THE GOOD SHIP "MOHOCK"

—BY—

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CHAPTER VII.

WE TAKE THE AIR IN GANGS.

The rain thrashed the decks at intervals the glass paled to a dim violet glare of distant storm; this perhaps reconciled most of us to our imprisonment. The steward bustled about with glasses and drink and (the ladies consenting) the Colonel and Mr. Jackson smoked cigars. Sharp tempestuous noises of strainings and groanings ran through the fabric as she took the seas; from time to time you heard the sullen thunder of a fall of water forward. It was a black night. Monsignor stepped to the barometer and said to the hard-faced lady that there was a fall.

"Small wonder," said he, "that the fellows who are on deck should be glad to have Captain Sinclair to take charge."

"Hark! What's that?" cried Mr. Macbride.

It reached the ear in a hollow echoing rumble, and was accompanied by the hoarse yowling of pulling and dragging sailors.

"They have let go the maintopsail halliards," said Colonel Wills, who had made the passage often enough to know the ropes, "and are going to reef the sail, I suppose."

"Surely they never would have sent the captain adrift in an open boat on such a night as this," exclaimed Mr. Macbride, whose face looked as white as his clerical tie as he and his wife sat swaying to the swings of the ship whose leeward fetches were growing sharper and sharper.

It was also unreal to me from that sort of incredulity which awaits at first upon tragic surprise that I sat idly looking, idly listening, idly thinking like one dim of vision and a little hard of hearing in a theatre where the show is complex and without narrative in movement. It was hard upon ten o'clock. I felt weary without being sleepy, and reeled over the tumbling deck to the table to get me a little drop of wine from a decanter in a swinging tray. The grasshopper, pipe in mouth, with native unexpected civility, leapt to my side, watched, dodged, and caught the decanter as it swung to him, and handed me a glass of wine. I thanked him, and looked about me with a faint smile and a little bow of good night to this one and then that, I went to my berth.

It was long before I could sleep for wondering what they meant to do with the passengers. All this while the ship was rushing south; to what part of the world had they agreed to steer her?

I lay feverish with the hurry of my thoughts, miserable with amazement and anxiety. My berth was to leeward, and my bunk just under the cabin port-hole, and every minute the ship as she swept along the slant of the roaring ridges plunged her side into the seething cataract that swelled about my head with the thunder of a hurricane. It blew a black, wet, hard gale. The creaking and rending noises in the ship drowned all other sounds, yet I knew by the motion not more than by the flashing of white brine that they held her throughout the wild hours ceaselessly rushing through it.

In the morning so great a sea ran that it was scarcely possible to walk. By clinging and clawing I reached a seat in the saloon. A few passengers sat here and there; they were the picture of dejection: the comedian of a grimy blue for want of the razor, and Mrs. Wills scarcely recognizable through her hair having floated out of curl. The steward was making some show of preparing breakfast, but he moved in a manner that gave us no promise of a meal for another hour at least. The cabin was sunk in gloom; nothing better than a wet, dim twilight sifted through the windows when the ship lifted the weeping glass to the gray sky.

"This wind will carry us very far south; we shall be crossing the equator in a little while," exclaimed Monsignor in a melancholy voice.

The steward informed us that the sea was running mountain high; nevertheless, the ship was sweeping before it under a foresail and reefed maintopsail: the gale was on the quarter and you felt the weight and volume of the mighty ocean surge in each swift, giddy, launching upheaval. I asked after my stepfather.

"He's been keepng the deck more or less all night, miss," said the steward. "He's on deck now. Who's he a-going to trust to keep a look-out? That there Owen ain't no sailor."

The passengers emerged by degrees, and a little before ten the steward came down the companion steps with some hot breakfast. We drew to the table, melancholy, uneasy, alarmed, darting looks furtively, staring oddly, speaking in low voices. The height of the sea frightened many of us, the subduing influence of the storm was upon us, and there was nobody at table to be a reassuring thing.

In the middle of breakfast Captain Sinclair came below. He pulled off his streaming sou'wester and oilskin [illegible] let them drop on the deck by [illegible] making a bow to [illegible] himself [illegible] mask. I met his glance—it was a distortion of the lips, no smile certainly that he returned my nod with.

"What news can you give us, Captain?" howled Colonel Wills.

"None that you'll thank me for."

"Have the men decided upon a destination?" enquired Mr. Jackson.

"Yes, sir."

Every face seemed to turn wild and white with eagerness at this—every neck was stretched. Monsignor put his hand to his ear. The captain remained silent.

"Will you name the place to us, Captain?" shouted the grasshopper.

"The Great Salvage Island," answered my stepfather.

"Where was that?"

"Its a rock between Maderie and the Canaries," the captain said, chewing his food slowly, and speaking as though he forced himself to an effort he abhorred, and looking at those who questioned him full and straight under his dark brow.

Questions crackled like discharges of musketry, and the distracting motions of the ship, the dartings and leapings of lamps and swing trays, were in that confusion of tongues to heighten it to sheer sick dizziness. How far was the Salvage Island from England? What was going to happen after the ship arrived there?

"Say!" sings out the Colonel, "are they going to bury the gold buccaneer fashion? If Maderia isn't far off from that rock, what's to stop us from sighting it, and privately signalling for a man-of-war to follow us?"

"Or couldn't you put into Maderia by mistake, as it were?" said Mr Jackson. "There's nealry always a British ship of war lying there."

"Who says so?" said the Captain.

"Well, sir, I don't know," answered the comedian, who looked ferocious with a nervous attack, "but I must have read of it, and it's in my head that it is so."

The Captain slowly masticated his food, looking fixedly at Mr. Jackson.

"After all," continued the comedian, "since there's no navigator among the twelve scoundrels who've seized us, which of them's to know you're heading for Maderia till we're close enough to the island for distress signals to be seen?"

"Were you ever off Madeira?" demanded the Captain.

"Not to my knowledge."

"It's a large lump of land, and looms in a big shadow many miles distant," said the Captain. "There's scarce a man of the twelve who wouldn't know it as we approached when miles off, long before we should be in sight from Funchal, and perceiving that I meant foul play there's not a man of the twelve who'd grant me a minute for prayer before sending a bullet through my head."

"Oh, God, Captain, don't talk so!" cried Mrs. Wills, upheaving her shapeless mass in a start of horror upon her chair, and she dried her great face on a handkerchief.

"What I am doing I am forced to do," continued the Captain, closing his knife and fork and addressing Monsignor. "It's a horrible obligation. Yet should I be serving you by being sent adrift? Could I be of use to you by so acting as to place myself at the mercy of men whose instant gift of grace would be the yardarm or the knife? I tell you straight, ladies and gentlemen, that were I to sulk, shut myself up in my cabin, decline to come to any sort of terms with them, they'd toss me over the side to perish in an open boat, with no more compunction than I feel in breaking this;" he snapped a biscuit, whilst his eyes seemed on fire as he talked. "I may be of service to you and the ship whilst I am on board—there are no certainties at sea—a few hours might easily find all well with us."

Mr. Macbride clasped his hands and looked up.

"But I tell you as things stand, we are helpless. The men have possession of the decks and they are armed. I have no fears for your safety, nor for your personal property. I have stipulated for that. If they leave the vessel at the Salvage Island we shall have to work her to the Canaries or to Maderia amongst ourselves." He stood up, and said, "I ask our sympathy for my situation—no, your forbearance will suffice. I have lost my ship. I am miserable enough to be obliged to see women and children, both here and in the 'tween decks, placed in my charge, distracted some of them, wretched all of them, by the feeling of insecurity, by the tragic uncertainty of their position, by the fears that their lives are endangered. More—I know by this stroke (unless I save the ship) that I am professionally ruined."

His voice broke. It seemed as though he would speak on; bowing hurriedly he withdrew to his cabin.

I thought he would wish to talk with me presently, and watched his cabin door, thinking to see it open and himself beckon. He came out indeed after half an hour, but merely to pick up his oilskins, put them on, and stalk up the steps.

The gale hummed fiercely throughout the morning, but shortly before mid-day a flash of wet sunshine slipped in white splendour from one reeling cabin window to another, and shortly afterwards the tarpaulins were removed from the skylights, the companion doors were opened, and the steward descended. I think we were nearly all of us then assembled in the saloon.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said the man, "any half-dozen of you, three ladies and three gents, who would feel disposed to take the air are at liberty to go on deck for their entertainment."

"Who sent that message?" called out the Colonel, savagely.

"I was stopped as I came along by the man called Owen; he sent it, sir."

After some talk it was arranged that the three men to go on deck should be Monsignor, Colonel Wills, and the actor; and the ladies were the hard-faced lady, another and myself. I know not how it was with the rest, but my own heart burned with the humiliation of being let out like Newgate prisoners in a little gang "to take the air." I was the first ready and passed on deck. The companion doors were opened on my knocking. I stooped low and gained the deck, staggering and nearly falling to a sudden giddiness raised by the whirling, maring, brilliant light of the day after the gloom of the saloon. The sentry caught me by the arm. I shuddered, instantly rallied, and went a little way to look about me.

My stepfather stood upon the ship's quarter with a sextant in his hand. He saw me but made no other sign than glancing. The man at the hatch was armed with a cutlass; he was draped midway to the heels in pilot cloth, and wore jack boots and a yellow sou'wester. Others about the deck were clothed in apparel which they certainly had not worn nor brought with them in their long boat. Monsignor came to my side and begged me to take his arm, and together we stood looking. It was a marvellous fine scene of ocean. Nothing grander ever rolled under the heavens. The sky above the horizon was painted a delicate dusk with cloud, and the sea flashed like sunbeams against that soft darkness. A vast green noble surge swelled with us as we ran. It foamed to our bulwark rails, and lifted us high, and our wake was a highway of yeast that topped the lift of the billow and died out in the dim liquid flickering distance. The sky was a race of large torn cloud, white as milk; the sun of a windy whiteness sprang off their edges, and at each leap the whole surface of the pouring south flashed into hills of dazzling light. In the midst rushed the ship; she stormed along under a few breasts of canvas; her spars looked naked, her rigging yelled, every slack rope arched forwards with her course, and her lofty mastheads reeled to the sovereign height of their white trucks.

I observed that a man with a cutlass dangling at hip lurked about the main hatchway; no steerage passengers were visible; of the twelve of a crew eight were to be counted, including the helmsman and a sturdy, broad, red-headed fellow who trudged in that part of the deck which they call the gangway, as though he were in charge of the ship. Colonel Wills and the comedian stood staring along the decks and up at the sails; the two ladies hung together at the companion, unable to walk.

"If this wind lasts," said the priest, "it will put an end to uncertainty. Maderia is not far off; the Great Salvage is close to that island."

"Can you imagine what the men intend?"

"I believe they will disembark with the money, then bury it, and sail away, keeping us in the ship, but what they will do afterwards I can't conceive."

"Is this the result," said I, "of a pre-arranged conspiracy, or were the men really shipwrecked wretches, who have been taken on board, risen, and seized the vessel?"

His French blood spoke in the shrug he gave.

"I should hold that it had been a pre-arranged plan but for this," said he. "What confederates could they have had in the ship? They sent the original crew, mates and all, out of her."

"Might not that have been part of the conspiracy?"

"How could it serve them, Miss Hayes?"

"Supposing—for argument's sake—that Mr. Gordon was in the plot. He contrives without suspicion of my stepfather to place the ship on a given day in a position settled upon."

The priest shook his head.

"He secretly helps the men by telling them where the arms chest is, or perhaps by taking them to it in some black hour of the middle watch. Nevertheless, Mr. Gordon is put into the boat and sent away with the rest of the people——."

"Why? He would want a share of the booty. It is not likely he would leave the ship had he betrayed her into the hands of these pirates."

"Perhaps not," said I.

Colonel Wills and Mr. Jackson came up to us.

"It seems to me," said the Colonel, gasping hoarsely in his efforts to make us hear him above the wind, but with a voice that should not reach the companion sentry, "that it ought to be no difficult matter to recapture this vessel. There may be eight or ten men in the steerage; then there are ourselves. It's to be done."

"It's to be done," exclaimed the comedian, sarcastically, "if they'll let us all out and allow us to arm ourselves, and give us a fair chance, as man to man. But put me into that hole again," said he, pointing to the companion hatch, "and let that chap there be ready with his cutlass to jab me over the nut on my showing myself, and what sort of a draw am I going to make of this ship's recapture?"

Just as he said this my stepfather passed us.

"Laura, I want you," said he.

The sentry threw open the doors, and I followed the captain, who seemed to be reading the brass arch of his sextant. I was at his heels and closed the door of his berth when we were in it. He put down his sextant, seated himself and so postured that my breath left me. I thought he would sink in a fit. He laid one hand upon his breast, the other upon the table, and strangely and slowly clenched his fingers till the veins showed like whipcord upon his fist; meanwhile he looked down upon the table with an expression of grief full of wildness and anger.

"Do you remember," said he, presently, "what Christian said to Bligh when that captain was getting into the boat, 'I am in hell. I am in hell. 'Tis so with me.'"

"Colonel Wills just now on deck said that he thought this ship might be re captured."

"By whom?"

"By Wills and the other men in the saloon; and then there are eight or ten males in the 'tween decks who would fight for their lives and liberty, surely."

"Wills is a Yankee bouncing braggart; full of fine possibilities—for other men. He married that huge human as something to get behind in time of danger. I would advise him to be careful in his talk. If his words reach the ears of the men who hold the ship I'll not answer for his life. None of you seem aware of the frightful significance of what has happened."

"How do you mean?" said I. "You should have sat with us and heard us."

"Ay, but they don't know what's before them," said he, pointing to a locker that I should sit. I watched him, feeling frightened on a sudden. "The man Owen and some others came to me on the quarter-deck about an hour ago, and their plan's this: the whole of the passengers, bag and baggage, are to be put ashore on the Great Salvage Island. I am then to carry this ship to a certain Bahama Cave."

He stopped, eyeing me intently.

"Why," said I, fetching my breath, "I don't think the passengers will object to being set ashore. Anything better than being imprisoned, living in a constant state of uncertainty and terror, never knowing but that we may all be butchered if it should suit the ruffians to change their plans."

"Yet they'll not like to be put ashore on the Great Salvage Island. It's a bare rock, not much bigger than half a dozen ships of this size. Did you think there was a town and hotels on it?"

"The people will be glad to get out of this ship anyhow," I said. "Maderia is not far distant."

"Nor the Canaries," said he.

"And I suppose," said I, "that ships frequently pass within sight of the island?"

He nodded inattentively, and said: "I hate the idea of assenting to it. Why do I do so? Because I am a ruined man;" he cried again clenching his fist in the former odd slow way, as though he did it in his sleep, or was catching at dry sand. "And not only ruined, if I oppose them they'll take my life."

"Ruined! This capture is no fault of yours," said I, meeting his gaze steadily. "It is not like some vile blunder of seamanship. Your explanation, supported by the evidence of the passengers, must set you right with the owners——."

"I am ruined," he blazed out. "Don't talk rubbish to me. What do you know about the sea? I am prejudiced forever in this trade, and now if I want a berth I must be willing to hang about until I can pick up a job as first or second of something this ship could make a long boat of."

"What's to become of me?"

"You'll stop on board. I stipulated for that."

"I would rather take my chance with the passengers," I exclaimed, not liking the look that was in his face.

"You'll stop on board," he repeated, with cold, deliberate emphasis.

"Shall I ever get home?"

"Perhaps you'll not want to," said he. "This is to be a voyage of adventures, and if it must ruin me on one side, by God, Laura, it shall equip me on the other!" He jumped up as if to stop my mouth. "You can go," said he. "Leave me to tell the passengers what the men intend to do. I have my observations to work out."

Just as the features of a picture creep out to the stealthy light of the dawn the whole meaning of this voyage was beginning to steal in upon my mind. His acting was clumsy; it seemed half-hearted in its general expression to me; and still I could not yet be sure that he was the master-spirit of this audacious, unparalleled plot; all I had to build on was, first, my having heard through my sister and others that he was in debt and in great difficulties, and next my having seen the man Owen at his house.

I walked through the saloon, and when passing the companion steps the doors were opened and the Colonel and Mr. Jackson, Monsignor Luard and the two ladies came down; they were yet on their way when the fellow above roared out:

"Any other three gents and three ladies can come up for half-an-hour. Let them knock when so be they're ready."

The Colonel was in an agony of rage, but he held his tongue until after the man had shouted down and the doors were shut. He then let fly.

"Of all the blistered insults ever offered to ladies and gentlemen who've paid their good money and plenty of it too, for cabins to New York, smother me if this ain't way-down the unholiest sunk out of conception right out of sight of all other insults, by God, as far low as the spirits of the damned be yelling! To turn ladies and gentlemen off the deck they're paid for the use of! To allow 'em half an hour to walk and breathe for their entertainment as that blistered cuckoo atop there calls it. Rats alive! If it's to come to this, and to go on at this, better set fire to the bucket, says I, and bonfire ourselves out of it."

Whilst he talked he flourished his arms as though he cut with a sword and seemed mad with his starting eyes and high-pitched voice.

Mr. Jackson, who had wrapped a cloak about him, fixed his dark eyes upon the grasshopper and said, "Are you going on deck?"

"I am not," answered the other with a smooth smile, "I am going to eat my dinner down here when it comes."

"But heavenly angels!" cried the comedian, "if we should devise some scheme of re-capturing the vessel, how in Joseph are you as one of us to know what to do unless you go on deck and look about you?"

The elbows rose high when the grasshopper answered with an arch diabolical sneer, "As one of you! But what's what?"

"Will you tell us, sir," cried Mr. Jackson, coloring with temper, "that if we agree to break out and rise upon the villains who have seized the ship, you will not fight?"

"I'll fight when you break out."

"Gentlemen," cried Mr. Macbride, who stood with a face pale with consternation swinging at a stanchion. "I hope nothing will be attempted that's likely to jeopardise the safety of the ladies."

"I am of Mr. Macbride's opinion," said Mr. Bergheim.

The grasshopper uttered another hollow laugh.

The dinner that day was a very shabby affair: no soup, no preliminaries; just a round of corned beef, a ham, and some pieces of boiled fowl. When it was served we waited for the Captain. The Colonel reeled to the table and called out, "Is this all?" The steward from the foot of the companion steps answered, "All."

"No matter," said the Colonel. "Still they shall fork me over every cent of my passage money if I have to sue 'em for it to my bottom dollar."

Just then the Captain arrived. He took his seat at the head of the table and the passengers placed themselves. Sunshine was on the ship, and the radiance leapt in stars from the cabin mirrors, and the atmosphere was bright and warm with a throbbing in it of foam-white gleams from the cabin windows. The comedian began to grumble about the poverty of the dinner. "Should we not consider ourselves fortunate to be fed so well," said the priest, "considering the hands we have fallen into?"

"There is enough for all," said Mr. Macbride.

"But not enough for my money," cried the Colonel, who, rounding upon the Captain, shrieked in a spasm of rage, this is a hellish situation, sir."

The captain carved the beef like a machine; his mind was locked up behind his iron hard face; there was no interpretable intelligence in is countenance, not even in his glance as he'd dart a look here and there, I observed the influence of his grim and gloomy demeanor upon those who sat near him: few spoke; his own speech was seldom more than yes or no.

At my end, however, the conversation was brisk with threats and temper. The Colonel went on with his braggart noisy talk of recapturing the ship. He did not tell us how it was to be done, merely that it must be done.

"What would your wife think," said Mr. Bergheim, "if you was to be shot as you sit eating there by her side?"

"Be our ideas what they may, we shall be fools to let the lawless villains above hear of them," said the comedian, rolling his dark eyes somewhat significantly towards the steward.

At this instant I saw my step-father close his knife and fork, he seemed to steady himself by grasping the table, then spoke:

"Ladies and gentlemen, I have waited until this meal was nearly done to give you news of the men's intentions."

"Ha!" exclaimed the comedian, and there was a general start.

"I am completely in the men's power, as you knew," continued the Captain. "They have commanded me with threats to steer the ship to a certain place, and though they may be ignorant of navigation, they'd know by the compass course if I was acting honestly by them. The ship is now heading direct for a cluster of rocks that lies between Maderia and the Canaries, called the Salvages. The men intend to bring up off the Great Salvage Island, and there disembark all the passengers along with their baggage."

"Good God!" shouted the grasshopper, springing out of his chair and standing. The others did not realize so rapidly. After a pause Mr. Macbride said faintly: "I hope there will be no difficulty in getting home?"

"I think not," said the Captain.

"Is it a naked rock?" said the hard-faced woman.

The Captain let his head sink.

"What are they going to do with you sir?" shouted the grasshopper, standing erect.

"They intend to keep me on board to carry the ship to another place which they have not yet named," answered the captain, looking at him with a scowl.

"And we're all to be put upon a naked rock where there are no houses, nor shelter, and where nothing's likely to come and take us off?" here screamed out a lady passenger.

"They mean to let you have one of the ships' boats," said the Captain, addressing the Colonel. "The distance to Maderia is short. You will easily procure assistance to take you all off. No threats," he cried, with a sort of fierceness that did not fit him to my eye, "could have driven me into helping them in any measure likely to endanger your lives. I hesitated long, and then imposed certain conditions before agreeing. Supplies of food will be landed, conveniences of shelter for the time. There is plenty of fresh water, and the climate is that of Maderia. I could not make better terms. Naturally they would not permit me to bring this ship to off a port. I have no fears whatever for your ultimate safety."

The conversation was at this moment arrested by the hard-faced lady going into hysterics.

To be Continued.