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TWO FATHOM BUOY.

Tale of the Sea written to Please Fishermen and Mariners

Johnson, and he now left her to her own meditations. Closing the door softly behind him he walked along the passage-way towards Mai's state-room.

What motive had this woman in making such an accusation? Did Mai know her? What relation did this woman with an alias bear to his stepson?

These questions were disquieting. He must settle them at once.

Through all these events the screw churned up the water, and the ship sailed west towards the inevitable. The fog still hung thick over the water, and the men at the bows had twice signalled to the bridge that danger lay ahead, and twice the steamer turned aside and vague shadowy forms of fishing-boats drifted past in the mist.

Very few passengers ventured out of the saloons. Only here and there a rubber-clad passenger braved the cold, raw wind and the wet decks and murky air. Among these, one man, in an absurd ulster dragging his heels after the manner of the feminine-looking footmen at the doors of Fifth Avenue carriages, slowly paced the deck, silent and bitter with himself and all the world. His luck had turned. The smoking-room bets were declared off—that was something—but at what a fearful cost! He had saved his money and met the one man in the world whom he held in mortal dread—on shipboard, too, and an officer of the ship, in whose hand all their lives were held—shut up on a ship with a man who he felt sure in his cowardly little soul would not hesitate to throw him into the sea. The situation was more horrible than any he had read in the wildest French novel. That nothing of the kind could happen never entered his head. His mind was completely unstrung by terror and remorse. At any moment his wife Julie might come upon deck and insist upon her rights. He felt sure she had gone to Paris and was now returning to New York for no purpose except to establish in some way her position as his wife.

He walked to and fro on the deck not far from the bows. It was not the best place, but since he came up from the saloon the pilot, dressed in oilcloth the color of gold, had come out upon the bridge, and he dared not pass under the bridge to reach a pleasanter part of the deck. Nor did he dare to go below and pass through the saloon, for he must in so doing pass his wife's state-room door, and he dared not meet her alone. He was practically in a trap, and he must keep to the farther end, nearest the bow, and stay there until chilled to the bone in the bitter wind and searching fog. Seeing a man at the extreme end of the bows standing like an old-gold statue and dripping at every angle, he went towards him and stood at the rail, looking down at the curling foam above the ship's forefoot.

How swiftly the enormous mass swept through the water!—nearer and yet nearer, every second, to the land—to exposure and misery. Even as he stood there the ship was a mile nearer her port, a mile nearer to his disgrace.

Suddenly there came over the gray water a faint moan.

The oilcloth-clad figure beside him started and leaned forward, as if to listen. A sob that moan—far away, blood-chilling in its mystery. To the young man it seemed the despairing cry of some lost soul.

Again it spoke. To his fevered imagination it was as the cry of a child perishing of neglect—the moan of starvation, misery and despair. His heart seemed to freeze, and he slipped on the wet deck and fell down, a limp mass, by the rail. The yellow mariner kicked him aside with an oath, and shouted some strange words backward towards the affrighted sailors on deck and officers on the bridge.

Below, the big bell clanged and the engineers sprang up and with tremendous efforts pulled at the valves, that the mighty engine stop, lest all be lost. An instant's silence in the engine room, and then the bell clanged twice. Reverse! reverse for dear life! The ponderous link motion stained under the stress of the small engine that puffed and roared to force it over. It was done, and then through the mighty cylinders rushed again the insistent steam. Every eccentric turned to guide the power in a new direction, and the whole awful force of the engine, 2,000 horses straining as one frantic beast, was bent to resist the terrific momentum of the ship; lest disaster overwhelm all.

The ship shook in the sea, and every heart on board seemed to stop with chilling suspense.

On the bridge the Captain stood with blanched face, expectant, resolute, fearful, yet confident in his immense machine. His heart seemed to keep time with the revolutions of the straining screw.

It slowed—stopped.

By his side stood his pilot, confounded with alarm and astonishment.

"Thought you said, Johnson, we were twenty miles south of Nantucket; and here we are right on the land."

"I dunno! I give it up. I must be breakin' all up. Lemme get down. I'll never take tiller again. I don't know what it means. I don't know where we be. Hark! What's that?"

"It's the buoy. We have passed to starboard of it."

"No. Listen. It's a fish-horn."

A number of passengers had come out of the saloon and were talking loudly on the deck.

"Keep quiet below."

The people meekly obeyed, and then through the awesome stillness of a steamer at rest at sea there came a faint note over the water through the blinding mist, then another note on the other side.

"Why, we've run into a fleet o' boats! Call 'em, Captain."

No need to suggest this, for the Captain had his hand on the rope, and the great whistle roared in short, blatant notes. A moment later the safety-valve moved, and the dull roar of escaping steam drowned all other sounds.

"That's loud enough. The fishermen will know we have stopped, and will come aboard. Mr. Ruthera, see that soundings are taken at once, and keep your men on the lookout for boats."

The officer addressed went down to the deck and prepared to take soundings. More passengers came on deck, looking white and scared, and talking together in whispers. Presently the boilers were relieved, and the escaping steam stopped. Then through the silence came the sound of oars.

Some people are like a camera; they see only what is directly before them, without regard to it focus, and the dry plates they call their minds are capable only of reporting one fact at a time. Mademoiselle recognized that Mai Johnson was in a sense her rival. She saw through the devise her husband had used to bring the girl into his mother's family that he might win her for himself. That he had no moral right to do this she felt sure; that he had no legal right she hoped to prove the moment they reached New York. On board ship she had no legal rights,—at least, she could not prove them,—and, enraged at what she considered an affront put upon her by the girl, she went directly to the one wish that was uppermost in her heated brain. She would be revenged on the woman who had

"THE YELLOW MARINER KICKED HIM ASIDE."

lured away her husband. She had already stabbed her through the Judge's wife. She would attack the girl herself, let the consequences be what they might.

The Judge knocked at Miss Johnson's state-room door. No response. He knocked again. Still no answer. Becoming alarmed, he tried the handle of the door. There was a faint moan within; and he boldly opened the door.

On the lounge lay the girl, white and still, her wavy black hair streaming on the floor.

"Mai! Mai! Are you ill?"

She opened her eyes slowly and smiled in a pained, wan way, and then closed them again.

"What is it, my child? Are you sick? Shall I call the doctor?"

She neither opened her eyes nor spoke, but slowly shook her head.

The Judge opened the port, and the raw, cold mist drifted in and the sounds of the sea filled the room. Again by the sea his heart was wrenched. This child, who had become so dear to him, was stricken grievously. He knelt upon the floor by her side and took one of her hands in his.

"Are you sick, my child?"

She looked at him for an instant, and then shook her head.

"Are you hurt? Let me call the surgeon."

"He could do nothing."

"What has happened? Tell me what has happened."

She hesitated for a few moments, and he waited for her to speak. Then she said, slowly—

"I wish I had died—with mother—on the ship!"

"What do you mean?"

"She came here."

"Who?"

"That woman. She hates me."

"Mademoiselle Rochet. Did she dare to come here too?"

"She forced herself in. I was frightened. I could not stop her. She—oh, why did I not die with my mother?"

"What did she say?"

"She said—oh, how can I tell you! Father knew it; she said he did. Sam knew it, too. I never knew; I never knew; and they were so cruel—oh, so cruel!—not to tell me. I could have gone away somewhere; and—oh, it is so hard to know it now!"

"You say your father knew it."

She turned away from him and began to cry softly to herself.

"What is it, my dear? What troubles you?"

"You—"

"I? What have I done? You know I love you."

"I know that; and yet—you believe it."

At this instant the screw stopped.

Neither spoke in the strange, terrifying silence that meant so much. Both listened intently. What new disaster was at hand?

Suddenly she started up, white, haggard and trembling.

"Hark! I hear it! the buoy! It is the buoy that marks the grave of that ship.

The Judge was fairly alarmed, and stood up by the port to listen.

Then came faint and far away through the breathless silence the clang of a bell.

"The ship is in trouble. They have reversed the engine to stop her."

"It is no matter. The sea is calling me again, as it does in my dreams. It's no matter now. Father—Sam—will never know how I died. I'm almost—almost glad it is so near. I can go home—to my mother—and my father."

A little glass on the marble washstand rattled. The ship was struggling, perhaps for her life.

Then, after a long, breathless pause, the distant bell clanged again. Then returned that freezing silence.

"The ship has stopped. Hark! they are signally some other vessel. I think we have escaped the danger, whatever it is. Come, let us go on deck."

He saw that while she was in this excited state of mind it would not be wise to attempt to reason with her. It were better for the time to ignore her fears and try to divert her attention to other matters till she was calmer. As for this woman—this Madame Potard-Rochet—he would probe her acts and motives till he found the truth. That she had some motive in her cruelty he clearly recognized. What that motive might be he would find out the moment his family were safe at home in New York.

"Let us go upstairs, Mai, and see what is going on."

"And you do not care, even if it were true?"

He stooped over her and gently raised her, and then, for the first time since he had known her, he gravely kissed her forehead. She snatched his hand and covered it with kisses and a flood of tears.

"There, there, my child! you are better now. Believe me if I tell you that perhaps I know more of this woman than you think. We will not care for her any more. The moment we touch New York I will set men at work on the marine records of every part of the world, and we will find the name of that ship if it takes from now to—to doomsday, whenever that legal holiday may be."

Her reply was to draw him down to her and to kiss him on the cheek and to say,—

"I—I thank you,—more than I can ever tell. Let me fix my hair, and I'll go with you. I'm not afraid of that woman now,—not if you are near me."

A friendly sailor, with an eye to a shilling, sprinkled some sea-water over young Mr. Royal Yardstickle, and the young man struggled back to a humiliating consciousness that he had fainted with superstitious fear, or from the prick of a guilty heart, or from both. As soon as he had recovered sufficiently to walk, he moved away from the bows, as if to go aft to the saloon. As he reached the first-deck engine he saw the people pouring out of the saloons and going to the ship's side, as if to see something on the water. He saw an officer clear the people from the railing, while a sailor threw over a rope ladder. The officers on the bridge seemed to be expecting something, and as the crowd cut off his view he mounted the base of the little engine, where he could see all that passed on the deck and on the bridge. To his surprise, he found the ship had stopped, and there was a good deal of suppressed excitement among the throng of passengers.

Then, to his amazement, over the side of the ship from the rope ladder came Skipper Johnson of Mr. Manning's yacht. Young Mr. Yardstickle prided himself on his nerves. He had nerves once. They seemed to be quite gone now, for he trembled so much he could not stand on the edge of the engine, and was forced to step down on the deck and hide behind a crowd of sailors and firemen. Presently over the heads of those before him he saw the young skipper mount the steps to the bridge, where both pilot and captain seemed to welcome him heartily.

Mai and the Judge experienced some difficulty in finding their way to the deck. They had stopped at Mrs. Gearing's room, and found her, poor lady, quite hysterical, and only Mai's calm confidence that no harm had come to the ship allayed her fears. She would not go on deck. "If it is safe," she said, "I'd rather stay here; and if we are all going to the bottom I'd rather keep in my room and be drowned in comfort than be pushed overboard by some frantic servant." The stairways were all crowded with people struggling to get on deck, some white, scared and silent, others talking feverishly with all about them, both friends and strangers, others laughing hysterically, and all urged by the one motive of personal safety. By dint of a little patience, the Judge found a place for Mai and himself behind the stern of a deck-boat directly under the bridge. The people all about them were talking in whispers. It was evident the officers had commanded silence.

Just than an officer near the ship's side called to some one on the bridge—

"Thirty fathoms out, sir, and no bottom."

"All right. Go round to the other side and bring that fisherman to the bridge."

Mai had taken the Judge's arm, and at the word "fisherman" she trembled slightly. He looked down upon her, and she smiled with an effort and endeavored to steady herself against the boat. Then there was some commotion on the other side of the ship, but, as the house was in the way, they could not see what was going on. They were not long in ignorance; for the voices of the officers on the bridge were painfully distinct in the hush than had fallen on all the people.

Just then a sudden burst of sunlight lit up the wet rigging till it sparkled as if hung with jewels. The sunlight passed, and a big rift of blue appeared in the gray mist overhead.

"By mighty! If that isn't my son Sam! Where on earth did you come from, Sam?"

"Been chasing the buoy."

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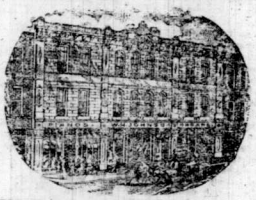

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