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MR. CHARLES WORTLEY CUNNINGHAM

FOR some days nothing happened in any way worth mentioning. At this distance of time I cannot be sure of dates; but I believe we had been somewhere about a fortnight from England when, happening to be on the poop in the afternoon, I was accosted by the captain as I stood alone leaning over the ship's quarter engaged in an occupation I was never weary of—I mean watching the exquisite configurations of the snow-white foam as it slid over the dark-blue surface into the ship's wake in glittering bells, careering round the edge of gleaming eddies or gyrating in shapes of stars and the tendrils of plants, or seething past in cloudy masses of a cream-like softness. I had had very little to say to Captain Stagg. I do not

know that he was much liked by any of the passengers. He was convulsive enough in his bows, effusive enough in his sea courtesies to the nobs amongst us: to Sir Charles and his daughter, to Colonel and Mrs. Mowbray and the like; but there was tyranny in his handling of his men. I used to find something brutal in the coarse fling of his voice whenever he had occasion to let fly an order at his crew, and he was rough and gruff and insolent in his bearing to his officers—that is to say, when the poop was thin and he thought himself unwatched; otherwise when there was no lack of spectators he would uncouthly request the chief mate to "*be so good as to get so and so done,*" or address the second mate with a "*Pray, Mr. Masters, walk forward, &c.*" The midshipmen hated and feared him, trembled when he arrived on deck, and watched him as though he carried a weapon which he might at any moment draw upon them.

Well, as I told you, he accosted me one afternoon as I stood gazing down upon the swirling wash of foam alongside.

"Busy, Captain Swift?"

"Nothing whatever to do," said I, turning upon him.

"I should like three words with you," said he.

"As many as you please, Captain."

"You share your cabin with a gentleman named Pellew?"

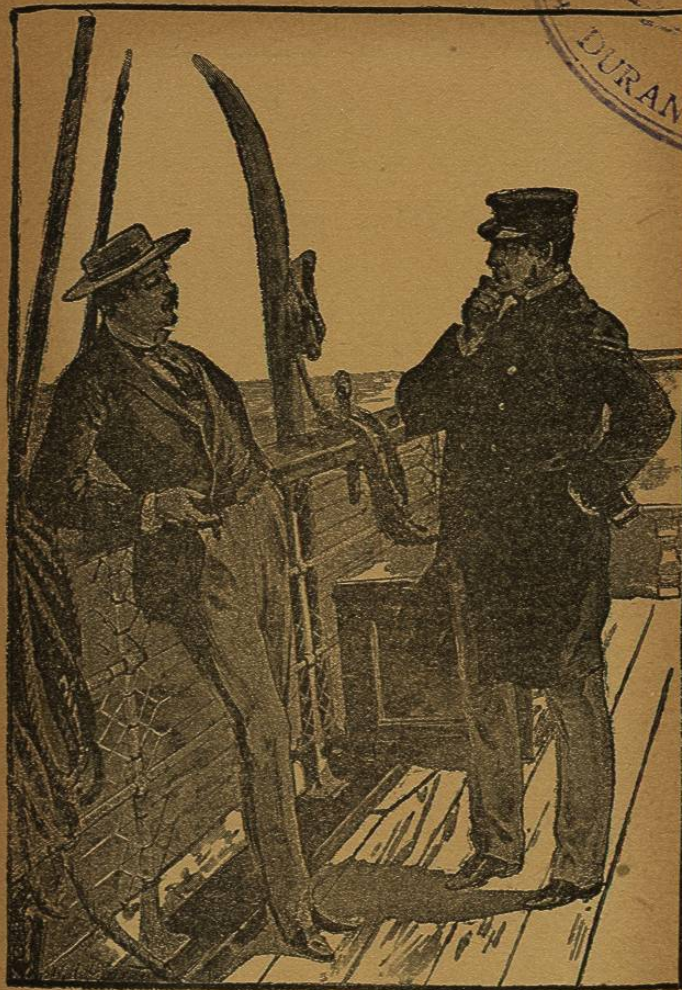
I nodded.

"I have been leaving a card upon him this afternoon in the sea-sense of visits," said he, with a grin which seemed to twist his mouth right into his cheek whilst his nose appeared to edge more directly the other way; "he is a very fine gentleman, quite a splendid man, I declare. Odd he should have been my passenger all this while and that I should never have seen him before. But he is perfectly well?"

"In health you mean? Oh yes, I should say he's perfectly well."

"Has he given you a reason for his clinging to his cabin—for his never putting in an appearance on deck or in the cuddy?"

"No, nor have I troubled myself to ask him for a reason."



"HAS HE GIVEN YOU A REASON, CAPTAIN SWIFT, FOR HIS CLINGING TO HIS CABIN?"

"He told me plainly," said he, "that he dislikes society, that if the accommodation of the ship had permitted he would have hired two berths, one to serve him as a sitting-room, the other as a bedroom, so that he could always be wholly alone if he chose."

"I suppose," said I, "in your time you have sailed with passengers whose tastes were a little odd and perplexing?"

"Many and many," he answered, driving his hands deep into his breeches pockets and bestowing a singular leer of self-complacency upon me. "In the Australian trade there's some sort of sociability to be found; but amongst Anglo-Indians, 'specially gents who are in your profession—and perhaps I shouldn't say *that* either, for, upon my word, I lay it mostly to the account of the ladies—there's a deal of—what shall I call it? Lord! how easily may a man's good sense be stumped by the want of a word! Well, I mean this: that to satisfy the outwards, I won't say the home-wards, folks in this trade a ship ought to be made up of separate living and sleeping rooms like a hotel; there should be no communication

unless desired; no public table save for those who choose to sit at it."

"You exactly express Mr. Pellew's motive for holding aloof, so far as I can gather it," said I.

"How do you and him get on?" said he, with a small fore-castle lapse in his speech.

"Very well indeed."

"Find him perfectly straight-headed?"

"You need only meet his eye to know that," said I, laughing.

"Does he talk in his sleep?"

"He rests as peacefully as a dog-tired sailor," I replied.

"Then he's quiet enough, though he'll snore if he's after that pattern," said he, with a nod and a grin. "Well, sir, I thought I would ask you about him. Certainly he's a very fine gentleman. He's not a nobleman, d'ye think, shipped under a false name?"

"I can answer nothing, for I know nothing," I responded.

"Not that he need be a nobleman to be fine-looking, either," said he, spitting into the sea; "I only want to satisfy my mind that all's right with him," and he touched his forehead.

"You may make your mind perfectly easy on that score."

He reflected a little, with his eyes fixed upon the horizon, and then said, "If you can induce him to show himself on deck by day I shall be glad. He needn't eat in the cabin; he needn't speak to any one; I'll give the passengers a hint; they're people of manners, and I warrant him he sha'n't be stared at. But his keeping below, only coming up when it's dark, and so fine a gentleman as he is, too—why, ye see, Captain Swift, it'll lead to talk, and by and by to a little uneasiness. The people 'll think that he's gone and done something wrong, and dursen't show himself in consequence. Let him make his appearance—on the quarter-deck if he likes; he can easily keep clear of the poop all the same as if he was a steerage passenger," and thus speaking he rolled over to the binnacle to examine the compass and resumed his station to windward of the wheel.

I have said that this conversation occurred during an afternoon when we had been about ten days out from England. It left no impression upon my mind. I had long foreseen that

the attention of the captain would be provoked by Mr. Pellew's curious behaviour, and whilst the issue was uncertain, that is to say, whilst I could only speculate on the attitude Captain Stagg would adopt—whether he would leave Mr. Pellew to tranquilly enjoy his cabin, or by the exercise of his authority oblige him to conform to the routine of shipboard life; whilst this issue was uncertain, I say, I would feel an interest that was sometimes almost lively in the matter. But now, as it seemed, it was a settled affair. If *I* could coax Mr. Pellew into showing himself on deck by day, so much the better; if not, then there was nothing to be done; Mr. Pellew was evidently within his rights; the captain might remonstrate or advise, but he could not command, and the passengers might talk as they chose and think as they pleased.

It happened on this day, whilst waiting in the saloon with others for the ladies to arrive to dinner, that a cabin door immediately opposite where I stood was opened and Miss Primrose stepped out. It was her berth: this I had not before known—indeed I had imagined that she slept next to her father's cabin,

which was on the starboard side of the ship, well aft. Her maid held the door open whilst she passed out, and continued to hold it open for a sufficient space of time to enable me to obtain not only a view of the interior of the compartment, but a sight of a thick rope called a shroud which almost perpendicularly ruled the large circular glass of the porthole.

This shroud was clothed with what at sea is termed "chafing gear"—mats, split bamboos, tarred canvas, and the like. In the case of this particular shroud the chafing gear that protected it from the fret of ropes was formed of some thickly knitted heavily tarred material to which I am unable to give a name, but which made me instantly recognize it as one that descended to a dead-eye in the mizzen-channel, the ledge of which, as I have before written, overhung the porthole that belonged to the cabin shared by Mr. Pellew and me. I knew this; because one day when idly overhanging the side, and looking down upon the mizzen-channel, I had amused myself by localizing the exact situation of our berth, and I made out that our cabin window was close against the iron fasten-

ing, or chain plate as it is termed, one end of which was bolted to the ship's side, whilst to the other end that penetrated the edge of the channel was secured the dead-eye through which were rove the lanyards that fastened the shroud which ruled the window of Miss Primrose's berth.

Now all this, which has taken me some time to write, simply signified a discovery to which, as you may suppose, I attached no possible significance at the time: namely, that Miss Primrose's berth was exactly over Mr. Pellew's and mine; that the two portholes were directly in a vertical line, so that but for the interposition of the wide shelf of the mizzen-channel a man—say a tall man; such a figure as Mr. Pellew's, for example—could, by standing on the rim of the lower port, grasp the edge of the upper one.

I had also time to observe whilst the maid held the door open that only one of the two bunks under the porthole was furnished with bedding, whence it was clear that the girl slept alone. This privilege had doubtless been secured by an early application from the

General for accommodation, possibly at an increase in the rate of fares. He might have a reason of his own for desiring an unshared berth for his daughter. The intimacy of successive nights of companionship must tempt her into a degree of communicativeness which Sir Charles would find inconvenient, for he might easily guess that the lady to whom she disclosed her secret—and a sad and most melancholy secret undoubtedly was hers if there be any virtue in female beauty to express feelings of secret and consuming wretchedness—would have some confidential friend on board to whom to impart it, and so the truth would thread its way from ear to ear in whispers.

But the bustle of dinner, the obligation of listening and replying, speedily drove all thoughts of Miss Primrose out of my head.

I withdrew to my berth that night shortly after ten o'clock. The wind on deck was wet with driving drizzle; and in the saloon there was nothing better to do than to watch Sir Charles, Colonel Mowbray, and two others playing at whist, and to listen to the chatter of four or five of the passengers assembled at the

other end of the table. I expected, as usual, to find Mr. Pellew in his bunk, asleep, or at least suggesting by his posture and air the now familiar indisposition to talk at that hour of the night. Instead, he was seated in a Madeira chair, smoking a cheroot, and reading a novel by the light of a bracket-lamp affixed to the bulkhead. The moment I entered he closed the volume, looked at his watch, and exclaimed, "I did not know it was so late. Are you going to turn in?"

"Yes," I answered; "there is nothing to be done above. The night is wet and dirty, and it is so confoundedly dull in the saloon that I am beginning to think your manner of making a voyage is, after all, the best theory for living out one's passage of life on board ship."

He looked at me earnestly. I seemed to find on a sudden a new meaning in his handsome, his incomparably handsome face, an expression of emotional resolution, which I had never before found in his calm, collected, haughty countenance.

"I hope you are not sleepy," said he; "I should enjoy a quiet chat with you."

"I am sleepy merely for the want of a quiet chat," I answered.

He handed me his cigar-case and I lighted a cheroot. Needless to say that smoking was *not* permitted below. Nevertheless he was seldom without a cigar in his mouth, and, wrongly or rightly, we now smoked.

"I received a visit from the captain to-day," said he, crossing his legs and settling himself in his chair in the manner of one who intends that the sitting he has entered upon shall not be hastily ended. "He was my second visitor. Did I tell you that the doctor of the ship honoured me with a call three days ago?"

"No. He found you quite well, I hope?"

"I did not ask him for an opinion. What is the captain's name?"

"Stagg."

"It should be Bear. Surely he is too rough and unpolished an animal for the civilities and elegances and hospitality of an East Indiaman's saloon, full of ladies and gentlemen, some of them high and mighty, I dare say."

"He told me this afternoon that he had paid you a visit."

"Ha!" he exclaimed; and with a smile added, "How did he describe me?"

"He was all admiration; but he is very anxious that I should tempt you to the deck. He fears that the passengers will presently begin to talk about the mysterious passenger below, and that their conjectures as to your motives will result in an uneasy feeling amongst them."

He thoughtfully stroked his moustache whilst he fixed his eyes upon the ash of his cigar, and for some moments, which may have run into a minute or two, there was silence between us. Speaking softly, but with abruptness,

"Captain Swift," said he, "may I communicate my secret to you?"

"That must be entirely for you to decide," I answered.

"You will be—you *must* be—the only living creature in the ship who has knowledge of it. No!" he paused as if he would correct himself, then continued with energy, yet preserving his wary softness of voice, "One other must know it: it will be you two only. That I may trust an English officer and a gentleman