

***MATURIN
M. BALLOU***

A group of African children and a woman are looking out from a doorway. The children are of various ages, some looking directly at the camera, others looking to the side. A woman in the center is holding a baby. The doorway is framed by rough, reddish-brown walls. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting daylight.

***THE SEA-
WITCH; OR,
THE AFRICAN
QUADROON***

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A photograph showing a group of African children and a woman looking out from a doorway. The children are of various ages, some looking directly at the camera, others looking to the side. One child is holding a baby. The woman is on the right, looking towards the camera. The doorway is made of rough, reddish-brown mud or brick. The background is bright, suggesting an outdoor setting.

***THE SEA-
WITCH; OR,
THE AFRICAN
QUADROON***

Maturin M. Ballou

The Sea-Witch; Or, The African Quadroon

A Story of the Slave Coast

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE.

THE SEA-WITCH.

CHAPTER I.

OUTWARD BOUND.

CHAPTER II.

CAPTAIN WILL RATLIN.

CHAPTER III.

THE GALE.

CHAPTER IV.

BRAMBLE PARK.

CHAPTER V.

THE NAVAL OFFICER.

CHAPTER VI.

THE WRECK.

CHAPTER VII.

THE SEA WITCH.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE QUADROON.

CHAPTER IX.

THE ATTACK.

CHAPTER X.

THE DUEL.

CHAPTER XI.

THE HUES OF LOVE.

CHAPTER XII.

THE CONFLICT.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE TRIAL.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE BROTHERS.

CHAPTER XV.

THE ESCAPE.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE CANNIBALS.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE POISONED BARB.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE DENOUEMENT.

LA TARANTULA.

BY GIDDINGS H. BALLOU.

CHAPTER II.

PAS SEUL BY MOONLIGHT.

CHAPTER III.

THE STUDENT'S RETURN.

THE GOLDSMITH OF PARIS.

BY H. W. LORING.

MISS HENDERSON'S THANKSGIVING DAY.

BY HORATIO ALGER, JR.

THE FIREMAN.

BY MISS M. C. MONTAIGNE.

PREFACE.

[Table of Contents](#)

LET the reader peruse the following story with the same spirit in which it was written, and not conceive that it is either a pro-slavery or anti-slavery tale. The "peculiar institution" which is herein introduced, is brought forward simply as an auxiliary, and not as a feature of the story. It is only referred to where the plot and locality upon the slave coast have rendered this necessary, and the careful reader will observe that the subject is treated with entire impartiality. These few remarks are introduced, because we desire to appear consistent. Our paper shall neither directly nor indirectly further any sectional policy or doctrine, and in its conduct shall be neutral, free and independent.—Editor of The Flag of our Union.

THE SEA-WITCH.

[Table of Contents](#)

CHAPTER I.

OUTWARD BOUND.

[Table of Contents](#)

OUR story opens in that broad, far-reaching expanse of water which lies deep and blue between the two hemispheres, some fifteen degrees north of the equator, in the latitude of Cuba and the Cape Verd Islands. The delightful trade winds had not fanned the sea on a finer summer's day for a twelvemonth, and the waves were daintily swelling upon the heaving bosom of the deep, as though indicating the respiration of the ocean. It was scarcely a day's sail beyond the flow of the Caribbean Sea, that one of those noblest results of man's handiwork, a fine ship, might have been seen gracefully ploughing her course through the sky-blue waters of the Atlantic. She was close-hauled on the larboard tack, steering east-southeast, and to a sailor's eye presented a certain indescribable something that gave her taut rig and saucy air a dash of mystery, which would have set him to speculating at once as to her character and the trade she followed.

Few things can be named that more potently challenge our admiration than a full-sized ship under way; her myriad of ropes, sails and appointments, all so complete and well-controlled, the power of her volition, the promptness with which she obeys the slightest movement of the helm, the majestic grace of her inclination to the power of the winds, and the foaming prow and long glistening wake, all go to make up the charm and peculiarity of a nautical picture.

There is true poetry in such a scene as this, beauty fit to move the heart of an anchorite. No wonder the sailor loves his ship like a mistress; no wonder he discourses of her charms with the eloquence of true love and confiding trust; no landsman can be more enamored of his promised bride.

But the craft to which we especially refer at the present writing, was a coquette of the first class, beautiful in the extreme, and richly meriting the name that her owners had placed in golden letters on her stern—the "Sea Witch." She was one of that class of vessels known as flat upon the floor, a model that caused her to draw but little water, and enabled her to run free over a sandbar or into an inlet, where an ordinary ship's long boat would have grounded. She was very long and sharp, with graceful concave lines, and might have measured some five hundred tons. Speed had evidently been the main object aimed at in her construction, the flatness of her floor giving her great buoyancy, and her length ensuring fleetness. These were points that would at once have struck a sailor's eye, as he beheld the ship bowling gracefully on her course by the power of the trade winds that so constantly befriend the mariners in these latitudes.

We have said that the "Sea Witch" was of peculiar model, and so indeed she was. Contrary to the usual rig of what are called clipper ships, her masts, instead of raking, were perfectly upright, for the purpose of enabling her to carry more press of sail when need be, and to hold on longer when speed should be of vital importance—that the straighter construction of the masts furthers this object, is a fact long since proven in naval architecture. She was very

low, too, in her rigging, having tremendous square yards; enabling the canvass to act more immediately upon the hull, instead of operating as a lever aloft, and keeping the ship constantly off an even keel. Though low in the waist, yet her ends rose gracefully in a curve towards the terminations fore and aft, making her very dry on either the quarter-deck or forecastle. She might have numbered fifty men for her crew, and if you had looked in board over her bulwarks you would have seen that her complement was made up of men. There were none there but real able-bodied seamen—sea dogs, who had roughed it in all weather, and on all sorts of allowance.

There was a quiet and orderly mien about the deck and among the watch, that spoke of the silent yet potent arm of authority. The men spoke to each other now and then, but it was in an under tone, and there was no open levity. A few men were lounging about the heel of the bowsprit on the forecastle, one or two were busy in the waist coiling cable; an officer of second or third caste a quiet, but decided character, to judge from his features, stood with folded arms just abaft the mizzen-mast, and a youthful figure, almost too young seemingly for so responsible a post, leaned idly against the monkey-rail, near the sage old tar who was at the helm. At first you might have supposed him a supercargo, an owner's son as passenger, or something of that sort, from the quite-at-home air he exhibited; but now and then he cast one of those searching and understanding glances aloft and fore and aft, taking in the whole range of the ship's trim, and the way she did her duty, that you

realized at once the fact of his position; and you could not mistake the fact that he was her commander.

He wore a glazed tarpaulin hat of coarse texture, and his dress was of little better material than that of the crew he commanded, but it set it somehow quite jauntily upon his fine, well-developed form, and there was an unmistakable air of conscious authority about him that showed him to be no stranger to control, or the position which he filled. The hair, escaping in glossy curls from beneath his hat, added to a set of very regular features a fine effect, while a clear, full blue eye, and an open, ingenuous expression of countenance, told of manliness of heart and chivalric hardihood of character. Exposure to the elements had bronzed his skin, but there were no wrinkles there, and Captain Will Ratlin could not have seen more than two and twenty years, though most of them had doubtless been passed upon the ocean, for his well-knit form showed him to be one thoroughly inured to service.

"She does her work daintily, Captain Ratlin," said he who was evidently an officer, and who had been standing by the mainmast, but now walked aft.

"Yes, Mr. Faulkner, 'daintily' is the word. I wish our beauty could be a little more spunky, time is money in our business, sir," was the prompt reply.

"But the willing craft does all she can, sir."

"I don't know, Mr. Faulkner, we can make her do almost anything."

"But talk," added the mate.

"Ay, she will do that in her own way, and eloquently, too," continued his superior.

"In coming out of Matanzas, when you made her back and fill like a saddle horse, I thought she was little less than a human being," said the mate, honestly.

"She minds her helm like a beauty, and feels the slightest pull upon her sheets."

"I never saw a vessel lie closer to the wind," said the mate; "she eats right into it, and yet has not shaken a foot of canvass this half hour."

"That is well."

"It's uncommon, sir," continued the other.

"She must and can do better, though," said the young commander, with an air of slight impatience. "Call the watch below, Mr. Faulkner, we will treat our mistress to a new dress this bright day, and flatter her pride a little; she is of the coquette school, and will bear a little dalliance."

"Ay, ay, sir," responded the officer, without further parley, walking forward to the fore hatch, and with a few quick blows with a handspike, and a clear call, he summoned that portion of the crew whose hours of release from duty permitted them below. The signal rang sharply through the ship, and caused an instant response.

A score of dark forms issued forth from the fore-castle, embracing representatives from nearly half the nations of the globe; but they were sturdy sailors, and used to obey the word of command, men to be relied upon in an emergency, rough in exterior, but within either soft as women or hard as steel, according to the occasion.

Now it was that an observer not conversant with the "Sea Witch," and looking at her from a distance, would have naturally concluded that she was most appropriately

named, for how else could her singular manouvres and the result that followed be explained? Suddenly the mizzen royal disappeared, followed by the top-gallant sail, topsail, and cross-jack courses, seeming to melt away under the eye like a misty veil, while, almost in a moment of time, there appeared a spanker, gaff topsail and gaff top-gallantsail in their place, while the vessel still held on her course.

A moment later, and the royal top-gallantsail, topsail and mainsail disappear from the main mast, upon which appears a regular fore and aft suit of canvass, consisting of mainsail, gaff topsail, and gaff top-gallantsail, reducing the vessel to a square rig forward, and a plain fore and aft rig aft. A few minutes more, and the foremast passed through the same metamorphose, leaving the "Sea Witch" a three-masted schooner, with fore and aft sails on every mast and every stay. All this had been accomplished with a celerity that showed the crew to be no strangers to the manouvres through which they had just passed, each man requiring to work with marked intelligence. Fifty well drilled men, thorough sea dogs, can turn a five hundred ton ship "inside out," if the controlling mind understands his position on the quarter-deck.

"She wears that dress as though it suited her taste exactly, Mr. Faulkner," said the captain, running his eye over the vessel, and glancing over the side to mark her headway.

"Any rig becomes the 'Sea Witch,'" answered the officer, with evident pride.

"That is true," returned the captain. "Luff, sir, luff a bit, so, well," he continued to the man at the helm; "we will have all of her weatherly points that site will give."

"The wind is rather more unsteady than it was an hour past," said Mr. Faulkner.

"Rather puffy, and twice I thought it would haul right about, but here we have it still from the north'rd and east'rd," replied the captain.

"Here it is again," added the mate, as the wind hauled once more.

The immediate object of the change in the vessel's rig, which we have described, was at once apparent, enabling the vessel to lie nearer the wind in her course, as well its giving her increased velocity by bringing more canvass to draw than a square rig could do when close hauled. But a shrewd observer would have been led to ask, what other reason, save that of disguise, could have been the actuating motive in thus giving to the "Sea Witch" a double character in her rig? For though temporary and somewhat important advantage could at times be thus gained, as we have seen, yet such an object alone would not have warranted the increased outlay that was necessarily incurred, to say nothing of the imperative necessity of a vessel's being very strongly manned in order to enable her to thus change her entire aspect with any ordinary degree of celerity, and as had just been accomplished.

CHAPTER II.

CAPTAIN WILL RATLIN.

[Table of Contents](#)

THE watch below, after completing the work which had summoned them for the time being on deck, tumbled helter-skelter down the fore hatch once more, and left on the deck of the "Sea Witch" about a dozen able seamen who formed the watch upon deck. A number of these were now gathered in a knot on the fore-castle, and while they were sitting cross-legged, picking old rope, and preparing it in suitable form for caulking the ship's seams, one of their number was spinning a yarn, the hero of which was evidently him who now filled the post of commander on board their vessel. The object of their remarks, meanwhile, stood once more quietly leaning over the monkey-rail on the weather side of the quarter-deck, quite unconscious that he was supplying a theme of entertainment to the fore-castle.

There was an absent expression in his handsome face, a look as though his heart was far distant from the scene about him, and yet a habit of watchful caution seemed ever and anon to recall his senses, and his quick, keen glance would run over the craft from stem to stern with a searching and comprehensive power that showed him master of his profession, and worthy his trust. Trust?—what was the trust he held? Surely, no legitimate commerce could warrant the outfit of such a vessel as he controlled. A man-of-war could hardly have been more fully equipped with means of offence and defence. Amidship, beneath that long boat, was a long,

heavy metalled gun that worked on a traverse, and which could command nearly every point of the compass, while the ship kept her course. Just inside the rise of the low quarter-deck—the cabin being entered from the deck by the descent of a couple of steps—there were ranged boarding pikes, muskets, cutlasses and pistols, ready for instant use. In shape they formed stars, hearts and diamonds, dangerous but fantastic ornaments.

The brightness of these arms, and the handy way in which they were arranged in the sockets made to receive them, showed at once that they were designed for use, while the various other fixtures of the cabin and docks plainly bespoke preparation for conflict. A strong and lofty boarding-netting being stowed, also, told of the readiness of the "Sea Witch" to repel boarders. That all these preparations had been made merely as ordinary precautions in a peaceful trade was by no means probable; and yet there they were, and there stood the bright-eyed, handsome and youthful commander upon the quarter-deck, but he did not look the desperado—such a term would have poorly accorded with his open and manly countenance, his quiet and gentlemanly mien. A pirate would hardly have dared to lay the course he steered in these latitudes, where an English or French cruiser was very likely to cross his track.

"He handles a ship as prettily as ever a true blue did yet," said one of the fore-castle group, in replying to some remark of a comrade concerning the commander.

"That's true," answered another; "he seems to have a sort of natural way with him, as though he'd been born

aboard and never seed the land at all; and as to that matter, there may be them on board who say as much of him."

"That isn't far from the truth," answered Bill Marline, "seein' he started so arly on the sea he can't tell when he wasn't there himself."

"How was that matter, Bill?" asked one of his messmates. "They say you have kept the captain's reckoning, man and boy, these fifteen years."

"That have I, and never a truer heart floated than the man you see yonder leaning over the rail on the quarterdeck, where he belongs," answered Bill Marline.

"How did you first fall in with him, Bill?—Tell us that," said one of the crew.

"Well, do ye see, messmates, it must have been the matter of thirteen years ago, there or thereabouts, but I can't exactly say, seein' I never have kept a log and can't write; but must have been about that length of time, when I was a foremast hand on board the 'Sea Lion,' as fine an Indiaman as you would wish to see. We were lying in the Liverpool docks, with sails bent and cargo stowed, under sailing orders, when one afternoon there strolled alongside a boy rather ragged and dirty, but with such eyes and such a countenance as would make him a passport anywhere. Well, do ye see, we were lazing away time on board, and waiting the captain's coming before we hauled out into the stream, and so we coaxed the lad aboard. He either didn't know where he came from or wouldn't tell, and when we proposed to take him to sea with us, he readily agreed, and sure enough he sailed in the 'Sea Lion.'"

"Well, heave ahead, Bill," said one of the group, as the narrator stopped to stove a fresh instalment of the Virginia weed in his larboard cheek.

"Heave ahead."

"We hadn't got fairly clear of the channel," continued Bill Marline, "before the boy had become a general favorite all over the ship. We washed him up and bent on a new suit of toggery on him, with a reg'lar tarpaulin, and there was almost a fight whether the forecastle or the cabin should have him. At last it was left to the boy himself, and he chose to remain with us in the forecastle. The boy wasn't sick an hour on the passage until after we left the Cape of Good Hope, when the flag halliards getting fouled, he was sent up to the peak to loosen it, and by some lurch of the ship was throw upon deck. Why it didn't kill him was the wonder of all, but the boy was crazy for near a month from the blow on his head, which he got in falling, but he gradually got cured under our captain's care.

"Well, do ye see, our captain was a regular whole-souled fellow, though he did sometimes work up a hand's old iron pretty close for him, and so he took the boy into the cabin and gave him a berth alongside his own, and as he grew better took to teaching him the use of his instruments, and mathematics, and the like. The boy they said was wonderful ready, and learned like a book, and could take the sun and work up the ship's course as well as the captain; but what was the funniest of all was that, after he got well, he didn't know one of us, he had forgotten or even how he came on board the ship, the injury had put such a stopper on his brain that he had forgotten all that ever occurred before it.

To my mind, howdsoomever, it wasn't much to forget, seeing he was little better than a baby, and hadn't been to sea at all, and you know there aint anything worth knowing on shore, more'n one can overhaul in a day's leave, more or less, within hail of the sea."

"That's true," growled one or two of his messmates.

"Our ship was a first class freighter and passage vessel, and on the home voyage we had plenty of ladies. 'Twas surprisin' to see how natural like the boy took to 'em, and how they all liked him. He was constantly learning something, and soon got so he could parley vou like a real frog-eating Frenchman. And then, as I said before, he took the sun and worked up the the ship's reckoning like a commodore. Well, do ye se, messmates, we made a second and third voyage together in that ship, and when master Will Ratlin—for that was a name we give him when he first came on board, and he's kept it ever since—was a matter of fourteen years, he was nearly as big as he is now, and acted as mate, and through I say it, who ought to know somewhat about those things, I never seed a better seaman of twice his years, always savin' present company, messmates."

"In course, Bill," growled three or four of his messmates, heartily.

"Well, do ye see, messmates, we continued together in the same ship for the matter of five years, and then master Will and I shipped in another Indiaman, and we were in the 'Birmingham' for three years or more. One day we lay off the Cape on the home passage, and a half dozen of us got shore leave for a few hours, and I among the rest, and somehow I got rather more grog aboard than I could stow,

and when I came off, the captain swore at me like a pirate, and after I got sober triced me up to the main rigging for a round dozen. When all hands were called to witness punishment, shiver my timbers, if master Will Ratlin, who was the first mate, didn't walk boldly up to the captain, and say, blunt and honest:

"'Captain Brace, Marline is an old and favorite seaman, and if you will let this offence pass without further punishment, I will answer for his future good behaviour, at all times. I ask it, sir, as a personal favor.'

"'But discipline, discipline must be observed, Mr. Ratlin.'

"'I acknowledge he's in fault, sir,' said our mate.

"'And deserves the punishment,' said the captain.

"'I fear he does, sir; but yet I can't bear to see a good seaman flogged, said the mate, apologetically.

"'Nor I either,' said the captain; 'but Bill Marline deserves the cat, though as you make it a personal matter, why I'll let him off this time, Mr. Ratlin.'

"The captain didn't wish to let me go, but he said he wished to gratify his mate, and so I was cast loose, and after a broadside of advice, and a hurricane of oaths, was turned over to duty again. I didn't forget that favor, messmates, and sink me if I wouldn't go to the bottom to serve him any time. He commanded a brig in the South American trade after that, and would have made a mate of me, but somehow I've got a weakness for grog that isn't very safe, and so he knows 'twont do. You see him there now, messmates, as calm as a lady; but he's awake when there's need of it. The man don't live that can handle a ship better than he; and as for fighting, do ye see, messmates, we were

running on this here same tack, just off the—but avast upon that, I haven't any more to say, messmates," said the speaker, demurely.

Bill Marline evidently found himself treading upon dangerous ground, and wisely cut short his yarn, thereby creating a vast amount of curiosity among his messmates, but he sternly refused to speak further upon the subject. Either his commander had prohibited him, or he found that by speaking he should in some way compromise the credit or honor of one upon whom he evidently looked as being little less than one of a superior order of beings to himself.

"But what do you bring up so sudden for? Pay out, old fellow, there's plenty of sea-room, and no land-sharks to fear," said one of the group, encouragingly.

"Never you mind, messmates, there's nothing like keeping a civil tongue in your head, especially being quiet about other people's business," added Bill.

"What think you, Bill, of this present vocation, eh?" asked another companion.

"I shipped for six months, that's all I know, and no questions asked. I understand very well that Captain Ratlin wouldn't ship me where he wouldn't go himself."

"Well, do you see, Bill, most of us are new on board here, though we have knocked about long enough to get the number of our mess and to work ship together, and don't perhaps feel so well satisfied as you do."

"Why, look ye, messmates, arnt you satisfied so long as the articles you signed are kept by captain and crew?" asked Bill Marline, somewhat tartly.

"Why, yes, as to that matter; but where are we bound, Bill?" asked the other.

"Any boy in the ship can make out the 'Sea Witch's' course," said the old tar, evasively. "We're in these here Northern Trades, close-hauled, and heading, according to my reckoning, due east, and any man who has stood his trick at the wheel of a ship, knows that such a course steered from the West Indies will, if well followed, run down the Cape Verds; that's all I know."

"Port Praya and a port; that was in the articles sure enough," answered he who had questioned Bill Marline; "but the 'Sea Witch' will scarce anchor there before she is off again, according to my reckoning."

That the old tar knew more than he chose to divulge, however, was apparent to his comrades, but they knew him to be fixed when he chose, and so did not endeavor by importunity to gather anything further from him; so the conversation gradually changed into some other channel.

In the meantime, while the crew gathered about Bill Marline were thus speculating, the vessel bowled along gracefully, with a speed that was in itself exhilarating to her young commander, who still gazed idly at the passing current. Once or twice a slight frown clouded his features, and his lips moved as though he was striving within himself either against real or imaginary evil, and then the same calm, placid manliness of countenance radiated his handsome features, and his lips were composed.

Now he turned to issue some necessary order, which was uttered in that calm, manly distinctness that challenges

obedience, and then he resumed his idle gaze over the vessel's side, once more losing himself in his day dream.