

## III

## MY MYSTERIOUS CABIN-FELLOW

FROM this hour I date a long term of stormy weather. In fact for several days the decks were unvisitable; the rain swept in sheets past the masts: the scuppers sobbed to the incessant downpour, and the wet gale blew with an edge of ice in it. Most of the passengers kept their cabins. Sir Charles was amongst those who were prostrated, and of his daughter I saw nothing. Often not more than six or eight of us assembled at meal-times. Mr. Pellew remained below with the others who were sea-sick; yet he certainly did not suffer. He ate well, was constantly smoking, emptied his bottle of champagne with relish, and was sufficiently easy to be able to sprawl upon his back in his bunk and to read novels, of which he had

a heap that stood in a corner of the berth. He would ask me in a voice of indifference what was going forward on deck, but no more was exchanged between us than common civility exacted.

I liked the confinement of my berth so little that after I quitted it of a morning my visits to it were very few and far between; and commonly, when I turned in of a night, my friend under me—for, as you know, I occupied the top bunk—was either asleep or hinting by keeping his eyes closed that he did not wish to converse. While such weather as we were now having continued it was not very likely that inquiries would be made about my secret and mysterious cabin-passenger; his representations of sea-sickness which would filter through the steward who waited upon him to the ears of the captain, mates, and passengers were entirely reasonable and credible. But how would it be later on, when the Madeira parallels, say, gave us bright skies and when everybody must be supposed cured of his nausea? Yet after all what more could follow than general astonishment at so extraordinary a whim—con-

jectures which would presently exhaust themselves, and a vast amount of throbbing curiosity amongst the women, particularly if they should gather that he was the extraordinarily handsome man and noble and commanding figure I found him? What could the captain do? Mr. Pellew had paid for his share of his berth and had a right to live in it, and though to be sure the commander with some idea of rooting the young fellow out of his cell might insist that the privileges of a bedroom did not comprise those of a parlour, it was not to be imagined that he would trouble himself over the behaviour of a man whom he and his officers would straightway set down as half-witted, or in the highest degree eccentric.

I have said that during these days of storm my cabin-fellow and I found little to say to each other outside a few civil commonplaces. At the same time I could not help noticing that he watched me with the air of a man bent upon solving a problem of human character by the interpretation of aspect without reference to speech. His gaze was keen and vivid; I had never encountered looks more penetrating.

Possibly I may have imagined his silent scrutiny a shrewder inquest than it really was, because of my powerlessness to fathom his motive for giving himself this trouble with a perfect stranger. I cannot feign that there was any charm in my face to merit a degree of attention that was sometimes almost impassioned despite its furtiveness. My character was commonplace; I was an off-hand, careless young soldier, by no means burdened with brains, and certainly to him I must have seemed perfectly colourless in intellect, and entirely insipid.

Sometimes I fancied that he was meditating an avowal, though by this time I had wholly absolved him from the several black crimes my early imagination had charged him with. He had not the look of a man with a dark secret. There was a high-born freedom in his face that was like nature's own resentment of a doubt of his honour, of his character, of his career. If he meant then to take me into his confidence, what had he to impart? Once a dim suspicion crossed my mind—vaguely and most illogically I seemed to connect his perplexing self-immurement with the melancholy and beautiful girl

whom I had not seen since I stood viewing her through the cabin skylight. Why? I cannot tell, unless it was because of his manner of dwelling with a kind of careless disgust upon the name of Sir Charles Primrose. But the light suspicion, or imagination rather, vanished in me as soon as it was formed.

The weather moderated on the morning of the fifth day, and when I went on deck after breakfast I found the sun shining amongst huge and swelling bodies of fleecy vapour, which, as their brows smote the luminary, caught a glory that seemed intenser than that of the orb himself, whilst there would flash from the stately sailing masses many fan-shaped radiations of blinding brilliance; the sea of a deep blue was still running high, and far as the eye could reach the ocean was a rising and falling surface of violet surge and frothing heads. It still blew a fresh breeze, but the wind was almost directly aft, sail had been made, and the ship was going along on a level keel, soaring and sinking with the majesty of an old line-of-battle ship, with a regularity that rendered walking easy.

A number of the passengers arrived; there were soldiers sunning themselves forward, and the decks were hospitable with colour and life.



"HE TUCKED HIS DAUGHTER'S HAND UNDER HIS ARM AND FELL TO PATROLLING THE DECK WITH HER."

Amongst those who came on the poop after breakfast—though the lady had not been present at the table—were Sir Charles and his

daughter. He looked somewhat haggard from confinement and sickness, but his face I thought had an unpleasantly hard expression; there was something frowning and even threatening in his eyes which he darted here and there, returning haughty distant bows to the salutation of the captain and others as he tucked his daughter's hand under his arm and fell to patrolling the deck with her. I could not gather that they conversed. She appeared to look at nothing but the planks on which she trod.

Old Captain Whale, the shipowners' representative whom I have previously mentioned, was leaning with me against the rail when they arrived.

"A stern-looking old gentleman!" said he to me; "I shouldn't like to be one of his soldiers. How many black chaps I wonder has he blown from the mouths of cannons? I know you to be of his profession, sir. You'll excuse my freedom."

"It is the traditional privilege of sailors to dislike soldiers," said I, laughing.

"Well, *there* you're right," he exclaimed with a broad grin. "Not but that a soldier may not

be a very good sort of man too, but where for instance would you find even an Admiral who had covered himself with glory, annihilated a fleet, occasioned what the newspapers would call a new geographical distribution, saved the throne, and lowered the income tax, give himself the airs of that old gentleman yonder? His daughter don't look a very happy woman, does she? His cabin's next to mine, and I heard him rating her this morning."

"Rating her? What did you hear?"

"I wouldn't hear. I didn't choose to hear. The fact is, sir, I had no *right* to hear. But the tone of his voice—why, it was like listening to a wrangling bo'sun through a bulkhead."

"How do you know that he was addressing *her*?"

"Why," said he, "as I entered my cabin she entered his. Tell you what," said he, sinking his voice, "there's a love-yarn in that job. That old gentleman's been and broken his daughter's heart. Look at her face, sir."

He wagged his purple countenance, fetched a sigh which for depth and intensity might have followed a long and thirsty pull at a bowl of

punch, and stepped down onto the quarter-deck.

I lingered awhile covertly watching the General and his daughter, and then went to my cabin for a pipe and a pouch of tobacco. Mr. Pellew was seated in my bunk, with his legs dangling over the edge of it, and, as I entered, was intent upon what I thought to be a coloured picture until a step took me close enough to see that it was a map. He begged my pardon for using my bunk, said that he was unable to see in his own bedstead, and then asked me in an easy off-hand way if I understood navigation.

"No," I responded, "I have no knowledge whatever of it."

"I believe," said he, bending his eyes upon the map, "that the marks which sailors make upon their charts to signify the course their ships have sailed along are called 'prickings.'"

"I cannot tell you."

"Here is a little map that I have been pricking," said he. "Have you any idea of our whereabouts to-day?"

"No," said I, "but I recollect that our lati-

tude yesterday was so and so, and as our course is about west-south-west and our average speed since then will have been so and so, our latitude this morning—or say our latitude at noon to-day should be—" I calculated and then named a figure.

He smiled and said, "You are not so ignorant as you pretend, Captain Swift."

"As knowing as the average schoolboy," said I with a shrug and a laugh, and approaching the bunk to take my pipe from a shelf.

"Then my 'prickings' will be pretty nearly right," he exclaimed, handing me the map, that was a very clean tracing of the two Atlantics from the mouth of the British Channel to a few degrees south of Agulhas.

I glanced at the pencil-marks upon it and exclaimed, "Yes. That will be about the situation of our ship at noon to-day, I should think."

"You have made this voyage before?" said he, taking the map from me and looking at it whilst he spoke.

"Once only," said I.

"What land do we sight, can you tell me?"

"I do not remember that we sighted any

land at all until we came to a halt in Simon's Bay, which, as you may know, is close to Cape Town."

"No land at all! I had no notion an Indian voyage signified so very melancholy a waste of waters. Yet," continued he, keeping his eyes fixed upon the map and speaking with the air of one who talks only for the sake of talking—and this was the first time that I had noticed any such disposition for sociability in him—"the navigation to the Cape should occasionally bring the land tolerably close."

"Quite the contrary," said I. "I cannot tell you where the equator is crossed; but I know that it is cut by these sailing keels deep in the heart of the Atlantic. Then, I believe, a course is made to bring the island of Trinidad off the starboard bow, after which the helm is shifted for the transverse stretch that brings the south-east trade-wind whistling to the edge of the sharply braced-up sails."

"You are at no loss for sea-terms," said he, speaking as though his thoughts were elsewhere whilst his eyes continued to muse upon the map; then abruptly folding and pocketing the

coloured sheet, he exclaimed, "Shipwreck must surely be a desperate business in a voyage of this sort. Figure the vessel foundering somewhere in the neighbourhood of the equator! Saving a little rock marked St. Paul there is no land for hundreds of miles for the boat to make for."

"One's best chance must lie in being picked up," said I.

"Ay," he exclaimed with a nod, "I suppose that is so; perhaps the *only* chance; and a pretty sure one, don't you think? There is no ocean so crowded with shipping as the Atlantic."

"Pretty sure or not," I exclaimed, "I hope we may not come to it. My two pet nightmares of fancy are, fire ashore and an open boat at sea."

He made no answer, and producing a cigar, lighted it.

I was astonished that he should choose to confine himself to this cabin. His motive was absolutely un conjecturable. It was ridiculous in him to feign dislike of the passengers. He had boarded the ship in the docks, and had, as I might take it, never set eyes upon a single