermen, rough and weather-beaten, in dandy, dark, Sunday sou'-westers, and dark blue Sunday jerseys and polished top-boots, were leaning against a boat, and one of them must shake hands politely and say —

"Hullo! my young hearties! W'y it does one's heart good to look at ye! Ain't they alike, Bill? Keep 'em together, Bill, till I run up for Nancy."

Nancy came, a good-looking, portly fisherman's wife, and for a time she did nothing but stick her hands in her sides and laugh. Oh, she *did* laugh, to be sure!

Then her husband and Bill, his mate, laughed too, and the seagulls chimed in, and somehow made us think of Punch and Judy. So then we laughed also, and a pretty chorus it was.

"Bless the darlings, though," said Nancy; "it's a shame to laugh; we don't mean anything unmannerly but – ha, ha, ha, he, he, he," and the chorus was all done over again.

"I say, lads," said the first speaker, "come for a sail with us to-morrow, or next day, will ye?"

"We would," we replied, both in a breath, and both in the same words precisely, "if auntie would let us."

"Ah! bless her, bring auntie too. We'll cushion the boat, Bill, won't us?"

"That we will, Joe."

"Well, we said we'd tell auntie," and away we went. We only met one man who spoke to us going back, and he said – "Good evening, young double and quits." Of course we did not say a word to auntie that evening about the invitation, but after a turn on the beach next day, during which we met our fisher friends, who renewed the request, we broached the subject.

Auntie tossed her head a little at first, but when we mentioned about the cushions she smiled and said – "Good people, I dare say. Well, it is evident they know we are gentlefolks. You can tell them we'll go to-morrow afternoon."

After school hours Jill and I ran to tell our new-found friends that we were to be allowed to come, and that auntie was coming as well.

They were so pleased that they kept us a whole hour in their queer, old-fashioned cottage, in which everything was as strange and wonderful to us as some of the places we read of in our old

story-books.

Poor Jill! It was really strange the dependence he had upon me, his twin brother – his elder brother – his second self. I but mention the following in proof of this. It happened about the time we first made the acquaintance of the boatmen. Jill had gone to look for nests all by himself for a wonder. Unfortunately he fell over a cliff. Not all the way down, else there would have been no more Jill – and no more Jack, perhaps, for I hardly think I could have lived without my brother. He had been in his perilous position for hours before found. Listening at last near the top of the cliff, I could hear his plaintive, pleading voice calling me, though he knew not I was there.

"Come to me, Jack, come to me," he prayed, "for I cannot come to you."

I had reason to remember these strange words in after life, as will be seen.

Chapter Three
The Story of a Shipwreck – A Mystery – The Fate of Poor Joe

We all went on that boat cruise – that is, auntie went, and Jill and I. Auntie appeared to take us with her but we were really taking her. That was fun.

There was nothing remarkable about the cruise, except that it was the first of many far more delightful, for Jill and me.

Auntie behaved like an angel all through, if one could conceive of an angel wearing two pairs of spectacles one on top of the other and long black mits. But auntie's heart contained the angel, and to-day she never once looked over her glasses – always through them.

The fishermen, Bill and Joe, "ma'am"-ed her and "miss"-ed her, and she smiled a deal, and did not get even squeamish, for she was a sailor's daughter, and knew all about boats and ships.

We sailed straight away out, and tacked round an island, and there was a lumpy bit of a sea on. But auntie steered part of the way, much to her own delight and the admiration of Bill and Joe. Sometimes the boat gave a jump or fell down with a jerk into the trough of a sea, and the sail would tighten and the sheet would strain, and perhaps a feather of a wave would skim across the boat and hit us all; but nothing disturbed the equanimity of our

bold Aunt Serapheema.

She shook hands so prettily, too, with the men and with Nancy, who curtseyed so low, that she looked like a brig under full sail settling down by the stern.

The men lifted their hats, and I'm sure each had something in his hand that auntie had left there; then away we came, and Jill and I jumped on lumps of seaweed to crack the little bladders all the way home, and auntie didn't mind a bit.

"It would do *you* good, mamma," she said to mother at dinner that day, "to go out for a sail now and then; I must say it has made me feel quite young again."

The pointer did not strike one o'clock on Jill's knuckles or mine all next forenoon, so of course we wished that auntie would always go out a-sailing.

But it was when telling my brother and me stories of a winter's evening by the fire, or upstairs on the balcony in the sweet summer-time that auntie was at her very very best. Then the angel came out in earnest, and neither Jill nor I were ever a bit afraid of her. We would sit close up by her knee, and even lean across her lap, or toy with her mitted hands as we listened entranced to every word she said.

They were mostly stories of the ocean wave, and of far-away lands and climes beyond the setting sun. Indeed what else could a sailor's daughter, whose father had gone down with his ship in the stormy Bay, speak to us about, secularly?

But she had the gift of telling Bible stories well also. The

wonderful adventures of Joseph and his brethren quite enthralled us, and often after we went to bed I used to try to tell it in the same way and same words to Jill, but never so entrancingly, though he liked it so much that he often went to sleep before I had finished.

I said my mother was delicate, and this is the reason why auntie took such charge of us; but mother invariably came to our room after Sally had done with us, and would sit by our bedside sewing for an hour together sometimes. It was to her we said our prayers. No, we did not *say* them, for mother taught us to think and *pray* the prayer – to *wish* what we said, as it were; and we got into that habit, Jill and I, so that at any time when praying, with our hearts wandering, as it were, we believed the good angels never could hear that prayer, and never bear it away to the good Father on the great white throne of grace.

I dare say few boys love their mother so much as we loved our beautiful mother, but then one always does think just in that way about one's own love. None other can be like it.

Well, at all events, our childhood, what with one thing or another, was a very happy one, and slipped all too soon away.

Why was it, I wonder, that as far back as I can remember, I always felt myself my brother's keeper, so to speak? Mind you, though I was the cider, it was *only by five minutes*. But this five minutes appeared to make me immeasurably wiser than Jill. I was not stronger, nor bigger, nor anything, only just five minutes older, and five years wiser. So *I* thought, and so Jill thought, and he never failed to consult me in all matters, however trivial.

He would just say, with that simple, innocent smile of his:

"Jack, what would you do now?"

And I would tell him, and he would do it straight away.

Of course Jill was very dear to me. I loved him more than I did myself. Does that seem a strange confession? Well, it is true, though. I think one reason for this great affection was his likeness to papa. *I* saw that, if others did not. And he even had papa's way of talking and using little odd words, such as "certainly," "assuredly," and so forth.

For example one day in the schoolroom we were among the "ologies" – bother them all.

"Reginald Augustus," said auntie, and I pulled myself to "attention" and braced sharp up, as Bill would say. "Reginald Augustus, define to us the meanings of the words 'entomology' and 'etymology.'"

Now I would have been all right if I hadn't started off by putting the cart before the horse.

"Entomology," I replied, "is the science that treats of word derivations, and etymology describes insects."

One o'clock struck on my knuckles, loud enough to be heard over all the room.

"Rupert Domville," said auntie, "is your brother right in saying that etymology describes insects?"

"Certainly, auntie."

"But suppose *I* say that *entomology*, not *ety*mology, is the science descriptive of insect life, would you *then* say your brother

was right?"

"*Assuredly*, aunt," said Jill, boldly.

One o'clock rang out sharp and clear on old Jill's knuckles, and we were both sent to our seats to think.

The cottage we lived in might have just as well been denominated a villa, only Aunt Serapheema, to whom it belonged, rather despised high-flown names. It was a beautiful old house in the suburbs of a romantic wee fisher village, that nestled under high banks and green braes, not far from the great naval seaport of P – .

My father's duties at the barracks were not very heavy in our childhood, for there was no war, and though the ride home was a long one, every night almost we listened for the clatter of his horse's hoofs, whether he came or not, and Jill and I bounded to meet him. His coming was *the* one great event of the day or week to us all, and he never failed to bring light and sunshine to Trafalgar Cottage.

Our mother was very, very beautiful – Jill and I always thought so – and our father was the beau ideal to our young minds of what a hero ought to be. I think I see him now as he used to look standing by his beautiful black horse, before mounting in the morning, one arm thrown carelessly over the mane, with his fair hair and his blue eyes smiling as he blew kisses to the drawing-room window, and had kisses blown back in return.

Of course you will excuse a son speaking thus of his parents. They might not have been much to any one else, but they were

all the world to my brother and me.

My father was to be a rich man some day, auntie told us, when he came into his estates in Cornwall. Meanwhile he was simply Captain Jones, and proud and happy to be so.

Ours was not a very large village, though dignified at times by the name of town by the people themselves, only it was quaint and pretty enough in the sweet summer-time, when the sky was blue, and the sea reflected its colour; when the waves sang on the beach, and birds in the hedges and bushes, on the cliffs, and in the glen; when fisher boats were drawn up on the sand, or went lazily out towards the horizon in the evening. Yes, then it was even picturesque, and more than one artist that I remember of lived quite a long time at the Fisherman's Joy. They would be sketching boats and sails and spars, and the natives themselves, all day, to the great astonishment of the natives.

"He do be uncommon clever-like," I heard one man say; "but surely he ought to let the loikes of we have our Sunday clothes on afore he paints us."

The artists thought differently.

Quite a friendship sprang up between our family and the Grays.

But shortly after we made their acquaintance, Bill – who was not a Gray, his name was Moore – went away, having got, at his own request – he being a deserving old coast-guardsman – a post as ship keeper on an old hulk, of which you will hear more soon. Here he lived alone with his old woman, as he called his buxom

wife.

Then something else really strange happened. Quite an adventure in a little way. Jill had gone to P – with mamma that day, and I was strolling on the beach, feeling very lonely indeed. The tide was far back, and near the water's edge I could see a girl gathering shells. Strolling down towards her was a fisher lad, about my own age, and some instinct impelled me to follow. I was just in time to notice him rudely snatch at her basket, and empty all the shells, and presently she passed me crying.

My blood boiled, so I went right on and told the boy he was no gentleman.

He said he didn't pretend to be, but he could lick me if I wanted him to, gentleman or not gentleman.

I said, "Yes, I wanted him to."

I never knew I was so strong before. That lad was soon on his back crying for mercy, and next minute I left him.

The girl was about seven, but so beautiful and lady-like.

She thanked me very prettily, and we walked on together, I feeling shy. But I summoned up courage after a time to ask her name.

"Mattie Gray," she replied; "and yonder comes mother."

To my surprise, "mother" was Nancy, the fisherman's wife.

I was invited in, and made a hero of for hours, but somehow I could not keep from wondering about Mattie.

I told auntie the story that evening. Now, if there be anything a woman loves in this world it is a mystery, and auntie was no

exception. So she and Jill and I all walked over to the cottage next afternoon.

"What a lovely child you have, Mrs Gray! We have not seen her before."

"No, ma'am, she'd been to school."

"Have you only one?"

"My dear lady," said Nancy, "Mattie isn't ours. You see, we have only been here for six months, and people don't know our story. We come from far south in Cornwall, and when a baby, bless her, Mattie, as we call her, came to us in a strange, strange way."

"Tell us," said auntie, seating herself in a chair which Nancy had dusted for her.

"Oh, it is soon told, ma'am, all that's of it. We lived on a wild bit o' coast, ma'am, and many is the ship that foundered there. Well, one wild afternoon we noticed a barque trying to round the point, and would have rounded it, but missed stays like, struck, and began to break up. We saw her go to pieces before our eyes, for no boat could be lowered.

"At long last, though, my man and his mate determined to venture. It was a terrible risk. But I am a fisherman's wife, and I never said, 'Don't go, Joe.'"

She paused a moment, woman-like, to wipe away a tear.

"And they saved the crew?" asked auntie.

"They came back wi' four in the boat, ma'am. One was a gentle lady, one was Mattie, and there were two sailors besides. They

were all Spanish, Miss. The poor lady never spoke a word we could understand. She wore away next afternoon, but that great box yonder was washed on shore, and when she saw it she pointed to poor baby, then to the chest, and smiled – and died."

"And the men, could they tell you nothing?"

"They told the parson something in Spanish, but it wasn't much. Mattie's mother was a grand dame, and the father had not been on board. They promised to write and tell us more, but ah! Miss, we'll never hear nor know aught else till the sea gives up its dead."

"We read of such things in books," said auntie, "but I never heard so strange a tale from living lips before. Come hither, child."

Mattie obeyed, and, marvellous to say, was not a bit afraid of auntie. She clambered on to her knee and put an arm round her neck, and auntie looked softened, so much so that for a moment or two I thought I saw a tear in her eye. She sat a long time talking, and orphan Mattie went sound asleep.

After this Mattie came very often to Trafalgar Cottage, and became our playmate all the winter, out of doors when the weather was fine, and in the house when it blew wild across the sea.

Jill and I grew very fond of Mattie, but we used to wonder at her strange beauty. She was so different from other children, with her creamy face, her weird black eyes, and long, long hair. And we used to wonder also at her cleverness. I suppose Spanish

people have the gift of tongues, but though Mattie was younger by three years than we, she could talk far better, and to hear her read was like listening to the music of birds.

She used to read to us by the hour, Jill and I lying on the floor on goats' skins, as was our custom, and feeling all the while in some other world – dreamland, I think they call it.

There were three of us now, for auntie asked permission to teach Mattie with us. But one o'clock was never struck on Mattie's little knuckles; indeed, she was clever even at "ologies," and had all the "ographies" by heart, and so did not deserve one o'clock.

There were three of us to play on the beach now, and climb the broomy hills, and gather wild flowers, and look for birds' nests in the spring, and three of us to go out with Father Gray in his brown-sailed yawl.

There were three of us, never separate all the livelong summer days.

But summer passed away at last, the days shortened in, the sea looked rougher and colder now, and the vessels out on the grey distance went staggering past under shortened sails, or flew like ghosts when the wind blew high.

And then came my first sorrow, the first time that I really knew there was grief and death in the world.

I will not take long to tell it. I am but little likely to linger over so sad and dismal a memory of the past. Yet every incident in that day's drama is painted on the tablets of memory in colours

that will never be effaced while life does last.

Little did big brown-bearded Joe Gray think, when he kissed his wife and Mattie on that bright afternoon, and with his mate put off to sea, that they would never see him alive again.

The moon rose early, and shone red and clear over the water in a triangular path of silver, that went broadening away towards the horizon. And when hours passed by, and the wind came up with cloud banks out of the west, Nancy – fisherman's wife though she was – grew uneasy, and went very often to the door.

The wind grew wilder and wilder, and the air was filled with rain, and with spray from the waves that broke quick and angrily on the beach.

The big petroleum lamp was lighted and put in the window. That lamp had often guided Joe Gray through darkness and storm to his own cottage door.

They tell me that fisher folks, and toilers by and on the sea have an instinct that is not vouchsafed to dwellers inland. Be that as it may, poor Nancy could rest to-night neither indoors nor out. But hours and hours went by, and still the husband came not. How she strained her ears to catch some sound above the roaring wind and lashing seas, to give her joy, only those who have so waited and so watched can tell.

Her only hope at last was that he might have made some other port or taken shelter under the lee of the island.

The night passed away. Wee Mattie slept, and towards morning even the distracted wife's sorrows were bathed for an

hour in slumber. But she sprang up at last – she thought she heard his voice.

The fire had burned out on the hearth, the lamp was out too, but grey daylight was shimmering through the uncurtained panes.

"Yes, yes!" she cried. "Coming, Joe! Coming, lad!"

And she staggered up and rushed forth.

What was that dark thing on the beach? It was a great boat – it was his yawl, bottom up.

She knew little more for a time after that. She saw people hurrying towards her and towards the wreck; then all was a mist for hours.

But they found poor Joe beneath the yawl, and they bore him in and laid him in the little "best" room. He was dead and stiff, with cold, hard hands half clenched, and in one a morsel of rope. It was the end of the main sheet he had grasped in his hour of agony, and they cut it off and left it there.

Her grief, they say, when she awoke at last, was past describing. With a wail of widowed anguish, that thrilled through the hearts of the sea-hardened listeners she flung herself on the body.

"My Joe, my Joe – my own poor boy!" she moaned. "Oh, why has Heaven deprived me of my man!"

They simply turned away and left her to her grief. They thought it best, but there was not a man among them whose face was not wet with tears.

That was my first sorrow; but, alas! there were more to come.

And it is strange the effect that sorrow has on the young. Before this, all my life had seemed one long happy dream. But all at once I became awake, and I date my real existence from the day they laid poor Joe Gray in the little churchyard, high above the sea, that will sing his requiem for ever and for ay.

Chapter Four
The Sound of War – First Sorrows – A Change in our Lives

Like many other poor folks, to the houses of whom Death comes when least expected, Nancy Gray was left without a penny in the world, and wee Mattie was doubly an orphan since Daddie Gray was drowned.

When then, after a visit or two to the fisherman's cottage, auntie one morning announced that she had taken Mattie over to be as one of her own kith and kin, and that Nancy herself would have employment at Trafalgar Cottage, none of us was a bit surprised. It was only the angel in auntie's heart showing a little more.

So Mattie was henceforth styled "sister" by Jill and me.

Then came sorrow the second. War broke out at the Cape, the Caffres were up and killing – butchering, in fact – our poor people at all hands. Father's regiment was ordered out, and though he himself might have stayed at home, he elected to go.

What a grief this was for us! Jill and I looked upon our dear father as one already dead.

"I'm sure they'll kill *you*, father," Jill sobbed.

"Why *me*, my boy?"

"Because they kill all the prettiest men," said the innocent boy.

Then came a few busy days and tearful days, and – then my father was gone. The scene of the departure of the soldiers for the war is something I will never forget. What made it all the worse was, that in returning home our carriage was blocked by a mob, and we had to witness the passing by of a soldier's funeral. It was inexpressibly sad, and I remember my dear mother wept on auntie's breast, till I verily believed her heart would break.

From that very date our bed was made up in mother's own room. We were all she had now. Besides, something must have told her that she would not even have us long.

Children's sorrows do not last very long, their souls are very resilient, and this is wisely ordered. So by the time we got father's first letter we had learned to live on in happy hope of soon seeing him back.

Letter after letter came; some that told of the fighting were sad enough, but there was no word of our soldier father returning from the wars.

One day we were all seated at breakfast and talking quite cheerfully, when the postman's thrilling rat-tat was heard at the door. That knock always did make us start, now that father was away at the wars. And this very morning, too, we had watched the postman till he went past and disappeared round the corner, so he must have forgotten our letter and come with it on his return. Sally came in with it at last, but seemed to take such a long time.

"It's from the Cape, ma'am," she said, "and it *isn't in black*."

Girls *are* so thoughtless.

I cannot tell you how it was, but neither Jill nor I could take our eyes off poor ma's face when she took the letter, tore it open, and began to read. A glance at the envelope told her it was his dear handwriting, so a gleam of joy came into her eyes, and a fond smile half-played round her lips. Alas! both the gleam and the smile were quickly banished, and were succeeded by a look of utter despair. Oh, my beautiful mother, how dazed and strange she appeared! One glance round the table, then the letter dropped from her fingers, and we rushed to support her.

But the flood of tears came now fast enough, and as she threw herself on the sofa in a paroxysm of grief, we really thought her heart would break.

Speak she could not for a time.

"Oh, mother dear, what is it?"

"Tell us, mother, tell us all."

"Is father killed?"

The sight of our anguish probably helped to stem for a time the current of her own.

"N-no," she sobbed. "Father is not killed – but he is wounded – slightly, he says, – and, I must go away to him."

Here she hugged us to her breast.

"It will not be for long, children – only just a little, little time – and you must both be so good."

Our turn had come now – our very hearts seemed swamped as the great grief came swelling over them, like the waves of the ocean. She let us weep for a time, she made no attempt either to

repress our tears or to stop our senseless, incoherent talk.

"You cannot go. You must not leave us."

This, and this alone, was the burden of our song. Alas! the fiat had gone forth, and in our very souls we knew and felt it. Once more she kissed us, then auntie led us out, saying we must leave mamma a little while for her good. We would do anything for ma's good, even to going away into the schoolroom – which never before had looked so grim and cheerless – and squatting on our goatskin to cry. Every now and then poor Jill would say —

"Don't *you* cry so, Jack."

And every now and then I would make the same request to him.

They say there is no love equal to that a mother bears for a child; but tell me this, ye who have known it, what love exceeds that which a fond and sensitive child bears for a mother? and oh, what else on earth can fill the aching void that is left when she is gone?

For a time weeping gave us relief, then even that consolation was taken away. I just felt that my life's lamp had clean gone out, that there was no more hope —*could* be no more hope for me.

It was difficult to realise or grasp all the terrible truth at once. Mother going away! Our own dear darling mother, and we, perhaps never, never to see her more! Never listen to her voice again at eventide, singing low to us by the firelight, or telling us tales by our bedside! Never kneel again by her knees to pray! Never feel again her soft good-night kisses, nor the touch of her

loving hands! Never – but here the tears returned, and once more Jill and I wept in each other's arms.

In times of grief like this I think the mind is more highly sensitised, as a photographic artist would say, and takes and retains impressions more quickly. For the *minutiae* even of that sad eventful morning are still retained in my memory in a remarkable way. I remember the slightest sounds and most trivial sights heard or seen by Jill and me as we sat in our listless grief by the window. I remember the yelp of a little cur we used to pity, because it was always tied up; the laugh of a street carter as he talked to a neighbour; the dreary, intermittent tapping of the twig of a rose-bush against the glass; the low boom of the breaking waves. I remember it was raining; that the wind blew high across the sea; that the sea itself was grey and chafing, and apparently all in motion in one direction, like some mighty river of the new world; I remember the dripping bushes in the front garden, and the extra-green look of the rain-varnished paling around it; and even the little pools of water on the street, and the buffeted appearance of the few passengers striving to hold umbrellas up against the toilsome wind.

Mother came quietly in, and – she was smiling now.

How much that smile cost her, mothers alone may tell, but even we knew it was a smile *without*, to hide the grief *within*.

Mother went away.

For many a long month now there was a blank, a void in our hearts and in our home that nothing could fill.

Except Hope.

"Hope springs eternal in the human breast." Truer words were never spoken. When Hope dies, Life itself is soon extinct.

Auntie Serapheema did all she could now to cheer us. She was far less prim and stern with Jill and me. One o'clock struck no more on his knuckles nor on mine. She even shortened our school hours, and was easier with us in the matter of "ologies" and "ographies." Letters came frequently and with great regularity, and they were always cheerful. Father was better, and mother would be happy if they could both get home, and they hoped to. Yes, they hoped to, but no letter said when, or how soon that hope might be realised.

But one of the most cheerful letters was from father himself, in which he said he trusted to be able to send us both into the Royal Navy as cadets. To be naval officers had always been our dream of dreams, Jill's and mine. To wear the grand old uniform of blue and gold, to tread the snowy quarter-deck with swords by our side, and the white flag fluttering in the sunshine overhead —

> "The flag that braved a thousand years,
> The battle and the breeze – "

to sail the seas, to hear great guns firing, to attack ships and forts, and do all kinds of gallant deeds for our own glory and our country's good – this constituted our notions of life as it ought to be led.

We would have to pass, though. The examination, however, was not a stiff one. Jill and I were but little over ten, but thanks to auntie we knew most of the subjects already well, if not thoroughly.

Would we pass the doctor with flying colours? Well, we were hardy and healthy, though at that time of no extra physique. We must get stronger somehow. Auntie consulted the family doctor, she herself suggesting "dumb-bells." The doctor's reply was – "Fiddlesticks, madam, fiddlesticks," – for doctors do not like other people, especially female-people, to put words in their mouths. But auntie was a little discomposed at the brusque mention of "fiddlesticks."

"What then would *you* suggest, sir?" she said, pompously.

The doctor simply pointed with his forefinger first at the green hills and cliffs, then at the sea, took up his hat and marched out of the room, curtly bowing her "good morning" as he turned in the doorway.

Now, whom should we find in earnest confab with auntie next forenoon but Bill Moore, the ship keeper.

Jill and I at once beat a discreet retreat.

I must tell you a little more about Bill. He had not always been simply Bill Moore, but *Mr* Moore. He had, first and foremost as a young man, taken honours in classics and mathematics at a northern university, then gone straight "to the dogs" – so they said. When he in some measure recovered himself – war being then going on – he had joined the service (Royal Navy) as a man

ready and willing to turn his hand to anything. Well, they were not so particular in those days; they would not refuse bone and muscle in whatever shape it came, and Bill had been a handsome fellow in his day. He got on in the service, and though he soon became an A.B., and really preferred to be before the mast, he was rated schoolmaster for many years, but finally received an appointment as coast-guardsman, and latterly, as we know, keeper of the hulk, with a fairly good pension.

He took a great fancy for us, and as somehow or other auntie had an acute and undying aversion to public schools, when Mr Bill Moore proposed we should come to the hulk and be drilled by him physically and mentally, she felt greatly inclined to accede. Hence the present interview.

"Perhaps they might do better at a public school, Miss, than with me, but – "

"I won't hear of a public school," auntie cut in with, curtly.

"Well, Miss, we have a mast and ratlins on my old tub; I would take care they were well drilled and had plenty of exercise, my wife will look after their internal comforts, and I can insure their passing their examinations in a year or two."

"And they would be out of harm's way," mused my aunt.

"We'll have strict discipline, Miss. They must not leave the ship without my permission."

"There would be no objection to your having the boys, I suppose?"

"I know the old admiral well, Miss; sailed with him for five

long years, and blew the Russians about a bit. No, I went straight to him before I wrote to you."

"And what did he say?"

"'Do what you please with the old *Thunderbolt*,' he said, 'only don't set her on fire.' These are his words, Miss."

"Well, then, Mr Moore, I think you may consider the matter as settled. The boys will not be far away, they will be under control and discipline, they will know something beforehand about ships, and they can come home, I suppose, now and then to go to church on a Sunday?"

"Oh yes, Miss, and I'm sure my wife and I will be delighted if you and dear Mattie will come and see us all regularly. We'll always call these our red-letter days."

Auntie smiled and promised. There is no doubt about it. Mr Bill Moore knew what ladies' hearts are made of.

So it was all arranged that very day, and in a fortnight after we started and took up our quarters on board the saucy *Thunderbolt*.

Chapter Five
The Gallant "Thunderbolt" – Tom Morley, Bo's'n's Mate – A Strange Dream

It would be hard to say, perhaps, why the gallant old *Thunderbolt* was laid up as a hulk. She looked a fine old wooden frigate, and had seen a lot of service in her time. But the engines had been taken out of her, and away up the water she lay like a good many more, moored by the head to swing with the tide, or with any extra strong wind that blew. She was evidently considered too good to break up, and she might, the Admiralty thought, come in handy some day, and even require to be fitted out for sea again.

Meanwhile she would do as a store, or rather lumber ship. But at this time neither stores nor lumber either worth speaking about was on board of her.

She hardly made any water, though occasionally some hands came off from the dockyard and pumped her dry, with a deal of din and noise and no end of talking and chaffing. In fact the *Thunderbolt* seemed to have been forgotten by the big human guns at Somerset House, and for that matter there was no real use in the bit stump of a lower mast that stuck out of her forward,

nor the morsel of ratlin that led to it, unless to dry clothes upon. Her crew, all told, were an old bo's'n's mate and Mr Moore. We must call him *Mr* Moore now, and forget the Bill.

Tom Morley was the bo's'n's name, a rugged old son of a gun as ever any one clapped eyes upon, with a face as rough and red as a boiled lobster, and a voice that would have brought down birds out of the air had he used it to its full extent. It was a harsh voice, however, and gave you the idea his air-tubes had been originally lined with emery paper, which had never worn quite smooth.

Such was Tom, a good-hearted old soul nevertheless, though with a sad predilection for tossing off cans. It will be seen, therefore, that he was a seaman of the old school – one that Dibdin would have delighted to portray. Yes, and he often made the decks of the saucy old *Thunderbolt* ring with Dibdin's heroic ditties.

Although it might have been difficult to define which was the superior officer of this hulk, owing to the peculiar rating of Mr Moore, when he had served afloat, neither was jealous of the other: when Moore was out of the ship Morley was captain, and *vice versa*; when both were on board, why then both were captains. But, between ourselves, I do think *Mrs* Moore herself was what the Yankees call "boss of the whole concarn." Anyhow, she did just as she pleased, and cooked and washed for the crew all-told, and hung up the clothes wherever she liked.

Attached to the hulk was a morsel of a dinghy boat not much bigger than Mrs Moore's washing tub, only differently shaped, in

some slight degree at least.

We youngsters received a hearty welcome when we came off. Tom had put on his best coat for the occasion, and much to our delight met us in the gangway, saluting us in true naval fashion with as much dignity as if we had been admirals.

"Very glad to see you, young gentlemen," said Tom. "You are truly welcome on board the saucy *Thunderbolt*. And I assure you the sight of your youthful faces makes me think the old times has all come back again. I'd like to be taking up anchor now with a Yee-ho and Heave-O!"

Jill and I laughed and thought Tom very jolly.

"But I say, Captain Moore," he continued, turning to his shipmate, "how ever are we to tell these youngsters apart? Why, bother my old wig, if they ain't as like as two whalers, same rig, too, from top to bottom, same cut from jib to binnacle. I say, messmate, if I'd never seen 'em before and met 'em as I was coming out of the 'Jolly Tapsters' I'd think – I was only seein' one, though there appeared to be two."

"I'll make that all right, Tom," said Mrs Moore, coming up from below and taking charge of us right away.

And she did too, for when we appeared on deck an hour after, I wore a red ribbon round my straw hat, and Jill wore a blue, and Tom doffed his cap, and giving a shout that must have been heard on shore, hailed us at once as "Admiral Jack of the Red," and "Admiral Jill of the Blue."

We were simply delighted with our accommodation on board,

and with everything on the old hulk fore and aft.

Of course we all lived aft, and dined in state together in the great cabin, where once a post captain had sat at meals or in council of war, and in which, probably, before now court-martials had been assembled and men tried for life itself.

Jill and I had a large cabin to ourselves on the starboard side of the "saloon," as it would be called in the merchant service, the Moorcs had theirs on the port side, and the bo's'n's mate occupied quarters in the ward-room on the deck beneath. Our cabin was furnished charmingly, but we each had a swinging cot, though they were in close juxtaposition. There were curtains to the windows and doorways, and a carpet and pictures and all complete.

All day long we had different views of our surroundings from the ports below in our cabin, or from the ward-room. For according to the tide the old ship swung; now we would be looking down the harbour among ships, noble men-of-war and others, and away out seaward, again it would be the town or dockyard, and at other times the green country. Oh, it was very charming and so romantic, I can tell you.

In a day or two we commenced our studies in downright earnest, and a very pleasant and thorough teacher Mr Moore proved. But it was all forenoon work, and not all book work either. For twice a week or oftener we were told off to go round the ship with Tom, and he gave us the name of every part of her hull, and examined us on his lectures afterwards.

One day a shore boat brought alongside a full rigged ship nearly as long as a sofa, and this was hoisted carefully on deck and lowered below. It was, of course, a model man-o'-war, and old Tom set about next day putting it "ship-shape and Bristol fashion," as he called it. He thoroughly overhauled it, altering here, and adding there, cutting and criticising all the time. While he was doing this we were with him, listening to every word, and gained quite a deal of information about rigging, etc, in this way. It took Tom three weeks to refit his model ship and make her ready for sea, as he called it. Then – still having us alongside of him – he manned and provisioned her, taking in stores from little boats that he brought alongside on the deck. And though this was to a large degree dummy work, he would have the thing rightly done. No lugger or officer's boat either must come alongside in any save an orthodox fashion, and if in hauling up stores any hitch happened to the gearing, he would have it all put carefully to rights before another cask, or box, or shot, or shell was taken on board.

I think we worked with Tom in this way for three or four months, by which time we really began to consider ourselves proficient seamen and officers.

Nor was our exercise forgotten. This was also Tom's department, and he would have Jill and I squirming up and down the ratlins and over the top for an hour at a time. Or standing face to face with sword-sticks, going through, at the word of command, each cut and guard and quirk of the sword exercise.

This we considered grand fun, but it was serious earnest with honest Tom.

"There ain't no nonsense about this sort of thing, young gentlemen," he would say. "I saw you laughing, Admiral Jack, and whatever *you* does Admiral Jill does too. Now if it occurs again on duty I'll mast-head ye, so look out for squalls. 'Ttention! On guard! Point o' your sword a leetle higher, Admiral Jill. Shoulders more square, Admiral Jack. That's better. Right toe a trifle more fore-and-aft. So. Steady as you go."

But as soon as duty, as Tom called it, was done, we were all as merry as Eton boys off on a summer holiday. We had all kinds of games on board, and plenty of rowing about on the water in that morsel of a dinghy, and were allowed to go on shore at any reasonable hour and for any reasonable time.

Tom had always gone in for growing mustard and cress on board, and a bit o' sea-kale in a flower-pot, but the idea struck Jill and me that we might carry garden operations out to even greater perfection, and having asked and obtained permission of Mr Moore, we set to work and soon arranged in different parts of the deck a series of little flower gardens made from orange boxes. And very charming and beautiful they looked.

So that when auntie came with Mattie one summer's morning, they were both astonished at our horticultural skill and contrivances.

Tom and Mr Moore always dressed in their best when the ladies were coming, and a bit of bunting was even hoisted on the

top of the mast, and no clothes permitted to be hung up to air or dry for that day.

Auntie used to make a pic-nic of these visits. Mrs Moore had the table-cloth laid with spotless linen and adorned with gay flowers, and Mummy Gray, as Mattie called her foster-mother, invariably brought a basket of such good things, that the very thoughts of them beforehand used to make my mouth water, and of course Jill's as well.

"I'm really delighted, Mr Moore," said Aunt Serapheema, on the quarter-deck one day, "to see the boys looking so well and happy. It was really an excellent thought of yours to have them here, and I have not the slightest doubt they will prove a credit to your tuition, and pass their examination with flying colours."

"Bravo! Miss," cried Tom Morley. "In my time, Miss, I've heard many's the little speech on a quarter-deck, but I declare to you, on the honour of an old sailor, I never heard a neater than that."

"To my mate Tom, here," replied Mr Moore, "belongs the credit more than to me and my wife, of making the young gentlemen what you see them."

Old Tom Morley scraped and bowed in the most orthodox fashion, and Mr Moore continued:

"He does keep them at it, Miss. Why, it's drill, drill, drill, all day long, and the boys like it, too. Then he reads to them and tells them stories in the evening."

"Good books, I hope?"

"Not bad 'uns, Miss, I can assure you. We've Dickens and Scott, and that lot, but what we're doin' principally at present is a thorough overhaul o' Marryat. He is the chap, Miss, to give a man, or boy either, a right taste o' the crust o' the service."

Dear Mattie was listening to all this while she stood close by me, with one wee arm round my wrist, all eyes and smiles.

"What a perfect picture those two little ones look!" said Mrs Moore. "You are very fond of your little sailor brothers, aren't you, dear? Which do you like best?"

Mattie's eye wandered from Jill to me, then she dropped her head smiling on my shoulder.

"I love them both," she said, "but Jack saved my life."

That was only Mattie's romantic way of alluding to our introduction, when I punched the rude fisher-boy's head on her account.

But there was never a bit of jealousy about Jill.

There was one other thing that Tom taught us, and it is a branch of such pleasant education that I advise all boys to go in for it, viz, joiner's and carpenter's work. We had a regular bench on board and all sorts of tools, so that we could make almost any sort of article.

We spent the greater part of every evening on board ship, and as Tom was generally on board also, and had a wealth of wonderful tales to tell, the time passed very quickly indeed.

We did not forget to read and pray as dear mother told us to, and this we did every night whether sleepy or not. Mind, I am

not telling this part of our story for the sake of showing we were good boys. We were no better, perhaps no worse, than other lads of our age, but we had then, as I have had all my life, unbounded faith in prayer, and in the goodness of the Father who made us. Besides, there was so much to thank Him for and to ask Him for, and while on our knees we somehow seemed always close to our absent mother. That alone made prayer *so* sweet.

Like most boys, we rather liked ghost stories, and though I do not believe it now, we had an idea then, that the old *Thunderbolt* was haunted. You see so many men had been killed on her battle-decks, and there were so many ugly dark stains about the parts where the guns had been, that it is no wonder lads so full of romance as we were, manufactured a ghost or two.

The decks did seem very gloomy and empty just after nightfall, so much so that, I do not mind confessing, when Jill and I had to go forward, we walked very closely together indeed, and gave many a fearful quick glance round, lest we should see a strange light or something even more startling.

But we never saw anything fearsome, though more than once, after we had been talking about mysterious things just before getting into our cots, we did have ugly dreams, and were glad when we saw daylight shimmering on the water alongside.

Now, all along my influence over Jill had been something quite marvellous. It really was as if his soul and mine were linked together in bonds that nothing could sever. Our very thoughts and imaginings were often precisely similar at the same time or

times.

Well, knowing this, I should have been most careful in all I did and in all I said, and I will never, *never* forgive myself for not being so. For as you will presently see, my giving way to romantic imaginings and thoughts, that however pleasant they might be for the present, were really silly, had terrible results.

Tom Morley used to tell us tales of the pirates of the olden times, a race of marauders that I need hardly say have been long since swept from the face of the great deep.

Well, we liked ghosts best, perhaps, but next to them came pirates.

Being older than Jill – by five minutes – I really ought to have known better, yet one day I proposed playing at pirates. And soon this became a regular game of ours. Tom did not seem to mind it much, though he himself did not play, but he lent us a couple of old-fashioned horse pistols, and taught us to load and fire them – one lesson was enough. Of course we did not use anything more deadly than a little blotting-paper to keep the powder in.

Jill was always the pirate. He used to hail and board the ship from the bows in fine form, while I represented the crew. The battle would rage with pistols and sword-sticks, the former being dispensed with after the first discharge, and the fight then continued all over the deck, breast to breast, the excitement increasing every minute.

Sometimes the ship was captured, and I had to represent the crew to the bitter end, and walk the plank a dozen times.

What we did miss more than anything else was a black flag with skull and cross-bones.

Happy thought, we would make one!

We worked unknown to Tom at this, however. I bought the stuff, white and black, and it cost us a whole week or more to finish the job, but it was certainly a very creditable piece of work when finished. Quite a big thing too, and all complete, and ready to be run up to the halyards on which Tom hoisted a bit of bunting on high-days and holidays.

We never really thought of running it up, of course, but it was nice to have it. We felt then we w'ere pirates, in imagination at all events.

Now here is a singular thing which I must relate. One morning after being called by Tom – this was a regular part of Tom's duty – I looked round to Jill's cot, and there he was sitting bolt upright in it, with that sunny smile on his innocent sleepy face.

"What's up, Jill?" I asked.

"You're not," said Jill, "though I heard Tom sing out, 'Five bells, young gentlemen, please,' more than half an hour ago."

Then the next words spoken were said by both at precisely the same time, *syllabic by syllable as if we had been wound up to it.*

"I've had such a funny dream."

We looked at each other, then I said:

"What was yours, Jill?"

"Nay," said Jill, "you tell me yours first, because you know you are the eldest."

"Well, I dreamt we had captured the *Thunderbolt*, hoisted the black flag and run off to sea with her."

"That was exactly my dream," said Jill.

"Did *you* make Mr Moore and the rest walk the plank?"

"Oh no, Jack, I wouldn't dream of anything so very dreadful. I didn't see them anywhere about."

"Neither did I in mine. But my dream was altogether jolly fun."

"So was mine and – "

"Gone six bells, young gentlemen. Really if this sort o' thing goes on, I'll take the number o' your hammocks, and report ye on the quarter-deck next time your aunt comes on board."

"All right, Captain Tom, we'll be out in five minutes."

And up we jumped, and were speedily dressed, and on deck for our morning walk.

But we thought no more of the dream.

It went as completely out of our minds as if we had never dreamed it at all.

But it was brought to our minds about a month afterwards in a way I am never likely to forget.

Meanwhile we still kept up our game of playing at being pirates.

It was summer now, and dear sister Mattie came often to see us, more often with her Mummy Gray than with Aunt Serapheema.

Of course we initiated her into the mystery of the pirate-game,

and she took a most active part in it too. She acted the rich old dowager who had bags of gold and treasures untold, diamonds and all the rest of it, and who was eventually captured, and made to walk the plank with the rest of the unhappy crew.

I never saw any game take such complete possession of a child, as that pirate-play did of Mattie. She came oftener on board now than she might otherwise have done; she entered into the thing heart and soul, suggesting many improvements we never should have thought about, and acting her part as if to the manner born.

Of course she was told of the black flag, and must see it, and her eyes actually sparkled as they fell on the weird white skull and bleached cross-bones.

Things went on thus for some weeks longer, the pirate-play never losing interest, and each of us being thorough masters of his or her part.

But one day Mr Moore with his wife were invited to Trafalgar Cottage and Tom Morley was left in charge of the ship, while at her own special request Mattie was also left on board.

We could play now to our hearts' content.

But we little knew what was before us.

Chapter Six
An Appalling Adventure – "We must Prepare for Instant Flight."

Just after tea, and while Tom was telling some of his most fascinating stories, and we three children were listening with dilated eyes and bated breath, we were hailed by a boatman.

"*Thunderbolt* ahoy!"

"Ay, ay," cried Tom, jumping up and rushing to the gangway – we had been having tea on the upper deck.

Then up sprang an old shipmate of Tom's, and we heard them talking earnestly together and looking towards us. At last Tom advanced almost shyly. "I dunno really," he said, "if one o' you young gentlemen would like to be left in charge of the old *Thunderbolt* for an hour or so. Yonder's an old shipmate o' mine, and I'd dearly like to run on shore for maybe an hour."

"Oh, we'd like it immensely." We spoke these words both at the same time, as strangely enough we always did speak brief sentences, when excited.

"Well then," said Tom, laughing and addressing me, "You're Captain Jack, this is Commander Jill, and this is Mattie the mate."

"Hurrah!" we shouted. "Off you trundle, Tom, and see you enjoy yourself properly; and if you don't report yourself in due

form when you come on board, we'll put you in irons. D'ye hear?"

"Ay, ay, sir," said Tom, saluting. Then over the side went he and his friend, and we saw them —*no more*.

Tom had promised not to be gone longer than eight o'clock, but eight and nine went by, and still he came not. The shades of night began to darken over the water and over the town, and worse than all it came on to blow.

We did not expect Mrs Moore to come back. Indeed it had been arranged, that if she did not return by seven, Tom was to see to putting us all to bed; and Tom – wicked, thoughtless Tom – had faithfully promised he would.

Alas! I fear that at that very moment Tom was tossing a can, and singing one of Dibdin's songs.

"It's very romantic, isn't it?" said Mattie.

We both smiled like automata and said "yes"; but I don't think either of us thought it was a desirable situation to be left in.

Jill and I were thinking about the ghost. But it would not do to say a word concerning this to Mattie. Each knew, too, what the other was thinking about. I am sure enough of this, because when, just as we were retiring into the great cabin, Jill gave a little glance behind him, and I said in his ear, "There are no such things, old Jill," he nodded and smiled.

The wind shortly increased to nearly the force of a gale. It went roaring through the rigging of our one mast in a way that was dismal to listen to, though Mattie assured us it was perfectly delightful. The water alongside was all in a seethe, and the great

ship wriggled if she did not roll, and kept pulling at her moorings as if she wanted to go flying away on the wings of that strong north wind. We busied ourselves, now, Jill and I, in getting supper, after which we put Mattie to bed on the couch. The three of us determined to turn in all-standing, as sailors phrase it when they mean that they do not undress.

But Jill and I took rugs and lay down in the cabin, as we did not want to be far from Mattie should she call during the night.

We had thought of keeping watch and watch in true navy fashion. But for several reasons we abandoned the idea. First and foremost there really was nothing to watch except Mattie, and we could watch her better if beside her; secondly it would be dreadfully dreary; and thirdly there was the very remotest chance, that the ghost of some of the brave fellows whose life-blood stained the fighting deck might take it into its head to visit the *Thunderbolt* during the storm that was raging.

The three of us said our prayers together, Jill and I kneeling down by Mattie's couch. Then we kissed "good night," and she went off like a top.

After we were quite sure she was sound, Jill looked at me and I looked at Jill, and up we both got as if we had arranged it all beforehand, and carefully locked the door and loaded our pistols and lay down again. We had no shot, but I said that did not matter, as if the noise of the pistol did not alarm the ghost and show him he was not wanted, shot would only go right through him and the holes would fill up again immediately.

However, we knew ghosts did not like light, so we left the swing lamp burning and lay down.

Not to sleep, for a time at all events. We could hear the roar of the wind now more distinctly, and many strange noises that we could not understand. It might have been rats, but there were footsteps so audible overhead every now and then, that we fully expected to see the door open and honest Tom appear to report himself.

I'm certain we heard scuffling and stamping outside the door, but at last all sounds merged into dreams, and if we did start awake now and then we could not be sure whether the noises that roused us were reality or imaginary.

We did sleep sound at last, for long hours too; then all at once, as if by instinct, or, as I said before, as if wound up to it like clockwork automata, Jill and I both rose up and became fully sensible that we were standing hand in hand in the centre of the room.

It was grey daylight on a lovely morning – very early, perhaps not quite three o'clock, and Jill and I both stared in astonishment as we gazed out of the port.

Why, the town was going round us. Houses and buildings and vessels were passing by the window.

Could we be dreaming? No, yonder was the green of a hill now, and the clouds moving also.

About the same moment that these wonderful phenomena were being presented to our eyes, the midshipman on watch on

one of the ships – who, by the way, was half asleep – ran down below and reported to his commander that a steamer was going up harbour, and would run into the dockyard.

The commander said, "Get out of here, youngster. You're mad or dreaming."

The middy went on deck, but came diving below again immediately, taking two steps at a time.

"The *Thunderbolt* has slipped her moorings, and is driving out to sea."

"Ay, lad," said the commander, "that is more like it. The steamer you thought moving has been stationary."

And now on board the hulk the real situation began to dawn upon our minds.

We were being run away with.

Then a great gun reverberated high over the howling wind, and gun after gun followed.

The good people of the town made quite sure that one of two things had happened: either a foreign enemy had landed, or the end of the world had come.

At the first gun Mattie, wideawake, jumped off the couch, and we at once explained to her the situation.

"Hullo!" she cried, "how nice! Hullo! hullo! Let's play at being pirates."

Her mirth and excitement were infectious.

In a minute or two we were armed and had rushed on deck, and the play was commenced.

The old *Thunderbolt* now was making good way down the harbour, and how she missed fouling and sinking some of the craft is to me a mystery to this day. But some of them had a marvellously close shave.

The whole harbour was now alarmed, and the officers and crews swarmed on the decks of the vessels. But the stately hulk held on her way, heading – sometimes sterning – for more open water.

Meanwhile, Pirate Jill was cheering in the ratlines, and finally leaped down, and the battle began with swords, we, the combatants, shouting as wildly as we thought was desirable.

We were now bearing close down upon the flag-ship, and could distinguish the officers on the poop.

"Hurrah!" cried Jill, "let's now play at being pirates proper."

"Hullo!" cried Mattie, "we're all pirates."

I ran speedily off for Tom's old battered speaking trumpet, and we were very close to the flag-ship when I hailed her, in true pirate fashion.

"Lie to there, till we send a boat on board, or we'll blow you out of the water."

A chorus of laughter came from quarter-deck and waist.

"Fire!" I cried.

Bang, bang, went both pistols at once.

"Hullo!" cried Mattie; "Hullo!"

And at the same moment, seeing she had the halyards in her hand, I looked aloft just in time to see a little black bundle expand

into a huge flag, and lo! fluttering out in the morning air was the dark dread ensign of the pirate, with its hideous skull and cross-bones.

"Hullo!" cried Mattie once more.

But Jill and I stood aghast!

Then our dream rushed back to our minds.

We did not foul the flag-ship, and were soon rolling away out seawards. But what had we done? It was dreadful to think of – hoisted the pirate flag and fired upon one of her Majesty's flags, right into the teeth of her officers and crew.

So paralysed were we that we entirely forgot to haul down the flag, and it was still flying when – an hour afterwards a couple of tugs managed to get us in tow, and we were once more heading back for the harbour.

The first words the officer of the tug said to me, when he had time to speak, were —

"Why, you're a pretty lot! Cutting out a man o' war under the very guns of the flag-ship, and running off with it. Ha! ha! ha!"

Whatever the laugh might have meant, it sounded to me like the yell of a hyena.

"If you please, sir," I advanced, "we didn't run away with the ship; the ship ran away with us."

"Was it bullum *versus* boatum," he said, "or boatum *versus* bullum?"

"I don't talk Turkish," I said.

"Well," he said, "Turkish here or Turkish there, you young

pirate, I suppose you know what you'll catch?"

"Hang us, won't they?"

"Hang you? Yes. Drum-head court-martial, and hanging, and serve you right too. You don't look very frightened," he added. "There get away inside, the lot of you, and thank your stars it is no worse."

We did as we were told, at the same time I could not help wondering what worse could befall us, than a drum-head court-martial with hanging to follow.

I stopped behind Jill long enough to ask the officer this question:

"They won't hang our little sister Mattie?"

"No, not likely, we'll make much of her."

He caught Mattie up as he spoke, and soon had her laughing and crowing like a mad thing as he galloped round the deck with her on his shoulder.

"They won't hang Mattie," I said to Jill.

"No," said Jill, "that is one good thing."

"Well, do *you* want to be hanged, Jill?"

"I don't think I should like it *much*."

"Well, nothing can save us, you know."

"But flight, Jack."

"Yes, flight, Jill, that's it. I suppose they won't drum-head us to-day?"

"I don't know. I'm not so sure. A drum-head court-martial *is* a drum-head court-martial, you see. And the beauty of it is – if

there be any beauty about it – that it's got up and got done with at once."

"Well, then, I move we prepare for instant flight."

"Quite right. I'm all ready as it is. Let us eat this pie, though."

We did eat the pie. In fact, we breakfasted very heartily. But we grew very sad again when we thought of Mattie we must leave so soon, if indeed we should be successful in getting away at all. However, we could only try.

I got Mattie by the port, and said sadly enough —

"You won't ever, ever forget me, will you, dear Mattie?" I put the question with a kiss.

"No, you silly boy; I promise I won't. But what a silly question. We'll play at pirates again to-morrow."

I felt very much inclined to cry, but – I did not.

Chapter Seven
Alone on the Moor – Adventure in the Cave

On looking back through a long vista of years, and considering all the *pros* and *cons* of the case, and remembering that Jill and I were only boys, I do not think it any wonder we ran away from the dear old *Thunderbolt* hulk. I have always accused myself to myself, for the folly of having given way to a sudden romantic impulse – for which I, being the elder of the three on board, am alone accountable – playing at pirates, firing at a flag-ship, and all the rest of it.

But when our little game was over, and the full enormity of the offence stared us in the face, and after what the officer of the tug-boat had told us, I repeat, it is no wonder we ran away. We were not to know the officer was, figuratively speaking, laughing in his sleeve at us. We believed him. We were convinced it would end in a drum-head court-martial, with, next day, poor Jack swung up at one end of the fore-yard, and poor dear Jill at the other. A pretty sight that would have been on a summer's morning. Romantic? Oh, yes, I own there would have been a good deal of romance about it. Rather much indeed. Our position would have been far too exalted to suit even my ambition.

Some one has said that hanging is the worst use you can put

a man to, so it cannot be good for a boy.

That officer of the tug-boat, too, made so awfully light of the matter.

When I had asked him if hanging was very, very, dreadful, —

"Oh, dear me, no, my lad," he replied, laughing, "not half so bad as having a tooth pulled."

Our darling mother told us never to hate anybody, but I do not think I loved that officer very much just then.

Well, how did we get away? The fact is our escape was effected far more safely and easily than I had anticipated. I had expected that there would be a considerable deal of romance about that I felt sure they would fire shot and shell and shrapnel at the boat that was bearing us off, and if after throwing ourselves into the water we reached shore safely, they would send a regiment or two of soldiers at the very least to pursue us.

The old *Thunderbolt*, when she ran away, "showed a pair of clean heels," so I heard that tug-boat fellow say, because wind and tide was hurrying her on. But it was no such easy matter to get her back; so the whole morning had fled before she was once more alongside her moorings. Then the bustle and din and the loud talking were shocking, for nearly an hour.

Mattie – I was so glad of this – got very sleepy, so we took her into Mrs Moore's room and placed her on the bed. She bade us both good-night prettily, but sleepily, and I was glad of this too, for the "good-nights" did for the "good-byes." Ah! little did Mattie think we were going to leave her, but she did not feel

the tear that fell on her beautiful hair as I bent over her. It was best. After this I suppose it was activity that made us feel brave. We had to look sharp, I assure you. We hurried into our cabin – ours, alas! no more – and exchanged our hats for caps, and put on our monkey jackets – our winter ones. This would not look odd, because there was quite a raw air over the water. We went and packed our one portmanteau, taking nothing lumbersome, and no books, except our little Bibles that mamma had given us.

Then I sat down and wrote a letter, a very brief one, to Mattie. It only said, in a boy's scrawling hand —

> "Dearest Mattie, – Please always pray for Jack and poor Jill. – Your loving and affectionate Jack."

I folded this up, and glided away into the child's room and laid it on her pillow. She was sound asleep, but I kissed her brow. If I had stopped to look at her, I believe my heart would have broken in two.

Jill was waiting with the bag, and the difficulty was now to get a boat. We had thought of getting into the dinghy and paying a man to return it. It was better we didn't.

I opened the port. The fresh morning air blew in and calmed me, and just at that moment, as if a good fairy had sent him, a shore boatman rounded the stern of the hulk, and was close beneath us.

"Boatman," I said, "can you take us on shore?"

He looked about him a bit and nodded. Then I dropped my bag, and he caught it *so* neatly.

"We'll get in from a lower port," I said.

The man nodded again. Off Jill and I went down below to poor Tom Morley's quarters. Nobody saw us, for everybody was on the upper deck forward, and making a terrible din. In three minutes more we were well away from the ship, but I made Jill lie down for fear of the shot and shell and shrapnel which I expected to be flying about our ears soon, and I myself pulled up the neck of my monkey jacket.

The man rowed right away up the harbour, and, to my intense joy, we had soon put a wall between us and the ships of war.

My heart had been thumping violently, and I dare say so was poor Jill's.

When we landed, and I was diving for my purse to pay the mail, he held up his hand deprecatingly.

"Look here, youngsters," he said, "I was a boy myself once. You've got into a little scrape, and you're going to stop away from school till the little storm blows over. I won't take a penny for this job, and I'll take you both on board free and for nothing. My name's Joe Saunders; you can ask for me."

Then we thanked him and shook hands with him, with the tears in our eyes – in fact I think some rolled over. Next moment we were off and away.

We walked very fast and took the quietest streets. We met some marines, and our hearts began to beat again; but they hardly looked at us.

When we had gone some distance we were on high ground,

and paused to look back. We could see the forest of masts rising over the walls and yards, and the smoke curling up from the chimneys. And as we gazed two bells rang out almost simultaneously from all the ships, while immediately afterwards, sweet and clear in the still morning air, rose the music of the band on the flag-ship's quarter-deck.

It was very beautiful, but to us inexpressibly saddening.

We hurried on now, and were soon thankful to find ourselves out in the green country, with music of another kind falling on our ears – the happy songs of the birds.

We did not stay to listen then, however; we were in far too great a hurry to put as many miles as the day would admit of between us and the scenes of our wild piratical escapades. For we had not a doubt that, as soon as the *Thunderbolt* was once safely moored, the hue and cry would go out for the capture of the daring pirates who had threatened to blow one of Her Majesty's flag-ships, with a tame admiral on board of it, out of the water.

So we went on, and on, and on, bearing away to the north, the country becoming wilder and more desolate at every turn of the road. When it was long past midday we began to feel very hungry, and, spying smoke rising from a little roadside inn not far off, we determined to halt and refresh ourselves.

A very quiet-looking, motherly sort of woman showed us into a neat little parlour, and making her acquainted with our desires, she went out and soon returned with a dinner fit for a king. Indeed I am sure that King Charles, when he was in hiding, did not

fare half so well. Here were new potatoes, and boiled bacon and beans, and a jug of table beer, to say nothing of the white cloth and the wild flowers. What more could a king desire?

We felt exceedingly comfortable after dinner, and much bolder. Indeed we felt so far braced up that I determined forthwith to write to Auntie Serapheema and our darling mother. We had brought with us our little writing-cases, so, with Jill looking over my shoulder, I began writing.

Auntie's letter did not take long. We expressed our sorrow, thanked her for all her kindness, and told her we were determined to be sailors if not captured; and that we hoped one day to return to England laden with jewels and gold, and come back and live happy ever after in Trafalgar Cottage. We sent our love to Sally and Robert, and our very dearest love to little Mattie; and we signed the letter with our names in full.

That last was a stroke of policy, we thought.

Next we commenced writing to papa and mamma. I wrote letter after letter and tore them all up, carefully stowing away the pieces in our bag, lest if left about they might lead to our capture.

I hardly remember what sort of a tear-blotched, loving, and penitent epistle the last was, but perhaps it would have answered as well as a longer one. Just then a postman hove in sight. He stopped to refresh himself, and I ran out and gave him the letters. I had not even forgotten to put the correct number of stamps on poor mamma's.

So we had crossed the Rubicon.

But having sent the letter to mamma, a load appeared to have fallen off my mind, all in a heap as it were.

When we asked the landlady how much was to pay, she looked at us and said, "Sixpence each."

"Which way are you going?" she added.

"North," I answered.

"You'll be on a walking tour, young sirs?"

I nodded.

"Well, you better not walk farther the night. There isn't another house now for seven miles. You're on the moor. I can give you a clean, nice bed, and breakfast any time you like in the morning."

I consulted with Jill and we concluded to stay.

When alone again we counted our money. Financial ruin did not stare us in the face, for our united fund from the savings of many a lucky penny – dear aunt was so good to us – came to a few shillings over seven pounds. We thought ourselves rich, but determined to be very cautious nevertheless.

We slept well and did not dream once. Our bedroom was a little attic, the window of which looked over the front causeway. The sound of many voices awoke us next morning. I sprang out of bed, and peeped cautiously out from under a corner of the blind.

To my horror and dismay the roadway was crowded with soldiers, and I could distinctly see the glitter of fixed bayonets. Pale and trembling were both of us now, but we dressed and waited. After about an hour's terrible suspense the party broke

up, one half – who, by the way, had a prisoner – going south, and the rest going on in the direction of the moor.

The men were only hunting for deserters, after all, so our appetite returned, and we did ample justice to the good things set before us by the kind landlady. Then we bade her good-bye, and started.

We had to move with great caution now, for we knew the soldiers were on ahead, and we did not know what might happen. However, nothing did happen all that forenoon. We must have missed our way somehow, for instead of coming to the one house the woman spoke of, we came to quite a little hamlet, with a shop or two, and here, not knowing what might be before us, we bought provisions enough in the shape of bacon, butter, bread, and red herrings – we were not dainty – to last us for a week at least.

Then cautiously inquiring our way north, and after making a hearty lunch at a small inn, we set out once more, and, feeling very buoyant and fresh, walked on as straight as the road would take us till nearly sundown.

We never came to an eminence, however, without getting up and gazing round us, and when we came to a wooded turn in the road we deserted it altogether and took to the bush.

Just about sundown we heard voices on ahead, and Jill and I leapt like deer behind a hedge, and lay as still as snakes do. We soon saw the gleam of scarlet. It was the soldiers returning, and with them, between men with fixed bayonets, a poor dejected-

looking lad with his fatigue jacket open and soiled, and his head bare. He was handcuffed.

When right opposite us they all stopped.

"Give us a light, Bill," said one.

They had only stopped to light their pipes, though Jill and I trembled like aspen leaves. I noticed that one of the men, after he had taken a draw or two himself, wiped the pipe-stem and thrust it friendly-like into the the prisoner's mouth. He must have been a good man.

But we gathered enough from their conversation, brief as it was, to quite frighten us.

"He's on the moor," said one, "and they're bound to have him."

"A desperate character, isn't he?"

"Rather. Kill you as soon as wink."

Then they went on.

Who was this desperate character, abroad on the moor?

"Surely they can't refer to me, Jill?" I said.

"Oh no," said Jill; "certainly not. They would have mentioned me, you know."

"I don't think so, Jill. You are not such a desperate character as I am."

"Oh yes; I'm ten times worse," said Jill, awfully.

We soon after came into a country high, bleak, and desolate, with only here and there a clump of trees. Hills there were in plenty, but houses none.

And night was falling fast, and both of us were getting very

tired. We would have to sleep out, that was evident, and so determined to take the first available shelter. So on coming to a bushy gully, with a tiny streamlet going singing down the centre of it, we left the road and followed the water upwards, and were soon at the foot of a rock. To my surprise, on pulling some bushes aside I found a cave.

Some shepherd's, evidently, we thought, for here was a bed of withered ferns, soft and dry; and not far from the mouth of the cave a place where a fire had been.

So we camped at once and lit a fire, for I had forgotten nothing. We made the fire between some stones, and placed thereon our tin billy with water to boil for tea.

We soon had made an excellent supper, and Jill's dear eyes sparkled as he sipped his tea.

"What a splendid bushman you are, Jack!" he said. "This is a first-rate sort of a life, and, don't you know, I wouldn't mind living this way for a month."

"Well," I said, "it seems pretty safe; and I propose we do stop here for a few days. By that time they will think we are far away, and never look here for us."

"Agreed," said Jill.

Then we went and gathered a quantity of fern, so that we had quite a delightful bed in the cave; and as night was now over all the wastes around us, we determined to retire. The stars were out and glimmering down, and bats wheeling about, and every now and then the *tu-whit – tu-whoo*! of the brown owl made us start.

It sounded so close to us, and oh, it was so mournful!

Other than that there was not a sound to be heard. We crept in, and I lit a candle as coolly as if I had been an old campaigner. I stuck it between two stones. Then I read a bit from mother's Bible, and down we lay after that, leaving the candle burning for company's sake. We did not like to be quite in the dark in so eeriesome a place.

But tired as we were, we lay and talked and planned for hours, and when I looked at my watch – yes, we each had a watch – I was surprised to find it was nearly twelve o'clock.

"We needn't hurry up in the morning though, Jill."

"Assuredly not," said Jill.

Five minutes after we were sound asleep.

It might have been an hour afterwards, or it might have been two. I know not. But I do know we both awoke with a start at the same moment, and sat up shaking and trembling with fear.

A terrible-looking man stood in the cave gazing down at us.

Chapter Eight
Good Advice from a Strange Quarter – Midnight and Anxiety

The state of my mind at this moment must have been akin to that of a snake-charmed bird. I felt utterly, abjectly helpless. Had the apparition taken a knife out and proceeded to kill us, I do not think I should have lifted a hand or uttered a cry, except a frightened moan like a person in a nightmare.

He stood and looked down at us long and earnestly. A strangely haggard, but not an evil face, black beard of a week's growth perhaps, and short dark hair hardly seen for the napkin that bound his head instead of a hat or cap.

We found voice at last, both at the same time. "Oh, sir," we said, beseechingly, "do not kill us!" He started as we spoke the last two words, started as if stung, and gazed behind him with quick dramatic action, his black eyes all ablaze for the moment. So have I often since seen a hunted wolf look when at bay.

The first words he spoke betrayed him to be a foreigner.

"Kill!" he said, "what for I kill you? You alone? All alone?"

"Yes," we replied, "yes, sir, quite alone."

"'Tis goot. Do not fear me. Where go you to-morrow day? What you do here?"

I glanced at him for a moment before I spoke, and the truth

flashed across my mind. This was the terrible convict we heard the soldiers say was abroad on the moor. He was not in convict dress, and though his coat was in rags, his boots were good. We learned from him, afterwards, that he had exchanged clothes, strange though it appeared, with a scarecrow. There was some humour here, though sadly blended with deepest pathos.

No, this man might rob, but he would not kill us. He was in trouble like ourselves. So we told him we were running away from school.

He looked at us again, and I saw he believed us. "Angleese, I not speak much. I am Español. I am a convict. Do not fear. I have never kill one. No – no – no."

He sat down beside the candle and took out a knife and a turnip.

Something told me the poor fellow was famishing. I jumped up and went to my bag, and placed bread and bacon in his hand. He ate ravenously and thanked me. Perhaps it was only fancy, but I thought I saw tears in his eyes.

While he ate, much to our astonishment, a little black mouse ran down his sleeve, and sat on the back of his left hand, which he took care to keep still. The creature ate hungrily of the crumbs he gave it, and when finished, he held out his little finger, around which the mouse entwined both its little arms, while it licked it as lovingly as a dog would have done. Then, at a sign from the convict, it once more retreated.

I am sure, even now, that it was his love for the gentle wee

mouse that made Jill and I take to this man, and believe what he told us. Briefly, his story was this:

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.