

LAURA RICHARDS

JIM OF HELLAS, OR IN
DURANCE VILE; THE
TROUBLING OF
BETHESDA POOL

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Laura Elizabeth Howe Richards

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JIM OF HELLAS

Part I

Everyone knows the Island; it is not necessary to name it. With its rolling downs, its points, its ponds, its light-houses, and above all, its town, – who does not know the Island? Some day I shall write a story about the downs, the billowy acres of gold on russet, russet on gold, wonderful to see, – but this story is about the town.

The town has its nominal government, like other towns; its selectmen, and its town-meeting, and other like machinery; but everybody knows that the real seat of government lies in the Upper House. The meetings of this republican House of Lords are held in the best room of "Bannister's," the one inn of the town. It is a pleasant, roomy old structure, built in the Island fashion, with wide windows and plenty of them, and with a railed platform on its flat-topped roof, from which, in former days, the women of the house used to watch for the coming of the whaling-fleet.

There is little watching now on the Island. No ships come into that wonderful harbour, once thronged with sails. The great wharves rot silently and fall apart; a few old hulks rot quietly beside them. Two or three fishing-smacks, a coal-schooner or two, – these are all one sees now from the roof or the windows of Bannister's.

But the men who sit together in the upper room still look out of the windows a great deal, because from them they can see the harbour, and beyond it the sea; and the sea is what they love best to look at, for the greater part of their lives has been spent on it. Old sea-captains, – it needs but one glance to tell of what the Upper House is composed: Men with faces that might have been carved out of mahogany, wrinkled and seamed and beaten into strange lines by wind and weather; with gray or white hair, for the most part, and shaggy beards, yet with keen, bright eyes which are used to looking, and, what is not always the same thing, to seeing what they look at.

Though most of them go to sea no more, they keep with care their sea-going aspect; they wear pea-jackets with huge horn buttons, heavy sea-boots, and never fail to don their sou'westers in bad weather. The room in which they sit is well suited to them. On the broad window-seats lie spy-glasses and telescopes of all kinds. The walls are hung with sea-trophies.

Here is a piece of plank transfixed by the sharp blade of a sword-fish; there, a pair of walrus-tusks; there, again, the beautiful horn of the narwhal, like a wonderful lance of ivory, fit weapon for King Olaf or Eric the Red. In the doorway stands a whale's jaw, a great arch ten feet high, under which all must pass with thoughts of Jonah. As for corals and shells, there is no end to them, for the upper room is a museum as well as a place of convention, and here the captains love to bring their choicest treasures, keeping only the second-best to adorn the chimney-piece of the home-parlour.

In a great arm-chair, facing a seaward window, sits the patriarch of the Upper House, old Abram Bannister. His grandfather had built the inn itself, his grandsons now keep it. Every morning, winter and summer, Jake and Bill "hist" the old captain out of bed, put him in his chair, and wheel him into the great room; then they give him a spy-glass to hold in his hand, and leave him till dinner-time. The captains begin to straggle in about eight o'clock, when their morning chores are done. They greet the

white old man with never-failing cordiality; he is the pride of the Upper House. They are never tired of asking him how old he is, nor of hearing him reply in his feeble, cheery pipe, —

"Ninety-nine year, and risin' a hundred."

He sleeps a good deal of the day, and, on waking, never fails to cry out, "Thar' she blows!"

Whereupon, one of the captains promptly replies, "Where away?" and the patriarch says, — "Weather bow!" and straightway forgets all about it, and plays with his spy-glass.

When the captains are assembled in sufficient number, they discuss the affairs of the town, talk over this or that question, and decide what the "*se-leckmen*" ought to do about it.

Woe to the selectmen who should dare to oppose the decision of the Upper House! Something dreadful would happen to them; but, as they never have opposed it, one cannot tell what form the punishment would take.

Now it fell, on a day, that the captains were sitting together spinning yarns, as was their custom when business was over. The present and the immediate future provided for, it was their delight to plunge into the past, and bring up the marvellous treasures hidden in that great sea. Captain Zeno Pye was telling about the loss of the "Sabra" in the year 1807. His father had been on the vessel, and Captain Zeno sometimes forgot that it was not himself, so often had he told the story. The other captains, sitting like so many veiled prophets, each shrouded in his cloud of smoke, listened with the placid enjoyment of connoisseurs, making a mental note of any slightest variation of word or inflection in the familiar narrative. Any one of them could have told it in his sleep, but it was Captain Zeno's story, and it was one of the unwritten laws of the Upper House that no captain should tell another's story.

"So," said Captain Zeno, — he was a little walnut-faced man, with sharp black eyes, and a dry and rasping utterance, — "so they was makin' good sailin' with a fair wind, on the 18th day of October, when all of a suddent the lookout sung out —"

"Thar she blows!" broke in Captain Abram, in his piping treble.

"Where away?" responded Captain Silas Riggs, promptly.

"Weather bow!" said the old man, and fell silent again. All looked at Captain Zeno, who smiled appreciatively.

"Won'erful, aint it?" he said, meditatively. "He knows that pint, Cap'n Abram does, as well as I do. Wal, as I was sayin', they struck a school o' whales, on the weather bow, sure enough; sperms they was, and likely-lookin' fur as they could see. Three boats put off, and my father, bein' mate at that time, had one of 'em. He sighted a sixty-barrel bull, and was pullin' for him for dear life, when an old cow come by with her calf, and when she saw the boat she dove, and one eend o' the fluke struck 'em amidships, and stove a hole in 'em. Wal! that kerwumpussed 'em, ye see! Nothin' for it but to pull back to the ship, and set to work on repairs. My father called the carpenters, and give 'em their job, an' then he looked after the school, and cussed a little, mebbe, for all he was a perffessor, to think he was losin' all the fun. All of a suddent he seed a whale leave the school, turn round, and make straight for the ship. He didn't think nothin' of it, 'cept he see 'twas the biggest bull his eyes had ever come across. Big? Wal! 'Twas like a island, Father used to say. He'd heerd tell of two-hundred-and-thirty-barrel whales along back in the seventeens, and he calc'lated this might be one of 'em left over. He see the critter was comin' pooty nigh, and he sung out for a harpoon, thinkin' he might git a shy, after all; when, lo ye! that whale took a start an' come through the water like a shot out of a gun, and struck the ship just forrard of the forechains.

"Wal, sir, they was knocked consid'able eendways, I tell ye! Father was dumfounded for a minute, and the ship's crew with him, what with the surprise on't, and the everlastin' shakin' it giv 'em, too. But Father never let his wits go without a string tied to 'em, and in a minute he ordered all hands to the pumps, to see if she had sprung a-leak. She hed, sir; she was sinkin'; and Father run up the sign for the boats to come back. He turned round from runnin' up that signal, and you may call me a Jerseyman if the whale wasn't comin' for 'em agin, head on and all sails drawin'! Before Father

could sing out, he struck 'em again, pooty nigh the same place, with a crash that sent every man-jack sprawlin' on his face. Wal, sir, 'twas boats then, I can tell ye, and no time to lose, neither! Th' other boats kem back and took 'em aboard, and in five minutes' time the 'Sabry' down with her nose and up with her heels, and down she went to Davy. Yes, sir! That's what you might call – "

At this moment the captain was interrupted by a knock at the door. He looked displeased, but said "Come aboard!" with as good a grace as he could; while the other captains turned cheerfully in the direction of the knocker, who might bring them something new in place of a many-times-told tale.

A lank, ungainly man entered, and stood timidly on one foot, with his mouth open, holding the door in his hand.

"Come aboard!" repeated Captain Zeno, impatiently. "Shet the door! Say yer say with yer mouth, and then shet that, – if ye can get it all to at onc't!" he added, in an undertone.

The ungainly man looked slowly round the room, and stroked his lantern-jaws. "That man!" he said, deliberately, lingering on each word as if it were too precious to part with, "what be I to do with him?"

The captains looked at one another. They had been speaking of this matter only a few minutes before, but they feigned unconsciousness.

"What man do you mean, Sefami Bunt?" asked Captain Zeno, severely. "The prisoner who was caught stealin' hens from Palmyry Henshaw last week?"

The man nodded. "Says he wants somethin' to do!" he said. "Says he'd like to do chores round for his victuals. Says he doesn't like my victuals."

The captains chuckled. Sefami Bunt was a bachelor, and his housekeeping was not supposed to be of a high order.

"Have ye got him in the jail?" asked Captain Asy Bean.

The lantern-jawed man shifted uneasily to the other foot. "Wal, I hev!" he admitted. "But he doesn't seem to be contented with that." Then, after a pause, "I brung him with me. 'T want safe to leave him, for the jail door sags so I can't lock it, and the chain is bust. So 'f you'd like to see him for yerselves – "

"Where is he?" asked the captains in chorus.

Sefami Bunt gave a backward jerk with his head. "I tied him to the leg o' the table," he said. "The boys is mindin' of him. Sh'll I fetch him up?"

Receiving an affirmative answer, he disappeared, and returned, dragging the prisoner by the collar.

The latter, the instant he caught sight of the assembly of mariners, shook off his keeper with a single movement; then, making his obeisance in true seaman fashion, he glanced quickly round the room, and stood still, cap in hand, in an attitude of respectful humility.

He was a short, thick-set man, evidently of great strength; a sailor, every inch of him, from the gold rings in his ears to the way he set his feet down. Jet-black curls clustered about his brown, smiling face. His dark eyes were alive with intelligence and humour. His open shirt displayed a neck elaborately tattooed, while hands and wrists were a museum of anchors, hearts and crosses.

"Will you speak to him, Cap'n Bean?" said one or two of the other captains in low tones.

"Wal, I don't want to be settin' myself up," replied Captain Asy, "but if it's the wish" – he glanced round the circle, and ascertained that it was the wish. Whereupon, clearing his throat and assuming a quarter-deck frown, he asked, in majestic tones, "What is your name, prisoner?"

The dark eyes looked intelligence. "Name, honourable captains? Giorgios Aristides Evangelides Paparipopoulos."

"Great Andes!" exclaimed Captain Asy. "We've got the whole archipelago, and no mistake. What do they *call* ye? Hey?"

"Ah!" – the brown face flashed into a bewildering smile, an ivory revelation. "Call me? Jim!"

The captains breathed again.

"That's more civilized!" said Captain Asy. "Now, you Jim, what have you got to say for yourself?"

It appeared that Jim had a great deal to say for himself. He was not happy, he must inform the honourable captains. He complained of his quarters, of his jailer, of his fare. He had, it was true, stolen a hen, being very hungry and having no money to seek the so honourable hotel. The hen was almost uneatable, but – he had stolen her. He had been condemned to three months' imprisonment in the jail, and it was well. But – here he waxed eloquent, pathetic. "I haf been in jail, honourable captains, before. Never for great offence, but – I have been. But never like zis! Ze rain come in upon my bed. I try to shut ze door, for ze wind blow at me, but he not shut. I sleep, and ze ship come in ze door and eat me."

"Hold on there!" said Captain Asy. "What do you mean by that? Hey? Ship come in the door?"

"Yes, honourable captain; t'ree gre't big ship. I hear 'baa! baa!' I wake suddainlee, and zey are eat my foot."

"Sheep, he means!" the jailer explained. "The' warnt but two, I guess. Fact, they got a way o' wand'rin' int' the jail, but they wouldn't ha' hurt him any. He's dretful skeered for one that's knocked about pooty nigh the world over, from what he says."

"But!" the prisoner maintained, turning a candid face upon the court; "is it a jail – for ship to walk in and eat – what you say neeble – ze foots of prisoners?"

"No! no! 'taint!" "That's so!" "He's right, gentlemen!" came from the assembled captains.

"Zen," Jim continued, "ze mess! Salted backbone of hog – must I eat always zis? Never for t'ree mont's ozer sing? Honourable captains, I die."

"Wal!" said Sefami Bunt, with a hint of bluster in his voice, "I guess if backbone's good enough for me, it's good enough for him! 'Twas a good hawg! and, anyway, I've got to use it!"

"Sold the rest and salted down the backbone for yourself and prisoner?" queried Captain Asy Bean.

The jailer nodded, and repeated in an injured tone:

"'Twas a good hawg! Anybody could ha' seen him fattenin' any time they mind to pass by."

"And I tell Mr. Bont," – Jim resumed the thread of his narrative, smiling apology around, – "I tell him, 'Let-a me go!' not ron away, of course; I cannot ron away if I wish. It is island. I tell him 'Let-a me go and work! I make ze door good; I mend ze windows; I do for ozer people work, perhaps zey give me ozer mess.' Is it not?" with a sudden flash and gleam of eyes and teeth.

There was a short pause. "How did you come here, anyway?" queried Captain Bije Tarbox.

It appeared that Jim had fallen overboard from his vessel. It was night, and his fall had not been noticed. Fortunately, the vessel was, even at the moment, passing the Island. He was a good swimmer, used to being in the water for a long time – briefly, behold him! He stole the hen. He was taken, brought before the "selected gentlemen." That was his story.

"Just step outside with Bunt a minute, my man," said Captain Asy Bean, "and we'll settle your case." Then, as the door closed behind the smiling criminal and his gloomy guardian, Captain Asy turned to the others:

"Gentlemen, this story may or may not be true. It sounds fishy; but, anyhow, the man must have come from somewhere, and I d'no as it matters much, s'long as he's here now. Question is, what to do with him now he *is* here. Just like them *seleckmen*, lettin' the jail go to rack an' ruin, an' then clappin' a man in thar for the sheep to nibble."

"Man's a seaman, anyhow," said Captain Bije Tarbox. "Ought t' ha' been sent straight to us."

"That's so!" assented the captains all.

"Wal!" resumed Captain Asy, "'pears to me the straight thing is for us to send for the *seleckmen* – they'll be goin' by to dinner direckly, an' we can toll 'em in an' say to 'em – "

"Thar she blows!" sang out Captain Abram.

"Where away?" asked Captain Moses Packard.

"Weather bow!" was the reply; and then the talk went on again.

Part II

Palmyra Henshaw was sitting in her neat kitchen, with folded hands. The kettle was singing cheerfully, the cat was purring contentedly by the stove; but for once Miss Palmyra's mood did not chime in with the singing or the purring. She had sprained her ankle the day before, and it was now so painful, that, after dragging it about till her work was "done up" (for, land sakes! she couldn't sit down in the dirt; and her kitchen had to be cleaned up, if she did it on her hands and knees), she was fain now to sit down and put the offending member up on a chair.

She looked at the poor foot with great displeasure. It was badly swollen; she had had to put on a green carpet slipper, one of an old pair of her father's; and the contrast with her other foot, in its trim, well-blackened shoe, was anything but pleasant.

As she sat thus in silent discomfort, she heard the sound of the pump in the yard. Somebody was working the handle up and down with firm, regular strokes.

"Well, what next?" said Miss Palmyra, fretfully, peering out of the window and trying to gain a sight of the intruder. "I sh'd like to know who's at that pump without askin' leave or license. I left the pail out there, too, didn't I? Like as not it'll go, same as the hen did. I must get up!" – she made a motion to rise, but sank back with a groan. "My Land! Have I got to sit here and have my things stole without liftin' a finger?"

At the same moment she heard quick steps crossing the yard: the door opened, and a man entered, carrying a brimming pail of water. Miss Palmyra opened her mouth to shriek, but closed it again when the stranger smiled.

"Good eve!" said the man, who had black curls, gold rings in his ears, and the brightest eyes that ever were seen. "I come to do ze work."

"Work!" ejaculated Miss Palmyra, faintly.

"Ze shores!" explained the man, with a brilliant flash of eyes and teeth. "You have hurt ze foot? So peety! Look! I fill ze kettel – so! I bring ze wood – so!" (He was gone, and back again with an armful of wood before Miss Palmyra could trust her bewildered senses enough to know whether she was awake or dreaming.) "I fill up ze stofe – so! And next? It is a cow zat you haf? I milk her!" He swept a glance around the kitchen, seized with unerring instinct the right pail, and was gone again.

Miss Palmyra pinched herself, and opened and shut her eyes several times.

"I wonder if I'm goin' crazy!" she said. "I feel kinder light-headed."

She looked at the cat, who blinked quietly in return, and his calm air of tranquillity steadied her nerves. "If he'd been a tramp, he wouldn't ha' brought in that wood!" she said. "Would he, Eben?" The cat was named Ebenezer. Ebenezer purred assurance, and Miss Palmyra's spirits rose. "Like as not he's stayin' with some o' the neighbours!" she said. "Mis' Brewster's real kind: mebbe this is her nephew she was expectin', and she sent him in to help me. Well, I'm sure!" She twitched a little shawl over the carpet-slipper, and settled her neat collar and apron.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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