

CHAPTER XIX

Who Goes There?

Jarl's oar showed sixteen notches on the loom, when one evening, as the expanded sun touched the horizon's rim, a ship's uppermost spars were observed, traced like a spider's web against its crimson disk. It looked like a far-off craft on fire.

In bright weather at sea, a sail, invisible in the full flood of noon, becomes perceptible toward sunset. It is the reverse in the morning. In sight at gray dawn, the distant vessel, though in reality approaching, recedes from view, as the sun rises higher and higher. This holds true, till its vicinity makes it readily fall within the ordinary scope of vision. And thus, too, here and there, with other distant things: the more light you throw on them, the more you obscure. Some revelations show best in a twilight.

The sight of the stranger not a little surprised us. But brightening up, as if the encounter were welcome, Jarl looked happy and expectant. He quickly changed his demeanor, however, upon perceiving that I was bent upon shunning a meeting.

Instantly our sails were struck; and calling upon Jarl, who was somewhat backward to obey, I shipped the oars; and, both rowing, we stood away obliquely from our former course.

I divined that the vessel was a whaler; and hence, that by help of the glass, with which her look-outs must be momentarily sweeping the horizon, they might possibly have descried us; especially, as we were due east from the ship; a direction, which at sunset is the one most favorable for perceiving a far-off object at sea.

Furthermore, our canvas was snow-white and conspicuous. To be sure, we could not be certain what kind of a vessel it was; but whatever it might be, I, for one, had no mind to risk an encounter; for it was quite plain, that if the stranger came within hailing distance, there would be no resource but to link our fortunes with hers; whereas I desired to pursue none but the Chamois'. As for the Skyeman, he kept looking wistfully over his shoulder; doubtless, praying Heaven, that we might not escape what I sought to avoid.

Now, upon a closer scrutiny, being pretty well convinced that the stranger, after all, was steering a nearly westerly course--right away from us--we reset our sail; and as night fell, my Viking's entreaties, seconded by my own curiosity, induced me to resume our original course; and so follow after the vessel, with a view of obtaining a nearer glimpse, without danger of detection. So, boldly we steered for the sail.

But not gaining much upon her, spite of the lightness of the breeze (a circumstance in our favor: the chase being a ship, and we but a boat), at my comrade's instigation, we added oars to sails, readily

guiding our way by the former, though the helm was left to itself.

As we came nearer, it was plain that the vessel was no whaler; but a small, two-masted craft; in short, a brigantine. Her sails were in a state of unaccountable disarray; .only the foresail, mainsail, and jib being set. The first was much tattered; and the jib was hoisted but half way up the stay, where it idly flapped, the breeze coming from over the taffrail. She continually yawed in her course; now almost presenting her broadside, then showing her stern.

Striking our sails once more, we lay on our oars, and watched her in the starlight. Still she swung from side to side, and still sailed on.

Not a little terrified at the sight, superstitious Jarl more than insinuated that the craft must be a gold-huntress, haunted. But I told him, that if such were the case, we must board her, come gold or goblins. In reality, however, I began to think that she must have been abandoned by her crew; or else, that from sickness, those on board were incapable of managing her.

After a long and anxious reconnoiter, we came still nearer, using our oars, but very reluctantly on Jarl's part; who, while rowing, kept his eyes over his shoulder, as if about to beach the little Chamois on the back of a whale as of yore. Indeed, he seemed full as impatient to quit the vicinity of the vessel, as before he had been anxiously courting it.

Now, as the silent brigantine again swung round her broadside, I hailed her loudly. No return. Again. But all was silent. With a few vigorous strokes, we closed with her, giving yet another unanswered hail; when, laying the Chamois right alongside, I clutched at the main-chains. Instantly we felt her dragging us along. Securing our craft by its painter, I sprang over the rail, followed by Jarl, who had snatched his harpoon, his favorite arms. Long used with that weapon to overcome the monsters of the deep, he doubted not it would prove equally serviceable in any other encounter.

The deck was a complete litter. Tossed about were pearl oyster shells, husks of cocoa-nuts, empty casks, and cases. The deserted tiller was lashed; which accounted for the vessel's yawing. But we could not conceive, how going large before the wind; the craft could, for any considerable time, at least, have guided herself without the help of a hand. Still, the breeze was light and steady.

Now, seeing the helm thus lashed, I could not but distrust the silence that prevailed. It conjured up the idea of miscreants concealed below, and meditating treachery; unscrupulous mutineers--Lascars, or Manilla-men; who, having murdered the Europeans of the crew, might not be willing to let strangers depart unmolested. Or yet worse, the entire ship's company might have been swept away by a fever, its infection still lurking in the poisoned hull. And though the first conceit, as the last, was a mere surmise, it was

nevertheless deemed prudent to secure the hatches, which for the present we accordingly barred down with the oars of our boat. This done, we went about the deck in search of water. And finding some in a clumsy cask, drank long and freely, and to our thirsty souls' content.

The wind now freshening, and the rent sails like to blow from the yards, we brought the brigantine to the wind, and brailed up the canvas. This left us at liberty to examine the craft, though, unfortunately, the night was growing hazy.

All this while our boat was still towing alongside; and I was about to drop it astern, when Jarl, ever cautious, declared it safer where it was; since, if there were people on board, they would most likely be down in the cabin, from the dead-lights of which, mischief might be done to the Chamois.

It was then, that my comrade observed, that the brigantine had no boats, a circumstance most unusual in any sort of a vessel at sea. But marking this, I was exceedingly gratified. It seemed to indicate, as I had opined, that from some cause or other, she must have been abandoned of her crew. And in a good measure this dispelled my fears of foul play, and the apprehension of contagion. Encouraged by these reflections, I now resolved to descend, and explore the cabin, though sorely against Jarl's counsel. To be sure, as he earnestly said, this step might have been deferred till daylight; but it seemed too

wearisome to wait. So bethinking me of our tinder-box and candles, I sent him into the boat for them. Presently, two candles were lit; one of which the Skyeman tied up and down the barbed end of his harpoon; so that upon going below, the keen steel might not be far off, should the light be blown out by a dastard.

Unfastening the cabin scuttle, we stepped downward into the smallest and murkiest den in the world. The altar-like transom, surmounted by the closed dead-lights in the stem, together with the dim little skylight overhead, and the somber aspect of every thing around, gave the place the air of some subterranean oratory, say a Prayer Room of Peter the Hermit. But coils of rigging, bolts of canvas, articles of clothing, and disorderly heaps of rubbish, harmonized not with this impression. Two doors, one on each side, led into wee little state-rooms, the berths of which also were littered. Among other things, was a large box, sheathed with iron and stoutly clamped, containing a keg partly filled with powder, the half of an old cutlass, a pouch of bullets, and a case for a sextant--a brass plate on the lid, with the maker's name. London. The broken blade of the cutlass was very rusty and stained; and the iron hilt bent in. It looked so tragical that I thrust it out of sight.

Removing a small trap-door, opening into the space beneath, called the "run," we lighted upon sundry cutlasses and muskets, lying together at sixes and sevens, as if pitched down in a hurry.

Casting round a hasty glance, and satisfying ourselves, that through the bulkhead of the cabin, there was no passage to the forward part of the hold, we caught up the muskets and cutlasses, the powder keg and the pouch of bullets, and bundling them on deck, prepared to visit the other end of the vessel. Previous to so doing, however, I loaded a musket, and belted a cutlass to my side. But my Viking preferred his harpoon.

In the forecastle reigned similar confusion. But there was a snug little lair, cleared away in one corner, and furnished with a grass mat and bolster, like those used among the Islanders of these seas. This little lair looked to us as if some leopard had crouched there. And as it turned out, we were not far from right. Forming one side of this retreat, was a sailor's chest, stoutly secured by a lock, and monstrous heavy withal. Regardless of Jarl's entreaties, I managed to burst the lid; thereby revealing a motley assemblage of millinery, and outlandish knick-knacks of all sorts; together with sundry rude Calico contrivances, which though of unaccountable cut, nevertheless possessed a certain petticoatish air, and latitude of skirt, betokening them the habiliments of some feminine creature; most probably of the human species.

In this strong box, also, was a canvas bag, jingling with rusty old bell-buttons, gangrened copper bolts, and sheathing nails; damp, greenish Carolus dollars (true coin all), besides divers iron screws, and battered, chisels, and belaying-pins. Sounded on the chest lid,

the dollars rang clear as convent bells. These were put aside by Jarl the sight of substantial dollars doing away, for the nonce, with his superstitious Misgivings. True to his kingship, he loved true coin; though abroad on the sea, and no land but dollarless dominions ground, all this silver was worthless as charcoal or diamonds. Nearly one and the same thing, say the chemists; but tell that to the marines, say the illiterate Jews and the jewelers. Go, buy a house, or a ship, if you can, with your charcoal! Yea, all the woods in Canada charred down to cinders would not be worth the one famed Brazilian diamond, though no bigger than the egg of a carrier pigeon. Ah! but these chemists are liars, and Sir Humphrey Davy a cheat. Many's the poor devil they've deluded into the charcoal business, who otherwise might have made his fortune with a mattock.

Groping again into the chest, we brought to light a queer little hair trunk, very bald and rickety. At every corner was a mighty clamp, the weight of which had no doubt debilitated the box. It was jealously secured with a padlock, almost as big as itself; so that it was almost a question, which was meant to be security to the other. Prying at it hard, we at length effected an entrance; but saw no golden moidores, no ruddy doubloons; nothing under heaven but three pewter mugs, such as are used in a ship's cabin, several brass screws, and brass plates, which must have belonged to a quadrant; together with a famous lot of glass beads, and brass rings; while, pasted on the inside of the cover, was a little colored print, representing the harlots, the shameless hussies, having a fine time

with the Prodigal Son.

It should have been mentioned ere now, that while we were busy in the fore-castle, we were several times startled by strange sounds aloft.

And just after, crashing into the little hair trunk, down came a great top-block, right through the scuttle, narrowly missing my Viking's crown; a much stronger article, by the way, than your goldsmiths turn out in these days. This startled us much; particularly Jarl, as one might suppose; but accustomed to the strange creakings and wheezings of the masts and yards of old vessels at sea, and having many a time dodged stray blocks accidentally falling from aloft, I thought little more of the matter; though my comrade seemed to think the noises somewhat different from any thing of that kind he had even heard before.

After a little more turning over of the rubbish in the fore-castle, and much marveling thereat, we ascended to the deck; where we found every thing so silent, that, as we moved toward the taffrail, the Skyeman unconsciously addressed me in a whisper.