

## CHAPTER VIII. FACES ON THE CITY FRONT.

It is very much the custom to view life as if it were exactly ruled in two, like sleep and waking; the provinces of play and business standing separate. The business side of my career in San Francisco has been now disposed of; I approach the chapter of diversion; and it will be found they had about an equal share in building up the story of the Wrecker--a gentleman whose appearance may be presently expected.

With all my occupations, some six afternoons and two or three odd evenings remained at my disposal every week: a circumstance the more agreeable as I was a stranger in a city singularly picturesque. From what I had once called myself, The Amateur Parisian, I grew (or declined) into a waterside prowler, a lingerer on wharves, a frequenter of shy neighbourhoods, a scraper of acquaintance with eccentric characters. I visited Chinese and Mexican gambling-hells, German secret societies, sailors' boarding-houses, and "dives" of every complexion of the disreputable and dangerous. I have seen greasy Mexican hands pinned to the table with a knife for cheating, seamen (when blood-money ran high) knocked down upon the public street and carried insensible on board short-handed ships, shots exchanged, and the smoke (and the company) dispersing from the doors of the saloon. I have heard cold-minded Polacks debate upon the readiest method of burning San Francisco to the ground, hot-headed working men and women bawl and swear

in the tribune at the Sandlot, and Kearney himself open his subscription for a gallows, name the manufacturers who were to grace it with their dangling bodies, and read aloud to the delighted multitude a telegram of adhesion from a member of the State legislature: all which preparations of proletarian war were (in a moment) breathed upon and abolished by the mere name and fame of Mr. Coleman. That lion of the Vigilantes had but to rouse himself and shake his ears, and the whole brawling mob was silenced. I could not but reflect what a strange manner of man this was, to be living unremarked there as a private merchant, and to be so feared by a whole city; and if I was disappointed, in my character of looker-on, to have the matter end ingloriously without the firing of a shot or the hanging of a single millionaire, philosophy tried to tell me that this sight was truly the more picturesque. In a thousand towns and different epochs I might have had occasion to behold the cowardice and carnage of street fighting; where else, but only there and then, could I have enjoyed a view of Coleman (the intermittent despot) walking meditatively up hill in a quiet part of town, with a very rolling gait, and slapping gently his great thigh?

Minora Canamus. This historic figure stalks silently through a corner of the San Francisco of my memory: the rest is bric-a-brac, the reminiscences of a vagrant sketcher. My delight was much in slums. Little Italy was a haunt of mine; there I would look in at the windows of small eating-shops, transported bodily from Genoa or Naples, with their macaroni, and chianti flasks, and portraits of Garibaldi, and coloured political caricatures; or (entering in) hold high debate with

some ear-ringed fisher of the bay as to the designs of "Mr. Owstria" and "Mr. Rooshia." I was often to be observed (had there been any to observe me) in that dis-peopled, hill-side solitude of Little Mexico, with its crazy wooden houses, endless crazy wooden stairs, and perilous mountain goat-paths in the sand. Chinatown by a thousand eccentricities drew and held me; I could never have enough of its ambiguous, interracial atmosphere, as of a vitalised museum; never wonder enough at its outlandish, necromantic-looking vegetables set forth to sell in commonplace American shop-windows, its temple doors open and the scent of the joss-stick streaming forth on the American air, its kites of Oriental fashion hanging fouled in Western telegraph-wires, its flights of paper prayers which the trade-wind hunts and dissipates along Western gutters. I was a frequent wanderer on North Beach, gazing at the straits, and the huge Cape-Horners creeping out to sea, and imminent Tamalpais. Thence, on my homeward way, I might visit that strange and filthy shed, earth-paved and walled with the cages of wild animals and birds, where at a ramshackle counter, amid the yells of monkeys, and a poignant atmosphere of menagerie, forty-rod whiskey was administered by a proprietor as dirty as his beasts. Nor did I even neglect Nob Hill, which is itself a kind of slum, being the habitat of the mere millionaire. There they dwell upon the hill-top, high raised above man's clamour, and the trade-wind blows between their palaces about deserted streets.

But San Francisco is not herself only. She is not only the most interesting city in the Union, and the hugest smelting-pot of races and

the precious metals. She keeps, besides, the doors of the Pacific, and is the port of entry to another world and an earlier epoch in man's history. Nowhere else shall you observe (in the ancient phrase) so many tall ships as here convene from round the Horn, from China, from Sydney, and the Indies; but scarce remarked amid that crowd of deep-sea giants, another class of craft, the Island schooner, circulates: low in the water, with lofty spars and dainty lines, rigged and fashioned like a yacht, manned with brown-skinned, soft-spoken, sweet-eyed native sailors, and equipped with their great double-ender boats that tell a tale of boisterous sea-beaches. These steal out and in again, unnoted by the world or even the newspaper press, save for the line in the clearing column, "Schooner So-and-so for Yap and South Sea Islands"--steal out with nondescript cargoes of tinned salmon, gin, bolts of gaudy cotton stuff, women's hats, and Waterbury watches, to return, after a year, piled as high as to the eaves of the house with copra, or wallowing deep with the shells of the tortoise or the pearl oyster. To me, in my character of the Amateur Parisian, this island traffic, and even the island world, were beyond the bounds of curiosity, and how much more of knowledge. I stood there on the extreme shore of the West and of to-day. Seventeen hundred years ago, and seven thousand miles to the east, a legionary stood, perhaps, upon the wall of Antoninus, and looked northward toward the mountains of the Picts. For all the interval of time and space, I, when I looked from the cliff-house on the broad Pacific, was that man's heir and analogue: each of us standing on the verge of the Roman Empire (or, as we now call it, Western civilization), each of us gazing onward into zones unromanised. But I was dull. I

looked rather backward, keeping a kind eye on Paris; and it required a series of converging incidents to change my attitude of nonchalance for one of interest, and even longing, which I little dreamed that I should live to gratify.

The first of these incidents brought me in acquaintance with a certain San Francisco character, who had something of a name beyond the limits of the city, and was known to many lovers of good English. I had discovered a new slum, a place of precarious, sandy cliffs, deep, sandy cuttings, solitary, ancient houses, and the butt-ends of streets. It was already environed. The ranks of the street-lamps threaded it unbroken. The city, upon all sides of it, was tightly packed, and growled with traffic. To-day, I do not doubt the very landmarks are all swept away; but it offered then, within narrow limits, a delightful peace, and (in the morning, when I chiefly went there) a seclusion almost rural. On a steep sand-hill, in this neighbourhood, toppled, on the most insecure foundation, a certain row of houses, each with a bit of garden, and all (I have to presume) inhabited. Thither I used to mount by a crumbling footpath, and in front of the last of the houses, would sit down to sketch. The very first day I saw I was observed, out of the ground-floor window by a youngish, good-looking fellow, prematurely bald, and with an expression both lively and engaging. The second, as we were still the only figures in the landscape, it was no more than natural that we should nod. The third, he came out fairly from his intrenchments, praised my sketch, and with the impromptu cordiality of artists carried me into his apartment; where I sat presently in the midst of a museum of

strange objects,--paddles and battle-clubs and baskets, rough-hewn stone images, ornaments of threaded shell, cocoanut bowls, snowy cocoanut plumes--evidences and examples of another earth, another climate, another race, and another (if a ruder) culture. Nor did these objects lack a fitting commentary in the conversation of my new acquaintance. Doubtless you have read his book. You know already how he tramped and starved, and had so fine a profit of living, in his days among the islands; and meeting him, as I did, one artist with another, after months of offices and picnics, you can imagine with what charm he would speak, and with what pleasure I would hear. It was in such talks, which we were both eager to repeat, that I first heard the names--first fell under the spell--of the islands; and it was from one of the first of them that I returned (a happy man) with Omoo under one arm, and my friend's own adventures under the other.

The second incident was more dramatic, and had, besides, a bearing on my future. I was standing, one day, near a boat-landing under Telegraph Hill. A large barque, perhaps of eighteen hundred tons, was coming more than usually close about the point to reach her moorings; and I was observing her with languid inattention, when I observed two men to stride across the bulwarks, drop into a shore boat, and, violently dispossessing the boatman of his oars, pull toward the landing where I stood. In a surprisingly short time they came tearing up the steps; and I could see that both were too well dressed to be foremast hands--the first even with research, and both, and specially the first, appeared under the empire of some strong emotion.

"Nearest police office!" cried the leader.

"This way," said I, immediately falling in with their precipitate pace.

"What's wrong? What ship is that?"

"That's the Gleaner," he replied. "I am chief officer, this gentleman's third; and we've to get in our depositions before the crew. You see they might corral us with the captain; and that's no kind of berth for me. I've sailed with some hard cases in my time, and seen pins flying like sand on a squally day--but never a match to our old man. It never let up from the Hook to the Farallones; and the last man was dropped not sixteen hours ago. Packet rats our men were, and as tough a crowd as ever sand-bagged a man's head in; but they looked sick enough when the captain started in with his fancy shooting."

"O, he's done up," observed the other. "He won't go to sea no more."

"You make me tired," retorted his superior. "If he gets ashore in one piece and isn't lynched in the next ten minutes, he'll do yet. The owners have a longer memory than the public; they'll stand by him; they don't find as smart a captain every day in the year."

"O, he's a son of a gun of a fine captain; there ain't no doubt of that," concurred the other, heartily. "Why, I don't suppose there's been no wages paid aboard that Gleaner for three trips."

"No wages?" I exclaimed, for I was still a novice in maritime affairs.

"Not to sailor-men before the mast," agreed the mate. "Men cleared out; wasn't the soft job they maybe took it for. She isn' the first ship that never paid wages."

I could not but observe that our pace was progressively relaxing; and indeed I have often wondered since whether the hurry of the start were not intended for the gallery alone. Certain it is at least, that when we had reached the police office, and the mates had made their deposition, and told their horrid tale of five men murdered, some with savage passion, some with cold brutality, between Sandy Hook and San Francisco, the police were despatched in time to be too late. Before we arrived, the ruffian had slipped out upon the dock, had mingled with the crowd, and found a refuge in the house of an acquaintance; and the ship was only tenanted by his late victims. Well for him that he had been thus speedy. For when word began to go abroad among the shore-side characters, when the last victim was carried by to the hospital, when those who had escaped (as by miracle) from that floating shambles, began to circulate and show their wounds in the crowd, it was strange to witness the agitation that seized and shook that portion of the city. Men shed tears in public; bosses of lodging-houses, long inured to brutality, and above all, brutality to sailors, shook their fists at heaven: if hands could have been laid on the captain of the Gleaner, his shrift would have been short. That night (so gossip reports) he was



headed up in a barrel and smuggled across the bay: in two ships already he had braved the penitentiary and the gallows; and yet, by last accounts, he now commands another on the Western Ocean.

As I have said, I was never quite certain whether Mr. Nares (the mate) did not intend that his superior should escape. It would have been like his preference of loyalty to law; it would have been like his prejudice, which was all in favour of the after-guard. But it must remain a matter of conjecture only. Well as I came to know him in the sequel, he was never communicative on that point, nor indeed on any that concerned the voyage of the Gleaner. Doubtless he had some reason for his reticence. Even during our walk to the police office, he debated several times with Johnson, the third officer, whether he ought not to give up himself, as well as to denounce the captain. He had decided in the negative, arguing that "it would probably come to nothing; and even if there was a stink, he had plenty good friends in San Francisco." And to nothing it came; though it must have very nearly come to something, for Mr. Nares disappeared immediately from view and was scarce less closely hidden than his captain.

Johnson, on the other hand, I often met. I could never learn this man's country; and though he himself claimed to be American, neither his English nor his education warranted the claim. In all likelihood he was of Scandinavian birth and blood, long pickled in the forecastles of English and American ships. It is possible that, like so many of his race in similar positions, he had already lost his native tongue. In

mind, at least, he was quite denationalised; thought only in English--to call it so; and though by nature one of the mildest, kindest, and most feebly playful of mankind, he had been so long accustomed to the cruelty of sea discipline, that his stories (told perhaps with a giggle) would sometimes turn me chill. In appearance, he was tall, light of weight, bold and high-bred of feature, dusky-haired, and with a face of a clean even brown: the ornament of outdoor men. Seated in a chair, you might have passed him off for a baronet or a military officer; but let him rise, and it was Fo'c's'le Jack that came rolling toward you, crab-like; let him but open his lips, and it was Fo'c's'le Jack that piped and drawled his ungrammatical gibberish. He had sailed (among other places) much among the islands; and after a Cape Horn passage with its snow-squalls and its frozen sheets, he announced his intention of "taking a turn among them Kanakas." I thought I should have lost him soon; but according to the unwritten usage of mariners, he had first to dissipate his wages. "Guess I'll have to paint this town red," was his hyperbolic expression; for sure no man ever embarked upon a milder course of dissipation, most of his days being passed in the little parlour behind Black Tom's public house, with a select corps of old particular acquaintances, all from the South Seas, and all patrons of a long yarn, a short pipe, and glasses round.

Black Tom's, to the front, presented the appearance of a fourth-rate saloon, devoted to Kanaka seamen, dirt, negrohead tobacco, bad cigars, worse gin, and guitars and banjos in a state of decline. The proprietor, a powerful coloured man, was at once a publican, a ward politician,

leader of some brigade of "lambs" or "smashers," at the wind of whose clubs the party bosses and the mayor were supposed to tremble, and (what hurt nothing) an active and reliable crimp. His front quarters, then, were noisy, disreputable, and not even safe. I have seen worse frequented saloons where there were fewer scandals; for Tom was often drunk himself; and there is no doubt the Lambs must have been a useful body, or the place would have been closed. I remember one day, not long before an election, seeing a blind man, very well dressed, led up to the counter and remain a long while in consultation with the negro. The pair looked so ill-assorted, and the awe with which the drinkers fell back and left them in the midst of an impromptu privacy was so unusual in such a place, that I turned to my next neighbour with a question. He told me the blind man was a distinguished party boss, called by some the King of San Francisco, but perhaps better known by his picturesque Chinese nickname of the Blind White Devil. "The Lambs must be wanted pretty bad, I guess," my informant added. I have here a sketch of the Blind White Devil leaning on the counter; on the next page, and taken the same hour, a jotting of Black Tom threatening a whole crowd of customers with a long Smith and Wesson: to such heights and depths we rose and fell in the front parts of the saloon.

Meanwhile, away in the back quarters, sat the small informal South Sea club, talking of another world and surely of a different century. Old schooner captains they were, old South Sea traders, cooks, and mates: fine creatures, softened by residence among a softer race: full men

besides, though not by reading, but by strange experience; and for days together I could hear their yarns with an unfading pleasure. All had indeed some touch of the poetic; for the beach-comber, when not a mere ruffian, is the poor relation of the artist. Even through Johnson's inarticulate speech, his "O yes, there ain't no harm in them Kanakas," or "O yes, that's a son of a gun of a fine island, mountainous right down; I didn't never ought to have left that island," there pierced a certain gusto of appreciation: and some of the rest were master-talkers. From their long tales, their traits of character and unpremeditated landscape, there began to piece itself together in my head some image of the islands and the island life: precipitous shores, spired mountain tops, the deep shade of hanging forests, the unresting surf upon the reef, and the unending peace of the lagoon; sun, moon, and stars of an imperial brightness; man moving in these scenes scarce fallen, and woman lovelier than Eve; the primal curse abrogated, the bed made ready for the stranger, life set to perpetual music, and the guest welcomed, the boat urged, and the long night beguiled, with poetry and choral song. A man must have been an unsuccessful artist; he must have starved on the streets of Paris; he must have been yoked to a commercial force like Pinkerton, before he can conceive the longings that at times assailed me. The draughty, rowdy city of San Francisco, the bustling office where my friend Jim paced like a caged lion daily between ten and four, even (at times) the retrospect of Paris, faded in comparison. Many a man less tempted would have thrown up all to realise his visions; but I was by nature unadventurous and uninitiative: to divert me from all former paths and send me cruising through the isles of paradise, some force

external to myself must be exerted; Destiny herself must use the fitting wedge; and little as I deemed it, that tool was already in her hand of brass.

I sat, one afternoon, in the corner of a great, glassy, silvered saloon, a free lunch at my one elbow, at the other a "conscientious nude" from the brush of local talent; when, with the tramp of feet and a sudden buzz of voices, the swing-doors were flung broadly open and the place carried as by storm. The crowd which thus entered (mostly seafaring men, and all prodigiously excited) contained a sort of kernel or general centre of interest, which the rest merely surrounded and advertised, as children in the Old World surround and escort the Punch-and-Judy man; the word went round the bar like wildfire that these were Captain Trent and the survivors of the British brig Flying Scud, picked up by a British war-ship on Midway Island, arrived that morning in San Francisco Bay, and now fresh from making the necessary declarations. Presently I had a good sight of them: four brown, seamanlike fellows, standing by the counter, glass in hand, the centre of a score of questioners.

One was a Kanaka--the cook, I was informed; one carried a cage with a canary, which occasionally trilled into thin song; one had his left arm in a sling and looked gentlemanlike, and somewhat sickly, as though the injury had been severe and he was scarce recovered; and the captain himself--a red-faced, blue-eyed, thickset man of five and forty--wore a bandage on his right hand. The incident struck me; I was struck particularly to see captain, cook, and foremost hands walking the street and visiting saloons in company; and, as when anything impressed me,

I got my sketch-book out, and began to steal a sketch of the four castaways. The crowd, sympathising with my design, made a clear lane across the room; and I was thus enabled, all unobserved myself, to observe with a still-growing closeness the face and the demeanour of Captain Trent.

Warmed by whiskey and encouraged by the eagerness of the bystanders, that gentleman was now rehearsing the history of his misfortune. It was but scraps that reached me: how he "filled her on the starboard tack," and how "it came up sudden out of the nor'nor'west," and "there she was, high and dry." Sometimes he would appeal to one of the men--"That was how it was, Jack?"--and the man would reply, "That was the way of it, Captain Trent." Lastly, he started a fresh tide of popular sympathy by enunciating the sentiment, "Damn all these Admiralty Charts, and that's what I say!" From the nodding of heads and the murmurs of assent that followed, I could see that Captain Trent had established himself in the public mind as a gentleman and a thorough navigator: about which period, my sketch of the four men and the canary-bird being finished, and all (especially the canary-bird) excellent likenesses, I buckled up my book, and slipped from the saloon.

Little did I suppose that I was leaving Act I, Scene I, of the drama of my life; and yet the scene, or rather the captain's face, lingered for some time in my memory. I was no prophet, as I say; but I was something else: I was an observer; and one thing I knew, I knew when a man was terrified. Captain Trent, of the British brig Flying Scud, had been

glib; he had been ready; he had been loud; but in his blue eyes I could detect the chill, and in the lines of his countenance spy the agitation of perpetual terror. Was he trembling for his certificate? In my judgment, it was some livelier kind of fear that thrilled in the man's marrow as he turned to drink. Was it the result of recent shock, and had he not yet recovered the disaster to his brig? I remembered how a friend of mine had been in a railway accident, and shook and started for a month; and although Captain Trent of the Flying Scud had none of the appearance of a nervous man, I told myself, with incomplete conviction, that his must be a similar case.