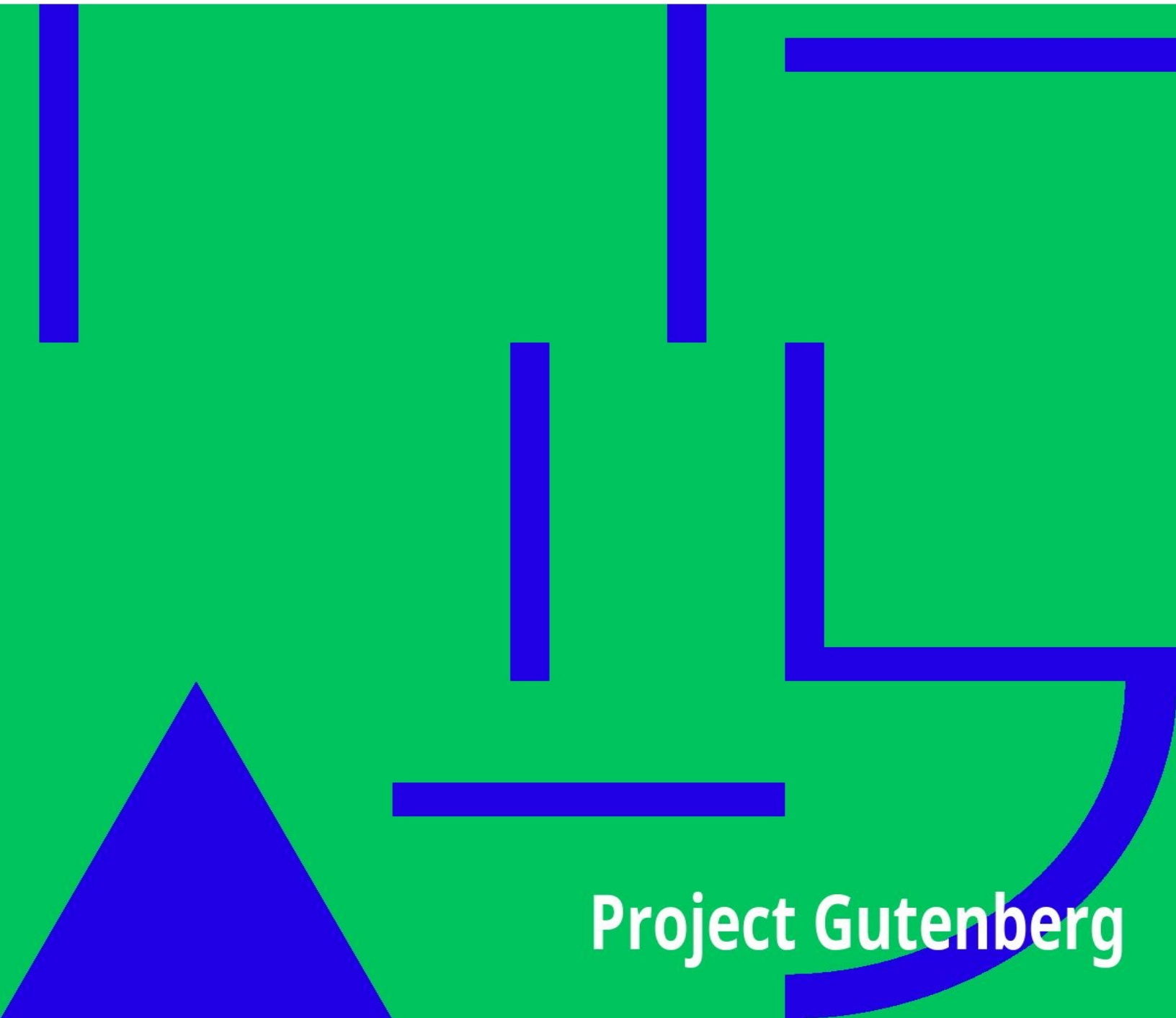
The Black Tor

A Tale of the Reign of James the First

George Manville Fenn



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Chapter One.

One Captain Purlrose.

About as rugged, fierce-looking a gang of men as a lad could set eyes on, as they struggled up the steep cliff road leading to the castle, which frowned at the summit, where the flashing waters of the Gleame swept round three sides of its foot, half hidden by the beeches and birches, which overhung the limpid stream. The late spring was at its brightest and best, but there had been no rain; and as the men who had waded the river lower down, climbed the steep cliff road, they kicked up the white limestone dust, and caked their wet high boots, which, in several instances, had opened holes in which toes could be seen, looking like curious reptiles deep in gnarled and crumpled shells.

“Beggars! What a gang!” said Ralph Darley, a dark, swarthy lad of perhaps seventeen, but looking older, from having an appearance of something downy beginning to come up that spring about his chin, and a couple of streaks, like eyebrows out of place, upon his upper lip. He was well dressed, in the fashion of Solomon King James’s day; and he wore a sword, as he sat half up the rugged slope, on a huge block of limestone, which had fallen perhaps a hundred years before, from the cliff above, and was mossy now, and half hidden by the ivy which covered its side.

“Beggars,” he said again; “and what a savage looking lot.”

As they came on, it began to dawn upon him that they could not be beggars, for if so, they would have been the most truculent-looking party that ever asked for the contributions of the charitable. One, who seemed to be their leader, was a fierce, grizzled, red-nosed fellow, wearing a rusty morion, in which, for want of a feather, a tuft of heather was stuck; he wore a long cloak, as rusty-looking as his helmet; and that he carried a sword was plain enough, for the well-worn scabbard had found a very convenient hole in the cloak, through which it had thrust itself in the most

obtrusive manner, and looked like a tail with a vicious sting, for the cap of the leathern scabbard had been lost, and about three inches of steel blade and point were visible.

Ralph Darley was quick at observation, and took in quickly the fact that all the men were armed, and looked shabbier than their leader, though not so stout; for he was rubicund and portly, where he ought not to have been, for activity, though in a barrel a tubby space does indicate strength. Neither were the noses of the other men so red as their leader's, albeit they were a villainous-looking lot.

"Not beggars, but soldiers," thought Ralph; "and they've been in the wars."

He was quite right, but he did not stop to think that there had been no wars for some years. Still, as aforesaid, he was right, but the war the party had been in was with poverty.

"What in the world do they want in this out-of-the-way place—on the road to nowhere?" thought Ralph. "If they're not beggars, they have lost their way."

He pushed back the hilt of his sword, and drew up one leg, covered with its high, buff-leather boot, beneath him, holding it as he waited for the party to come slowly up; and as they did, they halted where he sat, at the side of the road, and the leader, puffing and panting, took off his rusty morion with his left hand, and wiped his pink, bald head, covered with drops of perspiration, with his right, as he rolled his eyes at the lad.

"Hallo, young springald!" he cried, in a blustering manner. "Why don't you jump up and salute your officer?"

"Because I can't see him," cried the lad sharply.

"What? And you carry a toasting-iron, like a rat's tail, by your side. Here, who made this cursed road, where it ought to have been a ladder?"

"I don't know," said Ralph angrily. "Who are you? What do you want? This road does not lead anywhere."

“That’s a lie, my young cock-a-hoop; if it did not lead somewhere, it would not have been made.”

The man’s companions burst into a hoarse fit of laughter, and the boy flushed angrily.

“Well,” he said haughtily, “it leads up to Cliff Castle, and no farther.”

“That’s far enough for us, my game chicken. Is that heap of blocks of stone on the top there the castle?”

“Yes! What do you want?”

The man looked the lad up and down, rolled one of his eyes, which looked something like that of a lobster, and then winked the lid over the inflated orb, and said:

“Gentlemen on an ambassage don’t read their despatches to every springald they see by the roadside. Here, jump up, and show us the way, and I’ll ask Sir Morton Darley to give you a stoup of wine for your trouble, or milk and water.”

“You ask Sir Morton to give you wine!” cried the lad angrily. “Why, who are you, to dare such a thing?”

“What!” roared the man. “Dare? Who talks to Captain Purlrose, his Highness’s trusted soldier, about dare?” and he put on a tremendously fierce look, blew out his cheeks, drew his brows over his eyes, and slapped his sword-hilt heavily, as if to keep it in its sheath, for fear it should leap out and kill the lad, adding, directly after, in a hoarse whisper: “Lie still, good sword, lie still.”

All this theatrical display was evidently meant to awe the lad, but instead of doing so, it made him angry, for he flushed up, and said quickly:

“I dare,” and the men laughed.

“You dare!” cried the leader; “and pray, who may you be, my bully boy?”

“I don’t tell my name to every ragged fellow I meet in the road,” said the

boy haughtily.

“What!” roared the man, clapping his hand upon the hilt of his blade, an action imitated by his followers.

“Keep your sword in its scabbard,” said Ralph, without wincing in the least. “If you have business with my father, this way.”

He sprang to his feet now, and gazed fiercely at the stranger.

“What?” cried the man, in a voice full of exuberant friendliness, which made the lad shrink in disgust, “you the son of Sir Morton Darley?”

“Yes: what of it?”

“The son of my beloved old companion-in-arms? Boy, let me embrace thee.”

To Ralph’s horror, the man took a step forward, and would have thrown his arms about his neck; but by a quick movement the lad stepped back, and the men laughed to see their leader grasp the wind.

“Don’t do that,” said Ralph sternly. “Do you mean to say that you want to speak to my father?”

“Speak to him? Yes, to fly to the hand of him whom I many a time saved from death. And so you are the son of Morton Darley? And a brave-looking, manly fellow too. Why, I might have known. Eye, nose, curled-up lip. Yes: all there. You are his very reflection, that I ought to have seen in the looking-glass of memory. Excuse this weak moisture of the eyes, boy. The sight of my old friend’s son brings up the happy companionship of the past. Time flies fast, my brave lad. Your father and I were hand and glove then. Never separate. We fought together, bled together, and ah! how fate is partial in the way she spreads her favours! Your father dresses his son in velvet; while I, poor soldier of fortune—I mean misfortune—am growing rusty; sword, morion, breast-plate, body battered, and face scarred by time.”

“Aren’t we going to have something to eat and drink, captain?” growled one of the men, with an ugly scowl.

“Ay, brave boys, and soon,” cried the leader.

“Then, leave off preaching, captain, till we’ve got our legs under a table.”

“Ah, yes. Poor boys, they are footsore and weary with the walk across your hilly moors. Excuse this emotion, young sir, and lead me to my old brother’s side.”

There was something comic in the boy’s look of perplexity and disgust, as, after a few moments’ hesitation, he began to lead the way toward the half castle, half manor-house, which crowned the great limestone cliff.

“Surely,” he thought, “my father cannot wish to see such a ragamuffin as this, with his coarse, bloated features, and disgraceful rags and dirt.”

But the next minute his thoughts took a different turn.

“If what the man says be true, father will be only too glad to help an old brother-officer in misfortune, and be sorry to see him in such a plight.”

With the frank generosity of youth, then, he softened his manner toward his companion, as they slowly climbed upward, the great beeches which grew out of the huge cracks and faults of the cliff shading them from the sun.

“So this is the way?” cried the man.

“Yes: the castle is up there,” and Ralph pointed.

“What! in ruins?” cried the captain.

“Ruins? No!” cried Ralph. “Those stones are natural; the top of the cliff. Our place is behind them. They do look like ruins, though.”

“Hah! But what an eagle’s nest. No wonder I find an eaglet on my way.”

Ralph winced, for the man clapped a dirty hand upon his shoulder, and gripped him fast, turning the lad into a walking-staff to help him on his road.

“Have you come far this morning?” said Ralph, to conceal his disgust.

“Ay, miles and miles, over stones and streams, and in and out among mines and holes. We were benighted, too, up yonder on the mountain.”

“Hill,” said Ralph; “we have no mountains here.”

“Hills when you’re fresh, lad; mountains when you’re footsore and weary. But we stumbled upon a niche, in a bit of a slope near the top, and turned out the bats and foxes, and slept there.”

“Where?” cried Ralph quickly. “Was there a little stream running there—warm water?”

“To be sure there was. Hard stones, and warm water: those were our bed and beverage last night.”

“I know the place. Darch Scarr.”

“Fine scar, too, lad. Been better if it had been healed up, with a door to keep out the cold wind. Oh! so this is where my old comrade lives,” he added, as he came in sight of an arched gateway, with embattled top and turrets, while through the entry, a tree-shaded courtyard could be seen. “And a right good dwelling too. Come on, brave boys. Here’s rest and breakfast at last.”

“And I hope you’ll go directly after,” thought Ralph, as he led the way into the courtyard, and paused at a second entrance, at the top of a flight of stone steps, well commanded by loopholes on either side. Then aloud:

“Will you wait here a minute, while I go and tell my father?”

“Yes: tell him his old brother-officer is here.”

“I did not catch your name when you spoke before,” said Ralph. “Captain Pearl Ross?”

“Nay, nay, boy; Purlrose. He’ll know directly you speak. Tell him, I’m waiting to grasp him by the hand.”

Ralph nodded, and sprang up the stone flight, while the visitor's companions threw themselves down upon the steps to rest, their leader remaining standing, and placing himself by the mounting stone on one side, hand upon sword-hilt, and arranging his ragged cloak in folds with as much care as if it had been of newest velvet.

Chapter Two.

Sir Morton receives his Guest.

"Father can't be pleased," thought the lad, as he hurried in through a heavy oaken door, strengthened by the twisted and scrolled iron bands of the huge hinges, and studded with great-headed nails. This yielded heavily, as, seizing a ring which moved a lever, he raised the heavy latch, and for a moment, as he passed through, he hesitated about closing the door again upon the group below. But as he glanced at the party, he hesitated no longer. Their appearance begat no confidence, and the great latch clicked directly.

The next minute, he was hurrying along a dark stone passage, to spring up a few more stairs, leading into a corridor with a polished oaken floor, and mullioned windows looking down upon the courtyard; and as he reached the second, a bright, handsome girl, whose features proclaimed sisterhood, started out to meet him.

"Oh Ralph," she said, "who are those dreadful-looking men you have brought up?"

"Don't stop me, Min," he said hastily. "Old soldiers who want to see father. Where is he?"

"In his room."

The lad hurried on, and entered through a door way on his left, to where, in an oaken-panelled room, a stern, slightly grey, military-looking man sat poring over an old book, but looked up directly the lad entered.

"Ah, Ralph, boy," he said; "been out?"

“Only on the cliff, father,” cried the lad hastily. “Visitors.”

“Visitors? Nonsense! I expect no visitors. Who are they?”

“Captain Purlrose and his men.”

“Purlrose!” cried Sir Morton, with a look of angry disgust. “Here?”

“Yes, father,” said Ralph, watching keenly the impression made by his words. “Waiting at the foot of the steps.”

“Bah! I thought the drunken, bullying scoundrel was dead and gone years ago. Hung or shot, for he deserved either.”

“Hah!” ejaculated the lad, with a sigh of relief. “Then you are not glad to see him, father?”

“Glad to see him? Are you mad, boy?”

“No, father,” said the lad, with a merry laugh. “I hope not; but he said you would be, and that you were old brothers-in-arms, and that he longed to grip you by the hand; and he tried to hug me, and shed tears, and flattered me, and said all sorts of things.”

“Pah! the same as of old; but you said—and his men.”

“Yes, about a dozen like him; ruffianly-looking, rag-bags of fellows, all armed, and looking like a gang of bullies and robbers.”

Sir Morton frowned, rose from his seat, and walked to the side of the room, where his sword and belt lay in front of a bookcase.

“Well, I suppose I must see the fellow. He served under me, years ago, Ralph, and I suppose he has come begging, unless he sees a chance to steal.”

“Then I was not unjust, father, in thinking ill of the man and disliking him.”

“Unjust? Pah! The fellow was a disgrace to the name of soldier; and now, I suppose, that there is no war on the way, he has been discharged from

the king’s service, with a pack of his companions.”

“He said he had saved your life, father.”

Sir Morton laughed contemptuously. “I have no recollection of the fact, Ralph, boy, and I don’t think I should have forgotten so important a matter; but I do recollect saving his, by interceding when he was about to be shot for plundering some helpless people. There; let him and a couple of his men come in. The poor wretch is in a bad state, I suppose, and I will give him something to help him on his road.”

Ralph went to the door, but turned back, hesitating.

“Well, my boy?” said his father.

“Had I not better tell some of the men to arm, and be ready?” asked the lad.

“What! Nonsense, boy! I know my man. He would not dare to be insolent.”

“But he has a dangerous-looking gang of fellows with him.”

“Of the same kind as himself, Ralph. Have no fear of that. If there were real danger, we could soon summon a dozen stout men to deal with him and his party. But, as I said, let him only bring in two or three with him.”

Ralph hurried out, and found the captain and his men forming a picturesque group about the stone steps; and as soon as he appeared, the former swung himself round, and threw his cloak over his shoulder, with a swaggering gesture.

“Hallo, my young eagle,” he cried. “What saith the parent bird, the gallant lord of the castle?”

“My father will see you, sir,” replied Ralph. “This way.”

“Aha! I knew he would,” cried the man, giving his steel cap a cock over on one side, and displaying a large pink patch of his bald head. “Come on, brave boys.”

“Stop!” cried Ralph quickly. “Three of you, only, are to accompany your leader.”

“Eh? What?” cried the captain fiercely, as a low murmur arose.

“That is what my father said, sir.”

“What does this mean?” cried the man theatrically. “Separate me from my brave companions-in-arms? Does this mean treachery, young sir?”

“Treachery? Why should it mean that?” cried Ralph stoutly, as the man’s words endorsed the character so lately given of him. “If,” argued Ralph to himself, “the fellow were the honest, brave soldier, why should he fear treachery from the brother-officer with whom he said he had often shared danger?”

“The world is full of wickedness, boy,” replied the captain; “and I have often been misjudged. But there; a brave man never knows fear. You three come with me, and if in half an hour I do not come back, boys, you know what to do.”

There was a shout at this, and hands struck sword-hilts with a loud clang.

“Right, brave boys, and don’t leave one stone upon another until you have found your captain.”

Ralph burst out into a fit of laughter, and then felt annoyed with himself, as the man turned round scowling.

“What do you mean by that, boy?”

“That your men would have their work cut out, sir,” said Ralph sharply. “This way, please.”

The captain uttered a low growl, signed to three of his men, and the party followed the lad, who, to his annoyance, once more came across his sister, hurrying along the passage.

“Salute, brave boys, salute,” cried the captain. “Youth and beauty in front —the worship of the gallant soldiers of the king.”

He struck an attitude, which was roughly imitated by the men.

“A sister, on my life,” cried the captain.

“This way,” said Ralph shortly, and with the colour coming into his cheeks, as he felt indignant with the man for daring to notice his sister, and angry with her for being there.

The door of Sir Morton’s room was thrown open, and the captain strode in, followed by his men; and, as he saw the knight, standing with his back to the fireplace, he struck a fresh attitude.

“Ah! at last!” he cried. “My old brave companion-in-arms! Well met, once more.”

He stretched out his hands, and swaggered forward to grasp Sir Morton’s.

“Halt!” cried that gentleman sharply, without stirring from his position. “Now, Captain Purlrose, what is your business with me?”

“Business with you? Is this my reception, after long years of absence? Ah, I see! The war-worn soldier forgotten once again. Ah, Sir Morton Darley, why humble me before my gallant men?”

“I have not forgotten you, Captain Purlrose. I remember you perfectly, and you are not changed in the least. Now, if you please, be brief, and explain your business.”

“My business! I thought I was coming to an old friend and brother.”

“No, sir; you thought nothing of the kind. Come, you know I understand you thoroughly. State your business, if you please.”

The three men laughed aloud, and Sir Morton, who had not before noticed them, turned upon them sharply, with the result that the laughter died out, and they looked uncomfortable.

“And this before my men! Humbled thus! Have I fallen so low?”

“You are wasting words, Captain Purlrose; and, as you have found where I lived, and have evidently journeyed long, tell me at once why you have come.”

“I will,” cried the captain, resuming his swaggering air. “I, as an old soldier, sir, came to ask favours of no man.”

“Then why have you come, sir, if not to ask a favour?”

“I was passing this way, and, as an old brother-in-arms lived here, I thought I would call.”

“You were not passing this way, sir; no brother-in-arms lived here, but an officer, under whom you once served; and you had some object in view to make you cross our desolate moors,” said Sir Morton, sternly. “If you want help, speak out.”

“I am no beggar, Sir Morton Darley,” said the man, in blustering tones.

“I am glad to hear it. Now, then, what is it?”

“Well, sir, you boast of knowing me thoroughly. Let me tell you that I know you, and your position here.”

“And find it is in every respect a strong one, sir. Well?”

“You live here, close at hand to an enemy who covets your lands, and with whom you have fought again and again. You and your ancestors were always enemies with the Edens.”

“Quite right, sir. Well, what is that to you?”

“This, Sir Morton Darley. The war is over. I and my brave fellows are idle, our swords rusting in their sheaths.”

“More shame to the brave fellows who do not keep their weapons bright. Well, this is a long preamble to tell me that you have all been dismissed from the king’s service. Go on.”

The captain stared and scowled, but he could not fully meet the

searching eyes which looked him down.

“Well,” he said, rather blunderingly now, “knowing what I did of my old officer’s state—”

“‘Old officer’ is better, Captain Purlrose. Go on, sir.”

“I said, here am I, a brave soldier, with a handful of stout followers, eager to do good, honest work; why should I not go and offer my sword to Sir Morton Darley? He is sorely pressed.”

“Wrong,” said Sir Morton.

“He would be glad of our help,” continued the man, without heeding the interruption; “we could garrison his castle and help him to drive his enemy from the field. Twelve of them, all well-tried soldiers, who can make him king of the country round. That, sir, is why I have come, to confer a favour more than ask one. Now, sir, what do you say? Such a chance for you may never occur again.”

“Hah!” ejaculated Sir Morton; “and all this out of pure good fellowship!”

“Of course; save that a retainer who risks his life in his chief’s service is worthy of his hire.”

“Naturally, sir. So that is your meaning—your object in coming?”

“That is it, Sir Morton. We can put your castle in a state of defence, make raids, and harass the enemy, fetch in stores from the surrounding country, and make you a great man. Think of how you can humble the Edens.”

Sir Morton frowned as he looked back at the past, and then from thence up to his present position, one in which he felt that he played a humble part in presence of his stronger enemy; and Ralph watched him, read in his face that he was about to accept his visitor’s proposal, and with a feeling of horror at the thought of such a gang being hired to occupy a part of the castle, and brought, as it were, into a kind of intimacy, he turned quickly to his father, laid his hand upon his arm, and whispered eagerly:

“Father, pray, pray don’t do this. They are a terribly villainous set of ruffians.”

The captain twitched his big ears in his efforts to catch what was said; but he could only hear enough to make out that the son was opposing the plans, and he scowled fiercely at the lad.

“Wait, wait,” said Sir Morton.

“But do go out and look at the rest of the men, father,” whispered Ralph.

“There is no need.”

“Then you will not agree, father?”

“Most certainly not, my boy.”

Purlrose could not catch all this, but he scowled again.

“Look here, young cockerel,” he cried, “don’t you try and set my old officer against me.”

“No need,” said Sir Morton hotly.

“Ah, that’s because hard times have made me and my poor gallant fellows look a little shabby.”

“Not that, sir. Your old character stands in your way.”

“Oh, this is hard—this is hard. You rich, and with everything comfortable, while I am poor, and unrewarded for all my labour and risk by an ungrateful Scot.”

“Don’t insult your sovereign, sir!” cried Sir Morton.

“Oh, this is hard—this is hard.”

“Look here, Michael Purlrose, if you had been an officer and a gentleman in distress, I would have helped you.”

“Do you mean to say that I am not an officer, and a gentleman in distress,

sir?" cried the captain, clapping his hand to the hilt of his sword, a movement imitated by Ralph, angrily. But Sir Morton stood back, unmoved.

"Let your sword alone, boy," he said sternly. "You, Michael Purlrose, knowing you as I do of old, for a mouthing, cowardly bully, do you think that I am going to be frightened by your swagger? Yes, I tell you that you are no gentleman."

"Oh, this is too much," cried the visitor. "It is enough to make me call in my men."

"Indeed!" said Sir Morton coolly. "Why call them in to hear me recapitulate your disgrace? As to your appeals to me for help, and your claim, which you profess to have upon me, let me remind you that you were engaged as a soldier of fortune, and well paid for your services, though you and yours disgraced the royal army by your robberies and outrages. All you gained you wasted in riot and drunkenness, and now that you are suffering for your follies, you come and make claims upon me."

"Oh, this is too hard upon a poor soldier who has bled in his country's service. Did I not once save your life, when you were at your last gasp?"

"No, sir; it was the other way on. I saved yours, and when I was surrounded, and would have been glad of your help, you ran away."

"Ha-ha-ha!" cried Ralph, bursting into a roar of laughter.

"Ah–h–ah!" cried the captain fiercely, as he half drew his sword; but he drove it back with a loud clang into its sheath directly. "Stay there, brave blade, my only true and trusted friend. He is the son of my old companion-in-arms, and I cannot draw upon a boy."

Ralph laughed aloud again, and the captain scowled, and rolled his eyes fiercely; but he did not startle the lad in the least, and after a long, fierce stare, the man turned to Sir Morton.

"Don't be hard upon an old brother-soldier, Morton Darley," he said.

"No, I will not," said Sir Morton quietly. "You and your men can refresh

yourselves in the hall, and when you start on your way, I will give you a pound or two to help you."

"Oh, as if I were a common wayside beggar. Comrade, this is too hard. Can you not see that my beard is getting grizzled and grey?"

"Yes; but I do not see what that has to do with it."

"Think again, old comrade. Twelve brave and true men have I with me. Take us as your gentlemen and men at arms to protect you and yours against those who are unfriendly. You must have enemies."

Sir Morton started and glanced at his son, for these words touched a spring in his breast. With thirteen fighting men to increase his little force, what might he not do? The Edens' stronghold, with its regularly coming-in wealth, must fall before him; and, once in possession, Sir Edward Eden might petition and complain; but possession was nine points of the law, and the king had enough to do without sending a force into their wild out-of-the-way part of the world to interfere. Once he had hold of the Black Tor, he could laugh at the law, and see the old enemy of his house completely humbled.

Sir Morton hesitated and turned his head, to find his son watching him keenly, while Captain Purlrose stood with his left hand resting on the hilt of his sword, making the scabbard cock out behind, and lift up the back of his ragged cloak, as with his right he twisted up and pointed one side of his rusty-grey fierce moustache.

The man was watching Sir Morton keenly, and his big ears twitched, as he tried to catch the whispered words which passed between father and son.

"What do you say, Ralph, lad? With the help of these men I could easily make Eden bite the dust. Then the Black Tor would be mine, and afterwards yours; with all the rich revenue to be drawn from the lead-mine. It is very tempting, boy."

"Yes, father," said the boy hotly, and his face flushed as he spoke; "but that's what it is—a miserable temptation. We'll humble the Edens, and have the Black Tor and the lead-mine; but we'll win all with our swords

like gentlemen, or fail. We could not go and take the place with a set of ruffians like those outside, and helped by such a man as yonder bully. You couldn't do it, father. Say no."

"Hah! More insults," cried Purlrose, who had caught a word here and there. "But no; lie still, good sword: he is a beardless boy, and the son of the brave comrade I always honoured, whate'er my faults."

Ralph turned upon him angrily; but his father laid a hand upon the boy's shoulder, and pressed it hard.

"Right, Ralph, lad," he said warmly, and he looked proudly in the boy's eyes. "I could not do it in that way."

"Hah!" ejaculated the lad, with a sigh of content.

"No, Purlrose," continued Sir Morton. "I shall not avail myself of your services. Go into the hall and refresh yourself and your men. Come to me afterward, and I will help you as I said."

"With a mouthful of bread, and a few pence, and after all this weary journey across these wild moors. But I see: it is all through the words of this beardless boy. Suppose I tell you that, now I have come, I mean to stay?" he added threateningly.

"Shall I get the men together, father?" said Ralph quickly.

"No, boy, there is no need," said Sir Morton firmly. "I am not afraid of Michael Purlrose's threats."

"What!" cried the man. "You do not know me yet."

"Better than you know yourself, sir," said Sir Morton, rising. "That is the way to the hall. Have the goodness to go first."

The captain threw his cloak back over his right shoulder, slapped his right hand heavily upon his rusty breast-plate, and then, with a flourish, caught at the hilt of his sword, and again half drew it from its sheath, to stand scowling at Ralph, the intentness of his gaze seeming to affect his eyes, so that they began to lean towards each other, as if for help, till his look

became a villainous squint. Then, as neither father nor son quailed before him, he uttered a loud “Hah!” thrust back his sword, and strode with a series of stamps to the door, his high, buff-leather boots rustling and creaking the while.

There he faced round.

“I give you one more chance, Morton Darley,” he cried. “Yes or no?”

“No,” said Sir Morton firmly.

“One moment before it is too late. Are we to be friends or foes?”

“Neither,” shouted Ralph quickly.

“Yes, boy, one or the other. You, Morton Darley, will you take me into your service, or do you drive me into going straight to your rival and enemy, who will jump at my offer, and pay me better than I could expect of you?”

“Go where you please, sir,” said Sir Morton.

“Ah, you drive me to it, when I would have been your friend. There, it must be so; but don’t blame me when you are humbled in the dust.”

“Why, if you go there,” cried Ralph, “Sir Edward Eden will make his men disarm your crew of ragged Jacks, and set you all to work in his mine.”

“What! Never. Now, Darley, once more—friends or foes?”

“Neither, I tell you, man. Now leave my place at once, you and yours. I will neither help you nor have any further dealings with you. Go.”

“What!” roared Purlrose; and this time he drew his sword fully, and Ralph’s bright blade followed suit, glittering, while the captain’s looked rusty and dull.

“Pooh! put up your sword, Ralph,” said Sir Morton, advancing toward their visitor, who began to shrink back. “Sheathe your blade, sir,” he said sternly, and without paying the least attention to the man’s bullying looks, he threw open the door, and pointed to the entrance.

He passed out, giving the door behind him a heavy slam, and marched out to the group standing about the broad steps and road, where father and son could hear him haranguing his men, who immediately burst into an angry yell, and for the most part turned menacingly toward the house.

Chapter Three.

About the Enemy.

“Shall I fasten the door, father?” cried Ralph excitedly.

“No,” said Sir Morton firmly. “I know my man of old.”

Ralph looked on and listened, as a low growl arose; but, bully and coward or no, it was evident that Captain Purlrose was master of his men, who stood listening and nodding their heads, one or two slapping the hilts of their swords menacingly, and at last the leader of the ragged crew turned and shook his fist threateningly at the house, and ended by striding jauntily away through the embattled gateway, followed by his gang.

“Will they come back, father, at night?” said Ralph, after uttering a sigh of relief.

“No, my boy; I judge the men by their leader. Michael Purlrose always had a wholesome love of keeping his skin sound; his men have, without doubt, the same. He will execute his threat, though, of going to Eden’s.”

“And if Sir Edward takes them into his service, it will be awkward for us, father.”

“Yes, *if*, my boy; but I do not think that Eden will. We shall hear no more of the vagabonds, unless Purlrose comes back to beg.”

“I’ll go and watch them, father,” cried Ralph eagerly.

“Yes; but you will not go near, so as to run any risk? If they found you alone, they would attack and strip you of everything of value you have.”

“I’ll take care,” cried the lad. “I can get up to the side of the cliff, and watch them right away. I can see the path to the Black Tor from there.”

“Yes; go,” said Sir Morton, and the boy hurried out, crossed the little court, and passing through a small side-door, reached the slope of the cliff upon which the old castle was built, and then by a narrow pathway, clambered a couple of hundred feet higher, starting the jackdaws from their resting-places, making them fly off, uttering angry cries of *tah*! *tah*! Then throwing himself down behind a great block of limestone, which had fallen from above, and which looked as if a thrust would send it hurtling down some hundred feet, into the river below, he waited till, as he fully expected, he saw the party of men appear down below in the track; and then he followed their course, seeing them disappear behind the trees, appear again, and after making divers short cuts, as if their leader were well acquainted with the place, make off for the ford. Then he watched them as they straggled across the river, and struck into the narrow cliff path which led to the great dark-hued cliff known as the Black Tor, where the Edens’ impregnable stronghold stood, perched upon a narrow ledge of rock which rose up like a monstrous tongue from the earth, connected on one side by a narrow natural bridge with the main cliff, the castellated building being protected on all sides by a huge rift fully a couple of hundred feet deep, the tongue being merely a portion of the cliff split away during some convulsion of nature; or perhaps gradually separated by subsidence, the top affording sufficient space for the building, and its courtyards.

Ralph watched the men until the last had disappeared; and then, knowing from the configuration of the place as he had seen it from another point of view, that he would probably not see them again for an hour or two, perhaps not again that day, if Sir Edward Eden received the proposals of Captain Purlrose favourably, he began slowly and thoughtfully to descend. For he knew that it would be a serious matter for his father if Sir Edward Eden seized upon the opportunity for strengthening his retainers and attacking his rival.

The feud between the two families had lasted for generations, beginning so far back that the origin was lost in the mists of time. All that Ralph Darley knew was, that in the days of Henry the Eighth, an Eden had done a Darley deadly injury that could never be forgiven, and ever since the

wrong had been handed down from father to son as a kind of unpleasant faith by which it was the duty of all Darleys to be prepared to exterminate all Edens; and if they could not exterminate them and seize upon their possessions, to do them all the injury they could.

There was another version of the story, as Ralph well knew, and it was precisely the same, saving for the following exception: that in the beginning it was a Darley who did the deadly wrong to an Eden. But one thing was certain—the two families had carried on their petty warfare in the most determined way. Edens had fallen by the sword; so had Darleys. There was a grim legend, too, of an Eden having been taken prisoner, and starved to death in one of the dungeons of Cliffe Castle, in Queen Mary's time; and Ralph had often gone down below to look at the place, and the staple ring and chain in the gloomy place, shuddering at the horror of the prisoner's fate.

For this the Edens had waited their time, and surprised the castle one night, driving the occupants from place to place, till they took refuge in the central tower, from which they could not be dislodged; so the Edens contented themselves by the following reprisal: they set fire to the castle in a dozen places before they retired, the flames raging till there was no more woodwork to destroy, and nothing was left but the strong central tower and the sturdy walls. The place was restored, though, soon after, and the Sir Ralph Darley of Elizabeth's time made an expedition one night to give tit-for-tat, but only to find out that it was impossible to get across the stoutly-defended natural bridge at Black Tor, and that it was waste of time to keep on shooting arrows, bearing burning rags soaked in pitch, on to the roofs of the towers and in at the loopholes. So he retreated, with a very sore head, caused by a stone thrown from above, dinting in his helmet, and with half his men carrying the other half, wounded or dead.

His successor had tried again and again to master the Edens and seize their possessions. Amongst these was the Black Tor lead-mine, approached by steps in the side of the cliff; its galleries honeycombed the place, running right under the earth, and into natural caverns of the large opposite cliffs of limestone, where the jackdaws built their nests.

Ralph Darley, living as he did that day in the days of King James,

pondered on all those old legends as he descended to give his father the information he had acquired; and as he stepped down, he knit his brows and began to think that it was quite time this feud had an end, and that it must be his duty to finish it all off, in spite of the addition to the strength at Black Tor, by waiting his opportunity, and meeting, and in fair fight slaying, young Mark Eden, who was about his own age, seventeen, and just back home from one of the great grammar-schools. This done, he would make a scheme for seizing the Black Tor, putting Sir Edward Eden and his mercenaries to the sword, but sparing the men who were miners, so that they might go on working for the Darleys. By this means he would end the feud, secure peace, and make his father a rich and happy man, having proved himself a thoroughly good and chivalrous son.

Ralph felt very brave, and proud, and happy, when he had reached this point, which was just as he opened the door of his father's room, which contained a very small library—books being rare and precious in those days—plenty of handsome armour and war-like weapons of offence, and a corner set apart for alchemy and the study of minerals; for, in a desultory way, Sir Morton Darley, bitten by the desire to have a mine of his own to produce him as good an income as that of his enemy neighbour, had been given to searching without success for a good lode of lead.

Sir Morton was reading an old tome as his son entered the room, hot, eager, and excited.

"Well, boy," he said, looking up dreamily; "what is it?"

"They've gone straight to Black Tor, father."

"The Edens? Have they? I did not know they had been away."

"No, no, father; that captain fellow and his men."

"Oh, of course. I had almost forgotten them. Tut, tut, tut! It will be very awkward for us, Ralph, if Sir Edward listens to that scoundrel's proposals. But there, it cannot be helped. There never was an Eden yet who was a gentlemen, and all we have to do is to be well prepared. The old tower is stronger than ever, and if they come we'll fight them from the outer gate to the wall, from the wall to the inner wall, and if they drive us from that,

there is the tower, where we can set them at defiance."

"As old Sir Ralph did, father," cried the boy, flushing with pride.

"Exactly, my boy; and I do not feel much fear of Captain Purlrose and his men."

"No, father; I suppose he will keep on half-drawing his sword, and thrusting it back with a clang."

"Exactly, Ralph, boy," cried Sir Morton, laughing. "Just that one act shows the man's character to a T. Bluster, and then retreat. But suppose it should come to fighting, my boy. Hadn't you better go back to school, and stay till the trouble's over?"

"What!" cried Ralph fiercely.

"You surely don't want to fight, boy?"

"No, father, I don't want to fight; but if you are obliged to— Oh, father, you will not send me away?"

Sir Morton looked searchingly at the flushed countenance before him for some moments before speaking.

"If you wish to stay, Ralph, certainly I shall not send you away. I only gave you the opportunity to go if you wished. However, perhaps we shall hear no more of the matter. Eden may not listen to that scoundrel. If he does, we may set to work and furbish up our arms, lay in stores of provisions, and be prepared for our defence."

"Then I hope he will engage the men, father," cried Ralph.

"Eh? And pray why, boy?" exclaimed Sir Morton.

"Because, father," said the lad, speaking in a deeply-moved tone of voice, his eyes flashing and his cheeks flushed. "You have done nothing lately to show how deeply you resent all the old wrongs; and if the Edens hire these men, it will be a good opportunity for fighting our old foes, beating them and taking possession, and ending the feud."

“Yes,” said Sir Morton, smiling, “a good opportunity, boy; but we might lose the day.”

“We will not lose the day, father,” cried the lad hotly. “Those men who fight for pay are cowards at heart, and they will lead the Edens to their destruction.”

“But suppose that, after all, the Darleys were the ones to blame?”

“Oh, father, we can’t stop to think of that. We do know that they have committed outrage after outrage against our family, and you have always taught me that it was our duty to punish the Edens.”

“Yes, my boy, I have, as my father and my grandfather taught me; but I have often wished the wretched business were at an end. I want to be at peace.”

“And you shall be, father, and soon, too, now,” cried Ralph excitedly. “But you will begin at once?”

“What, making peace?”

“No, father, war,” cried the lad eagerly.

“Yes,” said Sir Morton sternly, “if the Edens do.”

“Oh, father, how calmly you take it all. I should have thought you would be ready to begin at once.”

“Yes, Ralph, because you are young, and have never seen what even the pettiest war means, not even the bright side, with its chivalry and panoply, and gay show. I have seen that, and the other side too.”

“But you would fight, father?” cried the lad, looking astonished.

“Yes,” said Sir Morton, with his face turning hard and stern, “if the need arises, boy, and to the death.”

Chapter Four.

Mark Eden has a Morning's Walk.

Eden, fresh from Linkeham, on account of a terrible attack of fever ravaging the school to such an extent that it was considered wise to close it for a time, was enjoying the pleasant change, and wondering how long it would be before the school would reopen, and whether his father, Sir Edward Eden of Black Tor, would send him back.

"I ought to be old enough now to give up a schoolboy's life," he said to himself, "and begin thinking of what I shall be as a man."

He said this to himself as he descended the stone steps which led to the platform at the side of the precipice, where a natural Gothic arch hung over the entrance to the mine, which began with a steep slope running down through the limestone for fifty yards, and then opened out into an extensive cavity, whose roof was a hundred feet overhead, and in whose floor the square hole had been cut to follow the great vein of lead, which spread like the roots of some gigantic tree in various directions. The great hole represented the trunk of the tree, and this had once been solid lead ore, but all had been laboriously cut away, as well as many of the branches, which represented the roots, though plenty were left to excavate, and fresh ones and new cavities were constantly being formed, so that the Eden mine at Black Tor was looked upon as the richest in the county.

Mark Eden stopped to have a chat with some of his father's men, who were going and coming from the square trunk-hole, and he watched them ascending and descending the greasy ladders fixed against the side, each man bearing a candle, stuck in his leather cap.

"I shan't want to be a miner," he said, as he gazed down at the tiny sparks of light below. "Faugh! how dark and dismal it looks. A dirty hole. But father says dirty work brings clean money, and it's just as well to be rich, I suppose. But what a life! Might just as well be a mole."

He began to hum over an old English ditty, and his voice echoed strangely from above.

"Let's see: Mary wants some of that blue spar, and I promised to get a lot.

Must go down one of these days with Dummy Rugg: he says he knows of some fine bits. Not to-day, though."

He hurried out into the bright sunshine again, went up the steps to the castle, which stood perched at the top of a huge mass of rock, surrounded on all sides by the deep gorge, and then crossed the natural bridge to the main cliff, of which the foundation of the castle was the vast slice, split away, most probably by some volcanic disturbance. Masses of lava and scoria uncovered by the miners, from time to time, showed that volcanic action had been rife there at one period; additional suggestion that the said action had not yet died out, being afforded by the springs of beautifully clear warm water, which bubbled out in several places in the district.

As the lad crossed the bridge, thinking nothing of the giddy, profound depths on either side, there being not the slightest protection in the way of rail to the six-foot wide path, he shook back his brown hair, thrust his hands in his pockets, and with the sheath of his sword banging against his legs, started off along the first level place for a run.

A looker-on would have wondered why he did this, and would have gazed ahead to see what there was to induce him to make so wild a rush in a dangerous place. But he would have seen nothing but rugged path, tree-top, and the face of the cliff, and would not have grasped the fact that the reason for the boy's wild dash was, that he was overcharged with vitality, and that energy which makes a lad exert himself in that natural spontaneous effort to get rid of some of the vital gas, flashing along his nerves and bubbling through his veins.

"What a day!" he cried aloud. "How blue the sky is. Hallo! there they go."

He stopped suddenly to watch a cavernous hole in the cliff, from which half-a-dozen blue rock-pigeons had darted out, and as he watched, others swooped by, and darted in.

The next minute he went on, followed the path, and turned a buttress-like corner, which took him to the other side of the great chine of limestone, which was here quite as precipitous, but clothed with trees, which softened the asperities of nature, and hung from shelf, crack, and chasm,

to cast shadows down and down, right to where the river flashed and sparkled in its rapid flow, or formed deep dark pools, which reflected the face of the cliff in picture after picture.

“One never gets tired of this place,” muttered the lad, as he began to descend a zigzag path, worn in the face of the cliff, starting the powdered-headed jackdaws from their breeding shelves and holes, and sending the blackbirds chinking from out of the bushes which clung to the grey precipice.

“That’s where the brown owl’s nest was,” muttered the lad. “Bound to say there’s one this year. S’pose I’m getting too old for birds’-nesting and climbing. Don’t see why I should be, though.”

He reached the river’s bank at last, and after walking for a few yards, trampling down the white blossoms of the broad-leaved garlic, which here grew in profusion, and suggested salad, he reached a rippling shallow, stepped down into the river, and waded across, the water only reaching to his ankles.

As he stepped out on the other side, and kicked and stamped to get rid of the water, he gazed along the winding dale at as glorious a bit of English scenery as England can produce; and on that bright May morning, as he breathed in the sweet almond-like odour of the fully-blown hawthorn blossom, he muttered: “Linkeham’s nice enough, but the lads would never believe how beautiful it is here. Hallo! there he goes. I wonder where they are building this year.”

He shaded his eyes as he looked up at a great blackbird, winging its way high up above the top of the great cliff which hung over the river, and watched till it disappeared, when, in a low melodious voice, he began singing softly another snatch of an old English song, something about three ravens that sat upon a tree, with a chorus of: “Down, a-down, a-down,” which he repeated again and again, as if it helped him to reflect.

“Wonder where they are building this year,” he said to himself again. “I should like a couple of little ones to bring up. Get them young, and they’d be as tame as tame.”

He went on wondering where the ravens, which frequented the

neighbourhood of the river and its mountainous cliffs, built their nests; but wondering did not help him, and he gave up the riddle, and began, in his pleasant holiday idleness, to look about at other things in the unfrequented wilderness through which the river ran. To trace the raven by following it home seemed too difficult, but it was easy to follow a great bumble-bee, which went blundering by, alighting upon a block of stone, took flight again, and landed upon a slope covered with moss, entering at last a hole which went sloping down beneath the stones.

A little farther on, where a hawthorn whitened the bank with its fragrant wreaths, there was a quick, fluttering rush, a glimpse of a speckle-breasted thrush, and a little examination showed the neat nest, plastered inside smoothly with clay, like a cup, to hold four beautiful blue eggs, finely-spotted at the ends.

“Sitting, and nearly hatched,” said the lad. “Might wait for them, and bring them up. I dunno, though. Sing best in the trees. Wouldn’t hop about the courtyard and cliffs like the young ravens. Wonder where they build?”

He went on, to stop and watch the trout and grayling, which kept darting away, as he approached the riverside, gleaming through the sunlit water, and hiding in the depths, or beneath some mass of rock or tree-root on the other side.

“Rather stupid for me, getting to be a man, to think so much about birds’ nests; but I don’t know: perhaps it isn’t childish. Old Rayburn is always watching for them, and picking flowers, and chipping bits of stone. Why, he has books full of pressed grasses and plants; and boxes full of bits of ore and spar, and stony shells out of the caves and mines.—Well now, isn’t that strange?”

He stopped short, laughing to himself, as he suddenly caught sight of a droll-looking figure, standing knee-deep in the river, busy with rod and line, gently throwing a worm-baited hook into the deep black water, under the projecting rocks at the foot of the cliff.

The figure, cut off, as it were, at the knees, looked particularly short and stout, humped like a camel, by the creel swung behind to be out of the way. His dress was a rusty brown doublet, with puffed-out breeches

beneath, descending half-way down the thigh, and then all was bare. A steeple-crowned, broad-brimmed hat, from beneath which hung an abundance of slightly-curling silvery hair, completed the figure at which Mark Eden gazed, unseen; for the old man was intent upon his fishing, and just then he struck, and after a little playing, drew in and unhooked a finely-spotted trout, which he was about to transfer to his basket, when he was checked by a greeting from the back.

“Morning, Master Rayburn. That’s a fine one.”

“Ah, Mark, boy, how are you?” said the old man, smiling. “Yes: I’ve got his brother in the basket, and I want two more. Better come and help me to eat them.”

“Can’t to-day.—Quite well?”

“Yes, thank God, boy. Well for an old man. I heard you were back from school. How’s that?”

“Bad fever there. All sent home.”

“That’s sad. Ought to be at work, boy. Better come and read with me.”

“Well, I will sometimes, sir.”

“Come often, my boy; keep you out of mischief.”

“Oh, I shan’t get into mischief, sir.”

“Of course not; idle boys never do. Not likely to get fighting, either. I see young Ralph Darley’s at home. Fine chance for you,” said the old man, with a sarcastic ring in his voice, as he slipped his trout into the basket.

“Is he?” cried the lad excitedly.

“Oh yes; he’s up at the Cliff. Now then, why don’t you fill your pockets with big stones to throw at him, or cut a big club? Oh, I see, though. You’ve mounted a skewer. Pull it out, and try if the point’s sharp. I suppose you’re going down the river to lay wait for him and kill him.”

“There, you’re as bad as ever, Master Rayburn,” cried the lad, flushing, and looking mortified. “Last time I saw you it was just the same: laughing at, and bantering, and sneering at me. No wonder my father gets angry with you, and doesn’t ask you to the Tor.”

“Yes, no wonder. Quarrels with me, boy, instead of with himself for keeping up such a mad quarrel.”

“It isn’t father’s fault, sir,” cried the lad quickly. “It’s the old feud that has been going on for generations.”

“Old feud! Old disgrace!” cried the fisherman, throwing away the worm he was about to impale on his hook, to see it snapped up at once by a good fish; and standing his rod in the water, like a staff to lean on, as he went on talking, with the cold water swirling about over his knees, and threatening to wet his feather-stuffed breeches. “I’m ashamed of your father and Ralph’s father. Call themselves Christian gentlemen, and because a pair of old idiots of ancestors in the dark ages quarrelled, and tried to cut one another’s throats, they go on as their fathers did before them, trying to seize each other’s properties, and to make an end of one another, and encouraging their sons to grow up in the same vile way.”

“My father is a gentleman and a knight, sir,” cried Mark Eden hotly; “and I’m sure that he would never turn cut-throat or robber if he was left alone.”

“Of course; and that’s what Sir Morton Darley would say, or his son either; and still the old feud is kept up. Look here, boy; suppose you were to run against young Ralph now, what would happen?”

“There’d be a fight,” cried the lad, flushing up; and he drew in his breath with a hiss.

“Of course!” sneered the old man.

“Well, he never sees me without insulting me.”

“And you never see him without doing the same.”

“But—”

“But! Bah! I haven’t patience with you all. Six of one; half a dozen of the other. Both your families well off in this world’s goods, and yet miserable, Fathers, two Ahabs, longing for the other’s land to make a garden of herbs; and if they got it, a nice garden of herbs it would be! Why, Mark Eden, as I’m a scholar and a gentleman, my income is fifty pounds a year. My cottage is my own, and I’m a happier man than either of your fathers. Look about you, boy—here, at the great God’s handiwork; wherever your eyes rest, you see beauty. Look at this silvery flashing river, the lovely great trees, the beautiful cliffs, and up yonder in the distance at the soft blues of the mountains, melting into the bluer skies. Did you ever see anything more glorious than this dale?”

“Never,” cried the lad enthusiastically.

“Good, boy! That came from the heart. That heart’s young and soft, and true, as I know. Don’t let it get crusted over with the hard shell of a feud. Life’s too great and grand to be wasted over a miserable quarrel, and in efforts to make others wretched. And it’s so idiotic, Mark, for you can’t hurt other people without hurting yourself more. Look here, next time you, spring boy, meet the other spring boy, act at once; don’t wait till you are summer men, or autumn men. When you get to be a winter man as I am, it will be too late. Begin now, while it is early with you. Hold out your hand and shake his, and become fast friends. Teach your fathers what they ought to have done when they were young. Come, promise me that.”

“I can’t, sir,” said the boy, frowning. “And if I could, Ralph Darley would laugh in my face.”

“Bah!” ejaculated the old man, stamping the butt of his rod in the water. “There, I’ve done with you both. You are a pair of young ravens, sons of the old ravens, who have their nests up on the stony cliffs, and you’ll both grow up to be as bad and bitter as your fathers, and take to punching out the young lambs’ eyes with your beaks. I’ve done with you both.”

“No, you haven’t, Master Rayburn,” said the lad softly. “I was coming to see you this evening, to ask you to go with me for a day, hunting for minerals and those stones you showed me in the old cavern, where the hot spring is.”

“Done with you, quite,” said the old man fiercely, as he began to bait his hook with another worm.

“And I say, Master Rayburn, I want to come and read with you.”

“An untoward generation,” said the old man. “There, be off! I’m wasting time, and I want my trout, and *thymallus*, my grayling, for man must eat, and it’s very nice to eat trout and grayling, boy. Be off! I’ve quite done with you.” And the old man turned his back, and waded a few steps upstream.

“I say, Master Rayburn,” continued the lad, “when you said ‘Bah!’ in that sharp way, it was just like the bark of one of the great black birds.”

“What, sir!” snapped the old man; “compare me to a raven?”

“You compared me and my father, and the Darleys, all to ravens, sir.”

“Humph! Yes, so I did,” muttered the old fisherman.

“I didn’t mean to be rude. But you reminded me: I saw one of them fly over just before I met you, sir. Do you know where they are nesting this year?”

“Eh?” cried the fisherman, turning sharply, with a look of interest in his handsome old face. “Well, not for certain, Mark, but I’ve seen them several times lately—mischievous, murderous wretches. They kill a great many lambs. They’re somewhere below, near the High Cliffs. I shouldn’t at all wonder, if you got below there and hid among the bushes, you’d see where they came. It’s sure to be in the rock face.”

“I should like to get the young ones,” said the lad.

“Yes, do, my boy; and if you find an addled egg or two, save them for me. Bring then on, and we’ll blow them.”

“I will,” said the lad, smiling.—“Don’t be hard on me, Master Rayburn.”

“Eh? No, no, my boy; but I can’t help being a bit put out sometimes. Coming down this evening, were you? Do. I’ll save you a couple of

grayling for supper—if I catch any," he added, with a smile.

"May I come?"

"Of course. Come early, my boy. I've a lot of things to show you that I've found since you were at home, and we'll plan out some reading, eh? Mustn't go back and get rusty, because you are at home. We'll read a great deal, and then you won't have time to think about knocking Ralph Darley's brains out—if he has any. You haven't much, or you wouldn't help to keep up this feud."

"Oh, please don't say any more about that, Master Rayburn."

"Not a word, boy. Must go on—a beautiful worm morning."

The old man turned his back again.

"Don't be late," he cried; and he waded onward, stooping, and looking more humped and comical than ever, as he bent forward to throw his bait into likely places, while Mark Eden went onward down-stream.

"I like old Master Rayburn," he said to himself; "but I wish he wouldn't be so bitter about the old trouble. It isn't our fault. Father would be only too glad to shake hands and be friends, if the Darleys were only nice, instead of being such savage beasts."

He went on, forcing his way among the bushes, and clambering over the great blocks of stone which strewed the sides of the river, and then stopped suddenly, as he sent up a moor-hen, which flew across the river, dribbling its long thin toes in the water as it went.

"I wonder," he said thoughtfully, "whether the Darleys think we are beasts too?"

Chapter Five.

How Mark Eden found the Raven's Nest.

"Ah, there he goes," said Mark, beneath his breath, as he stood motionless, and watched a large raven flapping along, high overhead, in the direction he was taking. "Perhaps that's the cock bird. Looks big. The nest may be where old Master Rayburn says, or up this way, and the bird's going for food."

He waited till the raven disappeared, and then went on down-stream, taking to a path higher up, which led him by a pretty cottage, standing in a niche at a bend of the river, so that the place had a good view up and down-stream, and with its pleasant garden, looked the sort of home which might well make its owner content.

But Mark Eden's mind was too full of ravens' nests, to leave room for any contemplation of the old scholar's cottage; and he hurried on by the path, which cut off two or three bends of the river, taking him right away for quite a couple of miles, and bringing him to the water's-edge again, just in front of a mighty cliff, which towered up out of a dense grove of beeches on the other side of the river.

The place was solitary and still in the extreme; and going close down to the water's-edge, Mark Eden seated himself upon a mossy stone, between two great hawthorns, which hid him from anything coming up or down-stream, while brambles, ferns, and clustering hemlock-plants, hid his back and front.

It was a pleasant resting-place, to sit and watch the rapidly running river, which was very shallow here; and from his hiding-place, he could see the shadows of the ripples, and the stony bottom, and also those cast by trout, as they glided here and there, waiting for the unfortunate flies and caterpillars which had fallen from overhanging boughs, to be washed down the stream.

But Mark had but a glance for the fish: his attention was taken up by the mass of precipitous stone before him, so steep, that it was only here and

there, in cracks or on ledges, that herb or stunted bush could find a place to root; and as he scanned the precipice, from its foot among the beeches, to its brow, five hundred feet above where he sat, he wondered whether the ravens nested there.

No more likely place could be found for the great birds to rear their young; the cliff looked inaccessible, and days would pass, sometimes weeks, and not a soul come near.

“Old Master Rayburn must be right,” thought the lad. “What eyes he has for everything of this kind. There are no rooks in the beeches; there isn’t a jackdaw about; and I haven’t seen a rock-dove; all proof that the ravens are here, for the others would not dare to nest near them. Only be to hatch young ones for food. But I don’t see my gentleman nor his lady.”

A hoarse, distant bark was heard, just as the lad’s neck began to ache with staring up in vain, in the search for the nest, and he sat perfectly motionless, crouched amongst the hemlock and heracleum, to be rewarded by seeing a shadow thrown on the white limestone far on high, and directly after one of the great glossy black birds alight, right on the edge of the cliff, from whence it hopped into the air, and seemed to let itself fall some forty feet, down behind a stunted patch of broom, which had rooted in a cleft. There it disappeared for a few moments, to reappear, diving down toward the stream, but only to circle upward again, rise higher and higher, and finally disappear over the cliff, half a quarter of a mile away.

“Found it!” panted Mark; “a nest with young ones. Chance if there are any eggs for Master Rayburn.”

He leaned back to examine the place.

“Can’t get up there,” he muttered at last; “but it would be easy to get down from the top. I could do it, but—”

He took off his cap, and gave his brown hair a vicious scratch, for there were other obstacles in the way.

It would be easy to wade across the river; easy to make his way along the other side to where the cliff sloped, five hundred yards lower down

the stream. From there he could reach the high down, which was broken off short to form the cliff, and walk along the edge till he was exactly over the nest, and then descend. Those were not obstacles, but trifles. The great difficulty was moral. That great mass of limestone was on the Darley estate, and for a few minutes, the lad felt as if he must give it up.

But obstacles only spurred him on to action, and he cried to himself, petulantly:

“Is it theirs? Who are they, to claim an open wild place like that? They’ll be saying next that all Darbyshire belongs to them. It’s as much ours as theirs, and, if we had our rights, it would be ours. I shall go, in spite of all the Darleys in the county. Who are they? Piece of rock and moor like that, and they claim it. Let them. I shall not stop away for them.”

The boy flushed, and ignoring the fact that he was about to commit a trespass, he slipped off shoes and hose, waded straight across the shallow river, and sat down on the other side to dry his feet, and put on hose and shoes again.

And all the time he felt a strong desire to glance up and down the river, to see if he had been observed by any one; but in his pride of heart he would not, for fear that he would be seen watching, and some one connected with his family’s enemies take it for a sign of fear.

This done, he rose, gave his feet a stamp, glanced up at the face of the cliff, to see one of the parent ravens fly off, uttering an angry croak; and then he began to bear off to the right, so as to ascend the low part of the cliff, reaching the top quite five hundred yards away, and turning at once to continue his ascent by walking along the edge, which rose steeply, till it reached the point above the raven’s nest, and then sloped down into a hollow, to rise once more into the wooded eminence which was crowned by Cliff Castle, the Darleys’ home.

“They’ve a deal better place than we,” said Mark to himself, as he strode on, in full defiance of the possibility of being seen, though it was hardly likely, a great patch of mighty beech-trees, mingled with firs, lying between the top of the big cliff and the Darleys’ dwelling. “More trees, and facing toward the west and south, with the river below them, while our

home is treeless and bare, and looks to the north and east, and is often covered with snow when their side's sunny and bright. My word! warm work, climbing up here, and the grass is as slippery as if it had been polished. Mustn't go over. Father wouldn't like it if I were to be killed; but I shouldn't be, for I should come down in the tree-tops, and then fall from bough to bough into the river, and it's deep just under the raven's nest."

Thinking this, he went on, up and up, cautiously, clear of head as one who had from childhood played about the cliffs, and reaching the summit breathless, to stand on the extreme verge, watching one of the ravens, which came sailing up, saw him at a distance, rose above his head, and then began to circle round, uttering hoarse cries.

"Ah, thief!" cried the lad; "I see what you have in your beak. A chicken; but your tricks are at an end. No more feeding young ravens here."

"Better get to the nest, first, though," said the boy laughingly; and he leaned forward, quite out of the perpendicular, to look down below the bush which sheltered the nest. "Easy enough: I can do it. If Ralph Darley had been half a fellow, he would have taken it himself. Better take off my sword, though. No; mustn't leave that in the enemy's country. I'll take it down with me. Be nice to come up again, and find that one of those ragged Jacks had got hold of it! I wonder whether Sir Morton engaged them the other day. Very likely. He's bad enough to do such an ungentlemanly thing. What did that fellow call himself. Pearl nose? Ought to have been Ruby nose. No, no; I remember now; it was Pearl Rose. My word, how high and mighty he was! Quite threatening. He'd go straight to Sir Morton Darley, if father did not enlist him and his men in our service. That upset father, just as he was thinking whether he should have them. He never could bear being threatened. How soon he sent them about their business, and threatened to summon the miners as well as our men. It will be awkward, though, if Sir Morton has engaged them, and strengthened his followers like that. May mean an attack. I wonder whether he did take their offer. If he has, father will wish he had agreed to the fellow's terms. I don't know, though. As he said to me, they would have been falling out with the mine men, and they seemed a ragged, drunken-looking set. Glad he sent them about their business."

All this, suggested by the possibility of losing his sword, just when he was

upon an enemy's land; but he had not stopped on the top to think, for after lying down upon his breast, to gaze down and select the best place for his descent, he turned as he mused, lowered his legs, and began to descend, finding that after all his sword was not much in his way.

It was no new thing to Mark Eden to climb about the limestone cliffs, which formed one side of the Gleame, sometimes sloping down gradually, at others perpendicular, and in some cases partly overhanging, though in the latter case, it meant only for a few winters before, after being well saturated, the frost split them, piece by piece, till they went thundering down among the trees, generally to bound right into the river bed.

But, sloping or perpendicular, the formation was nearly always the same, stratum after stratum of from one to three feet in thickness, lying one upon the other, and riven into blocks which looked as if they had been laid by giant masons, to form a monstrous wall. Consequently, between the strata and their upright dividing cracks, there were plenty of places where a bold climber could find foot and hand-hold, without counting upon roots of trees, wiry shrubs, and tough herbs, to hold on by when other objects failed.

So easily enough, down went Mark, humming his tune again, and changing the humming to singing about the three ravens sitting on a tree, though in this instance, excepting the young in the nest below, there were only two, and instead of sitting, they were sailing round and round, croaking and barking angrily, the cock bird, if it was not the hen, making a pretence every now and then, to dart down and strike at the would-be marauder, who was descending to their home.

But Mark lowered himself steadily enough, laughing at the angry birds, and listening for the first cries of their young, as he wondered how big they would be.

He soon found that appearances were deceitful, upon a great height like that, for instead of the bush which hid the nest, being forty feet from the cliff brow, it was a good sixty, and the climbing was not so good as he had anticipated. The limestone crumbled away here and there; tufts of tough grass came out by the roots, and the stunted stems of bushes

were not plentiful enough for hand-hold. But whenever the lad found the place too difficult, he edged off to right or left, and found an easier spot from which he lowered himself, and edged his way back along the joining of the next row of blocks.

To any one gazing from the opposite side, his appearance, flattened against the cliff, would have seemed appalling, but to Mark Eden it was a mere nothing; he was descending the old cliff, and trying to find the easiest way, that was all. No nervous qualms troubled him, and the thought of falling never once came into his head.

Lower and lower, with the sun beating upon his back, and the ravens croaking more and more loudly, and getting more threatening.

“Just wait till I get down to the bush, my fine fellows,” he said aloud. “Then you may come on if you like, and I should like to see you do it; only look out, for it means spitting yourselves. Glad I brought my sword.”

He was now only about ten feet above the bush; and as he held on for a few moments and looked down, he saw that there was a good-sized ledge in front of a cranny, in which the nest must be, and upon this ledge, bones, bits of wool, feathers, and remains of rabbits’ fur, were scattered, showing how hard the old birds had worked to feed their young.

He saw, too, something else which completely upset one of his plans, which was, to continue his descent right to the bottom of the cliff, after securing the young ravens; for the strata retired for some distance below the bush, and he grasped at once the fact, that he must return by the way he descended.

“Wish I had a bag with me,” he thought, as he heard a peculiar squeaking arise from beneath his feet. “Never mind: I’ll tie their legs together with my handkerchief, or thrust them into toy breast.”

Croak—croak—craw—awk! came from one of the ravens, as it swept by him with a rush.

“Wait a minute, my fine fellow, or madam,” said the boy. “Hard for you, perhaps; but how many chickens and ducklings have you stolen? how many unfortunate lambs have you blinded this spring? Can’t have ravens

here. Hah! that's it."

For upon forcing his hands well into a fault in the rock, he had lowered his feet and found good foot-hold on the ledge, lowered himself a little more, and saw that he could easily sit down, hold on by his left hand, the stout bush being ready, and draw out a pair of well-grown nestlings as soon as he liked.

"I'm afraid, Master Rayburn, that if there are eggs I should get them broken if I put them in my pocket," he said aloud; "and if they do break, phew! It would be horrible. Ah, put them in my cap. Let's see."

He thrust his right hand into the niche, and snatched it back, for the young ravens were big enough to use their beaks fiercely, and set up a loud, hoarse series of cries, as soon as they found that an enemy was at the gate.

"You vicious little wretches!" he cried. "My word, they can bite. Ah, would you!"

This was to one of the ravens, which rendered frantic by the cries of the young, swooped at him, and struck him with a wing in passing.

"Declaration of war, eh!" he said. "Well, it's your doing, you murderous creatures, you lamb-slayers. I did not know you could be so fierce."

The raven had sailed off to a distance now, croaking loudly, and joined its mate; and as at the next movement of Mark, seated on his perilous perch, the young ravens screeched hoarsely again, it was evident that there was to be a fresh attack, this time united.

But the lad reached down his right arm, got hold of the hilt of his thin rapier, and pressing closely to the niche, drew the weapon from its sheath.

"Now then!" he cried, as the blade flashed in the sunshine, "I'm ready for you. A new way of killing ravens. Come on."

He had not long to wait, for finding the entrance to their nesting-place partly darkened, the young birds set up a loud series of cries, maddening

the old ones, and with a rush, down came one of them, so fiercely that the lad's arm received a heavy stroke from a powerful wing, the sword, passing through the feathers, between the bird's wing and body.

"That's one to you," said the lad, drawing his breath with a sharp hiss. "My word, you can hit hard! It's your life or mine, my fine fellow, so look out."

Almost before he had breathed these words, amidst the outcry made by the young, the second raven stooped at him, just as a falcon would at a heron, and it came so unexpectedly, that once more the point of the sword was ill directed, and a severe buffet of the bird's wing nearly sent him down.

"This is getting too serious," he said, pressing his teeth together, as he for the first time fully realised what enormous power a bird has in its breast muscles.

They gave him no time for thinking, the first bird which had attacked, after taking a swift curve round and upward, coming down again with a fierce rush. But it was its last. Mark's sword was too well pointed this time; there was a whirr, a heavy thud which made the hilt jar against the lad's thigh, and the brave fierce bird had spitted itself so thoroughly, that it struggled and beat its wings heavily as it lay on the lad's lap, till he thrust out his arm to keep off the rain of blows, and the bird fluttered itself off the rapier, and fell with the force of a stone, down, down, out of sight.

A hoarse croak set the lad on guard again, and none too soon, for once more he received a heavy blow from the companion raven's wing, as it passed him with a whirr, striking the bush as well. Then recovering itself from the stoop which carried it low down, it sailed up again, to prepare for another attack.

"A bad miss," muttered the lad. "There was so little time to aim. Now then, come on again."

The raven was far enough away, but as if it heard the challenge, it swept round, and came on now from the other direction, an awkward one for Mark; but he managed to hoist himself round a little, and presented his point steadily at the advancing bird, as it came on, looking small at first,

then rapidly appearing bigger and bigger, till, with a furious whish through the air, it was upon him.

“Hah!” ejaculated the lad, as his right arm was swung round by the violence of the raven’s stoop, and the unfortunate bird had shared its mate’s fate, for with the rush it had not only pierced itself through and through, but swept itself off the blade, wrenching the holder’s shoulder, and falling, fluttering feebly, downward, till it too passed from sight.

“Well done, brave birds!” panted the lad. “Seems too bad: but it has saved no end of lambs. Who’d have thought that they would fight like that? Why, they could have beaten me off. Lucky I brought my sword. Phew! it has made me hot,” he muttered, as he wiped the blade carefully; and after a little wriggling to find the hole in the scabbard, thrust the weapon home. “They will not come at me again; so now for our young friends.”

He began to feel the nest again, making the young birds squeal hoarsely, and peck at him viciously as well; but after the parents’ attack, this seemed trifling, and, to his great satisfaction, he found that there was an egg as well.

“Must get that down safe,” he said. “Old Master Rayburn will be so—”

He did not finish his sentence, for at that moment a hoarse voice shouted: “Hallo, below! What you doing there?” And looking up, to his horror he saw three heads against the sky, as their owners lay on the cliff and looked down at him; one of the faces being that of Ralph Darley, the others, those of two of the enemy’s men.

Chapter Six.

Nick Garth makes a Find.

“Hi! Nick! Nick, I say, hallo!” Ralph Darley ran as he shouted at a couple of his father’s men, who were descending the slope on the eastern side of the castle, each shouldering a short sharp pick, of the kind in common use for hewing stone.

At first, though they must have heard, they paid no attention whatever; but at the third angry summons, they both stopped short, looked slowly round, and seeing their young master running, they stood still, and waited for him to come up, which he did, panting and angry.

“You, Nick Garth,” he cried; “you must have heard me call.”

“Yerse,” said the man addressed, a strong-built fellow, with a perfectly smooth face, and an unpleasant-looking pair of eyes, so arranged that they did not work properly; in fact, he could only use one at a time. If he brought one to bear upon an object, that eye dragged its fellow round so that the pupil dived under the man’s thick nose; and if he made an effort to see with the eclipsed one, it served its fellow in the same way.

“You must have heard too, Ram Jennings.”

“Yoss, I heared,” said the other man, a dark, rather villainous-looking fellow, whose face could not be called troubled with yellow specks, but streaked here and there with a little whitish red, the rest being one enormous freckle, which covered brow, cheeks, and chin.

“Then why didn’t you answer?”

“Both on us stopped,” said the first man addressed.

“Ay, that’s so,” said the other.

“Why didn’t you come back, then?”

“’Cause we see you running. Didn’t we, mate?”

“Ay, that’s so.”

“It’s your duty to come to me when your called,” said Ralph hotly. “The man to the master, not the master to the man.”

“Allus do,” said Nick, looking insolently at the lad first with one eye, and then with the other.

“Don’t be impertinent, sir. Now then, where are you two going?”

“Over yonder,” said the first man surlily.

“Ay, over yonder,” said the other.

“What for?”

“Fads.”

“What?”

“Fads. Young missus wants some o’ they softy stones cut to build up in the yard, round a bit o’ drain pipe, to make a puddle to keep fishes in.”

“Oh!” said the lad, cooling down. “Go and do it then; I’ll wait till the afternoon.”

The men grinned, shouldered their picks, and went off, while the lad took a few paces in another direction; but turned sharply, and called the men again, with the same result—that is, they stood still and waited for him to join them.

“They’re a pair of thick-headed fools, that’s what they are,” muttered the lad. “I could teach a dog to be more dutiful. Here, Nick—Ram—did you see those soldiers who came the other day?”

“Nay, only one o’ their cloak things as they left behind.”

“Left a cloak behind?”

“Ay,” said the second man. “I fun’ it.”

“What did you do with it?”

“Burnt it. Warn’t good for nothing else.”

“Do you know where they went?”

“Summun said they went to Black Tor, and old Eden set ’em to work in the mine, and keeps ’em there,” said Nick, moving his head from side to side, so as to bring his eyes alternately to bear upon his young master.

“Oh!” said Ralph softly to himself. Then aloud: “That will do.”

The men grinned again, and went off, while Ralph walked slowly away to where he could throw himself down at the side of the cliff in the sunshine, swing his legs over the edge, where it was nice and dangerous if he slipped, and finally leaned back to rest on one elbow, and gaze in the direction of the high cliff beyond the depression, where the men were gone to chip out pieces of the soft spongy-looking tufa, which lay in beds on the slope.

“That’s bad news,” thought the lad. “I wonder what father will say. It will be horrible. They will be so strong there, that one doesn’t know what will happen, only that we shall have to fight. Well, then,” he cried hotly, “we’ll fight. Let them come. The Darleys have never been beaten yet.”

For the next half-hour, he lay thinking about swords, and pikes, and armour, and big stones to cast down off the towers upon assailants, and then his attention was taken by one of the great black ravens, flapping its way along over the dale, and he watched it till it seemed to him to slide down toward the cliff, a quarter of a mile away.

By-and-by he saw another great bird, and thought it the same, but directly after, the first one reappeared, and he saw the pair cross in the air.

“They’ve got a nest, and it must be on the High Cliff. Wonder whether I could hit one of the great thieves with a crossbow-bolt. Be practice,” he thought; “I may have to shoot at two-legged thieves.”

Then the absurdity of his words came to him, and he laughed aloud.

“Well, ravens have only two legs. Rather horrible, though, to shoot at a man. Well, I don’t want to, but if they come and attack us, I’ll shoot, that I will. What are those great birds flying to and fro for? and, yes, now they’re going round and round. I know: a young lamb must have gone over the cliff, and be bleating on one of the ledges because it cannot get up. Poor little wretch! They’ll pick its eyes out. I’ll go and see. Better get a crossbow first. Might get a shot at one of the ravens.—Bother! it’s such a way to go and fetch it; and if I did, I’ll be bound to say it would want a new string, and it would take ever so long to get ready. Bother! it’s hot, and I

shan’t go. Perhaps there isn’t a lamb there, after all. Fancy.”

He rested his head upon his hand, and watched the far-off ravens, becoming more and more convinced that a lamb had gone over.

“Then why don’t they go at it?” he muttered. “Perhaps it’s a sheep, and they’re afraid to attack. Must be something there, or they wouldn’t keep on flying to and fro like that. Well; bother! I don’t care. Sheep and lambs ought to know better.”

He tried to take his thoughts back to the castle and its defensive powers, if the Edens, strengthened by the gang of mercenaries, should attack them, but it was too hard work to think of the imaginary, when the real was before him in the shape of a pair of great black ravens, flying round and round, and showing plainly against the great grey crags, threatening from moment to moment to attack something down below.

“Here, I must go and see what there is to make them fly about like that,” said the lad to himself, at last, his curiosity getting the better of his laziness; and, springing up, he began to descend the slope, making a circuit, so as to reach the high cliff, away from the precipice, and ascend where he could do so, unseen by the birds.

But before he was half-way down, he caught sight of the two men coming in his direction rapidly; and as soon as they caught sight of him, they began to gesticulate, beckoning, waving their caps, and generally indicating that he was to hurry to their side.

“Oh, you idle beauties!” muttered Ralph. “I should like to give you a lesson. Spoiled by father’s indulgence, you do just as you like. I’m to run to you, am I? Come here, you lazy dogs!”

He waved his hand to them in turn, but instead of coming on, they stopped short, and pointed back toward the highest part of the cliff.

“Come here!” roared Ralph, though he knew that they were quite out of hearing. “You won’t come, won’t you? Oh, don’t I wish I was behind you with my riding-boots on! I’d give you such a kicking, or use the spurs. Come here!” he roared. “I want to send one of them for a crossbow. Well, I don’t like doing it, my fine fellows, but if you won’t move, I must. One of

you will have to go, though, and walk all the farther. That's it. I'm right," he continued to himself, as he saw the men keep on pointing upwards. "Why, what's the matter with them? Dancing about like that, and slapping their legs. Stop a moment: went up the side gap to chip out stones for Minnie. Why—yes—no—oh! hang the ravens! they've hit upon a vein of rich lead, and we shall be as rich as the Edens."

Ralph set off at a trot down the slope, and this seemed to have an effect upon the two men, who now began to run, with the result that they were bound to meet at the bottom of the hollow between the two eminences.

"Come on, Master Ralph!" roared Nick Garth, as they came within hearing.

"What is it? Found lead?"

"Lead, sir, no, better than that. There's a raven's nest over the other side yonder."

"Bah! What of that?" cried the lad breathlessly. "Here, Ram, go back to the castle, and get me a good crossbow and some bolts."

"Going to shoot 'em, master?" cried Nick excitedly. "Well done, you!"

"If I can hit them," said the lad. "What have they found there—a lamb?"

"Lamb?" cried Nick. "Hor, hor, hoh! You are a rum one, sir. Lamb, eh? I call un a wolf cub."

"Wolf cub? Oh!" cried Ralph excitedly; and the disappointment about the lead was forgotten, the crossbow too.

"Come on, sir, this way. Right atop, and you'll be able to look down on un just above the big birds' nest. He was after the young birds."

"Then that accounts for the ravens flying about so."

"Yes, sir, that's it. We was getting close to the stone quarry, when Ram, he says: 'What's them there birds scrawking about like that there for?' he says."

“Summut arter the young uns,” I says: “and we went to where we could look, and there was a young wolf cub, getting slowly down. Let’s fetch the young squire,” I says; “and we come after you, for I thought you’d like to have the killing on him.”

“Yes, of course, Nick; but I have no bow. I can’t reach him with my sword, can I?”

“Tchah! you’d want a lot o’ pikes tied together, and then you wouldn’t do it. I’ll show you. There’s plenty of big bits o’ stone up yonder, and you can drop ’em on his head, and send him down into the water.”

“Yes,” cried Ralph breathlessly, as he climbed the steep ascent; “but I should like to catch him alive, and keep him in a cage.”

“Would you, sir? Well, that wouldn’t be amiss. Sir Morton would like to see him, and you could tease him. Down in one o’ the dungeons would be the place, till you got tired on him, and you could kill him then.”

“Yes, but to think of his being on the cliff here!”

“Ay, it do seem a game,” said the man, chuckling, and showing some ugly yellow teeth.

As they reached about half-way up, they caught sight of one of the ravens, shooting high above the top of the cliff, and instead of darting away at their approach, it only made a circle round, and then descended like an arrow.

“Tackling on him,” cried Ram Jennings.

“Ay, and there goes the other,” cried Nick. “Come on, master, or they’ll finish him off before you can get there. Real wild, they birds is, because he’s meddling with their booblins. ’Bout half-fledged, that’s what they be.”

“Make haste, then,” cried Ralph; and as they hurried on as fast as the steep ascent would allow, they saw the ravens rise and stoop, again and again. Then only one reappeared, and a few moments later, neither.

“We shall be too late,” cried Ralph excitedly. “They must have killed him,

and are now tearing his eyes out."

"And sarve him right," cried Nick savagely. "What does he do on our cliff, a-maddling wi' our birds?"

"But it would be such a pity not to take him alive, Nick," panted Ralph breathlessly.

"How were you going to catch him alive?" growled the man. "Wouldn't catch us going down to fight un, and you wouldn't like to crawl down there."

"Get a rope with a loop, noose him, and drag him up," cried Ralph.

"Eh? Hear him, Ram? Who'd ha' thought of that? Comes o' larning, that does, and going away to school. You'd never ha' thought on it, lad."

"Nay, I shouldn't ha' thought o' that," said Ram heavily; "but I've been thinking o' somethin' else."

"What?" said Ralph, as they were mounting the last fifty feet of the steep slope.

"As like enough he's nipped they two birds, and we'd best look out, or he'll come sudden-like over the edge there, and run for it."

"Forward, then, quick!" cried Ralph; and pressing on, he threw himself on his breast, and crawled the last few feet, so as to thrust his head over the edge and gaze down, to see the so-called wolf's cub sheathe his sword, and prepare to get the young ravens out of their nesting recess in the face of the cliff.

Chapter Seven.

The Young Enemies.

Eden recovered his presence of mind on the instant, and looking coolly up at Nick Garth, who had shouted at him so insolently, he replied

haughtily: “What is it to you, sir? Be off!”

Then, entirely ignoring Ralph, who was looking down, breathless with rage and exertion, he carefully withdrew the egg from the nest, in spite of the pecking of the young ravens, and transferred it to the lining of his cap.

After this he took off his kerchief, and began to twist it up tightly to make an apology for a line with which to tie together the young ravens’ legs.

The two men on either side of Ralph looked at him, as if wondering what he would say.

“Now, then, it’s of no use to peck: out you come, my fine fellows. Quiet, or I’ll wring your necks.”

As Mark spoke, his right hand was in the nest, feeling about so as to get four legs together in his grasp, but this took some little time, and a great deal of fluttering and squealing accompanied the act. But as he worked, Mark thought hard, and of something else beside ravens. How was he to get out of this unpleasant fix, being as he was quite at his enemy’s mercy? But all the same, with assumed nonchalance, he drew out the fluttering ravens, loosened his hold of the shrub with his left hand, and trusted to his powers of retaining his balance, in spite of the birds’ struggles, while in the coolest way possible he transferred the legs from his right hand to his left, and proceeded to tie them tightly.

“There you are,” he said. “I think that’s safe.”

Then, to Ralph’s astonishment, the lad began to hum over his song again about the ravens as, completely ignoring those above, he took hold of the bush again, and leaned forward to gaze down into the dizzy depths as if in search of an easy path, but really to try and make out, in his despair, what would be his chance of escape if he suddenly rose to his feet and boldly jumped outward. Would he clear all the trees and come down into the river? And if the last, would it be deep enough to save him from injury at the bottom?

Where he had crossed was only ankle deep, but there was a broad, still patch, close up under the cliff, for he had noticed it as he came; but whether he could reach it in a bold leap, and whether it would be deep

enough to save him from harm, he could not tell; but he was afraid that if he missed it he would be broken upon the pieces of rock which had fallen from above.

That way of escape was too desperate, and the more repellent from the fact that the beech-trees below prevented him from seeing what awaited him.

He busied himself in pretending to examine the knot he had made about the birds' legs, and then, raising his sword-belt, he passed one young raven inside, leaving the other out, so that they hung from his back, not in a very comfortable position for them, but where they would not be hurt. All the time though the lad was scanning the rocky face, first to right then to left, to seek for a way by which he could climb down, escape upwards being impossible; and he had quickly come to the conclusion that if unmolested he could manage, by taking his time, to get down in safety.

He had just decided this when Ralph, who had remained perfectly silent, exclaimed abruptly, "Now then, come up."

Mark took not the slightest notice, and the order was repeated.

"Hear what the young master says?" growled Nick. "Come up!"

"Are you speaking to me, fellow?" cried Mark angrily. "Be off, I tell you, before I come up and chastise you."

"Going to stand this, Master Ralph?" growled the man. "Shall I heave a bit o' stone down upon him, and knock him off?"

For answer, Ralph drew back out of sight, and the two men followed at a sign, leaving Mark alone, seated upon his perilous perch; but directly after Ralph's head reappeared, and Nick's close beside it, when Mark realised—rightly—that the other man had been sent on some mission—what, he could not tell, but in all probability to fetch more help, so as to be sure of taking him.

"Now," said Ralph sternly, "are you coming up to surrender?"

"What!" said Mark sharply; "why am I to surrender to you?"

“For trespass and robbery. This is my father’s land, and those are our birds.”

Mark laughed scornfully to hide his annoyance, for conscience pricked hard.

“Your land, indeed!” he cried. “Wild moorland, open to anybody; and as to the birds, are all the crows yours too?”

Ralph did not condescend to reply, but lay there looking down at the young representative of his father’s rival.

“I wish you good day, Master Owner of the land, and lord of the birds of the air,” said Mark mockingly. “If you had asked me civilly, I might perhaps have given you a young raven. As it is, I shall not.”

“What are you going to do?” said Ralph sharply. “Wait and see,” was the mocking reply. “Shan’t I heave this stone down on his head, Master Ralph?” said Nick in a low tone; but the words came plainly to Mark’s ear, and sent a cold chill of horror thrilling through his nerves; but he felt better the next moment, and then anger took the place of dread, for Ralph said sharply, “Put the stone down, sirrah! You know I want to take the wolf’s cub alive.”

“Wolf’s cub!” said Mark to himself. “Never mind; I may meet him some day when it is not three to one, and then he shall find that the wolf’s cub can bite.”

Then, conscious that his every movement was watched, he cautiously rose to his feet, made an effort to ignore the presence of lookers-on, and began to climb sideways along the ledge, by the route he had come. Still he had no intention of going up, knowing full well that he would only be giving himself up to insult, and perhaps serious injury, taken at a disadvantage, as he felt that he must be; but calmly, and in the most sure-footed way, sidled along, with the ledge getting more and more narrow, but the hand-hold better.

In this way he passed the spot where he had lowered himself down, and reached a slight angle, by which he expected, from long experience in cliff-climbing, to be able to descend to the next.

He was quite right, and it proved to be easier than he had expected; but a looker-on would have shuddered to see the way in which the lad clung to the rough stones, where the slightest slip would have sent him down headlong for at least three hundred feet before he touched anywhere, and then bounded off again, a mere mass of shapeless flesh.

Mark knew of his danger, but it did not trouble him, for his brain was too much occupied by the presence of young Darley; and as he descended he felt a slight flush of pride in doing what he was certain his young enemy dare not attempt.

In a moment or two he was standing safely—that is, so long as he held on tightly with his fingers in the crack above—upon the next ledge, a few inches wide, and his intention had been to go on in the same direction, so as to be farther from his watchers; but he was not long in finding that this was impossible, and he had to go back till he was well beneath Ralph Darley, and saw that he must go farther still before he attempted to descend to the next rest for his feet.

“It will take a long time to get down like this,” he thought; “and perhaps he’ll send below to meet me at the bottom. Perhaps that is what he has already done. But never mind; I shall have done as I liked, and not obeyed his insolent orders. Let him see, too, that I’m quite at home on the rocks, and can do as I like. Wonder whether I shall get Master Rayburn’s egg down safely! Not if they throw a stone down upon my head.—Now for it.”

He had reached another comparatively easy place for descending from the course of blocks on which he stood, when he suddenly found himself embarrassed, not by the egg, but by the young birds, which nearly upset his equilibrium by beginning all at once to struggle and flap vigorously with their half-fledged wings.

The lad’s first impulse, as he clung to the ledge, was to tear the birds from his belt and throw them down; but his spirit revolted from the cruelty of the proceeding, and his vanity helped to keep the trophies of his daring where they were.

“It would look as if I was afraid,” he said to himself; and lowering one foot,

he felt for a safe projection, found one, and his other foot joined the first. A few seconds later his hands were holding the ledge on which he had just been standing, but his chin was level with them, and his feet were feeling for the next ledge below, but feeling in vain.

He was disappointed, for experience had taught him that this course of stones would be about the same thickness as the others, and yet he could find no crack, not even one big enough to insert his toes.

But he was quite right; the range of stones in that stratum was just about the same thickness as the others, but the crack between them and the next in the series, the merest line, over which his feet slipped again and again, giving him the impression that they were passing over solid stone; and the birds chose this awkward moment to renew their struggling and screaming.

“You miserable little wretches,” he muttered; “be quiet! Well, it might be worse. I should have been in a sad pickle if the old birds had chosen this moment to attack me.”

He hung in the same position, with his chin resting on the ledge, as well as his hands, till the birds were quiet again, and then wondering whether Ralph Darley was still watching, he slowly let his muscles relax, and his body subside, till he hung at full stretch, seeking steadily the while for foot-hold, but finding none, and forced now to look down between his chest and the rock, to see how far the next ledge might be.

To his disgust, it was quite two feet lower, and it was forced upon him that unless he could climb back to the ledge upon which his hands were clasped, he must let himself drop to the resting-place below.

It was no time for hesitation, and condensing his energies upon what he knew to be a difficult task, he drew himself up by strong muscular contraction till his chin once more rested between his hands, and then grasped the bitter fact that to get up and stand upon the ledge was impossible; it was too narrow, and he could find no foot-hold to help.

Accepting the position, he let himself sink again to the full length of his arms, hung motionless for a few moments, and then, keeping himself perfectly rigid, allowed his fingers to glide over the stone, and dropped

the two feet to the ledge below, perfectly upright and firm. In all probability he would have found hand-hold the next moment, but, scared anew by the rush through the air, the young ravens began to flap their wings violently, and that was sufficient to disturb the lad's equilibrium. He made a desperate effort to recover it, but one foot gave way, and he fell, scraping the edge.

Another desperate effort, and he clung to the ledge for a brief moment or two, and then a yell arose from above, as he went down a few feet and felt what seemed a violent blow against his side. The next instant his hands had closed upon the tough stem of a stunted yew, and he was hanging there, hitched in the little branches, saved from falling farther, but unable to move from the fear of tearing the shrub from its root-hold in a crack of the cliff, where there was not a trace of anything else to which he could cling.

Chapter Eight.

How Ralph secured the Wolf's Cub.

The perspiration broke out in great drops upon Mark Eden's face; and for some minutes he hung there, expecting moment by moment that each was his last, for he knew that he could do nothing, and that he must not stir hand or foot.

And now he began to realise how mad his attempt had been. Better far that he had resigned himself to circumstances, and climbed back to the top. But even then he felt he could not have done this. It would have been like humbling himself to an enemy of his house, and a flush of pride came into his pallid cheeks as he felt that he had boldly played his part. Then a sense of misery and despair crept over him as he thought of home, of his father and sister, and their sorrow when they knew of his fate.

All that passed off, and a flush of anger and indignation made his temples throb, for he distinctly heard Nick Garth say,—

"Why not? Heave it down yourself, then, and put him out of his misery."

What else was said he could not make out; voices were in hurried converse evidently a short distance back from the edge of the cliff, and then Mark recognised Ralph's tones, as he said huskily,—

"Can you hold on?"

A bitter defiant taunt came to Mark's lips, and he cried,—

"Your doing, coward! Are you satisfied with your work?"

There was no answer, but the hurried murmur came over the edge of the cliff again, followed by what sounded like angry commands, and then all was silent for a few moments.

"Don't move," cried Ralph then. "I've sent for help. They've gone for ropes. One will be here directly. I sent for it before. Can you hold on?"

Mark made no reply, for no words would come. Hope had sprung up at the possibility of escape, for life seemed then to be very sweet, but there was a bitterness to dull the bright thought, for the lad felt that it was the hated enemy of his house who was trying to help.

Then a dull feeling of apathy, as if he had been half stunned, came over him as he hung there in a terribly cramped position, with his face pressed against the wall.

And now, as if his hearing had become sharpened, the murmur of the rushing river came up quite loudly, and the wind seemed to be gathering force, while all this was, as it were, preparatory to his falling headlong down. Then he must have lost his senses for some little time, for the next thing he heard was a voice crying out, in tones full of despair,—

"Too short, too short, Ram!"

"Ay, so it be. Good ten foot."

"Could I help him if you lowered me down?"

"Lower you down? Are you mad? I couldn't hold you; and you'd break your neck."

Mark heard every word now, for his senses had suddenly recovered their tone and something more.

Then what seemed to be another long space of time elapsed, and Ralph shouted to him,—

“This rope is too short, but there’ll be another here soon.”

Mark could make no reply, and he hung there, listening to the murmur of voices once more. Then the rush of the river sounded like the distant boom of thunder. There was a loud *cizz*, *cizz*, going on somewhere on the cliff face from a cricket, and the birds were singing more loudly than he ever remembered to have heard them before.

Once more his senses must have left him and come back, for he heard the voice above louder than ever, followed by Ralph shouting,—

“Can you tie the rope round you?”

Mark could not answer for some little time; then his lips parted, and he gasped out the one word,—

“No.”

A sharp rustling followed, as of a rope being rapidly drawn up. Then it was lowered again; and as Mark strained his eyes round into the left corners to get a glimpse, he saw a loop swinging to and fro, and it struck him again and again; but those who lowered it, in the hope of noosing the lad and drawing him up, soon found that the bush and the sufferer’s position precluded this.

“Can you push your arms through the loop, and hang on?” cried Ralph now.

“No,” was the discouraging reply, for Mark fully realised the fact that if he loosened his desperate hold for a moment he must fall.

“Haul up!” shouted Ralph. “Quick!”

The rope rattled and scraped again; and then, as Mark hung there, half-

insensible, he heard what sounded like quarrelling.

“You shan’t go, Master Ralph. Who’s to meet Sir Morton if you get a fall trying to save a thing like that?”

Even in his half-insensible state Mark felt a quiver run through him; and then he lay listening again, as if to hear what was taking place about some one else.

“Silence!” came to his ear. “How dare you, sir! Now, all of you lower me down.”

There was a rustling and scraping directly after, which seemed to last a long time, before something brushed against the listener, and he quivered, for he felt that he was going. Then there was a panting noise, which came up, as it were, out of the darkness, and he was clutched tightly, hot breath came upon his cheek, and a hoarse voice yelled in his ear,—

“Got him! Haul up steadily!” and directly after, the voice became a whisper, which said,—

“Pray God the rope may not break.”

Mark was conscious now of being scraped against the rock, and brushed by twigs, for what seemed to be a very long time, before he was roughly seized by more hands, and dragged heavily over the cliff edge, to be dropped upon the short grass, as a voice he had heard before cried harshly,—

“You’ve done it now, Master Ralph, and got your wolf cub after all.”

“Yes,” panted Ralph hoarsely, as Mark felt as if a cloud had suddenly rolled away from his sight, and he saw clearly that half-a-dozen men were surrounding him, and Ralph Darley, his greatest enemy, was kneeling at his side, saying softly,—

“Yes, I’ve got the wolf cub after all;” and then the two lads’ eyes met, and gazed deeply into each other’s in a curious stare.

That stare had the same effect on both lads—that of making them feel uncomfortable.

Mark Eden, as he recovered from the shock of being so near a terrible ending to his young life, felt that, surrounded as he was by enemies, he ought to spring to his feet, draw his sword, and defend himself to the last; while Ralph Darley knew that, according to all old family traditions, he ought to order his men to seize a hand and foot each, give his young enemy two or three swings, and launch him headlong off the mighty cliff, and then stand and laugh at the capers he would cut in his fall.

For people had been very savage in their revenges out in that wild part of England, shut away from the civilisation of the time by moor and mountain. Ralph knew, too, that though they were better then than in the early days of the Wars of the Roses, they were still brutal enough, and that he would gain the applause and respect of his men by giving them the order. But Mark Eden had not drawn his sword to begin cutting and thrusting; and instead of leaving the lad to hang till he fell, he, Ralph Darley, had, in opposition to his father's men, risked his own life to save that of his enemy—going down over a hundred feet, swinging at the end of a couple of ropes badly tied together.

"Seems very stupid," the two lads thought.

"What does he mean by coming here, and getting into such a horrible position—an idiot!" said Ralph to himself.

"How dare he, an insolent Darley, come down by a rope and save my life!" said Mark to himself.

Then there was an awkward pause, with the two lads scowling, and avoiding each other's gaze, and the men nudging one another, and winking knowingly. Nick Garth whispering behind his hand to Ram Jennings, that the young cocks would set up their hackles directly, whip out their spurs, and there would be a fight; and, in expectation of this, the men, six in number, now spread themselves into an arc, whose chord was the edge of the cliff, thus enclosing the pair so as to check any design on the part of the enemy to make a rush and escape.

Mark, who did not feel so breathless and numb now, sat up on the grass,

and resumed his old role of ignoring his enemies, putting his hands behind him, to feel for the ravens hung from his sword-belt, taking them out from their awkward position, to find that they were limp and literally crushed. The reason for this was that when Ralph, as he swung, seized him, he had to do this from behind, clasping him round the chest, just under the arms, and then, as the rope was hauled, flinging his legs about him to help to hold, with the consequence that they formed a sort of sandwich, he and Mark being the slices of bread, and the young ravens the meat.

“Hah!” said Mark softly, as if to himself; “you two will never dig out any young lambs’ eyes. Feed the fishes instead;” and, rising to his feet, he untied his kerchief from about the dead birds’ legs, and gave each a swing, sending it on its first and last flight, out from the cliff edge, away into the gulf.

“Now’s your time, Master Ralph,” whispered Nick, “Whip out your sword, and show him how you can fight.”

Ralph turned upon the man with an angry glance, and Nick shrank back into his old position with a sheepish grin, which, in conjunction with his cross eyes, did not improve his personal appearance.

Without so much as glancing at his enemies, Mark now took off his cap and smiled, for the egg he had so carefully placed in the lining was intact.

“Well done!” he said aloud. “That’s for Master Rayburn at the cottage. Here, one of you fellows, take that to him, and say I sent it. I dare say he’ll give you a coin for your trouble.”

Ram Jennings made an awkward shoot forward, and seized the egg.

“Don’t break it, clumsy,” cried Mark; and then with a quick motion, he threw his cap on the grass, took a step or two back toward the edge of the cliff, and, quick as lightning, drew his sword.

“There,” he cried, with a scornful look at Ralph; “seven of you to one. Come on.”

A low growl from the men greeted this display, but Ralph did not stir, and

Mark stood for a moment or two *en garde*. Then with a bitter laugh he continued: “I suppose I must surrender. You don’t draw. Take my sword. My arm’s wrenched, and I can’t use it.”

As he spoke he threw his sword at Ralph’s feet; his enemy picked it up by the slight blade, and the men closed in.

This movement sent a flash of anger from their young master’s eyes.

“Back,” he cried hoarsely. Then taking a step or two toward Mark, and still holding the sword by the blade, he presented the hilt to his enemy. “Take your sword, sir,” he said haughtily. “The Darleys are gentlemen, not cowards, to take advantage of one who is down. That is the nearest way back to Black Tor,” he continued, pointing.

For a few moments Mark stood gazing at his enemy, with his face flushing to his temples; then turning haggard and pale, as a flood of mingled sensations rushed through him; shame, mortification, pride, anger against self, seemed to choke all utterance, and he could not even stir. He felt that he wanted to be brave and manly, and apologise for his words—to thank the gallant lad before him for saving his life—to make him see that he was a gentleman—to strike him and make him fight—to do something brave—despicable—to do he did not know what—before he accepted this permission to go, but he could for the moment do nothing—say nothing.

At last, with a hoarse gasp, he literally snatched at the sword, and glared at his enemy with a menacing look, as if he were about to thrust at him; and Ralph’s hand darted to his own hilt, but with an angry gesture, he let it fall, and stood firm.

Then a cry, mingled of rage and shame, escaped from Mark; and he thrust his sword back into its sheath, and pushing Nick aside, as the man stood in his way, he hurried down the hill.

“Yah–h–ah!” growled Nick savagely, “you aren’t going to let him off like that, master?”

Mark heard the words, and turned round.

“How dare you speak to me like that!” cried Ralph, glad of some one on whom to vent the anger he felt.

“Because Sir Morton, if he’d been here, would have had that young Eden tied neck and heels, and pitched into one of the cells. Because you’re a coward, sir. There!”

“Ah–h–ah!” growled the other men in chorus, as they glared at the lad.

“Then take a coward’s blow,” cried Ralph; and he struck the man with all his might across the face, using the back of his hand.

There was another growl from the men, but no one spoke, and Mark Eden turned again, and strode down the hill, while the men untied and coiled up the ropes, and slowly followed their young master down the slope, and then up once more toward the Castle, Nick Garth shaking his head a good deal, and looking puzzled, and a great deal interested in the blood which he kept smudging off, first with one hand, and then with the other, from his face.

“Here,” he cried at last, as Ralph disappeared through the gateway, “what’s best to stop this here? I can’t go with it all tied up.”

“Bucket o’ water from the well,” said Ram Jennings, grinning. “Say, Nick, he aren’t such a coward, arter all.”

“No,” growled Nick, after a double wipe; “and, for such a little ’un, he can hit hard.”

Chapter Nine.

Another Turn of Fortune's Wheel.

Master Rayburn received the raven's addled egg, and gave Ram Jennings a groat for his trouble, and for telling him all about how it was obtained, and what followed, keeping the man, and questioning him a good deal, as he smiled and frowned over the task he began at once, that of chipping a good-sized hole in one side of the egg, and extracting its contents in a little wooden bowl of clean water.

At last, after a great deal of sniffing and shuffling about, the man said, "Done with me, Master Rayburn?"

"Yes," said the old man sharply. "Unless you can tell me any more. But why?"

"Well, master, I'm pretty hard about the smell, and it falls to me to clean out the pigsties; and when they've been left a month or two in the summer, and got pretty ripe, they aren't so nice as bean-fields in bloom, or the young missus's roses in her bit o' garden; but pigsties aren't nothing to that there *egg*. It's enough to pyson a black dog."

"Be off with you, then," said the old man, with a dry chuckle; and as soon as he was alone, he threw the foul water away. "Yes," he muttered, "it does smell; but that's a splendid egg, and not stained a bit."

"Hah!" he ejaculated a few minutes later. "I'd have given something to be there. Brave lads. True English, to the backbone; but with their young minds warped and spoiled by the traditions of this miserable feud. Why, it must have been grand," mused the old man, shaking his grey locks. "How I should have liked to see and hear it all! What a fight to master the inborn hatred! On both sides the evil contending with the good; and, according to that man's telling, that boy Mark did not show up well. I don't know, though! He could not help it. He had to fight the black blood in his veins that has been handed down for generations. So young Ralph saved his life, made him prisoner, and set him at liberty like a true honest gentleman; and the other had to battle with his dislike and bitterness at

receiving a favour from his enemy's hands.

"Good Heavens!" he cried aloud. "Enemy's! What contemptible worms we are, to dare to nurse up such a feeling from father to son, generation after generation! Why, with them it is an hereditary disease. But who knows? Those two lads may grow up to be friends, and kill the old feud. They cannot help respecting each other after such an encounter as that. I'll try and get hold of young Darley, and then of Mark; and perhaps I may be able to— Bah! you weak-minded, meddlesome old driveller!" he cried impetuously. "You would muddle, and spoil all, when perhaps a Higher Hand is at work, as it always is, to make everything tend toward the best.

"But I should like to be present, by accident, the next time those two lads meet."

The meeting took place before many days had passed.

In the interim Ralph Darley had told his father all that had happened, and Sir Morton had frowned, and looked pleased, and frowned again.

"You think I did wrong father," said the lad.

"No, my boy; I think you behaved splendidly; but you see what a miserable race those Edens are. You do good to one of them, a boy of your own age, and he is ready to turn and rend you."

"But I did not go on purpose to do good to him, father. I meant to catch him, tie him hand and foot, and bring him here to do what you liked with him."

"Never mind: you acted bravely; and he like a roused wolf's cub, as Nick Garth called him."

"Felt humbled," said Ralph thoughtfully.

"Yes, my boy. Well, it's all over; but don't go risking your life again for your enemies. We don't want to quarrel with them unless they force it on, and I'm afraid they are going to, for I believe Eden has enlisted that gang of ruffians in his service. I can't hear that they were seen to go away."

Mark Eden told his father too, about the incident, and Sir Edward looked very grave.

“As the lad was a Darley, matters are different,” he said at last, “and I don’t like your conduct over the matter, Mark. To begin with—well, to go all through the business, you did wrong.”

“Yes, father,” said the lad bitterly.

“It was not right for you, a young scholar, and a gentleman, to go upon their land and invite a quarrel.”

“But I wanted the young ravens, father.”

“Yes. And they want my lead-mine; and if young Darley comes to try and take it, I hope you’ll break his neck.”

“Yes, father.”

“But you did not come out well, my boy,” said Sir Edward irritably. “The young cub has some good in him, and he behaved splendidly.”

“Yes, father; that made me feel so mad against him, and all the time I was feeling as if I would have given anything to shake hands, for he was very brave.”

“Well, it would have been, if he had not been a Darley.”

“And, of course, I could not shake hands and say thank you to a boy like him.”

“Shake hands—an Eden with a Darley! Impossible, my boy, impossible. There, it’s all over, and you must never give them the opportunity of insulting you again. That family has done us endless injury.”

“And we’ve done them a deal, too, father.”

“Yes, my boy, as much as ever we could. I mean in the old days; for I’m beginning to think that it’s best to let them go their way, if they let us go ours.”

“Yes, father.”

“I wish they lived on the other side of the county, instead of so near. But there, promise me that you will not run foul of any of the savages again.”

“Yes, father, I promise you,” said the lad quietly.

“By the way, Mark, you say young Darley had half-a-dozen ruffianly fellows with him, and they wanted to stone you, and then throw you off the cliff?”

“Yes, father.”

“Do you think any of them were part of the rough crew who came here with that red-faced captain?”

“I think not, father.”

“I’m afraid they went to Sir Morton Darley; so we must be watchful. Let that other trouble drop now, and be careful for the future. Don’t worry me now; Rugg wants to see me about the mining accounts. Keep out of mischief, and don’t let me hear any more about young Darley.”

Mark promised, and went out with the intention of going down the river to see old Master Rayburn, and ask him whether he had received the egg. But before he had gone far, the memories of the whole business seemed so distasteful, and he felt so much annoyed with himself, that he turned back.

“He’d make me tell him all about it, and I feel as if I couldn’t,” muttered the lad. “It tastes more and more bitter every time I think about it, and if Master Rayburn began to ask me questions, he’d get it all out of me, for he has such a way of doing it. I don’t believe any one could tell him a lie without being found out. Of course I shouldn’t tell him one. No, I won’t go. He’d say that I behaved badly, and I don’t want to be told, for though I wouldn’t own it, I know it better than any one could tell me. Hang the Darleys! I wish there wasn’t one on the face of the earth.”

So, instead of going to old Master Rayburn’s cottage, Mark walked back to the Black Tor, and after making up his mind to go down into the lead-

mine, and chip off bits of spar, he went and talked to his sister, and told her, naturally enough, all that had passed.

Mary Eden, who was about a year older, and very like him in feature, shuddered a good deal over parts of his narration, and looked tearful and pained at the end.

“What’s the matter?” he said, rather roughly; “why, you’re going to cry!”

“I can’t help it, Mark,” she said sadly.

“Why: what makes you look like that?” said the lad irritably.

“Because—because—” she faltered.

“Well, because—because—” he cried mockingly.

“Because what?”

“Don’t be angry with me, dear. My brother Mark seems as if he behaved like a Darley, and that young Darley like my brother Mark.”

“Oh!” cried the lad, jumping up in a rage; and he rushed off, in spite of an appealing cry from Mary, and went down into the mine after all, where he met Dummy Rugg, old Dan’s son, and went for a ramble in the very lowest and grimmest parts, feeling as if to get away from the light of day would do him good, for his sister’s words had struck very deeply into his heart.

It was a gloomy place, that mine, and opened out into strange cavernous places, eaten away by water, or by strange crackings and subsidences of the earth, in the far distant ages when the boiling springs of the volcanic regions were depositing the beds of tufa, here of immense thickness, springs which are still in evidence, but no longer to pour out waters that scald, but of a gentle lukewarm or tepid temperature, which go on depositing their suspended stone to this day, though in a feeble, sluggish manner.

Dan Rugg was Sir Edward’s chief man over the mine. Not a gentleman superintendent, but a genuine miner, who gave orders, and then helped

to carry them out. He had the credit of knowing more about mines than any man in the midland counties, knowledge gathered by passing quite half his life underground like a mole.

Dummy was his only child, so-called on account of his being a particularly silent, stupid-looking boy. But old Dan said he was not such a fool as he looked, and Dan was right.

Dummy hailed his young master's coming with quiet satisfaction, for Mark was almost the only being to whom he ever said much; and as soon as he saw him come to where he was at work, he walked with him to a chest, and took out a flint and steel and a good supply of home-made candles, without stopping to ask questions; and then lighting one, he handed it to Mark, and led off into the part of the mine where the men were not at work.

"Aren't you going to take a candle, Dummy?" said Mark.

"No, master; I can manage."

"I believe you can see in the dark, like a rat or an owl. Can you?"

"Not very well, Master Mark; but I can see a bit. Got used to it, I s'pose."

"Well, why are you going down there?" asked Mark.

"'Cause I thought you'd like to see the place I found while you were at school."

"Ah! Is it worth seeing?"

"Dunno. It's big."

"Been dug out?"

"Nay. It's a big split as goes up ever so far, and goes down ever so far. Chucked bits down; and they were precious long 'fore they hit bottom. There's a place over the other side too, and I clum round to it, and it goes in and in, farther than I could stop to go. Thought I'd wait till you came home."

“That’s right, Dummy. We will not go to-day; but start early some morning, and take a basket and bottle with us.”

“Ay, that’s the way. Water’s warm in there, I think.”

By degrees, from old acquaintance and real liking for the dull heavy lad, who looked up to him as a kind of prince, Mark dropped into telling his adventures over the ravens, while they trudged along the black passages, with Dummy leading, Mark still carrying the candle, and the lad’s huge long shadow going first of all.

The miner’s son listened without a word, drinking in the broken disconnected narrative, as if not a word ought to be lost, and when it was ended, breaking out with: “Wish I’d been there.”

“I wish you had, Dummy. But if you had been, what would you have done?”

“I d’know, Master Mark. I aren’t good out in the daylight; but I can get along on the cliffs. I’d ha’ come down to you. I should just like to ketch any one heaving stones down upon you. I wonder that young Darley didn’t kill you, though, when he’d cotched you. We should ha’ killed him, shouldn’t us, sir?”

“Don’t know, Dummy,” said the lad shortly. “Let’s talk about something else.”

Dummy was silent; and they went on and on till Mark spoke again.

“Well,” he said, “found any good bits of spar for Miss Mary?”

“Lots, sir. One big bit with two points like a shovel handle. Clear as glass.”

There was another silence, and then Mark spoke again.

“What’s going on?”

“Witches, master.”

“Eh? What?”

“Things comes in the night, and takes lambs, and fowls, and geese.”

“You mean thieves.”

“Nay, not like thieves, master. Old Mother Deggins saw ’em the other night, and they fluttered and made a noise—great black witches, in long petticoats and brooms. It was a noise like thunder, and a light like lightnin’, she says, and it knocked her down night afore last; and she won’t live in the cottage no longer, but come next to ours.”

“Somebody tried to frighten her.”

“P’r’aps. Frightened two of our men too. They was coming back from Gatewell over the hills; and they see a light up by Ergles, where there aren’t no lights, and they crep’ up to see what it was, and looked down and see a fire, with a lot of old witches in long gowns leaning over it, and boiling something in a pot; and they think it’s babies.”

“Why do they think that?”

“I d’know, master. Because they thought so, I think. Then, as they were looking, all at once there was a ter’ble squirty noise, and a rush like wings; and there was no fire, and nothing to see. Glad I warn’t there. Wouldn’t go across the moor by Ergles for anything.”

“But you’re not afraid to come along here in the dark.”

“’Fraid, Master Mark? No: why should I be? Nothing to hurt you here.”

“You’re a queer fellow, Dummy,” said Mark.

“Yes, master. That’s what father says. I s’pose it’s through being so much in the mine.”

“I suppose so. But you don’t mind?”

“Mind, Master Mark? I like it. Wish you was at home more, though.—I say —”

“Well?”

“If ever you go to fight the Darleys, take me, Master Mark.”

“I shall not go to fight the Darleys, Dummy. They may come to fight us, and if they do, you shall come and help.”

“Hah!” ejaculated the rough-looking boy. “I’m pretty strong now. If they come and meddle with us, do you know what I should like to do, Master Mark.”

“No: hammer them, I suppose.”

“Nay; I should like to drive ’em all down to the place I’m going to show you.”

“Well, where is it?”

“Oh, ever so far yet. ’N’our away.”

Mark whistled in surprise.

“Not tired, are you, sir?”

“Tired? No; but I didn’t think you could go so far.”

“Oh yes, you can, sir, if you don’t mind crawling a bit now and then. You can go miles and miles where the stone’s split apart. I think it’s all cracks under the hills.”

“On you go, then; but don’t you want a candle?”

“No, sir; I can see best like this, with you holding the light behind.”

Mark relapsed into silence, and his guide remained silent too, and went on and on, along passages formed by the busy miners of the past, in following the lode of lead, and along ways that were nature’s work.

At last, fully an hour after Dummy had announced how far they had to go, he stopped short, took a candle, lit it, and looked smilingly at Mark, who gazed round the natural cavern in which they were, and then turned to

his guide.

“Well,” he said, “is this it? Not much of a place. I thought you said it went farther.”

“So it does, Master Mark. Shut your eyes while you count a hundred.”

Mark obeyed, and counted his hundred aloud, opened his eyes again, and he was alone.

“Here! Where are you?” he cried; and he looked about the place, up and down, but to all appearances, he was in a *cul de sac*, whose walls were dotted with the fossil stems of *pentacrinites*, over which stalagmitic petrifaction had gradually formed, looking as if dirty water had run over the walls in places, and hardened in the course of time to stone.

“Here, Dummy! Haven’t run back, have you?” shouted Mark, as it occurred to him that should the boy have played him a trick, he would have no little difficulty in getting back to the part where the men were at work.

But there was no occasion for so loud a cry; the words had hardly passed his lips when a hand holding a candle suddenly appeared against the wall in front, and upon stepping to it, he found that the sheet of stalagmite there, instead of touching the wall, was a foot away, leaving room for any one to creep up a steep slope for thirty or forty feet, and continue the way through a long crevice, whose sides looked as if they might have separated only a few hours before.

“This is the way,” said Dummy, and he led on for a quarter of an hour longer, with a peculiar rushing noise growing louder, till it became a heavy dull roar, as the narrow crack through which they had passed suddenly opened out into a vast cavity which, below the ledge on which they stood, ended in gloom, and whose roof was lost in the same blackness; but the echoes of the falling water below told them that it must be far enough above their heads.

“What a horrible hole!” cried Mark.

“Yes; big,” said Dummy. “Look: I climbed along there. It’s easy; and then

you can go right on, above where the water comes in. It's warm in here."

"Yes, warm enough."

"Shall we go any farther?"

"No, not to-day. Let's stop and look. Shall I throw down my candle?"

"No, Master Mark: it's no good. Goes out too soon. I'll light a match."

He took an old-fashioned brimstone match from his breast, lit both its pointed ends, waited till the sulphur was fluttering its blue flame, and the splint was getting well alight and blackening, and then he reached out and let it fall, to go burning brightly down and down, as if into a huge well. Then it went out, and they seemed for the moment to be in darkness.

"I don't think it's very, very deep," said Dummy quietly; "but it's all water over yonder. Seen enough, Master Mark!"

"Yes, for one day. Let's go back now."

Dummy topped the long wicks with his natural snuffers, to wit, his finger and thumb, and led the way back, after Mark had taken a final glance at the vast chasm.

"So you found this place out, Dummy?"

"Yes, Master Mark. I'm always looking for new holes when I've nothing to do and the men aren't at work."

"It's of no use: there's no lead."

"No: aren't any ore. All spar and stones like this."

"Well, we must bring hammers and find some good pieces next time we come."

"And go on along by the water, Master Mark?"

"If you like. Want to find how far it goes?"

“Yes: I want to find how far it goes, master. Perhaps it opens somewhere. I often think we must come out somewhere on the other side.”

“That would be queer,” said Mark thoughtfully; “but I don’t think my father would be pleased. Seem like making a way for the Darleys to come in and attack us.”

Dummy stopped short, and turned to stare open-mouthed at his young chief.

“What a head you’ve got, Master Mark,” he said. “I never thought of that.”

“Didn’t you? Well, you see now: we don’t want to find another way in.”

“Yes, we do, if there is one, Master Mark, and stop it up.”

Very little more was said as they went back, Mark becoming thoughtful, and too tired to care about speaking. But that night he lay in bed awake for some time, thinking about the visit to the cavernous mine, and how it honeycombed the mountainous place: then about Dummy’s witches, and the fire and caldron, at the mouth of the hole by Ergles, a mighty limestone ridge about three miles away. Then after a laugh at the easy way in which the superstitious country people were alarmed, he fell asleep, to begin a troublous dream, which was mixed up in a strangely confused way with the great chasm in the mine, down which he had worked his way to get at the ravens’ nest: and then he started into wakefulness, as he was falling down and down, hundreds upon hundreds of feet, to find his face wet with perspiration, and that he had been lying upon his back.

Chapter Ten.

In a Wasp’s Nest.

Days had passed, and strange reports were flying about the sparsely inhabited neighbourhood. Fresh people had seen the witches in their long gowns, and it was rumoured that if any one dared to make the venture, they might be found crouching over their fire any dark, stormy night on

the slope of Ergles, where nobody ever went, for it was a desolate waste, where a goat might have starved.

The tales grew like snowballs, as they passed from mouth to mouth, but for the most part they were very unsubstantial in all points save one, and that possessed substance; not only lambs, but sheep, had disappeared, and in the case of a miner and his wife, who lived some distance off, and who had been away for a week to a wedding beyond the mountains, they returned to their solitary cottage to find that it had been entered in their absence, and completely stripped of everything movable, even to the bed, while the very cabbages in the garden had been torn up and carried away.

Mark had the news from the man himself, and he carried it to his father and sister, as he had carried Dummy Rugg's rumour about the witches and their fire, which went out so suddenly on being seen.

"Humph!" said Sir Edward, smiling; "that looks as if the witches liked vegetables with their lamb and mutton. Stripped the cottage, and took the meal-tub too?"

"Everything, father," said Mark.

"Then it's time the men made a search, my boy," said Sir Edward; "we must have a robber about. There is the whole explanation of the old women's tales. Well, they will have to bestir themselves, and catch the thief."

It was on that same morning that the news reached Cliff Castle, where similar stories had floated about witches and warlocks having taken possession of the shivering hills, where the slatey rocks were always falling, and forming what the country people called screes, which, at a distance, when wet and shiny, looked in the sunshine like cascades descending from on high.

"If it comes to any of our sheep being taken, we shall have to take to a hunt, Ralph," Sir Morton had said. "The people like to have a witch or two to curdle their blood, but I'm not going to find them in sheep."

It was a glorious morning, and the lad went into the courtyard with his

sister to have a look at her new fad, as Nick Garth called it, that is to say, the well-plastered pool with its surrounding of rock-work, in which various plants were beginning to flourish and reflect themselves in the crystal water with which the little pond was filled.

“Capital!” cried Ralph; “but you ought to have a few fish in it. They’d look well.”

“That is just what I wanted you to say, sir,” cried Minnie, clapping her hands; “and if you hadn’t been such a solemn, serious brother, you would have taken your rod and line, and caught me a few.”

“Well, I will,” said the lad eagerly; “and some for a fry as well. The little ones will be best for you, and I’ll take a tin can for them, as well as a creel.”

An hour later, with a plentiful supply of caddis, caterpillars, and other tempting bait, and rod in hand, Ralph descended to the side of the stream. He was not long in following suit with old Master Rayburn as to his hose; and then stepping into the water, he began to wade upstream, where it was shallow, going on to the bank where it grew deep.

But the day was too bright and the water too clear for his task. The fish saw him, and darted away, and when his keen eyes followed them to their lair, they refused to be tempted out by any bait he threw.

“Just my luck when I come fishing,” muttered Ralph, as he waded slowly on, picking his way among the stones. “There’s always something wrong; either it’s too hot, or it’s too cold, or there’s too much water, or there isn’t enough, or the wind’s somewhere in the wrong quarter, or I haven’t got the right bait; and so sure as I was to meet old Master Rayburn, picking flowers on the bank, he’d say: ‘Ah, you should have come yesterday, or last week, and then you’d have caught a fish at every throw.’

“Stupid work, fishing,” he said, half-aloud, when he had waded as far as he could without getting wet, for the water had suddenly deepened and curved round out of sight, all calm and still beneath the boughs shading it on either side. “Seems very easy, though, when you watch old Rayburn. He always knows where to throw.”

For the moment, he was ready to give up, but feeling that his sister would be disappointed if he went back empty-handed, he waded out, and taking a short cut across the horseshoe formed by the stream, he reached it again beyond the deeps, where it was possible to wade once more; and before entering the bubbling waters, he stood looking upward, thinking how beautiful it all was, with the flashing water gurgling and swirling round the great stones which dotted the bed. Every here and there the sides were glowing with patches of the deep golden, yellow globe-flower; a little farther on, there was a deeper spot with a patch of the great glistening leaves of the water-lily, not yet in bloom; and as he stepped down into the water, there was a flutter from a bird seated on a dead twig, and a flash of azure light gleamed over the river, as the disturbed kingfisher darted upstream, to be watched till it disappeared.

Flies danced up and down above the water, and every now and then one dropped on the surface, with its wings closed, and sailed downward like a tiny boat. Bees swept by with a humming, slumberous sound; and among the sedges at the sides, where the golden irises displayed their lovely blossoms, the thin-bodied dragon-flies, steel-blue or green, darted on transparent wing, pairs every now and then encountering fiercely with a faint rustling of wings, and battling for a few seconds, when one would dart away with the other in pursuit.

Ralph waded on, catching nothing; but the beauties of the place increased, and satisfied him so that he began to forget his mission, and paused now to listen to the soft coo of the wood-pigeon in the grove, to the quick sharp *tah*! of the jackdaws sailing about high up, where they nested in the bare face of the creviced cliffs. Then on and on again, in sunshine or in shade, for quite a couple of hours, fishing in a desultory way, but with not the slightest result. Then his luck turned.

He had been driven ashore several times by the deep water, but always returned to the bed of the river where it shallowed, for it was easier going than forcing his way amidst the stones, bushes, and trees at the side; and now, as he was wading up toward where the water came over a ridge in a cascade, a little shoal of half-a-dozen fish darted upward, and he followed them, with the water growing more and more shallow, till his pulses beat with satisfaction, for a little investigation showed him that he would be able to drive the slippery prey right into a broad stretch where

the water was but an inch or two deep, and dotted everywhere with shoals that were nearly dry.

Fishing was out of the question in a place like that, so twisting his line round his rod, he used the latter as a walking-staff, and followed till the prey he sought were compelled to flap themselves along upon their sides; two trout on finding themselves in such straits leaping right on to one of the half-dried pebbly shoals. Here Ralph pounced upon one after the other, and transferred them to his creel, after first taking out his shoes and hose, which had been reclining there, at rest from their ordinary avocation of protecting his feet.

“Queer fishing,” muttered the lad; “but I’ve caught them. Now for you.”

This to the rest of the shoal, which he chased so perseveringly that he caught four more by driving them into the shallowest water, the two largest succeeding by desperate rushes in getting through the treacherous part, and disappearing in the deeps toward the cascade.

“All too big to go in the little can,” thought Ralph. “Never mind; they will make a fry. Perhaps I can catch some smaller ones the same way.”

He tied his shoes together by the strings, and fastened them to the strap of his creel, tucked his hose through his belt, and went ashore again, to make his way beyond the little cascade which fell musically over the rocks; and as he was going on by the dammed-up deeps, there was suddenly a rush among the sedges and rushes, followed by a splash, the lad catching sight of a long, wet, brown body, as the animal made a plunge and disappeared in deep water.

The next moment his eyes rested upon the remains of a feast, in the shape of a fine trout, half-eaten, evidently quite freshly caught.

“Better fisherman than I am,” said Ralph to himself, as he searched the surface of the water to see if the otter he had disturbed would rise. But the cunning animal had reached its hole in the bank, and was not likely to return to its banquet: so Ralph went on beyond the deeps to where the river ran shallow again beneath the overhanging trees, just catching a glimpse at times of the great cliffs, whose tops often resembled the ruins of neglected towers, so regularly were they laid in fissured blocks.

Encouraged by his success, though conscious of the fact that it was the work of a poacher more than an angler, Ralph was not long in finding a suitable place for driving a few more fish. Fate favoured him in this, and in their being just of a suitable size for the little pool, and he had just secured one about six inches long, and was filling his little can with water, when he was startled by hearing a half-stifled bark uttered, as if by a dog whose muzzle was being held.

He looked sharply round, and suddenly woke to the fact that, for how long he could not tell, while he had been stalking the trout, he had been stalked in turn.

For a man suddenly appeared among the bushes on the right, looked across the river, and shouted, “Come on, now.”

Three more appeared on the other side, one of whom leaped at once into the river, while simultaneously a couple of dogs were let loose, and dashed into the shallow water.

“Don’t let him go back, lads,” shouted the first man. “Run him up: he can’t get away.”

Ralph was equal to the occasion. In a sharp glance round, while snapping his rod in two where the butt was lashed to the thinner part, he saw that his retreat was cut off down the river, and that his only chance of escape was to go forward, right and left being sheer wall, twenty feet on one side, two hundred, at least, on the other. He grasped, too, the fact that the men about to attack him were evidently lead-miners, and the thought flashed upon him that he had inadvertently come higher till, after a fashion, he was occupying Mark Eden’s position, trespassing upon an enemy’s ground.

These thoughts were lightning-like, as he swung his rod-butt round, and brought it down heavily upon a big mongrel dog that splashed through the shallows, knocked it right over, to lie yelping and whining as it tore up water and sand, the second dog contenting itself with yapping, snarling, and making little charges, till a lucky blow caught it upon the leg, and sent it howling back.

This was sufficient for the moment, and Ralph began to retreat, with the

men following him.

“There,” shouted the one who seemed to be the leader. “It’s of no use, so you may give in. We know you, so come out, fish and all. You haven’t no right up here.”

Ralph made no reply, but flushing with anger and annoyance, he hurried on over the shallows, with the men now in full pursuit, shouting, too, at the dogs, and urging them to renew their attack.

“What an idiot I have been!” muttered the lad, as he splashed on, wishing that he was on open ground, so that he could run; but wishing was in vain. He was unarmed, too, save for the stout ash-butt of his spliced rod, and he knew that it would be impossible to defend himself with that for long against four strong men, who were apparently only too eager to get hold of the heir of the rival house, and drag him before their lord. For that they were Sir Edward Eden’s men the lad had not a doubt.

But Ralph had little time for thought; action was the thing, and he splashed on, glancing from right to left to find a spot where he could land and take to his heels—an impossibility there, for he soon saw that his only chance was to climb, and that chance was small.

Then, as the men followed some forty yards behind, he saw the light of hope. Not far ahead, the water looked black and still, as it glided through a narrow defile, shut in by the rocks. That meant deep water; but if he could reach that, he would have to swim, and the men probably would not dare to follow.

Already the shallows were coming to an end, the water reaching to his knees; and it was here that, encouraged and bullied into making a fresh attack, the dogs overtook him once more, and half swimming, half making leaps, they came at him, the bigger avoiding a blow, and seizing him by the left, fortunately without hurt, the animal’s teeth meeting only in the padding of the short breeches of the period; but it held on, growling, and shaking its head violently, while its companion, after a deal of barking, dashed in on the right.

This time Ralph’s aim was surer and quicker, the dog receiving a sharp cut across the ear from the butt of the rod, and going down at once, to

begin howling, and swimming in a circle.

Rid thus of one enemy, the lad proceeded to get rid of the second by a very simple plan. Lowering his left hand, he got hold of the strap which formed the dog's collar, and in spite of its struggles and worryings, went on as fast as he could go—slowly enough, all the same—to where the water deepened; and as it reached his thigh, he bent his knees, with the natural result that as the dog held tenaciously to its mouthful of cloth and padding, its head was beneath the water.

A few seconds were sufficient to make it quit its hold, and come up choking and barking; but in obedience to the urging on of one of the men, to pluckily renew the attack.

A sharp crack from the butt knocked all the remaining courage out of its head, and it turned, howling, to swim back toward its masters.

"Here, it's no good, young Darley," yelled one of the men. "You may give up now. We've got you fast."

"And it'll be the worst for you, if you don't. We have got you now."

"Hold me tight, then," muttered the lad, with a triumphant feeling at his chances of escape beginning to make him glow.

"You mustn't go there," shouted another. "It's woundy deep, and you'll get sucked down."

"Come and be sucked down after me," muttered Ralph, as the dogs began barking again furiously, but refused to follow and attack, keeping close to the men, who were all now in the river, wading slowly, the walls having grown too precipitous for them to keep on the sides.

Ralph's progress was slow enough too, for the water had deepened till it was above his waist, and the next minute was nearly to his armpits, while the river having narrowed now to half its width, the stream though deep came faster, and grew harder to stem.

"D'you hear, youngster!" roared the leader. "You'll be drownded."

“Better that than be caught and dragged up to the Black Tor for that wretched boor, Mark Eden, to triumph over me,” thought Ralph; and he pushed boldly on, forced his way a dozen yards, and then made a step, to find no bottom, and going down over his head.

“Told you so,” rang in his ears, as he struck out and rose, to find himself being borne back; but a few strokes took him to the right side, where he snatched at some overhanging ferns rooted in the perpendicular wall of rock, checked himself for a few moments, and looked back, to see the four men, nearly breast-deep, a dozen yards behind, waiting for him to be swept down to their grasp.

“There, give up!” cried another, “for you’re drownded. You don’t know the waters here, like we do. Some o’ that goes right down into the mine.”

To the astonishment of the men, who did not dare to venture farther, the lad did not surrender, but looked sharply about to try and fully grasp his position and his chances of escape. Ahead the water certainly appeared deeper, for it glided on towards him, looking black, oily, and marked with sinuous lines. There was no ripple to indicate a shallow, and he could feel, from the pressure against him, that it would be impossible to stem it in swimming; while most ominous of all, right in the centre, a little way ahead, there was a spot where the water was a little depressed. It kept circling round every now and then, forming a funnel-shaped opening about a foot across, showing plainly enough that the men were right, and that a portion of the stream passed down there into some hole in the rock, to form one of the subterranean courses of which there were several in the district, as he knew both where rivulets disappeared, and also suddenly gushed out into the light of day.

Ralph grasped then at once that it would be impossible to escape by swimming against such a stream; that if he could have done so, there was the horrible risk of being sucked down into some awful chasm to instant death; that he could not climb up the wall of rock where he hung on then; and that, if he let go, he would be borne along in a few moments to the men’s hands; and then, that he would be bound, and dragged away a prisoner, to his shame, and all through trying to get those unfortunate fish.

“It’s of no use,” he muttered despairingly, as he looked above him again, and, as he did so, saw that the men were laughing at his predicament, for, as Touchstone the clown told the shepherd, he was “in a parlous case.”

But hope is a fine thing, and gives us rays of light even in the darkest places. Just when Ralph felt most despondent, it occurred to him that there was another way out of the difficulty, and he proceeded to put it in force by looking straight ahead, along the wall of rock, which ran down into the water, and there, just beyond the tuft by which he held on, and certainly within reach, was one of the perpendicular cracks which divided the stone into blocks. In an instant he had stretched out his left hand, forced it in there, drawn himself along till he could get the other hand in, and was safe so far; and to his great joy found, by a little searching, that he could find foot-hold, for the horizontal crack ran some four feet below the surface, and afforded him sufficient standing room, if he could only find something to hold on by above.

For the moment he was safe, but his object was to get along the wall, till he could find a place where he could climb the rocky side of the river; and once clear of the water, he felt that it would go hard if he could not find some way to the top, the more easily from the fact that above the steep piece of wall down into the water the trees grew so abundantly that a climber would for a certainty find plenty of help.

The men remained motionless in the water, watching in the full expectation of seeing the lad swept down to them; but he held fast, and once more reaching forward, he strained outward till he caught a tuft of grass, crept on along the submerged ledge to that, and from there gained a large patch of tough broom. Then came two or three easy movements onward, bringing the fugitive abreast of the sink, which was larger than it had appeared from below, and Ralph shuddered as he felt that any one who approached the vortex would for a certainty be dragged down.

For a few moments he clung there, the nervous thoughts of what might be if he slipped and were caught in the whirlpool being sufficient to half paralyse him; then turning angry at his feeling of cowardice, he reached boldly out again, found fresh hand-hold, and did the same again and again, till he was a dozen yards beyond the sink-hole, and had to stop

and think. For the wall was smoother than ever; the stream ran stronger; the distance between the two sides being less, it looked deeper; and the next place where he could find hand-hold was apparently too far to reach.

Still, it was his only chance, and taking fast hold with his right, and somehow thinking the while of Mark's passage along the surface of the High Cliff, he reached out farther and farther, pressing his breast against the rock, edging his feet along, and then stopping at his fullest stretch, to find the little root of ivy he aimed at grasping still six or seven inches away.

The dead silence preserved by the men below was broken by the barking of one of the dogs. Then all was still again, and Ralph felt that his only chance was to steady himself for a moment with his feet, loosen his hold with his right hand, and let himself glide along the face of the rock forward till his left touched the ivy, and then hold on.

If he missed catching hold—?

"I mustn't think of such a thing," he muttered; and he at once put his plan into action, letting himself glide forward.

As a scholar, fresh from a big school, he ought to have been more mathematically correct, and known that in describing the arc of a circle his left hand would go lower; but he did not stop to think. The consequence was that as his fingers glided over the rough stone, they passed a few inches beneath the tough stem he sought to grasp, and once in motion, he could not stop himself. He clutched at the stone with his right hand, and his nails scratched over it, as he vainly strove to find a prominence or crevice to check him; but all in vain; the pressure of the running water on the lower part of his body helped to destroy his balance, and with a faint cry, he went headlong into the gliding stream, the men simultaneously giving vent to a yell, half of horror, half of satisfaction.

"The sink-hole! Shall I be sucked down?" was the thought that flashed across the lad's brain, like a lurid light, as he went under; then he struck out vigorously for the side, and as he rose to the surface saw that he was being drawn toward the hole where it gaped horribly, and closed, and gaped again, a few yards away.

If any boy who reads this cannot swim, let him feel that he is sinning against himself, and neglecting a great duty, till he can plunge without a trace of nervousness into deep water, and make his way upon the surface easily and well. Fortunately for Ralph Darley, he was quite at home in the water, and the strong firm strokes he took were sufficient to carry him well in toward the side, so that he passed the little whirlpool where its force was weakest; and as the men below closed together, and waded a couple of steps to meet him, they had the mortification of seeing him clinging to the wall of rock, half-a-dozen yards above them, and then creeping forward again, step by step, till he reached the point from which he had been swept, and held on there once more.

Here, as they watched him curiously, they saw that he remained motionless, as if thinking what to do next, as was the case; and coming to the conclusion that he must manage somehow to grasp that tuft of ivy, he tried again, with the dread of the consequences the less from the experience he had gone through.

Coming to the conclusion that the only way was to raise himself upon his toes at the last moment, and jerk himself forward, he drew in a deep breath, reached out to the utmost, but raised his left hand more, then loosened his grasp with his right, and when he thought the moment had come, gave a slight bound.

That did it. He caught at the ivy, his fingers closed upon it tightly, and he tried hard to keep his feet upon the ledge below water. But this effort failed, his balance was gone, his feet glided from the ledge, and he swung round, holding on to the ivy, which seemed to be giving way at its roots.

But as Ralph fell, his hand slipped quite a foot down the ivy, and the water took a good deal of his weight, so that, though the strain upon the feeble growth was great, it remained firm enough to hold him; and he hung half in, half out of the water for some time, afraid to stir, but all the time energetically using his eyes, to seek for a way out of his perilous position.

He was not long in coming to a decision. Above the ivy there was one of the cracks, and he saw that if he could reach that, he could climb to the

one above, and from there gain the roots of a gnarled hawthorn, whose seed had been dropped in a fissure by a bird generations back, the dryness of the position and want of root-food keeping the tree stunted and dwarfed. Once up there, another ten or twelve feet would take him to the top of the lower wall, and then he felt that it would go hard if he could not climb and hide, or escape up the cliff; so he set to at once to try.

Chapter Eleven.

Ralph gets Tit for Tat.

Ralph Darley's first step was to get his right hand beside his left, and his feet once more upon the ledge, but the ivy gave way a little more at this movement, and he paused. But not for long. Another danger was at hand.

Moved by the boldness of the lad's efforts to escape, and in dread lest he might be successful, the leader of the four men, after a short consultation with the others, who tried to dissuade him, began to wade cautiously forward till the water grew too deep for him, and then creeping sidewise, he climbed on to the smooth wall, and began to imitate the course taken by Ralph; but before he had gone many yards, one of his companions shouted:

"You'll go down, and be swep' away, and sucked in."

This checked him and made him hesitate, but rousing his courage again, he once more began to edge along the shelf below the surface, and this spurred the fugitive on to make another effort.

This time he caught at the ivy, which gave way a little more, but still held, and by moving cautiously, Ralph managed to get his feet upon the ledge. The next minute he had found another prominence below water, raised his foot to it, and caught at a rough bit of the stone above the ivy, stood firm, drew himself a little higher, and by a quick scramble, got a foot now on the ivy stem and his hands in the crack above, just as the growth yielded to his foot, dropped into the stream, and was swept away, leaving the lad hanging by his cramped fingers.

But though the ivy was gone, the crevice in which it had grown remained, and in another few seconds Ralph's toes were in it, and the weight off his hands.

He rested, and looked down-stream, to see that the man was steadily approaching, but the lad felt safe now. The ivy was gone, and the enemy could not possibly get farther along the ledge than the spot from whence he had slipped.

Cheered by this, Ralph began to climb again, finding the task easier, and the next minute he had hold of the tough stem of the hawthorn; and heedless of the thorns, dragged himself up into it, stood upright, reached another good, strong hand-hold, and then stepped right up on to a broad shelf of grass-grown limestone. The men uttered a fierce shout, and their leader, seeing now that his task was hopeless, began to retire and join his companions.

Ralph watched him for a few moments, and then began to climb again, finding this part of the slope easy, for great pieces of stone were piled up, and made fast by the bushes which grew amongst them, hiding the fugitive from the sight of those below, and raising his hopes as he found how easily he could get up. Twice over he heard shouts and their echoes from the opposite side, but he was too busy to heed them, and soon felt confident enough to sit down in a niche, half-way up the cliff, and rest for a few minutes.

"Horribly wet," he said to himself; "fishing-rod broken and lost, fish-can gone, and—ah! I did not expect that," for he found that shoes, hose, and creel were safe. "Glad I shall take the fish home after all."

He listened: all was still. Then he peered down, but he could see nothing save the bushes and trees on the other side; even the river was invisible from where he sat; and getting his breath now after his exertions, he turned, and began to look upward.

Ralph was born somewhere about three miles from where he sat, but he had inadvertently wandered into a part that was perfectly unfamiliar to him, the feud between the two families having resulted in its being considered dangerous for either side to intrude within the portion of the

rugged mountainous land belonging to the other.

Still, the lad had some notion of the bearings of the cliff hills from seeing them at a distance, and he rapidly came to a conclusion as to which would be the best course for him to take to avoid the occupants of the Black Tor; but when any one is flurried he is liable to make mistakes, and much more likely when deep in a tangle of pathless wood, and listening for the steps of those who are seeking to make him a prisoner.

According to Ralph's calculations, the narrow gap which led eastward to the edge of the huge hollow in which the narrow, roughly conical mass of limestone rose crowned with the Eden Castle, lay away to his left; and as he had in climbing kept on bearing to the right, he was perfectly certain that he had passed right over the men in the river. He felt, therefore, that he had nothing to do but keep steadily on in the same course, always mounting higher at every opportunity of doing so unseen, until close to the top, when he could keep along the edge unseen till well on his way homeward, and then take to the open downs above.

The silence below was encouraging, and in spite of being compelled often to creep beneath the bushes, and here and there descend to avoid some perpendicular piece of rock, he got on, so that he grew more and more satisfied that he had escaped, and had nothing to do but persevere, and be well out of what had promised to be a very awkward predicament. His clothes clung to his back, and his legs were terribly scratched, while one of his feet was bleeding; but that was a trifle which he hardly regarded.

Just before him was a steeper bit than usual, and he hesitated about trying to climb it; but the way up or down seemed to promise no better, so taking advantage of the dense cover afforded by the trees, he steadily attacked the awkward precipice, the dwarf trees helped him with their gnarled trunks, and he mastered the ascent, found himself higher up than he had expected, crawled a step or two farther, and arrived the next minute at the brink of a deep chasm, while to the left, not a couple of hundred yards away, rose the castle-crowned Black Tor.

He shrank back the next instant, and a feeling of confusion came over him. He could hardly understand how it was, but directly after it was

forced upon his understanding that he had been quite wrong in his bearings; that when he began to climb, the Black Tor lay to his right instead of his left, and that, instead of going into safety, he had been making straight for the most dangerous place.

To go on was impossible, for the cliff beneath him was overhanging; to go to the left was equally vain; and to descend or return was in all probability to walk right into the arms of his pursuers.

Once more he cautiously advanced his head between the bushes to look out, but the prospect was not encouraging. There, fifty or sixty feet away, was the fellow cliff to that upon which he lay, split apart by some terrible convulsion of nature; and once there he could have made for home, but there was no way of passing the opening save by descending right to the river's bank, and he felt pretty certain that he could not do this without being seen.

Still it was the only course, and his choice was open to him—to lie in hiding till the darkness came, many hours later, or boldly descend.

To lie there in the shadow with his wet clothes clinging to him was not a pleasant prospect, but it seemed the only one feasible under the circumstances; and he concluded that this was what he would do, wishing the while that he dared go and lie right out in the sunshine.

He had hardly thought this, when a hot thrill ran through him, for from somewhere below there came the sharp bark of a dog, and a voice rose cheering the animal on, and then shouted: "Close in, all of you: he's up here somewhere. Dog's got his scent."

Then voices answered with hails from different parts, and Ralph's next movement was to crawl forward again to the very edge of the precipice, look over, and seek for a place where he might perhaps descend.

But again he saw that it was utterly hopeless, and nerved now by his despair, he began to descend through the fringe of scrub oak and beech, close to the chasm, so as to get down to the river, where he meant to plunge in, and cross by wading or swimming to the other side.

But there is no hiding from the scent of a dog. Ralph had not gone down

half-a-dozen yards before the dog gave tongue again, and kept on barking, coming nearer and nearer, and more rapidly as the scent grew hotter: while before another dozen yards were passed the lad had to seize the first block of stone he could lift, and turn at bay, for the dog had sighted him and rushed forward, as if to leap at his throat.

There is many a dog, though—perhaps taught by experience—that will face a staff, but shrink in the most timid manner from a stone; and it was so here. At the first threatening movement made by Ralph, the dog stopped short, barking furiously, and the lad glanced downward once more. But to proceed meant to turn his back upon his four-footed enemy, which would have seized him directly.

There was nothing then to be done but face it, and he prepared to hurl his missile, but, to the lad's despair, the second dog, which had been silent, now rushed up, and he had to keep them both off as he stood at bay, the new-comer being more viciously aggressive than the first.

"I can't help it: I must make a dash for freedom," thought Ralph; and, raising his stone higher, he hurled it at the bigger dog, which avoided it by bounding aside. Then turning, he dashed downward, right into the arms of a man.

There was a sharp struggle, and the latter was getting worsted, being lower down, and having to bear the shock of Ralph's weight in the bound, but the next moment unexpectedly the lad felt himself seized from behind, two more men came panting up, and, utterly mastered, he found himself upon his back, with one enemy seated upon his chest, another holding his arms outspread, and the others his legs, thoroughly spread-eagled upon the sloping rock.

"Got you now," said the leader of the little party. "You, Tom, we can manage him.—Get out, will you, dogs!—Here, take them with you. Run to the mine hut, and get some rope to tie him. Be as smart as you can. The master'll give us something decent for a job like this."

The man addressed called the dogs to him, and was unwillingly obeyed, but a few stones thrown by the rest overcame the animals' objections, and they trotted off, leaving the prisoner relapsed into a sulky silence; his

captors chatted pleasantly together about his fate, banteringly telling him that for certain he would be hung over the castle wall.

Ralph paid no heed to what was said, and after a time the men grew tired of their banter, and began to wonder among themselves whether their companion would say anything to those whom he might meet.

“He’ll like enough be doing it,” said the leader. “I tilled him to fetch a rope, and if he does anything else, he’ll hear of it from me. What we wants is to take our prisoner up proper to the master, and get our reward.”

Then they began muttering in a low voice among themselves, taking care that their prisoner should not hear, as he lay upon his back, staring straight up at the blue sky, and thinking of how soon it had come upon him to be suffering Mark Eden’s reverse.

At last a hail came from below, and the man panted breathlessly up to them, throwing down a coil of thin rope, with which, after turning him over upon his face, the men, in spite of his struggles, tightly and cruelly tied their prisoner’s arms behind him, and then his ankles and knees. They were about to lift him up, when there was a sharp barking heard again.

“Here, you, Tom,” cried the leader, who had been most savage in dragging the knots as tightly as possible, “I told you to take those dogs back.”

“Well, so I did. I didn’t bring ’em.”

“They’ve come all the same,” cried the other. “Well, it don’t matter now. Perhaps Buzz wants a taste of these here naked legs.”

The dog barked close at hand now.

“Here, you, jump up, before he has you,” cried the leader brutally; and then he stared wonderingly, for there was a sharp rustling amongst the bushes, and the dog sprang out to them, closely followed by Mark Eden, who cried in wonder:

“Why, hallo: then this is what Buzz meant! Whom have you got there?”

The men drew back, and Mark stooped, as the dog barked violently, turned the prisoner over, and once more the two enemies were gazing curiously in each other's eyes.

Ralph did not flinch, but a dull feeling of despair ran through him as he saw Mark Eden's face light up, his eyes flashing, and a smile of triumph playing about his lips.

Mark did not speak for a time. Then he turned his back upon the prisoner.

"Do you know who this is?" he said to the men.

"Oh yes, Master Mark, we know him. Don't you? It's young Darley, from below there. We was having a bit of a ramble 'fore going down in the mine, and we'd got the dogs, to see if there was any chance of a rabbit pie for supper; but they didn't find one; they found his nabbs here instead. We had to hold the dogs' muzzles to keep 'em quiet till he'd got by."

"What was he doing?"

"Wading, and ketching our trout. We let him go right up to the deep water, down below where the narrows are, and we thought we'd trapped him; but somehow he managed to scramble up the side and get up here, so we set the dogs on, and they run him down. Look here, Master Mark; he'd got all these trout. Fine 'uns too."

The man opened Ralph's creel, and held it out for Mark to see, the lad nodding at the sight.

"Know'd where the good uns was."

"And what were you going to do with him?" said Mark quietly.

"We had to ketch him first," said the man, with a savagely stupid grin. "And he give us a lot o' trouble, and we thought best thing to do was to tie a stone to his neck and pitch him in one of the holes. But Tom, here, said the master wouldn't like it, and seeing he was a Darley, might like to make a sample of him, or keep him down in the mine to work. So we tied him tight, and was going to swing him between us, and carry him up to

the gateway for the master to see. Then you come."

Mark made no sign of either satisfaction or anger, but stood thinking for a minute or so, before turning again to where Ralph lay gazing straight up to the sky, waiting for whatever fate might be his, and setting his teeth hard in the firm determination to die sooner than ask for mercy from the cruel young savage who stood before him with what seemed to be a malicious grin upon his face.

And as he lay, Ralph thought of his school life, and all that had passed there, and how strange it was that in the wild part of Midland England there, amongst the mountains of the Peak, people could still be so savage as to be able to follow their own wills to as great an extent as did the barons and feudal chiefs of a couple of hundred years before.

Such thoughts as these had never come to him till after he had left home for school, to find his level. Earlier in his boyhood his father had appeared to him to be chief or king of the district, with a neighbour who was a rival chief or king. He knew that King James ruled the land; but that was England, away from the Peak. There, Sir Morton Darley, knight, was head of all, and the laws of England did not seem to apply anywhere there. Then he had gradually grown more enlightened, and never more so than at the present moment, as he lay bound on the mossy stones, feeling that unless his father came with a strong enough force to rescue him, his fate might even be death. And the result? Would the law punish the Edens for the deed? He felt that they would go free. They were to a pretty good extent outlaws, and the deed would never be known beyond their district. The moors and mountains shut them in. But Sir Morton, Ralph felt, would never sit down quietly. He would for certain attack and try to punish the Edens, and the feud would grow more deadly than ever.

Thoughts like these ran through his brain as he lay there, till the silence was broken by Mark Eden, whose face plainly told of the supreme pleasure he felt in seeing his young enemy humbled thus before him.

"Well," he said at last, "are you not going to beg to be set at liberty?"

Ralph looked at him defiantly.

"No," he said.

“Want to be taken up to the Tor, and hung from the tower as a scarecrow to keep away all the other thieves?”

“What is it to you?” replied Ralph bitterly.

“You came and took our trout,” said Mark, with a sneer; and he raised his foot as if tempted to plant it upon the prisoner’s chest.

“Yes, I came and caught some trout: but I looked upon the river as free to me, as you thought our cliff was free to you.”

“Hah!” cried Mark triumphantly; “I knew you would begin to beg for your life.”

“I have not begged,” said Ralph coldly. “You spoke to me and I answered.”

“Ropes hurt?” said Mark, after a pause, during which he could find nothing else to say.

Ralph smiled.

“Look for yourself,” he said. “They don’t quite cut to the bone.”

“Our mine lads are strong,” said Mark proudly. “Strong enough to beat your wretched set of servants if ever they dare come up here.”

“So brave and strong that you are glad to hire a gang of ruffianly soldiers to help you,” said Ralph scornfully.

“What? Those fellows in rags and rust? Pooh! We would not have them.”

Ralph opened his eyes a little wider.

“The Edens want no paid help of that kind. We’re strong enough to come and take your place whenever we like; but as you won’t be there, it will not matter to you.”

“No,” said Ralph, who was sick with pain, and faint from the throbbing caused by his bonds.

“But it would be a pity for my father to have you hung as a scarecrow,” said Mark mockingly. “I don’t like to see such things about. What do you say to going down to work always in our lead-mine?”

“Nothing,” said Ralph coldly.

“Better to live in the dark there, on bread and water, than to be killed.”

Ralph made no reply, but gazed fixedly in the speaker’s eyes.

“Better beg for your life, boy,” said Mark, placing his foot now on the prisoner’s chest.

“What! of you?” cried Ralph.

“Yes: I might make you my lackey, to wait upon me. That is what the Darleys should do for the Edens.”

“You coward!” said Ralph, with his pale face flushing now.

“What!” cried Mark. “Oh yes, call names like a girl. Come: beg for your life.”

Ralph’s answer was a fierce and scornful look, which told of what he would do if his hands were free. Then for a few moments he struggled, and Mark laughed.

“No good,” he said; “our men can tie knots fast enough to hold a Darley.”

The men, who stood at a little distance, laughed together in their satisfaction as they eagerly waited to see what was to come. Mark did not keep them long in suspense, for his hand went to the hilt of his sword, which he half drew.

“Now,” he said, “beg for your life, Darley.”

“Coward!” cried Ralph, in a hoarse whisper.

“Very well,” said Mark. “I gave you the chance. You were caught by our men stealing on our land, and you ought to have begged. The Darleys

always were beggars and thieves; but you will not. I gave you the opportunity."

He thrust the sword back in its sheath, and let his right hand fall to his side, where a strong knife-like dagger hung by a short chain from his belt, and whipped it out of its case.

"Does for a hunting-knife," he said, with a curious laugh. "My father has killed many a stag with it. Now, are you going to beg for your life?"

There was no reply, and the men took a step or two forward.

"Go back!" cried Mark fiercely; and the men obeyed.

Mark bent over the prisoner, with the mocking laugh intensifying.

"Too much of a coward to beg for your life," he said: "well, I'm too much of a coward to make you see it taken. There!"

With a quick movement, he turned Ralph over upon his face, thrust the point of the dagger beneath the line where the cut would tell best, and the prisoner's wrists were free; another quick cut divided the rope which drew his elbows together, and then the knees and ankles followed, the strained hemp easily parting at the touch of the keen blade, and Ralph Darley was free.

"Why, Master Mark," cried the chief man of the party in astonishment, "what you doing of?"

"Can't you see, idiot?" cried Mark, with a fierce snap.

"But what's the good of our ketching and tying on him?" cried the man addressed as Tom, in an ill-used tone.

"Say another word, you brute, and I'll have you tied as you tied him," cried Mark fiercely.

"Well, I dunno what Sir Eddard'll say when he knows."

"What he says he'll say to me," cried Mark. "You fellows ought to be in the

mine by now. Go back to your work."

The youth stood pointing down the steep slope, and an angry murmur of opposition arose; but the men began to move off, only to be called back just as Ralph rose painfully to his feet.

"Come here," cried Mark. "Pick up those pieces of rope."

"Who's going to take them back to the mine?" said the leader, in an ill-used tone. "What's Dan Rugg going to say? Noo rope too."

"Tell him I cut it," said Mark imperiously. "You take it back."

The man picked up the pieces, and Tom quietly took up the creel from where it lay, half hidden by a tuft of fern fronds, to begin moving off with the trout. But Mark let him get a few steps away before following with a rush and a kick which sent the man on his face. Then, as he struggled up, angry and threatening, the lad snatched the creel from his hands.

"The Edens are not thieves," he said fiercely—"only when they want a few young ravens," he added, turning with a mocking laugh to Ralph; and once more the two lads stood gazing in each other's eyes for a few moments, the rustling made by the departing men and the murmur of their voices rising from below.

Then, imitating Ralph's action of the last time they met, he pointed down to the river, and said, with a mocking laugh:

"It's my turn now. The Darleys are not the only ones who know how to treat a fallen enemy. Your creel, sir; and you are welcome to our trout."

Ralph took the basket without a word, and without taking his eyes from Mark's, while it seemed as if each lad was fighting hard not to be the first to let his glance sink before the other's.

Then Ralph raised the lid of the creel, and began to take out the fish, but hesitated, and laid them back. To have thrown them on the ground seemed to him contemptible and mean.

"Now go," said Mark. "You and I are straight, sir. Next time we meet I

hope you will wear your sword."

Ralph hesitated, and remained standing in the same place; his eyes looking as if he wanted to speak, but no words would come; and at last he turned and took a step to go, but his numbed feet and ankles gave way beneath him, and he tottered, and would have fallen, had not Mark involuntarily sprung forward and caught him in his arms.

Ralph laughed painfully.

"Let me sit down on the enemy's ground for a few minutes," he said. "Your men have left me no use in my limbs."

Mark gently let him down; and, faint with pain, the cold sweat breaking out in great drops all over his brow, Ralph said feebly, smiling the while:

"Not straight yet, Master Eden. I am in your debt now."

Then a deathly feeling of sickness came over him; trees, rocks, and sunny sky were dim, and glided before his eyes till all was darkness, for how long he could not tell.

When he opened his eyes again the sickly feeling still troubled him, but he could not understand why. It was like awakening from some troubled dream, and full consciousness came back slowly. Then, by degrees, he grasped the fact that his head was resting on a tuft of heath, and bracken fronds shaded him from the sun. His wrists throbbed with sharp-shooting pains, which ran right up beyond his elbows. There were pains, too, about his knees and ankles, and there was something else which he could not make out, till he looked towards his feet, to see that some one was seated a little below him on the sharp slope, with back half-turned to him, and his bare legs across his lap, chafing the ankles gently, first one and then the other, over and over again.

Ralph was quite conscious now, but he did not speak. He lay back there, making no movement, no sign; but a curiously dark look came into his eyes, and his lips quivered a little, grew firm again, and were softened by a smile, while a strange glowing sensation set in about his heart.

Five minutes must have elapsed before Mark Eden turned his head,

started as he saw that Ralph's eyes were watching him, and his quiet intent gaze gave place to a frown; his face became scarlet, and he hastily placed his patient's legs upon the ground.

"How long have you been watching me?" he said hotly.

"Only a minute or so. Did I faint?"

"I suppose so," said Mark roughly. "Just like a great girl."

"Yes: very weak of me," said Ralph quietly.

"Yes, very," said Mark. "The brutes tied you too tightly. Try if you can walk now. Get down by the river, and bathe them a bit."

He stood up and thrust his hands behind him, looking at his young enemy scornfully; but the scarlet flush was in his face still, and would make him look as if he were ashamed of what he had been caught doing.

Ralph sat up, and struggled painfully to his feet, turning hot and faint again; but he made a brave effort to be firm, and took a step or two and then stopped, Mark making no effort to assist him. Then stifling a cry of pain, he took another step or two and tottered, when Mark caught his arm.

"You're shamming," he cried angrily.

Ralph's brow wrinkled, and he looked down at his bare legs and feet, raising one a little, painfully, to draw attention to the terribly swollen state of his ankles and knees.

"Shamming!" he said quietly. "Am I? Well, they are not."

Ralph held out first one leg, and then the other, before seating himself again, drawing his hose from his belt, and trying to draw them on; but at the end of a minute the pain from his swollen wrists forced him to give up the task, and he slowly replaced the hose in his belt.

Twice over, unseen by Ralph, his companion made a gesture as if to advance and help him, but he mastered the inclination; and after a while,

Ralph sat perfectly still, waiting for the giddy feeling from which he suffered to go off. And at last, feeling a little better, he rose to his feet, bowed distantly, and began to descend the steep slope; but in a few minutes he was clinging to a tree, helpless once more, and he started, as Mark suddenly said, roughly:

“Here; you don’t know our cliff: let me show you—”

Ralph was under the impression that he had left Mark Eden quite behind, and his surprise was the greater when he found that his enemy was offering him his arm, and ended by helping him down the remainder of the way to the river, where the injured lad gladly seated himself at the edge upon a stone, which enabled him to lave both feet at once in the clear cool current, to the great comfort and relief of his swollen ankles.

After a time he was able to use his feet, resume his hose and shoes, and rise to start back; but it was awkward to part without some word of thanks, and these were very difficult to say to one who stood by all the time, watching every action, with a mocking smile upon his lips.

But the words had to be said, and making an effort Ralph turned to speak. But before a sound had left his lips, Mark burst out with:

“Going now? Very well. Wait till we meet again. That way, sir. I dare say you know that you can cross the river there?”

Ralph bowed coldly, and took a few steps toward the shallows, before stopping short.

“I must go and thank him for what he has done,” he said to himself; and he turned to walk back, but Mark was not visible.

“Master Mark Eden,” he cried; but there was no reply, and he cried again, shouting as loud as he could, but there was still no response. And, sick at heart with pain and vexation, Ralph once more stumbled awkwardly along by the river, amongst stone, bramble, and fern, trying to make out where the deep chasm was down into which he had looked, but it was completely hidden by the trees; and, reaching the shallows, he slowly crossed to go homeward on the more open side, which was a far less difficult task, though it necessitated crossing the river again.

But as the lad disappeared among the trees, Mark Eden rose from where he had been hidden behind a pile of fallen blocks, to make his way into the chasm, and then upward to the castle on the Black Tor, frowning very fiercely, and feeling a good deal dissatisfied with himself, though brightening up a little as he began thinking of what was to happen the next time he and Ralph Darley met.

“One couldn’t do anything,” he said roughly, “till that old business had been put straight.”

Chapter Twelve.

Baring the White Blade.

Ralph Darley's disposition led him to determine to say nothing about what had passed, but his lame legs forced him to confess how it was his ankles were so bad, and Sir Morton was furious. He was ready to declare war on a small scale against his neighbour, and carry fire and sword into his camp. But Ralph's legs were better the next day; and when the whole history of the two encounters had been gone over, he thought better of the affair, to the extent of determining to wait till his son was quite well again; and when he was quite well, there were other things to dwell upon.

For one, Nick Garth, who had been across to one of the villages beyond the moor, came back with his head bleeding, and stripped to breeches and shirt.

His account of his trouble was that he was coming home in the dark, keeping one eye upon a flickering light some distance away up the mountain-side. Sometimes it was visible, at others all was black; and he was wondering whether it had anything to do with the witches' fire of which he had heard tell, when all at once he found himself surrounded by seven or eight wild-looking figures, either in long gowns or cloaks, who seized him; and upon his resisting wildly, they knocked him down, took the best of his clothes away, emptied his pockets, and departed, carrying off a large basket he was taking home, a basket containing two chickens, two ducklings, and a big pat of butter, the present of a married sister beyond the moors.

The next day news reached the Black Tor that the witches had been seen again by two different miners, and in each case the tale was the same.

The witches were crowding together in a huddled way, in their long cloaks, over a fire. A caldron was hung from three sticks, joined together at the top, and one of the men declared that they must have been busy over some unhallowed work.

"Why do you say that, man?" asked Mark.

“Because they were chanting some horrible thing together.”

“You heard that?”

“Ay, Master Mark, I heered it.”

“A song?”

“Song, Master Mark? Save us, no! A song makes your eyes water if it’s about solemn things, or it makes you laugh if it’s comic; but this made the marrow in my bones turn hard as taller, for it went through me; and as I watched them, they all got up and joined hands, and began to walk slowly round the great pot over the fire, and the light shone on their horrible faces and long ragged gowns. I wanted to run away, but my legs was all of a tremble. I’d ha’ give anything to run, but they legs wouldn’t go, and there I stood, watching ’em as they danced round the fire a little faster, and a little faster, till they were racing about, singing and screeching. And then all at once they stopped and shouted ‘Wow?’ all together, and burst into the most horrid shrecking laughter you ever heered, and the light went out. That seemed to set my legs going, master, and I turned to get away as fast as ever I could go, when I heered some kind o’ wild bird whistle over the mountain-side, and another answered it close to me: and before I knew where I was, the great bird fluttered its wings over me, and I caught my foot in a tuft of heather, and fell.”

“Well, and what then?” asked Mark.

“Nothing, sir, only that I ran all the way home to my cottage yonder, and you ask my wife, and she’ll tell you I hadn’t a dry thread on me when I got in. Now, sir, what do you say?”

“All nonsense!” replied Mark bluntly, and he walked away.

Another few days passed. Mark had been very quiet and thoughtful at home, reading, or making believe to read, and spending a good deal of time in the mine with Dummy Rugg, who twice over proposed that they should go on exploring the grotto-like place he had discovered; but to his surprise, his young master put it off, and the quiet, silent fellow waited. He, though, had more tales to tell of the way in which things disappeared

from cottages. Pigs, sheep, poultry went in the most unaccountable way, and the witches who met sometimes on the mountain slope had the credit of spiriting them away.

“Then why don’t the people who lose things follow the witches up, and see if they have taken them?”

“Follow ’em up, sir?” said Dummy, opening his eyes very widely. “They wouldn’t dare.”

Then came a day when, feeling dull and bitter and as if he were not enjoying himself at home, as he did the last time he was there, Mark mounted one of the stout cob ponies kept for his and his sister’s use, and went for a good long round, one which was prolonged so that it was getting toward evening, and the sun was peering over the shoulder of one of the western hills, when, throwing the rein on his cob’s neck, and leaving it to pick its own way among the stones of the moorland, he entered a narrow, waste-looking dale, about four miles from the Tor.

He felt more dull and low-spirited than when he started in the morning, probably from want of a good meal, for he had had nothing since breakfast, save a hunch of very cake-like bread and a bowl of milk at a cottage farm right up in the Peak, where he had rested his pony while it had a good feed of oats.

The dale looked desolation itself, in spite of the gilding of the setting sun. Stone lay everywhere: not the limestone of his own hills and cliffs, but grim, black-looking millstone-grit, which here and there formed craggy, forbidding outlines; and this did not increase his satisfaction with his ride, when he took up the rein and began to urge the cob on, to get through the gloomy place.

But the cob knew better than his master what was best, and refused to risk breaking its legs among the stones with which the moor was strewn.

“Ugh! you lazy fat brute,” cried Mark; “one might just as well walk, and—Who’s that?”

He shaded his eyes from the sun, and looked long and carefully at a figure a few hundred yards ahead till his heart began to beat fast, for he

felt sure that it was Ralph Darley. Ten minutes after, he began to be convinced, and coming to a clearer place where there was a pretence of a bit of green sward, the cob broke into a canter of its own will, which brought its rider a good deal nearer to the figure trudging in the same direction. Then the cob dropped into a walk again, picking its way among great blocks of stone; and Mark was certain now that it was Ralph Darley, with creel on back, and rod over his shoulder, evidently returning from one of the higher streams after a day's fishing.

Mark's heart beat a little faster, and he nipped his cob's sides; but the patient animal would not alter its steady walk, which was at about the same rate as the fisher's, and consequently Mark had to sit and watch his enemy's back, as, unconscious of his presence, Ralph trudged on homeward, with one arm across his back to ease up the creel, which was fairly heavy with the delicate burden of grayling it contained, the result of a very successful day.

"He has his sword on this time," said Mark to himself, "and I've got mine."

The lad touched the hilt, to make sure it had not been jerked out of the scabbard during his ride.

"Just a bit farther on yonder," he muttered, gazing at the steep slope of a limestone hill to his right, and a mile distant, "there are some nice level bits of turf. I can overtake him then, and we can have a bit of a talk together."

The cob walked steadily on, avoiding awkward places better than his master could have guided him, and suddenly stopped short at a rocky pool, where a little spring of water gushed from the foot of a steep slope, and lowered its head to drink.

"You don't want water now," said Mark angrily; and he tightened the rein, but his cob had a mouth like leather; and caring nothing for the bit, bore upon it heavily, stretched out his neck, and had a long deep drink.

"I wish I had spurs on," muttered Mark; "I'd give you a couple of such digs, my fine fellow."

Then he sat thinking.

“Good job I haven’t got any on. I should trip, for certain, when we were at it.”

Then the cob raised its dripping mouth, which it had kept with lips very close together, to act as a strainer to keep out tadpoles, water-beetles, leeches, or any other unpleasant creatures that might be in the water, took two or three steps back and aside, and then, noticing that there was a goodly patch of rich juicy herbage close by the spring, it lowered its head once more, uttered a snort as it blew the grass heavily, to drive off any flies that might be nestling among the strands, and began to crop, crop at the rich feed.

“Oh come, I’m not going to stand that,” cried Mark, dragging at the pony’s head. “You’re so full of oats now that you can hardly move, and he’ll be looking back directly, and thinking I’m afraid to come on.”

The cob’s head was up: so was its obstinate nature. It evidently considered it would be a sin to leave such a delicious salad, so tempting and juicy, and suitable after a peck or two of dry, husky oats; and, thoroughly determined not to pass the herbage by, it set its fore feet straight out a good distance apart, and strained at the reins till, as Mark pulled and pressed his feet against the stirrups, it seemed probable that there would be a break.

“Oh, you brute!” cried the lad angrily; “you ugly, coarse, obstinate brute! Pony! You’re not a pony, I feel sure; you’re only a miserable mule, and your father was some long-eared, thick-skinned, thin-tailed, muddle-headed, old jackass. Look here! I’ll take out my sword, and prick you with the point.”

The cob evidently did not believe it, and kept on the strain of the bit, till the lad took a rein in each hand, and began to saw the steel from side to side, making it rattle against the animal’s teeth.

This seemed to have a pleasant effect on the hard mouth, and produced the result of the cob nodding its head a little; and just then, to Mark’s great disgust, Ralph turned his head and looked back.

“There! I expected as much. Now go on, you beast, or I’ll kill you.”

The pony snorted with satisfaction, for in his excitement, the rider had slackened the reins a little. Down went the animal's muzzle; there was another puff to blow away the insects, and it began to crop again, with that pleasant sound heard when grazing animals are amongst rich herbage.

Then followed a fresh struggle, and the pony won, taking not the slightest notice of the insulting remarks made by its rider about its descent, appearance, and habits.

But at last, perhaps because it had had its own way, more probably because it was not hungry, and just when the rider was thinking of getting down to walk, and sending Dummy Rugg to find the animal next day, it raised its head, ground up a little grass between its teeth and then began to follow Ralph once more, as he trudged on without turning his head again.

Still, try as he would, Mark could not get the animal to break into a canter; in fact, the way was impossible; and when the sun had sunk down below the western hill, which cast a great purple shadow, to begin rising slowly higher and higher against the mountain on his left, he and Ralph were still at about the same distance apart.

"I can't halloa to him to stop," muttered Mark angrily; "I don't want to seem to know him, but to overtake him, and appear surprised, and then break into a quarrel hotly and at once. Oh! it's enough to drive anyone mad. You brute! I'll never try to ride you again."

Rather hard, this, upon the patient beast which had carried him for many miles that day, and was carefully abstaining now from cantering recklessly amongst dangerous stones, and giving its master a heavy fall. But boys will be unreasonable sometimes, almost as unreasonable as some men.

Finding at last that drumming the cob's sides was of no use, jerking the bit of not the slightest avail, and that whacks with the sheathed sword only produced whisks of the tail, Mark subsided into a sulky silence, and rode at a walk, watching the enemy's back as he trudged steadily on.

The vale grew more gloomy on the right side, the steep limestone hill

being all in shadow, and the rough blocks looked like grotesque creatures peering out from among the blackening bushes; and as he rode on, the lad could not help thinking that by night the place might easily scare ignorant, untutored, superstitious people, who saw, or fancied they saw, strange lights here and there.

“And in the sunshine it is as bright as the other hill,” thought Mark, as he glanced at the left side of the dale; “not very bright, though. It’s a desolate place at the best of times;” and once more he glanced up the steep slope on his right.

“Wonder why they call it Ergles,” he mused. “Let’s see; it’s up there where the cave with the hot spring is. Not a bit farther on.”

He was still a long distance from home, and knowing that before long Ralph Darley would turn off to the left, he again made an effort to urge on the cob, but in vain.

“And he’ll go home thinking I’m afraid,” muttered the lad; “but first time I meet him, and he isn’t a miserable, wretched, contemptible cripple, I’ll show him I’m not.”

“Then you shall show him now,” the cob seemed to say, for it broke into a smart canter, but only because the bottom of the dale was here free from stones, and in a very short time Ralph was overtaken.

“Here, hi! fellow! clear the road,” shouted Mark; and he essayed to stop. But now, the way being good, the cob was anxious to get on and reach its stable, passing Ralph quickly enough, and enraging its rider more and more.

“Oh, you brute, you brute!” he muttered. “Now he can’t help thinking I’m afraid of him. If I only had a whip.”

For the moment Mark felt disposed to turn in the saddle, and make some insulting gesture at the lad behind—one that would make him, if he had any courage within, come running rapidly in pursuit. But the act would have seemed too weak and boyish, when he wanted to be manly; and he refrained, contenting himself with dragging hard at the rein, till a hundred yards farther the ground grew stony again, and the pony dropped into a

walk, and picked its way in and out more slowly than ever.

This had the result that Mark desired, for a glance back showed him that Ralph was coming on fast, and in a few minutes he had overtaken him, just as he sprang off his pony and faced round.

“Oh, it is you,” said Mark haughtily.

“Yes,” said Ralph, meeting his eyes boldly.

“I thought it was. Well, you are not lame now?”

“No.”

“And I see you have a sword.”

“Yes, I have my sword.”

“Then as we are equal now, and if you are not afraid, we may as well have a little conversation with them.”

“Fight?” said Ralph quietly. “Why?”

“Ha-ha!” laughed Mark, with his face flushing. “Why? Because we are gentlemen, I suppose; because we have been taught to use our swords; at least I have; and it’s the worse for you if you have not.”

“But I have,” said Ralph firmly, his own cheeks beginning to look hot; “but I don’t see that this is a reason why we two should fight.”

“Then I’ll give you another,” cried Mark; “because you are a Darley, and I am an Eden, and we cannot meet without drawing swords. Your people were always a set of cut-throats, murderers, robbers, and thieves.”

“It’s a lie,” cried Ralph hotly. “My people were always gentlemen. It was your people who always insulted ours, as you are insulting me now, and did a few minutes ago, when you passed me going quietly on my way.”

“That’s enough,” said Mark sharply. “Out of the way, beast,” and he drew his sword and struck the cob sharply on the flank, sending it trotting

onward at the risk of breaking its knees.

“This is your doing,” said Ralph quietly, as he threw down his rod, and passed the strap of his creel over his head, to swing it after.

“Bah! don’t talk,” cried Mark hotly. “This place will do. It is as fair for you as for me.”

He made a gesture with his sword toward a tolerably level spot, and Ralph bowed his head.

“Then draw,” cried Mark, throwing down his cap.

Ralph followed his example, and the next moment his own bright blade leaped from its sheath, and without further preliminary, they crossed their trusty blades, which emitted a harsh grating noise as they played up and down, flashing in the paling evening light, each awaiting the other’s attack.

Mark, in the fear that his enemy would doubt his prowess, began the attack; and in defending himself from his adversary’s thrusts Ralph soon showed him that he had learned the use of his thin rapier from a master the equal of his own teacher, thus making the hot-headed youth more cautious, and ready to turn aside the thrusts which followed when he ceased his own.

They fenced equally well, and for a few minutes no harm was done. Then all at once, in response to a quick thrust, a spot appeared high up above the russet leather boot which came half-way up Mark’s thigh, and Ralph leaped back with a strange feeling of compunction attacking him that he could not understand.

“Nothing,” cried Mark angrily; “a scratch,” as he pressed his teeth upon his nether lip; and they crossed swords once more, with the wounded lad commencing the attack with as much vigour as before. And now, forgetful of everything but the desire to lay one another *hors de combat*, they thrust and parried for the next minute, till Ralph uttered a faint cry, as his adversary’s sword passed through his doublet, between his right arm and ribs, a sharp pang warning him that the blade had pierced something more than the velvet he wore.

Mark dropped the point of his blade, for at that moment a whistle rang out, and he looked inquiringly in the direction from which it had come, leaving himself quite open to any treacherous attack had it been intended.

But none was meant, Ralph standing with his left hand pressing his side, just below the armpit, as another whistle was heard from a fresh direction. Others followed, and the adversaries looked sharply at each other.

“Not birds,” said Ralph quickly.

“Don’t look like it,” said Mark bitterly, as he drew his breath with a hissing noise, as if in pain.

“We’re surrounded,” cried Ralph excitedly, as they saw six or seven men appearing from different directions, and evidently all making the spot where the lads now stood the centre for which they aimed.

“You coward!” cried Mark bitterly—“a trap—your father’s men. *En garde*!” he shouted. “You shall pay for this!”

“My father’s men?” cried Ralph angrily, as he ignored the other’s preparations for a fresh attack. “You’re mad; can’t you see they’re those scoundrels who came to us—Captain Purlrose and his men. Look, there he is—up yonder by that hole.”

“What do they mean, then?” cried Mark, dropping the point of his weapon.

“Mischief to us,” cried Ralph.

“Or me,” said Mark suspiciously.

“To us, I tell you,” cried Ralph.—“You won’t give in?”

“No; will you?”

“Not if you’ll stand by me.”

“And I will,” cried Mark excitedly.

“But you are wounded.”

“So are you.”

“I don’t feel it now.”

“No more do I. Hurrah, then; let them come on!”

Chapter Thirteen.

Fighting Long Odds.

But the men did not come on, and the two lads, now breathing hard from their exertions, had time to think as well as recover their breath, for the men, after carefully approaching singly from different directions, so as to surround the combatants, now halted as if by one consent a good fifty yards away, each looking upward from time to time at the burly cloaked figure high above them, and now standing upon a big block of stone, making signals by waving his arms and pointing.

In answer to one of these signals, the men all took off the long cloaks they wore; and in a moment the thought flashed through Mark Eden’s brain that these men must have been seen seated round their fire, somewhere above, and hence had arisen the rumours of witches on the mountain slope, the cloaks being their long gowns.

And now, as the men stood fast, in spite of several signs from above, Ralph suddenly said:

“Perhaps they’ve only come to see us fight, and are waiting for us to begin again.”

“Not they,” cried Mark excitedly. “I know: they mean to take us prisoners, and keep us till we’re ransomed.”

“Perhaps. That is why we have heard of so many robberies,” said Ralph,

whose hot anger against his enemy was fast cooling down.

“Yes, that’s it. The dogs!” cried Mark. “I know there’s a big cave up there that you go in through a narrow crack. I saw it once. They couldn’t get my father to have them up at the Tor, and so they’ve taken possession of the cavern and turned robbers. Well, my father will soon rout them out of there.”

“If yours don’t, mine will,” replied Ralph. “But they don’t seem disposed to interfere. Are they stopping to see us fight?”

“If they are,” cried Mark hotly, “they’ll have to wait a long time. I’m not going to make a raree-show of myself to please them.”

“Nor I neither,” cried Ralph. “But,” he added hastily, “you know I’m not afraid?”

“Say you know that I’m not afraid either, and I’ll say the same.”

“Oh, I’ll say that,” replied Ralph, “because I know it.”

“That’s right, then,” said Mark; “and we can finish having it out another time.”

“Of course. I say, though, your leg’s bleeding a good deal.”

“Oh, never mind that. So’s your arm.”

“Can’t be deep,” said Ralph, “because it only smarts a bit. I say, look there! That’s Captain Purlrose upon the stone, and he’s making signals again.”

The wide ring of men saw the signs made by the burly figure above, and they all wrapped their cloaks round their left arms, and then drew their swords.

“Then they do mean to fight,” cried Mark excitedly.

“Yes, but they don’t come on. I say: you’re not going to let them take you prisoner, are you?”

“I’m not going to run away,” said Mark sturdily.

“But they are six to one,” said Ralph.

“Yes, if you stand still and look on. If you won’t let them take you, they’ll only be three to one.”

“I’m going to make a dash for it,” said Ralph, setting his teeth hard, for his wound smarted a good deal, and there was a peculiar warm feeling as of something trickling down his sleeve.

“What, run away?”

“Who said I was going to run away?” cried Ralph. “Look here: in war two kings who hate one another often join together against an enemy.”

“Of course,” said Mark.

“I hate you and all your family, but we don’t want any one else to set up here, near our homes, do we?”

“No,” said Mark sharply.

“Then I’ll stand by you like a trump,” cried Ralph; “if you’ll stand by me now. It’s long odds, but we’ve got right on our side.”

“Shake hands on it then,” cried Mark— “No, we can’t do that, because it’s like making friends, when we’re enemies and hate one another.”

“No, we can’t shake hands,” said Ralph warmly, “but we can make our swords kiss hilts, and that’s joining together for the fight.”

“Agreed,” cried Mark; and the lace steel shells of their rapiers clinked together, making the men, who were watching them intently, exchange glances. “I say,” said Mark hastily, “wasn’t that a mistake?”

“What?”

“Joining like that. It’s making our swords friends.”

“Only till this skirmish is over,” said Ralph.

“Oh yes; of course. We can make the blades kiss then. Here, what’s that Captain what-you-may-call-him doing, waving his arms like that?”

“Means for them to come on and attack. He’s savage because they don’t,” said Ralph.

“Yes, that’s it. I believe they’re afraid of getting more holes in their jerkins.”

“Ha-ha!” laughed Ralph; “and they have no room, I suppose. Look here, let’s have a dash for it.”

“What! run away? That I won’t, from them, so long as I’ve got a sword.”

“Run away! No!” cried Ralph, who was bubbling over with excitement, the slight wound he had received acting as a spur to his natural desire to punish some one for his pain. “Can’t you see that if we make a dash at them on one side, we shall only have two to fight for a bit till the others can come up; and we might wound the first two if we’re quick, before their companions could attack.”

“Well said, general,” cried Mark excitedly. “That’s right. Let’s look sharp then, for my leg hurts as if it was getting stiff.”

“Never mind your leg. Hallo! hark!”

“Why don’t you come on yourself, then?” shouted one of the men, in answer to a good deal of gesticulation from the captain. “Take care you don’t get a hole in your skin.”

“Hurrah!” cried Mark; “they are afraid. Ready?”

“Yes; come on!” cried Ralph; and the two lads made a rush at the men who stood in their homeward way, astonishing them so that they turned and ran before the attacking party had gone half-a-dozen paces.

But a yell of execration rose from the others, as they now made a rush after the lads, who became pursuers and pursued as well.

A savage yell, too, came from high up the mountain slope, the captain

being joined by the rest of his gang, and standing shouting and waving his hands furiously.

The position now was this: Two men were running, with the lads some five-and-twenty yards behind, and gaining on them fast. Two men were fifty yards away, to right and left; and two more were right behind, sixty or seventy yards, in full pursuit.

“Forward!” shouted Mark. “No mercy, Darley; run your fellow through, and then turn and spit that fellow on your right.”

The two men in front heard the words, and redoubled their efforts, but they were heavy, middle-aged scoundrels, and plodded clumsily over the stone-strewed ground; while, forgetting their wounds in the excitement, Mark and Ralph bounded along, leaping blocks that stood in their way, and gaining so fast upon their flying enemies, that in a few minutes they were close up: and the retreating pair, in response to the yells of their companions, and in despair, turned at bay, when Mark, who was first, leaped straight at his man, turning the fellow’s rusty sword aside, and came upon the lower part of his chest with his knees, like a stone from a catapult.

Down went the man, with his sword flying out of his hand, and Mark nearly fell a couple of yards beyond him, but, active as a fallow deer, he saved himself by a couple of leaps, as his feet touched the ground; and he turned, to see Ralph’s man down and motionless, as his companion leaped to his side, and faced round to meet the next two, who, urged on by the shouts from the hill, charged at them, carried on by their legs, almost involuntarily, their spirit having little to do with it.

The next minute swords were clashing, there were a few quick parries and thrusts, and one man dropped his weapon, as Ralph’s sword passed through his shoulder, almost simultaneously with a sharp clang, caused by the shell of Mark’s weapon striking against that of his adversary, whose blade broke short off at the hilt. Then, without a moment’s hesitation, the lad struck sidewise at the fellow with his fist, catching him in the ear, and he staggered sidewise, *hors de combat*.

“Now for the others,” cried Ralph wildly, his blood up, and ready for

anything; and they were about to dash at them, when, to their utter astonishment, the last two turned and ran up the slope toward their captain and the rest of the party, who were coming to their aid.

“No, no, stop, stop!” yelled Mark, half choking the while with a hoarse hysterical laugh. “Oh, what a game! Here, look; that fellow’s getting his sword.”

Without another word, the pair dashed at the disarmed man, who had risen and picked up his weapon, but he turned and fled.

“Who’d have thought of that?” cried Mark wildly. “Shall we turn and attack the others as they come on?”

“No,” said Ralph, recovering his coolness; “let’s trot on now. It’s madness to try it again.”

“Well, I suppose it would be pushing it too far. They can’t say we’re cowards if we retreat now.”

“No; but we can say they are,” cried Ralph. “Why, what a set of curs, to be beaten by us.”

“Yes, and they can’t fight a bit. I could parry their thrusts with a stick. But here; I can’t lose my pony. Where is he?”

“And I can’t lose my rod and creel,” cried Ralph. “There’s your pony yonder ahead.”

“And your fish are right back there. I’ll come with you to fetch them.”

“No, no; let them have ’em. We must retreat now. Two, four, six, eight-nine of them now; and I don’t think those fellows who are down are much hurt. Come along.”

For Captain Purlrose was now descending the slope, and his men were approaching menacingly, spurred on by a shower of oaths, threats, and abuse from their leader.

“Well, I suppose we must; but my blood’s up now,” said Mark, “and I hate

running from such a set of curs."

"So do I," said Ralph; "it's like being beaten, when we won. I say, were you hurt?"

"Only where you jobbed that sword of yours into my leg. Phew! it's getting stiffer every moment. I shan't be able to walk directly. Were you?"

"What, hurt? No, only where you scratched me."

"It was pretty deep, then, for your sleeve's soaked. Here, let me tie my handkerchief round it."

"No, no," said Ralph; "they'll overtake us. Let's make a run for it now."

"Shall we?" said Mark unwillingly.

"Yes, we must. I can't use my arm any more."

"Well, I don't think I can run much farther."

"You must," cried Ralph, sharply as he looked over his shoulder. "We're not fit to fight."

He thrust his sound arm through Mark's, and they ran on pretty swiftly for a hundred yards or so, with the enemy in full pursuit, and then Mark stopped suddenly.

"Can't go—any farther," he said. "My leg's awful."

Ralph looked round, to find that the men had given up the pursuit, and were going back.

"Can we catch your pony?" he said.

"I think so. He's grazing yonder."

"Would he let me catch him?"

"No," said Mark. "He'd be off directly. There, I think I can hobble on now for a bit. What! are they coming again?"

“No; only watching us,” said Ralph rather faintly. “Would you mind tying that tightly round my arm?”

For answer, Mark seized the handkerchief Ralph held out, and knotted it last round his companion’s arm.

“Now let me do something to your leg.”

“No; it doesn’t bleed now,” said Mark. “Let’s get on. If they see us crippled, they’ll come on again, and if they do I’m good for nothing. It doesn’t bleed; it only feels of no use. There, let’s get on. Are they watching us?”

“No, I think not. It’s getting so dark there. I say; I can see they’re lifting one of the men to carry him.”

“Wish some one would carry me,” groaned Mark.

“I don’t think I can,” said Ralph. “Perhaps I could, though, if you could hold on.”

“Bah!” cried Mark sharply. “Likely. Come on, and I’ll coax that beast of a pony. If I can only get hold of him, I’ll make him carry us both.”

They pressed on in silence, Mark using his sword as a walking-stick with one hand, and compelled to accept his enemy’s arm, till they came up to where the cob was grazing.

It let them come close up before raising its head, and then, after contemplating them for a bit, twitching his ears, as Mark uttered a series of blandishments, and ended by tossing its head, and spinning round, as upon a pivot, to trot off. It failed in this, however, for Ralph thrust his foot through the trailing rein, and brought the animal up short.

“Well done!” cried Mark. “There, jump on, and then pull me across like a sack.”

“Nonsense! Get on yourself. I’ll help you.”

“I shan’t, it’s my pony. You’re wounded, so get on.”

“After you,” said Ralph, and, after a little more bandying of words, Mark felt so sick with pain that he had either to lie down on the earth or mount.

He did the latter, after several groans, for his leg was very stiff and painful.

“There’s a coward for you,” he said. “Now jump up behind.”

“There is no need,” said Ralph. “I can walk.”

“That’s not fair.”

“Never mind.—Get on with you.”

This last to the pony, who walked quietly along with his burden in the pleasant evening light.

For some minutes now neither of the lads spoke, being too much engrossed by pain and the strangeness of their position.

“I say,” said Mark at last, “you’d better come up to the Tor, and drop me, and I’ll lend you the pony to carry your wounded arm home.”

“No,” said Ralph quietly. “I shall come a bit farther, and then strike off. You can get safe home now.”

“Yes, I suppose so; but you ought to have the pony, or one of our men, to see you safe.”

“He’d finish me off,” said Ralph grimly, and Mark was silent.

“I say,” he said at last; “I shan’t say we fought.”

“Why?” asked Ralph, in surprise.

“Because it’s like bragging so, to talk of two fights. I shall say the robbers attacked us, and we beat them off; then they’ll get the credit of our wounds.”

“But it will not be true.”

“I shan’t say they wounded us,” replied Mark. “If my father likes to think they did it, I shall let him.”

“I shan’t,” said Ralph quietly. “I shall tell my father everything.”

“Well, I suppose it will be best,” said Mark. “But, I say, that fight doesn’t count, you know. We must begin again where we can’t be interrupted.”

“When your leg’s better.”

“Yes, and your arm’s all right.”

“Of course.”

“Queer thing being such enemies, Darley, isn’t it?”

“Very,” said Ralph quietly.

“But I suppose it comes natural, though, to our families.”

“I have always thought so,” replied Ralph.

“I say, I’m glad you’re not a coward, though. They say that all the Darleys have been cowards.”

“Yes; and all the Edens too.”

“It’s a lie—an abominable lie,” cried Mark hotly. “Do you mean to say I’m a coward?”

“How could I, after the way you helped me to fight those ruffians this evening? I thought you very brave,” said Ralph gravely.

“Thank ye. That’s what I thought about you. But I think it’s a pity you are a Darley.”

“Don’t say that. I am very proud to be one, but I say—”

“Yes?”

“Don’t you think, instead of paying compliments to one another, we ought

to go and get our wounds properly seen to?”

“Yes, it would be more sensible. You’ll turn off, and go round by the cliff?”

“Yes, where the path comes up from the river,” replied Ralph.

“And we’ll finish that fight as soon as ever we can,” said Mark.

“Very well. I suppose we must see who’s best man.”

“Of course.—Hallo! who’s this?”

A figure was dimly-seen coming up through the bushes, along the track just mentioned, and directly after, it became fully visible as Master Rayburn with his fish-creel on his back, and rod on shoulder; and they saw the old man stop short and cry:

“Shade of good Queen Bess! What’s the meaning of this?”

Chapter Fourteen.

Master Rayburn begins to think.

Neither of the lads answered, for a feeling of confusion which troubled them. They felt abashed at being seen in each other’s company; but they had to stop, for the old man planted himself right in the middle of the narrow track, where it passed between two blocks of stone, and as soon as the cob reached him, it began to sniff at his breast and creel, and stood still. “The wolf and the lamb together,” said the old man drily, and in the most serious manner; “but which is wolf, and which is lamb?” Then, without waiting for a reply, he caught sight of something in the dimming light beneath the trees, and said; “What’s this? Surely, my dear lads, you two have not been fighting? You have—and with swords.”

Mark’s cheeks flushed, and his eyes fell for a moment before the old man’s piercing eyes; but he recovered himself directly, before Ralph could speak, and said:

“Yes, we’ve had a desperate fight coming home. Set upon by about a dozen ruffians, and if it had not been for young Darley here—”

“You did as much as I did, or more,” cried Ralph.

“Oh, never mind who did most. We don’t know. Had enough to do without. But we whipped them, Master Rayburn, and made the beggars run.”

“Where was this?” cried the old man.

“In the vale at the foot of Ergles. They came down from the cave there.”

“Were they a set of disbanded soldiers—those who came up to Cliff Castle, Ralph?”

“Yes, and to the Black Tor, too,” cried Mark.

“I thought as much,” said the old man eagerly. “Then this accounts for the witches seen on the mountain, and the thefts that have taken place.”

“Too late, Master Rayburn,” cried Mark, laughing. “We caught that fish first.—Didn’t we, Darley?”

“Yes; we said that was it,” replied Ralph.

“Then I am too late; and I had made up my mind to go out that way, after I had taken home my fish—after dark—and watch. So you had to run for it?”

“Well, I don’t know about that,” said Mark bluntly. “We retreated at last, when they got too many for us, but we charged six of ’em.—Didn’t we, Darley?”

“Yes; and upset four, and the other two ran,” said Ralph modestly. “But we only had to fight two at a time, and of course that made it even.”

“Very,” said the old man drily; and his eyes sparkled in the gloom at the frank way in which the two deadly enemies were relating their adventures.

“Then some more came down from up above,” continued Mark, “and two more got up again, and the odds seemed to be too great, and we retreated.”

“And very wisely too,” said Master Rayburn. “But let me look at your hurt, Mark, lad.—Tut-tut! soaked with blood.—Wound in the thigh.”

“Ah! Don’t touch it,” shouted the lad. “You hurt.”

“This must be seen to, my dear boy. I’ll come home with you and dress it.”

“Yes do, please. It makes me wriggle like a worm on a hook; but he’s hurt too.”

“Yes, I see. Roughly-bandaged, but, tut-tut-tut—why, the sword thrust has gone through. There is blood on both sides.”

“But it’s only through the skin, I think,” said Ralph.

“Only through the skin, my lad! It must be worse than that. But the other side? You paid them for this, I hope.”

“Oh yes, we gave them as much as we could, but we didn’t kill any one.”

“But we saw them carrying one away,” said Ralph.

“Oh yes: so we did.”

“The villains! And they wounded you both like this.”

Mark glanced at Ralph, and Ralph glanced at him.

“No,” said Ralph quietly; “they did not wound us.”

“Then how came these injuries?” said the old man anxiously.

“Oh, never mind,” cried Mark pettishly; “it doesn’t matter. We got ’em—somehow.”

“How was it, Ralph Darley?” said the old man sternly.

“He overtook me, and we quarrelled, and fought,” said the lad quietly.

“Ah!”

“And just in the middle of it we found that these men had surrounded us.”

“Yes, yes, yes; don’t make such a fuss about it, Master Rayburn,” cried Mark hastily. “And then we had to join and whip the beggars, and we did whip ’em at last; and my leg hurts horribly, and you stand there talking, instead of coming home to doctor it.”

“Yes,” said the old man, looking at the lad curiously, and then at Ralph. “Come along, boy. You, Darley, you had better come up to the Black Tor, and be attended to there.”

“No, thank you, Master Rayburn; I must make haste back. Come and see to my arm when you have done his.”

Ralph turned upon his heel as he spoke, and hurried away through the bushes; while, feeling puzzled, and yet pleased and hopeful, Master Rayburn gave the cob its head, and walked on and up the steep zigzag beside his young friend, carefully avoiding all allusion to the lads’ duel, and discussing the possibility of an expedition to drive the marauders out of their stronghold.

“I’m not a man of war, Mark,” he said; “but I shall have to carry a pike instead of an eel-spear against these villains. We shall none of us be safe.”

“Oh yes, we’ll talk about that to-morrow,” said Mark peevishly. “This hurts horribly. I say, don’t say anything to my father about my fighting alongside that young Darley. I was obliged to, you see.”

“Of course you were, my lad! We must all make common cause against such an enemy. No, I will not say anything unless you wish me to.”

“Thank ye. Father mightn’t like it, you see.”

“But you will tell him?”

“No, I think not—I don’t know—well, there, not to-night. I’m giddy, and feel sick. I didn’t notice it so much when I was hot and all in the fight, but it’s very painful now. Would you mind putting your arm round me? I feel as if I should fall off.”

“My poor brave boy!” said the old man gently, as he supported the wounded lad. “There, only a little farther. Ah! Hoi! Rugg! Dummy Rugg! Here, quick!”

The lad, who was perched upon a block of stone half-way up the zigzag, evidently watching for his young master’s return, sprang down and came running to them.

“What’s the matter?” he cried hoarsely. “Don’t say Master Mark’s hurt!”

“Hush! Quiet, boy!” said Master Rayburn quickly. “Help me to get him into his own room without frightening Miss Mary.”

“Yes; but what’s the matter?” cried the boy.

“Been attacked—fighting—slightly wounded.”

“But who done it?—I know. It was them Darleys. Which of ’em was it?”

“Quiet, I tell you, boy! Can’t you see he has fainted? Why do you want to know?”

“To kill him,” said the lad, through his teeth.

“Humph! you young savage,” muttered Master Rayburn; “then you will not know from me. Lead the pony carefully, Dummy,” he continued aloud. “Where is Sir Edward? where is your young mistress?”

“Out in the garden, waiting for him to come home to supper. Who hurt him?”

“Will you mind the pony’s head, or must I come and lead him?” cried the old man angrily.

“Yes; but I want to help Master Mark,” cried the lad.

“Mind the pony, sir. Ah! here is one of the men. Here, you are stronger than I am. Lift Master Mark up carefully, so as not to jar his leg. Dummy, run in and get a chair.”

This was done, another of the serving men coming out to see what was the matter, and they lifted and bore in the half-fainting lad; while Master Rayburn disencumbered himself of his creel and rod, and prepared to follow, to turn chirurgeon instead of angler, when Dummy caught him by the sleeve.

“You won’t tell me who did it?” he said sharply.

“No: it is no affair of yours, boy,” said the old man; and he shook him off, and entered the gate.

“Yes, it is,” muttered Dummy; and he did what he had never done before —sprang after the old man, entered the hall, and caught him by the sleeve.

“You here, sir!” cried Master Rayburn. “What is it now?”

“Is Master Mark going to die?”

“Yes, when he grows to be an old man. Not now. Go away.”

“Yes, I’ll go away,” muttered Dummy, as he slunk out, and away through the gate. “But I want to know who it was. I know it was one of them Darleys, and I’m going to see; and if it was, I’ll kill him.”

As he spoke, the lad stood for a few moments thinking of what he had better do, and ended by dashing down the steep zigzag path leading to the bottom of the rock, when he made his way through the gap, and began to run at a dog-trot in the direction taken by Ralph a quarter of an hour before.

Ralph, on parting from Mark and Master Rayburn, walked away quite briskly till he was well out of sight, and then he stopped short to lean against a tree and rest for a while, for he felt deadly sick. He laid his left hand upon his sleeve, and felt that it was very wet; but the bandage had stopped the bleeding, though not the pain, which was like the sensation

of a hot iron being plunged into his flesh, accompanied by throbbings which at times seemed too painful to bear.

But after a few minutes' rest he went on again, light in spirit, in spite of the bodily suffering; and the way seemed short when he was walking, for his mind was full of the recollections of the day.

For that day had begun well. The walk had been delightful in the pleasant cool breeze which blew from the hills, and promised a ripple on the water of the open river he was bound to fish, and he had not been deceived. In fact the grayling had risen freely to the natural fly he had softly thrown, and his creel had grown heavier till well on in the afternoon, when he had started back with his load.

Then came the *pad*, *pad* of the pony's hoofs on the soft grass, with an occasional click when the shoe caught upon a stone. Then he was overtaken by Mark, and the encounter followed, one which was more full of pleasure in its memories than pain, and the lad's lips curled in a smile as he went over everything which had passed till they parted.

Somehow these thoughts would be pleasant, although mingled with them came others of their next meeting. Every now and then, though, the lad's progress was hindered by the throbbing of his wound, and the giddy, faint sensation which followed; and twice over, when his forehead turned damp, he threw himself down amongst the ferns to lie for a few minutes on the cool moist earth, with the result each time that the sensation of swimming and sickness passed off.

Then he rose again, and plodded on, getting nearer and nearer to home; but the darkness increased till it became hard work to avoid the stones which lay about, and his way beneath the trees near the river grew solemn and gloomy in the extreme.

Once he started as he was listening to the croaking of the frogs down among the sedges and rushes, for a peculiar hoarse cry arose from close by; but he was country boy enough to know that it was the peculiar sonorous squawk of a heron, evidently a visitor to the river for the sake of the aforesaid frogs.

A little farther on, after one of his rests, just as he was starting again, a

low whoo-whoo-whoo! was uttered close to his ear, and answered from a little farther on, to be apparently echoed again from the trees high up on the side of the cliff.

But after the first startled sensation, he walked on steadily enough, for the cry of the brown owl was quite familiar to him, and he knew that it was only uttered in all probability close to some patch of ivy, where small birds roosted, to startle them out, ready for the sharp dash of their enemy's claw, from whose four-way talon clutch there was no escape.

"How cowardly I am to-night," he said to himself. "Everything sounds different. It's being tired, and feeling the pain of my wound. Soon be home now."

Then he began thinking of his father, and what he would say about the two encounters; and in imagination he saw his stern frowning face.

But he was satisfied that Sir Morton would be glad to hear the news about Captain Purlrose and his men, and he began to think that there would be some talk of attacking the gang of thieves in their lurking-place; for, as Master Rayburn had said, they could not be allowed to harbour there.

Ralph gave quite a jump now, for he heard a sharp rustling sound, followed by the rattle of a little stone, a short distance behind him, and he increased his pace, with his heart beating heavily.

"Just as if some one was following me," he thought, "and stepped upon a stone, and sent it rolling."

But he soon calmed down again, though he did not slacken his pace, keeping on as fast as his weakness and the darkness would allow, with the result that it was not more than half of his ordinary rate.

Again he was startled by a sound behind, this time as if a piece of dead wood had cracked sharply, from the weight of some one following.

This time it was nearer, and succeeded by a rustling, plainly enough caused by some one or something forcing a way through the bushes. Some one or something? The lad felt that it must be something. If it had

been some one, he would have spoken; but what thing could it be?

He was in a dense part of his way now, with the sky quite hidden by the overhanging boughs, so that it was not possible to see more than a few feet behind or before him, and hence he looked back in vain; and though he listened intently there was no heavy snorting breath, such as he would probably have heard if it had been pony or cow.

“It’s some one tracking me,” thought the lad at last, as again he heard, very near him now, the rustle of the leaves and the flying back of twigs.

So impressed was he now, and satisfied that whoever followed might mean him harm, that he essayed to draw his sword as he hurried on; but the sheer agony caused to the stiffened wound made him drop his hand at once, and trust to getting out of the wood to where the ground was more open, and he could reach the cliff, for he felt that now he could not be many hundred yards from the way leading to the step-like path cut in the stone.

Again there was a quick rustle, as if his pursuer had tried to diminish the distance, and a minute later this sounded so near that, convinced of his follower being one of the men who had attacked them that evening, Ralph suddenly faced round—just when the sensation was strong that some one was about to leap upon him and strike him down—and shouted aloud:

“Keep back, whoever you are. I am armed.”

“Ralph! that you?” came from a short distance in his rear.

“Yes, yes, quick!” cried the lad faintly; and he staggered on now, to find himself a minute later in his father’s arms.

“Why, Ralph, boy, what does this mean? I have half-a-dozen men out hunting for you.”

“I’ll—I’ll tell you presently,” panted the lad, who was bathed in sweat. “Draw your sword, and be on your guard. Some one has been following me this last half-hour.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know. Be on your guard.”

“Not fancy, is it, my boy?” said Sir Morton, rather doubtfully.

There was a sharp rustling sound, and a foot kicked a stone, as its owner was evidently retreating fast.

“Humph! Then some one has been following you.—Hallo, there! stop!”

“Hoi! hillo!” came from a distance in answer.

“Quick!” said Sir Morton. “This way, man. Found—found!”

The cliffs echoed the words, and Sir Morton took the lad’s arm and pressed it firmly—fortunately the left.

“I beg your pardon, Ralph. I thought you were scared by the darkness of the wood. Some one was after you; but it would be folly to try and catch him in this gloomy place. Why, what’s the matter, boy? you are reeling about. Feel faint?”

“Yes,” panted the lad heavily. “I have been fighting—wounded. Help me, please.”

Sir Morton Darley passed his arm under his son’s, and helped him quickly along; a whistle brought Nick Garth and another man to his side; and the former carried the lad right up the slope to the entrance of the castle, where a little rest and refreshment recovered the sufferer sufficiently to enable him to relate why he had brought back no fish, a task he had hardly ended, when Master Rayburn entered to dress his second patient’s arm.

“We must put an end to such alarms as this, Master Rayburn,” said Sir Morton angrily.

“Ay; and the sooner the better,” cried that gentleman, as he carefully re-bandaged the lad’s hurt.—“I wonder,” he said to himself, “whether Ralph has told him how he obtained his wound? Is this the beginning of the

end?”

Chapter Fifteen.

What Sir Morton said.

Master Rayburn, the old scholar, angler, and, in a small way, naturalist, had no pretensions to being either physician or surgeon; but there was neither within a day's journey, and in the course of a long career, he had found out that in ordinary cases nature herself is the great curer of ills. He had noticed how animals, if suffering from injuries, would keep the place clean with their tongues, and curl up and rest till the wounds healed; that if they suffered from over-eating they would starve themselves till they grew better; that at certain times of the year they would, if carnivorous creatures, eat grass, or, if herbivorous, find a place where the rock-salt which lay amongst the gypsum was laid bare, and lick it; and that even the birds looked out for lime at egg-laying time to form shell, and swallowed plenty of tiny stones to help their digestion.

He was his own doctor when he was unwell, which, with his healthy, abstemious, open-air life, was not often; and by degrees the people for miles round found out that he made decoctions of herbs—camomile and dandelion, foxglove, rue, and agrimony, which had virtues of their own. He it was who cured Dan Rugg of that affection which made the joints of his toes and fingers grow stiff, by making him sit for an hour a day, holding hands and feet in the warm water which gushed out of one part of the cliff to run into the river, and coated sticks and stones with a hard stony shell, not unlike the fur found in an old tin kettle.

He knew that if a man broke a leg, arm, or rib, and the bones were laid carefully in their places, and bandaged so that they could not move, nature would make bony matter ooze from the broken ends and gradually harden, forming a knob, perhaps, at the joining, but making the place grow up stronger than ever; and it took no great amount of gumption to grasp the fact that what was good for a cut finger was equally good for arm, head, leg, or thigh; that is to say, to wash the bleeding wound clean, lay the cut edges together, and sew and bandage them so that they kept in place. With a healthy person, nature did all the rest, and Master Rayburn laughed good-humouredly to himself as he found that he got all

the credit.

“Nature doesn’t mind,” he used to say to one or other of the lads. “There’s no vanity there, my boys; but I’m not half so clever as they think.”

But let that be as it may, Master Rayburn mended Dummy Rugg when he fell from top to bottom of the steep slope leading down into the lead-mine, getting thereby very much broken, the worst injury being a crack in his skull. He “cobbled up,” as he called it, a number of other injuries which happened to the men by pieces of rock falling upon them, slips of the steel picks, chops from axes, and cuts from scythes and reaping-hooks, the misfortunes of the men who toiled in the woods and fields.

If a regular physician or surgeon had come there, the people would have laughed at him, so great was their faith in Master Rayburn, who did his best for the people, and never asked for payment. In fact, his patients never thought of offering it to him in money, but they were not ungrateful, all the same. Indeed, he used to protest against the numbers of presents he was always receiving, the women bringing him pats of butter, little mugs of cream, and the best of their apples and potatoes; and their husbands never killed a pig without taking something to Master Rayburn for the kind actions which he had performed.

It fell out then, as quite a matter of course, that he went on treating Ralph Darley for the little hole in his arm, beneath the shoulder joint, and that he also dressed and bandaged Mark Eden’s thigh, so that the injuries went on healing rapidly.

It was known, too, at the Cliff Castle and the Black Tor that he was treating both, but the Edens never mentioned the Darleys, nor the Darleys the Edens, the amateur surgeon saying nothing at either place; and the wounds got better day by day.

“I wish I could heal the old sore as easily,” the old man said to himself; “but that wants a bigger doctor than I.”

Master Rayburn believed in the old saw, that a still tongue maketh a wise head, and he waited.

But in the meantime Ralph had told his father everything about his encounter, and waited afterwards to hear what his father said. In due time he did say something, but it was not to the effect that Mark Eden had behaved very gallantly in helping his son, and *vice versa*, that his son had shown a fine spirit in forgetting family enmity, and fighting against a common enemy. He only frowned, and said, “Humph!”

He said something more, though upon another occasion, when, in obedience to Master Rayburn’s orders, Ralph was keeping quiet at home, and sitting in his father’s room, reading, and thinking about Mark Eden, determining, too, that he would ask Master Rayburn how the lad was the next time he came, for though family pride and old teachings had kept him quiet, he had hoped that his doctor would volunteer the information which had not come.

Sir Morton was poring over an old tome which dealt with alchemy and the transmutation of metals, in which the learned writer gravely gave his opinion about baser metals being turned into gold, all of which Sir Morton Darley thought would be very satisfactory, as he could not succeed in finding a profitable lead-mine on his estate, and had not been any more successful than his forefathers in taking possession of that belonging to the Edens.

He had just come to the way of thinking that he would begin to buy ordinary lead and turn it into gold, when Ralph said suddenly:

“I say, father, why do we want to be at enmity with the Edens?”

Sir Morton looked up at his son, and then down at his book, as if expecting to find an answer to the question there. Then he coughed to clear his voice, cleared it, and coughed again, which was perfectly unnecessary. But still the answer did not come. Finally, he replied:

“Well, you see, my boy, we always have been at enmity with them.”

“Yes, I know, ever since my great, great, ever so great, grandfather’s time.”

“Exactly Ralph. That’s it, my boy.”

“But what was the beginning of it?”

“The beginning of it—er—the—er—commencement of it—er—the family feud. Well—er—it was something in the way of oppression, as I have told you before. A great injury inflicted by the Edens upon the Darleys. But it will not do your arm any good to be fidgeting about that. I want it to heal. That can be healed; but our family feud never can.”

“Why not, father?”

“Why not? Oh, because it is contrary to nature, boy. What a question, when you are suffering now from the way in which the deadly hatred of the Edens comes out! Are you not wounded by a scion of the vile house?”

“Yes, father; but then young Eden is suffering too in the same way, and I think he got the worst of it.”

“I’m glad of it, Ralph. I think you behaved very bravely.”

“What; in fighting the robbers?”

“I did not mean that. I meant in defending yourself,” said Sir Morton austerely. “There, that will do: I want to go on studying this book.”

But Ralph was fidgety from the state of his wound, and went on again.

“Couldn’t the old trouble be settled by law?”

“Pooh, boy! As I have told you before, the law does not reach here among these mountainous wilds. I am the law here. I could settle the matter; but that man Eden would never agree to what I said.”

“And I suppose, father, that you would never agree to what he considered was the proper law.”

“Certainly not, Ralph,” said Sir Morton impatiently. “But why are you going on like this?”

“Because I was thinking again how easy it would be if you and Sir

Edward Eden were to join and attack that Captain Purlrose and his men. You would be able to drive the gang out of the neighbourhood."

"I shall be able to drive this fellow out of the district, my boy, without the help of the Edens, who ought to be driven out too, for they are very little better than Captain Purlrose and his men. Stop, sir; what are you going to do?"

"Go out, father. It's so dull sitting here."

"You had better stay in: the sun is hot, and you have been rather feverish. I want you to grow quite well."

"So do I, father," said the lad, smiling.

"Then do what Master Rayburn advised you. Keep perfectly quiet."

"But it is such weary work doing nothing, father. I'm sure I should get better if I were out in the fresh air. Ah, there is Minnie;" for just then his sister came to the open window, and looked in.

"Why don't you come out and sit in the shade here, Ralph?" she said. "Come and read with me."

Ralph glanced at his father, who shrugged his shoulders and nodded, as much as to say, "Well, be off;" and the lad went out into the castle-yard, and then on to the little terrace where the new basin and fountain were looking bright and attractive, though still wanting in the fish Ralph was to have procured.

Brother and sister sat down in a shady nook, and watched the glint of the river through the trees far below, looked over the lovely prospect of hill and dale; and finally Minnie's eyes rested upon the shoulder of the great shaley hill at whose foot the encounter with the disbanded soldiers had taken place.

"When is father going to lead the men to drive out those dreadful people?" said the girl at last.

"I don't know: soon, I hope. When I'm better."

“Well, you are better, Ralph.”

“That’s what I told father. Only a bit sore. I’m sick of being coddled up.”

“That’s because you are a boy. You are never happy unless you are in the open-air.”

“You would not be, if you were a boy,” said Ralph sharply.

“Well, I don’t know that I am, even as a girl. It’s dreadful. You know, father has given orders that I am not to go outside the walls. No walks, no rides; and my poor pony looked so reproachfully at me. Wants to go out as badly as I do. Don’t you think it’s being too particular?”

“Well, no, Min,” said Ralph thoughtfully. “While those men are about, I don’t think you ought to go out alone.”

“Now, Ralph,” said the girl, pouting, “you’re as bad as father. I declare you are not a bit like a nice, brave, merry boy now. You used to be; but ever since you’ve been at that great school you have been growing more and more serious, till you are getting to be quite an old man.”

“And quite grey,” said Ralph drily.

“It only wants that,” said the girl, with a merry laugh. “I declare that old Master Rayburn has more fun in him than you.”

“Wouldn’t say so if you had been wounded, and had him to pull the bandages about.”

“What nonsense! he said I was to come and see him as soon as ever I could.”

“And you can’t go and see him. He wouldn’t advise you to go out while those ruffians are yonder.”

“No,” replied the girl, smiling frankly. “He said I must wait till the wasps’ nest had been burned out, and I suppose he meant the cave where those men are. Oh, I wish I were a man, and could go and fight the wretches. They’ve been robbing and frightening people in all directions. They even

went last night and frightened old Mistress Garth, Nick's mother, and took away her bag of meal."

"They did that!" cried Ralph angrily. "How do you know?"

"Nick told me, and he says he means to kill the captain first time they meet."

"Nick says so?"

"Yes; but I suppose it's only boasting. I don't think he's very brave, is he?"

"Don't know," said Ralph thoughtfully. "But it's quite time something was done."

"And it was so funny, Ralph," continued the girl; "he actually said to me that he didn't care a bit for his mother, for she has the worst temper of any one he knows, and is always scolding when he goes to see her; but he won't have any one interfere with her, and he'll kill that captain for stealing the meal-bag as sure as he's alive."

"Well, it shows he's a good son," said Ralph quietly. "But you see that it is not safe for you to go out."

"Yes," said Minnie with a sigh; "but it seems very silly. The other day one was obliged to stop in because of the Edens; now it's because of those men."

"I suppose it's as bad for the Edens as it is for us," replied Ralph, who became now very thoughtful; and when, soon afterwards, Minnie looked up to see why he did not speak, she found that his head was resting against the stone, beside a crenelle, and that he was fast asleep.

"Poor boy!" she said softly, "he is weak yet, and soon worn-out. It was very brave of him to fight as he did—with Mark Eden, I mean—against the men who attacked them, and for both to be wounded. I wonder what Mark Eden is like. Ralph has met him three times, he says, but he only growls if I begin to ask him questions. What a pity it is, when we might all be so friendly and nice. How stupid it does seem of people to quarrel!"

Chapter Sixteen.

How Mark's Sister lost her Whip.

Fate seemed to be determined that the young people of the rival families should become intimate, in spite of all the stringent rules laid down by the heads; for Ralph was out one day, making a round, when it occurred to him that he would call upon Master Rayburn, to let him see how well the wound was healing up, and to say a few words of thanks to the old man for his kindness and attention.

He found the object of his visit seated in a kind of grotto, shaded by a great sycamore, with his doublet off, hat on the floor, and beautifully white sleeves rolled up, busily at work, tying up some peculiar little combinations of wool, hair, and feathers, to the back of a hook; and as the lad approached, he held up the curious object by the piece of horsehair to which it was tied.

"Well, patient," he said, "what do you think of that?"

"Nothing at all," cried the lad. "No fish would ever take that. What do you call it?"

"A bumble-bee, and the fish will take it, Mr Cleversides; but not if they see a big lubberly boy staring at them with his arm in a sling, or an old grey-headed man, either, Ralph. There, don't frown. It's very nice to be a big lubberly boy; much better than being a worn-out old man, with not much longer to live. Ah, you laugh at my bumble-bee, and it certainly is not like one, but the best I can do, and I find it a great bait for a chevin, if used with guile. Take these two, Ralph, boy, and early some sunny morning go down behind the trees, where they overhang the stream, and don't show so much as your nose, let alone your shadow, for it would send them flying. Then gently throw your fly."

(Note: a chevin is a chub.)

"How can you," said Ralph quickly, "with the boughs overhanging the water?"

“Good, lad! what I expected you to say; but there is where the guile comes in. I don’t want you to throw your fly into the water, but to let it drop on the leaves just above it, a few inches or a foot, and then shake the line tenderly, till the bee softly rolls off, and drops naturally from a leaf, hardly making a splash. Then you’ll find that there will be a dimple on the water, the smacking of two lips, and the chevin will have taken the bait. Then it is your fault if it is not laid in your creel.”

“Thank you, Master Rayburn; I’ll try. I haven’t had a fish since I was wounded.”

“No: it would have been bad work if you had gone whipping about, and irritating the two little holes in your arm. Well, how is it?”

“Oh, quite well now,” said the lad, as he carefully hooked the bees in his cap, and twisted the hair to which they were attached under the band; “and I’ve come to say how thankful I am for all you have done for me, and —”

“That’s enough, my dear boy,” cried the old man warmly; “look the rest. And now about those wild men of the mountains; have you heard how they are going on?”

“A little; not much.”

“Ah, you don’t know, or you would not talk about a little. Why, Ralph, boy, the country round is full of complaints of their doings. About a dozen great idle scoundrels are living up at Ergles in that cave, laying the people for miles round under contribution; picking the fat of the land, and committing outrage after outrage. Only during the past week, I’ve had to bind up two broken heads, and strap up a broken shoulder, where the poor fellows had made a brave fight for it—one man against seven or eight.”

“You don’t mean that!” cried Ralph flushing.

“But I do, boy. They are growing worse and worse, and making themselves a scourge to the country.”

“I did not know it was so bad.”

“No, I suppose not, sir; and here are you people living safely in your castles, with plenty of stout men about you, ready to arm and defend you behind your walls and gates. But if the scoundrels came and robbed you, perhaps you would do something. Don’t you think you ought to begin?”

“Yes, that I do,” cried Ralph quickly. “My father has been talking about it for some time.”

“Yes; and so has Sir Edward Eden been talking about it for some time; but neither of them does anything, and the wasps’ nest thrives; all the best things in the country are carried up there—the wasps robbing the bees; and I, though I am a man of peace, say that it is the duty of you gentlemen to burn that wasps’ nest out before anything worse is done, for the ruffians grow more bold and daring every day, feeling, I suppose, that they can do these things with impunity.”

“Father shall do something at once,” cried the lad.

“That’s right,” cried the old man, patting his late patient on the shoulder. “I don’t want blood shed, and I hardly think any of your people would come to much harm, for, like most scoundrels of their kind, I believe the enemy would prove miserable cowards.”

“They have proved to be so,” cried Ralph warmly. “Father must act now.”

“I’ll tell you what he ought to do, boy,” said the old man, grasping his visitor by the arm. “Of course he need not make friends, but he ought to go or send to the Black Tor, and ask Sir Edward to head so many men, your father doing the same; and then they could march together, and rout out the scoundrels.”

“Yes, it would be easy enough then,” said Ralph sadly; “but I know my father too well: he would not do that.”

“No,” said the old man, “he would not do that.”

The tone in which this was said roused the lad’s indignation.

“Well,” he said hotly, “do you think this Sir Edward Eden would come and ask my father to join him?”

“No, boy, I do not,” replied the old man, “for I said something of this kind to Mark Eden only yesterday, when I was fishing up that way, and he spoke just in the same way as you do.”

“You saw him yesterday?” said Ralph eagerly. “How is he?”

“What’s that to do with you?” said the old man rather roughly. “You don’t want to know how your enemy is. But all the same, his leg is nearly well. He limps a little: that is all. Going?”

“Yes,” said Ralph hurriedly; “I must be off now. I am going on about a mile, and coming back this way. Perhaps I shall see you then.”

“Going about a mile? Not going to see old Mother Garth?”

“Yes: to take her a present from my sister. Nick told her about his mother being robbed.”

“And your sister wants to make it up to her. Poor old woman! she is in great trouble, but she will not hear of leaving her cottage up there on the moor; and she says that next time the men come to rob her, they’ll find she has two pots of boiling water ready for them.”

Ralph laughed, and went off, crossed the river at the shallows, and climbed the ascent to where the old woman lived in her rough stone cot, in its patch of garden; and as soon as he had given his present, with an addition from his own purse, and the fierce old lady had secured it in her pocket, she turned upon him angrily, upbraiding him and his for allowing such outrages to be committed.

“But there,” she cried, when quite out of breath, “it’s of no use to speak: there are no men now, and no boys. When I was young, they’d have routed out those wretches and hung them before they knew where they were. But only let them come here again, and they shall know what boiling water is.”

“They’ll be well punished before long,” said Ralph, as soon as he could get in a word.

“I don’t believe it,” cried the old woman. “Don’t tell me! I want to know

what my boy, Nick, is about for not making his master do something. It's shameful. But I see how it is: I shall have to go and do it myself."

Ralph was not sorry to get away from the ungracious old dame, who stood at her door, shouting messages to his father about his duty and her intentions, till the lad was out of sight, when he could not help seeing the comic side of the matter, and wondered, laughingly, what his father would say to her if she kept her word, and came up to the castle to ask him why he and her son, Nick, did not go and punish those wicked men for coming and stealing her bag of meal.

"I should like to be there," said Ralph, half-aloud, as he tramped on: and then his thoughts took a serious turn again, and he began to ponder upon the possibilities of his father and their men attacking Captain Purlrose, and the chances of success.

"It ought to be done," thought Ralph, as he began to climb the path leading to the shelf upon which Master Rayburn's cottage was built, half-a-mile farther on, "so as to take them by surprise when part of the men are away. It can hardly be called cowardly with men like them. Then we could hide in the cavern, and wait till the rest came back, and take them prisoners too. What's that?"

He listened, and made out the sound of a horse galloping, wondering the while who it could be. Then his interest increased, for the track was narrow and stony, and ran along like a shelf beside the cliff, with a steep descent to the river—altogether about as dangerous a place for a canter as any one could choose. But he recalled immediately how sure-footed the ponies of the district were, and thought no more of it for a few moments. Then his face flushed as he remembered how Mark Eden had galloped after him. Would it be he, and if so, now they were going to meet again, would it be upon inimical terms, and with drawn swords?

His heart began to beat faster, and the next minute it was beating faster still, for he caught sight, at a curve of the track, of the pony and its burden, not Mark Eden, but a lady; and then his heart seemed to stand still in his horror at seeing that she had lost control of the spirited little animal, which was tearing along as hard as he could go.

The next minute it was nearly abreast of Ralph, who, without thinking of the consequences of such an act, leaped at the rein, caught it, and was dragged along some twenty yards, before, snorting and trembling, the little animal, which he knew as Mark Eden's, stopped short, and began to rear.

"Quick!" shouted the lad. "I can't hold him: try and slip off."

His words were heard by the frightened rider, but there was little need to tell her to slip off, for the pony reared again, nearly upright, the rider glided from the saddle over the animal's haunches, and fell amongst the bushes by the track, while Ralph was dragged onward again.

It all occurred in a few moments, the pony stopped, reared again, made another bound, dropped off the track, and, as Ralph loosed his hold, rolled over and over down the steep slope right into the river with a tremendous splash, which cooled it on the instant; and it regained its feet, scrambled actively ashore, gave itself a shake, and then began to graze, as if nothing was the matter.

"Mark Eden's sister," thought Ralph, as he hurriedly climbed back to the track, where, looking wild and scared, Mary Eden had just regained her feet, and was standing trembling.

"Are you hurt?" he cried aloud.

"Yes, dreadfully. No: I don't think so. Only scratched," she replied, half-crying. "I couldn't stop him. He hasn't been out lately. He ran away with me. What shall I do?" she sobbed now. "Mark will be so angry. Is his pony much hurt?"

"Oh, never mind the pony," cried Ralph, taking her hand. "Here, let me help you to Master Rayburn's."

"But I do mind about the pony," cried the girl angrily. "It doesn't matter about me. Do you think he has broken his knees, or his legs?"

"It does not seem like it," said Ralph, smiling. "Look, he is browsing on the thick grass down there."

“Is—is my face much scratched?”

“Hardly at all,” said Ralph.

“Then thank you so for stopping him; I was so frightened. Ah, look! there’s Master Rayburn.”

She clapped her hands with delight, as she caught sight of the old man, hatless, and with his white hair flying, running down the path. Then turning, back to Ralph, she said, naïvely:

“Please, who are you? Oh, I know now. I haven’t seen you for two years, and—”

She shrank away from him in a peculiarly cold and distant manner, and at that moment Master Rayburn panted up.

“Much hurt, my dear?” he cried excitedly, as he caught the girl in his arms.

“No, no, I think not,” she said, beginning to sob anew.

“Thank God! thank God!” cried the old man fervently.—“Hah! My heart was in my mouth. Why can’t people be content to walk? Come back home with me, my child. Here, Ralph Darley, how was it? Did you stop the brute?”

“I tried to,” said the lad quietly, “but I couldn’t hold him long.”

“Long enough to save her, my lad,” cried the old man, looking from one to the other in a peculiar way.—“How strange—how strange!” he muttered.

Then aloud, in an abrupt way:

“There, never mind the pony. You be off home, sir. I’ll take care of this lady.”

Ralph coloured a little, and glanced at the girl, and as she met his eyes, she drew herself up stiffly.

“Yes, sir,” she said, “Master Rayburn will take care of me. Thank you for stopping my pony.”

She bowed now, in the stately way of the period, clung closely to the old man, turning her back upon her rescuer, who unnecessarily bowed, and walked on up the steep path, wondering that the pony had not come down headlong before.

Then he felt disposed to look back, but his angry indignation forbade that, and he hurried on as fast as he could on his way home, passing Master Rayburn’s cottage, and then, a hundred yards farther on, coming suddenly upon a riding-whip, which had evidently been dropped. The lad leaped at it to pick it up, but checked himself, and gave it a kick which sent it off the path down the slope toward the river.

“I’m not going to pick up an Eden’s whip,” he said proudly. “Just like her brother,” he muttered, as he went on faster and faster, to avoid the temptation of running back to pick it up. “They are a proud, evil race,” as father said. “What did I want to interfere for, and stop the pony? It was looked upon as an insult, I suppose. I don’t like the Edens, and I never shall.”

Ralph’s adventures for that day were not ended. A quarter of a mile farther on he heard footsteps in front. Some one was running, and at a turn of the track a lad came into sight, whom he recognised as Dummy Rugg, one of the mine lads. The pair came closer quickly, and Ralph saw that he was recognised, and that the boy was scowling at him, passing him with rather an evil look, but stopping the next minute, and running back after him. As soon as he heard the steps returning, Ralph faced round, his left hand seeking the sheath of his sword, to bring it round in case he should want to draw. But the next minute he saw that the lad had no evil intent.

“Look here,” cried Dummy, “did you see a young lady on a pony?”

“Yes.”

“Was it going fast?”

“As fast as it could go,” said Ralph haughtily.

“Not running away wi’ her?”

“Yes,” said Ralph, rather enjoying the boy’s anxiety, in his ruffled state.

“I knowed it would: I knowed it would!” cried the boy wildly; “and she would have it out. Here! gone right on?”

“Yes.”

“Ah! And you never tried to stop it. Oh, wait till I see you again!”

Ralph did not feel in the humour to stop and explain to one who had threatened him so offensively, and he would have felt less so still if he had known that Dummy Rugg had followed him that night through the dark woods, till he met his father.

“Let him find out for himself,” he muttered. “I have nothing to do with the Edens, and we can none of us ever be friends.”

Chapter Seventeen.

Dummy turns Stunt.

Dummy Rugg caught the pony, after seeing that his young mistress was unhurt at Master Rayburn’s cottage; and, perfectly calm now, the girl insisted upon remounting, the old man opposing her, until Dummy gave him a curious look or two, and a nod of the head.

“And there is no need whatever for you to go up home with me, Master Rayburn,” she said. “It is all uphill now, and the pony will not run away again.”

“Very well, Mistress Obstinacy,” said the old man, smiling and patting her cheek, before helping her on the pony; “but I feel as if I ought to see you home safely.”

“There is no need, indeed,” cried the girl. “Goodbye, and thank you. I’m afraid I frightened you.”

“You did, my child, terribly. More than you frightened yourself. I was afraid that the little girl who used to ask for rides on *my* foot would be killed.”

“But it was only a gallop, Master Rayburn,” said the girl, leaning forward to receive the old man’s kiss. “Please, if you see Mark, don’t say anything about it, or he will not lend me his pony again.—Now Dummy, let go the rein.”

“Come on!” growled the lad, leading the frisky little animal, and Master Rayburn chuckled a little, for the boy bent his head, rounded his shoulders, and paid not the slightest heed to the order he had received.

“Do you hear, Dummy? Let go.”

Dummy let go of the rein by passing his arm through, and thrust his hand into his pocket.

“Do you hear me, sir?” cried the girl imperiously. “Let go of that rein directly.”

“Have let go,” grumbled the boy.

“Go away from his head, and walk behind.”

“Run away agen if I do,” said Dummy.

“He will not,” cried the girl angrily. “I shall hold him in more tightly.”

“Haven’t got strength enough.”

“I have, sir. How dare you! Let go.”

“Nay: Master Mark would hit me if I did, and Sir Edward’d half-kill me.”

“What nonsense, sir! Let go directly.”

Dummy shook his big head, and trudged on by the pony.

“Oh!” cried the girl, with the tears of vexation rising in her eyes. “I will not be led, as if I were a little child. Go behind, sir, directly.”

“Nay,” growled Dummy.

“Let go, sir, or I’ll beat you with the whip.—Ah! where is it?”

“Beat away,” said Dummy.

“I really will, sir, if you don’t let go.”

Dummy laughed softly, and Mary Eden could not see his face, but she saw his shoulders shaking; and in her anger she leaned forward and tried to drag the rein from the lad’s arm.

“You’ll have him off the path agen if you don’t mind, Mistress Mary.”

“Where is my whip? I’ve lost my whip,” cried the girl.

“Good job—for me,” said the boy, with a little laugh.

“If you don’t let go of that rein, directly, sir, I’ll make my brother beat you,” cried Mary angrily.

“You won’t tell him he ran away,” said the boy, without turning his head.

“Then my father shall, sirrah!”

“Won’t tell him neither, mistress.”

“Then I’ll tell him you were rude and impertinent to me, sirrah, and he’ll have you horsewhipped for that.”

“Master Mark’s sister couldn’t tell a lie with her pretty little lips,” said the boy quietly, and never once looking round. “Pony’s too fresh, and I won’t see my young mistress get into trouble again—so there!”

Mary Eden flushed with annoyance, and tried to stamp her foot, but only shook the stirrup, and sat still for a few moments, before trying cajolery.

“The pony’s quite quiet now, Dummy,” she said gently. “Let him have his head again—there’s a good boy.”

Dummy shook his own, and Mary bit her red lip, and made it scarlet.

“But I shouldn’t like to be seen led up home like this, Dummy,” she said softly. “It looks as if I can’t ride.”

“Every one knows you can ride beautiful, mistress.”

“But please let go now.”

“Nay: won’t.”

“I’ll give you some money, Dummy.”

“Wouldn’t for two donkey panniers full o’ gold—there!” cried the lad. “Come on.”

This to the pony, and then the boy checked the cob.

“That your whip, mistress?” he said, turning and wagging his head sidewise towards where, half-a-dozen yards down the steep slope, the whip lay, where Ralph had kicked it on to a clump of brambles.

“Yes, yes; get it for me, please,” cried the girl eagerly.

Dummy drew his arm from the pony’s rein, leaped off the shelf path, and lowered himself step by step toward the whip; and the girl, after waiting a few seconds, with her eyes flashing with satisfaction, shook the rein, kicked at her steed’s ribs, and did all she could to urge it forward.

“Go on—go on!” she whispered sharply. Then, as this was of no avail, she began to saw the bit to and fro in its mouth, but only made the animal swing its head from side to side in response to each drag, keeping all four legs planted out firmly like a mule’s, and obstinately refusing to move.

“Oh, you wicked wretch!” cried the girl angrily; “go on—go on!”

At the first efforts she made to force the pony on and leave him behind, Dummy turned sharply, and made a bound to catch at the rein; but as soon as he grasped the stubborn creature’s mood—knowing its nature by heart—he chuckled softly, and went on down to where the whip lay, recovered it as deliberately as he could, and began to climb the slope

again.

“It aren’t no good, Miss Mary,” he said; “he won’t go till I get back to his head.”

“Go on—go on, sir!” cried the girl angrily, as she saw her last chance of escape dying away; and then, hardly able to restrain the tears of vexation, for Dummy climbed back on to the track, went to his old place by the pony’s head, and handed her the whip.

Mary snatched it in an instant, and struck the pony a sharp blow, which, instead of making it leap forward, had the opposite effect; for it backed, and but for Dummy seizing the rein once more, its hind-legs would have gone over the edge.

“Look at that, mistress,” said the boy quietly; “see what you nearly did;” and, slipping his arm through once more, he walked on, cheek by jowl with the pony, which seemed on the most friendly terms with him, swinging its nose round and making little playful bites at his stout doublet.

“Now, sir,” cried Mary angrily, “I have my whip, and if you do not leave the pony’s head directly, and come round to the back, I’ll beat you.”

“Nay, not you,” said the boy, without looking round. “Why, if I did, the pony would only turn about and follow me.”

“He would not.”

“There, then, see,” said the boy; and slipping out his arm, he turned and walked back, the pony pivoting round directly. “Told you so,” said Dummy, and he resumed his old place, with his arm through the rein.

“You told him to turn round, sir.”

“Nay, never spoke to him, Miss Mary.—There, it aren’t no good to be cross with me; I shan’t leave you till you’re safe home.”

The girl, flushed with passion, leaned forward, and struck the lad sharply over the shoulders three times.

“There, sir,” she cried; “what do you say to that?”

“Thank ye,” replied the boy coolly. “Frighten away the flies.”

Whish-whish-whish, came the whip through the air.

“Now then,” cried Mary; “what do you say now?”

“Hit harder, mistress,” said the boy, with a chuckle; “that only tickles.”

“Oh!” cried Mary, in a burst of passion. “I did like you, Dummy, but you’re a nasty, ugly old thing;” and she subsided in her saddle, sobbing with vexation, while Dummy rounded his shoulders a little more, and plodded on in silence, with the pony’s shoes tapping the stony path, as it playfully kept on making little bites at different parts of the boy’s clothes.

“’Taren’t no use to be cross with me, mistress,” said the boy at last. “Can’t help it. You don’t know, and I do. S’pose he runs off again, and Master Mark says to me, ‘Why didn’t you lead her home?’ what am I to say?”

Mary sat gazing straight before her, and had to ride ignominiously back to the zigzags leading up to the top of the Black Tor, where she dismounted, and Dummy led the pony to its underground stable.

“I shan’t tell Master Mark,” said the boy to the pony, as he took off bridle and saddle; “and you can’t, Ugly; and she won’t neither, so nobody’ll never know.”

Chapter Eighteen.

Master Rayburn advises.

Captain Purlrose and his merry men had found a place just to their liking, where they lived like pigs in a hole of the earth, and as voraciously. He chuckled and crowed as they ate and drank, and waited till their stock of provisions began to grow low, and then started off upon a fresh expedition, to gather tribute, as he called it. He did not expose himself to any risks, but kept his ascendancy over his men by sheer cunning and

ability in making his plans, leading them to where they could come quite unexpectedly upon some lonely cottage or farmhouse, ill-use and frighten the occupants nearly to death, adding insult to injury by loading the spoil of provisions, or whatever it pleased them to take, on the farmer's horses, leading them away, and after unloading them at the cave, setting them adrift.

The captain laughed at all threats, for he felt that no one would dare to follow him to his stronghold; and if an attack were made, he knew that he could easily beat it off. The only two people near who were at all likely to trouble him were his old captain, Sir Morton Darley, and Sir Edward Eden.

"And they'll talk about it, and and threats, and never come."

He seemed to be right, for as report after report of raids being made, here and there in the neighbourhood of the two strongholds reached their owners, Sir Morton Darley would vow vengeance against the marauders, and then go back to his books; and Sir Edward Eden would utter a vow that he would hang Captain Purlrose from the machicolations over the gateway at the Black Tor, and then he would go into his mining accounts, and hear the reports of his foreman, Dan Rugg, about how many pigs there were in the sty—that is to say, pigs of lead in the stone crypt-like place where they were stored.

And so time went on, both knights having to listen to a good many upbraidings from Master Rayburn, who visited and scolded them well for not combining and routing out the gang from their hole.

"I wish you would not worry me, Rayburn," said Sir Morton one day, in Ralph's presence. "I don't want to engage upon an expedition which must end in bloodshed. I want to be at peace, with my books."

"But don't you see that bloodshed is going on, and that these ruffians are making the place a desert?"

"Yes," said Sir Morton, "it is very tiresome. I almost wish I had taken them into my service."

"And made matters worse, for they would not have rested till you had

made war upon the Edens."

"Yes," said Sir Morton, "I suppose it would have been so."

"Why not get the men quietly together some night, father, and if I went round, I'm sure I could collect a dozen who would come and help—men whose places have been robbed."

"That's right, Ralph; there are people as much as twenty miles away—twelve men? Five-and-twenty, I'll be bound."

"Well, I'll think about it," said Sir Morton; and when Master Rayburn walked home that day, Ralph bore him company part of the way, and chatted the matter over with him.

"I'm getting ashamed of your father, Ralph, lad. He has plenty of weapons of war, and he could arm a strong party, and yet he does nothing."

"I wish he would," said the lad. "I don't like the idea of fighting, but I should like to see those rascals taken."

"But you will not until your father is stirred up by their coming and making an attack upon your place."

"Oh, they would not dare to do that," cried Ralph.

"What! why, they are growing more daring day by day; and mark my words, sooner or later they'll make a dash at the Castle, and plunder the place."

"Oh!" ejaculated Ralph, as he thought of his sister.

"I wish they would," cried the old man angrily, "for I am sick of seeing such a state of things in our beautiful vales. No one is safe. It was bad enough before, with the petty contemptible jealousies of your two families, and the fightings between your men. But that was peace compared to what is going on now."

"Don't talk like that, Master Rayburn," said Ralph warmly. "I don't like you

to allude to my father as you do."

"I must speak the truth, boy," said the old man. "You feel it now; but some day, when you are a man grown, and your old friend has gone to sleep, and is lying under the flowers and herbs and trees that he loved in life, you will often think of his words, and that he was right."

Ralph was silent.

"I am not a man of war, my boy, but a man of peace. All the same, though, whenever either your father or young Mark Eden's arms his men to drive these ruffians out of our land, I am going to gird on my old sword, which is as bright and sharp as ever, to strike a blow for the women and children. Yes, for pretty Minnie Darley, and Mary Eden too. For I love 'em both, boy, and have ever since they were bairns."

Ralph went back home to Cliff Castle, thinking very deeply about the old man's words, and wishing—and planning in a vague way—that he and Mark Eden could be friendly enough to act in some way together without the help or knowledge of their fathers, and make an attack upon these men, so as to put an end to a state of things which kept all women-kind prisoners in their homes, and the men in a state of suspense as to when next they should be attacked and plundered of all they had.

It was only natural that Master Rayburn should talk in an almost similar way to Mark Eden and his father, but only for Sir Edward to promise and not perform. And one day the old man actually took Ralph's idea, and said suddenly to Mark:

"Look here, young fellow, why don't you take the bit in your teeth, collect your men quietly, get Ralph Darley to do the same, and you boys go together and thrash those ruffians out, kill them, or take them prisoners. Old as I am, I'll come and help."

"Yes, why not?" cried Mark eagerly. "No," he said directly; "the Darleys would not and could not join us even if I were willing; and I'm not."

Old Master Rayburn's words went deeper into the breasts of the two lads than they knew. Their natures were in those early days rather like tinder, and in his angry flint and steely way, the old man had struck a spark into

each, which lay there latent, waiting to be blown into a hot glow; and who should perform that office but Captain Purlrose himself?

It was in this way. One bright morning, Sir Edward was examining a young partly-broken horse that had been reared in the pastures across the river, and expressed himself delighted with its appearance.

“What do you say to it, Mark?” he cried. “Not strong enough to carry me, but I should think it would suit Mary exactly.”

“Couldn’t be better, father,” said the lad, though he felt a little disappointed, for he half expected that his father would have given it to him.

“Call her, then, and she shall try it. And by the way, Mark, there is that other—that chestnut—which will do for you.”

The lad flushed with pleasure, for he had fully believed that his father intended the handsome, strongly made chestnut for his own use. Mary Eden was fetched, came out, and tried the gentle, slightly-built palfrey, and the chestnut was brought too, proving everything that could be desired.

“There!” said Sir Edward, after their paces had been tried in one of the meadows; “now you are both better mounted than any young people in the Midlands, so go and have a good round together, and get back well before dark. Don’t distress the horses, and go right away, and make a round to the west, so as not to go near Ergles. Not that the scoundrels would dare to attack you.”

Ten minutes after, brother and sister were riding slowly along the track on the other side of the river, Mary enjoying the change after being shut up for some weeks; and in consequence, the round was extended to a greater distance than the pair had intended. It was getting toward dark, and they were approaching one of the narrow ravines through which the river ran, one which hardly gave room for the horse track as well, when Mary said merrily:

“You must take the blame, Mark, for we shall not be home by dusk.”

“Oh yes, we shall,” he replied. “Once we are through these rocks, we’ll cut right across country, and—who are those people in front?”

“Carriers, with pack horses and donkeys,” said his sister; “and they have heavy loads too.”

Mark looked long and hard at the party, which was partly hidden by the trees, and then agreed with his sister.

“Yes,” he said; “the horses are loaded with sacks of corn seemingly.”

The people with their stores of provender were some distance ahead, and Mark thought no more of them, for, soon after, his attention was taken up by a group of men behind them a few hundred yards, walking, and coming on hurriedly, as if to overtake them.

“Let’s ride on faster, Mary,” he said rather quickly.

“Why? What is the matter?”

“Nothing now; only I don’t quite like the look of the men behind.”

“Not robbers, are they?”

“Oh no, I think not; only we hear so much about Captain Purlrose’s men, it sets one thinking that every man one sees is a marauder. But it would not matter if they were; we could soon leave them behind.”

They rode on, entering the straits, as the place was called from the river contracting, as it did in several other places, and running between two upright walls of rock. The men were some distance behind, and they had ceased to trouble about them, when, to Mark’s consternation, on passing round one of the curves in the track, he found that there in front the narrowest part was blocked by the horses with their loads; and a something in the aspect of the party of men in charge of the laden beasts slightly startled him, for he thought them suspiciously like some of Purlrose’s followers.

The next minute he was awake to the fact that they were in danger, for from behind a block of stone a slight figure, whose hands were bound

with cords, and who made Mark stare, suddenly started to his side, shouting:

“Ride for it! ride! You are in a trap.”

There was no time for hesitation. Two men dashed after the prisoner they had made, and in another instant they would have had him, but for Mark’s quick movement. He caught his sister’s rein, touched his horse’s side with the spurs, and the two active animals sprang between the men and their quarry as they were sharply turned.

“Lay hold of my nag’s mane, Darley,” he shouted to the prisoner, who held up his bound hands, and caught at the dense mass of hair, succeeding in holding on, while Mark now drew his sword.

“Oh Mark!” cried his sister, “is there any danger?”

“Not if you sit fast,” he cried.—“Can you keep up if we canter?”

“Try,” said the prisoner excitedly. “If not, go on, and save yourselves.”

The horses broke into a sharp canter, keeping well together, as the men they had seen following them with drawn swords, and joined up across the narrow way, shouted to them to stop.

Mark’s reply to this was a yell of defiance.

“Sit fast, Mary,” he cried. “They must go down before your horse.”

The girl made no answer, but crouched lower in her saddle, as they rode on, Mark in his excitement pressing home his spurs, and causing his horse to make a frantic leap. But there was no collision; the men leaped off to right and left to avoid the charge, and the next moment they were behind.

“Well done!” cried Mark excitedly. “Well done, six! Ah!—Here, canter on, Mary. I’ll soon overtake you.”

He checked and turned his own steed, to dash back, for he had suddenly found that the bound given when he used his spurs was too much for

Ralph Darley's hold on the mane, and he had turned, to see the lad lying in the track with the men about to seize him and drag him away.

Without a moment's hesitation, Mark charged at the enemy again, and as they fled he chased them, sword in hand, for some little distance before once more turning to rejoin Ralph, who had struggled to his feet, ready to cling once more to the horse's mane, a task made more easy by Mark cutting through the bonds with his sword.

Mary was waiting a little farther back, and the trio had to go back some distance to reach a fresh track across country, the enemy making no sign of pursuit, but getting on with their plunder.

"They completely deceived me," Ralph told his companions. "I took them for carriers."

"Ah! as I did," said Mark grimly.

"And when it was too late, I saw my mistake, for they seized and bound me, and," added the lad bitterly, "they have got my sword and belt."

Ralph walked by his companions almost in silence the rest of the time that they were together, both Mark and his sister appearing troubled by his presence, and it seemed a great relief to all when a path was reached which would enable Ralph to reach Cliff Castle, the others having some distance farther to go to reach an open part passable by their steeds.

"I thank you, Master Mark Eden," he said quietly; and then, raising his cap to Mary Eden, he leapt over the stones which led to the top of a slope, and soon disappeared from their sight.

"What were you thinking, Mark?" said Mary, breaking the silence at last.

"That this would not be a bad place if we had no enemies. What were you thinking?"

"Plenty of things," said the girl sadly.

"Well, tell me some."

“I’m tired, and hungry, and thirsty. It will soon be dark. Father will be angry because we have been so long; and I am getting frightened.”

“What of?” said Mark sharply.

“Of meeting with the robbers again.”

“I should almost like to,” cried Mark fiercely.

“Oh Mark!” cried the girl in dismay.

“Well, if you were not here,” he said, with a laugh.

“It’s getting too bad. Once upon a time there was only the Darleys to mind. Now these people—this Captain Purlrose and his men—seem to belong to the land, and father will not fight them. Oh, if I only were master, what I would do! There, canter, and let’s get home. I want to think.”

Home was reached, and Sir Edward made acquainted with the encounter, at which he frowned, but said very little that night, except once, when he suddenly broke out petulantly:

“It seems, Mark, as if you were always running against this boy of Darley’s. Have the goodness in future to go some other way.”

Chapter Nineteen.

A Council of War.

“How can I help it?” said Mark one morning, as he was sauntering down by the river. “I did not mean to meet him, and here he is again. Hallo! he has got a fresh sword.”

The lad instinctively clapped his hand to his side, to feel if he had his own buckled on, though of late, consequent upon the troubled state of the country round, he had never thought of stirring without it.

“Mark Eden!” said Ralph to himself, as he caught sight of his enemy. “Then I suppose now it is going to be our fight. Very well: it is none of my seeking, and I don’t think we shall have Captain Purlrose to stop it.”

They came to a stand about a yard apart, and delivered themselves each of a short nod, but for some moments neither spoke.

“Well,” said Mark at last, “are you ready?”

“Yes,” replied Ralph; “here or somewhere among the trees.”

“Of course. We don’t want to be seen.”

They walked off side by side till they reached a patch of grass, fairly level and free from stones, where they flung their caps on the ground, and drew their swords; a dove high up in view of the cliff breaking out, as if ironically, with a soft, gentle coo. But their minds were too much occupied with war to think of the bird of peace. Then all at once Mark rested his point upon the toe of his high boot.

“Look here,” he said; “if I stop to say something now, will you promise me that you will not think it an excuse to keep from fighting?”

“Let me hear what it is,” said Ralph coldly; and Mark flushed and raised his point again.

“No!” he cried. “Yes: I will say it, and you may think I’m a coward if you like. I don’t care.”

“What is it?” said Ralph, making a dimple on the toe of his boot with his sword point.

“Well, it’s this,” said Mark; “and mind, I’m speaking to you as an enemy.”

“Of course,” said Ralph.

“Old Master Rayburn said to me, that as my father did not put a stop to the doings of this Captain Purlrose, I ought to do it.”

“That’s exactly what he said to me.”

Mark hesitated for a moment or two, and then, as if speaking with an effort, he blurted out:

“And thought I ought to join you, each getting together some men, and going and taking the ruffians by surprise.”

“Yes; and he said all that to me.”

“Oh! Well, it’s quite impossible for us to fight together as friends, isn’t it?”

“Quite,” cried Ralph.

“We did once, though,” suggested Mark.

“Yes, so we did. Well, couldn’t we again if we tried?”

“I don’t know,” said Mark thoughtfully. “We should have to do it in secret if we did.”

“Oh yes; nobody must know, or it would be stopped.”

“Well, I’ve thought a deal about it. What do you say? Shall we try?”

“I will, if you will.”

“And you won’t think I don’t want to fight you now?”

“Well, I can’t help thinking that. You don’t want to, do you?”

Mark frowned, and was silent for a few moments, before saying hurriedly:

“I want to fight the enemy of my house, but I don’t want to fight you in particular. You see, it seems strange, after we’ve fought together against another enemy.”

“It doesn’t seem strange to me,” said Ralph quietly; “it seems stupid.”

“But I’m not afraid.”

“I don’t think I am,” said Ralph. “I think we showed we were not afraid when I wounded you.”

“I wounded you too,” said Mark hotly.

“Yes. Well, then, don’t let’s fight this morning.”

Mark sheathed his weapon, and Ralph did the same.

“Now then,” said the former, “how many men could you get together?”

“Nick Garth, Ram Jennings, and six more.”

“Eight,” said Mark, flushing proudly. “I could get Dan Rugg, Dummy Rugg—he’s only a lad, but he’s stronger than I am. Oh yes: and fourteen more at least.”

“That would not be fair. If you agreed to come and attack the men at Ergles, you would have to bring eight. But could you get swords and pikes for them?”

“Oh yes—for five times as many. How about yours?”

“We’ve plenty of arms. They’re old, but very sharp and good.”

“And could you depend on your fellows to fight?” said Mark.

“Oh yes,” said Ralph, smiling; “they hate these people, and they’d rush at them like dogs would at wolves.”

“So would ours,” cried Mark. “There isn’t one of our men who hasn’t had some relative or friend attacked and ill-used or robbed.”

“Sixteen and ourselves would be plenty.”

“And then there’s Master Rayburn.”

“No,” said Ralph quickly; “he’s getting a very old man, and I don’t think he ought to go. Let’s do it all secretly, and make the men vow not to say a word. Nobody else must know.”

“When would you go?” said Mark, nodding his head in agreement.

“They say you should always strike when the iron is hot.”

“Well, it’s hot enough now,” cried Mark eagerly. “What do you say to to-morrow night.”

“Why not to-night?” said Ralph. “I’m willing. Then we’ll go to-night. What time?”

“It ought to be after our people are gone to bed. We should have to come out unknown.”

“Yes, I forgot that. Then it would have to be ten o’clock first, and it would take us quite an hour to get quietly up to the mouth of the cave.”

“Yes, with a lantern under a cloak, and every man a torch,” said Ralph.

“Oh, I say, you are good at this sort of thing,” cried Mark eagerly. “I shouldn’t have thought of that.”

“We couldn’t fight in the dark; we shouldn’t know friends from foes.”

“We should know our own men, and of course your men would be enemies to my men; but, of course, we shouldn’t want to fight, but to know Purlrose and his men. Yes, we must have pitch torches. I can bring any number of them, for we use them sometimes in the big parts of the mine, where the smoke doesn’t matter. Well, it all seems easy enough. I don’t believe there’ll be a door to batter down, only a curtain across to

keep the wind out, and it's a very narrow place, I remember. I went just inside once."

"I went in fifty yards or more, with Nick Garth," said Ralph, "and we had candles. We were looking for lead, but it was all stone shells."

"Oh, there's no lead there," said Mark confidently. "We've got all the lead worth working at the Black Tor."

"Yes, I'm afraid so; but there's a warm spring of water in there, and from where we stopped, you could hear water running and falling, ever so far-off."

"But what was it like, as far as you went in?"

"Just as if the mountain had been cracked, and both sides of the crack matched, only sometimes they were two feet apart, and sometimes twenty or more, making big chambers."

"Yes; some of our mine's like that," said Mark thoughtfully. "I say, enemy: think they set any sentries?"

"No, I don't believe they would."

"Then we'll rout them out; and if we can't do that, we'll drive them farther in, and pile up big stones at the entrance, and starve them till they surrender."

"Yes," cried Ralph eagerly, as he looked at his companion with the same admiration Mark had displayed when he had proposed taking the torches. "Capital: for the place is so big, that I don't believe we could find them all. Yours will be the way."

"Well, I think it is right," said Mark suddenly; "but we must catch old Purlrose to-night."

"We will if we can," said Ralph.

"Well then, that's all. It's as easy as easy. All we've got to do is to get our best men together, and meet—Ah! where shall we meet?"

“At Steeple Stone, half-way there. That will be about the same distance for you to come as for us.”

“That’s good,” cried Mark gleefully. “But we must have a word to know each other by. What do you say to ‘foes?’”

“Oh, that won’t do,” said Ralph. “‘Friends?’”

“But we’re not friends; we’re—we’re—what are we.”

“Allies,” said Ralph quietly.

“Why not that, then? Yes, of course. ‘Allies.’ Can’t be better.”

“‘Allies,’ then,” said Ralph.

“Well, what next?”

“To get the stuff together to fight with,” replied Ralph.

“What, the men? Yes, of course. Then we’d better see to it at once.”

“Yes, in a very quiet way, so that no one knows,” said Ralph.

“And meet at the Steeple Stone about half-an-hour after our people are gone to bed.”

“And the first who are there to wait for the others.”

“Oh, of course,” cried Mark. “Fair play; no going first, and doing the work. That would mean a fresh quarrel.”

“When I fight, I fight fair,” said Ralph proudly.

“I didn’t mean to doubt it,” said Mark apologetically. “I say: this is more sensible than for us two to fight now.”

“Think so?”

“Yes: oh yes; only, of course, our fight has to come. Yes, when these people are cleared off.”

“We can’t have three sets of enemies,” said Ralph gravely; “and I can’t help thinking that if we do not act, they will get more and more daring, and drive us out.”

“Pooh!” said Mark defiantly.

“Ah, I laughed at the idea at first; but they might take Cliff Castle or Black Tor by surprise some night.”

“Well, they might take Cliff Castle,” said Mark, in rather a contemptuous tone, “but not the Black Tor. And they shan’t even try to take either,” he added quickly, as if repenting his words. “We’ll surprise them, and to-night.”

“One moment,” said Ralph. “We must be careful, for it’s quite possible that some of the ruffians may be out on an expedition, and if we met them in the dark, it might cause a serious mistake.”

“We’ll settle all that when we meet,” said Mark. “‘Allies,’ then—to-night.”

“‘Allies’—to-night,” said Ralph; and after stiffly saluting, in the style taught by their fencing masters, the two lads separated, each making for his own home.

Mark’s task proved easy. He went straight to the mine, descended, and found Dummy.

“Coming to go right through the cave beyond the big waterfall, Master Mark?” cried the lad eagerly.

“No,” replied Mark shortly. “Where’s your father?”

“Right away down the mine, in the new lead, Master Mark,” said the lad in a disappointed tone. “Aren’t you never coming to have a hunt?”

“Oh yes, some day.”

“That’s what you always say. There’s lots to see and find out. You know where that water is.”

“Yes: but never mind now.”

“But, Master Mark, I’m sure that it comes from the river, where there’s that sink-hole in the narrow, where you see the water turn round and round.”

“Very likely; but here, I must see your father. Take a light, and go before me. Here, Dummy, are there plenty of torches?”

“Yes, Master Mark; but what do you want with torches?”

“Don’t ask questions, sirrah.”

“Very well, Master Mark,” said the boy, so meekly that his young master was touched, and said gently:

“Look here, Dummy, can I trust you?”

“I dunno, Master Mark. I’ll do what you tell me.”

“That’s right. Will you fight?”

The boy’s eyes flashed in the candle-light, down in the grim chamber were they stood.

“Torches—fight,” he whispered. “Are you going to tackle the Darleys?”

“No; the robbers.”

“T’other’s best; and they’re robbers too. But them’ll do. Want me to come and help fight them?”

“Yes; will you?”

“Will I?” said the boy, showing his teeth. “I’ll follow you anywhere, Master Mark.”

“Well, I want to follow you now. Take me to your father, and—not a word to a soul.”

Dummy slapped his mouth, and shut it close; then going to a niche in the

rock, he pointed to a box of candles, and a much bigger one, which he opened and showed to be quite full of long sticks of hempen tow soaked in pitch, one of which he took out, and gave to Mark, and took one himself, lit it, and then led the way down, and in and out among the darkest recesses of the mine.

“Smoky,” said Dummy, giving his torch a wave, and sending the black curls of fume eddying upward, to hang along the stone ceiling. Then he uttered an angry cry.

“What’s the matter?”

“Hot pitch, Master Mark. Big drop splathered on to my hand.”

In due time the place where Dan Rugg was working and directing the men, chipping out the rich lead ore, was reached, and he came out of the murky place.

“Ah, Master Mark,” he said. “You, Dummy, put your foot on that smoky link. Want to smother us?”

“My fault, Dan,” cried Mark. “Come here.”

He communicated a part of the plan, and the miner’s stern face began to relax more and more, till he showed his yellow teeth in a pleasant grin, and put his sharp pick under his arm, so as to indulge in a good rub of his hands.

“The varmin!” he said. “The varmin! Time it were done, Master Mark. Oh yes, I’ll pick out some lads who owe ’em a grudge, same as I do. You want eight of us? Me and seven more?”

“You and Dummy, and six more.”

“Dummy! Tchah! He’s no good.”

Dummy silently dug his elbow into his master’s ribs, but it was unnecessary.

“I want you and Dummy, and six men,” said Mark decisively.

“Oh, very well, sir; you’re young master; but what you can see in that boy I don’t know. Nine on us,” he continued thoughtfully. “Twelve o’ them. ’Taren’t enough, master.”

Mark hesitated. He had not meant to speak of his allies, for fear of opposition, but concluded now that it would be better, and explained everything.

“No, Master Mark; won’t do, sir,” said Dan, shaking his head ominously. “No good can’t come o’ that. They’ll be running away, and leaving us in the lurch.”

“Nonsense. Eight men will be picked who, as you say, owe the ruffians a grudge, and they’ll fight well.”

“But they’d rather fight us, master, same as us would rather fight them.”

“Not this time, Dan. We must join hands with them, and beat the robbers. Another time we may fight them.”

There was a low savage snarl.

“What do you mean by that, Dummy?” cried Mark.

“You didn’t tell me that Darley’s boy was coming to fight alongside o’ you, Master Mark.”

“Then I tell you now, Dummy,” said Mark haughtily. “We’ve joined together to crush the robbers; so hold your tongue.”

“Ay, he’d better,” growled Dan. “Well, Master Mark, I don’t quite like it; but if you say it’s to be done, why, done it shall be.”

“And you’ll make the men you choose be secret?”

“Why, master? Of course Sir Edward knows?”

“Not a word; and he is not to know till we bring in the prisoners.”

“Whee-ew!” whistled the old miner; and then he chuckled. “Well,” he said,

“you have growed up a young game-cock! All right, Master Mark. We’ll come; only you must bear all the blame if the master don’t like it. You order me to do this?”

“Yes, I order you,” said Mark firmly. “It is time it was done.”

“That’s so, Master Mark, and that’s enough. I begin to feel as if I should like a fight.”

“And you shall have it. I’ll be outside, by the horse-stone, with eight swords, eight pikes, and eight belts.”

“That’s good, master; but we must bring our picks as well. We can handle them better than other tools.”

“Very well. You leave your lads down at the bottom, and come up with Dummy to fetch the arms; and mind this: I want to show up well before the Darleys. You’ll pick fine trusty lads who can fight?”

“You leave that to me, Master Mark,” said the old miner. “I’m proud of our family as you are. They shan’t have eight fellows as can equal us, ’cepting me and that stoopid boy.”

“Don’t you mind what he says, Dummy,” cried Mark laughingly; “he doesn’t mean it. There, come along. I want you to help me pick out some good sharp swords and pikes. Mind, Dan, I shall be waiting for you as soon as the last light’s out.”

“I shall be there, Master Mark,” replied the old miner; and the two lads returned to daylight, along the passages sparkling with crystals and bits of ore.

Meanwhile, Ralph was as busy arranging with the retainers at Cliff Castle, and as soon as he had taken Nick Garth into his confidence, that gentleman lay down on the ground, and hid his face.

“Why, what does that mean?” cried the lad.

“Couldn’t help it, sir. ’Bliged to, or I should have shouted for joy. Get seven more? Have a dozen, sir, or twenty. Every man-jack’ll want to go.”

“No: seven,” said Ralph firmly. “There’ll be nine from the Black Tor, so we shall be eighteen.”

“What! nine o’ them coming to help, Master Ralph!” cried Nick, whose jaw dropped in his astonishment.

“Yes: they are as much at enmity with the rascals as we are.”

“But, Master Ralph—”

“Now, no arguing, Nick; do as I tell you. Get Ram Jennings, and six men who have been injured by the gang, and I’ll have swords and pikes ready at ten. Not a word to a soul.”

“Isn’t the chief coming?”

“No: I am the chief to-night, and my father will not know.”

“But what’ll he say to me?”

“Nothing. I take all the blame.”

“But he’ll be mad about our going with a lot o’ Black Torers.”

“I tell you I am answerable for everything.”

“Yes, but—”

“Look here, Nick: do you want to rout out Captain Purlrose and his gang?”

“Do I want to, Master Ralph? Do I want to get his head under a stone, and sarve it like I would a nut? Yes, I doos.”

“Then pick the men. Bind them to be silent, and meet me as soon as the lights are all out. Will you do this?”

“Won’t I?” said the man exultantly; “and won’t we?—Master Ralph, sir, I am proud on you.—Well, this is going to be a treat! But, say, Master Ralph, will them Edens fight ’longside of us without being nasty?”

“Yes, because it’s against a common enemy,” said the lad.

“Common? They just are, sir. Commonest muck o’ men. Fit for nothing but putting under ground. Why, how I should like to take my old mother with us, and let her loose at that there captain. I wouldn’t give much for his chance. Shall I tell her?”

“No!” cried Ralph. “Not a soul. Everything must be done in secret, and the rascals up at Ergles taken by surprise.”

“You trust me, Master Ralph,” said the man; “and when Master Captain Purlrose finds who’s come, he will be surprised. We’ll hang him for a scarecrow at once, of course?”

“No: bring him here a prisoner, and my father will settle that.”

“Very well, sir. We’ll take him, dead or alive oh; but if I had my way, I’d like to turn him over to my mother and all the women him and his have robbed. Why, do you know, sir, night afore last the beggars carried off a pickle-tub and two feather beds. And they call themselves men.”

Nick Garth spat on the ground in his disgust, closed one eye as he looked at his young master, gave his mouth a sounding slap, and went round at once to garden, stable, and barns, to quietly enlist the little force, making each man swear secrecy, so that at nightfall not another soul save the initiated had the slightest inkling of what was going on, either at Cliff Castle or the Black Tor.

Chapter Twenty.

Allied Forces.

The crescent moon sank like a thin curve of light in the western sky soon after nine o’clock that night. At ten the last light disappeared at both places connected with the adventure, when Mark Eden lowered himself from his window on to the top of the dining-hall bay, and from thence to the ground.

Soon after, there was a faint whispering and chinking, and three dark figures, carrying swords and pikes, descended the steep zigzag to the bottom of the great tongue of rock, where six men were lying down waiting; and a few minutes later, all well-armed, they were tramping in single file through the darkness toward Steeple Stone. Their young leader, armed only with his sword, and wearing a steel morion of rather antiquated date, which could only be kept in place by a pad formed of a carefully folded silk handkerchief, was at their head; and in obedience to his stern command, not a word was spoken as they made for the appointed tryst.

A similar scene had taken place in the dry moat of Cliff Castle; and at the head of his little party of eight, Ralph Darley was silently on his way to the Steeple Stone, a great rugged block of millstone-grit, which rose suddenly from a bare place just at the edge of the moor.

The night was admirable for the venture, for it was dark, but not too much so, there being just enough light to enable the men to avoid the stones and bushes that lay in their way, which was wide of any regular path or track.

Ralph's heart throbbed high with excitement, and in imagination he saw the gang of ruffians beaten and wounded, secured by the ropes he had had the foresight to make Nick Garth and Ram Jennings bring, and dragged back at dawn to the Castle to receive the punishment that his father would measure out.

He was a little troubled about that, for he felt that it was possible some objection might be raised by Mark Eden; and he was also a little uneasy about the first encounter of the two little bands of men so hostile to one another. But his followers were amenable to discipline, and one and all so eager for the fray, that he soon forgot all about these matters in the far greater adventure to come, and marched steadily on, keeping a bright look out, till he was nearing the solitary rock.

"See any one, Nick?" he whispered to his head man.

"No, sir. All as still and lonesome as can be."

"Then we are first," whispered Ralph. "I am glad. We'll march close up,

and then crouch down round the stone till the others come."

Nick grunted; and they tramped softly on over the grass and heath, with all looking grim and strange, the utter stillness of the night out there adding to the solemnity of the scene.

But they had not taken half-a-dozen paces toward the block, seen dimly against the starless sky, when there was a sharp chink, and a familiar voice cried:

"Who goes there?"

"'Allies,'" said Ralph promptly.

"Halt!" cried the leader.

"Advance!" came back; and directly after, the two lads were face to face, comparing notes.

"Began to think you were Purlrose's men," whispered Mark.

"And I that you had not come."

"Been here some time, and the lads are all lying down. Now then, what are our plans? I want to get to work."

"March together in single file, about five yards apart, straight for the cave. Get within fifty yards, halt, and let two advance softly to reconnoitre."

"Can't do better," said Mark softly. "But we must keep very quiet, in case any of them are out marauding."

"Yes, of course. When we get up to the mouth of the cave, we must halt on one side, light our torches, and rush in. We must leave it to the men then."

"Oh yes; they'll do it. They've all got their blood up. We must succeed."

"But what about the torches?"

"Got plenty for both, and two men have got mine lanterns alight under

their gaberdines. Better pass round torches for your men now."

Ralph agreed that this would be best, and Mark summoned Dummy with a faint bird-like chirrup, and made him bring the links.

Then at a word, Mark's men sprang up, and after marking down the spot below the dimly-seen top of the mountain-limestone ridge, beneath which, half-way down, as they well knew, the cavern lay, the two parties marched on in silence side by side, pausing every few minutes, in response to a shrill chirp, while the leaders took a few paces ahead to make a keen observation and whisper a few words.

"All still," said Ralph, after the last of these pauses, which took place where the slope had grown steep, and they had about a quarter of a mile to go upward to reach the entrance to the cavern.

"Are you sure we're aiming right?" whispered Mark.

"Certain. The hole is below that sharp point you can see against the sky. I remember it so well. Saw it when the men had surrounded us, and the captain was making signs."

"Keep on, then," whispered Mark. "Let's get one on each side of the mouth, light our torches, and rush in. We'll go in side by side, and the men must follow as they can."

The march upward in the darkness was resumed almost without a word, but no regular lines could be kept to now, on account of the blocks of stone projecting, rough bushes, and cracks and deep crevices, which became more frequent as they progressed. Then, too, here and there they came upon heaps of broken fragments which had fallen from above, split away by the frosts of winter.

Hearts beat high from excitement and exertion, for the slope grew more steep now, and an enemy would have been at great advantage above them, if bent on driving them back.

But all remained still: there was no warning of alarm uttered by sentry, no shrill whistle; and so utterly death-like was all around, that Ralph whispered to Mark, who was close beside him now:

“I believe they must be all out on some raid.”

“Seems like it,” whispered back Mark; and they paused to let their men get close up, for the entrance could now dimly be made out, some twenty yards higher.

“Better take your lantern,” whispered Mark. “Then give the word after you are up, on one side, and we the other. We must go in at once then, for the light will startle them if they’re there.”

The lantern, carefully shaded, was passed to Nick Garth, and once more they pressed on, the men spreading out a little on either side now, so as to get level with the entrance, which gradually grew more plain, in the shape of a narrow cleft, little more than wide enough to admit one at a time; and they saw now that stones had been roughly piled beneath it to form a rough platform in front.

Still no sound was heard, and the next minute the two little groups clustered in their places close by the platform; Ralph gave the word, the lanterns were bared, and thrown open, and three links at a time thrust in, to begin burning, though not so quickly as their owners wished, while men stood on either side with pikes levelled, ready to receive the enemy should a rush be made from inside.

It was a picturesque scene, as the light from the lanterns gleamed dimly upon eager faces, and lit up the bright steel weapons. Then, one after the other, the torches began to burn and send upward little clouds of pitchy smoke, the light growing brighter and brighter, and throwing up the grey stones and darkening the shadows, till all were armed with a blazing light in their left hands, and sword or pike in their right, while between the two parties the mouth of the cave lay dark and forbidding, but silent as the grave.

“Ready?” whispered Ralph.

“Ready!” came from Mark.

“Then forward!” cried the former, and, sword in hand, the two lads stepped from right and left on to the platform, their shadows sent first into the dark rift; while the Ruggs crowded after Mark, and Nick Garth and

Ram Jennings shouldered them in their effort to keep their places close behind Ralph.

“Hang the link!” cried Mark suddenly. “Here, Darley, do as I do.”

He threw his flaming torch right forward into the cave as far as it would go, and it struck against the wall and dropped some dozen yards in, and lay burning and lighting up the rugged passage.

“I’ll keep mine till we get past yours,” said Ralph in a hoarse whisper; and the lads pressed in, side by side, to find that the link was burning at an abrupt corner, the passage turning sharply to the right.

Mark stopped and picked up his link, but before he could throw it again, Ralph stepped before him over the rugged floor and hurled his light, to see it fall right ahead, after also striking against the wall.

“Zigzags,” said Mark in a sharp whisper. “Here, mind what you’re doing with those pikes.”

“All right,” was growled, but the men who held the weapons did not withdraw them, two sharp points being thrust right forward, so as to protect the two leaders, the holders being Dan Rugg and Nick Garth. Both Mark and Ralph objected to this again, but it was no time for hesitation. At any moment they might be attacked, and they were all wondering that they had heard nothing of the enemy, all being singularly still, save a low murmuring sound as of falling water at a distance.

“They must be all out,” said Mark in a low voice. “Gone on some raid. Well, we shall catch them when they come back.”

Chirp!

“Who did that?” said Ralph quickly, at the sound of a steel weapon striking against the rock.

But no one answered; and as they advanced slowly, and Mark stooped to pick up his burning link once more where it lay against the corner of the natural passage, Ralph seized the opportunity to change his sword to his left hand, and swing his round the corner out of sight.

They heard it fall, and the glow struck against the wall to their left, lighting up the passage beyond the corner.

“Take care, Master Mark,” whispered Dan Rugg.

“Ay, and you too, Master Ralph,” whispered Nick Garth. “P’r’aps they’re lying wait for us.”

“No,” said Mark, aloud. “They’re away somewhere, and I hope they haven’t seen our lights.”

Whizz—thud!

There was an involuntary start from the attacking party, for at that moment the burning link Ralph had thrown came sharply back, struck against the wall where the glow had shone just before, and dropped, blazing and smoking, nearly at their feet.

“That settles it,” said Mark excitedly.

“Yes, and that explains the chink I heard. They’re waiting for us. Ready? We must charge.”

Ralph’s words were followed by the pressing forward of the men behind —those of each family being eager to prove their valour by being before their rivals; and the next minute half-a-dozen were round the corner, with the two lads at their head, to find that the passage had suddenly widened out into a roomy chamber, toward whose high roof the smoke from the torches slowly ascended, and contracted again at the end, about a dozen yards away.

“Yes, I remember,” whispered Ralph. “I had forgotten: it goes off in a passage round to the left again at that corner.”

The men crowded in after them, finding ample room now, and all looked about, puzzled, for the enemy who had hurled back the link, several of those present being ready to place a strange interpretation upon the mystery.

But the explanation was plain enough when they reached the end of the

chamber, where the onward passage was but a crack some two feet wide, with a bristling palisade of pike-heads to bar their further progress. There was no hesitation. At the sight of something real to attack, Mark uttered a shout.

“Here they are, lads,” he cried. “Now for it! Pikes.”

The men, Edenites and Darleyites, closed in together, forgetting all their animosities, and their pike-heads gathered into a dense mass, clashing against those which bristled in the narrow opening, clinked against the stone sides, and rattled, as the holders thrust and stabbed away past their young leaders’ shoulders, for, to their great disgust, both Mark and Ralph found that they could do nothing with their swords.

And now the silence which had reigned was further broken by the excited cries of the men, given at every thrust they made into the opening, their attack eliciting yells of defiance, oaths, and threats of what would be done directly.

The fight went on for a few minutes, with apparently no effect on either side, the attacking party being unable to reach the defenders, while the latter seemed to be too much crippled for space to attack in turn, contenting themselves with presenting their bristling points against the advance.

“Halt!” cried Mark suddenly. “This is of no use.”

“No,” growled Nick Garth, as, in obedience to the order, the men drew back a couple of yards, to stand, though, with their pikes directed at the narrow opening.

“Come out, you rats, and fight fair,” roared Dan Rugg; and there was a derisive shout of laughter, which echoed through the chamber, followed by the hoarse voice of Captain Purlrose.

“Go home, bumpkins!” he shouted, “or we’ll spit you all together like larks.”

“Beast!” shouted back Mark; and stepping forward he hurled his link right in over the pike-heads, amongst their holders, eliciting a series of thrusts

and furious yells, as he took one step back, and fell back the next. A savage roar rose from his men, answered by another from within.

“Hurt, Mark Eden?” cried Ralph excitedly, catching at his brother leader, and saving him from going down.

“No: feel stupid,” panted Mark, who looked confused and dizzy; “point struck this stupid steel cap;” and he tore it off, and threw it down, though it had in all probability saved his life; the step back he had taken, however, had lessened the force of the thrust. “Better now.—Here, stop them. They are doing no good.”

For enraged by what had taken place, the attacking party had rushed in again, to go on stabbing and thrusting away with their pikes, keeping up a series of rattlings and clashings, till Ralph made his voice heard, and they drew back, growling angrily, and the weird light shed by the torches showed that blood had begun to flow from hands and arms.

“We must do something different to this,” cried Ralph, as soon as the yells of derision which greeted their repulse were over.

“Yes, young idiot! Go home to bed,” shouted the captain hoarsely. Then he burst into a savage tirade of curses, for Dummy, in his rage at being right at the back, had thrown another blazing torch straight in over the bristling pike-heads, lighting up the interior, and showing the savage faces of the defenders close together. Ralph judged that the link had struck the captain.

“Stand fast, men,” he whispered. “We may make them charge out that way. Go on, Dummy, and half-a-dozen more of you throw in your links all together.”

The order was obeyed, after the torches had been waved into a fierce blaze, and they flew in, scattering drops of burning pitch, bringing forth an outburst of yells of rage and pain, and a quick movement showed that the marauders were about to rush out. But the voice of Captain Purlrose was heard thundering out the words:

“Stand fast! Only a few drops of pitch, and a singe or two. Here, two of you, throw them back.” An exchange of burning missiles now took place

for a few minutes, which soon ended on the part of the defenders, who, roaring with rage and pain, kept on trampling out the torches now thrown.

“Stop!” cried Mark. “It’s of no good. The cowards will not come out. Here, Ralph Darley.”

There was a few moments’ whispering, resulting in orders being given to the men, two of the Edens, and two of the Darleys standing aside, ready for some action.

“Now for another charge,” whispered Mark. “Take as long a hold of your pikes as you can, and when I give the order, let your points be all together like one. Ready? Forward!”

As the little party advanced, with their pike-heads almost touching, while those of their enemies were advanced to defend the opening, the two men on either side darted close up, shielded by the wall, passed their arms over with a quick motion, and each grasped and held fast one or two pike-shafts, in spite of the efforts of their holders to get them free.

But there were enough left to defend the hole, and one by one, in spite of the desperate efforts made to hold them, the imprisoned weapons were at last dragged away, to reappear, stabbing furiously, till, breathless with their exertions, the men once more drew back, several of the Edens in their rage snatching their small mining-picks from their belts, one hurling his into the hole, a wild yell telling that it had done its work.

“Well,” said Mark despondently, “what can we do?”

“Wait and see if they will come out and attack us. We are wasting strength.”

“Yes. It’s no good. We ought to have brought a lot of blasting-powder, Dan, and blown them out.”

“Yes, Master Mark; but we didn’t know. My advice is that we go back now, and come again.”

“Why, you’re hurt,” said Ralph excitedly, as he saw the blood streaming down the man’s arm.

“Ah, so’s a lot of us, young master,” growled the man. “Look at your own lads.”

Ralph took and raised a torch, and saw that half his own party, including Nick Garth and Ram Jennings, were suffering from cuts and stabs in their arms.

“Oh, they’re nowt,” growled Nick. “They’ve got it worse inside. Now then, let’s go at ’em again, or we shall never do it.”

Another yell of defiance came from the passage, followed by mocking invitations to them to come on again.

“Yah! You aren’t men,” roared Ram Jennings. “Rats, that’s what you are —rats. Only good to go and fight wi’ women.”

“It’s of no good,” said Mark bitterly. “I feel done. I haven’t had a single cut or thrust at one of the brutes; neither have you. We can’t do it.”

“I don’t like to say so,” said Ralph, “but my father was a soldier, and he said a good officer never wasted his men.”

“Well, we’re wasting ours,” said Mark bitterly, “We must give up, and come again.”

“Stop,” whispered Ralph. “I know. Give orders to your men quietly, and I’ll do so to mine. Then we’ll throw the torches in at them with all our might, and give a shout, and retreat as if we were beaten.”

“And stop on each side of the mouth to catch them as they pursue us,” said Mark excitedly, catching at the idea. “That’s it.”

The next moment they were hurrying from man to man, who heard them sulkily, growling and panting in their rage. But they obeyed their leaders’ orders, getting their remaining links well ablaze, the holders forming in front, and the rest quietly and quickly filing out by the other end of the chamber.

“Now!” shouted Ralph suddenly. “In with them.”

There was a rush of light, and the fiery missiles flew in through the opening, falling amongst the defenders, and leaving the chamber in comparative darkness, amidst which was heard the quick tramping of feet, mingled with the yells of rage from the defenders.

The next minute, with Mark and Ralph coming last, all were outside the mouth of the cavern, grouped in two parties, with presented weapons, breathing the soft, cool night air, and waiting for the attack of their foes.

Sound after sound came from the opening, but not such as they longed with bated breath to hear. Once there was a loud order which came rolling out, and a little later a gleam of lights was seen, but no rush of footsteps, no sign of pursuit; and suddenly a voice broke the silence of the peaceful night air, as Nick Garth roared out:

"'Taren't likely. Rats won't show for hours after the dogs have hunted 'em in their holes."

"Ah! might wait for a week," growled Dan Rugg. "It's all over for to-night."

"They're right, Eden," whispered Ralph.

"Yes: they're right," said Mark, with a groan. "We're beaten—beaten, like a pack of cowards. Let's go home."

"I did not see much cowardice," said Ralph bitterly. "But it's all over, and we must retreat. Give the word."

"What! to retreat?" cried Mark passionately. "I'll die first."

"It is not fair to the men to keep them longer."

"Well, you're a soldier's son, and know best, I suppose. Give the word yourself."

Ralph hesitated, for his companion's words seemed to be tinged by a sneer, but he knew that it was madness to stay, and hesitating no longer, he gave the word to retire.

"We're not going back for your orders," said one of Mark's followers

surlily.

“Yes, you are,” cried his young master fiercely. “Back home now. March!”

There was a low growling on both sides, but the orders were obeyed, and slowly and painfully the two parties, stiff with exertion, and smarting with wounds, filed over the steep stone-besprinkled slope.

As they walked down, the two lads drew closer together, and at last began to talk in a low voice about their failure.

“Head hurt much?” said Ralph.

“Yes, horribly; and I’ve left that old iron pot behind. Air’s cool to it, though.”

“Shall I bind it up?”

“No: don’t bleed. I say.”

“Yes.”

“How are we going to meet our fathers to-morrow morning? Nice state the poor lads are in.”

Ralph uttered a gasp at the thought of it. There was no leading prisoners back in triumph, with their hands bound behind them. They were beaten —cruelly beaten, and he was silent as his companion, as they tramped slowly on, at the head of their men, till the Steeple Stone was seen looming up ahead, where they would separate, little thinking that the worst was to come.

The lads halted to listen whether there was any sound of pursuit, and the men filed slowly by till they were fifty yards ahead, when all at once voices were heard in altercation, angry words were bandied from side to side; and spurred by the same feeling of dread, the two leaders dashed forward again.

Too late! The smouldering fires of years of hatred had been blown up by a few gusty words of bitter reproach. Nick Garth had in his pain and

disappointment shouted out that if the party had been all Darleys the adventure would have succeeded.

Dan Rugg had yelled back that it was the Darleys who played coward and hung back; and the next moment, with a shout of rage, the two little parties were at one another, getting rid of their rage and disappointment upon those they looked upon as the real enemies of their race.

Chapter Twenty One.

Ralph pleads guilty.

It was a savage fight, and before Mark and Ralph, who rushed desperately into the *mêlée*, not to lead their men, but to separate them, could succeed in beating down the menacing pikes, several more were wounded; and at last they drew off, with their burdens greatly increased by having on either side to carry a couple of wounded men.

“We must put it down to Purlrose,” said Mark bitterly, as he ran back for a moment to speak to Ralph. “But what do you say—oughtn’t we to have our duel now?”

“If you like,” said Ralph listlessly; “Perhaps we’d better, and then I may be half killed. My father may be a little merciful to me then.”

Mark leaned forward a little, so as to try and make out whether his ally was speaking in jest or earnest; and there was enough feeble light in the east to enable him to read pretty plainly that the lad was in deadly earnest.

“No,” he said sharply; “I don’t think we’ll have it out now. My head’s too queer, and my eyes keep going misty, so that I can’t see straight. You’d get the best of it. I don’t want to meet my father, but I’d rather do that than be half killed. The poke from that pike was quite enough to last me for a bit.”

He turned and trotted off after his men, while Ralph joined his, to hear them grumbling and muttering together, he being the burden of their

complaint.

Nick Garth and Ram Jennings seemed to be the most bitter against him, the latter commencing boldly at once.

“Oh, Master Ralph,” he cried, “if your father had been here, we should ha’ paid them Edens for hanging back as they did.”

“They did not hang back,” cried Ralph angrily; “they fought very bravely.”

“What!” cried Nick. “Well, I do like that. But I don’t care. Dessay I shall be a dead ’un ’fore I gets to the Castle, and then we shall see what Sir Morton will say.”

“Well, you will not hear, Nick,” said Ralph quietly.

“No: I shan’t hear, Master Ralph, ’cause I shall be a dead ’un, I suppose. But I’m thinking about my poor old mother. She’ll break her heart when they carry me to her, stiff as a trout, for I’m the only son she has got.”

This was too much for the wounded men even. They forgot their sufferings in the comic aspect of the case, familiar as they all were with the open enmity existing between Mother Garth and her son, it being common talk that the last act of affection displayed toward him had been the throwing of a pot of boiling water at his head.

The laugh lightened the rest of the way, but they were a doleful-looking, ragged, and blood-stained set, who bore one of their number upon a litter formed of pike-staves up the zigzag to the men’s quarters at day-break; and Ralph felt as if he had hardly strength enough to climb back to his window and go to bed, after seeing his roughly-bandaged men safely in.

But he made the essay, and when half-way up dropped back again into the garden, just as a thrush began to pipe loudly its welcome to the coming day; and the blackbirds were uttering their chinking calls low down in the moist gloom amongst the bushes on the cliff slope.

“Can’t leave the poor fellows like that,” he muttered. “Oh dear, how stiff I am! Father said he always felt it his duty, when he was a soldier, to look well after his wounded men.”

He stood thinking for a few moments, and then began to tramp down the steep path to where the shadows were still dark, and a mist hung over the rippling stream. Then taking to the track beside it, he trudged on, with the warm glow in the east growing richer of tint, the birds breaking out into joyous song, and minute by minute the vale, with its wreaths of mist, growing so exquisitely beautiful that the black horrors of the past night began to seem more distant, and the cloud of shadow resting above his aching head less terrible and oppressive.

And as the sun approached its rising, so did the beauties around the lad increase; and he tramped on with a sensation of wonder coming upon him, that with all so glorious at early morn in this world of ours, it should be the work of the highest order of creatures upon it to mar and destroy, and contrive the horrors which disfigure it from time to time.

“And I’ve been one of the worst,” he said to himself bitterly. “No: it was to stop others from doing these things,” he cried quickly. “Oh, if we had not failed!”

He quickened his pace now, and, just as the sun rose high enough to light up the vale with its morning glow, he came in sight of the opening where Master Rayburn’s cottage stood.

“I shall have to wake him up,” said the lad, with a sigh; “and oh! what a tale to tell!”

But he did not have to waken the old man, for as he drew nearer he suddenly caught sight of his friend, standing with his back to him, hands clasped and hanging in front, head bent and bare, and the horizontal rays of the rising sun turning his silver locks to gold.

The lad gazed at him in surprise, but went on softly till he was quite close up, when Master Rayburn turned suddenly, smiled, and said:

“Ah! Ralph Darley, my lad, that’s how I say my prayers, but I’m a good Christian all the same. Why, what brings— here, speak, boy,” he cried excitedly—“torn, covered with dirt—and what’s this?—blood? Oh, Ralph, boy, don’t say that you and Mark Eden have been meeting again.”

“Yes,” said Ralph slowly; “we parted only a little while ago;” and he told

the old man what had taken place, while the latter eagerly examined the speaker to seek for hurts.

“Then—then—you two lads—on the strength of what I said—attacked those ruffians in their den?”

“Yes, Master Rayburn,” said the lad bitterly; “and failed—miserably failed. Do, pray, come up and see our poor fellows. One of them is badly hurt, and the others have nearly all got wounds.”

“But you—you, boy. I don’t see the cause of all this blood.”

“No,” said Ralph wearily. “I’m not hurt. I suppose that came through helping the men.”

“Ah! and Mark Eden—is he hurt?”

“No: we two ought to have had the worst of it. He had a thrust on the head, but his steel cap saved him, and he walked home.”

“But Sir Morton? he did not know you were going?”

“No: we kept it to ourselves.”

“He knows now, of course?”

“Nothing at all. We’ve only just got back.”

“I’ll come at once,” said the old man; and hurrying into the cottage, he took some linen and other necessaries, put on his hat, and rejoined the lad, making him give a full account of the attack and failure as they walked sharply back to the Castle.

“You don’t say anything, Master Rayburn,” cried Ralph at last. “Do you think we were so very much to blame?”

“Blame, my boy?” cried the old man. “I always liked you two lads, and, wrong or right, I think you’ve done a grand thing.”

“What?”

“I never felt so proud of you both in my life.”

Ralph smiled.

“That’s very good of you, Master Rayburn,” he said, “and it’s a bit comforting; but I’ve got father to meet by-and-by.”

“And so have I, my boy,” cried the old man warmly, “to take the blame of it all. For it was my doing from beginning to end. I incited you lads to go and do this, and I shall tell your father it is only what he and Sir Edward Eden ought to have done months ago.”

“But we failed—failed,” groaned Ralph dismally.

“Failed! You have not done all you meant to do, but you have read those ruffians a severe lesson, and next time—”

“Ah! next time,” sighed Ralph.

“Come, Ralph! Be a man. Nothing great is ever done without failure first. Your father will be angry, and naturally. He’ll scold and blame, and all that; but I know what he is at heart, and he’ll think as I do, that he need not be ashamed of his son, even if he has failed.”

The quarters were reached soon after, and the sufferer who had been carried back received the first attention, the others all having their turn; and just as the last bandage had been applied, Sir Morton, who had been having a walk round, came upon the pikes, stained and blunted, leaning against a buttress of the wall. This brought him to the men’s quarters, and in utter astonishment he stood gazing at the scene.

“Ah! good morning,” said Master Rayburn, in answer to his wondering look from his son to the injured men and back. “They’ll be easier now. Only one hurt much, and he’ll be all right again after a few days’ rest.”

“But what does this mean?” said Sir Morton; and his son stood out, and in a frank, manly way, once more related the adventures of the night.

Sir Morton’s face grew sterner and harder as he heard everything to the finish; and he was just about to speak, when Master Rayburn broke in:

“My doing, from beginning to end. I told them they ought to do it.”

“And a nice business your interference has made, sir!” cried Sir Morton angrily. “You see now that it is impossible for two such adverse elements to get on together. The brutes! to turn upon those who had been fighting by their side!”

“Are you speaking about your men or Sir Edward Eden’s?” said the old man drily.

“Eden’s, of course,” cried Sir Morton angrily.

“Six of one and half-a-dozen of the other,” said the old man; “and all due to the evil teaching of their masters, my dear old friend. Come, Darley, it’s of no use to cry over spilt milk; the boys have set their fathers a splendid example, and driven in the thin end of the wedge. The sooner you and Eden send it home the better.”

“I must try again.”

“Of course. I don’t ask you to make friends. It would be absurd; but you must stir now, and I shall tell Eden the same, and that he cannot for very shame leave the work undone that his son has begun. Ralph, lad, you go to bed, and sleep all day. I am doctor enough to insist to your father that you are not to be disturbed. I must go up to the Black Tor at once, for I suppose I am badly wanted there.”

The old man hurried away with the remainder of his bandages, and Sir Morton signed to his son, who followed him to the room into which Captain Purlrose had been ushered.

“Now, Ralph,” began Sir Morton, but his son interrupted him:

“Guilty, father,” he cried dismally, “and I have failed.”

“There, do as Master Rayburn said,” cried Sir Morton, “and—well—I’ll talk to you another time—I’m—er—I’m not very angry, my boy, but—there, be off. It was very brave, and like a soldier’s son.”

“I wonder what Mark Eden’s father has said to him,” thought Ralph as he

threw himself wearily upon his bed.

Chapter Twenty Two.

A Cure for the Headache.

Master Rayburn was anxiously expected at the Black Tor, Mark's first act having been to send Dummy Rugg down to his cottage to ask him to come up; and not finding him there, the boy had very bravely followed him to Cliff Castle, in the full belief that he would be there, and on learning that he was, he sent a message in, and then hurried away.

Matters went on in a very similar way at the Tor, even to Sir Edward accidentally finding that something was wrong, and going to the building at the entrance to the mine, where the wounded men were being attended. But he did not take matters in the same spirit as his inimical neighbour, but attacked his old friend furiously, vowed that he would never forgive him, and threatened his son with the severest punishment, though he did not say what.

Master Rayburn said nothing, but went on dressing the men's wounds, till, regularly worked up into a perfect fury, Sir Edward turned upon him again. "This ends everything between us, Master Rayburn," he cried. "I have treated you as a friend, made you welcome at my table, and allowed my son to make you a kind of companion; but now, have the goodness to recollect that we are strangers, and if the gang from out of the cavern yonder attack you, get out of the trouble in the best way you can, for you will have no help from me."

"Very well," said Master Rayburn quietly.

"And now, sir, leave my place at once."

"Oh no!" said the old man quietly, as Mark looked on, scarlet with annoyance, but feeling that he must suffer for what had happened.

"Oh no!" cried Sir Edward, aghast. "Have the goodness to explain what you mean."

"Certainly," replied the old man. "I have not finished with this man, and I

have another to attend later on."

"Leave, sir, at once," cried Sir Edward.

"No," replied the old man quietly. "You are angry, and are saying that which in calmer moments you will regret. Those men require my assistance, and I must insist upon staying."

Sir Edward made an angry gesture.

"Go on, then," he cried; "finish what you have to do, and then leave at once."

"Yes," replied Master Rayburn calmly; "but it will be necessary for me to come day after day for quite a week. This man will need much attention."

Sir Edward turned and walked angrily out of the place; and as if not a word had been said, the old man went on with his task until he had ended. Then telling the men to be of good heart, for their injuries were none of them serious, he went to the door with Mark, whose face was troubled and perplexed.

"There, you need not look like that, my lad," he said. "Your father's angry now, but he'll calm down, and I don't think he will say much to you. It is more likely that he will want to take revenge upon those ruffians. Cheer up, my boy: I'm not angry with you for what you've done. It was the fighting afterwards that was the unlucky part."

The old man hurried away, and Mark stood watching him descend the slope.

"Cheer up, indeed!" he muttered; "who's to cheer up at a time like this? I wish I hadn't listened to that miserable scrub of a Darley. I always hated him, and I might have known that associating with him would lead me into trouble.—Well, what do you want?"

This was to Dummy Rugg, who, like his young master, had escaped without much damage.

"Only come to talk to you, Master Mark," said the boy humbly.

“Then you can be off. I don’t want to talk.”

“I’ll talk, then, and you listen, Master Mark,” said the boy coolly; and Mark opened his eyes, and was about to order the lad off, but Dummy went on quickly. “I’ve been thinking it all over,” he said. “That gunpowder’s the thing. When we go next we’ll take a lot in bags. When we get there, and they’re hiding in that narrow bit, I’ll untie the bags and throw two or three in. Then we can throw three or four torches, and one of them’s sure to set the powder on fire, and start ’em; then we can all make a rush.”

“Oh, then you think that we shall go again?”

“Oh yes, we must go again, Master Mark. Why, if we didn’t go, the robbers would think we were afraid, and come at us. You’re not going to sit down and look as if we were beat?”

“Well, it would be too bad, Dummy,” said Mark, thoughtfully.

“Bad? I should think it would, Master Mark. I say, wasn’t it grand last night?”

“Grand?”

“Yes; when we were in the cave, with the lights shining, and the pikes sparkling. If they had only come out and fought fair, it would have been splendid.”

“Then you would like to go again, Dummy?”

“Of course, sir. Wouldn’t you?”

“Yes, I suppose so,” said Mark thoughtfully.

“Yes, you must go again, and take ’em all prisoners. But I suppose you won’t go to-night?”

“Go to-night? No!”

“Well, there’s nothing going on in the mine to-day. Father’s too sore to head the men, and he’s going to lie down and rest till his arm’s better.

What do you say to having a good long day below there, and finding which way the river runs—the one we heard?"

"Bah! Stuff! Rubbish! After being up fighting all the night! You must be mad."

"No, I aren't," said Dummy. "I only want you to come. It'll do you good. You don't know how much better you'll feel after a good walk and climb down there."

"What's the good, Dummy?"

"We want to find out where the water goes to that is always falling. I'm sure some of it comes out of our river, where the hole's in the stream."

"And what good will it do to know where the water goes?"

"I don't know, but I want to. Can't go to work after such a night as we had. There's nobody down the mine to-day."

Mark put his hand to the place where he had received the blow.

"Headache, Master Mark?"

"Yes. All jarred-like."

"Then come down. I've often had a bad headache when I've gone down into the mine, and it's been so quiet and still there that it has soon got better. Do come, Master Mark; it'll be better than sitting thinking about being beaten last night."

"Very well, Dummy," said Mark at last: "I don't feel as if I could go to bed and sleep, and I don't want to be thinking."

"And you'll have too much to do down there to think."

"Yes, I suppose so; and if I stay up, I shall be meeting my father and catching it. Oh, I only wish we had won the day."

"Couldn't; 'cause it was night," said the boy thoughtfully.

“Well, be ready with the candles, and I’ll come in half-an-hour, as soon as I’ve seen how the men are.”

“Oh, they’re all right, and gone to sleep. They don’t mind. But you ought to have let us beat the Darleys, as we didn’t beat the robbers.”

“You go and get the candles,” said Mark sourly.

“Like to have torches too, master?” said the lad, with a cunning grin.

“You speak to me again like that, you ugly beggar, and I won’t go,” cried Mark wrathfully. “Think I want all that horrible set-out with the torches brought up again?”

“I’m off to get the candles ready, Master Mark,” said Dummy humbly; and he hurried down the steep steps to get to the mouth of the mine.

“Wish I’d kicked him,” muttered Mark, as soon as he was alone. “I do feel so raw and cross. I could fight that Ralph Darley and half-kill him now. Here, let’s go and see how miserable all the men are; it’ll do me good.”

He hesitated about going, though, for fear of meeting his father; but feeling that it was cowardly, he went to where the men lay now, found them asleep, and came out again to go into the dining-room and make a hasty breakfast; after which he went out, descended the steep steps out in the side of the rock upon which the castle was perched, glanced up at it, and thought how strong it was; and then came upon Dummy, waiting with his candle-box and flint and steel, close by the building where the blasting-powder was kept.

“Let’s take these too, Master Mark,” he said, pointing to the coils of rope which had been brought back from the cave; “we may want ’em.”

He set the example by putting one on like a baldric, Mark doing the same with the other.

“Now for a light,” he said, taking out his flint, steel, and tinder-box.

“Well, don’t get scattering sparks here,” said Mark angrily. “Suppose any of the powder is lying about, you’ll be blowing the place up.”

“Not I,” said the boy, smiling; “I’m always careful about that.”

He soon obtained a glow in the tinder, lit a match, and set a candle burning. Then taking each one of the small mining-picks, the two lads descended into the solitary place, Dummy bearing the light and beginning to run along cheerily, as if familiarity with the long wandering passages and gloomy chambers had made them pleasant and home-like. Mark followed him briskly enough, for the solemn silence of the place was familiar enough to him, and he looked upon it merely as a great burrow, which had no terrors whether the men were at work or no.

Dummy went steadily on, taking the shortest way to the chamber where he had shown his companion that it was no *cul de sac*, but the entrance to the grotto where nature had effected all the mining, and at last the great abyss where the sound of the falling water filled the air was reached. Here Dummy seated himself, with his legs swinging over the edge, and looked down.

“That’s where the river water comes in,” he said, “through a big crack. Now let’s see where it goes, because it must go somewhere.”

“Right into the middle of the earth, perhaps,” said Mark, gazing down into the awful gulf, and listening to the rushing sound.

“Nay,” said Dummy; “water don’t go down into the earth without coming out again somewhere. Dessay if we keep on we shall come out to daylight.”

“Eh?” cried Mark; “then we had better find it and stop it up, for as I said the other day, we don’t want any one to find a back way into our mine.”

“That’s what I thought, Master Mark,” said Dummy quietly. “Wouldn’t do for Purlrose and his men to find it, and come in some day, would it?”

“No; that wouldn’t do at all, Dummy.”

“No, sir. But how’s your head?”

“My head? Oh, I’d forgotten all about it.”

“I know’d you would,” said the lad, grinning. “Don’t feel so tired, neither?”

“No.”

“Then I’ll light another candle, and we’ll get on: but don’t you get slipping while we are going round here, because I don’t know how deep it is, and I mightn’t be able to get you out.”

“You take care of yourself, and lead on,” said Mark shortly. “I dare say I can go where you do.”

Dummy nodded, and after handing the second candle to his master, he went along sidewise, and then lowered himself over the edge of the gulf, and dropped out of sight.

“Only ’bout a fathom, Master Mark,” he shouted, “and plenty of room.”

Mark did not hesitate, but lowered himself in turn, and dropped upon his feet, to find they were upon a rugged shelf, about four feet wide, sloping downward right by the side of the gulf; and passing along this, they soon reached the other side of the great chasm, to stand nearly opposite to the end of the passage where they had entered, but about twenty feet lower; and here they again looked down into the awesome depths. But nothing was to be seen. The water fell from somewhere beneath where they had entered; and as they judged, plunged deep down into a wide chasm, and from thence ran out and under the great crack, which the boy found out as the way they had to go.

“Stream runs right under that, Master Mark. I went along some way, and every now an’ then I could hear it, deep down. I say, did you bring anything to eat?”

“Some bread that I couldn’t manage at breakfast.”

“So did I,” said the boy. “P’r’aps we may want it by-and-by.”

“We want better lights, Dummy,” said Mark, after they had progressed some distance.

The boy turned round with a merry look, and was about to suggest

torches once more, but at a glance from Mark's eyes, he altered his mind and said:

"Yes, those don't give much."

But pitiful as the light was, it was sufficient for them to see walls covered with fossils, stalactites hanging from the roofs of chambers, others joined to the stalagmites on the floor, and forming columns, curtains, and veils of petrifaction, draping the walls as they went through passage, hall, and vast caverns whose roofs were invisible. And all the time, sometimes plainly, sometimes as the faintest gurgling whisper, they heard the sound of flowing water beneath their feet.

"Well, this is grand!" said Mark; "but it's of no use."

"Aren't no lead," said the boy quietly; "but it's fine to have such a place, and be able to say it's ours. May be some use."

"But I say, how are you going to find your way back?"

"Oh, I dunno," said the boy carelessly. "I've often been lost in the other parts, and I always found my way out."

"Yes, but how?"

"Oh, I dunno, quite, Master Mark," said the boy earnestly, "but it's somehow like this. I turn about a bit till I feel which is the right way, and then I go straight on, and it always is."

"Mean that, Dummy?"

"Oh yes, Master Mark; that's right enough. But come along."

There was a certain excitement in penetrating the dark region, with its hills and descents, passages and chambers, deep cracks and chasms, down in which water was running, and strange ways, formed either by the settling or opening of the rock, or literally cut away by the rushing water; and every step was made interesting by the weird shapes around, formed by the dripping of water from the roof.

Earth there was none, the stalactites and stalagmitic formations were of the cleanest stone, pale drab, cream, or ruddy from the solution of iron; and at last, when they must have been walking, climbing, forcing their way through narrow cracks, or crawling like lizards, for hours, the boy stooped by a little pool of crystal water in the floor, and said:

“Don’t you think a bit o’ bread and cheese would be nice, Master Mark?”

“Yes; that’s what’s the matter with me,” cried the lad. “I was beginning to feel poorly. It’s because I did not have a proper breakfast.”

The next minute they had stuck their twice renewed candles in a crack in the rock wall, and were seated upon a dry stalagmite looking like the top of a gigantic mushroom, eating ravenously, and moistening their dry food with copious draughts from the crystal pool. There was water, too, below them, a low rushing gurgle announcing that they were still following the course of the subterranean stream running through a wide crevice in the floor.

“How much farther does it go, Dummy?”

The boy shook his head.

“May be for miles; but we’ll see now, won’t we?”

“Let’s finish our eating first, and then see how we feel,” said Mark. “If we don’t now, we will some other time. I say, if that water was not running, how quiet it would be!”

“Yes,” said Dummy, with his mouth full. “I don’t think anybody was ever here before.”

“I suppose not,” said Mark, looking round.

“Here, have some more of my cheese,” said the boy. “You haven’t got none.”

Mark nodded, and took the piece cut by the boy’s pocket-knife, for it improved the dry bread.

“It’s some of yours,” said Dummy, with a grin. “They give it me in the kitchen.”

Mark was looking round, and listening to the water.

“I say, Dummy, suppose there was to be a storm outside, and this place filled up, we should be drowned.”

“Never been no water along here, only drips,” said the boy, examining the floor. “No, there’s never been any floods here.”

“How do you know?”

“Been some mud or sand left,” said the boy, scraping in a narrow chink in the floor. “All hard stone.”

“I suppose you’re right; but we must be very deep down.”

“No. I have been thinking, just as you have to when we’re looking for fresh lead, we’ve been down a deal, and we’ve been up a deal, ’bout as much one as t’other. I should say we’re just a little lower down than when we started from that big water-hole, but not much.”

“Made my back ache a bit, Dummy,” said Mark, with a groan, as he leaned himself against a column which was pleasantly smoothed and curved.

“Yes, we’ve come a good way,” replied Dummy, “and you didn’t have no sleep last night.”

The boy munched his last crust, and then lay flat down on his breast, with his mouth over the pool, lowered his lips, and took a long deep drink, after the fashion of a horse. After this, he rolled himself clear away, and lay upon his back, staring at the two candles stuck in the crack a few feet above his head.

“Does rest your back and lynes, Master Mark, to lie like this for a bit. You just try it.”

There was no reply.

“D’you hear, Master Mark? You try it.”

Still no response, and he turned his head, to see that his companion’s chin was resting upon his chest.

“Sleep!” said Dummy, with a little laugh. “Can’t stand being up all night like I can. Being on night-shifts, sometimes, I s’pose. Well, let him sleep for a few minutes, and then I’ll wake him.”

Then all was blank.

Chapter Twenty Three.

Just in Time.

All at once Dummy Rugg uttered a peculiar snort, and started up in a sitting position, with the thought still fresh in his brain that he must rouse up Mark from his nap.

But all was dark, and there was the gurgling rush of the water below. “Why, I’ve been asleep,” muttered the lad excitedly. “Think o’ me doing that!”

He rose quickly, and felt for the crack in which he had stuck the candles, narrowly escaping a plunge into the little pool from which he had drunk.

He found the spot where the candles had been, both of them; he could feel it by the size, and knew it by the shape, for it grew smaller at each extremity, so that he had been able to wedge the ends of the candles tight.

Yes: there was no doubt about it. Both candles, as if to be in fashion with the stony drippings of the cavern, had run down a little, to form tiny stalagmites of grease.

“Burnt right out,” muttered Dummy, still more excitedly. “Why, I may ha’ been asleep for hours.”

Thrusting his hand into his breast, there was a faint rattle as he drew out tinder-box and match, and then felt for a candle in the box he had carried slung by a strap from the shoulder, and laid it ready.

The next minute he was nicking a piece of flint against the steel, striking sparks down into the box, and at the second sharp click Mark started awake.

“Yes! What is it?” he cried—“Where am I?”

“On’y here, Master Mark,” replied the boy. “Candle’s gone out.”

“Why, Dummy! Have we been to sleep?”

“I s’pose so, Master Mark. Po–o–o–o–f–f–uf! There we are!”

He had obtained a light, the match burning up brightly, and then the candle, after the fluffy wick had been burnt and blown.

“How tiresome! I don’t know, though. I feel rested.”

“Being up all last night, I s’pose,” said Dummy, as he stuck the candle in the crack.

“Yes, of course; that’s it. Think we’ve been asleep long?”

“I dunno. Fear’d so.”

“Let’s go back, then, at once,” said Mark, springing to his feet. “Why, we may have been asleep for hours. Light another candle, and let’s get back.”

“Right, Master Mark. Well, it don’t much matter, for we hadn’t nothing to do.”

The second candle was lit, and stuck in the rough wooden carrying-stick, the other was taken from the crack in the stone and treated the same.

“Won’t go no furrer, then, Master Mark?” said the boy.

“No, not to-day,” said Mark decisively, as he looked round the chamber,

and then stooped to take a draught of the clear water, an example Dummy followed.

“Ready, Master Mark?”

“Yes, lead on. But which way?”

“Don’t you know, sir?” said Dummy grinning.

“Haven’t the least idea. Have you?”

“Yes, sir. This way. I know.”

“But are you sure you are right?”

“Ay, this is right.”

“Then you have been there before?”

“Nay, never; but I can feel that’s right,” and he pointed in the opposite direction to that which Mark felt they ought to take.

“Forward, then, and let’s get out as quick as we can.”

“Yes, but it’ll take some time;” and the boy led on.

“Why, Dummy,” cried Mark, suddenly, “we must have slept for hours and hours.”

“How do you know, sir?”

“Why, I can feel.”

“In your head, like, sir?” said Dummy eagerly.

“Head? No: somewhere else,” cried Mark, laughing. “I am half-starved.”

A good three hours must have elapsed before, after a weary climb and tramp, and when the last candle had been lit, the two lads emerged from behind the stony veil into the grotto-like place that had deceived Mark Eden.

“Don’t matter about candles now, Master Mark,” said Dummy; “I could find my way out ready enough by touching the wall with one hand.”

“Well, make haste and let’s get out; I don’t want to be in fresh trouble through stopping so long. I believe it’s supper-time.”

“Yes, Master Mark,” replied the boy, “and so do I.”

They had still a long way to go, but once past the veil of stalactite, they began to enter the workings with the passages and chambers possessing fairly level floors, made for the convenience of transporting the ore to the mouth of the mine. The walking then became comparatively easy, but Mark’s weariness was on the increase, and there were moments when the faint glow of light which spread around Dummy, as he walked in front, grew misty and strange, playing fantastic tricks to the observer’s eye: now it seemed close to him; now it and the black silhouette it formed of the bearer’s body appeared to be far-off, and to die away in the distance, but only to return again with a sudden jerk, as Mark started and tried to step out more firmly.

At these moments, his own candle having burned out, Mark watched the shadow of his companion dancing about, now on the floor, now on the ceiling or on either side, looking grotesque and goblin-like for a few moments, and then dying out again and causing the lad to start, as he felt in a dreamy way that he was being left behind, though on recovering his fleeting senses it was only to find that Dummy was almost within touch.

This had been going on for some time, when Mark spoke:

“I say, don’t go right away and leave me, Dummy.”

“Who’s a-going to?” said the boy, looking round in surprise.

“I know you wouldn’t on purpose, but keep looking round. I can’t keep awake. My legs do, but all the rest goes to sleep, and I begin getting in a muddle.”

“Oh, we shall soon be out now,” said the boy laughing.

“Soon be out! I never knew the place was so big before. Keep looking

back to see that I don't drop down fast asleep."

"I'd make you go first," said Dummy, "but you don't know the way."

"No: keep on as you are, and make haste."

"Can't: must go steady, because of the candle."

"Oh dear!" sighed Mark. "I am so sleepy, and it's beginning to get down below my belt, to where my leg was hurt."

"No, no, don't you think that," cried Dummy. "Let's keep on talking."

"Yes," said Mark, jumping at the proposal. "Let's keep talking—Who are you laughing at?"

"You, Master Mark. You are sleepy. 'Tarn't far, now. Fresh air'll soon rouse you."

There was no reply, and as the boy glanced back he could see that his companion was beginning to reel about like a drunken man, and that his eyes had a peculiar dull, fixed look.

The next minute the lids drooped, and he walked on as if that which he had said was quite true—that all was fast asleep but the legs, which went on automatically, and supported their load.

"With a fal, lal-lal, lal-lalla, lalla, la!" yelled Dummy, not unmusically; and it had its effect, for Mark sprang at him, and caught him by the shoulder.

"What was that?" he cried excitedly.

"On'y me singing, Master Mark. Soon be out now."

"That's what you keep on saying," cried the lad, pettishly. "I don't believe we're going right. You've taken a wrong turning by mistake. Here, I can't go any farther, Dummy. I must lie down and go to sleep again. It's horrible to keep on like this. I know I shall fall."

"You do, and I'll stick a pin in you," said the boy roughly.

“What!”

“I’m not going to have you fall asleep again. Come, rouse up, Master Mark; I’m ashamed of you. For two pins I’d hit you over the head.”

“What!” cried Mark, in an access of passion; “why, you ugly big-headed mole, how dare you speak to me like that?”

“’Cause I like,” cried Dummy sharply. “Talking of going to deep, like a great gal. Yah! Gen’lemen aren’t no use. Never do have no legs.”

“You insolent dog!” roared Mark, leaping at him, and striking the boy twice heavily on the back, with the result that the one candle was jerked out of the stick he carried, to fly forward on to the floor, flicker for a moment or two, and then, before it could be seized, go out, and with it Mark’s bit of passion.

“Oh!” he cried, as he stood fast in the darkness.

“There, you’ve done it now,” cried Dummy, in mock tones of horror.

“Yes, be quick; get out the flint and steel.”

“What for?”

“To get a light.”

“For you to begin knocking me about again.”

“No, no, Dummy; I won’t touch you again. It was your fault: you made me so cross.”

“All right, Master Mark,” said the boy, with a good-humoured laugh. “I only did it o’ purpose to wake you up, and it has. I don’t mind what you did. Don’t feel sleepy now, do you?”

“No, no, I’m quite awake. The drowsy feeling has gone off. Come, light the candle.”

“Shan’t now,” replied Dummy. “We’re only a little way off now, and I can

manage.”

“But are you sure?”

“Oh yes, I’m sure enough, Master Mark. Wait a minute.”

“Yes. What are you going to do?”

“Only unloose a few rings of this line we brought.”

“What for? If you play me any tricks now we’re in the dark, I’ll—”

“Who’s going to play any tricks?” grumbled the boy. “Men don’t play tricks. Here, kitch holt: now you can follow me, and feel me, if you keep the rope tight, and won’t go hitting yourself again the wall.”

Mark grasped the end of the rope handed to him, and they started forward in the intense blackness, the novelty and sense of shrinking soon passing off, and the lad feeling more and more confidence in his leader.

“Don’t feel a bit sleepy now, do you?” asked Dummy.

“Not in the least. I say, are you sure that you can go on without taking a wrong turning?”

“Oh yes, I’m right enough, Master Mark.”

“How far is it now?”

“On’y ’bout fifty fathom or so. We’re just getting to the rise.”

“Then we—no, you’re wrong. We can’t be. Why, if we were so near the mouth we should see daylight.”

“What! in the middle o’ the night? Not you.”

“What! You don’t think it’s so late as that?”

“Yes, I do. It’s past twelve o’clock, if it’s a minute.”

“Then we must have slept a very long time below there.”

“Hours upon hours,” said Dummy, chuckling.

“Hark! What’s that?” said Mark excitedly.

“Shouting,” said the boy, after listening. “My! they are making a row about it. They’re coming to fetch us, because we’ve been so long.”

The two lads were still making for the mouth of the mine, and were now ascending the rough steps, to pause by the stone shed inside the entrance, where tools, gunpowder for blasting, and several kinds of tackle were kept, in among the candles and torches.

“Here, Dummy,” cried Mark excitedly, as the noise outside and above them increased, “what does this mean? They’re fighting!”

“Fighting?” cried the boy excitedly.

“Yes, what can it mean?”

“Mean, Master Mark? I can tell you. It’s the Darleys come at last to take our place. Oh, why didn’t I kill young Ralph that night when I followed him home through the wood?”

“You did what?”

“Followed him. I wasn’t sure he’d been trying to kill you, or I would.”

“Come along, and don’t talk,” whispered Mark excitedly. “Ah! I have no sword.”

“Got a pick in your belt, and so have I.”

“You’ll stand by me, Dummy?”

“Won’t I, Master Mark! I want to get a hit at some of ’em. You won’t stop me, will you, to-night?”

“If they’ve come and attacked us, no. Hush, quiet! Let’s steal out first, and see.”

The night was very dark as they left the mouth of the mine, but after their

late experience it seemed to both to be comparatively light, and with Mark now armed with the miner's pick, which he felt would be a good substitute for a battle-axe, they hurried up the steps, with the noise above increasing, but seeming to be over on the other side of the little castle. A minute or two later they had reached the platform which led to their right over the narrow natural bridge, to the left, through the gateway into the first courtyard. This was empty, and they ran lightly across it, to find that the encounter was going on beyond the second gateway, which led into the little inner courtyard, surrounded by the dwelling-house portion of the castle. Both gateways were furnished with means of defence, the outer having an iron grille of heavy crossed bars, while the second had folding doors of massive oak, with a wicket for ordinary use in the lower part of one of the folds. But in spite of the enmity between the two families, little heed had of late been given to the defences. Sir Edward had considered that the outer gate at the end of the natural bridge was sufficient, as there was so little likelihood of an attack without warning; and, as far as Mark could make out, it seemed that under cover of the darkness the enemy had crossed the bridge and forced the gate under the little towers, when the rest would be easy for them. They had only had to pass through the first courtyard, and were now in the lesser or inner court, evidently trying to batter down the entrance door into the hall.

They must have begun their work before Sir Edward and his people were alarmed; but how long before it was impossible to tell. What met the eyes of the two lads now was an armed group trying to batter in the great door by means of a beam they had brought up into the yard, while others, armed with pikes, guarded their companions, upon whom missiles of all kinds were being dashed down from above, and thrusts were being made with other pikes from the windows which flanked or overhung the door.

"The Darleys," whispered Dummy, as they peered together round the inner corner of the gateway dividing the two courts.

"In with it, boys!" roared a hoarse voice; and they dimly made out a heavy figure standing in the shelter of the wall.

"Captain Purlrose and his gang," whispered back Mark huskily. "I wonder how many men my father has in there."

“They were going over to Dexham for a holiday, all but them as was hurt,” whispered Dummy. “Come on and help, or the robbers’ll get in.”

A pang shot through Mark, and he grasped the handle of his pick firmly, ready for a dash, but the feeling that it would be utter madness kept him back. For he knew that even if he could strike down two of the attacking party, they must succumb to the others, and they would have done no good.

It was all plain enough. Purlrose must have gained the information that the mine people were away, and that Sir Edward would be almost without defenders, and, out of revenge for the previous night’s attack, have seized the opportunity for a reprisal.

“Why, Dummy,” he whispered, with his lips close to the other’s ear, “if they take the castle, they’ll keep it, and turn us out.”

“Yes, and grab the mine,” said the boy hoarsely. “Well, we mustn’t let ’em.”

Bang, *bang*, came the reports of a couple of arquebuses from one of the windows, but no harm was done, and the men answered with a derisive cheer and continued their battering of the door, which still resisted their efforts.

Another shot was fired, but still without effect, and Mark ground his teeth together as he felt the impotency of his father’s efforts now that the enemy had stolen in beyond the gates that would have been admirable for defence.

“Well, aren’t you going to do something, Master Mark?”

“What can I do, Dummy?” cried the lad, in despair. “We might shut these gates, and defend them.”

“Yes, so we could; but what’s the good?”

Just then there was a quick flash and a sharp roar close to the doorway, and in the bright light the lads saw the men drop the beam and run back; but no one was hurt, and in answer to a roar of orders from their leader,

the enemy seized the beam again and began to drive it against the centre of the great door.

“Running away from that,” roared Purlrose; “handful of powder rolled up in a bag and thrown at you! Down with it! they’ve got no more.”

“Yes, they have,” whispered Dummy, excitedly. “Here, Master Mark, quick!”

Mark grasped the idea, without explanation, and ran back with his companion, leaving the shouting, cursing, and firing behind, to descend with him to the mouth of the mine, and then downward to the big stone shed, where Dummy tore open the great oaken closet, and drew out a bag of the coarse blasting-powder used in the mine.

“Feel in that box, Master Mark; that’s it. You know. The fuse cord.”

Mark had a roll of loose twisted hemp soaked in saltpetre and powder out of the box directly, and armed with a powder-bag each, they hurried trembling back, to reach the gateway, peer round the corner, and see that the attack was going on as fiercely as ever, while the defence was very weak, and they knew that before long the door must yield. In fact, amidst a burst of cheers, a hole had been already driven through, to be made use of by the defenders for sending thrusts out with their pikes.

“Up with you,” whispered Mark, and the two lads hurried up a little winding staircase on to the top of the inner gate-tower, from whence they could go along one side of the little yard, hidden by the crenellated battlement, till they were about five-and-twenty feet from where the men were carrying on their attack.

“Light it, and chuck it among ’em,” whispered Dummy, but he proceeded with system. “Put t’other inside the doorway,” he whispered. “Don’t want that to go off too.”

Mark obeyed, and returned unseen by those below, or the party defending the hall-door, to find that his companion, used to seeing such things done, had cut a little hole in the side of the powder-bag, inserted a piece of the fuse, and thrust the rest in his pocket.

“Here, you hold the end of the string up,” whispered Dummy; and there was a rattling noise, as he took out the flint and steel he was carrying.

A cold chill ran through Mark.

“Mind,” he whispered; “you’ll blow us to pieces.”

“Nay, I won’t,” said the lad, between his teeth. “You hold the thing in your hands; open it out a bit. I won’t send no sparks nigh the powder. Aren’t afeared, are you?”

“No,” said Mark, setting his teeth; and stooping down, he screened the bag by passing the fuse between his knees, holding the frayed-out end ready while Dummy made a low clicking noise, and cleverly sent a shower of sparks down upon the prepared hemp.

It caught directly, and began to sparkle and sputter, Mark holding it firmly, but feeling as if he were the victim of some horrible nightmare dream.

“That’s the way,” said Dummy, coolly replacing the flint and steel. “It won’t go off yet. I want it to burn till it’s nearly ready, and then heave it down right amongst ’em. Make some on ’em squint.”

“Throw it—throw it,” panted Mark hoarsely.

“Nay, not yet. They’d see it burning, and tread it out. Here, you let me have it. I’ll hold it to the last minute, and when I throw, you duck yourself down, or you might get burnt.”

Dummy took hold of the burning cord with his left hand, the bag with his right, pressing his companion out of the road, and then standing twitching the sparkling fuse, which was only a few inches away from the powder in the bag.

“I’ve often seen it done,” he whispered.

A shout came up from the little court, for the followers of Captain Purlrose had again driven their battering ram through the great door, and a shout of defiance came back from the hall from a few voices, among which Mark recognised his father’s; but he could not turn from that sparkling

piece of line to glance over the stony battlement to see what was being done. His eyes were fascinated, and nothing could have withdrawn them then.

He had proved again and again that he was no coward, but a great terror chained him now, and his voice trembled as he panted out:

“Quick—quick; throw—throw!”

“Nay, not yet. I’m watching of it. Father always waits till there’s on’y about an inch, to make sure it’ll go off.”

There was not much more as he spoke, and just then, in obedience to an order from their captain, the men drew back from the doorway, balancing the beam swung between them, as, four on each side now, it hung from their hands, and backing till they were past the spot where the pair were crouching.

“Now, all together, my brave boys,” cried Purlrose; “a good run, and down goes the door. Off!”

The order answered for Dummy as well as the men, and feeling now that he had waited too long, the boy swung the bag over the battlement. The passage through the air increased the sparkling of the fuse, and before it touched the pavement, a few feet in front of the men starting for their run, there was a wondrous flash of light, a fierce wind drove the two lads backward, and then came a deafening roar, mingled with the breaking of glass, a yell of horror, and as the roof still quivered beneath the lads’ feet they heard the rush of men through the gateway, across the next court, and through the outer opening on to the bridge, and then down the first slope.

“Come on!” cried Dummy, running to the low doorway of the gate-tower, where he picked up the other powder-bag, and, hardly knowing what he did, Mark followed him down the winding stair into the gateway.

“Come on!” cried Dummy again, and Mark still followed, across the outer court and the first gateway, grasping the pick from his belt, feeling that they were about to charge the rear of the flying enemy.

“Come on,” shouted Dummy, for the third time, and they crossed the narrow space, which brought them to the little tower and gateway by the natural bridge, where, as Mark closed up, he could hear the babble and growl of voices from the bottom of the first slope.

“Shied it too soon,” growled the boy. “I don’t believe it’s killed one.”

“They’re coming back, Dummy,” cried Mark, “and the gate’s broken away from the hinges.”

“Then they shall have it this time,” cried the lad, and cutting a hole with his knife in one corner of the powder-bag, he held it down at one side behind the massive wall of the little tower, and striding his legs, walked slowly forward till he reached the middle of the bridge, where he plumped the powder-bag down, after leaving a little train of the black grains behind him where he walked.

Then carefully avoiding it, he stepped quickly back to where Mark was standing, and took out and handed him the flint and steel.

“You do it this time,” he said. “We shall be in shelter here. I’ll watch and say when.”

Mark took the rough implements, and knelt down by the commencement of the train.

“Hold it close down, quite steady, and give one good nick, and it will set the powder off.”

“Come on, you cowardly dogs,” cried a now familiar voice. “There’s everything that’s good in there, and the place will be ours, I tell you. What, going to be scared by a puff of smoke? The place is our own now. All here?”

“Ay,” came in a growl.

“Form in good order, three abreast, and charge right across and into the yard. Halt! Steady! To think of running for a flash in the pan!”

“You ran too,” growled a voice.

“You won’t be happy till you’re strung up, Hez Bingham,” cried the captain. “Now then: swords. Steady! Forward!”

“Now!” whispered Dummy; and as the men tramped on to the bridge for their renewed attack, Mark struck the steel with his flint, and a tiny spark or two fell.

“Quick—another!” whispered Dummy, and the men halted in the middle of the bridge.

“Forward!” shouted the captain from the rear; “what are you halting for?”

“What’s this here?” growled one of the men in the first line, for he had caught sight of the powder-bag lying in the middle of the pathway, his question taking off his comrades’ attention from the two sharp clicks which came from behind the lesser gateway.

But they saw a little line of light and smoke running over the stone paving of the bridge, and with a yell of horror, they turned and fled hurriedly back and down the slope.

“Don’t look!” yelled Dummy, forcing Mark aside, when the flash brought the castle and summit of the Black Tor into full view; then there was an awful muffled roar, which went echoing away, and as it died out, the two lads dashed across the bridge to the head of the zigzag descent, to make out by hearing that the enemy were in full retreat.

“I think that settled ’em,” said Dummy quietly. “You did it fine, Master Mark.”

“Hoi! Who’s there?” cried a voice behind them.

“Dummy Rugg, father.”

“And you, my boy? Thank Heaven! I was afraid something was wrong.”

“Then it was you two with my powder,” cried another voice out of the darkness.

“Yes, Dan Rugg, and a splendid use they made of it,” cried Sir Edward.

“Well done, my lads. But come into shelter; they surprised us, with everything left open. We must lock the stable door now. Think they’ll come again, Rugg?”

“Nay, Sir Edward; not to-night. Those explosions will bring our lads up to see what’s the matter.”

“Well, secure the gates as we go in.”

Dan Rugg was right. Within half-an-hour a dozen men had come up and been admitted, ready to meet the enemy should he return, but the silence up at the Black Tor was not disturbed again that night.

“Out of revenge for you boys’ attack,” said Sir Edward, when he had heard his son’s account of their proceedings in the mine, and Dummy’s clever thought about the powder. “It might have meant the loss of this place. But there must be an end to it now. You lads were so handy with the powder-bags that you shall try your hands upon that wasps’ nest, for I can’t rest now till I’ve had it well burnt out. Pity more powder was not used this time. I don’t believe they were more than singed, and half my windows were smashed.”

“But if we had used more powder, father,” said Mark, smiling, “we might have knocked down the place.”

Chapter Twenty Four.

An Enemy in Distress.

The rattling of a handful of tiny pebbles took Mark Eden to his window that morning—for it was beginning to grow grey in the east when he went to his bed, Sir Edward insisting upon his going, and announcing that he was going to keep watch with three men.

Mark pleaded for permission to join in the vigil, but Sir Edward firmly ordered him to go and take proper rest; so he went, feeling that after such an exciting time sleep would be impossible, and going off directly into a deep dreamless slumber, from which he was awakened by that

shower of pebbles.

He threw open the casement, fully expecting to find that he had been summoned to help defend the place from a fresh attack; but only saw Dummy Rugg below in the yard, waving his arms to him.

“Dress yourself and come down, Master Mark,” cried Dummy, in a hoarse whisper, uttered between his hands. “What is it—the enemy?”

“Yes,” said Dummy, nodding his head a great deal. “He wants to see you.”

“Me or my father?”

“You,” whispered Dummy mysteriously. “Look sharp.”

Mark did look as sharp as he could, hurriedly washing and dressing, while still feeling stupid and thick with sleep.

As he went down he saw one of the servants, and asked for Sir Edward, but learned that his father had not long gone to his chamber.

He went out of the battered hall-door, looked round at the shivered casements and the walls blackened and whitened by the powder blast, and then hurried through the gateway into the outer court.

But Dummy was not there now, so he passed through and saw the boy waiting at the entrance of the gateway which had protected the bridge so poorly on the previous night.

“Where is he?” cried Mark.

“Bit o’ the way down the path,” was the reply.

“Is it Captain Purlrose?” asked Mark.

“Yah! No, not him. T’other enemy.”

“What enemy? Whom do you mean?”

“Him you hate so. Young Ralph Darley.”

“Here?” cried Mark in astonishment.

“Yes; I see him coming up, and was going to heave a big stone down on him, but he threw up his hands, and called out as he wanted you.”

“Why, what can he want?” cried Mark, flushing with fresh excitement.

“I dunno, but it’s some mischief, or a Darley wouldn’t have come. You be on the look out: he’s got his sword. I’ll come with you and let him have my pick if he means anything again’ you. He’s heard of the fighting, and thinks we’re beat; so just you look out.”

“You stop here,” said Mark sharply, for he felt that this must be an advance toward friendship on the part of the Darleys—that on hearing of the attack Sir Morton had sent his son as an ambassador, to offer to join Sir Edward Eden in an expedition to crush their mutual foe.

“Stop here, Master Mark, and let you go into danger,” cried Dummy. “I won’t!”

“Stop here, sir! How dare you!” cried Mark. “Do you think that I cannot defend myself against a boy like that?”

“He’s as big a boy as you are, Master Mark, and I won’t let you go alone.”

“Dummy, you’re an insolent dog,” cried Mark haughtily. “Keep your place, sir, or I’ll never go down the mine with you again.”

“Oh, very well,” said the boy sulkily, “but if he cuts your head off, don’t come and howl about it to me after it’s done.”

“I promise you I won’t,” cried Mark.

“And I shall climb up yonder and watch you, Master Mark; and if he kills you I’ll follow him till I get him, and I’ll take him and heave him down that big hole in the mine, where the water falls.”

Mark hardly heard this, for he was hurrying over the bridge, followed by Dummy, who, as his young master went down the zigzag path, began to climb up to where he could keep watch, a sentry being higher still, where

he could command the approaches to the Tor Castle.

At the bottom of the third slope, Mark came upon Ralph, who was approaching to meet him, and at a glance he saw that something terrible had happened, for the lad's face was haggard and wild. There were smears of blood about his temples, while his face looked as if it had been washed, and some injury had bled again. In addition, a closer inspection showed that his hair had been singed off on one side, while the other was matted by dry blood.

"Why, hullo! Have you been in the wars too?"

"Help!" cried the lad, holding out his hands to him imploringly.

"Help? You come to me!" said Mark wonderingly.

"Yes, to you, mine enemy," cried Ralph, with a wild hysterical cry. "I am humbled now—there is no one else to go to. Oh, for pity's sake, help!"

He covered his face with his hands in his shame and agony, feeling that his manhood had gone out of him, and Mark felt that something terrible must have occurred, for a burst of hysterical sobbing escaped from the wounded lad, and he threw himself face downward upon the path.

For a moment shame and contempt reigned in Mark Eden's breast, but they were chased away by a manly feeling of pity for the enemy who seemed to be humbling himself so before him.

Then all selfishness passed away in turn, and the word enemy dropped out of his being as the true English boy shone out of his eyes in compassion for a lad who had evidently passed through some terrible experience.

"I say! Darley," he said gently, "don't go on like that. I know, though I don't like you, that you are a brave lad, and it hurts me to see you so. There's a sentry up yonder, and our boy, Dummy. Don't let them see you cry. It's like a woman."

Ralph sprang to his feet, with his face distorted, and his eyes flashing wildly.

“Yes,” he cried fiercely, “like a weak, pitiful girl; but I couldn’t keep it back. If it had not come I should have gone mad, for my head felt as if it was on fire. That’s past now, and I can talk. You see how I am, I have come to you and your father—to you Edens, our enemies—to ask you by all that is holy, by all that’s manly, to help me.”

He stopped, panting, and trying to speak, but the words would not come; he was choking. The blood seemed to rush to his temples so that the veins stood out, and he reeled and would have fallen had not Mark caught, supported him, and lowered him down upon the rocky path.

Then looking up, he shouted to Dummy.

“Fetch two men here—quick!” he cried.

Dummy disappeared, and Mark knelt down and unfastened the neck of the lad’s doublet, and saw that his head had received a bad cut, for the cap had fallen off, and his face was ghastly.

“Poor lad!” said Mark softly. “I know it’s wrong, but I can’t help liking him. Why, I know,” he cried excitedly. “That’s it. I never saw such an enemy! He must have known that we were being attacked, and been coming to help us, and those fiends have served him like this. That’s it! He’s just the fellow who would do it, for I know he likes me. I’ve seen it over and over again.”

He sprang up, feeling ashamed of what he had said, and afraid of being seen by his people, for he heard steps coming; and directly after, Dummy came running down, followed by a couple of stout miners, each fully armed.

“Here, Dummy,” cried Mark, “run all the way to Master Rayburn, and tell him to come here directly.”

“Go to fetch Master Rayburn for him?” said the boy, staring.

“Yes, can’t you see he is wounded and burnt? Run, or I’ll go myself!”

Dummy, awed by this—to him—awful threat, dashed down the zigzag at a dangerous pace, while, at their young master’s orders, the two miners

gently lifted and bore the insensible lad up to the castle, into the dwelling-house, and then to Mark's chamber, where he was laid upon the bed.

As soon as he had dismissed the bearers, Mark began to bathe the lad's temples, and in a few minutes he opened his eyes and stared wildly round.

"Where am I?" he said.

"Here: safe," said Mark.

Recollection came back to the poor fellow's swimming brain, and he threw his legs off the couch and tried to rise, but sank back with a groan.

"There: you can't," said Mark soothingly, and he took his hand. "Tell me—what's happened? You didn't see, because you'd fainted when I had you brought in, but we're in trouble too. But I suppose you know. Were you going to help?"

"To help?" said Ralph faintly. "No; to ask for help. They took us by surprise. Our men wounded. Just at day-break. We were all asleep. They climbed in."

"Who did? Purlrose?"

"Yes; and his men. Father called me to dress, and we called the men together, but they got between us and the arms. The cowards! they cut us down. The poor lads who were wounded too. All so sudden. In a few minutes it was all over. Father prisoner—half our men dead; rest locked in one of the lower rooms: and I crawled away—to lie down and die, I thought."

"Why, it must have been after they had failed here," muttered Mark.

"They did not see me; I was behind an over-turned table, and a curtain and chair over me. I could hear all they said. They sat and drank after they had dragged out four of our poor fellows, dead."

"Then they sat and talked; I heard them. That captain said Cliff Castle would do as well as Black Tor, and they would stay there."

“Ah!” panted Mark excitedly.

“And a great deal more. It meant that they’d taken the place, and I felt then that I must die. I don’t know how long they were there. It was hot and stifling, and there was smoke, and a man rushed in, and said the prisoners had escaped, and set fire to the place.”

Ralph shuddered and was silent, till Mark began bathing his face again, when he seemed to revive a little, and wandered on:

“Fire burned so fast—crawled out—through the window—Minnie’s fish-pool—castle burning so fast—father—Minnie—help!—oh help!”

Chapter Twenty Five.

Drawing together.

Mark bathed the sufferer's face again, but there was no return to consciousness, and growing more and more alarmed, he hurried to his father's chamber and woke him, Sir Edward as he leaped up, still dressed, snatching eagerly at his sword. "You, Mark?" he cried. "The enemy?"

"Yes—no, father. Come quickly. Young Darley's here, dying."

"Young Darley here!"

"Yes, in my room," cried Mark wildly. "I've sent for Master Rayburn, but come and do something; we mustn't let the poor fellow die."

And in a wild incoherent way, he told Sir Edward all he knew.

"Then in their disappointment they went on down there," cried Sir Edward, as excited now as his son. "The fiends! the monsters!" he continued, as he entered his son's room. "Poor boy! Oh, Mark, lad, but for God's mercy, this might have been you. Oh! who can think about the old family enmity now? How long is it since you sent for old Rayburn?"

"Ever so long, father. Oh, I say, don't—don't say you think he'll die, father!"

"Heaven forbid, my boy," said Sir Edward softly, and he laid his hand gently on the wounded lad's brow—and kept it there as Master Rayburn entered the room.

"You've heard, then!" he cried, throwing down his hat and stick, and beginning to examine his patient.

"Yes, Mark tells me. Is it all true?"

"True, yes," growled Master Rayburn. "I find they attacked you, were

beaten, and then went across and round by the down to Cliff Castle. When I got there it was in ashes, burnt out, and the wretches had gone back with what plunder they could save, and two prisoners to their den."

"Two prisoners?"

"Yes—put your finger here, Mark, while I clip off his hair. Here's a bad cut—Sir Morton badly hurt, and his sweet young child, Minnie."

"Oh!" cried Sir Edward excitedly. "But is this true—are you sure?"

"I had it from one of his men, Nick Garth. Badly wounded too. But he and three others broke out of their window where they were prisoned, in a tower chamber, and out of revenge, to keep the enemy from keeping the place, as they were going to do, they set it on fire."

"Who did?" said Sir Edward sharply.

"Nick Garth and Ram Jennings. He's wounded too. A fine chance for you now, Eden. You can march in and take possession of your enemy's lands."

"I'll march in and take possession of that cursed den that my boy here tried to take, and failed," raged out Sir Edward. "Mark, we can do nothing here. Off with you, and muster every man we have. I can't show mercy now. Tell Daniel Rugg to get ready an ample supply of powder and fuses, and I'll blow up the hornets' nest, and let them stifle where they lie. Rayburn, you'll stay with this poor lad; and Heaven help you to save his life."

"Amen," said Master Rayburn softly.

"His father—his sister—carried off by these demons," muttered Sir Edward, and seizing his son's arm, he hurried with him to give his orders himself.

Mark Eden followed his father, feeling half stunned. The one thought which seemed to stand out clear above a tangle of others, all blurred and muddled, in his brain, was that these troubles—the attack on the Black Tor, and the hundred times more terrible one upon Cliff Castle—were

caused by him. Certainty Ralph Darley had something to do with it, but he was badly wounded and out of the question now, so that he, Mark Eden, must take all the blame.

Then, too, he could not understand his own acts. It all seemed so absurd, just such a confused sequence of events as would take place in a dream, for him to be listening to Ralph's appeal for help, and to begin pitying him, his natural enemy, feeling toward him as if he were his dearest friend; and then, with his heart burning with rage against those who had injured him and his, to follow his father, panting to get ready an expedition whose object was to drive Captain Purlrose and his murderous, thieving crew off the face of the earth.

That was not the greatest puzzle which helped to confuse Mark Eden, for there was his father's conduct, so directly opposed to everything which had gone before; but at last, after fighting with his confusion for some time, his head grew clearer, and he drew a long deep breath.

"I know how it is," he said to himself, with a curious smile, mingled of pleasure and pain; "the old trouble's dead. This business has killed it, and I'm jolly glad."

"Mark, boy," said his father just then, and it seemed to the lad that his father must have been thinking and feeling in a similar way, "I daresay you think my conduct strange, after all the teachings of the past, but nature is sometimes stronger than education, and after what has taken place we must, as English gentlemen, forget all old enmity, and behave toward the Darleys as—as—as—"

"I'm sure Ralph and his father would have behaved towards us, if we had been in such a terrible state."

"Yes, my boy—thank you—exactly," cried Sir Edward, with a sigh of relief. "I was afraid you would think it half mad and strange of me to be doing this, when—when you see we could go over and take possession of the Darley's place, and hold it for our own."

"But we couldn't now, father," cried Mark. "If it had been a challenge, and we had gone and attacked them, and conquered, it would have been grand, but the Edens couldn't go and fight wounded men—hit people

when they are down."

"No, my boy," said Sir Edward firmly; "the Edens could not do that."

A busy day followed, with the men collected in a state of the wildest excitement, those who had been wounded in the attack upon the cavern and the bitter encounter between the allies for the most part declaring their readiness to bear arms again.

"But you're not fit, Dan," said Mark, as he stood talking to the head miner.

"Not fit, Master Mark?" cried the sturdy old fellow, showing his teeth; "I'm going to show that gang of murderous wolves that I am very fit indeed. My arm won't go very well, and I turn a bit sick and swimming whenever I turn my head."

"Then you mustn't go," cried Mark.

"Mustn't, Master Mark," said the man grimly, "but I must. The lads'll fight as well again with me there. And look here: I won't use my right hand, and I won't turn my head; so I shall be all right, and I'm not going to fight."

"Then what is the use of your coming?"

The man half shut one eye.

"Powder!" he whispered—"powder. You know what that will do, eh?"

"Yes, you can manage that, Dan," said Mark thoughtfully.

"Better than any one else, my lad, and that aren't boasting. Look here, Master Mark; I've been having it over with the lads, and we all think the same. The Darleys are about as bad a lot as ever stepped, and they've done us a lot o' wrong, and deserved all we could give 'em, but they aren't deserved this, and we are going to forgive 'em a bit. Who's going to stand still and see a lot o' ragged rapscallions come and attack our enemies, and try to take that castle? It aren't to be borne, Master Mark; now is it?"

"No, Dan, it is not to be borne."

“Right, sir. I’ve heered everything now: how they’d took the castle, and was wineing and beering theirselves, and going to stop there, when Nick Garth—ah! I do mort’ly hate that fellow—sets fire to the place, and burns ’em out. Makes me feel as if I could half forgive him all old scores. My pick! It was a fine idea.”

“A grand idea, Dan.”

“And don’t you see, Master Mark, as they missed getting Cliff Castle, they’ll just wait their time, and catch us napping, and get this place.”

“Never,” cried Mark hotly.

“Never, it is, Master Mark. Me and the lads’ll blow the old place up first.”

“Mark, my boy,” cried Sir Edward just then; “here, I want you.”

The lad hurried to his father’s side, and a strong hand was clapped upon his shoulder, Sir Edward looking him full in the face, but with his eyes thoughtful and fixed.

“No,” he said suddenly, “they could not think that if you go alone.”

“Who, father? Where?” said Mark, staring.

“I’ve been thinking, boy,” said Sir Edward. “We can make up a good muster, but we ought to be as strong as we can, and it is only right to give Sir Morton’s poor fellows who are left a chance of striking a blow for their master and young mistress. Would you mind riding over to the enemy’s camp, and asking all who can to come and join us in our expedition this evening?”

“Mind? No, father: I should like to.”

“Then go at once.”

“Yes, father.”

“And bring back with you all you can. If it’s only four or five sturdy fellows, it is worth while; and I hope they will be willing to come under my

command—no, this will be better: ask them if they will follow you."

"I think I can bring them," cried Mark, flushing.

"Then off. Tell them we have plenty of arms."

Mark hurried away, gave Dummy orders to saddle the cob, and ran in and up to his own room, whose door he opened softly, to start in surprise on finding a nurse assisting Master Rayburn, and seated by the head of the bed, fanning the heated brow of the poor disfigured lad, as he lay muttering in delirium.

"You here, Mary," said Mark, in a sharp whisper.

"Of course she is, boy," cried the old man testily. "Woman's place—and girls grow to women—look finer than a queen on a throne, seated by a sick-bed."

"Yes," assented Mark. "How is he?"

"Couldn't be worse," said Master Rayburn. "There, go and beat the dogs, and if one of them bites you, we'll make up another bed, and nurse you too; won't we, Mary?"

"Oh, no, no, Mark dear; don't, pray don't you get hurt," whispered the girl wildly.

"He won't get hurt much," said Master Rayburn. "Come to stay?"

"No," said Mark, as he made the old man's eyes twinkle by going on tip-toe to the bedside, and gently taking Ralph's right hand which he held for a few moments, and then laid it back.

"Needn't put it down in such a hurry, boy," whispered the old man. "Didn't hurt you, did it?"

"Poor fellow! No," sighed Mark. "But I must go. Father has ordered me to go down the river to the Cliff, to try and get all the Darley men together to come and help in the attack."

“What!” cried Master Rayburn; “Sir Edward has told you to do that?”

“Yes,” said Mark, flushing hotly. “Well, what have you to say to it?”

“Nothing,” said the old man softly; “only, boy, that I wish you God speed.”

There was the clatter of hoofs heard through the open window, and Mark hurriedly kissed his sister.

“I’ll take care,” he said, smiling.

“But the Darley men may attack you, Mark,” she whispered excitedly.

“I’m not afraid,” he said, laughing. “Don’t let Ralph Darley die, Master Rayburn; he isn’t such a bad fellow after all.”

“Bah! Bad, indeed,” said the old man, pressing Mark’s arm, and looking at him proudly, “Deal better fellow than you.”

The next minute Mark leaped into the saddle, and the restive cob began to rear.

“Take me with you, Master Mark,” said Dummy, as he held the rein.

“Can’t! Must go alone, Dum. You come by my side to-night.”

“Got to carry bags of powder.”

“Well, I shall be there.”

“But s’pose the Darleys fight you, Master Mark?”

“They will not, Dummy,” cried Mark. “Let go.”

And pressing the cob’s sides, the little animal bounded over the narrow bridge, and would have galloped in a break-neck fashion down the steep zigzag but for the strong hand at the rein.

The pony had its own way, though, along the rough track by the river, on past Master Rayburn’s peaceful cottage, and away again, till at a bend of the stream the rider saw a cloud of smoke hanging over the ravens’ cliff,

and soon after caught sight of one corner of the castle, with the glorious beeches and sycamores low down, and birches high up, scorched and shrivelled; and now he saw through an alley burned by the flames driven downward by the wind that the beautiful old pile was reduced to a shell, in whose interior the smoke was still rising from a heap of smouldering wood.

As he drew nearer, and crossed the ford which led to the steep path up, he saw on one of the terrace platforms quite a crowd of women and children, collected from the outlying cottages and farms, all standing gazing at the smoking ruins; and on one side there was a little group of men, some standing, others sitting and lying down upon the stones.

“And if it had not been for Dummy our place might have been like this,” thought Mark, as he rode up. The men, as they caught sight of him, began to rise to their feet, two or three actively, the others as if in pain, but all wearing a savage scowl.

But Mark did not shrink. He rode right past the women, and drew rein, as Nick Garth said fiercely:

“Well, youngster, have you come to enjoy’s morning’s work?”

“What have I ever done to make you think me such a cowardly brute, Nick Garth?” said Mark boldly; as the others uttered a menacing growl. “Well,” he continued, “is that all you have to say? What about your young master?”

The man’s face was convulsed by a spasm, and he turned away, pointing the while at the smoking ruins.

“What does he mean by that?” said Mark to another of the men.

“They killed him,” said the man hoarsely. “Burned, poor lad! In yonder.”

“No, no,” cried Mark excitedly. “He escaped, and came up to us—to ask for help.”

“The young master?” cried Nick, turning back to look at the speaker fiercely; “why, I see him cut down with my own eyes.”

“I tell you, he crawled out of the fire. He’s badly wounded and burned, but he’s lying in my room, with Master Rayburn by his side.”

“Say that again—say that again, youngster!” cried Nick Garth, as he caught Mark fiercely by the hand, and thrust his blood-smeared and blackened face close to him.

“There is no need,” said Mark. “He is very bad, but he was able to ask us for help.”

A wild *hurrah*! burst from the men, even the worst wounded waving their hands, as they crowded round the startled pony, which began to rear, and tried to unseat his rider.

“Quiet!” cried Mark, patting the spirited little animal’s neck, and as soon as it was quiet, turning to the object of his mission.

“Now,” he said, “my father starts this evening to crush out this gang of miscreants and rescue Sir Morton and your young lady. We have plenty of swords and pikes, and I have come to ask as many of you as can strike a blow to join us.”

“Is this a trap, young gen’leman, to make an end of us now we’re weak and down?”

“Look in my eyes, Nick Garth,” said Mark, gazing straight at the sullen lowering face. “The Edens are gentlemen, not such vile cowards as that. Now then, who’ll come and strike a blow for Sir Morton, your young lady, and Master Ralph Darley, lying helpless there?”

“All on us, my lad,” cried Nick, with a fierce growl—“all on us as can manage to crawl.”

“Ay,” rose in a shout.

“It’s all right, lads,” continued Nick; “the young gen’leman means what he says. No one could be such a hound as to come down upon us now. I says it’s right, sir. We trust you, and if you’ll give us your hand like a man-like an Englishman should—we’ll come.”

Mark's hand went out, and his handsome young face shone with the glow that was at his heart, as he gripped the grimy blackened hand extended to him.

He held on tightly, and then gazed wonderingly at the man, whose face turned of a very ashy hue, and he caught at the pony's mane to save himself from falling.

"What is it?" cried Mark eagerly; "you are faint!"

"Got my hand brent a bit, young master," said the man, recovering himself with a forced laugh. "Better now."

He drew back, and limped a little.

"But you are badly hurt. I'll get Master Rayburn to run down."

"Nay. We'll come up to him. Let him stop with the young master."

"You are not fit to come."

"What! Not to have a stroke at them devils?" cried the man fiercely. "I'm a-coming, and so's all as can walk. I'd come if it was half a hour 'fore I was going to die. I did try to burn 'em where they were drinking together, on'y I was in too great a hurry. I ought to ha' waited till they was asleep."

Mark shuddered slightly, but he said no more, and proceeded to examine the men, all of whom, to the number of seven, declared themselves fit to come.

But, including Nick, there were only five really fit to bear arms; the rest had unwillingly to give up. Still, there were three quite uninjured, and these would, Mark felt, be a valuable addition to the little force at home, for they were burning to try and do something to help Sir Morton in his terrible strait; and even the women wished to join. But this was declared impossible, and soon after, feeling the strangeness of his position, Mark was riding back with his recruits.

Five minutes later, he cried, "Halt!" and sprang from his pony.

“Here, Garth,” he cried, “I can’t ride and see you limp along with that wounded leg.”

“Can’t help my leg being hurt, young sir,” cried the man sourly. “I won’t go back, so there!”

“I don’t want you to; I want you to strike for your master; but you are lame. There: up with you. Master Rayburn will make you better able to walk when we get to the Tor.”

“What, me ride on your pony?” said the man, staring.

“Yes: up, and don’t lose time.”

The man refused again and again, till Mark cried fiercely:

“You said you’d follow me, and I’m in command. Up this minute, sir;” and the man climbed into the saddle.

It was in this fashion that Mark Eden led the Darley men up the zigzag, and into the inner court of the Black Tor, where his father’s followers welcomed them with a hearty cheer, for, enemies they might be, but those assembled felt that they were stricken sore.

Chapter Twenty Six.

“Has your Father been a Soldier?”

There had been plenty going on in Mark’s absence of an hour or two, and as soon as he had seen the recruits to their little force settled down in the hall to rest and refresh, he hastened up to Master Rayburn to find how his patient was going on. “Badly, Mark, boy,” said the old man; “very badly. He has been wounded in the mind as well as body. The best remedy for him will be the knowledge that his father and sister are safe. Well, what fortune in your mission?”

“That’s good in two ways,” he said, as soon as he had heard Mark’s account; “strengthens your hands, and sounds as if the people are

getting as wise as their masters."

Mark did not wish to discuss that subject, for it was irksome to him at a time when he felt that he did not know whether the Darleys and he were enemies or friends, his thoughts going toward the former as being the more natural in connection with the past.

Under these circumstances, he hurried away, descended, and found his father superintending the repair of the gate which defended the castle by the bridge. The piping times of peace had caused carelessness, and this gate had been so neglected that Purlrose and his men had had no difficulty in levering it off the pivots, and gaining an entrance.

Sir Edward was determined not to be caught sleeping again, for sentinels had been posted, and various means taken for strengthening the place. As for the damage to the great doors of the hall, these had already been covered with stout boarding, and missiles in the shape of heavy stones and pigs of lead were piled up on the platform of each tower.

Under Dan Rugg's supervision, arquebuses had been cleaned and placed ready for use, and a couple of small cannon trained where they could sweep the approach to the bridge, and in turn the gateways leading into the outer and inner courts.

Sir Edward expressed himself as being highly pleased with his son's success; and, treating him in this emergency as if he were a man, he joined him in the little council of war that was held with Dan Rugg. In this the best way of proceeding was discussed, and it was determined that instead of waiting for the darkness, the attacking party should set off early in the evening.

For old Dan had said: "It's no use to think of trying to surprise them now, master; they'll be well on the look out for us, and have men ready. Means a sharp bit of fighting to get up to the hole yonder, but once we get there, the powder will fight for us."

"You mean to fire some at the entrance?" said Mark.

"Ay, Master Mark; that's it, and then send another bag in before us, and fire that, and go on doing it till we've either blasted 'em all out of the place

or made ’em so sick and sorry that they’ll cry surrender.”

The hours glided by, as it seemed to Mark, very slowly, till the time appointed for starting approached; and, after a final glance at Ralph, he was coming down, when Master Rayburn followed him.

“I should like to come with you, Mark, my boy,” he said gravely, “but my place is here. Heaven grant that you may be successful; and if you are,” he said meaningly, “there will be peace in our vale.”

Mark pressed his hand, buckled on his sword, and went down into the yard to join his father, who was giving final instructions to the wounded men about keeping the gates fast during their absence, not that an attack was expected, but “to make assurance doubly sure.”

While he was giving his last instructions, Dummy came running over the bridge, and trotted up to Sir Edward.

“Well, boy, could you see anything?”

“Yes,” replied Dummy, with a sharp nod of the head. “You can see two, if you go far enough, one on each side of the hill, keeping a look out.”

“Did they see you?”

“Nay, I was a-creeping among the bushes.”

“Then it is of no use to try and get up unobserved, Mark,” said Sir Edward, quietly. “It must be a bold open attack.”

He turned and said a few words to Sir Morton Darley’s men, Nick and the rest, after having had their injuries tended, and a few hours’ rest and refreshment, looking far better prepared for the encounter, and falling into their places with sullen determination.

Mark, at a word from his father, marched up alongside of Nick Garth, who gave him a surly nod, and seemed to be about to speak, but checked himself, and then let his curiosity master him.

“What ha’ they got in them baskets?” he said, nodding to a couple strung

from poles, and each hanging from two men's shoulders, "bread and cheese?"

"No: blasting-powder."

"Eh? What for?" said the man, staring.

"Blow out the cavern," said Mark quietly.

The man uttered a low long whistle, and then a grim smile covered his face.

"Hah!" he whispered, "that does a man good, young Eden! I was coming, and I meant to fight till I dropped; but after what we tried to do, I knew they'd be too many for us; but I begin to see my way now."

"Yes, they don't like the powder," said Mark. "We made them run with it when they attacked us here."

"What, did they 'tack you here?"

"Yes, and were beaten off, and came down to you."

"Well, it wasn't very neighbourly to send 'em down to us," said the man sourly.

"You should have beaten them off, and sent them back again," said Mark, smiling.

Then the order to march came, and the little band of sturdy men went off at a solemn tramp, Dummy carrying a couple of lanterns and a box slung from his shoulder, well supplied with torches, candles, and slow match, for the powder which it did not fall to his lot to bear.

As they passed over the bridge, the wounded men clanged to the gates, and two of them took their places on the tower above, while, as the party tramped across and turned to descend the zigzag, a thought came to Mark, and he turned back to glance at the window of his bed-chamber, as he wished that Ralph Darley were uninjured and marching by his side to help in the rescue of his father and sister.

There were two faces at the casement: those of Mary and Master Rayburn; and as the lad descended the slope they waved their hands to him. The next minute the cliff-side hid them from view.

The march in the calm bright evening was uneventful. Everything was so beautiful that it seemed hard to realise the horrors which had taken place during the past night, till Mark looked to right or left, and saw the bandages of several of the men. Nick Garth, too, was limping, but he resolutely kept on declaring that it was nothing to mind.

The Steeple Stone was left to the right, for there was this time no party of allies to meet; and very soon the great heavy mass of barren rocky hill loomed up before them, higher and higher, till the party were out from among the trees which had so far concealed their march, and proof was soon given that they were observed.

For all at once something was seen to be in motion, and Dummy shouted:

“There: I told you so!”

At the distance they then were, the object seen might have been a sheep or goat, slowly moving up the higher part of the mountain; but before long it stood out on the ridge, clear against the golden evening sky, plainly enough now a man.

Mark judged that after watching them the sentinel waved his hand to some one below, for the movement was seen, and a few minutes later another, and again another figure came up to stand clearly marked against the sky; and after a time all descended, their course being tracked down the barren hill face, till they disappeared, without doubt, in through the mouth of the cavern.

“Preparing a warm reception for us, Mark, my lad,” said Sir Edward, advancing to his son’s side; “but we shall be able to give them one equally warm. Well, my man, how are the wounds? Would you like to have ten minutes’ halt?”

Nick, to whom this was addressed, showed his teeth in a peculiar smile.

“When we’ve done our work, master; not before. Dessay we shall be ’bliged to wait before we get in.”

“I hope not,” said Sir Edward. “I mean for us to make a bold rush.”

“That’s right, master,” said the man, whose fellows were listening eagerly; “but I’ve been thinking about Sir Morton yonder, and my young lady.”

“Yes? What about them?” asked Sir Edward.

“You’re going to use blasting-powder?”

“Well, what of that?”

“I was thinking about them inside. We wouldn’t like to hurt them.”

“Of course not; but as I know the place, there is little fear. I went in some distance, some twenty years ago, and the passages run to and fro and keep opening up into chambers. Now, one of these, some distance in, is sure to be turned into a prison for the captives, where they would be beyond the reach of the powder, and I feel certain that they would be too far away to be hurt.”

“Won’t bring the roof down upon ’em, will it?” asked the man.

“I don’t think there is any fear; but it is only where we fail to drive the wretches back that I shall have a charge fired. I must save my men from injury as much as I can.”

“That’s what Sir Morton used to say, young gentleman,” said Nick, as Sir Edward drew back; and for the next half-hour the attacking party, a good twenty strong, advanced steadily, the steepness of the climb soon enforcing slower progress.

For some little time now they had been aware of the fact that the enemy had been making preparations for an attack. Taught by the last, they had worked hard, and built-up a massive wall across the entrance to their stronghold, this defensive work being formed of the rough blocks lying about the little slope, and for the most part they were dragged down, and hoisted into their place.

Upon this, half-a-dozen armed men were standing, watching their approach, and the attacking party made out their swords and pikes, the latter leaning against a rock, with their bright steel heads sloping towards the climbers.

When these latter were within about a hundred yards, Sir Edward halted his party, and ranged them in a curved line, the men at a short distance from each other, so that as they all made for the mouth of the cave they would gradually draw together, and be close when they delivered the attack.

“Pikes only,” said Sir Edward. “Keep your swords for the close hand-to-hand work.”

“Has your father been a soldier, youngster?” whispered Nick Garth hoarsely.

“No; why?”

“Talks like one. He couldn’t do better. He’ll give the word soon, and the sooner the better. I’ve got my wind now. ’Member the master and the young missus, lads.”

There was a growl from his companions, and as Mark glanced at them he felt that it would go hard with any one among the enemy who came within reach of their pikes.

The enemy had, however, now descended from the top of their wall, and only their heads and breasts were visible, as, ten strong now, they stood in a row, with their pikes resting upon the top; ready to thrust at the first who came within reach.

“Now, my lads,” cried Sir Edward; “have you all got your wind?”

“Ay!” ran along the crescent line.

“You with the powder, and the two centre men stand fast till you are wanted.”

This order was obeyed as the next was given, and headed by Sir Edward

and his son, the party made steadily for the wall, at first slowly and gradually increasing the pace, till Sir Edward cried, “Charge!” and they broke into a trot, the fastest speed to be attained to upon such a slope.

Then, amidst shouts of hatred and mocking defiance from the marauders, there was the clash of steel, and the heavy rattling noise made by the pike-staves, as, thrusting and stabbing, the attacking party strove to win their way over the wall. Sir Edward led his men bravely, while, in a wild fit of excitement, Mark, young as he was, strove to show the Darley men that he was worthy to be their leader.

A fierce rage filled these men, fresh from the ruined home, and half mad with desire to revenge themselves upon those who had given them their wounds; but all along it was the same; they were at a terrible disadvantage in their approach, their enemies having their undefended bodies as marks for their weapons, while they had only head and shoulders to strike at, the rest of their bodies being safe, behind the strong breastwork.

Then, too, feeling secure in this approach to their stronghold, the marauders stood firm, waiting their opportunities, and then thrusting home, with the result that several of their assailants went down, and at the end of five minutes’ vain attack, Sir Edward ordered the men to draw back a few yards, and with some difficulty he and his son, by rushing before them, and thrusting up their pikes, induced them to obey.

“This is useless, Mark,” he said anxiously. “They are too strong for us. Take the extreme right next time we advance, and I will take the left. Then as soon as they are well engaged in front, you, with two men must try to get in over your end, and drop over amongst them from the side, and I will do the same. Do you dare to do that?”

“I feel as if it is horribly risky,” replied the boy, “but I’ll try.”

“Then you will do it,” said Sir Edward quietly. “Choose your men, and I will do the same.”

Five minutes later, amidst the mocking jeers of the men behind the breastwork, a fresh attack was made, and as Mark reached the front, he ducked down to avoid a thrust from a lance, crept close to the wall and,

followed by Nick Garth and Ram Jennings, turned the end of the stones, climbed on, and reached the stone-strewn cliffs behind.

Then, knowing that the two men, in their fierce energy and hate, would be quite close, Mark turned suddenly, drew himself up, sword in hand—his followers letting their pikes slip through their hands, and holding them close up to the heads—and leaped down inside the breastwork, his father simultaneously coming over at the other flank.

There was not much force in either attack, but it proved effectual by its suddenness, throwing the defenders into confusion.

These rallied directly, and pikes were swung round and directed at the flanking parties, but the momentary check gave the men in front the opportunity to rush close up to the breastwork, which now became their protection, the defenders, having fallen back, becoming in turn exposed.

The fight now became furious, for the marauders began to back toward the mouth of the cave, giving way step by step, as the length of their line was gradually contracted by one after another dashing in, till all had passed into the narrow passage, the first men blocking the way with the heads of their pikes, while their fellows stooped and crept beneath, till the last was in safety. It is needless to say that an attempt to follow would have meant instant death.

A cheer now rose from the attacking party, who had achieved the taking of the outwork, and Sir Edward forced his way to his son's side, to clap him on the shoulder, as he stood just out of reach of the defenders' bristling pikes, which effectually barred the way.

"We have them now, Mark," he cried. "Pass the word there for Daniel Rugg."

But a low growl on the other side of the wall told that there was no need to pass any word. As soon as he saw that there was a chance for the next step, Dan had signed to Dummy, who trotted forward with lantern, fuse, and powder-bag, and father and son climbed into the little fort a few feet away from the opening into the cavern.

"Silence!" roared Sir Edward now—"you within there, lay down your arms,

and march out at once.”

A defiant yell came from the holders of the pikes, enraging Nick Garth to such an extent that he picked up a block of stone from the top of the breastwork, raised it above his head, and dashed it into the doorway, Ram Jennings following suit with another.

The stones crashed in among the pikes with plenty of rattling, and a burst of yells followed as the men picked up a couple more.

“Stop, there,” cried Sir Edward sternly. “You can do no good, and I want the wall left sound for our own protection.”

Nick growled savagely, but he obeyed, and the men all stood fast at the cavern’s mouth with presented pikes, ready to attack if any movement was made by the defenders, while Dan Rugg and his son quickly prepared their missile.

“Ready,” shouted Dan from where he stood inside the wall with, his back to the men, and with Dummy looking intensely interested standing ready with the lantern.

“You, in there,” cried Sir Edward now, “will you surrender?”

“No,” cried a hoarse voice from inside. “Go back with your ragged pack of hungry hounds, or we’ll come and burn you out as we did the other idiot.”

“Once more,” cried Sir Edward, who still hesitated to proceed to the sternest measures; “will you give up your prisoners and surrender?”

“Bah! Laugh at him, boys,” cried the same hoarse voice: and another derisive yell arose.

“Out with you, my lads,” cried Sir Edward; and his men sprang over the wall again.

“You too, Mark,” said Sir Edward; and Mark followed, while Dan Rugg came close up with his bag of powder and fuse carefully tied in.

“Lay it as near as you can, so as to be out of reach of the pikes.”

“No good, Sir Edward,” said the man in a husky whisper. “Out with you. I’m going to light the fuse, and go right close, and heave it in over their pikes.”

“But that is too dangerous for you.”

“Not it. I know to a quarter of a minute when it will fire, and I shall hold it till then. That’ll give me time to jump the wall. Quick, sir, please.”

It was no time for hesitation, and feeling that his old servant at the mine could be trusted, Sir Edward climbed the wall, and Dummy, showing his teeth in a satisfied grin, opened the door of the lantern.

The next moment Dan had held the end of the short fuse he had provided to the candle, and a slight spluttering began.

“Over with you,” growled Dan, as his son snapped to the lantern door.

“Take care of yourself, daddy,” said the boy coolly.

“You be off,” growled Dan, and Dummy placed the lantern on the top of the breastwork, and vaulted over amongst the men, who were crouching down behind, to be out of the blast.

All this had taken place unknown to the defenders, who, from the narrowness of the entrance, were shut off from seeing the quaint, sardonic face of the old miner, as he stood holding the bag, with the burning fuse spluttering and sending up its curls of greyish smoke.

The men held their breath, and Mark’s eyes dilated as he watched the brave old fellow holding the bag, in the full knowledge that if he held the powder a moment too long he must be shattered to pieces.

It was a combination of the familiarity which breeds contempt and the confidence born of long experience which made Dan Rugg stand there so coolly for what seemed to be a long time before turning as he watched the burning fuse.

“Heads down there,” he said suddenly; “she’s going off.”

There was a quick movement, but Mark felt as if he was held by a nightmare dream, and he stood there watching, as the old man took a couple of steps forward, and now for the first time in full sight of those who held the fence of cross pikes.

In an instant there was a wild yell, and the pikes went down with their heads to the stones, and disappeared, but it was as Dan Rugg raised the bag above his head, and hurling it right into the cavern passage, he started aside to the shelter of the wall, while now by a step aside Mark also reached shelter. Then there was a roar and a burst of flame and smoke came as from the mouth of a cannon, and the men sprang up again to cheer.

“Steady—steady!” cried Sir Edward. “Now, my lads, over the wall with you, and follow me; never mind the smoke. Rugg, have another charge ready; we shall want it soon.”

“Ay, Sir Edward, that was a failure. I didn’t hold it long enough. They had time to get away.”

Sir Edward and his son entered the murk, and had to feel their way, and halted.

“Light torches,” cried Mark: and half-a-dozen were lit and passed in, when once more the party advanced, expecting to be attacked, but the blast had produced a scare, though it had done no serious harm, save tearing down a few stones, and instead of attacking, the marauders stood on their defence in the place familiar to Mark and some of the men.

There was again the same bristling array of pikes in the opening; and after a renewed summons to surrender, the old miner proceeded coolly to prepare a second bag of powder.

This was fired, but the explosion did not take place till some time after the defenders of the cavern had retreated; and for a while the passage was so stifling with the fumes that it was impossible to go on, so the party had to draw back to allow them to be dissipated.

At last it was deemed prudent to proceed, and once more the advance was ordered, the men eagerly obeying; and with torches adding their

smoke to that already hanging in the gloomy cracks and vaults, they pressed on till once more the way was blocked.

It was no array of spear-points in a narrow passage, but in this case the solid blocking of a wall of stone, built-up with care, the stones well wedged in, a narrow opening left for the retreat of the defenders having been filled up since their last retreat, and the wonder to those who examined it was that it had been so quickly secured.

The choice of position, though, had been well made, for the passage was not above four feet wide at this point, and the roof had sunk till it was in this particular spot only five in height.

Once more the powder was brought forward by Dummy, the bag laid close to the bottom stones, the fuse added, and lit, and the party retired to a safe distance, to wait until the powder had swept the barrier away.

The explosion was long in coming, and when it did, with a mighty roar, an hour had to be passed before another advance was made, but no farther than the wall, which was found apparently quite uninjured, though the powder had brought down a huge mass from the roof.

“Pull it down,” said Sir Edward impatiently, and a couple of the men—there was no room for more—attacked the well-fitted stones, but only for one to start back with a cry of rage and pain, his hand to his side.

“Hurt?” cried Mark excitedly, and he ran to the man’s aid, to be sent staggering back by a heavy blow.

It was Sir Edward’s turn to rush to his son, and he too reeled as he received a thrust, but in the case of both, the pike-thrusts did not penetrate their clothes, the point of the weapon having been turned, unknown to the man who used it, by a thrust against the rock.

It was a warning, and throwing the light of the torches well upon the built-up wall, a couple of the men found the holes through which the thrusts had been made, and advancing cautiously to send their pikes through, had to leap back again, for the enemy thrust at them. Nick struck in turn, though, and a yell of pain told that it was not without effect.

“Keep back,” cried Sir Edward, as his men advanced recklessly, and when the wounded man had been drawn away and carried out, after a rough bandage had been applied to his wound, Sir Edward turned to his son.

“You must be hurt, my boy,” he whispered.

“I was, father, horribly.”

“But I mean wounded.”

“Only my doublet,” said the lad merrily. “What are we to do now?”

After a few moments’ thought, as Nick Garth had been so able, Sir Edward decided to let him try again, which he eagerly did, feigning so as to draw a thrust from the enemy, and darting aside and close up to the wall. Then, as the man withdrew his pike, Nick, holding his own short, thrust it through after it, and again there was a yell of pain, but almost at the same moment Ram Jennings was just reached by a thrust through another hole, and sprang back, roaring like a wild beast.

“Yah! don’t howl like that,” cried Nick angrily; “do as I do.”

But poor Ram Jennings preferred to stand nursing his injured arm, and watching his fellow ramming away with his pike, as if loading a gun, till suddenly it was jerked out of his hand, and drawn through the wall.

“Look at that,” he growled. “Here, give’s hold of another.”

But Sir Edward ordered him back.

“It’s of no use, my lad,” he cried; “come away.”

“All very well to say come away, captain,” growled the man, as he stood close up, “but if I stir, I shall get a hole through me.”

Sir Edward saw the man’s difficult position, and gave an order in a low tone, when every man bearing a light ran back and round one of the corners, leaving the cavern in darkness.

Nick took advantage thereof, and sprang away from his perilous position. The rattle of a pike-staff against the stones told that a thrust had been made at him in the darkness.

“Are you hit?” cried Mark anxiously.

“Ay, youngster, but on’y with the staff,” growled Nick; and the order for the lights to be brought back was given and obeyed.

“Another, Rugg,” said Sir Edward laconically, and Dan, who had a bag ready, primed with fuse, laid it on the stony floor, picked it up on the point of a pike, and advanced to place it against the wall.

A couple of thrusts were made at it directly, but he lowered it, and the enemy could not force their points down low enough to reach it. But as Dan placed it against the bottom of the wall the pikes were aimed now at his breast.

“Back!” roared Sir Edward, as Mark rushed at the man to drag him away.

“All right, Master Mark,” said Dan coolly; “my arms and my pike are as long as theirs. They can’t reach me. They’ve got all the thickness of the wall to push through as well;” and he coolly placed the powder-bag and arranged the fuse ready for being lighted.

“I did not think of that, Dan,” said Mark.

“Ay, but I did,” said the old fellow, chuckling. “Now, Dummy, my boy, son, bring a lighted torch.”

Dummy trotted forward, and they heard a growl from beyond the wall, as the miner thrust the point of his pike into the end of the torch, and then reached out toward the fuse, but only succeeded in getting it half-way before it was knocked off the point of his weapon.

“Ah, deal o’ good that’s done,” growled Dan, trying to drive the point of his pike into the torch again. “There,” he shouted, “run for it; I can reach to pitch it up to the bag.”

The men on the other side did not grasp the fact that if Dan did this his

companions would fare worse than they, but scuffled off at once, their steps being plainly heard.

“Fools!” growled Dan, and stepping forward, he picked up the torch, went close up to the wall, and touched the end of the fuse, which began to sparkle at once.

“Plenty o’ time, Sir Edward,” he said coolly, “if you’ll now order us back.”

The order was given, and as it was obeyed, Sir Edward and his son retiring last, they saw Nick Garth step close up to old Dan and pat him on the shoulder.

“You’re a cool one, mate,” he said. “I never see one as cool as you.”

Dan chuckled a little, and all went along the narrow passage and into the chamber beyond, well out of reach of the blast, and waited.

It was a good two minutes before the explosion took place, and Mark had made perfectly sure that the fuse had gone out, when there was a sensation as if his breath was being sucked away, then a deafening roar, followed by a crash.

Again they had to wait till the fumes had somewhat dispersed. Then, with Sir Edward and Mark leading, they returned, expecting to see the wall demolished; but as far as they could see it was perfectly sound, while another huge mass from the roof had come down, to lie piled up before it, so that there was hardly room for a man to crawl over the heap, so close was it to the roof.

“It’s of no use, Mark,” whispered Sir Edward, as they drew back a little from the smoke, “we must devise some other plan. It is useless to try another bag there without first clearing away the mass of stones, and we can only do that at the expense of many men wounded by pike-thrusts, perhaps killed.”

“Yes,” said Mark, “and it doesn’t seem fair to order them to do it.”

“I cannot, my boy. There, we have done our work for this time. Let’s get out of this horrible smoke.”

“Hoi, you!” came from beyond the wall; “if you fire any more of that choke-dog stuff, I’ll give orders to my men to kill the prisoners, ’specially the girl.”

“You cowardly ruffian!” cried Mark, in a rage.

“Bah! Puppy!” came back scornfully.

“Don’t answer, boy,” said Sir Edward softly.

“But father!—if—”

“It is only a boast. They dare not do such a thing as that. Come.”

They retired, making for the mouth of the cavern, where the cool night air blew with refreshing force.

“But we cannot give up, father,” cried Mark.

“I am not going to give up, my boy,” said Sir Edward quietly. “When an assault upon a stronghold fails, a general tries to starve his enemy into submission. We must do the same here. Unfortunately they must have stores, and they have a good supply of water from a spring within there. But still we must try. The first thing is to protect ourselves from a sudden attack, and this will be easy. Now, my lads, every man take in a block of stone, and carry it into the cavern as far as the end of the first chamber. Take these from the breastwork; we do not want it now, for we shall encamp inside.”

Mark nodded approval, and the men, glad that the night’s fighting was at an end, set to work with a will, after laying their arms aside; and in less than an hour had walled up to a great thickness the narrow exit from the cavern, wedging in the top stones with blows, and in spite of the want of mortar producing a good solid piece of work, through which no pikes could be thrust.

This done, Sir Edward reduced his force to one-third, this being plenty to defend the wall should it be attacked from the inner side; and the rest were sent back to the Tor Castle, for provisions and blankets.

“Now, Mark, lad,” said Sir Edward, “the thing to consider is, how long can the enemy hold out?”

“Not long, father,” replied the lad; “they cannot have a very good supply.”

“That,” said Sir Edward, “remains to be proved.”

Chapter Twenty Seven.

Preparations for a Siege.

Siege was now commenced, Ergles being to all intents and purposes an impregnable natural castle. Provisions and other necessaries were brought up, and the force was divided into three watches, who regularly mounted guard in the chamber in front of the wall. But the whole of the next day passed without a sound being heard, the enemy not attempting to break down their own side, for fear of getting into a trap, the utter stillness being interpreted to mean a *ruse* to get them to make an opening through which an attack would be made.

Then another day was passed, and still all was quiet; but toward the middle of the next those on guard in the chamber heard, and reported to Mark, that they could hear the distant sound of stones rolling down, and Mark went and listened so as to determine whether his father ought to be roused, for after a very long watch he had lain down upon a blanket to sleep.

“I wouldn’t call un, Master Mark,” said Dan. “He’s tired enough. Watches twice to our once. Let the hounds come; we could account for ’em if they tried to pull our wall down.”

“Well, it would be plenty of time to awaken my father if they came and tried,” said Mark. “Look here, then, we’ll wait; and let it be in perfect silence, so that we may hear if they come as far as the other side of the wall.”

The men were as obedient to his orders as to those of Sir Edward, and they all sat or lay about, with their weapons close to their hands, listening in the darkness, the calm and silence being good for thought; and before long Mark’s brain was at work thinking about the state of affairs at the castle, to which he had been three times since the siege began, to see his sister and learn how Ralph Darley was progressing.

The news was always bad, Master Rayburn shaking his head and looking very serious.

“Bad hurts, Mark, boy,” he said, “bad hurts. I hope, please God, he may be spared; but I have my fears.”

“Master Rayburn!” cried Mark wildly. “Oh! you must not—you shall not let the brave fellow die.”

“I’d give my poor old life to save his,” said the old man sadly. “We can only wait and hope.”

And as Mark sat in the dark natural chamber formed in the old limestone hill, he recalled Ralph’s white, fire-scarred face, looking pale and unnaturally drawn, and wondered that he should feel so low-spirited about one who was an enemy and almost a stranger, till his musings were interrupted by a dull sound on the other side of the wall—a sound which came after the long period of utter silence which had succeeded to the noise made by forcing out and rolling down stones.

No one else heard the faint sound, and setting it down to fancy, Mark was thinking again about the prisoners within, and wondering what treatment they were receiving from the enemy.

It seemed hard enough for Sir Morton Darley, but Mark could not help feeling how terrible it must be for a delicately sensitive girl.

Then once more he heard that sound, which he felt sure could only be caused by a foot kicking against a stone.

Just then there was a faint rustling, a hand was laid upon his arm, and Dummy whispered:

“Hear that, Master Mark?”

“Yes. Don’t talk,” whispered Mark, and the two lads, who were well upon the alert, listened in perfect silence, till all at once there was a faint gleam of light, so feeble that it could hardly be distinguished, but there it was, close to the roof, and Mark was satisfied that it must come over the top of their defensive wall.

Then all was still for a minute or two, till the two mentally saw what was taking place—some one was passing his hands over the built-up stones,

and trying whether one of them could be dislodged.

Then all was still again, and the light died out.

It was not till hours after that any further sound was heard, and this time Sir Edward was awake and about, passing from the dark chamber where the sentries were on guard to the light outside, and back again.

Mark went with him, and Sir Edward had just happened to say in a whisper:

“All quiet enough now,” when a voice, apparently close to his elbow, said hoarsely:

“No. I’m not going to walk into a trap.”

There was a good deal in those few words, for to Mark, among other things, they meant that if the speaker was not going to walk into a trap, it was because he must have food enough to last him for some time longer, and was not willing to lay down his arms.

Chapter Twenty Eight.

Dummy Rugg has the Thinks.

The blockade was strictly kept up at the mouth of the cavern, Sir Edward having cast aside, at all events for the time being, every feeling of enmity; and in spite of the many disappointments, he grew day by day more determined to rout out the gang, and rescue their prisoners. “Only tell me what to do, Mark, my boy, and if it is possible, it shall be done. If we go on blasting the place we shall end by shutting them in beyond recovery,” said Sir Edward, “a good enough thing to do as far as the ruffians are concerned, but we shall destroy Sir Morton Darley and his child.”

“I can’t think of anything, father,” said Mark, gloomily. “I suppose we can only wait.”

“That is the conclusion I always come to, my boy. All we can do is to be

perfectly ready for the moment when, utterly desperate, they will surrender or break out."

"I hope they'll fight, father," said Mark grimly. "Why?"

"Because it would be so horrible for them to surrender. I'd rather see them die fighting."

"Yes," said Sir Edward, frowning heavily. "Hanging prisoners was all very well a hundred years ago. We don't want to do that sort of thing nowadays. There, run over to the Tor, and see how things are going. You need not hurry back. Tell Mary I shall come myself to-morrow, and that I'm getting very tired of sleeping in a cavern."

"But suppose the men try to break out while I'm gone, father."

"Well, if they do, I shall have all the honour of the fight."

"But I shall not like that," said Mark.

"I might say the same to you to-morrow, my boy," said Sir Edward, smiling. "Go and see how young Darley is; we cannot give up everything to this business."

Mark started for home, leaving his father with a strong enough guard to master the men if they attempted to escape; and before he had gone fifty yards, Dummy came trotting after his young master like a dog.

"Hullo! what is it, Dummy?" cried Mark, stopping short.

"Only coming home with you, Master Mark. Saw you, and father said he didn't want me."

"Oh, very well. Getting tired of it?"

"Ever so, Master Mark. I liked it when we were firing the powder, or having a bit of a fight, but it's so stupid to be doing nothing but sit down and watch a wall, like dogs after rabbits that won't ever come."

"Yes," said Mark, with a sigh, "it is weary work."

“Father says he don’t believe they’ll ever come.”

“But they must, when they’ve finished their food.”

“He says they’ve got such lots. They’ve been at work, he says, for twenty miles round, as he knows, and they’ve stored up sacks of meal and corn, and sides of bacon, and hams, and pickle-tubs of pork. There aren’t no end to the stuff they’ve got, and then they’ve plenty of good water, both warm and cold.”

“Oh, don’t talk about it,” cried Mark; “it makes me feel as bad as can be.”

Dummy settled down into the mood which originated his name during the rest of the way, and the lads parted as they reached the Tor, Dummy to go down the steps to the mine to see how everything looked, and report to his father upon his return, and Mark to hurry up to his room, where Ralph Darley lay insensible still, and where he had a very warm reception from his sister and Master Rayburn.

“Then you have taken the place at last, Mark,” cried Mary.

“No,” said the lad, frowning, “and we’re not likely to take it. I say, Master Rayburn, isn’t he a long time getting better?”

“Yes,” said the old man gravely, “and perhaps after all it is a mercy that he remains insensible. Poor fellow! it would be horrible for him, in his weak state, to lie fretting because he could not go to the help of his father and sister.”

Mark conveyed his message about Sir Edward’s intentions for the following day, and he was bending down over the sufferer’s pillow, thinking how very much he was changed, when there was a tap at the door, and an announcement that Dummy Rugg must see Master Mark directly.

“I must go, Mary,” said Mark excitedly. “Some one has come over after us.”

“Oh Mark!” cried the girl, looking startled, and clinging to him.

“Don’t do that,” cried the lad. “Be brave; I’ll take all the care I can.”

“Yes,” said Master Rayburn to him, with a sad smile, “you will take all the care you can. I know what you are, Mark, but do try, boy, not to be rash.”

Mark promised, and hurried down and out into the courtyard; but there was no Dummy visible till he had passed the second, and found him seated on a block of stone, whistling, and swinging his legs to and fro.

“What is it? some one come to fetch us?” cried Mark excitedly.

“No: nobody aren’t come,” said the boy, looking at him fixedly.

“Then why did you send for me?” cried Mark angrily.

“’Cause I wanted you, Master Mark, very bad indeed.”

“Here, what do you mean? What’s the matter with you?”

“Got the thinks, very bad.”

“Dummy!”

“Yes, Master Mark, I was took with ’em as soon as I got as far as the powder store. It all come at once.”

“What do you mean?”

Dummy was perfectly silent, but not perfectly still; for as he stared straight in Mark’s face in a peculiarly stolid way, he kept on swinging and jerking his legs till he seemed as if some one was pulling a string to make him act like a jumping toy.

“Look here, stupid-head,” cried Mark angrily, but only to break into a laugh, half of amusement, half of vexatious contempt, “are you going mad?”

“I dunno, Master Mark. Perhaps I am. There’s something keeps on buzzing in my head like a wheel going round.”

“You’ve been out too much in the sun.”

“No, I aren’t. I’ve been down the mine in the dark.”

“And got frightened?”

“Not as I knows on, Master Mark. It’s the thinks.”

“Here, what do you mean, thick-head? I can’t stop here listening to your nonsense.”

“’Taren’t nonsense, Master Mark,” said the boy, giving him a peculiar stare.

“What is it, then?”

“I want to know where that water goes to yonder in the mine.”

“What! do you mean to say you’ve had me fetched out to tell me that?”

Dummy nodded, and Mark doubled his fist.

“I’ve got it, Master Mark.”

“Got what, you idiot?”

“We’re up ever so much higher here than they are at Ergles, yonder, aren’t we?”

“Higher? Of course,” said Mark, looking at the lad curiously; “but what of that?”

“That’s what I wanted you to tell me, Master Mark, and that’s it then.”

“What’s what then?”

“Why, that water in the mine where we went along, and was under us when we went to sleep—that goes along under ground, right under the moorland, and it comes out again in Ergles Dale.”

“Do you think it goes in that direction?”

Dummy nodded.

“Well, but suppose it does, what then?”

“I’m sure it does now, Master Mark, and what the thinks have made me see’s this: if you and me had kept going on instead of sitting down, and eating and drinking till we went fas’ asleep, we should have found ourselves in Ergles Hole, and if it hadn’t been for the Purlrose gang, we might have worked back ’bove ground.”

“Why, Dummy! I don’t know—yes, if it’s that way—goes for miles. I say, perhaps you’re right.”

“Yes, I’m right,” said the boy quietly; “but you don’t jump about a bit: you aren’t glad.”

“Glad? Jump about? Why should I? Oh!”

“Haw—haw—haw!” laughed Dummy. “He can see it now. Why, it come to me, Master Mark, like a flash of lightning.”

“Oh, Dummy, I’ll never call you a thick-head again,” cried Mark excitedly.

“Why not? May if you like: I don’t mind.”

“Then you think,” cried the lad, who was trembling now with excitement, “that we might get into Ergles through our mine?”

“Sure I do—all along them grotters and passages.”

“And take the ruffians by surprise?”

“Ketch ’em asleep, Master Mark. They’d never think of our coming behind, like.”

Mark seized the boy by the shoulders, and shook him as hard as ever he could.

“Why, you stupid old, ugly old, cleverest fellow that ever was! Why didn’t you think of this before?”

“Couldn’t, Master Mark,” cried the boy, grinning as if he were determined

to display every tooth in his head; “it never come till this morning. Right, aren’t I?”

“Right! You must be. But suppose we can’t get all the way?”

“Water does. Sure to be plenty of room. See how there always was.”

“Hurrah! Then we’ll go at once.”

“What, us two?”

“Of course!”

“We couldn’t fight all that lot. Six to one!”

“No; we must go and tell my father at once.”

“That’s best way,” said Dummy, jumping off the stone. “Come on,” and they started off at once for the tiny camp, discussing the possibility of the men finding the way through.

“Suppose they got into the mine, and attacked the Black Tor while we’re away?”

“No fear o’ that, Master Mark,” said Dummy, with another of his nice open smiles. “Not many folk as would go and do what we did.”

“No, I suppose not,” said Mark thoughtfully.

“I’m sort of used to it, Master Mark, from always being down the mine, and always wanting to see where every hole went. No, I don’t think any o’ them would care to go. Too big and clumsy. They’d never get there.”

Chapter Twenty Nine.

Playing Mole.

Sir Edward met them as they ascended the slope, Mark having been taking mental notes all the way of the trend of the hills and the valley,

seeing for certain that, in spite of its bulk and height, Ergles was a good deal lower than the range along the valley of the Gleame.

Their narrative of adventure below was listened to in silence, and Sir Edward grew moment by moment more interested till the whole was told.

“I don’t think there is a doubt of it,” he said. “We are quite three hundred feet lower here, and in all probability it is the same underground stream as we have at the Tor; but whether it will be possible to get right through into this cavern is more than we can judge till we have tried.”

“But you will try, father?”

“Of course, my boy,” cried Sir Edward; “and at once. Here, we must have Daniel Rugg, and hear what he says.”

Dummy fetched his father, who listened in turn without a word.

“Sounds well, Rugg,” said Sir Edward.

“Yes, Sir Edward; sounds well.”

“But is the grotto likely to run so far?”

“Lots on ’em do. There’s one yonder up in the Peak as goes for miles, and they’ve never yet found the end, nor where the water goes.”

“Well,” said Sir Edward, after a few minutes’ thought; “I’m afraid to be too sanguine. This may all end in disappointment; but it shall be tried.”

“Now, at once, I s’pose, Sir Edward?”

“Now, at once.”

Ten men were chosen for the expedition, and Mark noted with satisfaction that Dan Rugg put forward those who had been accustomed to work in the mine.

“Better for getting along, Master Mark,” said the miner, on seeing that Mark took notice of his action.

“But will ten be enough, Dan?”

“Why not, sir? Ten, and me and Dummy’s twelve, and you and Sir Edward fourteen. Well, perhaps it would be as well to have a couple more.”

Garth and Jennings were selected without having the slightest notion of where they were going, but they took their places without a word, only too glad to have some change from the monotonous existence they had been leading for many days.

No embargo was placed upon their way of marching, and they tramped eagerly on, till the occupants of the Castle were startled by their sudden arrival, to share in the surprise of their fellows when orders were given for rations to be supplied to each man, after a good meal had been eaten.

Half-an-hour after, well provided with picks, hammers, big nails for driving in the cracks, either for foot-hold or to bear ropes, the whole party were descending into the mine, with Dummy promoted, from his knowledge, to the onerous post of guide, leading, and Mark by his side or following next, according to the state of the way.

The men were in excellent spirits, for by this time the object of the expedition had oozed out, and it gave them a feeling of confidence now that the attack was to be made through the mine, where they were all much at home.

There was the rumour, too, that they were to take the enemy by surprise where there would be no barricades or breastworks, and altogether the men moved on after their young guides in the highest of spirits, feeling as they did that at last the petty war was to be brought to a conclusion.

The ways through the old galleries and chambers of the mine were traversed with the men talking and laughing, and reminding one another of this or that particular working where the lead ore was rich; and Dummy strode in front, bearing his lantern well, and his importance ill. For he was to all intents and purposes the originator and head man of the little campaign, till suddenly casting his eyes sidewise he caught sight of Mark looking at him in an amused way, which discharged all his conceit upon the instant, as he flushed up and changed back to the old Dummy at

once.

“You shouldn’t laugh at a poor fellow, Master Mark,” he remonstrated in a whisper.

“Then you shouldn’t strut along like a game-cock just come in for his spring feathers.”

“I didn’t,” said Dummy angrily.

“You did. But go on. I will not laugh at you any more.”

A complete change came over the boy, and he went on gravely enough after the reproof, till, to the surprise of all, they were led into the chamber hung with the veils of stalactite, where Dummy stopped and looked round.

“Well, my lad, what does this mean?”

Dummy smiled in a rather imbecile way, and his father nudged him heavily with his elbow.

“Don’t you hear what Sir Edward says? What you come here for? Lost your way?”

“No, I aren’t lost my way, father.”

“Then go back and show us. Where is it? Down by the old workings?”

“Nay, this is right,” said the boy, in high glee at his father’s puzzled look; and giving Sir Edward a wave of the hand, he went on to the end, and passed behind the stony veil dropping from near the roof.

Sir Edward, uttered an ejaculation, and turned to his son.

“You have been by here, then?” he cried.

“Yes, father; this is the way,” replied Mark. “Follow him.”

“No, keep with him yourself,” said Sir Edward. “You are the guides. But be silent now.”

“There is no need yet,” replied Mark; “we have a tremendously long way to go yet.”

“Let there be silence,” said Sir Edward sternly. “For aught we know, these men, if the grottoes do communicate, may be exploring on their own account, and sound runs curiously along these passages.”

Mark accepted the rebuke, and joined Dummy at once, the rest of the party followed, and at a word from Sir Edward, raised their pikes and advanced steadily, as if expecting at any moment to meet the foe.

But many hours seemed to have elapsed, during which they had climbed, descended, squeezed through narrow upright cracks, and crawled, as the two lads had crawled before, ere they reached the limpid pool where their guides had rested and gone to sleep.

Here, at a word from Mark, Sir Edward gave the word to halt for refreshment, while, in company with the two lads, he made a farther advance, and planted two men at intervals along the route they took, following the flow of the underground stream, whose musical gurgling grew very plain at times.

The second man was posted a good two hundred yards beyond the first, and made no objection to being left in the dark, showing Dan Rugg’s wisdom in selecting miners for the task in hand.

Then, silently and with great caution, Dummy led on along a wild chasm of the same nature as others they had passed, and formed, evidently during some convulsion, the encrinite marble of which the walls were composed matching exactly, and merely requiring lateral pressure and the trickling of lime-charged water to become solid once again.

About three hundred yards beyond the last sentinel the trio paused, and stood listening and gazing as far as they could across a rock chamber whose sides glittered with double prismatic crystals.

But there was the water gurgling at the bottom of the deep crack along which they passed—nothing more; and they returned toward the pool, Sir Edward giving the men a word or two of caution, and then passing on to the others who were whispering to each other as they ate their food.

It was too good an example not to be followed, and soon after, quite refreshed, Sir Edward gave the order for a fresh start, the way being doubly interesting now that it was all fresh ground to the guides. In addition, it became more difficult, for the formation began now to change, and instead of being a succession of narrow crack-like passages—in almost every variety of inclination between the horizontal and perpendicular, and rock grotto-like chambers of varying extent—the road began to fork and break up into vast halls, from which more than once they could hardly find an exit.

But Dummy was invaluable, and there was a kind of triumph in his face when he pointed out how easy it was to go on if you listened for the trickling of the stream below.

At last, after passing through a long succession of scenes that were as wondrous as strange, Sir Edward called upon the boy to stop, and upon Dummy coming back to his side, lantern in hand, “Do you think you can find your way back?” he asked.

“Yes, with my eyes shut,” said the boy, smiling.

His tones chased away his master’s feeling of uneasiness, and he went on:

“That’s a good boy; but what about your notion of this place leading into the cavern where those ruffians are? We must be far past Ergles, even if we are in the right direction.”

“No,” said Dummy confidently, as his father, who now came up, lantern in hand, looked doubtful too.

“Why do you say no, boy?” said Sir Edward.

“Because we’ve got among the same sort of rock as you find at Ergles.”

“Good, lad!” burst out Dan Rugg. “That’s minding your teachings. But are you right?”

“Yes, father: look,” said the boy, holding up his lantern toward the glittering roof of the hall in which they stood. “There it is: Blue John.”

Dan raised his lantern too, and drew his miner's pick from his belt.

Chink, *clash*.

There was a sharp blow from the pick, and Dan stooped to take up the piece of rock he had struck off, and handed it to his lord.

"Boy's right, Sir Edward," he said. "Look at that."

"But what has Blue John, whoever he is— Oh, pish! I had forgotten the name of the blue spar. Is there any of it in Ergles?"

"Only place about here where there is any, Sir Edward, and that's a piece."

"Then we may be close to the cavern," said Sir Edward, lowering his voice.

"Or in it, perhaps," said Mark excitedly.

He started, for at that moment Dummy clapped a hand upon his lips, and pointed forward.

"Cover your lanterns," he whispered.

The word was passed along back, and the next moment they were standing in darkness, watching a faint gleam of light in the distance.

It was playing upon the glittering prismatic crystals which covered wall, roof, and floor, and these flashed as the light played upon them, disappeared, and came into sight again from behind a Gothic pillar, was again eclipsed, and once more came into sight; and now, plainly seen, they made out that it was the light of a lantern, which shone upon a man's face as he went slowly along what seemed to be an opening, which led him past where they stood watching.

Then the light seemed to go down toward the floor, lower and lower, as it went on till it passed out of sight, but left a faint glow.

"Let Dummy and me go," whispered Mark to his father.

“Yes. Cautiously. Don’t be seen.”

Dummy was panting to be off, and keeping his lantern hidden, he felt his way onward toward the glow, keeping tightly hold of Mark’s hand, till, as they came nearer, they saw that the man must have been descending a steep rift, and as the light came into sight again, they found that they were standing on the very edge of this place, and that the light was away to their left, twenty feet or so lower, and gleaming upon the surface of a smooth far-spreading pool.

Chapter Thirty.

Nearing Dawn.

The two lads stood there motionless for a time, wondering what the lantern-bearer could be doing, for he evidently had no suspicion of his being watched. Then as they saw that in place of gleaming over the water, the lantern was once more in motion, they crouched down, with their eyes alone over the edge of the clean-cut chasm, feeling that whoever it was must pass just beneath them, when they would be able to see which way he went, and so gain a clue to the robbers’ hold.

The light came nearer, and it was plain that whoever bore it was coming very slowly, but they grasped the reason directly, for he was passing over a flooring of slippery crystals, and as he came on they could hear him breathing hard.

As they had anticipated, he came very close beneath them, and Mark felt that if he looked up they would be seen. But he whom they watched walked stooping, and letting the light fall upon the glittering ascending floor, so that at last he was not six feet below them, and Mark said in a quick whisper: “Sir Morton!”

“Great Heavens!” came back in company with a sharp crash, as of an earthenware pitcher falling in shivers upon the rocky floor.

“Hush!”

“Who is it?”

“Friends,” whispered Mark.

“Thank Heaven! At last—at last,” came up, with a piteous groan, and they heard a heavy fall.

“Quick, Dummy,” whispered Mark. “We must go down to him.”

“Listen first,” said the boy: “p’r’aps some one heard.”

But as he spoke there was the sound of a hoarse laugh from a long distance off, and Dummy whispered: “Didn’t hear. Been to fetch water, and broke the pitcher. I say, Master Mark, wasn’t I right?”

Mark made no reply, for he was lowering himself down over the edge, and directly after he dropped on to the crystals below.

“Show the light, Dummy,” he whispered, and the boy lay face downward and swung the lantern down as far as he could reach.

As Mark touched the fallen man’s hand he began to recover consciousness.

“Not a dream—not a dream,” he murmured. “Whoever you are, have you come to help?”

“Yes; but hush! Purlrose and his men—are they near?”

“Too far to hear us speak; but hide your lights. Now tell me, are you one of those who attacked these wretches?”

“Yes; and we have reached you at last.”

“Ah!” sighed the prisoner. “It was time—it was time. I don’t know your voice; I could not see your face; but if you know, tell me, for mercy’s sake—my poor boy—was he killed?”

“No. Badly wounded, but alive, and he will live.”

Mark heard the prostrate man muttering, and felt the hand he grasped

trembling violently.

“It puts life into me,” he whispered, “when I was nearly spent. Tell me—pray tell me—where is my boy! Not a prisoner?”

“No: safe with us, at the Black Tor.”

“Safe—at the Black Tor!” faltered Sir Morton. “Then you are an Eden?”

“Of course: and my father is close by here with a dozen stout men to punish these villains and save you, and—you do not say anything about your child.”

There was no reply, and Mark pressed the hand he held, to find that there was no response, and that it was turning wet and cold, for the unfortunate prisoner had been unable to bear the tidings, and had swooned away.

“Go back,” whispered Mark, “and tell my father whom we have found.”

“Leave the light?” said the boy.

“No, take it. Tell him all you have heard.”

The light glided away, and the next minute a faint sigh told that Sir Morton was regaining his senses, his complete recovery thereof being announced by a trembling pressure of the hand.

“Weak,” he whispered. “I was badly wounded. So Heaven has sent my greatest enemy to save us.”

“Us?” cried Mark excitedly. “Then Ralph Darley’s sister is safe.”

“Will be, I pray,” said Sir Morton feebly. “I, her father, can do no more.”

Sir Edward came up, in company with Dan Rugg and five men, approaching cautiously with one lantern; and they were in the act of descending to Mark and the prisoner when a hoarse bullying voice was heard from a distance, the words echoing and reverberating as along a vaulted passage.

“Now then, back to your den, old fool. Don’t be a week fetching that water.”

“I—I am going back,” cried Sir Morton, and then in a whisper—“the light—the light. I will soon return.”

He caught at the lantern, and began to move off painfully, while his would-be rescuers stood watching till the light disappeared round a corner, and a minute later the same harsh voice was heard speaking fiercely. Then all was still.

“Hah!” whispered Sir Edward, “at last. Keep all lights covered, Rugg, and go and bring up the rest of the men.”

Dan grunted, and they heard his steps as they stood listening. Twice over there came the hoarse sound of laughter, but Sir Morton did not return, and Sir Edward in his impatience was about to order a movement forward, now that all his men were at hand, when from out of the black darkness, close by where Mark stood listening with every nerve upon the strain, the lad heard a slight rustling, then a faint panting sound as of hasty breathing, and a low voice whispered: “Is any one there? Please speak.”

“Yes, yes,” whispered Mark, and he stepped forward quickly with outstretching hands, which came in contact with one as cold as ice.

“Oh!” gasped its owner, as another hand felt for him and clung to him. “I know your voice, Mark Eden. I am Minnie Darley: pray, pray come and help my father; he is too weak to come back to you.”

The voice trailed off into a wail.

“Hush! Don’t, pray don’t cry,” whispered Mark. “Can you guide us to where your father is?”

“Yes; oh yes.”

“In the darkness?”

“Yes, I can find my way.”

“Can you lead us, my child, to where these ruffians are?” said Sir Edward, who had approached. “We must surprise and make them prisoners first.”

“Yes—no, you will kill them,” whispered the girl. “It is too treacherous and dreadful.”

“My child,” said Sir Edward gently, and he stretched his hand forward till he could touch the girl’s head, upon which he softly laid his hand; “I have a girl as young and fair as you, and Heaven forbid that she should ever be called upon to perform such an act. But think: it is to save your father’s life; to save you from the hands of these treacherous ruffians. You must be our guide.”

There was a dead silence for a few moments, and Sir Edward felt his hand taken and held to two soft lips.

“Yes,” came gently; “it is to save my poor father. He will die in this terrible place; and I must die too. You do not know, and they would easily kill you if you went without. Yes, I will guide you to where they are. I feel that I must.”

Chapter Thirty One.

The Wasps’ Nest.

There was a sound in the darkness as if several men had drawn a deep breath together, and then for a few moments all was very still, so still that Mark started when he heard his father’s voice, and felt strange and wondered to hear the gentle tones in which he spoke.

“Do you feel that you can guide us all without lights?”

“Oh, yes; I have been so long in the dark, and have often come with my father to fill the pitcher in that pool below.”

“Rugg, you and your boy stay back, and keep the lights hidden,” said Sir Edward firmly.

“Oh!” cried the old miner, in a tone full of protest; and then hastily: “Right, Sir Edward.”

“And be ready to bring the lanterns, and come to our help when called.”

Dan Rugg growled his assent, but Dummy murmured angrily.

“Join yourselves together, my lads,” whispered Sir Edward, “by carrying your pikes each with the head upon the shoulder of the man before him—the man behind me to rest his in the same way as I lead. Ready?”

“Ay!” came in a low growl from out of the darkness.

“One word more,” said Sir Edward sternly, and his words sent a thrill through Mark. “If the enemy surrenders, show mercy now: if he does not, remember not a man must escape.”

A low deep murmur, full of hatred against the destroyers of their homes, came from the miners, and then in the renewed silence Sir Edward said sharply:

“Mark, take this poor child’s other hand, and protect her when I am away. Now forward.”

A little soft cold hand closed tightly upon Mark’s, as he stepped to Minnie’s side; and then slowly and silently the party advanced under the girl’s guidance for quite two hundred yards through what seemed to be solid darkness, out of which her voice came in a low whisper from time to time.

“Stoop here—a little to the right—to the right once more—now through this narrow opening on the left. Only one can pass at a time: you first.”

Mark led, and passed through a rift, to see a feeble glow upon his left, where a candle was stuck against the rock, and beneath it lay a figure, very dimly-seen, while, apparently coming through an opening farther on, they heard the low hoarse sound of voices; and words came suggesting that the speakers were engaged in some game of chance.

Minnie withdrew her hands from her protectors, and hurried to kneel

down by the figure in the corner, Sir Edward and Mark following, to bend over the prisoner.

“Too weak,” he panted—“I tried to come. Eden! A strange meeting, oh mine enemy! God forgive us all the past; and if when you—come back—a conqueror—for the sake of Him who died—protect my child.—Minnie!” he cried faintly, and the girl sank beside him with a wail.

Sir Edward went down on one knee, sought for, and took his enemy’s hand.

“Can you hear?” he whispered.

A feeble pressure was the answer.

“Trust me. I will. Now we are in complete ignorance of the place, and must be guided so as to succeed.”

“You need no guidance,” said Sir Morton feebly. “Cross yonder—there is an opening: follow the narrow passage for twenty yards, and there is a big chamber-like grotto, and upon your right an archway leading into another smaller chamber. The enemy—are there. You have them as in a trap.”

Sir Morton Darley’s voice grew a little firmer as he proceeded, and when he, ceased there was a low murmur of satisfaction, and the men’s faces, dimly-seen, were turned to Sir Edward for the order to advance.

“Lay your pikes in that corner,” he whispered. “It will be close quarters. Draw your swords.”

The order had hardly been executed when there came suddenly angry shouts, sounding hollow and strange, multiplied as they were by reverberations.

“They know we are here, father,” whispered Mark excitedly. But at that moment came distinctly the words:

“He cheated! A thief!” and the clashing of swords.

“Forward!” said Sir Edward, and closely followed by his son and Nick Garth, whose breath came thickly, he followed the directions given by Sir Morton Darley, guided more by the sounds, to reach the entrance to a natural chamber, with high Gothic roof and walls glittering with crystals, which reflected the light of half—a—dozen candles stuck here and there.

Mark saw all this at a glance, as he grasped the fact that the inmates had broken into two parties, and were contending so fiercely that for a few moments they did not see the doorway crowded with angry countenances, and were only brought to a knowledge of their peril by the rush that was made by all but two of Sir Edward’s men, who stayed back to guard the entry and cut off the escape of any who tried to get away.

The encounter was short and fierce, Sir Edward’s men dashing forward like a wedge, striking with all their might; and at the end of a couple of minutes’ savage encounter, the mercenaries fighting like rats at bay, there was a terrible silence, broken only by muttered curses and groans, while eight men stood erect, half of whom had cast away their swords and fought with their miners’ picks.

The scene was ghastly, as shown by two only of the candles, the rest having been knocked down in the struggle.

“Hurt, Mark?” cried Sir Edward from the far end, where he stood sword in hand, supporting himself by the wall, and with his foot resting upon the burly body of Captain Purlrose.

“Not much, father,” panted the lad. “Bit of a cut.”

“How many escaped? I saw three make for the door.”

“None, master,” growled Nick Garth, who was upon the floor at the right. “There they lay: those brave lads brought ’em down.”

“Shout for the lanterns, Mark, boy,” cried Sir Edward; and Mark reeled as he stepped over the bodies lying in the way.

His call was responded to directly by Dan Rugg and his son, both standing aghast for a few moments before energetically setting to work to help their friends, who, saving the two who had guarded the entrance,

were wounded to a man, while of Captain Purlrose's party, four and their leader were dead, the others lying disabled to wait their turn of help from their captors, who, now that the rage of battle was at an end, were ready to show mercy to their wounded foes.

Sir Edward was so badly hurt that after a brave struggle he had to give up, and leave the ordering of the work now necessary to his son, who began by having his father borne to the chamber where Minnie crouched, trembling with horror, by her half-insensible father's side; but upon being reassured by the information that her captivity was at an end, she revived, and devoted herself to helping the wounded with all a true woman's zeal.

Mark's next task was to go with Dan Rugg and Dummy to the entrance, wondering the while at the extent of the place and the hoard of all necessaries which the fellows had collected in the cavern.

Upon reaching the wall beyond which the guard were stationed, still in perfect ignorance of what had taken place within, a few shouts set the men to work, the defence was rapidly demolished, and the wounded were borne out into the light—a ghastly procession, though not a man murmured; and as soon as they were laid upon the heather, began to chat eagerly together about the success of the underground expedition.

As for the wounded prisoners, they were kept under guard in the chamber—where the wall had just been destroyed.

The two great enemies were borne out last; and as Mark followed with the trembling girl upon his arm, he looking proud and satisfied, in spite of a stained bandage upon his forehead, and she with her face unnaturally white and her eyes closed, unable to bear the light after so long an imprisonment in the depths of the cavern, Nick Garth raised himself upon his elbow and uttered a shout which rose into a rousing cheer.

"God bless you, Mistress Minnie!" cried the man hoarsely, "and you too, youngster. You're a brave lad, and I'll never call you an enemy again."

"Humph! No," said Dan Rugg, who was close to him. "I s'pose all that's dead as mutton now. Look here, Nick Garth, I never see a man who could fight as well as you, and if you'd got a decent paw I'd say shake

hands.”

“Say it, mate,” said Nick, and he painfully lifted a wounded arm, to place his bandaged hand in that of the old miner who had hated him all his life.

A man had been started off as soon as the news was known to fetch more help from the Black Tor; and, as tidings fly swiftly, assistance soon came from every farm and cottage for miles, the women flocking up to Ergles, and eagerly helping to bear the sufferers to their homes.

Sir Edward and Sir Morton went last, each borne upon a litter, Minnie being provided with a pony, led by one of her father’s men, who kept on shaking his head and saying that he couldn’t understand it, for it seemed so strange that his master and young mistress and their leaders should be going up to the Black Tor.

He said this to Nick Garth, who was lying with closed eyes upon a roughly-made litter of poles.

“Well,” said Nick roughly, “who can? It’s ’cause they say the world turns round, and sometimes we’re standing on our heads and sometimes on our feet; we’re on our heads now, and it’s o’ no use to kick when your legs are in the air.”

There was one more task to see to, though, before Mark left the place, with its plunder in charge of Dan Rugg and a guard, so that the robbers’ stores could be restored to their rightful owners.

Over this matter Mark had a whispered consultation with the two wounded knights, and then went off to Rugg.

“Well, yes, Master Mark,” said that worthy; “I was thinking o’ something o’ that sort. Right in that little chamber place. A good thick wall, and well made, with plenty o’ lime. It wouldn’t seem Christian-like to throw ’em out on the hill among the stones; and you see there’s so many ravens and crows.”

Dummy Rugg kept as close to Mark as he could in these busy times, and tried several times to speak to him, but without success. At last, though, the opportunity came.

“Oh, Master Mark,” he said, in a tone full of reproach; “you ought to have spoke out.”

“When? What about?”

“When I was sent back to take care of those nasty old lanterns. But it serves you right. If I’d been there at the fight you wouldn’t have been hurt like that.”

“And perhaps you’d have been killed. Get out, you ungrateful dog!”

“Dog, am I? Well, it’s enough to make me bite.”

“Bite away, then, Dummy. I can’t lift my arm to hit you now.”

“Then I’ll wait till you get well again. But it was mean. I never seem to get a chance.”

“Well, you are a grumbler, Dummy. Here, you’ve done what none of us could do—shown us how to end all this trouble, and pleased everybody, and yet you’re not happy.”

“Happy?” said the boy; “who’s to be happy after what I’ve done? Why, I shan’t never dare to come past Ergles now in the dark.”

“Why?”

“’Cause old Purlrose and his men’ll come popping out to haunt me for getting ’em killed. I shall never like to come by there again.”

“They won’t come out this way, Dum,” said Mark, trying to look very serious; “they’ll come the other way, and get into the mine to lie in wait for you in the dark parts, and heave blocks of stones at you.”

“Think they will, Master Mark?” gasped the boy, and his eyes and mouth opened wide.

“Sure to.”

“Get out: you’re laughing at me.”

“I’m more disposed to cry; to think of such a stout, brave lad as you should believe such nonsense.”

“Nonsense?” cried Dummy. “What, don’t you be—believe in ghosts and bor—bogies, Master Mark?”

“Do I look as if I did?” cried Mark contemptuously. “You wait till I get well, and if you tell me then that you believe in such silly old women’s tales, I’ll kick you.”

Dummy grinned.

“You wouldn’t,” he said. “But I say, Master Mark, think old Purlrose will haunt me?”

“Bah!” ejaculated Mark. “There, come along; I want to get home and let Master Rayburn do something to my bit of a wound. It hurts so I can hardly walk.”

“Here, let me carry you, Master Mark. Pig-a-back. I can.”

“No, no, Dummy, old lad; but you come to the castle to-morrow, and say you are to walk up and see me. I shall have to be put to bed, I expect, in the same room with young Ralph Darley.”

“Then I shan’t come,” said the boy, scowling.

“Why?”

“’Cause I don’t like him, and I don’t like to see his father and their girl took there as if they were friends.”

“They are now, Dum, and there isn’t going to be any more fighting in the vale.”

It was a strange scene when the slow procession wound its way up the zigzag, at the top of which Mary Eden and Master Rayburn were waiting with the women and the tiny wounded garrison to receive the fresh party of injured folk.

Mary ran to her wounded father to embrace him, and then to Minnie Darley, to whom she held out her hands, and the people cheered as the two girls kissed.

Mary was about to lead the trembling girl in, but she shook her head and went to her father's side; and then Mary looked round for her brother, and ran to him, as he came up leaning upon Dummy's arm.

"Oh, Mark, darling! hurt?" she cried, flinging her arms about his neck.

"Just a bit," he said, with a sickly smile. "You do as Minnie Darley did. Never mind me; go and stay with father. He's more hurt than he'll own to. Ah, Master Rayburn! brought you some more work, but we've burnt out the wasps."

"My brave boy!" cried the old man, wringing his hands. "There, I'll come to you as soon as I can. I must go to those who are worse."

"Yes, yes," said Mark; "I've got my doctor here. But tell me—young Ralph?"

"Recovered his senses, and asked about his father and sister."

"Come along, Dummy," said Mark faintly; "let's go and tell him we've brought them safe; and then you shall wash and bind up my cut."

He uttered a faint "Ah!" and would have fallen but for the boy's ready arm; and the next minute he was being borne up the steps, pig-a-back after all, though he had scouted the offer before. He had fainted dead away.

Chapter Thirty Two.

A Dead Feud.

Time glided away as fast in the days of James the First as it does in the reign of our gentle Queen; and a year had gone by in the quiet peaceful vale, where, to a man, all who had been in the great trouble had more or less quickly recovered from their wounds.

The prisoners were the worst sufferers, and in the great friendly peace brought about between the old lords of the land, partly by their own manly feeling and the love that had somehow sprung up among their children, the greatest of all the Christian virtues took deep root, and flourished in a way that would have put the proverbial green bay tree to shame.

Hence it was that, as very slowly one by one the miserable crippled prisoners, so many wrecks, diseased by their own reckless life and crippled by their wounds, struggled back slowly to a condition in which perhaps a few years were left them for a better life, they were left entirely in Master Rayburn's hands; and first one and then another was sent off with a little money and a haversack of food to seek his friends and trouble the peaceful valley no more.

It took nearly the year before the last of the wretched crew bade farewell to the place, grateful or ungrateful, according to his nature, after going through a long course of physical suffering; and by that time Cliff Castle was pretty well restored, and the two lads, after a long absence, were back home again to the land of mighty cliff, green forest, and purling stream.

It was on one of those glorious early summer mornings when the air seems full of joy, and it is a delight even to exist, that, as the sycamores and beeches in their early green were alive with song, there came a rattle of tiny bits of spar against Mark Eden's casement window, and he sprang out of bed to throw it open and look down upon Ralph Darley, armed with lissom rod over his shoulder and creel on back.

"Oh, I say," he cried, "asleep, and on a morning like this!"

"Yes, but you're too soon."

"Soon? Why, I'm a quarter of an hour late. Be quick, the May-fly are up, and the trout feeding like mad, and as for the grayling, I saw the biggest —oh! do make haste."

"Shan't be long."

"And Mark, tell Mary that father is going to bring Min up about twelve, and they are to meet us with the dinner-basket up by the alder weir. Well, why

don’t you make haste and dress?”

“I was thinking,” said Mark, with a broad smile.

“What about?”

“Oh, here’s Dummy with the net,” cried Mark. “Hi! you sir! why didn’t you come and call me at the proper time?”

“Morn’, Master Ralph,” said the lad, with a friendly grin. Then with an ill-used look up at the window:

“’Tis proper time. You said six, and it aren’t that yet.”

“There,” cried Mark; “you are too soon.”

“Very well. It was so fine; but I say, what were you thinking about?”

Mark grinned again.

“Is it so very comic?” said Ralph impatiently.

“That depends on what you say.”

“Well, let’s hear.”

“I was thinking that you and I have never finished that fight.”

“No; you haven’t been down to steal our ravens. I say, Mark, what do you say? Shall we? They’re building there again.”

“Let ’em,” said Mark, “in peace.”

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