

***FREDERIC
STEWART ISHAM***



***HALF
A CHANCE***

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Half A Chance

EAN 8596547365754

DigiCat, 2022

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PART ONE

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CHAPTER I

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MR. GILLETT'S CHARGE

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"By all means, m'deah, let's go down between decks and have a look at them."

"Of course, if you wish, Sir Charles, although--Do you think we shall be edified, Mr. Gillett?"

"That depends, m'lady,"--and the speaker, a man with official manners and ferret-like eyes, shifted from one foot to another,--"on what degree, or particular class of criminal your ladyship would be interested in," he added. "If in the ordinary category of skittle sharper or thimblerrigger," with a suspicion of mild scorn, "then I do not imagine your ladyship would find much attraction in the present cargo. But, on the other hand," in a livelier tone, "if your ladyship has any curiosity, or shall we say, a psychological bent, regarding the real out-and-outer, the excursion should be to your liking. For," rubbing his hands, "a properer lot of cutthroats and bad magsmen, it has never been my privilege to escort across the equator; and this is my sixth trip to Australia!"

"How interesting! How very interesting!" The lady's voice floated languidly. "Sir Charles is quite right. We must really go down. At any rate, it will be a change, after having been shut up so long in that terrible state-room."

"One moment, m'lady! There's a little formality that must be observed first."

"Formality?" And the lady, who was of portly appearance and uncertain age, gazed from the speaker standing deferentially before her, to a man of size, weight and importance seated in a comfortable chair at her side. "What does he mean, Sir Charles?"

"Regulations, m'lady--m'lord!" was the answer. "No one allowed on the prisoners' deck without the captain's permission. There he is now."

"Then be good enough to beckon to him!" said the lady.

But this Mr. Gillett, agent of the police, discreetly declined to do; Captain Macpherson was a man not to be beckoned to by any one; much less by him. As he stood squarely in the center of the ship, he looked like a mariner capable of commanding his boat and all the people aboard; indeed, some of the characteristics of his vessel seemed to have entered into his own make-up; the man matched the craft. Broad-nosed, wide of beam, big, massive, obstinate-looking, the *Lord Nelson* plowed aggressively through the seas. With every square sail tugging hard at her sturdy masts, she smote and over-rode the waves, and, beating them down, maintained an unvarying, stubborn poise. But although she refused to vacillate or shuffle to the wooing efforts of the uneasy waters, she progressed not without noise and pother; foamed and fumed mightily at the bow and left behind her a wake, receding almost as far as the eyes might reach. Captain Macpherson looked after the bubbles, cast his glance aloft at the bulging patches of white, and then condescended to observe the agent of the police who had silently approached.

"Sir Charles and lady, and Sir Charles' party have expressed, Captain Macpherson, the desire to obtain permission to visit the prisoners' deck."

Captain Macpherson looked toward Sir Charles and his lady, the other passengers lounging around them, a little girl, at the rail, her hair, blown windward, a splash of gold against the blue sky. "What for?" said the skipper brusquely.

"To have a look at the convicts, I suppose."

"What good'll that do them?" growled the commander. "Idle curiosity, that's what I call it. Well, go along. Only, I'll hold you accountable, and bear this in your mind, no tracts!"

"I don't think," replied Mr. Gillett with some asperity, "you need be apprehensive on that score, Captain Macpherson. Sir Charles and m'lady are not that sort."

"Well, keep them away from the bars. The weather has nae improved the tempers of a few of the rascallions, and they'd like naught better than a chance for their claws."

"Thanks for the permission, and," a little stiffly, "the admonition, which latter," turning away, "a man whose lifelong profession has been dealing with convicts is most likely to stand in need of and heed."

Captain Macpherson frowned, stumped the other way, then looked once more aloft, and, by the exercise of that ingenuity peculiarly his own, found new tasks for the sailors. Aboard any ship, especially a ship of this character, it was his theory and practice that discipline could not be too strictly maintained and the men on the *Lord Nelson* knew no idle moments.

"May I go, too?"

The child with the golden hair desisted in her occupation of watching the flying-fish and other *real*-winged creatures, and, leaving the rail, walked toward the group that was about to follow Mr. Gillett. She was a very beautiful girl of ten or eleven; slim, delicately fashioned, of a definite proud type. But although she held herself erect, in an unconscious patrician sort of way, there was, also, about her something wayward and different from the conventional, aristocratic set. The disordered golden hair proclaimed it, while in the depths of the fine, blue eyes manifold changing lights told of a capriciousness out of the pale of a stiffly decorous and well-contained caste.

"May I go, too, aunt?" she repeated.

"Why, of course!" interposed a blasé, cynical-appearing young man who had just emerged from the cabin. "Don't know where she wants to go, or what she wants to do; but don't say she can't; really you mustn't, now."

"Well, since you insist on spoiling her, Lord Ronsdale--"

He twisted a blond mustache which adorned a handsome face that bore many marks of what is called experience of the world. "Couldn't do that! Besides, Jocelyn and I are great chums, don't you know. We're going to be married some day when she grows up."

"*Are* we?" said the child. "The man I marry must be very big and strong, and must *not* have light hair."

Lord Ronsdale laughed tolerantly.

"Plenty of time for you to change your mind, don't you know. Meanwhile, I'll not despair. Faint heart, and so on. But," turning to Sir Charles, "where is it she 'wants to go?'"

"To see the convicts."

"Convicts? Ah!" He spoke rather more quickly than usual, with accent sharper.

"You didn't know who your neighbors were going to be when you decided so suddenly to accompany us?"

"No." His voice had a metallic sound.

Sir Charles addressed Mr. Gillett. "Tell us something more definite about your charges whom we are going to inspect. Meant to have found out earlier in the voyage, but been so jolly seasick, what with one gale after another, I for one, until now, haven't much cared whether we had Claude Duval and Dick Turpin themselves for neighbors, or whether we all went straight to Davy Jones' locker together. A bad lot, you have already informed us! But how bad?"

"Well, we haven't exactly M. Duval or Mr. Turpin in the pen, but we've one or two others almost as celebrated in their way. There's Billy Burke, as desperate a cracksman as the country can produce, with," complacently, "a record second to none in his class. He"--and Mr. Gillett, with considerable zest entered into the details of Mr. Burke's eventful and rapacious career. "Then there's the 'Frisco Pet,' or the 'Pride of Golden Gate,' as some of the sporting papers call him."

"The 'Frisco Pet!" Lord Ronsdale started; his color slightly changed; his lashes drooped over his cold eyes. "He is on board this vessel?"

"Yes; you remember him, my Lord, I dare say?"

"In common with many others," shortly.

"Many of the gentry and titled classes did honor him with their attention, I believe."

"Why," asked Jocelyn, whose blue eyes were fastened very intently on the face of the police agent, "did they call him such a funny name, the 'Frisco Pet?"

"Because he's a yankee bruiser, prize-fighter, or was, before the drink got him," explained Mr. Gillett. "And originally, I believe, he hailed from the land of the free. Some one brought him to London, found out about his 'talents' and put him in training. He was a low, ignorant sailor; could scarcely write his own name; but he had biceps and a thick head. Didn't know when he was whipped. I can see him yet, as he used to look, with his giant shoulders and his swagger as he stepped into the ring. There was no nonsense about him--or his fist; could break a board with that. And how the shouts used to go up; 'the pet!' 'a quid on the pet!' 'ten bob on the stars and stripes!' meaning the costume he wore. Oh, he was a favorite in Camden Town! But one night he failed them; met some friends from the forecastle of a Yankee trader that had dropped down the Thames. Went into the ring with a stagger added to the swagger. Well, they took him out unconscious; never was a man worse punished. He never got back to the sawdust, and the sporting gentlemen lost a bright and shining light."

"Broke his heart, I suppose," observed Sir Charles.

"How could that break his heart?" asked the child wonderingly. "I thought when people had their hearts broken--"

"Jocelyn, don't interrupt!" said the wife of Sir Charles. "Although," to her husband, in a lower tone, "I must confess these details a little tiresome!"

"Not a bit!" Sir Charles' voice rose in lively protest. "I remember out in Australia reading about the fellow in the sporting papers from home, and wondering what had become of him. So that was it? Go on, Mr. Gillett! With your permission, m'love!"

The police agent proceeded. "After that it was a case of the rum and the toss-pots, and when he was three sheets in the wind, look out for squalls! He got put in quad, broke out, overpowered and nearly killed two guards. Took to various means of livelihood, until they got him again. Trouble in prison; transferred to the solitary with a little punishment thrown in for a reminder. When he got out of limbo again, he lived in bad company, in one of the tunnels near the Adelphi; hard place for the police to rout a cove from. Then followed a series of rough bungling jobs he was supposed to have been mixed up in. At any rate, he got the credit. More hazards than loot! He had too heavy fingers for anything fine; but he made it quite interesting for the police, quite interesting! So much so, he attracted *me*, and I concluded to take a hand, to direct the campaign against him, as it were."

Mr. Gillett paused; obviously in his case egotism allied to enthusiasm made his duties a pleasure; he seemed now briefly commending himself in his own mind. "Up to this time," he resumed, "our friend, the ex-pugilist, had never actually killed any one, but soon after I engaged myself to look after him, word was brought to the department that a poor woman had been murdered, a cheap music-hall dancer. She had seen better days, however."

Lord Ronsdale, who had been looking away, yawned, as if finding the police agent "wordy," then strolled to the rail.

"Suspicion pointed strongly in his direction; and we got him after a struggle. It was a hard fight, without a referee, and maybe we used him a little rough, but we had to. Then Dandy Joe was brought in. Joe's a plain, mean little gambler and race-track follower, with courage not big enough for broad operations. But he had a wide knowledge of what we term the thieves' catacombs, and, well, he 'peached' on the big fellow. Gave testimony that was of great service to the prosecution. The case seemed clear enough; there was some sort of contrary evidence put in, but it didn't amount to anything. His record was against him and he got a heavy sentence, with death as a penalty, if he ever sets foot in England again."

"What," asked Mr. Gillett's youngest listener, "is 'peached'?"

"In school-girl parlance, it is, I believe, to 'tell on' some one."

"You mean a tattle-tale?" scornfully. "I hate them."

"They have their uses," he answered softly. "And I'm rather partial to them, myself. But if you are ready, m'lord--m'lady--"

"Quite! Egad! I'm curious to have a look at the fellow. Used to like to see a good honest set-to myself occasionally, before I became--ahem!--governor!" And rising with alacrity, Sir Charles assisted his lady from her chair. "Coming, Ronsdale?"

"Believe I won't go down," drawled the nobleman at the rail. "Air better up here," he explained.

Sir Charles laughed, got together the other members of his party and all followed Mr. Gillett to a narrow companion way. There a strong iron door stopped their progress, but, taking a key from his pocket the police agent thrust it into a great padlock, gave it a turn, and swung back the barrier. Before them stretched a long aisle; at each end stood a soldier, with musket; on one side were the cells, small, heavily-barred. The closeness of the air was particularly and disagreeably noticeable; here sunlight never entered, and the sullen beating of the waves against the wooden shell was the only sound that disturbed the tomb-like stillness of the place.

One or two of the party looked soberer; the child's eyes were large with awe and wonder; she regarded, not without dread, something moving, a shape, a human form in each terrible little coop. But Mr. Gillett's face shone with livelier emotions; he peered into the cells at his charges with a keen bright gaze that had in it something of the animal tamer's zest for his part.

"Well, how are we all to-day?" he observed in his most animated manner to the guard. "All doing well?"

"Number Six complained of being ill, but I say it's only the dumps. Number Fourteen's been garrulous."

"Garrulous, eh? Not a little flighty?" The guard nodded; Mr. Gillett whispered a few instructions, asked a number of other questions. Meanwhile the child had paused before one of the cells and, fascinated, was gazing within. What was it that held her? the pity of the spectacle? the terror of it? Her blue eyes continued to rest on the convict, a young fellow of no more than one-and-twenty, of magnificent proportions,

but with face sodden and brutish. For his part he looked at her, open-mouthed, with an expression of stupid surprise at the sight of the figure so daintily and slenderly fashioned, at the tangles of bright golden hair that seemed to have imprisoned some of the sunshine from above.

"Well, I'm blowed!" he muttered hoarsely. "Where'd you come from? Looks like one o' them bally Christmas dolls had dropped offen some counter in Fleet Street and got in here by mistake!"

A mist sprang to the blue eyes; she held her white, pretty fingers tight against her breast. "It must be terrible--here"--she said falteringly.

The convict laughed harshly. "Hell!" he said laconically.

The child trembled. "I'm sorry," she managed to say.

The fierce dark eyes stared at her. "What for?"

"Because--you have to stay here--"

"Well, I'm--" But this time he apparently found no adequate adjective. "If this ain't the rummiest Christmas doll!"

She put out her hand. "Here's something for you, poor man," she said, as steadily as she could. "It's my King George gold piece, date 1762, and belonged to my father who wore it on his watch chain and who is dead. Perhaps they'll let you buy something with it."

He looked at the hand. "If she ain't stickin' out her duke to me, right through the bars. Blamed if she ain't! Looks like a lily! A bally white lily!" he repeated wonderingly. "One of them kind we wonst run acrost when the Cap. turned us adrift on an island, jest to waller in green grass!"

"Don't you want it?" said the child.

He extended a great, coarse hand hesitatingly, as if half-minded to and half-minded not to touch the white fingertips.

"You ain't afraid?"

The golden head shook ever so slightly; again the big hand went toward the small one, then suddenly dropped.

"Right this way m'lord--m'lady!" The face of the convict abruptly changed; fury, hatred, a blind instinct to kill were unmistakably revealed in his countenance as he heard the bland voice of the police agent. From the child's hand the gold disk fell and rolled under the wooden slab that served as a couch in the cell.

"Jocelyn!" The expostulating tones of the governor's wife preceded the approach of the party. "What are you doing, child, so near the bars?"

"Good heavens!" Mr. Gillett seized the girl's arm and abruptly drew her away. "My dear little lady!" he said. "Really you don't know the danger you run. And near that cell of all of them!"

"That cell?" observed Sir Charles. "Then that is--"

"The convict I was telling you about! The 'Pet of 'Frisco.' The 'Pride of Golden Gate.'"

CHAPTER II

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A MESSAGE TO THE ADMIRALTY

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The following night, Captain Macpherson in his cabin, rolled up carefully the chart he had been scanning, deposited it in a copper cylinder and drew from his pocket a small pipe. As he filled and lighted it, exhaling the smoke of the black weed and leaning more comfortably back in his low, swinging chair, the expression of his iron countenance exhibited, in the slightest degree, that solace which comes from the nicotine. Occasionally, however, he would hold his pipe away from his mouth, to pause and listen. The weather had turned nasty again; above, the wind sounded loudly. Now it descended on the ship like a fierce-scolding virago, then rushed on with wild, shrieking dissonance. The *Lord Nelson* minded not, but continued steadily on her way.

Her captain emptied his pipe, glanced toward his bunk and started to take off his coat. Human nature has its limit; he had passed many sleepless nights and now felt entitled to a brief respite, especially as the chart showed neither reef nor rock anywhere in the neighborhood. But he had only one arm out of the garment when something happened that caused him to change his mind; abruptly hurled to the other end of the cabin, he found himself lying, half-stunned, on the floor. A hubbub of noises filled the air, snappings, crashings, the rending of woodwork.

Captain Macpherson staggered to his feet, and, swaying like a drunken man, stood a few moments holding his hand to his brow. Then his fist clenched and he shook it at the cylinder that had fallen from the table.

"Ye viperous, lying thing!" he cried, and ran from the cabin to the deck.

A single glance told all: two of the ship's giant spars had gone by the board; entangled in her own wreckage, the vessel thumped and pounded with ominous violence against some sunken reef. The full scope of the plight of the once noble ship was plainly made manifest. Though thick streams of scud sped across the sky, the southern moon at the moment looked down between two dark rivulets, and cast its silvery glow like a lime-light, over the spectacle. Captain Macpherson groaned.

"Mr. O'Brien!" he called loudly.

"Aye, aye, sir."

"How long do you give her?"

"Half an hour, sir."

The master shook his head. "She'll nae last that long." And holding to a stanchion, he seemed like a man in a dream.

"Any orders, sir?" asked the chief mate.

Captain Macpherson recovered himself; his tone became once more quick and incisive. "Ye're right; I'm gone daffy. We'll get this business over in a decorous and decent manner. And, Mr. O'Brien--lest I have nae time to speak of it later--should ye get ashore, and ever find yourself in the neighborhood o' Piccadilly, be so gude as to drop into the

admiralty office and say Captain Macpherson sends his compliments, and--to the diel with their charts!"

"I'll not forget, sir!" A number of orders followed.

As the chief mate disappeared to execute the commands he had received, the harsh noises of the breaking ship, the seething of the sea about her, the flapping of canvas, like helpless broken wings, was supplemented by a babel of new and terrifying sounds, the screaming and cursing of the convicts below, their blasphemous shrieking to be let out! To this turmoil and uproar were added the frantic appeals and inquiries of the passengers who, more or less dressed, had hurried to the deck and who were now speaking to the master of the ill-starred vessel. He answered them briefly: what could be done, would be done.

"It's a question of the boats, I suppose?" Sir Charles, one of the calmest of the ship's cabin party, asked quickly.

"In ten minutes they'll be ready for the launching with nae lack of water and provision. Get plenty of wraps and greatcoats. It'll be a bit disagreeable, nae doubt, out yon in the wee craft!"

"Wee craft!" The voice of the governor's lady--she was clinging to her husband's arm--rose shrilly. "You surely are not going to send us out there in one of these miserable cockleshells?"

"M'love!" Sir Charles expostulated mildly drawing her closer as he spoke, "it's the only chance, and--" Then to the captain half-apologetically--"She'll meet it with me, as she has met danger before, in the bush, like a true English-woman! But what," indicating the convicts' deck, "what about them? It seems inhuman, yet if they were let out--"

"They must not be!" Lord Ronsdale's metallic voice interposed quickly. "I call upon you, Captain Macpherson, in the name of the women and children--"

"I've thought about that," said Captain Macpherson shortly, and turned to his task.

The boat was soon overhauled, the lockers and water-butt were filled, and the passengers, one by one, set into it. On the whole, at that moment for leaving the ship, their conduct left little room for criticism; one or two of the women who had appeared on the verge of hysterics now restrained audible manifestation of emotion. Sir Charles proved a monument of helpfulness; assisted in placing the women here and there, and extended a helpful hand to Lord Ronsdale, who had become somewhat dazed and inert. Total darkness added to the difficulties of their task, for the moon which until then had shone with much luster now went behind a curtain of cloud. But Captain Macpherson coolly called out by name the men to handle the life-boat, and, with no evidence of disorder, they crowded in, none too soon! As the boat with its human freight hung in readiness for the lowering, the remaining spar of the *Lord Nelson* fell with a mighty crash.

"Remember the name of your ship, lads!" Captain Macpherson's voice seemed to anticipate a movement of panic among the seamen on deck; if there had been any intention to "rush" the already well-loaded boat, it was stayed. "Mr. Gillett, I'll be troubling ye for the keys to the convicts' deck. Mr. O'Brien, get in and take charge. Steer southeast with a bit of rag; it's your best chance to get picked up. Hold near the ship until the other boat with the

crew can come alongside. It's as well to keep company. Are the lines clear? Let her go."

The boat was lowered and at the right moment touched a receding wave. Captain Macpherson waited until the chief officer called out that they were safely away, then gave his last order:

"And now, lads, ye can be lookin' to yourselves!"

They did; the master turned and with some difficulty made his way toward the convicts' cells. Her decks soon deserted, the ship, like a living, writhing thing, seemed to struggle and groan, as if every timber were crying out in vain protest against the tragic consummation. But only an irrevocable voice answered, that of the mocking sea beating harder, the cruel sea, spotted here and there with black patches between which splashes of light revealed the wild waves throwing high their curd in the cold, argent glimmer. One of these illuminating dashes, as if in a spirit of irony, moved toward the ship, almost enveloped it and showed suddenly a number of mad, leaping human figures issuing with horrible cries from one of the hatches.

"The life rafts! Old man said the boats were gone."

"Rafts good enough for the likes of us, eh? Well, he's paid for keeping us down so long. Blime if I don't think Slick Sam killed him."

"The rafts!" Shrieking, calling down maledictions on the captain, they ran about, when suddenly an angry black wave swept the deck; a few went overboard with the hissing crest; several were hurled against the bulwarks, limp, lifeless things, swirled back and forth. One of their number, a big fellow of unusual strength, was shot toward the open

companionway leading to the main cabin; as he plunged down, he clutched at and caught the railing. Considerably shaken, dripping with water, he pulled himself together, and, raising a face, sodden and fierce, like a beast brought to bay, he looked around him. The light of one or two swinging lamps that had not yet been shattered revealed dimly the surroundings, the dark leather upholstering, the little tables. Uncertainly the convict paused; then suddenly his eyes brightened; the lustful anticipation of the drunkard who had long been denied shone from his gaze as it rested on a sideboard across the cabin.

"Bottles!" he said, steadying himself. "Rum! Well, I guess there ain't much chance for any of us, and a man's a fool to go to hell thirsty!" He had started toward the sideboard with its bright gleaming ware and its divers and sundry receptacles of spirits and liqueurs, when suddenly his look changed, and his jaw fell.

"What the--" A flow of choice Billingsgate, mingled with the sailor's equally eloquent Golden-Gate, completed the sentence. The convict stood stock-still.

From the door of a state-room at the far end of the cabin a figure appeared. A great shawl draped the small form; the golden hair, a flurry of tangles, floated around it. Clinging to a brass rail that ran along the side of the cabin, she approached, her eyes all alight as if well satisfied with something. Amazed beyond power of action, the man continued to gaze at her, at the tiny feet in the little pink slippers, at something she carried. "By the great horn spoon, the Christmas doll!" he muttered hoarsely. Then

forgetting his purpose, the bottles, he lurched quickly toward her.

"Wat you doin' here?" he demanded.

"I slipped out," said the child, holding the rail tighter, as perforce she paused to answer. "I thought it would take only a moment."

"Slipped out?" he repeated.

"Of the life-boat, I mean. It was dark and they didn't see me. I just happened to think, and I had to do it. If I'd told them, they mightn't have let me. It would have been very wicked if I'd gone away and forgotten--don't you think so? And now I'm going back! Only I am afraid I've been longer than I thought I would be. The door of my state-room seemed to stick, and I was a few minutes getting it open."

Beneath disheveled masses of thick dark hair, the brutish face continued to study the fairylike one; for the instant words seemed to fail him. "Do ye mean," he observed, "you come back here for that measly dicky-bird?"

"It isn't 'measly' and it isn't a 'dicky-bird!'" she answered indignantly. "And I'll thank you not to call it that. It's a love-bird, and its name is Dearie!"

"Dearie! Ho! Ho!" The ship reeled at a dangerous angle, but the convict appeared not to notice; his voice rose in harsh, irresistible rough merriment. "Dearie! And she thanks me not to call it names! It! No bigger'n my thumb! Ho! Ho!" His laughter, strange at such a moment, died abruptly. "Do you know what you've gone and done on account of what's in that cage?" he demanded almost fiercely. "You've got left!"

"Left?" said she blankly, shrinking from him a little. "You don't mean--oh, I thought I would be only a minute! They haven't really gone, and--"

The great fingers closed on her arm. "They've gone and the crew's gone! Both boats are gone!"

"Oh!" The big blue eyes widened on him; an inkling of her plight seemed to come over her; her lips trembled, but she held herself bravely. "You mean--we must drown?"

The thunder of seas breaking on the deck answered; a cascade of water dashed down the companionway and swept round them. The man bent toward the child. "Look at that! Now ain't ye sorry ye come back?"

"I couldn't leave it to drown!" passionately--"couldn't!--couldn't!"

"Blow me, she's game!" With difficulty he maintained his equilibrium. "See here: maybe there's a chance, if any of them's left to help with the raft. But we've got to git out o' this!"

He passed his hand through her arm, awaited a favorable moment, and then, making a dash for the stairs, drew her, as best he might, to the deck. At the head of the companionway, the wind smote them fiercely with sheets of foam, but his strength stood him in good stead, and bracing himself hard, the man managed to maintain his stand; holding the child close to him, he sheltered her somewhat from the full force of the storm. As he cast his glance over the deck, an oath burst from his lips; the convicts had succeeded in launching one of the rafts and leaving the ship by means of it, or else had been carried away by the seas. Of living man, he caught no sight; only a single one of the

dead yet remained, sliding about on the slippery planks with the movement of the ship; now to leeward, now rushing in a contrary direction, as if some grotesque spirit of life yet animated the dark, shapeless form.

From wave-washed decks the man's glance turned to the sea; suddenly he started; his eyes straining, he stared hard. "Maybe they've missed you. One of the ship's boats seems headin' this way!"

Her gaze followed his; at intervals through driving spray a small craft could be discerned, not far distant, now riding high on a crest, now vanishing in a black furrow.

"Are they coming back to save us?" asked the child.

The convict did not answer. Could the boat make the ship, could it hope to, in that sea? It was easier getting away than getting back. Besides, the opportunity for a desperate, heroic attempt to come alongside was not to be given her, for scarcely had they caught sight of her, when the stern of the *Lord Nelson*, now filled with water from the inflow at the bow, began to settle more rapidly. Then came a frightful wrenching and the vessel seemed to break in two.

"Put yer arms round my neck," said the man, stooping.

She put one of them around; with the other held up the cage. He opened the door of the wickerwork prison and a tiny thing flew out. Then he straightened. Both arms were around him now.

"'Fraid?" he whispered hoarsely.

The child shook her head.

An instant he waited, then launched himself forward. Buffeted hither and thither, he made a fierce fight for the rail, reached it, and leaped far out into the seething waters.

CHAPTER III

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AN UNAPPRECIATED BOUNTY

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In the prime of his belligerent career the Pet of 'Frisco had undergone many fierce contests and withstood some terrible punishments, but never had he undertaken a task calling for greater courage and power of endurance than the one he had this night voluntarily assumed. Dashed about by the seas, he yet managed to keep to the surface; minutes seemed to lengthen into eternity; many times he called out loudly. The arms about his neck relaxed, but he held the child to him. Not for an instant did the temptation come to him to release her that he might the more surely save himself. Overwhelmed again and again by the waves, each time he emerged with her tight against his breast; half-strangled, he continued to fight on. But at length even his dogged obstinacy and determination began to flag; he felt his strength going, when raising his eyes he saw one of the small craft from the lost vessel bearing directly down upon him.

The sight inspired new energy and effort; nearer, nearer, she drew; now she was but a few yards away. Then suddenly the sheet of the life-boat went out and the little sail fluttered like a mad thing, while the men bent with might and main over their ash handles in the endeavor to obey the commands of the chief mate in the stern. But despite skill and strength she was not easy to steer; once she nearly