

CLASSICS TO GO

THE WRECK OF THE GROSVENOR

VOL.1 (1 OF 3)



WILLIAM CLARK RUSSELL

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CHAPTER I.

There was every appearance of a south-westerly wind. The coast of France, which had been standing high and shining upon the horizon on the port bow, and so magnified by the clear northerly air that you could discern, even at that distance, the dim emerald sheen of the upper slopes and the streaky shadows thrown by projecting points and elbows on the white ground, was fast fading, though the sun still stood within an hour of its setting beyond the bleak Foreland. The north wind, which had rattled us with an acre of foam at our bows right away down the river, and had now brought us well abreast of the Gull lightship, was dropping fast. There was barely enough air to keep the royals full, and the ship's number, which I had just hoisted at the peak—a string of gaudy flags which made a brilliant figure against the white canvas of the spanker—shook their folds sluggishly.

The whole stretch of scene, from the North Foreland down to the vanishing French headlands miles away yonder, was lovely at that moment—full of the great peace of an ocean falling asleep, of gently moving vessels, of the solemn gathering of shadows. The town of Deal was upon the starboard bow, a warm cluster of houses, with a windmill on the green hills turning drowsily, here and there a window glittering with a sudden beam of light, an inclined beach in the foreground with groups of boats high and dry upon it, and a line of foam at its base which sang upon the shingle so that you could hear it plainly amid intervals of silence on board the ship. The evening sun shining over the giant brow of the South Foreland struck the grey outline of the cliff deep in the still water, but the clear red blaze fell far and

wide over the dry white downs of Sandwich and the outlying plains, and threw the distant country into such bold relief against the blue sky that, from the sea, it looked close at hand, and but a short walk from the shore.

There were three or four dozen vessels at anchor in the Downs waiting for a change of wind or anticipating a dead calm for some hours. A few others, like ourselves, were swimming stealthily over the slack tide, with every foot of their canvas piled upon them with the effort to reach safe anchorage before the wind wholly failed and the tide turned. A large ship, with her sails stowed and her masts and rigging showing with the fineness of ivory-tracing against the sky, was being towed up Channel, and the slapping of the water by the paddles of the tug, in fast capricious revolutions, was quite audible, though both ship and steamer were a long league distant. Here and there small boats were rowing away from the anchored ships for the shore. Now and again you could hear the faint distant choruses of seamen furling a big sail or paying out more cable, the *clank, clank* of which was as pretty as music. Down in the east the heavens were a deep blue, flecked along the water line with white sails, which glowed in the sunshine like beacons.

I was in a proper mood to appreciate this beautiful tranquil scene. I was leaving England for a long spell, and the sight of that quiet little town of Deal and the grand old Foreland cliffs shutting out the sky, and the pale white shores we had left far astern, went right to my heart. Well, it was just a quiet leave-taking of the old country without words or sobs.

"The pilot means to bring up. I have just heard him tell the skipper to stand by for a light sou'-westerly breeze. This is a *most* confounded nuisance! All hands, perhaps, in the middle watch to get under way."

"I expected as much," said I, turning and confronting a short, squarely-built man, with a power of red hair under his chin, and a skin like yellow leather through thirty years exposure to sun and wind and dirt all over the world. This was the chief mate, Mr. Ephraim Duckling, confidently assumed by me to be a Yankee, though he didn't talk with his nose. I had looked at this gentleman with some doubt when I first met him in the West India Docks. He had blue eyes, with a cast in the port optic; this somehow made him humorous, whether or no, when he meant to be droll, so he had an advantage over other wits. He had hair so dense, coarse, and red withal, that he might have been safely scalped for a door-mat. His legs were short, and his body very long and broad, and I guessed his strength by the way his arm filled out, and threatened to burst up the sleeve of his coat when he bent it. So far he had been polite enough to me, in a mighty rough fashion indeed; and as to the men, there had been little occasion for him to give orders as yet.

"I expected as much," said I. "I have been watching the coast of France for the last quarter of an hour, and the moisture has nearly shut it out altogether. I doubt if we'll fetch the Downs before the calm falls."

"There's a little wind over the land, though, or that mill wouldn't be turning."

He turned his eyes up aloft; then went to the ship's side, and looked over. I followed him. The clear green water was slipping slowly past, and now and again a string of sea-weed went by, or a big, transparent jelly-fish, or a great crab floating on the top of the water. A thin ripple shot out in a semicircle from the ship's bow, and, at all events, we might tell that we were moving by watching the mast of the Gull lightship sliding by the canvas of a vessel hull below the horizon to the eastward of the sands.

Some of the hands were on the forecastle, looking and pointing towards the shore. Others stood in a group near the galley, talking with the cook, a fat, pale man, with flannel shirt-sleeves rolled above his elbows. The pigs in the long-boat grunted an accompaniment to the chattering of a mass of hens cooped under the long-boat. There was no movement in the sea, and the great sails overhead hung without flapping, and nothing stirred aloft but the light canvas of the royals, which sometimes shook against the masts lazily, and with a fine distant sound.

The skipper stood on the weather-side of the poop, against the starboard quarter-boat, conversing with the pilot.

Have before you a tall, well-shaped man, with iron-grey hair, a thin aquiline nose, a short compressed mouth, small dark eyes, which looked at you imperiously from under a perfect hedge of eyebrow, and whitish whiskers, which slanted across his cheeks; dressed in a tall hat, a long monkey-jacket, and square-toed boots.

Captain Coxon was a decidedly good-looking man, not in the smallest degree approaching the conventional notion of the merchant-skipper. Happily, it is no condition of good seamanship that a man should have bow-legs, and a coppery nose, and groggy eyes; and that he should prefer a dish of junk to a savoury kickshaw, and screeching rum to good wine. I had heard before I joined the *Grosvenor* that Coxon was a smart seaman, though a bully to his men. But this did not prejudice me. I thought I knew my duties well enough to steer clear of his temper; and for the rest, knowing what a seafaring life is, and how scarcely an hour ever comes without bringing some kind of peril of its own, I would rather any day take service under a Bashaw who knew his work, than a mild-natured creature who didn't.

The pilot was a little dusky-faced man, with great bushy whiskers, and a large chocolate-coloured shawl round his throat, though we were in August. I was watching these two men talking, when Duckling said—

"It's my belief that we shall have trouble with those fellows forward. When we trimmed sail off the North Foreland did you notice how they went to work?"

"Yes, I did. And I'll tell you what's the matter. As I was going forward after dinner, the cook stopped me, and told me the men were grumbling at the provisions. He said that some of the pork served out stunk, and the bread was mouldy and full of weevils."

"Oh, is that it!" said Duckling. "Wait till I get them to sea, and I'll give them my affidavit now, if they like, that *then* they'll have something to cry over. There's a Portugee fellow among them, and no ship's company can keep honest when one of those devils comes aboard. He'll always find out something that's wrong, and turn and tumble it about until it sets all hands on fire."

He went to the break of the poop and leaned, with his arms squarely set, upon the brass rail, and stared furiously at the group of men about the galley. Some of them grew uneasy, and edged away and got round to the other side of the galley; others, of those who remained, folded their arms and stared at him back, and one of them laughed, which put him in a passion at once.

"You lazy hounds!" he bellowed in a voice of thunder, "have you nothing to get about? Some of you get that cable range there more over to windward. You, there, get some scrubbing-brushes and clean the long-boat's bottom. Forecastle, there, come down out of that and see that your halliards are clear for running! I'll teach you to palaver the cook, you grumbling villains!" and he made a movement so

full of menace that the most obstinate-looking of the fellows got life into them at once, and bustled about.

I looked at the skipper to see what he thought of this little outbreak; but neither he nor the pilot paid the smallest attention to it: only, when Duckling had made an end, the pilot gave an order which was repeated by the chief mate with lungs of brass—

"Aft here, and clew up the mainsail and furl it!"

The men threw down the scrubbing-brushes and chain-hooks which they had picked up, and came aft to the main-deck in a most surly fashion. Duckling eyed them like a mastiff a cat. I noticed some smart-looking hands among them, but they all to a man put on a lubberly air; and as they hauled upon the various ropes which snug a ship's canvas upon the yard preparatory to its being furled, I heard them putting all manner of coarse, violent expressions, having reference to the ship and her officers, into their songs.

They went up aloft slowly and laid out along the yard, grumbling furiously. And to show what bad sailors they were, I suppose, they stowed the sail villainously, leaving bits of the leech sticking out, and making a bunt that must have blown out to the first cap-full of wind.

I was rather of opinion that Duckling's behaviour was founded on traditions which had been surrendered years ago by British seamen to Yankee skippers and mates. He had sailed a voyage in this ship with Coxon, and the captain therefore knew his character. That Coxon should abet Duckling's behaviour towards the men by his silence, was a bad augury. I reckoned that they understood each other, and that the whole ship's company, including myself, might expect a very uncomfortable voyage.

Meanwhile, Duckling waited until the men were off the yard and descending the rigging: he then roared out, "Furl the mainsail!"

The men stopped coming down, and looked at the yard and then at Duckling; and one of them said, in a sullen tone, "It is furled."

I was amazed to see Duckling hop off the deck on to the poop-rail and spring up the rigging: I thought that he was going to thrash the man who had answered: and the man evidently thought so too, for he turned pale, and edged sideways along the ratline on which he stood, whilst he held one of his hands clenched. Up went Duckling, shaking the shrouds violently with his ungainly, sprawling way of climbing, and making the men dance upon the ratlines. In a moment he had swung himself upon the foot-rope and was casting off the yard-arm gaskets. I don't think half a dozen men could have loosed the sail in the time taken by him to do so. Down it fell, and down he came, hand over fist along the main-topsail sheets against the mainmast, bounded up the poop-ladder, and without loss of breath, roared out, "Furl the mainsail!"

The men seemed inclined to disobey: some of them had already reached the bulwark: but another bellow, accompanied by a gesture, appeared to decide them. They mounted slowly, got upon the yard, and this time did the job in a sailor-like fashion.

"I'm only beginning with them," he said in his rough voice to me; and then glanced at Coxon, who gave him a nod and a smile.

The pilot now told me to go forward and see everything ready for bringing up. We were drawing close to the Downs, but the air had quite died out and the sea stretched like oil to the horizon. I don't know what was giving us way, for the

light sails aloft hung flat, and the smoke of a steamboat with its two funnels only showing away across the Channel, went straight up into the sky. There must, however, have been a faint, imperceptible tide running, but it took us another half-hour to reach the point where the pilot had resolved to bring up, and by that time the sun had sunk behind the great headland beyond Deal, and was casting a broad crimson glare upon the further sea.

The royals and top-gallant sails were clewed up and furled, and then the order was given to let go the topsail halliards. Down came the three heavy yards rumbling along the masts, with the sound of chain rattling over sheaves. The canvas fell into festoons, and the pilot called, "All ready forrard?"

"All ready."

"Let go the anchor."

"Stand clear of the cable!" I shouted.

Whack! whack! went the carpenter's driving hammer. A moment's pause, then a tremendous splash, and the cable rushed with a hoarse outcry through the hawser hole.

When this job was over I waited on the forecastle to superintend the stowing of the sails forward. The men worked briskly enough, and I heard one of them who was stowing the fore-topmast stay-sail say "that it was good luck the skipper had brought up. He didn't think he'd be such a fool."

This set me wondering what their meaning could be; but I thought it best to take no notice nor repeat what I had heard, as I considered that the less Mr. Duckling had to say to the men the better we should all get on.

It was half-past seven by the time the sails were furled and the decks cleared of the ropes. The hands went below

to tea, and I was walking aft when the cook came out of the galley and said—

"Beg your pardon, sir; would you mind tasting of this?" And he handed me a bit of the ship's biscuit. I smelt it and found it mouldy, and put a piece in my mouth, but soon spat it out.

"I can't say much for this, cook," said I.

"It's not fit for dogs," replied the cook. "But, so far as I've seen, all the provisions is the same. The sugar's like mud, and the molasses is full of grit; and though I've been to sea man and boy two and twenty year, I never saw tea like what they've got on board this ship. It ain't tea—it makes the liquor yaller. It's shavings, and wot I say is, regular tea *ain't* shavings."

"Well, let the men complain to the captain," I answered. "He can report to the owners and get the ship's stores condemned."

"It's my belief they was condemned afore they came on board," answered the cook. "I'll bet any man a week's grog that they was bought cheap in a dockyard sale o' rotten grub, by order o' the Admiralty."

"Give me a biscuit," said I, "and I'll show it to the captain."

He took one out from a drawer in which he kept the dough for the cuddy's use, and I put it in my pocket and went aft.

CHAPTER II.

I will here pause to describe the ship which, being the theatre of much that befel me which is related in this book, I should place before your eyes in as true a picture as I can draw.

The *Grosvenor*, then, was a small, full-rigged ship of five hundred tons, painted black, with a single white streak below her bulwarks. She was a soft-wood vessel, built in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Her lines were very perfect. Indeed, the beauty of her hull, her lofty masts, stayed with as great perfection as a man-of-war's, her graceful figure-head, sharp yacht-like bows and round stern, had filled me with admiration when I first beheld her. Her decks were white and well kept. She had a poop and a top-gallant forecastle, both of which I think the builder might have spared, as she was scarcely big enough for them. There was a good deal of brass-work on her after-decks, and more expense than she deserved, from the perishable nature of the material of which she was constructed, had been lavished upon her in respect of deck ornamentation. Her richly carved wheel, brass belaying-pins, brass capstan, brass binnacle, handsome skylights, and other such details made her look like a gay pleasure-vessel rather than a sober trader. Her cuddy, however, was plain enough, containing six cabins, including the pantry. The woodwork was cheaply varnished mahogany; a fixed table ran from the mizzen-mast to within a few feet of the cuddy front, and on either side this table was a stout hair-covered bench. Aft the mizzen-mast were the two cabins respectively occupied by Captain Coxon and Mr. Duckling. My own cabin was just under the break of the poop, so that from the window in it I could look out upon the

main-deck. A couple of broad skylights, well protected with brass wire-fenders, let plenty of light into the cuddy; and swinging trays and lamps, and red curtains to draw across the skylights when the sun beat upon them, completed the furniture of this part of the vessel.

We could very well have carried a few passengers, and I never learned why we did not; but it may, perhaps, have happened that nobody was going our way at the time we were advertised to sail.

We were bound to Valparaiso with a general cargo, consisting chiefly of toys, hardware, Birmingham and Sheffield cutlery, and metal goods, and a stock of pianofortes. The ship, to my thinking, was too deep, as though the owners had compensated themselves for the want of passenger-money by "taking it out" in freight. I readily foresaw that we should be a wet ship, and that we should labour, more than was comfortable, in a heavy sea. The steerage was packed with light goods, bird-cages and such things, but space was left in the 'tween decks, though the cargo came flush with the deck in the hold.

However, in spite of being overloaded, the *Grosvenor* had beaten everything coming down the river that day. Just off the Reculvers, for example, when we had drawn the wind a trifle more abeam, we overhauled a steamer. She was pretty evidently a fast screw, and her people grew jealous when they saw us coming up astern, and piled up the fires, but could not stop us from dropping her, as neatly as *she* dropped an old coal brig that was staggering near the shore under dirty canvas. But she smothered us with her smoke as we passed her to leeward, and I dare say they were glad to see the dose we got for our pains.

I came aft, as I have said, after leaving the baker, with the biscuit in my pocket, and got upon the poop. The skipper had gone below with the pilot, and they were having

tea. Duckling was walking the poop, swearing now and again at a couple of ordinary seamen, whom he had set to work to flemish-coil the ropes along the deck, for no other reason than that he might put as much work upon them as he could invent—for this flemish-coiling was of no use under the circumstances, and is only fit for Sundays on passenger ships when you want to please the ladies with "tidy" effects, or when a vessel is in port. A watch had been set forward, and having cast a look up aloft to see that everything was trim, I went down the companion-ladder to the cuddy, followed by Duckling.

The interior of the cabin looked like some old Dutch painting, for the plain mahogany woodwork gave the place an antique air. The lamps were alight, for it was dusk here, though daylight was still abroad upon the sea; and the lamplight imparted a grave, old-fashioned colouring to the things it shone upon. The skipper sat near the mizzen-mast, stirring the sugar in a cup of tea. He looked better without than with his hat; his forehead was high, though rather peaked, and his iron-grey hair, parted amid-ships and brushed carelessly over his ears, gave him a look of dignity. The coarse little pilot was eating bread and butter voraciously, his great whiskers moving as he worked his jaws.

Duckling and I seated ourselves at the table, and I had some difficulty to prevent myself from laughing at the odd figures Duckling and the pilot made side by side—the one with his whiskers working like a pair of brushes, and the other with that door-mat of red hair on his head, and the puzzling cast of the eye that made me always doubt which one I should address when I tried to look him full in the face.

"There's a breeze coming from the sou'-west, sir," said Duckling to the captain. "The water's darkish out in that