

## STRAIGHTFORWARD.

## CHAPTER VIII.

**M**OLLY had proved a wise doctor. The morning after her long conversation with Peter, 'Lisbeth roused herself sufficiently to occupy a chair on deck, and take an interest in what was going on around her. Peter came in for a kind word from her, we may be sure. "Me love the missis," he informed Molly a little later in the day, an assertion which was promptly rebuked by that young person, who had forgotten her temporary fit of compassion of the day previous.

"You mean the missis is very good to you; and so she is," she declared.

"Hollo! See here, two rivers!" cried the light-natured Peter, quitting Molly to point ahead in the direction the *Dart* was cautiously steaming—cautiously, for snags and rapids, rocks in mid-stream, and pebble-banks had of late made progress difficult, if not dangerous.

No wonder Peter pointed and marvelled, for there was a general pause, and gaze of astonishment on all faces. Two channels—the map only gave one, doubtless the navigable one; but which of these two apparently equally favorable waterways should the steamer take?

Of course opinions differed, but the engineer was the person to lay down the law on such a subject, and after a half-day's serious consideration and investigation of the rival streams, he chose the one which bore eastward: its position seemed most nearly that of the river on Perran's rough map.

Two days of disheartening, slow progress up the stream brought them to a standstill; drought again had diminished the depth of water, to such an extent that the *Dart* was liable to be stranded once more.

Could they have missed their way? Ought they to have taken the other channel?

All was perplexity and uncertainty.

On cool deliberation Captain Mostyn was inclined to think that Mr. Crane had been right in his choice, and that the specially dry season was their only enemy. If so, it would be worse than useless to retrace their steps.

"We can't go on; we won't turn back; we don't want to stick here." George aptly summed up the thoughts of all.

There was an ominous silence. Then 'Lisbeth whispered a word in Perran's ear.

"Dat my thought too, missis," chimed in the irrepressible Peter.

"Let us have your advice, Mrs. Proudfoot," said the engineer, smiling—"yours and Peter's." 'Lisbeth looked at Perran. "All right, go on," he nodded.

And then 'Lisbeth stood up, blushed, and spoke.

"Oh, please, couldn't we land now, and begin our journey through the forest on foot? We must be near the cross on the map."

"Hooray!" Peter threw his cap in the air.

"Peter, go into the coal-hole. You forget yourself," said Captain Mostyn curtly.

Peter retired at the command, relieving his mind by pulling Johnnie's pigtail on the way—evading a side kick from Johnnie's affectionate father afterwards.

Then the council sat again.

'Lisbeth's wish found an echo in most hearts.

Captain Mostyn was all on her side. Perran, too, confessed that he longed to be making way on land. George had no better suggestion to offer. Only Mr. Crane stood aloof.

"You can't expect me to cut my own throat," he said, "by hurrying you off any sooner than I need. A poor time I shall have of it, I expect, when you leave me with Sin-sing and Johnnie."

"Oh, I wish you could come, too," said 'Lisbeth, her soft heart now moved to sympathy for the coming solitude of the engineer.

"I must stick to my post, Mrs. Proudfoot," was the reply. "I shall take to my beetles for comfort."

"Me got one, real beauty, for you in my bunk," said a stifled voice from behind the party, and a grimy face protruded from the coal-hole.

Peter was released from his prison to fetch the beauty. Mr. Crane was an ardent naturalist, and Peter was his great ally in securing specimens.

"You'll not leave me, Peter, surely?" said Mr. Crane. They all made a playfellow of the good-natured lad, who was as ready with repenting as with sinning.

"Me not like to leave you," was the answer, "but me 'bliged to go 'long of missis."

It was pretty well settled before nightfall that the land journey was to begin on the morrow, and great were Molly's preparations for the event. Kettles, saucepans, and dishes she selected as absolutely necessary for the expedition; each separate article drawing forth a special exhortation on the subject of the luggage being reduced to the very lightest weight possible. Thirty pounds was all a strong man could carry in so trying a climate; no wonder Molly could find no one to take her precious frying-pan from her.

"But I'll lap it in my own shawl," the girl whispered to herself. "The missis shall never eat nasty raw food like the savages, as long as I can help it."

Nor was Molly the only busy one. Never, perhaps, since the day of leaving the Australian port had the deck of the little steamer presented such a stirring scene; such choosing of stores, such packing and assigning of bundles to each member of the party.