

Literature, &c.

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From Hogg's Instructor.

MARY DOUGLAS:

OR, THE PIRATE'S ATTACK.

THE 'Seabird' was under weigh. As I went on deck she was lying with her canvass spread to court the salutations of the rising breeze. At that moment the sails hung listlessly against the masts, and the exhalations that curled upon the waters rose perpendicularly to the upper regions of the air. Soon, however, they began to flutter and chafe with the rigging, as if impatient at the tardy movements of the wind, till, as it came murmuring from the Jersey shore, mist, and ripples, and ships were moving swiftly towards a point, which, in the dimness of the hour, seemed the opening into another world. We soon reached it, and the perilous scene of our future labours opened before us. I turned to look for the lighthouse. It had disappeared; and the vessels in whose company we had sailed were scattered, like a frightened flock, towards every corner of heaven. The breeze freshened; we were shaping our solitary course for Turk's Island. At length the beams of the setting sun lighted on nothing but our own little vessel and the blue waters that rolled around us.

'And now,' thought I, 'I am alone in the world—upon the wide, wide sea.'

'We have every prospect of a favorable passage,' said a voice near me; and for the first time since I embarked I recollected that I was not the only passenger on board. The speaker was a venerable gentleman of some threescore years, with silver locks and a countenance expressive of amiable feelings, though careworn and melancholy. On his arm leaned a small and extremely graceful female figure, to whom his remark had been addressed, and both were gazing in the direction where the waters were still flashing with the living splendours of the sunset.

'Beautiful!' at length exclaimed the lady, without seeming to heed what the other had said. 'How lovely is this scene, my dear father! And see, what a beautiful cloud! It seems as if it were one of the enchanted isles of fairyland.'

Who has not felt the magic of a voice? I had not seen the speaker, and yet her tones came over me like pleasant music.

'You are the child of imagination, my dear Mary,' said her father, affectionately, pressing his arm round her waist; 'would to Heaven you were less so.'

'But,' said she, in a mournful tone, 'I do not always indulge in gay fancies.'

'True, my dear; your feelings change their hues as often and as suddenly as the clouds of Heaven. See, yonder, your enchanted island has already lost its golden mantle, and now lies brooding on the breast of the sea a dusky and threatening bank of fog. Thus suddenly do you pass from the brightest dreams of happiness to the darkest forebodings. I repeat, would to Heaven you were less the child of imagination! You had been happier.'

The father, in alluding to her constitutional weakness, had probably awakened distressing recollections; for she hung her head and withdrew from his arm, and when I approached to get a view of her face, her eyes were filled with tears. She turned away quickly on seeing a stranger. But that view was enough. I have spoken of the magic of a voice, but what is it to the human face?

'You seem interested with the deportment of my daughter,' said the old gentleman as she retired.

I started, I believe in some confusion. 'She has just risen from a bed of sickness,' he continued, with a melancholy accent; 'and I am fearful will never be herself again.'

'If I were to judge of her malady from her appearance,' said I, 'I should say that the mind has had more to do than bodily infirmities with the ruin which has been wrought in that lovely countenance.'

'You are right sir,' replied he, with a sigh; 'her illness was occasioned by mental anguish, the cause of which is buried deep in both our hearts. Suffice it to say, that the victim of intemperance seldom falls alone; and that when a youth of high promise immolates himself on the altar of the disgusting fiend, tears and broken hearts attend the sacrifice.'

The old man spoke with mournful energy, and I pitied him.

'Is there no hope of the reformation of such an one?' I inquired.

'In this case, none. It is more than six months since William Ashton fled from society, and went to sea as a common mariner. The presence, the devoted affection, the tears of my child could not reclaim him—what on earth then can?'

'What indeed?' repeated I. 'And this voyage is undertaken for the recovery of her health? You will excuse my inquisitiveness.' I immediately added; 'I have lived long enough in your country to acquire her characteristic mode of questioning.'

'I hold it every man's duty as well as interest,' said he, 'whose lot it is to travel on the great deep, far from his home and kindred, to relate so much of his own history as shall entitle him to the sympathy and confidence of the companions of his voyage. I am a Scotchman, and my name is Douglas.'

'My name,' said I, 'is Brae, and I am a freshman in — College; you have my whole history.'

The shadows of night had settled over the solitary waste before we parted for the night.

Many leagues of sea had been ploughed in that short period, as the ship, yielding to the impulse of the powerful breeze, dashed on her way over the billows. Three days of this propitious wind brought us off the Hatteras, and though at the distance of three hundred miles from land, we received the usual greeting of the Cape, and were obliged to do homage to its strong spirit, under bare poles, for several hours. It will be supposed by those of my readers who will have the charity to consider me a man of taste, that during these three days I had not avoided the society of Mary Douglas and her father. I found her mind all that her countenance had promised. Her sufferings had been cruel; sufficiently severe, indeed to cause a temporary alienation of her reason, but its only remaining trace was an occasional wildness of the eye, and an imagination highly and sometimes painfully susceptible of excitement. In her moments of animation it was delightful to stand by her side, leaning on the taffrail, and behold the world of romance her playful fancy would call up above and around us. The ocean and everything visible on its surface, the finny herds that glide through its depths, were all made to assist in supporting, adorning, and peopling her ideal world.

Her father was happy to see her possess even the shadow of enjoyment. 'You will not have many days to revel in these watery realms of fairyland,' said he, 'if we go on at this rate.'

The propitious and powerful breeze that had brought us out of port, and which had temporarily been put to rest by a counter and more violent gust from the Hatteras, had now revived, and came sweeping from the north east in a steady gale. Swift flew the Seabird on her snowy wing, dashing recklessly through the exulting elements, as if anxious to redeem the time that had been lost in port.

Shortly after crossing the tropic, the breeze suddenly left us. There is nothing that a seaman loves less than a calm: the rushing of the wind in a small hurricane is far more welcome if it only blow the right way; and peculiarly aggravating it is to be becalmed within sight of his destined haven. We could not as yet see Jamaica, but along the south-western quarter of the horizon lay a pile of dusky clouds, which the captain assured us was the loom of that island. The reader will not wonder then, if, in our circumstances, all the strange oaths and imprecations found in a seaman's vocabulary were called into service by our nettlesome captain and his crew, and hurled without mercy on the winds and weather.

'You may have more wind than you want before you reach Kingston moorings,' said I, a little nettled at their absurd conduct.

'Blow—blow—let it blow!' roared the captain; 'I would rather go to the bottom at once than lie here roasting in this sun that's enough to cook a Guineaman. Besides, Mr Brae,' added he, in a milder tone, and pointing to the north-west, 'yonder is Cape Maisie, the eastern end of Cuba, not fifteen miles off. Two hours' rowing would bring us off a gang of the picaroons ready to cut our throats, if we should not happen to hit their fancy; and though this good ship is called the Seabird, she is one of that kind which can't rise without a swell. I say then, let it blow.' So saying, he took his glass and went into the maintop, where he might be seen for an hour reconnoitering the Cuba shore.

It was the fourth afternoon of the calm. Impatience was visible in almost every face. But my feelings agreed perfectly with the weather. There reigned as complete a tranquillity in my bosom as in the elements. Mary Douglas was there; it was enough; I felt not the sun; I feared no pirates. Mistake me not, gentle reader. I do not say that I was in love, for on the doctrine of tender sentiments I entertain some sceptical, perhaps treasonable ideas. I only found myself strangely fascinated, was glad I was just there, and as I was. I pitied Mary Douglas, and would have done much to have made her happy. She seemed better than when we sailed; but well, or substantially happy, she certainly was not. Still that hectic glow would appear on her cheek, and flitter and depart like the tints of sunset, leaving it colourless as marble. She lived in a world of fancy, and beautifully would she deck the objects of her own creation; but then there would come a revulsion of her feelings—a deep dejection—when one who studied her speaking countenance might rightly conceive that fancy, aided by memory, was conjuring up a far different scene. Oh! how has my heart yearned, as I have gazed upon her in these sad moments, for power to extract the worm that had taken such deep hold upon her peace; to recall her to a world she was so eminently qualified to bless and adorn, and that should no longer fright her from its stern realities by dreadful images of the past. She had closed her book and I had been sitting by her side, I know not how long, perhaps an hour. Our conversation had been interesting, but of its subject I have only a confused recollection.

'Say no more, Mr Brae,' said she, rising; 'I should be weak to deny that I understand you; but, looking up into my face with a melancholy smile, you know something of my past history; you know that I once loved; here her lip quivered and the colour left her cheeks; 'but he proved himself unworthy, and I tore him from my heart! But oh! in doing this, think you that I did not rend my heartstrings?' She left me in tears, and retired to her cabin, adding only as she passed, 'My heart is crushed, Mr Brae, I feel that I can never love again.'

The sun had settled far towards the Mexican Gulf before Captain Boltrop came down from his look-out. Standing on the quarter deck, he

again looked long and anxiously to the westward.

'There is that between us and that shore,' he at length said, 'that I dread more than I would that shore in a hurricane off St. Domingo.'

'I thought that nothing could be more terrible to a seaman than a gale of wind upon a lee shore,' observed Mr Douglas.

'I had rather fall into the sea than into the hands of a bloodthirsty picaroon,' said the captain very decidedly, and with an air of great meaning.

Just then the sun dipped its flaming circle in the waters of the Caribbean Sea.

'There is a spot in the sun,' I exclaimed.

The captain looked at it a moment, and then smiling grimly—'Ay, a spot, and a dark one too,' said he; 'watch it, Mr Brae, and see if it sets.'

The dark object, which appeared on the very disc of the sun, and which I had taken for one of those spots that are occasionally seen on his surface, instead of sinking behind the bright and level waters with the part of the luminary on which it was first observed, seemed to mount upwards, and after lingering a moment on the last visible arch of the glorious orb, it sprang into that pure and glowing element which the sun had shed along the western horizon. It wavered for a moment between the heavens and the earth, as if uncertain to which to attach itself, till, as the flashings of the dying light became fainter, it appeared on the sea a black and motionless speck.

'The sun has found water to wash himself of your spot, Mr Brae,' said the captain, with another of his mysterious smiles; 'I wish it had gone down with him.'

An air of deep care settled over his face. I knew not what to make of him or of his words.

'Why, what do you take that speck to be?' I at length enquired.

'Look for yourself, Mr. Brae,' said he.

I took the glass from his hand, and examined the dim distant object.

'It is a boat, captain.'

'Ay, a boat!' echoed he, 'and coming for us as fast as twelve stout rowers can shove her through the water. Now you know why I wished for a wind, and a hard wind too.'

The beautiful twilight of the tropics had now settled in all its softness over the quiet bosom of the deep. The heights of Cuba rose majestically from its chrysal depths, boldly lifting their pointed peaks to the spotless heavens, and I fancied that I could almost hear the soft murmur of the small wave as it broke upon the coral strand. The heavy loom in the south-west, as if it had only waited to grace the setting of the king of day, after glittering for a moment in a thousand gay colours, settled behind the heaving breast of ocean, leaving only a dark mass like a church with its spire in bold relief against the sky. It no sooner caught our captain's eye than he shouted with as much rapture as a seaman ever allows himself to express, 'The Blue Mountain Peak of Jamaica!' The cry was echoed with enthusiasm by a dozen joyful voices. We were still one hundred miles from the island, and were not gaining an inch on our way towards it; still every eye was turned to it with affection as to a long sought home, and an emotion awoke even in my breast, distinct from those which of late had usurped its entire possession. The whole view to the westward was beauty, unbroken by a single blemish, and nothing of alarm was there save the dark spot on the sea to which so suspicious a character had been attached by our captain, but which had already disappeared in the increasing darkness of the hour. But the east, as if envious of the tranquillity that reigned in the opposite quarter, wore a savage scowl. Enormous piles of vapour, black as the smoke from a volcano's crater shrouded the heights of St. Domingo, and blotted out the very shores from our view. It looked indeed as if the island had sunk and another of subterranean formation had risen from the depths of the sea to fill its place.

'I would give a month's wages,' said the captain with an air of deep thought, 'if we could have that squall upon us within an hour.'

I stared at him with a feeling between contempt and astonishment.

'You doubtless do honour to a seaman's taste,' said I, dryly, 'for my part I dislike my fellow-creatures so little, that I would rather see a piratical privateer within gun-shot than encounter the contents of yonder mass of solid darkness.'

'It may be proved before you leave the ship, Mr. Brae,' replied he with great coolness, 'that I fear the face of man as little as another.' Then turning to the whole ship's company, with very considerable dignity, 'Gentlemen and shipmates,' said he, 'I have reason to apprehend that danger is at hand. The boat that is putting off to us is doubtless a pirate. (If armed men she is certainly full; for I have lived too long on the sea not to know the glitter of arms in the sun. It is more than probable that she has comrades; for would one open boat venture to attack a vessel of our size? something has been hinted about fear, and, to say the truth, I had rather run than meet these gentry. But, that is out of the question, and fight we must' as long as there is a man to stand at one of those brass guns, or to pull a trigger.

Three cheers were the echo to this chivalric speech, and not a moment was lost in preparing to give the pirate a warm reception. A formidable show of miscellaneous articles of warfare was drawn from the secret places of the ship; and there were finally mustered on deck fifteen men, twenty stand of arms, and two brass cannons. These last, after being

wheeled to the starboard side of the quarter-deck and charged nearly to the muzzle, were thrust through port-holes towards the quarter whence our foes were expected. Our small arms were all loaded with three balls each—every man girded with a cutlass and brace of pistols—and the captain even carried his precautions so far as to have the railings, bulwarks, and sides of the ship well slushed, in order to give a slippery foothold if they attempted to board. After all this bustle of preparation, every man posted himself in a situation to command a view of the whole prospect to the westward, and a look-out was stationed in every top. By this time night had drawn her curtain close around the scene, and no trace of the sun's existence remained but in his pale-faced representative, now riding near her meridian. For an hour no sound broke the deep silence that reigned throughout the ship. Not a murmur to excite alarm, or even suspicion, arose from the slumbering ocean, and it seemed even criminal to believe that any being could be found daring enough to disturb a tranquillity so deep and holy.

'It is a lovely hour,' said Mary, in a whisper, as if afraid to trust her voice. 'Can there be danger?'

'It is just such an hour as man selects for the exercise of his evil genius,' replied I, in her own tone.

The gigantic piles of vapour remained motionless as rocks of adamant, resembling more the black smoke of some smouldering mine of coal than exhalations of the sun's rising. No lightning glanced from its bosom. The feeble and timorous moonbeams were unable to penetrate its dark depths, only faintly silencing its edges, and rendering visible and more gloomy the blackness below.

'There is a hurricane in a visible shape,' said I.

Still the dark mass moved not, but stood upon the waters, motionless, and black as a mountain of infernal elements. Hour after hour rolled on, and the scenes on either hand continued the same. Suspense had rendered the men fretful and impatient, and, after striving in vain to discover some dim trace of the foe or to detect the dip of their oars, many had closed their eyes in slumber. Mr Douglas and his daughter had retired for the night. The hour of midnight came, and the moon was fast sinking towards the sea. Like the rest I had become weary. 'Well, captain,' said I, 'what has become of our friends from Cuba?'

'Gone to the bottom, I hope,' replied he; 'but there is no knowing how to calculate for the rascals, so we had better keep a sharp look out yet.'

'For my part,' said I, 'I am tired with looking at nothing, and will just see how the squall comes on. I turned accordingly, and a flashing on the water, rising and disappearing in quick and regular succession, met my eye.

'There they are!' exclaimed the captain, whose eye had taken the direction of mine; 'the rascals have rowed clear round us, and are coming on from the St. Domingo side. Stand to your arms, boys! the rogues are upon us.' In an instant every man was at his post, and on the alert. 'Stand in the shadow of the spars and rigging to be out of sight,' continued the captain, 'and not a man of you fire till I give the word.'

'Ay, ay, sir,' responded the crew, with nautical precision.

'And now,' said the captain, who really went to work in a business-like style, 'let us get this gun on the other tack, Mr Brae, to be ready for the gentlemen.'

The muzzle of the piece was accordingly thrust through the opposite port, keeping a dead aim on the boat, which was now little more than a quarter of a mile distant from us.

'Strange,' said I, 'that the fellows should choose to row against the moon, when, by so doing, they must know we should see the glitter of their oars.'

'I suspect,' replied the captain, 'that they had no choice about it. You forget that we have had more or less wind off the land since sunset, and are at least six miles from where we were then. The probability is, that the rogues lost us after nightfall; but it seems they have found us at last.'

The boat was now very near us, still not a sound came from her. The closest and most painful attention could not hear the dip of their oars, which rose and fell like a piece of mechanism, glittering in the moonlight like blades of silver.

'Boat, ahoy!' cried the voice of Captain Boltrop, in its most startling tones. No answer was returned to this summons, and the oars were plied more lively. 'Keep off, you rascals,' again shouted our commander—'off! or I'll blow you out of the water!'

This threat and the firebrand which I flourished with great fierceness seemed to make the pirates hesitate. The motion of the boat was arrested. Captain Boltrop thought the victory almost achieved, and he again raised his voice in tones of authority—'Throw your arms overboard, and come alongside.'

A volley of musketry was the reply to this summons—a dozen balls whistled by, and a deep captain's hat flew across the deck. A deep imprecation burst from his lips. The next instant a broad stream of flame issued from the quarter-deck, and the explosion of the piece broke upon the dead stillness of the elements with a noise like thunder. A distant crash, a heavy splashing in the water, above which a heavy sighing in the air, and a wailing cry of mortal agony was terribly distinct, had arisen in the direction of the foe before the smoke dispersed sufficiently to enable us to see the effect of our shot. No boat was then to be seen, nor any trace of her crew; we had in all probability sent every soul into eternity.