



E. W. HORNUNG

***DEAD
MEN
TELL
NO TALES***

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CHAPTER I. LOVE ON THE OCEAN

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Nothing is so easy as falling in love on a long sea voyage, except falling out of love. Especially was this the case in the days when the wooden clippers did finely to land you in Sydney or in Melbourne under the four full months. We all saw far too much of each other, unless, indeed, we were to see still more. Our superficial attractions mutually exhausted, we lost heart and patience in the disappointing strata which lie between the surface and the bed-rock of most natures. My own experience was confined to the round voyage of the Lady Jermyn, in the year 1853. It was no common experience, as was only too well known at the time. And I may add that I for my part had not the faintest intention of falling in love on board; nay, after all these years, let me confess that I had good cause to hold myself proof against such weakness. Yet we carried a young lady, coming home, who, God knows, might have made short work of many a better man!

Eva Denison was her name, and she cannot have been more than nineteen years of age. I remember her telling me that she had not yet come out, the very first time I assisted her to promenade the poop. My own name was still unknown to her, and yet I recollect being quite fascinated by her frankness and self-possession. She was exquisitely young, and yet ludicrously old for her years; had been admirably educated, chiefly abroad, and, as we were soon to discover, possessed accomplishments which would have made the plainest old maid a popular personage on board

ship. Miss Denison, however, was as beautiful as she was young, with the bloom of ideal health upon her perfect skin. She had a wealth of lovely hair, with strange elusive strands of gold among the brown, that drowned her ears (I thought we were to have that mode again?) in sunny ripples; and a soul greater than the mind, and a heart greater than either, lay sleeping somewhere in the depths of her grave, gray eyes.

We were at sea together so many weeks. I cannot think what I was made of then!

It was in the brave old days of Ballarat and Bendigo, when ship after ship went out black with passengers and deep with stores, to bounce home with a bale or two of wool, and hardly hands enough to reef topsails in a gale. Nor was this the worst; for not the crew only, but, in many cases, captain and officers as well, would join in the stampede to the diggings; and we found Hobson's Bay the congested asylum of all manner of masterless and deserted vessels. I have a lively recollection of our skipper's indignation when the pilot informed him of this disgraceful fact. Within a fortnight, however, I met the good man face to face upon the diggings. It is but fair to add that the Lady Jermyn lost every officer and man in the same way, and that the captain did obey tradition to the extent of being the last to quit his ship. Nevertheless, of all who sailed by her in January, I alone was ready to return at the beginning of the following July.

I had been to Ballarat. I had given the thing a trial. For the most odious weeks I had been a licensed digger on Black Hill Flats; and I had actually failed to make running

expenses. That, however, will surprise you the less when I pause to declare that I have paid as much as four shillings and sixpence for half a loaf of execrable bread; that my mate and I, between us, seldom took more than a few pennyweights of gold-dust in any one day; and never once struck pick into nugget, big or little, though we had the mortification of inspecting the “mammoth masses” of which we found the papers full on landing, and which had brought the gold-fever to its height during our very voyage. With me, however, as with many a young fellow who had turned his back on better things, the malady was short-lived. We expected to make our fortunes out of hand, and we had reckoned without the vermin and the villainy which rendered us more than ever impatient of delay. In my fly-blown blankets I dreamt of London until I hankered after my chambers and my club more than after much fine gold. Never shall I forget my first hot bath on getting back to Melbourne; it cost five shillings, but it was worth five pounds, and is altogether my pleasantest reminiscence of Australia.

There was, however, one slice of luck in store for me. I found the dear old Lady Jermyn on the very eve of sailing, with a new captain, a new crew, a handful of passengers (chiefly steerage), and nominally no cargo at all. I felt none the less at home when I stepped over her familiar side.

In the cuddy we were only five, but a more uneven quintette I defy you to convene. There was a young fellow named Ready, packed out for his health, and hurrying home to die among friends. There was an outrageously lucky digger, another invalid, for he would drink nothing but

champagne with every meal and at any minute of the day, and I have seen him pitch raw gold at the sea-birds by the hour together. Miss Denison was our only lady, and her step-father, with whom she was travelling, was the one man of distinction on board. He was a Portuguese of sixty or thereabouts, Senhor Joaquin Santos by name; at first it was incredible to me that he had no title, so noble was his bearing; but very soon I realized that he was one of those to whom adventitious honors can add no lustre. He treated Miss Denison as no parent ever treated a child, with a gallantry and a courtliness quite beautiful to watch, and not a little touching in the light of the circumstances under which they were travelling together. The girl had gone straight from school to her step-father's estate on the Zambesi, where, a few months later, her mother had died of the malaria. Unable to endure the place after his wife's death, Senhor Santos had taken ship to Victoria, there to seek fresh fortune with results as indifferent as my own. He was now taking Miss Denison back to England, to make her home with other relatives, before he himself returned to Africa (as he once told me) to lay his bones beside those of his wife. I hardly know which of the pair I see more plainly as I write—the young girl with her soft eyes and her sunny hair, or the old gentleman with the erect though wasted figure, the noble forehead, the steady eye, the parchment skin, the white imperial, and the eternal cigarette between his shrivelled lips.

No need to say that I came more in contact with the young girl. She was not less charming in my eyes because she provoked me greatly as I came to know her intimately.

She had many irritating faults. Like most young persons of intellect and inexperience, she was hasty and intolerant in nearly all her judgments, and rather given to being critical in a crude way. She was very musical, playing the guitar and singing in a style that made our shipboard concerts vastly superior to the average of their order; but I have seen her shudder at the efforts of less gifted folks who were also doing their best; and it was the same in other directions where her superiority was less specific. The faults which are most exasperating in another are, of course, one's own faults; and I confess that I was very critical of Eva Denison's criticisms. Then she had a little weakness for exaggeration, for unconscious egotism in conversation, and I itched to tell her so. I felt so certain that the girl had a fine character underneath, which would rise to noble heights in stress or storm: all the more would I long now to take her in hand and mould her in little things, and anon to take her in my arms just as she was. The latter feeling was resolutely crushed. To be plain, I had endured what is euphemistically called "disappointment" already; and, not being a complete coxcomb, I had no intention of courting a second.

Yet, when I write of Eva Denison, I am like to let my pen outrun my tale. I lay the pen down, and a hundred of her sayings ring in my ears, with my own contradictory comments, that I was doomed so soon to repent; a hundred visions of her start to my eyes; and there is the trade-wind singing in the rigging, and loosening a tress of my darling's hair, till it flies like a tiny golden streamer in the tropic sun. There, it is out! I have called her what she was to be in my heart ever after. Yet at the time I must argue with her—with

her! When all my courage should have gone to love-making, I was plucking it up to sail as near as I might to plain remonstrance! I little dreamt how the ghost of every petty word was presently to return and torture me.

So it is that I can see her and hear her now on a hundred separate occasions beneath the awning beneath the stars on deck below at noon or night but plainest of all in the evening of the day we signalled the Island of Ascension, at the close of that last concert on the quarter-deck. The watch are taking down the extra awning; they are removing the bunting and the foot-lights. The lanterns are trailed forward before they are put out; from the break of the poop we watch the vivid shifting patch of deck that each lights up on its way. The stars are very sharp in the vast violet dome above our masts; they shimmer on the sea; and our trucks describe minute orbits among the stars, for the trades have yet to fail us, and every inch of canvas has its fill of the gentle steady wind. It is a heavenly night. The peace of God broods upon His waters. No jarring note offends the ear. In the forecastle a voice is humming a song of Eva Denison's that has caught the fancy of the men; the young girl who sang it so sweetly not twenty minutes since who sang it again and again to please the crew she alone is at war with our little world she alone would head a mutiny if she could.

"I hate the captain!" she says again.

"My dear Miss Denison!" I begin; for she has always been severe upon our bluff old man, and it is not the spirit of contrariety alone which makes me invariably take his part. Coarse he may be, and not one whom the owners would have chosen to command the Lady Jermyn; a good seaman

none the less, who brought us round the Horn in foul weather without losing stitch or stick. I think of the ruddy ruffian in his dripping oilskins, on deck day and night for our sakes, and once more I must needs take his part; but Miss Denison stops me before I can get out another word.

"I am not dear, and I'm not yours," she cries. "I'm only a school-girl—you have all but told me so before to-day! If I were a man—if I were you—I should tell Captain Harris what I thought of him!"

"Why? What has he done now?"

"Now? You know how rude he was to poor Mr. Ready this very afternoon!"

It was true. He had been very rude indeed. But Ready also had been at fault. It may be that I was always inclined to take an opposite view, but I felt bound to point this out, and at any cost.

"You mean when Ready asked him if we were out of our course? I must say I thought it was a silly question to put. It was the same the other evening about the cargo. If the skipper says we're in ballast why not believe him? Why repeat steerage gossip, about mysterious cargoes, at the cuddy table? Captains are always touchy about that sort of thing. I wasn't surprised at his letting out."

My poor love stares at me in the starlight. Her great eyes flash their scorn. Then she gives a little smile—and then a little nod—more scornful than all the rest.

"You never are surprised, are you, Mr. Cole?" says she. "You were not surprised when the wretch used horrible language in front of me! You were not surprised when it was a—dying man—whom he abused!"

I try to soothe her. I agree heartily with her disgust at the epithets employed in her hearing, and towards an invalid, by the irate skipper. But I ask her to make allowances for a rough, uneducated man, rather clumsily touched upon his tender spot. I shall conciliate her presently; the divine pout (so childish it was!) is fading from her lips; the starlight is on the tulle and lace and roses of her pretty evening dress, with its festooned skirts and obsolete flounces; and I am watching her, ay, and worshipping her, though I do not know it yet. And as we stand there comes another snatch from the forecabin:—

“What will you do, love, when I am going.
With white sail flowing,
The seas beyond?
What will you do, love—”

“They may make the most of that song,” says Miss Denison grimly; “it's the last they'll have from me. Get up as many more concerts as you like. I won't sing at another unless it's in the fo'c'sle. I'll sing to the men, but not to Captain Harris. He didn't put in an appearance tonight. He shall not have another chance of insulting me.”

Was it her vanity that was wounded after all? “You forget,” said I, “that you would not answer when he addressed you at dinner.”

“I should think I wouldn't, after the way he spoke to Mr. Ready; and he too agitated to come to table, poor fellow!”

“Still, the captain felt the open slight.”

“Then he shouldn't have used such language in front of me.”

“Your father felt it, too, Miss Denison.”

I hear nothing plainer than her low but quick reply:

“Mr. Cole, my father has been dead many; many years; he died before I can remember. That man only married my poor mother. He sympathizes with Captain Harris—against me; no father would do that. Look at them together now! And you take his side, too; oh! I have no patience with any of you—except poor Mr. Ready in his berth.”

“But you are not going.”

“Indeed I am. I am tired of you all.”

And she was gone with angry tears for which I blamed myself as I fell to pacing the weather side of the poop—and so often afterwards! So often, and with such unavailing bitterness!

Senhor Santos and the captain were in conversation by the weather rail. I fancied poor old Harris eyed me with suspicion, and I wished he had better cause. The Portuguese, however, saluted me with his customary courtesy, and I thought there was a grave twinkle in his steady eye.

“Are you in deesgrace also, friend Cole?” he inquired in his all but perfect English.

“More or less,” said I ruefully.

He gave the shrug of his country—that delicate gesture which is done almost entirely with the back—a subtlety beyond the power of British shoulders.

“The senhora is both weelful and pivish,” said he, mixing the two vowels which (with the aspirate) were his only trouble with our tongue. “It is great grif to me to see her growing so unlike her sainted mother!”

He sighed, and I saw his delicate fingers forsake the cigarette they were rolling to make the sacred sign upon his breast. He was always smoking one cigarette and making another; as he lit the new one the glow fell upon a strange pin that he wore, a pin with a tiny crucifix inlaid in mosaic. So the religious cast of Senhor Santos was brought twice home to me in the same moment, though, to be sure, I had often been struck by it before. And it depressed me to think that so sweet a child as Eva Denison should have spoken harshly of so good a man as her step-father, simply because he had breadth enough to sympathize with a coarse old salt like Captain Harris.

I turned in, however, and I cannot say the matter kept me awake in the separate state-room which was one luxury of our empty saloon. Alas? I was a heavy sleeper then.

CHAPTER II. THE MYSTERIOUS CARGO

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“Wake up, Cole! The ship's on fire!”

It was young Ready's hollow voice, as cool, however, as though he were telling me I was late for breakfast. I started up and sought him wildly in the darkness.

“You're joking,” was my first thought and utterance; for now he was lighting my candle, and blowing out the match with a care that seemed in itself a contradiction.

“I wish I were,” he answered. “Listen to that!”

He pointed to my cabin ceiling; it quivered and creaked; and all at once I was as a deaf man healed.

One gets inured to noise at sea, but to this day it passes me how even I could have slept an instant in the abnormal din which I now heard raging above my head. Sea-boots stamped; bare feet pattered; men bawled; women shrieked; shouts of terror drowned the roar of command.

“Have we long to last?” I asked, as I leaped for my clothes.

“Long enough for you to dress comfortably. Steady, old man! It's only just been discovered; they may get it under. The panic's the worst part at present, and we're out of that.”

But was Eva Denison? Breathlessly I put the question; his answer was reassuring. Miss Denison was with her step-father on the poop. “And both of 'em as cool as cucumbers,” added Ready.

They could not have been cooler than this young man, with death at the bottom of his bright and sunken eyes. He was of the type which is all muscle and no constitution;

athletes one year, dead men the next; but until this moment the athlete had been to me a mere and incredible tradition. In the afternoon I had seen his lean knees totter under the captain's fire. Now, at midnight—the exact time by my watch—it was as if his shrunken limbs had expanded in his clothes; he seemed hardly to know his own flushed face, as he caught sight of it in my mirror.

“By Jove!” said he, “this has put me in a fine old fever; but I don't know when I felt in better fettle. If only they get it under! I've not looked like this all the voyage.”

And he admired himself while I dressed in hot haste: a fine young fellow; not at all the natural egotist, but cast for death by the doctors, and keenly incredulous in his bag of skin. It revived one's confidence to hear him talk. But he forgot himself in an instant, and gave me a lead through the saloon with a boyish eagerness that made me actually suspicious as I ran. We were nearing the Line. I recalled the excesses of my last crossing, and I prepared for some vast hoax at the last moment. It was only when we plunged upon the crowded quarter-deck, and my own eyes read lust of life and dread of death in the starting eyes of others, that such lust and such dread consumed me in my turn, so that my veins seemed filled with fire and ice.

To be fair to those others, I think that the first wild panic was subsiding even then; at least there was a lull, and even a reaction in the right direction on the part of the males in the second class and steerage. A huge Irishman at their head, they were passing buckets towards the after-hold; the press of people hid the hatchway from us until we gained the poop; but we heard the buckets spitting and a hose-pipe

hissing into the flames below; and we saw the column of white vapor rising steadily from their midst.

At the break of the poop stood Captain Harris, his legs planted wide apart, very vigorous, very decisive, very profane. And I must confess that the shocking oaths which had brought us round the Horn inspired a kind of confidence in me now. Besides, even from the poop I could see no flames. But the night was as beautiful as it had been an hour or two back; the stars as brilliant, the breeze even more balmy, the sea even more calm; and we were hove-to already, against the worst.

In this hour of peril the poop was very properly invaded by all classes of passengers, in all manner of incongruous apparel, in all stages of fear, rage, grief and hysteria; as we made our way among this motley nightmare throng, I took Ready by the arm.

"The skipper's a brute," said I, "but he's the right brute in the right place to-night, Ready!"

"I hope he may be," was the reply. "But we were off our course this afternoon; and we were off it again during the concert, as sure as we're not on it now."

His tone made me draw him to the rail.

"But how do you know? You didn't have another look, did you?"

"Lots of looks-at the stars. He couldn't keep me from consulting them; and I'm just as certain of it as I'm certain that we've a cargo aboard which we're none of us supposed to know anything about."

The latter piece of gossip was, indeed, all over the ship; but this allusion to it struck me as foolishly irrelevant and

frivolous. As to the other matter, I suggested that the officers would have had more to say about it than Ready, if there had been anything in it.

"Officers be damned!" cried our consumptive, with a sound man's vigor. "They're ordinary seamen dressed up; I don't believe they've a second mate's certificate between them, and they're frightened out of their souls."

"Well, anyhow, the skipper isn't that."

"No; he's drunk; he can shout straight, but you should hear him try to speak."

I made my way aft without rejoinder. "Invalid's pessimism," was my private comment. And yet the sick man was whole for the time being; the virile spirit was once more master of the recreant members; and it was with illogical relief that I found those I sought standing almost unconcernedly beside the binnacle.

My little friend was, indeed, pale enough, and her eyes great with dismay; but she stood splendidly calm, in her travelling cloak and bonnet, and with all my soul I hailed the hardihood with which I had rightly credited my love. Yes! I loved her then. It had come home to me at last, and I no longer denied it in my heart. In my innocence and my joy I rather blessed the fire for showing me her true self and my own; and there I stood, loving her openly with my eyes (not to lose another instant), and bursting to tell her so with my lips.

But there also stood Senhor Santos, almost precisely as I had seen him last, cigarette, tie-pin, and all. He wore an overcoat, however, and leaned upon a massive ebony cane, while he carried his daughter's guitar in its case, exactly as

though they were waiting for a train. Moreover, I thought that for the first time he was regarding me with no very favoring glance.

"You don't think it serious?" I asked him abruptly, my heart still bounding with the most incongruous joy.

He gave me his ambiguous shrug; and then, "A fire at sea is surely serious," said he.

"Where did it break out?"

"No one knows; it may have come of your concert."

"But they are getting the better of it?"

"They are working wonders so far, senhor."

"You see, Miss Denison," I continued ecstatically, "our rough old diamond of a skipper is the right man in the right place after all. A tight man in a tight place, eh?" and I laughed like an idiot in their calm grave faces.

"Senhor Cole is right," said Santos, "although his hilarity sims a leetle out of place. But you must never spik against Captain 'Arrees again, menma."

"I never will," the poor child said; yet I saw her wince whenever the captain raised that hoarse voice of his in more and more blasphemous exhortation; and I began to fear with Ready that the man was drunk.

My eyes were still upon my darling, devouring her, revelling in her, when suddenly I saw her hand twitch within her step-father's arm. It was an answering start to one on his part. The cigarette was snatched from his lips. There was a commotion forward, and a cry came aft, from mouth to mouth:

"The flames! The flames!"

I turned, and caught their reflection on the white column of smoke and steam. I ran forward, and saw them curling and leaping in the hell-mouth of the hold.

The quarter-deck now staged a lurid scene: that blazing trap-door in its midst; and each man there a naked demon madly working to save his roasting skin. Aft the mainmast the deck-pump was being ceaselessly worked by relays of the passengers; dry blankets were passed forward, soaking blankets were passed aft, and flung flat into the furnace one after another. These did more good than the pure water: the pillar of smoke became blacker, denser: we were at a crisis; a sudden hush denoted it; even our hoarse skipper stood dumb.

I had rushed down into the waist of the ship—blushing for my delay—and already I was tossing blankets with the rest. Looking up in an enforced pause, I saw Santos whispering in the skipper's ear, with the expression of a sphinx but no lack of foreign gesticulation—behind them a fringe of terror-stricken faces, parted at that instant by two more figures, as wild and strange as any in that wild, strange scene. One was our luckless lucky digger, the other a gigantic Zambesi nigger, who for days had been told off to watch him; this was the servant (or rather the slave) of Senhor Santos.

The digger planted himself before the captain. His face was reddened by a fire as consuming as that within the bowels of our gallant ship. He had a huge, unwieldy bundle under either arm.

“Plain question—plain answer,” we heard him stutter. “Is there any —— chance of saving this —— ship?”

His adjectives were too foul for print; they were given with such a special effort at distinctness, however, that I was smiling one instant, and giving thanks the next that Eva Denison had not come forward with her guardian. Meanwhile the skipper had exchanged a glance with Senhor Santos, and I think we all felt that he was going to tell us the truth.

He told it in two words—"Very little."

Then the first individual tragedy was enacted before every eye. With a yell the drunken maniac rushed to the rail. The nigger was at his heels—he was too late. Uttering another and more piercing shriek, the madman was overboard at a bound; one of his bundles preceded him; the other dropped like a cannon-ball on the deck.

The nigger caught it up and carried it forward to the captain.

Harris held up his hand. We were still before we had fairly found our tongues. His words did run together a little, but he was not drunk.

"Men and women," said he, "what I told that poor devil is Gospel truth; but I didn't tell him we'd no chance of saving our lives, did I? Not me, because we have! Keep your heads and listen to me. There's two good boats on the davits amidships; the chief will take one, the second officer the other; and there ain't no reason why every blessed one of you shouldn't sleep in Ascension to-morrow night. As for me, let me see every soul off of my ship and perhaps I may follow; but by the God that made you, look alive! Mr. Arnott—Mr. McClellan—man them boats and lower away. You can't get quit o' the ship too soon, an' I don't mind tellin' you why.