

V

I DELIVER THE LETTER

MR. CUNNINGHAM had risen and finished his letter before I awoke next morning. The composition of the missive—in a physical sense I mean—must have been a labour of some severity; for during the night it had come on to blow a strong breeze of wind off the beam, and a snappish sea, with a touch of fierceness sometimes in its frequent hurls, was charging in bursts of thunder to the side of the ship on which our cabin was situated, and blinding the porthole with smothering heaps of glittering green brine that eclipsed the light in the berth and gave one nothing to look at but the dim twinkle of the wet circle of glass. But the letter was written, and when I was dressed I put it in my pocket; bothered, however, by having

to call him Cunningham when the name of Pellew was the familiar one.

“Indeed,” said I, “I wish you had not given me your real name. If I have occasion to speak of you my memory may play me a trick, and I shall be calling you Cunningham when everybody who has heard of you at all understands that you are Pellew.”

“Pray be on your guard,” he exclaimed.

Unpleasant as the weather was, there was a full attendance of the passengers at breakfast. Miss Primrose occupied her usual place next her father, and my eyes were incessantly going towards her as I worked away with my knife and fork, pondering how I should approach her, and conjecturing the reception she would give the intelligence of her sweetheart being in the ship. Was she of an hysterical nature? Suppose she should shriek out, behave extravagantly, or faint away when I broke the news to her, or when she opened the letter and read the truth for herself! The situation in that case would be an exceedingly disagreeable one for me. General Primrose was by no means a gentleman whom one would wish to quarrel with—

at least on board ship, where one would be forced into incessant sight of or contact with him. Here were we no more than eleven days out; there might be four months of sailing before the pilot should board us off the Sandheads; and those four months must be rendered the most unpleasant of any in my life should it come to the knowledge of General Primrose and of Captain Stagg that Mr. Cunningham *alias* Pellew was on board, and that I was acting as a go-between for him and Miss Primrose.

I was nervous and made but a poor breakfast, and was found so thoughtful and incommunicative that my neighbours at table gave up addressing me. But I had given my word to Mr. Cunningham, and the promise must be kept. There was no change in the demeanour of Miss Primrose. As she was when I had first noticed her, so did she still appear: the same unheeding girl, her eyes downwards bent with nun-like persistency, faintly smiling and scarcely looking up if accosted, and answering, so far as I might judge, barely above her breath, and in the briefest sentences, as though articulation were a distress, and a moment's divergence

from the current of her thoughts a pain and a perplexity to her.

I eyed her father somewhat strenuously, and believed I could find in his countenance all necessary confirmation of Mr. Cunningham's story. His expression was unpleasantly fierce. No doubt his heavy eyebrows, the angry curl of his moustache, the tiger-like tension of his whiskers, heightened the formidableness of his looks; but it was quite possible to separate him from that aspect of haughty impassioned austerity with which nature had clothed him—to distinguish in short the difference between character and hair, between a sluggish liver and thick eyebrows, between wire-like whiskers and a highly excitable temperament.

Once the ship's doctor at my side asked me how my cabin-fellow Mr. Pellew did, and whether he had not some reason much more extraordinary than any he had chosen to give for lying hidden; and once he asked me in a bantering tone—for in my time there was always something of the wag, and often of the tipsy wag, in the typical ship's doctor—if I had lost my heart to Miss Primrose, since I seemed

unable to remove my eyes from her; but my short answers rendered sullen by uneasiness silenced him.

I went out on to the quarter-deck when I had breakfasted, and found a very uninviting scene of ship and ocean. The decks were dark with wet; as the vessel rolled to windward the froth of the green seas rushing at us from out the haze of the near horizon glanced ghastly and melancholy above the tall rail of the bulwark; there was a dreary shrill whistling of the wet wind in the iron-taut weather shrouds, and in the slack damp-blackened rigging curved to leeward by the rush of the blast. Yet the ship under comparatively small canvas was sailing nobly, shouldering off the blows of the olive-coloured surge with volcanic shocks of her bow as she plunged, and flinging the sea into boiling froth to right and left of her as she went, so that from aloft the path of her keel must have resembled the sweeping career of the foaming foot of the waterspout.

My prospects as a messenger of love looked exceedingly meagre and contemptible in the face of this weather, which of course must

confine all the passengers to the saloon and provide me with the slenderest of all chances of finding Miss Primrose alone. And yet strangely enough some while after eleven o'clock it so fell out that on descending from the poop, where I had been trudging in a pea-coat with a young officer, and taking a peep into the long interior through the window I saw Miss Primrose seated at the foremost end of the table—that is to say, the end the most remote from where her father's cabin was and from her place at meals—writing, as I might suppose, in a diary. A few ladies were at the aftermost part of the saloon reading, sewing, and talking. The rest of the people were either on the poop—for the rain had now ceased, though it still blew a fresh breeze of wind—or in their cabins.

“This,” thought I, “must be my chance;” and being resolved to make an end of a business that grew more and more distasteful to me in proportion as I delayed the execution of it, I walked in. No purpose was to be served by any sort of ambiguity in my first address. There was an item of intelligence to impart, and the place—the opportunity—my own de-

sire to get quit of my errand—rendered it certain that the sooner the news was communicated the better. I approached and placed myself on her right that I might conceal her from the view of the ladies in the after part of the saloon; yet it was necessary to start with some conventional commonplace.

“I have the pleasure of addressing Miss Primrose?”

She started and raised her pen from the book in which she was writing, whilst she lifted her sad and beautiful eyes to my face with a slight expression of surprise in her countenance.

“I have a cabin companion,” said I, speaking low but swiftly. “You may have heard him spoken of as the mysterious passenger. He has asked me to give you this. The handwriting will tell you who he is;” and so speaking, I put the letter down upon the table before her.

She glanced at her name that was written in a bold hand upon the envelope; instantly a burning blush covered her face and as much of the neck as was revealed by the collar of her dress; but almost as quickly as one could look the scarlet glow was replaced by a pallor that

seemed the deadlier for the contrast of the hue that had preceded it. I believed that my fears were to be realized—that she would shriek out and then faint! Never had I imagined that the workings of the human heart could have found such visible, such poignant expression in flesh and blood as I witnessed in her. I felt that I had no right to look—my gaze was an impiety, a profanity, an audacious peering into a sacred mystery the sheltering curtain of which had been ruthlessly rent. Yet I dared not leave her side until, to use the expressive old word, she had recollected herself, for there were shrewd female eyes in the neighbourhood and on the alert, and the interposition of my form alone protected her from their gaze. Expression after expression crossed her face; she breathed with such difficulty that every instant I feared some outbreak of hysteria in her; there was hardness and wildness in her eyes as she turned them from the letter to me and from me to the letter again.

All this might have occupied two or three minutes at the outside. Suddenly she slipped

the letter into her pocket, rose with a little stagger in her manner of erecting her figure,



"SHE WENT TO HER CABIN, THE DOOR-HANDLE OF WHICH SHE SEEMED TO GROPE FOR AS THOUGH SHE WERE BLIND."

and picking up her book sought to address me; her lips moved inarticulately, she faintly bowed, and trembling from head to foot went to her cabin, the door-handle of which she seemed to grope for as though she were blind, and then, not a little to my relief, she disappeared.

I was as much agitated by sympathy as by the character of the delicate and distasteful mission, and was sensible that my heart beat faster than usual as I sent a hasty glance at the ladies to remark if they appeared to have observed Miss Primrose's sudden withdrawal; but they were reading, gossiping, sewing as before, and I stepped out again on to the quarter-deck to soothe my fluttered nerves with a cigar and to reinforce by several powerful vows my resolution to take no further part in this business, unless indeed it were to convey to Mr. Cunningham the girl's answer to his letter, should she write to him, simply because I quite understood if she asked me to do so I should be unable to withstand the entreaty of her sweetness and her sorrow.

I went some paces forward that I might obtain a view of the poop, and perceived Sir

Charles and Colonel Mowbray marching up and down it. Had he seen me accost his daughter? The foremost saloon skylight was almost immediately over that part of the table at which she had been seated; and if the General looked down then he must have seen us. I waited until his return walk brought him to the forward extremity of the deck; but he continued hot in altercation, or in conversation that resembled it. I won no more regard from him than did the mainmast or the pump. Now, I knew he was a sort of man who would have stared very hard at me, very hard and very fiercely at me, had his glance, lighting upon the skylight, penetrated to me and his daughter; and this I say because she had held herself markedly aloof from all us males; so that, had he seen us together, he would have been struck, and paused perhaps to observe us. That he did not stare at me, that he took no notice whatever of me, was assurance enough that he had seen nothing, and I returned to the shelter of the recess to finish my cigar.

Miss Primrose did not appear at tiffin, the bell for which was rung at one o'clock. The

General on taking his seat missed her from his side, rose, and walked with ramrod-like erectness to her berth. He returned in a few minutes, and I heard him, in response to an inquiry from Mrs. Mowbray, exclaim in his hard voice of command that "Miss Primrose was suffering from a headache." That was all, and he at once fell to his soup. When lunch was ended I went below for my pipe and tobacco—how enormous is one's consumption of tobacco at sea! but what else can one do but smoke?—and to inform Mr. Cunningham that I had given his letter to Miss Primrose. I found him stalking about the cabin with the air of a lunatic in a padded cell.

"At last!" he cried, as I entered. "Gracious powers! how long the time has been. What have you to tell me?"

"She has your letter," I answered.

"My *dear* fellow!" he exclaimed, grasping my hand with a squeeze that left the finger-ends bloodless, "how can I thank you sufficiently?" And then came a whole broadside of questions. What did she say? How had I introduced the matter? Did she immediately recognize his

handwriting? Having satisfied him on these and a score or two of other points, I said:

"You will of course expect an answer from her? Now, who is to deliver it?"

"You, you!" he cried; "you, my dear friend, for a friend indeed you have proved to her and to me."

"Well now, Mr. Cunningham," said I, "I will do this: if she asks me to give you a letter, I will bring it to you; but that done—*no more*, if you please. I am not of the profession that is distinguished for cowardice; but all the same, I have no desire, no intention indeed, to run foul of General Primrose, with whom I must necessarily be locked up in this ship for the next three or four months. The voyage will inevitably be dull; but I do not wish it to be tragical."

"Enable me this once," he cried, "to receive a reply from her, and I shall not again even dream of troubling you."

Well, I saw no more of Miss Primrose that afternoon until the dinner hour came round, and it was in the moment of my wondering whether she would show herself, that the door

of her cabin opened and she stepped forth. Her eyes sought me; they rested on my face for an instant only. How am I to convey the expression of them? Was it delight? Was it gratitude? For the first time since I had beheld her, a smile lay in the soft depth of her gaze like a light there; a delicate smile, too, gave a new character of sweetness to her beauty as her glance for a heart-beat or two met mine. You would have supposed her visited and possessed by a new spirit. There was an elasticity in her movements, a life in her manner of looking, a suggestion of freedom, of liberty, operating in her as an impulse in her whole bearing, and especially in the carriage of her head, as she went round the table to her chair and seated herself.

"No headache now," thought I, "and no heartache either, seemingly!" I watched the General as he took his place. Without turning his head he seemed to take a view of her out of the corners of his eyes, sending his black and searching gaze over the angry white curl of the moustache upon his cheek sheerly to her profile, as though his vision were a corkscrew

laterally directed. He addressed her and she responded. He was clearly surprised by the change in her, and I observed that he pricked his ear whilst she replied to the sympathetic questions and congratulations of the people at her end of the table. Indeed, there was a clear ring in her voice as she answered that the headache was much better—that it had been wholly due, she believed, to the motion of the ship; in a word, responding at length and fixing her eyes upon those she addressed with lingering smiles which warranted them of the heart.

“Well now,” thought I to myself, “what will this remarkable change in her be attributed to?” It was a sort of comedy in its way, not without a quality of humour sufficiently defined to bring the performance perilously close to the kind of pathos we look for in tragedy. I, who of all that company alone stood behind the scenes, I, who knew more and saw more than General Primrose himself, watched this strange little shipboard play with an interest that would have been impossible had the rest of us been in the secret. Sir Charles spoke little; during the intervals of

the meal he was incessantly pulling out his whiskers or curling his moustache, occasionally glancing askant at his daughter. Puzzled indeed he was, as were others too, for the matter of that. The ship's doctor, whose eyes at meal-times were incessantly travelling over the company, whispered to me to observe the improvement in Miss Primrose's spirits.

“Were this ship a hotel ashore, you know, Swift,” said he, with the tone and speech of familiarity that I disliked in him, “one would suppose Miss Primrose had received a bit of good news—an offer of marriage from a nobleman, or a letter from a firm of solicitors announcing a legacy of a few cool thousands. But what can happen at sea to improve the animal spirits? The cause, then, must be physical. It may be a mere matter of nerves—some abrupt effect of oxygenation of blood. The fact is, Swift, we are wonderfully and fearfully made. The wonderfulness of it I don't mind, but the fearfulness of it I strongly object to.”

I suffered him to talk himself out, and when dinner was over stepped, as usual, into the recess under the forward part of the poop, where I

was joined by two or three fellows, and there we stood talking and smoking. The weather had improved; there were a few lean stars sliding betwixt the squares of the rigging, and the half-moon floated dim and moist over our waving mast-heads, with a weak silver ring around her.

"How deuced sick a fellow gets of hearing that hissing noise of water alongside," exclaimed one of my companions, Lieutenant Elphinstone. "I'd rather be a private in the Army than an admiral in the Navy."

"There must be a sort of music in that melancholy noise for some ears," said another young officer. "Burton, did you observe—Elphinstone you knaaw can't see—the change in a certain young party who don't sit forty miles off from the General?"

"Good Ged, yes," rejoined Burton, who wore an eye-glass. "What d'ye want to make out, Cobb? That she's got a fresh stock of spirits in through her cabin port-hole out of what Smithers would call the demmed music of the waters?"

"Order, order," whispered Elphinstone: and

following the direction of his eye as he looked into the saloon through a window, I saw Miss Primrose approaching.

There was nobody in sight saving the stewards, who were stripping the tables. The clear light of the lamps streamed through the windows on to the quarter-deck, and plainly disclosed us to any one within. I imagined that the girl on seeing me would pause, as a hint for me to approach, making sure that I should interpret her object in seeking me; and with the velocity of thought I figured her embarrassment, her change of countenance, the conflict of emotions in her eyes, as she tremblingly handed me her reply to her sweetheart's note. Greatly to my astonishment, she stepped through the door on to the open deck, her head uncovered and her luxuriant hair trembling in the lamp-light in dull gold to the shrewd draughty sweep of the wind in the recess, and said:

"I thought I should find you here, Captain Swift. These are the lines you were admiring so much;" and so saying, she put a letter into my hand, and with a sweet smile and easy bow re-entered the saloon, giving me no time indeed

to act any part even if astonishment had not rendered an instant assumption impossible.



“THESE ARE THE LINES YOU WERE ADMIRING SO MUCH.”

My companions' surprise, though proceeding from a different cause, equalled mine. They

had never before seen me speak to this girl—this daughter of General Sir Charles Primrose, whom we addressed as “sir,” and viewed from afar with emotions of awe; they had believed, as I knew in fact, that she held herself almost as much apart, so to speak, as my mysterious, and to them utterly unknown, fellow-passenger; and now they had beheld her smiling sweetly upon me, handing me some verses, or some sentences of prose copied by her own hand, suggesting indeed a degree of positive intimacy by her careless manner of coming out without her hat, and by her swift but sweetly managed retreat, as though she had been scared by the sight of them, and would have stayed had they been away.

“By Ged then!” said young Elphinstone, “it’s altogether a doocid deal too killing, d’ye knaaw. How on earth have you managed it, Swift? Into what holes and corners have you been getting that no fellow has had a sight of you and her together?”

“I say, Swift,” drawled Burton, “what is it,—poetry? Read it out like a good fellow. Hang me if I shouldn’t like to know what she admires in verse.”

I threw my unfinished cigar overboard and stepped below to get rid of them, though I might well believe that my absence would only improve their opportunity to indulge their astonishment in conjectures and opinions. And the fellows talked with such a mess-room drawl, in voices so heedless of those who might be near, that, thought I to myself, as I made my way to Mr. Cunningham's berth, nothing more is needed to exquisitely complicate this singular sea-going drama than the overhearing of those young fellows' conversation by Sir Charles or by some one who should communicate what he had heard to him.

Mr. Cunningham sat in his Madeira arm-chair smoking a cigar as usual, with a bottle of champagne on the deck at his side. I extended the letter and he sprang to receive it.

"A million thanks," he cried, and his hand trembled with eagerness as without another word he opened the envelope and stepped close to the bracket-lamp to read.

It was a letter of four or five sheets, crossed and recrossed, and so absorbed was he by it, smiling all the while, sometimes nodding, and

once pausing, with a sigh that resembled a groan, to press it to his lips, that he suffered me to depart without making the least sign or removing his eyes from the thickly-scrawled page.

I returned an hour later, having spent most of the time between in reading a magazine that I had found upon a sofa in the saloon. Mr. Cunningham was clothed in his theatrical cloak; the shawl about his neck rose to his nostrils, and his soft felt wide-awake was pulled down over his eyebrows, so that there was nothing more to see of him than his nose. He freed his mouth to speak and exclaimed, "I have not thanked you nearly enough for your kindness."

"Indeed you have," said I. "Pray say no more about it. The rest you will be able to manage, and I heartily hope you will make a good ending of this romantic business."

"When did she give you the letter?" he asked, "and how did she contrive to do so?"

I told him very honestly all that had passed, and added that I was astonished by her coolness and self-possession.

"Ha!" he exclaimed, "what an illustration

is this of the power of love to make heroines of girls! What courage! what inventions! How much better under the circumstances the boldness, call it the pluck, that amazed you, Captain Swift, than the timid, reluctant, emotional approach! And yet there is not a timider creature than my sweet girl. Indeed, I have grieved that she cannot command more resolution; she would then be able to hold her father in check, have something of her way with him, even, in spite of the endevilmnt of the old coxcomb—" He broke off, and looking down himself, exclaimed in a changed voice, "Are there many people in the saloon?"

"A few."

"Is the General amongst them?"

"No."

"I am going on deck," said he, "to breathe the air."

"There are a few men, I believe," said I, "hanging about the entrance to the cabin."

"No matter," he answered, "let them look and let them think. There's little enough to see. Will you accompany me?"

"No," I said, "I may join you later on. I

presume you will station yourself at the galley as before. But if I am seen to pass through the saloon with you, I shall be pestered with questions, and I have made up my mind, Mr. Cunningham, not to know anything, not more for your sake than for my own. There is a number of young fellows on board, loose talkers and noisy in their chaff. Their badinage may prove dangerous; their references to you may tempt the General into inquiries; and you will forgive me for saying, that apart from what I have done, I must positively meddle no further with your affairs."

"Not *meddle!*" he cried in a cordial voice, whilst his fine eyes shone with the grateful and cheerful smile that was else concealed by his shawl and hat. "Do not speak of yourself as a meddler. You have acted the part of a true friend. But you are right. We must not be seen together."

He opened the door and passed out. I followed in about ten minutes, and walked to the recess but found it vacant. The few people in the saloon were assembled in the after part, and as the hatch through which Mr. Cunning-