

Armitage began talking of the American army—its strength and weaknesses—with an intimate knowledge that greatly surprised and interested the young officer; and when they separated presently it was with a curious mixture of liking and mystification that Claiborne reviewed their talk.

The next day brought heavy weather, and only hardened sea-goers were abroad. Armitage, breakfasting late, was not satisfied that he had acted wisely in speaking to Captain Claiborne; but he had, at any rate, eased in some degree his own conscience, and he had every intention of seeing all that he could of Shirley Claiborne during these days of their fellow-voyaging.

## CHAPTER VII

## ON THE DARK DECK

Ease, of all good gifts the best,  
War and wave at last decree:  
Love alone denies us rest,  
Crueler than sword or sea.

*William Watson.*

"I am Columbus every time I cross," said Shirley. "What lies out there in the west is an undiscovered country."

"Then I shall have to take the part of the rebellious and doubting crew. There is no America, and we're sure to get into trouble if we don't turn back."

"You shall be clapped into irons and fed on bread and water, and turned over to the Indians as soon as we reach land."

"Don't starve me! Let me hang from the yard-arm at once, or walk the plank. I choose the hour immediately after dinner for my obsequies!"

"Choose a cheerfuller word!" pleaded Shirley.

"I am sorry to suggest mortality, but I was trying to

let my imagination play a little on the eternal novelty of travel, and you have dropped me down 'full fathom five.'"

"I'm sorry, but I have only revealed an honest tendency of character. Piracy is probably a more profitable line of business than discovery. Discoverers benefit mankind at great sacrifice and expense, and die before they can receive the royal thanks. A pirate's business is all done over the counter on a strictly cash basis."

They were silent for a moment, continuing their tramp. Fair weather was peopling the decks. Dick Claiborne was engrossed with a vivacious California girl, and Shirley saw him only at meals; but he and Armitage held night sessions in the smoking-room, with increased liking on both sides.

"Armitage isn't a bad sort," Dick admitted to Shirley. "He's either an awful liar, or he's seen a lot of the world."

"Of course, he has to travel to sell his glassware," observed Shirley. "I'm surprised at your seeming intimacy with a mere 'peddler,'—and you an officer in the finest cavalry in the world."

"Well, if he's a peddler he's a high-class one—probably the junior member of the firm that owns the works."

Armitage saw something of all the Claibornes every day in the pleasant intimacy of ship life, and Hilton Claiborne found the young man an interesting talker. Judge Claiborne is, as every one knows, the best-posted American of his time in diplomatic history; and when they were together Armitage suggested topics that were well calculated to awaken the old lawyer's interest.

"The glass-blower's a deep one, all right," remarked Dick to Shirley. "He jollies me occasionally, just to show there's no hard feeling; then he jollies the governor; and when I saw our mother footing it on his arm this afternoon I almost fell in a faint. I wish you'd hold on to him tight till we're docked. My little friend from California is crazy about him—and I haven't dared tell her he's only a drummer; such a fling would be unchivalrous of me—"

"It would, Richard. Be a generous foe—whether—whether you can afford to be or not!"

"My sister—my own sister says this to me! This is quite the unkindest. I'm going to offer myself to the daughter of the redwoods at once."

Shirley and Armitage talked—as people will on shipboard—of everything under the sun. Shirley's enthusiasms were in themselves interesting; but she was

informed in the world's larger affairs, as became the daughter of a man who was an authority in such matters, and found it pleasant to discuss them with Armitage. He felt the poetic quality in her; it was that which had first appealed to him; but he did not know that something of the same sort in himself touched her; it was enough for those days that he was courteous and amusing, and gained a trifle in her eyes from the fact that he had no tangible background.

Then came the evening of the fifth day. They were taking a turn after dinner on the lighted deck. The spring stars hung faint and far through thin clouds and the wind was keen from the sea. A few passengers were out; the deck stewards went about gathering up rugs and chairs for the night.

"Time oughtn't to be reckoned at all at sea, so that people who feel themselves getting old might sail forth into the deep and defy the old man with the hour-glass."

"I like the idea. Such people could become fishers—permanently, and grow very wise from so much brain food."

"They wouldn't eat, Mr. Armitage. Brain-food forsooth! You talk like a breakfast-food advertisement. My idea—mine, please note—is for such fortunate peo-

ple to sail in pretty little boats with orange-tinted sails and pick up lost dreams. I got a hint of that in a pretty poem once—

"Time seemed to pause a little space,  
I heard a dream go by."

"But out here in mid-ocean a little boat with lateen sails wouldn't have much show. And dreams passing over—the idea is pretty, and is creditable to your imagination. But I thought your fancy was more militant. Now, for example, you like battle pictures—" he said, and paused inquiringly.

She looked at him quickly.

"How do you know I do?"

"You like *Detaille* particularly."

"Am I to defend my taste?—what's the answer, if you don't mind?"

"*Detaille* is much to my liking, also; but I prefer *Flameng*, as a strictly personal matter. That was a wonderful collection of military and battle pictures shown in Paris last winter."

She half withdrew her hand from his arm, and turned away. The sea winds did not wholly account for the sudden color in her cheeks. She had seen Armitage in Paris—in cafés, at the opera, but not at the great exhibi-

tion of world-famous battle pictures; yet undoubtedly he had seen her; and she remembered with instant consciousness the hours of absorption she had spent before those canvases.

"It was a public exhibition, I believe; there was no great harm in seeing it."

"No; there certainly was not!" He laughed, then was serious at once. Shirley's tense, arrested figure, her bright, eager eyes, her parted lips, as he saw her before the battle pictures in the gallery at Paris, came up before him and gave him pause. He could not play upon that stolen glance or tease her curiosity in respect to it. If this were a ship flirtation, it might be well enough; but the very sweetness and open-heartedness of her youth shielded her. It seemed to him in that moment a contemptible and unpardonable thing that he had followed her about—and caught her, there at Paris, in an exalted mood, to which she had been wrought by the moving incidents of war.

"I was in Paris during the exhibition," he said quietly. "Ormsby, the American painter—the man who did the *High Tide at Gettysburg*—is an acquaintance of mine."

"Oh!"

It was Ormsby's painting that had particularly capti-

vated Shirley. She had returned to it day after day; and the thought that Armitage had taken advantage of her deep interest in Pickett's charging gray line was annoying, and she abruptly changed the subject.

Shirley had speculated much as to the meaning of Armitage's remark at the carriage door in Geneva—that he expected the slayer of the old Austrian prime minister to pass that way. Armitage had not referred to the crime in any way in his talks with her on the *King Edward*; their conversations had been pitched usually in a light and frivolous key, or if one were disposed to be serious the other responded in a note of levity.

"We're all imperialists at heart," said Shirley, referring to a talk between them earlier in the day. "We Americans are hungry for empire; we're simply waiting for the man on horseback to gallop down Broadway and up Fifth Avenue with a troop of cavalry at his heels and proclaim the new dispensation."

"And before he'd gone a block a big Irish policeman would arrest him for disorderly conduct or disturbing the peace, or for giving a show without a license, and the republic would continue to do business at the old stand."

"No; the police would have been bribed in advance,

and would deliver the keys of the city to the new emperor at the door of St. Patrick's Cathedral, and his majesty would go to Sherry's for luncheon, and sign a few decrees, and order the guillotine set up in Union Square. Do you follow me, Mr. Armitage?"

"Yes; to the very steps of the guillotine, Miss Claiborne. But the looting of the temples and the plundering of banks—if the thing is bound to be—I should like to share in the general joy. But I have an idea, Miss Claiborne," he exclaimed, as though with inspiration.

"Yes—you have an idea—"

"Let me be the man on horseback; and you might be—"

"Yes—the suspense is terrible!—what might I be, your Majesty?"

"Well, we should call you—"

He hesitated, and she wondered whether he would be bold enough to meet the issue offered by this turn of their nonsense.

"I seem to give your Majesty difficulty; the silence isn't flattering," she said mockingly; but she was conscious of a certain excitement as she walked the deck beside him.

"Oh, pardon me! The difficulty is only as to title—"

you would, of course, occupy the dais; but whether you should be queen or empress—that's the rub! If America is to be an empire, then of course you would be an empress. So there you are answered."

They passed laughingly on to the other phases of the matter in the whimsical vein that was natural in her, and to which he responded. They watched the lights of an east-bound steamer that was passing near. The exchange of rocket signals—that pretty and graceful parley between ships that pass in the night—interested them for a moment. Then the deck lights went out so suddenly it seemed that a dark curtain had descended and shut them in with the sea.

"Accident to the dynamo—we shall have the lights on in a moment!" shouted the deck officer, who stood near, talking to a passenger.

"Shall we go in?" asked Armitage.

"Yes, it is getting cold," replied Shirley.

For a moment they were quite alone on the dark deck, though they heard voices near at hand.

They were groping their way toward the main saloon, where they had left Mr. and Mrs. Claiborne, when Shirley was aware of some one lurking near. A figure seemed to be crouching close by, and she felt its furtive

movements and knew that it had passed but remained a few feet away. Her hand on Armitage's arm tightened.

"What is that?—there is some one following us," she said.

At the same moment Armitage, too, became aware of the presence of a stooping figure behind him. He stopped abruptly and faced about.

"Stand quite still, Miss Claiborne."

He peered about, and instantly, as though waiting for his voice, a tall figure rose not a yard from him and a long arm shot high above his head and descended swiftly. They were close to the rail, and a roll of the ship sent Armitage off his feet and away from his assailant. Shirley at the same moment threw out her hands, defensively or for support, and clutched the arm and shoulder of the man who had assailed Armitage. He had driven a knife at John Armitage, and was poisoning himself for another attempt when Shirley seized his arm. As he drew back a fold of his cloak still lay in Shirley's grasp, and she gave a sharp little cry as the figure, with a quick jerk, released the cloak and slipped away into the shadows. A moment later the lights were restored, and she saw Armitage regarding ruefully a long slit in the left arm of his ulster.

"Are you hurt? What has happened?" she demanded.

"It must have been a sea-serpent," he replied, laughing.

The deck officer regarded them curiously as they blinked in the glare of light, and asked whether anything was wrong. Armitage turned the matter off.

"I guess it was a sea-serpent," he said. "It bit a hole in my ulster, for which I am not grateful." Then in a lower tone to Shirley: "That was certainly a strange proceeding. I am sorry you were startled; and I am under greatest obligations to you, Miss Claiborne. Why, you actually pulled the fellow away!"

"Oh, no," she returned lightly, but still breathing hard; "it was the instinct of self-preservation. I was unsteady on my feet for a moment, and sought something to take hold of. That pirate was the nearest thing, and I caught hold of his cloak; I'm sure it was a cloak, and that makes me sure he was a human villain of some sort. He didn't feel in the least like a sea-serpent. But some one tried to injure you—it is no jesting matter—"

"Some lunatic escaped from the steerage, probably. I shall report it to the officers."

"Yes, it should be reported," said Shirley.

"It was very strange. Why, the deck of the *King Ed-*

*ward* is the safest place in the world; but it's something to have had hold of a sea-serpent, or a pirate! I hope you will forgive me for bringing you into such an encounter; but if you hadn't caught his cloak—"

Armitage was uncomfortable, and anxious to allay her fears. The incident was by no means trivial, as he knew. Passengers on the great transatlantic steamers are safeguarded by every possible means; and the fact that he had been attacked in the few minutes that the deck lights had been out of order pointed to an espionage that was both close and daring. He was greatly surprised and more shaken than he wished Shirley to believe. The thing was disquieting enough, and it could not but impress her strangely that he, of all the persons on board, should have been the object of so unusual an assault. He was in the disagreeable plight of having subjected her to danger, and as they entered the brilliant saloon he freed himself of the ulster with its tell-tale gash and sought to minimize her impression of the incident.

Shirley did not refer to the matter again, but resolved to keep her own counsel. She felt that any one who would accept the one chance in a thousand of striking down an enemy on a steamer deck must be animated by

examined it twice daily to see that it was intact. The three red wax seals were in blank, replacing those of like size that had originally been affixed to the envelope; and at once after the attack on the dark deck he opened the packet and examined the papers—some half-dozen sheets of thin linen, written in a clerk's clear hand in black ink. There had been no mistake in the matter; the packet which Chauvenet had purloined from the old prime minister at Vienna had come again into Armitage's hands. He was daily tempted to destroy it and cast it in bits to the sea winds; but he was deterred by the remembrance of his last interview with the old prime minister.

"Do something for Austria—something for the Empire." These phrases repeated themselves over and over again in his mind until they rose and fell with the cadence of the high, wavering voice of the Cardinal Archbishop of Vienna as he chanted the mass of requiem for Count Ferdinand von Stroebel.