

SECOND SCENE - The Store-Room.

Persons possessed of sluggish livers and tender hearts find two serious drawbacks to the enjoyment of a cruise at sea. It is exceedingly difficult to get enough walking exercise; and it is next to impossible (where secrecy is an object) to make love without being found out. Reverting for the moment to the latter difficulty only, life within the narrow and populous limits of a vessel may be defined as essentially life in public. From morning to night you are in your neighbor's way, or your neighbor is in your way. As a necessary result of these conditions, the rarest of existing men may be defined as the man who is capable of stealing a kiss at sea without discovery. An inbred capacity for stratagem of the finest sort; inexhaustible inventive resources; patience which can flourish under superhuman trials; presence of mind which can keep its balance victoriously under every possible stress of emergency--these are some of the qualifications which must accompany Love on a cruise, when Love embarks in the character of a contraband commodity not duly entered on the papers of the ship.

Having established a Code of Signals which enabled them to communicate privately, while the eyes and ears of others were wide open on every side of them, Natalie and Launce were next confronted by the more serious difficulty of finding a means of meeting together at stolen interviews on board the yacht. Possessing none of those precious moral qualifications already enumerated as the qualifications of an accomplished lover at sea, Launce had proved unequal to grapple with the obstacles in his way. Left to her own inventive resources, Natalie had first suggested the young surgeon's medical studies as Launce's unanswerable excuse for shutting himself up at intervals in the lower regions, and had then hit on the happy idea of tearing her trimmings, and condemning herself to repair her own carelessness, as the all-sufficient reason for similar acts of self-seclusion on her side. In this way the lovers contrived, while the innocent ruling authorities were on deck, to meet privately below them, on the neutral ground of the main cabin; and there, by previous arrangement at the breakfast-table, they were about to meet privately now.

Natalie's door was, as usual on these occasions, the first that opened; for this sound reason, that Natalie's quickness was the quickness to be depended on in case of accident.

She looked up at the sky-light. There were the legs of the two gentlemen and the skirts of her aunt visible (and stationary) on the lee side of the deck. She

advanced a few steps and listened. There was a pause in the murmur of the voices above. She looked up again. One pair of legs (not her father's) had disappeared. Without an instant's hesitation, Natalie darted back to her own door, just in time to escape Richard Turlington descending the cabin stairs. All he did was to go to one of the drawers under the main-cabin book-case and to take out a map, ascending again immediately to the deck. Natalie's guilty conscience rushed instantly, nevertheless, to the conclusion that Richard suspected her. When she showed herself for the second time, instead of venturing into the cabin, she called across it in a whisper,

"Launce!"

Launce appeared at his door. He was peremptorily checked before he could cross the threshold.

"Don't stir a step! Richard has been down in the cabin! Richard suspects us!"

"Nonsense! Come out."

"Nothing will induce me, unless you can find some other place than the cabin."

Some other place? How easy to find it on land! How apparently impossible at sea! There was the fore-castle (full of men) at one end of the vessel. There was the sail room (full of sails) at the other. There was the ladies' cabin (used as the ladies' dressing-room; inaccessible, in that capacity, to every male human being on board). Was there any disposable inclosed space to be found amidships? On one side there were the sleeping berths of the sailing-master and his mate (impossible to borrow them). On the other side was the steward's store-room. Launce considered for a moment. The steward's store-room was just the thing!

"Where are you going?" asked Natalie, as her lover made straight for a closed door at the lower extremity of the main cabin.

"To speak to the steward, darling. Wait one moment, and you will see me again."

Launce opened the store-room door, and discovered, not the steward, but his wife, who occupied the situation of stewardess on board the vessel. The accident was, in this case, a lucky one. Having stolen several kisses at sea, and having been discovered (in every case) either by the steward or his wife,

Launce felt no difficulty in prefacing his request to be allowed the use of the room by the plainest allusion to his relations with Natalie. He could count on the silence of the sympathizing authorities in this region of the vessel, having wisely secured them as accomplices by the usual persuasion of the pecuniary sort. Of the two, however, the stewardess, as a woman, was the more likely to lend a ready ear to Launce's entreaties in his present emergency. After a faint show of resistance, she consented, not only to leave the room, but to keep her husband out of it, on the understanding that it was not to be occupied for more than ten minutes. Launce made the signal to Natalie at one door, while the stewardess went out by the other. In a moment more the lovers were united in a private room. Is it necessary to say in what language the proceedings were opened? Surely not! There is an inarticulate language of the lips in use on these occasions in which we are all proficient, though we sometimes forget it in later life. Natalie seated herself on a locker. The tea, sugar, and spices were at her back, a side of bacon swung over her head, and a net full of lemons dangled before her face. It might not be roomy, but it was snug and comfortable.

"Suppose they call for the steward?" she suggested. ("Don't, Launce!")

"Never mind. We shall be safe enough if they do. The steward has only to show himself on deck, and they will suspect nothing."

"Do be quiet, Launce! I have got dreadful news to tell you. And, besides, my aunt will expect to see me with my braid sewn on again."

She had brought her needle and thread with her. Whipping up the skirt of her dress on her knee, she bent forward over it, and set herself industriously to the repair of the torn trimming. In this position her lithe figure showed charmingly its firm yet easy line. The needle, in her dexterous brown fingers, flew through its work. The locker was a broad one; Launce was able to seat himself partially behind her. In this position who could have resisted the temptation to lift up her great knot of broadly-plaited black hair, and to let the warm, dusky nape of her neck disclose itself to view? Who, looking at it, could fail to revile the senseless modern fashion of dressing the hair, which hides the double beauty of form and color that nestles at the back of a woman's neck? From time to time, as the interview proceeded, Launce's lips emphasized the more important words occurring in his share of the conversation on the soft, fragrant skin which the lifted hair let him see at intervals. In Launce's place, sir, you would have done it too.

"Now, Natalie, what is the news?"

"He has spoken to papa, Launce."

"Richard Turlington?"

"Yes."

"D--n him!"

Natalie started. A curse addressed to the back of your neck, instantly followed by a blessing in the shape of a kiss, is a little trying when you are not prepared for it.

"Don't do that again, Launce! It was while you were on deck smoking, and when I was supposed to be fast asleep. I opened the ventilator in my cabin door, dear, and I heard every word they said. He waited till my aunt was out of the way, and he had got papa all to himself, and then he began it in that horrible, downright voice of his--'Graybrooke! how much longer am I to wait?'"

"Did he say that?"

"No more swearing, Launce! Those were the words. Papa didn't understand them. He only said (poor dear!)--'Bless my soul, Richard, what do you want?' Richard soon explained himself. 'Who could he be waiting for--but Me?' Papa said something about my being so young. Richard stopped his mouth directly. 'Girls were like fruit; some ripened soon, and some ripened late. Some were women at twenty, and some were women at sixteen. It was impossible to look at me, and not see that I was like a new being after my two months at sea,' and so on and so on. Papa behaved like an angel. He still tried to put it off. 'Plenty of time, Richard, plenty of time.' 'Plenty of time for her' (was the wretch's answer to that); 'but not for me. Think of all I have to offer her' (as if I cared for his money!); 'think how long I have looked upon her as growing up to be my wife' (growing up for him--monstrous!), 'and don't keep me in a state of uncertainty, which it gets harder and harder for a man in my position to endure!' He was really quite eloquent. His voice trembled. There is no doubt, dear, that he is very, very fond of me."

"And you feel flattered by it, of course?"

"Don't talk nonsense. I feel a little frightened at it, I can tell you."

"Frightened? Did you notice him this morning?"

"I? When?"

"When your father was telling that story about the man overboard."

"No. What did he do? Tell me, Launce."

"I'll tell you directly. How did it all end last night? Did your father make any sort of promise?"

"You know Richard's way; Richard left him no other choice. Papa had to promise before he was allowed to go to bed."

"To let Turlington marry you?"

"Yes; the week after my next birthday."

"The week after next Christmas-day?"

"Yes. Papa is to speak to me as soon as we are at home again, and my married life is to begin with the New Year."

"Are you in earnest, Natalie? Do you really mean to say it has gone as far as that?"

"They have settled everything. The splendid establishment we are to set up, the great income we are to have. I heard papa tell Richard that half his fortune should go to me on my wedding-day. It was sickening to hear how much they made of Money, and how little they thought of Love. What am I to do, Launce?"

"That's easily answered, my darling. In the first place, you are to make up your mind not to marry Richard Turlington--"

"Do talk reasonably. You know I have done all I could. I have told papa that I can think of Richard as a friend, but not as a husband. He only laughs at me, and says, 'Wait a little, and you will alter your opinion, my dear.' You see Richard is everything to him; Richard has always managed his affairs, and has saved him from losing by bad speculations; Richard has known me from the time when I was a child; Richard has a splendid business, and quantities of money. Papa can't even imagine that I can resist Richard. I have tried my aunt; I have told her he is too old for me. All she says is, 'Look at your father; he was much older than your mother, and what a happy marriage theirs was.' Even if I said in so many words, 'I won't marry

Richard,' what good would it do to us? Papa is the best and dearest old man in the world; but oh, he is so fond of money! He believes in nothing else. He would be furious--yes, kind as he is, he would be furious--if I even hinted that I was fond of you. Any man who proposed to marry me--if he couldn't match the fortune that I should bring him by a fortune of his own--would be a lunatic in papa's eyes. He wouldn't think it necessary to answer him; he would ring the bell, and have him shown out of the house. I am exaggerating nothing, Launce; you know I am speaking the truth. There is no hope in the future--that I can see--for either of us.

"Have you done, Natalie? I have something to say on my side if you have."

"What is it?"

"If things go on as they are going on now, shall I tell you how it will end? It will end in your being Turlington's wife."

"Never!"

"So you say now; but you don't know what may happen between this and Christmas-day. Natalie, there is only one way of making sure that you will never marry Richard. Marry me."

"Without papa's consent?"

"Without saying a word to anybody till it's done."

"Oh, Launce! Launce!"

"My darling, every word you have said proves there is no other way. Think of it, Natalie, think of it."

There was a pause. Natalie dropped her needle and thread, and hid her face in her hands. "If my poor mother was only alive," she said; "if I only had an elder sister to advise me, and to take my part."

She was evidently hesitating. Launce took a man's advantage of her indecision. He pressed her without mercy.

"Do you love me?" he whispered, with his lips close to her ear.

"You know I do, dearly."

"Put it out of Richard's power to part us, Natalie."

"Part us? We are cousins: we have known each other since we were both children. Even if he proposed parting us, papa wouldn't allow it."

"Mark my words, he will propose it. As for your father, Richard has only to lift his finger and your father obeys him. My love, the happiness of both our lives is at stake." He wound his arm round her, and gently drew her head back on his bosom, "Other girls have done it, darling," he pleaded, "why shouldn't you?"

The effort to answer him was too much for her. She gave it up. A low sigh fluttered through her lips. She nestled closer to him, and faintly closed her eyes. The next instant she started up, trembling from head to foot, and looked at the sky-light. Richard Turlington's voice was suddenly audible on deck exactly above them.

"Graybrooke, I want to say a word to you about Launcelot Linzie."

Natalie's first impulse was to fly to the door. Hearing Launce's name on Richard's lips, she checked herself. Something in Richard's tone roused in her the curiosity which suspends fear. She waited, with her hand in Launce's hand.

"If you remember," the brassy voice went on, "I doubted the wisdom of taking him with us on this cruise. You didn't agree with me, and, at your express request, I gave way. I did wrong. Launcelot Linzie is a very presuming young man."

Sir Joseph's answer was accompanied by Sir Joseph's mellow laugh.

"My dear Richard! Surely you are a little hard on Launce?"

"You are not an observant man, Graybrooke. I am. I see signs of his presuming with all of us, and especially with Natalie. I don't like the manner in which he speaks to her and looks at her. He is unduly familiar; he is insolently confidential. There must be a stop put to it. In my position, my feelings ought to be regarded. I request you to check the intimacy when we get on shore."

Sir Joseph's next words were spoken more seriously. He expressed his surprise.

"My dear Richard, they are cousins, they have been playmates from childhood. How can you think of attaching the slightest importance to anything that is said or done by poor Launce?"

There was a good-humored contempt in Sir Joseph's reference to "poor Launce" which jarred on his daughter. He might almost have been alluding to some harmless domestic animal. Natalie's color deepened. Her hand pressed Launce's hand gently.

Turlington still persisted.

"I must once more request--seriously request--that you will check this growing intimacy. I don't object to your asking him to the house when you ask other friends. I only wish you (and expect you) to stop his 'dropping in,' as it is called, any hour of the day or evening when he may have nothing to do. Is that understood between us?"

"If you make a point of it, Richard, of course it's understood between us."

Launce looked at Natalie, as weak Sir Joseph consented in those words.

"What did I tell you?" he whispered.

Natalie hung her head in silence. There was a pause in the conversation on deck. The two gentlemen walked away slowly toward the forward part of the vessel.

Launce pursued his advantage.

"Your father leaves us no alternative," he said. "The door will be closed against me as soon as we get on shore. If I lose you, Natalie, I don't care what becomes of me. My profession may go to the devil. I have nothing left worth living for."

"Hush! hush! don't talk in that way!"

Launce tried the soothing influence of persuasion once more.

"Hundreds and hundreds of people in our situation have married privately--and have been forgiven afterward," he went on. "I won't ask you to do anything in a hurry. I will be guided entirely by your wishes. All I want to quiet my mind is to know that you are mine. Do, do, do make me feel sure that Richard Turlington can't take you away from me."

"Don't press me, Launce." She dropped on the locker. "See!" she said. "It makes me tremble only to think of it!"

"Who are you afraid of, darling? Not your father, surely?"

"Poor papa! I wonder whether he would be hard on me for the first time in his life?" She stopped; her moistening eyes looked up imploringly in Launce's face. "Don't press me!" she repeated faintly. "You know it's wrong. We should have to confess it--and then what would happen?" She paused again. Her eyes wandered nervously to the deck. Her voice dropped to its lowest tones. "Think of Richard!" she said, and shuddered at the terrors which that name conjured up. Before it was possible to say a quieting word to her, she was again on her feet. Richard's name had suddenly recalled to her memory Launce's mysterious allusion, at the outset of the interview, to the owner of the yacht. "What was that you said about Richard just now?" she asked. "You saw something (or heard something) strange while papa was telling his story. What was it?"

"I noticed Richard's face, Natalie, when your father told us that the man overboard was not one of the pilot-boat's crew. He turned ghastly pale. He looked guilty--"

"Guilty? Of what?"

"He was present--I am certain of it--when the sailor was thrown into the sea. For all I know, he may have been the man who did it."

Natalie started back in horror.

"Oh, Launce! Launce! that is too bad. You may not like Richard--you may treat Richard as your enemy. But to say such a horrible thing of him as that--It's not generous. It's not like you."

"If you had seen him, you would have said it too. I mean to make inquiries--in your father's interests as well as in ours. My brother knows one of the Commissioners of Police, and my brother can get it done for me. Turlington has not always been in the Levant trade--I know that already."

"For shame, Launce! for shame!"

The footsteps on deck were audible coming back. Natalie sprang to the door leading into the cabin. Launce stopped her, as she laid her hand on the

lock. The footsteps went straight on toward the stern of the vessel. Launce clasped both arms round her. Natalie gave way.

"Don't drive me to despair!" he said. "This is my last opportunity. I don't ask you to say at once that you will marry me, I only ask you to think of it. My darling! my angel! will you think of it?"

As he put the question, they might have heard (if they had not been too completely engrossed in each other to listen) the footsteps returning--one pair of footsteps only this time. Natalie's prolonged absence had begun to surprise her aunt, and had roused a certain vague distrust in Richard's mind. He walked back again along the deck by himself. He looked absently in the main cabin as he passed it. The store-room skylight came next. In his present frame of mind, would he look absently into the store-room too?

"Let me go!" said Natalie.

Launce only answered, "Say yes," and held her as if he would never let her go again.

At the same moment Miss Lavinia's voice rose shrill from the deck calling for Natalie. There was but one way of getting free from him. She said, "I'll think of it." Upon that, he kissed her and let her go.

The door had barely closed on her when the lowering face of Richard Turlington appeared on a level with the side of the sky-light, looking down into the store-room at Launce.

"Halloo!" he called out roughly. "What are you doing in the steward's room?"

Launce took up a box of matches on the dresser. "I'm getting a light," he answered readily.

"I allow nobody below, forward of the main cabin, without my leave. The steward has permitted a breach of discipline on board my vessel. The steward will leave my service."

"The steward is not to blame."

"I am the judge of that. Not you."

Launce opened his lips to reply. An outbreak between the two men appeared to be inevitable, when the sailing-master of the yacht joined his employer on

deck, and directed Turlington's attention to a question which is never to be trifled with at sea, the question of wind and tide.

The yacht was then in the Bristol Channel, at the entrance to Bideford Bay. The breeze, fast freshening, was also fast changing the direction from which it blew. The favorable tide had barely three hours more to run.

"The wind's shifting, sir," said the sailing-master. "I'm afraid we shan't get round the point this tide, unless we lay her off on the other tack."

Turlington shook his head.

"There are letters waiting for me at Bideford," he said. "We have lost two days in the calm. I must send ashore to the post-office, whether we lose the tide or not."

The vessel held on her course. Off the port of Bideford, the boat was sent ashore to the post-office, the yacht standing off and on, waiting the appearance of the letters. In the shortest time in which it was possible to bring them on board the letters were in Turlington's hands.

The men were hauling the boat up to the davits, the yacht was already heading off from the land, when Turlington startled everybody by one peremptory word--"Stop!"

He had thrust all his letters but one into the pocket of his sailing jacket, without reading them. The one letter which he had opened he held in his closed hand. Rage was in his staring eyes, consternation was on his pale lips.

"Lower the boat!" he shouted; "I must get to London to-night." He stopped Sir Joseph, approaching him with opened mouth. "There's no time for questions and answers. I must get back." He swung himself over the side of the yacht, and addressed the sailing-master from the boat. "Save the tide if you can; if you can't, put them ashore to-morrow at Minehead or Watchet--wherever they like." He beckoned to Sir Joseph to lean over the bulwark, and hear something he had to say in private. "Remember what I told you about Launcelot Linzie!" he whispered fiercely. His parting look was for Natalie. He spoke to her with a strong constraint on himself, as gently as he could. "Don't be alarmed; I shall see you in London." He seated himself in the boat and took the tiller. The last words they heard him say were words urging the men at the oars to lose no time. He was invariably brutal with the men. "Pull, you lazy beggars!" he exclaimed, with an oath. "Pull for your

lives!"