

Rasmus, or the Making of a Man.

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CHAPTER I.

Rasmus in the Rushes.

Then banks came down with ruin and rout,
Then beaten foam flew all about,
Then all the mighty floods were out.'

Between two forlorn landscapes, a mighty tawny flood, dominant over its natural bounds, is flinging itself across the country, sending terror before it, leaving desolation behind, boastfully tossing its plunder on its muddy breast. Sweeping resistlessly southwest, with a hollow roar as of far-off, persistent thunder, the swollen Ohio carries trees, lumber, cord-wood, chicken-coops, sheds, furniture, hay-ricks, straw-stacks, a dead brute or two, a drenched cock gloomily voyaging on a raft of corn-stalks, an unhappy cat, clinging desperately to the roof of a shed—all these, tumbling, jostling, tossing, half submerged. In mid-stream, drifting heavily, the windows of the second story not far above the water-line, went a small house. Behind it, floating fast in its wake, sped a stout pig-pen, well built of heavy planking, one-half of it provided with a roof. It was a pen that had long been tenantless, washed by rain, swept by wind, bleached by the cleansing sun; it floated like a raft on the surface of the angry river, offering no resistance to the water, and following hard upon the slower motion of the deeply-sunken house. In the pig-pen, luxuriously established on a bed of new straw and corn-stalks, of a tint brighter than the pale crocus-hue of the new dawn, flat on his back, his face to the feebly-growing light, his arms flung over his round, black, curly head, his skin tanned by exposure to a strong, perennial red, sleeping the sleep of the just, lay a nineteenth century Moses in the bullrushes—Rasmus—a tramp.

The pen moved faster than the house, and behind it, in the path traced by the larger building along the water. The distance between the two speedily diminished: the pen came with a crash against the dwelling, and a projecting plank crushed in the window. The tracas woke the child of luck; he sat up, alert, and in possession of himself, as much surprised as he ever allowed himself to be, and remarked to himself, 'Here's a go!' Then he rose to his feet, shook the straw from his clothes, combed with his fingers stray wisps from his hair, and continued his monologue. 'Here, if I haven't gone and set myself up with a yacht, while I was asleep! Going off down the river on a tower! and now if I ain't likely to become a bloated household-er!' He seized the window-sill, and wrenched the remnant of the fragile sash from its place. Then clasping his knees against the pen, and his elbows like grappling-irons within the window, he held firmly by the house found derelict, and thrusting head and shoulders through the empty frame, surveyed the interior. The upper story was but one room: a table heaped with books, a row of pegs holding clothing, a bureau with open drawers, promiscuously filled, as if in some hasty attempt at salvage—three or four chairs, the muddy Ohio water washing almost a foot deep on the floor—in the far corner a bed—on the bed a pillow, with light, soft hair floating loosely across it.

At this sight the tramp recklessly flung himself into the window, and went softly toward the bed. He touched the wavy hair with a gentle finger, and just as gently moved the bed-clothes, and with an expression of disappointment, said 'Straight as a die! I might have knowned it. I never have any luck!' After which inscrutable remonstrance against the straightness proper to a young boy, he sat on the edge of the bed, his feet dangling in the water, and putting his hand under the sleeper's chin, cried, 'Wake up, brother!'

A good mile away this 'brother' might have heard the stentorian challenge: it called him back from farthest dreamland, whither deep exhaustion and the cradling of the waters had carried him. He sat up, eyed the stranger, the disordered room, the broken window, the pen rudely bumping against the house, the tossing, yellow flood—deduced and expressed the facts of the case.

'Why! This house was carried off while I was asleep!'

'You bet!' said his morning guest. 'Where's your folks?'

'Haven't any—not around here.'

'None? Whose things are these? Whose house is it?'

'Mine, I suppose. They were old Tom Andrews's, till he was buried yesterday morning. What made me sleep so hard I did not know I was carried off was, I have been nursing him about two weeks.'

'Relation of yours?'

'Kind of a cousin. I saw the water was coming into the down-stairs room, last night, but I never thought it would sweep away the house. I brought up all the things I could, and then I read till the lamp burned out, and I lay down, dressed—and the thing got away while I was asleep.'

'You're a plucky one!' said the tramp; 'there's many a little shaver wouldn't have took easy to sleeping alone in a house the first night a corpse was carried out of it.'

'I don't see what there was in that,' said the boy; 'but I wouldn't have stayed if I'd thought of being carried away while I was asleep.'

'I reckon not,' drawled the tramp; 'and there's my new yacht got carried away while I'm awake!' He splashed along to the window, and looked after the pig-pen, that, having fulfilled its destiny, had swung clear of the house, and was making its accelerated way down-stream.

The boy had found his shoes on his bed, and reaching for comb and towel from the bureau, proceeded to make his toilet, using the river water that washed about the floor.

'Rather of a dandy, ain't you, brother? But I go in for that sort of thing, myself,' said Rasmus. Then his eye fell on a big tin pan standing on a chair. Bread, meat, butter, a jug of milk, in the pan, reminded him of breakfast. Appetite with Rasmus was always 'yours to command.' He carried the pan to the bed, and invited his host to breakfast. He looked about as he ate.

'And these is all your things, says you? Pity to leave 'em all to go to the bottom of the river. I see a suit on the nails as would fit me handsome.'

'If they're going to the bottom, I would like to save a change of clothes,' said the lad; 'but where are we going?'

The house gave a sudden lurch, and then righted; but a new flood had entered at the window, and the structure lay deeper.

'We're going to get off this craft before she breaks up,' said Rasmus, 'and the first thing will be to take to the roof, then we'll know where to find ourselves. Is that your grip-sack? Will you make me a present of it?'

'You may have whatever you want!' cried the boy, desperately, as he felt the poorly-built house quivering.

'Then, brother,' said the tramp, cheerfully, 'over your head is the scuttle-hole; and on yon piece of furniture I see a leather bag. I recommends you to tumble in it whatsoever you want to save, and then climb out on the roof, an' I'll follow you. Don't stop to get a razor, or white kid gloves; go in for solid plunder.'

Even while he was speaking, he took the best man's-suit from the pegs, underwear from the open drawers, and filled the carpet-bag he had requested for himself, with flannel and kerchiefs.

He evidently believed in the survival of the fittest, and had a singular facility in selecting the same.

'I say, brother!' he shouted through the scuttle, 'you don't mind my taking a boiled shirt, do you? They'll go to the bottom, anyway.'

'Take them all; I don't care,' said the young owner, who had filled his small satchel judiciously and quickly, and clambered to the roof.

'Not all,' said Rasmus, solemnly, shaking his head. 'I don't set up for no Vanderbilt.'

His plunder being piled on the bed, he stood there himself, shifted his clothes with the celerity of a 'transformation man,' filled his bag, tied the remaining provisions in a clean towel, and fastened his wet shoes and socks to the bag handle. Then he rolled his new trousers to the knee, knotted a red bandanna about his brawny neck, put a blue one in his coat pocket, and finally crawled up through the scuttle, gay and glowing. He had never been so well dressed in his life.

The sun had fully risen; the mid-sky was an intense blue, the east a vivid flame, and in the glory of the sunshine the river was transmuted to a flood of molten gold. The birds broke into song; sudden bluebirds and premature robins appeared on the distant shrubs or fences; the sweeping Ohio uplands, and the low lying Virginia hills were no longer gray, but bronze; and twig and tree, and long bramble whips, had the tints of red and green, that speak a new spring-life in flowers. But the river roared and threatened, and hurled its debris. The roof of the buoyant house sloped, but not sharply, from front to back. The building now gave another lurch forward, and the water poured as before in at the upper windows, while the few articles of heavy furniture fell to the declined side, and the whole structure settled and filled until the roof was lying nearly level, and only a foot or two above the water.

'You'd have been drowned in your sleep, brother, if we hadn't happened to come aboard,' said Rasmus, calmly.

'Will she float this way long?' asked the alarmed boy.

'No, pardner, she won't. She'll go to pieces,' replied Rasmus, with the tranquillity of one whose normal condition had been a succession of untoward accidents.

'But what shall we do? We can't swim in this flood!'

'If she breaks up,' said Rasmus, looking longingly at his new plunder, 'I can't save you and the grip-sack. Howsumever, brother,' he added with a sigh, 'I'll save you. I give you my hand on it. I've lived without riches; but I couldn't live with a yellow-haired boy's drowning lying heavy on my mind.'

He held out his big hand, and the boy made haste to seize it in token of sealing the compact, but it did not reassure him. The house cracked and quivered with the pressure of the tumultuous water. He gave an involuntary cry.

'Always keep brain end up, brother,' said the tramp, coolly, 'or you'll come to some bad end.' He then demonstrated the presence of mind which he characterized as 'brain end up,' by studying the river, and the course of the flotsam borne on it. Then he spoke cheerily.

'Now, brother, I've lost my yacht this morning without a murmur, and likewise we have got to lose our house. I'm not kicking about it. Seeing as I'm alone in the world, I don't know as I care to be a householder. I might not like to pay taxes. You notice, pardner, that all that goes ahead of us catches in that eddy, 'bout a mile down-stream, and swings up against them trees? There's quite a pile of wrack below them, and our house will turn in there to some day, an' ang by a

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