

The Moonlight

I STRAINED TO SEE THE SHORE WE WERE LEAVING AND when, at last, it melted into the darkness, I was overwhelmed with sleepiness. But it is hard to settle down in the bottom of a small boat. It curved where my back didn't; I was in danger of decapitation from the wooden arm to which a sail was attached, and which swung unexpectedly from side to side. And when I thought: Here is space to stretch out in, I found I needed grasshopper legs to make room for my head, or else a turtle's neck I could pull in to make room for my legs.

I suppose I dozed now and then during that long trip. At times, the water seemed only a dense shadow which we skimmed across to avoid falling through. The men spoke in undertones about nothing familiar to me. The sail, a three-cornered patch of whiteness, swung over my head. The little

The Moonlight

boat groaned and creaked. The water tapped ceaselessly against the hull like a steady fall of rain on a roof.

Hours passed with nothing to mark them until in the east the sky paled ever so faintly as though a drop of daylight had touched the black. I wanted to stand up, to stretch. But when I started to my feet, Claudius' voice rang out so loud I was sure he would be heard on every shore. "Sit down, boy!"

We passed a small island. I saw the glimmer of a light in a window—only that solitary, flickering yellow beacon. I felt hopeless and sad as though everyone in the world had died save the three of us and the unknown lamplighter on the shore. Then, as if daylight was being born inside the boat itself, I began to make out piles of rope, a wooden bucket, a heap of rusty looking net, the thick boots of my captors.

"There!" said the big-jawed man, pointing straight ahead.

And there was our destination, a sailing ship, its masts looking as high as the steeple of St. Louis Cathedral, its deck empty, a shape as astonishing on the expanse of dawn gray water as a church would have been. Across its bow were painted the words: *The Moonlight*.

I was hauled up a rope ladder from which I dared not look down, and no sooner had I reached the deck when from being so stiff and tired, I fell flat on my face. At once, my

The Slave Dancer

nostrils were flooded with a smell so sickening, so menacing, that it stopped my breath.

"He's not standing well," said Claudius.

"Then we must stretch him," said the other, wagging his chin.

I breathed shallowly. Despite my fatigue, I sprang to my feet and stood there quivering, my head bent back so that I faced the sky. The smell persisted but it was weaker the farther my head was from the deck. Perhaps the two men, who were tall, didn't smell it at all.

"Maybe he swims better than he stands," said Claudius.

"We'll rest him in a barrel of vinegar," said the other with a broad grin. Then he placed my fife to his lips and blew mightily. His cheeks puffed out but he could make no sound.

"You haven't the gift, Purvis," said Claudius.

"Leave him be," ordered another voice, and a third man appeared from out of a little door on the deck. He was much older than my captors, and he was dressed in a thick garment that hung from his shoulders like a quilt. "Purvis, Claudius, leave him be," he repeated. "He's not going to swim away. Give him his instrument and tell him where he is."

The old man hardly glanced at me, and there was no particular kindness in his voice. Purvis, who had taken a hard grip on my wrist, dropped it.

The Moonlight

"Thank you," I said, wishing I did not sound so timid.

"Don't waste your breath," said the old man.

"I told you you were going on a sea voyage," said Purvis.

"But I must get home," I cried. While he spoke, I had looked around me. I had no sense of the ship at all or how one should move on it or where there was a place to lie down, the thought of which made me groan out loud.

"Now don't give up heart, boy," said Purvis. "You'll get home. Claudius and I will see to that. But it won't be for a bit."

"Oh, when!" I shouted.

"Not long at all," said Claudius softly, trying to touch my head as I ducked away from him. "With luck, you'll be back in four months."

My knees turned to pudding. "My mother will think I'm dead!" I cried, and ran wildly away from the three men only to collide with a wooden structure of some sort and knock myself to the deck where I curled up like a worm.

I thought desperately of my mother and Betty in the room with that apricot brocade. I cursed the rich stuff and the lady who had ordered a gown from my mother, and the candles I had gotten from Aunt Agatha. I cursed myself for taking the longest way home.

The old man bent over me. "You've run into my bench," he said peevishly. "Get up now and behave yourself."

The Slave Dancer

I got to my feet. "It's my mother who'll be heartbroken," I said in a low voice, hoping to stir some feeling in him. "My father drowned long ago, and now she's lost me."

Purvis grabbed my arm. "We've taken care of all that, boy!" he insisted. "Claudius and me spoke to your mother and explained we'd borrowed you for a while."

I knew he was lying. But I was afraid to show him that I knew for fear he'd wrap me up in that canvas again.

"The wind's changing," Purvis muttered.

"Indeed, it's not," said the old man.

"What do you know, Ned? You can't tell whether you're on land or sea anyhow!"

"I don't require to," replied the old man sharply. Then he turned his attention back to me. "I don't approve of it," he said. "This taking of boys and men against their will. But I have nothing to do with it. We had got a boy, but he ran away in Charleston just before we sailed. Still, it isn't my fault. I'm only a carpenter. You might as well settle yourself to what's happened. The Captain will have what he will have no matter how he gets it."

"Who's on the watch?" inquired Purvis as he pressed my life into my hand.

"Sam Wick and Cooley," answered Ned.

"I know nothing about ships," I ventured.

The Moonlight

"You don't need to, no more than Ned here. He does his carpentering, and can even do surgery if he feels like it. But he can't tell a bowsprit from a topmast. You'll only be doing what you've done before, playing your pipe."

"For the Captain?" I asked.

Purvis opened his mouth so wide he looked like an alligator, and shouted with laughter. "No, no. Not for the Captain, but for kings and princes and other such like trash. Why, we'll have a ship full of royalty, won't we, Ned?" he said.

Misery made my head ache. I wandered away from Purvis and Ned not caring if they threw me in the water or hung me for a sail. They paid no attention to my departure but went back to quarreling about the wind.

I couldn't even feel a breeze. A gull like a puff of smoke flew across the bow. Everything except the dark smudge of shore was gray now, sky and water and dull clouds. It looked like rain. I caught my foot in a coil of heavy chain, and I bumped my shoulder against a mast. Except for the mutter of Purvis' voice, I heard only the fluttering sound of water about the hull of the ship. A man passed me wearing a woolen cap, his gaze on the horizon.

There was no one to save me—and I didn't even know from what I needed to be saved. As quickly as my mother's sharp scissors cut a thread, snip! I had been cut off from the

The Slave Dancer

only life I knew. When I felt a hand on my arm, I supposed it was Purvis come to tease me, so I didn't turn around. But a strange voice asked, "What's your name?"

It was a plain question, asked in a plain voice. I was startled, as though life had come straight again, and turned to find a tall heavy-limbed man standing behind me. I made no reply at first. He smiled encouragingly and said, "I'm Benjamin Stout and sorry for what's been done to you."

I wanted to ask him why it had been done, but I was so grateful to be spoken to in such a sensible way that I didn't wish to provoke him. I said nothing. He leaned against the bulwark.

"How old are you? Thirteen, I'd guess. I was pressed too, although when I was older than you, and for a much longer voyage than this will be. A whole year I was gone. But then, you see, I got to like it, the sea and all, even the hard life on a ship, so that when I go ashore, I get restless in a few hours. I get half mad with restlessness. Though I promise you, there are days at sea when all you want is to be on a path that has no end, a path you can run straight ahead on till your breath gives out. Oh, I'm not speaking of gales and storms and squalls. I mean the flat dead days without wind."

"I'm thirteen," I said.

"Thirteen," he repeated thoughtfully. "Just as I said.

The Moonlight

You'll see some bad things, but if you didn't see them, they'd still be happening so you might as well."

I couldn't make sense of all that. I asked him the question that was uppermost in my mind.

"Where are we going?"

"We're sailing to Whydah in the Bight of Benin."

"Where is that?"

"Africa."

For all the calmness with which he said *Africa*, he might as well have said Royal Street. I felt like a bird caught in a room.

"You haven't told me your name," he said.

"Jessie Bollier," I replied in a whisper. For a second I was ready to throw myself off the ship. The very name of that distant place was like an arrow aimed at me.

"Jessie, we'll shake hands, now that we know each other. I'll show you to our quarters where you'll sleep. You'll get used to the hammock in a night or two. I've got so I won't sleep in anything else, and when I'm ashore, I prefer even the floor to a bed."

"Here!" roared Purvis, his heavy steps pounding toward us. "Is this boy bawling up trouble?"

"Shut your great face," Benjamin Stout called over his shoulder, then said to me, "He's harmless, only noisy. But watch out for the Mate, Nick Spark. And when you speak to

The Slave Dancer

the Captain, be sure and answer everything he asks you, even if you must lie."

Purvis dropped a heavy hand on my shoulder. "You've met Saint Stout, I see. Come along. Captain Cawthorne wants to see what sort of fish we caught."

His hand slid down and gripped my arm. Half dragging me, for I couldn't match his strides, he took me to a part of the ship which had a kind of small house on it, the roof forming what I later learned was the poop deck.

"Stand, Purvis," a voice ordered, as dry as paper and as sharp as vinegar. Purvis became a stone. I twitched my arm away from his grasp and rubbed it.

"Step forward, boy," said the voice. I took a step toward the two men who stood in front of the small house.

"What a fearful runt!" boomed the smaller man. Paper-voice agreed, adding a high-pitched "Sir" like a sour whistle at the end of his words. I supposed from that that the short fellow was the Captain.

"Your name?" he asked.

"Jessie Bollier."

"Never heard such a name."

"It used to be Beaulieu but my father didn't want to be thought French, so he changed it," I hastened to explain, recalling Stout's advice to answer everything I was asked.

The Moonlight

"Just as bad," said the Captain.

"Yes," I agreed.

"Captain!" roared the Captain. I jumped.

The thin man said, "Address the Captain as Captain, you boy."

"Captain," I echoed weakly.

"Purvis!" cried the Captain, "Why are you standing there, you Irish bucket! Get off to your work!"

Purvis slid away soundlessly.

"So you're one of them Creoles, are you?" asked the Captain.

"It was only my grandfather who was from France, Captain," I replied apologetically.

"Bad fellows, the French," remarked the Captain, scowling. "Pirates all of them."

"My father wasn't a pirate," I declared.

"Indeed!" sneered the Captain. He looked straight up at the sky, an odd smile on his lips. Then he coughed violently, clapped his hands together, grew silent and stared at me.

"Do you know why you are employed on this ship?"

"To play my fife for kings," I answered.

"Did you hear that, First!" the Captain cried. "That's Purvis-talk, ain't it? I'd know it anywhere. It was Purvis told you that, wasn't it?"

The Slave Dancer

"Yes, Captain," I said.

"Purvis is an Irish bucket," the thin man said reflectively as though he'd only just thought of it himself.

"Well, now, listen, you miserable pygmy!"

"I will, Captain."

Without a word of warning, the little man snatched me up in his arms, held me fast to his chest and bit my right ear so hard I screamed. He set me down instantly, and I would have fallen to the deck if the thin man hadn't yanked me up by my bruised arm.

"He answers too fast, Spark," said the Captain, "but that may teach him!"

The thin man gave me a shake and let me loose, saying, "Yes, Captain, he answers much too fast."

"We are sailing to Africa," said the Captain, looking over my head, in a voice altogether different from the one with which he had been speaking. He was suddenly, insanely, calm. I wiped the blood from my neck and tried to concentrate on what he was saying.

We were sailing to Africa, the Captain repeated with a lofty gesture of his hand. And this fast little clipper would keep us safe not only from the British, but from any other misguided pirates who would try to interfere in the lucrative and God-granted trade of slaves. He, Captain Cawthorne,

The Moonlight

would purchase as many slaves as possible from the barracoon in Why dah, exchanging for them both money, \$10 a head, and rum and tobacco, and returning via the island of São Tomé to Cuba where the slaves would be sold to a certain Spaniard. The ship would then return to Charleston with a hold full of molasses, and the whole voyage would take—with any luck at all—four months.

"But what is wanted is strong black youths," the Captain said excitedly, slapping Spark on his shoulder. "I won't have Ibos. They're soft as melons and kill themselves if they're not watched twenty-four hours a day. I will not put up with such creatures!" Spark nodded rapidly like a chicken pecking at corn. Then the Captain scowled at me.

"You'd best learn to make yourself useful about this ship," he said. "You'd best learn every sail, for you ain't going to earn your way just by playing a few tunes to make the niggers jig!" He suddenly sighed and appeared to grow extremely dispirited. "Ah . . . you finish, Spark."

Spark finished, but what he said I'll never know. I had ceased to listen for I was thinking hard upon the one fact I'd understood. I was on a slaver.

Sometime later, Benjamin Stout showed me the quarters I was to share with the seamen. Tween decks, he called it, and you wouldn't have thought a few boys could find room

The Slave Dancer

in the tight airless space, much less a crew of grown men. Stout took some garments from his sea chest and handed them to me.

"They'll be too big for you," he said, "but they'll do when you're soaked to the skin and need a change."

I stared up at the hammocks slung from the beams.

"You'll get used to them," Stout assured me. "Come along. I'll show you where we go for the needs of nature." I followed him to the bow of the ship. Just below was suspended a kind of platform with a grating for a floor. Two rope ends swept gently against the grating as the water shifted the ship about. "It's bad there in a heavy sea," Stout said, "but you'll get used to that, too."

"I'll not get used to anything," I replied, touching my ear now caked with dried blood.

"You have no idea how much you can get used to," said Stout.

Hungry and miserable as I was, I fell asleep in a hammock which curled about me like a peapod. I never did get entirely used to the hammock, but in time, I learned how to keep myself from falling out of it, or twisting it so I couldn't free my limbs. And although at first, upon waking, I always cracked my head against the deck above, I developed the habit of passing from deep sleep to full attention in an instant.

The Moonlight

After a few days, I had stopped clinging to the hammock like a wounded crab clings to a bit of weed.

But that first afternoon, the crack against my skull that I suffered as I sat up removed any doubts I might have had that I was dreaming. The first object my eyes rested upon was crawling idly along my leg as though I was a yard of bread. The insect was no stranger to me for we had them in all sizes at home. But I'd never thought a cockroach was a sea-going creature. I didn't care for the breed. Still, I found it a touch comforting that such a familiar land thing was making itself at home on me.

Enough light filtered through the door joints for me to see I was alone in this hole with its swaying hammocks. The smell of the place, nourished by darkness, protected against cleansing air, was terrible. I was able to distinguish sweat, soured cheese, tobacco, musty cloth and damp timbers and binding it all together, a trace of that vile smell that had forced me to my feet after I'd fallen to the deck. I heard wood creaking as though it was close to splitting. I wondered what was making my stomach so uneasy.

I brushed off the cockroach, escaped from my hammock and went up the ladder and out onto the deck. The sky was full of sunlight, and the ship's great white sails were stiffened by wind. I drew a deep breath of fresh air, which

The Slave Dancer

went straight to my foggy brain, and felt such a violent pang of hunger I pushed my fist against my teeth. I staggered as I moved, perhaps because I didn't know where to go, but most likely because I had never walked on the deck of a moving ship. There were several sailors near me engaged in various tasks which they didn't interrupt to even glance my way. A hand touched my shoulder. I found Ben Stout standing next to me, holding out a thick piece of bread.

"Go below to eat it," he said. "I let you sleep because you had such a harrowing night of it, but you'll be put to work soon enough."

"Thank you!" I cried gratefully, and would have spoken further with him, but he waved me away. "Don't let anyone see you eating on deck. Get below at once. I'm on the watch now. Move!"

Just before I ducked down to our quarters, I caught sight of Purvis, his hands on the helm, his feet spread wide apart, his huge face as serious as I had seen it.

I wolfed down the bread in the dark, then, unable to postpone any longer what Stout had called the needs of nature, I found my way back to that dreadful platform hanging above the water. I was so frightened, I held on to both ropes and shut my eyes tight as though by not actually *seeing* my circumstances, they would not exist. I heard a loud snort of laughter. Morti-

The Moonlight

fied, I opened my eyes at once to see who was observing me, for I assumed the laughter was at my expense. I looked up and saw four men, among them Purvis, leaning on the rail, their teeth bared in grins, watching me closely. I managed to gain the bow with only a scrape or two on my shins and turning my back on the jeerers, faced the shore along which we were sailing. I pretended great interest in what I saw. Soon, I grew interested in fact, for I observed that all the trees were pointing in one direction as though they'd been planted crookedly.

"Come along," Purvis said. "Stop that sulking."

When I didn't reply, he stooped over me quickly and seeing that I was gazing determinedly at the shore, he too looked in that direction.

"You'd never manage it," he said.

"I was only wondering why the trees are so bent," I said coolly.

"Prevailing wind," he answered. "Now stop being so high and mighty!"

"I suppose the ship is steering herself," I said with as much sarcasm as I could heave up at the brute.

He turned me straight about and gripped my head so I was forced to look at the helm. "My time's done," he said. "That's John Cooley who's helmsman now." Then he turned me once again.

The Slave Dancer

"This is Jessie, our music man," he said to the other three seamen who stood looking at me. "And that's Isaac Porter and Louis Gardere and Seth Smith."

"Play us a tune," said Isaac Porter cheerfully.

I shook my head at which Purvis seized my sore arm and led me away. "There's some more you haven't met, not counting Cook. There's eight in the crew, excepting Cook, Ned, Spark and the Master. That means there are thirteen of us now, all because of you, so watch your step for if something goes wrong, it'll be your fault. Don't forget Jonah and what happened to him, only you shall land up in the belly of a shark—"

"Pleasanter than this . . ." I muttered.

Purvis ignored my remark. "You'll have some grub with me now," he went on. "I saw Saint Stout pass you that bread, and if I fancied I could have him flogged for that. I'm the only one beside Spark and Stout who's sailed with the Captain before, and I could tell you stories about him that would melt your ribs. A word to the wise—he likes to eat well, and he likes to beat men. The only good in him is that he's a fine seaman. Terrible, terrible with his crews, and only a little less so with the blacks. But he wants *them* in good health to make his profit. But God help the sick nigger for he'll drop him overboard between the brandy and the lighting of his pipe!"

The Moonlight

By this time, he'd led me to a hatchway. We descended to what Purvis called the galley. There, stirring up a huge pot of lentils with a wooden ladle as though he was rowing a boat against the tide, was the thinnest man I'd ever seen. His skin was the color of suet except for uneven salmon-colored patches along the prominent ridges of his cheekbones.

"Give me my tea, Curry," demanded Purvis.

Curry slowly turned his head without ceasing his ladling, and gave Purvis such a furious look that I expected him to attack him physically. Purvis nicked my neck with his finger and announced, as if Curry was deaf, "Cooks are all like him, though Curry is worse than some. It's the smoke that maddens them, and whatever good humor they start with is fried to a crisp by the heat."

Curry suddenly abandoned his ladle, darted about a minute or two, then slammed a bowl of tea in front of Purvis, and a square biscuit that banged on the table like a stone. Purvis took a filthy rag from under his shirt, wrapped it around the biscuit, then let his fist fall upon it like a hammer.

"I should like to find out who makes these things," he said pensively, as his fist fell, "for I would do the same to them as I am doing to this biscuit."

He rose and hunted about in the greasy dark smoke that surrounded Curry like a cloak, returning with something in

The Slave Dancer

his hand which he tossed at me. It was the driest curl of sorry looking meat I'd ever seen. Then he pushed his bowl of tea toward me. "Take a bite of the beef, then a swig of tea. Hold them both in your mouth until the beef softens."

As I sat there on the narrow little bench, breathing in the close clay-like smell of lentils, and drinking tea from Purvis' bowl, I felt almost happy. When I remembered the wretchedness of my situation, I wondered if there was something about a ship that makes men glide from one state of mind to another as effortlessly as the ship cuts through water.

John Cooley and Sam Wick were the last members of the crew I met. Cooley did not even glance at me, and Wick laughed foolishly and observed that my feet were too large for the rest of me. I joined Purvis on the bench he'd brought from some place below, and I watched him mending a sail. "Sews like a lady," shouted Claudius Sharkey as he passed us by.

Porter and Wick and Sharkey were topmen, Purvis told me, responsible for the masts, while the rest of the crew worked the lower sails and took turns at the wheel. As for him, he said proudly, he was a sail-man, and knew all there was to know about sails which was "as good as knowing the gospels straight through, and takes a lot more thought."

I was still afraid of Purvis, for I thought him as unpredictable in his moods as a frog is in the direction of its

The Moonlight

jumps. In some ways, Purvis resembled a very large frog. But he seemed to have taken a sort of fondness for me, and that evening, I learned a good deal my eyes alone could not have taught me.

Purvis was never idle, nor were the other sailors unless they'd just come off watch. I saw that day, and didn't forget, that a ship must be tended to day and night as though it was the very air one took into one's lungs, and that to neglect it for a second was to risk dangers which, at that time, I could only imagine when Purvis recounted tales of storms at sea, masts split like twigs, crews swept overboard by giant waves, men caught in flying anchor cables and flung, broken, into the churning water. There was no way to leave off the work of a ship.

I hadn't noticed the man way up near the top of a mast until Purvis pointed him out.

"There's always someone stationed on the foretop sail-yard," he said. "And if a sail appears, the Captain must look through his spyglass to make sure what it is."

Then he spoke of pirating, especially in the waters near the islands of the West Indies. When I asked him why Captain Cawthorne had spoken of the British he looked both sly and angry.

"They're worse than the pirates, Jessie!" he cried.

The Slave Dancer

"Why, they try to board our ships as if we still belonged to them. But there's laws against that, and those laws give us the right to sink them if they try anything. Oh, but they do make trouble for us, blockading the African coast, and sniffing about Cuba."

"But why?" I asked.

"They've different laws than us. They've entirely stopped the slave trade in their own country—the worse for them—and would like us to copy them in their folly. Why, the trade is the best trade there is! Black Gold, we call it! Still, there's one way they help us. The native chiefs are so greedy for our trade goods, they sell their people cheaper than they ever did to tempt us to run the British blockade. So we profit despite the damned Englishmen."

Later, he spoke of the arms *The Moonlight* carried, but gave me no details of them, nor would he explain what he meant when he mentioned flags from various countries which the Captain kept in his quarters.

At first the wind had been a tight fist, shoving us on, but now it was an open hand pushing us before it at such a rousing clip I felt my own arms had become wings as we flew across the water. Ben Stout called out to me that the ship was *speaking*. He pointed down at the wake that purred and foamed behind us as though a razor had slit the

The Moonlight

dark surface of the sea and allowed its mysterious light to shine through.

I had often noticed the gait of sailors about the river front in New Orleans, and understood it better now as I made my way about the ship. Although our progress was smooth that day, one of my legs always felt shorter than the other. You had to keep a kind of balance as though you were walking along the back of a cantering horse.

Except for Purvis and Ben Stout, the rest of the crew barely noticed me. They did not speak much among themselves, going about their work in a hard relentless fashion.

Ben Stout showed me a wooden pin that fitted into a hole in the rail. It had several purposes, he explained, one of which was to make fast a rope by winding it on a cleat, another, to knock an unruly seaman on his head, and still another, to kill rats. This last concerned me. Rat hunts were part of the ship's routine, he said. They'd eat up everything if they weren't kept down. I must learn to seek them out, kill them and toss them overboard.

There were other crawling and creeping things, beetles and worms and such like, but they were as much a part of a ship as its timbers and, he said, could be killed for pleasure, not out of necessity. He removed a hatch cover and showed me the hold where the drinking water was stored in wooden

The Slave Dancer

casks. "You'll have to be sly to run after the rats down there," he said. "They're as smart as the Devil himself."

"And if I'm bit?" I asked, pretending by my tone I was only making a joke.

"Bite them back," he replied. "And when it rains, you'll help set out the casks for fresh water. The worms and the beetles can make off with our stores—we can survive a storm with broken masts, but without water, we're a dead ship."

He told me then that we must all share one bucket of water a day for our washing, and the longer the voyage took, the less drinking water we would be given. "The Mate doles it out once a day, not a drop more than the Captain allows."

"And does the Captain get rationed too?"

Ben snorted. "The Captain of this ship would drink your blood before he'd go without. Haven't you noticed his chicken coops? The boxes of vegetables he's got growing there aft?" I shook my head. I had no wish to go near the Captain. My ear was still sore. Ben gestured at the hold.

"That's where the slaves will be stowed," he said, "right on those casks, and in the aft hold when we've unloaded the rum."

"But there's not room for a dozen men!" I exclaimed.

"Captain Cawthorne's a tight packer," Ben said.

"I'm what!" roared a voice.

The Moonlight

We turned from the hold to discover Cawthorne himself standing not two feet away.

"Sir," said Stout smartly. "I was explaining his work to the boy."

"Were you indeed? I thought you was describing *my* work to Bollweevil here. That's your name, ain't it, lad? Yes. I'm a tight packer, as neat as a pin, stack them up like flannel cakes, one top of the other. Ah—it's the British who've forced me to be so ingenious, Bollweevil, for we must have speed before all else, and speed means a ship without the comforts, stripped down, a ship like a winged serpent. You see—" he held out his arms, and I ducked, thinking he meant to mark my other ear, but he dropped them to his sides almost at once, shook his head, and muttering something about studding sails, stomped off aft.

I sighed mightily.

Ben Stout said, "You can't never tell about him . . ."

He was about to replace the hatch cover, when, perhaps because of some slight change of wind, I caught a powerful whiff of that ugly smell mixed with something else. I sniffed, thinking to myself what a comical human habit it was—how often I'd observed someone who, offended by an odor and proclaiming loudly how awful it was, continued to sniff away as though, in fact, he was smelling a rose.

The Slave Dancer

"That's chloride of lime," Ben said.

"What's that?"

"What we sprinkled in the hold after our last cargo of slaves was unloaded."

"Why?"

Ben put his foot on the hatch. "To clear out the stench. But it never quite goes away."

I felt a thrill of fear as if a bottle had crashed next to me, and the bits of glass were flying toward my face. I asked him nothing more.

Claudius Sharkey was at the helm and he let me look at the ship's compass. It seemed to me to be the finest looking thing aboard although I understood it no better than I did the time divisions marked by the ship's bell.

Curry had made a spice duff for our supper. I amused myself by amassing as many raisins as I could before Purvis snatched them up and thrust them in his big mouth, grinning at me and chewing at the same time. I wanted to stay and watch Curry knead the flour paste in his kneading trough, but Stout ordered me to get below and to my hammock.

I felt the ship's movement in my very bones as I lay there, rocking back and forth. I thought of the rigging, the yards, the ratlines up which I'd seen the seamen move as easily as though they'd been walking on level ground, and I hoped

The Moonlight

I'd never have to set foot on those precarious spider webs. The ratlines began to blur and extend into a wake of rope as sleepiness overcame me. Suddenly I heard a great shout. I peered over the edge of my hammock.

There was Purvis sitting on a sea chest, drinking from a mug.

"And I'll have none of that," he says. "And I'll have some of that," she says. "And we'll none of us have none of that," we say," he roared. Then he grew silent and peered up at my face. By the weak light of the oil lamp, I saw a benign smile stretch his big mouth.

"Did you hear something, Jessie, lad?" he asked gravely.

"Why, yes," I replied. "I heard you shouting about some of this and some of that."

"You're mad!" he cried, rising to his feet. "There wasn't nobody here but me, and I was only quietly drinking my little tot of warm wine."

I fell back, breathing as softly as I could, praying he'd forget I was there.

It began again—"and we'll none of us have none of that," we say . . ." Silence.

"Did you hear anything, lad?" asked Purvis in a wheedling voice.

"No, sir, nothing at all!" I replied hastily.

The Slave Dancer

"Then you're deaf as a post!" he exclaimed, and clapped his hand against the bottom of my hammock with considerable force.

I lay motionless, my hands over my mouth to muffle my laughter. Once I let it out, I knew I'd not be able to stop, such had been my fear, such was now my relief.

The Shrouds

THE TRUTH CAME SLOWLY LIKE A STORY TOLD by people interrupting each other. I was on a ship engaged in an illegal venture, and Captain Cawthorne was no better than a pirate.

At first, these hard facts had been clouded over by the crew's protestations that the sheer number of ships devoted to the buying and selling of Africans was so great that it cancelled out American laws against the trade—"nothing but idle legal chatter," Stout remarked, "to keep the damned Quakers from sermonizing the whole country to death!"

All the crew protested, that is, except Ned Grime the carpenter, who talked as if he lived a mile from the earth and had nothing to do with the idiot carryings on of the human race. But when I discovered that Ned, too, like all the rest of the men, held a share of the profit to be realized