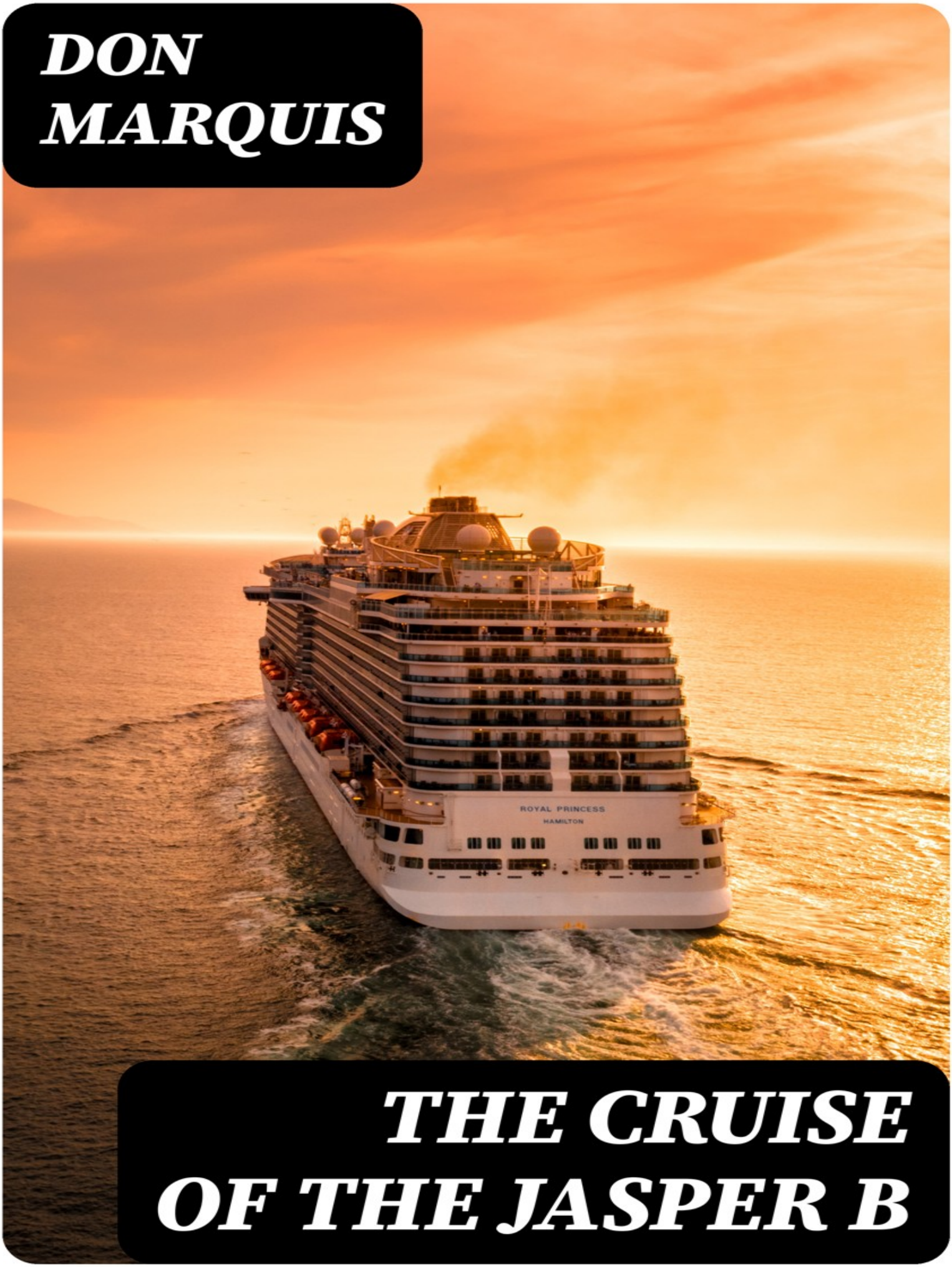
DON MARQUIS



THE CRUISE OF THE JASPER B

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The Cruise of the Jasper B

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CHAPTER I

A BRIGHT BLADE LEAPS FROM A RUSTY SCABBARD

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On an evening in April, 191-, Clement J. Cleggett walked sedately into the news room of the New York Enterprise with a drab-colored walking-stick in his hand. He stood the cane in a corner, changed his sober street coat for a more sober office jacket, adjusted a green eyeshade below his primly brushed grayish hair, unostentatiously sat down at the copy desk, and unobtrusively opened a drawer.

From the drawer he took a can of tobacco, a pipe, a pair of scissors, a paste-pot and brush, a pile of copy paper, a penknife and three half-lengths of lead pencil.

The can of tobacco was not remarkable. The pipe was not picturesque. The scissors were the most ordinary of scissors. The copy paper was quite undistinguished in appearance. The lead pencils had the most untemperamental looking points.

Cleggett himself, as he filled and lighted the pipe, did it in the most matter-of-fact sort of way. Then he remarked to the head of the copy desk, in an average kind of voice:

"H'lo, Jim."

"H'lo, Clegg," said Jim, without looking up. "Might as well begin on this bunch of early copy, I guess."

For more than ten years Cleggett had done the same thing at the same time in the same manner, six nights of

the week.

What he did on the seventh night no one ever thought to inquire. If any member of the Enterprise staff had speculated about it at all he would have assumed that Cleggett spent that seventh evening in some way essentially commonplace, sober, unemotional, quiet, colorless, dull and Brooklynitish.

Cleggett lived in Brooklyn. The superficial observer might have said that Cleggett and Brooklyn were made for each other.

The superficial observer! How many there are of him! And how much he misses! He misses, in fact, everything.

At two o'clock in the morning a telegraph operator approached the copy desk and handed Cleggett a sheet of yellow paper, with the remark:

"Cleggett—personal wire."

It was a night letter, and glancing at the signature Cleggett saw that it was from his brother who lived in Boston. It ran:

Uncle Tom died yesterday. Don't faint now. He splits bulk fortune between you and me. Lawyers figure nearly $500,000 each. Mostly easily negotiable securities. New will made month ago while sore at president temperance outfit. Blood thicker than Apollinaris after all. Poor Uncle Tom.

Edward.

Despite Edward's thoughtful warning, Cleggett did nearly faint. Nothing could have been less expected. Uncle Tom was an irascible prohibitionist, and one of the most

deliberately disobliging men on earth. Cleggett and his brother had long ceased to expect anything from him. For twenty years it had been thoroughly understood that Uncle Tom would leave his entire estate to a temperance society. Cleggett had ceased to think of Uncle Tom as a possible factor in his life. He did not doubt that Uncle Tom had changed the will to gain some point with the officials of the temperance society, intending to change it once again after he had been deferred to, cajoled, and flattered enough to placate his vanity. But death had stepped in just in time to disinherit the enemies of the Demon Rum.

Cleggett read the wire through twice, and then folded it and put it into his pocket. He rose and walked toward the managing editor's room. As he stepped across the floor there was a little dancing light in his eyes, there was a faint smile upon his lips, that were quite foreign to the staid and sober Cleggett that the world knew. He was quiet, but he was almost jaunty, too; he felt a little drunk, and enjoyed the feeling.

He opened the managing editor's door with more assurance than he had ever displayed before. The managing editor, a pompous, tall, thin man with a drooping frosty mustache, and cold gray eyes in a cold gray face that somehow reminded one of the visage of a walrus, was preparing to go home.

"Well?" he said, shortly.

He was a man for whom Cleggett had long felt a secret antipathy. The man was, in short, the petty tyrant of Cleggett's little world.

"Can you spare me a couple of minutes, Mr. Wharton?" said Cleggett. But he did not say it with the air of a person who really sues for a hearing.

"Yes, yes—go on." Mr. Wharton, who had risen from his chair, sat down again. He was distinctly annoyed. He was ungracious. He was usually ungracious with Cleggett. His face set itself in the expression it always took when he declined to consider raising a man's salary. Cleggett, who had been refused a raise regularly every three months for the past two years, was familiar with the look.

"Go on, go on—what is it?" asked Mr. Wharton unpleasantly, frowning and stroking the frosty mustache, first one side and then the other.

"I just stepped in to tell you," said Cleggett quietly, "that I don't think much of the way you are running the Enterprise."

Wharton stopped stroking his mustache so quickly and so amazedly that one might have thought he had run into a thorn amongst the hirsute growth and pricked a finger. He glared. He opened his mouth. But before he could speak Cleggett went on:

"Three years ago I made a number of suggestions to you. You treated me contemptuously—very contemptuously!"

Cleggett paused and drew a long breath, and his face became quite red. It was as if the anger in which he could not afford to indulge himself three years before was now working in him with cumulative effect. Wharton, only partially recovered from the shock of Cleggett's sudden arraignment, began to stammer and bluster, using the words nearest his tongue:

"You d-damned im-p-pertinent———"

"Just a moment," Cleggett interrupted, growing visibly angrier, and seeming to enjoy his anger more and more. "Just a word more. I had intended to conclude my remarks by telling you that my contempt for YOU, personally, is unbounded. It is boundless, sir! But since you have sworn at me, I am forced to conclude this interview in another fashion."

And with a gesture which was not devoid of dignity Cleggett drew from an upper waistcoat pocket a card and flung it on Wharton's desk. After which he stepped back and made a formal bow.

Wharton looked at the card. Bewilderment almost chased the anger from his face.

"Eh," he said, "what's this?"

"My card, sir! A friend will wait on you tomorrow!"

"Tomorrow? A friend? What for?"

Cleggett folded his arms and regarded the managing editor with a touch of the supercilious in his manner.

"If you were a gentleman," he said, "you would have no difficulty in understanding these things. I have just done you the honor of challenging you to a duel."

Mr. Wharton's mouth opened as if he were about to explode in a roar of incredulous laughter. But meeting Cleggett's eyes, which were, indeed, sparkling with a most remarkable light, his jaw dropped, and he turned slightly pale. He rose from his chair and put the desk between himself and Cleggett, picking up as he did so a long pair of shears.

"Put down the scissors," said Cleggett, with a wave of his hand. "I do not propose to attack you now."

And he turned and left the managing editor's little office, closing the door behind him.

The managing editor tiptoed over to the door and, with the scissors still grasped in one hand, opened it about a quarter of an inch. Through this crack Wharton saw Cleggett walk jauntily towards the corner where his hat and coat were hanging. Cleggett took off his worn office jacket, rolled it into a ball, and flung it into a waste paper basket. He put on his street coat and hat and picked up the drab-colored cane. Swinging the stick he moved towards the door into the hall. In the doorway he paused, cocked his hat a trifle, turned towards the managing editor's door, raised his hand with his pipe in it with the manner of one who points a dueling pistol, took careful aim at the second button of the managing editor's waistcoat, and clucked. At the cluck the managing editor drew back hastily, as if Cleggett had actually presented a firearm; Cleggett's manner was so rapt and fatal that it carried conviction. Then Cleggett laughed, cocked his hat on the other side of his head and went out into the corridor whistling. Whistling, and, since faults as well as virtues must be told, swaggering just a little.

When the managing editor had heard the elevator come up, pause, and go down again, he went out of his room and said to the city editor:

"Mr. Herbert, don't ever let that man Cleggett into this office again. He is off—off mentally. He's a dangerous man. He's a homicidal maniac. More'n likely he's been a quiet,

steady drinker for years, and now it's begun to show on him."

But nothing was further from Cleggett than the wish ever to go into the Enterprise office again. As he left the elevator on the ground floor he stabbed the astonished elevator boy under the left arm with his cane as a bayonet, cut him harmlessly over the head with his cane as a saber, tossed him a dollar, and left the building humming:

"Oh, the Beau Sabreur of the Grande Armee Was the Captain Tarjeanterre!"

It is thus, with a single twitch of her playful fingers, that Fate will sometimes pluck from a man the mask that has obscured his real identity for many years. It is thus that Destiny will suddenly draw a bright blade from a rusty scabbard!

CHAPTER II

THE ROOM OF ILLUSION

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That part of Brooklyn in which Cleggett lived overlooks a wide sweep of water where the East River merges with New York Bay. From his windows he could gaze out upon the bustling harbor craft and see the ships going forth to the great mysterious sea.

He walked home across the Brooklyn Bridge, and as he walked he still hummed tunes. Occasionally, still with the rapt and fatal manner which had daunted the managing editor, he would pause and flex his wrist, and then suddenly deliver a ferocious thrust with his walking-stick.

The fifth of these lunges had an unexpected result. Cleggett directed it toward the door of an unpainted toolhouse, a temporary structure near one of the immense stone pillars from which the bridge is swung. But, as he lunged, the toolhouse door opened, and a policeman, who was coming out wiping his mouth on the back of his hand, received a jab in the pit of a somewhat protuberant stomach.

The officer grunted and stepped backward; then he came on, raising his night-stick.

"Why, it's—it's McCarthy!" exclaimed Cleggett, who had also sprung back, as the light fell on the other's face.

"Mr. Cleggett, by the powers!" said the officer, pausing and lowering his lifted club. "Are ye soused, man? Or is it your way of sayin' good avenin' to your frinds?"

Cleggett smiled. He had first known McCarthy years before when he was a reporter, and more recently had renewed the acquaintance in his walks across the bridge.

"I didn't know you were there, McCarthy," he said.

"No?" said the officer. "And who were ye jabbin' at, thin?"

"I was just limbering up my wrist," said Cleggett.

"'Tis a quare thing to do," persisted McCarthy, albeit good-humoredly. "And now I mind I've seen ye do the same before, Mr. Cleggett. You're foriver grinnin' to yersilf an' makin' thim funny jabs at nothin' as ye cross the bridge. Are ye subjict to stiffness in the wrists, Mr. Cleggett?"

"Perhaps it's writer's cramp," said Cleggett, indulging the pleasant humor that was on him. He was really thinking that, with $500,000 of his own, he had written his last headline, edited his last piece of copy, sharpened his last pencil.

"Writer's cramp? Is it so?" mused McCarthy. "Newspapers is great things, ain't they now? And so's writin' and readin'. Gr-r-reat things! But if ye'll take my advise, Mr. Cleggett, ye'll kape that writin' and readin' within bounds. Too much av thim rots the brains."

"I'll remember that," said Cleggett. And he playfully jabbed the officer again as he turned away.

"G'wan wid ye!" protested McCarthy. "Ye're soused! The scent av it's in the air. If I'm compilled to run yez in f'r assaultin' an officer ye'll get the cramps out av thim wrists breakin' stone, maybe. Cr-r-r-amps, indade!"

Cramps, indeed! Oh, Clement J. Cleggett, you liar! And yet, who does not lie in order to veil his inmost, sweetest thoughts from an unsympathetic world?

That was not an ordinary jab with an ordinary cane which Cleggett had directed towards the toolhouse door. It was a thrust en carte; the thrust of a brilliant swordsman; the thrust of a master; a terrible thrust. It was meant for as pernicious a bravo as ever infested the pages of romantic fiction. Cleggett had been slaying these gentry a dozen times a day for years. He had pinked four of them on the way across the bridge, before McCarthy, with his stomach and his realism, stopped the lunge intended for the fifth. But this is not exactly the sort of thing one finds it easy to confide to a policeman, be he ever so friendly a policeman.

Cleggett—Old Clegg, the copyreader—Clegg, the commonplace—C. J. Cleggett, the Brooklynite-this person whom young reporters conceived of as the staid, dry prophet of the dusty Fact—was secretly a mighty reservoir of unwritten, unacted, unlived, unspoken romance. He ate it, he drank it, he breathed it, he dreamed it. The usual copyreader, when he closes his eyes and smiles upon a pleasant inward vision, is thinking of starting a chicken-farm in New Jersey. But Cleggett—with gray sprinkled in his hair, sober of face and precise of manner, as the world knew him—lived a hidden life which was one long, wild adventure.

Nobody had ever suspected it. But his room might have given to the discerning a clue to the real man behind the mask which he assumed—which he had been forced to assume in order to earn a living. When he reached the apartment, a few minutes after his encounter on the bridge, and switched the electric light on, the gleams fell upon an astonishing clutter of books and arms....

Stevenson, cavalry sabers, W. Clark Russell, pistols, and Dumas; Jack London, poignards, bowie knives, Stanley Weyman, Captain Marryat, and Dumas; sword canes, Scottish claymores, Cuban machetes, Conan Doyle, Harrison Ainsworth, dress swords, and Dumas; stilettos, daggers, hunting knives, Fenimore Cooper, G. P. R. James, broadswords, Dumas; Gustave Aimard, Rudyard Kipling, dueling swords, Dumas; F. Du Boisgobey, Malay krises, Walter Scott, stick pistols, scimitars, Anthony Hope, single sticks, foils, Dumas; jungles of arms, jumbles of books; arms of all makes and periods; arms on the walls, in the corners, over the fireplace, leaning against the bookshelves, lying in ambush under the bed, peeping out of the wardrobe, propping the windows open, serving as paper weights; pictures, warlike and romantic prints and engravings, pinned to the walls with daggers; in the wardrobe, coats and hats hanging from poignards and stilettos thrust into the wood instead of from nails or hooks. But of all the weapons it was the rapiers, of all the books it was Dumas, that he loved. There was Dumas in French, Dumas in English, Dumas with pictures, Dumas unillustrated, Dumas in cloth, Dumas in leather, Dumas in boards, Dumas in paper covers. Cleggett had been twenty years getting these arms and books together; often he had gone without a dinner in order to make a payment on some blade he fancied. And each weapon was also a book to him; he sensed their stories as he handled them; he felt the personalities of their former owners stirring in him when he picked them up. It was in that room that he dreamed; which is to say, it was in that room that he lived his real life.

Cleggett walked over to his writing desk and pulled out a bulky manuscript. It was his own work. Is it necessary to hint that it was a tale essentially romantic in character?

He flung it into the grate and set fire to it. It represented the labor of two years, but as he watched it burn, stirring the sheets now and then so the flames would catch them more readily, he smiled, unvisited by even the most shadowy second thought of regret.

For why the deuce should a man with $500,000 in his pocket write romances? Why should anyone write anything who is free to live? For the first time in his existence Cleggett was free.

He picked up a sword. It was one of his favorite rapiers. Sometimes people came out of the books—sometimes shadowy forms came back to claim the weapons that had been theirs—and Cleggett fought them. There was not an unscarred piece of furniture in the place. He bent the flexible blade in his hands, tried the point of it, formally saluted, brought the weapon to parade, dallied with his imaginary opponent's sword for an instant....

It seemed as if one of those terrible, but brilliant, duels, with which that room was so familiar, was about to be enacted.... But he laid the rapier down. After all, the rapier is scarcely a thing of this century. Cleggett, for the first time, felt a little impatient with the rapier. It is all very well to DREAM with a rapier. But now, he was free; reality was before him; the world of actual adventure called. He had but to choose!

He considered. He tried to look into that bright, adventurous future. Presently he went to the window, and

gazed out. Tides of night and mystery, flooding in from the farther, dark, mysterious ocean, all but submerged lower Manhattan; high and beautiful above these waves of shadow, triumphing over them and accentuating them, shone a star from the top of the Woolworth building; flecks of light indicated the noble curve of that great bridge which soars like a song in stone and steel above the shifting waters; the river itself was dotted here and there with moving lights; it was a nocturne waiting for its Whistler; here sea and city met in glamour and beauty and illusion.

But it was not the city which called to Cleggett. It was the sea.

A breeze blew in from the bay and stirred his window curtains; it was salt in his nostrils.... And, staring out into the breathing night, he saw a succession of pictures....

Stripped to a pair of cotton trousers, with a dripping cutlass in one hand and a Colt's revolver in the other, an adventurer at the head of a bunch of dogs as desperate as himself fought his way across the reeking decks of a Chinese junk, to close in single combat with a gigantic one-eyed pirate who stood by the helm with a ring of dead men about him and a great two-handed sword upheaved.... This adventurer was—Clement J. Cleggett! ...

Through the phosphorescent waters of a summer sea, reckless of cruising sharks, a sailor's clasp knife in his teeth, glided noiselessly a strong swimmer; he reached the side of a schooner yacht from which rose the wild cries of beauty in distress, swarmed aboard with a muttered prayer that was half a curse, swept the water from his eyes, and with pale,

stern face went about the bloody business of a hero.... Again, this adventurer was Clement J. Cleggett!

Cleggett turned from the window.

"I'll do it," he cried. "I'll do it!"

He grasped a cutlass.

"Pirates!" he cried, swinging it about his head. "That's the thing—pirates and the China Seas!"

And with one frightful sweep of his blade he disemboweled a sofa cushion; the second blow clove his typewriting machine clean to the tattoo marks upon its breast; the third decapitated a sectional bookcase.

But what is a sectional bookcase to a man with $500,000 in his pocket and the Seven Seas before him?

CHAPTER III

A SCHOONER, A SKIPPER, AND A SKULL

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It was a few days later, when a goodly number of the late Uncle Tom's easily negotiable securities had been converted into cash, and the cash deposited in the bank, that Cleggett bought the Jasper B.

He discovered her near the town of Fairport, Long Island, one afternoon. The vessel lay in one of the canals which reach inward from the Great South Bay. She looked as if she might have been there for some time. Evidently, at one period, the Jasper B. had played a part in some catch-coin scheme of summer entertainment; a scheme that had failed. Little trace of it remained except a rotting wooden platform, roofless and built close to the canal, and a gangway arrangement from this platform to the deck of the vessel.

The Jasper B. had seen better days; even a landsman could tell that. But from the blunt bows to the weather-scarred stern, on which the name was faintly discernible, the hulk had an air about it, the air of something that has lived; it was eloquent of a varied and interesting past.

And, to complete the picture, there sat on her deck a gnarled and brown old man. He smoked a short pipe which was partially hidden in a tangle of beard that had once been yellowish red but was now streaked with dirty white; he

fished earnestly without apparent result, and from time to time he spat into the water. Cleggett's nimble fancy at once put rings into his ears and dowered him with a history.

Cleggett noticed, as he walked aboard the vessel, that she seemed to be jammed not merely against, but into the bank of the canal. She was nearer the shore than he had ever seen a vessel of any sort. Some weeds grew in soil that had lodged upon the deck; in a couple of places they sprang as high as the rail. Weeds grew on shore; in fact, it would have taken a better nautical authority than Cleggett to tell offhand just exactly where the land ended and the Jasper B. began. She seemed to be possessed of an odd stability; although the tide was receding the Jasper B. was not perceptibly agitated by the motion of the water. Of anchor, or mooring chains or cables of any sort, there was no sign.

The brown old man—he was brown not only as to the portions of his skin visible through his hair and whiskers, but also as to coat and trousers and worn boots and cap and pipe and flannel shirt—turned around as Cleggett stepped aboard, and stared at the invader with a shaggy-browed intensity that was embarrassing.

It occurred to Cleggett that the old man might own the vessel and make a home of her.

"I beg your pardon if I am intruding," ventured Cleggett, politely, "but do you live here?"

The brown old man made an indeterminate motion of his head, without otherwise replying at once. Then he took a cake of dark, hard-looking tobacco from the starboard pocket of his trousers and a clasp knife from the port side. He shaved off a fresh pipeful, rolled it in his palms, knocked

the old ash from his pipe, refilled and relighted it, all with the utmost deliberation. Then he cut another small piece of tobacco from the "plug" and popped it into his mouth. Cleggett perceived with surprise that he smoked and chewed tobacco at the same time. As he thus refreshed himself he glanced from time to time at Cleggett as if unfavorably impressed. Finally he closed his knife with a click and suddenly piped out in a high, shrill voice:

"No! Do you?"

"I—er—do I what?" It had taken the old man so long to answer that Cleggett had forgotten his own question, and the shrill fierceness of the voice was disconcerting.

He regarded Cleggett contemptuously, spat on the deck, and then demanded truculently:

"D'ye want to buy any seed potatoes?"

"Why—er, no," said Cleggett.

"Humph!" said the brown one, with the air of meaning that it was only to be expected of an idiot like Cleggett that he would NOT want to buy any seed potatoes. But after a further embarrassing silence he relented enough to give Cleggett another chance.

"You want some seed corn!" he announced rather than asked.

"No. I———"

"Tomato plants!" shrilled the brown one, as if daring him to deny it.

"No."

He turned his back on Cleggett, as if he had lost interest, and began to wind up his fishing line on a squeaky reel.

"Who owns this boat?" Cleggett touched him on the elbow.

"Thinkin' of buyin' her?"

"Perhaps. Who owns her?"

"What would you do with her?"

"I might fix her up and sail her. Who owns her?"

"She'll take a sight o' fixin'."

"No doubt. Who did you say owned her?"

The old man, who had finished with the rusty reel, deigned to look at Cleggett again.

"Dunno as I said."

"But who DOES own her?"

"She's stuck fast in the mud and her rudder's gone."

"I see you know a lot about ships," said Cleggett, deferentially, giving up the attempt to find out who owned her. "I picked you out for an old sailor the minute I saw you." He thought he detected a kindlier gleam in the old man's eye as that person listened to these words.

"The' ain't a stick in her," said the ancient fisherman. "She's got no wheel and she's got no nothin'. She used to be used as a kind of a barroom and dancin' platform till the fellow that used her for such went out o' business."

He paused, and then added:

"What might your name be?"

"Cleggett."

He appeared to reflect on the name. But he said:

"If you was to ask me, I'd say her timbers is sound."

"Tell me," said Cleggett, "was she a deep-water ship? Could a ship like her sail around the world, for instance? I can tell that you know all about ships."

Something like a grin of gratified vanity began to show on the brown one's features. He leaned back against the rail and looked at Cleggett with the dawn of approval in his eyes.

"My name's Abernethy," he suddenly volunteered. "Isaiah Abernethy. The fellow that owns her is Goldberg. Abraham Goldberg. Real estate man."

"Cleggett began to get an insight into Mr. Abernethy's peculiar ideas concerning conversation. A native spirit of independence prevented Mr. Abernethy from dealing with an interlocutor's remarks in the sequence that seemed to be desired by the interlocutor. He took a selection of utterances into his mind, rolled them over together, and replied in accordance with some esoteric system of his own.

"Where is Mr. Goldberg's office?" asked Cleggett.

"You've come to the proper party to get set right about ships," said Mr. Abernethy, complacently. "Either you was sent to me by someone that knows I'm the proper party to set you right about ships, or else you got an eye in your own head that can recognize a man that comes of a seafarin' fambly."

"You ARE an old sailor, then? Maybe you are an old skipper? Perhaps you're one of the retired Long Island sea captains we're always hearing so much about?"

"So fur as sailin' her around the world is concerned," said Mr. Abernethy, glancing over the hulk, "if she was fixed up she could be sailed anywheres—anywheres!"

"What would you call her—a schooner?"

"This here Goldberg," said Mr. Abernethy, "has his office over town right accost from the railroad depot."

And with that he put his fishing pole over his shoulder and prepared to leave—a tall, strong-looking old man with long legs and knotty wrists, who moved across the deck with surprising spryness. At the gangplank he sang out without turning his head:

"As far as my bein' a skipper's concerned, they's no law agin' callin' me Cap'n Abernethy if you want to. I come of a seafarin' fambly."

He crossed the platform; when he had gone thirty yards further he stopped, turned around, and shouted:

"Is she a schooner, hey? You want to know is she a schooner? If you was askin' me, she ain't NOTHIN' now. But if you was to ask me again I might say she COULD be schooner-rigged. Lots of boats IS schooner-rigged."

There are affinities between atom and atom, between man and woman, between man and man. There are also affinities between men and things-if you choose to call a ship, which has a spirit of its own, merely a thing. There must have been this affinity between Cleggett and the Jasper B. Only an unusual person would have thought of buying her. But Cleggett loved her at first sight.

Within an hour after he had first seen her he was in Mr. Abraham Goldberg's office.

As he was concluding his purchase—Mr. Goldberg having phoned Cleggett's bankers—he was surprised to discover that he was buying about half an acre of Long Island real estate along with her. For that matter he had thought it a little odd in the first place when he had been directed to a real estate agent as the owner of the craft. But as he knew very little about business, and nothing at all about ships, he