

A TALE OF THE SEA.

We were sitting one sunny morning on the esplanade at Weymouth, my dear old friend Colonel Ramsay and I, watching with interest the movements of an unusually large vessel at some distance from the land. Accustomed to see vessels of all sizes and builds, I knew at once that she was no mere merchantman; and for some time, as she approached little by little, and showed a lofty side and a forest of spars, both the colonel and I were inclined to think her a large ironclad, probably detached from the Channel Fleet. But as her distance lessened, and we saw that her lofty sides were painted white, and were scored along their whole length with small square ports, we knew that she was one of those great Indian troopships employed by the Admiralty for the special purpose of carrying our soldiers in safety and comfort to or from our Eastern dependency. Presently she rounded the Breakwater, headed for the anchorage in Portland, and in doing so passed behind the North Fort and out of sight.

"Ah, my dear madam," said the colonel, as he removed and wiped his glasses, "they take more care of the British subaltern nowadays than they did when I joined the service. Nobody had ever heard of a troopship in those days; we just took a passage in any vessel that was available, no matter if she was fit for the work or not; and where these ships take weeks we used to take months, and regard it as a matter of course."

"Yes," said I; "I have often read of difficulties, and even dangers, incurred by our troops on their Indian voyage; but I used to think them probably greatly exaggerated."

"Exaggerated, madam!" quote the colonel hotly. "Say, rather, not a tenth part was told. I once, on my first voyage, encountered perhaps the most bloodthirsty pirate that then sailed the seas."

"How terrible!" I cried. "A pirate! I thought a vessel carrying troops would be certainly safe from such an attack."

"Stay!" interrupted the colonel. "I have not said that the ship was full of armed troops; though even in that case she might be unequal to the task of driving off a determined pirate. But the case I am speaking of was very different, and if you care to hear it I will tell it to you."

"I should like it very much," I said; "the attraction of a story of real life is too great to be resisted."

"Very well," said the old colonel; then you shall have it, whether worthy of your interest or not. You must know," he continued, "that when I joined the army—more than fifty years ago—I was gazetted to a regiment then quartered in the West Indies; and on making inquiries as to my passage I was informed that a vessel would shortly sail for that station, and that some other officers belonging to my own and other regiments would take a passage in her. She was a barque of about seven hundred tons called the *Alfred*, and I joined her at Gravesend. A smart, trim, little craft she was; and her captain prided himself on her appearance, and inspired his men with the same feeling. I found two or three young fellows going out like myself to join their regiments, a married major with his wife and child and his sister-in-law, and two other ladies going to join their husbands abroad. As usual, we were shorthanded enough as regards the crew, who barely numbered twenty all told.

"Just before I went down to join the ship, a terrible tale of outrage upon the high seas had occupied the minds of all in England, for the papers were full of the horrible story of the discovery of the *Morning Star*, and of the tragedy that was revealed when that unhappy vessel was boarded as a derelict. If I remember aright, they who were told off to board and examine the apparently deserted ship found, on entering the saloon, her ill-fated officers and passengers sitting back to back around the long table, closely lashed in pairs, each with his throat gashed from ear to ear! And there were fair and delicate girls among them too—none spared—not one! And the fiends who had done this deed had attempted to scuttle the ship that she might sink and carry all evidence of the awful crime down to the bottom of the sea, to join the sad list of vessels that are posted as 'missing,' none knew how or where. But Providence willed it otherwise.

"Well, as I say, it was this story that was in the minds and mouths of us all as we gathered first around the table in the *Alfred's* saloon, and the weaker expressed strong apprehensions of a similar fate befalling us on our lonely voyage; and some who were strong of heart tried to laugh down the notion; and others even made as if they would desire such a meeting, that they might wreak vengeance upon such demons. Our good little captain said nothing, or at any rate very little; but, as we afterwards found, he made every inquiry that was possible as to the appearance, size, armament and habitat of the pirate-ship to which this deed was ascribed. Then we sailed; and for the first time I experienced the delicious pleasure of sweeping down Channel with a fresh and fair wind, the English coast spreading out before us from the Foreland to the Start, as we rushed along hour after hour, bright sun overhead, tight little ship underfoot, young blood in my veins, and all the world before me. What wonder then that ere we were clear of the Channel the ghastly mystery of the *Morning Star* was pretty nearly crased from my memory, crowded out by the thousand new sensations consequent upon this new departure in my life.

"All went well with us; no hurricane came down to drive us struggling in the wild whirl of waters; the wind was not always fair, nor the sky always bright, but the monotony of the voyage was disturbed by no menace of disaster. At last a day came when our little captain at breakfast announced to us that if the wind held fair and strong we might hope to reach our destination in another forty-eight hours; and to us, more than satisfied as we were with our experience of the sea, weary of being cooped up in so small a vessel, and full of eager desire to see the wonders of the foreign land, the announcement was delightful, and often and anxiously did we pop up from below and cast a glance around to see if the wind still held fair.

On one of these occasions, when I had put my head up the hatchway to see if all was well, I noticed the skipper standing aft with his glass to his eye looking long and hard at some distant object; and following the direction of his tele-copo I saw a speck which could be nothing else but a ship.

"Hillo! captain," said I, "a stranger in sight?"

"Yes," said he quietly; "she is coming up with us fast. She must be bringing up a breeze with her, or we are running out of the wind which she still holds. A short time ago we could only see her topsails, and now her hull is rising. Take a look at her," as he handed the glass to me.

"I looked. She seemed a small brig or brigantine with very square yards, and she was, as he said, overhauling us fast; but other than that I could not tell."

"The wind is falling fast," said our skipper; "I am afraid it will end in a dead calm."

"I did not answer; I merely rushed down below with the eagerness of youth. I say, a sail! you fellows—that looks like nearing land, eh?—Miss Dsah! a sail! You'll see it right aft; the captain thinks the wind is falling, and away I rushed on deck again to inspect anew the interesting stranger.

"I was surprised not to see the skipper anywhere about the deck; but following the eye of the man at the wheel I looked aloft, and saw him settling himself down in the cross-trees and loveling his glass once more. He, too, was interested in her, that was evident. Presently he closed his glass, came down from aloft, and said to the first mate: 'Mr. Brown, stunsails!'

"How glad we were! We loved to see the stunsails set, and to feel that the little ship was doing her best to bring her long voyage to an end, and our captain was anxious to be in port. The extra canvas pulled her along considerably faster than she had gone before; but it was evident that the breeze was fading away both with us and with the stranger, for the glass showed that she too had stunsails. As the evening came down the wind fell to almost nothing, and in its place an exceedingly heavy ground-swell got up, on which our little ship rolled and squattered in a most restless and uncomfortable manner.

"As it was impossible to remain comfortably on deck, the ship rolled so incessantly and so wildly, I went below, turned in, and tried to sleep, but the motion of the ship made it almost impossible. Again and again I woke through the hot night, and in the occasional intervals of noise, fancied I heard the skipper's voice giving orders on deck, but this I supposed was merely imagination. At last at about five A.M. I could stand it no longer—my bunk was intolerable; and, tossing on my clothes, I scrambled as best I could up the ladder and staggered cautiously aft.

"Good morning, captain. Not a breath of wind, eh? and she is rolling worse than ever, I think. Ah, there's our friend!" I added, as I looked in the direction of the strange vessel. "Seems nearer than last night after all. What do you make of her?"

"I don't like the look of her at all," said he, very gravely and in a low voice. "I don't wish to alarm you unnecessarily, but I never saw a craft of more suspicious appearance. She is showing no colors, though once were hoisted at daylight; she carries a great number of guns for a vessel employed in trade; she has a perfect swarm of men on board; and what is more," added he, sinking his voice so that not even the man at the wheel could hear him, "she is terribly like the description of the craft which is supposed to have taken the *Morning Star*!"

"For an instant my blood seemed to rush back to my heart and congeal there; but I mastered my excitement and concealed it as best I might."

"What can we do?" said I in a low voice.

"Not much, I fear," returned he calmly. "We have two gun-carronades, but a very small supply of shot and powder, and if it came to fighting in that way he could lie off and sink us at his leisure. But he won't do that; that is not his business—he must take first and sink afterwards; and if it comes to boarding—God help!—Say nothing about it down below to the ladies," he added. "They will know it, if it is true, but too soon as it is; but you might give a hint to your brother officers."

"With a heavy heart I made my way to the hatchway to whisper distress and terror to my friends below. What a terrible breakfast that was! I sat with the ghastly secret weighing down my heart like lead, and heard the gay chatter of the ladies as they anticipated a speedy arrival, laid out the plans for the future, and rallied me and the other men on our want of spirit. We tried after breakfast by various excuses to keep them down below; but they laughed us aside; and gaily scrambled up the hatchway to renew the acquaintance with the stranger, full of eager hope that she might be within speaking distance. How they laughed to see her roll till her copper showed bright and radiant half-way to her keel; how they plied the skipper with questions about her; ventured to imagine that she might have friends of theirs on board, and finally waved their handkerchiefs to her in the guilelessness!

"At last the captain made some excuse for requesting the ladies to retire below, and having succeeded in his object took us all into his cabin and laid the matter before us.

"If, as I have every reason to fear, gentlemen," said he "the craft of us is a pirate, we must face the fact and try and make some plan of escape. At present I believe we are safe from him as long as this calm and this tremendous ground-swell last. He cannot come any nearer, there being no wind; he cannot hoist out his boats and tow up to us in so heavy a swell. My idea is that he will wait for the roll to go down and the breeze to spring up, and then take us at his ease, knowing that we cannot escape now. There are one or two things in our favor: he cannot have been waiting for us, for our cargo would be worthless to him. He has probably fallen on us by accident, and he will want to know what we are before he attacks. Vessels of his trade have occasionally caught a tartar, and they learn