CHAPTER SIX--. . . A MOONLESS NIGHT, THICK WITH STARS ABOVE, VERY DARK ON THE WATER

In the mess-room Powell found Mr. Franklin hacking at a piece of cold salt beef with a table knife. The mate, fiery in the face and rolling his eyes over that task, explained that the carver belonging to the mess- room could not be found. The steward, present also, complained savagely of the cook. The fellow got things into his galley and then lost them. Mr. Franklin tried to pacify him with mournful firmness.

"There, there! That will do. We who have been all these years together in the ship have other things to think about than quarrelling among ourselves."

Mr. Powell thought with exasperation: "Here he goes again," for this utterance had nothing cryptic for him. The steward having withdrawn morosely, he was not surprised to hear the mate strike the usual note. That morning the mizzen topsail tie had carried away (probably a defective link) and something like forty feet of chain and wire-rope, mixed up with a few heavy iron blocks, had crashed down from aloft on the poop with a terrifying racket.

"Did you notice the captain then, Mr. Powell. Did you notice?"

Powell confessed frankly that he was too scared himself when all that lot of gear came down on deck to notice anything.

"The gin-block missed his head by an inch," went on the mate impressively. "I wasn't three feet from him. And what did he do? Did he shout, or jump, or even look aloft to see if the yard wasn't coming down too about our ears in a dozen pieces? It's a marvel it didn't. No, he just stopped short--no wonder; he must have felt the wind of that iron gin-block on his face--looked down at it, there, lying close to his foot--and went on again. I believe he didn't even blink. It isn't natural. The man is stupefied."

He sighed ridiculously and Mr. Powell had suppressed a grin, when the mate added as if he couldn't contain himself:

"He will be taking to drink next. Mark my words. That's the next thing."

Mr. Powell was disgusted.

"You are so fond of the captain and yet you don't seem to care what you say

about him. I haven't been with him for seven years, but I know he isn't the sort of man that takes to drink. And then--why the devil should he?"

"Why the devil, you ask. Devil--eh? Well, no man is safe from the devil--and that's answer enough for you," wheezed Mr. Franklin not unkindly. "There was a time, a long time ago, when I nearly took to drink myself. What do you say to that?"

Mr. Powell expressed a polite incredulity. The thick, congested mate seemed on the point of bursting with despondency. "That was bad example though. I was young and fell into dangerous company, made a fool of myself--yes, as true as you see me sitting here. Drank to forget. Thought it a great dodge."

Powell looked at the grotesque Franklin with awakened interest and with that half-amused sympathy with which we receive unprovoked confidences from men with whom we have no sort of affinity. And at the same time he began to look upon him more seriously. Experience has its prestige. And the mate continued:

"If it hadn't been for the old lady, I would have gone to the devil. I remembered her in time. Nothing like having an old lady to look after to steady a chap and make him face things. But as bad luck would have it, Captain Anthony has no mother living, not a blessed soul belonging to him as far as I know. Oh, aye, I fancy he said once something to me of a sister. But she's married. She don't need him. Yes. In the old days he used to talk to me as if we had been brothers," exaggerated the mate sentimentally. "'Franklin,'--he would say--'this ship is my nearest relation and she isn't likely to turn against me. And I suppose you are the man I've known the longest in the world.' That's how he used to speak to me. Can I turn my back on him? He has turned his back on his ship; that's what it has come to. He has no one now but his old Franklin. But what's a fellow to do to put things back as they were and should be. Should be--I say!"

His starting eyes had a terrible fixity. Mr. Powell's irresistible thought, "he resembles a boiled lobster in distress," was followed by annoyance. "Good Lord," he said, "you don't mean to hint that Captain Anthony has fallen into bad company. What is it you want to save him from?"

"I do mean it," affirmed the mate, and the very absurdity of the statement made it impressive--because it seemed so absolutely audacious. "Well, you have a cheek," said young Powell, feeling mentally helpless. "I have a notion the captain would half kill you if he were to know how you carry on."

"And welcome," uttered the fervently devoted Franklin. "I am willing, if he would only clear the ship afterwards of that . . . You are but a youngster and you may

go and tell him what you like. Let him knock the stuffing out of his old Franklin first and think it over afterwards. Anything to pull him together. But of course you wouldn't. You are all right. Only you don't know that things are sometimes different from what they look. There are friendships that are no friendships, and marriages that are no marriages. Phoo! Likely to be right--wasn't it? Never a hint to me. I go off on leave and when I come back, there it is--all over, settled! Not a word beforehand. No warning. If only: 'What do you think of it, Franklin?'--or anything of the sort. And that's a man who hardly ever did anything without asking my advice. Why! He couldn't take over a new coat from the tailor without . . . first thing, directly the fellow came on board with some new clothes, whether in London or in China, it would be: 'Pass the word along there for Mr. Franklin. Mr. Franklin wanted in the cabin.' In I would go. 'Just look at my back, Franklin. Fits all right, doesn't it?' And I would say: 'First rate, sir,' or whatever was the truth of it. That or anything else. Always the truth of it. Always. And well he knew it; and that's why he dared not speak right out. Talking about workmen, alterations, cabins . . . Phoo! . . . instead of a straightforward--'Wish me joy, Mr. Franklin!' Yes, that was the way to let me know. God only knows what they are--perhaps she isn't his daughter any more than she is . . . She doesn't resemble that old fellow. Not a bit. Not a bit. It's very awful. You may well open your mouth, young man. But for goodness' sake, you who are mixed up with that lot, keep your eyes and ears open too in case--in case of . . . I don't know what. Anything. One wonders what can happen here at sea! Nothing. Yet when a man is called a jailer behind his back."

Mr. Franklin hid his face in his hands for a moment and Powell shut his mouth, which indeed had been open. He slipped out of the mess-room noiselessly. "The mate's crazy," he thought. It was his firm conviction. Nevertheless, that evening, he felt his inner tranquillity disturbed at last by the force and obstinacy of this craze. He couldn't dismiss it with the contempt it deserved. Had the word "jailer" really been pronounced? A strange word for the mate to even imagine he had heard. A senseless, unlikely word. But this word being the only clear and definite statement in these grotesque and dismal ravings was comparatively restful to his mind. Powell's mind rested on it still when he came up at eight o'clock to take charge of the deck. It was a moonless night, thick with stars above, very dark on the water. A steady air from the west kept the sails asleep. Franklin mustered both watches in low tones as if for a funeral, then approaching Powell:

"The course is east-south-east," said the chief mate distinctly.

"East-south-east, sir."

"Everything's set, Mr. Powell."

"All right, sir."

The other lingered, his sentimental eyes gleamed silvery in the shadowy face. "A quiet night before us. I don't know that there are any special orders. A settled, quiet night. I dare say you won't see the captain. Once upon a time this was the watch he used to come up and start a chat with either of us then on deck. But now he sits in that infernal stern- cabin and mopes. Jailer--eh?"

Mr. Powell walked away from the mate and when at some distance said, "Damn!" quite heartily. It was a confounded nuisance. It had ceased to be funny; that hostile word "jailer" had given the situation an air of reality.

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Franklin's grotesque mortal envelope had disappeared from the poop to seek its needful repose, if only the worried soul would let it rest a while. Mr. Powell, half sorry for the thick little man, wondered whether it would let him. For himself, he recognized that the charm of a quiet watch on deck when one may let one's thoughts roam in space and time had been spoiled without remedy. What shocked him most was the implied aspersion of complicity on Mrs. Anthony. It angered him. In his own words to me, he felt very "enthusiastic" about Mrs. Anthony. "Enthusiastic" is good; especially as he couldn't exactly explain to me what he meant by it. But he felt enthusiastic, he says. That silly Franklin must have been dreaming. That was it. He had dreamed it all. Ass. Yet the injurious word stuck in Powell's mind with its associated ideas of prisoner, of escape. He became very uncomfortable. And just then (it might have been half an hour or more since he had relieved Franklin) just then Mr. Smith came up on the poop alone, like a gliding shadow and leaned over the rail by his side. Young Powell was affected disagreeably by his presence. He made a movement to go away but the other began to talk--and Powell remained where he was as if retained by a mysterious compulsion. The conversation started by Mr. Smith had nothing peculiar. He began to talk of mail-boats in general and in the end seemed anxious to discover what were the services from Port Elizabeth to London. Mr. Powell did not know for certain but imagined that there must be communication with England at least twice a month. "Are you thinking of leaving us, sir; of going home by steam? Perhaps with Mrs. Anthony," he asked anxiously.

"No! No! How can I?" Mr. Smith got quite agitated, for him, which did not amount to much. He was just asking for the sake of something to talk about. No idea at all of going home. One could not always do what one wanted and that's why there were moments when one felt ashamed to live. This did not mean that one did not want to live. Oh no!

He spoke with careless slowness, pausing frequently and in such a low voice that Powell had to strain his hearing to catch the phrases dropped overboard as it were. And indeed they seemed not worth the effort. It was like the aimless talk of a man pursuing a secret train of thought far removed from the idle words we so often utter only to keep in touch with our fellow beings. An hour passed. It seemed as though Mr. Smith could not make up his mind to go below. He repeated himself. Again he spoke of lives which one was ashamed of. It was necessary to put up with such lives as long as there was no way out, no possible issue. He even alluded once more to mail-boat services on the East coast of Africa and young Powell had to tell him once more that he knew nothing about them.

"Every fortnight, I thought you said," insisted Mr. Smith. He stirred, seemed to detach himself from the rail with difficulty. His long, slender figure straightened into stiffness, as if hostile to the enveloping soft peace of air and sea and sky, emitted into the night a weak murmur which Mr. Powell fancied was the word, "Abominable" repeated three times, but which passed into the faintly louder declaration: "The moment has come--to go to bed," followed by a just audible sigh.

"I sleep very well," added Mr. Smith in his restrained tone. "But it is the moment one opens one's eyes that is horrible at sea. These days! Oh, these days! I wonder how anybody can . . . "

"I like the life," observed Mr. Powell.

"Oh, you. You have only yourself to think of. You have made your bed. Well, it's very pleasant to feel that you are friendly to us. My daughter has taken quite a liking to you, Mr. Powell."

He murmured, "Good-night" and glided away rigidly. Young Powell asked himself with some distaste what was the meaning of these utterances. His mind had been worried at last into that questioning attitude by no other person than the grotesque Franklin. Suspicion was not natural to him. And he took good care to carefully separate in his thoughts Mrs. Anthony from this man of enigmatic words--her father. Presently he observed that the sheen of the two deck dead-lights of Mr. Smith's room had gone out. The old gentleman had been surprisingly quick in getting into bed. Shortly afterwards the lamp in the foremost skylight of the saloon was turned out; and this was the sign that the steward had taken in the tray and had retired for the night.

Young Powell had settled down to the regular officer-of-the-watch tramp in the

dense shadow of the world decorated with stars high above his head, and on earth only a few gleams of light about the ship. The lamp in the after skylight was kept burning through the night. There were also the dead-lights of the stern-cabins glimmering dully in the deck far aft, catching his eye when he turned to walk that way. The brasses of the wheel glittered too, with the dimly lit figure of the man detached, as if phosphorescent, against the black and spangled background of the horizon.

Young Powell, in the silence of the ship, reinforced by the great silent stillness of the world, said to himself that there was something mysterious in such beings as the absurd Franklin, and even in such beings as himself. It was a strange and almost improper thought to occur to the officer of the watch of a ship on the high seas on no matter how quiet a night. Why on earth was he bothering his head? Why couldn't he dismiss all these people from his mind? It was as if the mate had infected him with his own diseased devotion. He would not have believed it possible that he should be so foolish. But he was--clearly. He was foolish in a way totally unforeseen by himself. Pushing this self-analysis further, he reflected that the springs of his conduct were just as obscure.

"I may be catching myself any time doing things of which I have no conception," he thought. And as he was passing near the mizzen-mast he perceived a coil of rope left lying on the deck by the oversight of the sweepers. By an impulse which had nothing mysterious in it, he stooped as he went by with the intention of picking it up and hanging it up on its proper pin. This movement brought his head down to the level of the glazed end of the after skylight--the lighted skylight of the most private part of the saloon, consecrated to the exclusiveness of Captain Anthony's married life; the part, let me remind you, cut off from the rest of that forbidden space by a pair of heavy curtains. I mention these curtains because at this point Mr. Powell himself recalled the existence of that unusual arrangement to my mind.

He recalled them with simple-minded compunction at that distance of time. He said: "You understand that directly I stooped to pick up that coil of running gear--the spanker foot-outhaul, it was--I perceived that I could see right into that part of the saloon the curtains were meant to make particularly private. Do you understand me?" he insisted.

I told him that I understood; and he proceeded to call my attention to the wonderful linking up of small facts, with something of awe left yet, after all these years, at the precise workmanship of chance, fate, providence, call it what you will! "For, observe, Marlow," he said, making at me very round eyes which contrasted funnily with the austere touch of grey on his temples, "observe, my dear fellow, that everything depended on the men who cleared up the poop in the

evening leaving that coil of rope on the deck, and on the topsail-tie carrying away in a most incomprehensible and surprising manner earlier in the day, and the end of the chain whipping round the coaming and shivering to bits the coloured glass-pane at the end of the skylight. It had the arms of the city of Liverpool on it; I don't know why unless because the Ferndale was registered in Liverpool. It was very thick plate glass. Anyhow, the upper part got smashed, and directly we had attended to things aloft Mr. Franklin had set the carpenter to patch up the damage with some pieces of plain glass. I don't know where they got them; I think the people who fitted up new bookcases in the captain's room had left some spare panes. Chips was there the whole afternoon on his knees, messing with putty and red-lead. It wasn't a neat job when it was done, not by any means, but it would serve to keep the weather out and let the light in. Clear glass. And of course I was not thinking of it. I just stooped to pick up that rope and found my head within three inches of that clear glass, and--dash it all! I found myself out. Not half an hour before I was saying to myself that it was impossible to tell what was in people's heads or at the back of their talk, or what they were likely to be up to. And here I found myself up to as low a trick as you can well think of. For, after I had stooped, there I remained prying, spying, anyway looking, where I had no business to look. Not consciously at first, may be. He who has eyes, you know, nothing can stop him from seeing things as long as there are things to see in front of him. What I saw at first was the end of the table and the tray clamped on to it, a patent tray for sea use, fitted with holders for a couple of decanters, water-jug and glasses. The glitter of these things caught my eye first; but what I saw next was the captain down there, alone as far as I could see; and I could see pretty well the whole of that part up to the cottage piano, dark against the satin-wood panelling of the bulkhead. And I remained looking. I did. And I don't know that I was ashamed of myself either, then. It was the fault of that Franklin, always talking of the man, making free with him to that extent that really he seemed to have become our property, his and mine, in a way. It's funny, but one had that feeling about Captain Anthony. To watch him was not so much worse than listening to Franklin talking him over. Well, it's no use making excuses for what's inexcusable. I watched; but I dare say you know that there could have been nothing inimical in this low behaviour of mine. On the contrary. I'll tell you now what he was doing. He was helping himself out of a decanter. I saw every movement, and I said to myself mockingly as though jeering at Franklin in my thoughts, 'Hallo! Here's the captain taking to drink at last.' He poured a little brandy or whatever it was into a long glass, filled it with water, drank about a fourth of it and stood the glass back into the holder. Every sign of a bad drinking bout, I was saying to myself, feeling quite amused at the notions of that Franklin. He seemed to me an enormous ass, with his jealousy and his fears. At that rate a month would not have been enough for anybody to get drunk. The captain sat down in one of the swivel arm-chairs fixed around the table; I had him right under me and as he turned the chair slightly, I was looking, I may say, down his

back. He took another little sip and then reached for a book which was lying on the table. I had not noticed it before. Altogether the proceedings of a desperate drunkard--weren't they? He opened the book and held it before his face. If this was the way he took to drink, then I needn't worry. He was in no danger from that, and as to any other, I assure you no human being could have looked safer than he did down there. I felt the greatest contempt for Franklin just then, while I looked at Captain Anthony sitting there with a glass of weak brandy-and-water at his elbow and reading in the cabin of his ship, on a quiet night--the quietest, perhaps the finest, of a prosperous passage. And if you wonder why I didn't leave off my ugly spying I will tell you how it was. Captain Anthony was a great reader just about that time; and I, too, I have a great liking for books. To this day I can't come near a book but I must know what it is about. It was a thickish volume he had there, small close print, double columns--I can see it now. What I wanted to make out was the title at the top of the page. I have very good eyes but he wasn't holding it conveniently--I mean for me up there. Well, it was a history of some kind, that much I read and then suddenly he bangs the book face down on the table, jumps up as if something had bitten him and walks away aft.

"Funny thing shame is. I had been behaving badly and aware of it in a way, but I didn't feel really ashamed till the fright of being found out in my honourable occupation drove me from it. I slunk away to the forward end of the poop and lounged about there, my face and ears burning and glad it was a dark night, expecting every moment to hear the captain's footsteps behind me. For I made sure he was coming on deck. Presently I thought I had rather meet him face to face and I walked slowly aft prepared to see him emerge from the companion before I got that far. I even thought of his having detected me by some means. But it was impossible, unless he had eyes in the top of his head. I had never had a view of his face down there. It was impossible; I was safe; and I felt very mean, yet, explain it as you may, I seemed not to care. And the captain not appearing on deck, I had the impulse to go on being mean. I wanted another peep. I really don't know what was the beastly influence except that Mr. Franklin's talk was enough to demoralize any man by raising a sort of unhealthy curiosity which did away in my case with all the restraints of common decency.

"I did not mean to run the risk of being caught squatting in a suspicious attitude by the captain. There was also the helmsman to consider. So what I did--I am surprised at my low cunning--was to sit down naturally on the skylight-seat and then by bending forward I found that, as I expected, I could look down through the upper part of the end-pane. The worst that could happen to me then, if I remained too long in that position, was to be suspected by the seaman aft at the wheel of having gone to sleep there. For the rest my ears would give me sufficient warning of any movements in the companion.

"But in that way my angle of view was changed. The field too was smaller. The end of the table, the tray and the swivel-chair I had right under my eyes. The captain had not come back yet. The piano I could not see now; but on the other hand I had a very oblique downward view of the curtains drawn across the cabin and cutting off the forward part of it just about the level of the skylight-end and only an inch or so from the end of the table. They were heavy stuff, travelling on a thick brass rod with some contrivance to keep the rings from sliding to and fro when the ship rolled. But just then the ship was as still almost as a model shut up in a glass case while the curtains, joined closely, and, perhaps on purpose, made a little too long moved no more than a solid wall."

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Marlow got up to get another cigar. The night was getting on to what I may call its deepest hour, the hour most favourable to evil purposes of men's hate, despair or greed--to whatever can whisper into their ears the unlawful counsels of protest against things that are; the hour of ill- omened silence and chill and stagnation, the hour when the criminal plies his trade and the victim of sleeplessness reaches the lowest depth of dreadful discouragement; the hour before the first sight of dawn. I know it, because while Marlow was crossing the room I looked at the clock on the mantelpiece. He however never looked that way though it is possible that he, too, was aware of the passage of time. He sat down heavily.

"Our friend Powell," he began again, "was very anxious that I should understand the topography of that cabin. I was interested more by its moral atmosphere, that tension of falsehood, of desperate acting, which tainted the pure sea-atmosphere into which the magnanimous Anthony had carried off his conquest and--well--his self-conquest too, trying to act at the same time like a beast of prey, a pure spirit and the "most generous of men." Too big an order clearly because he was nothing of a monster but just a common mortal, a little more self-willed and self-confident than most, may be, both in his roughness and in his delicacy.

As to the delicacy of Mr. Powell's proceedings I'll say nothing. He found a sort of depraved excitement in watching an unconscious man--and such an attractive and mysterious man as Captain Anthony at that. He wanted another peep at him. He surmised that the captain must come back soon because of the glass two-thirds full and also of the book put down so brusquely. God knows what sudden pang had made Anthony jump up so. I am convinced he used reading as an opiate against the pain of his magnanimity which like all abnormal growths was gnawing at his healthy substance with cruel persistence. Perhaps he had rushed into his cabin simply to groan freely in absolute and delicate secrecy. At any rate he tarried there. And young Powell would have grown weary and

compunctious at last if it had not become manifest to him that he had not been alone in the highly incorrect occupation of watching the movements of Captain Anthony.

Powell explained to me that no sound did or perhaps could reach him from the saloon. The first sign--and we must remember that he was using his eyes for all they were worth--was an unaccountable movement of the curtain. It was wavy and very slight; just perceptible in fact to the sharpened faculties of a secret watcher; for it can't be denied that our wits are much more alert when engaged in wrong-doing (in which one mustn't be found out) than in a righteous occupation.

He became suspicious, with no one and nothing definite in his mind. He was suspicious of the curtain itself and observed it. It looked very innocent. Then just as he was ready to put it down to a trick of imagination he saw trembling movements where the two curtains joined. Yes! Somebody else besides himself had been watching Captain Anthony. He owns artlessly that this roused his indignation. It was really too much of a good thing. In this state of intense antagonism he was startled to observe tips of fingers fumbling with the dark stuff. Then they grasped the edge of the further curtain and hung on there, just fingers and knuckles and nothing else. It made an abominable sight. He was looking at it with unaccountable repulsion when a hand came into view; a short, puffy, old, freckled hand projecting into the lamplight, followed by a white wrist, an arm in a grey coat-sleeve, up to the elbow, beyond the elbow, extended tremblingly towards the tray. Its appearance was weird and nauseous, fantastic and silly. But instead of grabbing the bottle as Powell expected, this hand, tremulous with senile eagerness, swerved to the glass, rested on its edge for a moment (or so it looked from above) and went back with a jerk. The gripping fingers of the other hand vanished at the same time, and young Powell staring at the motionless curtains could indulge for a moment the notion that he had been dreaming.

But that notion did not last long. Powell, after repressing his first impulse to spring for the companion and hammer at the captain's door, took steps to have himself relieved by the boatswain. He was in a state of distraction as to his feelings and yet lucid as to his mind. He remained on the skylight so as to keep his eye on the tray.

Still the captain did not appear in the saloon. "If he had," said Mr. Powell, "I knew what to do. I would have put my elbow through the pane instantly--crash."

I asked him why?

"It was the quickest dodge for getting him away from that tray," he explained. "My throat was so dry that I didn't know if I could shout loud enough. And this

was not a case for shouting, either."

The boatswain, sleepy and disgusted, arriving on the poop, found the second officer doubled up over the end of the skylight in a pose which might have been that of severe pain. And his voice was so changed that the man, though naturally vexed at being turned out, made no comment on the plea of sudden indisposition which young Powell put forward.

The rapidity with which the sick man got off the poop must have astonished the boatswain. But Powell, at the moment he opened the door leading into the saloon from the quarter-deck, had managed to control his agitation. He entered swiftly but without noise and found himself in the dark part of the saloon, the strong sheen of the lamp on the other side of the curtains visible only above the rod on which they ran. The door of Mr. Smith's cabin was in that dark part. He passed by it assuring himself by a quick side glance that it was imperfectly closed. "Yes," he said to me. "The old man must have been watching through the crack. Of that I am certain; but it was not for me that he was watching and listening. Horrible! Surely he must have been startled to hear and see somebody he did not expect. He could not possibly guess why I was coming in, but I suppose he must have been concerned." Concerned indeed! He must have been thunderstruck, appalled.

Powell's only distinct aim was to remove the suspected tumbler. He had no other plan, no other intention, no other thought. Do away with it in some manner. Snatch it up and run out with it.

You know that complete mastery of one fixed idea, not a reasonable but an emotional mastery, a sort of concentrated exaltation. Under its empire men rush blindly through fire and water and opposing violence, and nothing can stop them--unless, sometimes, a grain of sand. For his blind purpose (and clearly the thought of Mrs. Anthony was at the bottom of it) Mr. Powell had plenty of time. What checked him at the crucial moment was the familiar, harmless aspect of common things, the steady light, the open book on the table, the solitude, the peace, the home-like effect of the place. He held the glass in his hand; all he had to do was to vanish back beyond the curtains, flee with it noiselessly into the night on deck, fling it unseen overboard. A minute or less. And then all that would have happened would have been the wonder at the utter disappearance of a glass tumbler, a ridiculous riddle in pantry-affairs beyond the wit of anyone on board to solve. The grain of sand against which Powell stumbled in his headlong career was a moment of incredulity as to the truth of his own conviction because it had failed to affect the safe aspect of familiar things. He doubted his eyes too. He must have dreamt it all! "I am dreaming now," he said to himself. And very likely for a few seconds he must have looked like a man in a trance or profoundly

asleep on his feet, and with a glass of brandy-and-water in his hand.

What woke him up and, at the same time, fixed his feet immovably to the spot, was a voice asking him what he was doing there in tones of thunder. Or so it sounded to his ears. Anthony, opening the door of his stern- cabin had naturally exclaimed. What else could you expect? And the exclamation must have been fairly loud if you consider the nature of the sight which met his eye. There, before him, stood his second officer, a seemingly decent, well-bred young man, who, being on duty, had left the deck and had sneaked into the saloon, apparently for the inexpressibly mean purpose of drinking up what was left of his captain's brandy-and- water. There he was, caught absolutely with the glass in his hand.

But the very monstrosity of appearances silenced Anthony after the first exclamation; and young Powell felt himself pierced through and through by the overshadowed glance of his captain. Anthony advanced quietly. The first impulse of Mr. Powell, when discovered, had been to dash the glass on the deck. He was in a sort of panic. But deep down within him his wits were working, and the idea that if he did that he could prove nothing and that the story he had to tell was completely incredible, restrained him. The captain came forward slowly. With his eyes now close to his, Powell, spell-bound, numb all over, managed to lift one finger to the deck above mumbling the explanatory words, "Boatswain on the poop."

The captain moved his head slightly as much as to say, "That's all right"--and this was all. Powell had no voice, no strength. The air was unbreathable, thick, sticky, odious, like hot jelly in which all movements became difficult. He raised the glass a little with immense difficulty and moved his trammelled lips sufficiently to form the words:

"Doctored."

Anthony glanced at it for an instant, only for an instant, and again fastened his eyes on the face of his second mate. Powell added a fervent "I believe" and put the glass down on the tray. The captain's glance followed the movement and returned sternly to his face. The young man pointed a finger once more upwards and squeezed out of his iron-bound throat six consecutive words of further explanation. "Through the skylight. The white pane."

The captain raised his eyebrows very much at this, while young Powell, ashamed but desperate, nodded insistently several times. He meant to say that: Yes. Yes. He had done that thing. He had been spying . . . The captain's gaze became thoughtful. And, now the confession was over, the iron-bound feeling of Powell's throat passed away giving place to a general anxiety which from his breast

seemed to extend to all the limbs and organs of his body. His legs trembled a little, his vision was confused, his mind became blankly expectant. But he was alert enough. At a movement of Anthony he screamed in a strangled whisper.

"Don't, sir! Don't touch it."

The captain pushed aside Powell's extended arm, took up the glass and raised it slowly against the lamplight. The liquid, of very pale amber colour, was clear, and by a glance the captain seemed to call Powell's attention to the fact. Powell tried to pronounce the word, "dissolved" but he only thought of it with great energy which however failed to move his lips. Only when Anthony had put down the glass and turned to him he recovered such a complete command of his voice that he could keep it down to a hurried, forcible whisper--a whisper that shook him.

"Doctored! I swear it! I have seen. Doctored! I have seen."

Not a feature of the captain's face moved. His was a calm to take one's breath away. It did so to young Powell. Then for the first time Anthony made himself heard to the point.

"You did! . . . Who was it?"

And Powell gasped freely at last. "A hand," he whispered fearfully, "a hand and the arm--only the arm--like that."

He advanced his own, slow, stealthy, tremulous in faithful reproduction, the tips of two fingers and the thumb pressed together and hovering above the glass for an instant--then the swift jerk back, after the deed.

"Like that," he repeated growing excited. "From behind this." He grasped the curtain and glaring at the silent Anthony flung it back disclosing the forepart of the saloon. There was on one to be seen.

Powell had not expected to see anybody. "But," he said to me, "I knew very well there was an ear listening and an eye glued to the crack of a cabin door. Awful thought. And that door was in that part of the saloon remaining in the shadow of the other half of the curtain. I pointed at it and I suppose that old man inside saw me pointing. The captain had a wonderful self-command. You couldn't have guessed anything from his face. Well, it was perhaps more thoughtful than usual. And indeed this was something to think about. But I couldn't think steadily. My brain would give a sort of jerk and then go dead again. I had lost all notion of time, and I might have been looking at the captain for days and months

for all I knew before I heard him whisper to me fiercely: "Not a word!" This jerked me out of that trance I was in and I said "No! No! I didn't mean even you."

"I wanted to explain my conduct, my intentions, but I read in his eyes that he understood me and I was only too glad to leave off. And there we were looking at each other, dumb, brought up short by the question "What next?"

"I thought Captain Anthony was a man of iron till I saw him suddenly fling his head to the right and to the left fiercely, like a wild animal at bay not knowing which way to break out . . . "

* * * * *

"Truly," commented Marlow, "brought to bay was not a bad comparison; a better one than Mr. Powell was aware of. At that moment the appearance of Flora could not but bring the tension to the breaking point. She came out in all innocence but not without vague dread. Anthony's exclamation on first seeing Powell had reached her in her cabin, where, it seems, she was brushing her hair. She had heard the very words. "What are you doing here?" And the unwonted loudness of the voice--his voice--breaking the habitual stillness of that hour would have startled a person having much less reason to be constantly apprehensive, than the captive of Anthony's masterful generosity. She had no means to guess to whom the question was addressed and it echoed in her heart, as Anthony's voice always did. Followed complete silence. She waited, anxious, expectant, till she could stand the strain no longer, and with the weary mental appeal of the overburdened. "My God! What is it now?" she opened the door of her room and looked into the saloon. Her first glance fell on Powell. For a moment, seeing only the second officer with Anthony, she felt relieved and made as if to draw back; but her sharpened perception detected something suspicious in their attitudes, and she came forward slowly.

"I was the first to see Mrs. Anthony," related Powell, "because I was facing aft. The captain, noticing my eyes, looked quickly over his shoulder and at once put his finger to his lips to caution me. As if I were likely to let out anything before her! Mrs. Anthony had on a dressing-gown of some grey stuff with red facings and a thick red cord round her waist. Her hair was down. She looked a child; a pale-faced child with big blue eyes and a red mouth a little open showing a glimmer of white teeth. The light fell strongly on her as she came up to the end of the table. A strange child though; she hardly affected one like a child, I remember. Do you know," exclaimed Mr. Powell, who clearly must have been, like many seamen, an industrious reader, "do you know what she looked like to me with those big eyes and something appealing in her whole expression. She looked like a forsaken elf. Captain Anthony had moved towards her to keep her

away from my end of the table, where the tray was. I had never seen them so near to each other before, and it made a great contrast. It was wonderful, for, with his beard cut to a point, his swarthy, sunburnt complexion, thin nose and his lean head there was something African, something Moorish in Captain Anthony. His neck was bare; he had taken off his coat and collar and had drawn on his sleeping jacket in the time that he had been absent from the saloon. I seem to see him now. Mrs. Anthony too. She looked from him to me--I suppose I looked guilty or frightened--and from me to him, trying to guess what there was between us two. Then she burst out with a "What has happened?" which seemed addressed to me. I mumbled "Nothing! Nothing, ma'am," which she very likely did not hear.

"You must not think that all this had lasted a long time. She had taken fright at our behaviour and turned to the captain pitifully. "What is it you are concealing from me?" A straight question--eh? I don't know what answer the captain would have made. Before he could even raise his eyes to her she cried out "Ah! Here's papa" in a sharp tone of relief, but directly afterwards she looked to me as if she were holding her breath with apprehension. I was so interested in her that, how shall I say it, her exclamation made no connection in my brain at first. I also noticed that she had sidled up a little nearer to Captain Anthony, before it occurred to me to turn my head. I can tell you my neck stiffened in the twisted position from the shock of actually seeing that old man! He had dared! I suppose you think I ought to have looked upon him as mad. But I couldn't. It would have been certainly easier. But I could not. You should have seen him. First of all he was completely dressed with his very cap still on his head just as when he left me on deck two hours before, saying in his soft voice: "The moment has come to go to bed"--while he meant to go and do that thing and hide in his dark cabin, and watch the stuff do its work. A cold shudder ran down my back. He had his hands in the pockets of his jacket, his arms were pressed close to his thin, upright body, and he shuffled across the cabin with his short steps. There was a red patch on each of his old soft cheeks as if somebody had been pinching them. He drooped his head a little, and looked with a sort of underhand expectation at the captain and Mrs. Anthony standing close together at the other end of the saloon. The calculating horrible impudence of it! His daughter was there; and I am certain he had seen the captain putting his finger on his lips to warn me. And then he had coolly come out! He passed my imagination, I assure you. After that one shiver his presence killed every faculty in me--wonder, horror, indignation. I felt nothing in particular just as if he were still the old gentleman who used to talk to me familiarly every day on deck. Would you believe it?"

"Mr. Powell challenged my powers of wonder at this internal phenomenon," went on Marlow after a slight pause. "But even if they had not been fully engaged, together with all my powers of attention in following the facts of the case, I would

not have been astonished by his statements about himself. Taking into consideration his youth they were by no means incredible; or, at any rate, they were the least incredible part of the whole. They were also the least interesting part. The interest was elsewhere, and there of course all he could do was to look at the surface. The inwardness of what was passing before his eyes was hidden from him, who had looked on, more impenetrably than from me who at a distance of years was listening to his words. What presently happened at this crisis in Flora de Barral's fate was beyond his power of comment, seemed in a sense natural. And his own presence on the scene was so strangely motived that it was left for me to marvel alone at this young man, a completely chance-comer, having brought it about on that night.

Each situation created either by folly or wisdom has its psychological moment. The behaviour of young Powell with its mixture of boyish impulses combined with instinctive prudence, had not created it--I can't say that--but had discovered it to the very people involved. What would have happened if he had made a noise about his discovery? But he didn't. His head was full of Mrs. Anthony and he behaved with a discretion beyond his years. Some nice children often do; and surely it is not from reflection. They have their own inspirations. Young Powell's inspiration consisted in being "enthusiastic" about Mrs. Anthony. 'Enthusiastic' is really good. And he was amongst them like a child, sensitive, impressionable, plastic--but unable to find for himself any sort of comment.

I don't know how much mine may be worth; but I believe that just then the tension of the false situation was at its highest. Of all the forms offered to us by life it is the one demanding a couple to realize it fully, which is the most imperative. Pairing off is the fate of mankind. And if two beings thrown together, mutually attracted, resist the necessity, fail in understanding and voluntarily stop short of the--the embrace, in the noblest meaning of the word, then they are committing a sin against life, the call of which is simple. Perhaps sacred. And the punishment of it is an invasion of complexity, a tormenting, forcibly tortuous involution of feelings, the deepest form of suffering from which indeed something significant may come at last, which may be criminal or heroic, may be madness or wisdom--or even a straight if despairing decision.

Powell on taking his eyes off the old gentleman noticed Captain Anthony, swarthy as an African, by the side of Flora whiter than the lilies, take his handkerchief out and wipe off his forehead the sweat of anguish--like a man who is overcome. "And no wonder," commented Mr. Powell here. Then the captain said, "Hadn't you better go back to your room." This was to Mrs. Anthony. He tried to smile at her. "Why do you look startled? This night is like any other night."

"Which," Powell again commented to me earnestly, "was a lie . . . No wonder he

sweated." You see from this the value of Powell's comments. Mrs. Anthony then said: "Why are you sending me away?"

"Why! That you should go to sleep. That you should rest." And Captain Anthony frowned. Then sharply, "You stay here, Mr. Powell. I shall want you presently."

As a matter of fact Powell had not moved. Flora did not mind his presence. He himself had the feeling of being of no account to those three people. He was looking at Mrs. Anthony as unabashed as the proverbial cat looking at a king. Mrs. Anthony glanced at him. She did not move, gripped by an inexplicable premonition. She had arrived at the very limit of her endurance as the object of Anthony's magnanimity; she was the prey of an intuitive dread of she did not know what mysterious influence; she felt herself being pushed back into that solitude, that moral loneliness, which had made all her life intolerable. And then, in that close communion established again with Anthony, she felt--as on that night in the garden--the force of his personal fascination. The passive quietness with which she looked at him gave her the appearance of a person bewitched--or, say, mesmerically put to sleep--beyond any notion of her surroundings.

After telling Mr. Powell not to go away the captain remained silent. Suddenly Mrs. Anthony pushed back her loose hair with a decisive gesture of her arms and moved still nearer to him. "Here's papa up yet," she said, but she did not look towards Mr. Smith. "Why is it? And you? I can't go on like this, Roderick--between you two. Don't."

Anthony interrupted her as if something had untied his tongue.

"Oh yes. Here's your father. And . . . Why not. Perhaps it is just as well you came out. Between us two? Is that it? I won't pretend I don't understand. I am not blind. But I can't fight any longer for what I haven't got. I don't know what you imagine has happened. Something has though. Only you needn't be afraid. No shadow can touch you--because I give up. I can't say we had much talk about it, your father and I, but, the long and the short of it is, that I must learn to live without you--which I have told you was impossible. I was speaking the truth. But I have done fighting, or waiting, or hoping. Yes. You shall go."

At this point Mr. Powell who (he confessed to me) was listening with uncomprehending awe, heard behind his back a triumphant chuckling sound. It gave him the shudders, he said, to mention it now; but at the time, except for another chill down the spine, it had not the power to destroy his absorption in the scene before his eyes, and before his ears too, because just then Captain Anthony raised his voice grimly. Perhaps he too had heard the chuckle of the old man.

"Your father has found an argument which makes me pause, if it does not convince me. No! I can't answer it. I--I don't want to answer it. I simply surrender. He shall have his way with you--and with me. Only," he added in a gloomy lowered tone which struck Mr. Powell as if a pedal had been put down, "only it shall take a little time. I have never lied to you. Never. I renounce not only my chance but my life. In a few days, directly we get into port, the very moment we do, I, who have said I could never let you go, I shall let you go."

To the innocent beholder Anthony seemed at this point to become physically exhausted. My view is that the utter falseness of his, I may say, aspirations, the vanity of grasping the empty air, had come to him with an overwhelming force, leaving him disarmed before the other's mad and sinister sincerity. As he had said himself he could not fight for what he did not possess; he could not face such a thing as this for the sake of his mere magnanimity. The normal alone can overcome the abnormal. He could not even reproach that man over there. "I own myself beaten," he said in a firmer tone. "You are free. I let you off since I must."

Powell, the onlooker, affirms that at these incomprehensible words Mrs. Anthony stiffened into the very image of astonishment, with a frightened stare and frozen lips. But next minute a cry came out from her heart, not very loud but of a quality which made not only Captain Anthony (he was not looking at her), not only him but also the more distant (and equally unprepared) young man, catch their breath: "But I don't want to be let off," she cried.

She was so still that one asked oneself whether the cry had come from her. The restless shuffle behind Powell's back stopped short, the intermittent shadowy chuckling ceased too. Young Powell, glancing round, saw Mr. Smith raise his head with his faded eyes very still, puckered at the corners, like a man perceiving something coming at him from a great distance. And Mrs. Anthony's voice reached Powell's ears, entreating and indignant.

"You can't cast me off like this, Roderick. I won't go away from you. I won't--"

Powell turned about and discovered then that what Mr. Smith was puckering his eyes at, was the sight of his daughter clinging round Captain Anthony's neck--a sight not in itself improper, but which had the power to move young Powell with a bashfully profound emotion. It was different from his emotion while spying at the revelations of the skylight, but in this case too he felt the discomfort, if not the guilt, of an unseen beholder. Experience was being piled up on his young shoulders. Mrs. Anthony's hair hung back in a dark mass like the hair of a drowned woman. She looked as if she would let go and sink to the floor if the captain were to withhold his sustaining arm. But the captain obviously had no

such intention. Standing firm and still he gazed with sombre eyes at Mr. Smith. For a time the low convulsive sobbing of Mr. Smith's daughter was the only sound to trouble the silence. The strength of Anthony's clasp pressing Flora to his breast could not be doubted even at that distance, and suddenly, awakening to his opportunity, he began to partly support her, partly carry her in the direction of her cabin. His head was bent over her solicitously, then recollecting himself, with a glance full of unwonted fire, his voice ringing in a note unknown to Mr. Powell, he cried to him, "Don't you go on deck yet. I want you to stay down here till I come back. There are some instructions I want to give you."

And before the young man could answer, Anthony had disappeared in the stern-cabin, burdened and exulting.

"Instructions," commented Mr. Powell. "That was all right. Very likely; but they would be such instructions as, I thought to myself, no ship's officer perhaps had ever been given before. It made me feel a little sick to think what they would be dealing with, probably. But there! Everything that happens on board ship on the high seas has got to be dealt with somehow. There are no special people to fly to for assistance. And there I was with that old man left in my charge. When he noticed me looking at him he started to shuffle again athwart the saloon. He kept his hands rammed in his pockets, he was as stiff-backed as ever, only his head hung down. After a bit he says in his gentle soft tone: "Did you see it?"

There were in Powell's head no special words to fit the horror of his feelings. So he said--he had to say something, "Good God! What were you thinking of, Mr. Smith, to try to . . . " And then he left off. He dared not utter the awful word poison. Mr. Smith stopped his prowl.

"Think! What do you know of thinking. I don't think. There is something in my head that thinks. The thoughts in men, it's like being drunk with liquor or--You can't stop them. A man who thinks will think anything. No! But have you seen it. Have you?"

"I tell you I have! I am certain!" said Powell forcibly. "I was looking at you all the time. You've done something to the drink in that glass."

Then Powell lost his breath somehow. Mr. Smith looked at him curiously, with mistrust.

"My good young man, I don't know what you are talking about. I ask you--have you seen? Who would have believed it? with her arms round his neck. When! Oh! Ha! Ha! You did see! Didn't you? It wasn't a delusion--was it? Her arms round . . . But I have never wholly trusted her."

"Then I flew out at him, said Mr. Powell. I told him he was jolly lucky to have fallen upon Captain Anthony. A man in a million. He started again shuffling to and fro. "You too," he said mournfully, keeping his eyes down. "Eh? Wonderful man? But have you a notion who I am? Listen! I have been the Great Mr. de Barral. So they printed it in the papers while they were getting up a conspiracy. And I have been doing time. And now I am brought low." His voice died down to a mere breath. "Brought low."

He took his hands out of his pocket, dragged the cap down on his head and stuck them back into his pockets, exactly as if preparing himself to go out into a great wind. "But not so low as to put up with this disgrace, to see her, fast in this fellow's clutches, without doing something. She wouldn't listen to me. Frightened? Silly? I had to think of some way to get her out of this. Did you think she cared for him? No! Would anybody have thought so? No! She pretended it was for my sake. She couldn't understand that if I hadn't been an old man I would have flown at his throat months ago. As it was I was tempted every time he looked at her. My girl. Ough! Any man but this. And all the time the wicked little fool was lying to me. It was their plot, their conspiracy! These conspiracies are the devil. She has been leading me on, till she has fairly put my head under the heel of that jailer, of that scoundrel, of her husband . . . Treachery! Bringing me low. Lower than herself. In the dirt. That's what it means. Doesn't it? Under his heel!"

He paused in his restless shuffle and again, seizing his cap with both hands, dragged it furiously right down on his ears. Powell had lost himself in listening to these broken ravings, in looking at that old feverish face when, suddenly, quick as lightning, Mr. Smith spun round, snatched up the captain's glass and with a stifled, hurried exclamation, "Here's luck," tossed the liquor down his throat.

"I know now the meaning of the word 'Consternation,'" went on Mr. Powell. "That was exactly my state of mind. I thought to myself directly: There's nothing in that drink. I have been dreaming, I have made the awfulest mistake! . . ."

Mr. Smith put the glass down. He stood before Powell unharmed, quieted down, in a listening attitude, his head inclined on one side, chewing his thin lips. Suddenly he blinked queerly, grabbed Powell's shoulder and collapsed, subsiding all at once as though he had gone soft all over, as a piece of silk stuff collapses. Powell seized his arm instinctively and checked his fall; but as soon as Mr. Smith was fairly on the floor he jerked himself free and backed away. Almost as quick he rushed forward again and tried to lift up the body. But directly he raised his shoulders he knew that the man was dead! Dead!

He lowered him down gently. He stood over him without fear or any other feeling, almost indifferent, far away, as it were. And then he made another start and, if he had not kept Mrs. Anthony always in his mind, he would have let out a yell for help. He staggered to her cabin-door, and, as it was, his call for "Captain Anthony" burst out of him much too loud; but he made a great effort of self-control. "I am waiting for my orders, sir," he said outside that door distinctly, in a steady tone.

It was very still in there; still as death. Then he heard a shuffle of feet and the captain's voice "All right. Coming." He leaned his back against the bulkhead as you see a drunken man sometimes propped up against a wall, half doubled up. In that attitude the captain found him, when he came out, pulling the door to after him quickly. At once Anthony let his eyes run all over the cabin. Powell, without a word, clutched his forearm, led him round the end of the table and began to justify himself. "I couldn't stop him," he whispered shakily. "He was too quick for me. He drank it up and fell down." But the captain was not listening. He was looking down at Mr. Smith, thinking perhaps that it was a mere chance his own body was not lying there. They did not want to speak. They made signs to each other with their eyes. The captain grasped Powell's shoulder as if in a vice and glanced at Mrs. Anthony's cabin door, and it was enough. He knew that the young man understood him. Rather! Silence! Silence for ever about this. Their very glances became stealthy. Powell looked from the body to the door of the dead man's state-room. The captain nodded and let him go; and then Powell crept over, hooked the door open and crept back with fearful glances towards Mrs. Anthony's cabin. They stooped over the corpse. Captain Anthony lifted up the shoulders.

Mr. Powell shuddered. "I'll never forget that interminable journey across the saloon, step by step, holding our breath. For part of the way the drawn half of the curtain concealed us from view had Mrs. Anthony opened her door; but I didn't draw a free breath till after we laid the body down on the swinging cot. The reflection of the saloon light left most of the cabin in the shadow. Mr. Smith's rigid, extended body looked shadowy too, shadowy and alive. You know he always carried himself as stiff as a poker. We stood by the cot as though waiting for him to make us a sign that he wanted to be left alone. The captain threw his arm over my shoulder and said in my very ear: "The steward'll find him in the morning."

"I made no answer. It was for him to say. It was perhaps the best way. It's no use talking about my thoughts. They were not concerned with myself, nor yet with that old man who terrified me more now than when he was alive. Him whom I pitied was the captain. He whispered. "I am certain of you, Mr. Powell. You had better go on deck now. As to me . . . " and I saw him raise his hands to his

head as if distracted. But his last words before we stole out that cabin stick to my mind with the very tone of his mutter--to himself, not to me:

"No! No! I am not going to stumble now over that corpse."

* * *

"This is what our Mr. Powell had to tell me," said Marlow, changing his tone. I was glad to learn that Flora de Barral had been saved from that sinister shadow at least falling upon her path.

We sat silent then, my mind running on the end of de Barral, on the irresistible pressure of imaginary griefs, crushing conscience, scruples, prudence, under their ever-expanding volume; on the sombre and venomous irony in the obsession which had mastered that old man.

"Well," I said.

"The steward found him," Mr. Powell roused himself. "He went in there with a cup of tea at five and of course dropped it. I was on watch again. He reeled up to me on deck pale as death. I had been expecting it; and yet I could hardly speak. "Go and tell the captain quietly," I managed to say. He ran off muttering "My God! My God!" and I'm hanged if he didn't get hysterical while trying to tell the captain, and start screaming in the saloon, "Fully dressed! Dead! Fully dressed!" Mrs. Anthony ran out of course but she didn't get hysterical. Franklin, who was there too, told me that she hid her face on the captain's breast and then he went out and left them there. It was days before Mrs. Anthony was seen on deck. The first time I spoke to her she gave me her hand and said, "My poor father was quite fond of you, Mr. Powell." She started wiping her eyes and I fled to the other side of the deck. One would like to forget all this had ever come near her."

But clearly he could not, because after lighting his pipe he began musing aloud: "Very strong stuff it must have been. I wonder where he got it. It could hardly be at a common chemist. Well, he had it from somewhere--a mere pinch it must have been, no more."

"I have my theory," observed Marlow, "which to a certain extent does away with the added horror of a coldly premeditated crime. Chance had stepped in there too. It was not Mr. Smith who obtained the poison. It was the Great de Barral. And it was not meant for the obscure, magnanimous conqueror of Flora de Barral; it was meant for the notorious financier whose enterprises had nothing to do with magnanimity. He had his physician in his days of greatness. I even seem to remember that the man was called at the trial on some small point or other. I

can imagine that de Barral went to him when he saw, as he could hardly help seeing, the possibility of a "triumph of envious rivals"--a heavy sentence.

I doubt if for love or even for money, but I think possibly, from pity that man provided him with what Mr. Powell called "strong stuff." From what Powell saw of the very act I am fairly certain it must have been contained in a capsule and that he had it about him on the last day of his trial, perhaps secured by a stitch in his waistcoat pocket. He didn't use it. Why? Did he think of his child at the last moment? Was it want of courage? We can't tell. But he found it in his clothes when he came out of jail. It had escaped investigation if there was any. Chance had armed him. And chance alone, the chance of Mr. Powell's life, forced him to turn the abominable weapon against himself.

I imparted my theory to Mr. Powell who accepted it at once as, in a sense, favourable to the father of Mrs. Anthony. Then he waved his hand. "Don't let us think of it."

I acquiesced and very soon he observed dreamily:

"I was with Captain and Mrs. Anthony sailing all over the world for near on six years. Almost as long as Franklin."

"Oh yes! What about Franklin?" I asked.

Powell smiled. "He left the Ferndale a year or so afterwards, and I took his place. Captain Anthony recommended him for a command. You don't think Captain Anthony would chuck a man aside like an old glove. But of course Mrs. Anthony did not like him very much. I don't think she ever let out a whisper against him but Captain Anthony could read her thoughts.

And again Powell seemed to lose himself in the past. I asked, for suddenly the vision of the Fynes passed through my mind.

"Any children?"

Powell gave a start. "No! No! Never had any children," and again subsided, puffing at his short briar pipe.

"Where are they now?" I inquired next as if anxious to ascertain that all Fyne's fears had been misplaced and vain as our fears often are; that there were no undesirable cousins for his dear girls, no danger of intrusion on their spotless home. Powell looked round at me slowly, his pipe smouldering in his hand.

"Don't you know?" he uttered in a deep voice.

"Know what?"

"That the Ferndale was lost this four years or more. Sunk. Collision. And Captain Anthony went down with her."

"You don't say so!" I cried quite affected as if I had known Captain Anthony personally. "Was--was Mrs. Anthony lost too?"

"You might as well ask if I was lost," Mr. Powell rejoined so testily as to surprise me. "You see me here,--don't you."

He was quite huffy, but noticing my wondering stare he smoothed his ruffled plumes. And in a musing tone.

"Yes. Good men go out as if there was no use for them in the world. It seems as if there were things that, as the Turks say, are written. Or else fate has a try and sometimes misses its mark. You remember that close shave we had of being run down at night, I told you of, my first voyage with them. This go it was just at dawn. A flat calm and a fog thick enough to slice with a knife. Only there were no explosives on board. I was on deck and I remember the cursed, murderous thing looming up alongside and Captain Anthony (we were both on deck) calling out, "Good God! What's this! Shout for all hands, Powell, to save themselves. There's no dynamite on board now. I am going to get the wife! . . " I yelled, all the watch on deck yelled. Crash!"

Mr. Powell gasped at the recollection. "It was a Belgian Green Star liner, the Westland," he went on, "commanded by one of those stop-for- nothing skippers. Flaherty was his name and I hope he will die without absolution. She cut half through the old Ferndale and after the blow there was a silence like death. Next I heard the captain back on deck shouting, "Set your engines slow ahead," and a howl of "Yes, yes," answering him from her forecastle; and then a whole crowd of people up there began making a row in the fog. They were throwing ropes down to us in dozens, I must say. I and the captain fastened one of them under Mrs. Anthony's arms: I remember she had a sort of dim smile on her face."

"Haul up carefully," I shouted to the people on the steamer's deck. "You've got a woman on that line."

The captain saw her landed up there safe. And then we made a rush round our decks to see no one was left behind. As we got back the captain says: "Here she's gone at last, Powell; the dear old thing! Run down at sea."

"Indeed she is gone," I said. "But it might have been worse. Shin up this rope, sir, for God's sake. I will steady it for you."

"What are you thinking about," he says angrily. "It isn't my turn. Up with you."

These were the last words he ever spoke on earth I suppose. I knew he meant to be the last to leave his ship, so I swarmed up as quick as I could, and those damned lunatics up there grab at me from above, lug me in, drag me along aft through the row and the riot of the silliest excitement I ever did see. Somebody hails from the bridge, "Have you got them all on board?" and a dozen silly asses start yelling all together, "All saved! All saved," and then that accursed Irishman on the bridge, with me roaring No! No! till I thought my head would burst, rings his engines astern. He rings the engines astern--I fighting like mad to make myself heard! And of course . . . "

I saw tears, a shower of them fall down Mr. Powell's face. His voice broke.

"The Ferndale went down like a stone and Captain Anthony went down with her, the finest man's soul that ever left a sailor's body. I raved like a maniac, like a devil, with a lot of fools crowding round me and asking, "Aren't you the captain?"

"I wasn't fit to tie the shoe-strings of the man you have drowned," I screamed at them . . . Well! Well! I could see for myself that it was no good lowering a boat. You couldn't have seen her alongside. No use. And only think, Marlow, it was I who had to go and tell Mrs. Anthony. They had taken her down below somewhere, first-class saloon. I had to go and tell her! That Flaherty, God forgive him, comes to me as white as a sheet, "I think you are the proper person." God forgive him. I wished to die a hundred times. A lot of kind ladies, passengers, were chattering excitedly around Mrs. Anthony--a real parrot house. The ship's doctor went before me. He whispers right and left and then there falls a sudden hush. Yes, I wished myself dead. But Mrs. Anthony was a brick.

Here Mr. Powell fairly burst into tears. "No one could help loving Captain Anthony. I leave you to imagine what he was to her. Yet before the week was out it was she who was helping me to pull myself together."

"Is Mrs. Anthony in England now?" I asked after a while.

He wiped his eyes without any false shame. "Oh yes." He began to look for matches, and while diving for the box under the table added: "And not very far from here either. That little village up there--you know."

"No! Really! Oh I see!"

Mr. Powell smoked austerely, very detached. But I could not let him off like this. The sly beggar. So this was the secret of his passion for sailing about the river, the reason of his fondness for that creek.

"And I suppose," I said, "that you are still as 'enthusiastic' as ever. Eh? If I were you I would just mention my enthusiasm to Mrs. Anthony. Why not?"

He caught his falling pipe neatly. But if what the French call effarement was ever expressed on a human countenance it was on this occasion, testifying to his modesty, his sensibility and his innocence. He looked afraid of somebody overhearing my audacious--almost sacrilegious hint--as if there had not been a mile and a half of lonely marshland and dykes between us and the nearest human habitation. And then perhaps he remembered the soothing fact for he allowed a gleam to light up his eyes, like the reflection of some inward fire tended in the sanctuary of his heart by a devotion as pure as that of any vestal.

It flashed and went out. He smiled a bashful smile, sighed:

"Pah! Foolishness. You ought to know better," he said, more sad than annoyed. "But I forgot that you never knew Captain Anthony," he added indulgently.

I reminded him that I knew Mrs. Anthony; even before he--an old friend now--had ever set eyes on her. And as he told me that Mrs. Anthony had heard of our meetings I wondered whether she would care to see me. Mr. Powell volunteered no opinion then; but next time we lay in the creek he said, "She will be very pleased. You had better go to-day."

The afternoon was well advanced before I approached the cottage. The amenity of a fine day in its decline surrounded me with a beneficent, a calming influence; I felt it in the silence of the shady lane, in the pure air, in the blue sky. It is difficult to retain the memory of the conflicts, miseries, temptations and crimes of men's self-seeking existence when one is alone with the charming serenity of the unconscious nature. Breathing the dreamless peace around the picturesque cottage I was approaching, it seemed to me that it must reign everywhere, over all the globe of water and land and in the hearts of all the dwellers on this earth.

Flora came down to the garden gate to meet me, no longer the perversely tempting, sorrowful, wisp of white mist drifting in the complicated bad dream of existence. Neither did she look like a forsaken elf. I stammered out stupidly, "Again in the country, Miss . . . Mrs . . . " She was very good, returned the pressure of my hand, but we were slightly embarrassed. Then we laughed a little.

Then we became grave.

I am no lover of day-breaks. You know how thin, equivocal, is the light of the dawn. But she was now her true self, she was like a fine tranquil afternoon--and not so very far advanced either. A woman not much over thirty, with a dazzling complexion and a little colour, a lot of hair, a smooth brow, a fine chin, and only the eyes of the Flora of the old days, absolutely unchanged.

In the room into which she led me we found a Miss Somebody--I didn't catch the name,--an unobtrusive, even an indistinct, middle-aged person in black. A companion. All very proper. She came and went and even sat down at times in the room, but a little apart, with some sewing. By the time she had brought in a lighted lamp I had heard all the details which really matter in this story. Between me and her who was once Flora de Barral the conversation was not likely to keep strictly to the weather.

The lamp had a rosy shade; and its glow wreathed her in perpetual blushes, made her appear wonderfully young as she sat before me in a deep, high-backed arm-chair. I asked:

"Tell me what is it you said in that famous letter which so upset Mrs. Fyne, and caused little Fyne to interfere in this offensive manner?"

"It was simply crude," she said earnestly. "I was feeling reckless and I wrote recklessly. I knew she would disapprove and I wrote foolishly. It was the echo of her own stupid talk. I said that I did not love her brother but that I had no scruples whatever in marrying him."

She paused, hesitating, then with a shy half-laugh:

"I really believed I was selling myself, Mr. Marlow. And I was proud of it. What I suffered afterwards I couldn't tell you; because I only discovered my love for my poor Roderick through agonies of rage and humiliation. I came to suspect him of despising me; but I could not put it to the test because of my father. Oh! I would not have been too proud. But I had to spare poor papa's feelings. Roderick was perfect, but I felt as though I were on the rack and not allowed even to cry out. Papa's prejudice against Roderick was my greatest grief. It was distracting. It frightened me. Oh! I have been miserable! That night when my poor father died suddenly I am certain they had some sort of discussion, about me. But I did not want to hold out any longer against my own heart! I could not."

She stopped short, then impulsively:

"Truth will out, Mr. Marlow."

"Yes," I said.

She went on musingly.

"Sorrow and happiness were mingled at first like darkness and light. For months I lived in a dusk of feelings. But it was quiet. It was warm . . . "

Again she paused, then going back in her thoughts. "No! There was no harm in that letter. It was simply foolish. What did I know of life then? Nothing. But Mrs. Fyne ought to have known better. She wrote a letter to her brother, a little later. Years afterwards Roderick allowed me to glance at it. I found in it this sentence: 'For years I tried to make a friend of that girl; but I warn you once more that she has the nature of a heartless adventuress . . . ' Adventuress!" repeated Flora slowly. "So be it. I have had a fine adventure."

"It was fine, then," I said interested.

"The finest in the world! Only think! I loved and I was loved, untroubled, at peace, without remorse, without fear. All the world, all life were transformed for me. And how much I have seen! How good people were to me! Roderick was so much liked everywhere. Yes, I have known kindness and safety. The most familiar things appeared lighted up with a new light, clothed with a loveliness I had never suspected. The sea itself! . . . You are a sailor. You have lived your life on it. But do you know how beautiful it is, how strong, how charming, how friendly, how mighty . . . "

I listened amazed and touched. She was silent only a little while.

"It was too good to last. But nothing can rob me of it now . . . Don't think that I repine. I am not even sad now. Yes, I have been happy. But I remember also the time when I was unhappy beyond endurance, beyond desperation. Yes. You remember that. And later on, too. There was a time on board the Ferndale when the only moments of relief I knew were when I made Mr. Powell talk to me a little on the poop. You like him?--Don't you?"

"Excellent fellow," I said warmly. "You see him often?"

"Of course. I hardly know another soul in the world. I am alone. And he has plenty of time on his hands. His aunt died a few years ago. He's doing nothing, I believe."

"He is fond of the sea," I remarked. "He loves it."

"He seems to have given it up," she murmured.

"I wonder why?"

She remained silent. "Perhaps it is because he loves something else better," I went on. "Come, Mrs. Anthony, don't let me carry away from here the idea that you are a selfish person, hugging the memory of your past happiness, like a rich man his treasure, forgetting the poor at the gate."

I rose to go, for it was getting late. She got up in some agitation and went out with me into the fragrant darkness of the garden. She detained my hand for a moment and then in the very voice of the Flora of old days, with the exact intonation, showing the old mistrust, the old doubt of herself, the old scar of the blow received in childhood, pathetic and funny, she murmured, "Do you think it possible that he should care for me?"

"Just ask him yourself. You are brave."

"Oh, I am brave enough," she said with a sigh.

"Then do. For if you don't you will be wronging that patient man cruelly."

I departed leaving her dumb. Next day, seeing Powell making preparations to go ashore, I asked him to give my regards to Mrs. Anthony. He promised he would.

"Listen, Powell," I said. "We got to know each other by chance?"

"Oh, quite!" he admitted, adjusting his hat.

"And the science of life consists in seizing every chance that presents itself," I pursued. "Do you believe that?"

"Gospel truth," he declared innocently.

"Well, don't forget it."

"Oh, I! I don't expect now anything to present itself," he said, jumping ashore.

He didn't turn up at high water. I set my sail and just as I had cast off from the bank, round the black barn, in the dusk, two figures appeared and stood silent, indistinct.

"Is that you, Powell?" I hailed.

"And Mrs. Anthony," his voice came impressively through the silence of the great marsh. "I am not sailing to-night. I have to see Mrs. Anthony home."

"Then I must even go alone," I cried.

Flora's voice wished me "bon voyage" in a most friendly but tremulous tone.

"You shall hear from me before long," shouted Powell, suddenly, just as my boat had cleared the mouth of the creek.

"This was yesterday," added Marlow, lolling in the arm-chair lazily. "I haven't heard yet; but I expect to hear any moment . . . What on earth are you grinning at in this sarcastic manner? I am not afraid of going to church with a friend. Hang it all, for all my belief in Chance I am not exactly a pagan . . . "

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