

Stables Gordon

**In the Land of the Great
Snow Bear: A Tale of Love
and Heroism**



Gordon Stables

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In the Land of the Great Snow Bear: A Tale of Love and Heroism

Chapter One

Dunallan Towers

Even in the days of his boyhood – I had almost said infancy – there seems to have been much in the character and habits of Claude Alwyn that is unusual in children so young.

Some people tell us that the qualities of mind, developed by the individual, depend entirely on the nature of his associates and associations in early youth. I am not prepared to deny that there is a great deal of truth in this statement. But the facts therein do not account for everything, for individuality is stamped on a child from his very birth, and the power for good or for evil of the accidental association of after life may mould in a great measure, but cannot alter this.

“Many men many minds.”

A true though trite old saying is that, and there were, no doubt, a great many different opinions concerning young Claude among those who dwelt in, or were in the habit of visiting at, Dunallan Towers.

From an old journal or diary, which has been handed to me by its writer, with full permission to make whatever use I choose of it, I have gleaned much information bearing on the boy’s character and peculiarities.

Dunallan Towers, now so gloomy and desolate, was once the happiest and the homeliest, and at the same time the gayest and brightest of all the many beautiful mansions that grace the banks of the winding Nith. This was shortly after the marriage of Lord Alwyn to the only daughter of an English baronet.

There were those, however, about the country-side who did not hesitate to say that Alwyn might have been content to take for himself a bride from among the many fair and high-born dames of the shire in which he lived.

“The goshawk should never mate wi’ the ringdove,” said one stern old Scottish lady, “nor the owl perch low in the nightingale’s bower. Our cauld Highland hills will hardly suit the dainty limbs of Alwyn’s bonnie English bride. Our wild forests are no’ like scented southern groves, and the roaring Nith is no’ the placid Thames. A’thing will be strange to her, everything foreign, wild, and queer. She’ll no’ stay lang. You’ll see! you’ll see! you’ll see.”

But if this proud and ancient dame really meant to give herself out as a prophetess, she proved to be a false one; only, to her credit be it said, she was the very first to call on the Lady of the Towers, as people named the bride of Lord Alwyn – the first to call, and the first to become one of her best and firmest friends.

As a bachelor hall, the Towers had been somewhat of a failure; all that was altered after Alwyn brought home his young wife – she looked so young, and in years, indeed, was little more than a girl.

But her easy, pleasant manner captivated every one; and, whether it were winter, with the snow on lawns and park, and ice on the river’s edge, or summer, with the roses all in bloom, and the wind sighing softly through the birch-clad glens, bright and happy faces never failed to encircle the dinner-table of our winsome Lady of the Towers.

There was great rejoicing throughout all the parish on the birth of Lord Alwyn’s heir. Village bells were rung, and a huge bonfire was lighted on the very top of the highest hill: a bonfire that could be seen from house and hut for leagues and leagues around.

The bonfire was kept burning all night long. Meanwhile the village lads and lasses had assembled in a barn gaily bedecked with evergreens and flowers of every hue, and had made quite a ball-room of it. So the fire burned all the livelong night, and as long as the fire burned, the lads and lasses danced, till at last the grey dawn of a summer morning made fire and dancing both seem out of place.

But Alwyn's heir did not cease to be a wonder and a subject for talk for the traditional nine days at least, during which time there was not a living soul in or about Dunallan Towers who had not been honoured with a peep at his little full moon of a face.

His nurse was so proud of her charge that she had even brought him as far as the top of the great hall-stair for Peter, the cow-boy, to have just one glimpse at.

Peter – the diary informs me – had left his boots on the mat; and when he reached the stair-top, and the snowy-white wraps were down-folded from the child's face, the good-hearted cow-boy, thinking he was in duty bound to say something very complimentary in return for the high honour bestowed upon him, lifted both hands and eyes ceiling-wards, and ejaculated —

“My goodness! What a bonnie, bonnie bairn! I never saw the like o' that before in a' my born days!”

I pause for a moment here, reader, and raise my head from the table at which I have been writing with the diary mentioned lying open before me. I look up because some one has just glided silently into the room. It is Janet – Janet who wrote the diary; Janet who had been Claude's nurse. She is very old now, her hair is as white as wreaths of drifted snow, but her face is still pleasant, and her eyes are bright, nor has the weight of years succeeded in bending her form.

She stands by my side, erect. She places one hand – how thin it is! – on the pages of the journal. “You will not find everything there,” she says, “about my dear boy Claude.”

“Sit down, Janet,” I say to her kindly. “I like to have you near me. Take the book on your lap. Read to me, or talk to me, or do both; I shall listen and presently I shall write.”

The apartment in which I am seated is what is called the red parlour of Dunallan Towers. It is in one of the many gables of the old mansion that abuts upon a green lawn, or brae, sloping somewhat steeply down to the river's bank.

It is a lovely evening in early autumn. Behind the purple hills in the west yonder, the sun has just set in a golden haze, and high up in the sky's blue there are a few feather-like clouds of brightest crimson. By-and-by these will change to grey, then shadows of night will creep up from glen and dell, the rooks will cease to caw, and we shall hear only the murmur of the river over its pebbly bed, and the wind moaning through the topmost branches and the crisp leaves of those tall swaying trees.

Janet's voice falls upon my ear in sad but pleasant monotone. It is like the voice of one chanting some old-world ballad. I do not think her eyes are turned on me as she speaks – mine are looking outwards into the twilight; and she is gazing back, as it were, to the far-distant past.

Why, it is dark! Janet must have been talking for hours and hours, and has glided away as silently as she came.

I awake from the reverie into which I had fallen and step out through the casement. How fresh the air is! How pleasant the wind's soft whisper and the river's song! The stars are out, and the round yellow moon is struggling up through a bank of clouds on the horizon. Now and then a bat flits past; now and then an owl hoots mournfully from some turret or chimney, round which the darkling ivy creeps. Not a light in any window. Silence broods over Dunallan Towers.

“The harp that once thro' Tara's halls
The soul of music shed,
Now hangs as mute on Tara's walls
As if that soul were fled.

“So sleeps the pride of former days,
So glory’s thrill is o’er,
And hearts that once beat high for praise
Now feel that pulse no more.”

The night air is keen. I re-enter the red parlour, close the casement, and light my reading-lamp.
And now I write once more. No need for the journal’s assistance any longer, though. Every word that old Janet said has sunk deep into my mind and rooted itself in my memory, and will never be effaced while I and time have any connection.

Chapter Two

Claude Alwyn's Boyhood

On the very day after the birth of Alwyn's heir something strange occurred: a large flight of curious seagulls alighted in the park around Dunallan Towers. No one had ever remembered seeing such weird-looking birds there before, and Janet had averred that their arrival betokened no good. She was not wrong, for that same night it came on to blow from the north, oh, such a fearful gale! Many of the tallest and sturdiest trees were torn up by the roots, and even tossed about, and the Towers shook and trembled as if the very earth were quaking. It was eerisome to hear, at the dark midnight hour, the shriek of frightened wild birds around the house, high above the fitful roaring of the wind.

The Nith, too, came down "in spate;" they could see its white flashing waters, nearly close up to the window of the red parlour in which I now am sitting at work. It brought along with it from the mountains, fallen trees, bushes, heather-clad turf, and boulders of solid rock, tons and tons in weight.

All that night the storm raged, and though the wind went down about sunrise, the terrible rain still fell, and the river continued in raging spate. Great was the damage done to the lower-lying lands seawards; huts and even houses were laid low, sheep and cattle were drowned and borne away, so great is the fury and strength of a Highland river like the Nith when it "comes down," as the people phrase it.

But the sun shone forth at length, and the clouds went driving southwards, leaving lovely rifts of blue between them, and the rain ceased, and the poor people of the glens came forth to view the work of devastation and to mourn their losses.

One of these, while walking in the park and not far from the mansion house, found, crouching under the gnarled root of an old tree, and gazing up at him with its bright crimson eye, or rather first with one eye then with the other, a snow-white gull of most graceful form.¹

He caught it – one wing was injured – and brought it round to the kitchen, where it was much admired and tenderly cared for. In little over a week it seemed as well and strong as it must have been before the storm. Yet it was in no hurry to leave.

It stayed on and on and on, and became as tame as a dove, and most affectionate to all it knew. But to Janet in particular it attached itself. One day it followed her into the room where Alwyn's heir lay in his little crib. Janet showed him the bird. He smiled and stretched out his arms with a fond cry, and next moment the snow-bird was nestling quietly on his breast.

There was no keeping the gull out of Claude's room after this, so it came to be called "baby's bird."

When Claude Alwyn was about three years of age, an event happened down the glen that cast that gloom on Dunallan Towers that never yet has left it: Lord Alwyn was thrown from his horse and killed on the spot. Her ladyship left the glen after this, and went south, and Claude, childlike, would insist on taking his pet along with him.

Years flew by, summers passed and winters passed, but smoke was hardly ever seen to hover over the Towers. Then one day the old steward came down to the village all a-quiver with excitement. He wanted tradesmen of all kinds to come forthwith to the mansion house. Lady Alwyn and young Claude – now grown a great lad, the steward felt sure of this – were to return in less than a month.

Smoke enough now began to curl high over turret and tree; even the rooks seemed to feel the importance of the coming occasion, and positively crowed themselves hoarse.

At the appointed time the family carriage, a very stately and gigantic kind of a concern, rattled up the long avenue through the park, and soon after the widow of Lord Alwyn was once more Lady

¹ Probably the arctic tern or snow-bird, which is hardly ever seen below the latitude of Iceland.

of the Towers. She was greatly altered. Though still young and youthful in appearance, sorrow had stamped itself on her brow and saddened her eye. It was said that she seldom smiled.

But she was even kinder to the poor of the district than she had been in the days of yore, and, wet day or dry day, she was never missed from the pew in church of a Sunday. And beside her always sat a sturdy bright-faced boy of about thirteen, with blue eyes, and short irrepressible locks of soft fair hair, that nothing on earth except scissors could have kept from tumbling over his brow. He was always dressed in the Highland garb as Highland lads ought to be, but his jacket was of black velvet and his kilt of the sombrest coloured tartan.

He was the favourite of every one on the estate, and so was his bird. Wherever young Claude – he was seldom called Lord Claude, because he did not like to be – wherever he went his snow-bird went as well.

And Claude was quite as fond of his pet as his pet was of him, and that was the secret of his success in taming this wild and strangely beautiful creature.

Only those who have seen the snow-bird in its own country, sailing around great icebergs or glittering glaciers, its plumage rivalling the snow in the purity of its whiteness, its shape more graceful than that of a swallow, can have any idea of the extreme loveliness of the creature. No wonder that the humble people of the glens, deeply imbued as they were with that superstition peculiar to the Highland peasantry, often looked upon young Claude and his matchless bird with something akin to awe.

“It is his good angel and nothing else,” one old crone used to remark, “his good angel, Heaven bless the bonnie boy.”

Yes, and a bonnie boy he looked at all times. Had you seen him standing, alpenstock in hand, dressed in Highland garb, on the brow of a hill, well defined against the sky, up to which his face was turned, and in which the snow-bird kept sailing and sailing, following every motion of Claude’s upstretched, waving arm, you could not have helped admiring him.

Claude spent much of his time fishing or shooting, but more particularly the former. Little he recked if the fish did not bite. He would then throw himself on his back among the ferns and flowers on the banks of the stream and pull out his “Burns” or his “Scott.” Meanwhile the snow-bird would perch upon a mossy boulder, or water-washed stone, and watch for the tiny troutlets, which sought for shelter and sunshine in the shallower water.

Young lord though he was, Claude was a “people’s boy.” It would be an exaggeration of speech to say that any of the villagers would have died for him; but it is true that Claude brightened every doorstep he crossed. And this too, all and only, by means of his own handsome face, sunny smile, and kindly words. Not that he did not bring the poor folks gifts, for he was often sent on errands of mercy by his mother, and he brought them also of his own accord many a goodly string of trout.

In a wild country like that in which our young hero dwelt and wandered, there are many dangers to life and limb, and Claude did not always escape quite scot-free. But when, on rushing down a lofty hillside once, he missed his foothold and fell over a crag full fifty feet high, he did not lose his presence of mind, but simply jumped up from the soft turf on which he had alighted, as if on a feather bed, and looked around for his bonnet, which he never saw again. The old shepherd who witnessed the involuntary exploit, told of it all over the parish, and the wise women alleged it was the bird that had saved him. When Claude’s gun burst in his hand and he escaped without a scratch, that too was in some way owing to the bird’s protecting care. When a branch on which he was leaning snapped beneath his weight and precipitated Claude into the roaring, foaming torrent beneath, where any one save a Webb would have been drowned, and when bleeding and cut he safely scrambled out, who but the bird, averred the wise old women, helped him out?

Claude rather encouraged than otherwise the belief in the supernatural powers of this wonderful snow-bird of his. Rather mischievous of him, it must be confessed, but then he was only a boy.

“My bird tells me I must do this or that,” he would often say; or, “I must consult my bird on that subject.”

Then he would pretend to hold communication with it, and the creature looked as though it understood every word he said. During the winter, Claude used to be at a distant school. Then his bird stayed at the Towers; but, although it suffered itself to be fed and petted by Lady Alwyn and by Janet, it did little else but mope until spring returned, and with it Claude.

The library at Dunallan Towers was a very large one, and Claude had the choosing of his own summer reading after forenoon lessons were over, and the books he took with him afield were always those of adventure, or some of the poets. It was often remarked that he never invited any of his tutors to accompany him in his rambles – only the bird.

“Mother,” said Claude one evening, “I’m going to be a sailor.”

“Dear boy,” replied his mother, “what has put such a notion in your head?”

“My bird, perhaps, mother,” said the boy, smiling.

“No, Claude, but those books you pore over. Dear boy, hardly half of what you read bears any resemblance to the truth.”

“Oh, mother,” cried the boy, “if only one *half* is true I must go and see that half I’m a good sailor already; you know how I enjoyed that voyage down the Mediterranean. I dream of all I saw even till this day. Mother, I must go to sea.

“Mother,” he said again, after a long pause, during which Lady Alwyn was musing, and very sad and gloomy were her thoughts – “mother, do you know where my bird came from?”

“It came from the wild mysterious region around the Pole.”

“Yes, I have been reading about that too, reading about it until I seem to have spent years and years of my life in the country. I have but to shut my eyes, any time I wish, and such pictures rise up before me as few but sailors ever see the reality of.”

Young Claude placed one hand across his eyes as he spoke.

“Here it is again, mother, a vast and lonely trackless waste of snow; great glaciers, against whose sides mountain waves for ever dash and foam; icebergs whose pinnacled heads taper upwards into a sky of cloudless blue. Fields of ice on which white bears roam; dark, inky seas where the walrus plays and tumbles, and through which the solitude-loving narwhal pursues his finny prey; and crystalline caves where sea-bears roar. But the scene is changed: it is night – the long, long, Polar night. Oh, how bright and beautiful the Aurora, with its ever-changing tints of crimson, green, and blue; and the stars, how near they seem; and the silence, how deep, how awful! But see, a storm is coming across the pack, and clouds are banking up and hiding the glorious Aurora; now it is on us, and higher than the stars rise the clouds of whirling, drifting snow. Hark! how the wind howls! There is danger on its wings; there is – ”

“Stop, boy, stop?” cried Lady Alwyn, laying her hand on his arm. “Speak not thus; you frighten me.”

There were tears in her eyes. Claude made haste to soothe her.

“Dear mother, forgive me!” he cried. “I am so thoughtless; but I will not transgress so again. Forgive and forget it.”

“You are all I have on earth to care for,” she said, drawing him gently towards her; “but, Claude, your happiness has always been, and ever will be, my first, my chief care. Yes, I will forgive your heedless words. You did not mean to hurt me; but, Claude,” – here she smiled, but it was a very sad smile – “I will not quite forget them. You love the sea.”

Lady Alwyn retired early to her room that evening, but it was long past midnight ere she slept. Her last thoughts ere slumber sealed her eyelids were these —

“And so my boy, even my boy, will be taken away from me. He will be a sailor; it is his bent, and why should I do aught that would mar his happiness? Heaven give me strength to bear my every trial here below, nor forget that on earth I have ‘no continuing city.’”

Lady Alwyn was rich, though not surpassingly so. She could afford her boy a yacht, in which he made many a cruise as owner – not as master – round the British islands and as far north as the Shetlands; indeed more than once they ventured over to Norway.

And so Claude grew up a sailor, so to speak. The smaller yacht gave place to a larger, and still a larger; and in a few years, when young Lord Alwyn had reached his twentieth year, he commanded, as well as owned, his ship himself.

About this time an event occurred that in a great measure altered the old tenor of Claude's life, and that of his mother too, and on this event our story hinges.

In none of his cruises did his snow-bird accompany its master. Lady Alwyn was glad of this. "So long," she thought, "as the bird stays with me, my boy will return safely from sea."

It will be seen that even Lady Alwyn was slightly superstitious.

And Claude's cruises were ever northwards. He had been several times to Iceland itself, and one day he meant to make a far longer and much more adventurous voyage. In the words of the old Norse song, it appeared as though —

"Nought around howe'er so bright
Could win his stay or stop his flight
From where he saw the Pole-star's light
Shine o'er the north."

Chapter Three

Among Iceland Wilds

It was early morning. So early, indeed, that although it was sweet summer-time – and summer can be as sweet in Iceland as in any other part of the world – the birds had hardly yet uttered a note. Only the robin shook the dew from his wings (the American, not the English robin), and uttered a peevish twitter; and far away up among those wild hills, with their strange jagged peaks, you might have heard an occasional plaintive whistle or scream, the cry of the golden plover. Yet, early though it was, though the stars had not yet all fled from the west, sea-fowl were gracefully circling round – the gull, the tern, and the thievish skua. There was no wind, not a breath, but the dew lay heavy on the moss, on the green heather and stunted shrubs, and dragged the snow-white plumes of the lovely cotton grass. The wild flowers had not yet opened their beautiful petals when poor Claude Alwyn opened his eyes. Languidly, yet painfully, he raised himself on his elbow, and gazed dreamily around him. Where was he? How had he come here? These were questions that he asked himself. What is that on a stone yonder? A snow-bird gazing at him with one beautiful eye, and seeming to pity him. A snow-bird? His snow-bird?

“Alba! Alba!” he calls it; but the bird flies away. He was not at home, then, in bonnie Scotland, by the green banks of the Nith, as he had almost thought he was.

No, no; for look, yonder is his horse at the foot of the cliff – dead.

Dead? Surely not dead. He tries to crawl towards it. The movement gives him intense agony. He himself is wounded. And now he remembers all. How he left his yacht at Reykjavik a week ago; how he had been travelling ever since in search of incident and adventure, making sketches, gathering wild flowers, and enjoying the scenery of this strange, weird island; and how he was belated the evening before, and fell headlong over a cliff. That was all, but a dreadful all. He closes his eyes again and tries to think. Must he lie here and die? He shudders with cold and dread, starts up, and, despite the pain, staggers to his feet. He slowly passes the poor horse. Yes, there is death in that glazed eye, death in the drooping neck and stiffened limbs.

It takes Claude nearly an hour to drag himself to a neighbouring knoll, for one limb is smashed, and he has lost blood. He throws himself down now, or rather he falls, and when next he becomes conscious the sun is shining down warm on him from a bright blue sky; birds are singing near, and the wild flowers are open and nodding to a gentle breeze.

And yonder – oh, joy! – down there in the hollow, there is smoke curling up from an Icelandic farm. He shouts till hoarse, but no one appears.

Wearily he leans back, and once again his eyes are closed, and he is back once more in his own room at Dunallan Towers. No pain now, for his sad-eyed but beautiful mother is bending over him, and soothing him.

Is it so? Not quite.

“Jarl! jarl! Wake, jarl, wake?”

The jarl wakes. The jarl looks up.

Over him is bending a huge male figure, dressed in a long-sleeved waistcoat and lofty nightcap. Pained though he is, Claude cannot help thinking he is the ugliest man he ever saw. He is a giant in stature. He kneels beside young Alwyn, and there is a kindness visible in his little grey eyes, as he strokes Claude’s face, just as if he had been a colt. Byarnie, for such is this giant’s name, soon finds out how matters stand, and gently he lifts Claude in his arms and places him on his shoulder, and then marches off.

Preposterous and humorous thoughts will often pass through the mind, even when the body is in agony; and now, Claude could not help recalling the story of Jack the Giant-killer, and fancied

himself Jack being carried away on the shoulders of Blunderbore. But not to a castle with a lawn littered with skulls and bones was Claude borne.

He had probably fainted with pain, and when he again became sensible he was no longer on Byarnie's back, but in a comfortable warm bed in an antique but well-furnished room, and being attended to by a couple of old dames, both dressed alike, in gowns of dark rustling silk, and elevated steeple-like skull-caps of white net. And both, too, were alike wrinkled and ugly. They had almost finished dressing his leg.

“Thou must not speak, dear; thou must lie still and sleep.”

Good enough English, but spoken in a strange monotone – no rising or falling of the voice.

In a few minutes the work was done, and poor Claude found infinite relief. Then they brought him coffee and milk, and made him drink, and a little dram of schnapps which he also had to swallow. They evidently thought him a child, and stroked his face as Byarnie had done. One left the room, and the other took her seat beside the bed, and, still gently passing her hand downwards over Claude's face, began to “croon” over that beautiful English lullaby —

“Hush, my dear, lie still and slumber,
Holy angels guard thy bed;
Countless blessings without number,
Gently falling on thy head.”

The voice was quavering, but the music was sweet. How soft the pillows felt – they were eider-down. How light the quilt – that also was of the same. Under such circumstances it is little wonder that Claude soon forgot everything and fell into a deep and childlike slumber.

The scenes, it seemed to Claude, were continually shifting. He did not *feel* that he had slept, only that he had just closed his eyes and opened them again, when lo! the crones were gone, the sunlight was no longer shimmering in through the crimson and yellow flowers in the little window as he had last seen it. The room was lighted by a lofty lamp that stood on an ancient high-backed oaken piano, throwing a flood of light over all the apartment. A great grey cat was singing herself to sleep on the piano stool, a fire was burning on the low hearth – a fire of peat and wood, that looked very cheerful – and above the window, in a tiny wicker cage, hung a tiny and miserable-looking snow-flea.

Claude took all this in at a glance. But none of these things interested him. His eyes were riveted on the only figure now in the room. A beautiful young girl, almost spirit-like she looked. So thought Claude. She stood leaning against the piano reading a tiny gilt-edged book. She was dressed in a long flowing robe of crimson adorned with snow-white fur. Her fair hair floated free over her shoulders, and her sweet face seemed very sad as she read, all unconscious of Claude's wondering gaze. But presently she became aware of it. A slight tint of crimson suffused her face, but next moment she advanced boldly towards the bed, and laid her hand – such a tiny hand – on his brow.

Claude would have spoken, but she lifted a finger and beckoned him to lie silent.

Lie silent? Yes. Claude would not have disobeyed the behests of so sweet a nurse whatever they might have been.

There was food to be partaken of; he took it. Nauseous brown medicine also; he quaffed it.

Presently, however, there was a change of nurses. One of the droll old ladies came back, and remained an hour. Claude thought it ten, and felt in the third heaven when his young nurse again returned.

She seated herself at a little table facing Claude, and without even knocking at the door, Byarnie the giant stepped in, and placed a zither in front of her. It was a strange household, but, altogether, Iceland is a strange place.

She was going to play to soothe her patient. And sweetly she played too. Old-world airs, but how delicate the touch, how tasteful the fingering. And now she sings. “*Who*,” thought Claude, “can have taught her that wild sad song? Can a girl so young as she have loved and lost?”

“She is far from the land where her young hero sleeps,
And lovers around her are sighing;
But coldly she turns to his grave and weeps,
For her heart with her hero is lying.”

But Claude’s sorrow was to come. Inflammation was succeeded by high fever, and for days he lay in a state of delirium – dreamful, racking, burning delirium.
Then came peace and calmness.

Chapter Four

Idyllic Life in Iceland

Iceland! land of flowers and sunshine? Ah no; but Iceland! land of storms; land of the thunder-cloud; land of lordly hills, whose strange, jagged peaks pierce the clouds by day, and at night seem to nod to stars or moon; land of rugged shores, around which for ever toss and roll the arctic billows; land of glorious sunsets; land of the Aurora; land of romance too, a romance of the olden time, for do not ancient Vikings slumber on its shores in their wave-rocked graves? Iceland! land of peace and innocence? Yes. Iceland! land of love? Yes, land of love – of love as pure and true, if not so passionate, as ever budded and bloomed beneath the sunny skies of fair Italia.

It was the evening of the eighth day since poor Claude's accident. The fever had all gone and left him. He lay there pale and weak and thin, as quiet and as obedient as a child.

It was very still in that ancient room; the purring of the great grey cat seemed very loud, so did the gentle twitter of the snow-flea in his wee wicker cage, and when an old raven, perched on a stool near the fire, rustled his feathers, the noise sounded harsh and startling.

It was near sunset, for the window was in the west, and the sun shimmered in through the red and green and yellow of the flowers.

“Dear nursie, what is your name?”

The words appeared to fall unconsciously from the lips of our stricken hero.

In his fever dreams, he just dimly remembered hearing it, but he was not quite certain. Anyhow, he wished to hear it from the girl herself.

“Dear nursie, what is your name?”

“My name is Meta?” – this from the maiden, with a blush and a smile.

There was a pause. He would have liked her to have asked, “And what is yours?”

But she did not. She only sat silently there, with the book on her lap, as she had been sitting for the last half-hour.

“Mine is Claude,” he said at last. “May I call you Meta?”

“Ye-es,” with modest hesitation.

“Do call me Claude?”

“Claude,” said the girl, advancing towards him with a very serious countenance, and laying a tiny hand on his pulse, “I think you are going to die. Oh! I trust not. But there is a strange glitter in your eyes to-night – a look I like not, and your pulse flickers feebly. I will call aunt.”

She was hurrying away.

“Meta!”

She came back.

“Meta, I will not die if – ”

He paused hesitatingly.

“If what?”

“If you – if you will stay and nurse me.”

“I will; but now sleep. You are very weak, and, see, twilight is creeping up from the fiord. Close your eyes, and I will play to you.”

“Meta,” said Claude next day.

“Yes, Claude.”

Claude felt happy to be called Claude. Remember, he was very weak and ill, and in this condition even men grow childish.

“Tell me something about yourself. You were not always in this island. You even talk sweetly beautiful English.”

“I am Norwegian. My father was a sailor, the captain of a barque. He always took mother and me everywhere. We were all he had. Thus I learned English. We often traded to Reykjavik. My two aunts used to live there.”

“Yes, Meta; and your parents?”

“Alas! we were wrecked on this wild coast; both were drowned. My dear mother lies buried in the little graveyard yonder. My poor father was – never – found.”

Her face was hurriedly buried in her hands, and tears welled through her fingers.

Tears filled Claude’s eyes too, but he spoke not. He knew well how sacred grief and tears like hers are.

But soon she lifted her tearful face.

“They are both in heaven, Claude,” she said.

Claude hastened, with good tact, to change the subject. When he told her of his father’s sad death and of his mother’s perpetual sorrow, then even Meta felt that something had suddenly grown up in their hearts to draw them together in friendship.

We will be brother and sister, she thought; but, alas! he will go, and I shall see him never more again.

After this, though Meta still played, sung, and read to her patient as before, patient and nurse talked more together.

Meta told Claude of her early life, and Claude exchanged confidences.

“I would dearly like to see your great lady mother,” said Meta one day, about two weeks after their first earnest conversation.

“You may one day,” said Claude, thoughtfully.

“What? she may come here? – here in your ship? Is she very, *very* proud? She might not deign to speak to a sailor’s daughter,” she added.

“Oh yes, dear Meta,” exclaimed Claude, with enthusiasm; “she would speak to you. She would thank you – she would bless you for having saved the life of her only son.”

“My aunts did that; not I,” said innocent Meta.

“No, Meta, no; but you, and you alone, saved my worthless life – worthless to all but my mother.”

There is a joy in returning health and strength that only those who have been really and dangerously ill can understand. It was still the sweet summer time when Claude was able to go out once more. Very feebly went he at first, but in the keen, fresh, mountain air, vigour came fast. He was soon able to take long rambles, then longer rides. How delightful these rides were; how glorious, but sometimes how terrible and awesome, was the scenery!

They rode on ponies, Meta and Claude, while the great, unwieldy Byarnie trotted along by their side, or ran on ahead; for often there were rivers to ford, and gorges to descend, without e’er a path except that found, extempore, by this honest, but ghoulish groom.

Many and many a day after, when imprisoned in the icy North without hope of deliverance, except through the valley of death, did Claude Alwyn look back with joy and pleasure to these excursions. He remembered every feature of the scenery – the frowning cliffs, the towering mountains, the broad, shallow rivers, the deep ravines and glens, the cliffs and rocks, the great boulders that seemed about to topple over and hurry them to destruction, the wild birds, the green, green sward, the beautiful mosses, and the still more lovely wild flowers. But, above all, he remembered the innocent, childlike face of Meta, that used to look into his so trustingly as she called him “brother Claude.”

Sometimes they would seat themselves together by the banks of a stream where Byarnie would be fishing, and Meta would tell her brother such wondrous tales – mostly Icelandic and Norse fairy stories, about which there is so great a charm. Claude loved to hear her talk; there was such an earnestness about her while she related tales of folk-lore, as if she really believed them all herself.

But when she came to speak of the ancient Vikings, and their deeds of valour and prowess, then the maiden's eyes sparkled, and there came a brighter glow in her cheeks, that told of a bold heart that beat within her breast, a heart that could not only love but *dare*.

So weeks sped on, so even months passed by, and surely Paul and Virginia led no more idyllic life than did Claude and Meta during this time.

They sat near a geyser one lovely day in July. There was no great eruption that day, no startling and awful upthrow of boiling water, only now and then a bubbling, rumbling sound, which made a rude bass to the song of the birds that hovered near.

Giant Byarnie had boiled some eggs in a spring. Byarnie always provided luncheon for the party of one kind or another. He had placed the eggs in the sun, and had gone away to a distance to milk a cow. I am really afraid that Byarnie was not particular whose cow it was. Cows are often public property in Iceland. Anyhow he found a cow, two of them for that matter, so he went to pull some of the sweetest grass to lay before one to keep her quiet while he filled his pannikin.

Meanwhile Meta and brother Claude sat on a bank near the spring. The sunshine was very soft and warm, and the air was filled with the odour of wild thyme.

Meta was silent and sad, for to-morrow Claude was going away – never, never, she thought to return again. She could not speak much. Very little would have made her cry, and she felt determined not to do that.

Claude was silent also.

And Byarnie, away down in the valley yonder, went on milking his cow – or rather somebody else's cow – and singing in Norse to himself. Presently Claude put out his hand and took that of Meta. It was very cold.

“Dear sister Meta,” he said.

She felt she wanted to cry more than ever now.

“I am going away to-morrow – south to my mother, dear; south to my own bonnie land. I am going away – ”

Oh, how the tears rained now! There was no keeping them back. She threw herself on the grass and sobbed as if her heart would really burst.

Claude could say nothing for a moment or two.

“Meta! Meta!” he cried at last, “look up – speak to me. Listen, dear; I am going south to tell my mother I will never marry any one except you, dear Meta. Do not speak; I know you love me as I love you. I will not be long away. You will long for my return, even as my dear mother is longing now. My mother will be your mother, Meta; my home and country will be yours.”

Meta was smiling now through her tears. What more was said, if anything, may never be known, but when Byarnie came floundering back with his pannikin of milk, he found his mistress and master, as he called them, both happy and gay, and wondered at this very much, because he had left them both sad and quiet.

A little Norse maiden knelt in prayer that night beside her dimity-curtained bed, and thanked the kind Father for the hope and joy of pure love, the hope that as she had a mother in heaven, she yet might have one on earth as well.

And Claude's yacht spread her wings to the breeze, and south and south she flew. Past the Westmann Isles, past lonely Stramoe, past the rugged Faroes, past the Shetlands, past the Hebrides themselves.

And now Claude slackens sail His men notice that he is no longer so buoyant and happy. He treads the deck with a quicker step, as if to keep time with those thoughts.

“Oh?” he was saying to himself, “what will mother say? How will mother take it? How will the proud Lady Alwyn look, when I tell her I am betrothed to a simple Iceland maiden?”

Chapter Five

“Will He Never Come Again?”

Not since the bright old days before the death of Claude’s father had Dunallan Towers looked so cheerful as it did the week before the arrival of the wanderer himself in Glasgow waters.

“I believe my boy will come to-day,” Lady Alwyn would remark to her maid.

“Something tells me, too, he won’t be long,” Janet would reply; “and do you know, my lady, that Alba seems to know it also? He cried, ‘Claude! Claude! Claude!’ last night quite distinctly in his sleep, and the sound thrilled every nerve in my body. Oh! I hope nothing has happened to him, my lady.”

“Hush! hush!” replied her ladyship; “you are superstitious, Janet; but you mustn’t try to make me so.”

Even as they spoke there came a patter of tiny feet along the passage, like the rattle of hail on a summer-house roof, and the next moment Alba himself appeared. He flew up, and on to the back of a quaint old chair, and gazed first at Janet and then at her mistress with his garnet eyes.

Lady Alwyn smoothed the graceful creature, and it bent low on its perch, as if enjoying the gentle caress.

“Do you not notice,” said the lady, “how white and snowy its plumage has become of late? It is always thus before my boy arrives.”

“Dear Lady Alwyn, I did not like to tell you before; but all the three days you were at Dumfries Alba was lost, and I never thought to see him again. He was whiter when he came back than the snows on the mountains.”

“How strange!” said Lady Alwyn, meditatively.

“Claude, Claude!” cried Alba.

There is nothing strange in hearing a seagull talking, and Alba’s vocabulary was not a small one.

Lady Alwyn held out her hand; the bird perched on it, and presently was nestling fondly on her breast. This did not altogether please Fingal, Claude’s favourite deerhound. He must needs get up from the skin on which he had been reclining, and lean his noble head on the lady’s lap. And she could spare a hand to fondle the head.

Yes, everything was bright and pleasant. What though the early winter winds were raving through the leafless trees without, where swayed the rooks near their cheerless nests? what though the blasts were biting and cold in the uplands, and the Nith – brown and swollen – roared angrily over its rocky bed? Bright fires burned in every grate, and were reflected in patches of crimson from the massive mahogany furniture.

And Lady Alwyn’s face was cheerful too. Resigned and calm though she always appeared, to-day there was a sparkle in her eyes, that made her look almost young.

Rat-tat! It was a double knock at the front hall door which resounded through all the house.

Lady Alwyn started from her seat, and stood eager and expectant. She even went to meet the liveried servant, who presently entered with the telegram.

“Yes, yes!” she joyfully exclaimed in answer to Janet’s inquiring look. “My boy is coming to-day. I knew he would be. Alba, your master is coming.”

She embraced the bird again. Fingal, sure that something more than usual was on the *tapis*, began to scamper round the room, jumping over the chairs – a way he had when excited. He jumped all round the room twice, then he playfully snatched the telegram from Lady Alwyn’s hand and went jumping round again with that.

How much or how little of the truth Fingal guessed I cannot pretend to say. It was but a telegram. Had it been a *letter* written by his loved master’s hand, Fingal would have known it, even had the wanderer been years away.

So when Claude stepped briskly out of the train at the little station of P – , there, sure enough, was the great stately old carriage, with its two splendid dark bays, in their silvered harness, waiting to receive him.

His mother was not there; but Fingal was, and almost pulled his master down in the exuberance of his joy.

It was a long five-mile drive from the station to Dunallan. Charming enough, in all conscience, during the spring and summer months, and even when autumn tints were on the trees, but cold-looking and dreary now. All the more so that night was coming on apace, the little of lurid light which the sun had left in the west getting quickly absorbed in the heavy banks of rising cloud.

Claude's spirits fell lower now than they had yet fallen. There was something even in the sombre grandeur of the family carriage that brought dark clouds around his heart.

Not one thought except those of love for the fair and innocent maiden far away mingled with these. But his mother? His proud, good, gentle mother?

How would the Lady Alwyn, the Lady of the Towers, herself of ancient family, like the idea of her only son marrying a poor Iceland orphan unblessed with a pedigree?

And he – a lord – Lord Alwyn! Yes, Lord Alwyn. He could not deny it, though he hated the title, hated it now more than ever for the sake of Meta.

There was some relief from his present gloom and doubts and fears in placing his arm round great Fingal – seated so lovingly by his side, – and breathing into his ears the strange story of his love.

Fingal could listen and sympathise, even if he did not know one whit what it was all about.

Fingal was a wise old dog, so he wisely held his peace, and offered no advice on the matter either way. He gave his master one lick on the cheek, however, as much as to say —

“Whatever you think, dear master, must be right, and whatever you do can't be wrong in my eyes, so there?”

Mother and son had much to talk of that night. Lady Alwyn's life since the *Alba*, her son's ship, bore away for the far North, had been uneventful enough; but *he* had had adventures numerous indeed – although, mind you, he did not speak of them as such. Hardly ever is a rover off the stage heard making use of the word “adventures.” Modesty is one of the leading characteristics of your true hero.

There were times on this first evening when Claude would suddenly lapse into silence, almost into moodiness. He might be looking at his mother or not, but his mind was evidently abstracted, preoccupied, and his eyes had a far-away look in them. This did not escape his mother's notice.

“Could he have any grief?” she thought. “Could he be ill and not know it?”

“You are sure,” she said once, “my dear Claude, that you have quite recovered from your terrible accident?”

“What, mother? Accident? Oh yes; indeed I had almost forgotten.”

“And your nurses, your kindly nurses, Claude: you must never forget them, dear.”

“I'm not likely to,” he said, with an emphasis which she thought almost strange. “Never while I live.”

He gazed into the fire.

“Would not this be the right time,” he was thinking, “to tell her all: to tell her I had three nurses instead of only two?”

But no; he dared not just yet. He would not run the risk of bringing a care to her now happy face. He thought himself thus justified in putting the evil day – if evil day it were to be – further off.

Claude was no coward, as I believe the sequel of my story will show, but still he dreaded – oh, how he dreaded! – the effect which the intelligence he was bound soon to give her would have upon her.

Claude slept but little that night, and slept but ill. More than once he started from some frightful dream, in which his mother was strangely mixed up, and not his mother only, but his Meta.

It was about five o'clock, though it would not be daylight for a long while yet. Claude was lying partially asleep: I say partially, because he seemed listening to the wind roaring through the leafless boughs of the trees, and every now and then causing the twiglets to tap and creak against the panes; but he thought he was at sea, and that the rushing sound was the rushing of waves, the creaking the yielding of the ship's timbers to the force of the seas.

Suddenly he sprang half up in bed and listened intently, painfully.

He had distinctly heard some one in the room calling him. He could not be mistaken, and the voice seemed Meta's.

"Claude! Claude!" cried the voice again, and his heart almost stood still for a moment as he saw a figure, which his imagination magnified a hundredfold, near the bed. "Claude?"

Next moment Alba, the snow-bird, alighted on his breast.

He slept soundly soon after this, but still when he appeared at breakfast he was so jaded looking and restless as to cause his mother considerable anxiety. He stoutly refused to see a medical man, however.

"It is nothing," he laughed. "Nothing, dear mother, only slight fatigue. A sailor like myself thinks little of travelling a thousand miles by sea, yet dreads the rolling, jolting train."

There was plenty to do and think about all day, well calculated to banish care. The villagers, the tenants, and neighbours all round were delighted to see the manly face and handsome figure of young Claude Alwyn once more among them, still accompanied by his pet – his spirit-bird, as the older cottagers had come to call it.

Then, although grouse were wild, there were hares in plenty, and fish in the river ready to be wooed by the gentle art of so true a fisherman as Claude Alwyn. And the walking exercise, through the heather hills, the fresh air, and the balmy breath of pine trees, never failed to refresh and invigorate him both in mind and body, so that he always returned to dinner buoyant and hopeful. But ever at the breakfast-table there was that weary look of carking care in his face.

He would go no further, however, in explaining it than confessing he did not sleep very well at night.

"It is the change," he remarked, smiling, "from a hard mattress to one far too soft and luxuriant for a sailor. Besides, mother, I dare say I miss the motion of the ship."

His mother only sighed softly.

There came to Claude one night a dream as vivid as any reality. He was back again in Iceland. He was gazing on the face and form of her whom he loved, though she did not seem to see him. She was seated on a hill-top, a favourite spot, where beside her he had often sat, when the fields beneath were green, the far-off sea an azure blue, when wild birds sang above and around them, and the perfume of wild flowers filled the summer air.

But snow was all over the landscape now, save where dark rocks jutted through the white, and the ocean, foam-flecked, dashed high over the beetling cliffs. Yes, there sat Meta, but oh! the sad, sad look in those beautiful eyes! She opened her lips and spoke at last.

"No, no, no!" she murmured; "he will never come again."

He thought he sprang towards her, but she faded away like the mist from a geyser, and he was alone on the snow.

He slept no more that night. But he formed a resolve.

"No," he said to himself, "I am not a man; not a drop of proud Alwyn's blood runs through my veins if I hesitate longer. It is a duty I owe to my mother and to her to speak my mind. Yes, Meta, I will come back again."

Were I an artist, I should delight in painting only beauty and peace: the fairest, holiest faces should be transferred to my canvas; the most smiling summer landscapes, the sunniest seas. But, alas! I am but an author, and no pen-and-ink depiction of life would be complete without the shade and shadow of sorrow.

I will not needlessly dwell on the interview that took place in the very room in which I am sitting writing now, between the proud Lady Alwyn and her son. Indeed, the interview was brief in itself: I have thus some excuse for being brevity personified in my description.

Pass we over, then, Claude's introduction, his passionate declaration of love for Meta, his glowing panegyrics on her person and mind, and even the statement that only his regard for his mother and fear of hurting her feelings caused him to conceal the truth so long from her, and then we come to the *dénouement*.

"But, dearest mother, I now know and feel that your constant desire to do everything for my happiness will cause you to receive my Meta when I bring her home as my bride."

If she had been silent till now, it was because she seemed as if thunder-struck.

"My boy," she cried at last, "you are bewitched, or I am dreaming some hideous dream. Tell me it is all but an ill-timed joke. You are but a child –"

"I am a man."

"You have been deceived, put upon, tempted by a designing –"

"Hold, mother, hold! Though the few words you have uttered sound like the death-knell to hopes I have fondly cherished, go no further: forget not yourself so far as to speak one word against my bride-elect, lest I forget I am your son."

"My son? *My son?*" exclaimed the proud Lady of the Towers almost tragically. "Oh! would I could forget it, or that your ship had sunk in the blackest depths of ocean, rather than you had lived to bring this disgrace on the noble house of Alwyn."

"Enough, mother; I will hear no more. You have thwarted me in the dearest wish of my heart, you whose love for a son ought to have conquered family pride. You have thrust me from the halls of my ancestors. I go forth into the world of adventure. I will seek in ambition, in ceaseless change, the only possible balm for the sorrow I have in parting from you."

He turned on his heel as he spoke. He strode down the hall and through the avenue; he looked neither to right nor left, and never once behind him. His mother watched him with clasped hands, with anxious eyes, and with prayers on her pale and quivering lips.

"Would he turn? Surely, surely he would turn." But nay; the trees soon hid him from view – hid him, and lastly Fingal, who with tail and head bent low, as if he knew that sorrow had come, followed at young Claude's heels.

"Widowed and childless!" These were her words as she sank apparently lifeless on the floor.

Janet, her maid, found her thus and lifted her gently on to the couch. But when memory came back, no words her maid could utter could give comfort.

"I forgive him, Janet," she said, "as he will forgive me. It is fate. He *may* write, but he'll *never* return: too well do I know the pride of the Highland Alwyns. But, but, dear Janet," – here all the woman's nature gushed out in tears – "Janet," she sobbed, "poor Fingal – too – has – gone."

Sorrow had fallen like a dark cloud on Dunallan Towers, a cloud that was deepened in its darkness when one morning Alba, the snow-bird, was missing. It was last seen flying listlessly around the great elm trees, then straight as lightning bearing northwards. It was Janet who saw it, and it seemed to say —

"I hear a voice you cannot hear,
That bids me not to stay;
I see a hand you cannot see,
That beckons me away."

Chapter Six

“Grief is the Parent of Fame.”

Claude was miles away from home ere he noticed faithful Fingal trotting near him.

His first thought was to order him back, but this poor dog, as if reading his mind, crouched low at his feet, looking beseechingly up.

“*This is my home,*” he appeared to plead.

Claude’s next thought was to *take* him back; his mother might even ere now have relented. But that Highland pride, which has been at once the glory and the curse of Auld Scotland, stepped in and forbade.

Young Claude went on.

“Grief,” says one of England’s greatest novelists – Lord Lytton – “is the parent of fame.”

This is so true! Many and many a grief-stricken, sorrow-laden man and woman in this world would faint and fail and die, did they not fall back upon work to support them. This is the tonic that sustains tens of thousands of sorely stricken ones, until Time, the great healer, has assuaged the floods of their sorrow.

Young though Claude was – but little more than twenty-one – he had already obtained some fame in the fields of literature. He had been a rover, and to some extent an explorer – more especially among those wild and lonely islands in the Norland Ocean. Nor had he been content to merely cruise around these, watching only the ever-changing hues of the ocean, or the play of sunshine and shade on bold bluff crags and terraced cliffs. No, for he was as much on shore as afloat, mingling among their peoples when peoples there were, mingling among the birds if they were the only inhabitants, studying flora, studying fauna, reading even the great book of the rocks, that told him so much, but never yet had caused him to waver in his belief in a Supreme Being, who made the sea and all that is in it, the land and all it contains.

He was a sportsman and naturalist; in fact, “a man of the world,” in the only true and dignified sense of the term.

His was an original mind, and a deep-thinking one, so that the sketches of his life and travels which he had been in the habit of sending from time to time to the organs of higher-class literature were sure to be welcome both to editors and readers.

He was, moreover, a student of Norse lore, and a speculator in the theories – many of them vague enough – concerning the mysterious regions that lie around the Arctic Pole. And it was his writings on these countries that first brought him into real notoriety among a class of very worthy *savants* who, though seldom too willing to venture into extreme danger themselves, are, to their credit be it said, never averse to spend money in fitting out ships of research.

On the very day of his rejoining his vessel at Glasgow, a letter was handed to him by his chief mate, inviting him to London on important business in connection with discovery in the Arctic regions.

Two hours afterwards Claude was seated in a flying train, whirling rapidly on towards the borders. In nine hours more he was in town. Another half-hour brought him to a shipping office in Leadenhall Street.

“You are Captain Lord Alwyn?” said the grey-haired clerk, looking at him over the rims of a pair of golden spectacles.

“The same, at your service,” returned Claude.

“We did not expect you quite so soon. But if you did come, I was told to hand you this note.”

It was simply an invitation to dine with Professor Hodson and a few friends next evening at Richmond.

When Claude got there, the first person to greet him when announced was the learned professor himself, and a very bustling, dignified little man he was.

“Ha! ha!” he laughed, as he shook Claude warmly by the hand. “I couldn’t have believed it. Really, it is strange!”

“Believe what?” said Claude, bluntly.

“Why, that you were so young a man. Should have thought from your writings you must be forty if a day.”

It was Claude’s turn to laugh.

“But there, never mind. Authors are always taken to be older men than they are. No, I don’t think that youth will be an insuperable objection. Besides, youth has courage, youth has fire and health, to say nothing of a recuperative power of rising again even after being floored by a thousand misfortunes.”

“Difficulties, I dare say,” said Claude, “were made to be overcome.”

“To be sure. Well, then, having heard and read a good deal about your doings up North, we thought we would send for you, and instead of having a learned day discussion round a green baize-covered table, to invite you to join us at dinner – quite a quiet affair – and just to chat matters over.”

It must be confessed that poor Claude did not feel altogether at home among those extremely learned men.

The conversation was all about previous voyages of scientific discovery. Had those gentlemen been more practical and less theoretical, Claude would have been all with them; but it was evident from the way they spoke that not one of them had ever been on blue water, much less on the stormy seas of the Far North.

When, by way of encouraging him to talk more, in the course of the evening they asked Claude’s advice concerning the practicability of the plans they had in view, then young Claude spoke out like a man of business and a sailor.

Cool and collected to a degree, boldly banishing all theories, he hung on to facts. He did not ignore dangers and difficulties; he did not despise them, but professed himself willing to meet them, without for a moment holding out any promise of ultimate success in the adventurous undertaking. How dared he, he said, expect to do more than abler and better and braver men who had gone on the same track before him? If he did presume to hope to even a little more, it was because he should have all their bygone experiences to help him. If they entrusted the command of an exploring ship to him, there was but one thing he could boldly promise, and that was to do his best. He said much more to the same effect, and even enlarged upon the necessary equipment, victualling, and armament of a ship of the kind they proposed sending out, and when he at length concluded —

“Spoken like a man and a sailor,” said the professor, and a murmur of assent passed round the table:

The *savants* retired to another room to consult. When they came back, Professor Hodson advanced and shook hands with Claude.

“We are unanimous in thinking, Lord Alwyn,” he said, “that you are just the man we want. The vessel you are to command already lies in Southampton waters. There are doubtless a thousand alterations to be made: these you, with your experience, will be able to see to. Do not spare expense. Draw upon us. We want you to feel that it will be no fault of ours if the expedition be not crowned with success; and I have the support of my colleagues in adding that we sincerely believe it will be no fault of yours. Other details,” added the bold professor, “can be gone into whenever you please.”

It was a quiet little hotel that Claude occupied that night, but one which he meant to make his home while in London. And why? Smile if you like, reader, but the reason is this: the landlord did not object to the presence of noble Fingal in his house.

Claude sat long in his sitting-room before retiring. The state of his feelings may be more easily imagined than described. His mind was by turns here, there, everywhere – back in his boyhood’s

home, afloat on the sea, with his mother at Dunallan Towers, then away in the Far North with Meta. His mind reverted to the past, and went forward again to the future. He was sad and hopeful by turns. But he had crossed the Rubicon; he could not now draw back from anything he had done or promised to do.

Before he retired, he knelt and asked guidance from Him in whose hands are all our ways, and he slept more soundly that night than he had done for weeks.

Chapter Seven

A Pleasure Sail

“Oh, mamma, I do hope the weather will be fine!” said pretty Miss Hodson.

“Well, my dear Clara, isn’t it fine? Why, a more delightful day could not well be imagined.”

“Yes, now, mamma; but I mean all along on this adventuresome voyage that we are about to take.”

“Don’t you bother your little head, my mouse,” said her father, fondling one of her little hands in his. “I know enough about the weather to give a forecast a week beforehand, and a good deal about the sea, too, though I confess I’ve never been on it much. Ahem!”

The speakers were seated in a cab that was rattling along the quay of Aberdeen on a lovely morning in April. There were monster boxes on top, another cab filled with luggage only came up behind, and still another containing three gentlemen.

Very distinguished men these were, indeed, though oddly ill-matched in appearance. Number 1, let me call him, was a true type of a middle-aged John Bull – tall, whiskered, stout, strong, yet calm and thoughtful withal. Number 2 might have been a Boston editor or an Edinburgh genius of the old school. He was medium in height, lanky rather, high in cheek-bone, deep in eye. He wore no beard, but had a bushy moustache and very long grey hair. Number 3 was evidently a fat Frenchman, rotund to a degree, black as to hair, which was cropped as short as a convict’s, and moustache, but *so* fat! You could best describe his outline by letters, thus – take a big O and a little o and two letters l. Now stick the little o on the top of the big O and you have his head and body. Then clap on the two l’s to represent his legs, and you have his lines complete. He was so stout that when he stuck out his little white hands, with their palms upwards, as Frenchmen have a habit of doing in argument, the fingertips did not project an inch beyond him in front. But Number 1 was no less an individual than Sir Thomas Merino; Number 2 was the Baron de Bamber; and Number 3, Count Koskowskey himself.

The little boys in Aberdeen had never before seen such a strange procession of cabs, nor such a strange crew inside, so that they felt constrained to run alongside and wave their ragged bonnets and shout themselves hoarse.

The *savants*, for such they were, thought to purchase peace with a shower of coppers. This only increased the crowd, and no beggars in Cairo ever yelled for backsheesh as did those boys for “bawbees.”

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