

ham had emerged, lay well in the fore-part of the interior, it was as likely as not that he had passed through unobserved. As I paused in the recess with my eye at the window, the General, Colonel Mowbray, and two others came to the table and seated themselves for a rubber

VI

THE GENERAL QUESTIONS ME

WHEN I went to my cabin on the night of this same day that I have been writing about, I found a boat-hook in my bunk. A pole about six feet long with a spike and an iron hook at the end of it is an odd object to encounter in one's bed. I picked it up and was about to put it in the passage outside where the steward would find it and remove it, when Mr. Cunningham, whom I had found in bed and who I had thought was asleep, called out:

"Pray let that boat-hook remain, Captain Swift. It has cost me some trouble to procure and to smuggle it here."

"I found it in my bed," said I.

"I heartily apologize," he exclaimed; "I

believed I had put it in the corner with my bundle of sticks and umbrella."

It was not my business to inquire his motive in adding a boat-hook to the slender stock of cabin furniture; but one thing I guessed: that there must be some one on board—probably one of the crew—who was willing to serve him; because the boat-hook belonged to one of the quarter-boats; and the four quarter-boats swung from davits over the edge of the poop; so that as Mr. Cunningham was not likely to have shown himself upon the poop, some one must have sneaked aft and abstracted the boat-hook for him.

But it was not long before I discovered the use he designed the boat-hook for. It was next day indeed, during the afternoon, that on entering the berth I found him standing at the open porthole with his watch in one hand and the boat-hook in the other. The wind was off the beam on the side of our cabin and the heel of the hull rose the window above the sea-line, so that you saw nothing but the piebald sky through it. It had been a day of quiet weather; and the ship was sliding pleasantly at some

eight knots in the hour over the wide Atlantic heave that was scarred into lines of small billows by the brushing of the wind. Scarcely guessing what he would be at, yet judging that he wished to be private, I was about to withdraw.

"No, no, pray remain," he said; "I have no secrets from you. What time do you make it?"

I looked at my watch and gave him the hour—that is, the time by the clock in the saloon.

"Quite right," said he; and pocketing his watch he stood gazing intently through the porthole.

I watched him with curiosity, not in the least knowing what to expect. On a sudden he uttered an exclamation, and quickly thrusting the boat-hook through the porthole, he carefully but dexterously hauled in a length of thin line at the extremity of which was a letter folded very small, weighted by a piece of stuff which I afterwards discovered to be a lump of holystone. He removed the letter, thrice pulled the string or length of twine as a signal, and the attached piece of stone lying in the

port was jerked out and drawn upwards past the rim of the mizzen channel.

I guessed by the flush in his face and the sparkle in his eye that the letter was the first of these strategic communications. He shot a glance of triumph at me and eagerly read the missive.

"What think you of my idea of an ocean post-office?" said he, folding up the letter and stowing it away in his pocket as carefully as though it had been a thousand-pound Bank of England note.

"Why," said I, who had viewed this manoeuvre with no little astonishment, "I think the device a very ingenious one. It must tax the young lady's cleverness, however, so to cast her weighted letter through the porthole as to insure it falling over the edge of that platform up there."

"She manages it, nevertheless," said he. "That platform provides us with the very shelter we desire. The stone passes swiftly through the window—too swiftly for the detection of any eye that may be looking over the side; and it might dangle for hours and for days

under that channel without being seen from any part of the ship's bulwarks."

My desire to share as little as possible in this strange, romantic business held me reticent, otherwise my curiosity was active enough to have tempted me into several inquiries. As I made my way on to the deck again I found myself smiling as I wondered what Sir Charles's sensations would be had he been an unobserved spectator of this boat-hook-and-catch-letter proceeding. Miss Primrose was manifestly a very resolved young lady. There was real audacity in her conduct now. Who would suspect the heroic capacity of resolution her love was compelling her to exhibit, concealed in such a perfectly feminine, such an adorably feminine aspect of modesty, sweetness, melancholy, timidity as one and all of us passengers witnessed in her? That piece of holystone! She must have obtained it by some strategy—feigned an interest in the stuff and asked to look at a piece of it on hearing that the sailors whitened the decks by scrubbing the planks with the stone. "And what will the issue be?" I remember thinking. "Will all this sincerity of passion

end in forcing the hand of the General? Is he a sort of man to be coaxed into compliance by such secret conspiracies, such dark underhand devices, as his objectionable and most reprehensible conduct had obliged this loving couple to be guilty of?" One had only to think of his face to say "*No!*" to that fancy with the utmost emphasis.

And now there went by a week with nothing in it that deserves chronicling. We penetrated the warm and sparkling parallels, caught the strong breath of the north-east trade-wind in the overhanging wings of studding-sails, and the noble ship drove along day and night, night and day veining the sea astern of her with a wake of liquid pearl, and smiting the blue billow with her coppered forefoot into yeast that was made radiant at intervals by the gossamer-like gleam of flying-fish. Once or twice after dark during this week I had spied the shadow of Mr. Cunningham looming tall in the obscurity to leeward of the galley, and had joined him for a talk of ten minutes or so; but my anxiety not to be implicated in any measures his love might suggest to him ren-

dered me very wary and brief in these approaches. One night indeed I found him so busily occupied in conversing with two or three sailors that he remained unconscious of my presence; he seemed to look towards me, yet went on addressing the men with energy, though in a very subdued voice; on which I strolled aft again, wondering what on earth he could find in a mere chat with two or three commonplace Jacks to so deeply engage and interest him. I never again offered to join him on deck.

From Miss Primrose I would regularly receive a faint smile or a slight bow when she arrived at meal-times, or if she ascended to the poop-deck when I was there; but these courtesies were absolutely without any further significance than to the general eye they were intended to express. I do not doubt that Mr. Cunningham had carefully advised her in his boat-hook-and-porthole-correspondence; that he had repeated my strongly-expressed wish that my name should not in any way be mixed up in his romantic undertaking; so that her cold and colourless deportment would be due to his

written admonitions. Yet so inconsistent is the mind that, whilst on the one hand I was sincerely rejoiced that she should favour me with as wide a berth as she gave the rest of us men, on the other my vanity was piqued by what I considered a sort of ingratitude in her. I would sometimes think that I merited something more than a bow that was only reclaimed from stiffness by its elegance: that, in short, some glow of feeling should illuminate the beautiful eyes she directed at me; that something of warmth, of cordiality, should colour the smile which she occasionally bestowed upon me. Yet it was very well as it was, as my good sense would note when I observed the manner in which I was watched by Burton and young Elphinstone and others of the young jokers who swelled our military company aft. I well knew, not by seeing only but by hearing also, that the news of "those lines Swift admires so much, you knaaw," having been copied by Miss Primrose and given to me, had gone the rounds; and many a thirsty glance did I detect if Miss Primrose came on deck when I was there, or on any other occasion of our exchanging a bow.

I was one morning smoking a cigar to leeward of the wheel, which I need hardly say—though to be sure this is the age of steamboats and "amidship steering-gear"—was fixed at the after end of the poop-deck, with nothing behind it and the taffrail save a wide spread of sand-white grating. It was a clear, brilliant morning, the sun soaring with a growing fierceness of sting in its bite; but the coolness of the fresh ocean breeze was in the violet shadow under the long stretch of snow-white awning. It was shortly after breakfast; a few people lounged here and there, but this part of the ship was comparatively deserted. From the main-deck resounded the sharply uttered orders of a non-commissioned officer drilling a number of the soldiers. The mate in charge of the ship paced a little space of the poop near the weather ladder.

I was gazing with admiration at the gleaming canvas of a vessel rendered toylike by distance when the companion-way suddenly framed the formidable countenance of Sir Charles Primrose. As he emerged, I expected to see his daughter behind him, instead of

which there appeared the grotesque figure of Captain Stagg. Without the pause of an instant as for reflection, the General accompanied by the little skipper marched right up to me.

"Good-morning," he exclaimed in his loud emphatic voice of command.

"Good-morning, sir," I answered.

"I should like a word with you, Captain Swift."

"With pleasure."

He cast a look at the man at the wheel who was close by. "Pray step a little this way," said he, and the three of us—and I saw that Stagg was to be of our party—moved to a vacant part of the deck. "I understand," began the General, standing in his towering, erect way and looking at me over his stiff high cravat, "that you share a cabin with a gentleman named Pellew?"

"Mr. George Pellew, Sir Charles," broke in Captain Stagg: "that's what he's down as in the Passengers' List."

"Now, sir," continued the General, "I want you to tell me if you have any reason to suppose that Pellew is *not*"—he thundered out

this word *not*—"your fellow-passenger's real name."

There was nothing for it but to equivocate. I deplored the obligation, but Mr. Cunningham had pledged me to secrecy, and my answer therefore must protect him.

"Is there any reason to doubt that his name is Pellew?" I exclaimed, addressing Captain Stagg.

"Sir Charles believes the gentleman to be somebody else," responded the skipper.

"I have reason to suspect that his name is Cunningham," exclaimed the General. "As his cabin-fellow, you will often have conversed with him, some remark will have excited your suspicion. You will have observed the initials on his linen, for instance."

"This really concerns you more than me, Captain Stagg," said I.

"If the safety of the ship isn't threatened by the gentleman's conduct, I can't possibly make it concern me that I can see," rejoined Captain Stagg. "As I have explained to Sir Charles, the master of a ship has got nothing to do with the *names* of his passengers. Have they paid

their fares? Do they conduct themselves properly? If the master of a ship is answered 'yes' to the like of such questions, then," he added with an emphatic nod at me, "I don't see how he can interfere when it comes to the matter of the company of one passenger not being agreeable to the taste of another."

Sir Charles listened with a frown, keeping his eyes fastened with their habitual expression of fierceness upon the round face and distorted features of the skipper. He waited for him to cease, then addressed me.

"Captain Stagg has described your fellow-passenger. The description leaves me in no doubt. His name is Cunningham. Yet I wish to be perfectly satisfied. Will you describe him to me?"

"I don't know how better to put him before you, sir," said I, "than by saying that without exception he is the handsomest young fellow I ever saw in my life." The General made an angry gesture. "He is perfectly well-bred, he is rather taller than you, I should say, a magnificently built man—" I paused as though at a loss to say more.

"Why does not he show himself?" demanded the General.

"Did not he explain his motive to you, Captain?" said I.

"Oh yes," rumbled Stagg in a voice of ill-temper. "He said he wanted to keep himself to himself, had no taste for company, least of all for soldiers. His name may be Cunningham or his name may be Pellew for all I know; but unless you're certain of your man, Sir Charles, my own notion is he's a nobleman, some real Lord with a fine title, travelling for his entertainment, and wishful to remain unknown."

"Is that your opinion?" asked the General, turning upon me with dignity, though with a face full of irritability.

"Really, sir, he has not interested me so much as to cause me to speculate about him. I seldom visit my berth in the daytime, therefore we meet rarely; and at night he is commonly in bed and asleep when I go to my cabin. He is in the habit of coming on deck after dusk, and is usually I think to be found on the main-deck yonder. You may easily satisfy your

doubts, sir, by walking forward any night when he is on deck and looking at him."

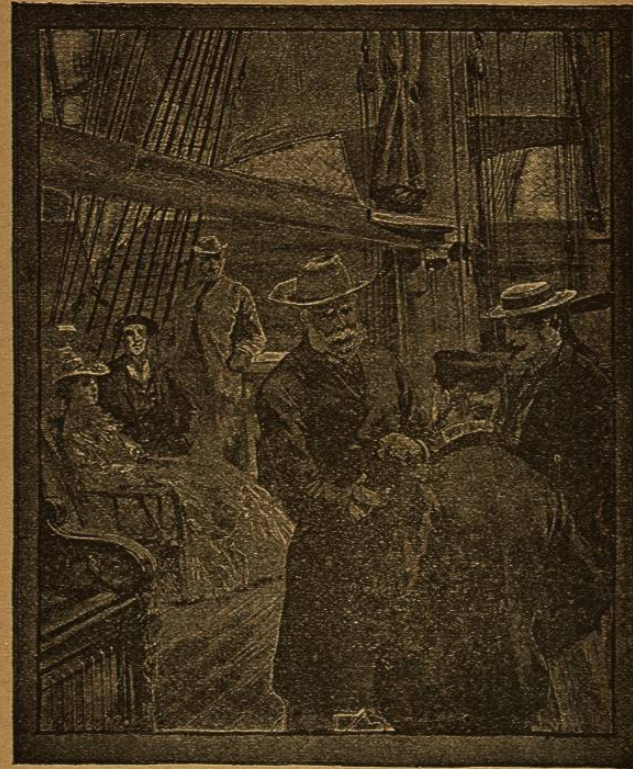
He bent his gimlet-like eye upon me, and I seemed to feel it pierce my very conscience. Passion then mastered him, and he whipped round in a very undignified manner upon Stagg.

"I must insist, sir," he cried, "upon your ascertaining who the person is who lies skulking in his cabin below."

"What am I to do?" cried Captain Stagg. "The road to his cabin's all plain sailing, Sir Charles. Why not call upon him yourself?"

"Sir," thundered the General, heedless of the presence of the people on the deck, who, though they feigned not to look, were listening to every word he said, "you are commander of this ship and responsible for her safety. There is a man skulking below. Who is he? You do not know. Sir, it is your duty to know. I have a right to demand in my own name and in that of my fellow-passengers," and here he swept the deck with his eyes, "that you produce this secret person, who, for all you can tell us to the contrary, may be an escaped felon—a—a—murderer, sir,—an—an—incendiary, sir," he

continued, stammering with temper, "a fellow whose design may be to make a hole in your



"I MUST INSIST, SIR," HE CRIED, "UPON YOUR ASCERTAINING WHO THE PERSON IS WHO LIES SKULKING IN HIS CABIN BELOW"

ship and sink her for some purpose of horrible revenge. You tell me you cannot interfere

with him?" He directed his fiery eye at a group of soldiers who were watching us on the fore-castle; but whatever suggestion came to him from *them* was quickly dismissed as a notion too preposterous even for his illogical and groping mood of wrath to entertain. "Send a company of sailors in command of one of your officers to his cabin, and if he still declines to come on deck, have him dragged up."

"Sir," exclaimed Stagg warmly, his face all a-work with the conflict of sensations excited by the General's fierceness, by his own struggles to maintain an air of respectfulness, by his disgust at being thus shouted at in the hearing of the passengers and the man at the wheel, "I know my duty as commander of this ship, and I know, sir, that that duty don't include the dragging of gentlemen, who have paid their passage-money, out of their cabins by a company of sailors in charge of a mate. There are soldiers aboard, sir, and you're a General; and if you like to take it upon yourself to order a file of them red-coats to bring Mr. Pellew on deck against his will, why, Sir Charles,

you may do it if you like; but if Mr. Pellew comes to me and makes a grievance of the force displayed, then my duty will be to protect him as a passenger and to request the officer in command of those troops to clap the fellows who went below in irons so as to keep them out of mischief for the future. And if the officer refused to do it, *I* should have to do it."

The General without a word marched to the companion-hatch, and went below.

"Did any man ever hear the like of such a thing?" cried Stagg, talking loudly with a mingled air of consternation and passion, and intending his words as much for the ears of the others on the poop as for mine, "that a high-bred gentleman like Sir Charles should dictate to me aboard my own ship—a soldier, too, ignorant of nautical duties!—that because he's got some notion the gentleman isn't the gentleman he calls himself, *I'm* to send some of my sailors below to have him dragged up as if—as if—"

But my identification with this curious business was already much too marked for my

taste as it was, so I left him to splutter out the rest of his incensed mind to the people at whom he was looking, and stepped below on to the quarter-deck.

Such exaggeration of resentment, such public and undignified disclosure of excessive temper, could only signify that the General had plumbed the mystery of Mr. "Pellew," and that the suspicion amounting to detection had set his heart on fire and his brain at its wits' ends. What was now to do? Would he lock his daughter up? No—he *dared* not venture that. The knowledge that she was imprisoned by him would determine the passengers to render his life a burthen, and *that*, let me assure you, spite of his distinguished military position and forbidding countenance, they would one and all have been very easily able to contrive through the ceaseless and countless opportunities of shipboard association.

It soon got wind that he had been in a passion on the poop, and the reason of it, as a piece of news in going from mouth to mouth, was laughably exaggerated. In fact, a young officer came to me, and asked me with a grave face to

settle the matter, as it involved a bet of a couple of guineas.

"Was it not you, Swift, and not the queer chap who shares your berth, whom the General quarrelled with for falling in love with his daughter?"

This same young fellow, however, gave me one item of intelligence: that Miss Primrose was no longer to sleep alone.

"Who is to be her companion, do you know?"

"Her maid," said he. "I met a couple of stewards lugging a mattress up from below, and asked them what was the matter, and they told me it was Miss Primrose's maid's bedding, and that the woman was going to sleep with her mistress for the future. Next thing'll be a sentry with a loaded musket outside her door, I suppose."

All this time the weather was wonderfully fine, the breeze strong and steady on the quarter, and the ship averaging some two hundred and eighty miles in the twenty-four hours. I went to rest late on this night of the day on which Sir Charles had questioned me. A game of chess, of which I was, and still am, a

great lover, had detained me at the saloon table beyond my usual hour; we, however, who occupied the after-part of the ship were much indulged; the lamps, for instance, were never extinguished until the last of us had withdrawn; and up to the hour of midnight the steward was permitted to serve us with refreshments. But midnight was the limit; after that hour the ship floated on the calm sea or fled through the windy night in darkness, and the pop and gush of the soda-water bottle ceased, unless, perhaps, down in my obscure part of the ship a dim explosion gave the listeners to know that one of the "officers" was making himself happy with a secret if not a final "nightcap."

It was some little time before twelve o'clock when I got to my cabin; but Mr. Cunningham was not in his bunk. I concluded that he was still haunting that black part of the deck which was to leeward of the galley, and undressed myself. The atmosphere was hot despite the open porthole—the cabin, indeed, being to leeward; nor though the ear found the sound grateful, was there any refresh-

ment for the flesh in the cool, fountain-like seething of the foam expiring along the ship's side, or twisting into an arrow-like wake of snow. I put my face into the porthole to cool my heated cheeks, and on a sudden caught a noise as of the shuffling of feet upon the channel or platform outside. I supposed that some sailor had jumped into the chains to clear away a rope. Still, the prolonged absence of Mr. Cunningham rendering me suspicious in a vague sort of way, I continued to listen, scarce knowing what next I might hear; but if ever any sound again came from the mizzen-channel, it was whelmed by the hiss of the rushing brine.

In about twenty minutes' time the door opened and Mr. Cunningham stepped in, draped as usual in his immense coat and slouched brigandlike hat. He flung the weighty garment from him with an air of loathing as though half dead with the heat, and observing me to be awake, he exclaimed, whilst he flourished a handkerchief over his face:

"Such a masquerade becomes unbearable in a dog-day atmosphere of this sort."