

pretend to understand, came off in the boat, and made signs that she wanted to inspect me. I took her round, civilly of course, but I felt more about it; and when she said that her mistress would come aboard at twelve o'clock on the following night, I thought again of the mystery which was about all the business, and it stuck in my mind like an uncanny thing.

On the following day, just before eight bells, the lady's luggage came off in the boat—a pile of trunks, some light hamper, and a cage with a raven who croaked dimly in it. The bird had an uncanny look, and the hands grouped round its cage and discussed it. The older ones shook their heads (there were three croaks from the bird, they counted), and thought no luck would come of it; Martin Key, the boatswain, said plain out, "that if he'd known what he was shipping with, he'd sooner have signed to hang!" the younger men asked themselves why the owner wanted to come aboard at midnight? It was altogether such a bit of a thing as will set a crew talking ill, and make hands dissatisfied before sheets are home. I talked to them straight out, as you may think; told them to go back if they were tired of the job before it began; but they only said that they felt themselves all right with me, and would thank me to pitch the raven into the Solent. Why the bird put them out I never knew; some men account it was lucky; others have different stories of them. Our lot were put up to it by the Norwegian mate, Hesmmer, and, coupling it with the mystery about the lady, they read the bird as an evil omen. They were this way when the owner came aboard at midnight, accompanied by the crane, but with no soul, man, woman, or child, to wish her a "God-speed." She was a bit of a thing, a slight girlish creature, who did not appear to be twenty-three years of age; and I was never more astonished in my life than when first I saw her; her face nigh covered in a blue mantle, but tears running down her cheeks like rain, and big saucer-like eyes, which seemed to look through and through you. I met her ashore, and when she thanked me very sweetly for what I had done, and said she could never repay me, I was like a man struck in a squall with topsails unhoisted, and I just stood there and stammered like a booby. There never was a prettier morsel on God's earth, never one with such kindness in her baby face, and such a something which went straight to a man's heart. I was in love with her long before she set foot on the deck; and when I had a glimpse of her whole face as she sat under the lamp of the cabin I felt myself all of a tremble, like one who has heard good news. Then we weighed, and by the forenoon watch stood well down Channel with a smoking breeze almost abaft, and every stitch set the ship could carry.

"We had been at sea a week, and were making a long reach out of the Bay before anything more passed which would be worth your hearing. The schooner well passed my track in her. She was the greatest ship I ever saw; her rigging handled; and she stood stiff as a chimney even with three parts of gale on her beam. The men began to forget their talk, and I was what I took them to be, smart hands, who would have done credit to any service. But the trouble began again on the seventh day, as I could see, and it began because our owner and passenger never showed herself on deck, nor, for the matter of that, allowed any of us to enter her cabin. She was even waited on at meals by the hag she brought with her, and the old creature passed the dishes through the panel to the galley just for all the world as if it was death for any of the crew to see her mistress. This wouldn't have mattered so much if there had not been talk of other things—of wild nights of weeping, of hysterical laughter, of a woman crying like one in agony, and of strange sights which the hands, now beginning to be wound up, declared that they had seen and heard. The boatswain, Martin Key, was at the bottom of it as I knew, and one night I sent for him to my room, and put it straight to him: "Key," said I, "what's all this nonsense, and who set it afloat?"

"Ay, sir," he said, "it may be nonsense, but you don't look for to quell it that way. Ask Mr Hesmmer, sir, he's from Norway, and like enough he knows."

"Never mind Mr Hesmmer," said I, "but speak for yourself. They tell me you have seen something to frighten you in the chief cabin. Now, you're not a child or a woman, and this ship's not the place for hysterics—I want to know as between man and man what the trouble is?"

"He looked well enough at this, and began to finger his hat, as seamen will."

"No, sir," he said presently, "I couldn't tell you what I've seen, and what I think I distrust, tell you. If I should be right, there's not a man of us but what would walk into the sea the minute after he knew it—God forbid! I'm a plain able man, with no learning in my figure-head, and like enough I'm wrong. But you ask Mr Hesmmer, sir."

There was nothing to be done with a man like this, as you may think. I sent him to his work, and went on deck with my mind in a blind fog, and my nerves twitching indistinguishably. The plain truth was that, if it had not been for a pretty face, and the sweetest smile man ever looked upon, I had gone into the saloon there and then and told my owner all that was being said in the fo'castle. But when I wanted to do it, when my plain common sense told me to solve the thing at once, another impulse held me back. The girl had stipulated for privacy. I, in a sense, was her protector; I felt, even in that early stage, that her life might be in my hands. She had some great sorrow, no doubt, but what concern was that of mine? It would be a personal degradation, I imagined, to give any heed to the maunders of a superstitious crew. More than that, and there is not gain in withholding it, I was just about as deep down in love with her as ever man was with woman, and dared no risk the possibility of her anger. What was it to me or to the men, I asked, if she chose to bide in her cabin? what concern of ours, if she was haunted by trouble? It was her own ship, bought with her own money, and it was hers to do with as she pleased. And I was determined that she should be talked about no more, and that I would so deal with the first man who broached the topic again that the talk of it should end there and then.

These things went round in my head as I walked the watch, and waited for Hesmmer to come up at eight bells. It is true that I could not escape the questions which my mind put to me, or fail to ask, "What is my passenger? Where does she come from? Has she any friends? What is her trouble? But they are such questions ever will, ceased to harass me when my attention for the girl grew, and my imagination fed upon the one picture of her I had known. A man's love is rarely tricked out with logic; mine was no exception. When I kept my watch on that night I saw the vision of her face, turn where I would; and I knew that I

would have given half my life if the other half could have been spent with her. Sentiment, you say, and possibly it was, but of such sentiment are the exquisite moments of life.

"It was a little after eight bells when Hesmmer came on deck and relieved me. Before I went below I had a few words with him, and told him that Key had referred me to him. I thought that he had no plain straightness of manner with me in the business, but did not unduly press him when he made the shape of a tale.

"The fact is," said he, "your men are scared, and that's just the whole of it. I told Key, it was yesterday, something that might possibly explain away the whole of it, but there's a thousand chances to one I'm wrong, and I'm not going to talk of it. You don't forget I'm Norwegian born, and have in my head things that wouldn't occur to an Englishman. If you take my word, you'll leave 'em be, and in a week you'll hear no more of it. This sort of affair is fed on words, and the more you listen to 'em, the more trouble they'll give you."

"Well, I think you're right," said I, "and the next man who comes to me with a crank in his head is going to have it knocked out with a handspike. Just put that abroad, and see if it helps them."

"I will," said he, "but listen a minute; there's crying down in the cabin again."

"Sure enough, as we stood at the open skylight there came up from the saloon below a pitiful moaning and wailing, the like to which I have never heard. Long drawn sobs which cut your heart to hear were followed by screams as of rage; then came grating exclamations in a tongue I did not understand; and a sound of weeping, deep and bitter as of climate distress. So painful altogether was the outbreak, and so much was I moved at the suffering of a mere child—as my own always was in my mind—that I did what I had never done before, and went down the companion to the cabin door. Before that, I had sent Hesmmer forward, telling him that one of us only should intrude upon the lady's privacy, and that I meant to do the work myself.

"At my first knock upon the panel the sounds within the saloon died away. I heard muttered whispering, and then the door was drawn back a little way, and the face of the beldame appeared thrust around it. Stealthily as she did the business, I could yet see for one moment into the cabin, and the sight struck my nerves as no shock before or since has ever done. I saw in that moment an apparition beautiful enough to blind a man—the apparition of a woman with golden-yellow hair streaming all over her shoulders, of a woman who was yet a girl, but whose face, with all its extravagant loveliness, was yet running with tears and distorted with such visual tokens of misery that my heart seemed ready to burst at the sight of it. More than this, the hag gave me no opportunity to remember, for she began to rant like a fury; and above the sound of her rasping voice I heard the words of the girl herself crying, "How dare you come to my cabin! How dare you after all your promises!"

"When I got up the companion I was like a man whipped. She had reproached me for a breach of good faith; and all said and done I was only her servant. I was that mad with shame I could have cut my right hand off; and I went straight to my own room and fell upon my bed to pass four hours, which I would not number again for the command of a liner. The second glimpse of the girl's face had only added to my first impression. I can remember every line of it now as though she stood before me, the play of the mouth, the pathos of the eyes, the flush of red upon the cheeks. And I can remember how curious I thought it then that her shoulders and her arms were all bound up in a great white cloth, and that the crone seemed to fear my looking into the cabin just as much as if the dead lay there. But the mystery, great as I knew it to be, went out of my mind before the other feeling—the feeling that I would surrender every pleasure of my life if by my service I could earn the gratitude of the seemingly friendless creature who thus had come to my charge.

"On the next morning after I had spent weary hours in my bunk, I found a strange spirit abroad amongst my men. They were silent and moody, and for the first time they avoided me. I talked to one or two of them, but they would give me nothing definite in reply; Hesmmer himself had become taciturn and did his duty with a heavy spirit, which was in concord with my own feelings, though for a very different reason. As for the chief cabin, that had become suddenly as silent as the grave; we did not hear even the sound of talking there; the whole ship was stricken with an unspeakable gloom, in which the croaking of the raven was like a knell. And we went on in this miserable truce for many days, no man coming near me when he could stay away, none seeking my confidence or returning it.

"It must have been at a point not twenty miles from here that the climax came. The stiff breeze which had brought us to Africa fell away altogether after we'd sighted the islands; and we stood in toward the land with canvas slack and decks on fire almost with the heat. I had turned in through the second "dog," but came up at eight bells, and was on deck until midnight. Most of my time I spent hovering near the skylight of the woman's cabin, as if to get a sound of her voice to my consolation; the rest I passed leaning over the taffrail and thinking how strange it was that I should be near the African coast at all. When the watch changed I slept an hour in my bunk, but the heat was intolerable, and I went up to the deck again determined to make another effort to speak to Hesmmer, and to drag from him the whole of his suspicions. To my surprise I could not find him either on deck or below; and the hand, Thompson, as the wheel stammered and stuttered with unmistakable

desire to lie when I questioned him. Before I could take any steps to solve the mystery of the mate's absence, he appeared quickly coming over the bulwarks, and stood before me unabashed. He had climbed into the main chains to spy upon the woman through the port of her cabin; and when I remembered what he had done I could have struck him down as he stood.

"Mr Hesmmer," said I, my fingers tingling with rage, "you seem to have been well occupied. I congratulate you on your employment, watching a lady in her cabin."

"You speak the truth," said he, answering with impudent confidence, "and maybe she's a lady, but it was no lady's act to look us for this trip."

"He took all my command from me at the boldness of his answer, and I asked him stammering:

"What do you mean? For the love of God speak plain!"

"I mean, Mr Capper," said he, "that me and the men are going ashore in the long boat within the next hour, and you're coming with us."

"Mr Hesmmer," said I, quite calmly, "your intentions towards me are very kind, but the first man that puts a finger on the boat may look to have his funeral in the same hour. Let's have an end of this nonsense. What is it to you and the hands if the lady chooses to keep her own cabin and her own counsel; are we not all her servants? What is this thing you hint at perpetually? Are you all mad? It seems to me very like it. Must I take means to make you sane? As there's a God above me I'll shoot the first man that speaks to me of it again like I'd shoot a dog. You hear me? then attend to it, and turn the hands up, I've something to say to them."

"He heard the order quite calmly, then stepped up to me, and whispered a word in my ear.

"Before you do that, I'd like you to answer a question," said he. "Have you ever thought why you lady won't show amongst us? Likely you haven't; but I'm going to tell ye. Man, she's a leper!"

I listened to him as one listens to the echo of a cry. He seemed like a man speaking afar off; I could not get the whole of his words into my head. But he repeated them, and slowly my mind shaped the truth, and a great gulf seemed to leap up between the vision of the girl and myself; and there was an intolerable pain at my heart, so that I stood rocking for a spell, and then, as they told me, fell flat upon the deck. When I came to my senses I was in the long boat, bound up like a log; and the whole of the crew sat round, speaking kind words, but firm ones. The El Dorado herself was drifting two miles away astern, just as it might be into your bank of cloud.

"What I did in the next hour God alone knows. My struggles to free myself from the ropes at my wrists and ankles cut me almost to the bone. I tried to throw myself into the sea, but the men held me back. I told them a hundred times that they ran no risk on board the ship; but they laughed at me. It was their fear that every man would be stricken down even then with the overwhelming horror; and they were as madmen, rowing swiftly for the land, while I implored them until my voice stuck in my throat, and tears ran down my face. In my delirium I thought to hear the girl calling me to her help; I saw her again, as I had first seen her with her beautiful face tender in sorrow, and death very near to her. Then I must have lost my wits entirely, for I came to reason many weeks after in St. Louis at the house of the English consul.

"You may ask if I made no effort to follow the derelict ship and come up with her, but how could I? The crew were before me with their tale. They said that the ship had foundered at sea, and that the catastrophe had robbed me of my mind. And one by one they disappeared covertly, lest the truth should come to light; but those who had heard my story shook their heads and said that my memory would be restored presently. When I returned to England people were still more incredulous. The El Dorado drifted ashore fifty miles from Cape Verde; but the passengers were not on board her. The discovery of the wreck seemed to confirm the hands; and I was looked upon as a man with a weak head; and for many months owners would not speak to me. The ban lies upon me to this day; it has crushed my future, and taken away my hope of life."

"But the girl?" said I, when he had ceased to speak for some time, "did you never fathom the mystery of her case?"

"In some part, yes. The mate Hesmmer sent a paper from Nantes, in France, a year after the El Dorado stranded; and there I read of the disappearance of the young wife of a merchant named Oliver. He was a man of travel, and had married in Norway into a family at Trondhjem; but during his absence at Algiers his wife had left him and was never subsequently heard of. The paper spoke of the girl's philanthropy, and of her noble work in the leper hospital at Bergen; and then pointed out how curious it was that she had sold her jewels in Paris before quitting the country. This woman, said Hesmmer, was your Madame Aldibert; and I believe he spoke truth. It's always been my opinion that she must have taken the disease before she was married, and then, when the fearful thing came upon her, she fled from her husband that he might never know."

"And why did she want to go to the Cape?"

"Ah, that helps the case. She told me to take her to the Cape, but I don't doubt that her real destination was Robben Island, where the greater leper hospital is. She thought, perhaps, the voyage would do something for her. Poor thing! Death was welcome to her, I'm sure; but what a life, my God, and what a curse!"

And with an infinite tenderness in his voice as he finished his story, Matthew Capper lurches off to his work forward.

