A TANGLED SKEIN

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BY

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A TANGLED SKEIN.

CHAPTER I.

COMING HOME.

A BLAZING sunset in the Indian ocean, — out of sight of land, — and a great steamship throbbing her resolute way in solitary grandeur through the glittering waves that creamed and darkened in her wake! I think I can picture the scene in my own mind, but I had rather not try to describe it; for I was born within the sound of Bow bells, have never been to India, and consequently never came back from thence. I have to deal with very stern realities affecting persons, most of whom I can lay my hands upon at a few hours' notice, and associate them with scenes familiar to me from my youth, — all but this. I should not like to run the risk of marring what I *know*, by attempting to detail what I have only heard of. I have read, — (who has not?) — much print about the Overland Route. Shall I take down from their shelves half a dozen of the books in which it is described, hash up for you as many odds and ends of scenes and sketches therein contained, and serve up the dish in a sauce of my own composition? Will it possess the genuine Indian flavor? I am afraid not. It would taste of the pot; and I should be sure to put in some ingredient which, without being pleasing to the palate of the uninitiated, would expose my poor *rechauffé* in its true character. No! I will, if you please, describe that which I have seen, — and that only.

The vessel in question was the Peninsular and Oriental steamship Ganges, Captain Stevenson, bound to Suez. She had on board many sufferers by the Indian mutiny, and amongst them Captain Stephen Frankland, of the Bengal Light Cavalry. You will be good enough to picture for yourselves the good ship which is bearing him, the persons of his fellow-voyagers (other than those to whom you will be introduced), and the appearances of the sunset which he is watching on the evening of the 8th of July, 1858, when first he is presented to your notice.

Brave, honest, Stephen Frankland! If there ever was a man who deserved to have a smooth and pleasant pilgrimage through life, it was he; but Fate, — chance, a combination of untoward circumstances, call it what you please, — took up the thread of his life and tangled it, as we shall see, into a dark web, in which all hope and happiness seemed at one time to be lost. It is his story that I am about to tell, therefore let me photograph him at once, as it were, on the title-page of my book.

He is incapable of resisting the indignity; for he has been to death's door with jungle fever combined with sunstroke, and is still very, very weak, — so weak that it has taken him half an hour to totter from his cabin to the spot where he now reclines, wrapped in his regimental cloak, and gazing over the darkening sea westward, far westward! towards the home he has not seen for years, — that he may never see again!

Did he stand upright, he would measure at least five feet eleven, and his wasted limbs, that are now extended in such lamentable helplessness upon the deck, were, a few weeks ago, full of grace and strength. He has fought under Havelock, — he has marched with Chamberlayne, — he has borne the whole brunt of the mutiny. He is one of that scant band of heroes who kept the tiger at bay, — hurling him back, in spite of all his frantic bounds, till England arose in her might and strangled the bloody brute in his lair! He has won the Victoria Cross, and by and by, when the armies are amalgamated, will be made a brevet-major, if he has a friend at the Horse Guards to remind the authorities of his services. Oh, his country is proud

of him, — and very grateful too, of course! Though, being a country of a naturally phlegmatic temperament, she does not give way to her feelings very warmly.

The young soldier's face is very grave, and his fine brown eyes, which are unnaturally bright just now, have rather a hard expression. His brow is calm and massive, but his mouth, though almost overshadowed by his tawny moustache, gives a look to the lower part of his face which is quite at variance with the sternness of its upper features. Wait until he smiles, and the stern look will melt away, and one of almost womanly softness take its place. To a fresh acquaintance, Stephen Frankland's manner is not pleasant: he is cold and haughty, especially with men. No one values the good-will of companions and comrades more than he does; and I think that his reserve springs more from shyness than from pride, or any other feeling. He values friendship so highly, that he cannot bear the idea of forcing himself on that of any one, and will not lightly admit any one to his own. But if he be slow in making friends, he is slower still in losing them; and many a raw cornet, who has complained loudly after the manner of the tribe, "that Frankland was so confoundedly bumptious," has been checked by the best men in the regiment, and told to wait till he knew him better before he repeated such an opinion. It is a great pity that people will go about masquerading in manners which do not belong to them; but my hero is a mortal man, and subject to all the diseases, mental and bodily, that flesh is heir to. So he will be introduced to you to-morrow. Bow stiffly, say half a dozen chilly common-places; and if you go away disgusted with his reserve and seek his society no more, — if you are a good sort of fellow, and worth cultivating, — he will take to heart your not liking him, and be doubly cold to the next man he meets by way of mending matters. Not the sort of temperament, this, with which to get on well in the world. Too sensitive and self-accusing a great deal, as I am afraid we shall find before long.

Have you ever met with a serious accident in a foreign country, or felt some illness creeping over you when amongst strangers? If you have, did not a wild yearning seize you to hurry *home*, in spite of all assurances that you would be safer and better tended where you were? If you have not, believe me that it is no use arguing with the stricken one who has this feeling upon him. He craves for *home*, — home, no matter how humble it may be; and staggers thitherward with the unreasoning terror which makes a wounded bird drag itself in torture from the hand that would assuage its pain, to seek some well-known haunt wherein to die.

Well! Home is distant, and the blow has fallen before it can be reached. The sufferer has to praise the All Merciful for a great escape; for the crisis is over and the danger past. But will he admit that it is possible for him to become quite well away from *home*? Does he believe that there can be any medicine so potent for his good as the sight of old familiar scenes, the sound of old familiar voices, the sympathy, above all, of those he loves? I think not! Happy are you if you have never known that weary, incurable disease, — the home-sickness of the sick. I know of poor people who have died in squalid cellars, because they were their *homes*, rather than enter the hospitals, in which they might have been cured in a week. I know of men who have passed all their lives abroad, whose associations, friends, and fame all belong to foreign scenes, but who have tottered back in their old age to the home-land that knows them not, — merely because it is the home-land, — to enrich it with their hard-won wealth, and ask of it nothing but a grave. Ay! we may philosophize, and scoff, and make merry, with these and other human softnesses. Let us crown with bays the clever fellows who are so fond of depicting the morbid anatomy of *Homes*, — who delight in tearing down the gay hangings from the walls, — who smash through the gay gilding and the lath-and-plaster, and disclose to us, with many a chuckle of triumph, the hidden closet where the skeleton grins and clanks his horrid bones. Ah, these are something like writers! Their pens are lancets, their ink a fluid caustic, and every printed page a cataplasm. How the great world smarts and simpers as they ply their trade, — each half of it enjoying the discomfiture of the other! I think, though, that there be pure homes and home influences in the land, after all; but, bless my soul! it would be very insipid work to treat only of these. *Eau sucré* is mawkish tipple at the best of times. A squeeze of lemon and a dash of something out of the *garlé de vin* improves the flavor wonderfully.

The home-sickness was strong upon Stephen Frankland as the sun went down upon this pleasant July evening, for the home of his boyhood had been a very happy one, — a breezy, crag-bound, leafy, stream-girt home, snugly settled half-way down a Der-

byshire valley, with a great rugged Tor that was always ready to do battle with the north-east wind on its behalf; to its rear, and in all other directions, fat meadow-lands, and hills with dark pine-woods hanging on their slopes; and fern-carpeted dells, and tangled coppices, with the restless Wye lacing all the beauties of the landscape together with a silver thread, — a home in which he had been a free and happy country-lad, revelling in field-sports and feats of strength and daring, which had made him the ready and dashing soldier that he was before the fever struck him down. He has closed his eyes now, in his painful weakness, and the whole panorama floats across his mind's eye. There is the field in which he made that famous double-shot of which his father was so proud. Did he not have preserved and stuffed the two unfortunate partridges who fell victims to his boy's precocious skill? and are they not now hanging up in a glass-case in the hall? There is the quiet pool in the bend of the river into which he used to plunge in the summer time, to the terror of his little brother Frank; and the shady nook, hard by, where afterwards he would loll, half-dressed, all the blazing mid-day, hidden by the tall ferns, reading the lives of the great soldiers and sailors who were his heroes, or half-terrifying, half-delighting, his childish companion with wondrous tales about giants and fairies, and other inhabitants of the dear old realms of Fancy! There, far away to the right, over the grass land, is the fence at which he got that ugly fall out hunting, when he mounted Lord Harkington's new chestnut mare, — merely because some one had said that he could not ride her. The hot, blundering brute bolted with her head in the air, and crashed right into the middle of the double post and rails without rising an inch, rolling over her rider, and nearly killing him in her frantic struggles to rise. There again, close to the house, hanging from the sycamore-tree, is the swing where he and Laura Coleman used to swing each other when they were children together, and where he wished her good-by, and pressed into her reluctant hand a little gold pencil-case as a parting gift the evening before he left for India! There is Bill Grant's, the head-keeper's, cottage. It was in the somewhat musty kitchen of that tenement that he smoked his first pipe, procured from Bill with much diplomacy, and not without a bribe. Ah! will he ever forget that first pipe? At a certain period of its enjoyment, what would he have given to Bill *not* to have had it? There, close by the privet hedge on the lawn, is old Ponto's grave. Poor old Ponto! Would he have been a better dog, in his life, if he had known what a grand funeral he was to have when all was over? There is the wood, — that on the hill yonder, near the bean-field, where they had that tough tustle with the poachers on Christmas-Eve! And there — there — there! far and near, all around, is some spot full of old recollections for Stephen Frankland, on which his memory loves to dwell. It dwells on them, and those with whom they are associated, as they were in the careless old times which are stamped on his mind. He cannot realize them as they are. He has heard that Bill Grant is not head-keeper now. The poor fellow has had a paralytic stroke, and is a hopeless cripple; still his pupil finds himself planning a long day's shooting, which he intends to have in company with his old tutor in woodcraft, directly the season comes round again. He cannot think of Laura as a grown-up woman who has been engaged to be married. She is ever, for him, the shy, timid child who cried when she was swung too high. And Frank, his little brother! the loved companion of all his expeditions, — poor, gentle, delicate little Frank, — whom he has carried for miles upon his shoulders, rather than he should be disappointed of being present at some steeple-chase, or cricket-match, or other sport that he wished to see, — little Frank came of age a year ago! He was but a little boy, and small and weak for his age, when Stephen sailed for India. There was a wide gulf between them then; the one was quite a man, the other still a child. Time had bridged it over now, and the seven and a half years that separated their ages was lost in their mutual manhood. A pleased smile played round Stephen's lips and glistened in his eyes, as he tried to picture little Frank as the great country gentleman, and Justice of the Peace, Deputy-Lieutenant, and High Sheriff of the County, — posts of dignity which letters from home had informed him his brother was soon to fill. For, as will presently appear more distinctly, Frank, though his father's younger son, was sole heir to Tremlett Towers and all its lands, whilst Stephen, the first-born, would inherit a baronetcy, an honorable title attached to very few possessions of any sort for its support.

The idea of envying Frank his good fortune never entered his half-brother's mind; the possibility that Tremlett Towers might not be his home, to come and

go in as he pleased all the days of his life, never occurred to him for a moment. How should it? Never by word, or act, or look, has he been reminded of his position under his father's roof. He knew it well enough; his father had broken it to him long before he left, and I think it reflected much credit on his stepmother that he soon forgot what he was told. Now, perhaps, you begin to see how matters stand. He was his father's companion in all the sports of the field, his *alter ego* with the tenantry and servants. He was his mother's right hand in her garden, the distributor of her bounty in the village, her representative in a dozen different ways; for this lady was not given to exertion, and was fond of doing what she did by deputy. His wishes were always anticipated, his orders never questioned. He was an universal favorite, the bright-eyed, hearty lad! Like all brave men, with a high sense of duty, he thought little of what he had done, otherwise it might have occurred to him that the news of deeds which had won him the highest object of a soldier's ambition, the Cross for Valor, would quite dissipate the clouds with which absence sometimes hides a vacant chair. But, as I said before, the idea from which such a thought would spring never occurred to him. He longed for home with a sick man's longing as the sun went down that July evening. And so vividly did home and home faces come back to him, that it seemed as though he had never really left them, and that the wonders of the strange land in which his lot had been cast, and all its recent horrors, were the baseless fabric of a vision which was passing away.

He was aroused from such day-dreaming by a tap upon the shoulder, and, turning round, saw that a square-built man, with a jolly, weather-beaten face, and dressed in the handsome uniform of the Peninsular and Oriental Company, had taken a seat by his side.

"Glad to see you on deck, Sir!" said the officer. "I am Captain Stevenson, of this ship, at your service. How do you feel yourself to-night — picking up your crumbs, eh? There now, don't move; I've got plenty of room where I am, thank ye!" And the jolly seaman kindly pressed Stephen Frankland back into the reclining position from which he had started, and smoothed the pillow that supported his head.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" he added, when this was done — "anything you want in your cabin?"

"Thank you very much!" Stephen replied; "I have everything I require, and I shall soon cease to be the troublesome fellow that I am sure I must have been to you all. I feel as though every breath of this cool sea-breeze was putting new life into me."

"To be sure," said the Captain; "so it does. Why, I've had young fellows carried aboard further gone than you were — and *you* hadn't much to spare on this side Davy Jones's locker when we left Calcutta; but, Lord bless you! as soon as ever they can crawl on deck they sit gasping in the fresh air like a shoal of blue-fish, and are on their pins again calling out for bitter beer before we sight Perim!"

"How long shall we be before we sight Perim?" asked the sick man after a pause.

"How long will you be before you get to your bitter beer? you mean," said the Captain with a jovial laugh. "But you will get a chill if you stay out any longer. The wind is freshening, and you have had quite as much of it as you can bear for the first time: the Doctor would tell you so if he were here. You had better turn in, and — Ha! just in the nick of time!" he continued, as a tall figure moved silently out of the shadow of the hatchway, and took its stand by Stephen's side. "Here's your servant come to help you in."

"Hush!" exclaimed the invalid in a quick whisper; "he is not my servant."

Captain Stevenson opened his mouth and raised his eyelids, and so made those expressive features reply — "Who the deuce, then, is he?" as plainly as though he had articulated the words. The question was lost upon the new-comer, so busily was he engaged in collecting the books, cushions, and other articles which fell as the sick man rose and prepared to pass below; but as he rose, he laid his finger on his lip with a meaning look, until the old man had descended the companion-ladder, and then replied in a whisper —

"You will think it very odd, but I know absolutely nothing about him, beyond this — I owe my life to his care! I will try and find out who he is to-night."

CHAPTER II.

HOW CAPTAIN FRANKLAND AND MR. BRANDRON COMPARED NOTES.

ARRIVED in his cabin, Stephen Frankland flung himself heavily upon the cot

with an impatient moan. He had only descended some eight or ten steps, and walked as many yards; but so feeble was his state that the exertion, slight as it was, proved almost too much for him. I think the worst part of an illness is when you have gained strength enough to know how weak it has made you. His attendant, who had followed, carefully measured out some tonic medicine, and handed it, without a word. He then placed everything that might be required within his reach, and silently proceeded to set the cabin in order for the night. This done, he was about to retire, when Frankland raised himself, and laid a hand upon his arm —

"Don't leave me," he said — "that is, I mean, if you do not want to go on deck again."

The person thus addressed paused, and held the cabin-door half shut behind him as he turned towards the cot.

"You see I am getting all right again," Frankland continued, in a cheerful tone. "Yesterday I could scarcely stand, and to-night I have walked ever so far, all by myself. In a very few days I shall be off the sick-list altogether."

"I am glad to find you so hopeful," was the grave reply; "take care, though, that you do not over-exert yourself. You know what the Doctor said, and if I stay here with you, you must promise not to talk."

"That is exactly what I want to do. It's all bosh saying that I must not talk. Why, I haven't coughed once for I don't know how long! I am going to ask you to redeem the promise that you made, I think, two days ago. My head is getting clearer now, and it worries me awfully not to know what has passed. I lay awake all last night trying in vain to recall the past; and I am sure I shall not sleep to-night unless you help me. I do assure you that I am quite strong enough now to hear all you like to tell, — to ask what I so much want to know."

His attendant closed the door softly, and drawing a trunk close to the cot, seated himself so that the wan detaining hand still rested on his arm.

"Well?"

The sick man was a little disconcerted by that monosyllabic reply to his anxiously urged request, but more so by the sad, searching gaze with which the speaker regarded him.

It was not easy to fix his exact age; his face and figure were so wasted by the ravages of the Indian climate. He looked sixty, at least, but was, probably, some years younger. He was unusually tall and gaunt, with a square, massive brow, and restless, though earnest eyes. A few flowing locks of iron-gray hair, thrown back from his temples and passed behind each ear, would have given an air of benevolence to almost any other face; but there was a fixed sternness upon his pale features which never left them even whilst he was performing acts of womanly tenderness for his patient, — a sternness which did not reflect anger or dislike, but betokened the absence of all softer feelings from a heart that had once been their home.

Frankland sank back again into a reclining posture as the old man took his seat; and when the hand that had been laid on his slipped downwards, and the arm swung heavily beside the cot, the patient attendant took it in both his own, and regarding it with a strange, cynical smile, pressed it almost tenderly and placed it softly on the coverlet.

There was no light in the cabin, and the shades of evening were rapidly closing in. After waiting some moments to see if his companion would volunteer the information which he so much desired, Stephen again broke the silence which had become painful to him —

"I am afraid," he said, "that I have lost all count of time. I am conscious that I have been a long time ill, and that you have all along tended me with a care and patience for which I cannot account. I feel that I owe you my life, and do not even know your name."

"My name is Brandron — John Everett Brandron. I am an uncovenanted servant of the East India Company, if it still exists, and I am going ho——, I am going to England upon leave. I have done for you what any other man would have done for any other man whom he found as I found you."

"But where *did* you find me? That is what I want to know," Stephen said in an excited tone, and starting up into a sitting posture. "When was it? — and where? Why am I not with my regiment? How is it that I am here? All this is a blank to me, in which my mind goes wandering till it is lost in distraction."

"This will never do! Compose yourself, pray, or I must leave you," said Brandron; "you shall know all you require; but have patience. There now," he added, as Stephen sank into his former position; "tell me, as quietly as you can, what you can last remember, and I will recount the rest — at least, as far as I know of it."

"You want to know how I was wounded?"

"I *want* to know nothing," the old man replied, with a smile; "but you must tell me where to begin, or I shall be saying what you know already."

Frankland closed his eyes, and paused for a moment to collect his thoughts. "You have heard," he then said, "of that affair of ours at the Raptee?"

"Where your regiment and the ——th charged the rebel Sowars in the middle of the river? Yes."

"Well; no matter what we did," said Frankland, "or how I got through; I managed to keep to my saddle, and when poor old Cherry — (that's my charger, I wonder what has become of him?) — scrambled with me up the opposite bank, I saw some score or so of the enemy forming on the flat ground close by. I collected a few of our fellows, and we rode straight at them — straight through them, by Jove! too; and when they scattered right and left, I saw that their leader was Lal Roogee, — a villain whose life I had sworn to have if ever I saw him again; and so — But I am wandering on too quickly. I must tell you why I made this vow. There was a young cornet of ours, — a dashing, handsome boy, a prime favorite with all of us, and a special chum of mine. His name was Charley Treherne, the only son of a clergyman down in Kent, near Westborough."

Brandron started, and a crimson flush spread for an instant over his pale face.

"What makes you start? Do you know the family?"

"No, nor heard of it. I know the country in which they live, that is all — go on."

"Well, Charley was on sick-leave in the hills when the mutiny broke out, and had only just rejoined us at the time of which I am speaking. It was a few days — perhaps a week — before the Raptee business, that he saw the enemy for the first and last time. There was a fort to be taken — one of those that our Government were fools enough to let a set of rascally Rajahs arm and occupy, to turn against us at the very first opportunity. The infantry were, for a wonder, led up to the right side of it — the rear, and we were posted in the front, hidden in a little wood, to cut off the scoundrels in their inevitable bolt. I had dismounted, and was watching the fort through a field-glass — and so was Charley, but he was on horseback. I had not to watch long! Crack! went half a dozen shells into the middle of the place — Crash! went the gate, blown into lucifer-matches by a powder-bag fixed there by little Teddy Scott, of the Engineers, as coolly as though he were hanging up a picture in the drawing-room. In went three companies of the gallant —rd at one end, and out came about two hundred Pandies at the other, who scattered themselves helter-skelter into the jungle. It was no use charging after *them*. But a better enemy soon came in sight. An entire regiment of horse that had only mutinied a few days before, drew up in good order, and to our intense satisfaction prepared to march off our way. At their head was a man that I had known by sight, and had heard too much of. 'Charley,' I whispered, 'do you see that fellow on the white barb, with a shirt of mail over his tunic? That's Lal Roogee.'

"'And what is the Roogee famous for?' asked poor Charley, in his playful way.

"'Hush!' I said; 'this is no joking matter. That is the fiend who killed poor Clayton's young wife. He set fire to her muslin dress, and the devils that were with him hacked her to pieces with their swords, as she ran shrieking through the compound.'

"I shall never forget the expression on Charley's face when he heard those words. The poor lady had been very kind to him when he first came out, and there, proudly riding at the head of the troop that her husband once commanded, was her murderer! It was as much as I could do to hold the excited boy: he would have ridden out, then and there, single-handed, to cut him down. At last we got the word 'Officers to the front!' The word was given to charge, and away we went. It was a regular race; but my charger stumbled over a fallen tree, and this threw me back almost equal with the men. I then saw that Charley was charging straight on Lal Roogee. I saw his sabre glimmer in the air; I saw the rebel sowar rein back his horse to avoid the stroke; I saw him wave his sword, as it seemed to me, only *towards* Charley as he whirled by — and then I was in the thick of it myself — doing my duty, I hope — till the recall was sounded. Then my sergeant came up, and, with a tear on his bronzed cheek, told me what had really happened. The apparently idle wave of that practised villain's sword had done deadly work. The sharp curve of the blade had just touched poor Charley's neck, and inflicted a deep wound through which, long before we reached the spot where he fell, he had bled to death. We buried him in the