

A TRAVELLER'S TALE

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"HE'M a monkey that hath seen the world, no doubt," said Merryweather Chugg, the water-bailiff.

"Yes — an' brought back some nuts wi' gold kernels, by all accounts," answered Noah Sage; "though he ban't going to crack none here, I reckon, for the chap's only come to have a look at the home of his youth; then he'm off again to foreign parts."

The two old men sat in the parlour of the "Bella-ford" Inn at Postbridge, and about them gathered other labouring folk. All were inhabitants of the Dartmoor district, and most had been born and bred in the valley of East Dart or upon adjacent farms. This village, of which the pride and glory is an old bridge that spans the river, shall be found upon the shaggy breast of the Moor, like an oasis in the desert; for here much land has been snatched from the hungry heath, groves of beech and sycamore lie in the bosom of these undulating wastes, and close at hand are certain snug tenement farms whereon men have dwelt and wrestled with the wild land from time immemorial.

To-day a native had returned to his home; and as a vacant room at the "Bella-ford" Inn well served

his purpose, Mr. Robert Bates secured it for a fortnight, that he might wander again about his boyhood's haunts and shine a little in the eyes of those who still remembered him. That night he had promised to relate his experiences in the public bar; he had also let it be known that upon this great occasion beer and spirits would flow free of all cost for old friends and new.

"He'll have to address a overflowed meeting, like a Member of Parliament," said Michael French, the Moor-man, "for be blessed if us can all get in your bar, Mrs. Capern."

"Lots of room yet," she said, "if you'd only turn some of they boys out-of-doors. They won't drink nought, so I'd rather have their room than their company."

"I should think you was uncommon excited to see this chap, ban't you?" asked Noah Sage of a very ancient patriarch in the corner. "It was up to Hartland Farm, when you was head man there, that Bob Bates comed as a 'pretence from Moreton Poorhouse, if I can remember."

"Ess fay, 'tis so," said the other. "You ax un if the thrashings I used to give un every other day for wasting his time weern't the makin' of un; an' if he ban't a liar, he'll say 'twas so. If he owes thanks to any man, 'tis to old Jacob Pearn — though I say it myself."

"That's the truth, an' I'll allow every word of it, Jacob; an' I'm terrible glad you ban't dead, for you were the first I meant to see come to-morrow."

Mr. Bates himself spoke. He was a small, wiry man of fifty or thereabout. His clothes were well cut, and he wore a gold watch-chain. His face and hands were tanned a deep brown; his hair was grizzled, and his beard was also growing grey at the sides. His eyes shone genially as he grasped a dozen hands in turn, and in turn answered twice a dozen salutations.

Robert Bates had run away from the heavy hand of Gaffer Pearn some five and thirty years before the present time, and he looked round him now and saw but one familiar face; for the old men had passed from their labours, the middle-aged had taken their places, his former mates were growing grey and he could not recognise them.

"I'll tell you the whole tale if you'm minded," he said. "'Tis thirty years long, but give two minutes to each of they years an' I'll finish in a hour. An' meantime, Mrs. Capern — as was Nancy Bassett, an' wouldn't walk out Sundays with me last time I seed 'e — be so good as to let every gen'leman present have what he wants to drink, for I be going to leave ten pounds in Postbridge, an' I'd so soon you had it as anybody."

Great applause greeted this liberal determination.

"You'm an open-handed chap, wherever you've comed from," said Merryweather Chugg, "an' us all drinks long life an' good health to you an' yours, if so be you'm a family man."

"I'll come to that," answered Mr. Bates. "Let me sit by the fire, will 'e? I do love the smell of the peat, an' where I come from, us don't trouble about fires, I assure 'e, for a body can catch heat from the sun all the year round."

"You was always finger-cold in winter," said Mr. Pearn. "I mind as a boy your colour never altered from blue in frosty weather, an' you had a chilblain wheresoever a chilblain could find room for itself."

"'Tis so; an' when I runned away to mend my fortune, 'twas the knowledge that a certain ship were sailing down to the line into hot weather as made me go for a sailor. To Plymouth docks I went when I ran off, an' there met a man at the Barbican as axed me to come for cabin-boy; an' when he said they was going where the cocoanuts comed from, I said I'd go.

"My dear life!" murmured Mrs. Capern, — "to think what little things do make or mar a fortune!"

"'Tis so; — a drop of rum cold, mother, then I'll start on my tale. An' I may as well say that every word be true, for Providence have so dealt by me that to tell a falsehood is the last thing ever I would do."

"Not but what you used to lie something terrible when you was young, Bob," said Mr. Pearn, from the corner.

"I know it, Jacob," answered the traveller; "an' hard though you hit, you never hit hard enough to cure me of lying. 'Tis a damned vice, an' I never yet told a fib as paid for telling. But 'twasn't you cured me; 'twas a man by the name of Mistley, the bo'sun of the ship I sailed in. I told un a stramming gert lie, an' he found it out, an' — well, if you want to know what a proper dressing-down be, you ax a seafaring man to lay it on. In them days they didn't reckon they'd begun till they'd drawed blood out of 'e; an' so often as not they'd give 'e a bucket of salt water down your back arter, just so as you shouldn't forget where they'd been busy. One such hiding I got from Mistley, an' never wanted another. I'd so soon have told that man a second lie as I'd told God one to His shining face. An' long after, to show I don't bear no malice, when I fell on my feet, I went down to the port when my old ship comed in again two years later, an' in my pocket was five golden pounds for Mistley. Only he'd gone an' died o' yellow jack in the meantime down to the Plate, so he never got it. An' you boys there, remember what I say, an' never tell no lies if you want to get on an' pocket good wages come presently. 'Tis more than thirty years ago, an' the

man that did it dust; yet I wriggles my shoulders an' feels the flesh crawl on my spine to this day when I thinks of it.

"But I'm gwaine too fast, for I haven't sailed from Plymouth yet. Us went off in due course, an' I seed the wonders of the deep, an' I can't say I took to 'em; but there — I'd gone for a sailor, an' a sailor I thought 'twould have to be. Us got to a place by name of Barbados in the West Indies presently — Bim for short. A flat pancake of an island, with not much to tell about 'cept that there's only a bit of brown paper between it an' a billet I hope none of us won't never go to. Hot as — as need be, no doubt; but there was better to come, for presently we ups anchor an' away to St. Vincent — a place as might make you think heaven couldn't be better; an' then down to Grenada, another island so lovely as a fairy story; an' then Trinidad — where the Angostura bitters comes from, Mrs. Capern — an' then a bit of a place by name of Tobago, as you could put down on Dartmoor a'most an' leave some to double up all round. Yet, 'pon that island, neighbours, I've lived my life, an' done my duty, I hope, an' got well thought upon by black, white an' brindled; for in them islands I should tell you the people be most every shade you could name but green. Butter-coloured, treacle-coloured, putty-coloured, saffron-coloured,

peat-coloured, an' every colour; an' sometimes, though a chap may have the face of a nigger — lips an' nose an' wool an' all — yet he'll be so white as a dog's tooth; an' you know there's blood from Europe hid in him somewheres. They'm a mongrel people; yet they've got souls — just as much as they Irish-Americans; an' God He knows if *they've* got souls, there's hope for everything — down to a scorpion. My own wife, as I've left out in Tobago with my family — well, I wouldn't go for to call her black; an' for that matter I knocked a white man off the wharf to Scarborough in Tobago, who did say so; but you folks to home — I dare swear you'd think her was a thought nigger-like, owing to a touch of the tar-brush, as we call it, long ways back in her family history. But as good a woman — wife an' mother — as ever feared God an' washed linen. A laundress, neighbours — lower than me by her birth, so my master said; then I laughed in his face, an' told un I was a workhouse boy as couldn't name no father but God A'mighty. A nice little bungy, round-about woman, wi' butivul black eyes, an' so straight in her vartue as a princess. Never a man had no better wife, an' her'd have come to see old Dartmoor along with me but for my family, as be large an' all sizes.

"Well, to Tobago it was that, lending a hand to help lade a Royal Mail Steam Packet as comed in

— just to make a shilling or two while we was idle, I got struck down. Loading wi' cocoanuts an' turtle her was; an' 'twould make you die o' laughin', souls, to have seen them reptiles hoisted aboard by their flippers. No laughing matter for them though, poor twoads, because, once they'm caught by moonlight 'pon the sandy beaches there, 'tis a very poor come-along-of-it for 'em. Not a bit more food do they have, but just be shipped off home in turtle-troughs an' make the best weather they can. Us had a stormy journey back last fortnight, an' I knowed by the turtle-soup o' nights that the creatures were dying rapid an' somebody had made a bad bargain. But if you gets the varmints home alive, they be worth a Jew's eye.

"Suddenly, helping in a shore barge, I went down as if somebody had fetched me a clout 'pon top the head; an', when I came to, there was doctor from shore an' the dowl to pay. 'Twas days afore I could get about, an' my ship couldn't wait, an' no work for me nowhere 'cept odd jobs. Then they told me I was a D.B.S., which means a Distressed British Seaman, an' I found as I'd have to wait for next steamer that comed to ship me off. But I weren't very down-daunted 'bout it, for, since I'd seen the size of the earth, I'd growed bigger in the mind a bit, an' I ate my food an' smoked my pipe an' thanked God that I was alive to try again.

"Then, trapesing about one afternoon, footsore like and tired of trying to get something to do on the sugar estates, I climbed over a wall into a bit of shade, an' sat me down under some cocoa trees to rest. I confess I did get over a wall, which is a thing you can't often do without making trouble except on old Dartmoor. An' there I was with the mountains around — all covered to their topmost spurs wi' wonnerful forest, and the Caribbean Sea stretched blue as blue underneath. Such a jungle of trees an' palms laced together with flowering vines as you've never dreamed of. Trumpet flowers, an' fire-red flamboyants, an' huge cactuses, an' here an' there a lightning-blasted, gert tree towering stark white above all the living green. An' king-birds an' humming-birds twinkling about in the air like women's rings an' brooches, an' lizards so big as squirrels a-scampering upon the ground, an' tree-frogs in the trees, an' fireflies spangling the velvet-black nights. An' no dimpsy light, neither at dawn nor even, for the moment sun be down 'tis night, an' moment he be up again 'tis morning. You can see un climb straight out o' the sea as if he was rolling up a ladder.

"I sat there in the shade, an' at my very hand what should I find but a ripe pomegranate? 'Tis a fruit as you folks haven't met with outside the Bible, I reckon, yet a real thing, an' very nice to