

Supplement to The Post.

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 21, 1879.

A ROMANCE OF MID-OCEAN.

[CONTINUED FROM FIRST PAGE.]

An idea that will sound barbarous, though I should not have hesitated to carry it out could I have seen my way to it, occurred to me. This was to watch an opportunity, when the carpenter was alone, to lead him overboard. But here, again, the chances against me were fifty to one. To destroy the villain without risk of detection, without the act being witnessed, without suspicion attaching to me on his being missed, would imply such a host of favoring conditions as the kindest fortune could scarcely assemble together.

What, then, was to be done? I had already pointed out the course the ship was to steer, and could not alter it. But though I should probably alter her course point or two, what could follow? The moment land was sighted, let it be what coast it would, they would know I had deceived them; or, giving me the credit of having mistaken my reckonings, they would leave the ship to themselves, and then would come the dastardly crime. I dared not signal any passing vessel. Let my imagination devise what it would, it could invent nothing that my judgment would adopt; since, being single-handed in this ship, no effort I could make to save the lives of the persons it was my determination to stand by but must end in our destruction.

By such confessions I show myself no hero; then I do not want to be thought one. I was and am, a plain man placed in one of the most formidable situations any one could find himself in. In the darkness and horror of that time I saw no means of escape, and so I admit my blindness. A few strokes of the pen would show me other than I was, but then I should not be telling the truth, and should be falsely taking glory, instead of truly showing it to be God's by whose mercy I am alive to tell the story.

My clothes, and other things belonging to me, being in the cabin now occupied by Stevens, I opened the door and desired the steward to bring them to me. My voice was heard by Miss Robertson, who came round the table to where I stood, and thanked me for my kindness to her and her father.

She had made good use of the few conveniences I had been able to send her. Her hair was brushed and most prettily looped over the comb, and she wore a collar that became her mightily, which she had found in the steward's box. She looked a sweet and true English girl; her death-like pallor gradually yielding to a healthy white, with a tinge of color on her cheeks.

"Papa seems better," she said, "and is constantly asking for you; but I told him" (with the prettiest smile) "that you require rest as well as others, and that you have plenty to occupy you."

Then looking earnestly at me for some moments, while her face grew wonderfully grave, she exclaimed: "What is wrong, Mr. Royle? What makes you look so anxious and worried?"

"There is plenty to trouble me," I answered, not carelessly, but not putting too much significance into my tone, for at that moment I did not think I ought to tell her the truth. "You know the men have mutinied, and that my position is a difficult one, I have to be careful how I act, both for my sake and yours."

"Yes, I know that," she said, keeping her clear and thoughtful eyes on me. "But then you said you did not fear that the men would be violent again and that they would leave us on board this ship when we were near New Orleans."

I watched her face some time without speaking, asking myself if I should take her into my confidence, if I ought to impart the diabolical scheme of Stevens, as told me by the boatswain. Certainly I should have put her off without telling her the truth had not the courageous expression in her eyes, her firm and beautiful mouth, her resolute voice and manner, told me she would know how to bear it.

"I will not conceal that I have heard something just now which has affected me very much," I said to her, "Will you step into my cabin? We can talk there without being seen." I added, having observed Stevens walk along the main-deck, and expecting that he would return in a few moments to his cabin, it being his watch below.

She followed me in silence, and I closed the door.

"I will tell you in a few words," I at once began, "what I heard just now. I told the boatswain that I questioned whether the men would let me land

with them, for fear of the evidence I could give. He replied that he had learned from the carpenter, while at sea, that the men intended to scuttle the ship when they quitted her, and to leave us on board."

"To scuttle?"
"That is their idea."
She passed up her mouth tightly, and pressed her hand to her forehead. That was all. Whatever emotion my statement inspired was hidden. She said, in a low voice:

"They are fiends! I did not think them so cruel. My poor father!"

"This is what I am told they mean to do; and I know Stevens to be a ruffian, and that he will carry out his project if he can. I have spent some time alone here in trying to think how we can save ourselves. As yet I see no remedy. But wait," I said "it will take us three weeks, sailing well every day, to reach the Gulf of Mexico. I have this time before me; and in that time not only something must, but something shall be done."

She did not answer.
"I will hazard nothing; I will venture no risks. What I resolve to do must be effectual." I went on, "because my life is dearer to me now than it was three days ago, for you and your father's sake. You must be saved from these ruffians, but no risk must attend your deliverance. That is why I see no escape before us as yet; but it will come—it will come! Despair is very faithful in expedients, and I am not beaten because I find myself flung like a dog in a hole."

She looked up at this, and said, "What is to be done?"

"I must think."
"I will think, too. We need not tell papa," she added, turning her eyes to a question, with an appealing look in her eyes.

"No, certainly not. Remember, we are not supposed to question the men's honest intentions toward us. We must appear utterly ignorant."

"Are they armed?" she inquired.

"No."

She cast her eyes round the cabin and said, "Have you no guns?"

"Nothing but a pistol. But though we had twenty guns, we have no hands to use them. So far as I know as yet, there is no man as would stand with me—not even the boatswain, unless he were sure we could conquer the ruffians."

"Could I not use a pistol? Ah, I remember, you have only one."

She sunk her chin on her hand and looked downwards, lost in thought.

"Why would you not steer the ship for some near port?" she asked, presently.

"I could not alter the course without being challenged. Remember that my policy is not to excite suspicion of my honesty."

"If a gale would rise like that which wrecked the 'Cecilia,' it might drive us near the land, where we could get help."

"No, we shall have to depend upon ourselves. I do not want to pin my faith on chance."

I began to pace to and fro, torn by the blind and useless labors of my mind.

Just then a step sounded along the cuddy. The cabin door was pushed open roughly, and Stevens walked in. He stared at Miss Robertson, and cried:

"Sorry to interrupt. Didn't know you was here, ma'am I'm sure. I thought," addressing me, "I should find you turned in. I've come to look at that chart o' yours. How long d'ye make it to New Orleans?"

"About three weeks."

"Well, there's live stock enough for three weeks, anyway. I've just told the cook to stick one of them porkers. All hands has a fancy for roast pork to-day. Servant, miss. You was pretty nigh drowned, I think."

"My father and I owe our lives to the noble fellows in this ship. They must be brave and good men to risk their lives to save ours," she answered, with a smile of touching sweetness, looking frankly into the face of the miscreant, who stood, cap on head, before her.

"Lor' bless yer!" he exclaimed, "there wasn't no risk. I'd ha' sworn the distance is such a sea for five shilling."

She shook her head with another smile (I judged the effort this piece of acting cost her) as she said:

"I know that English sailors always undervalue their good deeds. But happily my father is a rich man, and when you land us he will take care that no man on this ship shall complain of his gratitude."

"Oh, he's rich!" exclaimed the carpenter, as though struck with a new idea.

"Very rich."

"How rich might that be, ma'am?"

"Well, he owned the ship that you saved us from—cargo and ship."

She could not have offered a better illustration of her father's wealth to the crew, for he would appreciate the value of a vessel of that size.

"And what do you think he'll give the men—them as saved him, I suppose?"

"Oh, he won't make any difference. He is indebted to you all, for I have heard that the captain would not have stopped for us had he not been obliged to do so by the crew."

"That's true enough," rejoined the carpenter with an oath, looking at me.

"Perfectly true," I made haste to say.

"My father would not certainly offer less than one hundred pounds to each man," she said quite simply.

He pulled off his cap at this and twirled it, and let it drop; picked it up so slowly that I thought he would never bend his body sufficiently to enable him to recover it; looked at her sideways as he put it on his head again, and then said to me, with offensive abruptness:

"Come master, let's have a look at that blooming chart."

I opened the door to let Miss Robertson pass out, exchanging one glance with her as she left, and addressed myself to the carpenter.

He pored over the chart with his dirty forefinger upon it.

"Whereabouts are we now?" he inquired.

I pointed to the spot, as near as I could judge from yesterday's reckonings.

"What's this here line?" he asked.

"That's the longitude."

He ran his eye to the bottom of the chart and exclaimed:

"Thirty. Is that it?"

"Call it thirty."

"But what do you call it?"

"Thirty, I tell you—thirty degrees west longitude."

"And this here line's the latitude, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"That's forty."

"Call it forty-four."

"Will that make it right?"

"Pretty nearly."

"What are all these here dots and streaks?" said he, after squinting with his nose close to the chart.

"They are the Azores."

"Oh, we're to the north o' them, aren't we?" he inquired, sharply.

"You can see for yourself," I answered, putting my finger on the chart.

"Where's this blessed Gulf of Mexico?" he inquired, after casting his eyes all over the chart.

"There."

He ran his dirty thumb-nail in a line to the Gulf, and asked me what that blot was.

"Bermuda."

"You'll keep south o' that, will yer?"

"If I can, certainly."

"It's a man-o'-war station, I've heard."

"I believe it is."

"All right," he said, and looking at the boat's compass on the table asked if it were true.

I told him it was; whereupon he set it on the chart and compared its indications with the line he had run down the chart, and was going away, when I said:

"What do you think of the young lady's idea? I should like to earn a hundred pounds."

"So should I," he answered gruffly, pausing.

"It would pretty well pay me for what I have had to put up with from Coxon."

He gave me an indescribable look, full of fierceness, suspicion and cunning.

"I demsay it would, if you get it," he said, and he walked out, banging the door after him.

Chapter XX.

I had been greatly struck by the firmness with which Miss Robertson had received the ghastly bit of information I had given her, and not more by this than by her gentle and genial manner towards the carpenter, whereas she had shown herself perfectly well qualified to set with me in this critical, dangerous time. She had only just been rescued from one trial frightful enough in character to have driven one, at least, of the male sufferers mad; and now fate had plunged her into a worse situation, and yet she could confront the terrors of it calmly and deliberately collected upon the danger.

Such a character as this was, I thought, of the true type of heroine, with nothing in it that was strained; calm in emergency and with a fruitful mind uttering hope around it—even though no hope then—arise the

teasing flower sheds its perfume. I

had especially noticed the quickness with which she had concealed and expressed that idea about her father regarding the men; it inspired me in spite of the sensation Stevens had given it. One hundred pounds a man was a promise that might move them into a very different train of thought from what Stevens had induced and was sustaining.

Having heard the carpenter enter his cabin, I determined to step on deck and take the boatswain's sense on this new idea. But before quitting the cuddy I knocked lightly on Miss Robertson's cabin door.

She opened it instantly.

"Will you come on deck?" I asked her.

"Yes, if I can be of use there."

"The air will refresh you after your confinement to this cabin, and will do your father good."

"He is sleeping now," she answered, opening the door fully that I might see the old man.

"Let him sleep," said I; "that will do him more good. But you will come?"

"Yes, with pleasure."

"You have nothing to fear from the men," I said, wishing to reassure her.

"They are willing to acknowledge the authority of the persons they have put over them—the boson, Stevens and myself."

"I should not mind if they spoke to me," she exclaimed. "I should know what to say to them, unless they were brutal."

She suddenly added, putting her hand to her head and almost laughing:

"I have no hat."

"I have a straw hat you shall have," I said, and brought it.

She put it on her head, and it sat very well on the pile of yellow hair that lay heaped over her comb.

"How strange," she said, speaking in the whisper in which our conversation had been carried on, "to find one's self destitute—without even the commonest necessities! When the captain of the 'Cecilia' said we were sinking, papa ran with me out of the cabin. We did not think of putting on our hats nor of saving anything but our lives."

She turned to look at her father, closed the door softly, and accompanied me on deck.

The morning was now advanced. The day was still very bright; and the wonderful blue of the heavens lost nothing of its richness from contrast with the stately and swelling clouds—pearl-colored where they faced the sun, and with here and there a rainbow on their skirts, and centres of creamy white—which sailed solemnly over it.

The breeze had freshened but the swell had greatly subsided, and the sea was almost smooth, with brilliant little waves chasing over it. The ship was stretching finely along the water, all sails set and every sail drawing.

On our lee beam was the canvas of a big ship, her hull invisible; and astern of her I could just make out the faint tracing of the smoke of a steamer upon the sky. The sun shone warm, but not too warm; the strong breeze was sweet and soft; the ship's motion steady, and her aspect a glorious picture of white and rounded canvas, taut rigging delicately interlaced, and gleaming decks and glittering brass-work. The blue water sung a chorus at the bows and the echo died upon the broad and bubbling wake astern.

I ran my eye forward upon the men on the forecastle. Most of the crew were congregated there, lounging, squatting, smoking—no man doing any work. I wondered, not at this, but that they should be so orderly and keep their place. They might have come aft had they pleased, swarmed into the cuddy, occupied the cabins; for the ship was theirs. Since they acted with so much decency could they not be won over from their leader's atrocious project? If I went among them holding this girl now at my side by the hand, and pleading for her life, if not for my own, would they not spare her? Would not some among them be moved by her beauty and her helplessness?

Nothing should seem more rational than such conjectures, always providing I ceased to remember these men were criminals, that their one idea now was to elude the law, and that I who should plead, and those for whom I pleaded, could by a word when set on shore procure the conviction of the whole gang, charge them with their crimes, prove their identity and secure their punishment! Would not Stevens keep them in mind of this? Knowing what they knew, knowing what they meditated, I say that in the very orderliness of their behavior I wit-

nessed something more sinister than I should have found in violent conduct.

I alone could carry them to where they wished to go. I must be conciliated, pleased, obeyed, and my fears tranquilized. If I failed then their doom was inevitable; shipwreck or capture was certain. All this was plain to me as the fingers on my hand; and during the brief time I stood watching them I found myself repeating again and again the hopeless question, "What can I do?"

Miss Robertson seized herself on one of the sky-lights, that nearest the break of the poop. The boatswain glanced at her respectfully, and the men forward stared and some of them laughed, but none of the remarks they indulged in were audible to the ear.

"Fish was at the wheel. I went to the binnacle and said:

"That's our course. Let this wind hold and we'll soon be clear of this mess."

"Three weeks about, I gives us," answered the man.

"And long enough, too!" said I.

He spit the quid in his mouth overboard and dried his lips on his cuff. As he did not seem disposed to talk I left him and joined the boatswain, and at my request he came and stood near me with Miss Robertson.

"I have told this lady what you repeated to me at breakfast," I said in a low voice. "She is full of courage, and I have asked her to come on deck that we may talk before her."

"If she's as brave as she pretty I reckon not many'll carry braver hearts in 'em than her," he said, addressing her with an air of respectful gallantry that was very taking.

She looked down with a smile.

"Boatswain," said I, "every hour is precious to us, for at any moment Stevens may change the ship's course for a closer shore than the American; and though we should hold on for the Gulf it may take us all our time to hit on a scheme to save ourselves and work it out. I have come to tell you an idea suggested by this lady, Miss Robertson. Her father is a rich man, owner of the vessel he was wrecked in—"

"Robertson & Co. of Liverpool, ship-brokers," he interrupted, addressing her.

"Yes," she replied.

"Why, I sailed in one o' that firm's wessels as boson's mate three years ago—the 'Albany' she was called, and a werry comfortable ship she was, well found and properly commanded."

"Indeed!" she exclaimed, brightening up and looking at him eagerly. And then, reflecting a little, she said, "The 'Albany'—that ship was commanded by Captain Tribbett."

"Quite right, miss; Tribbett was his name. And the first mate's name was Green, and the second's Gull, and the third—ah! he were captain Tribbett's son—same name, of course. Well, blow me if this ain't wot the Italians call a coincidence."

He was as pleased as she, and stood grinning on her.

"Mr. Royle," she suggested, raising her fine eyes to mine, "surely there must be others like the boatswain in this ship. They cannot all be after the pattern of that horrible carpenter."

"We ought to be able to find that out, boson," I said.

"Look here, miss," he answered, with a glance first at the men forward and then at Fish at the wheel, "the circumstances of this affair is just this: the crew have been very badly treated, fed with rotten stores, and starved and abused by the skipper and chief mate until they went mad. I don't think myself that they meant to kill the captain and Mr. Duckling; but it happened, and no man barrin' Stevens was guiltier than his mate, and that's where it is. The carpenter knocked the skipper down and the others kicked him when he was down, not knowing he was dead; and four or five set on Mr. Duckling, and so you see it's a sin as they all share alike in. If one man had killed the skipper and another man had killed the chief mate, why then, as to me, miss, the others might be got to turn upon 'em to save their own necks. But here it's all hands as did the job. And the only man who kept away, though I pretended to be one with 'em hearty enough, was me; and wot's the consequence? Stevens don't trust me; and I'm sartin in my own mind that he don't mean to let me into the boats when the time comes any more than you."

So saying he deliberately walked aft, looked at the compass, then at the sails, and patrolled the poop for several minutes, for the very obvious reason that the men should not take

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