

# “The Finest Story in the World”

By Rudyard Kipling

“O ever the knightly years were gone  
With the old world to the grave,  
I was a king in Babylon  
And you were a Christian slave.” –W. E. Henley.

His name was Charlie Mears; he was the only son of his mother who was a widow, and he lived in the north of London, coming into the City every day to work in a bank. He was twenty years old and suffered from aspirations. I met him in a public billiard-saloon where the marker called him by his given name, and he called the marker “Bulls-eyes.” Charley explained, a little nervously, that he had only come to the place to look on, and since looking on at games of skill is not a cheap amusement for the young, I suggested that Charlie should go back to his mother.

That was our first step toward better acquaintance. He would call on me sometimes in the evenings instead of running about London with his fellow-clerks; and before long, speaking of himself as a young man must, he told me of his aspirations, which were all literary. He desired to make himself an undying name chiefly through verse, though he was not above sending stories of love and death to the drop-a-penny-in-the-slot journals. It was my fate to sit still while Charlie read me poems of many hundred lines, and bulky fragments of plays that would surely shake the world. My reward was his unreserved confidence, and the self-revelations and troubles of a young man are almost as holy as those of a maiden. Charlie had never fallen in love, but was anxious to do so on the first opportunity; he believed in all things good and all things honorable, but, at the same time, was curiously careful to let me see that he knew his way about the world as befitted a bank clerk on twenty-five shillings a week. He rhymed “dove” with “love” and “moon” with “June,” and devoutly believed that they had never so been rhymed before. The long lame gaps in his plays he filled up with hasty words of apology and description and swept on, seeing all that he intended to do so clearly that he esteemed it already done, and turned to me for applause.

I fancy that his mother did not encourage his aspirations, and I know that his writing-table at home was the edge of his washstand. This he told me almost at the outset of our acquaintance; when he was ravaging my bookshelves, and a little before I was implored to speak the truth as to his chances of “writing something really great, you know.” Maybe I encouraged him too much, for, one night, he called on me, his eyes flaming with excitement, and said breathlessly:

“Do you mind—can you let me stay here and write all this evening? I won’t interrupt you, I won’t really. There’s no place for me to write in at my mother’s.”

“What’s the trouble?” I said, knowing well what that trouble was.

“I’ve a notion in my head that would make the most splendid story that was ever written. Do let me write it out here. It’s *such* a notion!”

There was no resisting the appeal. I set him a table; he hardly thanked me, but plunged into the work at once. For half an hour the pen scratched without stopping. Then Charlie sighed and tugged his hair. The scratching grew slower, there were more erasures, and at last ceased. The finest story in the world would not come forth.

“It looks such awful rot now” he said, mournfully. “And yet it seemed so good when I was thinking about it. What’s wrong?”

I could not dishearten him by saying the truth. So I answered: “Perhaps you don’t feel in the mood for writing.”

“Yes I do—except when I look at this stuff. Ugh!”

“Read me what you’ve done,” I said. He read, and it was wondrous bad and he paused at all the specially turgid sentences, expecting a little approval; for he was proud of those sentences, as I knew he would be.

“It needs compression,” I suggested, cautiously.

“I hate cutting my things down. I don’t think you could alter a word here without spoiling the sense. It reads better aloud than when I was writing it.”

“Charlie, you’re suffering from an alarming disease afflicting a numerous class. Put the thing by, and tackle it again in a week.”

“I want to do it at once. What do you think of it?”

“How can I judge from a half-written tale? Tell me the story as it lies in your head.”

Charlie told, and in the telling there was everything that his ignorance had so carefully prevented from escaping into the written word. I looked at him, and wondering whether it were possible, that he did not know the originality, the power of the notion that had come in his way? It was distinctly a Notion among notions. Men had been puffed up with pride by notions not a tithe as excellent and practicable. But Charlie babbled on serenely, interrupting the current of pure fancy with samples of horrible sentences that he purposed to use. I heard him out to the end. It would be folly to allow his idea to remain in his own inept hands, when I could do so much with it. Not all that could be done indeed; but, oh so much!

“What do you think?” he said, at last. “I fancy I shall call it ‘The Story of a Ship.’ ”

“I think the idea’s pretty good; but you won’t be able to handle it for ever so long. Now I”—

“Would it be of any use to you? Would you care to take it? I should be proud,” said Charlie, promptly.

There are few things sweeter in this world than the guileless, hot-headed, intemperate, open admiration of a junior. Even a woman in her blindest devotion does not fall into the gait of the man she adores, tilt her bonnet to the angle at which he wears his hat, or interlard her speech with his pet oaths. And Charlie did all these things. Still it was necessary to salve my conscience before I possessed myself of Charlie’s thoughts.

“Let’s make a bargain. I’ll give you a fiver for the notion,” I said.

Charlie became a bank-clerk at once.

“Oh, that’s impossible. Between two pals, you know, if I may call you so, and speaking as a man of the world, I couldn’t. Take the notion if it’s any use to you. I’ve heaps more.”

He had—none knew this better than I—but they were the notions of other men.

“Look at it as a matter of business-between men of the world,” I returned. “Five pounds will buy you any number of poetry-books. Business is business, and you may be sure I shouldn’t give that price unless”—

“Oh, if you put it *that way*,” said Charlie, visibly moved by the thought of the books. The bargain was clinched with an agreement that he should at unstated intervals come to me with all the notions that he possessed, should have a table of his own to write at, and unquestioned right to inflict upon me all his poems and fragments of poems. Then I said, “Now tell me how you came by this idea.”

“It came by itself.” Charlie’s eyes opened a little.

“Yes, but you told me a great deal about the hero that you must have read before somewhere.”

“I haven’t any time for reading, except when you let me sit here, and on Sundays I’m on my bicycle or down the river all day. There’s nothing wrong about the hero, is there?”

“Tell me again and I shall understand clearly. You say that your hero went pirating. How did he live?”

“He was on the lower deck of this ship-thing that I was telling you about.”

“What sort of ship?”

“It was the kind rowed with oars, and the sea spurts through the oar-holes and the men row sitting up to their knees in water. Then there’s a bench running down between the two lines of oars and an overseer with a whip walks up and down the bench to make the men work.”

“How do you know that?”

“It’s in the table. There’s a rope running overhead, looped to the upper deck, for the overseer to catch hold of when the ship rolls. When the overseer misses the rope once and falls among the rowers, remember the hero laughs at him and gets licked for it. He’s chained to his oar of course—the hero.”

“How is he chained?”

“With an iron band round his waist fixed to the bench he sits on, and a sort of handcuff on his left wrist chaining him to the oar. He’s on the lower deck where the worst men are sent, and the only light comes from the hatchways and through the oar-holes. Can’t you imagine the sunlight just squeezing through between the handle and the hole and wobbling about as the ship moves?”

“I can, but I can’t imagine your imagining it.”

“How could it be any other way? Now you listen to me. The long oars on the upper deck are managed by four men to each bench, the lower ones by three, and the lowest of all by two. Remember it’s quite dark on the lowest deck and all the men there go mad. When a man dies at his oar on that deck he isn’t thrown overboard, but cut up in his chains and stuffed through the oar-hole in little pieces.”

“Why?” I demanded, amazed, not so much at the information as the tone of command in which it was flung out.

“To save trouble and to frighten the others. It needs two overseers to drag a man’s body up to the top deck; and if the men at the lower deck oars were left alone, of course they’d stop rowing and try to pull up the benches by all standing up together in their chains.”

“You’ve a most provident imagination. Where have you been reading about galleys and galley-slaves?”

“Nowhere that I remember. I row a little when I get the chance. But, perhaps, if you say so, I may have read something.”

He went away shortly afterward to deal with booksellers, and I wondered how a bank clerk aged twenty could put into my hands with a profligate abundance of detail, all given with absolute assurance, the story of extravagant and bloodthirsty adventure, riot, piracy, and death in unnamed seas. He had led his hero a desperate dance through revolt against the overseas, to command of a ship of his own, and ultimate establishment of a kingdom on an island “somewhere in the sea, you know”; and, delighted with my paltry five pounds, had gone out to buy the notions of other men, that these might teach him how to write. I had the consolation of knowing that this notion was mine by right of purchase, and I thought that I could make something of it.

When next he came to me he was drunk—royally drunk on many poets for the first time revealed to him. His pupils were dilated, his words tumbled over each other, and he wrapped himself in quotations. Most of all was he drunk with Longfellow.

“Isn’t it splendid? Isn’t it superb?” he cried, after hasty greetings. “Listen to this—

“ ‘Wouldst thou,’—so the helmsman answered,  
‘Know the secret of the sea?  
Only those who brave its dangers  
Comprehend its mystery.’ ”

By gum!

“ ‘Only those who brave its dangers  
Comprehend its mystery.’ ”

he repeated twenty times, walking up and down the room and forgetting me. “But I can understand it too,” he said to himself. “I don’t know how to thank you for that fiver. And this; listen—

“ ‘I remember the black wharves and the ships  
And the sea-tides tossing free,  
And the Spanish sailors with bearded lips,  
And the beauty and mystery of the ships,  
And the magic of the sea.’ ”

I haven’t braved any dangers, but I feel as if I knew all about it.”

“You certainly seem to have a grip of the sea. Have you ever seen it?”

“When I was a little chap I went to Brighton once; we used to live in Coventry, though, before we came to London. I never saw it,

“ ‘When descends on the Atlantic  
The gigantic Storm-wind of the Equinox.’ ”

He shook me by the shoulder to make me understand the passion that was shaking himself.

“When that storm comes,” he continued, “I think that all the oars in the ship that I was talking about get broken, and the rowers have their chests smashed in by the bucking oar-heads. By the way, have you done anything with that notion of mine yet?”

“No. I was waiting to hear more of it from you. Tell me how in the world you’re so certain about the fittings of the ship. You know nothing of ships.”

“I don’t know. It’s as real as anything to me until I try to write it down. I was thinking about it only last night in bed, after you had loaned me ‘Treasure Island’; and I made up a whole lot of new things to go into the story.”

“What sort of things?”

“About the food the men ate; rotten figs and black beans and wine in a skin bag, passed from bench to bench.”

“Was the ship built so long ago as that?”

“As what? I don’t know whether it was long ago or not. It’s only a notion, but sometimes it seems just as real as if it was true. Do I bother you with talking about it?”

“Not in the least. Did you make up anything else?”

“Yes, but it’s nonsense.” Charlie flushed a little.

“Never mind; let’s hear about it.”

“Well, I was thinking over the story, and after awhile I got out of bed and wrote down on a piece of paper the sort of stuff the men might be supposed to scratch on their oars with the edges of their handcuffs. It seemed to make the thing more lifelike. It is so real to me, y’know.”

“Have you the paper on you?”

“Ye-es, but what’s the use of showing it? It’s only a lot of scratches. All the same, we might have ‘em reproduced in the book on the front page.”

“I’ll attend to those details. Show me what your men wrote.”

He pulled out of his pocket a sheet of note-paper, with a single line of scratches upon it, and I put this carefully away.

“What is it supposed to mean in English?” I said.

“Oh, I don’t know. Perhaps it means ‘I’m beastly tired.’ It’s great nonsense,” he repeated, “but all those men in the ship seem as real people to me. Do do something to the notion soon; I should like to see it written and printed.”

“But all you’ve told me would make a long book.”

“Make it then. You’ve only to sit down and write it out.”

“Give me a little time. Have you any more notions?”

“Not just now. I’m reading all the books I’ve bought. They’re splendid.”

When he had left I looked at the sheet of note-paper with the inscription upon it. Then I took my head tenderly between both hands, to make certain that it was not coming off or turning round. Then . . . but there seemed to be no interval between quitting my rooms and finding myself arguing with a policeman outside a door marked Private in a corridor of the British Museum. All I demanded, as politely as possible, was “the Greek antiquity man.” The policeman knew nothing except the rules of the Museum, and it became necessary to forage through all the houses and offices inside the gates. An elderly gentleman called away from his lunch put an end to my search by holding the note-paper between finger and thumb and sniffing at it scornfully.

“What does this mean? H’mmm,” said he. “So far as I can ascertain it is an attempt to write extremely corrupt Greek on the part”—here he glared at me with intention—“of an extremely illiterate—ah—person.” He read slowly from the paper, “*Pollock, Erckman, Tauchnitz, Henniker*” four names familiar to me.

“Can you tell me what the corruption is supposed to mean—the gist of the thing?” I asked.

“I have been—many times—overcome with weariness in this particular employment. That is the meaning.” He returned me the paper, and I fled without a word of thanks, explanation, or apology.

I might have been excused for forgetting much. To me of all men had been given the chance to write the most marvelous tale in the world, nothing less than the story of a Greek galley-slave, as told by himself. Small wonder that his dreaming had seemed real to Charlie. The Fates that are so careful to shut the doors of each successive life behind us had, in this case, been neglectful, and Charlie was looking, though that he did not know, where never man had been permitted to look with full knowledge since Time began. Above all he was absolutely ignorant of the knowledge sold to me for five pounds; and he would retain that ignorance, for bank-clerks do not understand metempsychosis, and a sound commercial education does not include Greek. He would supply me—here I capered among the dumb gods of Egypt and laughed in their battered faces—with material to make my tale sure—so sure that the world would hail it as an impudent and vamped fiction. And I—I alone would know that it was absolutely and literally true. I,—I

alone held this jewel to my hand for the cutting and polishing. Therefore I danced again among the gods till a policeman saw me and took steps in my direction.

It remained now only to encourage Charlie to talk, and here there was no difficulty. But I had forgotten those accursed books of poetry. He came to me time after time, as useless as a surcharged phonograph—drunk on Byron, Shelley, or Keats. Knowing now what the boy had been in his past lives, and desperately anxious not to lose one word of his babble, I could not hide from him my respect and interest. He misconstrued both into respect for the present soul of Charlie Mears, to whom life was as new as it was to Adam, and interest in his readings; and stretched my patience to breaking point by reciting poetry—not his own now, but that of others. I wished every English poet blotted out of the memory of mankind. I blasphemed the mightiest names of song because they had drawn Charlie from the path of direct narrative, and would, later, spur him to imitate them; but I choked down my impatience until the first flood of enthusiasm should have spent itself and the boy returned to his dreams.

“What’s the use of my telling you what *I* think, when these chaps wrote things for the angels to read?” he growled, one evening. “Why don’t you write something like theirs?”

“I don’t think you’re treating me quite fairly,” I said, speaking under strong restraint.

“I’ve given you the story,” he said, shortly replunging into “Lara.”

“But I want the details.”

“The things I make up about that damned ship that you call a galley? They’re quite easy. You can just make ’em up yourself. Turn up the gas a little, I want to go on reading.”

I could have broken the gas globe over his head for his amazing stupidity. I could indeed make up things for myself did I only know what Charlie did not know that he knew. But since the doors were shut behind me I could only wait his youthful pleasure and strive to keep him in good temper. One minute’s want of guard might spoil a priceless revelation: now and again he would toss his books aside—he kept them in my rooms, for his mother would have been shocked at the waste of good money had she seen them—and launched into his sea dreams. Again I cursed all the poets of England. The plastic mind of the bank-clerk had been overlaid, colored and distorted by that which he had read, and the result as delivered was a confused tangle of other voices most like the muttered song through a City telephone in the busiest part of the day.

He talked of the galley—his own galley had he but known it—with illustrations borrowed from the “Bride of Abydos.” He pointed the experiences of his hero with quotations from “The Corsair,” and threw in deep and desperate moral reflections from “Cain” and “Manfred,” expecting me to use them all. Only when the talk turned on Longfellow were the jarring cross-currents dumb, and I knew that Charlie was speaking the truth as he remembered it.

“What do you think of this?” I said one evening, as soon as I understood the medium in which his memory worked best, and, before he could expostulate read him the whole of “The Sag of King Olaf!”

He listened open-mouthed, flushed his hands drumming on the back of the sofa where he lay, till I came to the Songs of Emar Tamberskelver and the verse:

“Emar then, the arrow taking  
From the loosened string,  
Answered: ‘That was Norway breaking  
'Neath thy hand, O King. ’ ”

He gasped with pure delight of sound.

“That’s better than Byron, a little,” I ventured.

“Better? Why it’s *true*! How could he have known?”

I went back and repeated:

“ ‘What was that?’ said Olaf, standing  
On the quarter-deck,  
‘Something heard I like the stranding  
Of a shattered wreck.’ ”

“How could he have known how the ships crash and the oars rip out and go *z-zzp* all along the line? Why only the other night. . . . But go back please and read ‘The Skerry of Shrieks’ again.”

“No, I’m tired. Let’s talk. What happened the other night?”

“I had an awful nightmare about that galley of ours. I dreamed I was drowned in a fight. You see we ran alongside another ship in harbor. The water was dead still except where our oars whipped it up. You know where I always sit in the galley?” He spoke haltingly at first, under a fine English fear of being laughed at.

“No. That’s news to me,” I answered, meekly, my heart beginning to beat.

“On the fourth oar from the bow on the right side on the upper deck. There were four of us at the oar, all chained. I remember watching the water and trying to get my handcuffs off before the row began. Then we closed up on the other ship, and all their fighting men jumped over our bulwarks, and my bench broke and I was pinned down with the three other fellows on top of me, and the big oar jammed across our backs.”

“Well?” Charlie’s eyes were alive and alight. He was looking at the wall behind my chair.

“I don’t know how we fought. The men were trampling all over my back, and I lay low. Then our rowers on the left side—tied to their oars, you know—began to yell and back water. I could hear the water sizzle, and we spun round like a cockchafer and I knew, lying where I was, that there was a galley coming up bow-on, to ram us on the left side. I could just lift up my head and see her sail over the bulwarks. We wanted to meet her bow to bow, but it was too late. We could only turn a little bit because the galley on our right had hooked herself on to us and stopped our moving. Then, by gum! there was a crash! Our left oars began to break as the other galley, the moving one y’know, stuck her nose into them. Then the lower-deck oars shot up through the deck-planking, butt first, and one of them jumped clean up into the air and came down again close to my head.”

“How was that managed?”

“The moving galley’s bow was plunking them back through their own oarholes, and I could hear the devil of a shindy in the decks below. Then her nose caught us nearly in the middle, and we tilted sideways, and the fellows in the right-hand galley unhitched their hooks and ropes, and threw things on to our upper deck—arrows, and hot pitch or something that stung, and we went up and up and up on the left side, and the right side dipped, and I twisted my head round and saw the water stand still as it topped the right bulwarks, and then it curled over and crashed down on the whole lot of us on the right side, and I felt it hit my back, and I woke.”

“One minute, Charlie. When the sea topped the bulwarks, what did it look like?” I had my reasons for asking. A man of my acquaintance had once gone down with a leaking ship in a still sea, and had seen the water-level pause for an instant ere it fell on the deck.

“It looked just like a banjo-string drawn tight, and it seemed to stay there for years,” said Charlie.

Exactly! The other man had said: “It looked like a silver wire laid down along the bulwarks, and I thought it was never going to break.” He had paid everything except the bare life for this

little valueless piece of knowledge, and I had traveled ten thousand weary miles to meet him and take his knowledge at second hand. But Charlie, the bank-clerk, on twenty-five shillings a week, he who had never been out of sight of a London omnibus, knew it all. It was no consolation to me that once in his lives he had been forced to die for his gains. I also must have died scores of times, but behind me, because I could have used my knowledge, the doors were shut.

“And then?” I said, trying to put away the devil of envy.

“The funny thing was, though, in all the mess I didn’t feel a bit astonished or frightened. It seemed as if I’d been in a good many fights, because I told my next man so when the row began. But that cad of an overseer on my deck wouldn’t unloose our chains and give us a chance. He always said that we’d all be set free after a battle, but we never were; we never were.” Charlie shook his head mournfully.

“What a scoundrel!”

“I should say he was. He never gave us enough to eat, and sometimes we were so thirsty that we used to drink salt-water. I can taste that salt-water still.”

“Now tell me something about the harbor where the fight was fought.”

“I didn’t dream about that. I know it was a harbor, though; because we were tied up to a ring on a white wall and all the face of the stone under water was covered with wood to prevent our ram getting chipped when the tide made us rock.”

“That’s curious. Our hero commanded the galley? Didn’t he?”

“Didn’t he just! He stood by the bows and shouted like a good ’un. He was the man who killed the overseer.”

“But you were all drowned together, Charlie, weren’t you?”

“I can’t make that fit quite,” he said with a puzzled look. “The galley must have gone down with all hands and yet I fancy that the hero went on living afterward. Perhaps he climbed into the attacking ship. I wouldn’t see that, of course. I was dead, you know.”

He shivered slightly and protested that he could remember no more.

I did not press him further, but to satisfy myself that he lay in ignorance of the workings of his own mind, deliberately introduced him to Mortimer Collins’s “Transmigration,” and gave him a sketch of the plot before he opened the pages.

“What rot it all is!” he said, frankly, at the end of an hour. “I don’t understand his nonsense about the Red Planet Mars and the King, and the rest of it. Chuck me the Longfellow again.”

I handed him the book and wrote out as much as I could remember of his description of the sea-fight, appealing to him from time to time for confirmation of fact or detail. He would answer without raising his eyes from the book, as assuredly as though all his knowledge lay before him on the printed page. I spoke under the normal key of my voice that the current might not be broken, and I know that he was not aware of what he was saying, for his thoughts were out on the sea with Longfellow.

“Charlie,” I asked, “when the rowers on the galleys mutinied how did they kill their overseers?”

“Tore up the benches and brained ’em. That happened when a heavy sea was running. An overseer on the lower deck slipped from the centre plank and fell among the rowers. They choked him to death against the side of the ship with their chained hands quite quietly, and it was too dark for the other overseer to see what had happened. When he asked, he was pulled down too and choked, and the lower deck fought their way up deck by deck, with the pieces of the broken benches banging behind ’em. How they howled!”

“And what happened after that?”

“I don’t know. The hero went away—red hair and red beard and all. That was after he had captured our galley, I think”

The sound of my voice irritated him, and he motioned slightly with his left hand as a man does when interruption jars.

“You never told me he was redheaded before, or that he captured your galley,” I said, after a discreet interval.

Charlie did not raise his eyes.

“He was as red as a red bear,” said he, abstractedly. “He came from the north; they said so in the galley when he looked for rowers—not slaves, but free men. Afterward—years and years afterward—news came from another ship, or else he came back”—

His lips moved in silence. He was rapturously retasting some poem before him.

“Where had he been, then?” I was almost whispering that the sentence might come gentle to whichever section of Charlie’s brain was working on my behalf.

“To the Beaches—the Long and Wonderful Beaches!” was the reply, after a minute of silence.

“To Furdurstrandi?” I asked, tingling from head to foot.

“Yes, to Furdurstrandi,” he pronounced the word in a new fashion “And I too saw”— The voice failed.

“Do you know what you have said?” I shouted, incautiously.

He lifted his eyes, fully roused now. “No!” he snapped. “I wish you’d let a chap go on reading. Hark to this:

“ ‘But Othere, the old sea captain,  
He neither paused nor stirred  
Till the king listened, and then  
Once more took up his pen  
And wrote down every word.

“ ‘And to the King of the Saxons  
In witness of the truth,  
Raising his noble head,  
He stretched his brown hand and said,  
“Behold this walrus tooth.”

By Jove, what chaps those must have been, to go sailing all over the shop never knowing where they’d fetch the land! Hah!”

“Charlie,” I pleaded, “if you’ll only be sensible for a minute or two I’ll make our hero in our tale every inch as good as Othere.”

“Umph! Longfellow wrote that poem. I don’t care about writing things any more. I want to read.” He was thoroughly out of tune now, and raging over my own ill-luck, I left him.

Conceive yourself at the door of the world’s treasure-house guarded by a child—an idle irresponsible child playing knuckle-bones—on whose favor depends the gift of the key, and you will imagine one-half my torment. Till that evening Charlie had spoken nothing that might not lie within the experiences of a Greek galley-slave. But now, or there was no virtue in books, he had talked of some desperate adventure of the Vikings, of Thorfin Karlsefne’s sailing to Wineland, which is America, in the ninth or tenth century. The battle in the harbor he had seen; and his own death he had described. But this was a much more startling plunge into the past. Was it possible that he had skipped half a dozen lives and was then dimly remembering some episode of a thousand years later? It was a maddening jumble, and the worst of it was that Charlie Mears in

his normal condition was the last person in the world to clear it up. I could only wait and watch, but I went to bed that night full of the wildest imaginings. There was nothing that was not possible if Charlie's detestable memory only held good.

I might rewrite the Saga of Thorfin Karlsefne as it had never been written before, might tell the story of the first discovery of America, myself the discoverer. But I was entirely at Charlie's mercy, and so long as there was a three-and-six-penny Bohn volume within his reach Charlie would not tell. I dared not curse him openly; I hardly dared jog his memory, for I was dealing with the experiences of a thousand years ago, told through the mouth of a boy of today; and a boy of to-day is affected by every change of tone and gust of opinion, so that he lies even when he desires to speak the truth.

I saw no more of him for nearly a week. When next I met him it was in Gracechurch Street with a billbook chained to his waist. Business took him over London Bridge and I accompanied him. He was very full of the importance of that book and magnified it. As we passed over the Thames we paused to look at a steamer unloading great slabs of white and brown marble. A barge drifted under the steamer's stern and a lonely cow in that barge bellowed. Charlie's face changed from the face of the bank-clerk to that of an unknown and—though he would not have believed this—a much shrewder man. He flung out his arm across the parapet of the bridge, and laughing very loudly, said:

“When they heard *our* bulls bellow the Skroelings ran away!”

I waited only for an instant, but the barge and the cow had disappeared under the bows of the steamer before I answered.

“Charlie, what do you suppose are Skroelings?”

“Never heard of 'em before. They sound like a new kind of seagull. What a chap you are for asking questions!” he replied. “I have to go to the cashier of the Omnibus Company yonder. Will you wait for me and we can lunch somewhere together? I've a notion for a poem.”

“No, thanks. I'm off. You're sure you know nothing about Skroelings?”

“Not unless he's been entered for the Liverpool Handicap.” He nodded and disappeared in the crowd.

Now it is written in the Saga of Eric the Red or that of Thorfin Karlsefne, that nine hundred years ago when Karlsefne's galleys came to Leif's booths, which Leif had erected in the unknown land called Markland, which may or may not have been Rhode Island, the Skroelings—and the Lord He knows who these may or may not have been—came to trade with the Vikings, and ran away because they were frightened at the bellowing of the cattle which Thorfin had brought with him in the ships. But what in the world could a Greek slave know of that affair? I wandered up and down among the streets trying to unravel the mystery, and the more I considered it, the more baffling it grew. One thing only seemed certain and that certainty took away my breath for the moment. If I came to full knowledge of anything at all, it would not be one life of the soul in Charlie Mears's body, but half a dozen-half a dozen several and separate existences spent on blue water in the morning of the world!

Then I walked round the situation.

Obviously if I used my knowledge I should stand alone and unapproachable until all men were as wise as myself. That would be something, but manlike I was ungrateful. It seemed bitterly unfair that Charlie's memory should fail me when I needed it most. Great Powers above—I looked up at them through the fog smoke—did the Lords of Life and Death know what this meant to me? Nothing less than eternal fame of the best kind; that comes from One, and is shared by one alone. I would be content—remembering Clive, I stood astounded at my own

moderation,—with the mere right to tell one story, to work out one little contribution to the light literature of the day. If Charlie were permitted full recollection for one hour—for sixty short minutes—of existences that had extended over a thousand years—I would forego all profit and honor from all that I should make of his speech. I would take no share in the commotion that would follow throughout the particular corner of the earth that calls itself “the world.” The thing should be put forth anonymously. Nay, I would make other men believe that they had written it. They would hire bull-headed self-advertising Englishmen to bellow it abroad. Preachers would found a fresh conduct of life upon it, swearing that it was new and that they had lifted the fear of death from all mankind. Every Orientalist in Europe would patronize it discursively with Sanskrit and Pali texts. Terrible women would invent unclean variants of the men’s belief for the elevation of their sisters. Churches and religions would war over it. Between the hailing and re-starting of an omnibus I foresaw the scuffles that would arise among half a dozen denominations all professing “the doctrine of the True Metempsychosis as applied to the world and the New Era”; and saw, too, the respectable English newspapers shying, like frightened kine, over the beautiful simplicity of the tale. The mind leaped forward a hundred—two hundred—a thousand years. I saw with sorrow that men would mutilate and garble the story; that rival creeds would turn it upside down till, at last, the western world which clings to the dread of death more closely than the hope of life, would set it aside as an interesting superstition and stampede after some faith so long forgotten that it seemed altogether new. Upon this I changed the terms of the bargain that I would make with the Lords of Life and Death. Only let me know, let me write, the story with sure knowledge that I wrote the truth, and I would burn the manuscript as a solemn sacrifice. Five minutes after the last line was written I would destroy it all. But I must be allowed to write it with absolute certainty.

There was no answer. The flaming colors of an Aquarium poster caught my eye and I wondered whether it would be wise or prudent to lure Charlie into the hands of the professional mesmerist, and whether, if he were under his power, he would speak of his past lives. If he did, and if people believed him . . . but Charlie would be frightened and flustered, or made conceited by the interviews. In either case he would begin to lie, through fear or vanity. He was safest in my own hands.

“They are very funny fools, your English,” said a voice at my elbow, and turning round I recognized a casual acquaintance, a young Bengali law student, called Grish Chunder, whose father had sent him to England to become civilized. The old man was a retired native official, and on an income of five pounds a month contrived to allow his son two hundred pounds a year, and the run of his teeth in a city where he could pretend to be the cadet of a royal house, and tell stories of the brutal Indian bureaucrats who ground the faces of the poor.

Grish Chunder was a young, fat, full-bodied Bengali dressed with scrupulous care in frock coat, tall hat, light trousers and tan gloves. But I had known him in the days when the brutal Indian Government paid for his university education, and he contributed cheap sedition to *Sachi Durpan*, and intrigued with the wives of his schoolmates.

“That is very funny and very foolish,” he said, nodding at the poster. “I am going down to the Northbrook Club. Will you come too?”

I walked with him for some time. “You are not well,” he said. “What is there in your mind? You do not talk.”

“Grish Chunder, you’ve been too well educated to believe in a God, haven’t you?”

“Oah, yes, *here!* But when I go home I must conciliate popular superstition, and make ceremonies of purification, and my women will anoint idols.”

“And bang up *tulsi* and feast the *purohit*, and take you back into caste again and make a good *khuttrj* of you again, you advanced social Free-thinker. And you’ll eat *desi* food, and like it all, from the smell in the courtyard to the mustard oil over you.”

“I shall very much like it,” said Grish Chunder, unguardedly. “Once a Hindu—always a Hindu. But I like to know what the English think they know.”

“I’ll tell you something that one Englishman knows. It’s an old tale to you.”

I began to tell the story of Charlie in English, but Grish Chunder put a question in the vernacular, and the history went forward naturally in the tongue best suited for its telling. After all it could never have been told in English. Grish Chunder heard me, nodding from time to time, and then came up to my rooms where I finished the tale.

“*Beshak*,” he said, philosophically. “*Lekin darwaza band hai*. (Without doubt, but the door is shut.) I have heard of this remembering of previous existences among my people. It is of course an old tale with us, but, to happen to an Englishman—a cow-fed *Malechk*—an outcast. By Jove, that is most peculiar!”

“Outcast yourself, Grish Chunder! You eat cow-beef every day. Let’s think the thing over. The boy remembers his incarnations.”

“Does he know that?” said Grish Chunder, quietly, swinging his legs as he sat on my table. He was speaking in English now.

“He does not know anything. Would I speak to you if he did? Go on!”

“There is no going on at all. If you tell that to your friends they will say you are mad and put it in the papers. Suppose, now, you prosecute for libel.”

“Let’s leave that out of the question entirely. Is there any chance of his being made to speak?”

“There is a chance. Osh, yess! But if he spoke it would mean that all this world would end now—instanto—fall down on your head. These things are not allowed, you know. As I said, the door is shut.”

“Not a ghost of a chance?”

“How can there be? You are a Christi-an, and it is forbidden to eat, in your books, of the Tree of Life, or else you would never die. How shall you all fear death if you all know what your friend does not know that he knows? I am afraid to be kicked, but I am not afraid to die, because I know what I know. You are not afraid to be kicked, but you are afraid to die. If you were not, by God! you English would be all over the shop in an hour, upsetting the balances of power, and making commotions. It would not be good. But no fear. He will remember a little and a little less, and he will call it dreams. Then he will forget altogether. When I passed my First Arts Examination in Calcutta that was all in the cram-book on Wordsworth. Trailing clouds of glory, you know.”

“This seems to be an exception to the rule.”

“There are no exceptions to rules. Some are not so hard-looking as others, but they are all the same when you touch. If this friend of yours said so-and-so and so-and-so, indicating that he remembered all his lost lives, or one piece of a lost life, he would not be in the bank another hour. He would be what you called sack because he was mad, and they would send him to an asylum for lunatics. You can see that, my friend.”

“Of course I can, but I wasn’t thinking of him. His name need never appear in the story.”

“Ah! I see. That story will never be written. You can try.”

“I am going to.”

“For your own credit and for the sake of money, of course?”

“No. For the sake of writing the story. On my honor that will be all.”

“Even then there is no chance. You cannot play with the Gods. It is a very pretty story now. As they say, Let it go on that-I mean at that. Be quick; he will not last long.”

“How do you mean?”

“What I say. He has never, so far, thought about a woman.”

“Hasn’t he though!” I remembered some of Charlie’s confidences.

“I mean no woman has thought about him. When that comes; *bus—hogya*—all up’ I know. There are millions of women here. Housemaids, for instance.”

I winced at the thought of my story being ruined by a housemaid. And yet nothing was more probable.

Grish Chunder grinned.

“Yes—also pretty girls—cousins of his house, and perhaps *not* of his house. One kiss that he gives back again and remembers will cure all this nonsense. or else”—

“Or else what? Remember he does not know that he knows.”

“I know that. Or else, if nothing happens he will become immersed in the trade and the financial speculations like the rest. It must be so. You can see that it must be so. But the woman will come first, I think.”

There was a rap at the door, and Charlie charged in impetuously. He had been released from office, and by the look in his eyes I could see that he had come over for a long talk; most probably with poems in his pockets. Charlie’s poems were very wearying, but sometimes they led him to talk about the galley.

Grish Chunder looked at him keenly for a minute.

“I beg your pardon,” Charlie said, uneasily; “I didn’t know you had any one with you.”

“I am going,” said Grish Chunder.

He drew me into the lobby as he departed.

“That is your man,” he said, quickly. “I tell you he will never speak all you wish. That is rot—bosh. But he would be most good to make to see things. Suppose now we pretend that it was only play”—I had never seen Grish Chunder so excited—“and pour the ink-pool into his hand. Eh, what do you think? I tell you that he could see *anything* that a man could see. Let me get the ink and the camphor. He is a seer and he will tell us very many things.”

“He may be all you say, but I’m not going to trust him to your Gods and devils.”

“It will not hurt him. He will only feel a little stupid and dull when he wakes up. You have seen boys look into the ink-pool before.”

“That is the reason why I am not going to see it any more. You’d better go, Grish Chunder.”

He went, declaring far down the staircase that it was throwing away my only chance of looking into the future.

This left me unmoved, for I was concerned for the past, and no peering of hypnotized boys into mirrors and ink-pools would help me do that. But I recognized Grish Chunder’s point of view and sympathized with it.

“What a big black brute that was!” said Charlie, when I returned to him. “Well, look here, I’ve just done a poem; did it instead of playing dominoes after lunch. May I read it?”

“Let me read it to myself.”

“Then you miss the proper expression. Besides, you always make my things sound as if the rhymes were all wrong.”

“Read it aloud, then. You’re like the rest of ’em.”

Charlie mouthed me his poem, and it was not much worse than the average of his verses. He had been reading his book faithfully, but he was not pleased when I told him that I preferred my Longfellow undiluted with Charlie.

Then we began to go through the MS. line by line; Charlie parrying every objection and correction with:

“Yes, that may be better, but you don’t catch what I’m driving at.”

Charlie was, in one way at least, very like one kind of poet.

There was a pencil scrawl at the back of the paper and “What’s that?” I said.

“Oh that’s not poetry at all. It’s some rot I wrote last night before I went to bed and it was too much bother to hunt for rhymes; so I made it a sort of a blank verse instead.”

Here is Charlie’s “blank verse”:

“We pulled for you when the wind was against us and the sails were low.

*Will you never let us go?*

We ate bread and onions when you took towns or ran aboard quickly when you were beaten back by the foe,

The captains walked up and down the deck in fair weather singing songs, but we were below,

We fainted with our chins on the oars and you did not see that we were idle for we still swung to and fro.

*Will you never let us go?*

The salt made the oar handles like sharkskin; our knees were cut to the bone with salt cracks; our hair was stuck to our foreheads; and our lips were cut to our gums and you whipped us because we could not row.

*Will you never let us go?*

But in a little time we shall run out of the portholes as the water runs along the oarblade, and though you tell the others to row after us you will never catch us till you catch the oar-thresh and tie up the winds in the belly of the sail. Aho!

*Will you never let us go?”*

“H’m. What’s oar-thresh, Charlie?”

“The water washed up by the oars. That’s the sort of song they might sing in the galley, y’know. Aren’t you ever going to finish that story and give me some of the profits?”

“It depends on yourself. If you had only told me more about your hero in the first instance it might have been finished by now. You’re so hazy in your notions.”

“I only want to give you the general notion of it—the knocking about from place to place and the fighting and all that. Can’t you fill in the rest yourself? Make the hero save a girl on a pirate-galley and marry her or do something.”

“You’re a really helpful collaborator. I suppose the hero went through some few adventures before he married.”

“Well then, make him a very artful card—a low sort of man—a sort of political man who went about making treaties and breaking them—a black-haired chap who hid behind the mast when the fighting began.”

“But you said the other day that he was red-haired.”

“I couldn’t have. Make him black-haired of course. You’ve no imagination.”

Seeing that I had just discovered the entire principles upon which the half-memory falsely called imagination is based, I felt entitled to laugh, but forbore, for the sake of the tale.

“You’re right. You’re the man with imagination. A black-haired chap in a decked ship,” I said.

“No, an open ship—like a big boat.”

This was maddening.

“Your ship has been built and designed, closed and decked in; you said so yourself,” I protested.

“No, no, not that ship. That was open, or half decked because. By Jove you’re right. You made me think of the hero as a red-haired chap. Of course if he were red, the ship would be an open one with painted sails.”

Surely, I thought he would remember now that he had served in two galleys at least—in a three-decked Greek one under the black-haired “political man,” and again in a Viking’s open sea-serpent under the man “red as a red bear” who went to Markland. The devil prompted me to speak.

“Why, ‘of course,’ Charlie?” said I. “I don’t know. Are you making fun of me?”

The current was broken for the time being. I took up a notebook and pretended to make many entries in it.

“It’s a pleasure to work with an imaginative chap like yourself,” I said after a pause. “The way that you’ve brought out the character of the hero is simply wonderful.”

“Do you think so?” he answered, with a pleased flush. “I often tell myself that there’s more in me than my mo—than people think.”

“There’s an enormous amount in you.”

“Then, won’t you let me send an essay on The Ways of Bank Clerks to *Tit-Bits*, and get the guinea prize?”

“That wasn’t exactly what I meant, old fellow: perhaps it would be better to wait a little and go ahead with the galley-story.”

“Ah, but I sha’n’t get the credit of that. *Tit-Bits* would publish my name and address if I win. What are you grinning at? They *would*.”

“I know it. Suppose you go for a walk. I want to look through my notes about our story.”

Now this reprehensible youth who left me, a little hurt and put back, might for aught he or I knew have been one of the crew of the *Argo*—had been certainly slave or comrade to Thorfin Karlsefne. Therefore he was deeply interested in guinea competitions. Remembering what Grish Chunder had said I laughed aloud. The Lords of Life and Death would never allow Charlie Mears to speak with full knowledge of his pasts, and I must even piece out what he had told me with my own poor inventions while Charlie wrote of the ways of bank-clerks.

I got together and placed on one file all my notes; and the net result was not cheering. I read them a second time. There was nothing that might not have been compiled at second-hand from other people’s books—except, perhaps, the story of the fight in the harbor. The adventures of a Viking had been written many times before; the history of a Greek galley-slave was no new thing, and though I wrote both, who could challenge or confirm the accuracy of my details? I might as well tell a tale of two thousand years hence. The Lords of Life and Death were as cunning as Grish Chunder had hinted. They would allow nothing to escape that might trouble or make easy the minds of men. Though I was convinced of this, yet I could not leave the tale alone. Exaltation followed reaction, not once, but twenty times in the next few weeks. My moods varied with the March sunlight and flying clouds. By night or in the beauty of a spring morning I perceived that I could write that tale and shift continents thereby. In the wet, windy afternoons, I saw that the tale might indeed be written, but would be nothing more than a faked, false-varnished, sham-rusted piece of Wardour Street work at the end. Then I blessed Charlie in many ways—though it was no fault of his. He seemed to be busy with prize competitions, and I saw less and less of him as the weeks went by and the earth cracked and grew ripe to spring, and the buds swelled in their sheaths. He did not care to read or talk of what he had read, and there was a new ring of self-assertion in his voice. I hardly cared to remind him of the galley when we met; but Charlie alluded to it on every occasion, always as a story from which money was to be made.

“I think I deserve twenty-five per cent., don’t I, at least,” he said, with beautiful frankness. “I supplied all the ideas, didn’t I?”

This greediness for silver was a new side in his nature. I assumed that it had been developed in the City, where Charlie was picking up the curious nasal drawl of the underbred City man.

“When the thing’s done we’ll talk about it. I can’t make anything of it at present. Red-haired or black-haired hero are equally difficult.”

He was sitting by the fire staring at the red coals. “I can’t understand what you find so difficult. It’s all as clean as mud to me,” he replied. A jet of gas puffed out between the bars, took light and whistled softly. “Suppose we take the red-haired hero’s adventures first, from the time that he came south to my galley and captured it and sailed to the Beaches.”

I knew better now than to interrupt Charlie. I was out of reach of pen and paper, and dared not move to get them lest I should break the current. The gas-jet puffed and whinnied, Charlie’s voice dropped almost to a whisper, and he told a tale of the sailing of an open galley to Furdurstrandi, of sunsets on the open sea, seen under the curve of the one sail evening after evening when the galley’s beak was notched into the centre of the sinking disc, and “we sailed by that for we had no other guide,” quoth Charlie. He spoke of a landing on an island and explorations in its woods, where the crew killed three men whom they found asleep under the pines. Their ghosts, Charlie said, followed the galley, swimming and choking in the water, and the crew cast lots and threw one of their number overboard as a sacrifice to the strange gods whom they had offended. Then they ate sea-weed when their provisions failed, and their legs swelled, and their leader, the red-haired man, killed two rowers who mutinied, and after a year spent among the woods they set sail for their own country, and a wind that never failed carried them back so safely that they all slept at night. This and much more Charlie told. Sometimes the voice fell so low that I could not catch the words, though every nerve was on the strain. He spoke of their leader, the red-haired man, as a pagan speaks of his God; for it was he who cheered them and slew them impartially as he thought best for their needs; and it was he who steered them for three days among floating ice, each floe crowded with strange beasts that “tried to sail with us,” said Charlie, “and we beat them back with the handles of the oars.”

The gas-jet went out, a burned coal gave way, and the fire settled down with a tiny crash to the bottom of the grate. Charlie ceased speaking, and I said no word.

“By Jove!” he said, at last, shaking his head. “I’ve been staring at the fire till I’m dizzy. What was I going to say?”

“Something about the galley.”

“I remember now. It’s 25 per cent. of the profits, isn’t it?”

“It’s anything you like when I’ve done the tale.”

“I wanted to be sure of that. I must go now. I’ve, I’ve an appointment.” And he left me.

Had my eyes not been held I might have known that that broken muttering over the fire was the swan-song of Charlie Mears. But I thought it the prelude to fuller revelation. At last and at last I should cheat the Lords of Life and Death!

When next Charlie came to me I received him with rapture. He was nervous and embarrassed, but his eyes were very full of light, and his lips a little parted.

“I’ve done a poem,” he said; and then quickly: “it’s the best I’ve ever done. Read it.” He thrust it into my hand and retreated to the window.

I groaned inwardly. It would be the work of half an hour to criticise—that is to say praise—the poem sufficiently to please Charlie. Then I had good reason to groan, for Charlie, discarding his

favorite centipede metres, had launched into shorter and choppier verse, and verse with a motive at the back of it. This is what I read:

“The day is most fair, the cheery wind  
Hallows behind the hill,  
Where be bends the wood as seemeth good,  
And the sapling to his will!  
Riot O wind; there is that in my blood  
That would not have thee still!

“She gave me herself, O Earth, O Sky:  
Grey sea, she is mine alone!  
Let the sullen boulders bear my cry,  
And rejoice tho’ they be but stone!

“Mine! I have won her O good brown earth,  
Make merry! ’Tis hard on Spring;  
Make merry; my love is doubly worth  
All worship your fields can bring!  
Let the bind that tills you feel my mirth  
At the early harrowing.”

“Yes, it’s the early harrowing, past a doubt,” I said, with a dread at my heart. Charlie smiled, but did not answer.

“Red cloud of the sunset, tell it abroad;  
I am victor. Greet me O Sun,  
Dominant master and absolute lord  
Over the soul of one!”

“Well?” said Charlie, looking over my shoulder.

I thought it far from well, and very evil indeed, when he silently laid a photograph on the paper—the photograph of a girl with a curly head, and a foolish slack mouth.

“Isn’t it— isn’t it wonderful?” he whispered, pink to the tips of his ears, wrapped in the rosy mystery of first love. “I didn’t know; I didn’t think—it came like a thunderclap.”

“Yes. It comes like a thunderclap. Are you very happy, Charlie?”

“My God—she—she loves me!” He sat down repeating the last words to himself. I looked at the hairless face, the narrow shoulders already bowed by desk-work, and wondered when, where, and how he had loved in his past lives.

“What will your mother say?” I asked, cheerfully.

“I don’t care a damn what she says.”

At twenty the things for which one does not care a damn should, properly, be many, but one must not include mothers in the list. I told him this gently; and he described Her, even as Adam must have described to the newly named beasts the glory and tenderness and beauty of Eve. Incidentally I learned that She was a tobacconist’s assistant with a weakness for pretty dress, and had told him four or five times already that She had never been kissed by a man before.

Charlie spoke on, and on, and on; while I, separated from him by thousands of years, was considering the beginnings of things. Now I understood why the Lords of Life and Death shut the doors so carefully behind us. It is that we may not remember our first wooings. Were it not so, our world would be without inhabitants in a hundred years.

“Now, about that galley-story,” I said, still more cheerfully, in a pause in the rush of the speech.

Charlie looked up as though he had been hit. “The galley—what galley? Good heavens, don’t joke, man! This is serious! You don’t know how serious it is!”

Grish Chunder was right. Charlie had tasted the love of woman that kills remembrance, and the finest story in the world would never be written.