

## **CHAPTER TWO--YOUNG POWELL SEES AND HEARS**

"You remember," went on Marlow, "how I feared that Mr. Powell's want of experience would stand in his way of appreciating the unusual. The unusual I had in my mind was something of a very subtle sort: the unusual in marital relations. I may well have doubted the capacity of a young man too much concerned with the creditable performance of his professional duties to observe what in the nature of things is not easily observable in itself, and still less so under the special circumstances. In the majority of ships a second officer has not many points of contact with the captain's wife. He sits at the same table with her at meals, generally speaking; he may now and then be addressed more or less kindly on insignificant matters, and have the opportunity to show her some small attentions on deck. And that is all. Under such conditions, signs can be seen only by a sharp and practised eye. I am alluding now to troubles which are subtle often to the extent of not being understood by the very hearts they devastate or uplift.

Yes, Mr. Powell, whom the chance of his name had thrown upon the floating stage of that tragicomedy would have been perfectly useless for my purpose if the unusual of an obvious kind had not aroused his attention from the first.

We know how he joined that ship so suddenly offered to his anxious desire to make a real start in his profession. He had come on board breathless with the hurried winding up of his shore affairs, accompanied by two horrible night-birds, escorted by a dock policeman on the make, received by an asthmatic shadow of a ship-keeper, warned not to make a noise in the darkness of the passage because the captain and his wife were already on board. That in itself was already somewhat unusual. Captains and their wives do not, as a rule, join a moment sooner than is necessary. They prefer to spend the last moments with their friends and relations. A ship in one of London's older docks with their restrictions as to lights and so on is not the place for a happy evening. Still, as the tide served at six in the morning, one could understand them coming on board the evening before.

Just then young Powell felt as if anybody ought to be glad enough to be quit of the shore. We know he was an orphan from a very early age, without brothers or sisters--no near relations of any kind, I believe, except that aunt who had quarrelled with his father. No affection stood in the way of the quiet satisfaction with which he thought that now all the worries were over, that there was nothing before him but duties, that he knew what he would have to do as soon as the dawn broke and for a long succession of days. A most soothing certitude. He

enjoyed it in the dark, stretched out in his bunk with his new blankets pulled over him. Some clock ashore beyond the dock-gates struck two. And then he heard nothing more, because he went off into a light sleep from which he woke up with a start. He had not taken his clothes off, it was hardly worth while. He jumped up and went on deck.

The morning was clear, colourless, grey overhead; the dock like a sheet of darkling glass crowded with upside-down reflections of warehouses, of hulls and masts of silent ships. Rare figures moved here and there on the distant quays. A knot of men stood alongside with clothes-bags and wooden chests at their feet. Others were coming down the lane between tall, blind walls, surrounding a hand-cart loaded with more bags and boxes. It was the crew of the Ferndale. They began to come on board. He scanned their faces as they passed forward filling the roomy deck with the shuffle of their footsteps and the murmur of voices, like the awakening to life of a world about to be launched into space.

Far away down the clear glassy stretch in the middle of the long dock Mr. Powell watched the tugs coming in quietly through the open gates. A subdued firm voice behind him interrupted this contemplation. It was Franklin, the thick chief mate, who was addressing him with a watchful appraising stare of his prominent black eyes: "You'd better take a couple of these chaps with you and look out for her aft. We are going to cast off."

"Yes, sir," Powell said with proper alacrity; but for a moment they remained looking at each other fixedly. Something like a faint smile altered the set of the chief mate's lips just before he moved off forward with his brisk step.

Mr. Powell, getting up on the poop, touched his cap to Captain Anthony, who was there alone. He tells me that it was only then that he saw his captain for the first time. The day before, in the shipping office, what with the bad light and his excitement at this berth obtained as if by a brusque and unscrupulous miracle, did not count. He had then seemed to him much older and heavier. He was surprised at the lithe figure, broad of shoulder, narrow at the hips, the fire of the deep-set eyes, the springiness of the walk. The captain gave him a steady stare, nodded slightly, and went on pacing the poop with an air of not being aware of what was going on, his head rigid, his movements rapid.

Powell stole several glances at him with a curiosity very natural under the circumstances. He wore a short grey jacket and a grey cap. In the light of the dawn, growing more limpid rather than brighter, Powell noticed the slightly sunken cheeks under the trimmed beard, the perpendicular fold on the forehead, something hard and set about the mouth.

It was too early yet for the work to have begun in the dock. The water gleamed placidly, no movement anywhere on the long straight lines of the quays, no one about to be seen except the few dock hands busy alongside the Ferndale, knowing their work, mostly silent or exchanging a few words in low tones as if they, too, had been aware of that lady 'who mustn't be disturbed.' The Ferndale was the only ship to leave that tide. The others seemed still asleep, without a sound, and only here and there a figure, coming up on the fore-castle, leaned on the rail to watch the proceedings idly. Without trouble and fuss and almost without a sound was the Ferndale leaving the land, as if stealing away. Even the tugs, now with their engines stopped, were approaching her without a ripple, the burly-looking paddle-boat sheering forward, while the other, a screw, smaller and of slender shape, made for her quarter so gently that she did not divide the smooth water, but seemed to glide on its surface as if on a sheet of plate-glass, a man in her bow, the master at the wheel visible only from the waist upwards above the white screen of the bridge, both of them so still-eyed as to fascinate young Powell into curious self-forgetfulness and immobility. He was steeped, sunk in the general quietness, remembering the statement 'she's a lady that mustn't be disturbed,' and repeating to himself idly: 'No. She won't be disturbed. She won't be disturbed.' Then the first loud words of that morning breaking that strange hush of departure with a sharp hail: 'Look out for that line there,' made him start. The line whizzed past his head, one of the sailors aft caught it, and there was an end to the fascination, to the quietness of spirit which had stolen on him at the very moment of departure. From that moment till two hours afterwards, when the ship was brought up in one of the lower reaches of the Thames off an apparently uninhabited shore, near some sort of inlet where nothing but two anchored barges flying a red flag could be seen, Powell was too busy to think of the lady 'that mustn't be disturbed,' or of his captain--or of anything else unconnected with his immediate duties. In fact, he had no occasion to go on the poop, or even look that way much; but while the ship was about to anchor, casting his eyes in that direction, he received an absurd impression that his captain (he was up there, of course) was sitting on both sides of the aftermost skylight at once. He was too occupied to reflect on this curious delusion, this phenomenon of seeing double as though he had had a drop too much. He only smiled at himself.

As often happens after a grey daybreak the sun had risen in a warm and glorious splendour above the smooth immense gleam of the enlarged estuary. Wisps of mist floated like trails of luminous dust, and in the dazzling reflections of water and vapour, the shores had the murky semi-transparent darkness of shadows cast mysteriously from below. Powell, who had sailed out of London all his young seaman's life, told me that it was then, in a moment of entranced vision an hour or so after sunrise, that the river was revealed to him for all time, like a fair face often seen before, which is suddenly perceived to be the expression of an inner

and unsuspected beauty, of that something unique and only its own which rouses a passion of wonder and fidelity and an unappeasable memory of its charm. The hull of the Ferndale, swung head to the eastward, caught the light, her tall spars and rigging steeped in a bath of red-gold, from the water-line full of glitter to the trucks slight and gleaming against the delicate expanse of the blue.

"Time we had a mouthful to eat," said a voice at his side. It was Mr. Franklin, the chief mate, with his head sunk between his shoulders, and melancholy eyes. "Let the men have their breakfast, bo'sun," he went on, "and have the fire out in the galley in half an hour at the latest, so that we can call these barges of explosives alongside. Come along, young man. I don't know your name. Haven't seen the captain, to speak to, since yesterday afternoon when he rushed off to pick up a second mate somewhere. How did he get you?"

Young Powell, a little shy notwithstanding the friendly disposition of the other, answered him smilingly, aware somehow that there was something marked in this inquisitiveness, natural, after all--something anxious. His name was Powell, and he was put in the way of this berth by Mr. Powell, the shipping master. He blushed.

"Ah, I see. Well, you have been smart in getting ready. The ship-keeper, before he went away, told me you joined at one o'clock. I didn't sleep on board last night. Not I. There was a time when I never cared to leave this ship for more than a couple of hours in the evening, even while in London, but now, since--"

He checked himself with a roll of his prominent eyes towards that youngster, that stranger. Meantime, he was leading the way across the quarter-deck under the poop into the long passage with the door of the saloon at the far end. It was shut. But Mr. Franklin did not go so far. After passing the pantry he opened suddenly a door on the left of the passage, to Powell's great surprise.

"Our mess-room," he said, entering a small cabin painted white, bare, lighted from part of the foremost skylight, and furnished only with a table and two settees with movable backs. "That surprises you? Well, it isn't usual. And it wasn't so in this ship either, before. It's only since--"

He checked himself again. "Yes. Here we shall feed, you and I, facing each other for the next twelve months or more--God knows how much more! The bo'sun keeps the deck at meal-times in fine weather."

He talked not exactly wheezing, but like a man whose breath is somewhat short, and the spirit (young Powell could not help thinking) embittered by some mysterious grievance.

There was enough of the unusual there to be recognized even by Powell's inexperience. The officers kept out of the cabin against the custom of the service, and then this sort of accent in the mate's talk. Franklin did not seem to expect conversational ease from the new second mate. He made several remarks about the old, deploring the accident. Awkward. Very awkward this thing to happen on the very eve of sailing.

"Collar-bone and arm broken," he sighed. "Sad, very sad. Did you notice if the captain was at all affected? Eh? Must have been."

Before this congested face, these globular eyes turned yearningly upon him, young Powell (one must keep in mind he was but a youngster then) who could not remember any signs of visible grief, confessed with an embarrassed laugh that, owing to the suddenness of this lucky chance coming to him, he was not in a condition to notice the state of other people.

"I was so pleased to get a ship at last," he murmured, further disconcerted by the sort of pent-up gravity in Mr. Franklin's aspect.

"One man's food another man's poison," the mate remarked. "That holds true beyond mere victuals. I suppose it didn't occur to you that it was a dam' poor way for a good man to be knocked out."

Mr. Powell admitted openly that he had not thought of that. He was ready to admit that it was very reprehensible of him. But Franklin had no intention apparently to moralize. He did not fall silent either. His further remarks were to the effect that there had been a time when Captain Anthony would have showed more than enough concern for the least thing happening to one of his officers. Yes, there had been a time!

"And mind," he went on, laying down suddenly a half-consumed piece of bread and butter and raising his voice, "poor Mathews was the second man the longest on board. I was the first. He joined a month later--about the same time as the steward by a few days. The bo'sun and the carpenter came the voyage after. Steady men. Still here. No good man need ever have thought of leaving the Ferndale unless he were a fool. Some good men are fools. Don't know when they are well off. I mean the best of good men; men that you would do anything for. They go on for years, then all of a sudden--"

Our young friend listened to the mate with a queer sense of discomfort growing on him. For it was as though Mr. Franklin were thinking aloud, and putting him into the delicate position of an unwilling eavesdropper. But there was in the

mess-room another listener. It was the steward, who had come in carrying a tin coffee-pot with a long handle, and stood quietly by: a man with a middle-aged, sallow face, long features, heavy eyelids, a soldierly grey moustache. His body encased in a short black jacket with narrow sleeves, his long legs in very tight trousers, made up an agile, youthful, slender figure. He moved forward suddenly, and interrupted the mate's monologue.

"More coffee, Mr. Franklin? Nice fresh lot. Piping hot. I am going to give breakfast to the saloon directly, and the cook is raking his fire out. Now's your chance."

The mate who, on account of his peculiar build, could not turn his head freely, twisted his thick trunk slightly, and ran his black eyes in the corners towards the steward.

"And is the precious pair of them out?" he growled.

The steward, pouring out the coffee into the mate's cup, muttered moodily but distinctly: "The lady wasn't when I was laying the table."

Powell's ears were fine enough to detect something hostile in this reference to the captain's wife. For of what other person could they be speaking? The steward added with a gloomy sort of fairness: "But she will be before I bring the dishes in. She never gives that sort of trouble. That she doesn't."

"No. Not in that way," Mr. Franklin agreed, and then both he and the steward, after glancing at Powell--the stranger to the ship--said nothing more.

But this had been enough to rouse his curiosity. Curiosity is natural to man. Of course it was not a malevolent curiosity which, if not exactly natural, is to be met fairly frequently in men and perhaps more frequently in women--especially if a woman be in question; and that woman under a cloud, in a manner of speaking. For under a cloud Flora de Barral was fated to be even at sea. Yes. Even that sort of darkness which attends a woman for whom there is no clear place in the world hung over her. Yes. Even at sea!

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And this is the pathos of being a woman. A man can struggle to get a place for himself or perish. But a woman's part is passive, say what you like, and shuffle the facts of the world as you may, hinting at lack of energy, of wisdom, of courage. As a matter of fact, almost all women have all that--of their own kind. But they are not made for attack. Wait they must. I am speaking here of women

who are really women. And it's no use talking of opportunities, either. I know that some of them do talk of it. But not the genuine women. Those know better. Nothing can beat a true woman for a clear vision of reality; I would say a cynical vision if I were not afraid of wounding your chivalrous feelings--for which, by the by, women are not so grateful as you may think, to fellows of your kind . . .

"Upon my word, Marlow," I cried, "what are you flying out at me for like this? I wouldn't use an ill-sounding word about women, but what right have you to imagine that I am looking for gratitude?"

Marlow raised a soothing hand.

"There! There! I take back the ill-sounding word, with the remark, though, that cynicism seems to me a word invented by hypocrites. But let that pass. As to women, they know that the clamour for opportunities for them to become something which they cannot be is as reasonable as if mankind at large started asking for opportunities of winning immortality in this world, in which death is the very condition of life. You must understand that I am not talking here of material existence. That naturally is implied; but you won't maintain that a woman who, say, enlisted, for instance (there have been cases) has conquered her place in the world. She has only got her living in it--which is quite meritorious, but not quite the same thing.

All these reflections which arise from my picking up the thread of Flora de Barral's existence did not, I am certain, present themselves to Mr. Powell--not the Mr. Powell we know taking solitary week-end cruises in the estuary of the Thames (with mysterious dashes into lonely creeks) but to the young Mr. Powell, the chance second officer of the ship *Ferndale*, commanded (and for the most part owned) by Roderick Anthony, the son of the poet--you know. A Mr. Powell, much slenderer than our robust friend is now, with the bloom of innocence not quite rubbed off his smooth cheeks, and apt not only to be interested but also to be surprised by the experience life was holding in store for him. This would account for his remembering so much of it with considerable vividness. For instance, the impressions attending his first breakfast on board the *Ferndale*, both visual and mental, were as fresh to him as if received yesterday.

The surprise, it is easy to understand, would arise from the inability to interpret aright the signs which experience (a thing mysterious in itself) makes to our understanding and emotions. For it is never more than that. Our experience never gets into our blood and bones. It always remains outside of us. That's why we look with wonder at the past. And this persists even when from practice and through growing callousness of fibre we come to the point when nothing that we meet in that rapid blinking stumble across a flick of sunshine--which our life is--

nothing, I say, which we run against surprises us any more. Not at the time, I mean. If, later on, we recover the faculty with some such exclamation: 'Well! Well! I'll be hanged if I ever, . . . ' it is probably because this very thing that there should be a past to look back upon, other people's, is very astounding in itself when one has the time, a fleeting and immense instant to think of it . . . "

I was on the point of interrupting Marlow when he stopped of himself, his eyes fixed on vacancy, or--perhaps--(I wouldn't be too hard on him) on a vision. He has the habit, or, say, the fault, of defective mantelpiece clocks, of suddenly stopping in the very fulness of the tick. If you have ever lived with a clock afflicted with that perversity, you know how vexing it is--such a stoppage. I was vexed with Marlow. He was smiling faintly while I waited. He even laughed a little. And then I said acidly:

"Am I to understand that you have ferreted out something comic in the history of Flora de Barral?"

"Comic!" he exclaimed. "No! What makes you say? . . . Oh, I laughed--did I? But don't you know that people laugh at absurdities that are very far from being comic? Didn't you read the latest books about laughter written by philosophers, psychologists? There is a lot of them . . . "

"I dare say there has been a lot of nonsense written about laughter--and tears, too, for that matter," I said impatiently.

"They say," pursued the unabashed Marlow, "that we laugh from a sense of superiority. Therefore, observe, simplicity, honesty, warmth of feeling, delicacy of heart and of conduct, self-confidence, magnanimity are laughed at, because the presence of these traits in a man's character often puts him into difficult, cruel or absurd situations, and makes us, the majority who are fairly free as a rule from these peculiarities, feel pleasantly superior."

"Speak for yourself," I said. "But have you discovered all these fine things in the story; or has Mr. Powell discovered them to you in his artless talk? Have you two been having good healthy laughs together? Come! Are your sides aching yet, Marlow?"

Marlow took no offence at my banter. He was quite serious.

"I should not like to say off-hand how much of that there was," he pursued with amusing caution. "But there was a situation, tense enough for the signs of it to give many surprises to Mr. Powell--neither of them shocking in itself, but with a cumulative effect which made the whole unforgettable in the detail of its progress."



And the first surprise came very soon, when the explosives (to which he owed his sudden chance of engagement)--dynamite in cases and blasting powder in barrels--taken on board, main hatch battened for sea, cook restored to his functions in the galley, anchor fished and the tug ahead, rounding the South Foreland, and with the sun sinking clear and red down the purple vista of the channel, he went on the poop, on duty, it is true, but with time to take the first freer breath in the busy day of departure. The pilot was still on board, who gave him first a silent glance, and then passed an insignificant remark before resuming his lounging to and fro between the steering wheel and the binnacle. Powell took his station modestly at the break of the poop. He had noticed across the skylight a head in a grey cap. But when, after a time, he crossed over to the other side of the deck he discovered that it was not the captain's head at all. He became aware of grey hairs curling over the nape of the neck. How could he have made that mistake? But on board ship away from the land one does not expect to come upon a stranger.

Powell walked past the man. A thin, somewhat sunken face, with a tightly closed mouth, stared at the distant French coast, vague like a suggestion of solid darkness, lying abeam beyond the evening light reflected from the level waters, themselves growing more sombre than the sky; a stare, across which Powell had to pass and did pass with a quick side glance, noting its immovable stillness. His passage disturbed those eyes no more than if he had been as immaterial as a ghost. And this failure of his person in producing an impression affected him strangely. Who could that old man be?

He was so curious that he even ventured to ask the pilot in a low voice. The pilot turned out to be a good-natured specimen of his kind, condescending, sententious. He had been down to his meals in the main cabin, and had something to impart.

"That? Queer fish--eh? Mrs. Anthony's father. I've been introduced to him in the cabin at breakfast time. Name of Smith. Wonder if he has all his wits about him. They take him about with them, it seems. Don't look very happy--eh?"

Then, changing his tone abruptly, he desired Powell to get all hands on deck and make sail on the ship. "I shall be leaving you in half an hour. You'll have plenty of time to find out all about the old gent," he added with a thick laugh.

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In the secret emotion of giving his first order as a fully responsible officer, young Powell forgot the very existence of that old man in a moment. The following days, in the interest of getting in touch with the ship, with the men in her, with his

duties, in the rather anxious period of settling down, his curiosity slumbered; for of course the pilot's few words had not extinguished it.

This settling down was made easy for him by the friendly character of his immediate superior--the chief. Powell could not defend himself from some sympathy for that thick, bald man, comically shaped, with his crimson complexion and something pathetic in the rolling of his very movable black eyes in an apparently immovable head, who was so tactfully ready to take his competency for granted.

There can be nothing more reassuring to a young man tackling his life's work for the first time. Mr. Powell, his mind at ease about himself, had time to observe the people around with friendly interest. Very early in the beginning of the passage, he had discovered with some amusement that the marriage of Captain Anthony was resented by those to whom Powell (conscious of being looked upon as something of an outsider) referred in his mind as 'the old lot.'

They had the funny, regretful glances, intonations, nods of men who had seen other, better times. What difference it could have made to the bo'sun and the carpenter Powell could not very well understand. Yet these two pulled long faces and even gave hostile glances to the poop. The cook and the steward might have been more directly concerned. But the steward used to remark on occasion, 'Oh, she gives no extra trouble,' with scrupulous fairness of the most gloomy kind. He was rather a silent man with a great sense of his personal worth which made his speeches guarded. The cook, a neat man with fair side whiskers, who had been only three years in the ship, seemed the least concerned. He was even known to have inquired once or twice as to the success of some of his dishes with the captain's wife. This was considered a sort of disloyal falling away from the ruling feeling.

The mate's annoyance was yet the easiest to understand. As he let it out to Powell before the first week of the passage was over: 'You can't expect me to be pleased at being chucked out of the saloon as if I weren't good enough to sit down to meat with that woman.' But he hastened to add: 'Don't you think I'm blaming the captain. He isn't a man to be found fault with. You, Mr. Powell, are too young yet to understand such matters.'

Some considerable time afterwards, at the end of a conversation of that aggrieved sort, he enlarged a little more by repeating: 'Yes! You are too young to understand these things. I don't say you haven't plenty of sense. You are doing very well here. Jolly sight better than I expected, though I liked your looks from the first.'

It was in the trade-winds, at night, under a velvety, bespangled sky; a great multitude of stars watching the shadows of the sea gleaming mysteriously in the wake of the ship; while the leisurely swishing of the water to leeward was like a drowsy comment on her progress. Mr. Powell expressed his satisfaction by a half-bashful laugh. The mate mused on: 'And of course you haven't known the ship as she used to be. She was more than a home to a man. She was not like any other ship; and Captain Anthony was not like any other master to sail with. Neither is she now. But before one never had a care in the world as to her--and as to him, too. No, indeed, there was never anything to worry about.'

Young Powell couldn't see what there was to worry about even then. The serenity of the peaceful night seemed as vast as all space, and as enduring as eternity itself. It's true the sea is an uncertain element, but no sailor remembers this in the presence of its bewitching power any more than a lover ever thinks of the proverbial inconstancy of women. And Mr. Powell, being young, thought naively that the captain being married, there could be no occasion for anxiety as to his condition. I suppose that to him life, perhaps not so much his own as that of others, was something still in the nature of a fairy-tale with a 'they lived happy ever after' termination. We are the creatures of our light literature much more than is generally suspected in a world which prides itself on being scientific and practical, and in possession of incontrovertible theories. Powell felt in that way the more because the captain of a ship at sea is a remote, inaccessible creature, something like a prince of a fairy-tale, alone of his kind, depending on nobody, not to be called to account except by powers practically invisible and so distant, that they might well be looked upon as supernatural for all that the rest of the crew knows of them, as a rule.

So he did not understand the aggrieved attitude of the mate--or rather he understood it obscurely as a result of simple causes which did not seem to him adequate. He would have dismissed all this out of his mind with a contemptuous: 'What the devil do I care?' if the captain's wife herself had not been so young. To see her the first time had been something of a shock to him. He had some preconceived ideas as to captain's wives which, while he did not believe the testimony of his eyes, made him open them very wide. He had stared till the captain's wife noticed it plainly and turned her face away. Captain's wife! That girl covered with rugs in a long chair. Captain's . . . ! He gasped mentally. It had never occurred to him that a captain's wife could be anything but a woman to be described as stout or thin, as jolly or crabbed, but always mature, and even, in comparison with his own years, frankly old. But this! It was a sort of moral upset as though he had discovered a case of abduction or something as surprising as that. You understand that nothing is more disturbing than the upsetting of a preconceived idea. Each of us arranges the world according to his own notion of the fitness of things. To behold a girl where your average mediocre

imagination had placed a comparatively old woman may easily become one of the strongest shocks . . . "

Marlow paused, smiling to himself.

"Powell remained impressed after all these years by the very recollection," he continued in a voice, amused perhaps but not mocking. "He said to me only the other day with something like the first awe of that discovery lingering in his tone-- he said to me: "Why, she seemed so young, so girlish, that I looked round for some woman which would be the captain's wife, though of course I knew there was no other woman on board that voyage." The voyage before, it seems, there had been the steward's wife to act as maid to Mrs. Anthony; but she was not taken that time for some reason he didn't know. Mrs. Anthony . . . ! If it hadn't been the captain's wife he would have referred to her mentally as a kid, he said. I suppose there must be a sort of divinity hedging in a captain's wife (however incredible) which prevented him applying to her that contemptuous definition in the secret of his thoughts.

I asked him when this had happened; and he told me that it was three days after parting from the tug, just outside the channel--to be precise. A head wind had set in with unpleasant damp weather. He had come up to leeward of the poop, still feeling very much of a stranger, and an untried officer, at six in the evening to take his watch. To see her was quite as unexpected as seeing a vision. When she turned away her head he recollected himself and dropped his eyes. What he could see then was only, close to the long chair on which she reclined, a pair of long, thin legs ending in black cloth boots tucked in close to the skylight seat. Whence he concluded that the 'old gentleman,' who wore a grey cap like the captain's, was sitting by her--his daughter. In his first astonishment he had stopped dead short, with the consequence that now he felt very much abashed at having betrayed his surprise. But he couldn't very well turn tail and bolt off the poop. He had come there on duty. So, still with downcast eyes, he made his way past them. Only when he got as far as the wheel-grating did he look up. She was hidden from him by the back of her deck-chair; but he had the view of the owner of the thin, aged legs seated on the skylight, his clean-shaved cheek, his thin compressed mouth with a hollow in each corner, the sparse grey locks escaping from under the tweed cap, and curling slightly on the collar of the coat. He leaned forward a little over Mrs. Anthony, but they were not talking. Captain Anthony, walking with a springy hurried gait on the other side of the poop from end to end, gazed straight before him. Young Powell might have thought that his captain was not aware of his presence either. However, he knew better, and for that reason spent a most uncomfortable hour motionless by the compass before his captain stopped in his swift pacing and with an almost visible effort made some remark to him about the weather in a low voice. Before Powell, who was

startled, could find a word of answer, the captain swung off again on his endless tramp with a fixed gaze. And till the supper bell rang silence dwelt over that poop like an evil spell. The captain walked up and down looking straight before him, the helmsman steered, looking upwards at the sails, the old gent on the skylight looked down on his daughter--and Mr. Powell confessed to me that he didn't know where to look, feeling as though he had blundered in where he had no business--which was absurd. At last he fastened his eyes on the compass card, took refuge, in spirit, inside the binnacle. He felt chilled more than he should have been by the chilly dusk falling on the muddy green sea of the soundings from a smoothly clouded sky. A fitful wind swept the cheerless waste, and the ship, hauled up so close as to check her way, seemed to progress by languid fits and starts against the short seas which swept along her sides with a snarling sound.

Young Powell thought that this was the dreariest evening aspect of the sea he had ever seen. He was glad when the other occupants of the poop left it at the sound of the bell. The captain first, with a sudden swerve in his walk towards the companion, and not even looking once towards his wife and his wife's father. Those two got up and moved towards the companion, the old gent very erect, his thin locks stirring gently about the nape of his neck, and carrying the rugs over his arm. The girl who was Mrs. Anthony went down first. The murky twilight had settled in deep shadow on her face. She looked at Mr. Powell in passing. He thought that she was very pale. Cold perhaps. The old gent stopped a moment, thin and stiff, before the young man, and in a voice which was low but distinct enough, and without any particular accent--not even of inquiry--he said:

"You are the new second officer, I believe."

Mr. Powell answered in the affirmative, wondering if this were a friendly overture. He had noticed that Mr. Smith's eyes had a sort of inward look as though he had disliked or disdained his surroundings. The captain's wife had disappeared then down the companion stairs. Mr. Smith said 'Ah!' and waited a little longer to put another question in his incurious voice.

"And did you know the man who was here before you?"

"No," said young Powell, "I didn't know anybody belonging to this ship before I joined."

"He was much older than you. Twice your age. Perhaps more. His hair was iron grey. Yes. Certainly more."

The low, repressed voice paused, but the old man did not move away. He added:

"Isn't it unusual?"

Mr. Powell was surprised not only by being engaged in conversation, but also by its character. It might have been the suggestion of the word uttered by this old man, but it was distinctly at that moment that he became aware of something unusual not only in this encounter but generally around him, about everybody, in the atmosphere. The very sea, with short flashes of foam bursting out here and there in the gloomy distances, the unchangeable, safe sea sheltering a man from all passions, except its own anger, seemed queer to the quick glance he threw to windward where the already effaced horizon traced no reassuring limit to the eye. In the expiring, diffused twilight, and before the clouded night dropped its mysterious veil, it was the immensity of space made visible--almost palpable. Young Powell felt it. He felt it in the sudden sense of his isolation; the trustworthy, powerful ship of his first acquaintance reduced to a speck, to something almost undistinguishable, the mere support for the soles of his two feet before that unexpected old man becoming so suddenly articulate in a darkening universe.

It took him a moment or so to seize the drift of the question. He repeated slowly: 'Unusual . . . Oh, you mean for an elderly man to be the second of a ship. I don't know. There are a good many of us who don't get on. He didn't get on, I suppose.'

The other, his head bowed a little, had the air of listening with acute attention.

"And now he has been taken to the hospital," he said.

"I believe so. Yes. I remember Captain Anthony saying so in the shipping office."

"Possibly about to die," went on the old man, in his careful deliberate tone. "And perhaps glad enough to die."

Mr. Powell was young enough to be startled at the suggestion, which sounded confidential and blood-curdling in the dusk. He said sharply that it was not very likely, as if defending the absent victim of the accident from an unkind aspersion. He felt, in fact, indignant. The other emitted a short stifled laugh of a conciliatory nature. The second bell rang under the poop. He made a movement at the sound, but lingered.

"What I said was not meant seriously," he murmured, with that strange air of fearing to be overheard. "Not in this case. I know the man."

The occasion, or rather the want of occasion, for this conversation, had

sharpened the perceptions of the unsophisticated second officer of the Ferndale. He was alive to the slightest shade of tone, and felt as if this "I know the man" should have been followed by a "he was no friend of mine." But after the shortest possible break the old gentleman continued to murmur distinctly and evenly:

"Whereas you have never seen him. Nevertheless, when you have gone through as many years as I have, you will understand how an event putting an end to one's existence may not be altogether unwelcome. Of course there are stupid accidents. And even then one needn't be very angry. What is it to be deprived of life? It's soon done. But what would you think of the feelings of a man who should have had his life stolen from him? Cheated out of it, I say!"

He ceased abruptly, and remained still long enough for the astonished Powell to stammer out an indistinct: "What do you mean? I don't understand." Then, with a low 'Good-night' glided a few steps, and sank through the shadow of the companion into the lamplight below which did not reach higher than the turn of the staircase.

The strange words, the cautious tone, the whole person left a strong uneasiness in the mind of Mr. Powell. He started walking the poop in great mental confusion. He felt all adrift. This was funny talk and no mistake. And this cautious low tone as though he were watched by someone was more than funny. The young second officer hesitated to break the established rule of every ship's discipline; but at last could not resist the temptation of getting hold of some other human being, and spoke to the man at the wheel.

"Did you hear what this gentleman was saying to me?"

"No, sir," answered the sailor quietly. Then, encouraged by this evidence of laxity in his officer, made bold to add, "A queer fish, sir." This was tentative, and Mr. Powell, busy with his own view, not saying anything, he ventured further. "They are more like passengers. One sees some queer passengers."

"Who are like passengers?" asked Powell gruffly.

"Why, these two, sir."