

MATT.

A TALE OF A CARAVAN.

(Continued.)

At first he was guided by footprints, but as the sand grew harder these disappeared. At length, after a somewhat bewildering search, he found the sandhill he sought, the cross marked in the ground, and finally the well-concealed mouth of the hole.

He looked keenly to right and left. No one was visible. Stooping down he displaced the stones and loose sand and disclosed the trap-door with its iron ring. A long pull, a strong pull, and up came the trap. Open Sesame! Beneath him was a dark cavity, with a slanting path descending into the bowels of the earth.

Anxious to lose no time, he squeezed himself through the aperture and began descending. While he did so he heard the hollow roaring he had heard the night before. As he proceeded he drew out a box of matches and a candle which he lit. Proceeding cautiously on his back, and restraining himself on his elbows from too rapid descent, he found himself surrounded, not by sand, but by solid rock, and peering downward, saw that he was looking down into a large subterranean cave.

Just beneath him was a flight of steps cut in the solid rock. Descending these carefully, for they were as slippery as ice, he reached the bottom, and found it made of sea-gravel and loose shells, forming, indeed, a decline like the sea-shore itself, to the edge of which, filling about half the cavern, the waters of the sea crept with a long, monotonous moan. Approaching the water's edge he saw facing him the solid back of the cliff, but just at the base there was an opening, a sort of slit, almost touching the waves at all times, quite touching them when the swell rose, and through this opening crept beams of daylight, turning the waves to a clear malachite green.

The mystery was now clear enough. The cave communicated directly with the sea, but in such a way as to make an entrance for any large object impossible from that direction.

Punches of rum and other spirits, bales of wood, planks of mahogany and pine, oars, broken masts, coils of rope, tangles of running rigging, flags of all nations, and articles of such material as is used on shipboard, swinging tables, brass swinging lamps, masthead lanterns and hammocks; enough, and to spare, in short, to fit out a small fleet of vessels. Lost in amazement, Brinkley examined this extraordinary hoard, the accumulation of many years. All at once his eye fell upon a large canvas bag, rotten with age, and gaping open. It was as full as it could hold of pieces of gold, bearing the superscription of the mint of Spain.

O William Jones! William Jones! And all this was yours, at least by right of plunder, upon the Queen's seaway; all this which, turned into cash, would have made a man rich beyond the dreams of avarice, was the possession of one who lived like a miserly beggar, grudging himself and his flesh and blood the common necessities of life, and had never been known, from boyhood upward, to give a starving fellow-creature so much as a crust of bread or to drop a penny into the poor box! O William Jones! William Jones!

The above reflection belongs, not to the present writer, but to my adventurous discoverer, the captain of the caravan.

As Brinkley proceeded on his tour of inspection he became more and more struck with wonder. Nothing seemed too insignificant or preposterously useless for seclusion in that extraordinary ship's cavern. There were mops and brooms, there were holystones, there were "squeegees," there were cannisters of tinned provisions, there were bags of weevil'd biscuits, there were sacks of potatoes (which esculents, long neglected, had actually sprouted and put forth leaves), there were ring bolts, there were tin mugs and pannikins, and, lastly, miserable dictu, there were books—said books lay piled on the top of a heap of sacks and were in the last stage of mildew and decay. For what purpose had they been carried there? Certainly not to form a library, for William Jones could not read. As curiosity deepened, Brinkley opened some of the forlorn volumes covered with mildew and filled with hideous crawling things. Most were in foreign tongues, but there were several English novels half a century old, and a book of famous "Voyages," also in English. Near to them were some large paper rolls—ships' charts, evidently, and almost falling to pieces. And on the top of the charts was a tiny prayer-book, slime-covered and dripping wet!

What possessed Brinkley to examine the prayer-book I cannot determine, but in after years he always averred that it was an inspiration. At any rate he did open it, and saw that the fly-leaf was covered with writing, yellow, difficult to decipher, fast fading away. But what more particularly attracted his attention was a loose piece of parchment, fastened to the title page with a rusty pin, and covered also with written characters.

Fixing the candle on a nook in the damp wall he inspected the title page and deciphered these words:

"Christmas Eve, 1864, on board the ship 'Trinidad,' fast breaking up on the Welsh coast. If any Christian soul should find this book and these lines where I place them, if they sink not with their bearer (on whom I leave my last despairing blessing) to the bottom of the sea, or if God in His infinite mercy should spare and save the little child." (The book trembled in his hand as he read. The writing went on :) "I cast her adrift in her cradle in sight of shore, on a little raft made by own hands. 'Tis a desper-

ate hope, but He can work miracles, and if it is His will she may be saved. Attached to this holy book are the proofs of her poor dead mother's marriage and my darling's birth. May she live to inherit my name. Signed. MATTHEW THORP MONK, Colonel, 15th Cavalry, Bengal."

The mystery was deepening indeed!

At last Brinkley thrust the book and its contents into his pocket, and after one look round took the candle and made his way up the rocks and out of cave. When he saw the light of day above him he blew out the light and crawled up through the aperture. Then, standing on the sandhill, he surveyed the scene on every side. There was no sign of any living soul.

Carefully, but rapidly, he returned the trap-door to its place, covered it with stones and liberal handfuls of loose sand, and walked away, taking care, for the first hundred yards, to obliterate his footprints as he went.

CHAPTER XI.

MYSTERIOUS BEHAVIOUR OF THE YOUNG GENTLEMAN.

About this time Matt noticed a curious change come over her artist friend. He was more thoughtful and consequently less entertaining. Often when she appeared and began chatting to him about affairs in which she thought he might take some interest she had the mortification not merely of eliciting no reply, but of finding that he had not heard a word of her conversation.

Now this style of proceeding would certainly have caused her some annoyance, but for one compensating fact which put the balance entirely on the other side. It was evident that, despite the change, Brinkley's interest in Matt was not lessening—nay, it rather seemed to be on the increase—and this fact Matt, very woman as she was, was quick to perceive.

Very often on looking suddenly at him she found his eyes fixed wonderingly and sympathetically upon her. She asked him on one occasion what he was thinking about.

"You, Matt," he answered, promptly. "I was trying to imagine," he continued, seeing her blush and hang her head, "how you would look in silks and velvet; got up, in fact, like a grand demoiselle. What would you say, now, if a good fairy were to find you out some day and were to offer to change you from what you are to a fine young lady—would you say Yes?"

Matt reflected for a moment, then she followed her feminine instinct and nodded her head vigorously.

"Ah—by the way, Matt, can you read?"

"Print, not writing."

"And write?"

"Just a bit!"

"Who taught you? William Jones?"

"No, that he didn't; I learned of Tim Penreun down village. William Jones, he can't read and he can't write; no more can William Jones' father."

This last piece of information set the young man thinking so deeply that the rest of the interview became rather dull for Matt. When she rose to go, however, he came out of his abstraction and asked her if she would return on the following day.

"I don't know—p'raps!" she said.

"Ah," returned the young man, assuming his flippant manner. "You find me tedious company, I fear. The fact is, I am generally affected in this present state of the moon. But come to-morrow, Matt. Your presence does me good."

However, the next day passed and the next again, and there was no sign of Matt. He began to think the child had taken offense, and that he would have to seek her in her own home, when her opportune appearance prevented the journey. He was taking his breakfast one morning inside the caravan, when he suddenly became conscious that Matt was standing outside watching him.

"Oh, you are there, are you?" he said coolly. "Come in and have some breakfast, Matt."

He rose negligently, went to the door and held forth his hand, Matt took it, gave one spring and landed in the vehicle.

"Tim, another knife and fork for the young lady—some more eggs and milk; in fact, anything you've got!" said Brinkley, as he placed a seat for Matt at the little table.

Tim gave a grunt of dissatisfaction. The "bold colloen," as he called her, was becoming too much for him, but he perforce obeyed his master's commands. Matt sat down and ate with an appetite. Brinkley played negligently with his knife, and watched her.

"It is two days since you were here, Matt," said he. "I was seriously thinking of coming to look for you. Why wouldn't you come before?"

"'Twasn't that!" said Matt. "I couldn't."

"Couldn't? Why?"

"Why, he wouldn't let me, William Jones. He says he'll smash me if I come here and talk to you."

As Matt spoke her bosom heaved and her eyes flashed fire.

"He ain't at home to-day," she said, in answer to the young man's query concerning the ex-wrecker; "he's gone up to market-town and won't be back before night."

As Brinkley looked at her a sudden thought seemed to strike him.

"Matt," he said, "you and I will go wreck-hunting this afternoon, that is, if you have no objection."

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