

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

from the sale of the blacks, I paid little attention to his pretense of aloofness.

It was Sharkey who told me that not only the British cruisers made the slave trade hazardous. United States Revenue Cutters patrolled our own shores after privateers, and the smugglers who landed small groups of blacks in Georgia and Florida. I learned then that there were American laws, too, against the importing of slaves. He spread his hands as wide as he could to show me the money the smugglers made after they'd taken the slaves inland and sold them at the slave markets in the larger southern cities.

Those first days, the weather was splendid and we sometimes made a speed of 14 knots. Captain Cawthorne rolled about the deck, hilarious and noisy, hitting members of the crew out of sheer high spirits. Once I saw him do a strange little dance on the poop deck, holding up the skirt of his jacket and kicking out his legs.

"Pray the weather holds," Stout said to me. "The Captain's so stubborn he won't take in sail no matter how fierce the wind—not so long as he can see the bowsprit!"

My days were full. I was everybody's boy. But I had time to myself now and then, a moment when I was not fetching the Captain his tea and rum, or heaving waste over the side, or learning to mend a sail while Purvis howled at my clumsy

fingers, or tracking the rats which, not content with the food stores, would gnaw ropes and sail if not caught. Then I would find myself a corner on the deck and stare at the sea, or the distant coast line of Florida which we followed until we passed through the straits which separated it from Cuba.

How strange it was to see another ship! A taut sail in the distance like an unknown word written across the vast expanse of sky; a ship carrying a crew like *The Moonlight's* and perhaps someone like me.

There was no getting used to it for me—living the ordinary life of an eating and sleeping creature but on a thing that always moved, a wooden thing whose fare could be changed by a shift of wind, a sudden piling up of briny water, by currents and rain.

One morning I told Ned my thoughts.

"The earth itself moves," he said in his chilly way.

"That may be," I replied. "But I don't feel it."

"Why should you!" the old man snapped. "God has no wish to share his secrets with Adam's descendants." He loosened the vise around a piece of wood he was smoothing. He looked straight up at the heavens. "Once there was a garden where all was known," he said in a odd dreamy way.

My sister, Betty, had once embroidered a piece of linen with a bright blue sea and a little brown boat like a pecan.

But the sea was not only blue. Sometimes it was a color that was like the smell of salt wind. And at the end of the day, the sun could strain the water yellow as cane stalks, green as limes, pink and orange as shrimps.

I did not brood upon them much, my mother and Betty. They had sunk quietly to a place in the back of my mind. When I did picture them, they moved silently about, doing the things I had seen them do all my life, sewing and cleaning, washing and eating, going to market. It was only now and then I would feel a sharp thrust of pain and worry when I told myself that they must think me dead.

Once, during a rain squall, while the sea groaned about us, bearing upon its heaving back great forks of lightning, I wished most desperately to be off this ship, to be anywhere but on it. A kind of breathlessness shut my throat. I thought I was choking to death. It was Purvis who picked me up and shook me as I began to sob with terror. He hit me about the shoulders. If I didn't stop, he shouted, he'd have me up in the shrouds where I'd get more than air in my lungs.

That night, I lay in my hammock, a sorry thing soaked through to its bones. All the hatches had been closed against the rain. The smell of wet wool stuffed my nostrils, the pickled cabbage I had had for my midday meal seemed to have reformed itself in my stomach, and finally the thick mumble

of complaint from Sharkey and Isaac Porter, who were always arguing, drove me up on deck.

The rain had abated. We were moving like an arrow, like a sky ship, among the points of light which were stars. I knew it must be Purvis on the watch, for while I was idly counting stars, a great wad of vile brown stuff flew by my ear as he expelled his gob of chewing tobacco over the side. I ducked and heard a dark chuckle, its human familiarity over-coming the sound of the speaking ship, the creaking masts, the great thunk and slap of the sails, the breathing sea.

Perhaps the night and the sea leads a person to thoughts of his life. It did me. I thought about how the only grown people I had really known up to now were women—I wouldn't count the parson, who was a stick-notched with pious sayings, or the doctor at Charity Hospital who treated my sister with tonics and ointments—and here there were no females save the Captain's hens. I had not known that among men there were such differences. That thought led me to wonder why I didn't like Benjamin Stout. I surprised myself. I hadn't known till that second that *liking* mattered—what had mattered before was how I was treated. And Stout treated me kindly, showing me things the rest of the crew wouldn't have troubled themselves with, getting me extra helpings of rice and beef

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while Curry had his back turned, screaming away his brains over his cook stove.

But it was Purvis whom I was eager to see when I awoke in the morning, Purvis, with his horrible coarse jokes, his bawling and cursing, Purvis, whom I trusted.

The Captain had settled on the name Bollweevil, and I winced when I heard him call it out. Some of the crew had taken it up but when they used it, I turned my back. The Captain was still cheerful; I listened to him sing out his commands while the wind held fair. I learned some of the words of his song but had great difficulty connecting them up with the lengths of canvas to which they applied. Purvis said a sailor must know every sheet and brail and halyard so that on the darkest night he wouldn't make an error which could cost the life of the ship and the crew. I especially liked the words, skysail and moonsail, and turned them over in my mouth as though I was licking honey. But the sailing of the ship was something so far beyond my powers of understanding that I didn't trouble my mind about it. Although I found most of the crew rough men who were often cruel, I could not help but admire the fearless way they swarmed up the ratlines and hung over the yards as sure of their perch as birds on a limb. As for the Mare, Nicholas Spark, against whom Stout had warned me, I had little to do with him. He kept to the

The Shrubs

Captain's side like a shadow. He had a brooding look on his face, and when he spoke, his voice sizzled like a hot poker plunged into water.

We had been at sea now for nearly three weeks when one morning after the deck had been holystoned, the wind dropped entirely. No one appeared surprised except me. But then I knew nothing of the sky and how to read its signs.

For several days, *The Moonlight* made little progress, and that little because of a brief fierce blow that strained every sail. Certain changes had been taking place aboard which I had barely noticed, but the becalming of the ship brought my attention back to it. Gratings had replaced the solid hatches over the holds. A huge cauldron had appeared in Curry's gallery, and one morning I found John Cooley working intently on an object which, though I'd never seen one before, made me shiver.

It was a whip with nine knotted cords. As I approached, he began to fasten the cords to a handle. I didn't want to look at it. But I couldn't keep my eyes from it. Cooley looked up. Our eyes met. He laughed.

I turned away and discovered Spark staring at me from the helm. Cooley laughed again. A sail flapped somewhere nearby. Spark's frozen glare never wavered. The sun seemed impaled by the mizzenmast. I felt hot and cold. Then Purvis

slouched by, calling over his shoulder, "Jessie, I'll put a hitch in your arm if you don't get below and catch up with the rats! They're about to overtake us, boy."

The moment passed. When I glanced back at Spark, he was saying something to the helmsman, and Cooley was getting to his feet. Just before I dropped down into the hold, I saw Cooley flick the whip and nod to himself.

The ship was going nowhere under a sky that darkened into a windless night and lightened into a day so motionless, so empty, we were like a plate poised on the edge of a pit without bottom. The Captain and the Mate roamed the deck, their eyes on the sky, and the seamen quarreled.

They quarreled from morning until night and in the middle of the night. Benjamin Stout lost his smile when he found his sea chest emptied, and all its contents strewn about, his razor and strop, his knife and fork, his sheath knife and the fid he used for splicing, and his small seaman's Bible, its pages damp as though it'd been dipped in brine.

During those days, a fever seemed to pass among us, leaving everyone weak yet restless. Stout accused Purvis of emptying out his sea chest. He seemed to think it the worst of a list of crimes of which he accused Purvis. Purvis swore and threw his ham fists in the air. The others added fuel to the fire, inciting them both to what end I don't know. I stayed

out of our quarters as often as I could and once slept on the deck where Spark, finding me huddled near the bow, gave me a terrible kick that sent me rolling.

It was that dawn when the light was the color of the sea itself, and I could hardly make out the line of the horizon, that I saw a figure, its head wrapped in cloth so I couldn't recognize it, moving furtively on all fours toward the aft section. Although I was afraid Nick Spark would return, I was so curious about the creeping man that I stayed where I was.

I searched the deck with my eyes but either the Mate had evaporated or gone to his quarters. If Gardere and Seth Smith, who passed within a foot of where I was crouched near the ship's small boat, had seen the creeper, they didn't, apparently, care to investigate.

Not five minutes later, along the same route, like a sighless worm that must go by smell, the creeper returned. But this time, it crawled along on only three limbs for one hand was held up, its begrimed fingers holding a beautiful white egg which, in that dim light, was as luminous as a tiny moon rising between deck and rail.

The air was damp and sea-soaked, and I breathed it in as though it were a draught of fresh water. But no sooner did I imagine what it would be like to drink up a whole

pond than I skittered away from the thought. Our water ration had been cut. The longer it would take to reach our destination, the less we would have. God knows my family was poor! But there wasn't an *end* to anything. We'd always had something to eat and drink. For the first time in my life, I could, if I put my mind to it, see to the end of a thing needed for life to go on. We lived off what our ship could carry, but the ship drank the wind, and without that, ship and crew would be lost in the wastes of the ocean.

I made haste to return below. There, I found Purvis, Stout and Sharkey looking at the egg, an ordinary enough object in the light of the oil lamp. Someone had placed it in a tarpaulin hat, and the three sailors stared down at it as though it was a priceless jewel.

Although we'd had no eggs for our mess, I thought they were making a bit much of it. Still frightened by my vision of empty water casks, I said, "Would Curry give me some beer, do you think?" hoping one of the men would answer.

Stout murmured, "Don't fret, lad. Ill see you get what you need." But Purvis let go of the hat, leaving it in Stout's hands, and gave me a wallop across my back.

"None of that mewling," he said furiously. "None of us is better off save two we won't mention, and I'll have no cat cries from you, Jessie. You get the same amount to drink as all

of us, and that's a far sight better than you'd do on some ships I can think of."

I shrugged as coolly as I could, but felt better, not that I would have admitted it to Purvis.

Despite the murky dawn, the morning was clear and sunny. Later that day, a wind of sorts blew up. At the first breath of it, the men straightened their backs and moved smartly about the deck. Their voices rang out clearly, and in the galley, Curry sang a tune to himself in a horrible cracked voice that sounded as if it had been fried in lard. Only Nicholas Spark stalked about the ship like a spirit of mold and decay.

We made good speed that day, although as dusk approached the wind slackened somewhat, as did our spirits. Then we were summoned to the deck, even those men who were resting after their watch.

We stood in a clump amidship while all about us a great flaring sky of twilight burnished our faces and streaked the masts with a tender golden light.

The Captain and Spark were some distance away from us, regarding us fixedly. Gardere was at the helm, and Sam Wick and Smith were occupied with the sails. The eerie silence, the molten hills of the sea, the unmoving figures of Master and Mare filled me with dread and yet a kind of

exhilaration as though we were all waiting for the appearance of something supernatural. Then the Captain spoke.

"It has come to my attention—I'll not confide to you how—that a certain precious thing has been taken from me, stole in the dark by a scoundrel, grasped by his filthy claws, made off with to his hole." He paused. In the awesome silence that followed his words, I saw once again that dawn apparition carrying the moon egg.

"To its hole!" the Captain's voice rang out. "And there, EATEN!" he screamed. "My precious thing, EATEN!"

Spark stepped forward holding in his hands a length of tarred rope.

"That scoundrel, that Irish bucket, that thieving scum of the earth, will now show himself," the Captain ordered, his voice suddenly quiet.

None of us moved.

"Purvis!" cried Spark in his burnt out voice. "Forward, Purvis!"

Purvis went to stand before them.

"The wind's freshening again, ain't it?" the Captain observed conversationally to Spark.

"I believe it is, Sir," replied the Mate.

"I'll blow hard this night, would you say, Spark?"

"I would, Sir."

"Cooley, Stour, fasten the egg-stealing serpent to the mast," said the Captain.

Without a second's hesitation, the two sailors took hold of Purvis and bound him with ropes to the mast.

"Now, Spark, remove his shirt with your rope!" ordered the Captain.

Nicholas Spark flogged Purvis' shirt from his back. Beneath the leaping of the rope, blood and cloth mixed. The sun began to die on the horizon, and still he beat him. Faint, my legs like porridge. I leaned against Ned who made not the slightest accommodation of his body to my weight. I wept silently. Purvis groaned and moaned but never cried out.

At what seemed to be the last fading ray of sun, the tarred rope fell from the Mate's hand. He turned to the Captain, his face as smooth as the surface of a stone.

"Now tie him to the shrouds," said the Captain. "The air will refresh his corrupt soul."

I barely slept that night. Once, I peeped out at the deck. Far above, like a huge tattered bird, its wings flapping, hung Purvis, tied to the shrouds where the wind beat against him as though animated by the same demon which had raised Nicholas Spark's arm and brought the tarred rope down on his back.

Toward morning, I overheard a conversation.

Smith said, "You handed Purvis over to that beast."

"He would have done the same in my place," said Stout.

"You're a damned foul creature, Stout."

"No different from you or anyone else," Stout said mildly from his hammock.

"You're one with Cawthorne," Smith said. "No difference between you except he's ambitious."

"That may be true, Seth," said Stout. "I wish I had Cawthorne's ambition. I would have made a fine rich man," and he laughed.

Then I heard Ned asking who had informed on Purvis.

"Why, I wouldn't be surprised if it was Stout himself,"

said Seth Smith.

"No, no. I didn't do that," said Stout. "I expect Spark saw me. But then, you see," he continued amiably as though discussing the best way to splice a rope, "Purvis and me has sailed with the Captain and Spark before, and I believe they favor me a bit over him."

It was more than I could take in. My head felt swollen and my cheeks on fire.

Why hadn't Purvis denied the theft of the eggs? I couldn't find a word to put to Stout's actions. Why didn't the rest of the men seize him and toss him overboard? Why didn't they go to the Captain and inform him of the real culprit?

Why was Stout so calm, even satisfied as he lay there in the damp dark, accused of dreadful treachery by a fellow sailor, unmoved, unashamed, and now as I could hear plainly, snoring contentedly?

Shatkey and Smith brought Purvis down in the morning. Ned took a bottle of salve from his medicine chest and rubbed it into the wounds on Purvis' back as he sat hunched over on his sea chest. I brought him a mug of tea and rum and he drank it down slowly, his face creased like rumpled parchment, as white as though the wind had blown the blood out of him. He looked at me over the rim of the mug. His eyes had sunk into his head.

We were alone for a few minutes. I stood looking at him, unable to rear my gaze away. He groaned softly now and then, or shook his big head as though something was flying about in his hair and bothering him. Then he let the mug fall into my hands.

"I'll be all right soon, Jessie," he said in a cracked thin voice.

"But—it was Stout!" I cried.

"Oh, yes. It was Stout."

"But why didn't you say?" I pleaded, beside myself with rage at the injustice.

"There would've been no use in that. The officers of this