

Stables Gordon

Medical Life in the Navy



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Chapter One.

By Rail to London. Little Moonface. Euston Square

I chose the navy. I am not at all certain what it was that determined my choice; probably this – I have a mole on my left arm, which my gossiping old nurse (rest the old lady's soul!) used to assert was a sure sign that I was born to be a rover. Then I had been several voyages to the Arctic regions, and therefore knew what a sea-life meant, and what it didn't mean; that, no doubt, combined with an extensive acquaintance with the novels of Captain Marryat, had much to do with it. Be this as it may, I did choose that service, and have never yet repented doing so.

Well, after a six weeks' preparatory read-up I packed my traps, taking care not to forget my class-tickets – to prove the number of lectures attended each course – a certificate of age and another of virtue, my degree in surgery (M.Ch.), and my M.D. or medical degree; and with a stick in my hand, and a porter at my side, I set out for the nearest railway station. Previously, of course, I had bidden double adieus to all my friends, had a great

many blessings hurled after me, and not a few old shoes; had kissed a whole family of pretty cousins, ingeniously commencing with the grandmother, although she happened to be as yellow as a withered dock-leaf, and wrinkled as a Malaga raisin; had composed innumerable verses, and burned them as soon as written.

“Ticket for London, please,” said I, after giving a final wipe to my eyes with the cuff of my coat.

“Four, two, six,” was the laconic reply from the Jack-in-the-box; and this I understood to mean 4 pounds 2 shillings 6 pence of the sterling money of the realm – for the young gentleman, like most of his class, talked as if he were merely a column in a ledger and had pound shilling penny written on his classic brow with indelible marking ink, an idea which railway directors ought to see carried out to prevent mistakes.

I got on board the train, a porter banged-to the door so quickly that my coat-tails were embraced between the hinges; the guard said “all right,” though it wasn’t all right; the whistle shrieked, the engine puffed, the wheels went round with a groan and a grunt, and presently we were rattling over the bridge that spans the romantic Dee, with the white walls of the Granite City glimmering in the moonlight far behind us. After extricating my imprisoned garment, I leant over the window, and began to feel very dull and sentimental. I positively think I would have wept a little, had not the wind just then blown the smoke in my face, causing me to put up the window in disgust. I had a whole first-

class compartment to myself, so I determined to make the best of it. Impressed with this idea, I exchanged my hat for a Glengarry, made a pillow of my rug, a blanket of my plaid, and laid me down to sleep – “perchance to dream.” Being rather melancholy, I endeavoured to lull myself to slumber by humming such cheering airs as ‘Kathleen: Mavourneen,’ ‘Home, sweet home,’ etc – “a vera judeecious arrangement,” had it continued. Unfortunately for my peace of mind it did not; for, although the night train to London does not stop more than half-a-dozen times all the way, at the next station, and before my eyes had closed in sleep, the door of the compartment was opened, a lady was bundled in, the guard said “all right” again, though I could have sworn it wasn’t, and the train, like the leg of the wonderful merchant of Rotterdam, “got up and went on as before.”

Now, I’m not in the habit of being alarmed at the presence of ladies – no British sailor is – still, on the present occasion, as I peered round the corner of my plaid, and beheld a creature of youth and beauty, I *did* feel a little squeamish; “for,” I reasoned, “if she happens to be good, ‘all right,’ as the guard said, but if not then all decidedly wrong; for why? she might take it into her head, between here and London, to swear that I had been guilty of manslaughter, or suicide, or goodness knows what, and then I feared my certificate of virtue, which I got from the best of aged Scottish divines, might not save me.” I looked again and again from below my Highland plaid. “Well,” thought I, “she seems mild enough, any how;” so I pretended to sleep, but then,

gallantry forbade. “I may sleep in earnest,” said I to myself, “and by George I don’t like the idea of sleeping in the company of any strange lady.”

Presently, however, she relieved my mind entirely, for she showed a marriage-ring by drawing off a glove, and hauling out a baby – not out of the glove mind you, but out of her dress somewhere. I gave a sigh of relief, for there was cause and effect at once – a marriage-ring and a baby. I had in my own mind grievously wronged the virtuous lady, so I immediately elevated my prostrate form, rubbed my eyes, yawned, stretched myself, looked at my watch, and in fact behaved entirely like a gentleman just awakened from a pleasant nap.

After I had benignly eyed her sleeping progeny for the space of half a minute, I remarked blandly, and with a soft smile, “Pretty baby, ma’am.” (I thought it as ugly as sin.)

“Yes, sir,” said she, looking pleasedly at it with one eye (so have I seen a cock contemplate a bantam chick). “It is so like its papa!”

“Is it indeed, ma’am? Well, now, do you know, I thought it just the very image of its mamma!”

“So he thinks,” replied the lady; “but he has only seen its carte-de-visite.”

“Unfortunate father!” thought I, “to have seen only the shadowy image of this his darling child – its carte-de-visite, too! wonder, now, if it makes a great many calls? shouldn’t like the little cuss to visit me.”

“Going far, ma’am?” said I aloud.

And now this queer specimen of femininity raised her head from the study of her sleeping babe, and looked me full in the face, as if she were only aware of my presence for the first time, and hadn’t spoken to me at all. I am proud to say I bore the scrutiny nobly, though it occupied several very long seconds, during which time I did not disgrace my certificate of virtue by the ghost of a blush, till, seeming satisfied, she replied, apparently in deep thought, – “To Lon – don.”

“So am I, ma’am.”

“I go on to Plymouth,” she said. “I expect to go there myself soon,” said I.

“I am going abroad to join my husband.”

“Very strange!” said I, “and *I* hope to go abroad soon to join my,” (she looked at me now, with parted lips, and the first rays of a rising smile lighting up her face, expecting me to add “wife”) – “to join my ship;” and she only said “Oh!” rather disappointedly I thought, and recommenced the contemplation of the moonfaced babe.

“Bah!” thought I, “there is nothing in you but babies and matrimony;” and I threw myself on the cushions, and soon slept in earnest, and dreamt that the Director-General, in a bob-wig and drab shorts, was dancing Jacky-tar on the quarter-deck of a seventy-four, on the occasion of my being promoted to the dignity of Honorary-Surgeon to the Queen – a thing that is sure to happen some of these days.

When I awoke, cold and shivering, the sun had risen and was shining, as well as he could shine for the white mist that lay, like a veil of gauze, over all the wooded flats that skirt for many miles the great world of London. My companion was still there, and baby had woken up, too, and begun to crow, probably in imitation of the many cocks that were hallooing to each other over all the country. And now my attention was directed, in fact riveted, to a very curious pantomime which was being performed by the young lady; I had seen the like before, and often have since, but never could solve the mystery. Her eyes were fixed on baby, whose eyes in turn were fastened on her, and she was bobbing her head up and down on the perpendicular, like a wax figure or automaton; every time that she elevated she pronounced the letter "a," and as her head again fell she remarked "gue," thus completing the word "ague," much to the delight of little moonface, and no doubt to her own entire satisfaction. "A-gue! a-gue!"

Well, it certainly was a morning to give any one ague, so, pulling out my brandy-flask, I made bold to present it to her. "You seem cold, ma'am," said I; "will you permit me to offer you a very little brandy?"

"Oh dear, no! thanks," she answered quickly.

"For baby's sake, ma'am," I pleaded; "I am a doctor."

"Well, then," she replied, smiling, "just a tiny little drop. Oh dear! not so much!"

It seemed my ideas of "a tiny little drop," and hers, did not

exactly coincide; however, she did me the honour to drink with me: after which I had a tiny little drop to myself, and never felt so much the better of anything.

Euston Square Terminus at last; and the roar of great London came surging on my ears, like the noise and conflict of many waters, or the sound of a storm-tossed ocean breaking on a stony beach. I leapt to the platform, forgetting at once lady and baby and all, for the following Tuesday was to be big with my fate, and my heart beat flurriedly as I thought “what if I were plucked, in spite of my M.D., in spite of my C.M., in spite even of my certificate of virtue itself?”

Chapter Two.

Doubts and Fears. My First Night in Cockneydom

What if I were plucked? What should I do? Go to the American war, embark for the gold-diggings, enlist in a regiment of Sepoys, or throw myself from the top of Saint Paul's? This, and such like, were my thoughts, as I bargained with cabby, for a consideration, to drive me and my traps to a quiet second-rate hotel – for my purse by no means partook of the ponderosity of my heart. Cabby did so. The hotel at which I alighted was kept by a gentleman who, with his two daughters, had but lately migrated from the flowery lands of sunny Devon; so lately that he himself could still welcome his guests with an honest smile and hearty shake of hand, while the peach-like bloom had not as yet faded from the cheeks of his pretty buxom daughters. So well pleased was I with my entertainment in every way at this hotel, that I really believed I had arrived in a city where both cabmen and innkeepers were honest and virtuous; but I have many a time and often since then had reason to alter my opinion.

Now, there being only four days clear left me ere I should have to present myself before the august body of examiners at Somerset House, I thought it behoved me to make the best of my time. Fain – oh, how fain! – would I have dashed care and my

books, the one to the winds and the other to the wall, and floated away over the great ocean of London, with all its novelties, all its pleasures and its curiosities; but I was afraid – I dared not. I felt like a butterfly just newly burst from the chrysalis, with a world of flowers and sunshine all around it, but with one leg unfortunately immersed in birdlime. I felt like that gentleman, in Hades you know, with all sorts of good things at his lips, which he could neither touch nor taste of. Nor could I of the joys of London life. No, like Moses from the top of Mount Pisgah, I could but behold the promised land afar off; *he* had the dark gates of death to pass before he might set foot therein, and I had to pass the gloomy portals of Somerset House, and its board of dread examiners.

The landlord – honest man! little did he know the torture he was giving me – spread before me on the table more than a dozen orders for places of amusement, – to me, uninitiated, places of exceeding great joy – red orders, green orders, orange and blue orders, orders for concerts, orders for gardens, orders for theatres royal, and orders for the opera.

Oh, reader, fancy at that moment my state of mind; fancy having the wonderful lamp of Aladdin offered you, and your hands tied behind your back I myself turned red, and green, and orange, and blue, even as the orders were, gasped a little, called for a glass of water, – not beer, mark me, – and rushed forth. I looked not at the flaming placards on the walls, nor at the rows of seedy advertisement-board men. I looked neither

to the right hand nor to the left, but made my way straight to the British Museum, with the hopes of engaging in a little calm reflection. I cannot say I found it however; for all the strange things I saw made me think of all the strange countries these strange things came from, and this set me a-thinking of all the beautiful countries I might see if I passed.

“If, gracious heavens!” thought I. *“Are you mad, knocking about here like a magnetised mummy, and Tuesday the passing day? Home, you devil you, and study!”*

Half an hour later, in imagination behold me seated before a table in my little room, with the sun’s parting beams shemmering dustily in through my window, surrounded with books – books – books medical, books surgical, books botanical, books nautical, books what-not-ical; behold, too, the wet towel that begirts my thoughtful brow, my malar bones leaning on my hands, my forearms resting on the mahogany, while I am thinking, or trying to think, of, on, or about everything known, unknown, or guessed at.

Mahogany, did I say? “Mahogany,” methinks I hear the examiner say, “hem! hem! upon what island, tell us, doctor, does the mahogany tree grow, exist, and flourish? Give the botanical name of this tree, the natural family to which it belongs, the form of its leaves and flower, its uses in medicine and in art, the probable number of years it lives, the articles made from its bark, the parasites that inhabit it, the birds that build their nests therein, and the class of savage who finds shelter beneath its

wide-spreading, *if* wide-spreading, branches; entering minutely into the formation of animal structure in general, and describing the whole theory of cellular development, tracing the gradual rise of man from the sponge through the various forms of snail, oyster, salmon, lobster, lizard, rabbit, kangaroo, monkey, gorilla, nigger, and Irish Yahoo, up to the perfect Englishman; and state your ideas of the most probable form and amount of perfection at which you think the animal structure will arrive in the course of the next ten thousand years. Is mahogany much superior to oak? If so, why is it not used in building ships? Give a short account of the history of shipbuilding, with diagrams illustrative of the internal economy of Noah's ark, the Great Eastern, and the Rob Roy canoe. Describe the construction of the Armstrong gun, King Theodore's mortar, and Mons Meg. Describe the different kinds of mortars used in building walls, and those used in throwing them down; insert here the composition of gunpowder tea, Fenian fire, and the last New Yankee drink? In the mahogany country state the diseases most prevalent among the natives, and those which you would think yourself justified in telling the senior assistant-surgeon to request the surgeon to beg the first lieutenant to report to the commander, that he may call the attention of your captain to the necessity of ordering the crew to guard against."

Then, most indulgent reader, behold me, with these and a thousand other such questions floating confusedly through my bewildered brain – behold me, I say, rise from the table slowly,

and as one who doubteth whether he be not standing on his head; behold me kick aside the cane-bottomed chair, then clear the table with one wild sweep, state “Bosh!” with the air and emphasis of a pasha of three tails, throw myself on the sofa, and with a “Waitah, glass of gwog and cigaw, please,” commence to read ‘Tom Cwingle’s Log.’ This is how I spent my first day, and a good part of the night too, in London; and – moral – I should sincerely advise every medical aspirant, or candidate for a commission in the Royal Navy, to bring in his pocket some such novel as Roderick Random, or Harry Lorrequer, to read immediately before passing, and to leave every other book at home.

Chapter Three.

A Feline Adventure. Passed – Hooray! Conversation of (not with) Two Israelitish Parties

Next morning, while engaged at my toilet – not a limb of my body which I had not amputated that morning mentally, not one of my joints I had not exsected, or a capital operation I did not perform on my own person; I had, in fact, with imaginary surgical instruments, cut myself all into little pieces, dissected my every nerve, filled all my arteries with red wax and my veins with blue, traced out the origin and insertion of every muscle, and thought of what each one could and what each one could not do; and was just giving the final twirl to my delicate moustache, and the proper set to the bow of my necktie, when something occurred which caused me to start and turn quickly round. It was a soft modest little knock – almost plaintive in its modesty and softness – at my door. I heard no footfall nor sound of any sort, simply the “tapping as of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber-door; simply that and nothing more.”

“This,” thought I, “is Sarah Jane with my boots: mindful girl is Sarah Jane.” Then giving voice to my thoughts, “Thank you, Sally,” said I, “just leave them outside; I’ll have Finnon haddocks

and oatcake for breakfast.”

Then, a voice that wasn't Sally's, but ever so much softer and more kitten-like in tone, replied, —

“Hem! ahem!” and presently added, “it is only *me*.” Then the door was pushed slightly open, while pressing one foot doubtfully against it I peeped out, and to my surprise perceived the half of a little yellow book and the whole of a little yellow face with whiskers at it, and an expression so very like that of a one-year-old lady cat, that I remained for a little in momentary expectation of hearing it purr. But it didn't, merely smiling and repeating, —

“It's only me.”

“So I see,” said I, quite taken aback as it were. “So I see.” Then “*Me*,” slowly and gently overcame the resistance my right foot offered, and, pushing open the door, held out the yellow tract, which I took to be of a spiritual nature, and spoke to “I” as follows: —

“We – that is, he! he! my father and me, he! he! you see – had heard of your going up to join the Navy.” At that moment it seemed to “I” the easiest thing in the world, short of spending money, to “join” the Royal Navy. “And so,” continued “*Me*”, “you see, he! he! we thought of making you a call, all in business, you see, he! he! and offering you our estimate for your uniform.”

Uniform! grand name to my ear, I who had never worn anything more gay than a homespun coat of houden-grey and a Gordon tartan kilt. I thought it was my turn to say, “Hem! hem!” and even add an inaudible “Ho! ho!” for I felt myself expanding

inch by inch like a kidney bean.

“In that little book,” *Me* went on, “there,” – pointing to the front page – “you will find the names of one hundred and fifty-seven officers and gentlemen who have honoured us with their custom.”

Then I exclaimed, “Dear me!” and *Me* added with animation, “You see: he! he!”

Was it any wonder then, that I succumbed to such a flood of temptation, that even my native canniness disappeared or was swept away, and that I promised this gentleman of feline address that if I passed I would assuredly make his father a call? Alas! unfortunate greenhorn that I was, I found out when too late that some on the list had certainly given him their custom, and like myself repented only once but for ever; while the custom of the majority was confined to a pair or two of duck inexpressibles, a uniform cap, a dozen of buttons, or a hank of sewing silk.

“We can proudly refer you,” *Me* continued, as I bowed him to the door, “to any of them, and if you do us the honour of calling you will be enabled to judge for yourself; but,” added he, in a stage whisper, at the same time making a determined attempt, as I thought, to bite off my ear, “be aware of the Jews.”

“What,” said I, “is your father not then a Jew? the name I thought – ”

“Oh-h-h!” he cried, “they may call us so; but – born in England – bred in London – neighbourhood of Bond Street, highly respectable locality. Army and Navy outfitters, my father

and me, you see, he! he! We invite inspection, give satisfaction, and defy competition, you see, he! he!” And he glided silently down stairs, giving me scarcely time to observe that he was a young man with black hair, black eyes and whiskers, and wearing goloshes.

I soon after went down to breakfast, wondering, as I well might, how my feline friend had found out all about my affairs; but it was not till I had eaten ninety and one breakfasts and a corresponding number of dinners that I discovered he belonged to a class of fellows who live by fleecing the poor victims they pretend to clothe. Intending candidates, beware of the Jews!

Tuesday came round at last, just as Tuesdays have always been in the habit of doing, and at eleven o'clock precisely I, with my heart playing a game of cricket, with my spine for the bat and my ribs for the wicket, “repaired” – a very different mode of progression from any other with which I am acquainted – to the medical department of Somerset House. I do not remember ever having entered any place with feelings of greater solemnity. I was astonished in no small degree at the people who passed along the Strand for appearing so disgustingly indifferent, —

“And I so weerie fu’ o’ care.”

Had I been going to stand my trial for manslaughter or cattle-lifting, I am certain I should have felt supremely happy in comparison. I passed the frowning gateway, traversed the large square, and crossed the Rubicon by entering the great centre doorway and inquiring my way to the examination room.

I had previously, be it observed, sent in my medical and surgical degrees, with all my class tickets and certificates, including that for virtue. I was now directed up a great many long stairs, along as many gloomy-looking corridors, in which I lost my way at least half a dozen times, and had to call at a corresponding number of green-baize-covered brass tacketed doors, in order to be put right, before I at length found myself in front of the proper one, at which I knocked once, twice, and even thrice, without in any way affecting or diminishing the buzz that was going on behind the door; so I pushed it open, and boldly entered. I now found myself in the midst of a large and select assortment of clerks, whose tongues were hard at work if their pens were not, and who did not seem half so much astonished at seeing me there as I felt at finding myself. The room itself looked like an hypertrophied law office, of which the principal features were papers and presses, three-legged stools, calf-bound folios, and cobwebs. I stood for a considerable time, observing but unobserved, wondering all the while what to say, how to say it, and whom to say it to, and resisting an inclination to put my finger in my mouth. Moreover, at that moment a war was going on within me between pride and modesty, for I was not at all certain whether I ought to take off my hat; so being “canny” and a Scot, I adopted a middle course, and commenced to wipe imaginary perspiration from my brow, an operation which, of course, necessitated the removal of my head-dress. Probably the cambric handkerchief caught the tail of the eye of a quieter-looking knight of the quill, who

sat a little apart from the other drones of the pen; at any rate he quickly dismounted, and coming up to me politely asked my business. I told him, and he civilly motioned me to a seat to await my turn for examination. By-and-bye other candidates dropped in, each of whom I rejoiced to observe looked a little paler, decidedly more blue, and infinitely greener than I did myself! This was some relief, so I sat by the dusty window which overlooked the Thames, watching the little skiffs gliding to and fro, the boats hastening hither and thither, and the big lazy-like barges that floated on the calm unruffled bosom of the great mysterious river, and thinking and wishing that it could but break its everlasting silence and tell its tale, and mention even a tithe of the scenes that had been acted on its breast or by its banks since it first rolled its infant waters to the sea, through a forest of trees instead of a forest of masts and spires, or tell of the many beings that had sought relief from a world of sin and suffering under its dark current. So ran my thoughts, and as the river so did time glide by, and two hours passed away, then a third; and when at last my name was called, it was only to inform me that I must come back on the following day, there being too many to be examined at once.

At the hour appointed I was immediately conducted into the presence of the august assembly of examiners, and this, is what I saw, or rather, this was the picture on my retina, for to see, in the usual acceptation of the term, was, under the circumstances, out of the question: – A table with a green cover, laid out for a feast

– to me a ghastly feast – of reason and flow of soul. My reason was to form the feast, my soul was to flow; the five pleasant-looking and gentlemanly men who sat around were to partake of the banquet. I did not walk into the room, I seemed to glide as if in a dream, or as if I had been my own ghost. Every person and every thing in the room appeared strangely contorted; and the whole formed a wonderful mirage, miraculously confused. The fire hopped up on the table, the table consigned itself to the flames at one moment, and made an insane attempt to get up the chimney the next. The roof bending down in one corner affectionately kissed the carpet, the carpet bobbing up at another returned the chaste salute. Then the gentlemen smiled on me pleasantly, while I replied by a horrible grin.

“Sit down, sir,” said one, and his voice sounded far away, as if in another world, as I tottered to the chair, and with palsied arm helped myself to a glass of water, which had been placed on the table for my use. The water revived me, and at the first task I was asked to perform – translate a small portion of Gregory’s (not powder) *Conspectus* into English – my senses came back. The scales fell from my eyes, the table and fire resumed their proper places, the roof and carpet ceased to dally, my scattered brains came all of a heap once more, and I was myself again as much as ever Richard was, or any other man. I answered most of the questions, if not all. I was tackled for ten minutes at a time by each of the examiners. I performed mental operations on the limbs of beings who never existed, prescribed hypothetically

for innumerable ailments, brought divers mythical children into the world, dissected muscles and nerves in imagination, talked of green trees, fruit, flowers, natural families, and far-away lands, as if I had been Linnaeus, Columbus, and Humboldt all in one, so that, in less than an hour, the august body leant their backs against their respective chairs, and looked knowingly in each other's faces for a period of several very long seconds. They then nodded to one another, did this august body, looked at their tablets, and nodded again. After this pantomime had come to a conclusion I was furnished with a sheet of foolscap and sent back to the room above the Thames to write a dissertation on fractures of the cranium, and shortly after sending it in I was recalled and informed that I had sustained the dread ordeal to their entire satisfaction, etc, and that I had better, before I left the house, pay an official visit to the Director-General. I bowed, retired, heaved a monster sigh, made the visit of ceremony, and afterwards my exit.

The first gentleman (?) I met on coming out was a short, middle-aged Shylock, hook-nosed and raven-haired, and arrayed in a surtout of seedy black. He approached me with much bowing and smiling, and holding below my nose a little green tract which he begged I would accept.

“Exceedingly kind,” thought I, and was about to comply with his request, when, greatly to my surprise and the discomposure of my toilet, an arm was hooked into mine, I was wheeled round as if on a pivot, and found myself face to face with another Israelite

armed with a *red* tract.

“He is a Jew and a dog,” said this latter, shaking a forefinger close to my face.

“Is he?” said I. The words had hardly escaped my lips when the other Jew whipped his arm through mine and quickly re-wheeled me towards him.

“He is a liar and a cheat,” hissed he, with the same motion of the forefinger as his rival had used.

“Indeed!” said I, beginning to wonder what it all meant. I had not, however, long time to wonder, being once more set spinning by the Israelite of the red tract.

“Beware of the Jews?” he whispered, pointing to the other; and the conversation was continued in the following strain. Although in the common sense of the word it really was no conversation, as each of them addressed himself to me only, and I could find no reply, still, taking the word in its literal meaning (from *con*, together, and *verto*, I turn), it was indeed a conversation, for they turned me together, each one, as he addressed me, hooking his arm in mine and whirling me round like the handle of an air-pump or a badly constructed teetotum, and shaking a forefinger in my face, as if I were a parrot and he wanted me to swear.

Shylock of the green tract. – “He is a swine and a scoundrel.”

Israelite of the red. – “He’s a liar and a thief.”

Shylock of the green. – “And he’ll get round you some way.”

Israelite of red. – “Ahab and brothers cheat everybody they

can.”

Shylock of green. – “He’ll be lending you money.”

Red. – “Whole town know them – ”

Green. – “Charge you thirty per cent.”

Red – “They are swindlers and dogs.”

Green. – “Look at our estimate.”

Red. – “Look at *our* estimate.”

Green. – “Peep at our charges.”

Red. – “Five years’ credit.”

Green. – “Come with us, sir,” tugging me to the right.

Red. – “This way, master,” pulling me to the left.

Green. – “Be advised; he’ll rob you.”

Red. – “If you go he’ll murder you.”

“Damn you both!” I roared; and letting fly both fists at the same time, I turned them both together on their backs and thus put an end to the conversation. Only just in time, though, for the remaining ten tribes, or their representatives, were hurrying towards me, each one swaying aloft a gaudy-coloured tract; and I saw no way of escaping but by fairly making a run for it, which I accordingly did, pursued by the ten tribes; and even had I been a centipede, I would have assuredly been torn limb from limb, had I not just then rushed into the arms of my feline friend from Bond Street.

He purred, gave me a paw and many congratulations; was so glad I had passed, – but, to be sure, knew I would, – and so happy I had escaped the Jews; would I take a glass of beer?

I said, "I didn't mind;" so we adjourned (the right word in the right place – adjourned) to a quiet adjoining hotel.

"Now," said he, as he tendered the waiter a five-pound Bank of England note, "you must not take it amiss, Doctor, but –"

"No smaller change, sir?" asked the waiter.

"I'm afraid," said my friend (?), opening and turning over the contents of a well-lined pocket-book, "I've only got five – oh, here are sovs, he! he!" Then turning to me: "I was going to observe," he continued, "that if you want a pound or two, he! he! – you know young fellows will be young fellows – only don't say a word to my father, he! he! he! – highly respectable man. Another glass of beer? No? Well, we will go and see father!"

"But," said I, "I really must go home first."

"Oh dear no; don't think of such a thing."

"I'm deuced hungry," continued I.

"My dear sir, excuse me, but it is just our dinner hour; nice roast turkey, and boiled leg of mutton with –"

"Any pickled pork?"

"He! he! now you young *officers* will have your jokes; but, he! he! though we don't just eat pork, you'll find us just as good as most Christians. Some capital wine – very old brand; father got it from the Cape only the other day; in fact, though I should not mention these things, it was sent us by a grateful customer. But come, you're hungry, we'll get a cab."

Chapter Four.

The City of Enchantment.

In Joining the Service! Find Out what a “Gig” Means

The fortnight immediately subsequent to my passing into the Royal Navy was spent by me in the great metropolis, in a perfect maze of pleasure and excitement. For the first time for years I knew what it was to be free from care and trouble, independent, and quietly happy. I went the round of the sights and the round of the theatres, and lingered entranced in the opera; but I went all alone, and unaccompanied, save by a small pocket guide-book, and I believe I enjoyed it all the more on that account. No one cared for nor looked at the lonely stranger, and he at no one. I roamed through the spacious streets, strolled delightedly in the handsome parks, lounged in picture galleries, or buried myself for hour's in the solemn halls and classical courts of that prince of public buildings the British Museum; and, when tired of rambling, I dined by myself in a quiet hotel. Every sight was strange to me, every sound was new; it was as if some good fairy, by a touch of her magic wand, had transported me to an enchanted city; and when I closed my eyes at night, or even shut them by day, behold, there was the same moving panorama that

I might gaze on till tired or asleep.

But all this was too good to last long. One morning, on coming down to breakfast, bright-hearted and beaming as ever, I found on my plate, instead of fried soles, a long blue official letter, "On her Majesty's Service." It was my appointment to the 'Victory,' – "additional for service at Haslar Hospital." As soon as I read it the enchantment was dissolved, the spell was broken; and when I tried that day to find new pleasures, new sources of amusement, I utterly failed, and found with disgust that it was but a common work-a-day world after all, and that London was very like other places in that respect. I lingered but a few more days in town, and then hastened by train to Portsmouth to take up my appointment – to join the service in reality.

It was a cold raw morning, with a grey and cheerless sky, and a biting south-wester blowing up channel, and ruffling the water in the Solent. Alongside of the pier the boats and wherries were all in motion, scratching and otherwise damaging their gunwales against the stones, as they were lifted up and down at the pleasure of the wavelets. The boatmen themselves were either drinking beer at adjacent bars, or stamping up and down the quay with the hopes of enticing a little warmth to their half-frozen toes, and rubbing the ends of their noses for a like purpose. Suddenly there arose a great commotion among them, and they all rushed off to surround a gentleman in brand-new naval uniform, who was looking, with his mouth open, for a boat, in every place where a boat was most unlikely to be. Knowing at a glance that he was

a stranger, they very generously, each and all of them, offered their services, and wanted to row him somewhere – anywhere. After a great deal of fighting and scrambling among themselves, during which the officer got tugged here and tugged there a good many times, he was at last bundled into a very dirty cobbie, into which a rough-looking boatman bounded after him and at once shoved off.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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