



VIII

CONCLUSION

THE passengers now began to melt away, not to return to their beds, but to clothe themselves. The captain came from the rail and approached me close, then wheeled off on seeing who I was. Lanterns sparkled in the fore and mizzen rigging, and in their faint illumination the figures of soldiers and sailors on the main-deck and in the waist came and went. The mate with a night-glass at his eye incessantly searched the horizon, crossing from side to side to do so. The calm was absolutely breathless—a clock calm it is called at sea: not the faintest stir in the atmosphere, though a faint long-drawn swell, the systole and diastole of old ocean's sleeping heart, delicately swayed the buttons of our trucks under the sparkling

stars whose brilliance found no eclipse in the wan light of the moon.

Suddenly there was the explosion of a rocket with a long shearing hiss of it as it shot betwixt our masts and broke into a little cloud of light on high. This was the first of half-a-dozen that followed in rapid succession. Evidently Stagg's forlorn hope was that the two absconded sailors would be alarmed by reflection into a change of mind and row the pair of lovers back again to the ship. Nothing, however, to my fancy, to my recollection of Mr. Cunningham's determined character, to every thought of the devotion of the girl who had embarked on this most unheard-of, this most astonishing adventure, could seem more improbable. In strength Mr. Cunningham was a match for any two men; in a passion he might prove himself the equal of even three, and should the two sailors desire to return, it would assuredly go hard with them if they attempted to give effect to their resolution.

The General continued to stand alone near the wheel. No one offered to approach him. I can see with my mind's eye at this moment

his stately military figure, stirless as a statue saving a slow motion of his head as he gazed round upon the sea. I felt a hearty disgust of myself when I reflected upon the part I had taken in Mr. Cunningham's love affair. Never did I regret anything so much as my having served him and Miss Primrose as a messenger. The General was a man whose character and qualities were little to my taste; yet I own that it affected me deeply to witness him standing alone at the extremity of the deck searching with his eyes the cold black surface of the waters—to recall his professional distinction—to remember his achievements—to reflect upon the valour, the judgment, the loyalty that had gone to the creation of his long career; and *then* to think of the shame and sorrow that had come upon him.

Indeed there was something so extraordinarily audacious in the act of the lovers, that though the empty davits yawned before me, though the lanterns still shone over the ship's side, though there were eyes at many parts of the rails and bulwarks on the look-out, I could scarcely yet credit the occurrence as an actu-

ality. Who in all one's life had ever heard of such a thing as a young fellow eloping with a girl out of a ship in an open boat and taking his chance with his sweetheart at his side in the lonely heart of a thousand leagues of Atlantic water? I might suppose that he had heavily bribed the seamen who accompanied him. One could easily understand the scheme now. a programme that involved three sailors, one of whom should be at the helm by the rotation of the "tricks" on the night agreed upon for the carrying out of the plot. Had they victualled and watered the boat before going away in her? If so, this must have been secretly and darkly done on the previous nights: though how it had been accomplished without detection I cannot imagine. But what amazed me most was the subtle stillness, the sneaking breathless artfulness they had exhibited in lowering the boat, getting the girl into her, unhooking the blocks of the tackles and shoving off without a soul on board saving the fellow at the wheel, and the gagged and helpless second mate, hearing anything or having the least suspicion of what was go-

ing forward. To be sure I had seemed to hear the distant dip of a solitary oar, and I might now be certain that the noise had been no fancy of mine. But was it possible that the boat was lowered so quietly as to be unheard by the rows of sleepers on that side of the ship, all whose portholes would be wide open on so sultry a night?

But so it was: the boat was gone; the young couple were missing; two of the sailors had not answered to their names, and yonder stood the father, motionlessly gazing with God knows what passions and griefs surging in him, his tall figure blotting out a score or two of stars twinkling dimly in the distant dusk.

I was but partially clothed, as you know, and made my way below to complete my toilet in readiness for daylight when it should come. In passing through the saloon, I perceived the figure of a woman seated at the table with her face buried in her hands. She was sobbing bitterly. A couple of the lamps had been lighted and there was plenty of illumination to see by, but the interior was empty of all save that weeping form. I paused when abreast of

her, and wondering who she was and therefore unable to imagine the cause of her distress, I asked gently if I could be of use to her. She lifted her head. She was Miss Primrose's maid.

"There is no reason for all this unhappiness," said I; "the sea is delightfully calm, the weather delightfully fine, and your mistress will be restored to the ship, I hope and believe, during the morning."

"Oh, but Sir Charles will think me an accomplice, sir," she exclaimed in a broken voice.

"If you have the truth on your side you will be easily able to convince him," said I.

"I can assure you, sir, I had no notion that my young lady meant to take so mad a step," she exclaimed, talking eagerly as though glad of an opportunity to disburthen her mind. "I sleep very soundly, and that's where it is, sir. When I went to bed my young lady was undressed and sleeping as I believed. She had not dined at the table. She asked for some sandwiches and wine at eight, and then told me to go on deck and take the air, and to return at half past nine to help her to undress, but some

time before that hour I returned to the cabin to fetch a shawl to protect me from the dew, and when I entered I found Miss Primrose with her arm in the porthole. I thought



“OH, BUT SIR CHARLES WILL THINK ME AN ACCOMPLICE, SIR,” SHE EXCLAIMED IN A BROKEN VOICE.”

nothing of it, but now since I've heard that the gentleman slept in the cabin underneath us, I believe she was communicating with him through that window, though I do not know how she did it. When I came back at half

past nine I found she had undressed herself and was then getting into bed, and at ten o'clock, sir, as I have said, she seemed to be asleep, and then I went to bed myself, and until I was woke up by the noise on deck, and by Sir Charles knocking at the door to ask if his daughter was there, I knew no more of what had happened than the babe unborn.” She burst into tears again and continued to repeat, “I know I shall be thought an accomplice. I know it will be said that I was paid money to take no notice—which will be a most dreadful falsehood;” and the poor creature rocked herself in her wretchedness.

I addressed a few words of comfort to her and passed on. Her story was undoubtedly true, and it explained away a difficulty; for it had puzzled me to understand how Miss Primrose had contrived to dress herself and quit her cabin without disturbing her maid. As I looked at Mr. Cunningham's baggage, which stood near his chest of drawers in a corner of the cabin, I wondered if the man would ever turn up again to claim them, whether we should ever again hear of him and his sweetheart, or

supposing them to come off with their lives, what sort of adventures would befall them before they reached England. What, I thought to myself as I looked through the open port into the black profound of breathless sea and sky as they showed in that tube of window—what will be the girl's thoughts as she sits in the boat somewhere out yonder in the deep solitude of this immensity of water, and under that heaven of scintillant dusk? Is there any magic in the passion of love to reconcile her to such a situation? Will she not by this time be glad to exchange the bliss of sitting by her lover's side in an open boat in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean for the comfort of her berth, for the hospitable light and life of the saloon, for the safety of this stout tall ship, the *Light of Asia*?

I returned on deck, and as I stepped on to the quarter-deck on my road to the poop I was in time to hear the chief officer standing at the rail overhead call out: "A reward of ten guineas will be given to the first man, soldier or sailor, it matters not, who sights the boat."

There were many dusky figures flitting about on the poop. I looked around for the General, and presently spied his tall shape pacing, alone, a few feet of the deck near the wheel. I joined a group formed of Colonel Mowbray and other officers and some ladies, and stood with them, talking over the strange incidents of the night, the prospects of the recovery of the boat, the insane audacity of the elopement. One must have thought that the dawn never would come, so indescribably slow was the passage of those dark hours. I purposely raised my voice that Sir Charles might know I was on deck and question me if he chose; but he held aloof, he had nothing to say; once somebody joined him, but he speedily shook him off.

The calm was as preternatural for oppressive stillness, for the enormousness of the hush rising out of its heart and subduing every sense, till one felt the influence of it as a sort of command upon the spirits;—the calm, I say, was almost as beyond nature as the horrific snake-laden stagnation described in the *Ancient Mariner*. Shortly before daybreak I found the

dusky figure of the second mate standing near me, and asked him how he did.

“I’m all right again now, sir, thank you.”

“Shall we recover the runaways, think you?”

“I believe not,” he answered in a low voice.

“Even if the boat should be in sight when the sun rises, is the captain going to send in chase?”

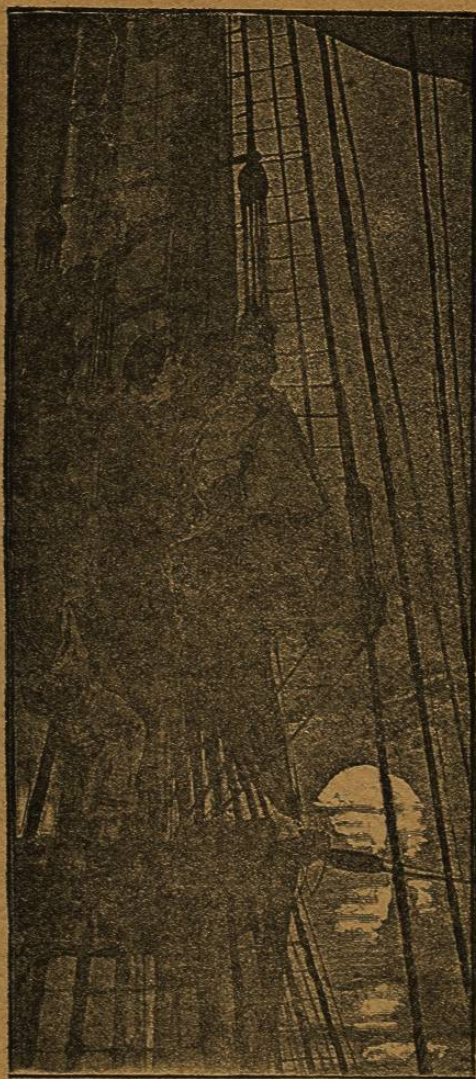
“He’ll not do it unless some wind comes to enable him to hold his boats in view, and there’s no hint that I can find in the sky of any wind for the next twenty-four hours, if it comes *then*.”

“The two sailors must have been handsomely bribed to fall in with so desperate a scheme?”

“Ay, sir, big promises and some ready money on top of them weren’t wanting, I dare say. Unfortunately, Mr. Pellew, as he called himself, has got hold of two of the worst men in the ship; fellows, so the bo’sun was saying, whose characters would the least bear looking into. It is that which makes the situation of the lady bad, and her father’s to be pitied if

we don’t pick ’em up. ’Twill be a heart-breaking job for him, so stern as he is and so proud too, and not liked well enough to be condoled with, d’ye see, so that his heart’ll have to burst by itself in its iron case if its splitting or holding together is going to depend upon kind words and sympathy.”

As he spoke, a dim, most elusive sheen of green, like a delicate mist upon which the reflection of a coloured glass is cast, was visible upon the rim of the eastern sea. It was the first of the daybreak, and to the instant glimpse of it there was a rush aloft; a dance of all hands up the shrouds, with soldiers slowly and warily crawling up the rigging, holding on very tightly, and often pausing to look up. Every mast bore its burthen of starers like clusters of bees settled upon the yards, when with the velocity of the tropic daybreak the sun sprang off the sea-line and flashed up the whole scene of sea and sky into a day splendid and boundless. Perched on the main-royal yard at an elevation of I know not how many feet above the deck was the figure of the chief mate, with a telescope at his eye; and on high,



'AT DAYBREAK THERE WAS A RUSH ALOFT OF ALL HANDS.'

on the fore-royal yard, with his head on a level with the truck, stood the figure of the second mate, also with a telescope at his eye; and with the slow deliberate motion of the merchant sailor, the two worthy fellows swept the ocean with their glasses. We down on the poop all stood staring up, breathless, agitated, hearkening for the first cry that should announce the visibility of a minute speck upon the horizon. But all remained silent aloft. The very ship seemed to participate in the emotion of the time, to hush the stir of her canvas, to arrest the swaying of her mast-heads.

"Main-royal yard there!" shouted the captain. "Do you see anything of the boat, Mr. Freeman?"

"Nothing, sir," came back the answer, clear but small as it fell from that spire-like altitude.

"She *must* be within range of the telescope," I heard the captain say, talking *at* Sir Charles, though addressing the passengers generally, "but the lenses aren't powerful enough to reveal her."

"Has she been picked up by some passing vessel, do you think?" somebody enquired.

"Nothing with sails *could* have passed her," answered the captain, "and steam we should have seen or heard. The lookout that's been kept has been bright enough."

The General approached the square little man whose insult of the night I could not forgive. I was startled by the haggardness and hollowness of his—that is to say, Sir Charles's—face; it was difficult to believe that passion and emotion could work so violent a change in a resolved and mature nature in so short a time. His complexion was of a greenish tinge; the pallor would have been ashen in a fair man, but it showed sickly, ghastly indeed, in its hue on his almost chocolate-coloured cheek. His black eyes were restless and full of the fire of temper; but there was a new expression of fierceness in his face; it almost amounted to ferocity as he looked down upon Stagg. This was a man to pity in the dark, when one could *imagine* him only, and invent whatever feelings and sensations one chose for him in his affliction; but in the day-

time sympathy was shot dead by his burning level glance. I confess as I looked at him when he approached Stagg that I ceased to feel sorry for him.

A number of the passengers were standing near; they could not miss what he said, nor did he address Stagg as though he were sensible of the presence of other listeners.

"The boat is not in sight then?"

"No, Sir Charles. But, as I have said, that'll be the fault of the telescope. She's bound to be this side of the horizon from half that way up, ay, from a quarter that way up," said the captain, indicating the mainmast with his elbow.

"But she is not in sight," repeated the General with vehemence, "no matter whether she ought or ought not to be so."

"No, she's not in sight."

"And what do you mean to do?"

"What *can* I do, sir?" exclaimed the captain, sending a gaze of despair, that was made comical by the twist of his nose and mouth, over the burnished blue sea in whose eastern quarter the sun's reflection flamed as though we were afloat on an ocean of quicksilver.