

CHAPTER IX

MISS FREGELIUS

While Miss Fregelius was speaking, Morris had been staring at the sail, which, after drawing for a time in an indifferent fashion, had begun to flap aimlessly.

"What is the matter?" asked his companion. "Has the wind veered again?"

He nodded. "Dead from the west, now, and rising fast. I hope that your spirit of prophecy still speaks smooth things, for, upon my word, I believe we are both of us in a worse mess than ever."

"Can't we row ashore? It is only a few miles, is it?"

"We can try, but I am afraid we are in for a regular tearer. We get them sometimes on this coast after a spell of calm weather."

"Please give me an oar," she said. "I am used to rowing--of a sort."

So he let down the sail, and they began to row. For ten minutes or so they struggled against the ever-rising gale. Then Morris called to her to ship oars.

"It is no use exhausting ourselves, Miss Fregelius," he said, "for now

the tide is on the ebb, and dead against us, as well as the wind."

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

Morris glanced back to where a mile behind them the sea was beginning to foam ominously over the Sunk Rocks, here and there throwing up isolated jets of spray, like those caused by the blowing of a whale.

"I am going to try to clear them," he said, "and then run before it.

Perhaps we might make the Far Lightship five and twenty miles away. Help me to pull up the sail. So, that's enough; she can't stand too much. Now hold the sheet, and if I bid you, let go that instant. I'll steer."

A few seconds later the boat's head had come round, and she was rushing through the water at great speed, parallel with the line of the Sunk Rocks, but being momentarily driven nearer to them. The girl, Stella Fregelius, stared at the farthest point of foam which marked the end of the reef.

"You must hold her up if you want to clear it," she said quietly.

"I can't do any more in this wind," he answered. "You seem to know about boats; you will understand."

She nodded, and on they rushed, the ever-freshening gale on their beam.

"This boat sails well," said Stella, as a little water trickled over the gunwale.

Morris made no answer, his eyes were fixed upon the point of rock; only bidding his companion hold the tiller, he did something to the sail. Now they were not more than five hundred yards away.

"It will be a very near thing," she said.

"Very," he answered, "and I don't want to be officious, but I suggest that you might do well to say your prayers."

She looked at him, and bowed her head for a minute or so. Then suddenly she lifted it again and stared at the terror ahead of them with wide, unflinching eyes.

On sped the boat while more and more did tide and gale turn her prow into the reef. At the end of it a large, humpbacked rock showed now and again through the surf, like the fin of a black whale. That was the rock which they must clear if they would live. Morris took the boat-hook and laid it by his side. They were very near now. They would clear it; no, the wash sucked them in like a magnet.

"Good-bye," said Morris instinctively, but Stella answered nothing.

The wave that lifted them broke upon the rock in a cloud of spray

wherein for some few instants their boat seemed to vanish. They were against it; the boat touched, and Stella felt a long ribbon of seaweed cut her like a whip across the face. Kneeling down, Morris thrust madly with the boat-hook, and thus for an instant--just one--held her off. His arms doubled beneath the strain, and then came the back-wash.

Oh, heaven! it had swept them clear. The rock was behind, the sail drew, and swiftly they fled away from the death that had seemed certain.

Stella sighed aloud, while Morris wiped the water from his face.

"Are we clear?" she asked presently.

"Of the Sunk Rocks? Yes, we are round them. But the North Sea is in front of us, and what looks like the worst gale that has blown this autumn is rising behind."

"This is a good sea-boat, and on the open water I think perhaps that we ought to weather it," she said, trying to speak cheerfully, as Morris stowed the sail, for in that wind they wanted no canvas.

"I wish we had something to eat," she added presently; "I am so hungry."

"By good luck I can help you there," he answered. "Yesterday I was out fishing and took lunch for myself and the boatman; but the fish wouldn't bite, so we came back without eating it, and it is still in the locker.

Shift a little, please, I will get the basket."

She obeyed, and there was the food sure enough, plenty of it. A thick packet of sandwiches, and two boiled eggs, a loaf, and a large lump of cheese for the boatman, a flask of whiskey, a bottle of beer, another of water, and two of soda. They ate up the sandwiches and the eggs, Morris drinking the beer and Stella the soda water, for whiskey as yet she would not touch.

"Now," she said, "we are still provisioned for twenty-four hours with the bread and cheese, the water and the soda which is left."

"Yes," he answered, "if we don't sink or die of cold we shall not starve. I never thought that sandwiches were so good before;" and he looked hungrily at the loaf.

"You had better put it away; you may want it later," she suggested. And he put it away.

"Tell me, if you don't mind," he asked, for the food and the lightening of the strain upon his nerves had made him conversational, "what is that song which you sang upon the ship, and why did you sing it?"

She coloured a little, and smiled, a sweet smile that seemed to begin in her eyes.

"It is an old Norse chant which my mother taught me; she was a Dane, as my father is also by descent. It has come down in her family for many, many generations, and the legend is that the women of her race always sang it or repeated it while the men were fighting, and, if they had the strength, in the hour of their own death. I believe that is true, for she died whispering it herself; yes, it grew fainter and fainter until it ceased with her breath. So, when I thought that my hour had come, I sang it also, for the first time, for I tried to be brave, and wished to go as my forefathers went. It is a foolish old custom, but I like old customs. I am ashamed that you should have heard it. I thought myself alone. That is all."

"You are a very strange young lady," said Morris, staring at her.

"Strange?" she answered, laughing. "Not at all; only I wanted to show those scores of dead people that their traditions and spirit still lived on in me, their poor modern child. Think how glad they must have been to hear the old chant as they swept by in the wind just now, waiting to give me welcome."

Morris stared still harder. Was this beautiful girl mad? He knew something of the old Norse literature and myths. A fantastic vision rose up in his mind of her forebears, scores and hundreds of them gathered at some ghostly Walhalla feast, listening to the familiar paeon as it poured from her fearless heart, and waiting to rise and greet her, the last newcomer of their blood, with "Skoll, daughter, skoll!"

She watched him as though she read his thought.

"You see, they would have been pleased; it is only natural," she said; "and I have a great respect for the opinion of my ancestors."

"Then you are sure they still exist in some shape or form, and are conscious?"

She laughed again. "Of course I am sure. The world of spirits, as I think, is the real world. The rest is a nightmare; at least, it seems like a nightmare, because we don't know the beginning or the end of the dream."

"The old Egyptians thought something like that," said Morris reflectively. "They only lived to die."

"But we," she answered, "should only die to live, and that is why I try not to be afraid. I daresay, however, I mean the same as they did, only you do not seem to have put their thought quite clearly."

"You are right; I meant that for them death was but a door."

"That is better, I think," she said. "That was their thought, and that is my thought; and," she added, searching his face, "perhaps your thought also."

"Yes," he answered, "though somehow you concentrate it; I have never seen things, or, rather, this thing, quite so sharply."

"Because you have never been in a position to see them; they have not been brought home to you. Or your mind may have wanted an interpreter. Perhaps I am that interpreter--for the moment." Then she added: "Were you afraid just now? Don't tell me if you had rather not, only I should like to compare sensations. I was--more than on the ship. I admit it."

"No," he answered; "I suppose that I was too excited."

"What were you thinking of when we bumped against the rocks?" she asked again.

"Well, now that you mention it," he replied, rubbing his forehead with his left hand like a man newly awakened, "I could think of nothing but that song of yours, which you sang upon the vessel. Everything grew dark for an instant, and through the darkness I remembered the song."

"Are you married?" she asked, as though speaking to herself.

"No; I am engaged."

"Then, why----" and she stopped, confused.

Morris guessed what had been in her mind, and of a sudden felt terribly ashamed.

"Because of that witch-song of yours," he answered, with a flash of anger, "which made me forget everything."

She smiled and answered. "It wasn't the song; it was the excitement and struggle which blotted out the rest. One does not really think at all at such moments, or so I believe. I know that I didn't, not just when we bumped against the rock. But it is odd that you should believe that you remembered my song, for, according to tradition, that is just what the chant should do, and what it always did. Its ancient name means 'The Over-Lord,' because those who sang it and those who heard it were said to remember nothing else, and to fear nothing, not even Death our lord. It is the welcome that they give to death."

"What egregious nonsense!" he blurted out.

"I daresay; but then, why do you understand my nonsense so well? Tell me, if you will, of what blood are you?"

"Danish, I believe, in the beginning."

"Oh," she said, laughing, "no doubt that accounts for it. Some forefather of yours may have heard the song of the Over-Lord, perhaps from the lips of some foremother of mine. So, of course, you remembered

and understood."

"Such a thing will scarcely bear argument, will it?"

"Of course it won't. I have only been joking all the time, though I do half believe in this old song, as my ancestors did before me. I mean, that as I thought I had to die, I liked to keep up the ancient custom and sing it first. It encouraged my spirits. But where are we going?"

"To where our spirits will need no more encouragement," he answered grimly; "or, at least, I fear it may be so. Miss Fregelius, to drop jests, it is blowing very hard off land; the sea is getting up, and this is but a small boat. We are doing pretty well now, but sooner or later, I fear, and I think it right to tell you, that a wave may poop us and then----"

"There will be an end," said Stella. "Is there anything to be done? Have you any plan?"

"None, except to make the Far Lightship, as I told you; but even if we succeed, I don't know whether it will be possible to get aboard of her unless the sea moderates."

"Won't the lifeboat come out to look for you?" she asked.

He shook his head. "How could they find one tiny sail upon the great

ocean? Moreover, it will be supposed either that I have foundered or made some port along the coast. There is the worst of it. I fear that it may be telegraphed everywhere," and he sighed deeply.

"Why?" she asked. "Are you a very important person that they should bother to do that? You see," she added in explanation, "I don't even know your name or where you come from, only that you told me you worked in a shop which," she added reflectively, looking at him, "seems odd."

Even then and there Morris could not help a smile; really this young lady was very original.

"No," he answered, "I am not at all important, and I work in a shop because I am an inventor--or try to be--in the electrical line. My name is Morris Monk, and I am the son of Colonel Monk, and live at the Abbey House, Monksland. Now you know all about me."

"Oh! of course I do, Mr. Monk," she said in some confusion, "how foolish of me not to guess. You are my father's principal new parishioner, of whom Mr. Tomley gave us a full description."

"Did he indeed? What did he say?" he asked idly.

"Do you really want to know, Mr. Monk?"

"Yes, if it is amusing. Just now I shall be grateful for anything that

can divert my thoughts."

"And you will promise not to bear malice against Mr. Tomley?"

"Certainly, especially as he has gone away, and I don't expect to see him any more."

"Well, he described your father, Colonel Monk, as a handsome and distinguished elderly gentleman of very good birth, and manners, too, when he chose, who intensely disliked growing old. He said that he thought of himself more than of anybody else in the world, and next of the welfare of his family, and that if we wished to get on with him we must be careful not to offend his dignity, as then he would be quarrelsome."

"That's true enough, or most of it," answered Morris, "a good picture of my father's weak side. And what was his definition of myself?"

"He said that you were in his opinion one of the most interesting people that he had ever met; that you were a dreamer and a mystic; that you cared for few of the things which usually attract young men, and that you were in practice almost a misogynist. He added that, although heretofore you had not succeeded, he thought that you possessed real genius in certain lines, but that you had not your father's 'courtly air,' that was his term. Of course, I am only repeating, so you must not be angry."

"Well," said Morris, "I asked for candour and I have got it. Without admitting the accuracy of his definitions, I must say that I never thought that pompous old Tomley had so much observation." Then he added quickly, to change the subject, since the possible discussion of his own attributes, physical or mental, alarmed him, "Miss Fregelius, you have not told me how you came to be left aboard the ship."

"Really, Mr. Monk, I don't know. I heard a confused noise in my sleep, and when I woke up it was to find myself alone, and the saloon half full of water. I suppose that after the vessel struck, the sailors, thinking that she was going down, got off at once, taking my father, who had been injured and made insensible in some way, with them as he happened to be on deck, leaving me to my chance. You know, we were the only passengers."

"Were you not frightened when you found yourself all alone like that?"

"Yes, at first, dreadfully; then I was so distressed about my father, whom I thought dead, and angry with them for deserting me, that I forgot to be frightened, and afterwards--well, I was too proud. Besides, we must die alone, every one of us, so we may as well get accustomed to the idea."

Morris shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

"You think that I need not talk so much about our mortal end. Well, perhaps under all the circumstances, we may as well keep our thoughts on this world--while it lasts. You have not told me, Mr. Monk, how you came to be sailing about alone this morning. Did you come out to look at the wreck?"

"Do you think that I am mad?" he asked, not without indignation. "Should I make a journey at night, in a November fog, with every chance of a gale coming up, to the Sunk Rocks in this cockle-shell, and alone, merely to look at the place where, as I understood rather vaguely, a foreign tramp steamer had gone down?"

"Well, it does seem rather odd. But why else did you come? Were you fishing? Men will risk a great deal for fishing, I know, I have seen that in Norway."

"Why do you pretend not to understand, Miss Fregelius? You must know perfectly well that I came to look for you."

"Indeed," she answered candidly, "I knew nothing of the sort. How did you find out that I was still on the ship, or that the ship was still above water? And even if you knew both, why should you risk your life just on the faint chance of rescuing a girl whom you never saw?"

"I can't quite tell you; but your father in his delirium muttered some words which made me suspect the truth, and a sailor who could speak

a little bad French said that the Trondhjem was lost upon some rocks. Well, these are the only rocks about here; and as the whole story was too vague to carry to the lifeboat people I thought that I would come to look. So you see it is perfectly simple."

"So simple, Mr. Monk, that I do not understand it in the least. You must have known the risks, for you asked no one to share them--the risks that are so near and real;" and, shivering visibly, she looked at the grey combers seething past them, and the wind-torn horizon beyond. "Yet, you--you who have ties, faced all this on the chance of saving a stranger."

"Please, please," broke in Morris. "At any rate, you see, it was a happy inspiration."

"Yes, for me, perhaps--but for you! Oh, if it should end in your being taken away from the world before your time, from the world and the lady who--what then?"

Morris winced; then he said: "God's will be done. But although we may be in danger, we are not dead yet; not by a long way."

"She would hate me whose evil fortune it was to draw you to death, and in life or out of it I should never forgive myself--never! never!" and she covered her eyes with her cold, wet hand and sighed.

"Why should you grieve over what you cannot help?" asked Morris gently.

"I cannot quite explain to you," she answered; "but the thought of it seems so sad."