

STRAIGHTFORWARD.

CHAPTER IX.

DESERTED again!" Captain Mostyn pronounced the words in tones of real dismay. Courage had been screwed up to the sticking point, the village had been reached, the stockade had been entered through a low door in the side, with some misgivings, and the dozen of native huts within the enclosure had been hastily examined, without disclosing a living soul.

Sam muttered sulkily, that he didn't believe there were any men at all in this hole of an island. They were all monkeys, and hid in the trees when disturbed.

"That no monkey!" promptly pronounced Peter.

A pair of bright eyes were peeping through the stockade door from without—a daring little brown damsel of ten or eleven was evidently fascinated by the scarlet and glitter of the new-comers.

'Lisbeth held up a string of beads, and, after a few coy retreats, the creature could resist no longer. She advanced hastily, made a snatch at the treasure, and then fled like the wind.

A moment later, and she returned with the whole village at her back—all at least who were at home, consisting of some fifteen women, a few old men, and a horde of curious little children, of whom the bright little maid with the necklace was evidently queen and chief—the men were all out on a hunting expedition.

The poor creatures were trembling with fright at this sudden inroad of the "moon-faced" people, of whom they might have heard from natives that visited the coast, but whom evidently they had never met face to face before.

Presents, however, soon brought them into a happier state of mind, and their faces began to assume their natural aspect over red handkerchiefs, clasp-knives, and cheap ornaments. They would not have been ill-looking but for a disfiguring custom, which was very general, of boring large holes in their noses and ears, and carrying rolls of tobacco in these cupboards.

At the instigation of their first little friend, whom 'Lisbeth instantly named Gipsey, the new comers were pressed to rest, and take possession of an empty hut, built of tree-trunks, standing as they grew, and thatched with palm leaves.

It was a nervous moment when this little lady, doing the honors by displaying a box of leaves, and closing her eyes to entice 'Lisbeth to repose, suddenly caught a sound from without, and bounded away like a kid.

"The men!" 'Lisbeth gasped, clutching at Perran's hand; she was but a woman, after all.

But Gipsey was, as afterwards appeared, the petted daughter of the head man of the village, and she had undertaken the protection of the visitors, so all was to be well.

Besides, the hunting party had returned in great spirits; it had been a good day, they had "bagged" twenty kangaroos.

"Kangaroo chop mighty good!" whispered Peter to George, and then, with the freedom of his nature, he was soon hand and glove with an unclothed young sportsman; apparently conversing, although neither knew a word of the other's language.

Captain Mostyn advanced straight to the chief, bowed to the ground, pressed his hand to his heart, and then laid at his feet a store of trifles, which, at home in England, would have only been acceptable to a very immature schoolboy in the parish school.

There was a slight consultation, and then it appeared that the hand of friendship was to be extended to the white men.

A kangaroo was at once placed at their service, upon which Molly triumphantly produced her frying pan. Alas! a moment too soon, for the chief's eye caught the dazzle of the copper, and he instantly coveted it as a headpiece.

In vain Molly said, in very decided English, "After dinner, sir, I'll lend it to you."

His longings could not be mistaken, and when she set it on the ground for a second it was missing. Nay, it was on his dark Excellency's head, the long handle trailing down his back, a good deal in the way. He had taken it for a species of helmet!

Molly wanted to cry, but George and 'Lisbeth laughed till the tears ran down their cheeks.

"If I'd only brought the glazed saucepan, too," sighed Molly, "I could have made a stew in that."

But the native mode of cooking had to be resorted to for to-day, and very good the roast meat proved to the tired, hungry travellers.

"That friend of Peter's is a very sharp lad; listen to him now, he is saying 'How you do?' 'Ver well, thank you,' after Peter in the exact tones of his teacher, I wonder could we get him as a guide. I must have a palaver with the chief about it. We can't go far without someone to explain matters for us. In two days' time we must reach the territory of the unfriendly tribes, and then we may find ourselves in a mess."

Captain Mostyn spoke lightly, but the subject was serious.

The next day was Sunday, and though the natives crowded like flies round their strange guests, the white men determined to hold their usual Sunday service.

They listened in some amazement to the chanting of the psalms for the day, and were tolerably quiet during the reading of a lesson,