

THE GOOD SHIP "MOHOCK"

W. CLARK RUSSELL.

He stared with his eyes glowing with the fires of suspicion. His face then relaxed. He brought his hand down so heavily upon my shoulder as to pain me, and exclaimed, slowly, and in a low voice:

"Laura, as you value your life, keep your own counsel. Say nothing of what you know. If you do—think. It might prove your evidence that may make me a convict for life. As it is—"

"The cook," he said, "stuttering hoarsely and breathing swiftly, 'things are not at their worst. They allow me to remain on board! So much the better!' His whole face faded into wrinkles as with a sudden grin of madness. Then repeating, 'As you value your life, as you value of what you know,' he sprang his lips to my bow and kissed me as violently as he had saluted me with his hand. For some moments he stood considering, and then went to his cabin a little unsteadily, as though his vision had been dimmed, and I walked about the cabin waiting for what was next to come and hoping that it might prove the young lieutenant.

CHAPTER XI.

I grow weary of being alone, and as my stepfather kept hidden in his berth, I stepped on deck to take a look around, not meaning to stop.

The first sight my eye went to was the wreck of what is called the mizzen-top gallant mast hanging aloft; the sails upon its yard were set. A few blue-jackets dangled in the rigging, cutting and hacking and clearing the mizen away. It was this trifling piece of wrecking, no doubt, that had brought my stepfather to a change of mood, for the Mohock when the frigate sent that shot, was within easy hailing reach, and in the roaring smoke of a single broadside the clipper might have made as magio an exit as her likeness on the bubble that splits whilst you look.

They had trimmed sail upon the Atlantic packet, and a seaman in the uniform of the Navy stood at the wheel. What a smart fellow he looked in his clean dress, carelessly rolling his figure, and the beds of cloud astern set him sharp upon the eye. This man the third crew the Mohock had shipped since she sailed from the Thames.

I stood in the companion, but the man at the wheel called to me to step astern of the way of the stuff aloft, this brought the attention of the lieutenant to me. He was at the rail with one foot stirring a coil of rope. He stroked his chin wistfully, and watched intently the frigate as though something was happening aboard that fixed his sight; yet turned on the helmsman calling, and seeing me crouched himself with a smile and a little color and was coming.

At that instant a gun was fired aboard the frigate, and a stream of flags fluttered half-mast high. The lieutenant sprang to the flag-boat, clearly understanding the meaning of the frigate's signal, which was in the hunting of the Navy, and picking out the long thin triangular flag that is called the answering pennant, in the merchant service, rain aloft, shouting to his men to back the maintop-sail.

There were five men aloft and one at the wheel; yet eight blue-jackets in obedience to the lieutenant's call came to the braces with a nimbleness that was amazing after the floundering and tumbling of the "longshore gang"; they brought the sails to the mast in silence; the merchantman's song regaled the ear, and no whistle took its place. Eight and six, thought I, so here is the ship in charge of fourteen Royal Naval sailors, commanded by a lieutenant who, I should think, is one of the handsomest men of the breed.

I stood on the quarter watching him stalk, whilst he eyed the procedure of the sailors at the braces, and though I perfectly well understood this change of fortune most proper of terrible significance to my unhappy stepfather, yet I own I could not but drink in a sigh of blessed relief when I thought of that adventurous creature Owen, with his daring sailor looks, as safe in the frigate as if in a goal, and replaced by Lieutenant Jervis.

Presently I wondered why the lieutenant did not come to speak to me. I wanted to know his name and that of the frigate; till on looking as he stared I noted a small cutter or gig approaching from the main of war that had like-wise come to the little boat was washed through it in froth by six oars. She passed the side, and a midshipman sprang aboard.

This midshipman was a fine bronzed boy of about sixteen, and all the time he delivered his message his eyes were upon me. I was pleased to humor him. These poor fellows who are stationed in the mizzen-top for months and months at a time, unless they be sent to the main, which is a complexion of skin no white man can find any relief for even in the most favored climes of the tropics. They run about the mizzen-top for months, perishing of heat and thirst, and the doctor is obliged to take care of them.

"You'll take care of your talk that I shall not long remain innocent," said I.

"It is to my interest to make you appear so, at all events. You are my stepfather."

"And that is all."

I kept silence a bit while he stood watching me as though summing me up. I then said: "You are an innocent man whilst you are on board the ship. There is no living creature in her, saving myself, that can whisper a word against you. You will go ashore from the vessel's arrival as an innocent man, and then you do as you please."

"Take your advice to the devil, for God's sake!" he roared. "He may want it. I don't. What! A chit to come to me here—"

"Some conceit broke in, and he laughed loud and harshly. "When your advice can help me, I'll ask you for it."

I thought him sickeningly discourteous as I stepped out of his berth. Perhaps his behavior was due to my speech and manner, when he came into the saloon after the frigate had brought the Mohock to after wounding her.

I killed some time in brushing my hair and changing my dress. It was then nearly dark, with a very pretty splintered glow of delicate violet lightning over the sea far off through the port-holes. The wind was falling. Every sound had a lazy creaking note, and the ship, bereft of her spirit of life rolled wearily and sleepily upon the long swell. I looked into the saloon, and found the cabin skylight still girt with the light flowing over the bows out of the west, and was surprised to find the cloth laid, and well laid. The cabin lamps glowed. Covers were laid for three at the head of the table. Glass and silver sparkled, and whilst I looked I saw a man-of-warman with his hair carefully smoothed over his brow, come out of the pantry with a crust-stand, and survey the table with the anxiety of a head waiter.

Whilst I looked the lieutenant appeared in the hatch. "Well, Jack," says he, "how are you getting on?"

"That's as good a job as I can make of it, sir."

"There should be plenty. The ship's not long out. The coops are fairly full, and I understand she carries a number of 'twendeeck' passengers. Bear a hand with the grub! I didn't know how hungry I was till I looked at this table."

Then he saw me. "Pray, Miss Hayes, where's your father?"

"In his cabin."

"Before we dine, said he, 'I should like to have a few words with Captain Sinclair."

I knocked on my stepfather's door, not inconsiderable as I passed the lieutenant in the glowing light of the lamps that his eyes wandered over my figure.

My stepfather looked out, clad as for the deck, saying that he was uncovered.

"Lieutenant Jervis wants to speak to you, said I.

"Captain," said the young lieutenant in a frank, gay manner, as though full of good spirits and happy in his change of ship and experience, "what cabin can I take without inconveniencing anybody at all?"

"You are in command here; you have but to choose," answered the Captain.

"Well, I'll not deprive you of your cabin, anyhow," said the lieutenant. "All I require is the loan of your sextant and the use of your chronometer and charts."

"When the first mate was turned out of the ship," said Captain Sinclair, "he left behind him all the sea furniture you'll need, saving the chronometer and charts."

"This was his cabin," said I, walking to it, heartily vexed by my stepfather's rude manner.

"See," said the Captain as the lieutenant followed me, "that three places have been laid at that table. For whom, sir?"

"For you and for your stepfather and myself," answered the officer.

"No need to trouble yourself so far as I am concerned," answered the Captain with his grimmest look, and in his least, most repellent manner. "I am no longer concerned in this ship. Since you are good enough to grant me the use of my cabin, I'll live in it with your leave till we reach port. Nor will I require your men to wait upon me. The food I need I can myself procure."

"It seems a pity—" began the lieutenant, looking at him compassionately.

"Ay, a pity indeed!" burst out my stepfather. "That was the chief officer's cabin."

He indicated with his clenched fist, and without another word closed the door upon himself.

The lieutenant made no remark, and I was glad to hold my peace. He entered Mr. Gordon's cabin and stayed some time looking round. When he came out he said all he should find necessary was there saving the chronometers. Perhaps the Captain would lend him one? We then sat down to dinner. I call this meal dinner for it came nearer to that sort of repast than to the suppers we used to get before the ship was seized. A man-of-warman had cooked, and done his work finely. He sent us a very good dish of broth, roast fowl, and boiled bacon. He had boiled some vegetables too, so that with these things and the cold meats and the pleasant little surprise of a damson pie, with a very good dry dessert routed out by the blue-jacket who acted as steward, I never enjoyed a meal more in all my life.

And then there was the company of the young officer! Jack after waiting ably and briskly left us. He had put a decanter of sherry upon the table, and the lieutenant rose to open a pint bottle of champagne for me. I said no very earnestly, having already taken as much as I was used to, and we sat over the dessert under the skylight talking, sometimes watching the stars in the skylight vanish in a vast blue smoke of sheet lightning.

I will not pretend I regretted my stepfather's absence. In real truth I was very glad he kept away. Whilst the lieutenant talked to me perhaps it would come as a little damp to my spirits to think of the Captain alone in his cabin, a brokenhearted man bound to a port where they would make a felon of him if he did not take my advice and vanish on his arrival. Yet I knew how it would have been had he dined with us. I had never sat in company with a more delightful young fellow than Lieutenant Jervis. He was a born gentleman, with all the easy grace of the sea in his bearing. He had a merry laugh, wonderful white teeth, and played his dark eyes so finely that half his meaning lay in their turns and leers. Beyond enquiring about the passengers, the character of the mates, and the like, he asked no questions about the voyage.

Many would have thought his talk frivolous, he told me of bun-balls at home, routs and high jinks and fine dinner parties in the West Indies, and it was as agreeable as reading a newspaper to listen to him.

Indeed I was already sick of ships and the scenery and treachery of the sea and the conduct of sailors, and it did me good to hear this young man talk of dancing of the amusements they contrived for themselves in the frigate, and such things. He looked at the clock after we had been over an hour at table, and exclaimed:

"Will your stepfather let you come for a turn with me on deck, Miss Hayes?"

"I'll risk his objecting to anything so harmless," said I, rising, and went for my hat.

The sea looked as calm as grease, black and of a smoky appearance. A pale light was shining at one of the yard arms, and the reflection of it worked like a luminous cork-screw in the water. I asked the lieutenant what it was.

"A comet," said he. "Fires kindled by the hands of spirits. I was aloft once and heard a rush of invisible pinions, a light came close—such a light as you'd see, and behind was the drowned face of a sailor, very pale and faint."

"A sailor in wigs!" said I.

"Of course it was the fluttering of his loose trowsers," he answered.

He now went to the wheel and looked at the card, sniffed around the sea, gazing very earnestly, then left me to speak to a gigantic seaman who walked in the gangway keeping a look out. Their talk rumbled. They evidently debated the weather and the sail to be kept on the ship. It was a strange night, and mountainous with great blocks of blackness. Between the stars shone purely, but there was much lightning, and about a mile off a squall of wet without a feather stir of air in it was striking in tumps of ice and huge rain drops into the ocean; the fall was up and down, and the noise was like a score of locomotives blowing off steam.

The lieutenant asked permission to light a cigar, and we passed the deck together. I never could have pictured so strange a night. Ships of dim vapor hung in the smoky obscurity, till you looked at them straight, and then they disappeared. Lights glared out upon the sea, as though flickering lanterns were upheld by the feeble hands of starving men in open boats. In the oily blackness alongside, every time the invisible heave made the ship stoop, a marvellous tapestry of the cold sea glow was kindled. Lieutenant Jervis and I leaned over the rail watching this show for a while. We saw in outlines of waving and gathering brightness what seemed like the turrets of castles, heads of sea horses, trees and fish, and many sights which were not like the things they reminded us of.

In going alone to the skylight to look at the time, I spied the figure of my stepfather passing through the saloon; he was in his shirt sleeves, was ashy pale, and carried a dish of food. I wondered why he should act so irritably. He would have found the lieutenant very good company, been treated as a gentleman, and led a very comfortable life till we reached port, where he could have sneaked away as things stood.

I roamed about the deck with the lieutenant, greatly enjoying his conversation and society. He told me that his father, a very aged man who lived at Bath, was Rear-Admiral Sir Thomas Collingwood Jervis. Young as he was, he appeared to have seen some active service, particularly amongst slavers, had received three musket-balls in his legs, lost the tip of his left little finger, and while telling me the story took me to the binnacle lamp to show me a scar at the back of his neck.

"A six-pound ball did that," said he. "Had the aim of the gun been truer by the diameter of its muzzle only, this head would never have had the honor of inclining itself to you."

I wondered if he was married, but did not know how to get at that truth. Sailors will not own they have wives ashore when they are flirting with girls at sea.

I went below, after spending a very pleasant evening, partook of some wine and biscuits, and with a half glance at my stepfather's berth, arresting my walk for an instant to the thought, "Shall I knock and bid him good-night?" I withdrew to my berth. It had been surprisingly quiet on deck. The clouds appeared to have broken and sank in masses of elusive dyes to the water's edge, where they floated like giant toad stools and huge bushes, with a sort of deceptive wreathing of lines of thickness round about the horizon, till the ship seemed encompassed in an enormous vaporous cork-screw, between the spirals of which shone the stars in two or three different colors, whilst dry pale gleams, such as are said to haunt churchyards, hung low down, and elsewhere the black-surface shined fitfully in dim flashes.

But there was a number of stout hearts in the forecastle, and a smart young officer aft; then again my stepfather was aboard to counsel and

in spite of the ugly look out of doors, I got into my bunk and slept sweetly and throughout the night dreamt most deliciously. In fact it was from one of the choicest of those dreams, fragrant with the smell of the bridal nosegay, that I was aroused by a rapping on the door.

"Sorry to disturb you, Miss Hayes," said the voice of the young lieutenant, when I had answered. "Is Captain Sinclair here?"

"No."

"Has he visited you in the night?"

"No."

"His cabin door is open and—when you are dressed will you come to me?"

His voice was cautious and plaintive, and my heart forboded trouble. It was seven o'clock, a roasting shining morning, a flat sea, and the heavens as I made out filled with heavy masses of white cloud. So then the thunderous frown of last night's weather had proved but the bully's scowl. I dressed quickly and found the lieutenant walking up and down the saloon.

"I hate to be a bearer of ill news," said he, "but I must tell you we cannot find your stepfather. We suspect—"

"What?" said I, feeling myself pale and viewing him anxiously.

"That he has made away with himself."

"Why do you think that he has committed suicide?"

"He is not in the ship and must therefore be overboard. He must have slunk overboard in a deliberate, suicidal manner; the splash of him would have been heard had he fallen by accident. We found his hat, waistcoat, and other garments in the mizzen chains, as though he had unclashed himself to secure the silent dip of the unclashed skin."

"Poor man! Where have you looked?"

"In every likely place," he answered. "He would have no motive in hiding himself."

"None."

I ran my eye along the cabins and then went to the one my stepfather had used followed by the lieutenant. Here they had put the clothes they found in the mizzen chains. They lay on the deck, nearly a suit. I was infinitely more shocked and startled by the sight of those clothes than by the news. The lieutenant's tale had put a faint image before me; but those clothes enabled me to think of a drowned man I shuddered and sighed and chancing to look into a mirror saw myself very white. That mirror was screwed over a sort of sea toilet table, and the thing catching my eye in a second, I picked it up. It was a letter addressed to me. I opened it and read this:

"Ship Mohock.

"Laura, — I am a ruined man, and when ever way I look I see nothing but beggary and starvation. I have lived for many years an honorable life, and now go to God to answer for what I have done in my closing days. My will is at home. All that I possess my creditors must seize. But I do not expect they will trouble you until the time when they think I should return from New York, nor then if they get news of the piracy of the Mohock. They will await my return. You will find 200 pounds in gold in the small chest in the left of my cabin. The key of the chest is in the drawer of the table on which you find this letter. Take the money, and with it return home in safety, and with the balance secure, I beg of you, such little possessions and memorials at home, as your mother would wish you and your sister to have. Farwell, Laura. I did not know it would come to this or I should not have brought you with me."

—Amelius Sinclair.

My eyes were dim before I arrived at the signature. I handed the letter to the lieutenant, who merely said:

"This puts the matter beyond all doubt. Poor old chap! I should have foreseen it. I ought to have had him watched. His manner was very strange yesterday."

He returned the letter to me, and taking the key from the drawer, opened the chest, saying: "We will make sure of this money at once, Miss Hayes. There's no such friend abroad as our young Queen's head in gold."

He opened the chest, and we saw a sooty stook of wearing apparel, soiled linen, an odd shoe or two. Up in a corner was a canvas bag; a place had been made for it; it stood so that the eye should not miss it. The lieutenant took it up, and the instant he had it in his hands I observed a look of temper that was not wanting in earnestness. He glanced at me, then looked at the bag. On one side was written in good bold figures 200 pounds. On the other side: "For Laura with the same love she bore me."

"There is no gold here, I fear," says the lieutenant, pulling out a pocket knife, and snipping the string that noosed the bag, he poured on to the deck about a pint of dried peas.

"He was mad, but mean too," said the lieutenant, after singing a bit of a song, and then tossing the bag into the chest and letting the lid fall: "A jolly stepfather's joke. But stay!" he cried, "How do you know this is not a ruse, that the real money is not somewhere? He writes kindly and sincerely. Shall I rummage for you?"

I bowed my head being too exquisitely mortified to speak and going into the saloon, sat down at the table, and waited whilst the lieutenant hunted.

"Never a stiver," says he, coming out with a cheerful laugh. "This, strange too. Most sea captains of his sort carry loose cash to sea with them."

He went on deck to look after the ship, and I to my cabin to improve my toilet and prepare for breakfast. I was never more stung and humiliated in all my life. It was not that I wanted the paltry 200 pounds, but it was doubly irritating and offensive that Lieutenant Jervis should see that my stepfather put the value of a handful of peas on my love, and deemed me fit

to be insulted in his dying humor by a piece of brutal cynicism, beyond anything I should have thought even he was capable of. But it did me good. Nothing could be more drastic to lay to such grief as I felt for him. If I had a tear now it was for myself.

I put on a white muslin body trimmed with black. I found some black ribbon in a box and trimmed my straw hat with it; then went on deck to look at the morning. It was roasting and silent. The sea was like steel under the sun, and the ship looked to rest in a bed of liquid glass. A slight swell put some life into her masts, and the shadows of the great white clouds which burnt sunwards with all sorts of golden and silver splendors floated in islands of violet upon the sea and refreshed the eye.

Lieutenant Jervis coming to the rail pointed to the mizzen channels, and told me that was where they had found the clothes. I looked down, shuddered, and withdrew my head. A fit of horror shook me then. The ship had scarcely stirred throughout the long night. Some grease and mess that had been flung overboard on the previous evening floated close by. I thought that the body of my stepfather might rise and hang close in the brilliant clear brine even whilst I looked down, and it was that which dismissed me from the rail with a sick heart.

The wreck of the mizzen topgallant mast had been cleared away, but the ship carried a mutilated look aft. Whilst I stood conversing with Lieutenant Jervis about my stepfather, Jack, with his forehead of carefully smeared hair, reported breakfast.

"There's no stage like shipboard for astounding performances," said the lieutenant, as we seated ourselves, "only think what a theatre this craft has proved in a few weeks."

"What's to happen next?" said I.

"Oh, Kingston, Jamaica, where we shall see you safely on board some homeward bounder. But before we part you must give me leave to call upon you in England on my return."

I felt the hot blood spring to my cheek whilst I bowed to him.

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