The Stowaway

By

LOUIS TRACY

Author of the "Pillar of Light," "The Wings of the Morning" and "The Captain of the Kansas."

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CHAPTER II.

WHEREIN THE ANDROMEDA BEGINS HER VOYAGE.

THE second officer of the Andromeda was pacing the bridge with the slow alertness of responsibility. He would walk from port to starboard, glance forward and aft, peer at the crescent of the starlit sea, stroll back to port and again scan ship and horizon. Sometimes he halted in front of the binnacle lamp to make certain that the man at the wheel was keeping the course, south 15 west, set by Captain Coke shortly before midnight. His ears listened mechanically to the steady pulse beat of the propeller, but his mind dwelt on something far removed from his duties, though, to be sure, every poet who ever scribbled four lines of verse has found rhyme and reason in comparing women with stars and ships and the sea.

Philip Hozier was no poet. he was a sailor, and sailors are notoriously susceptible to the charms of the softer sex. But the only woman he loved was his mother; the only bride he could look for during many a year was a mermaid, though these sirens of the deep waters seem to be frequenting undiscovered haunts since mariners ceased to woo the wind. For all that, if perforce he was heart whole, there was no just cause or impediment why he should not admire a pretty girl when he saw one, and an exceedingly pretty girl had honored him with her company during a brief minute of the previous day.

He was superintending the safe disposal of the last batch of cotton [illegible] in the forward hold when a young lady, accompanied by a dock laborer carrying a leather portmanteau, spoke to him from the quay.

"Is Captain Coke on board?" said she.

"No, madam," said he, lifting his cap with one hand.

"I am Mr. Verity's niece, and I wish to send this parcel to Montevideo. May I put it in some place where it will be safe? You are Mr. Hozier, I suppose?" said Iris, gazing with frank brown eyes into his frank blue ones. "Well, I will just pop the bag into Captain Coke's stateroom and leave this note with it. I have explained everything fully. I wrote a line in case he might be absent."

"I AM MR. VERITY'S NIECE."

All of which was so strictly accurate that it served its purpose admirably, though the said purpose, it is regrettable to state, was the misleading and utter bamboozling of Philip Hozier. Miss Iris Yorke knew quite well that Captain Coke was then closeted with David Verity in Exchange buildings. She knew because she had watched him pass through the big swing doors of her uncle's office. She also knew, having made it her business to find out, that in fifteen minutes or less the crew would muster in the fo'c'sle for their midday meal. Not having heard a word of Hozier's free speech to the gentlemen of various nationalities at the bottom of the hold, she wondered why he was blushing.

When Hozier was free to glance a second time at the cross rail Iris had vanished. He was annoyed. Evidently she did not wish to encounter any more of the ship's officers that morning.

The hatches were on and everything was orderly before Coke's squat figure climbed the gangway. Hozier reported the young lady's visit, and the skipper was obviously surprised. As he hoisted himself up the steep ladder to the hurricane deck the younger man heard him condemning some one under his breath as "a leery old beggar." The phrase was hardly applicable to Iris, but Coke came out of his cabin with an open letter in his hand and bade a steward stow the portmanteau in some other more hallowed and less inconvenient place.

And there the incident ended. The Andromeda hauled down the blue peter for her long run of over 6,000 miles to Montevideo, and Hozier had routine work in plenty to occupy his mind during the first twenty-four hours at sea without perplexing it with memories of a pretty face. Soon after Holyhead was passed, it is true, a sailor reported to the second officer that he had seen a ghost between decks in the region of the lazarette. It was then near midnight, a quiet hour on board ship, and Hozier told the man sharply to go to his bunk and endeavor to sleep off the effects of the bad beer [illegible].

Now, on this second night of the voyage, while the ship was plodding steadily southward with that fifteen point inclination to the west that would [illegible] soon after daybreak, Philip remembered [illegible] that when she paid former visits to the Andromeda fate had decreed that he should be serving his time on an[illegible] when he heard that this charming girl knew his name, and it seemed to him for an instant that she was looking into his very soul, analyzing him, searching for some sign that he was not as others, which meant that there were some whom she had bitter cause to distrust.

At any rate, she had left a memento of her too brief appearance on board in the shape of [illegible]. He would contrive to take on his own shoulders its mission in Montevideo. Then on returning to Liverpool he would have an excuse for calling on her. He did not know her name yet. Possibly Captain Coke would mention that in[illegible] its raw edge.

It was strange that he should be thinking of Iris, far stranger than he could guess, but his thoughts were [illegible] neglecting the safety of the ship. [illegible] act to the shellbacks who were supposed to keep a sharp lookout ahead. But the captain did not monopolize the conversation. His deep notes rumbled [illegible] thing to say. He returned to the [illegible].

"One of them scallywags sez 'e 'as seen [illegible] calm air of a man who states that the [illegible] four.

"Oh, is he the man who reported a ghost outside the lazarette last night?"

"I s'pose so. Did 'e tell you about it? That's where she walks."

"She!"

"That's his yarn—a female ghost, a black 'un, black clo'es anyhow. I'll take the forenoon watch, an' you might overhaul the ship for stowaways after breakfast."

"Yes, [illegible] Hozier. And that is how it fell to [illegible] to discover Iris Yorke, looking very white and miserable, when the hatch of the lazarette was [illegible] past 8 on Thursday morning.

A [illegible] is not a complex organism. She is made up of holds, bunkers, boilers and engines, with scanty accommodation for officers and crew grouped round the funnel or [illegible] were stripped of their tarpaulins and a [illegible] examined the only available hiding places were the shaft tunnel, the holds and the lazarette, a small space between decks, situated directly above the propeller, where a reserve supply of provisions is generally carried.

But the door of the lazarette was locked and the key missing. There was nothing for it but to force the lock.

It was dark in there, and Hozier was undeniably startled by the spectacle of a slim figure, wrapped in a long ulster, standing among the cases and packages.

"Now, out you come!" he cried, with a gruffness that was intended only to cover his own amazement, but Iris, despite the horrors of seasickness and [illegible] ed to suffer what she considered to be impertinence on the part of a second officer.

"I am Miss Yorke," she said, coming forward into the half light of the lower [illegible] of my [illegible] the captain [illegible] is capable [illegible] Hozier felt [illegible] was dis[illegible]. And Iris was quite dignified and self possessed. She had given a few deft touches to her hair.

"Of course I did not know to whom I was speaking," he managed to say, for he now recognized the "ghost" and was more surprised than he had ever been in his life before.

"That is matterless," said Iris frigidly. "Where is Captain Coke?"

"On the bridge," said Philip.

"I will go to him. Please don't come with me. I tried to tell you that I would unlock the door, but you refused to listen. Will you let me pass?"

He obeyed in silence.

Iris hurried to the deck. The light seemed to dazzle her, and her steps were so uncertain that Hozier sprang forward and caught her arm.

"Won't you sit down a moment, Miss Yorke?" he said. "If you searched the whole ship you could not have chosen a worse place to travel in than the lazarette."

"I was driven out twice at night by the rats," she gasped.

"Too bad!" he whispered. "But it is your own fault. Why did you do it? At any rate, wait here a few minutes before you meet the captain."

"I am not afraid of meeting him. Why should I be? He knows me."

"I meant only that you are hardly able to walk, but I seem to say the wrong thing every time. There is nothing really to worry about. We are not far from Queenstown. We can put you ashore there by losing half a day."

The girl had been ill, racked in body and distraught in mind, but she summoned a half laugh at his words.

"You are still saying the wrong thing, Mr. Hozier," she murmured. "The Andromeda will not put into Queenstown. From this hour I become a passenger, not a stowaway. My uncle knows now that I am here. Thank you. You need not hold me any longer. I have quite recovered. Captain Coke is on the bridge, you said? I can find my way. This ship is no stranger [illegible]."

And away she went, justifying her statements by tripping rapidly forward. The mere sight of her created boundless excitement among such members of the crew as were on deck.

When she reached the bridge, where Captain Coke was propped against the chart house, she had lost a good deal of the pallor and woebegone semblance that had demoralized Hozier.

Coke heard the [illegible] light footsteps and turned his head. Certainly he could not have been more stupefied had he seen the ghost reported overnight.

"They told me I should find you here, captain," said she. "I must apologize for thrusting my company on you for a long voyage, but—circumstances [illegible] and"—

Faced [illegible] the commander of the ship and startled anew by his expression of blank incredulity, the glib flow of words conned so often during the steadfast but dreadful hours spent in the lazarette failed her.

"You know me," she faltered. "I am Iris Yorke."

Not a syllable came from the [illegible] astonished man gazing at her. [illegible] ders had not abated a fraction of their [illegible] thrust against the frame of the chart house. His hands were [illegible] in the pockets of his reefer coat. Had he wished [illegible] a hostile reception he could not have succeeded more completely, though, to be just, he meant nothing of the sort. [illegible] into chaos by the apparition of the last person alive whom he expected or desired to see on board the Andromeda.

But Iris could not interpret his mood, and [illegible] conquer [illegible] fear welling up in her breast because of the grim anger that seemed to blaze at her from every line of Coke's brick red countenance. In the struggle to pour forth the excuses and professions that sounded so plausible in her ears, while secured from observation behind the locked door of her retreat, she blundered unhappily on to the very topic that she had resolved to keep secret.

"YOU KNOW ME," SHE FALTERED. "I AM IRIS YORKE."

"Why are you so unwilling to acknowledge me?" cried [illegible] a nervous indignation that lent a tremor to her voice. "You have met me often enough. You saw me on Sunday at my uncle's house."

"Did I?" said Coke, speaking at last, but really as much at a loss for something to say as the girl herself. He had recognized [illegible] he would recognize the moon if the luminary fell from the sky and with as little comprehension of the cause of its falling.

Of course she took the question as a forerunner of blank denial. This was not to be borne. She fired into a direct attack.

"If your memory is hazy concerning the events [illegible] it may be helpful if I recall the conversation between my uncle and you in the summer house," she [illegible]. Some of the glow [illegible] from [illegible] face.

"Wot's that you're sayin'?" demanded Coke, coming nearer and looking her straight in the eyes.

"I heard every word of that interesting talk," she continued valiantly. "I know what you arranged to do, so I have promised—to marry Mr. Bulmer—when the Andromeda—comes back!"

A light broke on Coke's intelligence that irradiated his prominent eyes. His heavy lips relaxed into a cunning grin.

"Oh, is that it?" he said. "Artful old dog, Verity! But why in—why didn't 'e tell me you was comin' aboard this trip? We 'aven't the right fixin's for a lady, so you must put up with the best we can do for you, Miss Yorke. Steady, now. You ain't a-goin' to faint, are you? Hi! Below there!" he yelled. "Tumble up, some of you!"

Hozier was the first to gain the bridge. He had followed the progress of events with sufficient accuracy to realize that Miss Iris Yorke had met with a distinct rebuff by the skipper, and, judging from his own experience of her physical weakness when she emerged into daylight, he was not surprised to hear that she had fainted.

"'Ere, take 'old," gurgled Coke, who had nearly swallowed the cigar in his surprise at Iris' unforeseen collapse. "This kind of thing is more in your line than mine, young feller. Just lay 'er out in the saloon an' ax Watts to 'elp. His missus goes orf regular w'en they bring 'im 'ome paralytic."

Philip took the girl into his arms. To carry her safely down the steep stairway he was compelled to place her head on his left shoulder and clasp her tightly round the waist with his left arm. Some loosened strands of her hair touched his face. He could feel the laboring of her breast, the wild beating of her heart, and he was exceeding wroth with that unknown man or woman who had driven this adorable girl to such straits that she was ready to dare the discomforts and deprivations of a voyage as a stowaway rather than be persecuted further.

Iris was laid on a couch in the mess room, and the steward summoned Mr. Watts. The chief officer came, looking sheepish. It was manifestly a great relief when he found that the "ghost" was unconscious.

"Oh, that's nothing!" he cried in response to Hozier's eager demand for information as to the treatment best suited for such emergencies. "They all drop in a heap like that w'en they're worried. Fust you takes orf their gloves an' boots, then you undoes their stays an' rips open their [illegible] rubs their 'ands an' [illegible] their feet, an' you dabs cold water on their foreheads [illegible] their noses. In between whiles you [illegible] it. It's dead easy. Them stays are a bit troublesome if they run to size, but [illegible] can show you a fine trick for that. Just [illegible] loose with my knife."

Watts was elbowed aside so unceremoniously that his temper gave way. Hozier lifted Iris' head gently and [illegible] blouse. He began to chafe her cold [illegible] hair from her damp forehead. [illegible] flections, thought fit to [illegible] half [illegible].

"She's only a woman like the rest of [illegible]," he growled, "even if she is the owner's niece, an' a good looker at that, I s'pose now you think"—

"I think she will want some fresh [illegible]," said Philip.

His words were quiet, but he flashed a warning glance at the other man that sufficed. Watts retired, muttering [illegible] under his breath.

Iris revived, to find Philip supporting her with a degree of skill that was remarkable in one who had enjoyed so little experience of these matters. She heard his voice, coming, as it seemed, [illegible] urging her to sip something very fiery and spirituous. Instantly she protested.

"What are you giving me?" [illegible] "What has happened?"

[illegible]

"Well, I couldn't do anything else."

"I suppose you don't realize what it means to a woman to feel that she has been out of her senses under such conditions?"

"No, but in your case it only meant that you sighed deeply a few times and tried to bite my fingers when I [illegible]."

"What for? Why did you want to open my mouth?"

"To give you a [illegible] a stimulant."

By this time a few dexterous twists and turns had restrained those wandering tresses within bounds. She held a hairpin between her lips, and a woman can always say exactly what she means when [illegible] siveness.

"I am all right now," she announced. "Will you please leave me and tell the steward to bring me a cup of tea? If there is a [illegible] put that portmanteau in it which I brought on board at Liverpool."

[illegible] joined Coke on the bridge.

"Miss Yorke is quite well again, sir," he reported. "She wants a cabin—to change her clothes. That bag you saw"—

"Pretty foxy, wasn't it?" broke in Coke, with a glee that was puzzling [illegible].

"[illegible] fair seems to have been carefully planned," agreed Philip. "But, as I was saying, she asked for the use of a cabin, so I told the steward to give her mine until we put into Queenstown."

"PRETTY FOXY, WASN'T IT?"

Coke, who had lighted another black and stumpy cigar, removed it in order to speak with due emphasis.

"Put into h—l!" he said.

"But surely you will not take this young lady to the river Plate!" cried the astonished second officer.

"She knew where she was bound w'en she kem aboard the Andromeda," said the skipper, frowning now like a man who argues with himself. "There's her portmanteau to prove it, with a label, an' all in her own 'and writin'. It's some game played on me by 'er an' 'er uncle. 'Any'ow, the fust time she sees land again it'll be the lovely 'arbor of Pernambuco, an' that's straight. 'Ere she is an' 'ere she'll stop, an' the best thing you can do is spread the notion among the crew that she's runnin' away to avoid marryin' a man she doesn't like. That sounds reasonable, an' it 'appens to be true. Verity an' me talked it over last Sunday p. m."

"To avoid a marriage!" repeated Hozier.

"Yes, that's it," said Coke. "But look 'ere, me boy, this gal sails under my flag. I'm—wot d'ye call it?—in locomotive parentibus, or something of the sort, while she's on the ship's books. You keep your mouth shut an' wink the other eye an' leave it to me to give you the chanst of your life. Eh, wot?"

Philip Hozier did not strive to extract the precise meaning of the skipper's words. The process would have been difficult since Coke himself could not have supplied any reasonable analysis. Somehow, to the commander's thinking, the presence of the girl seemed to make easier the casting away of the ship. Exactly how or what bearing her strangely begun voyage might have on subsequent events he was not yet in a position to say.

"Queenstown!" he chuckled. "Not this journey—not if my name's Jimmie Coke, the man 'oo is stannin' on all that is left of 'is 'ard earned savin's. No, sir; I've got me orders, an' I've got me letter, an' the pore old Andromeda gets ripped to pieces in the Recife or I'll know the reason why. Wot a card to play at the inquiry! Owner's niece on board bound to South America for the good of 'er health. 'Oo even 'eard of a man sendin' 'is pretty niece on a ship 'e meant to throw away? It's providential, that's wot it is, reel providential! I do believe ole Verity 'ad a 'and in it."

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

MAKE FINAL PROOFS.

Henry Zumwalt and Joseph E. Lord made final proofs on their homesteads before County Clerk W. C. Boatman, Thursday.

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