

CHAPTER II

A MESSAGE TO THE ADMIRALTY

The following night, Captain Macpherson in his cabin, rolled up carefully the chart he had been scanning, deposited it in a copper cylinder and drew from his pocket a small pipe. As he filled and lighted it, exhaling the smoke of the black weed and leaning more comfortably back in his low, swinging chair, the expression of his iron countenance exhibited, in the slightest degree, that solace which comes from the nicotine. Occasionally, however, he would hold his pipe away from his mouth, to pause and listen. The weather had turned nasty again; above, the wind sounded loudly. Now it descended on the ship like a fierce-scolding virago, then rushed on with wild, shrieking dissonance. The Lord Nelson minded not, but continued steadily on her way.

Her captain emptied his pipe, glanced toward his bunk and started to take off his coat. Human nature has its limit; he had passed many sleepless nights and now felt entitled to a brief respite, especially as the chart showed neither reef nor rock anywhere in the neighborhood. But he had only one arm out of the garment when something happened that caused him to change his mind; abruptly hurled to the other end of the cabin, he found himself lying, half-stunned, on the floor. A hubbub of noises filled the air, snappings, crashings, the rending of woodwork.

Captain Macpherson staggered to his feet, and, swaying like a drunken man, stood a few moments holding his hand to his brow. Then his fist clenched and he shook it at the cylinder that had fallen from the table.

"Ye viperous, lying thing!" he cried, and ran from the cabin to the deck.

A single glance told all: two of the ship's giant spars had gone by the board; entangled in her own wreckage, the vessel thumped and pounded with ominous violence against some sunken reef. The full scope of the plight of the once noble ship was plainly made manifest. Though thick streams of scud sped across the sky, the southern moon at the moment looked down between two dark rivulets, and cast its silvery glow like a lime-light, over the spectacle. Captain Macpherson groaned.

"Mr. O'Brien!" he called loudly.

"Aye, aye, sir."

"How long do you give her?"

"Half an hour, sir."

The master shook his head. "She'll nae last that long." And holding to a stanchion, he seemed like a man in a dream.

"Any orders, sir?" asked the chief mate.

Captain Macpherson recovered himself; his tone became once more quick and incisive. "Ye're right; I'm gone daffy. We'll get this business over in a decorous and decent manner. And, Mr. O'Brien--lest I have nae time to speak of it later--should ye get ashore, and ever find yourself in the neighborhood o' Piccadilly, be so gude as to drop into the admiralty office and say Captain Macpherson sends his compliments, and--to the diel with their charts!"

"I'll not forget, sir!" A number of orders followed.

As the chief mate disappeared to execute the commands he had received, the harsh noises of the breaking ship, the seething of the sea about her, the flapping of canvas, like helpless broken wings, was supplemented by a babel of new and terrifying sounds, the screaming and cursing of the convicts below, their blasphemous shrieking to be let out! To this turmoil and uproar were added the frantic appeals and inquiries of the passengers who, more or less dressed, had hurried to the deck and who were now speaking to the master of the ill-starred vessel. He answered them briefly: what could be done, would be done.

"It's a question of the boats, I suppose?" Sir Charles, one of the calmest of the ship's cabin party, asked quickly.

"In ten minutes they'll be ready for the launching with nae lack of

water and provision. Get plenty of wraps and greatcoats. It'll be a bit disagreeable, nae doubt, out yon in the wee craft!"

"Wee craft!" The voice of the governor's lady--she was clinging to her husband's arm--rose shrilly. "You surely are not going to send us out there in one of these miserable cockleshells?"

"M'love!" Sir Charles expostulated mildly drawing her closer as he spoke, "it's the only chance, and--" Then to the captain half-apologetically--"She'll meet it with me, as she has met danger before, in the bush, like a true English-woman! But what," indicating the convicts' deck, "what about them? It seems inhuman, yet if they were let out--"

"They must not be!" Lord Ronsdale's metallic voice interposed quickly. "I call upon you, Captain Macpherson, in the name of the women and children--"

"I've thought about that," said Captain Macpherson shortly, and turned to his task.

The boat was soon overhauled, the lockers and water-butt were filled, and the passengers, one by one, set into it. On the whole, at that moment for leaving the ship, their conduct left little room for criticism; one or two of the women who had appeared on the verge of hysterics now restrained audible manifestation of emotion. Sir Charles

proved a monument of helpfulness; assisted in placing the women here and there, and extended a helpful hand to Lord Ronsdale, who had become somewhat dazed and inert. Total darkness added to the difficulties of their task, for the moon which until then had shone with much luster now went behind a curtain of cloud. But Captain Macpherson coolly called out by name the men to handle the life-boat, and, with no evidence of disorder, they crowded in, none too soon! As the boat with its human freight hung in readiness for the lowering, the remaining spar of the Lord Nelson fell with a mighty crash.

"Remember the name of your ship, lads!" Captain Macpherson's voice seemed to anticipate a movement of panic among the seamen on deck; if there had been any intention to "rush" the already well-loaded boat, it was stayed. "Mr. Gillett, I'll be troubling ye for the keys to the convicts' deck. Mr. O'Brien, get in and take charge. Steer southeast with a bit of rag; it's your best chance to get picked up. Hold near the ship until the other boat with the crew can come alongside. It's as well to keep company. Are the lines clear? Let her go."

The boat was lowered and at the right moment touched a receding wave. Captain Macpherson waited until the chief officer called out that they were safely away, then gave his last order:

"And now, lads, ye can be lookin' to yourselves!"

They did; the master turned and with some difficulty made his way toward

the convicts' cells. Her decks soon deserted, the ship, like a living, writhing thing, seemed to struggle and groan, as if every timber were crying out in vain protest against the tragic consummation. But only an irrevocable voice answered, that of the mocking sea beating harder, the cruel sea, spotted here and there with black patches between which splashes of light revealed the wild waves throwing high their curd in the cold, argent glimmer. One of these illuminating dashes, as if in a spirit of irony, moved toward the ship, almost enveloped it and showed suddenly a number of mad, leaping human figures issuing with horrible cries from one of the hatches.

"The life rafts! Old man said the boats were gone."

"Rafts good enough for the likes of us, eh? Well, he's paid for keeping us down so long. Blime if I don't think Slick Sam killed him."

"The rafts!" Shrieking, calling down maledictions on the captain, they ran about, when suddenly an angry black wave swept the deck; a few went overboard with the hissing crest; several were hurled against the bulwarks, limp, lifeless things, swirled back and forth. One of their number, a big fellow of unusual strength, was shot toward the open companionway leading to the main cabin; as he plunged down, he clutched at and caught the railing. Considerably shaken, dripping with water, he pulled himself together, and, raising a face, sodden and fierce, like a beast brought to bay, he looked around him. The light of one or two swinging lamps that had not yet been shattered revealed dimly the

surroundings, the dark leather upholstering, the little tables.

Uncertainly the convict paused; then suddenly his eyes brightened; the lustful anticipation of the drunkard who had long been denied shone from his gaze as it rested on a sideboard across the cabin.

"Bottles!" he said, steadying himself. "Rum! Well, I guess there ain't much chance for any of us, and a man's a fool to go to hell thirsty!" He had started toward the sideboard with its bright gleaming ware and its divers and sundry receptacles of spirits and liqueurs, when suddenly his look changed, and his jaw fell.

"What the--" A flow of choice Billingsgate, mingled with the sailor's equally eloquent Golden-Gate, completed the sentence. The convict stood stock-still.

From the door of a state-room at the far end of the cabin a figure appeared. A great shawl draped the small form; the golden hair, a flurry of tangles, floated around it. Clinging to a brass rail that ran along the side of the cabin, she approached, her eyes all alight as if well satisfied with something. Amazed beyond power of action, the man continued to gaze at her, at the tiny feet in the little pink slippers, at something she carried. "By the great horn spoon, the Christmas doll!" he muttered hoarsely. Then forgetting his purpose, the bottles, he lurched quickly toward her.

"Wat you doin' here?" he demanded.

"I slipped out," said the child, holding the rail tighter, as perforce she paused to answer. "I thought it would take only a moment."

"Slipped out?" he repeated.

"Of the life-boat, I mean. It was dark and they didn't see me. I just happened to think, and I had to do it. If I'd told them, they mightn't have let me. It would have been very wicked if I'd gone away and forgotten--don't you think so? And now I'm going back! Only I am afraid I've been longer than I thought I would be. The door of my state-room seemed to stick, and I was a few minutes getting it open."

Beneath disheveled masses of thick dark hair, the brutish face continued to study the fairylike one; for the instant words seemed to fail him.

"Do ye mean," he observed, "you come back here for that measly dicky-bird?"

"It isn't 'measly' and it isn't a 'dicky-bird!'" she answered indignantly. "And I'll thank you not to call it that. It's a love-bird, and its name is Dearie!"

"Dearie! Ho! Ho!" The ship reeled at a dangerous angle, but the convict appeared not to notice; his voice rose in harsh, irresistible rough merriment. "Dearie! And she thanks me not to call it names! It! No bigger'n my thumb! Ho! Ho!" His laughter, strange at such a moment,

died abruptly. "Do you know what you've gone and done on account of what's in that cage?" he demanded almost fiercely. "You've got left!"

"Left?" said she blankly, shrinking from him a little. "You don't mean--oh, I thought I would be only a minute! They haven't really gone, and--"

The great fingers closed on her arm. "They've gone and the crew's gone! Both boats are gone!"

"Oh!" The big blue eyes widened on him; an inkling of her plight seemed to come over her; her lips trembled, but she held herself bravely. "You mean--we must drown?"

The thunder of seas breaking on the deck answered; a cascade of water dashed down the companionway and swept round them. The man bent toward the child. "Look a' that! Now ain't ye sorry ye come back?"

"I couldn't leave it to drown!" passionately--"couldn't!--couldn't!"

"Blow me, she's game!" With difficulty he maintained his equilibrium.

"See here: maybe there's a chance, if any of them's left to help with the raft. But we've got to git out o' this!"

He passed his hand through her arm, awaited a favorable moment, and then, making a dash for the stairs, drew her, as best he might, to the

deck. At the head of the companionway, the wind smote them fiercely with sheets of foam, but his strength stood him in good stead, and bracing himself hard, the man managed to maintain his stand; holding the child close to him, he sheltered her somewhat from the full force of the storm. As he cast his glance over the deck, an oath burst from his lips; the convicts had succeeded in launching one of the rafts and leaving the ship by means of it, or else had been carried away by the seas. Of living man, he caught no sight; only a single one of the dead yet remained, sliding about on the slippery planks with the movement of the ship; now to leeward, now rushing in a contrary direction, as if some grotesque spirit of life yet animated the dark, shapeless form.

From wave-washed decks the man's glance turned to the sea; suddenly he started; his eyes straining, he stared hard. "Maybe they've missed you. One of the ship's boats seems headin' this way!"

Her gaze followed his; at intervals through driving spray a small craft could be discerned, not far distant, now riding high on a crest, now vanishing in a black furrow.

"Are they coming back to save us?" asked the child.

The convict did not answer. Could the boat make the ship, could it hope to, in that sea? It was easier getting away than getting back. Besides, the opportunity for a desperate, heroic attempt to come alongside was not to be given her, for scarcely had they caught sight of her, when the

stern of the _Lord Nelson_, now filled with water from the inflow at the bow, began to settle more rapidly. Then came a frightful wrenching and the vessel seemed to break in two.

"Put yer arms round my neck," said the man, stooping.

She put one of them around; with the other held up the cage. He opened the door of the wickerwork prison and a tiny thing flew out. Then he straightened. Both arms were around him now.

"Fraid?" he whispered hoarsely.

The child shook her head.

An instant he waited, then launched himself forward. Buffeted hither and thither, he made a fierce fight for the rail, reached it, and leaped far out into the seething waters.

* * * * *