

her cold and withholding demeanour vexed me as an expression of ingratitude, and perhaps in



"ME SHE NOW SCARCELY NOTICED."

a small degree it removed my sympathy from her.

VII

"IN THE MIDDLE WATCH"

By the date at which this story has now arrived we had been a day less than a month out from the Thames ; but the equator was still under our bow. Indeed I have some recollection of our latitude at noon on this day being 40' or 45' north. Throughout the morning and throughout the afternoon the burnished heave of the sea was faintly tarnished by catspaws only, delicate breathings of air that rapidly expired in their sportive flights, leaving our lofty canvas sulkily and breathlessly swaying as the tall fabric lightly rolled on the light wide blue undulations.

Yet the heat was not so excessive as we had found it further north. The pitch no longer lay soft as putty in the seams of the deck, and

the vision could penetrate to the sea-line without being sickened by the serpentine waving of it in the dim blue haze which rose in steam from the smoking rail and sides of the ship, and which everywhere created an atmosphere that caused whatever the eye rested on to revolve; so that the long jibbooms and the very mastheads of the vessel seemed to twist round and round as though they were Archimedean screws slowly worked.

The moon rose very late and it was a dark but clear night when I left the deck to kill half-an-hour in the saloon over a glass of cold grog, and in a chat with such men as I might find there. On entering my cabin at half-past ten or thereabouts I found Mr. Cunningham in bed. He lay with his face to the ship's side, but his regular breathing assured me that he was sleeping. The cabin porthole was wide open, but not a breath of air seemed to penetrate the aperture. There was something almost oppressive in the strange hush outside. At intervals one heard a sob of water or a dim splash and a weak noise of gurgling that made one think of a person drowning alongside.

The light swaying of the ship was illustrated by the slow small slide of the stars in the velvet disc of the porthole. Now and then I would be sensible of a light jar or shock as from the "kick" of the wheel as it is called.

I got into bed after extinguishing the bracket-lamp, and lay perhaps for half-an-hour or so wide awake, *listening*, as an Irishman might say, to the deep impressive stillness upon the ocean and wondering how long this sort of weather was going to last, and at what date we might expect to enter the river Hooghley.

I was awakened by something that irritated my face, and putting my hand into a bag at the end of my bunk I pulled out a box of lucifers, struck a light, and discovered that my visitor was a cockroach. The match swiftly burned out, and suspecting that there might be others of the disgusting creatures crawling upon my bedclothes, I hopped from my bunk and lighted the lamp. As I did this a sound floating in through the porthole caught my ear. I listened. The noise had resembled the dip of an oar; but I might be quite sure it could be

nothing of the sort; nothing more than some instant murmur of water alongside, some note of eddying resembling the stroke of an oar.

I examined my bed and had the satisfaction of observing a short line of cockroaches crawling in good processional order off the sheet under which I had lain: they made for the side of the bunk to the interstice in which they lodged in the day. The matter was trifling, yet the disgust the sight of the noisome pests excited rendered me in a moment very broad awake. I glanced at Mr. Cunningham's bunk: it was empty. His clothes were removed from the pegs on which he commonly hung them. I looked to see if there were any cockroaches in his bed, conceiving that he might have been driven by the vermin on to the deck. No: his bed was free of cockroaches.

I had not found it excessively hot when I first came below; but now, whether because of the cockroaches or because of the glow of the freshly-kindled lamp, or, which was no doubt the case, because whilst I slept there had happened a sensible increase in the temperature, I found the atmosphere overpowering. "Mr.

Cunningham is on deck," thought I, "I'll join him." Indeed, I seemed to pant for the wide freshness of the ocean night, for the dew of it, and the ice-like brilliancy of the stars, and for the sweet draughts of air which came and went as the folds of the canvas swung large and pallid over the glimmering decks.

I partially clothed myself, thrust my naked feet into a pair of slippers, clapped a light straw hat on my head, and put a cigar into my pocket, and turning down the lamp, went out softly with that regard for the sleep of others which operates as a sort of instinct in one on board ship. I groped my way to the foot of the stairs which led to the saloon. This interior was in darkness, but the starlight touched the windows which overlooked the quarter-deck, and it lay in a faint sheen upon the skylights, and I passed very easily out through the door. Had the ship been deserted the decks could not have been stiller. There was no moon to make a reflection, and nothing visible stirred. I thought to hear the dull hum of voices, and went a little way forward, expecting to behold the shadowy outline of Mr. Cunning-

ham's tall figure. A couple of sailors seated Lascar fashion against the galley were snoring at the top of their pipes. Others I might, no doubt, have found coiled away in secret nooks ready to spring to their feet to the first sharp summons from the poop, for on such a breathless night as this was, with a cloudless heaven of stars going from sea-line to sea-line, the watch on deck were to be excused for napping.

I turned to look aft, and was somewhat surprised to find nobody in motion upon the poop; for *there* at least one thought to find that ceaseless vigilance which is and indeed must be the pulse, the marrow, the seminal principle of the vocation of the sea. Mounting the ladder on the port side of the ship, I made a few steps aft, still without catching sight of the officer of the watch, though the figure of the man at the wheel grasping the spokes at the extremity of the deck was to be seen rising and falling against the stars over the taffrail. Then my eye going to the huddle of thick ropes—shrouds and backstays complicated by the interlacing of ratlines—which formed the support of the mainmast, and which descended a little way

abaft the point at which the forward end of the poop terminated, I spied the motionless figure of a man.

"That will be the mate who has charge of the deck," thought I, and crossed over to him. He stood stirless as though blasted by lightning. I was struck by his posture.

"Is that you, Mr. Masters?" I inquired.

He returned no answer. For the moment I believed him lifeless; but even as I so thought I seemed to observe a sort of wriggle in the whole man, and now drawing close to him and peering narrowly, I was astounded to find him not only gagged but helplessly bound by turn upon turn of rope, and securely fastened to the rail of the deck!

I immediately went to work to liberate him. No fly involved by a spider in its web was ever more hopelessly imprisoned than was this second mate. Fathom after fathom of rope had gone to the securing of him, and it was like unreeling cotton to remove the innumerable turns that swathed him from his neck to his heels. The manner in which he had been gagged too, showed the hand of an artist. The

contrivance was so framed as to sit clear of his nostrils, yet to fill his mouth and paralyze the motion of his tongue. He leaned against the rail for some minutes speechless after I had released him, and guessing his condition, I bawled over the edge of the poop for some men to come to me, and three or four seamen approached, hurrying out of the darkness forward.

I swiftly explained the state in which I had found the second mate, and bade them chafe his limbs: which they forthwith did, understanding me with the prompt intelligence of sailors, yet marvelling greatly as they rubbed, as I might know by their manner of staring around.

"I am all right now, men, I am all right now," exclaimed Mr. Masters, and he made as though he would break from them, but staggered and leaned afresh against the rail with a manner of exhaustion, and feebly cried to me, "Will you call the captain, sir? I am not able to walk yet."

I hastened below into the saloon, too astonished, and I may say alarmed, to use my eyes as I ran; for let me tell you, it was no small shock



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to one like myself, a passenger, to come on deck in the blackness of the night and find the officer of the watch, to whose keeping were entrusted the lives of all on board the ship, inhumanly bound and gagged, stirless and helpless and voiceless, and nothing at hand to explain the why and the how and the wherefore of the wild piece of business. I knocked smartly on the door of the captain's cabin, and before I could repeat the summons the handle was turned, and the figure of the square little man appeared.

"What is it? What is it?" The dim light that burnt in his cabin scarcely revealed me to him as he stood staring.

"Something is wrong on deck, Captain Stagg. I found your second mate gagged and bound to the rail, and have only just released him. He asked me to call you."

He waited to hear no more, but with a strange, half-smothered exclamation that sounded like the growl of a dreaming mastiff, he made a plunge for his small-clothes and was immediately following me on deck, struggling into his coat as he ran. The second mate leaned against

the rail where I had left him; the little knot of men lingered near, but they had ceased to chafe his limbs.

"What is it?" cried Stagg, marching in an impetuous deep-sea roll up to him, and speaking in a voice harsh, almost brutal with excitement, expectation, and temper.

"This was it, sir," answered the second mate in weak tones: "Five bells had just gone when Mr. Pellew, the tall gentleman that shares Captain Swift's cabin, came on to the poop. He stepped up to me, and we got into conversation. Presently he asked me if some shadow that he pretended to see out upon the water was a ship, and whilst I was leaning over the rail to look, I was gagged, half-throttled, and thrown on my back. There were three of them in the job. Mr. Pellew was one. His strength was like a giant's. The others were two of our men, but it was too dark to make them out. They bound me from head to foot, and then set me up against the rail here, and I was just able to notice—for the suddenness of the attack had taken half my mind out of my head—that they went to the after port quarter-boat and lowered