

Stables Gordon

The Island of Gold: A Sailor's Yarn



Gordon Stables

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The Island of Gold: A Sailor's Yarn

Book One – Chapter One.

Two Mitherless Bairns

Ransey Tansey was up much earlier than usual on this particular morning, because father was coming home, and there was a good deal to do.

As he crawled out of his bed – a kind of big box arrangement at the farther end of the one-roomed cottage – he gave a glance towards the corner where Babs slept in an elongated kind of basket, which by courtesy might have been called a bassinette.

Yes, Babs was sound and fast, and that was something Ransey Tansey had to be thankful for. He bent over her for a few seconds, listening as if to make sure she was alive; for this wee three-year-old was usually awake long before this, her eyes as big as saucers, and carrying on an animated conversation with herself in lieu of any other listener.

The boy gave a kind of satisfied sigh, and drew the coverlet over her bare arm. Then he proceeded to dress; while Bob, a beautiful, tailless English sheep-dog, lay near the low hearth watching his every movement, with his shaggy head cocked a trifle to one side, as if he had his considering cap on.

In summer time – and it was early summer now – dressing did not take Ransey long.

When he opened the door at last to fetch some sticks to light the fire, and stood for a moment shading his brow with his hand against the red light of the newly-risen sun, and gazing eastwards over a landscape of fields and woods, he looked a strange little figure. Moreover, one could understand now why he had taken such a short few minutes to dress.

The fact is, Ransey Tansey hadn't very much to wear just then. Barely eight years of age was Tansey, though, as far as experience of the world went, he might have been called three times as old as that; for, alas, the world had not been over-gentle with the boy.

Ransey wore no cap, just a head of towy hair, which was thick enough, however, to protect him against summer's sun or winter's cold. The upper part of his body was arrayed in a blue serge shirt, very much open at the neck; while below his waist, and extending to within nine inches of his bare feet, where they ended in ragged capes and promontories like a map of Norway, he wore a pair of pants. It would have been difficult, indeed, to have guessed at the original colour of these pants, but they were now a kind of tawny brindle, and that is the nearest I can get to it. They were suspended by one brace, a bright red one, so broad that it must have belonged to his father. I think the boy was rather proud than otherwise of this suspender, although it had a disagreeable trick of sliding down over his shoulder and causing some momentary disarrangement of his attire. But Ransey just hooked it back into its place again with his thumb, and all was right, till the next time.

A rough little tyke you might have called Ransey Tansey, with his sun-burnt face, neck, and bosom. Yet there was something that was rather pleasing than otherwise in his clear eyes and open countenance; and when his red and rather thin lips parted in a smile, which they very often did, he showed a set of teeth as clean and white as those of a six-months-old Saint Bernard puppy, and you cannot better that.

Had this little lad been a town boy, hands and face and feet would have been far from clean; but Ransey lived away down in the cool, green country, in a midland district of Merrie England, and being as often in the water as a duck, he was just as clean as one.

Away went Ransey Tansey now, and opened a rough old door in a rock which formed part of the hill by the side of which the humble cottage stood. The door opened into a kind of cave, which was a storehouse for all kinds of things.

He was soon back again, and in five minutes' time had lit the fire, swept the hearth as tidily as a girl could have done it, and hung the kettle on a hook and chain. By this time another member of this small family came in, a very large and handsome tabby cat, with a white chest and vandyked face.

Murrams, as he was called, was holding his head very high indeed. In fact he had to, else the nice young leveret he carried would have trailed on the ground. Bob jumped up to meet him, with joy in his brown eyes.

Had Bob possessed a tail of any consequence, he would have wagged it. Bob's tail, however, was a mere stump, and it was quite buried in the rough, shaggy coat that hung over his rump. But though honest Bob had only the fag-end of a tail, so to speak, he agitated this considerably when pleased.

He did so when he saw that leveret.

"Oh, you clever old Murrams!" Bob seemed to say. "What a nice drop of soup that'll make, and all the bones for me!"

Murrams walked gingerly past him, and throwing the leveret on the hearth, proceeded to wash his face and warm his nose at the blaze.

Ransey put away the young hare, patted pussy on his broad, sleek forehead, then took down a long tin can to go for the morning's milk. He left the door open, because he knew that if Babs should awake and scramble out of her cot, she would toddle right out to clutch at wild flowers, beetles, and other things, instead of going towards the fire.

Ransey Tansey happened to look round when he was about thirty yards from the cottage. Why, here was Bob coming softly up behind. Murrams himself couldn't have walked more silently.

His ears disappeared backwards when he was found out, and he looked very guilty indeed.

Ransey Tansey shook his finger at him.

"Back ye goes – back ye goes to look after Babs."

Bob lay down to plead.

"It ain't no go, Bob, I tell ye," continued Ransey Tansey, still shaking his finger. "Back to Babs, Bob – back to Babs. We can't both on us leave the house at the same time."

This latter argument was quite convincing, and back marched Bob, with drooping head and with that fag-end of a tail of his drooping earthwards also.

There grew on the top of the bank a solitary brown-stemmed pine-tree. Very, very tall it was, with not a branch all the way up save a very strong horizontal limb, which was used to hang people from in the happy days of old. The top of this tree was peculiar. It spread straight out on all sides, forming a kind of flat table of darkest green needled foliage. Had you been sketching this tree, then, after doing the stem, you could easily have rubbed in the top of it by dipping your little finger in ink and smudging the paper crosswise.

When not far from this gibbet-tree, as it was generally called, Ransey looked up and hailed, —
"Ship ahoy! Are ye on board, Admiral?"

And now a somewhat strange thing happened. No sooner had the boy hailed than down from a mass of central foliage there suddenly hung what, at first sight, one might have taken for a snake.

It was really a bird's long neck.

"Craik – craik – crik – cr – cr – cray!"

"All right," cried Ransey, as if he understood every word. "Ye mebbe don't see nuthin' o' father, do ye?"

"Tok – tok – tok – cr – cray – ay!"

"Well, ye needn't flop down, Admiral. I'll come up myself."

No lamplighter ever ran quicker up a ladder than did Ransey Tansey swarm up that pine-tree. In little over two minutes he was right out on the green roof, and beside him one of the most graceful and beautiful cranes it is possible to imagine. The boy's father had bought the bird from a sailor somewhere down the country; and, except on very stormy nights, it preferred to roost in this tree. The neck was a greyish blue, as was also the back; the wings were dark, the legs jet black, the tail purple. Around the eyes was a broad patch of crimson; and the bill was as long as a penholder, more or less slender, and slightly curved downwards at the end. (A species of what is popularly known as the dancing crane.)

The Admiral did all he could to express the pleasure he felt at seeing the boy, by a series of movements that I find it difficult to describe. The wings were half extended and quivering with delight, the neck forming a series of beautiful curves, the head at times high in air, and next moment down under Ransey's chin. Then he twisted his neck right round the boy's neck, from left to right, then from right to left, the head being laid lovingly each time against his little master's cheek.

"Now then, Admiral, when ye're quite done cuddlin' of me, we'll have a look for father's barge."

From his elevated coign of vantage, Ransey Tansey could see for many miles all around him. On this bright, sunny summer morn, it was a landscape of infinite beauty; on undulating, well-wooded, cultivated country, green and beautiful everywhere, except in the west, where a village sheltered itself near the horizon, nestling in a cloudland of trees, from which the grey flat tower of a church looked up.

To the left yonder, and near to the church, was a long strip of silver – the canal. High on a wooded hill stood the lord of the manor's house, solid, brown, and old, with the blue smoke therefrom trailing lazily along across the tree-tops.

But the house nearest to Ransey's was some distance across the fields yonder – an old-fashioned brick farm-building with a steading behind it, every bit of it green with age.

"So ye can't see no signs o' father, or the barge, eh? Look again, Admiral; your neck's a bit longer'n mine."

"Tok – tok – tok – cray!"

"Well, I'm off down. There's the milk to fetch yet; and if I don't hurry up, Bob and Babs are sure to make a mess on't afore I gets back. Mornin' to ye, Admiral."

And Ransey Tansey slid down that tree far more quickly even than he had swarmed up it.

Scattering the dew from the grass and the milk-white clover with his naked feet, the lad went trotting on, and very quickly reached the farm. He had to stop once or twice by the way, however. First, Towsey, the short-horned bull, put his great head over a five-barred gate, and Ransey had to pause to scratch it. Then he met the peacock, who insisted on instant recognition, and walked back with him till the two were met by Snap, the curly-coated retriever.

"I don't like Snap," said the peacock. "I won't go a bit further. The ugly brute threatened to snap my head off; that's the sort of Snap he is."

The farmer's wife was fat and jolly looking.

"Well, how's all the family?"

"Oh, they're all right, ye know; especially Babs, 'cause she's asleep. And we kind of expect father to-day. But even the Admiral can't see 'im, with *his* long neck."

She filled his can, and took the penny. That was only business; but the kindly soul had slyly slipped two turkey's eggs into the can before she poured in the milk.

When he got back to his home, the first thing he saw was that crane, half hopping, half flying round and round the gibbet-tree. The fact of the matter is this: the bird did not wish to go far away from the house just yet, as he generally followed his little master to the brook or stream; but, nevertheless, on this particularly fine morning he found himself possessed of an amount of energy that must be expended somehow, so he went hopping round the tree, dangling his head and

long neck in the drollest and most ridiculous kind of way imaginable. Ransey Tansey had to place his milk-can on the ground in order to laugh with greater freedom. The most curious part of the business was this: crane though he was, wheeling madly round like this made him dizzy, so every now and then he stopped and danced round the other way.

The Admiral caught flies wherever he saw them; but flies, though all very well in their way, were mere tit-bits. Presently he would have a few frogs for breakfast, and the bird was just as fond of frogs as a Frenchman is.

Ransey Tansey opened the door of the little cottage very quietly, and peeped in. Bob was there by the bassinette. He agitated that fag-end of a tail of his, and looked happy.

Murrams paused in the act of washing his ears, with one paw held aloft. He began to sing, because he knew right well there was milk in that can, and that he would have a share of it.

Babs's blue eyes had been on the smoke-grimed ceiling, but she lowered them now.

"Oh," she said, "you's tome back, has 'oo?"

"And Babs has been so good, hasn't she?" said Ransey.

"Babs is dood, and Bob is dood, and Murrams is dooder. 'Ift (lift) me up twick, 'Ansey."

Two plump little arms were extended towards her brother, and presently he was seated near the fire dressing her, as if he had been to the manner born.

There was a little face to wash presently, as well as two tiny hands and arms; but that could be done after they had all had breakfast.

"Oh, my!" cried Ransey Tansey; "look, Babs! Two turkey's eggs in the bottom of the can!"

"Oh, my! 'Ansey," echoed the child. "One tu'key's egg fo' me, and one fo' 'oo."

The door had been left half ajar, and presently about a yard of long neck was thrust round the edge, and the Admiral looked lovingly at the eggs, first with one roguish eye, then with the other.

This droll crane had a weakness for eggs – strange, perhaps, but true. When he found one, he tossed it high in air, and in descending caught it cleverly. Next second there was an empty egg-shell on the ground, and some kind of a lump sliding slowly down the Admiral's extended gullet. When it was fairly landed, the bird expressed his delight by dancing a double-triple fandango, which was partly jig, partly hornpipe, and all the rest a Highland schottische.

"Get out, Admiral! – get out, I tell ye!" cried the boy. "W'y, ye stoopid, if the door slams, off goes yer head."

The bird seemed to fully appreciate the danger, and at once withdrew.

Ransey placed the two turkey's eggs on a shelf near the little gable window. One pane of glass was broken, and was stuffed with hay.

Well, the Admiral had been watching the boy, and as soon as his back was turned, it didn't take the bird long to pull out that hay.

"O 'Ansey, 'ook! 'ook!" cried Babs.

It was too late, however, for looking to do any good. For the same yard of neck that had, a few minutes before, appeared round the edge of the doorway, was now thrust through the broken pane, and only one turkey's egg was left.

Babs looked very sad. She considered for a bit, then said solemnly, —

"'Oo mus' have the odel (other) tu'key's egg. You is dooder nor me."

But Ransey didn't have it. He contented himself with bread and milk.

And so the two mitherless bairns had breakfast.

Book One – Chapter Two. Life in the Woods

I trust that, from what he has already seen and heard of Ransey Tansey, the reader will not imagine I desire this little hero of mine to pose as a real saint. Boys should be boys while they have the chance. Alas, they shall grow up into men far too soon, and then they needn't go long journeys to seek for sorrow; they will find it near home.

And now I think, reader, you and I understand each other, to some extent at all events. Though I believe he was always manly and never mean, yet, as his biographer, I am bound to confess that there was just as much monkey-mischief to the square inch about Ransey Tansey, as about any boy to whom I have ever had the honour of being introduced.

It was said of the immortal George Washington that when a boy at school he climbed out of a bedroom window and robbed a wall fruit tree, because the other boys were cowards and afraid to do so. But George refused to eat even a bite of one of these apples himself. I think that Ransey Tansey could have surpassed young Washington; for not only would he have taken the apples, but eaten his own share of them afterwards.

To do him justice, however, I must state that on occasions when his father went in the barge to a distant town on business, as he had been now for over a week, Ransey being left in charge of his tiny sister and the whole establishment, the sense of his great responsibility kept him entirely free from mischief.

Now a very extraordinary thing happened on this particular morning – Ransey Tansey received a letter.

The postman was sulky, to say the least of it.

"Pretty thing," he said, as he flung the letter with scant ceremony in through the open doorway; "pretty thing as I should have to come three-quarters of a mile round to fetch a letter to the likes o' you!"

"Now, look 'ee here," said Ransey, "if ye're good and brings my letters every day, and hangs yer stockin' out at Christmas-time, I may put somethin' in it."

"Gur long, ye ragged young nipper!"

Ransey was dandling Babs upon his knee, but he now put her gently down beside the cat. Then he jumped up.

"I'se got to teach you a lesson," he said to the boorish postman, "on the hadvantages o' civeelity. I ain't agoin' to waste a good pertater on such a sponce as yours, don't be afeard; but 'ere's an old turmut (turnip) as'll meet the requirements o' the occasion."

It was indeed an old turnip, and well aimed too, for it caught the postman on the back of the neck and covered him with slush from head to toe.

The lout yelled with rage, and flew at Ransey stick in hand. Next moment, and before he could deal the boy a blow, he was lying flat on the grass, with Bob standing triumphantly over him growling like a wild wolf.

"Call off yer dog, and I won't say no more about it."

"Oh, ye won't, won't ye? I calls that wery considerate. But look 'ee here, I ain't agoin' to call Bob off, until ye begs my parding in a spirit o' humility, as t'old parson says. If ye don't, I'll hiss Bob on to ye, and ye'll be a raggeder nipper nor me afore Bob's finished the job to his own satisfaction."

Well, discretion is the better part of valour, and after grumbling out an apology, the postman was allowed to sneak off with a whole skin.

Then Ransey kissed Bob's shaggy head, and opened his letter.

“Dear Sonnie, – Can’t get home before four days. Look after Babs. Your Loving Father.”

That was all. The writing certainly left something to be desired, but it being the first letter the boy had ever received, he read it twice over to himself and twice over to Babs; then he put it away inside his New Testament.

“Hurrah, Babs!” he cried, picking the child up again, and swinging her to and fro till she laughed and kicked and crowed with delight – “hurrah, Babs! we’ll all away to the woods. Murrams shall keep house, and we’ll take our dinner with us.”

It was a droll procession. First walked Bob, looking extremely solemn and wise, and carrying Ransey’s fishing-rod. Close behind him came the tall and graceful crane, not quite so solemn as Bob; for he was catching flies, and his head and neck were in constant motion, and every now and then he would hop, first on one leg, and then on the other. Ransey Tansey himself brought up the rear, with a small bag slung in front of him, and Babs in a shawl on his back.

Away to the woods? Yes; and there was a grand little stream there, and the boy knew precisely where the biggest fish lay, and meant to have some for supper. The leveret could hang for a few days.

Arrived at his fishing-ground, where the stream swept slowly through the darkling wood, Ransey lowered his back-burden gently on the moss, and lay down on his face in front of her to talk Babs into the best of tempers.

This was not difficult to do, for she was really a good-natured child; so he gave her his big clasp-knife and his whistle, and proceeded to get his rod in order and make a cast. Bob lay down beside the tiny mite to guard her. She could whistle herself, but couldn’t get Bob to do the same, although she rammed the whistle halfway down his throat, and afterwards showed him how she did it.

Well, there are a few accomplishments that dogs cannot attain to, and I believe whistling is one of them.

The fish were very kind to-day, and Ransey was making a very good bag. Whenever he had finished fishing in about forty yards of stream, he threw down his rod and trotted off back for Babs, and placed her down about twenty yards ahead of him, fished another forty yards and changed her position again, Bob always following close at the boy’s heels and lying down beside his charge, and permitting himself to be pulled about, and teased, and cuddled, and kissed one moment, and hammered over the nose with that tin whistle the next. Even when Babs tried to gouge his eye out with a morsel of twig, he only lifted his head and licked her face till, half-blinded, she had to drop the stick and tumble on her back.

“You’s a funny dog, Bob,” she said; “oor tisses is so lough (rough).”

Of course they were. He meant them to be, for Bob couldn’t afford to lose an eye.

I think the Admiral enjoyed himself quite as much as any one. He chose a bit of the stream for himself where the bank was soft, and there he waded and fished for goodness only knows what – beetles, minnows, tiny frogs, anything alive and easy to swallow.

I don’t think, however, that the Admiral was a very good Judge of his swallowing capabilities. That neck of his was so very, very long, and though distensible enough on the whole, sometimes he encountered difficulties that it was almost impossible to surmount. Tadpoles slid down easily enough, so did flies and other tiny insects; but a too-big frog, if invited to go down head-foremost, often had a disagreeable way of throwing his hind-legs out at right angles to the entrance of the Admiral’s gullet. This placed the Admiral in a somewhat awkward predicament. No bird can look his best with its beak held forcibly agape, and the two legs of a disorderly frog sticking out one at each side.

The crane would hold his head in the air and consider for a bit, then lower his face against the bank and rub one leg in, then change cheeks and rub the other in; but lo! while doing so, leg number one would be kicked out again, and by the time that was replaced out shot leg number two.

It was very annoying and ridiculous. So the Admiral would step cautiously on to the green bank, and stride very humbly down the stream to Ransey Tansey, with his neck extended and his head on a level with his shoulders.

"You see the confounded fix I'm in," he would say, looking up at his master with one wonderfully wise eye.

Then Ransey would pull out the frog, and the little rascal would hop away, laughing to himself apparently.

"Crok – crok – cray – ay!" the Admiral would cry, and go joyfully back to his fishing-ground.

But sometimes Mr Crane would swallow a big water-beetle, and if this specimen had a will of its own, as beetles generally have, it would catch hold of the side of the gullet and hang on halfway down.

"I ain't going another step," the beetle would say; "it isn't good enough. The road is too long and too dark."

So this disobliging beetle would just stop there, making a kind of a mump in the poor Admiral's neck.

When Ransey saw his droll pet stride out of the pool and walk solemnly towards a tree and lean his head against it, and close his eyes, the lad knew pretty well what was the matter.

There is nothing like patience and plenty of it, and presently the beetle would go to sleep, relax its hold, and slip quietly down to regions unknown. There would be no more mump now, and the crane would suddenly take leave of his senses with joy.

"Kaik – kaik – kay – ay?" he would scream, and go madly hopping and dancing round the tree, a most weird and uncanny-looking object, raising one leg at a time as high as he could, and swinging his head and neck fore and aft, low and aloft, from starboard to port, in such a droll way that Ransey Tansey felt impelled to throw himself on his back, so as to laugh without bursting that much-prized solitary suspender of his, while Bob sat up to bark, and Babs clapped her tiny hands and crowed.

Ransey got tired of fishing at last, and made up his rod. There was some sort of silent joy or happiness away down at the bottom of the boy's heart, and for a moment he couldn't make out what was causing it. The big haul of fish he had caught? Oh, no; that was a common exploit. Having smashed the postman with a mushy turnip? That was capital, of course, but that wasn't it. Ah! now he has remembered – father was coming home in four days. Hurrah! he must have some fun on the head of it. Ransey loved to have a good time.

But, duty first. Babs was a good little girl – or a "dood 'ittle dirl," as she phrased it – but even good girls get hungry sometimes. Babs must be fed. She held her arms straight out towards him.

"Babs is detting tired," she lisped.

So he took her up, kissed her, and made much of her for a minute, then set her against a tree where the moss was green and soft. With a bit of string and a burdock leaf he made her a beautiful bib; for though Ransey himself was scantily attired, the child was really prettily dressed.

And now the boy produced a pickle bottle from the luncheon bag, likewise a small horn spoon. The pickle bottle contained a pap of bread and milk; and with this he proceeded to feed Babs somewhat after the manner of cramming turkeys, until she shook her head at last, and declared she would *never* eat any more – "Never, never, *never*!"

There was a turnip-field not far off. Now Bob was as fond of raw turnips as his master. He knew where the field was, too.

"Off ye go for a turmut, Bob; and mind ye bring a big 'un. I'll look after Babs till ye comes back."

Bob wasn't long gone. He had obeyed his master's instructions to the very letter – in fact, he had pulled more than six turnips before he found one to please him. (It is easy to teach a dog this trick, only stupid farmer folks sometimes don't see the fun of it. Farmer folks are obtuse. – G.S.) That "turmut" made Bob and Ransey an excellent luncheon, and Babs had a slice to amuse herself with.

The day was delightfully warm, and the wind soft and balmy. The sunshine filtered down through a great beech-tree, and wherever it fell the grass was a brighter green or the dead leaves a lighter brown. Now and then a May beetle would go droning past; there were flies of all sorts and sizes, from the gnats that danced in thousands over the bushes to the great rainbow-like dragonfly that darted hither and thither across the stream; grasshoppers green and brown that alighted on a leaf one moment, gave a click the next, and hurled themselves into space; a blackbird making wild melody not far off; the bold lilt of a chaffinch; the insolent mocking notes of a thrush; and the coo-cooing of wood-pigeons sounding mournfully from a thicket beyond the stream.

High up in that beech-tree myriads of bees were humming, though they could not be seen. No wonder that under such sweet drowsy influences Babs began to wink and wink, and blink and blink, till finally her wee head fell forward on her green-bough bib.

Babs was sound asleep.

Book One – Chapter Three.

“O Eedie, I’ve Found a Child.”

Ransey Tansey took his tiny sister tenderly up and spread her, as it were, on the soft moss.

“She’s in for a regular forenooner, Bob,” said the boy, “and I’m not sure I don’t like Babs just as well when she is asleep. Seems so innercent-like, you know.”

Bob looked as if he really did understand, and tried by means of his brown eyes and that fag-end of a tail to let his master know that he too liked Babs best asleep, because then no attempts were made to gouge his eyes out with pieces of stick, or to ram the business end of a tin whistle halfway down his throat.

“Bob!” said Ransey.

“Yes, master,” said Bob, raising his ears.

“Babs is a sailor’s darter, ye know.”

Bob assented.

“Well, she ought’er sleep in a hammock.”

“To be sure. I hadn’t thought of that,” said Bob.

“I can make one in a brace o’ shakes, and that’s sailor langwidge. Now just keep your eyes on me, Bob.”

Ransey Tansey was busy enough for the next five minutes. He took that shepherd-tartan shawl, and by means of some pieces of string, which he never went abroad without, soon fashioned it into a neat little hammock. Two saplings grew near, and by bending a branch downward from each, he slung that hammock so prettily that he was obliged to stand back for a little while to smile and admire it.

When he lifted Babs and put her in it, and fastened the two sides of the hammock across her chest with some more string and a horse-shoe nail, so that she could not fall out, the whole affair was complete.

“Hush-a-bye, baby, upon the tree-top,
When the wind blown the cradle will rock.”

Well, the wind did blow, but ever so softly, and the little hammock swayed gently to and fro. And the blackbird’s voice seemed to sound more melodiously now; the thrush went farther away; only the wild pigeons continued to coo, coo, and the bees to hum, high, high up in the green beech-tree.

No wonder that the baby slept.

“Come along now, Bob. We’ve a whole hour at least.”

The boy placed his rod and bag on the branches of a tree.

“A whole hour, Bob, to do as we likes. No good me askin’ that idiot of an Admiral to watch Babs. He’d only begin scray-scrayin’ and hopping around the hammock, and Babs would wake. I’m goin’ to run wild for a bit, are you?”

And off he bounded, with Bob at his heels.

The Admiral, whose feet were getting cold now, hopped out of the stream, stretched out his three-foot neck, and looked after them.

“They think they’re going to leave me behind, do they? Tok – tok – tok,” – which in craneish language means “No – no – no.”

So away *he* went next, with his head and his long neck about a yard in front of him, and his wings expanded. It would have puzzled any one to have told whether the Admiral was running or flying.

If Ransey Tansey climbed one tree he climbed a dozen. Ransey walked through the wood with upturned face, and whenever he saw a nest, whether it belonged to magpie, hawk, or hooded crow, skywards he went to have a look at it.

He liked to look at the eggs best, and sometimes he brought just one down in his mouth if four were left behind, because, he thought, one wouldn't be missed. But even this was sinful; for although birds are not very good arithmeticians, every one of them can count as far as the number of its eggs – even a partridge or a wren can.

Sometimes the Admiral wanted to investigate the nests, but Ransey sternly forbade him. He might dance round the tree as much as he liked, but he must not fly up.

Bob used to bark at his master as he climbed up and up. Indeed, when perched on the very, very top of a tall larch-tree Ransey himself didn't look much bigger than a rook.

Yet I think the ever-abiding sorrow with Bob was not that he had not a tail worth talking about, but that he could not climb a tree.

Different birds behaved in different ways when Ransey visited their nests. Thus: a linnet or a robin, flying from its sweet, cosy little home in a bush of orange-scented furze, would sit and sing at no great distance in a half-hysterical kind of way, as if it really didn't know what it was about. A blackbird from a tall thorn-tree or baby spruce, would go scurrying off, and make the woods resound with her cries of "beet, beet, beet," till other birds, crouching low on their nests, trembled with fear lest their turn might come next. A hooded crow would fly off some distance and perch on a tree, but say nothing: hooded crows are philosophers. A magpie went but a little distance away, and sat nodding and chickering in great distress. A hawk would course round and round in great circles in the air, uttering every now and then a most distressful scream.

But one day, I must tell you, a large hawk played the lad a very mischievous trick. Ransey was high up near the top of a tall, stone-pine-tree, and had hold of a sturdy branch above, being just about to swing himself in through the needled foliage, when, lo! the stump on which one foot was resting gave way, leaving him suspended betwixt heaven and earth, like Mohammed's coffin – and kicking too, because he could not for some time swing himself into the tree.

Now that hawk needn't have been so precious nasty about it. But he saw his chance, and went for Ransey straight; and the more the boy shouted at the hawk, and cried "Hoosh-oo!" at him, the more that hawk wouldn't leave off. He tore the boy's shirt and back, and cut his suspender right through, so that with the kicking and struggling his poor little pants came off and fluttered down to the ground.

Ransey Tansey was only second best that day, and when – a sadder and a wiser boy – he reached the foot of the tree, he found that Bob had been engaged in funeral rites – obsequies – for some time. In fact, he had scraped a hole beneath a furze bush and buried Ransey's pants.

Whether Bob had thought this was all that remained of his master or not, I cannot say. I only state facts.

But to hark back: after Ransey Tansey had seen all the nests he wanted to see, he and his two companions rushed off to a portion of the wood where, near the bank of the stream, he kept his toy ship under a moss-covered boulder.

He had built this ship, fashioning her out of a pine-log with his knife, and rigged her all complete as well as his somewhat limited nautical knowledge permitted him to do. In Ransey's eyes she was a beauty – without paint.

Before he launched her to-day he looked down at Bob and across at the Admiral, who was quite as tall as the boy.

“We’re going on a long and dangerous voyage, Bob,” he said. “There’s no sayin’ wot may happen. We may run among rocks and get smashed; we may get caught-aback-like and flounder,” – he meant founder – “or go down wi’ all han’s in the Bay o’ Biscay – O.”

Bob tried to appear as solemn and sad as the occasion demanded, and let his fag-end drop groundwards.

But the crane only said “Tok,” which on this occasion meant “All humbug!” for he knew well enough that Ransey Tansey was seldom to be taken seriously.

Never mind, the barque was launched on the fathomless deep, the summer breeze filled her sails – which, by the way, had been made out of a piece of an old shirt of the boy’s father’s – and she breasted the billows like a thing of life.

Then as those three young inseparables rushed madly and delightedly along the bank to keep abreast of the ship, never surely was such whooping and barking and scray-scraying heard in the woods before.

But disaster followed in the wake of that bonnie barque on this voyage. I suppose the helmsman forgot to put his helm up at an ugly bend of the river, so the wind caught her dead aback. She flew stern-foremost through the water at a furious rate, then her bows rose high in air, she struggled but for a moment ere down she sank to rise no more, and all on board must have perished!

When I say she sank to rise no more I am hardly in alignment with the truth.

The fact is, that although Ransey Tansey could easily have made another ship with that knife of his, he was afraid he could not requisition some more shirt for sails.

“Oh, I ain’t agoin’ to lose her like that, Bob,” said Ransey.

Bob was understood to say that *he* wouldn’t either.

“Admiral, ye’re considerabul longer nor me in the legs and neck; couldn’t ye wade out and make a dive for her?”

The crane only said, “Tok!”

By this time Ransey was undressed.

“Hoop!” he cried, “here goes,” and in he dived.

“Wowff!” cried Bob, “here’s for after,” and in *he* sprang next.

“Kaik – kaik!” shrieked the crane, and followed his leader, but he speedily got out again. The water was deep, and as a swimmer the Admiral was somewhat of a failure.

But the barque was raised all and whole, and after a good swim Ransey and Bob returned to the bank. Bob shook himself, making little rainbows all round him, and the boy rolled in the moss till he was dry, but stained rather green.

Then he dressed himself, and looked at his watch – that is, he looked at the sun.

“Why, Bob,” he cried, “it is time to go back to Babs.”

It was such a lovely forenoon that day that the elderly Miss Scragley thought a walk in the woods and wilds – as she phrased it – would do her good. So she took her little six-year-old niece Eedie with her, and started.

The butler wanted to know if he would send a groom with her. But she declined the service.

“It is ever so much better,” she told Eedie, “going all alone and enjoying things, than having a dressed-up doll of a flunkey dawdling behind you carrying wraps.”

I think Miss Scragley was right.

The Scragleys were a very old family, and that was their mansion I have already mentioned as standing high up on the hill in a cloudland of glorious trees. But excepting Miss Scragley herself, and this little niece, Miss Eedie Moore, the rest of the Scragleys were all dead and away.

Though the family estates were intact and financially secure, afflictions of all sorts had decimated the Scragleys. No less than two had died on the hunting-field; one, a soldier, had fallen on the field of fame in far Afghanistan; another, a captain in the royal navy, had succumbed to fever at sea; and still another had sailed away in a ship that never returned.

Others had died in peace and at home. So Miss Scragley was indeed a relic of the past, but she was lord of the manor for the time being. Her heart was bound up in little Eedie; and the girl would have to change her name when of age, as she would then be heir to all the Scragley estates. Even if she married, her husband must become a Scragley. It would never do to let the glorious name of Scragley die out.

But Miss Scragley was somewhat antiquated though not very old; somewhat set up and starchy in manner too. She preferred to import good people from London to mixing with the residents around, with the exception of the kindly-faced, white-haired old rector, Captain Weathereye, R.N., and Dr Fairincks.

In bygone ages it was currently believed that this rough old sea-dog of a captain, Weathereye would lead the then graceful Miss Scragley to the altar, and the lady herself still believed that the happy event would yet come off.

And she was quite gay when she thought of it. At Christmas-time, when she imported more good people from London than usual, and turned on the family ghost for the occasion, when she had the special brand of port decanted that old Weathereye so dearly loved, and when Scragley Hall resounded with mirth and laughter, and was lighted up from basement to attics, Miss Scragley nursed the fond hope that the captain was almost sure to pop the question.

Old Captain Weathereye praised the port. But – well, he loved to hear corks popping, only he wouldn't pop himself.

Poor Miss Scragley!

"I wonder will he *ever*?" she used to remark to herself, when she had finished saying her prayers and was preparing to undress – "ever —*ever*?"

"Never – never," old Weathereye would have unfeelingly replied had he heard her.

On this particular occasion Miss Scragley extended her walk far into the very wood – forest, she romantically called it – where Ransey Tansey and his pets were enjoying themselves.

She and her niece wandered on and on by the banks of the stream, till they came to the place where little Babs lay, still sound asleep in her hammock, and this was swaying gently to and fro in the summer wind.

"O Eedie!" cried Miss Scragley, "why, I've found a child!"

"Oh, the wee darling!" exclaimed Eedie; "mayn't I kiss it, auntie?"

"If you kissed it," said the lady, as if she knew all about babies and could write a book about them – "if you kissed it, dear, it would awake, and the creature's yells would resound through the dark depths of the forest."

"But there is no one near," she continued; "it must be deserted by its unfeeling parents, and left here to perish."

She went a little nearer now and looked down on the sleeping child's face.

A very pretty face it was, the rosy lips parted, the flush of sleep upon her face; and one wee chubby hand and arm was lying bare on the shawl.

"Oh dear!" cried Miss Scragley, "I feel strangely agitated. I cannot let the tiny angel perish in the silvan gloom. I must —*you* must, Eedie – well, *we* must, dear, carry it home with us."

"Oh, will ye, though?" The voice was close behind her. "Just you leave Babs alone, and attend to yer own bizness, else Bob will have somethin' till say to ye."

Miss Scragley started, as well she might.

"Oh," she cried, looking round now, "an absurd little gipsy boy!"

"Yes," said Ransey Tansey, touching his forelock, "and I'm sorry for bein' so absurd. And ashamed all-so. If a rabbit's hole was handy, I'd soon pop in. But, bless yer beautiful ladyship, if I'd known I was to 'ave the perleasure o' meetin' quality, I'd 'ave put on my dress soot, and carried my crush hat under my arm."

“Don’t be afeard, mum,” he continued, as the crane came hopping out of the bush. “That’s only just the Admiral; and this is Bob, as would die for me or Babs.”

“And who is Babs, you droll boy?”

“Babs is my baby, and no one else’s ’cept Bob’s. And Bob and I would make it warm for anybody as tried to take Babs away. Wouldn’t us, Bob?”

Just then his little sister awoke, all smiles and dimples as usual.

Ransey Tansey went to talk to her, and for a time the boy forgot all the world except Babs.

Book One – Chapter Four.

“Ransey, Fetch Jim; We’re Goin’ On.”

“I’se glad ’oo’s tome back, ’Ansey. Has I been afeep (asleep), ’Ansey?”

“Oh, yes; and now I’m goin’ to feed Babs, and Babs’ll lie and look at the trees till I cook dinner for Bob and me.”

“That wady (lady) won’t take Babs away, ’Ansey?”

“No, Babs, no.”

Ransey Tansey fed Babs once more from the pickle bottle with the horn spoon, much to Miss Scragley’s and little Eedie’s astonishment and delight.

Then he commenced to build a fire at a little distance, and laid out some fish all ready to cook as soon as the blazing wood should die down to red embers.

“You’re a very interesting boy,” said Miss Scragley politely. “May I look on while you cook?”

“Oh, yes, mum. Sorry I ain’t got a chair to offer ye.”

“And oh, please, interesting boy,” begged Eedie, “may I talk to Babs?”

“Cer – tain – lee, pretty missie. – Babsie, sweet,” he added, “talk to this beautiful young lady.”

“There’s no charge for sittin’ on the grass, mum,” said Ransey the next minute.

And down sat Miss Scragley smiling.

The boy proceeded with the preparation of the meal in real gipsy fashion. He cooked fish, and he roasted potatoes. He hadn’t forgotten the salt either, nor a modicum of butter in a piece of paper, nor bread; and as he and Bob made a hearty dinner, he gave every now and then the sweetest of tit-bits to Babs.

Eedie and the child got on beautifully together.

“May I ask you a question or two, you most interesting boy?” said Miss Scragley.

“Oh, yes, if ye’re quite sure ye ain’t the gamekeeper’s wife. The keeper turned me out of the wood once. Bob warn’t there that day.”

“Well, I’m sure I’m not the gamekeeper’s wife. I am Miss Scragley of Scragley Hall.”

The boy was wiping his fingers and his knife with some moss.

“I wish I had a cap on,” he said.

“Why, dear?”

“So as I could take her off and make a bow,” he explained.

“And what is your name, curious boy?”

“Ransey; that’s my front name.”

“But your family name?”

“Ain’t got ne’er a family, ’cepting Babs.”

“But you have a surname – another name, you know.”

“Ransey Tansey all complete. There.”

“And where do you live, my lad?”

“Me and Babs and Bob and Murrams all lives, when we’re to home, at Hangman’s Hall; and father lives there, too, when ’ee’s to home; and the Admiral, yonder, he roosts in the gibbet-tree.”

“And what does father do?”

“Oh, father’s a capting.”

“A captain, dear boy?”

“No, he’s not a boy, but a man, and capting of the *Merry Maiden*, a canal barge, mum. An’ we all goes to sea sometimes together, ’cepting Murrams, our pussy, and the Admiral. We have such fun; and I ride Jim the canal hoss, and Babs laughs nearly all the time.”

“So you’re very happy all of you, and always were?”

"Oh, yes – 'cepting when father sometimes took too much rum; but that's a hundred years ago, more or less, mum."

"Poor lad! Have you a mother?"

"Oh, yes, we has a mother, but only she's gone dead. The parson said she'd gone to heaven; but I don't know, you know. Wish she'd come back, though," he added with a sigh.

"I'm so sorry," said Miss Scragley, patting his hand.

"Oh, don't ye do that, mum, and don't talk kind to me, else I'll cry. I feels the tears a-comin' now. Nobody ever, ever talks kindly to me and Babs when at home, 'cepting father, in course, 'cause we're on'y common canal folks and outcasts from serciety."

Ransey Tansey was very earnest. Miss Scragley had really a kind heart of her own, only she couldn't help smiling at the boy's language.

"Who told you so?"

"W'y, the man as opens the pews."

"Oh, you've been to church, then?"

"Oh, yes; went the other Sunday. Had nuthin' better to do, and thought I'd give Babs a treat."

"And did you go in those – clothes?"

"Well, mum, I couldn't go with nuthin' on – could I, now? An' the pew-man just turned us both out. But Babs was so good, and didn't cry a bit till she got out. Then I took her away through the woods to hear the birds sing; and mebbe God was there too, 'cause mother said He was everywhere."

"Yes, boy, God is everywhere. And where does your mother sleep, Ransey?"

"Sleep? Oh, in heaven. Leastways I s'pose so."

"I mean, where was your gentle mother buried?"

"Oh, at sea, mum. Sailor's grave, ye know."

Ransey looked very sad just then.

"You don't mean in the canal, surely?"

"Yes, mum. Father wouldn't have it no other way. I can't forget; 'tain't much more'n a year ago, though it looks like ten. Father, ye know, 'ad been a long time in furrin parts afore he was captin' o' the *Merry Maiden*."

The lad had thrown himself down on the grass at a respectable distance from Miss Scragley, and his big blue, eyes grew bigger and sadder as he continued his story.

"'Twere jest like this, mum. Mother'd been bad for weeks and so quiet like, and father *so* kind, 'cause he didn't never touch no rum when mother was sick. We was canal-ing most o' the time; and one night we stopped at the 'Bargee's Chorus' – only a little public-house, mum, as perhaps you wouldn't hardly care to be seen drinkin' at. We stopped here 'cause mother was wuss, and old dad sent for a doctor; and I put Jim into the meadow. Soon's the doctor saw poor mother, he sez, sez he, 'Ye'd better get the parson. No,' he sez, 'I won't charge ye nuthin' for attendance; it's on'y jest her soul as wants seein' to now.'

"Well, mum, the parson came. He'd a nice, kind face like you has, mum, and he told mother lots, and made her happy like. Then he said a prayer. I was kind o' dazed, I dussay; but when mother called us to her, and kissed me and Babs, and told us she was goin' on to a happier land, I broke out and cried awful. And Babs cried too, and said, 'An' me too, ma. Oh, take Babs.'

"Father led us away to the inn, and I jest hear him say to the parson, 'No, no, sir, no. No parish burial for me. She's a sailor's wife; she'll rest in a sailor's grave!'

"I don't know, mum, what happened that night and next day, for me and Babs didn't go on board again.

"Only, the evenin' arter, when the moon and stars was ashinin' over the woods and deep down in the watur, father comes to me.

“‘Ransey,’ sez father, ‘fetch Jim; we’re goin’ on.’ And I goes and fetches Jim, and yokes him to and mounts; and father he put Babs up aside me, ’cause Jim’s good and never needs a whip.

“‘Go on, Ransey,’ sez he, an’ steps quietly on board and takes the tiller.

“Away we went – through the meadows and trees, and then through a long, quiet moor.

“Father kep’ the barge well out, and she looked sailin’ among the stars – which it wasn’t the stars, on’y their ’flection, mum. Well, we was halfway through the moor, and Babs was gone sound asleep ’cross my arm, when I gives Jim his head and looks back.

“An’, oh, mum, there was old dad standin’ holdin’ the tiller wi’ one hand. The moon was shinin’ on his face and on his hair, which is grey kind, and he kep’ lookin’ up and sayin’ somethin’.

“Then there was a splash. Oh, I knew then it was dead mother; and – and – I jest let Jim go on – and – and – ”

But Ransey’s story stopped right here. He was pursing up his lips and trying to swallow the lump in his throat; and Miss Scragley herself turned her head away to hide the moisture in her eyes.

Grief does not stay long at a time in the hearts of children. It comes there all the same, nevertheless, and is quite as poignant while it does last as it is in the breasts of older folks. Children are like the traditional April day – sunshine and showers.

“I think, mum,” said Ransey after a while, “it is time for us to bundle and go.”

Miss Scragley watched the lad with considerable interest while he struck his little camp. First he scattered the remains of his fire and ashes carefully, so that there should be no danger to the wood. Then he prepared to hide his ship.

“Did you make that pretty ship?” said Eedie.

“Oh, yes; I can make beautiful ships and boats, ’cause I seed lots on ’em w’en father took me to Southampton. Oh, that seems millions and millions o’ years ago. And ye see, miss,” he added, “I’m goin’ to be a sailor anyhow, and sail all over the wide world, like father did, and by-and-by I’ll be rich enough to have a real ship of my own.”

“Oh, how nice! And will Babs go with you?”

“As long as Babs is quite little,” he answered, “I can’t go to sea at all, ’cause Babs would die like dead mother if I went away.”

He had Babs in his arms by this time, and it was evident enough that the affection between these two little canal people was very strong indeed.

Seated on his left shoulder, and hugging Ransey’s head towards her, Babs evidently thought she was in a position to give a harangue.

She accordingly addressed herself to Eedie: —

“My bloder ’Ansey is doin’ to drow a big, big man. As big as dad. My bloder ’Ansey is doin’ to be a sailor in s’ips, and Babs is doin’. ’Oo *mufn’t* (mustn’t) take my bloder away from Babs. ’Oor mudder *mufn’t*, and noboddy *mufn’t*.”

Meanwhile her brother was nearly strangled by the vehemence of her affection. But he gently disengaged the little arm and set her on the moss once more. He speedily enveloped her in the shawl, and then hoisted her on his back.

Next he hung his bag in front, and handed the fishing-rod to Bob.

“We must all go now, lady.”

“Oh, yes, and we too must go. We have to thank you for a very interesting half-hour.”

Ransey wasn’t used to such politeness as this little speech indicated. What to say in reply did not readily occur to him.

“Wish,” he said awkwardly and shyly, “I could talk as nice like as you and t’other young lady.”

Miss Scragley smiled. She rather liked being thought a young lady even by a little canal boy like Ransey.

“Oh, you will some day. Can you read?”

"Ye-es. Mother taught me to read, and by-and-by I'll teach Babs like one o'clock. I can read 'Nick o' the Woods' and the 'Rev'lutions o' Saint John,' but Babs likes 'Jack the Giant Killer' better'n the Bible. An' oh," he added, somewhat proudly, "I got a letter to-day, and I could read that; and it was to say as how father was comin' home in four days. And the postman cheeked us, and shook his head, threat'nin' like, and I threw a big turmut and broke it."

"What! broke his head?"

"Oh, no, mum, only jest the turmut. An' Bob went after him, and down went postie. Ye would have larfed, mum."

"I'm afraid you're a bad boy sometimes."

"Yes, I feels all over bad – sometimes."

"I like bad boys best," said Eedie boldly, "they're such fun."

"Babs," said Ransey, "you'll hang me dead if you hold so tight."

"Well, dears, I'm going to come and see you to-morrow, perhaps, or next day, and bring Babs a pretty toy."

"Babs," said the child defiantly, "has dot a dolly-bone, all dlessed and boo'ful." This was simply a ham-bone, on the ball of which Ransey had scratched eyes and a mouth and a nose, and dressed it in green moss and rags. And Babs thought nothing could beat that.

As she rode off triumphantly on Ransey's back, Babs looked back, held one bare arm on high, and shouted, "Hullay!"

"What strange children!" said Miss Scragley to her niece. "They're not at all like our little knights of the gutter down in the village where we visit. This opens up life to me in quite a new phase. I'm sure Captain Weathereye would be much interested. There is good, in those poor canal children, dear, only it wants developing. I wonder how we could befriend them without appearing officious or obtrusive. Consult the captain, did you say?"

"I did not speak at all, aunt."

"Didn't you? However, that *would* be best, as you suggested."

Miss Scragley did not call at Hangman's Hall next day – it looked showery; but about twelve o'clock, while Ransey Tansey was stewing that leveret with potatoes and a morsel of bacon, and Babs was nursing her dolly-bone in the bassinette, where Ransey had placed her to be out of the way, some one knocked sharply and loudly at the door.

The Admiral, swaying aloft in the gibbet-tree, sounded his tocsin, and Bob barked furiously.

"Down, Bob!" cried Ransey, running to the door. He half expected the postman.

He was mistaken, however, for there stood a smart but pale-faced flunkey in a brown coat with gilt buttons.

Now Ransey could never thoroughly appreciate "gentlemen's gentlemen" any more than he could gamekeepers.

The flunkey had a large parcel under his arm, which he appeared to be rather ashamed of.

"Aw!" he began haughtily, "am I right in my conjecture that this is 'Angman's 'All?"

"Your conjecture," replied Ransey, mimicking the flunkey's tone and manner, "is about as neah wight as conjectures gener'ly aw. What may be the naychure of your business?"

"Aw! An' may I enquiah if you are the – the – the waggamuffin who saw Miss Scwagley in the wood yestah-day?"

"I'm the young *gentleman*" said Ransey, hitching up his suspender, "who had the honah of 'alf an hour's convehsation with the lady. I am Ransey Tansey, Esq., eldest and only son of Captain Tansey of the *Mewwy Maiden*. And," he added emphatically, "this is my dog *Bob*."

Bob uttered a low, ominous growl, and walked round behind the flunkey on a tour of inspection.

The only comfort the flunkey had at that moment arose from the fact that his calves were stuffed with hay.

“Aw! Beautiful animal, to be shuah. May I ask if this is the doag that neahly killed the postman fellah?”

“That’s the doag,” replied Ransey, “who *would* have killed the postman fellah dead out, if I had tipped him the wink.”

“Aw! Well, my business is vewy bwief. Heah is a pawcel from Miss Scwagley, of which she begs your acceptance.”

“Ah, thank you. Dee – lighted. Pray walk in. Sorry my butler is out at pwesent. But what will you dwink – sherry, port, champagne – wum? Can highly wecommend the wum.”

“Oh, thanks. Then I’ll have just a spot of wum.”

Ransey brought out his father’s bottle – a bottle that had lain untouched for a long time indeed – and his father’s glass, and the flunkey drank his “spot,” and really seemed to enjoy it.

Ransey opened the door for him.

“Convey my best thanks to Miss Scwagley,” he said, “and inform her that we will be ree – joiced to receive her, and that Miss Tansey and myself will not fail to return the call at a future day. Good mo’ning.”

“Good mawning, I’m shuah.”

And the elegant flunkey lifted his hat and bowed.

Ransey ran in, gave the leveret stew just a couple of stirs to keep it from burning, then threw himself into his father’s chair, stretched out his legs, and laughed till the very rafters rang.

Book One – Chapter Five.

“Oh, No! I’ll Never Leave ’Ansey till we is Bof Deaded.”

The day had looked showery, but the sun was now shining very brightly, and so Ransey Tansey laid dinner out of doors on the grass.

As far as curiosity went, Babs was quite on an equality with her sex, and the meal finished, and the bones eaten by Bob, she wanted to know at once what the man with the pretty buttons had brought.

Ransey’s eyes, as well as his sister’s, were very large, but they grew bigger when that big parcel was opened.

There was a note from Miss Scragley herself right on the top, and this was worded as delicately, and with apparently as much fear of giving offence, as if Ransey had been the son of a real captain, instead of a canal bargee.

Why, here was a complete outfit: two suits of nice brown serge for Ransey himself, stockings and light shoes, to say nothing of real Baltic shirts, a neck-tie, and sailor’s cap.

“She’s oceans too good to live, that lady is!” exclaimed Ransey, rapturously.

“Me see! – me see! Babs wants pretty clothes.”

“Yes, dear Babs, look! There’s pretty clothes.”

That crimson frock would match Babs’s rosy cheeks and yellow curly hair “all to little bits,” as Ransey expressed it.

After all the things had been admired over and over again, they were refolded and put carefully away in father’s strong locker.

I think that the Admiral knew there was gladness in the children’s eyes, for he suddenly hopped high up the hill, and did a dance that would have delighted the heart of a Pawnee Indian.

“No,” said Miss Scragley that same day after dinner, as she and her friends sat out in the great veranda, “one doesn’t exactly know, Mr Davies, how to benefit children like these.”

The parson placed the tips of his fingers together meditatively, and looked down at Miss Scragley’s beautiful setter.

“Of course,” he said, slowly and meditatively, “teaching is essential to their bodily as well as to their spiritual welfare.”

“Very prettily put, Mr Davies,” said Miss Scragley; “don’t *you* think so, Dr Fairincks?”

“Certainly, Miss Scragley, certainly; and I was just wondering if they had been vaccinated. I’d get the little one into a home, and the boy sent to a Board school. And the father – drinks rum, eh? – get him into the house. Let him end his days there. What should you propose, Weathereye?”

“Eh? Humph! Do what you like with the little one. Send the boy to school – a school for a year or two where he’ll be flogged twice a day. Hardens ’em. So much for the bodily welfare, parson. As to the spiritual, why, send him to sea. Too young, Miss Scragley? Fiddlesticks! Look at me. Ran away to sea at ten. In at the hawse-hole, in a manner o’ speaking. Just fed the dogs and the ship’s cat at first, and emptied the cook’s slush-bucket. Got buffeted about a bit, I can tell you. When I went aft, steward’s mate kicked me for’ard; when I got for’ard, cook’s mate kicked me aft. No place of quiet and comfort for me except swinging in the foretop with the purser’s monkey. But – it made a man of me. Look at me now, Miss Scragley.”

Miss Scragley looked.

“Staff-commander of the Royal Navy. Three stripes. Present arms from the sentries, and all that sort of thing. Ahem!”

And the bold mariner helped himself to another glass of Miss Scragley’s port.

“But you won’t go to the wars again, Captain Weathereye?” ventured Miss Scragley.

The Captain rounded on her at once – put his helm hard up, so to speak, till he was bows on to his charming hostess.

His face was like a full moon rising red over the city's haze.

"How do *you* know, madam? Not so very old, am I? War, indeed! Humph! – I'll be sorry when that's done," he added.

"What! the war, Captain Weathereye?" said the lady.

"Fiddlesticks! No, madam, the *port*– if you will have it."

"As for the father of these children," he continued, after looking down a little, "if he's been a sailor, as you say, the house won't hold him. As well expect an eagle to live with the hens. Rum? Bah! I've drunk as much myself as would float the *Majestic*."

"But I say, you know," he presently remarked as he took Eedie on his knee; "Little Sweetheart here and I will run over to see the children to-morrow forenoon, and we'll take the setter with us. Anything for a little excitement, when one can't hunt or shoot. And we'll take you as well, madam."

Miss Scragley said she would be delighted; at the same time she could not help thinking the gallant captain's sentences might have been better worded. He might have put *her* before the setter, to say the least.

Next morning was a very busy one at Hangman's Hall.

Ransey Tansey was up betimes, but he allowed Babs to sleep on until he had lit the fire, hung on the kettle, and run for the milk.

Ransey was only a boy, and boys will be boys, so he could not help telling kind Mrs Farrow, the farmer's wife, of his luck, and how he expected real society people to visit himself and Babs that day, so he must run quickly home to dress.

"Certainly, dear," said Mrs Farrow; "and here are some lovely new-laid eggs. You brought me fish, you know; and really I have so many eggs I don't know what to do with them all. Good-bye, Ransey. Of course you'll run across and tell me all about it to-night, and bring Babs on your back."

Babs was a "dooder dirl" than usual that morning, if that were possible.

Ransey was so glad that the sun was shining; he was sure now that the visit would be paid. But he had Babs to wash and dress, and himself as well. When he had washed Babs and combed her hair, he set her high up on the bank to dry, as he phrased it, and gave her the new doll to play with. Very pretty she looked, too, in that red frock of hers.

Well, away went Ransey to the stream, carrying his bundle. Bob was left to mind Babs.

Ransey was gone quite a long time, and the child grew weary and sighed.

"Bob!" said Babs.

"Yes, Babs," said Bob, or seemed to say.

"Tiss my new dolly."

Bob licked the doll's face. Then he licked Babs's hand. "Master'll soon be back," he tried to tell her.

She was quiet for a time, singing low to her doll.

"Bob!" she said, solemnly now; "does 'oo fink (think) 'Ansey 'as fallen in and dlownd hisself?"

"Oh, look, look, Bob," she cried the next moment, "a stlange man toming here!"

Bob started up and barked most savagely. He was quite prepared to lay down his life for his little charge. But as he rushed forward he quickly changed his tune.

It was Ransey Tansey right enough, but so transformed that it was no wonder that Babs and Bob took him for a stranger.

Even the Admiral must fly down from the gibbet-tree and dance wildly round him. Murrams, the great tom-cat, came out and purred aloud; and Babs clapped her tiny hands and screamed with delight.

"'Oo's a zentleman now," she cried; "and I'se a lady. Hullay!"

Ransey didn't feel quite comfortable after all, especially with shoes on. To go racing through the woods in such a rig as this would be quite out of the question. The only occupation that suggested itself at present was culling wild flowers, and stringing them to put round Bob's neck.

But even gathering wild flowers grew irksome at last, so Ransey got his New Testament, and turning to Revelation, read lots of nice sensational bits therefrom.

Babs was not so well pleased as she might and ought to have been; but when her brother pulled out "Jack the Giant Killer," she set herself to listen at once, and there were many parts she made Ransey read over and over again, frequently interrupting with such questions as, —

"So Jack killed the big ziant, did he? 'Oo's *twite* sure o' zat?"

"And ze axe was all tovered wi' blood and ziant's hair? My! how nice!"

"Six 'oung ladies, all stlung up by ze hair o' zer heads? Boo'ful! 'Oo's *twite* sure zer was six?"

"An' the big ziant was doin' to kill zem all? My! how nice!"

Ransey was just describing a tragedy more ghastly than any he had yet read, when from the foot of the slope came a stentorian hail: —

"Hangman's Hall, ahoy! Turn out the guard!" The guard would have turned out in deadly earnest — Bob, to wit — if Ransey hadn't ordered him to lie down. Then, picking up Babs, he ran down the hill, heels first, lest he should fall, to welcome his visitors.

Miss Scragley was charmed at the change in the lad's personal appearance, and Eedie frankly declared him to be the prettiest boy she had ever seen.

Captain Weathereye hoisted Babs and called her a beautiful little rogue. Then all sat down on the side of the hill to talk, Babs being perfectly content, for the time being, to sit on the captain's knee and play with his watch and chain.

"And now, my lad," said bold Weathereye, "stand up and let us have a look at you. Attention! That's right. So, what would you like to be? Because the lady here has a heart just brimful of goodness, and if you were made of the right stuff she would help you to get on. A sailor? That's right. The sea would make a man of you, lad. And if you were in a heavy sea-way, with your masts gone by the board, bothered if old Jack Weathereye wouldn't pay out a hawser and give you a helping hand himself. For I like the looks of you. Glad you paid the postman out. Just what I'd have done myself. Ahem!"

Ransey felt rather shy, though, to be thus displayed as it were. It was all owing to the new clothes, I think, and especially to the shoes.

"Now, would you like to go to school?"

"What! and leave Babs? No, captin, no. I'd hate school anyhow; I'd fight the small boys, and bite the big uns, and they'd soon turn me adrift."

"Bravo, boy! I never could endure school myself. — What I say is this, Miss Scragley, teach a youngster to read and write, with a trifle of 'rithmetick, and as he gets older he'll choose all the knowledge himself, and tackle on to it too, that's needed to guide his barque across the great ocean of life. There's no good in schools, Miss Scragley, that I know of, except that the flogging hardens them. — Well, lad, you won't go to school? There! And if you'll get your father to allow you to come up to the Grange, just close by the village and rectory, I'll give you a lesson myself, three times a week."

"Oh, thank you, sir! I'm sure father'll be pleased to let me come when I'm at home and not at sea."

"Eh? at sea? Oh, yes, I know; you mean on the barge, ha, ha, ha! Well, you'll live to face stormier seas yet."

"An' father's comin' to-morrow, sir, and then we're goin' on."

"Going on?"

"He means along the canal," said Miss Scragley.

“To be sure, to be sure. What an old fool I am! And now, lad, let me think what I was going to say. Oh, yes. Don’t those shoes pinch a bit?”

“Never wears shoes and stockin’s ’cept in winter, sir. I keeps ’em in dad’s locker till snow time.”

“Now, in you go to your house or hut and take them off.”

“Ha!” said Weathereye, when Ransey returned with bare feet and ankles, “that’s ship-shape and Bristol fashion. Now, lad, listen. If Miss Scragley here asks you to come and see her – and I’m sure she will, for she’s an elderly lady, and likes to be amused,” – Miss Scragley winced a little, but Weathereye held on – “when you’re invited to the ancestral home of the Scragleys, then you can wear them togs and your shoes; but when you come to the Grange, it’ll be in canvas bags, bare feet, a straw hat, and a blue sweater – and my own village tailor shall rig you out. Ahem!”

Captain Weathereye glanced at Miss Scragley as if he owed her a grudge. The look might have been interpreted thus: “There are other people who can afford to be as generous as you, and have a far better notion of a boy’s requirements.”

“And now, Babs,” he continued, kissing the child’s little brown hand, “I’ve got very fond of you all at once. Will you come and live with me?”

“Tome wiz ’oo and live! Oh, no,” she replied, shaking her yellow curls, “I’ll never leave ’Ansey till we is bof deaded. Never!”

And she slid off the captain’s knee and flew to Ransey with outstretched arms.

The boy knelt on one knee that she might reach his neck. Then he lifted her up, and she looked defiantly back at the captain, with her cheek pressed close to Ransey’s.

Weathereye glanced towards Miss Scragley once again, and his voice was a trifle husky when he spoke.

“Miss Scragley,” he said, “old people like *you* and me are apt to be faddy. We will both do something for these poor children, but, bless them, there’s a bond of union betwixt their little hearts that we dare not sever. The bairns must not be parted.”

Book One – Chapter Six.

Chee-Tow, the Red Chief of the Slit-Nosed Indians

During the time the memorable visit lasted no one took much notice of Ransey Tansey's pets. Yet each one of the three of them was interested, and each showed his interest in his own peculiar way.

The Admiral had flown gracefully down from the gibbet-tree, and alighted on the ground not more than a dozen yards from the group.

"Craik – a-raik – a – r-r-r – a – cray – ay!" he said to himself, which being interpreted seemed to signify, "What do *they* want here, anyhow? That's about the same gang I saw in the woods. Curr-r-r! Well, they haven't guns anyhow, like the beastly biped called a keeper, who tried to shoot my hind-legs off because I was a strange bird. I was only tasting some partridge's eggs, nothing else. Shouldn't I have liked just to have gouged out his ugly eyes, thrown 'em one by one into the air, caught 'em coming down, and swallowed 'em like eggs."

All the time the talking was going on the Admiral stood twisting his body about, sometimes crouching low to the ground, his neck stretched straight out towards them, the head on one side and listening, the next moment erect as a bear pole, and seeming to look surprised and angry at what he heard them saying.

Bob had rushed to see about the setter. He lay down at some distance off, with his nose between his paws, and the setter *set*, and finally *sat*.

"Not a yard nearer, Mr Sportsman, if *you* please," said Bob; "I'm a rough 'un to look at, and a tough 'un to tackle. I suppose you call yourself a gentleman's dog; you live in marble halls, sleep on skins, and drink from a silver saucer. I'm only a poor man's doggie; I sleep where I can, eat what I can get, and drink from bucket or brook. But I love my master maybe more than you love yours. Yonder is my home, and yonder is our cat in the door of it; but my humble home is my master's castle. Just try to come a yard or two nearer, if you're tired of your silly life."

But Dash preferred to stay where he was.

Murrums the cat behaved with the utmost dignity and indifference. He sat in the doorway washing his face, with dreamy, half-shut eyes. To have seen him you would have said that butter wouldn't melt in his mouth, so cool was he; yet if Mr Dash had come round that way, Murrums would have mounted his back and never ceased clawing the dog till he had ridden him half a mile at least from Hangman's Hall.

It wasn't, however, until the visitors had taken their departure that the grand jubilee commenced.

"*They're gone!*" said Bob, running up and licking the pussy's ear. "That's a jolly good job!"

"*They're gone!*" said pussy in reply, as he rubbed shoulders with Bob.

"*They're gone!*" cried the crane, hopping madly round the pair of them.

And as she nestled closer in her brother's arms, Babs sighed and said just the same thing.

"Hurrah!" cried Ransey Tansey; "let's run off to the woods."

"Let's wun off to ze woods at wance," echoed Babs.

Had little Eedie seen Ransey five minutes after this, I question whether she would have pronounced him the prettiest boy she had ever known.

Ransey was himself again, old shirt, ragged pants, and all.

I think that the children and Bob, not to mention the gallant Admiral, enjoyed themselves that afternoon in the woods as much as ever they had done in their young lives.

Babs insisted on taking her ragged old dolly-bone with her, and leaving the new one at home upside down in a corner.

Well, Ransey fished for just an hour, but had glorious luck and a good string to take to Mrs Farrow. This was enough, so he put away his rod, and read some more horrors to Babs from “Nick o’ the Woods.” The torture scenes and the scalping took her fancy more than anything else.

So Ransey Tansey invented a play on the spot that would have brought down the house in a twopenny theatre if properly put on the stage.

He, Ransey Tansey, was to be a wild Indian, Babs would be the white man, Bob the bear, and the Admiral the spirit of the wild woods and ghost of the haunted cañon.

The play passed off without a hitch. Only Ransey Tansey himself required to dress for his part. This he did to perfection. He retired to a secluded spot by the river’s bank for the purpose. He divested himself of his pants and his solitary suspender. These were but the evidences of an effete civilisation. What could such things as these have to do with the red man of the wild West, the solitary scalp-hunter of the boundless prairie? But a spear and a tomahawk he must have, and these were quickly and easily fashioned from the boughs of the neighbouring trees. He tied a piece of cord around his waist, and in this he stuck his knife, open and ready for every emergency. He fuzzed up his rebellious hair, and stuck rooks’ feathers in it; he thrust his feet into the darkest and grimest of mud to represent moccasins, and streaked his face with the same.

When enveloped in his blanket (the big shawl) he stalked into the open in all the ghastliness of his wur-paint, and said “Ugh!” He was Ransey Tansey no longer, but Chee-tow, the Red Chief of the Slit-nosed Indians.

On beholding the warrior, Babs’s first impulse was to scream in terror; her next – and this she carried out – was to roll on her back, her two legs pointing skywards, and scream with laughter.

“Oh,” she cried delightedly, “‘oo *is* such a boo’ful wallio! (warrior); be twick and tell somefing.”

For the time being Babs was only the audience. When she became an actor in this great forest drama she would have to behave differently.

And now the red chief went prowling around, and presently out from a bush darted a grizzly bear.

The bear was Bob.

Chee-tow uttered his wildest war-cry, and rushed onwards to the charge.

The grizzly held his ground and scorned to fly.

“Then began the deadly conflict,
Hand to hand among the mountains;
From his eerie screamed the eagle (the crane)
...the great war-eagle,
Sat upon the crags around them,
Wheeling, flapped his wings above them.

* * * * *

“Till the earth shook with the tumult
And confusion of the battle.
And the air was full of shoutings,
And the thunder of the mountains
Starting, answered ‘Baim-wa-wa.’”

This fierce fight with the terrible grizzly was so realistic that the audience sat silent and enthralled, with its thumb in its mouth.

But it ended at last in the victory of the red chief. The bear lay dead, and the first Act came to a close.

In Act Two an Indian maiden has been stolen, and borne away by a white man across the boundless prairie to his wigwam in the golden East. The red chief squats down on the moss with drooping head to bewail the loss of his daughter, during which outburst of grief his streaks of war-paint get rather mixed; but that can't be helped. Then the spirit of the wild woods appears to him – the ghost of the haunted cañon (that is, between you and me, the Admiral comes hopping up with his neck stretched out, wondering what it is all about) – and whispers to him, and speaks in his ear, and says: —

“Listen to me, brave Chee-tow-wa,
Lie not there upon the meadow;
Stoop not down among the lilies,
Lest the west wind come and harm you.
Follow me across the prairie,
Follow me across the mountains,
I will find the maiden for you,
The maid with hair like sunshine,
Who has vanished from your sight.”

So Chee-tow gets up, seizes his arms, and follows the spirit, who goes hopping on in front of him in a very weird-like manner indeed.

Meanwhile Babs, knowing her part, has hidden herself in a bush, and in due time is led back in triumph as the white man who stole the maiden. He is tied to a tree, scalped, and tortured. Then a fire is lit, and thither the white man is dragged towards it to be burned alive.

But another bear (Bob again) rushes in to his assistance and enables him to escape.

The same fire built to burn the white man (Babs) is being utilised to roast potatoes for supper; only this is a mere detail.

And the play ends by the spirit of the wild woods bringing the maiden back (Babs again) to the camp fire in the forest, and – and by a supper of baked potatoes with salt.

All's well that ends well. And shortly after the dénouement there may be seen, wending its way in the calm summer gloaming up the little footpath that leads through the green corn, the following procession. First, Bob solemnly carrying the fishing-rod; then Ransey Tansey with a string of red-finned fish in front of him, and Babs on his back, wrapped in the Indian's blanket; and last, but not least, the Admiral himself, nodding his head not unlike a camel, and lifting his legs very high indeed, because the dew was beginning to fall.

Babs had gone soundly to sleep by the time they reached the farm, but she was lively enough a few minutes after this.

And Mrs Farrow made them stay to supper, every one of them, including even the Admiral, although he said “Tok – tok – tok” several times, out of politeness, perhaps when first invited in.

The kitchen at the farm was in reality a sitting-room, and a very jolly, cosy one it was; nor did the fire seem a bit out of place to-night.

It took Ransey quite a long time to tell all his adventures, and dilate upon the kindness of his visitors, especially rough but kindly Captain Weathereye.

It was almost dark before they got to the little cot at the foot of the hill that they called their home; and here a fresh surprise awaited them, for a light was shining through the little window, and through the half-open door as well.

Babs herself was the first, I believe, to notice this.

"O 'Ansey," she cried, struggling with excitement on the boy's back, "O 'Ansey, look! fazer (father) has tomed! Be twick, 'Ansey, be twick."

And Ransey quickened his pace now, while Bob ran on in front.

"Wowff, wowff," he barked, "wowff – wowff – wow!" But it was in a half-hysterical kind of way, as if there were a tear of joy mixed up with it, joy at the hope of seeing a kind old master again.

Even the crane felt it his bounden duty to indulge in an extra hop or two, and to shout, "Scray – scray – scray – ay – ay!"

It was the Admiral's voice that caused honest Tom Tandy to get up from his chair, lay down his pipe, and hurry to the door.

"Hill – ll – o!" he shouted. "Here we all are, Ransey Tansey, Babs, and Bob, and all. Why, this *is* a merry meeting. Come, Babs. Hoist away, Ransey. Hee – hoy – ip! and there she is safely landed in harbour. So you missed your old father, little lass, did you? Bless it. But we're all going on to-morrow, and the *Merry Maiden* has got a new coat o' paint, and new furniture for the cuddy, and it's no end of a jolly time we'll all have."

Yes, it *was* a merry meeting, and a right happy one. I only wish that both Miss Scragley and Captain Weathereye had seen it.

"Why," the former would have said to herself, "this good fellow could surely never have been a slave to the bottle!"

Mr Tandy had never really been a constant imbibor of that soul-killing curse of our country – drink; but some years gone by, like many another old sailor, he was liable to slide into an occasional "bout," as it is called, and it was with sorrow he thought of this now. But Miss Scragley and many others have yet to learn that it is often the best-hearted and the brightest that fall most easily into temptation.

As for Weathereye, had he been a witness of this little reunion, he too would have given his opinion about the sturdy old sailor.

"Why!" he would have cried frankly to Mr Tandy, (pronounced Tansey only by the children) "why, my good fellow, Miss Scragley, who is faddy and elderly, and myself, old fool that I am at the best, were considering what best we could do for your children. We were to do all kinds of pretty things. The boy was going to a school, the child to a home, and you – ha, ha, ha – you, with your bold face and your sturdy frame, a man of barely forty, were going to be sent to the house. Ha, ha, no wonder I laugh. But tip us your flipper, Tandy, you're a man every inch – a man and a sailor."

That is what Weathereye would have said had he seen Tandy sitting there now.

They are right in saying that those whom animals and children love are possessed of right good hearts of their own.

And here was this old sailor – the word "old" being simply a term of endearment, for none but the sickly are old at forty, and they've been old all the time – sitting erect in his chair, Babs on one knee, the great cat on the other; Ransey on the hearth looking smilingly up at father's bronzed face, silver-sprinkled hair and beard; the Admiral standing on one leg behind the chair; and poor Bob asleep before the fire, with his chin reposing on his old master's boot.

It was a pretty picture.

"Children," says Tandy at last, "it is getting late, and – just kneel down. I think we'll say a bit of a prayer to-night."

Book One – Chapter Seven. On Silent Highways

It was early next morning when Ransey Tansey ran off through the fields for a double allowance of milk.

“Double allowance to-day, Mrs Farrow,” he shouted. “Oh, yes, father’s come; and we’re goin’ on to-day. Isn’t it just too awfully jolly for anything?”

“Well, I’m sorry to lose you and Babs.”

“Back in a month, Mrs Farrow. It’ll soon pass, ye know. But I – I am a kind o’ sorry to leave you too, for ye’ve been so good to Babs and Bob and me.”

There was a tear in Ransey’s eye as he took the milk-can and prepared to depart.

“The Admiral can take care o’ his little self,” he said, “but there’s Murrams.”

“Yes, dear boy, and our nipper shall go over every morning, and put Murrams’s bowl of milk in through the broken pane.”

“Oh, now I’m happy, just downright happy.”

“Well, off you run. Mind never to forget to say your prayers.”

“No; and I’ll pray for Murrams, for the Admiral, for you, and all.”

He waved his hand now, and quickly disappeared.

The world wasn’t a very wide one just yet to these poor children, Ransey and Babs. It was chiefly made up of that little cottage which went by the uncanny name of Hangman’s Hall, and of the carrying barge or canal-boat yclept *Ye Merry Maiden*. But when at home, at the hut, they had all the sweet, green, flowery fields around them, the stream, and the wild woods. These formed the grand seminary in which Ransey studied nature, and moreover, studied it without knowing he was studying anything. To him every creature, whether clad in fur or in feather, was a friend. He knew all their little secrets, and they *knew* that he knew them. Not a bird that sang was there that he did not know by its eggs, its nest, or its notes; not a rabbit, hare, vole, or field-mouse that he could not have told you the life-story of. His was a —

“Knowledge never learned at schools,
Of the wild bee’s morning chase.
Of the wild flowers’ time and place;
Flight of fowl, and habitude
Of the tenants of the wood;
How the tortoise bears his shell;
How the woodchuck digs his cell,
And the ground mole makes his well;
How the robin feeds her young;
How the oriel’s nest is hung;
Of the black wasp’s cunning way,
Mason of his walls of clay;
And the architectural plans
Of grey hornet artisans.”

It is true enough that this family was poor in the eyes of the world. I am sure they were not ashamed of it, however.

The poverty that goes hand in hand with honesty may hold up its head before the Queen.

“Is there, for honest poverty,
That hangs his head, and a’ that?
The coward slave, we pass him by;
We dare be poor for a’ that!
For a’ that, and a’ that,
Our toils obscure, and a’ that;
The rank is but the guinea stamp,
The man’s the gowd for a’ that?”

So sang the immortal Robert Burns.

But could any boy, or girl either, be really poor who had so many friends in field and forest, and by the winding stream? No; and such a one as this, who has been in touch with nature in his or her early days, may grow up, grow old, but never forget the days of youth, and never, never lose faith in Heaven and a happy Beyond.

The cottage and the surrounding country, however, did not constitute all the children’s world. There was the ship – as I have said – the barge that went to sea, and in which they so often sailed.

For to them as yet the barge was a brig, and the canal the ocean wide and wild. Well, I might on second thoughts withdraw those “wee wordies,” *wide* and *wild*. The canal was not a very wide one, nor was it ever very wild, in summer time at all events.

Never mind, to the imagination of Ransey, Babs, and Bob, the *Merry Maiden* was —

“A gallant ship, with a crew as brave
As ever sailed the ocean wave.”

The crew of the *Merry Maiden*, I may tell you at once, was a very small one indeed, and consisted – all told, that is – of the captain himself, who was likewise cook, boatswain, and bedmaker all combined; one sturdy, great boy of sixteen, strong enough to lift almost any weight, Sammy by name, who was first lieutenant, supercargo, and chief engineer, and who often took his trick at the wheel – that is, he took the tiller and relieved his captain, or mounted Jim and relieved Ransey; Ransey himself, who was second engineer – Jim, the stout old bay nag, being the engine itself, the moving power when no fair wind was blowing; and Bob, whose station was at the bows, and his duty to keep a good look-out and hail those aft if any other ship hove in sight or danger was near.

The *Merry Maiden* rejoiced in one mast, which had to be cleverly lowered when a bridge had to be negotiated. The sail was a fore-and-aft one, though very full at times. Picturesquely reddish-brown it was, and looked so pretty sometimes against the green of the trees that, as the craft sailed slowly on in the sunshine, dreamy artists, seated smoking at their out-door easels, often made the *Merry Maiden* part and parcel of the landscape they were painting.

I think that Tandy himself liked being on board. The barge was his own, and carrying light wares or parcels from village to village, or town to town, his trade.

Things had gone backwards with Tandy as long as he looked upon the rum when it was red; he had got into debt. But now he was comfortable, jolly once more, because his keel was clear, as he phrased it; and as he reclined to-day on the top of the cuddy, or poop, with the tiller in his hand, Babs nestling near him, with the greenery of the woods, the fields, and little round knolls floating dreamily past him in the silvery haze of the sunshine, he looked a picture of health, happiness, and contentment.

Ransey and Babs took their canal life very easily. They never knew or cared where they were going to, nor thought of what they might see. Even the boy’s knowledge of the geography of his own country was very limited indeed.

He had some notion that his father's canal – he grandly termed it so occasionally – was somewhere away down in the midlands. And he was right. He hadn't learned to box the compass, however; and even had he possessed the knowledge, there wasn't a compass on board the *Merry Maiden* to box or be boxed. Besides, the ship's head was seldom a whole hour in any one particular direction. The canal was a very winding one, its chief desire seeming to be to visit all the villages it could reach without being bothered with locks. These last were few and far between, because the country was rather a level one on the whole.

Nevertheless the fact of their not knowing exactly where they were going to, or what they would see next, lent an additional charm to the children's canal life. It was like the game children play on moonlight nights in Scotland. This is a very simple one, but has a great fascination for tiny dwellers in the country, and, besides, it gives excellent scope for the imagination. One child blindfolds another, and leads him here, there, and everywhere, without going far away from home – round the stackyards, over the fields by the edge of the woods, or across bridges, the blindfolded wondering all the time where he is, but feeling as if he were in fairyland, till at last his eyes are free, and he finds himself – well, in the very last place he could have dreamt of being.

There is no reason why canal life in England should not be most pleasant, and canal people just as happy as was the crew, all told, on board the *Merry Maiden*.

The saloon of the *Maiden*, as Tandy grandly called it, was by no means very large. It was simply a dear little morsel of a doll's-house, but the taste of the owner was shown in many different ways. By day the beds were folded up and were prettily draped with bright curtains. There were a lounge, an easy-chair, a swing-lamp, a beautiful brass stove, and racks above and at both sides of it for plates and mugs and clear, clean tin cooking utensils; there were tiny cupboards and brackets and mirrors, and in almost every corner stood vases of wild flowers, culled by Babs and Ransey whenever they had a chance. And this was often enough, for really Jim was so wise a horse that he never required any urging to do his duty. He was never known to make either break or stumble. But when sail was on the ship, Jim had nothing to do except to walk after her and look about him. Sometimes the oats or the wheat grew close to the path, and then, although a very honest horse, Jim never failed to treat himself to a pluck. So he was as sleek and fat as any nag need be.

The weather was not always fine, of course, but on wet days Babs could be sent below, with Bob to mind her, to play with her picture-books, her lady doll, and her dolly-bone.

Ransey's father had made him discard now, for ever and ay, his ragged garments, although the boy had not done so without a sigh of regret – they were so free and easy.

His best clothes, presented by Miss Scragley, were stowed away for high days and holidays, and the suit his father bought him and brought him was simply neat and somewhat nautical.

Let us take a little cruise in the *Merry Maiden*. Shall we, reader?

It will be a cruise in imagination certainly, but very real for all that, because it is from the life.

It is very early, then, in the joyous month of June, and the *Merry Maiden* is lying alongside a green bank. There is no pier here. It is a country place. Yonder on the right is a pretty little canal-side inn, the "Jolly Tapsters." You can read its name on the sign that is swinging to and fro beneath a wide-spreading elm-tree. Under this tree is a seat, and a table also; and on fine evenings, after their day's work is done, honest labourers, dressed in smocks, who have been haymaking all day, come here to smoke long clays, to talk to their neighbours, and now and then beat the table with their pewters to ask for "another pint, landlord, if *you* please."

Tandy lay in here last night and left a whole lot of parcels and things at that cosy hostelry; for the country all about is an agricultural one, beautifully wooded with rolling hills, with many a smiling mansion peeping grey or red above the trees, and many a well-tilled farm. The parcels will all be called for in due time.

The barge-master is up before even Ransey is stirring. He has lit the fire and made ready for breakfast. Before going on shore by the little gangway, he stirs Sammy up. Sammy, the sixteen-

year-old boy, has been sleeping among the cargo with a morsel of tarpaulin for a blanket. He rubs his eyes, and in a few seconds pulls himself up, and begins, lazily enough, to sort and arrange the parcels and make notes for the next stop in a small black book, with a very thick pencil that he sticks in his mouth about once every three seconds to make it write more easily.

“What a lovely morning!” thinks Tandy, and Bob, who has come bounding after him, thinks so too. The sun is already up, however. From every copse and plantation comes the melody of birds. Flocks of rooks are flying heavily and silently away to the distant river, where among the reeds they will find plenty to eat. Swimming about in the canal yonder are half a score of beautiful ducks. No, not wild; wild birds seldom build on a busy canal side. They are the innkeeper’s Rouens, and that splendid drake is very proud indeed. He lifts himself high out of the water and claps his wings in defiance as Bob passes.

Yonder is a lark lilting loudly and sweetly high above the green corn. There are linnets and greenfinches in the hedges, and warblers among the snow-white blossoms of the may.

There is a wealth of wild flowers everywhere – blue-eyed speedwells, the yellow celandine, the crimson of clover, the ragged robin, and ox-eye daisies weeping dew.

So balmy is the air and fresh that the barge-master has wandered further than he had intended. Hunger warns him to beat a retreat. Canal people, like caravan folks, have excellent appetites.

But here he is on board again. Ransey has already cooked and laid the breakfast, dressed Babs, and folded up the beds. With the ports all open the tiny saloon is sweet and clean.

“For what we are about to receive,” the father begins, and little Ransey’s head is bent and Babs’s hands are clasped till grace is said.

Those eggs are fresh. The fish was caught but yesterday. Butter and beautiful bread are always to be had cheap all along the canal.

Sammy’s breakfast and Bob’s are duly handed up the companion-way, and in half an hour after this the horse is yoked, the landlord has wished them all good luck, and they have gone on.

But the wind, though slight, is dead ahead for miles, and Jim has a heavy drag. Jim doesn’t mind that a bit. He jingles his light harness, strains nobly to his work, and jogs right merrily on.

Gradually the country wakens up to newness of life. Smoke comes curling up from many a humble cottage; cocks are crowing here and there; and busy workman-like dogs are hurrying to and fro as they drive cattle or sheep to distant pasture lands.

There are houses dotted about everywhere, some very close to the canal side, from the doors of which half-dressed children rush out to wave naked arms and “hooray” as the barge goes slowly floating past. To these Babs must needs wave her wee hands and give back cheer for cheer.

Many of those cots, humble though they be, have the neatest of gardens, with flowers already blooming in beds and borders, in tubs and in boxes; neat little walks all sanded and yellow; and strings along the walls, up which, when summer is further advanced, climbers will find their way and trail in their loveliness over porch and windows.

There are orchards behind many of these, the gnarled trees snowed over with bloom, many clad in pink or crimson. All this brings to one’s mind snatches from Mrs Hemans: —

“The cottage homes of England,
By thousands on her plains,
They are smiling o’er the silvery brooks,
And round the hamlet-fanes.
Through glowing orchards forth they peep,
Each from its nook of leaves,
And fearless there the lowly sleep
As the bird beneath their eaves.”

The sun climbs higher and higher, and the mists have disappeared from the far-off hills, and now you can tell it is school time.

Well-dressed children, in groups, are wending their way all in one direction. But they find time to cull wild flowers for teacher; and see, a bold, bright-faced lad comes near to the edge of the canal. Perhaps he is charmed by the innocent beauty of little Babs. Who can tell? One thing we *are* sure of – he has learned a little French, and is proud to air it.

“*Bon voyage*,” he shouts.

And next moment a bonnie bunch of flowers falls right into the child’s lap.

“Kiss your hand to him, dear,” says father.

Babs smilingly does as she is told. No actress could do so more naturally.

Then the boy runs off, looking happy, and the barge floats on.

Book One – Chapter Eight.

“Poor Mary! She has Gone On.”

The barge floats on, and soon the village appears in sight. Yes, thoroughly English, and therefore pretty: the old grey houses only half seen in the midst of the foliage; the wreaths of blue smoke; the broad, squat steeple; wooded hills behind, and amongst these latter here and there a tall Elizabethan house sheltering itself in a hollow, for wildly in winter do the winds sweep through the leafless oaks and elms now clad in all the glory of summer's green.

The canal makes a sweep just before it comes up to the village, as if it had entertained some thoughts of going past without calling. But it hasn't the heart to do so, and presently the barge is close alongside a kind of wooden platform which is dignified by the name of wharf.

Ransey dismounts to water his horse and slip on the nose-bag. Then, while Sammy is busy with his note-book, handing out cargo and taking fresh orders, he takes delighted Babs and Bob on shore to look at the shops. These visits to villages are much appreciated by her tiny ladyship, but if the streets are steep Ransey Tansey must take her on his back, and thus the two go on.

No fear of the “ship” leaving without them; and why, here is father himself, his hands deep in the pockets of his pilot jacket, and smoking.

A penny to Ransey and a halfpenny to Babs secure them additional happiness; but in less than an hour the anchor is weighed, and the *Merry Maiden* is once more going on.

The wind changes, or the canal, or something; anyhow sail can now be set, and Jim thinks himself about the happiest horse in all creation.

On and on through the quiet country, by the most silent of all thoroughfares, goes the barge. Babs is getting drowsy; father makes her a bed with a bundle of sacks, shading her face from the sun; and soon she is in the land of forgetfulness.

Were it not for the breeze that blows freshly over the meadows, the day would be a warm and drowsy one. No fear of Sammy falling asleep, however, for as the canal winds in and out he has to tighten or loosen the sheet according to the shift.

Just at present the sounds that are wafted towards the barge are all lulling and dreamy: the far-off singing of birds; the sound of the woodman's axe in the distant wood; the rattle of a cart or carriage on a road that is nowhere visible; the jangle of church bells from a village that may be in the sky for anything any one can tell; and now the merry laughter of young men and maidens making hay, and these last come in sight just round the next green bend.

It suddenly occurs to Jim that a dance wouldn't be at all a bad idea. Ransey is some distance behind his horse, when he sees him lower his head and fling his heels high in air. This is merely preparatory; next minute he is off at a gallop, making straight for that meadow of fragrant hay, the wind catching mane and tail and blowing it straight out fore and aft.

When tired of galloping round the field, Jim bears right down upon the haymakers themselves.

“That stuff,” he says, with distended nostrils, “smells uncommonly nice. Give us a tuft.”

He is fed handsomely by both lads and lasses gay. But they get gayer than ever when Jim throws himself down on his back, regardless of the confused entanglement of bridle and traces. But Jim knows better than to roll on the bare ground. He has thrown down a hay-cock for himself, and it is as good as a play to witness the girls bury him up till there is nothing to be seen of him except his four legs kicking skywards.

He gets up at last, and looks very sober and solemn. One girl kisses him on the muzzle; another is busy doing something that Ransey cannot make out, but a minute or two after this, when Jim comes thundering back, there is a huge collar of hay around his neck. Ransey mounts him

bareback, and, waving his hand to the haymakers, goes galloping off to overtake the barge, and throw the hay on board. A nice little snack it will make for Jim some time later on!

To-day Mr Tandy has bought a newspaper. He had meant to read it, but he is too fond of country sights and sounds to bother about it now. In the evening, perhaps, over a pipe.

On, ever on. There are locks to get through now, several of them, and lockmen are seldom, if ever, more than half awake; but everybody knows Tandy, and has a kindly word to say to Ransey Tansey, and perhaps a kiss to blow to Babs, who has just awakened, with eyes that shine, and lips and cheeks as red as the dog-roses that trail so sweetly over a hedge near by.

The country here is higher – a bit of Wales in the midlands, one might almost say. And so it continues for some time.

Sammy takes his trick at the wheel, and prefers to steer by lying on his back and touching the tiller with one bare foot. Sammy is always original and funny, and now tells Babs wonderful stories about fairies and water-babies that he met with a long time ago when he used to dwell deep down beneath the sea.

Babs has never seen the real sea, except in pictures, and is rather hazy about it. Nevertheless, Sammy's stories are very wonderful, and doubtless very graphic. The sail is lowered at last, and the saucy *Merry Maiden* moored to a green bank.

The dinner is served, and all hands, including Jim, do justice to it.

I said the barge was "moored" here. Literal enough, for a wide, wild moor stretches all around. Sheep are feeding not far off, and some droll-looking ponies that Jim would like to engage in conversation. There are patches of heath also, and stunted but prettily-feathered larch-trees now hung with points of crimson. Great patches of golden gorse hug the ground and scent the air for yards around. Linnets are singing there, and now and then the eye is gladdened by the sight of a wood-lark. Sometimes he runs along the ground, singing more sweetly even than his brother musician who loves to soar as high as the clouds.

Here is a cock-robin, looking very independent and lilting defiance at everybody. Robins do not always live close to civilisation. This robin comes close enough to pick up the crumbs which Ransey throws towards him. He wants Ransey to believe that all the country for miles and miles around belongs to him – Cock-Robin – and that no bird save him has any real business here.

There are pine-trees waving on the hills yonder, and down below, a town much bigger than any they yet have arrived at.

But see, there is a storm coming up astern, so, speedily now, the *Merry Maiden* is once more under way.

Babs is bundled down below, and Bob goes with her.

Presently the air is chilly enough to make one shiver. A puff of high wind, a squall we may call it, brings up an army of clouds and darkness. Thunder rolls, and the swift lightning flashes – red, bright, intense – then down come the rain and the big white hailstones. These rattle so loudly on the poop deck, and on the great tarpaulin that covers the cargo, that for a time the thunder itself can scarcely be heard.

But in twenty minutes' time the sun is once more shining, the clouds have rolled far to leeward, the deck is dry, and but for the pools of water that lie in the hollows of the hard tarpaulin, no evidence is left that a summer storm had been raging.

But away with the storm has gone the wind itself, and Jim is once more called into requisition. Then onwards floats the barge.

Through many a bridge and lock, past many a hamlet, past woodlands and orchards, and fields of waving wheat, stopping only now and then at a village, till at last, and just as the sun is westering, the distant town is reached.

Oh, a most unsavoury sort of a place, a most objectionable kind of a wharf, at which to pass a night.

Tandy sends Babs and Bob below again; for a language is spoken here he does not wish the child to listen to, sights may be seen he would not that her eyes should dwell upon. Yonder is an ugly public-house with broken windows in it, and a bloated-faced, bare-armed woman, the landlady, standing with arms akimbo defiantly in the doorway. Ah! there was a time when Tandy used to spend hours in that very house. He shudders to think of it now.

There is one dead tree at the gable of this inn, which – half a century ago, perhaps – may have been a country hostelry surrounded by meadows and hedges. That tree would then be green, the air fresh and sweet around it, the mavis singing in its leafy shade. Now the sky is lurid, the air is tainted, and there is smoke everywhere. Not even the bark is left on the ghastly tree. It looks as if it had died of leprosy.

But the work is hurried through, and in a comparatively short time the *Merry Maiden* is away out in the green quiet country.

What a blessed change from the awful town they have just left!

The sun has already gone down in such a glory of crimson, bronze, and orange, as we in this country seldom see.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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