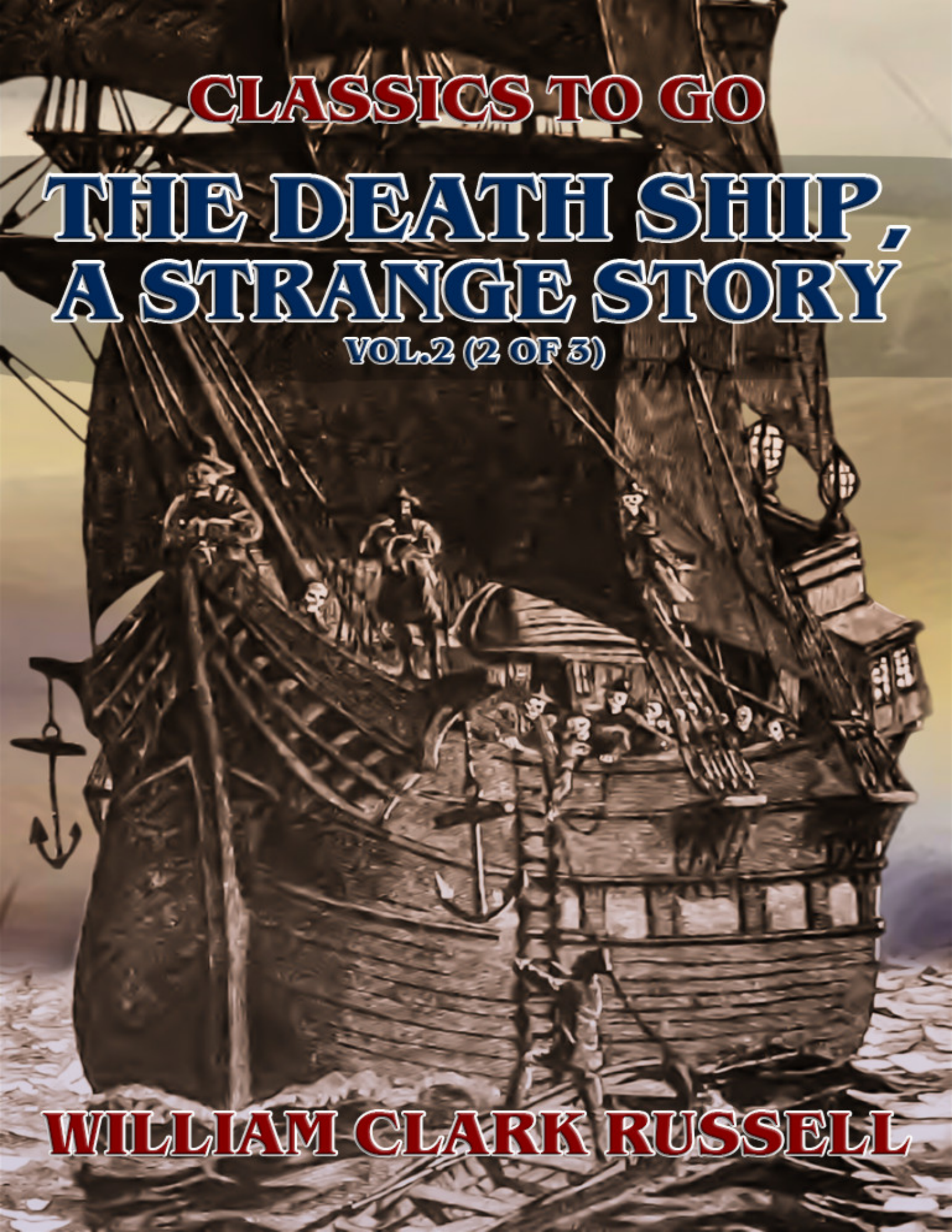
CLASSICS TO GO
THE DEATH SHIP, A STRANGE STORY
VOL.2 (2 OF 3)
WILLIAM CLARK RUSSELL

The Death Ship,

A Strange Story Vol. 2 (2 of 3)

William Clark Russell

CONTENTS
OF
THE SECOND VOLUME.

CHAPTER I.
IMOGENE SAYS SHE WILL TRUST ME.

A half-hour passed, and during that time I had sufficiently recovered from the distressful croak of the parrot to wonder, as any sailor would, how the ship was navigated; for I could not doubt that the clock kept pretty close to the true time, since the easting and westing made by the ship was small, never, perhaps, exceeding ten degrees; and the circumstance of noon having struck set me wondering in what fashion the captain and mates navigated the ship, whether they used the cross-staff or relied on dead reckoning, or were supernaturally conned.

At half-past twelve arrived Prins, to prepare the table for dinner. I was so dull that his coming was extremely welcome, and I watched him go about his work with interest, not, perhaps, unmixed with fear. Out of the great drawer, under the table, he withdrew the cloth, knives, forks, silver goblets and the like, which had been set out for breakfast; but his movements were those of a marionette rather than a man's, he scarcely looked at what he did, putting a goblet here, a knife and fork there and so on, with the lifeless air of an object controlled by mechanism. Small wonder that the unhappy wretch should know his business! He had been at it long enough! Yet it wrung my heart to watch him and to think that he would still be arranging the cabin tables for meals, and attending upon Vanderdecken and his mates when Heaven alone knows how many times the wave of civilisation should have followed the sun round the globe, and how often our British Islands should have lapsed into their ancient savageness and emerged again.

Whilst he was at this work, Miss Dudley stepped out of her cabin. She came to a stand, not instantly recognising me in my own clothes, but quickly satisfying herself, she advanced with a smile and sat down near me, with no further sign of timidity than a slight blush which greatly heightened her beauty.

"Where is Captain Vanderdecken?" said she.

"I left him on deck three-quarters of an hour since," I answered. "We were talking when he suddenly broke off, and I should have supposed him in a fit but for his erect posture and the fiery life in his eyes."

"This happens to them all," said she, "as you will find out. I do not know what it means or why it should be."

"Possibly," I exclaimed, recalling the conjecture I have already written down, "the death in them grows too strong at periods, for the power that sustains them, be it demoniac or not, and then follows a failure of the vitality of the body, which yet leaves the spirit—as one sees it flashing in Vanderdecken's eyes—strong enough to recover the corporeal forces from their languor. But how terrible is all this for you to be living familiarly with!—the sweet, fresh, human life of the world your beauty would adorn and gladden, hidden from you behind the melancholy sea-line, and the passage of months, yes, and of years, finding you still aimlessly beating about these waters, with no better companions than beings more frightful in their shapes and behaviour as men than were they phantoms which the hand could not grasp and whose texture the eye can pierce."

"What can I do, Mr. Fenton? Captain Vanderdecken will not part with me. How can I escape?" she cried, with her eyes brimming. "If I cast myself overboard, it would be to drown; if I succeeded in gaining the shore when we anchored near to the coast, it would be either to perish upon the broiling

sands, or be destroyed by wild beasts, or be seized by the natives and carried into captivity."

"But if a chance offered to make good your escape without the risks you name, would you seize it?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Well," said I, speaking with such tenderness and feeling, such a glow and yearning in my heart that you would say the tiny seed of love in my breast, watered by her tears, was budding with the swiftness of each glance at her into flower, "whilst I have been sitting melancholy and alone I have turned over in my mind how I am to deliver you from this dreadful situation. No scheme as yet offers, but will you trust me as an English sailor to find a means to outwit these Dutchmen, ay, though the Devil himself kept watch when they were abed?... One moment, Miss Dudley—forgive me, it had not been my intention to touch upon this matter until time had enabled you to form some judgment of me. But when two are of the same mind, and the pit that has to be jumped is a deep one, it would be mere foppery in me to stand on the brink with you, chattering like a Frenchman about anything else sooner than speak out and to the point as a plain seaman should."

"Mr. Fenton," she answered, "I will trust you. If you can see a way to escape from this ship I will aid you to the utmost of my strength and accompany you. You are a sailor; my father was of that calling, and as an English seaman you shall have my full faith."

It was not only the words, but her pretty voice, her sparkling eyes, her earnest gaze, the expression of hope that lighted up her face with the radiance of a smile rather than of a smile itself, which rendered what she said delightful to me. I answered, "Depend upon it your faith will animate me, and

it will be strange if you are not in England before many months, nay, let me say weeks, have passed."

Here leaning her cheek in her hand she looked down into her lap with a wistful sadness in her eyes.

Not conceiving what was passing in her mind, I said, "Whatever scheme I hit upon will take time. But what are a few months compared with years on board this ship—years which only death can end!"

"Oh!" she answered, looking at me fully, but with a darkness of tears upon those violet lights, "I don't doubt your ability to escape and rescue me, nor was I thinking of the time you would require or how long it may be before we see England. What troubles me is to feel that when in England—if it please God to suffer me to set foot once more upon that dear soil—I shall have no friend to turn to." I was about to speak, but she proceeded, her eyes brimming afresh: "It is rare that a girl finds herself in my situation. Both my father and mother were only children and orphans when they married, my mother living with a clergyman and his wife at Rotherhithe as governess to their children when my father met her. The clergyman and his lady are long since dead. But were they living, they would not be persons I should apply to for help and counsel, since my mother often spoke of them as harsh, mean people. The few relations on my mother's side died off; on my father's side there was—perhaps there yet is—an uncle who settled in Virginia and did pretty well there. But I should have to go to that country to seek him with the chance of finding him dead. Thus you will see how friendless I am, Mr. Fenton."

"You are not of those who remain friendless in this world," said I, softly, for can you marvel that a young man's heart will beat quickly when such a beauty as Imogene Dudley is, tells him to his face that she is friendless. "I implore you," I

added, "not to suffer any reflection of this sort to sadden or swerve you in your determination to leave this ship——"

"No, no!" she interrupted, "it will not do that. Better to die of famine among the green meadows at home than—oh!" she cried, with hysterical vehemence, "how sweet will be the sight of flowers to me, of English trees, and hedges blooming with briar roses and honeysuckles. This dreadful life!" she clasped her hands with a sudden passionate raising of her eyes, "these roaring seas, the constant screaming of the wind that bates its tones only to make a desolate moaning, the company of ghost-like men, the fearful sense of being in a ship upon which has fallen the wrath of the majesty of God! Oh, indeed, indeed it must end!" and burying her face in her hands she wept most grievously, sobbing aloud.

"What will end, mynheer? And what is it that causes thee, Imogene, to weep?" exclaimed the deep, vibratory voice of Vanderdecken.

I started, and found his great figure erect behind me, a certain inquisitiveness in the expression of his face, and much of the light shining in his eyes that I had remarked when he fell into that posture of trance I have spoken of. I answered as readily as my knowledge of his tongue permitted, "Miss Dudley weeps, sir, because this gale, as others have before, retards the passage of your ship to Amsterdam; and 'tis perfectly natural, consistent, indeed, with the wishes of all men in the Braave, that she should wish the baulking storm at an end."

He came round to his high-backed chair, and seated himself, and, putting his arm along the table, gently took Imogene's wrist, and softly pulled her hand away from her face, wet with her tears, saying, "My dear, your fellow-countryman is right; it is the sorrow of every creature here that this gale should blow us backwards, and so delay our return; but

what is more capricious than the wind? This storm will presently pass, and it will be strange," he added, with a sudden scowl darkening his brow, and letting go Miss Dudley's hand as he spoke, "if next time we do not thrust the Braave into an ocean where these north-westers make way for the strong trade wind that blows from the south-east."

She dried her eyes and forced a smile, acting a part as I did; that is to say, she did not wish he should suspect her grief went deeper than I had explained; though I could not help observing that in directing her wet, sweet, violet eyes, with her mouth shaped to a smile, upon him, a plaintive gratitude underlay her manner, an admixture of pity and affection, the exhibition of which made me very sure of the quality of her heart.

To carry Vanderdecken's thoughts away from the subject he supposed Miss Dudley and I had been speaking about, I asked her in Dutch what she had been doing with herself since breakfast. She answered in the same language that she had been lying down.

"Have you books?" said I.

"A few that belong to the captain. Some are in French and I cannot read them. The others are in Dutch. There is also a collection of English poetry, some of which is beautiful, and I know many verses by heart."

"Are these works pretty new?" said I.

She answered, "Of various years; the newest, I think, is dated 1647."

"Ay," said Vanderdecken, "that will be my friend Bloys Van Treslong's book upon the tulip-madness."

Finding him willing to converse, I was extremely fretted to discover that, owing to my ignorance of the literature and

art of his time, I could not "bring him out" as the phrase runs, for looking into the Batavian story since, I find scores of matters he could have told me about, such as the building of ships at Hoorn, the customs of the people, the tulip-madness he had mentioned, the great men such as Jan Six, Rembrandt, Jan Steen, Van Campen who designed the Stadhuis and others, some of whom—as happened in the case of the great Willem Schouten—he may have known and haply smoked pipes of tobacco with.

But be this as it may, we had got back again to the gale when Prins brought in the dinner, and in a few minutes arrived the mate, Van Vogelaar, whereupon we fell to the meal, Imogene saying very little and often regarding me with a thoughtful face and earnest eyes as though, after the maiden's way in such matters, she was searching me; I taciturn, the mate sullen in expression and silent, as his death-like face would advertise the beholder to suppose him ever to be, and Vanderdecken breaking at intervals from the deep musing fit he fell into to invite me to eat or drink with an air of incomparable dignity, hardened as it was by his eternal sternness and fierceness.

At this meal I found the food to be much the same as that with which we had broken our fast. But in addition there was a roasted fowl and a large ham; and into each silver goblet Prins poured a draught of sherry—a very soft and mellow wine—which I supposed Vanderdecken had come by through the same means which enabled him to obtain coats for his own and his men's backs, and ropes for his masts and sails, and brandy and gin for his stone jars—that is, by overhauling wrecks and pillaging derelicts, for certainly strong waters were not to be got by lying off the coast and going a-hunting.

Yet though the wine put a pleasant warmth into my veins, insomuch that I could have talked freely but for the

depressing influence of the captain and his mate, them it no more cheered and heartened, it gave them no more life and spirit than had they been urns filled with dust into which the generous liquor had been poured. Several times, indeed, whilst I was on board that ship, have I seen Vanderdecken, Vogelaar, and Arents swallow such draughts of punch out of bowls, as would have laid me senseless in five minutes, yet these capacious jorums gave rise in them to not the least signs of jollity; as, indeed, how should it have been otherwise, for their brains were dead to all but the supernatural influence that kept them moving—dead as the works of a going watch—and what is there in the fumes of wine to disorder embodied ghosts?

CHAPTER II.
VANDERDECKEN EXHIBITS SOME TREASURE.

When Vogelaar left the cabin to relieve Arents on deck, Vanderdecken exhibited a disposition to talk. He gently took Imogene's chin in his hand and chided her very tenderly, yet without the slightest quality of what we should call pleasantness in his manner. For this would have brought him to some show of good-humour, whereas never during the time I was thrown with him did I see the least light of merriment on his face; I say, he chided her, but very gently, for crying at the delay caused by the storm, and exclaimed, motioning to me, "Here is a seaman. He will tell you that this is a stormy part of the ocean, and that at this season of the year we must look for gales from the north-west; but he will also know that these tempests are short-lived and that a breeze from the east, north or south, must carry us round the Cape as fairly as our helm controls us."

"Oh! that is so indeed, Miss Dudley," said I, quickly, and darting a meaning glance at her; and wishing to change the subject I went on: "Mynheer, when I was in your cabin last night shifting myself, I noticed a cross-staff. 'Twould be of no use to you to-day, the sun being blotted out. Failing an observation, upon what method do you rely for knowing your position?"

"What else but the log?" he exclaimed. "I compute entirely by dead-reckoning. The staff hath often set me wide of the mark. The log fairly gives me my place on the sea card, and then there is the lead."

I bowed by way of thanking him, for in this direction I gathered by his rejoinder as much as he could have acquainted me with in an hour's discourse, besides, the earnest regard of the pair of sweet light eyes opposite reminded me that I must be very wary in showing myself inquisitive.

"You have a sharp sight, sir," said Vanderdecken, but speaking without any fierceness, "to see that fore-staff in my cabin by the faint light there was. What else did you observe?"

I told him honestly, for I could imagine no challenge to his wrath in answering, that I had seen a speaking-trumpet, sand-glass, pictures, and the like. But as though Imogene knew him better and desired to shield me, she instantly said, "Oh, captain, will not you show Mr. Fenton the pictures of your wife and children? They will charm him, I know."

On this he called Prins to bring the pictures. If ever I had doubted this ship was the veritable Flying Dutchman the portraits would have settled my misgivings once and for all. The material on which they were painted was cracked in places, and the darkness of age lay very gloomy and thick upon them. They were all of a size, about ten inches long and six inches broad. He put his wife before me first and watched me with his fierce eyes whilst I pored upon the painting. The picture was that of a portly lady in a black close-fitting cap, the hair yellow, the bosoms very large, a square-shouldered heavy woman of the true Dutch mould, round-faced, not uncomely, and perhaps of five and forty years of age. How she was dressed I could not tell, but the arms were bare from the elbows, and they and the hands were, methought, very delicately painted and exquisitely life-like. The others were those of girls of different ages. Which of them Captain Vanderdecken imagined Miss Dudley to resemble I could not conceive; there was nothing in these

darksome likenesses, albeit they represented maidenhood and infancy, to suggest a resemblance to the English beauty of the fragile, large-eyed, gold-crowned face of Imogene Dudley.

She that was named Geertruida was of a style that came close to good looks, eyes merry, dainty mouth, but cheeks too fat. Here was little Margaretha, for whom the piping swain had been purchased, peering at me with a half-shy, half-wondering look out of the dusky background.

As I returned them one by one, the captain took them from me, lingering long upon each and making such comments as "'Tis Johanna to the life!" meaning his wife. "What art is more wonderful than this of portrait painting? No age is likely to beat our time, and no nation the Dutch. How alive is the eye here! Methinks if I spoke angrily to her she would weep!" or "You will find this girl," meaning Geertruida, "a true sister, Imogene, homely, honest and innocent, so fond of fun but yet so dutiful, that there is no woman in all Holland who would make a better wife," or "Ah! little one, thy father will be with thee ere long," stopping to kiss the painting of his daughter Margaretha.

Prins stood by to receive the pictures, but Vanderdecken hung over this one for some minutes, falling motionless, insomuch that I thought another one of his strange fits or trances had seized him; and perfectly still for those moments were Miss Dudley and I, often glancing at each other as though both of us alike felt the prodigious significance imported into this spectacle of a father's love, by the bellowing of the wind, and the long, yearning, sickening, broadside rushes of the ship, ruthlessly hurled back by the surge and storm into the deeper solitude of those waters whose confines she was never to pass.

Now Arents left the table, never having given us, nor our talk, nor the pictures, the smallest imaginable heed. His