ROB RAT:

A STORY

OF BARGE LIFE.

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INTERIOR OF A BARGE CABIN.

LOOKING OUT.

ROB RAT:

A Story of Barge Life.

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WESLEYAN CONFERENCE OFFICE.
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SOLD AT 66, PATERNOSTER-ROW.

1878.

1489. f. 370

HAYMAN BROTHERS AND LILLY,
PRINTERS,
HATTON HOUSE, FARRINGDON ROAD,
LONDON, E.C.

DEDICATION.

To

GEORGE SMITH, ESQUIRE,

COALVILLE, LEICESTER,

WHOSE NOBLE AND UNFLAGGING EFFORTS ON BEHALF OF

THE BRICK-YARD CHILDREN

AND OF

THE CANAL POPULATION

HAVE MADE HIS NAME ONE OF THE MOST BLESSED

OF OUR AGE.

MAY THE SUCCESS THAT HAS GLADDENED HIS HEART IN THE FORMER WORK, AND RESCUED THOUSANDS OF LITTLE ONES FROM A HORRIBLE BONDAGE, SOON CROWN HIS ENDEAVOURS ON BEHALF OF OUR

BARGEMEN AND THEIR FAMILIES.

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ROB RAT:

A STORY OF BARGE LIFE.

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CHAPTER I.

ROB IS TURNED OUT IN THE COLD.

PICKARD'S WHARF wasn't the kind of place that anybody could call delightful, at the best of times. On the finest day that ever shone the roads were choked with mud, leading down to muddy quays with heaps of brick and coal and less fragrant manure, and slabs of slate and great blocks of building stone. Rotting refuse lay thick and fever-breeding where the barges had not made a way through it. Bubbles of ill-smelling, poisonous gas came up from the foul depths of the canal. You can fancy, then, what a dismal sort of a place it must be on a night like this, when a cold north-east wind nips the life out of you, and pelts you

every now and then with showers of rain and sleet. The only cheery-looking thing about the place is the *Bargeman's Rest*, and the glare of ruddy light that streams out upon the bleak darkness. But such a bad name has the place for ribald talk, for brutal fights, for horrible drunkenness of men and women too, and even children, that it adds only to the weird terrors of the place.

There was no doubt about it, Pickard's Wharf *was* a dismal place. It was dismal even for 'Old Rat,' as he was called, and he certainly wasn't very particular. You might see him any day of the week—Sundays included—lounging over the rudder of the barge to which he is indebted, not only for house and home, for bread and beer, but also for the only surname that the family ever rejoiced in—you could read it daintily inscribed on either side of the stern—'THE WATER-RAT.' There he sat in his rough, hairy cap, that he is commonly supposed never to take off, day or night; his grimy face almost as deep-coloured as the short, black pipe that is perched in the corner of his mouth.

It was a dismal place, too, for Rat's 'mate,' or 'Missis Rat,' as she was called very occasionally. And she wasn't used to delicacies either. For all her rags, and her thin pale face, and the black eye that commonly relieved the hungry whiteness of her cheeks, it was well known amongst the boating fraternity that when

'she had a drop or two,' she could give her master quite as good as she got.

It was a dismal place for poor 'Lizer,' 'little lame Lizer,' as everybody called her, though fourteen years of hard usage had brought her life to a level as dead and dreary as the canal itself; and unless some help should come, Heaven knows it must speedily be as defiled. You might see her, too, almost any day limping along in thin ragged dress, without shoes or hat, keeping the half-starved donkeys up to the mark. And at her side you might generally see the most important member of the family—'Fly,' the bull-terrier, now sniffing in the rushes, and then trotting up to Lizer, looking at her as he pricked up the cropped ears and wagged his tail, saying as plain as anybody could say it, 'Don't yer mind, Lizer; I'll stick up for you agen all the world.' And having assured himself that she was all right, he bounds off to bark at the birds that play hide and seek with him along the way, the only happy thing about the place.

Most certainly it was a dismal place for poor Rob. But so was every other place, for that matter. For in addition to hauling at the towing-rope all day long, and often half through the night, and yelling at the miserable donkeys, the chief purpose of his existence was to bear the almost hourly thrashings with which his father gratified his ill-will to everybody and to everything.

Then there were five other children, who shared in the general misery to which they added. You might find them at any hour of the day racing along the towing-path, bare-footed, bare-headed, half-clad except in a general suit of mud, that covered them for the most part from head to foot. Their 'playing' consisted of an almost monotonous round of quarrels and fights, in which these little tongues flung out with a horrible freedom the ribaldry and oaths that to them were mother-tongue, and father's too; and these little hands struck out fiercely, or tugged at the mop of hair, or scratched each other's face, in exact imitation of their parents.

Yet in such a place and on such a night it was that an exceedingly indiscreet bit of mortality chose to put in a first appearance.

There are good, kindly souls who think that one baby more in the great world does not make so very much difference. But, good, kindly souls, when your world happens to be a cabin about six feet long and six feet wide, and little more than five feet high; when husband and wife lie in the only bed, with a child or two stuffed away at the head of it, and a couple more under it, and two or three more curled up in a cupboard somewhere and somehow; when you throw in a stove and chimney-pipe, and a few boxes and bunks and pots and pans as further 'incumbrances,' and yet another

item in the shape of the bull-terrier, always kept in fighting trim as a means of getting his master a pot of beer; when the air is foul to begin with, and but just enough for one pair of lungs, and is actual poison for nine—well, in such a world even the proverbial philosopher might doubt if another babe in the house was of necessity 'a well-spring of pleasure.'

But there it was. You could just catch sight of it as Lizer moved with the rushlight to get such help and comfort as the mother needed. There it was, what there was of it—a poor little pale thing in the arms of the poor pale woman, even now with the familiar ring around the eye. And small as it was, it upset the domestic arrangements of *The Water Rat*, and that in turn upset the temper of the head of the family to such a degree as finally to upset poor Rob altogether, and to throw him out into the cold world. 'Old Rat' for this one night was lying on the floor, flinging his huge, hob-nailed boots about in a miserable state of unrest, and in a frame of mind even less amiable than was usual with him. The last little intruder had kindled in the father's breast a general sense of wrong, and now it burned to avenge itself on something or somebody. His opportunity soon came, for as he lay sprawled upon the floor, his feet could reach each side of the little cabin, and almost the roof too, for that matter. The boots lighted presently on something softer than

wood. Hoping that it was some living creature—perhaps it was little Lizer, or perhaps the wife of his bosom with this last comer, or it might be Rob; anyhow it felt like somebody. So striking out with a savage kick, he shouted with as many oaths as could be crowded into so few words, 'Get out o' my way, can't yer?'

Of course it was the unlucky Rob that got the kick. But it chanced that Fly, the cropped bull-terrier, was coiled up in his favourite position as the partner of Rob's bosom. Rob's constant friend, and certainly the only creature that had ever uttered a sound or made a sign in his behalf, it flew now to his defence, and gave the intruding foot a sharp snap that sent its stinging pain through the shoe-leather. In a furious rage the father snatched the poker that lay in front of the stove. Rob, familiar with the movement, leaped in a moment into the darkness, and springing over the barges, cowered in a place of shelter till the morning.

Fly was safe enough. It was Rob, of course; it always was; and this was the climax of his evil-doings. 'Hakchewly turnin' the dawg agen his own feyther, the hunnatural young varmint!' and 'Old Rat' swore a mighty oath 'that if ever that boy set foot aboard *The Water-Rat* again, he 'd break every bone in his body—that he would.'

With the light of the next morning poor Rob, cold

and miserable, crept towards the barge. A brick that nearly struck his head, was at once his greeting and his warning. It was followed up by a shouted message that 'there was too many a' ready without him, and that he could take himself off for good and all.'

Rob sat down at a safe distance, shivering with the cold, and wrapping his ragged jacket about him, thinking only that he was 'horful 'ungry.' As to the threat, he took little notice of that; it would end as others had done. He had been hanged and 'drownded' and 'whopped' to death so many times already in his father's threatenings, that he was quite hardened to it. Before the day was over he would be back again, taking the kicks and blows quite as usual. He watched poor tired Lizer fastening the donkeys to the towing-rope, and his father loosening the barge from her moorings. Again Rob came on to lend his hand for the start. But in a moment his father leaped on the wharf. With an awful curse he rushed upon the lad, and narrowly missed him. More savage at his failure, his eyes glaring madly, his voice hoarse with rage, he looked at the boy with a murderous hatred. Rob turned at his safe distance and read instinctively his fate.

'If ever I lay hands upon yer, mark, I 'll *kill* yer,' the father hissed between his teeth; and Rob felt somehow that this was meant. Sitting down like one stunned, the lad watched the rope flung off, and his

father seat himself at the rudder. Tears gathered in the lad's eyes, without force enough to run over on his cheeks. Wretched hole as it was, it was all of the world that he knew, and just the one little bit of it that he cared for. There was Fly, the fierce, scarred bull-dog, that was more to him than father or mother; and little wonder, for it had shown him much more kindness than either. And there was Lizer, little lame Lizer, who never spoke unkindly to anybody,—Rob loved Lizer too, though not quite so much as he loved Fly, perhaps. But then Fly *was* such a wonderful dog.

Sitting there, watching it all, on this foggy November morning, the one or two brighter memories of his life came up before him as in a dream, in strange contrast to this scene on Pickard's Wharf—memories of when on a summer's evening he had snatched an hour's pleasure with Lizer and Fly. He seemed to see them all three again sitting near to the water-lilies, under a willow-tree, watching her fingers nimbly plaiting the rushes. He heard again the happy song of the thrush and the nightingale as they sang that evening. He had peeped through the thick bush fence and seen the rabbits skipping about over the mossy paths in the wood. And now he saw it all again. And he heard again, too, the words that he had spoken as they sat there:—'Little Lizer, don't yer mind. When I'm a man, I'll save up and buy a barge

all o' my own. An' I won't have no mate, so you shall come an' live along o' me, Lizer. An' I shan't never whop yer, Lizer, never. 'Cos why, says you?' And he stops, as if it were a riddle to be guessed. Lizer looks up from the rushes quite puzzled at such an extraordinary condition of things as that in which she was never to be whopped. ''Cos why?' asks Rob again. ''Cos I shan't never have no drink, Lizer, like mother an' father does—that's 'cos why.'

Then the memory faded, and that bit of summer died into the chill grey winter's morning. They were just going to start, going away into that cold mist, leaving him here alone. The father lounged on the rudder, with the short, black pipe puffing fiercely, muttering terrible threats against everybody in general, and poor Rob in particular. The rope that fastened the barge was loosened and drawn in. The donkeys had woke up from their sleepiness with a slow shake of the ear and then a shake all over, by way of stirring up their stiff old limbs. Then Rob saw Lizer suddenly drop the rope she held, and, in spite of oaths and shouts from her father, she came running back to him. She flung her arms about the lad's neck and kissed him tenderly.

'Good-bye,' she said hurriedly. 'Keep up, Rob. Yer see father's mad about Fly. But I'll send yer word by some o' them if you'll hang about here.

We'll have our barge yet, Rob, and no whoppin' either. Yer knows 'cos why, Rob.'

Poor Lizer! she knew whose step this was that came behind her, and what these furious oaths meant: 'A-turnin' the gal agen me now, the wretch! I'll kill him if ever I sets hand on him agen,' cried old Rat, hoarse with rage.

And as Rob ran from the scene, his heart sickened, and the grief poured down in tears, at the sound of the blows that drove his sister back to the rope.

'They're gone then,' said Rob, half an hour later, as he stood looking away over the misty hill-side where the canal ran; and without knowing why, probably because he wasn't thinking at all, he set off along the same path, hungry, cold, and lonely. We will let him go on, good reader, whilst you and I linger here for five minutes.

CHAPTER II.

THE WRITER BUTTONHOLES HIS READER.

THAT is, if the reader have anywhere at all a heart in him.

Good friend, not altogether dried up in money-getting and the prevailing east wind of life, here is something for us to think about.

There goes *The Water-Rat,* towed by its worn-out donkeys, tugged and driven by the lame little ragged Lizer, splashing in the mud.

There goes Rob, poor Rob, kicked out in the cold to pick up what he can, starving and utterly wretched. The child of parents never wed; untaught in everything but the monotonous round of misery, the curse of drink, and the cruelties of daily life; ignorant of the name of God except in oaths; to whom father and mother are not sacred symbols, but words only of terror.

I know that there are in all our large towns, houses and even streets, where all this may be said of the people. Alas that it should be so! And these, too, a population not *neglected* so much as *neglectful,* who are 'bothered' by the persistence of minister and home missionary, of tract distributor and sick visitor. Yet there are points at which legislation does interfere in these cases. Take this, and think of all that it means. Boards of Health condemn a room as unfit for habitation in which there are less than 800 or 900 cubic feet of air. *Here are cabins, in which whole families are born and brought up, with* 150 *cubic feet for the whole;* that is, in a space not big enough to hold a comfortable bed. In the town the police are 'down upon' a case of overcrowding; but into a place *like* this are huddled a man, his wife, and six or seven

children. In the town the School-Board visitor has a sharp eye for vagrant children that seek to escape the troubles of the three R's. But to what district do these poor little water babies belong? who cares for them? No registrar is troubled at their birth, or attends at the later ceremony of their wedding. It is sad that the state should have no interest in them until they are dead. Marriage is an act of primitive simplicity. 'A kind of ceremony is gone through at a low public-house some four or five miles from the boat, finishing up with a "spree." This is how the knot is tied, and for a time it lasts, until either the family is grown too large, or from other causes the boater leaves "his woman and the young brats" to care for themselves as best they can.' Let the reader hear what Mr. Smith, of Coalville, says in his *Canal Population*.* The age is almost too dainty for his plain-speaking; it turns from such things as disgusting and vulgar. Yet before God, Who made us all, these are bone of our bone, and flesh of our flesh. It is of these little ones, too, as well as of our own, that the Lord from Heaven saith that it were better for you and me that a millstone were hanged about our necks and we cast into the depths of the sea than that we offend one of them.

* *Our Canal Population: the sad Condition of the Women and Children.* By George Smith, F.S.A. London: Haughton and Co.

Let our daintiness lead us to pity, and to protest, and to pray and to help them as much as in us lies.

Listen to this as to the cabins: 'Some of them are models of neatness, and a man or two youths might pass a few nights in such very comfortably. Others are the most filthy holes imaginable. What with bugs and other vermin creeping up the sides, stinking mud finding its way through the old leaky joints at the end to the bottom of the cabin, and being heated by a hot stove, stenches arise therefrom enough to make a dog sick. In the boat cabins—*hell-holes* as some of the women call them—cohabitation takes place. Father, mother, sister, brother sleep in the same bed and at the same time. In these places girls of seventeen give birth to children, the fathers of which are members of their own family.'

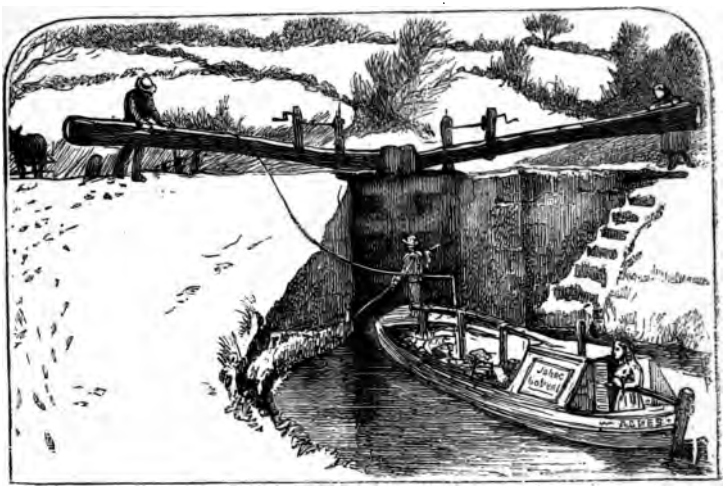
Is it any wonder that the boats should go to and fro, carrying not only human beings of all ages, and cargoes of filth and manure and the refuse of our large towns, but carrying also small-pox and deadly fevers,—carrying vices too that are a thousand times deadlier if we would but believe it? Is it any wonder that living, cooking, eating, sleeping together in such a place, we should find two-thirds of those who live as man and wife are unmarried? That ninety per cent. are drunkards? Can we wonder at such a *picture* as this? 'I can never forget the scenes I often

witnessed, but which my pen is totally unable to describe. Drunkenness, filthiness, cruelty, selfish idleness at the cost of children and animals, thieving, fighting, and almost every other abomination prevailed among them. I have often seen the boat-women strip and fight like men (if anything more savagely), pulling the hair out of each other's heads by handfuls, after they had tired themselves with hard hitting, with sometimes a little biting into the bargain, to say nothing of kicking. . . . It is not an uncommon occurrence to see, as I have done, two boaters fighting, the wife of each backing her husband, and egging him on by all sorts of ferocious cries, each cry running into the next with a volley of oaths and curses' (p. 41). And what can we expect but an ignorance of God, of the Bible, of all religion, such as would have long ago aroused a special effort and a special mission on the part of half a dozen Churches had it not been lying at our very doors?

Now surely there is some great wrong somewhere, in which it is possible you and I may have a share, that we can suffer thousands of these floating hovels to be going day and night through our cities, past our own homes, and along by our churches and chapels. Think of them; picture them going silently along the waterways of our land, carrying not merely gunpowder that makes noise enough about itself at times, but

carrying *half a million souls*, to whom a decent life is simply impossible—mother, father, boys and girls herded together in a common den. For the most part without Sabbath rest, much more without Sabbath service or Sabbath school. Lying away outside the efforts of philanthropy, until of very late; outside the reach of School-Boards, and all parish legislation; lying, too, with less excuse, outside even the limits of parliamentary regulation.

Pray God that this reproach be speedily wiped away! And seek we, as much as in us lies, to remedy it. Urge on our legislators the need of government interference on behalf of these women and children, that they may be rescued from the ignorance, the brutality, and the heaped-up evils that float away on board *The Water-Rat* and ten thousand other barges.



CHAPTER III.

ROB SPENDS THE DAY ASHORE.

MEANWHILE Rob was splashing along the muddy towing-path, shivering as he went, hugging the tattered jacket round him as well as he could, and thinking only that he was 'horful 'ungry.' It was just because he thought of nothing else that he went on thus, for it was in no faint hope that he might creep on board the barge again. He tramped on in his unmeaning, stunned way, along by the ploughed fields

where the rain lay in the furrows, and even the plough-boy's whistling caught the prevailing dreariness; over bridges, and under them; past other barges, and Rob, so cold and hungry, thought of the smoky, stuffy, little cabins as if each were a very paradise. On past the river-side public-house, where stood one who recognised the lad.

'Why, yer Rat's boy; ain't yer?'

Rob looked up dreamily, and only nodded his head by way of reply.

'Passed her a mile down. Old 'un was fierce enough to ha' eat onybody. The lame gal told me as he'd a-gived you the sack. But don't be down about it, young 'un. Come in here; I'll stan' yer 'arf a pint.'

Then Rob woke up as if from his dream. He started as he looked at the place.

The fire that he saw through the window, dancing cheerily, seemed to scorch him; its shelter was a hundred times worse than the bitter cold outside. He remembered the place well; how often poor little lame Lizer and he had talked together of it! It was before he could remember that it happened, for he was a year younger than his sister, but the scene was as vividly before him as if he had seen it yesterday; and whenever *The Water-Rat* passed there, Rob and Lizer had shuddered in their fear, and always rejoiced together when it was left behind.

Not that the nameless beer-shop was worse than most of its trade. It was as dirty and grimy-looking as the rest of the beerhouses that ranged along the canal, but not more so. It seemed conscious of its repulsive appearance, and tried to make up for it by setting one-half of the place aside for tempting customers by something more than the attractions of the beer and tobacco which it was 'licensed to sell,' and the additional inducement of being 'drunk on the premises.' Here were hung up half a dozen gaily-coloured waistcoats, sleeved, and lappetted heavily over the many pockets, while pairs of great hob-nailed boots filled up the window. Further back, but plainly visible, and in strong contrast with the gayer finery, hung sets of second-hand clothing, announcing the fact that you might pay for your beer in other things than money, as many others had done. But there was nothing that could brighten for a moment the one memory that made it stand out by itself in the black list of these places.

There it was that one night the father and mother were drunk; and little Lizer, a toddling maiden, was going from one to another of the noisy company, making friends amongst them, clapping her hands and prattling innocently. The drunken father laughingly caught hold of her and forced her to drink the rum from his glass until she could not stand. The whole set of them,

hardened by their miserable life and the cruelties of every day, roared aloud at the sport, and set her up again and again to see her ramble and fall. But presently she fell and could not rise. In vain her own mother hiccuped her oaths at her, and in vain the father pushed her with his great heavy boot. They managed to carry her somehow to the cabin and lay her on the floor; and there she was for many a day and night. Her hip was injured, and when she came out again she was lame for life.

Little wonder that Rob hurried past the place without a word, leaving the man staring at him, thinking that he was gone mad. And as the lad pushed on he seemed to hear little Lizer's voice again with its tender cheerfulness: 'Never mind, Rob; we'll have our own barge yet, and no whoppin's either. Yer knows 'cos why, Rob.' The words kept ringing in him, waking up thoughts like echoes—how that drink meant nothing but fights and 'whoppin's' and misery. And no drink meant—well, Rob hardly knew what; something indefinitely blessed, as people think of heaven. It meant somehow and certainly a barge of your very own. Of that there could not be the shadow of a doubt. That was the centre-piece, and round it like a halo there was a bright circle of other brilliant things.

As he thought about it Rob stepped out more bravely, as if he could see his way to it already. On he went

pushing and splashing along the path. But as the day wore on the mist gave place to a drenching rain of bitter coldness. The wretched rags that hung about the boy were soaked already. Benumbed and shivering as he was, little wonder that the heavy cold drops put out these sparks of hope, and left him going on in the old stunned way, as if the cold had crept into his head and numbed his very thoughts.

So it came about that suddenly, and without thinking of it all, he stopped, with his strength gone, and sat down under the dripping branches of a tree. The rushes nodded to him familiarly from the bank of the canal as an old friend, but Rob didn't recognise them. A robin, anxious for company, perched himself on a tree close by, and began to ask him in a cheery way what he was doing there, and how long he meant to stay, and finished up with a merry chirping that certainly meant,—

'Cheer up, Rob! Cheer up, cheer up! We'll have a barge of our own yet. Cheer up, cheer up!'

Then he stopped, as if that were the end of the first verse; and he put his head on one side and looked out with his brilliant eye, thinking to himself,—'Now I wonder what he thinks of that; it ought to do him good.'

Then he gave one chirp again, to get the key-note, and away he went with the second verse—'Cheer up,

cheer up! Little lame Lizer shall come and live with us. Cheer up, cheer up! No whoppin' either—yer knows 'cos why. Cheer up, cheer up, cheer up!'

And again the little redbreast stopped, and put his head on one side thoughtfully, as if he couldn't make it out. It was plain enough that poor Rob hadn't cheered up as he ought to have done. The day's tramp, the hunger, the cold and wet had finished their work, and Rob fell from his seat and lay across the muddy path, the bleak rain beating on the pale face and the drenched bundle of rags.

CHAPTER IV.

WE GET ABOARD NOAH'S ARK.

'NOW then, Roger boy, make the best of half an hour more, and we'll have done for the day.' And the old man patted the horse's neck fondly. 'Thee'lt not mind thy stable a bit earlier on a night like this—a-gettin' dark as 't is too.'

Giving the neck a final pat, that made the horse step out bravely with a will, 'old Noah' jumped on board *The Ark;* and having put the rudder right, and

looked ahead through the drenching rain, the shiny sou'wester disappeared within the cabin. Every now and then it was thrust out, and the sharp look went forward so far as the rain and fading light would let it go, and then it was in again alongside of the ruddy firelight, and amongst the savoury smells that proclaimed the fact that old Noah was going to have supper, and even whispered what it was going to be.

Now where there are two such characters, each having such a claim to historic record as this old Noah and his horse 'Roger,' it really is a matter of grave consideration which should first be introduced to the reader.

Public opinion along the canal side, and upon it, was equally divided. If they told you first of 'holy Noer,' as they called him, they always finished up by saying, 'But, bless yer! old Noer ben't nothing to Roger. There weren't nobody as I ever heerd tell on as were so knowin' as that ere 'oss.'

On the other hand, if they told you first of Roger they would be sure to go on with the assurance that it was all very well to talk of Roger, but really 'the 'oss could not hold a candle to his master'—which was at least so strictly true that no one could contradict it. Even Rob's father, who had not often a good word for anybody, had been heard to declare—'I 'll tell yer *what; that* there ol' Noer 's about the best bit o' cargo

that ever come aboard a boat; an' if anybody don't think so, let him step forward and hoblige. I'm to be heard on ginerally aboard *The Water Rat.*' And the speaker put himself into an attitude expressive of the strength of his convictions, and his determination to maintain them against all comers.

Certainly Roger had the advantage over his master in one respect. Old Noer was what you saw him. But about the horse there hung a convenient mystery.

'As for that 'ere hanimal—well, if he'd only a mind to, there!'—and thus plenty of room was left for the imagination. He had been the property of a drunken showman, who had brought himself and all belonging to him to the lowest stage of misery, and then set Roger up for sale as not only 'free from wice, but as capable of tricks as would make anybody's fortin' in no time if they only used him right.'

The sale was encouraged by Roger's sitting on his haunches and partaking of an imaginary banquet with the showman, after which he went through sundry mysteries with a pack of cards, and finished with a hornpipe. It was the last thing that you would expect the old bargeman to buy, and it was a bit of news that set the boating brotherhood agape for a month after—'that holy Noer was goin' into the show line.'

The fact was, however, that Roger came out of it, and from that time 'did not hold with no cards nor

hornpipe, and sichlike, though not objectin' to go out to tea now and then.' You might often come across him sitting among a lot of the barge children whom old Noah delighted to entertain, making his bow for the apple or bit of bread that was given him. He was as knowing too in his work as in his play. He knew every lock and bridge, and the proper manœuvres at each. He never needed a hand on his bridle, much less a cudgel at his back. Altogether he trotted along the sleekest, the happiest, and by far the most wonderful horse that ever went along the canal bank.

But having begun with Roger, we are bound to say —'You should see old Noer; Roger is all very well in his way, but he's nothing to his master.' And on such a night as this, it is worth while to think so, as an excuse for getting aboard *The Noah's Ark*, and turning into this snug cabin. In the dancing light that flickers from the little stove, you can see the shining brass knobs winking back to the flames as if they quite understood what was going on. You can see the shadows dancing over the pictures that decorate the little place. And there is sweet music too, not of organ or harp indeed, but almost as good sometimes—a sputtering, hissing noise coming from an instrument shaped like a monstrous Jew's-harp, on which Noah performs by poking it briskly with a knife. You might guess what was going on, even if the tell-tale onions had not

told everybody who came near the place that the old man was going to have a beefsteak for supper. And now as the frying-pan is moved the flame leaps up to show his face. Not much to look at, and yet the sun himself never brought with it more brightness and summer than did that round, weather-beaten, wrinkled old face to hundreds who lived in an arctic winter so far as anybody else was concerned. 'The boatmen were a bad lot,' so said everybody; and by saying so of course everybody relieved himself of all responsibility, and conveniently put them outside all claim upon his sympathy and help. And yet this same everybody went to worship God, and rejoiced to hear of Him Who was come to seek and to save that which is lost.

Standing there, with the glow of the fire falling full upon the face, you saw it at its best, but simply because it was generally up to that mark, reflecting the light and ruddy warmth until it shone again. And, good reader, is not this the philosophy of people's looks? A man's face is not so much a window for the soul to show itself at; it is a reflector and mirror of what he makes about him. That was the story of the face that looked out from under the sou'wester, with its fringe of white whisker going round it like an oval frame. It was the happiness he had made for other people that turned and twisted the corners of the mouth into a settled good humour, as exquisites twirl up the corners

of their moustaches. This had polished the little round dumpy nose to its glossiness, and this it was that had guided all the wrinkles until they had spread a permanent smile over his face right up to the corners of his eyes. Then as the old man lights the lamp and sets it up in the fixed brass frame you catch sight of those eyes. Fancy a weather-beaten, toughened old salt hiding such a pair of eyes under those thick bristles of eyebrows. Eyes of a deep blue for the matter of colour, they were the eyes of a little child, all simplicity and tenderness. They took hold of your heart in a moment, and compelled you to like him whether you would or no. You understood at once why old Noah had the love of all the children—love that would have died out very often but for him. You knew then why the sick and troubled ones (and there were always plenty of both) muttered his name and longed that he would look in. You did not wonder then that rough men appealed to him in their disputes, abiding by his decisions as if he were a judge. He ruled amongst the darkness and savagery like the stars that rule the night, and like them too he ruled by giving light.

Old Noah had taken the little black teapot from its peg, and was just going to brew his dish of tea, when he felt the strain on the rope suddenly slacken. Out of the cabin door at once went the sou'wester, and the old man peered through the mist.

'What's amiss, Roger?' he cried.

Back through the gloom came a loud whinnying.

'He wants me, anyhow;' and Noah pushed the rudder and let the boat drift to the bank. Making it fast there, he ran on to where Roger was sniffing at a bundle of rags lying in the path. He bent over it eagerly, and lifted up the cold white hand.

'Dead, Roger? Dead?' asked the old man with great tenderness, as he raised the boy and carried him back towards the barge. 'God help me with him. Somehow I can't help thinking as he's sent for something better than to be buried yet! Ah, it would be a real chance o' passing it on, wouldn't it, if he were to live?'

He stripped off the rags from the thin body, muttering a prayer all the time. He piled up the fire until he almost choked the brave little stove; but it soon got the better of it, and sparkled and cracked and roared with the dancing flames, as if it had caught its master's kindliness—a sort of thing that is certainly very infectious. As the old man knelt in the ruddy light, rubbing the warmth into the lad, there came a heavy sobbing breath.

'Thank God!' he cried, the fire glistening in his tears. 'Thank God, he'll live! I *shall* be able to pass it on after all. Thank God! thank God!' And Noah rubbed on with tears of joy, muttering to himself, as

if it were a charm, those words, 'Pass it on. Thank God! I can pass it on.' Whatever they meant, they stirred within him a fervent gratitude, and put new energy into the hands that rubbed away at poor Rob.

The life returned with the warmth, and old Noah's fears began to hurry into guesses: Whose boy was he? and how came he to be there? Then the childlike heart caught up the matter, and began to shape a score of generous purposes for the lad.

'Whoever he did belong to, he's mine now, and I'll pass it on, by God's help. I'll pass it on. Never had a chance before, but I thought it would come some day; an' so 't is. He come, not 'xactly like Moses, for I took him off the shore. But for all that I'll be a kind o' Pharaoh's daughter to him.'

And the old man lifted the shining headgear, and wiped off the perspiration that hung on his wrinkled forehead with a huge red handkerchief. Standing there, in his oil-skin, puffing with the heat and the exertion, he looked as little like the gentle princess of old as well could be; only if Pharaoh's daughter had such a pair of eyes, no wonder that the little baby took so kindly to her.

CHAPTER V.

ROB DISCOVERS A NEW WORLD.

ROB revived with the warmth and rubbing. The old man left him fast asleep when he stepped out and made all right for the night; for Roger would have walked straight into the cabin and asked what was the matter, if any hand but his master's had tended him. Noah was still busy outside when the lad woke up and stared around him.

'I s'pose I was dreamin',' he said, rubbing his eyes

as if a bit of the dream were still lingering in them.

But there it was, bearing to be looked at—the shining brasses winking mysteriously back to the fire, the faces that stared at him from the pictures; there was the delicious fragrance, too, of old Noah's supper. It was all real enough. And yet what could it mean? Rob had never heard of anything so pleasant as fairies and fairyland; but it was some such mystery as that which came into his mind to explain his whereabouts, and how he came there. He lay back on the cabin floor, faint and bewildered, and as he dozed again he heard little Lizer's voice plain enough,—'Keep up, Rob; keep up! We'll have our own boat yet, and no whoppin's either; yer knows 'cos why.' And he fell asleep thinking that this must be a ''cos why' boat.

Then his mind wandered away in dreams, and he was tramping along in the cold rain again, and the thin hands moved as if hugging the drenched rags around him, and the poor lad muttered faintly in his sleep, 'Horful cold an' horful 'ungry too.'

Before long the shiny sou'wester came creeping on board again. Now it was hung up on its peg, with the oilskin under it, in a kind of way that meant that its work was over for that day. Then the old man, in his blue jersey, bent over the boy.

'So thou art Rat's boy, they tell me; poor lad!'

Noah whispered as he looked at him. 'But if he has turned thee out, as they say, he can't say aught to me for takin' thee in. I wish thou couldst sit up alongside o' me and do thy share at supper; but sleep will do thee more good than meat for a good bit yet, I'm fearin'.'

Then moving about carefully, so as not to disturb the lad, he made ready for what was, with him, the meal of the day.

It was wonderful where all came from, for looking about amongst the shining knobs and the framed pictures, you couldn't spy a cupboard anywhere. In the first place, as if the sky had fallen, the roof came down and swung itself into a table. Then Noah dived somewhere, and came up with a table-cloth that was set out in order. There was another dive, and the brown hands were filled with cup and saucer and plate. A knife and fork came right off the cabin-side, and yet another dive brought out a cruet-stand with its luxuries. After such tricks it was nothing to conjure up a loaf of bread to complete the preparation, and to see a seat glide out from nowhere and set itself for its master. Then Noah sat down, completing as pleasant a picture as one could set eyes on.

Rob stirred again. The thoughts that had been tramping in the mud through bitter rain suddenly ended, and he looked out wondering upon the scene before him.

'Eh, my poor laddie, come—thou 'rt waking up.

Canst thou eat a bit? Try now.' And the old man turned round tenderly towards him.

Rob only shook his head, more bewildered than ever.

'Well, I'm fearin' thou'rt more thirsty than aught else; he 's got the fever on him after the chill, you see,' said the old man in the same tone. 'Come, thou shalt drink a sup o' tea.'

Bending over him like a mother—more tenderly than any mother Rob had ever known—he held the cup to the lips. The boy sipped it unconsciously, his eyes fixed all the time upon the face. This strange comfort, this kindness, these tender tones perplexed him. Something very queer had happened. Just now he was back in the world, and that was cold and raining, and he was tramping along the dreary path. How came he into this other world, and where was it?

'Please, what is your name!' said Rob, rather frightened.

'Noah, my lad,' said the old man, very gently.

A confused knowledge of such a one, a strange man who lived thousands of years ago, crept in Rob's mind, confirming the notion that he had certainly got into another world. He stared if possible with a look more frightened than before.

'Noah, of *The Noah's Ark*,' added the old man, nodding his white head and smiling pleasantly, by way of making things plainer.

Rob only kept the wide-open eyes fixed on the old man for some minutes. Then he sank back again, exhausted, and was soon asleep. 'Horful cold, and horful 'ungry,' he muttered between his teeth.

Meanwhile the table was cleared, and diving once more into mysterious holes, all was snugly stowed away. Then old Noah fetched a stout leathern Bible from a ledge above the cabin door, and sat down with the opened book. He trimmed the lamp, and began to read. 'He weren't no scholard,' he said of himself, but it was habit rather than anything else that made him say the words over as he read. The chapter was in Genesis, the story of Hagar and Ishmael; and in a soft undertone he read: *And the water was spent in the bottle, and she cast the child under one of the shrubs. And she went and sat her down over against him a good way off, as it were a bowshot: for she said, Let me not see the death of the child. And she sat over against him, and lift up her voice, and wept. And God heard the voice of the lad.*

Rob stirred.

The old man turned, unconsciously repeating the words, *And God heard the voice of the lad.* All was quiet, so he went on again: *And the angel of God called to Hagar out of heaven, and said unto her, What aileth thee, Hagar? fear not; for God hath heard the voice of the lad where he is. Arise, lift up the lad, and*

hold him by the hand; for I will make him a great nation.

Again Rob stirred, and looked up.

Noah read on: *And God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water, and she went and filled the bottle, and gave the lad drink.*

'Wilt have a sup again, my sonnie?' said Noah, as he saw the boy sit up. He filled the cup, and brought it to him. There was no doubt in Rob's mind now. He *certainly was* in another world. It was his voice that the old man had been speaking about in such a strange way. He held the cup tremblingly and stared with wonder, almost awe.

'Don't be frightened, my lad; I'll take care of yer,' and Noah's arm went round him gently. 'He's wandering a bit, you see,' he explained to himself.

'I'm not frightened,' said Rob, very faintly, and at last his eyes turned and looked around the little cabin. 'But I thought that they said *she,* an'—an' you 're a man—I mean Noah—an' so I thought that it might be little Lizer that was come up here too, you know—and Fl——'

'Wanderin' agen, poor dear,' said the old man, as Rob sank back; and he returned to his reading. Then the book was closed, and kneeling down, Noah poured out his heart to his Father in heaven, praying in the same way that he had read. 'Thou hast laid

him down right afore me, O Lord, and I'll take him as one of Thine own little ones. Help me to do the right for him, body and soul—body and soul. If Thou hast sent him, Lord, Thou'lt send all the wisdom and grace that I want for him. Thou art the Good Physician, and Thou art the blessed Saviour too. Help me with him, body and soul. And by Thy grace I'll pass it on, Lord, and thank Thee for hearing my prayer, and a-givin' me the chance.'

* * * * *

ill-fed donkeys, that had been cudgelled into sores. Wet through and cold, and aching from the blows of the morning, she splashed along through the mud, with her tender heart thinking only of Rob, and sorrowing for him, as if she had no griefs of her own. And there too, was Fly, knowing quite well that some special effort on his part was needful to cheer his little lame mistress to-day. Now he came trotting by her side, licking her hand, and looking wistfully into her face, saying as plainly as could be, 'Never mind, little Lizer; don't yer be afraid. I'll take care of yer; I'll drive all yer troubles away.' And off he went, bounding some distance, barking half-a-dozen times, then trotting back to her again with a very satisfied air.

'Dear old Fly! Where's Rob?' she asked very sadly. Fly pricked up his ears, licked her hand, looking as if he knew all about it, but he mustn't tell; but he was quite sure that it was all right.

As soon as they had reached the night's resting-place, old Rat took his unhappy self off to find solace in *The Three Jolly Bargemen*, leaving little Lizer to see to the donkeys, and to all else that had to be done.

At last, tired out, she crept on board. But there was no rest for her. The mother, suspecting where her husband was, roundly declared that it was a shame that she would not endure, to have him spending the money like that when the children wanted for

bread. So leaving little Lizer to nurse the baby, and to mind the other children, she set off, as she said, 'to fetch him out of that.'

She soon found him, sitting in the low, smoky room amongst a group of men and women, all belonging to bargedom; some drinking together out of a pewter pot, whilst others indulged a more aristocratic taste, and sipped a glass of rum;—of water they had too much all day long, and would not suffer it to dilute the spirit now. 'Rat's mate' appeared at the door just as one of the younger men of the company rose very solemnly to beat a lively tattoo with the heavy hobnailed boots on the floor, keeping time with the huskiest of fiddles; whilst amidst a roar of laughter, one of the women put her hands on her hips and stood in front of him, shuffling her feet in pretence of dancing. But alas! poor Missis Rat, won by the bright fire, by the merry company, and above all by a sip from old Rat's tumbler, forgot her virtuous purpose, and seating herself at his side, she gave herself up to the enjoyment of the evening.

Little Lizer had stowed the others away in the odd nooks and corners that were their sleeping places, and now she sat trying to hush the fretful baby, waiting hour after hour, knowing too well what to expect. At last, overdone with weariness and watching, she dropped into a doze.

The thoughts of Rob, that had followed her all day, clung to her in her sleep. Presently the wretched cabin and all her misery was far away. She sat on the bank of a river, not the dirty canal with its muddy towing path, but a clear and flowing river, where the water-lilies spread themselves in exquisite beauty; and she could watch the shoals of fish that came lazily swimming along till they caught sight of her, and then flashed out of sight. The trees bent down their green branches all about, half hiding her, as she trimmed her hat with the flowers that she had picked. Then she heard somebody singing, and round the winding of the river there came a barge. It was painted in brilliant colours, and moved along in some happy fashion without the trouble of being pushed or pulled. As it came nearer she saw the name. There it was, as plain as could be—so plain, that even she could just manage to put the letters together and spell it —*THE 'COS WHY.*

It stopped directly in front of her. Then Rob appeared suddenly from somewhere, beckoning her to come on board. And there was Fly, too, standing wagging his tail, and telling her to come on as plainly as Rob did. And she was just going to step across; but in upon her pleasant dream came the noise of staggering steps, and there was a heavy fall overhead. Then there came a volley of oaths, in a voice

thick and stammering—'If that's you, Rob, I'll kill yer.'

Little Lizer started, trembling lest Rob should have returned on board and been caught. But all was still again, and soon her father, lying where he fell, was snoring loudly. The mother meanwhile, better able to direct her steps, had reeled into the cabin in a rollicking good humour. There had been 'a bit of a scrimmage' at the public-house, in which 'Rat's mate,' considering her condition, had notably distinguished herself, and earned the admiration of all the men and most of the women—but then they were partisans—by her courage and skill. But she bore many traces of the battle, and sat now with her hair hanging about her face, and her cheeks scratched and bleeding. In her arms the baby lay tugging at her breast, whilst the mother rocked herself to and fro, now humming bits of rhymes, now stopping to lift her foot and declare with heaped-up oaths what she would have done to her antagonist and where she would have sent her 'if only she had a-been herself and had fair play.' And at the happy thought of such a victory she laughed aloud, and held the little baby, chirrupping to it with her foul breath.

Little Lizer had crept out of the way as soon as she could, renewing, let us hope, the happy dreams that had been so rudely disturbed.

* * * * *

'Really it is dreadful,' says the kind-hearted reader, turning from my story.

It is dreadful, Sir, or Madam; but turning away from it doesn't make it less so. Here is the position of thousands of men and women and children whilst we sit luxuriantly at home and say only, 'Dreadful!' Should you and I have been better if we had been brought up in such circumstances, and if we had to live in such a place? Would not the public-house, with all its horrors, be sweetness itself? And what should you and I have thought of the religion that had looked down on us as dreadful people, and then gone idly by on the other side? Pray for these our brothers. Demand for them at least that decency be possible. 'Why cannot there be coffee-rooms for them in the more frequented places, and Bethels for these boatmen too?' you ask. And so do I.

Well, go on asking; only let it be persistent, and loud, and entreating; and we may perhaps rouse somebody into doing something, who knows?—perhaps even rouse ourselves to do something.

CHAPTER VII.

OLD NOAH PASSES IT ON.

FOR Rob it was a hard struggle and a long one. Cold and starved as the lad was, death had its very teeth in the prey, and was loth to loosen them. A less tender and careful nurse than old Noah would have lost him. But old Noah would have been deeply grieved if the recovery were put down to anything besides the prayer that went up hourly for the lad; *that* wrought the victory.

From the first there was a conviction in the old man's heart that Rob would live. Sitting on the deck steering, looking along the canal, dodging his head to and fro and up and down, as if to look under the sails or outside the ropes—a trick learned long ago at sea that he still fell into unconsciously when his thoughts were hard on something else—old Noah talked it over with himself.

'You see, the heavenly Father sent the boy, didn't He?'

And Noah nodded his head in answer to his own question.

'Well, and He sent the boy a-purpose for me to pass it on, didn't He?'

Noah confirmed that opinion too by a double nod of his head.

'Well now, I put it to you,' and he spoke with the air of a man who was getting much the best of the argument, 'do you mean to say that the heavenly Father was a-going to give me just time to look at the boy, and afore I could begin to pass it on that He should take him away again?'

Noah shook his head vigorously.

'No, I should think not. That wouldn't be like Him, for He taketh pleasure in them that fear Him. And this what you may call the first downright chance as I ever had, too.'

Then Noah only looked along the canal and over the green fields and misty woods ever so far beyond, as if the opinion were really not worth a moment's consideration.

'Of course the heavenly Father have seen what's a-been in my heart for these years; and what I've a-kept asking Him for, that I might have a chance of passing it on. And the Book says that He will fulfil the desire of them that fear Him.'

Noah only put his head on one side as if waiting to see what this proved.

'And so He laid it right down there afore my very eyes, so that I couldn't help finding it. Why, if I'd been a blind man, I believe I should have tumbled over it, and found it that way. So now what I says is this,'—and Noah nodded his head over each word, speaking slowly and with much emphasis,—'that my Father in heaven sent it a-purpose for me to pass it on; and by His help I will too.'

Then, as if Noah did not want to hear another word about it, he hastened into the cabin to look at Rob, gently putting the blanket more snugly about him as he lay there asleep.

Half an hour later, and there you might have seen old Noah again, with the lad's pale face propped against the old man's blue jersey whilst he gave him a few spoonfuls of broth. Then setting him down again

very tenderly, and carefully covering him, old Noah said cheerfully,—'Come, sonnie, please God, I shall pass it on yet, and make a man of thee.' Rob only lifted the heavy eyes and smiled gratefully, then sank back dozing again.

So days and even weeks went by before Rob was up and about once more. On milder days he was brought on deck, wrapped in the old man's overcoat and seated by Noah's side at the rudder. To Rob it was a strange and almost sorrowful waking up to find himself back again in the old world. Here was the foul canal, the muddy towing-path, the dismal wharf. Here too were the brutal men, the wretched women, the suffering children, the miserable horses and donkeys tugging at the ropes.

But yet for Rob there was all the new joy that he had found, and the sight of these things about him made him only think more of the happy change; for it was a joyous life for all belonging to *The Noah's Ark*. The old man owned the barge, and was a sort of general carrier between the busy country town and the places that lay along a branch of the canal for fifty miles or so, coming and going in a leisurely way that was quite in harmony with Roger's tastes, and that left room for the comforts and pleasures that filled up the cup of Rob's happiness. Here was Noah—dear old Noah—mother, father, nurse, doctor, and every-

thing. Here was the clean, snug little cabin. Here was Roger too—wonderful Roger, who took to Rob at once, as if he had a right to him by finding him first. And besides all this, there was no knowing as he was back in the old world again but that little Lizer might come there some day, and even Fly too. And at the thought of that the lad's eyes shone as if he had been taking lessons from Noah.

And 'taking lessons' from him Rob was, much more than he knew, as all of us are taking lessons and giving them every hour of the day; but in one thing he did know, he was taking lessons every evening. When Roger was done up for the night, and when supper was over and cleared away, the old Bible was fetched down from its ledge over the cabin door. There in the light of the swinging lamp sat the two—old Noah, with the white locks hanging about the wrinkled forehead, and the weather-beaten face lit up with joy. Beside him leaned Rob, still pale and weak, puzzling over the mysteries of the alphabet, and spelling out the letters awkwardly and slowly.

'Now what's that, sonnie?' asks the old man encouragingly.

Rob makes a guess, and flounders through half a dozen times of failure.

Patiently the old schoolmaster puts him through it again, going into bursts of extravagant praise when

at last some faint success broke the monotony of failure. Then kneeling down together, Noah prayed for them both; whilst Rob, strangely awed, began to realise the great mystery of the unseen and all-seeing God, to whom men may come and say, 'Our Father, which art in heaven.'

Of all the things that he learned from Noah, this sank most deeply into the lad's thoughts, it haunted him day and night: that God should have made all things and everybody! So great and wise! and yet that He should let old Noah speak to Him! Old Noah must be *very* good. And that He should know all things too; and yet why did He allow there to be such cruel, drunken men and women? And if He loved the children so much as Noah said, why didn't He take all the boys and girls up to His own beautiful house, all for Himself? He was sure their fathers and mothers wouldn't mind it a bit. His father was quite glad to get rid of him. Old Noah might be sorry, because then he couldn't 'pass it on,' as he called it whenever he was kind to anybody. But then old Noah was different from everybody else, Rob thought.

It was after these things had been turned over again and again that Rob ventured on his first prayer. He was sitting in the little cabin alone, waiting for the old man. The lad's thoughts were of little Lizer

and Fly. It was a long time now since there had been any tidings of *The Water Rat.* Then it occurred to him that if this great God knew everything, He must know all about little Lizer, and about Fly too. Why should he not kneel down and try to pray like Noah did? Timidly going to the very spot where the old man generally knelt, and putting himself into the same attitude, Rob began very softly and rather frightened,—

'Please, God, I'm not Noah, and I'm not good like Noah is; I wish I was. But, please, God, I'm sure Noah wishes it every bit so much as I do. And, please, God, if You know where everybody is, will You please to bless little lame Lizer. She belongs aboard *The Water Rat.* And, please, God, to bless Fly too. And don't be angry with me, please, God, for asking so much. Amen.'

Then feeling doubtful lest kneeling there and speaking thus should seem too much to resemble old Noah, Rob closed his eyes again. 'If You please, O God, I am Rat's boy, but Noah took me aboard. And, please, God, will You bless him too. Amen.'

Poor Rob! thou hast spoken from thy heart, and thy prayer shall be answered. Though little Lizer is not to be found aboard *The Water Rat,* He knows where she is, and He will bless her this very night.

So the lad was right after all; it was a new world that he woke up in. To know Him Who is the Almighty, to speak to Him, to trust in Him, to rest in His love makes all things new.

up, chiefly, however, for the sake of appearances. Yet in its own eyes Crackleton was all the world. And in the opinion of Mr. Thomas Doe, he himself, the radiant beadle of Horner's Charity, was all the world to Crackleton.

A physician who had accidentally caught the capricious favour of fashionable London some two hundred years ago, saved a few thousand fees, and bequeathed to his native town this gift and charity, in which three sick men and three sick women might find bed and medicine, nurse and doctor. But Crackleton was either so healthy or so dull as not to appreciate Horner's Charity to anything like its full extent, and often for weeks together nurse and beadle had nothing to do but to gossip to each other, and then to draw the week's wages. In the opinion of Mr. Thomas Doe, the people were 'hungrateful wretches' to keep in such a state of perfect health when here was 'bed and board, doctor's stuff and wittles all for nothing.' 'But then,' Mr. Thomas Doe explained to himself with a lofty air, 'there hain't no accountin' for them there kind of lower horders, which yer see they was born without any taste for sich things. An' for want o' heddycatin' they never had what yer might call a fair chance.'

To-day, however, there was 'a case,' a serious case. 'Werry bad' was the report that Mr. Thomas Doe gave to privileged inquirers. But it was not the

'case' that absorbed the beadle's thoughts. He sat in the one room of the little lodge, with his cocked hat pushed back in an undignified manner over his head, the scarlet cloak flung on either side of the chair, and the clean white stockings displaying themselves to great advantage as the shoes were raised on the side of the fire-place. Holding the poker in his hand, the beadle emphasised each word with a ringing blow, whilst his large red face expressed indignation enough for everybody connected with the place, from the founder and trustees down to the Charity Commissioners themselves.

'The nasty — ugly — spiteful — little — warmint. Dead agen the perwisions of this 'ere gift and charity —dead agen the founder—the trustees—and likewise the beadle, Mr. Thomas Doe, which it was a-goin' to fly at his calves.'

And he patted the threatened part tenderly, and looked proudly at the snowy whiteness.

'Dead agen all the statties—and harticles—and hacts o' Parliament. "Men an' women" may be made for to hinclude boys an' gals, and even hinfants. But not dawgs, Mr. Thomas Doe—not dawgs. And sich a dawg! a nasty—ugly—spiteful—little warmint of a dawg! There *is* dawgs as no Christian can't come up to, not for sense nor manners neither. And there *is* dawgs as a 'eathen blackamoor would blush

for to call his hown—to go actooally for to fly at my calf!'

A ring at the bell disturbed the reverie, and the beadle rose leisurely to meet the doctor.

'We're werry bad still, sir, werry'—and he shook the cocked hat solemnly. 'But there's a dawg,—a nasty—hugly—spiteful—little warmint of a dawg a-lyin' 'pon the bed—a-lyin' there dead——'

'Dead!' said the doctor, wondering.

'Yes, sir—dead agen all the perwisions o' this 'ere charity. A dawg as won't be coaxed with wittles nor druv off with sticks. The gal she keeps on wanderin', and that dawg so soon as ever he hears her wice comes up a-lickin' her hand, and sets hisself close alongside of her a-moanin' like, and a-sayin' so plain as anybody could say it,—"Don't yer mind, little 'un; I'm here, and I'll stick up for yer agen all the world." And somehow it seems to make her more comfortabler for a bit. But he's a werry warmint of a dawg for all that.'

The doctor hastened across the courtyard and passed into the little wing of the little building that was known as The Women's Ward. As he opened the door, a cropped terrier sprang up and stood on the clean white counterpane, with head on one side and a fore-paw, half lifted. His action seemed doubtful for a moment; then, as if he knew that it was the doctor, he wagged his well-bred tail instead of showing his teeth,

and turned to his mistress, looking wistfully from her into the doctor's face. Of course it was 'little Lizer' that lay there, delirious—dying the nurse thought. And of course it was 'Fly' that kept such faithful watch beside her.

'Typhoid fever, plain enough,' said the doctor to himself, as he stood holding the girl's hand—'wonder is that they don't all die of it.'

'The woman is dead, Sir—so they tell me, and her baby,' said the nurse, glad to be able to tell the doctor something. 'The man has gone on with the other children aboard.'

And whilst the doctor is seeing to the patient, will you turn for a minute or too, good reader, to this report, and wonder with the doctor and with us that 'they don't all die of it.' Wonder, too, what is the use of sanitary acts and Boards of Health since such wholesale fever-breeding as this is permitted, and then such carriers of the contagion are licensed to carry it through our towns and along our water-ways. Here is the report of the medical officer to the Town Council of Crackleton, when they were stirred up by the county paper into an inquiry. *'The canal was the cesspool of the most thickly populated part of the town. It was itself an open drain, fed by many other drains. The water was inky black, and large bubbles of gas constantly rose through it. The stench was intolerable.*

Dead dogs floated in it in various stages of decomposition, so thick in some places that the boat-ganger had to push them out of his way before he could move his boat.' This report the Town Councillors formally received, then they went home to dinner. So there is the condition of the canal still; and the barge population, not only live on it, breathing such poisoned air, but *wash* in it, *cook* in it, and *drink* it too,—when they do drink water at all!

Meanwhile *The Water Rat* had gone on its way, leaving its mistress and her last-born in a pauper's grave; leaving 'little Lizer' in Horner's Charity; and bearing the other little ones to other towns, to sicken there and take their chance. As to 'Old Rat' himself, he consoled himself in his grief by two days' drunkenness, and then by an outburst of savagery upon the wretched children because Fly was lost. None imagined where he was; none had seen him disappear. The dog, altogether disconsolate at the absence of little Lizer, had suddenly sprung up and leaped off the barge under cover of the night, and gone carefully sniffing everywhere for a trace of her steps. It was not far from the quay when he bolted straight in at the door of the hospital, and there, waiting his chance, had sprung upon the bed, and stood over little Lizer, defying the beadle himself to move him by threat or coaxing.

As the doctor stood holding the hot hand in his own, the girl opened her languid eyes. The dog

instantly stood over her with pricked-up ears and a gentle moan. A gleam of consciousness came over the face for a moment, almost a gleam of pleasure; then she was asleep again.

'Don't move the dog,' said the doctor. 'He'll be nurse and doctor too. He knows quite well what we say.' Fly certainly might have done. He had turned to the doctor with his head on one side, in a sort of suspicious way; but the moment this order was given he wagged his tail with delight; he licked the outstretched hand, and then coiled himself up beside the sick girl's pillow.

'We're werry bad still, sir, hain't we?' said Mr. Thomas Doe, as the doctor came back.

'Don't know how it will go yet—may pull through. But don't move the dog.' And the doctor stepped into his gig.

'O, no, sir,' said the beadle; and then turning into the lodge he repeated the order to himself—'O, no, Sir, on no account whatsomever. Mr. Thomas Doe will not move that dawg in a 'urry—not if he knows it. But there—if the little 'un should go for to die, what 'll they do then? It 'll be a werry troublesome matter for somebody. The hundertaker 'll have to hundertake that job, which Mr. Thomas Doe has a-got his horders, and which Mr. Thomas Doe means to stick to.'

CHAPTER IX.

THE ''COS WHY' BOAT.

SO days and weeks went by. *The Noah's Ark* came to and from her stations, only occasionally leaving her usual track with a cargo for some other town.

Meanwhile the spring had come again; though it is scarcely fair to say *again*, for to Rob it had never

come before. Its beauty ran down to the very banks of the canal itself. The trees with dainty young green leaves hung over it, against a background of mossy trunks, and thick branches in which the merry birds sang.

Of course there used to be a spring-time in the old world, but, alas! then Rob had no eyes to see it, no heart to enjoy it. Year in and year out there was for him nothing but the dull round of cursing and misery, of blows and oaths. Alas! that birds should sing, and the very hedgerows blossom into May; the nettle hide some honey, and the prickly thistle wear his jaunty crimson cap; the creeping caterpillars sprout their wings and come out in a gorgeous suit of clothes;—and yet thousands of boys and maidens, dearer to the heavenly Father than all these things, go tramping by us; with never a sweet breath to bless their lives, never a ray of sunshine in their hearts: love, hope, joy, these are trampled out of them. Surely there shall be a terrible reckoning some day! He watcheth all and keepeth strict account, Who called these children His own little ones.

But now spring had come to the lad's heart, and all his soul was opened to the gladness about him. Those talks and readings, and the nightly prayer with old Noah, had already borne good fruit. Not only because the seed itself was 'good,' but because it was sown

with such unfailing love, and with hope that was always counting on the harvest, and with faith that helped the lad to believe; and because the very air was hallowed for it by the cheerful goodness of the old man's life. Many sow good seed, but fail to lodge it in the heart. Some do get it there, and then kill it by harsh and frosty ways directly after. Moreover, the good seed was watered well at the little 'Zion' in which the old bargeman worshipped, and sometimes talked, on the Sunday; and where on Sunday afternoons he gathered a class of lads, and read with them of the life and death of the blessed Redeemer.

Altogether, you would scarcely have known that the stout, happy lad sitting there at the helm, well clad and well shod, was Rob Rat. In the quiet calm of the spring evening, with the thrush ringing out its sweetest notes, and the bats flitting past him, with the ruddy sunset glow falling full upon old Noah's face, lighting it up with a radiance that is fitly framed by the snowy white hair, Roger is plodding over his last mile to Crackleton. And as the boat moves leisurely along there floats out the simple song that went up from their hearts, the old man's bass mingling with the lad's sweet treble.

The sun had set, and here and there a star shone out faintly as *The Noah's Ark* drew up at her resting-place. The master was busied about Roger, whilst

Rob was off to leave some parcels in the quiet little town.

'Good night, old lad—good night, and take care o' thyself,' said the old man as he came out of the stable. He was fastening the door when a plaintive, timid voice made him turn round suddenly.

'Please, Sir, can you tell me if *The Water Rat* is lying anywheres here?'

Noah looked eagerly at the girl, so pale and thin. Then he caught sight of the cropped terrier beside her, that stood looking up at him, asking the question quite as plainly as she had done. The tears gathered in his eyes—tears of grief at the worn, pale face; tears of joy at finding her of whom they had so often talked, and for whom they had daily prayed.

'Why, thank God! 'tis our little Lizer, I do believe!' and the old man turned her face up towards the light —a proceeding against which Fly protested with a low growl. But it was very short-lived. 'Come, I know thee too. Thou art Fly, wonderful Fly; and thou 'lt come to know me better than to snarl in that fashion, lad.'

Fly instantly apologised, and sought to make friends by wagging his tail.

Poor little Lizer was utterly bewildered, and as the old man took her by the hand and led her towards the barge, she shrank back timidly.

'Please, Sir, I asked if you could tell me anything about *The Water Rat.* Can you please, Sir?'

But the old man's thoughts were too busy to notice the question, and he led her gently on. Fly, at any rate, had no misgiving. He kept springing up at the girl's side, and then bounding forward—standing and looking back for a moment, saying as plainly as could be, 'Come on, little Lizer, come on. I'm sure 'tis all right.'

Noah only kept muttering something to himself about 'passing it on,' and wiping his eyes. Suddenly he turned to the little lame girl as she limped along beside him, and said with a husky voice,—

'Dear lad! his prayer is heard. Won't he be glad, Lizer?'

'Who, Sir?' she asked, timidly.

'Why, Rob, to be sure. Didn't you know?'

'Rob!' cried little Lizer, starting and grasping the old man's hand very tightly. Her eyes flashed and her cheeks reddened with a strange joy. 'Is this a *'cos why* boat then, please, Sir?'

'Ay, ay, 'tis that, dear little one, as thou shalt find. Dear me, and to think she didn't know!' and the old knuckles were dug into the eyes again, as if to try and shut up the troublesome springs. 'Rob lives here with me; and we have talked and prayed for thee many and many a time, my little lass—bless thee!'

It was all too good to be true. Dazed with her good fortune, she could only sit looking round at the beautifully clean cabin, the shining knobs, the pretty little pictures. All was like a dream; but one thing was certain—this really was a *'cos why*.

Noah meanwhile was bringing out the contents of the mysterious bunks and cupboards, and arranging the supper.

'Come now, little Lizer, thou must try and eat.'

Weak and excited, she sat still, looking around her bewildered, afraid to move or speak lest it should break the spell, and the real, cold misery of the outside should come back upon her again.

'Ah, thou'rt waiting for Rob—thou'rt right, lass, quite right;' and the old man moved about and rubbed his hands, as if he were a great deal too happy to keep quiet. 'Now, Fly, don't you spoil our little game;' and he gave the dog a round off the loaf by way of hush-money.

But almost before the little plot could be laid, Fly was up with a bark of delight, and leaping about Rob in an ecstasy.

'Why, Fly!' cried Rob, as he stooped and hugged the dog to himself. 'Dear old Fly! And is little Lizer come too?'

'Ah, Fly—thou hast told my secret!' cried old Noah, putting his happy face out at the cabin

door. 'She 's here, Rob, bless her! she 's here, lad.'

In another moment Rob stepped into the cabin, to find it almost too full of joy. Fly leaped up, licking his hand, and little Lizer laid her face on his neck and clung to him, only able to let the tears of gladness roll down her cheeks. And as for old Noah, there he stood working his knuckles into the corners of his eyes. It was only natural that just then the kettle upon the little stove should boil over, and bring them all to their senses by reminding them that supper was ready, and that tea had to be made.

Over the supper there was much to be talked of. So much to be heard and to be asked about on each side, and with so much excitement, that very little came to be told—Lizer's sickness, Fly's faithfulness, and her discharge from the hospital that very day, was almost all. If there had been more she might perhaps have told of Mr. Thomas Doe's farewell as he peeped from the half-opened door, fearful of the 'hungrateful warmint' that had threatened such mischief to his white stockings and what lay inside them.

The fact was that poor little pale-faced Lizer couldn't talk much, and Rob was eager to tell everything. She could only let her eyes go flitting over the cabin, and then let them rest on Rob as a kind of assurance that it was all real. Her wonder grew into awe as old Noah

took down the big leathern Bible, and read the chapter; and as they kneeled down, and the old man spoke to some unseen One as their loving Father, her big eyes looked over the little place to see Who this could be, the kind Lord to Whom he was speaking about her.

'Bless little Lizer, O Lord. We do bless Thee for making her better, and for bringing her here. Make her quite well, body and soul, O Lord; and may she come to know Thee, and to love Thee, and to be Thine; and I do thank Thee for such a chance of passing it on.'

What did this mean? Who could this be? And she rose from her knees still expecting to see this wonderful Person beside her somewhere.

'Now then,' said old Noah, bustling about, his face shining with joy, 'we must fit up your ladyship's sleeping-room.'

The plan was one that had been all arranged and settled long ago. Rob in his hope and impatience had gone to the length of preparing for it weeks since. A gaily painted shutter was made, that could be put across the cabin, in which a place was left for the lamp to hang, so that it could shine on both parts at once. Here, with the stove on her side, was little Lizer's room, as daintily fitted up as it could be made; the other apartment was to be shared by Noah and Rob.

'And Fly—as for thee,' said the old man, 'thou mayest lie there and take care of thy mistress. Good

everything else. When I think about it I can't help singing.'

'Come,' said old Noah, clearing his husky voice, and pushing his knuckles into those troublesome eyes of his, 'do let's sing.'

So little Lizer learnt her first happy song.

CHAPTER X.

OLD NOAH SPINS A YARN.

THAT evening, as they sat in the little cabin, when the supper was done, and before the Bible was taken down from the ledge, old Noah broke out suddenly,—

'Now, my hearties, I'm going to spin you a yarn,

And I want you to mind it long after I am dead and gone. For if ye don't—well, I don't know what dreadful things will happen to you, or to me either.' And old Noah laughed to himself, as if it were some quiet little joke of his own that he could not explain.

'"T is seventy years since the dear old couple began to pass it on to me. But I've beaten them, hearties—out and out. They were two of them, and could only pass it on to one. But here I am all by myself, and I have got two of you for to pass it on to.'

At the thought of it old Noah dug his knuckles into the corners of his eyes, the gladness of his heart would keep running over so.

'Yes, seventy years ago, hearties, and just about this time, too, since one evening, at low water, somebody left a little baby in old Barker's boat. There lay the boat on the sands, heeled over on her side, as I've seen her hundreds of times since then. Well, in amongst the old brown sail, and the crab-pots, and all sorts of gear, they left a little baby—somebody did, but who it was they never found out. Well, of course, the tide turned, and the water began to come up round the boat, lapping about her, and very soon floating her. Then a breeze sprang up.

'So old Barker heard the wind. He could always hear how it was in his sleep, he said; and so says he to his wife (ah, bless them! many and many's the

times they have told me about it since then), he says to his wife, "Betty, I think I'll be after getting down and hauling up the boat; 't is coming in fresh." So almost before 't was daylight the old man was busy hauling in the boat. The wind was whistling about his sou'wester, and the waves were hissing all up the sandy beach.

"'What's that?" says old Barker, pricking up his ears, and pulling the boat in faster; "that's neither breeze nor breaker, or my name is not Bob Barker." And he hauled away, thinking that a mermaid must have crept aboard. "There 't is again!" Ah, hearties, how the dear old man loved to tell of it, and how he would chuckle over it! I can see him now, sitting in the old chair laughing about it. Says he, "There 't is again." Well, my hearties, he hauled the boat ashore, and there, wrapped up in the sail, was the little crying baby.

"'Well," said old Barker, scratching his head, "this here is a queer thing as ever I saw. How did you come here, young un?" But I expect that the little thing hadn't a word to say. The old man set the child down between the rocks while he made the boat fast, and then took the little one in his arms and turned homeward again, wondering whose it could be, and what he could do with it. When he got near to the door he called out, "Betty, bring a basket, the biggest you 've got. There 's a chest somewheres, bring that."

'So old Betty put her head out of the little upstairs window: "La, Barker, whatever have'e got there?"

'"A mermaid, I reckon," says Barker, "if it ben't a boy. 'T is cruel hungry too."

'So Betty came running down, and took the little one in her arms. She carried it in by the fire and warmed it, while Barker told the story of finding the baby in the boat. Then, handing it to Barker again, Betty set herself to find something for it to eat.

'Well, hearties, and what do you think they called the baby? It *was* a boy, you know, and not a mermaid.'

Little Lizer put her lips together to say the name she thought, but her courage failed her, and the words would not come out. Rob listened only in wonder.

'Well, if you give up I'll tell you. The old man was for Moses; it was just like that, he said.

'But Betty was dead against *that*. "'T is like saying that the baby's mother built your boat, Barker; and you know that it weren't so. He ought to be called Noah."

'But old Barker would not have that. "It is all one with saying that the baby made the boat his own self." Ah, bless the dear old couple! they often had it over again afterward, that I might know about it; and old Barker would finish up by laughing, and saying that

"Betty was always too many guns for him." For when they took the baby to be baptized, says the parson to Betty, "*Name the child.*" And while old Barker was scratching his head, trying to think which name he wanted, Betty had said, Noah; and it wasn't until it was nearly done that Barker cried out, "Moses, Sir." Of course it was too late then, my hearties; so Noah it was, and Noah it has been ever since.'

'What, *you?*' cried Rob, starting up. 'You, dear old Noah, of *The Noah's Ark?*'

'Yes; I was the little one, sonnie, so they tell me.'

Little Lizer looked up then, and ventured to take that old brown hand in her own. Somehow, it had not occurred to her that old Noah had ever been a little child like that.

'Well, hearties, it happened the old couple had no children of their own, so they took me up like as if I was their born son. When I was ever so little the old man would have me out alongside of him, in his fishing-boat, holding my hand around the rudder or the rope of the sail. But I must spin you a yarn about that another day.

'I grew up to take care of the dear old pair before they died, and tried to pay back a little bit of their kindness to me. But this is what you are *never, never* to forget, my sonnie, or my little Lizer either.

'When old Barker was dying he called me to his

bedside, and held me fast with his wasted, trembling hand.

'"Noah," said the old man, "we have tried to do for you as if you were our own, and you've been a good lad, too. But now you must promise me one thing. 'T is on my mind, and it'll make me rest more comfortabler in my grave. Promise me on the Book, Noah. And if you don't keep your word I shall lie uneasy, and maybe I shall come round to remind 'e of it if I can get to know your whereabouts. Have you got the Book?"

'So I held the Book in my hand. "Now, Noah—Noah Barker they call 'e, but you 'm nothing but plain Noah—we found you a little chield; we gave you house and home, and all we had. Now, Noah, promise me on the Book *that you will pass it on if ever you get a chance.* Then it will be pleasant to lie in the old churchyard, and to think that though we've left ne'er a chick nor a chield, that we have left something behind for to be kept a-passing on and on. So promise me, Noah, upon the Book, my boy."

'Then I kissed the Bible, hearties; it is the one over the cabin door. And I pledged my word that I would pass it on.

'Well, I have gone up and down a-trying to pass it on in a fashion—a-going to see sick folk and dying, and a-helping them a bit that were out of luck. But

that wasn't anyhow a fair chance. I always thought it would come somehow. Thank God! it is come now, and here are you, sent a-purpose for me to pass it on. Bless you, my hearties; bless you!'

Again the knuckles were worked vigorously into the corners of the eyes.

'And when I am gone, you must think of them that were mother and father to me, and you must think how I passed it on to you. And be sure that you pass it on, my dearies, whenever you get the chance.'

As he finished, little Lizer longed to tell out all that was in her heart, but again the words would not come.

'You are a dear old Noah to be so kind,' said Rob, 'and I am sure we will promise to pass it on; won't we, little Lizer.'

'A *very, very* dear old Noah,' said little Lizer timidly. And she bent over the old brown hand and kissed it, as if she were sealing the promise that she had made in her heart.

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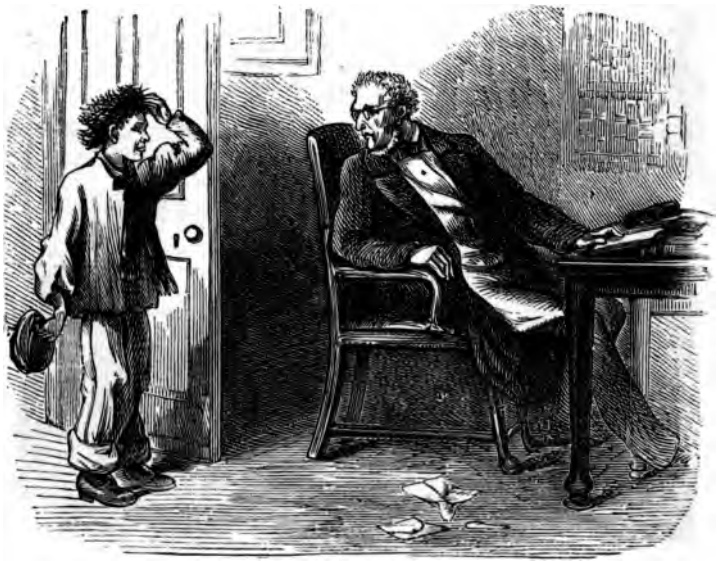

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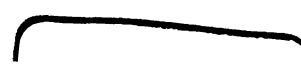

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