

# The Choice of Captain Ebenezer.

By CLARISSA MACKIE.

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CAPTAIN EBENEZER HOBSON washed and dried his dishes with amazing celerity. In a trice they stood in shining rows on the trim dresser, and the gaunt form of the captain was bent over his little cook stove, while his great brown hands were plying the blacking brush vigorously. When the stove shone like a mirror and the teakettle fairly sparkled with cleanliness, the captain swept out the kitchen and hung the broom upon its accustomed hook, with a sigh of relief. He lighted an old pipe and sat down on the floor-step with his back against the lintel and his keen blue eyes fixed across the bay to where the Ledge light shone like a large red star.

It was after sunset, and the pale pink and primrose of the afterglow were fading from the western sky. Captain Ebenezer was lost in reverie. His blacked pipe went out all unnoticed and hung from his fingers listlessly, while the old sailor whistled softly to himself. Suddenly he slapped his knee and burst into a hearty laugh. "Ho, ho!" he chuckled. "I guess that will fetch one or 'other of 'em! Let me see. Now, the Widder Banks says, says she, 'It ain't no good for man to live alone, Capt'n Ebenezer, and, moreover, 'tain't always good for wimmen, either!' Now, I wonder if Widder Banks meant I should ask Miss Phoebe to change her name?" Again the captain shook with laughter as he contemplated upon the rather complex state of his love affairs, for bluff, hearty Captain Ebenezer had tired of his long, lonesome years of widowhood and had determined to seek another companion to share his snug cottage on the beach and the proceeds of his fishing smack, the Saucy Liz.

"Now," mused the captain, "there's Miss Phoebe, as trim a little craft as ever sailed the seas. She's good natured and a good cook, and I guess she ain't afeared of the water. A sailor's wife ought to be able to sail across the bay without gettin' yaller about the gills. I don't know, though, whether she'd move down to my cabin. If Miss Phoebe won't have me, I'll have to ask the widder. There ain't another woman with marryin' within twenty miles; but, Lor', the widder's tongue 'll make things lively, I suppose!"

Captain Ebenezer had sighed after Miss Phoebe Lummis for many months. That little lady's utter indifference to his society had chilled his ardent sailor heart, and he had changed his matrimonial course in the direction of the Widow Banks' brown house on the high bluff overlooking the bay. Captain Ebenezer had made up his mind to marry, and marry he would, one or the other of the two ob-

jects of his choice—whichever one would have him.

That night the wind changed and blew restlessly from the southward. The pale sun rose on a gray-green bay whipped with white foam and on long green waves that broke on the beach with a sullen roar that was music to Captain Ebenezer's ears.

"It's pretty roughish," he muttered between the teeth clinched on his pipe, "but the Saucy Liz is as safe as a rockin' chair, and if either of them two wimmen is scared to go out in her she won't do for me!" He spat reflectively at one great roller and stepped back as it broke with a hissing roar over his feet.

"Pretty near got me that time, god darn yer!" he chuckled, pulling his sou'wester snugly over his ears and turning up the shore road toward the little village which nestled between two high, protecting bluffs.

"Good mornin', Mrs. Banks," he called cheerily as the widow opened wide her hospitable door in answer to his resounding summons. "I'm goin' out to Bar Island for a mess of blues. Thought mebbe you'd enjoy the sail!"

Mrs. Banks cast a startled glance over the captain's burly shoulder toward the tossing, tumbling, white-capped bay.

"You ain't afraid, be you?" asked the captain hopefully, edging his way toward the steps and unconsciously glancing toward a small white house half hidden among the oaks across the road.

"Of course I ain't a mite afraid," Captain Ebenezer said Myra Banks at last. "It ain't the kind of a day I'd choose to go out for pleasure, but I'm a sailor's widder, and it ain't for me to balk before a sou'west storm. Many's the storm I've rid out with poor Jim before he had his last sickness and—"

"Yes, yes, ma'am," interrupted Captain Ebenezer hastily. "I'll be ready to cast off in about an hour, when the tide turns, although it don't make much difference on a day like this whether we wait for tide or not."

"I'll be ready, captain," returned Myra Banks decisively. "I guess I'll take a basket and get some beach plums over to the island. I heard they was a-plenty there."

"So they be; so they be. I thought mebbe I'd ask Miss Phoebe to go along, too, as company for you, ma'am."

"So do; so do," agreed Mrs. Banks ironically as she watched the captain's



"THANK THE LORD!" MURMURED CAPTAIN EBENEZER.

stout form proceeding down the path. "I believe I see Phoebe Lummis trustin' herself to the Saucy Liz or any other craft on a day like this. I guess victuals for two will be a-plenty this day!" She closed the door and went within, where she busied herself over her preparations with more trepidation than Captain Ebenezer would have believed she could display.

In the meantime the captain had rolled up the trim path bordered with snowy clam shells which outlined rows of richly colored dahlias and gay, many-lued asters.

"Terribly neat, Miss Phoebe," he muttered dubiously as he tiptoed across the freshly painted porch and rang the bell.

Miss Phoebe Lummis, small, exquisitely neat in person and delicately neat in form and feature, as Captain Ebenezer mentally inventoried her, smiled pleasantly upon the good looking sailor man.

"Come right in, captain," she said cheerfully, throwing open the door of her sunny parlor, where the honeysuckle vines cast dancing shadows on the walls. "Do sit down while I take my cookies out of the oven. I'll be back in a minute."

Captain Ebenezer looked around the room approvingly. There were a gayly figured brussels carpet, a whatnot containing strange seashells and curiosities from foreign lands, great ragged branches of coral flanking the fireplace and comfortable old fashioned chairs. There were geraniums in the front windows and a canary singing in an adjoining room. Many a long winter evening had the captain played cribbage with Miss Phoebe, and many a drink of sweet cider had been quaffed to wash down the deliciously crisp cookies and light doughnuts that she offered for his refreshment. In spite of this entertainment the captain stood in wholesome fear of Miss Phoebe, who spoke what she thought in brief terms, and it was the fear of getting the right about from Miss Phoebe that deterred the captain from uttering the words of affection that so often trembled on his lips.

"It's a dreadful day on the water," began Miss Phoebe when she had returned and seated herself opposite the captain. "I don't know who'd want to be out on a day like this!"

"I'm goin' out myself," ventured the latter, twirling his sou'wester in his horny hands, "and I came in to say that I'd like to have you go out with me in the Saucy Liz. There's a good fresh wind, and it won't hurt you none."

"Never!" returned Miss Lummis decidedly. "I'd be seasick the minute I got aboard. I ain't no sailor, Captain Ebenezer, so you'll sail without me this time!" She smiled pleasantly upon the discomfited sailor.

"The Widder Banks is goin' along to get beach plums on the island, and I thought mebbe you'd be company for one another. You ain't a good sailor, then, ma'am?" Captain Ebenezer's

voice expressed poignant anxiety as he ventured this question.

"Not a bit. I like a sail on a smooth sea, but no sou'westers for me, captain. You ask me some time when it isn't rough and I'll go with you gladly."

"You wouldn't—you wouldn't—oh—easy there!" Captain Ebenezer thrust a hand inside the collar of his flannel shirt and jerked it fretfully. With sudden exasperation he jumped to his feet and extended one hand pleadingly. "You wouldn't marry me, Miss Phoebe, would you?" he shouted desperately.

Miss Phoebe's tinkling laugh died away as a pink flush rose to her delicate cheeks. "I might if you asked me, captain," she said demurely.

"I thought mebbe you wouldn't want to leave this pretty house of yours, Phoebe," said the captain tenderly as later he occupied a place on the sofa beside his fiancée.

"I figured," began Miss Phoebe dreamily, and then she stopped, with a sudden shocked expression in her mild eyes—"I mean," she went on hastily, "I should think we could move this house right down the bluff and fasten it on to your cabin, you know."

"Surest way, my hearty!" sang Captain Ebenezer blithely. "And now—" "You better be going along, captain," interrupted Miss Phoebe briskly. "I see the widder going down the road, and you don't want to keep her waitin'."

Captain Ebenezer stared, aghast. He had forgotten the Widow Banks and the proposed trip to Bar Island.

"I'm an engaged man now, Phoebe," he said, mopping his forehead and looking at her out of troubled eyes.

"Oh, go along, Ebenezer, do!" she said, with playful impatience. "I ain't a mite jealous, and you can come to tea and eat 'em."

Captain Ebenezer's blissful smile faded from his face as he proceeded down the road to the beach, where he could see the red knitted jacket of Myra Banks moving toward the landing where the Saucy Liz dragged at her anchor. What the Widow Banks might expect from him as a result of this marked attention he could not dare not imagine. If he had only gone to Miss Phoebe's first! He tried to recall if he had ever uttered a remark to the keen witted widow which might have committed him in any way to an avowal of love. There was none that he could remember. He had been wary indeed.

"Here I be a-waitin' for you," began Myra Banks playfully as she deposited a heavy basket on the landing. "I expect we'll have to eat up all the victuals so's I can put the plums in the basket. Where's Phoebe?"

"Phoebe, she—Miss Phoebe ain't a-comin'." She thinks it's too rough for her," exclaimed Captain Ebenezer, reddening under the keen gaze of the widow. "Now, Mrs. Banks, jest step into the dory, your foot right in the middle—that's it—easy now—umph—so!" With surprising agility the big captain took his place in the rocking boat and with a few quick, long strokes brought them to the side of the Saucy Liz.

It is needless to record this voyage over the careening seas, for neither one of the occupants of the sloop cared to remember the unpleasantness of that day. To the widow it was one long, nauseous period of terror. To Captain Ebenezer it was a dark and gloomy passage. The successful outcome of his wooing was counterbalanced by the fear of what the widow might expect from his marked attentions in the past. He trailed his lines and pulled in myriads of shining, steely bluefish ere they grounded on the pebbly beach of the quiet cove.

The widow tottered ashore on Captain Ebenezer's arm, and they sat down, and while Myra Banks languidly discussed the contents of the lunch basket, which the captain attacked with a right good will, the widow seemed to be revolving some weighty matter within her mind, a matter that might excuse her want of appetite after the bracing voyage.

"I'll help you get your plums, Mrs. Banks," said the captain, looking kindly upon the pallid face and disheveled hair of his guest.

Myra Banks turned a gloomy eye upon her host and then looked back over the tossing sea of green water and shuddered.

"I guess it was a little too rough," ventured Captain Ebenezer uneasily. The continued silence of the Widow Banks was disconcerting and somewhat alarming.

Suddenly the pent up wrath of Myra Banks found vent, and she shook quivering fingers in the air before the astonished visage of the captain.

"Rough, indeed! And what do you mean by a-askin' frail wimmen off on a voyage like this, a-temptin' them with—"

"Sho—sho—Mrs. Banks," expostulated the captain indignantly. "Whatever do you mean? I didn't hold out no temptations when I asked you to go. I jes' asked you to go—that was all!"

"I want to go home," returned Mrs. Banks bitterly in reply to the captain's last remarks, and when they were beating before the wind, mounting green heights of water and diving into valleys flecked with foam, while the captain was dropping his anchor, Myra Banks looked fiercely about the harbor at the flying smacks, the high wooded bluffs and around the deck of the Saucy Liz, and yet she said never a word.

Silently she accompanied Captain Ebenezer ashore, and suddenly she parted from him, and then, just as he turned away from her, dangling a string of fish in his hand, she called

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him. "Captain Ebenezer Hobson." "Yes," he shouted back eagerly. "I wouldn't marry a sea-farin' man for anything, so there ain't no need for you to come a-callin' any more!" She faced about and plodded up the road toward home.

"Thank the Lord!" murmured Captain Ebenezer piously as he turned to the clam shell bordered path between the dahlias.

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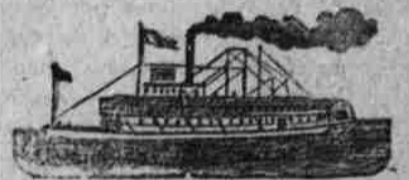
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