One of the Garrison;

Or, A Mysterious Affair.

CHAPTER XI.—(Cont'd.)

"Who were they?" I asked. "I could not have believed that it was possible for men to appear so unconcerned in the face of such imminent peril."

"As to who they are or were," the captain answered, puffing thoughtfully at his pipe, "that is by no means easy to say. Our last port was Kurrachee, in the north of India, and there we took them aboard as passengers for Glasgow. Ram Singh was the name of the younger, and it is only with him that I have come in contact, but they all appeared to be quiet, inoffensive gentlemen. I never inquired their business, but I should judge that they were Parsee merchants from Hyderabad whose trade took them to Europe. I could never see why the crew should fear them, and the mate, too; he should have had more sense."

"Fear them!" I ejaculated, in surprise.

"Yes, they had some preposterous idea that they were dangerous shipmates. I have no doubt if you were to go down into the kitchen you would find that they are all agreed that our passengers were the cause of the whole disaster."

As the captain was speaking the parlor door opened and the mate of the bark, a tall, red-bearded sailor, stepped in. He had obtained a complete rig-out from some kind-hearted fisherman, and looked in his comfortable jersey and well greased sea boots a very favorable specimen of a shipwrecked mariner. With a few words of grateful acknowledgment of our hospitality he drew a chair up to the fire and warmed his great brown hands before the blaze.

"What d'ye think now, Captain Meadows," he asked presently, glancing up at his superior officer. "Didn't I warn you what would be the upshot o' having those niggers on board the 'Belinda?'"

The captain leaned back in his chair and laughed heartily. "Didn't I tell you?" he cried, appealing to us. "Didn't I tell you?"

"It might have been no laughing matter for us," the other remarked petulantly. "I have lost a good sea kit and nearly lost my life into the bargain."

"Do I understand you to say," said I, "that you attribute your misfortunes to your ill-fated passengers?"

The mate opened his eyes at the adjective. "Why ill-fated, sir?" he asked.

"Because they are most certainly drowned," I answered.

He sniffed incredulously and went on warming his hands. "Men o' that kind are never drowned," he said, after a pause. "Their father, the devil, looks after them. Did you ever see them standing on the poop and rolling cigarettes at the time when the mizzen was carried away and the quarter boats stove? That was enough for me. I'm not surprised at you landsmen not being able to take it in, but the captain here, who's been sailing since he was the height of the binnacle, ought to know by this time that a cat and a priest are the worst cargo you can carry. If a Christian priest is bad, I guess an idolatrous pagan one is fifty times worse. I stand by the old religion, and be d——d to it!"

My father and I could not help laughing at the rough sailor's very unorthodox way of proclaiming his orthodoxy. The mate, however, was evidently in deadly earnest, and proceeded to state his case, marking off the different points upon the rough red fingers of his left hand.

"It was at Kurrachee, directly after they come, that I warned ye," he said, reproachfully, to the captain. "There was three Buddhist Lascars in my watch, and what did they do when them chaps come aboard? Why, they down on their stomachs and rubbed their noses on the deck—that's what they did. They wouldn't ha' done as much for an admiral of the R'yal Navy. They know who's who—these niggers do; and I smelled mischief the moment I saw them on their faces. I asked them afterward in your presence, captain, why they had done it, and they answered that the passengers were holy men. You heard 'em yourself."

"Well, there's no harm in that, Hawkins," said Captain Meadows.

"I don't know that," the mate said, doubtfully. "The holiest Christian is the one that's nearest God, but the holiest nigger is, in my opinion, the one that's nearest the devil. Then you saw yourself, Captain Meadows, how they went on during the voyage, reading books that was writ on wood instead o' paper, and sitting up right through the night to jabber together on the quarter deck. What did they want to have a chart o' their own for and to mark the course of the vessel every day?"

"They didn't," said the captain.

"Indeed they did, and if I did not tell you sooner it was because you were always ready to laugh at what I said about them. They had instruments o' their own—when they used them I can't say—but every day at noon they worked out the latitude and longitude, and marked out the vessel's position on a chart that was pinned on their cabin table. I saw them at it, and so did the steward from his pantry."

"Well, I don't see what you prove from that," the captain remarked, "though I confess it is a strange thing."

"I'll tell you another strange thing," said the mate, impressively. "Do you know the name o' this bay in which we are cast away?"

"I have learned from our kind friends here that we are upon the Wigtownshire coast," the captain answered, "but I have not heard the name of the bay."

The mate leaned forward with a grave face. "It is the Bay of Kirkmaiden," he said.

If he expected to astonish Captain Meadows he certainly succeeded, for that gentleman was fairly bereft of speech for a minute or more. "That is really marvelous," he said, after a time, turning to us. "These passengers of ours cross-questioned us early in the voyage as to the existence of a bay of that name. Hawkins here and I denied all knowledge of one, for on the chart it is included in the Bay of Luce. That we should eventually be blown into it and destroyed is an extraordinary coincidence."

"Too extraordinary to be a coincidence," growled the mate. "I saw them during the calm yesterday morning, pointing to the land over our starboard quarter. They knew well enough that that was the port they were making for."

"What do you make of it all, then, Hawkins?" asked the captain with a troubled face; "what is your own theory on the matter?"

"Why, in my opinion," the mate answered, "them three swabs have no more difficulty in raising a gale o' wind than I should have in swallowing this here grog. They had reasons o' their own for coming to this God-forsaken—saving your presence, sirs—this God-forsaken bay, and they took a short cut to it by arranging to be blown ashore there. That's my idea o' the matter, though what three Buddhist priests could find to do in the bay of Kirkmaiden is clean past my comprehension."

My father raised his eyebrows to indicate the doubt which his hospitality forbade him from putting into words. "I think, gentlemen," he said, "that you are both sorely in need of rest after your perilous adventures. If you will follow me I shall lead you to your rooms." He conducted them with old-fashioned ceremony to the laird's best spare bedroom, and then returning to me in the parlor, proposed that we should go down together to the beach and learn whether anything fresh had occurred.

The first pale light of dawn was just appearing in the east when we made our way for the second time to the scene of the shipwreck. The gale had blown itself out, but the sea was still very high, and all inside the breakers was a seething, gleaming line of foam, as though the fierce old ocean was gnashing its white teeth at the victims who had escaped from its clutches. All along the beach the fishermen and crofters were hard at work hauling up spars and barrels as fast as they were tossed ashore. None of them had seen any bodies, however, and they explained to us that only such things as could float had any chance of coming ashore, for the undercurrent was so strong that whatever was beneath the surface must infallibly be swept out to sea. As to the possibility of the unfortunate passengers having been able to reach the shore these practical men would not hear of it for a moment, and showed us conclusively that if they had not been drowned they must have been dashed to pieces upon the rocks.

"We did all that could be done," my father said sadly, as we returned home. "I am afraid that the poor mate has had his reason affected by the suddenness of the disaster. Did you hear what he said about Buddhist priests raising a gale?"

"Yes, I heard him," said I.

"It was very painful to listen to him," said my father. "I wonder if he would object to my putting a small mustard plaster under each of his ears. It would relieve any congestion of the brain. Or perhaps it would be best to wake him up and give him two antibilious pills. What do you think, Jack?"

"I think," said I, with a yawn, "that you had best let him sleep, and go to sleep yourself. You can physic him in the morning if he needs it." So saying I stumbled off to my bedroom, and throwing myself upon the couch was soon in a dreamless slumber.

CHAPTER XII.

It must have been eleven or twelve o'clock before I woke up, and it seemed to me in the flood of golden light which streamed into my chamber that the wild tumultuous episodes of the night before must have formed part of some fantastic dream. It was hard to believe that the gentle breeze which whispered so softly among the ivy leaves around my window was caused by the same element which had shaken the very house a few short hours before. It was as if nature had repented of her momentary passion and was endeavoring to make amends to an injured world by its warmth and its sunshine. A chorus of birds in the garden below filled the whole air with their wonder and congratulations.

Down in the hall I found a number of the ship-wrecked sailors, looking all the better for their night's repose, who set up a buzz of pleasure and gratitude upon seeing me. Arrangements had been made to drive them to Wigtown, whence they were to proceed to Glasgow by the evening train, and my father had given orders that each should be served with a packet of sandwiches and hard-boiled eggs to sustain him on the way. Captain Meadows thanked us warmly in the name of his employers for the manner in which we had treated them, and he called for three cheers from his crew, which were very heartily given. He and the mate walked down with us after we had broken our fast to have a last look at the scene of his disaster.

The great bosom of the bay was still heaving convulsively, and its waves were breaking into sobs against the rocks, but there was none of that wild turmoil which we had seen in the early morning. The long emerald ridges, with their smart little cockades of foam, rolled slowly and majestically in, to break with a regular rhythm—the panting of a tired monster. A cable length from the shore we could see the mainmast of the bark floating upon the waves, disappearing at times in the trough of the sea, and then shooting up toward heaven like a giant javelin, as the rollers tossed it about. Other smaller pieces of wreckage dotted the waters, while innumerable spars and packages were littered over the sands. These were being drawn up and collected in a place of safety by gangs of peasants. I noticed that a couple of broad-winged gulls were hovering and skimming over the scene of the shipwreck as though many strange things were visible to them beneath the waves. At times we could hear their raucous voices as they spoke to one another of what they saw.

"She was a leaky old craft," said the captain, looking sadly out to sea; "but there's always a feeling of sorrow when we see the last of a ship we have sailed in. Well, well, she would have been broken up in any case, and sold for firewood."

"It looks a peaceful scene," I remarked. "Who would imagine that three men lost their lives last night in those very waters?"

"Poor fellows," said the captain, with feeling. "Should they be cast up after our departure, I am sure, Mr. West, that you will have them decently interred."

I was about to make some reply when the mate burst into a loud guffaw, slapping his thigh and choking with merriment. "If you want to bury them," he said, "you had best look sharp, or they may clear out o' the country. You remember what I said last night. Just look at the top o' that 'ere hillock, and tell me whether I was in the right or not?"

There was a high sand dune some little distance along the coast, and upon the summit of this the figure was standing which had attracted the mate's attention. The captain threw up his hands in astonishment as his eyes rested upon it. "By the eternal," he shouted, "it's Ram Singh himself! Let us overhaul him!" Taking to his heels in his excitement he raced along the beach, followed by the mate and myself, as well as by one or two of the fishermen who had observed the presence of the stranger. The latter, perceiving our approach, came down from his post of observation and walked quietly in our direction, with his head sunk upon his breast, like one who is absorbed in thought.

I could not help contrasting our hurried and tumultuous advance with the gravity and dignity of this lonely Oriental, nor was the matter mended when he raised a pair of steady, thoughtful dark eyes and inclined his head in a graceful, sweeping salutation. It seemed to me that we were like a pack of schoolboys in the presence of a master. The stranger's broad, unruffled brow, his clear, searching gaze, firm set yet sensitive mouth, and clean cut, resolute expression, all combined to form the most imposing and noble presence which I have even known. I could not have imagined that such imperturable calm and at the same time such a consciousness of latent strength could have been expressed by any human face. He was dressed in a brown velveteen coat, loose dark trousers, with a shirt which was cut low in the collar, so as to show the muscular brown neck, and he still wore the red fez which I had noticed the night before. I observed with a feeling of surprise, as we approached him, that none of his garments showed the slightest indication of the rough treatment and wetting which they must have received during their wearer's submersion and struggle to the shore.

"So you are none the worse for your ducking," he said in a pleasant, musical voice, looking from the captain to the mate. "I hope that all your poor sailors have found pleasant quarters."

"We are all safe," the captain answered. "But we had given you up for lost—you and your two friends. Indeed, I was just making arrangements for your burial with Mr. West here."

The stranger looked at me and smiled. "We won't give Mr. West that trouble for a little time yet," he remarked; "my friends and I came ashore all safe, and we have found shelter in a hut a mile or so down the coast. It is lonely down there, but we have everything which we can desire."

"We start for Glasgow this afternoon," said the captain; "I shall be very glad if you will come with us. If you have not been in England before you may find it awkward traveling alone."

"We are very much indebted to you for your thoughtfulness," Ram Singh answered; "but we will not take advantage of your kind offer. Since nature has driven us here we intend to have a look about us before we leave."

"As you like," the captain said, shrugging his shoulders. "I don't think you are likely to find very much to interest you in this hole of a place."

"Very possibly not," Ram Singh answered with an amused smile. "You remember Milton's lines:

'The mind is its own place, and in itself
Can make a hell of heaven, a heaven of hell.'

I daresay we can spend a few days here comfortably enough. Indeed, I think you must be wrong in considering this to be a barbarous locality. I am much mistaken if this young gentleman's father is not Mr. John Hunter West, whose name is known and honored by the pundits of India."

"My father is, indeed, a well-known Sanscrit scholar," I answered, in astonishment.

"The presence of such a man," observed the stranger, slowly, "changes a wilderness into a city. One great mind is surely a higher indication of civilization than are incalculable leagues of bricks and mortar. Your father is hardly as profound as Sir William Jones, or as universal as the Baron Von Hammer-Purgstall, but he combines many of the virtues of each. You may tell him, however, from me that he is mistaken in the analogy which he has traced between the Samoyede and Tamulic word roots."

"If you have determined to honor our neighborhood by a short stay," said I, "you will offend my father very much if you do not put up with him. He represents the laird here, and it is the laird's privilege, according to our Scottish custom, to entertain all strangers of repute who visit his parish." My sense of hospitality prompted me to deliver this invitation, though I could feel the mate twitching at my sleeve as if to warn me that the offer was, for some reason, an objectionable one. His fears were, however, unnecessary, for the stranger signified by a shake of the head that it was impossible for him to accept it.

"My friends and I are very much obliged to you," he said, "but we have our own reasons for remaining where we are. The hut which we occupy is deserted and partly ruined, but we Easterns have trained ourselves to do without most of those things which are looked upon as necessaries in Europe, believing firmly in that wise axiom that a man is rich, not in proportion to what he has, but in proportion to what he can dispense with. A good fisherman supplies us with bread and with herbs, we have clean dry straw for our couches, what could man wish for more?"

"But you must feel the cold at night, coming straight from the tropics," remarked the captain.

"Perhaps our bodies are cold sometimes. We have not noticed it. We have all three spent many years in the Upper Himalayas on the border of the region of eternal snow, so we are not very sensitive to inconveniences of the sort."

"At least," said I, "you must allow me to send you over some fish and some meat from our larder."

"We are not Christians," he answered, "but Buddhists of the higher school. We do not recognize that man has a moral right to slay an ox or a fish for the gross use of his body. He has not put life into them, and has assuredly no mandate from the Almighty to take life from them save under most pressing need. We could not, therefore, use your gift if you were to send it."

"But, sir," I remonstrated, "if in this changeable and inhospitable climate you refuse all nourishing food your vitality will fail you—you will die."

"We shall die then," he answered with a bright smile. "And now, Captain Meadows, I must bid you adieu, thanking you for your kindness during the voyage, and you, too, good-bye—you will command a ship of your own before the year is out. I trust, Mr. West, that I may see you again before I leave this part of the country. Farewell!" He raised his red fez, inclined his noble head with the stately grace which characterized all his actions, and stole away in the direction from which he had come.

"Let me congratulate you, Mr. Hawkins," said the captain to the mate as we walked homeward. "You are to command your own ship within the year."

"No such luck!" the mate answered, with a pleased smile upon his mahogany face; "still there's no saying how things may come out. What d'ye think of him, Mr. West?"

(To be continued.)

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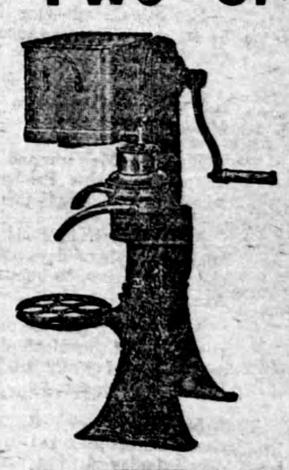

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