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"A Fighter in Green," &c., &c.

CHAPTER I.

An Opening in Life.

THE story of my life contains but one real adventure, and that occurred many years ago, when I was a mere boy almost fresh from school.

It came about mainly through Uncle Tom Sedgwick, my mother's brother, a very skilful engineer, equally able to make with his own hands wonderful pieces of machinery, or to superintend their construction by others.

He was much younger than my father, a short, slight man but possessed of great strength and hard as iron. It was rather embarrassing when Uncle Tom shook hands with you thoughtlessly; his grip generally having the effect of numbing your fingers for an hour.

"What are you going to do with this boy?" said he to my father one day.

"I really don't know. There's my own profession"—my father was a country doctor with a large practice and a small income—"or the law, or I might get him a berth in Cuddle's Bank, but he doesn't seem to care for any of them."

"Quite right!" returned Uncle Tom stoutly. "Too many blanks; too few prizes. Stand up, Steph"—my name is Stephen Barton—"and let us look at you. Why, he tops me already, and has more bone than a young cart-horse. What do you say, Steph? Any desire to walk the London Hospitals?"

"Not the least, uncle!" I answered with a blush.

"Rather go to sea, eh?" at which I went very red, and Uncle Tom burst out laughing.

"The young dog's been having a course of Marryat!" he chuckled. "Splendid life, eh?"

No end of larks, adventures galore, and jolly

times all round. See the world, too, without reckoning the chance of exploring the bottom of the ocean. Shall you let him go, Harry?"

"If his heart's set on it," said my father, "but I'd rather not. If I had a friend in the service who could keep an eye on him 'twould be different."

"Just so," replied Uncle Tom. Then all of a sudden he added, "Look here, Harry, why not hand him over to me? I'll put my trade at his finger tips and while his health lasts he'll be independent. What do you think of it, Steph? A first-class engineer is not to be sneezed at, I can tell you. There's more than one man who started with me making his five hundred a year now."

"It's a splendid chance," exclaimed my father, "and I'm much obliged for the offer. Steph ought to jump at it."

"No, no," said Uncle Tom, "give him time. Let him think it over. I'm not so fond of jumping at short notice. I like to measure the distance first. There's no particular hurry. I shall be down again in a week or so, meantime you can talk it over with him."

Accordingly the next ten days were devoted to the *pros* and *cons* of the question, with the result that on Uncle Tom's next visit it was decided he should take me in hand at once.

Six months passed very pleasantly in a busy northern workshop, and I was gradually being initiated into the mysteries of wheels and cranks, of cogs and bolts, when an event happened which led to the one adventure of my life and gave me a chance of seeing more of the world than I had bargained for.

This was Uncle Tom's appointment as superintendent of machinery in the Oural

mines, which he obtained through the friendship of a Scotch engineer who had lived several years in St. Petersburg.

"Well, Steph, my boy," said he, "this somewhat knocks our plans on the head. I can't refuse this berth; it means nearly a thousand a year. Of course I can teach you almost as well out there as here; but the question is, will you care to come?"

Fancy putting that question to me! I was nearly wild with delight; the only drawback to my joy being that my father might not consent to my going. However, my uncle talked him over—my mother had been dead nearly three years—and, after a brief visit home to get the necessary outfit, we started on what in those days was a decidedly novel and not altogether safe voyage.

We reached St. Petersburg without adventure, and here my uncle had to interview some high officials and obtain the necessary papers. Neither of us understood Russian, but both being passable French scholars we found no difficulty in getting on.

As my uncle had to spend a lot of time in the government offices, I was glad to meet with a friend of his, a Mr. Maston, who took me over the town. It was a grand sight, and I shall not readily forget the long wide streets, the immense squares, the numerous bridges crossing the rivers, the magnificent buildings, the splendid palaces, and the costly churches with their marble columns and their gilded domes. The people, too, with their strange dress and customs interested me greatly, so that I was really sorry when the time came for us to move on.

From St. Petersburg we went straight to Moscow, and then, stopping only for the night, proceeded to the district of the Oural.

Being in the government, or rather Imperial service, Uncle Tom had no difficulty whatever in getting forward. On seeing the orders which he had brought from St. Petersburg everyone hastened to do his bidding. The post-masters brought out their finest vehicles and swiftest horses, the police officials saw us comfortably housed in the village inns, and I believe if any robbers had attacked us on the way the production of that paper with its official seal would have put them to flight.

But in spite of our talisman the journey was awfully dreary. It was in the fall of the year and we drove mile after mile, now through a thick wood, now over a sandy barren waste, seeing scarcely a human being from morning to night.

"Enough to give one a taste of nightmare, eh?" said my uncle. "But this is the worst of it. Macpherson tells me that Ekaterineburg is a fine town, and makes

quite a charming residence. It's the capital of the Oural and the head-quarters of the mining industry. All the gold found in the district is sent there to be smelted, and diamond workers cut all sorts of precious stones."

"Does it belong to the government?"

"To the Crown, I believe. The precious stones, I know, are the Emperor's private property; though he is lucky if he gets them all."

After the monotony of the barren wastes it was a relief to drive into Ekaterineburg, and I will say at once that it quite bore out Macpherson's description.

It was pleasantly situated on a beautiful lake, with a long stretch of pine-clad hills in the near distance. There were six or seven dome-topped churches besides other public buildings, and a number of well-built private houses.

In the centre of the town stood the government works, containing a Mint, and various apparatus for smelting gold and casting it into bars.

The machinery had been erected by an English engineer, and it was part of Uncle Tom's work to keep it in order, and to devise and make fresh appliances.

Near by was a second building, the Granlnoč Fabric, where all kinds of beautiful stone, such as jasper, porphyry, and malachite, were made into vases, tables, pedestals, and other articles. It was really a marvellous sight, and for a week after my arrival I wandered through the building feasting my eyes on the gorgeously-coloured stones—violet and purple, deep green, pink with yellow and black veins, in fact, almost all the hues of the rainbow.

Here was an exquisite table inlaid with pictures of birds, fruits, flowers and foliage, fashioned by the peasant workmen from the beautiful jasper; there a semi-transparent vase of a deep pink colour, with black and yellow veined foliage marvellously carved; farther along a group of men were cutting emeralds, amethysts, garnets, and other precious stones.

I had not come to Ekaterineburg, however, merely as a sight-seer, and after the first week I settled down to work. There was a house provided for Uncle Tom just outside the government buildings, and there, with a female attendant to wait on us, we soon became very much at home.

For a few months all went well. During the day we worked hard, and our evenings were usually spent at the house of some well-to-do resident. My French had considerably improved, and I was gradually picking up a little Russian, just enough to pass the time