

The Queen of the Pirate Isle eBook

The Queen of the Pirate Isle by Bret Harte

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[Illustration]

THE QUEEN OF THE PIRATE ISLE.

I first knew her as the Queen of the Pirate Isle. To the best of my recollection she had no reasonable right to that title. She was only nine years old, inclined to plumpness and good humour, deprecated violence and had never been to sea. Need it be added that she did *not* live in an island and that her name was "Polly."

[Illustration]

[Illustration]

Perhaps I ought to explain that she had already known other experiences of a purely imaginative character. Part of her existence had been passed as a Beggar Child—solely indicated by a shawl tightly folded round her shoulders and chills,—as a Schoolmistress, unnecessarily severe; as a Preacher, singularly personal in his remarks, and once, after reading one of Cooper's novels, as an Indian Maiden. This was, I believe, the only instance when she had borrowed from another's fiction. Most of the characters that she assumed for days and sometimes weeks at a time were purely original in conception; some so much so as to be vague to the general understanding. I remember that her personation of a certain Mrs. Smith, whose individuality was supposed to be sufficiently represented by a sun-bonnet worn wrong side before and a weekly addition to her family, was never perfectly appreciated by her own circle although she lived the character for a month. Another creation known as "The Proud Lady"—a being whose excessive and unreasonable haughtiness was so pronounced as to give her features the expression of extreme nausea, caused her mother so much alarm that it had to be abandoned. This was easily effected. The Proud Lady was understood to have died. Indeed, most of Polly's impersonations were got rid of in this way, although it by no means prevented their subsequent reappearance. "I thought Mrs. Smith was dead," remonstrated her mother at the posthumous appearance of that lady with a new infant. "She was buried alive and kem to!" said Polly with a melancholy air. Fortunately, the representation of a resuscitated person required such extraordinary acting, and was, through some uncertainty of conception, so closely allied in facial expression to the Proud Lady, that Mrs. Smith was resuscitated only for a day.

[Illustration]

[Illustration]

The origin of the title of the Queen of the Pirate Isle, may be briefly stated as follows:—

An hour after luncheon, one day, Polly, Hickory Hunt, her cousin, and Wan Lee, a Chinese page, were crossing the nursery floor in a Chinese junk. The sea was calm

and the sky cloudless. Any change in the weather was as unexpected as it is in books. Suddenly a West Indian Hurricane, purely local in character and unfelt anywhere else, struck Master Hickory and threw him overboard, whence, wildly swimming for his life and carrying Polly on his back, he eventually



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reached a Desert Island in the closet. Here the rescued party put up a tent made of a table cloth providentially snatched from the raging billows, and from two o'clock until four, passed six weeks on the island supported only by a piece of candle, a box of matches, and two peppermint lozenges. It was at this time that it became necessary to account for Polly's existence among them, and this was only effected by an alarming sacrifice of their morality; Hickory and Wan Lee instantly became *Pirates*, and at once elected Polly as their Queen. The royal duties, which seemed to be purely maternal, consisted in putting the Pirates to bed after a day of rapine and bloodshed, and in feeding them with liquorice water through a quill in a small bottle. Limited as her functions were, Polly performed them with inimitable gravity and unquestioned sincerity. Even when her companions sometimes hesitated from actual hunger or fatigue and forgot their guilty part, she never faltered. It was her *real* existence—her other life of being washed, dressed, and put to bed at certain hours by her mother was the *illusion*.

[Illustration]

[Illustration]

[Illustration]

Doubt and scepticism came at last,—and came from Wan Lee! Wan Lee of all creatures! Wan Lee, whose silent, stolid, mechanical performance of a Pirate's duties—a perfect imitation like all his household work—had been their one delight and fascination!

It was just after the exciting capture of a merchantman with the indiscriminate slaughter of all on board—a spectacle on which the round blue eyes of the plump Polly had gazed with royal and maternal tolerance, and they were burying the booty—two table spoons and a thimble in the corner of the closet, when Wan Lee stolidly rose.

[Illustration]

“Melican boy pleenty foolee! Melican boy no Pilat!” said the little Chinaman, substituting “l's” for “r's” after his usual fashion.

“Wotcher say?” said Hickory, reddening with sudden confusion.

“Melican boy's papa heap lickee him—spose him leal Pilat,” continued Wan Lee, doggedly. “Melican boy Pilat *inside* housee; Chinee boy Pilat *outside* housee. First chop Pilat.”



Staggered by this humiliating statement, Hickory recovered himself in character. “Ah! Ho!” he shrieked, dancing wildly on one leg, “Mutiny and Splordinashun! Way with him to the yard arm.”

“Yald alm—heap foolee! Allee same clothes hoss for washee washee.”

It was here necessary for the Pirate Queen to assert her authority, which, as I have before stated was somewhat confusingly maternal. “Go to bed instantly without your supper,” she said, seriously. “Really, I never saw such bad pirates. Say your prayers, and see that you’re up early to church to-morrow.” It should be explained that in deference to Polly’s proficiency as a preacher, and probably as a relief to their uneasy consciences, Divine Service had always been held on the Island. But Wan Lee continued:—



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“Me no shabbee Pilat *inside* housee; me shabbee Pilat *outside* housee. Spose you lun away longside Chinee boy—Chinee boy makee you Pilat.”

[Illustration]

Hickory softly scratched his leg while a broad, bashful smile, almost closed his small eyes. “Wot!” he asked.

“Mebbee you too frightened to lun away. Melican boy’s papa heap lickee.”

This last infamous suggestion fired the corsair’s blood. “Dy’ar think we daresent,” said Hickory, desperately, but with an uneasy glance at Polly. “I’ll show yer to-morrow.”

The entrance of Polly’s mother at this moment put an end to Polly’s authority and dispersed the pirate band, but left Wan Lee’s proposal and Hickory’s rash acceptance ringing in the ears of the Pirate Queen. That evening she was unusually silent. She would have taken Bridget, her nurse, into her confidence, but this would have involved a long explanation of her own feelings, from which, like all imaginative children, she shrank. She, however, made preparation for the proposed flight by settling in her mind which of her two dolls she would take. A wooden creature with easy going knees and moveable hair seemed to be more fit for hard service and any indiscriminate scalping that might turn up hereafter. At supper, she timidly asked a question of Bridget. “Did ye ever hear the loikes uv that, Ma’am,” said the Irish handmaid with affectionate pride, “Shure the darlint’s head is filled noight and day with ancient history. She’s after asking me now if Queen’s ever run away!” To Polly’s remorseful confusion here her good father equally proud of her precocious interest and his own knowledge, at once interfered with an unintelligible account of the abdication of various Queens in history until Polly’s head ached again. Well meant as it was, it only settled in the child’s mind that she must keep the awful secret to herself and that no one could understand her.

[Illustration]

The eventful day dawned without any unusual sign of importance. It was one of the cloudless summer days of the Californian foot hills, bright, dry, and as the morning advanced, hot in the white sunshine. The actual, prosaic house in which the Pirates apparently lived, was a mile from a mining settlement on a beautiful ridge of pine woods sloping gently towards a valley on the one side, and on the other falling abruptly into a dark deep olive gulf of pine trees, rocks, and patches of red soil. Beautiful as the slope was, looking over to the distant snow peaks which seemed to be in another world than theirs, the children found a greater attraction in the fascinating depths of a mysterious gulf, or “canon,” as it was called, whose very name filled their ears with a weird music. To creep to the edge of the cliff, to sit upon the brown branches of some fallen pine, and putting aside the dried tassels to look down upon the backs of wheeling hawks that seemed to hang in mid-air was a never failing delight. Here Polly



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would try to trace the winding red ribbon of road that was continually losing itself among the dense pines of the opposite mountains; here she would listen to the far off strokes of a woodman's axe, or the rattle of some heavy waggon, miles away, crossing the pebbles of a dried up water course. Here, too, the prevailing colours of the mountains, red and white and green, most showed themselves. There were no frowning rocks to depress the children's fancy, but everywhere along the ridge pure white quartz bared itself through the red earth like smiling teeth, the very pebbles they played with were streaked with shining mica like bits of looking-glass. The distance was always green and summer-like, but the colour they most loved, and which was most familiar to them, was the dark red of the ground beneath their feet everywhere. It showed itself in the roadside bushes; its red dust pervaded the leaves of the overhanging laurel, it coloured their shoes and pinafores; I am afraid it was often seen in Indian like patches on their faces and hands. That it may have often given a sanguinary tone to their fancies, I have every reason to believe.

[Illustration]

It was on this ridge that the three children gathered at ten o'clock that morning. An earlier flight had been impossible on account of Wan Lee being obliged to perform his regular duty of blacking the shoes of Polly and Hickory before breakfast,—a menial act which in the pure Republic of childhood was never thought inconsistent with the loftiest piratical ambition. On the ridge they met one "Patsey," the son of a neighbour, sun burned, broad-brimmed hatted, red handed, like themselves. As there were afterwards some doubts expressed whether he joined the Pirates of his own free will, or was captured by them, I endeavour to give the colloquy exactly as it occurred:—

Patsey. "Hallo, fellers."

The Pirates. "Hello!"

Patsey. "Goin' to hunt bars? Dad seed a lot o' tracks at sun up."

The Pirates (hesitating). "No—o—"

Patsey. "I am; know where I kin get a six-shooter."

The Pirates (almost ready to abandon piracy for bear hunting, but preserving their dignity). "Can't! We've runn'd away for real pirates."

Patsey. "Not for good!"



The Queen (interposing with sad dignity and real tears in her round blue eyes). “Yes!” (slowly and shaking her head). “Can’t go back again. Never! Never! Never! The—the —eye is cast!”

Patsey (bursting with excitement). “No’o! Sho’o! Wanter know.”

The Pirates (a little frightened themselves, but tremulous with gratified vanity). “The Perleese is on our track!”

Patsey. “Lemme go with yer!”

Hickory. “Wot’ll yer giv?”

Patsey. “Pistol and er bananer.”

Hickory (with judicious prudence). “Let’s see ’em.”

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Patsey was off like a shot; his bare little red feet trembling under him. In a few minutes he returned with an old fashioned revolver known as one of “Allen’s pepper boxes” and a large banana. He was at once enrolled and the banana eaten.

As yet they had resolved on no definite nefarious plan. Hickory looking down at Patsey’s bare feet instantly took off his own shoes. The bold act sent a thrill through his companions. Wan Lee took off his cloth leggings, Polly removed her shoes and stockings, but with royal foresight, tied them up in her handkerchief. The last link between them and civilization was broken.

“Let’s go to the Slumgullion.”

[Illustration]

“Slumgullion” was the name given by the miners to a certain soft, half-liquid mud, formed of the water and finely powdered earth that was carried off by the sluice boxes during gold washing, and eventually collected in a broad pool or lagoon before the outlet. There was a pool of this kind a quarter of a mile away, where there were “diggings” worked by Patsey’s father, and thither they proceeded along the ridge in single file. When it was reached they solemnly began to wade in its viscid paint-like shallows. Possibly its unctuousness was pleasant to the touch; possibly there was a fascination in the fact that their parents had forbidden them to go near it, but probably the principal object of this performance was to produce a thick coating of mud on the feet and ankles, which, when dried in the sun, was supposed to harden the skin and render their shoes superfluous. It was also felt to be the first real step towards independence; they looked down at their ensanguined extremities and recognized the impossibility of their ever again crossing (unwashed) the family threshold.

Then they again hesitated. There was a manifest need of some well defined piratical purpose. The last act was reckless and irretrievable, but it was vague. They gazed at each other. There was a stolid look of resigned and superior tolerance in Wan Lee’s eyes. Polly’s glance wandered down the side of the slope to the distant little tunnels or openings made by the miners who were at work in the bowels of the mountain. “I’d like to go into one of them funny holes,” she said to herself, half aloud.

Wan Lee suddenly began to blink his eyes with unwonted excitement. “Catchee tunnel—heap gold,” he said, quickly. “When manee come outside to catchee dinner—Pilats go inside catchee tunnel! Shabbee! Pilats catchee gold allee samee Melican man!”

[Illustration]

“And take perseshiun,” said Hickory.

“And hoist the Pirate flag,” said Patsey.



“And build a fire, and cook, and have a family,” said Polly.

The idea was fascinating to the point of being irresistible. The eyes of the four children became rounder and rounder. They seized each other’s hands and swung them backwards and forwards, occasionally lifting their legs in a solemn rhythmic movement known only to childhood.

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“Its orful far off!” said Patsey, with a sudden look of dark importance. “Pap sez its free miles on the road. Take all day ter get there.”

The bright faces were overcast.

“Less go down er slide!” said Hickory, boldly.

[Illustration]

They approached the edge of the cliff. The “slide” was simply a sharp incline zigzagging down the side of the mountain used for sliding goods and provisions from the summit to the tunnel men at the different openings below. The continual traffic had gradually worn a shallow gully half filled with earth and gravel into the face of the mountain which checked the momentum of the goods in their downward passage, but afforded no foothold for a pedestrian. No one had ever been known to descend a slide. That feat was evidently reserved for the Pirate band. They approached the edge of the slide hand in hand, hesitated—and the next moment disappeared!

[Illustration]

* * * * *

Five minutes later the tunnel men of the Excelsior mine, a mile below, taking their luncheon on the rude platform of *debris* before their tunnel, were suddenly driven to shelter in the tunnel from an apparent rain of stones, and rocks, and pebbles, from the cliffs above. Looking up, they were startled at seeing four round objects revolving and bounding in the dust of the slide, which eventually resolved themselves into three boys and a girl. For a moment the good men held their breath in helpless terror. Twice, one of the children, had struck the outer edge of the bank and displaced stones that shot a thousand feet down into the dizzy depths of the valley! and now, one of them, the girl, had actually rolled out of the slide and was hanging over the chasm supported only by a clump of chimasal to which she clung!

“Hang on by your eyelids, Sis! but don’t stir for Heaven’s sake!” shouted one of the men, as two others started on a hopeless ascent of the cliff above them.

[Illustration]

But a light childish laugh from the clinging little figure seemed to mock them! Then two small heads appeared at the edge of the slide; then a diminutive figure whose feet were apparently held by some invisible companion, was shoved over the brink and stretched its tiny arms towards the girl. But in vain, the distance was too great. Another laugh of intense youthful enjoyment followed the failure, and a new insecurity was added to the situation by the unsteady hands and shoulders of the relieving party who were apparently shaking with laughter. Then the extended figure was seen to detach what



looked like a small black rope from its shoulders and throw it to the girl. There was another little giggle. The faces of the men below paled in terror. Then Polly—for it was she—hanging to the long pig-tail of Wan Lee, was drawn with fits of laughter back in safety to the slide. Their childish treble of appreciation was answered by a ringing cheer from below.

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“Darned ef I ever want to cut off a Chinaman’s pig-tail again, boys,” said one of the tunnel men as he went back to dinner.

Meantime the children had reached the goal and stood before the opening of one of the tunnels. Then these four heroes who had looked with cheerful levity on the deadly peril of their descent became suddenly frightened at the mysterious darkness of the cavern and turned pale at its threshold.

“Mebbee a wicked Joss backside holee, He catchee Pilats,” said Wan Lee, gravely.

Hickory began to whimper, Patsey drew back, Polly alone stood her ground, albeit with a trembling lip.

“Let’s say our prayers and frighten it away,” she said, stoutly.

“No! No!” said Wan Lee, with sudden alarm. “No frighten Spillits! You waitee! Chinee boy he talkee Spillit not to frighten you.”[A]

[Footnote A: The Chinese pray devoutly to the Evil Spirits *not* to injure them.]

Tucking his hands under his blue blouse, Wan Lee suddenly produced from some mysterious recess of his clothing a quantity of red paper slips which he scattered at the entrance of the cavern. Then drawing from the same inexhaustible receptacle certain squibs or fireworks, he let them off and threw them into the opening. There they went off with a slight fizz and splutter, a momentary glittering of small points in the darkness and a strong smell of gunpowder. Polly gazed at the spectacle with undisguised awe and fascination. Hickory and Patsey breathed hard with satisfaction; it was beyond their wildest dreams of mystery and romance. Even Wan Lee appeared transfigured into a superior being by the potency of his own spells. But an unaccountable disturbance of some kind in the dim interior of the tunnel quickly drew the blood from their blanched cheeks again. It was a sound like coughing followed by something like an oath.

“He’s made the Evil Spirit orful sick,” said Hickory, in a loud whisper.

A slight laugh that to the children seemed demoniacal, followed.

“See,” said Wan Lee, “Evil Spillet be likee Chinee, try talkee him.”

[Illustration]

The Pirates looked at Wan Lee not without a certain envy of this manifest favouritism. A fearful desire to continue their awful experiments, instead of pursuing their piratical avocations, was taking possession of them; but Polly, with one of the swift transitions of childhood, immediately began to extemporise a house for the party at the mouth of the tunnel, and, with parental foresight, gathered the fragments of the squibs to build a fire



for supper. That frugal meal consisting of half a ginger biscuit, divided into five small portions each served on a chip of wood, and having a deliciously mysterious flavour of gunpowder and smoke, was soon over. It was necessary after this, that the Pirates should at once seek repose after a day of adventure, which they did for the space of forty seconds in singularly impossible attitudes

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and far too aggressive snoring. Indeed, Master Hickory's almost upright *pose*, with tightly folded arms, and darkly frowning brows was felt to be dramatic, but impossible for a longer period. The brief interval enabled Polly to collect herself and to look around her in her usual motherly fashion. Suddenly she started and uttered a cry. In the excitement of the descent she had quite overlooked her doll, and was now regarding it with round-eyed horror!

"Lady Mary's hair's gone!" she cried, convulsively grasping the Pirate Hickory's legs.

[Illustration]

Hickory at once recognised the battered doll under the aristocratic title which Polly had long ago bestowed upon it. He stared at the bald and battered head.

"Ha! ha!" he said, hoarsely; "skelped by Injins!"

For an instant the delicious suggestion soothed the imaginative Polly. But it was quickly dispelled by Wan Lee.

"Lady Maley's pig-tail hangee top side hillee. Catchee on big quartz stone allee same Polly, me go fetchee."

"No!" quickly shrieked the others. The prospect of being left in the proximity of Wan Lee's evil spirit, without Wan Lee's exorcising power, was anything but reassuring. "No, don't go!" Even Polly (dropping a maternal tear on the bald head of Lady Mary) protested against this breaking up of the little circle. "Go to bed," she said, authoritatively, "and sleep until morning."

Thus admonished, the pirates again retired. This time effectively, for worn by actual fatigue or soothed by the delicious coolness of the cave, they gradually, one by one, succumbed to real slumber. Polly withheld from joining them, by official and maternal responsibility sat and blinked at them affectionately.

[Illustration]

Gradually she, too, felt herself yielding to the fascination and mystery of the place and the solitude that encompassed her. Beyond the pleasant shadows where she sat, she saw the great world of mountain and valley through a dreamy haze that seemed to rise from the depths below and occasionally hang before the cavern like a veil. Long waves of spicy heat rolling up the mountain from the valley brought her the smell of pine trees and bay and made the landscape swim before her eyes. She could hear the far off cry of teamsters on some unseen road; she could see the far off cloud of dust following the mountain stage coach, whose rattling wheels she could not hear. She felt very lonely,

but was not quite afraid; she felt very melancholy, but was not entirely sad. And she could have easily awakened her sleeping companions if she wished.

[Illustration]

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No! She was a lone widow with nine children, six of whom were already in the lone churchyard on the hill, and the others lying ill with measles and scarlet fever beside her. She had just walked many weary miles that day, and had often begged from door to door for a slice of bread for the starving little ones. It was of no use now—they would die! They would never see their dear mother again. This was a favourite imaginative situation of Polly's, but only indulged when her companions were asleep, partly because she could not trust confederates with her more serious fancies, and partly because they were at such times passive in her hands. She glanced timidly round; satisfied that no one could observe her, she softly visited the bedside of each of her companions, and administered from a purely fictitious bottle spoonfuls of invisible medicine. Physical correction in the form of slight taps, which they always required, and in which Polly was strong, was only withheld now from a sense of their weak condition. But in vain, they succumbed to the fell disease—they always died at this juncture—and Polly was left alone. She thought of the little church where she had once seen a funeral, and remembered the nice smell of the flowers; she dwelt with melancholy satisfaction on the nine little tombstones in the graveyard, each with an inscription, and looked forward with gentle anticipation to the long summer days when, with Lady Mary in her lap, she would sit on those graves clad in the deepest mourning. The fact that the unhappy victims at times moved as it were uneasily in their graves or snored, did not affect Polly's imaginative contemplation, nor withhold the tears that gathered in her round eyes.

[Illustration]

Presently the lids of the round eyes began to droop, the landscape beyond began to grow more confused, and sometimes to disappear entirely and reappear again with startling distinctness. Then a sound of rippling water from the little stream that flowed from the mouth of the tunnel soothed her and seemed to carry her away with it, and then everything was dark.

The next thing she remembered was that she was apparently being carried along on some gliding object to the sound of rippling water. She was not alone, for her three companions were lying beside her, rather tightly packed and squeezed in the same mysterious vehicle. Even in the profound darkness that surrounded her, Polly could feel and hear that they were accompanied, and once or twice a faint streak of light from the side of the tunnel showed her gigantic shadows walking slowly on either side of the gliding car. She felt the little hands of her associates seeking hers, and knew they were awake and conscious, and she returned to each a reassuring pressure from the large protecting instinct of her maternal little heart. Presently the car glided into an open space of bright light, and stopped. The transition from the darkness of the tunnel at first dazzled their eyes. It was like a dream.



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They were in a circular cavern from which three other tunnels like the one they had passed through, diverged. The walls, lit up by fifty or sixty candles stuck at irregular intervals in crevices of the rock, were of glittering quartz and mica. But more remarkable than all were the inmates of the cavern, who were ranged round the walls; men, who like their attendants, seemed to be of extra stature; who had blackened faces, wore red bandanna handkerchiefs round their heads and their waists, and carried enormous knives and pistols stuck in their belts. On a raised platform made of a packing box, on which was rudely painted a skull and cross bones, sat the chief or leader of the band covered with a buffalo robe; on either side of him were two small barrels marked "Grog" and "Gunpowder." The children stared and clung closer to Polly. Yet, in spite of these desperate and warlike accessories, the strangers bore a singular resemblance to "Christy Minstrels" in their blackened faces and attitudes that somehow made them seem less awful. In particular, Polly was impressed with the fact that even the most ferocious had a certain kindness of eye, and showed their teeth almost idiotically.

"Welcome," said the leader. "Welcome to the Pirate's Cave! The Red Rover of the North Fork of the Stanislaus River salutes the Queen of the Pirate Isle!" He rose up and made an extraordinary bow. It was repeated by the others with more or less exaggeration to the point of one humourist losing his balance!

"O, thank you very much," said Polly, timidly, but drawing her little flock closer to her with a small protecting arm; "but could you—would you—please—tell us—what time it is?"

"We are approaching the Middle of Next Week," said the leader, gravely; "but what of that? Time is made for slaves! The Red Rover seeks it not! Why should the Queen?"

"I think we must be going," hesitated Polly, yet by no means displeased with the recognition of her rank.

"Not until we have paid homage to your Majesty," returned the leader. "What ho! there! Let Brother Step-and-Fetch-It pass the Queen around that we may do her honour." Observing that Polly shrank slightly back, he added: "Fear nothing, the man who hurts a hair of Her Majesty's head, dies by this hand. Ah! ha!"

[Illustration]

The others all said, ha! ha! and danced alternately on one leg and then on the other, but always with the same dark resemblance to Christy Minstrels. Brother Step-and-Fetch-It, whose very long beard had a confusing suggestion of being a part of the leader's buffalo robe, lifted her gently in his arms and carried her to the Red Rovers in turn. Each one bestowed a kiss upon her cheek or forehead, and would have taken her in his arms, or on his knees, or otherwise lingered over his salute, but they were sternly restrained by their leader. When the solemn rite was concluded, Step-and-Fetch-It paid



his own courtesy with an extra squeeze of the curly head, and deposited her again in the truck—a little frightened, a little astonished, but with a considerable accession to her dignity. Hickory and Patsey looked on with stupefied amazement. Wan Lee alone remained stolid and unimpressed, regarding the scene with calm and triangular eyes.



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“Will Your Majesty see the Red Rover’s dance?”

“No, if you please,” said Polly, with gentle seriousness.

“Will Your Majesty fire this barrel of Gunpowder, or tap this breaker of Grog?”

“No, I thank you.”

“Is there no command Your Majesty would lay upon us?”

“No, please,” said Polly, in a failing voice.

“Is there anything Your Majesty has lost? Think again! Will Your Majesty deign to cast your royal eyes on this?”

He drew from under his buffalo robe what seemed like a long tress of blond hair, and held it aloft. Polly instantly recognized the missing scalp of her hapless doll.

“If you please, Sir, it’s Lady Mary’s. She’s lost it.”

“And lost it—Your Majesty—only to find something more precious! Would Your Majesty hear the story?”

A little alarmed, a little curious, a little self-anxious, and a little induced by the nudges and pinches of her companions, the Queen blushing signified her royal assent.

“Enough. Bring refreshments. Will Your Majesty prefer winter-green, peppermint, rose, or accidulated drops? Red or white? Or perhaps Your Majesty will let me recommend these bull’s eyes,” said the leader, as a collection of sweets in a hat were suddenly produced from the barrel labelled “Gunpowder” and handed to the children.

“Listen,” he continued, in a silence broken only by the gentle sucking of bull’s eyes. “Many years ago the old Red Rovers of these parts locked up all their treasures in a secret cavern in this mountain. They used spells and magic to keep it from being entered or found by anybody, for there was a certain mark upon it made by a peculiar rock that stuck out of it, which signified what there was below. Long afterwards, other Red Rovers who had heard of it, came here and spent days and days trying to discover it; digging holes and blasting tunnels like this, but of no use! Sometimes they thought they discovered the magic marks in the peculiar rock that stuck out of it, but when they dug there they found no treasure. And why? Because there was a magic spell upon it. And what was that magic spell? Why, this! It could only be discovered by a person who could not possibly know that he or she had discovered it, who never could or would be able to enjoy it, who could never see it, never feel it, never, in fact know anything at all about it! It wasn’t a dead man, it wasn’t an animal, it wasn’t a baby!”



“Why,” said Polly, jumping up and clapping her hands, “it was a Dolly.”

“Your Majesty’s head is level! Your Majesty has guessed it!” said the leader, gravely. “It was Your Majesty’s own dolly, Lady Mary, who broke the spell! When Your Majesty came down the slide, the doll fell from your gracious hand when your foot slipped. Your Majesty recovered Lady Mary, but did not observe that her hair had caught in a peculiar rock, called the ‘Outcrop,’ and remained behind! When, later on, while sitting with your attendants at the mouth of the tunnel, Your Majesty discovered that Lady Mary’s hair was gone; I overheard Your Majesty, and despatched the trusty Step-and-Fetch-It to seek it at the mountain side. He did so, and found it clinging to the rock, and beneath it—the entrance to the Secret Cave!”



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Patsey and Hickory, who, failing to understand a word of this explanation, had given themselves up to the unconstrained enjoyment of the sweets, began now to apprehend that some change was impending, and prepared for the worst by hastily swallowing what they had in their mouths, thus defying enchantment, and getting ready for speech. Polly, who had closely followed the story, albeit with the embellishments of her own imagination, made her eyes rounder than ever. A bland smile broke on Wan Lee's face, as, to the children's amazement, he quietly disengaged himself from the group and stepped before the leader.

"Melican man plenty foolee Melican chillern. No foolee China boy! China boy knowee you. *You* no Led Lofer. *You* no Pilat—you allee same tunnel man—you Bob Johnson! Me shabbee you! You dressee up allee same as Led Lofer—but you Bob Johnson—allee same. My fader washee washee for you. You no payee him. You owee him folty dolla! Me blingee you billee. You no payee billee! You say, 'Chalkee up, John.' You say, 'Bimeby, John.' But me no catchee folty dolla!"

[Illustration]

A roar of laughter followed, in which even the leader apparently forgot himself enough to join. But the next moment springing to his feet, he shouted, "Ho! ho! A traitor! Away with him to the deepest dungeon beneath the castle moat!"

Hickory and Patsey began to whimper. But Polly, albeit with a tremulous lip, stepped to the side of her little Pagan friend. "Don't you dare to touch him," she said, with a shake of unexpected determination in her little curly head; "if you do, I'll tell my father, and he will slay you! All of you—there!"

"Your father! Then you are *not* the Queen!"

It was a sore struggle to Polly to abdicate her royal position, it was harder to do it with befitting dignity. To evade the direct question she was obliged to abandon her defiant attitude. "If you please, Sir," she said, hurriedly, with an increasing colour and no stops, "we're not always pirates, you know, and Wan Lee is only our boy what brushes my shoes in the morning, and runs of errands, and he doesn't mean anything bad, Sir, and we'd like to take him back home with us."

"Enough," said the leader, changing his entire manner with the most sudden and shameless inconsistency. "You shall go back together, and woe betide the miscreant who would prevent it. What say you brothers? What shall be his fate who dares to separate our noble Queen from her faithful Chinese henchman?"

"He shall die!" roared the others, with beaming cheerfulness.

"And what say you—shall we see them home?"

“We will!” roared the others.

[Illustration]

Before the children could fairly comprehend what had passed, they were again lifted into the truck and began to glide back into the tunnel they had just quitted. But not again in darkness and silence; the entire band of Red Rovers accompanied them, illuminating the dark passage with the candles they had snatched from the walls. In a few moments they were at the entrance again. The great world lay beyond them once more with rocks and valleys suffused by the rosy light of the setting sun. The past seemed like a dream.



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But were they really awake now? They could not tell. They accepted everything with the confidence and credulity of all children who have no experience to compare with their first impressions and to whom the future contains nothing impossible. It was without surprise, therefore, that they felt themselves lifted on the shoulders of the men who were making quite a procession along the steep trail towards the settlement again. Polly noticed that at the mouth of the other tunnels they were greeted by men as if they were carrying tidings of great joy; that they stopped to rejoice together, and that in some mysterious manner their conductors had got their faces washed, and had become more like beings of the outer world. When they neared the settlement the excitement seemed to have become greater; people rushed out to shake hands with the men who were carrying them, and overpowered even the children with questions they could not understand. Only one sentence Polly could clearly remember as being the burden of all congratulations. "Struck the old lead at last!" With a faint consciousness that she knew something about it, she tried to assume a dignified attitude on the leader's shoulders even while she was beginning to be heavy with sleep.

[Illustration]

And then she remembered a crowd near her father's house, out of which her father came smiling pleasantly on her, but not interfering with her triumphal progress until the leader finally deposited her in her mother's lap in their own sitting room. And then she remembered being "cross" and declining to answer any questions, and shortly afterwards found herself comfortably in bed. Then she heard her mother say to her father:—

"It really seems too ridiculous for any thing, John, the idea of these grown men dressing themselves up to play with children."

"Ridiculous or not," said her father, "these grown men of the 'Excelsior' mine have just struck the famous old lode of Red Mountain, which is as good as a fortune to everybody on the Ridge, and were as wild as boys! And they say it never would have been found if Polly hadn't tumbled over the slide directly on top of the outcrop, and left the absurd wig of that wretched doll of hers to mark its site."

"And that," murmured Polly sleepily to her doll as she drew it closer to her breast, "is all that they know of it."

[Illustration]