ON THE BRINK

"In wrath remember mercy."

There was a tragedy once in the second class cabin of the Mahanaddy, than which no more popular steamer sails from London to Bombay. It was, moreover, a real tragedy, as such usually are the second class places of the world. For the possession of money frequently averts things that go to make life tragic —Among others, death. Mark Ruthine had his hand in it, for the Mahanaddy's surgeon was in some sort a moral supercargo of the load of humanity that the good ship carried to and fro between India and home.

It was, for instance, to Dr. Mark Ruthine that Mrs. Sweedon-Ellis appealed, and on the surgery sofa that she wept, when Grinding Pontarrow —that great, overworked, liver-ridden civilian—bribed the steward to give him a cup of milk every morning from the yellow cow when the small Sweedon-Ellis of ten months, who had emptied the cabins on the forward starboard side, required all the yellow cow could give him. It was to Dr. Mark Ruthine that Mrs. Judge Barrowby took her indignant red face and self-righteous uncharitableness when the Hon. Miss Johnson fell in love with young Stanford. It was, moreover, the doctor who told Grinding Pontarrow that there was something wrong about the yellow cow's milk, and conveyed to Mrs. Judge Barrowby that when Stanford had muttered audibly of "interfering old cats" he had referred to that upstart, Lady Smith, of Golden Gulch, N.S.W., and not to herself.

To Ruthine the stewards brought their queer stories and were told to hold their tongues for the good of the ship. For there are pseudonyms on passengers' as well as publishers' lists and society sends her failures down to the sea in ships for reasons that need not be too minutely dwelt upon. Suffice it to say that, what with a warm climate—the thirst acquired there, the vices developed there —the respectable relatives at home are usually enabled to say later, "Ah, well, poor fellow, his constitution was much impaired before he went."

Dr. Ruthine for reasons of his own took a deep interest in human nature as such, and had certain methods of watching over society's failures, until with a sigh of relief he saw them stumble down the gangway at last. He was not only charitably disposed toward them, but, being a wise man, had knowledge that there is often more good in society's failures than in her successes. Be that as it may, however, the doctor averted several unpleasant incidents, and the reputation of the Mahanaddy increased a thousandfold on Eastern seas.

It happened on a homeward voyage that the steamer lay one night at anchor at Port Said on account, as it was understood by the passengers, of a hitch in the supply of coal, but in reality to put ashore the bodies of three firemen who had died of cholera in the canal. Thus appears to be confirmed the poet's absurd notion that things are not always what they seem.

Ruthine was returning to his cabin about two o'clock in the morning, having been put on board by the Board of Health boat, when he noticed that the door of the second class saloon was open. He ran aft, for he had caught sight of a shadowy form hurrying in that direction. Then he heard a splash. The quartermaster on watch on the main deck heard it also, and ran toward the gangway.

"All right," whispered Ruthine, seizing him by the arm. "I know where she went over. Give me a rope over the stern—I shan't want a boat—and keep quiet."

He went over the rail just as he was, and the sound of his fall was no louder than that of a seal taking the water from a low rock. The quartermaster's bull's-eye lantern glared persistently on a gray shadow stirring the water under the stern, and Ruthine went there at the quick sidestroke. He had saved a Lascar in earlier days, who in a laudable desire to render all assistance had inserted three fingers into his mouth, nearly tearing his cheek open. So Mark Ruthine approached the object of his present pursuit with caution. She had sunk once when he snatched at her dress. As soon as her face was above water she struck at him savagely with both hands.

"Let me go! let me go!" the woman spluttered.

By way of answer Ruthine captured one wrist and felt at the moment the nails of her other hand near his eyes. For a moment there was a hard struggle—the woman fighting as folk only do when there is life, or death, in it.

Then Ruthine turned over on his back, having twisted the woman's arms behind her. Close beside him as he swam a white life buoy bobbed placidly on the smooth water. It was attached to a rope and kept pace with his progress. The quartermaster on watch on the main deck knew his business thoroughly.

The woman scarcely struggled now, for she was a close prisoner—her arms twisted behind her back, her head well on Ruthine's chest, and free of the water. Her hair, which had come adrift, was spread all over Ruthine's face.

"You are breaking my arms," she gasped, and the voice was that of a lady.

"Can't help it," answered her rescuer, mindful of the Mahanaddy's reputation.

The quartermaster had lowered the gangway, and knelt on the bottom grating of it awaiting their arrival.

"Don't let her go," said Ruthine, and the woman was handed from one to the other in sullen helplessness.

"My cabin," said Ruthine, as the quartermaster staggered up the steps with his wet burden.

"The captain," he added, curtly, when the man had deposited his charge on the doctor's sofa. The quartermaster went away with his staring lamp and left them alone in the dark for a moment until Ruthine found the electric light. Then he turned and saw for the first time whose life he had saved. It was a Mrs. Mallwaner—a slight, pretty woman, with hard eyes and a mouth that was much too small. Her appearance was, of course, known to Ruthine.

"You did that on purpose," he said, opening the door of his wine locker.

"Yes," she answered, in a voice full of resentment. She was putting back her hair, which was pretty even when wet.

"It is a warm night," said Mark Ruthine, whose suddenly aroused interest prompted him to assume as complete a composure as her own. "You will not hurt in your wet clothes until the captain comes. Did you swallow much water?"

"Yes."

He was adding something from his medicine chest to a glass of brandy.

"Better drink that," he said. "You don't feel any nausea?"

"No!" snapped the lady.

She drank the mixture with a stoical face, though it was horribly hot and strong. Before she put the glass aside the captain knocked at the door and was admitted by Ruthine, who shot the bolt again.

The captain of the Mahanaddy was a small man, with a pointed grey beard and thoughtful blue eyes of a quiet expression. He was reported to possess great endurance and strength, and the eye of knowledge in such matters could scarcely fail to notice the depth of his chest. He looked at Mrs. Mallwaner and than at Ruthine, who was wiping his face with a handkerchief.

"This lady has just attempted to commit suicide," said the doctor, and he handed Mrs. Mallwaner a towel.

There were men in the forecastle who averred, in the picturesque language of that part of the vessel, that they would rather perform three weeks of hard labor than face the skipper's wrath. A few explanations put this autocrat in possession of the facts of the case, and then the captain of the Mahanaddy rose up in his anger and fell on Mrs. Mallwaner. He expounded to her the law pertaining to attempted suicide, and Mrs. Mallwaner's pretty face turned rather gray. Then he said other things in a quiet voice that made her sob, and when he closed his oration the little lady was shivering on the sofa. But she had not told them why she did it, nor yet could they extract from her a promise not to do the same again.

So Mrs. Mallwaner, who was travelling alone, found herself transferred to a very pleasant deck cabin of a central position and lighted by a skylight only. Thither, in a marvellously short time, the head stewardess brought her possessions from the second class cabin. These possessions were of a refined quality. The silver fittings of her dressing bag bore a crest.

Ruthine noted these matters when he visited the lady professionally the next morning after breakfast, which had been served to her in her new apartment. He found her restless and more excited than on the previous night. Indeed, she seemed to watch his face with a breathless anxiety. Her conversation, however, proved her to be indignant and defiant still.

"The captain thinks," she said, "that he can say anything to me because I am travelling alone and second class, but he will find out that he is mistaken. My husband is obliged to remain with his regiment, and I am travelling home second class because my little girl has had a long illness and must now undergo a most expensive operation. In India we know all the best people, and I shall take care that they hear of this affair."

"I hope," replied Ruthine, quietly, "that nothing we have said or done has appeared to convey that we ever had the slightest doubt of your social position, Mrs. Mallwaner."

The lady bit her lip and vouchsafed no answer. So Ruthine continued: "The captain begged me to renew his assurance that this matter shall be held in the strictest confidence by ourselves and the quartermaster— who alone know of it—and that you will be set at liberty on giving your word of honor not to make any further attempt on your life."

Ruthine was again met by stubborn silence, and presently withdrew.

In his own cabin he found a woman waiting to see him—a middle-aged person, to be described by the word "respectable"—who had the subdued manner of a high-class lady's maid.

"I wish to ask your advice, sir," she said.

"Professional?"

"No, sir."

"Then I would suggest your going to the captain. I am not a person in authority, you understand."

Which was true—up to a certain point.

"It is only something I wish taken care of," said the woman, with downcast eyes.

"Well, the captain has a large safe in his cabin. I have only a small one here, and it is full. Come with me, please."

And the ex-lady's maid found herself morally hustled into the captain's cabin; where that grey-haired mariner was making entries in a private log-book.

"Good-morning," said the captain, in his pleasant, brisk way. "What can I do for you?"

"If you please, sir," said the woman, with a hesitation which she tried to conceal, "I have a packet I should like you to take care of."

"Jewelry or valuables, I suppose?"

And Mark Ruthine closed the door with his foot.

"Yes, sir."

"Which?"

"Is it necessary to give particulars, sir?"

"Most certainly," answered the captain, "so that I may give you a receipt."

The captain took a book from his writing table drawer and waited. Very slowly the woman laid a small parcel on the table.

"I must ask you to show me the contents," said the captain, with sudden sharpness. The woman glanced slantways at Ruthine and found him in contemplation of his own boots.

The captain then took up the packet and opened it himself. It contained a single jewel case and on the red velvet reposed a necklet of diamonds as big as peas.

"Most assuredly stolen," said the captain in the Telugu tongue, and Ruthine said "Yes."

"You know," said the captain, pleasantly, as he made out the receipt "you ought to have given these into the purser's care when you first came on board. That is the usual way of doing it."

"Yes, sir."

"Why did you not do so?" inquired he, dabbing the blotting paper with a genial hand.

"I did not think there would be any danger in keeping them myself, sir."

"Not at first?"

"No, sir."

"But you do now?"

"Er—yes, sir."

"Why?" asked the captain, looking up sharply, and the woman was surprised into giving an answer.

"Because some one tried to take them last night."

"Are you sure of that?" inquired the captain, looking straight at her.

"Yes, sir," answered the woman, emphatically, "for I had a hard struggle to keep possession of them."

"Then you saw the thief?"

"No, sir. But I heard and felt her in the dark. However, I got my property back, and there is an end of it."

The captain looked at her keenly.

"Do you want it to end there?"

"If you please, sir," replied the woman, with an aplomb that proved her meekness to be only a badge of office. "It will do the ship no good to have a scandal, and I do not care so long as I have my property."

The woman scored her points with a quiet self-possession.

"You could not identify the thief?" inquired the captain, indifferently.

"Oh, no, sir."

"She is lying," put in Ruthine, in Telugu, and the captain nodded.

The person who looked like a lady's maid presently returned to her quarters, leaving the two men together.

"So far as I could see she only lied once, and that was when she said she did not know the thief," said Ruthine, when the door was closed.

"Yes," answered the other, "the diamonds are hers right enough, and it is fortunately not our business to ask her how she came by them."

In the afternoon Ruthine visited Mrs Mallwaner and found her in a frame of mind which would in the second class saloon have been called snappy. He told her of some stories of persons who had had the same complaint as her little girl, and had satisfactorily recovered therefrom.

"By the way, Mrs. Mallwaner, the captain has transferred you to the first-class list," he added, rising to go; indeed, he stood by the door with his shoulder turned toward her until he had completed his observations. "Rather an unpleasant incident has occurred in the second class saloon, which is only known to the captain and myself, and which I tell you in the strictest confidence. There was an attempted robbery last night, but the victim of the attempt can give no clue whatever to the thief, and there will be no inquiry."

Then he went out and closed the door softly behind him. He had caught sight again of the crest engraved on the fittings of Mrs. Mallwaner's dressing case, and with the device fresh in his memory he went to his own cabin to consult Debrett. Mrs. Mallwaner had spoken no more than the truth when she talked of being connected with the best people in India.

The captain and Dr. Mark Ruthine sat long over their pipes that night and if they set aside the law they remembered the word that urges us to forgive our neighbor his trespass.

Ruthine visited Mrs. Mallwaner the next morning.

"We reach Brindisi to-night," he said, in answer to her inquiry, and her change of demeanor was not lost upon him. There was a sort of suppressed happiness about Mrs. Mallwaner this morning.

"I have been immensely relieved," she said, "by what you tell me of Cicely's illness. "I—I think I could give that promise now if you and the captain will trust me."

Ruthine looked thoughtfully at Mrs. Mallwaner's hands, which were twisted nervously together on her lap.

"I have been working myself up into a terror," she went on, "ever since I got my sister's letter. You are not married, Dr. Ruthine?"

"No," answered Mark Ruthine.

"Then you do not understand feelings about—children."

"One may understand in part," said the doctor, quietly.

"I was quite hopeless about her," went on the little lady, with a look in her hard eyes which the doctor knew for the maternal instinct crops up in strange places. "We cannot afford to pay the best surgeon. It is always hard to be poor; sometimes it is horrible."

"Yes," said Ruthine, and there was something in his voice that startled away the conventional and somewhat self-complacent expression of her face. There followed a silence which Ruthine at length broke.

"I came to tell you," he said, "that the captain had arranged to exchange your passage for an overland route ticket from Brindisi, if that is agreeable to you. You will thus be with your child eight days earlier."

Mrs. Mallwaner looked up with the startled air again. Her face was suddenly colorless.

"By which arrangement you leave the ship to-night," added Ruthine, in a final voice.

Mrs. Mallwaner looked into his face for a moment.

"Then you know?" she whispered.

Ruthine turned away. He already had his hand on the door.

Mrs. Mallwaner's pretty face was hidden in her pocket handkerchief, and assuredly the dregs of the cup of humiliation were hers.

"None of us can be sure of ourselves," he said, gently, "in time of great temptation." And she did not hear the door close behind him.—Henry Seton Merriman in The Tattler.

BLUSH ROSES

Miss Rebecca Brackett wore steel-bowed glasses because she was near-sighted, and gold-bowed ones would have seemed an extravagance; and did her hair up in a tight knob because it could be done quickly so, and there was nobody to tell her that it was unbecoming. And she walked very fast and straight when she went on errands, and nobody stopped her for a chat, because she looked as if she would resent such an interruption. To most people she was either forbidding or uninteresting. But most people had not seen her in her garden.

Passing Miss Rebecca's story-and-a-half house, spick and span in its coat of white paint, you never would have suspected the presence of that garden; for in front was only a narrow, grass-covered embankment with a small flowering quince on one side of the front door, and on the other an aged syringa-bush. But once behind the house, something from the country seemed to have slipped into the midst of this New England city. Apple trees and pear trees dappled the grass with their shadows; grape vines clambered lovingly over unsightly wall or shed, and a line of phlox marched beside the one garden path. In a corner where most of the day the sunlight fell full and warm was a clump of rose bushes—blush rose bushes—that had bloomed for forty years or more. Miss Rebecca's father and mother had set them out and tended them in their lifetime, and now Miss Rebecca pruned and watched over them. Each year they filled the air with their fragrance, and in due season were gathered by Miss Rebecca and borne proudly to her church vestry to be used as decoration for its June festival. It was her one vanity—to sit primly by and feel that on the many tables, with their spotless tablecloths and shining silver, there were no other flowers so beautiful as here.

To this end she weeded and watered and fought bugs and blight, and, reckless of twings in her back, coaxed the bushes with beguiling touch to do their utmost. And for one day, when the tender pink of her flowers shone out from bowl and vase, she bore an exultant spirit, a thrilling sense of public importance.

It was nearing the time now of this annual rose gathering delight, and Miss Rebecca at work in her front yard left her mind concerned with the number of basketfuls she would have. The season had been one most friendly to roses. Never had there been more buds; never had the bushes been more vigorous or free from blemish. She paused a moment while she allowed anticipation to have its way with her. Into the pause there came the sound of a gate latch being lifted. She turned toward the noise and saw a scantily clad figure wedging through the partly opened gate.

Now, Miss Rebecca was not used to having small figures, scantily clad or otherwise, open her gates unbidden. She had waged a sharp but decisive war against that very thing many years before, and the fame of it had not wholly died out. All newcomers on the street were cautioned against letting their children ask her for flowers or fruit. The children who disregarded warnings climbed over the back fence at night, and all the next day lived in terror of Miss Rebecca's avenging presence.

Miss Rebecca straightened up, scowled over her glasses, and groped round in her mind for the old phrase she had been accustomed to find effective on such occasions. It was a "run away, little boy," uttered in so severe a tone that seldom was anything else necessary. But the phrase had lain unused for a long time, and it failed, in this instance, to respond before the little boy had wholly wriggled himself in and was standing beside her. He was quite dirty as to his hands and face, and very untidy as to his attire; but he smiled happily.

"You's got nice flowers," he said, pointing to the quince bush; "I likes nice flowers."

Miss Rebecca relieved her frown in pure amazement. "Little boys must not come into people's yards without being asked," she heard herself say; "don't you know that?"

The smile wavered uncertainly on the round face. "I like nice flowers." There was a pause; then the smile shone out again brilliantly. "You give little boy a nice flower?"

Miss Rebecca tried to summon some other arrangement of words that should express severity, but failed. Here was something that didn't fear her. She moved toward the syringa bush.

"Well," she said, "I'll give you one piece, and then you must go right away."

She broke off a large spray and held it out to him. He took it in one chubby hand, but the other he reached up to her.

"Thank you," he gurgled. "I like to kiss you."

If the house had stood on end or the syringa bush gone walking down the street, Miss Rebecca could hardly have been more astonished. A child wanted to kiss her! It was the first time in all her life that such a thing had happened; but she dropped her sickle, and, stooping awkwardly, offered her cheek to be hugged against a very wet kiss.

"That's a bear hug. Now I go home, but I come again."

He trundled off, and Miss Rebecca, still in a daze, went slowly on with her work.

The birds sang blithely from the elms, the soft wind dallied with the grass, the bumblebees buzzed about the flowers. It was a very lovely day, thought Miss Rebecca.

By degrees she got back to her normal state of mind, and when she went in to get her solitary dinner she could say, with something of self disdain—"What nonsense!"

But the next morning she was out in her yard long before her usual time, digging up dandelion roots that had grown there in security for many years. As she worked she listened, and at last there came a sound—the gate latch clicked.

Miss Rebecca looked up. There stood the small boy, and with him another small boy. They both came in—boy number two hanging back and looking ready to run. That was the old remembered attitude of children; it was what Miss Rebecca was accustomed to; but somehow it gave her a pang to see it. Would boy number one be affected by it? Apparently not, for he came straight on, dragging his companion after.

"This little boy likes nice flowers, too," he announced. "We's come for some."

Without a word Miss Rebecca went to her syringa bush and stripped off an armful of blossoms for each. And of her own accord she knelt for the kiss.

"What is your name?" she remembered to call as they went out of the yard.

"Tommy," said boy number one, "Jimmy," said boy number two.

The next day saw pretty much the same scene in Miss Rebecca's door yard, and the next day and the next and the next, only with each new day the procession, headed by Tommy, was larger than the day before. Miss Rebecca gave and gave and gave. She finished the syringas and plundered the quince bush, until one morning she woke to the fact that the blossoms were almost gone. Another visit and she would have given her last spray, even of buds. And then the click of the gate under Tommy's fingers would sound no more.

The day suddenly seemed less bright and the air grew heavy. She should miss Tommy.

Then she thought of her roses. They were blooming, now, in all their beauty. But her roses were for the church festival. It was impossible to think of their going elsewhere. No Tommy could not have her roses.

She gave the last of the quince blossoms to the outstretched hands, and worked the rest of the day with dull persistence. It was the last she should see Tommy, she was sure of that. Still, when the morning came again she took her sickle and made a pretense of cutting the grass. She trimmed the edges to the smallest spear of green, and let no dandelion or plantain leaf escape her; but no Tommy came.

So it went on for two long mornings.

On the third day Miss Rebecca put on her second best hat and dress and stood irresolutely at her front door. She would go and see the committee about her roses; perhaps she would go round by way of some of those back streets; she could just as well as not, and she hadn't been round that way for ages; there was no knowledge what changes had taken place.

She peered over her glasses in the direction of the back streets, and her heart gave a thud, for there, trudging towards her, alone, almost at her gate, was Tommy.

"Ain't you got just one more nice flower?" he greeted her. "I's come for one more."

Miss Rebecca sat down abruptly on the top step.

"Tommy," she commanded, "come here."

Tommy marched up to her.

"You go off and get all the other little boys you can find, and the little girls, and come back here quick, and there'll be some more nice flowers; do you understand, dear, all the nice flowers you can carry?"

What did one day of glory and self-importance matter; Tommy had come for some more flowers, and there were the roses. She would beg some for the festival, or buy some, or get them somehow, but Tommy should have hers.

She waited at the side gate for the small rabble that gathered at Tommy's summons, and when they came led them into the guarded garden. And while they rifled her bushes and climbed her trees and trampled her grass, she sat blissfully by, watching the havoc. The angles softened in her face, the years faded from her eyes. And when the laden and tumbling children went out, she drew Tommy to her side. She held him tight, while she said boldly, as one who might have known children all her life, "There'll be apples and pears and grapes by and by; you'll come and get them, won't you?"

"Yes, said Tommy, serenely; "I'll come, and bring all the little boys and girls." Then he smudged a kiss on the side of Miss Rebecca's nose and trudged off.

A belated sense of humor awakened in Miss Rebecca's breast.

"I shouldn't wonder," she sighed, "if the next thing I'd be putting up a sign, 'Wanted—Boys to climb over my back fence and help themselves to my grapes.'"—H. G. Duryee in the Outlook.

STORY OF GRAND OLD MUSICIAN

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