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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE DEATH SHIP: A STRANGE STORY, VOL. 3 (OF 3) ***

THE DEATH SHIP

**THE DEATH SHIP
A STRANGE STORY;**

AN ACCOUNT OF A CRUISE IN "THE FLYING DUTCHMAN," COLLECTED
FROM THE PAPERS OF THE LATE MR. GEOFFREY FENTON, OF POPLAR,
MASTER MARINER.

BY
W. CLARK RUSSELL,
AUTHOR OF
"THE WRECK OF THE GROSVENOR," "THE GOLDEN HOPE," "A SEA QUEEN,"
ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III

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THE DEATH SHIP.

[1]

CHAPTER I.

WE TELL OUR LOVE AGAIN.

I had passed from the deck, where I slept, to the cabin in too great a hurry to notice the weather. Now, reaching the poop, I stood a moment or two to look around, being in my way as concerned about the direction of the wind as Vanderdecken himself.

It still blew fresh, but the heavens lay open among the clouds that had thickened their bulk into great drooping shining bosoms, as though indeed the crystalline blue under which they sailed in solemn procession mirrored the swelling brows of mighty snow-covered mountains. The sea ran in a very dark shade of azure, and offered a most glorious surface of colours with the heave of its violet hills bearing silver and pearly streakings of sunshine and foam upon their buoyant floating slopes, and the jewelled and living masses of froth which flashed from their heights and stormed into their valleys as they raced before the wind which chased them with noisy whistlings and notes as of bugles. The Death Ship was close-hauled—when was the day to come when I should find her with her yards squared?—but on the larboard tack, so that they must have put the ship about since midnight; and the sun standing almost over the mizzen topsail yard-arm showed me that we were doing some westing, for which I could have fallen on my knees and thanked God.

[2]

The captain and the mate were on deck, Vanderdecken abreast of the tiller, Van Vogelaar twenty paces forward of him, both still and stiff, gazing seawards with faces whose expressionlessness forbade your comparing them to sleeping dreamers. They looked the eternity that was upon them, and their ghastliness, the age and the doom of the ship, fell with a shock upon the perception to the horrible suggestions of those two figures and of the face at the tiller, whose tense and bloodless skin glared white to the sun as the little eyes, like rings of fire eating into the sockets beneath the brows, glanced from the card to the weather edges of the canvas.

[3]

Yet I found comfort in their entranced posture and disregard of me, for the less I engaged their attention the safer I should be whilst in their ship, and memory being with them a deceptive and erratic quality, I might hope in time to find that they had forgot to hate me.

I quitted the poop, not choosing to keep myself in view of Vanderdecken and Van Vogelaar, and walked about the quarter-deck, struggling hard with the dreadful despondency which clouded my mind, whilst imagination furiously beat against the iron-hard conditions which imprisoned me, as a bird rends its plumage in a cage, till my heart pulsed with the soreness of a real wound in my breast. The only glimmer of hope I could find lay, as I had again and again told Imogene, in the direction of the land. But who was to say how long a time would pass before the needs of the ship would force Vanderdecken shore-wards? And if the wind grew northerly and came feeble, how many weeks might we have to count ere this intolerable sailer brought the land into sight? Oh! I tell you, such speculations were sheerly maddening when I added to them the reflection that the heaving of the land into view might by no means prove a signal for our deliverance.

[4]

However, by the time Imogene arrived on deck I had succeeded in tranquilising my mind. She took some turns with me and then went to the captain on the poop and stayed with him, that is, stood near him, though I do not know that they conversed, till he went to his cabin; whereupon I joined her, neither of us deigning to heed the mate's observation of us, and for the rest of the morning we were together, knitting our hearts closer and closer whilst we talked of England, of her parents, the ship her father had commanded, and the like, amusing ourselves with dreams of escape, till hope grew lustrous with the fairy light our amorous fancies flung upon it. And lo! here

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on the deck of this Death Ship, with Van Vogelaar standing like a statue within twenty paces of us, and the dead face of a breathing man at the tiller, and silent sailors languidly stirring forwards or voicelessly plying the marline-spike or the serving-mallet aloft, where the swollen canvas swayed under the deep-breasted clouds like spaces of ancient tapestry from which time has sponged out all bright colours—here, in this fated and faded craft, that surged with the silence of the tomb in her through hissing seas and aslant whistling winds, did I, in the course of our talk, find myself presently speaking of my mother, of the little town in which she lived, of the church to which, under God, I would lead my sweetest, there to make her my bride!

[6]

She blushed rosy with delight, and I marked the passionate gladness of her love in the glance she gave me, as she lifted the fringes of her white eyelids to dart that exquisite gleam, whilst she held her chaste face drooped. But looking, as though some power drew me to look, at Van Vogelaar, I met his malignant stare full, and the chill and venom of his storm-bruised countenance fell upon my heart like a sensible atmosphere and poison.

For the life of me I could not help the shudder that ran through my frame. "Do you believe," said I, "that the men of this Death Ship have any power of blighting hope and emotion by their glance? The mere sighting of this vessel, it is said, is sufficient to procure the doom of another!"

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She shook her head as though she would say she could not tell.

"There is something," said I, "to ice the strongest man's blood in the expression Van Vogelaar sometimes turns upon me. There is an ancient story of a bald-pated philosopher who, at a marriage-feast, looked and looked a bride, and the wondrous pavilion which the demons she commanded had built, into emptiness. He stared her and her splendours into thin air, sending the bridegroom to die with nothing but memory to clasp. There may be no philosophy in yonder Dutch villain, but surely he has all the malignity of Apollonius in his eyes."

"Do you fear he will stare me into air?" said she, smiling.

[8]

"I would blind him if I thought so," said I, with a temper that owed not a little of its heat to the heavy fit of superstition then upon me. "In the times of that rogue it was believed a man could pray another dead; but did one ever hear of a stare powerful enough to dematerialise a body? Sweet one, if that pale ruffian there could look you into space, what form would your spirit take? Would you become to me, as did the girl of his heart to the old poet—

"The very figure of that Morning Star
That, dropping pearls and shedding dewy sweets,
Fled from the greedy waves when I approached."

"He cannot part us!" she exclaimed. "Let me be your Morning Star, indeed, flying to you from the greedy waves, not from you, Geoffrey! Do not speak to me of Van Vogelaar, nor look his way. Tell me again, dear, of your mother's home; talk to me of flowers—of English flowers—and of that old church."

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CHAPTER II. WE SIGHT A SAIL.

[10]

As the day advanced, the breeze weakened, the sea grew smoother, the surge flattened to the swell, and the wind did little more than crisp with snowy feathers those long, low, broad-browed folds swinging steadily and cradlingly out of the heart of the mighty southern ocean. Every cloth the Braave carried had been sheeted home and hoisted. She looked as if she had been coated with sulphur, as she slipped rolling up one slant and down another brimming to her channels; the hue of her was as if she had been anchored all night near to a flaming hill and had received for hours the plummy, pumice-coloured discharge of the volcano. There was nothing to relieve this sulphurous reflection with flash or sparkle; the sunshine died in the green backs of the brass swivels, it lay lustreless upon the rusty iron cannons, it found no mirror in the dry and honeycombed masts, and it touched without vitalising the rounded canvas, whose breasts had nothing of that hearkening, seeking look which you find in the flowing swelling of a ship's sails yearning horizon-wards to the land beyond the sea.

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She was heading about north west by north, on the larboard tack, the yards as hard fore and aft as they would lie; and though she was making more leeway than headway, 'twas certain her bowsprit—for the first time during the days I had spent in her—was pointing fair for the Cape passage. It was this that had softened Vanderdecken's fierceness. As bit by bit the Death Ship stole up to this heading, so had his temper improved; insomuch that throughout the afternoon he had exhibited towards me a manner marked in no small degree by the haughty courtesy and solemn and stately urbanity which I had observed in his treatment of me in the first day or two of my being with him. This, I promise you, singularly rejoiced me, as exhibiting precisely the influence necessary to neutralise the hideous malignity of the mate. It also showed that he was still so much a sea-captain in soul as to be rendered bland and obliging, or savage and dangerous, by the turn of the weather, or rather by the direction and strength of the wind. Indeed, had his character contained more strokes of the humanity that is familiar to us, I should have heartily sympathised with the rage which contrary gales aroused in him. But the Curse had made a *lusus naturæ* of him. Much of what had, in 1653, been sailorly had been eaten out by

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time, and he flourished chiefly on those instincts which had miserably won him his doom. Hence, however greatly you wished to feel pity, you found you could not compassionate him as you would a living and real person. And of this, indeed, I was especially sensible that afternoon, whilst watching him and reflecting that though to be sure he could speak to me now without striving to blast me with his eyes and to damn me with his frown, yet let the wind suddenly head us and blow hard, and 'twas odds but that I should be hiding away from him, in the full conviction that it might need but a single indiscreet word to procure my being thrown overboard. [13]

It was half-past five o'clock in the afternoon. I had come up from supper, leaving Vanderdecken smoking at the head of the table. Imogene had gone to her cabin for her hat. Van Vogelaar was off duty, and very likely lying down. Arents had the watch. There was a fine sailing wind blowing, and but for the choking grip of the trim of the yards on the creaking, high, old fabric, I believe the ship would have got some life out of it. [14]

It was the first dog-watch—an idle hour—and all the ghostly crew were assembled forward, every man smoking, for tobacco was now plentiful; and their postures, their faces, their different kinds of dress, their lifelessness, save for the lifting of their hands to their pipes, and above all their silence, made a most wonderful picture of the decks their way; the foreground formed of the boats, a number of spare booms, the close quarters for the live-stock, the cook-house chimney coming up through the deck and trailing a thin line of blue smoke, whilst under the arched and transverse foot of the foresail you saw the ship's beak, the amazing relic of figure-head, the clews of the sprit-sail and sprit-topsail pulling aslant—between being the men, a dismal, white and speechless company, with the thick fore-mast rising straight up out of the jumble of them, whilst the red western light flowed over the pallid edges of the canvas, that widened out to the crimson gold whose blaze stole into the darkened hollows this side and enriched the aged surfaces with a rosy atmosphere. [15]

I stood right aft, carelessly running my eye along the sea-line that floated darkening out of the fiery haze under the sun on our weather-beam, till in the east it curved in a deep, blue line so exquisitely clear and pure that it made you think of the sweep of a camel's hair-brush dipped in indigo. I gazed without expectation of observing the least break or flaw in that lovely, darkling continuity, and 'twas with a start of surprise and doubt that I suddenly caught sight of an object orange-coloured by the light far down in the east, that is to say, fair upon our lee-quarter. It was a vessel's canvas beyond question; the mirroring of the western glory by some gleaming cloths; and my heart started off in a canter to the sight, it being impossible now for a ship to heave into view without filling me with dread of a separation from Imogene, and agitating me with other considerations, such as how I should be dealt with, on a ship receiving me, if they discovered I had come from the Flying Dutchman. [16]

I waited a little to make sure, and then called to the second mate, who stood staring at God knows what, with unspeculative eyes.

"Herr Arents, yonder is a sail—there, as I point."

He quickened out of his death-like repose with the extraordinary swiftness observable in all these men in this particular sort of behaviour, came to my side, gazed attentively, and said, "Yes; how will she be heading?" He went for the glass, and whilst he adjusted the tubes to his focus Captain Vanderdecken arrived with Imogene.

"What do you see, Arents?" asked the captain.

"A sail, sir, just now sighted by Herr Fenton." [17]

Vanderdecken took the glass and levelled it, and after a brief inspection handed me the tube. The atmosphere was so bright that the lenses could do little in the way of clarification. However, I took a view for courtesy's sake, and seemed to make out the square canvas and long-headed gaff-topsail of a schooner as the sails slid like the wings of a sea-bird along the swell.

"How doth she steer, mynheer?" said Vanderdecken, as I passed the telescope to Arents.

"Why," I answered, "unless the cut of her canvas be a mere imagination of mine, she is close-hauled on the larboard tack and looking up for us as only a schooner knows how."

"What do you call her?" he exclaimed, imperiously.

"A schooner, sir."

Whether he had seen vessels of that rig since their invention I could not know, but it was certain the word schooner conveyed no idea. It was amazing beyond language that hints of this kind should not have made his ignorance significant to him. [18]

The sight of the amber shadow on the lee quarter put an expression of anxiety into Imogene's face. She stood looking at it in silence, with parted lips and shortened breathing, her fragile, her too fragile profile like a cameo of surpassing workmanship, against the soft western splendour, the gilding of which made a trembling flame of one side of the hair that streamed upon her back. Presently turning and catching me watching she smiled faintly, and said in our tongue, "The time was, dear, when I welcomed a strange sail for the relief—the break—it promised. But you have taught me to dread the sight now."

I answered, speaking lightly and easily, and looking towards the distant sail as though we talked of her as an object of slender interest, "If our friend here attempts to transfer me without you, I shall hail the stranger's people and tell them what ship this is, and warrant them destruction if they offer to receive me." [19]

The time passed. Imogene and I continued watching, now and again taking a turn for the warmth of the exercise. As on the occasion of our pursuit by the Centaur, so now Vanderdecken stood to windward, rigid and staring, at long intervals addressing Arents who, from time to time, pointed the glass as mechanically as ever Vanderdecken's piping shepherd lifted his oaten reed to his mouth.

Shortly after six, arrived Van Vogelaar, who was followed by the boatswain, Jans; and there they hung, a grisly group, whilst the crew got upon the booms, or overhung the rail, or stood upon the lower ratlines, with their backs to the shrouds, suggesting interest and excitement by their posture alone, for, as to their faces, 'twas mere expressionless glimmer and too far off for the wild light in their eyes to show. [20]

Thus in silence swam the Death Ship, heaving solemnly as she went, with tinkling noises breaking from the silver water that seethed from her ponderous bow, as though every foam bell were of precious metal and rang a little music of its own as it glided past. But by this time the sail upon our lee-quarter had greatly grown, and the vigorous red radiance, rained by the sinking luminary in such searching storms of light as crimsoned the very nethermost east to the black water-line, clearly showed her to be a small but stout schooner, hugging the wind under a prodigious pile of canvas, and eating her way into the steady breeze with the ease and speed of a frigate-bird that slopes its black pinions for the windward flight. Her hull was plain to the naked eye and resembled rich old mahogany in the sunset. Her sails blending into one, she might, to the instant's gaze, have passed for a great star rising out of the yellow deep and somewhat empurpled by the atmosphere. It was our own desperately sluggish pace that made her approach magical for swiftness; but there could be no question as to the astonishing nimbleness of her heels. [21]

After a while, Vanderdecken and his men warmed to the sight, and fell a-talking to one another with some show of eagerness, and a deal of pointing on the part of Jans and Arents, whilst Van Vogelaar watched with a hung head and a sullen scowl. Occasionally, Vanderdecken would direct a hot, interrogative glance at me; suddenly he came to where we stood.

"What do you make of that vessel, mynheer?" said he.

"Sir," I replied, "to speak honestly, I do not like her appearance. Two voyages ago my ship was overhauled by just such another fellow as that yonder; she proved to be a Spanish picaroon. We had a hundred-and-fifty troops who, with our sailors, crouched behind the bulwarks and fired into her decks when she shifted her helm to lay us aboard, and this reception made her, I suppose, think us a battle-ship, for she sheared off with a great sound of groaning rising out of her, and pelted from us under a press as if Satan had got hold of her tow-rope." [22]

"What country does her peculiar rig represent?" he asked, looking at the vessel with his hand raised to keep the level rays of the sun off his eyes.

"I cannot be sure, mynheer; French or Spanish; I do not believe her English by the complexion of her canvas. She may prove an American, for you may see that her cloths are mixed with cotton."

The word American seemed to puzzle him as much as the word schooner had, for in his day an American signified an Indian of that continent. However, I noticed that if ever I used a term that was incomprehensible to him, he either dismissed it as coming from one who did not always talk as if he had his full mind, or as some English expression of which the meaning—as being English—was of no concern whatever to his Dutch prejudices. [23]

"Doth she suggest a privateer to your judgment?" he inquired.

I answered "Yes; and more likely a pirate than a privateer, if indeed the terms are not interchangeable."

On this he went to the others, and they conversed as if he had called a council of them; but I could not catch his words, nor did I deem it polite to seem as if I desired to hear what was said.

"Do you really believe her to be what you say, Geoffrey?" said Imogene. [24]

"I do, indeed. The dusk will have fallen before we shall have her near enough to make out her batteries and judge of her crew; but she has the true piratical look, a most lovely hull—low-lying, long and powerful—do you observe it, dearest? A cutwater like a knife, a noble length of bowsprit, and jibbooms, and a mainsail big enough to hold sufficient wind to send a Royal George along at ten knots. If she be not a picaroon, what is her business here? No trader goes rigged like that in these seas. 'Twould be otherwise were this the Pacific. She may be a letter of marque."

"Look!" cried Imogene, "she hoists her flag."

I hollowed my hands and used them for telescopes. The bunting streamed away over the stranger's quarter, but it was a very big flag, and its size, coupled with the wonderful searching light going to her in crimson lancing beams out of the hot flushed west, helped me to discern the tricolour. [25]

"French!" I exclaimed, fetching a quick breath.

Vanderdecken had seen the flag, and was examining it through his ancient tubes. After a little he gave the glass to Van Vogelaar, who, after inspecting the colour, handed it to Arents; then Jans looked.

Vanderdecken called to me, "What signal is that she hath flying?"

I responded, "The flag of the French Republic."

He started, gazed at the others, and then glanced steadfastly at me as if he would assure himself that I did not mock him. He turned again to the schooner, taking the telescope from Jans.

"The French Republic!" I heard him say, with a tremble of wonderment in his rich notes. The mate shrugged his shoulders, with a quick, insolent turning of his back upon me; and the white, fat face of Jans glimmered past him, staring with a gape from me to the schooner. But now the lower limb of the sun was upon the sea-line; it was all cloudless sky just where he was, and the vast, rayless orb, palpitating in waving folds of fire, sank into his own wake of flames. The heavens glowed red to the zenith, and the ruby-coloured clouds moving before the wind looked like smoke issuing from behind the sea where the world was burning furiously. The grey twilight followed fast, and the ocean turned ashen under the slip of moon over the fore yard-arm. The stealing in of the dusk put a new life into the wind, and the harping in our dingy, faded heights was as if many spirits had gathered together up there and were saluting the moon with wild hymns faintly chanted. [26]

CHAPTER III. [28]

THE DEATH SHIP IS BOARDED BY A PIRATE.

I will not say that there is more of melancholy in the slow creeping of darkness over the sea than in the first pale streaking of the dawn, but the shining out of the stars one by one, the stretching of the great plain of the deep into a midnight surface, whether snow-covered with tossing surges or smooth as black marble and placid as the dark velvet sky that bends to the liquid confines, has a mystic character which, even if the dawn held it, would be weak as an impression through the quick dispelling of it by the joyous sun, but which is accentuated in the twilight shadows by their gradual darkening into the blackness of night. I particularly felt the oncoming of the dusk this evening. The glory of the sunset had been great, the twilight brief. Even as the gold and orange faded in the west so did the canvas of our ship steal out spectrally into the grey gloom of the north and east; the water washed past wan as the light of the horny paring of moon; the figures of the four men to windward were changed into dusky, staring statues, and the wake sloped out from the starboard quarter full of eddying sparkles as green as emeralds. The canvas of the schooner, that had shone to the sunset with the glare of yellow satin, faded into a pallid cloud that often bothered the sight with its resemblance to the large puffs of vapour blowing into the east. [29]

"I should be glad to know her intentions," said I, uneasily. "If she be a piratical craft it will not do for you to be seen by her people, Imogene. Is it curiosity only that brings them racing up to us? May be—may be! They will be having good glasses aboard and have been excited by our extraordinary rig." [30]

"Why should I not be seen, Geoffrey?" asked my innocent girl.

"Because, dearest, they may fall in love with and carry you off."

"But if they should take us both?" said she, planting her little hand under my arm.

"Ay, but one would first like to know their calling," I replied, straining my eyes at the vessel that, at the pace she was tearing through it, would be on our quarter within hailing distance in twenty minutes.

What did Vanderdecken mean to do? He made no sign. Fear and passion enough had been raised in him by the Centaur's pursuit; was I to suppose that yonder schooner had failed to alarm him because he was puzzled by her rig and by the substitution of the tricolour for the royal *fleur de lys*?

"Speak to him, Imogene," said I, "that I may follow. They may resent any hints from me if I break in upon them on a sudden. [31]

"Captain," she called in her gentle voice, "is not that vessel chasing us?"

He rounded gravely upon her: "She is apparently desirous of speaking with us, my child. She will be hailing us shortly."

"But if she be a pirate, captain?"

"Doth Herr Fenton still think her so?" he demanded.

"She has the cut of one, sir," said I; "and in any case her hurry to come at us, her careful luff and heavy press of sail, should justify us in suspecting her intentions and preparing for her as an enemy."

"Will the Englishman fight, think ye, captain, if it comes to that?" exclaimed Van Vogelaar, in his harshest, most scoffing voice.

Taking no notice of the mate, I said in a low voice to Imogene, speaking quickly, "*They* have nothing to fear. It is not for a Frenchman's cutlass to end these wretches' doom. I am worried on your account. Dearest, when I bid you, steal to my cabin—you know where it is?" [32]

"Yes."

"And remain there. 'Tis the only hiding-place I can think of. If they board us and rummage the

ship—well, I must wait upon events. In a business of this kind the turns are sudden. All that I can plan now is to take care that you are not seen."

I should have been glad to arm myself, but knew not where to seek for a weapon; but thinking of this for a moment, it struck me that if the schooner threw her people aboard us, my being the only man armed might cost me my life; therefore, unless the whole crew equipped themselves I should find my safest posture one of defencelessness.

"Do these men never fight?" I asked Imogene.

"There has been no occasion for them to do so since I have been in the ship," she answered. "But I do not think they would fight. They are above the need of it." [33]

"Yet they have treasure, they value it, and this should prove them in possession of instincts which would prompt them to protect their property."

"God manages them in His own fashion," said she. "They cannot be reasoned about as men with the hot blood of life in them and existing as we do."

Yet their apathy greatly contradicted the avidity with which they seized whatever of treasure or merchandise they came across in abandoned ships, nor could I reconcile it with the ugly cupidity of the mate and the lively care Vanderdecken took of those capacious chests of which he had exposed to me the sparkling contents of two. Blind as they were, however, to those illustrations of the progress of time which they came across in every ship they encountered, they could not be insensible to the worthlessness of their aged and cankered sakers and their green and pivot-rusted swivels. Their helplessness in this way, backed by the perception in them all that for some reason or other no harm ever befel them from the pursuit of ships or the approach of armed boats, might furnish a clue to the seeming indifference with which they watched the pale shadow of the schooner enlarging upon the darkling froth to leeward, though I am also greatly persuaded that much of the reason of their stolidity lay in their being puzzled by the rig of the schooner and the flag she had flown; nor perhaps were they able to conceive that so small a craft signified mischief, or had room for sailors enough to venture the carrying of a great tall craft like the Braave. But Vanderdecken could not know to what heights piracy had been lifted as a fine art by the audacity and repeated triumphs of the rogues whose real ensign, no matter what other colours they fly, is composed of a skull, cross-bones, and hour-glass upon a black field. [34]

The moon shed no light; but the wind was full of a weak dawn-like glimmer from the wash of the running waters and from the stars which shone brightly among the clouds. In all this while the schooner had never started a rope-yarn. Her white and leaning fabric, swaying with stately grace to the radiant galaxies, resembled an island of ice in the gloom, and the illusion was not a little improved by the seething snow of the cleft and beaten waters about her like to the boiling of the sea at the base of a berg. She showed us her weather side, and heeled so much that I could not see her decks, but there was nothing like a gun-muzzle to be perceived along her. A gilt band under her wash-streak shone out dully at intervals to her plunges, as though a pencil had been dipped in phosphorus and a line of fire drawn. [35]

She was looking up to cross our wake and settle herself upon our weather quarter. Nothing finer as a spectacle did I ever behold at sea than this spacious-winged vessel when she crossed our wake, rearing and roaring through the smother our own keel was tossing up, flashing into the hollows and through the ridges with spray blowing aft over her as though she were some bride of the ocean and streamed her veil behind her as she went, the whole figure of her showing faint in the dull light of the night, yet not so feeble in outline and detail but that I could distinguish the black, snake-like hull hissing through the seas, her sand-coloured decks, a long black gun on the forecastle, and a glittering brass stern-chaser abaft the two black figures gripping the tiller, the great surface of mainsail going pale to its clew at the boom end, a full fathom over the quarter, the swelling and mounting canvas, from flying-jib to little fore-royal, from the iron-hard stay-foresail to the thunderous gaff-topsail on high, dragging and tearing at the sheets and bringing shroud and backstay, guy and halliard, sheet and brace so taut that the fabric raged past with a kind of shrieking music, filling the air as though some giant harp were edging the blast with the resonance of fifty wind-wrung wires. Great heaven! how did my heart go to her! Oh, for two months' command of that storming clipper with Imogene on board! [36]

'Twas a rush past with her; all that I saw I have told you, saving a few men in the bows and a couple of figures watching us near to the two helmsmen. If she mounted guns or swivels along her bulwarks I did not see them. [37]

I overheard Vanderdecken exclaim, "It is as I surmised; she hath but a handful of a crew; she merely wishes to speak us."

Van Vogelaar returned some gruff answer in which he introduced my name, but that was all I heard of it. [38]

Once well on our weather quarter, the schooner ported her helm, luffing close; her gaff-topsail, flying-jib, royal and topgallant sail melted to the hauling upon clewlines and downhauls as though they had been of snow and had vanished upon the black damp wind; but even with the tack of her mainsail up, they had to keep shaking the breeze out of the small sail she showed, to prevent her from sliding past us.

"Oh, ze sheep ahoy!" sung out one of the two figures on the quarter-deck, the man coming down to the lee rail to hail, "What sheep air you?"

As with the Centaur, so now, Vanderdecken made no response to this inquiry. He and the others stood grimly silent watching the schooner, as immobile as graven images.

I said to Imogene, "'Tis dark enough to show the phosphor upon the ship. That should give them a hint. Mark how vividly the shining crawls about these decks." [39]

"Ze sheep ahoy!" shouted the man from the schooner that lay to windward, tossing her bows and shaking the spray off her like any champing and curvetting steed angrily reined in and smoking his impatience through his nostrils. "What sheep air you?"

Vanderdecken stepped his towering figure on to the bulwark; "The Braave," he cried, sending his majestic voice ringing like a note of thunder through the wind.

"Vhat ees your country?" yelled the other.

Vanderdecken did not apparently understand the question, but probably assuming that these sea-interrogatories followed in the usual manner, answered, "From Batavia to Amsterdam," speaking as the schooner's man did in English, but with an accent as strongly Dutch as the other's was French.

Thought I, he will see that we are a Holland ship, and as France and their High Mightinesses are on good terms he may sheer off. But even as this fancy or hope crossed my mind, a sudden order was shouted out on the schooner and in a breath the vessel's hatches began to vomit men. They tumbled up in masses, blackening the white decks, and a gleam of arms went rippling among them. [40]

"Captain Vanderdecken!" I bawled, "that fellow is a pirate! Mind, sir, or she will be aboard of you in another minute!" And not stopping to heed the effect of my words, I grasped Imogene by the hand and ran with her off the poop. "Get you to my cabin, dearest, they are pirates and will be tumbling in masses over the rail directly."

I pressed my lips to her cheek and she glided like a phantom down the hatch-ladder.

What I relied on by advising her concealment I could not have explained; since those who rummaged the vessel were pretty sure to enter the cabins. But my instincts urging me to hide her away from the first spring of the men on to our deck, I took their counsel as a sort of mysterious wisdom put into me by God for her protection; it coming to this in short—that there might be a chance of their overlooking her if she hid below, whereas they were bound to see her if she remained on deck, to be ravished by her beauty, and, supposing them pirates, to carry her off as a part of their booty, according to the custom of those horrid villains. [41]

I stepped away from the hatch, lest it might be supposed I was guarding it, and stationed myself in the deep shadow under the quarter-deck ladder, where it and the overhanging deck combined cast an ink-like shade. There was small need to look for the schooner, you could hear her hissing like red-hot iron through the water as she came sweeping down upon our quarter under a slightly ported helm, ready to starboard for the heave of the grapnels and the foaming range alongside. There was no show of consternation among the crew of the Death Ship; nay, if emotion of any sort were at all visible, you would have termed it a mere kind of dull, muddled, Dutch curiosity. I had fancied they would jump to arm themselves and assume some posture of defence; instead of this they had gathered themselves together in several lounging groups about the waist and gangway, many of them with pipes in their mouths, the fire of which glowed in bright, red spots against the green and lambent glitterings upon such woodwork as formed their background; and thus they hung with never a monosyllable uttered among them, their silence, their indifference, their combination of ghostly characteristics, with their substantial, glooming shapes, more terrifying to my mind than had every man of them a carbine pointing from his shoulder, with a crew forward as numerous again standing match in hand at twenty murdering pieces! [43]

All in an instant the shadow of the schooner's canvas was in the air deepening the gloom upon our decks with a midnight tincture; you heard the snarling wash of water boiling between the two vessels; the claws of the grapnels flung from the bows and stern of the Frenchman gripped our aged bulwark with a crunching sound, and the mystical fires in the wood burnt out to the biting iron like lighted tinder blown upon. Then, in a breath, I saw the heads of twenty or thirty fellows along the line of the bulwark rail, and as they sprang as monkeys might into our ship, one of them that grasped a pistol exploded it, and the yellow flash was like the swift waving of a torch, in the glare of which the faces of the silent, staring, indifferent sailors of the Braave glanced in a very nightmare of white, unholy countenances.

There was some yelping and howling among the Frenchmen as they tumbled inboard—indeed, the seamen of that nation cannot budge an inch without making as much noise as would last a British fore-castle several voyages; but their clamour sounded to me very much like the cries of men who did not relish their errand and raised these shouts for the same reason that sets a boy whistling on a road in a dark night. They jumped from the rail in slap-dash style indeed, waving their cutlasses and flourishing their pikes; but whether it was that they were suddenly confounded by the silence on our decks, or that they had caught sight in the pistol flash of the faces of the Death Ship's crew, or that the suspicion of our true character, which must have been excited in them by the glow upon our hull and by the ancient appearance of our spars, was quickly and in a panic way confirmed and developed by the glitterings upon our deck, the aspect of our ordnance, the antiquity suggested by the arrangement of our quarter-deck and poop—all of these points visible enough in the wild, faint light that swarmed about the air but all of them taking ghostly and bewildering, ay, and terrifying emphasis from the very dusk in which they were surveyed; whatever the cause, 'tis as sure as that I live who write this, that instead of their making a scamper along the decks, charging the Dutch seamen, flinging themselves down the hatchways and the like, all which was to have been expected, they suddenly came to a dead stand, even massing themselves in a body and shoving and elbowing one another, for such [45]

courage, maybe, as is to be found in the feel of a fellow-being's ribs, whilst they peered with eyes bright with alarm at the phlegmatic sailors of Vanderdecken and around then at the ship, talking in fierce short whispers and pointing.

It takes time to record the events of thirty seconds, though all that now happened might have been compassed whilst a man told that space. 'Twas as if the frosty, blighting Curse of the ship they had dashed into had come upon their tongues, and hearts and souls. Over the side, where the grappling schooner lay, heaving with a catacractal roaring of water sounding out of the sea between, as the Flying Dutchman rolled ponderously towards her, loud orders in French were being delivered, mixed with passionate callings to the boarders upon our decks; the schooner's sails waved like the dark pinions of some monstrous sea-fowl past ours, which still drew, no brace having been touched. I guessed there were thirty in all that had leapt aboard, some of them negroes, all of them wildly attired in true buccaneering fashion, so far as the darkness suffered my eyes to see, in boots and sashes, and blouses and lolling caps; there they stood in a huddle of figures with lightning-like twitching gleams shooting off their naked weapons as they pointed or swayed or feverishly moved, staring about them. Some gazed up at the poop, where, as I presently discovered, stood the giant figure of Vanderdecken, his mates and the boatswain beside him, shapes of bronze motionlessly and silently watching. But the affrighting element—more terrible than the hellish glarings upon the planks, bulwarks and masts, more scaring than the amazing suggestions—to a sailor's eye—of the old guns, the two boats and all other such furniture as was to be embraced in that gloom—was the crowd of glimmering faces, the mechanic postures, the grave-yard dumbness of the body of spectral mariners who surveyed the boarding party in clusters, shadowy, and spirit-like. [46]

I felt the inspiration, and, with a pang of Heaven-directed sympathy with the terrors working in the Frenchmen's breasts, which needed but a cry to make them explode, I shouted from the blackness of my ambush, in a voice to which my sense of the stake the warning signified in its failure or success, lent a hurricane note: "*Sauvez vous! Sauvez vous! C'est l'Hollandais Volant!*" [47]

What manner of Paris speech this was, and with what accent delivered, I never paused to consider; the effect was as if a thunder-bolt had fallen and burst among them. With one general roar of *l'Hollandais Volant!* the whole mob of them fled to the side, many dropping their weapons the better to scramble and jump. Why, you see that shout of mine exactly expressed their fears, it made the panic common; and 'twas with something of a scream in their way of letting out the breath in their echoing of my shout that they vanished, leaping like rats without looking to see what they should hit with their heads or tails. [48]

I sprang up the quarter-deck ladder to observe what followed, and beheld sure enough, the towering outline of Vanderdecken standing at the rail that protected the fore-part of the poop-deck gazing down upon the schooner with his arms folded and his attitude expressing a lifelessness not to be conveyed by the pen, though the greatest of living artists in words ventured it. Against the side were the two mates and Jans looking on at a scene to whose stir, clamour, excitement, they seemed to oppose deaf ears and insensible eyes. Small wonder that the Frenchmen should have fled to my shout, fronted and backed as they were in that part of the ship into which they had leapt, and where they had come to an affrighted stand, by the grisly and sable shapes of Vanderdecken and his comrades aft, and by the groups of leprous-tinctured anatomies forward. [49]

I peered over the rail. The two vessels lay grinding together, and as the tall fabric of the Death Ship leaned to the schooner, you thought she would crush and beat her down, but with the regularity of a pulse the dark folds of water swept the little vessel clear, sometimes raising her when our ship lay aslant to the level of our upper deck, and giving me, therefore, a mighty good prospect of what was happening in her. Both vessels were off the wind and were surging through it with a prodigious hissing betwixt their sides. [50]

The fright of the boarders had proved contagious. I shall never forget the sight! Small as the schooner was, there could not have been less than ninety men on her decks, and they made a very hell of the atmosphere about them with the raving notes in their cries and bawlings. My knowledge of French was small, but some of their screams I could follow, as for instance: "'Tis the Flying Dutchman!"

"Cut us adrift! Cut us adrift!"

"Flatten in those head-sheets! Shove her off! Shove her off! Pole her, my children, with a couple of sweeps!"

"Now she starts. No! What holds her? Ha! ha! the weather topsail-brace has fouled the Hollander's fore-topsail yard-arm. No use going aloft! Let go of it—let go of it—that it may overhaul itself!" [51]

Imagine about four-score throats—some with the guttural thickness of the negro's utterance—all together roaring and delivering orders such as those of which I have given you specimens! Figure the decks throbbing with men rushing with apparent aimlessness from one side to the other, from one end to the other—not a vestige of discipline among them—a drowning yell or two coming up from between the ships where some wretch that had fallen overboard was holding on—the sails shaking, the water washing beyond in a glaring white that gave a startling distinctness to the shape of the schooner as she rose softly to the level of our upper deck bulwarks upon the seething snow!

Why, no matter how strongly imagination should present the picture, what is the simulacrum as compared to that reality which I need but close these eyes to witness afresh? The wildness of the [52]

scene took a particular spirit from the frowning, rocking mass of the Death Ship—the tomb-like silence in her—the still and glooming shapes watching the throes and convulsions of the terrified Frenchmen and negroes from the poop and forward over the rail—the diabolic glowing in her timbers—the swaying of her dusky canvas like the nodding of leviathan funeral plumes—the dance of the slender slip of moon among the rigging, defining the vast platforms of the barricaded tops, monstrous bulgings of blackness up there as though a body of electric cloud swung bulbously at each lower masthead.

They had the sense to cut the lines which held them by their grapnels to our ship, and presently to my great joy—for if they were true pirates, as there was good reason to believe from their appearance and manner of laying us aboard, 'twas impossible to feel sure that the fiercer spirits among them might not presently rally the rest—the schooner went scraping and forging past ahead of us; snapping her topgallant mast short off, with the royal yard upon it, by some brace, stay or backstay fouling us in a way the darkness would not suffer me to witness, and in a few minutes she had crossed our bows and was running away into the north east, rapidly expanding her canvas as she went, and quickly melting into the darkness. [53]

I stopped to fetch a few breaths and to make sure of the Frenchman's evanishment by watching. More excitement and dread had been packed into this time than I know how to tell of.

I slipped to the hatch on the upper deck, descended a tread or two, and softly called. In a minute I espied the white face of my dearest upturned to me amidst the well-like obscurity. [54]

"They are gone," said I, "the danger is over."

She instantly stepped up.

"I heard you cry out 'The Flying Dutchman! Save yourselves!'" she exclaimed, with a music almost of merriment in her voice. "It was a bold fancy! What helter-skelter followed!"

I took her hand and we entered the cabin. The richly-coloured old lamp was alight, the clock ticked hoarsely, you heard the scraping of the parrot clawing about her cage.

"Oh," she cried, "what a dismal place is that they have given you to sleep in! I believed I was hardened to the dreadful flickerings upon the deck and sides, but they scared me to the heart in that cell—and the noises too in the hold! Oh, Geoffrey, how severe is our fate! Shall we ever escape?" [55]

"Yes, my dearest, but not by ships, as I have all along told you. A chance will offer, and be you sure, Imogene, it will find me ready. Wondrous is God's ordering! Think, my dear, that in the very Curse that rests upon this ship has lain our salvation! Suppose this vessel any other craft and boarded by those villains, negroes of the Antilles, and white ruffians red-handed from the Spanish Main—'tis likely they were so and are cruising here for the rich traders—by this time where would my soul be? and *you*—ay, there is a virtue in this Curse! It is a monstrous thought—but, indeed, I could take Vanderdecken by the hand for the impiety that has carried you clear of a destiny as awful in its way as the doom these unhappy wretches are immortally facing."

She shuddered and wept a little, and looked at me with eyes the brighter for those tears which I dared not kiss away in that public cabin. [56]

CHAPTER IV. [57]

MY LIFE IS AGAIN ATTEMPTED.

Vanderdecken and the mate came below soon after this, and Prins set a bowl of punch before them. The captain seated himself in his solemn way, and the mate took Imogene's place—that is, over against my seat—she being at my side. They filled their pipes and smoked in a silence that, saving Vanderdecken's asking me to drink, would, I believe, have remained unbroken but for Imogene.

She said: "Captain, there is no fear, I hope, of those pirates attempting to board us again in the darkness?"

"Did Herr Fenton tell you they were pirates?" he replied, with the unsmiling softness of expression he was used to look upon her with. [58]

"Surely they were pirates?" she cried.

"Be it so, my child," said he, "what doth it signify? They are gone; I do not fear they will return."

Being extremely curious to know what sense he had of this strange adventure, I exclaimed, "It is very surprising, mynheer, that a score of ruffians, armed to the teeth, should fling themselves into this ship for no other purpose, seemingly, than to leap out of her again."

"They imagined us English, Herr Fenton," said Van Vogelaar, with a snarl in his voice and a sneer on his lip.

I did not instantly catch the drift of his sarcasm.

"Doth any man suppose," said Vanderdecken, rearing his great figure and proudly surveying me, "that the guns of our admirals have thundered in vain? You seek an interpretation of the Frenchman's behaviour? Surely by this time all Englishmen should understand the greatness of [59]

the terror our flag everywhere strikes! Twice you have witnessed this—in the hasty retreat of your man-of-war, and this night in the conduct of the French schooner. Tell me," he cried, with new fires leaping into his eyes, "how I am to resolve the panic-terror of the boarding party, if I am not to believe that until they were on our decks, had looked round them and beheld our men, they knew not for certain the nation to which the Braave belonged?"

I bowed very gravely as I acquiesced.

"Skipper," cried Van Vogelaar, "is it not likely that they imagined us English? They showed no fear till our country spoke in the faces of our sailors."

A faint smile of scorn curled the lips of Imogene, but the contempt of her English heart quickly faded into an expression of compassion and sadness when she let her eyes travel from the sinister and ugly mate to the majestic countenance of the commander. But no more was said. The two men puffed at their pipes and sipped at their silver mugs in silence, and at long intervals only did Imogene and I exchange a word. [60]

That they should so easily have been able to satisfy the surprise which the behaviour of the schooner must have excited in them was astonishing. Yet a little reflection made me see that, since they did not know they were accursed and were ignorant of the horror and terror with which mariners of all countries viewed them, it was almost inevitable they should attribute the flight of ships from them either to a selfishness and indifference to their needs or to the dread which they inspired as a vessel that flew the Dutch flag. Yet may I, without irreverence, suggest that much of the venom of the Curse must be neutralised by their ignorance of their condition and their inability to drive conjecture to the truth of whatever befel them? The shaping of their doom is beyond the power of reason to grasp, and I feel, therefore, the impiety of criticism. Nevertheless, I must say that, since it is Heaven's will these wretches should be afflicted with earthly immortality, it is inexplicable that the torments which perception of the truth would create, should be balsamed into painlessness by ignorance. For hath not the Curse the idleness of that kind of human revenge which strikes and mutilates an enemy already dead? [61]

Imogene withdrew to her cabin at about half-an-hour after nine; Vanderdecken went on deck and I sat alone smoking, thinking of the surprising events of the evening, scheming how to escape and making my heart very heavy with a passionate hopeless yearning for the time to come when, secure upon the soil of our beloved land, I should be calling the delicate, lovely, lonely girl—the amber-haired fairy of this Death Ship—my own! The slow, rusty, saw-like ticking of the ancient clock was an extremely melancholy noise, and I abhorred its chimes too, not because of the sound, that was very sonorously melodious, but because it startled the parrot into its ugly, hobgoblin croak. It was a detestable exclamation to salute the ears of a man whose thoughts ran in the very strain of that coarse, comminatory confirmation of them. [62]

The ancient salt and weedy smell of the ship—a distinguishable thing in the after part—if it was somewhat mitigated forward by the greasy smoke and steam of the cook-house—lent a peculiar accentuation to the various shinings of the lamp, in whose many-coloured radiance some of the dusky oval-framed paintings loomed out red, others green, the ponderous beams of the upper deck blue, the captain's tall, velvet-backed chair yellow, and so on; all these tints blending into a faint unearthly atmosphere as they stole dying to the bulkhead of the state-room, behind whose larboard door my love lay sleeping. [63]

I was glad to quit the place, and went on deck. There was nothing to be seen saving the foam that flashed near and crawled afar, the glitter of the low-lying stars like the sparkle of torches on ships dipping upon the horizon, a sullen movement of dark clouds on high, and the moon red as an angry scar up-curved over the western horizon. 'Twas on a sudden I noticed that we were making a fair wind of the breeze. Yes, on looking aloft I perceived that the yards were braced in, lying so as to show the wind to be blowing about one point abaft the beam. It was strange that in the cabin I had not heard any noise to denote that the men were trimming sail, no sound of rope flung down in coils, no rusty cheeping cry from the aged blocks, no squeak of truss or parrel, or tread of foot. That was, maybe, because the men had fallen dumbly, as usual, to the job of hauling and pulling, so that my attention had not been drawn to such noises as were raised. Be this as it may, for the first time since I had been in the ship the wind had come fair. By the situation of the Cross, I guessed she was being headed about west-north-west, which would carry us to Agulhas, and also into the Ethiopic Sea. [64]

For a little bit I was sensible of a degree of excitement; there had come a break; it was no longer a hopeless ratching to the north, then a bleak, slanting drift into the mighty solitude of the south; the ship was going home! But with that thought my spirits sank. Home? What home had she but these wild, wide waters? What other lot than the gentle cradling or tempestuous smiting of these surges, the crying of the winds of the southern ocean in her rigging, the desolate scream of the lonely sea-bird in her wake, the white sunshine of the blue heavens, the levin-brand of the electric storm, the midnight veil of the black hurricane, the wide, snow-like light of the northern moon, over and over again! No! I was mortal, at least, with the plain understanding of a healthy man, and was not to be cheated by a flowing sheet as though mine, too, was the unholy immortality with its human yearnings and earthly labours of the men who manned this Death Ship. The change was but one of the deceits of their heavy sentence, and with an inward prayer that for me and for my precious one it might work out some profitable issue, I went to my cabin. [65]

The door hung on a hook that held it open by the length of a finger; outside swung the lamp that sent light sufficient to me through the interstice. At midnight, this lamp was borne away by Prins, whose final duty before going to his sleeping-place lay in this. It was a regular custom, and whenever it happened that I stayed on deck beyond midnight, then I had to "turn in," as best I

could, in the dark. Yet, dark I could not term my cabin at night, 'twas rather "darkness visible," as Milton hath it; for though the glowing crawlings yielded no radiance, no, no more than a mirrored star shining out of the wet blackness of a well, yet such objects as intercepted it, it revealed, as a suspended coat, for instance, that, hanging against the bulkhead, had its figure limned against the phosphor, as though 'twas blotted there in ink, very faithful in outline. [66]

There was enough in the events of the evening to keep my brain occupied and my eyes open, and I lay thus for some half-hour, thinking and watching the unnatural lights, and wondering why they should be there, since I had never beheld the like glowing in the most ancient marine structure I had ever visited, when, on a sudden, I was sensible of someone standing outside the cabin door and listening, as it appeared. It was a peculiar, regular breathing sound, that gave me to know this—a respiration as rhythmic as that of a sleeping man whose slumber is peaceful. An instant after I heard the *click* of the hook of the door lightly lifted out of the staple, but all so quietly that the noise would have been inaudible amid the straining of the rocking vessel if my attention had not been rendered piercing by that solemn and strong breathing, rising very plainly above the sounds in the hold. [67]

I sprang on to the deck; being in my socks I fell on my feet noiselessly. Against the greenish glitterings about the cabin I easily made out the figure of a man, standing within the door, holding it in a posture of eager listening. My breath grew thick and short; the horror of this situation is not to be conceived. It was not as though I were in an earthly ship, for in that case, no matter who the midnight intruder, he would have had a mortal throat for my fingers to close upon. But whoever this shape might be he belonged to the Death Ship, and 'twas frightful to see his outline, black as the atmosphere of a churchyard grave, thrown out, in its posture of watching and listening, by the fiery, writhing fibrines of the phosphor, to know that the deep and hollow breathing came from a figure in whom life was a monstrous simulation, to feel that his confrontment by an Hercules or a Goliath would as little quail his endeavilled spirit as the dead are to be terrified by the menaces of the living. [68]

I watched with half-suffocated respiration. Since his outline was plain it was sure mine was so likewise; but I could not distinguish that he was looking towards the place where I stood, that is, in the middle of the after bulkhead, a couple of paces from the foot of the bed, whither I had backed on his entering.

He very softly closed the door, on which I drew myself up waiting for the onslaught I was certain he designed, though when I considered what thing it was I should be dealing with, the sense of my helplessness came very near to breaking me down. Having closed the door he approached the bed, and bent his head down as though listening; then, with amazing swiftness, stabbed at the bed four times, each blow, with the vehemence of it, making a distinct sound; after which he hung over the bed with his arm uplifted and his head bent as though he would make sure by listening that he had dispatched me. His figure was so plain that it was as if you should cut out the shape of a man in black paper and paste it upon a dull yellow ground. From the upraised hand I could distinguish the projection of a knife or small sword not less than a foot long. He was not apparently easily satisfied that I lay dead; for he kept his menacing, hearkening posture while I could have counted sixty; he then went lightly to the door, opened it and passed out. [69]

Whether he walked in his sleep—and certainly his motions were those of a somnambulist—or whether he was influenced by some condition of his doom, of a character as un conjecturable as the manner in which vitality was preserved among the crew, who were years and years ago dead in time, I could not conceive; but, resolved to discover him if I could, I followed on his heels, catching the door as it swung from his grasp; but there was no need to close it nor slip a foot beyond the coaming; for, the glimmer all about serving my sight, I saw him enter the cabin opposite—that in which Van Vogelaar slept, whereby I knew who it was that would have assassinated me that night had I slept when I lay down. [70]

You will easily credit that this man had murdered sleep so far as I was concerned. I would not go on deck, and I would not lie down either, for what I had beheld had so wrought in my imagination that the mere idea of resting upon the holes which the villain's blade had made in the aged mattress filled me with horror. So for the rest of the night I walked about the cabin or rested on the edge of the bed, praying for daylight, and repeatedly commending myself to God; for, this being the second time my life had been attempted by the same hand, I could not question, if it was the will of Heaven this hideous cruise should be prolonged, the third venture would be successful, and in the dreadful loneliness and luminous blackness of that cabin I viewed myself as a dead man, and could have wept with rage and grief when thinking of my helplessness and of Imogene's fate. [71]

However, I clearly saw that no good could attend my telling Vanderdecken of his mate's hunger for my life. If Van Vogelaar had walked in his sleep he would not know what he had done; he would call me a liar for charging him with it, and I might count upon Vanderdecken siding with him in any case. The Dutch are a less savage people than they were, but in the age to which this ship's company belonged they were the most inhuman people in Europe, perhaps in the world, and such were the barbarities they were guilty of, that the passage of two centuries—and it would be the same if it were the passage of two hundred centuries—leaves their crimes as fresh and smoking to God as the blood of their victims at the time of their being done to death. Consider their treatment of sailors: how for a petty theft they would proclaim a man infamous at the fore-mast; torture him into confession by attaching heavy weights to his feet, running him aloft, and then letting him fall; keel-haul him, that is, draw him several times under the ship's keel; affix him to the mast by nailing him to it by a knife passed through his hand; flog him to the extent of three hundred to five hundred strokes, then pickle his bleeding mangled back; fling him [72]

[73]

ironed into the hold: there half-starve him till they met with a bare, barren, lonely rock upon which they would set and leave him. Read how they treated the English at Amboyna! No! I had the Dutch of the seventeenth century to deal with in these men, not the Hollanders of my day, borrowing fine airs from the Germans and sweetening their throats with French *à la mode* phrases. But how to escape them? There were moments when I paced my cabin like a madman and with a madman's thoughts in me too.

I brought a haggard face with me to the breakfast table, and Imogene surveyed me with an eye full of inquiry and anxiety. My thoughts, acting with my wakefulness, had told, and I fancied that even Vanderdecken suffered his gaze to rest upon me as though he marked a change. Van Vogelaar's manner satisfied me that he had acted in his sleep or under some spell that stupefied the understanding whilst it gave the spirit full play, for he discovered nothing of that wonder and terror which had been visible in him when I entered the cabin after his former attempt to destroy me, which certainly had not been the case had he quitted my bedside in the belief that I was dead of my wounds. [74]

Vanderdecken talked of the fair wind; a sort of satisfaction illuminated his sombre austerity; though his dignity was prodigious and his commanding manner full of an haughty and forbidding sternness, he was nevertheless politer to me than he had ever yet been, going to the length of talking about the food on the table, the excellent quality of the African Guinea fowl and bustard, recommending me to taste of a dish of marmalade, and relating a story of a privateer having left behind him, in a ship he had clapt aboard of, a number of boxes which seemed to be full of marmalade, but which in reality were loaded with virgin silver. But it was the fair wind that produced this civility, though after last night's business 'twas welcome enough let the cause be what it would. [75]

No sooner had Imogene and I a chance of speaking alone than she asked me what was the matter. I told her how Van Vogelaar had entered my cabin and stabbed at my bed. She turned white; her beautiful eyes grew large and bright with terror; she clasped her hands and for some moments could not speak. Her agitation diminished, however, when she understood that Van Vogelaar walked in his sleep, though she was still very white when she cried: "If you had been sleeping when he entered you would now be dead!"

I answered: "What he does in his sleep he may do awake. This action is like the whispers of a dreamer, babbling out his conscience. It is in his soul to kill me, and long thinking upon it has moved him to the deed in his sleep." [76]

"Oh, Geoffrey, did I not beg you to secure your door?"

"Ay—that shall be looked to in future, I warrant you. But why should this man, of all the others, especially thirst for my life? How have I wronged him?"

She replied by pointing out that the crew of my ship had fired upon him; also that in the days of his natural life he was no doubt a villain at heart and that all the features of his devilish nature attended him through his doom; that being more jealous, rapacious and avaricious than the others, he might regard my presence as a menace to his share of the treasure, and hunger after my destruction; so that, come what might, I should never be able to report the wealth that lay in the ship's hold.

There was no doubt my darling was right, impossible as I found it to reconcile these earthly and human passions and motives with his supernatural being; and particularly the indifference he exhibited on the previous evening when the Frenchman came running us aboard, with his concern for his share in the gold, jewels and plate below. But I had long abandoned all speculation concerning what I must term the intellectual aspect of these miserable creatures. You will suppose that we found a fruitful text in this mate's somnambulistic attack upon me, and that we talked at great length about our chances of escape and the necessity Van Vogelaar's malignant hate put me under of inventing some method to deliver ourselves by, be the risks of it what they might. Yet it was but talk. [77]

Indeed, never did prisoners' outlook appear more hopeless. Compared to this floating jail, compassed about by the mighty sea, the walls of a citadel were as paper, the bars of a dungeon's window as packthread. But the most bitter and invincible barrier of all was Captain Vanderdecken's resolution to carry Imogene with him in this ship to Amsterdam. [78]

CHAPTER V. [79]

A TEMPEST BURSTS UPON US.

I did not, as I had told Imogene, need a second hint to secure my life by night, however it might fall out with me in the day. By looking about I met with a piece of ratline stuff which I hid in my cabin, and when the night came I secured one end to the hook of the door, passing the other end through the staple and then making it fast to my wrist; so that, the door being shut, no one could enter without tweaking or straining my arm with such violence as was sure to awake me.

Meanwhile the fair wind hung very steady, blowing about south, a pleasant breeze that yielded a pure blue sky and small puff-shaped clouds exceedingly white; the sea was also of a very lovely sapphire, twinkling and sparkling in the north like a sheet of silver cloth set a-trembling. The [80]

Braave stole along softly, with but little seething and hissing noises about her now that her yards lay braced well in. I would think whilst I watched her flowing sheets, the long bosoms of her canvas swelling forwards with the slack bolt-ropes arched like a bow, and the mizzen rounding from its lateen yard, backed by the skeleton remains of the great poop lantern, that she needed but the bravery of fresh paint, a new ancient, pennons and streamers, bright pettaroes or swivels, glass for the lanterns and gilt for her galleries and beak, to render her as picturesque and romantic a vessel as ever sailed in that mighty procession, in whose van streamed the triumphant insignia of the great Spanish, Dutch and Portuguese Admirals.

'Twas impossible to doubt that every man in the ship believed that he was going home this time. There was an air of alacrity in them that had never before been noticeable. They would look eagerly seawards over the bows, gazing thus for long minutes at a time. Whenever the log was hove I'd mark one or more inquire the speed of the men who had held the reel or dragged in the line, as they went forward. They smoked incessantly, with an air of dull and heavy satisfaction in their faces. [81]

I observed a lifting, so to speak, of the stupor off Vanderdecken. His trances—I mean those sudden fits of death-like insensibility which I can only liken to cataleptic attacks—were few, whence I concluded that his spirit, or whatever might be the nature of the essence that owned his great and majestic frame for a tabernacle—had gathered an increase of vitality from the invigorated hope and brisk desires which the fair wind had raised. In Van Vogelaar I witnessed no change. Possibly the dark shadows of my fears being on him held him gloomy and malignant to my sight. Likewise, I was careful to keep a wide space between us, save at meals, and never to have my back upon him, for to be sure, if I was to be murdered by the rogue, it should not be for the want of a bright look-out on my part. [82]

This state of things continued for three days. A powerful current runs to the westward in these seas, and adding its impulse to our progress, I calculated that in those seventy-two hours we made not less than an hundred and thirty-three leagues. As time passed my wonder increased, for though I knew not our position, and never durst ask Vanderdecken what situation his dead-reckoning assigned us, I could not conceive—recollecting the place in which the Saracen was when we sighted the Death Ship—that we had been blown, during the time I had been on board, into a very remote sea; and hence 'twas reasonable that I should think it wanted but a few days sailing after this pattern to carry us round the Cape. Therefore I say my wonder grew, for whilst it was impious to suppose that the Devil could contrive that this ship should outwit the Sentence, yet our steady progress caused me to waver in my faith in the stern assurance of the vessel's doom. [83]

I would say to Imogene: "The breeze holds; see how steady is the look of the southern sky! Is it possible that this wind will carry her round?"

To which she would answer: "No, the change will come. Oh, Geoffrey, it will come, though no more than the ship's length lay between her and the limit which you believe the Curse has marked out for her upon this sea."

Then I would agree with her. But afterwards, coming on deck in the afternoon, or next morning, and finding the Death Ship pushing along, her head pointing north-west, her sails full, the wake sliding away astern in a satin smoothness, wonder and doubt would again possess me, and twenty odd fancies occur, such as, "Suppose the Sentence has been remitted! Suppose it be the Will of Heaven this ship should return to Amsterdam, that a final expiation of Vanderdecken's wrong-doing might be accomplished in his and his miserable crew's beholding with their own eyes the extinction of those houses they had yearned for, and the tombs—if aught of memorial in that way remain—of those hearts whose beating they hoped to feel upon their own?" [84]

Such thoughts would set me talking to Imogene.

"Conceive of this ship's arrival in the Texel! What consternation, what astonishment would she arouse! What mighty crowds would flock to view her!" And in the hurry and ardency of my imagination, I would go on figuring the looks and behaviour of the people as our ghastly crew stepped ashore, asking one and another after their wives and children, those Alidas, Geertruidas, Titias, Emelies, Cornelias, Johannas, Fedoras, Engelinas, and Christinas, and those Antonys, Hendricks, Jans, Tjaarts, Lodewyks, Abrahams, Willems, Peters, and Fredericks, whose very memory, let alone their dust, was as utterly gone as the ashes in any pipe forward there when the fire had been tapped out of the bowl overboard. [85]

During the night of the third day the wind held steadily. I left the deck a little before midnight, having passed some hours of the darkness in the company of my love, and our sails were then full with the prosperous wind, the ship passing along over the quiet sea in a great shadow, the stars very piercing, and the light of their colours sharp and lovely; but on coming from my cabin next morning, I found the breeze gone; the ship was rolling upon a swell coming with some power from the westwards; and the dead cloths of the canvas striking a small thunder into the motionless air as they beat against the masts with the weary, monotonous swaying of those spars. [86]

The change had come! The swell was full of foreboding; it was as my heart had foreseen, spite of the wonder and inventions of my imagination; but nevertheless, the perception of that polished sea heaving into the dimness of the distant sky, the sight of the deadness of the calm that had slued the Death Ship till her sprit-topsail veiled and disclosed the oozing sun as she bowed with her beak pointing into the east, brought a disappointment that sickened me to the soul.

"Great God," I cried within myself, "is this experience to end only with my death!" and I entered the cabin in so melancholy a mood that I could scarce hold up my head for the heaviness in my

eyes and brain.

Imogene was alone. I kissed her hand and fondled it. She instantly observed my depression, and said, gently, "I feared this calm would dishearten you. But it was inevitable, dear. It was impossible a change of some kind should be delayed." [87]

"Yes, but it breaks me down to think of another long, soul-starving, stormy drive into the south-east, another terrible spell of Vanderdecken's savage manners—of Van Vogelaar's murderous attempts, and of the hopelessness afterwards. Oh, my love! the hopelessness afterwards!—when the weather breaks and the wind blows fair again. Will it never end?"

She cast her eyes down with a swift motion of her finger to her lips. I turned, as Vanderdecken approached. The darkness of his inward rage lay heavy upon the folds of his brow; 'tis no exaggeration to apply to his appearance the strong words of Beaumont:

"There are a thousand furies in his looks,
And in his deadly silence more loud horror
Than, when in Hell, the tortur'd and tormentors
Contend whose shrieks are greatest!" [88]

He came without speaking to his chair, turning his fiery eyes from Imogene to me without saluting us. A moment after Van Vogelaar arrived.

We took our places, but none spoke. One side-long look the mate darted at me under his parchment-coloured lids, and malice and hate were strong in it. I could see that Imogene was awed and terrified by the captain's manner. You dreaded to hear him speak. His stillness was that of a slowly ripening tempest and his sultry, forbidding, darkening bearing seemed to thicken the very atmosphere about him till you drew your breath with labour. He drank a silver cupfull of wine, but ate nothing.

The mate on the other hand plied his knife and fork with a surly heartiness. For my part, I felt as though a mouthful must choke me; yet I made out to eat that these men should not think I was afraid. I believe Imogene would have gone to her cabin but for her anxiety to support and encourage me, so to say, by her presence. [89]

"What horrible curse do we carry in this ship," presently exclaimed Vanderdecken, speaking with a hoarse muttering that had no note of the familiar melodious richness, "that all winds which might blow us westwards die before the meridian of Agulhas is reached? What is there in these masts to poison the breeze? Do we spread sails woven in the Devil's loom? Have we a Jonah among us?"

"Skipper!" cried Van Vogelaar, "Is it Herr Fenton, think you? Measure the luck he carries by what hath happened since he has been in this ship. Six days of storm!" He held up his fingers with a furious gesture. "Twice, in a few hours, have our lives, our treasure, our ship been imperilled! Note, now, this westerly swell, this stagnant atmosphere, and a dimness in the west that will have grown into storm and wind ere the afternoon watch be ended." [90]

"He speaks to my prejudice," I exclaimed, addressing Vanderdecken; "let him be candid. His tongue is injurious to the Hollander's love of honour. Mynheer, consider: He talks of the six days of storm—that weather had been brewed before my ship sighted yours. Of the English man-of-war and the French pirate; why not of the wreck that yielded you a bountiful store of needful things? He knows—as you do, Herr Vanderdecken, that Englishmen—least of all English mariners—are not among those who practise sorcery. This change is the concern of that Being who has yet to judge this man. If he charges me with the control of the elements, then, by the Majesty of Heaven, he basely lies even in his rash and impious effort to do me, a weak and erring mortal, honour!" [91]

With which I turned upon the villain and stared at him with eyes fuller of more potent fury flashed into them by the rage of my healthy, earthly manhood than could possibly possess him out of that dusty sepulchre of his body which lived by the Curse alone. He shrunk away from me, looking at his skipper.

"Captain Vanderdecken," broke in the sweet voice of Imogene, "you will not let Herr Van Vogelaar's intemperate accusations influence your love of justice. Herr Fenton is not accountable for this calm; 'tis monstrous to suppose it. Charge me sooner with witchcraft; I have been longer in this ship than he; in that time you have met many adverse winds; and if his being an Englishman is his wrong, hold me also answerable for the failure of your hopes, since I am English too!"

He looked at her, then at me, then back to her, and methought her beauty coloured the stormy cloud of his expression with a light of its own, not softening it, but robbing it somewhat of its terror. He moved his lips, talking to himself, folded his arms and leaned back, staring straight up at the deck. [92]

I fancied by saying more yet I could mend my case, and would not meet Imogene's eye for fear of being checked.

"Captain Vanderdecken, I am here as a shipwrecked man—dependent upon your generosity as a fellow-being, of which you have given me so abundant an illustration that my heart sinks when I consider that I am too poor to make you any return saving in thanks. Had I tenfold the powers your mate imputes to me, could I work you evil? Give me the control of the wind, and such a gale would follow this ship that you should be speedily counting the date of your arrival at Amsterdam in hours. Is it reasonable that I should seek to delay this voyage? I, who have but these clothes in [93]

which I stand—who am divorced from my home—who am helpless and defenceless among the enemies of my country—among men from whom I should have nothing to hope if they had not long given the world to know that their generosity as foes is alone equalled by their heroism as mariners!"

He had slowly turned his eyes upon me when I began to speak, and now made a haughty gesture with his hand as if bidding me hold my peace. And perhaps my conscience felt the rebuke, though he merely designed to let me know that I had said enough; for, between ourselves, I had as little opinion of Dutch generosity as I had of Dutch valour, and should have despised myself for this flattering had I been talking to human beings.

Happily nothing more came of the tempest that lay muzzled in the captain's breast. Whether my standing up for myself, my heated manner towards his mate, gave a new turn to his mood, he did not speak again of the change of weather, and as speedily as ceremony would permit, I got up, made my bow, and went on deck. [94]

The appearance in the west was sullen enough, though merely with a faintness there that was unrelieved by any edging or shouldering outline of cloud. A few patches of vapour lay streaked along the sky, otherwise the heavens hovered in an unstained hollow, but of a faded, watery blue, unwholesome and with a sort of blindness of fog in it; and up in the north-east hung the sun, shorn of his rays, a squeezed yet uncompact mass of dazzle, like as I have seen him show when setting in a belt of vapour that has not entirely hid him, and casting a wake as dim as burning oil. The swell had grown in weight even while we had been breaking our fast. There being not the faintest draught of air to steady the vessel—no, not so much as to put the most delicate curl of shadow upon the heads of the muddy-blue, grease-smooth, liquid roundings which came with a sulky brimming to the channels. She rolled with stupid heaviness, her sails rattling like a discharge from great ordnance, and a sort of song-like cries twanging out from the sharp fierce strains put upon the shrouds and backstays, and many noises in her hold. You would have thought that her huge round-tops and heavy furniture of spar and rigging would have given some regularity to her pendulous swaying: but the contrary was the case, her action being so jerky, abrupt, and unforegatherable by the legs, that walking was impossible. [95]

I passed the morning partly on deck, partly in the cabin, nearly all the while in Imogene's society, Vanderdecken's passionate mood being too vehement to suffer him to notice either me or my dearest. Indeed, I sought the cabin chiefly to remove myself from his sight, for as the weather darkened round his wrath mounted with it—visible in his tempestuous stridings, and above all, in the flaming and cursing eyes he would again and again level at the heavens; and I sometimes felt that nothing less than my life might be the forfeit of my even provoking his regard and constraining his attention to me in his present satanic posture of mind. [96]

When the dinner hour came, he fiercely ordered Prins to bring him some drink on deck: he could not eat. All the morning he had been directing his gaze into the south and north and east for any blurr of the polished folds that should exhibit movement in the air in those quarters; and from the undulating sea-line, which he searched in vain, his eyes seemed to reel with the very sickness of wrath into the west where, as I knew, the Curse was busy.

Imogene and I were as mute as images at table. We had agreed not to utter a syllable whilst the mate was present, and some time before he had finished his meal, we left the cabin for the quarter-deck, where we sat hidden from Vanderdecken, who marched about the poop near the tiller, with a tread whose echo rang through the solid deck, and with a mien that made me ready to witness him at any minute repeat, waking and sensible, the horrid blasphemous part he had performed in his sleep. [97]

The faintness in the west deepened into thickness. The atmosphere grew hot, and the fanning of the canvas that had before filled the decks with chilling draughts became a refreshment. By two o'clock in the afternoon the heads and shoulders of ponderous storm-clouds had shaped themselves above the dingy blueish obscurity in the west; they jutted up with a ghastly sheen of sickly bronze upon their peaks and brows and made a very frightful appearance. You would have thought there was a great motionless fold of heat suspended, viewless, in the middle of the heavens, and that it was magnetically drawing up volumes of black fumes from some pestilential land lying hidden behind the sea. The strange light, rusty with the ominous storm-tinge, made the sea appear round and hard, cheating the eye with the illusive complexion, till the eastern sea-line looked thirty leagues distant, and not closer westwards either, spite of its fading out in a jumble of ugly shadow that way. The sky still had a dirty sort of blue where the sun went out behind it, and I tell you 'twas scaring to find him sunk out of sight in a kind of ether whose hue, deceptive as it was, caused it to look clear enough for him to float in. It was in its way a sheer drowning of the luminary, like the foundering of a flaming fabric in the sea. [98]

The gloom stole gradually into darkness as though some giant hand was warily drawing a sable curtain over our mastheads. Never did I watch the growth of a storm with such awe as now filled me. To my alarmed sight, the gathering seemed like an embodiment of the Curse in dreadful, swelling, livid vapours, whose dull hectic, whose sallow bronze glaring out of the murkiness, showed like the overflowing of the blue and scarlet and sunlight fires pent up in those teeming surcharged bosoms. My plain sense assured me that the tempest could not hold for this Death Ship the menace that would render its aspect terrifying to the mariner on board an earthly craft; yet it was impossible for my instincts as a seaman to accommodate themselves to the supernatural conditions which begirt me, and I found myself trembling for the safety of the ship when I discovered that the tempest was suffered to grow without an order being given to the men to shorten sail and prepare for it. [99]

I left Imogene and stepped furtively along the quarter-deck to command the poop, and saw Vanderdecken standing aft, surveying the storm with his arms folded, his chin depressed, and his face staring out ashenly against the gloom. I watched him for some minutes, but never once did he stir. Arents and Van Vogelaar were on the other side of the deck, leaning over the rail, gazing at God knows what, but never speaking as I could be sure in the silence that rested upon the ship. The men hung about in groups forward; mere cunningly devised shapes of human beings without the faintest stir of restlessness among them. Many of them smoked, and the pale wreaths went from their paler lips into the air straight as staffs. [100]

"Imogene, look at that sky!" I whispered, "did mortal ever behold the like of it?"

'Twas two o'clock; a tempest-coloured twilight, in which the sails to the flattened swell swayed like visionary wings grown languid with long flight, and feebly hovering and almost noiselessly beating over the ship; out of the gloom over the side came now and again the yearning moan of water, foamlessly laving the bends and run of the vessel; in each death-like pause you heard the silence tingling in the air with the low phantasmal muttering of a weltering sea, a sound as of an imagination of unreal breakers upon a faery shore. [101]

With hands clasped upon my arm, my darling looked as I pointed. In the extreme west the shade of the heavens was a sort of dismal slate, and there was an incessant winking of lightning all about it, like a mad dancing of stars of piercing brilliance; this enlarged into dense masses of dark vapour streaked as sand is ribbed by the action of surf; then zenith-wards was a space of faint green sky, very dim as though beheld through smoke, and past this lay a floating body of thin vapour thickening over our mastheads into an amazing appearance of clouds like to the bush that shags the New Holland slopes, merging eastwards into a vast array of clouds twisted into the aspect of whirlpools, and in their brooding motionlessness resembling vortices suddenly arrested when most madly gyrating. But this description, though imitated to the life, conveys not the least idea of the horrid appearance of that sky, for there is nothing in words to express the effect upon the mind of the contrast of the several shades of colour all combining to fill the sea with a malignant hue, and the keen throbbing of the lightning low down, the washing sweep of the sick and ghastly ocean into the western dusk, the stooping soot of the vaporous maelstroms overhead, only waiting, as it seemed, for some storm-signal to start off every one of them into a very madness of revolution, boiling out into wet and crimsoned tempests. [102]

After a little all these appearances melted into one great cloud of an indigo tint, ridged with layers of black vapour and blackening into very midnight on the western seaboard where the lightning was shooting. The sea had strangely flattened; the weighty swells which had precoursed the growth of the storm had run away down the eastern waters; it was as though the hot heaviness of the rising and spreading blackness had pressed down the ocean into a smooth plain. [103]

As not an order had yet been given, not a clewline nor a halyard touched, I had made up my mind to presently behold an astonishing exhibition of magic; that is to say, I was to witness a sudden violent blast of storm strike this Death Ship with every sail she carried abroad, and no harm to come to her from it. All at once there was a great stroke of lightning that flashed up the heavy oppressive obscurity, and the whole ship leapt to the eye in a blaze of emerald fire. There fell a few huge drops of rain, covering the decks with circles as big as saucers. A sullen shock of thunder boomed in a single report out of the west, and then it was that the voice of Vanderdecken rang out like a vibratory echo of the deep storm-note that had died away. [104]

"Clew up the topsails and topgallant sails!"

"In sprit-sail and get the yard fore and aft!"

"Some hands this way and stow the mizzen!"

"Lower the main-yard and furl the sail!"

"Stand by to double reef the fore-course!"

These and other orders he delivered one by one, and they were repeated by the two mates and the boatswain.

I cannot believe that any fantastic vision was ever wilder, stranger, more impressive than the picture offered by the Death Ship when her men went to work to snug her down. Their mechanically-moving shapes hauling upon the ropes, running like shadows along the decks, vanishing in the sullen, swarming thickness as they mounted the shrouds, every man as silent as a spectre; the fitful trembling out of the whole vessel to the white and green and violet glimmer of the yet distant lightning; the dark sea dimly glancing into a kind of light, wan and indeterminate as the sheen of stars in polished steel, under the play of those western glitterings; the blackness overhead now settled down to the eastern seaboard, over the horizon of which there yet hovered a streak of dusty green—it was a spectacle to need the hand of Dante or Milton. [105]

Compar'd to these storms, Death is but a qualm,
Hell somewhat lightsome, the Bermudas calm;
Darkness, Light's eldest brother, his birthright
Claims o'er the World!

It was as black as night. What the men were about, with what dispatch they worked, it was impossible to see. No songs or cries came from them to enable me to guess their movements. If ever Imogene and I exchanged a word it was in a whisper, so heart subduing was the darkness and the horrible element of suspense and uncertainty in it. I had her close to the cabin-front [106]

under the poop, ready for the shelter of it at the outburst. Ten minutes went by, and then it seemed to me as if a deeper shade yet had penetrated the darkness. Suddenly, I heard a far-off humming noise, a kind of growling sound, not to be likened to thunder, though you seemed to catch the note of that too in the multitudinous crying. It was as if the denizens of a thousand forests were flying before the roaring of a tornado among the trees, every savage beast raising its own savage cry as it went, the whole uproar so remote as to resemble a mountain's reverberation of the horrible clamour leagues and leagues distant inland.

"What is that?" cried Imogene.

Ere I could speak, the heavens were split in twain by a blast of lightning that looked to fly like a dazzling shaft of flame from the north sheer over our mastsheads into the south. It was almost instantly followed by a crash of thunder, ear-splitting as the explosion of the batteries of a dozen first-rates all discharged at one moment. And then fell the rain in a whole body of water, charged with hailstones as big as pigeon's eggs. The fall raised such an uproar on our decks that you looked to see the whole substantial fabric shattered by it. The surface of the sea foamed in fire to that lashing of water and hail. There was now a perpetual blaze of lightning, but the thunder merely deepened the prodigious noise of the rushing wet without, its claps being distinguishable in the dreadful tumult. We had immediately withdrawn to the cabin, and closing the door, stood looking on through the window. The decks were full of water, which, cascading through the ports and all other freeing orifices, added its roaring to the other notes of the tempest. The ship seemed on fire to as high as we could see with the hellish and continual flaming of the lightning. [107]

'Twas of several colours, and in the same breath you saw spars, rigging, bulwark-rails, all blazing out as though lumined with brushes dipped in blue and crimson, and star-white and yellow and dark violet fires. [108]

But no wind as yet; not a breath! That I could tell by the droop of the fore-course hanging by its gear, and faintly fanning dark and wet from its yard. But I knew it could not be far off. Those sounds I had heard as of a thousand affrighted wild beasts were—my ear well knew the noise—the echoings high in the middle air of a prodigious wind bellowing as it swept the ocean into white rage. My heart beat swiftly; all was so fearfully real that I could not grasp the supernatural conditions of the life of this ship and crew, which had otherwise assured me that the Curse that triumphed over the monarch Death must be superior to the wildest hurricane that ever piled the ocean into mountains. [109]

"Hark!" I exclaimed, "it is upon us!" and as I spoke the gale smote us like a bolt from heaven, falling upon us with a long and frightful scream and amid a volley of lightning that made the sky a blinding purple dazzle from sea-line to sea-line. I held with both hands to one side of the frame of the window, and Imogene, half-swooning with terror, lay against me, nothing but my body saving her from being dashed against the side of the cabin. Such was the sharpness of the angle to which the first frenzy of the liberated hurricane heeled the vessel, that for some minutes I veritably believed she was foundering. The ocean boiled in a flat plain of froth, and the ship lay steady upon the enraged whiteness, with the rail of her bulwarks under, and you heard amid the seething and shrill shrieking of the wind, the sound of the water pouring on to her decks over the upper and quarter-deck and fore-castle-rails, as the cataract thunders, coiling with a pure head, over the edge of some rocky abrupt. If I had opened the door—if indeed I could have taken action on that violent headlong steep of deck—it would have merely been to drown the cabin and Imogene and myself. There was nothing to be done but attend the issue, and for several minutes, I say, I stood holding on, my dearest clasping me and so supporting herself, scarce knowing whether the vessel was under water or not, unable to speak for the horrible clamour without, the lightning continuously holding the fabric visible through the window in its mani-coloured blaze, and the enduring steadiness of the hull upon the flat foam putting a terror into the situation you would not have remarked in her labouring in a hollow sea. [110]

Presently, to my great joy, I perceived that she was recovering her upright posture. They had succeeded in getting her to pay off, and after a little, giving her tall stem to the gale, she went before it as upright as a church, the water on her decks pouring away overboard, the piercing fury of the wind robbed to the extent of the velocity with which the vessel drove, and no other sound rising up off the sea but the amazing hissing of foam. [111]

"Curse or no Curse," said I, "Vanderdecken knows his business as a sailor, and call me a Dutchman if here has not been a noble stroke of seamanship!"

"Wy zyn al Verdomd!" said the parrot.

CHAPTER VI.

WE SPRING A LEAK.

I never remember the like of such a storm as this in these seas, though I have made the passage of the Cape four times and have met some frightful weather off the great Agulhas Bank. Amazing suddenness and violence in the first bursting of a storm you have reason to expect in the inter-tropical regions eastwards of the African continent, but not down here. Captain George Bonny, of the ship Elizabeth Tudor, is the only person that I am acquainted with who has had experience of so sudden a tempest as I have attempted to describe off this African headland; and who is to say [112]

that he had not happened upon the neighbourhood of the Death Ship and unwittingly tasted somewhat of the doom of that vessel, whose passage over the limits of her fate the storm the Elizabeth Tudor encountered was designed to furiously arrest? [113]

Be this as it will. I passed from the cabin into as raging and affrighting a scene as was ever witnessed in any ocean. The sky was made unearthly by the flashes of lightning, whose blinding leaps seemed to bring the blackness down like a wall upon the eyes, and if ever an interval lasted long enough to suffer the light to resume its powers, then you found that blackness horrible with the unspeakable shade it took from the plain of boiling froth that stretched like a world covered with snow to the sea-girdle, fading from startling, staring, glaring whiteness around us into a pallid, ghastly dimness, where it sank and melted into the levin-riven inky folds.

I struggled on to the poop and crawled on my hands and knees to the little deck-house, against the foremost end of which I stationed myself; and here I was protected from the rain and wind. Straight as an arrow over the seething smother the Death Ship was running, and her keel slid smooth as a sledge through the feathery surface. The tempest lay like a red-hot iron sheet upon the waters, making it boil and furiously hiss, but stifling all life of billow, ay, of ripple even, out of it. The men had contrived to shorten sail down to the double-reefed fore-course, and under that strip of curved and lifted canvas—a steel-hard belly, black as a cloud against the white water beyond the bows—the ship was driving, three men at the great tiller, and others attending the tackles attached to it. With every blue or green or yellow flash, you saw the rain sweeping along in crystal lines, complexioned by the electric dartings, now like silver wire, now as if the heavens were shedding blood. 'Twas like a sea of water in the wind, and the shrill harsh singing of it above, and the vehement sobbing of it upon the decks, were sounds of themselves amid the universal shrieking and hissing. There was an incessant explosion of thunder, sometimes right overhead, the echoes answering in volleys, and the rattling sharper than the speaking of great guns in mountain scars and hollows. The dazzling play made a fiery tapestry of the scene, and the flying ship came and went in flames, leaping out of the black tempest, then vanishing like a burning shape, eclipsed and revealed by the speeding of sooty vapours. [114]

Amid these fierce swift shinings I would catch sight of the towering form of Vanderdecken standing at the mizzen-rigging, one hand on a shroud or backstay, sloping his figure against the tempest and his beard blown straight out before him. The others being abaft the little house I could not see. The scene now did indeed astonishingly realise the doubtful traditions which depict the Flying Dutchman perpetually sailing amid storm. Since I had been on board I had viewed her in many conditions of weather; but though her supernatural qualities and characteristics best appeared when they stole out to the faint, waving silver of the moonshine trembling along the oil-like blackness of a midnight calm, yet she could never be more impressive than when, as she was now, fleeing like a witch driven mad by pursuing demons, whose numbers darkened the heavens, the lightning streaming about her like ordnance in Titanic hands fired to bring her to, all her rigging in a scream as she ran, showing in the spaces of dusk betwixt the flashes a great, black, phantasmal shape upon the floor of ringing and frenzied whiteness which the tempest swept along with her, and which broke not therefore in the lightest curl from her stern, nor yielded a hand's-breadth of wake. [115]

She was flying dead into the east, and every minute her keel passed over as many fathoms of sea as would take her hours of plying to recover. I frequently directed my eyes at Vanderdecken, suspecting his wrath, and prepared for a tragical exhibition, whose furiousness should be in awful correspondence with this insanity of sea and sky, but had the life been struck out of him as he stood there his posture could not have been more fixed and unmoving. [117]

It was, however, impossible for such wind as this to blow many minutes without raising a sea. The increased soaring and falling of the black wing of canvas forward against the boiling that rose in a faintness of spume and lustre of its own into the air denoted the gradual hollowing of the water, and then no sooner had the talons of the storm succeeded in scooping shallow troughs out of the levelness of foaming snow than the surge grew magically. Every liquid side was shouldered by the tempest into hills, and the hills swelled into such mountains as you must come down into these seas to behold the like of. Half-an-hour after the first of the hurricane the ship was plunging and laying along amid a very cauldron of infuriate waters, scarcely visible amid the fleecy fog of spray, heights of the sea reaching to her tops, spouting their prodigious lengths alongside, sometimes tumbling in thunder upon her forward decks, sometimes curling in blown snakings ahead of her. Heavy as had been some of the hours of my first six days of storm, the wildest of that time was but as a feather to the weight of this tempest. The lightning ceased, and but for the evening that was now descending, and that had put the shadow of night into the shade of the storm, the heavens must have shown somewhat pale by the thinning of the electrical vapour; but this scarce perceptible clearance did but leave larger room for the wind, and it was now blowing with extraordinary spite. It would be impossible for the ship to run long before the swollen acclivities, whose foaming heads appeared to brush the black ceiling under which they coursed as they arched in the wake of the vessel's narrow stern, and methought they would have to bring her to speedily if she was not to be pooped and swept and smothered. [118]

Even whilst I thus considered, the tempestuous voice of Vanderdecken swept in a roar along the deck. [119]

"Settle away the fore-yard and secure the sail!"

"Some men aft here to the mizzen and show the foot of it as she rounds!"

'Twas more like the spiriting of canvas than the hands of men going prosaically to work on jeers and clew-garnets when the fore-yard slowly slid down to the bulwark-rails, and the sail was

smothered as though frapped by airy fingers forked out of the whirling dusk. Some of the crew with glimmering faces came crawling aft, probing the solid substance of the wind with figures bowing sheer into it, and all in silence the helm was put down amid a sudden mad flogging of liberated cloths aft, and the ship lying along gave her round bow and side to the seas which flashed in storms of water over her as she met them to the pressure of the hard-over rudder. [120]

Once with the sea fair upon the bow, the ancient structure rose as buoyantly as a wooden castle to the heave of the mighty surge, for all her labouring with full decks and the veiling of her by clouds and storms of spray. But had her situation looked to be one of frightful and imminent peril, I must by this time have viewed it with unconcern. The sense of the Curse that held the ship vital was strong in me. Out of the first terrific blast of the hurricane 'twas odds if the newest and stoutest ship could have emerged without damage, supposing she had not been sunk outright; yet did this vessel survive that fearful outfly, aged as she was. Not a yarn of her old ropes broken, nor a spar nor yard, whose rottenness caused them to glow in the dark, sprung or strained; more staunchly than could have been possible to her, even in the hour of her launch, did she breast the great black seas which swept her to their mountain-tops with yelling rigging and masts aslant, to hurl her a breathless moment afterwards into stagnant valleys, echoing the thunder of the gale that touched not their depths. [121]

I quitted the deck and returned to Imogene in the cabin. The lighted lamp swung wildly, and though the uproar of the tempest was muffled below, yet the noise of straining was so great that I had to put my lips close to my dear girl's ear to make myself heard. I gave her a description of the sea, acquainted her with the posture in which the ship lay, and told her that the incredible violence of the storm was promise enough that it would not endure; though it was horrible to think of the miles we had been forced to run into the eastwards, and of the leagues off our course the drift of the ship, even in twelve hours, would compel us to measure. [122]

Prins came to inquire if we would eat. We answered "No." That evening was the most dismal I had ever spent in the accursed ship. I held my sweetheart's hand, and speech being, as I have said, as good as impossible, I afflicted myself with a thousand miserable thoughts and dark and ugly fancies. Great heaven! With what loathing did I regard the sickly mask of the ship's side, the gloomy ovals, the ghastly revelry of the lantern's colours flashing to the prodigious swinging of the tempest-tossed fabric! And from time to time the parrot, affrighted by the noises and by the dashing of her cage against the bulkhead, burst suddenly out with her horrid croak of "Wy zyn al Verdomd!" [123]

Neither Vanderdecken nor his mate came below. Nothing could better have illustrated their ignorance of their true state than the anxieties which held them to the deck in the heart of that raging wind. Their solicitude might indeed deserve another name for the impious passions which informed it, yet it had a character sailorly enough to make it intelligible to human sympathy, and 'twas truly soul-subduing to sit in that cabin and hear the uproar of the tormented waters without, the outcry in the rigging, the straining and groaning below, and think of those men—of Vanderdecken, at all events—watching his ship as though Batavia were but six weeks distant and Amsterdam a certain port presently.

At half-past nine Imogene withdrew. I led her to her cabin door, tenderly kissed her, then returning called for a cup of spirits and water and went to my sleeping place. I thought to have stayed a minute on deck to look about me, but the wind came with so much fury of wet in it that, having no mind to turn in with drenched clothes, I hastily raised the hatch and dropped below. I believe I lay awake the greater part of the night. My memory is not clear owing to the confusion my brain was in. It was not only a feeling akin to conviction that my fate was sealed, that my dearest and I were never to be rescued nor suffered to deliver ourselves from this Death Ship, though to be sure such apprehensions, so keen and fierce, might have caused a stouter mind than mine to fall distraught, the movements of the ship were so excessive, being very high, light and broad, and the seas so extraordinarily hollow, that, without disordering me with sickness, they wrought an alarming giddiness in me, and I lay as one in a sort of fit. [124]

In some such condition as this I languished, I believe, through the greater part of the night, but contrived to snatch sleep enough to refresh me, so that when I awoke I felt better, the dizziness gone and with it something of the distress of mind. The action of the ship showed that the gale was considerably abated, but I had no sooner my senses than I took notice of an unusual sound, like a slow and measured beating in the ship, as though some stout fellow with a heavy mallet regularly struck a hollow object in the hold. This excited my curiosity, and I went on deck. The moment my head was through the hatch I saw what produced the noise. The men were pumping. There was but one pump seemingly that would work, and this four seamen were plying, the water gushing freely from the pipe and washing away overboard through the scuppers. [125]

The old engine made so melancholy and uncommon a sound that I might have lain a week in my bed speculating upon it, without even hitting the truth. I took notice that the water came up clear and bright as glass, a sure sign that it was entering freely. A sullen shade still hung in the weather, the sky was of slate, with a small scud flying under it of the hue of sulphur, but the breeze was no more than a fresh gale of which we were making a fair wind, the yards braced very nearly square, and the Braave sulkily swinging through it with a noise of boiling at her bows. [126]

I was not a little excited by this combination of glass-bright gushing and square yards, and after going forward for the comfort and sweetness of a canvas bucketful of salt water foaming like champagne as I lifted it out of the snow-flaked, dark-green surge, I walked on to the poop, where stood Arents alone, and stepped up to the binnacle. The card made a west-north-west course, the wind on the larboard quarter. I ran my eye over the sea, but the olive-complexioned hue worked [127]

with a sulky sinuosity naked against the livid shadow, and the deep looked indescribably gloomy and swollen and confused, though the sun had been risen above half-an-hour. Arents was not a man I held in awe, albeit many might have deemed his unearthly pallor more dreadful than most of the others because of the great breadth of fat and hairless face it overlay; yet I was determined not to question him lest he should repulse me. I therefore contented myself with a short salute and lay over the rail watching the swollen bodies of water and wondering what plan Vanderdecken was now upon, until the chimes of the clock in the cabin made me know it was breakfast time.

The captain came to the table with a stern and bitter expression in his countenance. It was possible he had been on deck throughout the greater part of the night, but he exhibited no trace of the fatigue you would expect to see in one that was of this earth. Methought, as I glanced at him, that sleep must be a mockery to these men, who, being deathless, stood in no need of that repose which counterfeiting death, reinvigorates our perishable frame every morning with a quickening as of a resurrection. What has one to whom the grave is denied to do with slumber? Yet if a whiter pallor was possible in Vanderdecken I fancied I witnessed it in him now. His eyes were angry and bright; the skin of his forehead lay in folds upon his heavy brows, and yet there was the stillness of a vitality, numbed or blasted by disappointment or exhausted by passion, in his manner. [128]

Van Vogelaar did not arrive, maybe he was sleeping, with Arents' leave, well into his watch on deck. Imogene had a wan and drooping look. She answered my concerned gaze by saying she had not slept, and she smiled as she spoke, but never more sadly to my knowledge; it seemed but as a light playing over and revealing her melancholy. Lovely she appeared, but too fragile for my peace, and with too much of the sorrowful sweetness of the moon-lily when it hangs down its white beauty and contracts its milky petals into leanness with the waning of the silver orb it takes its name from. [129]

Suddenly she pricked her ears. "What is that sound?" she exclaimed, in English.

"It is the seamen pumping the water out of the ship," I replied.

"Strange!" she said. "Long before dawn I heard it indistinctly and have ever since been listening to it with a languid, drowsy wonder, not imagining its nature. It has been working continuously. Is there water in the ship?"

"I have not dared inquire," I answered, with a side-long look at Vanderdecken, who ate mechanically without heeding us.

"Captain," she said, softly, touching him on the arm with her hand, which glittered with his jewels, "the men have been pumping for some hours—why? Will you tell me?"

He brought his eyes slowly to hers with a blank look that caused her to repeat her question. [130]

Whereupon he answered: "The heavy working of the ship in the small hours has caused her to start a butt or hidden end."

"She is leaking?"

He answered: "Yes, my child."

"Can the leak be stopped?" she asked, encouraged to these questions by my glances.

"No, 'tis below her water-line. But it does not gain. Continuous pumping keeps the water level. We shall have to careen to get at the leak."

"Are we sailing to the coast?" she asked.

"Yes," he answered.

CHAPTER VII.

IMOGENE FEARS FOR ME.

 [131]

On hearing that we were sailing to the coast my delight was so keen that I came near to suffocating myself by the sudden checking of the shout of joy that rose to my throat like an hysteric throttling thickness in the windpipe. To be sure, had anyone asked what there was in the news to fill me with this transport I should not have been able to offer a sufficient reason, for it was not as though Vanderdecken meant to steer for a port. I was sensible that he would head for some desolate bay upon a hot shore of sand, backed by great mountains, and leagues distant from any settlement, whether Dutch or British. Yet so great had been the depression excited by the tempest and the barrenness of our chances, that the mere circumstance of a change having come about, the mere happening of a departure from our rueful business of beating to the windward, raised my spirits to a very great height; nor must it be forgotten that though I conjectured in darkness, I had for a long time felt persuaded that if ever we were to remove ourselves from the Death Ship, the only opportunity that could offer would attend our dropping anchor off the African Coast. [132]

I will not say that Vanderdecken did not observe the change in my countenance when he made his answer to Imogene. But whatever might have been his reflections they were concealed by his

frowning brow and the dark and stormy shadow of passion upon his face. He ceased to speak when she ceased to question, and went on deck without calling for his usual pipe of tobacco, which was a very remarkable illustration in him of his wrath and concern.

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"Dearest," said I, going to Imogene's side, "it has been a dark and cheerless night with you I fear. Would to God it were this day in my power to give redness to the roses that now lie white in your cheeks. Yet this is great news that Vanderdecken has given us."

She smiled in a questioning way.

"Why," said I, answering her, "'tis very certain that we shall never escape from this Death Ship whilst she sails the seas. But though I could not here say for the life of me what the land may do for us, I feel that the coming to an anchor close to it may give us a chance, and it will go hard indeed if a sailor's cunning, sharpened by despair, does not contrive some remedy for this horrible enthrallment."

She mused a little and said, "Geoffrey, I have made up my mind to this: if you can carry me away with you I will go—whatever resolution you may form will be mine, as shall be your fortune. But, dearest," says she, smiling to my grasp of her hand, "I am also determined that your liberty shall not depend upon my escape; if you are able to get away alone, but not with me, then I stay."

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"Ah!" said I, shaking my head, "your gaze cannot have sunk very deep into me or you would not talk thus."

She put her finger upon my lip. "Geoffrey, consider this. You are a man, you are young, the world is before you, liberty is your precious jewel—nay, you have a home and a mother to return to. I am an orphan—lonely in this great world of water as any sea-bird that solitarily follows our ship. I sometimes feel that there is a cold hand on my heart and that my time is not long. If it is to be my destiny to remain in this vessel, I am too certain of a short residence to fear it."

She stopped suddenly and wept.

We were alone, and I took her in my arms. I saw how it was with her, how the fear of the tempest, how sleeplessness, had wrought in her delicate health and depressed her powers, and I comforted and cherished her as my heart's love best knew how; yet her foreboding concerning her time in this world struck a chill into my blood, for it just then found solemn accentuation in her unusual pallor, her languid eyelids, the sadness of her smile, her low voice and tears.

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However, I borrowed comfort from the reflection that the health of the heartiest maiden might well fail in such an existence as this girl passed, spite of the wine-like invigoration of the salt winds; that she had survived hard upon five years of experiences so wild and amazing that a few weeks had tended not a little to pale my own face and even rob me of something of my manhood; that it was inevitable she should break down from time to time, but that her sweetness would soon bloom and be coloured into a loveliness of health when this Death Ship had become a thing of the past, and when I had safely lodged her as my bride in my mother's pretty home, with flower-gardens and fields to wander in, upon floors unrocked by billows, in rooms irradiated at night by fires never more mystical than the soft flame of oil or the silver of star and moonshine.

[136]

The weather brightened as the day advanced. By noon the sky had broken into lagoons of blue, with fine large clouds that rained here and there upon the horizon and filled the air down there with broken shafts of rainbow, like to windgalls, only that the colours were very sharp and even glorious. There was now plenty of sunshine to give life and splendour to the ocean, whose dye of azure looked the purer and more sparkling for its cleansing by the great wind and rain and firebolts of the past night. The swell of the sea was from the southward, no longer a turbulent movement, but a regular respiratory action, with weight and volume yet that made you think of the deep as a sentient thing, with something of the violence of its hellish conflict yet lurking in its rhythmic breathing.

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About this hour a number of whales showed their black, wet backs at the distance of a mile. The sunshine turned their spoutings into very beautiful fountains, which fell in showers of diamonds and rubies and emeralds; and their great shapes and solemn movements, with now and again the dive of one with a breathless lingering of tail that showed like a gigantic fan of ebony, or the rise of another, floating its sparkling blackness above the violet fold of a brimming swell, as though a little island had been hove to the surface by some deep-sea convulsion, afforded Imogene and me some twenty minutes of very agreeable diversion. The wind was a trifle to the southward of west, a brisk breeze, and the ship swarmed and swirled and rolled along at a speed of some five or six marine miles in the hour, every cloth abroad and already dried into its usual dingy staring tones. But the pump was worked without intermission. The clanging of the brake upon its pin, the gushing of the bright water flowing to the scuppers and flooding the deck thereabouts with every roll, the hissing of the slender cascades over the side, grew into sounds as familiar as the creaking of the bulkheads, or the cries of the rudder upon its ancient rusty pintles.

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Those pumping gangs made a strange, mysterious sight. They toiled, but their labour was not that of living seamen who change their posture again and again, who let go an instant with one hand to smear the sweat from their brows or to bite an end of tobacco, who break into choruses as they ply their arms or growl out curses upon this hardest of marine tasks, or raise a cheerful call of encouragement one to another. There was the same soullessness in this as in all else they did. No dew was distilled from their death-like faces. Once at the pump they never shifted their attitudes. A seaman of seventy, and perhaps older yet, would work side by side with one of twenty years, and at the end of the hour's labour—for each gang was relieved every hour—the aged sailor would exhibit no more fatigue than the younger one. Their aspects came out

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startlingly as they stood close together, their countenances bearing expressions as undeterminable as the faint smile or the dim frown of horror or the slumberous placidity on the features of the dead; and never was the sense of the wild conjecture of the Saracen's mad captain so borne into me as when I viewed one group after another coming to this pumping business, and contrasted their faces and perceived how every man—young, middle-aged and old—showed in dreaded vitality the appearance he would have offered at the hour of his death, no matter his years, had the Curse not stood between him and the grave. [140]

That afternoon, happening to be alone on the poop—I mean, without Imogene—for when she was absent I was more alone, though the whole of that ship's grisly company had gathered around me, than ever I could have been if marooned on some mid-ocean rock—and listening a little to the monotonous beat of the pump-gear, a thought came into my head and I stepped over to Vanderdecken, who leaned upon the weather-rail, his chin upon his hand.

"Mynheer," said I, "I ask your pardon for breaking in upon you. The labour of pumping is severe—I know it from several stern experiences." He lifted his head and slowly looked round to me. "This ship," I continued, "has rescued me from death and proved an asylum to me. 'Tis but right I should share in the general toil. Suffer me then, mynheer, to take my turn at the pump with the others." [141]

He eyed me a little with his wonderful fiery gaze, and answered: "It is not necessary. Our company is numerous, there are hands enough. Besides, sir, there is no urgency, the water doth not gain if it do not decrease."

I bowed, and was leaving him, but he added: "I fear you have but an imperfect knowledge of the character of the Dutch. Yet you tell me you have often visited Rotterdam."

"It is true, mynheer, but only as a sailor liberated o' nights and forced therefore to form his judgment on such company as the ale-house supplies."

"That seems so," said he, "otherwise you would suspect from such treatment as we have shown you that we regard you as a guest, and it is not customary among us to use our guests as labourers."

I bowed again, contenting myself with merely thinking how, as a guest, I went in fear of my life—to say no more. I thought, however, I would use his seeming willingness to converse with me, and said in as deferential a manner as I could command, "Sir, the mere circumstance of my being your guest should properly teach me to believe that a time must come when I shall have wearied your courtesy by imposing too great a burden of my company upon it." [142]

I paused, hoping he would make haste to assure me to the contrary; but he did not speak, merely eyeing me steadfastly.

"You will therefore judge, mynheer," I continued, "that I am actuated by no idle motive of curiosity in asking you whether your present design is to steer the ship to a port?"

"To what port?" he exclaimed.

I told him I did not know.

"Nor I," said he. "What settlement is there on this seaboard? You do not suppose that, with yonder pump going day and night, I should be willing to head for any other point of the coast than the nearest bay in which to careen and get at the leak?" [143]

"Will that bay, mynheer," said I, still speaking with the utmost modesty and deference, "be far distant?"

He answered: "It lies a few miles south of the parallel of thirty-four degrees. To reach it we shall have to sail an hundred and eighty leagues."

"Five hundred and forty miles!" I exclaimed, with an involuntary dejected glance aloft and at the passing water. "At this rate of progress, sir, the passage will occupy about five days."

Our gaze met as I said this and I observed a sudden fire in his eyes.

"Does the execution of any project you have in your mind depend upon the time we will take in reaching the coast?" said he, with suspicion sounding fiercely in the rich deep notes of his utterance. [144]

I felt the blood in my face as I answered: "Mynheer, I have no project. Methought, if you sailed to a port, you would rid yourself of my company. I have been long in your ship; every day increases my sense of trespass——" which said, I broke off, being really dismayed by the passionate fixity of his regard. Such a searching for the heart in one's face was unbearable. My imagination, perhaps my conscience, imparted a wizard-like power to his burning eyes, and I felt that if I lingered, I should be constrained into a revelation of my intention to escape with Imogene, as certain birds are fascinated into motionlessness and charmed to their devourment by the gaze of serpents. With the abruptness of alarm I bowed and left him. As I walked I could feel that his searching, scorching gaze followed me.

However, it was something to have found out our whereabouts, to have gathered his intention, and to be able to calculate the time of our arrival off the coast. On this I plumed myself, making pretty sure that if my questions had caused him to suspect some project in my mind, his memory would loose its hold of the thing after a few hours. But I was mistaken, as you shall now see. [145]

Whilst we were seated at the last meal, and with us in that Death Ship formed of soup or wine for drink, and such victuals as remained from dinner, I observed a peculiar air of distress and anxiety

in Imogene's face. I do not know that she made the least effort to disguise it. A sharp gleam of resentment would sparkle in the soft violet depths of her eyes as she now and then turned them on Van Vogelaar or Vanderdecken, and then as they came to me they would soften into an exquisite wistfulness that was very near to a look of grievous pain.

On the captain filling his pipe I went on deck and stood out of sight of the cabin on the poop-front, wondering what Imogene's manner signified. Presently she joined me. [146]

The sun was gone down; the stars shone singly or in clouds of bright dust over our northward-pointing bowsprit, and the air was soft and faint with the delicate light of the moon that was drawing out of her first quarter, and that could now rain her pearls with power into the dark waters under her.

"What is amiss, dearest?" said I, taking her hand in mine, and moved in a way I could not give expression to by the pallor of her face, her eyes showing large and dark, the paleness of lip and hair and throat—her whole countenance, yes and her figure too; stealing out of their realness into an elfin-like unsubstantiality to the wan complexion of the moon.

She answered: "Did not I tell you I was sorry you had questioned Vanderdecken? He is full of suspicion, and there is always Van Vogelaar at hand to exasperate his captain's temper and fancies by the poison of his own reptile-nature." [147]

"Has Vanderdecken spoken to you of my questions?"

"No," she replied. "What has happened is this:—Half-an-hour before supper I was in my cabin. The air was close, and I put the door on the hook and was near it combing my hair. Vanderdecken came into the cabin and spoke to Prins. Soon afterwards Van Vogelaar entered, and told the captain that he had been among the crew and informed them that he hoped to make the coast in four or five days, and that on their arrival at Amsterdam they would receive additional pay for their labour at the pump. They talked a little, but I should not have heeded them had not I suddenly caught the sound of your name. On this I left off combing my hair and crept close to the door. Vanderdecken said: 'I believe he hath some scheme. He shrunk from my gaze and the colour mounted to his cheeks. He quitted me with the air of one whose conscience is like an exposed nerve.'" [148]

"Heaven defend us!" I exclaimed, "your true Dutchman is very fit to be a hangman. Yet this unholy creature did certainly look at me to some purpose. 'Twas time I walked off!"

She continued: "Van Vogelaar answered, 'I would not trust that man further away from me than my hand could seize him. Skipper, I ask your pardon, but was it wise, think you, to exhibit samples of the treasure below to this Englishman? There is a noble fortune for him in those chests could he but come at them. What sort of egg is that which, beyond question, his mind is sitting upon, and that will be presently hatched? He is eager to learn your intentions. He manifests this eagerness in defiance of the contempt and anger with which you have again and again crushed down his curiosity into the silence of terror. Suppose he hath some plot to secure the stranding of this ship; or that he intends her a mischief that shall force us to beach and perhaps abandon her? He is a sailor and an Englishman; we are Hollanders! Skipper, the like of that man needs no help from sorcery to contrive our ruin.' Vanderdecken answered, 'He must be got rid of,' in a voice that showed how Van Vogelaar's talk worked in him. I did not need to look, Geoffrey, to know what sort of expression his face wore. They were silent awhile. Vanderdecken then said: 'Twould be mere barbarous, useless murder to take his life; there is no evidence against him. But we have a right to protect ourselves since he hath been mad and ungenerous enough to raise our suspicions——' Van Vogelaar interrupted: "'Tis more than suspicion—'tis conviction with me, skipper——' 'This occurs to me as a remedy,' said Vanderdecken: 'he must be set ashore before we sail; but he shall not be left to starve. A musket and ammunition will provide him with food, and he shall have a week's provisions. He is young, and with stout legs, and cannot miss his way to our Settlement if he hold steadfastly to the coast.' The mate said, 'Ay, that will be dismissing him lovingly.' They then went to the other end of the cabin and talked, but I could not hear them." [149]

"It would be barbarous, useless murder," I cried, "to hang, or stab or drown me, but kindness, nay, lovingness, to set me ashore with a week's provisions and a fowling-piece, to give me a night to be torn to pieces in by wild beasts, or a week to be enslaved by the Homadods, or a month to perish of hunger! The villains! Is this to be their usage of me?"

"Geoffrey, if they put you on shore I will follow. The future that is good enough for you is good enough for me. And, indeed, I would rather die a hard death on shore than be left to miserably live with men capable of cruelly destroying you." [151]

I reflected a little, and said, "Their resolution keeps me safe for the present, at all events. If I am to be marooned they will let me alone meanwhile. Therefore I consider that their determination greatly improves our chances.... No! there is nothing in their intention to scare me. I like their meaning so well that our prayer to God must be that Vanderdecken may not change his mind."

She was at a loss to understand me until I pointed out that, as I gathered from her report, they would not send me ashore until just before they were about to sail, so that I should have plenty of time to look about me and consider the surest method of escaping, whilst the ship was being careened and the leak repaired and the vessel in other ways doctored. [152]

"And, dearest," said I, "it has come to this with you, too: that sooner than remain with these fierce and dreadful people you will take your chance of that African coast you so greatly feared."

"I will share your fortune, Geoffrey, be it life or death—let come what will," said she, nestling

close and looking up at me out of the phantom faintness of her face with her large eyes in whose liquid darkness the moon was reflected in two stars.

"My precious one! I could not leave thee! If the terrors of the shore—the fears of the savage, the wild beast, the poisonous serpent—triumphed over your desire of escape, I would remain with you, Imogene, if they would let me. 'Twould be a hard fate for us both, dearest, to wear out our lives in this ship. But we cannot be parted—not of our own will, at least, however God may deal with us, or the knife or yard-arm halter of these villains. Wherever you are I must be——" [153]

"Yes!" she cried, passionately.

"It may not indeed come to our delivering ourselves by using the coast. Another scheme is in my head, though of it I will say nothing, since too much of fortune must enter it to fit it for cold deliberation. But it may end in our escaping to the land and lurking there in hiding till the ship sails. And it makes my heart feel bold, Imogene, to hear you say that sooner than languish and miserably end your days in this accursed fabric you will dare with me the natural perils of that shore."

And I say this: that had I been sure our life would prove the forfeit of attempting to escape by the coast, I would have welcomed death for her and myself sooner than live to think of her locked up in this detested ship, passing the long horrid days in the society of unearthly men condemned of Heaven, and stealthily weeping away her heart at the thought of our severance. [154]

CHAPTER VIII.

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LAND.

But for Imogene having overheard his conversation with Van Vogelaar, I should never have been able to guess that there was any change in Vanderdecken's resolution respecting me; I mean any change in his intention to carry me to Europe in his ship. There was the same uniformity in the variety of his moods; he was sullen, haughty, morose, often insanely fierce, sometimes talkative, then falling into trances, in all such exhibitions as heretofore. In Van Vogelaar, however, there was a slight alteration. At moments I caught him peering at me with a look in his eyes that might have answered very well as a dark malicious merriment of soul of which the countenance was capable of expressing the villainous qualities only, I mean, not the mirth also. Sometimes he would make as though to converse; but this I cut short, repelling him very fearlessly now that I understood his and his captain's plans, and that I had nothing to fear this side the execution of it. [156]

On my side, I was extremely wary, walking cautiously in all I said and did, and never venturing a remark to Imogene, even when we had reason to believe we were absolutely alone, without sinking my voice after a careful probing glance around as if I expected to see an human ear standing out on any beam or bulkhead my sight went to.

I busied myself in certain preparations in which I got Imogene to help me. Since, in any case, our escape to the land would have to be profoundly secret, 'twas necessary we should get ready a small stock of food to carry away with us, and I told Imogene to make some bags out of the stoutest stuff she could come at to store it in, and to privately convey to me such provisions as I indicated, which she, as well as I, was to secrete when alone, during Prins' absence, when the table was prepared. [157]

I said: "You have needles and thread?" for she had told me that some of the apparel Vanderdecken lent or gave her she had been obliged to alter. "We shall require three or four bags. Linen will do for the material."

"There is plenty of linen," said she. "I will make the bags. But what is your project, Geoffrey? Tell me your full scheme—I may be able to put something to it."

"I have two schemes," I answered: "but I will speak only of the one that concerns the shore. Vanderdecken is sure to bring up close to the land; I have little doubt of being able to swim the distance, and shall make a small frame of wood to sit about your waist on which you will float when I lower you into the water, and then I shall softly let myself down and tow you to the land by swimming." [158]

I thought to see her countenance change, but she regarded me fearlessly, indeed with an emotion as of triumph colouring her face.

"How am I to enter the water?" she asked.

"I will lower you from the quarter-gallery outside your cabin," I replied, "the height is not great. The blackness under the counter will hide you, and I shall contrive to float us both away very quietly."

She said, gazing at me fondly and smiling: "Everything is feasible so far, Geoffrey. But now imagine us arrived on shore."

"I must carry you as far as your strength will suffer," I replied. "Of course, Vanderdecken will send in pursuit of us, but there should be no lack of dense vegetation full of hiding places. Yet in this as in all other things, my dearest, we must rely upon God's help. That given there is nothing to fear; denied—then it would be better for me if I threw myself overboard at once." [159]

"Geoffrey," she said, "I do not question you, dear heart, for dread of what we may encounter, but merely that by letting your plans lie in my mind my girlish spirit may grow used to them and unswervingly help you when the time comes."

"Brave little woman!" I cried, "do not believe I could misjudge you. You would ask me what is to follow when this vessel quits the coast and leaves us alone there? How can I answer? We must attempt what others have successfully achieved, and struggle onwards to some settlement. I know—I know, my darling, that the outlook is black and affrighting. But consider what our choice signifies; the fate that awaits us if you remain and I am marooned; or the chances—meagre indeed, but chances, nevertheless—which offer if we escape to the land. And we shall be together, dearest!"

I kissed her brow, and her love leapt in her to my impassioned greeting; beautiful as she was, yet did she appear transfigured by the rich hue in her cheeks, her smile, the sparkle of her chaste and maidenly joy in the dark heaven of her eyes. Call me not cruel for thus deliberately preparing to bring her face to face with the horrors of the African coast—with those barbarous features which her heart had long ago recoiled from the mere thought of. She was my sweetheart—my affianced—my life's blood. Oh! how dear to me for her beauty, her sweetness, her passion for me, the miracle of our meeting, her loneliness under the sun and stars of the mighty Southern Ocean, amid shapes more spectral than ghosts, more horrible with their survival of human vices than had they been dead bodies quickened into life without soul or brain. [160]

How could I leave her? How could I endure the idea of my being forced ashore—alone—and of her sailing away forever from me in this grisly company? I had considered all these things; how if we gained the beach she would have to walk, as far as her limbs suffered, in drenched clothes and her delicate flesh chilled to the bone; how in our hiding-place the dews of a deadly climate would fall upon her by night, with creeping abominations of reptile and vermin swarming in the tangle where she lay—enough! I say that all perils which experience or imagination could crowd into such a deliverance as that I had in my mind and was steadfastly working out had been present to me from the beginning—but to what purpose? Only to make me feel with the power of every instinct, with the impulse and strength of all-influencing and heated passions, that my fortune must be hers and that we could not part! [161]

A sailor will wonder perhaps to hear me speak of three or four bags of provisions, and wonder also that I should not see that if there was the least movement in the water when I lowered Imogene with these bags about her into it, the provisions would be spoiled by the wet. But 'tis proper to say here that this proposal to float her in a frame and tow her ashore by swimming was but an alternative scheme which, at all hazards, I would go through with, if the other and less perilous venture should prove impracticable, and in case this should be so, I said nothing to her about it, that by her growing accustomed to the dismal and dangerous project she would not tremble and shrink if it came, as I feared it might, to our having to escape ashore. Three small bags secured about my darling's shoulders, well out of the water, were less likely to be wetted than one big one that must needs hang low, trice it as I might; and anyway the three would be as good as one, let the manner of our escape be what it would. [162]

She made me these bags, and I hid them in my cabin, along with some biscuit which had been taken from the wreck, a few pieces of salted meat cooked, a small jar of flour, a little silver cup for drinking, and other compact and portable things, such as the flat banana cakes the cook sent to the cabin, a bottle of marmalade of the size of a small pickle jar, and the like. These things she and I took from the table by degrees, and they were not missed. I would have given a finger for a musket and powder and balls; but if there was an arms-chest on board neither she nor I knew where to find it. And suppose it had been possible to me to have secreted a musket—what they used, I believe, for shooting game and cattle were match-locks with barrels about three and a half feet long, and the bore of the bigness of a horse-pistol, and cartridges in small hollow canes, each holding a charge of powder—ammunition was not to be had without asking. [163]

She stitched me four bags, but three I found when loaded would be as heavy a load as it was prudent to put upon her; because when I came to look about me for wood for a frame for her to float in I could only meet with five small pieces, and even the purloining of these was attended with prodigious anxiety and trouble, as you will judge when I say that to get them I had to watch till I was unobserved and then kick a piece, as if by accident, under a gun, or to any corner where it might lie until I could carry it below under cover of the night. [164]

All these things I hid under the bed-place in my cabin, where I had very little fear of their being found; for the good reason that, to my knowledge, no one ever entered the berth.

Meanwhile, the wind held bravely, with—on the third day—but a few hours of stagnant atmosphere and a flat and brilliant sea, followed by a shift into the westward of south that worked into a hearty wind, before which the Death Ship drove under all cloths, the clear water gushing from her scuppers to the clanking and spouting of her pump. Bearing in mind our situation after the tempest, as given me by Vanderdecken, and narrowly, if furtively, observing the courses we made, I kept a dead reckoning of our progress—for by this time I could measure the vessel's pace with my eye as correctly as ever the log could give it—and when the fifth day arrived I knew that at eight o'clock that morning either we were some twelve leagues distant from the African coast or that Vanderdecken was amazingly wrong in his calculations. [165]

My excitement bade fair to master me. It needed a power of will such as I could never have supposed I possessed to subdue my demeanour to that posture of calmness which the captain and his mates were used to see in me. Happily, Imogene was at hand to control any exhibition of impatience or anxiety. [166]

"Let them suspect nothing in your manner," she would say. "Van Vogelaar watches you closely; the least alteration in you might set him conjecturing. Who knows what fancies his base and malignant mind is capable of? His heart is bent on your destruction, and though he hopes that must follow your being left alone on the coast, yet a change in your ordinary manner might fill his cruel soul with fear that you had some plan to escape with your life, in which case I fear, Geoffrey, he would torment and enrage Vanderdecken into slaying you either here or on shore."

Well, as I have said, at eight o'clock that morning I reckoned we were some twelve leagues distant from the coast. The breeze had slackened somewhat, but it still blew a fresh air, and the water being quiet and such small swell as there was, together with the billows, chasing us, our speed was a fair five and a half knots. Yet there was no sign to advertise us of the adjacency of land. A few Cape hens flew along with us on our starboard beam, but this kind of sea-fowl had accompanied the ship when we were as far south as ever we were driven since I had been in her, and they could not be supposed to signify more than that we were "off" the South African headland—which term may stand for the measure of a vast extent of sea. The ocean was of as deep and glorious a blue as ever I had beheld it in the middle of the Atlantic. My suspense grew into torment; anxiety became anguish, the harsher and fiercer for the obligation of restraint. There was no dependence to be placed on Vanderdecken's reckoning. For several days he had been hove-to, and his log would certainly neither tell him his drift nor how the currents served him. My only hope then was in the supernatural guiding of the ship. I might believe, at least, that the instincts of the sea-bird would come to one whose dreadful and ghostly existence lay in an aimless furrowing of the mighty waters, and that he would know how to steer when the occasion arose, as does the ocean-fowl whose bed is the surge as its pinion is its pillow, but whose nest must be sought in rocky solitudes, leagues and leagues below that sea-line in whose narrow circle you find the creature flying.

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I dared not seem to appear to stare earnestly ahead; the part I had to play was that of extreme indifference; yet, swift as were the looks I directed over either bow, my eyes would reel with the searching, passionate vehemence of my stare, and the blue horizon wave to my sight as though it swam upon a swooning view.

Shortly after twelve o'clock, I was standing alone on the forward end of the poop, when I observed a clear shade of blue haze upon the horizon directly ahead. I watched it a little while, believing it no more than a darkening in the dye of the sky that way; but on bringing my eyes to it a second time, I found a fixity in the atmospheric outlining of the shadow that was not to be mistaken for anything but the blue faintness and delicate dim heads of a distant hilly coast. I turned, with a leap of heart that was a mingling of rapture and dread, to win Imogene by my manner to view the land, too; but she stood with Vanderdecken near the tiller, with her back upon me, apparently watching the motions of a bird that steadily flew along with us, some three cables' length on our larboard quarter, flying no faster than we sailed, yet going through the air as straight as a belated homeward-bound rook. One of the men forward saw the azure shadow, and seemed to call the attention of two or three others to it in that voiceless, mechanical way, which furnished a ghostlier and grislier character to the bearing and movements of the crew than ever they could have taken from the paleness of their faces, and the glittering, unreal vitality of their eyes only; and they went towards the beak to look, dropping whatever jobs they might have been upon, with complete disregard of discipline.

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Broad as the day was, abounding as the scene with the familiar and humanising glory of the blessed golden sunshine and the snow-topped peaks of shallow liquid sapphire ridges, yet the figures of those men, showing under the swelling and lifting foot of the foresail, peering under the sharp of their hands against their foreheads, silent in postures of phlegmatic observation, gave the whole picture of the ship a wild and dismal colour and appearance, and the black melancholy, the cold unholiness of it, stole biting as polar frost-smoke to the senses through the genial splendour of the noon-tide. Yet, like those men, did I stand looking with my hand against my brow, for there was a wonderful and almost blinding magnificence of light upon the shivering waters under the sun that was now floated north, but the resplendent haze did not dim the substantial line that was growing with a deepening hue into the atmosphere, and already methought I could discern the curve and sweep of inland airy altitudes with the dainty silver of clouds streaking them.

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"Land, Herr Fenton!" cried a voice in my ear.

I started. Van Vogelaar stood close beside me, pointing with a pale leathern forefinger, his harsh and rugged face smileless, though his eyes grinned with malice as they lay fastened upon mine.

"I see it, mynheer," I replied, coldly.

"It should rejoice your English soul," he exclaimed. "Your countrymen will not count you as a mariner of theirs if you love not the land! See! Remote and faint though it be, how substantial even in its blue thinness doth it show! No sea-sickness there, Herr Fenton! No hollow seas yawning black as vaults!"

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Had this man been of the earth I needed but to catch him by the scroff and breech and bring his spine to my knee to kill him. And he looked so much as if I could have served him so that it was hard to regard him without pity. I said, quietly, "Will that be the land the captain desires to make?"

"Ay," he answered, snarlingly, "the Dutch are sailors."

I thought to myself, yes, when they have the Devil for a sea-cunny they will hit their port.

"You will be glad to step ashore if but for half-an-hour?" said he, looking at me.

"That is a matter that concerns your master," I answered, turning from him. A low ha! ha! broke from him, muffled as the sound of a saw worked under deck, as musical too, and as mirthless. Yet Imogene's quick ear caught it, and she turned swiftly to look. And methought it had penetrated further yet, for upon the heels of it, there rose up, as an echo, from the cabin, that harsh and rusty cry, "Wy zyn al Verdomd!" [173]

CHAPTER IX. WE BRING UP IN A BAY.

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I could not at that time know what part of the South African coast was this we had made, but I have since learnt that it lies a few miles to the eastward of the meridian of twenty-two degrees, and about an hundred and sixty miles from Cape Agulhas. When it first came into sight, as I have said, it was but a faint, long-drawn shade in the light blue of the sky over the horizon, with such a fairy tincture of flanking eminence beyond that the whole was as delicately tender as the visionary shore of a dream.

But before the dinner-hour had come round we had stolen nearly two leagues closer to it, and the coast lay plain enough and very brave with colours, the green of several dyes, the mountain sky-lines of an exquisite clearness of cutting in the radiant atmosphere and against the hard azure brilliance of the heavens, and the tracts of white sand low down as lustrous as the foam of a dissolving surge. [175]

Soon after the land had hove into view, Imogene joined me. She had kept her feelings under whilst near Vanderdecken. Now, by my side, she stood with twenty emotions working in her, her nostrils quivering, her lips pale, the colour coming and going in her cheeks, the bright light that a passing hope flashed into her eyes dying out to the tearful shadowing of some bitter fear.

I said to her, very softly, and keeping my face as expressionless as my inward agitation would permit—for Vanderdecken and his mates conferred together near us, sometimes stopping close, sometimes pacing—"If this pace holds our anchor should be down by dusk." [176]

"What will they do?" she asked.

"I have been asking that question of myself," I replied. "Were they human—of this earth—I could foretell their movements. No sooner were they come to an anchor than they would turn to and get the guns and cargo over to one side, that by listing the ship they might bring the leak out of water and save themselves this starving job of pumping. But we have to base conjecture upon men who are neither dead nor alive, who are Dutchmen besides, I mean of a dull and apathetic habit, and they may wait for daylight and so obtain rest, of which they should get as much as they want with the reliefs they are able to send to the pump."

"What should best fit your project, Geoffrey?"

"Oh," said I, under my breath, "if we are to escape we shall need a deserted deck and a sleeping ship." [177]

"If this should come about to-night will you make the venture?"

"I cannot tell. Put it thus: if they shift the cargo after coming to an anchor with the idea of raising the leak clear, the work may occupy them all night. So all night long the ship will be alive and busy, and there will be no chance for me."

"But the ship will also be alive if they continue to ply the pump, which must be done if she is not to sink."

"Yes," said I, "so I may have to wait till to-morrow night."

She cried, with a quick blanching of her face that cruelly proved her stock of strength but slender, "If they careen the ship to-night they will be able to repair the leak in the morning, and be ready to sail before the evening."

"I do not fear that."

"Yet it might happen, Geoffrey! They will put you on shore before sailing——" She stopped, bringing her hands together with a passionate clasp. [178]

"I do not fear that," said I again. "Much will depend on where the leak is. If it be low down they may not be able to come at it without discharging cargo, which, seeing that they have but those two boats yonder to work with, and that they will have to make tents ashore and protect themselves against the natives—if any there here be—should keep them on the move for a long month. No, dearest, I do not fear that they will get away by to-morrow night—not if they were ten times as numerous and as nimble; nor is it probable that Vanderdecken would suffer me to be marooned till the ship is ready to start. My one anxiety is just now the weather. There is tranquility in that dark blue sky over us; the wind weakens as we approach the land, and there is promise of a calm night. May God help me to achieve my purpose before another twelve hours have rolled by." [179]

She looked at me with eagerness and alarm. "To-night!" she cried. "If this ship lies here for days,

as you imagine, how, when we are ashore, dare we hope to escape the strenuous search Vanderdecken is certain to make for us?" I smiled; she continued, with a feverish whisper: "Consider, dearest! If we are captured—he will have your life! God knows into what barbarities his rage may drive him!"

"Dearest," said I, gently, "let us first get out of the ship."

And here we broke off, for our whispering had lasted long enough. Soon after this we went below to dinner. At the start we none of us spoke, our behaviour and perhaps our appearance answering very exactly to the poet's description of a party in a parlour who sat—

"All silent and all damned!"

Outside, the sun shone gloriously, and the blue air had the purity of polished glass; but only a small portion of light found admission through the small windows in the cabin front, and we ate and gazed upon one another in a sullen atmosphere as gloomy as the expression on Vanderdecken's face. At this moment I see him plain, as on that day; his beard falling to his waist, his head slightly bowed, and his glance travelling in a gaze that would often stop and become fixed, his skin bleak and high and drawn with pallor. He was attired in a sort of blouse of dark-green cloth, confined about his waist by a yellow belt fastened by a small metal clasp, that would have given him a romantic and buccaneering look but for the austere majesty and fateful character of his appearance, which inevitably neutralised every suggestion that did not accord with the solemn, horrible mystery of his being. [180]

We sat for some time, as I have said, as silent as the dead; but on reflecting that there was nothing, in reason, I could say likely to procure me a harder fate than that already designed by these men, I determined to ask a question or two, and said: "Has your carpenter ascertained in what part of the ship the leak is, mynheer?" [181]

He turned his eyes round upon me slowly. He was indeed stately in all he did. I never beheld him glance quickly nor start, and the only time in which his dignity fell, torn in rags from him, was that night when he acted over the scene of the Curse in his sleep.

He answered, "Yes."

"Is it far down?" said Imogene.

"The ship will need heeling to four strakes," he replied.

I dropped my knife on to the deck for the excuse to pick it up that I might hide the delight in my face. A list of four strakes would prove but a very small matter to bring about, and my fears that the vessel would linger for days, perhaps for a month, on this coast vanished. [182]

"I hope," said I, "it may not prove worse than a started butt-end."

"It is that, and no more," said he.

"How much more would you have, Herr Fenton?" exclaimed Van Vogelaar, in his ugliest manner. "Dost suppose our pump can deliver half the great South Sea with every stroke?"

"It should take us four days of easy working," said I, "to careen, repair, and start afresh snugly stowed."

"You are in a hurry to get home, sir, no doubt?" exclaimed Van Vogelaar.

"Sir," said I, "I am addressing the captain."

"Skipper!" cried the man; "Herr Fenton is in a hurry to get home! We should put him in the way of making a speedy passage."

"I expect to return in this ship," said I, speaking with my eyes on Vanderdecken. "I am well satisfied. Nothing stauncher floats. Consider, mynheer, how nobly she has acted in the gales we have encountered. It would please me to entreat you to use such poor skill as I have as a mariner in helping your men; but your courtesy is magnanimous—of the form that is to be met in highest perfection in the Hollander of lineage—and I will not risk my own civility by further requests." [183]

He motioned with his hand, contenting himself with whatever answer the gesture signified. I perceived there was no further information to be obtained from him—from Van Vogelaar nothing but sneers and insults—and so held my peace. Yet I had learnt something.

When, after dining, I went on deck, the land looked as near again as it had when I went below. This was owing to the amazing transparency and purity of the atmosphere, insomuch that every twenty fathoms the ship measured was like adding a fresh lens to a perspective glass. Yet it was not until four o'clock that the coast lay so clear as to render every detail of it a visible thing, and then the sight was helped by the sun being on the larboard side and showering his glory aslant, which, mingling with the golden splendour rising out of his wake in the sea, put an extraordinary shining into the atmosphere, but without the lustrous haze that had been rising when he was right over the land and kindling the water under our bows. 'Twas a picture of a bay with a shelving beach thickly green with bushes and trees, in and out of which there winded lengths and lines of exceeding white sand that trembled to the sunshine with the shivering metallic sheen of frosted silver. The sea went blue as the sky to the shore and tumbled into foam, in some places leaping up in creamy dartings, in others making a small crystal smoke with its boiling, elsewhere lapping tenderly and expiring in ripples. The azure heights beyond, which had seemed to closely flank the coast when first beheld, drew inland with our approach, marking their remoteness by the retention of their lovely atmospheric delicacy of colour, and their height by the lengths of vapour that clung to their mighty slopes at various altitudes, like fragments of great silken veils [184] [185]

or cloths of pale gold which had been rent whilst blowing along. The seaboard went in a rugged line east and west by the compass, sometimes coming very low down, sometimes soaring into great forelands, plentifully covered with wild growths, as you saw by the several dyes of green that coated it, and in one place—about a league from the bay—a pale blue smoke rising up denoted a bush-fire, and, as it was easy to suppose, the presence of natives.

The sky was catching a tinge of brassy hardness from the westering sun, and the complexion of it where the mountain heights were somehow made you think of measureless miles of hot and cloudy sand glowing yellowly up into that feverish reflection. The weak swell that lifted us rolled in wind-wrinkled folds into the bay, which yawned unsheltered to the south. I knew from experience that it needs no great wind on this coast to raise a monstrous sea, and it was with unspeakable eagerness and anxiety that I directed my eyes from the land to the sky overhead and on our quarters. But the promise of tranquility seemed to deepen with the drawing down of the sun. It was sheer sapphire in the south, melting eastwards into violet, and the sea that way was like an English lake, and to the left of the sun there floated a few purple clouds, which I watched some time with attention but could not tell that they moved, though a breeze was still about us, humming pleasantly aloft, keeping our old sails rounded, and sending the aged structure gliding at four knots an hour as quietly through it as a seagull paddling in the level water of an harbour. [186]

But for the tedious clanging of the pump and the fountain-sounds of its discharge, the stillness on board would have been as deep as the hush upon the land. Still, lovely as was that afternoon, I very well remember wishing it had been a month earlier or later than this. We were in the stormy time of the year in these parts, though it was summer at home, and a violent change might quickly come. If it came, Vanderdecken would have to put to sea, leak or no leak, for it was not to be supposed that mere hemp could partake of the Curse; and the cables which I saw some of the crew getting up out of the hold and bending to the anchors at the bows were assuredly not going to hold this lump of a craft, high out of water and as thick as a tower aloft, for twenty solid minutes in a seaway and in the eye of a stout wind. [187]

Therefore it was, when I was alone with Imogene, the coast being then about a league distant and the sun low, that I said to her: "Dearest, I have made up my mind to make a desperate effort to get away with you to-night." [188]

"I am ready," she answered, instantly; "you need but tell me what to do."

"We must make use of this noble weather," I continued; "it is a fickle season, a change may come in half-a-dozen hours and force Vanderdecken to sea with his pump going. Imogene, it must not find us aboard."

"No."

"There will be no moon till eleven; we must be away before she rises, for she will glow brightly in that sky."

"Dearest, I am ready," she repeated. "But, Geoffrey, risk nothing on the mere chance that the weather will change. You might imperil your life by haste—and to-morrow night may be as reposeful as this that approaches, and with a later moon too!" [189]

"Yes, but do not bid me risk nothing!" I exclaimed. "We must risk everything—our chances aboard and our chances out of the ship—or you are as good as chained to this vessel for life."

She smiled her acquiescence. I looked at her with passionate inquiry, but never did a braver and more resolved heart gaze at a lover from a maiden's eyes. I found the fearlessness of her devotion the more admirable for the dread she had expressed concerning the perils of the coast, and for her speaking thus to me with the land close to and all its wildness and melancholy visible to her, together with the distant smoke, towards which I had seen her glance again and again, and whose meaning she perfectly understood.

The ship swam slowly forwards. The coast dried the wind out of the atmosphere, but so much the better, for there was enough to carry us in, and then it could not die too soon to serve my turn. All was ready with the anchors forward, and the men hung about in pallid gangs waiting for orders to take sail off the ship. The vitality of the wondrous craft seemed to lie in the pump and its automatic plyers, so deep was the silence among the crew and so still their postures; but now and again the heavy courses would swing into the masts to the soft bowing of the fabric and raise a feeble thunder-note like to the sound of bowls rolling over hollow ground. The red light in the west lay upon the head of the shaggy line of coast, and the far-off mountains that had been blue went up in a dim purple to the sky; the crimson haze seemed to float over the rugged brink and roll down the slope to the shore, so that the scene was bathed in a most exquisite delicate light—all features touched with red; a bronze as of English autumn upon the green; the white sand gleaming rosily, and great spaces of reddish rubble-like ground glowing dark as blood. But the loneliness! I figured myself ashore there—the ship gone—Imogene gone! I stood in fancy upon the beach looking out on this bare sea; an aged, perhaps worthless firelock by my side, a few cartridges, a week's store of provisions! The moan of the surf was in my ear; every creaking and rustling of the wind in the near bushes startled me. To right and left rolled the coast for endless leagues, and the vast plain of sea, whose multitudinous crying found echoes in a thousand caverns, east and west, and in the reverberating heart of giant cliffs, whose walls were best measured in parallels and meridians, went down into the heavens where the uttermost ends of the earth were. [190]

Yet, hideous as was the prospect of that shore when I thought of myself marooned upon it, its horrors shrunk into mere perils, such as courage, patience and resolution might overcome, when [192]

my imagination put my darling by my side, and with her hand in mine, I looked round me upon the vast scene of solitude. In her weakness I found my strength; in her devotion my armour. Great God! How precious to man is Thy gift of woman's love! But for Imogene where would have been my purpose and determination? I have but to recall the condition of my spirits when I looked at the shore and thought of myself as alone there to know.

The sun had been sunk an hour, the twilight had melted into darkness, and the sky was full of stars, when the Death Ship floated in a breathless manner to abreast of the eastern bluff or foreland of the bay, and with an air as faint as the sigh of a spirit expiring upon the black drapery of her higher canvas, she slid the blotting head of coast on to her quarter, and came to a dead stand within half-a-mile of the beach.

I heard Vanderdecken tell Arents to drop the lead over the side. This was done. The captain [193] exclaimed: "What trend hath she?"

"None, sir. The line is up and down like an iron bar."

"Clew up the topsails and topgallant-sails. Up with the courses. See all ready to let go the anchors, Van Vogelaar."

These orders were re-echoed. In a moment the decks were alive with dusky shapes of moving men; one after another the sails dissolved against the stars like clouds, amid the hoarse rumbling of blocks, the whistling of running ropes, the rattle of descending yards.

"Are you all ready forward?" cried Vanderdecken, his rich voice going in notes of deep-throated music up into the gloom.

"All ready!" answered Van Vogelaar from the forecastle.

"Then let go the anchor!"

The heavy splash of a great weight of iron was followed by a hot seething sound of cable torn [194] through the hawse-pipe; the water boiled to the launching blow from the bow and spread out in a surface of dim green fire.

I watched to see if the vessel would swing: but there was no air, neither was there tide or current to slue her, and she hung in a shadow like that of a thunder-cloud over her own anchor, her mastheads very softly beating time to the slow lift and fall of the light swell.

"Keep all fast with the larboard anchor!" exclaimed Vanderdecken. "Overhaul the cable to the fifty fathom scope. Aloft men and stow the canvas. Carpenter!"

A hoarse voice answered, "Sir?"

"Sound the well and let me know what water there is."

In a few minutes a lantern flickered like an *ignis fatuus* and threw out the sombre shapes of men as its gleam passed over the decks which rippled in faint sheets of phosphoric light. He who bore [195] it was the carpenter. When he came to the pump he handed it to a seaman whilst he dropped the sounding-rod down the well. The light was yellow, and the figures of the fellows who were pumping and the stooping form of the carpenter stood out of the gloom like an illuminated painting in a crypt. A foot or two of water gushing from the pump sparkled freely to where the darkness cut it off. Against the glittering lights in the sky you saw the ink-like outlines of men dangling upon the yards, rolling up the canvas. I watched the carpenter pore upon the rod to mark the height to which the wet rose; he then came on to the poop and spoke to Vanderdecken in a voice too low for me to catch what he said.

Imogene had left me ten minutes before, and I stood alone in the deeper shade made in the gloom upon the poop by the mizzen-rigging. The beating of my heart was painful with anxiety. From one moment to another I could not tell what the next order might be, and if ever I seemed [196] to feel a breath of air upon my hot temples, I trembled with the fear that it was the forerunner of a breeze. As it stood, 'twas such a night to escape in that my deepest faith in God's mercy had never durst raise my hopes to the height of its beauty and stillness.

On the opposite side of the poop slowly walked Vanderdecken; in the starlight such of his skin as showed was as white as wax; he sometimes looked aloft at the men there, sometimes around at the ocean, sometimes coming to a stand to mark the gradual swinging of the ship that was now influenced by some early trickling of tide or by the motions of the small heaving in the sea, or by some ghostly whisperings of air overhead.

Ten minutes passed. Though the ship was full of business, not a sound broke from the men, and the hush you felt upon the dark line of shore would have been upon the vessel but for the [197] clanking jerks of the pump-brake and the noise of flowing water.

A figure came up the poop-ladder and softly approached. It was Imogene. I lightly called and she came to my side in the shadow.

"What are they doing?" she asked.

"They are furling the sails; nothing more as yet," I answered.

"Will they endeavour to lift the leak out of water to-night?"

"Dearest, I am waiting to see what they mean to do."

"I will ask Vanderdecken," said she, "he always answers my questions."

I seized her hand. "No! He may suspect I sent you. Let us walk carelessly here and there. Lurking

in the shadow might give an air of conspiracy to the prattle of infants to the suspicions of such a mind as his."

We moved towards the taffrail—the helm was lashed and abandoned—and then quietly to and fro, speaking under our breath. [198]

"Geoffrey, we may find no water to drink when we get on shore; have you provided for that?" she said.

I started. I had thought of all things, as I fancied; yet I had overlooked the most essential of our certain needs.

"No, I have not provided for that," I exclaimed. "How now to manage?"

"I thought of it just now in my cabin. There is a pitcher there and the sight of it put it into my head to ask if you had included water in your stock of provisions. It holds about two gallons. It has a narrow neck and may be easily corked. But how can we convey it ashore. My weight and the bags and it would sink a bigger frame than the one that is to float me."

I said: "Is there fresh water in it?"

"It is nearly full. Prins keeps it replenished."

I said: "Are bottles to be had?" [199]

She reflected and answered: "There are jars in which wine is kept, but I do not know where to find them."

'Twas my turn to think. I then cried: "There is a silver flagon in the box under the table; that which Prins took away last week and brought back filled with sherry for Vanderdecken. Can you get it?"

"Yes."

"We may not need it; if so we will leave it. Vanderdecken shall not say that we have plundered him though we must risk a graver charge even than that if there be occasion. Dearest, convey that flagon to your cabin. Fill it with fresh water in readiness. We shall find fresh water sweeter than the richest wine. Also contrive to have the pitcher filled to the brim. Prins will do that and suspect nothing. You will invent a reason, and when it is filled cork it as securely as possible and bind the head with stout rag that what you use as a cork may not fall out." [200]

She said she would go and see about it at once.

"A moment," I whispered. "Is the window of your quarter-gallery open?"

"No; but I will open it."

"Do so; stand at it till you hear me cough. Then grasp a rope that I will let hang against the window and coil it away as you pull it in."

She understood me with the readiness of a sailor's child and a sailor's sweetheart, and left me. The mizzen-yard was lowered; the sail had been stowed some time. Rove through a small block at the end of the yard was a length of thin line termed signal halliards used for the showing of colours. I waited till Vanderdecken came to a stand at the head of the ladder that was, of course, at the forward end of the poop, and then with a mariner's swiftness overhauled the halliards through the block, catching the end as it fell that it might not strike the deck, and threw it over the quarter, coughing distinctly as I did so. I felt her pull it; I paid it out cautiously, narrowly watching Vanderdecken till the whole length was gone, then sauntered forward to where the shadow of the mizzen-rigging blackened the air. [201]

I had not stood there a minute when Vanderdecken cried out, "Van Vogelaar!" The mate answered from the forecandle.

"Let a hand remain on the main-topsail yard to receive a tackle for hoisting out both boats."

I turned my back, putting both my hands to my face in an ecstatic burst of gratitude to the great God of Heaven for this signal mercy. 'Twas what I had been hoping and waiting for, with a heart sickened by doubt and fear. The order was given, and had I been suddenly transported with Imogene into a ship bound for England my soul could not have swelled up with keener exultation! [202]

CHAPTER X.

THE WEATHER HELPS MY SCHEME.

I will say now that the alternate scheme I had all along had in my mind was escaping by means of one of the boats. But I had held this project back from Imogene; nay, had kept it in hiding almost away from my own consideration for fear that I should be unable to secure a boat. Perhaps, indeed, I had counted upon Vanderdecken practising the custom of his day, which was to get the boats over on coming to an anchor; yet it was but a hope, and not daring to think too heartily in this direction I had talked wholly to Imogene of delivering ourselves by floating and swimming ashore.

But now the boats were to be lifted over the side, and my next proceeding must therefore be to [204]

watch an opportunity to enter one of them with Imogene and silently sneak away.

To see what they were about, the men hung several lanterns about the waist and gangways. The canvas had been furled, and the yards lay in thick black strokes against the stars. The coast looked like peaked heights of pitch, and the sea, with a sort of dead gleaming floating in it with the motion of the folds, spread out brimful to the dim flashing of the surf. You could hear nothing for the noise of the pumping, yet it seemed to me but for that, God knows what mysterious whisperings, what faint noise of howling cries, what strange airy creeping of hisses and the seething of swept and disturbed foliage and burrowed bush I might catch the mingled echo of, hovering in a kind of cloud of sound, and coming, some of it, from as far away as the deeper blackness that you saw in the land where the cerulean giants of the afternoon steadied their burdened postures by pressing their brows against the sky. There was a red spot upon that part of the coast over which you would be looking for the crimson forehead of the moon presently. 'Twas a league off, and expressed a big area of incandescence, and was the fire whence the smoke I had noticed arose. [205]

One after the other they swung the boats clear of the rail to the water, and secured the ends of their painters, or the lines by which they were fastened, to a pin, on either quarter, thus leaving both boats floating under the counter. Vanderdecken then gave orders for the second anchor to be let go, the ship having some time since slid imperceptibly back to the fair tension of the cable already down.

I now thought I had been long enough on deck, that further lingering must suggest too much persistency of observation; so I went to the cabin. It was empty. I coughed, and in a minute or two Imogene came from her berth. The lamp swung over the table and the white light that fell through the open bottom of it streamed on my face. [206]

She instantly exclaimed: "You are flushed and look glad! What is it, Geoffrey?"

"We are as good as free!" I cried. She stared at me. Then I explained how Vanderdecken had ordered the boats over as though in sober truth he had as great a mind as I that we should escape; how our deliverance by one of the boats had been my second but concealed scheme; how both boats were under the counter, to our hands almost; and how nothing more remained to be done but wait a chance of entering one of them and dropping hiddenly out of sight.

"Then we need not land!" she cried.

I said, "No." She clasped her hands and looked at me with a rapture that made me see how heavy though secret had lain the horror of escape by the shore upon her. [207]

I said to her: "Slip into your quarter-gallery and look over and tell me which boat lies under it, whether the little or the large one. Also if the rope that holds her is within reach. Also distinguish what furniture of oars and sails are in the boats—if any there be. I dare not go to your cabin lest Vanderdecken should arrive as I come out."

She went, and was gone about five minutes. During this interval I took notice of a sobering down of the movements of the men about the deck, as though they were coming to an end with their various jobs of coiling away and clearing up. But the pump gushed incessantly. I grew extremely eager to know if they meant to handle the cargo and guns, towards careening the vessel, that night. But whether or no, I was determined to leave the Death Ship, and before the moon rose—if possible.

'Twas now a little after seven o'clock. Imogene returned. She glanced about her to make sure I was alone, and seating herself close to me, said: "It is the bigger boat that is under my quarter-gallery." [208]

"Good!" I cried. "She will be the safer for our purpose."

"Where the other boat lies the gloom is so thick 'tis impossible to see what is in her. But I can distinctly perceive the outline of a sail in the big boat."

"There will be a mast as well," said I. "Since the sail is there she will have been lowered fully equipped. And the rope that holds her?"

"It tightens and droops with the lifting of the boat and the heaving of the ship," she replied. "But I think it may be grasped by standing upon the rail of the galley."

This I had expected, for the boat rode to a very short scope of line.

"Now, dearest," said I, "this is my plan: the line you dragged in, when middled and doubled, will serve me to lower you down with. When in the boat, you must throw the line off you, so that I may use it to send down the pitcher of water and the bags of provisions. I will then come down by it myself. Retire as early as you may under pretence of being weary, then clothe yourself in your warmest attire and select such apparel as fits most closely, for flowing drapery cannot but prove troublesome. Leave your cabin door unlatched, but seemingly shut, that I may enter by pushing only. Meanwhile, stay here. I shall return in a few minutes." [209]

I walked to my cabin below. The gang of pumpers clove to the brake like a little company of spectres clothed as seamen, and their manner of toiling suggested a horrid mockery of the labour of earthly beings. I shot a swift glance along the deck ere descending the hatch, but, saving the men who pumped, could see no more than a shadow or two moving in the distance forward. I took the bags of provisions from under the bed; the smallest of the three fitted my hat, which I put on my head; the other two I crammed into my coat pockets, which were extremely capacious. A goodly portion of the bag in the larboard pocket stood up, and the head of the other was very [210]

visible; but I covered them by keeping my arms up and down; and so conveyed them to the cabin, which I surveyed through the door before entering.

Imogene instantly took them to her berth, and then returned. She had scarce resumed her seat when Vanderdecken entered. He came to the table and looked on a moment, and said: "Imogene, where is Prins?"

"I have not seen him," she answered.

He stepped to the door and called, and then came to his chair and seated himself, not offering to speak till Prins arrived.

"Get the supper," said he. "Mix a bowl of brandy punch. My limbs ache. I have stood too long." [211]

Encouraged to address him by his breaking the silence, I said, "Mynheer Vanderdecken, may I ask if it is your intention to careen to-night?"

He looked at me sullenly and with a frown, and said: "Why do you inquire?"

"That I may crave a favour, sir. My cabin is close to the pump; the clattering of that engine is extremely disturbing, and therefore I would ask your permission to use this bench for a bed to-night if you do not intend to careen to the leak, and so render further pumping unnecessary."

He considered awhile, eyeing me sternly; but it was not conceivable that he should find any other than the surface-meaning in this request.

He answered: "I do not intend to careen; the weather hath every promise of continued fairness; the men shall have their night's rest; they will work the more briskly for it to-morrow. As the pump must be kept going, your request is reasonable. You can use this cabin, and Prins shall give you one of my cloaks to soften your couch." [212]

I made him a low grateful bow, secretly accepting his civility, however, as does a man condemned to death the attentions of a gaoler or the tenderness of the hangman.

Prins prepared the table for supper, and then set a bowl of steaming punch before the captain. Shortly afterwards arrived Van Vogelaar and Arents. Our party was now complete, and we fell to. I said: "Gentlemen, you will forgive the curiosity of an English mariner who is unused to the discipline of the Batavian ships. How, Mynheer Vanderdecken, are the watches among you arranged when in harbour, as in a sense we may take ourselves now to be?"

Imogene observing my drift came to my help and said in Dutch: "The practice is as with our countrymen, Herr Fenton." [213]

"Then the commandant stands the watch till midnight, and the mates together till sunrise," said I, speaking inaccurately that I might draw them into speech.

"No," exclaimed Arents. "With us the commander keeps no watch. The mates take the deck as at sea, I till midnight, Van Vogelaar till four, then I again."

"That is as it should be," said I, smiling into Arents' large, fat, white face.

"And it is very proper," said Van Vogelaar, in his coarse sarcastic voice, "that English sailors should apply to the Dutch for correct ideas on true marine discipline."

"Gentlemen," said I, suavely, "I have learnt much since I have been with you."

The mate darted one of his ugliest looks at me. And it was made infernal by the twist of leering triumph in his heavy lips, though he could not suppose I exactly understood what it meant. [214]

We fell silent. Vanderdecken served out the punch with a small silver goblet. I drank but a mouthful or two, dreading the fumes. The others quaffed great draughts, making nothing of the potency of the liquor, nor of the steaming heat of it. Had they been as I was or Imogene—human and real—I should have rejoiced in their intemperance; but 'twas impossible to suppose that the fumes of spirits could affect the brains of men immortal in misery.

When they had done eating they called for pipes, and Vanderdecken told Prins to bring him such and such a cloak, naming and describing it. The fashion of it was about eighty years old; 'twas of very dark velvet, with a silver chain at the throat and silk under-sleeves. He motioned to Prins to put it down, giving me to know by the same gesture that it was at my service. I thanked him with a slight inclination of the head, grateful that he did not speak, as I knew not what effect the news of my desire to sleep in the cabin might have upon the malignant mate's suspicious mind. [215]

Imogene observed a strict silence. Sometimes I caught her looking at Vanderdecken, sometimes round upon the cabin. At such moments there came a softened light of wistfulness into her eyes; nay, rather let me call it pensiveness, for there was nothing of yearning in it—merely the emotion that would attend the thought that, under God, this was the last night she would ever pass in the Death Ship; the last hours she would ever spend in the company of Vanderdecken. The old fabric had for nearly five years been her ocean home—the only refuge in the wide world for her. 'Twas associated with the desolation of her orphaned state—with the anguish of her loneliness in the open boat. Her very being had merged into the ancient timbers—to the spirit of her life a voice and an expression had been given by each hollow straining sound, by the roar of wind in the rigging, by the musical stirrings of air in the quiet night, by the sob of gently-passing waters, by the thunder of the storm-created surge. And he at whom she gazed—cruel, fierce, scowling, imperious as he was—lifting God-defying eyes to the heavens, his giant frame volcanic with the desperate perturbations of a soul of fire—yet had that man ever been gentle to her—he had tendered her with something of a father's love; he had held her to his breast as an ocean-stray for whom, Heaven help him! he believed that there was an asylum, that there was affection, that [216]

there was motherly and sisterly sympathy in his distant home at Amsterdam. She could not have been the Imogene of my adoration, the fresh, true-hearted virginal being of this Death Ship, mingling something of the mystery of the doomed structure and something of the mighty deep, with the pure, chaste, exquisite vitality of a living and a loving woman, had not her violet eyes saddened to the thought of parting for ever from her floating home and from that stately, bearded figure whose affection for her was even fuller of pathos than his dream of those whom he deemed yet slumbered at night in far-off Amsterdam. [217]

But no sentiment of this kind coloured my view of him. To me, that was to be put ashore by his command and left miserably to perish there, he was a cruel and a murderous rascal; of which qualities in him I had so keen a sense that I never for a moment questioned that if my scheme miscarried and he found out what I intended, he would have me swung at the yard-arm right away out of hand, though it should be pitch dark and they should have to hang me by lantern-light.

Presently Arents put down his pipe and went on deck. Van Vogelaar, leaning on his elbow midway across the table, muttered with the long shank of his pipe between his teeth to Vanderdecken about the routine and rotation of the pumping-gangs. The captain let fall a few instructions touching the morning's work. Imogene rose. [218]

"I am like you, Captain Vanderdecken—weary," she said, smiling, whilst her pale face fully warranted her assurance. "I shall go to bed."

"'Tis early," said he, sending a look at the clock; "you seem dispirited, my dear. It will not be this brief halt here, I trust? We shall be under weigh again in a couple of days, homeward-bound—one great ocean already traversed. Think of that!" She put her fingers to her mouth simulating a yawn. "But if you are weary," he continued, "go to rest, my dear."

She smiled at him again, curtsied to me, and with a half-bow to Van Vogelaar went to her cabin.

Vanderdecken, dipping the silver goblet into the punch-bowl, bade me extend my cup. I thanked him, said my head ached, and that with his leave I would take the air above for a spell. On gaining the poop I walked right aft and looked over the taffrail. The boats there rose and fell in two lumps of blackness under the quarters. They strained very quietly at the lines which held them, and this enabled me to observe, by noting the trend of the land, that such surface-motion as the water had was westerly. I was fretted to observe the sea unusually phosphorescent. Every time the rise and fall of the ship's stern flipped at one or the other of the boat's lines the sudden drag raised a little foam about her, and the bubbling flashed like the reflection of sheet lightning in a mirror. This, I say, vexed me; for the dip of an oar must occasion a fire as signalling in its way as a flare or a lantern, though the boat itself should be buried in the darkness. [219]

I came away from the taffrail after a very brief look over. Arents at the head of the poop-ladder stood apparently gazing at the men pumping on the main-deck, but I knew the motionless postures into which he and the others fell too well to guess that any speculation would be found in his eyes could they be peered into. The bush fire burnt like a great red spark on the black outline to starboard. Out of the western ocean the stars looked to be floating as though they were a smoke of silver sparkles, meeting in a mass of diamond-light over our swaying mastheads, with scatterings of brilliant dust among them, suggesting the wakes of winged star-ships; but past the starboard yard-arms all this quick, glorious scintillation of planet and meteor, of fixed stars and the Magellanic clouds, with the beautiful Cross sweetly dominant, went wan and dying into mere faintness. This however I did not particularly heed, though the habits of a sailor would cause me to fasten my eye upon the appearance; but presently looking for the crimson scar of bush-fire, I found it was gone with many of the stars which had been glittering above and against it. [220]

A few minutes put an end to conjecture; 'twas a true South African fog coming along, white as gunpowder smoke, and eating out the prospect with long feelers and winding limbs till the whole body was fluffing thick and soft as feathers about the ship, eclipsing everything save a golden spike or two of the lighted lantern that hung against the main-mast for the comfort or convenience of the pumpers. [221]

CHAPTER XI.

MY POOR DARLING.

It was ten o'clock. For half-an-hour had I been sitting in the cabin alone waiting for Vanderdecken to come below and go to bed. I heard the parrot angrily clawing about her cage to the chiming of the bell, as if impatient of the slowness of the strokes and enraged by their disturbing notes; and when the last chime died out she violently flapped her wings and cried, with an edge of scream in the ordinary harshness of her voice, "Wy zyn al Verdomd!" [222]

"Verdomd for you, you vile croaker!" thought I, involuntarily clenching my fist as I looked towards her. "Such another yell might bring Van Vogelaar out of his berth."

But she was never again to utter that curse in my hearing. [223]

I went to the cabin door, and found the thickness boiling black about the decks, not an outline visible, nothing to be seen but the lantern-shine, dim as a glow-worm in the crystalline denseness. The clanking of the pump seemed to find twenty echoes in the great concealed fabric

of round-tops and square yards on high. How ghostly the stillness with which the brake was plied! You listened till your ear seemed in pain for the sound of a human laugh, the growl of a human voice.

Whilst I stood looking into the thickness, Vanderdecken came down the quarter-deck ladder. The wet of the fog sparkled in his beard, and his fur cap glistened to the lamplight. He stood in the doorway and stared at me under his great heavy brows as though surprised, and even startled, to see me; then exclaimed, "*Ach*, I had forgotten you sleep in this cabin to-night. The lamp can be left alight, if you please." [224]

"If you please, mynheer," said I, with a note of careless indifference in my voice. In fact I would rather have been in darkness, but it was my policy to seem as if his wishes were all the same to me, let them run as they would.

"Tell Prins when he comes, it is my order he should leave the lamp burning," said he, speaking quietly and in a manner that recalled my earliest impressions of him when he talked low lest he should disturb Imogene. He gave me a stiff bow and walked to his cabin.

Five minutes after arrived Prins.

"'Tis the captain's wish," said I, in a low voice, "that the lamp should be kept alight."

"Good, sir," he replied, imitating my soft speech.

"It is for my convenience; I sleep here as you know, that the pump may be less disturbing. Captain Vanderdecken is good enough to consult my comfort, but as the light is bright, pray dim it, Prins. That may be managed, I hope?" [225]

"Easily," he answered, and climbed upon the table to come at the lamp.

"So," said he, turning down the mesh, "how is that, Herr Fenton?"

"A little fainter yet—so! I thank you, Prins. Have you made an end of your work? I am in no hurry to lie down."

He slipped off the table with a look round, and said: "My work is finished, Herr. You can take your rest at once for me." He yawned. "These African fogs make one gape. Good-night, sir."

"Good-night, Prins."

He halted in the doorway.

"I will shut this door to keep the damp out," he said. I motioned with my hand as though bidding him shut it, which he did, and I was left alone.

I wrapped Vanderdecken's large rich cloak about me, and stretched myself along the bench, using my arm as a pillow. I resolved to lie thus for at least half-an-hour, conceiving that this would be long enough to weary any one who should take it into his head to watch me through the cabin window. As to Vanderdecken, I did not fear his seeing me whilst he kept his door closed. The bulkhead of his berth was thick and apparently seamless, and his door fitted into overlaps of the jambs, for the exclusion of draughts of air after the fashion in old shipbuilding. I lay very quiet hearkening to the dulled beating of the pump and watching the clock, the great hand of which was just visible. When it came round so as to lie upon the quarter before the hour, I rose with the utmost stealth, arranging the cloak in such a fashion as to make the dark shape of it resemble a recumbent form, and holding my breath, stole on tiptoe to Imogene's cabin and pushed the door. It opened; I entered and pushed the door to again, and it jammed noiselessly upon the soft substance that had kept it closed before. [226] [227]

Imogene sat on the side of her bed, that exactly resembled the bed in Vanderdecken's room which I have described. She was fully dressed, and had on a fur or sealskin cap, with flaps for the ears. A small silver lamp of a very ancient pattern hung from a hook in the great beam that traversed the ceiling of her cabin, but she had trimmed or depressed the mesh into a feeble gleam. The little door that led to the quarter-gallery stood open. I kissed her cold forehead, and whispered, "Are you ready?"

"Yes!"

I held her hand whilst I could have counted ten, but found it steadier than mine.

"Come, dearest!" said I, and I stepped into the gallery.

The fog put an intolerable blackness into the air, and the chill of it was like frost upon the flesh. But for the phosphorescence of the sea, which I had before lamented, I should not have been able to see the boat under the counter. As it was, the tweaking of the line to the rise and fall of the Death Ship kept a small stir of water about the boat; the greenish-yellow shining showed through the fog and threw out the figure of the structure. The railing of the gallery rose to the height of my breast. I leaned over it, waving my hand in the blackness for the rope, and not catching it, bade Imogene seize my coat to steady me, and jumped on to the rail, and in a moment felt the line and grasped it; then dismounted, holding the rope. In a few seconds I had the boat's head—that was square and horned, as you will remember—fair under the gallery, and in that posture I secured her by hitching the slack of the line to the rail. [228]

Everything continued to help us; first the fog, that made an astonishing blackness of the night, though I guessed this would grow into a pallid faintness presently, when the moon was up and had gathered power; next the phosphoric shinings upon which the boat rose and fell like a great blot of ink; then the noise of the pump, which, to the most attentive ear on deck, would absorb all such feeble sounds as our movements were likely to cause; and again, there was the small but [229]

constant grinding of the sudden jumping of the rudder to the action of the swell, very nicely calculated to lull the suspicions of Vanderdecken in the adjacent cabin should he be awake and hear us. But this I did not fear, for the quarter-gallery was outside the ship, and we worked in the open air, and made no noise besides.

Not a moment was to be lost; the halliards I had unrove from the mizzen-peak lay in a heap at my feet. I ran the length through, doubled it, and made a bowline-on-the-bight of the two thicknesses. This bight or loop I slipped over Imogene's shoulders, bringing the running or lowering part in front of her that there should be no pressure to hurt her tender breasts, and then took two turns round a stancheon on the quarter-gallery. [230]

"Dearest," I whispered, kissing her, "keep a stout heart and do exactly as I bid. First, in what part of the cabin shall I find the pitcher and the provisions?"

"Between the foot of the bedstead and the door. They are covered with a dress."

"Right. I am now about to lower you into the boat. I will lower very gently. The moment your feet touch the boat, cough—but not loudly—as a sign for me to lower handsomely, for the rise and fall of the boat necessitates smart action. When you are safe—that is when you are gotten into the middle of the boat—sit down, and throw the rope off you. I will then send down the pitcher and bags by the line which you will cast adrift from them. It will then be my turn to join you." [231]

So saying I took her in my arms and lifted her on to the rail, seating her there an instant, then taking in one hand the end of the rope which was twisted round the stancheon, with the other I gently slid her over the rail, easing her down with my arm round her till she hung by the line. In another moment she was in the boat.

I hauled up the line, went for the pitcher and bags and sent them down to her, she receiving and detaching them from the line with a promptitude equal to anything I could have hoped to find in that way in a sailor. I called to her softly—that she might know why I lingered—"I am going for the cloak," for the moment I saw it I had made up my mind to carry it off as a covering for Imogene.

I opened her cabin door breathlessly and peered out; then stole soft as a mouse to the cloak and threw it over my arm. The interior lay in a sullen gloom to the dim shining of the lamp. Our stock of provisions was small, and my eye catching sight of the chest under the table I recollected having seen Prins put a canvas bag full of biscuit into it after supper. This I resolved to take. So I went to the chest, raised the lid, and found the bag, but my hurry and agitation being great I let fall the lid which dropped with a noisy bang. Heaping curses upon my clumsiness, I fled like a deer into the cabin and on to the quarter-gallery, threw the cloak and bag into the boat, and followed headlong down the rope I had left dangling from the rail. [232]

I was scarce arrived when the faint light that streamed from Imogene's berth into the quarter-gallery was obscured, and to my horror I saw the loom of a human shape overhanging the rail.

"Imogene! Imogene! Come back—come back!" rang out Vanderdecken's deep and thrilling voice. "Herr Fenton, restore to me the treasure thou wouldst rob me of and I swear not a single hair of thy head shall be harmed." [233]

In mad haste I sawed through the rope that held the boat with my pocket-knife. He could not see, but he heard me; and springing on to the rail, roared, in his thunderous notes, "Arents, Arents, the Englishman hath seized one of the boats and is kidnapping Miss Dudley. Do you hear me? Speak—or you swing!"

I heard the clattering of heavy boots running along the tall echoing poop high over our heads.

"Sir—sir—I am here! Your orders, sir?" bawled Arents.

Again roared out Vanderdecken, in a hurricane note fit to awaken the echoes of the inland mountains, "The Englishman is kidnapping Miss Dudley, and hath already seized the larger boat. Send the men from the pump to man the other boat!" [234]

"No, by Heaven, you don't!" I shouted, mad with the excitement of the minute. The line that held us was severed; the boat's head swung round; I leaned half my length over the gunwale, caught the other boat, and severed the rope that secured her to the ship; then, in a frenzy of haste, tumbled a couple of oars over and pulled away. But I had not measured five boat's lengths when the fog in which the ship, even at that short distance, lay completely swallowed was gashed and rent by a blaze of red fire. The explosion of a musket followed. I knew, by the flame leaping out of the quarter-gallery, that it was Vanderdecken who had fired, and with set teeth strained with all my might at the oars.

A dead stillness reigned. The clanking of the chains had ceased. I could hear nothing but the grind of the oars in the pins, and the sound of the water seething to the unnatural vigour with which I rowed. After a little I paused to gather from the noise of the surf how the boat headed. I bent my ear and found that the boiling was on my left. [235]

"How does it strike you, Imogene?" I asked, in a broken voice, being terribly distressed for breath.

She answered, very low, "The sound is on your left."

"That should signify," said I, "that we are heading out to sea. The breakers are heavy in the west, and 'tis down there the noise of them seems greatest. We must head right out, or this bay will prove worse than a rat-trap."

As I spoke I heard the scattering reports of some six or eight muskets discharged one after another, but the glare of the explosions was absorbed by the fog.

"Ha!" cried I; "they shoot in hope!"

I fell to rowing again, and held to the weighty job stoutly for a good quarter-of-an-hour. Weighty it was, for not only was the boat extremely cumbrous about the bows—if one square end of her more than another could be so termed—the oars were heavy, the blades being spoon-shaped, though flat, and the harder to work not only for the breadth of the boat, but because of the pins being fixed too far abaft the seats. [236]

I had now not much fear of being chased. Even if they found the boat I had liberated by sending men overboard to swim in search of it—there was movement enough in the water to glide it very swiftly into obscurity—I did not apprehend they would venture to pursue me in so great a fog. I threw in my oars and listened. A faint air stirred in the blackness, and if I was correct in supposing that we were heading seawards, then this draught was coming about south-east. The sound of the surf was like a weak rumbling of thunder. I strained my hearing to the right—that is, to starboard, for I sat with my back to the bows; but though indeed I could catch a faint, far-off moan of washing waters that way, the noise of the boiling was on our left. [237]

"I am sure we are out of the bay," said I; "were we penetrating it we should be by this time among the breakers. I heartily pray now this fog will soon thin out. It may whiten into something like light when the moon rides high. There is a faint wind, and I should be glad to step the mast and set the sail. But that isn't to be done by feeling. Besides, there is no rudder, and what there may be in the stern to steady an oar with I cannot conceive."

I paused, thinking she would speak. Finding she was silent, and fearing her to be cold and low-hearted, I said: "My dearest, you will gain confidence with the light. Meanwhile, we have good reason to be grateful for this blackness. They might have killed us could they have seen the boat, for they were prompt with their fire-arms." [238]

"Geoffrey, dear," she exclaimed, in the same low voice I had before noticed in her, "I fear I am wounded."

"Wounded!" I shrieked, springing to my feet.

"The instant Vanderdecken fired—if it was he—" she continued, "I felt a stinging blow in my shoulder. I am very cold just there; I am bleeding, I believe."

"Oh, my God! Oh, my God!" I cried, for now she spoke at some little length I could hear in her voice the pain she was in; and the feebleness of her voice was like to break my heart, as was the thought of her suffering and bleeding in silence until I had rowed the boat a long distance from the ship.

I felt for her, and took her in my arms, but the shiver that ran through her warned me that my caress increased her pain. I would have given ten years of my life for a light. 'Twas maddening to have to sit in such blackness, with nothing but a dim star or two of the green sea-glow rising with the invisible heave of the water to the gunwale for the eye to rest upon, and to think of my precious one bleeding—perhaps wounded to death—utterly concealed from me, so that I could not staunch her wound, nor comfort her except by speech, nor help her in any way. 'Twas the doing of Vanderdecken! the murderer! Oh, why, when there was all the wide black air for the shot to whistle through, had it struck my life, my love, the darling whom I had snatched to my heart from the huge desolation of the deep, and from the horrible companionship of beings accurst of God? [239]

I groped about for the cloak I had flung into the boat, and found it; I made a bed of it, and pulling off my jacket rolled it up into a pillow. I felt for her again, and told her that the bleeding might lessen if she would lie down. She answered, "I will lie down, dearest." [240]

I took her in my arms very tenderly and carefully, and laid her upon the cloak with the wounded shoulder uppermost, covered her as far as the skirts of the cloak would suffer, and chafed her hands. I was in so great a confusion and agony of mind that had I heard the dip of the oars astern and knew Vanderdecken was after me in the other boat, I should not have let go her hand. I could not have stirred from my kneeling posture beside her to help myself. But now that we were out of the bay, as I might be sure by the sound of the surf, I knew that our keel would be in the grip of the westerly current, and that whether I rowed or not every hour must increase our distance from the Death Ship, and improve our prospect of escape.

I asked her if she was thirsty, understanding how quickly wounded persons crave in this direction. She answered "No;" but, as I believed, out of the sweetness of her heart, to save me anguish by any kind of confession of suffering beyond what she had already owned to. Believing her to be bleeding all the time, I held her hand, in constant expectation of feeling it frosted and turning heavy with death. The sea, in its mighty life of a thousand centuries, has upborne many dismal and affrighting pictures to the chill eye of the moon, to the fiery inspection of the sun, to the blindness of the cloud-blackened sky; but none worse than what our boat made; no torments direr than what I suffered. I could not see her face to observe whether she smiled upon me or not; the love in her eyes was hidden from me, and my heart could take no comfort from imagination when, for all I knew, the glazing of approaching dissolution might have iced those liquid violet impassioned depths into an unmeaning stare. [241]

Add to her lying in the blackness, wounded and bleeding; add to the anguish with which I probed the ebon smother for the merest glimpse of her, till my eyes burned like red-hot balls of fire under my brows; add to this, those elements of mystery, of horror, which entered into and [242]

created that black, sightless time; the desolate thunder of surf, defining to the ear the leagues and leagues of savage coast aswarm with roaring beasts, with hissing reptiles, with creatures in human form fiercer and of crueller instincts than either; the magnitude of the ocean on whose breathing breast our tiny bark lay rocking; the wondrous darkness of the deep shadow of the fog upon the natural gloom of the night; the commingling of sullen and mysterious tones in the sulky obscurity—notes that seemed to come out of the seaward infinity, that seemed to rise from each swinging respiring fold under us, in voiceless sound that made you think of a moody conscience in some labouring breast troubling the ear of imagination with mutterings whose audibility was that of the inarticulate speech of phantoms. [243]

CHAPTER XII.

I AM ALONE.

[244]

It was about midnight, as I was able presently to gather, when a sort of paleness entered into the fog; and hard upon the heels of this change, the air, that had been weakly breathing, briskened somewhat, fetching a deeper echo from the booming roll of the surf on the starboard side; and the water came to the boat in a shivering phosphoric light of ripples that set her a-dabbling.

The light brightening—that is the fog growing more luminous, without appearing to thin—the boat's outline lay visible, together with her furniture, such as the sail and the oars. I tenderly laid Imogene's cold hand down, and turning the sail over, found—as I had expected—the mast lying under it; and partly peering and partly groping, I made out an iron clamp fitted to the foremost thwart or seat, with an hollow under it in the bottom of the boat for receiving the heel of the mast. [245]

I lifted the spar and very easily stepped it, discovering that the halliards for hoisting the sail were ready rove through a small block seized to the head of the mast. I hauled upon this rope to clear the sail, and perceived it to be shaped like a lug, fitted to a yard, only the yard was arched, causing the head of the sail to appear like a bow when the arrow is drawn upon it. Before setting the sail I went aft, and by dint of feeling and staring discovered a rope grummet or hempen hook fastened to the larboard horn, but close in, so that it lay out of sight against the boat's stern. 'Twas very clear that this was meant to receive an oar for steering; but whether or not it would serve my turn for that purpose; so without more ado I rove an oar through the grummet, then hoisted the sail, making the tack fast to the larboard horn on the bow, and came aft with the sheet. [246]

The boat instantly felt the pressure, and the wind being abaft the beam, she slipped along like a sledge, as you will suppose, when I say that her bottom was shaped like the side of a pea-shell, and that her whole frame might have been imitated from one of those black pods of sea-weed which are furnished by nature with wire-like projections, and which may be found in plenty upon our sea-coast. The oar controlled her capitally.

The double motive I had for getting away from this place—first, to run out of the fog and so get light to enable me to minister to Imogene, and next to remove myself so far from the Death Ship as to render pursuit hopeless even should the thickness in the bay clear up and enable Vanderdecken to recover his boat which I had cut adrift; this double motive, I say, lifted my anxiety and eagerness to the height of madness. My dearest lay with her head towards me, and in the glistening white obscurity I could discern her pale face upon the pillow of my coat, but could not tell whether her eyes were open or shut. She did not moan; she lay as still as the dead. I asked her if she was in pain. She said "No," but in a voice so feeble that I had to bend my ear to catch the syllable. [247]

I could not think of her but as slowly dying to the streaming away of her precious blood. What to do I knew not; and in addition to this dreadful state of despair was the obligation upon me to watch the boat and shrewdly and seriously attend to my course by the warning surf-thunder floating back against the wind from the echoing strand. From time to time I would address Imogene, always with a terror in me of winning no reply, of touching her and finding her dead. Once she answered that she believed the bleeding in her shoulder had stopped; the icy-coldness was gone, and there was a small smarting there as if she had been burnt, but nothing that she could not easily endure. But I knew by the tone of her voice that she spoke only to give me comfort; either that she was suffering above the power of her love for me to conceal in her faltering whispers or that her strength was unequal to the labour of utterance. [248]

Yet, as I have said, what could I do? I was no chirurgeon; and I wonder that my heart did not break to the bending of my scorching eyes upon my love lying wounded and bleeding at my feet.

An hour passed; the fog still compassed us, but the white splendour of the moon was upon it. Methought that I heard Imogene whisper; I dropped on my knee, and she asked for water. I let go the steering oar, that jammed in the grummet and that could not therefore go adrift, and with great trouble found the little cup that I had hidden in one of the bags, and poured some water out of the pitcher into it. She moaned in pain when I put my arm under her head to raise it; but she drank greedily, nevertheless, and thanked me in a whisper when I tenderly let sink her head on to the jacket. [249]

I resumed my place at the oar, and through the blackness drove the boat, the sail pulling briskly,

the water shining very brightly in our wake, and, as my ear seemed to fancy, the noise of the surf dwindling somewhat, whence I conjectured we were hauling off the coast and standing more directly seawards. I do not know that I should have been without hope for my beloved if it had not been for the haunting and blasting thought that nothing but misery could attend association with Vanderdecken and his doomed ship. It seemed to me now—though on board I had been too eager to escape with her, too wrapped up in my love for such consideration to occupy my mind—that nothing less than the death of one of us could expiate our involuntary and unhappy connexion with the banned and fated craft. Ships that spoke her perished, often with all hands; misfortunes pursued those who merely sighted her. What sort of death could the Curse involve for one who had lived for years or for weeks in the monstrous fabric, who had conversed familiarly with her abhorred occupants, who had been admitted into close inspection of her secret life, beheld the enactment by Vanderdecken in his sleep of the impious and horrible drama of his Christ-defying wrath, eat of his bread, drank of his cup, yea, and hearkened with sympathy to his talk of home, to his yearning speech concerning those he loved there? [250]

The sense of the doom that was upon her as upon me—upon her in her young and beautiful life, upon me in my love for her, upon both in the crushing separation of the grave, whether 'twas for her to die or for me; oh! I say, the sense of this thing weighed as iron and as ice upon my heart, crushing out all hope and leaving me as blind in my soul as my eyes were in the fog to steer the boat through the silence of that vaporous night, hearing nothing but the rippling of the water, and the blunted edge of the surf's wild beat, and beholding nothing but the outline of my dearest—of my dearest—stricken and dying at my feet! [251]

Suddenly the fog broke up. It was then about two o'clock. The vapour floated into league-long streaks, lunar-tinted here and there into an ærial mockery of the rainbow, and over the edge of one great steam-like body the moon with an ice-like, diamond-splendour of radiance looked down upon us out of a pool of black sky. The lustre had something of the sharpness of daylight, only that the flooded pearl of it wore the complexion of death, all things showing out wan; and in that illumination the delicate gold of Imogene's hair melted into the extreme pallor of the forehead on which it stirred to the wind, and her lips were of the colour of her cheeks, and her half-closed lids like wax. [252]

I let go the oar to kneel and look at her. She lay so still, with such unheeding eyes, that I made sure she was dead, and my brain reeled as though my heart had stopped.

I said hoarsely and hollowly, "Imogene."

The fringe of her eyelids trembled, and I marked a faint smile on her lips.

"Dearest," cried I, "how is it with thee?"

She returned no answer.

I said "I shall be able to see the wound now, and perhaps check the bleeding. I can cut the dress clear of the shoulder and you need not stir."

She exclaimed—but, my God, how feebly!—"Dearest, let me lie as I am," speaking with a sort of sigh between each word. And then she added, "Kiss me."

I pressed my lips to hers; they were cold as the mist that was passing away in wreaths and clouds. I saw how it was and let her have her way. It would have been cruel to touch her with more than my lips. And even though I should have cut away her apparel to the wound and saw it, what could I do? Suppose the bleeding internal—the bullet lodged within, the lung touched, or some artery severed? [253]

A wild feeling seized me; I felt that I must leap upon a seat and rave out madly or my head would burst. The efforts to control myself left me trembling and weeping. I wiped from my brow the sweat that had leapt in drops there out of my weakness, and put my hand upon the oar afresh. The fog had settled away to leeward; it looked like a vast cliff of snow-covered ice, and the moonshine worked in it in shifting veins of delicate amber and dim steel-blue. Out of it, trending a little to the south of west, rolled the loom of the dusky land; it died out in the showering haze of the moonlight, whence ran the dark sea-line to right astern of us—nothing in sight but the land growing out of the fog. Over the horizon the stars hung like dew-drops, giving back the glory of the central luminary and set twinkling by the wind. They soared in sparkling dust, rich with large jewels, till they died out in the cold silvering of the sky round about the moon. [254]

My hysteric fit sobered down and I fell to sharply thinking. The nearest refuge was Simon's Bay, and that would lie some three or four hundred miles distant. How long would it take me to sail the boat there? Why, 'twas a thing idle to calculate. Give me steady favourable winds and smooth seas and I could answer; but here was a boat that, like the ship she belonged to, was fit only to be blown along. She could not beat, she had no keel for holding to the water. Hence progress, if any was to be made, was so utterly a matter of chance that conjecture fell dead to the first effort of thought. If I was blown out to sea we might be picked up by a ship; if we were blown ashore I might contrive to find a smooth spot for landing; if the wind came away from the east and south it might, if it hung there, drive me round Agulhas and perhaps to Simon's Bay. That's how it stood—no better anyhow; but how much worse you may reckon when you reflect in what part of the ocean we were, when you consider the season of the year, how few in comparison with the mighty expanse of those waters were the ships which sailed upon it, how worthless the boat as a sea-going fabric, how huge the billows which the gales raised, how murderous the shore to which the breakers, roaring on it, might forbid escape. [255]

Twice my darling moaned for water. Each time she thanked me with a smile, but the mere task of

swallowing seemed to rob her lips of the power of pronouncing words. The moon went down in the west towards the black line of land, and when it hung a rusty-red over the ebon shadow under which trickled the blood-like flakes of its reflection, the dawn broke. For above an hour I had not been able to see Imogene, so faint had fallen the light of the westerling orb, and for longer than that time had she neither moaned, nor whispered, nor stirred. [256]

I directed my burning eyes into the east for the sun, and when the pink of him was in the sky, ere yet his brow had levelled the first flashing beam of day, I looked at Imogene.

I looked, and yet looked; then knelt. She was smiling, and by that I believed she lived; but when I peered into the half-closed lids—oh, great God! The sun flamed out of the sea in a leap then, and I sprang to my feet and cursed him with a scorching throat for finding me alone!

The sequel to this extraordinary narrative must be told by another pen. [257]

On the morning of the second day of October, one thousand seven hundred and ninety-six, the full-rigged ship Mary and James, bound from Tonquin to London, dropped anchor in Table Bay. She had scarcely swung to her cable when the gig was lowered, and her master, Captain William Thunder, a small, bow-legged man, with a fiery nose and a brown wig, entered her and was rowed ashore. He marched, or rather rolled, into the town, which in those days was formed of a mere handful of low-roofed, strongly-built houses, and knocking at one of them, situated not a musket shot distant from the grounds of the building of the Dutch East India Company, inquired for Mr. Van Stadens. The coloured slave, or servant, showed him into a parlour, and presently Mr. Van Stadens, an extremely corpulent Dutchman, entered.

They talked awhile of business, for Van Stadens was the South African agent for the owner of the Mary and James, and then said Captain Thunder: [258]

"Mr. Van Stadens, I'm going to tell you the most wonderful thing you ever heard in all your life."

"By Gott, Toonder, and so shall you," replied Van Stadens.

"See here," said the captain, polishing his forehead with so much energy that he unconsciously shifted his wig, "we were about ninety miles to the eastwards of Agulhas, the weather clear, the wind about south, a quiet breeze, the ship under all plain sail, and the second officer in charge of the deck, when a hand aloft sung out there was a vessel three points on the lee bow. When we had her in sight from the poop and caught her fair in the glass, I was so much struck by the cut of her canvas, which was a lug, narrow in the head and secured to a yard more arched than either of my legs, that I bore down to see what was to be made of her by a close squint." [259]

"So," said Van Stadens, crossing his legs and putting his hands upon his waistcoat in a posture of prayer.

"She proved to be a canoe or boat," continued Captain Thunder, "rounded at bottom like one of Crusoe's periaguas, with horns sticking out at each square end of her. She was, or I should say she had been, painted red inside. The blades of her oars, shaped like a Japanese fan, were also painted red. Her sail looked to be an hundred years old—I never saw the like of such canvas. The most perfect description of its colour, patches, texture would have sounded an abominable lie to me if I hadn't viewed it myself."

"So," said Van Stadens, nodding upon his four chins, which resembled layers of pale gutta-percha, with the elastic properties of that stuff.

"In fact," said Captain Thunder, "she was of the exact fashion of the boats you see in old Dutch paintings—ship's boats, I mean." [260]

"How oldt?" asked Van Stadens.

"Two hundred years old," said Captain Thunder.

"Goot. Is dot der fonder, Toonder?"

"Not by all the distance from here to the top of Table Mountain, Mr. Van Stadens," answered the captain. "I said to the second mate, 'That's no natural boat, Mr. Swillig. If she belongs to the age in which she appears to have been built she ought to have been powder or ooze a hundred and fifty years ago. Can you make out anybody in her?' He said 'No,' and argued with me that there was something unnatural about her, and recommended that we should haul to the wind again and appear as if we hadn't seen her, but my curiosity was tickled and we stood on. Well, Mr. Van Stadens, we passed close and what we saw fetched a groan out of every man that was looking and brought our main-topsail to the mast in the wink of a muskeety's eye, sir. A girl lay dead in the bottom of the boat. She looked beautiful in death, in life she must have been as lovely as the prettiest of the angels of God. But her dress! Why, Mr. Van Stadens, it belonged to the time the boat was built in. Ay, as I sit here to say it!" [261]

The Dutchman shook his head.

"You shall see it for yourself, sir—you shall see it for yourself!" cried Captain Thunder, with excitement. "We all said she had been floating about in that boat for two hundred years, and was a dead saint watched by the eye of God, and not to be corrupted as you and me would be. There were three Dagos in our crew, and when they saw her they crossed themselves. But that wasn't all—not nearly all. In the bows lay the figure of a seaman—an English sailor, dressed as my mate is. We thought he was dead, too, till we lowered a boat, when on a sudden he lifted his head out of his arms and looked at us. There was a shine in his eye that showed us his wits were gone. Such a haggard face, Mr. Van Stadens!—unshaven for weeks, and his hair all of a mat; yet you saw he had been a handsome man and was a young one too. Well, his being alive settled any [262]

hesitation I might have felt had they both been corpses. I sung out to my second mate to bring him aboard and the girl's body also, proposing decent burial; but the sailor man wasn't to be coaxed out of the boat; he grinned with rage to Mr. Swillig's invitations, flung himself upon the girl's body, howling like a dog when my men boarded him, and caused such a scuffle and a melee that both boats came very near to being swamped. They bound him with the painter, and brought him and the corpse on board along with three bags of provisions—such bags, Mr. Van Stadens, and such provisions, sir! But ye shall see 'em—ye shall see 'em, and a pitcher half full of water and a silver cup——"

[263]

"Eh?" grumbled Van Stadens.

"A silver cup."

"So," said the Dutchman. "Now ve com to der fonders."

"Ay, sir, as you say. Look here!"

He pulled a ring out of his waistcoat pocket and held it up. It was a diamond ring of splendour and beauty. The gems flashed gloriously and Van Stadens gaped at their brilliance like a wolf yawning at the moon.

"Vere got you dot, Toonder?"

"Off the girl's finger. 'Tis but one, Mr. Van Stadens."

"But fon, hey! By toonder, Toonder, but dot ring is der fonderfullest part of your story as yet."

He took it in his hand and his eyes danced greedily to the sparkle of the beautiful bauble.

"Well," continued Captain Thunder, "we put the man into a spare cabin, and gave the job of watching him to the steward, a stout hearty fellow. The girl was stone-dead, of course. I ordered her dress, jacket and hat to be removed, likewise the jewellery about her—specially a noble rope of pearls——"

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"By toonder, no! You shoke, Toonder!" cried Van Stadens.

"Ye shall see with your own eyes—ye shall see with your own eyes!" exclaimed the captain. "I gave these orders more with the idea of the things proving of use to identify her by than for their value. I never saw such under-linen, sir. 'Twas exquisitely fine and choice. Beyond description, Mr. Van Stadens. There was a ball-wound in her shoulder, with a caking of blood about it. That the fellow below had done this thing I could not suppose. There were no arms of any kind—if you except a big clasp knife—on him or in his boat. We buried the poor, sweet, murdered thing in her fine linen, giving her a sailor's hammock for a coffin and a sailor's toss for a last farewell. As for the boat, she looked unnatural and unlucky, and I think my men would have mutinied if I had ordered them to sling her over the side. We unstepped the mast and sent her adrift for the MAN she belongs to to pick up, if so be he stands in need of her."

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"Vot MAN?" inquired Van Stadens.

"Vanderdecken," responded Captain Thunder, in a low voice, and with as much awe in his face as his fiery pimple of a nose would suffer to appear.

"Vot!" shouted Van Stadens. "Der Flying Deutchman!"

Captain Thunder nodded. The other smiled, and then broke into a roar of laughter.

"Hark, Mr. Van Stadens, wait till I've done," exclaimed Thunder, with his face full of blood. "All that day the man remained moody, with a lunatic's sullenness. He refused to eat or drink. I was in and out a dozen times but couldn't get him to speak. Well, sir, at nine o'clock in the night the steward came and told me he was asleep. He was watched all night, but never stirred; all next night, and the day after that, and the night after that, sir, but he never stirred. For sixty hours he slept, Mr. Van Stadens, or may I not leave this room alive! and I thought he meant dying in that fashion. Then he awoke, sat up and talked rationally. His mind had come back to him and he was as sensible as you or me."

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"Vell?"

"Well, he fed and rested a bit, and then feeling stronger, he told me his story." And here Captain Thunder repeated what is already known to the reader.

Mr. Van Stadens listened with his fat face full of incredulity.

"'Tis fonderful, inteet," said he, "but it isn't true."

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"I believe every word of it," said Thunder. "Blast the Flying Dutchman! who doubts him?"

"Your sailor man is mad," said Van Stadens.

"Oh, indeed," sneered Thunder. "Then account to me for the boat I saw him in, for his female companion lying dead of a gunshot wound; for this," said he, holding up the diamond ring, "and for other matters I'll show you when we get aboard."

"Ve vill go on boort at oonst," cried Van Stadens.

They repaired to the ship and found Geoffrey Fenton in the cabin. He looked haggard, weak, extremely sorrowful; but he was as sane as ever he had been at any time of his life. Thunder introduced Van Stadens, and to this Dutchman Fenton repeated his story, relating it so artlessly, with such minuteness of detail, above all unconsciously using so many old-fashioned Dutch words, which he had acquired from Vanderdecken, that the wonder in Van Stadens' face grew

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into a look of stupefaction. He muttered, frequently, "Fonderful! fonderful! By toonder, amazing!" But the measure of Captain Thunder's triumph over the agent's incredulity was not full till the articles belonging to Fenton—for so they were regarded—were produced. Van Stadens examined the pearls, the rings which poor Imogene had worn, the silver goblet, the antique dress, jacket and sealskin cap, Vanderdecken's velvet cloak, the pitcher, the articles of food which had been preserved, these things, I say, Van Stadens examined with mingled admiration and consternation, such as a man might feel to whom another exhibits a treasure he has sold his soul to the Devil for.

"Do you believe now!" cried Captain Thunder.

"It is fonderful! it is fonderful!" returned the Dutchman. "Do you go home with Toonder, Herr Fenton?" [269]

"No," said Thunder, "I am sorry; I dare not do it. The crew have got scent of the experiences of our friend here and wouldn't sail with him for tenfold the value of the plate and silver in the Death Ship's hold."

"I do not blame them," said Fenton, with a melancholy smile.

"What I have proposed to Mr. Fenton is this, Mr. Van Stadens," said the captain: "You are a man of honour and will see that right is done to this poor gentleman."

"So," said Van Stadens.

"Let these articles be sold," continued Thunder.

"All but the diamond ring," interrupted Fenton.

"All but the diamond ring," said the captain. "No one need know how they were obtained; not a syllable of Mr. Fenton's story must be repeated; otherwise he'll get no ship to carry him home." [270]

Van Stadens turned to Fenton and said in Dutch: "I will buy these goods from you. Their value shall be assessed to our common satisfaction. Meanwhile, a room in my house—my house itself—is at your service. Remain awhile to recruit your strength, and I will secure you a passage to Amsterdam in the Indiaman that is due here about the end of this month."

They shook hands, and half-an-hour later Fenton had taken leave of Captain Thunder and his ship.

It is proper to say here that the hospitable but shrewd Dutchman gave Fenton eight hundred dollars for the Vanderdecken relics, and when Fenton had sailed, sold them for three thousand ducatoons, of eighty stivers each, after clearing some thousands of dollars by exhibiting them.

The subsequent safe arrival of Geoffrey Fenton in Europe may be gathered from his narrative. Necessity forced him back to his old vocation and he continued at sea, holding various important commands down to the age of sixty. Among his papers is a curious note relating to the fate of the vessels which had encountered the Death Ship during the time to which his narrative refers. The Plymouth snow, after speaking the Saracen, was never again heard of; the Saracen was lost on one of the islands of the Chagos Archipelago, but her people were saved to a man by the boats. The Centaur, three days after sighting the Death Ship, was dismasted in a hurricane and struggled into Simon's Bay in a sinking condition. The fate of the French corsair is not known, but it is satisfactory to know that the James and Mary reached the Thames in safety after an uneventful passage. [271]

THE END.

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Transcriber's Notes

Obvious punctuation errors repaired.

Inconsistent hyphenation fixed.

Table of contents entry for Chapter VII changed to page 131.

P. 38: made no reponse -> made no response.

P. 262: melhee -> melee.

Ad for SHIKAR SKETCHES: Horse and Hourd -> Horse and Hound.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE DEATH SHIP: A STRANGE STORY, VOL. 3
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