

## CHAPTER X

### DAWN AND THE LAND

A day, a whole day, spent upon that sullen, sunless waste of water, with the great waves bearing them onwards in one eternal, monotonous procession, till at length they grew dizzy with looking at them, and the ceaseless gale piping in their ears. Long ago they had lost sight of land; even the tall church towers built by our ancestors as beacons on this stormy coast had vanished utterly. Twice they sighted ships scudding along under their few rags of canvas, and once a steamer passed, the smoke from her funnels blowing out like long black pennons. But all of these were too far off, or too much engaged with their own affairs to see the little craft tossing hither and thither like a used-up herring basket upon the endless area of ocean.

Fortunately, from his youth Morris had been accustomed to the management of boats in all sorts of weather, the occupation of sailing alone upon the waters being one well suited to his solitary and reflective disposition. Thus it came about that they survived, when others, less skilful, might have drowned. Sometimes they ran before the seas; sometimes they got up a few square feet of sail, and, taking advantage of a veer in the wind, tried to tack, and once, when it blew its hardest, fearing lest they should be pooped, for over an hour they contrived to keep head on to the waves.

Thus, diversified by some necessary bailing, passed the short November day, long enough for them, till once more the darkness began to gather. They had still some food and drink left; indeed, had it not been for these they would have perished. Most happily, also, with the sun the wind dropped, although for hours the sea remained dangerously high. Now wet and cold were their enemies, worse than any that they had been called upon to face. Long ago the driving spray had soaked them to the skin, and there upon the sea the winter night was very chill.

While the wind, fortunately for them, by comparison a warm one, still blew from the west, and the sea remained tempestuous, they found some shelter by wrapping themselves in a corner of the sail. Towards midnight, however, it got round to the northeast, enough of it to moderate the sea considerably, and to enable them to put the boat about and go before it with a closely reefed sail. Now, indeed, they were bitterly cold, and longed even for the shelter of the wet canvas. Still Morris felt, and Stella was of the same mind, that before utter exhaustion overtook them their best chance for life lay in trying to make the shore, which was, they knew not how far away.

There, then, for hours they cowered in the stern of the boat, huddled together to protect themselves as best they might from the weather, and plunging forward beneath their little stretch of sail. Sleep they could not, for that icy breath bit into their marrow, and of this Morris was glad, since he did not dare relax his watch for an instant. So sometimes they sat silent, and sometimes by fits and starts they talked, their

lips close to each other's face, as though they were whispering to one another.

To while away the weary time, Morris told his companion about his invention, the aerophone. Then she in turn told him something of her previous life--Stella was now a woman of four and twenty. It seemed that her mother had died when she was fourteen at the rectory in Northumberland, where she was born. After that, with short intervals, she had spent five years in Denmark, whither her father came to visit her every summer. Most of this time she passed at a school in Copenhagen, going for her holidays to stay with her grandmother, who was the widow of a small landowner of noble family, and lived in an ancient, dilapidated house in some remote village. At length the grandmother died, leaving to Stella the trifle she possessed, after which, her education being completed, she returned to Northumberland to keep house for her father. Here, too, it would seem that her life was very lonely, for the place was but an unvisited coast village, and they were not rich enough to mix much with the few county families who lived anywhere within reach.

"Have you no brothers or sisters?" asked Morris.

Even then, numb as was her flesh with cold, he felt her wince at the question.

"No, no," she answered, "none now--at least, none here. I have--I mean

I had--a sister, my twin, but she died when we were seventeen. This was the most dreadful thing that ever happened to me, the thing which made me what I am."

"I don't quite understand. What are you, then?"

"Oh, something very unsatisfactory, I am afraid, quite different from other people. What Mr. Tomley said you were, Mr. Monk, a mystic and a dreamer of dreams; a lover of the dead; one who dwells in the past, and--in the future."

Morris did not pursue the subject; even under their strange circumstances, favourable as they were to intimacy and confidences, it seemed impertinent to him to pry into the mysteries of his companion's life. Only he asked, at hazard almost:

"How did you spend your time up there in Northumberland?"

"In drawing a little, in collecting eggs, moths, and flowers a great deal; in practising with my violin playing and singing; and during the long winters in making translations in my spare time of Norse sagas, which no one will publish."

"I should like to read them; I am fond of the sagas," he said, and after this, under pressure of their physical misery, the conversation died away.

Hour succeeded to hour, and the weather moderated so much that now they were in little danger of being swamped. This, indeed, was fortunate, since in the event of a squall or other emergency, in their numbed condition it was doubtful whether they could have found enough strength to do what might be necessary to save themselves. They drank what remained of the whiskey, which put life into their veins for a while, but soon its effects passed off, leaving them, if possible, more frozen than before.

"What is the time?" asked Stella, after a long silence.

"It should be daybreak in about two hours," he said, in a voice that attempted cheerfulness.

Then a squall of sleet burst upon them, and after this new misery a torpor overcame Stella; at least, her shiverings grew less violent, and her head sank upon his shoulder. Morris put one arm round her waist to save her from slipping into the water at the bottom of the boat, making shift to steer with the other. Thus, for a while they ploughed forward--whither he knew not, across the inky sea, for there was no moon, and the stars were hidden, driven on slowly by the biting breath of the winter wind.

Presently she awoke, lifted her head, and spoke, saying:

"We can't last much longer in this cold and wet. You are not afraid, are you?"

"No, not exactly afraid, only sorry; it is hard to go with so much to be done, and--to leave behind."

"You shouldn't think like that," she answered, "for what we leave must follow. She will suffer, but soon she will be with you again, where everything is understood. Only you ought to have died with her, and not with me, a stranger."

"Fate settles these things," he muttered, "and if it comes to that, maybe God will give her strength. But the dawn is near, and by it we may see land."

"Yes, yes,"--now her voice had sunk to a whisper,--"the dawn is always near, and by it we shall see land."

Then again Stella's head sank upon his shoulder, and she slept heavily; nor, although he knew that such slumbers are dangerous, did he think it worth while to disturb her.

The invisible seas hissed past; the sharp wind bit his bones, and over him, too, that fatal slumber began to creep. But, although he seldom exercised it, Morris was a man of strong will, and while any strength was left he refused to give way. Would this dreadful darkness never end?

For the fiftieth time he glanced back over his shoulder, and now, he was sure of it, the east grew ashen. He waited awhile, for the November dawn is slow in breaking, then looked again. Heaven be thanked! the cold wind had driven away the clouds, and there, upon the edge of the horizon, peeped up the fiery circle of the sun, throwing long rays of sickly yellow across the grey, troubled surface of the waters. In front of him lay a dense bank of fog, which, from its character, as Morris knew well, must emanate from the reeking face of earth. They were near shore, it could not be doubted; still, he did not wake his companion. Perhaps he might be in error, and sleep, even a death-sleep, is better than the cheatings of disappointed hope.

What was that dim object in front of him? Surely it must be the ruin a mile or so to the north of Monksland, that was known as the Death Church? Once a village stood here, but the sea had taken most of it; indeed, all that remained to-day was this old, deserted fane, which, having been built upon a breast of rising ground, still remained, awaiting its destruction by the slow sap of the advancing ocean. Even now, at times of very high tide, the sea closed in behind, cutting the fabric off from the mainland, where it looked like a forsaken lighthouse rather than the tower and chancel of a church. But there, not much more than a mile away, yes, there it was, and Morris felt proud to think how straight he had steered homewards through that stormy darkness.

The sea was still wild and high, but he was familiar with every inch of the coast, and knew well that there was a spot to the south of the Dead

Church, just where the last rood of graveyard met the sand, upon which he could beach the boat safely even in worse weather. For this nook Morris headed with a new energy; the fires of life and hope burnt up in him, giving him back his strength and judgment.

At last they were opposite to the place, and, watching his chance, he put the helm down and ran in upon the crest of a wave, till the boat grounded in the soft sand, and began to wallow there like a dying thing. Fearing lest the back-wash should suck them off into the surf again, he rolled himself into the water, for jump he could not; indeed, it was as much as he could do to stand. With a last effort of his strength he seized Stella in his arms and struggled with her to the sandy shore, where he sank down exhausted. Then she woke. "Oh, I dreamed, I dreamed!" she said, staring round her wildly.

"What?" he asked.

"That it was all over; and afterwards, that I----" and she broke off suddenly, adding: "But it was all a dream, for we are safe on shore, are we not?"

"Yes, thank Heaven!" said Morris. "Sit still, and I will make the boat secure. She has served us a good turn, and I do not want to lose her after all."

She nodded, and wading into the water, with numbed hands he managed to



lift the little anchor and carry it ashore in his arms.

"There," he said, "the tide is ebbing, and she'll hold fast enough until I can send to fetch her; or, if not, it can't be helped. Come on, Miss Fregelius, before you grow too stiff to walk;" and, bending down, he helped her to her feet.

Their road ran past the nave of the church, which was ruined and unroofed. At some time during the last two generations, however, although the parishioners saw that it was useless to go to the cost of repairing the nave, they had bricked in the chancel, and to within the last twenty years continued to use it as a place of worship. Indeed, the old oak door taken from the porch still swung on rusty hinges in the partition wall of red brick. Stella looked up and saw it.

"I want to look in there," she said.

"Wouldn't it do another time?" The moment did not strike Morris as appropriate for the examination of ruined churches.

"No; if you don't mind I should like to look now, while I remember, just for one instant."

So he shrugged his shoulders, and they limped forward up the roofless nave and through the door. She stared at the plain stone altar, at the eastern window, of which part was filled with ancient coloured glass

and part with cheap glazed panes; at the oak choir benches, mouldy and broken; at the few wall-slabs and decaying monuments, and at the roof still strong and massive.

"I dreamed of a place very like this," she said, nodding her head. "I thought that I was standing in such a spot in a fearful gale, and that the sea got under the foundations and washed the dead out of their graves."

"Really, Miss Fregelius," he said, with some irritation, for the surroundings of the scene and his companion's talk were uncanny, "do you think this an occasion to explore ruins and relate nightmares?" Then he added, "I beg your pardon, but I think that the cold and wet have affected your nerves; for my part, I have none left."

"Perhaps; at least forgive me, I did so want to look," she answered humbly as, arm-in-arm, for she needed support, they passed from the altar to the door.

A grotesque imagination entered the numbed mind of Morris. Their slow and miserable march turned itself to a vision of a bridal procession from the altar. Wet, dishevelled, half-frozen, they two were the bride-groom and the bride, and the bride was a seer of visions, and the bridegroom was a dreamer of dreams. Yes, and they came up together out of the bitter sea and the darkness, and they journeyed together to a vault of the dead----

Thank Heaven! they were out of the place, and above was the sun shining, and, to the right and left, the grey ocean and the purple plough-lands, cold-looking, suggesting dangers and labour, but wholesome all of them, and good to the eye of man. Only why did this woman see visions, and why did he dream dreams? And what was the meaning of their strange meeting upon the sea? And what----

"Where are we going?" asked Stella after a while and very faintly.

"Home; to the Abbey, I mean, where your father lies. Now it is not much more than a mile away."

She sighed; her strength was failing her.

"You had better try to walk, it will warm you," he urged, and she struggled on.

It was a miserable journey, but they reached the house at length, passing first through a street of the village in which no one seemed to be awake. A wretched-looking couple, they stumbled up the steps into the porch, where Morris rang the bell, for the door was locked. The time seemed an age, but at last steps were heard, the door was unbarred, and there appeared a vision of the lad Thomas, yawning, and clad in a nightshirt and a pair of trousers, with braces attached which dangled to the floor.

"Oh, Lord!" he said when he saw them, and his jaw dropped.

"Get out of the way, you young idiot," said Morris, "and call the cook."

It was half-past seven in the evening, that is, dinner time, and Morris stood in the study waiting for Stella, who had announced through the housemaid that she was coming down.

After telling the servants to send for the doctor and attend to his companion, who had insisted upon being led straight to her father's room, Morris's first act that morning on reaching home was to take a bath as hot as he could bear. Then he drank several cups of coffee with brandy in it, and as the office would soon be open, wrote a telegram to Mary, which ran thus:

"If you hear that I have been drowned, don't believe it. Have arrived safe home after a night at sea."

This done, for he guessed that all sorts of rumours would be abroad, he inquired after Mr. Fregelius and Stella. Having learned that they were both going on well and sent off his telegram, Morris went to bed and

slept for ten hours.

Morris looked round the comfortable sitting-room with its recessed Tudor windows, its tall bookcases and open hearth, where burned a bright fire of old ship's timbers supported on steel dogs, and thought to himself that he was fortunate to be there. Then the door opened, he heard the housemaid's voice say, "This way please, Miss," and Stella came in. She wore a plain white dress that seemed to fit her very well, though where she got it from he never discovered, and her luxuriant hair was twisted up into a simple knot. On the bosom of her dress was fixed a spray of brilliant ampelopsis leaves; it was her only ornament, but none could have been more striking. For the rest, although she limped and still looked dark and weary about the eyes, to all appearances she was not much the worse for their terrible adventure.

Morris glanced at her. Could this dignified and lovely young lady be that red-cloaked, loose-haired Valkyrie whom he had seen singing at daybreak upon the prow of the sinking ship, or the piteous bedraggled person whom he had supported from the altar in the Dead Church?

She guessed his thought--from the beginning Stella had this curious power of discovering his mind--and said with a smile:

"Fine feathers make fine birds, and even Cleopatra would have looked

dreadful after a November night in an open boat."

"Have you recovered?" he asked.

"Yes, Mr. Monk; that is, I don't think I am going to have inflammation of the lungs or anything horrid of the sort. The remedies and that walk stopped it. But my feet are peeling from being soaked so long in salt water, and my hands are not much better. See," and she held them towards him.

Then dinner was announced, and for the second time that day they walked arm-in-arm.

"It seems a little strange, doesn't it?" suggested Morris as he surveyed the great refectory in which they two, seated at the central table, looked so lone and small.

"Yes," she answered; "but so it should, anything quite usual would have been out of place to-day."

Then he asked her how her father was going on, and heard what he had already learned from the doctor, that he was doing as well as could be expected.

"By the way, Mr. Monk," she added; "if you can spare a few minutes after dinner, and are not too tired, he would so much like to see you."

"Of course," answered Morris a little nervously, for he scented a display of fervent gratitude.

After this they dropped into desultory conversation, curiously different from the intimate talk which passed between them in the boat. Then they had been in danger, and at times in the very shadow of Death; a condition that favours confidences since those who stand beneath his wings no longer care to hide their hearts. The reserves which so largely direct our lives are lifted, their necessity is past, and in the face of the last act of Nature, Nature asserts herself. Who cares to continue to play a part when the audience has dispersed, the curtain is falling, and the pay-box has put up its shutters? Now, very unexpectedly these two were on the stage again, and each assumed the allotted role.

Stella admired the room; whereon Morris set to work to explain its characteristics, to find, to his astonishment, that Miss Fregelius had more knowledge of architecture than he could boast. He pointed out certain details, alleging them to be Elizabethan work, to which age they had been credited for generations, whereon she suggested and, indeed, proved, that some of them dated from the earlier years of Henry VIII., and that some were late Jacobean. While Morris was wondering how he could combat this revolutionary opinion, the servant brought in a telegram. It was from Mary, at Beaulieu, and ran:

"Had not heard that you were drowned, but am deeply thankful that you are saved. Why did you pass a night at sea in this weather? Is it a riddle? Grieved to say my father not so well. Best love, and please keep on shore. MARY."

At first Morris was angry with this rather flippant message; then he laughed. As he had already discovered, in fact, his anxieties had been quite groundless. The page-boy, Thomas, it appeared, when questioned, had given the inquirers to understand that his master had gone out to fish, taking his breakfast with him. Later, on his non-appearance, he amended this statement, suggesting out of the depths of a fertile imagination, that he had sailed down to Northwold, where he meant to pass the night. Therefore, although the cook, a far-seeing woman who knew her Thomas and hated him, had experienced pangs of doubt, nobody else troubled the least, and even the small community of Monksland remained profoundly undisturbed as to the fate of one of its principal inhabitants.

So little is an unsympathetic world concerned in our greatest and most particular adventures! A birth, a marriage, an inquest, a scandal--these move it superficially, for the rest it has no enthusiasm to spare. This cold neglect of events which had seemed to him so important reacted upon Morris, who, now that he had got over his chill and fatigue, saw them in their proper proportions. A little adventure in an open boat at sea which had ended without any mishap, was not remarkable, and might even



be made to appear ridiculous. So the less said about it, especially to Mary, whose wit he feared, the better.

When dinner was finished Stella left the room, passing down its shadowed recesses with a peculiar grace of which even her limp could not rob her. Ten minutes later, while Morris sat sipping a glass of claret, the nurse came down to tell him that Mr. Fregelius would like to see him if he were disengaged. Reflecting that he might as well get the interview over, Morris followed her at once to the Abbot's chamber, where the sick man lay.

Except for a single lamp near the bed, the place was unlighted, but by the fire, its glow falling on her white-draped form and pale, uncommon face, sat Stella. As he entered she rose, and, coming forward, accompanied him to the bedside, saying, in an earnest voice:

"Father, here is our host, Mr. Monk, the gentleman who saved my life at the risk of his own."

The patient raised his bandaged head and stretched out a long thin hand; he could stir nothing else, for his right thigh was in splints beneath a coffer-like erection designed to keep the pressure of the blankets from his injured limb.

"Sir, I thank you," he said in a dry, staccato voice; "all the humanity that is lacking from the hearts of those rude wretches, the crew of the

Trondhjem, must have found its home in you."

Morris looked at the dark, quiet eyes that seemed to express much which the thin and impassive face refused to reveal; at the grey pointed beard and the yellowish skin of the outstretched arm. Here before him, he felt, lay a man whose personality it was not easy to define, one who might be foolish, or might be able, but of whose character the leading note was reticence, inherent or acquired. Then he took the hand, and said simply:

"Pray, say no more about it. I acted on an impulse and some wandering words of yours, with results for which I could not hope. There is nothing to thank me for."

"Then, sir, I thank God, who inspired you with that impulse, and may every blessing reward your bravery."

Stella looked up as though to speak, but changed her mind and returned to her seat by the fire.

"What is there to reward?" said Morris impatiently; "that your daughter is still alive is my reward. How are you to-night, Mr. Fregelius?"