CHAPTER THREE--DEVOTED SERVANTS--AND THE LIGHT OF A FLARE

Young Powell thought to himself: "The men, too, are noticing it." Indeed, the captain's behaviour to his wife and to his wife's father was noticeable enough. It was as if they had been a pair of not very congenial passengers. But perhaps it was not always like that. The captain might have been put out by something.

When the aggrieved Franklin came on deck Mr. Powell made a remark to that effect. For his curiosity was aroused.

The mate grumbled "Seems to you? . . . Putout? . . . eh?" He buttoned his thick jacket up to the throat, and only then added a gloomy "Aye, likely enough," which discouraged further conversation. But no encouragement would have induced the newly-joined second mate to enter the way of confidences. His was an instinctive prudence. Powell did not know why it was he had resolved to keep his own counsel as to his colloquy with Mr. Smith. But his curiosity did not slumber. Some time afterwards, again at the relief of watches, in the course of a little talk, he mentioned Mrs. Anthony's father quite casually, and tried to find out from the mate who he was.

"It would take a clever man to find that out, as things are on board now," Mr. Franklin said, unexpectedly communicative. "The first I saw of him was when she brought him alongside in a four-wheeler one morning about half-past eleven. The captain had come on board early, and was down in the cabin that had been fitted out for him. Did I tell you that if you want the captain for anything you must stamp on the port side of the deck? That's so. This ship is not only unlike what she used to be, but she is like no other ship, anyhow. Did you ever hear of the captain's room being on the port side? Both of them stern cabins have been fitted up afresh like a blessed palace. A gang of people from some tip-top West-End house were fussing here on board with hangings and furniture for a fortnight, as if the Queen were coming with us. Of course the starboard cabin is the bedroom one, but the poor captain hangs out to port on a couch, so that in case we want him on deck at night, Mrs. Anthony should not be startled. Nervous! Phoo! A woman who marries a sailor and makes up her mind to come to sea should have no blamed jumpiness about her, I say. But never mind. Directly the old cab pointed round the corner of the warehouse I called out to the captain that his lady was coming aboard. He answered me, but as I didn't see him coming, I went down the gangway myself to help her alight. She jumps out excitedly without touching my arm, or as much as saying "thank you" or "good morning" or anything, turns back to the cab, and then that old joker comes out slowly. I hadn't noticed him inside. I hadn't expected to see anybody. It gave me

a start. She says: "My father--Mr. Franklin." He was staring at me like an owl. "How do you do, sir?" says I. Both of them looked funny. It was as if something had happened to them on the way. Neither of them moved, and I stood by waiting. The captain showed himself on the poop; and I saw him at the side looking over, and then he disappeared; on the way to meet them on shore, I expected. But he just went down below again. So, not seeing him, I said: "Let me help you on board, sir." "On board!" says he in a silly fashion. "On board!" "It's not a very good ladder, but it's quite firm," says I, as he seemed to be afraid of it. And he didn't look a broken-down old man, either. You can see yourself what he is. Straight as a poker, and life enough in him yet. But he made no move, and I began to feel foolish. Then she comes forward. "Oh! Thank you, Mr. Franklin. I'll help my father up." Flabbergasted me--to be choked off like this. Pushed in between him and me without as much as a look my way. So of course I dropped it. What do you think? I fell back. I would have gone up on board at once and left them on the quay to come up or stay there till next week, only they were blocking the way. I couldn't very well shove them on one side. Devil only knows what was up between them. There she was, pale as death, talking to him very fast. He got as red as a turkey-cock--dash me if he didn't. A bad-tempered old bloke, I can tell you. And a bad lot, too. Never mind. I couldn't hear what she was saying to him, but she put force enough into it to shake her. It seemed--it seemed, mind!--that he didn't want to go on board. Of course it couldn't have been that. I know better. Well, she took him by the arm, above the elbow, as if to lead him, or push him rather. I was standing not quite ten feet off. Why should I have gone away? I was anxious to get back on board as soon as they would let me. I didn't want to overhear her blamed whispering either. But I couldn't stay there for ever, so I made a move to get past them if I could. And that's how I heard a few words. It was the old chap--something nasty about being "under the heel" of somebody or other. Then he says, "I don't want this sacrifice." What it meant I can't tell. It was a quarrel--of that I am certain. She looks over her shoulder, and sees me pretty close to them. I don't know what she found to say into his ear, but he gave way suddenly. He looked round at me too, and they went up together so quickly then that when I got on the quarter-deck I was only in time to see the inner door of the passage close after them. Queer--eh? But if it were only queerness one wouldn't mind. Some luggage in new trunks came on board in the afternoon. We undocked at midnight. And may I be hanged if I know who or what he was or is. I haven't been able to find out. No, I don't know. He may have been anything. All I know is that once, years ago when I went to see the Derby with a friend, I saw a pea- and-thimble chap who looked just like that old mystery father out of a cab."

All this the goggle-eyed mate had said in a resentful and melancholy voice, with pauses, to the gentle murmur of the sea. It was for him a bitter sort of pleasure to have a fresh pair of ears, a newcomer, to whom he could repeat all these

matters of grief and suspicion talked over endlessly by the band of Captain Anthony's faithful subordinates. It was evidently so refreshing to his worried spirit that it made him forget the advisability of a little caution with a complete stranger. But really with Mr. Powell there was no danger. Amused, at first, at these plaints, he provoked them for fun. Afterwards, turning them over in his mind, he became impressed, and as the impression grew stronger with the days his resolution to keep it to himself grew stronger too.

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What made it all the easier to keep--I mean the resolution--was that Powell's sentiment of amused surprise at what struck him at first as mere absurdity was not unmingled with indignation. And his years were too few, his position too novel, his reliance on his own opinion not yet firm enough to allow him to express it with any effect. And then--what would have been the use, anyhow--and where was the necessity?

But this thing, familiar and mysterious at the same time, occupied his imagination. The solitude of the sea intensifies the thoughts and the facts of one's experience which seems to lie at the very centre of the world, as the ship which carries one always remains the centre figure of the round horizon. He viewed the apoplectic, goggle-eyed mate and the saturnine, heavy-eyed steward as the victims of a peculiar and secret form of lunacy which poisoned their lives. But he did not give them his sympathy on that account. No. That strange affliction awakened in him a sort of suspicious wonder.

Once--and it was at night again; for the officers of the Ferndale keeping watch and watch as was customary in those days, had but few occasions for intercourse--once, I say, the thick Mr. Franklin, a quaintly bulky figure under the stars, the usual witnesses of his outpourings, asked him with an abruptness which was not callous, but in his simple way:

"I believe you have no parents living?"

Mr. Powell said that he had lost his father and mother at a very early age.

"My mother is still alive," declared Mr. Franklin in a tone which suggested that he was gratified by the fact. "The old lady is lasting well. Of course she's got to be made comfortable. A woman must be looked after, and, if it comes to that, I say, give me a mother. I dare say if she had not lasted it out so well I might have gone and got married. I don't know, though. We sailors haven't got much time to look about us to any purpose. Anyhow, as the old lady was there I haven't, I may say, looked at a girl in all my life. Not that I wasn't partial to female society in my

time," he added with a pathetic intonation, while the whites of his goggle eyes gleamed amorously under the clear night sky. "Very partial, I may say."

Mr. Powell was amused; and as these communications took place only when the mate was relieved off duty he had no serious objection to them. The mate's presence made the first half-hour and sometimes even more of his watch on deck pass away. If his senior did not mind losing some of his rest it was not Mr. Powell's affair. Franklin was a decent fellow. His intention was not to boast of his filial piety.

"Of course I mean respectable female society," he explained. "The other sort is neither here nor there. I blame no man's conduct, but a well- brought-up young fellow like you knows that there's precious little fun to be got out of it." He fetched a deep sigh. "I wish Captain Anthony's mother had been a lasting sort like my old lady. He would have had to look after her and he would have done it well. Captain Anthony is a proper man. And it would have saved him from the most foolish--"

He did not finish the phrase which certainly was turning bitter in his mouth. Mr. Powell thought to himself: "There he goes again." He laughed a little.

"I don't understand why you are so hard on the captain, Mr. Franklin. I thought you were a great friend of his."

Mr. Franklin exclaimed at this. He was not hard on the captain. Nothing was further from his thoughts. Friend! Of course he was a good friend and a faithful servant. He begged Powell to understand that if Captain Anthony chose to strike a bargain with Old Nick to-morrow, and Old Nick were good to the captain, he (Franklin) would find it in his heart to love Old Nick for the captain's sake. That was so. On the other hand, if a saint, an angel with white wings came along and--"

He broke off short again as if his own vehemence had frightened him. Then in his strained pathetic voice (which he had never raised) he observed that it was no use talking. Anybody could see that the man was changed.

"As to that," said young Powell, "it is impossible for me to judge."

"Good Lord!" whispered the mate. "An educated, clever young fellow like you with a pair of eyes on him and some sense too! Is that how a happy man looks? Eh? Young you may be, but you aren't a kid; and I dare you to say 'Yes!'"

Mr. Powell did not take up the challenge. He did not know what to think of the

mate's view. Still, it seemed as if it had opened his understanding in a measure. He conceded that the captain did not look very well.

"Not very well," repeated the mate mournfully. "Do you think a man with a face like that can hope to live his life out? You haven't knocked about long in this world yet, but you are a sailor, you have been in three or four ships, you say. Well, have you ever seen a shipmaster walking his own deck as if he did not know what he had underfoot? Have you? Dam'me if I don't think that he forgets where he is. Of course he can be no other than a prime seaman; but it's lucky, all the same, he has me on board. I know by this time what he wants done without being told. Do you know that I have had no order given me since we left port? Do you know that he has never once opened his lips to me unless I spoke to him first? I? His chief officer; his shipmate for full six years, with whom he had no cross word--not once in all that time. Aye. Not a cross look even. True that when I do make him speak to me, there is his dear old self, the quick eye, the kind voice. Could hardly be other to his old Franklin. But what's the good? Eyes, voice, everything's miles away. And for all that I take good care never to address him when the poop isn't clear. Yes! Only we two and nothing but the sea with us. You think it would be all right; the only chief mate he ever had--Mr. Franklin here and Mr. Franklin there--when anything went wrong the first word you would hear about the decks was 'Franklin!'--I am thirteen years older than he is--you would think it would be all right, wouldn't you? Only we two on this poop on which we saw each other first--he a young master--told me that he thought I would suit him very well--we two, and thirty-one days out at sea, and it's no good! It's like talking to a man standing on shore. I can't get him back. I can't get at him. I feel sometimes as if I must shake him by the arm: "Wake up! Wake up! You are wanted, sir . . . !"

Young Powell recognized the expression of a true sentiment, a thing so rare in this world where there are so many mutes and so many excellent reasons even at sea for an articulate man not to give himself away, that he felt something like respect for this outburst. It was not loud. The grotesque squat shape, with the knob of the head as if rammed down between the square shoulders by a blow from a club, moved vaguely in a circumscribed space limited by the two harness-casks lashed to the front rail of the poop, without gestures, hands in the pockets of the jacket, elbows pressed closely to its side; and the voice without resonance, passed from anger to dismay and back again without a single louder word in the hurried delivery, interrupted only by slight gasps for air as if the speaker were being choked by the suppressed passion of his grief.

Mr. Powell, though moved to a certain extent, was by no means carried away. And just as he thought that it was all over, the other, fidgeting in the darkness, was heard again explosive, bewildered but not very loud in the silence of the ship

and the great empty peace of the sea.

"They have done something to him! What is it? What can it be? Can't you guess? Don't you know?"

"Good heavens!" Young Powell was astounded on discovering that this was an appeal addressed to him. "How on earth can I know?"

"You do talk to that white-faced, black-eyed . . . I've seen you talking to her more than a dozen times."

Young Powell, his sympathy suddenly chilled, remarked in a disdainful tone that Mrs. Anthony's eyes were not black.

"I wish to God she had never set them on the captain, whatever colour they are," retorted Franklin. "She and that old chap with the scraped jaws who sits over her and stares down at her dead-white face with his yellow eyes--confound them! Perhaps you will tell us that his eyes are not yellow?"

Powell, not interested in the colour of Mr. Smith's eyes, made a vague gesture. Yellow or not yellow, it was all one to him.

The mate murmured to himself. "No. He can't know. No! No more than a baby. It would take an older head."

"I don't even understand what you mean," observed Mr. Powell coldly.

"And even the best head would be puzzled by such devil-work," the mate continued, muttering. "Well, I have heard tell of women doing for a man in one way or another when they got him fairly ashore. But to bring their devilry to sea and fasten on such a man! . . . It's something I can't understand. But I can watch. Let them look out--I say!"

His short figure, unable to stoop, without flexibility, could not express dejection. He was very tired suddenly; he dragged his feet going off the poop. Before he left it with nearly an hour of his watch below sacrificed, he addressed himself once more to our young man who stood abreast of the mizzen rigging in an unreceptive mood expressed by silence and immobility. He did not regret, he said, having spoken openly on this very serious matter.

"I don't know about its seriousness, sir," was Mr. Powell's frank answer. "But if you think you have been telling me something very new you are mistaken. You can't keep that matter out of your speeches. It's the sort of thing I've been

hearing more or less ever since I came on board."

Mr. Powell, speaking truthfully, did not mean to speak offensively. He had instincts of wisdom; he felt that this was a serious affair, for it had nothing to do with reason. He did not want to raise an enemy for himself in the mate. And Mr. Franklin did not take offence. To Mr. Powell's truthful statement he answered with equal truth and simplicity that it was very likely, very likely. With a thing like that (next door to witchcraft almost) weighing on his mind, the wonder was that he could think of anything else. The poor man must have found in the restlessness of his thoughts the illusion of being engaged in an active contest with some power of evil; for his last words as he went lingeringly down the poop ladder expressed the quaint hope that he would get him, Powell, "on our side yet."

Mr. Powell--just imagine a straightforward youngster assailed in this fashion on the high seas--answered merely by an embarrassed and uneasy laugh which reflected exactly the state of his innocent soul. The apoplectic mate, already half-way down, went up again three steps of the poop ladder. Why, yes. A proper young fellow, the mate expected, wouldn't stand by and see a man, a good sailor and his own skipper, in trouble without taking his part against a couple of shore people who--Mr. Powell interrupted him impatiently, asking what was the trouble?

"What is it you are hinting at?" he cried with an inexplicable irritation.

"I don't like to think of him all alone down there with these two," Franklin whispered impressively. "Upon my word I don't. God only knows what may be going on there . . . Don't laugh . . . It was bad enough last voyage when Mrs. Brown had a cabin aft; but now it's worse. It frightens me. I can't sleep sometimes for thinking of him all alone there, shut off from us all."

Mrs. Brown was the steward's wife. You must understand that shortly after his visit to the Fyne cottage (with all its consequences), Anthony had got an offer to go to the Western Islands, and bring home the cargo of some ship which, damaged in a collision or a stranding, took refuge in St. Michael, and was condemned there. Roderick Anthony had connections which would put such paying jobs in his way. So Flora de Barral had but a five months' voyage, a mere excursion, for her first trial of sea-life. And Anthony, dearly trying to be most attentive, had induced this Mrs. Brown, the wife of his faithful steward, to come along as maid to his bride. But for some reason or other this arrangement was not continued. And the mate, tormented by indefinite alarms and forebodings, regretted it. He regretted that Jane Brown was no longer on board--as a sort of representative of Captain Anthony's faithful servants, to watch quietly what went on in that part of the ship this fatal marriage had closed to their vigilance. That

had been excellent. For she was a dependable woman.

Powell did not detect any particular excellence in what seemed a spying employment. But in his simplicity he said that he should have thought Mrs. Anthony would have been glad anyhow to have another woman on board. He was thinking of the white-faced girlish personality which it seemed to him ought to have been cared for. The innocent young man always looked upon the girl as immature; something of a child yet.

"She! glad! Why it was she who had her fired out. She didn't want anybody around the cabin. Mrs. Brown is certain of it. She told her husband so. You ask the steward and hear what he has to say about it. That's why I don't like it. A capable woman who knew her place. But no. Out she must go. For no fault, mind you. The captain was ashamed to send her away. But that wife of his--aye the precious pair of them have got hold of him. I can't speak to him for a minute on the poop without that thimble-rigging coon coming gliding up. I'll tell you what. I overheard once--God knows I didn't try to--only he forgot I was on the other side of the skylight with my sextant--I overheard him--you know how he sits hanging over her chair and talking away without properly opening his mouth--yes I caught the word right enough. He was alluding to the captain as "the jailer." The jail . . . !"

Franklin broke off with a profane execration. A silence reigned for a long time and the slight, very gentle rolling of the ship slipping before the N.E. trade-wind seemed to be a soothing device for lulling to sleep the suspicions of men who trust themselves to the sea.

A deep sigh was heard followed by the mate's voice asking dismally if that was the way one would speak of a man to whom one wished well? No better proof of something wrong was needed. Therefore he hoped, as he vanished at last, that Mr. Powell would be on their side. And this time Mr. Powell did not answer this hope with an embarrassed laugh.

That young officer was more and more surprised at the nature of the incongruous revelations coming to him in the surroundings and in the atmosphere of the open sea. It is difficult for us to understand the extent, the completeness, the comprehensiveness of his inexperience, for us who didn't go to sea out of a small private school at the age of fourteen years and nine months. Leaning on his elbow in the mizzen rigging and so still that the helmsman over there at the other end of the poop might have (and he probably did) suspect him of being criminally asleep on duty, he tried to "get hold of that thing" by some side which would fit in with his simple notions of psychology. "What the deuce are they worrying about?" he asked himself in a dazed and contemptuous impatience. But all the

same "jailer" was a funny name to give a man; unkind, unfriendly, nasty. He was sorry that Mr. Smith was guilty in that matter because, the truth must be told, he had been to a certain extent sensible of having been noticed in a quiet manner by the father of Mrs. Anthony. Youth appreciates that sort of recognition which is the subtlest form of flattery age can offer. Mr. Smith seized opportunities to approach him on deck. His remarks were sometimes weird and enigmatical.

He was doubtless an eccentric old gent. But from that to calling his son- in-law (whom he never approached on deck) nasty names behind his back was a long step.

And Mr. Powell marvelled . . . "

"While he was telling me all this,"--Marlow changed his tone--"I marvelled even more. It was as if misfortune marked its victims on the forehead for the dislike of the crowd. I am not thinking here of numbers. Two men may behave like a crowd, three certainly will when their emotions are engaged. It was as if the forehead of Flora de Barral were marked. Was the girl born to be a victim; to be always disliked and crushed as if she were too fine for this world? Or too luckless--since that also is often counted as sin.

Yes, I marvelled more since I knew more of the girl than Mr. Powell--if only her true name; and more of Captain Anthony--if only the fact that he was the son of a delicate erotic poet of a markedly refined and autocratic temperament. Yes, I knew their joint stories which Mr. Powell did not know. The chapter in it he was opening to me, the sea-chapter, with such new personages as the sentimental and apoplectic chief-mate and the morose steward, however astounding to him in its detached condition was much more so to me as a member of a series, following the chapter outside the Eastern Hotel in which I myself had played my part. In view of her declarations and my sage remarks it was very unexpected. She had meant well, and I had certainly meant well too. Captain Anthony--as far as I could gather from little Fyne--had meant well. As far as such lofty words may be applied to the obscure personages of this story we were all filled with the noblest sentiments and intentions. The sea was there to give them the shelter of its solitude free from the earth's petty suggestions. I could well marvel in myself, as to what had happened.

I hope that if he saw it, Mr. Powell forgave me the smile of which I was guilty at that moment. The light in the cabin of his little cutter was dim. And the smile was dim too. Dim and fleeting. The girl's life had presented itself to me as a tragi-comical adventure, the saddest thing on earth, slipping between frank laughter and unabashed tears. Yes, the saddest facts and the most common, and, being common perhaps the most worthy of our unreserved pity.

The purely human reality is capable of lyrism but not of abstraction. Nothing will serve for its understanding but the evidence of rational linking up of characters and facts. And beginning with Flora de Barral, in the light of my memories I was certain that she at least must have been passive; for that is of necessity the part of women, this waiting on fate which some of them, and not the most intelligent, cover up by the vain appearances of agitation. Flora de Barral was not exceptionally intelligent but she was thoroughly feminine. She would be passive (and that does not mean inanimate) in the circumstances, where the mere fact of being a woman was enough to give her an occult and supreme significance. And she would be enduring which is the essence of woman's visible, tangible power. Of that I was certain. Had she not endured already? Yet it is so true that the germ of destruction lies in wait for us mortals, even at the very source of our strength, that one may die of too much endurance as well as of too little of it.

Such was my train of thought. And I was mindful also of my first view of her--toying or perhaps communing in earnest with the possibilities of a precipice. But I did not ask Mr. Powell anxiously what had happened to Mrs. Anthony in the end. I let him go on in his own way feeling that no matter what strange facts he would have to disclose, I was certain to know much more of them than he ever did know or could possibly guess . . . "

Marlow paused for quite a long time. He seemed uncertain as though he had advanced something beyond my grasp. Purposely I made no sign. "You understand?" he asked.

"Perfectly," I said. "You are the expert in the psychological wilderness. This is like one of those Red-skin stories where the noble savages carry off a girl and the honest backwoodsman with his incomparable knowledge follows the track and reads the signs of her fate in a footprint here, a broken twig there, a trinket dropped by the way. I have always liked such stories. Go on."

Marlow smiled indulgently at my jesting. "It is not exactly a story for boys," he said. "I go on then. The sign, as you call it, was not very plentiful but very much to the purpose, and when Mr. Powell heard (at a certain moment I felt bound to tell him) when he heard that I had known Mrs. Anthony before her marriage, that, to a certain extent, I was her confidant . . . For you can't deny that to a certain extent . . . Well let us say that I had a look in . . . A young girl, you know, is something like a temple. You pass by and wonder what mysterious rites are going on in there, what prayers, what visions? The privileged men, the lover, the husband, who are given the key of the sanctuary do not always know how to use it. For myself, without claim, without merit, simply by chance I had been allowed to look through the half-opened door and I had seen the saddest possible

desecration, the withered brightness of youth, a spirit neither made cringing nor yet dulled but as if bewildered in quivering hopelessness by gratuitous cruelty; self-confidence destroyed and, instead, a resigned recklessness, a mournful callousness (and all this simple, almost naive)--before the material and moral difficulties of the situation. The passive anguish of the luckless!

I asked myself: wasn't that ill-luck exhausted yet? Ill-luck which is like the hate of invisible powers interpreted, made sensible and injurious by the actions of men?

Mr. Powell as you may well imagine had opened his eyes at my statement. But he was full of his recalled experiences on board the Ferndale, and the strangeness of being mixed up in what went on aboard, simply because his name was also the name of a shipping-master, kept him in a state of wonder which made other coincidences, however unlikely, not so very surprising after all.

This astonishing occurrence was so present to his mind that he always felt as though he were there under false pretences. And this feeling was so uncomfortable that it nerved him to break through the awe-inspiring aloofness of his captain. He wanted to make a clean breast of it. I imagine that his youth stood in good stead to Mr. Powell. Oh, yes. Youth is a power. Even Captain Anthony had to take some notice of it, as if it refreshed him to see something untouched, unscarred, unhardened by suffering. Or perhaps the very novelty of that face, on board a ship where he had seen the same faces for years, attracted his attention.

Whether one day he dropped a word to his new second officer or only looked at him I don't know; but Mr. Powell seized the opportunity whatever it was. The captain who had started and stopped in his everlasting rapid walk smoothed his brow very soon, heard him to the end and then laughed a little.

"Ah! That's the story. And you felt you must put me right as to this."

"Yes, sir."

"It doesn't matter how you came on board," said Anthony. And then showing that perhaps he was not so utterly absent from his ship as Franklin supposed: "That's all right. You seem to be getting on very well with everybody," he said in his curt hurried tone, as if talking hurt him, and his eyes already straying over the sea as usual.

"Yes, sir."

Powell tells me that looking then at the strong face to which that haggard expression was returning, he had the impulse, from some confused friendly feeling, to add: "I am very happy on board here, sir."

The quickly returning glance, its steadiness, abashed Mr. Powell and made him even step back a little. The captain looked as though he had forgotten the meaning of the word.

"You--what? Oh yes . . . You . . . of course . . . Happy. Why not?"

This was merely muttered; and next moment Anthony was off on his headlong tramp his eyes turned to the sea away from his ship.

A sailor indeed looks generally into the great distances, but in Captain Anthony's case there was--as Powell expressed it--something particular, something purposeful like the avoidance of pain or temptation. It was very marked once one had become aware of it. Before, one felt only a pronounced strangeness. Not that the captain--Powell was careful to explain--didn't see things as a ship-master should. The proof of it was that on that very occasion he desired him suddenly after a period of silent pacing, to have all the staysails sheets eased off, and he was going on with some other remarks on the subject of these staysails when Mrs. Anthony followed by her father emerged from the companion. She established herself in her chair to leeward of the skylight as usual. Thereupon the captain cut short whatever he was going to say, and in a little while went down below.

I asked Mr. Powell whether the captain and his wife never conversed on deck. He said no--or at any rate they never exchanged more than a couple of words. There was some constraint between them. For instance, on that very occasion, when Mrs. Anthony came out they did look at each other; the captain's eyes indeed followed her till she sat down; but he did not speak to her; he did not approach her; and afterwards left the deck without turning his head her way after this first silent exchange of glances.

I asked Mr. Powell what did he do then, the captain being out of the way. "I went over and talked to Mrs. Anthony. I was thinking that it must be very dull for her. She seemed to be such a stranger to the ship."

"The father was there of course?"

"Always," said Powell. "He was always there sitting on the skylight, as if he were keeping watch over her. And I think," he added, "that he was worrying her. Not that she showed it in any way. Mrs. Anthony was always very quiet and always

ready to look one straight in the face."

"You talked together a lot?" I pursued my inquiries. "She mostly let me talk to her," confessed Mr. Powell. "I don't know that she was very much interested--but still she let me. She never cut me short."

All the sympathies of Mr. Powell were for Flora Anthony nee de Barral. She was the only human being younger than himself on board that ship since the Ferndale carried no boys and was manned by a full crew of able seamen. Yes! their youth had created a sort of bond between them. Mr. Powell's open countenance must have appeared to her distinctly pleasing amongst the mature, rough, crabbed or even inimical faces she saw around her. With the warm generosity of his age young Powell was on her side, as it were, even before he knew that there were sides to be taken on board that ship, and what this taking sides was about. There was a girl. A nice girl. He asked himself no questions. Flora de Barral was not so much younger in years than himself; but for some reason, perhaps by contrast with the accepted idea of a captain's wife, he could not regard her otherwise but as an extremely youthful creature. At the same time, apart from her exalted position, she exercised over him the supremacy a woman's earlier maturity gives her over a young man of her own age. As a matter of fact we can see that, without ever having more than a half an hour's consecutive conversation together, and the distances duly preserved, these two were becoming friends--under the eye of the old man, I suppose.

How he first got in touch with his captain's wife Powell relates in this way. It was long before his memorable conversation with the mate and shortly after getting clear of the channel. It was gloomy weather; dead head wind, blowing quite half a gale; the Ferndale under reduced sail was stretching close-hauled across the track of the homeward bound ships, just moving through the water and no more, since there was no object in pressing her and the weather looked threatening. About ten o'clock at night he was alone on the poop, in charge, keeping well aft by the weather rail and staring to windward, when amongst the white, breaking seas, under the black sky, he made out the lights of a ship. He watched them for some time. She was running dead before the wind of course. She will pass jolly close--he said to himself; and then suddenly he felt a great mistrust of that approaching ship. She's heading straight for us--he thought. It was not his business to get out of the way. On the contrary. And his uneasiness grew by the recollection of the forty tons of dynamite in the body of the Ferndale; not the sort of cargo one thinks of with equanimity in connection with a threatened collision. He gazed at the two small lights in the dark immensity filled with the angry noise of the seas. They fascinated him till their plainness to his sight gave him a conviction that there was danger there. He knew in his mind what to do in the emergency, but very properly he felt that he must call the captain out at once.

He crossed the deck in one bound. By the immemorial custom and usage of the sea the captain's room is on the starboard side. You would just as soon expect your captain to have his nose at the back of his head as to have his state-room on the port side of the ship. Powell forgot all about the direction on that point given him by the chief. He flew over as I said, stamped with his foot and then putting his face to the cowl of the big ventilator shouted down there: "Please come on deck, sir," in a voice which was not trembling or scared but which we may call fairly expressive. There could not be a mistake as to the urgence of the call. But instead of the expected alert "All right!" and the sound of a rush down there, he heard only a faint exclamation--then silence.

Think of his astonishment! He remained there, his ear in the cowl of the ventilator, his eyes fastened on those menacing sidelights dancing on the gusts of wind which swept the angry darkness of the sea. It was as though he had waited an hour but it was something much less than a minute before he fairly bellowed into the wide tube "Captain Anthony!" An agitated "What is it?" was what he heard down there in Mrs. Anthony's voice, light rapid footsteps . . . Why didn't she try to wake him up! "I want the captain," he shouted, then gave it up, making a dash at the companion where a blue light was kept, resolved to act for himself.

On the way he glanced at the helmsman whose face lighted up by the binnacle lamps was calm. He said rapidly to him: "Stand by to spin that helm up at the first word." The answer "Aye, aye, sir," was delivered in a steady voice. Then Mr. Powell after a shout for the watch on deck to "lay aft," ran to the ship's side and struck the blue light on the rail.

A sort of nasty little spitting of sparks was all that came. The light (perhaps affected by damp) had failed to ignite. The time of all these various acts must be counted in seconds. Powell confessed to me that at this failure he experienced a paralysis of thought, of voice, of limbs. The unexpectedness of this misfire positively overcame his faculties. It was the only thing for which his imagination was not prepared. It was knocked clean over. When it got up it was with the suggestion that he must do something at once or there would be a broadside smash accompanied by the explosion of dynamite, in which both ships would be blown up and every soul on board of them would vanish off the earth in an enormous flame and uproar.

He saw the catastrophe happening and at the same moment, before he could open his mouth or stir a limb to ward off the vision, a voice very near his ear, the measured voice of Captain Anthony said: "Wouldn't light--eh? Throw it down! Jump for the flare-up."

The spring of activity in Mr. Powell was released with great force. He jumped. The flare-up was kept inside the companion with a box of matches ready to hand. Almost before he knew he had moved he was diving under the companion slide. He got hold of the can in the dark and tried to strike a light. But he had to press the flare-holder to his breast with one arm, his fingers were damp and stiff, his hands trembled a little. One match broke. Another went out. In its flame he saw the colourless face of Mrs. Anthony a little below him, standing on the cabin stairs. Her eyes which were very close to his (he was in a crouching posture on the top step) seemed to burn darkly in the vanishing light. On deck the captain's voice was heard sudden and unexpectedly sardonic: "You had better look sharp, if you want to be in time."

"Let me have the box," said Mrs. Anthony in a hurried and familiar whisper which sounded amused as if they had been a couple of children up to some lark behind a wall. He was glad of the offer which seemed to him very natural, and without ceremony--

"Here you are. Catch hold."

Their hands touched in the dark and she took the box while he held the paraffin soaked torch in its iron holder. He thought of warning her: "Look out for yourself." But before he had the time to finish the sentence the flare blazed up violently between them and he saw her throw herself back with an arm across her face. "Hallo," he exclaimed; only he could not stop a moment to ask if she was hurt. He bolted out of the companion straight into his captain who took the flare from him and held it high above his head.

The fierce flame fluttered like a silk flag, throwing an angry swaying glare mingled with moving shadows over the poop, lighting up the concave surfaces of the sails, gleaming on the wet paint of the white rails. And young Powell turned his eyes to windward with a catch in his breath.

The strange ship, a darker shape in the night, did not seem to be moving onwards but only to grow more distinct right abeam, staring at the Ferndale with one green and one red eye which swayed and tossed as if they belonged to the restless head of some invisible monster ambushed in the night amongst the waves. A moment, long like eternity, elapsed, and, suddenly, the monster which seemed to take to itself the shape of a mountain shut its green eye without as much as a preparatory wink.

Mr. Powell drew a free breath. "All right now," said Captain Anthony in a quiet undertone. He gave the blazing flare to Powell and walked aft to watch the

passing of that menace of destruction coming blindly with its parti-coloured stare out of a blind night on the wings of a sweeping wind. Her very form could be distinguished now black and elongated amongst the hissing patches of foam bursting along her path.

As is always the case with a ship running before wind and sea she did not seem to an onlooker to move very fast; but to be progressing indolently in long leisurely bounds and pauses in the midst of the overtaking waves. It was only when actually passing the stern within easy hail of the Ferndale, that her headlong speed became apparent to the eye. With the red light shut off and soaring like an immense shadow on the crest of a wave she was lost to view in one great, forward swing, melting into the lightless space.

"Close shave," said Captain Anthony in an indifferent voice just raised enough to be heard in the wind. "A blind lot on board that ship. Put out the flare now."

Silently Mr. Powell inverted the holder, smothering the flame in the can, bringing about by the mere turn of his wrist the fall of darkness upon the poop. And at the same time vanished out of his mind's eye the vision of another flame enormous and fierce shooting violently from a white churned patch of the sea, lighting up the very clouds and carrying upwards in its volcanic rush flying spars, corpses, the fragments of two destroyed ships. It vanished and there was an immense relief. He told me he did not know how scared he had been, not generally but of that very thing his imagination had conjured, till it was all over. He measured it (for fear is a great tension) by the feeling of slack weariness which came over him all at once.

He walked to the companion and stooping low to put the flare in its usual place saw in the darkness the motionless pale oval of Mrs. Anthony's face. She whispered quietly:

"Is anything going to happen? What is it?"

"It's all over now," he whispered back.

He remained bent low, his head inside the cover staring at that white ghostly oval. He wondered she had not rushed out on deck. She had remained quietly there. This was pluck. Wonderful self-restraint. And it was not stupidity on her part. She knew there was imminent danger and probably had some notion of its nature.

"You stayed here waiting for what would come," he murmured admiringly.

"Wasn't that the best thing to do?" she asked.

He didn't know. Perhaps. He confessed he could not have done it. Not he. His flesh and blood could not have stood it. He would have felt he must see what was coming. Then he remembered that the flare might have scorched her face, and expressed his concern.

"A bit. Nothing to hurt. Smell the singed hair?"

There was a sort of gaiety in her tone. She might have been frightened but she certainly was not overcome and suffered from no reaction. This confirmed and augmented if possible Mr. Powell's good opinion of her as a "jolly girl," though it seemed to him positively monstrous to refer in such terms to one's captain's wife. "But she doesn't look it," he thought in extenuation and was going to say something more to her about the lighting of that flare when another voice was heard in the companion, saying some indistinct words. Its tone was contemptuous; it came from below, from the bottom of the stairs. It was a voice in the cabin. And the only other voice which could be heard in the main cabin at this time of the evening was the voice of Mrs. Anthony's father. The indistinct white oval sank from Mr. Powell's sight so swiftly as to take him by surprise. For a moment he hung at the opening of the companion and now that her slight form was no longer obstructing the narrow and winding staircase the voices came up louder but the words were still indistinct. The old gentleman was excited about something and Mrs. Anthony was "managing him" as Powell expressed it. They moved away from the bottom of the stairs and Powell went away from the companion. Yet he fancied he had heard the words "Lost to me" before he withdrew his head. They had been uttered by Mr. Smith.

Captain Anthony had not moved away from the taffrail. He remained in the very position he took up to watch the other ship go by rolling and swinging all shadowy in the uproar of the following seas. He stirred not; and Powell keeping near by did not dare speak to him, so enigmatical in its contemplation of the night did his figure appear to his young eyes: indistinct--and in its immobility staring into gloom, the prey of some incomprehensible grief, longing or regret.

Why is it that the stillness of a human being is often so impressive, so suggestive of evil--as if our proper fate were a ceaseless agitation? The stillness of Captain Anthony became almost intolerable to his second officer. Mr. Powell loitering about the skylight wanted his captain off the deck now. "Why doesn't he go below?" he asked himself impatiently. He ventured a cough.

Whether the effect of the cough or not Captain Anthony spoke. He did not move the least bit. With his back remaining turned to the whole length of the ship he

asked Mr. Powell with some brusqueness if the chief mate had neglected to instruct him that the captain was to be found on the port side.

"Yes, sir," said Mr. Powell approaching his back. "The mate told me to stamp on the port side when I wanted you; but I didn't remember at the moment."

"You should remember," the captain uttered with an effort. Then added mumbling "I don't want Mrs. Anthony frightened. Don't you see? . . ."

"She wasn't this time," Powell said innocently: "She lighted the flare-up for me, sir."

"This time," Captain Anthony exclaimed and turned round. "Mrs. Anthony lighted the flare? Mrs. Anthony! . . . " Powell explained that she was in the companion all the time.

"All the time," repeated the captain. It seemed queer to Powell that instead of going himself to see the captain should ask him:

"Is she there now?"

Powell said that she had gone below after the ship had passed clear of the Ferndale. Captain Anthony made a movement towards the companion himself, when Powell added the information. "Mr. Smith called to Mrs. Anthony from the saloon, sir. I believe they are talking there now."

He was surprised to see the captain give up the idea of going below after all.

He began to walk the poop instead regardless of the cold, of the damp wind and of the sprays. And yet he had nothing on but his sleeping suit and slippers. Powell placing himself on the break of the poop kept a look-out. When after some time he turned his head to steal a glance at his eccentric captain he could not see his active and shadowy figure swinging to and fro. The second mate of the Ferndale walked aft peering about and addressed the seaman who steered.

"Captain gone below?"

"Yes, sir," said the fellow who with a quid of tobacco bulging out his left cheek kept his eyes on the compass card. "This minute. He laughed."

"Laughed," repeated Powell incredulously. "Do you mean the captain did? You must be mistaken. What would he want to laugh for?"

"Don't know, sir."

The elderly sailor displayed a profound indifference towards human emotions. However, after a longish pause he conceded a few words more to the second officer's weakness. "Yes. He was walking the deck as usual when suddenly he laughed a little and made for the companion. Thought of something funny all at once."

Something funny! That Mr. Powell could not believe. He did not ask himself why, at the time. Funny thoughts come to men, though, in all sorts of situations; they come to all sorts of men. Nevertheless Mr. Powell was shocked to learn that Captain Anthony had laughed without visible cause on a certain night. The impression for some reason was disagreeable. And it was then, while finishing his watch, with the chilly gusts of wind sweeping at him out of the darkness where the short sea of the soundings growled spitefully all round the ship, that it occurred to his unsophisticated mind that perhaps things are not what they are confidently expected to be; that it was possible that Captain Anthony was not a happy man . . . In so far you will perceive he was to a certain extent prepared for the apoplectic and sensitive Franklin's lamentations about his captain. And though he treated them with a contempt which was in a great measure sincere, yet he admitted to me that deep down within him an inexplicable and uneasy suspicion that all was not well in that cabin, so unusually cut off from the rest of the ship, came into being and grew against his will.