

ILFRACOMBE.

"Frightened at that! No, sir, nor not likely to be either. I never was really frightened but once in my life!"

"Only frightened once in your life! Come then, Captain, tell us all about it; it must have been a rare fright to last you all your life."

"Was it a ghost?" added the brother of the last speaker.

"No, Master Alfred, it was no ghost; I don't believe in ghostness myself."

"Well, tell us all about it," repeated William Sinclair.

"But I thought you young gentlemen wanted me to take you out fishing," replied the old boatman, commonly called Captain Abbott.

"So we did; but the sun is so hot now, and you said we should not catch much as the wind was east; so we would much rather hear what frightened you, and go fishing another time."

"Yes; in the evening," chimed in Alfred Sinclair. "When the sun has gone down and the wind may have changed from the east by then, you know, Captain."

"Very likely it may, sir; often does just before sunset. Now, if you young gentlemen like to do so, I'll row you across the harbor to Rapparee Cove, and we can sit in the shade there, and I'll mend my nets a bit, while I spin a yarn for you."

"We'll row and you steer," exclaimed the two brothers, jumping into the boat and taking the oars. "What is it called Rapparee Cove for?"

"Can't say, sir; unless it be that smuggling used to be carried on here; it's a convenient place to run a boat in, you see. Some Spanish ships were lost on the rocks here years ago, and many a gold doubloon found its way into Ilfracombe from them. Mind your oar, Mr. Alfred, here we are. Now I'll make the boat fast and bring the nets—as nice a place to spend an hour or so, to my thinking, as need be. What do you say, sir?" said Abbott, appealing to the elder brother.

"I think it's the jolliest place I ever saw, Captain, with those beautiful cliffs at our back, and all those rocks running out into the sea. And now, Captain, for your story," said William, throwing himself on the dry, warm sand near Abbott, and shading his eyes with his hat while Alfred seated himself on a large stone on the other side of the sailor, and commenced shying pebbles into the water.

"I've been thinking, young gentlemen, I can't tell you what frightened me without telling you a good bit of my early life."

"All the better," said the two brothers. "All the better. Now begin, as the story books always do, with 'Once upon a time.'"

Abbott took off his hat and wiped his face with his handkerchief several times; he was a fine looking fellow, in his blue guernsey and bare throat, and dark curly hair well streaked with gray.

"I was born at Clovelly yonder," he began, "and lived there the first twelve or fourteen years of my life. You can see the furthest point there away to the left; the prettiest place in England, to my thinking. We moved from Clovelly to Ilfracombe. My father was a carpenter, and I worked with him when I wasn't going off to sea. When I was about 18, I went to Squire Bassett as carpenter, but I still lived at home, and walked backward and forward night and morning if I didn't get by water. I was the only child they ever had, and my poor mother made a good deal of me. She had never the best of health; I remember her being very hearty, but she was a good woman and a good mother to me."

"I'm sorry for any lad who hasn't a good mother. No one can be what a mother is to a lad. The thought keeps him from many a hurtful thing; he wouldn't like to vex her, or he would be ashamed of her knowing, when he would not care so much about his father. I owe a good deal to my mother. I'm certain sure of that. All the comfortable things a mother does to help to keep a son's heart soft and loving to her—for we're all more or less selfish—you know. Well, my father died when I was just turned twenty, and before I was 21 I had begun to keep company with a girl that had been a time at Squire Bassett's, but afterward she came into the town here, as her aunt set up a lodging-house and she was to help her."

"Visitors had begun to find out this place was pleasant to come to even then; they would come from London, and the gentry from the country would come for a few weeks to get some fresh air and sea bathing—nothing like it is nowadays, but still there was a few. I had kept company a good bit before I liked to tell my mother (a bad sign, young gentlemen); but one day some neighbor let out to her about me and Susan walking together; so in the evening, when I came back from work and she was getting supper ready—she always waited for me, let me be ever so late—she said, 'My boy, is Susan Turner anything to you?' I laughed a bit and leant back in my chair and said, 'What little bird told you that, eh, mother?'"

"Well, she got up and came behind me, and took my face in her two hands and kissed me many times. 'Jem,' she said, 'I'd like you to have a good wife, and she should be as my own daughter. I could not love any one so well as my own boy, except his wife, if she was a good wife to him; but oh, Jem, mind what you're doing, and don't do what you may repent of, once and forever.'"

"I did not like to say much, and mother speaking in that kind way, and not flying out

about Susan as many mothers would when they didn't approve, kept me from being vexed with her."

"You'll not leave me, Jem, if you do marry?" she said, "will you? My health's never good, you know, and I'd like this to be your home so long as I live." Father had put a bit of money by, but it was all hers, and I'd never thought of leaving her, so I said, 'No, mother, I'll not leave you. I'll always be your son, even if I have a wife.'"

"You'll promise me that?" she said. "Yes mother, I promise," I said. "I promise willingly."

"Thank you, my boy," she answered, and again she put her thin hands on my head and kissed me. "God bless you, Jem; and may he guide you in your choice, and keep you in all your ways."

"She never said a word about me not having told her, and never said she didn't like Susan, you see, so I could not but feel a bit vexed with myself for never having taken counsel with mother, or let her know what I was thinking about."

"Well, we went on, Susan and me, keeping company some three years, and then I thought it was time we should think of marrying. My work was very regular, chiefly carpentering, and my wages good."

"Well, I asked Susan about our settling, but she was quite set on having a house of her own, and that I could not promise. 'Mother will be as good as your own mother could have been,' I said, 'and there's two sitting-rooms—one will be yours, Susan, and all your own things in it.' No; she wasn't pleased, and I wasn't, and we walked home rather put out with each other, and as we came near the nursery gardens beyond the church, we met the new upholsterer, Mr. Albert Strong, smoking like a chimney, and he took off his hat in a free and easy way to Susan. I didn't like it; and when he had gone on, says I, 'You know that young man, Susan!'"

"Know him! of course I do. I should think every one knows him by this time—most genteel he is, and taken such a good shop in High-street—he comes from London."

"The next time I met this Mr. Albert Strong was a Sunday afternoon, and to my surprise Susan was with him and he smoking all the time. She coloured up a bit, and seemed vexed at meeting me, for she had sent me word she could not walk, as her aunt had lodgers and wanted her in that day; and it was not a likely part of the place for me to be too. However, she came forward and said aunt had let her go at last; it was a shame, such a lovely evening, to stay in the house, and Mr. Strong had escorted her till she could meet me."

"Whatever made you think of looking for me on the Torr?" said I, feeling uncomfortable.

"Do you think you're so small one can't see you?" said she, laughing; and I was nigh a foot higher than Mr. Strong, so if she had been looking out for me no doubt she might have seen me from the hill; and, perhaps, I ought not to have suspected anything. We walked on a bit together, and then somehow I thought he made a sign to Susan, and once more I felt uncomfortable, and longed to knock him down. I've often wished I had then; but he took his leave immediately after, and I began to feel a little better."

"Very genteel he's dressed, isn't he?" said Susan, as soon as he was out of hearing.

"Genteel, is it? Oh! I didn't know," I said. "I thought his coat must have been cut out of a remnant; he couldn't button it after a good dinner, I'll be bound."

"Such a thing as it was! Blue cloth and brass buttons and small tails behind."

"And his hair is brushed so very genteel," she continued; "and smells so sweet."

"So we went on, and she seemed as if she would only talk that way. I could not get her to be grave, or think about the house; not that evening, nor any time we were together. She never let me begin about our settling or anything serious, if she could help it; and one day, about a month after that walk, I said I thought she had something on her mind—was her aunt good to her?"

"Oh yes," she said, "everybody was better to her than she deserved."

"Well, come home with me this evening," I said, "and have tea with us and see what thee'll say to the house; it's a long time, Susan, since thee've been to see mother." "I can't, I can't," she said, "don't ask me; not to-night, James, not to-night." With that she burst into tears, and turning from me—we were just passing her aunt's house at the time—she waved her hand, and ran in."

"That was our last walk together."

"Next morning I could not go up very early, for I had a particular job to finish, but just before dinner I ran off to her aunt's. 'Susan's not in,' she said. 'Not in,' I repeated; 'where is she gone?'"

"Oh, I suppose a bit of shopping or something," she said; "I can't rightly say." So I went round home the other way, and passed Mr. Strong's smart shop; the blinds were all closed, but there was a notice that a new and startling investment was expected from London on the following Saturday, which would be ready for inspection on Monday next. I went home, and had my dinner, and back to my work till about 5 o'clock; and about 5, mother came to me in the shop and put her hand on my arm, and said, looking as kind and pitiful as ever woman did: 'Jem, dear, have you seen Susan to-day?'"

"No, mother," says I, turning sharp; 'what's the matter?'"

"Why, her aunt's come to see after her, she's not been in since morning, Jem, and—"

"And what, mother?" I said feeling scared like."

"Her best clothes are gone, and Mrs. Hobbs has heard she was seen early to-day on the road to Lee."

"What should take Susan to Lee?"

"Well, James Abbott," said her aunt—who had followed my mother and was just outside the door, though I hadn't noticed her—"I'm sure if all's true, it is quite as strange to me as to you; I never was so took aback, and I hope you'll throw no blame on me for it."

"For what, Mrs. Hobbs?" I said; 'what's true? What's the matter? Can't you tell a fellow at once, and not go playing with him, when you've got him on the hook sure enough?'"

"Well, indeed, Mrs. Abbott, I don't like telling things too sudden like," she said; 'but if James would rather know, no one has a better right, of course, than him. Well, then, they say that Albert Strong went to Lee this morning, too. His shop's empty, and the quarter's just up. They suspect that they have been married at Lee. Strong has been sleeping there, and walking backward and forward for a fortnight, and they say the bans must have been cried there. She came into a bit of money about a month ago.'"

"Money! and me never to know!" I said. 'Why, 'twas only yesterday I asked her if she wanted any! I'm off to Lee, mother. If he's not married her, I'll follow them, break every bone in his body, and bring her safe home to Mrs. Hobbs. If they are married, I'll come home to you, mother. I said I'd be your son all my life.'"

"I was not long getting to Lee, but the clerk had gone out fishing, and the parson had ridden over to Barnstable. So I climbed to the top of a hill and watched till the boats began returning. It had got so dark, I had to wait for the clerk to get a lantern, before we went to the church. He brought out the book, and there sure enough was the marriage: Albert Strong and Susan Turner. Mr. Wrey had married them and gone to Barnstable after the clerk said. I never spoke a word, went out of the church, and straight home."

"I went about my work a week or two, and then I felt I had no stomach for it. I must have a change of some sort, and I did not see how to get it, and leave the poor mother, either. I was turning it over in my mind when a groom from Squire Bassett's rode up, and said a young gentleman in his yacht was off Watermouth Bay, and wanted a handy man to do some little work on board at once; so he, being a friend of mine, called to give me the job. Even this was different from what I had been at in Ilfracombe, so I took up my wallet, and told mother not to wait dinner for me; got a lift in a boat as the tide served, and was there in no time."

"The yacht was off Watermouth Island (you must go and see that, and the caves there too, young gentlemen, some day; a beautiful trip it is). Well, I went on board, and Mr. Hamilton himself was there, and told me at once all he wanted done. I did it to his satisfaction; he going up and down and coming back every now and then, and asking me a question or two."

"Do you know anything about working a ship?" said he. 'I've never been on board one like this, sir,' I said, 'but, of course, I am as much at home in our fishing snacks and such like craft, as on land, living always by the sea.'"

"And you're a handy man and can give a hand to anything going on, I hear," continued Mr. Hamilton. "And a sober one too, which is best of all."

"Yes, sir, I hope so."

"And your name's James Abbott, I think?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, Abbott, don't leave the yacht till I return. You see there's a cold pie and some bread and cheese there; eat your dinner, and I'll come back."

"In about an hour I heard him come back. I, and Squire Bassett with him. I could hear them talking all the way, and somehow felt it was about me. So I got up and stood ready. My work was all done and my wallet over my shoulder, and the two gentlemen came in, and the Squire nodded and said, 'Good day, Abbott. My friend Mr. Hamilton wants a steady, useful fellow to go with him in his yacht to the Mediterranean; he's taken rather a fancy to you, and came to inquire of me.'"

"The fact is, Abbott," said Mr. Hamilton, 'I've had so much trouble with my fellows getting drunk, I've had no peace of my life; now I've a new crew. I don't want you to do much in working the vessel; but a handy man to wait on me, and take charge of things, and do any carpentering required, will suit me far better than the drunken valet I had to send off before I had him a month.'"

"Here was just what I had been longing for! And how long should we be away, sir?" I asked.

"Eighteen months or two years; not more, certainly," said Mr. Hamilton.

"I'd like it above all things, sir, and I think I could give you satisfaction. I've my old mother at home, and I must speak to her before I could give anything positive of an answer."

"Where does she live?" said Mr. Hamilton. "Oh, I know," said the Squire; 'at least my people do; we can call this evening, as we pass through the town, and see what Mrs. Abbott thinks of it.'"

"In the evening Mr. Hamilton came; he shook hands with mother, and very pleasant he was; he talked a good bit, and he told her it was extraordinary the difficulty there was in

getting sober men, and, with his small crew, it would be maddest to start if he couldn't depend on them. 'They're far worse than animals,' says he. 'Positively, a monkey after being once made drunk will never touch it again, and just look at men!'"

"Well, my dear mother never made any trouble about my going, never thought of herself in the matter. 'Jem,' she said, 'I'm far better pleased in my heart that you should get this situation and leave me than that you should have staid at home married to Susan; she never was worth so much as your little finger.'"

"Well, we started in the Isabella. We touched at Ushant, off the coast of France, and then across the Bay of Biscay to Ferrol, then Lisbon, Cadiz, and Gibraltar, and up and down the Mediterranean, sometimes staying weeks at one place. I enjoyed all uncommon; saw Mount Vesuvius smoking, and often watched it at night; it was splendid to see the fire rising out of the crater. However, at last the time came for us to return home; I had written regular to my mother, and heard often from her. I wasn't sorry when Mr. Hamilton told us we were homeward bound. We had the worst storm all through the two years off Cape Finistere, but our little craft weathered it, and we reached Southampton in safety two years and one month since we left England."

"As soon as Mr. Hamilton could spare me, I was anxious to be off home, and I left very early one Thursday morning, to catch the 6 o'clock Government train to Exeter. I was going along the empty streets at a sharp pace, with a good big bundle on my stick over my shoulder, when, all of a sudden, in a narrow dirty street, a man half wild rushed out of a mean-looking lodging-house, and said: 'For Heaven's sake, young man, come in here!'"

"Now, young gentlemen, when I began my tale, I was to tell you I had never been frightened but once. Now's the time."

"What for?" said I stopping short.

"He's hanged himself! I'm afraid he's dead! For heaven's sake, come and help!"

"I went in after him up the narrow stair, put my bundle down, and followed him into an empty room. The fire-place projected a good way, so that there was like a small room on each side of it, which might be left to different lodgers. Behind the door, on a large hook, a wretched man had indeed hanged himself."

"Can you cut him down?" said my poor, shivering guide. 'I had not the strength myself.'"

"Who are you?" I asked.

"Only a fellow lodger, nigh as hard off as them; but I came to bring the poor wife a sup of tea, and found him here; then I heard a step, I ran down and saw you coming along."

"All this was said in a hurried whisper, as I got out my knife; but I could not reach him quite; the hook was so high, and the bit of rope so short. 'Lean on me,' said my guide; 'I could bear your weight for a moment, and you could catch hold of the door.'"

"I got my knee on his back, then one foot on his shoulder to steady myself, while my left arm grasped hold of the door, and I began cutting at the rope. I had cut half through, when my frail support tottered, and at the same moment the door swayed under me. Dropping my knife I clutched at something to recover myself; it was the dead man, and down I came to the ground."

"Down I came, and straight atop of me fell the corpse. I had cut more than half through the rope, and the remaining thwarts were not enough to support him when my guide let go, and I caught hold of his coat. Young gentlemen, I was frightened then."

"Straight upon me fell the dead man. I saw his staring eyes, felt his cold face against mine. The horror of it went all through me; shivering to my inside, and I believe I half fainted. When I recovered myself we lifted him and laid him straight out behind the door, and I sat down on the stairs a bit to get heart again."

"There's no use telling the poor wife, whispered little Pegson; 'she can't live over the day; better not tell her. There was a distress put in yesterday; all the poor things they had was took from them; only her bed left, as she would not want it long; seen better days; brought up quite genteel, they was. I had brought her a cup of tea, but had no time to give it to her when I found him there. Would you, in charity, give it while I inform the police? I'm the oldest lodger, and it will be expected of me.'"

"I was too late for the 6 o'clock train, so I agreed to stay where I was. He was just going down the stair, when he turned back suddenly. 'Sir, do you know what brought him to that,' pointing to the wretched body, 'and brought them to their miserable state?' I can tell you; it was nothing but drink. He drank everything; wife and child might starve, so that he could get a drop of the devil's bottle.'"

"Then he hurriedly left, and taking up the cup of tea, I went toward the bed."

"There was a little child fast asleep, the mother's face was hidden, and her arms stretched out over the child. At first I thought she was dead, but when I gently moved one arm, I heard the quick short breathing. I put a spoonful of tea into her mouth, and heard it swallowed; I gave a few more; then she turned over, and I saw her face. Young gentlemen, it was poor Susan—it was indeed!"

"Her eyes were closed, but she took the tea eagerly; it refreshed her. She felt for her child and her thin fingers moved in his curly hair, while big tears fell down her cheeks."