

ADA CAMBRIDGE

MATERFAMILIAS

Ada Cambridge

Materfamilias

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Содержание

| | |
|-----------------------------------|----|
| CHAPTER I | 5 |
| CHAPTER II | 12 |
| CHAPTER III | 21 |
| Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. | 26 |

Ada Cambridge

Materfamilias

CHAPTER I

THE BEGINNING OF IT ALL

My father in England married a second time when I was about eighteen. She was my governess.

Mother herself had engaged her, and I believe had asked, when dying, that she would remain to take care of us; and I don't say that she was not a good woman. She had been nearly five years in the house, and we had the habit of looking to her for advice in all family concerns; and certainly she took great pains with my education. But of course I was not going to stand seeing her put in mother's place. I told father so. I said to him, kindly, but firmly: "Father, you will have to choose between us. There will not be room under this roof for both."

He chose her. Consequently I left my home, though they both tried hard to prevent it, and to reconcile me to their new arrangements. I will say that for them. In fact, my father, pleading legal rights, forbade me to go, except for some temporary visiting. I went on the understanding that I was to return in a couple of months or so. But I was resolved not to return, and I never did. While staying with my uncle, a medical man, I privately married his assistant – one (if I may say so) of a miscellaneous assortment of admirers. I am afraid I encouraged him to propose an elopement; I certainly hastened its accomplishment. Then after all our plottings and stratagems, when at last I had the ring on my finger, I wrote to inform father of what he and Miss Coleman had driven me to. Poor old father! It was a tremendous blow to him. But I don't know why he should have made such a fuss about it, seeing that he had done the same – practically the same – himself.

It was a greater disaster to me than to him, or to anybody – even to my husband, who almost from the first regarded me as a millstone about his neck; for *he* could go away and enjoy himself when he liked, forgetting that I existed. Indeed, it was a horrible catastrophe. When my own children are so anxious to get married while they are still but children, and think it so cruel of me to thwart them, I wish I could tell them what I went through at their age! But I don't mention it. I promised Tom I never would.

At twenty I was teaching for a living – I, who had been so petted and coddled, hardly allowed to do a hand's turn for myself! My husband was travelling about the world as a ship's doctor. Father wanted me to come home, but I was too proud for that. Besides, I would not go where I had to hear Edward insulted. After all, he was my husband, and our matrimonial troubles were entirely our own concern. Not from him, either, would I accept anything after I was able to earn for myself. I taught at a school for thirty pounds a year, and managed to make that do. It was a wretched life.

I was barely of age when the news came that Edward had caught fever somewhere and been left in a Melbourne hospital by his ship, which was returning without him. At once I made up my mind that it was my duty as a wife to go to him. He had no friends in Australia, and not much money; it was pathetic to think of him alone and helpless amongst utter strangers; and I thought that if I did this for him he would remember it afterwards, and be kind to me, and help me to make our married life a little more like other people's. In those days there was no cable across the world, and mails but once a month; so that when I started I was altogether in the dark as to what I was going to. The first news of his illness – with no particulars, except that it was fever – was all I ever had.

I would not ask my father for money. Indeed, he would have frustrated my purpose altogether had he known of it in time. I went to my old godmother, Aunt Kate, who was very rich and fond of me, and begged the loan of fifty pounds, not telling her what I wanted it for. She gave the money

outright, with another fifty added to it; so that I had plenty to cover the cost of a comfortable voyage. I determined, however, to save on the voyage all I could, that I might have something in my pocket on landing, when funds would be sorely needed. To which end I engaged my berth in the humblest passenger-boat available – Tom's little Racer, of ever-beloved memory. They told me at the office that she was better than her name – faster than many that were twice her size. I was young and silly enough to believe them, and also to forget that by the time I reached Australia Edward's illness would have long been a thing of the past, and he perhaps back in England or well on his way thither.

If the Racer was one of the smallest ships in the Australian trade, her master, Thomas Braye, must have been one of the youngest captains. At that time he was under thirty, though he did not look it, being a big man, quiet and grave in manner, deeply sensible of his professional responsibilities. I remember thinking him rather rough and decidedly plain when I saw him first; but he was gentleness and gentlemanliness incarnate, and I never afterwards thought of his appearance except to note the physical inadequacy of other men beside him.

He has told me since that *his* first feeling on seeing *me* was one of strong annoyance. Though a married woman and going out to my husband, I was but a young girl in fact – far too young and far too pretty (though I say it) to be travelling as I was, without an escort. It unfortunately happened that I was the only lady in the saloon, and that the ship was too small to have a stewardess. Three wives of artisans herded with their husbands and children in the black hole they called the steerage, and one of them was summoned aft as soon as we were in the river to keep me company. But as the others were disagreeable about it, and she was a coarse and dirty creature, I myself begged Captain Braye to send her back again. Poor Tom! By the way, I did not call him Tom then, of course; I did not even know his Christian name. He says he never undertook a job so unwillingly as he did that job of taking care of me. How absurd it seems – now!

We sailed in late autumn, in the twilight of the afternoon. I remember the look of the Thames as we were towed down – the low, cold sky, the slate-coloured mist, with mere shadows of shores and ships just looming through it. Nothing could have been more dreary. And yet I enjoyed it. The feeling that I was free of that horrible schoolroom, and that still more horrible lodging-house, where I cooked meals over an etna on a painted washstand, and ate them as I sat on a straw-stuffed bed – the prospect of long rest from the squalid scramble that life had become, from all-day work that had tired me to death – oh, no one can understand what luxury that was! Besides, I had hopes of the future, based on Edward's convalescence and reform, to buoy me up. And then I loved the sea. People are born to love it, or not to love it; it is a thing innate, like genius, never to be acquired, and never to be lost, under any circumstances. When the Channel opened out, and the long swell began to lift and roll, I knew that I was in my native element, though a dweller inland from birth up to this moment. The feel of the buoyant deck and of the pure salt wind was like wings to soul and body.

But I had to pay my footing first. It came upon me suddenly, in the midst of my raptures, and I staggered below, and cast myself, dressed as I was, upon my bunk. Never, never had I felt so utterly forsaken! When ill before, with my little, trivial complaints, Miss Coleman had waited on me hand and foot – everybody had coddled me; now I was overwhelmed in unspeakable agonies, and nobody cared. It is true that – though I would not have her – the steerage woman came in the middle of the night; and once I roused from a merciful snatch of sleep to find my bracket lamp alight where all had been darkness. These things indicated that some one was concerned about me – Tom, of course – but I did not realize it then. I was alone in my misery, alone in the wide world, of no consequence even to my own husband; and I wished I was dead.

Early in the morning – it was a rough morning, and we were in a heavy, wintry sea – the captain tapped at my door. I was too deadly ill even to answer him; so he turned the handle and looked in. Seeing that I was dressed, he advanced with a firm step, and, standing over me, said, in the same voice with which he ordered the sailors to do things —

"Mrs. Filmer, you must come up on deck."

I merely shook my head. I was powerless to lift a finger.

"Oh, yes, you must. You will feel ever so much better in the air."

"I can't," I wailed, and closed my eyes. I believe the tears were running down my face.

He stood for a minute in silence. I felt him looking at me. Then he said, with a kindness in his voice that made me shake with sobs —

"I'll go and rig up a chair or something for you. Be ready for me when I come back in ten minutes. If you can't walk, we will carry you."

He departed, and the steerage woman arrived, very sulky. I was obliged to accept her help this time. Captain Braye, I felt, did not mean to be defied, and it was a physical impossibility for me to make a toilet for myself. When he returned he brought the steward with him, and, before I knew it, he had whisked a big rug round and round me, and taken me up in his arms. I weighed about seven stone, and he is the strongest man I know. The steward carried my feet, but it was a mere pretense of carrying; he was only there as a sort of chaperon, because Tom was so absurdly particular. Up on the poop, with the ship violently rolling and pitching, the man could not keep his own feet, and let mine go, and we did not miss him. Tom bore me safely and easily, like a Blondin with his pole, to where he had fixed a folding-chair for me — it was his own chair, for I had not been able to afford one — and there he set me down, in the midst of pillows and an opossum rug, with that sort of powerful gentleness which is the manliest thing I know. All at once he made me feel that I was in shelter and at rest. As long as I remained on that ship I could cease fighting with the difficulties of my lot. He would take care of me. There are women who don't want men to take care of them — I am not one of those; I have no vocation for independence.

I found I could not sit in that chair, luxurious as it was. I think all my worries and hard work and bad meals must have undermined me. Even though Tom made me drink brandy and water, I could not hold myself up.

"Oh," I sighed wretchedly, "I feel so faint and swimmy, I *must* lie down!"

"So you shall," he answered, like a kind father, and he shouted to the steward to bring up a mattress and pillows. In five minutes there was a bed on the deck floor, and I was in it, swathed in fur and blankets, like a chrysalis in its cocoon, more absolutely comfortable than I had ever been in my life. I still felt ill and exhausted, and could not bear the thought of food; but I breathed the sweet, cold, reviving air, and yet was as warm as a toast, and no spray or rain could touch me. When he had tucked me up to his satisfaction, placing his oilskins over all, he took some rope and lashed me to the bars of the hen-coops behind me. And there I lay all day, resting and dozing. No matter how the ship rolled, it could not roll me out of my nest; being so secure, I felt the motion to be soothing rather than the reverse. When not asleep, I gazed at the pure sky and the gleaming tiers of sails, listened to the voices of the wind and of the sea, and watched the stalwart figure of my dear commander. At short intervals he would come over to ask if I was all right; and at least once an hour he brought something with him — brandy and water or strong broth — and fed me with it out of a spoon. Oh, Tom! Tom! And I had almost forgotten what it was like to be tended and cared for in that way.

In a day or two I was well enough to walk about the ship and occupy myself, and he was more reserved with me again. But still I always knew that he was keeping guard over my comings and goings, and I felt as safe as possible. His officers and my fellow saloon-passengers — none of them gentlemen like him — were too much interested in my movements after I began to move, and his eye seemed always upon them. Now and then I was embarrassed and annoyed, and at such moments he quietly stepped in to relieve me, never making a fuss, but promptly putting people back into their proper places. At the first hint of trouble of this sort he had a spare cabin turned into a little sitting-room for me — my boudoir, he called it — where I might always retire when I wanted privacy. I found it a comfort at times, but still my sleeping-berth would have done almost as well; for I never wanted any visitor but him, and he never asked to come. When it was weather for it, I lived on the poop in his folding-chair — always lashed ready for me — and that's where I preferred to be. Even when

not weather for it, I often begged to stay, for the support of his company; and sometimes, but not always, he would allow me to do so, making me fast with ropes, and surrounding me with a screen of tarpaulin. For hours I would lie, like a cradled baby, and watch his gallant figure and his alert eyes, and listen to his steady tramp, as he went up and down. I had no fear of anything while he was there, and he seemed always there. I learned afterwards how terribly he deprived himself of rest and sleep because of his responsibility for the safety of us all.

For the Racer was an ancient vessel of the tramp description, little fitted to do battle with such storms as we encountered. Her old timbers creaked and groaned, as if in their last agony, when buffeted by the heavy seas; and the way she took in water at the pores, without actually springing leaks, was dreadful. The clacking of the pumps and the gushing of the inexhaustible stream seemed always in one's ears, and when waves broke over her and drained down through a stove-in skylight, of course it was far worse – even dangerous. She simply wallowed about like a log, too heavy and lumbering to get out of the way of anything. I could not bear to see Tom's stern and haggard face, to know the strain he was enduring, and that I could do nothing to lighten it; but as for *danger* – I never thought of such a thing! Not that I am at all a courageous person, as a rule.

I believe we were somewhere in the neighbourhood of the Cape when the most noteworthy of our experiences befell us. We were struggling with the chronic "dirty" weather – absurd adjective for a thing so majestic and inspiring! – and I was on deck, firmly tied to my chair, and my chair to the mast, dry under oilskins, and only my face exposed to wind and spray, which threatened to take the skin off. I could hardly see the length of the ship through the spindrift of the gale, and the way it shrieked in the rigging was like fiends let loose. Bee – a – utiful!

And Tom wanted to spoil all my pleasure by shutting me down in a nasty, stuffy, smelly, pitch-dark cabin, where I couldn't breathe and shouldn't know anything that went on, nor have a soul to speak to. However, I was getting used to him by this time, and so, when he staggered up and announced that he had come to take me below, because it was no longer fit for me to be on deck, I told him flatly that I would not go.

"You must go," said he.

"I won't go," said I.

"The captain's commands must be obeyed, Mrs. Filmer."

"Not in this case, Captain."

"In every case, Madam."

"Not a bit of it," I persisted, laughing in his face, which was rather grim, but yet not quite inflexible. "I am not one of your sailors, to be ordered about. I shall do what I like. And this is exactly what I like."

He condescended to argue, and then of course I would not give in. He said he must use force and carry me, but that was an obviously impossible thing to do without my assistance, considering the angle of the decks. When I saw him looking really worried, I condescended to plead myself, and I suppose he could not resist that. He has told me since that he never felt the same man after this act of weakness, but I'm sure I cannot see where the weakness came in. With great difficulty, and meanwhile flashing anxious glances hither and thither, he got more rope and made fresh windings and tyings about me.

"You are a spoilt child," was all he said. He did not look happy, but I was very pleased with the issue of our encounter. I felt that it had strengthened my position somehow – taken away all my awe and fear of him – and I would not have missed my subsequent experiences on deck that day for anything.

They were really tremendous. No sooner had I been trussed up like an Indian baby in preparation for contingencies – no sooner had Tom left me to give his undivided attention to the ship – than the chronic gale produced a spasmodic and special one which I am sure was a cyclone of the first magnitude, though he would not give it that name in the book. What he called nor'-nor'-east had

been the direction of the storm we had grown used to, but just before he asked me to go below it had shifted to "nor'," and now it jumped all at once to "sou'-west," with effects upon the sea and the poor ship that were truly startling. Those wall-sided mountains of water, that were bad enough to get over when we knew which way they were going, began a furious dance together, all jumbled up anyhow; and the first treacherous monster created by the change of wind crashed bodily inboard quite close to where I sat – "pooped" us, as Tom expressed it – and, washing over me, simply swept all before it, including the wheel and the two poor men steering, who were driven upon rail and rigging with such force as to injure both of them. How my lashings held as they did I cannot understand – or, rather, I can, of course – when strong wood was being torn from iron fastenings; and how I issued alive from that tremendous shower-bath is much more wonderful. It must have been the packing round me that saved my bones from being smashed like the boats and hen-coops. I heard Tom's shout of warning just before I was overwhelmed, and when I emerged, and could expand my breathless lungs, I answered him, with a strange and joyful lifting of the heart, "All right! I'm safe! Don't mind me, Captain!"

If he had minded me at that moment we should have been lost together, ship and all. She began to broach to, as they call it, and the supplementary wheel had to be used at once to stop it, and just then our lives hung upon a hair. The decks were filled to the brim, and I could hear the deluge thudding down through the shattered skylight upon the table set for dinner. And she rolled all but bottom upwards, the broken rail going under and I dangling in air above it, and – and, in short, if any one but Tom had been her captain she would never have been heard of from that day. I am quite convinced of that. No man born could have accomplished what he did – he says, "Nonsense," but I know what I am talking about – although I was just as sure that *he* would accomplish it as I was that the sun would rise next morning. I calmly held on to my supports, and waited and watched. Sometimes I clenched my teeth and shut my eyes, while I prayed for his preservation in the perils he did not seem to see. He called to me at short intervals, "Are you all right?" and I called back, "All right!" And when the worst was over for the moment, he scrambled to where I was, and fixed me up afresh. Never shall I forget the look on his face and the ring in his voice when he spoke to me. "Brave girl! Brave girl!" I think it was the happiest moment of my life.

"But I don't understand it," he said to me, later, when there was time to breathe and talk. "Why are you not frightened? When you were first on board, crying because you were seasick –"

"I did *not* cry because I was seasick," I indignantly interposed, "but because I was lonely and miserable. You would have cried if you had been in my place."

"I thought," he continued, heedless of the interruption, "that you were a poor little baby creature, without an ounce of pluck in you. But you've got the courage of a grenadier. How is it?"

"It is because I am with you," I answered promptly.

I don't know what feeling I allowed to get into my voice, but something struck him. Motionless where he stood, he stared at the great waves silently, for what seemed a long time; then abruptly walked forward to give an order, and did not come back.

We were mostly silent when we were together after that. How hard I tried to think of a common topic to discuss, and could not! So did he. But while I had nothing to do but to think, he was terribly preoccupied with the condition of the ship. She had recovered to a certain extent, and was able to stagger on again, but she was a living wreck, all splintered and patched, and the difficulty of keeping the water down was greater than before. The pumps were always clanking, and the carpenter hammering, and the sailmaker putting canvas plasters over weak places. The whole ship's company were glum and weary, and the passengers – wet, ill-fed, and wretched – complained loudly all the time, indifferent as to how much they added to the poor captain's cares. He, though firm with everybody, never lost his temper, or seemed to give way to the depression that must at times have weighed him down. He was worthy to command who could so command himself – worthy to be a sailor, which is the noblest calling in the world. As for me – well, it was no credit to me that I, of all on board,

was satisfied to be there, and consequently happy. I kept a serene and smiling face to cheer him. It was the least that I could do.

And it did cheer him. To my unspeakable comfort I was assured of that, though he did not say so. I could see it in his face, and hear it in his voice, when now and then he came to sit beside me, evidently for rest and peace.

"And so," he said, on one of these occasions, speaking in an absent-minded way – "and so you are not nervous with me? Well, I hope I shall be able to justify your trust."

"You will," I said calmly. "You could not help it."

"Heaven knows!" he ejaculated. "The glass is falling again, fast."

"Never mind the glass. It is always falling."

"I wouldn't, if I had any sort of proper ship under me. But this – she isn't fit for women to sail in."

"If she is good enough for you," I remarked cheerfully, "she is good enough for me."

"But she isn't. I don't ask for much – at my age – but I do want a ship of some sort, not a sieve. Oh, dear! oh, dear!" – looking round him with a restless sigh – "we shall be months getting to Melbourne at this rate."

"I don't care," I said, "if we are years."

He made no comment on this statement, which I blushed to perceive was a mistake; and I hastened to remind him that Edward's illness must have been over long ago. Then he began, in an abrupt manner, to ask me how I thought the passengers were bearing the trial of short rations which he had been compelled to lay upon them.

One day we were at great peace, because the weather was beautiful and the water in the well diminished. A hammock of sailcloth had been made for me, and slung in a nice place, and I lay there almost the whole day through, swinging softly with the ship as she soared and dived over mile-long billows or swayed in the deep beam swells with the airy motion of a bird upon the wing. The *Racer* could feel like that at times, even yet; and I was too happy for speech or thought – that is, in a sad and pensive fashion. So, I know, was Tom, although he too had no words and hardly a look for me as he paced to and fro. It was just the consciousness that I was there – that he was there – permitted to rest together for an interval from our battle with fate. Even the sight of his substantial figure, never out of my mind's eye, while my other eyes saw only the lifting and sinking of the gunwale against the gleaming, silky sea – even the roar of his strong voice, occasionally using "language" in a professional way – could not take away the sense as of an enchanted world enveloping us, as if we were disembodied spirits in some heavenly sphere. But I can't describe it. Perhaps the reader understands.

The night was lovelier than the day – there was a moon shining – and one literally *ached* with the sweetness of it. Each of us was on the way to bed, and somehow we could not resist the temptation to linger by the rail a little. The ship was under command of the chief officer, and all was well for the time. We were alone where we stood.

Speaking of the change of weather and his late responsibilities, he said: "If I am ever so unfortunate as to lose the lives committed to me, I shall just stand still and go down with the ship – when I have done what I can do."

"If that should come," I returned, "please don't put me into a boat and send me off without you. Let me stand still and go down too."

"Not if there's a chance for the boat," he said.

We had spoken in a light way, but deep thoughts welled up in us. "Oh," I broke out – for I had not his self-control – "oh, it would be better than anything that could happen to me now!"

All he said to that was "Hush – sh – sh!" but I could not check myself immediately.

"I would rather die that way than live – as I must live when I no longer have you to take care of me!" I wailed, reckless. "Oh, I wish I could! I wish I could!"

And indeed I meant it. Even as we went down, I thought, he would keep the sea monsters from terrifying and devouring me; he would take care of me, regardless of himself – that was inevitable – until we were both dead. The fear of death was nothing to the fear of life as it would present itself at my journey's end. I had *no* fear of death – with him.

He laid his broad, brown hand on mine that clutched the rail – a solemn gesture – and he said, in a shaking voice, "My dear, it's well you remind me that it's my business to take care of you. We have got our duty to do, both of us. Come, it's getting late; it's bed time. We mustn't stay here in the moonlight and let ourselves get foolish."

Still holding my hand, he led me downstairs. At the door of my cabin he gave it a great strong squeeze, and then let it go without another word. He did not kiss me. Oh, true heart! Death to him would have been infinitely easier than the ordeal I made him suffer through those long weeks. But he never allowed himself to be overcome.

It was not long after this that the dreaded moment came when land was reported. Words cannot describe my terror of the impending change. It was my only safe haven – my home – from which I was, as I thought, to be cast out, and I simply dared not imagine what sort of life awaited me.

The crippled Racer anchored in Hobson's Bay at nightfall. Most of the passengers went off in boats, and those who rowed to the ship returned with them. Dressed in walking clothes, I sat in the little cabin that had been my sitting-room, listening and shivering, trying (with the example I had before me) to brace myself to meet things as a brave woman should; but no one came for me. Only Tom. Rather late in the evening, when all had gone except the steerage woman and her children, with whose husband and father he had made some business arrangement, the captain entered my private apartment alone for the first time. There was an indescribable expression on his face, which had looked so fagged of late. His eyes did not meet mine. His whole frame trembled like a girl's.

"Oh, has he come?" I cried – I believe I almost shrieked.

"No," said he; "he hasn't come. You'd better go to bed now – go and sleep if you can – and I'll tell you about it to-morrow."

"What is it?" I implored. "What has happened? What have you heard? Oh, tell me now, for pity's sake!"

He sat down on the little bunk beside me, and took my hand between his two hands; he did it as a father might do it, to support my weakness under the shock coming.

"The fact is, Mrs. Filmer – the fact is, dear – I sent ashore for news. I thought I'd better make some inquiries first. And – and – and –"

"I know – I know! He has left the country, and abandoned me again!"

"No, poor fellow! He died of that illness – six months ago."

At first I did not understand the meaning of the words. It was an event that had never entered into my calculations, strange to say. But the moment I realised the position – it is a dreadful, dreadful thing to confess, but God knows I never meant any harm – my arms instinctively went up to Tom's stooping shoulders and, hiding my face in his breast, I nearly swooned with joy.

CHAPTER II IN THE EARLY DAYS

I was not a girl, but a woman, when I married Tom. He, a man incapable of grossness in any shape or form, was still a man, healthily natural, of ripe experience in the ways of men. Whatever our faults in the past – if they were faults – the result was to teach us what we could never otherwise have learned, the meaning of wedlock in its last perfection. Don't let any one run down second marriages to me! The way to them must necessarily be painful and troubled, and one always desires passionately to keep one's children out of it; but the end of the journey, bringing together, open-eyed to all the conditions, educated to discriminate and understand, two born mates like Tom and me – ah, well! One mustn't say all one thinks about these matters – except, of course, to him.

Talking of being open-eyed, I was so blind at one time as actually to fancy that he was in no hurry to have me. When I gave him to understand – hardly knowing what I did – that I should die or something without him to take care of me, he said he asked nothing better than to take care of me, God knew, but that how to do it for the best was what bothered him. It did not bother me in the slightest degree. I depended on him – only on him of all the world – and I told him so; and yet he wanted, after *that*, to send me back to my father with some old woman whom I had never seen, in another ship, while he took the *Racer* home – which never would have got home, nor he either. And I a married woman, independent in my own right, and over twenty-one! However, I flatly refused to go, except with him, as I had come. He said he would not trust my life to that rotten tub again, and I said – I forget what I said; but I hurt his feelings by it; and then I cried bitterly, and said I would go out and be a housemaid.

The deadlock was suddenly ended by the *Racer* being condemned by the authorities of the port as unfit for sea again. When that happened we both decided to stay in the new country, and, having him near me, I was quite content to postpone matrimony until things became a little settled. It was soon plain enough that he was not anxious to postpone for the mere sake of doing so; he only wanted a clear understanding with father first, as well as with his owners, and to give me time for second thoughts, and for considering the advice of my family.

It took long for letters to come and go, and I began to be haunted in my walks by a strange man, who – I suppose – admired me. Tom found this out on the same day that he accepted an appointment as chief officer with a Melbourne shipping company. I could not imagine what had happened when he came to see me at my poor lodging with such a resolute face.

"Mary," he said, "who's that fellow hanging round outside? I've seen him several times."

"Tom," I protested sincerely, "I don't know any more than you do. But he is a rude man; he stares at me and follows me, and I can't get rid of him. Of course, he sees that I am – " I was going to say "unprotected," and hastily substituted "alone," which was not much better.

"Well, now, look here – I've got a ship, Mary" – he did not pain me with further explanations on that head; later I wept to think of his subservient position in that ship – "and this means an income, dear. Not much, but perhaps enough – "

"Does it mean that you are going away?" I cried, terrified.

"Not far. Only for a few days at a time. I start on Friday. This is Monday."

He took my hands; he looked into my eyes; I knew him so well that I knew just what he was going to say. The colour poured into my face, but I made no mock-modest pretence of being shy or shocked.

As a preliminary, he questioned me as if I were on trial for my life. "Answer me *quite* truthfully, Mary" – he called me Mary before we were married, but always Polly afterwards – "tell me, on your

solemn word of honour, do you love me – beyond all possible doubt – beyond all chance of changing or tiring, after it's too late?"

I told him that I loved him beyond doubt, beyond words, beyond everything, and should do so, I was absolutely convinced, to my life's end. I further declared that he knew it as well as I did, and was simply wasting breath.

"And you really and truly do wish to marry me, Mary?"

I attempted to laugh at his tragic gravity and his awkward choice of words. I said I didn't unless he did, that I wouldn't inconvenience him or force his inclination for the world. I asked him, plainly, whether he thought that quite the way to put it.

"Yes," he said. "For I want to make sure that I – that circumstances – are not taking advantage of you while you are young and helpless. And yet how can I be sure?"

He took my face between his hands and gazed at it, as if he would look down through my eyes to the bottom of my soul. I shut them after a moment, and tears began to ooze between the lids at the thought that he could doubt me. One trickled out and splashed upon his knee, and my heart began to heave with the impulse to cry in earnest. Then he drew my face – drew me into his arms, and we sat a little without speaking, hearing our hearts thump.

"We'll chance it, shall we?" he whispered between short breaths. "Sooner or later it must come to that, and better as soon as possible if I have to leave you in Melbourne alone. You won't be so much alone if you belong to me, even when I am away – will you, sweetheart?"

I merely sighed – that kind of long, full, vibrating sigh which means that your feelings are too deep for words.

"I think I shall be able to answer to your father – I hope so," he continued, rallying his constant self-control. "I think I am justified, Mary. If not – "

But I would not let him go upon that tack. Justification was absolute, in my view of the case. I know what the ill-natured reader will say – she will say that I threw myself at his head, that I forced myself upon him, that I did not give him a chance to get out of marrying me if he had wanted to; but that is only because she knows nothing whatever about it. I cannot explain. I simply state the fact that we had one mind between us on the matter, and if she doesn't believe me I can't help it.

"This is Monday," Tom repeated, "and I sail on Friday. If we are going to do it, Mary, I'd like it done before I leave. There's nothing to wait for, if we don't wait for the letters, is there?"

I told him nothing – that I was in his hands; and he proposed that we should walk out then and there to find some one to "splice" us, as he appropriately termed it, because it would be so much easier to attend to all the other business after we were man and wife than before.

Sailors have a terse way of acting as well as of speaking, and the change that made life such a different thing for both of us actually took place that very day as ever was. When the unknown admirer would have followed young Mrs. Filmer in her evening walk – it was too hot to go out earlier – there was no such person. Mrs. Braye was dining delicately at a pleasant seaside hostelry, in the company of her lawful protector, whose name alone was like a charm to keep his proud wife in safety.

We gave ourselves until Wednesday morning. Then we worked all Wednesday and Thursday, like two navvies, to settle ourselves in the small lodging that we selected for our first home. We were as poor as poor could be and had to proceed accordingly, but little I cared for that, or for anything now that I had him. On Friday afternoon he sailed – a subordinate on that trumpery intercolonial boat, after being captain and lord of an English ship – and I cried all night, and counted the hours all day till he returned, when I went quite daft with joy. Not that much joy was allowed us, even now, seeing that the greater part of his short sojourn in port had to be spent on board. But it was wonderful what value we could cram into the precious minutes when we did get them. Again we had the agony of parting, the weary interval of separation, the renewed bliss of the return, continually intensified; and then the letters came – the letters we had tried, so unsuccessfully, to wait for. Father desired me to come home for a time – a foregone conclusion – and Miss Coleman did the same in more impassioned

sentences. I daresay it was heartless, but I laughed and danced with delight to know that it was all too late for advice of that sort. And, to counteract any possible feeling of remorse, Aunt Kate wrote in the sweetest way, all fun and jokes, practically approving and encouraging me in the course I had taken. To a young woman so situated, she said, fathers were quite useless and superfluous, and she advised me to please myself, as I had always done – that was how she put it. Best of all, she sent me a draft for £500, either to come home with or for a wedding present, as the case might be. And this precious windfall enabled us to take a little private house that we could make a proper home of.

The worst of being on these small lines is the uncertainty about the movements of your ship. In winter Tom would run one trip for months, or suddenly stop in the middle for docking and repairs – a mere excuse for laying up, I used to say, because trade was not paying expenses – in which case he would have a holiday without salary, and the pleasure of his companionship would be marred by anxieties about money. In summer there were occasional special excursions, "round tours," that kept him away for a month or six weeks at a time; and these were what I dreaded most.

We had not yet had this long separation, but I knew – knew, but would not admit – there was danger of it when we had been married a little less than a year. It was our second Australian summer, and the time of all times when I could not endure to part from him. I had now grown accustomed to having him at home for a day and a couple of nights weekly – happily he had a command again, such as it was, and could do as he liked in port – and that was far, far too little, under the circumstances.

He was sleeping late, and I, having prepared his breakfast, sat down by an open window to read the morning paper until he should appear. As a matter of course, I *always* saw the name of our ship before I saw anything else, even the Births, Marriages, and Deaths; she had her place in a list of the company's vessels, with her sailing dates, in smallish print, answering to her comparatively modest rank in life; my eye fell on the exact spot by instinct in the moment of the page becoming visible. I suppose it was the same instinct which to-day drew my first glance to quite another column, where s.s. Bendigo stood in larger type. My heart jumped and seemed to stop – "Christmas Holiday Excursion to West Coast of New Zealand, if sufficient inducement offers." There it was! And I felt I had all along expected it.

I got up to run to Tom with the news. On second thoughts I decided to let him have his sleep out before dealing him a blow that would spoil his rest for many a night to come, and tramped round and round the breakfast-table, moaning and wringing my hands, asking cruel Fate why Christmas should be chosen —*this* Christmas of all times – and how I was to get through without my husband to take care of me.

My husband looked most concerned when he saw what I was doing. "Hullo, Polly, what's up?" was his greeting, as he faced me from the doorway; and his bright home-look vanished like a lamp blown out.

I could not speak for the rush of tears. I held out the newspaper, pointing to the fatal spot, and, when he took it, abandoned myself upon his shoulder.

"Oh, Tom – Christmas! *Christmas*, Tom!"

He read in silence, with an arm round my waist. For a whole minute and more we heard the clock ticking. Then he cleared his throat, and said soothingly: "After all, it mayn't come to anything – at any rate, not till afterwards. People don't care to be away from their homes at Christmas. It's only an approximate date."

He was wrong. The postponements that invariably take place at other times did not occur this time – as if on purpose. The hot weather set in early, and it seemed that many people did desire to escape, not from it only, but from the social responsibilities of the so-called festive season. The Bendigo was a good boat, as everybody knew, and her captain a great favourite with the travelling public. I don't wonder at it! So that the passenger list filled rapidly, and every day brought us less hope of a reprieve. Tom seemed a year older each time that he returned from the regular voyage,

bringing this information, and I know I nearly drove him mad with my pale face and tear-sodden eyes. One day he told me so.

"What am I to do?" he groaned, staring strangely. "How can I leave you like this? I can't, I can't! and yet, if I don't go, Polly – it is all our living, my dear – "

Nothing ever frightened me so much. For *him* to have that look of agitation – my strong rock of protection and defence – he who had never wondered what he was to do, but always knew and did it, while others wondered – it was too shocking. I pulled myself together immediately.

"After all," I said, with a gulp and a smile, "the other poor seamen's wives have to take their chance of this sort of thing, so why not I?"

"You," he replied, in his fond, stupid way, "are not like the others, my pretty one."

He meant that I was far more choice and precious.

"Being pretty," I rejoined, "is no disadvantage that I know of, having regard to the present circumstances. Now if I was delicate, then you *might* be anxious. Tommy, dear, I can't have you look like that! And there's no reason in the world why I should not do as well as possible – as well as everybody else does; indeed, I'm sure I shall. Of course I shall miss you awfully – awfully" – my cheerful voice quavered in spite of myself – "but there will be the proper people to look after me, and – and —*think* what it will be when you come back again!"

He had me in his arms now, with my face under his left ear.

"My brave girl!" he murmured. "My own brave girl!"

Just as when he called me that before, my heart rose elated. I determined to deserve the title.

"Of course you must go," I said firmly; "it is our living, as you say. No use having a family, and nothing to keep it on, is it? I suppose it won't be *more* than a month? A month is soon over. I can send you telegrams. Don't you worry about me. I'm a wicked idiot to fret and grumble; it is because you have spoiled me, love! I have got so used to having you to take care of me – "

I choked, and burst into fresh tears.

However, I did manage to keep up very well until he went. Of course he *had* to go; we agreed about that. Not much of Aunt Kate's wedding present was left by this time. We had our little home, all comfortable and paid for, but his small salary comprised the whole of our current income. It would never have done to jeopardise that.

But oh, it was cruel! It *was* cruel! He says I shall never understand the agony of his soul when he bade me good-bye, and I tell him he can't possibly have suffered the thousandth part of what I suffered. We clasped and kissed as if we never expected to see each other again. I really don't think we did expect it. And yet I was quite well and strong, and every possible thing had been done to safeguard me in his absence. Poor as we were, he made the nurse, who charged three guineas a week, come into the house before he left it, and engage to stay there till his return; and he also installed a nice old lady, whose son he had befriended, and who he thought would be a mother to me when the time of trial came. So she was; but not even an own mother could have made up for the want of him.

"God keep you safe for me," he prayed, as he held me to him, heart to heart. "And you'll take care of yourself, my Polly. You won't fret, and make yourself sick and weak – promise that you won't – for my sake!"

"I won't," I answered him, trying to comfort him; "I will be as good as possible. We'll *both* be well and strong – well and happy – to meet you when you come home again. Tom! Tom! *do* you realise what the next home-coming will be? Let us look forward to that."

So I kept up to the last, to hearten him. The very last was the seeing the ship go by at nightfall, on her way to sea. I lived where I lived on purpose to have this view of her as she passed in and out. I watched for her for an hour, and when she came it was too dark for me to see my darling on the bridge through the strong glasses he had given me on purpose that I might see him, and the flutter of his cabin towel against the black funnel. Nor could he see me in the blue dusk of the shore, with the evening afterglow behind it. But he sent a farewell toot across the water, and I pulled the blind to the top of

my window, and lit up my room with every lamp and candle I could find. I knew he was looking, and that he knew I knew it. We always signalled good-night in this way when he passed out late.

So I kept up to the very last. But when I saw his mast-head light go round the pier, like a bright star in the evening sky, and glide towards the sea that was to keep him from me so long when I wanted him so desperately, then I collapsed like a spent bubble, and all my courage went out of me. I think I fainted there by the window, all of a heap upon the floor.

At any rate, his back was hardly turned – he could scarcely have cleared the Heads, we reckoned – when the catastrophe befell. I have often tried to imagine what his feelings were when, at his first port of call, the intelligence was conveyed to him that he had a son, and that mother and child were doing well. He attempted to express them by letter, but he is not literary. And he can't gush. All the same, I know – I know!

Did I say that the happiest moment of my life was when he called me a brave girl? I was wrong. The happiest moment of my life – even though Tom was away from me – was the moment when I heard the first cry of my own child. Words cannot describe the effect on me of that little voice so suddenly audible, as great an astonishment as if one had never expected it; but every mother in the world will understand.

Oh, I am getting maudlin with these reminiscences! I can't help it.

He was a beautiful boy – my Harry – worthy to be his father's son. We called him Harry because Henry was Tom's second name, and also that of my own father, whom I wished to please; for, after all, he was a good father to me, and I used to think that perhaps I had not been as good a daughter to him as I might have been. This thought occurred to me when I had a baby of my own, and wondered how I should feel if, when he was grown up, he were to take his own wilful way as I had done. It does make such a difference in one's point of view, with regard to all sorts of things – having a baby of one's own. For instance, I knew that Miss Coleman – Mrs. Marsh, I ought to say – had two, and when Aunt Kate told me I was actually angry about it; it seemed to me that it was just another impertinence on her part, and that the children were interlopers in my old home. I could not bear to picture them sitting on father's knee, and being carried in his arms, filling my place and consoling him for the loss of me. But now I was quite glad that he had them, and I sympathised with Miss Coleman. I wished she could come and nurse me now, as she used to do; how much better we should understand each other! I resolved to have baby's likeness taken as soon as possible to send home to her, and to ask her to send me the photos of her little ones in return. I was convinced, of course, that there would be no comparison between them. Doubtless hers were nice children enough – father was a particularly handsome man, in the prime of life – but my baby was really a marvel; *everybody* said so. His proportions were perfect, his skin as fine and pure as could possibly be, his little face too lovely for words, and his intelligence simply wonderful. Before he was a week old he knew me and smiled at me. He had Tom's fair hair and straightforward blue eyes —

However, I suppose all this is silly. At any rate, the silly fashion is to call it so.

It was dreadfully hot upstairs in that venetian-shuttered room, but still I rallied quickly, and everything went well. The old lady was indeed a mother to me, the nurse inflexibly conscientious, and my own little maid like a faithful dog upon the doormat, constantly asking to look at the baby and to be allowed to hold him. And yet – I know it was ungrateful to them, but I could not help it – I never felt that I was properly taken care of, because Tom was not behind them. I pined for him – oh, *how* I did pine for him! – happy as I was in every other respect. While I was still weak, and inclined to be a little feverish, I fell asleep and dreamed that the Bendigo had been wrecked, and that he would never come home to see his child. I cannot describe how that dream frightened me and haunted me – that, and the memory of our last parting, when we seemed to have had so many forebodings.

"If I could only go to him!" was my constant thought, knowing that weary weeks had still to pass before he could return to me, even if his voyage prospered; and once I put it into words, "If we could only go to him, Mrs. Parkinson, *what* wouldn't I give!"

The old lady patted my shoulder soothingly, and assured me he would be home in no time, if I would have but a grain of patience; while I had to reflect that it was impossible to go a-travelling without money. I would have "given anything" indeed, but I had nothing to give, though Tom had amply provided for all my wants at home. Moreover, I could only have left the house, while she was in it, over the dead body of my nurse. I could manage the old lady, but not her; she was a rock of resolution where her duty was concerned.

Suddenly a series of things happened. The old lady had a telegram summoning her to the sick-bed of her son – the very son that Tom had been so good to – and flew to him, distracted. Poor old lady! My mother's heart bled for her. And next day my little maid upset a kettle of boiling water over the nurse (providentially, when the baby was not in her arms), and the poor thing had to go to a hospital to have the scalds dressed. She sent a substitute at once, because it was found that she was for a few days incapacitated for her work; but I was able to manage without the substitute. I told her I was now perfectly well – as in truth I was – and therefore did not require her services. And the day after that, by the English mail, I had a letter from *dear* Aunt Kate, which, when I opened it, shed a bank draft upon the floor. She had heard that I was going to have a baby, and sent fifty pounds to pay expenses. A box of baby-clothes, she said, had been despatched by the same ship; for she didn't suppose I had any money to buy them, or that, if I had, I could get anything in "that outlandish country" fit for a poor child to wear.

I went straight into town and cashed that draft, taking my son with me – proud to carry him myself, though he nearly dragged my arms off. At the same time I ascertained at the company's office that the Bendigo was hourly expected to report herself from Sydney.

"We will go to Sydney," said I to my little companion, as we travelled home again, rich and free. "We'll get Martha's mother to come and keep house until we all return together – with *father* to take care of us."

That same night I had a wire from him. He was safe at Sydney, all well; and would I telegraph immediately to inform him how it was with me? Would I also write fully and at once, so that he might get the letter before he left?

"We will telegraph immediately, to set his dear mind at rest," I said to the son, who smiled and guggled as if he perfectly understood – and I am sure he did; "but we won't write fully and at once. We can get to him as quickly as a letter, and he would rather have us than a million letters. Oh, what a simply overwhelming surprise we shall give him!" I was so full of this blissful prospect that I never thought how I might be embarrassing him in his professional capacity.

There were no intercolonial railways then, and we could not have stood the wear and tear of overland travel if there had been. Nor was there any choice in the matter of sea transport. I was obliged to take the mail steamer that brought me Aunt Kate's money, for it was the only vessel going to Sydney that could get me there in time. I had to be very smart to catch her, and just managed it, leaving my home at the mercy of a plausible red-nosed charwoman who was all but a perfect stranger to me.

Of course I was an idiot – I know that; but, as Tom says, you can't put old heads on young shoulders, and don't want to; and there is no occasion to remember things of that sort now. *He* never blamed me for a moment, and I am sure I cannot regret what I did, when I weigh the pleasures of that expedition against what in the end we had to pay for them. They were richly worth it.

The voyage, even without the nursemaid whom I did not feel justified in adding to my other extravagances, not only did me no harm, but really invigorated me. A new-made mother, I had been informed, was never sea-sick, and my experience seemed to prove the fact; while as for baby, in spite of his catching a little cold, which he might have caught at home, the exquisite sea air must have been better for him than the gutter smells of Melbourne. He was as good as gold, and the stewardess was an angel, and we slept like tops all through our two nights on board.

It was afternoon when we entered Sydney Harbour – that beautiful harbour which I had never seen before, but had no eyes for now. All I cared to look at was my beloved Bendigo, and there she

was at her berth, and the blue-peter was up! When I saw that, I felt quite faint. I ran round the deck asking everybody when she was expected to leave, and all but those who did not know said at five o'clock. It was now three. So that, with other weather, I might have missed her! And Tom would have gone home to find – Great heavens! But with the misadventures that we did have, there is no need to count those we didn't. As it chanced, I was in plenty of time.

It was nearly four before I could get off the mail boat, and it was considerably past that hour when I hurried up the gangway of the Bendigo, panting, and bathed in perspiration – for Sydney is a hot place in January – looking everywhere for Tom. The second officer, who knew me, uttered an exclamation as he ran to take my bag from the cabman; and the way he looked at baby – then asleep, fortunately – was very funny.

"Oh, Mr. Jones," I cried, "is the captain on board?"

"No, Mrs. Braye; he's on shore," was the reply, accompanied with violent blushes. "You must have missed him somehow. Are you – are you going back with us?"

"Of course I am," I said, as calmly as I could. "But he does not know it yet. I had some business in Sydney, and I thought I would give him a surprise. Don't tell him, please; I will go up to his cabin on the bridge and wait for him."

"He may be here any moment," said the young man. And, looking to right and left in an embarrassed way, he asked if he should call the stewardess.

"Not yet," I returned affably. "I will ring when I want her. He will sleep for a long time. He's such a good baby – not the least little bit of trouble." And then I turned back the lace handkerchief from the placid face, and asked Mr. Jones what he thought of that for a month-old child.

He said he was no judge, and behaved stupidly. So I left him, and went up to the bridge, where Tom had a room composed of a bunk and a bay window, entirely sacred to himself. I don't suppose a baby had ever been in it, but the pillows and things I found there made a perfect cradle. As I laid my little one down on his father's bed, I was afraid the thumping of my heart would jog him awake, but it did not. He sank into his nest without sound or movement, leaving me free to watch at the window for Tom's coming.

It was past five o'clock before he came, and I knew when I saw him why he was so late. He had been looking for his expected letter up to the last moment, and had now abandoned hope. I also knew that somebody on deck had betrayed my secret when I heard the change in his step as he ran upstairs. Ah – ah! Before I could arrange any plan for my reception of him I was in his arms. Before either of us could ask questions, we had to overcome the first effects of an emotion which arrested breath as well as speech. Never when we were lovers had we kissed each other as we did now.

"But what – how – why – where?" the dear fellow stuttered, when we began to collect our wits; and in the same bold and incoherent style I simultaneously gave my explanation. Half a minute sufficed to dispose of these necessary preliminaries. Then I led him into his own cabin, the doorway of which I had been blocking up.

"But what are we going to do with him?" Tom asked – a singular question, I considered, but he was full of the business of the ship – I wondered how he *could* think about the ship at such a moment. "Hadn't you better make a nursery of my cabin on deck? It's empty, and the stewardess'll rig you up whatever you want."

"I will make a nursery of it," I replied, "when I want to bath and dress him for the night. And, by the way, perhaps I had better do that now, before we start." For our son had been wakened out of his sleep, in order that his father should see how blue his eyes were.

"Yes, yes, do it now," urged Tom, in a coaxing way. It was sweet of him not to cloud my perfect happiness by hinting at the scandalous breach of etiquette it would be to let a baby appear on the bridge while he was taking the ship out. For my part, I never thought of it.

He took me down to the deck, now crowded with people, who stared rudely at us, and into the one cabin there, which was his own; and he called the stewardess – a delightful woman, charmed

to have the captain's baby on board – and left us together, while he rushed off to speak with the superintendent of the Sydney office, I suppose about my passage. Soon afterwards we started, and until we were away at sea I was fully occupied with Harry's toilet. Then came dinner, and Tom made me go in with him, while the stewardess stayed with the child; and the short evening was taken up with preparations for the night. It was arranged that I should spend it in the nursery, of course, and I was strongly advised to retire early.

But the cabin was hot, and the outside air was cool, and I simply could not rest so far from Tom. The moonlight was lovely at about ten o'clock, so bright that, stepping out on the now deserted deck to look for him, I could plainly see his figure moving back and forth at the end of the bridge, outlined against the sky. And I could not bear it. Slipping back into my room to pick up my child and roll him in a shawl, I prepared to storm the position with entreaties that I felt sure my husband was not the husband to withstand.

He came plunging down the stairs just as I was about to ascend. I stopped, and called to him.

"Tom, *do* let me be with you!"

"I was on my way to you, Polly, to see if you were awake, and would like to come up for a little talk. It's quiet now."

He put his arm round my waist, and turned to hoist me upward.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed, "Is that – "

"Of course it is. You wouldn't have me leave him behind, all alone by himself?"

"But won't he catch his death of cold?"

"How can he, on a night like this? It will do him good. And I won't let him cry, Tom."

"Give him to me. I'll carry him up."

"*Can* you?"

He laughed, and took the little creature from me in a delightfully paternal fashion, and without bungling at all. I had been half afraid that he was going to turn out like so many men – like Mr. Jones, for instance – but had no misgivings after that. Even when we encountered Mr. Jones on duty, he was not ashamed to let his officer see him with an infant in his arms. Certainly he was born to be a father, if anybody ever was.

It was very stuffy in his little house, which had the funnel behind it; so he put a chair for me outside, under the shelter of the screen, and I sat there for some time. It was simply the *sweetest* night! The sea is never still, of course, however calm it may be, but its movements were just as if it were breathing in its sleep. And the soft, wide shining of the moon in that free and airy space – what a dream it was! At intervals Tom came and dropped on the floor, so that he could lean against my knee and get a hand down over his shoulder. The man at the wheel could see us, but carefully avoided looking – as only a dear sailor would do. The binnacle light was in his face, and I watched him, and saw that he never turned his eyes our way. As for Prince Hal, he slept as if the sea were his natural cradle. So it was.

Presently Tom went off the bridge, and when he returned a steward accompanied him, carrying a mattress, blankets, and pillows, which he made up into a comfortable bed beside me.

"How will that do?" my husband inquired, rubbing the back of a finger against my cheek. "It isn't the first time I've made you a bed on deck – eh, old girl?"

I was wearing a dressing-gown, and lay down in it, perfectly at ease. He lowered the child into my arms, punched the pillows for our heads, tucked us up, and kissed us.

"This is on condition that you sleep," he said.

"It is a waste of happiness to sleep," I sighed ecstatically. "I want to lie awake to revel in it."

"If I see you lying awake an hour hence," he rejoined, pretending to be stern, while his voice was so full of tenderness that he could scarcely control it, "I shall send you back to your cabin, Polly."

So I did not let him see it. But for several hours, when he was not looking, I watched his dear figure moving to and fro, and the sea, and the stars, with the smoke from the funnel trailing over them, and revelled in full consciousness of my utter bliss.

Even now – after all these years – I get a sort of lump in my throat when I think of it.

CHAPTER III

A PAGE OF LIFE

Does love fly out of the window when poverty walks in at the door? No, no – of course not! Only when love is an imitation love, selfish and cowardly, as true love can never be. I am sure ours stayed with us always, no matter how cramped and starved. We never felt a regret for having married each other, even when the practical consequences were most unpleasant – never, never, not for a single instant. And yet – and yet – well, it is all over now. One need not make one's self gratuitously uncomfortable by reviving memories of hardships long gone by, and never likely to be repeated.

Another thing. *Is* it fair that a sea-captain should have such miserable wage for such magnificent work? He has no play-hours, like other working men, no nights' rest, no evenings at home, no Saturday holidays – no Sundays even – and no comfort of his wife and family. He is exposed to weather that you would not turn a dog into, and to fatigue only measured by the extent of human endurance; and accepts both without a thought of protest. He has the most awful responsibilities continually on his mind, as to which he is more inflexibly conscientious than any landsman living; and he is broken and ruined if an accident happens that he is but technically to blame for and did his utmost to prevent. Yet all he gets in return is a paltry twenty pounds a month! At least, that is what Tom got – with an English certificate and a record without a flaw. It is because sailors are not money-grubbers, as landsmen are, that the money-grubbers take advantage of them.

Tom used to bring his money home and give it all to me, and he almost apologised for having to ask for a little now and then, to provide himself with clothes and tobacco. Moreover, he never pried into my spendings, though anxious that I should be strict and careful, and pleased to be asked to advise me and to audit my small accounts. In this he was the most gentlemanly husband I ever heard of. And of course I strained every nerve to manage for the best, and prove myself worthy of the confidence reposed in me. But I was not much of a housekeeper in those days. At home Miss Coleman had attended to everything, even to the buying of my frocks; for my father had never made me an allowance – which I do think is so wrong of fathers! If you are not taught the value of money when you are a girl, how are you to help muddling and blundering when you are a married woman? – especially if you marry a poor man. I thought at first that twenty pounds a month was riches. But even at the first, and though we used enough of Aunt Kate's wedding present to cover the cost of setting up a house, there seemed nothing left over at the month's end, try as I would to be economical. When the second draft came I had doctor's and nurse's fees like lead upon my mind; we did not invest that hundred at all, and it melted like smoke. And then – before Harry was fairly out of arms – Phyllis was born, and I was delicate for a long time; without a second servant my nursery cares would have killed me. I thought Aunt Kate would have sent me help again, but she did not – perhaps because I had neglected to write to her, being always so taken up with household cares. And I got into arrears with the tradesmen, and into the way of paying them "something on account," as I could spare the money and not as it was due; and this wrecked the precise system that Tom had made such a point of, so that I kept things from him rather than have him worried when he wanted rest. And it was miserable to be struggling by myself, weighed down with sordid anxieties, tossing awake at night to think and think what I could do, never any nearer to a solution of the everlasting difficulty, but rather further and further off. And I know I was very cross and fretful – how could I help it? – and that my poor boy must often have found the home that should have cheered him a depressing place. He seemed not to like to sleep while I was muddling about, and used to look after the children, or clean the knives and boots, when he should have been recruiting in his bed for the next voyage. For I was again obliged to do as I could with one poor maid-of-all-work, and I am afraid – I really am a little afraid sometimes – that I have a tendency to be inconsiderate when I have much to think of.

By the time that Bobby was born – we had then been five years married – all the romance of youth seemed to have departed from us, dear as we were to one another. Our talk when we met was of butchers and bakers, rents and rates, the wants of the house and how they could be met or otherwise; and we had to shout sometimes to make ourselves heard above the noise of crying babies and the clack of the sewing-machine. It was exactly like the everyday, commonplace, perfunctory, prosaic married life that we saw all around us, and to the level of which we had thought it impossible that *we* should ever sink.

Tom says, no. On second thoughts I do too. The everyday marriage was not dignified with those great moments of welcome and farewell, those tragic hours of the night when the husband was fighting the wind and sea and the wife listening to the rattle of the windows with her heart in her mouth – such as, for the time being, uplifted us above all things tame and petty. And what parents, jogging along in the groove of easy custom, can realize the effect of trials such as some of those that our peculiar circumstances imposed on us, in keeping the wine of life from growing flat and stale. The same thing happened at Bobby's birth as at Harry's, Tom was perforce away, and I might have died alone without his knowing it. Three months later the little one took convulsions and was given up by the doctor; and the father again was out of reach, and might have come home to find his baby underground. Never shall I forget those times of anguish and rapture – and many besides, which proved that nothing in the world was of any consequence to speak of compared with our value to one another.

But we forget so soon! And the little things have such power to swamp the big ones. They are like the dust and sand of the desert, which cover everything if not continually dredged away. And all those little debts and privations and schemings and strugglings to make ends meet that would not meet, were enough to choke one. Especially as Bobby cut his teeth with more trouble than any baby I ever had, and as I, what with one thing and another, grew quite disheartened and out of health, so that I never knew what it was not to feel tired.

The ignoble sorrows of this period – which I hate to think of – seemed to culminate on the morning of the day that I am going to tell of – at the end of which they were so joyfully dispelled.

Bobby had cried incessantly through the night, so that I had only slept in snatches, just enough to make me feel more heavy and yawny than if I had not slept at all. I dragged myself dispiritedly out of bed, dying for the cup of tea which did not appear till an hour after its time, and was then brought to me rank and cold from standing, with no milk in it.

"I forgot to put the can out last night," was Maria's cheerful explanation, "and I waited in hopes that the milkman would come back, but he didn't. And, please'm, what shall I do about the children's breakfast?"

"You mean to say you never left a drop over from yesterday, in case of accidents?" I demanded, tears rushing into my eyes. "Oh, Ma-ria!"

It sounds a poor thing to cry about, but I appeal to mothers to say if I was a fool. Bobby was a bottle baby, and we had all our milk from one cow on his account; and he was ill, and the dairy at least a mile away. Rarely had I trusted Maria to remember to put the can out for the morning supply, delivered before she was up; I used to hang it on the nail myself. But last night, having my hands so full, I had contented myself with telling her twice over not to forget it. With this result! At any moment the poor child might awake and cry for food, and a spoonful of stale dregs was all I had for him.

There and then, with clenched teeth and a lump in my throat, and boots on my feet that had mere rags of soles to them, I set off with the milk-can to that distant dairy. It was a thick morning, and presently rained in torrents. When I arrived, drenched to the skin, I was told that all the milk was with the cart, and I had to wait half an hour until the proprietress could be persuaded to give me a little. She was unsympathetic and disobliging – I suppose because I had not paid her husband for three months. On my return home Bobby, in Maria's arms, was shrieking himself into another fit of convulsions; and the other children, catching their deaths of cold in their nightgowns, were paddling about on flagstones and oilcloth, fighting and squalling, and trying to light the dining-room fire. They

imagined they were helping, but had spilled coals all over the carpet and used the crumb-brush to spread the black dust afterwards; and the wonder is that they didn't burn the house down.

It was not quite just perhaps – poor little things, they *were* trying their best – but the first thing I did was to box the ears of both of them and send them back to bed. I don't think I ever saw them, as babies, take so small a punishment so greatly to heart. They snuffled and sulked for hours – wouldn't even show an interest in the apricot jam and boiled rice that I gave them for their breakfast and imagined would be a treat to them – and were more vexatious and tiresome than words can say.

"I wish father was home," Harry kept muttering, in that moody way of his; it is the thing he always said when he wanted to be particularly aggravating. "Phyllis, I wish father was here, don't you?"

"Oh," I cried, "you don't wish it more than I do! If father were here, he'd pretty soon make you behave yourselves. *He* wouldn't let you drive your mother distracted when she's already got so much to worry her, with poor little brother sick and all." Tears were in my eyes, as they must have seen, but the heartless little brats were not in the least affected.

And father's absence was an extra anxiety, for he was hours and hours behind his time. The papers reported fogs along the coast, and I thought of shipwrecks as the day wore on, and began to feel that it would be quite consistent with the drift of things if I were to get news presently that the Bendigo had gone down. I knew how he dreaded fogs, which made a good navigator as helpless as a bad one, and wondered if it implied an instinctive presentiment that a fog was to be his ruin! I remembered his telling me that if ever he was so unfortunate as to lose his ship, he should cast himself away along with her; and the appalling idea filled me not with anguish only, but with a sort of indignation against him.

"And he with a young family depending on him!" I cried in my heart – as if he had already done it – "and a wife who would die if he went from her!"

I was in that state of mind and health that when, early in the afternoon, I heard him come stumbling in, my solicitude for him suddenly passed, and only the bitter sense of grievance remained. The grocer had been calling in person, insolent about his account, which indeed had been growing to awful dimensions; and I was fairly sick of the whole thing. It was not my poor old fellow's fault, for he gave me his money as fast as he got it, but somehow I felt as if it was. And when he dumped down on the sofa beside me to look at Bobby, I began at once – without even kissing him – to pour out all my woes.

I was reckless with misery and headache, and did not care what I said. I told him things I had been scrupulously keeping from him for months – things which I imagined would harrow him frightfully, much to my sorrow when it would be too late. And he – even *he* – seemed callous! He mumbled a soothing word or two, and fell silent. I asked him for advice and sympathy, and he never answered me.

Looking at him, I saw that his eyes were shut, his head dropped, his great frame reeling as he sat, trying to prop himself with his broad hands on his broad, outspread knees.

"Tom," I cried in despair, "you're not listening to a word I'm saying!"

He jerked himself up.

"I beg your pardon, Polly. The fact is, I'm dead-beat, my dear. It has been foggy, you know, and I haven't dared to turn in these two nights."

It seemed as if *everything* was determined to go wrong. I could see that his eyelids were swollen and gummy, and that he was half stupefied with fatigue.

"What a shame it is!" I passionately complained. "What wretches those owners are – sitting at home in their armchairs, wallowing in luxury, while they make you slave like this – and give you next to nothing for it!"

"It's no fault of theirs," said he. "They can't help the weather. And when I've had a few hours' sleep I shall be as right as ninepence. Then we'll talk things over, pet, and I'll see what can be done."

I rose, with my sick child in my arms, and he stumbled after me into our bedroom. For the first time it was not ready for him. I had been so distracted with my numerous worries that I had forgotten to make the bed and put away the litter left from all our morning toilets; the place was a perfect pigsty for him to go into. And he coming so tired from the sea – looking to his home for what little comfort his hard life afforded him! When I saw the state of things, I burst into tears. With an extremely grubby handkerchief he wiped them away, and kissed me and comforted me.

"What the deuce does it matter?" quoth he. "Why, bless your heart, I could sleep on the top of a gatepost. Just toss the things on anyhow – here, don't you bother – I'll do it."

He was contented with anything, but I felt shamed and heart-broken to have failed him in a matter of this kind – the more so because he *was* so unselfish and unexacting, so unlike ordinary husbands who think wives are made for no other purpose than to keep them always comfortable. In ten minutes he was snoring deeply, and I was trying not to drop tears into the little stew I was cooking for his tea.

"At least he shall have a nice tea," I determined, "though goodness knows how I am going to pay for it."

Poor baby was easier, and asleep in his cradle; the two others had gone to play with a neighbour's children. So the house was at peace for a time, and that was a relief. It was also an opportunity for thinking – for all one's cares to obtrude themselves upon the mind – and the smallest molehills looked mountains under the shadow of my physical weariness.

Having arranged the tea-table and made up the fire, I sat down for a moment, with idle hands in my lap; and I was just coming to the sad conclusion that life wasn't worth living – wicked woman that I was! – when I heard the evening postman. Expecting nothing, except miserable little bills with "account rendered" on them, I trailed dejectedly to the street door. Opening it, a long-leaved book was thrust under my nose, and I was requested to sign for a registered letter.

"Ah-h-h!" I breathed deeply, while flying for a pen. "It is that ever-blessed Aunt Kate – I know it is! She seems to divine the exact moment by instinct."

I scribbled my name, received the letter, saw my father's handwriting, and turned into the house, much sobered. For father, who was a bad correspondent – like me – had intimated more than once that he was finding it as much as he could do to make ends meet, with his rapidly increasing family.

I sat down by the fire, opened the much-sealed envelope, and looked for the more or less precious enclosure. I expected a present of five pounds or so, and I found a draft for a hundred. The colour poured into my face, strength and vigour into my body, joy and gladness into my soul, as I held the document to the light and stared at it, to make sure my eyes had not deceived me. Oh, what a pathetic thing it is that the goodness of life should so depend upon a little money! Even while I thought that hundred pounds was all, I was intoxicated with the prospect before me – bills paid, children able to have change of air, Tom and I relieved from a thousand heartaches and anxieties which, though they could not sour him, yet spoiled the comfort of our home because they sapped my strength and temper.

I ran to wake him and tell him how all was changed in the twinkling of an eye; but when I saw him so heavily asleep, my duty as a sailor's wife restrained me. Nothing short of the house burning over his head would have justified me in disturbing him. I went back to my rocking-chair to read my father's letter.

Well, here was another shock – two or three shocks, each sharper than the last. My beloved aunt was dead. She had had an uncertain heart for several years, and it had failed her suddenly, as is the way of such. She went to church on a Sunday night, returned in good spirits and apparently good health, ate a hearty supper, retired to her room as usual, and was found dead in her bed next morning when her maid took in her tea. This sad news sufficed me for some minutes. Seen through a curtain of thick tears, the words ran into each other, and I could not read further. Dear, dear Aunt Kate! She was an odd, quick-tempered old lady, cantankerous at times; but how warm-hearted, how

just and generous, how good to me, even when I did not care to please her! When one is a wife, and especially when one is a mother, all other relationships lose their binding power; but still I could not help crying for a little while over the loss of Aunt Kate. And I can honestly say that I did not think of her money until after I had wiped my eyes and resumed reading. When I turned over a leaf and saw the word, I remembered the importance of her will to all her relatives. I said to myself, "After all, the hundred pounds does come from her. It is her legacy to me." And I was sordid enough to feel a pang of disappointment because – being her last bequest – it was so small.

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