

CHAPTER II.

SARAH PURFOY.

CONVICTISM having been safely got under hatches, and put to bed in its government allowance of sixteen inches of space per man, cut a little short by exigencies of ship-board, the cuddy was wont to pass some not unpleasant evenings. Mrs. ^aVickers ^bwas poetical and owned a guitar, ^cand was also musical and sang to it. Captain Blunt was a jovial, coarse fellow, Surgeon Pine had a mania for story-telling, while if Vickers was sometimes dull, Frere was always hearty. Moreover, the table was well served, and what with dinner, tobacco, whist, music, and brandy-and-water, the sultry evenings passed away with a rapidity of which the wild beasts 'tween decks, cooped by sixes in berths of five feet three inches, had no conception.

On this particular evening, however, the cuddy was dull. Dinner fell flat, and conversation languished.

"No signs of a breeze, Mr. Best?" asked Blunt, as the first officer came in and took his seat.

"None, sir."

"These—he he!—awful calms," says Mrs. Vickers. "A week, is it ^dnot, Captain Blunt?"

"Thirteen days, mum," growled Blunt.

"I remember, off the Coromandel Coast," put in cheerful Pine, "when we had the plague in the Rattlesnake——"

"Captain Vickers, another glass of wine?" cries Blunt, hastening to cut the anecdote short.

"Thank you, no more. I have ^ea headache."

"Headache—um—don't wonder at it, going down among those

^aVickers] ~, ^bwas] who was ^cand was] was ^dnot,] ~ ^ea] the

fellows. It is infamous the way they crowd these ships. Here we have over two hundred souls on board, and not boat room for half of 'em."

"Two hundred souls! Surely not," says Vickers. "By the King's Regulations——"¹

"One hundred and eighty convicts, fifty soldiers, thirty in ship's crew, all told, and—how many?—one, two, three—seven in the cuddy. How many do you make that?"

"We *are* just a little crowded this time," says Best.

"It is very wrong," says Vickers, pompously. "Very wrong. By the King's Regulations——"

But the subject of the King's Regulations was even more distasteful to the cuddy than Pine's interminable anecdotes, and Mrs. Vickers hastened to change the subject.

"Are you not heartily tired of this dreadful life, Mr. Frere?"

"Well, it is not exactly the life I had hoped to lead," said Frere, rubbing a freckled hand over his stubborn red hair; "but I must make the best of it."

"Yes, indeed," said the lady in that subdued manner with which one comments upon a well-known accident, "it must have been a great shock to you to be so suddenly deprived of so large a fortune."

"Not only that, but to find that the black sheep who got it all, sailed for India within a week of my uncle's death! Lady Devine got a letter from him on the day of the funeral to say that he had taken his passage in the ^aHydaspes, for Calcutta, and never meant to come back again!"

"Sir Richard Devine left no other children?"

"No, only this mysterious Dick, whom I never saw, but who must have hated me."

"Dear, dear! These family quarrels are dreadful things. Poor Lady Devine to lose in one day a husband and a son!"

"And the next morning to hear of the murder of her cousin! You know that we are connected with the Bellasis family. My aunt's father married a sister of the second ^bviscount."

"Indeed. That was a horrible murder. So you think that the dreadful man you pointed out the other day, did it?"

^aHydaspes,] ~ ^bviscount] Lord Bellasis

“The jury seemed to think not,” said Mr. Frere, with a laugh; “but I don’t know anybody else who could have a motive for it. However, I’ll go on deck and have a smoke.”

“I wonder what induced that old hunk of a shipbuilder to try and cut off his only son in favour of a cub of that sort,” said Surgeon Pine to Captain Vickers as the broad back of Mr. Maurice Frere disappeared up the companion.

“Some boyish follies abroad, I believe; self-made men are always impatient of extravagance. But it is hard upon Frere. He is not a bad sort of fellow for all his roughness, and when a young man finds that an accident deprives him of a quarter of a million of money and leaves him without a sixpence beyond his commission in a marching regiment under orders for a convict settlement, he has some reason to rail against fate.”

“How was it that the son came in for the money after all, then?”

“Why it seems that when old Devine returned from sending for his lawyer to alter his will, he got a fit of apoplexy, the result of his rage, I suppose, and when they opened his room door in the morning they found him dead.”

“And the son’s away on the sea somewhere,” said ^aMrs. Vickers, “and knows nothing of his good fortune. It is quite a romance.”

“I am glad that Frere did not get the money,” said Pine, grimly sticking to his prejudice; “I have seldom seen a face I liked less, even among my yellow jackets² yonder.”

“Oh dear, Dr. Pine! How can you?” interjected Mrs. Vickers.

“Pon my soul, ma’am, some of them have mixed in good society, I can tell you. There’s pickpockets and swindlers down below who have lived in the best company.”

“Dreadful wretches!” cried Mrs. Vickers, shaking out her skirts. “John, I will go on deck.”

^bAnd at the signal, the party ^carose.

“Ecod,³ Pine,” says Captain Blunt, as the two were left alone together, “you and I are always putting our foot into it!”

“Women are always in the way aboard ship,” returned Pine.

“Ah! doctor, you don’t mean that, I know,” said a rich soft voice at his elbow.

^aMrs.] Mr.

^bAnd at] At

^carose] rose

It was Sarah Purfoy emerging from her cabin.

“Here *is* the wench!” cries Blunt. “We were talking of your eyes, my dear.”

“Well, they’ll bear talking about, captain, won’t they?” asked she, turning them full upon him.

“By the Lord, they will!” says Blunt, smacking his hand on the table. “They’re the finest eyes I’ve seen in my life, and they’ve got the reddest lips under ’m that——”

“Let me pass, Captain Blunt, if you please. Thank you, doctor.”

And before the admiring commander could prevent her, she modestly swept out of the cuddy.

“She’s a fine piece of goods, eh?” asked Blunt, watching her. “A spice o’ the devil in her, too.”

Old Pine took a huge pinch of snuff.

“Devil! I tell you what it is, Blunt, I don’t know where Vickers picked her up, but I’d rather trust my life with the worst of those ruffians ’tween decks, than in *her* keeping, if I’d done her an injury.”

“Hearty Blunt laughed.

“I don’t believe she’d think much of sticking ^ba knife into a man, either!” he ^csaid, rising. “But I must go on deck, doctor.”

Pine followed him more slowly. “I don’t pretend to know much about women,” he said to himself, “but that girl’s got a story of her own, or I’m much mistaken. What brings her on board this ship as ^dlady’s maid is more than I can fathom.” And as, sticking his pipe between his teeth, he walked down the now deserted deck to the main hatchway, and turned to watch the white figure gliding up and down the ^epoop-deck, he saw it joined by another and a darker one, he muttered, “She’s after no good, I’ll swear.”

At that moment his arm was touched by a soldier in undress uniform, who had come up the hatchway.

“What is it?”

The man drew himself up and saluted.

“If you plase, doctor, one of the prisoners is taken sick, and as the dinner’s over, and he’s pretty bad, I ^fvintured to disturb your honour.”

^aHearty] *Om.* ^ba knife into] *Om.* ^csaid,] ~ ^dlady’s maid] lady’s-maid
^epoop-deck] poop deck ^fvintured] ventured

“You ass!” says ^agruff Pine—who, like many gruff men, had a good heart under his rough shell—“why didn’t you tell me before?” and knocking the ashes out of his barely-lighted pipe, he stopped that implement with a twist of paper and followed his summoner down the hatchway.

In the meantime the woman who was the object of the grim old fellow’s suspicions was enjoying the comparative coolness of the night air. Her mistress and her mistress’s daughter had not yet come out of their cabin, and the men had not yet finished their evening’s tobacco. The awning had been removed, the stars were shining in the moonless sky, the poop guard had shifted itself to the quarter-deck, and Miss Sarah Purfoy was walking up and down the deserted poop, in close *tête-à-tête* with no less a person than Captain Blunt himself. She had passed and repassed him twice silently, and at the third turn, the big fellow, peering into the twilight ahead somewhat uneasily, ^bseemed to obey the glitter of her great eyes, and joined her.

“You weren’t put out, my wench,” he asked, “at what I said to you below?”

She affected surprise.

“What do you mean?”

“Why, at my—at what I—at my rudeness, there! For I was a bit rude, I admit.”

“I? O dear, no. You were not rude.”

“Glad you think so!” returned Phineas Blunt, a little ashamed at what looked like a confession of weakness on his part.

“You *would* have been—if I had let you.”

“How do you know?”

“I saw it in your face. Do you think a woman can’t see in a man’s face when he’s going to insult her?”

“Insult you, hey! Upon my word!”

“Yes, insult me. You’re old enough to be my father, Captain Blunt, but you’ve no right to kiss me, unless I ask you.”

“Haw haw!” laughed Blunt. “I like that. Ask me! Egad I wish you would, you black-eyed minx?”

“So would other people, I have no doubt.”

^agruff] *Om.* ^bseemed to obey] obeyed ^cHaw] ~,

“That ^asoldier-officer for instance. Hey, Miss Modesty? I’ve seen him looking at you as though he’d like to try.”

The girl flashed at him with a quick side glance.

“You mean Lieutenant Frere, I suppose. Are you jealous of him?”

“Jealous! Why, damme, the lad was only breeched^d the other day. Jealous!”

“I think you are—and you’ve no need to be. He is a stupid booby, though he is Lieutenant Frere.”

“So he is. ^bYou’re right there, by the Lord.”

Sarah Purfoy laughed a low, full-toned laugh, ^cthat made middle-aged Blunt feel his pulse take a jump forward, and ^dsend the blood tingling down to his fingers’ ends.

“Captain Blunt,” said she, “you’re going to do a very silly thing.”

He came close to her and tried to take her hand.

“What?”

She answered by another question.

“How old are you?”

“Forty-two, if you must know.”

“Oh! And you are going to fall in love with a girl of nineteen.”

“Who is that?”

“Myself!” she said, giving him her hand and smiling at him with her rich red lips.

The mizen hid them from the man at the wheel, and the twilight of tropical stars held the ^emain-deck. Blunt felt the ^fhealthy breath of this strange woman warm on his cheek, her eyes seemed to wax and wane, and the hard, small hand he held burnt like fire.

“I believe ^gyou’re right,” he cried, “I *am* half in love with you already.”

She gazed at him with a contemptuous sinking of her ^hheavily-fringed eyelids, and withdrew her hand.

“Then don’t get to the other half, or you’ll regret it.”

“Shall I?” asked Blunt. “That’s my affair. Come, you little vixen, give me that kiss you said I was going to ask you for below,” and he caught her in his arms.

^asoldier-officer] soldier officer ^bYou’re] You are ^cthat . . . his] whose sound made Blunt’s ^dsend] sent ^emain-deck] main deck ^fhealthy] *Om.* ^gyou’re] you are ^hheavily-fringed] heavily fringed

In an instant she had twisted herself free, and confronted him with flashing eyes.

"You dare!" she cried. "Kiss me by force! Pooh! you make love like a school-boy. If you can *make* me like you, I'll kiss you as often as you will. If you can't, keep your distance, please."

Blunt did not know whether to laugh or be angry at this rebuff. He was conscious that he was in rather a ridiculous position, and so decided to laugh.

"You're a spitfire, too. What must I do to make you like me?"

She made him a curtsey.

"That is your affair," she said; and as the head of Mr. Frere appeared above the companion, Blunt walked aft, feeling considerably bewildered, and yet not displeased.

"She's a fine girl, by jingo," he said, cocking his cap, "and I'm hanged⁵ if she ain't sweet upon me."

And then the old fellow began to whistle softly to himself as he paced the deck, and to glance towards the man who had taken his place with no friendly eyes. But a sort of shame held him as yet, and he kept aloof.

Maurice Frere's greeting was short enough.

"Well, Sarah," he said,—“have you got out of your temper?"

She frowned.

"What did you strike the man for? He did you no harm."

"He was out of his place. What business had he to come aft? One must keep these wretches down, my girl."

"Or they will be too much for you, eh? Do you think one man could capture a ship, Mr. ^aMaurice?"

"No, but one hundred might."

"Nonsense! What could they do against the soldiers? There are fifty soldiers."

"So there are, ^bbut——"

"But what?"

"Well, never mind. It's against the rules, and I won't have it."

"Not according to the King's Regulations,' as Captain Vickers would say."

Frere laughed at her imitation of his pompous captain.

^aMaurice?] ~. ^bbut——"] ~" ——

“You are a strange girl; I can’t make you out. Come,” and he took her hand, “tell me what you are really.”

“Will you promise not to tell?”

“Of course.”

“Upon your word?”

“Upon my word.”

“Well, then—but you’ll tell?”

“Not I. Come, go on.”

“^aLady’s maid in the family of a gentleman going abroad.”

“Sarah, can’t you be serious?”

“I am serious. That was the advertisement I answered.”

“But I mean, what you *have* been. You were not a ^blady’s maid all your life?”

She pulled her shawl closer round her and shivered.

“People are not born ladies’ maids, I suppose?”

“Well, who are you, then? Have you no friends? What have you been?”

She looked up into the young man’s face—a little less harsh at that moment than it was wont to be—and creeping closer to him, whispered.

“Do you love me, Maurice?”

He raised one of the little hands that rested on the taffrail, and, under cover of the darkness, kissed it.

“You know I do,” he said. “You may be a ^clady’s maid or what you like, but you are the loveliest woman I ever met.”

She smiled at his vehemence.

“Then, if you love me, what does it matter?”

“If *you* loved me, you would tell me,” said he, with a quickness which surprised himself.

“But I have nothing to tell, and I don’t love you—yet.”

He let ^dfall her hand with an impatient gesture; and at that moment Blunt—who could restrain himself no longer—came up.

“Fine night, Mr. Frere!”

“Yes, fine enough.”

“No signs of a breeze yet, though.”

^aLady’s maid] Lady’s-maid ^blady’s maid] lady’s-maid ^clady’s maid] lady’s-maid
^dfall her hand] her hand fall

“No, not yet.”

Just then, from out of the violet haze that hung over the horizon, a strange glow of light ^aseemed to break.

“Hallo!” cries Frere, “did you see that?”

All had seen it, but they looked for its repetition in vain.

Blunt rubbed his eyes.

“I saw it,” he said, “distinctly. A flash of light.”

^bAnd they strained their eyes to pierce through the obscurity.

“Best saw something like it before dinner. There must be thunder in the air.”

At that instant a thin streak of light ^cseemed to shoot up and then ^dto sink again.

There was no mistaking it this time, and a simultaneous exclamation burst from all on deck. From out the gloom which hung over the horizon ^eshot up a column of flame that lighted up the night for an instant, and then sunk, leaving ^fsomething that looked like a dull red spark upon the water.

“It’s a ship on fire!” cried Frere.

^aseemed to break] broke
sank ^cshot up] rose

^bAnd they] They ^eseemed to shoot] shot ^dto sink]
^fsomething . . . like] *Om.*